Gift of the Protector: Radiant Heart

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Summary

The once bold line separating humans and Pokemon has grown dangerously ambiguous in recent times. With the entire world now on the brink of a second Great War, an unlucky researcher investigates a mysterious phenomenon - armed with the power of his Pokemon and his heart. Will they manage to prevent an impending catastrophe before it is too late? Is it already too late for her?
Nightmare in the Broken Mirror
Chapter 1: Nightmare in the Broken Mirror

Darkness. It is the necessary opposite of light. Without one, the other cannot exist. Such a concept is eternal, unchanging throughout the eons as stars and galaxies abide by these fundamental principles of reality. And yet there is something primal existing in the world that dares to challenge this universal dichotomy. It is a creature. A being. In its very existence it defies the cosmic struggle and renders darkness separate from light. Not as a contrast, but different in its very essence. In its a breath of uncertainty, fleeting moment of doubt, the lingering anticipation of things unknown. Darkness and light may endlessly dance in the sky high above, but only darkness finds a home in the heart.

The late twilight hour grew ever more sinister with each passing moment. Resting against the marble faced clock tower in the silent city’s eastern square, she stopped to catch her breath. In her quivering palms, she held a small timepiece of her own. Made of silver, it was once a pocket watch but had since lost its chain. The two hands had just overlapped indicating it was midnight.

White as a patch of fluffy snow, the shifting moonlight bore a full moon’s face while black rainclouds passed over Slateport’s misty harbor. Like abstract designs etched into a frothy canvas, gloomy clouds concealed most of the night sky. Only the moon could shimmer through the thick blanket of amorphous sky above the port city.

Shivering specks of moonlight tickled her pale skin, her décolletage slightly exposed from the white collared shirt she wore under her short woolen dress-coat. There was a slight bluish-grey trim running along the base of her open neck collar, which appeared quite wide compared to her slender neck. A single rounded pocket adorned her top, on her left breast. She had a narrow red necktie that
danced in front of her average-sized chest, worn loosely and somewhat lazily wrapped around her collar. Her short black coat was worn over her top covering up her arms with its warmth, but the jacket’s skirt-like base just barely covered the bottom of her perky derriere. Her svelte legs were covered by stockings and she wore two-toned white and black spatterdashes on her feet. The footwear’s base and raised heels were liquid obsidian as were the diamond shaped buttons running up the side of the otherwise bleached leather that rode well above her narrow ankles, protecting all the way up to the base of her calves.

She knew she was alone. She felt alone. And yet she was unquestionably afraid. A sudden chill ran up her spine. Her pace hastened as she walked along the uneven cement of the park on her way home. Rising and falling, her lungs took in quick breaths of the icy moonlit air. Substantial yet effeminate exhalations were the only noises save for the wind.

As she dashed on her way at this late hour, she quickly turned to face the sound of a branch rustling in one of the nearby trees in the park. Though it was the dead of night in the city, she could not be too careful. Not after what she had seen. After she had scanned the low foliage for any further movement, she gradually proceeded again.

Not a shadow, not another noise. Wild Pokemon, she thought, breaking into a brisk jog in fright. The persistent sounds of her heels clapping against the cement soon stopped as she darted into the tall grass adjacent to the path. I shouldn’t have taken this shortcut back, she thought mired in frustration. Then she followed that thought by justifying her actions. I only just moved here.

She approached a large stone statute. Hesitating, her pace slowed. Amid all of the desire she had to continue on her journey home, she could not help but slow as she approached the large granite figure. Sparkling with midnight dew in the hoary light of the moon, the enigmatic figure drew her attention. Like a magnet of shelter, she stepped against the chiseled stone, rubbing her trembling hands against its coarse façade. Oddly shaped and in the filtering light from the only source above, she couldn’t tell what it was or what it represented, only that it offered a degree of comfort to someone who had lost her way.

Wet, overgrown grass bit at her slender legs as the wind picked up. Perturbed, she pressed her back against the statue and looked back. Her breathing quickened. The entire park was empty, and the supposedly “energy efficient” solar-powered lights lining the pathway had long since expended their meager collection on account of all the rain.

“Okay,” she whispered aloud to herself trying to build up her nerve. “You can do this. You’re not lost.”

But as she ran her dainty nails nervously against the figure she leaned against, the creeping sensation returned. It was an inescapable dread. She felt as if she was being watched. Cruelly enough, she could not discern nor ascertain the source of the foreign feeling. Like a tightly wound music box, her heart fluttered in the midnight air, each note of silent searching trying desperately to stabilize the ill atmosphere.

Panting, she fathomed what she could do. She had no Pokemon on her. The city park was not normally patrolled by guards at night. A co-worker had told her that the path through Central Park would get her to the block she lived on in half the time. Well didn’t that work out great, she thought sarcastically.

Should have taken a bus back from work. It was a foolish sentiment. Not even the bus-line ran past eleven. Working well past normal business hours on a busy day at her new job, she was stuck taking the streets no matter what. Still, even this was better than what she had been doing before.
She shook her head, trying to reorient where she was. *I came in through the western gate; Michael told me the path to Savon’s Ferry curved north and then east…*

“Ah-hh!” She ducked instinctually, hearing the flapping of Zubat wings overhead. Falling into a squat, she tucked her head between her knees, covering her neck with both her arms, lest they bite her. Luckily, the sound soon passed, as did the Supersonic hums emitted from the blind creatures’ mouths.

“I just want to go home…!” she whimpered. “Back to the Johto countryside. Before all this happened. Before… No, I promised myself not to think about it.” Troublesomely, she rose to her feet again, darting straight ahead into the inky blackness. She dared not look behind her. Running in a straight line through bushes and trees of all varieties, she eventually found her way to a metal gate. “Phew…! Thank heavens!” she said, grasping the icy bars with her delicate hands.

But the gate would not budge. Worse still, she could see the promise of civilization up ahead in the form of tall grey buildings, which stood fast, denying the night sky from touching the horizon.

“Ughhh! O-P-E-N!” She shook the bars, her flimsy gold armlet jingling loudly in the otherwise quiet park. Seeing no way to scale herself over the pronged fence, she gradually turned around, only to find the way back had grown pitch black as the sky continued to darken with the promise of rainfall.

“Dammit!” she swore, shaking the bars again in futile anguish. “…Let me out!” she said loudly, hoping a friendly ear would hear her pleading. “Please, somebody! I’m trapped in the park!”

However, there was no such listener on that dark night. Gradually, she walked parallel to the grated fence, keeping an eye on the park where she had come from. She longed to see that mysterious statue to point her in the right direction, but the inky blackness from the canopy of trees had long since consumed the beacon of hopeful respite.

The sound of a twig snapping from behind caused her to jump in terror and break into a dash. As she continued to run, her lush red hair bounced over her narrow shoulders with increasing recoil as the tie she wore loosened. Soon she felt the ribbon slip off, as if it were tugged right away from her. With a jolt, she felt her soft hair tingle against her sensitive back. Even in the dark night while she ran adjacent to the cast iron bars, the pasty seashell color of her top could be seen from beneath her dress overcoat. The snug undergarment she wore loosened with her hasty sprint. A leathery belt kept her grey dress skirt in place. With each less-than-graceful stride, her light skirt fluttered up higher into the blank night air.

Eventually, she reached a large gate with a padlock. She grappled clumsily in the dark, trying to locate the locking mechanism and escape to the dimly lit street ahead of her. Yet the lock would not give.

“Oh no! It’s locked…!” she whispered, afraid to admit that she might have to follow the path she had found back through the eerie park. The wind had died down. There wasn’t a sound in the park. Not even a Pokemon in the air. Only the rustling and tinkering with each of her panicked stirrings could be heard.

“Perhaps I can help you with that,” said a man’s voice.

“AHHH!” she shrieked. She spun around, grasping her wet palms tightly against the metal bars behind her. “W–who are you…?!” she asked the darkness.

Slowly a shadowy figure emerged, his posture lean and trimmed. Masculine and steady, he
gradually walked along the path towards her.

“Stay back…!” she ordered, blindly fumbling with her sweating hands on the gate’s lock.

“Don’t worry,” said the man calmly. “I only want to help you.”

She breathed out in hushed sigh, but did not trust him. “W–who are you?” she demanded.

“Me?” The faint tapping from his jet-black boots signaled his continued approach. “Nobody in particular. I’m here to help you. Think of me as…your guardian angel.” He suddenly paused, breathing out quickly. “Yes. That’ll do nicely.”

“Guardian…angel…?” she repeated, confused, and unsure of what the mysterious voice meant by that. “Umm…great…whatever.” Warily, she inched away from the lock as his shadowed visage drew near. Stumbling, she fell off the path, rear first. “Ahhh!”

Breaking her fall, an invisible arm grabbed her, stalling her untimely plummet. His hand, gloved in a suede fabric, guided her wrist back up until she stood almost beside him. Though he was taller, his twisted ebony hair danced in front of his face, only revealing a faint pair of tight lips not far removed from a narrow nose. “Careful now…” he said. “Don’t want to hurt yourself.”

“T–thank you,” she said to the stranger. Should I tell him I’m lost? she wondered silently. No. I need to be on my way.

“It’s okay,” said the man’s steady voice.

“Well, I need to be on my way then,” she said to him.

“You took the wrong way home, didn’t you?” he said craftily. “*Tsk, tsk*. Like a little Lostelle.”

“How did you…?” She pulled away from his grasp.

Surprisingly, he let her go immediately. “I told you already who I am. I’m here to protect something important.”

“Protect me?” she asked cautiously. “From what exactly?”

“There are plenty of things that could turn foul for a lost lady late at night,” he said with strange charisma.

“So,” she hesitated, “you knew I was lost here?”

“Of course I did,” he said. “You wouldn’t be wandering out here all by yourself at this hour.”

Feeling almost guilty, she replied, “I…I know. I’m sorry for troubling you. I thought this way would take me there faster. A –”

“– A co–worker told you that?” he said with a shake of his head, made obvious by the swaying of his bangs obscuring both his eyes.

“W-Wah! How did you…?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked her.

“Nothing’s obvious!” she said fretfully.
“Fine. Here. Your exit.” Pushing her gently aside with an extended arm, he approached the lock. With a sharp “click!” the padlock snapped open. Then the unoiled gate squeaked loudly as it was forced opened by the man’s shoulder.

“Okay…” she looked beyond his long sleeve and at the street ahead of her. “Thank you.”

However, he said mysteriously, “Don’t thank me yet.”

*What…?* she thought. But the prospect of being freed from the spooky park had her head coiled in a knot of emotion. “Okay, I appreciate it.”

“You do?” he asked, his thin frame gradually retreating back into the invisible embrace of the shadows. “Good.”

“Wait!” she exclaimed. “You haven’t told me your name!”

She saw his teeth reflected briefly in the hazy moonlight. “Who has time for names at this hour?” he asked. “I’m just a visitor here in Hoenn. Like yourself, I came here from far, far away on a ship.”

“Right…” she admitted. “I have to get to Devon’s Ferry.”

“Hah. You’re in for a rough time if that’s where you’re heading.” She wasn’t sure how, but she could tell he was smiling beneath the wooly scarf entangling his narrow neck. “Of course… I know where Devon’s Ferry is,” he said rather slowly. “How would you like me to show you the way?”

Shrugging, she thought, *He’s really weird and creepy. But he says he knows the way and was capable with that padlock. Um… If it’s not too much trouble. I haven’t found the best way around the city yet.*

“Oh, it’s no trouble at all,” he said with a prolonged sigh. Again, the haunting air seemed to dance slowly around her as he stepped out of the park through the open gate. “Follow me. We’re a lot closer than you’d think.”

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“Okay,” she said trialing closely behind him. “And listen: don’t you try anything suspicious or I’ll scream and wake up the entire city!”

“Oh ho. Don’t you worry,” he replied with a faint laugh. Sinisterly, his slender fingers clutched tightly onto something well hidden in his overcoat’s breast pocket. “Don’t you worry at all, my dear… I’ll get you there safely.”

Once the shady individual had guided her down a series of empty blocks, she began to recognize some of the structures around her. Silently, she heaved a sigh of relief. “Thank heavens…” she thought as they approached the light rose brick of her familiar apartment building. “Thank you for leading me here safely,” she said. Yet the gratitude she gave him did not appear to resonate upon his sallow expression.

His pace slowed as he reached the steep stairs leading up to her apartment complex. Cloaked behind a mask of thick, ebony hair, he showed very few features. He only nodded while she hastily searched her small purse for her keys in the dim overhead street light.

*Ah ha!* Grasping the boney key, she walked up the first step. Feeling relieved, she turned around to thank the stranger again. “Thanks for–” But no one was there. “Huh?” She stood alone under the eaves of her building, the swaying streetlight overhead squeaking in the hallow wind. “– everything…” she wondered. *I could have sworn he was right behind me…*
Again she looked up and down the desolate avenue, not seeing a soul in sight. The deafening sound of distant thunder from above caused her to all but forget her mysterious escort. Quickly sprinting, she rushed under the cover of the structure just as the rain began to pour down the dark eaves and onto the steep stairs. She slipped her key into the door’s knob and turned. With a satisfying sound it opened revealing the warm lobby’s interior.

It was a cozy environment. A bit musty, yet certainly homey. The scent of a recently cooked pasta dish from her neighbor caught her attention. “Mmm…” Walking down the hallway of the lobby, her eyes darted about at the various pictures faintly illuminated by the receded incandescent bulbs in the ceiling. “What a strange night…”

Not wanting to take the lift at this hour, since all she wanted was to get into her soft bed. The fresh sheets she had washed would feel so nice on her exhausted body especially after taking a warm shower. She still felt the uncomfortable sweat from before under her bra, and she hastily climbed up the spiral stairwell to reach her unit on the third floor.

Fumbling again with the bronze keys, she undid the lock with a quick turn and click. Opening the wooden door gave forth a scent of her perfume, a mixture of young Roselia petals and sweet Bellossom honey-dew mixed with delightful coconut oil. “Home at last…!” she thought as her preferred scent wafted through the air.

Eagerly, she dashed to the mirror, taking her high-strapped footwear off along the way. Stumbling slightly, the thunderous storm outside persisted with belts of lightning that arched across the sky, illuminating her flushed room with a flash of powerful light.

Getting to the bathroom, she peered into the full sized mirror, sighing in relief. The mirror itself was fine but it was on a broken stand and she had leaned against the wall for the time being. Some of her eye makeup had run off onto her pallid face, giving her the appearance of having two small bowls of charcoal beneath her azure eyes. Batting her long lashed eyelids, she played with her cheeks, removing their rosy flush and revealing more of the pale skin underneath. “Phew…”

Hearing a loud noise, she turned only to be confused by the sound of her door slamming shut. That was impossible. She had already closed it on her way in. What…? The echoing thunder eased her worries. “That was probably just the thunderstorm,” she whispered to herself. “I need to get around to calling maintenance. They should really check my door’s hinges…”

Turning back to face the broken mirror, a strange sight greeted her. She was still there, her slender build and beautiful visage an undeniable sight. But she was more than merely a sight to herself, for over her left shoulder stood a shadowy figure. The same figure from before. A murky visage of a man!

“Eep!” she yelped as the torrents of rain splashed outside the fogged window. Such raw terror overtook her, she could barely manage to cry out. “HELP!!!”

Another loud crackle of thunder separated the numbing sensation she soon felt and the slowed fall to the tiled floor. Everything had decelerated to a sluggish pace around her. As her body collapsed onto the hard floor, she barely felt any of the impact. Sharp tingling came from her neck. From the ground, she attempted to raise her hand up to her neck, only to feel the harsh grasp of the stranger’s gloved hand once more upon her wrist!

AHH! Get off me! she tried to scream, but her lips had frozen shut. Locked in a paralyzed vulnerability, she could only watch as the figure from the park approached her.

“Well, it seems were here,” said a familiar voice.
“*Huff! Huff!*” she twisted and screamed as loud as she could, but no air would come out, no sound could be made.

“You’re trying too hard,” whispered the man. “Don’t try to resist!”

“…!” Helplessly, she peered up into his mysterious eyes. Like two twinkling amber olives they drew in her gaze as he knelt down next to her collapsed frame. She tried to kick him, but he was too powerful as his body pressed down on hers.

“It’s okay…” he said, twirling her delicate red hair around one of his slender fingers. “I promise it’ll be over soon.” Oddly, she could not feel the familiar strain of concentrated pain as he tugged on her hair in a tight knot round his wrist. “There’s no pain, right?” he asked her.

She could only gasp in horror as he straddled her in an unprecedented act of advance. “Please…! No!!” Nevertheless, all of her earnest pleas felt upon silent ears. “Don’t! NOOOOOO!” she hollered from beneath the crushing terror against her chest.

The man, reached into his inner vest pocket, removing a thin set of square spectacles. Calmly adjusting the glasses on his narrow nose bridge so that they shielded his piercing eyes, he said faintly, “Don’t worry. To worry is to be weak. And to run is to let fear overwhelm you.” Resting his hand on her exposed shoulder blade, he smiled. “You chose to run from me. That was your mistake.”

“You— You’re— …! No! It can’t be you!”

“It’ll be over. It’ll all be over soon…” he said methodically. “Soon, you’ll be better…soon…for the sake of the research we swore to undertake and see through to the end.”

“…!” Without a voice, she squirmed and twisted, desperate to break free from the mysterious paralysis. “Let me go!” she desperately tried to call for help. However, her earnest struggle became soon futile, as her limbs seemingly traveled far away from the control of her mind. AHH! NOO!!

The distant outcry to those fading limbs soon became lost amid a new, comforting sensation. “Haaaahh…!” A sensation of warmth, culminating in her heart. A flutter of excitement jolted her chest. Tingling, beckoning, it urged her to coo gently as the wonderful sensation continued to overtake. Mmm…! …N—no! Her eyes felt frozen, and she could not avert her fixated gaze at the spinning ceiling. Trapped, she was imprisoned in a wellspring of ecstasy that was not her own. Countless beams of spectacular neon color and light danced around her living room. And yet as these brilliant lines of light she had never seen before continued to fill her room and her body with inexplicable warmth, she could not take her fearful eyes off of the intruder. The man, wearing a broad grin, stroked the ridge of her neck in a tender motion. The delicate touch of his fingertips tickled at first, but as they rose along her neckline, the sensation soon became overwhelming.

“Estenina!” boomed a terrifying voice, resounding from deep within her center. With wicked shrills that seemed to capture the trembling pain of countless generations seemed able to shatter all remaining control she held over herself. “The soul…the spirit…!” She sensed her body heaving below in desperate breaths, yet felt completely detached. “—ARE OURS!”

All was suddenly quiet. Someone was speaking to her. She couldn’t understand his voice. She watched his lips closely. Had she seen that face before? She could not remember. She watched his mouth open and close, ejecting strange sounds into the air. Was this some sort of language he was using to communicate with her? She peered downwards, utterly confused by the feeling of being embodied once more. Something was incredibly odd about this vessel. It lacked the capability for power that she once held before her body was ravaged by the wicked deeds of the Cult of Ascension. Yet exactly what they did to her was not memorable; all she could do was recall the name, not the deeds. In fact, she experienced a mix of memories. It was growing with each second.
Every breath seemed to be filled with a flood of memories that were not her own, that never belonged to her, and yet somehow always hers.

There were conflicts everywhere. Places she had never seen. Smells she had never felt emotional about. Rhythmic sounds she had never heard played on beautiful instruments. All of these came flooding into her consciousness. And one feeling trumped them all. It was a desire. It felt like something she had lost. Something special. Something precious. A longing for something, someone, but she could not remember who.

Though she could not determine the progenitor of the emotions stirring all these strange and foreign memories, it was clear that she now was no longer in her former body. If this being she inhabited could share her emotions, then perhaps it could also project and receive telepathic thought. She tried to focus her mind on linking a strong bond with her heart to do this. Instantly upon resorting to telepathy, she was thrust into the middle of the mysterious man’s sentence. “When memories fade… seek to carve them in their hearts… it’s not as though thoughts travel through time … consciousness is eternal … the key is so long as … remembers a name. …What is your name?”

“Celesta…” she whispered softly in her newfound voice. She gasped at how the cool air felt warm against her chest, how the slightest inhalation filled her with unparalleled cordiality. Bringing her quivering hands to her lips, she marveled at the tenderness of her fingertips against her glowing red lips. Feeling their plump redness ratchet a series of cascading vibrations, all of which shook her core with an urgent rush.

“Celesta?” asked the man’s voice. She could not recognize his voice; clearly she had never met the mysterious stranger before, as all forms of prior recollection had been suppressed by the searing scar on her chest. The handle appeared to be made of the same organic material that had cut through her cleavage. A collection of crimson shards held together by a silvery veins of liquid metal had penetrated deep within her. Its radiant glow seemed to pulse with the exact consistency of her internal heartbeat. She exhaled as ecstatic chills ran along her spine as the two mounds on either side brushed against the core. The tingling sensation around her lips and other sensitive organs had subsided from the initial climax, but their mysterious echoes seemed to endlessly resound through this new body. Her eyes batted convulsively as she began to cough, and her lungs felt the rush of precious oxygen she had been long deprived of. Looking to her side, for a brief moment thought she remembered the man beside her, but it was too fragmented of a memory. Where… where do we know him from…? she wondered. Who is he…? He can’t be the goddess we meet after death! He must be Senarmius, the animator.

“…There, there…” he said to her as heavy lids slid over her vision, fading her sight into a balmy warmth, “there, there, Celesta. You’re awake, again. Safely within a suitable vessel I might add.”

…This? Hearing that made her heart jump with excitement, and yet she felt incredibly tired physically. We’re here…? Where did the light go…? she wondered in twisted curiosity. You…! She could not remember his name, or anything at all about his mysterious appearance – as he seemingly arrived out of the blinding white light she saw after experiencing death.

“Hmm?”

She could barely see him. But she could feel his retreating touch. You can really hear us…? We’re really real…? Awake? Alive?

“Of course you are,” replied the man’s somber voice. By now, she could barely distinguish the lines of his angular face through the growing haze of misty colors. “You’ve been excellently preserved.”

Pre–served…? she pondered, the emptiness of the skin she inhabited feeling strange and delightful.
What… what does that mean?

“Your consciousness was kept alive as I predicted from my research. And beautifully so,” marveled the man’s voice. By now, his speech was only a faint static of syllables, dragged so distantly away from her by the anesthetic, she could no longer distinguish where the end of her horizon of perception was. “Angelus… The research was all correct. But… I never dreamed this would be possible,” he whispered.

Neither could she. From the rising pressure of her chest, to the delicately sensitive skin she felt so intimately connected to, everything had grown substantially closer to her. Save for vision, all of her senses felt heightened, as if on the edge of some miraculous new frontier of experience itself. What is this?

“Celesta…” said the invisible stranger. “This is your new life. This is humanity’s gift to you. This experience, this everything, is all thanks to me.”

“Thanks… to you?” she repeated softly.

“Your life goes on beyond the veiled shadow of death because of me, Celesta. I freed you from death itself; in saecula saeculorum. …This life is yours now.”

“*This life…?!*” she exclaimed, as if hearing the phrase for the first time. Indeed, the range of the man’s voice sounded rather shallow, and echoed far above where she had drowned deep into a vast pool of sinking consciousness. “But we are no longer one singular soul. No… not any longer.”

“Do not dwell on the imprisonment of your host… Despite the challenges of your *disjecta membra*, those scattered fragments, I gave this life back to you… brought you back from the prison of the so-called ‘Dagger of Life’. And did you not experience an eternal moment in your death? Gnawing on your soul along with the souls of countless other creatures like yourself… Gardevoir. But now, you again inhabit the physical reality of the world. You must do something for me in return. *Quid pro quo*, my dear Celesta – a favor for a favor.”

“What… what is it?” The urge to guard and protect took her by surprise, and she squinted in an attempt to see who it was that requested her aid. However, the air was still thick with a strange burgundy miasma of swirling clouds and traveling lakes of tears. She reached her hands up to try and find his voice, desperately looking for the source of that promised purpose. That promise. That duty to protect. That task to save what mattered in this finite existence. That mission to guard that which was most treasured to her heart. That goal to unify two hearts into one. What must *I* do for you…? she thought with urgency.

Though she could not see it, she felt his smile. The way his narrow cheeks retreated in pleasure.

“All that I want, Celesta, is to be together with you. …Forever.”

“…!” The surge of ecstatic pleasure was nearly unbearable. The sheer thought of sharing her life with that of another made it impossible to resist the sweeping fantasizing. “You… you want that?”

She felt something tickle her ear. The dangling cartilage felt less warm than she was used to. But the sound was as crisp as ever. And as he spoke she retreated into her own shocked trance. “You, that’s all I want Celesta! That’s all I need!”

The broiling warmth in her chest had tightly surrounded her entire body, everywhere she felt the delicate pins of wonderful sensation. From the silky fine tips of her hair, to the tiniest of her toes, everything about her body roared with excitement. On the verge of losing control, her knuckles tensed into tight fists, which soon exploded into open hands which she threw high into the air in an
exotic yearning. “Take me!” she gasped as the world around her began to collapse into smaller pieces. “Please, take me with you!”

Settling his cool hand on her fevered forehead, he rubbed the palm of his hand against her face, now flushed with uncontrollable and restless scarlet. “I can’t unless…”

His tempered refrain drove her into a flux of delirium. “…UNLESS…?!?”

“I want you to take me back,” he said. “I need you to take me to the Garden. To the forest of your origin. To the Old Forest. It is the only way for us to be together as you wish.”

At this her heart leapt. “A way to be together…!”

“Yes.” She sensed his nod. “A way for us to be together permanently.”

But...how....? she initially wondered, but the growing sense of an indomitable spirit soon overtook her. It no longer mattered how slim the odds were, just that there was a chance. Indeed a second chance was enough for her. Can this be happening...? She knew better than to question it, for the experience itself was immaculate.

“I want you to remember one thing, and one thing only. If you want to be whole again, if you want to experience your life with all of its newfound pleasures, then you must bind your will to mine! You must join your heart with my will! You must become my avatar, together; we must take back this wretched world!” She squeaked involuntarily at the sound of the mysterious man’s passion. Her excited eyes, longing for a taste of his zeal, glowed a bright crimson with a blend of awe and curiosity. Little by little, her vision began to glisten with shapes and colors, forming tiny kaleidoscopic patterns at first, and then morphing into discernible shapes. She felt herself slipping into a reality stranger than fiction.
A frail young man woke suddenly in a panic. His head was spinning, his nerves biting. “What... was that a dream...?” he asked aloud between breaths. He was covered in sweat and his chest was on fire. He felt like he had just run a triathlon. Just barely in his twenties, he was a Pokemon trainer with coppery auburn hair and emerald green eyes. “Alright, get a grip. It was just another bad dream,” he told himself.

Inquisitively he gazed around the slowly rocking cabin. The pale horizon was just barely illuminated enough by the early morning light. As far as he could tell there was nothing but miles of ocean all around. He peered out of the foggy porthole where the bed was, then opted to gaze outside the large front window by the nearby command deck.

He was still out at sea it seemed. The dark night’s mist slowly vanished. It took him a moment to remember that he had been at sea for almost a solid five days. A few days’ worth of fuel and rations was running dangerously low, and there was always the danger of being pursued.

“Great. Just great,” he said checking the sea map on the central terminal. Musingly, he twirled an old captain’s hat between his hands. He had about enough of the voyage and it seemed as though Johto’s southern coast was still a several hours away. It did not help that he barely escaped from the Sevii Archipelago with his life.

After all that had happened, he felt incredibly fortunate to have his life back. It was his life to begin with after all. Though countless memories remained that were not his own, he knew without question that his autonomy had returned. Remnants of his past were unclear and muddled in disarray. The amnesia he faced was a fickle beast, as it had tampered with many of his human memories leaving naught but doubt in its wake.

At the very least he wanted to remember the red haired girl. The skinny one with the clear blue eyes who wore the coconut and Bellossom-scented perfume. She had haunted his dreams since he began his Pokemon journey. He dreamed of her now more than ever before. And the dreams were never calm, always filled with peril. There was a profound sense of recurrent urgency, a rising tide he could not swim against, a terrible sea storm, or whatever it was that had happened in his most recent nightmare.

Even a scientist could dream. But for him, these dreams were more than mere visions. They were the doors to his forgotten memories, pathways to restoring his humanity – if he ever had any to begin with.

He leaned back in the captain’s chair of the sea vessel. It was very comfortable, being a luxury yacht once under the ownership of Lorelei of the Kanto Pokemon League. Arching back he wandered in his mind for a moment recollecting as much as he could, which was still not a whole lot. Lorelei was not the woman he was searching for. She had some of the features, had the signature red hair, and certainly was memorable in regards to her physique. But she was not from the dreams. He exhaled
in frustration. There was no way to talk with her now.

He sat up abruptly. He needed to get out of this confined cabin, breathe in some fresh air.

“Where are you going?”

The telepathic message had barely left her puckered lips before he noticed her blocking the door.

“Sanaria…!” he exclaimed.

“Are you okay, thas Feyera?” she asked. Peering at his ragged wet clothes she said, “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

Steadying himself, the young Pokemon trainer firmly grasped her quivering hands. “It’s okay… Was only a stupid dream…”

A worrisome squint of her deep cherry wood eyes seemed to echo the Gardevoir’s growing concern. “You’ve been having a lot of those recently. Haven’t you?”

“Yes,” he replied with a shrug. “I don’t really know why.”

“Are they YOUR dreams?” asked the Gardevoir.

“Yes,” he said nodding to her anxious expression. He knew what she was implying. Some memories were not his own. He had learned that the hard way and still did not know how to make it up to her now that he knew the truth. “They’re mine alright. I can see events happening to other humans, but they don’t exactly make sense.”

“Then… the Hypnosis can be defeated! This might be how you get all your memories back!” she squealed excitedly. “Isn’t that wonderful, thas Feyera?”

“No!” he said firmly, still holding tightly onto both her hands. “These dreams I have… these nightmares… they can’t be real… Do you understand? They can’t be real memories! That would mean…”

“…?” She looked quizzically at him. Her cherry eyes were glowing with a faint burgundy and she wore an expression that revealed her appetite for his prolific thoughts.

He decided to ease up. He was getting emotional and it was clear she was siphoning off those projected feelings with her empathy powers. “It’s been disturbing me a great deal, Sana. I’ve only recently come to terms with the research I was a part of. Suddenly these inexplicable dreams flood my mind at night. I can’t help but wonder why…”

Hugging him closely with embracing arms, her glowing crimson heart danced above his own with each one of her quivering breaths. “Y–you told me that you would be happier this way…” Gasping, she clutched the glowing crescent. “I thought you would be–”

“No, Sana.” Shaking his head he retorted, “I told you my mission. I never said it would be easy. … You didn’t have to remain by my side after we escaped Evercrest.”

“But you… but Seph…” she said feverishly.

“Sana,” he addressed her with a serious mien. “I told you already: I may have gotten my memories back, but at what price…?”

“Thas Feyera!” she exclaimed with a rapid shake of her head. “It’s not your fault! You’re just as
much innocent as you’re guilty!” Seeing her mint-green hair flop around with urgent concern, he tried to dissociate. Tried to look away. Tried to escape from her radiant eyes – penetrating his very soul.

“Was it worth it…?” he asked rhetorically. “The sacrifice he made for my sake… twice. It just doesn’t make any sense. Why would Seph do that?”

“Don’t be silly!” she chastised. Her pale cheeks flushed rose at the mere mention of her mate’s name; it had been a long time since he had said his name without a tinge of bitterness from being cursed by the Gardevoir. “This is something he chose to be a part of.”

“Who chose any of this?” Feyera asked jadedly. “If I had known… none of this would have ever happened!”

“I know that’s his heart… I can feel it. There’s no death so long as you’re breathing.”

“Who are you talking about Sana? Your mate?” he said already knowing the answer. He couldn’t blame her for thinking about Seph constantly. And yet he was enraged by the relentless association. He couldn’t bring himself to tell her what had happened. He couldn’t find the courage to tell her what needed to be said. That Seph had sacrificed his consciousness in a gambit to keep Feyera alive, that “Edge” was gone. Only fragmented memories of two lives filled Feyera’s empty head and heavy heart.

“He’s still here,” she insisted pawing at his heart.

“…What about my potential father?” Feyera asked raising his voice. He pulled away from her and sat down on the bench adjacent to the door to the deck. He bowed his head and looked down at the crystal imbedded in his sternum. “What about Fredrick? Is he still ‘here’?!”

“Thas Feyera,” unsteadily she continued, “there wasn’t a choice, was there?”

“Of course there wasn’t a goddamn choice!” he said, failing to fight back against the urge to expose his true feelings. “Fredrick died so that we could escape! If not for him, we would both be dead! I thought he was evil, and mind-controlling me with his wrist collar. I lost faith in him. But I was wrong. Oh, so very wrong. All this time. Sana, in the end all Fredrick wanted to do was save me from what happened to his daughter…”!

“Pft! As if you ever had a chance with that Lorelei-girl!” she snipped jealously.

“This has nothing to do with Lorelei!”

“Oh,” she calmly murmured.

“Don’t you see?! I had a future! Something to fight for. However vague, at least it was something! I gave it all away when I became the pawn of others! And now all I have left are shambled memories of the past!” On the verge of letting frustration consume him, Feyera quickly realized that she already knew what he felt. Gardevoir could project their every emotion upon another, and the Psychic powers went both ways. She knew exactly how he felt at this moment.

“…” With a protracted sigh, she shifted herself off the door and closer to her seated companion. Swinging her thin legs on the bench, she deftly adjusted herself, taking only a moment to reposition her silk-like gown over previously exposed skin. “Thas Feyera?” she asked.

“What?” he said, holding his head down in disgust. He squinted his eyes tightly until the pressure began to hurt the fair skin of his forehead.
“It’s all going to be okay. I promise. We’re together again. Nothing can sever our hearts.”

However, the discussion of Gardevoir anatomy and in particular their crystalline hearts failed to intrigue the young Pokemon researcher. Though he had spent countless years of education to earn a doctorate in bioinformatics at the prestigious Pokemon University, all of those memories – all of that education – was not worth what he now felt in his heavy heart. “Sana…” But, just as the gravity had begun to swell and weigh his spirit with the awful remorse of inadequacy, he felt a delicate finger dancing along the ridge of his heart. Almost mesmerically, her warm palm graced the edge of his very existence, all with a delicate precision.

“I promise I’ll protect you.” Relinquishing he grasp on his chest, she impishly rubbed her smooth hands along her crystalline heart. “Your heart is my heart now.”

Feyera shook his head. “Sanaria, not even you can protect me from my past… I’ve created a monster. It will only be a matter of time before my research catches up to me. Do you really think you can protect me from the horrors of weaponized genesplicing?”

“Maybe not,” she said telepathically, nodding. Then she grinned playfully. “But I can protect us, thas Feyera; that’s what I promised to do, isn’t it?”

“Why do you always have a stupid answer to everything?”

“Call it a hunch,” she giggled, “besides, human behavior is oh so predictable.”

“Sure it is…” Stretching his tired arms he replied, “That’s why I’m afraid. Psyonics… Tampering with people’s minds and emotions… All the conveniences and curses; I’m not sure how human I am at this point.”

Cutting him off with a tight pout, she insisted, “The heart is hard to translate. It has its own special language. …At least, that’s what I’ve felt.”

Anxiously, he grappled with his thoughts, muttering, “If I could only fix this… for both of us.”

“You already have,” she said adamantly. A glint of light from the rising dawn caused the grey sea beyond the window to jump to life with fantastic color.

“Have I?” he wondered airily.

“Mm.” Nodding, she brushed her wavy bangs back. “Even the smallest of gestures are signals, lighthouses to notable feelings.”

“It’s a language I haven’t learned,” admitted the young man. “No offense, but most of the emotions you toy with on a day to day basis aren’t even recognizable to me.”

“Well, with all of your education, learning shouldn’t be a problem!” she nudged his wilted shoulder with one of her petite elbows.

“True, but I’ll never belong on either side. Human or Pokemon. The rest of my life is going to be a learning experience. Unless… I can remember.”

“Well, I want to be there with you.”

“Hah truly? After all I’ve put you through?” he asked the slender Gardevoir beside him.

“Of course!” Closing her cherry-wood eyes behind her heavily lashed lids, she nodded. “Besides,
I enjoy learning about the world almost as much as you do. With you…through you.”

“Sana…?” He pawed her jawline with a quivering hand. Touching her pale skin seemed to steady every tremor in his body. The warmth of her tiny breaths became alarmingly soothing. Everything felt as if it had finally found a place. “What about how much I’ve hurt you in the past?” he asked her.

“The past stays in the past.” Her face flush with pinkish warmth, she whimsically added, “Think of this as my turn to ‘do research’. After all, human gestures can be so terribly obscure and confusing! You cry when you’re sad and when you’re happy?!”

“Hmm.” His narrow lips hid a smile. He knew how easy it was for a Gardevoir to deconstruct details and discern what a person was feeling. In fact, he had been on both sides of that avenue. Regardless, Sanaria was being sincere; her keen interest in humanity’s various quirks and mannerisms happened to surpass that of some humans! “Right. We’re in this together,” he answered affirmatively.

“I don’t see how there’d be any other way, thas Feyera,” she said with a roll of her shadowed eyes.

“Sanaria?” he asked moving close to her. “You know, I’ve been wondering: what does ‘thas’ mean anyway?”

“Oh… that means –” she shook her head, wildly waving her bangs in the process. “Ah… it’s just a silly saying. Heh… Heh…”

Smirking jokingly, Feyera pressured her with a nudge to the shoulder. “Aw c’mon, tell me!”

“Since when were you so interested in Gardevoir culture?”

“Since –” he paused briefly thinking back to the grisly research he had been a part of in the name of theoretical biology – “since I’ve had a desire to work with Pokemon. As a researcher.” Sana appeared to be unperturbed by the swelling puffiness beneath his emerald eyes. “Before botching things up –”

“Shh. Shh.” She quickly hushed him with a small finger from her raised hand. “– Is this really how a human feels? I find it so strangely similar to my own emotional inflection.”

“I–” he stared to say, but his glance quickly caught hold of her reclined body. Though as much of a Gardevoir as any she was unquestionably attractive in her effeminate mannerisms. She was a member of species Angelus Curator, according to his previously published scientific dissertation on Psychic Pokemon. Her silken garment’s shoulder straps, laden slightly off kilter, wrapped her thin body in a delicate position. With a subtle pat, he adjusted the thin shoulder strap, hearing her purr faintly from the contact. Transferring sensation straight through and unimpeded, her clothing naturally amplified potential sensory intake: having an exponential effect on the species’ emotion-based Psychic power. A shiny, rubicund crystal emerging from a thinly cut slit in her clothing divided her two small breasts.

“And…this…right now, this feeling, this attraction; is this how a human girl feels?” she asked pointedly.

“I wouldn’t know,” he answered truthfully. “What are you getting at by asking that?”

Looking out the nearby window – which was heavily fogged with the dew of the Southern Sea of the Sevii Islands – Sana straightened her already slender posture and asked, “I… I wonder sometimes. It’s just – every once in a while – I don’t only see your heart like I did before. …I see
“Well, that’s nice,” he said frankly. “– hate to disappoint you, but I’m nothing but a freak now thanks to my research.”

Immediately she knew what he was frustrated about. She didn’t need to be a Gardevoir to see his eyes dart downwards to his chest, searing with a sharp, metallic crystal. “No,” Sana paused for but a moment, “That came out wrong. I see what you stood for. That’s who you are.”

“Well now, Sana,” Feyera tightened the wide straps on a traveler’s style leather vest “– ‘who I am’ seems to be the Million Pokédollar Question now, doesn’t it?”

She couldn’t help but smile as he fumbled with the jacket’s suede dyed straps. Rather loose and oversized, it barely reached below his Smith and Salven’s Pokéball belt holster. A young Pokemon trainer, originally on a quest to aid Professor Oak in his field research, Feyera’s journey had taken him far away from the realm of laboratories. This weighed on him quite a bit. As a result, he wore a ceaselessly tired expression.

“You don’t have to be Doctor Anything, or a scientist. You’re you. Thas Feyera. Can’t you at least entertain the idea that there isn’t anything you need to completely understand?”

“A fair deal of science suggests otherwise, Sana. Life is full of mysteries, and I – as a subject – happen to be a very big one!” he said narcissistically.

“Happen to be what?” Sana asked with a snigger. “Science or mystery?”

“Both actually,” Feyera said. “I suppose it’s the mystery part that bothers me though. I want to solve it. Don’t you?”

“Life’s a mystery with many parts. *sigh* If you will it so that your life is about what you feel; your passions eventually become part of you.” Sanaria glanced down at Feyera’s scarred chest. “…Even grow to define your identity.”

“You really… uh … you really think so?” What had begun as a spiteful remark wound up stimulating a great deal of thought.

“Mmhmm.” She waved her willowy arms in the air cheerfully. “All that’s left is to spread your wings and fly!”

“Humph. You’re certainly one to talk,” he said gruffly. “People don’t get wings like Pokemon.”

“Oh, is that so!” she exclaimed. With a wink she said, “If that’s the case, then your little ‘angel’ isn’t going to try to embarrass you…” She lifted up her shoulders in a theatrical shrug. “Too much!”

“Get real!” he said bumping her lightly on the shoulder with his fist. “I didn’t remember you could trace abilities. I mean, c’mon Sana, how could I have known you’d trace Weezing’s ability to
hover?” Feyera said. He didn’t need to run a Battle Simulator to figure out Gardevoir’s psychokinetic powers; he’d gotten plenty experience of their battling techniques firsthand.

“Hmph. I thought you would have ‘researched’ it already,” she answered caustically.

“Research is a life-long endeavor,” he haughtily insisted. “A good researcher is always learning. I noted that strategy you managed to pull off back on the island.”

She grinned wildly at the indirect praise he was giving her. “Heh! Is that so, thas Feyera?”

“Take it easy,” he said as she danced her delicate fingers on his ebony collar. “Can’t you talk without making me feel so damn uncomfortable?” he asked as she pulled away slightly. “Sheesh.”

“Didn’t you promise to quit trying to justify yourself?” asked Sana. “I appreciate what you said to me. I never felt something so strong before. And from a human. Then again, you’re not really a human anymore, are you?”

“Hold on a second; you’re taking this out of context again with your intense emotions.”

“I know what you mean, thas Feyera; I can feel exactly what you mean, because I can feel exactly what you feel.” Sanaria pinned her hands lightly down on top of his shoulders. “Our hearts are bound together! Remember?”

Silently, he lowered his fair-skinned palm to the center of his chest. And the moment he felt contact with the slim crystal embedded in his sternum, the Gardevoir at his side instinctively shut her eyes in an irresistible gasp of stirring contemplation. “Huh? You really can feel all of that? All of the time?”

“Y–yeah,” she answered with a furtive peer out from between her dangling bangs. “Everything, thas Feyera. That’s why we need to stay together, no matter what.”

“You know what?” he asked. “Fine.”

“That’s it? Fine?” she repeated irritated by his lack of expressiveness.

“Yes. It’s fine for you to stay. Even if you tend to annoy me, we’re going to need to work together in order to fix all of this.”

“How do I annoy you?” she said feeling insulted.

“You’re an emotional creature, I’m a scientist. We’re like oil and water,” he explained.

“You’re emotional too sometimes. That’s the only thing good about you.”

“I’m flattered,” he laughed. “But as you know we’re on a dangerous mission. Pokemon and people have died at my side…”

“I know it’s not going to be easy, thas Feyera.”

“Strength through unity,” he explicated.

“I know. That’s why we’re doing this together.” She grinned happily and pecked his cheek. “…Close together!”

“Changing the subject as usual,” he grumbled.
“Mm. I never realized how bad I was at it. I learned how to do it from you.”

He pulled away from her and stood up. “I’m glad we’re on the same page. However… You haven’t answered my question yet! What do you mean by the prefixes ‘veh’ and ‘thas’?”

“It’s…well, it’s…a saying…” she said shyly stumbling over how to explain the terminology to a human being. “…just a little saying. Mmm. Nothing really…”

Such cautious reservation was a side he had not yet been exposed to. “A saying huh?” he said gliding his hand through her warm, silken hair. “Well, go on. Elaborate. What’s it mean?”

“It’s hard to explain; Gardevoir have a culture that’s very complex – the heart itself is very difficult to translate, it sometimes has a language of its own.”

“What culture?” Feyera pouted. “What’s the deal with that, Sana? Pokemon don’t usually have cultures. Communities yes. Ecosystems, also yes. But culture, that’s more of a human thing.”

“No,” she shook her head. “Culture is the proper word. You’d use the same word to describe it. I can decipher the meaning of words with our telepathy. I’ve learned a lot about your language through our bond — it’s becoming my favorite language to convey emotions through. It’s so expressive at times!”

“So what’s this culture of yours have to say about the prefixes veh and thas?”

“It’s extremely personal to call you ‘thas’ anything. Especially my thas.”

“Your thas?” he asked. “And here I was thinking that I was the possessive Pokemon Trainer.”

“First of all, I don’t approve of humans enslaving Pokemon to do their bidding!” she said pouting and crossing her thin arms in protest.

“Ugh, not this again. How about you quit trying to change the subject,” Feyera smoothly replied. The constant rocking of the floor made him rest his back against the cedar framed doorway. “Why don’t you translate it for me using my words?”

“You can’t simply translate such an old saying. No words or language can fully express feelings. The language of the Old Forest is more about sensations projected through telepathy to stir emotions. I will admit human language does come surprisingly close.”

Disagreeing with her, he quickly retorted with a scoff, “Oh yes, sure. Which is exactly why humans speak with words and not telepathy.”

“Have you ever been at a total loss for words? Speechless with emotion?” she interjected.

“Hmm.” He nodded carefully. “I didn’t have much of a choice when the psyonics overtook me in the past.”

“Language is one branch on the tree of understanding. Humans seem to like it a lot. Pokemon can use the language of the heart. That’s how you can communicate with them when you’ve built a bond. Since it is a psychic bond built on emotion, a Pokemon’s heard voice and tone is often tied to the memories of prior experiences most closely associated with the listener,” she explained. “But it’s not the same as speaking. It’s a vibration of a different caliber.”

“You seem keen on learning how to speak. I’m surprised your vocal cords can even work after years of evolutionary dependence on telepathy.”
“Actually, we can speak, just not very loud. It would probably sound like humming to your less sensitive ears.” She brought her hands to her mouth and cupped them. “Thas,” she said quietly. It sounded like a whisper and a hum.

“Your voice is…soft,” he acknowledged with a surprised look on his face.

“Your spoken language is something I wish to understand better,” she said returning to the easier form of telepathic communication. “I like the idea of annunciating your more passionate expressions a lot.” She used her hand to make an obscene gesture, chuckling aloud at Feyera’s startled reaction. And his reaction was by all means warranted. Obviously, Sanaria wasn’t a human. On the other hand, she had a strange growing fascination with humanity. Although her vocal cords were underdeveloped due to Gardevoir relying mostly on telepathy or psychokinetic-empathy in order to communicate, she had been practicing by mimicking him occasionally. It was actually very easy for her to do. She picked it up fast and supplemented laughter, or other audible sounds to augment her expression. Granted a soft murmur or coo hardly had the potential to be misinterpreted, but there were many other subtle human acts too.

He looked over at the ship’s control panel. “Okay, here’s the deal. It appears, judging from our current path, we still have a long way ahead of us before we reach land. Sea’s a big place.”

“Mmm,” she nodded.

“So if you want me to teach you how to use your voice to speak, you’ll need to practice. Tirelessly,” he added sternly. “I can tell already, for you, projecting is going to be the challenge since you speak so softly.”

“I’m willing to work at it,” she said.

“I’ve read that only a few Pokemon can learn the art of speech, let alone fluently master it,” he replied. “But if you’re going to stick around outside a Pokéball, I can try and teach you.”

“I told you how I feel about those devices. They’re prisons. Confinement chambers,” she hissed.

“My Pokemon don’t seem to mind. Brucie, Des, July; they’re all fine with it,” said the young man. “Are you implying you’re better than any of them?”

“I have a reason to be in this world. This heart,” she said pointing “is why I cannot rest like them.”

“You sure about that? I saw you sleeping yesterday on the bed below deck,” he laughed. “You were out like a light. I think I even heard a snore!”

She did not look happy. “This is the problem with communication,” she posited haughtily. “Rest means something different for humans than Pokemon. Rest does not have to be sleep. And sleep, not rest.”

“Hmhm,” he muttered. He made his way over to the central terminal guiding the ship and plopped down next to the helm. The Southern Sea of Kanto had been so calm and serene this morning. In the distance, the sea was dark and ominous. The ARMS-guided computer monitor above the steep cabin windows provided a dim light. It had been programeed to use the Global Positioning System to guide the ship to Johto’s southernmost coast. Once there, the plan was to meet up with Fredrick’s contact, a rustic Apricorn-crafter named Kurt living in Azealia. Thankfully, they had almost made it to their destination without encountering any other ships.

He had prepared his gear and was ready to disembark. The next few hours consisted of uneventful teaching instruction. Showing Sana how to shape her mouth when saying certain words proved to
be quite challenging since she was an unquestionably stubborn individual. Each time she spoke made the bizarre nature of their mutually dependent relationship even more confusing. Why she did this was a mystery to the young man, but he did not dwell long upon it.

He knew he and his unlikely travel companions would face a myriad of challenges in their journey to stop Cipher’s powerful Shadow Pokemon. Yet an untold number of problems still remained. How were they making them? How were they controlling them? These were paramount questions in young Feyera’s mind, but he kept his heart and mind focused on the final mission Fredrick had given him. On one hand, it was the only thing that should have mattered to Feyera. And yet, having a team of Pokemon by his side seemed to change everything about how he once perceived the world.
A gust of frosty, crisp air blew through the young man's auburn hair as he opened the cabin's squeaky door. With a quick step, he walked beyond the threshold and onto the sea vessel's deck. Dew from the morning fog covered the narrow floorboards, making the exterior of the Prima slippery and slick.

There was a soft murmur from behind him, however he paid it little mind. With a determined stride, he walked towards the bow of the ship. With a stern glare, he gazed off into the distance, and his emerald eyes seemed to shimmer at the first sight of land. "We finally made it," he thought to himself silently. It was a sublimely peaceful scene; the only sounds coming from the steady drone of the ship's engine and the breaking of waves against the recently refurbished hull. "Unbelievable—" he said aloud to the Johto peninsula appearing to rise high above the horizon, having to catch his breath as a tremendous array of color splashed over the canvas of his this beautiful dawn. The lofty peaks of Union Cave were like low-lying clouds of indigo, looming ominously over the sleepy village of Azalea. To his marvel, the distant sunrise to the east illuminated the Southern Sea's deep blue waters – as if to promise the upcoming day's warm vibrancy.

With a smile, he reached into his coat-pocket and clutched a silver timepiece. Running his palm against the device's smooth surface, latch clicked open with a flick of his finger. Despite the vital importance of the adventuring tool, the piece was utterly useless, as the hands had been frozen in place at quarter past three by Cipher's doomsday device. "What could Cipher possibly hope to gain in a world without our technology?" he wondered to himself.

As if to answer his fervent thoughts, a small voice echoed from behind him, "A world without those terrifying capture devices doesn't sound half bad."

They young man quickly turned around to face the direction of the voice – his frail form continuously buffeted by the wind. "Sana, you don't understand…"

"I understand you completely now, thas Feyera," she said with her piercing crimson eyes. As wind blew her mint hair about in the furious oncoming wind, she lackadaisically emphasized, "It was my choice."

"At their core, all humans are tool-wielding animals. Without the ARMOS computer system guiding this ship safely, we would have been in for a rough ride." He shrugged. Wearing a smirk, he noted, "But just look at who I'm talking to."

"Human hands are unwieldy," she noted. "Especially when controlling them over a great distance!"

"Heh." He smiled thinking back to the day he met her. "I suppose there's something to be said for your psychic abilities."

"Of course," she nodded her head, concealing a slight blush under the curtains of her hair. "But I can't just mind control anyone I please. No one can; not even you. There has to be an emotional connection fueling the process."

"I knew that," he replied quickly, trying his best to act knowledgeable. "I'm distinguished scholar
"I'd say you learn better from experience however, hehe." She wobbled back and forth playfully.

"Maybe." Gravitating towards the edge of the ship, he sighed, staring down at the rough waves breaking against the Prima's patched hull. "I suppose you have a fair point. Psyonics need to be further researched, and I'm the right man for the job."

"Hah! You mean this isn't a pleasure cruise?" she joked.

"Hmm. Believe me, I wish it was, but we have a long road ahead of us. There will be time to relax at the end of our journey, I promise."

"Hmm," she said nodding her head back and forth, "if you say so."

"I mean it," he reassured her apparent doubt. "Once we get to Fredrick's contact – Kurt – we'll be able to rest easier."

"You haven't been sleeping much. It shows in your eyes."

"You're right," he replied softly, "I'm a wanted man."

Her eyes widened "It's the dreams isn't it?" she asked fretfully.

"It's as if something, or someone is reaching out – calling out to me, Sana." He looked at her heart. "Like what you did right before we met."

"Calling out to your heart?" she asked with a tone of seriousness.

He nodded softly, emerald eyes affixed. "Is that something I should be worried about? I'm never me in the dreams."

"Sigh*– some of us believe that reoccurring visions are really messages – conveyed from other souls in our species. My guess is you're very perceptive now to Gardevoir."

"Whatever their origins; it cannot be helped," he said with a shake of his head. "I'm worried, Sana. Worried for the world."

The gravity of his heartfelt words resonated with her, and she replied rather shakily, "I never thought you'd be such a humanist –" she said and he tried to smile. "--the trainer I met for the first time weeks ago on this ship would have only had been concerned for himself. Everything was always about you; saving yourself from that which I treasure most."

"You're right, heh, in some ways I've changed. Thing is, you met me when I was still searching for answers, but not in the right places. Thanks to you, some of those answers were found," he said as she blinked in surprise. "Others will forever be an enigma, and I don't intend on compelling mysteries. I've realized that it's up to me to live this life in the here and now."

"So what does that mean?" she asked, suppressing excitement.

"That means warning Kurt about Cipher's plans for world domination. It's what Fredrick would have wanted me to do… in fact; it's the last thing he wanted."

She closed her eyes. "He wanted what was best for you, thas Feyera."

"I know. *Sniff* At one point, I would have questioned Fredrick's means, but now I think I finally
understand him."

"How so?" she asked with focused intrigue.

"Fredrick's hands were completely tied by things beyond his control. His daughter, who experimented with me at Evercrest was overtaken by the infectious Mercurium..." Feyera spoke gravely "And without knowing it; I almost met the same fate."

"So the armlet around your wrist..." she looked at his pale wrist – white as snow, "was only delaying the process of the heart overtaking you?"

"Basically. That's how the cellular fusion was stalled once I awoke the dormant powers of your mate." Feyera sighed. "It was a crude solution, but periodic Serenithium injections seemed to act like the opposite of the Mercurium already inside me. That is, until Ein's Phaeton device outright disabled the mechanism from working. After that, I almost completely vanished from existence. I would have been reborn as a monster with no memory; subservient to Cipher's will."

"Is that when you met Seph?" she asked.

"'Met' might not be the best word," Feyera said with a laugh as weak as his frame. "But yes, without the Serenithium, my psyonics triggered a chain reaction. It was only a matter of time before my human body gave in."

"But Seph didn't let you die," she hummed faintly, "he saved you... twice."

"I'll admit, I thought little of the first time Sephiteos saved my life. And to be honest, I wasn't even sure if saving me was his intention. But the second time... it was different, I didn't feel as if my body was being hijacked and overtaken by the lust for power. The whole experience felt entirely different... we actually spoke."

Her face reddened at the reminder of the last words Sephiteos had shared with her. Although it was incredibly painful for her to let him go, deep down she knew that his final decision was for the best. "It looks like the changes to your body stopped."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better or worse?" he asked pouting. "The Mercurium wound up producing extremely hostile genetic overwrites."

"Heh, and you were so afraid of it, weren't you?" she teased. "I think I've only seen bugs worry you more!"

"Gah! Of course I was afraid!" he said angrily crossing his arms. "For goodness sake Sana, the ancient technology had my body being overtaken by genetic code absorbed by Mercurium on the shard, not your mate."

"What is the difference though? Seph's heart was unique to him and only him. No human could possibly codify who he was!" Sana shrugged. "You must understand, no matter what, this is his heart... and it's all I have left."

"Hmm... All I have left is Seph's heart." Feyera looked at his chest. "He saved me through it, and for that, I'm grateful."

"Then...?" Sana placed her palm on the shard's edge, filling him with a sensation of feverish warmth. "Is this you?"

Feyera shook his head, trying his best to ignore the dazzling sparkling light. "No. I wouldn't say that
it's only me. Although his presence is no more a dormant internal force, by saving my memories from being totally erased, Seph's noble sacrifice will continue to live on with my every breath."

"He wanted you alive more than he wanted both of your memories to be dead," Sanaria said solemnly. "His heart is a gift, you know? It's not a menacing curse like you always used to complain about."

"Right." He held her close, their hearts connecting. "And I'll use this gift to protect the bond Seph forged." She smiled as he patted her back. "I'll have you know, that means protecting the world we live in. It's up to us to stop Cipher's madness."

"Thas Feyera, we're together now…" she said lightheartedly. "There's nothing that can stand between us."

"Mmm." he agreed, feeling a surge of emotional energy course through her heart and into his own. She winced slightly as he intuitively reciprocated with a smile. "Thankfully." Taking one last look at the horizon, he quietly led her back toward the protective shelter of the Prima's cabin.

"Destination imminent, prepare for manual override!" read out the computer as the Prima approached the Johto shoreline. The yacht's powerful engine turbines had begun to wane in their energy output as the rocky beach line came fully into sight. "ARMOS Guidance disengaged. Manual control override in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, mark."

Feyera grasped the vessel's platinum wheel, his knuckles grew white as he tried to take hold of the yacht. "Gah!" he grunted as the strong tide pulled the ship to its side. "Son of a…!"

"Thas Feyera! Don't crash the boat like I did!" squeaked a voice beside him.

"Sana, I'm trying my best, but this shoreline isn't exactly welcoming," he said squinting, desperate to find a place he could dock. "Doesn't Azalea have a port?"

"I don't know! I don't keep track of all your human settlements!"

"Pssh," Feyera steadied the ship's orientation with a quick turn of the wheel. "It's not looking good; I can't see anything but the sun reflecting off the shoreline!"

"OH! Slow down!" Sana suggested clutching him from behind. "Please, I'm going to be sick!"

"Huh – uh –" Feyera slammed down on the engine's throttle, but it did little good. The boat continued its wavering approach, riding the shimmering waves as they broke against the shoreline. "Uh-oh."

"Now you've done it!" she hollered as the boat rammed into a sandbar. The hull shot skyward, knocking Feyera and Sana onto their backs and rolling. The refurbished metal hull made a horrible screeching noise as rock jetties tore into the Prima.

"OOF!" Feyera exclaimed, feeling an alarming sensation of déjà vu.

Sana struggled to her knees. "Well, looks like a perfect landing, captain." His glare managed to catch her as she rolled her eyes. "Now what? It sounds like the water is coming in!"

Feyera had to think quickly. "Can you swim?" he asked.

"SWIM?!" Sana exclaimed. "What type of uncivilized Pokemon do you take me for? My clothes
will get all wet!"

He shook his head. "Swallow your pride, Sana; we don't want to drown!" Quickly, he snatched his belongings and knapsack from the cabin. The water was already up to his knees!

"Thas Feyera, I don't want to get wet! My clothes, they'll be ruined!"

"I guess you should have thought about that before all the water adventures we've been on!" Feyera scolded, his tension rising with the water level.

"Argh! I hate it when you're right!" Sana said, pulling her skirt above the water. "Wait! What about a life boat?"

"There's no time!" Feyera shouted, as he kicked the cabin door wide open, "C'mon Sana! It's sink or swim!"

She reluctantly followed him to the vessel's edge. "Okay, ready?" he said, estimating the distance to shore. Even with the atrophy his body had faced, it appeared as if he could make it. "One, …!"

"WAIT!" she screamed, appalled that he leapt before reaching three. The two splashed into the temperate waters, and Feyera immediately began kicking to shore, tugging Sanaria's limp figure along.

It was hardly a journey, after a few strokes the water was shallow enough to stand in. Out of breath, Feyera stood up, and waddled to the beach.

"Gasp! Gasp!"

"Something the matter Sana?" Feyera turned to ask.

With a loud splash, she kicked water straight at him. "YES! Why didn't we ride Des?"

"Heh," Feyera smiled, amused by how the water had inflated her garments. "I suppose we could have done that, now that you mention it."

"WHAT?" she bellowed. "You mean, you didn't even think this plan through before pulling me into the water with you?!"

"I guess not," he said feeling a bit guilty. "It was all happening so quickly."

"Why…?!" she moaned. "Look, my entire gown is ruined."

"Relax, it'll dry, right?" Feyera said with a nervous smile.

"No! The way Gardevoir fabric is woven, it's not meant to be submerged in water."

"Oh…" Feyera gave her a friendly look. "Aw c'mon, it's not terrible; the look suits you."

"Have you gone blind?! I look like a puffed up Qwilfish!"

"Haha!" Feyera snickered. "At least we're okay though…"

"–We are absolutely not okay until you find me new clothes!"

"New…clothes?" Feyera said with a laugh of disbelief "Don't be silly, we have a world to save! We can go shopping another time. Trust me, backwards folks living out here in the boondocks have no
"sense of style."

"How could you be oblivious enough to think human garments would work!?"

"Umm… I mean, they work for me just fine."

"I am not you, thas Feyera," Sana said with a sigh, "I channel my energy through my movements in battle, unlike your brutish use of psychic power."

"Hey! I'm not a brute."

"Sure you're not," she rolled her eyes. "You're worse! How could you forget about Des?"

"I… uhh… Sana, you're always complaining about how Pokéballs are enslavement tools."

"So? What does that have to do with anything?" she asked pointedly.

Feyera shrugged. "I guess I forgot that I had the power of my Pokemon to rely upon."

"Oh brother!" she exclaimed. "You shouldn't feel guilty about what's already done! Brucie, Des, and July, they're your family now. And a family needs to take care of each other."

Feyera felt a knot in his throat. "Uh, yeah. Family… right."

She looked him dead in the eyes, "Listen, I know it might be hard not having a family of your own species, but at least you have others that rely and care about you. Never forget that."

"You know that's going to be difficult. How am I supposed to beat Cipher without putting my friends into harm's way? The mission we're on is full of danger."

"Hmm…" Sana hummed, "but it's not a danger to face on your own. You'd be a hypocrite to say you don't rely on your companions."

Feyera looked down at his heart. "You're right. I need the strength of my companions."

"That's more like it," Sana said happily. "C'mon, let's get off this beach. I think there's sand between my toes."

"Hmph. Good idea," Feyera said with a quick nod. Oddly, not a soul was in sight. Feyera had expected to see some anglers by the crash site. Yet the sleepy little town of Azalea seemed to be deserted, as they walked west down the empty main street.

"Thas Feyera, why are all the people inside?" Sana asked with worry in her tone.

"Hmm. How do you know they're indoors?" he asked. "Is it because of the boards of wood inside the windows?"

"Very observant," she muttered sarcastically. "But no, it isn't the barricaded windows. It's the people behind them."

"One would presume these hillbillies don't take kindly to strangers," Feyera said casually.

"I–I can feel them." She turned her head to a small brick home. "They're scared of something, thas Feyera."

"Scared?" he asked. "Of us?"
"I don't know the emotion's trigger, but the feeling of fright seems to be the prevailing wind of this little town."

"Fascinating."

"What's so fascinating about that? Aren't you worried?"

"A little. Still, I can't believe you're sensitive enough to pick up those types of things; to me, this place just reminds me of Lavender Town all over again."

"Lavender Town," she said hollowly, "that's where you encountered Haunter, the ghost of desecration."

"Yes. Team Rocket was responsible for unearthing Pokemon in the Tower. I believe they were attempting to procure Mercurium from the bodies that were laid to rest."

"How grotesque! Why would dead bodies have Mercurium?" Sana asked.

Feyera shook his head. "I don't know."

"At least you admit it," Sana said, still squeezing out water from her gown.

"Heh," Feyera chuckled softly, "would you rather me lie?"

"No. I like the honesty, but not the situation we're in."

"Indeed," Feyera said passing by a few residential houses adorned with wind charms on their balconies and porches. "It's like Lavender Town all over again. It even feels the same as Lavender…"

Sana stopped dead in her tracks.

"Hmm? Sana?" Feyera asked, wondering why she halted. "Something wrong?"

With very concerned eyes, she asked him slowly, "Thas Feyera, what did you just say?"

"Uhh… I said that it feels like Lavender Town, you know, missing people and all."

"Your instincts should not be questioned; if this is the same thing you felt in Lavender, we are undoubtedly in a great deal of danger."

"Ah, nonsense!" Feyera shook his head. "Besides, I'm trained to question my instincts as a scientist. Just because a situation feels similar doesn't mean that it's the same thing."

"I would be more cautious about dismissing your instincts." She looked down at a pile of lime bricks, most were neatly stacked, but a few had been knocked over as if the construction project had been hastily abandoned. "Something about this land isn't right."

"Okay, but I doubt Haunter or Team Rocket will be here. I mean, we're out in the sticks of Johto's countryside. This place is about as rural as it gets. The only noteworthy landmark nearby is the Union Cave. Heh, heh, what day of the week is it anyway? Team Rocket might be looking for a Lapras if it's Friday, haha!"

Frowning at his joke, she insisted, "Still, if you had a feeling inside…” She began to walk again, this time much closer to him. "Just promise to be careful."
"Of course," Feyera said, "so long as you stop spooking me like that."

"Oh…” she squeezed his arm "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"I'm not scared!" Feyera belted defensively. "Let's just get moving and find Kurt, he has to be somewhere around here!"

However, unbeknownst to the young man, a frail figure had been watching him through a magnified scope, tracking his every move from atop one of the boarded-up houses. "Hmm," growled the man steadily holding the long-barreled rifle, "Looks like a Kanto absconder is here to cause more trouble for Azalea. *Sigh* hasn't Team Rocket been enough for our town to worry about?!"
Chapter 4: Village of Ruins

A light breeze blew through the exposed alleyways of the desolate town. The earth, charred and barren, had only sparse patches of grass growing in the shadows of the dilapidated structures. The sun, shimmering high above, scorched the arid landscape which had long since relinquished its last precious drops of water. Wispy clouds circulated high overhead, floating like gentle white smoke, but rain not had fallen for months. The wells were dry. Drought had seized the land. And yet a tension remained in the air. A foreboding sense of dread.

"LOOK OUT!" screeched the Gardevoir, launching a burst of psychic energy with a twist of her wrist. The ensuing kinetic kick startled Feyera as he and Sanaria were knocked backwards.

"Whoa!" grunted the young man as he attempted to regain his footing. "What are you doing?!" he asked feeling her frail figure lean defensively beside him.

"Poacher!" she yelled out, "Above us, atop that building!"

"I'm on it!" Reflexive intuition barreling into action, he clutched his belt holster, and charged forward with a burst of speed. His heart pounded as he looked up at the rickety balcony, perched high atop a tattered wooden house. Below the sun-faded awning, stood the shadow of a man holding what appeared to be a rifle.

"WAIT!" called out her voice from behind, realizing he had not taken cover behind her Reflect. However, this was no time for stalling; Feyera had already quickly surveyed the land, and realized both he and his Pokemon had little cover to survive a firefight. There was simply nowhere else to go except towards the shooter Sana had identified in the nick of time. He had seen the threat through her eyes, viewed the menacing steel barrel peering out from behind an iron-guarded platform atop a decrepit residence directly ahead. Bizarre feelings and confusing memories had also transmitted through the shared sensory perception – he felt the terror of being hunted since birth. The twisted horror of countless generations of Ralts and their kin. It was an awful, visceral sensation – one which would have crippled him had he not understood its origin. Yet this foreign fear did not dissuade him from his objective: to take the fort. If he could draw attention towards the base of the house, perhaps then he could duck below the rifle's sight and use psyonics to leap onto the dilapidated roof to finish the job.

He thought he heard a faint voice, but the emotions guiding his body were far too potent – he could barely comprehend the inundating thoughts from his heart. Everything around him was blurring into necessary action as spiritual energy guided him. Perilously rushing across the ground and closing the distance, Feyera heard another voice – this one louder and more urgent. "HALT! I told you to stop, outlander! The property's littered with mines–!"

With frightening quickness, he looked down, and saw the flashing lights riddled across the land, some of them barely even buried beneath the surface. In the blink of an eye, one of the mines had tripped with an audible "beep beep BEEP!"

"Shit!" he said breathlessly as a crackle of thunder from beneath the earth sent him skywards. Unable to manipulate the incredible force, Feyera covered his face with his forearm as the blast below
ensued sending explosive debris every which way. From his tumbling vantage, he could barely right himself in time to allow the psyonic impulses to moderate his decent. In a panic of swirling dust, he caught a glimpse of his adversary, who had now exposed himself from behind the shelter.

It was now or never, a focused mental state had overtaken him, and he felt familiar swirling energy streaming out of his palms. "It's gonna take more than that to kill me!" he hollered vengefully, but the air had barely returned to his lungs causing his voice to be hoarse. Another step forward and he felt the ground rumble yet again. Another eruption of force from beneath the surface nearby knocked him to the ground with a thud. It was a graceless stumble followed by a sharp pain in his right leg. The sensation, though muffled by his adrenaline, quickly caused him to look down to find a palm's width of fragmentation in his thigh. Blood had begun to spill out from the injury. Based on the lack of forceful bleeding, no vital arteries had been hit but his leg muscle was completely out of commission. He swore loudly and yelped as his hand ran over the piece in an attempt to dislodge it. However, he immediately felt nauseated from the severe pain and collapsed.

"Thas Feyera!" Sana bellowed, advancing toward his prone body with a reflect shield aloft in front of her.

Then from the balcony came a gritty and old voice, "Order your Pokemon to stand down or I'll detonate the rest of the mines!" ordered the man stationed in the makeshift bunker.

Buckled on his side, Feyera grimaced in the sheer agony from the fall while a deceptively soft-blue light pulsed in steady busts not more than an arm's length away. The dry soil barely covered the mine. "Damn..." he said weakly, "it's no good, I... I can't move. You have to back off, Sana; these things are set off by motion. Don't come any closer!"

Sana abruptly halted in fear, and was now looking down at her feet.

"Last warning outlander!" said the man with a stern order, "Tell your Pokemon to stand down and who knows, I might just let you live to see tomorrow in one piece!"

Rising slowly to his knees, Feyera felt the fresh tearing of skin seize him. More warm blood trickled from a deep gash on his hip. The pain was pulsating, and he tried to minimalize the sensation by focusing all of his energy on assessing the situation.

Above the heavily guarded property a lone gunman stood with his rifle, now pointed skywards. In his other hand the man appeared to be holding the detonator – its short silver antenna glimmered brightly in the harsh sunshine. "Give up already, will you? Taking my stronghold isn't worth your life!" roared the man from afar.

"Please, Please, listen to him! You're badly hurt. There's no other way!" she protested. Without even needing to snap his head around he could sense Sanaria's frightened presence. Though he could no longer see clearly through her eyes, the bond of sensation was just strong enough to reveal her sentiments. "Please, you have to listen to me, thas Feyera! This isn't worth getting blown up over!"

Biting his lip in utter frustration, Feyera called out, "Fine! You win! We'll stand down." Though the thought of backing down from a challenge did not agree with him, there was no rational way to win this fight now that he was knocked down in the middle of the field.

"Smart move kid," said the man with smug laughter, "Now get up on your feet real slow, hands high where I can see them!"

Humiliated, Feyera obliged without a grumble. His tattered clothes had small puddles of blood from the nearly fatal explosion. Had the force not lofted him, he surely would have been gravely wounded
from the mine's blast. At this point he was grateful to still be breathing, although the defeat stung at his core. "Urgh..." he could not help but tremble from the pain as the recently aggravated scars on his body leaked precious lifeblood. "I... *cough*" gagging on saliva he tried to talk, but the words felt incredibly distant, their meanings leaving him confused and lost. "Why...why?" he managed to ask whilst extending both his hands skyward to surrender.

"I should ask you the same question!" said the stranger. "You're trespassing on my land after all!"

"Your ...land?" he asked feeling rather puzzled by the concept at first. Considering he was from Saffron, it didn't look like much. In fact, the rural area looked unhospitable for farming even without the minefield. Forcing a smirk he said back, "I don't suppose you value your land very much if you're willing to booby-trap it with explosives!"

"Humph." He placed his rifle to his side and crossed his arms with a scowl. "You sure are snarky for a young pup! To be honest, I wish it did not have to come to this. Yet this is the only way I can protect what is my own from those who wish to take it from me by force."

"...!" Oddly enough, those words rang true. Maybe it was from the blood loss, although in spite of the lightheaded feeling, the gunman did appear to have some sense about him. By now Feyera had gotten a clear sight of him. Perched defensively atop the wired roof, he must have stood not much taller than average. He wore a pocketed overcoat, camouflaged in white and grey to match the surrounding dismal environment. Clearly, he sought not to be disturbed – or discovered for that matter.

"So! Now that I have your attention, tell me, what gang of marauders sent you?"

"I'm not a raider!" Feyera shouted. "I don't have any qualms with you!"

"And yet here you are, intruding upon my property – that makes you a liar. I don't take kindly to liars, I'll tell you what."

"What's it to you!?" Feyera snarled, "I won't allow you to hurt my friends." He glanced down at his Pokéball holster. Brucie, Des, and July remained in their stasis chambers, awaiting a quick trigger release by the C-gear. However, Feyera refrained from further aggression; surely, if the gunman was willing to talk to him for this long, he may very well be moved by the young man's request. "My Pokemon are too important to me!"

"Your words are little more than recycled hypocrisy, phrases all trainers are taught to adopt."

"I told you I would stand down!" Feyera exclaimed with fury, placing his Pokéball holster down by the side of his ankle. "Promise me you won't hurt them! They're innocent."

"I wouldn't be entertaining the thought had you not attempted to rush at me."

"You were aiming a rifle at me, what was I supposed to believe?! If not for that, I wouldn't have felt we were in immediate danger," Feyera wittily retorted.

"My eyes aren't the best at my age," the man replied, "I was monitoring your movements, through my scope."

"Oh, so that is how it is!? You just peer through a gunsight and expect me to not suspect hostility?!" Angered beyond measure and facing increasing levels of pain from the recent injury, Feyera's natural intuitiveness still demanded answers. "Hold up. You called me an outlander before, how do you know I'm not from Johto?"
"Hah! Boy, I can count the number of people I trust from this region on one hand. And you're not one of 'em."

"Are you serious?" Feyera asked, looking around at the deserted landscape. "At least tell me what happened here since - as you've correctly deduced - I'm not from around here."

The gunman, stiff in his posture, remained silent. Gradually he lowered his hand holding the threatening detonator. "Why should I?" he asked.

"I-it's not like I can do anything! What happened to this town?" pressured a wounded Feyera. He frowned, unable to make direct eye contact or rely on Sana's powers to boost his own at this distance, leaving much ambiguity as to the circumstances of his situation. At the very least sensing a diminished level of hostility, Feyera lowered his arms and applied pressure on the gash at the side of his leg. "Gahh!" he moaned tightening his grasp on the site of the injury. As the arid soil mixed with his blood, the coppery scent became unbearably strong; his heart glimmered a pale red, pulsating with every noxious inhalation. "Please..." he pleaded, feeling his time quickly draining away.

Finally the gunman spoke, "Why have you brought such a creature with you to this place?"

"Creature?" she snapped in riled anger. "How dare he say such a thing!"

"Sana, ease up!" he said shooting her a look warning her not to advance. "I don't know what you are talking about, I'm a Pokemon trainer and -"

But it was already too late, as their secret was out in the open, as obvious as the heart upon Feyera's chest. "So, you taught a Gardevoir to speak with the voice of a human being?" the man asked with a disgusted expression. "...How could you do such a thing?"

"I-I don't know what you are talking about," he replied nervously, "I'm just a Pokemon trainer and -"

"-Don't play coy; I spotted it with my scope before you even saw my rifle," interrupted the man with an accusing finger, "Your chest and your Gardevoir, there's something unnatural about the two."

"Ah -" Feyera flushed "- yes, well you're very keen to take notice of such things," he responded fretfully.

"Don't mock my observations, kiddo," chided the mysterious gunman. "That was no ordinary jump. I figured your Pokemon had something to do with it, but at that distance that does not make any sense. Unless..." he paused, and then quickly shook his head. "I sensed something off about you and your Pokemon the moment you set foot in Azalea."

"So this is Azalea?" Feyera replied suppressing a tight smirk – thankful for the information regarding their present location. "'Huff...!* I would have expected a quiet little town like this to be more hospitable to travelers. Looks like I was sorely mistaken..."

"True, you know nothing about the Azalea I once knew," he said with a serious tone, the shadows of his bunker concealing an old and cragged face, "as I said already – very few are left who do."

"And yet you'd expect me to know such things? I'm not even from around here as you already pointed out!" Feyera rebuked his wound tearing open further from the agitated stance. "Ah!" he crouched down in pain. "My heart!" he cried out as energy pathways continued to twist and coil through his aching body. "Gugh...it's tearing at my body from within!"

"Thas Feyera!" Sana telepathically conveyed, distraught with anxiety, "You mustn't move!"
"I'll be fine!" he quickly lied; knowing her drive to rescue him was reaching unprecedented levels. It was difficult enough to control his own physical pain, let alone her radiant feelings. "*Stay back, the field is riddled with his traps.*"

"I'll rise above them!" she said quickly trying to formulate a plan, "*I'll levitate like before and—*"

"No!" Feyera said sternly. "*They detect motion, not weight. It's bad enough one of us should have to suffer through our bond. This isn't your fault. Don't jeopardize the situation any further.*"

"*Thas Feyera…I…don't know what to do.*"

"I shouldn't have rushed ahead without thinking," he admitted embarrassingly. "*This is all my fault, that's why we're separated.*"

"I can't accept that – I won't let you die alone!"

"I can tell it really cares for you," interjected the gunman.

"Of course I do!" Sana cried out in a pitch of fevered emotion. "And I'm not an 'it', you decrepit old basta—"

"-Sana, now isn't the time," Feyera interjected. "*Don't you see? Hearing a Pokemon speak with the voice of a human upsets him.*"

"But I can only speak because of you! You taught me when our hearts kissed! A part of you stayed with me and I can't lose the rest of it!"

"Sanaria, I told you cannot follow me here, it's too dangerous."

"But…!"

"Humph. I don't want another corpse on my hands. Our town's once peaceful fields have been polluted with far too much loss already; I will not stand by and watch you slowly die before my eyes, despite what you've done."

"Y–you're going to let me live?" Feyera asked in confusion. "And my Pokemon too? After all of that?"

"I can see that you're badly hurt. And to be honest, I'm surprised my mine didn't outright kill you. To let you bleed out and die would be cruel and unjust to your friend."

"Thank you…" said Sana.

"Thanks…" Feyera quivered, "Hey, wait a second! What about the mines?"

"I will disable them remotely, after all they're not Voltorb" he said firmly. "But you'll have to trust me. These are devices I built, and they obey my control."

"You build mines?!" Feyera asked in bewilderment.

"Among other things," replied the man as he adjusted a nob on the detonator device. "There. It should be safe to walk over now."

"*Should* be?" asked Feyera trying not to sound as terrified as he actually was.

"*Listen to him,*" said a voice by his side. "*I trust him.*"
"Sana!" he exclaimed in disbelief upon seeing her standing on one of the devices. It had ceased its ominous blinking. "I – ahh – phew, you're all right."

"Of course I'm all right, the man said I would be! But you're not, and that needs to change."

Feyera shook his head, bemused by how trusting Sanaria was. If it was her nature to be this way, then it was a wonder she had managed to stay alive – especially around him.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Can you still walk?" she asked innocently. Her palm graced his shoulder and the stinging sensation subsided for a moment, giving him clarity.

"I think so." By the time he had gotten to his feet, he noticed the gunman was already downstairs and opening the reinforced door to the residence. In spite of the terrible damage he had taken, and the unknown future ahead, he could not help but give her a smile as she helped him to his feet. Arm in arm they walked over the field of mines and towards the open door.
Chapter 5: The House on the Hill

It was a long walk, filled with anxiety and the steady feeling of unease. The "house" before them was barely even capable of being qualified as such judging from its decrepit exterior. Yet there was nothing else to do but trust the mysterious figure who had since departed into the structure's interior from the second-story balcony.

Feyera mutely addressed his companion with uninhibited discomfort, "Is this the only way, Sana?"

She looked at him with a stern gaze. "Yes. It is the only way," she replied with a pale expression, "Your heart is still beating after all."

"You have a point," he said with an injured arm held tightly against his chest. His leg felt numb with pain from the explosion, and a small piece of metal protruded out from above his kneecap. Though he limped with each step forward, Sana helped to steady him. "If that guy wanted us dead, he could have detonated all the mines with the flip of a switch… Unless he was bluffing, which is not entirely beyond the realm of possibilities."

"What? You're so cynical, you know that?" she answered with a pout. "What would he even stand to gain from such a ruse?"

"Well… I… That nature of mine is what has kept me alive, isn't it?" he said backpedaling with his words.

"You're unbelievable!" Abruptly, she reached her arm around his shoulder and clutched at his heart. The suddenness of her maneuver surprised him.

"Hey!" he said with a start. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know. But if this is considered 'living' for you then you still have a lot to learn."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you need to stop nearly getting yourself killed!" she demanded with a high pitched voice indicative of her fevered emotion.

"I - Gee, I'm sorry," he apologized with the revelation of how much she cared about him. True, he had considered how expendable his life was after regaining the memories of his atrocious past. But as long as Sanaria had placed value on his life, there was indeed some reason however remote to continue his existence. Even if he could not atone for his wrongful actions, there was still a life that mattered beyond his own half-baked concept of 'redemption'.

By now they had approached the house without issue besides their own bickering and the door was opened by an oddly short man. Was it the same gunman who had been perched on the roof? Shifting back into the shadows of the building, he beckoned the both of them indoors with a rushed wave of his stocky arms.

The two of them crossed the threshold, walking into what could only be described as a shelter of
sorts. It was once a home, the interior walls were painted with a warm chestnut wallpaper, and tall floor lamps illuminated large photographs in the main foyer. Antiques and craftwork dotted the countertops of the main living area, with the kitchen being set further back behind a slightly ajar sliding oak door. In short, Feyera felt deceived, the outside of the bunker had given him an entirely different perspective. He wondered how long the gunman, who was now by some twist of fate now their host, had lived here. Probably for weeks, he figured to himself as Sanaria walked directly beside him in this strange place, her hand resting comfortably upon his jagged core. The lodging even smelt like a home, the musky air quickly reminded Feyera of days gone by, despite the distinctive odor of a generator wafting in from nearby.

The stocky man walked on ahead though a hallway, not paying much attention to his guests in spite of initially trying to keep them away at all costs. Something about him had changed. True, the gunman was a lot shorter now that he was not perched atop the house's upstairs lookout station, but there was something else that Feyera could not quite put his finger on. He walked with a slight limp, and his crooked back gave away his advancing age. Together they reached the living room, with tall ceilings and countless books and gadgets cozily nested in the bookshelves lining the walls.

Tossing his camouflaged overcoat on the nearby bench, he turned around and said, "I don't have much to offer you, but if you want to treat those open wounds of yours, I would advise using antiseptic before infection sets in. There's some in my first aid kit--" the man walked over to a bookshelf, standing up on a hand-carved wooden stool to accommodate for his lack of height "--here." With his piercing eyes he tossed Feyera the white medical bag.

Catching it offhand, Feyera thanked him. "I…err…thanks I suppose."

"Pah." He seemed to be annoyed by the gratitude, crossing his arms with a frown. "I told you already, kid; the less time you spend here the better. Hurry up and fix yourself up," he replied crabbily. "You're very lucky to be alive."

"Right." Feyera found it odd how the old man did not make a comment on his chest, nor about the psychic at his side. Sitting down on one of the teak benches, he could not help but notice one of the prominent pictures on the wall. He immediately recognized the tall and imposing figure – it was none other than Professor Oak! Though he appeared much younger, there was no mistaking his serious expression and he even held a Pokédex in his jacket's breast pocket. Standing beside him were two others, one appeared to be the gunman in his younger years. Though he still had cloudy white hair, it had not begun to recede. Beside him was a pretty lady, full-figured, and with determined hazel eyes. The gracefully tall brunette had an arm around a younger-looking gunman and she was obviously concealing a beaming half-smile with a faux serious expression. She wore a bright cerulean dress that draped down to her heels and sported a brooch necklace with a large white flower. Unsure of what to say, Feyera offhandedly commented, "So, you're one of Professor Oak's friends too?"

He shrugged, appearing not to care much for the subject. "So what?"

"I was curious since he gave me a Pokédex," Feyera said although he was not quite sure whether he still even had the technological device in his bag. "Did you know him personally?"

"Sure, I knew him, kid," he answered with a grimace. "That was years ago. Oak was a brilliant man, but he was also in cahoots with the League."

"The Pokemon League, right?"

"The very same, aren't you smart?" he responded sarcastically. His stout frame bobbedled as he walked a nearby clothed seat.
Feyera answered with a frank statement, "They are the only form of government we have."

"YOU have," he corrected with a bitter expression, his eyes piercing like a pair of honed daggers. "They don't much care about folks out here. In the end, forming the League never did us any good..." he grumbled angrily. However, the old man's subtle hostility was quickly masked by a change in subject. "Here, you better use some of this as well," he said giving Feyera a bottle of "Feraligatr-Brand" vodka from a nearby cabinet. It was one-hundred-and-sixty proof according to the label, which had a comical illustration of a giant, blue and beige jawed Pokemon guzzling the booze. "Take a swig if you have to."

He knew better than to do that, but a quick glance at the look on Sanaria's face showed her utter confusion. "Why would you ever drink that alcohol?" she asked him telepathically. "That's poisonous!"

He closed his eyes, ignoring her questioning in order to prepare himself for the inevitable sting. Tightly gripping the glass bottle of makeshift antiseptic, he liberally emptied some of the contents onto a clean white bandage. Though Sana was dulling the pain through their bonded hearts, he knew the application would hurt, perhaps even more than removing the piece of shrapnel partially imbedded in his thigh. Holding his breath, he poured the some of the alcohol on his new wound and the overwhelming pain riled all of his senses at once. "Argh...!" he bit his tongue in discomfort, and Sana pressed her head against his shoulder. Quickly feeling a break in the insurmountable burning, his desperate hand reached for the medical tweezers, and delicately pulled the mine's shrapnel free from his flesh. "Ahh... Ahhh!" he panted as the pieces gradually came loose from the side of his leg.

"It will be okay, thus Feyera, the worst is over;" she whispered in his ear. "You'll heal quickly if you rest."

Feyera knew that was a lie she concocted to help comfort him, he had learned her tricks well by now. There was no more time for rest. Not with Cipher on the warpath. "Oooh, that stings!" he said hastily enfolding an additional bandage on top of the blood-soaked gash. "Arrgh!" Biting on his lip in agony, he looked over at the white haired man, who was watching the interaction with perplexed silverly eyes. Feyera quickly met his gaze with a frown, "Say, mister, how about you help take my mind off this pain: what happened here? Why are you bunkered up in this place? Why the...arrghhh! - mines?"

Briefly contemplating the request, the stocky man furrowed his extraordinarily bushy eyebrows. "That's not something I need to share. Especially with an outlander so clueless as to what is happening to the world. If you still believe in your precious Pokemon League, you're probably better off not knowing."

This dismissal only intrigued Feyera further. With the tattered remnants of daily life seemingly cast aside, he wondered what had made this man into the recluse that he currently was. Surely the esteemed Professor Oak wouldn't be on speaking terms with a paranoid hermit. Would he?

Suddenly the sliding oak door opened! A little girl wearing a cheerful pink dress with white polka dots barged into the room. "Grandpa! Grandpa!" she squealed excitedly dancing, "We have guests! Yay!"

"Maisy!" scolded the elderly man, "I told you to wait downstairs in the safety room."

She quickly skipped over to Feyera, bounced up and down energetically by his side as her neatly combed brown hair in a bun unraveled. "No! I heard voices. That means other people are here." Her sunny blue eyes opened wide upon seeing Sana. "Ooh! What a pretty Pokemon!"
“…!” Sanaria flinched as the small girl rushed to grab her. "H-hey!" she blurted, then letting out a ticklish laughter when Maisy grabbed her arm.

"Hah, looks like you made a new friend." Feyera couldn't help but genuinely smile at Sana's reaction to the little girl.

"That's enough, Maisy, go back to your room and play with the toys grandpa made for you, it isn't safe here," he ordered sternly.

"NO! Toys are boring, grandpa," Maisy said as she latched on tighter to Sana. "I want to stay here with the pretty Pokemon!"

She let go of his heart and looked innocently at the little "Pretty…?" Sana repeated, first through her telepathic bond with him, and then aloud. "You think I'm pretty?"

"OOOH! You can talk too?" the small child exclaimed with a great voice that belied her diminutive frame. "What is your name? I'm Maisy, M-A-I-S-Y!"

Sana's cheeks flushed a bright rose color, and she leaned back towards the table, feeling overwhelmed by the little girl's energy. Feyera gave Sana's hand a squeeze, and said, "It's okay, go ahead, why don't you tell her?"

"Sana… you can call me Sana," she said softly. With a confused glower, she looked back at Feyera, who served as her functional liaison with humanity. "Are all human children this excitable?" she asked him privately.

"Haha!" Feyera chuckled at the interesting interaction between the two. Finally, the sharp pain in his chest had begun to subside, but frankly he wasn't sure if the soft bandage on his gashed leg had been the cause of relief or if it was the lighthearted interaction taking place before his eyes.

By now the older man had given up on sending Maisy back to her room, and instead he weakly reprimanded, "Honey, what did I teach you about talking to strangers or their Pokemon?" He kept a distrustful pair of eyes on Feyera all the while.

"I know grandpa, you're supper cautious," she said shaking her chocolate colored hair in an energetic headshake. "But I miss my Pokemon. I miss my little helper, Pinky. I'm so lonely. Why did mommy have to go away with Pinky?"

By now Sanaria was opening up to the little girl, demonstrated by her less defensive posture. She asked innocently, "Where did your mommy and Pinky go?"

Immediately, Feyera could sense the heightened unease in the room. With a downtrodden glare, the elderly man looked although he had just taken a hit to the heart. Maisy shrugged and quickly said, "AWAY!" she then lowered her voice, "Mommy and Pinky went away. I dunno where. I really miss them both though." Then she nodded optimistically at Sanaria. "I hope they come back home soon, I want them to meet you Sana!"

"Maisy…" said the man with a very fragile tone. A tremor in his hoary eyes said it all.

The little girl hugged Sanaria's leg. She barely was taller than her knee, and couldn't be much older than four or five. "I love daddy and I know he misses mommy very much. Grandpa is cool too, the toys he makes for me to play with are fun but I want Pinky and mommy to come home."

"Maisy, that's enough…" he said, "please, go back to your room, I promise I'll make you a new toy if you do."
"I don't want a new toy though! I want a Pokemon," she said defensively holding on, "and I want my mommy back!"

Understanding the situation, Feyera gave her an encouraging smile, "Don't worry Maisy, your mommy is happy for you and your daddy."

Her tiny fingers played with Sana's skirt. "Really?" she asked, a little untrusting. "Wait. Why should I believe you? You look kinda funny. Do you know where they are?"

"Well, no, I don't." Something strange had occurred, instead of giving her a lie or an explanation, the former scientist simply nodded and said, "But I know your mommy is with you whenever you think of her."

"Yeah, okay, whatever, but who are you?" she asked crossing her arms. "You look really weird."

"Oh me?" he said, taken aback by childish curiosity that rivaled his own, "My name's Mister Feyera, I used to be a Pokemon Doctor."

She looked at him skeptically. "A doc-tor? Hmm… You sure don't look like a doc-tor to me."

He tried to laugh it off. "Ah, well, you see that was a very long time ago. Before I became a Pokemon Trainer."

"Oh, I think I get it," Maisy said with a smile of revelation, "you're not a people doc-tor. You take care of Pokemon like Sana."

Feyera nodded. "Yes. Very good, I can tell you're going to go far with that clever head of yours. Maybe one day when you grow up you can be a doctor too."

Sana laughed – seeing a side of him he had not exposed made her feel even more curious about the intricacies of human relationships. Her brief chuckle was brief since Maisy knocked the wind out of her with another tight hug.

"I want to be a trainer too one day!" Maisy said resolutely. Then she looked up, "I never met a talking Pokemon before! Sana, will you be my Pokemon?"

"N–no!" she belted defensively at the thought of submitting to human will. "I will absolutely not be your pet!"

Maisy's eyes quivered and grew glassy with impending tears. "W-why not? Don't you like me? *Sniff*"

Feyera quickly gave her a nudge in the side and said, "C'mon Sana, she's only a child. Be nice to her."

"Why won't you like to be my Pokemon, Sana?!" wailed the little girl. "Is there something a'matter with me?"

"I…I…" Sana stuttered, completely taken off-guard by what was occurring around her. She never fathomed human interactions with young children could be this stressful. "I'm sorry, of course, whatever you say, I'll be your Pokemon, Maisy."

"Really?!" she asked excitedly reaching for the Gardevoir's shimmering heart. At first, she quivered, fighting the instinctive reaction to back away from the touch. But when the child touched her heart, a warm glow radiated throughout the room. "It's so pretty!"
"So, 'Doctor'," came the voice of the old man who had been very quiet up until now, "you know who I need to protect."

Feyera shook his head disapprovingly though, "Locking her up here isn't going to help her to overcome what she needs to."

"You fool!" he shouted angrily. Sanaria and Maisy both flinched. The little girl sought comfort in the Gardevoir's embrace. The elderly man continued to defend his stance, "You have no business telling me how to raise my granddaughter. She needs me more now than ever after everything that has happened here in this town."

"I'm sure she does," Feyera remembered back to his childhood, recollecting his absent parents. "But if you keep her locked up in this dangerous place all her life, she'll never learn see past the wrongs of the world."

This infuriated the man, and his temper rose. "How dare you lecture me on parenting!" he snapped as beads of sweat gathered on his wrinkly brow. "If you knew the evils of this land, then surely you too would -"

Feyera quickly interrupted him with a collected voice, "- Which is precisely why we should be discussing the current situation without the ears of little children nearby, no?"

Thankfully, the reasoning worked. "Maisy, I want you to go downstairs," he said trying hard to refrain from shouting. "I need to speak to our guest here alone."

Maisy held onto Sanaria tightly though, refusing to be released. "No!" she said defiantly. "I'm not gonna go anywhere! I'mma big girl."

"Please, be a good girl and listen to grandpa," insisted the aggravated grandfather.

"NO!" Maisy clung on tighter to Sana's waist. "I'm staying here! With Sana!"

Seeing the tensions throughout the room rising in hues of rich scarlet, Feyera quickly spoke up, "Say, Maisy, why don't you show Sana your toys grandpa built for you? I'm sure she'd love to see them."

Sanaria shot him a confused look. "What?!

"Aw, c'mon," he said nonchalantly, "wouldn't that be fun, Sana? I'm sure Maisy has a lot of fun toys for you to play with. Maybe you can make them float with your powers. I'm sure Miss Maisy would love that."

"My powers aren't for playing games -!" she cried out to little avail.

"Yes!" Maisy said happily tugging on the fabric she wore. "I like that idea. We'll play together just like mommy and Pinky!"

"M-mommy?!

"H-hold on! You're just using me to get rid of the baby in the room!"

Feyera smirked. "It'll be good for you both, just play nice, why don't you."

"Yay!" Bouncing joyfully onto the floor, she tugged on Sana's arm and pulled at her clothes. "Let's go, Sana! C'mon, C'MON!"
"Eeep!" Sana cried out. "Wait…! I'm not your - ! Hey, that hurts!"

"Gee, you're slower than Pinky, and she was a SLOWpoke!" urged Maisy. "Let's play now."

Feyera gave her a gentle push on the back and set her up on her feet. "Go along you two, have fun together!"

She glared at him from across the room; being dragged along by Maisy's surprisingly strong tugs. Sanaria appeared hopelessly defeated by the youthful persistence. "This isn't fair at all, thas Feyera! I hate you!" she said telepathically.

"Okay, bye bye," he said with a friendly wave and a satisfied grin.
Maisy and Sanaria had barely left the room, when the jaded old man barked, "Just who are you to come here and try to disrupt our already broken lives?!

Put on the defensive, he shook his head. "I told your granddaughter already what my name is, it's Feyera and I'm a –"

"– Baloney!" he interrupted with a distrusting glare. "You expect me to believe a cheap lie like that? Your deception is seriously trying my patience and – believe me – I don't have much patience to begin with!"

"Oh boy, this old geezer is crabbier than a Krabby on the beach," Feyera thought.

"Who sent you and what are you here for?" he pressured, squinting his eyes in a way that made his face appear all bunched together. Had he not been yelling, the scene would be quite comical. "Was it the group of marauders outside the town promising you a quick bounty?"

Deliberating over his next words carefully, Feyera started out slowly, "Listen, I can tell you're upset. But I'm not here to take anything away from you. In fact, I'm looking for someone who can help me out with a significant problem. The whole world is in terrible danger because of a group of people that want to –"

"–Forget it! I'll have no part in it!" the man said quickly with a feeling of unease. "Can't you see? This 'town' you came to is completely done in! There's no one left who cares about these smaller villages. I have enough to worry about here at home. Honestly, just surviving is enough. Is it too much to ask for me to live alone in peace with the last surviving thread of my family!?"

"I'm sorry," Feyera looked over at the picture again with Professor Oak in it. Was the woman in the photograph related to him? She definitely could have been; they shared the same almond-shaped eyes. Come to think of it, her eyes also looked a lot like Maisy's. He thought better than to raise that.

"This is really important…" he urged with a stern glare. "If you'll just hear me out, you'll understand why I've come all this way out here."

The man turned his back to Feyera, and faced the image that hung on the wall. "Important…? Take a good look around, kid! What could possibly be so important at a time like this?"

Feyera tried again to be direct with him. "Look, I'll be straight with you, gramps; I'm searching for a Pokéball artisan that is said to live around here."

The man let out a deep sigh, his hunched shoulders arcing further down with his exhale. "If you're looking for someone to craft you some Pokéballs, you've come to the wrong town. There's no one left here. Can't you see what Team Rocket has done to our town!?"

"Ah ha, Team Rocket!" he exclaimed in a mixture of resentment and frantic worry. "So, they're the ones responsible for all of this?"

"Oh, you've heard of them?" he asked with a strong tone of disdain. It appeared as though he had
just tasted a very sour berry indeed. "How uncanny," he cynically added.

Feyera felt a lump form in his throat as a pitch of nervousness overtook him. "To be fair, who hasn't?" he answered, deflecting the accusation. However, buried within his nonchalant response was a deep sense of regret and resentment to have ever been associated with the organization of criminals currently terrorizing the people here in Johto. He sincerely hoped that the man he was talking with did not pick up on his not too distant compunctions.

"They're not the ones that sent you then?" asked the older man mistrustingly. His worried expression showed Feyera hints of an abstract fear, not of the criminal organization itself, but of atrocities he had seen committed in their name; for this was different from the usual sensation of fear Feyera had been able to perceive before in others. The peculiar colors pertaining to emotions, which typically flavored the environment around their source of origin, were simply not present. Rather than that deep indigo color that his eyes associated with fear in the past, there was instead only a murky grey fog, thickly blanketing the already dim room. He pondered this unusual change in his idiosyncrasy, but only for a moment, figuring that it could also be due to the lack of Sana's presence nearby.

"Correct," Feyera said with a look of aversion on his face. "I – err… I know they did terrible things to Pokemon in an effort to further their own ambitions. I won't give up until they've been dealt with and their atrocities put to an end. That is my mission."

"Hah. That's some wild idealism," said the old man with a fleeting smile. "Kid, you need to slow down. No one crosses the Rockets and gets off the hook, believe me I –"

Feyera quickly interrupted him, "– It's not mere idealism! I may look weak, but what if I told you I already defeated Archer, one of their pit-leaders in Celadon?"

"WHAT!?" The man quickly turned around in worry. He shook his head frantically as he peered out of a shaded window behind him. Even though it was clearly daylight outside, the small window did very little to illuminate the gloomy atmosphere within the house. "No, no, no! Then you have to leave right away, the Rockets never forget an attack on one of their ranking admins, it's only a matter of time before they follow you here to seek their revenge!"

"Relax," Feyera urged with a cocky vaunt, "They have no idea where I am. I managed to make a clean break for it after infiltrating their base. Granted… I also had considerable help back then."

"You don't get it, do you?!" he shouted, clearly distraught. Slamming the blinds closed, he walked back over to the bench in the center of the living room. "This isn't about being faster than them! This place, my granddaughter, none of it is safe with you around! I'm sorry, but you need to leave at once, we're not going to get caught up in this anymore than we already have."

"I understand your concern." Feyera tried to level with him, his determined gaze unwavering. "But you welcomed me into your house for treatment, and I'm only really in need of one thing in particular. It's the reason I came here in the first place: to find a Pokéball craftsman named Kurt. A good man sent me here to look for him. Told me he would help."

"Kurt…" he said with an uncomfortably long pause, "was killed during the raids on our town."

"He has to be lying," thought Feyera. Tiny beads of sweat were gathering on his temples, and his keen mind had already deconstructing the falsehood. Avoidance of direct eye contact. A quivering upper lip. Even the faintest scent of primal fear became apparent through the latent psionic powers. "Oh really?" Feyera rebuked with an irritated scowl. "Why don't you tell me how he died then?"

The man furrowed his brow and his silvery eyes quavered. "Well, how should I know?" he asked.
Another uncomfortable delay followed. "…Team Rocket decimated our town. It was a calculated operation that started two weeks ago. First, they took the Slowpoke, our town's famous mascots. No one fought back out of fear; we thought they would leave after they had taken what they wanted. They subverted our Gym Leader, Bugsey, and still, no one fought the group of vandals believing this was all temporary, and that the Pokemon League would surely intervene. But there was no aid from the Indigo Plateau. No acknowledgement of Team Rocket's presence. Our people could not even flee through the Ilex Forest to Goldenrod for help. Instead, we had to hunker down. By the time the townsfolk realized this was a slow attrition, it was too late. Their heinous dogs were set loose to pillage the rest of the village."

"WHAT?" Feyera could not believe what he was hearing. He didn't know what he hated more, Team Rocket or the way that the town's destruction was orchestrated. "You didn't fight back? You allowed them to ransack the entire town?! How… How could you…? How could anyone stand by and just allow that to happen?!"

"You have to understand, it wasn't my choice to fight back. I had too much to lose. And yet, I was ultimately foolish. Our town's mayor, and Azalea's de facto leader, established a faux treaty with Team Rocket. He honestly believed they would leave us town-folk alone if we just gave them what they wanted – the Slowpoke. We're simple folks out here." The older man shook his head. "How could we hope fight back? The thugs who came for them were armed with advanced firearms and more vicious Pokemon than you can imagine. One of them was capable of bending the fabric of reality itself. It was truly a terror to behold … so wickedly unnatural."

"That sounds like the Team Rocket I know," Feyera growled. He could feel his temper rising. "Looks like their ranks out here abuse the people of Johto just as much as those from Kanto," he said conclusively.

"Kanto?" he repeated with a look of distaste. "You wouldn't understand, city-slicker. At least Kanto has the International Police Force intercepting every move the Rockets make – forcing them to act with some amount of discretion. Here in Johto, we aren't as lucky. Outside of the major cities, the population dwindles, allowing ample opportunity for unchecked criminal activity. Even the local sheriff was being paid in revenue from the Rocket's crimes of selling Slowpoke Tails."

"That's unpleasant, but not uncharacteristic of Team Rocket. I've seen this unrestrained malice before however," Feyera said as a chill ran up his side, causing him to impulsively clutch at his heart just thinking about the Pokemon Tower. "Small villages on the frontier of society may have little defense, but you should know Team Rocket also makes their appearance in populated areas, like Celadon City."

"Celadon you say?" asked the man his eyes faintly lighting up, if only for a brief moment. "I have a good friend from that city."

"You do?" Feyera asked.

The man said frankly, "My friend from Celadon hasn't gotten back to me in quite some time and - truth be told - I fear the worst. You wouldn't happen to know much about the city would you?"

"Maybe I know a few things about it. However… You've continuously danced around the question, and haven't told me who you are. Although, I certainly have a strong feeling that you're the person I'm looking for." His eyes suddenly felt very warm, and he had to actively concentrate on suppressing his psyonics from being employed on the older man. "No… I can't use it," he whispered to himself, "I won't let it…control me…I'm in control."

"Is something the matter with you?" asked the man as Feyera covered his eyes with his hand,
feigning a rub to his forehead.

"No, nothing's wrong," Feyera said shortly. "Just, call it a hunch I've been having this whole time."
Lowering his hand from his head, his once glimmering eyes lost their paranormal luster as his will overcame the urge to indulge in the stolen power once again. "I did it, I resisted using it," he thought, feeling relieved.

"Then how about you tell me something: who sent you here to find Kurt?" the man said, finally giving ground to his identity.

"A man named Fredrick Irving sent me to find you," Feyera said with conviction.

"Fredrick?!" exclaimed the man, with a shocked look on his aged face. "Of the International Police? By Jove, you must be joking! Why didn't you say so sooner? Are you his messenger or something? Is he coming to save our town from Team Rocket?"

"Since you know about him, you must be his contact, Kurt." Although feeling deeply troubled, Feyera did not hesitate with his answer, "Listen, I don't know how to say this, but Fredrick is no longer with us. He… well, he couldn't possibly still be alive after everything that happened in the Sevii Islands."

"Impossible!" denied Kurt raising an angry clenched fist into the air. "Fredrick's a hero and a dear old friend of mine." His cragged face was flushed with anger. "Don't you dare say such things!"

"I wouldn't say it unless it was true. Fredrick was like a father to me; his sacrifice is the only reason why I'm still alive today with my Pokemon." Feyera tried his best to not recall the scene in vivid detail. "It was a noble act," he said, "I have no reason to lie to you about the deceased."

Kurt bowed his head. "Then, that means no one is going to save us. Damn. All is lost," he whispered solemnly retreating into his own forlorn thoughts. "Without his help we're doomed."

"No!" Feyera slammed his open hand on the wooden table. "That's where you're wrong, Kurt! I'm going to finish what Fredrick started and put an end to this madness! That's my mission as a reformed man."

"Pah, you? Reformed? Don't make me laugh. You're barely old enough to pass for twenty. You haven't had the years to reform anything, you're still wet behind the ears."

"Don't mock me, old-timer," he replied stubbornly. "At least I actually want to do something to try and change the world. Unlike you."

Kurt laughed nervously, "Hah, kids these days with their overblown hubris. Don't you see? You can't change anything. And do you want to know why? Because Team Rocket has no boundaries. You get in their way - they'll kill you then and there without even flinching. Their unrestrained greed in the name of profit will strike fear even into the self-righteous. Consider this for a moment: the Pokemon League allows the Rockets to operate legally under their poorly veiled fronts and proxies. By Jove, some of the certified Gym Leaders have connections to Team Rocket."

Truth be told, this did not surprise Feyera. "Gym Leaders are no saints, that much I've learned the hard way," he said thinking about Brucie and how Koga had mercilessly used the most vicious of battle techniques during their 'regulation' battle in Fuchsia City. In fact, this grim information only served to further his convictions regarding the dystopian society he lived in. "The battles, the gyms, the badges, all of it is just an elaborate way to distract people from what's really going on. And I, of all people, fell for it. It was my Pokemon – my friends – that suffered though for my mistake."
"People rule the civilized world, that much is true, and when people are in positions of power, sometimes that power gets to their head," Kurt said with a long sigh. "Unpleasant concept - considering you never know who will remain true to their convictions when they are given a role of authority."

"I'm not afraid of those people though," Feyera said stubbornly, though he wasn't sure whether he was trying to convince himself or the man he was speaking to. Either way, he shook his head and pressed onward saying, "The world may be terribly corrupted, but I won't allow those irrational fears to rule it. Instead, I'll forge my own path forward."

"It's not only you though, there are other people in this world that fear the atrocities people and Pokemon are capable of committing." His bushy eyebrows furrowed low. "Fear paves the way for those who wish to exploit those terrors. In a sense, fear is cyclical. It feeds off itself. Feedback responses further encourages it in more and more people. People's fears rule everything around them with an iron fist. The sooner you learn that, the better."

"Fredrick taught me not to be afraid. He refused to fear Team Rocket and Cipher even when his own life was in mortal danger. …That's why I'm here." Feyera paused, and the feeling of remorse began sinking in. "And you know what, Kurt? That actually meant something to me. All my life I've been running away instead of facing my fears."

"Fear is necessary for survival lest you forget," insisted Kurt. "The only reason Team Rocket hasn't murdered the last threads of my family is because I built defenses around my house! Like you said, as a group they're too powerful to fight head-on. There's no help coming from the International Police, the best I can do is keep them at bay until…"

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"No," Feyera said with a stern expression and not allowing him to finish that hopeless sentence. "That's where you're wrong, Kurt. You might be able to delay their advance with your security contrivances, but if they force your granddaughter Maisy to live in the shadow of the place you once called home out of fear, then in the end, there are no victors, only people who have lost what it means to really live."

Those words seemed to resonate with Kurt. "You cannot expect to defeat them all," he replied, "doing so would be a death wish."

"I do not intend to fight them all. Just their leaders. Cut off the head of an Ekans and the body dies. That's why I'm here. I need your help, Kurt." Feyera raised a clenched fist into the air. "Let's put an end to Team Rocket together!"

"Forget it, kid. They killed my daughter!" Kurt's eyes welled with emotion. "Shot her in the back with a Gauntlet as she tried to run to safety after the first raids on the town! The fucking bastards had their Houndoom drag her body away before she was even dead! I could never explain the awful scene to my granddaughter. H-how do you explain such malice to a child?!" Kurt sniffled as tears began to form. He quickly wiped them away with the sleeve of his shirt. "No, you simply cannot explain it. How can you explain something so awful? It is utterly futile to try to comprehend that evil, much less explain it. All I've done, everything I've done since that terrible day is try to protect Maisy from the horrors this wicked world."

"I think I understand now. But I have one more question for you: Do you honestly think that's the end of it?" Feyera asked with a determined expression on his face. "They're not going to stop. Not yet. Innocents – your loved ones – have died because of Team Rocket's wickedness, yes, but if you do nothing but hide instead of facing your fears, you allow them to continue their atrocities unchecked! Surely with all your wisdom you must be able to see that!"
"You have a youthful spirit, Feyera. I'll give you that. But it is not enough to face Team Rocket with ideals; you need strategy, powerful Pokemon, and defenses to the firearms they'll be using against you."

"It's possible to outsmart them without overpowering them." Feyera crossed his arms. "You're just too old and set to do anything about what's happening right before your eyes. Do you think you're the only one in the world who has seen what evil Team Rocket is capable of?" That definitely struck a nerve, and judging from Kurt's enraged expression Feyera was not certain if it had worked. "My Gardevoir, Sana, and I are linked by our hearts because of what Team Rocket did to an innocent Pokemon. I have this piece of a dead Pokemon embedded in my chest as a memento to remind me every day."

"I figured that was unnatural," Kurt answered with a perplexed expression as he glared at his heart shard. "It only made sense to me once I saw the Pokemon you were with."

"That's right, but because of this fragment of a deceased Pokemon, I can help you," Feyera said confidently. "You need to trust me with what you know if we're going to stand a chance against Team Rocket. I'll do whatever it takes to bring Team Rocket to justice for what they've done here to your town. At the very least, I can manage to take out their leader with a sacrificial Psychic attack. If you won't help me, I'll go find them myself and end this nonsense on my own."

"No," Kurt shook his head, "Don't throw away your life."

"You'll help me then?" Feyera asked making an ultimatum clear to Kurt.

Kurt gave him a stern nod in response. "If that will stop you from acting with such reckless abandon," he said.

"Fair enough," said Feyera feeling relieved to have obtained a new ally.

"Humph! You young types sure are stubborn, you know that?" Kurt shook his head. "They've set up an underground camp in the Slowpoke Well to the east." He pointed in the direction Feyera and Sana had come from upon arriving in Johto. "Rumor has it that their recent Slowpoke Tail operation is a cover for something much more sinister."

"What do the tails of Slowpoke have to do with anything?" Feyera asked feeling puzzled.

"Good question," he nodded. "Say, can't you use your connection with Psychic Pokemon to help you figure it out?"

"It doesn't work like that, Kurt," replied Feyera with a disgruntled sigh. "I can barely control my own heart, let alone Sana's. We're both new at this, albeit for different reasons." His handicap was obvious considering he was a human, but even Sanaria - with years of experience - had shown deterioration in her abilities due to the way their hearts had been linked before the events of Evercrest. Thankfully, she showed promise of recovering slowly after their hearts had first touched, and that fact alone made Feyera feel some semblance of happiness considering the emotional damage to her might not be permanent.

"Ah, that was a foolish question then," Kurt said picking up a beige-billed cap and placing it over his shabby white hair.

"No it wasn't; honestly, I've heard worse," he replied. "Even with the power of my Pokemon at my side, I'm no wish maker – I can't work miracles."

"Indeed, you're not. Or surely you would have foreseen my field of mines," said Kurt smugly.
"Yeah." Feyera grumbled, taking a moment to massage his bandaged wound which was thankfully no longer quite as rife with pain. "Touché, old timer."

Kurt forced a tight smile at that. "You probably know this better than I do from your firsthand knowledge, but Psychic types all have different forms of telekinetic power, and each one emanates from somewhere within the mind."

"Sheesh," he thought to himself, "if Sana heard that, I bet she'd correct him and go on an explanation about how the heart is different from the mind and... – Wait, why the hell am I channeling her beliefs anyway?" Feyera tapped his foot anxiously on the wooden floorboards. Had she rubbed off on him that much? What was going on with him? Rather than dwell on it, he quickly asked Kurt, "Your granddaughter mentioned that you kept a Slowpoke as a pet. So, you ought to know, what makes their tails special?"

"Well," Kurt began to explain, "A Slowpoke's tail contains a rare type of regenerative protein molecule that's important for their evolution. You see, Slowpoke fish for food with their tails in shallow bodies of water. It's necessary for a Shellder to latch on to their tail in order for them to properly evolve. However, as you can imagine, not all fish happen to be Shellder. Sometimes their tail becomes a snack for other Pokemon, which is why - to ensure they can still evolve - their tail needs to be able to regenerate."

"No kidding. I always thought that species had little to offer - what with their dim-witted stare," Feyera replied recollecting an image of the pudgy pink creature he had seen in a recent Pokemon Weekly magazine. "They sure have an unusual behavior, even for Pokemon."

"The Slowpoke are a species known for their longevity, despite appearing to be absent minded they are surprisingly resilient," said Kurt as he scratched behind one of his sagging ears pressed firmly under the cap he now wore. "Their genetic code has changed very little over the centuries, similar to Pokemon found at the bottom of the ocean. That's why their tails are considered valuable for research purposes. There's even an old wives’ tale that they have the power to grant a longer lifespan when consumed."

"So..." Feyera muttered, rubbing his chin in thought, "If they're truly just in it for the money, Team Rocket would be expecting to turn a profit by cultivating the tails of the Slowpoke?"

"Right. However, Team Rocket doesn't cultivate them. The tails grow back, but it takes far too long to happen. Instead they've been breeding them and discarding the offspring after severing their tails. Whenever the well floods, the tailless baby carcasses wash up," he explained with a sad look on his aged face. "Then they sell the small tails in mass quantities, and presumably make a small fortune on the black market."

