The Dark Type

by Manifest Destiny

Summary

“With the lover, it is the end which is fixed. The path may be modified indefinitely.” - William James

What you know to be your own life can easily be seen as merely the reactions of someone else's choices. Who can say they have control over their own fate? Is your life any less real because someone else directs it?

If you could change your path, where would you go?
A Break from the Monotony

Arc 1: A Summons to Newbark Town

[“…The storm can be seen here, heading south from the northwest, and should miss most of the Olivine and Ecruteak City areas. Projected snowfall is estimated to be anywhere from nineteen to thirty-four inches. The storm is expected to begin late Friday night, and continue throughout all of this weekend. Areas that should see the most significant accumulation are the Mahogany Town and Lake of Rage areas, while the storm could reach as far west as Blackthorn, a as far south as Violet City. Even though the last of the snow we received over the holidays is finally starting to melt, it seems that we have quite a bit more in store for us this winter season.”] The weatherman had just finished his report on the coming snowstorm about to hit northern Johto.

[“Thank you, Tom. People living in the areas of the projected snowfall should be advised to only leave your homes if it is absolutely necessary. If anyone should head out into the storm, be sure to use extreme caution when doing so. Be sure to tune into Rapid78 News as we’ll have up to date road conditions as the storm develops later this week. That’s it for this evening’s Tuesday night news broadcast. I’m Steve Johnson—”]

[“—And I’m Tom Jay—”]

[“—wishing Johto well in this active winter season. Good night.”]

The television continued to run; moving onto ads for the sponsors of the night’s broadcast as Iruni Thomas got up from the couch. He switched off the screen and walked through the living room, heading up to his room on the second floor. Nothing interesting ever comes on right after the news is over, he thought to himself. He got up to his room and pushed open the door.

Iruni was greeted with a lazy bark that came from the half-asleep Houndour lying on Iruni’s bed.

“There you are,” Iruni sat down next to his Dark Pokémon and scratched behind his ears. “Have you been sleeping all day, Karros?” It wasn’t a real question, not one he didn’t already know the answer to; without much to do around the house, his Pokémon often spent most of the day asleep.

Karros whined as he let out a long, drawn out yawn.

“I guess the cold can have that affect even on you…”

Iruni got up and sat down at his computer. While milling about on the internet, he decided to check up on the snowstorm that the news had mentioned. Iruni missed the beginning of the piece on the storm, and checked the website’s online weather radar. From the image on the radar at “Rapid78”’s website, the storm’s size looked as if it could stretch across half of the region. Now, I’m a fan of a little snow, but this is a little ridiculous.

“This will probably shut down the roads for a week, don’t you think, Kar?” Iruni asked Karros, who probably was asleep. “And what’s that say about a town with an Ice Type Gym Leader? Would that go under ‘gross incompetence’?”
Karros then perked up from where he was laying and let out a quick bark, which Iruni thought was his Pokémon actually being interested in something other than his own sleep schedule, until a familiar voice sounded outside his room.

“Who’s saying a lot about who now?” asked someone at his door.

Iruni’s sister Katelyn had taken the liberty of letting herself in. She was followed—almost instantly—by her Dratini, Azula. The Dragon Pokémon had been Katelyn’s Pokémon for as long as Iruni could remember. She had been given an Everstone, which was set into a simple collar around her neck, to wear at all times. The reasons being twofold: so she could, as Katelyn put it, “Stay as cute as she is forever!”, and having a Pokémon as big as Dragonair or a Dragonite would pose interesting problems in such a modest household; after all, Dratini alone were five feet long.

“There’s a new concept called ‘knocking’. I enjoy it personally, but it’s obviously not for everyone,” said Iruni.

“Sarcasm, that’s a nice touch. What’s this about roads being shut down?”

“Eavesdropping is also frowned upon these days, you know…” mocked Iruni. At the look of impending doom being set upon him by his older sister, he continued. “Anyway, there’s another snowstorm coming. Check out the radar.”

As Kate checked the computer, she asked, “When’s it expected to hit?”

“The weatherman says it should start sometime late on Friday, and snow through the weekend.”

“Well, crap… that’s going to make heading back to Saffron this weekend a problem.”

“Why were you planning on heading back to college so early?” Iruni’s sister attended Saffron University, in Kanto. She was in her third year there, studying Human-Pokémon Relations. “I thought your classes didn’t start until the end of January.”

“I told you I was getting an apartment this semester. They don’t allow anything larger than a Skitty in the dorms at SU.” Kate had her heart set on taking all her Pokémon with her to Saffron this semester, so as to help Kate acclimate her Pokémon to the ‘big city’ scene.

“You’re actually going through with that? I thought you were just throwing the idea around.”

With his sister gone most of the year anyway, their big house would seem depressingly empty without Kate’s three Pokémon to help distract him.

“Yep. Dad already put the down payment on the place and paid it through for the whole semester.”

Iruni glanced at the clock on the computer. “Speaking of, is Dad working late tonight? It’s almost eight-thirty.” Iruni’s father usually came home in the early evening.

“He has one of his bank meetings tonight. It’s the first Tuesday of the month,” explained Kate. She always had a better memory for the patterns of the household.

Ignoring what his sister had just said, and the news broadcast earlier that night, Iruni had no solid idea on what day of the week it was. I’ve been out of school for two months, and I’m all thrown off. I need to find something to occupy myself with or I’ll go insane when this weather comes in. Iruni had arranged an early graduation from high school with the help of some college level classes, and had since been bored to tears with nothing to do.
“What do you think he does at those meetings?”

“Protect the secrets of the universe, probably,” Kate and her brother had a good hard laugh at that.

“Well, since he’s out till late, what are we cooking for supper?”

“What are you cooking is the better question. I ate already.” Iruni gave her a half-sarcastic scowl and a long sigh as she left his room with an amused Dratini snickering close behind.

“Hmm,” Samuel Oak began reading an article aloud to himself, “‘According to a recent study, two of Eevee’s evolutions—Glaceon and Leafeon—which were previously thought to only be able to be obtained by an Eevee being exposed to certain environmental conditions found in Sinnoh, Eterna Forest, and Route 217 respectively, can in fact be obtained outside the Sinnoh region by utilizing similar areas, such as Ice Path in Johto, and Viridian Forest of Kanto to name a few,’” Professor Oak said as he read aloud in his lab in Kanto, to no one in particular. “‘Professor Rowan and his assistant—Rowan being the leading authority on Pokémon Evolution—were the first to discover this while traveling through—’”

The professor nearly had a heart attack as his phone began ringing rather loudly. It echoed throughout his empty lab, the moments of silence between rings leaving a sharp contrast in his ears. Oak rushed over to his desk and picked up the phone. He was perplexed why no one answered on the other line, and why the phone kept ringing, but realized it was the phone set on the wall on the other end of his lab. The phone was red, and enclosed in a plastic case, designated for emergency use only.

“Who in blazes calls in an emergency at this hour of the night?” he grumbled to himself. “Hello?”

The voice on the other end of the line seemed to not have any concern on the time of day. [“PROFESSOR! Th-Thank goodness I caught you! This is M-Misty, of Cerulean. I have an emergency!”] stammered the excited young woman on the other end of the line.

“Yes, yes, I’ve gathered that much, and I know your voice by now, Misty, now calm down. What seems to be the problem?” asked Oak as he sat down at his computer.

[“Okay, okay. Well, I was up on route twenty-five, a little ways south from Bill’s cottage, I spotted a large group of Pokémon not native to Kanto at all! And this group is way too large and developed to be a swarm. It looked like a population that had been there for years.”] She calmed down a great deal since the start of the conversation.

“Hmm… Let’s see,” Oak then brought up the information pertaining to the route in question, ready to calm what worries the young woman might have. “What Pokémon did you see, Misty?” Oak was starting to gain some interest in this late night emergency.

[“I saw a huge school of Feebas! The largest I’ve ever seen! There must’ve been a few hundred in this small section of the river! There were even a few Milotic among them! I was up on route twenty-five less than a week ago, and I saw no signs of any new Pokémon. It’s as if they all migrated overnight. I didn’t know who else to report this to, so I called you as soon as I could.”]

Misty could hear a pin drop all the way from Pallet Town over that connection. Oak was dumbfounded by the Water Gym Leader’s discovery. “Feebas!? Those are extremely rare, even in their home regions of Hoenn and Sinnoh!” Oak quickly tried to formulate a plan to help alleviate the situation. “Misty, I need you to go and secure the area where the Feebas have settled. Poachers will
jump at the chance to snag a few Feebas or Milotic. Try and not disturb them as best as possible, but if worst comes to worst, I’d say round them all up and have them safely monitored in Cerulean Gym, until the situation calms down. While that last suggestion was a bit drastic, I’d rather we not have to go that far, but we must not allow the situation to get out of hand.”

[“Got it Professor. What do you think caused this?”] asked Misty.

“I have a few guesses at the moment, but I need to consolidate my research and consult with some colleagues of mine to gain any sort of headway. Try and give me an accurate estimate on the demographics of this Feebas population as soon as possible.”

[“Alright. I’ll report back with you in the morning on my situation.”] The line went dead.

“…Hmmm, another report of a massive migration of Pokémon…” Oak said as he paced up and down his lab, running figures in his head. “If these reports keep coming in at this rate… no, they’re increasing in frequency and at a rate that… I need to call Elm and the others to have them speed up the preparations to our project. We can’t let things get out of hand…”

Iruni woke up the following morning by rolling out of bed in a rather painful manner.

“Oww… I’m even getting restless in my sleep…” he groaned as he got up to see that the sun was already up over the horizon, and early morning was in full swing. He found it odd that Karros wasn’t asleep at the foot of his bed, but he’d figure that out later. Iruni groggily looked around his upstairs room for his clock; it was just after nine in the morning. “Wow, I haven’t gotten up this early for a while…” Iruni had made it a habit to sleep in to at least noon everyday ever since he finished his regular schooling.

After stretching and getting out of bed, he began his initial morning routine.

Whilst taking his morning shower, Iruni had a swarm of thoughts running through his head. What can I do around here to occupy myself? I could get a job at Dad’s bank, but they’d probably get me a job in filing or something. I was planning on waiting until the spring to start on becoming a full-time Trainer, but can I last that long? Maybe I should train Karros a bit. He’s becoming too much like me for his own good… If I started my Trainer career, let’s say, once this storm is past and melted, where should I start? Head east to Ecruteak or brave the Ice Path and head to Blackthorn? No, neither of those towns are low enough on the Johto Gym Circuit for just me and Karros to handle…

He continued to mull over his thoughts as he stepped out of the shower to dry and change into his clothes. Iruni dressed himself in plain, comfortable clothes. He had no plans for the day, and his outfit choice reflected the mindset.

His brown, shoulder length hair, which fell evenly down the sides of his head, was becoming a hassle to deal with. His inactivity these last few months attributed to its unusual length. Iruni felt no urgency to get it cut yet, so he let it grow.

Iruni’s tall, skinny body type always confounded him, though he never argued against it. Being almost incapable of gaining any excess weight, a condition his sister affectionately referred to as, “being born from a family of stick people”, was more of a blessing than a curse. One downside of having his particular body image is that the lack of body fat made the winter months a bit harder on him than most people. He loved the winter regardless of the cold it brought; snowfall being a bit of a personal favorite time for him.
As his mind continued to wander as he stared at himself in the mirror, an unmistakable feeling in his stomach snapped him back to the present. The need for food pushed itself to the front of his priority list.

Iruni made his way downstairs to the kitchen, the main living room sitting adjacent in the same room. Kate and Azula were lounging on the couch watching something that didn’t catch his interest and Karros was up and wandering around the house. The rest of Katelyn’s Pokémon were nowhere to be found this morning.

His father’s Persian, Vester, was home this morning surprisingly enough, sleeping soundly on the large arm chair in the living room. He usually went with Iruni’s father to his work at Johto National Bank, the headquarters of which was centered out of Mahogany Town. Bruce Thomas was the current owner and manager of Johto National Bank, which has branches throughout the region. Most of Johto’s money was traded through the numerous JNB branches.

“Well, now look who’s decided to wake up before dusk?” Iruni bent down and patted his Houndour on the head and was headed to the kitchen to find some food.

“Like you’re one to talk, you enjoy sleeping in as much as he does,” Kate said.

“Yeah, yeah… shut it,” said Iruni playfully. “Does Dad have the day off today?”

“No, Vester was being stubborn this morning for whatever reason.”

“Hmm… I smell bacon, you cook anything for breakfast?”

“I made some bacon and eggs for myself about an hour ago. Karros was up, so he got some.” Iruni was about to make some sort of hurt response, but Kate continued to say, “You mind doing me a favor?”

“Is there any bacon involved?”

“No, but a lack of bacon could result if you don’t help.”

“I’ll get my best man on the job.” joked Iruni. “No, but seriously, what?”

“I need you to spend the day with Azula. Since the snow outside is all melted, she can finally go out and have some exercise rather than stay cooped up in the house all day, like some people. And with all this snow coming, I’d rather she get some now rather than wait for the next thawing.”

“Why can’t you go with her?”

“Aside from it being a nice thing you could do for your sister, I’m going to do some major grocery shopping, so we can have enough food if we are to survive the ‘white death’ that will be upon us this weekend.”

“I thought the news said that the snow shouldn’t start until late Friday. Why are you bothering with this so early?” Iruni asked.

“The news had a piece on the snowstorm this morning. It’s moving a lot faster than expected. They say it could start snowing as early as tomorrow night. So, I’m going to beat the rush of people I know who’ll wait to the last minute to get any essentials, and you’re going to make sure Azula gets some fresh air. I’ll even pick up more bacon. So, deal?”

“Sure, this will actually give me something to do to escape the boredom of the day,” said Iruni.
“When are you heading to the store?”

“In about an hour or so. Also, do you mind if I take Karros with me? He likes to help me when I go to shop downtown. I should be back before Dad gets off work.”

Iruni spent the rest of the morning doing whatever struck his fancy around the house. He spent an hour before lunch cleaning his room, for lack of anything better to do. While picking up the random bits of garbage strewn about on his floor, he found something he had been looking for.

A copy of an essay titled: *Dark Types, and What They Truly Are*. This had been the final assignment Iruni did for his Trainer’s License class, and eventually became his one small claim to fame. For as long as he could remember, Iruni loved Dark type Pokémon. While most people looked at Dark types and saw nothing but vicious or evil creatures, Iruni saw just another type of Pokémon; his favorite type. Dark types could be as amiable a newborn Pichu; Karros was proof enough of that.

*Dark Types are too unappreciated*, Iruni thought as he picked up the essay. *I’ve seen Charizard more vicious than any Dark type I’ve met.*

His essay had been so extensive and in-depth that it had his teacher, Professor Auburn, astounded by Iruni’s level of detail and professionalism put into a simple school assignment. The professor personally praised him on the work put into the paper. Needless to say, he passed the class. Iruni had been so proud of his paper; he made a copy for himself.

His love of Dark types had first manifested itself when he was eleven years old, when he rescued his Houndour from an angry flock of Fearow while on a family trip to Kanto. Due to the trauma of the experience, Karros had developed ornithophobia, a fear of birds. Although Karros made a full recovery from his physical injuries, his fear of avian creatures still affects him to this day.

He put his essay on his desk and finished the cleanup of his once disastrous room. With his task completed, he headed downstairs for some lunch. He noticed while making a sandwich that Vester was now nowhere to be seen. *Hmm, maybe Dad came and got him on his lunch break.* While eating, Iruni turned on the news to watch for any updates on the coming storm.

There was a different news anchor for the afternoon news. [“…And our top story this afternoon… The appropriately dubbed “Winter Hurricane” headed for northern Johto has advanced farther south and at speeds unprecedented for a snow storm. While the speed of the storm could mean that we should expect snow to fall for less time than previously expected, we could be seeing snow fall early in the afternoon tomorrow.”]

*That’s even earlier than what the news said a few hours ago!* The news reporter finished with much the same information as the previous night, with expected amounts of accumulation and general warnings to the public.

“Well then,” as Iruni finished his sandwich, “Kate wasn’t lying about the weather.” He was about to put his dishes away in the washer when Azula nudged his back from behind, causing him to almost drop his plate. “Hold on, hold on. I didn’t forget about you. Let me put my dishes away first and we’ll leave in a minute.”

Once he was finished with the cleanup, got his winter coat from the front closet, and picked up his PokéGear from his room, he and Azula headed out the door. “Where do you want to go today, Az? I’ve got nothing.” Azula slithered forward toward town and pointed towards the tree line in the cloudy distance.
“Want to head to the lake?” An emphatic squeal and a nod confirmed his guess. “Sounds good to me.” Iruni started to catch up to the excited dragon-snake. “It shouldn’t be too crowded this time of year, and with the snow coming, most people will be staying inside anyway.”

Iruni lived about a half a mile from the center of town, in Mahogany’s residential area to the south. The houses there were of higher quality than the ones closer to town. Many of Mahogany’s distinguished residents had houses in the southern neighborhood, among them Pryce, Mahogany’s Gym Leader and close friend of the Thomas family.

Despite what Kate had said, downtown seemed twice as crowded as usual. With so many people going from store to store buying what they were lacking in terms of essentials during the lull in the winter weather, it was a good call on her part to leave as early as she did.

With the main thoroughfare through town as crowded as it was, it took Iruni about an hour to get to the edge of town. He headed up the short path of Route 43, which had no particularly interesting happenings this afternoon. He reached the checkpoint building that led to The Lake of Rage. The attendant lazily looked up from his magazine and waved Iruni by as he passed through. As he stepped out of the checkpoint building, Iruni was greeted with a nice blast of fresh air. The air that surrounded the lake was pure and crisp. The smell of the pine trees that surrounded the body of water had a relaxing effect on the two sightseers.

As Iruni expected, there seemed to be no one else sightseeing at the lake, save for a man he could barely make out a ways up the shore, who seemed to just be staring off into the distance. From what he could tell, it seemed like the man wore a black trench coat with a matching hat, which obscured most of his face. Iruni could see no other distinctive qualities from where he was standing. Iruni paid the man little mind, as he wasn’t really doing much.

“So Az, want to head to the shore for a swim?” asked Iruni.

She chirped, and was half way to the shore before Iruni could catch up to the giddy dragon. She sidled up to the water’s edge and tested the temperature with the tip of her tail. She immediately backed away from the chilly water, squealing.

“Too cold for you?” Iruni tested the water with his hand, and as the icy sensation crept up his arm he wondered how water could be so cold without it actually being ice. “Brr…I don’t blame you, Azula. I would not like to swim in that.” Dragon Types do hate the cold after all. “This isn’t all bad. We still have the rest of the lake to see.”

Iruni led Azula around the eastern coast of the lake; all the while Azula would playfully splash the freezing water at Iruni. From where they were, Iruni could no longer see the man in the coat and hat, but that wouldn’t matter soon anyway. Iruni checked his PokéGear and saw it was getting to be five o’clock.

“Oh Azula,” Iruni said as he turned to his sister’s Dratini, still unaware that they weren’t alone on the shore any longer, “I think it’s time to head ba— Oh hell…!”

Towering above the two visitors loomed a very disgruntled Gyarados. White, crackling energy was building up in its mighty jaw. It was all Iruni could do to dodge the initial Hyper Beam that nearly caught them both off guard.

“Shit!” Iruni stumbled back onto his feet after the blast had sent him and his blue serpent companion flying backwards more than ten feet. Dirt and gravel littered the once clear shoreline. Azula had fallen behind Iruni for what little cover he offered. Iruni noticed that, as the Gyarados continued to fire Hyper Beams off seemingly at random, that its eyes were wide with anger.
I don’t think we were being loud enough to piss it off, something must’ve happened to make him like this.

The Gyarados then noticed where his initial targets had gone and began to charge another beam.

“What’s that, I wonder…?” the man said aloud on the opposite shore of the Lake of Rage. He looked on in wonder as he spotted the irate Gyarados beginning to wreak havoc on the shore beyond.

“Hmm… That kid and his Dratini headed that way not too long ago…” the man in the coat and hat made sure his Poké Balls were at the ready and ran to aid the unprepared trainer.

“Damn this conscience of mine…”

Iruni and Azula were frantically trying to dodge all the blasts of energy the angry blue beast shot at them. Iruni put his hand to his belt and grasped a Poké Ball. “Karros! Use Thunder Fa—”. Aww, Dammit all! He’s with Kate today! He quickly put the ball back on his belt and had to dive to avoid being obliterated by yet another attack.

The fall knocked the air from Iruni’s lungs, and caused something to crack in his left shoulder, leaving him to pause on the ground. Azula was frantically trying to get him up, but his legs refused to respond. He wouldn’t get up in time to dodge the next attack, of that Iruni was sure. Then, inspiration hit.

“Azula!” Iruni forced out, “Light Screen!”

Azula responded by creating a translucent wall of light between them and the coming burst of energy. The Light Screen held, but left Azula straining to maintain it further. The Gyarados was furious that his prey escaped unharmed from what he had thought would have been the end to this annoyance. He then redoubled his efforts and shot another Hyper Beam at the feeble shield.

Azula could only maintain the shield through the third Hyper Beam, her concentration then shattered along with their only hopes of staying off the blue monster’s attacks. The last attack had caused a large dust cloud to form around the shore of the lake, giving Iruni and Azula a moment of cover. Iruni took this opportunity to act. The time Azula bought him was enough for Iruni to regain his composure.

“Azula, listen!” Iruni said quietly as to not alert their enemy to their whereabouts. “Run back to town and get some help! I’ll make sure he doesn’t target you!”

His sister’s Pokémon shook her head emphatically, unwilling to leave his side.

“It’s alright, Azula. I can move now. Just hurry back to town!” he reached down and grabbed a fist sized rock. “When I distract him, get out of here, alright?” She nodded and prepared herself.

Iruni ran out of the dust cloud on the Gyarados’ right side. He managed to escape being spotted and threw the rock, hitting the beast in the side of the head. It seemed like such a good idea at the time, but as results would have it, it seemed all more likely that the Gyarados would end him.

The Gyarados was furious that this puny-creature-with-two-legs would dare to harm him. Him! The strongest Gyarados in the lake! He’d see to his impudence with fast-haste. The little two-legged-
creature-who-threw-the-hard-painful-rock kept dodging all of his efforts though, determined to not be blasted into nothingness.

From what Iruni could see, the dust cloud had dispersed and Azula took his advice and was making her way back to town. *I hope she gets help soon, this big guy seems intent on getting the kill!* Iruni kept dodging all that the Gyarados threw at him, but as he turned to strafe left around the lake to gain better ground, he tripped in a crater from one of the previous blasts.

*Well, so much for living through this experience…* he thought as he landed hard on the ground, further exacerbating his shoulder injury.

As Iruni lay face down in the dirt waiting for the end to come, it didn’t. He tentatively got up and looked around for what would be his demise. The Gyarados had disappeared under the lake. *Why would it give up? I really pissed it off with that rock.*

Just as Iruni decided it was not worth standing around and finding out the hard way and started to head home, the ground blow him exploded and he landed on his back. The Gyarados had burrowed underground and came up behind him, trapping Iruni and preventing any further escape.

The Gyarados then lunged forward, intent on swallowing Iruni whole.

The following process lasted five seconds.

One second: The Gyarados opened his mouth. He was going to savor ending this obnoxious-two-legged-creature. Iruni couldn’t see that the man in the dark coat had advanced upon his position.

Two seconds: Iruni looked for a place to run to, but lacked the sufficient land to move. It took the man half a second to grasp the two Ultra Balls on his belt. It took another half to throw them.

Three seconds: The Gyarados reared back, preparing to swallow the annoying-two-legs. The Ultra Balls landed in their designated targets: one in front of Iruni, one underneath the Gyarados.

Four Seconds: The Gyarados lunged forward towards his target, intent on getting revenge for that hard-painful-rock-throw. The two Pokémon were released in a flash of light. Iruni closed his eyes, preparing for the inevitable.

Five seconds: The Gyarados neared his target, about to finally have revenge for that hard-painful-rock.

“Nidoqueen, Protect!” came a commanding voice.

When Iruni opened his eyes, he was being protected be another screen of transparent, solid light. It was similar to Azula’s Light Screen, but perfect and impenetrable. The Pokémon generating the barrier was looming over him with her arms outstretched toward the blue dragon, whose face was currently pressed against the shimmering shield. On the bright side, if nothing else, Iruni got to see the inside of a Gyarados’ mouth without any negative side effects. The man’s other Pokémon awaited his orders.

“Nidoking, grab hold of that Gyarados and do not let go of him. Kid, I’d get out of the way now, if I were you.” The man’s Nidoking grabbed the serpent by its horns and grappled with the large, angry serpent. Iruni took the opportunity to get out of the way of the two brawling creatures by slipping past the Nidoqueen who had just canceled the Protect. The man then recalled his Nidoqueen and ordered his other Drill Pokémon to go on the offensive.

“Nidoking, Thunder Punch!” The purple beast clenched his right hand and brought it back behind
his back, while keeping hold of the Gyarados’ horns. Electricity began to arc around his fist as he brought it crashing into the abdomen of the Atrocious Pokémon. At the contact of its intended target, the Thunder Punch sent discharges of electrical energy powerful enough to scar the earth where they landed. The Gyarados was sent back into the lake with such a crash that it sent water high into the sky. As the water succumbed to the effects of gravity, Iruni was met with a freezing rain shower.

*Wow*… Iruni thought, *he took out that Gyarados in seconds…he’s good.*

The man went over to his Pokémon and patted it on its spiny back, and recalled it. He then walked over and helped Iruni to his feet. From what Iruni could see of the man’s face, he seemed to be in his mid-forties, with short black hair. “Up you get, son. That was some impressive footwork you showed back there.”

“Thanks, but really I should be the one thanking anybody. I would’ve been killed if you were even a second too slow.”

*Two* seconds. But who’s counting besides me?” he laughed. “I was just in the right place at the right time.”

“Really, thank you. I owe you one.” Iruni shivered, absolutely soaked in cold water. He turned to look out over the lake. “Why do you think that Gyarados was so angry? Well, before I hit it in the face…”

The man paused for about a long moment before answering Iruni. “If I had to guess, that Gyarados was a remnant of one of the most terrible acts against Pokémon in recent history. Team Rocket had been trying to use a makeshift radio transmitter to try and contact their lost leader all those years ago when they were powerful in Johto. The radio waves they produced seemed to tamper with the evolutionary patterns of some of the Magikarp in the lake, and forcibly evolved them. They were put into a blind rage as they had no idea of what was happening to them, which seemingly lasted forever. When their efforts failed, Team Rocket moved to take over the Radio Tower in Goldenrod, leaving these Gyarados to suffer. As you can see, there are a few Gyarados who still suffer from the side effects.”

Iruni took a moment to consider the man’s words before he spoke up again.

“Do you know who the leader of Team Rocket was before they disbanded, son? Who it was they were trying to contact with their experiments?”

“No, I don’t think I ever heard his name.”

“He was Viridian City’s Gym Leader, Giovanni. A man no one expected to have fallen so far, or become so corrupt. He had the perfect cover to stay undetected for years, until he was uncovered and defeated.”

“How could a Gym Leader allow such terrible things to happen to Pokémon?” asked Iruni.

He sighed. “If I had to guess, it might be because in his mind, I think he thought what he was doing was right. Good and evil are only two sides of the same coin, matters of perspective, really…Well, enough of this dark talk. What’s your name son?” the man asked as he reached for an Ultra Ball on his belt.

“Bartholomew Iruni Thomas, but I like going by my middle name,” he said. “Thanks again for saving my life today. By the way, what’s your name, sir?”

“Think nothing of it, my boy. And not to be rude, but my name would only complicate both of our
lives if you knew it, believe me.”

The man in the coat and hat released his Pokémon in another flash of light. A proud and strong Honchkrow stood awaiting his master’s orders.

“Wow! A Honchkrow!” Iruni forgot all about his injuries and near death experience at the sight of the Pokémon. “I’ve haven’t seen one of these in person before! Mind if I take a look, sir?”

“Not at all. Why’d the old bird catch your eye?”

“I’m a bit of a self-made Dark type Pokémon specialist; at least I’d like to think I am. If I could be, I’d like to study and become a Gym Leader one day.”

“It’s nice to see a trainer such as yourself with such a serious interest,” the man said, but Iruni wasn’t really listening.

Iruni took a few circles around the proud bird, taking in all of its characteristics. The Honchkrow was eyeing him with a little apprehension, questioning what exactly he was up to.

“I’ve read that the Dusk Stones that are required to make a Murkrow evolve are especially rare,” Iruni sounded off, like he was presenting facts for a grade.

“Not if you know where to look. In fact, I happen to have a spare I could part ways with.”

“Really?” Iruni asked. “I wouldn’t want to take something as valuable as that from someone who could put it to better use.”

“Nonsense, I couldn’t think of a better person to have it. You might catch a Murkrow yourself one day.” The man reached into his coat and handed Iruni a deep purple stone, which grew darker towards the center of the gem. As Iruni continued to inspect the gem, the man spoke. “Well, as much as I enjoy the scenery here, lingering much longer would prove to be unsatisfactory. I wish you well on your endeavors, Iruni. Be sure to change out of those wet clothes soon, and see to that arm of yours.”

As Iruni tried to thank the man again for the Dusk Stone, and for saving his life, he leapt onto the back of his Honchkrow and took off to the east. Iruni watched as he became nothing more than a speck in the distance, and then gone from sight completely, leaving only the peak of Mt. Silver in the distance.

Iruni then took his opportunity to leave the lake filled with angry Pokémon behind him and, putting the dusk stone in his pocket, started to head back to town. Remarkably, he escaped his ordeal; a few scrapes on his hands and face from the debris of the fight, a slight limp, soaking wet and freezing, and not to mention his left arm was sore as hell, but he was otherwise alright.

Halfway down Route 43, he met up with his would-be rescue party. It was led by his father and Kate, with Karros, Azula, and Vester in tow, and surprisingly, Gym Leader Pryce, moving unusually fast for a man his age. They all let out a sigh of relief when Iruni came limping into view.

“Iruni! Are you alright?” Bruce almost yelled as he spoke, his voice strong and filled with worry. “We were hearing sounds of battle coming from the lake and huge levels of energy being discharged could be felt back in town. When Azula came home trying to tell us something, we came as fast as we could. What happened to you?” Iruni had never seen his father so worked up before in his life.