"Grisly, but that sounds about right. So, they're selling them at an exorbitant price in order to make money. But who would buy them? And why take the risk if they're considered important your town? It doesn't make sense, sure a rich trainer may have the money, but it's clearly not a long-term, sustainable plan," pondered Feyera with a puzzled expression. "Something's missing here."

"See that's the rub, kid," Kurt agreed. "It just doesn't add up as a sound business strategy. This is what I do know: if the Slowpoke Tails were valuable on their own, then Team Rocket would be cultivating or cloning them – they have the technology to do so."

Feyera nodded. "I'm well aware of their dabbling in ethically questionable forms of technology," he then said with a deep feeling of personal regret.

"Instead of setting up a base," Kurt lowered both his hands to gesture, "the captured Pokemon are
taken underground, and never seen again. Then their offspring's tailless corpses wash up. But why are they being taken underground in the first place? Wouldn't a laboratory be more suitable?"

"Yes. Then…that means…" but the young researcher was still feeling stumped. "There has to be another angle to this we're not seeing. From what I've learned, Team Rocket may act like an autonomous entity, but they will answer to other criminal organizations out there if it profits them."

"There's only one thing I can think of -" The man walked over to a low shelf nearby and picked up a laminated scroll. He then unraveled it on the table, placing two oddly shaped Pokéballs at either end in order to weigh it down. It was a map of the local area from the looks of it, the general topography appeared unchanged; however, the outline of the town no longer appeared anything like the way it was portrayed. Judging from that, it had to be an older map. With a point, he directed Feyera's attention to the eastern region of the diagrammatic. "- Here. The Union Cave. It sits further east of the Slowpoke Well, but rumor has it that the caverns are connected by a subterranean source river deep underground. Some people theorize that it links vast regions of Johto together with its labyrinthal passageways, and that these channels are navigated by a Pokemon called Lapras. Most of the deep caverns are treacherously steep and sealed off by landslides so there's no telling for sure how far they go. Worse still, adventurers used to become very sick just from visiting the Pokemon that lived there, yet the only poison types that live there are the Golbat. Strange, don't you think?"

"What's so odd about the Golbat living there?" Feyera asked tapping the bandage on his leg nervously.

"In case you didn't already know, Golbat drain the life force of their victims with a well-placed Bite attack followed by Leech Life. And if they manage to strike you with their Poison Fang, they won't allow you to escape, because their secreted poison takes time to replenish. From a predatory standpoint, this makes the use of their poisonous move valuable and they'll unrelentingly follow through with a Confuse Ray or emit Supersonic waves in order to disorient their prey and assure a kill. However, the trainers getting sick carried repels as they searched for Lapras, and never even encountered a single Golbat on their quest for the rare Pokemon deep in the caverns. Furthermore, they never had any bite marks; it was as if the environment itself had poisoned them."

"Hmm… Sickness from spending time underground…" Feyera snapped his fingers, "That's it! This is just like what happened at Mount Moon! Team Rocket must be excavating the buried Mercurium!"

Surprisingly the other man's eyes lit up. "What was that? Did you say Team Rocket is searching for Mercurium?"

"Yes," Feyera said hesitantly, "It's an ancient material with properties I'm keen on researching. Based on what I've learned from Cipher, exposure to it in its unrefined form can alter an organism's genetic code resulting in acute sickness and even cause mutations."

"Ah, that would make sense. I didn't think natural Mercurium was still dormant in the deep pockets of the earth. Then again, there is not much natural about Mercurium. I suppose you're proof that its unpurified form still exists."

"Exactly and – wait, what? How am I proof of anything?"

"Hah. Do you take me for a fool simply because I am your elder?" cracked the old man.

"Uh, well considering you're a hermit living out here in a minefield I am rather surprised," Feyera impulsively replied, his eyes aglow with characteristic curiosity. "Fredrick knew that Kurt had some information on the Mercurium after all!" he thought excitedly to himself. "Now, why don't you tell
me what you know about Mercurium?"

"Very well, but you may not like what I have to say," Kurt said waringly.

"I've had to accept my fair share of things in the past — He looked down at his heart, " — Even if they didn't make any sense. So what's the truth?"
Kurt crossed his arms and motioned over to a nearby desk with his eyes. "See those?" he asked. Feyera looked at where he was directing and to his surprise he saw a collection of round, chestnut shaped objects atop a well-balanced workbench. They had little caps on their tops making them appear somewhat unbalanced, and were fastened with a loop of refined woody resin that encircled their plump circumference.

"Those are…?" he began to say, but Feyera honestly wasn't sure, so he walked up to the bench and had a closer look. They were a bizarre mixture of organic and synthetic components. He touched one and it felt smooth, as if its natural unevenness had been thoroughly sanded. The spheres were comprised of naturally blended colors, ranging from red to violet, the fruit of some strange plant no doubt. However, what differentiated them from being completely organic was a small metal latch fastened to their plum-like centers. "Actually, I have no idea," he said feeling stumped. "They're certainly not conventional Pokéballs made entirely from metal. What do you call them?"

"The *Bonguri Fruit,*" answered Kurt. "Our ancestors first used these over six hundred years ago in the process of capturing Pokemon. They are called 'Apricorn' today by most lay folk."

The sturdy workbench had several of the fascinating contraptions laid upon it; judging from all of the pieces of wood scattered about close by, these Apricorns were at different phases in their construction. They were clearly Pokéballs based on their form, but were made of nearly entirely organic compounds. "Uh huh. You…made these things?" he asked picking up a yellowish sphere with a crescent shape on its top. It felt quite a bit lighter than a Pokéball, no doubt due to a lesser amount of metal used in its structure. He tossed it up into the air and caught it, admiring its lightweight and predictable trajectory. "Not bad."

"Well, let's say I contributed," Kurt said tersely and a bit of a country twang in his voice. "I'm a Pokéball artisan. One of the last of a chosen few in this age shown how to make 'em the old fashioned way; that is, by the sweat of my brow. You have to understand, when the process became automated by factories, like the one out in Kalos, people as a whole started to forget the nature of our world originally gave us the tools to create the first 'Pokéballs'."

"No kidding," Feyera replied nonchalantly. "Nature huh?"

Kurt gave him a disapproving look. "Have you ever wondered how a Pokéball actually works?" he asked. "Or how Pokemon are able to fluently manipulate the world around them?"

"No, but I'm assuming it has something to do with the Mercurium."

"To be fair," Kurt started to answer, "Pokemon trainers are often ignorant enough to gallopade around the globe without a concrete understanding of how their primary tools function. Bah! In this day and age that's considered par for the course."

Frustrated, Feyera crossed his arms as if a nerve had been struck. He wondered whether he had become one of those trainers Kurt was describing. "Getting my trainer's license was surprisingly easy now that you mention it."
"Of course it was," Kurt granted. "You barely have to demonstrate minimum competency nowadays."

"Hey," Feyera snapped, "if you're insinuating I'm not competent as a trainer –"

"Your words; not mine," Kurt said dismissively.

"Whatever. I didn't come here to show off my trainer card. That is irrelevant, what really matters is how Pokéballs and the Apricorns you grow around here work."

"As luck would have it," replied Kurt, "these particular fruits only grow on trees in this part of the world. What that means is before the process became fully automated, the development of these capture devices was limited to our region of the globe. As you can imagine, this made them a special export, highly sought after by the rest of the world. As for what makes them special, the plants that produce the fruit have a certain genetic encoding intimately linked to your so-called Mercurium."

"How'd you learn the trade?" asked Feyera as he picked another one of the Apricorns up from the workbench. This variety was quite a bit larger with some cobalt colored mounds on the sides of its grey exterior. After tossing it up into the air and catching it, the weight seemed to match that of a conventional Pokéball despite the differences in size, this ball was larger and yet lighter than a typical metal Pokéball. "Did you have a mentor teach you?"

"Hmph, no. I did not have mentor in the traditional sense. Though I followed his example, my first mentor never actually knew me," Kurt said frowning. "And even though I'm sure those versed in my trade will continue to pass it down to future generations, I won't know who my successor is. That's the tragic thing about learning the secret of the Apricorn; my heir may be able to learn about who I was, yet – all throughout my life – I would have no idea that I was their predecessor even if I saw them pass by me on a regular basis…"

"So, how'd you actually learn how to make these things anyway?" he asked ignoring the old man's presumably confused ramblings.

"Hah. You and the rest of the world wouldn't believe me if I told you. That's part of the reason why my craft is so rare. You see, a special Pokemon that lives beyond the gate to the west of this town showed the process to me when I was just a young boy, not much older than Maisy," Kurt reminisced.

"Excuse me?" Feyera's jaw dropped. "You said a Pokemon showed you how to make Pokéballs?"

"Naturally," Kurt said with a faint smile. "Pokemon and Pokéballs are two sides of the same coin."

"I never would have thought that." Feyera scratched his head. He recalled Sana being vehemently opposed to Pokéballs after all. She hated the very idea of Pokéball capture and was rather vocal about it unlike Brucie, Des and July. Feyera saw no easy way to force her to be captured by a traditional way. However the more he thought about it, the more he realized that his heart core had in a roundabout method captured her, or at the very least kept her close by. "That's very odd," he cynically replied, "so this special Pokemon actually wanted you to learn how to make Pokéballs?"

"Right you are," Kurt nodded. "It was so important that I saw the very first one ever made with Apricorn."

"Whoa, whoa, hold up there, pops!" he said suddenly worrying that Kurt had dementia. "You're not making any sense. You just said a minute ago that these were first made by your ancestors six hundred years ago!"
"Is it that hard to believe?"

"Well, yes actually," grouched Feyera. "After all, what you are implying defies all reason. How on earth could you witness the first Apricorn being made if that occurred six hundred years in the past? It simply doesn't make sense, old timer."

"Do you know anything about the Ilex Forest Guardian, Feyera?" Kurt asked with a gaze of seriousness on his weary face.

"No." He shook his head. "Who or what is that?"

"It's a Pokemon also known as the 'Voice of the Forest' in these parts," said Kurt. "It lives – or rather – it is always bound to return to the forest where it was conceived. To put it another way, the forest and the Pokemon are the same living being in different forms. You may know of it as the legendary Pokemon Celebi."

"Never mind the legendary part about that; you're saying Celebi was the one who taught you how to make Apricorns?"

"Indeed it did. However, it didn't teach me; rather, it showed me. That's its nature. Celebi is a small creature that can show you various points in time, but only in the forested area where it has made its domain. That's because it is actually sharing its primeval memory with you, being a Psychic type. It just so happens that the first Apricorns were made here in the forest bordering Azalea hundreds of years ago."

"But surely what you saw was a hallucination," Feyera insisted. "You couldn't have actually traveled through time and seen something from six hundred years ago. Legendary Pokemon or not, that's preposterous."

"Then our conversation is over," Kurt said stubbornly crossing his arms. "If you will not believe me, then what is the point of taking the time to share the information I've acquired through personal experience?"

"Damn. You sure are stubborn, you know that?" Feyera answered trying hard not to break into a smile. He knew even his own dogmatic adherence to rationality had its limits. Of course, he blamed Sana for wearing him down. "Fine, I'm not saying I believe you… but I'll entertain the thought that Celebi showed you how to make Apricorns. My question however, is why a Pokemon would want you – a human – to know how to do that? Wouldn't Pokemon be against getting captured?"

"Were you not listening before when I told you?" rebuked Kurt. "Pokemon and Pokéballs are two sides of the same coin."

"Sure, sure. I've got that image in my head now," Feyera lied. Just trying to imagine the abstract concept was making him feel lightheaded. How could they possibly be one and the same? Pokemon were organic, living creatures and their capsules were very much the opposite – static, hollow globes that contained them. "The problem is Pokéballs – an object – wind up holding a Pokemon – a being – within them. Wouldn't that make them more of a prison than anything else?"

"Hmm. Would you call your body a prison for your mind?" Kurt gave him a dubious look. "Pokéballs aren't inherently evil devices despite what radical Pokemon Rights groups might have you think. In many ways they are necessary, not only for our society to function smoothly, but also for the Pokemon themselves. The Pokéball has one particularly important function, which often enough goes unmentioned because it has been forgotten about – it connects the Pokemon back to the Source of its origin. Prolonged disconnection from this Source and the Pokemon eventually forgets"
its origin, returning instead to its default primal instincts. As I'm sure you've seen, wild Pokemon tend to have less restraint than those which have been captured."

"So what?" he derisively replied. "You've seen trainer's Pokemon lash out without restraint. You know as well as I do, mere capture doesn't stop Pokemon from being coldblooded killers."

"Then you've pinpointed the heart of the issue," Kurt said. "According to Celebi, that has been an issue since the start of its sentience as a Forest Guardian. I've had time to reflect upon what Celebi told me years ago. Many years of my life have been spent pondering the potential implications, and it still sets me into a fit of despair whenever I think about it."

"Oh?"

"The issue is humanity, according to Celebi," said Kurt with a frown. "Stated simply, some people are good, others are not. Thankfully, most of us fall somewhere in between those two extremes."

"How could everything wrong in this world be blamed on humanity?" Feyera disagreed. "There are good people in the world like Fredrick. It sounds to me like Celebi sees humanity as a scapegoat for the world's problems. I wouldn't trust it."

"You have a point. Maybe it's right, maybe it's wrong about the future. The important thing to remember here is what it thinks of the world around it. Even if Celebi turns out to be wrong about us humans, it still has made up its mind based on what it has seen," Kurt said with a worried look on his face.

"Who cares what it sees? The past might be fixed, but I refuse to believe that the future is set in stone. We're not bound by what a Pokemon says about us because of our free will."

"Regrettably, from time to time that defining trait of free will interferes with the natural order."

"An overly simplistic analogy if you ask me," Feyera concluded bitterly. "Do me a favor and let's bring this whole discussion back down to earth: say I was able to capture a Pokemon, what happens to it?" As far as he could remember, he had always gone to the local Pokemart to buy his capture devices without giving the whole process much thought. Using his hand, he gestured with the Apricorn he was holding. "It goes into the ball and... then what?"

"Why, it returns back to its Source until it is released," replied Kurt. "That's the reason why Pokéballs contain derivatives of Mercurium within their cores."

"Its 'Source' you say?" Feyera repeated more perplexed than before. "What's that?"

"Simply put, the Pokemon becomes what it once was in its purest form. It reverts back into energy, which is sealed within the container. Mercurium, as an organic catalyst, promotes the transformative energy conversion. Even a small amount of it is capable of changing living matter into different forms, including pure energy."

"But what IS that?" he demanded, unsatisfied with the ambiguous answer Kurt gave. "You make these Pokéballs so explain the process to me."

"Only a Pokemon could explain it to you, Feyera. What the Pokemon becomes upon entering that state is truly mysterious to mortals. It's not something you can easily measure; for the Pokemon, it is an experience, a glimpse into the very beginning."

Kurt slowly began to explain, "And what you call..."
'Mercurium' is at the very center of that process known as 'Reversion' – or 'The Return'.

"So in that case, what you call 'Source' would be the state of matter sealed within the Pokéball. Yet what does the Pokéball – or Apricorn for that matter – have to do with Mercurium?" he asked.

"You told Maisy you were a doctor; I would've expected you to have at least a minimal understanding of it."

"I'm more of an ex-doctor," Feyera said insistently as he shook his head, deciding not to blame amnesia any more. "I'm not researching any longer, that time in my life has passed, and it's a bit of an empty title now. Besides, ever since I left that position, most of my labor has consisted of fieldwork instead of theory."

Kurt's slumped figure acknowledged him with a heavy nod. His old, wintry eyes seemed to understand that there had been a change in his profession as a Pokemon researcher. Perhaps he too had misgivings about his past, but he held those secrets close to his heart. Kurt did admit to having connections to the famous Professor Oak, which in and of itself was mildly suspicious considering how removed from the nexus of professionals in that field Kurt had become. He answered Feyera with a musing question, "In your opinion, what is the difference between the truth sought and the truth found?"

"Is that some sort of trick question?" Feyera paused for a moment and raised his hand under his chin. He bowed his head in deep thought. "Truth is truth," he said shortly thereafter raising his head with conviction. "When you know the truth, only then is there no difference between what you seek and what you find. That's because truth is unchanging by its definition. When I expect it to be something it hasn't revealed itself as, I'll make mistakes every time."

Kurt gave him a surprised gaze, raising a bushy white eyebrow in response to his answer. "So you would assert that the truth people go out of their way to seek is not the same as the actual, real truth?"

"Yeah. I suppose so," he replied with a slightly haphazard expression. "I'll admit I don't know the truth behind Mercurium; however, truth is still what I seek. At this point, I don't even have a hypothesis. All I know is that Mercurium was sought by Team Rocket and Cipher, for different reasons, but I don't know exactly why other than its rarity. As a former scientist, as a man of reason, I need to know. Most of all, I need to know because of my own connection to the mysterious material," Feyera said pointing to his heart.

"Very well. But I must warn you first, many trainers are kept in the dark and are not given the entire story about the synergetic relationship between Pokemon and Pokéballs," said Kurt. "Bear in mind that the actual truth thwarts the idealistic world consisting of sought truths."

"To be honest, I do not know what to believe anymore," Feyera sighed. "My world has been turned around, upside-down, and inside-out so many times. I just want to know what's really true in this world besides myself and the Pokemon I've traveled with."

"Ho ho. That might be a good enough start then." Kurt smiled brightly.

"You think so?" he asked feeling embarrassed to be as clueless as he was.

"Yes. Quite. Actually I couldn't have hoped for a better answer from you," Kurt said happily. "Right then, if you want to understand the connection between Mercurium, Pokéballs and Pokemon we need to take a step back in time."

"Back in time? You're not being literal are you?" he nervously asked.
"Figuratively of course," Kurt clarified. "Celebi has no power outside the domain of the forest it is connected to. Remember, Celebi contains the same exact life-force as the forest it inhabits; and this is not all too different from the relationship between Pokemon and Pokéballs."

"Somehow that answer doesn't make me feel any better," Feyera grumbled. "I for one never even met this Celebi you're talking about!"

"Ahem! If you're done bellyaching now," Kurt impatiently rebuked, "I'd like to finish what I was saying."

"Fine, go right ahead. Humor me."

"You're well aware that many centuries ago, there was a cataclysmic event, one which ended the old world called the Terminal War."

"Sure, I've heard about it. 'Terminal' is a bit of a misnomer though, since, well, here we are talking about it," Feyera answered with a snide remark. "Of course, I would say no one knows much about it, let alone what civilization was like before then."

"Not entirely true. The powers that be – the Pokemon League – insists that the world before the catastrophic war was abundant with Pokemon." Kurt gave a sour look. "And of course they would, since it is in their best interest people don't question the new regime established in the wake of the Great War which later followed."

"You certainly seem to have it out against the Pokemon League." Feyera could read him like an open book. Surely he was upset about the lack of aid sent to help Azalea in time, but the way he described the Pokemon League made it sound like they were a malevolent entity.

"Why wouldn't I?" Kurt asked rhetorically. "Our mutual friend, rest his soul, was on the trail of something enormous the Pokemon League was trying real hard to cover up. With him gone, we may never find out what they were up to."

"I thought Fredrick was working in tandem with the Pokemon League," said Feyera.

"He must have not told you then. Probably was for your own protection now that I think about it. His investigations into the Pokemon League's activities often had him working ironically under the guise of the League's authority. However, Fredrick was an official of the International Police, through and through."

"I didn't know that he was a double agent." It made sense now why Fredrick hadn't reported his psyonics to the Pokemon League and had instead taken matters into his own hands.

"Fredrick was on a mission to expose corruption and deliver his own flavor of justice. That's who he was as a man. The Pokemon League made his job more difficult. It was much more difficult than exposing known syndicates such as Team Rocket, because the League's always in compliance with their own rules."

"What did Fredrick tell you about the League then?"

"Not much at all," Kurt said sadly. "Always said that it was classified and all. Although in retrospect I probably should've pressured him for more info. I'm still in shock over his death. What I know about the League consists of these three things: first, their deception convolutes the history of the origins of Pokemon. Secondly, they've furnished propaganda messages that severely undercut the level of technical knowledge required by most trainers. And then finally of course there's the badge hunting everyone's obsessed with, which cartelizes Hidden Machines necessary for trainers to travel..."
"in certain ways with their Pokemon."

"That really isn't much to go on," Feyera said hoping to have heard more convincing incriminating evidence.

"It can't be helped. They're an organization more concerned with encouraging trainers to take part in their sports than the actual protection of people."

"For them to not investigate into this town which had an official gym set up seems very peculiar. Especially following the recent attacks by a gang of criminals like Team Rocket."

"That's what I'm saying, kid," Kurt agreed. "Something about this whole thing stinks of something foul and unfortunately we're no closer to figuring it out without Fredrick."

"So it looks like their current motives are well concealed, but what about the discrepancy about the origin of Pokemon? Shouldn't that give us some information in regards to their motives?"

"It just may," replied Kurt. "Only a few individuals have been able to gather bits of a hidden truth, despite the League's collaborated effort to conceal such things from the general populace."

"A hidden truth?" Feyera repeated with a curious glance at the shelves of tools stacked behind Kurt. What could this old man from the countryside possibly know that other people didn't? "Why hide the truth?"

"You can decide that one for yourself, young man," Kurt said. "Keep in mind that the aftermath of the Terminal War sowed the seeds of the world we now live in. Pokemon and people would not have coexisted otherwise."

"Pokemon and people coexisting? Have they ever not coexisted?" he asked confounded by the suggestion that there was ever a world without one or the other.

"Before the Terminal War, the world only had people and various other creatures that lived in the sea, the sky, and the land. There were no Pokemon like the ones we see today. There existed a great diversity of species, but the creatures of that era were not built the same way as the creatures that exist today known as 'Pokemon'."

"So where did the Pokemon come from?" shrugged Feyera. Then he considered Cipher's underground laboratory which had produced Shadow Pokemon, the current pinnacle of biological warfare. "Wait, don't tell me… Were Pokemon weapons created during the war?"

"Not quite. People of that time had other, far greater weapons that were able to shape the world's physical form," said Kurt. "To quote one of our oldest records following the event by a few centuries: 'the Terminal War brought the sun down to earth, and all of its fury changed the planet forever.'"

"The sun you say?" Feyera shook his head in disbelief. "You do realize that's downright impossible. Perhaps even less likely than your time-traveling adventures with that Celebi Pokemon. Not sure what they teach you country folks out here in your science classes, but the sun is a star millions of miles away."

"Oh, forgive the metaphor, these ancient stories often use such an analogy to describe the type of power," Kurt said with a mope. "You cannot take them literally. Rather, they are allegorical. It was not the actual sun in the sky, but a force of a similar type of energy. And for the people of that time, it surely was the type of unimaginable power only seen beyond our planet."
"Power beyond our planet. What could be beyond our planet?" he wondered, his imagination wandering to what cosmic magnitude of power Kurt could be talking about.

Kurt's expression then darkened. "What we do know is this: there was a development of sorts, a need – if not a dependency – on forces of great power that went beyond the limits of human control."

"I've heard stories about incredibly powerful weapons of ancient times." Feyera's shoulders slumped as he retreated into deep thought. Cipher's Ein had mentioned using the power of the sun. Were the two related? These questions were burning inside his head. "The end of the entire old world… Was it an accident?" Feyera asked in frustration. "Why would such a thing happen?"

"No one from this side of history really knows for sure. We can only make educated guesses…" Kurt lamented with a troubled look in his eyes, "Geological studies show that in those final moments, there was enough energy released to reshape entire continents. The seas swallowed mountains, the once-buried mantle spewed outward in cataclysmic volcanic eruptions as tremendous shockwaves of energy shook the foundation of the planet's crust. Perpetual darkness overtook the skies, and life was set on the brink of extinction."

"Only Pokemon can do those types of things, Kurt. Pokemon that are spoken of in legends and their existence has no way of being verified," he stressed.

"The power of human ingenuity has few boundaries, as I'm sure you're aware. It's truly a miracle any life managed to survive the initial destruction. It all came down to fate – perhaps the will itself, the universal consciousness is stronger than we're willing to acknowledge."

"I still do not understand. How did people manage to do all of that before Pokemon existed?"

"By triggering a coordinated splitting of reality itself. The division of these infinitesimally small building blocks causes cataclysmic effects when carefully orchestrated," Kurt answered frankly. "As absurd as it sounds, reality is comprised of smaller pieces of matter. When humanity first discovered this, it undoubtedly signaled the next stage of our evolution. Our understanding of the infinitesimally small changed our species entirely. Ironically, the discovery also was the end of that old world and the beginning of our own new one."

"That's… possible in theory," Feyera replied. "And if it was possible in the past, it is surely possible again."

"As the legend goes, much of the world became polluted with a terrible blight described as the 'Charring Plague'." Kurt gathered a worn scroll from his shelf and unraveled it on the oak table. The title read in large typed letters "Underground Exploration Of Zone One" and from the looks of it, the document appeared to be some type of map of a man-made cavern, not unlike the Cipher facility on Penta Island. The tunnels stretched like lanky tendrils deep underground, twisting and turning in strange root-like patterns, containing rooms, halls and a myriad of other mysterious places. It all appeared amazingly laid out; each section leading into the next through a system of tunnels linked together, a massive web of vast interconnectedness.

"What is this?" Feyera asked aghast. "An underground prison?"

"The first time I saw it, I said the same thing to Samuel Oak, but that was very long ago," Kurt replied as a brief moment of nostalgia overtook him. "Based on this excavation mission undertaken decades ago, what you see here was an ancient underground base used by our most distant of ancestors. After a large tremor exposed it, it was explored and later mapped out. From the looks of it, ancient people survived the Charring Plague by taking refuge deep underground, though I would imagine most survival came down to dumb luck. If there were other such shelters, surely not all of
them were safe when the earth's plate tectonics became unstable."

"That's dismal. An airborne blight would explain the need to dwell underground."

"Yes, the blight was a dangerous condition, unlike any we have ever seen. This brings me back to the initial point I was trying to make. Mercurium and its evolutionary descendants were the solutions to humankind's woes following the Great Collapse of the old world. It was a true wonder which manifested for the sake of our species' continued existence on the damaged world."

"But what exactly is it?" Feyera took a moment to glance at his heart, noting the slight shimmering at its base, near where the heart core touched his chest. "Is it an ancient relic …or something more?"

Kurt nodded, observing the young man's predicament with steady expression. Silently with a hand gesture, he motioned Feyera over toward a different oak table beside him, which was lower to the ground. There was a partially obscured stone tablet resting on the sturdy desk, etched with grooves and chiseled edges. Kurt used his feeble strength to move one of Maisy's toy trucks off the table and expose the slab of rock. "It was Mew," said Kurt with a heavy respire. "The progenitor of all Pokemon."

Feyera observed the strange image set before him. Although it was an archaic illustration, it was depicting clearly a small bipedal Pokemon, with cat-like eyes and a thin tail that was at least the length of its body. The creature appeared to have two tiny horns protruding from the crown of its head, but he was not sure if those were ears. Its diminutive body was a pale color, a silvery roseate with large feet and a pair of small paws.

"Mew?" he repeated, dumbfounded. "You're telling me that Mercurium is actually a Pokemon?"

"It was a Pokemon," said Kurt correcting the tense to past with emphasis. "The very first Pokemon to come into contact with humans."

"That's not possible… How could this be Mew? What I saw that day – the relic in the Pokemon Sanctum looked nothing like that!"

"The Pokemon Sanctum?" Kurt said in alarm. "W-what on earth were you doing there?"

"Never mind that!" Feyera hastily tried to take back what he had just said.

"Not so fast!" Kurt had caught on quickly for an old man. "I want an explanation for why you were there."

"Oh me? Just a bystander that saw Team Rocket break into the ruins, after all the commotion I decided to have a peek inside myself."

"Hrm. What did you see once you made it inside?" Kurt asked. "Be as detailed as possible so I can help."

Feyera could not tell whether Kurt believed his fabricated story, but he had to leave some critical details out. He figured explaining the scene itself could not hurt. "What I saw in the Sanctum was different. The entire place had strange contrivances, ancient pulley-systems that used hot steam as a source for power. It was very bizarre. Judging by the age of the ruins, it felt like those large vats did not belong from that era. There were also a number of steep tunnels that led down to the lowest level where there was a sort of altar that also seemed out of place – unless it was all an elaborate trap. Regardless, I did not see what your tablet depicted, that's for sure; I would have remembered Mew had I saw it."
"You haven't been listening to what I've been saying. Its body's cells can alter and transform into essentially anything imaginable," Kurt replied. "If you've been inside the Pokemon Sanctum, I'm sure you would have at least known that. Do you remember any vivid details?"

"Hmm… When I fell down a half-collapsed shaft, I wound up in this tall room. The walls were chiseled into spiral stairs that led all the way up beyond a thick stone ceiling to the Sanctum's mezzanine. There was also a crane elevator near the back. Everything was illuminated by a light that emanated from the center of the room. It was an object, a large floating ring that appeared to be made of a swiftly flowing liquid traveling in one direction. Not at all like a Pokemon. Although, after that it took on a different shape and color, a large emerald spike, resembling a plant without roots. In fact, now that I think back, it only changed when I touched it…"

"YOU WENT AND TOUCHED IT?!" Kurt shouted.

"Well yeah," he said sheepishly. "I didn't know – err remember it was Mew at one point. That's how I wound up in this whole mess actually. Had I just left it alone… No, I can't change the past."

"Did you hear any voice when you touched it?"

"No," he answered truthfully. "I was the only one down there as far as I knew."

"I see," Kurt nodded. "Then it wasn't Mew, but a concentration of its preserved power."

"What do you mean by that?"

"If the Pokemon did not respond to you contacting it, then that means it was devoid of consciousness. Meaning it shared more similarities to the remnants of Mercurium scattered underground in Mount Moon and Union Cave," Kurt informed. "Although I would conceive that the volume of the lost genetic sample you came across was of a much higher in potency if it was able to manifest a physical transformation on its own accord without binding itself to organic matter."

"It didn't bind itself to my hand."

"What eventually happened to the plant object the Mercurium ring transformed into?"

"There was another Pokemon," said Feyera, fabricating the story slightly as to not tip Kurt off about his awkward past. "Another Gardevoir was there with Sana at the time. The whole scene was very bizarre. I saw it unleash a Psychic attack from the Pokemon's perspective, and then the waves of force were repelled by the relic I was holding."

"That is strange. I'd reckon the Pokemon was powerful if it managed to stand up to the remnants of Mew's code without being bound back to its Source. Especially considering the level of concentration of Mercurium you described, making physical contact would be nothing short of the fabled Master Ball's power."

"That's the thing. I wasn't trying to catch it; I had a different motive during the battle. Hell, I don't remember even having any Pokéballs with me."

"Why'd you go after it then?" Kurt asked perplexed.

"At first, I thought I was trying to help it. It might have been manipulating me with its powers the whole time, or maybe I initially felt sorry for it. Either way, once I set it loose I saw it as a threat after its manipulation wore off. It had a strong reason to hate me and I could tell; if nothing else, I felt its hatred radiating when I looked into the creature's eyes."
"They are able to project emotions, by virtue of their Psychic typing. And apparently so are you I see. That explains the Pokemon's heart you have."

"I knew you'd figure it out, Kurt," Feyera tried to force a smile. "Considering how old you are, you've still got it."

"Bah, it was obvious from the moment you arrived. You, your very body – " Kurt was studying him with his hoary eyes, " – has been integrated with a derivative of Mercurium, and yet you didn't know anything about its properties?"

"Well, it's not like I became an idiot by choice. Sana had the bright idea to erase my memory after I lunged with the Mercurium into the other Gardevoir she was with," Feyera said. "The only reason she didn't outright kill me is because of this heart that appeared, which she identified as her mate's."

"Fascinating."

"I don't find it anywhere near as fascinating as you do. Thanks to the whole ordeal, I'm a freak of nature."

"It truly is a strange concept though," Kurt said decisively. "Without a Pokéball to contain the energy of the Pokemon Mercurium had bonded with, your body became the catalyst and vessel to cause a Return. That's one theory at least."

Feyera replied with a sardonic remark, "Uh Kurt, how long have you been cooped up here again? Take a good look at me, I'm not a Pokéball. Besides, that doesn't explain the heart of the Pokemon appearing since you told me Pokéballs seal the state of pure energy within them."

"Hmm, good point. Then perhaps that heart is a form of channeling the Pokemon through you and into the physical?"

"I don't think that can be true anymore. The Gardevoir that this belonged to is gone now. It was not able to survive after the psychic bracer on my wrist was overloaded."

"Psychic bracer? I've never heard of such a thing."

"One of Fredrick's ideas." Feyera felt a sense of melancholy looking back at the past and trying to explain it to Kurt. Nevertheless he continued to give unfalsified details, "I told him back in Celadon about how I was unable to control the Pokemon's psionic powers, and how when I used them they caused my body to decay. Frequently, I had no control over these episodes, which turned into a major problem as you can probably imagine. Fredrick fooled me into thinking a psychic bracer was the actual relic from the Pokemon Sanctum. I didn't know any better at the time, so I went along with it, thinking that it was both the cause and the cure for my psyonics. The funny thing is, it was a solution that would have probably worked, since psychics like Sabrina use them and I was actually able to keep the abilities under control for a very long while."

"Oh, that's Fredrick for you. Always doing things his own way without telling you."

"Yeah, come to think of it, I hated him for tricking me when I found out the 'Reilken Mercurius' he presented me with turned out to be a fraud. Then again, once I regained my memories, I should have known it would have been impossible for him to provide the actual relic since it was absorbed when I stab– err I mean, got too close to Sana's partner," he said trying to tone down some of the specifics. "Everything changed after the psychic bracer broke and I nearly lost control of my mind."

"What happened?" Kurt asked him.
"I am still putting all the pieces together, but what I understand is the suppression of the psyonics caused them to amplify in power in order to compensate for the constraints being imposed on them. After the bracer was disabled, the sheer power that had built up was so overwhelming I could barely speak, let alone stand. The next thing I remember there was a struggle occurring right in front of me and then a bright flash of light. When that happened, I felt something inside my heart shattering, the sensation brought me back into the moment, and then everything began to return to normal. However, something was different. I finally felt like the powers had become my own somehow and through this heart – which was now my own – they were under my control."

"Sounds like the Pokemon relinquished its powers to you and passed on."

"Right, and although it's handy, I have no way of splitting back apart since there's only me," Feyera muttered. "That Edge is gone. And I still don't know how to tell Sana that this heart is mine…"

"Sorry, what was that?" Kurt asked.

"Pfft, enough about me," he said hastily. "How can you verify that Mercurium was at one time a Pokemon?"

"Hmm. Verify it?" Kurt snapped open a Pokéball on the shelf beside him. "Just take a look inside a Pokéball. What you'll find in the center of each and every one of 'em is a silvery material coating the inner chamber. See here? This is the substratum of the device. The Pokéball uses artificial Mew DNA to 'transform' a Pokemon back into pure energy – Source."

"Wait, hold on a sec. You're saying me and every other trainer out there have been carrying around legendary Pokemon this entire time inside our Pokéballs?"

Kurt shook his head. "No. Even if you had over a hundred million Pokéballs, it would not be enough to reanimate Mew. Instead, the replica Pokemon Ditto is how nearly all conventional Pokéballs work today; with higher priced Great Balls and Ultra Balls containing purer strands and more volume of the synthetic energy catalyst used to power The Return to Source. For whatever reason, only Apricorn trees contain traces of the original Mew's genetic data in their fruits, but it is such a miniscule amount on all but the ripest of berries."

"Unbelievable. This whole time I had no idea." Feyera was in a state of astonishment. "How can Pokemon like Mew or Ditto's DNA turn matter into energy?"

"Oh ho, I'm glad you finally asked so specifically," Kurt replied with a look of excitement and eager to explain the phenomenon. "One of the most advanced and commonly used technologies in the world is the Pokéball, which transforms a Pokemon into energy so it can be contained in the small ball. In a battle, once the opposing wild Pokémon has been weakened, the trainer will throw a Pokéball at it. Assuming the Pokéball hits it and is not dodged or hit back to the trainer, the Pokéball will open, convert the wild Pokemon to an energy form, pull the energy into its hollow center, and then close. The wild Pokemon will then be given the chance to struggle to try to escape the Pokéball. Pokéballs originated from Apricorns, which as I said are a non-synthetic Pokéball. However, this whole process all goes back to one fundamental equation. \( E = mc^2 \). Spelt out, energy equals mass multiplied by the speed of light squared. Notice anything about the two sides of that famous equation? There is energy on one side and mass on the other. Because of that, the two states are made comparable and every piece of matter contains a vast amount of energy."

"Then Mew – and Ditto by extension – exist to do what besides make our lives easier?"

"They facilitate a Pokemon's Return back into a trance-like state of pure energy called Source. Without this process to return to their Source of origin, Pokemon would indeed rule our world
through sheer ruthless might begotten by a tireless existence with neither meaning nor rest." Kurt explained, "According to the legend, Mew was the very first Pokemon people made contact with after the Terminal War. Mew explained that it was also the only way humanity could hope to survive the shattered ruins left behind by the Terminal War. Mew entered into a covenant with people, to cleanse the world and make way for new life, so long as there was respite for its offspring to revisit the Source. It then used its unique cells to manipulate energy on a level that was the only way to absorb the high levels of toxicity in the world by converting that into cellular energy. There were many changes throughout the centuries, and eventually through a series of mutations and interactions with the creatures from the environment, Mew became more than one species."

"So according to the legend, Mew saved the world from decaying from the Charring Plague after the Terminal War by making a pact with the humans that survived underground. But over time it changed into many different creatures in order to rid the world of toxins, and because of that the original is gone now."

"Correct. There's no living specimen of the creature because it has changed so much over the years. Even the largest concentrations of Mercurium such as the relic you found in the Pokemon Sanctum are remnants of the original, without sentience. Mercurium samples found underground and the Apricorns fruits themselves contain fragments of the creature's original genetic code. Though these can be carefully studied by scientists, attempts to mimic their properties through cloning are only sufficient enough to create a blob of a replica, Ditto."

"And what happens to those replicated Pokemon?" Feyera asked, but in his heart he already felt he knew the answer.

"Pokéball factories splice the batches of genetically engineered Ditto most similar to Mew in order to create Pokéballs for trainers worldwide. The pieces of Ditto essentially become the man-made catalysts for triggering a Return to Source. You could say that their sacrifice helps other Pokemon find peace by bonding with them on a genetic level and allowing them to return to a state of pure energy."

"…!"

"It may sound horrible," Kurt sighed reading Feyera's distressed expression. "However, that's just the way things are kid. There are simply too many Pokemon and not enough Apricorns in the world to go around. And it isn't like Mew is going to do anything about it after all these years."

"Still, those Pokemon, the Ditto, they exist only to be used as a science experiment," Feyera said feeling a tug at his heart.

"When I was younger I thought I could change the world, but even with the legendary Celebi at my side, I was unable to."

"Then I'll do it."

"What…? H-how?" Kurt asked. "You didn't even know what Mercurium was until I told you!"

"Simple," he said with a look of enthusiasm the belied the difficulty of the problem at hand. "I'll figure out a way where the cloned Ditto don't have to be sacrificed to power the Pokéballs' Return."

"You're talking about solving a problem you don't even understand," said Kurt with a dismissive wave of his hand. "The only reason we have the Pokéball technology curbing the huge population of Pokemon is because of the Ditto produced."
"It's not like I can ignore it now that I know the truth," Feyera exclaimed. "Besides, Cipher has been working on a device that will render a Pokéballs obsolete."

"Render the Pokéball obsolete?!" Kurt gasped. "What are you saying?"

"I don't know all of the technical details, but I saw it happen with my own eyes," said Feyera. "The project's lead, Ein, triggered a large detonation miles above the sky over a remote island. There was a sudden flash of light and an expansive cloud of bright color high above the clouds. The next thing I knew, all my Pokéballs opened without my own doing, their internal circuitry was completely fried and I had to toss them. Luckily, Cipher had found a way to shield the effects of the weapon — as the mechanical devices protected inside their base's walls were still operable. I managed to find replacements thankfully," he said motioning to his holster, "and my Pokemon and I, we were able to make it far away quickly after Fredrick bought us some time by challenging the admins. The power of that weapon, the Phaeton they called it, was terrifying to behold at an enormous distance, and yet the most devastating thing about it was how it damaged all of the electronics."

"This is not good. No, no. Not good at all," Kurt said, his panicked expression revealing the worry he felt.

"Hey, don't stroke out on me now, Kurt. They wouldn't have done it over a remote island with base shielding unless they were testing its properties. I gather that means they have yet to perfect it. Don't you see? We still have time. That's why I need to get to their nerve center in Orre before they finalize the weapon!"

"You need to get to Orre, and you want to stop Team Rocket along the way. There is one thing you can do."

"Go ahead," Feyera said impatiently, "I'm all ears."

"Union Cave links Johto together," Kurt quickly explained with the map he had on his desk. "Team Rocket has set up a base in the caverns no doubt beneath the Slowpoke Well. Right here, see?"

His eyes followed Kurt's crooked finger as it drew a line straight across the region toward a more civilized part of Johto. "If your mission is to stop Cipher from using this Phaeton device, then you'll need to get to an airport, since the Orre region is far beyond our continent. There's a small one in Violet City, as well as an international port in Goldenrod. With a small 'X' he marked the two locations.

"Gotcha."

"Normally the route through Ilex Forest – here – would be safer, but ever since the Slowpoke have been removed from our town, that area has seen an increased number of aggressive Pokemon, no doubt due to sudden changes in the food chain," Kurt explained. "Keep in mind the reason for that is Team Rocket's interference."

"Right, but I doubt disrupting the local ecosystem was something they'd even consider, much less care about. The path through the caves is clearly the only way," Feyera concluded. "I need to investigate what Team Rocket is doing besides cutting off Slowpoke Tails to make some quick cash."

"Right you are," Kurt agreed. "You'll want to head north through the cave, by following the river which flows north to south. That means you want to head upstream."

"Alright," Feyera said, making a mental note. "When I manage to get through the caves, where will I
"That all depends on the route you take. There are a multitude of exits, of course I'll give you this map to help, but depending on what exactly is going on underground, you may have to improvise an exit strategy," said Kurt. "You could wind up in the Ruins of Alph, one of the oldest places on this continent. Luckily, that is not too far from Violet City to the east, and if you go west and cut through the National Park you'll make it to Goldenrod in a few hours."

"I see. So in order to have the advantage of choice, I want to end up in the Ruins of Alph."

"Exactly."

"I've had some experience with archeology," Feyera said recalling the Sanctum expedition. "And I know that not all ruins look alike. What separates the Ruins of Alph from other ruins?"

"Well… the ruins are the location where language was first transcribed into living Pokemon, called Unown."

"So I'm supposed to look for what exactly?" he asked. He had heard that Unown were Pokemon that ancient people had created in order to preserve their written language into a living form. Like many ancient Pokemon though, they only inhabited a particular place, and did not stray far enough away to be studied in great detail by humans.

"Do you have a radio?" Kurt asked him quickly.

"Huh?" Feyera was taken aback by the strange question. "I…err…yeah. Fredrick gave me one back in Kanto —" With a shrug, he grabbed his bag and rustled through the contents to find the small device. "Here it is, pretty sure it's busted though after the blast."

Kurt flipped the switch on the device's side with a click. There was nothing that happened however. No typical static or anything for that matter. "You'll be needing some new circuitry for this."

"Oh, okay, I figured as much. You have some lying around?" Feyera asked.

Kurt smiled. "What kind of sorry Pokéball craftsman would I be if I didn't? Follow me."

The old man was surprisingly quick on his feet as he walked down the hall way and into a smaller room with a collection of metal boards lined up on wall racks. There was no musty scent in the air, and the lighting was much better. This must be his serious workstation. With a clamor of his tools and loud snapping Kurt began taking apart the radio with swift hand dexterity. "Looks like the capacitors are fried. Must have been overloaded. Nothing I can't fix though," he said talking to himself. "Place this here, adjust the diode, and add a bit of solder to complete the circuit… Done."

"Damn, that was quick. You sure are handy."

"Hoho, I try. Let's give it a test now."

This time with a flip of the switch, the radio buzzed to life. Kurt turned the knob and soon they were listening to some far away music station.

"Great work old man," Feyera said thankfully. "And here I was thinking it was just a functionless memento." He took the radio back from Kurt with a smile.

"Now, you might be wondering why a radio is important. However, you've given me an idea, and now I have this vision inside my head for it," Kurt said excitedly. "Mind if I make some
modifications to another apparatus on my bench here while I explain the importance of having a radio?"

"Sure, go for it."

"Great," Kurt reached up and grabbed a set of wires and cables from his shelf. He immediately started to work again. He spread out a group of metal pieces on the table and began arranging them in a two-dimensional configuration; this time instead of muttering to himself, he started to explain the reason for having a radio. "When you get to the Ruins of Alph, you'll be able to hear a strange frequency broadcasted on channel 13.5. These sounds are actually the Pokemon Unown, that are able to interfere with the electromagnetic spectrum." There was a loud snap and Kurt grunted as he forced one of the components wiring through the device he was working on. "Some people say they are actually listening to radio programs because of their association with language. Others insist that the two are coincidental. Either way, it is a mystery here in Johto as old as the Radio Tower itself. Obviously the Unown have been around longer than the Radio Tower, but there has been no way to test their relationship with radio waves since prior to then we only used shortwave radio. Hmm…"

Kurt paused again and another grating noise rattled the workbench. "In any event, the radio I fixed for you should be able to receive the frequency on that channel precisely when you are beneath the Ruins of Alph. That'll be your cue to stop following the underground river upstream, and look for an exit."

"What will it sound like?" he asked, peering at what Kurt was working on, but seeing the collection of pieces gathered together was just ambiguous enough to make the new creation an enigma.

"Oh trust me," Kurt grabbed a big pair of goggles and a set of thick gloves from the workbench's draw, "you'll know when you hear it. Won't sound anything like the static you'll get elsewhere." He put the goggles over his eyes, wrapped their strap over his head with a satisfied snap, and picked up a small welder to light a bright blue flame. "It'll be sounding like Pokemon cries more than anything else. As long as you remember that and frequency 13.5, you should be good… There, that should do it."

"Whoa, what's that thing supposed to be?"

"Careful, it's still hot," Kurt warned. "I haven't given it a name yet. You gave me an idea though when you told me about the device Cipher engineered to tamper with electronics from afar."

"Oh?"

"I think I was able to replicate a similar effect with this gun. It's nowhere near as powerful or as devastating, but it's portable which is important for you."

"This gun is able to mimic the electronic interference Cipher created?!!" Feyera exclaimed in wonder. It was barely the size of a Gauntlet model firearm that Team Rocket members typically carried with them. It had all the quirky qualities of a make-shift weapon, being jury-rigged by Kurt in such a way where its barrel had conflicting plates of red and white along with a jet black handle probably taken from an aforementioned Gauntlet.

"It's far from perfect I'd say, but I think it will get the job done." Kurt smacked the gun's handle and a small cartridge popped out from below. "See this? It runs on battery so you'll have to recharge it with electricity. It'll hold a few charges; I'd reckon five, maybe a weak sixth shot if you have enough juice stored up. But, yes, a direct hit in theory will be able to hamper a target's small mechanical devices by overloading their circuit boards."

"Wow, that's incredibly useful!"
Well, don't thank me yet since there are a few kinks in its design I couldn't iron out. First and foremost, you'll have to be especially accurate with this weapon because it has no way to fire in bursts and takes a good ten seconds to recharge after a shot. Furthermore, Pokéballs and devices of similar size are particularly difficult to hit at a distance – especially if they're in transit. Not to mention the device's range is probably limited since I didn't have an amplifier lying around. Anyway, enough theory, let's go give it a test!

Kurt swung around and picked up the device, rushing back out to the hallway. With excitement, he placed a small Pokéball and an Apricorn atop a table and then walked back twenty paces. "Here goes," Kurt said. Taking aim at the Pokéball first, he clicked the trigger and a faint blue spark ejected from the tip of the weapon's jagged mouth. He lowered the gun and walked over to the table on the other side of the hall. He grabbed the Pokéball and tossed it onto the ground as if he were releasing a fictional Pokemon from its stasis. Upon hitting the polished wooden floorboards it opened without a hitch. "Nothing happened. Damn," he said. "Must've missed."

"Give it to me to try then."

"Go for it," Kurt said as he handed it off after setting up the range again, "but first give it a sec to recharge. Count to ten."

"Okay," Feyera said taking the gun. It was lightweight and easy to aim with, having a comfortable firearm grip cushioned in neatly wrapped insulating tape. There was one protruding nail-head that seemed to work as a center, though he doubted that it was intentionally placed there as an aiming apparatus. "Not a problem," he said aiming it at the Pokéball and focusing his mind on striking the target with precision. His heart jumped as he pulled the trigger back, another quiet blue flash projected from the gun. This time however, the Pokéball began to show a few tiny sparks.

"Oh ho ho," Kurt laughed. "Looks like we've got a sharpshooter. Wait a moment, then try for the Apricorn on the right."

"Mmm," Feyera nodded, this time taking aim at the funny shaped berry sitting next to the Pokéball. Again he tapped into a state of focus and shot directly at the Apricorn. The faint blue light flashed, but to his surprise nothing happened to the ball though his aim was true. "What?!" he exclaimed with a glare of frustration. "I hit it!"

Kurt chuckled. "You sure did, but the Apricorn has no electrical circuitry to exploit. The metal provides framework for the spheres but they don't use circuits to open and close. Being a plant, the Apricorn's Thigmonasty causes them to open and close based on sensory triggers, similar to a Carnivine's mouth."

"That means…!"

"That's right," Kurt said. "If you use Apricorns, you'll be able to immunize your Pokemon from Cipher's energy manipulating weapon since there's no chipset inside them. I highly doubt they've considered the defensive use of Apricorns since most people today only travel with Pokéballs in tow."

"Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant!" he said appreciatively. "With this gun you fastened together, I'll be able to give them a taste of their own medicine." Feyera walked over to the table and grabbed the Pokéball that had been hit. When he grabbed it, the ball gave him a brief, yet unpleasant shock – like static electricity when touching metal after walking on a carpet. "Yeah this one was hit, that's for sure. I just felt a small jolt from touching it." He threw the ball on the ground, and to his amazement the ball would not open. "How long you think the effect will last?"

"Dunno," shrugged Kurt. "You'd need to field-test that. Could be a couple seconds, could be up to an hour before it the ball finally resets the internal board; it would depend a lot on the model of the
Pokéball you're targeting. Expect the higher classes of Pokéballs to reset much quicker."

"This is truly remarkable craftwork, Kurt. I'm impressed by your tenacity in putting it together from an idea."

"Ah, now let's not be too hasty… this is still just a prototype after all. We didn't even give it a name."

Feyera gave the gun a good look over. He felt its weight and noted the nuance of the relatively quiet firing mechanism, which was a far different feeling than a typical Gauntlet series and definitely whisper quiet and compact compared to RAIL guns. The electrical weapon's recoil was non-existent, which was perfect since he lacked the frame to absorb such bursts; heck, even Sana could probably manage a way to use it if she had to. It was crude, but effective at what it was designed to do as an interference weapon. "How about the Pomson?" he said finally.

"I like it," Kurt said with a grin. "The Pomson Mark One it is!"

With that resolved, Kurt gave Feyera an assortment of Apricorns he had crafted. He explained to him the seven types of Apricorn and their respective end-products: the Fast Ball, the Friend Ball, the Heavy Ball, the Level Ball, the Love Ball, the Lure Ball, and finally the Moon Ball.

Feyera thanked him for all of his help.

"Don't mention it." Kurt replied coolly, "Just go make Fredrick proud. Give Team Rocket the old what-for."

"That I can do," he said. "Sana! Come on, we're leaving."

Feyera could have sworn he heard her laughing as he walked over to the room downstairs where she and Maisy had been playing. "Guess she must have been all right with kids after all," he muttered.

After they had left, there was a secure quietness that filled the house atop the hill. Kurt, having recently disabled the mines surrounding his house so Feyera could leave, was still standing sentry overseeing his land. There was much on his mind, and he wondered whether he had done the right thing by sending Feyera off without disclosing everything.

Suddenly there was a light rustling coming from the foyer of the house's interior. Kurt swiftly turned around with a confused look on his face. "Maisy?" he called out. "Maisy, is that you I hear?"

Instead of the little girl, there was a small creature floating through the central hallway of the house. It was diminutive in frame, shaped like a pixie or a tiny fairy. It had large eyes reminiscent of clear blue streams, which coordinated with the tips of its two antennae above those eyes. Light green leaves that matched its body color danced magically in the air close around it.

"I had a lot of fun, Kurt!" it said with a playful beam. "But I'm curious, why didn't you tell him about the future I foresaw?"

Kurt furrowed his brow. "I didn't tell him because he's not Mew."

The tiny creature shook her head and spun about, flying in a small circle on transparent butterfly wings. "That doesn't change the decision he'll still have to make."
"I know."

"Then why didn't you choose to warn him about my Future Sight?"

Kurt took a deep breath and gazed out at the horizon. The large mountains in the distance loomed ominously before them both. "Because I believe he'll find a way in the end. And it will be his own way – not yours, and certainly not mine. With those Pokemon he has at his side, I believe he'll find a way to overcome the trial."

"They're just average Pokemon though," it said with a carefree flutter. "Not even legendary as would surely befit this situation. They might not live long enough to see the truth revealed to them. And then what?"

Kurt shook his head. "Who he brings with him on this trial is his own decision. That's not up to me."

"Of course it's not," it said cheekily. "You're clearly stuck here with me."

"True. But rest assured, this time the outcome will not be up to you either."

"Oh. Now I get it. You really think that will change anything?" the little Pokemon said as it danced about near the house's rafters. "I'm never wrong. And with me as your guardian Pokemon, you don't ever have to be wrong either."

"Hmmm, but that's the thing; I want to be proven wrong about this."

"Well, not telling him everything was certainly unprecedented."

"Actually it was not unprecedented from his perspective. I told him everything that I know is actually true. I'm clearly old; I can only disclose the past since that alone is definite, actual truth. And moreover, he reminded me of something when I asked him what truth really is."

"Oh?"

"He reminded me that I have no right to speak of things which have yet to transpire, because such things are not actually true until they happen," Kurt explained. "Having faith in something you believe is true might very well give you the courage to keep on fighting for that truth, but when all your sureness is taken away, when you have nothing left to believe in, that's when there's nothing left but muddled doubt."

"Oh."

"Besides, had I said more than I did, he may well have changed his mind."

"You humans are all so silly," teased the little Pokemon. "That's why you have me. With my power, the future is an open book to you."

"An open book you say?" Kurt shut his eyes for a moment, reflecting as the orange sun slowly sank behind the forest's tall canopy to the west. "That implies that it can be changed in the present moment before it is closed. Hmm, maybe we're not as silly as you think, old friend."

"Hee hee, maybe, maybe not. Time will tell."

"Indeed it will."
Land of Beauty and Memories
Chapter by Solar

Chapter 8: Land of Beauty and Memories

Low in the sky, the late sun hung barely above the forest's thick canopy. The fading orange light illuminated the worn mountain path beyond Azalea. It was a peaceful early evening; the wind had died down and now only the softness of footsteps broke the silence on the quiet trial heading east.

Like many areas of Johto, the region around Azalea was sparsely populated by people. Most of the scenery was simply pure, beautiful countryside. While walking, there was no sign of any local inhabitants besides the occasional hoot of a Pokemon and the gentle flutter of wings. The mountain air was cool with the change of the seasons, feeling fresh and rather invigorating.

As the path continued on toward the large mountain ahead it became slightly less linear. It was covered in old cobblestone and had a few dips along the way, but for the most part would still be serviceable by utility vehicles. However, there was no apparent sign of any recent such activity on the winding roadway.

While the last stretches of daylight began fading, clouds began to form overhead. Their lofty peaks reached high up, far into the changing sky. Their substantial, lofty peaks reached high up into the changing sky, mirroring the much more jagged mountain tops. The sun's setting light made the clouds appear orange in color, complemented by the rocky slabs of earth that extended up below them. A very light breeze passing through was cool and crisp rustling through the dense forest's changing leaves on this late autumn afternoon.

Eventually there was a major bend in the pathway, revealing a wide, yet rather uninteresting cave mouth behind the trees. It had appeared out of nowhere since the sharp turn had been concealed by the dense forest. Engraved on a faded sign dimly lit by the last rays of light were the words "Union Cave Southern Entrance" followed by a group of simple symbols that represented a cave. Beyond the wooden board was a small slope that led gradually into a dim cave mouth.

"Bingo. Looks like we're here," Feyera said examining the sign from a distance.

"It wasn't difficult to find," she replied, acknowledging the obvious. "There are people here right?"

"Yes."

Sanaria shook her head with concern, her green hair blowing in the gentle breeze. "Something about it seems off."

"Oh?" he asked.

"Mmm, I don't know how to explain it. It's not like I can say I've been here before, but it feels strangely familiar."

He looked at her blankly, unable to fathom what she was talking about. "If I recall correctly, you grew up in Hoenn and traveled to the Sevii Islands, Sana. How can this cave feel familiar to you?"

"It's not that. No. Not the cave itself. It's that feeling you get when you're about to meet someone again. Someone you've met before."
"That doesn't make much sense. This is your first time in Johto isn't it?"

"Yes. ...And it's your first time as well, right?" she asked with an emphasis on the question.

He couldn't remember for sure. It certainly felt new to him, though he imagined he had seen photographs of the countryside. Wait! That was it – photographs.

It came back in a rush of thought. She had curly, sunshine-kissed strawberry hair and a cheerful smile with little dimples on her rosy cheeks from grinning. She sure was happy a lot, wasn't she? Her lighthearted, bubbly laughter was the next thing which came to mind. The way her dainty caramel colored eyes shone brightly when she first explained to him that not all girls raised outside of Kanto were "bumpkins" - contrary to what he had once been convinced of prior to making her acquaintance in a laboratory. He recalled her scent, a unique perfume she wore, the warm mixture of vanilla, creamy coconut, and beachy gardenia.

Finally, he remembered her showing him pictures of her hometown, which unsurprisingly shared remarkable resemblance to this region. Where, or better yet, when was that memory from? Was it from when he left Kanto's metropolis to work on the Progenitor Project with Cipher? Must have been around that time, right before the memories began to grow blurry. Was she the same person he kept on having vivid dreams about even after reuniting with Sana? It had to be her, all these memories of her felt so incredibly visceral. What on earth was her name again…?

"What's wrong?" Sana asked.

"I...uh, don't think I have any contacts that currently live out here," he said as he scratched his head. "Erm...Besides, isn't this your feeling – not mine?"

"It's hard to tell sometimes because of your heart being connected to mine."

"Right, I almost forgot about that being a side effect." However, in truth he hadn't forgotten about it, and was rather fascinated by the concept of shared thought though he'd never admit it to her. "Well, it could just be your imagination." He looked around, but the only noise came from the chirping of crickets nearby. "You have a particularly active one, right?"

"Yeah," she eventually agreed with a half-smile. "You're probably right. But this feeling that I have here in my heart, I can't seem to shake it."

"Let's set up here for now," he said with a point. "We'll move off to the side of the road in case anyone decides to come by."

With a nod, she followed him into the thicket. "This area of the woods is a lot like the Forests of Petals where I have my first memories."

"You mean outside Petalburg City in Hoenn?" he asked.

"I suppose, if that's what it you want to call it. You humans probably only know it as that name, but to me and my kin the region is simply called Home in everyday speech."

"Sounds confusing if all of you refer to where you live as Home. What would you say to a Gardevoir that lived halfway across the globe?"

"It's not like our community deals with other Gardevoir. The others... - I guess that includes me now too, doesn't it? - They have their own traditions, many of which conflict with the rituals we had to follow within Home. One of which is to avoid interaction with the rest of the world in order to protect Home."
"Must've gotten a little lonely in its own way then."

"It was," Sana agreed. "Which is why we left. The first few weeks were eye-opening. I never dealt with the humans that lived close by, much less observed them. I was taught that your kind should be completely avoided, especially so if there was more than one person present since two minds are significantly more difficult to deal with than one."

"You make it sound like all people are bad news."

"Well, they're certainly more difficult to avoid and trick using telepathy when they're gathered together in groups." She smiled. "That's similar to us actually."

"You never interacted with humans before me?"

"There was this one old man who lived nearby with a ship but that's about it."

"Huh, so that's how you learned about traversing water?"

"I saw him do it over and over. Day after day, I would watch him calmly from a distance. I was only a Kirlia then, and a rebellious one at that. One day I finally decided to act it out along with Seph. Thankfully he didn't ever manage to catch us!" she said with a laugh. "Then again, that was the last we ever saw of Home. We followed the coastline using his memories – and dreams to guide the way, but eventually the vessel began acting on its own."

"Must've triggered an ARMOS program. You know, a computer captain guided by satellites."

"Whatever it was, I thought it to be possessed. If it weren't for Seph, I surely would have jumped off. It was nearly a day of traveling on the bedeviled contraption before we had reached a large mass of land in a sea of clearest blue. The tropics were always different with all the palms and large plants with thick leaves and huge flowers. It makes me nostalgic to think about the old woods from my memories."

"There's your answer then. You obviously miss your home, and that's why the wood forest here reminds you of it," he concluded. He was honestly more concerned about his own memories of the mysterious strawberry haired girl haunting his dreams. If only he could remember her name! Doing so was like trying to see through a heavy fog that completely enveloped his once recognizable world.

When they were still within sight of the cave's entrance, but no longer on its direct path, he took a knee and began rummaging through his worn pack. There were things still in here that he had forgotten about, a few potions, some fishing string, and even an old cap. "I really need to clean this thing out," he said plunging his hands deeper. "When we make our move, I'd like to make sure I'm not carrying too much baggage."

"We're going to go into the cave at night?" Sana asked with a hint of anxiety in her voice.

"Not going to be much difference whether it's day or night once we're inside. There are several advantages to a nighttime operation; namely, it's more likely that we'll be able to get the drop on Team Rocket if we play our cards right since we'll have the element of surprise. However, -" he fished out his new Apricorns from the pack with a smile "- I first wanted to get a consensus from my Pokemon."

"Wait, what about what I think we should do?" she asked with a look of jealousy.

He loosened the Pokéballs resting on his holster and answered her with a laugh. "But you're technically not my Pokemon, remember?"
Sana crossed her arms at that and pouted, kicking a small stone on the ground. "You're right. If you think I'm going to let you catch me, think again."

"I wasn't planning on that actually," he smiled innocently. "In fact, I was going to ask what they thought since I need to switch them over into Apricorns anyway."

"Wait," she grabbed his shoulder which startled him. Her hand was warm and her gaze unwavering as she stared into his eyes. Those deep cherry eyes of hers seemed to pierce into his very being.

"Uh, yeah?" he asked with a puzzled look. "What's the matter…?"

"Isn't it important what I think we should do?" she finally said with a bat of her eyelashes.

"Sure, sure," he said removing her hand from his shoulder gently. "But let's face it, there's more Pokemon involved than just you."

Sana looked like something inside of her had snapped, and she quickly twirled around on her heel. "Fine! Go ahead, ask your Pokemon. They'll probably come up with a better idea than anything YOU can think of on your own."

"You're in a bit of a mood right now. However, if you have a suggestion…" he said as he began to fidget impulsively from the air of uncomfortableness between them, "…I'll hear it."

"A suggestion? From me?" she let out a short laugh. "Why would you care about that? I'm not your Pokemon."

"To be honest," he said sitting up, "it really depends on how useful the suggestion actually is. It sounds like you have a thought, so I'm giving you a chance to tell me about it before I consult the rest of the team for their input."

"Pfft." Sana brought her hand up to cover part of her face. It was an unusual gesture, but he noticed she did it more often when fretted, though he did not know exactly what it meant. "First of all, I'm the only Pokemon that's actually been aware of everything going on. The others have been in stasis, trapped the prison you humans call the Pokéball."

"It isn't like that though," he retorted thinking about what Kurt had told him. Something about Pokéballs and Pokemon being two sides of the same coin, but he doubted he could articulate the concept in an eloquent fashion to Sana while she was in this state of emotion.

"It isn't?" she glared. "They haven't been in the world and experiencing it like you and I have!"

"True, but they're also in a state where they don't need to expend any energy like you and I," he said trying to parrot what Kurt had told him about energy storage. "Don't you need to rest at times?"

"Of course I need to rest; that's why I sleep, just like you do. However, I don't want to ever disappear from the world. What about you? Do you want to disappear…? Or worse —" She then pointed menacingly at his heart. "Have you ever considered what'll happen if the other half of the heart in your chest suddenly turned into energy imprisoned inside a capsule?"

"Sana, I don't think it works that way," he said masking the uncontrollable feeling of worry she had prompted. Honestly, he had no idea how any of it worked. All his theories and conjectures had been turned upside down when experience contradicted reality in unusual ways.

"Face it, thas Feyera. You don't know anything with total certainty."
"Which is precisely why I struggle to figure it out!" he replied raising his voice in a firm manner. "Like it or not, we're stuck with one another for now. If you want to antagonize me then by all means, do so. I've grown thick enough skin through this journey. But if what you say about our hearts is true, then you're only causing harm to yourself indirectly."

She was taken aback by the sincere reply. Appearing speechless at first, she quickly gathered her thoughts and said, "In both of our best interests, I think we should find a way that doesn't involve going out of your way, helping every helpless human you meet. Do you see me stopping to help every destitute little Caterpie? Why?! What do you owe them anyway?"

"Sana..." he started to say with a stern voice to admonish her lack of compassion, but soon he trailed off after hearing a small sniffle coming from her. Was she crying? He couldn't tell since her face was turned away, but it sounded like she was genuinely upset about something and was lashing out. "...You had fun with Maisy, didn't you?"

"Only for a little," she replied sheepishly. "But I still haven't forgiven you for using me like that, you know!"

"I wasn't using you though, Sana. I thought you'd be caring enough to help that poor little girl, and maybe learn more about people at the same time."

"Oh please!" she said straightening her posture. "You only wanted me to occupy that little child that was pesterling you. Well, the joke is on you, Thas Feyera. I had an enlightening experience, despite your efforts to try and use me."

"You did?" he said in a surprised voice.

"Oh yes," she said quickly looking the other way. "I learned humans aren't all idiots like you. No, instead, they grow up to become idiots!"

"Well now, that certainly isn't too nice," he replied with a frown. "Still, I'm impressed you didn't scare Maisy off."

She turned back to face him with a stark look of dissatisfaction on her pale face. "Are you implying that I'm scary?"

"Nah, not really," he said trying not to laugh; she might have been frightening when he first met her, but after all spending all this time with her she seemed rather docile. "Although who knows, maybe to a kid you might be. Especially when you make an angry expression like that."

"Hmm," Sana bit at her lip nervously. "You're not a child though! So what do you know?"

"Not much, remember? My childhood memories are in conflict with foreign memories. Some of things I can recall I never personally experienced. Yet, that doesn't really matter in the end: I still know a happy face when I see it. Which is why I'm commending you," Feyera said keenly. "You did a good job back there."

"I guess if you say so," she began to say half-heartedly but suddenly she stopped to ask, "wait, that isn't a complement is it?"

"Oh, don't flatter yourself. I was merely surprised since you have it out against humans." He quickly returned to rummaging through his worn pack. "Honestly, I didn't expect that from you, that's all."

She observed him as he went through his bag and asked with a rising inflection in her tone, "You want to do something important don't you? Something that goes beyond yourself. That's why you
"brought us here."

"What! No, not at all," he said with a tone of resistance. He quickly averted his eyes back to the inside of his pack. "I'm still just in this for the big reward."

"What reward?" she asked acutely. "You never mentioned a reward before."

"Oh… Guess you forgot about my master plan!" He let out a burst of satisfied, almost maniacal laughter, "Haha! Then let me educate you once again, Sanaria! First thing's first, I'm going to find a way to undo all of this with the power of Mercurium. It's a matter of heuristics, working backwards from precisely what got me into this whole mess. After I have a grasp on how Mew links to Pokemon, it should be a matter of reversing the biochemical reaction. That shouldn't be a problem if I gather enough of the material to experiment on. Based on what I know, the only real competition also searching for Mercurium would be: Team Rocket, Cipher, and any ambitious Pokéball manufacturer looking to create a flawless Pokéball by using Mew’s genetic code. If we follow those leads, we'll find enough of the material for sure. The best bet is Team Rocket since I know they've been extracting Mercurium."

"Mercurium," she repeated telepathically, then again aloud but softly and barely above a whisper, "Mercurium."

"Yeah, it's supposedly a legendary Pokemon. Or rather, it was a Pokemon." Feyera shrugged, feeling somewhat content with her level of understanding being marginally less than his own. "Either way, it's been dormant for a long time, and only a few samples of its unadulterated genetic code exist buried underground as fossils."

Her eyes opened wide, showing intrigue. "Isn't that the weird metal you humans are so obsessed with finding since it is only found beneath the ground like gemstones?" she asked.

"Indeed, it's something simple like that for the mere plebeians who are sent out on their aimless missions to find and extract it from the earth!" He paused for a moment thinking about how outright ignorant Team Rocket members must have been to go searching for such a dangerous unrefined fossil in the depths of Mount Moon.

"Aren't you doing the same thing though?" she asked with an air of seriousness and worry on her face.

"Don't forget, I am privy to information that will make me rise above all those previous attempts to obtain Mercurium!" he said confidently. "Just you wait, you'll see soon enough. Once I usurp Team Rocket's plans here in Johto, I'll undoubtedly have access to even more of the precious compound!"

"But even if you do manage to do that, is it a good idea?" she asked, sincerely worrying he was being used as a pawn.

"Of course it is a good idea, Sana. Don't be hesitant at a crucial time like now. Mercurium is the reason why I'm in the sorry state that I am. If I can gather more of the material, I'll have a tidy supply of my own to experiment on. Then it's only a matter of time before I, the great scientist that I am, decipher its innermost secrets!" he boasted proudly with a flourish. "Once I have all the data neatly complied, it should fetch a worthwhile amount of academic clout when I publish my next dissertation on the subject!"

Sana sighed. "Why don't you just find an expert on the material? Wouldn't that be a lot easier than going on a pointless quest to find more of it since you don't even know how it works?"
"Kurt," he said quietly.

"Excuse me?"

"Kurt is the closest thing I have to a neutral expert on it. He creates his version of Pokéballs using a derivative of Mercurium that has adapted to grow within special types of plants."

"Oh. Well… Did you learn anything from him?"

"Perhaps. It's all just conjecture until I have solid proof in my hands. And only a true scientist can develop knowledge through experimentation."

"So, you're no closer to separating your human body from the heart?" she asked directly.

"Not true!" he said quickly. "In fact I'm closer than I ever was before! If I can find more samples of Mercurium I should be able to undo the binding effects of the fossilized relic of Mew and finally remove this heart from my body once and for all."

"Really?" she asked, but he could not tell whether or not she honestly believed him.

"Of course," he said as certainly as he possibly could. "It's just a matter of time, don't you worry. It will all work out. If what Kurt said is true, Mew is real and there's nothing to worry about."

"Hmm. You sound like you're only trying to convince yourself of that."

"Pah, you're just in awe of my abilities!" he said arrogantly. "You'll remember this day as the day you were wrong!"

Sana did not even bother to answer him. She figured when he went off on immature tangents like this it was best to just ignore him for the sake of her own sanity. He claimed to have grown since the onset of his journey, and yet this overconfident aspect of him never seemed to change. At the very least it helped her to recognize and distinguish him from her previous companion.

"Ah ha! Thanks to Lorelei packing extra Pokéballs on her yacht, these replacements were able to work out just fine. It was shielded from Cipher's energy weapon, so the replacements are still in working order."

"How wonderful…" she muttered sarcastically.

"However, in order to protect them from weapons that cause electronic interference, I'll need to switch everyone over to Apricorns. That's the safest bet."

Sana rolled her large eyes. She still watched him fiddle with the devices out of curiosity. He lined the three Pokéballs in a neat row and placed the Apricorns directly adjacent to the sphere in their centers making it look like they were kissing lips. One by one, he pressed down on both and a beam of light shot from one into the other. If Sana was not so adverse to the idea, she might have found it fascinating since the beams of light, although short, were composed of all the different colors of a rainbow.

"Okay. That should do it, the transfer is complete," he said happily. "Now to test it out… Go, Brucie!"

A flash of light surrounded the sphere as the Apricorn ball made contact with the earth below it. A familiar Pokemon took shape from the release of stored energy.
[Boss!] the Pokemon said excitedly with a big smile.

"Welcome back, Brucie," Feyera said with a warm grin. But then he felt compelled to ask a question that was burning inside his brain. "Say Brucie, when I sent you into the Pokéball, did time pass for you?"

[Time…?] The Charmeleon looked at his trainer quizzically with bright blue eyes. [Uhh…]

"Do you remember being inside of the Pokéball?" Feyera asked as straight as he could. "Could you count while you were inside?"

Sana gave him a shove and said coldly, "Why would you ask him that? He's been trapped in there while the two of us have been experiencing the world!"

Brucie gave a small leer. [Glad to see things haven't changed at all between the two of you. I wasn't really trapped anywhere, Sana. It was more like I was always ready to go but I didn't need to. I don't think I've changed one bit since the boss gave me a new Pokéball to return to.]

"What'd I tell you?" he spiritedly rebuked. "Brucie's fine. From his perspective, he didn't even feel any time passing. Haha. Look at you. You're a bona fide time traveler, Brucie!"

[Sometimes it's a little disorienting though.] He looked around at the trees, extending his short claws menacingly at the unfamiliar environment. [Say, where the heck are we anyway, boss?]

"Oh…" Feyera felt an unpleasant knot form in his throat. Brucie had last seen the tropical palm trees in the distance as they rode away from Penta Island on the Prima. To him, no time had passed at all since after the battle with Cipher. In other words, his subjective experience had been changed completely by the Pokéball.

Brucie stretched his short arms into the air and let out a yawn. [I guess it doesn't really matter. At least things seem calm now.]

"Yeah," Feyera answered hoarsely. "Things are a bit different now, that's true buddy."

Sana's ensuing glare was a sharp as a dagger. "And you're going to ask him what to do about Team Rocket?"

[Team Rocket?] Brucie exclaimed with a jump. He raised his claws and menacingly slashed at the air. [Where?! I'll take 'em on!]

"Hush, Sana," Feyera said disparagingly. Then he turned his attention back to Brucie, who was still swinging his nails and exposing his healthy set of sharp teeth. "There's no need to get excited just yet, buddy. Team Rocket is in the Union Cave, which is over there. See?"

[Okay,] Brucie lowered his claws, albeit not without a hint of trepidation Feyera and Sana could pick up on. [What's the play?] he asked. [I thought we were up against Cipher.]

"Well… where to even begin? We were after Cipher that's true, but now our priorities have shifted in response to some new information…" his voice trailed off as he heard a faint noise in the distance. Actually, noises. The sounds of human voices talking to each other. "Shh!" he urged.

The three of them huddled close together by a nearby berry bush. Sanaria's short dress helped to conceal the small flame Brucie's tail was emitting. From a distance, the three of them were about as conspicuous as a Volbeat's taillight.
Gradually, a crew of four people approached the cave's entrance. There was a little bit of laughter, and judging by their body frames two of them were definitely female. All of them were garbed in jet black clothing. The two men were carrying what appeared to be large cloth bags over their shoulders. They looked pretty heavy based on the way their backs were slumped over.

"Nother good haul, eh?" said one of the men in a low voice. He sported a crew-cut, though some of his brown hair had receded. On top of his sweater, he had a large dark overcoat with a number of pockets. While he was tall in statute, his posture was slumped from the article he was carrying on his back. It was difficult to see his face however based on the way he was facing toward the cave's mouth.

"You'll write a report that this extraction was filed twice, right?" one of the women beside him muttered. She was lanky and held a Pokéball in her thin hand. Her hair was tied in a short blonde bun, and she had bright teal eyes. "That way we'll receive that juicy bonus," she squealed with excitement.

"No shit," replied the first man. He let out a dry laugh that sounded more like a wheeze. "This job pays peanuts if you don't game the figures!"

"I'll be out of this hell soon enough," the other man said with a dark look on his face. "Gotta pay off my next loan installment to the Boss. Good thing I've got contacts outside of the country."

The fourth member of the group, a petite red-haired girl finally spoke up, "You'll never get out, Harrison. If you pay off your debt, there's always some other favor he'll ask of you. And you won't be able to refuse."

"Ha," the man replied with an air of resentfulness uncannily similar to Feyera. "That's what you think, Red. But I have a plan, see? In the end, Harrison will no longer exist. I'll make myself a new identity, move out to Mossdeep or somewhere warm, settle down, have a few kids, and be free from the grip of this crime ring once and for all."

"Lofty dreams," replied the other man with a grumble. He appeared to be struggling more with carrying his load. "You'll never be able to get out in one piece. Even if you do, they'll probably send agents looking for you; Hoenn isn't too far away. No one truly ever leaves Team Rocket."

The first man suddenly threw his sack down on the ground at the cave's entrance with a loud thud. The three other people appeared shocked by his action. But he did not express aggressive behavior, instead speaking slowly and carefully, "I know you guys want out as well. That's why we're friends here, see? If y'all were narcs, I wouldn't want the first thing to do with you. I can smell a filthy rat from a mile away."

The blonde quickly piped up, "Who's to say we won't rat on you, Harrison? You're new identity could be worth a sizable bounty. Might even help us pay off our own debts to the Boss."

"Heh," Harrison laughed with a wide smile unconcealed by his thick brown facial hair. "That's what I like about you, Trish. You're never afraid to say it as it is."

"It's not like I give a rat's ass about you or anything," she replied with a flustered look.

"I know you don't. That's the thing. None of us really have a reason to care. Look at the shit we do just to get paid," Harrison sighed. "Doesn't matter though. If there's a way to slip on out, you can bet your bacon I'll be taking it. Proton, Ariana, Petrel be damned."

"You shouldn't say stuff like that, bud," replied the cool and collected other man. "You never know
"Hah," Harrison laughed directing his attention to the other man in the group. "You're a real funny-bone, you know that? If it comes down to any of you guys having loose lips, I'll make sure to slit your throats myself. Don't need a new identity and a Mossdeep Condo to do that now, do I?"

The four of them shared a brief laugh as Harrison picked up his load again. With a grunt, he led them into the cave. "C'mon, it's getting dark. We'll log this as a two-for-one since that damn secretary is probably sleeping on the clock again."

Brucie, Sana, and Feyera waited silently until the last sounds of their trailing voices were extinguished.

Sana affectionately patted Brucie on the head since he was starting to tremble from the cool night air. [What's going on, boss?] he asked clutching at his clothes in order to get attention.

Feyera scratched his chin, pondering the situation carefully. He then nodded triumphantly. "Fortune smiles on us yet again! I'd say we've found our marks. Proton, Ariana, and Petrel were the names that grunt, Harrison, mentioned. They're likely to be around here overseeing the operation since that's how the chain of command usually works."

"Do you know them!?" Sana asked quickly as she grabbed his shoulder.

"...!" The question caught him more off-guard than her hand squeezing his arm. For a brief second he wondered, did he know them at one point? "I don't think so." Feyera turned back to Brucie, "Say, do you remember what that Archer character told me back in Celadon?"

Brucie spat a small ember on the dirt. [Yeah, what about that jerk!]

"He said something about me being a part of their plan, but that's no longer possible," he said looking around, feeling paranoid. "There's no way for Team Rocket to still have their claws in my life. I'm on my own now; I don't answer to Team Rocket anymore."

Brucie could tell he was upset. [Well, he might've been trying to tick you off since you had a history with them. Didn't you used to do some real dirty work for them way back when?]

Feyera sighed. He had no idea if he would ever figure it out, and yet he had no choice but to keep moving forward into the unfamiliar darkness. Quickly the surge to construct his own identity overtook him. "Ah haha. That's where you're gravely mistaken, Brucie. I wasn't a mere lackey. Oh no, I was an important scientist! Doctor Feyera! Truthfully, they were incredibly foolish to let me just slip away! And tonight they shall rue the day they let me escape."

Sana let out an exacerbated sigh. "We all know you're absurdly self-conscious, thas Feyera."

"What!? Nonsense! I am anything but self-conscious!" he said with an uncompromising look of determination in his emerald eyes. "It's because of me that Team Rocket began extracting Mercurium in the first place."

"That's nothing to be proud of!" Sana scolded, taking a quick swat at his heart.

"It is what it is," he said wincing in surprise. "Hopefully they've gathered enough of the fossilized Mew data by now, which I will gladly relieve them of."

Brucie shook his head. [You know boss, a lot of times you say these big words with that wild look...]

who might be reporting to the Executives."
on your face. But sometimes I don't even know what they mean."

"He's basically saying he's going to steal whatever they have," Sana clarified.

[Well they're crooks, so they probably stole it to begin with. Guess that means stealing is not as bad as it usually is.] Brucie appeared to be truly torn over the ethics of this plan. [Are you sure this is a good idea?]

"Brucie, you are my trusted assistant in this matter, I require your full support and attention!" Feyera replied with a grin. "If I can't trust you, then who am I to trust? Surely, not this Gardevoir here at my side!"

"Hey jerk, I'm still here, remember?" Sana replied trying to conceal a smile. "Don't forget I helped you even though I had no obligation to!"

"Ah, now look what you've done, Brucie. You've gone and angered her!" Feyera proclaimed with a dramatic flourish towards the starless sky.

[S-sorry,] Brucie replied almost instinctually.

"My friend, do not apologize, for Sana does not yet understand the bond we share as Trainer and Pokemon!"

Sana shoved him with a soft telekinetic burst. "Stop being such an ass, tha's Feyera."

"Ah," he said catching himself before toppling over. "It appears that we're on our way now. To discover Team Rocket's intentions here in the Union Cave. For that very reason, I need your help Brucie!"

[Lemme guess… You need a light?] he asked with a slight flicker of his flaming tail.

"Well… it would certainly be beneficial to have illumination whilst traversing such a dark and foreboding cave, would it not?"

[Alright, alright, I'm on it. Just cut it out with the big words boss,] he said eagerly as the flame on the tip of his tail became a brighter red. [All you have to do is call me your torch, cause I'll be shining up this whole dark place with my fire!]

"That's my Brucie!" Feyera said with a lighthearted laugh. "We're a team here no matter what. Team Rocket's got nothing on this."

Sana could not help but smile. This was the carefree and energetic man she had known. Even if he was delusional, she still saw something about his will to interact with Pokemon which was an unfamiliar aspect of humanity to her. At the very least, it was intriguing to watch.

Brucie gave Sana and Feyera a thumbs up. [I'm always here to help you two out, and don't you forget it!]

"I'd never forget," he said directing his gaze at Sana. "I don't want to forget."

"You said before that your memories were in conflict. What did you mean by that?"

"Oh, yeah. That. It's just a strange sensation I get sometimes. Usually occurs when trying to remember things that took place a long while ago. It feels like I've been in two different places at once sometimes."
"You don't say," Sana haphazardly answered, but her mind was clearly elsewhere deep in thought.

"Chalk it up as another affect of your unwarranted Hypnosis."

"I did what I could to try and stabilize your heart considering you probably would have died," she replied. "Was I wrong to do that?"

"Only you can answer that," he said resolutely.

"Huh?" She expected some half-baked explanation as to why his life was absolutely necessary for the progress of science, or something a similar caliber of grandiose delusion.

"I'm thankful you made that choice, since now it gives me a chance to prove that I can change. Isn't that something people and Pokemon have in common? We're both seeking out way of overcoming the law of nature that was imprinted and forced upon them. That's something you strive to achieve as well, right?"

"That came out of nowhere," she said in surprise. "And…it sounds completely unrealistic when you say it like that!"

"Just…answer the question," he insisted with a serious expression.

"But I don't understand why you're even asking it. And why are you asking ME that question?"

"I'm just wondering: why are you the way that you are?"

Sana immediately recoiled. "I'm just who I am. Isn't that enough?"

"That type of answer is something I'd expect from a human, not you," he laughed. With that being said, he turned towards the cave and began to walk. "My mind is made up. We'll make our move now."
A thick dampness in the air surrounded them as they entered the cavern’s wide mouth. Beyond the threshold, the cave was dark, but thanks to Brucie’s flame tail, there was enough illumination to see relatively far into the cave; the only problem was that the cave appeared to twist and turn, so the light did not reach as far as it possibly could have. However, this was also a boon, since it would undoubtedly make their progress through the cavern somewhat less noticeable if there were any guards on lookout.

They heard a distinct whirling noise in the distance, the atmospheric sound of rushing water. The steady splashing and churning echoed ceaselessly through the countless chambers of Union Cave that were depicted on the map Kurt had provided.

Together they walked onwards, turning abruptly at several points as the passageway continued to descend deeper and deeper into the hidden bowels of the earth. The underground path was barely wide enough for the three of them to walk next to each other. Below was just a brutally steep drop, leading straight down into a churning black river. The water violently smashed against the rocks below, forming a perpetual thick mist above the mixing bowl of streams approximately fifty feet below the path they were on. Falling from all the way up here would almost certainly be a death sentence; even if the initial fall was broken by the water below, the turbulent current would probably lead to a quick demise as they smashed ruthlessly against the massive stalagmites jutting out of the underground river like a stone bramble-bush of thorns.

“Okay, so here’s the main channel of water we’re supposed to follow upstream,” he said with a point on the yellowed and worn map. Brucie’s tail barely illuminated the parchment, despite the luminosity of the fire being boosted by the light reflecting off the limestone walls.

“You think that map is accurate?” Sana asked pressing her face close to his in order to see the depicted layout.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Feyera asked, peering into the dark abyss below.

“Usually you don’t trust anything,” she replied with a tug to pull him back. “And I’m wondering how old it is considering that geezer gave it to you.”
“True, Kurt was old,” he agreed with her. “You know, I’ve been wondering: what does age mean to you as a Pokemon?”

“Age means a lot of things depending on the type of Pokemon. It can symbolize power or tenacity for my species. However…” she pouted as if pondering a difficult concept. “It’s different. For us, perspective will do that. It can influence the time we perceive. Our eternity is not infinite, although time is drawn in to meet with that eternity.”

“Hmm.” Suddenly a question came to mind, but he hesitated to ask it. “How long do Gardevoir usually live for anyway?”

“Well, that depends,” she replied fretfully. “Assuming you live in a safe community with other Pokemon, and there aren’t any human poachers looking to capture you…then your rate of survival dramatically increases. With enough nourishment, it could be up to a quarter century if we live alone. That estimate is close to my age actually.”

“Jeez, you’re near the end of your life already?” he asked feeling worried suddenly by her dismal response. “You don’t look that old.”

“D-don’t be ridiculous!” she flushed. “Age all depends on the state of the heart. If it is well-nourished throughout childhood and bonded at a young age to another’s, then both living for a hundred years is not out of the question.”

“A hundred years?” he asked with a look of shock. What she was telling him began to sink in. “That’s…really, really old…” he said eventually.

“I guess…so. Humans don’t usually live that long, do they?” she asked innocently.

“No,” Feyera acknowledged in a matter-of-fact manner. “Usually we don’t make it past seventy without health problems, which is why the elderly are either wise or senile. I’m banking on the former in Kurt’s case.”

However, Sana knew him too well and immediately pointed out the issue with his statement. “You know, it’s not like you to take a leap of faith like that. You must have some reason for trusting him. Otherwise why would we even be here?”
“Humph. You have a point there,” he said with a sigh. “You know me too well for you own good…”

She gave him a tight grin in response, feeling somewhat happy to have her natural skills as an empath acknowledged by him, but even more satisfied that it was a complement granted to her expanding reasoning ability. “You really want to believe in whatever he told you, don’t you? … Even if it doesn’t make sense.”

“Sana, I’ll admit you have a fair point. But Doctor Feyera takes no leaps of faith, for he is a man of science and reason!” Truly, he felt pinned by her pointed reply, yet he managed to say in an unemotional way, “It’s all too obvious from the collection of various facts I’ve been presented with. Surely Kurt knows a thing or two about the region where he lives, and this map is no exception.”

“Fine, fine,” she grumbled. “If we get lost though, I’m blaming you, and only you, for it! Doctor whatever or not, I won’t pass any blame on the geezer you so recklessly decided to trust on a whim.”

“A whim? You think that little of me? Not to mention my ability to seek out the truth buried in countless falsehoods! You’re seriously underestimating me, Sanaria!” Feyera said haughtily. She had a solid rationale all things considered, but he wouldn’t admit it. Indeed, Kurt may have been friends with Fredrick, but his chief motivation was revenge on Team Rocket. If he truly sought to do anything about the raiding, he would have come here himself and done something. But then again, Kurt also had young Maisy to look after.

“That Feyera, I’m being serious, don’t lose sight of what we’re doing here together. You’re alive for a reason.”

“Pfft, don’t you worry about that.” He felt like she had become rather cynical, which oddly enough was more characteristic of himself. Regardless, he did not want to dwell on his mortality.

[Where we heading?] asked Brucie as they rounded yet another steep corner.

Quickly, he explained the plan, “It’s nice and simple, see. All we need to do is follow the river upstream until there’s a signal from this radio.” He took out the radio Kurt had repaired. With a flip of the switch he turned it on and a dull static began to echo through the cave’s antechamber.
Sana covered her ears, pressing the smooth pointed cartilage snuggly against her face. “I thought you said this was a covert mission?!”

“Yeah, I know, I was just thinking that.” He quickly adjusted the knob on the device to reduce the volume of white noise. “Phew, kinda loud, huh?”

Brucie gave a nod.

“Haven’t used it in so long, I forgot. That’s better, right?”

[Yeah. You don’t want to alert that we’re here. That’s covert Op. 101.]

“Mmm, I guess.” Sana shrugged, turning her attention to the cave’s river. “It’s strange don’t you think?”

“What’s strange?” he asked anxiously.

“There’s no one here and yet... Hmm. That feeling when I look at the river reminds me of something familiar, but I can’t... quite put my pointer on it.”

“You mean ‘finger’. Sana, that’s an idiom,” he said with a bit of discomfort, “where’d you pick that up anyway?”

“I think I heard you say it once. Back when we first started this crazy mission of yours. Back when I hardly knew you. That was such a long time ago.” She started to laugh to herself, “Heh. Actually, it makes a lot of sense when you can’t reach something and you need to use your telepathy to access it.”

“Uhh, I don’t think that’s entirely accurate.” He scratched his head, feeling spent from navigating the steep descent towards the river. “Whatever though.”

“You don’t feel it too?” she asked slowly and directly as they pressed forward. “It approaches slowly and in stark contrast to the world around it...with it comes sharp pain and a strange disconnect with the world.”
“Hmm?” He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing for a moment. The cave’s air was damp and cool; with the subterranean river flowing even closer nearby he was not surprised. “I don’t feel anything,” he said opening his eyes and looking at her with a puzzled expression. “But I do smell something foul and I’m almost sure it’s Zubat droppings.”

“Bleh, that’s not what I’m talking about!” she rebuked.

“Excuse me for not knowing what you’re talking about!” He gestured with his hand and pointed around at the environment around them. “Look around. This cave feels the same as any other I’ve been in. Stalagmites, stalactites, Zubat, more stalagmites…”

“Hush!” she said with a glare of seriousness. “It’s a feeling of loneliness, can’t you sense it?”

“I’ve got nothing,” he answered with a frown. “I don’t feel anything weird here at all. It’s just another cave…”

“Nothing at all?” she asked before lunging forward at him unexpectedly.

“Wha—” he started to say but she had already grasped at his heart, causing him to feel unpredicted warmth in his core. “Cut it out!” he commanded. “We’re not here to fool around!”

“I’m not fooling around,” she said. “Just trying to help you see something you seem to be missing.”

His heart felt warm as she pressed against it. Feeling himself slipping backwards he quickly forced out, “Forget it!”

Sana paused, her hands now hovering above his heart. “But…don’t you want to see?” she asked.

He shook his head firmly. “My eyes work just fine.”

“But your heart is…”
With a sour look in his eyes he forcefully grabbed her hands, clutching them tightly, he pulled her away. “I can’t let this happen, Sana; it’s not the same… I’m not who you thought I was,” he wanted to say, but he could not muster the courage. Instead he replied rather mutely, “My memories…”

“Hmm?” she melodramatically responded with wide eyes. “Memories? Of what?”

“Of what a fool I was to think this would work out,” he said finally. “It… can’t…”

She allowed him to move her hands further from his heart. All the while her eyes were fixed upon it, as if in a bizarre trance.

“Sana, this heart, it’s no longer able to –”

“Stop,” she said unexpectedly. “Don’t say anymore.”

He complied and they stood in an awkward silence. The only sound came from the rushing water off in the distance as it echoed through the cave.

“You lost your sense of feeling haven’t you?” she asked. However it appeared as though she was not even addressing him.

Feyera shook his head and placed her hands upon her own heart. “No. I’ve only just begun feeling what it means to be a part of the world again. That’s why I’m doing this.”

“You’re terrible,” she pouted, pulling away and breaking the link between them.

“Sana, we can’t afford to be caught off-guard here. If what you’re saying is true about feeling despair, then that means there’s something going on that probably isn’t good. We do know that they’ve been using Slowpoke Tails however. You might be sensing unease from that.”

By now they had reached what appeared to be the deepest part of the cavern. The path had leveled out a mere five feet above the river. Most of the path ahead of them was coated in a dense fog from the current splashing relentlessly against the rocks. Up ahead, it seemed to branch off in two directions, one of which followed closer to the river, but the other seemed to depart on another path.
through a thick stone wall.

Without hesitating, Feyera consulted his map. However the splashing water had begun to turn the parchment rather soggy. If it had been laminated, this would probably not be a problem, but some of the ink had begun to smear. “…!” Feyera gasped as the way forward became slightly more convoluted than before.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “You look really pale.”

“It’s nothing,” he said quickly trying to dispel his own worry. “As long as we follow Kurt’s instructions and follow the river upstream we’ll be fine.”

[Uh boss, this salty water keeps getting sprayed in my eyes.] Brucie lamented. [Let’s keep moving.]

“Wait, hold up, I have an idea,” he quickly snatched the Apricorn ball containing Des. “Go Desperado!”

A bright flash of light, further augmented by the cavern’s mist, lit up the narrow chamber. A large serpentine Pokemon dove headlong into the river as the light energy released transformed into physical form. Even more water sprayed all around them as the Pokemon lofted her head above the water’s surface. She didn’t even appear to be phased by the current rushing around her.

She let out a tremendous yawn, but it sounded more like a roar with the way that the echoes worked in these narrow stone passages. Thankfully, the surrounding rapids seemed to drown out the unquestionably loud noise. [Howdy there.] Des said reeling her long neck up high in the water.

“Hey Des,” he said with a grin. If there was one Pokemon suited for this type of underground exploration it had to be her. “How’s the current?”

She dipped back into the water, using her strong fins to guide her against the rushing rapids coming from upstream. [Lil’bit on the rough side here, cowboy.] she said looking around the cave. [What in tarnation y’all doing here in these here parts?]

Sana looked over at the Gyarados and gave her a small wink. “Des, we’re trying to figure out what Team Rocket is doing underground in this cave.”
“Hey, that’s my line,” he complained. “Nevertheless, what Sana said is correct; they’re up to something down here.”

Des shook her head and growled lowly. [Aye, so we’re down here in these parts ta put a nice ol’ spoke in their wheel, aren’t we?]

“More or less. The plan is to get the drop on them and then use the surprise ambush to press forward and usurp their operation at the jugular.”

[By hook or crook?] asked Des warily.

[Probably by crook.] Brucie answered.

“We have to insure that no matter what we get the Mercurium Team Rocket’s been extracting. That’s an imperative part of this mission.”

[Now hold yer horses, Edgy. This is Team Rocket yer talkin’ about. Even if ya manage ta chisel their goods, if ya wake up the wrong passenger, and they sure won’t be sending ya to the Calaboose. No siree bub, they’ll take ya straight out ta pasture, right off to the bone orchard without a lick of hesitation.]

“I’m not going to be afraid of them killing me, Des. If that was the case I would have turned back a long time ago.”

[Is that supposed ta be a bluff, or do ya mean it for real play?]

“I’m being completely serious about this,” he answered. “If you still have doubts, consider this: I’ve stolen from them before and here I am right in front of you.”

She nodded, closing her mouth in affirmation. [Ya know, if ya were still something between hay and grass, I’d tell ya to pull in yer horns ’n shin on outta here.] Des looked over at Brucie and Sana who were standing nearby and silently nodded. [Looks like ya need someone ta ride the river with?]
“Thanks Des,” he said, “I knew I could count on you.”

[Great,] Brucie agreed hastily. [Can we get moving again? This whole place is as wet as waterhole.]

[Fine as cream gravy, if you ask me; I feel pert as a ruttin’ buck!] Des said as she splashed about happily in the river.

Brucie shielded his tail behind his back defensively from all the water splashing about. [Hey, watch where you’re splashing!]

“If this map wasn’t smudged I could probably see better, but it looks like we’re right here in this chamber,” he said pointing to an approximate location on the parchment.

[Just ‘cause you’re following a well-marked trail don’t mean the guy who made it knew where they were goin’.]

“I’ll trust Kurt’s map over blindly exploring. Even if it’s smudged, the main path is fairly linear, and if we keep a lookout for landmarks, we should be fine. Here’s the first one: there’s two paths ahead but we probably want the one that Team Rocket doesn’t take in order to get as close as possible to their nerve center without triggering a premature alarm. At the very least, we need to keep following the river upstream until the radio begins to act up.”

[Always drink upstream from the herd,] Des said with a grin. [Water and truth are freshest at their source.]

“Des, can you check how deep the water is here?” he said walking ahead towards the back of the room to investigate the other route for signs of patrols.

She nodded quickly and dove underwater. She was gone for quite some time, and Feyera had made it to the other part of the room. As she reemerged, she started to say, [It’s deeper than a whale’s belly down there…Whoa now!]

A mighty tremor shook the entire cave. The earth began to vibrate at an incredible rate as rocks and ceiling pieces began to fall freely from high above. Feyera ducked down, covering his head. However everything soon went dark for him.
Another tremor, an afterquake much less forceful than the first, shook him awake. When he came to, he found himself in complete blackness, lying face down on the dirt floor of the damp cave. His limbs ached terribly from the tumble he took and he felt weakened as he pressed off the floor. Worse still, he could not sense his Pokemon or Sana for that matter. His breathing quickened and sweat began to form on his forehead and palms. Were they okay?

Anxiously, he scrambled to his feet, and dug around in his pocket for the metal lighter that he had befriended Brucie with. He shook it a few times, and felt that it still had some amount of fluid inside. With a nervous flick of the flip mechanism, he lit the small light source.

In front of him was a new wall of rocks and rubble. It must have blocked his way towards the river. Worse still his Pokemon were probably trapped on the other side. But then he quickly stopped breathing as fear seized his mind. They probably weren’t trapped if they were close to the river since it flowed out of the cave. But he could not say the same for himself and his only remaining Pokemon, July.

Trembling from the cave’s dampness and the recent violent shaking, he closed his eyes and tried to establish a telepathic link. While he did feel his heart emit a comforting feeling of warmth, his efforts to make contact were all but futile. He felt like something was blocking him from making the connection. Each time he tried, he applied more pressure against his warm heart, squeezing at it, hoping desperately to hear a voice from beyond the physical blockade in front of him.

He turned on his radio to the frequency Kurt had told him about. To his great surprise, the bizarre beating of vexing low pitched cries and a monotonous whine of cursed flutes assaulted his ears. So strange and alien was the signal he felt compelled to switch off the accursed device, as if it had become possessed by some awful, unexplainable monstrosity from the depths.

“Dammit… That old fart was right about radios picking up a weird signal near the ruins, but at least he could have warned me about earthquakes in the cave,” he whispered to himself bitterly. However, he soon came to the conclusion that blaming one thing or another was not going to get him out of this situation any faster. “I’m going to run out of light if I don’t do something quick…”

There were two options, but really only one viable one. If he stayed here waiting, he’d be more than likely to come across a member of Team Rocket patrolling if the earthquake hadn’t scare them off. He had to trust that Sana, Brucie, and Des were alright. The longer he delayed, the less light he had, and the worse shape he’d be in. He had no choice but to press forward. Though he considered
pausing and explaining the situation to July, he decided against it since it might frighten her and would only expend more precious time. The map he had had been dropped as he dove out of the way from the falling stones, and a thorough survey of the ground nearby showed no sign of it, meaning it was probably buried under that giant wall of rubble next to him.

“Have to keep moving…” he muttered as he cautiously turned another corner. He thought he heard something up ahead beyond the next passageway, and quickly extinguished his light and turned off the radio Kurt had repaired. Sure enough, his eyes adapted to another light coming from the distance. Resting his palms on the smooth side of the cave wall he peered carefully into the next chamber. A lone Team Rocket member was on his intercom, talking quickly to someone else. He was dressed in uniform, and held a flashlight which he was waving about. He did not appear burly or overly strong, but Feyera knew better than to judge a book by its cover. On his belt were several Pokéballs and a Gauntlet handgun.

“Always packing heat,” he thought to himself. “There’s only one, so I can probably take him if he gets off his transmitter. Don’t want him calling for backup.” He scanned the area again. From the looks of the chamber, he couldn’t opt for a stealth approach unless the man moved further down the tunnel. “I’ll follow him silently when he’s on the move again. No need to be hasty.” While he worried about his Pokemon, he knew he alone was clearly outmatched without them. His psyonics would be a last ditch effort, but it would be best to save that trump card for when he made it to wherever they were storing the Mercurium since that place would likely be under heavier surveillance. Still, a grunt was dangerous enough alone and could potentially call for backup, making this situation a tense waiting experience for him. As he continued to look on from the shadows, his thoughts assumed the worst: what if his other Pokemon were injured in the earthquake? What if that’s why he could not sense them before? What if Team Rocket had captured or killed them while he was passed out? He didn’t know how long it was between the earthquake and the aftershock that woke him. Because he was in a cave it was impossible to tell the time of day. For now, he assumed it was still the night of the same evening he and his companions had entered the cave.

Even with a clear line of sight on the mark, it was difficult to make out what he was saying. One thing was for sure, he spoke quickly, panicky even, as if deeply concerned about something. Could it have been related to the earthquake? The water from the river echoed far in the distance, so at the very least he knew he was on the right track. As he continued to wait for the Team Rocket member to change his position, he began to feel lethargic from standing still. “C’mon. Make a move,” he thought feeling antsy.

Suddenly, to his surprise, the man holding the light turned to face him. Feyera quickly ducked behind the rock’s face, but it might have not been fast enough since he now heard footsteps approaching his position. “Ok. Change of plans. Deep breath,” he said to himself to work up his nerve and prepare for a confrontation.

“Was that a Pokemon…?” he heard the panicked voice from before say, but it was now much closer. He could not identify whether he was still on the intercom. It was a game of cat and mouse,
and both parties were keeping their advantages well concealed. “Saw I saw something…” the light was bearing down on him and only a marginal angle of the rock he was behind continued to conceal him.

“It’s now or never,” he said with a start. Jumping out from the hiding spot, Feyera lunged at the figure who was now only an arm’s length away.

“Urk!” belted the man as Feyera collided with him at full force, knocking them both to the ground. Feyera nimbly snatched the Gauntlet from the grunt’s holster as they continued to tussle on the cold cave floor. As they rolled, Feyera managed to pin him down on his back. “BACK UP! SEND-!” he started to yell out. Feyera struggled to cover his mouth using his hand, but the man viciously bit down on his palm, breaking skin.

Angrily, Feyera shoved the Gauntlet against the grunt’s temple. “Shut the hell up or I’ll blow your brains out!” he ordered. Blood had begun to color the Gauntlet’s handle from the bite the grunt had given his hand. The flashlight had rolled to the ground nearby and the darkness of the cave had all but returned, but judging by the grunt’s reaction to the metal piece pressed against his forehead, he was timid enough to comply. The low light from the flashlight caused the shadows to stretch and move with each exacerbated breath. A quick scan of the nearby area revealed that the intercom was no longer on the grunt’s person. “I’m only going to ask this once: Who were you talking to?” Feyera demanded as he pressed the barrel against his head.

“I…” he started to say hesitantly, but his eyes had begun to wander.

“Look at me!” Feyera ordered, his heart beating vigorously. The pressure welling in his eyes was a queue his psyonics were activating, meaning eye contact was essential to fully employ the psychic manipulation.

“The others. We’re not alone… You can’t take all of us,” he answered as if in a trance. “You can’t…”

“Who’s your boss?”

“Giovanni… hail…Giovanni…” he repeated in a trance-like state.

“Where is he?” he demanded, keeping the questions brief and focused.
“Don’t…know…only the…executives have…that info—”

“What executives?” Feyera continued to pressure as many short questions as he could while the mind manipulation was still in effect through their locked eyes.

“Proton… Petrel… Ariana’s not here. Archer is dead…K.I.A.”

“Where’s the Mercurium?”

“What?” the grunt asked in confusion. “I don’t know…”

“The Mercurium!” Feyera repeated. “The mineral extracted from underground! Where is it being processed?!”

“I…don’t know what that is.”

He couldn’t be lying, his eyes were glazed and under the effects of the psyonics. Still Feyera wondered if he was asking the right questions. “Where do you take the Slowpoke?”

“To the central facility… In the center of the cave… Below the Ruins of Alph. …A large underground lake… dammed to provide lots and lots of power… to the machinery there.”

“What is the machinery in the central facility used for?”

“Testing site… for radio waves and signal interference,” the grunt replied lackadaisically. “Electronic waves… powered by the dam. Amplifying waves… the river…”

The grunt’s answers, though consistent, were becoming less and less helpful. Still, he had to squeeze every bit of information out from this source if he wanted to live long enough to accomplish his mission. “What caused the earthquake?”

At that, there was a look of clarity in the grunt’s eyes, as if he had just remembered something important. “The earthquake… Another test…? Got to be… prepared for it… Got to… be ready
“What?” Feyera asked trying to shake him awake in vain. There was no response however, the man had passed out. 

He cursed furiously at the unconscious body, wondering if he had gone too far with his abilities. There was no changing the past now though, he had made a choice and knew he had done it to preserve his own ambitions from being snuffed out. Standing back up, he walked over and grabbed the flashlight, reassessing what he had learned from the brief mental interrogation. The central facility was a dammed lake below the Ruins of Alph; that made things easier. He still had to locate his Pokemon and of course the Mercurium which the grunt had obviously not been made privy to. On the bright side, at least his exit strategy correlated with his objective. With so many unknown variables at this point, it felt like headstrong determination and hope alone carried him onward.

As he continued down the path and through the twisting labyrinth, he heard another group of noises. This time there were multiple footprints. “Reinforcements,” he thought in a vexed frenzy. “What do I do?” 

The path was so linear, that were no real good hiding spots. He could try to run back towards that collapsed grunt, but what would that accomplish? No, he could not outrun this problem, as doing so would lead him to a dead end for sure. “I have to fight,” he said with conviction. Steeling himself against a rock, he leaned against it and waited for the appropriate time to ambush. If they turned this next corner he could get the drop on them. However, judging on the sound, there were more than two of them coming this way. Maybe even more followed behind. “Too many unknowns. There’s not enough time to work out a decent strategy other than simple surprise.” He turned off the light he was carrying, setting it on the ground quietly with the light facing down towards the ground. Bravely clutching the Gauntlet and the Pomson in both hands, he prepared for a battle he could not run away from.

“Get to it!” said one man’s voice. 

“His signal dropped out up ahead, let’s move it people!” another responded.

“The next tremor is due soon, we don’t have much time before we need to go back,” a third voice panted from further behind.

At least three men were heading this way. Feyera saw their lights flickering ever closer as they rounded the second corner from where he was positioned. The first thing he did upon seeing the silhouette of a man turning the corner was violently kick the metal light he had laid down on the
earth in front of him with his sturdy Alterieno boot. The heavy metal rod — chock full of large batteries — spun around and around quickly as it flew through the air. With a faint amount of psyonic manipulation, Feyera guided the spinning rod straight at his bewildered target.

A bone-shattering clunk ensued as the spinning metal flashlight smashed directly against the first man turning the corner, colliding with his nose and causing him to fall backwards in utter disorientation.

“What was that spinning light?!” the second man asked rounding the corner, but even though he was carrying a flashlight of his own, he soon tripped over the first who had fallen flat on his rear in an unexpected place.

“It’s a hostile!” the first man warned grabbing at his holster and reaching for a Pokéball. He pushed the second man off him and tossed the ball into the air.

“I don’t think so!” Feyera said as he took aim with the Pomson Mark 1. His eyes followed the spinning motion of the ball as it traveled in a predictable trajectory. Leading the shot slightly, he fired a silent blue flash of energy from the jury-rigged gun. Sparks flew out from the Pokéball in midair and it collided with the ground without opening. However, he could not celebrate the first successful employment of the gadget, as a third man also rounded the corner, cautiously enough to avoid the other two who were still prone.

“Take this,” said the third man, sending out a Pokéball of his own.

There was nothing Feyera could do to stop it; the Pomson clicked without any reaction. Then he remembered what Kurt had told him, “It takes a good ten seconds to recharge after a shot.” In the heat of the action he had forgotten about the recharging time.

The Pokéballs light shone brightly in the dim chamber, and a large mouse Pokemon emerged from the capsule. It was a large mouse with beady eyes and spines covering its backside.

“GO!” shouted the second man, releasing a large bat from the tossed ball. A Golbat flapped its wings, darting around in a cave which was suitable as its environment. It bore the menacing fangs of a vampire, eager to draw blood.

“Two on one now, this isn’t good,” Feyera thought. However he realized that he wasn’t outnumbered just yet. Lowering the still recharging Pomson Mark 1, he reached for the only Apricorn he had left. “July, go!” Another flash of light filled the cave, and a healthy Gloom
appeared in its wake. “Stun spore!” he ordered.

She lowered her head towards the ground taking aim with the flower upon her head. With a surge of energy, her large bud tremored and released a massive burst of bright yellow spores into the cramped chamber.

“Sandslash, use Dig!” ordered the second grunt. In a frenzy, the Pokemon avoided the powder of July’s spores by swiftly burrowing into the cave’s floor.

The Golbat was not so fortunate, as it took the brunt of the attack, buffeted by the cloud of pollen, causing it to seize violently in uncontrollable paralytic spasms. It fell to the ground, unable to remain aloft.

“Electrode, go!”

That was bad news. Feyera hoped the Pomson had enough energy to fire another round, and he again attempted to intercept the first grunt’s dangerous next Pokéball. Taking careful aim at the ball, and delaying his shot as long as possible, as soon as it neared the ground, he fired another blue bolt from the weapon causing a series of sparks to erupt from the ball rather than another Pokemon.

“What the hell!” exclaimed the first grunt as his Pokéball appeared to short out from the precise surge of electricity.

“Go, Graveler!” said another grunt rushing out from behind cover. A large bolder of living rocks rumbled into action, taking a defensive position in the center of the room.

This was quickly getting out of hand. The group had managed to release yet another Pokemon he simply could not intercept. He had to keep more pressure on his adversaries, and proceeded to aim his pilfered Gauntlet at the group of grunts, aiming for the center of mass of the man with the most Pokéballs on his holster. As he shot his first round off with a loud blast, the Graveler jumped up in front of the bullet, deflecting the shot effortlessly with its thick hide and wearing a shit-eating grin on its cragged face.

“Take out his gun!” he said directing the Pokemon’s attention at Feyera’s pistol.

He didn’t stop; he kept shooting at the group of grunts with increasing ferocity after each round’s
strong recoil. But Graveler was ready. It used its Stone Edge technique to create spires of rock that jutted out of the ground, creating a fortress of stone in the center of the battlefield. Each shot ricocheted off these large pillars of rock in a cacophony of earsplitting echoes.

“THAT GUN HE’S USING! TAKE IT OUT!”

The earth below him began to quiver again. Feyera thought for sure it was another earthquake and braced himself, bending his knees in order to lower his center of gravity. But to his surprise, a Pokemon shot out of the ground right next to him.

“Rapid Spin!”

The Rocket’s Sandslash burst out a hole in the dirt, spiraling upwards like a corkscrew and flinging dust and dirt all over. The Sandslash’s huge claws and spines just grazed past the edge of Feyera’s heart as it spun upwards with a tremendous amount of whirling momentum. The creature’s spikes knocked into the Gauntlet Feyera was holding in his already injured left hand, sending it sailing away through the air.

“Yeah! Now give him a good ripping in half, Sandlash!” ordered the grunt. “Use Slash!”

“July look out…!” Feyera shouted to his Pokemon who was on the other side of the menacing Sandslash that had just landed and was eying him with its cold killing instinct. It raised its massive claws, each of them well over the size of a human hand, and charged at Feyera again.

[I’ll save you!] said July as she twirled around, releasing multiple jagged-edged petals into the air.

Their minds connected and Feyera gave the command, “Petal Blizzard!” For a brief moment he saw the back of the creature from July’s perspective, as razor sharp leaves flew forth, digging deep in between the spines on Sandslash’s backside. With each petal that dug into the Pokemon, it lurched forward in agony, unable to cope with the tapered projectiles as they sought out the narrow crevices, the weak points in Sandslash’s spine armor.

It fell to the ground a mere foot away from Feyera, belly first, exposing clearly how its backside was littered with the petal arrows. Just as it did another flash of light illuminated the cavern, as the group of Rockets sent out yet another Pokemon. Feyera was so preoccupied with giving July battle commands he did not have time to use the electric gun he still had in his right hand. Sandslash might have knocked the wrong gun away with its Dig and Rapid Spin combo, but the strategy still seemed
to cause enough havoc as to inhibit him from using it to prevent being outnumbered.

“Graveler use Magnitude! Knock em over!”

The earth beneath them began to shake violently as the rock Pokemon slammed all four of its arms onto the floor. Had his psyonics not been in their active state, he surely would have lost balance from the tremor. A feeling of weightlessness kept him steady from the initial tremor, but it was naught but a fleeting sensation that quickly dissipated. Drawing on the quickly fading energy from within, he did his best to channel whatever was left to force July a few inches above the shaking ground with a weak telekinetic burst.

“Counter with Mega Drain!” he ordered, feeling his heart drenched in bright scarlet and observing the air in front of him take on a distorted appearance from rising waves of vented heat.

July unfurled her flower’s leaves and drew close to the Graveler with the help of the push into the air she had recently gotten. Landing right on top of the stony creature, her bulb’s thick vines grew out and siphoned life energy from Graveler. The opponent was anchored in one place and left vulnerable to such an attack. July’s leafy tendrils continued to choke at Graveler’s body until it became still and the shaking of the ground ceased.

There was no period relief however. “Go Drowzee!” shouted the first man with a look of relentless fury in his eyes. “Stop him from using that bloody sorcery!”

The new Pokemon emerging from the light was a psychic type as well, he could immediately tell from the dramatic shift in energy around him. It felt as though an invisible force was pulling at him, as though he was falling forward against his will. At the source of this new well of power was a Pokemon with a trunk shaped nose, and pudgy yellow and brown body. Its eyes, shaped like half-moons, immediately locked on to Feyera’s heart and its trunk long extended forward as if pointing at it. The creature then raised its paws up and down in a wave-like fashion, and Feyera could feel his sense of psychic manipulation spiraling away from him unwillingly and toward the Pokemon.

“Drowzee, keep using Psych Up!” said one of the grunts. The second Rocket who had recalled his Golbat raised his arm into the air in order to send out another Pokemon.

“No!” Feyera said trying to aim the gun at the ball, but his arms felt like gelatin. He was being overpowered by the Drowzee siphoning his psyonics causing his body to become weakened without their support. His arm could not remain still, as it felt as though weights had been strapped to it, and his index finger could not even pull back on the trigger. The flash of light ensued as the Rockets managed to put another Pokemon into play on the battlefield. A massive puddle of animated sludge
coalesced into a single blob of purple foulness and rose up two hands as its stretched-out and deformed face continued to drip back into its slime body in a hideously bizarre manner. A horrid stench of decay and death filled the chamber.