Iruni then told the group the happenings of this afternoon up until the man and Iruni had their conversation. He decided to keep that part secret unless they asked specifically. Karros came up and
nearly knocked him off his feet, and proceeded to lick his face.

“I'm alright Karros, thanks for the concern, buddy.” Iruni patted his faithful Dark Pokémon on the head as Pryce spoke up.

“And this man just left and flew off to the east?”

Iruni nodded. “He flew off on his Honchkrow not fifteen minutes ago. I didn’t get his name, though.”

“It seems odd that he would leave so quickly… and he hid his name…” Pryce seemed to have more on his mind, but he didn’t push the matter.

“Well, I’m glad you’re safe now. Let’s head home to tend to those cuts on your face.” Iruni’s father had calmed down a great deal in the minutes of Iruni retelling of his day.

“And what happened to your arm?” asked Kate.

“Landing on hard rock hurts, Katelyn; wouldn’t recommend it.”

“I bet. It looks like a pack of Sandslash got a hold of your face,” joked Katelyn.

“Yeah, yeah…”

As Iruni and the rest of the group started to head back, Iruni palmed the Dusk Stone in his pocket, feeling its faceted surface with his fingers.

Well ... I'm the one who wanted something to do around here...

To Be Continued…
“I’m going to ask him tonight, Kate.”

Katelyn was lying on her bed reading a book when Iruni came limping into her room, her hair flowing down the sides of the pillow she lay on. Despite being three years apart in age, Iruni and his sister were sometimes mistaken for each other. This was likely because of their similar choices in hair length. Azula was curled up and asleep on her smaller circular bed in the corner of her room. The floor was mostly filled with Kate’s boxed-up belongings for her move back to Saffron City. Outside, snow was falling heavily at a slight angle, just fast enough to obscure the forest that began Route 44.

“And you think I need lessons on common courtesy? Ask who about what?” Katelyn asked, annoyed. She set down her book on the nightstand next to her bed and sat up to listen to what her brother deemed important enough to interrupt her reading.

“I’m going to ask Dad if I can start my Trainer career once this storm’s passed,” he told her.

Kate looked rather surprised. “Where’s this coming from? I thought you were fine with waiting until you were eighteen like Dad said.”

“There’s no way I’m waiting until July to leave home. I have nothing to do here. The only reason I took those advanced classes at school in the first place was so I could get an early start on my journey. I’ve just been out of school for over two months and I’m going crazy with boredom. I know I’ll regret it if I wait another half a year to get out of here and actually start living my life. And right now, the only thing stopping me is Dad being overprotective.”

“That and you’ve got a broken shoulder, or did you already forget about yesterday?” Kate asked, crossing her arms. “There’s no way he’d let you head out in your condition.”

*She has a point*, Iruni admitted to himself. The scuffle at the Lake of Rage seemed to take a harder toll on Iruni than he had thought initially. As the doctor at the Mahogany hospital had explained, he suffered from a broken left shoulder, a sprained right ankle, and two cracked ribs. His left arm was currently in a brace that kept any movement from the shoulder to his elbow at a standstill.

“It’s not as bad as it looks. I can move around just fine. I’ll just have to take it easy for a while.”

“You know Dad would never buy that. You saw how freaked out he was when he saw you coming back from the lake all beat to hell. He doesn’t want anything to happen to us. I know he can be excessive sometimes, he has been since Mom passed, but he just wants what’s best for us.”

Their mother, Jennifer Thomas, had become very ill just before Iruni entered high school. She passed on just before he finished his freshman year. Their father had seemed to bounce back emotionally from the loss rather well, as did Iruni and Kate, but he had become much more involved about keeping his family safe as a result.

The subject of his mother often made Iruni fall silent. His mother’s passing was one of the worst times of his life, and made his high school career all the more difficult. Iruni’s mother had been a Pokémon researcher in Kanto before she met his father. The entire time she was sick, Jennifer was never upset about her illness, and seemed to take it better than anyone else. She often made jokes about it, and was the one that laughed the hardest at them. She always had a commanding presence about her. She always knew how to cheer up her children when they had a problem.
In honor of his mother, Iruni had modeled his extensive essay on Dark Types on one of her research documents he found, and even dedicated the document to her.

The silence continued for a few more moments before Iruni let out a long and drawn out sigh.

“Fine, I get it. I was just getting ahead of myself with the idea. Do you think he’d let me leave once my shoulder got better?” Iruni did his best to steer the topic away from the topic of his mother.

“Pfft, I’m not him, I wouldn’t know,” Kate said dismissively.

“Do you think I could make it on my own?”

“It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see you have potential as a trainer. You’ve got more common sense than to go and try and take on the Gym Circuit unprepared. You already have a Pokémon, and the two of you get along great. You have a great head on your shoulders when it comes to battles, and hell, you’ve got most of my Pokémon’s moves memorized, so I think you’ll do fine out there. As for Dad, he’ll need some more persuasion than a lazy Houndour and nearly getting eaten by a grouchy Gyarados.”

“I just hope he will see it your way,” said Iruni. “I understand the concern and all, but I really feel like I need to get my life moving. Speaking of leaving, when is your trip to Saffron happening now?”

Kate laughed before she answered. “Since I’m not mortally wounded, I will be leaving once this storm has passed, but who knows how long this’ll last.” Kate looked out her window, guessing in her head how much had already fallen. The storm had bypassed the ‘accurate’ time frame the meteorologists had predicted again. “So, you still plan on asking him?”

“Tonight, after supper. Speaking of, I’m feeling like cooking spaghetti with garlic bread tonight. What do you think of that?”

“Sounds good to me. Just don’t burn down the house trying to boil the water, alright gimpy?”

Iruni tried to think of how one would actually go about performing such a feat when he heard the front door open.

“Hey guys, I’m home!” Iruni’s father called as he took off his coat and headed for the front closet. Vester, who had gotten absolutely covered during the walk from the bank, sent snow flying through the house as he shook himself.

“Hi Dad,” Iruni and Katelyn called back in unison.

Their father came over to Kate’s doorway, still with his snow-covered coat and briefcase in hand. Vester was close behind, annoyed at the current weather outside and his wet fur.

“Whew, that snow is getting pretty heavy out there. I sent everyone home at lunchtime. Vester hates having to walk when it’s snowing out.” He laughed as his Persian came in and jumped up on Kate’s bed, trying to warm himself.

“How bad are the roads out there?” Katelyn asked as she got up and put a blanket over the shivering, wet feline.

“It’s a level three snow emergency as of now. The Center is going to stay open for emergencies, and the city is trying to use the salt trucks and plows to keep the major roads passable. But it’s really coming down out there. Imagine the skiing conditions right now…” Bruce had always been an avid skier whenever time allowed it. “How’s your arm doing, Iruni?”
“Better. I can move it from my elbow down without any pain.” Iruni demonstrated that his lower arm had all but the full range of motion, limited only by the brace keeping his shoulder in an ample healing position.

“Make sure you don’t aggravate it. I don’t think getting to the hospital would be easy in this weather.”

“Well, our resident one-armed chef here has volunteered to cook tonight, so what time should we start worrying about supper?” asked Kate.

“Oh? What are you cooking?”

“I thought we’d have spaghetti tonight. We haven’t had that in a while.”

“Sounds good. Let’s shoot for around seven to start cooking; I have some paperwork to get done on our accounts while I have the files with me.”

Once the Thomas family had finished their meal—which took longer to prepare than Iruni had initially thought—Bruce headed to his work room down the hall.

As he was clearing the dishes, Iruni contemplated the best way to open the subject of his early departure.

I should lead into it gradually, rather than say it out of the blue. He might just tell me to ask him later if he’s busy, so I have to finish this up soon. I can’t let him shut me up. He’s my Dad and all, but I won’t let him ignore me. I don’t want to piss him off, though. I shouldn’t have to be afraid of my Dad, the worst he could do is say ‘no’ anyway. If he does say ‘no,’ could I just accept that? I can’t stand just being at home anymore. I could leave home whenever I’m better. No, that would only make everything worse.

As Iruni continued his inward battle with himself, he failed to notice that he’d stopped putting the dishes away, and that he had been staring off into space for some time.

“HEY GIMPY!”

Iruni almost dropped the casserole dish he was holding, catching it by trapping it between his left leg and his working right arm. He wheeled around to find Katelyn laughing at his reaction.

“What’s the matter with you? I could’ve dropped this!”

“But you didn’t. Now will you hurry up with the dishes?”

“Oh, right. Sorry. Is Dad working on anything right now?”

“Not sure, but I’d hurry up with that before he gets busy… actually, here, I’ll finish this up while you go try and convince him.”

“Thanks a bunch, Kate. I owe you one. And stop calling me ‘gimpy’…”

“I’ll remember that for later, and that nickname sticks until you can remember how to walk correctly like the rest of us. Now hurry up and ask him already!”

Iruni made his way to his father’s office. The far wall had large sliding doors that led out onto the back patio. The right wall had his father’s desk and computer in the corner. The room had three
bookshelves lining the wall where the door connected to the hallway, two of which were filled with old bank statements and similar documents. The third was a display case without the glass door. It housed the things most precious to his father: his wedding pictures, his high school and college diplomas, various trophies from past competitions he had won, an ornate sword-shaped letter opener embedded in a clear crystal base, and five empty Poké Balls which used to contain the other members of his old Pokémon team. The occupants of the balls in question had been released years ago. When Bruce retired from being a Trainer, he offered to let his team return to the wild. Only Vester chose to stay. At the center of the five spheres of varying colors was a stand to prop up an open Trainer Badge case, which was absent. Bruce was holding his case, examining the eight symbols of accomplishment he had earned all those years ago.

“Hey Dad, what’s up?”

“Oh, nothing much, just feeling a bit nostalgic tonight.” He set the case filled with freshly polished Badges back on its pedestal. “I was thinking on finishing up this paperwork now, and heading to bed. You need anything?”

Iruni took a deep breath and sighed, a feeble attempt at ridding himself of his nervousness. *I guess no leading up to it gradually. It’s now or never.*

“Um, yeah, actually. I know I had agreed to wait until I was eighteen to start my Trainer career, but I was wondering if you would consider letting me start a bit earlier.”

“I see… How early did you have in mind?”

“Once my arm is better, and this snow is gone and melted. I know it’s soon, but I really think I should leave as soon as possible.” The look on his father’s face didn’t seem like he was giving him a convincing case. Iruni started to panic.

“I don’t think that would be a very good idea,” his father said. “I don’t think you’re ready yet to head out into—”

“But I do!” Iruni all but yelled. His father stopped what he was doing at his desk. “Kate does, too! You might think you know what’s best for me, but I’m the only one who knows what feels best! I know it’s because you care about my safety, but I’m not a little kid anymore. I don’t have anything to do here and I don’t think waiting around for half a year doing nothing will help prepare me. I know you can still refuse, but I’m not backing down on this. Mom always taught me never to back down on something if I believe in it.” As Iruni continued his rant, his father just sat at his desk, not making a single objection to what his son was saying. When he finished, he met his son’s stern look with a calm and relaxed expression.

“So, you won’t back down and let me stand by my original answer? Even if I were to lay out consequences, such as extending the time until you can leave?”

“No Dad, I meant everything I said. I will keep at this.”

“Hmm…” Iruni’s father grabbed a small stack of papers, pulled out one, and handed it to Iruni. “Do me a favor and read when that account was made, and who can access it.”

“‘Account opened September 16, 1994. Account Holders: Bruce Atticus Thomas, Jennifer Ellen Thomas, … and me? Why is my name on this account?’ Iruni went wide-eyed when he saw the balance of the account; a sizable amount. “Why didn’t I know about this before?”

“Well, your mother and I had a long talk when we got back from our trip to Kanto that year. We saw
how much getting Karros excited you about being a Trainer, so we opened up an account in all of our names. This was meant to be your funds for your training journey, and with me and your mother on the account, we could add money any time you needed it. I wanted to keep you at home until you were eighteen so that the account would grow as much as possible before you set out. But I can see that you’re serious about leaving sooner. I’m glad that you have the determination to follow through on your dreams.” He got up from the desk and handed Iruni a worn envelope, weathered from years of being stored in a filing cabinet. Still shocked that his father had actually agreed to his request, he shakily opened the envelope. Inside was a small debit card, with his name below the logo of the Johto National Bank.

Not so far away from the Thomas home where Iruni was busy telling his sister his exciting news, two figures slowly made their way through Mahogany Town. The winds had picked up and now the storm concealed everything but the various sources of light that were still on around the town. The two men were dressed for the weather, both in heavy coats and hats, and belts with six Poké Balls each. The only defining feature between them was that the man leading had a length of silvery hair trailing down his back that could not be covered by his hat. The men walked a lonely path this night. Not a soul was out in this storm, aside from a few Ice type Pokémon common around Mahogany.

“Man, it’s so damn cold,” one man complained.

“That is because we are in the middle of an uncharacteristically powerful blizzard. Now shut your mouth before you compromise what we set out to do,” the other warned.

“It’s not like anyone else is out in this shit anyway. You always only see the mission parameters and regulations and none of the obvious.”

“I only see what is to be seen.”

“Hmph.” There he goes with his psycho-babble again. The two rarely got along, but were at least efficient as a team.

The two were headed north. While it might have been unwise to travel in such weather, it was necessary. These men could not afford to be spotted this night. Their destination was the Lake of Rage. One of their sources claimed to have a lead on what they were searching for. And with their target as elusive as it was, the two could not afford to pass up any opportunity. They chose to bypass the checkpoint entirely; the chance their informant was still on duty was very slim. They reached the lake after trudging through the snow and trees and began their search for evidence.

“What are we looking for again?” one of them asked.

“Our source said there was a battle on the western shore,” the other said. “Hyper Beams were used without much discretion, so I doubt it will be hard to miss the spot.” The man with long silver hair continued to lead the search, and within a few minutes they found the spot in question. There were several craters in the ground, along with assorted debris and uneven ground. The man with silver hair grasped one of the six Psy Balls from his belt. The specialized type of Poké Ball allowed a trainer to communicate mentally with a Psychic type Pokémon inside. It is a shame they discontinued these.

‘I apologize, Xatu,’ the man communicated to the creature psychically. ‘I know you hate the cold and snow, so prepare a Barrier.’

With a flash of light, a green-feathered bird stood in the middle of the snow covered lake side. Almost immediately after, a sphere of soft blue light enveloped the area, stopping the snow from
falling on them.

“All right Dalton, your turn. Go’n should do nicely, I think.”

“Finally, something for this damn cold.” The other man grasped a Dusk Ball from his belt and released a Magcargo. The ground where it now stood hissed and steamed as its body came in contact with the snow. The remaining snow within the Barrier didn’t last long with the Lava Pokémon’s body temperature of eighteen-thousand degrees. The Barrier also trapped in the heat while keeping the cold wind at bay. The two could see the true level of destruction now that the snow was no longer present.

“That detour to Sinnoh wasn’t all bad now, was it? This guy from Stark Mountain has come in handy plenty of times. So Sebastian,” he asked the man with silver hair, “how long is this going to take?” Dalton took off his coat and hat, finding their weight more annoying than anything.

Sebastian kept his coat on. “Patience is a virtue, Dalton. It all depends on Xatu now.” He closed his eyes and expanded his consciousness out towards his Pokémon.

‘Xatu, my friend. Let me see what has already been by lending me the sight of your left eye.’

The Xatu had stayed silent and kept its eyes closed until this point. At once, Sebastian and Xatu both opened their left eyes, sharing in the same vision while their minds were joined. What they saw was not the battle-scarred lakeside in the middle of a late night blizzard, but the lake when it was whole.

The events of the day prior scanned past their eyes in fast-forward, the trainer telling his Mystic Pokémon to slow down the vision for anything interesting. The point in time that caught his attention was when a Trainer and their Dratini came up on the shore. Before he told his psychic bird to proceed and skip what could be a boring afternoon outing, he saw the cause of the lake’s partial demolition rise up out of the lake.

Sebastian half-expected the novice trainer not to see the attack at all, but he watched on as they dodged the first strike. As he continued to watch the battle unfold, he could not help but feel a rush of encouragement for the would-be victims. Whoever this Dratini’s trainer is, it seems they can adapt well to the situation. He had to stifle a laugh when he struck the Gyarados with a simple rock, while sending away his only reasonable form of attack or defense. Maybe not. He could see what the trainer never did, and saw the Gyarados prepare its final ambush by burrowing under the shore. If not for his Xatu also watching the battle he might have missed what he was looking for. She alerted him to the second figure advancing on the scuffle.

‘Found you.

He watched as the man in the coat and hat took down the monstrous serpent with ease. He saw him help the battered Trainer to his feet, and while he could see the conversation between the two, Xatu’s post-cognitive abilities only recalled what was to be seen. The sounds of past events were lost in the ever expanding void of time. The final clues presented themselves as the man made his leave. Handing the Dusk Stone to the Trainer and his third Pokémon made it clear to him. A Nidoking, Nidoqueen, and a Honchkrow! Now I see… He sure knows how to make himself disappear when he wants to.

‘Thank you, Xatu. That will be enough.’ Sebastian severed the connection with his Pokémon and his vision returned to the present.

Dalton was sitting on the ground, leaning back against the rock-shell of his Magcargo, seemingly ignorant of the substantial heat it gave off. “So, what’s the word?”
Sebastian’s usual calm voice held an excited tone. “We are not far off. He was here just yesterday. Those long, thin gouges in the ground were from his Nidoking’s Thunder Punch. And I must apologize; your intel was in fact, correct. He was in Sinnoh; he just simply eluded us.”

“Ha! I knew it! How the hell did he get back to Johto without us knowing, though?”

“He has a Honchkrow now, which would explain how someone of his type specialty left the country with such ease.”

“Anything else? Any leads on where he might be?” Dalton was busy gathering up his winter clothing for their departure back into the winter weather.

“He saved a trainer from a rampaging Gyarados—the unfortunate recipient of that Thunder Punch.”

“A trainer saw him? Did they speak to him? Why didn’t you open with this? Did you find out who this was? Any noticeable features? A name at least? We might finally have the lead we need to find him.” Dalton failed to hide how eager he was to finally more forward with their plans.

“Xatu’s eyes cannot see sound. The only thing meaningful I could glean from the vision was that they wore their long brown hair without any significant style, and that they had a Dratini that wore a collar that held an Everstone. The Dratini should be easy enough to track down, but the trainer could blend into any crowd and we would not have the slightest advantage to us. I could not even be sure about the Trainer’s gender; they were wearing a large coat.”

“There you go again! Missing a crucial piece of information that could save us days or even weeks of extra effort.” Dalton continued his rant on the supposed ‘incompetence’ of his partner. Sebastian didn’t mind, he knew he had seen all that could be seen, and felt no worse for it. “Well then, at least we have a rough description. ‘A Trainer with long brown hair, who owns a Dratini wearing an Everstone collar.’ Dratini aren’t common in Johto, they must be from Blackthorn. I’m sure it’d be easy to get information out of the Elders at the Dragon’s Den. Too easy, really.” He began to laugh as he contemplated implementing some of his more unorthodox interrogation methods.

“You know as well as I that showing any sort of hostility towards the Elders of Blackthorn would result in a direct confrontation with Clair, or even Lance himself. We need to be smart about this Dalton, not barge in and threaten lives with a handful of questions. A confrontation with the Champion would not bode well for us. Coralis has his connections in that city, he’ll figure out what we need to know.”

Dalton mumbled some sort of dissatisfied comment under his breath. “Like always, eh? Well, before we move on to wherever our ‘fearful leader’ has us go next, where’d our man-of-the-hour run off to after his good deed of the day?”

“East, towards Mt. Silver.”

That comment seemed to strike a chord with Dalton, leaving a wide-eyed Fire type expert where the angry operative once stood. “You don’t think he’d…”

“Let us hope he is just heading back to Kanto, and not taking a detour on the way. Now we must leave this place. We need to find refuge from this storm until it passes.”

The two men left the lakeside as quickly as they arrived, leaving without a trace. Without the Barrier present, the evidence of the battle at the lake disappeared in a matter of minutes, invisible until the spring.
The wind had died down to a dull breeze, letting the snow fall slowly downward. The outside world held an unearthly glow; snow reflected and scattered the light twinkling from the many sources of light around the city, leaving an effect of permanent twilight. Iruni sat in a chair on his back patio. He had set up their large umbrella that would usually keep them in the shade during a sunny summer afternoon, but it did a fine job of keeping the snow from burying him. Iruni often went outside during snowy nights, even if he technically was under a curfew. He liked to just watch the snowflakes as they only became visible when passing through some ambient light and listening to the silence the night offered, with the occasional patter of heavy snow hitting the umbrella. Even though it was getting very late, he was too occupied with his thoughts to sleep; he couldn’t fall asleep even if he tried. As far as he was concerned, he’d slept enough.

I can’t believe it. I’m actually leaving in a few weeks and finally getting a start on with my life. Now all I have to worry about now is exactly where I’ll be going to go once I head out. Iruni went over the options plenty of times before in his head, and each time he reached the same conclusion:

I have no idea.

Karros had been sleeping on his lap this whole time, not bothering trying to keep up with his trainer’s newfound interest in the waking world. Aside from his winter clothes, having Karros on his lap was helping stave off the cold; Fire types had a much higher body temperature than the average snowflake after all.

Iruni was enjoying the silence, now that his inner debate had been delayed once again, until two sounds shattered the peace. They first was slow and drawn out. A faint creaking followed by a loud series of cracks, the sound of a tree finally giving way and falling to the earth. The second sound followed almost immediately after the thud of the tree hitting ground, and it was this sound that sent a chill up Iruni’s spine that wasn’t caused by the temperature outside.

A sharp cry pierced his ears, actually paining his heart for having to bear the sound. Whoever—or whatever—had made that sound was in a terrible, unforgiving pain. Iruni couldn’t place why the cry unsettled him as much as it did; it was as if the cry carried past his eardrums, and struck something deep within his soul.

Despite the noises, Karros continued to sleep, leaving Iruni to wonder whether or not he had heard them in the first place. This unnerved him on an even deeper level. What if that call had been for him?

As it turned out, Karros awoke when the noise carried through the night a second time. The Houndour immediately lifted his head up and turned to face the direction of the sound. Karros hopped off his trainer’s lap and made to leave, but Iruni stopped him. Despite having already heard it once, the sound had the same chilling effect on Iruni.

“Wait up, Karros. I know, I know, calm down. I want to go see what’s up too, but I need to get something out of the house.” His Pokémon grudgingly agreed to wait for his Trainer as he snuck back in the house. He came back a minute later with a thick wool hat and his PokéGear in hand. Luckily, the storm wasn’t interfering with the handheld’s satellite up-link.

He checked the time; quarter past one o’clock. He would have to be back within five hours, before his family woke up. He opened his PokéGear’s map and placed a marker at his house. It’d suck to get lost in this blizzard... Just to be safe... He also put a marker on the Mahogany Pokémon Center.

As Iruni made his way to the tree line behind his house, he was surprised at how much snow had fallen, with many places having already accumulated enough to reach to his knees. The snow had less room to fall in the forest of Route 44, and the snow there was much easier to traverse than the
snow on open ground. But what freedom the trees gave with the lack of snow to impede him, it took away by robbing him of his visibility and bearings. The trees themselves blocked his view of anything more than a few feet in front of him, and blocked most of the light coming from the town. The further he went into the forest, the darker it got.

Traveling in a dark forest during a blizzard is very disorienting, as Iruni soon found out. While he looked for the source of the desperate cries, he failed to notice a large tree root in his path. He hit the icy protrusion with his bad ankle and tripped.

“Shit!”

As he spun to his right, he caught a low-lying branch, suspending him inches from the ground and inches from further injuring his shoulder. He let go and slowly set himself down on the snowy ground, trying to catch his breath. That was too close. I really need to stop overestimating my mobility. I can’t afford to be out of commission for much longer or get stranded in the woods. His reprieve did not last long, however. He heard the cry again, and noticed the time between each of the cries was getting longer.

Whatever is calling for help, they’re running out of strength.

The cries were having an effect on Iruni; making him nervous, heart racing and he was starting to panic. I have to hurry. I can’t stand this for much longer. I need to help whoever’s in pain.

He was not sure why he had felt this increasing sense of urgency to find the source of the pleas, but he didn’t care. All he knew was that it felt right. He could still feel as if something else was in the cry, like some underlying message or emphasis to its meaning. To Iruni, it felt as if he had been searching for hours, but in reality, it had only been about twenty minutes.

He checked his PokéGear periodically, making sure they were a manageable distance from home and ensuring they didn’t come up on a cliff unawares. Each time they heard the scream, Karros would hone in on the direction to give them a fresh bearing. What little path existed this far out in the dense forest had gotten very repetitive. Trees in all directions, snow blown up and clinging to their trunks. The sameness of the forest, coupled with the ever-decreasing light, would have gotten Iruni lost in a matter of minutes.

Much to his relief, and eventual distress, he happened upon what was making the terrible noise after another thirty minutes of agonizing searching. The sight almost had him in tears. It was a Sneasel, and from what he could tell, she wasn’t very old. She—Iruni could tell the gender by the length of her head-feather—still had yet to gain the white markings on her paws, and her underdeveloped claws were no sharper than human fingernails.

The Sneasel’s left leg was trapped under a fallen tree, the same one he heard fall back at his house. The bark of the tree had been feebly scraped at in a few places, in a desperate attempt to free herself. From the looks of it, the tree was long dead, and could no longer bear the weight of the snow that had gathered on its rotting branches. The Sneasel was trying to claw away at the heavy trunk crushing her leg, without much success. When she cried again, without trees or distance to distort or dampen the sound of her pain, Iruni nearly ran to her aid, but his reason returned to him.

Wait, I need to keep my head. Let’s think, a Sneasel this young shouldn’t be far from its parents, so they should be nearby. But she’s been calling for help for almost an hour; if I could hear her they should’ve heard her. Iruni checked the trees in the area at a glance, not finding any of the telltale signs that Weavile and Sneasel carved into trees to mark their territory. No markings; this isn’t Weavile territory. Why is this one out on its own? She can’t be more than a couple months old. Then the young Sharp Claw Pokémon made a cry so long and drawn out, its voice failed it, ending in a
defeated whimper. It was enough to push Iruni over the edge.

“I can’t stand this. Karros, let’s go, but don’t rush over. I won’t cause her more pain.”

Karros gave an affirmative grunt, letting his trainer take the lead.

Iruni and Karros slowly made their way into the clearing where the tree had fallen. The Sneasel didn’t notice them until they were about two yards away. Iruni expected the reaction. She immediately took the best defensive position that she could and growled defensively at the newcomers.

Her angry snarl rose to a hoarse and feeble roar, but was cut short. Her voice being too ragged and worn out from calling into the night. She coughed, trying a few more times to howl the two of them, but settled for a few quick hisses and a low, cautionary growl.

“Karros, go wait over there, I’ll try and calm her.” Despite the clear message the Sneasel was sending him, Iruni went over to her and knelt down beside the injured Dark-Ice type, which resulted in getting a few swipes from her dull claws. He looked into her eyes, and saw that she was terrified. She needed to be calmed down before anything could be done about the tree. Iruni took off the glove on his left hand and offered his hand to the defensive creature. She began to take in his scent, determining if he was a threat to her.

“It’s alright, girl. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m just here to help. I promise I’ll help your leg an—

AH!”

Sneasel didn’t seem to take Iruni’s gesture of kindness as well as he’d hoped. She had latched onto his arm with her dull claws, tearing the fabric slightly, and bit hard into the side of Iruni’s left hand. Her sharp fangs had dug deep into his hand, sending blood dripping onto the snow below, and a sharp pain up Iruni’s already battered left arm. A young Sneasel’s teeth were sharper than an adult’s, to compensate the lack of their signature Sharp Claws while they were still infants. She continued to stare back at Iruni, her red eyes gleaming with fear and determination.

“See? You can bite all you want, but I’m still going to try and help you. It’s alright, you don’t have to worry anymore.” As Iruni continued to give more words of encouragement, the look in the Sneasel's eyes began to soften, and eventually grew a bit remorseful at the realization of what she had done. As she relinquished her grip on his hand, she began to lick his wound clean, as if to apologize.

“There you go, you’re alright.” As she finished, Iruni inspected the wound himself; a near perfect semi-circular bite mark on both sides of his hand. The bite was still sending fresh blood running down the side of his arm and coat sleeve as he examined his hand. Iruni quickly put his glove back on his hand, wincing from the pain of the fabric touching the wound as well as the sight of the blood.

As Iruni got up to try and assess the damage done by the tree, and to see about freeing the Sneasel, he felt something tug on his glove. The Sneasel had bitten his left hand again, but this time to only try to get him to stay, not biting hard enough to fully penetrate the glove. She now had a new fear in her eyes, a fear that she would be abandoned and left with her crippling pain.

“I’m not going anywhere, don’t worry. I need to see if I can get this tree off your leg.” The Sneasel didn’t seem convinced. “I promise I won’t leave you. Please, trust me.”
She grudgingly let him go, making a mewing whimper as if to ask, “Are you sure?”

“I’ll be just over here, I promise. Karros, come over here.” As Iruni and Karros circled the tree to find any sort of opportunity to exploit, it became increasingly obvious that the only way was to move the tree off the Sneasel’s leg was rolling the trunk with sheer force. But with Iruni’s newly injured hand and previous injuries, it didn’t seem likely he was going to help much in moving the heavy tree.

Alright, let’s not panic. What can we do here? I can’t do much in the heavy lifting or pushing department, so there goes that. I won’t risk burning the Sneasel with Karros trying to burn the tree. What can I do? As he continued to wrack his brain for answers, he remembered something. Oh well, looks like I don’t have much of a choice. It’s not as if anyone’s around to see anyway…

“Karros, come with me.” Iruni and Karros made their way back to the trapped Sneasel, who wasted no time in showing her gratitude for them returning. “Karros, crouch down next to the tree and wait for the word. Now Sneasel, this might hurt a bit, but we’re going to try and be as careful as possible. It will be all over in a few seconds, alright?” At the nod from her, Iruni steadied her by placing his right harm behind her back, and gave the order. I could get in a lot of trouble if anyone from the League saw this.

“Karros, use Strength! But keep it gentle, try not to hurt her.” Using such moves outside of battle without the proper Gym Badge requirement could mean the revocation of his Trainer’s License, but no other option remained at this point.

Houndour’s body began to glow white, and with the apparent ease of nudging a simple pillow, he slowly pushed the heavy tree off the hurt Pokémon’s leg. Once there was no danger left, he pushed the tree with the remainder of his strength. The tree slid about ten feet, flinging a large amount of snow into the air. Karros stood and watched the snow settle over the tree’s new resting place, proud of his feat.

“A little overboard but good job, Kar.” Iruni made to brush off the snow that had fallen thanks to Karros’ little act when he heard the Sneasel cry out again. She thought it would be wise to try to get up and move on her own, but her leg would not allow that.

“Oh, no, no! Don’t try and move yet. Here.” Iruni unzipped and took off his coat, an awkward move due to the brace he wore. Making sure to not to aggravate her leg anymore, he picked her up and cradled her in his left arm. He zipped up his coat back up enough to where the Sneasel could look out, but be stable enough to where he wouldn’t accidentally drop her, and have his right arm free to helm navigate the icy forest. “There we go. That should hold you. Let me know if your leg is in too much pain, alright?”

She still seemed to have trouble finding her voice, but mumbled her thanks anyway. She looked up into Iruni’s eyes, this time without a look of fear or of regret, but of happiness. Gratitude. The poor Sneasel couldn’t remember the last time she was treated with such kindness.

Iruni checked his PokéGear, and set it to display the marker on the Pokémon Center. He put it back in his coat pocket, so he could access it with his free arm.

“Karros, I want you to lead. Keep a low Ember on, to melt the snow as we walk. I don’t want to risk falling again, so I need to see where I’m going. The Center should be directly north of here.”

Karros barked and let out a short stream of flame from his mouth, making a path in the snow as it melted away. Karros began leading the way back to Mahogany, with Iruni carrying his precious cargo.
“And try and not catch any trees on fire.”

The Houndour whined and brought his ears back, looking almost disappointed at the request.

*Crazy pyromaniac,* he thought as they started to head back to town through the blizzard of the decade.

Their trek back to town was infinitely easier than the trip from. With Karros’ flame he had little chance of tripping and falling, and the light from the fire made it possible to see. However, the trip was taking longer than Iruni would have liked. Karros had to melt every bit of ice that had layered over during the storm, and that took time with such a low flame. On top of that, the wind had picked up, cutting their movement to a slow crawl and further obstructing their visibility. After a few minutes into the drudgery, something was unnerving Iruni, something he’d missed. Until now, he had been preoccupied with searching for the source of the cry, and now with a calm and alert mind he noticed something.

“Karros, kill the flame for a sec. Wait here.” At the word of his Trainer, Karros cut the Ember. Through the sound of the wind blowing, Iruni could hear soft footsteps in the snow. After a few seconds they stopped, having noticed the group’s sudden halt. Something was following them. Iruni waved Karros on, and continued without flame. When Iruni heard the footsteps again, he quickly turned to see their pursuer. He saw nothing but snow blowing in the wind, and heard the steps stop again.

*We’re being followed? By what? And why can’t I see what it is? It sounds like they’re right on top of us, but nothing’s even near us. If it’s a predator, they’d have an easy fight. We need to get out of these damn woods.*

“Karros, pick up the pace! I don’t care if you scorch a few trees, but be careful you don’t set any ablaze. We need to get out of here now!”

Karros howled into the wind, acknowledging the urgency in his trainer’s command.

When Iruni said “now”, Karros seemed to take it quite literally, letting loose an enormous Flamethrower and clearing a path for a hundred yards. To Iruni’s surprise, Karros did miss most of the trees, and only charred a few of the ones that were in the path of the flame.

“The ride might get a little bumpy, Sneasel. Just hold on.” Sneasel nodded and gripped his shirt for support. Iruni and Karros made a run for it, or as much of a run Iruni could manage, for the rest of the way back, sending Flamethrowers when they ran out of open ground. Iruni never heard those unknown footsteps as they ran.

The night-shift attendant at the Mahogany Town Pokémon Center was sitting at her desk reading a book. She saw the snowstorm as an opportunity to catch up on her reading, as opposed to a potential natural disaster. She was too engrossed in her book to notice Iruni running up to the automatic doors of the Center, but noticed the large amount of snow that flew inside because of them opening.

“Nurse! I need help! Now!” Iruni yelled as he entered the empty lobby.

“Yes, what seems to be the— Oh my lord!”

What the nurse saw standing in the front lobby of the Center was a Trainer and his Houndour, both
out of breath and covered in snow, the Trainer holding something wrapped up in his coat, which would move about occasionally. The nurse rushed towards the emergency room and motioned the snow-covered Trainer to follow. Once inside, Iruni unzipped his coat and informed the nurse of the situation. The nurse seemed more alarmed than she should have been when Iruni gave a brief explanation of what happened.

“This is not only a crushed leg! She’s covered in blood! Where else is she injured— Sir, are you alright?”

Iruni was glad he had set the Sneasel down on the hospital bed, because once he looked at himself, he felt consciousness start to waver. His entire left arm and most of his left side was stained with blood. His blood. He saw that his once white glove on his left hand, and the inside of his coat, had turned a very deep scarlet. The wound on his hand had apparently never closed, and the run from the forest had accelerated his heart rate enough to cause an alarming amount of blood to seep from the wound.

“It’s just her leg… I promise… the blood’s mine… I’m pretty sure…” Iruni was losing the fight to stay awake. He braced himself on whatever was in front of him, his legs threatening to give out on him. “Just… take care of her… if you could…” Iruni couldn’t hear the nurse’s, Karros’, nor Sneasel’s words of alarm, as his mind fell into darkness.

Iruni woke up about an hour later to something poking at his face. When he opened his eyes, the Sneasel he had saved was sitting on his chest, gently prodding him awake. He was on a bed of his own. His left hand was bandaged and numb; likely from whatever the nurse had done to help the healing process. He was still in his bloodstained clothes, but he noticed his coat on a chair to his left, in which Karros was sound asleep.

I see someone’s terribly upset. Sneasel wasted no time in welcoming Iruni back to the waking world. She leapt at his face and nuzzled him affectionately. After seeing his blood-covered self again, Iruni nearly fainted a second time, but his newfound companion easily took his mind off of his clothing dilemma.

“It’s nice to see that someone was worried about me,” Iruni said as the nurse came back in the room.

“Now Sneasel, I let you lay on his bed because you wouldn’t keep quiet, but you can’t— Oh, you’re awake. That’s a remarkably fast recovery for losing enough blood to pass out.”

“It wasn’t the amount of blood that did it,” Iruni assured her. “I just don’t like looking at lots of it. Makes me take unplanned ‘naps’.”

Iruni sat up, making sure not to notice his attire, and let Sneasel sit on his lap, whose attitude took a sharp downturn at the return of the nurse. Sneasel laid down in Iruni’s lap, and soon fell asleep with him gently stroking her head. Poor thing, she’s exhausted.

Iruni noticed a series of small, and rather shallow, scratch marks covering the nurse’s hands and face.

“How is she?”

“Well, aside from being very uncooperative, she’s going to be fine. As you said, most of the bones in her left leg are broken. You were lucky that you brought her here when you did, it wouldn’t have taken much to complicate an injury like that. I couldn’t find her Poké Ball in your coat or on your belt, so I had to make her a cast and set her leg manually. It would’ve been a lot simpler to use the recovery machine.”
“Well, she doesn’t have a ball; she’s wild. I heard her calling for help when she was trapped under the tree, and I went to help her.” Iruni finished explaining his story about his search through the woods to the nurse, whose face adopted an awed expression when he was finished.

“Oh, she’s wild? I just assumed because of how much she’s attached to you that she’d been your Pokémon. I can’t think of many trainers who would risk a storm like this to save a wild Pokémon, let alone a Dark type.”

That last comment caught Iruni’s bad side. “And what makes you say that? Why would you think any trainer should treat a Dark type any differently?” Iruni kept his voice down to not wake Sneasel.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you, really. It’s just that Dark types aren’t that popular with most people, so it’s a little unexpected to see someone go so far out of their way to help one. What you did tonight was brave and selfless and I wish all trainers followed your example, I do. I didn’t mean to offend.” The nurse at least looked sorry from what she said, so Iruni let it slide. “By the way, how did you get that bite on your hand? It was pretty deep.”

“My Houndour bit my hand through my glove to save me from falling on my broken shoulder.” Iruni couldn’t risk having the Sneasel being looked down on for something she did on instinct. “I tripped over a tree root that was covered in snow. It’s a good thing I had my gloves on, or I might be missing a few fingers. I can’t handle seeing so much blood, so I fainted. I should be fine once I get some food and some rest.” Luckily, there were bite marks on his glove to help solidify his story when the nurse went to investigate. She seemed satisfied with his answer.

“Since that Sneasel is wild, do you plan on keeping her?”

Iruni mulled the question over for a few moments before responding. “I’d like to, but I don’t really know. I’d want wait to let her heal before I’d try anything like a battle against her, but I could always ask if she wanted stay with me.”

“Ask a Pokémon whether they wanted to be captured?” The nurse laughed.

“What’s so weird about that? Back when I saved my Houndour from a flock of Fearow, he agreed to come with me. It’s not that odd to me.”

“You sure are an interesting kind of trainer, you know that? You have no bias towards Dark types, defend them even, and you braved a snowstorm just to save a Pokémon who might not even want anything to do with you.” The nurse finished her little giggle before continuing. “Do you mind if I ask you a favor?”

“What is it?”

“Well, I’m by no means an expert, but this Sneasel looks to be very young. I’d say she’s only about three to four weeks old, maybe a bit older. She’s too young to be on her own, even if she didn’t have a broken leg. If you would, I’d like you to take care of her to make sure her leg heals correctly, even if you don’t plan to keep her. I wouldn’t want her to be easy prey for some predator, and I doubt she’d be able to fend for herself very well without a working leg. As it is right now, we can’t take any long-term patients at the Center during this storm, or we might risk not having any facilities for emergencies. Besides, I doubt she’d mind if it was you helping her along.”

“I wouldn’t think of letting her out on her own in this condition. I’d love to look after her at least until she’s better, and she does seem to be grateful for me saving her life.”

“Thank you. I’d feel terrible if something happened to such a young one. And I have to admit, she
looks cute all curled up asleep on your lap.”

“Yeah, she does,” Iruni realized that he’d been petting her the entire time he’d been talking. Sneasel had a content expression on her face, not bothered by her condition in the slightest. *Oh man, what time is it? Crap, it’s almost five! Dad gets up in an hour.* Iruni handed the sleeping Pokémon to the nurse and got up to get his coat. “Karros, get up. Time to head home.” Breaking curfew was one of the few things Iruni’s father never looked the other way at.

“Mr. Thomas, you’re in no condition to head back out into that weather! I suggest you at least wait until morning before heading home.”

“Can’t do that. I’m fine, really, so long as I don’t see another blood bath. Thanks for everything, would it be alright if I came in from time to time to have you check up on her?”

“Oh, that would be perfectly fine. Here, I don’t want her waking up and scratching me again.” The nurse handed Iruni the sleeping Sneasel, and he cradled her as he did when he brought her in. Once she was safe to travel, Iruni thanked the nurse once more and headed out into the winter weather. Fortunately for them, the storm had since dwindled to a slight flurry with little wind, so the walk back to Iruni’s house went without incident.

Unfortunately, however, Iruni failed to notice that they were being watched every step of the way, a pair of eager eyes watching them as they entered the house from the back porch door. Their silent observer smirked once the group was in the house.

*Well then, isn’t this an interesting turn of events? I bet Ruby would love to hear about this…*  

Once Iruni got to his room without waking the rest of his family, he made sure to lock his door to deter any unwanted visitors in the early hours of the morning. Iruni laid the still sleeping Sneasel on his bed as he got out of his winter wear. She hadn’t woken up at all between home and the Pokémon Center. *She and Karros already have something in common. Let’s hope she’s not too against the change in scenery.* He made sure to hide his blood stained clothes discreetly, he’d worry about them in the morning. As Iruni got under the covers, Karros jumped up to the foot of his bed and draped a paw over the sleeping creature.

“Make sure she doesn’t fall off the bed, okay?”

Karros yawned as he laid his own head down to rest from the most active night he’d had in a long time. It didn’t take long for Iruni to join them.

*Mmm … It’s so nice and warm here… and soft too… really comfy… Oh, why is it so bright now…?*

Sneasel awoke with a start when she realized she wasn’t asleep in her den in one of the many caves within what the humans called Ice Path. Where she found herself was quite unlike any place she had been before.

All around her were strange objects and formations she didn’t recognize. A strange black rectangle sitting on a pedestal, with many other things attached to it with what she assumed were black vines of some sort, occasionally lit up with flashes of blue light, seemingly at random. A strange circle hung on the wall of the dwelling, with three lines surrounded by strange markings she didn’t recognize. She noticed that one of the lines moved at a constant speed, stopping at each of the small dashes around the perimeter of the circle.
She looked on the wall in front of her, and saw that the sun had risen, but the clouds were keeping most of the early morning light at bay. She could see snow falling out the opening in the wall, but none came into the room, and she felt no cold from the wind. As she continued to take in her new surroundings, she tried to stand up, only to find she was unable to move her left leg. When she looked at it, she saw it was covered in a hard and rough material, preventing any movement from her left leg. Now I remember... last night... that tree fell on me... I thought I wouldn’t make it... and then...

She looked to her left and saw the same Houndour from the previous night, sleeping on his back; legs sprawled out in an awkward fashion. He’s the one who pushed the tree off my leg... but where’s...? The answer to her unfinished thought came as a groan to her right. She saw the human who had carried her to safety, sleeping soundly underneath the soft and puffy sheet of material she had been sleeping on.

The human was sleeping on his right side, with his left arm draped over the bed in a vain attempt to stave off the morning brightness. The Sneasel noticed the odd garment he wore on his left shoulder, thinking it would make moving it around difficult. He’s the one who found me... and he took me to that place where that mean lady pushed on my leg... I guess it wasn’t just a bad dream... This place must be his den... I wonder why he brought me here?

The Sneasel crawled over to the human’s side of the strange soft square, and looked at his sleeping face. His long hair was draping over most of his face, and he wore a truly relaxed expression.

Why did this human save me? Why was he out in that storm? Did he hear my calls for help? The questioning creature noticed the bandage over his left hand, stained red. He saved me, risked that storm for me... and I attacked him... I didn’t mean to... I was scared... I thought he was going to hurt me... What if he’s mad at me? I didn’t mean to bite him...

She carefully moved closer to the sleeping human so as to not wake him. She sidled up close to his face and licked his cheek.

“Thank you for saving me... and I’m sorry for biting you...” Sneasel soon fell asleep under his arm, enjoying the flow of warmth from his body to hers.

———

To Be Continued...
Iruni Thomas was fast asleep, exhausted from the long night he had endured out in the snow to rescue the injured Sneasel. As he lay unconscious, his mind was mysteriously blank. Normally, dreams would play out in his head and leave a wistful sort of bittersweetness when he awoke the next morning. But tonight he did not dream.

He felt as if he was awake but he was clearly not in his room.

The world around him was darker than any night, but Iruni could clearly see his own hands in front of his face. Below his feet was no ground or floor that he could see, but kneeling down, he could feel some smooth surface. It was neither hot nor cold, the same as the air, if there was any to breathe. Iruni checked his arms and legs and found that his injuries were no longer present on himself in this strange place.

Iruni wondered whether this place was simply a dream gone wrong; a clean slate to be painted on but nothing had formed to keep his mind occupied, and his mind wished to wander anyway.

As far as he could see, the place stretched on forever. Iruni walked for an unknown time, but nothing around him ever changed. His footsteps made soft thuds as they landed on the “ground”, but they did not seem to echo.

The lucid experience was beginning to wear on him. Nothing changed and nothing happened for as long as Iruni waited. Traditional dreams would have actions, words, feelings, or emotions that he would be a part of. Here he had full control of his body and mind, but nothing to do with it. The black void of nothingness only ate at his nerves and made him anxious.

“Why am I aware right now?” asked Iruni. “What am I supposed to do until I wake up?”

‘I’m sorry.’

The unknown voice seemed to come from everywhere at once, startling Iruni and making him fall down onto the blank surface he stood on.

“Who was that?” he shouted into the darkness. Iruni got up and spun on the spot, eyes straining to see anything around him.

‘I’m so sorry.’

“Sorry for what?” Iruni decided to engage the voice. He felt a sort of pressure weighing down on him, like something was clinging to the back of his neck.

‘I’ve been trying for so long to fix what I’ve broken all by myself. Then I saw you. I got excited.’ The voice sounded sad and remorseful.

“What are you talking about?” Iruni asked. “You’re not making any sense.”

‘That’s okay. I just... have to make sure of something. I wanted to ask you now, to know for the future.’

“Ask me what?”
‘If you had the chance to help someone right a wrong, to make amends with another person they have wronged, would you do it?’ the voiced asked.

Iruni thought the question over. It seemed too simple and innocent to be so important. “Why wouldn’t I? There’s no reason to let someone get away with hurting someone else.”

‘What if it meant throwing away your fate?’

“My fate?” repeated Iruni. “What do you mean?”

‘You wouldn’t know it, not unless I came to you in the waking world, but your future would become something else, a life going along a path that I need you to. You might never meet someone you were supposed to. You would live out your life, but it wouldn’t really be “yours”.’

“Then…” Iruni went over the proposal. It was terrifying to think about, but he didn’t feel this voice was threatening him with the scenario they had explained. They didn’t sound committed to the plan just yet. “No, I wouldn’t do it. No matter how much you want to fix a mistake you’ve made, you shouldn’t control the lives of others.”

‘I see…’ the voice said, disappointed. ‘How very human. Never willing to give up their free will or their way of life.’

“Are you calling me selfish?” Iruni accused. “Do you expect me to just throw away everything I have planned for whatever you want from me?”

‘You misunderstand…’ said the voice. ‘I was merely… comparing you to someone I knew. It was a compliment, I assure you.’

“Well, okay then.” Iruni was having trouble understanding this strange presence’s purpose for coming to him. “What is it about me that you decided to ask this of me?”

‘Only you can do what I need.’

“Do what?”

‘It’s only ever you. Every time I look, there you are. Both of you.’

“Both of who? You’re not answering my questions.”

‘It hardly matters now. You are going to help me. That can’t be changed now. It never could.’

“What? What do you mean?” Iruni felt fear rise up inside himself. He felt desperation from this strange voice. “I don’t know what you are, but no one has the right to alter the future of someone else.”

‘I do have that right. I’ve done it before.’

“Get someone else to help you!” Iruni yelled.

‘There is no one else,’ the voice said, defeated. ‘You’re the only one who ever helps me!’

“You’re not making sense again,” Iruni warned, but he considered their words again. “You’ve looked into my future, is that right?”

‘Yes.’
“Did you… already know what I would say before you came here?” Iruni asked.

‘No, not for sure. I don’t have a clear vision of the future, but I can see timelines and possibilities. The only ones that look like I can finally fix my mistake, you’re there. Helping me.’

“But I said ‘no’ just now,” Iruni protested. “I don’t want to lose whatever future I already have ahead of me. If I refuse you here now, doesn’t that change those futures you saw?”

‘No,’ said the voice. ‘because I already told you; I’m sorry. I’m very sorry, but you won’t remember this conversation. You’ll become involved in my problem even if I do nothing, but you’ll be cared for and guided along the way.’

“Don’t!” Iruni pleaded. “That’s not a life! That’s a prison.”

‘In the future, when you’ve had the chance to see the world, you may change your tone.’

“I’m saying ‘no’ now!” Iruni swung at the darkness, but his fist hit nothing. “Nothing… will change your mind? I’ll just become a tool for you to use?”

‘I am not as cruel as you think I am. This terrible life you are imagining right now is what I’m trying to correct. There’s another life that I… interfered with. I want to fix what I’ve done and you’re the only one who can help save them.’

“I…” Iruni sat down on the blank ground, struggling to put his thoughts together. “How different will my life be? You can see that, can’t you? Telling me now won’t matter if you’re just going to take my memories away.”

‘True enough…’ the presence in Iruni’s mind was silent for a long moment. ‘Like I said, you will likely never notice the differences, but what is different will actually prolong your life by a significant amount. I will only need to actively intervene once and that will save you from an early death.’

“And why should I believe you?” Iruni asked.

‘You don’t?’

Iruni did believe what the voice had told him. He was going to set out and begin his Pokémon trainer career soon, so it stood to reason that he might find himself in dangerous situations as he traveled the region. If he was none the wiser to his altered fate, would his future self care?

“You aren’t very trusting,” Iruni said. “Not showing your face and doing all of this to me… If I agree to do this, can I at least ask you to do something for me?”

‘I suppose.’

“This major intervention you have planned in my future,” Iruni stood defiantly. He did not know where to look into the darkness, but he stared intently as if he had locked eyes with whatever had been speaking with him.

“I want you to show yourself to me, who or whatever you are. Try and convince me again, face to face.”

‘I… will try.’

“When—I know I probably won’t remember, but—when will you change my life?”

‘Your life… I won’t need to change a thing for about… three and a half months. That time will be
entirely yours.’

“When you show up to me then, will you tell me about this?” he gestured to the blank void around him. “Will you tell my future self that I agreed to help you?”

‘I don’t know about that,’ the voice said. ‘If you found out that kind of knowledge, you might start working against me.’

“You know, I probably would,” Iruni agreed. “I don’t like this now.”

‘I don’t expect you to forgive me for what I will do,’ said the voice. ‘But I hope that in your future, you find yourself a reason to agree to help me on your own.’

“What do you mean?”

‘Maybe something precious to hold onto?’ the voice suggested. ‘Or someone?’

The black void that had imprisoned Iruni’s mind drifted away and was soon replaced with an innocent dream. Iruni continued sleeping soundly throughout the encounter with the strange presence. He unconsciously held the wild Sneasel, who occasionally snuggled closer to the human as she slept, safely against his chest. Further down on the bed Iruni’s Houndour lay over the human’s feet.

Hovering just above the three slumbering individuals, a fourth being looked down on them as they slept the early morning away.

“I’m sorry,” they said. “If you don’t know I’m here, maybe it’ll all be alright. You can hate me for the rest of your lives, but for now… try to enjoy yourselves.”

The uninvited guest teleported away without a sound.

Iruni and the two Pokémon continued to sleep, unaware that their fate had become forever altered.

To be continued…
Meetings of Great Influence

It was not until the sun had finally broken through the clouds did the snowstorm cease its relentless assault on northern Johto. It had been the largest snowstorm for quite some time. That, at least, the weather reporters got right. City workers had been hard at work since the early morning, trying to clear the roadways of the snow and ice. Any natural pathway held nearly two feet of accumulated precipitate, hiding all natural formations or characteristics beneath it, leaving a blank, white canvas across the land. With the arrival of the blazing sun, the city workers toiled with renewed vigor to clear the roads of Mahogany Town.

The late afternoon sun had done little to melt any snow that had fallen, but was doing wonders for removing Iruni from his unconscious state. The vibrant orange and yellow rays cascaded into his room, unimpeded by the curtains he forgot to close the previous day. The room’s occupants were still asleep, trying to recover from the events of the previous night and early morning. Iruni however, was finding it hard to stave off waking up any longer. In addition to the blinding sunlight, there were numerous conditions urging him to awaken for the day: hunger, pain, and the occasional tickle across his face.

What keeps hitting my face? Iruni struggled to open his eyes in the bright room. When he did, he was met with a pink feather barely brushing against his face. In the morning grogginess, it took him a few moments to recognize its origin. The young Sneasel had curled up against his bare chest, her head resting just below his collarbone. Iruni found that in his night movements, his left arm had, as much as his brace would allow, draped over the small creature. Surprisingly enough, this did not cause him too much pain. Iruni gently stroked the fur on the top of the Sneasel’s head, eliciting a contended murmur in her sleep.

Who put you here, I wonder…? Iruni took a few seconds to look for Karros, finding him lying half off the bed, front legs and head draped over the side. I guess you did it yourself then. That’s just adorable.

As he contemplated getting up for the day, he thought, Note to self: Don’t let Karros babysit.

Reacting to Iruni moving about on the bed, the Sneasel kept nudging closer to him, not wanting to be without his presence. She tried her best to stay next to him, until he finally stood up out of bed. Without his warmth against her, she began whining softly, and wore a wanting expression. Iruni bent down and gently stroked her head; Sneasel leaned into each pass and mewed contently.

“You’re such a cute little thing. If you don’t want to stay, I think I’ll be a bit sad to see you go,” he said quietly. Iruni pulled the covers over her, which seemed to placate her for the time being. Soon, she began sleeping peacefully once more. He passed by the foot of his bed without bothering to wake Karros; he’d be out for a while. He looked to his clock; it was nearly six o’clock in the evening.

Damn, it’s late. I wonder why no one’s come to wake me up? As he put on a shirt, he remembered the bandage on his hand. He looked at the slightly stained gauze, and wondered how to explain yet another injury to his family.

Iruni sighed, How in all the hells am I going to explain this? If I play it off as Karros again, they might buy it, but his teeth won’t match the mark if they checked it. Speaking of, I wonder if it’ll scar too badly? His eyes drifted to the sleeping Sharp Claw creature on his bed one last time. I don’t think
they’d care too much if they found out it was you. Who knows how long I could even keep it hidden, considering she lives here… I guess I’ll have to tell them about you eventually. How I can even bring this up?

With that, Iruni began his descent into the rest of his house. It was oddly barren—considering the time of day and the current weather he had expected some activity. As he wandered about the house, Iruni had a strange sense of forgetfulness about him.

Why I can’t remember if I dreamed at all last night? Usually when I sleep this long, I can at least remember some of them… A cursory glance at his driveway noted that his father’s truck was gone. Iruni assumed he was either helping with clearing the roads. More likely, he was finding any sort of hill to ski down. That left Kate, and her Pokémon, unaccounted for.

While it seemed a bit inappropriate due to the time of day, Iruni set out for breakfast foods nonetheless.

“I should get some Pokémeal for those two. I wonder if I should get some special kind for young Pokémon for Sneasel. Though… I can’t remember if they make any specialty kinds… This’ll do fine for now.” Iruni set aside two dishes of food for his sleeping Dark types, and set about finding his own sustenance.

“I guess I could make some pancakes. I hope we ha—”

Iruni stopped what he was doing mid-step. Not because he wanted to, or because he remembered something; he had been stopped by something. He had lost his voice, for all the good talking would do him. Some unseen force bound his arms and legs. Try as he might to get his body under control, it continued to obey the commands of another. Despite the sudden assault on his nervous system, Iruni didn’t seem too surprised. He had a good idea as to who set about relieving him of his basic motor skills.

‘What is it, Ruby?’ Iruni had gotten used to her Psychic antics over the years—Ruby loved to toy with Iruni’s head, and today seemed no different.

‘Aww, you’re no fun. I didn’t even get to say “Guess who?”’ Ruby leapt up on the counter and leisurely strolled up to Iruni, relinquishing her hold on him. His sister’s Espeon sat and stared the human in the eyes. ‘You really need to lighten up a bit, kiddo. No wonder your dad didn’t want you leaving so soon.’

“But I am leaving,” he said as he gathered some syrup for his belated breakfast, and put it in the microwave to heat it up a bit, “He’s agreed to it. And despite what you might think, even Kate thinks I’ll be fine.”

‘Everyone makes a wrong call now and again you know.’

“Tell her that, why don’t you,” he watched the syrup spin slowly in the microwave, the contents slowly becoming more fluid.

Ruby flicked her two-pronged tail at his face. The Espeon grinned, ‘Hey, guess what?’

“What is it now?”

‘You smell nice.’

“Uh… thank you?” This was odd, even for Ruby, for her to compliment Iruni unexpectedly.
‘I bet you can’t guess what you smell like to me. It’s strong too. I’m surprised you can’t tell.’

“You’re starting to get a bit creepy on me Ruby,” Iruni said. The microwave started to beep, signaling a completed cycle, “Let me eat my food in peace for once and—”

“You smell like blood. And lots of it.” Iruni found himself paralyzed again. He found that he could still control his eyes, and met her stare with his own. Ruby’s red gem gleamed in the light, ‘Alright, spill it. Why are you up so late?’

“You know I sleep a lot, it’s nothing catastrophic.’

‘I suppose. But look over there. Two servings of Pokémeal? I know that Houndour of yours eats, but he’s no glutton.’ Ruby held her stern gaze on Iruni’s eyes.

‘He hasn’t eaten since lunchtime yesterday. If he doesn’t eat it all, I’ll save what’s left for later.’ Iruni was feeling a bit uneasy at this barrage of questions.

‘Oh, getting a little defensive, are we? That’s quite the drive you have going there. Maybe you could earn a gym badge or two.’ Iruni still couldn’t manage to free his mind from the clutches of the Sun Pokémon. ‘But what,’ Iruni felt his left hand rise up out in front of him, blood-stained bandage in plain view, ‘happened here? Care to elaborate?’

How does she keep asking all the right questions? he thought. Iruni should have remembered that Espeon could read the thoughts of humans. His mind was an open book; it was at mercy to Ruby’s every inquiry.

‘How do I, I wonder?’ she said with a smirk. Ruby didn’t seem like she was trying to hide how much she was enjoying toying with Iruni. She had developed a liking to watching him squirm under her influence over the years.

This is what I hate about Psychic types, always so damn intrusive. Still, Iruni was open to her.

‘It’s what we do.’

‘Get out of my head, Ruby! Let me go, now!’

‘I’d love to, but not until we go on a little walk. A walk isn’t so bad, is it? Besides, you have someone waiting on you. By the way, you sure do know how to have fun out in a blizzard.’ With that, Ruby leapt up to Iruni’s uninjured shoulder and took control of his motor skills. She walked him out of the kitchen, his body traveling subject to her whims.

A dull thud, followed by a yelp, was what brought Sneasel back into the waking world. She sat up—a task she found more difficult with the thick blanket that now covered her. She was in the room she found herself in when she last awoke, but this time sunlight was pouring in through the open window, allowing her to see what the strange den held in detail. She also noticed—aside from the fact that she was covered by the strange, heavy fabric—that she was alone on the bed. Surveying the now blindingly bright room, she could find no source of the noise that had awoken her until a pained groan soon drew her attention to the edge of the bed.