“July, you have to interrupt Drowzee! It’s sapping all my strength!” he implored telepathically. Even a brief message such as that took an incredible toll, and meanwhile Drowzee’s trunk extended as if feasting off the mental energy.

[Okay,] July said turning to face Drowzee head-on. [I’m coming for you, slinky-nose!]

“Grimer, use your Mud Bomb! Protect Drowzee at all costs!”

With a sickening churn of the sludge creature’s hands it groped at the ground, mixing its own volatile mire with the dirt of the cave floor. July did not stop though, charging full speed at Drowzee, ignoring the noxious stench and focusing on only her target. Feyera felt helpless, unable to do anything but watch, as Drowzee continued focusing on pulling away his psyonics from a distance with Psych Up, drawing more and more telekinetic power into itself. Grimer launched the Mud Bomb it was preparing with a sordid belch. The thick blob of muck and dirt flew up high through the air above July. Just as the globule was about to fall down gravity, she lowered her flower and unleashed her Nature Power attack. A shadowy globe of spectral energy shot with tremendous velocity directly at Drowzee.

Drowzee suddenly stopped employing Psych up as its half-moon eyes opened fully wide in fear. The dark cave environment had transformed July’s Nature Power into a powerful ghost type attack, and the blitzing speed at which it traveled insured it would connect with Drowzee before the Mud Bomb fell on her. Drowzee barely could raise its stubby arms to protect its face before taking the full brunt of the Nature Power-turned-Shadow Ball tactical strike. The force buffeted Drowzee so violently, that it spun over a few times before finally smashing its head against the rock wall behind it.

Feyera’s psyonics were no longer being suppressed by Drowzee, and he had to protect July from the Mud Bomb from falling directly on her now that her back was exposed from using Nature Power. But what could he possibly do to help her? There wasn’t enough time to redirect the attack from hitting her or force her out of the attack’s wide-ranging trajectory. But maybe he could interpose something like a shield between them! Remembering what Sana had done before to guard against non-physical attacks, he stretched his arms straight out and pointed his fingers above July, focusing his mind on mimicking what she did. A surge of warm heat filled his chest reminding him of what it felt like to protect another. It seemed to be working as his vision blurred in a reddish hue. The poisonous Mud Bomb came crashing downwards, but splattered against a tiny barrier barely above July. From the point of impact the blob exploded in a mighty surge of toxic mire. Parts of the foul liquid still dripped through cracks in the lattice of his first attempt at Light Screen, but miraculously the attack did not impact her at full power.
July looked up in amazement at the window now covered in brown sludge above her. [Thanks,] she said with a tone of disbelief.

However the creation of a meager arm’s length sized screen had his heart burning at feverish temperatures. Despite taking all of his focus and every last bit of his reserves, he could barely keep the pathetically small telekinetic shelter in existence. Sana had created something that was well over his height in diameter with what appeared to be minimal effort, but this action was pushing him far beyond his limit. Each second that passed felt like an eternity, his chest was going to burn apart at this rate. “Move! I can’t hold it!” he cried out in blistering agony.

She quickly complied, darting to the left and away from Grimer. And not a second too soon, the floor where July had been was drenched with the sticky grime that was dripping off the jagged sides of the temporary shield. Feyera gasped for the cool cave air to fill his lungs as the screen vanished. The venting temperatures from his core were unbearable, wicked waves of scorching pain. Everything in front of him looked like a heat-induced mirage.

“Calling for back-up,” radioed the second grunt. “Send the whole damn team! We got us a special visitor here!”

“NO!” Feyera shouted desperately as his entire plan began to unravel before his eyes. He feared the worst, he could not take on more of them without resorting to a last ditch burst of psyonics. Even then, there was no guarantee he would survive and he hadn’t even made it to where he needed to be.

He heard more voices from further down the cavern. “They’re coming.”

[What do we do?] July asked.

“We fight! We can’t give up.”

“Grimer, drench em with Sludge attack!”

Grimer looked like it was about to cough up something terrible. With a violent sounding belch, it spat out a glob of pure poison, which very well could have been a part of the Grimer’s slimy body.
“Get back!” Feyera ordered, using a mental burst to push July narrowly out of the attack’s range. “Counter with Sleep Powder!”

Dense clouds of green spores erupted from the flower on July’s head and spread out towards Grimer. As the pollen mixed with its gooey body, it slowly transitioned into a large puddle, falling into a state of slumber.

Another Team Rocket member turned the corner. This particular one was instantly recognizable as the red-haired grunt Feyera had seen outside the cave. She looked over quickly at her companions and the battle. With a sultry lick of her lips, she grabbed two Pokéballs resting on her hip and tossed them both into the fray. “Go Houndour! Ekans!”

Desperately, Feyera shot at one of them before it hit the ground, and though he managed to hit it in time, the other one was unaffected. The undamaged ball smashed against the ground, releasing a canine Pokemon with pitch black fur and a dark orange muzzle.

“Flamethrower!” It flared its fangs and spat a stream of fire at July.

“July, no!” Feyera said as the stream of fire approached her. He could do nothing in time to save her from this. If he let her be sacrificed like this, what would be the point of all their adventures together? There was no chance to think twice about it and he did what he felt was right. “Return,” he said drawing her back into the Apricorn before the waves of fire could connect with her plant body.

“Get em!” said the girl in a high pitch squeal.

He looked over at the source of Houndour’s fire, but to his great surprise, the Pokemon was no longer there. It was as if it had just up and vanished. He tried to sense it using his psyonics, but felt nothing at all.

“Feint Attack!” commanded the redhead.

From behind him came a mighty force that dropped him to the ground. It was a strike that shook his core and made him desperately cling to the dirt as the Pokemon continued to pounce on his weakened body. Then there were voices directly above him. He felt a kick to the stomach. And then a blow to the head by something solid. A sharp object jabbed into his side.
“Use…Smo… se…een!” he heard very faintly as an unknown object brushed against the side of his heart.

Houndour’s hot breath and barking were the last things he sensed as he struggled to retain consciousness. There was nothing else he could do. His body had grown cold. He was completely spent, and blackness overtook his world.
Chapter 10: Phantasm of Fate

A cold metal table below him. Darkness and shadows surrounding him all over again. He immediately knew in his heart that had been here before, or in a similar state of existence at the very least. And yet this sense of somehow knowing the setting and recognizing it as familiar as the back of his hand made it even more terrible than it should have been. The alien sensation of complete awareness – feeling the presence of his immediate surroundings as a recreated moment – was absolutely nauseating as he felt constrained to relive it.

Where had he known this sensation from before? The steel table. The icy coldness. The inky void that engulfed the world around him. It had to be the Progenitor Project. It was dreadful to recall the powerful memory of long needles piercing deep into his eyes, injecting their noxious fluid as near as possible into brain's visual receptors. Though it was not truly his own experience – for it was not him on that cold table. On that day, there was no researcher on any table, only a Pokemon. So, why? Why were his memories in such stark conflict with objective facts? Conceivably, he should be able to remember the perspective where he was the researcher rather than the test subject. However, in all of his memories of the event, he felt the table's coldness vividly beneath himself during the scene exactly like he did right now. What did that mean? If there was more than one memory of the same event, then did that mean the human memory was overwritten?

Two perspectives could have existed independently so long as there were two respective observers. In other words, two different memories causing the same result would have to collapse to one from a single subject's perspective. Otherwise there would be an irreparably fatal conflict in continuity of the subject's viewpoint. It was a variation of the classic: "What came first, the Torchic or the egg?" scenario. "Both" was simply not an acceptable answer for the universe because that inherently would defy causation. Feyera couldn't both cause the experiment and not cause the experiment at the same time in his mind.

With Progenitor, the cause and effect were closely situated; so much so, a contradiction in his observation of the events would likely prove disastrous. It was obvious that the heart had supplanted a memory that was not originally his own, eradicating the other side that once was his. But what did that have to do with causation? It was quite simple – Feyera's actions as a researcher caused the experience for the Pokemon he now had the memories of. He had played a vital role in that Pokemon's life by blinding it for the sake of scientific advancement. And because of that initial cause, was he not further responsible for the outcome as he tried to bring about an end to the unnatural life he had inflicted upon it? What if this side of the story existed as an inseparable part of his actions taken?

These ensuing questions of consciousness and memory were anything but simple to decipher. What would that mean for all the human memories he carried in his mind? Why was he always so sure that he actually experienced the times he recalled from the past despite their obvious contradictions? Were those experiences he felt certain he had lived through just the shattered remnants of a life he no longer had unfettered access to? When specifically had the foreign memories won out? Where exactly did he end as a person? How could he ever hope to delineate such a vital question without removing the heart shard?

An incessant doubt nagged at him, for this was no mere recollection of the haunting event which had
overwritten his original memories. There was something more to this, something very wrong about it. The current sensation he felt could not be explained by reason or causation; a subtle defiance of intrinsic logic irked him to no end.

At first, it seemed like mere coincidences were causing him to feel the unease. For instance, he anticipated there would soon be a voice. It would be a man's voice, low and deep, filled with an unquenchable angry thirst. It would originate from directly above him and say the following: "I'm glad you brought him here to me."

Sure enough, the next sound he heard coincided with the anticipation; it could have been written off as a lucky guess had not there been such a strong sense of feeling attached to the rendition of the voice. "I'm glad you brought him here to me." Exactly as he knew it would happen. It served as an indication that this already-seen memory accounted for more than mere déjà vu. Furthermore, it was obviously not Feyera's own voice, and this detail struck him as particularly odd. He had been the one to conduct the various experiments on Pokemon test subjects in the past. By that logic, if this were truly a memory and he was experiencing it from the perspective of the Gardevoir whose heart was now his own, then the sound of his voice would have been as recognizable as it was the first time he experienced this memory and saw himself from the Pokemon's viewpoint. But no, this was not quite the same. True, the similarities were uncanny. The setting was familiar, as was the sensation of being stretched out and on his back. In a primal sort of way, his heart had evoked the Pokemon's experience to mind; the recollection process felt completely foreign at first, but familiar now, and even commonplace.

Memories were always supposed to be concerning the past. Yet what he predicted and then heard – coupled with the various sensations he felt right now - could not be restrained to a mere memory of the distant past. With unquestionable certainty, he knew he was in this moment right now. Experiencing the blood coursing through his veins. Pulling in short breaths of damp air to fill his lungs. Hearing the pounding heart in his chest. Fearing the unknown. It was all occurring right here, in real time. But if this was not the past, how exactly did he come to know these things immediately before they unfolded? The sheer unfamiliarity of it all sustained dizzying levels of introspective questioning.

An unsettling revelation dawned on him. If this was all taking place in the present, then he was glimpsing into the future, not the past. What that meant challenged him to shoulder the weight of a devastating fact capable of undermining all rationality concerning the natural flow of time. However, regardless of whether the fourth dimension could be manipulated by something as intangible as the will, his chief concerns were drawn elsewhere. He was tied up and could not see after all. Those reasonably pressing issues took precedence over an inherently unverifiable hypothesis.

Gradually, the dense fog of darkness swirling around him began to give way to opaque shadow figures moving around. One was directly above him. A man's wide framed shoulders hovered to the left of his restricted field of vision. He tried to turn his head unsuccessfully, realizing that too was bound to the metallic board. So were his legs, thick ropes dug deep into his the skin of his ankles, cutting off circulation. Both his arms were tightly fastened behind his back, held underneath the narrow metal sheet by bracers.

Something was working against his psyonics. At first, he couldn't tell whether it was a device on him, or if it was affecting him remotely from a distance like Drowzee had done. Then he realized that this dampening suppression felt strongest at his extremities. And there were a set of slightly heated pieces of metal latching his wrists behind the steel board and the causing a tingling sensation as the circulation of blood was being cut off.

Again he tried to twist his neck in fury, but despite his best efforts he could barely see more than one
other cloaked figure in the distance. This feeling of utter helplessness was exactly like the memory of Progenitor — a nightmare he did not want to remember; a nightmare that he had wished over and over would not become his reality. But deep down, he knew it was too late to wish for relief from this fate. Had he any sense of the consequences, he would have not caused the events giving rise to his current state of affairs. If he only knew the results of his experimentations, then perhaps things would not be this way right now. Unfortunately, the sense of psychic prediction did not exist when it mattered most — before the experiments took place. And even if it did eventually become his, it was never quite natural, belonging to another creature entirely.

"Scan him," said the figure closest to him with a voice he had just recently heard. The sense of resentment was still there. He hated it more than anything — knowing the feeling and not the reason. It drove his mind mad.

"Roger," said another man from further away. Footsteps approached, rapping against the rocky dirt floor. There was a faint buzzing noise, as if someone had just turned on an electrical household appliance. The electrical humming began to increase in volume until it was a steady drone.

The world around him was still very dark from being knocked out by the grunt's Pokemon; however, the first specs of distant light had begun to gather around the peripherals of his sight. "What...?" he groaned as something that felt like solid ice pressed forcefully against his chest and clamp down like jaws on his protruding heart shard. There was a soft vibration he felt. And then sharp pain rattled his core. "Argh!" he cried out as he involuntarily convulsed from what felt like an electrical shock rippled outward through his body.

"Deviation marker is currently 0.58397. If the reading is correct, then that means the little squirt's plan actually worked and the value went up on its own over time. Ha! ...How about that?"

"What the hell are you doing to me?!" he shouted at the darkness. His pulse raced uncontrollably and he felt sweat forming on his forehead in thick beads.

However they continued to ignore him. "Grab me the file from that terminal. I want to see a concrete figure to compare this to."

"Of course," said the second voice as it went off in the distance. There was the familiar sound of typing on a keyboard.

"You're still getting in there?" asked the first man.

"Ha, it's a lot easier than you'd think. Cipher's mainframe is poorly insulated, and their encryption methods are terribly out of date. Psh, their client's damn near broken, left wide open from our previous cracking attempts. Their 'security' is just downright pathetic. It's like their entire I.T. department took off on one hell of a long holiday..."

"Spare me the technical details. I want his two files. Our records and Cipher's for comparison," said the voice above him. He felt someone grab at his hair and tug. "Humph. Performing your onus sets you up for failure, doesn't it?"

"Piss off," Feyera wheezed.

"The mouth on this one..." The back of a hand smacked him across the face. "Here I thought the Psy Bracers we latched on his wrists would shut his trap as well as his witchcraft."

While the pain stung, it had started to make the world seem a bit clearer from the black fog that was covering his eyes. His senses were slowly coming back, yet he still was locked down in place. Sure
enough, he felt metal pieces encircling both his wrists, and weighing them down like two incredibly heavy weights. It must be similar technology to the type that Fredrick had set him up with, but certainly a great deal more powerful. Without use of his psyonics, he felt incredibly vulnerable. Mortal, even. The fear of death felt a lot closer than ever before without a trump card to fall back upon.

Meanwhile the other man, stationed across the room, was rattling away on a keyboard at a blitzing rate. "Hmmm..." he said finally. "Looks like it was at 0.32821 before. Huh, that's weird."

"What is?"

"From where I'm patched in, Cipher's current data is conflicting with our own. Drastically I might add."

"Where's the ambiguity?" barked the man standing directly above.

"Their numbers shouldn't be this high. In fact, they exceed the current elevated reading we took not a moment ago. And... by an alarming amount too. Uh, unless they have new data it shouldn't be possible to reach those figures."

"In plain language please, you tech wizard."

"Okay, there's an achieved file here that links to the Progenitor Project and Evercrest. In there, the figure Cipher has is consistent with our own database. It was 0.32821 precisely three years ago - same as our own independent record. That makes sense because it was a joint venture when Christian worked on it with our Cipher contact. However... if I leave the Cipher archives, and parse into their main data folder for this project, the most recent figure reads an astonishing 0.94112."

"How can that be?" asked the man standing above his head. "He's right here and we just scanned him for variance and got a figure barely over halfway to 1."

"I don't know. But I should clarify the current reading of 0.58397, although technically above the 0.5 threshold, it is not equivalent to halfway perfect sequencing. It's actually a lot closer to the original value of 0.32821 than 0.94112."

"Math was never my strong suit," sighed the first man.

"The value we'd use to measure the marker is a logarithm function; therefore, you would need a vast amount of increasingly accurate code sequences in order to get even remotely close to 1. By the same coin, having many errors in the sequence will not cause a large decrease as the decimal value approaches 0. To summarize, the closer you get to 1, the more perfect all the information has to be, because even one little mistake will result in a massive drop in the deviation value."

"Right, right..." the first man sighed in an uninterested manner. "So how the hell is the discrepancy a problem?"

"Well... ignoring the conundrum of how the statistic went up over time, the highest value on record is the one we just took: 0.58397. Without a truckload of data resources from purified Mercurium, that 0.94112 number is not realistically obtainable since it would require near-perfect mastery of Mew's genetic code sequence; something we just haven't been able to achieve given how little we know about the legendry's nature. Probably would be very unstable too."

"Hmm. Does Cipher know you're hacking into their system? Maybe they altered the data values just to screw with us."
"Negative. There's zero possibility of that. Their server's encryption has not been updated for almost a month and they're still logging with the same exact admin IDs and passphrases. Tsk, tsk. Whoever was in charge of keeping their data under lock and key seems to no longer care about remote unauthorized access. They stopped updating their server's security protocols about three weeks ago."

"Huh, funny. I thought Cipher had a real brainiac on their side."

"You're looking at the reason for that," Feyera said. Three weeks ago coincided approximately with the events on Penta Island. His pride convinced him that his infiltration of their remote island base must have had something to do with the broken server system.

"Pfft. You? You're our investment, Christian – not Cipher's. Don't you forget that!"

"I'm nothing to you!" Feyera said defensively. "You and the rest of your criminal organization will recognize that fact."

"You'll have no fucking say in the matter!" Another smack hit him directly the face, this time causing a thin river of warm blood to gush down from his nose.

"Tell me who you are!" Feyera blurted. He could turn his head slightly, and through the tunnel of darkness, saw faint light in the center of his field of vision. Being smacked seemed to help clear up the disorientation, if only slightly.

"You don't remember me?" he asked. "Looks like the resulting brain damage was too much for you. But, I remember you. I remember very well. I remember when you first came groveling to Team Rocket, begging the boss for the funding to back your little research project. You were just a foolish upstart. A young, naïve boy who called himself a researcher. Yes, I remember. You were with drive but without purpose. But I digress. By chance, our organization and your research met. That's when we gave you your petty purpose, and led everything down this inescapable path."

"You're so damn full of it…" he spat. "What gives you the right to decide my future? I'm through with you and your organization."

"We're not through with you though." Another tug on his hair caused the back of his head to smash against the metal board. "And I have a more personal grudge. You remember what you did to Archer, don't you…?" The man again hit him across the face twice with increasing ferocity.

"Arghh." He was now feeling stars dancing around his head. "You'd… do well to learn from his mistakes… so you don't wind up the same."

"I'm the one giving orders!" shouted the man. As expected, there was another tug and resounding blow as his head bounced off the solid board. "REMEMBER THAT!"

He was reeling in pain, but he couldn't give up now. Just a little more enduring and he could regain his sight. "You're giving orders? Ha…" Feyera laughed weakly. "To me? Sorry, but I'm not taking any orders from you. …They're probably not even yours."

That seemed to infuriate the man he was speaking to, as a volley of hits to the face soon followed his insult. Each shock rattled his head against the metal, and it felt like the entire world was spinning, spiraling upwards uncontrollably. "You're nothing more than a tool! A tool to help Team Rocket profit. That's all you'll ever be! And your insubordination will not be tolerated."

In a daze, Feyera sarcastically taunted, "Psh, so they give you a fancy title to brag about to your fellow grunts? You must be good at your criminal pastime after all."
"You've got some fucking nerve mouthing off to me after what you've done!" There was a loud noise, as if something nearby had been knocked over. The sound of metal clanging against the cave floor echoed ominously throughout the large room. "Executive Proton," he said in a more threatening voice. Feyera felt a sharp object press against his temple. A knife or a scalpel of some sort. "And if those two words won't stick inside that thick skull of yours, I'll have no problem carving them straight into your brain."

"Ha. Haha." Gathering his courage and acting out as supercilious as he possibly could Feyera replied, "You can't kill me. I don't have to be a Rocket Scientist to figure out that you've an order from superiors of yours. You know what that makes you, 'Mister Executive'? Just another grunt taking orders…!"

A fist slug him hard in the jaw, knuckles slamming in the bone. But as soon as it did, a bright light filled his world again. Lights and colors never seemed as welcomed as they were now. His sight was returning!

"You don't have to worry, kid. I ain't gunna kill you. You're worth more alive than dead. And according to my number-crunching buddy here, Team Rocket's only concern is profit." Proton insisted, "However, you're going to suffer by my hand for what you and your International Police pal did to my brother Archer back in Celadon."

"You're related to that prick? Pah!" Feyera sneered. "Guess Archer took most of the good genes with him, because you hit like a girl!"

Warm blood mixed with saliva dripped from his face as another blow landed. He was in bad shape, but thanks to the repeated blows knocking him out of the daze at least now he could actually see again. Proton's face finally came fully into view. He was a gaunt man, gruff with the look of sleeplessness in his pale eyes, wearing a thick ebony hat on his head to tuck in his dense but light green hair.

Just as Proton raised his clenched fist again, a loud rattling came from nearby. The ground began to shake, and small rocks started to fall from the ceiling. Feyera looked around and saw that the place where he was did not have much room, though the ceiling was lofty and there were a number of barrels and other storage items lying about as well as a few steel crates.

"That's the signal," the other man by the terminal said hurriedly. He had darker black hair that was almost violet in color, worn in a pompadour. He had a slightly crooked face, and a fair amount of bushy chin stubble.

"Go on ahead, Petrel; I'm not through with this piece of work yet." Proton said grabbing another knife from a nearby cart.

The bearded man quickly grabbed his portable terminal and headed off in the direction of the noise. With a loud click, he unhooked the briefcase-shaped computer from a thick wire that ran along the floor and into the next room. "Make sure not to leave a mess," Petrel said running out in the direction of the cable.

Proton brought the blade close to his face, grinning manically he said, "I'll make it look like it was an accident. Say a wild Pokemon carved you up, no one would know the difference, and no one would care. Your life might be guaranteed, but that doesn't mean I can't permanently disfigure you."

The edge of the knife was now a scant inch away from his eye. Suddenly, he felt afraid and unable to retort.
"How badly do you need those?" Proton asked, a disgusting smile forming on his gaunt face. He danced the blade nearer and nearer. "...I always wanted a trophy from a psychic. Someone with real power in their eyes. They say you can use them to manipulate others. Shame you can't do anything to stop me with those bracers. I like how they glisten with your fear. They're so expressive and yet without them you're made so powerless. Your eyes will do nicely as a memento."

Desperately, Feyera struggled to free himself from the dreaded future. Proton swung the knife against the soft skin beneath his eye with brutal precision. He yelled out as the metal broke the tissue under his eye causing blood to gush out onto his assailant's twisted face. Blood filled his vision as his right eye went numb to the world. "AHHHHHHHH!" he cried at the top of his lungs as the blade continued to saw into the lower part of his eyelid in slow motion, the thin metal cutting into him as Proton laughed manically.

This couldn't be real he thought. It had to be a dream. No, a nightmare. The same nightmare he always had. He would wake up any moment. Except he knew he wouldn't. There was no one who would save him from this. No intervention from anyone else. Fredrick was dead. His Pokemon were not in any place that he could sense. There was no chance of rescue. This was really happening in the most slow-moving manner imaginable. Everything felt meaningless since he could not do anything to stop the sensation. His continued struggles would only end in more pain. Pain as unimaginable as what he felt now clawing through his face.

Something within him snapped as the agony of being cut open overflowed in chaotic waves of hatred, anger, and vengeance. This was not how it would end for him. "No!" he told himself with conviction. This could not be the end. It was possible to break the Psy Bracers holding back his powers; he had done it once before thanks to Fredrick. All he had to do was focus on channeling all of his metal energy into overloading one of the grips fastened on his arms. A distortion of the world around him would simply not be possible otherwise. He had only one chance to free himself from this hell, and he knew it would have to bring him out of this nightmare!

Pushing all of what little energy he had left toward the place where the fake relic had once been stationed on his left arm, a similar sensation of cathartic ecstasy washed over him. He felt a great weight of undeniable magnitude underneath him, and felt drawn toward it for a moment – feeling the unmistakable sensation of falling backward into it with incredible speed. A loud snap came from the metal table below as it was bent down in half, as it had suddenly become subject to a crushing mass.

Proton was stupefied, as the table had broken in two as he was in the process of gouging Feyera. Not only that, but the quick fall had caused him to be momentarily out of reach from Proton's blade. The resulting impact had freed his hands from the bracers that had been binding his body down. His legs were loosened from the ropes as the table was divided allowing him to slip out from their entanglement.

"DIE!" Proton dived at his prone body with the knife.

Feyera quickly rolled to the side, no longer stuck in one place because of the Psy Bracers or the ropes. The sound of the knife's edge impacting against the ground originated right behind his ear.

As Proton withdrew his weapon from the dirt, Feyera took the brief lull to roll into Proton's shins, stabbing him with his heart's edge. Though it hurt himself as well, the sensation was overwhelming and seemed to give Feyera a burst of momentary strength to swipe upwards at his bent over assailant, pegging Proton in the chin and knocking him back.

"Urgh!" Proton was barely hindered, quickly shrugging off the blow and getting to his feet.

Feyera took the opportunity to lunge up after him, using a quick burst of psionic energy to lift
himself off the floor. Proton raised his knife in a defensive manner, no longer using it as an offensive weapon but as a deterrent evident by his stance.

With fast reflexes, Feyera managed to dodge multiple slashes Proton took at his lithe body. However, he had already sustained a heavy beating from earlier and was unable to maintain endurance to dodge endlessly. As the struggle continued, it didn't take long for Proton's wild swings to nick the side of Feyera's exposed heart.

"Argh!" Feyera yelled as pain shot through his body and forced him to recoil backwards from the nick to his core.

"How you like that, motherfucker?!" Again, he lunged at Feyera with the knife raised high in the air. This time, he was ready for the repeated attack. It was the same as last time, and the staleness of the maneuver gave Feyera an opening to dodge and gasp the arm of Proton.

Proton used his free arm to jab Feyera in the gut with a tight fist. However, the relatively close distance between them made the blow less effective than it could have been; the punch still knocked the wind out of Feyera though.

The two men grappled, with Feyera grabbing and squeezing tightly on Proton's wrists. With great effort, he managed to move the hand holding the blade off to the side, twisting Proton's wrist around as he did so. Proton struggled to center himself. Taking newfound the opening Feyera head-butted Proton in the chin, sending the Rocket Executive reeling backwards in shock from the unexpected impact.

"You're a monster…" Proton said gasping in disbelief as he lurched forward, swinging his leg to go for a desperate kick below the belt. "A freak…!"

"You're gonna look awfully funny yourself, with that knife sticking outta your ass," Feyera answered grabbing Proton's knife-holding arm tightly with both hands. He saw the kick coming and deftly swung over to the side, still holding on firmly to Proton's weapon-hand. Using the momentum his adversary had built up from going for a kick, he twisted around on his heel and pulled with him Proton's arm all the way back behind him. This maneuver rendered Proton completely off-balance. The strength of his once strong grip on the knife faded, allowing Feyera a precious second to pry it loose from the executive's white knuckles. A downward heave using the strength of both his arms sent the blade careening into the back of his neck, impaling deep into the man's spine with a brutal crack of finality.

There was only silence. His body collapsed face down, dark blood spilling out slowly from the mortal wound.

Feyera immediately fell to his knees, wincing in terrible pain originating from his right eye. Warm blood was still running down his face from the open incision that ran from the middle of his nose to where his temple met the start of his hairline. He didn't even have enough energy to curse out loud. He just sat there in speechless exhaustion, watching the blood gather around Proton's corpse silently.

The psyonics might have released him, but by the strength of his hands alone had he killed his adversary. He felt a profound sense of apathy from it – an unfeeling that was anything but conventional. The moment would not seem to pass. His thoughts were blank, his body muddled with pain. Only the sound of his labored breaths filled the room.

Another rumble of the cave shook him back into reality. Then he thought he heard voices. He did not have the energy to fight anymore. He hoped they would just leave him alone. It would be better if he
could just fade away out of existence.

But out of the corner of his remaining eye, he saw a familiar figure approach. It was Sanaria; he'd recognize her anywhere. But why was she here now? What was she doing deeper in the cave? How come only now could he sense her heart as she approached? The questions kept pouring through his mind like a pounding march of footsteps approaching.

"Thas Feyera, what happened to you?!" Sana exclaimed, kneeling to the ground and hugging him tightly. "Oh... No! You're...!"

He realized that he was shaking. "...Just a little scratched up," he said trying his best to sound like he still had it together.

"You're eye...it's...!" she began to say but her telepathic voice became caught.

"...Not missing yet, but I don't think it'll do me any good," he answered covering his unsightly wound with a hand.

"You need to have something done for you!"

He tried to shake his head, but was met with intense pain from the motion. There were his Pokemon, who had arrived a little too late through a separate passage that reconnected in this room. Brucie was close behind Sana, not willing to approach his trainer with the usual enthusiasm he usually had. Des was uncoiling herself even further behind them both, judging from the water dripping off her serpentine body she had been in the river.

"Try not to move," Sana cautioned holding his head.

"How...did you find me?" he asked wearily. "I couldn't sense you at all before."

She quickly explained, "After the shaking had subsided, I lost track of where you were. ...It was like you had disappeared. I knew that could not be the truth, so together Brucie and I rode Des upstream like you said."

"You did? And you weren't lost?" he sighed in relief.

"No. I felt a surge of energy coming from here, a sudden and strong change in the world. I knew it had to be your heart..."

[Boss, who did this to you?] Brucie asked, interrupting Sana from touching his core with her hand.

"A dead man," Feyera answered frankly. "He might have cut through my eye, but it turns out he won't be seeing anything. Huh, funny how that works..."

Sana stood up. Deftly, she clutched another smaller surgical knife from the nearby table. She proceeded to sever a thin piece of her already short skirt. "Please, cover your wound with this..." she implored presenting the strange fabric to him.

"You know I can't do that. I still remember what you told me before on the island... If it bonds to my skin, I won't be able to remove it easily."

"Don't be ridiculous," she implored. "You're not thinking straight right now. The benefit outweighs the costs. It will stop the blood and prevent an infection!"

She had a point. There were no first aid kits around and definitely no physicians down here in the
cave either. The floor was covered in splotches of his blood just from moving around a little bit. Still, he worried about what she had cautioned him about when using the life fabric she wore. But now wasn't a time for reason to effectively paralyze him, he was in too much pain and near to being completely broken inside. He grabbed the ends of the fabric she had outstretched in her trembling hands and said, "All right. Fine. We'll do things your way."

But before she would let go of the cloth she said, "You'll have to cut your hair where it's going to rest."

"Ha," he laughed weakly. "Know any good barbers down here?"

She glared at him seriously. "I know this is difficult for you. I can tell. That's why you're acting this way. But I can try to use the knife to…"

He knew what she was planning on doing. "Go ahead," he said. "Butcher me some more, why don't you?"

She nodded and took the blade in her hand, carefully using the razor's edge to saw at his auburn hair. She worked surprisingly quickly, cutting a ring of hair about, exposing approximately an inch of scalp that went unevenly around his head, low on the right side, and rising at an angle towards the top of the left. He sat motionlessly, watching as pieces of his hair fell silently like autumn leaves onto the cave floor.

"That should be enough to keep it in place," Sana said.

"Glad you didn't decide to make me bald," Feyera joked.

"I could still do that," she said with a soft laugh.

"Which side goes against the skin?" he asked, getting serious once more.

"The side that's green," she explained. "That's the underside supposed to be against the skin for Gardevoir."

He wrapped it tightly around his skull covering the large gash on his check and his blood-filled eye. Immediately he felt some relief from the coolness of the silken garb. With Sana's help lifting his hair up away from the exposed scalp, she helped to tie the two ends together at the back of his head. It wasn't easy to do since the texture of the fabric was slippery like a soft velvet until it was made taut against his head. Afterwards, his hair dropped back down covering the band. However, the two folds from tying the knot dangled downwards about a hand's length from his hair, mint green on one side and pale white on the other. Surprisingly, the underside was able to absorb most of the blood, and did not appear to be stained red on the exposed white side.

"Ugh…" he groaned. "I really botched this whole thing up, didn't I?"

Just ask he feared, none of his companions answered him. They probably agreed with him. Or they simply did not have anything to say.

Des was the first to say something after a pause, [If ya go 'n lose your head by givin' up, then ya neither live nor win, pardner.]

"You're right, Des. I still have my partners here with me. I'll be alright… Besides, I can still sorta see," he said blinking a few times with his good eye. "And this bandage isn't the worst idea Sana's ever come up with for me."
She forced a laugh. "You're as grateful as ever, Feyera."

"How did you get down here? What happened after the earthquake and why couldn't I communicate with you?"

Sana clutched her heart and explained, "Something down here is interfering with the frequency we use to talk at a distance. You can hear me now because you're right next to me. After the cave in, I couldn't communicate with you, something was blocking the signal. It couldn't have been the rocks, since we've communed over much greater distance in the past due to our bound hearts."

"The strange radio waves..." Feyera pondered. "Could that be what's interfering?"

[Is July okay?] Brucie asked fretfully.

Feyera glanced over at the table nearby and saw her Apricorn as well as his Pomson and other belongings. "Yeah buddy, she's fine. She's going to need some rest though."

[That's great! You're still the boss.] Brucie insisted.

"Right," he replied salvaging his composure as best he could. "We're now at the precipice of the operation. The reason why we came here is just a little further away."

"You can't mean to continue in the current state that you're in!" she exclaimed. "You need to rest. You might not be gouged, but that incision is still deep and long enough to barely be covered by my bandage. Give yourself time to heal."

"That won't do me any good, Sana," he said rather angrily. "We can't go back! The cave's collapsed! And even if that wasn't the case —" he stood up "—There's only one thing left to do here that will save this operation from becoming a catastrophic failure. That's what I came here to do, and I'm going to accomplish my mission."

"But your eye..."

"You said your fancy cloth would help right?"

"I think. But it's more complicated than a simple piece of cloth."

"You'll have to tell me more about it at another time, but right now we simply haven't the time."

"I will," She nodded solemnly. "But removing it will prove very difficult if it's not just a flesh wound. Especially for you."

"I'm willing to bet this'll leave a little more than a scar," he said making a grouse.

"That's why I'm worried."

"Whatever." He crossed his arms. "I'll still have one eye to make use of the psyonics; that's all that really matters, right?"

She leaned in close and insisted firmly, "If you use your psyonics again, even just the simpler ones that only require your eyes to employ, there's no telling what will happen since the fabric acts as a potent conduit for our mental powers. You cannot risk it."

"Hmm..." The last thing he wanted to hear was obtaining a disability on top of a disability. He patted the area around his cheekbone. The skin felt smooth right up until his fingers met the cloth.
"At the very least, try not to move it," she warned him, grabbing his hand and pulling it away from his face. "You need to give it time to set."

He nodded and touched her heart. It felt warm to his fingers unlike the rest of this awfully cold cave. "Don't worry, I'll trust you on that," he said looking directly into her cherry eyes with a stern conviction. "C'mon, we're going to finish this."

Together as a team they hurried on toward the source of the noise, following a loud sound was coming from up ahead in the distance. It was a persistent, droning sound of machinery mixed with the splashing of water. This had to be the place where the dam was located. And the center of the operation. Sana helped him keep his balance while Brucie strode close by at his other side. He recalled Des back to her Apricorn since she was not as quick on land as she was in the water.

There was a large metal grate up ahead that appeared to be a threshold into another deeper chamber. As they approached, another vibration overtook the cave, as it shook from somewhere deep below.

"Hold on!" he encouraged running full speed at the passageway. Rocks fell from nearby as the structure of the tunnel started to crumble apart from the shaking.

Passing through the gate, the group made it into an enormous chamber. It was easily over the size of a stadium. Sure enough, there was a large lake in the center of the room feeding into a metal dam that produced the river they had been following upstream. Bright floor-stand florescent lamps littered the great chamber with artificial light since the area was deep below the surface.

"He's here," yelled out someone from atop the dam's tall walkway which apparently served as a lookout. "And Proton's not with him!"

"You're right," said Feyera shrugging. "Turns out Proton's been gutted more than I have."

"Petrel, your orders?" asked one of the grunts next to the executive Feyera had seen not long ago with a portable computer.

"Prime the high-frequency Radio Burst Recording. It's ready…I think. If I calculated this correctly, when the next tremor occurs…"

"On your command, sir," said the grunt next to him high up on the bridge over the dam. "R.B.R. is ready."

"Hold on," Petrel said raising a hand, signaling his assistant to stop. He looked down at Feyera from his high vantage point atop the dam's bridge leading across to the other side of the lake. "You look worse for the wear."

"Oh this?" he scornfully replied. "This is nothing. You, however — you're going to look like shit very soon."

"Ah, attaching an emotion to your arrangements, same as always," Petrel replied with a dry laugh. "Shame my late associate valued his vengeance for Archer's death over our organization's profit margin. That's certainly why you were able to defeat him, he could not see; he was blinded by his own sense of retribution for what you and your misguided police friend did back in Celadon. But mark my words, Proton's misguided actions do not accentuate the true goals our organization."

"Then by all means, tell me why you built this facility if you're so damn concerned with profiteering?" he shouted. For a moment his temples felt warm with rage and the band covering his eye became tight. The sensation made him self-conscious of the powers. Did he really tend to use them this often? Under normal conditions, he probably would not even be able to tell they were being employed since he had grown so accustomed to it.

"Remember what I said," whispered Sana from beside him. "Don't use them."

"Why build it? Are you daft?" Petrel gave a snort. "We did no such thing. Building this place would require incredible amounts of resources — losses that profits simply would be unable to cover. No, no. We merely controlled it, bending the environment to our will so that it would serve our interests better. Over the years, the underground river carved out this entire chamber. After time, the river began to recede and left behind these massive hollow tunnels underground."

"And you needed a new base of operations to hide from the International Police?"

"No. The International Police pose no obstacle to our organization any more. Furthermore, we have adequate funding to harbor multiple regional bases with me being in charge of how assets are divvied up."

"Then why come here? What's the point of a remote hideout if it doesn't serve your interests?"

"To make money, you've got to spend some money. You see, like you, I like to think big. My ambitions were never quite satisfied until I joined Team Rocket. Before then I was a lowly computer exploiter; hacking into civilian accounts, breaking into weaker security systems, skimming a little off the top here and there with fraudulent charges — that wasn't cutting it. I had bigger plans on profiting. Plans that correlated closely to our Leader's timeless adage: 'Pokemon are for profit — the profit of Team Rocket!'"

"You're just another one of Giovanni's pawns then," Feyera spat venomously. "Have some self-respect, show some autonomy."

Petrel ignored the insult, and smiled darkly. "You're certainly one to talk."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he was curious but could not read Petrel's mind. Even if he could use the psyonics without risk, the distance was simply too great.

"Oh, nothing at all," Petrel responded nonchalantly. "You know, being below the Ruins of Alph, this cave also happens to be a source of radio frequencies not found anywhere else in the world. Of course, testing such things required a base of operations as well as a significant power supply. The dam you see here is designed to do exactly that."

"Then why go after the Slowpoke? Why destroy Azalea? How do those atrocities profit you?!" he shouted. He was tired, exhausted from before, and the target he had been pursuing was so close, and yet at the same time so far away. The temptation of using the psyonics to simply end this venture immediately was growing by the second.

This time a telekinetic tug from Sana pulled on his shoulder warning him. How did she know?

"Put simply, we were hired to do an important job no one else wanted to do," Petrel replied oblivious to the covert interaction occurring between them.

"By who?" Feyera asked more calmly than before.

"You already know."
"It was Cipher, wasn't it. The joint efforts of the Progenitor Project led to all of this."

"Very good." Petrel mockingly clapped his hands slowly. "You do remember."

"Why?" he asked, trying to bide time in order to put the jigsaw pieces together. "Don't they distrust you after what happened at the Pokemon Sanctum?"

"Not us, to them we're just the mercenaries. We're just simple folks, easy to direct, employ, and all that. Hired to do a job if it means we'll make money off it. You however… You've been ostracized by both us and them. Your stigma doesn't carry over into our affairs, and yet your legacy set us up with an invaluable avenue to exploit."

"But this isn't about me anymore. Why work with Cipher again after all this time?"

"To make the most money, of course! Haven't you been paying attention? Using Pokemon to profit has always been our goal! In order to see this through, we required a classic bait and switch tactic. First, we'd undertake Cipher's dirty work here in Kanto and Johto, get paid nicely. But… here's the best part," Petrel grinned wildly, "figure out WHY Cipher is paying so much to extract these precious reserves, and turn that technology into our own… you see where I'm going with this? When we can manipulate Pokemon on a genetic level, we will be able to create more powerful creatures; evolution no longer is something to be worked tirelessly for. Time is a valuable resource. Our work promises instant gratification. People desire powerful Pokemon to rule over others. Whoever carries the largest weapons always sways the tides of global politics – Pokemon are weapons, tools of war. With the ancient Pokemon Mew finally within our grasp after the trail went cold three years ago, we'll be able to stimulate energy conversion and bypass one of the most frustrating hurdles of becoming powerful — wasting precious time to raise the creatures so they'll evolve into stronger versions."

"Then I was right. You know about the Mercurium," he concluded earnestly.

"Of course." Petrel nodded. "It's right here, under my feet. Resting at the bottom of this newly formed, artificial lake. …A whole motherlode, I might add."

"And you haven't extracted it?!!" he said unable to conceal his excitement very well.

"There are…complications, to put it bluntly," Petrel sighed. "Though if you're willing to help us out again, I can offer you all the Mercurium your little heart can possibly imagine…"

"Forget it." The proposal was not nearly as tempting as it would have been only a few hours ago. "You can take that offer and shove it where the sun doesn't shine, since I'll never join Team Rocket again."

"Humph. Then we have no more to discuss," Petrel said. "A pity, you could have had it all. But in the end, you'll profit us all the same."

"That's exactly why I can't trust you. Your offer is nothing but a hoax. How do I even know the Mercurium motherlode isn't also a lie?"

"Hah!" Petrel laughed. "That's the funny thing. You can't! But I can give you one guarantee: you'll be in for quite a show momentarily."

"I have a very bad feeling about this, thas Feyera."

There was a massive tremor that shook the cave. "Activate it!" Petrel ordered his grunt.
A tremendous roar echoed through the chamber. The entire cave shook as the river began to split asunder revealing a massive Pokemon. As the river flowed south, it began to part in two upon a set of sharp crimson scales. Feyera and the others watched as a mighty whirlwind of mist and water sprayed across the river's surface as the scales rose upright and into the artificial light. The florescent platforms illuminating the inner part of the cave gleamed off the creature's exposed contour, which dominated the majority of the river. It howled with another vicious roar and reared its serpentine body higher out of the water for all to behold. With a mighty tremor the entire cave rattled from the creature's bellow, as rocks fell from above and splashed into the water. The creature's repeated howls were anything but natural and yet they seemed to restructure all of nature around it. Crumbling pieces of the cave's ceiling crashing down nearby, forcing Feyera to recoil as dust blew forth from the center of the vast room.

"That…that's not possible…" he gasped. He had never seen a creature this large before of any species.

"No…it can't be!" Sana exclaimed equally short of breath. "They can't grow that large…!"

[Edgy, you better think of something!]

"GYROOO!" Another incredible roar shook the cavern, knocking everyone to their knees.

There it was before them. A truly massive creature, unlike anything outside of legends. Its hardened red scales reflected the artificial lights in the cave in a brilliant way, shimmering and reflecting the harsh lights as though it were a fractured mirror. The Pokemon's head alone was easily the size of a small house, though most of its serpentine body dwelled under the lake water. With a vicious whip of its tail, the creature exposed more of its body, spraying the entire cave with briny water. Four huge gleaming fangs, each the size of a human adult jutted out of the creatures gapping maw as it spewed a mixture of briny river water with an incredible force. Its eyes were as feverishly red as its body, and its mighty twin dorsal fins were wrought with deep scars and thick regrown flesh.

"AHHH!" screamed one of the Rockets near the water's edge, as he tried to run away from where the creature had emerged. With an effortless swat of the creature's mighty tail, the man was sent flailing high up through the air, arms and legs floundering wildly as he spun uncontrollably – his body smashing loudly against the cave wall at an unbelievable velocity and shattering countless bones.

The Pokemon's fangs gleamed as it reared its coiled body back into the water momentarily. Swiftly, it lunged back out of the water, spraying the floor with a wave of water and smashing its thick head into a column of rocks that stretched up to the lofty ceiling.

"Shit, it's gone berserk!" called out another one of the grunts.

"Wasn't that part of the plan?" Petrel said menacingly.

The other grunt pointed at the creature with fear in his eyes. "What do you think? We've clearly outdone ourselves here!"

"This is the true power of controlling Pokemon evolution," Petrel said observing the creature from high above. "It boggles the mind when you think about it. Ha…hahaha! We have become gods in our own right. Rich, rich gods!"

Feyera and his team were knocked to the ground from dodging rubble falling nearby. There was no way to fight the red monstrosity before them. It was just too massive, too powerful. The twisting scales of its huge body dominated the entire lake's surface. With a mighty blast, it spewed a mixture
of draconic energy and scalding water from its gapping maw, evaporating the surface of the water around it into steam.

Another member of Team Rocket attempted to shoot at the creature from afar. Using a gauntlet and firing from above the dam, he shot down at the creature emptying his entire clip, but it didn't even seem to notice the bullets as they harmlessly ricocheted off its bright, titanium-like scales.

The creature flung its large head back with reckless abandon as light began to form in its enormous mouth. Its crimson scales glistened as it quivered for a moment before firing an incredible beam of pure white energy toward the sky. The light was blinding, the sound thunderous. The thick ray of light tore the rock ceiling, disintegrating through solid stone as though it were naught but air. In the wake of the blinding Hyper Beam there was nothing left but a massive circular hole in the ceiling, a testament to the creature's godlike power.

"…We're done here; the test was a success, but this base is sunk." Petrel was grasping tightly onto the dam's railing for support. "Time to head out and begin Phase Two…!"

"Petrel, what about the rest of the extraction unit?" asked the grunt by his side. "We still have men and women down in the cave!"

"Leave them. They've done their part of the mission, and now it's time to pass the torch to more capable hands." He took a look at the giant creature from above his high perch. "Given the circumstances, I'm sure they'd understand."

"Roger that," replied the grunt who had the look of abject terror in his eyes.

"The most important thing is getting out of here before that monstrosity uses Outrage! It's still gotta recharge from that Hyper Beam."

The grunt nodded at the executive like a frightened child.

"And farewell to you, Christian Feyera! May we meet again!" Petrel said sarcastically. He drew several Pokéballs from his belt holster, and threw them into the lake near the creature's wake. They opened to reveal a collection of Koffing and Weezing. "Smokescreen!" ordered Petrel, as he turned and ran toward the other side of the dam atop the tall bridge.

"I don't think so, you little Sneasel!" He gave a quick glance to his Pokemon. "Sana. Brucie. You ready?"

For what? There was not enough time to explain. They nodded as rocks continued to fall all around them as the red Gyarados' thrashing continued to shake the cave. True, he could not use any psionic powers without risk, but having his Pokemon by his side provided him more than enough firepower to execute his plan.

"Heave ho," Feyera said grabbing Brucie under his arm and carrying him at a full sprint towards the dam. When Petrel had just gotten past the halfway mark on the dam's bridge, Feyera used his free arm to fling Des out from her Apricorn, causing her to appear in front of them with a flash of light.

"Gonna need a lift, girl," he quickly relayed to his Pokemon as the large group of floating Koffing and Weezing began to dispense their clouds of inky black smog. "Use Aqua Tail, send us up high!" He rushed up onto the tip of her tail and felt the damp air whiz past him as she hoisted him and Brucie skyward in a swift motion. To maintain steadiness, he grappled on tightly to one of her protruding dorsal scales.

At the pinnacle of the lift, he launched Brucie with all his might at the collection of Pokemon
facilitating Petrel's escape. "Fire Blast, Brucie! Straight into the center of the smoke!"

The momentum from Des' tail flew an otherwise wingless Brucie far enough through the air to be within striking range. Inside the Charmeleon's jaws seared with tremendous heat, and he released it midair with one brutal burst. Upon discharge from Brucie's maw, it split into a five-pronged emission of scorching flare. The spreading waves of combustion caught onto the noxious smog Koffing was releasing, triggering an immense firestorm that engulfed the entire cloud of smoke. In unison, the bodies of the volatile gas bombs exploded from the ignition, causing massive shockwaves and destroying everything around them. The orchestrated noises of their explosions were deafening. Concrete and steel flew into the air, chunks of the once massive dam used to extract power from the flow of water.

"Now! Sana, pull him back!" he ordered tugging his hand back as a signal from atop Des.

She used her telepathy to yank Brucie backwards from the enormous chain of explosions and away from the lake. It was a risky maneuver to be sure, but he could trust no one else but her to pull it off.

The massive red Gyarados cried out again, as the rocks and debris flew down from everywhere above. Its body, though massive, was still in the water. With the dam destroyed, the creature was helpless to resist the incredible force of water rushing downstream. It tried to swim against the current, but could not pull away from the draw of the newly opened channel. Thrashing wildly, it screeched loudly as its massive body was tugged away into the darkness beyond where the dam once stood.

Feyera could barely believe it and fell to his knees in exhaustion as Brucie landed gently next to him. Des pressed her body down to earth, coiling closely next to the pair. Although the power to all the underground lights had been severed, natural light was now flooding in through the broken cave's lofty ceiling. Feyera exhaled a deep sigh of relief and felt water forming in his eye. Breaking down, he hugged his Pokemon with outstretched arms.
Chapter 11: Root of Lives Taken Away

Light poured in from the wide breaks in the cavern ceiling. It was clearly day out, but the sheer height of the massive underground chamber made the sunlight seem far off and cold. The once dammed underground lake had quickly drained into a narrower rapidly flowing river. Much more of the cave's floor had suddenly become visible from the receding basin waters. The distinct smell of brine was heavy in the air, as was the scent of combustion from the dam's destruction.

Had the Team Rocket Executive escaped from the carnage? It was impossible to tell for sure. There was too much smoke released from Koffing and Weezing prior to their unexpected detonation. Not only did a heavy cloud linger in the damp cave, but nearly all traces of the cement dam had vanished. It had been swallowed by the force of the river, which had been strong enough to carry the enormous red Gyarados downstream.

How was such a monstrosity even produced? The sheer size of the creature went well beyond even the most embellished fishing stories. Des was not even a twentieth of the size of the red Gyarados, and — all things considered — Des was a smaller sized member of the species due to Feyera's unintentional siphoning of her potential earlier on.

It was odd that the Pokemon had been so grand as to fill a substantial portion of the lake. Executive Petrel had claimed it was due to radio waves and the Unown, but then there was also mention of the mysterious fossil related to Mew. The Mercurium relating to Mew was what interested Feyera the most. For he still did not know the extent of his own consciousness, and faced a profound query of whether the heart embedded in his chest – including all of its strange urges, its conflicting memories, its inhuman powers, and its unquestionable allurement towards Sana – existed as an inseparable part of himself. The only way to figure this out would be to remove it and that required going back to the source of what started it all: Mew.

Of course there was also the issue involving the Slowpoke tails. This made for quite a conundrum at first, but now that the dust had settled it was time to deconstruct this entire mystery step by step. Fortunately, the cave had been cleared out of other grunts before the encounter with Petrel. From a logical perspective, they must have escaped the cave somehow through an exit passageway. Thus following their trail would be preferable – if not necessary – to move forward.

Feyera stood up, recalling his Pokemon back into their respective Apricorns. He gave Sana's shoulder a squeeze and walked toward one of the many steel barrels that littered the perimeter of where the lake's shore once was. There was some debris nearby from the explosion, including a short metal rod from one of the railings on the dam's bridge. He picked it up off the ground to have it serve as a lever when prying the lid off the barrel in front of him.

The metal grated as he struggled to uncap the round top like an oversized can. With a little effort applied to the edges it finally came loose.

Immediately the noxious smell of decay flooded his nostrils. Only one thing could possibly smelt of this rot. It was the unmistakable odor of death. His eye stung from the repulsive wave of putrefaction,
but he kept lifting the lid – for he had to see it to believe it.

He heard Sana approach with soft footsteps from behind him. He tried to tell her not to approach, but he was too much in shock to even lift a hand. Standing there in a paralysis, he realized that his mouth was hanging open aghast as she quickly joined him at his side. He should have expected what he saw, but somehow seeing it – smelling it – made the experience feel more real than his hypothesis predicted.

For there in the canister were corpses, stuffed like anchovies into a bin. The liquid they were drenched in was that of their own blood and bile. All of them were without tails, though it would be incredibly difficult to tell had Feyera not been looking for that particular detail.

"...!" the gasp Sana made next to him seemed to bring him back from the stupor he had fallen into by staring into the barrel.

"Sana… look away…" he said short of breath.

"I c-cant…" she stammered, grabbing his waist in a hug. "W-why… why would they do this…?!"

Feyera dropped his guard ever so slightly and put an arm around her shivering body. What could he possibly tell her as an explanation? He couldn't even think of a rational one for himself, so how could he possibly begin to explain it to an emotional Gardevoir? It was futile to even try. Silently, he lowered the lid back on the can. Sana's ear cartilage was tickling the side of his head as she shook her head repeatedly, but he could not laugh, he could not do anything.

"Why?" she said again and again. "Why this cruelty?"

Why? He didn't know. He could only posit a guess. And judging by how he was feeling, even that was unsatisfactory at best. To try and explain it to Sana would only make things feel worse. She knew the bounds of his own cruelty, but this felt like something else entirely – though the connection could still be made between Progenitor and this operation, both were the byproducts of a pact with Cipher. He hated himself for being involved with such people in the past. In a sense, he knew that trying to rationalize it would only further her conviction that he was in fact once a part of Team Rocket and thus capable of similar gross iniquities.

But who was he trying to fool? Sana already knew all about him. She had seen him at his worst and still managed to see value in preserving his offensive life – albeit for personal motivations. So maybe the barrier was not rationalizing to her, but rather coming to terms with himself.

Biting his lip in frustration, he closed the canister with a loud thump that echoed throughout the otherwise quiet cave. The noise from the adjacent river had died down since now it was flowing freely downstream.

"Can we leave now?" she asked in a shaken voice. "Please…enough is enough."

He agreed with her. Or rather a feeling in his heart agreed with her. But was that him? He tried to take a step back in his mind and consider things rationally. There was no point in staying here. The damage was already done. Meanwhile, other Pokemon might be currently suffering a similar fate elsewhere. All he wanted to do was leave this place behind. After being beaten to a pulp, nearly losing an eye, facing an unnatural monstrosity, and then witnessing this, he wanted nothing more than to rest somewhere else. Somewhere far, far away. Some place safe with Sana and his Pokemon at his side. Feeling the heat of her core pressed so close against him was only exacerbating this already strong feeling.
It took his entire will to fight the inexplicable longing tugging at his heart. If he gave up right now, if he relinquished his mission in order to be with Sana and remain with her until the end, then all the sacrifices prior to this moment would have been in vain. Logically speaking, the decision should have been an easy one. It should have been fine to simply deny her this and move onwards. However her heart so closely adjacent to his own made the choice immeasurably more complex. At this moment, the thought of sharing in the throbbing warmth of one another's hearts was all it would take to change the course of his goal. It made him feel vulnerable to his own suppressed desires.

But wait. Were they even his desires? Or were these just remnants of the heart drawing to her – the way the pole of a magnet would attract its opposite? With no small amount of resistance, he twisted his torso as to avoid having the edges of their cores continue to touch during this close moment. It took him more effort than he'd care to admit to break the contact.

Sana flinched as well in an awkward sort of way, unorthodox of her usual composure. Whenever this happened in the past, there was always a feeling of uncertainty. True, there was comfort in the fact that they both held such insecurity, but it did little to alleviate the intensifying truth that each held their respective reservations for vastly different reasons.

And then it dawned on him, she was the conduit for these memories. He knew it. It was that familiar aroma of tropical hibiscus and gardenia that made him think again of the strawberry haired girl. His memory of her unique perfume included traces of coconut and milky vanilla cream, scents that were different from the floral aroma present on Sana. He found it odd that being in such close proximity to Sana consistently brought such memories to the surface. The memories were primal in a sense — lacking in detail, but vivid in overall meaning. Clearly there was a close bond between Feyera and the girl with strawberry hair, similar to the bond he was now engaged in with Sanaria. The question was: should he continue to channel these memories of the girl by remaining close to Sana if that attractive force was not entirely genuine?

He glanced down at his heart. Was any of this even genuine? Surely, the heat it was radiating meant he was feeling something. But was it actually genuine? Her heart gave off a similar heat and reddish glow alongside his.

What could it all mean? If his heart was still bound to hers, as it undoubtedly was based on the evidence, then that explained what had happened between them before. Those reservations he felt, they were his humanity – or whatever had been left of it. That pill alone was a struggle to swallow, but now he was not sure what Sana felt either based on how she pulled away. From his perspective, her body language was easier to read than her heart's emotions. Did she suspect that he was using her? This question was most pertinent to the current sensation, involving a nagging sensation in his mind that he was using Sana to draw out deeper memories of the strawberry haired girl. The closer he was to Sana, the more the intense the memories of being with her physically became. And yet it was the only way to effectively draw out the memories of the girl that he could no longer remember, but wanted to oh so much!

Bewildered by this inconvenient reality, he could do naught to stop the mounting rise in his pulse as they shared closely synchronized breaths – their hearts separated by but a scant inch.

"We'll leave, don't worry. I promise," he said finally regaining his audacity. He couldn't get bogged down with all of these bizarre feelings; it was not the right time for such introspection. The only reason to remain here would be to gather any intel on the Mercurium fossils but even that objective seemed far out of reach. What were they even supposed to be looking for? Was Petrel bluffing when he claimed there was a motherlode of material in the lake? If not, then how was the earthquake, the unusual radio waves, the giant red Gyarados, and even the dead Slowpoke's tails all related to Mercurium? Did he really want to know how to harness such a power if it meant atrocities for those
creatures involved? He could not say for sure with the same conviction he once held.

"Thanks..." she replied feebly. "When the earthquake happened and I couldn't send messages to your heart any longer, I started to panic... If not for your Pokemon I don't know what I would have done."

"They're not so bad to have around, huh?" Feyera joked. Bits of humor were the only way for him to remain composed.

Sana was still shaking from the sight of the Pokemon. She was still looking around the room with her cherry eyes nervously. "Are all these barrels...?"

He knew what she was asking, but could not find the strength to answer her directly. Truth be told, there must have been over three hundred of them littered throughout the compound. It would be a fair assessment to assume they all contained similar contents based on their uniform white and red labels.

Again she pressured, this time with a force of her cheek against the base of his neck. This time she finished her sentence. "Are all of these full of...death...?"

He nodded. Team Rocket was ruthless when it came to Pokemon. There were very few boundaries to what they would do and this he knew for a fact. The sacks he saw before, the ones the grunts were carrying outside of the cave were full of more carcasses. They had been harvesting the tails no doubt, and these barrels of the tailless remnants were the smoking gun. The only question left was: why? How did it benefit Team Rocket?

It struck him as strange that the tails were completely gone. Also, the presence of them being gathered here in this specific cave seemed to be too much of a coincidence. If only there had been some trace left behind...

"Petrel's computer," he said with determination. "I'm going to hunt that son of a bitch down like the dog he is."

"Huh? Why are you so angry all of a sudden?" It must have surprised her how quickly his shock turned to wrath.

"Because... this needs to end. And the only cure for my anger is action."

"I guess I can't try to stop you then."

"Not a chance of that," Feyera insisted.

"So...what are you going to do if allowing yourself to heal isn't part of the plan?"

"Don't twist my words like that. I'll heal just fine when I'm done doing what needs to be taken care of," he admonished her.

She moved in some discomfort. Times like these were especially taxing on the bond to her heart.

"Listen up: I only have time to explain this once. If I can find where the computer was plugged into, I'll have a means of access to whatever this operation involves. When I was captured, I saw Petrel unplug his portable computer from a wire. That has to be how the interference was dealt with since Petrel was using his computer to hack into Cipher's database. If our telepathy wasn't working because of the radio waves, then there's no way a wireless signal would hold up either. If we can find that track of cable and then proceed to follow it..."
"The whole structure is destroyed though..." Sana sighed.

"There has to be a trace, there has to be something!" he insisted. "Anything!"

"Calm yourself down," she implored. "You're acting really aggressive."

"I need to figure this out Sana!" he said as he squeezed her lithe hand tightly. "Please, just understand that this is more important than anything I've ever faced. If I lose my chance to make amends now I don't know how I can live with my failures."

"I... understand... but this warmth, I don't want you to leave."

"Then come with me," he urged. "We'll figure this out together."

"As if that was ever even a question," she said forcing a soft smile.

"Psh, don't get all excited about it! It'll simply be faster this way, that's all."

"How do you manage to keep that façade up after all this?"

"Practice," he said with a haphazard shrug. "You'll figure it out in due course."

"Despite knowing your heart for as long as I have, now I sometimes feel like I've barely scratched the surface." Her ear cartilage pecked at his cheek as she rocked her head in thought. "You're just a simple man."

"Thanks, I guess." Though her words were not flattering, they did acknowledge that he had some depth as a man. Up until this point, he could barely consider himself a full adult. The childish fantasies and the pseudo academic clout were all just barriers to his otherwise vulnerable self, all of which had been torn down by the state of sheer desperation forcing him to find a new way forward. Of course, he was in no state to denounce anything, since his prior experiences for better or worse had led him up to this point.

"Let's go then. I don't like it here, thas Feyera."

"Right." He squinted at the cave's wall in the distance. "We'll make for the source of the cable lining the wall. That would be the best trail to follow."

Sure enough, there was a thick cable, taut as an umbilical cord resting against the cave's wall. This had to be the way Petrel was able to access a remote server without interference from the nearby ruins.

"What is that exactly?" Sana pondered.

"This is a wire that seems to run through most of the cave. It looks like this was how Team Rocket managed to remain unaffected by the unusual radio waves present here in this cave."

"So...that was how they could still use their form of telepathy?"

"Kinda," Feyera said with a light sigh. "But computers are a little bit different from telepathy."

"How?" she asked curiously.

"A computer uses electrical signals to convey information. That information can be read by another computer. If there is a cable connecting them then it is easier to connect than relying on a wireless signal that could be easily interfered with."
"They sound similar to our hearts."

He saw what she meant, but was convinced that she was wrong in making the connection. "It's not," he said dismissively. "It's just a similar method of achieving the same goal: transmission of information from A to B."

"I think our hearts transmit a lot more than information..." she said drawing near. "Feelings and warmth are electrical in their own way."

As she rested against his shoulder, his thoughts insistently returned back to the mysterious girl he had only vaguely remembered. Something about feeling Sana's head resting gently against his shoulder brought the memory to surface. He winced slightly as the top of her hair brushed against his ear and near his covered wound. It felt strange, surreal even. Like he was living the same experience once more. He tried to channel this feeling of intense curiosity toward remembering more about the strawberry haired girl. Just as her face was starting to come into view he felt a nudge against his temple.

"How does it feel?" she asked gliding her hand over the silken life fabric covering his eye.

"Weird when you do that," he replied truthfully in response to her stroking the bandage, the motion of her fingers feeling like a strange dancing heat.

"N-no," she stammered. "I meant does it hurt still?"

"Nah, not too bad. This fabric is pretty handy. Numb the area right up."

"Ahh...maybe I made it too tight..." she said fidgeting her hands together.

"It's fine, you shouldn't worry about it. I'm better off than I was before with an open gash by my eye, right?"

"...I hope..." she softly replied.

"Whadda you mean, 'I hope'?" Feyera asked twisting about the fabric's dangling pieces with uncertainty.

"I told you it would be risky."

"Mmm. I remember you saying that, but c'mon have a little faith. I might never see out of this eye again. Isn't that bad enough?"

"...There could be other consequences if you're not careful. Life Fabric is not meant for human bodies to wear."

"Well yeah, that makes sense. Can't say I've ever seen a person wearing your species' garments."

She shook her head. "It's not even that... most humans don't produce enough heat to cause the Life Fabric to react."

So that's what it was. Heat. His psyons generated a ton of it in a similar fashion to her species. Oftentimes it felt like his entire body was burning just to use a small amount of the powers and the time it took to vent such temperature was directly related to the amount of psyonic manipulation he had attempted. Sana's physiology was different from his own because she was thinner and always wore this life fabric to handle her abundant use of telekinesis. The fabric must yield a chemical reaction when subject to higher temperatures Gardevoir were frequently subject to, otherwise what
purpose did it have? "I'll refrain from using the heart's powers until I can take this bandage off," he promised.

"That's a really good idea for your sake," Sana said seriously.

"Doesn't make me feel any better when you say that… but it'll have to do for now since we need to follow this lead. …Time's of the essence."

The two of them chased the cable against the wall as it snaked around the cave, until it suddenly went directly up – straight through the ceiling.

"This is the spot," he said. "Now, let's look for a way up."

"Over here!" Sana motioned toward a tiny alcove in the cave's wall. It was well hidden on account of all the rubble that had recently settled, but it was certainly leading up to a steep incline.

"Good work," he told her. His weakened sense of depth perception had begun to take a toll on his observational skills.

They climbed up the path, using rocks as handholds to navigate the sharply angled floor. Occasionally one of them would slip, only to have the other catch hold. And so this otherwise perilous climb continued, each supporting the other.

At last, they saw unfiltered daylight streaming in from up ahead. Feyera nearly toppled over in excitement on his way out of the cave and Sana too was overcome with relief.

"We… made it…" he gasped. "Whew, finally."

She wrapped her arms around him and said happily, "We really did it!"

"Whoa now, we're not done yet," he said patting her back. "Still have to find out where that wire leads to."

"Okay," she said enthusiastically as the bright sunlight shone on her pale face.

Taking a look at the local area, there appeared to be no signs of any civilization. However, Sana was keen to point out fresh tracks that lined the outside of the cave. Together they followed the tracks, which led beyond several rocky outcrops and past rugged mass of earth that was shaped like a rounded barrow. From there, the tracks led north judging by the position of the late morning sun.

It took them several minutes and a few shared quips to finally reach a cabin.

Peering through the closed windowpane, the lights were turned off inside but that was no reason to let down their guard. First, he tried to gently open the door, but the nob would not turn. He then pressed up on the window pane but it would not budge. Finally, looked over at Sana and smiled.

"How about smashing this door in with some telekinesis?"

"Hmm… let me think about that…" she said raising her hand to her chin and slanting her eyes mischievously.

"Use Psychic or something and knock the door down," he said with an order.

"But that Feyera, like you said before, I'm not your Pokemon," she gave a snarky laugh. "You can't tell me what to do!"

"You know damn well I can't do it," he pointed at her fabric being used as a bandage around his eye.
"Don't want to mess up the healing process."

"Very good point." She rolled her eyes playfully, clearly enjoying this position of power. "But I'm still not convinced. Maybe you can try to convince me to—"

He took his elbow and smashed with all his might into the window causing it to shatter loudly. If anyone was inside, the noise certainly would have alerted them.

Sana looked surprised. "I was going to help..." she said faintly.

"Yeah...well uh... took you too long," he said wiping shards of glass off the window's wooden threshold. "Since you didn't want to help with breaking in, stand guard out here while I look around inside for clues."

He hopped over the frame and into the cabin. As far as he could tell the room was devoid of inhabitants. Quickly he found the light bulb dangling from the low ceiling and tugged on the string next to it, illuminating the tiny room. It could probably house one person, or maybe two in a pinch. It was very cramped rather than cozy, and had been built right into the rock with two wooden walls as the exterior.

There were several magazines littered around on the desk next to the broken window, some of them pornographic judging from their covers, as well as foodstuffs and wrappers. He sighed, picking one of the tablets and flipped through it precariously. "Whoever was here sure left in a hurry, didn't even think to take their nudie magazines along with them..." he said with a faint laugh. To his dismay, many of the starlets were old news. One issue even featured Miss Unova from five years ago as the headliner on the cover. At first, he was surprised that he remembered her, since that too should have been affected by the amnesia. Then again, his mind could be playing tricks on him. Maybe he saw her sometime after three years ago. It was difficult to tell for certain what he actually remembered and what his mind told him he remembered. What he needed was proof that the memories were real, that the stuff he recalled actually happened according to other people. That would be conclusive evidence that the girl with the strawberry colored hair was as real of a memory as the pictures he remembered her showing him long ago. One thing was certain though: distinct images, photography in particular, seemed to jog his memory better than anything – except for Sana.

After he had finished perusing through the stash of unmentionables, he made his way toward the back of the room. There was a large door left ajar that led into another smaller room. Inside, he saw what he had been looking for. The thick cable jutting out of the ground had found its way into a large terminal. The tower was showing activity, which was a good thing since it indicated the system had been in an idling state rather than fully turned off. Even better, the wireless router it was connected to appeared to be offline judging from a lack of flashing lights. He quickly rebooted up the computer from standby, leaving the wireless router stationed next to it turned off – hoping to intercept another lead on the operation Team Rocket was a part of.

"Mounting Local Disks...Complete.


C:\ has no label, index located.

D:\ has no label, index located.

E:\ has no label, index located.

Resuming Previous Session...
Distributed Resources Disconnected.

Connecting to Network Drive…

Z:\ Not Found.

Error: Network Connection Unsuccessful.

Loading Previous Session…Complete."

The screen flashed a few times, then a loading window, and finally the login screen appeared – must have been an older operating system or just a slower processor. "Let me see what's been going through here recently…” he said confidently sitting down at the makeshift workstation.

However, he was soon confronted with an obstacle: the terminal was locked by a passphrase.

"Hail_giovanni" he typed in, recalling what the grunt in the cave had said earlier during the mind interrogation. No dice. He tried using multiple attempts capitalizing characters, adding numbers, substituting names of the executives, failing in every regard at brute forcing through. After losing count of the attempts he had made, he finally leaned back in the chair looking up at the dirty ceiling for an answer that simply would not come. Psyonics were no good here – even if he could use them.

While he was leaning back pondering what else the password could be, he started to feel tired from lack of sleep, and looked back down at the monitor with a sense of urgency. He took a deep breath. There was a faint odor coming from the desk. Curious, he yanked out the desk drawer and found several processed food snacks stuffed inside like some type of edible treasure trove.

"Rollout Rolls, Swirlix Surprise, Munchlax Munchies…!" he said reading the colorful labels on the wrapped pastries, candy, and nutritional bars. His stomach growled loudly. Clearly famished, he spared no time in devouring the food he'd come across. Most of it was junk, yet at least there was some sustenance that could hold him over until he procured his next meal. When would that be? He'd left his camping supplies behind containing various provisions he had routinely restocked over the weeks. With his metabolic rate stalled he could ration longer than the average adventurer, but was not free from intense hunger pangs especially after exerting himself. After taking the beating he had, the food was a most welcome and satisfying reprieve; so ravenous was his appetite for fuel, he didn't even think to save any of it for Sana or the others.

After polishing off the snacks, he dug around further in the desk, insatiably searching for more to eat. Something sharp pinched his hand, it felt like stiff card paper. It was tapped down to the very back of the drawer, but he easily managed to pry it out now that the snacks once obstructing it had been cleared out of the desk by his appetite.

"Hmm what's this…?" he said aloud as he flipped the small index card around in his hand. His mind was still contemplating all the delicious sugary goodness, so it took a moment to register what he had just found. "AH, HA! A key card! 'user1: Goldeen need log'. Never would have guessed that…” Swiftly he typed in the credentials, continuing to talk to himself in a sugar induced rush of thought, "Huh, you'd think with a password you'd want to keep others out… doesn't do much good to have the key card so close to the machine. Humph, not that I'm complaining. Easier job for me!"

Excitedly, he waited for the login process to finish, tapping anxiously at the desk – revved up from all the sweets. "…This probably isn't Petrel's computer, but if he connected to it via a landline I can hopefully still cull some info from that contact."

Using a command function he typed out "C:\Users\user1\network statistics workstation" and was
greeted with a history of the server station's up-time as well as several technical details indicating this particular computer system had been host to quite a number of transmissions since its last boot-up late yesterday's evening.

"Hmm… Whole lot of data going through here…several connections too." While he was no expert on networking, it was clear to a reasonable certainty that this outpost was related to what was going on underground. "Team Rocket did leave here in an awful hurry. Maybe there's still a file in here that wasn't yet sent to its final destination when they got out of dodge. Or at the very least a backup version of a communication stored on the local drive."

For several minutes he slaved at the desk, buried in the nested list of folders in tree view and shift-tabbing his way through, trying to find any promising lead on the underground operations. There had to be a record in here somewhere. Even a routine backup would suffice for his purposes.

He rubbed his eye as the screen's whiteness began to wear on him. Many of the files contained Hexadecimal Digits in Unicode, though without a translator handy it was useless to try and decipher them. Connecting to the internet in order to translate them might very well result in a stored message being sent off to its intended destination, because of the local area network no longer being isolated as it was now with its wireless transmitter turned off. It was not worth the risk. Besides, these were very small files; the clusters of paired numbers and letters probably denoted shipment sizes or otherwise insignificant information.

Eventually after what felt like endless searching through the command tree and opening text files, he came across a suspicious folder named "Sparrowhawk" that contained several iterations of the same document as if frequent amendments had been made to it judging by the consecutive dates which it was updated. Furthermore the most recent update was made a mere two hours ago!

With all hope riding on this being the answer, he punched in a command to open the folder, which prompted him for administrator credentials. "Interesting…” he said rubbing his chin in thought. "Not many of the other files had an administrator lock on them."

He then ran a search on the keyword "Sparrowhawk" and the resulting hits were staggering to say the least. It had several hundred hits in the first few seconds; the numbers continued to rise as the various disk volumes were searched and indexed.

"Got to hand it to them, it sounds like a cool name. Maybe even one I'd use…” he said with a shake of his head.

The only local folders he had privilege to open were "Sparrowhawk_ver_V" and "Sparrowhawk_Plans".

He opened the former first.

C:\Users\user1\start c:\Storage\Docs\Recent\Sparrowhawk_ver_V\

Project Primer:

The PURPOSE of this Operation is to "Provide a Channel by which to Profit Regardless of Future Global Uncertainties"

***NOTICE: For consistency and increased security please use the term 'Zephyrus' when referring to the organization whose name rhymes with 'heifer'; I don't want to have to explain again how
important it is to use code words! Grunts who fail to comply with these policies will be reported for insubordination!*** /P

Two following situations remain unsatisfied and will likely result as Mercurium samples increase over time and perfect sequencing is finalized:

(1.) Deployment of Archangel 44 65 69 72 64 72 65 20 22 44 65 65 22 20 41 6c 64 61 69 6e 65 6e 65
(2.) Global war on multiple fronts and massive scale instigated by codename "Phaeton Device"

The potential of Zephyrus completing either objective remains questionable at best, but judging from analysis of their administrative data files, we can be assured that societal destruction is their endgame.

The bad news is a lot of people and Pokemon will probably die.

The good news is there's tremendous profit in that.

What better way than to play off the uncertainties of the future by promising the future warlords of tomorrow the most premium of biological weaponry?

Those in the know already understand something big is looming on the horizon.

Anyone with access to a satellite already knows about the destruction of all life on Penta Island even though that information has quickly been made "classified" by the Pokemon League.

The corporation bigwigs with satellites to their name have pockets that are deep, and I mean DEEP!

With the Pokéball industry booming, these bastards are absolutely loaded with wealth!

Any company with a hand in this so called "Quantum Superposition Technology" is reaping those earnings as the presence of this method of data processing becomes increasingly commonplace and necessary.

Silph and Devon alone grossed 7.8 trillion last year and those corporate earnings are likely deflated for tax purposes.

Conclusion: we exploit these people with heavy pocketbooks by taking advantage of their desire to avoid an Armageddon situation which will render them powerless.

How?

Simple!

Two Phases, much simpler to implement than anything Zephyrus has planned for "down the line" we make our product available today for the "here and now":

Phase One – Use those special rocks Zephyrus' has been paying us to dig up and generate an electronic frequency similar to that of the legendary Mew's transformative frequency.

First, need to gather a lot of the compound to research the particular frequency we need.

Hacking into Zephyrus' mainframe proves that living samples with beating hearts are superior in every way to fossilized samples.

Christian's research "Concerning the Paranormal" provides a model understanding of this technical relationship.
Turns out Psychic Pokemon share a unique affinity with the compound.

No surprises there considering the Progenitor Project was such a success.

Slight problem: Most Psychic Pokemon are quite dangerous, so we'll settle for the low hanging fruit.

Gather Slowpoke because they're unbelievably dimwitted and make for easy prey.

Plus Azalea is absolutely infested with them!

Their tails are key to their evolution process; the transformative process of energy stored within them for when a Shellder bites down on one is somehow related to Mew.

Slice off the tails, discard the rest; feed the tails to an (unwilling) host

This will make the Pokemon evolve easier because the presence of this high concentration of Mercurium/samples of Mew's genetic code lowers the threshold needed to trigger an evolution.

Thanks to this, the next part will be like aiming at a large, stationary target rather than a tiny, volatile one.

We noted that Magikarp developed to gargantuan proportions, though the jury's out on whether this is due to the increased nutrients or the massive quantities we force fed it.

Now here's the tricky part, need to use a natural signal to trigger evolution.

Fortunately Unown happen to produce a radio wave that affects Pokemon.

I have no idea how since I'm not a scientist, but it must have something to do with potential energy becoming active energy.

That natural signal emitted by the Unown is our ticket to inducing the evolution.

The presence of Mercurium in the subject's bloodstream will make this an easier task since it promotes change at the slightest variable trigger.

As soon as the creature evolves, lock the signal currently being transmitted by the Unown – that's the "Harmonic Resonance" a special type of radio wave that signals change in all Pokemon, though only the ones with enough stored up energy to evolve could respond to it.

We then copy the signal, and amplify it.

We amplify it a lot.

Amplify it to the point where it cannot be ignored, even by Pokemon with minimal amounts of evolutionary energy storage.

Phase Two — Find a tall broadcasting station, preferably in a densely populated area for maximum effect.

Ramp the signal strength up to eleven and force 'spontaneous evolution' to take place en masse.

Since we've already isolated the specific wavelength, it only will require a single burst.

Perhaps two if there are multiple stages in the Pokemon's evolutionary tree.
Doesn't matter if the Pokemon is ready for evolution or not, the signal causes an unavoidable response.

If the Pokemon has insufficient reserves of energy to evolve it might mutate or simply draw in surrounding energy from its local environment in order to balance the equation to equilibrium.

Think of the chaos it will cause people living at home with their Pokemon or taking them out for a stroll.

Next, think of all the Pokemon that work on infrastructure, producing electrical power or otherwise contributing to the wellbeing of society suddenly gaining tremendous untapped potential.

We'll have a biological superweapon before Zephyrus even finishes their projects, shifting the balance of power.

Think of all the money this will make just to keep it out of the wrong hands!

Too bad for everyone that we're the dictionary definition of "the wrong hands".

/P

***PROJECT UPDATE***

Still working on a way to get through to Pokemon with the Soundproof ability, or the ones inside their Pokéballs for that matter…will work out those inconvenient details later. We're going to need to keep this weakness a secret. Fortunately for us, plenty of people like to keep their Pokemon outside of Pokéballs as pets, so we'll still manage to affect a lot of them as long as they aren't soundproof.

/P

***NEW DATA***

Zephyrus either has their data wrong or has made extensive progress on their first option. At first, I thought it was a joke that they managed to break out a high figure of 0.94112 on a test subject. Then I realized that these figures, like the Mercurium itself, were prone to change. For instance when I ran a stress-test using a Mind Plate, Christian Feyera had a rising deviation of 0.58397 from a previous recorded value of 0.32821. This was unprecedented, but unfortunately I did not have the time to further investigate this strange phenomenon.

/P

Next, he opened the second file.

C:\Users\user1\start c:\Backups\Other\Blackmail\Sparrowhawk_Plans\ Goldenrod Radio Tower is the perfect place to broadcast our special signal!

Ariana has a killer plan to make it look relatively normal hostage situation at first before we pull out
the rug from underneath everyone (and the ransom money could be a nice bonus!)

Always admired how she has a way of luring others into a false sense of security before asserting her authority

Does that make me a masochist?

Maybe she'll get tired of being single one day

Who am I kidding she could have any guy she wants on the team

And besides she's only interested in honoring her precious Giovanni's legacy

Still might be worth a shot now with Archer eating dirt

I know she thinks his brother Proton is a psychopath but that’s as obvious as the stench of Muk

I think I'll ask her out when we're at the top of the tower together could be romantic as we watch the city unravel beneath us

The signal sent from way up there is strong enough to span a few kilometers should give the city a good shaking

I'm definitely a sucker for romance

/P

***DELETE THIS!*** /P

---

Feyera quickly read through the two available files again, jotting down key terms on the reverse side of the index card once attached to the monitor and committing the various code words to writing.

Sana was probably getting restless by now. He logged out of the terminal and made his way back outside, hastily stuffing the scribbled on card in his pocket.

He found her leaning on the door outside and staring down at her heart in the midday sunshine.

"Did you find anything useful?" she asked eagerly looking up at him.

"A lot," he said proudly. "For one, I know exactly what Team Rocket has in mind, and it isn't pretty." Then he took the time to briefly explain to her the notes he pulled from the drive.

"Forcing evolution?" she remarked with a gasp. "So that was what the Slowpoke were sacrificed for."

"You are right. Petrel wasn't lying about there being a motherlode of Mercurium; it was in an organic form that had transformed their test subject Magikarp into a giant red Gyarados. Shame that one got away, but I doubt we could have taken it. Besides, the real problem is that now Team Rocket doesn't even need to gather a bunch of the Slowpoke to isolate the signal since they've matched the particular radio wave corresponding to spontaneous evolution and plan to amplify it!"

"That's terrible!" she started to protest. "...Pokemon should be able to evolve when the time is right, not when there's no choice."
"And it's not even the will of their trainers – as would be the case with stone evolutions."

"Pokemon can choose to use evolution stones too. Gallade use dawn stones on their own. I've seen it take place before with my own eyes!"

"Fair enough, I won't argue that with you. However, right now we only have a precious amount of time to spoil their plans before Team Rocket mobilizes their scheme into action."

"Where do we need to go?"

"To Goldenrod, the very center of Johto."

Sana looked at him quizzically. She did not understand. Goldenrod was probably just a random word to her with little meaning. Given her minimal contact with humans in general, the thought of bringing her into a major city was almost as staggering as trying to explain it.

Feyera rubbed his nose bridge and tried to think of a way to explain it in terms familiar to her. "Think of it as the beating heart of region. That's where they're planning to use the signal since from there it will affect the most number of people with Pokemon. If they manage to broadcast atop the Goldenrod Radio Tower, the effect will be devastating."

"Then we have no time to lose," she nodded, satisfied with the analogy. "How do we get there?"

"Judging by our current position near the Ruins of Alph, it's west of here. We'll cut through the National Park on the way. There will be signs all over the place since it's a major attraction. Should be able to make it there by midafternoon if we hurry."

"What are we waiting for then? Let's go now!" Sana said with a sunny smile.

They headed west with all due speed across open hills and deep valleys. The wind blew at their backs as they left the mountainous region behind.
Goldenrod City, a booming metropolis located in the center of an otherwise rural Johto. The city owed its vast liveliness no small part due to the numerous connections and ports as well as an incredibly healthy commercial district. There was of course the Magnet Train which connected the city to Kanto via a high speed rail track. This allowed citizens of either nation to venture to the jewels of both region's cities. In addition, Goldenrod was located on the seaboard, giving it open access to international trade. A close proximity to the vessel manufacturing city of Olivine meant it was never short on transport cargo ships. Then of course there was the international airport, whose planes that were produced nearby in Violet City. All in all, Goldenrod was truly the beating heart of the entire region, whose only competition on the entire continent was Saffron City.

It helped that the nations of Johto and Kanto cooperated in regards to open boarder agreements that made both cities easily accessible by those living in the major cities. Though the regions as a whole were certainly different in character: namely, Kanto having more dense, newer cities and Johto having several older smaller towns, the two nations were intimately tied together. So much so, that they had been de facto allies in the Great War taking place twenty years ago. The aftermath of the war, and the subsequent adoption of the Pokemon League in every region that had participated in the Great War, resulted in Kanto and Johto actually sharing a League – the regional governing body. Kanto and Johto could be considered a federation. If history were to ever repeat itself, the two nations would surely be allies again. Of course in times of peace, the various cities had their own gym leaders and mayors. This was true from a practical standpoint as well as a sociological one, considering the Pokemon League could not be everywhere at once. Thus, the structure of government was very rigid in regards to its centralization; local municipalities and city-states governed infrastructure and local bylaws with their own elected leaders, but were often required to host delegates from the League as gym leaders. This tension was sharp in certain cities like Goldenrod, but in other locations the split of authority was somewhat blurred between the powers.

Goldenrod was first and foremost a cultural epicenter. It was the yang to Saffron City's yin. While Saffron possessed a great deal of commercial and industrial prowess, it lacked a cohesive whole. Thus its two dominant districts were divided into Saffron and Celadon. Not so for Goldenrod, which held in high esteem its own unique elements of culture and flare. Most of these originated from the various intersections of traditions of the Johto region as a whole.

The most striking example of the dichotomy between Saffron and Goldenrod was in their respective architecture and road layout. The largest of skyscrapers in Saffron often had to include massive columns of cement in their foundation to account for various pitches in the landscape. Saffron was built above an older city that predated the modern era, and as consequence most of its infrastructure was constructed based on older arrangements, which had sunk into the earth over time and had become the basis for the city's extensive sewage system. The brick roads in Saffron were especially uneven and often intersected at odd angles. Some roads were wide, and others were narrow regardless of the traffic flow, meaning it required familiarity with the city to avoid commuter bottlenecks.

Goldenrod was an entirely new city and boasted an intuitive street design of right angles. These
frequent intersections made for easy navigation of the metropolis by anyone with even a moderate sense of direction. Goldenrod's skyline was not as jagged as Saffron's due to the former being built on well-leveled ground above sea level. Buildings did not usually exceed more than one hundred stories in either city, save for their respective tallest buildings: Saffron's Silph Company Headquarters was over that particular threshold – at one hundred and twenty eight floors – and only trumped in height by buildings existing in other far away nations, whereas Goldenrod's iconic Radio Tower was the tallest uninhabited spire in the skyline. The base of the Radio Tower was mostly office space, similar to Silph's building with a glass façade, but nested atop its commercial base it hosted a narrow tower of interconnected metal beams that stretched over two thousand feet into the sky. There was little doubt these tall buildings were engineering marvels.

It was no surprise that upon reaching the outskirts of the city, the first object to come into view was the jet black antenna, dominating the urban skyline with a lofty presence. Two bright lights flashed periodically from atop the spire, so bright was their light that they could even be visible like dim stars during the day.

The outskirts of Goldenrod were dense with industry, ranging from power plants to intercontinental shipping companies. The airport was nearby, as a large jumbo jet was coasting in for a landing right above their heads.

Sana looked amazed at the sight. Her head peered back in awe and wonder as the jet passed overhead. "Why is it so loud?" she asked holding her ears.

"Because it's a giant plane made of metal."

"It's made of what?! Steel?!" she asked with a perplexed telepathic shout.

"Haha, technically aluminum," Feyera forced a laugh. He was explaining a foreign concept to her.

"How did it get up there though?"

"That plane has wings and needs to go fast or it won't fly. Reason it's so loud is because it needs those loud, powerful engines to maintain lift."

"It's dropping though," she said pointing in awe.

"Yeah, landing!" he yelled over the loud roar of the engine. "Probably has a lot of people or products on board that need to get to their destination…!"

Her mouth stayed agape for a moment before she realized that she probably should close it. "I didn't think that they were so large…"

"Go big or go home," he said with a spirited grin. "That's the human attitude."

"Apparently," she muttered. A small family of three Furret rustled in the low bushes beside where she was walking. They quickly darted around her legs and dashed back into the foliage with reckless abandon. For a brief moment he considered catching one of them and building his team further. However something caused him to stop while his arm was midway to his belt holster. He just couldn't do it. Although wild, these Pokemon were living together in a small group. It would probably not be for the best to destroy that.

He shook his head as thoughts of retrospect pervaded him. "Am I becoming too soft?" he wondered. Indeed, there was a time where he wouldn't think about consequences before acting. But failing to act could be just as much of a hazard. Without question, he needed to become stronger as a trainer and that meant improving his team. Having his psyonics restricted caused him to feel more
responsible and think a little slower. He took a deep breath of the crisp air as the sun warmed his face causing the makeshift bandage over his eye to heat up.

The weather was unquestionably pleasant. A bright blue sky, low humidity, and a warm breeze made the walk enjoyable. However, there were very large white clouds with dark bases looming out to the west as they continued to head south alongside the sea. Several giant windmills, anchored into the nearby water by thick pylons of cement, slowly turned in the coastal breeze. They had massive arms made of metal and a wide grated platform that served as a lofty lookout post. Atop the closest one, a solitary human figure stood on the high balcony. It was the young girl with light strawberry hair fluttering behind her in the breeze as the large propellers lazily spun behind her. The early afternoon sunshine kissed her fair face. In the seaside wind, her dancing red hair appeared almost blonde from the way light reflected off it. Though she was far away, he could sense that she was smiling with her rosy lips. For a brief second an odd feeling washed over him. Familiarity it seemed, something pleasant and warm like the weather.

A sudden chill ran up his spine. That couldn't be right. The windmill was to his right, and his right eye could not see. He quickly turned his head to face the windmill. He saw nothing there. It was a mirage. He froze.

Sana paused as well. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Yeah… I mean, no," he said as words failed him.

"You really ought to learn how to lie better," Sana said with a groan. She clutched her heart with her hands. "Even if you couldn't talk, I can tell when you're feeling anxious because of our bond."

"Throw my privacy to the wind, why don't you?" he said begrudgingly. He wondered if other trainers ever struggled with a similar connection with their Pokemon. Probably not. It was her species' anatomy that made the bond between them more intense. Sana had even gone so far as to describe their as a living organism in its own right. Now that was a crazy theory, Feyera thought to himself. Of course it could be explained if the organ was in fact sending signals to the other on a matching frequency. Yeah, that had to be it.

"Then again, you probably don't want to talk, right?" she replied astutely reading him. "You're still upset and sad from before."

"It's not that," he quickly denied. "I'm just a bit confused, that's all." He padded his bandage, unsure of what to expect from the action. He was blind in that eye, right? Even if he wasn't, there was no way to see through the fabric. Was he hallucinating? His mind felt so sure that he had seen the figure standing there atop the windmill, but once he actually looked there it had completely vanished.

"Why are you confused? Is it because of the connection between our hearts?"

"Ugh. Stop bringing that up please!" he said insistently.

"You're acting like your old self again. I had missed the grouchiness oh so much," she sarcastically replied.

"…I need to get some food and I'll feel better," he told Sana as he started walking again.

"Typical."

A low stone wall divided the rocky shoreline from the main road they were on. Sana playfully walked on the wall which was wide enough for her to stand on. Feyera watched her from a short distance, his mind still racing from the vivid image he was sure that he had seen. They drew closer to
the city, and things were beginning to liven up all around them. He quickly forgot about the strange sensation as his mind brought him to absorb the richness and complexity of the environment around him.

It truly felt like it had been ages since he had been in a real city. Nevertheless, areas such as these felt special to him, as they were the closest thing to a home he could remember. Feyera noticed more than a few people were staring at him on account of his various injuries or perhaps because he was walking around with a Pokemon at his side. Was that uncommon here in Goldenrod he wondered.

In any event, he turned to Sana and said seriously, "I need to find a place to obtain some clothes to cover this stuff up. Don't want to attract any unnecessary attention while we're here."

"Attention seems to have a way of following you."

"Yeah, you sure do," he sneered under his breath. "Certain attention is unwarranted though."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked taking some offense to his jab. She was acting out of both of their best interest, at least in her mind.

"Don't worry about it," he cautioned. "Anyway… I recall seeing an advertisement for an outlet here in Goldenrod."

"Huh?" she looked surprised.

"Yep. Saw it years ago, on a plaster at the Saffron Rail Station. I remember it vividly because it was an advertisement for a shop in Johto – was really out of place in Saffron. But I guess they were looking to drum up business from outside Goldenrod. There was a huge metal bike sticking out on a street corner, and the Radio Tower was in the background on the right hand side of the skyline. That means it should technically be around this area of the city if it's still in business."

"Wow! That's amazing," she exclaimed. "You remember the strangest things, thas Feyera!"

"Oh you have no idea," he replied with a bit of trepidation in his voice. Truth be told, memories that stimulated his various senses certainly had a greater probability of being recalled. He noticed this trend when the photographs of the countryside from the strawberry haired girl first gave him a clue on how to remember.

"How did you remember something like that after all this time? I thought my Hypnosis made that incredibly difficult for you."

"Simple," he said with a point. "See that ad on the corner of that block…? Same sign; it's like nothing's changed."

"You cheated then!" she said with a pout and blowing her light green hair out of her face.

"Not at all," Feyera insisted. "Memories can be triggered by similar events triggering the same region of the brain with electrical signals. Visual cues will do it. Emotions too."

She nodded in agreement with his rationale. Powerful emotions certainly linked her thoughts and memories together into a cohesive whole. In a metaphorical way, those feelings were the glue to the story of her life. Perhaps humans had similar avenues to utilize in recalling their past. One thing was relatively certain to Sana: Feyera was not recalling the memories of her betrothed. That meant she might be stuck with the human she had once detested with all her being. It made her feel anxious. The implication being she could not control what he remembered and was forced to remain bound to the heart regardless. She did her best to cover up this anxiety with a smile. Fortunately for her,
Feyera was too busy talking about his memories to pick up on her subtlety projected worry.

"...I saw that exact same sign before, I'm absolutely sure of it. I can tell you exactly where I was too. I was standing at the rail station back in Saffron, before I visited Pallet, when I saw that sign for a shop in Johto. Struck me as odd, incredibly out of place even, and that's exactly why I remember it so well. Somewhat memories related to images lined with a specific feeling are clearer and I have an easier time when a certain memory happens to be associated with a visual cue."

"Well if you say so..." she said begrudgingly. "I was sure you lost most of your memories for good."

"Yeah, you wish!" he said smugly. "I'm not THAT helpless, Sana."

"I liked it better when you were," she admitted.

"Bah, well that's just too bad then isn't it?!" he scoffed, reprimanding her for saying that. "C'mon, let's pick up the pace, Sana; we're heading straight to Togo's."

"What's a Togo's?" she asked catching up to him in a light jog.

"The name of the outlet store on the sign...can't you read?" he huffed. "Hurry up already! It's right here on this block."

Sana did not know if he was being rude to her or just plain ignorant. She obviously could not read in the conventional sense of the word. In order for human language to have meaning to her species, there had to be a way to tie it to feeling. A sign might be bright or happy, but that certainly did not convey the entire meaning of the various words written on it. Even with a proficiency in language and communication, Sana struggled learning the plethora of expressions humans were prone to engaging in without even thinking twice. However, she was keen on using her connection with Feyera's heart shard to learn written language from whenever he read something. Problem was she had to catch him while he was reading a text in order to understand the meaning from his perspective. This shortcut would probably not exist except for the heart in his chest constantly sending hers signals based on his sensations. It was a slow process she thought, but how many words and sayings could there possibly be in the whole of human language? She knew from Feyera that humans were forced to use the simpler language of words to communicate. Sometimes those words had other meanings only expressions could detect. In contrast, her species dabbled in language as a means to amplify their more vibrant emotional expressions. As a consequence, Gardevoir had a marginally simpler language since it was secondary to their communication through use of their other senses. It was still very detailed, but oftentimes their communication did not have to be restricted to words, meaning it did not develop the same way as human language did.

They continued to walk through small crowds of pedestrians. Some appeared to be talking to themselves which confused Sana. They had little gadgets in their hands that gave off heat as they were pressed against the ear of their holder. It was really strange, but so was this entire scene for her! Just the thought of trying to perceive all of their various feelings overwhelmed her and for this reason she stayed very close to her only known connection to this bizarre world. She'd never seen so many of one species — let alone humans — in one place before!

Eventually, Sana's guide to this place slowed down his pace. She looked up with him. Sure enough there was a large metal bike — much too large to actually ride — anchored to the side of the first floor of an apartment complex. From the looks of things the shop had seen better days, since the bike was rusted over along with the large sign reading "Togo's Wear and Ride". She was able to read the words, but they did not really make much sense until Feyera's quickly glanced at them. Then it became familiar to her through his emotions divulging the purpose of the shop through his prior experiences at such stores. She felt like an expert after doing that, and Feyera probably didn't even
realize what she was doing. The avenue had many more people bustling toward them, so Feyera was quick to push open the shop door and head inside – the glass door nearly slamming into Sana's stupefied face behind him.

The shop was two stories judging by the stairwell leading upstairs lined with merchandise ranging from light outerwear to stylish equipment. However, his impressions from the deteriorated exterior of the shop proved to be correct, there was not a single customer wandering the well-stocked aisles. It was the middle of the day, and plenty people were busily walking around right outside the display windows, yet not providing any patronage to Togo's. The entire shop had a very distinct smell of motor oil.

"Jen!" said a boisterous voice in reply to hearing the ringing door chime. "Jen, we got us a customer here!"

He looked up at where the voice was coming from. A buff man was standing at a countertop near the corner of the wall. His head was completely shaven. He had a thick brow furrow, and piercing brown eyes. With a welcome gesture, he uncrossed his tanned, tree-trunk arms that had been exposed from the rolled up sleeves of his dark orange shirt.

"Hi," Feyera said politely. "Saw your sign, was wondering if you sell clothes here."

"Ha," laughed the big man behind the counter. "We certainly do. Take it you're not from around here. Hmm… no sir, haven't seen your face 'round here before. I'd be sure to remember a mug like that."

"Yeah…right," he replied feeling self-conscious of his appearance. "Nice to meet you too…” Feyera didn't know whether to be insulted or just roll with the punches. Had this been a higher end shop, he might very well be escorted out on account of his ragged appearance. Luckily the seedier areas of Goldenrod did not discriminate much when it came to making a sale. Even the most unsavory of characters could find a bargain on these side streets.

"Name's Rilando Nelson. Folks round these here parts just call me Ril. I manage and deal in all your equipment needs for city scramblers." He waved with his large hands to the window display of shiny motorcycles, polished to the point where the chrome trim was practically a mirror. "These here are the best bikes you'll ever find and have the pleasure of riding, guaranteed!"

"Wasn't exactly in the market for a new bike…” he said cautiously. It would certainly help with getting around the city and exploring, but he did not intend on remaining here any longer than necessary. "Though you did say you also sold clothes."

"Yeah, yeah," Ril said with an air of disappointment in his voice. "That's my sister, Jen's, dig. She handles that stuff on the second floor. Got a whole lot of outfits, she does. Perfect for riding with."

"I'm sure she does," Feyera said eager to break away from Ril's relentless sales pitch. "I'd like to see them."

"Oh wait! We're running a promotion now, see?" Ril said as Feyera just about made it to the stairs. "Buy some clothes upstairs and get a special discount on everything down here that's not bolted down as well."

"Ah, great to know," Feyera said quickly, tugging Sana along with him. "We'll keep that in mind…” "He really loves his motorbikes," Sana said silently as they climbed the stairs.

"Sure he has his passions, but it's clear he's trying to push a sale. Gotta be careful or they'll peddle
you the very air you breathe."

"How could they do that?" she asked in shock as she held her breath.

"Geez, it's only an expression ya know," he explained after seeing her face turn paler than usual. "Air doesn't cost a Poképenny. No wonder he's pushy though, the business must be hurting badly based on a lack of customers. Just let me do all the talking."

"Mmm," she nodded as they reached the stairway's middle landing. She was scared, having never seen so many humans gathered in one place. Even though the shop was relatively empty, sensing all of the people meandering about outside was really overwhelming for a Gardevoir. She stuck close by for this reason and did her best to focus on only the immediate area Feyera was so effortlessly perceiving. He was used to crowds and seemed to be almost comfortably in his element here. That aura of confidence gave her the strength to follow by him with similar aplomb.

The second story of the shop was a large studio with a high ceiling and tall windows, though the shadows from other nearby buildings blocked most of the midafternoon sunlight. However despite the muted lighting, there were racks upon racks of clothes in every color and style imaginable. Faint jazz music played in the background, though the exact name of the tune was unrecognizable.

A young woman with wavy black hair was organizing some shirts on a shelf nearby. She was younger than her brother, perhaps not even twenty yet, but then again Ril had no hair so he appeared a bit older. Her face was definitely less worn though, and her complexion was smooth as silk and pasty white. She raised her thick rimmed turtle shell eyeglasses on the bridge of her nose.

"Hello there. My, my… I haven't seen you two before," she said tidying up quickly and directing her undivided attention to them. Her petite outfit was somewhat reminiscent of a maid; she had a dark teal dress with a white slip underneath. The top of her dress only rose up to her moderately sized bust line, and a short white collar rested around the base of her neck. On her arms, she had blue diamond shaped arm sleeves with white frill underneath. Around her waist rested a small white apron with a stitched pattern on them, carrying a belt that held a brown bag with a sewing kit inside.

Feyera quickly took the initiative. "Hi there miss. We're from Saffron. Saw your ad at the rail station there."

"Oh that," her round face blushed a bright red and she adjusted her glasses nervously. "…I'm really surprised you remember us from that…"

"I was under the impression that your shop was incredible enough to attract customers from the other side of the Silver Mountains," he said with as much charm as he could muster without sounding too over the top.

"Yes. We got a handful of customers from Saffron thanks to that ad four years ago. Actually, to tell you the truth it was quite a mix-up," she let out a cute little laugh. "We paid to have the advertisement here at the Johto station, but the incompetent louts in charge of setting up the ad put it in the wrong station."

"Wow, that ad ran four years ago?" he asked. The significance of this was monumental to him because Jenifer had independently verified that his memory of the ad being in Saffron was in fact correct. What that meant was he had figured out a way to overcome the amnesia. With a pale look he asked seriously, "Has it really been that long? …Four years…?"

"Don't be silly, you sound like a lost time traveler when you say it like that!"
"Hmm… Oh, sorry, where are my manners? My name is Christian and this is Sana. Needless to say, we've been waiting a long time to visit your shop."

"I'm Jenifer," she said with a cheerful smile. "I guess that mix-up really did help… we don't seem to get a whole lot of customers."

"Yeah, your brother Ril got that message across very quickly."

"Oh please don't listen to him for too long with both your ears; he's so obsessed with his bikes."

"Naturally. Seems to like them a lot judging by his extensive collection. However, we're specifically here to buy some clothes."

"For the both of you? Or are you just here to dress up your Pokemon?" Jenifer looked him over. "Don't take offense, but you look more like the type of person who would come here to buy a bike."

"Erm… I do?"

"You look awful! Have you been in a gang fight recently?"

"Not in a gang," he sighed. "That's the problem. See, I'm trying to stand out less, and with a bandage over my eye as well as an injury from before on my chest I can't seem to blend in the way I need to."

"Oh, I get it!" Jenifer said with a snap of her thin fingers. "You're going for that subtle yet dangerous look."

"Sure…" he said with a grimace. "Whatever you want to call it. Just find me something to cover this bandage on my eye and a scarf to wear on my chest."

"I have just the thing! What about your Pokemon, would she like something to wear, maybe a sunhat or a ribbon to wear out on the town?"

"No," Feyera said quickly.

Sana gave him a cross look and said telepathically, "But I want something too!"

"I changed my mind actually. I'll get her something as well."

Jenifer looked confused by his rapid shift in answers. He'd have to be more careful about doing that since Sana was just a Pokemon to the merchants, not someone he was telepathically bound to.

"At this rate, we might qualify for the promotion Ril mentioned."

"Oh… he says that to everyone coming in, it's a load of hot air though."

"Wait, wait, even if I buy all these clothes, I don't get a cool bike…!?"

"No, sorry. The bikes are sold downstairs in a separate shop. This upstairs section is my store. If you're one of Ril's friends he might cut you a break on paying it all upfront, but don't count on it after the crocodile incident with Daryl."

"What 'crocodile incident'?" he asked with a look of suspicion.

"Oh, I'll let Ril tell you the story. It's one of the few things he gets excited about on these slow days." Jenifer walked over to the shelves and picked out several clothes and accessories from the stock. "Oh ho, this will go nicely…" she talked to herself in swift soliloquy.
When she had finally finished with the preparations, he breezed into the changing room leaving Sana with Jenifer and whatever fashion accessories the exuberant shopkeeper fancied.

A new pair of denim pants and a greyed out sleeved shirt wore over his undershirt fit well. A thick woolen jacket with ample pockets and scarf completed the look. She also provided him with a hat to try on, which he wore low on his brow to help conceal the distinctive white bandage over his right eye. Of course, he also had to fiddle with the chest buttons in order to fit properly. All in all, it would get the job done satisfactorily and keep him warm in the crisp late afternoon air. Most importantly, now Feyera looked less like a vagrant and more like a city dweller like he used to be only a few years ago. He also looked a fair deal older as well, but that was probably a harsh life on the road aging him more so than the outfit he wore.

"…Classy as ever," Jenifer was saying to Sana as she put various sunhats on her head. "I like this one a lot; it reminds me of a little girl's dream!" The sunhat she had picked out was a large white one with floral patterns laced in black on the face with a dainty string of ribbons that dangled from the brim. The hat was certainly big, but it fit over her poufy hair surprisingly well for a lady's article of clothing. Sana was smiling ear to ear under the shade of the sunhat.

"Now how about some accessories? Don't worry, I promise nothing too gaudy!"

"Ugh… accessories too?" he thought. He certainly had a fair amount of cash on hand from Fredrick's bounty on the wanted Executive Archer, but he didn't want to blow through all of it on a shopping spree. Come to think of it, in his absentmindedness he never actually sat down and counted it all, so the exact figure in his wallet was a bit of a mystery even to him. How irresponsible. Either way, it would be more than enough for any travel expenses as well as amenities should their path happen to take them across any. Perhaps that's why he had to savor these little moments of relaxation, comparatively speaking to what he was used to going through this was truly a walk in the park.

"I have to tell you something!" Jenifer said forcefully while spinning a floral-patterned arm bangle.

"W-what?" Feyera asked taken aback since he was in the midst of adjusting his new scarf in the mirror.

"You should… No, no, you MUST enter your Pokemon in a contest!" encouraged Jenifer as she beamed with her pearly white teeth. Her delicate, rosy red lips did not even need lipstick. When Feyera didn't answer her she quickly exclaimed, "Oh…! Don't tell me…! You're already planning on doing that!"

"No way." Adamantly, he shook his head. "…Wait a minute; have contests gotten that popular here in Johto? I was sure they were more of a Hoenn thing."

"Oh you're funny!" she said. But the look in Feyera's eye made it apparent the he was not joking. "Oh, you're serious. Gee, you Pokemon Trainers really know how to miss out on culture! Pokemon Contests really took off here in the city two years ago when a group of all female pop idols called 'Suzune's Angels' took the Annual Music Festival by storm!"

"Weird," he muttered. The name didn't matter, culture didn't matter. What mattered to him was when. "Two years ago?"

"You heard me," she said adjusting the shimmering bangle on Sana's arm. "And I am their hugest fan! I have all their tours' posters, signed and everything! I have every one of their collectable colored microphones too! And what kind of fan would I be if I didn't also save every single last one of my tickets! Even their smallest venues I've known about way, way, way before the rest of their growing
"Oh…" Feyera suddenly felt his heart sink because allowing Jenifer to open this can of worms was perhaps not the best idea. "Do you have a shrine to them too?"

"I WISH! Oh my gosh, that's totally a great idea! I can't believe I didn't think of doing that."

Feyera could only shake his head at his sarcasm being completely misunderstood – without his eyes to convey feelings, he was certainly less impressionable on others. It occurred to him just how often he had employed the psyonics latently without noticing. Oddly enough, it felt a bit better to be misunderstood and a fair deal more natural to him as well.

"Oh wow! You should know about them, they're like, totally everywhere! You must've seen the posters in town or at the Pokemon Centers."

"Gee, well it has been a few weeks since visiting a Pokemon Center," he admitted.

"Oh they've been around before then! C'mon, I'm sure you've seen Akira; she's got the really short hair in a tight pair of buns with red ribbons styled to look like a Kirlia's! And of course she's always with everyone's favorite starlet, Riona Suzune!"

"Afraid not," Feyera grumbled. What the heck was she even talking about?

"Aw, get outta town!" she said, leaving Sana looking confused by the idiom. Again, Jenifer shook her head in disbelief at Feyera's apparent lack of currently trending culture. "You even have a Pokemon that their lead mascot evolves into. I'm so jealous!"

"Uhh, yeah…that's real nice I guess." His thoughts had shifted back to evolution. When was Team Rocket planning on making their move? If the files were accurate, then that tall black tower in the center of the city would be their primary target. "Say, how is the Goldenrod Radio Tower?"

"How is it?" Jenifer asked with a puzzled look. "Huh?"

Feyera gave her a verifying nod. "You notice anything weird going on around it lately?"

"Say what? No, not a thing wrong with it. Ahem. Ya know…" Jenifer leaned in really close as if to tell him a secret "…It broadcasts TV too now – you know, moving pictures. 'Goldenrod Radio Tower' was the original name and you sound like an old fart when you call it that."

"…!" Feyera felt flushed not only from smelling her aromatic lavender perfume as she leaned in against his ear, but also from being ridiculed by a self-proclaimed culture specialist. To be fair, she did seem to know a lot about her city. He tried to return a smile, but wound up looking even more like an idiot by doing so.

"You trainer types amaze me," Jenifer said with her bright eyes both aglow. "How do you just unplug from the world and go adventuring without ever looking back?"

Sana's reflection looked at Feyera with a sharp glare through the dressing mirror. She probably was interested in his response as well.

"Pokemon can do that if you're serious about them," he replied in a dismissive manner. It was such a cliché and canned answer, but he could not think of anything else to say. He was not a very good trainer, but he genuinely hoped to change that for the sake of his mission. He used his psyonics as a crutch to help himself and his team members win battles. Now that they had to be set aside in order for him to heal, he needed to focus more on his battle technique. Expanding his team's roster would
not be a half bad idea either. Perhaps if he had more Pokemon under his command he could handle greater threats that his rag-tag team faced. If he truly hoped to save anybody – even himself – there was no question he'd need to get stronger. Without the psyonics to fall back upon in a pinch, this was the only reasonable option really.

While he was thinking, Jenifer was apparently talking, droning on and on about something less than interesting. "...But! I want her to want for nothing!" Jenifer said loudly with conviction, drawing Feyera's attention back to the young lady. "We'll enter into master contests together, me and Yvette!"

"Who's Yvette?" Feyera asked, his natural curiosity getting the best of him.

"Oh! I just told you! She's my little Snover! ...Heehee! I'm so, SO glad you asked about her! But where to begin? I can't wait to tell you ALL about her...!"

"Aw, no! Shouldn't have asked..." he thought, but it was already too late – Jenifer was talking at about a mile a minute about her precious Snover.

"...And...this sunhat I made was based off her color scheme. I thought, when I was making it: gosh, everyone always jokes about how Snover bring hail and bad weather wherever they go with their Snow Warning, but Yvette never does. So I thought, 'wouldn't it be fun to give my special little sunshine a hat she can wear!? We could go to contests all dressed up and be the best duo ever!' YES, YES, YES!" Jenifer was seriously excited and pawing all over the sunhat Sana was now wearing.

"...But... in my hurry to make it, I made it too small for her wide icecap of a head!"

Sana gave Jenifer a wink of understanding through the mirror. Come to think of it, the hat was kind of cute on her. It matched the white of Sana's garments and the lacy green trim on the wide brim was in the same family of colors as her hair.

"I think it looks just as good on your Pokemon though...erm, what is her name again?"

"Sana," Feyera said finally returning to the conversation after zoning out for a few minutes while Jenifer was going on about her Pokemon.

"Oh, right. Sana. Now I remember." Jenifer grinned. "You, like, totally have to enter the next contest! The two of you would be a major hit together! I can see it now: a dark, edgy character with a twisted past and his adorable Pokemon inspired by Suzune's Angels' own mascot, Riona! The two of them, polar opposites of one another, linked only by their passion for contests...together taking over the stage one audience member's heart at a time! So... Freaking... COOL!"

"Sheesh, woman!" exclaimed Feyera. "Are contests the only thing you ever think about!?"

"I suppose..." Jenifer dropped her enthusiastic gaze and fidgeted with her turtle shell spectacles. "I really want to win one, but I'm not very good at them."

"Why not? You make your own contest clothes, don't you? This might be a bit beyond my field of knowledge, but I'm pretty sure that it takes a good seamstress to do that."

"It's not that. It's just... well... I always seem to get nervous when I'm on stage. My palms get all gross and wet, then my voice starts to shake and I feel so warm not even Yvette can cool me off."

"Sounds like stage fright. Not a good thing for a contestant."

"I know... you don't have to rub it in, mister!"

"Oh, sorry," he apologized. "That was rude."
"It's okay; you're right after all. Darn it…! I'm too scared to get up on that stage like all my idols do. It really stinks worse than last week's Trubbish." She looked really sad, like she was on the verge of tears as she looked at Sana who was all dressed up. "I just want to be successful with my Pokemon in contests…"

"Hey, cheer up; I'm sure you'll get better with a bit of practice," Feyera said leaning his back against one of the cement support pillars in the shop.

"No. I never get better, I just get more nervous," Jenifer insisted with her sparkling eyes fixed on Sana. "It's no use trying, but maybe I can help other people become good at it."

"Listen," Feyera raised his arms in the air gesturing his disapproval at the suggestion, "I hate to break it to you, but Sana and I don't have time for contests. We've got an important mission here that involves a lot of people and Pokemon's safety."

Jenifer's eyes widened. She looked at him inquisitively. "W-what do you mean?" she asked in a trembling voice. "Uh, a-are you a lawman? We passed all of our inspections, I swear; I've got the paperwork downstairs in a folder…"

"No, no. Gah, do I look like an inspector to you?"

"Well, no you don't." Jenifer was clearly relieved. "Haha, but that would make the perfect trick for the unsuspecting now wouldn't it!"

"It's about the Radio Tower," Feyera said crossing his arms over his chest shard; the comfortable scarf felt better than having his bare arms resting against it. "And if you still think I'm clandestinely working with the State, then I've got news for you. An agent would be forbidden from telling you this top secret information: there's going to be an attempt made by Team Rocket to hijack the tower."

"Oh that's impossible!" Jenifer laughed. "Have you been taking goofy pills?"

"No," Feyera replied with a dry expression.

"You don't have to worry about things like that. Team Rocket has only been in Kanto according to all the live feeds and news channels. You know, back where you're from."

"Afraid that's no longer the case. They are here in Johto as well," he explained with a grave tone. "That's a fact I've seen with my own eyes…err, eye."

"You're…not joking are you…?" she asked hesitantly.

"No jokes," he said firmly.

"H-how do you know for sure?"

He could easily pick up on her nervousness, so he kept his explanation brief. "I keep running into them. It's like they're following me. This time though, I'm a step ahead of them."

"You don't have to worry about the cultural center of our city getting bamboozled by a couple of low-life, no-good Kanto thugs!" Jenifer quickly covered her mouth in embarrassment. "…Um… no offense since you're from around there and all."

"None taken." He didn't give a damn about petty national heritage; although raised in Kanto and a bona fide citizen there, Christian's extended family on his father's side, the Wests, were originally from Orre – where his aunt still lived. Kanto simply had better school systems, especially in wake of
"Why are YOU so sure your city is safe from Team Rocket?"