“That’s just a bad way to wake up…” After shaking his head to rid himself of his post-slumber delirium, Karros jumped back up onto the bed, and took notice of the creature eying him. “Oh, hey. Nice to see you’re up and about.” Karros padded over to the still waking Sneasel. “Did I wake you?”
“I guess so… who’re you?” she asked as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

“The name’s Karros. I pushed that tree off you last night and got us out of those woods,” he said with a little annoyance in his tone, perhaps annoyed he made so little of an impression.

“Oh, that’s right! I’m sorry,” she reached up and gave him a hug around his neck. “Thanks… um…?” she had a nervous expression on her face.

“Karros, and you’re welcome.” He began to head over to his side of the bed, intending to get some more sleep before Iruni inevitably came back up with the delusion of getting anything done today. The quizzical young Dark type however, seemed to have more on her mind.

“No, I remembered, but… um…”

“What’s the matter?”

“That human that was with you, the one who carried me… is he still here?” she asked as she looked around nervously.

“Oh, my trainer? His name’s, well, he goes by Iruni, but his first name is something different. I can’t remember it, but I know it’s kinda long. All I know is that he hates being called that, so he decided to go by ‘Iruni’. He’s here, but not right here. My guess is that he went down to get some food. I doubt he’ll be gone too long.”

“So… his name is ‘runi?’” asked Sneasel.

“Iruni,” he repeated.

“‘runi.”

“Eh, close enough. Like I said, he’ll probably be back up here sometime so—,” Karros ended that with sudden sneeze, a few embers of flame escaping his maw. “He’ll probably— Hey, what’s the matter?” Sneasel had hidden her face from him, quivering in fear at the sight of the accidental bit of fire.

“I—I… I don’t like fire… Please don’t burn me…” she looked up at him with a terrified face, but hid herself again as he approached her.

“Listen,” he said as he laid a paw on her shoulder, “I’m not going to hurt you. That was an accident. I promise I won’t let it happen again. You’re safe here.” Karros wasn’t too experienced in comforting anyone else but his message got through.

“R—Really?” she could barely muster the courage to face the fire hound, but the sincerity of his voice won through the fear.

“I promise. As long as you’re here, I’ll make sure you’re safe. So will Iruni. He’ll probably do more than I could anyway. So just relax until he comes back, hopefully with food.” He went back to lay down next to the Sneasel, who seemed much more at ease being near the fire-dog.

“Alright. I’m really hungry, now that I think about it. I’m sorry I was afraid of you…” she reached out to hug his neck once more. “No more fire?”

“I’ll try my best, I promise. Those sneezes have been a bad habit of mine for years. Once, at one of Iruni’s birthday parties, let’s just say the fire department wasn’t there for the cake.” Even though many references were lost to her, Sneasel could tell he was trying to cheer her up, and she laughed
along with him.

“I’m sorry, again. I just—”

“Hey, it’s not your fault. Just instinct I guess. Don’t apologies about it.” He felt another sneeze coming on and stifled it. “Like I was saying before I almost set the whole house ablaze. Anyway, Iruni probably went down to get some food and he’ll probably be back with some for us pretty soon. So until then, just relax, and get some rest. That’s what I plan on doing.” He gave her a reassuring pat on the head, and went to lay back down.

In the minutes that followed, Sneasel took her first real look around the room. While she was looking around, she noticed that it had stopped snowing outside. “Hey, Karros…?”

He had been trying to sleep, but he didn’t expect to get far with such a curious creature sharing the bed. “Hm, yeah?”

“How did you find me last night? You and ‘runi I mean.” This had been nagging at her since she woke up.

“He heard you. Well, we both did, but Iruni was the first to hear your calls for help. It was kinda odd though, he could hear you well before I did, and what I heard was very faint. He was really determined to find you too; something really drove him to make sure he found what was making those screams. Surprising, especially considering him going out in the storm as he was.”

“What do you mean? Is something wrong with him?”

“Well, a few days ago, he was hurt pretty badly. He had a bad run-in with a Gyarados up at the lake, but he rushed out into the storm without a second thought. He almost hurt himself even more when we were trying to find you, but he never gave up. He kept saying, ‘I have to find who’s in trouble,’ over and over again. I hardly ever see him that determined.” Karros told her of everything that happened that night, up until they reached the house.

“Wow… He went through all of that… just to help me?” Her eyes betrayed her awe as Karros finished explaining the story. To think that someone would go through the trouble of braving such a powerful snowstorm to save her, all the while bearing an injury, was almost too much for her.

He nodded, “Iruni’s a good guy. He did the right thing, at the right time. You and I have that in common it seems.”

“Hmm? How?”

“Well, I was originally from a forest outside Saffron City, in Kanto. Pretty far away from here. One day, I tried to get at some Spearow eggs while their nests were unattended. Long story short, the parents weren’t very happy when they found me stalking around their nests,” he sighed. “They were brutal. They didn’t even stop attacking me when their eggs were safe from danger. No, they were intent on killing me. Iruni happened to be with his family in Saffron that day while on vacation in Kanto, and they were passing by where it all happened. He managed to scare off the Fearow with the help of his sister, but not without taking some damage himself. If you ever get a good look at his back, you’ll probably see some lingering marks from those damn birds.”

“And you stayed with him?”

“Yeah. He officially caught me later on when we got back here, but there wasn’t much opposition on my part.”
“Caught’ you? What’s that?”

“It means that—here,” Karros got up and jumped to the floor. Sneasel could see him reach up and grab something off the large pedestal-like structure at the end of the room. He came back with a small, round sphere in his mouth. It was half red and half white, with a dark line splitting down its center. He set down the plain Poké Ball where she could get a good view of it.

“This is called a ‘Poké Ball’. It’s what humans use to ‘catch’ Pokémon with. From what I know, there are a lot of different kinds of these things, but this one here is mine,” explained Karros.

“What does it do?” asked Sneasel.

Karros was beginning to feel his pride swell despite being aware that his teachings were common knowledge. “Here, watch this. In a few seconds, press this button I’m about to push, alright?”

Sneasel nodded, and Karros pressed his paw on the button on the red and white orb. In a blinding flash of light, he warped into the ethereal space that characterized the invention. The Sneasel was, suffice to say, surprised at his disappearance. She looked around fervently for him, but could not find a trace of the Dark Pokémon she was just talking to. Then she remembered what she had been told and tapped the button on the center of the ball with one of her dull claws. In a flash the same as the first, Karros was once again standing in front of her.

“As you can see, I just went into the Ball. Humans use these to carry their Pokémon around with them when they travel. It’s usually up to the trainer if they want to keep their Pokémon in their balls or not, but Iruni lets me out when I feel like it. Whenever we go somewhere though, I usually go inside. I hate walking.” Karros picked his Poké Ball back up and put it back where he found it.

This development left her amazed. “Wow! Those are neat. Do I have one, Karros?”

“No, actually,” he jumped back up onto the bed, “You’re still free. Iruni hasn’t caught you.”

“Oh… Will he? Do you think?” Sneasel had a disappointed expression.

“Well,” he yawned, “I heard him saying to the nurse at the Pokémon center, where we got your leg patched up, that he’d leave it up to you. He did the same for me back in Kanto. As I said, there wasn’t much thought on my part, I immediately agreed. I have to say; these past six years have been good to me. Iruni’s a good friend, he treats me well, and we’re planning an adventure soon.” Karros had been longing for the day he and Iruni would set out on their journey. Finally, he’d be able to see what the world had in store for him. “So, Sneasel, what do you think of Iruni?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what do you think of him? If you decide to stay, you’ll have to at least like the guy. In general terms, really. Do you like him?”

“I,” she started fidgeting with her head feather, “I guess I do like him. I mean, I just met him, but he seems nice. He saved me, and he took me to get help for my leg. He brought me back here too. And I think he likes me too…” she stayed silent for a time.

“Karros?” Sneasel spoke up.

“Yeah?”

“You—You don’t think he’s mad at me, do you?” she had her head lowered; her voice held a regretful tone.
“For what?”

“For biting him last night. I really didn’t mean to. But I was really scared. And he bled a lot. He could’ve died! All he was doing was trying to help me and—” she began to tear up a bit.

“Hey, now stop with that. It should be obvious to you that he isn’t mad at you. Look at how much he’s cared for you, even after just meeting you. He made sure you got care before he did. He brought you here, to his home. He’s already considered letting you stay if you wanted to. I don’t that in all the years I’ve known him, I’ve ever seen him get mad at anything. Sure minor things maybe, but I know him. He isn’t going to think any differently of you because of what you did. You were scared, and you acted on instinct. He knows it. You know it. I know it. You worry too much. Now just relax for a bit until we get our… well obviously not ‘breakfast’.” They had a good, long laugh. With the tension in the air gone with the recent snowstorm, Karros had a much more positive thought for conversation.

“So, I guess I’ll ask you now, but I’m sure Iruni will bring this up soon anyway. Do you want to stay here, with Iruni and me? It’s entirely up to you. He says you’re welcome to leave once your leg is better, but until then, he thinks you should stay here.”

“What will happen if I stay?”

“Well, he’ll catch you, like he did me, and you’ll probably come with us when we leave for our journey. But that won’t be until Iruni’s injuries are fixed up.”

“What’s gonna happen on the journey? Where will we go?”

Karros began to sound off an explanation he remembered his human master once give him, “The typical trainer life style consists of a trainer and his team of Pokémon—six at most, but sometimes people carry more—as they travel around the country, taking part in Pokémon battles, catching more Pokémon, and most importantly, competing in the regional Gym Circuit. Trainers from all over travel around the country to the eight gyms in their respective region. There, they challenge the Gym Leader to a battle, for that Gym’s Badge. Once a trainer has all the badges in the circuit, they challenge the Elite Four, and if they win, compete for the Championship title, by challenging the current Champion,” Karros was starting to become a bit weary from having to explain so much. “He’s told me a lot about the region, and what to expect, but we’ll still be out there in the wild. Who knows what will happen?” He began gazing out the window, watching the sun begin to set.

“That sounds really exciting! I don’t really get a lot of what you said, but I’ve always wondered what the rest of the world looked like, and I’ll get to see it with you guys! I’d love to stay.” She wore a sunny look, infinitely more suited to her character, as opposed to her previously sour demeanor.

“Well, I expected as much. You seemed to take to Iruni in no time, and I didn’t think it’d take much to sway you. I know he wants you to come with us, but he’ll come to you with what I said later I bet.” He laid his head down on the bed once more, hopefully to get some more sleep before his trainer returned.

“Hey, what do you think he’ll name me like you? I wonder what it’ll be like. What do you think he’ll pick, Kar? Hey… C’mon, what do you think? Tell me…” Karros looked up to see the excited face of a Sneasel who seemed intent on not letting him sleep, and began dreading what having such a lively creature on the team could mean for his sleep schedule.

[“… … … Hello?”]
"It's about time you answered your damn phone! Where’ve you been?"

"I had a conference over in Goldenrod. And with that snowstorm causing hell up north, I decided to stay there a few days to see if it would hit us."

"Why didn’t you get any of my messages?! Don’t you have your computer on you?"

"I did bring it with me, or I thought I did when I left. Turns out it never got packed."

"I swear, you are the most unorganized professional I’ve ever had the misfortune of being associated with. Check the most recent one and go over the attachment."

"We’re not already going ahead with Cartographer are we? I thought we had more time."

"Well then, check the other twenty documents I’ve sent you, and tell me we have 'more time'! I’ve already contacted everyone, and they’re ready to move at a moment’s notice. I just need your confirmation on that list I sent you. Three. Days. Ago."

"Alright, sheesh. Let me pull it up … … … … Hey, this third one, I’ve heard about him. He’s an up-and-coming trainer from my region."

"Yes, Auburn passed his name to me, so I can assume he’ll do just fine. How about the rest?"

"Well, this list looks good on my end."

"Alright then, I’ll forward this list to everyone else then. You go prep everything that you need to as soon as you can; we’re all set for them over here."

"Alright. Contact me again if any problems come up."

"… … …"

Hanging up the phone, Professor Oak sat back in his office chair in his lab, “Project Cartographer has begun. I hope we’re not too late.”

———

Bitter cold, blinding sunlight, and a severe lack of oxygen. These were the current top-three on his list of “Things I really could do without right now”. Rather than be trapped in the behemoth weather disturbance that was just now dwindling below him, he had opted to fly above it, into the realm of Rayquaza. A risky move for anyone unprepared, but he was well aware of the implications of his chosen flight path. Giovanni’s concern was currently centered on his means of transportation. While his mount was a strong creature to be sure, it was unfamiliar to the high demands that he usually puts on his Pokémon.

“How are you holding up, Honchkrow?” he yelled over the deafening roar of the passing wind. He had to keep a firm grip on his hat, lest it fall to the impossible winds below. His large coat was doing what it could to stave off the bitter cold of the upper altitude. While it was proving effective for his body, it left his hands and face at the mercy of their stinging torment.

His Big Boss Pokémon cawed back an affirmative response, letting his trainer be at ease. His wings were screaming at him for a reprieve from their seemingly endless task, and his lungs burned with every breath, but he pressed on regardless.

“We’ll be landing soon. I can see the mountaintop just a few miles off. Try to land a ways below the
summit. We can’t really show up falling from the sky and expect a warm welcome.”

Giovanni wasn’t expecting to be greeted with open arms even if he had sent word months ahead of time. His intended audience wasn’t too amiable when it came to old ‘friends’. It hardly mattered now however; the option of arriving unawares were forfeited long ago, when he spotted a large, orange, dragon-like beast flying just to the west of them confirmed his suspicions as to the whereabouts of his target. Once the beast spotted their approach, it sped up and headed off toward their destination, no doubt alerting its master of their impending arrival. Without receiving a Blast Burn from below, Giovanni took that to mean that he didn’t pose much of a threat to him.

After diving back into the clouds and landing, it was merely a lengthy hike up the side of the mountain face. His Honchkrow flew close by and low to the ground, forgoing receding into his ball to escape the now-present barrage of hail and snow. They were well above the tree line, where the fresh snow met old. Underneath the new powder were layers of permafrost, unhawed for decades at a time. The man’s footsteps left a crunching sound under as he marched ever forward. As they increased their altitude, the remnants of the snowstorm began to be less prevalent; soon the blizzard had lessened to nothing more than the falling of tiny ice crystals. They sparkled in the setting sun, like diamonds falling from the heavens.

Finally, after nearly two days of flying in blinding sun, bitter cold, and air that made his lungs spit back out, he found his quarry. He was harder to track down than one would expect, considering a reputation like his. Normally, any trainer who sought this man out would be hard-pressed to find out where he was, let alone survive the resultant confrontation. Luckily, for the ex-Gym Leader, he wasn’t looking for a mountaintop battle today. Not to say he didn’t expect one.

Giovanni’s target stood casually atop a mound covered in snow, hands in the pockets of his jacket, facing away from the setting sun, his features eluding any cursory glance. He wore no attire that would be suitable for the current climate; a t-shirt covered with a red and white jacket, blue jeans, a pair of seemingly uninteresting shoes, a plain backpack, and a simple red hat. Despite this, he showed no concern for the cold around him. A small, yellow creature resided on his shoulder. Its ears perked up at the approach of their first visitor in many weeks. The trainer continued to pay no attention to the company who had just appeared, but Giovanni knew he was clearly aware of his arrival. He had to calm his Honchkrow and reassure him that they weren’t walking to their doom.

The silent young man simply went by the name “Red”.

“Do you have any idea how hard it was to find you?” Giovanni asked him. “You made such a name for yourself, and yet naught a soul could tell me where you were. Luckily, I have a few good sources left who can give me a straight answer every now and then,” he then turned to whisper a command to his large bird Pokémon. “Go ahead and land, get some rest. If he’s in a bad mood we might need to take our leave rather quickly, but I’m going to try and make sure our business is concluded before flying again.”

The Honchkrow nodded and landed next to his trainer. The winged Dark type would be lying if he thought he wasn’t worried. Even with their target facing away from them, it was clear from his mere presence that he could easily wipe them out without much effort.

Red took his time in facing his company, showing no sign of interest or urgency in his movements. He didn’t seem angry to see Giovanni again after all these years, but it had been a long while since anyone had seen any emotion on Red’s face. He merely stood there, silently gazing into his seeker’s eyes. A cold and calculating stare that exuded enough meaning to make any sort of vocalized warning an unnecessary act.

“Oh, come now. We can cut it out with the ‘death-stare’ can’t we? We’ve been through this all
before. We both know that, as of now, I would have a hard time stopping anything you could throw at me, so let us forgo all this pent up hostility.”

When he didn’t get a rise out of him, Giovanni shook his head. “But, I can guess what that look in your eye means; you’re probably wondering why I’ve shown myself now, and to you of all people,” Giovanni kept at his rant without breaking his gaze from Red’s—if he did, he knew he’d be wide open for an attack. “Coming here wasn’t my first option, but it was my best one, despite the fact that your people would love to get their hands on me again. I didn’t come here to pick a fight for some petty vengeance, just to talk. Like reasonable adults.” He opened his coat to show that his five occupied Ultra Balls were clearly in locked stasis, and that his Honchkrow would stay out in the open.

“Your sparky little rodent could make quick work of my feathered friend here, I’m not so blind to the fact that any sort of attack on you would fail, even if I tried it. I’m asking for ten minutes to plead my case, then I’ll let you get back to your solidarity.”

For a moment, Red acted as if he hadn’t even heard Giovanni’s proposal. His Pikachu lowered its ears and began to build up electricity, sparks crackling around its cheeks, but Red lifted a hand to halt his attack. He sat down on the mound of snow and rested his elbows in his knees. He extended his hand out toward the man garbed in black, five fingers extended, never once breaking the stare he had on him.

“Wow, five minutes? You’re as generous as you look.”

When Red lowered two of his fingers in response. Giovanni laughed, “And a sense of humor to boot! The years have been good to you my friend.” Two fingers remained raised.

“Alright, fine. I’ll cut to the chase. Like I said, I didn’t come here to fight; I came here to ask for your help. Not for you to join me in a feeble attempt at global domination, however likely of a plan that would be, but of mere cooperation. My sources tell me of a small group about to try to bring about some sort of wrong doings, the nature of which would generally be handled by you and your people, but so far, they’ve managed to stay quite under the radar. And normally, I wouldn’t give a rat’s ass if someone was plotting some debauchery here and there, but they’ve stumbled upon something that could actually prove to my disadvantage.

“I know what they’re planning, because I was the one who had planned to do it originally. I’ve come here for your support, as I have already gained a few new cohorts to support my efforts; I think you could be a valuable asset.” Red had only his index finger raised at this point, and it was slowly curling back into his palm. “Alright, I get it. I’ll have to show you something then. These people have taken some bits and pieces of a plan I had thought up a while back, but I scrapped the idea for bigger opportunities. They have barely the outline of the plan, but what they have could be very detrimental should they enact it,” the Pokémon Trainer from Pallet Town kept his finger aloft, “But luckily, as far as I know, they never found out about this plan’s back up. Something to use should the original source not be available. Once I got wind of these people dredging up my old work, I worked out a contingency scheme so that when their efforts do inevitably fail, they won’t be able to start back up again, even if they figure out my back up.”

Giovanni opened his coat and withdrew a large jewel, about the size of a small melon. The many facets that reflected the orange light of the setting sun, obscuring its natural light-blue tint, offset its smooth surface. This move actually resulted in wrenching a look of surprise from the younger trainer’s usual calm expression.

“Ah, you know what this is then? Wonderful. That’ll save me some breath—It sure is hard to breathe up here, isn’t it? They’ll need this to make the plan work if the main one fails. I came here to ask you
His sentence was cut short as Red extended his finger in his direction. Hardly a moment later, a gleaming metallic cannon extended from out beneath the mound of snow on his right. A blast of super pressurized water shot straight toward Giovanni, carving a new ravine into the side of Mt. Silver. The trainer stood, and his Blastoise followed suit, shaking off the snow that covered him. Red looked up and saw that his target had evaded the Hydro Cannon.

He hovered just above the site where the deadly attack had barely missed him seconds prior. His Honchkrow was true to its word, and made for an escape. He wasn’t shooting to kill. He’s still soft.

They began their descent down the side of the mountain, with as much haste as the bird could spare, “Well that sure didn’t go as planned, did it?”

Just as he finished the phrase, a rather determined Charizard with his trainer and electric partner on his back, came soaring down from clouds above. Further down the mountainside, a Venusaur was lying in wait, just inside the tree line, absorbing the surrounding trees and plant life and aiming a slew of Frenzy Plant attacks in his direction. As if anything ever goes as planned when he’s involved.

If the staff at the Pokémon Center at the base of Mt. Silver weren’t busy answering the seemingly random questions of a red haired trainer and his Dark type partner, they all would’ve been able to look outside and see the sky light up in a brilliant display of yellow and orange. Not from the setting sun, the thick clouds and snow blocked out any light coming from the sky, but from the many Blast Burns and Thunderbolts that were clearing sections of mountainside that had been snow-covered for decades.

‘You mind letting me go anytime soon?’ asked Iruni.

Ruby was taking her time, leading Iruni around the house in a seemingly endless loop. This had been repeating itself for the past quarter hour. ‘Now if I did, you’d run away, wouldn’t you? Can’t have that.’

‘Then get whatever you’re trying to do over with. Karros and—’ he stopped himself before he said anything he shouldn’t, but it was a futile effort.

‘And who?’

‘Oh just shut up already. You know everything anyway. Why don’t you just run and tell my dad everything like I know you’re wanting to?’

‘As satisfying as that sounds, that would make this whole process worthless, wouldn’t it? Besides, your dad’s off doing something in town, he’ll be back later tonight. As to why I’m driving you around the house, I’m just enjoying some quality time with an old friend.’ Her sarcasm was evident, even through her mental voice.

‘That’s cute and all, but seriously, this is getting old! I don’t have the time to mess around with you.’

‘Oh will you calm yourself? Isn’t it nice to just— Oh?’ Ruby paused, ‘Yeah, he’s up. I have him here. No, he wouldn’t tell me anything. Yeah, that sounds like him. Now? Sure, heading to you now.’

‘What are you babbling about now?’
‘Looks like you’re getting your wish; she’s ready for us now.’

‘She’? Wait, Kate?’

‘You catch on quick; you’ll make a decent trainer yet. Now, let’s get to it.’ Silencing any further comments from Iruni, she led him through the house to her trainer’s room. Kate was sitting on her bed when they arrived. She had an expectant expression. As they entered, Ruby closed the door behind them, denying Iruni that particular escape route.

“Thanks a bunch, Ruby,” she said as Ruby leapt to the bed, and severed her control over Iruni’s body, “Now then, where do you want to start? Before or after you left the house last night? I’d love to hear it all.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Ruby’s just going on one of her crazy rants,” he said defiantly, hoping that he’d be able to lie his way out.

“Cut the bullshit, dammit! I don’t know everything that went on last night, but Ruby’s told me enough! She said you went out last night, and came back hours later, reeking of fresh blood! She also said there was something else, but wouldn’t tell me. This isn’t a joke, not some rebellious teenage act; this is serious! You go running around in a blizzard at night and come back soaked in blood and bandaged up, and you expect us to think you can live on your own as a trainer? Right now, Dad doesn’t know, but I’ll let you tell him yourself. I want you to explain what happened, and I hope you have a good enough reason.”

“How do you know Ruby’s even telling the truth? She could be lying you know.”

“Oh I believe her, Tom followed you last night and saw everything,” she motioned to have her Glaceon join in the conversation. He had been hiding under the covers of her bed before now, and held a proud stance as he showed himself to Iruni.

*That’s why I couldn’t see what was following us! Tom’s a Glaceon, they have natural camouflage in the snow. Hands down the worst gift Pryce ever gave Kate… I’ll be sure to ‘thank’ him, if I ever I get to challenge his Gym.* “Stupid Glaceon…” His offhand comment was met with the Eeveelution blowing snow into his face. “I’ll get you for that…”

“Hey, cut that out, both of you. You’re on the spot here, Iruni, not him. Anyway, I told Tom to wait outside for the next few nights to keep an eye out and make sure you wouldn’t go and do anything reckless now that Dad’s given you the go ahead to leave early. Sure enough, he saw you head out into that storm on the same night. But putting aside everything stupid you did, Tom told me he stopped following you after you had apparently spotted him, but he said you returned with something ‘interesting’, or at least that’s what Ruby says he said. She and Tom are being stubborn and won’t tell me everything they know or what you have with you, so I want you to tell me everything. Now.”

‘I know Kate, I’ll give you a hint: You know how I always said that his mutt always looked like a haze of static in my mind’s eye, right? Well guess what? I can clearly sense two balls of static up in his room right now. We told you it was ‘interesting’, didn’t we?’

“Shut up Ruby! You’re not helping!”

“And you’re stalling!” Kate stood up and looked him straight in the eye, “Tell me now, Iruni. I’m not doing this because I want to get you in trouble, I’m worried about what you’re going to be doing when you really leave home!” She looked down, “I mean look at your hand! How bad is that wound!? This is what I’m talking about! We can’t have you out in the wild and getting yourself hurt doing something reckless, or getting yourself killed. So, please, tell me what happened before I start...
assuming the worst.”

Iruni met his sister’s gaze as long as he could muster before finally relenting to Kate’s urgency.

“Alright, fine. I’ll tell you, but try and not freak out? It’s really not as bad as Ruby’s making it seem.”

He began retelling what had transpired that night in the storm. With Ruby and Tom putting in their
two cents here and there, it went slower than he had hoped. Unfortunately, with Tom’s testimony,
Iruni couldn’t lie and say that it was Karros who had marred his hand with a new set of scars. “It’s
not like she meant it. She was just acting on instinct,” Iruni explained as Kate began redressing the
wound after inspecting it. “How bad is it?”

“Well,” she paused, “It’ll scar, that much is for sure. Right now, just keep the wound’s covered up
and it shouldn’t reopen unless you try to use that hand too much. I can’t believe you were running
around with a wound this deep! You could’ve passed out in the snow and bled to death!”

“Oh, I get it, enough of the scolding already,” Iruni said. “I know it was reckless, but the Sneasel
might not be alive right now if it wasn’t for me. How’s that for an excuse for being out in the storm?”

“Well, it could’ve gone a lot worse, I guess. I’m glad you actually managed to do something
worthwhile instead of just acting a dumbass,” she laughed, and Iruni scowled back at her. “So now
there’s only one thing left to do now. Let me see her.”

“Who?”

“The Sneasel you almost got lost in a blizzard over, you idiot! She’s up in your room now, isn’t
she?”

‘Yes, she is.’ Ruby hopped off the bed and opened the door with a telekinetic pulse. ‘I’ll come with
you, if you don’t mind. It looks like that idiot brother of yours is planning on keeping the little runt,
so I’d better take a good look at what will be soon destroying the house.’

“Ruby! Don’t judge her before you even meet her!”

‘I don’t need to ‘meet’ her to know she’ll be trouble. You and your Dark types… You coming, hon?’
Tom shook his head, ‘Well then,’ She leapt back up onto Iruni’s shoulders, deciding not to take
control of his body this time, ‘Let’s get this over with.’

“I hate you sometimes, you know that Ruby?”

Kate usually let their little fights resolve themselves, and she was laughing at this point. After years
of near-constant fighting, it had become humorous to her.

‘I live for it. Now, let’s go already.’

The group had started to make its way up to Iruni’s room, when Kate asked, “So, do you plan on
keeping this Sneasel? Same deal with Karros then?”

“That’s the plan. I’ve been asked to take care of her until her leg heals, so she’ll be staying here at
least that long. I’ll ask her some other time, maybe after her leg’s healed, if she wants to stay. She
seemed to be grateful to me for saving her, so I think there’s a chance she’ll choose to stay.”

“Well, I’d suggest finding out soon, you’re telling Dad as soon as he gets back.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll get to it,” he said as he rounded the corner to the stairway leading to his room.
Ruby kept quiet for the most part, occasionally offering her own comments to anything Iruni had to
say. When they got up the stairs and to his room, he could hear sounds of commotion coming from inside his room.

I hope that’s Karros entertaining her.

He asked Kate and Ruby to wait outside while he went in to check on the two Dark Pokémon. He walked in to seeing the Sneasel restlessly poking Karros in the head, calling out in annoyance of his lack of response. At the return of his trainer, Karros shot him a pleading look to save him from any more torture.

“Well, then, looks like it’s the other way around,” he said as he walked in. the sound of his voice caught the Sneasel's attention. “Hey there, Sneasel. How’re you doing today?”

The Sneasel greeted him warmly, scurrying over to Iruni as best as she could manage in her condition. She sat on the edge of the bed, and thrust out her arms up at him.

“Alright, I get it. Here we go,” he bent down to pick the small Dark type into his arms, “How’s your leg today?” she called back in affirmative, hugging his chest tight, “I guess better enough to be so cheerful, huh? And your voice sounds a lot better than last night,” he patted her on her head as she nuzzled him.

“Was she too much for you, Kar?” His response came in the form of a sarcastic feigned cardiac arrest. “Hey, I need you awake for this too, you’re my witness,” Karros roused himself enough to sit back up. “Sneasel, I’m going to ask you to bear with me for a bit, alright? There’s someone who wants to see you.”

Finding no reason to refuse him, she agreed.

“Alright you two, come on in.” Kate and Ruby walked and sauntered in to the room respectively. The appearance of the newcomers made her nervous, but Sneasel tried to show confidence. “Sneasel, this is my sister, Katelyn. And this is Ruby, who is currently challenging you to a staring contest. Don’t worry; she’s harmless, say hi.”

The Sharp Claw Pokémon offered just a short “hello” and then buried her head in Iruni’s chest.

“Aww, she’s shy. That’s adorable,” Kate said. “Can I hold her?”

“Let’s see. Sneasel, come on, they just want to get to know you,” he stroked her head a few times, “They’re nice, I promise. Now say hi to Kate.”

He carefully handed her to Kate, who cradled the nervous Dark and Ice type in her arms. Once she noticed that she was out of Iruni’s arms, she frantically reached out for him, crying out.

“Hey there, it’s alright,” Kate tried her best to console her, but to no avail.

Iruni tried what he could to cease her calls. He walked over, and let her grasp his arm for comfort. After a few minutes, and more than a few words of confidence, she eventually grew comfortable in Kate’s arms. Kate tried easing her awkwardness by tickling her, which threw her into a fit of laughter. With the initial nervousness gone, Sneasel was soon just as friendly to Kate as she was to her brother. After a few minutes of being acquainted, Kate asked, “Hey, when are you going to ask her if she wants to stay?”