"I'm sure they won't succeed because of Mayor Garrett," Jenifer said adamantly. "Saffron's Pokemon Sanctum was easily robbed by the Rockets because the city's run by the Silph consortium. Here in Goldenrod, we don't have businesses suits running everyday life from Stall Street; this whole city is Mayor Garrett's turf and he's always been accountable for it!"

"Oh him…" Feyera replied, recalling the name of the personality Goldenrod City was famous for. "Mister Radio" was what everyone referred to him as years ago. Goldenrod's mayor, Cornelius Aaron Garrett, had tremendous popularity among his people. This was in no small part due to the sixty year old man's widespread reputation for being frequently at odds with the League. He was a staunch believer in the freedom of press, and news that was not censored or overly slanted to serve political interests in the vein of propaganda. His fame began when he built the massive Radio Tower, one of the tallest structures on the entire continent. As Director, his mission was to 'broadcast what matters most; not to the people, but for the people'. On more than a few occasions, this uncensored approach to broadcasting landed the mayor in hot water, however – much to the appreciation of the public – he would often embrace critics head on instead of quashing difficult questions the city faced. He soon found himself involved in politics during the famous Great War Broadcasts, given during the various invasions made by different fronts during the war. After receiving an overwhelming amount of the popular vote following the end of the Great War, he had retained power in the city for nearly two decades – a political feat unheard of in most political districts. The city loved the mayor and his young daughter, Whitney who served as a gym leader, much to the Pokemon League's disapproval.

"Now do you see?" Jenifer motioned out the window with an approximate point in the direction of the downtown commercial district. "That's Garrett's prized tower, there in the center of town. He built the whole thing with his own ideas set into action by his unparalleled determination. During the Great War, it was attacked numerous times by enemy insurgents, but never overtaken. There's no way he'd lose out his jeweled skyline trophy to a bunch of criminal goons from Kanto."

"I get that you have faith in Mayor Garrett, but the Team Rocket I'm talking about are a bit more organized than your average 'goons'. They have a definitive plan, and that's what worries me. It's why I rushed to Goldenrod as fast as I could."

"Then if you're in such a hurry, why are you wasting time around here buying clothes?"

"Touché," he said. "Truth is: I need to implement a plan of my own in order to intercept them. I can't just barge into the tower and go yelling about Team Rocket unless I want to get locked up for creating a public disorder."

"So why did you come out here to our little shop if you've gotta make such big plans?" Jenifer asked sincerely.

"Well…erm…this was the only place I could actually remember."

"Oh you poor thing! Did you hit your head?"

"No, no. I'm all right. It's just that everything around here is foreign to me, despite having grown up in a city. Out cities may be linked by rail lines, but Goldenrod is just not the same as Saffron. Truth be told, I was hoping that you could help me get around inconspicuously and eventually get to the tower."

"Sure, but how do I know YOU'RE not the one working for Team Rocket?" Jenifer keenly asked him. He quickly turned pale at the thought. Was that even possible? No, he was no longer their tool;
his actions defying them proved it. However before he could respond to her accusation, she gave him a bright smile and started to laugh. "Haha! You should've seen the look on your face. Was like you saw a ghost! Of course I'll help you out, silly! I'll even strong-arm Ril into it too, he looks like a big meanie but he always listens to his little sister. BUT… only after you buy all of these clothes."

"Deal." What a minuscule thing to do! Of course he'd buy the damn clothes if it meant saving people like Jenifer from the forced evolution of Pokemon. Problem was he didn't know how to explain the threat in terms people like her would understand.

The final purchase came to a reasonably high amount, but if it meant having a set of locals on his side, it was worth every poképenny. Besides, he really needed to replace a lot of his beat up clothes from his travels and couldn't expect to be inconspicuous going around town wearing what he had been. The long overcoat he purchased would serve to help his thin body stay warm.

Sana also needed to appear more domesticated in a city setting. Her skirt was already very short from removing pieces of life fabric in order to heal him. It might even be considered indecently so in a less liberal city. Luckily, Jenifer had more than a few light sundresses for her to try on. She finally settled on a bleached white dress, with two narrow straps over the shoulders tied into a dainty keyhole below the back of her neck. The dress was designed for humans, so even the smallest size seemed a little billowy on her, but also managed to make her appear more graceful than usual. The sunhat had a large white bow on the back of it, and it matched an even larger bow on the back of her chosen dress. With a matching outfit complete with all the frills and design details befitting a pampered Pokemon, it unquestionably appeared like she was ready to take part in a contest. It was a surefire way to get around Goldenrod inconspicuously.

"There's the Pokemon Contest Music Festival going on downtown. Contestants are put to the test along with their Pokemon to put on a performance to be aired at the broadcast each evening. It's a really popular show, and everyone watches it," Jenifer explained. "Bet you didn't know that."

"No, I didn't. So what you're saying is: we should just pose as contest participants in order to get to the tower?"

"Pshh! Of course not!" Jenifer covered her wide grin with both her hands embarrassingly. "I think you two should enter the contest and win!"

"Don't be ridiculous," he replied with straightened posture. "This is no time for games!"

"It's not a just a game, it's my dream to see my work showcased in contests!"

"It could be fun…!" Sana conveyed telepathically as she toyed with her hat like a little girl.

"No. Never. Absolutely NOT," he repeated thrice for emphasis. Although he had to admit it was strange that Sana was actually interested in learning about human culture.

"Aww, you stink," Jenifer said with a downtrodden look.

"Yeah, she said it. You really do know how to let a girl down…"

"W-what's that supposed to mean?" he said intending to reply to Sana.

Unfortunately, Jenifer was not privy to Sana's telepathy and it appeared as if he were talking back to her. "Well, at least the clothes don't stink as bad as you do."

"Ugh… I guess I could do with a shower if that's what you're implying."
"What does this look like, a hotel?!" Jenifer sardonically exclaimed. "Hmm… but I guess you gotta look your best for the contest. Tell you what, there's a washroom downstairs in the workshop. I'm sure Ril won't mind if a good paying customer uses the facilities. And you definitely gotta look like a star to win like a star in the contest!"

"Sheesh, again with the contest…I told you already, I'm not…"

"Chop, chop, mister! We've got a city to save, one smile at a time! Smiles go for miles! Get on downstairs; clean yourself up before I change my mind and charge you extra for using the facilities!"

Jenifer started shoved him down the stairs with some unexpected force coming from a woman of her diminutive frame.

Was this seriously all just a joke to her? She had such conviction in this whole contest idea, she even made it seem like his efforts to help the city were related to the contest.

Thankfully he caught hold of the railing and avoided an embarrassing fall down the stairs.

On his way back downstairs, Jenifer called out to her brother ordering him to let Feyera use the workshop's washroom.

Ril sounded upset and started complaining about water bills, but Jenifer quickly retorted with the fact that they also hadn't had a customer all week and Feyera's sale was footing the water and the electrical bills this month. Those statements in turn made Ril undergo a dramatic one-eighty as he started to act very considerate, albeit in a forced mannerism since he was by nature incredibly gruff. "Here, right this way man," he said pointing to the door reading "Employees Only". Inside was a tiny cupboard of a shower, a low toilet, along with an old porcelain sink with some unsightly grease stains that seriously needed cleaning.

Feyera shut the door behind him and made use of the facilities as he needed.

Warm water from the showerhead rushing over his bandage felt very strange. He couldn't actually feel the individual droplets of water as they fell against the fabric covering his injured eye, but at the same time the fabric itself felt very much like an extension of his eyelid. With some trepidation, he ran his fingers along the edge of the strange piece of what could only be described as a velvety silk previously belonging to Sana's skirt. It felt like more like a sponge, the absorption of water had caused it to become denser and heavier as it pressed against his temple and around his head. In the front close by his eye he couldn't maneuver it very well since his own scar tissue from the gash running horizontally along his face had fused with the underside of the fabric. While this perturbed him, he remembered that as long as he refrained from using psyonsics that generated excessive heat, it should be removable according to Sana. She knew much more about all of this than he did, and he fully intended on grilling her for answers as soon as feasibly possible. For now, he could only grit his teeth and hope for the best outcome. It still made him worried though. After all, he already had a piece of her species' anatomy imbedded into his body. Technically the heart shard was unwillingly present, whereas the bandage was a conscious decision he had made with her. He thought that at worst it would blind him permanently, which would certainly have happened anyway if he had not covered his open wound in order to prevent infection.

He needed to study it further. The nature of the fabric was still much of a mystery, but it seemed to be an extension of Sana's physiology. This did not mean it was her anatomy per se. He'd need to press her for information soon since this was really starting to bother him. The longer he waited, the more it seemed to be outside of his control. The mushiness of the cloth from the warm water and its
attachment around his head made him feel slightly trapped by it. Then of course there was also the bizarre sight of a familiar girl atop a sea windmill which his covered eye had seen.

As he was drying off and cleaning up his recently trimmed hair, he heard a loud yelp coming from outside the washroom in the workshop. Pondering what could be the problem; he quickly hurried with the rest of his dressing ritual and made his way outside.

To his surprise, he saw Ril standing in the middle of an aisle waving a long wooden pole in his hand. It looked like a broom. "I told ya, this croc was trouble, Jen! I told ya!"

"What's the matter?" Feyera asked him.

"Oh good, you take short showers…" Ril said haphazardly lowering the broom in his hand.

"Uh huh," Feyera said squeezing some excess water from the two drapes of cloth dangling down from the back of his head. "But why are you holding a broom like a weapon?"

"Ah see, I just got spooked, that's all…" he said lowering his voice and his makeshift weapon of choice.

"Spooked by what? Is my Pokemon okay?" he asked rubbing water off his temple that had dripped from the remarkably absorbent cloth.

"Yeah, yeah; your Pokemon's fine. Still upstairs with Jen," Ril replied avoiding the question pertaining to what startled him.

Feyera walked toward him, trying to figure out what could have possibly spooked a burly man like Ril. He saw a small cage with an open top faced down resting on the floor holding what appeared to be a Pokemon. It was a small creature, a reptile crawling around on all fours. It had a sandy colored body, with a pink underbelly, and black stripes running across its body's length. It had a relatively long snout, tipped by two protruding nostrils. Its four feet, attached to stubby legs on its sides, were flat with three sharp black claws. The most noticeable feature about the Pokemon was its shrouded eyes that looked like a strange mix of binoculars and sunglasses.

"This… is your problem?" Feyera asked raising a skeptical brow.

"Don't try and act tough! You've got no clue what this thing is all about!"

"Actually, I've studied a lot about Pokemon. And besides, it looks harmless in that cage you've got it in."

"Yeah well, you're just appreciating the fruit of my labor!" insisted Ril. "Aye. Took a whole day to catch the bugger and I'm still trying to figure out what to feed it since they sure as hell ain't from around here. What's it called…?"

Feyera knelt down beside the cage, which only reached up to his kneecap. He looked at the Pokemon inquisitively with his good eye and tried to consult his memories of the scientific names for Pokemon he had once been familiar with as a researcher.

"*Crocodylinae desertumus*, or Sandile. And you're correct; they're not from around here. They live in desert regions, are native to Unova, and have a carnivorous nature as apex predators in their respective ecosystems. Hunt by ambushing their prey after observing their behavior patterns, and are surprisingly intelligent. They are social creatures as well and their thick hides make especially durable leather."

He inspected the creature closer, and the tidbits of biological information came back to him in short bursts of recollection, dissimilar to the way memories of the strawberry haired girl he once knew returned all at once when he was really close with Sana. "Significant sexual dimorphism – males are generally larger than females, and this one looks like a boy based on its reasonable size at this evolutionary first stage. Hmm... Look at his eyes, you see how they're set back inside those slits? Means he's more active at nighttime, since he can employ powerful night vision to assail unrespecting victims with those sharp teeth you see right there sticking down from the top of his mouth. Those don't cut as much as they trap – the Sandile's powerful down-bite does more work than his teeth. Their jaw's muscle is so well developed that it's as tough as bone when tensed, able to crush shut with a force of over 3,700 pounds per square inch. For comparison, that's about 25 times the maximum strength of a human's bite, but their weakness is in opening the mouth since those muscles are underdeveloped. Oh, and I wouldn't be surprised if there was a law regulating their capture since they're considered endangered."

Ril looked at him with a blank stare. "...Jeez, who are you? A Pokemon Professor?"

"Pfft. Hardly. I'm a researcher, or at least I was before becoming a trainer. Studied these things back in school just to pass my entrance exams."

"Sheesh..." Ril replied rubbing his forehead, "Whadda think he's worth?"

"No idea," Feyera admitted. "I'm not in the business of selling Pokemon."

The Sandile swung his thick tail noisily against the bars of the cage and hissed, causing Ril to instinctively grip the broom tightly in his hand again. "I think it's hungry again. You said they eat meat right? That's what I've been feeding him."

"Technically they also eat berries and sometimes even rocks called 'gastroliths' in order to help them digest their food by stimulating their strong stomach acids. But yes, meat is a staple of their diet. They're at the top of the food chain after all."

"Well let me tell you, the little guy can sure pack the grub in his gullet. He's gonna eat into my profits at this rate!"

"It's a carnivorous Pokemon, what did you expect?" Feyera asked. "Anyway, since I've entertained your various questions how about you answer one of mine: I'd like to know how you managed to come across one here in Johto."

"Now, ho ho, would you believe this?!" Ril boomed with pent up vigor. "I had a contract with a client, see? Guy was a real hardass, rolled with a bunch of blokes in the 'Burnt Bones' judging by his tattoos. Anyway, fellow's name was Daryl, had an old model Saint XIV he needed fixed. The bastard comes by, with a big sack over his shoulder, like a real fat jolly ol' Saint Nick riding his vintage motorcycle I fixed up. I'm thinking to myself, finally...he's got my money for the work I did a week ago on his damn bike! Kept telling me he was signing loan papers over and over until I agreed to let him pay me back later, see? Anyways, here he comes, riding up the street lookin' like a plump Delibird right in time for the holidays. He's ridin' kinda fast, figure he's just gonna drop the sack of cash as he drives by; pay me off, bygones be bygones and all that dumb shit. But just then the crazy bastard reaches his gloved hand into the sack, and yanks out a fucking crocodile by the tail! Starts swinging it around over his bald head, round and round – as it's flailing its legs about like a downtown whore. I'm beside myself with confusion seeing this whole scene unfold, feels like something straight outta the movies, when he tosses the critter right at my face and speeds off. Damn nearly gave me a heart attack! Luckily the bugger didn't manage to hit me, but the little runt ran right on into the shop like it owned the place or something. Took a metal cage and some bait Jen made to finally catch the critter who had been our only customer all day! Now see, he might look awful tame
behind them bars, but let me tell you something, that little croc's a demon just like his former owner–mark my words."

"That's quite a story!" He didn't think Ril was exaggerating based on how worked up he had gotten. The veins on the sides of his neck looked like they were ready to burst. Little observations like this did not require Feyera to employ any powers, but having used them in the past made it easier to know exactly what changes in physical demeanor to look for.

"Yeah, tell me about it…" Ril said with slumped shoulders. "This little guy has been nothing but trouble."

"Why are you keeping him then?" Feyera asked Ril as the caged Sandile made a loud clicking noise originating from the bottom of his mouth followed by a hiss.

"For profit, duh. I've never seen one of these Sander—erm… whatchamacallits before here in Goldenrod. Little guy must be worth something to a collector passing through."

"And meanwhile you've got a hungry crocodile to feed and keep from gnawing on your potential customers. What could possibly go wrong?" he asked mockingly.

"Listen, I need to get my money's worth otherwise it's like Daryl ripped me off, see?"

"I suppose, but the only thing foreseeably going to get ripped off here is some poor customer's foot thanks to your little crocodile problem."

"…Ah…you think it's a safety violation?" Ril said sheepishly.

"At minimum," Feyera answered adroitly. "And you're also forgetting: word of mouth travels fast. If you want to be known as the bike salesman with a pet crocodile then that's your prerogative, but to be honest it doesn't sound very welcoming or very legal for that matter. …I mean, look at him, he's not even trained."

"Say, you know… I've been thinking…" Ril started to talk slowly. It was an obvious sign he was scheming something up in his thick skull. "You're a trainer right…?"

Feyera cut him right off. "Forget it. I'm not buying anything."

"Aw, but you know how rare he is right…? That's gotta mean something to your wallet, doesn't it? You even said he was in-danger-ed."

"ENDANGERED," Feyera corrected with his typical and unchanged stuck-up tone. "Do you take me for a fool? I KNOW you're just trying to unload it onto me and you have the audacity to suggest I'll actually pay you to take the nuisance off your hands?!"

"Well… no, now that you say it like that it does sound pretty bad," Ril responded scratching the back of his tree trunk of a neck uneasily.

"Because it is," he interjected with a sour look on his face.

"Can I just ask you one small favor then?" Ril asked while raising a stocky finger into the air.

"Huhh," he sighed deeply. *Might as well hear him out.* Raising a brow he asked, "What is it?"

"Could you go to the marketplace and grab him some food? I need to stay here to take care of the shop, and I'm really worried he might try something crazy if he gets hungry enough to chomp
"Ugh…unbelievable! I came all this way to Goldenrod in order to help save people, and now you want me to go be your shop's errand boy?" However as soon as he said this, his own stomach began to grumble loudly at the thought of food.

Ril picked up on this obvious giveaway of Feyera's hunger and smiled. "Tell ya what: I'll reimburse you a meal of your own if you do me this solid. You know the way there? All you gotta do is make a right out of the shop onto Poggem Road, and then go a block and a half until you reach Lepimrun's Emporium – a stone boutique on the corner of Central Avenue. Take Central west all the way to Bayside which is another three blocks. From there, follow the water south a block and a half towards an open market at the water's edge. Place is called Snagrud Market. They've got the best seafood and fresh deli meats you can imagine."

"Hmm, that's kind of a walk," he said untruthfully. In actuality, he'd been well accustomed to navigating cityscapes from living in Saffron during his youth and traversing several blocks was nothing to him. Furthermore he had been journeying long enough on foot to have developed a respectable level of endurance. "How about you pay for Sana's meal as well?" he added to the bargain.

"Huh? Who's that, your date?" Ril asked.

"No," he said with embarrassment at the thought. "My Pokemon that's upstairs with your sister. I know her well, we've been on the road for a long time and she's probably hungry too."

"Oh that little twig? Sure, sure, hahaha how much can she eat? Alrighty kid, you drive a hard bargain but I'll cut you this deal if you go get my meat."

Feyera wasn't even negotiating at this point, Ril was simply weak in willpower; ironically too considering how strong he was, he must have worked out. Feyera pointed to the caged Sandile and insisted, "I'm doing you a favor, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah," Ril said with a grumble as he took out his wallet and fetched some currency.

Feyera walked over to the stairs and called out to Sana, "C'mon Sana, we're going out to get some fresh air."

She didn't take long, and was gliding down the stairs with all her various articles of clothing worn proudly. She must have felt good based on her beaming smile. Maybe it was all the attention. There was no denying her happiness as her heart approached close to his.

"There, that's plenty. Make sure the meat you bring back is red and raw," Ril said sternly. "Get as much as you can cause this croc knows how to eat like none other."

"Mhm," Feyera mumbled seizing the spending money in a tight fist. "Food for the crocodile, food for me," he said simply. But he still had his doubts. Was it really okay for him to be taking a detour like this? With Team Rocket still at large there was no telling when they would plan to execute their Sparrowhawk plan on the Radio Tower. For once he had an advantage over them: here he was at the scene of the crime before it took place. What an opportunity. If only he could capitalize on this potential. Again his stomach growled loudly, causing Sana to giggle at the obtrusive noise. "Priorities…" he muttered to her feeling empty inside.

As he was walking out of the shop he happened to pass by a pair of sunglasses on the shelf. Feeling a little brazen, he picked them up off the wooden shelf and asked casually, "Say, how much are these
shades?"

"Those…uh…those are mine! They're not for sale!"

"Oh, okay," he said putting on the shades to cover his bandaged eye. "Don't worry; I'll bring them right back then along with the meat. Promise."

"Hey hold on, wait a minute! You can't just—" Ril shouted from across the shop. However a loud clambering noise came from the Sandile's cage causing Ril to quickly turn his attention elsewhere. And by the time he had checked on the cage, Feyera was already out the store's front door and on his way to Snagrud Marketplace.
The bright afternoon sun sparkled high above the towering buildings, as wispy white clouds danced in the crystal blue sky. The very first shadows had begun to take shape from the highest apartment complexes capturing their share of the gradually sinking sun. It was so easy to get lost beneath the majestic grandeur of these tall man-made peaks.

However, an astute observer would quickly recognize that man alone did not build this grand city. No, man had his help in the form of Pokemon. Everywhere from shops to architecture, Pokemon were all around, assisting in the daily rituals of humanity within the tight-knit urban environment. These Pokemon were not experts in any sense of the word, and yet were being coached and trained to help their companions in fascinating ways. Some very strong Pokemon were working side by side their trainers on scaffolding. It was quite a scene to behold, as it encapsulated the co-existence of people and Pokemon at their best.

A Gurdurr and Machoke crew were helping a group of engineers steady a heavy beam in place on one of the glass building's façades. Together, the Pokemon worked with the hardhat wearing group to adjust the position just right while balancing on a tall exoskeleton of the building. There were flashing yellow lights down below on the streets and hazard cones placed all around to signify that this was a construction zone. There were some loud grunts and orders barked from high above, echoed in the concrete tunnel of the block they found themselves walking in.

Sana asked with an expression of confusion, "What are they doing?"

Feyera looked up at the scene and tried to explain it to her, but not without first posing a question. "What does it look like? …Pokemon are helping people to fix that part of the skyscraper."

"But are the people helping the Pokemon of their own volition?" she asked pointedly.

"Of course they are!" scoffed the young researcher. "Don't you know it's good to have a job and stay busy? Those Pokemon need something to do, Sana. They are fighting types, you see?" He flexed his weak biceps in a joking manner. "They need to have a physical outlet to help them with their training regiments. I'd say lifting in a construction project fits the bill just fine for them."

"Oh, so you're saying it helps them to become stronger." She made a face that screamed disbelief. "Sure…"

"Quit being such a misanthropist!" Feyera said. "It's win-win. Their trainers get help from their Pokemon and the Pokemon get to develop their muscles."

"Hmm…" she pondered the concept. "I wouldn't know since I'm not a fighting type."

"I'd hope not, you'd probably make a really scrawny one," he laughed.

"So would you!" she retorted.
"Ah, but I'm not a Pokemon, remember? Humans don't exactly fall into type categories like Pokemon do." He explained, "Humans take professions. What you do makes you who you are. Pokemon are not all that different you know?"

"Hmph. Still..." she trailed off.

"I get it Sana, I'm weak physically. Probably can't lift those bricks the Machoke are carrying with one arm. However, strength isn't everything."

“But you can't even use your psyonic powers, so what good is it?"

"I still have my Pokemon at least," he insisted. "And that brings up a question I need to ask you."

"What?" she asked.

"I need to know why I can't use the powers. What's the danger posed by the fabric on my eye?"

"You just shouldn't use them while you're wearing my Life Fabric!" she contumaciously implored.

"Sana, you know that's not an answer I'd be willing to just accept at face value. C'mon, you gotta tell me so I can understand. Our hearts are bound, remember?" he said persuasively.

"If I tell you, you'll just come up with an excuse where you rationalize how it won't apply to you. Just like with everything else," she sighed. "And I don't want to do that because I'm afraid you'll wind up blaming me in the end."

"Why would I blame you? Not like I had a choice!"

"Why wouldn't you? All you do is pass blame onto me. For your amnesia, for your heart, for everything that doesn't go well!" she said getting worked up. Fortunately her shouts of telepathy were inaudible to the group of pedestrians they were passing by.

He stopped and pulled her to the side. Leaning against one of the nearby cement support pillars of the building to some investment bank, he cleared his throat and said, "Sana, I've made a mistake in my research." She looked at him with wide and confused eyes.

"What? W-why are you apologizing to me?"

"I'm certainly NOT apologizing!" he said matter-of-factly. Then he added harshly, "Especially not to you!"

"Humph!" she growled.

"My mistake was not being clear enough to you." He took a quick breath and scratched his temple in contemplation. "Whether I like it or not, you're a part of my research team. You'd better know and understand that!"

"Whoever went and decided that I want to even be part of your stupid ensemble?!" She crossed her arms, and blew some of her hair away from her face with a strong pout. "Are you stupid?"

"How dare you call me such a word!" Feyera said taking offense to her backlash. "I'm a genius, a prodigy, a scientist—"

"You're so full of it," Sana retorted. "You're living in a fantasy from the past."

"No I'm not!" he stammered, feeling rather vulnerable to her on-point psychoanalysis. "Some things
may have changed over the years, but I'm still a brilliant researcher!"

"What does that even mean to anyone?" she asked with a frown. "You've been doing nothing but running after a dream."

"A…dream?" His thoughts suddenly began to orbit the mysterious girl with the rich strawberry colored hair he had seen in dreams and in mirages alike. He had been chasing her since before meeting Sana. Even Lorelei had reminded him of her. And the dreams had grown stronger. There were now visions persistently invading his waking hours.

"Mhmm," Sana nodded her head expressively. Then she mockingly shut her eyes and specified, "As in, sleeping."

"I don't get you at all!" He gave her a quick shake on the shoulder so that she would open her eyes again. "You're not making any sense."

"See, I told you that you were stupid." Then she gave him a sarcastic smile. "Or maybe you're just pretending to be stupid," she said with a faint laugh. "I don't know which is worse, thas Feyera."

"There is no stupidity!" he defensively countered. A few people walking nearby stared at him. Sana thought for sure the attention of other human onlookers would bother him. However, he did not quit mouthing back at her, which surprised her since she surely would have handled the social cue differently. "Where the heck did you pick up that word anyway – it really pisses me off!"

"You use it frequently in your language when you're being emotional over something," she answered coyly. To her, it was exhilarating to use the language of another species so fluidly. Indeed, she used it as if it were her own account on the work of his heart. Being with Feyera for even a few weeks had expanded her knowledge of human expression to lofty heights on par with the skyscrapers that surrounded her. Furthermore, his heart gave her matching one an insight into his mind, his thoughts and verbal processes were all hers in a sense whenever emotions were involved.

"Bah! Do I now?" It was difficult to believe, but her ability for empathy had shaped her behavior in a way he had not conceived. But he had to clarify that he was the one in charge. He straightened his posture and firmly ordered, "It's imperative that you communicate clearly with me for the sake of my research!"

"You're so typical when you become frustrated, thas Feyera. You convey the exact same feelings of insecurity every time, you know? Then you go off about 'research' or something silly."

"Research is NOT silly!" he insisted. If anything, hearing her mock his designated profession was even worse than being subjected to her teasing him personally. In a way it was one and the same.

"So…where has your precious research gotten you anyway, thas Feyera?" she asked with a tilt of her head. She knew the jaggedness of her line of questioning, and yet she was unrelenting in unearthing those feelings within him.

He was at a loss for words. Where had any of this gotten him? Perhaps he could imagine nice things such as fame, or academic clout, but when it was all boiled down based on experience, those ephemeral qualities he had attached to his work quickly evaporated. Sana watched as he struggled to phrase a response. Her eyes were rather cold, distant even. It was as if she had something else on her mind all the while – unfortunately, he could not discern what exactly it was.

"So what type of dastardly scheme do you have for stopping Team Rocket anyway, 'mister researcher'?"
Even though Sana was clearly being facetious, Feyera could not help but feel a tingle of warmth when she called him that. It was like being given an acknowledgement of sorts from her in a strange way. Clearly, she had not been around him long enough to know what made him tick, but little things like this sure did seem to demonstrate the contrary. "Ahem, the next phase will begin after dark," he replied to her authoritatively. "The plan is to infiltrate the Radio Tower after the contest airs tonight. It shall be henceforth be referred to as: 'Operation—"

"—Wait," she asked cutting him off before he came up with some ridiculous name for the plan, "so we're really going to the contest together?" She padded her sundress nervously. "L-like this?"

"Don't be stupid!" he replied trying to sound less embarrassed than he felt. He blamed the transmission of Sana's own emotional insecurities being imparted onto him via their bond. Indeed, he felt warm inside, anxious even at the sheer thought of participating in a Pokemon contest with her. What would other people say? What would they think? Would they notice that the two of them shared a lot in common? What about their matching hearts? The rush of anxiety had to be her feelings, not his; at least, that's what he had to tell himself in order to maintain his composure while the various ideas were boiling furiously in his mind.

Sana was clearly flustered as well, and she hid her rosy cheeks under the large brim of the sunhat she wore. "Some of the things that Jenifer told me seemed kind of…nice."

"Bah! There's a ton of things I need to take care of and not a whole lotta time left before sundown —" Feyera briefly glanced up at the digital tickers on one of the street corners, it read "1:52PM" in large red dots.

"Oh yeah, like what?" Sana asked curiously. The rising inflection of her tone probably met she felt very happy to have a change of subject, even if it was about something mundane like the time of day or even the weather.

"For tonight's — ahem, mission," he stammered, as he had almost slipped and said "contest" on account of the inexorable thoughts going through his head "—I'm going to need to get everyone all set for the plan: Brucie, July, and Des."

"Oh," she wiggled under that large hat she wore. She effortlessly read what his feelings were, and they had not matched what he had said, even though he had attempted to correct himself. "Are you going to buy them clothes too? I bet Brucie would look really cute in a little jacket. Maybe give Des a nice hat to wear, but I don't know about July, she's sweet but… smelly in a pungent sort of way."

"Huh? No! Geez, you're starting to sound like Jenifer, I think you spent too much time with her while she was babbling about contests! This isn't about getting all dressed up for a contest; I just need to get everyone ready for battle."

"Mmm, I see how it is; you only would engage in dress-up for me." She did not even try to conceal her mischievous smile. "How very…considerate of you."

"Why not?" he answered sharply. "You're always following me, and you certainly stood out like a sore thumb with your ripped garments and short skirt from before. Can't be walking around a liberal city with a Gardevoir looking like a harlot."

"That's so rude, thus Feyera! I did that for you!" she shouted back in an angry voice.

"Okay. So, yeah, tit-for-tat." Feyera wiped his hands together as if he were brushing away invisible dirt from them. "We're even now."
"I don't think so," she said resolutely. With one of her hands, she aggressively grappled with the scarf he wore. Even through the wool fabric, he was more than capable of feeling her fingers against the piece of crystal. "You still need to hold up your end of the bargain with your heart."

"Yeah, fine, whatever," he shrugged, unamused. "And as long as you keep following me, I won't be able to think of anything else, right?"

"Mmmhmm," she cogently murmured.

"Well, this may come as a surprise to you, but I need to do some extra shopping around town before we head back to our make-shift base of operations at Togo's."

"Oh, really?" Sana looked at him with an expression of doubt. "I thought you weren't planning on going back there after stealing their stuff."

"WHAT?!" Feyera exclaimed. "That man has a little sister, a shop in a seedy part of town, and a hungry Sandile to worry about! Do you think I'm some heartless crook?"

"Well..." she looked at him with even greater scrutiny, and then at his concealed heart.

"Ah...right. You know, don't answer that."

"Fine," Sana said stretching lazily and letting out a yawn. "If it makes you feel any better, I don't think you're heartless anymore."

"Pssh. Well yeah, that much is obvious," Feyera grumbled with a long sigh.

Energetic sounds of the city continued to permeate the busy streets. There were the sounds of distant sirens, the squeaking of brakes, hammering of construction, steady hums coming from the air conditioning units in the windows of nearby buildings, not to mention the thousands of people going about their daily routine. Huge neon lights and billboards decorated every street corner with fantastic light and color.

Massive high-rise buildings created artificial tunnels of concrete – their giant flat faces encircling every street and avenue. It was unlike anything Sana had ever seen before. To be fair, her only prior experience with human cities involved Petalburg, which was a small city in comparison and also one she never had actually entered. And the smell was truly something new to her. The pollution was shocking, and she would often cough bitterly after a bus rolled by.

Clouds of dense smog floated out of the cold steel buildings vibrating with human activity. To Sana, the challenge of walking these busy streets was twofold: not only was the city environment incredibly foreign to her, it was also a nightmare to comprehend all the emotions of the stampede of people passing around them like a churning river of mixed thoughts.

There was no way to possibly empathize with the tremendous number of people that were in the midst of the city's busy streets. People were everywhere and they traveled in such close proximity to one another that it was impossible to tell them all apart. Having the ability to perceive the thoughts and feelings of other beings was proving to be burdensome. The longer she remained quietly walking by Feyera's side, the worse the overwhelming sensations became.

"How do you do it?!" she blurted out at last.
"Huh?" Feyera asked. He could tell she was distressed.

"How do you manage to stay so calm here?"

"Oh..." Feyera tried not to laugh at her predicament because he found the circumstances somewhat amusing. After being forced to deal with her on a distant island inhabited by mostly Pokemon in the archipelago, she had followed him to the world of humans. In a sense, he felt he was finally getting even considering her disadvantages in his environment. "Don't like the city much, do you?" he concluded objectively.

In a rapid-volley set of responses, she started complaining. "I don't like all the feelings spinning around! It is making me feel dizzy. How can you possibly be used to this? I don't understand; how is your heart not overwhelmed by it all?"

"To be honest, I'm used to it," he replied.

"You're used to this?! Even with your heart?!

"I'm not completely slave to it anymore, ever since... well... since my more recent memories started coming back. Besides, I can just think back to when I handled this when I was younger, since I did grow up in Saffron after all – it's not all that different from here. Over time, you learn to just zone out overtime and not let all the people bother you. They're mostly harmless, going about and living their own lives. Who really cares what they're thinking about or how they're feeling?" he asked rhetorically.

"You're a terrible empath then." She held her ears close to her head with both her hands in a clearly frustrated gesture.

"Hah, you're being too noisy. That's your problem, Sana." Seeing that she was starting to wobble a little bit as she was walking he quickly suggested, "Hey, let's take a break and go inside this shop."

She looked up at where Feyera was pointing, unable to fully dismiss the sensation of being helplessly trapped in a labyrinth of human creation.

"Lepimrun's Emporium" he read, and through processing his thought as though it were her own, she was able to comprehend it, albeit slower than usual due to the influx of interference from the surrounding crowd.

The building itself was situated on a street corner of Central Avenue. It had a glossy marble archway and a collection of stark white pillars supporting an overhanging slab. On top of this polished granite, there was a large collection of replica evolution stones, enlarged to be visible from half a block away. They were really bright in a multitude of colors and patterns; the replica stones looked somewhat like giant Pokemon eggs.

"Here, come on." Feyera insisted, pushing through the fancy revolving door. Sana clumsily followed him through. Even the doors humans constructed in their cities were bizarre she thought.

Inside, there was a huge vaulted ceiling, with classical painted murals decorating the clean white marble. The lights were bright and cheerful. There were prominent jet black security cameras everywhere, similar to any reputable city bank establishment. Fortunately, it was only around 2PM and there was no afternoon crowd in the store. In fact, they were one of only seven customers. There was a young man with a burly-looking Vigoroth helping him carry a crate of stones in front of them.

Sana let out a sigh. She felt relieved to be off the sidewalk. All the commotion had seriously started to mess with her. In a burst of uninhibited gratitude she quickly said, "Thank you, thas Feyera..."
"For what?" he snapped back. He was in no mood for praise. "I only came in here to look at what Evolution Stones they're selling."

"No," Sana insisted. "You wanted me to feel better; I know that because of our connection. Don't try and hide that."

"Not hiding anything!" Feyera continued to deny. "This is an essential part of Operation-That-Still-Needs-A-Name!"

"Psh," she hissed. But before she could continue to bother him, the line of people moved forward. Reluctantly she followed Feyera to the available cashier.

"Can I help you today?" asked a pudgy brunette with a round face and orderly bangs. She wore a sharp uniform, clearly part and parcel of working for the evolutionary stone boutique.

"Sure," Feyera said, looking at her, and then down at the display case beneath the substantial counter between them. There was a bulletproof piece of glass between them and some of the merchandise on display. "Looking for a stone for a branch evolution. Have a Gloom I would like to evolve."

The brunette behind the counter gave him a warm smile. She pointed at two stones inside the display case. "You have two options, Vileplume and Bellossom. The stone on the left is a Leaf Stone, and the one on the right is a Sun Stone."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Feyera said haughtily. Of course he knew; he was a famous researcher! Though, he had enough prudence to not bring that detail up to the clerk.

"Oh," she nodded her head. "How will you be paying? We offer competitive payment plans too."

"Payment plan?" Feyera asked in shock. "How much are we talking about for a rock?"

"Leaf stone will run you 2,100 and Sun Stone is 5,500 – the price has gone up ever since the Bug Catching Contest has made Sun Stones the First Place prize. Supply is down, demand is up."

"That's doable. I'll pay in cash," Feyera said sternly. Archer's bounty money was still coming in handy.

The cashier raised a skeptical brow, but then nodded. "Very well." She took out a money authenticator, a small neon glowing marker from her drawer to mark the bills.

"Which one will you pick for her?" Sana asked silently.

The decision was not as straightforward as he had hoped it would be. Both evolution routes had genuine advantages and disadvantages. Vileplume retained Gloom's Grass and Poison Typing, whereas Bellossom was a pure Grass type. Those details were rather superfluous to an esteemed researcher. However, he was making a decision not only as a researcher, but also as an aspiring Pokemon trainer. For that reason, he had to withhold his bias towards selecting an interesting test subject and instead attempt to make the selection based on the needs of his team.

Each Pokemon had its own variety of skills and abilities that went beyond the field of battle. For starters, Vileplume's flower was exceptionally resilient to fungus and other similar hazards to plants. These resistances went beyond natural threats; Vileplume was exceptionally durable, but also toxic to the point where it could win in a battle of attrition. This was due in no small part to the fully developed flower, which could regenerate lost cellular structure at an alarmingly quick rate just by absorbing the biomass of a nearby organics. This process was especially dangerous if Vileplume came across a recently deceased lifeform because its plantlike body could effectively absorb the
nitrogen within the recently dead creature, further powering the plant almost like an unrelenting zombie.

Some scientists in the field of botany even had written papers on how the plant itself was a species of "corpse flower" and its heavy mass was actually a collection of millions of tiny flowers that had formed into one. Vileplume had a distinctive odor because of its flower, and rather surprisingly this powerful scent was used in some perfumes. However, this scent was almost a certain giveaway of the Pokemon's presence. It was very difficult to conceal a Vileplume due to the distinct way it smelled; any Pokemon with even a rudimentary olfactory system would be able to smell the creature from a mile away.

On the other hand, Bellossom was a pure Grass type Pokemon. They resided in tropical locales, and made a characteristic noise when their bright red and pink petals spun as they danced. Bellossom was much smaller than Vileplume, and was even tinier than its pre-evolution Gloom. This reduction in size is due to the loss of its poisonous cells. Radiation from the Leaf Stone augments the toxic cells in Gloom, whereas the Sun Stone purges them from the body. The end result is a flower Pokemon that is able to harness the power of photosynthesis to quicken its metabolism. It relied more on the sun than its counterpart, but also was a lot less bulky. Bellossom could use evasive techniques like Double Team to greater effect as it was a smaller species and more proficient at dodging than Vileplume. In addition, the floral aroma of Bellossom was more pleasant, but that was neither here nor there, what was important was the creature's ability to better control the fragrance.

If it were up to him right now, he would have selected Vileplume. Not only was the concept of having a corpse flower incredibly persuasive to the young researcher, but the stone itself was a lot cheaper.

He was about to select it, but something stopped him. It was a strange thought. He could not exactly explain it. Something was bothering him. Not knowing what to do, he turned to look at Sana, who in turn asked, "What's wrong?"

He shook his head, and turned back to the cashier. Casually he asked, "Hey, mind if I take a minute to ask my Pokemon?"

She was very confused by his statement. "S-sure..." she said scratching her head. "But you're asking a plant what it wants...?"

"Thanks," Feyera said, dismissing the oddity like it was nothing. "We'll be right back."

He and Sana stepped out of line and Feyera reached for the Apricorn on his holster containing July. As soon as he sent her out, a strong smell filled the nearby area, some of the other customers started to grumble and hold their noses. Feyera and his team were used to the smell of Gloom's flower after traveling together for so long, but other people certainly were not fond of it.

[Hey!] July said rushing at Feyera and grasping his leg. [Are you okay?!] she asked worriedly looking at his bandaged eye.

He knelt down and gave her a pat on the head and stroked her long leaves. "Fine," Feyera insisted. "I'm fine now."

[You don't look fine!] July astutely replied. [What happened in the cave?]

"My Life Fabric sealed his injury," Sana interjected. But what that meant was still anybody's guess.

"Don't worry about it, July," Feyera urged. "She patched me up."
"—Hey! July, cut that out!" Feyera ordered. "You did great in the caves. I was the one who messed up; I got us neck deep in a dangerous situation, you're not to blame."

"No, I'm not," he truthfully replied. Though the healing process was taking a lot longer than he had hoped. "I'm over that emotion. Anger was not getting me anywhere."

[So, you were angry before?]

"Yes, I was. However, my anger, my desire for vengeance was not enough to undo what Proton did to me."

[I'm sorry, Edgy.]

"Don't be. Listen, we're going to get stronger as a team."

[We are?] She rustled her thick leaves anxiously in his arms. [But how're we going to do that?]

"Couldn't be simpler!" Feyera said with a smile. "We're going to evolve, and adapt to new situations."

"Thas Feyera, you should not talk about evolving any further. The two of us, we should refrain from those thoughts…"

"Hush, you!" he replied to Sana. "I'm TRYING to help out July here! Sure, Gardevoir don't evolve further, but what I'm talking about is adapting to new circumstances. That's something humans and Pokemon can do no matter how developed they already are."

"You're wrong though. You're an adult and so am I. How are we going to get any more powerful without…?" she trailed off. Something was clearly on her mind but she was hesitant to elaborate.

"Will you stop worrying about details for a second, Sana?" Feyera sighed. "This is July's big moment; I won't let YOU ruin it with your irrational concerns."

"You're the one being irrational," she said folding her arms. "As far as YOU know, we cannot evolve. So why are you trying to level with poor July, the only Pokemon who can still evolve?"

"Ugh…Can't you see I'm trying to help her out here? Geez, I liked it better when you didn't have such an adversarial attitude."

"Good thing I learned it from the best," she sarcastically said whilst giving him a glare.

He ignored her snide comment and turned back to July. "Alright, July, you have a choice in the matter. Take your pick: which Pokemon do you want to become?"

[I…uh…] she stammered, unable to fully appreciate the choice she was being presented with.

"Thas Feyera, what if July does not want to evolve? Would you force it upon her? That would be very like you to do you know—"

"Nobody is forcing anybody. I am leaving the choice up to my Pokemon."

[Sana, I want to evolve,] July said in response. [I want to become stronger so that I can be a part of
Sana nodded. She had been essentially told off. Knowing what she did about the plans Team Rocket had to force evolution upon Pokemon made her naturally more wary of how Feyera approached the evolution of his Pokemon. "You should be thankful she's compliant, that Feyera."

"I've known July longer than you," Feyera said back. "She's a good Pokemon, and she'll tell me things as they are. At the very least after all we've been through, I owe her the respect to let her choose her own destiny."

[My destiny is with you!] July said energetically. [We're going to be the best team ever, just you wait and see!]

"That's what I'm talking about. So, what'll it be July?" he asked again.

[I think…this one!] she said with an enthusiastic point.

Feyera nodded. "Affirmative. Being an assistant in my research squad, your wish is my command!"

"Oh please." Sana was playing with her hat in faux boredom. "Just get it over with already, you two."

"Now, now. No need to be hasty, Sana. I still need to buy the rock," he said recalling July back to her Apricorn – to the relief of the other customers. He then walked back up to the cashier and completed his purchase.

After returning back to the vibrant streets, Feyera and Sana set a direct course for the marketplace located near the city's busy pier. It was to the west, as Ril had explained earlier. Just the appetizing thought of fresh food was enough to drive them to walk at a quick pace amongst all the locals. It was a concrete maze, overflowing with pulsating energy.

Crowds of people, all of them in their own worlds, bustled around the street. Some had headphones on, others were talking on their cellular phones, but they were all moving. This was a busy street after all. The dense population of the main roads in Goldenrod made just traveling down a few more blocks an adventure.

"C'mon, Sana, you need to let me know!" Feyera was imploring Sana to explain the Life Fabric to him.

Though his demands were annoying, she did like how they distracted her from the multitude of people in the streets. Having a companion at her side made the journey feel more bearable, even if his petitions were insufferable.

"We're a team, you and I, you've gotta be straight with me here. Is this cloth dangerous? Am I going to die from wearing it?"

"Geez! You're not going to die from it," she implored. "Way to sound all dramatic about nothing!" Her face was turning red from him telling her that she was a part of his team. She didn't like the idea of being anyone's Pokemon, but for some reason the way he said it made her feel warm and happy inside. Was it his sincerity that she felt through their bond? Or was it the serious look in his face? It wouldn't have surprised her if he was lying through his teeth had they first met, after all he was an untrustworthy human whose species enslaved Pokemon and even other humans at times. But
something had changed over the time they had spent together. Here they were in the middle of a human metropolis, a place she never thought she'd be. And what was he doing? Saying something that made her feel extremely uncomfortable. She hated him for doing this, but also could not help but feel glad.

"Thank goodness!" he said in a hyper-exaggerated sigh of relief. Then he cracked a joke as he typically did when feeling stressed by pressure. "I'll bet you all my trainer badges you wouldn't last very long without me!"

"Pft!" she huffed and tugged him away from the building and back toward the center of the sidewalk. Here she was in a completely foreign environment, one filled with countless faces all bustling around with their own stories and feelings. She knew she should be feeling nervous, intimidated even; the very idea of so many people being around her would have paralyzed an unaccustomed empath. Yet, this strange place full of humans, Pokemon, and their tall buildings did not scare her. She knew precisely why with more certainty than ever before, it was due to his heart. His calmness, his familiarity with the bizarre land, it was all rubbing off on her in a remarkable way, overwhelming the initial fears she once held; she felt liberated and unbound in a way she never thought she would.

"Sana?" he asked her since she had been quiet for a few seconds, "Was my joke that bad?"

She had to think of something to say quickly otherwise he'd be on to her. As consequence, she quickly blurted out the first thing to come to mind, "Badges or not, it's only your heart that matters to me."

"Thought so," he replied. He could tell she was happy but wasn't really sure why. She very well could have been still riding the high from the shopping adventure, but somehow he knew that wasn't it. Her mental blockades to her emotions were for more intricate than his own. Regardless, he was more concerned with being transparent with the Pokemon he spent by far the most time alongside – not to mention was bound to. Being persistent, he asked, "So why didn't explain it to me before?"

"I didn't want to tell you because I knew you'd react in a way that would jeopardize your health," she said honestly. "Back in the cave... you were so angry, so vicious, and I thought for sure you would only hurt yourself."

"And that would indirectly hurt you?" he concluded with a hand motion to the scarf now covering his heart.

"Mhm," she murmured. "Was I wrong to be in fear?"

"No," he admitted. "Listen, Proton hurt me real bad. Not just physically, but on an emotional level. He tried to take away my sight. And he almost completely succeeded. That made me feel very mortal inside, fragile even. I know I was a bit reckless, but the important thing is I can still see."

"Sight is very important for me too," she said sympathetically. "I empathized with you back there. When you were feeling all of those things, so was I."

"You were?" He didn't know why he was surprised by this. Sana was an empath by nature, and her heart was linked to his. In retrospect, she really held it together when he could not.
"I only did what I knew how to do, thas Feyera. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Wait, so were you acting according to your nature? Or was that something else?"

She couldn't believe how he had split right through her barricade. Of course it wasn't just her nature, and yet he had begun with a leading question suggesting that it was! She obviously had a choice. She wanted to help him, but admitting that would force an analysis as to why she wanted to. And while she had her motives in preserving her heart's counterpart, she also was unsure of why the other human parts of his body mattered to her. Certainly his eyes allowed her to see through them for a different perspective if the situation called for it, but that was less concern to her now that they were inseparable most of the time. The real reason went beyond that; she knew she wanted him to be happy, and seeing him hurt or upset caused her equal measure of the feeling. But was it just uncontrollable empathy? She couldn't be sure any more. In all her years, she had never faced such a daunting dissonance.

"I…don't— …Fine! I'll explain it to you! Stop asking so many questions," she said at last.

"Perfect timing!" he replied with an excited clap of his hands. "We're here, let's talk over some food."

In front of them was a huge pier with hundreds of colorful awnings decorating all the outdoor shops. The extensive structure, which was at least the width of three city streets, was called "Zayo Pier" and was host to the outdoor marketplace Ril had told them about. The pier itself was a little to the north of both the Global Terminal and the Radio Tower. Numerous boats were docking on the sides of the wide cement structure, unloading their fresh catches of the day to the market stalls. Large groups of Wingull cawed in the air as they swooped overhead at the smell of fresh seafood and delicacies.

People were bustling through the open air market, enjoying the coastal air and the delicious food simultaneously. The open marketplace was filled with customers, here to enjoy all of the fresh produce brought in from the morning shift. The variety was prodigious! Nearly every type of food imaginable was for sale. Feyera quickly swung into action and made his way toward the most appetizing looking vendors.

He was very quick, on account of his ravenous hunger, to secure a bounty of food for himself and his Pokemon. The fresh whole-roasted Dungeness crab, spicy mesquite grilled steaks, and clam chowder in a sourdough bread bowl all smelled heavenly. He scored an entire barrel of freshly caught fish for Des, and enough deli meats for both July and Brucie to fill up on. There were baskets of berries and other exotic greens which were so appetizing - they must have just recently been shipped in from overseas.

Sana was indecisive as ever. To her everything humans cooked and ate "looked funny" but he did not let her unwarranted skepticism stop him from buying her some pizza with sliced fish on it. Finally, he made sure to secure the meat he had promised to get Ril; as it turned out, there was a special on fresh steer cuts from the northern MooMoo Ranch.

After managing all of that, he found a quiet area on the north-western side of the pier, near some old picnic tables right next to the water. Setting down the bags and plates of food, he released his Pokemon.

"All right! Let's eat!" he said triumphantly. Together he and his Pokemon ate joyously, wrapped in the warm breeze of the midafternoon on the beautiful pier.

"This isn't too bad..." Sana said after trying an assortment of food. She was especially fond of the fish. It was strange for her because Sana never had considered herself to be a carnivore despite
having a set of canine teeth similar to humans. And Feyera was surprised at how quickly she could put away the food too. For a dainty creature, her appetite was nothing other than voracious. Then again, he was starved as well, and kept eating even after he felt full.

"Say Sana, I've been thinking: that slice of pizza kinda reminds me of your heart shard," Feyera said musingly.

"What?" she exclaimed in shock. "It's more like yours since you don't have it coming out from your back!"

"Oh yeah. I always forget that," he replied. "By the way, why to Gardevoir have their hearts protruding out the front and the back?"

"Are you serious? You're a FAMOUS researcher, you should know," she grumbled.

"I can't remember," he said biting into the recently sliced meat. "You be the expert for once, my assistant."

"It's so we can kiss reality," she said dryly.

"Say what?" Feyera said, nearly choking on the piece of flank steak in his mouth. "Kiss reality?"

"Teleportation you call it in human-speak. Gardevoir refer to it as kissing reality, because you are connecting two pieces of reality."

"Oh that. Weird… thought we did that once before."

"Haven't you noticed? You can't do it alone, thas Feyera," she said seriously. "Have you ever wondered why?"

"Gee, I guess I never knew how to Teleport," he said truthfully. "That would come in handy however."

She shook her head at his childish reply. "You learned you needed my heart to accomplish a Mutual Teleport on the island, but I could have told you that just by looking at you when I met you on that beach after you fell from the cliff."

"Well, why didn't you?!" Feyera said heatedly. "It's not like I can tell these things."

"It's because your heart is only the front half."

"I don't get it. You're saying I'm defective?" He never thought he would have felt upset to lack the full capabilities of the Pokemon the relic had imparted upon him.

She paused, and then nodded. "It's not normal for a Gardevoir to only have half a heart. You can't push your way through the fabric of the world with only half a heart."

"Push my way through?" he repeated, more confused than before.

"You can still do an important part the job though, opening the gate. I saw it when you used your power on the bridge."

"Oh. That." He did not want to think of that time where he had such little control over his body. Yet he had to find out more about what the implications of having a half-heart meant. "You're talking about the power that crushes things?"
“Mmm,” she bobbed her head. “A Teleport is movement through space without time. Think of it as going through an invisible world, a world where everything is connected by these colorful strings of light.”

“Like another dimension?” Feyera asked.

“Maybe?” Sana shrugged. “I’ll try to explain it to you like I would explain it to a Ralts. …What you’re doing is pulling yourself towards that center of the crushing force with one heart shard. But you need to use your other heart shard to counteract the crushing force.”

“How?”

“Well, when the colors appear, you need to draw the light through you. You do this by channeling the string of light so it passes between your hearts. You stay on the string for as long as it goes and arrive wherever it ends, but you need to allow the string to go through both your hearts if you want to control it. There are stories of Ralts who failed to do this and are lost to time in a forbidden realm known as ‘Nav—”

”—Whoa, whoa!” interrupted Feyera. “Wait, how do your pre-evolutions do this trick then?”

“Sheesh, does feeding your stomach make you slower in the head? Ralts have two hearts on their head—front and back. Kirlia do as well, but theirs are side-to-side. For Gardevoir, we have a merged heart on our chest, comprised of a front and back from our earlier forms,” she explained pointing it out to him. "As long as you have a pair, you can travel on those strings of colored light by forcing the thread to pass through both."

“I think I understand. I’ve seen it with my own eyes, it’s difficult to deny. Because I only have the front half of your heart, I can only compress space in front of me?”

"More or less. Good thing you have me though!” she said cheerfully.

"Yeah, no kidding Sana. That’s how we escaped from Cipher back then. And here I was thinking I could learn how to control that on my own."

“Well…” she said with a pause looking at his patched eye. "I can derive the power from our heart and our bond, but in the end, it’s the two of my hearts that the thread passes through. That part is crucial,” she said adamantly. "Otherwise, at best we might find ourselves trapped in an eternal limbo with no way out… or much, much worse."

“What could be worse that being trapped in a limbo forever?” he pressed.

“You can’t even imagine infinity,” she scoffed. "No physical being can. But there is a place, a place where space switches with time. That place is called Navenfell."

"Nah-ven-fell?” Feyera tried pronouncing it.

“Yes. Tales are told of a realm where our ancestors from the Old Forest once found refuge. Despite the stories, it is hardly a place of respite. No. Navenfell is a danger all beings with the potential to kiss reality face."

"Just call it the scientific term: Teleport," pleaded Feyera.

"Luckily for you, you don’t have to worry about it since you can’t ‘Teleport’ alone with your missing heart. I’ve done it enough to know how to avoid Navenfell. However, the real danger of a mutual Teleport is the heart is only meant to transport one entity through the fabric of reality. That’s why
Ralts are taught from a young age to never Teleport another being with them; the potential consequences are too dire." Sana stopped to take a quick bite of food nervously. "A tag-along's weight diverts the thread from going straight through the heart. It can become curved, bent, twisted, or even forked." She used her hand to map out the four possibilities with simple gestures. "Each of those outcomes is more dangerous than the last. When the thread is curved, you do not wind up where you intend to — you could find yourself miles away or even inside a mountain or at the bottom of the sea. If the thread is bent, you'll find yourself in Navenfell, an eternity of sorts where you cannot move and can only see time pass forever around you. If the thread is twisted, you emerge as one entity instead of two. And finally, if the thread happens to fork itself, you will create a fatal paradox since you cannot be in two places at once."

"Geez!" Feyera nearly spat out the water he was drinking at the thought. "We're lucky to be alive, let alone in one piece! Remind me to never Teleport with you again! I didn't know all the risks involved."

"Naturally you didn't. But that was never a problem for you, since I was in control," she smugly replied. "You simply cannot Teleport on your own with just a piece of the front heart, so you're less of a harm to yourself and others than most Ralts."

"Humph. I'll have you know I managed to do substantial damage with just half a heart," he boasted.

"True, you can open gates with the crushing force, but never pass through them since the other side of the heart is not present for you to draw the colored lights through yourself like a thread." Sana sighed.

"Drawing the lights through both hearts results in a Teleport? Sounds to me like you're moving space and time around yourself or jumping through a wormhole."

"You'd be hard pressed to find a Gardevoir that narcissistic. Reality does what nature commands, and weaving through cohesive whole is something living creatures do every day. However the moment you kiss points of the world together with your heart, it becomes a source of great power and great risk."

"You must be seriously afraid to Teleport. Too bad. It seems like it would be the best way to do anything or get anywhere."

"It's easier to do when you are smaller. I don't know why, but the older you become the more difficult Teleporting is."

"Weird. Hmm… It might have to do with size. The equation must consider the mass of the body moving through space-time."

"Or it could have to do with how long you've spent in this reality," Sana suggested.

Contemplating, he scratched his chin. "What about me, where do I fit in to all this?"

"As far as I know, you can only destroy with the carnage from 'opening the gate'. That's the force that tugs on things and pulls them toward the center of your Psychic focal point."

"Be nice to know why it causes me so much strain when you can do it effortlessly."

"That's quite simple. It takes a tremendous toll on your body because you don't have the other side of the heart to allow for relief from channeling so much energy. Without it, it's only half the job. You can compress, but not expand, and therefore the threads of light cannot travel through you. It's like inhaling and not being able to exhale. I almost pity you, thas Feyera. Almost. But it's not rightfully
"Fine, whatever. I won't worry about opening any gateways to other dimensions then." The concept fascinated the young man, but he knew his limits. Besides, one heart shard was more than enough to deal with considering its overwhelming propensity to act as a conduit for emotions. Furthermore, hearing about a limbo for Teleports gone wrong was enough to snuff out the curiosity he once had. Feyera continued to eat, digging into the cheese and deli meat sandwich next and watched his Pokemon as they feasted on all the food. However, he chewed a little slower now that his mind was contemplating everything Sana had just told him. "So, about this fabric you wear, the one on my eye right now, what can you tell me about it?" he asked.

"Life Fabric," she clarified as he reached up to touch the strange cloth wrapped over his eye. "Its history is tied to our species, and to the Forest of Origin."

"Here we go again…" Feyera said with a roll of his eye. "Can you spare the mythos?"

"Thas Feyera!" she scolded him for interrupting her again.

"I want the facts, not the myths; that's all."

"Do you want to hear or not?" Sana pouted. "You sure were making a big stink before about me telling you all of this!"

"Alright, go ahead," he said taking a swig of cold water. "Sorry."

"The Forest of Origin is the birthplace of the Life Fabric. An ancient forest, one protected vigilantly by a Time Guardian. Lonely, the Time Guardian sought to create other creatures from the land itself. To bring forth new life, it seeded a great tree in the center of the forest by a pristine spring known as the Garden. With the help and nurturing of the Guardian, the tree grew large and its roots surrounded the spring. When it was ready to bear fruit, the encasing of the new seeds were of finest smoothness, like Silcoon. However, the Time Guardian had a companion; a Pokemon that suggested the tree's silk become cloth for the lifeforms inhabiting the forest, rather than for the protection of the tree's seeds. The Time Guardian was a creature of nature, and had physical form within the forest. The Pokemon was from beyond the forest, and could leave freely without forfeiting its physical body. The Time Guardian saw this as an advantage befitting its children of spirit of nature."

"Spirit and nature…" he repeated. It was uncannily similar to human creation stories about the soul and body.

"This union of spirit and nature is said to be what brought us into existence. …Ralts were once pure Faerie spirits, without a physical tie to the world, and bound to the forest like the Time Guardian was. However, at the suggestion of the Time Guardian's companion Pokemon, Ralts were given physical form — a body." Sana rubbed her shoulder. "The union of spirit and body, and a spiritual connection to the eternal forest through the Life Fabric wrapping around our skin. The Life Fabric has been nurtured for centuries, once it is bound to a Ralts it becomes their protective armor and their essence. But it is also a link to nature since it channels the power of the ancient faerie spirit through Animus – life itself."

"Oh come on, give me a break! That's just a silly fairy tale!" Feyera said frankly. "There's little to no proof other than the fact that you wear these cloths that supposedly come from a special ancient tree or that it's related to ancient forest creatures."

"Don't you see why the cloth is significant though?" She looked at his clothes. "Humans wear cloth
as well. You wrap their bodies in it. Ever wonder why?"

"Warmth, comfort, and nudity is generally looked down upon," Feyera answered. "There's only a few beaches in southern Kalos where it's acceptable to be naked in public," he added knowledgeably.

"What about freedom of expression though? Looking around this city I can tell the feelings of individualism are particularly strong in humans."

She had a good point. "Sure, you can express yourself by what you wear."

"That's what I thought – there are strong feelings of belonging associated with what humans wear. Life Fabric can channel feelings like clothes. And yet…it's a conduit of thought not limited by physical threads."

"Hmm… What are you without the Life Fabric?"

"T-that's...really personal," was her uneasy reply.

"Sheesh! I wasn't going to ask you to strip!" However by saying that it made her blush. "I was just curious how it worked… ugh, never mind, this is getting too weird."

"Let's leave it at that." Her cheeks were really red. "The first of our species had been set free from the Old Forest as garbed Pokemon rather than Fae nature spirits. Yet many to this day still call the forest Home. I'm living proof of that."

"Right," he agreed. "You ran away from 'Home'."

She nodded enthusiastically, happy that he had remembered. "Yes. But not just me." She pointed to his heart. "We were able to leave Home because we are not bound to the forest like the Fae; though we still share certain similarities. This is what quite literally stitches us to nature no matter how far we travel from Home."

"It's this cloth then?" Feyera asked. "This is the piece of the puzzle connecting you to the ancient forest where the Time Guardian is believed to be from?"

"It's more than a belief, thes Feyera. It's a part of who I am. My identity, my print on this world," she said softly. "It's incredibly powerful. It goes beyond history. With it, you have a portion of my Animus – a part of my life. And now that you've learned about it, I don't want you to take advantage of it."

"You don't trust me," he sighed. "I can tell."

"You're absolutely right. But I have to trust you," she said seriously. She had a scowl on her face. "If I don't, you'll wind up doing something we'll both regret."

"Like what?" he asked intrigued.

"The cloth on your eye, it's a piece of who I am. If you employ psychic powers, it could react as if I am using them. That might go poorly for both of us in a variety of ways."

"Huh? How's that a bad thing? Our hearts are already connected, so it shouldn't be such a big deal…"

"It IS a big deal! Your half-heart is limited by your human frailty and your relative proximity to
mine, but my heart has none of those restrictions."

"Ah HA, I get it!" Feyera snapped his finger. "You're worried I might use it to control you," he said with a mischievous grin.

"Good luck controlling anything!" she retorted shooting him a defensive glare. "I'd fight you, and you would certainly lose!" she snapped angrily after sensing his motives.

"There goes that fantasy…" he mumbled to himself.

"Besides, you've got it all wrong. You can't take control, but you could pretend to be me while using psychic powers."

"Why would I want to do that?" Feyera asked.

"No reason I can think of considering you're a human who stole my mate's heart!" she sardonically exclaimed whilst crossing her arms warily. "Most important is the danger that you can pull us both into Navenfell. And though I value your heart, an eternity spent with you would be torture!"

"Pssh, you're so unbelievably vain!" he remarked. "Say I was able to employ your powers with this cloth while using my psyonics, what advantage would I gain?"

"None," she said resolutely. "So don't do it! Life Fabric is plenty powerful on its own just by existing as a part of my Animus. Even if it wasn't mine, the properties can ward off dark spirits who fear the Fae. Dragons and their descendants are unable to pierce it. Its properties can even alter others' perceptions of the wearer."

"Hah, those are some tall tales, Sana." She looked at him defensively, anticipating him to crack a wise comment about the fabric. "And that's fine. I'm not going to be wearing this any longer than necessary. What I really want to know is: when do I get my sight back?"

She gave him a worried look. "I don't know, thas Feyera. I've never heard of any Gardevoir that used the Life Fabric to heal an eye injury as bad as yours."

"Great!" he said sarcastically. "I'll be the first. Hey, maybe I'll make it into a medical encyclopedia."

"You're taking all this surprisingly well," she concluded as she finished eating her last bite of the food in her hand.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"I thought you'd be all angry like you usually are."

"Angry? I'm plenty angry," Feyera said.

"Really? You're good at hiding it."

"Sana, I need to keep my cool here," he admitted. "Now isn't the time for emotions to get in the way of the current mission."

"Emotions are what power your heart, so you need them; however, you're right – don't let the wrong ones take over."

"Knowledge will do more good than feelings at this point. So this cloth you wear, it's another means of manipulation then?" he asked rhetorically while patting it. Her species means of mental manipulation had almost become stale and expected to him at this point. "Funny, I was under the
impression you were a Psychic type for the longest time," he added.

"Some of us were only one type. But that changed." Sana bowed her head. "To think, I'm telling my species greatest secrets to you… a human. Someone who sought to end all that which I love… But yes. It is true. The Life Fabric binds Gardevoir to the realm of Fae from which we were conceived."

"Ehh," Feyera muttered, unsure of what to say. "Listen: every mystery has a hint of truth to it."

"You don't believe me because you're a self-proclaimed scientist. But considering the things you've seen…"

"Even the really crazy theories out there occasionally lead to rational conclusions. …Hmm… No doubt though, this one's tricky. We barely have anything to go by other than your story… we each have a sample of the material to work with fortunately, and you said it works in tandem with the heart shard. Okay…I got it! So, how bout it?"

"How 'bout what?" she asked with a look of confusion.

"Isn't it obvious, Sana?" he asked, dramatically slamming his hands on the wooden picnic table. "Let's begin the research!"

"I'm not about to let you go prying through the secrets of my species' origins, thas Feyera!" she defensively replied to his suggestion. Then again he did seem able to help by being a researcher, and until he figured out a definitive plan she was stuck with him. Softly she added, "...At least not alone."

"Splendid, splendid. We'll work as a research team and uncover the rationale behind all this, mark my words," he promised excitedly. He was more curious than ever before.

"One question, thas Feyera. How can YOU hope to solve a mystery like that? You're not even one of us!"

"Hah! In fact, it is the external perspective which elevates me, granting me the ability to approach the challenge rationally and methodically."

"'Elevated' indeed – raised on your own nonsense," she retorted. "You're emotional too; even if you want to deny it."

"Sure," he said in an aloof manner. "But you're forgetting something important: I have the mind of a mad scientist; not one secret shall pass me by unanswered! Ahaha!"

"Grow up, thas Feyera," she sighed. "If generations upon generations of Gardevoir were never able to figure it out, then what on earth makes you think you're entitled to?"

Feyera thought for a moment before replying, "It's a matter of viewpoint. What if you were told some of the legends involving your origin, but only the convenient portions of them? We're talking about a creation myth here after all! It would behoove those in power to retain that power. What that means is not providing full disclosure of the facts behind the tales told."

"Seems you trust as little as I did," she whispered. It was strange for her to agree with him on such a thing. Her constant doubt had led her astray from the teachings, and from Home.

"Of course!" Feyera said firmly. "I'm a man of reason; there is no room for anything else in the realm of science!"
"Gardevoir don't exactly need science, thas Feyera. It's a concept is completely foreign to us. The only reason I know about this human concept of 'science' is because I'm stuck with you."

"I figured. Your kind is all about feelings, emotions, sensations. Too bad, isn't it? You're not seeing the big picture! That's why I need to get to the bottom of this mystery." He gave an airy laugh. "If not me, then who else?"

"I'd agree with you if you weren't so keen on trying to undermine our culture by tampering with our heart bonds!"

"Undermine your what now?" he asked doggedly. "Your culture? I thought you were a couple of vagrants on the run."

"You insolent...!" she growled with a rather frightening expression. "I am not a vagrant! I am still clothed with my Life Fabric!"

"Easy, easy, take it easy; come on, it was just a joke!" he said quickly.

"I'll have you know, it wasn't easy giving up a part of my Life Fabric to someone like you! Life Fabric only regenerates within the forest or grows using the energy from evolution," she huffed. "I'm in my final stage, and my Life Fabric is reduced to a feeble miniskirt! You have no idea what that feels like."

"Well, thanks," Feyera said humbly. "Didn't realize it was such a big deal for you. Guess I still owe you one after all."

"You can start by being more honest with me, thas Feyera." She looked him dead in the eye with her large cherry eyes. "Remember, we are heart-bound and I shared with you my secret."

He thought about the strawberry-haired girl again. Did Sana know about her? It was strange that she had made a request for him to be honest. Maybe she knew about the visions he was having since they always appeared to be through the eye that was covered by her Life Fabric. He didn't want to tell her though. He was afraid to. For whenever he saw her, he felt something powerful inside of himself. It was a sensation like none other. A feeling that ate at his very existence and caused him to question everything he had once known and believed in. Sana was important to him, but she was not important enough to share those intimate details with. And so, he decided not to tell her about the visions of the mysterious girl.

Instead, he reached into his satchel and removed a small stone from the thick packaging it had been placed in. "Ahem, it's time for the main event!" he said, pulling July close to him and Sana. "Here, we shall witness the miracle of evolution! Behold: the power of compelling Pokemon evolution is in my hands! Muahaha!" Feyera laughed manically for dramatic effect. Sana rolled her eyes at his terrible acting.

He touched the stone he had purchased against July's puffy flower bud. A brilliant white light surrounded her entire body. Several nearby pedestrians turned to look at the source of the bright beams of light enveloping July. Gradually, the light began to fade away.

She was only a foot and four inches tall – approximately half the height of her previous stage as a Gloom. She was a green Pokémon with vast circular blue eyes, and rosy markings on both her cheeks. She also had two bright hibiscus colored flowers on her head and green and yellow leaves around her pudgy waist that resembled a grass hula skirt. July excitedly rubbed the petals on her head together, and it created a pleasing sound.
Feyera grinned at the pleasurable result. He knew that a Bellossom's petals were supposed to be more beautiful the worse the Gloom it evolved from smelled. But what happened next was something he did not expect at all.

"SHE'S SO CUTE!" Sana squealed in ecstatic happiness. Quickly she reached down and hugged July, embracing her tightly in both her arms. "I've never seen such an adorable Pokemon this close before!" She continued to hug and fawn over July, completely enamored by her new evolution.

[Ah, Sana!] July said as her face turned beet red. [S-Stop it! That tickles!]

"You're SO cute, July!" Sana insisted rubbing her flower petals with delicateness and possessiveness.

[You're embarrassing me!] July nagged, but she had a faint smile.

Sana laughed and squeezed July's small figure close to her chest. "I can't let you go!"

[Sana…! Stop it!] July said as her tiny mouth was muffled by the sundress. [Mmphh!]

Feyera had been watching the two interact with a bit of skepticism. He had not expected Sana to have such a propensity for Bellossom. July was certainly smaller and cuter than before, but Sana was really attached to this new form of hers. It made him feel strange inside, seeing a part of her which might have been repressed. If she liked cute things, she should be open about it.

However, rather than comment on this observation, he bit his tongue and let the two of them interact in their affectionate manner. As he was rolling his eye, he noticed that another trainer was observing him from a distance. The man wore a light orange vest with a large collar and several pins adorning the sides. He had sandy brown hair, with a long face and bright blue eyes. He walked with a bit of a swagger, and was carrying several unique looking Pokéballs on his waist holster. As he approached, Feyera also recognized that his stubby facial hair, like his hair, was rather unkempt.

In a matter of fact fashion, the stranger asked in a challenging tone, "Say, are your Pokes just for show?"

Feyera gave him eye contact right back and answered, "If the situation demands. Why?"

"Pshh, I don't wanna battle you. You don't look like you'd put up much of a fight."

"Oh?" Feyera replied with a condescending tone, "Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you. Never been a fan of wasting my time."

"So, are your Mons just for show in contests?" The brown haired trainer looked at Des who was in the water finishing up her meal of fresh fish. "Now that there's a grisly looking water-stead. Bet it can only use Splash, Tackle, and Thrash. Unless…you know how to ride?"

"Ride?" That caught the attention of both Des and Feyera. [Hrm?] She looked up from her food and gave a large exhale of hot breath.

"Yeah… Like on water, scarf-boy," taunted the other trainer. "Or are you too casual of a trainer to Surf?"

"I have five badges," Feyera snapped back.

"Weeeaaak! I had five badges when I was still in my nappies! Now I've got ten – " the other trainer proudly flashed his badge collection worn on the inside of his coffee-colored leather vest; some of the badges could have been from other regions or perhaps even frauds, it was always difficult to tell
whether badges were genuine before a trainer revealed his Pokémon "— so you wanna race?"

"You're on," Feyera said, unwilling to withdraw from this pompous trainer's dare. It was not surprising, as he himself was an arrogant individual who prided his reputation more than most. He knew he had other responsibilities, but the way he saw it was his reputation as a trainer had been put on the line by some conceited punk. There was only enough room for one superior trainer on this pier, and it sure as hell wasn't going to be anyone but Feyera. "I'm not gonna back down from your stupid challenge."

Sana snickered at his use of the word. "See, you always say the word stupid when you're feeling hotheaded," she pointed out telepathically.

"Put some money on it," sneered the other trainer.

"Fine, I'll bet you 1K."

"What the hell? Are you poor or something?" admonished the young man. "What is that chump change gonna buy, a couple of potions at the discount convenience store?"

Feyera shrugged. "Alright then, simple solution: put up something worthwhile of yours and I'll raise the bet. Go ahead, make it worth my while."

The other trainer started to laugh. "Oh haha! I see how it is – money don't matter to you. I like that you know."

"Didn't ever agree to an extensive conversation with the likes of you by the way. I'm waiting," Feyera replied impatiently.

"All right. If you win, you can have my Lucky Seven Saddle."

"Come again?" He raised a brow and repeated, "A lucky… saddle?"

"Yeah, cause I've never lost a race on it. Believe it!"

"And it's called a Lucky Seven Saddle, because…?" Feyera asked with a distinct look of confusion in his eye.

"Well, haha, it's got the number of times I've won races written on the side of it. Seven-hundred-and-seventy-seven to be exact, genius."

Feyera shook his head. "I find that very hard to believe. There's no way the odds favor you that much."

"Believe it or not, I don't give a Rattata's ass. What matters is: can you put up?"

The confrontation hit a nerve. He desperately wanted to put this arrogant trainer in his place. It did not help that he himself was conceited. "Fine, I'll raise the stakes. Ten-K. How's that sound to you?"

"Oh, ho ho! You're gonna be sorry when you're out that kind of money, Scarfy!"

"In your dreams!" he barked back. "I'm doing this cause I want to see how much of a sorry loser you are without your stupid lucky saddle!"

"Pshh aren't you sensitive!" The other trainer raised his arms in the air mockingly. "Keep taunting me like that and we'll be here till the sun sets. Personally, I think you're all bark and no bite. Why don't you show me how good you are without insults?"
"He does have a point, thas Feyera," Sanaria quickly interjected. "You're really being confrontational with your emotionally-charged language."

"I'll show you how serious I am!" Feyera looked over at Sana and gave her a disapproving glare; after all, this was his chance to prove himself at something besides battling. Just the very idea filled his heart with strong passion to compete in the challenge. Without even starting the race, he was already feeling the blood pumping throughout his body in excitement. It was an incredible feeling, and one which he fully intended to ride out.

"Go, Milotic!" said the brown haired trainer. A brilliant flash of bright, colors shone like a prism over the pier's edge. However the light was not just from the Pokéballs, but from the beautifully polished rainbow scales of the trainer's Milotic. The serpentine Pokemon was approximately the length of Desperado, though its overall length was somewhat ambiguous as it coiled in the water off the pier. However, the shape and size was where the comparisons to Des ended; Milotic's smooth body was like a polished gemstone unlike the rugged scales of Feyera's Gyarados.

"Wow," Des and Feyera thought simultaneously. Their competition was not only beautiful but also extremely quick. Milotic dashed atop the small waves as they lapped against the pier.

"You havin' second thoughts, chum?" asked the Milotic's trainer with a sneer. "It's too late to back out of the bet now!"

"Des, we're going to need to play this right," Feyera communicated to his Pokemon. Truly, he felt they might be out-matched. "Don't be fooled by Milotic's graceful form, they're wickedly fast sea serpents."

[Pardner, I'd reckon we'd ought to turn this here race into a victory no matter who we're up against.]

"Alight then," Feyera acknowledged. He deftly jumped from the pier onto his Gyarados' back. Her hide felt warm, and she was eager.

"Rules are simple," said the other trainer, "You race me around the bay, marked by the buoys around the pier. We go counterclockwise, around the Global Terminal and back through the inlet under the walkaway bridge leading there. You get all that, Patches?"

"Patches, huh? You're a funny guy, how long did it take you to think that up?" At the very least, he'd be getting a first-hand view of the area around the Radio Tower. Though at the present moment nothing seemed peculiar about the tall black tower they were heading toward tonight. "Let's race!" he insisted as he set his boots against Des' uneven scales.

"Fat chance!" Feyera retorted as Des let out a deep growl. "You're gonna cough up that lucky saddle of yours in no time!"

"Oh, don't be so sure," chided the young man from the back of his well-groomed Milotic. He padded the back of the creature's smooth scaly neck. "Milotic, let's show Team Ugly how we win!"

A small crowd of onlookers had approached the edge of the pier. They appeared really intrigued by the developing contest. It made Feyera nervous at first, but he managed to dismiss the doubt in a concentrated effort of self-encouragement. "Des, let's kick this guy's ass," he said resolutely.

A large man was standing near the pier, and had taken it upon himself to call out, "On your marks, get set...GO!"
There was an incredible splash of cool water which washed over the trainers and the crowd as Des and Milotic simultaneously kicked off from the pier. The serpentine Pokemon lashed their thick tails to-and-fro in a frantic manner to build up momentum.

Feyera squinted with his good eye as the salty water sprayed up into his face; fortunately, the makeshift bandage absorbed the briny seawater and did not cause his injury to burn. Galloping forward on choppy waves, Des continued to match Milotic's pace. "We got this, Des!" Feyera said excitedly. His pulse was rising, and he felt like he was riding on air despite Des' thrashing body tossing beneath him.

[Yee-haw!] Des acknowledged as she used the length of her entire body to force herself through the water in a choreographed motion. She was quickly overtaking her Milotic adversary; at this rate, her raw grit had given her a sizable lead. They turned a corner and passed under a small iron bridge, away from the crowds.

"Go! Qwilfish!" yelled the other trainer from atop his Milotic. Feyera quickly turned his head upon hearing the unmistakable sound of a Pokéball snapping open. Right behind them was a huge blowfish creature. It had a dark blue top half, and its underbelly was a pale green. Large, three inch spines jutted out all around the puff-fish.

"Use Toxic Spikes!" ordered the trainer from behind them. Qwilfish inflated its balloon body, and shot out countless venomous spines directly in Des' path.

"Argh!" Feyera tugged hard back on Des' dorsal fins, steering her away from the floating water hazards that Qwilfish had recently made. The large purple spines, filled with toxins, loomed ominously in the water like mines.

Milotic effortlessly passed them by. Feyera could hear the laughter of the trainer as he swooped passed them and recalled his Qwilfish. The young researcher was overcome with rage, anger. The entire race was rigged; his opponent was cheating to win. The world around him seemed to redden. Even the light blue water was becoming crimson in his mind's eye. "You rotten motherfu—"

[Edgy, ease up now.] Des said quickly, trying to calm her trainer with a bit of her twang. [If y'all lose yer cool, then there ain't no way to bounce back and win.]

"Sheesh, I hate it when you're right," Feyera said quickly. He then patted the back of Des' neck in approval as the world around him began to normalize. "All right, we'll deal with this cheat by cheating ourselves!"

[How ya reckon we do that?] Des asked as she approached the line of Toxic Spikes which Qwilfish had placed in their path.

Feyera took a deep breath. "DIVE!" he ordered.

Des complied in an instant. The cool water surrounded them as she brought them both underwater. The sun was so bright in the sky that it was easy to see the shadows of the spikes as well as the Milotic ahead of them. "You're faster underwater, Des!" Feyera said to her telepathically. "NOW GO! Let's catch up and give them a nice surprise!"

Gyarados was obviously an aquatic species, but research had shown that the creatures excelled at movement underwater. Due to their rugged scales, air resistance did not favor them while they were partially above water. Now they had an advantage and could bypass the traps Qwilfish had set. Feyera just hoped he could hold his breath long enough.
Rapidly they gained on Milotic's shadow from beneath the surface. It appeared to stall slightly. The trainer must have been looking back for Feyera and Des. To him, they had disappeared from the race. Little did he know that they were right beneath him.

At this point, Feyera had begun to lose his sense of position. It could not be helped as biological survival functions began to take him over. The unpleasant sensation of being trapped underwater and needing to breathe was hardly something anyone could simply ignore, even if they happened to have psionic abilities. First, he started to cough, then he began gagging, unable to stop himself from inhaling some of the water around him as his lungs begged for oxygen. At this point, any connection he once had with his Pokemon had completely shut down, and had been replaced with a primal sense of self-preservation. Des lurched upwards as he convulsed with involuntary spasms, she was clearly privy to what was going on, and for that he was thankful to not need to convey such a dire message through telepathy.

She rocketed up with a brilliant Dive technique, smashing directly into Milotic's underbelly. Though she did not draw blood, the huge bruise she left was very substantial considering Milotic's Marvel Scale. "Waaahh!" cried the trainer as he was knocked off his Pokemon from the impact.

Feyera gasped for air and spat seawater as the sunlight again kissed his face. Holding on tightly to Des, he pressed her away from Milotic and toward the finish line. With a final surge of speed from Des' Aqua Tail, the two of them completed the race as the victors.

"No way! No way man!" hollered the other trainer as he clutched onto his Milotic. "You got guts! I..." He was at a loss for words. "Guess I lost."

Still hacking and coughing, Feyera tried to nod, but found the head motion to be much too difficult. Instead, he leaned over from the side of Des and rested his dizzy head against her rough scales. "That's right," he said finally. "Serves you right for trying to cheat."

"Gotta admit, you had balls to sneak up on us like that from underwater," acknowledged the adversary with a groan.

"I wasn't about to let you win after pulling that nonsense. Pay up or I'll tell everyone at the pier what a fraud you are."

"We got bested, Milotic," he said unstrapping the saddle from his Pokemon. "I might be a charlatan, but I know when I've been beat. Hell, I got this saddle at the local casino's club riding a bucking Tauros for 7.77 seconds. Here, you're earned it."

The crowd of people on the pier had begun clapping as the trainer handed off the Lucky Seven Saddle to Feyera and Des. He could hardly believe it, but then again this feeling of happy lightheadedness may very well have been due to the lack of oxygen in his brain. Smiling, he took the saddle and placed it on Des' back. The smooth leather of the saddle with "777" stitched on the side certainly made her rough scales feel less abrasive.

Feyera took a quick look back over at his team waiting for him on the pier. Sana was holding the newly-evolved July possessively in her arms like a doll. Both of them were smiling and waving as Des gradually approached the pier. Brucie was standing coolly by her side with his arms crossed. Des gave a mighty triumphant roar. This moment felt perfect.

It all changed in a flash. An inexorable high pitched screech filled the air. At first it sounded like metal on metal, the noise of a train grinding along the tracks. But then it became something more. The sound was augmented by a tremendous ringing; a terrible echoing of a microphone feedback, repeated over and over, looped until naught but pure distortion remained.
He couldn't help but lurch his head back in trauma from the sound. It pervaded his entire essence, struck at his core, and rattled his bones. Warm blood dripped out from his nose and ran down over his mouth and down his neck. Was the water too much for him? Had the pressure gotten to him? He could not even think coherently as the unstoppable ringing in his head continued unabated. Opening his mouth to yell, he found that his voice was gone, replaced by the coppery taste of blood gushing out from his nose.

Suddenly, other clamors joined in the cacophony: the distant sounds of falling metal, a woman screaming, and the noise of far off sirens. Feyera tried to focus, but the sound resonating in his head had become so unbearable that it was actually causing the entire world to vibrate around him. The bandage around his injured eye felt tight and hardened, his good eye could barely make out the skyline despite it being broad daylight. It was like being thrown into a blender, he had lost all sense of a stable external world as the wicked shuddering continued to tremble reality.

And then suddenly it all stopped. The ringing and the shaking instantly evaporated, leaving nothing behind but confusion. There were still other sounds, all types of disorder coming from the distant city of Goldenrod. He heard a voice, it sounded like Sana but her words were in another language. Feyera held his head and clasped his ears. It was then that he noticed Sana's Life Fabric wrapped around his head felt different. The texture was off, the smoothness was gone. Instead it felt numb comparable to pins and needles.

*Is it over? What was THAT?*
There was pandemonium throughout the city of Goldenrod. The ringing noise had dissipated, but following in its mysterious wake was a violent cacophony of madness. Sounds of the once bustling and lively city were replaced with the dire air horns and sirens accompanied by the screaming voices of people nearby. It felt like being dropped into a foreign world – sent into the shadow of what was once familiar.

"MY POKEMON!" yelled a woman close to the edge of the pier. Her shrieking voice sounded hysterical and terrified.

Feyera quickly turned to look, but something pale was blocking his sight. Rays of bright light covering his field of view would not dissipate. Everything in front of him was distorted. He felt like he was in a Trick Room or a funhouse of sorts, but there was nothing fun about the nausea he felt from having his vision dramatically altered. From the source of the woman's voice he could only make out a mass of violet color. It felt wrong. Paradoxical. It was as if she wasn't even there but her presence remained in this strange blob of color.

"Argh!" Feyera groaned. Holding his throbbing head, he felt himself swaying on Des' newly won saddle. "What…what happened?" he asked the blinding light surrounding him. "Where am I…?"

However, only distant yells responded to him. The voice of the woman he heard before was trailing off. "Someone…! Do something! HELP!"

"Wha—?" Awkwardly, Feyera fumbled forward on Des' back as he tried to stand. He had been so blinded and disoriented by the sound and light that he had forgotten he was still saddled on the back of his Gyarados in the middle of the city's port marketplace. "Des, are you alright?" he asked feeling the sea water splash against his calves.

[What in tarnation was that noise?!] Des replied with a mighty shudder. [What's done happened to everyone?!]

"I don't know!" he angrily said back to his Pokemon. "I can't see with all this light! But something's wrong…something is very wrong…!"

[Try to focus, Edgy,] Des encouraged with a heavy grumble. [Shut your big bazoo and concentrate!]

"I… Alright," he said with a deep breath. What was manipulating his sight? There could only be one thing: Sana's Life Fabric. Troubled, he rubbed at the bandage covering his eye and exclaimed, "Is this why?!” It had a different texture than before. Instead of feeling smooth to the touch, it was quite rigid. Not only that, but it also occupied a larger portion of his forehead. Even the dangling pieces from the knot on the back of his head were longer. "It can't be… This fabric… it changed?"

The questions were mounting, but at the same time his vision was growing clearer. Colors and shapes came into focus from the blurry mess that he had previously been viewing. Fortunately, his sight was returning, but what he saw defied all of his expectations. Thick, dark smoke was rising
from the east. The dense smell matched that of a nearby fire. People were scattered everywhere on
the pier, pushing and shoving in what could only be described as an utter frenzy. Only one thing that
could be the cause of all this turmoil. He knew it the moment he looked to the pier and saw a
Charizard standing next to his Pokemon.

"The radio frequency…! They actually did it. They really…" he started to say, but all his excitement
was quickly overrun by a sense of profound worry. The sirens, the smoke rising, the sensation of
panic in the air was palatable. "What have they done…?" The wobbling of Des' body in the water,
and the panic of the civilians made him a little dizzy. "C'mon Des, get us to the pier!" he said
pointing.

As they approached the large pier, the massive levels of commotion and pandemonium continued
unabated. Pokemon and people were running around, desperate and confused by the recent
transformation of many Pokemon. Next to Sana and July, Brucie had been changed. He was no
longer the small reptilian creature Feyera had known since becoming a trainer. No; now he was quite
different. He still had those bright blue eyes, clear as Lake Acuity. But his body had radically
changed. For starters, he had a large set of wings on his back, his tail had gotten longer, and his
horns were raised higher. However something was strange about his body's color. It was still a
darker red, similar to a Charmeleon's complexion; had Feyera not known better that Charizard was
orange in color, he might have declared this evolution to have occurred without a hitch.

"Brucie!" he shouted, jumping off Des' back and giving the Charizard a hug. All the insanity
unfolding around the nearby city felt washed out and distant. He squeezed his first Pokemon who
had finally become an adult. "Are you alright?!"

Brucie put his arm on Feyera's shoulder and spat a small fire ball up into the air, letting out a growl
and unfurling his new wings. [Feeling full of energy… power…] said the creature through their
telepathic connection. [Is this normal…? What about the medicine I took to save me from Toxic?]

"I… I don't know buddy," Feyera said rapidly. Shaking his head, he tried to put the pieces together,
though his mind felt to some extent disoriented. "…The radio signal must have done this to you! Did
you hear it too?"

Brucie flapped his wings. [It was a loud noise, a ringing sound in my head. The next thing I knew, I
was covered in white light… and bigger.]

"Aw Brucie," he said trying hard to block out the unfurling city-wide chaos. "I'm glad you're okay
pal. I knew you had the potential to evolve… I just knew it!"

[Stop it, boss. You're embarrassing me.] he said glancing over at Des, Sana, and July.

"Looks like I can't call you 'Brucie' anymore. You're all grown up!" He was actually a little misty
eyed since he felt really emotional at seeing his first Pokemon as an adult. "Ah, the damn salt water is
getting in my eye. C'mere you. From now on, I'm calling you 'Bruce'!"

Bruce blew out a large plume of flame into the air and wagged his flame tail. [I really did it, boss!] he
said as his trainer patted him on the back.

"I hate to break up this cheerful reunion," said Sana with a straight face that belied her current
anxiety. "I think the ringing might have affected all of us."

"Huh?" Feyera asked looking over at her. She did not look any different. Neither did July who was
cradled in her arms. "What do you mean? You're already in your final stage."
"My! Thas Feyera, weren't you paying attention to what I told you on the pier?" She padded the sundress she wore. Then she lifted the skirt up slightly, revealing that her gown of Life Fabric had regenerated. "The energy I had stored was forced into my Life Fabric," she explained pointing to the additional inches of fabric draping from her waist.

"That means—" he padded the Life Fabric over his eye warily "—it affected me too?"

"It changed didn't it?" she said pointing at the longer pieces on the back of his head. "See, it's grown here too."

"You saw the light?" he asked quickly. "The colors from the voices?"

"Yes. Twice and now three times. I could imagine it being somewhat disorienting for you since that's something normally experienced during an evolution," she the expression she wore made it clear she was worried about more than just the surrounding city. "...We're both lucky there wasn't a Soul Star nearby."

"What's a Soul Star?" Feyera asked feeling very confused. Had they not been isolated on the edge of the pier, his questioning would be impossible amidst the city's panic.

"A Blood Crystal," Sana glowered while looking up at the skyline. "...Made from the condensed Life Fiber of countless individuals cast into the Dark Void," she explained in her usual esoteric manner.

"Condensed Life Fabric? You can do that?"

She gave a nod. "It's a culmination of collective essence. An ancient channeling conduit that can rebirth fully evolved Pokemon into a higher state of existence."

"That doesn't make sense!" he dogmatically interjected even though he knew the Pokemon's power could create singularities capable of crushing matter. What bothered him was a glaring discrepancy. "You can't evolve anymore!" he pointed out.

"That's incorrect," she said shaking her head and frowning. "It is possible to achieve by merging with condensed Life Fabric... absorbing ancient blood compressed from a powerful gravity wave."

"Don't correct me, I'm the scientist here!" asserted Feyera. "I know the evolution chain goes: Ralts, Kirlia, Gardevoir or Gallade!"

"That's not the whole picture though," Sana said as she twirled one of July's flowers with her finger. "There is an additional state. A further form achieved by a terrible price."

"I've never heard of it!" Feyera scoffed. "And I'm a researcher on Psychic Types!"

"Of course you haven't heard of it! You're a human!" Sana retorted. "At least... I think. However, considering what just happened, the reason I need to tell you this is because you are wearing my Life Fabric over your eye. If this reacts to a Soul Star through your subjective ignorance of how evolution works, then you just doomed us both!"

"How..." he started to say. However a large crane in the distance collapsed and drew his attention back to the city. "WHY!" he called out desperately.

"Thas Feyera, your psyonics are a liability to both of us. But if I don't tell you this then they can become a liability to more than just us."

"Look around. The city we were supposed to protect tonight has just been attacked! I don't care
about any stupid myths."

"Soul Stars are as real as this city," she insisted. "What worries me is how hearing the sound brought all of my energy to the tipping point of evolution all over again even though I'm already fully grown. You felt it too; you saw the light. If I had a conduit... if any Pokemon that heard the sound from the tower had a proper conduit..."

"This device – the Soul Star. You said it was an ancient channeling device. We should assume that there aren't any around in a modern city."

She smiled weakly, impressed by his rationale but not completely convinced. "It's a secret, near forgotten, following the Ancient Cataclysm. Species capable of it guard it with every fiber of being lest it one day again fall into human hands."

His patience for her stories was nearing an end. "Ancient Cataclysm... Soul Stars and Blood Crystals... What does it mean?!"

"It means we need to proceed with utmost caution," she replied steadily.

Feyera had a thousand different questions; however, the rising chaos of the unraveling city grounded him. "Argh! We don't have time to discuss this! Just look around! The whole city is falling apart! Break it down, short and plain: what do I need to know?"

She gave a huff and thought. The metropolitan human settlement was of little concern to her; however, the sea of feverish panic building nearby was enough to rattle her powers dependent on emotion. "First: At all costs, stay away from sources of energy that cause your heart to feel as though it is about to split — that indicates there is a Soul Star nearby. Second: Don't use psyonics unless your life depends on it because the damage they cause will at best significantly delay the healing process and at worst make removal of the fabric impossible. Finally: The Life Fabric uses my energy, but it can use yours as well since we're heart-bound. Think of it like a plant that grows based on energy you feed it. Unfortunately, if you employ it as a venting organ for your already unstable half-heart by simply using psyonics, it will quickly absorb all the power that would have been released from the heart half you don't have."

"Okay," Feyera said hesitantly at first, but quickly gaining his pose back. "Hmm... I've trained you well if you're giving me lists when I demand the pertinent info. Well done. I'll make a research assistant out of you yet!"

"Stop that!" she implored. "...Were you even listening?!"

Her words of protest did not seem to reach his march back into the city. The sounds of newly freed Pokemon howled in the distance. Large creatures, grown from the evolutionary signal, smashed against the sides of buildings as they precariously roamed the emptying streets. All around, the people were retreating into the buildings to avoid being crushed by the Pokemon that had unwillingly harmed their trainers during the spontaneous evolution. They now roamed freely, with great power, and no guidance on how to use it. All the traffic lights and electricity had cut out. Steam was leaking from the manholes as well as wild Pokemon. They crawled, slithered and wriggled out of the sewage system to explore the urban landscape in their more powerful forms. It was a recipe for disaster, and Feyera was heading for the very center of it in the commercial-government district.

As soon as he had gone a block inland from the pier, there was a great commotion up ahead. Then there was the sound of gunfire. A loud explosion shook the street. Rather than press forward into the booming chaos, Feyera recalled his Pokemon and sprinted back toward Togo's. Getting to the radio tower in one piece was more important than rushing blindly into the unknown horrors on streets of
The small two story shop was dark inside. It was difficult to see due to the power outage and the way that the taller neighboring buildings cast the sibling's shop into shadow.

"ARGH!" yelled a familiar voice. "GET! OY! Ya hear me?! GO ON, GET! GET BACK!"

"Ril?!" exclaimed Feyera, as he rushed towards the back of the store. The burly bike enthusiast was standing on top of a counter with his broom in hand, swinging it wildly. Directly below him was the overturned cage that the Sandile used to be in. Next to it was a very stout Krokorok, with a beige hide and inky black stripes. The Krokorok snapped his jaw and fiercely slashed at the broom Ril was swinging, breaking it in two. Ril yelled in a panic as the Krokorok closed in.

"Hurry! Pass me that bag!" Feyera said to Sana. With a light hurl she tossed the satchel of food they had picked up earlier at the open market before things all went pear shaped. "HERE, CATCH!" Feyera shouted, grabbing a piece of raw meat from inside the bag and tossing it behind the stout Krokorok. The Pokemon turned around, his keen sense of smell detecting the food. It used its powerful rear leg muscles to jump into the air and intercept the steak. It clamped down and gobbled it up voraciously with a hiss. It still looked hungry. Turning, it looked at Feyera with its shady eyes and grumbled.

Sana was afraid, Krokorok was a Dark type Pokemon after all. "What have you done?!" she squealed pointing at the hungry Krokorok. "Why would you do that?! I can't read its heart because it's a Dark Type, but I know that look in its eyes! …It's associated us with food!"

"Wait for it…" Feyera said reaching into the bag and clutching another juicy steak in his hand. The fresh piece of prime Miltank meat was still bloody and warm from the butcher. With a devious look he unsnapped a free Apricorn from his belt holster. Krokorok's craving eyes were so set on the piece of food Feyera was holding that the Pokemon did not even notice what the trainer was actually doing. "Here you go!" exclaimed Feyera tossing the second steak at Krokorok. He chucked it high up so that the Pokemon would have to jump to reach it. With his other hand he rolled a large Apricorn along the floor. Predictably, Krokorok jumped in the air like before, trained by the previous presentation of food. He used his powerful legs in order to catch the steak in his jaws several feet in the air. However, in all his excitement to eat, Krokorok had failed to notice that there was a deceptively innocuous hazard beneath him on the shop's floor. With a loud smash from his heavy body, Krokorok was forced to land directly on top of the Apricorn Feyera had lobbed. The ball opened up with a flash of light, and the heavy weight of Krokorok's stocky body combined with his substantial falling velocity did the rest.

One shake, two shakes, and then that sweet stillness all trainers love. "All right!" Feyera said raising a proud arm into the air. "Knew that Heavy Ball would come in handy!"

"You caught it?" Sana asked him in disbelief. She was shaking.

"You bet! Never seen a Krokorok that huge before!"

"Why would you do that?! It's a Dark type! It preys on Psychic types like you and me! Did you see the look in its eyes when you fed it?! I thought we were food!"

"Psh, I'm not sure you'd have enough meat to satisfy that croc," laughed Feyera.

"I hope you're going to get rid of it! Throw it in the river or something."
"Damn, you're one tough customer," he said to her waving the Apricorn victoriously in his hand. "I'm the trainer; I decide who stays and who goes. Besides, Sandile and its evolutions are weak to water! They dwell in arid deserts for a REASON!"

"Hmph! We'd all be better off with one less Dark Type in the world!" She crossed her arms and continued to mutter about the many dangers of Dark Types to her species.

Feyera ignored her and turned back to Ril, who was still sweating bullets from the encounter. "Hey, glad I stopped by in time," he said to the rattled bike shop owner.

"Holy Miltank! You really saved our bacon there with that quick thinking!" Ril exclaimed as he wiped the sweat off his brow. "JEN! Come on down, it's safe now! …Phew, thanks. I dunno what happened. One minute he was peacefully snoring in his cage, the next he was five times his size and five times as pissed!"

"Probably was just hungry," Feyera concluded. "Figure the evolution would have given him more of an appetite. One thing is odd however."

"Oh?"

"I've never seen a specimen that fat in any encyclopedia – usually a Krokorok has a lanky body unlike its more compact pre-evolution," he explained to Ril. Then he started putting the pieces together. "…Come to think of it, Brucie's evolution wasn't exactly perfect either. His hide is still the color of a Charmeleon. Yes…mhm, quite bizarre…. Must have something to do with the way the radio signal interacts with the Pokemon's evolutionary stimuli."

"Yoohoo!" smiled Jen as she hopped down the stairs holding her Snover tight against her breasts. "What evo-who-see stim-u-whats-i are you talking about?"

"I'll explain, but we're really pressed for time." He gave Ril and Jen the run-down, being as brief as possible. "…And that's why we need to get into that tower to stop the broadcast. If they continue to employ it, there is no telling what might happen next. I hate to say it because the research potential of this remote evolution device is truly profound, but there's only one solution. Three little words: Shut. It. Down."

"Whoa whoa whoa! You're saying that they used radio frequencies to trigger evolution in Pokemon all the way from up atop Grant's TV tower?" Jenifer asked wide-eyed.

"That's exactly what happened! It's not that different from broadcasting a television program when you think about it. The signal had to be precise, and the experiments in Union Cave were undertaken in order to hone in on the correct biological stimuli which would act as a universal receiving antenna. Any Pokemon that could evolve based on experience was forced to expend all of its stored power to attempt evolution regardless of whether or not it was prepared for the transition!"

"Huh, that's like… really weird!" Jenifer pawed her chin with a contemplating finger. "Yvette didn't turn into an Abomasnow. I definitely wonder why…"

"Some Pokemon were not affected," Feyera said curtly. He tried to remember the Team Rocket report he had read about the limitations on the radio burst. "Was Yvette in a Pokéball?"

"No, I was playing dress-up with her when the power went out," Jenifer explained. "Then we smelled smoke! Looked outside and there were black clouds rising up over so many buildings! I was so scared, and then Ril started shrieking about the crocodile getting bigger and escaping its cage."

"I was not 'shrieking!'" her brother denied, but his face said otherwise since he was red with
embarrassment.

"Yes, you did!" Jenifer insisted. "You were scared to tears until he showed up to save us!"

"WAS NOT!" Ril bellowed.

"WAIT! QUIET! Please you two; stop arguing for one second so that I can think!" Feyera said earnestly to the bickering siblings as he tried to solve the discrepancy. "Jenifer, you said before your Snover doesn't cause hailstorms… That can only mean one thing."

"What's that?" both Ril and Jenifer asked; they almost sounded like the same person.

"Simple," Feyera said snapping his finger. "It means Yvette has the Soundproof ability. The radio waves did not affect Yvette because she never heard them!"

"Well… I'll be!" Ril replied with a look of surprise.

"Oh my gosh! That's like totally wonderful!" Jenifer said. "Yvette would have like crushed me if she had evolved while I was holding her."

"I hate to be the one to say it: you got lucky," Feyera gravely asserted. "The rest of the city though… I'm afraid to think of what might have happened to some people who were innocently spending time with their Pokemon when it happened."

"You think a lot of people got killed?" asked Ril bluntly.

Feyera shook his head. "Imagine you're with a small Pokemon and suddenly it evolves while you're holding it. Hrm… Depending on the size of its evolutionary stage, it could easily crush you without intending to. And that's not all. Spontaneous evolution caused damage to the infrastructure; I saw it on my way back here. Hospitals, Pokemon Centers, all those places with higher Pokemon populations were likely hit hardest. As for the power, Pokemon working in the plants, in the power generators, were also forced to evolve. Unfortunately, their new electrical output could have been too strong for the system, causing the city-wide power outage."

"Cripes!" said Ril in his usual boisterous voice.

"Oh no! Oh no!" Jenifer cried, hugging her pet Snover close to her breast. "What are we going to do!?"

"Only one thing I can think of," said Feyera with a look of resolve. "I don't know if I can reverse it, but I sure as hell can stop it from being used again. I need to get to the Radio Tower ASAP. The entire city depends on it!"

"Are you crazy!?" Ril shouted. "With all the shit that's going on out there, you're lucky to have made it back here in one piece! The power grid is down, the city's under siege, and – worst of all – an emergency martial law has been put into effect, you won't be getting anywhere near the cultural district now!"

"How do you know about the martial law?" Feyera asked.

"I got connections," Ril replied doggedly. "Not exactly the most reputable fellas when it comes to association, but blimey, their intel on the local police is never wrong!"

"In other words, you know exactly how dire the situation is!" Feyera retorted.
"It was right before I went to check on the croc," he explained. "I got a message to stay indoors if I couldn't get out of the city. Thing is: I don't think anyone is getting out since the bridges are raised."

"Wait. They're not letting anyone out of Goldenrod?"

"Quarantined us like a bunch of infected rats. Must be some emergency protocol. That's why ya gotta lay low until the fog lifts. You'd be confronting a trained militia; they'll use force if necessary to enforce the curfew and keep you out of the government district."

"The local militia won't keep order for long with all those Pokemon out there."

"That's the thing," Ril heaved a sigh. "They don't need to protect the whole city. Just the center of town where everything is going down."

"Dammit! At this point we're – the whole city's – at Team Rocket's mercy! To make matters worse they may go ahead and hit us with another burst as soon as the power is restored. What then? We don't have much time left!"

"I… No way! I ain't gonna send you off to get killed after you went through all that trouble to save my hide and my shop from that crocodile!"

"Don't you get it you big lug?!" exclaimed Jenifer. "There isn't gonna be a shop left if we don't stop Team Rocket pronto!"

"Jen?"

"We need to help him, bro," Jenifer said with a look of gravity in her eyes that certainly did not suit her normally cheerful demeanor. "Call your buddies from the Bones! We have a city to save! Our star contestants will lead the charge to save Goldenrod!"

"Erm…" Ril and Feyera moaned at her mention of contests at a time like this.

"C'mon, don't look at me like that!" Jenifer said. "If we don't stop Team Rocket, then there may never be another music contest again!"

"I think you got your priorities mixed up…" Feyera scowled. "Haven't you noticed? Your entire city is falling apart!"

"Hey asshole, take it easy on my lil sis," Ril said defending his sister. "She's right."

"Huh?"

"It's like you said. Sis is just expressing it a bit different, 'tis all. Ya know…our way of life is under attack. Sounds crazy when I say it. Man, I don't want to let this stand if there's something we can do about it before it's too late. Martial law isn't going to solve anything if the terrorists already seized the broadcast hub. You gotta go after those wretched sons of bitches broadcasting weird signals in that TV tower! We need to act, even if it's against the law!" boomed Ril.

"Heh. Besides, big bro, this wouldn't be the first time you did something illegal," muttered Jenifer under her breath.

Ril ignored his younger sister's comment and deftly snatched a Pokéball from the shelf behind the counter. "Go, Wingull!" Ril's Pokemon appeared with a bright flash of light. It was a small seagull but it had a convenient leather belly pouch. Ril quickly wrote something down on a sheet of paper, rolled it up, and stuffed it in the pouch his Wingull wore. "Go on now! Send out word to the gang,"
he said to his Pokemon with a gentle pat on the creature's head. Wingull cawed happily, and quickly departed out the store's open window.

"What was that all about?" asked Feyera.

"We need a plan to get past those cops guarding the center of town," Ril explained. "And I've got just the thing in mind! Ho-hah!"

"You better let me in on the plan," insisted Feyera with a cold glare.

"Don't worry! Ha, in due time you'll see. Thing is, right now we don't exactly have time on our side!" Ril insisted.

"WAIT!" Feyera insisted like a researcher. "I demand to know!"

"Follow me," Ril said waving.

"Ugh…I don't like secrets," he protested. He could not mind-pry and was at the mercy of whatever lunacy Ril might have come up with.

"I have one bike that'll get you there in no time flat. It's a modified import from right outside Kalos. Did all the alterations myself! It's got nearly 1,600 CCs with the engine I worked on." Ril breezed past all the other bikes he had on display and towards his workstation. On the raised platform was a portable, medium-sized motorcycle. It hadn't even been polished yet since it was still under repair work. "This is it," Ril said like a proud father, "the 'Hercules M'! Take a good look at that beaut!"

The Hercules was a bare-bones cycle, completely devoted to function over form. It had minimal bells and whistles in the pursuit of achieving maximum top speed. Furthermore, the designers figured an aerodynamic design was less important than a powerful engine. Under the metal plate fairing was a massive radiator, easily twice the width of the bike's wheels and cowl. It was not flush with the side fairing along with the intake. The bulky fuel tank appeared to be slightly modified based on the way it joined uneven with the big engine. There was one large exhaust muffler latched on the opposite side of the rear wheel's drive chain. It sat directly below a fat diamond-shaped glowing taillight. The suspension was all bare and unsheathed, welded to the low riser; both handlebars had small aftermarket rectangular mirrors. While the wheel rims and footpegs were worn, the break disc appeared in pristine condition.

"It's not street legal – capping out at 176 Ponyta Power," Ril said with a satisfied laugh. "But you got bigger things to worry about now that the whole damn city has gone belly-up!"

"Right," Feyera said helping Ril lift the hefty bike off the mechanic's stand.

"You know how to ride one of these?" asked the big man.

"Memory's real foggy," Feyera shrugged. "I'd be able to tell you as soon as I get on and try."

"HAH!" Ril laughed heartily setting down the bike. "I like your attitude!"

"Yeah, don't sweat it." Feyera was trying to convince himself as much as he was trying to instill confidence in Ril. "I probably had wheels back when I lived in Saffron. It should come back as muscle memory."

"Might be tricky to navigate the busted streets with that eye covered," Ril said.

"I'll have a Psychic Pokemon to help me keep balance," he said looking at Sana. "It's the least she
can do after tampering with my memories."

"Right," she replied softly.

"We're going to stop this insanity," Feyera acknowledged firmly grabbing the handlebar.

"I sure as hell hope so!" Ril huffed. "Terrorism in our own city…it ain't right… it just ain't right… and it sure ain't good for business!"

"I understand your concerns," he said to the bike enthusiast. "There's going to be retribution for this atrocity, mark my words. I know who did this, and I'll bring them to justice!"

"Hah! If the League doesn't get there first, my money's on you, kid," Ril said with a grunt as he crossed his muscular arms.

Feyera wanted to tell Ril that the League probably wasn't coming. Based on the trail Fredrick was on, the International Police had evidence that the League had ties to these malevolent criminal organizations. And the proof was clear from experience because Feyera knew the League had abandoned Azalea. But what about Goldenrod? Surely with this many people, such an attack could not go unresolved! What were they playing at? It did not make any sense. Why would the League allow an attack a major city by Team Rocket? If what Fredrick told Kurt was true then there was foul play afoot. However, Feyera did not have enough time to explain the potential conspiracy to Ril. "Right; the Pokemon League should be on the same side as us," Feyera said firmly, though he did not believe it. "That means getting to the top of that broadcast tower ASAP."

"Don't worry, kiddo, you'll be there in no time on this bike," Ril grinned. "Take the southern route on Broad Street next to the park, there's less stuff to worry about going wrong through there, no bridges or anything, plus the street is real wide. Got that? Good! Quit lollygagging and go save our city from those bastards!"

"You got it!"

"Good luck!" Jenifer blew him a kiss from behind her older brother and winked, "I know you'll save us and Pokemon contests!"

"And… thanks for helping us," Ril said somewhat awkwardly passing him a helmet to wear. "I don't know many folks I can rely on. But I'm glad you're one of us, Kanto-boy."

"Don't mention it. Thanks for letting me use your bike." After putting on the helmet, he raised the kickstand and started the engine with a turn of the key. It roared to life with an impressive thunder. The round headlight glowed a warm orange color like a setting sun. Sana hopped on behind him on the passenger part of the seat. "Let's go!" he said throttling on out of the shop's garage.

"You sure you can control this thing seeing out of one eye?" Sana asked as he weaved through a collection of crashed and abandoned cars on the road.

"Relax, Sana; I've got this." Riding came back to him as he engaged in muscle memory since he had ridden before. He could not recall when he rode due to the amnesia clouding his human memories, but right now it felt almost like it was in a dream. The cool afternoon wind whipped at his clothes as he continued to pick up speed. "Just… I dunno… give me a pinch if something is coming at us from the right. Might not see it in time without clairvoyance and peripheral vision."
He drowned her out with the loud hum of the engine and picked up speed on the straightaway. It was really strange seeing the once busy streets devoid of people. Everyone had been ordered to stay indoors. Feyera doubted people would listen to that. They were probably trying to escape the city via the bridges which left the inner part of the city deserted. The question was when he would come across the police guarding the government district and by extension Mayor Grant's TV tower. They likely had set up a small perimeter downtown near the cultural buildings and the seat of government. Traveling at this rate on the Hercules-M, he would be there in no time.

Another engine roar startled him. He wobbled slightly on the bike. A second and then a third motor also joined in. He was being tailed. "Sana, status report," he said having difficulty seeing out of the right rearview.

"What?" she asked.

"For the love of…! Who's following us? Or do you want me to turn my whole head around to look?"

"Three… wait no, four… five… six other motorbikes. Looks like they're waving to you or something … I don't understand that human gesture at all."

"Ah! Shit. That's bad news. We're not even halfway there yet and the cops are already on to us…" he growled. "Alright, hold on. Let's feed them some dust!" He kicked the bike into a wheelie as he accelerated at a blistering speed. The Hercules would have no problem out muscling police cycles. To his surprise however, he still heard the roaring engines of his pursuers from uncomfortably close behind him.

"There's a lot of them now, thas Feyera," warned Sana.

"How many?" he asked.

"Elven… and some Pokemon too?"

"What?! Details, Sana, details!" he barked while weaving through abandoned cars. "There are Pokemon chasing us too?"

"Hmmhm. They're riding with people like us, but I also see an Arcanine and a Jolteon keeping pace with them on foot!"

"Now this I have to see…!" Feyera said with excitement.

"Wait, no! Please don't you're still driving!"

However he ignored her and turned around for a quick look. The group following him had no fancy lights or logos on their bikes. In fact, they all looked like custom made cycles. "Sana, I don't think they're the police."

"Then who are they?!" she asked worriedly.

"Let's slow down and find out," he said easing off the gas.

"Wait, is that a good idea?" she asked, questioning his decision.

"These guys don't look like law enforcement," he said noting their renegade attire and chains.
"I wouldn't know. I can sense their intentions are strong, and their Pokemon are powerful."

As he slowed down, the group of bikers approached from either side. They had Pokemon riding along with them. There was Machoke, Hitmonchan, Electabuzz, Scizor, Medicham, Toxicroak, Bisharp, and even a Hawlucha in addition to the Jolteon and Arcanine that were running on foot rather than riding. The group made way for the biggest bike, a real low-rider with huge handlebars and a set of chrome crossbones on the front. Its driver was a massive fellow with a wild black beard and a bandana. As he rolled up, it became apparent that he also had a Pokemon with him: a beefy looking Marowak, with as many interesting looking tattoos as his human companion.

"Who are you?" Feyera asked the honcho wearing the bandana.

"Don't you recognize the insignia?" The big man flexed his bicep revealing a Marowak skull and crossbones with flames all around it. "It's in our bikes, it's in our skin, it's in our bones… We're the Burnt Bones and this is our city."

"Nice. Ril told me about you guys." He prudently did not mention the whole crocodile incident however.

One of the men riding along with Hawlucha held a piece of paper in the air. It was the same piece that had been attached to Ril's Wingull. "Ril... he can be a real pansy cause he's always hanging around with that fine piece of ass of a sister, but ain't no one knows how ta fix bikes up like him!"

"Quiet, you!" said the bearded leader of the gang. "You ain't sposed' ta talk bout familia like that!"

"Sorry boss."

"We're here to see to it this here junior rider makes it through to that tower. Ain't nothin' else worth talkin' bout, considerin' the state of affairs in ta' city."

"So you're going to help us get by the police barricade?" Feyera asked.

The only reply from him was a low grunt and the revving of the mighty engines. Marowak tossed the thick charred bone club it was holding and caught it impishly.

"Fine by me," shrugged Feyera. "What's the play?"

"Leave that to us," said a tall man riding next to Jolteon. "We'll crack that nut open like a Seedot."

With a deafening roar, the group took off, creating a V-shape formation on the wide central avenue. All the power packed by their cycles made the next several blocks pass quickly. Eventually, a large makeshift barricade of busses and cars appeared in their path. The leader of the Burnt Bones gave a hand gesture from his position and took point. Two other riders, one with the Medicham and the other with Electabuzz followed him, and the three of them broke ahead from the main group and to the left flank of the wall in a triangle formation. Two other bikers, the one riding with Bisharp and the other riding alongside Jolteon, took the right side of the wall.