Hearing Kate’s question, Sneasel began to eagerly call out to Iruni, trying to convey a message that was lost to the language barrier.
“Whoa, there Sneasel, calm down. Uh, Ruby? Care to help translate for her?” asked Iruni.

‘And why should I?’

“Because I would owe you one, wouldn’t I?”

‘Well look at that, you’re learning.’ She addressed the frantic Sharp Claw creature, offering to relay her words for her. ‘She wants you to ask her “the question” now. Karros has apparently told her everything.’

“You trying to put me out of work, Kar?” His Houndour gave an apologetic whine.

Sneasel started pawing at Iruni’s arm to get his attention again.

‘Go on already… she’s making me anxious.’

“Alright, calm yourself. Well Sneasel, how much did Karros tell you?”

She relayed another message to Ruby, ‘She says he’s explained the Gym Circuit, and what you have planned in terms of keeping her here for her leg to heal. She said Karros said you want to keep her, and wants you to ask “the question”.’

“Alright then,” he sat Sneasel down in front of him on the bed. “Sneasel, do you want to stay here with Karros and me? It’s entirely up to you, and you can refuse if you wa—”

She leapt from Kate’s arms into Iruni’s and hugged his chest, nuzzling him emphatically.

‘That’s a ‘yes’, if you didn’t catch that.’

“Thanks Ruby. Well, it’s great to have you Sneasel. I’m really glad you want to stay.”

Sneasel faced him with a sunny expression and smiled.

Kate got up from the bed, and looked out Iruni’s window, “Hey, guess what? Dad’s back. You know what you have to do, right?”

“Yeah, yeah… I’ll get right to it. You think you can handle another introduction, Sneasel?”

She nodded and then eagerly asked something Iruni couldn’t understand.

“Ruby?”

‘Heh, I wondered that too. So, what are you going to name her?’

The next few days were filled with nothing but preparation. Preparation for Kate’s eventual departure and for the impending journey that awaited the now three-member party. Iruni’s father had been much more lenient on him than he was expecting. His punishment being to shovel what little snow remained on the walkway leading up to the house. Bruce, despite his initial anger at Iruni for breaking curfew and injuring himself, was beside himself with pride for his son.

“To think you would risk that storm to help an injured Pokémon. Your mother would be very proud of you,” he had said.

Today, Iruni had plans to head out into town, but he found himself trapped in the house for longer
than he liked. He was asked to help pack, unpack, and sort the various things Kate needed for her
trip to Saffron City. Of course, “asked” would be the polite term. This was merely Ruby’s way of
cashing in her favor from Iruni.

With Sneasel’s leg being in a cast, Karros had her ride around the house oh his back. Tom had taken
to her very quickly, and often took over for Karros to help entertain her. Ruby was not the kind to
warm up to Dark types, and kept her distance as best she could. Sneasel had tried to make contact a
couple of times, only to receive a cold shoulder. Whenever she could, Sneasel would try to be with Iruni.
She slept on his bed at night, and kept close to him as much as possible during the day. To be able to
enact his plans to their fullest however, he would need to go into town alone.

“Hey, Ruby. Come here a minute,” Iruni called from his father’s workroom.

‘What is it? You know how busy we are today, don’t you? We’re leaving in two days, and there’s
still a lot to do, and you’re not helping as much as we’d agreed to, now are you?’

“Yeah, I get it. I’ll help out more in a bit, but I need your help for a little while.”

‘Again? What kind of Dark trainer are you? Always asking for help from a Psychic type,’ Ruby
sneered.

“You sure are on top of things, aren’t you?” he asked, resisting the urge to swat at the Sun Pokémon.
“Anyway, I want you to spend a few hours with Sneasel. I want to head to town for a bit, and I’m
picking up something for her that I want to be a surprise. I also want you to try to get to know her.
She just wants to be your friend, and you’ve done nothing but ignore her.”

‘And why should I try and become friends with her? I’ll be leaving soon anyway, what’s in it for
me?’

“I’d owe you again.”

‘Yeah, that’s really enticing. You’re already disappointing me from the last time, so you’ll have to do
better than that.’

“Well, I’m heading into town; I’ll pick something up for you. How’s that sound?”

Ruby paced the length of the room a few times before responding, ‘Get me a Dream Eater TM,
since Kate always refuses to. Take it or leave it.’

“But— Ah, fine. I’ll be sure to pick one up.”

‘And be quick about it! I’d rather not spend more time than I have to with that icy weasel.’

“Ruby, making friends means you have to be nice first. I know that’s a new concept to you, but a
Pokémon of your caliber should be able to handle it.”

‘Whatever. Hurry back anyway.’

“Well, let’s go get you two acquainted then!” he caught Ruby off guard as he picked her up and
carried her to the living room, where Sneasel was playing with Karros. The Houndour was
seemingly exhausted with trying to keep up with the demands of such an energetic creature.

“Karros, you can go lie down upstairs if you want.” He didn’t have to be told twice, and Karros all
but sprinted for his spot on the bed. “Sneasel, Ruby says she wants to spend the afternoon with you
today. I’m heading into the town for the day, so you’ll be playing with her today, alright?”
Sneasel whined and shook her head, desperately clinging to Iruni’s hand to get him to stay.

“Hey, it’ll be okay. I’ll be back in a little while, alright? When I come back, I’ll have a surprise for you. How’s that sound?”

Without needing to be asked, Ruby quickly translated the Sneasel’s immediate and nosy question. ‘She asked what it is. Not too keen on the idea of a surprise is she?’

‘Cut it out, Ruby…’ Iruni sent to her privately. “A surprise is a gift that you give someone, but you don’t tell them what it is before you give it to them. It helps make the experience for the person receiving the gift much more exciting.” After thinking on it, Sneasel reluctantly let go of his hand, but had an unsure look on her face. “I promise I’ll be back in a bit, but until then, Ruby’s here to keep you company.”

‘Whoopee.’

The midday crowd in Mahogany Town had dwindled when the first signs of twilight began to show themselves. Piles of snow still lingered on the sides of the roads, with large collections pushed up on to the sidewalks. Despite the large amount of snowfall, the roads of Mahogany were cleared remarkably fast, thanks to the help of Pryce and his Mamoswine. Iruni was headed to the Poké Mart on the opposite end of town. His ankle had ceased troubling him, leaving only his shoulder to be healed. He walked alone, aside from the occasional passersby.

When he arrived at the Poké Mart he gave the clerk a friendly greeting. Iruni went straight to the store’s Poké Ball section and perused the selection, gazing from sphere to sphere, contemplating their usefulness. A Nest Ball would be fitting considering she is a bit young. I could splurge and get a Luxury Ball, but I don’t want to spoil her. If I got her a Heal Ball, that’d fix her leg instantly. Damn, they’re out of Dusk Balls. I guess I’ll—

Iruni noticed a Poké Ball he hadn’t recognized. It was mostly white with the middle ring being of a very dark black and a deep crimson activator button. The top half of the ball had what appeared to be two black crescent shapes, encompassing third, smaller crescent that nearly completed a circle. The most interesting quality of the Ball was that its finish always seemed to fade to black, no matter the angle of light. A trick of the paint, Iruni assumed. He looked to the shelf for the Ball’s description:

[Umbra Ball: for use on Dark Type Pokémon and Pokémon that evolve with a Dusk or Moon Stone.]

"A Ball for Dark types? Sold." He almost hit himself for not knowing about them sooner. He grabbed three Umbra Balls, five standard ones, and a Great and Ultra Ball. “This should last me a while. At least till I get a second badge.” He walked up to the technical machine counter and checked for what Ruby had tasked him to buy. Luckily they had the Dream Eater in stock. Normally, Iruni would be more conservative with his purchasing habits, but he decided to break in his new bankcard.

“Thank you for your purchase, sir. As a store promotion, with the purchase of ten Poké Balls, you receive a Premier Ball as an added bonus!” He handed the glossy, white sphere to Iruni.

“Thanks you.” As he went to pocket his store bonus, his PokéGear received a text message.

“I wonder if Kate needs me to pick up anything—" He looked at the address the message was sent from and didn’t recognize the number. Curiosity urging him onward, he chose to open the mail:
What the? This unnerved Iruni. He rarely gave out his number, and he surely didn’t remember the number the cryptic message had come from. He glanced around the Poké Mart and wondered if someone in the building was playing some prank on him.

“Hey mister, you got a bathroom?” Iruni asked the clerk.

“Sure do, it’s in the back,” he tossed him the key.

Once he entered the musty bathroom in the back of the store, Iruni followed the vague instructions given to him and replied with: [Yes.]

The remaining minutes lasted forever to him. Not because he expected something to happen, but to see if anything would. Luckily, something did.

Two minutes left, and then I’m heading home.

Iruni had made it to Mahogany Central Park in less than three minutes, and was now waiting out the remainder of the allotted countdown. He started to get skeptical when he didn’t receive a reply to his response, though the directions never stated they would respond to his answer. Leaning against the statue of Ho-Oh that was the center of the park, with his spoils from the Mart at his feet, he watched as the crowd of people that came and went through the park slowly diminished to only him. He was alone.

He checked his PokéGear; the time was up. As far as he could tell, nothing spectacular was going to happen. Oh well, what did you expect anyway? However, as soon as he made to get up, a thick fog quickly enveloped the park. All Iruni could see was vague shapes and hues, no more than a few feet in front of him could be seen. He started to follow what path he could see out of the park, but was met with an invisible barrier. He was trapped.

“Good job Dragonair, cancel the Light Screen around us, but maintain the one over this square.”

Iruni had heard the voice before. Vaguely, almost dreamily he remembered it. He turned around, not believing his ears, to see who had addressed him. It was who he guessed it to be, but he still could not believe it. He saw him phase into his vision out of an orb of bent and redirected light, standing on the head of a serpentine dragon.

“Now then,” said the red haired trainer as he descended to the ground from atop his Dragonair, “You are Bartholomew Iruni Thomas, correct? I believe we have business to discuss.” Addressing him by his full name, striding up to him with a confident, almost grand gait, cape flowing down evenly in the absence of any wind, was the Champion of Kanto and Johto.

Lance, the Dragon Master.
To be continued…

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Through the window, the setting sun was starting to be obscured by the distant trees. Katelyn was rooting through cabinets, trying to sort out which pieces of flatware she would take to her new apartment. Her brother hadn’t called or come back in time for dinner, leaving her to wonder what might be holding him up. Her father surprisingly wasn’t as concerned as she was, simply assuming that Iruni was just taking his time at the store.

“Hey Ruby,” she called to the living room, “what time did Iruni leave?”

Ruby was sitting on the couch, watching Tom take over her duty of entertaining the young Sneasel. The Glaceon would create small masses of ice, and effortlessly manipulate them into various shapes and designs. Every now and then Ruby would animate one with her Psychic powers, eliciting a gleeful cry from the young creature.

‘About two hours ago, I think,’ she sent over their mental link. ‘I asked him to get something for me too; he’s probably late because of that.’

“Are you exploiting my brother for his money?”

‘Hey, don’t be like that,’ she said playfully, ‘he offered to pay me back for watching this little bundle of mental static for him.’

“How’s she doing, by the way?”

‘Considering that she’s not trying to claw out our throats at the moment, it could be worse… but, I’d be lying if I said she wasn’t growing on me.’ Ruby jumped down from the couch, and playfully swatted at the ball of ice Tom had just made. Sneasel happily hit it back at her, enjoying the new game that her pink friend had started.

The sound of a slammed door alerted Kate to her brother’s return. She yelled at him from the kitchen, “There you are. About time you got home. You should’ve called if you were going to miss supper.” Without hearing any sort of reply, she went to intercept the slow and steady footsteps coming down the hall. “Hey Gimpy! Why’d it take you so— Hey…”

He didn’t stop. Iruni didn’t show any signs of acknowledging what she said and just kept walking, intently staring forward. Kate looked worriedly at him as he headed toward the living room.

Ruby was alerted to the new presence in the house by her trainer. She halted her game with Sneasel, sensing something odd. The young Dark type turned to see her trainer come into the room and called out to him. Iruni stopped at the sound and looked down to the scene in the middle of the room. The Sneasel held her arms out expectantly, wanting to welcome him home, but he did nothing. After holding a gaze with them for a few seconds, he continued walking, heading to his room upstairs.

Sneasel tried to crawl after him, but Ruby stopped her, “It’s okay, dear. He’s got a lot on his mind right now. You’ll see him in a few minutes, okay?” Saddened, Sneasel agreed to wait in the living room while Ruby went to follow him. ‘Tom, keep the little Sneasel occupied for a bit. The brat’s gone and done something to get himself into more trouble.’

“Of course he did…” he rolled his eyes, “Well, I’ll be here. Go on,” he said.
Ruby got up, and bolted up the stairs to Iruni’s room, keeping close to his heels. ‘Alright you, spill it. You aren’t hiding it at all, you know.’

“So… picked up on that did you?” he asked as he threw his bag from the Poké Mart on his bed, just missing the sleeping Houndour that lay there. He went into his bathroom, turned on the sink, and splashed some water on his face. He held himself over the sink, staring down at the rivulets of water running off his face. “Things just keep getting more and more interesting lately.” he said, a wide smile on his face.

‘Interesting or not, you’d better have a good explanation for what I’m picking up from. You’d better spill it, and I’ll know if you’re lying to me. What happened?’

Earlier ...

“Before we begin,” Lance said as he walked, stopping just a few feet in front of him. “I’d like to thank you for joining me here, Mr. Thomas. Or do you prefer; Bartholomew, Bart, Barry?” he extended his hand in a friendly manner.

“I—I… Uhh…” Iruni stammered, shaking his hand, “I usually go by my middle— Wait, wait, wait! What’s going on? You’re the one who called me out here? But you’re the Champion!”

Lance crossed his arms, “Well, now that my introduction is unnecessary, we can talk business.” He motioned behind himself, “First off: as you can see, my Dragonair is currently keeping the immediate area blocked off with a Light Screen in combination with Mist. The nature of my, or rather, ‘our’ business is not meant to fall on the wrong ears. No one will be able to see or hear what will happen here, nor will they be able to enter the barrier. The Mist, along with Dragonair’s Supersonic, will further deter any potential witnesses by distorting their sense of direction, leading them away from here and shrouding us from their vision. We have perfect privacy here. Now, here’s some food for thought: considering all of the precautions I’ve taken to secure a private meeting, what can you infer? I want your honest opinion.”

As he watched the serpentine dragon snake around the perimeter of the area, Iruni could faintly hear the buzz of the sonic deterrent. He carefully considered everything at hand; The Champion calls me out here—by name—and goes to all this trouble to get me secluded to discuss some business with me… I can’t be sure on what that might be though… His thoughts trailed off a few more moments before responding.

“Well?” Lance asked expectantly. “What is your answer?”

“You’re the Champion,” Iruni said, still nervous, “A person of great importance and wealth. So regardless to your business; you’d attract quite a lot of attention to yourself. You called me out specifically—hell, you used my first name, and I try and keep that on a need-to-know basis—with the intent of discussing some proposition or offer with me. I don’t know how you knew where to find me, or how you even know who I am, but whatever you’re here to discuss with me, you’ve gone to great lengths to make sure that we’re not seen or heard at all. That means whatever you’re here to talk about is, to be frank, probably not something that I should know about.”

“Good answer!” Iruni was surprised at the sudden burst of enthusiasm. It seemed his response was
amusing to the Dragon trainer, “Despite your inexperience, you were one of the more promising trainers on our list, I’m glad to see what I wasn’t mistaken in coming here.”

“There’s a list? How many other people have been called out like this?”

“Only a handful. This is a very low-profile operation and the plan was for the town’s respective Gym Leader, or one of the Elite Four if necessary, to contact the selected individual. But I requested a personal visit in your case. Being the Champion has its perks here and there.”

“What’s so special about my case?” Iruni asked, taken aback.

“To be a well-recognized authority on Dark types at your age is something I’d call ‘special’. Don’t sell yourself short.”

He stared blankly at him for a moment, “I’m no authority on anything… I’m barely out of school, and haven’t won a single badge. Why was I really chosen?”

“You do know that your paper on Dark type Pokémon has been receiving accolades from researchers the county over—and more—right? Nicholas Auburn presented your paper as an extra in one of his assessments, saying you were the youngest Type Specialist he’s ever seen.”

Iruni gaped at him, “He— But that— No, he didn’t tell me! That was just a school paper. Sure, I put a lot of time and work into it, but I don’t think it deserves to be called a study or anything. I mean, I do love Dark types, but I’d never think of considering myself in the same league as Karen or Sidney from Hoenn. Not yet at least.”

“Perhaps not, but the level of prowess you display at your age is enough to get certain people’s attention. When the list of potential candidates was generated; we only looked at the best each region had to offer. Auburn passed your paper onto Professor Oak, from Kanto, to recommend you for this opportunity,” explained Lance.

“Professor Oak has read my paper?” Iruni asked.

“It’s not just him either. I have it on good authority that our very own Karen has read your work as well. She’s impressed. I told you before, kid: Don’t sell yourself short.”

“K–Karen read my paper? And liked it?! Really?” Of the few Dark type specialists in the world, he idolized Karen’s training philosophy and battle technique the most. Apart from being the only one he’d likely meet, her message of ‘training only your favorites’ really struck home for him. “So, Auburn really did think my work was good. Obviously enough to show an Elite Four member… Who else—”

Lance raised his hand, “Let me stop you there. These pleasantries have gone on long enough, now it is time to discuss our business.” Iruni looked disappointed at the abrupt change in topic, but calmed down and allowed the Dragon Master to continue. “Do understand, that due to the nature of what we’re dealing with, I cannot tell you all of the details at the moment.”

“Why not?”

“Because the facts are few and far between. ‘Project Cartographer’ is the title of this operation, and it is still in its very early stages. The reason for this preemptive increase in activity within the operators is because as of late; more signs are pointing to what Project Cartographer was created for. So, rather than wait and see what happens, we’re getting ready, in case things get worse; like they are predicted to become.”
“Wait… So, what exactly am I supposed to do? How am I a part of this ‘project’?”

“That is to be discussed at a later date. If you don’t mind my bluntness, how long are you going to wait until you actually leave this small town? You said you’ve not won a single badge, so I assume you’re on the brink of starting your journey? Do you have a plan yet?” asked Lance.

“Well, the tentative idea was to head west to Ecruteak, then down to Violet to win the Zephyr badge. It seemed to be the quickest route to my first badge.”

“Quite, however I would have you take a different route and destination entirely. The three selected trainers of Johto are to report to Professor Elm’s laboratory in Newbark town. There you will be fully briefed on your role as members of Project Cartographer.”

“It does seem a bit farther than I had hoped… unless I go through Ice Path, then down the mountains of Route 45 and 46. Newbark isn’t that far from that junction, I don’t think…”

Lance watched as the young trainer contemplated his new situation. He was entirely calm and reasoning about what was being laid out in front of him, carefully analyzing what little information he had given him. “Ignore how you’re getting to Elm’s for a second, Iruni—that’s what you prefer to go by, yes? Just when will you be in any shape to leave this place? I see that your left shoulder is in a brace; your left hand is wounded too. You also walked here with a slight limp. How soon can you be ready to leave?”

“Oh, about all that… Well, I’m not sure. My ankle and hand aren’t too bad, but my shoulder was broken during an accident up at the Lake of Rage. It doesn’t help that it’s my throwing arm either, huh?”

“I can see where that’d be an issue,” Lance said. “But as it happens, time is on our side for now. It is not entirely crucial for you to report to Newbark Town immediately. So, you have time to recover from your injuries, but there is the fact that the situation could change at a moment’s notice. The time limit is three months. Report to Elm’s lab in Newbark before April 17th, or we’ll have to move on to our next available candidate.”

“That’s it? I’ll just be—”

“I’m not finished. You still have the option to refuse the offer, if you choose. And the decision does not have to be now,” Lance reached into his cloak, and tossed Iruni what looked like an older generation PokéGear. “That PokéGear is only activated to be able to call the one that I’ll be using. A week from now, both PokéGear will deactivate. You are to call me with your answer within that week. From then, it is up to you to get to Newbark before the 17th of April. Any questions?”

He thought a moment. Turning over the plastic device in his hand, “Just one: If I choose to accept this offer, and report to Professor Elm’s, would this mean that I would have to delay my Trainer career?”

“Actually, no. Project Cartographer operates solely within the boundaries of Johto and Kanto, and leaves you mostly free to do as you wish as long as you do what we ask of you. A Gym badge circuit wouldn’t hinder the mission plan in the slightest.”

He sighed in relief, “That’s good. Wait, Kanto too? Are there three trainers being selected from there too?”

“You are a sharp one, but that’s all the hints you’ll get out of me. So, a week to confirm, and then reach Elm’s before the 17th. Are we clear?”
“Yes sir!”

“You’re just full of good answers, aren’t you? We need decisive people like you in important jobs like this. I wasn’t disappointed in the slightest coming here. And now, it is time I take my leave.” His Dragonair coiled its serpentine body around her master, letting him step onto her head. The mist started to fade, and Iruni could see his surroundings start to become visible again. “Oh, and one last thing,” he said, kneeling on his dragon. “Do try and follow HM regulations next time you feel the need to move anything large and heavy.”

Iruni’s shock was evident even through the still-thick fog. He tried to offer a hasty explanation to the champion before he departed.

“It was an emergency, I swear!”

“And I believe you,” Lance called as his Dragonair rose into the sky. “Just a friendly reminder!”

———

“So after that,” Iruni said, finishing his story, “he flew off on his Dragonair, and the area cleared up in just a few seconds. It’s like he wasn’t even there,” Iruni reached into his pocket, and removed the PokéGear he received from Lance. “So, now I’ve got a week to confirm whether or not I want to be a part of this ‘Project’ or not.”

Ruby was sitting on the bathroom counter, carefully listening to his story. As far-fetched as it sounded, she detected no deception from him. That worried her. ‘So, what are you going to do?’

Iruni sighed, “I have no idea. That entire meeting lasted about, I don’t know, ten minutes? And I spent the rest of the time wandering around, just thinking on it. And really, I just don’t know right now. A part of me wants to, obviously, but I’m worried that Ri— I mean, we’re not ready for something this big.”

‘Oh? Now what was that? Did I just hear something almost out?’ Ruby asked playfully.

“Don’t bother prying, it’s Sneasel’s name. I’ve been anxious to finally name her, but it didn’t really feel right to just give a name to a wild Pokémon. That’s why I was going to the store, to buy her a Poké Ball. But, I don’t know… with her being as young as I think she is, and with her leg like that, would it be irresponsible to take on something like this?”

‘She’s more mature than you’d expect, you know. She’s very articulate and gathered for only being a month old,’ she paused a moment, but discarded the thought. ‘And her leg can be fixed at the Pokémon Center once you get her in a Poké Ball. I’m sure she’ll be fine. And you’ve got three months to train her and get stronger; you won’t be running to this completely unprepared.’

The amount of kindness in Ruby’s words caught him off guard, “Thanks Ruby. It helps to get another view on this. How’s Sneasel doing by the way?”

She suddenly stood up, ‘She’ll be better once you apologize to her! Don’t just snub her off like that ever again. She’s practically obsessed with you. She never once stopped talking about how glad she was to be here, and how lucky she was that you found her. And you’d better give her that name
soon; she’s been dying to know what you’d pick. I like it by the way, it fits her I think.’

“That’s good, and I will apologize, I promise. I’m surprised you’re so protective of her now, earlier you were afraid to go near her.”

‘She sees me as something of an older sister, and that means I have a certain authority above her. Always good to have they young ones learn respect as soon as possible, you know?’

“Of course, you’re being all high and mighty, how didn’t I see that coming?”

‘Because you’re an idiot,’ she said, bounding down to the floor. ‘So, did you pick up that TM?’

“Yeah, they had it. Also, can I ask you a—”

‘Another favor? What am I, your slave?’

“No, it’s that you’re the only one able to help me with this,” he went to his bed, sorting through his bag, and removed the plastic case which housed the precious disk. “If you could, tonight, use Dream Eater on me and try and find out a dream I had a few nights ago.”

‘A dream?’

Iruni nodded, “Yeah, it was strange. I remember feeling like I wasn’t dreaming, but I was. It’s hard to explain, but the thing is, I can’t remember anything it was about. Only that it happened. It’s been really bugging me lately. So can you try and find it in my mind somewhere?”

‘It wouldn’t be too hard,’ she took a moment to laugh at him, ‘but you know… I could just go through your mind right now, while you’re awake, and not have to put you through the agonizing pain of me tearing through your subconscious and ripping out a single memory.’

“I love it when you’re helpful. Yeah, the not-ripping-of-my-mind route sounds a lot more appealing. Can we do it now?”

‘Ugh, so needy. Just sit still, and relax.’ Iruni could feel her mind weighing down on his, ‘And don’t fight me. This won’t take a minute.’

‘Fine,’ he answered back mentally. He sat down on the bed, and relaxed as best he could.

For a few seconds, he could feel the tendrils of Ruby’s psychic powers sifting through his head, tingling as they burrowed farther into his mind. He signaled Ruby as to the night in question; she went in search for the memory. Iruni guessed she’d found it, because she started concentrating on a particular bit, causing him to strain to not reflexively force her out.

Suddenly, she severed the connection, ‘There’s nothing there.’

Iruni blinked, gathering himself after the abrupt disconnection, “Wh—What?”

‘I don’t know how it happened, but there’s a blank spot in your memory the time you say you had that dream. There’s nothing there, aside from tiny bits of half-thought thoughts. Nothing I can read, anyway.’ She withdrew for a moment, thinking to herself, It’s almost as if it… was intentionally erased or already ripped out.’

“But that’s… I know I had a dream that night.”

‘Tough luck, can’t help you.’
Iruni was about to press further, but was stopped when Kate appeared at his doorway, “Hey, everything alright up here?” she asked. Iruni noticed her voice was strained somewhat.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Ruby and I were just…”

‘Bonding.’

“Well, I need Ruby for a bit,” she reached behind her, revealing that Sneasel was clinging to her neck. She squirmed in her grip having seen Iruni, and Kate hastily handed her off. “Here, bond with this. Someone found out she can climb around in the pantry with her arms, and now we’re out of potato chips.”

Iruni and Ruby laughed at that, ‘I thought I left Tom to watch her. Where’d he go?’

“Oh, I think he had something to do with it. His damp paw prints lead to the pantry, so I can only assume this was a ‘group project’,” Kate said. “Ruby, I need your help with sorting out what needs to go with us to Saffron.”

Ruby grabbed the TM case in her mouth, ‘Coming.’ With that, she followed her trainer as Kate left Iruni, Sneasel, and the still-sleeping Houndour alone. As she walked with her, Ruby said, ‘You’re not going to believe what he’s gotten himself into now. Lance really overestimates him.’

Kate sighed, “Great, now Iruni’s going to get swept up in something he’s not ready for. Our Champion needs realize not everyone grows up at his pace.”

Back in his room, Iruni was dealing with apologizing for ignoring Sneasel when he had come home, “I didn’t mean it, Sneasel. Ruby and I just needed to talk for a minute. I’m sorry. I promise it won’t happen again, ‘kay?”

She stared at his face for a moment, then glanced over at Karros who, having woken up after Kate’s intrusion, gave her a subtle nod of agreement. She leaned forward on his lap, wrapping her arms around his chest in a hug.

Iruni smiled, rubbing her back, “Thanks… Hey Sneasel, do you want to see your surprise?” Sneasel perked up at that, eagerly nodding. Iruni picked her up, her claws clinging to his shirt, “Hey, let go, this is my shirt.” He felt some pain from the scratches to his back, but paid them little mind. He set her down near the center of the bed, noting that she felt marginally heavier than before, “Wow, you seem to be growing pretty fast. Must be strong genes, huh?”

She didn’t catch what he meant, but smiled at the compliment.

“Well, anyway,” he reached for his bag from the Poké Mart, placing the few kinds of Poké Balls that he had bought out in front of her. He gently woke up his sleeping Houndour so he could join them for what was about to happen.

“Sneasel, it’s customary for Pokémon Trainers to keep their Pokémon a Poké Ball. Normally, a trainer would use what he has on him, or her, in the wild and catch a Pokémon after a battle. We’ve got a somewhat… abnormal situation; I want you to choose which you’d like to be yours.” He watched Sneasel as she eyed the colorful spheres with great curiosity. She went from one to the next, turning her head to see how the light glanced of their surfaces.

Sneasel turned around and looked back up to Iruni, asking some question lost on his ears.
“Oh, I guess I should explain the basics,” he pointed to the first in the row. “This is a standard model, like the one Karros has; nothing too special there. These next two are called Great, and Ultra. Both of these work better than a standard one, giving a greater chance at catching stronger wild Pokémon.

“These two are a bit different; The Premier Ball, and the Umbra Ball. This one,” he said, holding the mostly white sphere, “Is a Premier Ball. And, in a practical sense, it’s the same as a regular Poké Ball, being generally the worst at catching a wild Pokémon, but a Premier Ball is a very high quality model.

“And this one,” picking up the last one in the line, “Is an Umbra Ball. It’s tailored specifically to work better with Dark type Pokémon, as well as a few others. This one is a newer model, I think. I didn’t know about it until today, so I’m anxious to see if they’re as good as they say.”

He set the Umbra Ball back on the bed, leaving the Sneasel to choose from the lineup. She crawled closer, and took a few more glances at them. Sneasel picked up the Premier Ball and carefully examining the pure white sides, tracing the red outline of the sphere with her claw. Ultimately though, she put it back in its place, and picked up one of the three Umbra Balls. She seemed to like it much more, turning it in her hands as the color shifted with the light.

Calling confidently, she held the Umbra Ball out to Iruni and placed it in his hand.

“You’re sure? This one?”

She nodded, sitting up eagerly, awaiting the next step.

“Okay Sneasel, this shouldn’t take more than a few seconds, I promise.”

He turned the ball in his hand, and gently tapped the crimson activator button to the Sneasel’s forehead. A flash of red light engulfed the room, pulling Sneasel into the void of the Umbra Ball. It fell to the soft bed, rumbling violently. Karros stood up to watch his trainer’s second official capture.

Suddenly, the ball burst open, expelling Sneasel back into the corporeal world. She shook her head violently, breathing heavily. She growled and cursed the sensation of being confined. She looked at the ball that had fallen to her side, and slashed it away from her. Iruni caught the ball as it flew back, confused as to what went wrong.