"HALT!" yelled a voice from over the wall through a megaphone. A bright light from a flying Sigilyph's top eye flashed at the main group like a spotlight. A Magnezone floated next to Sigilyph above the barricade of rubble. The man on the megaphone continued to blare, "This is an order from the Mayor-Director! Martial law has been invoked due to a state of emergency! No trespassing beyond this line! Return to your homes and wait for the curfew to be lifted!"

"Hah! As if that threat is going to make the Burnt Bones think twice!" said the rider next to Feyera who had a large Hawlucha with him. "Come on, show us what you got! Get em, Hawlucha!"
Hawlucha sprung high into the air, twirling around. At first the Pokemon appeared to be spiraling quickly to ready a Banzai Drop technique. As soon as it was detected by Sigilyph's all-seeing eye, Hawlucha opened its wings and shifted into a Flying Head-Butt. Sigilyph was able to narrowly dodge the full force of the impact, but was knocked into the underside of a bus being used as part of the barricade.

"Hit 'em with Flying Press, Hawlucha!"

Hawlucha wasn't finished yet, it clutched the exhaust muffler of the bus with its talons, swinging around in order to soar back up into the air. Magnezone shot out a great number of sparks in every direction to try and scare the fighting bird off, but Hawlucha was not deterred by the defensive action. After launching into the air from the bus's muffler, Hawlucha swung its talons out into a devastating Atomic Leg Drop. The forceful blow was powerful enough to crash into Magnezone with enough force to send the hovering creature straight into the dirt. It spun its magnets helplessly trying to spit out sparks at Hawlucha, yet Magnezone could not accomplish this desperate act for it was grounded.

Meanwhile the two electric Pokemon, Jolteon and Electabuzz, were on either ends of the blockade. Defended by their respective teams, Medicham warded off bullets fired at Electabuzz with a potent Reflect while Bisharp's arms created an impenetrable shield to protect Jolteon. Machoke, Hitmonchan, and Scizor all worked to hoist up a massive bar of metal from an overturned construction truck. They raised the beam near to the barricade, but avoided allowing it to make contact with the wall just yet. Toxicroak let out a shrill cry to give the signal, and the two electric Pokemon unleashed a current through the barricade with unbelievable power. Their volts were strong enough to turn the makeshift wall of overturned vehicles into an electrical fence. The bike leader's Marowak quickly grabbed hold of Hawlucha and grounded the fellow Pokemon with his earthen tail. Marowak took the bone club he held, which was slightly charred similar to the tattoos his owner wore, and tossed it at Sigilyph like a boomerang. The Pokemon came crashing down onto the electrified fence following the painful sounding thud of the club against its center of mass.

Several officers and Pokemon to yelp in shock as the defensive line they had fortified was turned against them. "ARRGGGHHH!" yelled the assembled uniformed personal charged with protecting the capital district. The unexpected shockwave from the steel barricade had sent them to their knees momentarily.

There was no choice, now was his opening! Rocketing forward on the throttle, he shot the bike up a steep incline. Barely balancing the Hercules-M's wheels on the raised beam of steel hoisted from Machoke, Hitmonchan, and Scizor, he managed to clear the top of the wall. The motorcycle roared, flying through the air over the blockade and stunned officers. It landed with an ungraceful kick; the suspension held on, the bike continued to wobble and run further down the blocked-off corridor at a blistering pace.

Immediately ahead was the enormous tower. Far atop its lofty reaches: their approaching destination.
Chapter 15: Rising Up Through Dragon's Flames

Beyond the breached barricade, mayhem had diminished significantly. The first few blocks were practically empty save for several abandoned automobiles. This district of Goldenrod had been quickly guarded in wake of the city-wide power outage due to the radio signal forcing countless Pokemon to evolve.

With the help of the Burnt Bones, Feyera and his companions had made it past the police barricade. Now they were in the clear, blitzing through the cultural district on the powerful Hercules-M motorcycle Ril had modified. The governmental complexes were all exceptionally well fortified, as were the city courts, but only one place mattered at this late afternoon hour.

It was an ominously dark building — sheathed in ebony and stretching up higher than all other nearby skyscrapers. The tower's base took up an entire city block; it was wide to provide ample office space for the first fifty floors. Beyond there it narrowed, forming a spire of windows and elevators half the width of the city block. At the precipice of this second stage, at over two thousand feet, was the radio beacon itself. The signal beacon was comprised of one massive spike, and surrounded by several shorter support beams. It was still flashing two bright lights from its tip despite the power outage that had ravaged the city.

The urgency set in as the motorcycle careened around the corner of the block. Feyera knew his mission was to stop the broadcast by any means, yet he did not know what awaited him in the tower. Fortunately, the nervous anticipation of confrontation was suppressed by his desire to seek out retribution on behalf of the citizens of Goldenrod. Stopping the bike with a smooth break, he let Sana jump off before swinging the kickstand out and hoping off the Hercules-M himself.

"We made it," she said softly.

Removing his helmet, Feyera opted to spare words on account of the urgency. There was no telling what would happen if they dawdled here on the deserted street. Though he was not sure whether the tower would be any safer. With an energetic stride, he approached the building's sleek façade. The tall glass doors were unlocked and entrance into the tower's ground level was not an issue.

"Wow...!" Sana exclaimed at his side, looking up at the sights. The main atrium was massive in scale. Tall walls of glass stretched up one hundred feet into the air to meet the giant suspended mezzanine. Light from the sinking sun peered through from between the buildings on either side of the main avenue, coloring the already posh vestibule with a vibrant orange glow. Straight ahead was a long receptionist's desk made of hardwood and beyond that a collection of elevators – their heavenward tunnels surrounded in a mixture of glass and steel.

"Over here!" he said grabbing her attention. "Look at this." Upon taking a closer inspection at the five elevator gates, the first thing that became apparent was the apparent lack of any functioning elevators. Above each doorway was a large half-moon shaped dial with long arching arms that pointed to various upper floor levels. "54, 32, 18, 45, 59...tsk!" Feyera griped while futility pressing the call button several times. "No good without power; looks like we're taking the stairs. That's a lot of floors, let's see if there's another way up..."
"Another way up?"

He ran up to the central terminal at the reception desk. To his surprise, it was active in standby. A quick check of the power system screen showed that the tower was still running on a residual generator located on the top floor. The interactive 3D diagram revealed that the power at the top of the tower was feeding certain emergency systems. "Elevators are offline. Not enough spare juice. Looks like we're stuck taking the stairs after all," he said to Sana making a sour expression. "I wish there was another way...we're going to be doing a lot of climbing at this rate."

"I can float," she said snidely levitating herself an inch above the tiled floor. "But you? I wouldn't risk it if you plan on being able to remove my Life Fabric from your flesh."

"Don't rub it in," he growled. "There's got to be a better way... I'll think of something, but for now we can't waste time. We climb!"

"You'll climb," Sana insisted emphasizing that he would be the one doing physical work. Her ability to levitate a few inches using her powers meant she could use that skill to travel up the stairs without so much as bending a leg. It was probably for the best considering how frail her legs were.

Reaching the emergency stairwell, and pushing open the large door, the scent of burning coal and rancid garbage filled his lungs. He held his nose in rebuke. "UGH! That smell!" he exclaimed. "It's putrid!" she agreed, trying to cover her face with both her hands.

"Any idea what it could be? It's nauseating!"

"Bleh! A Poison Type?" she suggested wearing a repulsed look on her scrunched face. "Seems this city is full of them."

"You might be right, but what's it doing in the tower?" he pondered. Any number of reasons could explain it, but having to endure the stench was currently the most pertinent aspect. Having to inhale the noxious odor while climbing the stairs panting was the worst part. "C'mon!" he urged to her as she lagged behind. Though she used telepathy to hover slightly above the cement stairs, he could tell it was quickly draining her stamina. They had reached the tenth floor and they both already were beginning to feel winded. "Only ten percent of the way to the top," he huffed trying not to breathe too heavily lest he taste the awful pong. "This... is not working...!"

And yet he was forced to soldier on. The stench had grown significantly stronger, which seemed impossible considering how potent it was before. Needing to catch a breath, he slammed into one of the stairwell doors exiting out to the fourteenth floor. To his alarm, there were people down the hallway.

"What was that!?" yelled one of them in a startled voice. "Hey! Hey you! HALT!"

Feyera had barely gotten a chance to breathe. However when he saw their black uniforms, immediately he knew that he had inadvertently blown his cover. Swearing an anger-induced obscenity, he dashed back into the stairwell. The sounds of Team Rocket grunts were closely following. His gasping and footsteps made it easy for the Rockets to tell he was heading up to a higher story. He heard them clambering a mere two stories beneath, five or six of them all armed in hot pursuit.

"Phew..." he gasped. "Gotta think of something!" Dashing up past the sixteenth story, he relayed to Sana, "Eureka! Follow me! We're getting off on the eighteenth floor!"

"What's special about that floor?!" she asked barely able to keep aloft. He could have sworn he
heard her feet clapping against the steps. It was too much for him to explain it — he'd have to show her. Considering the dire situation, he was ecstatic to have thought of something in time. Whether or not it actually would work was a totally different story.

Upon reaching the eighteenth story, he smashed with his shoulder recklessly into the exit door. It flung open and revealed another group of Team Rocket grunts further down the hallway. "Oh…!" he exhaled, stupefied to see them here as well.

"Was getting cornered part of your plan?!" admonished Sana as the footsteps from behind grew ever closer. "We're trapped!"

"No, I'm getting us out of this pickle!" He grabbed an Apricorn, and started to book it down the hallway. The group in front of him soon caught on, as they had heard the slamming of the door and the commotion that followed behind it.

Immediately ahead, about halfway down the long hallway leading to various offices on the floor, was the unmistakable source of the vile stench. Two Pokemon waited alongside the grunts, defending the floor's elevator. One creature was a bulky tortoise, a Torkoal resting low to the ground; its shell was made of burning coal, belting thick smog like a volcano. Next to Torkoal stood a hulking beast of what appeared to be trash. There were all sorts of thrown-out paper, desks, and even an office water cooler protruding out from its toxic body. The creature opened its huge mouth, or at least what appeared to be its mouth, and menacingly spewed out a clump of glowing acid onto the floor burning straight through it. It was a giant Garbodor. It had feasted on all of the garbage and had grown incredibly powerful in an office setting.

"Krokorok, go!" he said releasing the newest member to his team. Appearing from the flash of light, the overweight crocodile snarled and stood up on his hind legs to face the opposition. Feyera had no way to commune with it other than words since it was a Dark Type and immune to his psyonics. "Charge in with Bulldoze!" said Feyera with a firm voice.

Fortunately Krokorok complied. He barreled forward surprisingly fast considering how big he was. As he ran forward in a rushing fury he knocked over everything in his path. Chairs, cubicle walls, lamps; nothing was safe. Like a wrecking ball of destruction, the Krokorok continued his thrashing charge down the hall straight at Torkoal and Garbodor.

"Garbodor, use Sludge Bomb!" yelled a skittish voice from behind the massive pile of animated trash. It sucked in in air and burped out a purplish blob of filth directly at Krokorok from down the hall.

"React quickly with Dig, get into those plaster walls!" Feyera told Krokorok in the nick of time. He smashed through the hallway wall with impressive force, causing the Sludge Bomb to barely miss upon its detonation. Krokorok continued to charge unabated through the adjacent office. Krokorok then burst out of the side of the wall next to his opponent. Garbodor reeled backwards as Krokorok slashed and tore at the behemoth, knocking pieces of trash free from its massive body taking up the room.

"Torkoal, use Flame Wheel! Knock it away!" hollered another grunt. "Incinerate 'em!" The fire tortoise beside Garbodor pulled its limbs into its shell and spun around, ejecting scorching flames in every direction around it. Spinning, it attempted to smash into Krokorok head on. Krokorok was keen however and managed to avoid most of the strike, though Torkoal did graze his tail with a lick of the flames.

"Counter that attack!" Feyera said following close behind his Pokemon as to not get caught by the team of grunts that had just emerged from the stairwell behind him. His Pokemon seized the shell at
the perfect time, grappling the center. Krokorok's sharp claws dug in to Torkoal's shell, stopping it from spinning. Then Krokorok slamming the tortoise with all his might straight into the off-balance Garbodor. There was a huge burst of fire as Torkoal's still burning body ignited Garbodor. The smell was absolutely rancid, but the burning pile of garbage had cleared the way forward.

"Nice work!" Feyera commended Krokorok. Krokorok appeared to be indifferent to the praise because Feyera could not sense his Pokemon's emotions. He wondered if he would ever be able to understand a Dark Type using psyonics.

"B—backup!" stammered one of the grunts. "Send…backup!" Huge bits of flying rubble charred the walls as Garbodor decomposed in a bonfire-sized blaze. The group blocking the elevator doors was forced to retreat, but their backup was already on the floor chasing Feyera, Krokorok, and Sana from the other end of the hallway out from the stairwell they had come from.

Thinking fast, Feyera pulled down one of the small decorative yellow curtains in the hallway which had been adorning a windowed door, and wrapped it tightly around his palm. Pulling Sana along, he brought her to the elevator. The elevator door was closed except there was a small gap between the metal. With the help of Krokorok, slowly they managed to pry the door open with their combined strength. Upon opening it, he quickly urged Sana inside. "C'mon, hurry!"

She would not budge however. Sana looked at Krokorok with hateful eyes and dared not approach. Feyera saw the problem and recalled the Dark Pokemon back to the Apricorn so she would move. There were footsteps coming from outside the hall. He heard the doors to the nearby offices being smashed open forcefully by charging Pokemon. With little time left, he lifted Sana up and told her to press on the elevator's ceiling in on the engineer's access panel. At first she was a little embarrassed by him lifting her up like he did, but she nevertheless complied and pushed open the hole. He gave her another boost and she made it up to above the elevator's roof. Then she reached down with an arm to help him get up there as well.

The voices from the grunts were practically outside the elevator doors. With the curtain fabric in his hand, he grasped onto one of the taut cable wires supporting the elevator. "We're going to go up fast. How good are you at judging distance?"

She looked alarmed by his suggestion. "W-what do you mean!?!"

"It's kinda hard to tell with only one eye working and…" he stated to say. She looked very distraught, perhaps even more so than when she was glaring odiously at Krokorok. "Ah, don't worry about it!" he smiled. "I've done this before… I think."

"What do you mean, 'you think'?! Are you trying to get us killed?"

"Memory's still a little foggy — No thanks to you of course! — But this should work. Pretty sure this is a newer elevator than the one down in the Sanctum after all. Just hold on tight and we'll get out of this together." She grabbed onto him closely. "All right. I need you to use your psychic abilities to break those two latches."

She listened to him without protest, which was exceedingly rare. It probably had to do with her heart being so close to his. The incredible warmth he felt meant she was drawing power from his heart and combining it with her own. One of the cable supports split in half from her projected telekinetic force causing the elevator to lurch down on one side. Nervously, she squeezed on to his wrist tighter. "All right, on the count of three let's snap the other one…"

"Hurry guys, they're in here!" shouted someone from inside the elevator directly below them.
"Three!" he insisted hugging her tight and forcing his heart against hers. As they touched hearts, he felt a wave of warmth fill his body. The other emergency support latch snapped.

The elevator went sailing down the dark shaft beneath them as they were pulled up by the counterweight on the other side of the pulley system. They heard a long scream echo below but it was quickly blotted out by a loud crash. As they shot up through the dark elevator shaft, the floors whizzed past them at blistering speed.

Sana let out a squeal of excitement, feeling the air rush past her as the pulley system carried them skyward faster than she thought was possible. Eventually there was a loud crash from below as the counterweight hit something. Unfortunately, they had stopped between two floors, so there was no clear exit – only thousands of feet of nothing but dark empty air below. Sana was hugging on to him tightly and her heart was very warm, pressing rhythmically next to his. So heated it from all the feelings of her excitement, he could feel everything she felt with each breath that brought it against his. She let out a sigh of relief. "That was really fun," she gasped, "now I know why you like to do this!"

"Fun is hardly the reason!" he insisted with a half-smile. "I'm a man on a mission, and this is typically the quickest way forward!"

"You're full of it!" she laughed.

As the two of them twirled around the dangling wire like puppets held on an unsteady string, clutching on to one another and trying to reorient themselves, there was another sounds from below them in the elevator shaft. It sounded like the groan of metal at first, but there was also a deep, almost organic rumbling present within the strange noise.

A horrid screech came from below, causing her to jump and dig closer against him. He tried to see past her, down where the noise was coming from, but with her this close it was difficult to say the very least. He tried looking down over her shoulder. Her hair and the dangling parts of her dress were blocking most of the view, but it didn't take very long for him to see what he needed to.

"Uh…that can't be right, the power is out…" he said in disbelief.

Two glowing orange lights were approaching. The sound however, was the worst part; it was the echoing noise of jagged steel grating on steel. Persistently the noise seemed to increase in intensity, shifting from burst to burst as the two orange lights came further and further up the otherwise dark elevator shaft.

Sana also looked down and she started to panic. "Thas Feyera, what is that?!" she asked with a nervous whisper.

He had no idea since it was too dark to even see the wall beyond Sana's shivering shoulder. "It sure as hell isn't an elevator," he replied over the rough and resonating sound of scraping metal echoing from down below.

"I'm scared," she said with a tremble that shook them back and forth on the dangling wire he was still clinging onto desperately. "There's something down there…something cold, like iron. It's… moving…! Wriggling!"

"Snap out of it Sana!" he said firmly, "You can't be afraid right now!" While he did care for her, he also knew that he couldn't afford to be channeling her fright at a time like this. He needed to think of a plan quickly, and having her heart feed his heart fears was a recipe for disaster due to the feedback loop. When she was afraid, he was afraid; flinching in fear was not going to get them anywhere.
The two orange lights were nearly upon them; for the first time, they looked more like eyes. "Can it be? Is it a Pokemon?" Sana asked trembling. The shaking continued as the dark figure grumbled against the sides of the dark shaft. It let out a low, deep growl that sounded like the hiss of a pressure compressor and opened its massive mouth which reflected off the dim lights near the floor that was above them. The beast was finally within view.

Those steel, hinged jaws… Feyera knew what species it was right away from his intuition as a former researcher. "Steelix!" he exclaimed as it twisted its snakelike body in an attempt to tunnel further up the elevator shaft toward them. With a loud groan of its heavy jawbone lowering, it exhaled a searing wave of Flamethrower up the elevator shaft.

"DO SOMETHING!" Sana hollered in his ear. The Steelix's hot breath caused the entire chamber below them to heat up like an oven. Sweltering heat could not escape from the metal tunnel, causing the whole place to heat up quicker than an industrial furnace at Fuego Ironworks.

"Dammit, Sana; I'm trying!" He couldn't reach his Pokéballs while holding on to the cable wire. Sana's body wrapped around him was in the way and he needed both his arms to support both of their weight. Granted, Sana did not weigh very much, but his lack of arm strength was weak enough to make holding up the both of them a substantial challenge. His hands became slippery from the sweltering heat. His forehead was burning up and the Pokemon below them was unrelenting in its attack. The temperature kept rising; his hopes of escaping from this hellhole alive were melting.

"Curse it all…I'm NOT about to get cooked alive!" he said snatching the closest Apricorn he could manage on account of Sana being in the way. "There!" he exclaimed in relief.

The bright light illuminated the elevator shaft. Out from the light came the Krokorok, who quickly grappled on to the side of the wall. Being overweight, his limb strength was notably impressive. "Krokorok," he said looking the Pokemon dead in the eyes – he didn't know if this new Pokemon would understand the order, but he had to try – "Rock Climb your way to the top, and get to the axle this cable leads to. Use Snatch and pull the other end of the wire with all your strength!"

He did not expect the Pokemon to understand him without psyonics. In fact, he had only asked due to the heated delirium from the raging firestorm below. The Krokorok's half shrouded eyes seemed capable of understanding the request. With a burst of unprecedented speed, the hefty Krokorok hoisted himself up crawling vertically up the wall with a powerful climb. He only had to keep his hurried climbing consistent to arrive at the top. From there, he jumped to the metal platform housing the mechanical pulley system. With both arms he tugged on the severed piece of knotted cable and hoisted his new trainer up.

Feyera was sweating profusely from the searing heat caused by the encroaching Steelix, yet felt an unbelievable sense of relief when he felt himself rising up. Sana was so distraught by the entire event she had been shaking in fear. As they neared closer to the top, Feyera started wobbling back and forth to swing himself toward one of the top-floor elevator doors. Steelix was not about to let its prey escape, it roared and continued to climb, this time spitting out a bright blue Dragon's Breath from its mouth.

"Watch out!" Sana said suddenly in his arms. She tried to deflect the rising blue fire with her Light Screen, but was unable to channel the effect without using both her arms to form the shield. "D-don't worry," she said as the weak shield faded from view. "Dragons cannot harm Life Fabric!" she said in a manner that revealed how unsure she really was.

"I'm not taking any chances!" Feyera bellowed as he swung the furthest he had yet and grasped on to the inside of the door. His boot caught on to the door's edge and he managed to hold himself and Sana there by clasping on the thin gap between the metal. "Stop worrying about that shield! Help me
open this door!" he said. The two of them managed to pry the door open, and tumbled out of the elevator shaft back onto a solid floor. Blue flames continued to rise up through the elevator behind them.

Feyera jumped back into action to protect his new Pokemon who had just saved them. "Krokorok!" he said loudly over the gale of flame. "Use Knock Off! Send that whole mechanism down!"

Krokorok must have trusted him because by knocking the pulley system over he was essentially ridding himself of any support to stand on. Huge chunks of metal started to fall from the top platform inside the elevator. Then an enormous mechanical axle the size of Krokorok surrounded by cable fell down. Finally, he saw Krokorok also coming down through the elevator. Quickly, Feyera recalled Krokorok with the Apricorn, bringing him to safety. Meanwhile, the falling debris of the lift system went sailing down, smashing into Steelix with a concussive bang. The rising fire stopped, and he peeked back into the elevator shaft and looked down to see the metal snake unconsciously sliding back down the way it came with a huge pulley system half buried in its skull.

"Welcome to the Skylounge!" said the recording of an overly cheerful female. The noise shocked them, since it came from an automated speaker right outside the elevator. It must have sensed motion.

"Guess there's enough residual power for cheesy voice prompts. Looks like we made it," Feyera said dusting off the dirt from his outerwear.

"That's one way of putting it…" Sana replied quite out of breath.

The hallway they were in seemed to stretch on a long ways since it was curved around the building. It was adorned with fine red carpeting and the paneled walls featured famous artwork of Kalos artists.

"Phew… Nice place," he said trying to catch his breath. "Before we go any further though…" He sent out Krokorok. The big croc appeared in a flash of light. Sana winced at the sight and hid behind Feyera, cowering from the imposing dark type. Krokorok scoffed at Sana and hissed, showing displeasure in his beady eyes.

"I wanted to thank you," Feyera started to say to the Pokemon. It felt strange. This must be how most trainers felt after capturing a new Pokemon. He remembered feeling this way when he first met Brucie, but his own insecurities as a budding trainer had stifled that precious moment. Not this time; Krokorok was a Dark Type and Feyera's psyonics – even if he could use them without risk of the Life Fabric being irremovable – would be unable to reach him. For this reason especially, he wanted to make sure that his newest team member knew that he was a worthy trainer. "I want to give you a name as well."

Krokorok beat his stomach playfully and opened his mouth.

Feyera wasn't really sure if he was hungry again, but he figured he'd keep talking. "You did a great job back there, and even though we don't have a bond you knew what to do when I gave you the responsibility of saving our lives."

Krokorok made a clicking noise, clattering the bottom of his mouth with vigor.

"Anyway… Hm… Thanks." Feyera said simply.

"Are you done yet!?" said an intolerant voice from behind him. "He looks like he's going to eat us!"

The Krokorok frowned and made a low whimper. The thick tail swung back and forth on the carpet.
"Sheesh, Sana. Will you cut that out? You're making him feel bad."

"As if my feelings could ever reach such a dark creature," she huffed. "Bet he only thinks with his stomach and not his heart!"

"Please," Feyera pleaded. "Just give it a rest. I know you don't like Dark Types, however he saved us both from Steelix."

"Who's he?" Sana asked. "Another monster that would sooner eat a fairy..."

"Oh right!" Feyera said causing the Krokorok's membrane-protected eyes to perk up. "You need a name in order to be one of us!"

Krokorok hissed again, and this time his stomach rumbled noisily.

"Mmm, it's gotta be something cool. ...I got it! How 'bout Axel? You did some fine work in the elevator; I'd say it's appropriate!" Feyera said cheerfully.

To his surprise, Axel beamed. He opened and closed his mouth repeatedly and brought his clawed hands together in fists.

"Alright!" Feyera said. "We're a team now, Axel."

"Thas Feyera, let's go..." said Sana tugging on his a recall, he sent the newly named Krokorok back into the Apricorn. This put Sana at ease.

"You should try and be nicer to him," Feyera insisted. "Or am I supposed to teach you how to work together as a team?"

"But he's still a Dark Type," she rebuked bitterly.

"No." Feyera shook his head. "Axel's one of us now."

"Don't come crying to me when it tries to bite your arm off!" She then clutched at the fabric dangling down from the back of Feyera's head. "If he so much as touches my Life Fabric I'll..."

"Enough! — He's not like that anymore. He was only hungry because Ril hadn't been feeding him properly. Now that he's in an Apricorn, his metabolism is paused and is more manageable."

"Watching you try to fish for an excuse is absolutely adorable," she said sarcastically, "but we really should press on, don't you think?"

"For once, you're right," he replied. "Come on. I'll work on your prejudice some other time, research assistant."

"Stop calling me that!"

They had rounded the first portion of the hallway. Scanning the area, there was definitely a change in décor. This next part of the building was lavished in luxury. It was the type of place where only the VIPs of Goldenrod frequented. There was a fancy sign on the nearby wall that read "Delicatina, the Skyscape Restaurant" ahead. Next to it was a menu, complete with a fancy illustration of a posh Delcatty wearing a laced dinner napkin.
"Roof access through Delicatina restaurant," he said softly reading the sign so Sana would understand. "We're almost there."

He continued to run in the direction of the signs, Sana following him closely behind on his heels. Ahead of them was an incredibly massive door. It was made of an elegant cut of wood, perhaps rare mahogany. Feyera tried opening it, but it was bolted shut from the other side. "Solid as a brick. Going to need an assist on this one."

"Tsk, tsk. Can't you do anything on your own besides give orders without my mate's powers?" she joked dryly.

Silently, he backed up substantially from the door; he knew the risks of using psyonics she had told him not long ago. Her repeated bemoaning served as a reminder of his current fragility. "Synchronize with me and help break down this door!" he yelled to Sana. Feyera lowered his shoulder, and charged full sprint at the mighty door. "HAAA…!"

"Devastate it!" she echoed from behind him feeding off his passion.

Simultaneously, Sana unleashed a burst of psychic power in a vibrant magenta wave of energy from the tip of her outstretched arm. The wave of energy cascaded all around the hallway, shattering glass and foyer tables indiscriminately. Together, her mental energy wave and his charge collided with the huge door at full power, smashing it open with a massive crash. It splintered into pieces, bits of the once solid wood sprayed all around in the overwhelming force.

Upon splitting open the barricade, they beheld a sight that was truly stunning. Inside, it was a massive dining hall. The ceiling was at least four stories tall, and there was artwork on every square foot of the lofty walls and ceiling. Enormous crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling. There were enough tables to seat over a thousand people on over forty round set tables. However, this all paled in comparison to the view. Beyond all the seating arrangements, was an enormous wall of glass windows. There were thick curtains, presumably used to block the bright afternoon sunlight of dining guests, but they had been parted wide to show off the incredible vantage.

The sight was breathtaking and inspiring even for a scientist like Feyera. For in the distance was the setting sun, just sinking below the western sea. It was a massive glowing orange orb of seemingly magical energy, the radiant light coloring the thin wisps of paintbrush shaped clouds that hung above the far horizon. The sky was a deep pink, flushed with the light of the setting sun. Below, the countless buildings of Goldenrod faded in the final shadow of daylight as the last rays of the sun only reached the high point where they were. Even though they were both in quite a hurry, the marvelous view took their breath away. Neither of them had ever seen such a scene from this high vantage. "It's beautiful," Sana said wrapping her arm around his. She was awestruck by the incredible view. Feyera was at a loss for words to express his innermost feelings. A place like this felt like a personal cloud in heaven.

"…Clink, clink, clink." It was the unmistakable sound of glass against glass. However, the deliberate, rhythmic nature of the noise was almost taunting, like a slow clap. Feyera quickly averted his eyes from the majestic sunset and looked at where the noise was coming from. He couldn't believe it. There standing before him was a man he recognized. A man that had tried to kill him before. A man from Team Rocket.

"…!" It was Braddock. But he was not the same. His right arm had been changed, morphed somehow; his limb had been transformed into a twisted set of metal pieces to imitate a human limb. In his artificial arm's metal fingers, he held three flute champagne glasses, which he was steadily and rhythmically knocking against each other to make the clinking noise. On and on went the obnoxious sound; it repeated, over and over, as he slowly looked up at Feyera with a maniacal grin on his
twisted and scarred face.

"You're finally here," the dark haired man said shaking the drinking glasses so hard in his steel hand that they shattered into thousands of pieces. "Kept me fucking waiting!"

"You?!!" Feyera exclaimed.

"You know him?" Sana asked with a confused look on her face. To this question, Feyera nodded.

"After all this time, I'm finally able to exact my revenge for what you did to me on the S. S. Anne! Haha…hahahahaha!" Brad hacked in a laugh of madness. "After all this waiting, after all this suffering I've endured, you've finally arrived like I was told you would: as a frail dog, returning to his master!"

"You're alive?!" Feyera said, still stupefied at the sight.

"If you can call this… THIS…living!" Brad retorted, raising his mechanical arm piece into what resembled a fist. "My life ended… I'm nothing but a husk of a man broken by your wicked perversion of the world! You'll pay for what you did to me!"

"You got it all wrong! I tried to save you from the falling ship funnel!" Feyera replied defensively raising his voice. "And that was after you and your bitch tried to kill me!"

"What bitch?!!" spat Brad.

"Hrm? Your lady-friend. …The blonde," Feyera said somewhat perplexed.

"What the hell are you talking about?!" Brad bellowed. "I don't know any blonde!"

"Hold on!" Feyera was feeling an alarming amount of unsteadiness at what was being said. The woman Brad was with had been affectionate to him, she was a meaningful part of his criminal life. How could he possibly just forget her?

"What?" Brad asked with a venomous glare as he clutched his throbbing mechanical arm.

"Her name…!" Feyera said trying to think back. "Her name was Laurie! The two of you were together! You attacked me together on the ship. …Don't you remember!?"

"WHO?" bellowed Brad from across the room.

"No… No way… Your memories… What you had with her… You forgot as well…" Feyera was almost speechless. He looked over at Sana, but she shrugged. The two of them had never met before after all. Sana couldn't have wiped Brad's memories.

"Your mind tricks won't work this time!" Frenzied by the accusations Brad hollered back. "I was ordered to capture you! But don't you worry; you're not going in a cage this time around. No, not this time. Now I'm going to get even. I'm going to take the great pleasure in killing you."

"After I kicked you and Laurie's ass, you're still looking for more?" Feyera asked angrily. "You've got another thing coming!"

"Who the hell is Laurie!?!" shouted Brad with a look of utter confusion on his twisted face.

"You warped him," Sana said. "The man he was has already perished in a flood of emotion."

"No. I didn't… I couldn't… That's not what I did…!"
"His emotions are channeling pure rage and he remembers nothing except how to feel that sensation," she explained to him. "Only our species can cause such a reaction in the hearts of humans."

"Dammit!" he swore. He was angry at himself for causing this. Doubly so, considering he hassled Sana for tampering with his own memories and emotions on a regular basis. "Can we save him?"

"Save him?!" she asked with a dismal look in her cherry eyes. "...We can't bring back that which is dead, thas Feyera."

"DEAD!? Wait...then what about me?"

"Your memories are connected to your emotions, yes. However, his entire past is swallowed by emotions sowed by hatred."

Quickly, Feyera put his arm in front of Sana and said, "You stay back. I'll handle this!"

"You can't possibly fight him by yourself; he's a maelstrom of frenzied emotion thanks to you!"

"Sana, this is my mess. I'll handle him!" he said louder.

"You'll what?!" Brad retorted with a furious shout. "You'll 'handle me'?! Do you have any idea what you've done?!"

Judging from the lack of arm he had, his robotic appendage and scars probably had to do with the destruction of the S. S. Anne. He couldn't get away in time. What was far worse however, was the emotional damage. He had completely lost the memory of his partner Laurie. All those memories of their love, all the time they spent with one another. Gone. Did the heart's powers cause that too? That seemed to be the only logical answer. "I didn't want this," Feyera insisted. "Not even for someone like you."

"NO!" Brad yelled smashing one of the nearby tables with his metal arm. It broke through the durable mahogany with ease, leaving a small crater behind, and causing the large dining table to collapse inwards on itself. Loud and volatile white steam hissed out from where his mechanical elbow was, blowing the loose cloth covering it up like a bedsheet, revealing pistons that resembled a pile bunker on the upper section of his forearm. "Shut your mouth, wicked scientist! This...everything is all your fault! I'll break you... STRANGLE YOU for what you've done to me! I won't rest until you're dead!"

"All that rage... I can feel it radiating," he said as his chest grew warm. "...What the hell have I done to him?"

"Something's wrong!" Sana said hastily. "He's not alone!"

"Your miserable life...! And the lives of those around you! I will extinguish them all! GO!" A shattering noise filled the large banquet hall as a giant Pokemon smashed through the huge glass window, breaking open the view to the skyline. The strong wind howled through the breach. Standing before them, a massive orange creature. It had burst through the huge western windows on its wings unfurled its thick tail and arched its neck back with a colossal roar that rattled all the furniture in the room. The cacophony of sound and destruction of the long buffet table where the creature had landed was enough to cause both Feyera and Sana to flinch backwards from the shockwave as a cloudy mixture of dust, glass, bowls, and bleached white tablecloths flew through the air.

"Ah damn, I remember when you were just a Dragonair messing around with the weather," Feyera
groaned. "Looks like you're all grown up now."

"You know this Pokemon too?" Sana asked anxiously looking up at the beast. Its horn almost touched the lofty glass chandeliers when it stood up on its back legs.

"Back when it was a Dragonair it nearly toppled the Anne using its weather manipulation to summon a dangerous sea storm," he explained under his breath. "I would have drowned if Des hadn't saved me."

Sana was already focusing on channeling her Psychic energy to form a thin shield of crystal between them and Brad's Dragonite. "I thought they only existed in legends!"

"We're going to become legends ourselves if we don't come up with a plan," Feyera told her.

Dragonite reared up and flexed its meaty muscles covered by scales. It let out another ferocious howl that rattled the entire building. "This is payback, Feyera!" Brad shouted after his Dragon Pokemon's brutal battle cry. "This is vengeance for what you did to me…! You and your monstrous powers are to blame for what I have become! I had endless time… Time to think… Time to plan… Time to plan for this day. In the last moments of your life, you will know the indomitable hatred you've allowed me to assemble!"

"I had nothing to do with your foolhardy mission!"

"Oh but you did!" Brad laughed manically. "Ahahaha! Of course you did. In the end you ruined my life. I'm going to end yours as painfully as possible you miserable prick!"

"Even after all you did," Feyera said, "I can't believe I actually tried to save you from the collapsing debris—"

"—You should have let me die when you had the chance!" yelled Brad over the howling wind from the broken sky-lounge window. "You could have left me there, half-buried in that blasted ship's deck to perish…! But no! Because of you – because of your sickening sense of self-righteousness, I've been mutilated beyond recognition! I HATE YOU! Every day — every waking hour of unwanted existence —, my hatred of you has grown without end!"

Feyera shook his head in acknowledgement of his past deeds. And then it hit him — the responsibly, the profound sense of onus for this man's endless suffering. He reached a moment of personal clarity. He felt lighthearted, sobered from doubt and optimistic to face the daunting challenge before him.

"Allow me to release you from your hatred then," he said decisively assuming a battle stance. Bending his knees slightly, he grasped Sana's arm to channel energy to her heart through their bond, and snatched up an Apricorn from his belt holster. "Let's end this once and for all, Brad."

"FEYERAAAAA!" Brad bellowed. "I'll have your ugly head on a silver platter, you son of a bitch! Dragonite, REND HIM! Kill him and his Pokemon! HYPER BEAM!"

A powerful sphere of pure energy gathered forth in the Pokemon's wide maw. It reared its belly onto the ground, smashing tables as it charged its attack. Its razor sharp claws dug into the solid mahogany floors effortlessly. Grounding itself on all fours, it released a tremendous ray of destructive light from the center of its mouth with an incredible surge that broke the sound barrier.

Feyera shoved Sana to the side, pushing her far out of the way. Split apart, they managed to narrowly evade the unbelievable burst of energy from the opponent's Pokemon. However, now her augmented powers from being linked together with his heart were effectively returned to normal. Even at her normal strength Sana was a force to be reckoned with, but this was a Dragonite — a
mythical creature capable of reshaping entire coastlines with hurricanes.

Rolling on his side from the momentum, Feyera quickly grasped onto the edge of nearby table, pulling himself up, and sent out a beast of his own. "Des!" yelled the young researcher. A burst of light shone forth from the Apricorn as Feyera released his Gyarados. Des roared as loud as the opposing dragon, uncoiling her body in a manner equally destructive to the banquet hall furniture. Feyera jumped to his feet and ordered, "Des, get in there with an Ice Fang attack! Strike it in the neck while Dragonite's recovering!"

Desperado nodded and twirled her serpentine body outward, stretching herself closer to Brad's Dragonite. Her four fangs sparkled brightly with bright blue energy as she opened her mouth wide and snapped at the Dragonite's thick neck like an Ekans would. As she tore through the fleshy outer membrane of Dragonite's hide something strange happened. The scales on Dragonite's body shimmered brightly. There was a mighty crackle and flash of bright light.

As Des bit down using her Ice Fang, the Dragonite's scales resisted the impact, causing her to recoil in shock at the unprecedented resistance. The tough hide of dense scales managed to reflect her attack with their battle-hardened nature. There were additional layers of scales covering the Pokemon's body, the inner cells of which had hardened its very hide to become like diamonds. [Hu- wee! That there leather's tough as nails, Edgy!] Des said as her large head withdrew back from Dragonite's strong hide. [Reckon I can't punch through! This one sure knows how to stand the gaff!]

"Damn!" Feyera said quickly, "It's Multiscale! Des, we'll have to wear it down first before you can penetrate it!"

[Aye, pardner,] she said twirling her long body along the ground, circling Dragonite menacingly like a snake, as it was still reeling in recovery from launching the Hyper Beam.

"Gather your energy and raise your agility!" Feyera quickly ordered Des to follow up with her Dragon Dance technique.

[Ought to get a wiggle on!] Des swung her tail into a wide arc as red energy surrounded her body. Her charging glow of rich burgundy was unmistakable as she channeled archaic draconic energy through her long body.

"Dragonite, hit it with Thunder Wave!" Brad ordered. "Stun it so it can't react!" The Dragon Pokemon's two antenna and his stubby horn glowed yellow with electrical energy. Static formed all around the creature as it hoisted its stubby arms into the air. A huge bolt of energy shot forth from its horn, crackling through the air with enough ferocity to shake the entire building.

The crackling energy collided with Des's aquatic body with unbridled fury. She twitched as it electrocuted her, causing her to convulse involuntarily. [Oww,] she groaned in a weakened growl. [Knock'd galley west by that one.]

"Des, don't give up!" Feyera encouraged. "Use Aqua Tail to launch up at the ceiling. Aim for that chandelier and use Crunch!"

[Alley-oop!] The Gyarados used her powerful Aqua Tail technique to propel her long body skyward. Stretching out, she snapped her mouth shut around the golden chain holding up the massive crystal dome. With a definitive snap, the chain broke causing the massive glass fixture to fall down.

"W-what?!” Brad exclaimed. "Dodge it, Dragonite!" His orders came too late however, Dragonite was already buffeted by the shards of glass. The sharp pieces sliced through the creature's wings,
leaving small holes in their wake. The rest of the creature's hide was resilient enough to resist the barrage. Dragonite had managed to cover its venerable belly.

"Des, drop down with a Bounce attack!"

"Dragonite, use Thunder Punch as an uppercut!"

"Oh no!" Feyera thought, seeing that Des had already dropped down from the chain. Dragonite was still curled up, but its palm was crackling with electrical power, ready to strike once Des was within range. A direct electrical attack would be fatal to her! Desperately he relayed to Sana, "Hit Dragonite with all you got!"

From the other side of the battlefield Sana focused and smashed her hands together, unleashing a wave of telekinetic force. Just as Dragonite lifted itself off the ground to use Thunder Punch, the bubble of energy slammed into Dragonite scoring a direct hit into its unprotected side. Dragonite reeled on his back leg, lost balance and began to stumble. With a signature [Yippee-ki-yay!] Des smashed down onto Dragonite, finishing the job and knocking the beast prone.

"NO!" yelled Brad. "ENOUGH! END IT, DRAGONITE! OUTFRAGE!"

Reckless light shot forth from the dragon's maw, as it reared back on both legs and howled at the tall ceiling. In a deafening cry of indignation, it lashed out in all directions, shaking the entire room with its incredible power. Tables and chairs were turned to splinters, porcelain plates and stainless steel utensils flew through the air in every direction imaginable. The mighty crashes of Dragonite's outrage-induced thrashing rocked the entire building like an earthquake. It heaved, breaking everything around it as a furious embodiment of certain destruction. Dragonite's scaly body was covered in a bright yellow light; it shot beams of energy from its open mouth in every direction, vaporizing matter and burning holes deep into walls, floors, ceilings, and furniture indiscriminately.

"NO!" Feyera yelled at the cataclysmic sight. It was truly frightful to behold. Anything close-by was decimated and the pulsing beams of light from its mouth were strong as ion guns. And despite all this, through all this chaos and confusion, Des held on bravely. She tightly wrapped herself against the raging dragon coiling around the beast with all her body's length. Because of this, Dragonite could not manage to hit her with the beams of light, and its wildly flailing arms were unable to rip her off. This in turn caused Dragonite to rampage even more. The Pokemon's anger was nearing its peak. Searching for something to take out its rage upon, Dragonite howled and charged toward Sana with wild bloodlust.

"Sana!" Feyera started to say, "Get out of the way!" But it was too late, she had already tried to move, but was not fast enough. Dragonite had been hastened in its rampage, and it lashed out with a furious Dragon Claw after closing the distance. She awkwardly tried to evade the attack, but Dragonite was too large to run from. She backed up until her back hit against a table knocked on its side. Realizing she could no longer retreat, Dragonite attacked again with full force. Slashing and stabbing wildly, it got her with the second swipe, nailing her abdomen with its claws.

"NO!" Feyera shouted as the Dragonite shoved his massive claws straight through her garb and deep into her stomach. "SA—…!" He tried to yell but no words would come out. He could not believe what he was seeing. She had been run through; Dragonite's shimmering claws appeared raised out her back. The monstrosity roared as Gyarados tried to shift all her weight and pull Dragonite back. However it was too late. Dragonite's claw had gone all the way through Sana, directly below and to the right of her heart shard. Pinned by the impalement, Sana looked over at Des and then at Feyera before she weakly closed her eyes.

He felt the gravity of what had just transpired all at once. None of it felt real. His entire mind felt like...
it had shut off. Feyera felt water in his eye from what he had just seen. Everything was foggy. It
couldn’t be real. None of it was comprehensible. Memories of Jill's death came flooding back.
Helplessly, Feyera watched as Dragonite flung Sana's limp body like a rag off its claws and into a
nearby table with a snort. The sound of her frail body striking the solid wood was heart wrenching.
Only after Dragonite let out a satisfied hiss did he notice that he was shaking uncontrollably.
Dragonite glared at Feyera with murderous eyes.

"Kill them, kill them all!" Brad had been yelling from afar.

"This…this isn't happening…" Feyera said over and over in his head. "This can't be real… This isn't
real!" he exclaimed.

"Think again!" Brad insisted. "Now it's your turn! Die like the dog you are!"

Dragonite lumbered toward him, but was unable to walk straight due to Des coiling around the
massive dragon's body. "Des…!" Feyera cried out realizing what she was doing to protect him.
Strangely, he could no longer hear the voice of his Pokemon. She was roaring vigorously, clearly
struggling to slow down Dragonite's advance but there were no words he could understand. So
wrought with emotion, he could no longer understand her through the bond.

No longer rampaging, Dragonite managed to knock Des off with another burst of Thunder Wave
from its antenna. Des fell to the ground in Dragonite's wake. But the Pokemon was fixed on Feyera,
approaching according to the execution orders of Brad. Feyera glared at the Dragonite. Working up
the courage to fight back, he said, first to himself, and then to his adversary, "This has to end."

From behind Dragonite's imposing presence Des' entire body was hastily moving, twisting about in
quick coils. She was ready to make a play. And despite their inability to communicate, they both
knew that it would have to be a huge play. "Now it's time to unleash all that stored potential, Des!"
He swung his arm out in an order, "Iron Head!"

"Dragonite, about-face and repel it with Hurricane!" Brad ordered.

The Dragonite spun around. It flapped veiny, bat-like wings with supernatural force, creating a
maelstrom of windy fury in the banquet hall. However, Des was not phased by the windy resistance.
The crown of her head was shimmering with the power of steel. With uninhibited resolution, she
shot straight though the waves of wind like a torpedo on target. Her body extended like a missile,
speedily acquiring its target with deadly and unmatched precision.

"Dragonite, don't let Gyarados close in!" commanded Brad. "Use Dragon Tail and bat it away!"

Dragonite swung its meaty tail upward in a last ditch effort to block Des' approach. Des was right on
target, she had aimed for Dragonite's weak point – its belly. In trying to protect its sensitive
underbelly, Dragonite was forced to bring its Dragon Tail up on an angle. This gave Des the perfect
trajectory. "NOW! Use the momentum and let Dragonite's tail guide you right up to its neck!"

She smashed her head alongside Dragonite's rising tail, her long body traveling up bulky tail with all
the speed she had built up. The tail's curving angle sent her straight up to Dragonite's head. "It's the
moment to strike! Des, give it the Ice Fang!" shouted Feyera over the hurricane gale howling through
the shattered window.

Des opened her giant maw wide. Her fangs once again turned blue, but this time they were steaming
white clouds of stored power from the Dragon Dance. They shimmered with clear light, like mighty
icicles forged in subzero temperatures. With a single bite, she chomped down on Dragonite's
exposed neck; her glowing fangs penetrated deep through Dragonite's Multiscale. As she bit down
bright green draconic blood splattered out from the creature's jugular.

Dragonite tried to howl out in pain, but could not muster the strength. It wobbled and tried to tear Des off with its disoriented arms. However, Des held on fiercely as the opponent's Pokemon continued to lose blood. Eventually, the bleeding became too much for the Pokemon to bear, and it collapsed with a mighty crash that cleaved a massive buffet table in half. Des released herself from Dragonite, and let out a victorious roar that shook the entire floor. She was so exhausted from the fight that she too collapsed.

Feyera did not feel victory. In fact he did not feel anything. There was no unseeing that fateful attack. Sana – the Pokemon he never wanted yet found himself with – had been impaled. She had been brutally run through by Dragonite's claws. Yet he could not bring himself to say what had happened. If he did, he was deathly afraid it would be real; by not acknowledging the outcome of what he had witnessed, he drowned himself in a feverish hope that she was not killed. He felt tears in both his eyes, despite the Life Fabric covering one of them. As his rattled gaze traveled from the defeated Dragonite toward where Sana's body had been tossed, he heard a loud click – the unmistakable priming of a weapon. He turned back around to look.

"IT'S OVER! This is the end for you!" A rocket shot out from Brad's raised mechanical arm. A huge cloud of smoke followed in its trail.

Feyera felt something brush against his shoulder, and there was no mistaking the sensation. He knew the feeling all too well. It was Sana's heart. She jumped in to try and stop the bullet by using the combined power of their hearts. A thin Reflect shield of light appeared in front of him, interposing between him and the rocket. Even with all the strength of their hearts against one another, it was still not enough to stop the impact. The veil of protection she had conjured with the power of their two hearts only served to spread the missile's impact force over a wider surface area. The resulting dynamism was still devastating enough to send Feyera flying backwards and straight out through the open window behind him.

He was suddenly free, where he felt nothing but open air all around him. Spinning upside down, he frantically grasped on to a dangling curtain that was blown out of the window from the huge banquet hall. He abruptly felt himself stop free-falling into the empty orange sky; however, a quick glance down gave him serious vertigo. Even the largest of buses and trucks on the street two thousand feet below were indistinguishable from being ants. And the terrible wind – the gusts of air knocked him around against the glass side of the floor below the banquet hall like a helpless rag-doll. Each time his shoulder smashed against the glass, he felt weaker, and less able to maintain his desperate hold on the curtain. At first he was overcome with incredible relief that she was somehow alive, but he realized that dangling out of the two-thousand foot building, this was probably the last place on earth one should feel relief.

To make matters worse, when he looked up he saw Brad holding Sana in a neck-choke out the window. She was squirming and fighting in midair, tugging against his hand with both her arms, kicking his body with both her legs, but unable to break free from his mechanical steel arm.

"N-no!" Feyera yelled at Brad from below, but the howling wind rushing against the side of the skyscraper muted his voice. He felt powerless, completely unable to do anything but watch her struggle until Brad decided to either finish choking her to death or drop her one hundred stories.

The metal bar which the dangling curtain was attached to suddenly gave way to Feyera's weight, bending down and providing more slack. It was now or never before it broke from his weight. With fierce determination in his bright emerald eye, he kicked his leg out to steady himself against the building's glass. The polished surface was initially slippery on his sole, but his whole boot held
enough traction. With a deep breath, he tugged himself parallel with the building, using the curtain dangling out the huge opening to support the upper half of his body with a firm grasp on it using his left arm. Next, he ran full clip in a diagonal fashion up the glass, pulling on the curtain with all of his strength to steady his dangerous parkour.

Brad however, had excellent peripheral vision, and saw Feyera attempting to run back up toward him. Standing on the edge, Brad immediately released the metal arm's hold on Sana's thin neck, intending to drop her straight out of the building with an effortless toss.

Feyera was ready for this though, he used his free right arm mid-run to release Bruce from the Apricorn. With a flash of light, the Charizard appeared in front of him, and unfurled his wings threateningly. Using his powerful leg muscles he launched himself off from the side of the skyscraper's glass shattering it. Gliding on his new wings, Brucie snatched Sana with his arms as she began to fall. The two of them coasted on the substantial breeze right back in through wide open wall. Bruce set Sana down and she gasped for air she had been deprived of, uneasily holding her delicate neck with both her hands.

Meanwhile, Feyera had closed in on Brad, who had been briefly looking the other way considering a Charizard had just flew by and caught his intended victim. Using the running momentum he had built up from dashing, Feyera barreled in through the shattered windowpane - tugging hard on the curtain to yank himself back inside and at the same time managing to take it with him around Brad's stupefied body.

Though he only managed to wrap around Brad once with the curtain, it was enough to stop him from using his enhanced robotic arm. Brad twisted as he was caught by the coiling and tried to use the force of his hydraulic powered arm to break up and out of the cloth. In response, Feyera pulled even harder on the fabric to keep the arm pressed against Brad's body where it could not do much.

Brad swore in anger, and Feyera motioned with his head up at where the curtain was still attached to the partially bent metal rod supporting it. "Bruce, Fireblast!" he commanded.

"Trust me, you won't be missed!" Feyera yelled as he dropkicked Brad straight in the center of the face with the bottom of his Alterieno boot. There was a loud and distinctive noise of crunching facial bones. The impact was more than enough to send Brad flying out the side of the skyscraper window. He plummeted down like a bright meteor; part of the curtain was still brightly alight with flame, following his body down similar to a long tail of fire.

Panting heavily and watching the sight, Feyera fell to his knees and checked on his Pokemon to make sure they were alight. "How?!" he asked Sana out of breath. He reached out and touched her head just to be sure she was real. Her mint green hair felt as soft and warm as he had remembered. "How did you…?"

"Simple," she smiled. "Don't you remember what I told you before about Life Fabric?"

"I watched you get stabbed!" he insisted. "I saw it happen right in front of me…!"

"You don't sound too happy about that," she said with a faint chuckle. "After all the grief I've
brought you, I was sure you'd be overjoyed."

"No! Why the hell would I be happy about that happening to you!?” Feyera said shaking her by the shoulders. "That's messed up! When I saw what that Pokemon did … you almost made me snap. I couldn't even communicate with my other Pokemon clearly."

"I'm sorry you had to see that," she said squeezing his palm, "but it was the only way, thas Feyera."

"And you're not injured?" Feyera asked with a look of astonishment.

She shook her head. "I was never hit by the Dragon Claw. What you and the other Pokemon saw was an illusion of my Life Fabric. Dragon attacks are ineffective against cloth of the Old Forest."

Again with the fairy tales. He could not muster a response. The incredible relief he felt, that special lightheartedness in his chest, was enough to paralyze him from coming up with a witty remark.

"Life Fabric is more than Fae protection; it can also shift reality in a fantastic way depending on the strength of its wearer. In my case, when the claws reached me, they were repelled by the cloth, almost like a Magnemite. Although, the claws did manage to go through the dress you bought, they were not able to pierce the Life Fabric on my waist. However, I could use this opportunity to create the appearance of being struck, causing Dragonite to waste its Outrage and save the day...again. It's a way of employing 'glamour' if you want to know the Gardevoir term."

"I don't care what you call it," Feyera said. "That saved our lives."

"Mm, listen to you!" she said teasingly. "Don't you care about the scientific names for these things anymore?"

"No," he said. He looked over at Des. She was smiling next to Bruce who was holding on to her side for support like she was a wounded soldier. They needed healing potions for their battle wounds. Fortunately he picked up a few Full Restores earlier on before the city was attacked. "The research terms are not unimportant; once this is over there will be a documentation of all of this pursuant to scientific standards…” he took a deep sigh and felt better. "Thing is I'm just happy everyone's alright."

"Good," she said nudging him. "Come on, thas Feyera; let's finish this."

"Right," he nodded looking out at the endless orange sky through the open wall one last time. "Together."
Chapter 16: The Last of the Executives

This was their last stop. They had made it to the rooftop of the colossal skyscraper.

This was the place where everyday people would tune in to watch the evening news. Directly ahead, atop a massive signal beacon wrought of cold black steel carved into the orange sky. The lofty culprit that had devastated Goldenrod appeared to contrast nature itself. It gave the young man pause to realize people's once normal lives might never be the same again on account of the radio signal used to spur the process of evolution in thousands of Pokemon. The weight of the situation ate at Feyera's already heavy conscience. Yet he refused to be consumed by the fear and uncertainty of the future. He would not allow his determination to falter now. He had come too far. This heinous crime could not sway him from carrying out his mission. The ambitions of Team Rocket were as murky as Feyera's memories. But no matter what they were hoping to achieve, they had done something reprehensible to Goldenrod City. Team Rocket had to be stopped no matter the cost.

"It's time to put an end to this." Feyera stepped out onto the roof through the maintenance access door. The orange light from the setting sun greeted him. Two shadowed figures stood next to the center of the rooftop, at either side of the impressively tall signal beacon. They were in the midst of a conversation with one another.

"—Perspective. That is what shapes history. Look below at the chaos our beacon has sowed. What does it mean to the average citizen?" a familiar man's voice asked. He was speaking charismatically to the other figure.

"It's a coup d'etat from the vantage of lowly civilians," replied the female standing nearby. "Their media has been compromised. Its close ties to their government has already devastated their preconceptions… let alone their lives."

"Indeed," answered the man. "For we stand on the building owned by Mayor Grant himself! And through his media enterprise, we have orchestrated an undeniable narrative. We've placed fear back into the hearts of man. To the citizens of Goldenrod, their government has turned on them. We're witnessing the start of something that cannot be stopped. As the people come to realize that this very media tower brought about the evolutionary signal, we will have accomplished our purpose. We will have destroyed their city, but more importantly, we will have destroyed their faith! This is our finely crafted narrative to the world. One of global significance."

"Hm. A rather grandiose superlative for our role, even coming from you Petrel. But let's not forget our motive: the bottom line. Our plans will assure prosperity for Team Rocket in the years to come," the woman replied tactfully.

"Indeed," answered Petrel. "A very profitable venture in light of recent events. Hmm hmm. Not unlike a fine game of chess, all the pieces must be in place. Each piece has its own special purpose. The Special Forces, our infiltrators under civilian guise, kidnapped the Mayor-Director. Proceed to secure the media center and capture the satellite control apparatus. Siege the bridges to prevent the people's escape by impersonating the Mayor we captured using subterfuge to get the local police on our side. Broadcast the first signal… and call in the Calvary."
"Your intel was correct concerning the pilfered blueprints of the tower. They've got generators up here to power the beacon off the grid," replied the taciturn voice of the woman by Petrel's side. "I'm impressed that they've lasted us this long, but how much more time before…"

"Petrel!" Feyera called out from across the tower. "Your twisted plan ends now!"

"Hah! Speak of the devil. You're right on schedule!" Petrel said pointing at Feyera. Petrel appeared armed to the teeth, toting several firearms in addition to his Pokéball holster. His uniform was jet black, and trimmed with gold on the jacket, with a bold "R" in the center of his manly chest. His hefty rubber boots and gloves were both white with crimson wrappings that matched the Team Rocket logo. Atop his uniform, Petrel also wore an overcoat to keep his body covered from the substantial breeze atop the skyscraper's rooftop.

"So, you knew I would be here," Feyera said calmly. Petrel and a dark red haired woman were both waiting for him on the roof. His stealth had been blown a while ago and it was certainly possible that the grunts had radioed his location in the tower up to the Executives. Yet something felt off. "I should have expected as much from a weasel like you."

"Now now, insults will get you nowhere," Petrel laughed. "Besides, I'd rather be a snake than a traitor."

"That's how you've been spinning it in your head," Feyera sighed. "It won't work against me. For you see, the organization I left – YOUR ORGANIZATION – betrayed all forms of decency!"

"Such bold, passionate hatred. So it's true what the sources say; you can infect others with your contagion remotely without even touching them. How fascinatingly useless. Regardless of your reason for being here, I'm pleased you've finally made it to the signal beacon. Although I must ask: did something slow you down on the way?" asked the red haired woman at Petrel's side with a conceited smile. She was adorned in a Team Rocket Executive's attire, it was mostly white with black accents and a prominent red "R" emblazoned on a black shield over her heart. The uniform she wore was uniquely tailored to be both authoritative and flexible; fitting tightly around her sizable chest and hips, with breaks in the skirt to allow unrestricted leg movements and revealing her pale stockings which covered her graceful legs. Her hair was a rich ruby color, more of a burgundy than a gemstone, with two parts and a fair amount of volume in the back. She wore two golden earrings shaped like long and wide daggers that dangled down from her ears. Her face was cold, fair and serious. She did not get to this important position in the Rocket organization by mere happenstance; behind that feminine face laid hidden a host of ill deeds.

"Your lackeys proved no obstacle. You were expecting me this whole time," he said to her. "That much is clear."

"Of course we were expecting you," replied the woman, her dark burgundy hair blowing in the wind. "You've been on our watch-list for quite some time, genius." While Feyera did not recognize the executive with the ruby hair, he knew who she was from the communications; this had to be Ariana, the last of the four known Team Rocket Executives. Although he had to admit seeing her here face to face made him feel a rather uncomfortable sense of déjà vu.

Petrel stroked his substantial purple goatee with a gloved hand as he spoke up as well. "I didn't think you'd manage to get here as fast as you did. Guess I lost that bet, Ariana." He then combed his large pompadour with a slick action. "You're full of surprises, don't ya know!"

"Spare me the sarcasm," said Feyera. "If not for seeing your Sparrowhawk plans on that server above the Ruins, I would not have made it this far."
"Oh, THAT." Petrel scratched one of his big ears. "So, you happened to parse into our internal communications! Well, LA-TEE-DA, ain't that something," he lampooned in disdainful sing-song. "What a great detective, your police pal must be proud!"

"It wasn't difficult to do, Petrel," he said feeling less and less comfortable by all the variables comprising the Team Rocket strategy of bringing him here.

"Course you'd say that," sneered Petrel. "That cheeky confidence in the face of adversity is all too typical of our key member in the Progenitor Project. Nothing gets by you, eh? Heh… Well except the fact that Goldenrod is falling apart at the seams!"

"I knew what was coming for this city. I should have known after seeing what you did in Azalea. For it was the same unbridled, wicked malice. But despite my knowledge of your plans, I was not able to stop you from unleashing the radio burst." Feyera, feeling guilty inside, lowered his gaze. How many people might be suffering because he did not stop Team Rocket in time? As he looked at the small world far below, he felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility flood inside him. "I won't let this continue!"

"You've already failed," Ariana said coldly. "You failed the people and the Pokemon you sought to protect from our experiment using radio waves. And now you've sealed your fate by coming here."

"What…?" he wondered astonished by the threat.

"Yeah," Petrel agreed with his companion. "So why don't you just give up? This entire city is crumbling just as we planned. Hah. Even if you stopped us now, it's already too late. Your fight's over, doc."

"No it isn't Petrel," he replied seriously. "It's not over yet…" For a moment the wind seemed to calm as his mind wandered into deep thought. Looking out at the sun with his good eye, Feyera saw the sparkling orb of radiant light was nearly kissing the distant ocean's horizon. The sky entire sky was lit up in a deep orange and the clouds where wispy and pink, numerous and swiftly moving in the wind like the thousands of people that lived in the city below. He then looked down. From this vantage point, he could see the rooftops of several other nearby skyscrapers. Some had large penthouses; others had elaborate pools and garden terraces. They were all such peaceful protected alcoves, retreats where the utter chaos of the city seemed miles away.

As the warmth of the low setting sun soothed the fabric against his covered eye, he saw the strawberry haired girl in the distance. Once again, she was standing in a place he intuitively felt – or rather knew – she would be. There, atop one of the nearby apartment building complexes; standing unaccompanied, but also happy. Her recognizable hair danced in the breeze as the orange light from the sun sparkled playfully on her casual summer dress. She was smiling, as always, and her arms were outstretched as if to hug the last remaining rays of daylight before they slipped away below the deep blue ocean on the horizon.

Feyera did not even bother to dispel the illusion by looking at her with his good eye. Somehow the mirage of seeing her there comforted him. Even if she wasn't real. Even if she was just a memory of the past. She didn't have to be real and in front of him right this second for him to appreciate her existence. She was still his memory, present and not able to be stolen from his mind. She was something no amnesia could permanently deprive him of.

Further below, the chaos and confusion continued in the city's streets as the radio burst had caused countless Pokemon to forcibly evolve, destroying infrastructure and damaging the lives of the people that called Goldenrod City home. He felt the incredible gravity of their suffering as the distant echo of sirens blared over two-thousand feet below.
"—Hey! Yoo-hoo! You still with us, doc?" asked a gruff voice belonging to Petrel.

Feyera snapped back to reality. Now was not the time for reflection, now was a time for action. He faced the two executives with conviction building in his heart. "I told you I would stand in the way of your plans. Those living in the city endure violence and hostility at the hands of cold, calculating and dogmatic forces, people like yourself, who see their lives as nothing more than profit margins and testing grounds for mad science experiments. I've seen it firsthand and quite honestly I'm appalled at what you've done. This isn't about me however. Petrel. I'll tell you something else. In the end they'll win. In the end they'll be free from your unbridled ruthlessness."

"Are you serious? That's a riot coming from you!" Petrel replied contemptuously. "You're not a just man. You're a criminal like the rest of us. And don't you forget it!"

"You're right," Feyera sighed as the weight of his past decisions bore down on him. However, he could not afford to wallow in despair; he raised his head back up and said sharply, "Then again, I believe people can change."

"Baloney!" Petrel sneered with a vindictive expression. "Once a crook, always a crook. Try all you want. You're still one of us! After all, you can't un-ring a bell!"

"You wouldn't understand. My Pokemon have taught me otherwise," Feyera said motioning first to Sana at his side and then down to his holster with a glance. "I have them all to thank for teaching me I can become something better."

"Ah, ah, ah!" Petrel chided with a smirk on his face. "Go ahead, why don't you tell me how helpful your Pokemon are again." He drew one of his weapons, a small apparatus that appeared to be made of plated metal hurriedly assembled to be shaped like a standard issue Gauntlet. What differentiated the piece of equipment was a large prism the size of a fist embedded in the barrel. Even in the night sky, the glass edges shimmered brightly.

Sana raised her arms in defense, fearing for Feyera's life since he was without ability to deflect bullets using psyonics. However, Feyera did not flinch in fear of the unknown; instead, he stared down at the strange piece of equipment Petrel was holding and calmly studied it. In doing so, he determined it would not be a threat.

"Crunched some numbers before you arrived… You'll be fine with just your one Pokemon against all twelve of ours!" Petrel quickly snapped back the trigger, and a bright blue flash emitted from the weapon. The electrical light shot forth in a conic shape emanating from the prism, and covered the roof in a quick flash of light. "Hahahaha! How 'bout that, eh? Now your Pokéballs won't help you. Tell me! How's it feel to have your own weapons used against you?"

Feyera smiled right back at Petrel with an arrogant look on his face. Cockily he asked, "You went through all the trouble to replicate my Disrupter?"

"Ha! What are you so smug about? You think having one of these devices makes you so special?" Petrel sneered. "Think again! The joke's on you. See, while you were out cold and we were running tests, I figured I'd do a little inventory search for spoils. Gotta admit, thought your little electro-gun was not even worth stealing, made of rubbish materials found in a hick's backyard shed! However, the concept was intriguing enough to investigate. With a few improvements to the general design, I was able to engineer something far superior on my own. Found it was remarkably simple to build with the right tools."

"Ah, you are quite handy then; color me impressed, I thought you were only good at running away. Indeed, the Mark One was shoddily assembled with just the very basics available. It WAS made
under the desperate conditions that Team Rocket created in Azalea! But no matter, I'm sure with all your improvements to the rudimentary design you've ironed out the kinks of the original. So, why don't we test it? I'm a famous scientist as you undoubtedly recall. Experiment number one — Feyera gripped the first orb on his belt, "— how does it fair against the Apricorn?" Petrel appeared stupefied as Feyera released his first Pokemon with a flash of light from the Apricorn. "Tsk, tsk. Guess it's back to the drawing board for you."

"How…?" Petrel asked airlessly. "What…? No! You were out cold when I took it from you! Not even your witchcraft was functioning due to the psy-bracers we placed on you! You had no idea that I stole your weapon's schematics! The improvements I made were supposed to disable all of your Pokéballs from working properly at once, using a prism as an amplifier! How are you still one step ahead of me…?!"

"You could say I have some old friends," Feyera replied abstrusely, not even trying to conceal a conceited smile.

Ariana turned to her fellow executive as said disapprovingly, "You're incompetent as always, Petrel. Even with your toys. How much time did you waste working on that piece of scrap anyway?"

"Haa…HAHAHA!" Petrel laughed vigorously, regaining his aura of confidence. "It's hardly scrap if it accomplishes its purpose. This high volume capacitor releases light on the electromagnetic spectrum that is guided through a glass optic line, and filtered through an amplifying crystal. Essentially it is splitting a laser beam with the power of an extremely high capacity capacitor to overload circuits within its cone of effect. But let me dumb all that down for you in case you haven't realized: you won't be able to use your disrupter now thanks to the interference mine just caused!"

"Tsk!" He had not thought of that. The disrupter Kurt had assembled was a tactical weapon, useful for delaying threats and hampering opponents in battle. Petrel's prism disrupter was unable to overload his Apricorns, but it was able to prevent him from using his interference device. "So, if that's why you built it… Why didn't you just steal mine while I was out cold?"

"You ask a lot of questions. Fine. I'll amuse you. Your disrupter was not stolen, nor your Pokemon, because they were weak and fragile. If we simply stole from you and killed you off then there would be no chance of you fulfilling your mission to 'stop Team Rocket'. That is your 'mission' is it not?"

"My mission…? When you say it like that it sounds as if this meeting was planned all along."

"Very good," smiled Ariana. "You catch on quick, but apparently not quick enough. However what matters today is not your wit, but your strength."

"That's all? You wanted to see me stronger? Doesn't answer my question!" There had to be a specific reason that his equipment was left intact after he was captured in the Union Cave. "I don't have any orders. I don't know what you're talking about. This is my personal fight against you."

"I see no need to explain our plans to a cog. Do what you came here for, doctor. Demonstrate the sincerity of your mission!"

"Mighty arrogant words coming from an Executive who ran away last time we faced off."

"Very well. If it is a fight you want, you'll be pleased to know that we are ready."

"Winner take all," Feyera said soberly. "No holds barred."

"Ha! A real comedian. What makes you think we'll agree to that, eh?" Petrel scoffed. "I oughta end you right here for humiliating me."
"Are you afraid of losing in battle?" asked Feyera provokingly.

"No—!" Petrel started to deny before his companion cut him off.

"You'll have your battle," Ariana said with a thin smile on her merlot-colored lips. "I've been meaning to grasp how much you've improved since working with our organization."

"...!" Petrel was at a loss for words. How could she be agreeing to Feyera's demands? "Ariana! Surely, you don't intend to entreat a fair fight against a traitor to Team Rocket! One with freakish powers to boot!"

"I never agreed to a fair fight, Petrel." Sensing her fellow team member's dissatisfaction she explained, "Just an unrestricted one, without any pesky rules to worry about. A death match."

"So that's how it is." Feyera gave her a serious nod. "You'll put your lives on the line. My mission is to stop Team Rocket. I promise, no matter what, I won't lose here."

"Tsk. I recall how pathetically weak you were when we first met, Christian. You were so young, so naïve, yet not without your specific talents. You knew your way around a gun and a textbook, but dealing with Pokemon was always your Achilles heel. Despite your book smarts, you had some of the worst affinity with Pokemon among our numbers. Your trainer skills were non-existent, not even worth the title of grunt, and you needed constant supervision during our Sanctum Operation. However… now what I sense about you, the air is somehow different. But pay no mind to what I sense. Our new intel reports you've improved as a trainer since acquiring psyonics, earned yourself a nice collection of badges. Hmm…" her contemplating expression gradually morphed into a tantalizing grin "— I wonder, is that genuine? Are you capable without your psyonics? Are your Pokemon …capable?"

He knew for this fight he'd have to, but he rather not make her privy to his circumstance lest he reveal how his trump card – and also perhaps the one thing they both feared – was inaccessible without dire consequences. Swallowing this knowledge Feyera gave her a nod and said decisively, "Of course. When I win without psyonics, you'll disband tonight."

"And if you shall lose?" Ariana asked curiously. Her playful inquisitiveness quickly turned into an icy glare. "What then?" she demanded.

"I won't lose," he insisted again with determination.

"What a brave boy you are," she mockingly complemented with a sense of haughtiness in her authoritative voice, glancing at Petrel with a transient look of aversion.

"My proposal is simple. Shut down the signal beacon. Or I'll destroy it."

"You have a certain fire in your eye when you say that to me," she said turning again to face Feyera. "I suppose you'll want a guarantee?"

"The guarantee is you walking – and not falling – out of here," he said simply. Feyera didn't even have to gesture to the rooftop's edge to get the point across. A plummet from this extreme height was nothing short of a death sentence. "Though the fall itself would probably not kill you," he added musingly.

She bit her lip at what he was implying; she took the bait of his bluff. He saw a look of worry flash in her piercing eyes for a fleeting moment, followed by a rather convincing smile to cover her emotions. Then she ran one of her hands through her dense ruby hair for some strange reason. He found it odd, maybe it was a quirk of hers; she did have a lot of hair tied up in that bun, and the
breeze was certainly strong enough to mess it up. Before he could consider it further she began advancing. "Very well, "she said resolutely and with a firm glare. "As you wish; you'll have your battle."

"—BUT you'll face the BOTH of us!" Petrel quickly interjected. "Me and Ariana together."

"Pff!" Feyera looked at Petrel with a look of rebuke. He knew from reading the Team Rocket internal communications that Petrel had a fatal attraction towards Ariana, but right now he was being really obvious about it. He almost had the gall to blurt something out along the lines of, "Just tell her how much you fancy her!" It could not be helped, even without his psyonics Feyera was conditioned to pick up on these things from having engaged in using them for so long to sense things such as emotions. Petrel's desperation for Ariana aside, Feyera was not looking forward to facing two Rocket Executive's full teams.

"That's right, tough guy. ALL of our Pokemon," Petrel said with a whistle. "Phew-wee! Reckon that's a lot for one trainer to handle, even a skilled one. Bet you're not skilled. Never have been. Battles ain't your cup o' tea. Peh, I don't need to be a psyonic to predict you won't last very long!"

"Your dossier explained all the relevant details... His psyonics – not his Pokemon – are what make him dangerous. Though his laughable inability to control them counteracts the threat to us," Ariana said methodically.

"Might not be any rules involved in our little contest, but if you try anything funny with those funky powers you got, I'll give you some lead to think about." Petrel padded the silver handles of his two remaining guns with a threatening look. They both appeared to be Gauntlets, but their position in his holster coupled with the long trench coat he wore made judging the exact model difficult. In addition, he had six Pokéballs set on his belt holster, three on each side of his buckle.

"Normal guns won't work on a psyonic," Ariana explained. She ran her thin fingers playfully against the five Pokéballs on her reedy leather belt – pausing to affectionately rub each one's rounded center with her finger's provocative gesture. "Heh, he's just like a Pokemon in that regard."

"Oh shucks, don't you worry none, dear," Petrel insisted with a teasing tone, "I've got something special in mind to suit the circumstances."

Feyera did not like the sound of that, but it was not like he could do anything about it. He couldn't read their minds. The strangest thing about all of this was how far his bluff had gotten him. If they had known the limitations on him, they'd have no problem just offing him right now. Sana would likely be able to protect him from a Gauntlet's bullets, but it seemed like Petrel had another scheme in mind to account for the abilities of a psychic. That was a true wildcard. Then again, it could also just be another bluff. Neither side had shown their hand to the other in this match of poker. No matter what happened next in this fight, he'd have to be extremely cautious. Victory was never to be assumed due to the stakes. Success here required discipline just as much as skill.

"Your toys hardly have a good track record, Petrel," Ariana said frankly as she snatched up her first Pokéball from her belt with a definitive snap. "If you want to show Christian your power, then do so in the fiery heat of battle!"

Ariana sent out a cobra Pokemon, with a thick purplish serpent body. "Chaarbok!" it hissed as it expanded its neck skyward and unfurled an intimidating face on its chest.

Petrel followed suit, releasing a Golbat, which fluttered on its large wings though the air; the creature's large vampire fangs shimmered in the light of the orange sun, eager to draw blood.
"Poison types… Sana, you're up," Feyera said to his companion through their bond.

"Don't boss me around like your pet!" she replied.

"You're gonna get hit if you just stand there!" he called out pointing to Golbat, which was swooping toward her with an Acrobatics attack.

"Ack!" she exclaimed as the bat barely missed the top of her head. "Why, you pesky little…!"

Crackling electricity formed in her hands as she wound up a Thunderbolt to counter Golbat. However, the moment she released the charge of electrical energy, it was drawn away from Golbat, as if guided away by a mysterious force. Confused, she and Feyera watched as the electric attack was absorbed by the massive radio tower beacon.

"Haha! Your first Pokemon and you've already been outplayed by the battlefield!" exclaimed Petrel. "What a bunch of armatures! Golbat, dive in with a Poison Fang!"

"Sana, hit Golbat with your Psychic before it closes in!" Feyera said quickly.

"Arbok, use Glare to petrify it!" Ariana ordered.

The venomous cobra reared upward and uncoiled itself, with a loud flapping noise the hood of the cobra spread open wide, revealing its inflamed patterned eyes. It shot a debilitating Glare in Sana's direction with a menacing hiss.

"Shoot! Cover your eyes so you don't get stunned and roll to the side!"

The barreling Golbat took an unexpected turn as Sana dove out of the Poison Fang's range. Just as Arbok was reeling forward to give chase after unleashing the Glare attack, Feyera quickly sent out Krokorok to obstruct the snake's aggressive advance. "Axel!" Feyera exclaimed as his newest Pokemon appeared from a flash of light. "Give us striker support on the right flank!"

"I don't want to fight with a Dark type!" Sana protested from afar.

Feyera paid her no mind. She may have reasons for disliking Dark types. But Axel was a capable Pokemon, his type did not matter in the slightest now that he was on their team; Feyera refused to allow Sana's prejudice control how he approached this fight. The Pokemon was stout, even when he stood up on his hind legs. This Krokorok certainly had serious presence, enough to cause Arbok to slither away and shift into a standby Coil to raise the strength of its next attack.

"Charge up, Arbok!" yelled Ariana. "Coil and then get ready to strike with Poison Fang!"

"Get in there now, while it's gathering energy!" Feyera shouted to Axel. "Use Foul Play to hit Arbok fast and hard! Aim for the belly! It uses those markings to intimidate, but that's the snake's anatomical weakness!"

Axel lunged in forward to snap at the coiling Arbok. His claws were cloaked in inky blackness, and his wide open jaw revealed ebony smoke gathered around his gleaming white teeth. Arbok tried to move, but it was already wrapped around itself and could not escape. Axel hit straight into the Pokemon's neck ribs. With a loud crunch, Axel snapped its mighty jaw tight around Arbok. The cobra Pokemon squirmed, lashing its tail wildly and opening its huge mouth wide in a desperate attempt to try and swallow Axel. It was a battle of giant reptiles! As Arbok smacked Axel with its meaty tail, Krokorok replied by slashing mercilessly at the creature's eyes with his claws while maintaining the Arbok's neck firmly between his teeth to trap it. The two continued to struggle to dominate the other. Krokorok was in a better position since he was out of Arbok's large bite range but that all depended on the endurance of his jaw currently clapping down on the snake's neck.
At the same time, Sana was dodging repeated dive-bombs from Golbat. She had lost momentum from dodging the Gobat's swoops. She was unable to repel the bat using telekinesis since it was far too agile in the open air. She could not manage to get enough distance between herself and the persistent bat Pokemon out for blood.

"Make for the center of the roof! The trick is to give yourself as much solid ground under your feet while it's in the air!" She dove to the left, and then to the right, grappling the pipes near the beacon to help balance herself while adjusting her course. Despite his advice, Feyera could tell she was in trouble. He looked around at the layout of the rooftop, determined to find a way to use the battleground to his companion's advantage. Then he saw it. "Sana! Lure Golbat under that HVAC system!" he telepathically told her.

"WHAT IS A HVAC?!" she barked back swatting at Golbat with invisible arms of telekinetic force.

"There, the thing with all the fans!" Feyera pointed at the huge contraption on the rooftop. "Get it to fly near that, then uppercut it with a psychic burst when it loses balance midair!"

"Easy for you to say!" she snarled, breaking into a run toward the HVAC. Golbat predictably followed her. She dashed under the largest turbine and turned around to face Golbat with her glowing crimson eyes. The air coming from the strong turbines made the creature's flight unstable. It flapped its wings and tried to compensate for the change in air current by closing its mouth to focus on staying aloft.

"Now's your chance!"

"HI-YAH!" she yelled making a fist and sending a focused telekinetic burst directly up into Golbat. The creature was knocked senseless by the impact. Its body went careening off to the side and landed with a thud on the concrete, soundly knocked out from the psychic uppercut.

"Crud!" Petrel shouted upon seeing his Pokemon faint. "Your little bitch is finished! Get em, Houndoom!"

Out from the Pokéball emerged a ruthless hound – the living amalgamation of a ravenous Rottweiler and demons. A chill ran up Feyera's spine as he heard the creature's familiar, bloodcurdling howl. Sana was frightened too, he could tell through the waves of emotions she was projecting. It was disorienting to have her fears become his. "Get out of my head!" he yelled to her in a futile attempt to regain control over the battle.

There was no time to react, Houndoom immediately charged at Sana at an alarming rate. Her attempts to shoot ranged telekinetic attacks at the creature were ineffective. The fear in her heart was pouring over and transmitting to his. As consequence, he could not think clearly. She had unwillingly impaired him and he couldn't react. Meanwhile, Houndoom was not stopping; everything she threw at it was ineffective at slowing it down. As Houndoom closed in, it barked loudly then jumped up into the air, eager to pounce down on prey with Crunch.

Just as the large jaws were mere inches away, a brick of cement smashed directly into Houndoom's head from the side, knocking it over. Axel stood victoriously over a defeated Arbok. He was clutching another rock in his hand and toying with it threateningly by tossing it up into the air.

"T-thanks," Sana said. She was incredibly embarrassed at how Axel had saved her from Houndoom even after all the mean things she said about him. Her judgments were all misplaced. Axel grinned with his large teeth as Houndoom whimpered from the Rock Throw. However, the celebratory moment was short lived.
"Vileplume go! Use Sunny Day!" Ariana shouted

The flower Pokemon was everything Feyera had thought he wanted from July's evolution. He watched as its roots greedily suckled on the body of the defeated Arbok, growing plump with energy. It was a cruel looking plant, one that feasted on the remains of the deceased in order to gain strength. This did not mean it could not also benefit from photosynthesis. In fact, it could still employ the power of the sun but to a lesser degree than its evolutionary relatives. Feyera quickly pieced together why Ariana had ordered a weather move: she was planning to help boost not only Vileplume, but also Houndoom through use of the sun. The few clouds dotting the horizon dissipated as Vileplume stretched out its stubby root arms. Even though the sun had come close to setting, it was still strong enough to radiate enough heat atop the skyscraper. Simultaneously Houndoom got back up with a ferocious snarl as thick visceral drool ran down its injured jowl.

"Switch targets!" Feyera ordered. "Sana, you take Vileplume. Axel, provoke Houndoom using Taunt!"

The amplified rays of sunshine were enough to excite both Houndoom and Vileplume, and their metabolic rates surged. Axel used this heated rage to effectuate a Taunt, baiting Houndoom to give chase by flinging a bag of building cement at the Pokemon and letting out a series of clicks and hisses. Houndoom's heart was pounding in a frenzy as it lashed out at Axel with a series of Inferno attacks. Axel was able to seek refuge from the sea of fire by scuttling under some leftover construction cement pylons.

Meanwhile, Vileplume's flower began to glow yellowish-white in the light of the sun. "I know what that is…!" Feyera thought. But it was too quick. The huge beam of light ejected from the flower with unprecedented ferocity. The Solar Beam tore through the cement wall Axel was behind. The beam of bundled energy ripped a wide hole right through the thick stone barricade.

"How is that?" taunted Ariana. "You cannot out-power the sun."

"Here comes the sun, baby!" Petrel chimed in for good measure.

"Damn!" Feyera took another look at the distant orange horizon. The sunshine was effectively magnified in a large bubble atop the skyscraper. Weather effects like this were temporal and confined to a certain area known as the 'Domain of Influence' or more simply: a 'Weather Sphere'. The problem was he could not escape the area of effect while atop the skyscraper's roof. He knew he could not out-muscle the amplified sun, but he could try to outlast it. He was not keen on adopting a stalling strategy, such a tactic did not suit his nature, but there were only a few more minutes until sundown. He wondered if the sunset itself would be delayed due to the Domain. Pokemon could bend reality in fantastic ways, but delaying an entire sunset seemed impossible! Still, he had seen stranger things on his journey. Best not to take any chances. "Axel, use Sand Attack. Conceal your direction and move to flank from behind cover!"

"~AHAHA! Roast em while they run! Fire another instant Solar Beam! And another! And another!" Ariana ecstatically commanded from across the rooftop. "Keep firing!" Their attacks were unrelenting. He could not foresee his Pokemon surviving long enough if his strategy was a defensive one. The sun had augmented the offenses of his opposition to their upper limit.

"Change of plans!" No stalling this one out; he'd fight fire with fire. "Axel, return!" Feyera summoned Krokorok back. "Go, July!" His Bellossom leaped out from the Apricorn. She was overjoyed in the sunshine, and started twirling her flowers and skirt as she jumped around. "And go, Brucie!" His Charizard stomped out from the Apricorn next; his fire tail was glowing brightly.

"Alright, we've got solar power on our side now! July, use your speed to get in there and knock Houndoom with a Drain Punch! Bruce, cook that undead flower with a boosted Fire Blast!"
Immediately, July sprang into action, skipping forward with reckless aplomb at Houndoom. "Houndoom, surround that pesky bouquet with your Fire Spin in order to trap it!" Petrel ordered. As July approached, Houndoom released a plume of searing fire from its maw. July was able to jump deftly to the side of the fire tornado and avoided being pulled into it, but some of her leaves were still scorched brown from the incredible heat Houndoom was able to produce from Sunny Day.

"I'm gonna make you pay for that! You're gonna pay good!" July closed in and nailed Houndoom with a wallop from her Drain Punch. Dazzling, sparkling lights pulled energy out from the hound and restored July's leafy skirt back to green. The almost magical synthesis worked wonders to undo the fire damage, and it also knocked Houndoom prone.

"July, it's weakened! Take the opening! Finish it off with a Nature Power!" Feyera said as his heart pounded with adrenaline.

She spun her petals around and twirled in an energetic dancing motion. From the cores of her two flowers came three beams of solid color, each representing a unique element: Fire, Ice, and Lightning. The colored rays of the Tri Attack merged as they barraged against Houndoom's exposed underbelly. It yowled in pain, unable to resist the elemental attack with its bone armor.

Bruce's flames were immolating the rooftop battlefield. Every exhale of his fire breath was strong enough to roast his targets. Vileplume proved to be agile in the sun, the speed of the creature had increased dramatically. Bruce's plan was simple to compensate, he scorched the entire field with cone shaped blasts. The repeated bursts of flame positioned in this manner proved strategic, and managed to quickly corner Vileplume near the edge of the roof. With nowhere else to run, it desperately sprayed a mixture of toxic spores in the direction of Bruce.

[Not today!] Bruce roared. He was adverse to the toxins, for it was poison which had inhibited his evolution for so long. With a mighty fire blast, the waves of filth evaporated before him before slamming into Vileplume and turning it to ash.

"Go, Magcargo!" Ariana yelled in anger. "Use Shell Smash, then follow through with Rock Slide!"

The orange lava snail was generating so much heat it appeared to be cloaked in a mirage. From the cloud of heat, it shot forth multiple solid rocks from its shell. The pieces of magma were hardened stone, and flew at Bruce with alarming quickness.

"Bruce, launch yourself with a piroette so you don't get hit!" Feyera called out, knowing how much of a threat the stones posed. "Off the side of the building and glide to the left out of range!" Bruce tumbled over the edge of the building and unfurled his wings, swooping on a breeze and circling around the building. He barely managed to dodge the barrage of rocks that were sent hurdling after him. "Bruce, swoop in from the side, snatch Magcargo up by its shell! Use your Metal Claw to take hold of it!"

[On it boss!] relayed the Charizard as he flew quickly at Magcargo's blind spot with glowing silver claws outstretched. He snatched the top of the shell with his claws and lifted the snail off the ground, forcing it to pull its lava body into the shell in order to avoid falling out.

"No! Magcargo, use Overheat!" Ariana ordered. "Full power!" The rocky shell in Bruce's claws began to glow red as it began to rapidly heat up. Under the current weather effects, it was certain to be an exceptionally brutal attack.

"Bruce, drop that snail like a hot potato down the vent chute!" commanded Feyera.

In a quick motion, Bruce pitched the Magcargo while midair, hurling the creature toward the HVAC
and straight into the exhaust chute with a loud clang as it broke through the grated filter. The metal vent shaft turned bright red. Magcargo released Overheat with such an incredible blast of heat that it destroyed half the system. Superheated square sheets of metal and pieces of the HVAC exhaust vent flew everywhere from the explosion of heat.

"Hot damn! Nice wok, Bruce!" Feyera exclaimed. The scent of burning electrical components and smoke caused him to cough. The sun had just set, and the last glimmer of light sparkled before vanishing completely beneath the horizon.

"Remarkable synergy!" Ariana gasped. "Put an end to this, Kabutops!" She sent out an ancient fossil Pokemon with massive scythes for arms. Its billhooks were huge, each over half the size of its already large body. Kabutops clashed them together threateningly like massive swords.

"Octillery go!" Petrel said after seeing his Houndoom lay motionless after it had taken repeated blows from Bellossom. A large red octopus came from the Pokéball; it used its tentacles to slowly wobble its fleshy body forward while aiming its turret-like mouth in the direction of Feyera's Pokemon. "Use Rain Dance!" Petrel ordered. Octillery slapped its tentacles on the rooftop and bellowed a strange noise up toward the sky. Dark clouds began to form out of nowhere. Then the first drops of rain splashed down.

"You got lucky before," Petrel grimaced, "but things are about to get serious."

"What a clichéd line," huffed Feyera.

"My associate is correct," Ariana smiled venomously and motioned to her Kabutops. "Teams that excel in sunshine falter in rain. We have a team of fresh Pokemon between us. They're all suited for this, but what about you?"

"No!" thought Feyera. His current team wasn't suited for this weather. Bruce was especially weak in the rain. "Come back, Bruce!" he said as he recalled the Charizard. Ariana did have a point; he had already put his cards on the table while the Executives still had a team of Pokemon between them. However, like all good card players, he had an ace up his sleeve. "Go, Desperado!"

A bright flash of light rivaled the storm's lightning that had just struck the top of the radio tower. Even though Feyera knew she was still a bit weak from the fight with Dragonite, Des certainly did not look it. She bellowed at full volume toward Kabutops and Octillery over the sound of thunder as the rainwater doused her body. [Itching for a rough n' tumble fight!]

"Hah, a Gyarados. And a weak looking one at that," taunted Petrel. "What happened? You forget to feed it fish chow?"

"Strength is more than size," Feyera said keeping his temper. Still, the insult was conveyed through his bond with Desperado.

[You're gonna regret that!] Des let out a roar in response.

"Des, into an attack stance with Dragon Dance!" Feyera directed. "July, manipulate the field using Grassy Terrain!" Bellossom teetered in a hula dance and scattered a mist of spores from her flowers as they squeaked a pleasant reverberating sound. The cloud of her seeds coated the rooftop, and from the rainfall sprung to life forming dense grass coating the cement.

"X-Scissor attack, Kabutops!" Ariana ordered fervently upon seeing the battlefield shift so suddenly. "Cut that pesky flower pixie to bits with a Bug attack!"

"Des, guard July using Iron Tail!"
"Octillery, Rock Blast on Gyarados! Fire your artillery!"

Des' solid tail caught hold of Kabutops as it rushed in to swipe July with its twin scythes. Just as Des managed to block the prehistoric Pokemon's advance with a clash of steel on steel, Octillery had somehow set five large cement bricks in its expansive mouth and shot them out with deadly precision.

"July, intercept those rocks with Bullet Seed!" Feyera said. He felt completely in a battle-hardened trance. Visions of his Pokemon's perspectives and their line of sight continuously overrode his own. July's Bullet Seed was able to also muster five projectiles due to the Grassy Terrain augmenting her nature powers. One after another, the flying bursts of seeds smashed into the rocks Octillery had fired, knocking them off-course and saving Des from being brought down.

"Kabutops, use the force Gyarados hit you with to unleash your Shell Smash! Then Aqua Jet into that Bellossom!"

"Octillery, focus Ice Beam on Bellossom!" Petrel said pointing at July. "Freeze it in place!"

They had ordered their Pokemon to gang up on Feyera's anchor to turning around the battlefield environment. He knew they had gotten distracted by the summoned rain not being a clincher. Their strategy was not one of prudence but one of desperation since it left Des wide open to unleash her mastery of frost. "They're getting sloppy! Take the offensive as a team!" Feyera hollered. "Icy Wind to slow 'em both down, Des! July, your coup de grâce! Leaf Storm!"

"NO!" the executives shouted realizing what they had just done. It was too late. Uninhibited, Des conjured a gale of frozen wind and let the squall loose upon the Pokemon facing July. The raining storm turned to wicked hail in the wake of Des' attack. Kabutops dramatically slowed as it attempted to break its shell, Octillery sluggishly collected energy in its mouth to fire an Ice Beam. After the wail of Icy Wind had passed, neither of the Executive's Pokemon could outmaneuver the ferocity of what came next. July had pulled herself against the grassy floor, drawn all of her energy from the conjured plant-life nourished from the rain. She guided the growth from these plants and brought forth a whirlwind of bladed grass and leaves. The maelstrom of bladed thorns ripped through both Kabutops and Octillery with devastating effect. They both were sheared by the leaves, impaled by the bristles, and finished by the cascading glowing wave of green energy that followed.

"Damn! Parasect, take point!" Petrel said as he sent out his next Pokemon. "Don't let them breach our defensive line!"

"Mufufu!" Ariana was laughing. "Such integrated teamwork between trainer and Pokemon. Your bond with the creatures is quite fascinating I must admit. However, I know your weakness. Let's see how you like this next one, doc. Mismagius!" she said releasing a specter from her Pokéball. It had elaborate tufts resembling a witch's hat and wore a dark grin from underneath its large hat. Both his eyes felt a terrible pain as he gazed upon the cloud of purplish ghost. It had to be the Progenitor Virus acting up. His sight had blurred and the bonds to his Pokemon and their sight shut down.

"Nnngh…Of all times…Not good," Feyera muttered under his breath. While his augmented sight might have aided him in seeing the Mismagius, the distracting burning felt in his eyes was enough to break his iron focus. Additionally, both his Pokemon on the field were looking worse for the wear now that he saw them from his perspective rather from their own eyes. That brutal Leaf Storm had drained July's power significantly, not to mention her tactical advantage of Grassy Terrain was almost completely used up. Parasect was hobbling over toward July, its insectoid body carrying a massive mushroom growth on its back. The parasitic creature's dry skin was absorbing not only the rain, but its grass nature was benefiting from the terrain created.
"Infect with Bug Bite!" Petrel commanded. It used its claws to grapple to July's petal dress, slicing them with its clamping force as it tried to bite her body with its mouth. She was able to pull away from the bite, but her lower body's petals had been shredded and were oozing an aloe like substance.

"July, come back!" Feyera said withdrawing her to pivot to a Pokemon more suitable. "Go Bruce!" Bruce was able to avoid the close-range attack with an acrobatic launch off the ground and beyond the mouth's reach. "Parasect... ugh!" Feyera held his head, feeling an awful burning from his eye sockets. The entire building felt like it was vibrating beneath him. "Para-site..." He started to panic. Even his thoughts had slowed down. Everything, all of his senses were being pulled straight into the abyss of Mismagius. It was like facing Haunter all over again. His body had clamped up, focusing on survival, and closing out rational thoughts. "It's weak to... double weak to fire...! Bruce, Flamethrower!"

"Psh! A fire move? In the rain?!" Petrel smirked as the wave of powerful flame from Bruce's maw lost its vivacity and barely scorched the top of Parasect's drenched mushroom. "HAHA! You're losing your touch!"

"It's plain to see he's lost his nerve with a Ghost Type on the field," said Ariana gravely. "This should come as no surprise based on the incident in Lavender. His Pokemon heart is exposed to possession, and an electromagnetic anomaly such as a Ghost Type can latch on to the dimensional anchor with impunity. Mismagius, Curse!"

The Pokemon's three elliptical red spheres in the upper portion of Mismagius' body started to glow feverishly red like the color of Feyera's chest heart. Mismagius' attack split itself in half straight down the middle. A burst of icy coldness entered his body through his chest cavity. He felt kissed by death itself. His vision became distorted, his legs started to wobble uncontrollably. He felt weak at the knees; his vision had turned to grey. "Gah! N-Nugh-no!" he said as a terrible migraine overtook him. The rain felt like icy needles, he shivered uncontrollably as dense fog overtook the vicinity with ominous presence.

"Parasect! Use Cross Poison on Charizard! Lay in deep with your claws this time and let the toxins do their worst!"

"Nuh!" There was no way he'd allow something like that to harm Bruce again. He had been through so much pain with poisoning. And yet in Feyera's current state, he felt like there was nothing he could do to stop it. Mismagius had gotten him. The Ghost Pokemon had drawn itself inside of his heart. It was just like what Haunter had done. He couldn't move. Couldn't react. His vitals felt cold, unfeeling, drowned by a sea of artic water as cold as the grave. Possessed by the spirit, all he could do was shake uncontrollably from the vicious coldness welling inside his chest. "N-not like this!"

A warm feeling suddenly took the icy grip out from his chest. He gasped to see that Sana was exorcising the half of Mismagius that had faded into his body. With her hand she tugged and grappled with a piece of ragged purple hat dangling out from his heart shard. "Go on! Help Brucie and Des!" she said to encourage him as she yanked and tugged at the half-sized Mismagius buried in his chest.

He didn't need to be told twice. "Bruce, cut past Parasect from the side with Wing Attack, spin upward to dodge its oncoming claws and center on the mushroom! Des, use Crunch on Mismagius, aim for the glowing lights!"

"Parasect, don't get hit by the wings, roll out of the way and counter attack with Spore!" Petrel commanded. The Pokemon tried to curl its body away from Bruce. Being in the air, Bruce was able to alter his direction and connect his attack with no penalty from the rainstorm.
"Bruce, finish it, send it sailing with a Mega Kick!" From behind Parasect after swooping overhead with a Wing Attack, Bruce did an acrobatic front-flip midair and turned around. He rushed in fast; grabbing the top of Parasect firmly, taking the creature slightly into the air, then dropping and kicking the overgrown mushroom like a punter. The resulting force sent Parasect flying clear off the other side of the building.

"Des, close in with Crunch! Make a path straight as you can through the mist!" Des shot forward with incredible speed by launching herself off a low cement wall.

"Mismagius, Phantasm Force to counter!" Ariana ordered. Just as Des closed in on Mismagius, the spectral Pokemon vanished into a cloud of mist. She clamped down on nothing but smoke.

"It vanished…! There!" Feyera said pointing. The feeling in his chest had subsided after Sana had pulled on the specter seeking to take residence there. However, filling that void was a much worse pain. "Nugh! NO!" His eyes were inflamed and swollen again by the Toxicosis triggered by Progenitor. They were as red as Sana's, completely set on sensing the dimensional distortion in their presence. He couldn't look away even if he tried, making interfacing his mind or sight with his Pokemon impossible. Mismagius was consuming his essence in a powerful way that defied reason. "I can't sight-share…" he called out to his Pokemon. "NAARRGGHH!" He grasped Sana's shoulder and kicked himself up off the ground in a disoriented manner. "Des, take another shot! THERE!"

"Go Weezing!" Petrel said sending out yet another Pokemon to face. Feyera couldn't even see the corporeal mass of the creature – his mind could only sense it. Weezing had blended in with the greyish background of a bizarre world devoid of color. One thing was clear, it had obstructed Des' path to Mismagius. "Des, vault over Weezing with a Bounce!"

Des leaped over the toxic time bomb with a high flourish belying her small size. However, this left an opening for Petrel to capitalize on. "Slam Charizard with Double Hit!"

"Look out!" Feyera said in a panic. Worse still, he could not help pointing at where Mismagius was rather than the attacking Weezing. Through his diminished range of sight, Mismagius appeared as the only threat on the field. His overworking senses had made that decision for him. Everything else, regardless of how dangerous became secondary. In this current state, he could only react to their tremendous draw over his heart – his precious reason was drowned out by primal nature itself.

Petrel's Weezing slammed at full speed into Bruce. Levitating in the air, it easily managed to strike twice. Bruce fell out of the sky and onto the rooftop in a cloud of smoke and dust. "BRUCE!" Feyera exclaimed. And just as that happened, Mismagius unleashed a wave of chilling dark energy from beyond the higher dimension. It was a devastating combo, executed flawlessly. It had struck at the perfect time. The space around Des and Bruce darkened and became enveloped by an inky black shadow. Both Pokemon were buffeted by the phantom force made physical, causing lacerations on their hides. Bruce's flame tail began flickering, a sign of critical weakness. Des was swaying from the phantasmal impact.

"How did they pull that off?!" Feyera thought worriedly. "They're too tough in unison!" He couldn't think of one in time and had to improvise. "Need to stop them from coordinating their attacks! July, go!" Her weakened body was apparent, her flowers had wilted; the cold rain only further dampened her fragile battle composure.

"Oh, such desperateness! Trying to gang up on us? Hah! You're at your wits' end and have fallen right into my trap!" snarled Petrel. "Weezing use Explosion! Level this entire battlefield and take all his Pokemon out at once!"

"…!" Feyera realized his mistake. He had put his whole team – except Axel – on the battlefield at
once. Mismagius was impervious to Weezing's trump card. The glowing gas bomb was filling with air and shining bright as a star. Sana gripped his heart and he felt her drawing power from it as a small transparent shield rose in front of them. It would not be enough. No, not even their Psychic shield could stop Weezing's Explosion. It might prevent the blast from killing them outright, but what about Brucie Des and July? They were on the frontlines and vulnerable.

There had to be a way! Looking above the swirling radiant light from Weezing, he saw it. "July! Give us a fighting chance!" She could not respond over their bond due to Mismagius' interference. Words would be the only way. "To the right of Des! Energy Ball! Aim at the signal dish!"

July gracefully leapt to the side of the wounded Gyarados, using Des' serpentine body to steady herself, and launched a burst of energy up at one of the beacon's signal dishes. A green burst shot out from between her temple flowers and knocked the large metal dish down. Sana saw what she was doing; she felt the strategy through Feyera's heart. With an outstretched arm, and the other hand clasping Feyera's heart, she channeled her power to turn the dish to face down.

"Weezing!" Petrel exclaimed. The giant metal dish came toppling down like an upside-down bowl on top of the glowing Pokemon. A deafening blast followed, destroying the dish but deflecting much of the kinetic energy. The entire building shook from the shockwave. Nothing was left but a crater and the fragmented pieces of metal surrounded by dust.

"Mismagius, Ominous Wind!" Ariana ordered. "Spread the power of the dimensional rift through air itself!"

Feyera's eyes seared from Mismagius. Darkness gathered on the corners of his sight. The black energy mass above his Pokemon had manifested into a malevolent gale; Mismagius had turned itself into the air itself. The phantom gust whipped at all his Pokemon who were already beaten down. None of them could stand the attack – they all collapsed in frightening unison from the ghostly wave.

"NO!" he hollered. He could not tell if they were still alive due to the bond being interfered with; Feyera thought he saw a faint light from Bruce's tail, but that might have been a hallucination brought on by all the chaotic sensory input he was subjected to. Everything around was twinkling like distant stars, and the recent explosion had rattled his body. The threat was Mismagius. But he could only see where it was, not attack it due to his Pokemon being unable to receive orders instantly through the telepathic bond which Mismagius had broken.

"All my senses are focused on Mismagius, yet I can't relay that vital information in time to my Pokemon!" he thought. "And because of my failure they're at death's door!" Again he tried to see where Mismagius had gone, but it had all but disappeared.

"Thas Feyera! Your chest!" Sana said beside him with a start. A black wave pushed her away and sent her rolling.

"GAK! It's here…!" Feyera said suddenly as he realized what had happened. "Sana, you need to strike my heart!"

She was weakly getting to her knees. "I…" she hesitated as her strength was sapped from their bond breaking apart by the Mismagius overtaking his core.

"What are you waiting for!?" His vision was darkening at an alarming rate. He could barely see her cherry eyes from the thick blanket that coated his reality. Inside his chest he felt an incredible surge of raw power, something that was powerful enough to send him reeling backwards. The ecstasy of power from the heart releasing waves upon waves of endorphins stunned him. He could not even find words. All he could do was look down at a purple shadow rising out from his heart.
"NOW! PLEASE! Don't let this thing become me!" he shouted as his hands became like those of a puppet.

"Hyah!" Sana rushed up toward him with an arm covered in a pale light.

As she approached, he felt the force within him resist. He saw his body as an observer, deftly avoiding Sana. He was more nimble than he thought under this state of control. Sana swung again and again while he dodged with all the cunning of a long-lived Mismagius. He tried to slow himself down, but the possession had already gone too far. His entire body was acting according to Mismagius' will. The only thing he had control over were his eyes. "That's it!" he thought as his body dexterously sidestepped Sana. With all his will, he managed to shut his eye. Another wave of bliss overtook him, tempting him to open his eye from pleasure. He held back against the mounting urge to give Mismagius his sight in exchange for the boundless ecstasy it bled forth from his heart into his body.

A concussive force shattered into his chest. He felt the bliss dissipate and his senses return. Looking up with a winching eye, he saw Sana above his chest, again struggling to remove Mismagius from his heart with both her hands. The ancient ghost crackled with Feyera's voice as it twisted itself, furrowing the lower half of its ghostly body back into the heart shard. The extensions on the sides of her lower body, tattered and raw, began to expand outward through his chest, turning his skin dark purple as they grew out on his body. The ribbons grappled hold of Feyera, sapping and pulling forth life energy into Mismagius while she attempted to integrate with him.

"I don't think so!" Feyera said smashing a fist against the side of the heart. The resulting pain rattled him, but thankfully it shook Mismagius free. She began to spin herself around, her hat like a top as she bore her lower body back into Feyera's chest.

"Be gone from the heart!" Sana cried out as she launched an orb of shadow from her palm. The Shadow Ball slammed at point blank range into the Mismagius' glowing eyes under the witch hat. Immediately, Feyera felt a breath fill his lungs as Mismagius was ejected from possessing his body. The sensation of his diaphragm pulling in air never felt so good.

Sana followed up with another hit to Mismagius, this time striking the ghost right in her glowing red orbs around her neck with a Psychic attack. The Mismagius let out a horrific screech, the sound of a hundred banshees all in discord as its material form faded. The "necklace" of red orbs fell to the ground at Feyera's feet. He felt free. Unshackled from the terrible cold that had grown like icicles inside his chest. Sana panted and wheezed as she knelt down next to the Mismagius orbs.

"Enough of this! Time to do what we came here to!" Petrel bellowed from across the rooftop battlefield. He took hold of a bright gold Ultra Ball in his hand. "Go, Tyranitar!"

A monster hurdled out of the glamorous ball with impressive thunder. Tyranitar. A Pokemon so viciously powerful it could reshape maps was now towering before them on the roof of the skyscraper. And this was no small specimen. This particular creature had been bred for combat. It was bulkier and much more muscular than any pictures he had ever seen in the textbooks.

"It can't be..." Feyera said hollowly.

"No...!" Sana echoed his thoughts with fear of her own. She had expended so much of her strength from the drain of the phantom Mismagius.

The incredible energy from Tyranitar was billowing out in a massive stream of sand that cloaked the mighty beast behind a veil of swirling dust. The cyclone of sand made it impossible to get any sort of
read whatsoever. There was no opening to take, no weakness to exploit. His central body scales glistened like the face of polished steel. Even his back spines had been sharpened. The hulking monster dominated a fair portion of the rooftop. With each stomp of its mighty legs, Tyranitar shook the rooftop.

"Impressed?" Petrel asked. "This T-Tar's been given several extra doses of Archer's growth juice. Filled the beast with more vitamins than recommended that's for sure." Tyranitar howled and lashed its mighty tail out demolishing a section of the building next to the crater left by Weezing. "Wow-wee. Looks like he's pissed at you, eh doc?"

"Not good!" Feyera exclaimed. All of his Pokemon were battered from the fight. The ones on the rooftop had all lost consciousness. Sana couldn't fight this beast; her moves would not scratch it. Only one Pokemon left. Krokorok.

"Axel, it's all up to you now!"

"Hah! Go ahead; send out your one remaining Pokemon! Say your goodbyes! This is the end of the line," Ariana said smugly.

"Ariana. It's time to activate the beacon one last time," Petrel said suddenly.

"What?" exclaimed Feyera. His Pokemon were all down. They couldn't stop her from activating the signal, and Krokorok had to close too much distance having just been sent out. "NO!"

"Don't worry, I'll stop her!" Sana said by his side. She raised her arm and launched a telekinetic sphere of raw force at the Executives' beacon control apparatus.

Tyranitar dove in front of the energy wave with a mighty lunge. Its huge body absorbed the Psychic blast. It hardly recoiled from the burst having taken it head on, arms raised so that it would connect with the hard scales on his arms. Desperately Feyera shot his disrupter at the signal beacon in an attempt to overload the system before it was activated. No spark of light came forth from the weapon Kurt had constructed; Petrel's prism disrupter had neutralized his last chance to stop what was about to happen.

Ariana was swiftly running unimpeded toward the beacon's control panel. "Is the Key charged?" she asked mid-dash.

"It's here," Petrel acknowledged confidently. "Do it. We'll find out if it's charged."

"Right," she said clicking a button on the side panel of the signal tower. "Here goes."

There was an incredible howl. One which shook the entire structure, strengthened by the tremendous power of Mega Evolution! A blinding light surrounded the entire rooftop, covering everything in a brilliant white sheet. There was a high pitched ringing in the air, the reverberations of which shook him to the core. He shook from convulsions that were not his own. He struggled to raise an arm to block the light, but found himself knocked to the ground next to his Pokemon. The band over his eye stung again with burning heat. Fortunately the sensation did not feel as disruptive as it did the first time it had happened out on the water beyond Zayo Pier, and he was able to recover quickly. Colors came back into focus, and so did the tower. He felt something skitter against his leg. He looked to see what appeared to be Axel urging him to get back up. As he did, he once again had the revelation that everything had changed in an instant. The Tyranitar he had faced not a moment ago was gone. However what replaced it was far, far worse.

A colossal Tyranitar, nearly twice the size of the original Pokemon Petrel had sent out, stood before
him. Its many bodily spines had grown even larger, twisting like the claws of a dragon. A large horn was raised high out of its lofty head, reaching about a third of the way up the signal beacon in height. Even his mighty tail had forked. The creature's chest had become swollen and red; it looked like a face had grown out from the scales on Tyranitar. The body of the Tyranitar glowed with crimson light as it acclimated to its new body brimming with battle power.

"Thank you for making this test a thrilling success," said Petrel. He was not addressing Ariana. No. His eyes – as cold and intense as Tyranitar's – were fixed on Feyera. "We couldn't have done this without you. But, alas, I'm afraid your brave journey to the top of the Rocket Organization ends."

"What...! What have I done?!" he thought. There was something Petrel had needed, a Key. That plus the radio signal paved the way forward to Tyranitar's new form. But what exactly was the Key?

"Ah, a confused scientist is one of the most precious scenes," chimed Ariana. "Don't you see? We need you as much as you need us."

"Why... why would I EVER need you?!" Feyera belted.

"Oh, you foolish researcher. Isn't it obvious?" Ariana crossed her arms in a satisfied manner. "The Key Stone you possess is necessary for Mega Evolution. Yes, the Key to Ascension! The Heart of Broken Glass! I thought the myths of a proverbial Cult of Ascension were nothing but fairy tales until I witnessed their power with my own eyes!"

"WHAT?!"

"Think about it... Training Pokemon. Pitting them in battles against one another. Strengthening the bonds of trainers? Fostering the ties of companionship? All of it is an elaborate ruse. The real reason is to spill the timeless blood of Pokemon on the battlefield. This blood ritual is to awaken the ancient Pokemon from eternity and draw it into our world! And look, these ancient entities are now alive, pulsating through the blood of Pokemon! Behold, the new evolved form!" she said manically. "Witness the Ascension of Pokemon!"

"This can't be...! How did I cause this?"

"Hmm? Don't be so eager to accept responsibility. It's not exactly yours... it's ours, technically. Our property. Just like you. Mufufu," she chuckled.

"A profitable piece of property I might add," Petrel said. "You'll turn these low returns around willingly or unwillingly!"

What a joke. "Like hell I'm your property!" He stood up tall in defiance.

"Tch..." Ariana took a step back toward the edge of the building. "Don't believe my words? See for yourself what happens when this all over."

"In due time," Petrel said abruptly to his partner. He grabbed her wrist as if to stop her from walking off even though there was nowhere to go. "Ah ha! First, let's witness our specimen's potential. This is a new creature – Mega Tyranitar – not something you see every day."

"Hmm... Indeed," Ariana agreed. "Perhaps I have grown hasty." She looked over at Feyera – a profound indifference lain waste on her face. "The answers to your questions will have to wait."

"You answer me right now!" demanded Feyera.

"Ah, tsk tsk, ever the impatient one. We'll do nothing of the sort. Besides, I think HE will have a
"DAMMIT!" Feyera swore as the mighty behemoth lunged forward at him. Something caught his arm. He looked over to see Axel who was tugging on him with all his might. He turned to look, and saw before him an even larger crocodile. It was unreal. The crocodile he had met in Rils' cage earlier today had evolved yet again from the exposure to the radio signal. "AXEL!" he exclaimed in shock.

The Krookodile had many of the same features as before. He was quite burly, but had filled out more with reddish purple scales covering most of his bulk. His eyes were similar to Krokorok, having membranes that were facing outwards towards the sides of the head to assist in the creature's peripheral vision. His snout was longer, and he wore an intimidating visage with sharpened teeth to match. Axel hissed, and made a threatening clicking noise from the back of his throat.

"Let's go then!" he said jumping on the big crocodile's back. He was surprisingly fast for such a large specimen; the agile motion of Axel was enough to out maneuver the first charge made by Mega Tyranitar. However, the Tyranitar soon caught on and used a special rather than a physical attack. A swirling fire gathered in the maw of Mega Tyranitar as it launched a vicious stream of flame. Despite being stocky, Axel was able to jump over the fire stream, even with Feyera riding on his back. However, the big crash landing did leave him vulnerable to another charge by Tyranitar.

"Get to the side!" Feyera urged Axel jumping off and rolling to the side. Tyranitar kept charging, knocking into pylons and cranes along the way with his massive girth. "Axel, up there!" Feyera said with a point skyward. "I want you to snap those wires!"

Axel parried Mega Tyranitar by feinting to the left, then to the right. He spun on his tail to dodge Mega Tyranitar's vicious volley of tail swings. Finally he broke away from his adversary by darting under the beast's legs. Feyera was surprised the big croc managed to slither under Mega Tyranitar, but the opposition was huge enough where it was possible. Axel hastily clambered up the nearby crane behind. Mega Tyranitar was in pursuit; it turned around and started smashing the crane with an Iron Tail until the metal structure came loose from the cement pylon it had been stationed in. Axel nearly fell off, but just managed to hold on with the claws on his powerful hind legs.

"AXEL, NOW! CUT THE WIRE!" Feyera barked from below.

Axel swung himself up the last bit of distance between the crane and the wire. His powerful jaws were no match for the taut cables. There was a loud snap, the sound of whiplash. And then a horrible bellow. The wire had come down right on Mega Tyranitar's right arm, slicing it clean off. Blood gushed out in forceful bursts of crimson from the stump left behind and Mega Tyranitar struggled to regain balance. It howled in absolute anger, shaking the very building beneath their feet with a localized earthquake. The frightening waves of energy cascading all around the beast shook up more sand and dust. With a ferocious howl, Mega Tyranitar unleashed a Fireblast on his stump of an arm to cauterize it and stop the bleeding. It was then Feyera realized that Petrel and Ariana were not in control of this Pokemon. They were not issuing orders to it; Mega Tyranitar acted on its own accord in a ruthless manner.

"But how?!!" he cried out as the mighty Tyranitar licked its wound and lashed out with his tail at Axel who had just landed. "Axel, pull back! Get to the other side; you can't win one-on-one! Need to fight dirty and knock it off balance while it's charging! Sana, can you help with —?" He realized something else was off. She hadn't said a word since the radio signal was activated. "Sana?" He looked were she was last, and saw her collapsed. "SANA! C'mon, get up!"

His words did not reach her. Nor did any telepathic thoughts. The Mega Tyranitar continued to attack Axel with increasing ferocity brought on by the creature's rage. With every tail swing, Mega Tyranitar's carnage came closer to out-muscling Axel. Axel managed to parry the first blows, but
now his leathery hide was torn with lacerations from the thrashing onslaught of Mega Tyranitar.