“Sneasel, I know it can be a bit… jarring, but it has to be done. This’ll be better for all of us in the long run, I promise.”

She gave him a sharp look, and hissed defiantly at him, bearing her fangs.

It was a chilling warning, but Iruni didn’t back down. He sighed, thumbing over the two rough scratches that marred the smooth surface of the ball, “Listen, Sneasel please. You just have to let it happen. This is the only way for you to be able to stay here with me. You can’t stay wild and be with a trainer.”

She turned away from him, making a hurt sound as she faced the window.

“Sneasel, if you let yourself be caught, I can give you your name.”

She lifted her head up and turned back to him, eyes wide.

“Yep, I settled on one. But it’s not right naming a wild Pokémon, so I wanted to wait until you were officially ‘captured’. I know you hate the feeling, but you just have to let it take hold once. I promise, as soon as it’s over, I’ll let you back out and tell you the name.”
After some words of encouragement from Karros, the Sneasel nodded in agreement, and repositioned herself in front of him again. Once again, Iruni tapped the Umbra Ball’s activation button to her golden gem, and she was engulfed in the red light. The ball fell to the bed once more, but the shaking was much more subdued this time. The ordeal lasted a few seconds, with an instant where Iruni thought it would break open again, but the ball soon quelled its motion. The center button’s light dimmed and a chime sounded, signaling a completed capture.

“Thanks. Well, a promise is a promise,” he said. Iruni pressed the center button of the ball, releasing Sneasel back into the world. She seemed disoriented, but less so than last time. She looked around, eagerly looking for the human who was now her trainer, when she heard, “Welcome back, Rikalia.”

She quickly turned her head to look at him, eyes wide with surprise. She didn’t say anything in response, but turned completely around to sit properly in front of him. She met his gaze, staring hopefully into his eyes. She made a small murmur; to Iruni, it sounded as if she was trying to mimic the word she had heard.

“‘Rikalia’, or ‘Rika’ for short. It took me a while time to come up with it, but I think it fits. It doesn’t mean anything, not in a literal sense, but if I had to define it, it’d be—you. It wouldn’t fit anyone else; just like Karros’ name. His name is his own. And yours, Rikalia, is now yours,” he reached out, and stroked her pink head-feather. “So Rika, do yo—”

Ignoring her bound leg, she rushed Iruni with a quick and rather forceful hug. She repeated her thanks over and over, despite the fact he couldn’t understand her directly. She gripped his side, nuzzling his chest affectionately. Iruni looked to Karros who was looking a bit prideful at being involved in the process. He nodded at his trainer, and padded over to his new teammate.

He gave a small bark and welcomed her with a quick lick on the forehead.

She let go of Iruni, slightly scratching his sides with her claws, and hugged her fiery companion.

“I take it as a ‘yes’ then, Rika?” he asked, scratching her head. He looked down at his shirt, noticing the greasy crumbs and bits of potato chips that now covered most of it. “Rika, look at me for a sec;” he sighed. “I thought Kate was joking… Did Tom teach you where to find our chips?”

Her face still showed remnants of the impromptu snack session. Rika looked into his eyes innocently, offering a meek response to the accusation.

“Don’t listen to Uncle Tom, he’s always trying to give me grief; whether Kate asks him to or not,” he picked her up. “Here, let’s go clean you up.” He carried Rikalia into his bathroom, and set her on the counter. Karros went back to lying on the bed, the interesting activities of the day seemingly over.

Iruni turned on the faucet, and wet a washcloth to clean her face. “Next time, you want some snacks, don’t go and demolish them. You get too messy.”

She said something through the washcloth, grasping his left arm to steady herself.

“You know what, Rika? Now that you’re captured, we can get your leg fixed at the Center. It’d take mu— Ow! Watch… Your… claws?”

Iruni pulled his arm back slowly. A stream of blood was dripping down and slowly pooling on the tile floor. The sight left him stricken with fear, he looked at his arm; four fresh lacerations spewed the terrifying liquid. He fell down as his legs gave our beneath him, arm stretched out toward the counter. Despite how it made him feel, Iruni couldn’t tear his eyes from the crimsons streaks.
Rikalia shook the cloth from her head, calling frantically to find out what happened. She saw her trainer on the floor, paralyzed with fear. She placed her paws on the counter, but almost slipped forward. Looking down, she saw that they were covered in his blood, her ivory claws smeared red. She too was transfixed by the liquid.

“I… I didn’t… No! Not again!” She called out to Iruni, ignoring the language barrier that stood between them, “It was an accident, I mean it! Please, be okay!” she began to cry, not wanting to believe she had hurt him again.

At the sound of her voice he managed to look away, and focused instead on the crying creature, “R—Rika… How did… your claws…? You’re too young to…”

Rikalia heard something clatter down in the kitchen, followed by the sound of Ruby bounding up the stairs. The psychic feline ran into Iruni’s room, and dashed towards the bathroom, “What the? Dammit you, can’t you stay stable for fifteen minutes?” She moved Iruni’s arm aside, and forced her gaze into his. Her forehead gem glowed slightly, and Iruni fell unconscious.

‘Kate!’ Ruby called out mentally, ‘Get up here, now. Your brother’s out like a light.’

‘What happened?’

‘I’ll ask,’ she sent Kate a visual of the scene. Ruby leaped up on the counter, and cautiously approached Rikalia. “Alright you…What the hell did you do?”

“I— I swear I didn’t mean to hurt him! Please Ruby,” she began crying harder. “I didn’t want to hurt him again, it was an accident! I just got excited and, and… this happened…” she showed her claws to the Espeon.

Ruby scrutinized the implements of the recent commotion. Going by what Iruni had told her, they were far too sharp to be of an infant Sneasel. She stumbled back to a thought she had dismissed earlier.

“Well, can’t hurt to ask, can it?

“Sneasel, calm down. Now, let—”

“Rikalia,” said the troubled Dark-Ice type. “He— He gave me that name just before… before…” she began tearing up again. “I didn’t kill him, did I? He’s not moving.”

“No, it’s okay, okay. You’re fine. He’s fine. Everything will be okay. I get it, you didn’t mean it. Now, this may be an odd question, but… Rikalia,” Ruby got a feel for how to say the name, “how old are you?”

“Wh—What do you mean?”

“When were you born? What time of year? You know, how old.”

“It was… warm outside. Outside my den, at least. That’s what I first remember. But then it got even warmer. Then the trees turned brown and red, and now it’s cold outside.”

The spring then… That means she’s almost a year old! Iruni’ll have more of an explanation once he’s back on his feet again. Kate arrived on the scene then, nearly screaming at the sight of her brother passed out in a pool of his own blood. Karros was roused from his sleep, and went to his trainer’s side as well.

‘He’s fine for now, just sleeping,’ Ruby said, wanting to reassure her trainer.
“What happened?”

‘Someone got a little too excited and clawed up your brother’s arm. It was an accident, but he freaked out like he normally does when he sees blood.’

Kate looked over at the still-crying Sneasel and at the blood covering her paws. She sighed, “You’re one high-maintenance Pokémon, aren’t you?” Kate gave her a gentle pat on the head, “I’m sure you didn’t mean it. He’ll be okay, I promise. Ruby, wake him up, but make sure he stays calm.”

She did as she was told, jumping to the bathroom floor. Ruby sat on Iruni’s chest, bringing her face over his. Ruby relinquished the Hypnosis she had him under and allowed Iruni to regain consciousness.

He groaned a bit, opening his eyes to see a pair of bright purple ones staring back at him, “Uh… Ruby? What’re you…?”

‘Shut up and don’t look away from my eyes, got it?’ A warning that seemed rather pointless, as Iruni felt his body—apart from his left arm—freeze up as Ruby disabled his movement.

“Why’re yo— Ah! What’s going on with my arm?” he asked as Kate began to clean and dress his new wounds. The stinging of the disinfectant and gauze made his bound reflexes itch. “It hurts to move it that much!”

‘Deal with it. Kate’s bandaging up your arm. Your little ‘Rikalia’ over there went a little ‘claw happy’ and gave you some new scars to show off and tell fake stories about. I’m guessing you had one of your little episodes and collapsed from all the blood. I picked up on your heightened fear and panic, and found you up here lying on the floor.’

“But, Rika couldn’t have… Her claws aren’t nearly—”

‘I thought that too, but your arm and the blood on her claws suggest otherwise.’

“But she’s…” thinking back on it, he remembered how she had hurt his sides when she hugged him, and how she made such deep scratches on her Umbra Ball. “I thought she was only about one month old.”

‘Not according to her. Rikalia said she remembered being born the spring, so she’s almost a year old, if she’s right. How’s that sit with you? Are their claws sharp by then?’

Through his fuzzy mind, Iruni thought back to his research, “Yeah, their claws get sharp around six to seven months old. They have to stay near their parents to help survive, and are usually fully grown by one year of age.” He saw Ruby back away from his line of sight, to trade places with Karros. He offered his concern by licking his trainer’s face—an act that is much more irritating when you’re unable to move. “I’m fine, Kar. Please, I’m okay.” He whined and gave him another lick before letting going back to his room.

“Hey, can I move yet Ruby?” he said to the ceiling. In his peripheral vision, he could see his sister, but Ruby had yet to reappear. “This seems really unnecessary,” he had been hearing Rikalia’s cries for him since he had woken up; he didn’t want to worry her anymore.

‘Not if you’re going to freak out again. There’s still plenty of blood on the floor, I doubt you’ll be able to keep yourself together.’

“Then just bring Rika to me. She’s worse off than I am right now.”
What do you think I’ve been trying to do? Do you know how hard it is to get her down from here without being able to levitate her?”

After a few unsuccessful tries, Ruby, with Rikalia holding onto her neck, jumped down to the floor, next to Iruni. Making sure he knew not to look at the floor, or look at his left arm, Ruby lessened her control, and let Iruni’s head and right arm fall back under his control.

Rikalia scrambled over to his side, and hugged his neck. Seeing him awake and not angry with her gave her a great sense of relief. She nuzzled his face, apologizing as fast as she could.

“Easy Rika, calm down. I’m fine,” he rubbed her head gently. “I know you didn’t mean it. You’re okay.”

“You know, you really should be more careful,” Kate said with a sigh, finishing her work. “You can’t be out in the wild and get incapacitated by your own Pokémon. Looks bad on you.”

“I know… I get it. But this wasn’t exactly something I was expecting, you know? Now, can I at least sit up, Ruby?”

‘Go for it,’ he felt her influence on his body leave him, ‘Just don’t look down. Kate still needs to mop up.’

Iruni shook slightly at the mental image. Heeding her advice, he turned away from where the most blood had gathered, and set Rikalia in his lap. She wasn’t entirely over her ordeal, but much better than before. “Rika,” he said kindly, “look at me.”

She did, still crying a bit. He wiped her face with his hand, “Stop crying, okay? I’m alright, see?” he held up his bandaged arm. The bleeding had been minor compared to his hand, and left him with very little pain. “Kate fixed me up, so I’m all better now.” She nodded, and gave him a short hug before Iruni broke it, “Rika, show me your claws.”

Reluctantly, she showed him her paws and extended her claws. She was nervous when he examined them with his hand, fearful of hurting him again, but he assured her that he was being careful.

“They’re sharp alright. Definitely fully developed; her paws are even starting to show some white fur, he thought, cringing slightly at the blood that still clung to her claws. That alone would make her… at least ten months old. But, he analyzed her figure, and considered her weight; she’s tiny for her age. Something might be wrong with her growth. What if she’s a runt? No, they’re usually much smaller. She has been gaining more weight lately, but this is still serious.

Rikalia gripped his hand, getting his attention. She asked something he didn’t understand.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he said, snapping out of his mental daze. “Rika, Ruby said you told her you were born in the spring. Is that true?”

“The spring?” Kate asked. “She looks a little small to be almost a year old, don’t you think?”

He turned around, but quickly regretted it. Kate had a handful of bloody paper towels that she was piling into a garbage bag; he tried to forget the sight, “I know. It’s…” he looked down at the Pokémon in his lap. She was beginning to look worried with the sudden change in topic. She made a questioning murmur at him, pawing at his shirt.

“It’s okay, Rika,” he held her paw, “I’m just worried about how little you’ve grown. If you were born in the spring, we may need to do something very soon. You look healthy to me, but I don’t want to risk anything. Once I can find my legs, we’re going to the Pokémon Center, alright?”
She nodded, but didn’t sound any agreement. She curled up in his lap, clinging to his side.

“Cheer up Rika, I’m sure you’re fine. If nothing else, we can fix your leg tonight.”

Rikalia responded contently, grateful for the reassuring comment.

Iruni gently stroked her back, wondering if anything major could be wrong with her. *I hope not. But still, she’s way too small for her age.* He kept going over his notes in his head. It was possible that her growth had been stunted due to a lack of proper nutrition, or genetics, or random chance. *I’ll have a nice long chat with that nurse; I wonder if she knew? Why would she lie about that?*

After he had time to recover from his ordeal, and get a late dinner, Iruni set out to the Pokémon Center as soon as possible. He walked briskly in the cool air, the sound of the wet snow sloshing beneath his shoes. He cradled Rikalia in his arm, carrying her comfortably as she gripped his coat. The sky had taken on a moderate covering of clouds this evening. The last traces of sunlight outlined them in pink and red, a few stars could be seen in the darker edge of the sky. He was being followed by a pink-furred feline, whose steps were rather awkward as she tried to avoid the snow on the ground.

“Why’re you coming again?” Iruni asked.

‘*Because I’m as interested in this as you are, believe it or not.*’ Ruby had caught up with him not too long after he left, insisting she be a part of the venture. ‘*I want to find out why this nurse lied to you, or see if she’s just incompetent.*’

‘Just admit it; you’re worried about Rika. I know you like her,’ he said mentally.

‘You sure you didn’t say you wanted me to go ahead and try out my new TM on you tonight? Because that’s what it sounds like to me…’

Iruni caught the message, “Fine, fine… I suppose company is never a bad thing.”

‘*Also proof that Rikalia’s actually older than what that nurse told you she was,*’ she added.

“That too. But aren’t you supposed to help Kate pack?”

‘She’s fine. Azula’s finding ways to help out and Tom’s been drafted in my place to make up for letting Rikalia get into the snacks.’

He grinned in satisfaction at that, “About time he’s doing some work,” He rubbed his Sneasel’s head, “and not teaching you bad habits on how to get in our pantry.”

Rikalia pouted, crossing her arms.

“Hey, it’s alright Rika. No one’s mad at you,” he reassured her. He looked down, but she still wore a worried expression. Rikalia pawed at his chest, asking a question he couldn’t understand. “What is it Rika?”

‘She’s asking if she’ll be alright. She’s seen you worrying about her; you’re scaring her.’

“Oh Rika…” he said, petting her head. “I didn’t mean to make you worry. I’m sure there’s nothing wrong, but I just don’t want to leave anything unchecked. It’s probably just me being overly cautious.”
‘Says the kid who went out in a huge snowstorm after being in an accident days earlier.’

Iruni ignored Ruby’s comment, “I promise, you’ll be okay, alright?”

She nodded, but her expression didn’t soften. She merely hugged his chest for comfort.

———

Iruni sighed as he leaned against the reception counter inside the Pokémon Center. He looked around at the nearly empty lobby, listening to the ambient sounds of medical equipment off in the distance. The late-evening light was rapidly dwindling outside, the street lights outside having already been on for several minutes. Rikalia shifted in his arms, trying to shake off some of her anxiety. His sister’s Espeon, sitting on the counter next to him, yawned out of boredom.

‘Do you even remember the woman’s name?’ Ruby asked to break the silence.

“If I didn’t Ruby, this would be a big waste of time, wouldn’t it?” The sound of footsteps behind them drew their attention.

“Excuse me, sir?” a nurse ask as she walked up, “I’m sorry for the wait, can I help you?”

He turned, “I hope so. Is Nurse Lena working tonight?”

“Oh, let’s see…” she said, looking down at a card on her desk, “She is. I think she’s in the back attending to a patient. Is there something I can help with?”

“Would it be okay for me to see her? She offered to give my Sneasel a checkup the next time I came in.”

Seeing no reason to turn him down, she led the group to an empty room to wait. Iruni set Rikalia down on the bed, and Ruby jumped up join her. It was a few minutes before they heard a pair of footsteps approach the doorway “He’s right in here.”

“Oh, it’s you two! I wasn’t expecting to see you back again so soon,” the voice came from the same nurse that Iruni woke up to on the night of the snowstorm. She walked over, making note of the Espeon that now accompanied the trainer, and greeted the two. “What brings you in so late? Well, not as late as your last visit at least.”

Iruni laughed a bit at her joke, but quickly focused, “Well, I thought I’d come in and have you give my Sneasel a checkup.”

“Oh, that sounds fine. Have you officially caught her yet?”

“Yes. Her name’s Rikalia. I caught her today, actually,” he said. He produced her Umbra Ball, “I was wondering, since she’s able to be recalled, can we use the recovery machine to fix her leg?”

“That shouldn’t be too much trouble. Go ahead and recall her, and I’ll take her ball for a few moments. That’s a fine name, by the way.”

“Thanks,” Iruni nodded, and looked down at the Dark type clinging to his arm, “Rika, I know you hate it, but I have to put you in here, okay?” She whined in protest, but Ruby said something to help calm her.

“I promise you’re going to be alright Rika. This will only take a few minutes, and your leg will be all better. You want that right?”
Rikalia eventually relented, nodding to her trainer. Iruni tapped the button, sending out the recall signal. The ball rattled a few times after the flash of red light dissipated, but soon came to rest.

"Are you sure you caught her? Normally the recall process isn’t so violent," Nurse Lena observed.

"She just really hates it in there; it took us two tries to get it to work. I probably won’t keep her in it unless I have to," he said, handing her the ball.

Nurse Lena turned and walked to the recovery machine on the opposite end of the room, and placed the containment sphere in an open slot. "So, how’s little Rikalia doing these days? Not too much trouble, I take it?"

"Actually, there’s something about that," he said, walking up to the machine. "Miss Lena, Rika’s not really three weeks old, is she?"

She faltered, "Now what makes you say that? Don’t you trust a professional opinion?"

"Professional or not," he pushed back the sleeve of his jacket, revealing his bandaged arm, "these don’t lie. I’ve got more elsewhere too, but that’s beside the point. I may still be a bit inexperienced, but I know my Dark types. Sneasel develop their adult claws around six to seven months after birth, and begin show white fur on their paws at ten months. When she rejected the capture the first time, she even managed to scratch up her ball," he said, pointing at the window of the recovery machine; the two distinct claw marks were visible to the two of them.

"My sister’s Espeon, Ruby, also helped with this little discovery."

"That’s right," she said, ‘Our little claw-happy princess in there says she was born in the spring, almost making her a year old. So, why don’t you just come clean, and tell us what’s going on?"

"In more polite terms," Iruni interjected, "I just wanted to know why you just didn’t tell me in the first place. It wouldn’t have mattered to me."

She sighed, "Well, I wasn’t expecting to have this happen so soon, but it was inevitable considering how Sneasel develop." She rested a hand on the machine behind her, "Yes, while I was examining her for the first time, I was able to discern her correct age. Her claws were nearly fully developed, and I could tell she wasn’t as clumsy as what I had guessed her to be."

"That’s something else: Why is she as small as she is? In the few days I’ve had her, she has gotten a little bigger, but she’s still far below a normal size for her age."

"I know now that my earlier actions were unneeded," she walked over to a computer and asked him to follow. "This is a record of the wild Pokémon being admitted to this Center in the past year."

"Wh–wh… why?"

The list was varied, save for the last three months, "It was strange, until we found out what was happening. Sneasel were being found, either dead or on the verge of starvation throughout Ice Path. At first, we thought it was random, but the numbers started increasing drastically. Trainers kept reporting, and like you, bringing in any young ones they found alive…” she paused, “Not very many made it."

Iruni staggered back into a chair, stunned, "What happened? What’s been causing all this?"

"The Sneasel and Weavile population in Ice Path has been gradually decreasing over the years, due to over hunting of the local Swinub in the caves. The adults have been moving on to more
prosperous hunting grounds, like Mt. Silver. From what our research can tell us, the parents have been abandoning their young if they seem weak. Other families won’t take them in, and they soon begin to starve to death—"

“Stop it! I get it!”

The room fell silent for a few moments.

Ruby was the first to speak up, ‘Hey, you alright Iruni?’

He ignored her, “So… Why did you lie to me?”

“Well, I could tell that she—Rikalia, I mean—was much older than the previous ones that have been admitted, but she was still far from healthy. I thought that if you knew she was an infant, you’d take to caring for her easier. I couldn’t stand to let any more of these poor creatures suffer; especially one who had already grown so old on her own.”

“You think Rika’s parents abandoned her too?”

She nodded, “It looks like it. She’s malnourished, but she looks like she was able to fend for herself for a good while. You mentioned that you found her alone, outside of Ice Path, right?”

“Well,” he said. He was calming down a bit, remembering the night he found Rikalia, “There weren’t any markings on the trees, or any signs that other Sneasel or Weavile lived there. She was very aggressive when I first found her; she must’ve had a hard time alone… Ruby, did she say anything to you about her parents? Or her life before I found her at all?”

‘No. I think I asked once, but she avoided talking about it. She just went back to saying how glad she was that you found her.’

“I’ll ask her about it later. Would you want to help before you leave?”

‘Yeah, sounds like a plan.’

“Miss Lena, is Rika going to be alright? She’s not permanently stunted or anything is she?”

“It is a possibility, but not a likely one. You mentioned that she has grown a bit in the few days you’ve had her, so that’s a good sign. This recovery session will help as well, but it won’t fix it automatically. If you train her and care for her, I’m sure she shouldn’t have any lasting effects from her ordeal.”

Slouching in the chair, he leaned his head back, and sighed in relief, “That’s good…”

“You know, if you hadn’t found her when you did—”

“No more, please. I get it…” He sighed, “I get what you’re saying. But let’s not talk about this anymore.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it, I came here looking for good news and I got it. Rika’s going to be fine, so there’s no sense in dwelling on what could’ve happened,” he stood, offering his hand, “Thanks for all your help, Miss Lena.”

“Allison is fine,” she took his hand, but pulled him into a hug, “And I am sorry. I can tell you care for your Pokémon very much, I shouldn’t have said those things so lightly.”
“I— Thanks.”

‘Hey now… Rikalia might get jealous if she saw this little scene, wouldn’t you think?’

‘Shut up Ruby…’

After a less-than-comfortable separation, the three waited for Rikalia’s recovery to finish.

“There we go, all done.”

She ejected Rikalia’s Umbra Ball from the machine, and returned it to Iruni. No sooner did it touch his hand than the excitable Sharp Claw Pokémon erupted in a flash of light. She clung to his neck, nuzzling him under his chin.

“Nice to see you too, Rika. Remember; careful with your claws! Now, let Allison over there help get that cast off you.”

Rikalia let her grip loosen, holding onto his shoulders. She looked up at him and asked him a question.

“Ruby? A little help?” asked Iruni.

‘Think genius. What was the whole point of us coming here in the first place?’

“Oh, I’m dumb,” he held his Sneasel in his arms, rubbing her head, “You’re perfectly fine, Rika. There’s nothing wrong with you, and if all goes well, you’ll grow up without any problems.”

Rikalia gave an excited response, the look of worry and anxiety she wore was completely replaced with relief and joy.

“I’m glad too, but let’s get this over with,” Iruni handed her off to the smiling nurse; who was immensely amused by the display she had just witnessed, “And be nice. She’s a friend: we don’t claw at friends, got it?”

Rikalia pouted defiantly, but allowed it. Ridding the cast from her leg was a short and simple process. The recovery machine had healed her broken bones without flaw, but she was a bit clumsy on her feet after her time of resorting to crawling. Standing on the medical table, she tested her leg, measuring the flexibility of her joints. Satisfied, she decided to jump off the table, and then from the ground, she leaped up onto Iruni’s back.

“Hey! Watch the claws! Did Tom teach you this too?” he thought back to the sight of Kate arriving in his room with Rikalia in a similar fashion. “I think time away from him will do you some good.”

Rikalia responded with some sort of disappointed remark.

‘Ha!’

“What’d she say?”

‘Oh, nothing.’

“Why do I bother sometimes…” he placed a hand on the joined arms around his throat. “Rika, let go of my neck, it’s time to go.”

She clambered up onto his shoulders, dangling her legs over his chest.
“I’d think you’d want to try and walk beside me, but this is fine too.” She nodded, and waved at Ruby below her. “Well, if we’re done here, we should head back. Kate still needs your help Ruby.”

‘Don’t you mean our help? You’ve still barely done anything these past few days. Also, when are we going to talk to Rikalia about what happened to her?’

‘Let’s not spoil today, whenever we get a chance tomorrow, we’ll talk about it.’ Iruni turned to Allison, “Well, thanks for all of your help today. I really appreciated it.”

“You’re very welcome, Iruni. Please come again if you need anything else.”

“I will. Thanks again,” he said as he turned. He left the Pokémon Center, with Rikalia riding on his shoulders and Ruby following close behind.

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To be continued…

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Confirmation

[“… I don’t see why you keep complaining to me about this. I’m not who decides these things.”]

“I know, but I just don’t understand why you always get all the good work, while I’m up here freezing my ass off,” Dalton yelled into the microphone of his PokéGear. The high winds and poor reception made for terrible signal quality. “I told you I wanted to interrogate those old codgers.”

[“The relative interest of our assignments is irrelevant. Both are equally important, and suited to our own specific skill set. If it were you in my place, I doubt you would have been able to glean any useful information while still going unnoticed.”]

Dalton stopped walking for a moment to rest against a frost-covered tree, “Well mister ‘specific-skill-set’, did you ‘glean’ useful information?” He rolled his eyes, anticipating a smug report about his mission.

[“I’m afraid not. It seems as though our target does not hail from Blackthorn, nor does their Dratini have any origins here. A fruitless endeavor, but not a costly one. How are things on your front?”]

He clenched his fist, moments from exploding at the person on the other end of the line, “Well, let’s have a quick rundown: it’s cold as hell up here, there’s very little oxygen, and I don’t think it fucking ever stops snowing! I can’t see shit in this!”

[“Give me useful information Dalton, not a weather forecast.”]

“What the hell do you want from me, a damn floor plan? It’s a fucking mountainside. It’s rocky, snowy, and windy, there are a couple trees, and it’s damn cold.” He started walking forward again, and the voice on the other end of the line repeated its question. Dalton responded, “Well, from what I can tell, if anything happened here it’s all covered up now. I mean, it’s been three… Whoa…”

[“Dalton, repeat. You’re breaking up.”]

“Hey, Sebastian… The side of a mountain shouldn’t be peppered with craters the size of large minivans should it?”

The terrain of Mt. Silver had always been known to be treacherous—between dangerous paths, drop-offs, and various hidden features, there were many ways of swiftly finding yourself at the bottom of the mountain. The entire mountain seemed intent on being a threat to one’s health. Now, however, the surrounding area looked much more like an ancient war-zone than a desolate mountaintop.

Accompanying the large craters were columns of earth, sharp and covered with jagged stones, reaching into the air. The pillars were covered in ice from the near-constant snow. Dalton walked up to the closest one, and was surprised to see the group of spikes nearest him crumble into a pile of dirt at his approach. Continuing his investigation, he found large, spiraling vine formations similar to the earthen obelisks. He noticed that a few with scorch marks on them, seemingly from the same direction as their origin.

“Sebastian, I wish you could see this… It’s incredible! The sheer force and power required to cause this damage…” Dalton surveyed the damaged area of the mountainside further, stumbling upon something he could hardly believe. “Wait! I found some live embers! And here, open flame! How
can these even still be up here in this weather? It’s been days…”

[“Don’t be absurd, there can’t really be—”], he paused. Looking at the image his partner had just sent him. [“Well now… my apologies. What would it take for something to generate flames that last three days in almost pervasive snowfall?”]

“Something in the high ninety’s, at least. A legend might have an easier time at it, but it’d still be a considerable amount of effort. I know that my—”

[“And those vines that appear opposite the spires of earth, what do you make of those?”]

“Coralis would be a better botanist than I am, but off-hand, it has Frenzy Plant written all over it. But there’s something odd about them…”

[“How so?”] asked Sebastian.

“These vines are still alive… Oh, I get it!” he motioned towards the pines that still stood in the high altitude. “The surrounding foliage was leached for their vitality! Whoever launched the attack drained the life from… hell, probably the whole damn mountainside to power this attack! They’re probably helping keep the fire burning too.”

[“I have to say, considering your initial reaction, I’m surprised you’re not more worried for your own wellbeing at the moment.”]

“What do you mean— Oh shit! He’s here still, isn’t he?!” Dalton let go of his PokéGear, letting it dangle by its strap around his neck, “Fuck off you silent bastard! Hamath, get out here and—”

[“Dalton! Stop!”], he heard from the device, [“Do not call upon that right now…”]

“Why not?! I could be blown to bits in a second and you’re telling me—”

[“Precisely. Red wouldn’t hesitate in engaging any hostile activity, and if he were there, we wouldn’t be having this little argument.”]

The Fire type specialist stood still in the snow, breath heavy and ears straining to hear so much as an errant spark or stone being overturned. Satisfied with his own personal safety, he calmed himself down. “I guess you’re right… Plus it wouldn’t do us any good to reveal one of our aces now anyway, huh?”

[“You’re learning, I feel so proud.”]

“And your cocky ass is starting to grow a sense of humor. I can’t say I’m the same, though…”

[“In any case, continue your investigation of the scene. Once you reach the summit, report back should you find any more evidence.”]

“Can do, but what else should I be— Ah, fuck!”

He found himself face-first in a large, half-pipe of a crevice and slowly sliding down the side of the mountain. He quickly reached to his belt of Poké Balls, and released one at random: upon release, a large, bipedal avian appeared. His Blaziken ran alongside him and made a nimble leap for the sliding trainer. Successfully grabbing hold, he pulled his trainer to safety, landing on the other side of the small gorge.

He wiped his face with a gloved hand, removing the stinging snow. He spat out a mouthful of
gravel, “Holy—”, he coughed for a minute, “Holy shit…”

[“…-ton! Dalton! Respond! What happened?”]

He grabbed the PokéGear, which had remarkably survived the fall, from around his neck, “Oh, don’t worry about me; just almost fell off a goddamn mountain. No need to get worked up, I’m perfectly fine.”

[“Calm yourself, now what happened?”]