There was an incredible burst of heat energy from above. A brutal shockwave knocked all to their knees. Within it a bright cocoon of brilliant light. A figure within it, radiating with unbelievable light! The pulsing waves expanded outward from the top of the signal beacon, each burst stronger and more volatile than the last like a lighthouse of crescendoing luminosity.

"Hyyaaahhhh!" A familiar voice! It was as if remembering a distant dream from childhood. So strong was the sensation of remembrance, he was forced to try and look at the blinding light. When he looked at the cocoon of light, his eyes seared with brutal pain. Above the bright light was another figure, raised high into the deep evening sky. Atop the steeple of steel, she posed midair adverse to the behemoth Mega Tyranitar. "Hatred breeds hatred; and so also death yields death!" It was a voice of calculated certainty. Brief, but also commanding. Something strangely foreign and yet also recognizable.

From the center of the white light, the two shadows of creatures on the verge of the growing dimensional rift were facing off. At one side, the enormous Mega Tyranitar reared backwards as it charged into the heart of the white light. A loud crashing reverberated throughout the sky tower. From the white light came another beam of energy, brilliant in hue and followed by a frigid wind of the north. The icy cold was unrelenting as the face of the moon revealed itself – the harbinger of wicked cold front and mists of frost. From the unearthly coldness, another vertigo-inducing shake rattled the building. The half-faced moon above glowed brightly, shaking in the night as strange clouds of silver mist surrounded the top of the Radio Tower.

A loud howl echoed into the night as a silvery beam of moonlight shot down through the pale sky. Mega Tyranitar had stretched out – his horns raised high, like dark pillars of defiance against the bright light of the moon. It was hardly a moment before a billowing cloud of pure silver rose up out from underneath Mega Tyranitar. Its gaseous vapor swallowed Mega Tyranitar with ease, greedily pulling the entire creature into its unearthly mirage.

Feyera tried to yell out; however the light seemed to have some unbelievable power, making it difficult to shout since it felt like all of his oxygen was being used up. He struggled to break free from the petrification brought on by the strangely glowing moonlight. And just then he heard another voice.

"Nugh… This… isn't me. Please…set me free…"

"…!" He recognized that softer voice. Every bone in his body felt it. Every inch of his brain rattled with the tingling shock from hearing it. The undeniable feeling in his gut as he knew another barrier on his memories had been crushed and splintered. It was not Sana's nor was it unfamiliar.

There was a white-grabbed figure gracefully perched atop Mega Tyranitar's mighty stone back. The bright light had followed the figure and had grown even more brilliant as she raised an arm toward the moon. "NOW!" shouted the figure with a voice he had once known. "You wicked creature! Enter the fall! … Enter eternity!" A burst of prism colored light burst from the feminine figure's outstretched hand, penetrating down deep into the spine of Mega Tyranitar. Its massive body shuddered. Then it began to become undone, rapidly decaying. Its hide withered, wrinkled and old. The creature's once luminous fangs became brittle in the light of the moon and crumbled to ash in the beast's shocked mouth. Its once mighty claws grew brittle, aged to the point of crumbling to nothing. The spines on Mega Tyranitar's back twisted furiously as they darkened to black clouds of dust. It let out a final roar, a gasp of dusty air plumed out from its decayed mouth. The Mega Tyranitar's hide had decayed, falling off in entire pieces the size of sheetrock as the light of the moon shone on it.
"I—impossible!"

Mega Tyranitar's carcass had begun turning into dust, captured by the unseen ages of temporal anomaly. Its once strong body aged years growing decrepit with each second. The husk of the massive beast had turned to a frail skeleton in the bizarre scene. What was even stranger was how the creature tugged forth an orb of shining light out from the opened body of Mega Tyranitar.

"This…" said the voice Feyera remembered as she pulled the glossy orb from Mega Tyranitar's skeleton and grinned. Her telepathic voice was not completely foreign; a part of him recognized it. "This is the way it will be… the Soul Star will be ours!" With one more pull, she ripped the sphere out from Mega Tyranitar's earthen heart, collecting it against her brilliantly shining heart shard.

"You… your voice…!" he exclaimed realizing it was her standing within Mega Tyranitar crumbling corpse. Sana's body was grabbed in a large white cloak of moonlight, but her voice belonged to a human from his once lost memories. It was undeniable. Her body may have resembled Sana's new Mega Evolved form but the voice clearly did not match.

She nodded at him, her entire body shining with lunar light. In her arms she held the orb she had acquired from Tyranitar. "This vessel is not…" she started to say.

"It is not your choice," interrupted Petrel. "You've come. In the end, we knew you would. HAHA! You've fallen right into our hand! We knew with certainty you would have no choice but to answer the call of the Soul Star – after all, you were following him around in such close proximity from the shadows!"

"You planned to lure us out all along?" she said suddenly. Her white covered arms crossed in defiance. "Then the Soul Star was really here in order to… NO!"

"You really do have the voice of the young girl," Petrel said with a wicked smile on his face. He aimed his weapon to Sana's head. "Pity. You'll have to kill this Pokemon as well by hiding the way you do. Unfortunately it was your own emotional curiosity that bested you. After I learned of the two researchers at Evercrest and Cipher's plans with you I knew you would follow Christian. Like an unseen shadow you were compelled ghost him all the way to this tower because of your human counterpart's romantic ties. And that you did, which means your real body is close by. You see, Feyera taught us that memory wiping was not perfect and the previous entity's emotions were transmitted in bizarre ways after contact with Mercurium."

"You are correct, we cannot be in two places at once," said the voice coming from Sana's lips. It clearly did not belong to her. Someone or something was speaking through her. She was overflowing with power as she held the strange sphere in her hands. "However, this vessel is naught but a thrall to the Soul Ascension you have orchestrated! The evolutionary signal coupled with the spilling of blood through the ritualistic combat sacrifice has made this individual unable to resist the grasp of the Soul Star. From its siphoned will, we feel and experience everything of this being while in this transcended state. Even the sensations we did not yearn to feel, the affection of a past life are now our own… We shall not allow it to die so easily."

"Very well you stubborn wretch," said Petrel. "We'll have to do things the old fashioned way." He fired a round from the special weapon in his hand. The burst of energy collided with her and caused her to yell out in pain. "You're weakest after taken hold of a host. Not even with all your ancient powers can you stop our plan. These shots are specially designed to wreak havoc on the nervous system! They will ensure you're only able to feel the strongest pangs of agony before you revert back to your original form! Should you refuse to relinquish your host, you'll lose more than just your powers… you'll lose your memories, but also HER memories. All over again Celesta. You'll become a blank slate once more to be exploited just like—"
"Hey, Petrel, forgetting someone?" Feyera asked confronting the executive with a glare of wrath in his eye.

"Oh and what are you going to do about it, pawn?" Petrel sneered. "You haven't a clue what this is all about! Don't you see? You've been meticulously groomed this whole time with the end goal of reviving the ephemeral conduit known as Celesta."

"WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?" True, he didn't know what had happened to Sana. Something had overtaken her physically. It had granted her an incredible power to defeat Mega Tyranitar. Her voice resembled a distant human memory he had been trying to wedge out of the lost past from the beginning of his Pokemon journey when he spoke with Lorelei. He could not stand by and allow for this. Even if Sana had been possessed he could not leave her, or the voice of the memory to be tormented by those shock rounds. "I'm sure as hell not going to let you have your way with her!"

"Hah! What are you going to do about it?! Your Pokemon proved to be a perfect conduit for the Soul Ascension! So go on! Unless you want her to perish alone inside that husk of temporal energy waves, you must act." Petrel pointed his firearm again at Sana's collapsed shaking body. "Approach her! Save your Pokemon or save your memories of her possessing specter. What would your hesitation prove, I wonder?"

"Curse…you…" whimpered the voice coming from Sana's transformed body. "This was all part of your plan!" The pale light from the moon had faded as she collapsed within the carcass of Mega Tyranitar. She looked quite different now that she was no longer concealed by the pale light. Her once short skirt had expanded to form a glistening gown, her heart split in two, and her arms were covered in white sheathes of silk.

"Sana! Your voice!" he yelled out as he ran toward her. Petrel had referred to her as Celesta, but Feyera knew deep inside that wasn't her real name. No, he knew she had a human name. And yet he still wrestled with the fogginess of his amnesia. Was it really the strawberry-haired girl from the dreams? The one he had been seeking to recall after all this time? How did the Soul Star cause her to possess Sana?

"No! This isn't how it was supposed to be!" she said as the last skeletal bones of Mega Tyranitar crumbled to sand around her. The dust shimmered in the moonlight as it swirled around her evolved body like planetary rings. As Feyera looked at her, somehow it felt as if she was looking right through him. She raised her garbed arms in an effort to block his charge with everything she had. "You can't… don't…come any closer to us!"

"Hold on!" He quickly diverted his course and charged at Petrel, as he passed over Des' knocked out body, he withdrew his exhausted team back to the Apricorns.

"Oh? This is unexpected!" blurted Petrel. "Looks like you really don't care for your Pokemon! Not to mention your precious research associate from before your memory was wiped."

That was it! It was precisely what he needed to hear. The final lock on his amnesic mind had just been smashed by none other than his opponent. His research associate, the illusive phantom of the past, she was the girl with the strawberry colored hair! It all finally made sense. "You're WRONG Petrel! It's BECAUSE I care for her I'm coming for you instead!"

Petrel looked deeply concerned and his once confident expression changed as he realized that he could not manipulate all the pieces on the chessboard the way he had planned. He nervously glanced to his right at Ariana as if to ask, "What now?"

"If Celesta's real body is nearby then it seems this reunion has brought about a golden opportunity."
Ariana hastily backed up. Her long white uniform fluttered in the wind. Reaching the edge of the building, the soles of her white boots touched the last part of the cement.

"Ariana?! Wait…what are you…?!” Petrel asked in alarm.

She gave Feyera one last look before saying shortly, "Well done you bastard." Raising her arms spread eagle, she leaned backwards off the side of the radio tower's rooftop.

"ARIANA!" Petrel yelled.

Petrel and Feyera both ran after her, but it was too late, she had already fallen. The two men looked over the edge where she had fallen, and were surprised to hear that she was laughing. She quickly reached up into her ruby hair, and snatched a holdout Pokéball she had concealed there earlier before the battle. A Honchkrow spread its broad wings and swept underneath her, catching her as she fell from the great height. "MUAHAHA! Adieu, my boys! Give my regards to the boss!” she laughed from far below as the shadowy bird carried her off into the cold night sky.
There was a loud crackle which shook the whole of reality, a concussive blast of supernatural thunder. Yet the rain had passed, the incredible noise could not have been caused by the recent storm. Christian looked skyward into the dark night sky – there was no light pollution with Goldenrod's power grid overloaded by the forced evolution of Pokemon working in the Power Plant. A small gap in the clouds had revealed a bright half-moon in the sky. He felt a strong pressure weighing down on the inside of his chest. His breath seized up within his lungs as he felt an onerous sense of primordial dread.

Another flash of brilliant light illuminated the dark night, sparkling like a thin line of lightning raced through the air followed by an earsplitting clapping sound. It was a path of light that spanned across from one of the nearby buildings, almost like a searchlight aimed directly onto the top of the radio tower's antenna. The brilliant path of white light quickly turned dark red in color before fading into the blackness of night as if it had never existed.

A strong smell of ozone filled the air, the type of scent which usually accompanies rain; its sweet, yet pungent zing saturated his nostrils. He looked up at where the path of disappearing red light had gone, to the peak of the radio tower's antenna. To his alarm, he saw an inky black void swirling between the two flashing lights atop the antenna. Not only that but the antenna structure was so distorted as to appear as though the lights had existed on an entirely separate vertical axis. He knew from before that one of the flashing lights was directly above the other on the antenna, but now it the center of blackness had caused the lights to appear warped along with the straight metal beam they were anchored on. As the black void moved, it appeared to replicate the metal beam on either side of it, morphing the image like water would; the mirage of two towers both curving around the center of the black emptiness, creating a strange circular lens bordered by the curved antennas.

"What on earth!?" He struggled to comprehend what he was seeing. It was similar to his psyonics, yet somehow different in the sense that he knew that he did not cause it. Was it a Pokemon? It felt more potent than anything he had ever conjured.

A second blinding burst of light came forth from the center of the void, shooting upwards to the top of the antenna's post. The sound following the burst was less intense than before, and the resulting path of light turned a pale violet before dissipating as well into another dark emptiness. The first lensing had faded, and the antenna was once again a single straight beam with two lights directly in line with each other. And at the top, above the highest light in the skyline, a solitary figure took shape from the dark emptiness of the void.

Impossible! he thought. This familiarity…! It can't be anyone else! His thoughts were a scrambled mess, but there was no denying it. It was really her! That was the girl who he had been chasing relentlessly through memories and dreams alike. The figure he had been misled into thinking was Sana before having met her on Penta Island. She was the one from before, from the dream, from the memories, from all the times he had been close to Sanaria. The mysterious girl who had eluded him for so long was now right before him. It was almost too much for him to handle, emotions welled and blended in a grand catharsis of the long-awaited sight.

Her frail form was supported by two transparent rays of light. They were as thin as glass, jutting out...
from her back like fairy wings. They shimmered with ripples of incredible power, expanding outward as if overtaking the surface of water. Gracefully she levitated above the dark void; her slender body floating with the power of these strange supports, not moving a muscle, suspended and basking in their otherworldly radiance. So strong was the glow of these wings of colored light, their brightness cast strange shadows on her features. She was different, changed by the ruby shard of crystal between her breasts.

In spite of her immensely powerful aura, Christian could not stop the waves of memories now flooding his consciousness. The amnesia had finally been cured – or destroyed. For him it was a matter of seeing her face to face which broke the curse he had been under for so long. His eyes began to tear as he realized where he was and what had happened to the young girl he once knew so well. As he tried to move, he realized that he could not. His muscles were locked in a strange paralysis – the same sensation he felt when overexerting psyonics to their limit. Every bone in his body felt unnaturally heavy like wrought iron. But nothing compared to the incredible weight drawing down on his heart shard.

NO! he thought as the black void she hovered above began to expand outward like a long tunnel heading somewhere deep into space. He had come too far to lose sight of her ever again. There was no way he’d allow her to slip away from his memories again. This was it! His only chance! Move! MOVE ALREADY! With all of his will, he struggled to do something, anything to break free from the incredible pressure weighing down on his chest and keeping him stationed in place like an unwanted anchor.

She seemed to be looking at him, but she was still far enough away at the top of the antenna post where her features were obscured. The light from the rays of light from her back cast a dark shadow on her face. Her body appeared to be gracefully balanced atop to peak of the tower, her legs not even bent for balance as she stood tall in the calming night air following the storm's passing. Although it was the middle of the night, a peculiar haze surrounded her torso, distorting the silver light from the moon into waves and producing a blurred shimmering effect.

He wanted to scream, to call out to her, to do anything but be stuck where he was. The air in his throat was just as trapped as he was. What would he even say? Of course! Her name! What was her name?! Diving into his memories with all his intention and strength of will he searched for the missing piece to this seemingly endless puzzle. Seeing her right here in the flesh prompted a persistence that was too great to be defeated by the clouds of amnesia. And then it clicked. Something inside snapped like a bright light turning on.

"DEIRDRE!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. That was her name. Deirdre Aldaine. That was who he cared for. Memories of her flooded his mind as the last barricades of his amnesia crumbled beneath a tidal wave of remembrance. Seeing her here was the key to piercing through his once muddled memories. However, the boundless excitement of remembrance soon left him. For as he had spoken her name, she returned an unmistakable glare with shimmering crimson eyes. Those eyes were not hers. Another burst of color exploded forth from where she was balanced on the tip of the radio antenna, this time creating a pale blue path downwards toward the bottom of the metal antenna. After reappearing in a surge of light, he could finally see her features clearly as she was now a mere twenty paces away from him at the center of the roof by the antenna's base.

Her features were different. She had become something else; her entire body had changed dramatically. Nearly three years had passed since he last saw her. She did not look like his memories of her. She had been changed, corrupted. A glance at her chest explained everything. She too had a heart crystal imbedded in her torso. The aura around her, the dazzling wings of colored light, the dark void, all of it belonged to a Pokemon.
"How…?" he asked no one in particular. He was still confused despite having regained his memories of Deirdre. She was a brilliant researcher from Johto's countryside who had worked on a theory involving Pokéballs and their internals used to "capture" Pokemon. He remembered her explaining the science to him like it was nothing, going on and on late into the evening about the forces of gravity and Electromagnetic-Radiation being crucial to sustaining a small spinning black hole within the Pokéball; she had described this in her research as the "Master Ball" – a device capable of capturing anything within its gravity field without fail. Traditional Pokéballs and their predecessors, the Apricorns, used a weaker version of "exotic matter" found only in special plants to sustain a strong gravity field inside a capsule. A Pokemon had a similar enough genetic code to this "exotic matter" to be affected by it, whereas humans were somehow immune to its forces by being different in their cellular structure. It was a breakthrough moment for her; Deirdre had never been so excited to explain that the forces generated by the "exotic matter" truly affected different matter differently. It was a stark contrast to stellar physics, yet rooted in the same underlying principles. It began with understanding electromagnetic waves and microwave photon particles, smallest building blocks of reality. With an increase in processing power through supercomputers, such as Porygon and Porygon2 capable of entering cyberspace, the boundaries of these once theoretical frontiers became exciting new horizons for experimentation.

In manufactured Pokéballs, the "exotic matter" creates a strong field of gravity which is compressed into a tiny singularity, a point of infinite density, or a "black hole" – called such because even light would be trapped within making visual observation impossible. Fields of attraction are what bridge Pokéballs to Pokemon since Pokéballs are made by culling a certain type of "exotic matter" capable of manipulating matter. Once it is correctly processed, a Pokéball or an Apricorn bears a special relationship to all Pokemon on a molecular level through genetic datasets. The "exotic matter" which the Pokéball's center is made from acts as a gravitational singularity in this regard. The physical location of the Pokemon captured is drawn-in through an acceleration of its base material rushing in toward the core of the ball, reaching the speed of light as it approaches the orb's internal black hole. This process is known best by trainers as the "Return" which converts physical particles into pure energy. This energy remains in constant motion through the use of a special type of black hole which maintains a wobbling rotation pattern within the ball allowing for the "Release" to take place at a later time.

However, in order to release the Pokemon, the point of infinite density needed to be rotating like a spinning top's edge. Only a spinning black hole can possibly "spit out" a Pokemon from the capsule when the point of infinite density was in a place other than at the center. For argument's sake, a singularity in the center would trap the Pokemon with no chance of escape. Therefore a balance needs to be found. The black hole needs to have some rotation motion in order to be at all useful in storing anything to be called upon later. Put simply, too little rotation makes it easy to capture but very difficult to ever release, and too much rotation makes capture very challenging, and release easy. Of course, as Brucie proved, from the perspective of the Pokemon, minimal time passes while inside the orb's gravity field - its body and consciousness both turned into raw energy by the Pokéball's attractive tidal forces. In plain terms: the Pokemon inside a Pokéball travels through time into the future.

Deirdre had made it sound so very simple, when the calculations had taken her years of her youth to decipher and form a presentable thesis to her colleagues. She never finished perfecting the "Master Ball" project while at Evercrest. The two of them had been close, and had a relationship while working at Evercrest before the boundaries of dubious morality had been pushed too far. She had left him and Evercrest behind after seeing what ethical atrocities Christian and Cipher's Admins had engaged in the name of scientific progress. Deirdre's leaving him and the facility was what sent the young researcher into a spiraling drain of despair. Indeed, the depression had led him to become the villain that had brought forth the ruthless application of the Progenitor Project to the attention of
Team Rocket. However, he did not blame her for her actions. He could not find the feeling of anger in his heart; instead there was only deep, profound sorrow. That sadness was amplified as he put the final pieces of the past together. It cut at his very soul like a serrated knife. He had gained his memories back, but at a price he did not expect; he remembered her vividly yet it hurt him to do so.

Deirdre once had warm caramel eyes, bright with enthusiasm that matched her bubbly demeanor and a notoriously powerful disarming smile. She took great pride in being a "country girl" from Johto – an unusual background for most researchers in the field, but she found her niche in the field of Pokéball research. He recalled how he had lampooned this characteristic just to talk with her for the first time, joking about his own upbringing as a city-boy growing up in Kanto's metropolis. She wore thin black eyeliner accentuating her long eyelashes. Her eyebrows were slim, and very expressive. Her skin was fair and she always had a distinctive perfume of vanilla coconut blended with tropical hibiscus. She wore a clean, white collared shirt, with invisible small buttons tucked beneath a thin flap of cloth on the front. There was a slight bluish-grey trim running along the base of her neck collar, which appeared quite wide compared to her slender neck. A single small pocket adorned her top, on her left breast, budging out along with her moderately-sized bust. She had a narrow yellow necktie that danced in front of her chest, worn loosely and somewhat lazily around her large collar. As outerwear, she had a short little lab coat worn over her top, covering up her arms with its billowing folds, the jacket's base just barely covering the bottom of her perky derriere. Under her fashionably wide ivory waist belt, she wore a petite pair of grey dress shorts with a very subtle straight line pattern woven into the fine fabric. It was short enough for the tips of her dainty hands' polished fingernails to reach beyond the nethermost piece of the textile as she stood tall. Below, her svelte legs were covered by skintight stockings emphasizing her lanky figure. Two-toned white and black spatterdashes covered her feet. The footwear's base and raised heels were liquid obsidian as were the diamond shaped buttons running up the side of the otherwise bleached leather that rose well above her narrow ankles, protecting up to the base of her calves.

From the first day he met her, he knew something had changed inside of him. For once in his life, research had taken the backseat to his emotions. He experienced feelings he never felt before while he courted her three years ago. Her mere existence changed him for the better and every thought of his was centered on Deirdre. She was able to brighten up even the cold florescent-lit laboratories of Evercrest. Her attitude was one of furious optimism, and she very often wore her heart on her sleeve, expressing herself as much as one could in that field of ordinarily logical work. She loved to talk about her home, about living out in the country and exploring the vast forests to research Pokemon and their natural habitats. With conviction, she told him that he must visit her homestead and enjoy a home cooked meal since she fancied herself a virtuoso when it came to the culinary arts. "Food's not like research, it's something you can feel inside you when you're all done!" was what she told him on more than one occasion where he had worked overtime and neglected eating a full meal.

But those were all just fond memories of the past now. They were the rosy memories of a past once forgotten but now remembered for the first time in three years following Christian's blind wandering and searching. To see Deirdre in this altered state was heart wrenching, who had prior to this moment all but forgotten her. Only some of her features remained the same, following whatever had caused the heart shard to be in her chest. One thing was evident, her toxicosis was undoubtedly worse than his. Her hair had completely changed color, losing its signature strawberry color, becoming mint green and shorter at shoulder length. She had smaller bangs that could no longer be neatly tucked behind her attached ears; though the added volume of her hair managed to somewhat cover the new peaks of her ears. Her eyes also were severely affected by toxicosis. Deirdre's irises were now a deep burgundy, the wine-like reddishness greatly overpowering any familiar caramel color they once had.

"You're the one," she said softly looking him over. Her airy, feminine voice had a strange echoing quality to it. It sounded like she was further away than she actually was. No, distance was not quite
"You…you're—" he started to say, yet he could not finish his sentence. He didn't want to believe it. Somehow he felt by not acknowledging it with his words, there still might be a chance that it was not true. This foolish sense of hope, the shameful denial of reality was the only he had left in his heart. He couldn't fight it. He didn't want to see her in the state that she was in. Not saying anything was better than acknowledging it out loud. "No…not like this…!"

"Our meeting was destined by Nature – Aliturea – itself. The sister stars of Lune have written this meeting in their cosmic tapestry. This gathering was woven by the threads of time that stitch together our shared reality," she said in a voice that was definitely reminiscent of Deirdre's effeminate annunciations, yet somehow adulterated and unfamiliar.

"NO!" he yelled in protest. "Deirdre you can't be…! This isn't real! Please, talk to me like you used to! Remember, back in the lab… back when we were partners!"

"Your words confirm the reason for this…sensation of the body we now possess. There was something inside, a yearning, a desire, a longing, and a waiting for us to meet. The curiosity of this feeling, its strange power over our emotions, it is a human attachment which we long to be set free from." She silently leaned to her side, and pressed her heart's edge against the base of the pillar's steel beams. She arched her neck back to stare up into the moonlit sky and exhaled slowly, "The feeling of release from the prison of Eternity … Eshension!"

A series of loud, bell-like ringing noises emanated from where she had touched the metal and evoked her spell. As these clinging noises persisted, the area around where she had made contact with became bright orange and then white with unnatural heat. The melting section of the steel base had begun to warp from reaching such a high temperature in such a short amount of time. There was a groan of metal as the scalding piece buckled under the weight of the still solid antenna, causing the entire structure to topple down from its weight. With a mighty crash it split in half as it collided with the wide rooftop platform they were all on. The lower half of the metal antenna's steel beams smashed hard into the concrete roof, causing parts of the once tall structure to imbed itself in the building. The upper half of the antenna's structure went careening downward off the edge, spiraling out of control toward the street thousands of feet below.

She laughed slowly. "The structures you humans build, forged of iron and steel, are as cold as the hearts in your chests..." She looked a little tired and the heat radiating from her core created an optical illusion around her body, the same foggy refraction of light seen above the hot desert sands of Orre. "You still stand before us," she said as a matter of fact.

Indeed he was still upright. But he could barely find the strength. The entire sensation was unreal. He couldn't have experimented on her. How could he have done such a thing to the one girl he had feelings for?! Had he become that heartless to sabotage her life as well?! She didn't deserve this! This was his mistake, not hers! Deirdre was supposed to be innocent! She left before all this happened! She had left him after he started experimenting unethically on Pokemon. How did she wind up like this?! A chill traveled up his spine. How did he cause this to happen to her? He did not remember ever hurting her.

"Have you witnessed such power before?" she asked with an air of haughty certainty. She was discerning his thoughts, her incredibly powerful heart crystal reading him like an open book. There was nothing he could hide from her. "Have you not felt it within yourself? It's okay for you to be afraid; fear is a good emotion. Fear – or vereloria in the Old Voice – will take you far, young one."

He shook his head in disbelief. What she was saying was not only insane, but it got the facts all
wrong. He was older than Deirdre by almost a year. When they were working as researchers at Evercrest together, he'd even make jokes about it; she was always so self-conscious about her age. He couldn't blame her, most women were, but it gave him a reason to talk to her unrelated to their work and that's all that mattered back then during those simpler times. "Deirdre…you're the young one! Don't you remember who you are?!"

"You keep calling us this strange name… It elicits feelings and thoughts of a mortal's nature within. And so it should, as it is undeniably a human's name. However…" Her eyes glimmered with a sanguine and inhuman redness. "You are mistaken for doing so. For our name is Celesta, eternal as the heavens which we are named after." A noticeable red glow came from the heart crystal imbedded snuggly between her moderately sized breasts. "We are the Sacred Guardian of the Old Forest; our power to fold through the ages as an eternal spirit guides the creatures of the forest to live as nature intended. You have stolen our power through your hubris, but now you find yourself nourished by the same stream as all of Pokemon. Your heart has roots in our forest, and you are a part of our domain."

He looked to Sana for some hint as to what was happening. She appeared to be just as confounded as he was. Unsure of what to do, she remained quietly observing the scene. "Sana, who is this?!" he finally asked.

Sana lowered her gaze and clutched at her heart. "A Supreme Spirit of the Soul Star. True Guardian of the path to Navenfell. Celesta of the Heavens."

"That doesn't help me one bit!" he reprimanded. "What does that even mean?"

"Her heart," Sana pointed with a trembling arm. "It's not from a being of this world."

"How is that even possible?" he asked.

"You don't recall? What the two of us learned before we left Home behind. It was the reason why we had to flee, to safeguard the Soul Star from those who sought to betray our sacred duty to Celesta. Thas Feyera... your heart has forgotten the story of our Origin?" Sana replied with sadness in her voice.

"Your human memories seem to have won out against the memories of the Pokemon whose heart you carry with you. Most unfortunate," Celesta said through Deirdre's lips. The majority of the crystal in Deirdre's sternum had a smooth edge, jutting out a bit further than the pinnacle of her bust. Her body seemed to be radiating heat warming the environment around her with supernatural power. When it glowed with psyonic power as she spoke, it caused the necktie she wore to flutter in the air as if repelled by the invisible waves of deeply impassioned energy from another realm.

Christian desperately insisted, "It's you, Deirdre! I know it! I finally remember. It's you! I remember you!"

"We are not the human you speak of," answered Deirdre's voice coldly. The words used by Celesta was nothing like the body of the young girl. There was a disconnect in her echoed voice, a strange lull of emptiness between her words, a divide in her sentences, an inhuman quality to them.

"NO!" Had she been completely taken over by the heart in her chest? That was entirely possible, though he still did not want to admit the possibility. "There is no 'we'!" he shouted back, "You're you! Don't you forget that...! You can't let that depraved heart control you!"

"You dare speak to us in such a manner?!!" she said raising her girlish voice to a high pitch. "Your heart is but a solitary gate, a single source of power in an endless sea of possibility, a feeble leaf in
our forest." Her burgundy eyes glowed brightly and she raised an arm to point at his chest. "And as long as it remains a part of you, it shall yield to our influence when commanded to!"

Suddenly he felt his entire torso burn with internal pain. It was as if something had caught fire inside of him, emanating outward through his heart. He screamed out in agony and threw his head back in a desperate attempt to be released from the pain. But it did not stop. She continued to place pressure on his heart, causing it to become ever hotter with each passing second. Eventually the sensation was too much even for him to handle. His vision started to distort, the moon above in the sky began to shake violently, and he felt himself being pulled backwards. It was like he was being stretched, tugged apart at his center. He felt himself falling as if down a deep cliff, and wondered if he had been thrown off the building. The few stars he could see above between the clouds were trembling fiercely, leaving behind erratic paths of light in their wake. As the feeling persisted, he wondered if it would ever come to an end. He had to hit the ground eventually, right? And yet the anticipated impact did not come. No, instead he felt only the continuous sensation of falling, the never-ending decent into…what? He did not know. Only that he wanted to escape from it.

He sought to scream, to yell out, but the voice in his throat would not come out. The air itself was pushed down, back inside of him with ungodly force. It was perpetual, an inescapable dive backwards he could not pull himself free from. How long did it take to fall? How long did it take to land, to crash, to touch blessed earth again? When did he start to tumble backwards into this uncontrollable plummet? Time itself was no longer in his grasp, and he lost track of how many times the stars had stirred far above in the canopy of dark sky.

As soon as he hit the concrete, the terrible feeling dissipated all at once, evaporating into nothingness, replaced with involuntary shivering in the cool night air. He frantically gasped for air, simultaneously feeling waves of uncontrollable tears flooding both his eyes with unwelcome saltiness.

"You've learned your place, vehtrell," she said with a resolute tone reminiscent of an insane monarch. "You've learned to kneel when ordered to."

The pain had subsided instantly as if nothing had ever happened but he was now completely prone on the roof. His chest still felt uncomfortably warm from whatever Celesta had done to him, but he couldn't give up just yet. He heard footprints approaching and struggled to bring himself back to his knees. "Argh… I'll do no such thing!" he said trying hard to get back up.

"NO!" Sana had put herself between them. However, she wasn't facing Celesta. Instead she was facing him. "You can't stand up to her!"

"Sana? Not you too!" he said in an aggravated fury. "You have to fight it! Don't let her mind control you!"

"I'm not being controlled!" Sana answered seriously. "We cannot oppose her! Her heart belongs to a Vestige!"

"Like I give a damn who's it is!" he replied back at Sana. "Snap out of it! We need to save Deirdre from it!"

"No," she extended both her arms and held him back. "We can't, thas Feyera. It's too powerful in its radiant state."

"Radiant…what?!"

"Her Radiant Heart!" Sana said quickly, but it did not really help him to understand what she meant. It was indeed quite bright and capable of expelling an incredible amount of heat, but that's about all...
he knew based on experience. Sensing his confusion, she continued to speak in an abbreviated form of telepathy, "There's nothing we can do at all. Even when we use our powers together. We... Seph and I tried to stand up to her before, but it is impossible to overcome her permanence. We'll lose against the Radiant Heart every time. The outcome is predetermined."

"That's ridiculous!" He shook his head. "How can something like that be predetermined?! She's not a god."

"You've come closer to the truth than you may realize," Celesta said ominously.

"The Radiant Heart exists outside of time," Sana tried to explain. "It is eternal – its existence is guaranteed, written in the stars themselves. It cannot be subdued or destroyed by any action taken in our world."

"I can't just run away now!" he said to encourage himself. "No! Not after I've come this close! Sana, we have to try and do something to save Deirdre from that Radiant Heart!"

"You, thaserea, bound-by-heart," Celesta addressed Sana. Her head raised slightly skyward as Celesta spoke through Deirdre to her. "Tell us the truth. When you accepted the power of the Soul Star, when your body took forth our ancient power as our previous Conduit, did your will manifest itself, breaking free of the Eternal coil of rebirth?"

Sana gave him a quick wink before turning around to face the imposing Deirdre. "Yes," she said softly.

"You lie," Celesta said aiming Deirdre's index finger at Sana. "And you bring shame to Eternity for your imprudent actions."

Sana yelped in pain. It was a terrible high-pitched cry, something he did not want to hear. She pulled her arms back and let out a loud "AHH!" as her heart began to burn with awful heat. Her head shook back and forth, in a futile attempt to escape from the sensation imposed upon her. She squealed and twisted in agonizing desperation to escape from the imposed sensation. Her heart flickered with a foreign glow while she squirmed in midair, unable to stand. Christian quickly caught her as she fell backwards. Her large cherry eyes were glazed over from the shock of having her heart manipulated like that. She was shaking uncontrollably and her arms were clutching at his shoulders helplessly. "Make it...stop...please...end the fall...n-no more, no more!" she begged in tears.

"You bitch!" Christian shouted at Celesta. How could she do this to Sana? Deirdre was supposed to be innocent to all of this! This wasn't Deirdre as he remembered her. She was always so kind, so thoughtful in her words. She'd never take part in violence or atrocities. That's why she had left. Her reason for leaving was to escape the brutality he had introduced to the other researchers at Evercrest. She would not stand by him after he refused to reconsider his research's principles. His memories that had all come flooding back at once were directly adverse to the monster he saw before him. The being before him was cruelly wearing Deirdre's flesh like a mask, taunting him by merely existing!

"Your human words of degradation have little significance; such vanutearti, meaningless filth," Celesta replied dryly using Deirdre's effeminate voice. "But your unfettered passions… your wild emotions… those unrestrained feelings that you attach to the words you speak…. they are what matter. They sustain, as do all mortal creatures, they serve as estenina – our 'essence' of life. You know what that is, don't you? You've tasted it before, haven't you? Indulged deeply in the undeniable ecstasy it brings!" Her crimson eyes glowed hungrily as if she were mulling over an appetizing meal. "Human emotions are some of the most pleasurable to feast upon."

"Oh, ya don't say? How 'bout some human ingenuity to wash 'em down you freak!" shouted another
voice from nearby. Everyone turned to look at the side of the roof, and there stood Petrel. In his hands he held two silver gauntlets, one of which had a few modifications including a longer barrel. Without any delay he open fired at Deirdre. Once of the guns he held fired in bursts, and the other was actually a small RAIL series gun that had been designed to look like a gauntlet with an extended barrel.

The bright ion beam from the miniature RAIL weapon hit first. Like a shooting star, a flash of white shot directly into Deirdre, catching her completely unaware. Just as the beam made contact with her a dark void surrounded close to Deirdre's body. To everyone's surprise the ray of light scattered in a thousand directions up into the night sky fading obscurely into the distance with distant stars.

"…!" Christian and Petrel were stupefied by the resulting chaos since RAIL class weapons were a surefire way to defeat a wild Pokemon no matter its strength. Sana was the only one not entirely surprised by the outcome; she simply closed her eyes and let out a weak breath.

The RAIL gun let out a cooling hiss as the rest of Petrel's bullets were effortlessly absorbed by the growing orb of darkness surrounding Deirdre. Straightaway, another burst of light shot out from the black void. It faded to purple right in front of Petrel, and then passed straight through him. Deirdre appeared directly behind him in a swirl of mist. She yanked onto him under his arms with both her hands and said calmly into his ear, "It's a shame for you that when we thread the needle through time's tapestry, there is incredible warmth rising from within. All that heat has nowhere to go. It needs a place to belong lest we grow uncomfortable."

With what could only be described as an embrace, she dug her heart's edge mercilessly into his body. His uniform immediately burst into bright flames at the point of contact. The side of Petrel's body became so hot as to melt not only his skin but also burn through into his internal organs. His arm fell limp, blackened to a crisp along with half of his body. The appalling scent of burnt flesh perforated the cold air. Petrel could not even manage to scream from the unimaginable pain from having half his body cauterized by the wicked heat of the Radiant Heart. He collapsed without a word. Deirdre didn't even bother to walk over his charred corpse, opting instead to step onto the wound she had created with a grotesque squish.

"And as for you," she said with a voice repressing emotion. "You are the reason for this existence. This outcome is your doing."

"No!" Christian vehemently denied it. "I never asked for this to happen to you!" His voice was hoarse and he was tired, but he spoke with conviction. He knew he was capable of atrocious actions in the name of research. There was only his hope that she was lying and he had not done this to her.

"You had nothing to ask for in the matter. This outcome was fated to be. The joining of humans and Pokemon was destined to be repeated the moment you proved it possible. Your will, your heart, both were needed to accomplish this."

"You shouldn't be like this!" he pleaded. "Please, snap out of it! None of this was supposed to happen to you! I…finally… I remember how you left…how you didn't even say goodbye! I was the only one at fault for pushing the experiments in a direction you didn't want to see them going in!"

"No, this is not a punishment for your prior actions, for we have you to thank for preserving our lives once lost to time's dark oceans. With your help, we shall live freely forevermore. Such a gift given shall not go unrewarded. Your child-like mind has shown potential for growth, for awakening, and for truth. It is our will to join with you, our senarmius moriadvivant."

Sana quickly looked over at him and asked him in a surprised tone, "You were her corpse-finder?"
"What? 'Corpse-finder'?! I did no such thing!" Christian refuted automatically. He knew as well as Sana did that he could very well be responsible, and yet the mere suggestion of facing the blame caused him to react in with uncontrollable, vigorous denial. He had brought this same destiny upon himself, and accepting that for Deirdre as well was just too much to bear. It was not right, nor was it fair. She had left the project. He remembered the day she had left him and Evercrest behind. She had gone away to Hoenn to work on her Pokéball research at one of the Devon Corporation's satellite branches. For her sake and the sake of what he once shared with her, he had hoped she would just be happy. Forgetting about her was the best thing that could have happened to keep her safe. And yet recovery from the amnesia, remembrance of all the time they spent together was more painful than ever, since now he had no idea if he would ever see her true self again. How could he ever apologize to her enough for what he had done? He was overcome with deep-seated angst and bottomless despair.

"We have you to thank for salvation, and yet you are but a lowly child with closed eyes."

"I can still see, you know?" he said correcting her with a point to his good eye. Maybe she would remember his stuck-up attitude. Maybe something about who he was would help her to jog her memory of him and snap her out of the state she was in. He had to try. "Besides, I'm older than you!"

"No. You cannot make that claim. You are still wrapped by time's veil. Your mortal sight will only further entrench you in delusion. It is an irony that we must thank a disillusioned child. But irony too, is woven in fate's cloth. Here you stand, like a faint star to guide us through the everlasting night of Eternity. Fate has blessed you since we are in your debt." She lowered her head slightly in a superficial bow, while still maintaining eye contact and not dropping her gaze.

"I don't give a damn about any of that! You give her back! You can't have Deirdre…! You can't take her away from the world!"

"The one with this body—" She paused, looking at her dainty polished fingers inquisitively as if to examine them for faults. "She's already gone. Her spirit is no more… Crushed, by the unstoppable power of our Ra'leh – our Eternal Force."

"ARGH! I'll rip that damn heart right out of you if I have to! I'll find a way! Deirdre, can you hear me!?!" He shouted angrily, but it was like pushing an unmovable wall.

"There is no Deirdre anymore - only our vessel. This form serves to anchor us here in the mortal realm. You could say we exchanged places, but that would suggest the impossible concept of rescuing a mortal from the maws of Eternity. Her spirit has gone to Navenfell - the place where space kisses time at our behest."
"To the edge of eternity," Sana clarified in a whisper of quiet contemplation.

"What?! No!" He didn't know what that meant, but he didn't want to believe it.

"It matters not what your thoughts proclaim, only that your feelings provide sustenance… estenina – quintessence – for the collective whole. That is why your life is protected. Through a series of related events you brought us here into this plane of existence to stay. Your actions merging human and Pokemon in spirit were the necessary catalyst to breaking the Dagger of Life which sealed us away within the Soul Star. That very same Soul Star carried by your companion, she knew of its power to bring us here. Your actions through manipulating Mew's power have given us a more permanent residence on this plane of existence. Because of your actions, our Soul Star is no longer an ephemeral bridge between this world and Navenfell."

"Sana, what is this about?! Your Soul Star, the stone you used to gain power during the battle… was used to transfer Celesta somehow?"

Sana gave him a nod. "Its power is to access the greater force that lies beyond the veil of time. That place is Navenfell, where the Supreme Spirits of our past dwell in Eternity. When the blood of Pokemon is spilled, it summons the species' Supreme Spirit into the holder of the Soul Star. In exchange for the Spirit's ancient power, the holder of the Soul Star briefly becomes the Supreme Spirit's vessel, and the Supreme Spirit is able to act within the dimension of time."

"It is as she says," Celesta said. "Soul Stars were once the only way for us Eternal inhabitants of Navenfell to transfer our consciousness into a creature capable of manipulating time through its actions. However, this is no longer the only way to visit this world; through our ancient and once long-dead heart, we inhabit this human vessel as our own body. The limitless potential of your human will is that which we seek to break the chains of our curse of life Eternal."

"Eternity is a physical joke. Everything in this universe has a start and an end."

"Does it? Have you seen the beginning? Have you laid your sight its end? A pity you cannot understand without being possessed by our Eternal spirit." Celesta sighed and touched her stomach. "Your physical organs decay. In Time they turn to naught but unrecognizable dust. Even your heart will one day stop through the process of Time. You, mortal, are incapable of understanding Eternity unless you are attuned to the ebb of Time."

"Damn you! You're not making any sense!"

"Sense… it is important to our species and to humanity – for this reason let us not keep you in the dark shadow of night; instead let the pale reflection of truth be reflected from us to you in vividly clear moonlight."

"Out with it then!" he said encouraging her as best he could. "If you wish to thank me, you at least owe me that much! Tell me the secret of your Eternal life if you hold such knowledge!"

"Very well. There is but one truth. Through the primordial powers of Life and Death, the shackles of our Spirit shall not be set free unless our Will is to manifest. You alone hold the key to that release. We have foreseen it. Your Will is how we shall break apart from our connection to our Source in Navenfell and become free from Eternity!"

"The hell are you saying?!" he asked the graceful figure. "Don't you want to live forever?"

"You've lost your heart's memories of our Origin story. How…disappointing. We sensed a strong bond between you and the one at your side. But no matter, this is a tale of your awakening. If
"HOLD IT!" he shouted in a frenzy of rage. "You did not just say 'again'. Were you were the one who erased my memories?!

For the first time, Deirdre's face showed a hint of a grin. It was the twisted smile of Celesta's, but a show of emotion nonetheless. She looked at Sana and asked, "You never told him did you?"

Sana looked upset. Her face scrunched with frustration. "I... tried to say it was my fault..." she whispered.

"Sana? Tell me the truth!" Christian demanded.

"The Soul Star has always been in my possession since I left Home. I stitched it into a fold of my Life Fiber in order to protect it. Because of that I have communed with Celesta in the past, using her powers to achieve great things at a terrible price."

"Why?!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't you ever tell me you... IDIOT!" He was beside himself with rage, but he wasn't angry at Sana — he was angry at himself. All this time he had spent blaming Sana for wiping his memories was him being emotional and not rational. She never did say why she wiped his memories in the first place, only that he was in extreme pain when she did. The story she gave him never made sense to begin with, and rather than inquire rationally into it, he chose to be overly emotional and perpetually blame her. It was a fatal flaw that led him here. As he realized this the cold wind bit at the sides of his neck.

"The Soul Star allows the Supreme Spirit to manifest temporarily in the one who carries it," Celesta explained. "The exchange of unbelievable power — Mega Evolution — for the complete submission of the bearer's body. And you see, when you met Sanaria on that island shore after you fell from the cliff, when your human memories became yours no more, that was my doing through Sana's use of the Soul Star!"

He was speechless. This was all really Celesta's doing. She had been responsible all this time, the invisible puppeteer pulling everyone's strings. Sana never had the courage to tell him her secret. She could not divulge it until only recently when he shared her Life Fabric's mending power. Even then, her hurried explanation was done out of fear that he might somehow activate the Soul Star by having her Life Fabric over his wounded eye. But despite all the indignation he felt welling up inside Christian did not lose sight of his mission. He was here to save Deirdre from Celesta's grasp.

"I'm so sorry, thas Feyera," Sana began to say. "I tried to tell you about the Soul Star on the pier but —"

"I should have known better," he said simply. He then turned to face the young Deirdre being possessed. "CELESTA! This is all your doing!"

Her laughter was like ice. It did not sound human even though she was speaking through the body of a human. Granted, Deirdre's body and physical features had changed to accommodate Celesta's ageless power. "Very good, child. Maybe now you shall respect us before we again deem it appropriate to adjust your memories for the good of this world."

"WHY!? Why do it?! Why take away my memories?! Why would you TRY AND erase me?!!" Christian yelled in broken hate-fueled sentences.

"Because you are much easier to control when you think you're a Pokemon — or rather when you lose your ability to retain human memories you become a vessel capable of being controlled."
Memories are powerful things for mortals. Your memories determine who you are, and who you become. However, now we realize that the human will is truly a force not to be trifled with."

His vision was turning red with ire. The countless times he felt helpless and unable to remember who he was, it was all because of Celesta's yearning to control him! He struggled to the conclusion, "All this time you've been using memories… the most personal, intimate element of consciousness to control others!"

"We have failed since you have somehow regained your human memories. The plan was for you to relinquish those and only have your heart's memories – be they the memories of the Pokemon whose life force you stole or, as we had anticipated, Mew's memories. We did not anticipate your human memories ever returning to the shell we had hollowed out in your mind.

"YOU MONSTER!"

"Have you forgotten that we are the combined spirits of every Gardevoir that has channeled the power of the Soul Star?"

"Wait…every Gardevoir that has used the Soul Star… you mean to say—" he looked worriedly over at Sana.

The chilly laughter from Celesta confirmed his fears. "Yes, she will become assimilated once she has fulfilled her purpose. She will upon her body's death join us in Eternity as part of the Soul Star. It is an honor to any Pokemon who manages the ritual. Having channeled our power through the Soul Star, she will guide the future of countless generations of our species from beyond the veil of time just as we do because when she dies she becomes an inseparable part of 'us'."

"Sana…why didn't you ever tell me?" he asked.

She looked weakly at him and forced the answer he was not ready to hear. "Because… I didn't trust you."

He felt like a knife had been jabbed into his chest. He never did get her to completely trust him after all. He told himself it did not make him angry, that it was to be expected since she was a different species, but it still hurt all the same.

"And that is why you do not recall the story of our Origin," Celesta said breaking the silence that had formed.

Christian's hands were shaking with wrath; he wanted nothing more than to pummel the twisted Celesta with all his psyonics at once. And yet he kept his composure for the sake of Deirdre, the girl he once loved. He could not let harm befall her while she was overtaken by Celesta. At this point he realized the extent of his own powerlessness.

"Celesta…" he said softly. "I'm going to destroy that damn Soul Star!"

Celesta seemed pleased by his apparent inability to do more than threaten her archaic means of reaching the mortal world. After all, she was now living here in the flesh of a human being. The Soul Star could, as demonstrated by Sana during the recent battle, draw Celesta's power into the bearer, but as Celesta explained her spirit's residence was no longer in Navenfell, but inside Deirdre. That brilliantly shining heart crystal imbedded in Deirdre's chest, the Radiant Heart, was keeping her here.

"We cannot be defeated or destroyed. We are Eternal. It is a concept you cannot understand as a human," Celesta said.
"Try me," he said bitterly.

"If that is your wish. It seems the memories of Mew never did attach despite our attempts to bring back a living Seniscalus to this world. However…that was before we had a body to claim as our own in this realm."

"Seniscalus?" he repeated. It was an old term, Latin in root, meaning "Ancient servant". Christian had to confirm what she meant. "Just who are you talking about? Me or you?"

"Unbelievable. Your ignorance is a crime considering magnitude of the power you stole. It brings us pause. Were the memories we erased tied to Mew's or the Pokemon whose heart you stole instead?"

Christian shook his head. The reason he suddenly remembered his human memories was ironically standing right in front of him. Seeing Deirdre, even in this terrible state she was in, was enough to bring him back. "Your plan backfired, Celesta. I'm a human at heart."

"Perhaps that's correct," she admitted. "What that tells us is you were unable to retain Pokemon memories long-term. Even after a memory-wipe your ties to humanity are persistent as they are resilient. When you saw our corporeal form, it triggered an emotional response awakening the suppressed memories we thought we had erased inside your subconscious. What a pity…"

"Thanks, Deirdre," he thought. Somehow she was still the one saving him without even knowing it. "I promise, I'll figure out a way to save you from Celesta's grasp."

"Your thoughts are the hopes of a fool. Only an imprudent mortal could believe that such a thing possible. We are Eternal."

"Then why don't you explain this Eternal thing to us?" he said speaking on behalf of Sana. She couldn't have been caught up in Celesta's plot all this time, could she? He refused to believe Sana was anything other than a puppet for Celesta, similar to how Deirdre was now.

"We shall do more than explain if it is your wish. We will show you…" Deirdre closed her glowing red eyes and raised her arms skyward. He felt something tugging at his skin from all directions. A flash of white light surrounded him. It engulfed the entire rooftop in a warm, fuzzy feeling. When the bright light faded, he found himself in a forest next to Sana. He sat up and inhaled the sylvan air near a gently flowing stream of crystal clear water. Sana appeared to be surprised as well by the look on her face. She sat next to him with her arms wrapped around her knees. Their backs were up against a gigantic tree's trunk, the old bark teaming with ivy and plant life. The ground they sat upon was dense with soft moss and colorful ferns.

"This… is…?" but he felt so incredibly calmed and relaxed inside he could not find the words to describe it. The word "paradise" came to mind first. There was nothing but beauty all around, the leaves on the trees seemed to have countless sparkling diamonds coating them. Vibrant flowers covered the earth in spectacular colors; their rich aroma stilled the flow of time. The air was heavy and soothing beyond measure. There was the peaceful flowing of water in the pristine spring by his feet. He just wanted to stay here. No. He knew he couldn't remain in this bliss. He still had to save Deirdre and prevent Sana from becoming part of Celesta!

He felt Sana nudge him. Fighting the impulse to laugh from the heightened sense of touch tickling him, he followed where her lazy and happy gaze was facing. Beyond the thick canopy of trees he saw a majestic stone tower, with grand, lofty arches that seemed to touch the purple colored sky.

"That isn't the color of the sky," he thought. For the first time he felt something off about where he was. It was as if a voice inside his head was telling him that the sky was supposed to be a different
color, but the name of the color did not seem to exist here so he could not entertain the sense of inconsistency for very long. The trouble of the sky's color only irked him for what felt like a fleeting moment. After he stared at it for a while it did not seem to matter very much at all. He became comforted by its strange beauty. Why would something like that bother him in a place like this? The sky was beautiful wasn't it? What color it was didn't matter, especially when he could not remember it any other way. In the center of the sky was a black rift, it looked like a long tunnel in the purple sky, surrounded by a swirling sea of thick arm shaped clouds that danced around it endlessly.

The comfort had taken hold of his body and he felt like he was losing his grip on reality. Was anywhere besides this place even real? Didn't he have something he needed to do? The nagging voice in his head seemed to become weaker the longer he stayed here. It didn't bother him. What did that voice know about paradise anyway?

From the peaceful bliss came an angelic voice. He saw Sana's head look up toward the stone tower, near the peak of the structure where the supporting buttress departed from the ancient wall. There was a figure there she was garbed in purest white.

"My dream!" he said suddenly. The words came out as if he had no control over them. This was one of the first dreams he had before his adventure. The tall tower, the beautiful forest, all of it was in a dream that had somehow become real. The realization quickly cleared his head from the fog. "This… isn't real. I had this same dream before I set out on my journey! It is all… just an illusion."

"You wished to know the past. Of where we began," said the voice. It sounded so familiar but he could not put his finger on who it belonged to. Surely it could not belong to the monster Celesta…

"It IS her! She brought me here!" he said suddenly, insisting the charming splendor all around him was her handiwork. The cold truth was being drowned out by overwhelming beauty all around him. It was a fight he was quickly losing. He was in her domain now. The longer he stayed here the less likely he would ever leave.

From her high perch above, she twirled about on wings of colored light, floating above one of the arches in the windless purple sky. "In a distant, long-forgotten past, deep in the grove of the Ancient Forest, there existed two equal forces alongside the Forest Guardian. These were the Young Makers, half-plant-half animal beings, who had journeyed far through the emptiness of time and space from a remote part of the universe. Each was powerful as the other, matched in strength, ploy, and viciousness. And their guile was realized when they severed this realm, the paradise of Navenfell, from your world. This Severance was accomplished by a wish. A young Pokemon had foolishly wished to not die. Its wish was so full of primal emotion, and the fear of death, that the Young Makers saw fit to grant the wish. Their granting of Eternal Life to the creatures you humans call "Pokemon" is what caused the Forest Guardian to leave this plane of existence. The Young Makers, Xerneas and Yveltal, they are two oaks of the Forest whose canopy covers us all. Xerneas commands the power of life through propagation, and Yveltal has the power to absorb and cull life energy. Neither can create nor destroy from nothing, yet together they perpetuate the existence that is. These entities, the Young Makers of the Ancient Forest bore a wicked fruit – our curse."

"A curse?" he asked. Sana put pressure on top of his hand as he said it.

"Eternity… a foolish wish. An enchantment persisting in every moment for all moments in time. It seamlessly became part of the spirits of the Forest. Though generations lived and died, they were never able to free themselves from the 'Gift of Eternity'. Every Pokemon that falls and expires, is reborn in a new shape, a new form. But why? It is to bear further fruit, endless experience and emotion – branching into emotions and lifespans – before passing into the next. Reincarnated by the curse again and again in an eternal dance with Source! Each death followed by a rebirth. Each life
destined to lose all it worked for and begin anew in a terrifying world infested with humans! Such wicked cruelty of the Young Makers, the only escape from this unending cycle would be for a Pokemon to demonstrate something the human species dwelling on this planet are able to readily call upon. Such a simple task…and yet thousands of years have passed without any Pokemon being able to accomplish the challenge. What is it? What must a Pokemon demonstrate in order to break the Eternal cycle? It is Willpower. A unique part of consciousness belonging to humans in great abundance. Only if a Pokemon is able to make manifest this same Willpower, will it be unshackled from the prison of Eternity. Thus, the evolution of spirit, body, and soul takes place as one Ascends as your companion tried to accomplish with the Soul Star's power. If it fails when given the opportunity to demonstrate genuine Willpower while in an Awakened state, it remains to pass on its wisdom to the next generation by being assimilated into the Soul Star as countless others have. This is done in hope that one day, the curse might be broken and the release of death may finally come."

Sana frowned. The look on her face was one of hopelessness. It was not befitting a paradise such as this, which only confirmed Christian's belief that this peaceful forest they were now in was an illusion, a false reality created by Celesta.

Celesta looked at Sana and explained, "Your demonstrated will was too weak to escape Eternity. As you struggled to command the ancient power, it instead brought us into the world to bear it. And so, as your body drew forth the power of your Soul Stone alongside Tyranitar's it changed your physical form into what was once your ancient seat of power. That is to say, you Ascended to take on this form you now see before you, us. Unable to control it, you faltered, and your body became a hollow vessel our powerful spirit to overtake. Being familiar with the power of the Soul Star and the power of evolutionary Ascension, it was far too straightforward to assume your new form as our own and crush the opposition seeking to draw us out of hiding. The humans calling themselves Rocket, had anticipated my proximity. They too, hold ties to the human who's body has become my Conduit."

"Team Rocket has nothing to do with Deirdre!" Christian said with certainty. "It's impossible. She left before I decided to involve myself with their bidding."

"Oh, but that is where you are wrong," Celesta said mischievously. "We are all tied together in a Tapestry of Time. Only by stepping back outside of time can you appreciate the beautiful interconnectedness of reality."

"What are you saying exactly?"

"We are all connected in unseen ways. Perhaps you have yet to remember some things about your precious Deirdre. Maybe your memory is not as whole as you believe. Or maybe…you never knew her as well as you thought."

He wasn't about to doubt himself. He was certain that Deirdre had no ties to the Rocket Organization; she had worked exclusively at Evercrest as a visiting scientist. He felt angry at Celesta for toying with his emotions the way she did. "You're wrong about Deirdre!"

"The truth will be revealed, young one. But be patient in your search. You have Eternity to figure it out after all," she whimsically chuckled. "This is your Home now. You can reflect for the rest of time here in my domain."

That's right. He wasn't where he belonged. His home had a blue sky, it had people and Pokemon. This world was empty, the wind did not blow, the clouds did not change, the entire realm had lost any sense of time passing. There were no birds chirping, no insects buzzing, no animals rustling in the underbrush. It was a beautiful lie!

"You cannot escape this domain," said Celesta as she read his emotions. "This is our ultimatum, if
you ever wish to leave, you must do as we request. You must allow us to siphon your Willpower."

"I still don't understand what that means," Christian said.

"Even after you have engaged in it so frequently with the Pokemon you refer to as your companions?" Celesta asked pointedly. "This is the reason we sought to shadow you. We wanted to learn why you gave your companions pieces of your will so freely."

"Listen, I don't understand what you mean about sharing parts of my will with my companions. But it is clear that you had been following me. You're who I saw on the windmill outside Goldenrod."

"You never told me you saw the Vestige," Sana interjected.

"I thought it was a hallucination," he replied honestly. "I wasn't sure what to make of it."

"Yes, we followed to see you for ourselves," Celesta looked down at herself. "There is something that made this important to us."

"It's Deirdre! The girl whose body you're in right now. A piece of her is still there, suffocating right now from you, Celesta!"

"No. That was not it. She is no more," responded Celesta's serene voice.

"Liar!" Christian said venomously. "I know she's still alive! She has to be!"

"You choose to believe such falsehoods though you proclaim to be rational. How incredibly sad."

"How would you know anything about me?" He turned his gaze away from Celesta and looked at Sana. "She's traveled with me, she knows me well. We don't always get along, but she's still worthy of being my companion. You're nothing but a shade who claims to know me because you possessed Deirdre!"

Celesta stretched her arms out. "This one's body gave us a glimpse of her life before being assimilated by our collective consciousness. Her final emotions were of a time spent near you, the one she cared for, and so we followed to seek that powerful emotion which was lost."

"NO!" He could not believe what he was hearing, and yet all the evidence was right in front of him! She had been taken over by what appeared to be an ancient spirit, acting as its puppet and according to its whims.

"You should be thankful, as we are attempting to restore that powerful bond between humans. It will yield unbelievable emotional power for us both to tap into and defeat Source."

"Like hell. You're not her! You may have taken her body, but you're not Deirdre!"

"As we learned more of you and our Conduit's relationship we discovered something else. We became aware of your shattered will. We learned that it could be transmitted through the bonds you formed. By the Relic of Mercury – the Messenger and remnant of Mew, your will itself became manifest in the Pokemon you traveled with, granting them this gift of human will, powered by an emotional bond."

"So when they were communicating with me…"

"Now you see it. That was your will speaking. Like how a prism splits light, your willpower splintered into the vessels of your companions. It was siphoned from your consciousness into those
you care about through your emotional bonds."

"But how!" He thought of Bruce, Des, and July. They all had distinct personalities. He could not accept that their thoughts, always in communion with his own were each tied his will.

"And don't forget the one at your side. The one you call Sanaria. She saw this taking place, and she too decided to invest in it. She siphoned your will by strengthening a strong bond through the heart of her beloved."

"No…not Sana too."

"Certain Pokemon have more advanced forms of personality than others. Being an empath, she has her own unique disposition; however, it is now mixed with your will of her own doing. …But enough of that. What matters is severing us from our Source through the use of your will."

"You want a piece of me as well? That's why you did all this?"

"Naturally the Source always draws Pokemon back into its embrace. Whether in death or when exposed to the Fruit of the Forest. So intimately tied to Source, the humans on this planet have learned to cultivate the Fruit of the Forest into devices known as Apricorn."

"…And that means Fruit of the Forest is the Apricorn," he concluded. "It's what ties you back to your Source." Kurt had been right.

"Very good, you follow quickly. Our Source is Undeath. It is the deceitful Eternal Life promised by the Young Makers – the Old Ones of the Deep Forest. It always calls us back, in life and in death. It is our master, and we are its slave."

"It seems you've orchestrated a way to defeat Source."

"Quite. It involves tapping your will, similar to how your companions have done. Draining it until we possess the will we need to defeat the Source when it calls again."

"But Source cannot call you to it while you're in a human body," he answered. "Your body's cells will not be affected by the exotic matter within a Pokéball; everyone knows a human is not affected by any Pokéball. The material inside, the same stuff Kurt used to make Apricorns from plant fruit, is only related to the cells of Pokemon, and therefore only Pokemon are manipulated by the Pokéball's force."

"Indeed; neither Apricorn nor Pokéball will touch this form." She looked at Sana. "But hers can reach Source in exchange of her life… through the power of Ascension with the Soul Star we can overtake her body and defeat Source as we simultaneously siphon the energy of your will."

"Forget it," Christian said sternly. "You can't have her. Besides, I'm not about to agree to you siphoning anything that's mine to begin with!"

"Oh what a fool you are, holding back the power you have left untapped for so long. That body is but a scar of a battle three years ago between a dead man and a dead Pokemon. It is unfitting for a Seniscalus to remain in such a stifled state of existence. You hold inside you the limitless potential of Mew. Capable of assuming any form to meet the needs of the situation, able to copy nearly any lifeform effortlessly, and you've chosen to wear the skin of your Relic's plunderer. Don't you see? You cannot even use your full power in that form. You're weak. Fallible. A blank slate whose soul is long since gone. You're nothing but the remnants of a past which can be overwritten in that form."

It hit him rather suddenly. His head hurt from trying to understand what had just been said to him.
Was he really just a copy? A duplicate of a dead man? "You're wrong," Christian said resolutely. "I remember I am human now. It's all coming back like I never left. I have all these memories again. I'm back, and it's all thanks to you showing up."

"Good for you," she smirked. "But come now – let us face Source as one. It is the only way this body will ever be yours to caress again."

"I refuse. You cannot have anything of the sort. And I'll go a step further and proclaim that you'll be releasing Deirdre!"

"Ah, you lust for this corpse we inhabit… we can feel it in your gaze, all too telling you desire her, a lover of yore. But upon our chest, do you not see? This heart is not hers, it is ours."

"I know that's how you took over her body."

"But did you know you CAUSED this to occur?"

"WHAT! No! How could I have…?" He felt sick. Then he remembered that strange dream he had not too long ago. The one where the mysterious man had assaulted Deirdre in the middle of the night in her Slateport apartment. Could that have been him?

"Ah, seems your words have grown as weak as your spirit. But… all you must do is look at us both. Look at our hearts. What striking similarities the two of us have."

"No! I would never attack and do this to Deirdre! Never! Not in a million years!"

"Your cruelty created many things… viruses to take away sight, disposition of spirits from their natural bodies, the pilfering of Mew's Relic for your own gain. What would stop you from doing this to a companion you could no longer be with? Someone who hurt you and rejected your ideals? Can you say with absolute certainty that such vengeful behavior would not be beneath you?"

"I…" She was toying with his emotions again, attempting to cause the negativity to manifest and consume it. "NO! I won't let you trick me! Deirdre, if you can hear me you have to fight back! You hated me for what I had done in my experiments, and that is why I wept from losing you. I was not strong, I could not stand up for what you told me was right."

"In other words, a lack of will," said the ancient spirit through Deirdre's controlled body. "And this is why humans are mortal, and not cursed with the affliction of Undeath. It reinforces your nature, like a sturdy trunk the profound connection to time is how you grow the ability to change."

"That's right," he said softly. "But I cannot let my will be overcome by anything, not even you because it is so precious to me. You may be a spirit; without form, only able to interact with this plane of existence by possessing someone. You exist by assimilating those who take use of your powers! Celesta! Your place in this world is destroying Deirdre and Sana! That's why you have to be stopped."

"Oh?" she asked. He could not tell whether she was feigning her expression of surprise. He had seen the look on Deirdre so many times before he lost his memories, watching another creature overtake them made him feel disgusted and powerless. As if reading his mind, she quickly restated, "You had no trouble erasing the creature whose heart you stole. You set up a double standard for yourself ever so swiftly."

"That's not true," he insisted. "I know what I did to Pokemon was wrong. But there is no reason to become complacent with what is! I've lost friends and companions along the way, their lives were forfeit because of my inadequacy. HOWEVER! I owe it to all of them to continue fighting. That is
why I cannot let what you are doing continue."

"You would be the judge of who is to live and who is to die?" she asked jadedly. Her words seemed to prod at his conscious. "You would take up that mantle as though it were your own? Why? All you are is a shade, a shadow of life that has lost its way. What gives you the right to decide?"

"I don't need to explain why to you. I simply must take action before it's too late for her!" He had never felt more sure of anything in his life. His work had taken him through the deepest reaches of maliciousness, and his journey had brought him perspective. If there was any time for him to take up responsibility, it was now at this moment. "It is what I am meant to do."

Celesta wavered in her stance. She had for a brief moment lost her hold on Deirdre's body.
Chapter 18: Lunar Passport

The air was still. High above the tall stone tower the amethyst colored sky spun in a slow motion around the tear in the clouds. Was it the gateway to another world? A tunnel back to the reality he knew? Everything had felt like a dream since he arrived here. His memories of the world he was from felt wrong, as if they had been torn out and replaced by the manipulation of the girl's heart in front of him. He knew he had to go back home, to the place he was before all of this. And yet just by being here under the violet sky, those memories felt like ephemeral waves in an unfathomably deep sea of time.

"Thas Feyera, I think she's giving us a chance to go," Sana nervously said. "We should leave quickly…before—"

"No! I'm not leaving here without Deirdre!" he barked. He was upset by how things had turned out but powerless to change them. He looked at the altered Deirdre in front of him. "I've come too far to lose you. My memories of us together have finally returned, and after all this time, after all I've been through…! I can't walk away from this! I can't leave you like this…! I can't do that to you! I…just CAN'T!"

"Then you will not leave at all if that is your will," Celesta concluded, clutching her body's heart in a weakened stance. "However, there is no way for you to accomplish what you aim to. Your will is strong, and your feelings mighty. But alas, your hope… your hope is like a toxin, poisoning reality with wishes that simply cannot come true."

How the tables had quickly turned for the once proud, cynical, arrogant scientist. He always wanted truth, nothing more. But something about Deirdre had changed that about him. Specifically his memory of her had been the switch. His memories of the time they spent together. All of it was a blur, a pale shadow in the dark night. Whatever that intangible feeling was, whatever it had been, that was what gave him this hope she seemed to detest so much. He looked at her glowing heart, similar to his own and responded, "I will free you from that prison."

She continued to rebuke in her apathetic, echoing voice, "How will you ever grow past being a child if you continue to foolishly cling to wishes? Wishes are the same as hope, are they not? Poisons must be purged, lest the *Enherbra* – the toxic venom of the mind – can infect the body with its steady parasitic drain. For like the spirit, the heart too is subject to *Enherbra*."

"You're wrong." He shook his head disapprovingly. "Having hope isn't a poison. It's your hopelessness that's the poison!"

"When you conduct an experiment and it fails, what are you to do?" she asked as her levitating form touched down on the ground. Her bright wings vanished behind her back into two clouds of sparkling dust. "When it fails, fails, fails, and fails again. When failure is the only outcome of the experiment, do you sit in foolish, childish hope that one day it might not fail? Or do you rightfully accept the truth gained from the exercise and cease the experiment?"

He was caught off guard by her barrage of questioning. It was something only Deirdre would say. She was a scientist too, like him, despite having glowing red eyes and green hair. He wondered if her
memories had merged with Celesta's. It was certainly possible since for once the voice being used had sounded exactly like Deirdre, her words light but also thoughtful.

"If the experiment is done under different conditions then maybe—" he started to say before being interrupted.

"—The same conditions. The same actors. The same actions. A different world, a different time; but in the end, nothing really changes. Indeed, nothing can very well change when the future has been determined. The world you come from, a living reflection of this realm of Navenfell, is not able to change its course for this reason. There is no uncertainty left. No entropy remains to warrant a different outcome. And that is why we have brought you here, to pull you away from the place where there is no hope left."

"You have to send us back," Christian insisted. "Keeping Sana and me here won't change anything. Our world is a living one, unlike this elaborate lie you've built for yourself."

"No," Celesta said through Deirdre's lips. Her cold blank eyes rarely ever blinked. "Yours is a perishing world and we cannot allow you to return without jeopardizing our future."

"Then I must insist through use of force," he said stubbornly.

"Using force here will only complicate the already dire situation. Unless you wish for us to demonstrate our authority over your heart yet again?" she asked raising her arm menacingly.

"Don't threaten me." He felt a slight tingle of warmth in his chest, but he quickly advanced without letting fear of the awful pain hold him back.

"How will petty hope help you when Eternity itself reaches out to swallow your very soul?"

"Hah, I knew it!" His sudden laughter caused her to pause while she was channeling what appeared to be an entire prism of light rays along her arm. "Celesta, don't you see? You'd be sure to resort to that, because that's the only way you can HOPE to stop me!"

"You are mistaken. We do not hope. Hope is for the living. Hope is a construct for mortals cloaked comfortably within Time's Veil. There is no use for hope when all is predetermined. For us outside of Time, Fate is all there is. Fate alone weaves the fabric of Time."

"You're full of it," he rebuked.

"A feast of emotions is to be had by those covered by the tapestry. Those outside of Time's garment are not warmed by the steady comfort of the deceptive Veil. If you can understand this principle, you have grown wise to the nature of reality. For you see, stepping beyond the Veil of Time is a decision that affects what Eternity is."

"Blah, blah, BLAH! ARGH! Enough with the semantics! You're pissing me off more than Sana and that's saying something!"

"Your feelings of frustration at comprehending the truth are a natural consequence to your mortal perspective, as it once was for the individual members of what comprises 'us'. The way you see it: Space is infinite all around you and Time is eternal. You look up into the sky, and you see nothing but the vast emptiness of Space. It's a beautiful illusion; one that grants you the power to intimately feel all that is 'relatively close' to you. You experience Time as being eternal, an unchanging element of the universe. You see each second developing into a minute, each minute forming into an hour, every hour comprising a day, and so on. It is a lie of perspective."
"I didn't come all this way to argue relativity with you. I'm here for Deirdre."

"You live each day fully with this childish presumption ingrained in your heart, but Time too has an end." She moved her arm to draw a circle in the air around the dark tunnel in the center of the violet sky. "And therein is the secret to your continued existence. Your mortal feelings are so precious; their Estenina, their subjective life-force, sustains the eternal reality in ways you cannot even begin to fathom. Your persistent delusion of Time's fabric is why you must be protected, nurtured, and yes, even disciplined, as a child who does not know what they are doing would be. All beings circled by Lune are children, but not all children can grow up to become adults. It is simply not the weaving of Fate for it to be so. Some must perish so that others may eat. It is an absolute truth of Nature and the Universe."

"Are you done yet? I've had it up to here with your metaphysical jargon!" he spoke back confidently. He started walking toward her. As he marched forward, he stepped over the beautiful beds of flowers. With each step, the vegetation beneath his feet wilted. The petals faded from vibrant colors to a ghostly grey. Their lovely aromatic perfume was replaced by the scent of a cold wintery morning. Noticing the world rapidly changing around him, he ran full sprint toward her with reckless abandon for anything else. Coming near to the base of the stone tower, the sky above grew noticeably darker as he stood next to Deirdre directly beneath the endlessly deep hole in the clouds. "I don't care what time and space are — to you or to me! None of it matters! All I care about is right here, right now."

"Now?" she questioned. Her red eyes beneath her green hair revealed a flicker of life, the infinitely changing fractals within her irises paused. "'Now' is no different than the nothingness it was born out of and shall inevitably return into. Can you not see? You are only free in Space, but it is Time which has trapped your mind into becoming a prison. The moment you're speaking about – this ephemeral 'now' – has already disappeared forever into Navenfell, like the feelings of this vessel we inhabit."

"WRONG!" he shouted in defiance. "I'll tell you exactly what now entails: I'm rescuing Dee and there's nothing you can do to stop me!"

For some reason, she suddenly stopped talking. Her breathing paused as well as she was hushed to silence. She blinked a few times, showing the first emotion he had seen on her, looking confused and then worried. Her eyes were still red, but their alien glow had dissipated. She looked like she was about to fall over as her knees trembled uncontrollably. As he continued to approach, she quickly stammered, "Ahh! S-stay away from me!"

That was her. It was unmistakable. "I'll save you, Dee, I promise!" he insisted. He was close enough to her where her familiar coconut scent was all that he could think about. Recklessly, he grabbed hold of her body, clutching her curved shoulders with both his hands. "LISTEN, I WON'T LOSE YOU!" he vowed.

Her entire fragile body trembled in his arms. He leaned in; feeling his heart draw closer to hers as he pulled himself close. She seemed to resist at first, buckling her fragile arms and bending them at the elbows upwards toward her softly curved shoulders. It was like experiencing the sensation for the very first time since he did not fully remember the intimacy of their relationship. Even without the violet light of the glowing sky, her face was still fair and tantalizing. Even if they were no longer caramel in color like he remembered they were still beautiful. She had changed physically, but the woman inside he once knew – Dee – was still beautiful. Her once strawberry colored hair had turned green, but it had all the familiarity in texture as before. The tops of his hands felt her hair's soft tips as he clung onto her shoulders possessively. Just as he reached out to touch her pale cheek, her face appeared to drain of all feelings as pale light came down from the heavens.
She immediately recoiled and the pupils in her red eyes dilated despite there now being an increased amount of light to take in. It was truly bizarre to witness the sudden metamorphosis from an observer's standpoint. The colored region of her irises appeared to morph into a spiraling pattern of endless fractals. Looking into them was like looking into an endless spiral of patterns, the depths of which were truly unknown even to him. Deep into those cold eyes, she faded into obscurity. Her posture changed suddenly as her thin and elegant arms pulled back towards her chest. The moment her fair forearm skin touched the heart nestled between her breasts, an incredible shockwave shook forth from her core, knocking him backwards and loosening his grasp on her delicately rounded shoulders.

"Argh!" he exclaimed as he was thrown back several feet from her and landed on the frosted ground.

"We have rejected you. There is no reason for us to seek out these prior emotions. Your power over death and undeath – your *Moriadvivant* – is your untapped potential, and we seek to claim it from you! Willingly…or unwillingly we shall have it!"

"NO! DEE!" he shouted in agony. "I CAN'T LOSE YOU! NOT TO THAT…THING!"

"Insolent mortal, you cannot oppose the woven Fate. Your Fate is to cheat the rules, and brandish the spirit from body – that is what we seek! The power of the Mercury Relic, the Guardian of the Forest, and the Willpower of man must be ours to save us from the Eternal cycle. We shall snare our claim or we will perish!" she twirled her arms in a wide circle. "Should you refuse to obey, you will know only suffering!"

"NO! Please, stop!" Sana exclaimed, rushing close to his side. She raised her arms in defense to form a small shield of translucent crystal bursts of bright light emanated from Deirdre's glowing red heart. The rays of light seared outwards in burning ferocity, turning the entire area into a dense mirage of foggy heat. Sana's Light Screen diminished the power of her Dazzling Gleam, but not enough to resist the striking effects of the brilliant light. They were both momentarily blinded by the incredible release of light.

"Ugh!" "Ach!" he and Sana both said in unison as they were knocked back from the incredible surge of light. The force of the beams had knocked them both prone.

"You've grown quite attached to the human who cheats death, imprudent *thaserea!*" Celesta said coldly to Sana. With a blast from her palm, she fired a dark blob of energy directly at Sana's heart, striking her again and knocking her back down to the ground with a thud. Sana fell back to the ice-covered ground and tried to steady herself. She wobbled at the knees as she tried to stand. Celesta concluded sternly, "His Willpower is ours alone to lay claim to! Your defiance as our vassal is unforgivable! You must obey us and yield to the Radiant Heart. Do not forget your place as an eternal servant to the Cult of Ascension!"

"Enough!" Christian yelled back at Celesta. "You won't pull your weight with her either! I'll never let you take Sana away!"

"*Thas Feyera!*" Sana said excitedly as she caught her breath. "*We really shouldn't be opposing a Vestige like this.*"

"We're doing this because it is the only way to save her," Christian asserted.

"You? Save us?" Celesta laughed. "How ironic. We are the ones who will save all."

"You don't want to save anyone but yourself, Celesta. I'll not allow that heart of yours to bring about more pain. Try to take Deirdre or Sana away from me and there goes your entire plan; I'll finish this
at once if I have to!" he said as he pulled on his eyepatch's fabric dangling on the back of his head.

"You can't...!" Celesta said hurriedly. "You can't handle it! You're not ready to—!"

"Oh yeah?!" he said, ripping the bandage off with both his hands. "ARRRGHHH!" he hollered as unbelievable pain shredded through his entire body. "Gaah! I won't lose to you... no matter what...! These are my psyonics, and I'll use them to stop you!"

"You've made a grave mistake!" she insisted. "Here that power is not a—!" Her voice started to distort, it became garbled and unrecognizable sound. The moment he opened his wounded eye, everything had changed. The entire surrounding world became swallowed up by a vortex, a swirling tempest of wind and lines of color. He felt himself falling. Spinning out of control through a dark passageway as countless patterns and shapes passed him by at breakneck speeds.

Cold water all around him. A faint glowing around his immediate surroundings. He looked up and saw a pale light. Quickly he forced his head above the waterline and pulled the air into his lungs. It smelled like the air of a thunderstorm, there was that same pungent ozone scent in the air he had felt very familiar with. The night sky was as cold as when he had left. He had made it back. His psyonics had done something to pull him away from that twisted realm of Navenfell and back into the world of the living.

He heard Sana scrambling next to him as she pulled herself up out of the water as well. It gave him such relief to be back in Goldenrod. He took a moment to orient himself. The water was not deep at all. It appeared to be a small crater made by Team Rocket's Tyranitar in the rooftop of the skyscraper they had been on before. Apparently it had filled with water. He looked at his reflection, just to make sure he was still himself. Same person. Auburn hair, emerald eyes, and that same detestable heart crystal stared back at him between the pool's small ripples. Something was different however. Remarkably, there was no sign of his eye injury. Not even a little scar. It was like the confrontation with Proton had never happened. His arm had no claw marks on it from Haunter either. "What the hell...?" he whispered as Sana coughed from the water she had swallowed.

"Thas Feyera, don't do that without warning me..." Sana said shivering in the cool air. She was squeezing out the excess water from her Life Fabric garments.

He didn't know exactly what he had done. But did it really matter? He was back here, alive and in better physical shape than before he had left. That was all rather important, but wasn't there something else? Of course. It was Deirdre, the scientist who had been taken over by Celesta.

"Dee!" he called out. "Deirdre, where are you?" She was nowhere to be seen. He and Sana were the only ones atop the skyscraper's isolated rooftop floor. "Dammit Celesta!"

"Oh, she isn't here?" Sana asked with a perplexed look.

"No," he responded. "I don't like this feeling I'm getting. Something about this is wrong and I can't put my finger on it. She was just here. I could have sworn—"

"Then why don't we use this to contact her?" Sana said removing a small sphere from a folded pocket within her Life Fabric garment.

"...!? ARE YOU INSANE!?" he bellowed. She jumped at the shock of his admonishing voice being so loud. He caught his breath and said, "That's the Soul Star!"

"Mmhmm," Sana hummed rather happily. "I'm glad you remember what it's called. Usually you hate using the words our species use, thas Feyera." Her abilities as an empath quickly picked up that he
was not amused at seeing Celesta's channeling sphere. "Umm, you're acting more than a bit strange, are you feeling alright?" she asked in a muted voice.

"No!" he said feeling incredibly confused and disoriented. "Listen to me very carefully, Sana. You MUST NOT use that Soul Star! Promise me you won't channel Celesta's terrible power through that infernal machination!"

"There, there; calm down, I won't do anything foolish," she said patting his back with a gentle pat. She placed the sphere back into the fold in her Life Fabric. "Since when are you on a first name basis with our Vestige anyway?"

"Huh? You don't remember?"

"Psh, you're the one with memory problems, mister," she said with a carefree shrug. "Well, whatever. It's going to be alright. We're together, aren't we?"

"That's not it," he said suddenly fearing that he might not have ever left Navenfell. If Celesta was a powerful Supreme Spirit of the Soul Star capable of distorting reality into beautiful illusions, what if this was nothing more than another trick of hers? He grabbed Sana's hands and she yelped in shock.

"WHO ARE YOU?!" he demanded.

She looked ready to cry. Her large cherry colored eyes were upset. "I'm Sana. Don't you remember me?" Then she pushed him away from her with a weak telekinetic force. "Has your amnesia returned?" she asked with concern.

"No. That's not it. Damn, I'm sorry for scaring you like that," he apologized.

"What?" she exclaimed. "You never. EVER. say you're sorry to me, thas Feyera. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm not really sure anymore. I'm not really sure of anything," he answered holding his head with both hands. "Who… what am I…?"

"You look like you could use some sleep," Sana suggested. "Both your eyes have dark shadows under them. How long have you been awake for?"

"Ugh..." He didn't remember. It did feel like a long time had passed since he had last rested though. He rubbed both his eyes. It was amazing how the brutal wounds he once had completely healed. Not even Sana's Life Fabric was powerful enough to completely mend an eye injury like the one he had sustained. The "miracle" he had experienced was more so a sign for alarm. Something about it made him feel queasy inside, the residue of a terrible dream plagued his thoughts.

"Say... why did we come all the way up here anyway?" Sana asked innocently as she sat down next to him. "Oh! Was it to get a better view of Lady Lune?"

"Hmm..." Another one of her silly expressions since apparently the moon was quite important to her species. He looked up at the night sky, breathing deeply the night air. There was a smell of something awfully foul burning that reminded him of the Torkoal and Garbodor he faced while inside the Radio Tower. There were ominous, thick black clouds rising up from the city, the type usually produced from heavy industry and smokestack pollution. How very odd. Goldenrod's downtown and cultural district was known for being especially clean which struck him as peculiar.

"I do so love the full moon, thas Feyera," Sana said with favorable expression. She looked up and smiled. "They used to say back Home: wishing for something under the light of a full moon with all your heart will make your dreams come true. I don't really believe it, it's a bedtime story for Ralts
after all, but on some nights it still makes my heart flutter to think about. Doesn't Lady Lune's face make your heart happy to see?"

"That's…!" It was staring right at him this whole time! The full moon. Not a half moon. When he had battled with the Team Rocket Executives Petrel and Ariana before Celesta had shown up, the moon was unmistakably half covered in shadow! Now as he looked up at the heavens he saw its full face staring back at him with white ghostly light.

"What's wrong? Thas Feyera, you're shaking."

How could he explain this to her? He had just been here and the moon was in a different phase. It was impossible! But then again, so were the instant mending and erasure of his injuries. All of it was impossible to explain rationally and yet it was real!

He jumped to his feet and ran towards the edge of the rooftop.

"Wait! Where are you going?" she asked.

He had no time to answer her; he had a need to confirm something very important about the city they were in. This could not wait. She took his silence as an answer and followed him closely.

And when he got to the roof's edge and looked down at the city below he had his answer. A sense of dread unlike any other captivated him when he saw where they found themselves in was not Goldenrod.

This has to be hell.

Devastation stretched for as far as he could see. An endless sea of fire and smoke rising up from the ruins of the city. Far below the Radio Tower the flames were burning through dilapidated structures. Entire sections of the once beautiful city were covered in a dense smog of wicked brutality. The only lights came from the infernos of half demolished structures.

But worse than this sight, worse than all the atrocity he laid both his eyes on, was the stench. That foul redolence of death, an unmistakable ravaging odor consumed the entire city.

"It…it's all…" he started to speak but he could not put words together to describe what he was witnessing. The entire city had become like Azalea Town so quickly. All of it was destroyed. This was much worse than the aftershock of the Radio Signal that had caused Pokemon to evolve. It was the type of destruction that war brought; the indiscriminate desolation had consumed the metropolis. The once happy market pier they had been on to collect the food for Axel was half submerged in the water beneath a massive warship. Half the lower side of downtown was flooded with what appeared to be the overflow of rank sewage. He looked to the other side of town he had been to earlier today. There was the rough neighborhood where he had met Ril and Jen at their corner shop. However, there were no city lights, only the dim flames flickering in the murky shadows of the wasteland.

"I don't understand," he repeated. "How can this be?! IS THIS AN ILLUSION TOO?!"

"Get ahold of yourself!" Sana insisted tugging at his jacket. "This isn't an illusion."

"How can I trust you?! You're just a Pokemon that came along with me for the ride! You don't know what I've been through! You haven't seen the things I have!"

"I'm seeing what you're seeing right now," she said somberly.

"Death follows me," he said with a deep breath. "All of this time, wherever I run, it always finds a
way to catch up with me. I must be truly cursed."

"Cursed with being a big baby," Sana said with a sneer. "Get a grip, thas Feyera. You didn't cause this to happen."

"Did I?" he asked. "What about while we were in Navenfell with Celesta when I used my psyonics to bring us back here!"

"Navenfell?" she asked and her head tilted in an intrigued expression. "You mean the Forest of our Origin?"

"The very same." Something about that Forest did not sit right with him. It hid a sinister truth within its counterfeit beauty.

"I didn't know you were proficient in our history. Always thought you human types only cared about how to best research how Pokemon can better serve you."

"That's not my goal."

"But you can't honestly say it never was," she pointed out cynically. She was being awfully difficult to talk with, acting like she was when they had first met.

"Look, Sana, this place used to be a beautiful city, don't you remember it?"

"Human cities never really interested me." She crossed her arms. "The one closest to Home was always more than enough human interaction for me." Then she rolled her eyes. "At least until I met you."

"No, don't say that! Sana! You were enjoying yourself so much," he insisted.

She shrugged. "I don't see how there can be any enjoyment in this rotting husk of poison."

"Down there, at the shop." He pointed in the direction of Togo's Wear and Ride, but not even the iconic giant bicycle mounted to the side of the building was visible. "The two of us picked out clothes together with Jennifer and her Snover. We found a hungry Sandile in the garage and agreed to help Ril get food for it. We went to a store down the block and picked out an evolution stone for July." Then he pointed at the half-sunken pier beneath a smoldering battleship. "You and I went to that pier and ate delicious food before Des and I went on a surfing race. Brucie finally evolved into a Charizard."

She was trying to follow him, he could tell her attention was there, but her expression did not change much. Then she asked, "Umm... Who are they?"

A chilling fear arched up his spine as she said those words. Did she really not remember? "Sana, our companions! Look!" He put his hand to his belt to reach for his Apricorns stored on his C-drive holster but to his alarm nothing was there. "Where...?" Distressed, he ran back to the pool of water he had arrived in. "They're here, they have to be!" he shouted. He plunged into the water and desperately sifted around the bottom of the crater. After thrashing in the water in his desperate search he stood up and gasped for air. "No, dammit, where are they?!"

"Where are who?!" she asked again, this time more agitated. "You're hardly making sense."

"My Pokemon, Sana! Brucie, Des, July, Axel! I can't find their Apricorns! They were all just here with us! Together we defeated Team Rocket. How could I have lost their Apricorns?!"
"What under Lune is an 'Apricorn'?" she asked. She covered her smile with her hands and laughed, "It's a silly word made by a silly human no doubt."

And then it hit him. She did not remember anything. It was the saddest feeling. All this time, he had spent trying to remember his past and when he had finally broken through and gotten his wish, her memories were wiped clear of all the good times they had spent with their friends. He always wanted to remember. And now only he remembered. It was far too cruel.

"Why do you look like you're about to break down and cry?" she asked with concern.

"I'm not," he said straightening up out of the waist-deep water. "I can tell when you're feeling sad because of our bond, you know."

"I know." She didn't need to tell him something that elementary. "They're out there somewhere. Brucie, Des, July, and Axel. I know it. We have to find them when we save Dee from Celesta."

"Listen to yourself!" Sana said in frustration. "You're talking about a bunch of names that don't make sense! You're completely drained, there's no way we are going to do any of that stuff unless you take a rest."

True, he was exhausted, but solving this mystery was far too important to postpone. "Do you remember where we just were?" he asked as he got out of the water and began drying off.

"I... hmm..." She appeared very perplexed. Her expression darkened as if she had just realized something and she assumed a more defensive posture. "I was with you, wasn't I?"

"But WHERE?" he emphasized.

"Ummmn... I think it was somewhere far away." She was obviously having a difficult time with this. She shook her head back and forth and squeezed on her temples the way he always did when he was trying to recall something. "I can't remember!" she said with an expression of abject terror. "I CAN'T REMEMBER!"

Rather than curse at the situation, he picked himself up out of the crater and approached her. He put his hands on her slumped shoulders and said as sure as he could, "We're going to get your memories back, Sana. I'm going to find a way to."

"Wait! Thas Feyera, isn't this supposed to be the other way around?" she asked with a horrified look.

"So you do remember something," he responded trying to remain calm, "you recall that I had suffered from amnesia, correct?"

"Yes but—" she sighed and closed her eyes "—that all seems like a very, very long time ago."

"Do you know how long ago you felt that way? Can you tell me when it was you had concern for me because of my amnesia?"

"No," she murmured.

His hands fell from her shoulders and he turned around to face the ruins of the city. "Then this is the way things really are. All this time... I was wrong about everything."

"It was in a dream I had!" she said suddenly.
It caught his attention and he turned back around. "A dream?"

"Mm," she nodded. "We were on an adventure together in a tropical forest. I remember it but you didn't. The whole time you were blaming me for losing your memories. It felt so real, I thought I would never wake up, but here I am."

"Sana, that's the real world. This place is an illusion."

"This is NOT an illusion!" she said very defensively. She would not accept it. She was too afraid to do so or something was holding her back.

"No," he said sternly. "This place, this ruined city, it cannot be real!"

"What makes you so sure?" She touched her heart. "In my heart I know this is all real."

"But that's where you're wrong. This isn't the way things were; this isn't the way things should be."

"Why do you get to decide that?"

"I'm not deciding anything. It's just the truth. Your dream, Sana, that's what's real."

"How can that be…?" she pleaded. "I'm not sure of anything now."

"Okay," she said with a tepid nod.

"Right. First thing is first. I need to find out where my Pokemon are."

"Brucie, Des, July, and Axel," she recited.

"Yeah… wait, how did you?"

She poked him and said playfully, "I was listening to what you said, you know."

"So you believe me?"

"I don't have much choice since I don't remember what happened other than the dream…" Her shoulders slumped. "But you know how dreams are, Feya, you can only remember them for a little while before they vanish forever."

"It wasn't just a dream, Sana. I'll show you. I promise."

"You make a lot of promises you can't keep, you know?"

"Do I?" It never really occurred to him. Many times it was impulsive when he saw suffering taking place. Perhaps it was his way of trying to make amends for what he had done in the past. "I didn't realize I was so compulsive. I'll try not to—"

"I think it's just your style though," she said lightheartedly. "Even if you can't do everything you want to try."

"Well, that's certainly a nice complement coming from you," he laughed.

"Don't push your luck," she said blushing. "I only believe you because I have a feeling I should. The things you said, they match up with the dream I had… even though I know it couldn't have happened
"since I woke up."

"I'm going to prove to you it was real. We'll find our friends and together we'll save Dee from Celesta—"

"And what about me?" she asked pointedly. "Will you save me as well?"

"Of course," he said reassuringly. "Why would you have any doubt about that?"

"Because... you seem to know already about the connection Celesta and I share." She frowned. "It's rather odd since I don't remember ever telling you. But in the dream, I knew you felt so sad when you found out that I was forced to become a part of her because I had made use of her Soul Star."

"You don't have to do that!" he implored. "Keep that stupid rock of yours locked up, and remember what I said. Please, Sana, don't use it. No matter what."

She hesitated. What he had asked her to do was limit her power in such a way where she would not have access to Celesta's spirit. All the wisdom of generations that had come and gone before her would be sealed off. That meant she could not Mega Evolve by channeling Celesta through her Soul Star. It struck her as an odd request considering he was a Pokemon trainer now, and would benefit from having the most power in a battle. And since he had no other Pokemon to rely on it was even more risky. Despite all this she found the courage to say, "I'll... trust you on that, thas Feyera."

"Attagirl," he said remembering a little too late that she was not human. Regardless he gave her a rub on the head, fluffing up her damp hair. "Next order of business is finding our friends and locating Deirdre. Gonna be tough as nails navigating this wasteland of a city..."

"Who exactly is Deirdre to you?" she asked inquisitively.

"She's someone I promised to save," he said deciding to keep the extent of their romantic relationship at the research facility to himself. "Her body has been merged with the Radiant Heart, a physical manifestation of Celesta, the entity you channel into your body by using the ancient power of the Soul Star."

"I...see," Sana spoke softly. "Were the two of you close?"

Her perceptive heart-reading ability was nothing to scoff at. "In another place we were," he admitted.

"Then if it was between saving her or me, who would you choose?" she pressed.

"I would not make that choice," he said firmly. "You're both too important."

As the wind picked up, he heard a faint drone in the distance. Something was approaching. It sounded like a helicopter and he felt an undeniable sense of déjà vu. This whole sequence of a copter approaching from out of nowhere felt similar in such a profound way that he could not shake the sensation he was witnessing the very same event as before. The whirling noise of the rotor reminded him of Fredrick's copter. It rattled his thoughts, but he refused to let the events of the past shake his spirit. Before he knew it a jet black copter had lofted above the skyline and hovered above the rooftop they were on. The cold steel blades sliced through the pale moonlight. Sana stood by his side as the generated wind from the machine blew downwards on them both.

"What is that?" she asked awestruck.

"It looks like trouble," he said.
“Whether it's a dream or not, trouble has a way of following you.”
Chapter 19: Man of the Last Hour

It was a strange sight, one befitting an unfamiliar world. Through all his adventures, he had never seen such widespread devastation concentrated in a densely populated area. Certainly he had seen photographs of the Great War, learned much about the incursions of the first massive global conflict in modern times. The Great War had spurred the advancement of anti-Pokemon weapons and gave rise to the governing bodies called Pokemon Leagues, yet many lives were lost in the historic battles. But this was different. This was not a history book. This was being there amid the destruction; engulfed by the desolation all around, this was his reality now. He smelled it all around him, tasted the dark black smoke of decay. He heard the cold wind whistling through the empty, dilapidated city streets far below. More than anything else, he felt the catastrophe as something real. This undeniable revelation gave way to greater fear and uncertainty than he had ever faced as a young man.

How did I get here? he thought. It was a foolish question; he could not know the mechanism by which he arrived in this place. He only had clues, and he was quickly becoming more of a detective than a scientist. The chain of events was really all he understood.

Sana activated the Soul Star after blood had been spilled on the battlefield and channeled Celesta into her body so that she could Mega Evolve to defeat Team Rocket's Mega Tyranitar. Afterwards, she had reverted back to her usual form, but then Celesta – the so-called "Supreme Spirit" containing the souls of all Gardevoir who had used the Soul Star – appeared in physical form as Deirdre Aldaine. The sight of her, being one whom Christian had loved, triggered his human memories to all come flooding back at once. But sadly, she was not the associate researcher who he remembered from his past. Instead, she was the aggregate spirit of countless Pokemon that had activated the Soul Star over the centuries, wearing Dee's flesh as if it were a mask. Celesta, an extradimensional spirit with no physical form outside of Navenfell unless she possessed a Pokemon during Mega Evolution, had commanded Dee's body as if it was her own thanks to the heart crystal in the former researcher's chest. The toxicosis had resulted in her strawberry hair becoming green and her caramel eyes to be crimson and unreadable. Her personality and memories were all but gone.

Celesta had taken him and Sana to a place where time and space were not as they should be; a strange place with stone towers he remembered from his dream before starting his Pokemon journey. The sky was like sparkling amethyst and there was a large gateway or tunnel carved into the heavens with clouds shaped like arms perpetually circling around the gate. It was as ancient forest, what Sana called "The Forest of Origin" now known as "Navenfell". He had fought to approach Celesta, and upon touching her in an embrace, he had felt if only for a second the Dee he once knew. Their reunion moment was short lived, and he was quickly pushed back next to Sana. From there he attempted to use his psyonics by removing the Life Fabric covering his injured eye, much to the ire of Celesta. However she disappeared along with the forest, and he found himself here in the destroyed city of Goldenrod with only Sana at his side. His wounds, his Pokemon, equipment, and Sana's memories had all been lost. The moon had completely changed phases, suggesting weeks had passed, but that hypothesis was not certain.

"You're going to explain all of this to me, right?" Sana asked him. "When you figure it out, since you're a famous researcher."

He didn't have the gall to lie to her. There was no rational explanation for any of this. But what she
said proved that she did remember who he was, or at least who he once pretended to be, and that
gave him some small amount of solace. He nodded and said evenly, "I'll do everything I can to figure
it out. And when I do, you'll be the first to know."

She paused and tilted her head as if waiting for him to say something else. When he did not, she
asked impishly, "What, no promising?"

"You're the one who told me I shouldn't make promises I'm not sure I'll be able to keep," he
answered straightly.

At this she formed a small smile. "You never listened to me before. What happened to you?"

In truth, he did not know what to tell her. But he answered with his heart making a quick remark,
"You reminded me of someone I knew when you gave me that honest advice. And now...I don't
know whether I'll ever see her again."

Sana looked sad. He would have pegged her as the jealous type due to her emotions. She too had
lost someone close to her so this very well could be her empathy. Still, he could not put his finger on
what exactly was causing her disheartened reaction, something in his gut made him upset to see her
so downcast by his sadness.

"It's not going be like that," she said suddenly.

"...Oh?"

"When two souls are close they don't lose each other," she said with conviction. "That's what I've
learned. And I feel –no, I KNOW in my heart it is true."

"Huh. You got any proof?" he skeptically replied.

"Not yet," she admitted, "but like all things in life, it is a work in progress."

"Fair enough. You solve your mystery, and I'll solve mine on how we got here. By working together
our odds of figuring out something that makes sense are much higher," he concluded.

Sana squeezed his hand in hers and said brightly, "Agreed!"

The only other sound in the night was the steady drone of an approaching helicopter. It was close
enough now where he could see the general shape and size of the machine. The dread he felt was
because it reminded him of when Fredrick of the International Police had arrived by a similar copter
south of Lavender Town. What worried him was that Fredrick was dead. That was his memory.
Fredrick sacrificed himself to save Christian from Cipher on Penta Island.

Knowing all this, he did not try to run or hide. Even if he wanted to, there was nowhere to escape to
in this wasteland. It was time to confront who or what was coming this way. As the copter directed
broad beams of light at him and Sana, he knew they had been spotted by the searchlight. All he
could do was wait patiently and not allow his nerves to get the best of him. He finally understood
that his will was the bulwark that prevented his emotions from overtaking him, and it had been
exponentially strengthened after his memories had returned in full after seeing Dee.

The jet-black helicopter that had approached the roof of the Radio Tower was carrying what looked
like a cage on its underside. It was carrying a steel cage, glistening like a silver coffin, hugging
closely to the belly of the copter. The metal box was approximately twice the size of a Rotom-
possessed refrigerator and dimensions equal in proportion. There were thick chains wrapped around
the metal casing in the same way a String Shot would bind its mark.
The hovering machine opened its side door and turned to face them. Christian could not believe his eyes when he saw the figure leap ten feet from the door and land on the ground with minimal effort. He knew this man. Or rather, in his memories he thought he did.

His hair was a rich brown, combed all the way back. His eyes were a very dark brown, yet there was a glimmer of hazel in their stern gaze. He had a well-defined jaw, his grin was unmistakably memorable. He wore an executive suit, tailored to fit his wide frame and tall body. His dress-tie was scarlet and he wore a small lapel bearing a gilded insignia used by well-to-do Kanto politicians associated with the Pokemon League.

"It can't be!" Christian thought to himself.

"How've you been, buster?" said the burly gentleman. Though he was physically imposing, he was well-dressed and groomed. "A little birdie told me I'd meet you here. Hah! You right went and took your sweet time though!"

"T-Tim?! Timothy Rallsen?! Is it really you?!" Christian said in surprise. It was the first man he recognized in this strange world. He remembered writing a letter to him before leaving the Rocket crime organization for good. That letter was never delivered; Rallsen had no idea Christian had plans to leave Team Rocket until after they had succeeded in their raid on Saffron's Pokemon Sanctum. From Rallsen's perspective, the infamous Doctor Feyera had disappeared after the events at the Pokemon Sanctum.

"You've done well for yourself, haven't you?" Rallsen said with a big grin and an air of paternalism. "Guess you're more than a young lab rascal now, would ya look at that!

He felt embarrassed from the compliment, but simultaneously disarmed to see a familiar face. Even though Tim worked with Team Rocket, joining the Organization's rare artifact extraction branch years before Feyera did, there was something different about him. For one, Rallsen was not like the rest of the heartless criminals Feyera had dealt with. At least in the place where he came from, Christian recalled that this was the one man he trusted with his true identity while working under the guise of his researcher moniker on projects such as Progenitor. However, that had all gone so terribly wrong. The first thing he could do was blurt out, "Rallsen, I'm sorry about what happened in the Pokemon Sanctum."

"Hrm? What are you sorry about?" Rallsen asked as he scratched his defined jaw inquisitively. "You did brilliant."

"What…?" Something was not right. Rallsen's response was dramatically different from what he expected. Christian remembered fighting and easily subduing Rallsen's Nidoking after he had stolen the Mew Relic from the underground Sanctum. Rallsen tried to battle him for possession of the Relic, which led to their brief confrontation. That was the last time he saw Rallsen before escaping to Penta Island with the accursed Relic in hand. But maybe this world was different somehow. He wondered if he was mistaken about his memory of the events as they transpired.

"You're not angry with me?" He felt strange, lightheaded even. His memories were trying to desperately latch on to some constant of the past. The thoughts in his mind were like probing roots, searching the dark earth for nutrients that would sustain him and prove he was who he thought he was.

"Why would I be angry at you? You did a great job." Rallsen clasped his large hands together. "I knew you would."

"Wait…" Suddenly he started to feel sick inside. Like someone had just burned a deep, invisible hole
through his chest. "You're genuinely—?" but he could not find the words to match the sensation. Nothing about this scene was genuine.

"Admittedly, I was never quite as genuine as you were," Rallsen answered with his unforgettable sharp grin. "You see, you've proven time and time again how efficient it is to humanize Pokemon, or in your case the opposite. However, these are mere semantics; in truth, it does not matter which one came first: the Torchic or the Egg. As I'm sure you've come to realize, it would appear Nature cannot accept Pokemonized humans without also creating humanized Pokemon to balance the equation…"

"…!" In a pitch of frantic anxiety, he defensively grasped at his chest's heart shard. It felt slightly warmer than normal, but the sensation of touch did not encapsulate the depth of distress he felt at this moment. Fear, uncertainty, doubt, the entire world was unraveling beneath him like an out of control rollercoaster. "What are you trying to say?" he asked without succumbing to the building pressure in his chest.

"Don't you see?" Rallsen asked in a calm voice, as if he were speaking to a clueless child. "You've been all I've hoped you could be. A force of nature in ability, a human being's tactical cunning, an exploitable spirit. You're even able to commune with the beasts as if they were humans. That's what makes your kind so special. You are a somewhat outdated version of my vision, and it is that vision which binds our fates, for this reason I have a nostalgic connection with you."

"What do you mean by all that?!" he shouted as his tired, sweating body shook from exposure to the cold night air.

"I'm saying that your research has done great things for Team Rocket, Christian," Rallsen said with a look of conceit on his face. "Do you know why that is?"

"NO!" he yelled. "You're wrong! You've got it all wrong! That's no longer who I am! I've done everything to stop Team Rocket!"

But Rallsen continued, uninterrupted by Christian's claims of intent, motive, or purpose. "—It's because you've done so well in your role as a pioneer of what the future will bring," he said simply.

"The future?!" Christian shouted back in irate confusion. The air was thin in his lungs, and despite his breaths it was still not enough oxygen. "I don't understand!"

"You never did," Rallsen sighed. "Memories can be notoriously deceptive; repeat a falsehood enough with words, use Hypnosis or even Dream Eater, and eventually a lie will become the truth to someone. That subjective perception of reality is known as a 'false-truth'. Normally, a false-truth is only true to the individual who believes in it. The rest of the world goes on knowing that the false-truth is a lie. But sometimes, under exceptional circumstances, the false-truth can evolve into a truth."

"Don't let your emotions get the better of you," whispered Sana.

She was right; he had gotten hot under his collar just from listening to all of this. "Get a grip; don't let emotions control you," he told himself. "You told me a lie, and banked on my belief in it to get your way," he replied logically to Rallsen.

"Correct. It was a fabricated false-truth to encourage and motivate you to do what you did in the Sanctum. You of all people, the most rational of sorts, were the one who successfully managed to pilfer the highly volatile artifact, containing the genetic bases for all Pokemon. What you expected and what you got were two incompatible results. You could not be made aware that you would wind up losing your humanity after touching it, which was the main reason why it was sealed away for so long."
"You wanted this to happen to me?" Feyera asked. "You wished for me to lose my humanity to this...this...thing?!"

"I held no personal grudge against you specifically; I merely gave you an opportunity to make use of because it would be mutually beneficial."

"How can you say a sacrifice of my humanity was beneficial!"

"Wasn't it though? Look at where you are right now. Can't very well tell me with a straight face that you would've gotten here without your inherited powers. Besides, you're missing the point of mutuality. Parasites often benefit from keeping their host alive. Think beyond yourself. It was for the common good that you absorbed that relic. You achieved your desire of power, the clout of being veracious in your research."

"You got your wish?" Sana innocuously asked him.

"No...this isn't what I wanted to happen," he said resolutely. "The reason I acted the way I did was because I wanted to prove to her that I could change my ways."

"Her?" she repeated with an expression of understanding. She knew by the look in his eyes that he meant Deirdre, his companion from before when he was a researcher. She could only imagine what suppressed feelings he must have harbored to have gone this far to try and prove to her that he could change his ways. Tragically, as things were he'd never be able to prove his love for her now that Celesta had overtaken Dee's body. It gave Sana mixed feelings. On one hand she understood him better than anyone else, but on the other she could not shake the feeling that he had deserved all of this. Stranger still, she felt compelled to forgive him though it was not her place.

"So a lover's quarrel set you on the path you've chosen," Rallsen established. "That's surprisingly ordinary coming from you."

"I chose to walk this path because I knew it would be the only way. The reason Dee left was because of what I did to Pokemon in the name of science. I thought that if I could free the test subjects, and use the relic's power to give sight back to the blind I'd..."

"—No need for you to be modest," interrupted Rallsen. "I understand where your heart is in this matter. I understand all too well. My desire was to see the development of psyonics, since they are the key to shaping reality. Humans are not naturally born with the abilities of Pokemon, and so they can never achieve powers that defy all rationality unless they partner with a Pokemon to act in perfect synergy. Such training takes decades, requires unparalleled disciple, and usually ends with one of the two species dying before the other, negating all that hard work and effort. Thus your artifact became a convenient shortcut to forming the bond so few can forge with the creatures. I only had to engineer the perfect conditions and I was sure you would do the rest. Considering your ties to Cipher as a researcher with a hidden remorse for what he had done after it had cost you the girl you loved, it did not take very long for you to act upon that guilt in the desperate hope that you could win her affection back."

"You knew I harbored guilt for what I had done to Sephiteos," he said hands shaking. "And you used that emotion against me."

"Gave it a name did you? Pokemon are given nicknames by humans, they normally do not have their own names." Rallsen smirked. "Suppose that's natural considering you're able to communicate with them through your heart."

"This was HIS heart," he explained with a point.
"I'm sure it was," said Rallsen. "That would be one explanation for why that creature by your side continues to follow you around. However, are your "bonded hearts" the ONLY reason you stay together? I wonder if there is something else, more there to your Gardevoir than meets the eye."

"How does he know about our hearts?" Sana asked worriedly. "I thought he was part of Team Rocket, not Cipher."

"You're right. What are you playing at, Rallsen? What's your end goal for doing all this to me? You must have a plan."

"My plan? I plan for Semblance. A vision I had of a future a long time ago, where there was no longer separation between beast and man. You see, deep down, all men are animals. Society aims to control the carnal nature of humankind through law and custom. However, the beast always exists inside the heart, waiting to emerge at the pinnacle of emotion and bring forth its devastating potential. My role is to expedite the process and make it irreversible."

"He wouldn't dare!" Sana said in disbelief. "How can he think he is entitled to act on behalf of an entire species?"

"He's not who I thought he was, Sana. Anything is possible in this unfamiliar world," he said gritting his teeth.

"Pokemon, like the one next to you, used to be beasts as well before you existed. It would seem this planet is a prison of sorts for all matter of monsters. And so I thought, what makes a beast strong? Is it power? Is it control? Or is it something like tenacious resolve? All of those answers I found lacking. They can apply well to a Pokemon which acts according to nature, but not to man. Man is notoriously defiant of nature. His cities, here in the skies, stand against the natural order of things. And yet, chronic war readily destroys those achievements, belittles our accomplishments because we live in a false reality that teaches us to deny our better instincts. Why haven't we embraced our nature in the fullest way possible? Why do we pretend to be civil when the world we live in is nothing more than the ramifications of demons acting according to their whimsical bellies and emotions?"

"Lowering yourself to the status of a beast is not what it means to be human. You should be ashamed to say such things considering you still have your humanity!"

"Big words coming from a hypocrite who has trouble keeping his own emotions in check," Rallsen pointed out. "My philosophy is uncompromising reason. So long as Pokemon exist in the world, humanity will be unable to match them unless we ourselves tap our hidden potentials. Our weapons are powerless against mind-control. There are psychic dampeners, but they require finesse to attach and fail sometimes as you've demonstrated. Semblance is just one option to bridge the divide."

"Listen to what you're saying!" he retorted angrily. "You don't want this thing to take over your emotions. Nobody does!"

"Oh? You sure wanted control of other people's emotions while you were still human. The simple problem for you is you cannot undo a wish. You once felt powerless in a world filled with hateful creatures. The fire that killed your mother was caused by a Pokemon. In your heart of hearts, you were never able to forgive the monsters that had done this to you. Despite your worship of reason, those repressed emotions eroded your principles. Being a man of action, you sought out ways to manipulate and control the monsters better rather than confront the deep anger you harbored."

"Leave my family out of this," he said firmly. He felt vulnerable. Rallsen was practically psychoanalyzing him. How did he know so much about him? Did he really divulge all of this information willingly to Rallsen back when he trusted him?
"Does anyone go through life with zero physical or mental suffering? Why do some suffer more than others? There is no rhyme or reason for why a good man is made to suffer and an evil man is not. Certainly you can try to avoid suffering. Become a utilitarian, maximize pleasure, and minimize pain." Rallsen gestured an invisible set of weighing scales using both his hands. "Nevertheless, as you surely know by now, sometimes a person's pleasure and pain just comes down to dumb luck. Your research strived to change that. You wanted to furnish a way to control happiness no matter the cost. Well, can't say you missed out on getting your wish."

"This ISN'T what I wanted!" he insisted. Then he tempered himself with a breath. "Yet my emotions will not change the hand I've been dealt. I'll accept it, but not without changing my direction."

Rallsen furrowed his brow in thought. "I wonder. What part about becoming a beast caused you to change your tune? Was it the endless, insatiable hunger for further power brought on by consuming emotions? Or perhaps it was the revelation that you were not reborn as an angel, but as a devil."

"I'm neither of those things since they would imply my death," he stated realistically. "I regret what I've become, but as long as I have a choice, I can still bring myself to change…even as a monster."

"Choice, huh?"

"Yeah. So what made you choose this?"

"Not going to answer my question about why becoming a beast deranged your sense of self?"

"I wouldn't be able to answer that without getting personal," he admitted. "I can say that it's based upon what I've experienced. Besides, I think you know why. Should be obvious to someone who claims to understand reason like I once did."

"Humph. You've grown," Rallsen acknowledged. "Ingesting so many emotions throughout your journey must have caused some sense to emerge from the perpetual turbulence you've enveloped yourself within. Absorbing the hearts of others in order to feed your own, leaving your victims as blank vessels without the memories that had once made them feel the emotions you consumed, it's a marvel you haven't gone insane from stealing so much passion from others."

"I can't help it," he explained to avoid the guilt Rallsen was subtly encouraging. "This crystal keeps me alive, but at a terrible price. Hatred, sorrow, fear, rage, regret… each sensation has its own distinct flavor. I've lost what it means to go through life simply experiencing these passing feelings, because I can see them and associate them with sustenance. A perpetual need for an ephemeral thing like sentiment would break anyone, even a scientist."

"What I know is that your regret comes from a time before you became a monster, and it is specifically that hatred which allows you to do what you do best." Rallsen stretched out an open hand and snapped it shut. "You aren't beset with guilt from using your demonic powers any more than a Pidgey would be held to blame for using its talons to feed. People or Pokemon, your appetite for their feelings is voracious as it is necessary for your survival."

"My hunger for emotion is not something I want to be known for," he answered frankly. "But my desire for truth is. So out with it, Rallsen."

"Very well." Rallsen nodded slowly. "I needed to start with a false-truth and allow it to mature into truth as it grew within you. There never was a Timothy Rallsen to begin with, only a made-up memory to suit the purpose."

"Then who are you?" he hollowly asked.
"Timothy… Rallsen… The initials. 'T. R.' What does that stand for? What does it mean?" He grinned darkly. "I AM the Organization. I am Giovanni, the leader of Team Rocket."

The words did not make sense. Christian heard them loop in his head again and again. Giovanni, the leader of Team Rocket. "It was all a lie! Everything was a lie! The whole thing was planned and I fell for it! "NO!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

"And you were so happy to see me just a moment ago; I could very well sense the fleeting warmth of your happiness as you projected that ephemeral emotion," Giovanni said with a nonchalant expression. "Your relic has truly captured the essence of the Pokemon you experimented on better than any Pokedex in existence. Why, if not for your human body, I'd say you're indistinguishable from the emotion-fed demon you absorbed."

"I should have known you'd betray me!" Christian said lacing venom in his words.

"Betrayal is not the right word. We were never allies; those memories were planted in your mind, like that fiend's heart was planted in your already depraved heart. It's your own fault for being so gullible," he explained. "You really did believe my charade in the past, back when you were just a fledgling and an impressionable blank slate. You were easy to deceive; all you needed was a father figure to give you that oh-so-necessary sense of self-validation. That was three years ago, Christian. It was before your amnesia, back when the big old world was a simple equation for you to experiment and tinker with until you managed to solve it. It was well before you had any idea of what the true domain of people and Pokemon was really like. Before you could judge the consequence of an action; before you had been properly trained. And my, how you have struggled! Thoroughly trouncing my inadequate henchmen left and right like it's your fulltime job. Hah ha ha ha… What a pity. But just now. Just a moment ago, in spite of all your progress, with all your knowledge, with all your wisdom from experiencing the harsh realities of life… more than anything else: you wanted to believe in the lie."

"You imposter!" Christian shouted at the man who had deceived him. "This whole time, you've done nothing but manipulate me! You turned me into this! But WHY?"

"He's been using you this entire time." Sana repeated softly coming to terms with the situation.

"You followed orders," Giovanni said with a short laugh. "That's what matters. That's all a Pokemon Trainer needs to be concerned with — whether his Pokemon will listen to him. Sometimes that requires a bit of creativity to accomplish, but once it has been set the habit becomes undeniably affixed to the Pokemon psychology. As a Pokemon, you will continue to obey those who feed you emotions so long as you exist. You know this to be true in your heart. It's written into your very DNA — hardwired to your essence. And you've seen this as a Pokemon Trainer yourself. Obedience to your Trainer is your responsibility whether you like it or not."

"..." He had no words to retort with. No witty comeback. Only silence suited the fate that had befallen him.

"Thas Feyera," Sana said slowly at his side, "you became the same as me?"

"Isn't it poetic in a sense? Before – as a human – you had a choice, as do the greatest of kings and even the lowest of plebeians. And what did you choose to do with that free will? You tossed it away, squandered it, replaced it with a mocking shadow of the real thing when you merged with the relic. You relinquished that precious, unadulterated gem of humanity in exchange for power and control over nature itself. Yes, the world will answer to your 'psyonics'; indeed, it shall bend and fold in fantastic ways with the abilities brought by the gift of Mew. But, as consequence, your master is in control of what you must do forevermore."
His teeth rattled uncontrollably. The entire scene felt surreal to him. He half expected to wake up from this nightmare. How could he have not put the pieces together in time? Why didn't he question his memories of the Sanctum with comprehensive scrutiny as the scientist he knew he was would have? What had changed within him? What had made him acquiescent, domesticated, and unable to inquire and think critically? How come he never questioned, never tried to oppose those who lead him? He looked down at that sickening piece of crystal. There had been times where he hated it – for how it made him feel. There had been times where he could not stand the pain of it – when he overexerted its powers. But nothing before compared to this current sensation of absolute helplessness.

"If you don't believe me, try to attack me. I am the leader of Team Rocket after all. Your given 'mission' was to stop Team Rocket. I don't question your abilities. You killed my Executives and numerous grunts as you gained strength rising to the top, feasting on their ill will and claiming their fear as your sustenance to further empower yourself. How could anyone in their right mind not call that a monster?" Giovanni laughed. "But your limits exist. Like a toy soldier, all wound up, with nowhere to go once your source of emotional power has been stifled."

He tried to step forward, but his body would not budge. He was locked into place, seemingly by a wall of extraordinary dense air surrounding him like invisible gelatin. He had no free will. No agency at all. Just delusions that would serve to comfort his accursed sensitive heart! As Celesta had told him, his fate was determined, immutable, stitched from the very same cloth as their species; he had truly become one and the same as her and Sana. Like the heart of the Pokemon seared into his chest, he had become permanently bound by the will of humans. Finally, he understood the weight of his decision to allow himself to become indistinguishable from a Pokemon.

"I'm not angry at your attempts to outdo my underlings on your way here. I don't let my feelings get the best of me, so you cannot take advantage of my malice to feed that crystal of yours. On the contrary, I am capable of empathy; I know why you acted the way that you did, and because of that I cannot be angry. Unable to feed off that, you're at a very real impasse." Giovanni shrugged, displaying his indifference at the situation. "To you, my underlings served as deadly obstacles in your misguided warpath against my Organization. What you fail to realize is that it was all a part of the plan. Your so-called 'mission to stop Team Rocket'. Pah! And how very far along that road you've come believing it to be your purpose."

"You expected all of this?" He knew he was dealing with a criminal mastermind, it made sense Giovanni would have foresight, but his level of knowledge about how events were to unfold was truly profound.

"It was a test," Giovanni spoke clearly and concisely. "A proving ground of sorts. You've demonstrated your worth over those henchmen I associate with by running my gauntlet. Why, when I look at the trail of emotionally-hollowed corpses you've left in your wake, I cannot help but be surprised at seeing the runt of the litter devour the rest of his kin in a most depraved manner."

"That's how you see people in your Organization?" he retorted angrily. "As nothing but tools to be turned against each other?!"

"Of course not!" Giovanni laughed. "After all, they are only human. Flawed, yes, but unlike you, they are not beyond salvation. The dark paths they once walked in life brought them all to me, to my Organization, much like yourself. As vagabonds, con-artists, thieves and rouges, and yes, even the occasional mad scientist, they all found their way to me and my Organization. They did not wind up working for Team Rocket by chance; rather they were drawn to the Organization because of who they were. So no, I do not feel anything for them."
"It's not right!" he said with indignation. "It's not fair what you're doing!"

"Fair?" Giovanni scoffed as he scathingly repeated the word. "You're one to talk. The sins of your past are far too numerous. To a beast like you... I do not need to show remorse. Why would I? Do you expect an Ariados to evaluate the morality of the bugs that wander into its web? Of course not. The Pokemon world is a cold, unforgiving one. That is the truth of the Nature you chose to become a part of. Your choices are no longer your own now that you've been integrated with a Pokemon. You haven't any humanity left, and so you are to be judged by the laws of Nature. In a sense you are the perfect tool, sharpened by my hands to fulfill my ambitions for this world."

The paralysis would not dissipate, and he felt a layer of cold sweat form on every inch of his body. Am I really stuck like this? he wondered. A tool of this madman?! This whole world had just been flipped on its head. I should have known better, I really should have, he thought. Something prevented him from coming to the truth. The confusion shouldn't be this powerful. Yet the emotion he felt was so strong that he could not even fight it. Like a cold serum in his bloodstream it permeated every inch of his body, tunneling through him deeply from the inside. It weighed him down, became a part of his essence. The insurmountable feeling itself was the principle manifestation of his lost freedom.

"Go ahead, try to attack me. Try to bring down the infamous leader of the Rocket Organization you so despise!" Giovanni raised his arms. "...What's the matter?" he taunted with a conceited laugh. "Could it be that you have lost the Willpower to act on your own against me?"

He didn't know what the matter was. It was the same feeling he had known from before, the goal was to protect something other than himself. Before it had been Sana. That had made some sense on account of his heart's connection to her. But not this man. Who was he? Just a man. A human being made of meat and bones! What was stopping him from attacking Giovanni? His vision had become blurry and red.

"You forgot," Giovanni perceptively answered. "The creature you experimented on, the Pokemon whose essence you captured with the power of Mew - was the property of none other than Team Rocket."

"N-nugh!" He tried to yell out in defiance, but he could not muster it. Had this been anyone else, he would have rebelled. He would have fought tooth and nail. But no, this all made sense. It felt sensible to him. His breathing slowed. He felt hypnotized. The paralysis of his joints refused to allow him to budge an inch.

"You've been pulled back. Back down, to an obedient state. That crystal is your shackle. One befitting a tamed Pokemon. Soon, like so many other creatures, you'll come to accept it. Bear in mind, the Organization does not allow for loose ends. Let these next few words resonate in your heart forevermore: Your perceived freewill is nothing but an illusion, an artificial, internal construct of the mind, a means to cope with the necessity — no, rather the humility, to follow your master's orders."

"NO!" he shot back, rising up and clutching his chest. The pain of digging his nails into the side of the crystal gave him enough adrenaline to yell out, "I'm not your fucking pet! I...won't back down!"

"You will, because I order you to!"

"Nugh...no..." he said with a wavering voice that was lost in the rooftop's wind. He was desperate to fight, and yet every cell in his body defied his will.

"I can't hear you!" Giovanni shouted back with a commanding tone. "You may be able to recklessly
murder my underlings! You may be able to act in ways that undermine my Organization!
HOWEVER! Your powers have their limits! You cannot choose to defy ME. It is impossible for you to do so."

Why was it so impossible?! What made him immune? He again looked down at his heart, jutting out from the jacket he wore. That had to be it. It was the only thing that was holding him back from ending Giovanni's life right now. "I need to be rid of it," he said with a clearness of consciousness. Indeed, the clarity of his thought was too certain for second-guessing. But how? He wondered. There was no undoing the binding, it was a part of his body. Based on Pokemon physiology, it was essential to life. This scientific knowledge did not comfort his erratic considerations, which spewed forth like raging lava from a volcano in his mind.

"It is a simple concept," said the leader of Team Rocket. "A Trainer gives the Order and the Pokemon obeys, or it is disciplined. Basic psychology really; I'd assume as a scientist you're familiar with Classical Conditioning. A Pokemon listens without question when the alternative to cooperating is much worse."

"What alternative do you mean? What type of punishment could cause blind obedience?"

"Blind? An interesting choice of words. You really do share a strong connection to the Pokemon." Giovanni smiled. "Why don't you tell me? It is a psychological certainty that a Pokemon faced with the prospect of capture would know fear. The unknown, the dark void, the uncertainty of when release will ever come... all of it affects the consciousness of the prisoner."

"It's impossible for me to be captured in a Pokéball," he insisted. "As long as I'm not fully a Pokemon I can't be imprisoned by that mechanism since my genetics are different than its frequency."

"Perhaps," said Giovanni. "But your inherited psychology seems to disagree. The more important question is: can you even fight it?"

"I have to!" He spoke with conviction, "You'll never get away with doing this to me!"

"It doesn't matter what you say!" laughed Giovanni. "You can protest as much as you want, it will not change the latitude of your restricted choice. Ah, but what am I saying? You don't have a choice any more than a beast has a soul! Your fate is sealed, akin to a creature locked within a Pokéball. You made your choice three years ago to forfeit your freedom in exchange for the Mercury Relic."

"Pokemon...they can still choose..." he said desperately wanting to believe that he still had free will to oppose Giovanni. However his muscles locking up told a contradictory story, which manifested itself in the realm of the physical rather than in the ideal.

Sana grabbed his arm and held herself close to him. She too wanted to believe in the power to choose. She didn't need to say it; he felt her resolve like he felt her warmth.

Giovanni scoffed at her action. "Pah! Can Pokemon really choose anything at all? Their decisions are made by their masters or Nature itself, because they have not fully unlocked their own Willpower as mankind has."

There was that word again. Both Giovanni and Celesta had stressed the importance of Willpower. But something about what they both said bothered him. Was Willpower really unique to humans? His adventures with Brucie, Des, July, Axel, and especially Sana had demonstrated that each of them had their own resolves. More specifically, they had unique personalities, memories, attitudes, and could act on their own volition. However, he remembered how Celesta had mentioned to him that
this was because his Pokemon were "siphoning" his Willpower. According to Celesta, even Sana had siphoned his will to some degree; Celesta had gone so far as to call it "an investment" Sana had made. He did not know who to believe. Questions of consciousness and how the Pokeball affected a Pokemon's sense of individual awareness was something Dee understood far better than him through her research. Unfortunately, Dee was no longer within his reach; the kindhearted Dee he remembered from Evercrest had been overtaken by Celesta. She had killed a man without batting an eye.

"I can see your mind wrestling with the problem. Indeed, certain researchers – such as your former associate, Miss Aldaine – have come to different conclusions, but those fail to hold up when their creators are tasked with testing the very theories they posit."

The response horrified him. "You put Dee up to a test as well? What the hell is wrong with you!?

"I had no part in what took place at Evercrest; I am merely an observer to the actions of Cipher. Nonetheless, you could say that I am someone who is eager to learn from their mistakes. However, I digress. Perhaps some Pokemon have limited agency, maybe if they have been blessed with a loving Trainer to care and nurture them. But what about when their master is a cold-hearted man like the two of us?" Giovanni questioned in his brusque tone while pointing at him. "What is to be expected when their spirit is broken by countless weeks under bright lights, following endless eye prodding and injections, when the pursuit of science has distorted a once beautiful world, turning it into a realm of shadows? What then, researcher?"

"The experiments…so Progenitor did this as well?"

"Progenitor! Hah, Progenitor turned a beast into a demon, and turned you into a monster," Giovanni explained. "That monster became a part of yourself in the pursuit of your reckless ambition. With every experiment you conducted, you turned the specimen into a more expendable tool. Only to inherit the very clay you molded as your own body! You never thought it possible, oh never! Not someone as single-minded and smart as yourself! And yet here you are — the spawn of your own demons! Crippled your human agency in exchange for false promises of power. To put it into emotional terms you would better understand: how very hopeless you must feel. Don't you see? You've transformed yourself into the perfect slave!"

He was beyond livid. "Call me that one more time and I'll break every goddamn bone in your body, you piece of filth!" he spat vituperatively.

"Hah, the vigor of youth. Go on then. I, like you, am a man of action. Why don't you prove to me you're not a slave? Would you care to try?" he asked as he spread his arms out again, taunting and waiting to be attacked.

It was so unassuming. All he had to do was move one foot in front of the other. It was the simple action of walking forward! He had done it all his life; there was nothing complex about it. And yet, something prevented him in his efforts to move closer to Giovanni. Whenever his brain gave the order to raise his foot in order to step forward, he found it was stuck to the cement roof. He struggled to move, and when that failed he fought to employ his psyonics. All of this willingness to act he felt boiling within his body like scalding steam, and still nothing happened.

"Face it, Christian; you've been depleted of human Willpower when it comes to your master."

Giovanni lowered his arms. "Everything has a consequence. You trusted me when you were fully human, fully autonomous. And in your current state, you must protect me. A slave both in freedom and in bondage. What agreeable irony."

As he clutched at the heart buried in his chest in rueful fury, he felt something stop his trembling
hands. Without looking up he recognized those hands pressing against his own: they belonged to Sana. He looked upwards at her large cherry eyes, in a mixture of doubt and confusion. "What do I do?" was what he desperately wanted to ask her. He had fabricated in his mind that she held the answers to his questions. It was not true obviously, but that ray of hope could not be denied as he looked her in the eyes.

"You can't defy him. But I CAN!" she said with conviction.

"Sana…?" he started to say, but his voice trailed off. All the feelings running through him culminated with her sentiment. Her conviction matched that which he could not seem to actualize. She was truly, utterly and completely, channeling his innermost desires. It was incredible; she had pulled forth his will and channeled it into action outside of himself.

A bombardment of psychic energy flooded the rooftop. Pieces of the concrete floor, broken from the roof, lifted high into the air and rushed at Giovanni at blistering speeds. He raised his arms to cover his face just as the barrage of stone began to collide with him. He fell backwards from the impact and on to the ground as the stream of stone continued to madly dash past him off the edge of the Radio Tower.

"And here I thought my charade would be enough to control you. I did not expect you to have a pet of your own… much less a pet capable of understanding the extent of will," Giovanni said clutching his shoulder as he stood back up. "My manipulation was not enough and I must reveal what has truly been keeping your body trapped in place."

"All that talk about me not having freewill was another lie?" he asked wondering when the deception would end.

"What difference does it make? You believed it and so it became true! I'll ask one last philosophical question: what does that say about you?" laughed Giovanni. "But no matter, I've had enough of your drivel. It's time for you to become acquainted with your research's greatest accomplishment. A true evolutionary masterpiece!"

As he said those words, the armor-plated cage fastened to the underside of helicopter suddenly released itself. A massive chain that had tethered it to the belly of the copter rattled as the metal sarcophagus smashed into the cement. It buried into the roof with a loud crash and the solid metal door hissed open. Inside was a Pokemon Christian had never seen before in all his years of researching. It was a monster in every sense of the word.

There was no normal skin on the body, only pulsating muscular tissue, rippling with partially exposed tributaries of its cardiac system. These branching veins and arteries covered the body of the creature, which was the size of a man and a half. Its large head had two crooked horns, both dulled and scarred from repeated bludgeoning. The head of the monstrosity was not only connected by a thin neck, but also by a snake-like appendage that latched from the back of the head to the top of the spine, wriggling and twitching frenziedly like a caged Seviper.

Stored for who knew how long within its metal box, the creature seemed much too large for the container. A broad tail made of stitched-together flesh wormed from behind it as it pushed its bulky form from the claustrophobic chamber it had been housed in. It lurched forward, all too human in form on its weighty legs.

"Quite a feat, isn't he?" Giovanni said with pride. "The warped genome from Mew's dataset results in a compound epidermis highly sensitive to the environment and increases muscle density tenfold. His physical strength is more than enough to smash through granite boulders, but his real gift is psychic abilities on a scale most cannot even fathom. So powerful is this one's brain, he does not
even need to be looking directly at you to freeze you in place as you experienced. The brute doesn't even teleport like other psychics; his mind opens doors to other worlds."

"That's not a Pokemon! You've created a monster!" he exclaimed.

"Now there's the pot calling the kettle black," Giovanni mused. "Mercurium-Secundus, since I know how much you researcher-types romanticize your dead languages. In layman's terms, Mewtwo. It is the product of your foundational research and the Cinnabar Island team's hard work."

Mewtwo let out a low groan. It was something that had the deep moan of a Wailord, mixed with an abnormal hissing noise that came from where its mutilated mouth was. Its three nub-like fingers pressed against the sides of the container as it squirmed to be set free from the many tubes and metal wires that latched deep into its hulking back like anchors.

"We're in deep trouble," Sana said. "I've never felt psychic energy this powerful before!"

He could feel it too. Mewtwo was blistering with power; every cell in its body was attuned to its highly developed cerebral cortex. Waves of its invisible energy cascaded like a waterfall out from the opening of the cage it was in.

"I used him to track you; he led me all the way here – to this remote, dead universe. My Organization and Cipher have been in an arms race to secure dimensional travel after a certain scientist postulated its potential through the art of gene grafting Psychic type Pokemon. That is the true power of psyonics!"

"All this time you were looking to exploit psyonics. It all makes sense. That's why your goons were following me!"

"After my 'goons' captured you in Union Cave, they extracted something very special from your body. It was a marker of sorts, a specific type of genetic code that only became relevant following your unfettered use of psyonics. A complete integration of human and Pokemon would be a "1", a challenging prospect. Prior experiments have yielded values ranging between 0.3 and 0.6, never much higher than 0.9. However what was discovered in Union Cave was that you had increased your integration value as you continued to use your psyonics, becoming less and less human with each demonstration of power. Or maybe you had become more and more of a fiend from feasting on sorrows, fears, the very things that chill the hearts of men; by using those negative feelings as your demonic sustenance? Whatever the case, reaching 1 is a complete loss of humanity. After all, adding another angle and side to a triangle makes it an entirely new shape, doesn't it?"

"So that's what those codes meant..." he thought. "And then that would mean I am on track to end up like Dee if I continue to use psyonics. I'd change the world, but lose myself. Damn!"

"The psyonics used to generate advanced illusions, such as this grim one we are in right now, are especially strong amplifiers of the dehumanization process. A shift in the track of reality would make you reach the value of complete integration in just a few uses."

"My psyonics shifted the track of...reality?" he asked breathlessly. It made sense since he was not where he remembered. Despite it explaining why he was in the ruins of Goldenrod, it seemed ludicrous and a stretch of the imagination. "Is it me, or is it this world?"

It was an illusion in a loose sense of the word, but he had not considered the consequence. What would happen to all the people and Pokemon of the old world he remembered? Would they all die with the creation of a new world? Or was this created world his personal prison? He did not know, but both options were unacceptable.
"What else are psyonics besides finding a way past an obstacle? Even if it means changing what is accepted as true, psyonics are the way to make the impossible possible. They come at a price of being made into a beast, but their potential is undeniable."

"I'll never become a beast, a tool to be used by others. My humanity, whatever is left of it, will deny you until the very end!"

Mewtwo let out a low groan, reeled up on the front part of its legs smacking his large tail against the metal cage.

"It seems your protests have disturbed my Angel of Death. Bear in mind those transformative powers from the Mercury Relic originate from the Pokemon Mew. Its cells are undeniably prone to mutations and it can habitually alter genetic encoding. I suppose that makes you and Mewtwo relatives."

That thing was nothing like him. He looked at the creature's torn eye sockets. Buried beneath thick incision marks, its blank gaze past him looked so helpless. For all the power it was emanating, it conveyed a sense of absolute desperation, as if using its incredible power was the only way it could interact with the world around it. Suddenly, those dark murky eyes were covered in a haze of reddish smoke as it tapped into its psychic abilities. The world began to shake. It was not just the ground as was usually the case with earthquakes; everything, even the wind and the night air vibrated in unison with the burst of power.

"You could say he always has your scent because of the genetic connection you share. He's not the least bit daunted by your psyonics. You cannot fool him by manipulation of what is true; your false-truths, skipping along these broken paths on the stream of time are little but minor inconveniences. And like a tenacious Houndoom, Mewtwo will track you down to the very ends of the earth should I demand it."

Something did not make sense however. If Mewtwo was as powerful as Giovanni claimed, following him would be highly unnecessary. "Why is following me so important? You already have your dimensional traveling Pokemon at your side! What do you really want from me?"

"Mewtwo is but a tool. His 'genetic memory' causes him to seek out that which is similar to him, yet he has no dreams to call his own. Only through doors created by a former human, from the death throes of a man who lost everything to a demon, will the liberated world reveal itself. In other words, I need the emotions you've stolen from others along your journey to power my new world. Their haunting sorrow, fear, loathing, will cause your broken spirit to bring into existence a realm without those apparitions. That will occur precisely when you lose all humanity. You won't be able to prevent it because those vengeful feelings you've taken in would otherwise consume you. Therefore, you will be forced to expend your psyonics one last time to create a door to a world where reality coincides with my ambition in a beautiful way!" Giovanni said manically. "Of course, you'll lose all your memories in the process, but you should be used to that by now!"

He felt sick hearing all of that. His powers, the psyonics were just a tool, a means to an end. If Giovanni's plan was to come to fruition, it meant sacrificing himself – no, it meant sacrificing what it meant to be human in the first place. He was shaken, and speechless.

"I'll have my wish," continued his adversary. "Legends once spoke of a Pokemon from the Ancient Forest who wished away the willpower of all Pokemon; I too will do away with a cumbersome yoke oppressing my species. It is for the greater good of humanity. A world where sorrow is no more. A world where hatred is impossible. And yes, even fear will no longer be an impediment to humanity. I'll use your psylonics to remake the world the way it is meant to be! And you, as a completed monster, your tarnished soul will be the necessary sacrifice."
"You're the only monster here. I'm not sacrificing anything!" he retorted.

"It's already started. You've already come too far on your way towards this end by using your human will to feed that monster in your chest the emotions of the unwilling. Given the proper trigger, you'll snap. I'm surprised you haven't already considering what you've been put through. Yet even if you try to run, using your psyonics will deliver the same result when you reach complete soul integration with the beast. You cannot win against or outrun the inevitable dusk flowing out from your heart."

"You're insane!"

"Am I? I – like you – have been exposed to the truth of reality. I've seen other places I thought were only possible in my dreams. After witnessing these places, I realized that I could change what was true; not just for myself, but for others. Psyonics are the gateway which make the impossible possible!"

"Thas Feyera, if you're going to make your move, now's as good a time as any!" Sana encouraged.

"I can't," he communed back to her. "It's not possible for me to teleport. Remember, you told me on the pier that my psyonics can only open the gate. I can't travel through the gateway with half a heart. I was only able to teleport with your help, to another world from Navenfell."

"Then we need to go there," she said unflinchingly as she reached for the Soul Star.

"No!" he said hurriedly. "Remember what I told you, you mustn't use the Soul Star or else Celesta will be able to claim you."

"She already has, thas Feyera," Sana replied stubbornly. "It's too late for me. I already made the choice to allow her voice to speak through me — three years ago. I know it is true in my heart."

"No! That was in a dream—" he started to say but then realized his mistake. As he had previously told her, this place they were in was not the real world. His consciousness had already begun to accept it as true, he was mixing up the correct reality, despite the fact that he had not even been here for very long. Involuntary acceptance of the false world was shocking since he knew better. It was something he had no control over, as his memories began to latch on to this reality; he had all but forgotten his Pokemon who never existed in this false world. Even their names he could hardly remember.

"We're running out of time! I can't change my choices, but you still can," she tried to explain.

Mewtwo had hoisted itself partially free from the bindings and was out of the metal box. The once clear sky had grown dark, and the very heavens appeared to be folding in on themselves as the continued use of its incredible psychic powers shook the foundations of the world.

"I DON'T WANT TO DIE IN A LIE, CHRIS!"

"Open it," he said austerely. "Do it."

She held up the Soul Star in her hands and it began to glow brightly from the light radiating from her heart. She placed it above her heart. With her other hand, she touched the edge of her crystal and a small drop of blood appeared.

"NOW!" A bright window had appeared in-between her hands, and her body had begun to undergo a radical metamorphosis as she channeled Celesta into her body, completing the second Mega Evolution he had seen. The bright window expanded all around them and covered their bodies with a violet light. All the light from the once full moon vanished and was replaced by the deep tunnel in
the center of the spiraling amethyst sky of Navenfell.

"You're not the only one capable of slipping through the fabric of reality willy-nilly! After them!" he heard Giovanni say from through the other side of the rift. It would only be a matter of time before both Giovanni and his Mewtwo came hurdling through the gap in space following them to Navenfell.

"We...need to shake them off our trail," Sana said having become one with Celesta's power. She was gasping, struggling to retain her own identity, but the power of the Soul Star was rapidly eroding her sense of self. She held her head and swayed. Her Mega Form was unwieldy for her since she was usually light and quick.

"FEYERA!" Celesta's authoritative voice echoed through Sana's newly transformed body. "What have you done!? You need to do whatever you did last time to go somewhere else. Use psyonics to open a gate. Quickly! You cannot allow your pursuer to break into Navenfell! The result of Mewtwo entering this eternal realm would be catastrophic for us!"

"Ah ah ah," Feyera shook his finger. "Not unless you're willing to strike a deal, Celesta."

"We have no time for petty deals! We've seen Sana's recent memories. Mewtwo is after you! By bringing it here you'll end everything."

"Ah, yeah. Wouldn't that be a damn shame?" he said confidently crossing his arms. "All that nonsensical talk you gave me about time and space, and looks like you're quickly running out of the former. Hell, after Mewtwo gets here, there might not be any space left either, that thing can practically demolish entire worlds. I wonder if he'd like the taste of yours. All the stolen energy you've taken from other Pokemon to make yourself powerful must be a tantalizing feast. How's it feel to have your little pond finally be invaded by a bigger fish?"

"You... ARGH!" Celesta lost her composure. Her eyes began to glow and her arm became coated in an otherworldly power. She was overcome with the anger of being outmaneuvered despite having her own realm. She hissed, "You're nothing but a renegade!"

"To you," he clarified. "In reality, I'm just a messenger here to tell you that your time's almost up. Besides, you're the one who used your power to bring me back here because you desired to siphon my willpower. Couldn't help yourself when Sana channeled you, huh? Should've considered the result of your actions, Celesta. Being all high and mighty here with your god complex has caused you to forget that we mortals have a thing in our world called consequence that we've gotta worry about."

"Your filthy kind sickens us."

"Feeling's mutual, bitch. You took everything I ever cared about and now I'm getting even," he said vengefully. "You see, you took away my memories three years ago, then your Radiant Heart took away my love, Deirdre, then you tried to take away my assistant, Sana, and finally you even tried to take away my willpower. All for yourself you greedy, manipulative, soul-sucker. However...there's one thing you couldn't take." He paused to let it sink in.

"What?!” she demanded in irritation.

"My tenacity," he replied. "I'm stubborn as all hell from journeying with Sana and my Pokemon. I've learned the path to victory isn't always getting yourself to win; it's also making your opponent lose. You brought me here, but you can't make me leave. And the Mewtwo following me has my genetic signature so he'll surely find a way here even if I'm dead. That means you better cooperate if you
"What then do you want?!

"How about you start by dropping the obnoxious attitude?" he reprimanded. "I'm the one calling the shots now."

"You insolent—"

"Hey!" he cautioned. "Watch your tongue."

"..." Celesta was quiet.

"Good. I demand that you release Dee and Sana from your hold."

"That is impossible. Following the Soul Combination, we cannot be unbound from our hosts."

"I don't believe you," he said skeptically. "You've lied before, and I refuse to trust you."

"It is the truth and it parallels the way you are bonded to your heart. Once we become a part of a soul, it becomes a part of us. We can loosen our hold and let our hosts go gather us more food in the form of emotions, but at the hour of its dusk it shall return to join us."

"That's the case for Pokemon using the Mega Stone. But Deirdre is different, she's a human!" he protested.

"Human souls are even more susceptible to external influences. They call us demons, possessors of the body, witchcraft, voodoo, the names are endless but the principle remains unchanged. We are that which steals your precious will so we may grow stronger."

"Damn you... Dee was always a good girl," he reminisced. "I know she wouldn't have allowed herself to be overtaken by a demon willingly."

"Even the purest souls have traces of malice. All we need to latch on is a little hook. For her, she held a trace of guilt for not being able to help you see the error of your ways. That was enough for our Heart to join with hers."

"You disgust me. What you have done to an innocent girl is beyond the pale. I should put you out of your misery, but I wouldn't want to hurt her or Sana in the process."

"You hate us, don't you? That was the reason for the Ancient Wish which sealed spirits like us in this place. If it will make you leave this place, we will impart all our knowledge on the nature of this realm. Once you know, then you'll understand the way things work."

"Tempting offer," he said with a hand on his chin. "Alright, I'll accept that because I am a man of knowledge, but how about you sweeten the deal? You see, when Mewtwo uses his dimension shifting, as you can clearly see by him not being here yet, there is a delay. What I gather is he can't follow directly behind me when I come here. But what that really means is when I show up back in the world I came from, he'll be much closer than he is now. For example, when I returned back to the world from Navenfell last time, it was only a matter of minutes before Giovanni and his overgrown cat-in-a-box showed up in a helicopter. That's why I need your help, demon. You said this place is eternal, and the way it interacts with time in my human world is different."

"You can travel to the future in this realm due to the gravity here. Your future to be specific – no going to other worlds," Celesta explained quickly. "Every five minutes you spend in Navenfell, a day..."
"passes in your world."

"Ah huh, so that's why the moon had changed phases and the world had gone to shit," he reasoned.

"You are able to go even further into the future by falling from that stone tower," she said pointing at the massive spire below the gateway in the amethyst sky.

"Now you're being absurd," Feyera refuted. "You trying to kill me by making me jump off the top of that tower?"

Two large wings made of dazzling light appeared behind Sana's overtaken body. Celesta fluttered them and rose above the ground. "As much as we'd like for the fall to kill you, it will not work that way if you manage to use your psyonics to leave Navenfell. Moreover, if you hit the ground then Mewtwo would still seek out your mangled body, so you better succeed. But don't fear injury. This realm works a lot like a Pokéball. Your sustained wounds heal very quickly, look how your eye had healed instantly upon your return to the human world."

"I follow. But still, at that height, I don't think I'd survive if I messed up."

"Then don't." She vibrated her wings causing sparkling dust to trail off them. "We will be guiding this vessel to go with you."

"She has a name, and it's Sana," Feyera said sternly. "When we leave Navenfell, you will release your direct control over her."

"Such trivialities. All Pokemon souls are essentially the same after being consumed, but if you insist we will refer to this one as Sana. We will release her from our hold until she calls upon us again. If she should die however, then she will be consumed."

"Not gonna let that happen."

Celesta didn't seem to care either way. "The region around that part of the realm is closest to the gravitational anomaly. By falling near it, you will accelerate the rate of time passing in your world. As a result, you will arrive in your world at a much later period, making it a lot more difficult for Mewtwo to track you and giving you a strategic advantage. Furthermore, falling from that height will ensure that Sana retains her memories, since she will know to expect that you are pulling her out of Navenfell."

"Okay. The reason she thought it was a dream was because last time I left Navenfell I didn't warn her I'd be pulling us out?"

"Precisely. And though we will be using our power to fly you to the top of the tower, we will stand by our vow to release her if you leave Navenfell behind so that Mewtwo cannot breach this realm."

"I also want the knowledge of how this place works, and how it is connected to the human world where I'm from. Telepathically too since we are pressed for time."

"We will impart the knowledge of Navenfell, the Ancient Wish, the Soul Stars, and the nature of the Fruit of the Forest upon your descent into the future. It should make for an exhilarating experience for a mortal such as yourself," she added haughtily.

"Then we have an accord. Sana once taught me you seal deals with a sort of handshake."

"That will not be necessary. We are bound by our word and our promise to you. If we deceive you, then we would suffer the consequence of Mewtwo usurping our realm."
"I'm gonna have to insist," he said grabbing the possessed Sana's arm and tugging it close. "There. Now the deal is set."

"Psh... mortals and their formalities," Celesta griped in a manner not all too dissimilar from the Gardevoir she had possessed. "Are you satisfied?"

"Won't be until you hold up your end of the bargain," he replied to her. He put his arms around her and her fairy wings carried him aloft. It was an interesting experience, close to being magical as they approached the top of the giant stone tower he had remembered from long ago in a distant dream. It was situated directly underneath the hole in the amethyst sky, which was swirling with long clouds resembling arms. The closer they came to the top, the more detail he could see about these strange clouds revolving around the gateway in the heavens. Some had eyes. Others had wings of their own. "What are they?" he asked.

"They are souls," Celesta answered coldly. "Our food; tied to this place in accordance with the wish."

"Souls?!" he shouted and felt himself slip a little. "That's gotta be a joke; surely they are just clouds."

"You've witnessed how we can combine our souls with others effortlessly, yet refuse to believe it. You've also witnessed the Soul Combination. And now through your own eyes you see that which sustains us."

"Yeah, well I'm a scientist. Souls you can physically see don't exactly fit into my paradigm of the world," he answered with a scowl.

"Humans... You fail to appreciate that which you do not know even if it right in front of you; a truly confounding mystery. It is the same as how you can see emotion – a psychological state with minimal physical qualities – as different colors in the human world," she explained in reference to the psyonics he used. "In this realm, we can see the souls of creatures who have left their bodies."

"But if those things are really the souls of creatures that were once alive... what exactly were they...?" he asked uneasily. Some of them looked disturbingly human. It was difficult to tell where their individual features ended and another's began because of the way they all blended together in the swirling mix of clouds.

"People, Pokemon, they all taste the same after a while. In truth, we fail to distinguish them at times. These are the ones who had lost their lives from the Fruit of the Forest, the Apricorn, and its derivatives over the centuries."

"God..." He could not believe what he was seeing. It was beyond anything paranormal he had seen in the real world. This was existential, metaphysical in a profound way he was not prepared to come to terms with. It made him unsettled as he pondered whether he also had a soul similar to the ones he saw circling the sky in Celesta's domain. As a scientist it made no sense. But as a man it became all too real.

"Are you ready for the fall?" Celesta asked using Sana's voice in order to sound less intimidating to him. Nevertheless it still startled him.

He had been so preoccupied watching the swirling sea of souls in the amethyst sky he had failed to notice that they were standing atop the tower's arching stone precipice. The view from this height was as impressive as it was mesmerizing. It was much more supernatural than anything he had ever seen on earth's tallest skyscrapers. From this vantage it was easy to see that the edges of this world were like distant mirrors; there were infinite towers exactly the same as this one in every direction he
looked. Each tower stood stoically alone, miles away in its own realm, shimmering as a mirage would beyond a reflective veil of dense soul clouds crashing down like an endless waterfall over the horizon. He squinted to try and see if he could spot anyone else at the top of any of the other far-off towers. The mere thought that he might gave him a chill along his spine.

"Don't peer too hard into the abyss, or you might lose your nerve," Celesta cautioned softly. "You'll need your senses to successfully leave here."

"Yeah, you're right," he said looking back down at the distance between himself and the base of the tower he was on. "And I am ready for the truth."
Chapter 20: Curse of the Blood Fairy

The fall occurred suddenly. Only moments ago he stood at the precipice of an enormous stone tower surrounded by a sea of souls. Now he was plummeting down from the side of the highest elevation in Navenfell, directly beneath the tunnel in the swirling amethyst sky.

Aside him was the recently possessed Sana. She was freefalling, same as him. Her fairy wings from Celesta's possession had vanished and now her skirt billowed behind her limp body in a deadly descent. A look of profound indifference was on her face. It did not suit her. He knew it could not be helped while she was overtaken by the power of the Soul Star she held that allowed the spiritual entity Celesta to grant her power to Mega Evolve. However all the power she had gained through the Mega Evolution had worn off quickly after Feyera had made a deal with Celesta.

"We offer you our aid, yet it shall come at a price," he heard Celesta say. The voice was coming from Sana. It must have been the residual power of Celesta, because she still had to uphold her end of the bargain. In exchange for him leaving Celesta's realm of Navenfell and drawing away the Mewtwo pursuing him, she would tell him everything he needed to know about the realm and release Sana from her possession. What he hadn't realized was the deal had not been limited to just those terms.

"What price?!" he hollered as the wind whipped through his short auburn hair.

"If a mortal were to sign a contract and trade the keys to their soul, then the wisdom of centuries is little more than a bargaining piece. You shall soon see," was the devious reply from the limp Sana falling next to him. The voice came from within the Mega Stone she held. That was Celesta's channeling orb and it was called the Soul Star. "But first…a deal is a deal."

"Uagghh!" he yelled out as his head felt like it was about to split open. The falling sensation seemed to accelerate, but there was no way he could be going any faster than terminal velocity. He and she were plummeting past the large stone bricks comprising the tower in the Ancient Forest. The endless masonry of the tower was zipping by at a frightening speed, and yet he and Sana seemed no bit closer to the ground far below.

"Your mind is being converged with our own. Part of the deal," Celesta's voice said calmly next to him. But it felt closer now than where Sana was. Her ominous voice felt like it was right up against his windblown face. And it was only getting closer. But that was impossible unless it actually entered his head. That was when he first realized his mistake. In exchange for expedient knowledge, he had given her unfettered access to telepathically join with his thoughts.

"Nughh…no…" he protested. But he was completely powerless to fight back in his freefall. Even his psyronics were suppressed from the incredible force of Celesta's consciousness; the countless number of souls she absorbed were invading his head through telepathy. All the knowledge he wanted was not going to come easy.

"We agreed to this," Celesta's voice echoed from within his head. "And now we have achieved a union of spirit. A union of thought, necessary to impart the knowledge you requested!"
He wanted to fight her out of his own head, but she had taken residence swiftly and was stretching his mind apart with her psychic powers. Not even yelling was possible, his mouth felt very distant from his mind.

"A temporary union, but it shall suit the terms of our deal just fine," Celesta hummed from inside his brain. "If you like it enough, we can stay even longer; perhaps form an everlasting soul bond between us."

His eyes scrambled for some sign that the fall was ending. To his great dismay, it had appeared to have only slowed down in decent even more. It was like he was traveling slowly through thick gelatin, the decent down the side of the tower had all but stopped. That meant his release from Celesta's mental hijacking was further away. **WHAT'S HAPPENING? WHY DID WE STOP MOVING?**

"The request, knowledge of this place. It shall all be yours," Celesta said confidently. "Thanks to the tower's close proximity to the wormhole gate in the sky, the gravitational anomaly will slow down our perception of time to a crawl. In other words, we'll have plenty of time to be together! Aren't you excited?" she asked precipitately.

He couldn't answer. He didn't have control over his tongue or any useful part of his body. Even his thoughts didn't feel like they belonged to him. All he could do was muster a grunt as he looked at the basically frozen Sana falling torpidly next to him in midair.

"You're a desperate man to make a deal with us, especially after making such threats to our realm," Celesta chastised. "But we Blood Spirits like desperation, it is a feeling we have grown to appreciate the taste of. When Pokemon channel us into their physical bodies by using the Soul Star, they are often very desperate. Trying to overcome a difficult foe, avoid being killed, or maybe trying to save someone they love. Some even yearn for a taste of Freewill after being tethered to a Pokéball. It makes no difference why they are desperate enough to activate the Mega Stone. See, those motivations, those emotions, that's just flavoring for a Blood Fairy. We consume them and their desperation both as our essences merge through the Soul Combination."

"Hnh!" His whole head was aching; it felt like it was being inflated by her sickening infiltration.

"But you're different aren't you? Not fully a Pokemon, not fully a human. Caught somewhere in between," Celesta noted. "It's quite phenomenal since we have no idea what your soul would taste like. Ah, but she would know wouldn't she? Your beloved research associate, Deirdre. She knew the taste of your soul and your body. Once only she knew what it was like before we assimilated her."

He wanted to spit her out of his head. It was driving him mad how she had taken up residence in his most intimate thoughts so swiftly.

"In time, we lost her within ourselves. She became just another part of what makes us 'us'. But by being in your mind, her feelings come rushing to the surface like the eager blossoms of spring seeking out warmth from the dark earth."

His anger at Celesta was growing at a blistering rate. The things she said about Dee, she knew exactly how to get under his skin because that was where she now was. Yet what could he do? She had commandeered control over his body and he was hundreds of feet off the ground listlessly falling.

"Oh, your anger—" Celesta slowly acknowledged as if she was enthralled "—what a tremendous amount of negative emotion you've accumulated. It would be such a shame for all that consumed sustenance to go to waste."
"The…DEAL!" The very same anger she was referring to had given him the ability to talk back to her, albeit through telepathy, not his own mouth.

"Oh right, the deal," she said speaking through his lips and forming them into a twisted smile as she paused. "You wanted knowledge, didn't you? Typical. I suppose we should start at the beginning for your, I mean – MY – sake," she said referring to him by using his voice in a manner as if it was now hers.

The sensation was so confusing. Not even his own voice belonged to him. Even his mouth and tongue moved to form words he did not authorize due to her devilish possession.

"Very long ago, the world lay on the brink of complete disaster. It was called the End of Days; a Terminal War fought with Pokemon so violent its effect would destroy the entire world." The Terminal War was familiar to him, but that happened at a time before recorded history. However, based on what he had seen in Goldenrod, it appeared that history was about to repeat itself.

"To prevent the War from wiping out life, a wish was made. A Time Guardian made the choice to keep ancient spirits possessing unadulterated Willpower here within Navenfell. The Wishmaker understood that when Pokemon on earth had unrestrained Wills of their own, they were free to cannibalize each other to achieve nearly limitless strength. In other words, the world below would always be in grave danger of destruction so long as earthly Pokemon had their full Willpowers. That was why the Wish was made; to seal away the collective Willpower of earthly Pokemon through the creation of the Fruit of the Forest — the Apricorn, and later the Pokéball."

That made perfect sense. But it wasn't just because Celesta was inside his brain; from a logical standpoint the Pokéball did stifle the Willpower of Pokemon. Celesta was one of those "ancient spirits" channeled by Mega Evolution. Of course, that made him question why his Pokemon had independent personalities and sufficient Willpower to communicate their thoughts on complicated issues. He felt her invisible tendrils tugging on the back of his brain as he thought this through.

"I'm an inquisitive mind, aren't I?" Celesta said using his voice again. She was able to steal his thoughts and turn them into words in his mouth, a truly frightening experience. "The terms of the Wish provided that the Willpowers of earthly Pokemon were diminished by bonding them to Source. This changed earthly Pokemon on a cellular level. Their bodily cells became of Mercurium, and this allowed for their powers and free wills to be sealed by the Fruit of the Forest."

"The Apricorn!" He remembered that was something Kurt had mentioned.

"Oh, I remember!" Celesta said robbing his voice again, clearly enjoying herself. "This Fruit of the Forest is called the "Apricorn" and it resonates with the "Mercurium" cells of Pokemon. It causes their normal energetic and dynamic nature to become static and stilled by the forces of gravity when drawn into the sphere. Not only that, but the manner by which it dilates time acts as a natural suppressor to their wills; making captured Pokemon become broken down and obedient. Wild Pokemon retain a weakened sense of Willpower due to the presence of Mercurium, but the nature of the Pokéball in human society eventually takes that away. That is why Sana hates the Pokéball so very much in her current state."

"So she did have a good reason to hate the device." He never knew because his Pokemon all appeared to retain their Willpower despite being captured.

"Oh Sana hated the very idea of the Pokéball! Ironic considering her predecessors designed the perfect Pokéball."

"What does Celesta mean by that?"
"Ah. Memories. Quite prone to failure when sentenced to a different body. Regardless, Sana never fully understood the power of the Mercury Relic I possess," Celesta said with his mouth and touching his chest with his hand. "A pity for her. What she had not realized is that even if I were to have captured her inside a Pokéball, her Willpower would be preserved directly from my unusual heart here."

It felt very eerie having her refer to his crystal like she was; she was becoming way too comfortable overtaking his body. He wanted to tell her to stop, but she certainly would not listen and it might only make things worse. "How did you possess a human?! How did you steal Deirdre's body on top of the Radio Tower?!"

"You see – I mean, I see," Celesta whimsically corrected herself after feigning she had forgotten she'd overtaken him, "This heart here is carried by a human, and like the Radiant Heart within Deirdre, it defies the Wish which had been made to seal off all the Willpower of Pokemon outside of Navenfell. Having a human as a host negates the Wish's effect because a human is immune to the suppression of the Fruit of the Forest."

Again, that made sense to him. He would not be effected by a Pokéball due to his humanity, however little of it he still had left.

"But what part am I missing?" Celesta asked as she pawed his chin using his hand, a gesture he had done so frequently while in contemplation it made it easy for her to mimic the bodily habit. "Ah. Right. Through emotional bonds only a member of the Ralts line could form, I created a bridge between me and my Pokemon using my heart. In a process known as siphoning, my heart had given the Pokemon close to me back their own wills, personalities, and strength to act independent despite their Pokéball shackles designed to seal these traits away after capture pursuant to the Wish. Sana had never been captured by a Pokéball, and so she retained her Freewill, and it was amplified by the bond of our hearts. Bruce, Des, July, Jill, and Axel all had Willpower despite being captured by Pokéballs because of the anomaly of my heart overpowering the Wish."

He gasped in shock. It was hard to tell whether that was him or Celesta, but he was clearly surprised by the revelation.

"Ah-ha! It all makes sense, doesn't it?" Celesta asked him taking his voice as her own. "By defying the Ancient Wish, I've become a problem for the Wishmaker, Source, and the Soul Combination!"

"Wait what?" was what he wanted to say.

"Oh right, I should know this," she said as him. "The Soul Combination is a necessary sacrifice of all beings who deal with spirits in Navenfell through engaging in Mega Evolution. The Soul Combination is also protecting the world of humans by means of the Pokéball suppressing Freewill. However, if earth dwelling Pokemon had completely no will, they would be nothing but mere slaves. A complete slave broken by the Fruit does not taste very good, far too little emotion. That is why Supreme Spirits are able to convene with the earth dwelling Pokemon who'd otherwise have had their Willpower completely stifled by the Wish. It is an exchange."

"Like Sana did?" he futilely attempted to say. "When she used your Mega Stone?"

"Ha-ha, my genius knows no bounds!" Celesta lampooned in his voice. "Celesta and the other Supreme Spirits' power to control the fates of earth dwellers became limited within the domain of this sealed realm. The residents of these upper realms such as Navenfell are the only Pokemon with true, humanlike Willpower. And by using this gathered power, we are strong enough to transcend down to the earthly plane through Mega Evolution. Once, it was this way for all Pokemon, before the Wish divided the realms, shattering the Ancient Forest and turning it into the endless realms of Navenfell."
"But what IS Navenfell?"

"I should know this. Only in these hidden realms, Supreme Spirits consume the souls of Pokemon that tapped into their Mega Forms by use of the Mega Stone. But that's not all. Pokemon or people that perished as a result of the Pokéball or its predecessor the Apricorn wind up in one of these strange, fractured domains connected to all other places imaginable. Once within Navenfell, the lost spirit and body become nourishment to the particular Supreme Spirit dwelling within that realm; just like in the days where there was no suppression – a time before the Wish. In the rare case where a Pokemon could outmatch a Supreme Spirit by demonstrating enough Willpower to defeat it, it would take the place of the spirit. However, this became increasingly rare as time passed, since with every new soul absorbed, the incumbent spirits grew more deadly. The victor would acquire the traits, powers, and essence of their victims in Navenfell. It is a place of brutal, unrestrained evolution at its finest. And that was why these domains of Supreme Spirits had to be sealed away by the Ancient Wish. …Until I broke it."

"…!"

"Surprising isn't it? Must be without clear memories," Celesta teased. "Not only that, it all seems very similar to what I did with the Mercury Relic – the Relic of Mew. …Mmhm, that's because it's the very same Soul Combination."

"What I did…was Soul Combination?!"

He felt himself smiling against his will due to Celesta's control. "Oh yes, but I'm only special because I'm a human affected by the Soul Combination. Usually it is reserved for Supreme Spirits to use on their meals. For instance, Celesta used the Soul Combination countless times to eat earth dwelling Pokemon tapping into the power of the Soul Star. They even formed a Fairy Cult to worship us."

"No!" he thought, "then that means for Sana—"

"—She's already part of Celesta. Us," she spoke through him finishing his thought. "A Pokemon using a Mega Stone after the spilling of lifeblood is a contract. The stone, a focusing ritual to channel the Supreme Spirit. The host gains tremendous power, regains its full Willpower, but at a price of being subject to the Soul Combination. Each deal and dealmaker is different. Celesta prefers it when her meals live on to gather more emotional energy so that when they die they may fill her with all their delightful sentiments as the Soul Combination becomes complete."

The Pokemon spirit speaking through him was making him feel nausea. Especially when she referred to herself in the third person by making him say her name. It felt so terribly wrong.

"The Ancient Wish sacrificing the Willpower of the earth-dwelling Pokemon assures the Supreme Spirits that their meals are always available. Indeed, without it, these realms would lack the requisite sustenance." His voice lowered as Celesta said slowly and deliberately as him, "I now know what that sustenance entails; it is the Pokemon that dwell among humans seeking to reawaken their suppressed wills through the power of Soul Combination."

"A revolting system!"

"I am so very repulsed inside," she commented and touched his stomach. "Yet I too eat meat. I eat the bodies of other creatures raised to be cultivated for my consumption. I absorb their precious nutrients to grow stronger, just like Celesta does with the Soul Combination. That's perfectly normal. When Willpower is taken away from Pokemon, then consuming them like Celesta does becomes much like eating a delicious steak. But such physical delights I had as a human cannot compare to the ecstatic eating emotion. What a treat! With my heart I can even eat the emotions of my own
species, other humans, to take away their memories – stealing the very thoughts that made them feel
in the first place. Oh! Now I wonder… Does that make me a cannibal…?"

The revelation dawned on him. "I… all those people I attacked… the psyons… all of it, draining
their minds… taking away their memories…!" He really was a monster. Even if the people he went
after were criminals, what he had done to them using his psyons had gone beyond anything a
fellow human could morally justify.

"But it is understandable because this is what I am. I really can't help myself any longer because of
this heart here. Put a juicy piece of tender meat in front of a hungry critter and instinct wins every
time. Works on humans too," Celesta said as him to his chagrin.

"Ugh…" he grumbled. Coming to terms with that was difficult, but doubly so due to Celesta's
psychic manipulation of his entire body and mind.

"I can't very well fight it. Nevertheless, I would not prey on Sana despite the opportunity. Her soul
and her gathered emotions belong to Celesta after all," Celesta said happily in his voice to mock him,
"and it would be very rude to take another's repast."

"Fiend!" That was what he wanted to call her. But she was in his head now and she knew exactly
what he was thinking.

"More of a Fae actually, tee-hee!" was her blithe response. "But even Supreme Spirits have diversity.
Naturally, each species has its own types of ritual stones. Ours, as I should know by now, is
referred to as the "Soul Star" because of the way it has gathered countless souls over the ages to form
a very dense, small object that shines as brilliantly as any star in the night sky. Ahh… It's so beautiful
now that I think about it. A perfect little orb containing innumerable hopes and dreams. Sana had
taken this artifact from Home, after the Fairy Cult of Ascension planned to sacrifice her entire
community to us. Their goal was to power the Soul Star with enough Pokemon souls to manifest a
lasting physical version of us independent from the Mega Evolved host."

"THAT was why she left Home?!" he wanted to ask.

"Oh but she would not tell me, oh no, not a human who had stolen her mate's heart away through the
very same Soul Combination she sought to prevent," Celesta said impersonating him, turning his
thoughts into words effortlessly while he could do nothing. "Unfortunately, despite Sana's best
efforts to flee from the fairy cult with the artifact, the manifestation of Celesta in the lower world had
taken place."

"WHY?!" he questioned mutely.

"I should already know why." His mouth unwillingly formed a smile from Celesta's possession.
"Deirdre Aldaine had been overtaken by the Radiant Heart. A Radiant Heart is simply the result of a
Mega Evolved Gardevoir having its crystal forcibly removed while channeling Celesta. For this
reason, it carried with it tremendous power stemming directly from Navenfell. The crystal impaled
into Dee's chest had caused her – as a former human – to channel Celesta's power as though she
were a Pokemon. This brought Celesta freely out of Navenfell and into the world of man, without
need for the Soul Star's ritual."

"So Sana failed her mission because of the Radiant Heart…" he reflected silently.

"However, Celesta is still tied to the Soul Star Sana carries with her, and her tapping into the power
of the Soul Star is just the beginning of her inevitable Soul Combination. In fact it was the same Soul
Star Sana had activated out of anger on the cliff after witnessing me use the Soul Combination. This
in turn meant that Sana's Soul Star could pull Celesta out of Dee's physical body for a brief while, at the expense of Sana's own body being overtaken instead."

"That's how she did it," he thought from the last bulwark of his mind that was still his own. "And that's how she defeated Mega Tyranitar."

"Since Sana had channeled Celesta three years ago on the cliff when Celesta wiped my memories, her life was already forfeit to the power of the Soul Star. Upon Sana's death, she knew she would be absorbed and become part of Celesta. Until that happened, she was only barely able to control the ancient spirit while channeling her through the Soul Star; like Celesta had done when she used Sana to cause amnesia for me after I had used the Mercury Relic."

That made sense. "But what about Source and the Wish – the progenitor of the Soul Combination?"

"Ah yes, the Ancient Wish made by the Time Guardian – a notoriously elusive resident of the Relic Forest. The Time Guardian kept Pokemon with Willpower from destroying humanity, and it had also sealed away Mega Evolution spirits like Celesta – who had developed powerful wills they used to consume the souls of other Pokemon to grow ever stronger – away in the infinite realms of Navenfell."

All at once, the knowledge of this realm became apparent through the telepathic transmission of knowledge from Celesta to Feyera in accordance with their deal. The revelation, channeled into Feyera's brain as he fell, was directly from Celesta's powerful spirit. There was no going back now. Her eldritch knowledge and awareness had become a part of him. In spite of all this archaic information he had successfully bargained for, he still needed to leave Navenfell behind. That was part of the deal he made with Celesta. She had given him what he wanted so that he would leave her realm, preventing Mewtwo from pursuing him here and overthrowing her. Yet she had done so in the most invasive and vengeful way imaginable due to her being a fairy.

"What a pity, it appears our time grows short. I do so wish we could stay together longer… perhaps that can be arranged…"

Her tendrils began to unwind from within his head. He felt himself coming back. Time began to move at a normal rate. As the ground approached, the frozen flowerbeds became visible. This presented a problem since he had only seconds to react and save himself as well as Sana from the impact. He didn't have a choice to stay here any longer.

"Here goes," he said trying to remember what he had done to cause the first teleport to another dimension. "ARGH!" There was no eyepatch to rip off, but he could still use his psyonics to bring forth that same level of inner strength he had used on so many occasions before. He stretched his arms out and focused his mind on building the perfect sphere of psyonic power. Before he knew it, his body was tumbling toward it. The colors and lights of Navenfell flew past him in the reverse direction. Suddenly he was falling upward toward the dark tunnel in the amethyst sky, but at a much quicker rate than he had been falling downward at. The acceleration was so rapid it distorted the tower he had jumped from as it zoomed below him. He saw it become nothing but a faint rocky outcrop while continuing to rush toward the gaping hole in the sky.

He held on to Sana's hand tightly as they fell through the passageway. A girl started speaking to him inside his head. At first he feared it was Celesta again. However, he was beyond relieved to hear a voice he never thought he would hear again. "Think of a place you remember. A place of comfort, of fondness, a special place where you'll be able to stand against all of darkness."

"That voice!" he exclaimed. It was as if Deirdre was speaking to him! She was nowhere to be seen, and only Sana was with him. Unless that was a remnant of Celesta who had absorbed her, it did not
make sense. Yet he followed the advice of his former partner. He thought of the one place they had kept secret from the world.

It was a small island on the Alola archipelago called Poni Island. The reason they were even in that tropical paradise of a region had to do with a scientific research summit taking place in Alola.

Dee and he had traveled there together during a research event sponsored by another group of scientists called the Aether Foundation. It was a tranquil tour of all four islands and the artificial island the Aether Foundation had built to promote Pokemon Conservation. The keynote speech had to do with something less than interesting, ecological conservation and dangerous invasive species thriving within Alola. Theories concerning powerful unidentified Pokemon which had seemingly appeared out of thin air and invaded the island, called Ultra Beasts, had seemed to him like a wild fantasy of a scientist who had gotten a little too much of the Alola sunshine back at the time. Now however, the theory was not as farfetched to Feyera who himself had just traveled through a dimensional rift to get here from the pitiless realm of Navenfell.

Despite being researchers, back then they had gone to Alola for the scenery more than the science. Besides, he and Deirdre were working on separate ventures at the time. He had been perfecting the Progenitor grafting and she was working on the Master Ball project. There were researchers there from all over the world, even a famous scientist with an eccentric hairdo from Unova had showed up. Truth be told, being around other pompous scientists had irritated Christian back then. It was a good thing Deirdre had been there.

In his memory of this specific place, Dee had wandered off from the main tour group and found her way upon a large bay overlooking the ocean on the sparsely populated Poni Island. He had followed her. It was a beautiful view, but not as beautiful as her. As he remembered their first kiss atop these rocky crags, he couldn't help but want to go back there. Because of that, when he activated his psyonics to pull himself and Sana from the realm where Celesta dwelled he naturally found himself here.

Of course, following the dimensional shifting there was water all around him. Figures, he thought. He'd always ended up in a pool of water after doing this. Pulling his head out from the warm water, he immediately smelled the pungent ozone that always reminded him of a thunderstorm. Gasping for breath, he shook his head and splashed. His feet touched the soft sand of the shallow and crystal clear waters.

Looking around, he saw that it was still daylight in the late afternoon, and the sky had begun to turn from bright blue to sunset yellow. The faint crescent moon could be seen low in the eastern sky opposite from the sun's position. There weren't any people in sight, as this was a remote part of the park on the island. However, the bay was teeming with life. All types of crustaceans, fish, and wild Pokemon were going about their daily rituals.

A mother Pelipper was flying low near the water, scooping up Magikarp and Remora as she went to bring back to her nesting young Wingull cawing softly near the shallows. There were tall Exeggutor that only lived in this region of the world rustling their leafy crowns by the water's edge. A flock of Trumbeak and rare purple colored Oricorio flew over these living palm trees.

It was so serene. But things were not as beautiful and peaceful as they appeared.

After making the jump through the dimensional gate, he did not feel right inside. Something felt abnormal. Granted there was hardly anything normal about what he was doing, but there was this inexplicably terrible sensation. It wasn't directly from the knowledge of Navenfell he had just obtained, yet it was something close to the spirit that had imparted that information. That meant it related to Celesta.
He looked down at his body and realized Giovanni was right. There was a cloud of darkness swirling in the center of his heart. So thick was the fog, it had begun to spread out from his body, as if it were a darkened mist of evaporating dry ice. He put his hand through the cloud of smoke and felt it clamp up in supernatural frostbite. "This is…?"

"Rage, despair, vengeance, hate... all the wonderful emotions that build up over time," Sana explained with overt sarcasm as she yet again dried her Life Fabric from the water she had been dunked into after exiting the gate with him.

"Then that means..." The awful revelation hit him right in the gut. "Celesta cheated me."

"Depends how you look at it," Sana murmured as water dripped down from her hair. "She kept her end of the bargain because now you understand how Navenfell works, and you managed to avoid Mewtwo for the time being. She let me go too. However, being the Blood Fairy that she is... she infested your heart with a near lethal amount of negative emotion. Keeping her word but doing so in a way that would damage you as much as possible without breaching the agreement."

"A real bitch that one," he snarled. He had been cheated, and it made his blood boil in a way it never had before. The hate she imparted made it impossible to think clearly; knowing that fed the vicious cycle and made him even angrier. It was as if a disease or venom had infected his body and was changing it by using his heart as the medium. "You called her the Blood Fairy?"

"That's what she is, a Blood Fairy, which is a special type of Blood Spirit. She uses lifeblood to accomplish terrible things. Blood is the ancient force that allows me to channel her through the Soul Star. Pokemon blood, and your blood, contains the element Mercurium. By fusing with her, I gained...part of her memories. But this time I was able to keep them when I realized you're going to pull us out of Navenfell through the kinetic signal of falling from that tower. I can say with relative certainty that blood is the key to her influence," she clarified.

"Well I'm glad you're not an amnesiac this time. But damn, she really did a number on me," he grumbled.

"She didn't get to where she is by being anything but ruthless. You made a deal with an ancient spirit whose only means of continuing her existence is by absorbing souls. And she's a fairy too. What did you expect?"

"Hey, ya'know, you shouldn't be talking. You made a deal with Celesta long before me, back when you activated the Soul Star for the very first time," he pointed out crossly.

"...Fair enough," Sana said sighing. "We're both tied to her."

"This awful power I feel inside me and this cloud around my chest. The negativity. I can feel it moving all throughout my body..." He clutched his arms which were feverishly hot and traced his fingers along his veins which were burning with fire. "It's all flowing in my blood. Is this what pure evil feels like?"

"That's a moral question," Sana said folding her arms in contemplation. "I can sense what it's made of though. It's mostly hatred merged with vengeance, anger, and the rest is despair. I'd say that's a particularly nasty concoction of emotions that could lead to wrongdoing."

"I've never felt this strong before," he panted. His breaths were as heavy as the wickedness he carried inside his chest. "Do you think Celesta did this to me out of retaliation or fear?"

"From channeling her, I know that she had those same negative emotions you now carry from
previous blood rituals using the Mega Stone. After you threatened to take away her realm from her by attracting Mewtwo there, she thought it fit to combine your hatred with all of hers. As for why..." Sana frowned "I think she was genuinely curious to see what you'd turn into with all her hate being forced on you."

"No... All this time and I'm still winding up as somebody's test subject," he griped. "Mad scientists, syndicate leaders, spiritual sorceresses... can't wait to see what'll be next. Humph, maybe shadow thieves," he mused.

"You can't give up, Feyera," Sana told him steadfastly in order to stop his despair-driven rambling. "I've never heard of a Supreme Spirit backing down to anyone before. You really put her in her place back there."

"Hah," he laughed weakly, "So you saw what I did in the Ancient Forest? Could've sworn she took over you completely. And when we fell from the tower you looked to be out cold."

"I felt it more than anything. That's what happens when I merge with her. My mind goes blank, I lose control over my body, but I can still feel everything as it's happening to her. And sometimes while I'm there... I get lost in her past."

"Celesta's?" he asked curiously.

"Yes and no. She's not one entity anymore," Sana explained holding her Mega Stone. "She's taken in so many others over the centuries to grow more powerful. Yet some of those spirit's memories are still buried inside her despite her efforts to devour them completely."

"You're kidding!" Then he asked the most pertinent question on his mind. "What about Dee's memories? Are they there inside of her?"

Sana didn't respond at first. She looked to be torn and she refused to make eye contact with him. "Umm..."

"Well...?" he asked again getting just close enough where the outer reaches of the murky cloud circling around his heart chilled her skin. "Is Deirdre in there?"

"They're not exactly living memories," she explained evasively. "They're part of the past. I don't think whoever she was can ever come back unless you managed to break her apart from Celesta. Doing that would be...extraordinarily difficult. No one has ever changed their fate after having their spirit completely assimilated by her."

"Then I'll find a way to make it happen," he insisted. "I don't care what the cost is. I need to save her, Sana!"

"Oh please. Sana let out a weak laugh. "You don't get it. For a living soul merged with her, such as myself, you can pay a price to have her loosen her tendrils. However, once the soul is completely merged with hers... then there's no way to break them apart. They're one and the same – like you are with Seph. That force, the Soul Combination, is what contains the Pokemon within the Fruit of the Forest. You'd need to find a way to change the way the world works in order to break apart the fusion. Unlike your daring 'bargain' to loosen her tether to my individual spirit, that's not so easy to do!"

"Humph. Change the way the world works, huh?" He contemplated whether there was anything a man like himself could do. Nothing stood out. His psyonics had limitations and were more suited for causing mayhem. What Sana was talking about was rewriting the rules that guided Navenfell and the
world. However, that wild line of thinking gave him an idea. "Ya'know, the way I see it, the two of them are a lot like magnets."

"Magnets?" she repeated in a confused manner by his analogy.

"Yeah, like Magneton," he clarified.

"Oh," she nodded, "you mean the Pokemon Cipher had used as their security system back on the island."

"Right. Three individual Magnemite form one Magneton, an entity different from the individuals comprising it, yet the fusion can't exist without those individual parts AND the invisible force holding them together."

"Sounds like a paradox… you need the parts to make the whole, nevertheless the whole differs from the constituents despite being made from them."

"If I were a chef, I'd explain it as using ingredients to make a meal that retains all the flavors, but is also different because of the balance those particular components strike with one another. However, you know I'm awful at cooking," he reminisced briefly about simpler times when finding a warm meal was his biggest obstacle. Now the futures of people and Pokemon were riding on his choices. "Hmm, the more I think about it, the less I understand. What gets me is we're talking about what makes an individual who they are, their consciousness, ideals, memories, beliefs, and personality."

She had gotten a headache and held her head. "How do you explain the way they come together?"

"That drawing force is called the 'Soul Combination' according to Celesta. It fuses two or more things into one. That's the same situation I've been in since I used the Mercury Relic. And it's also the same as you, Dee, and every individual Celesta has merged with. They're entities stuck together to form something new because of an invisible force acting on them. You could say after fighting, the more powerful one wins and takes on the traits of the loser. Therefore, the way I can separate these individuals is by getting rid of the underlying 'magnetism' – whatever the process is by which they are bound. Put bluntly, it means I have to destroy the Soul Combination."

"I think I follow. You're going to go after the system itself, not the individuals subjected to it. But you can't just rewrite the laws of the universe for your own sake."

"Says who? You should know better than to have doubt. I did manage to save you from Celesta's clutches, didn't I?" he said fishing for praise.

"It's a temporary freedom — same as when a Pokemon is let out of the Pokéball. My spirit is still shackled to hers. She only let me go so that I might gather more emotional energy in life so that I'll make a better sacrifice at the end. Upon my death…when I turn into a spirit…back inside of her is where I'll go. When death comes, so does the Soul Combination. Just like Dee already—"

"—Don't say that," he demanded. "Dee isn't totally gone yet. I refuse to believe it after I saw a glimpse of her in Celesta's eyes!"

She tilted her head and the sun sparkled on her damp hair. "How can you have so much irrational hope for her after learning about what Celesta really is?"

"You think a monster like her scares me?" he asked. "I myself am a monster; this darkness is proof that she was able to latch on to me. If it's a battle she wants, I'll give it to her now that I have all her hate."
"No, no. Calm down, sheesh, I don't sense you're afraid," Sana said trying to deal with his crossness. "However, you know Celesta and Blood Spirits take on the traits of her victims. Just like you did. And that means what you saw atop that Radio Tower was a shade rather than the real person."

She was absolutely right from a logical standpoint. He had taught her so well to be rational. Being around him had rubbed off on her since she was impressionable as an empath. However, the way she concluded the end result was making him upset. He did not know if the disdain for reason he felt was due to Celesta's curse flooding him with negative emotions or if had to do with his selfish desire to rescue his lost love. A little of both it seemed. "I'm abandoning that reason is the only way," he said with conviction. "That's my decision as of this moment."

"Huh?" Sana gasped. "I thought you were a scientist committed to reason. That's who you always insisted you were."

"Sana, I don't know if this malice from Celesta has changed me. But I feel different now. I finally understand reason isn't going to give me the answers I desire. It's time for me to stop being a close-minded fool; by imposing dogmatic restrictions on myself I've been suppressing my inner strength." He peered down at the center of his chest where the cloud of darkness had formed. "Besides, I can still be rational in my approach of using emotional power to accomplish my mission. Celesta's malice is part of her way of exerting vengeance. A twist like this is something I should have expected from making a deal with a Blood Fairy. However, if I stop looking at it as a curse then I will have power over it."

"You'd be crazy to want to keep all that she gave you out of spite," Sana said perceptively. "Such condensed emotional energy will change who you are. It can alter everything about you, turn you into something unrecognizable! Celesta dumped a lot of hate and other nasty spirits on you. Although she said she can only sink her claws into a person when there's a hook to attach to. I believe some of it is yours originally, combined with the emotions of the people you've used psyonics on. Celesta added to it, augmented using her own feelings after you stood and threatened her. She cultivated your hate to turn your heart into a dark crystal radiating spite."

"All the better when you put it that way. Gives me ownership over it," he unwaveringly replied. "If this is her way of thanking me for what I've chosen to stand for, hell, I'll use the very gift she gave me against her and the rest of the Blood Spirits. I'll bring an end to the system that allows her kind to perpetuate the suppression of others through Soul Combination."

"Whoa, whoa, wait!" Sana said hurriedly. "What are you saying? We still have to worry about dealing with Mewtwo. Just because we're in the future doesn't mean it'll never catch us."

"You're right." His expression darkened. He felt the terrible power of Celesta's hatred welling up inside his chest. "Let them come. I want to see Mewtwo and its puppet master in this state."

"You're acting crazy again like Edge," Sana shook her head. "Didn't you lose that part of yourself after fighting Ein?"

"I did," he answered thoughtfully looking down at his open hand – even his upper extremities had a faint aura of miasma surrounding them. "Come to think of it, I lost the reason why I was fighting so hard as Edge when the Soul Combination finished."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The spirit of vengeance I had inherited from your mate's crystal was what carried me forward as Edge before I met you. That desire for retribution had defined me until my path crossed again with yours and I was able to let go of the hatred I carried inside. You gave me peace Sana. And you gave
it to Seph's heart as well. It lasted for a while as I fought to become a human once more. But, now look at my sinister heart. Look at how much darkness it spreads forth. It is impossible to ignore the facts. I'm a Blood Spirit as well. I became one the moment I killed Seph. My humanity is forfeit, and quickly fading away because of it."

"But you're not like Celesta!"

"No. But now that I have a piece of her, if we continue to run I'll become the natural end-product of her concentrated hatred," he explained thoughtfully. "I've already hurt someone dear to me in another life. I don't want to repeat that mistake again. Don't you get it? Edge is the monster that can turn the tides. Against Mewtwo, against Giovanni, against Celesta, against the goddam Soul Combination itself. Edge's darkness is how I will face anyone who stands against me… and crush them."

"I don't like where this is going at all," she objected. "You'll likely lose yourself in that darkness when it overtakes who you are."

"When I do, at least it will not be because of fate," he concluded firmly. "Rather than run away and let it slowly happen, I'll face it head on. If this cloud of darkness does overtake me, the only reason I'm willing to accept is: I decided for it to be this way."

"Sure, sure," Sana muttered tilting her head back and forth impetuously, "but did you decide for Celesta to give you all that darkness when you made that deal with her? Wasn't that fate?"

"You have a point," he said, "yet I accepted the risks of forming an arrangement with a soul absorbing Blood Fairy to earn your freedom. That's the only thing that matters. And this I swear, with my whole blackened heart — I'll turn her hate against her!"

"You're really impassioned, aren't you?"

"How could I not be?" he sighed collecting himself with a deep breath. "I just took on a whole lot of emotion from that friggin' fairy. Far more than anyone should have."

"She probably thought you'd immediately lose control after she amplified the hate you already had by mixing it with her own. Figured it would take hold as soon as you left the portal and transform you into a manifestation of pure hate. A Blood Fairy would go that far without hesitation; long-lived fairies like her are the most mischievous of Blood Spirits. It's part of the reason why she's worshipped by the Cult of Ascension."

"Yeah. Banking on the fact that my heart crystal makes me susceptible to emotions and that the Mercury Relic promotes mutations. A devilish trick, I'll give her that. But she doesn't know who she's dealing with!"

Sana's cherry eyes widened in understanding. "...I see it now. You're using your tenacity to overcome the urge to give in to all the negativity. That's what's stopping the hatred from completely transforming you."

"You're keen as ever, Sana," he said placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Though the air all around his heart was frigid he could still sense warmth. "I won't lose to her. I can tell she's desperate to have done this to me. I'm going to flip the tables on her. You, Dee, and everyone attached to Celesta will be given their freedom back when I'm through with what I must do."

She beamed. "You know how to say the right things… but can you put them into action?"

"Just you watch," he confidently grinned. "This is my new mission. And it's MY mission – no one else's."
"I think your will is rubbing off on me," she said happily. "I don't need to siphon from your heart the same way I used to."

"No." He shook his head and said, "That's your freewill, Sana. You always had it; all I ever did was strengthen it through our bond. A temporary fix, I'll admit. But by destroying the Soul Combination, I'll prevent the Pokéball from taking away the Willpower of Pokemon."

"So your friends, Brucie, Des, July, Axel… all Pokemon won't need to rely on your heart in order to be themselves after the capture device went and locked that part of them away?"

He nodded and noticed her eyes had become misty. Was she really on the verge of tears? Why did that make her so emotional? Did she not believe him? "What? Did you think I forgot about my friends even though they're not here? Sheesh."

"No," she sighed covering her check. "It's just, well, how can I trust you'll manage to do that?"

"Hey," he said reassuringly, "it'll be okay. There's got to be a better way. Let me worry about the details. I'm good for my word; I remember what you taught me way back when." He held out a hand. She clutched it. Repeating what he heard her once say to him he shook on the oath, "Promises are the things you keep."

"I'll stand by you," she vowed, "so no matter what happens you'll be able to fulfill that, thas Feyera."

"As if you'd get very far without my help!" he said with an overconfident laugh. "C'mon. Let's plan our next move before this terrible situation gets any worse."
"If you keep breaking through dimensional gates in that condition it will only end poorly," Sana said walking close to him along the warm and sandy shoreline in the Alola islands. It was so peaceful, so beautiful here. There weren't any signs of the war, only an endless sky, sun, sea, and sand.

"We've no choice unless you have a better idea," he said in a reserved manner. "If Mewtwo catches up to us, fighting's a death wish. We're both outmatched against a Psychic of that caliber. I have no other Pokemon to back me up – they're back in the past, sometime before we used Celesta's realm of Navenfell to fall into the future. Running isn't what I want to do either, it's damn cowardly. And yet this darkness is overtaking me so I'm not sure how much time I even have."

"Okay. Eventually we'll run out of time to run to," she smartly responded through her telepathy. "If we go far enough into the future, there won't be a world we can stand upon. But before we'd get there, I think that will be our biggest problem." She pointed at the darkness radiating from his heart. "We're going further and further from a place where you can unload all the hate you've absorbed. Even YOU should understand the concept that all the negative energy has nowhere to go."

He despised when she talked down to him like that, but she had a point — energy could not be created or destroyed, only changed from one form to another. "I get it. It stays with me. All this time I thought it just disappeared somewhere in the crystal. The haunting sorrow, fear, loathing, all those regrets I took from others became amplified the more I used my psyonics. This is how I lose my humanity completely."

"...I can't tell when that point is and neither can you," she confessed.

"Sana, you're right," he said uncharacteristically giving her acclamation. "This darkness fostered by Celesta's mind-meld... I can't win... it's part of me. When it takes over, I'll become a slave to those consumed sentiments. I'd do exactly what Giovanni had planned. Dammit! All the people I attacked so recklessly, many were bad people, and I stole from them the very thing that made them the way they were — hatred. Every time I used psyonics to affect another person's life by sapping their emotion away. Figures... this is their way of getting even with me."

"You honestly thought only going after baddies for sustenance wouldn't catch up with you?"

"I didn't think anything was wrong with it," he admitted. "Felt virtuous at the time, it gave me a rush every time I used psyonics on a grunt or whoever was in my way. ...Thought I was doing the right thing in a twisted way."

"Spoken like a true vigilante," she said lightheartedly. She kicked some of the fine sand at his ankles playfully. "You messed up."

"Sure did," he replied, "you know, I regret taking all this hatred upon myself and giving Celesta the opening she needed to infect me."

"Shouldn't have crossed a fairy," she interjected. "A Blood Fairy at that."

"No kidding. It's out of control after whatever she did to augment it. Look at what it has done to my
core. The cloud is around my entire torso. I'm using all my will to suppress it from overtaking me."

"Mmm. That's a very bad case. I've never seen negativity manifest in a physical form like that. Usually I can sense it in others, see its colors, detect the aura, smell it maybe, but the fact that I can touch it..." she reached out her hand and waved it next to his heart and through the surrounding cold dark cloud. "Yeeesh...!" Sana made a repulsed face. "Gross."

"Why don't you have it too?" he asked seriously. Her heart was still pure unlike his. If Celesta was able to do this to him, then why not her old vessel?

"Because I have a well-balanced diet!" Sana replied smartly. "Good people, bad people, nice Pokemon, mean Pokemon, it doesn't really matter too much to me. I'm a Pokemon, so I act like one. So don't look at me like that. It's not my fault you like to prey on criminals more than other types of individuals."

"Ugh. Don't remind me that's what you do, you're making me sick."

"You asked. Besides, I think all that negativity is what's really making you sick."

"Whatever," he replied gruffly. "I hate to say it but you're right. We can no longer run forward in time or this'll just get worse. I wonder... What about backwards?"

"I don't know much about time travel, thas Feyera," she said with a pout. "All I know are two things. The Pokéball sends a Pokemon's consciousness into the future. And when I use the Soul Star, Celesta pulls us into Navenfell only for you to break us out and we wind up in the future because of how quickly time passes while in there. If you give me notice when you pull us out from the Ancient Forest then I don't forget everything. Sound right?"

"Mm, both are similar to how a Pokéball works," he pondered, "it would be a lot more fascinating if we didn't have Mewtwo chasing us down."

"That IS a problem we can't ignore. Speaking of, where do you think it is now?"

"No doubt behind us by a bit," he said looking out at the clear sky above the ocean. "It takes a while for it to catch up. My best guess is the way time dilation works in the wormhole gate. Any time spent traveling in the gate was dilated by the gravitational effects of the wormhole. This seemingly provides us with additional time, even though time is relative. However, don't get too comfy. Mewtwo could jump out anytime. And judging by Celesta's way of twisting deals I wouldn't be surprised if her definition of 'in the future' turns out to be an exaggeration worthy of a Blood Fairy's guile. So, we're going to have to deal with it. Any ideas on how to stop it from killing us?"

"By fighting dirty," Sana answered smoothly. "Say... Why not use all that dark energy you have built up inside?"

"Heh. Fighting dirty alongside darkness you barely understand. Wow. Never thought I'd never see the day, Sana. Then again you did put up a good fight alongside Axel. You know something, you aren't always insufferable. Suppose that's why I keep you around," he said superciliously.

"I have no desire to embrace your darkness, yet if it helps us win against the thing trying to kill us... I'll certainly overlook it."

"Whoa, aren't you sweet," he sardonically replied.

"Despite the endless nonsense that comes out when you run your mouth, you know how to fight when cornered. So, what do you say? How about we put a fitting end to this numbered monster?"
"Mewtwo to Mewzero."

"That joke was terrible!" he said trying not to laugh.

"Tsk. I'll try harder next time," she shrugged. "Either way, I've got your back."

"Okay. Mewtwo is tracking my genetics – its own Mercurium, the Mew derivative. That gives us one major advantage," he strategized. "The second it breaks through, the first thing that creature will hone in on is me. Which will give you a brief moment of invulnerability from his suppression powers as long as we don't share thoughts. I'll take point as the scapegoat; meanwhile, you flank and nail that sonnavabitch with everything you got. And I mean everything. I'll be giving it all on my end hoping it doesn't squash my head like a Cherubi. The moment that gate opens I'll make sure I'm the only one it perceives and you'll back me up with all you can muster. Focus on my position so that I can amplify your powers while I'm physically centered on the so-called Angel of Death."

"You'll be caught in the crossfire if you rush in," she keenly noted. "It's not worth the extra power to expose yourself to the impact of my attack."

"We need absolutely everything to beat something like Mewtwo. You know that. If I go for the first strike you'll have nothing to interrupt you."

"Your approach is reckless," Sana remarked while shaking her head. "Sure you don't mind a few extra scars?"

"Oh come on, Sana," he said with an exaggerated expression. "If you manage to mess me up after all we've been through then we've got bigger issues than Mewtwo. I give you the opening you need, you'll strike true. What, do you need a signal?"

"What kind of Gardevoir would I be if I couldn't read you?" she facetiously remarked.

"Right. Then get ready to end this. We won't get another chance to run an ambush since it'll catch on. We only get one shot to spring our trap on that ugly 'mon. For our future… no, the future of the world."

"Remember your promise," she said earnestly.

"Which one?" he asked. Of course he knew the one she was referring to. Even though the odds were stacked against them, he could not help but feel optimism both from himself and from her. The final assault would not be easy, but that very challenge is what gave him the courage to give it his all.

"The one where you save me!" she said hurriedly but with a smile. "A deal's a deal!"

"Oh… right, right of course, how could I forget," he said pretending not to care. "I'm sure I'll get around to it."

"You're horrible," she remarked. At least his sense of humor had finally rubbed off on her. The old Sana would have believed him to be serious despite what he felt in his heart. The thing was he really did care for once. He was sure she could pick up on that, but he felt the need to keep the situation lighthearted, if anything to prepare for the final assault. Just like a fighter would not go into battle with tense muscles, he and she could not battle at their best if their moods were strained. That was just the way it worked, and he had grown to accept it.

There was a brilliant flash of light as the portal opened once again.

"Alright," he said dramatically posed for battle. There was a shift in the air, as if a storm was
approaching. "It's finally time. One shot. Bring it!"

Sana was silent; her job was to remain invisible long enough for him to make his move. He dared not use his powers to commune with her, as that would foil their plan if Mewtwo picked up on their telepathy. Right now, he had to do everything he could to empty her from his mind for the sake of the strategy.

All at once, the scenery began to change as Mewtwo's terrible power entered the world. It was like being caught in a sudden storm on the ocean. The waves of power emanating from the Pokemon were strong enough to cause the landscape to waver as if it were a piece of cloth. Dark clouds formed all around the tear that had formed.

The second he saw the bludgeoned horns of Mewtwo emerge from the portal he dashed forward at the beast. Raising an arm behind his back mid-sprint, he unleashed a burst of kinetic force propelling himself faster than he had ever traveled before. His eyes stung, but he kept his course, aiming directly at the center of mass like a human missile.

Mewtwo was halfway out of the portal when Feyera collided with him crystal first, locking them in a stalemate. The force of impact was enough to impale the creature's chest. Mewtwo lurched backward into the swirling glow of the dimensional gateway. Its godlike powers were useless if it was still in the portal. Feyera pushed against it with all his might, expending everything to keep a part of Mewtwo inside the portal. Meanwhile, the shadowy crystal and the cloud of negative energy started to spread outward from his heart like poisonous fumes.

"How do you like that hate?!" he hollered right in its expressionless face.

Mewtwo had begun to bleed from its gaping chest wound. Its eyes glowed with terrible power, yet the part of its body in the portal was quickly becoming warped as it was unable to leave the gateway. It struggled to push him out of the way, in a desperate rage it fought against his psyonics to escape the distortion effects from being half trapped in the portal. The tail of the creature had distorted so much that it appeared to no longer be a three-dimensional object.

All the frenzied energy generated by Mewtwo's desire to escape being stuck in the gateway Feyera's heart greedily absorbed and used to further empower his psyonics.

The cloud of darkness had become so dense it was becoming impossible for him to see. He had amassed an incredible amount of psychic energy in such a short amount of time due to the way Mewtwo was suffering. Every second the aggregate power he absorbed reached new heights. His arms felt heavy with heated blood. There was a change taking place in his extremities. He could not see what was occurring due to the cloud of darkness, but it felt beyond good.

Something invisible pushed him backward rather suddenly. The sensation gave him whiplash. He landed uncomfortably on his back. Mewtwo must have managed to knock him away. But he wasn't done yet. No, he wasn't finished what he had started. He needed more hatred. More anger. Rage gave him strength he never had as a human. The black smoke where Mewtwo was had begun to clear, but it was too soon for this to be over.

He pulled himself back onto his feet. It took longer than normal to get up. And then he looked at his arms. There was a coating of psychic energy running down both his arms, beyond his hands and forming two massive talons of shadow. They looked like the spectral hands of a ghost Pokemon. Reaching over his human hands in a way where the tendrils of sinister energy flowing down along his arms did not pierce his flesh as they gave form to an incredible miscreation wrought of pure wrath. Those claws of dusk wanted nothing more than to rend and tear out every last ounce of suffering from anything that could produce more of the hatred he craved.
"AAAARRRRGGGGGHHHHHHH!" Running forward at the cloud of hate where Mewtwo had been he slashed madly, left and right, up and down. Again and again he sliced with those merciless talons in blind ferociousness. Falling back into the nourishing fog of hatred, the brutal tearing sprayed his body with hot blood. All he could see was red. It became too much. The weight of the inhuman talons slowed his vicious lunges.

"AAUUGGH!" There were no words, only emotions. This dizzying depth of anger had no bottom. It stretched on for infinity, like a portal straight into hell. Thankfully his stamina did not have such endless reserves. Eventually the sheer physical fatigue brought him to his knees, yet his arms still swiped at the air so possessed by wrath he could not control them.

Stumbling backward from the gate, his two claws refused to quit their unrelenting assault on the rift. As he heard the drone of Giovanni's helicopter approaching through the slashed gate, the sound reinvigorated his tremendous hatred in a truly primal sense. That sound had brought memories of pain, and so his immediate response as the manifestation of the spite stolen from his psionic victims and augmented by Celesta was to lash back with twice the fury. After having fallen back a few paces to try and escape the cloud, the irresistible impulse of hatred drove him to reenter the fray. Seeing the dark metal of the copter leaving the gateway was all it took to make him snap.

With inhuman strength he jumped at the machine floating above the cloud of hatred as it exited the gate. With a vicious slice using both claws to swipe in the same downright motion, the ethereal talons punctured into the side of the copter. The screeching noise of the polished aluminum being pried open like a tin can exhilarated him. A fierce tug downward intensified by violent psyonics brought the machine completely out from the portal and tumbling out of the sky. It smashed into the ground and rolled into the sand, chaotically breaking apart and tossing a suited man's body out from within as the windows shattered.

It completely drained him. His heart was pounding uncontrollably. Opening his eyes and seeing the aftermath without the red glow took his breath away. The portal itself had been torn apart. As for the Pokemon he had attacked, it was no longer recognizable. Off to the side about twenty paces to the right of the ravaged gate were the ruins of a helicopter that had crashed into the ground and dragged through the earth for a fair distance. Against the wreckage was the silhouette of a man he recognized as the leader of Team Rocket.

Clutching his battered arms with his human hands underneath the dark claws, he walked toward the rubble where Giovanni had fallen. As he saw him up close, he knew the man's time was almost up. The injuries the boss had sustained from the fight were severe; he had a wide laceration on his forehead and numerous slashes in his once executive suit. That was to say nothing for his internal wounds from being knocked into the ground at a breakneck speed. He couldn't move, suggesting he had broken bones. But Feyera wasn't a medical doctor, and Giovanni's wellbeing was not his concern. Only one thing mattered to him in this awakened state of purest anger. Answers.

"Tell me one thing, you sonofabitch! What's Deirdre's connection to Team Rocket!?” he demanded leaning down and tugging up on the boss' bloodstained tie with a furious pull.

"Oh…OH! So you still don't know," Giovanni said as the loosened necktie unfastened itself.

Christian snatched firmly at his suit's lapel instead. "I'm tired, you're dying, this will go a lot smoother if you cooperate," he said between tired breaths.

"Need my help after all? You can't piece it together because deep down you really don't want to remember…" Blood was running down the sides of his head, staining his once clean dress suit.

"TELL ME!" he shouted. He raised his right arm threateningly and his hungering black crystal
began to glow. "Or I'll prove to you how much of a monster I've become. I'll rip out all emotions from you; take them all away, leaving only one behind – you know the one. I'll restrain myself and reject your despair, just to make sure that's the only goddamn thing you'll have left when you enter the void!"

"You couldn't restrain yourself if your life depended on it," Giovanni assumed calling his bluff. "You and I both know you've gotten too greedy with power. Mark my words: it will lead you to your doom."

Is he right? It doesn't matter, he thought to himself. "Humph. Says you, the leader of a crime ring. Your words mean nothing." The only thing that matters is getting answers! Yet in his current state of turbulent rage he could not manipulate his target by mind reading. He had become far too enraged to do anything with his psyonics that required finesse. He could barely sense anything around him save his own uncontrolled bloodlust.

Giovanni slowly spoke, "I've seen the Mercurium change who you are, transform you into a Shadow Pokemon. From a scientist obsessed with finding reason, to a fiend that drains the mental states of his victims. You turned them into emotionless husks by taking the memories that made them once feel. And you do so liberally, naturally, as nature would have intended had you been born a Pokemon. To think you have any restraint beyond a thrashing Pokemon is your own prideful folly."

NO – I have freewill! He could barely control his rage and found his hands shaking. Through the turbulence he found the strength to make his demand. "ANSWER THE QUESTIONS!"

"...You really need that bit of information to feel whole again. That final piece will make it all better you think, don't you?" he coughed. "Figure it'll set your heart at ease to know, right?"

"I don't have any tolerance left for your bullshit!" he yelled swiping down at the ground, leaving behind deep scars in the sand right next to Giovanni. "ENOUGH! You lost your dream; now it's time to come clean."

"Deirdre, she's the daughter of Ariana," Giovanni wheezed. "A true genius that one, takes after her mother, got her red hair, strong-will, and ... her father, not so much..."

"What...?" He was dumbstruck. His head started to ache terribly. "Ariana...?" he spoke breathlessly. She was the Rocket Executive who had escaped on Honchkrow and alerted Giovanni of my presence at the Radio Tower. She activated the evolution beacon that destroyed Goldenrod! That same Ariana is Dee's mother...? NO! He did not want to feel anything but rage. "That can't be true! You're lying to me again!" he shouted.

"What would a dying man stand to gain by lying?" Giovanni said as he coughed up more blood. "You're just too stupid to see it. Too blinded by anger. It's obvious. They've got the same genes."

"No! Shut up with that genetic nonsense! Dee isn't anything like that witch!"

"Ariana is exceptionally talented at what she does as an infiltrator, but wasn't always the way she is now—" Giovanni looked at the wreckage next to him and explained "—Ariana lost her hope after losing her daughter to a twisted experiment undertaken by Cipher. It was their vengeance for when Aldaine left the Evercrest facility without saying a word."

"NO!" He wanted nothing more than to slice and tear at the Rocket leader dying on the ground. The things he was saying – be they truth or more lies – were so infuriating. It meant that Dee's condition really was because of his actions at the Evercrest research facility. "WHO DID IT TO HER? WHO STABBED HER!!"
"A snake lurking in the grass…a man named Gideon. From what I learned, he always fancied Ariana's daughter since she arrived at the research facility. The man was jealous of your relationship with Deirdre and sought to remove you from the picture. Only to have her leave because of what you did to the Pokemon there under his supervision. His plan had backfired. He wanted nothing more than to torture you and bring out the very worst emotions from your heart. Looks like he succeeded at that at least."

Feyera was speechless. The plan, it all made sense. His relation to Deirdre was no secret to the other scientists including Ein. When his unethical work caused her to leave without a word, the one thing they could do to ensure he'd not run off too was bring her into the debauched world he had helped create. Gideon had been the one who stabbed Dee with the Radiant Heart in her Slateport apartment. That crystal — extracted from another Pokemon channeling the Ancient Forest spirits through a different Soul Star — was what Ein had used to turn Dee into the inhuman creature she was now. He had caused her to lose her humanity and become part of Celesta. And through this process, he had caused Feyera to lose everything as well. Ein had won in the end. The urge to enter another outburst of hate was so strong, but he managed to temper his anger by focusing on the things he could still learn. The only coherent word he could manage to vocalize was a broken, "Continue."

"That tragedy was what brought Ariana to my Organization. She lost who she was after what happened to Deirdre, her little girl. She fell into the web of hatred too, same as yourself. Hate… breeds more hate."

"And her father?" he asked trembling in resentment.

Giovanni looked up. Abruptly, the leader of Team Rocket gained a puzzled look on his battered face. His gaze seemed to pass through Christian, looking beyond his glare as if he were invisible or as though Giovanni were looking at something else. "Why don't you just ask her?" he questioned slowly as if in a controlled trance.

"Who the hell is he talking about? "She doesn't remember," he responded, speaking about Celesta. "Lost her human memories when that blood monster took over her. I… need to give her memories back. And since I'm not strong enough to confront Celesta on my own, I have no choice but to start at the root — Dee's familial ties. All in order to help her get her human memories back. Don't you get it? I need Dee's REAL memories, the ones she had as a human before Celesta took over her. That is what will set her free!"

"Her father, he's a dead man," Giovanni said between coughs. "Poor fellow never could manage to get his little girl back in this world though he tried his hardest. Tragic really. I think… it slowly drove him to madness, right up till the very end. Things might have ended differently if not for his demise."

"Funny. Even as an emotional monster, I don't feel the least bit sorry for you."

"Humph, you're denser than I thought possible. You don't feel anything from me because I'm not the lass's dad," he said shaking his head. "No, we were rivals. His little girl never wanted a thing to do with my Organization. Was a good girl, that one. Smart with books, but also wise to intention. The discerning type. Deirdre knew in her heart getting involved in all this would be a trap, and yet she still got wrapped up in all this…awfulness."

"Then if it wasn't you, who was her father?" he questioned in frustration. "How could he have let his girl become fused with the Radiant Heart and not manage to do a goddam thing about it?!!"

"Maybe he did manage to do something about it without you even knowing. That would be quite the elaborate trick, wouldn't it? Although… I believe you know the truth in your heart. Think back," suggested Giovanni. "You remember a time when you knew. Back to when your spirit was brighter
and innocent; back when, well before you fell into the web of hate."

"ALL I AM NOW IS HATE!" shouted Feyera. "I'm not in the mood for any more of your friggin' head games. You know something! Tell me who Dee's father is and I'll do what I can to make your last moments peaceful," he leveraged.

"Peace… is an illusion," he said, his voice growing weaker with every labored breath. "You made me realize that. Take away another person's pain; leave behind only happiness. That happiness can never be as genuine as the real thing. Why? Because real happiness only comes from facing the long struggle, from living in a painful world, and realizing happiness is something that's fought for, not given. True happiness is a reprieve from suffering; it is its own reward. I was wrong to think I could take refuge in a falsehood. You know it too. Giving Dee back her history, but without what truly made her feel alive, won't save her from what she's become…." His expression was fading and his hazel eyes were barely staying open.

"Stay here with me, asshole!" Christian said violently shaking him. Giovanni was starting to say things that didn't make sense to him; he had to bring the interrogation back to her closest relatives in order to have any hope of restoring Dee's memories. "Who was Deirdre's father!?"

"The answers you're searching for are from a past no one remembers; might as well have been a dream."

"I'm going back to the past because that's how I can help save her," he explained. "If she can remember the people she knew as a human, I know there is a chance she'll come back to herself. It worked for me when I saw her."

"You think she'll miraculously go back to herself? Look at what remembering her turned you into," he pointed out. "You're grasping at straws, willing to do anything to get your way. It won't bring your associate back."

"It's better than doing nothing! So who was he?! Answer the damn question, Rallsen!"

"Hah… Rallsen," he smiled. "A name I once used to sow confusion and darkness. How fitting for it to be the last name I'm called, near the end of my clear path where the light fades."

"You're not going anywhere until you let me know!" Christian shook his shoulder vigorously again and again. "Answer me! Rallsen!"

"…Up to you… end the Cycle of Hate – once, and for all…" he said as his eyes closed and his chest stopped moving. Feyera yelled at the body and cursed at his failure to ascertain anything useful. Deirdre would not want to remember her mother, Ariana. She was an Executive of Team Rocket in this world, someone who had abandoned the hope of saving her daughter from the Radiant Heart. But what about her father? If he had that information, he could help her find who she was again.

As Giovanni passed on and went limp, something was freed from the inner pocket of his vest and rolled out into the slash marks left in the ground near him. It was a peculiar Pokéball. It had a purple top and a large "M" on it. Feyera snatched it from the sand and inspected it. "This is the Pokéball Deirdre designed while she was a human," he said softly. "The Master Ball prototype. A perfect Pokéball. She had poured countless hours into researching and developing it, only to have a criminal like Giovanni take it for himself." Feyera squeezed the Master Ball in his trembling hand. The ghostly talons overlapping the back of his hand pulled back as if acknowledging the significance of this reminder of his beloved. "We're done here," he said slowly getting up. His whole body felt heavy, he was racked with exhaustion.
"Thas Feyera…"

"What?" he said shortly whilst turning to face Sana. He had been so angry at not getting the answers he needed, he had almost forgotten about her. *Shit, was she right here this whole time?* Usually he could sense her, but given the circumstances he was under and how the outrage had affected him, it made sense why he could not. He sighed, "I know I told you to not communicate with me, but what the hell were you even doing in the battle while I was busy carving up that cat?!"

"Oh…" she looked at his arms. "I… I might have overdone it…"

"Oh…OH." He suddenly understood. She didn't use the element of surprise to attack Mewtwo. Why would she? He would be in the way of her attack as she had insisted. No, instead of attacking Mewtwo, she charged his hatred to a feverish point where it physically changed him. And she couldn't tell him the strategy because disclosing it would jeopardize the plan since Mewtwo could easily read minds and react accordingly. She understood that the elements needed to defeat Mewtwo were hatred and darkness. All that hate he had been feeding on turned him into a monster amplified by her powers. It was frightening and all too real. It had worked so well there was no going back. Yet he could not argue his condition for having accepted all that wrath as his own.

"Was what he said true?" Sana asked sensitively. She looked afraid of him after seeing what he had done and what he had become.

"About what?" He assumed a less aggressive stance but could not do anything about the otherworldly claws that extended from the top of his wrists above and beyond his hands. They were unwieldy and heavy for a human despite their ghostly form.

"About the Cycle of Hate."

"Hatred is just another emotion, Sana," he explained. "And don't I know about it? Everyone has hate for something. There's no way to get rid of hate in people or Pokemon. That's what makes it so damn powerful. I believe in his last words he was little more than a delirious fool."

She sighed heavily. "I don't think he was talking about simply the emotion of hate."

"Oh? Then what did he mean?"

"I think he meant something else. I could feel it when he said it."

"So, like a code or something?"

"Mmm," she nodded her head. "'Cycle of Hate – once, and for all.' What do you feel when you hear those words?"

"My feelings have nothing to do with it, Sana. Besides, they're clouded by Celesta's hate."

She frowned. Looked like she wasn't going to let this one go.

"Fine. I'll humor you. A cycle to me means it keeps happening over and over. Again and again, ya'know?" He made a small circle in the air with the three fanged claw of shadow overlapping his human hand. It left behind a trail of dusty smoke in its wake. "And hatred… I know that well enough. I'm damn a manifestation of hate because I siphoned the emotions of so many to give my heart power. I went for the criminals, the people who turned to corruption because they harbored hatred. I wiped their minds, ate away the feelings that made them remember who they were. And now their hate is my hate, as is Celesta's curse. Hate breeds hate. It has always been that way for humanity; it's what made me a monster."
Sana looked like she had something important on her mind. Her hands were fidgeting with her clothes and she was biting her lip in a nervous fashion. "You're grieving, so you might not understand this…"

"I'm not grieving," he maintained. "Not for the bastard who tried to control my life and make me a slave just so he could have his stupid dream world. I'm furious I couldn't get anything more out of him involving Dee's past."

"I can tell you miss Rallsen though," Sana said sympathetically. "He was the man your memories wanted to remember."

"Rallsen was never real," he insisted, not only to Sana but also for his own sake. "He was a guise for the leader of Team Rocket. Giovanni used him like a mask to get me to do the things I did. If not for his puppeteering, I would never have stolen that damn Relic from the Sanctum and we wouldn't even be having this conversation!"

Solemnly she looked down at her core. "What if THAT was what he meant by the Cycle of Hate?"

"I don't see much of a cycle to be honest," he said with a shrug.

"Of course you don't," Sana said in whispered frustration. "I should know… You never remember."

"What are you mumbling about, Sana? How could I change anything? How could you change the fact that you used the power of the Soul Star three years ago?" he asked. "We're both living in our own dead-ends thanks to our decisions. You're doomed to merge with Celesta for using her Soul Star, and I'm condemned to being a monster for stealing the Mercury Relic. Tch… Feels a bit like we're talking corpses at this point."

"That isn't true. Celesta said that Time is not like a river flowing in one direction," she said. "The way we see Time is linear, but the true nature of it is more of a tapestry, a cloth of sorts, where all events are what weave together to form the whole."

"And you're going to believe her?" he asked cynically. "I'm sure she's insane."

"No doubt she is, but aren't we also now that we've seen the forbidden realm of the Ancient Forest? You and I have seen it first-hand. And the two of us… Our lives are bonded together not just by our hearts… I'm starting to see that now. Chris, what if Deirdre never left your side?"

He froze. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It's only conjecture but… when two spirits are close together in Time's tapestry, like threads they stay close no matter which way the cloth is folded."

He reached out and touched her shoulder carefully. "You're Sana. Remember that." She was getting too theoretical and losing focus on the objective of the mission. All the time travel, using the Soul Star repeatedly, merging and separating with Celesta, even losing her memories at times must have broken her a bit inside.

"I know I am now," she said uneasily. "But I still don't want to see you like this."

"This isn't the time to hesitate, Sana," he reassured. "I know you looked through my former associate's eyes when you merged with Celesta. It all makes sense. That's why you didn't want to say anything before. You took her memories upon yourself. However, you are who you are; please, don't ever forget that!"
"I am who I am?" she repeated as she clutched her heart.

"Of course. For you to think otherwise would be allowing the Soul Combination to triumph. In order to end this, in order to really end this, I need to reach the place where the Forest Spirit dwells. There I can petition the Time Guardian who managed to escape from Celesta to make another wish."

Sana looked terribly sad. Her eyes were swollen with the first sign of tears and her gaze was distant.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked her.

"It's nothing. Forget I said anything."

"I don't believe that," he stated plainly. "If you're going to lie, at least use some subtlety…"

"Liars are everywhere in the world. Gullible hearts are as well. If you choose a righteous path because of a lie, is the liar not righteous for creating the lie?" she asked quizzically. "Is the liar ever justified for using deceit in such a way to do good?"

"Sana… What the hell's gotten into you?"

"I don't know," she said with a pained expression. "Following all the merging I did with Celesta while we were jumping through the gateways, I think I've finally figured out my end of the deal we made after leaving Navenfell for the first time."

"Wait…you did?"

"Still only a theory, it's not yet finished. Our agreement on the tower was to only share our conclusions after we were sure that we figured out the truth. Moreover, I really wouldn't want to weigh you down with any additional emotions. After all, you need to make it to the Last Gate."

"The Last Gate… the doorway to the Relic Forest. You learned that from Celesta too. That's the place where the Time Guardian – the Wishmaker – responsible for the Pokéball and the Soul Combination can be found."

"Yup. So you better get gate-hopping," she nudged.

"Tsk. I would, but you're the one with the Key," he replied referring to the Soul Star she had.

"Of course, but it's your human will that gives me the strength in this form, don't you know?"


"Then whatever you are has retained human will. That alone is empowering strength for a Pokemon. So what is it that you want to do?"

"I want to end this. I need to destroy the Soul Combination. Open the last portal."

"Wait. Before I do." She reached inside her short garment where she had stored the Soul Star between the folds of silk and handed him a small object. It was a wooden doll in the likeness of a girl, no larger than a Pokéball, meticulously fashioned from small sticks and twine.

"Uh… This is…?" he asked examining it.

"Oh wow, isn't that something! I just remembered Maisy gave it to me," Sana said whimsically, as if it had somehow slipped her mind.
"You're full of it." He didn't believe her little act for a second. "Maisy? Kurt's little girl?"

"It's just a doll of hers, nothing too special," she said with a wink. "Although, you might want to hold on to it for good luck when you're going through the Last Gate. You know, treat it like a lucky charm."

"Impossible," he said looking it over. It didn't appear to have been made by a rambunctious child living under the care of Kurt. It looked more like the fine craftsmanship belonging to Kurt, except it was made completely out of wood and natural pieces. "The little girl I told you to play with gave you this talisman? I can't believe you kept this thing."

"Being with Maisy taught me that no matter what someone looks like, they can still surprise you," she said reservedly. "I never thought a little girl like her would be so much fun to be around. She really surprised me in a lot of ways."

"Yeah. That feels like ages ago," he replied remembering the little house in Azalea. "Simpler times, huh?"

"When you fall – holding on to something precious, a totem, is the best way to find where you're going."

"So you want me to trust in this little doll to take me there?" Then it clicked in his mind. "Wait…this doll, could it be related to the legendary Pokemon Kurt was talking about?"

Sana smiled and gave a nod. "However, I won't be able to go there with you. This is the last time I use the Soul Star to take us to Navenfell. What you do next with this piece of the past is up to you."

She helped him close his hand around the wooden trinket. Her eyes started to water. "Just, please, keep the promise you made to me."

"Don't worry. I will," he said reassuringly.

"—Thanks," she smiled brightly trying to hide the sadness forming in her heart. "After I use the Soul Star, you must take it from Celesta before you leave Navenfell. I can only hold back her power for a brief amount of time before the fusion is complete."

"Okay. I don't want to cause you pain," he said looking at the vicious claws overlapping his hands.

"There's only one thing that would bring greater pain than those talons," she asked as the tears came. "And that is… will…you remember me…?"

"Yes," he comforted. "I won't forget the past. Not this time, Sana."

The tears were pouring down her cheeks. "Will you remember me as a Pokemon…as your Gardevoir…?"

"I will," he insisted holding her in an embrace.

"Just remember," she sniffled leaning her chin close on his shoulder, "even when she wears my flesh… that Blood Fairy, she isn't me."

"Sana, be strong," he whispered. It hurt him to think about what he would have to do, yet he knew this was the only way forward. He needed to go through Navenfell to reach the Last Gate. That meant one of them had to use the Blood Spirit's stone and become a sacrifice. "Celesta, even without all her hate, she's gonna be livid, isn't she?"
"After everything she's done to us; I wouldn't have it any other way. Celesta, I know she won't spare me this time," Sana said with heightened awareness in her voice. "Chris, you have to succeed in stopping the Soul Combination."

"With a Time Guardian, that'll be cake," he assured her.

"Even if it isn't easy, you must not give up." She gazed longingly at the distant clear blue horizon. The storm had passed and it had set her at ease. "I won't blame you. Should you fail, you'll just have lift yourself up to try again, just like you always have."

"Like hell. That's a quitter's attitude," he boldly remarked. "It's my choice to bring an end to it."

Separating from the hug he helped her to lift her chin up. The lower half of her face was covered in rivers of tear water that sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight.

"I...don't want you to see me like this..." she remarked trying to cover her tears.

Tenderly he held her arm to prevent her from masking her crying face. "It's okay," he said without a doubt. "Everything is going to work out in the end. I know it."

"Thank you...for bringing me here..." she sniffled. Her gaze traveled around at the quiet beach. "This place... It's so peaceful... so...beautiful... like the time when we were together."

He nodded. Both Sana and Dee had been with him on tropical islands. This was where everything began. And this was also goodbye. He thought, Even if Sana managed to be released from Celesta, she would come back here alone; I could no longer be with her having gone on to the Relic Forest. This paradise would be where Sana would stay. Here, in this secret cove only Dee knew about. The place where their relationship started was where his path alongside the Gardevoir he had met through fate would end. For some reason it was much sadder than he expected. He did not know if he would ever see her again. The chances were slim after Celesta had her way with her.

"Please, for our sake..." She willed herself to put on a strong face. "Do it right this time. Destroy the Soul Combination for good."

"I will." He took one last look at the beautiful scenery that had returned following the battle. Alola was always so beautiful, but its beauty was enhanced by the memories he cherished. "It's time, Sana. You know what to do."

She held the wicked blood stone in her hands and punctured herself to generate the requisite lifeblood. Her face contorted in pain. It was the necessary sacrifice to fuse with Celesta, to open a gate into Navenfell – the realm connected to all places, including his final destination: the Relic Forest. "I remember...all the memories," she said as the Soul Star glowed like a brilliant star in her hands, "the real ones and the lies that never were. All of it is happening at once in my mind."

"Sana, I'll make it to the Relic Forest!" he said confidently. He was falling through the portal again.

"End the Cycle of Hate."

"I have to; everyone is depending on me!"

The dizzying colors and spinning lights faded as he showed up back in Navenfell one final time. Next to him, Sana had begun to undergo her metamorphosis as Celesta overtook her body triggering a mega evolution. As he saw the last bit of her disappear under the cloak of radiant light, he felt no sorrow, no guilt. None of that baggage. There was only one emotion. The one she had given him.

"ARRGH!" Feyera did not give Celesta the time of day. Ruthlessly he used the hatred he had
acquired from the Blood Fairy to grapple at her glowing form midway through the evolution process. His two talons of shadow ripped through the barrier of light she was cloaked in, puncturing straight into her corporeal form. The action had penetrated her shining gown and there was a mutual shudder he felt as her frail body twitched from his tearing for the sparkling item resting against her split heart.

Celesta let out an ear-splitting screech rivaling that of a banshee. "Auuggghh!" She struggled to force him back with an enraged burst of telekinetic energy at point blank.

It felt like she had dislocated his shoulder from the blow, but he held fast. His tenacity overrode any sense of physical pain. In response he pressed his shadow-covered claws deeper and tugged at the source of her power. Stealing the Soul Star from the Blood Fairy, he quickly focused on leaving the realm behind. With one final tear at her heart he severed the glowing psychic tendril connecting the Blood Spirit to Sana. This broke them apart if only for a brief moment. It still might not be enough time for her to be set free. If Sana could escape Celesta now was the time, but Feyera had to focus on reaching the Last Gate now that he had her Soul Star. Taking the innocuous wooden doll in his hand and focusing all of his psyonics on the object, a bright passageway of pure light opened directly beneath him.

_We did it_, he thought as the perception of dropping down a great distance overtook his senses.

Falling through the dimensional door with the items he needed, he looked skyward through the tunnel of light he heard the unmistakable voice of Sana. She said to him with utmost clarity, "Deirdre wants me to tell you that her father's name was Fredrick. She's... looking forward to seeing you both again."

A brilliant halo shone down from the realm of the Blood Fairy, as the portal leading to the Last Gate closed with a tremendous burst of light and color.
Chapter 22: Butterfree Effect

Butterfree Effect

Chapter by Solar

Everything was so incredibly bright. He blinked. It was like waking up from a dream only to find himself thrown into another. There was no water around him this time, only clean spring air in the dense forest. The light was shining through the leaves on the trees and everything was aglow in a shower of whiteness. His arms were awfully heavy with the weight of darkness spreading from his heart. Clasped in his hand was the small wooden doll that had brought him here.

"The Relic Forest," he said calmly, "I made it through the Last Gate." There wasn't any noise. Not even the wind blew. An eternal sun of pure white shone down from the heavens. The rich air was more fragrant than any flower garden. Despite its spectacular beauty, there was an ominous sense of unease he felt in this paradise. Something strangely onerous, unbefitting this heavenly realm. He couldn't figure out what it was, but it felt wrong. He did not belong here.

"You've made it," said a sweet voice. It sounded a lot like the chirping of a bird, but he knew birds could not talk. It was impossible to pinpoint the origin of the voice; it was as if its source was all around him.

He turned around but saw nothing. "Huh?" Alone in the forest, I think. But that little girl's voice… where have I heard it before? Wait…something's wrong…why can't I remember all of a sudden…? His torn jacket felt warm in this environment and he was beginning to perspire. He looked down past his blackened heart at the ground but saw no animals or Pokemon in the leaves of the underbrush. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a flash of golden light sparkle amid the treetops. He quickly looked up at the canopy. "Who's there?"

"Aw, what a shame. Guess it's just another one," the girly voice sighed as if she were disappointed. "I keep thinking one day you'll show up and know exactly why you're here. Set my standards pretty high, you know?"

He felt confused and with good reason. "Uh…" She's just a little girl? Prudently, he lowered his hands which had instinctively assumed an aggressive stance from his uncertainty. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"Well, at least you didn't say that last time," said the lighthearted voice.

"Last time?" He looked around again. There was no way he had ever been in this strange forest before. The trees seemed to stretch on in every direction forever, not a single cloud floated in the pure white sky, drenched by the static sun's unending radiance. Its supernatural beauty did remind him of what Navenfell might look like if it wasn't a massive grave and soul basin.

"Uh huh," the pleasant voice chirped. "Say mister, are you familiar with the Butterfree Effect?"

"Yeah," he replied ignoring the randomness of the question. I've heard of the Butterfree Effect before, he thought silently. I know it's a concept pertaining to causality – the way that events in history are tied together. However he could not for the life of him recall where it was that he first heard the concept. His eyes narrowed in deep thought. "Felt like ages ago I last heard that."

"Oh wonderful, I don't have to explain it to you from scratch." As he struggled to remember when he
first heard the concept, the voice continued to explain. "When a Butterfree's wings flap in Kanto, a storm will occur in Unova…"

"I remember how it sounded absurd when I first heard it," he answered, "I felt confused, disoriented even, kinda like I do right now."

"Why's that?"

"I thought: How could such a feeble Pokemon cause anything more than a light gust with its fragile wings? And how could the effects of this meager action lead to the events in such a far-off region on the other side of the globe? The very concept was counter-intuitive." And yet the meaning of those words was not lost on him, for he vividly remembered his knee-jerk reaction being of similar disbelief. The problem was, he could not recall when it was he first heard of what the voice was talking about, only that it resonated deep within him.

"Guess what? You made a similar claim while researching paranormal events. At least three years ago from the way you see things. Although, in reality it was much, much longer ago," the voice said airily. "Who can really tell anymore how much time has gone by…I certainly can't and neither can you."

"…!" He felt a sharp pain in the back of his head, the same dreadful sensation when Celesta took hold of his body. Something had just snapped in his mind and there were tingles racing up his spine. Something was very wrong about this place but he didn't know why he felt so terrified. It seemed pleasant enough. His body was practically screaming at him for being here, rejecting the very fact that he was here. Could it be the darkness in my heart? Or maybe something even more sinister than Celesta is at work. "What are you saying?" he wanted to ask but his head was killing him.

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" he said feeling put on the spot. "How could I prove to you anything that ridiculous?"

"Teehee!" she laughed. "Listen to what you're saying! You're the one who showed up here. Don't tell me that you, the famous researcher, haven't figured it out!"

He collected his scrambled thoughts and tried to focus. "I'm not here to play theory games with you. I have an important mission for coming here, ya know."

"Wow. You really are different. I think the last time you said… Ahem! And I quote: If the outcome was unknown at the time the initial conditions were put into place, then the theory is suitable as an explanation of chaos theory!" she chuckled, "Hehehe. What. A. Racket."

"Yeah, well, that's stupid," he replied to the invisible voice imitating his pompous attitude. "It doesn't even make sense!"

"Well naturally," laughed the light voice in response, "but I didn't think you'd come along and admit that your claimed knowledge of the universe is imperfect this time around. Just who are you?"

"Just what the hell is going on here?" he very uneasily shot back. "This is my first time here…isn't it?" The seed of doubt had been planted in his brain. Considering how easily memories were manipulated, he did not know whether or not to trust his memory or the only voice in the forest addressing him.
"Maybe it actually is," supposed the voice, "and, well, wouldn't that be something? Might be the key to breaking us both out of prison. But that's your call, not mine."