“I fucking fell into this— this long-ass crater on the mountain. Holy… It looks like it fucking goes all the way to the top! Hold on…” he crawled forward towards the large depression in the ground. One Flamethrower from his Blaziken later, he found himself looking at a steep scar in the mountainside. He removed a glove, feeling the stone that was once hidden, “Sebastian, this whole fucking trough was carved out of solid rock and soil, but it’s as smooth as marble! No wonder I nearly slid to my death on this shit!”

[“What do you think caused it?”]

“Who cares what the fucking cause was? Sebastian, seriously, why am I risking my life in this frozen hell while you’re off cozy in Blackthorn?! Do some real field work for once, dammit!”

[“As I said, you were the most appropriate for this situation, as determined by the mission plan. Don’t get upset with me if you’re given assignments that aren’t satisfactory. Listen, I’m done here, and I shouldn’t linger. Finish your sweep of the area, and record what you find. And seek any medical attention should you need it.”]

“I can feel the love from here…” he said sarcastically.

[“Sebastian out. … … …”]

Dalton stuffed his PokéGear back inside his coat, and got to his feet. His Blaziken caught his arm as he slipped on an icy patch of ground, eliciting another litany of curses from the already angered trainer, “Fucking hell, this place… Thanks Rel, you’re a lifesaver.”

The tall Blaze Pokémon acknowledged the praise his trainer gave him and helped pull him to his feet.

“Stay out with me, will ya? I’ve still got to get to the top of this damn mountain before we can get out of here, and I’d rather not fall to my death again.”

Rel nodded his affirmative, and he lit his wrists aflame, bringing some warmth to the surrounding area. The two set off towards the summit of Mt. Silver, following the curiously smooth depression in the ground.

———

Far beyond the mountain range that marked the border between Johto and Kanto, Mahogany Town was at its peak of midday activity. People were out in the streets, hurrying from place to place to escape the bitter January cold. The day had been persistently cloudy, nearly doubling the impact of the already-chilly weather. The remains of the large snow system that had moved through the area just days prior were still prevalent around the town. Street signs were surrounded with gray, particulate-filled drifts of plowed snow, and the walkways slushed along with every footprint. In the residential part of town, the less frequented sidewalks still held a fair amount of fluffy powder. The yards throughout most of the neighborhood held drifts of snow nearing one’s waist; an enticing sight
to the young, and the young-hearted.

Despite the less-than-favorable temperature, Iruni couldn’t help but long to escape the confines of his house. He could only stare longingly out the window whenever a moment allowed it, contemplating his impending journey. His entire morning was a near constant set of orders from either his sister or father. After days of skipping out on helping prepare, he was made to work a great deal to make up for it wherever he could. The house was a flurry of activity and movement with barely a moment’s rest to be found.

Throughout the day, Azula would often get in his way when he carried heavy boxes—Iruni assumed this was not accidental. Ruby spent every moment lying lazily on the stairs to the second floor of the house, silently watching him dart back and forth around the house. Karros and Vester hadn’t been seen since breakfast, and were likely hiding out in an attempt to escape any mundane tasks that could be handed to them. Tom was absent for the majority of the morning, but reappeared once lunchtime rolled around—a fact that Iruni couldn’t help but point out to Kate.

Rikalia, the newly named Sneasel, had been helping where she could; carrying small things, searching through boxes for some misplaced necessity, cutting appropriate lengths of string and helping tie boxes up securely. Iruni leaned back on the kitchen counter and watched her as she quickly moved about the house, making sure she showed no persisting ailments. Her leg had healed perfectly, it seemed. She moved about with an impressive speed, and Iruni realized that he had not seen her walk on her own before today, let alone run deftly through a house. A couple of times, accidental collisions with Azula resulted in a sudden chase around the living room, in which Rikalia always managed to out-maneuver her serpentine opponent. After each victory, she would leap up onto Iruni’s back, hiding behind him while laughing at the annoyed dragon.

“Rika, be nice to Azula,” he said, scratching her ear, “she’s a sore loser.” His last comment resulted in a prompt slap in the face from Azula’s long, blue tail.

‘Girls don’t enjoy it when you insult them, you know,’ Ruby remarked from her perch.

“And I don’t enjoy being slapped in the face while I’m paying back a favor either,” he glared at the Dratini, who slithered away into the next room. He turned back to Ruby, “Why aren’t you helping anyway?”

‘I am helping. I’m making sure you don’t sneak off to your room to dodge more work. So, more work is being done because of my efforts. That’s helping, isn’t it?’

“When taught you logic, I swear…”

“I did,” Kate said, walking in with another set of empty cardboard boxes. She threw them down at Iruni’s feet, “And I’d appreciate it if you’d stop annoying Azula and finish packing up this silverware! I leave tomorrow, and there’s still the furniture to pack into the truck, and we haven’t even gone through the attic for my old clothes and—”

“Calm down sweetie,” their father said as he came into the room. He bent down and started gathering the boxes up, “We’ll get everything ready in time, and your brother’s doing the best he can.”

She sighed, “I know, but this is just—everything at once. It’s all been pushed back to the last minute, and our train leaves in less than a day, and we’re not nearly done with everything, and—”

“Katelyn, I mean it. You’re not helping anything by stressing out over every little thing. If everything doesn’t make it this trip, we can get the rest later, or I can mail you some things. We’ll be fine
“Yeah, you’re right,” she turned to Iruni. “I’m sorry, I’m just—”

“It’s fine. I’d probably be a lot less organized than this. How about we take a break for supper? I think we all need it.”

Bruce chimed in, “Good idea. What should we do about cooking?”

Kate and her brother looked to each other, arguing the possible options, before they both agreed that cooking anything would take too much time. They ended up ordering pizza, and to take a break during the delivery time.

[Message received, Jan. 21, 2000, 01:34:45]

[“… … … Sebastian, I don’t know why the fuck you aren’t answering your damn phone, but you’d better get this message. I’ve reached the top of Mt. Silver… You’ll see everything thing in my report but, holy shit… I don’t know how either of them survived this… …… …”]

Iruni let out a content sigh as he fell back on his bed, relishing the abrupt cease in busy motion. The sounds of his room settled him into a comfortable daze as he stared up at his ceiling. Rikalia relaxed as well, plopping down onto his chest and resting her head on his shoulder.

“Hey there, Rika. Kate’s pretty demanding when she’s stressed, huh?”

She agreed, capping off her response with a yawn. Iruni began stroking her back, eliciting an appreciative purr.

Iruni felt the bed shift as another weight joined the two. He turned his head and locked eyes with Ruby, whose intent stare shifted from him to the content feline weasel lying on his chest.

“So, should we talk to her now? She seems pretty complacent at the moment, plus we’ve got some time.”

“Yeah, we should.” He looked down at the Sneasel lying so contently on his stomach. “I’d hate to ruin her good mood. She looks so cute just lying there…

“Aww, now aren’t you the sensitive one?”

“Stop doing that, dammit!” He shook his head reflexively, trying to break Ruby’s connection to him, but to no avail. Giving up on forcing the psychic cat out of his mind, he patted Rikalia on her head, “Hey Rika, can you get up for a sec?”

She complied, sitting up in Iruni’s lap. Rikalia looked up at him questioningly as Iruni sat himself up on the bed. Ruby joined him at his side soon after.

“Rika, Ruby and I want to talk about something we learned at the Pokémon Center,” at her instantly worried expression, he added, “Don’t worry. You’re still fine, but the nurse told us some… questionable things. I just want to know what happened before I found you.”

Catching on to the change in topic, Rikalia’s expression fell into sadness, and she lowered her head somberly.
Iruni scratched his head, trying to think of a way to make the process easier.

“Ruby, can you, I don’t know, translate in real-time for us?”

‘That’d be impossible. If she were anything else, I could link your minds together temporarily, but she’s a Dark type. This’ll take a while. I’ll bring her up to speed, and I’ll replay what she told you from my memory.’

“Thanks.”

Ruby took the lead and began explaining what they had learned at the Pokémon Center. Throughout the conversation, Rikalia would look up at Iruni. Each time her expression growing more distraught. When Ruby finished telling her what they knew, she latched onto Iruni’s side in a tight embrace. She shivered a bit, and a few tears escaped onto his shirt. He rubbed her back comfortingly.

After a few moments, Rikalia turned her head—still clinging tightly to her trainer—and began relaying her story to Ruby. Iruni could see Ruby’s face don a sorrowful expression as she listened; she even shed a tear. As Rikalia spoke to Ruby, Iruni started to feel a bit light-headed, a dull pressure begin to build behind his eyes. He ignored the sensation. After a final answer from Ruby, Rikalia fell into tears once more, and began sobbing into his chest.

‘Poor thing…’

“What’d she say?”

Without warning, he felt Ruby’s presence weigh in on his mind. He closed his eyes, somewhat surprised that his new pain didn’t increase, and let her show what had transpired:

“Rikalia,” Ruby began, “I know you don’t like to talk about it, but Iruni and I want to know how came to be on your own before he found you.”

“Why? Why does it matter how I lived I was before? I’m here now, and that’s all that matters… right?”

“Because dear, we learned something at the Center last night while you were being healed. Iruni didn’t want to spoil your day, but since Katie and I leaving tomorrow, we can’t put it off any longer.”

Rikalia looked up at her trainer and shifted in his lap, the concerned look he gave her made her worried. She looked back to Ruby, “What did you find out?”

“Well… we learned that, over these past few years, Ice Path has been steadily losing its Swinub population. Without an ample source of food, most predators move on to better hunting grounds. Long story short, the rest of your species has been noted leaving Ice Path over this span of time. And…”

“A–And what?”

“There were—many—reports and cases of infant Sneasel being abandoned by their families because they weren’t strong enough. They were left alone, and eventually starved to death.”

“That’s… That’s…” she clung to her trainer’s side for comfort then, shivering with fear. “That’s horrible…” she buried her face into Iruni’s chest.

“I know it is dear,” Ruby said. “But you have to realize, we’re only telling you these things so you’ll
understand why we want to know what happened to you.”

“…”

“Hon, did your family abandon you too?”

“Yes…”

“Do you know why? How did it happen?”

It was a few moment before she responded. She turned an eye towards her pink friend, “It… was a long time ago, or at least it feels like it… I was the youngest, I had a brother and sister. My father always helped them with hunts, but I don’t think he ever cared about me. I always had trouble sneaking up on prey; they usually got away from me. My mother would share her catch with me when I couldn’t catch anything myself… but my father didn’t like that. He sometimes stole the food my mother gave me, and made sure I never got it. I hated him for it.

“Once the cold season started, we started eating less. It was bad before, but it was a lot worse. I remember my brother and sister complaining a lot. I remember noticing less of my kind around the caves, but I never knew they were all gone. One night, after another foodless hunt, I asked my father where the others went. He said they went to ‘better lands’, and went off with my siblings. I asked my mother if we would go too, and she said they wouldn’t be going anywhere…” she began crying again, “and that she’d always be there to care for me!

“But when I woke up one morning, they were all gone! Even my mother! She lied to me, and left me there in our den. I was so scared. I waited for so long… but they never came back, Ruby! They left me… and— and— I tried so many times… I tried so hard to find them. Even just my mother, to tell me it was all an accident… but…”

“Shh, it’s okay dear. I understand…”

Rikalia sobbed quietly for a moment before asking, “R–Ruby… Did you and ‘runi find out… where the others went?”

“Yes. The nurse at the Center said they migrated to the caves of Mt. Silver, to the east.”

She turned forward to Ruby, stifling her crying as best she could, “Do you know… where ‘runi found me?”

“I think I know the general area, but I can’t be sure, hon—”

“Was I even close?! Were those months of searching even worth anything?”

“Rikalia…”

“Did I even get close to finding them Ruby?”

Ruby found herself shedding a tear at the desperation in the crying Sneasel’s voice, “No, I’m sorry hon. Mt. Silver is very far away. You still had a long way to go… I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, Ruby… it’s not your fault…” Rikalia’s crying renewed and she repeated her gesture of sobbing into her trainer’s chest.

After the vision ceased, Iruni looked down at Rikalia, who was still crying into his stomach. She was almost painfully holding onto his abdomen. Tears poured and dropped onto his shirt.
“Oh Rika… I—”

Rikalia surprised Iruni with a sudden, desperate outburst. She held a sharp stare with him, and waited for his response.

“She asked, ‘Will you abandon me one day too?’ And you’d better say the right answer, dammit!”

“Rikalia,” he said, breaking her composure with her full name. She continued to look up at him, “I promise, I won’t do what your family did. I won’t abandon you, not now, not ever,” he wiped a stray tear from her face, “You may be new to our lives, but we, Karros, Kate, Ruby, and everyone here care too deeply for you to do anything like that. There are bad people and Pokémon in this world, but there are just as many good ones.”

She buried her face in his chest again, this time in a show of thanks and affection. Iruni could feel her claws snag at his skin through his shirt, but he ignored it. Iruni scratched her right ear, and stroked her ear-feather, another joyful purr greeting his action.

“You’re alright Rika. I promise to keep you safe,” he looked up to see Ruby jump off his bed and make to leave his room. “Ruby, wait.”

“What? Kate’s calling me…’ she said, hiding her face.

“Thanks. I don’t know how I could’ve helped Rika along as much as I have without all of your help.” He sent her a thought, ‘I owe you ten favors, at least.’

She paused, sending him a warm pulse before adding, ‘Damn right you do.’

With Ruby gone, Iruni and Rikalia sat alone in his room. He eventually lay back onto the bed, his Sneasel still with her arms wrapped around his torso. He habitually stroked the soft, pink feather on her head—each time, her purring would reach a peak, then taper off. They stayed in this manner for a while. After a few minutes, Iruni heard the doorbell ring from elsewhere in the house.

“Hey… Rika? Food’s here, we gotta—” he lifted his head, and saw that Rikalia had fallen asleep. Much to his relief, her face was calm and content. “I guess we can stay here for a little while longer,” he said.

Iruni rested his head back on the bed, feeling the pulses of his headache slowly die away. He ignored the calls from the rest of his family as he laid there. The events of the day suddenly began taking their toll on him, and he soon found that he too was falling asleep.

“Ah! Cold! Cold! Cold! Cold!” It wasn’t the most pleasant wake-up call he could have asked for. Iruni squirmed about on the bed as something very cold was pressed against the back of his neck. He bolted straight up, immediately blinding himself as his eyes passed into a beam of sunlight streaming into his window. He shook his head to try and relive his drowsiness.

He heard laughter behind him, along with a voice he couldn’t quite place with his sleepy mind, “Haha, you were right Kar! That woke him up really fast!”

Iruni turned around, wondering who it was that was talking to his Houndour. At a cursory glance he saw no one, apart from Rikalia and Karros on his bed.

“Hey, now that you’re up, we gotta go ‘runi! Katie’s gonna leave soon!”
His attention was drawn to his Sneasel, who had somehow just spoken to him. Or at least that’s what it sounded like. From what he saw, it even looked like she said it, *But that’s… impossible…*

“Okay Ruby, enough with the joke,” he said, shifting to the edge of the bed. Iruni tried to shake away the feeling of having slept in the previous day’s clothes. “I’m up.”

Rikalia moved to follow him, putting her paws on his legs. “Ruby’s not here, ‘runi. Just me and Kar. Katie and your father are leaving soon! We gotta be down there when they leave.”

There was no mistaking it; he was actually *hearing* her talk to him. It wasn’t some psychic projection, but her words reaching him. He looked to Karros, but he didn’t show any signs that anything strange was happening, “Karros… do you… hear that?”

Karros responded in a way that Iruni expected him to, with a questioning bark and whine.

“’runi we have to hurry, or they’ll leave without you saying goodbye. C’mon…” Rikalia jumped off the bed and tugged at his hand, trying to get him up on his feet.

“Hey… Rika?” he asked, deciding to see for himself. “This might sound odd, but how are you… *talking* to me?”

She cocked her head a bit with a confused look on her face, “Umm… Like I always do? Am I doing anything different, Kar?”

“No Rika, that’s not— I mean, you’re talking to me right now, aren’t you?”

“Yeah?”

“And how exactly is it that I can understand you?”

Iruni held her questioning stare for a few more moments before coming to the realization herself. Her eyes widened with shock and joy, “You *can*!” she exclaimed as she flung herself at him. “I can’t believe it! You can really hear what I’m saying!”

“Rika, this is really… I can’t even explain it. To me, you’re speaking to me like Kate or my dad would. I can really hear what you’re saying…”

“Yeah…”

His Houndour looked as dumbfounded as Iruni felt. “She’s still talking normally for you, right Karros?” He gave his affirmative, which Rikalia was quick to translate for him. “Rika… this is…”

“It’s great! I was so worried that we couldn’t really talk anymore now that Ruby’s leaving, but now we don’t need her!”

“Rika, this is really… I can’t even explain it. To me, you’re speaking to me like Kate or my dad would. I can really hear what you’re saying…”

“Yes, but I can’t understand Kar though, that’s the thing. Why can I only hear you when I never could before? Why can I even understand a Pokémon at all?” Iruni’s head was spinning with questions.

She pouted, “Why does it matter? You can talk to me now, so why bother finding out how? Aren’t you glad this happened?”
I am Rika. This is really amazing, but I can’t stop myself from trying to figure out why,” he stroked her head-feather a few times. “I am glad we can talk, but finding out why might— Ow, ow, ow!”

“runi? What’s wrong?”

“Oh my head…” he held a hand to his temple, trying to ease the pressure on his head. The sharp pains came without warning, his vision blurred and blotted out sporadically. The pain began to lessen after a few tense moments. Rikalia gripped his hand in worry, and Karros placed a paw on his shoulder.

“I–I’m okay…” Iruni blinked heavily a few times. “I’m fine.”

Karros barked some words of concern for him.

“Yeah, what happened?” Rikalia added.

“Sudden headache. Really bad. It’s probably because I haven’t eaten since… I guess lunchtime yesterday.”

“It’s your fault you didn’t get up for breakfast, luckily Kar found a way that gets you up easily,” she raised her hand in front of Iruni’s face, and showed that she could coat her claws in a thin sheet of ice. “Uncle Tommy showed me how to do it! I can’t make it last for more than a few seconds though,” as if on cue, the ice on her claws melted and dripped away as her control over the frozen water faded.

“You’re fine. It just takes practice. In time, you might actually have a pretty strong Ice Punch on your hands!”

She looked up, staring intently at him, “That was a bad joke, you know.”

“What? I thought it was tasteful,” at another painful spike from his head, and his stomach, he made to get up. “Speaking of tasteful things, I need food. Let’s head downstairs and—”

“That’s right! They’re leaving soon, we gotta go!” She leapt up to his shoulders again, gripping his hair, “Go go go go! They said it’d be just a few minutes!”

“When’d they say that?”

“A few minutes ago, that’s why we’ve gotta hurry! C’mon Kar!”

Iruni stood—being mindful of Rikalia on his shoulders—and the group went down the stairs to the rest of his house. As they passed Kate’s room, Iruni felt an unsettling sense of emptiness emanate from it. Its now-bare walls and floor seemed to push the message further along; he sped up his pace, and Rikalia gripped his head to steady herself.

“Hey, ‘runi?” Rikalia asked.

“Yeah?”

“How far away are Katie and Ruby going?”

“A place called Saffron City, in Kanto—the region to the west of here. It’s pretty far away; they’re taking a train to get there.”

“Oh…” she laid her head on his, “When will we see them again? I wanted Uncle Tom to help me with my ice some more…”
He reached up and patted her head, “Don’t worry about it, Rika. We’ll see her around the holidays, and probably for my birthday. If we want, we could even go visit them if we ever need a break.”

“Good. It’ll be nice to see them after we’ve gotten stronger too—but I doubt Azuly will ever stand a chance at catching me when I’m getting faster while she just sits around the house all day.”

“Hey, you never know; Kate might just take on the Indigo League behind our backs and pass us up.”

“It’ll be like a race! We gotta beat her now!”

He laughed a bit at the idea, “It was a joke, Rika. She’s a college student; I doubt she’d have the time.”

She frowned, “Aww, but that sounded fun…”

“We’ll have plenty on our hands without worrying about anyone else’s badge count.” Iruni walked into the kitchen, silently hoping he hadn’t missed his sister’s departure. A quick check into the living room provided no further leads. He noticed Vester coming in from his father’s workroom, “Hey Vester, do you know if my father and Kate left yet?”

The Persian growled and nodded at the front door. As Iruni went to open it, the door knob seemed to avoid his touch as it opened from the other side.

Kate looked in and noticed her brother and his Pokémon on the other side of the threshold, “Oh hey, you’re up. Dad asked me to check one last time to see if you were awake; we’re leaving now.”

“I heard from—Oh! Kate! You won’t believe it! I can understand Rika! She’s the one who told me you were leaving.”

“Right…” his sister said, eying him curiously, “You sure you didn’t just dream that?”

“No. Trust me, I was surprised too, but I’ve made sure. I can prove it, just—”

“Hey, I’m all for new breakthroughs in insanity, but we’ve got a train to catch in Goldenrod. When I said we’re leaving now, I meant now,” Kate said. “Now give me a hug and I’ll call you once I’m all settled in.” Iruni gave his sister a hug, and Rikalia jumped over to Kate’s shoulder and did the same, “Hey, you’d better not claw my brother to pieces while I’m gone, or you’ll have to learn to dress his wounds when he faints.”

“Is that hard?” asked Rikalia.

“Hey… at least consider trying not to scratch me,” Iruni said.

“Wait…” Kate said, holding Rikalia out to Iruni, “Did you really just talk to her?”

“Yeah, she just asked if fixing up claw wounds would be hard,” he took his Sneasel from his sister’s arms, “but I hope she was kidding. I’d prefer keeping as few scars as possible.”

“I said I was sorry! I didn’t mean to—”

“Easy Rika,” he said, petting her head, “I was joking. I know these were all accidents.”

“Please don’t joke about that… I feel bad…”

“I’m sorry.”
Kate looked on as the scene unfolded in front of her. Her brother was talking to his Dark type Pokémon. “How’re you two doing that?”

“Oh, so now you believe me… But seriously, I have no idea. She just started talking when I woke up just now. Karros—and you obviously—don’t hear anything different, so she’s still talking normally. But the weird thing is that I can’t understand Kar, or Vester. So, I’m confused.”

Kate held a hand to her forehead, trying to think of an explanation, “That’s really… odd… But we really don’t have time for this. I gotta go,” Kate leaned in for another hug. “Like I said, I’ll call you when I get everything settled, okay? Dad said he’d be back here sometime early tomorrow; he’s taking the magnet train back since he won’t have any large luggage like we do today.”

“Alright. Let me know how the move went when you call!”

“Sure. Love you bye,” she said as she turned back outside. Iruni watched as she went to their truck, and he and Rikalia waved as Kate and his father pulled out of the drive way.

Suddenly realizing how cold the outside air was, Iruni went back inside and quickly closed the door. He went through his living room, heading for the kitchen; he hadn’t forgotten about his dire need for something to eat.

Just like the times before, the pain came without warning.

Iruni let out a pained grunt, his eyes began to water soon after. With his head spinning and eyesight temporarily a compilation of bright spots of light, his legs failed him, holding his head and steadying himself on the arm of the couch. Rikalia tumbled out of his grasp and onto the couch as he fell.

“‘runi! What keeps hurting you?!” Rikalia asked frantically. She looked to Karros, who only whined and nudged his trainer’s arm. “Are you alright?”

He blinked rapidly, trying to focus his eyes. “I… I think so…” he panted. “It's going away now…”

“You need food! C’mon, let’s go and find you something to eat.”

“Hold on Rika,” he said. “There’s something I want to take care of first. All this talk about leaving reminded me of something, I’ll be right back.”

“But—”

Iruni got back on his feet, taking a moment to gather himself, and quickly went up the stairs to his room. He rummaged through the various things piled next to his bed, and found the small device he was looking for.

Rikalia was soon to join him, “No, ‘runi! Food first, and then—well… What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry Rika, this’ll take a second,” he turned on the PokéGear he received a few days ago. He went to the contact list, and called the only listing.

[“… … … Well then,”] came the voice from the speaker. [“it hasn’t even been a week. I’m surprised you got back to me so quickly.”]

“I thought it’d do well to try and impress you. I hope I didn’t interrupt something.”

[”Not at all. But enough pleasantries, what’s the word? Are you on board?”]

“Count me in. I’ll be there before the 17th, as promised.”
[“You don’t disappoint, that’s for sure. But let’s see if you can keep your positive track record after you leave Elm’s Lab in Newbark.”]

To be continued…

To be continued…
“Three Months” had been the time-limit given to Iruni Thomas to make his way to Newbark Town in southeastern Johto. More than two months have passed since the strange meeting with the Champion, and Iruni’s injuries have all but faded into memories. Days of extra-careful preparation and planning culminated in the day he finally left his home in Mahogany Town to start a life as a Pokémon Trainer. His initial plans had been forced to change with Lance’s surprise visit, and the route Iruni and his Pokémon traveled took them through a place that both Iruni and Rikalia had on their minds; the Ice Path.

The early signs of the coming spring were nowhere to be seen inside the frigid caverns and caves. A thin sheet of ice covered nearly every rocky surface, which could sometimes lead to unexpected slips that could last until one collided with a rock or wall.

Iruni made sure to test his footing on the slick cave floor before continuing through the cave. He carefully stepped over another ice-covered ledge, his heavy boots thankfully held enough traction to keep him stable. Were it not for his PokéGear’s clock, the time of day would be near indiscernible in the dark caverns of Ice Path. He and his Pokémon had woken up early to try and cut their remaining time in the caves down as much as possible. Three full days of traversing nearly identical paths of glittering ice crystals and three whole nights huddled next to one another for warmth were starting to wear them down—Rikalia being an obvious exception. The Sneasel had been born and grew up here and her knowledge proved to be invaluable during their time in the frosty cavern.

“Hey Rika,” he said, nudging the half-asleep Dark type resting on his head, “are you sure this path leads to the exit?”

“No, not really,” continued Rikalia, “but I doubt I’d even know how to explain it you. See, I could write the sign for ‘fire’ completely differently from how another one of my kind might. It’s all in the
context of location and how the marking is drawn. The lines could be jagged or smooth, deep or
shallow, even the angle in which they’re carved can mean something important. I can tell what the
carving was intended to mean no matter how it ended up being made.”

“Did your parents…” he caught himself, “I mean, who taught you how?”

She rocked her head back into his, annoyed, “Stop doing that. You don’t have to keep avoiding the
subject. I’m not going to break down crying every time someone mentions my family… but to
answer your question, no, I wasn’t taught how to read them. Like I said, it’s just that I know how to
read them, not like I automatically know what they mean by instinct. Does that make sense?”

Iruni paused to look at another symbol on the cave wall. He removed a glove and traced the lines
with his index finger, “I think so. You’re born with the ability to read whatever your species writes.
Would it be hard to learn? To read these, I mean. It’s really interesting to think that your species has
written language that can differ completely simply because someone else wrote it down…” He put
aside his inquisitive mood for a moment, “And I’m sorry. I’ll try and not baby you from now on.”

She flicked her ear at him, the feather lightly tickling her trainer’s head. “You don’t need to
apologize… but thank you.” She turned back around and laid her head on his shoulder, “I don’t
think I could teach you though… There’s not much to teach when I can’t even explain it. Why
would you want to learn?”

“I’m looking to be the best Dark type trainer out there, especially after Lance told me that people
already think I am one. Learning something like your writing style would be a great thing to research
and study.”

“Like how you’re trying to find out how I’m even talking to you right now?”

“Exactly,” he said as he ducked under a low rocky outcropping. “Dad, Kate and everyone else
we’ve met have given us plenty of evidence to show that it’s only me who can hear you. And the
fact that I can’t understand other Pokémon leaves me to think this:” he looked at her, “You’re
unique, or at least doing something specific that Karros or Vester can’t.”

“So… how’re you going to find out what it is?”

“I’ve got a few ideas. Since you say you’re not doing anything that you know of to allow me to hear
you, it probably means that you’re doing it on reflex, or subconsciously. Why it just happened to start
when it did, I’m not sure. It could be that you’ve always been able to communicate like this, but just
weren’t old or strong enough to do it. This is the most plausible explanation, I think, because you
started showing this ability very soon after living with me.” He sighed, choosing his words carefully,
“Before then… you were in poor health, so this trait might have just been stunted, along with your
growth.”

“But you’re still not explaining how I can do it,” she said, slightly irritated.

“My idea is that it could be hereditary, like this thing here,” he said, running a finger along her ear-
feather.

In the two and a half months since he had found Rikalia, the feather above her left ear began to
change from the characteristic pink color common among Sneasal. The light blue color it now was
had been a surprise when it first began to develop. At first, Iruni thought she might be developing an
alternate or “shiny” coloration extremely late, but those rare cases have only been recorded to happen
at birth. That, coupled with the fact that her tail-feathers underwent the natural darkening to the
common red color led him to believe it was merely a genetic trait. Slowly the pink follicles began to
change to a light blue. Now, only a small streak of the original color remained. Whenever Iruni stroked her feather, Rikalia always returned him with a sunny look.

“You said your mother had blue ear-feathers too, right?” asked Iruni.

“Yeah,” she said. “I always thought they were pretty… hers were darker though—even my father said they made her look beautiful. Despite how he seemed to hate me,” she let herself smile a bit, “he did say that he hoped I turned out like my mother.”

“I’m glad you did, I like it. It’s a nice color,” he said, petting her head, he was met with an appreciative purr. “But as I was saying, your feather started to change around the time I started understanding you, and that lines up with when I caught you and got you healed at the Center back in Mahogany. When you started getting healthy, your body must’ve recovered from the shock of being so malnourished. Since then, you’ve started growing normally, if a bit faster to catch up to where you would be normally. If that’s the case, then it would make sense that something like this would’ve stayed dormant until you got better.”

“I guess that makes sense…” she said, drifting off into thought. “Hey,” Rikalia said, remembering something, “Your headaches started around that time too. I’m not causing them, am I?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You’ve been having those headaches ever since I’ve been talking to you, even right after it started… and you said you never had them before that…” her head fell against his, her eyes staring down at the ground. “I’m hurting you again, aren’t I?”

“Rika,” he said, reaching his arm back to rub her head, “Don’t go starting this up again. You can’t keep blaming yourself for those accidents.”