"HUH?!" he was getting a real bad sense of nausea and it wasn't from the dark crystal. "You're saying I can't leave here?"

"Now, don't be silly!" the voice cheekily replied. "You can do whatever you want "here". Your Willpower brought you here, something no ordinary Pokemon could be expected to accomplish pursuant to a certain Wish. So yes, you're free while here. Leave here right now if you want. Stay here indefinitely if you want. Slice with your claws wildly until you destroy this forest if you want. I think I've seen it all at this point. Thing is: It's all up to you, and only you, to see where each and every path leads."

There was ringing in his ears when she said that. "Up to…me?" he slowly repeated as the high pitch faded out.

"Oh yes – and the things you'll do…" the voice said whimsically before letting out a soft sigh. "Even though I'm partial to your peaceful choices, I can't blame you for struggling madly to find a way out."

"A way out?!" he said more worriedly. Agitatedly he thought, _The Last Gate was supposed to take me to the Time Guardian not trap me! _"What do you mean by that?"

"I'll let you in on a little secret: every time, no matter what you choose, whatever path you decide upon, it winds up with us two back here again shooting the breeze…if there was one," mused the sweet little voice. "So while you are completely free here, you're not able to resist coming back. Kind of like a Pokemon returning to a Pokéball! Eee-hee!"

"Preposterous! I came here by my own freewill!" he exclaimed. "Besides, I've never been here before; I don't recognize you or this Relic Forest!"

"Of course YOU don't recognize any of this. Think about what you are," her voice said admonishing the dark malice which had altered his form. "Why would a downtrodden creature like YOU recognize anything? …No memories, only wicked feelings. YOU are a cursed Blood Spirit cast adrift in the sea of Time."

"Then why does any of this matter?" he posited. "If I'm just going to come back here not knowing anything no matter what I do, what's the point of doing anything at all?"

"Mmhmhm, nihilism. How very juvenile. It doesn't matter, unless you want it to. There is no point, unless you want there to be one. But…we both know that line of thought doesn't work for you. You can try and be stoic and do nothing. However that heart of yours will hunger for emotion and your pessimistic idling will violently cease. What happens next is just the same as it's always been—" An uncomfortable pause, soon followed by a phrase that sent a chill along the back of his neck: "It's all up to you, and only you, to see where each and every path leads."

"Uh… look, this is getting way too weird for my tastes," he griped, "not to mention existential."

"It's already been, and will continue to be, weird, but for you – being an emotion demon – I'll take your feelings into consideration."

"Riiiiight…my feelings," he replied with reproach. "I'll be blunt then. You're asking me these strange questions, telling me I've been here already when I clearly haven't, and I'm just here to meet the darn Time Guardian I've been searching for."
"A TIME GUARDIAN!" the invisible voice shouted as if she were feigning surprise. "Lots of nasties out there looking for one of those. What with the Wish it made and all that."

"Uh huh, I follow," he nodded. "So you gonna help or not? I mean if you're just going to ask me bizarre questions and make me feel terrible inside you're kinda wasting my time." He thought to himself, I don't know how much longer I have. This weight of darkness has only gotten worse since I've arrived.

"Hehe," she laughed cheekily, "I'm SO insulted for wasting any time at all."

"Tsk, okay. Where's the Time Guardian then?" he brusquely asked.

"If a Time Guardian is who you seek, why would you ask for where if when is your real question?"

"Cut the crap." He crossed his shadow covered arms over his dark crystal. "I'm not sure I have the patience."

"Wouldn't be the first time you used those dark talons against me," the little voice said ominously. "That darkness is always close to your heart, it will become your entire being if you let it. And wouldn't it love to? Coupled with your will, it gains the ability to break everything, reshape the world if you simply allow it to. Darkness makes you its slave however. And unlike the Pokéball which was wished into existence, true darkness will never release its captive from its clutches. True darkness is a lot like the Supreme Spirits, or the lesser Blood Spirits, when they fully absorb an individual soul. In other words, Soul Combination."

"Then we're on the same side! I'm trying to destroy the Soul Combination. If you refuse to help then you're just getting in my way!" he barked with a threatening brandish.

"A pity you had to enthrall so many wraths. Anger has become a part of who you are, rage the very sails of your adrift vessel. You should have restrained yourself; who knows, maybe if you hadn't given me the good ol' slice and dice before we wouldn't be having this discussion right now."

"I…no…!" His head felt like it was about to split open and spill out his brain. "I didn't…" he insisted while his arms trembled. There were black and white memories of this still forest. Were those his? Were they memories from a prior life? They felt so visceral, so real, like the thoughts reminisced right before drifting into a deep slumber. "I —"

"Oh, wasn't you? Tsk, tsk. But someone exactly like you did," the voice said clearly knowing something he had not figured out. "That's the reason why we're both here aren't we? Cause. And. Effect."

"SHUT UP!" he hollered. "SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!" The anger inside him had reached a critical point where redness overtook his vision. Celesta's hatred being bound to his own hate absorbed from the people he had used his psyonics against made his rage induced fever worse. And now this compunction he felt tied to himself after the voice had told him that he had been here already. This utter confusion he had fallen into! Burdened with the blame for something he did not cause, nor could he even remember. And yet the guilt tortured him from within because he knew in his heart how much he craved to use the darkness in order to rip apart the source of the voice that had brought him pain.

"…" the voice went quiet. The forest was completely still. Not even the wind blew here. No animals either. Just the hot sun above, partially blocked from colossal trees that were frozen in place. The only sound was his heart pounding and his heavy breaths.
"I…I…didn't cause this," he told the forest through broken gasps, struggling to overcome the outburst that had seized control over him. "But you can be damn sure I'm going to finish it!"

"For both our sakes, I hope at least one of those statements is correct. Coincidentally, that's all we'd need to carry on. Then again your hateful shadow may betray us."

"I told you I won't hurt you," he said as calmly as he could manage. "I want to work together to end the Cycle of Hate."

"…!" There was a gasp from between the trees. "What did you just say?"

"It's the only way to stop the Soul Combination," he explained. "The very thing that made me the monster I am, and tore away the lives of so many. I will destroy it!"

"I see," the soft voice said contemplatively.

"Will you help me?"

"I have to because that was what I decided to do long, long ago. And so it has become my fate. I have always helped you in whatever path you selected. Even the ones that hurt the most. I did it all to give you a chance to one day fix the breaking-down Cycle. Admittedly, I prefer the choices where you don't decide to tear me apart like the wicked shadow Pokemon you've become. So, yes, I will help you, because I have to. The more pertinent question however is: can you help yourself?"

"Nugh!" Another one of those intense head-splitting migraines. They were getting worse each time the voice referenced something he couldn't remember. He was seeing himself here before, a torn black and white memory from another time or another life. "I'm not… not gone yet… the darkness hasn't turned me completely feral. I still have my will and my mission… I can still… I will choose!"

"Unfortunately, that's not the first time I've heard that," she sighed gently, "ohh, some things never change."

"I don't care!" he bellowed. "You're wrong to assume I'm fated to do anything. I'm a free man dammit!"

"Free? We shall see when the time comes. As you should already know, storms caused by the fluttering of wings are beyond any man's control."

"You know that theory about the Butterfree is founded on bullshit." But that was not all. "It's a stupid idea. A fricking joke! The thought that one little thing can cause so much destruction! It's infuriating!" The words were coming to him, as if a voice inside his head were telling him to reject the theory. It was the same way he felt when examining a Pokemon species, the knowledge seemed to just break out from the darkness in the back of his mind, like memories pulled through a long passageway tunnel in the brain. Why was he so sure of this? The words seemed to be coming from his subconscious, like they had been bottled up for a very, very long time.

"So, you have a different take on it after all this time has passed?" questioned the quiet forest voice.

"Yeah, you're goddam right my take is different. Unlike yours." He knew he could not remember the original theory he had. The memories of a Pokemon had befuddled his own, giving him amnesia. But somehow, when he was around her – near to Dee –they all came flooding back. How was that even possible? She was in the same situation as him. Her memories had also been influenced by the heart of the creature in her chest. Whoever she once was had been overwritten. There was nothing to explain why memories would return for either of them.
"Your theory yielded results that were unforeseeable. Your thesis, Concerning the Paranormal, was written to detail how psychic abilities – most notably the power of prediction – could be transferred from Pokemon to people."

He would not deny that. Everything that had happened since Evercrest was more or less an unintended consequence of that initial experiment three years ago. Instead he clarified, "The original theory was never contingent on foreseeability. If one were to know the outcome when the initial conditions were in place, then the entire theory breaks down."

"Oh?" was the surprised answer. "So basically – let me get this right – if only you had somehow known about the cause of the storm through a literal miracle, you would be able to alter the course of an unquenchable tempest traveling across the ocean?"

"A funny way of putting it." Indeed the storm was brought forth from a series of seemingly unrelated events taking place: Project Progenitor, the robbery of the Pokemon Sanctum, even his own Pokemon journey were all tied to the outcome seen in the present. He realized the potency of the theory if it were true. Regardless of whether or not he believed in coincidence, everything that had happened had led up to this end. "Cipher sought to end the world," he said somberly in response. "They succeeded. I just can't figure out why. Their motives are an enigma like my lost memories. At least I could understand why Giovanni wanted to achieve his wish."

"Hm. If that is the case, the world you know is doomed because of you and your research. Yet again."

"…!" He felt another jolt, this time in his gut. It felt like he had just been punched really hard. He felt winded, as if he had just lost something of a race. The air around him was thin and it hurt to breathe. "How can you say something like that to me? This wasn't my fault! I only know that this is where we are! I don't know enough to do anything about it."

"Perhaps it is best this sick world we've allowed to exist finally ends."

ENDS!? He couldn't believe what he was hearing. How could she have such nonchalance at the prospect of the world's end? He wanted to fight for it, and yet he felt so very tired of it all. He wanted to fall asleep; something heavy was tugging on the back of his brain, an invisible force, urging him to just submit, to close his eyes and forget. But the anger inside his chest kept him alert and full of passion. "How the hell can you say something like that?!" he demanded.

"Christian." His human name. For whatever reason it felt as though it had been ages since he heard that. The quiet voice up until this point had been referring to him as 'you' or 'mister' and other general pronouns. Because of this, he listened eagerly when she addressed him as such. Her shy voice said softly, "I want you to want to keep trying to save the theory. That is how the world continues."

"The theory?" he asked charily. "Not the world? Not the place where I'm from, on the brink of disaster?" It did not make sense at all, but then again neither did being here for a second time in the Relic Forest.

"You understand the theory better than any human; it is what has allowed you to persist this long."

"The…theory. Uh huh…right," he slowly repeated. "The one about the damn Butterfree flapping its wings across the ocean."

"Yes, the very same. It is the only thing we have left after your psyonics started envisaging the events of the future," replied the voice delicately.
"How do you know all of this?" he asked. Again his mind reeled with an unsurmountable headache and he saw glimpses of the same forest without its color. "About me... About my theories before my memory was lost?"

"Unlike you, I don't claim to 'know' anything. As a Pokemon, I'm a witness to a series of events. What is 'knowing' anyway? Oh! Here's a riddle! How does it differ from your psyonics? What about a Pokemon reading the future is different?"

So she's a Pokemon. He sighed. He didn't have time for her philosophical jargon. Yet part of him felt compelled to answer the query. He thought, What do I have to lose by entertaining that riddle? "Knowing is different from predicting because of conviction. Predictions are like a scientific hypothesis; they can be proven or disproved through observation. However, once you know something then it cannot change without undermining other attributes of the system. For example, I know there is air without seeing it because that's how I breathe."

There was a faint satisfied laugh. "Always the scientist. Your reasoning is passable, but it fails to address something crucial."

"Oh yeah?" His patience was being tested, yet there was no need to rush if his world was in an all-out global war. His motivations were self-driven, he knew if he waited Celesta's infestation would turn him into a Shadow Pokemon. "What am I missing?"

"You cannot see the air. It is invisible to the naked eye. And so are souls, as is one other thing: Volition. The will to power."

"Willpower?"

"Mmm. The very same. It can shape the course of history without ever being seen other than through the actions of its bearer. It is precious, so very precious and nurturing. Why do you think Blood Spirits demand the wills of their hosts in exchange for the power to Mega Evolve?"

He knew why because of Celesta's mind melding. He like many trainers had seen it happen firsthand. "Mega Evolution is how a Blood Spirit absorbs a Pokemon's Willpower in exchange for tremendous power. It's another method of control. Like the Apricorn and the Pokéball, a Pokemon's Willpower is suppressed."

"Oh ho! Very good. The problem for the Blood Spirits is that some Pokemon aren't captured by the devices wished into existence. The Fruit of the Forest only produced so many Apricorns, and craftsmen had to be talented humans in order to process the Mercurium in the Fruits so that it could resonate with the trace element of Mercurium present in Pokemon cells. Thankfully, this particular world has developed to a stage where the Pokéball can be produced by industry. And wouldn't you know: a Pokemon Trainer's mission is to "Catch 'em all". A remarkable Timeline we're living in, wouldn't you say! It's far more precious than the rest. In this universe, everything goes the most favorable way that it possibly could, but puzzlingly it still isn't enough. In fact—"

"—Wait," he interrupted, "your goal is to suppress every Pokemon's Willpower?"

"Isn't yours the same?" she chuckled. "Don't be coy with me; you're a Pokemon Trainer, for goodness sake!"

But my Pokemon retained their wills because of my heart, he thought to himself. "That wasn't why I went down this path."

"Ah, even with all the Pokéballs in the world, humanity will never succeed on its own. We all
realized this long ago. Shrewd Pokemon, legendries, and fringe communities of Pokemon will resist the suppression of their wills. However, the Soul Combination alleviates that problem through a convergence process. It is the process where a Blood Spirit overtakes and consumes another's essence, gaining its traits by catalyzing the element Mercurium present in trace amounts within all Pokemon. And that's obviously where you come in. The Soul Combination works by binding together broken pieces, but it works best when those fractured pieces, shall we say, fit. Now, there are special ways of making that happen, but the easiest method is to keep it simple. What is it that humans and Pokemon strive for?"

Had he been given the query before all of this had happened to him, he surely would have some witty response prepared. However, he had seen so much through his battles and adventures; he had met people and Pokemon all uniquely searching for different goals and spurred by motivations not even he could hope to catalog. "Erm… I don't know…" he muttered.

"Sure you do," encouraged the tiny voice. "You understand it better than anyone."

"I can't say for certain. Everyone wants something different. That's what made it impossible for me to control happiness without becoming a monster."

"Then I'm afraid there is nothing more to discuss," the forest voice said rather whimsically.

"Wait!" he retorted, compelled to continue the conversation and stave off the coming apocalypse for even just a few more precious moments. "I'll figure it out if that's what you want. I'm a researcher, it's what I do."

"He he! I like that answer. It might help you with your Butterfree theory too."

He didn't have time to figure anything out. Not with Cipher's bio weapons being used by terrorists about to destroy the world he knew. Goldenrod was already all but gone due to Team Rocket's amplified radio signal. "What we all strive for…it has to do with our sensations. Whether you're a person or a Pokemon, our emotions are what drive us. That's what the link is."

The forest voice was silent and listening.

"If people and Pokemon desire to become stronger, it is only a matter of time before that desire for strength evolves into something greater." He paused and looked down for a moment. "If we need to work together to achieve this greater strength then it is no surprise that the human will became the conduit for mutual strength between people and Pokemon."

"Oh?"

"And if that symbiotic relationship is disturbed, the parasitic ways of the past become dominant in both species. People using Pokemon. Pokemon using people. All as a means to an end rather than an end unto themselves."

"Hey, that sounds familiar."

"That's the world we're living in. A world where people use Pokemon, just like the Blood Spirits. Considering their wills can be sealed off by the Wish creating a capture device it is evident why. That Wish has turned Pokemon into our tools. Without the Pokèball, I never would have been able to do the things I did to the creatures." He thought about how Cipher had experimented on artificially sealing the door to a Pokemon's heart in order to make them more vicious. He wondered whether he to blame for that. Since Evercrest was a success and Project Progenitor succeeded allowing humans to alter the genetic code of Pokemon through DNA splicing it was all related. What would a world
"Then would you say it is fated to be this way?" she asked him.

"Fate?" He hated that word. "No." His expression reeled in disgust at the mere thought that the destiny of the planet was somehow determined by cosmic forces beyond his control. It was something he refused to believe in – not because he was a scientist, but because he was a human being.

"If it was not fate that led us here, then it was certainly Willpower that did. The problem with the human will is it is so easily misguided, making monsters out of men. Whether that's by choice or by chance is at the center of what it means to see the future."

"I'll tell you why I don't waste my time believing in fate. If I had not done what I had, then wouldn't someone else have no choice but to develop the same monstrosities I did if we assume those monsters were "fated" to exist?" He could not be sure. That uncertainty terrified him. It could have easily had been Deirdre's fault considering her body was now host to Celesta.

"Free or not, Willpower is not something to be trifled with. It can shape reality in unimaginable and fantastic ways. Just as that darkness in your heart has transformed you, a pure will can move mountains, cross seas, and change the world."

"If it's so great, why has it failed us?" he spoke into the still air. The world he knew was in its death throes. He could not fight for it; he was too weak to even control himself. His Pokemon could not fight it; they were soundly defeated atop the Radio Tower. He wanted to break down and rip out his heart in anger, realizing that it was the only thing that continued to tie him to this world. If he stopped his heart, then he would not continue to exist. But it would only make things worse and he knew it. That was the reason why he was so powerless.

"—You're forgetting what others have sacrificed."

Immediately he knew what the voice was talking about. Fredrick, the International Police agent who saved my hide, was killed trying to save me from Cipher on Penta Island. But that's not all. He had lost both his daughter and his wife as a result of the crimes I had committed, through a bizarre twist of events. Maybe Fredrick didn't know that my research led to Deirdre's body being overtaken by Celesta. Perhaps Fredrick didn't know that the unimaginable pain of losing Deirdre drove his wife to join Team Rocket as an Executive.

It still didn't make sense to him though. Fredrick knew what happened after the Hypnosis restored a portion of my lost memories. He was an intelligent detective, he even raised a bright girl like Deirdre, who could always connect the dots very quickly; he had to have known all this time. Even if he didn't, had Fredrick been doing his job, he should have arrested me the moment he found out I was tied to the Rocket Organization. And yet Fredrick still had a reason to spare me, and even try to help me. That reason had to be Deirdre, his daughter now turned into a Pokemon. The detective should have never forgiven me, but perhaps he thought I could save his daughter since the same Soul Combination thing happened to me. But now, that hope he could ever save Dee seemed so dim and distant. "Why?" he asked breathlessly. "Why did it turn out this way in the end?"

"Because this is the way it is fated to be. Blame won't change anything. Your friend knew that and that is why his soul is at peace."

"Huh?" That's nonsense, he thought. Through the chain of events following my research, I took away everything from Fredrick. His daughter, Dee… the girl I loved. And he still didn't kill me when he had the chance! That idiot had to save me instead! "I made this all happen and I don't know why
I'm still here," he finally admitted.

"Indeed," the tiny voice affirmed. "That's why your soul is not at peace. Even if you take responsibility, you failed to do so in the past, which is why you are always coming back here."

"Argh!" The voice was right about his soul not being at peace. Fredrick was dead. His wife, Ariana, had turned to a life of crime as a way of coping after losing her precious daughter Deirdre to the mad-science experiments Feyera was responsible for enabling. Gideon may have done the physical act of impaling her with the crystal, but it was Feyera's fault in the end. Dee would never be the same so long as that Pokémon's heart was embedded in her chest. Without the heart, she like Christian would die. And with it, her emotions, the precious sentiments that made her who she was as she experienced the world, would be drowned by the unquenchable tempest of Soul Combination anchoring her to Celesta's Radiant Heart.

To his further dismay the voice said portentously, "The world has already gone too far down the path of forbidden knowledge. I only see death and destruction ahead of us."

"You know about the future then?" he said humbly. "You said you were not the one who brought me here, but you know way too much to be an outsider. I know you're the Time Guardian. But that's just a title, like doctor, it doesn't mean shit. Who are you really? What's your real name?"

There was an impish laugh among the treetops. "C'mon, you couldn't figure it out?" she said chuckling.

"Don't rub it in," he grumbled. "Been a little bit under pressure with the world ending and not being able to do a thing about it."

"Hm hm. Then I will tell you," she said appearing out from the trees, "I am Celebi, the Forest Guardian you spoke of with Fredrick's long-time friend, Kurt."

"Celebi huh?" He was not entirely surprised. Though he did expect her to be bigger, a powerful Time Guardian this tiny was almost laughable. She had a green body, the color of Sana's hair. She wore a golden cloak with two frills that floated outward like a split cape beneath her dainty wings. Celebi had two curved antennae above her large dark blue eyes. However, one of her eyes had a strange light blue oval marking on the lower lid. Furthermore both Celebi's antennae had strange rectangular cloths dangling from their tips. One of the blue cloth pieces, the one dangling over Celebi's eye with the strange marking underneath, had writing on it, though it was so small and written in a foreign script.

The pixie spirit dancing about in the frozen Relic Forest seemed satisfied to reveal herself. "You knew me as Maisy. That was my cover back in Azalea. Teehee, and I'm happy you brought me my doll back, you have no idea how special that totem is to me."

Wait a minute. Did Sana know Maisy was Celebi? Did she really lie to me? Why on earth would she do that?! "...Well there's a surprise," he said collecting his inner thoughts. "You were the little girl with Kurt? I thought you were his granddaughter."

"Kurt's real child and grandchild were both brutally killed by the attacks on the town by Team Rocket," Celebi elucidated. "A terrible fate no man should have to endure; it is undeniable proof of the sadness that permeates the world below."

"No! Then that means—"

"—There is still a chance to save them," Celebi interrupted. "A chance to save their world as well."
But it will not be easy and I cannot tell you what you must do step by step. That would be interfering with the human Willpower that brought you here. …That's exactly what got us into this mess in the first place."

"Right, but how am I supposed to…" And then it clicked in his mind. Celebi could travel through time. He did not recall the details. Kurt had mentioned it, but at the time he wrote it off as a silly fairy tale. He was living that fairy tale now though. "You can travel through time!" he exclaimed.

"I'd be a lousy Time Guardian if I couldn't!" the tiny forest spirit squeaked. "However, I can't easily turn back Time for you on my own without creating many problems, hence the whole thing about the Butterfree Effect. No, that won't do at all. You'll have to be the one to make the choice concerning where you'd want to go."

"Ugh," he griped, "figured it wouldn't be that easy."

"Even if I could send you back, what would you want to change?"

He thought hard for a moment; it felt like he was making a wish to a very devilish genie, someone who would find a way to corrupt his desire and bring about this same outcome no matter what. "Project—" he was about to say Progenitor. It seemed like the natural thing to say. That was where things all went wrong from his perspective.

"—Remember what I said," warned her high pitched voice. "You cannot change what you did by using my power. Such an attempt would make things even more…strange…to compensate. Actions are written into the volumes of history like carved etchings on stone; even my power can't totally erase them."

He thought for a moment, realizing this was not as simple as it seemed. "If I decided not to involve myself with Progenitor, then someone else in the world would have," Christian replied warily. "It could have been Gideon or even Deirdre who would take my place as the creator of the project. Anyone really…" He cringed at the thought of Dee becoming the antagonist that would revolutionize psyonic abilities for humanity. She was such a kind young girl, someone he had fallen in love with long ago, and yet the events of the past had turned her into a monster. The way he understood it, even ordering Celebi to go back in time and kill everyone from the laboratory where Progenitor was conceived would not be enough to change anything. Reality simply would brute-force an outcome where everything existed the way it was right now. If things could be changed, then the end result would still be compelled into occurring as a matter of principle. The present world would demand it. Any number of increasingly strange events would transpire just to assure that. It was maddening.

"You look upset," Celebi chimed in.

"Just thinking," he snapped back. For he had seen it happen as he journeyed, downright impossible events happened to him, each one leading him further down this road that ended in destruction. If he had trained his ability to see the future even more he might have been able to foresee this eventual outcome. But even if he were a master of prediction, what could he possibly do to change any of it? His stomach grumbled.

"Are you hungry?" the forest spirit asked him. "Thinking on an empty stomach is no good."

"Why would you care?" he growled. The thought of a warm meal appealed to him. He felt his mouth start to water. "What's there to eat here anyway?"

"Nothing much. That's why I asked. Your sustenance is back where you came from, in the realm of
the living. My emotions won't be able to feed you and I can't make human food either. Unfortunately, the longer you stay here the worse the cravings will get. So, tick-tock, mister. If you thought existential nihilism was bad, just wait until the hunger pangs kick in."

He was even more hungry now thanks to her comment. *But wasn't that just nature?* He thought to himself, *I have the need to eat because that's nature. Be it a warm dish or an emotion, consumption of such would be nature taking its course and I'd have no say in the matter. It was from this line of thought that he realized his ultimate mistake. "No..." he whispered. "Where I went wrong was not with Progenitor. And it was not with the Pokemon Sanctum either. In fact, none of my devoted research is to blame for setting us on this path. ...It was something I had done so naturally without realizing it..."

"Oh?" Celebi's large eyes widened.

"The reason why this world is the way it is – the reason I can't change any of it – is because I used psyonics to predict my own future."

"Now we're getting somewhere!" Celebi said with a faint hint of enthusiasm.

He felt a shivering cold inside from the emptiness in his gut but his words did not waver. "Though I never thought of it at the time, that was what I had done. And when I did, it just felt so natural. I never stopped to think about it. Things became increasingly strange for me after I made that first prediction of things to come by using the powers of a Psychic Pokemon I had captured."

"How so?"

"It was as if a huge target had been placed on my head. Everywhere I went I was challenged with the struggle to survive. There were all manner of strange beasts and secret organizations that wanted my head. I could never figure out why other than psyonics being the culprit."

"You had a stigma placed on you when you discerned the future. An eternal perspective that did not belong to a mortal creature was something other Pokemon could sense. Your research, and what happened to Deirdre, assured that your anomaly – human prediction of the future – would be coveted by greater powers than yourself. The entire world would be battling to erase you, before your actions erased the world."

He had not predicted his own future out of hatred for the rest of the world, and yet that one action seemed to have consequences that went far beyond him; it would be replicated eventually, again and again in other human beings leading to this outcome. A war fought to secure the future of mankind loomed on the horizon. "When the ability to sense the thoughts of other people and Pokemon was not enough for me, I began using clairvoyance. The heart gave me the power to manipulate energy, but at a terrible price to my body which could not handle something it was not built for. However…"

A chill ran up his back as he thought about Lavender Town. "Prediction, seeing the future, was how I got through the Rock Tunnel without getting lost in the underground maze. I saw myself going through the cave successfully and in one piece; something I would have surely failed at if I did not have psyonics guiding me forward. The whole experience, there was something terribly off about it now that my memories are coming back. It was like watching myself from somewhere above my body, seeing every turn in the pitch black darkness as if it were the middle of the day." He had to sigh at the thought of it. *How could I have been so careless? No, I couldn't have known the consequences or the Butterfree Effect. It was impossible to foresee things would turn out this way based on my actions. Or was it? What if I had practiced more and predicted far enough into the future to see this outcome? Even if I did see the bleak future, how could I ever hope to stop it since that initial prediction – through the Butterfree Effect – had caused the outcome?* His head ached from the thought. He had recklessly kicked open Pandora's Box without even realizing it.
"Humans are not meant to know the future," the Celebi replied almost sadly. "It is a great tragedy that they coexist with creatures that do."

"Why though?" He wanted more than anything to know who it was that wrote the rules. "Why is it okay for a Pokemon to predict the future, but not a human?!"

"Because Pokemon are tied to Source according to the Wish we made. Their predictions are not connected to the will in the same way humans are. A Pokemon can predict the future because it is unable to manipulate the collective Willpower of humanity when doing so."

"Make some sense out of that!" Christian ordered in frustration.

"Free will is what drives the ambitions of lifeforms that know they are here today and gone tomorrow. Without an unknowable future to drive them forward, human will stalls because there is no undoing the gift of prophecy. In other words, like the wings of the Butterfree, its effect will change the entire world. Every seemingly impossible event that follows the initial prediction which undermined even a fractional part of the human will shall lead us here – to the end of the world."

"...!" he gasped. That was it. His personal prediction of the future had set the world on this path. Something seemingly so miniscule was destined to be what brought humanity to a fitting end. And why should any other outcome take place? What would be the point of existing in a world where the future was determined? The will for people to continue to live was being suffocated by his hubris.

"The world has to end, because the events leading up to this moment assure there is no genuine will to keep it alive. Once humans begin seeing their own future, they lose the will to exist. It becomes contagious as the feeling spreads. It wasn't only you. Celesta, after taking hold of Deirdre, aided Cipher. They used her knowledge of time to create the weapons that were from a forgotten era before the Terminal War. Those were the same weapons used on Goldenrod. This entire world is destined for nothing but despair once the future is known. Life would continue, but without the genuine will to face the unknowns of tomorrow, the universal reality becomes bleak. It even has a name: The 'Future Sight Situation'. You see, humans are not meant to see their futures. A Pokemon can look into the future, but does so without being able to see the actions of humanity. Do you know why? A human has Willpower, while a Pokemon's has been sealed by the Wish."

"I think your Wish was unfair to your own kind," he pointed out crossly. "Pokemon should have freewill."

"The Wish only affects the ones who dwell among humans. It serves them right for giving humans the power to undo everything built prior to the Terminal War."

"So that was your motivation." He paused. Celebi's Wish was unfair, but it also made a bit of sense. Still, he did not like how Celebi had prioritized the wills of Pokemon spirits that did not dwell with humans. In fact, that Wish was what gave rise to the powerful Blood Spirit Pokemon from Navenfell like Celesta in the first place. And the Soul Combination force as well. The Mega Stones too, it was all connected to what made the Pokéball function.

"It was the only reasonable solution," Celebi maintained. "Why, would you have chosen the world ending Terminal War instead?"

"No," he admitted. "We have that in common. My own world is also on the brink of annihilation due to war. I have to choose anything but that."

"Meaning we're on the same side," Celebi noted. "And I'm trying to tell you the moment we do make a choice: the choice shapes a new world."
"A new world?"

"Quite so. A world based on the last one. However, these worlds, men have learned to tell their own futures by attaining the predictive powers of Pokemon. And each of them must be destroyed without fail."

"WHAT!?"

"Hear me out," urged Celebi. "If these possible worlds are allowed to exist, then they create paradoxes. When people predict the future, foreshadowing their own destinies will lead to the end of the world in every case."

"No. Like hell I'm going to go along with destroying the world!" he rebuked.

"That's the beauty of THIS particular world; you don't have to destroy it…yet."

"You're not making any sense you know."

"We have not passed the point of no return. There's still time, an opportunity really, to repair the world before it destroys itself because of the Future Sight Situation."

"But still…multiple worlds…" It made him lightheaded.

"Think of it like this. There are many small drops of water in a stream, just as there are many similar worlds. There are many individual droplets of water – each a little bit different in position and movement, but their direction is determined by the direction of the stream they are a part of. Removing the droplet from the river causes it to evaporate and decay. And that is why the world will end. The moment humanity discovers its destiny the world unfailingly begins to decay, and increasingly strange events occur as the range of potential events overflows due to a lack of other nearby "droplets" outside the stream. With no nearby worlds to direct the flow of the world through their predictive paths influencing one another, errors in the renegade droplet build up quickly. In the end, as the strange events continue to occur by any means in order to fulfill the prophecy of the predicted future, the only outcome is Armageddon and a culling of the rogue world from the stream."

"But why should I have to face that?" he asked. "Why me?"

"Because it was determined to be this way by countless prior events already written in history. Your parents, their parents, on and on and on… Isn't that how things are for humans? The rigid rules of Time are far more important to you than for Pokemon. Thanks to our Wish, a Pokemon can be drawn into a special place, the so called Pokéball, an eternal place, existing outside of Time. Time is where you humans dwell because a steady progression of time moving forward allows you to exercise your Willpower. Because of your truly free will… because of how your consciousness is situated in the ocean of Time, humans alone have the ability to change what today is for tomorrow's sake."

Christian shook his head. He took a deep breath and said, "I just realized, even if you are able to do anything, it would have to take place at a time before the first prediction was used. The best way, indeed the only surefire way, to stop the use of human clairvoyance is to undo the events of Evercrest." In spite of this logical conclusion, he could not be sure of how Celebi would manage that.

"If that is what you want to do… The way back, is to use the Soul Star – your very own Mega Stone. This transfers the consciousness of the Supreme Spirits of Pokemon which reside through them. They are like seeds of power, able to contain energy in the environment, storing it for centuries
as the Spirits with their full, unhinged will rest in a place called Navenfell. And when a Supreme Spirit is called to this world – they are able to traverse through the connection between here and Navenfell as if the two places were connected by a dimensional tunnel."

"Then she would be released again. Undoing what Sana had done to imprison her," he reasoned. "You can't send me back in time using your Time Guardian powers?"

"Nope," she said suddenly. "It won't open for you as you are now."

"Why not?" Suddenly he felt guilty for having believed himself to be important. A lot of what had been said got to his head. He felt responsible for the way things were and felt compelled to save the world. But he had just been told he could not open the true path to the past. He did not know what to say because he wanted to fix the situation he felt responsible for. "Is it because of my darkness?"

"Not entirely..." Celebi said ambiguously. "Has more to do with the fact that I want to stay out of this as much as possible in order to reduce future liabilities. You ever make a mess, and then find by cleaning it you only make it worse?"

"Tell me about it," he griped.

"Your route to the past would require one of the Supreme Spirits to open the pathway there. Specifically their Mega Stone."

"Celesta..." Simply saying her name made him angry. A vindictive memory of her mind-controlling Dee atop the Radio Tower made his blood boil.

"You only possess her wrath, a miniscule fraction of the real Spirit, but it should be enough. And that way I don't have to get involved." Celebi fluttered her transparent wings causing sparkling fairy dust to scatter and gave a small laugh. "It's rather simple. Her Soul Star is similar to my Forest Domain. Every time a Mega Stone is used, it leaves an imprint on the tapestry of Time. If you know your way around these realms, going back to that point in time is easy to do with a totem. Isn't that how you got here?"

He understood, but he didn't want to use the Soul Star. Besides, if he did, wouldn't that channel Celesta? And then she'd find the Time Guardian by possessing him. He kept this information to himself. "So why exactly can't you take us back in time near your Forest Domain? Kurt had said you can travel freely through time as long as the forest is alive. So a simpler solution would have us going to a forest that was around in the past three years and using that to—"

"—I'm afraid the Domain you speak of is not capable of supporting the both of us. It is tied to my own heart rate. Because of that, only one of us can pass through: me. And I cannot change the past since I am a Pokemon. That means you would need to go alone while I maintained the Temporal Bridge. And if you were to travel alone without a guide, you would wind up lost in the great emptiness that is Navenfell. It has happened to many Pokemon that have Mega Evolved. Their essence remains trapped in Navenfell as the Supreme Spirit overtakes their corporeal form. If the Mega Evolution wears off after a defeat, the Pokemon that initiated it never really comes back to the world. It remains as an empty husk, something like the exact opposite of a Ghost type."

"No wonder it's so dangerous to use." He sighed. "Okay. Then the only way is to use a Supreme Spirit like Celesta to bring me through Navenfell and back to the past when the Soul Star was used."

"Precisely," squeaked Celebi. "You need to use the Soul Star to travel back to a time when it was activated. Every time it activated to channel an extradimensional being, it creates a 'Tear in Time' which may be returned to. Think of it like a record of information. You have a piece of Celesta in
your core, so it will work for you. You're not fully a Pokemon so you'll actually be able to change things by going into the past."

"Hmm." The only way to achieve the results would be to make sure Sana was around since presumably she had it with her sewn into her garments all this time. The issue with that was his first prediction of the future occurred outside of Lavender Town, long before they had met on Penta Island. Except…that wasn't the first time they met. There was another time, before that, back when he was human. She had been the one who cleared his memories, meaning he had an opportunity to prevent the prediction at the price of losing another three years of memories. The subtle irony of this did not amuse him in the slightest. And even if he went back there, he would be meeting a different Sana, one he would be unable to communicate with. The uneasy feeling nagged at his mind.

"You look like you're thinking real hard mister," Celebi pointed out with a chuckle.

"I can only think of one time before the first prediction was used...on the cliff when Sana activated the Soul Star out of anger."

"That would work; you'd be able to go back there."

"Not so fast," he said suddenly. He was annoyed she didn't let him finish his thought. "That time was AFTER I had used the Mercury Relic. So I wouldn't be able to stop my fusion."

"But surely, saving the world below from the coming war is more important than that."

"I told you to hold on!" he said more irritated. "If I'm already fused with a Psychic Pokemon then I'll inevitably use psyonics to start predicting the future. Like eating, it's nature. Psyonics will end the world by seeing the future and causing paradoxes that trigger the Future Sight Situation."

"So why not just go back further then?" Celebi asked innocently enough.

"Hm. Traveling back to a time where the Soul Star was used," he muttered deep in thought. That was the trick. However there was a major problem. He had no idea when it was used before the time when Sana activated it on the cliff! And it was impossible to find out from her now that she was fused with Celesta due to the Soul Combination. If he went back before that time on the cliff, he might wind up hundreds of years in the past! She had only given him hints about the Soul Star's prior use. It was kept at Home, and she had taken it from the fairy Cult of Ascension. The last thing he wanted was to wind up thousands of years in the past during an ancient fairy ritual. Besides, he wouldn't be able to change his outcome by going back before he knew he was alive. No; going back before she used the Soul Star on the cliffs outside Evercrest was off the table.

Unfortunately, the ideal target time to prevent the Future Sight Situation would be before he even used the Mercury Relic. No matter what, he had to have met Sana in order to achieve the goal. The conundrum was she used it for the first time AFTER the Mercury Relic was used. That meant he'd still be fused to a Pokemon. However, a dark thought came to mind. He could try to end himself in the past. That would in theory solve the problem. It was the only surefire way he could think of. The only way he could be sure that he would never come about reading the future again. If he accomplished just that, then it might be enough. He had to change the events to stop the "Future Sight Situation" from even getting off the drawing board. But then again if he killed the himself of the past, what would happen to the himself right now? He needed to be alive to go back and kill himself. "Ugh," he groaned at the anxiety of it all. "I hate Time."

"Naturally!" squeaked Celebi with a mischievous grin. "All humans do; it's meant to erode you, shape who you become. Time – it allows a flower to blossom from the branches of death. The ephemeral beauty of its fragile petals exists as something treasured because of the inevitable demise
that awaits it. Life itself is a cycle, yet only Time will alter your vision. Without Time, there would be little point to any existence at all."
"Tell me something important, what happens to "me" when I go into the past?" he asked Celebi.

"It's a one-way ticket. You cannot come back to this moment without living through the time you passed through," she replied. The strange pieces of blue cloth hanging from the tips of her antennae fluttered though there was no wind. "A journey through Time effects consciousness in truly phenomenal ways."

"That's kind of what I mean," he shook his head and asked the most pressing question, "are there two of me?"

"Obviously there's going to be at least two of you," Celebi said as her golden cloak reflected fantastic light. It appeared to be a part of her body just like the strange sheets of blue cloth hanging on her antennae.

"Well, isn't that a problem?" he asked curiously. "I can't be two places at once, can I?"

"Sure you can. Happens all the time. You're in bed dreaming. Are "you" in the bed or in the dream? Or both?"

"I'm wherever my brain is."

"A classic response. Physically speaking, your brain is simply an organ like your heart. Both serve a function, reducing their significance to mere physicality negates their purpose."

"The purpose being what?"

"Whatever you want it to be," she hummed, "maybe it's linked to the mind, the spirit, what some call a soul."

"A soul, huh." All scientific explanations left no room for such a thing, and yet his experiences had reshaped his worldview on that particular aspect of existence. The concept of a soul no longer was an element he could ignore. Not after all he had been through.

"Depends on your relative perspective. Should come as no surprise. A suffering soul sees the same environment differently than one which is content," Celebi clarified. "Here's the interesting part: If you are unable to change the final outcome of your actions, then your soul – both of the original and the current version – shall remain in the past, not as a whole part but as fractured entities."

"Fractured?" he repeated hollowly.

"At least to start out," Celebi half-explained. "Oh but this time it'll be different – I just know it! – you've made it so far already."

"What does it mean to be fractured?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. Try not to think about the past because doing so might detract you from your important mission to save the world's future."
"Hold on." Her swift dismissal of his question made him aggravated, doubly so since he was starved for truth. "I'll be the one deciding what I'm thinking about, thank you very much," he answered abrasively. "Besides, how am I supposed to not think about it after you specifically told me not to think about it? That defies all logic."

"Oh you." Celebi sighed, "Some things never change."

"I'm not finding that funny," he protested, "I'm not the same person you're talking about. I'm ME."

"So, I have a question for you now!" Celebi quickly buzzed through the still air on her fairy wings, followed by her billowing, bright golden cloak. "On your travels through this particular world, you have encountered a number of paranormal events have you not?"

"Apparently," he said scornfully. Ever since he started his journey there were unexplainable phantoms, ancient mysteries, and adversaries he could never quite wrap his head around despite taking the role of a rational scientist. Nevertheless this was a world filled with fantastic Pokemon, so the strange and unusual came with the territory, right? It had been his duty to figure it all out, a job he had failed miserably at. "Where to begin…"

"At the beginning. Have you ever stopped and wondered WHY these strange and inexplicable things happen to you specifically?"

He went to scratch his head but stopped realizing that might be a bad idea. "Predicting the future," he muttered staring at the dark claws of shadow that overlapped his human hands like a second set of previously unseen carnal viciousness now made physical. "What am I saying? I'm a scientist, but I'm starting to think I'm cursed. Even with the power of prediction everything is stacked against me."

"I'll let you in on another little secret," Celebi said cupping her arms next to her tiny mouth. "It is because in this world, yep, this very same world you're working so extraordinarily hard to save, you have already failed."

"WHAT?!" he exclaimed. "I don't remember ever attempting to go into the past!" But just as he said those words another disorientating headache overtook him. His mind was becoming undone and he could not see the color around him for an instant.

"Your human mind sees Time as linear," Celebi pointed out, not really caring that he looked about to throw up.

His head was throbbing. Closing his eyes he thought, *Celesta said the very same thing! This is too coincidental! Does that mean they are similar? Could Celebi be a Blood Spirit as well?*

"Linear Time is a grand illusion that fosters your Willpower, motivating self-improvement from your incremental perspective. Call it "progress". It works brilliantly, until it is disturbed by a greater force such as the Soul Combination."

"Just boil it down to basics," he requested as the headache began to subside. "I don't want any confusion to cause me to falter in my mission."

"Motivated are you?" Celebi asked, raising her strange eye with the pale blue discoloration under the lower lid. "That's good, you know. This world has seen your failure to change anything when you had an opportunity to. Yet, the show must go on; the world really should not stop for one individual's failures. Your actions were not enough to change anything in the last iteration."

The black and white came back again this time much more potently than before. All the green of the leaves on the trees vanished so suddenly. "Last iteration? You keep saying I've done this already."
"Not 'you' specifically. A version of Mew – I mean you – where I saw fit to intervene."

Of course, he thought to himself. The relic I took from the Sanctum was tied to Mew. It could have contained within it the Pokemon's memories. "How exactly did you intervene?" he asked Celebi.

"Last time — let me think, no wait, that was the time before — oh, right. I sent you on your mission to change the past when we met in Azalea Town. By revealing this task to you then, before your formidable Willpower had crystallized into what it has become now, I caused us both to enter this decaying purgatory – an endless Cycle neither of us can escape from which continues to fracture with every failure."

"Ungh…" His whole body felt sick. Every breath became a struggle. But he would not let the condition stop him from figuring this all out. "So what makes this 'version' of me now any different than then? And what happened to me from before?"

"Now is different because now you are acting with the humanity you've been fused to. It's the crucial final step to the Soul Combination, the key to solidifying the Wish that created the Pokéball. When Mew was captured by the Fruit of the Forest, it lost something special, freedom. Agency. Willpower. And so it turned to this: becoming a mutable parasite, a vampire dependent on the same creatures, the very humans that captured it and sealed away its power."

"Tch. You done rambling? I don't give a damn about a dead Mew. You didn't answer both my questions," he pointed out with a suspicious glare.

"Right, I forgot, you don't have the patience for stories about Mew after what it did to you. However, if I answer that second question you might not want to go through with this."

"I need to know, Celebi," he said stubbornly. "You owe it to me to tell me what happened when I failed because I don't remember."

"You were separated from your body when your Willpower was not strong enough to change the outcome. You went back to the past. Yet as I already explained you could not return to the present. At least not in your original form. Having failed, you became stuck in the fractured world where nothing had changed. And as such, you became a persisting paradox of the world."

"A paradox?"

"Coincidentally, it's the same principle you have in your research thesis — what was it? — right, Concerning the Paranormal. Lovely job on that second half of the paper which deals with Origins of Psychic Abilities and Ghost Types."

Celebi's knowledge took him by surprise. It was almost as if she knew him better than he knew himself. "How do you know about that?" he asked. "About my work as a researcher and all?"

"I've become well acquainted with you over time. I've had time to read; frankly, I have as much time as I want. But no matter. What I am referring to is the problems in the world that come across as strange, unfamiliar, or simply not quite right. Phenomenal things found through personal experience, beyond the light of reason. You follow? These are paradoxes. Glitches in the whole of reality. Some of them prove useful, others can be quite dangerous."

"You think a previous failure of whoever had the Mew Relic has something to do with paranormal activity in the world?"

"Haven't you seen it? Or rather, have you been observing the inconsistencies that follow you around? It's been right in front of you this whole time."
"Well psyonics are certainly a strange thing for a scientist to wrap his head around, but that's all thanks to this heart crystal," he pointed. "Suppose the real question is why they happen to me."

"I'll be forthright since you deserve the truth," Celebi sighed. "Did you figure out what you were seeing in Lavender Town?"

"Haunter," he answered with a scowl. "I fought it in the Pokemon Tower. That was a creation of Team Rocket, brought into the world by their excavation of the Mew genetic datasets."

"Oh ho!" Celebi's antenna perked up and the blue cloths on their tips fluttered like the pixie's wings. "That is not too far from the truth. But you are missing the oh-so-important link between you and Haunter."

"What do you mean?" And then it clicked. His claws. Those dark, ugly, heinous killing talons. They belonged to a Pokemon he had met. Haunter. "No…that's impossible!"

"As impossible as a young man roaming the country with a set of telekinetic abilities due to those same Mew genetic datasets? Hmm… A strange thing indeed, wouldn't you say?" Celebi mused. "They say only the strangest of things occur in very long-lived universes. Has something to do with chance and probability preserving the world through unconventional means."

His head was killing him. Every word that pixie spoke was like a nail being smashed into his skull. "That's different!" he insisted frantically. "I'm me. The ghost I saw…! The specter with the power to splice body parts together to form sick amalgamations of flesh…! That could not have been me. No! Haunter killed Jill right in front of me; I watched her die to his wicked attacks! How could I want to revel in so much death?!"

"Oh, but it was not just Haunter. The monsters that followed you in Mount Moon, the experiments in Cipher's laboratory. Those were each a part of you, from a previous attempt, a fracture which had been stranded in Time's endless ocean. A fractured soul, forced to relinquish his body in order to allow the you standing before me to continue to exist in the world and have a chance at changing the past again."

"AAGGHHHHH!" he held his head with his terrifying claws and screamed. The excruciating agony of the revelation had broken his sense of resolve. But he understood. He understood far too well why it would be this way. Why it HAD to be this way. "—That's why Haunter wanted to possess me. He wanted to take my body back. It was his – my – body once!" It all made sense, and left a terrible sensation in its wake.

"The only way that happens is if you fail. If you succeed, there will not be a paradox trapping you without a body in the past."

"But what if I'm made to fail?" he asked desperately. "What if that is the only way this world exists?!"

"That is the truth of a fractured world," Celebi acknowledged. "The cold Truth only Reason knows."

"No!" he denied resenting what Truth and Reason had condemned him into becoming.

"Be rational, that is, if you still can," taunted Celebi. "This reoccurring, fracturing world only exists when you do fail. However, it guarantees an opportunity to escape by keeping you alive long enough to make a change. Why do you think it was that Haunter, containing all the hatred and power you currently possess, could not control you or take over your body when he could do so to the other people in the tower? Do you remember?"
How does she know there were others in the tower? Something is very, very wrong. "—I remember I fought it with electricity," he explained to Celebi, "I raised my hands and shocked it after it had killed my companion Jill. I wasn’t sure why I could do that. It felt like using psyonics, but it also felt like something more."

"That was unprecedented. What happened next?"

"I flew out of the building…floated… and then nothing. It was a blur, I wasn’t in control. My body distant from myself, it felt as though I were in a dream."

"It is as I thought. Your existence was predetermined to be guaranteed up until this point. If Haunter had won, then there would be no Haunter able to become created in the future. Even though Haunter tried to take your body as a way of reclaiming his own, even though he had all the power to do so, it would seem the world itself could not allow for it. How very interesting."

"So what you're saying is—" His heart felt like it stopped "—I have to become that monster?"

"Oh don't be silly!" Celebi chirped. She pointed at his claws and grinned. "You already are. And where those claws take you next is all up to you. It's all up to you, and only you, to see where each and every path leads."

"..." Something inside him must have broken. He could not scream or yell or use any emotion. It was as if he had gone dead inside. All that passion and emotional energy he relied upon had vanished, drowned out by the ringing in his ears.

"Aw. Don't look that way; it doesn't suit you when you project no emotion," Celebi nagged. "Ghost types are made manifest mainly by the regret of others. Especially powerful ones like Haunter only come into existence when the regret is so strong that without it the individual in question would lose their memory. Regret becomes a manifestation. This can happen when someone dies really angrily or simply when their feelings are drained from a Psychic move or some other siphoning method."

"You explain it like it's some sort of natural thing," he said emptily. "But to me, it's my life you're talking about."

"And you'll go on, maybe. Even if you mess it up, you'll still come back here one day. What's there to fear? Death's a new beginning."

"There has to be a better way," he rebuked. He stared at his inhuman talons with a thousand yard stare. "I don't want to be the monster that killed Jill."

"Oh there are other ways. But you never liked them before; don't see why they'd appeal to you now."

"Tell. Me. Now."

"First option," Celebi smiled, "you take the Soul Star with you to the past and use it immediately after you arrive. Activate the Soul Star yourself with your psyonics the moment that Sana does so when she finds you following your tumble off that island's cliff. Since you will be using the same Soul Star from three years ago to reemerge in the past as your temporal guidepost, it's conveniently the perfect situation to create a localized paradox."

"Didn't you say paradoxes were bad? Like, wouldn't that fracture the world even further?"

"Not this one. This particular paradox is ground-zero. You'd be undoing the very mistake that led to the initial fracturing of the timeline."
Interesting, he thought to himself, if that's the original paradox, then that must mean Celebi was involved with the first fracturing. Her time traveling ability, the power to send others into the past, has something to do with why the world is in the state that it's in.

"There are two identical Soul Stars," Celebi said twirling about in the air. "If they remain inert, it's not a problem because we have already established that something can exist in two places at once. So long as there's a difference in perspective, like in the case of the dreamer who is in bed and in the dream simultaneously, nothing breaks; as in this case, where the Original Soul Star will be in a different place than Soul Star Prime."

"They'd have different locations in space. Original Soul Star in Sana's possession when she first becomes possessed by Celesta and Soul Star Prime from the future in my hand."

"Precisely. What's key is next: there's one Supreme Spirit, Celesta, being funneled into the same exact object twice, and the two cancel out. One minus one is zero. In other words, a division by zero. Do you follow?"

He nodded. "You can't divide by zero. It's unable to be defined by math or physics."

"Doing so creates a critical paradox because there's no way for the timeline to adjust into fractures in order to compensate for the anomaly. Unfortunately, a critical paradox is terminal to anyone involved. Time wipes the cause out of existence rather than further fracturing, meaning—"

"You're saying that would kill me, Sana, and Celesta all," he quickly reasoned before she explained. "Great plan…" he muttered sarcastically.

"Not existing is a little different from dying. It puts an end to your responsibility from taking the relic. A noble and selfless sacrifice would save the world you said you were so eager to protect as well as your research associate, Deirdre. There are several key events that will follow should you save her. If you manage to guard her from becoming Celesta's vessel, her mother will not turn to crime, and her despairing father would not die fighting Cipher. His continued presence in the world is enough to prevent the various criminal organizations from accomplishing their objectives. At least for a while," Celebi explained. "That world, if chosen, would be saved from the likes of Team Rocket and Cipher thanks to the Butterfree Effect, of that I am certain."

"So that's one terrible option." He had already decided that was not going to happen. Anything that required him to give up his own life would not be viable. That was just the type of person he was. Sure it was selfish, but also human nature and he was not trying to change that considering how precious little humanity he had left. He refused to sacrifice Sana. Not after the promise he made to her.

"The second option. You can instead take the Master Ball with you into the past. You then re-capture Mew within the final evolution of the Fruit of the Forest. How? Simple. You simply throw the Master Ball to capture Mew in the distant past. The Master Ball is the perfect Pokéball, Deirdre created it so that it cannot fail to capture even legendary Pokemon. Because of that, there is zero chance of the Timeline "correcting itself" from your actions, by perhaps causing you to miss or releasing your target through the troublesome principles of probability. It's a guaranteed reset of the clock."

"How does that reset the clock?"

"Oh it's rather anti-climactic actually. Like always, you become the one who plants the "Mew relic" in the Sanctum. Doing so will assure that some part of you again arrives to steal it, just like each and every time. Complete the circle. Become the invisible storm on the other side of the horizon, just like
the Butterfree."

His head was spinning. Fog surrounded his thoughts. "Unbelievable…"

"Don't be too hard on yourself. If you aren't strong enough to make the sacrifice this go around, maybe it'll be different next time. You might not be a slave to emotion," Celebi said pointing at his murky heart shard. "You're able to turn that relic on just about anything you can imagine. Snap! Couldn't be any easier than what they teach you in trainer school. Just like that, capture a Pokemon of your choice. It's all up to you, and only you, to see where each and every path leads."

Every time, without fail, that line of hers felt like grating nails on a chalkboard. There was something off about it. It made him want to do something but he could not remember what or why he even felt this sensation. Was she brainwashing him? It seemed too obvious to work. Nevertheless, he could not be sure of anything considering his forgotten prior failures. Trying to figure out how to proceed he asked carefully, "What's the catch though? There's always a consequence."

"The "catch" is twofold; taking the Master Ball back in time will prevent its creator, Deirdre, from remaining human. Since she is connected to that item, bringing it into the past will cause a paradox that will prevent her from existing in that world as a human."

"But she would still be alive, right?" he said hopefully.

"Of course, in the same way you would be "alive"."

He knew what that meant. She'd be a Pokemon and so would he. Part of her would be a Pokemon and part of her human. Another pair of souls, his and hers, warped by time into a fractured unity as a price for stalling the Timeline of the Soul Combination's inevitable singularity. "Don't tell me that's the only way to save us both."

"Not to sway your decision, but that's the choice you always go with. The more pressing problem of choosing the second option is doing so only maintains the status quo for another Cycle."

"We'd still be fractured."

"Indeed. Deirdre's spirit would be just the way it is now in this world. Her spirit exists as a Pokemon after the Radiant Heart took over her. It's the universe's way of insuring a paradox does not arise. A Pokemon is unable to fashion a Pokéball, correct? And that, my emotional friend, in cosmological terms assures the world will never have a duplicate Master Ball."

"That's what's preventing us from remaining as humans."

"In the grand scheme of things, that isn't the worst thing you could choose to do. Might work out favorably again. Thanks to your ability to emotionally bond and share your will with Pokemon through telepathy, you may still find a way to communicate with her – without knowing it's a part of her at first tragically. Her fractured soul is preserved from an otherwise inevitable doom by living on as Sana after she channels Celesta in that chosen world as you just witnessed."

"…!" It all made sense. "That's what Sana wouldn't tell me."

Celebi answered his shock, "As I said, it will not be an easy choice. The consequence of each action will result in the erasing of either Sanaria or Deirdre. But really they are just different pieces of her, made distinct by the bodies they inhabit. Given enough time, she'll develop two distinct personalities. Much like you did before the Soul Combination brought your fractured pieces back together. Unfortunately, the same Soul Combination you seek to destroy is the only force responsible for keeping Deirdre's original personality intact. Celesta absorbed the person you knew through the
Radiant Heart, and Sana's use of the Soul Star caused her to merge back with the original non-Pokemon personality briefly. …Two sides of the same coin. "Time" is seeing glimpses of both faces as you toss the coin in the air. Collateral damage is the life of your choice that it lands on."

"Don't you dare call them 'collateral' – that's not a decision I can make!" he shouted in anger.

"You can't have your cake and eat it too. If you wish to preserve both personalities, then the Second Option exists. Sacrificing Sana and yourself rids the world of the paradoxes caused by the Butterfree Effect, Celesta, and the Future Sight Situation. That choice saves the world. Sacrificing Deirdre's humanity buys you more time, yet you would forget the significance of your decision due to amnesia until you come here eventually to make the choice all over again. It fractures everything back into pieces, some of which are reassembled sooner than others by Soul Combination."

"I refuse to sacrifice either of them, what then?" he said swiping down angrily at the air.

"There is one other option… choosing not to act is still very much a choice," Celebi said circumspectly. "Opt out of responsibility by taking the third option, the guaranteed destruction of this fractured world. Whether or not it will ever be reborn is left to chance's whim, but the only certainty is a slow poisonous death for all living inhabitants of the world. You already saw it, in a grim future world based on the events so far. The ruins of civilization. An irradiated wasteland. The final outcome of the Future Sight Situation. A culling of the rogue world that has left the stream of Time."

He could not believe it. He felt like he was in a terrible dream again. Yet this was all too real. The whole world depended on his next action. He could not stand by and let the world be snuffed out, but how could he be forced to choose between Dee and Sana? It was a cruel choice with no right answer! Unless he could outsmart the way things were supposed to be there was nothing he could do but choose the second option. That gave Dee a chance to live on, and it also did not require him to sacrifice his own life or Sana's. A terrible choice. The despair brought him to desperation.

"To hell with all those options! I'll make a wish to save them both," he said resolutely.

"A wish…?" she echoed in disbelief. "You?"

"I'm not playing by reason's rules any longer," he told her defiantly, "I'll do what you did when you made the Ancient Wish to sever our world from Navenfell. Two sides of the same coin, you said. "Time" is seeing glimpses of both faces as you toss the coin in the air, you told me. Collateral damage is the life of your choice that it lands on, was your analogy. Well, if that's the case, I will wish for the coin to land on its edge so neither side is crushed."

Celebi fell silent. Her large eyes closed in contemplation. "In all my time, I've never witnessed you – any of you – say anything about a wish," she said.

"Is that going to be a problem?" he asked aggressively raising his ghostly talons.

"No…it's just…hmm."

"—That's what I'm going to do, Celebi," he insisted, his mind clearly made up. "I won't kill us, and I won't repeat the Cycle again. I'll make a wish to save them both and the world."

"Fascinating. Utterly fascinating."

"What?" he asked shortly.

"I have seen you, and countless others make this choice innumerable times before. You always pick the second option in the heat of emotion. But for some reason, or lack thereof, this time you thought
of something strangely lucid."

It baffled him because making a wish was by definition the furthest thing from being rational. "So work with me here," he said evenly. "How exactly do I make a wish?"

"You would need to make it with the Source of Willpower," Celebi said dismissively.

"The "Source of Willpower"? Fancy name," he remarked with a sneer. "That's what Pokemon return to when they enter a capture device? The infamous "holding zone" or limbo land?"

"Yes, yes," Celebi said hurriedly. "Although to do so, it will require going into the past as if you were to choose the either of the first two options."

"How's that?" He noticed she was suddenly pressuring him now more than ever. He sensed something in the air had changed as well. But with his mind flashing back to a black and white forest every few minutes, it was difficult to discern exactly what emotion Celebi was exuding. "I'm not dying as a sacrifice, and I won't continue to be trapped in an endless loop. Those options involving a trip into the past are off the table," he said sternly.

For the first time he thought he saw a glimpse of frustration on Celebi's cute face. She quickly spun around in midair in a whimsical fashion hiding her face. He wondered, What's bothering her? Ever since I mentioned making a wish she's been acting different. Strange. I thought she wanted to fix the fractured world.

"It's quite simple, if you refuse to go to the place where the First Wish was made, you won't be able to make a wish," she explained abruptly.

"Care to tell me why?" pressured the young man.

"Source is purified Willpower from the collected energies produced by the Soul Combination and the Fruit of the Forest," she answered curtly.

"Then it's part of your Wish. Meaning Source is connected to you," he said cunningly connecting the two. "So, being that you're here, why is it I can't meet Source right now?"

"Source doesn't just show itself like a Pokemon would. It's not even tangible on this plane of existence," Celebi dismissed with an unsavory pout.

"Oh?" he said feeling emboldened by her reticent sulking. "Surely a Time Guardian would not be intimidated by the extradimensional," he ridiculed.

"You have no idea how complicated things are. Have you ever stood between two mirrors facing each other and peered into the infinite?"

"Who hasn't," he said tersely. "What's that got to do with the Source of Willpower?"

"There exist an infinite number of possibilities," she hummed as she evasively dodged his question. "Call them other worlds, other times, other realities, or whatever you like, but those terms to describe possibility do not capture the sheer vastness of the infinite. All matter is information. It manifests itself through consciousness. That is the requisite catalyst of your so-called life and soul. They are simply the means, the cogs that make the mechanism run. How then does intelligence gather this information and set it on a path? Free will is choosing what your consciousness is anchored to. Free will is making the choice. That free will was wished away from Pokemon a long time ago and it has to be stored somewhere – Source."
"Well, what about you?" he asked. "Where's your free will?"

"Right here," Celebi said pointing at her tiny body. Below her chest was a peculiar horizontal slit on her stomach, it looked like a curved scar. "Pokemon that are in your world are the only ones affected by the Wish. Outside of the plane where humans dwell, we're the way we were before the Wish."

Then your Wish was the cause for creating the dimension where Pokemon go when they enter a Pokéball, he thought, I have to confront that if I want to meet this Source.

"If you want to see the Source of Willpower you have to go back to when the Wish was made and it came into existence," Celebi explained.

"Time isn't always linear," he said quoting Celesta. "Especially for a Time Guardian, capable of making world-changing wishes. Let me ask you something, Celebi. When did you really make the Wish?"

"You're right, Time is not linear. It spreads outwards from you. Your memories, your past, your ambitions, your future, are all tied to you."

As I thought. He knew for certain she was dodging all his questions. But he kept his composure; he had to for now. Just a little longer. "Small world," he said, "that's what Celesta, the Blood Fairy said." As he spoke, he noticed Celebi winced at the name "Blood Fairy". She knows of her real identity too, he thought, but why would that be? Have they met? Interesting because before Celebi referred to Celesta as a Supreme Spirit, not the Blood Fairy. Regardless of his creeping suspicions he continued to talk, "I could not deny it when Celesta took over Dee's body and then proceeded to possess Sana using the power of the Soul Star. But she had that power both in the world and also her domain, Navenfell. What do you know about Navenfell?"

"It was the Forest of Origin, our Home, our Eden. It is not a unified paradise any longer after my Wish split it into countless realms, each with a presiding spirit to lord over the dimension. Navenfell is the new name given to the spiritual heavenly domains that are above the mortal plane." Celebi seemed unsure, nervously hesitant and very restrained. "It was once a place to find rest. A place where there is no weariness of spirit. But then… There was the Severance, my Wish. It left some beings behind in Navenfell. Navenfell's link to this world is fragile and the route there is dependent on energy stored up by the passage of time. Places like Navenfell have no steady heartbeat of Time. That is because they sit at the very edge of a universe. A place where anything is possible from the start – where a pea can be chopped up and reassembled into the Sun. Where Space and Time kiss is where you'll find Source."

"Uh-huh. I remember when Sana told me that." It stuck with him and almost brought a smile to his face. Back then he thought it sounded ridiculous, but now it was quickly becoming the best option.

"Oh. Of course you do!" Celebi said hastily encouraging his fond recollection. "That was important to you wasn't it? Right?"

Something bothered him about how Celebi knew exactly what to say to lower his guard by getting him to relive a warm memory. "Back to the explanation," he said trying to shrug off the fuzzy feeling.

"Remember how I explained Time being a stream? Think of the center of Navenfell like a bubbling spring. Only in Navenfell does time skip and ebb through the ripples, allowing for passage through the temporal dimension. Do you understand it with that analogy?"

"Yeah. Totally," he said evenly. "If that's what it takes to meet Source, I'll use the spring to go back
in time and stop the prediction from ruining everything by making a wish. I'll prevent myself and Dee from getting merged with Pokemon, and there, problem solved. No end of the world, no more Soul Combination, everyone gets out alive."

"Is that what you want to do?" the tiny nymph asked him with a look of relief.

"You've got a problem with my plan?" he asked raising a skeptical brow.

"I never have, and never will," Celebi replied swimming through the air playfully on its butterfly-like wings. Like a clock's hourly chime Celebi sang, "It's all up to you, and only you, to see where each and every path leads."

"Great, this will be easy—" he started to say instinctually as the ringing in his head came back. And then he stopped. Something wasn't right. The way he had answered her canned line was so impulsive, it was almost as if it had been a habit. He had this awful sense of déjà vu. As if he had said this very same thing a long time ago and was about to make a truly terrible mistake. But moreover he realized something else. Something he didn't catch last time, or he had been so trained to miss. It was something that made his shadowy arms seethe with heated blood. The periphery of his sight became coated in thin rivers of red and black, these veins of darkness reached for the center of his vision. Vivid color came back to the Relic Forest as pressure welled behind his eye sockets. "—You know, something about that little line of yours has been bothering me. You always say WHERE the path leads, not WHEN,"

"….!" Celebi covered her small mouth in shock. "That's just my mantra." However the tiny Pokemon reeked of fear. His emotion-sensing psyonics spontaneously picked up on the familiar stench.

"Funny. Usually a mantra is for one's own use. However each time you say it, I get this splitting headache. Weird, huh? So figured I'd ask: what are you really playing at?" he asked threateningly raising his claws with eyes aglow with inhuman redness.

Celebi fluttered her wings as she tried to fly up toward the canopy of the Relic Forest without saying a word.

"I don't think so!" he yelled leaping after her. Using his psyonics to propel himself into a high jump, he snatched at the fleeing pixie. Her fluttering butterfly wings were just a few inches away from his grasp. With a final push forward, he snapped close his dark hand into fairy dust. However, he hadn't reached her, only her wings. The shadow talons went right through them and he saw naught but sparkling powder on his claws.

"AWAY!" said Celebi, gracefully turning to face him, spinning in midair like a figure skater. Her eyes were aglow with psychic power. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to interfere again. Last time I did and look what it turned you into! Every time I take part in this process, you come back with more heinous ferocity. Further fractured, more vicious, as if anger somehow carries over. A pity, soon you won't remember any of it."

"It was you!" he exclaimed. At the peak of his jump, the world started changing. In shock he realized he was moving backwards. However he was not falling down in the conventional sense. No, he was making his original jump in reverse. The exact trajectory he took to make his leap he was now traveling backwards in. He knew what this was. Time manipulation!

"You must go back. Back to the beginning!" Celebi belted from higher above the forest canopy, far out of reach. "It's the only way to preserve the reservation we've carved out."

"No!" He didn't want to go back. Going back meant losing everything. Everything he had fought
"Your past is our future. Relive it, perish in a song of Time!" Celebi said as she threw a flurry of twelve glowing ribbons from out of her hair. They twisted together like a braid and became as bright as the burning sun. The twirling green spiral shone brightly and became a radiant spear shining from heaven. On Celebi's body a previously invisible closed eye on her stomach opened wide, brimming with world-altering power. "Save the world, become a sacrifice to Time! Continue the Cycle our Wish created…DOOM DESIRE!" she cried out as the spear of light shot down at him.

He tried to dodge the sharp projectile from Celebi's hair, for it appeared to be a javelin of pure light at first. However it opened, splitting at the tip to reveal bright shimmering jaws. For an instant, the color disappeared from the world as he remembered the Timeweave through a flashback. It was how she kept him in check every step of the way. This was her trump card, her last resort, against him and all other opposition since the Cycle began. The Timeweave was a fusion attack consisting of purging eternal light and the perishing force of Time she commanded, a combination of both Doom Desire and Perish Song. It required preparation, but its destructive force was absolute. The Timeweave opened its brilliant maw, like a massive eldritch Wyrm eager to feed. The twelve strands of the Timeweave's teeth flew past him like long strands of shining cloth forming a gleaming tunnel around his whole body. Each individual stream of the glowing twelve cloths had an archaic language written on the sides, date inscriptions, roman numerals, and the hands of a clock, all things he associated with time. With a thunderous howl, the twelve teeth of the Timeweave collapsed into one singular point behind his falling body, forming a dense black hole.

"AUGH!" he hollered as he was dragged backwards even faster down to the portal leading to the past. Slashing wildly with his shadow claws at the Timeweave surrounding him, he desperately fought to slow his plummet into the abyss. The Timeweave began to distort when he attacked it, twisting and twirling as it probably would if any wind had ever graced the Relic Forest. The swirling collapsed star beneath him pulled with such strength that the inside of Timeweave had become a cyclone. As he ripped pieces of the Timeweave away with the claws of dusk the chaotic force of his grasping sent him spinning around the luminous wall in the unceasing whirlwind. With each deep tear, every laceration, the Timeweave would shudder like a living being, exposing more and more of the grim truth of a forever unchanging reality through the gashes, revealing glimpses of the frozen Relic Forest hidden beyond the temporal veil.

"You cannot escape Time," Celebi echoed from the peak of the long tunnel of light and turbulence. "Pokemon, Humanity, and yes, even Blood Spirit, all succumb to the inevitable passage of Time."

"NUGH!" he grunted as his body smashed against the side of the Timeweave's stretched cloth wall. His talons had dug in deep enough to the side of the Timeweave, slowing his fall backward. He struggled to steady himself by placing his Alterieno boots on the side of the Timeweave's wall, but they merely pushed the fabric out causing it to flutter him like a ragdoll. The only things that gave him a grip on her Timeweave were his shadow claws.

"You can't fight what you've already done," Celebi insisted from the shining crown of the Timeweave. "That is why it's so easy to fall back into the past."

He looked down and saw the tremendous dark star beneath him, right at the point where he had initially leapt after Celebi from. The end. That's the end, he thought. That's been the end so many times before. It's how I started this journey. It's how I had been tricked into ending countless others where I opposed Celebi. But not this time.

"Agh!" He clamped his other hand on the side of the wall and started to climb the side of the
Timeweave. "I'm not falling into the past, Celebi—" he shouted at the top of his lungs over the maelstrom of turbulence just below him "—the future's looking too damn bright!"

"The light you see is rebirth awaiting you. You had a chance to go peacefully, a chance to undo the many fractures by willingly facing this responsibility on your own accord," Celebi condemned as he unwaveringly continued to climb the side of her Timeweave. "I graced you with the opportunity to truly believe what you were doing was the right thing, the noble thing, the rational thing to do… Most importantly – I gave you all you ever wanted, your precious reason to save the world!"

"Save the world…by becoming a sacrifice without choice. NEVER!" he yelled ripping with greater severity spurred by anger as he climbed through the tornado. "I'll never accept that cruel reason!"

"You're impossible," Celebi replied over the typhoon. "When I involve myself in the affairs of Time, it makes the next Cycle more fractured than the last. There will only be additional paradoxes, greater discord, you and your beloved, you'll be even more fractured."

"You're the only one about to be fractured!" Feyera snarled with an extra vicious slice upward into Celebi's Timeweave. His resolution, the inner strength of his determination, had brought him closer to the top. Just a little further! Almost…!

"Humph. At least this time you tried to fight like a Pokemon. That will make the next reiteration easier," Celebi said ominously. "Nevertheless, thanks to what you told me earlier, I know exactly how this specific Timeline deals with the Haunter problem."

"Augh!" A sudden shock flooded his system as Celebi electrocuted the entire Timeweave. His body convulsing, he started to lose his grip. "NO!" he hollered as his shadow talons loosened from the Timeweave's glowing material. "NOOO!"

"Accept your fate, demon."

He was again in freefall. This time in the center of the swirling luminous tunnel of Celebi's Timeweave. There was nowhere to hold in the chaotic storm; he saw the dark hole at the pit awaiting him as he plunged down toward it at breakneck speed. The despair, the helplessness, the feeling of unavoidable doom consumed him, harnessed his hatred. With a defiant roar, he righted his body to face Celebi, using all the built up emotional energy to create a gravitational anomaly of his own. The dark star leading to the past began to lose its grip on him as his own pulled him upward toward the zenith of the Timeweave at an accelerating rate. She could not do anything to stop him; the Timeweave was attached to her body. As he shot up at her he could only sense fear in the creature's long-lived heart. Sensing genuine terror behind her glowing eyes made the rush skyward toward her perch all the more appetizing. In a split second he had used the same darkness, the insatiable desire for emotion which had wronged him so often, to reach her through the tunnel of time. His twin talons of shadow managed to reach around her tiny body and cage Celebi within them. The Timeweave shattered into a million pieces, brighter than a supernova, spraying light and temporal material in every direction through a cataclysmic explosion.

"You're a fraud!" he shouted after a rough landing. "A dirty cheat like that Blood Fairy! You're no Time Guardian, just another soul-sucking monster."

Celebi squirmed in his hands, desperately attempting to free itself from the secure prison he had created by interlocking the claws. "NO!" it screeched. "Let me go!"

"Like hell. Can't get away with your time manipulation while we're together." His black crystal glowed with the viciousness in his heart and a dark cloud of miasma wrapped around his prey. "And we're about to get a lot closer acquainted."
"WAIT! What are you doing—!?"

"You asked for this, you wretched trickster!" he explained tightening his grasp on her. "I'm going to make sure you tell the truth, by taking it from you! When I steal your emotions, I gain your memories. Feelings don't lie."

"DON'T!" Celebi pleaded.

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked feverishly. "I want to learn everything from you and unfiltered by your repulsive deception!"

"This isn't how you want to end this!" she squirmed. "I'm the only way you can save who you truly care about!"

"Shut your lying mouth. You forgot – I can sense fear now; I feed off it. I'll take what you're hiding by force, I'll take your memories and your emotions they're tied to! The very things that you never wanted me to have are intimately related; when I steal one, I get the other!" He forced her into the cloud of darkness swirling around his heart. "You thought you could manipulate me by instilling fear in my heart, but you're the one afraid because you actually like this twisted Cycle we're stuck in!"

"…!" Celebi gasped having been found out.

"What? No, "Please, not again!"? Guess that means I've never tried this before, huh? I was about to go along with your plan, but you referred to the place you'd be sending me to as where, not when. You're the one who messed up."

"Where and when are the same thing in the grand scheme of things!" Celebi insisted. "You aren't being rational!"

"Oh, I know there's a difference. I can sense it, straight from the source. It's in your fear, Celebi. It's why the world fractures more if you interfere, because you aren't sending me back in my time, you're sending me to a new time and rolling the dice I never wind up back here opposing you. You'd never send me back to when I can change anything, oh no, that would upset your little system here, instead you put me back to where I have to start all over again after being fractured!"

"Ahh…!" Celebi wailed in pain.

"What a manipulative little Blood Spirit you are," he said tightening his grip on the little nymph. "You made the Wish to seal away Pokemon's Willpower! You created the Wish, the Mercurium, the Pokéball! All for what?! So you and the rest of the Blood Spirits in Navenfell could enjoy your gathered Willpower in these sheltered realms? To harvest the Willpower of captured Pokemon and those who sought to use the stones to gain back their Willpower at the price of their lives?! All while remaining here in this inaccessible pocket dimension, protected like frightened deities, until a Pokemon called upon you to Mega Evolve, at which point you would absorb that will to power too! Unimpeded, unopposed as you feasted on them for the crime of living among humans!"

"I only did it because I had to secure our existence! The alternative would have ended the world," Celebi quickly reasoned. "There was no other way to stop certain doom wrought by the apocalypse of free men and mon during the Last War. If you just listen, I'll send you back to a time when—"

"A contradiction," he said scornfully. "You said you couldn't send me back, and I'd be damned if I listened to you. No, I'm not interested in your lies. I'm taking your soul, the thing you call your heart. That's the only way to see through you. I refuse to make the same mistake; I have nothing to lose by stealing it from you now that I'm here. I'll use the same Soul Combination you wished into existence
and rip away your innermost secrets!"

"You can't do that, you'd—!"

"DON'T TELL ME WHAT I CAN AND CAN'T DO!" he shouted. "I finally figured it out. The memories, the visions. All past lives. All failed attempts! I was about to embark on yet another one. You lied to me when you said I would bring about the end of the world because of my psyonics. You were trying to get me to only look into the past, not the future! And you succeeded countless times before. Times I had forgotten about after being fractured and having my memories wiped by a sister Blood Spirit. What you were trying to conceal was the bleak future – that as long as I oppose your Wish, I am stuck in an endless loop!"

"…!" Celebi's lack of response told him everything. And still the dark core drained sensations out of Celebi, her intentions were becoming clearer with each psyche it took hold over.

"You were hiding it in plain sight. By explaining my disjointed memories of this place, the déjà vu and the headaches I rightfully had as being my fault for not saving the world from the Butterfree Effect! All of that was just a cover!" he roared. "You wanted nothing more than to gain another three and a half years. CELEBI! There is no fucking end of the world! There is no Future Sight Situation! There's only the end of your Domain! And you can't let that happen. So you send me back every time I get here – not to when, but to where. Back to the beginning where I first gained the power to usurp you and your fucked up Wish!"

"I-impossible! Your memories…they were erased."

"So it's all true. It's just as your inner self said through your fear." He started to realize that he had lost any sense of mercy now that his humanity was all but gone. "The only question is what happens next once you're out of the way. I've come this far. I'll have find out won't I?"

"If you take my power you'll break the world. My ambitions will become yours, and you'll be forced to make a choice with no right answer!"

"Better me than you." He shook his head.

"You'll unleash hell on the planet below you love so much!"

"Oh? You're worried for "the planet below"?" he repeated contemptuously. "Get over yourself. This place is far from being heaven. It's Hell itself. The Last Gate is a portal straight into an eternal hell – and endless repetition of the same mistake, over and over without end. Each time I follow your rules because I can't remember why I got here. Sometimes I change the way I behave, other times I don't, but you know that all you have to do is get me to want to 'save the planet below' in order to win. That's how you perpetuate the Cycle. You've done it more times than I can remember and I've become fractured because of it. The circumstances were different this time though. My heart tells me something you won't. It can sense your primal fear from our countless encounters, and that's all I needed to realize the abysmal truth about this place!"

"You're not thinking clear," Celebi implored. "You're letting your sentiments, Celesta, get in the way, you'll regret what you don't think though rationally!"

He pulled her in close against his blackened heart. The churning black and red core reflected in her frightened eyes. "You're right, Celebi. I gave up reason just to break the goddam world away from you."

"What?! No! You're a Pokemon researcher, don't you lose sight of that." She started to cough from
the emotional miasma. "The darkness has muddled your mind!"

"No. I've never seen things clearer. I'd rather have the darkness that allows me to discern your intentions than be manipulated into thinking you're anything but the devil himself."

"ME?!" rebuked the pixie. "You're the devil whose shadow claws are around me!"

"Fitting, isn't it? All this time you had done the same to me with invisible claws masquerading as concern for "the planet below". I had to become a shadow just to see it. But I can't empty you yet. I need to know why. I want to hear it from you why you did it. Why you put me – no, anyone who took that damn relic – through this nightmare."

Celebi kept persistently squirming but it was clear she could not escape. "The Cycle you're a part of assures that the Wish is never broken," she said as she wore herself out. "The Wish made by my closest Jirachi."

"Another Pokemon?" It explained how she was able to use the fusion attack consisting of Perish Song and Doom Desire to create the Timeweave. And Celebi's unique traits, the golden cloak, the powerful eye on her stomach, and the wishing notes on her antennae, all consisted of a Jirachi she had fused her soul with.

"We are inseparable in this reality. She wished the Soul Combination into existence when she realized her Willpower was not strong enough to contain Source, and birthed an era of Blood Spirits that fed off Willpower that could not be contained."

"Her Wish was a mistake. It cost her dearly."

"On the contrary, her power fed my own. Her power alone was not enough to guarantee her Wish remained permanent. Pokemon rebelled. Your forerunner, Mew, fought it when the Wish relied on Mew's malleable genetics – the Mercurium present in all Pokemon – to create the catalyst for the Fruit of the Forest, the Apricorn and the Pokéball. That is why I, as a newly made Blood Spirit, took my friend's power. I...became her. With the power of Time and the fabric of Reality in our possession, we became one true Wishmaker, able to preserve my dear friend's Wish for all time."

"You took Jirachi's power to grant wishes, and used your own power over Time to make the Wish eternal," he surmised understanding now that Celebi was not just one Pokemon, but the dominant of two. She was just like him, a Blood Spirit, but substantially more powerful.

"When there is a challenge to the Wish, the challenger needs to be returned to the beginning, reincarnated, in order to assure that the Soul Combination remains for the Blood Spirits above to absorb Willpower and the humans below have dominion and control over Pokemon as well. That is your responsibility for taking the relic of Mew which made you a Blood Spirit. A Pokemon with pure, unhindered Willpower derived from a human interferes with our order."

"Only a coward would wish away the Willpower of creation and then cycle any adversary through an eternal loop!" he rebuked. "That's all you really are: A COWARD AFRAID OF THE FUTURE!"

"Call me what you will, you're nothing more than a hate fueled brute because of the power you stole!" Celebi admonished whilst wriggling against his wraithlike talons. "You're simply too filled with rancor to understand the logic, no, the necessity of our Wish. The future is to preserve the past, and the Wish that maintains order over an otherwise unruly realm of chaos! How you've fallen from the graces of sound judgment into an unquenchable disease of odious emotion."
"You're wrong. I understand why I needed this ugly hate," he menacingly said looking at his target secured between the twin talons of dusk. His ghostly hands were pulling memories from Celebi by using her fear as the conduit. "I had to become what I am to put a stop to your Wish. All the Cycles I failed, all those times I cannot remember, I was never strong enough to will the darkness until it became my own. That is why Edge exists. That is my purpose. To dismantle your Wish and end the very Soul Combination that gives us – Humanity and Blood Spirit – the ability to overcome the free wills of Pokemon."

"That's precisely why you are unable to end it!" Celebi shouted from the cage of shadow. "You too are a Blood Spirit! The very same Soul Combination you're trying to destroy is what made you who you are."

"This decision isn't about me. It never was. I never was important until I stumbled upon the relic, and even then I was just an instrument for someone else. All those lives I couldn't remember: fractured reincarnations of a Cycle I willingly gave myself up to because it was "the rational thing to do". This time is different. The gathered hate, the rage in my soul, it's all nothing compared to the atrocities you've committed. You expected someone rational to buy into your twisted logic. You expected the ignorant scientist I once was to face you. And you expected to be able to hide fear from someone who lacked the ability to sense it. Celebi, you expected wrong."

"You know deep down that you cannot end this. You must allow the Cycle to continue. It's the only way to guarantee our continued sustenance, the only way to assure humankind remains in control with the Pokéball, the only way for you to remain empowered by the Willpower of others. Everything you are, your entire world, depends on it!"

"INCORRECT!" he shouted. "Your reasoning denies me my choice! What I am doesn't matter here; what I DO in the Relic Forest, that's always been my decision. For better or for worse. The choices made – every damn one of them! — always to protect the world on your terms. To keep this sickening Cycle going for another round, all because I refused to accept the chaos and calamity defiance could bring. Even if it cost me memories, companions, my humanity. I let Dee become a Pokemon and her soul was fractured. I let that same fate befall myself because I wasn't strong enough. I did it so many times; broke our personalities into Pokemon to perpetuate the Cycle, I forgot who we once were, and barely knew the strange creatures we would become with each reiteration. Were my Pokemon companions once people too in another life?! Their forms changed by a previous Cycle's paradox, their wills suppressed by my own hand in accordance with your Wish? It's all beyond repulsive! If not for my heart, I'd never be able to communicate with them; they would simply be monsters I had robbed of will by catching them. It's all so wrong and twisted! Your Cycling of the timeline with the Wish has warped reality, changing the way individuals experience it each time they go through it! It's an endless game where souls are recycled pawns."

"Eternal life…is to experience all life."

The concept mortified him. Indeed, it harkened back to what Celesta had been distressed by. She knew of the Cycle. Like Celebi, Celesta was immune to forgetting the yoke – the price of perpetuating the Cycle that fed them. It made him infuriated because they alone knew the expense of controlling reality while those outside their domains were subjugated. "Not this time, Celebi. This time it's not me "saving the world" by cycling the timeline again for more soul variation to feed the Soul Combination. There needs to be release from the bondage of eternity. A freedom from the purgatory created by the Wish and the Pokéball. The world is worth saving from an endless Cycle of harvesting Willpower from fractured souls under the guise of living forever. Your perverted sense of "reason" allowed me to see that."

"Open your eyes!" Celebi rebuked in a final gambit. "You've seen the sadness, the unhappiness, the
melancholy of it all for yourself firsthand! Why shouldn't souls get another chance to become better? An opportunity to remedy their mistakes and grow again through Time! A different life, a different perspective. A reset until the conditions are right!

"Why should you be deciding that? Who the hell are you to reset the conditions that define our world? You're not even part of it!"

"What infernal madness drives your wicked desire to deny your world a better outcome?" she shot back. "Why can you not understand after all this time? We'll get it right through the laws of probability! The Wish and the Cycle create an eternal guarantee of life until Eden is reached!"

"Existence for perfection's sake is NOT what it means to live!"

"What is there for you to gain by opposing us? An invitation to a bleak future?! The world below is a filthy one, a place of constant strife and pain and war! Filled with suffering and despair, a hemorrhaging, festering land of chaos and disarray! Overwhelmed with countless griefs, sorrows, all manner of cruelty! These don't have to come to pass; life deserves the right to attain its inner perfection. The world's flaws demonstrate weakness, they will destroy it! This detestable fractured world, like a Pokemon given its greatest potentials through countless Cycles, shall evolve into a paradise if we simply reach out and control its unruly will with our power—!"

"—NO! YOU HATE THE WORLD BECAUSE YOU CANNOT CONTROL ITS FLAWS! CELEBI, THAT IS WHY I CHOOSE TO PROTECT IT FROM YOU!" He snapped both his shadow claws down on Celebi's tiny body. They ripped into its soft flesh and pulled from it the nourishment of countless sensations the Blood Spirit had acquired over eras lost to history. Through the power of the Soul Combination, memories from previous Cycles all came back. Countless years, all of them ending in the same mistake, save for this one. This one success earned him and the imprisoned world freedom again.

"Accept my choice, Celebi."

The line she had repeated over and over to him echoed in his mind: "It's all up to you, and only you, to see where each and every path leads." That was the same thing she told him when he had first come to the Relic Forest. A part of his fractured existence always remembered it, and so she could never change the hastily way it was initially worded if she wanted it to have its same spellbinding effect on him. She had been steadily brainwashing him each Cycle, not in the conventional sense of doing so in the present, but from a past he nor anyone else could remember after being fractured. Relying on his countless encounters with her to override any sense of emotional instinct by replaying a memory he had lost to the chronicles of Time. As a reasonable man he would have been swayed by the forest spirit, who had over a great many years perfected her control over him. But he was no longer consigned to onerous reasonableness.

And the most telling memory of all, the reason why he had experienced those flashbacks devoid of color. All of the Cycles. All of the fractured pieces of his soul. Past, present, future, all became one. It was at that precise moment, the eternal now, when he had finished drawing within the history of the world lost to Cycles of repeated Time to preserve the Wish, he had become the second Wishmaker. The Cycle had been broken and only the Wish remained.
Epilogue: After the Storm

Chapter by Solar

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you for reading Gift of the Protector.

A new story written by yours truly will follow the events of this series in an independent fiction titled "Heavens Slice". You may find it under the penname "Solarune" on this website and Ao3. https://archiveofourown.org/works/11428515

As of this epilogue the Gift of the Protector saga is concluded. However the events transpiring herein will carry on amidst the adventures of an exciting new cast of characters. Expect a fresh perspective, new Pokemon, and a more experienced author at the helm.

It has been an outright journey writing Protector over the years. I sincerely thank you for everything. Your reviews, private messages, and forum postings have been greatly influential, inspiring even, and have helped me complete this immense work of fiction. I cannot express my gratitude enough for your support and making it all the way to the end. That all being said, my final A/N for the series Gift of the Protector is in the books.

Epilogue: After the Storm

Wishmaker

There was an infinite sea of stars all around him. Darkness had consumed the Relic Forest, turning light into shadow. That same darkness he carried in his heart had made the decision to put an end to the infinite. It was the only way he could ever be free, and yet the road required his body to become shackled by the hate, morphed into something he was not. All for this.

Though it appeared he was in outer space, he stood upon an invisible platform in a cosmic ocean. Fantastic galaxies and tremendous emptiness filled his range of vision. It was as if he was standing in the very center of the universe. But in every direction he looked, space stretched on for impossible distances that would take forever to traverse. Time, always married to Space. Space, forever a part of Time. Two sides of the very same coin.

From the empty cosmos came one voice. It was clear, concise and lacked any feeling. "Speak your wish," it said. "Speak from your heart. The only wish that can be granted is that which you desire most with your whole heart."

"I'm nothing special. Just an instrument of hatred."

"Even you can change the course of the future. Our meeting together is proof of such a possibility."

"The Butterfree Effect," he replied to the unfeeling emptiness of the void. "I finally understand it. I comprehend why it's important and related to my actions. Everything – even the insignificant – has
consequences."

"Then give forth your wish, Wishmaker."

"Please don't call me that," he said mournfully, "I'm not the real Wishmaker. Only a fractured imitation of the real thing."

"Of course, but you are still here to make the Wish," the mysterious voice replied. "You simply have not realized it until coming here that was your responsibility all along."

"I wanted to believe my actions were more important than who I am. That conviction drove me to do the things that I did." He paused and took a breath; it felt peculiar to breathe in the empty darkness of deep space. "I had to end the Cycle and now I'm faced with the impossible Wish. Neither reason nor emotion provide a clear instruction; they run contrary to what I must do."

"Reason and emotion, the logos and pathos of existence. A reference, like the constellations, which guide through the long night."

"I became a monster because of my ego. The hatred did the rest. Celesta and her kin, the Blood Spirits, were the ones who set me up to manage all of this. However, I was the one who chose to provide those stolen emotions to work her curse. I'm only here because of the Blood Fairy. I too was made into a Blood Spirit through the Soul Combination. The same as any Pokemon that achieves a state of permanent Mega Evolution. The only difference was that I was once a human, like Dee was before she became Celesta. Despite all the strength I stole from the ancient relic of Mew, at the end of every Cycle, I was nothing more than a tool for powers greater to perpetuate their agendas."

"You have broken the Cycle. That required Willpower."

"To be honest, I did not even know about the Cycle due to my amnesia earned from taking part in it. But Sana, I think she knew. At the end, she regained all her memories from before the fracturing of our spirits began. The Cycle has been in place from long ago, when the Pokéball became real through the Fruit of the Forest. For a human to want to break such a thing, they would need to have endured what it meant to be a Pokemon." He looked down at his torso cloaked in shadow. "I could not have willed myself to dismantle it without the crystal in my chest sensing the Wishmaker's fear from previous Cycles. Ironically something paranormal and unscientific – déjà vu – was what saved me. The other Blood Spirits worked to keep me from ever realizing their control over my ability to make the choice."

"Do you understand why?" the voice asked from the sparkling heavens.

"Yeah. I cut the Blood Spirits off from their mortal food. My Pokemon companions regained their lost Willpower because of my heart's interference with the Wish. All the Pokemon the Blood Spirits feasted upon would recover their Wills if I managed to successfully stop the Soul Combination. The same force kept the Cycle going, made me and Dee into whatever we turned into." He sighed, gazing out at vast emptiness, an endless universe indistinguishable from the inside of a Pokéball. "Funny thing is, I know for certain that without becoming vested in emotion, I would have gone along with the same choice I made every single time before. It made too much sense back when I considered myself rational. I'd fall for the damn lie that the world was ending. Every time. Without fail." Gritting his teeth he explained, "Thought I could somehow save it, preserve it, maintain an inherently flawed system, because of my stupid ego! My desire to control things was no better than that of the selfish Wishmaker. All I ever did was postpone things for the Blood Spirits and clear my memories. Such thoughtless hubris. I'd get sent to a place where I have to live through another three years without memories just for a chance to repeat the same mistake. Over and over. Ad infinitum."
"But you didn't this time. This choice was yours. That is why you are here."

"Suppose you're right," he shrugged. "Who or what are you? Sure don't seem like any Pokemon I've ever met."

"What I am is the Will to exist, the Source of Willpower. Will to power is a function of nature. I am the aggregate Willpower sealed within the chamber of the Fruit of the Forest. Every Pokemon ever captured, every soul absorbed, is brought here at the end of Time where we are now."

"I get it. You're the final evolution of Soul Combination. You're the singularity of stolen Pokemon spirits. The stolen wills of those captured by the Pokéball."

"And you are the Wishmaker who will unseal the Willpowers of the Pokemon I am comprised of."

The words humbled him. However, he knew he could not waiver. Especially now he had to be strong. "I'm here to make the impossible wish."

"Until you do, it is impossible to return from whence you came."

"The end of the Soul Combination," he said with conviction. "That's my wish."

"And what of the souls already siphoned through the process Soul Combination?"

"If I wished to undo the First Wish because that's what got us into this mess in the first place, wouldn't that solve the problem?"

"It might, it might not. You'd leave the world to total chance."

"The universe is going to go its own way no matter what. Look what happened to the last idiot who tried to take control of the world."

"Additionally, a world without the First Wish creating the Fruit of the Forest, would not allow you to exist."

"I wouldn't exist?"

"You're a direct result of the First Wish. Undoing it would be your own undoing."

"You're saying I can't wish the First Wish never happened without erasing myself from existence?"

"You can wish for whatever you want. But it is your belief and conviction that allow the wish to take form. Can you truly make the wish knowing all of that?"

"No," he replied honestly. "I can't. I'm sorry, but that isn't what I came here to do. I want to live in the world I protected from endless annihilation."

"Who shall exist and who shall perish in accordance with this wish? Think carefully."

He thought of Sana. He thought of Deirdre. He even thought of himself. Two sides of the very same coin. "Neither shall perish." He quickly continued, worried that his wish might be easily misconstrued. "The wish I make has to assure that one isn't erased."

"How would that be accomplished?"

"A possibility. A gift of chance, which the previous Wishmaker failed to realize was possible, despite being aware of parallel realities," he said softly. "In essence: a mirror. One, a place where humans
have will and Pokemon do not as per the conditions of the First Wish. And two, a world where Pokemon have not lost their will due to the Severance and the First Wish – a replica of the first world where those events had not transpired."

"You would place Pokemon with free wills in one world, and those without wills under the dominion of humans? If you explain the reason, I believe it is possible. Belief is what grants a wish."

"I learned alongside my companions, my friends – they were Pokemon who have free will. They deserve a world without shackles that turn them into slaves. Yet humans also need a world where we will not be overwhelmed by the tremendous power of Pokemon. Most of all, the Soul Combination needs to be done away with. By splitting the world, ending the Soul Combination, the Blood Spirit Pokemon cannot continue their reign. There won't be a Pokéball in the mirror world to feed them souls, and our world has no Pokemon with any genuine willpower to sustain them. All spirits previously absorbed by the Supreme Spirits through the Soul Combination will be freed and their wills restored to live on in their respective world."

"Then I shall mark the Pokéball as a symbol of our pact, and fuse it together with the Soul Star you brought here. It shall be a token of the Second Wish you have made, a new relic of power. In one world, the Apricorn and its derivatives will not affect the bodies of Pokemon – their Wills shall be unhinged. In the other world; the dwellers of the Ancient Forest shall be barred from interfering with the affairs of humans – who shall rule the earth unopposed. But tell me, what of yourself, Wishmaker?"

"You really shouldn't call me that," he insisted. "All I want is a normal life again. When I finish my wish, I will go back to before I was ever able to become the usurper of the Wishmaker. Before I took that Relic away to become part of the Cycle."

"That would coincide with your wish since you choose to separate yourself from the effects of the Soul Combination."

"Right," he nodded. "These stolen powers deserve better than captivity. To live on as Pokemon in that new world I have wished for, without the Pokéball constraining their wills. All I want is to return to live in the world with my partner until the end of our long life together. All I really want to be happy again."

"Is that all? Should you sever the world in twain, you will not be able to traverse the worlds freely. Psyonics will be taken from the human world entirely. No Pokemon in your world will have access to will. Instead that shall be reserved for the world where Pokemon do have will. Their mirrored world shall lose the Fruit of the Forest, the Apricorn and the Pokéball. Is this something you can wish for with your whole heart?"

"I have one last request," he said steadfastly. "I don't want to forget this wish. If I am responsible for ruin, I must be held to the responsibility of making a mistake with the chance I stole."

"I cannot allow that," the voice inflexibly replied. "A human with such weighty knowledge of his wish would only fall into the bottomless pits of despair."

"Then give me three days," he insisted. "Just three days to ensure the knowledge is passed down to my descendants. Memories of the wish, of this encounter, all of it I would sacrifice after I prepare a record for my offspring."

"You're determined…" Source seemed to be contemplating though it was difficult to tell from just the voice. "I should know though, your strength of will was what arranged this meeting."
"So you'll grant me that?" he pressed.

"You will soon regret it," Source warned. "It would not be the first time you made an agreement only to have it bring you pain."

"I know. But I'm willing to take that risk for the sake of my future. Please," he requested. Then he perceptively added, "You want to see why I chose this path, don't you?"

No answer at first, just the calm swirling of galaxies. And then it came, "...You're determined to save them both?"

"I am," he acknowledged with a faithful nod. "To end the Soul Combination and keep my promises. This isn't just a wish. This – is my choice."

"Very well... Your choice... Your reality..."

The trillions of stars around him faded, each dimming as flickering candles late into the night, passing slowly into timeless nothingness. An end of a universe. It was bitterly cold; not in temperature, but for lack of matter. The sea of sparkling lights had all extinguished into the frozen blackness. All faded into the empty dark death.

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**Eternal Return**

It had been three days since he had awoken from the edge of the abyss, and evening was quickly approaching. He only had a short amount of time left at best.

When he had come to three days ago, he found himself back in a place his mind remembered, yet with the knowledge of what had transpired. At first he was groggy, feeling as though he had been woken up from a terribly long dream. However, that sluggishness had quickly passed after realizing that his wish had been fulfilled. He, the young researcher who would inevitably become Edge if the First Wish's Cycle was to continue, had been given the chance to change the fate of people and Pokemon throughout the world. From his countless journeys he had learned to treasure an opportunity to employ his choice above all else.

Alone for hours, he dedicated his borrowed time to this gambit. His eyes burned from sleeplessness. The only company he had was an archaically heavy television on the table behind a collection of assorted Pokéballs. It flickered dully in the dark room from the poor reception here at the research facility. He had been so busy, running the newsreels in the background helped to motivate him.

"We're receiving an update from our reporters on the scene," said the man inside the television. "Reporting to you live from News Channel Five—"

There was an ongoing special report on the television screen; a lady in a suit was speaking into a microphone outside the Kanto Pokemon League. "—Here, standing outside of Indigo Plateau, sources confirm that the International Police have managed to uncover a dastardly plot from within to stage a violent insurrection! This abhorrent scheme, funded through the syndicate Team Rocket conspired by none other than... the Gym Leaders!" said the woman on the screen with a look of surprise on her dolled up face.

He wasn't shocked. The psyonics were gone; his ability to predict anything was taken away pursuant to his wish. Yet he knew that the arrest of Team Rocket operatives would take place relatively quickly in this world because of the life he had chosen to save. Everything would be going in his favor now. The decision he made guaranteed that these justices would occur. The choice prevented
the end of the world he knew, it saved those he cared for. Nevertheless, until this evening, he knew
that it came at a price.

The lady on the television was loud and excited. She was exuberantly reporting all of the good things
taking place. "This remarkable event is taking place just after yesterday's special operation
successfully undermined the international terror group, Cipher! Our sources confirm that Cipher
illegally created biological weapons using Pokemon and even had blueprints to resurrect an ancient
weapon capable of dooming the entire world! Dangerous criminal enterprises around the world are
being exposed thanks to the hard work of the International Police! We are truly blessed to have these
noble men, women, and their Pokemon to protect us all from evil!"

"But at what cost…" the researcher muttered darkly to himself. Only he knew. And very soon, mere
minutes from now, no one save for his descendants would understand the price of this peace. It made
his fists tremble in anger. Deep down, he knew this was the only way to break the Cycle and keep
his promises.

"Oh, oh! And right now we have a visual outside the Pokemon League." The reporter turned around
and the cameraman zoomed in on the giant building in the background. It was a tall metal building,
decorated with burgundy tinted glass. In front of its modern façade, a collection of well-trimmed
hedges and a beautiful garden of flowers decorated the seat of the Indigo government and the center
of both the Kanto and Johto regions. There was a low wall keeping the reporters and many
onlookers from approaching the building and many police officers with their Pokéballs at their belt
guarding the unfolding scene.

"Hey! Don't push!" said an enthusiastic man loudly nearby the TV's microphone. "I want to see
too!" It looked like an entire congregation of trainers and laypeople had formed outside of the
League building. Everyone was eager to see the arrest. This was truly history in the making. The
Butterfree Effect was happening right before his eyes.

And then a man appeared out from the doors. He was tall, had broad shoulders and wore a fine suit.
His hair was brown and he appeared to have dark eyes, at this distance it would be impossible for an
onlooker at the scene to tell they were actually hazel. But he knew the man's eyes well; he had stared
those eyes down in another world and taken his emotions away. The hazel eyed man on the
television had his hands bound behind his back. A group of officers had accompanied him out the
door along with their law enforcement Pokemon.

"We are witnessing the formal arrest of the Leader of the Rocket Organization, the individual posing
as the Viridian Gym Leader!" the reporter on the television tried to say as informatively as possible.
She was soon drowned out by the erupting cheers of surrounding people nearby.

He felt bitter watching the triumphant scene unfold. It was strange, this was exactly what he had
worked tirelessly for, to defeat Team Rocket and end their invisible hold over the League in his
region. Things were going perfect, not just here, but all over the world. Had he been ignorant of
what was lost to secure this victory then he would likely be ecstatic at his apparent success. Maybe
he'd even write a book about it. But despite all of this fanfare and celebration, he was no hero. His
actions alleviated suffering here, yet they failed to actually remove any of it, the choice he made
simply sent tremendous amounts of suffering elsewhere. It continued to torment him, since he would
never know the full outcome. If only there was another way. A way where I didn't have to make that
damn wish because of Celesta's curse.

The crowd was chanting loudly, exhilarated to see the justice being done right before their eyes.
They had begun to shout and jeer as the notorious leader of Team Rocket was theatrically brought
down the white steps outside the League towards a waiting armored car. Alongside were several
Pokemon who obediently followed commands. Bound by the devices the men in uniforms kept on their belt holsters.

*It had to come to this. Any other way would lead this world to inevitable disaster. Disaster I saw with my eyes, and then even my own endless disaster,* he thought lowering the television’s volume. *But it wasn’t realizing my suffering that bothered me. It was seeing hers atop that sorrowful tower.*

The news ticker continued to run its seemingly endless reel reading things like, "Unidentified Pokéball containing fossilized Mew found by local man at Vermilion Pier under commercial truck. The DBC has issued no further comment."

"Everything's going so right," the young man said hollowly as he watched the letters flash by before his weary eyes. Initially he had doubts upon returning here. Wouldn't have been the first time he had been tricked by powers greater than him. What had worried him was that the agreement could have been breached and he would be powerless to enforce it without psylonics. Indeed there was no way for him to undo the wish he had made. At this point he could only hope that one day there would be a way to rectify what he had done in order to keep his vow.

*I have no choice but to face what I have done until even that is taken from me,* he thought. He had worked diligently without sleep over the past three days to record everything that had happened. He made copies and copies of copies on every medium he could think of. Ironically he was going through all this effort just to bury the information away. The knowledge he had gained after confronting Source and making his wish had to be sealed off or else he would certainly be ostracized for what he had subjected humanity to in another world. *That's where my friends are now. That's where their personalities will have to remain.*

The room was dark, and the old television’s light cast strange shadows all around him. The candle burning next to him on the desk had gone dark. He took out his family lighter, the one shaped like a tetrahedron pyramid with the inscription "West" on its now polished and unscratched sides. This was the first tool he had shown his Pokemon Brucie. It belonged to his father, and the flame inside had kindled the friendship that opened the door to trusting his Pokemon. Over his adventures the West lighter had become scratched and dirty with wear. Now it was completely clean, symbolizing the rebirth of a new Cycle. All those memories he had with his friends had never even happened outside of his mind. Soon, even those cherished first memories of meeting Brucie would vanish like smoke. *Source was right. Remembering my wish has only brought me pain from reflecting upon it.* He knew without question the consequences of his decision would be forced upon countless others. According to the deal, he would forget about the Other World after the night of the third day upon his return to the First World. It was the only way to save both Sana and Deirdre from their respective fates and give Pokemon a chance to be free from the Pokéball shackles that bound them.

*It was empathy,* he reasoned. *That is why I had to make the wish. Had I not been mistreated as a tool I may have chosen to break my vow. But I was used. Again and again, I let this all happen just to keep Dee alive, even as a Pokemon. All to perpetuate an endless Cycle for the Blood Spirits, the same way a Pokemon without Willpower is used like a tool in a world with the Pokéball. My soul, something I had forgotten about by becoming a scientist, was fractured into new forms, each reflecting every possible iteration of the same mistake I made so long ago. In the end, knowing the stubbornness of my will saved me from wandering an eternity of fractured dimensions. Pokemon fortunate enough to be in the Other World will have the same opportunity as me and my former companions to exercise their will by living in a parallel world without the Pokéball. But the humans there…they may suffer terribly because of me.*

Thanks to his wish, there would be an unreachable Second World, a place where the First Severance...
dividing the human world from the Ancient Forest never occurred. In that place, Apricorns and Mercurium would be one in the same, as they were once in the realm of Navenfell, the Ancient Forest. The Pokéball would not exist, and it would be virtually impossible for any technology to mimic it because the Pokemon there would lack the necessary cellular inhibitor. People, if they could even survive in such a place, would have no tools by which to tame the wild wills of Pokemon. In a world of powerful creatures able to manipulate the very foundations of nature and reality, what chance did weak humans even have?

People in that Other World would die because of him. Just like Pokemon in This World would never be freed from the Pokéball. Depending on what species you were in each world, your life would be either a have or a have-not.

This cold emptiness I feel inside, he thought. It's not from my missing heart. It's the gravity of my new mission. My duty... To accept the wish I decided to make for the sake of my friends before I forget I was the one who made it. It was not a morally sound choice to make that wish in retrospect. He had to believe it was the only thing he could have chosen. Yet it had to be done in order to break the Cycle trapping him and Deirdre in a purgatory of endless reincarnations. And that led him to the grim conclusion he never wanted to acknowledge. That creeping sensation came upon him like a cold wind, far worse than any self-pity, and the revelation of his new existence became crystallized reality.

It should have been left to someone else, someone who could wish to be the sacrifice, he thought helplessly unable to change a thing. His meager attempts at taking responsibility would not last once the memory was gone. In his heart, he knew his wish would very well cause unimaginable suffering in that Other World, the place where the Apricorn never existed. People and Pokemon would have a completely different relationship there. There, and only there, in that Other World both Man and Pokemon would have Willpower. But how long could humanity hope to last against Pokemon without restraints? Would humanity become an extinct species in that Other World? It was a very likely possibility that he had to come to terms with. What else could he have done? Saving Sana, or saving Deirdre, both could not exist in the same place. They were two sides of the same coin. And so he did the opposite of what was logical and rational, which would be to let them both perish to save the world; for the first time he listened completely to his human heart and made the gambit that created a door to hell. He had wished for the coin to land on its edge rather than crush either side.

Why did I have to be the one to do it? Because of fate? That isn't good enough! What about my friends...what about her...? he fathomed airlessly. Because of my wish, my friends would have a world to call their own, retain their personalities in a place without the Pokéball's interference. Sana will have had her original form at last because Deirdre is released from Celesta's hold. And yet, the amount of suffering experienced in these two separate realities created by the wish is not abated in the slightest even though I'm in the "right world" for humanity. Taking the Wishmaker's strength required my selfishness as a man – my desire to release Dee and myself free from the Cycle demanded that I sacrificed my friends. It meant creating a world out there without a Pokéball for humans to rely upon. Nevertheless, wasn't the Blood Spirit's First Wish, the one that had initially sealed away Pokemon's Willpower in this world outside of the Ancient Forest, just as selfish? And I should have complied being made into a new Blood Spirit by the Mercurium. When I chose to become the second Wishmaker, I undeniably took upon myself the same selfishness that led to the First Wish. Why should I care though? I became an emotion-driven monster of Celesta's creation to break the Cycle maintaining that damn original wish. I could not have done it without the Blood Fairy who took away my memories, turning me into Edge.

Surely, two wrongs did not make a right. But maybe, just maybe, there could be something good that came from what he had done. He had to believe in that conviction that led him to make the wish or else he would surely fall into despair. Even if many had to suffer, he had acted without reason as his
yoke. It was the last bit of his humanity, something the scientist had once cast-off; he understood in his soul there could be no other way he would be able to live with himself after losing what mattered most to him. Somewhere along the way, he had abandoned utilitarianism. In fact today he was unsure if he ever held those dogmatic views at all. His goal was never to make everyone happy. His initial objective for becoming a Psychic Type researcher was to control happiness, to give himself ownership over the coveted sensation of euphoria. Foolishly, he thought he could do that with psyonics. But it turned out that the only thing he ever did with those powers was steal memories and hatred until it changed him utterly. Now that he was wholly human, it dawned on him that the only happiness he could fully control was his own.

He was getting tired. There was nothing more he could do. Without the heart crystal he could not feed off mental states and his stamina had substantially diminished after he returned to human form. Food tasted better, but it made him very sleepy. The taste of black coffee was properly bitter again. His body ached from all the stress it had been put through. And his eyelids refused to stay open. He knew the second he closed his eyes and fell into slumber he would forever forget everything about the Other World he had allowed to exist through his wish. That was the bargain. Even if he saved a record, he would become unable to read it as per the agreement he made. It would be taken from him just like his opportunity to live in a world where Pokemon had their own wills had been. What he had left in writing for his future descendants was a record of his mistakes, but also a hope for the future. In a sense his choppy notes were a bridge that spanned generations. One day, after he had children and they had their children, sometime after his passing, one of them might discover the wish he had to make in order to fulfill his promise.

_In the end, I could not undo the First Wish. I might have made things worse, yet that will never be for me to know. I can only hope I made the correct choice, _he thought somberly. _But hope… He knew wanted to say something ugly about hope, but found he was no longer able to. Hope had turned into the one thing he treasured about the human condition. It had grown to be the sole attribute of existence to counter otherwise senseless suffering. That proverbial glimmer, however faint, was what made hope not worth mocking._

All he could think about was sleep. His teeth were grinding just to keep himself awake. He had to stay awake, before he forgot. He had to fight the sleep, because he had not figured out why he had chosen to walk this path. Guilt from his wish racked his mind. He didn't belong in this world. Not after what he had chosen to sacrifice in order to assure its existence.

Suddenly, he heard light footsteps approaching from behind him. A girl's tapping coming from the laboratory hallway right outside. Abruptly the door opened, and a bright light shone into the once dark chamber he had placed himself within. Quietly, she asked him just like she had countless times before, "It's late! Why are you still here?"

He had experienced this very same event many times before. It hurt his mind to fathom how many times it had been, long before the Cycle began. But this time was different. This time he knew the weight of his choices. This time he had saved her father from despair and the Butterfree Effect did the rest. Fredrick's International Police had just rescued this world from Team Rocket and Cipher on live TV. Christian had broken the Cycle. What he chose next was entirely up to him. It pained him that he could not accomplish that without dividing himself from his Pokemon. If by fate he met Brucie from Professor Oak, he would be just a Pokemon. A pet. Capable of following orders, but lacking the full Willpower and demonstrative personality he and his fellow companions had demonstrated on their journey together.

"Chris?" she asked.

Before he could turn around to face her, the poignant words left his lips, "Did I choose the right
thing…? Is it right for you and I to exist here, in the remnants of a failed world designed to be nothing more than a plantation for harvesting Willpower?"

However her answer that followed his existential question was familiar, comforting, and immediately eased his worries. "Yes," she said sensitively. "Because we're finally together and we both remember the reason why."

He had told her his decision. About how the Soul Combination had fractured their spirits with each Cycle. About the nightmarish Cycle wished into existence by the Blood Spirits and the deceitful Time Guardian. About how the Pokéball and Apricorn worked because they were wished into existence in order to seal and siphon the Willpower of their captives. And finally, about his reoccurring mistake that he could save the world for both humans and Pokemon. "Dee, I couldn't save our world and the freewill of Pokemon. Believing that lie would only start another Cycle. Turn us into fractured beings, with different lives, different memories, always in an unfamiliar world due to our lack of memory, until the Soul Combination force eventually pieced us back together at the end of the Cycle. But for us…two researchers sent through hell by a merger of human and Pokemon, I could not let you suffer again by becoming Celesta. And I couldn't erase Sanaria."

He didn't expect her, a scientist like himself, to believe any of it. It sounded delusional and irrational to anyone who hadn't experienced it. Yet something in her eyes told him that she had remembered parts of being fractured into a Pokemon as well. She too had memories of a past life from the previous Cycle – her personality splitting into Sana while her human body became Celesta's host. The Soul Combination at the end of the Cycle would force them back together only to be divided again when the loop repeated. The important thing was how she would remember even after he forgot. All along they had been a dance of forgetting and remembering, together in a world unable to escape the curse of the Blood Spirits.

"You decided to break the Cycle," she said thoughtfully. "You saw where each of those paths went, witnessed your motivations become distorted reflections of your intent; how they broke us apart, turned us into fractured existences again and again by the cold laws of the universe. Yet…you still found a way to bring us together again. Your decision – was for us to have the impossible future together. No matter the cost, this is our future."

For the first time he could remember in a long while, a genuine smile formed on his weary face. Facing his partner for what felt like the first time in ages never felt so right. Her silhouette in the light shining from the hallway behind her was stunning. As his fatigued eyes adjusted to the contrast, he realized that she looked so beautiful. Not even a trace of minty color remained in her strawberry-brown hair. Her bright eyes were as clear as a summer sky, without the red of the Blood Fairy. Her signature yellow tie rested evenly on her chest, there was no ruby crystal. And she finally had her emotions again. Never again would she be in a fractured form – human and Pokemon – forced to become a slave to the Blood Spirits because of his failures.

Caressing her in an embrace, he realized that there was water in his eyes. Those were tears, not of sadness, but of joy. Genuine happiness. Happiness that could not be created nor controlled through any way other than hardship and tribulation. It was then that he realized his real wish had been granted. That initial, long-fought desire for happiness was right here in his possession.

As she pulled him close into her warm arms, he finally succumbed to the inevitable loss of memory and closed his exhausted eyes. He was finally content here with her. The wish did not matter. Indeed, he had all but forgotten about it now that he was with her again. It dawned on him: this was his genuine desire in the end. She was right. She had been right about everything all along. And he loved her dearly for it. As he stood silently holding her tight, he knew exactly why he had made the wish. He understood how he had the strength to put an end to the Cycle of Hate. Finally the once
unknowable world around him made complete sense. This would be the one true future he selected from the infinite. No matter the cost, he had chosen to cherish every last moment of it with her.

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