“But I still hurt you,” she shook his hand away from her and slipped down to the ground behind him. “I don’t like it when I hurt you… like when I bit you…”

“Why do you still beat yourself up over that?” he said, kneeling in front of her.

She sat down and brought her legs close to her chest. “Because you were just trying to help, and I lashed out at you…”

“I still saved you that night, didn’t I?”

“Yes… but—”

“Rikalia, you’ve got to understand that I don’t hold it against you; it’s natural to be defensive when you’re scared and hurt. It was just something that happened. I know that you regret it, and that’s enough for me. I could see it in your eyes almost immediately; you’re very kind. You wouldn’t hurt me if it’s your choice.”

“But what if it’s not?” she lowered her head to her knees. “You said it yourself; I don’t know how I’m doing this, so how do you know it’s not something bad? What if I am hurting you because of this? I don’t want to hurt you, you’re—you’re the one who saved me…” she looked up with a sad expression on her face, “How is this any way to repay you?”

As much as he wished it weren’t the case, his headaches did seem to find their roots in his Sneasel’s peculiar communication. Early on, they came as a sudden jolt of pain—blinding, thought-shattering pain. Over the past months, they slowly began to dwindle in intensity, and now he simply suffered from a steady pulse of pain when Rikalia would talk to him. He guessed it could be him building a
tolerance to them. But now, as with a few other occurrences, when she would be very emotional, or put a lot of force behind her words, the pain would spike in intensity. He winced as another wave wracked his brain.

“Rika,” he said as the pain ebbed away, “You know you don’t have to repay me for what I did. And these,” he pointed to his head, “headaches don’t matter to me. If it is because of you that I feel this pain, then I can bear with it to be able to talk to you.” He reached out and stroked her ear-feather, “Remember how happy you were when I first understood you?”

“Yes…” she relented in her sullen pose and looked up at him.

“And would you want it to go back the way it was? Always needing Ruby or some other Psychic Pokémon just to translate what we say?” he asked.

She clenched her paws and looked away from him, “No…”

“I know I wouldn’t, even if it meant I’d lose these headaches. Losing this would mean that I wouldn’t be able to talk to you anymore, and I’d miss it too much. I’ve been gradually feeling less pain since they’ve started, so I’ll get used to them completely soon. And I doubt I’ll suffer anything long-term.”

“But you don’t know for sure! What if…” she began breaking into tears.

“Hey, it’s alright. If I start feeling anything, or notice any changes, I’ll do something about it, okay?”

“But… what if… it,” she fumbled with her words. She looked back up at him, trying to hold back her sadness.

“Rika,” he put his hand to her face to wipe a tear away, “What is it?”

“I—If I am hurting you—really hurting you… then you’d have to send me away… or leave me. And I wouldn’t want to be near you because I couldn’t stand knowing that you would be suffering because of me…” she hugged his arm tightly, “I don’t want that.”

With his free arm, Iruni took off his heavy backpack, the loud thud it made as it hit the ground startling the crying Sneasel. He picked her up in his arms and held her close to his chest. She struggled in his grasp for a moment, but soon relaxed and buried her head into his chest. She wrapped her arms around his chest, gripping tightly onto the fabric of his coat.

Iruni rubbed her back as he held her, thinking to himself, Anything that looks like it might separate her from anyone she cares about, she instantly thinks the worst. I can’t blame her though… her family abandoned her, how does she know I won’t?

“Rika, do you worry about this sort of thing a lot?”

She nodded.

“Why? You know you’re safe with me; you’ll always have a home, friends, and people who care about you.”

She pulled her face away from his chest and looked up at him, “Because… before you found me, I didn’t really expect to survive. I know that sounds pretty pathetic, but I didn’t have anyone; I was alone. After my family disappeared, I only wanted to find them… but I gave up… I didn’t know if I even wanted to trust anyone else…
“Then that tree fell, and I was stuck. I tried my best to move it—I even tried calling for my mother… but no one came. I almost gave up trying… but then you found me. At first, I didn’t know what to expect, so I was defensive. But you were only there to help. Even after I attacked you, you still saved me.” She closed her eyes and smiled, laying her head on his arm, “I was so happy. For the first time since my mother, someone actually cared for me. I didn’t—I don’t want this to end.

“I worry about this because I’m afraid that…” she clenched his arm tightly, looking back at him, “I’ll end up alone again. So I try my best to not let anything bad happen. But I’ve been hurting you, and I hate that. You’re not someone I want to hurt… and, I’m afraid that these headaches, or anything else, might push you away from me.”

“Do you honestly think I would do that?”

“I… No… but…”

“Rika, please listen. If I were like any of the bad trainers out there who abandon their Pokémon, I would have done so before now;” he patted her on the head, “But I’m not like that. You may be causing the headaches, you might not; but if you are, I wouldn’t mind. Headaches can be treated. The point is, as long as you’re here with me now, you shouldn’t worry about this. So, can you please forget about this?”

“But I can’t!” she turned around in his arms, looking into his eyes with a fierce gaze, “I can’t just ‘forget about it’! Not when I might be seriously hurting you… I can’t stand it. I won’t stop caring for you, Iruni. I care about you as much as you do for me, you know. Don’t ask me to stop, because I won’t.”

Iruni held her stare for a few moments, and then let out a long sigh. He fell backwards onto the icy floor, startling Rikalia at the sudden movement. “Well,” he said, looking at the ceiling, “looks like we’re stuck then, huh?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, sitting on the ground beside him. She leaned against his body, “I just don’t want to leave this open.”

“Can we at least agree to just put it aside for now?”

“Until when? We’re not just gonna magically know that to do sometime later on. We need to do something.”

Iruni continued laying the cold cave floor, racking his mind for a possible solution or answer. She’s so stubborn sometimes… it’s not like we’ll wander into some expert’s office to ask… Wait… He brought his arms beside him, propping himself up, “Alright Rika, how about this? We put all this worrying behind us for now, and we’ll ask Professor Elm for advice when we get to Newbark Town once this Cartographer business is settled. Until then, we forget about it, okay?”

She looked over at him, hopeful, “Do you think he could help us?”

“He’s a Pokémon expert with many connections to very prominent people all around the world; if the professor can’t, I’m sure he knows someone who can.”

“So… you promise you’ll ask him about it?”

“Yes Rika, I promise. And I’m sure if I forget, you’ll be there to remind me, won’t you?”

“Definitely.”
He got to his feet, readjusting his coat as he stood up, and picked up his gear, “So, we let this be until Newbark then?”

“Fine… but don’t expect me to *completely* forget about it…”

“Deal,” he said, bending down to let her crawl up his arm. Once she situated herself back on top of his large pack, they set off once again, “Now let’s hurry out of this cave. If we’re lucky, Elm might introduce us to Karen if he can’t help us! I’ve always wanted to meet her, you know.”

Rikalia flicked an icy claw at his face, “Just focus on walking for now… forget about the subject, remember?”

Iruni wiped the snow from his cheek, “Yeah, yeah… I got it.”

Iruni quickly threw up an arm to shield his eyes from the falling rain as he stepped out of the cave. The difference in temperature outside of the Ice Path was staggering. He stood on the edge of a steep slope, carefully holding on to the wall of the cave’s entrance, looking down to discern the safest route to take. The road leading out of Ice Path exited halfway up a mountainside and the only way to town was via a steep, icy, trail. The spring rain was doing well to whittle down the ice that escaped the cave’s interior, but nearly half of the way down the path was still covered in frost.

“So,” he said, throwing up the hood of his coat, “How’re we going to do this?”

Rikalia popped her head out of his coat, hiding under his chin, “How bad is the ground after the ice is gone?”

He reached into his pocket and removed his PokéGear. Scrolling through the screens to find the current weather, he said, “Let’s see… Damn. It’s been raining for a while, and it’s still got a ways to go… It’s probably really muddy, and this rain makes the ice really slippery…”

Rikalia shook her head as a raindrop hit her face, “I hate the rain…”

“Hmm… Well, we either risk sliding down the rain-slicked ice, and try and catch ourselves as it goes to mud, or have you freeze a path the rest of the way down. How good is your Ice Punch these days?”

She extended one of her arms out of his coat, clenching her paw. “Not very, watch,” she concentrated. A moment later, a thin sheet of ice began to slowly form on her hand. “I can get my whole paw covered, but I still only get a little bit. It takes a while, and I can’t hold it for long. It’s still too weak.”

He rubbed her head, “I’m sure you’ll get the hang of it, it wasn’t a realistic suggestion anyway; it’d take very powerful Ice type to manage that,” he leaned back against the cave entrance, “So, unless we want to wait out this rain, it looks like we’re out of options, huh?”

“What about Kar?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“He can use his fire to melt the ice, and maybe even dry a path for us temporarily. You did the same thing the night you found me, remember?”

“Nice catch, Rika. That should perfectly,” he said. Iruni reached for Karros’ Poké Ball on his belt, “I
just hope Kar’s not too pissed that I’m releasing him in an ice-covered cave,” he laughed.

He turned around and took a step back into Ice Path. The shining surfaces if the cave amplified the flash of white light as Iruni released his Houndour. As Karros’ feet touched the ice, he yelped in shock at the sudden change in temperature and scrambled to maintain his balance. Karros blew a quick Ember down at his feet to melt a place to stand. Annoyed, he looked up at his trainer and companion, questioning the rude and rather cold awakening.

“Before you get all upset, Kar,” he gestured over his shoulder, “just be glad that I didn’t release you out in the rain.” Iruni had another chuckle as Karros’ ears drooped in shock, and then raised in relief. “You think you can help us?”

Karros questioned what his trainer meant, tilting his head slightly.

“Come here— No… Come here and see,” he said, leading him to the mouth of the cave. Iruni tried to make sure Karros stayed out of the rain, “Look, we’ve got an annoying sheet of ice ahead of us, and then it just fades into mud. How about clearing us a safe path with some fire? We’ll celebrate with some food once we finally get into Blackthorn.”

His Houndour barked in agreement and nodded to indicate that he was waiting for the order.

“Awesome!” Iruni stepped aside, “Now, this’ll be some good practice; let’s try out your Fire Blast, just to make sure we don’t miss anything.”

“Wait… Fire Blast—?” Rikalia had to cut her question short as the temperature suddenly spiked. She ducked back down into her trainer’s coat, peeking down at her four-legged partner. His form was distorted as heat waves began rising from his body, melting all the ice surrounding him. Noticing her discomfort, and thinking of his own safety, Iruni stepped further back into the cave.

“Aim low, Karros! Don’t want all of Blackthorn freaking out, do we?”

With flames escaping through gritted teeth, the Houndour nodded and stepped up to the edge of the slope. The heat he generated evaporated the water just before it struck him, clouding him in steam. He let loose the explosive blast of fire straight down the mountain path, trying to direct the flare as best he could. The force of the eruption sent a large wave of heat into the cave, causing Iruni to turn his back to the flames to protect his vulnerable Ice type in his arms. Iruni kept a sidelong-glance towards the cave exit; he felt a great sense of satisfaction watching Karros do what he does best.

A few moments later, Iruni felt the cool breeze return and turned back to the cave entrance. He laughed with a prideful mirth as he saw the aftermath. All around his Houndour, the ground was dry and steaming as fresh rain landed on the flash-burnt dirt. Karros stood at the top of the hill, panting a little, surveying his work. An ice-free path now trailed down the center of the mountainside; some of the dirt near the bottom was charred as well.

Iruni stamped his foot on the ground, testing it. “Good job as always, Kar. So long as we hurry, the ground shouldn’t get too muddy before we’re at ground level,” he aimed Karros’ Poké Ball at him, “We’ll get food after we settle in at the center. ’Til then, take it ease.”

Rikalia worked her head out of the coat as her teammate was engulfed in red light. She looked up as her trainer pocketed his gloves and started walking down the freshly scorched path, “It’s nice to be out of that cold place. I probably won’t be needing all this cold weather gear for a while…”

“Umm, Iruni?” asked the Sneasel.
“What is it, Rika?”

“How…” she fidgeted a bit in her trainer’s coat. “How is Karros that strong?”

“It’s to be expected, isn’t it? Karros has been with me for nearly seven years now, and until you came along he was my only Pokémon. I’ve always been anticipating the day we’d begin our journey, so I spent a lot of time training him. Plenty of potential birthday gifts and extra cash have gone the way of a few expensive TMs as well; Fire Blast was last year’s, I think,” he placed his hand on Karros’ Poké Ball, “He’s really strong, he’ll likely be the powerhouse of the team, I’ll bet you that.”

“What about me? Will I get strong like him?” she asked.

“Sure you will. You’re already closing the gap between the two of you; Karros has just had more time to train than you. We never had that much battle exposure until now, but we’ve practiced our moves the best we can.” He rubbed the fur on her head, “And don’t you go feeling inferior to Kar just because he’s older; you’ll be the key to us winning in Violet City.”

“Why?”

Iruni sighed, “Violet City’s has a Flying type Gym; I wouldn’t want to put Karros through something like that… So, we’ll have to rely on your quick moves and advantage over their typing.”

Rikalia continued her barrage of questions relentlessly as they made their way down the mountainous path toward Blackthorn City. “And what Gym is after that?”

“Unfortunately Bug, in Azalea. But Kar will have the advantage there, so he’ll tear through that one all on his own, I bet.”

“You won’t let me try?” she asked, sounding hurt.

“Wh— No, I didn’t mean to say it like that, sorry. I was just saying that he’d do better there than—” he sighed, “I’m sorry; I was just getting ahead of myself.”

“So… you will let me fight at Azalea?”

“If you want to, of course. I’ve heard that Bugsy, the leader, his main Pokémon is a Scyther, it’ll be a good match for you, don’t you think?”

“Scyther… what are those again?”

“Big green bugs with scythes for arms; sharp, fast, smart, and tough. Think you can handle it?”

“I don’t know…” she said smugly, “I’ll probably be able to out-speed it way before we even get there, so it wouldn’t be much of a challenge. I can almost beat Kar whenever we train.”

“Well, you gotta keep in mind, Rika,” he said, reaching his left arm out towards the sky, letting the cool drops splash against the back of his hand, “We’re going to be seeing a lot of interesting places, meeting new people, and finding new Pokémon. You and Kar do fine by yourselves for now, but we’ll have to catch a full team eventually, so we’re likely going to have to change our regular battle plan.”

“Do you have any Pokémon you’re looking to catch?” Rikalia asked.

“I don’t know, I haven’t set my mind on anything specific. A Murkrow maybe since I already have a Dusk stone,” he paused for a moment, shaking out the water from inside his sleeve. “But if I set out
to make an all-Dark team, we’d be at a disadvantage to anyone who exploited that fact. Fighting, Bug, and Fairy types would be a major threat. So, at least for the start of our journey, I’m not going to bother trying so hard to catch more Dark types, and just focus on a balanced team.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes. The mountainous terrain soon leveled out to a rocky path, making walking far easier. Before turning their last corner until they entered the city, Iruni looked back up at the exit of Ice Path. The heavy rain battered the path, already freezing over the sections near the mouth of the cave and muddying the rest of the ground. *Not going even let me think about turning back, huh?*

“Iruni… what’s the matter?”


“Oh… How long are we staying here?” she asked. “I know you said we’re not going to bother with the badge here for a while, but what else are we going to do while we’re here?”

“Let’s see…” he said, pulling out his PokéGear again. “Today’s the 29th, so that means we’ve got nineteen days before Lance’s deadline.” He thought for a moment, “I’ll ask around at the center, and I think we’ll give Kate a call to see if she has any advice on how we soon we should leave.”

“Yay, I miss Katie! I wish we could talk to Ruby too…”

He laughed, “You know you can, but it’s too bad telepathy doesn’t travel over video-phone.”

Unlike the mountainous area surrounding Blackthorn, to the west, Ecruteak City had already dealt with its share of rain. A few small puddles still remained on the roads and sidewalks around the city, and the air held an almost uncomfortable humidity about it. A blond man threw the last of many suitcases into the trunk of his car, and went back inside his home to join his wife.

“Allan!” the woman yelled up the stairs, “It’s almost ten-thirty! Your father and I have to get going soon!”

The young man being beckoned surprised his mother by vaulting the banister from the second floor and jumping down from the landing outside of his room onto a step just a few feet in front of her. Allan Relmstead did his best to stifle his laughter at his mother’s shocked expression.

“I have a clock you know.” The shock from landing hard on the wooden staircase stung his legs, but he ignored it. The reveal was worth the effort. “Also working ears; you don’t have to yell.”

Recovering from the sudden appearance from her son, Mrs. Relmstead stepped back a bit, shaking her head, “Allan… how many times have we told you to **not jump down the stairs!** You could’ve hurt yourself!”

Allan walked towards the kitchen, “Could I? Yes. Did I? No.” He laughed at his mother’s angry expression, “Hey, it’s either jump, or have Xutan test out his multi-being teleporting. *Walking down stairs is boring.*” As he entered the kitchen, he was met with a palm smacking his forehead, causing him to stagger backwards.

“Allan, listen to your mother,” scolded his father.

“Good morning to you too, Dad…” His parents followed him into the kitchen, and he rooted through the pantry for a box of cereal. “So, how soon **are** you leaving?”
“The car’s all packed,” his father—Nathan Relmstead—said, “We were just waiting on your lazy butt to get out of bed.”

Mariah—his mother—noticed the distinct lack of a small, chipper, four-legged Pokémon and asked, “Where’s Umari? Is she still asleep?”

Allan looked down at his feet, now just as curious. “Well, she was following behind me when I came out of my room…” he leaned back to look up the stairwell. He paused, and motioned for his parents to look, holding a finger to his lips. “She didn’t make it…” he whispered.

Umari, his silver-furred Eevee, was asleep halfway down the stairs, one paw draped over the edge of the step she was sleeping on.

“It seems the sleepyhead needs her rest,” Allan said, sitting down at the table, bowl and spoon at the ready.

“How late were you up last night, Allan?” asked his father.

“I’m still up, actually. Umari’s gotten a lot better at responding to telepathy lately. We were up last night working on it. She’s able to communicate without Xutan around now!”

“That’s great, but make sure you get some sleep after you get back from work; you’re still my growing boy you know,” his mother said, ruffling his hair.

“You know I’m *nineteen* still, right? Same as yesterday, mom…”

“You’re lucky your mother called you when she did,” his father said, “We couldn’t wait on you much longer.”

“Oh how would I *ever* sleep at night if I missed the departure of my beloved parents?” Allan asked, pouring all the fake emotion into his words that he could. He prepared himself a bowl of cereal, added milk, and got a glass of water, “So,” he said, after taking a bite, “where’s this year’s trip taking you?”

“We’re going to the conference in the Unova region this year,” his mother said.

“Why they’re holding it there of all places,” Allan’s father chimed in, “I don’t know, but we’re excited all the same.”

“So… today’s the 29th,” Allan glanced at the calendar hanging on the fridge, “how long is the conference?”

“One, two weeks usually.”

“So, you won’t be able to be back before 15th, will you?”

“Actually,” his father said, “Your mother and I decided to stay in Unova after the conference and tour the region, like a vacation. We’re not exactly sure when we’ll be back.”

“What’s so special about April 15th honey?” his mother asked.

“I told you,” he said between bites, “That’s when I want to head out to start my Trainer career.”

His mother came up behind him, rubbing his back, “Oh, I’m sorry Allan. Does it bother you that we won’t be here to see you off?”
He swallowed, “Not really. You travel a lot, I’ve gotten used to it.”

“You sure you’ll be ready in two weeks?” his father asked. “What about your job at the bookstore?”

“Seventeen days,” Allan corrected, spoon raised, “and yes, I’m sure. I’ve already put in my ‘two weeks’ there—two weeks ago, actually—and today’s my last day. I’ll get my last paycheck there, and work on getting everything I need ready. The rest of the downtime I’ll spend training around town, I guess; that or sleeping since it’s so important.”

“Well, son” Nathan said, “We’ve got a plane to catch soon, is there anything else you need?”

“Are you two at least going to be back by my birthday? It’ll probably work out with me being ready to challenge Morty by then, so I’ll be in town.”

“That sounds manageable, that gives us a good date to shoot for to come back, right honey?” Nathan asked his wife.

“Just as long as our young trainer here doesn’t stand up his own parents on his birthday,” Mariah said, hugging her son.

Allan wrapped a free arm around her, returning the loving gesture, “I’ll be here, mom. I promise.”

“You’d better,” she said, pulling him into a full hug, “or I’m kicking your ass,” she laughed.

“You say that now…”

“Well Allan,” his father said, “I guess we should be heading off. You’ve got our numbers, so call us if you need us. If anything happens, let us know.”

“You know I will,” he said hugging his father. “Have a good trip. Hope the conference goes well.”

“We’ll try,” Nathan thanked him.

His parents walked to the door, calling back into the house as they opened it, “We’ll call when we land in Unova!”

“‘Kay,” he called back at them. “Be sure to get me a souvenir or something! Oh, and let me know about the gyms over there!”

“We will!” his mother answered.

Allan waved them off as they closed the door behind them. After hearing the car start up and pull away, he turned back to the counter and leaned over his breakfast. He ate in silence for a few moments before he felt a familiar mind enter the room.

“Well there you are, sleepyhead,” he said, anticipating her next move.

Umari jumped up to the counter next to his arm, ‘Why you leave?’ she asked, her words fuzzy and groggy, ‘I missed you.’

He put his spoon down and rubbed her head, “My parents just left to go to their conference; I had to come down and say goodbye. I said you could go to sleep without me, you didn’t have to follow me down.”

‘Wanted to.’ Umari yawned and closed her eyes. She laid down, resting her head on his arm.
“No Umari, you gotta stay awake,” he said. After a few unsuccessful attempts at waking her, he had an idea.

Allan gathered some milk from his near-empty bowl into his spoon. He held the spoon in front of her nose for a moment, watching as Umari’s face lit up as she recognized the scent. She happily lapped the milk up. She got to her feet and nodded expectantly at the bowl, ‘The rest?’

“Go for it.”

The silver Eevee soon buried her face in the bowl, quickly eating the scraps of cereal and making sure not a drop of milk remained.

“If you were hungry, you should’ve said something…”

‘Sorry.’ She raised her head, her small snack finished, with crumbs and a little milk clinging to her fur.

“Umari, today’s my last day at work, so I’ll probably be back early today, alright?”

‘I go too, right?’

He pointed at her face, “Not looking like that you’re not. Clean yourself up.” He gathered his dishes and set them in the sink.

Umari began cleaning her face with her paws, but paused to ask, ‘We leave soon?’

“I don’t need to be in for a little bit, so we’ve got a while.”

‘No. Leave home. To go gym battle and win.’

“Oh, that. We’ll be leaving here in a little over two weeks.”

‘Parents? They be here?’

Allan leaned against the counter, petting her, “No, they’ll still be off at their conference, or carrying on around the region. They’re going to Unova this year.”

‘Unova? Where that?’

“Pretty far away, Umari. I’ve asked them to let me know about the gyms over there in case we ever get the chance to go.” He laughed as a thought came across his mind, “Who knows, they might even send us a new teammate like they did with Duncan.”

‘Duncan idiot,’ Umari said with a sour look.

“He’s not so bad when he concentrates, but yeah, ‘idiot’ works.” He made to leave the room, “You stay and clean your face, I’ve got to go change for work. Be back in a sec.”

‘Okay. Allan… hurry?’

“Sure, I’ll be quick, Umari.”

—

Iruni took off his hood as he entered the Pokémon Center of Blackthorn City, glad to be out of the heavy downpour behind him. He looked around the main lobby; it was crowded with other trainers
wanting to stay out of the rain. A few of them looked his way and exchanged words as he unzipped his coat, revealing the blue-feathered Sneasel that quickly crawled over him and onto his shoulder.

“Hey there, new guy,” a rather bold local said, walking up to him. The man wore a large leather coat, one of a style that seemed rather eccentric for daily wear. It was trimmed with orange and dyed a deep blue. His short, orange hair seemed to draw the attention straight to him, “Welcome to Blackthorn City!”

The man extended his hand, and Iruni shook it, “Thanks, It’s nice to see some friendly people, you don’t see that too often.”

“Well, ya will here, friend. The name’s Jake, Jake Ostra. Our city isn’t large like Violet or Goldenrod; we know how to treat our own, and outsiders too.” He led Iruni by the shoulder over to his table, insisting that he join for a while, “So new guy, come sit down with the rest of the gang, will ya? What do they call ya?”

Despite the welcome being a bit too friendly for his tastes, Iruni decided to humor him. The rain-soaked trainer set his belongings down beside him as he took a seat, “Iruni Thomas, and this is my Sneasel, Rikalia.” The feathered-weasel waved at the group sitting at the table.

Another at the table spoke up, “Are you here to challenge our Clair? I see you already have an Ice Pokémon ready.”

“Is she your only Pokémon? Who else do you have on your team?” asked a woman.

“I won’t be challenging the gym on this trip, I’m afraid. We’re just passing through,” Iruni answered. “Aside from Rika, I’ve only got my Houndour; we’re pretty new on the trainer circuit at the moment.”

“Only passing though?” Jake asked. “Where’re ya headed?”

“I’ve got an appointment in Newbark Town,” Iruni said. He remembered his earlier conversation, and asked, “Say, do you know how long it takes to get to Newbark from here? I’ve got a deadline to meet.”

Jake thought for a moment, “Can’t say I’ve been as far east as Newbark before, I’ve always headed straight to Violet from Cherrygrove whenever I needed to go that way. If you’re walking, I can’t see it taking any more than a week to get to Cherrygrove, but if you’re careful and try and dodge the tricky paths, I think it’d be doable in five days.”

The woman, Andrea, added, “The road from the Route 29-46 junction to Cherrygrove is very calm and quiet, so going the other way to Newbark should be even easier. Just watch out for those Rattata,” she said, “they bite.”

Iruni laughed, easing up a bit around this new group of faces. He continued to exchange jokes and stories with the group of trainers, until Rikalia tapped his head, whispering something in his ear. He looked to his right and saw that the man sitting closest to him, who hadn’t spoken yet, was leaning towards him, staring intently. The man wore a simple black coat, much tamer than the garb of his friends, which fell over a thin frame. His skin was paler than it should be, almost yellow in tone. He had long, straight, black hair that obscured over the right side of his face.

“Yes? Is something the matter?” Iruni asked uneasily.

It took just a moment for the man’s attention to break, the man’s head snapped to Iruni’s. Having been caught, he raised his hands and sat up in his seat. “I—I’m sorry,” he said in a quiet voice, “I
“didn’t mean to stare…”

“Well, is there something you wanted?”

“It’s just that—your Sneasel…” he said, leaning back in, “I haven’t seen one with a blue feather in a very long time… is it dyed?”

“Nope, that’s her natural color. Rika just takes after her mother,” Iruni said. “Why do you ask?”

“I was… curious, that’s all…”

“Don’t worry about Mr. Galian there,” Jake boomed, slapping Iruni on the back. “Whenever he finds a unique lookin’ Pokémon, he’s just gotta ask about it. Don’t ya, Coralis?”

Iruni saw the black-haired man flinch at the name, he heard him whisper, “Don’t use my first name… I’ve asked you not to…”

“Oh, my bad Galian,” he leaned down to Iruni’s ear. “He’s not from around here, but he’s a good guy to have around. He took to our group pretty quick since he got here, but he hasn’t quite gotten used to the whole ‘social’ scene, if you get what I mean. Oh, and he hates his first name, so it’s best if you forget I said that, ‘kay?”

“That’s fine, I can relate.”

“So…” Galian spoke up, “Do you know? What makes her feather that color, I mean?” His head slowly tilted as spoke.

Rikalia moved over to Iruni’s left shoulder, wanting to distance herself from the strange man.

“No, I’m not sure. It’s not like a normal alternate coloration. Like I said, her mother had the same coloring in her ear-feathers and Rika inherited it from her. Shiny Sneasel have a bright pink coat and golden feathers.” Iruni remembered an earlier part on the conversation. “You said you had seen blue-feathered Sneasel before, didn’t you?”

“I have.” Coralis Galian spoke flatly. His face slowly began to fall as he talked. “It may not be commonly known, but Sneasel once had brown fur and blue feathers, just like that,” he said pointing to Rikalia’s head. “But, it probably doesn’t matter now.”

“Why doesn’t it?”

Galian suddenly leaned over the table, bringing his face close to Iruni’s. The man’s black hair fell away from his face as he tilted his head again, eyes wide. Iruni could see his right eye was glassy and was a dull gray color; blind. His left, the bright green iris it bore seemed to look straight through him and almost seemed to glow.

“Because it’s been too long. They’re all long gone. Now, all that’s left are only fragments and remnants of another age. They’re all gone and you might be all that’s left, Sneasel Rikalia,” he said, bringing a hand up to Iruni’s Pokémon.

Even faster than he had moved forward, Galian pulled his head back, holding a hand to his face. It took Iruni a moment to realize it was Rikalia that had caused the man’s sudden retreat; the entire move happening in a blur of red and blue. She stood on the table in a defensive stance, bloodied claws extended, pointing in the direction of her target. She hissed at him, punctuating the noise with a deep growl of intimidation. Iruni cringed as a little blood trickled past Galian’s fingers, running down his side of his palm.
“Rikalia!” Iruni rushed forward, pulling Rikalia off of the table and onto the floor. “What do you think you're doing?”

“Whoa there, no need for that…” Jake said, standing. The rest of the group stood along with him, except for Galian. All eyes in the center seemed to be converging on the group. The nurse behind the main desk began walking over to the scene.

“S—She…” Galian said shakily, “She attacked me…”

“I’m so sorry,” Iruni said, holding back his aggressive Sneasel. He looked back down to her, “Why did you do that to him?”

“He got too close, and I didn’t like the things he was saying…” she answered, not lowering her stance or taking her eyes off her prey.

“Rika, you don’t—”

“I apologize for my actions, Iruni Thomas and Sneasel Rikalia,” Galian said, surprisingly loud and forward. He pushed his hair out of his face, revealing a calm expression. “It was not my place to say such things; I let my emotions get the better of me, but that does not excuse me.” He removed his hand, revealing the two new shallow cuts on the bridge of his nose, trailing to his right cheek, “I’ve earned these marks today, and I’ll do better to not earn anymore.” He extended his unbloodied hand, “I hope you can accept my humble forgiveness, it was not my intention to offend.”

Rikalia snarled at the gesture, but the man did not flinch.

“Well, thanks,” Iruni said, shaking the frail man’s hand, “but it really should be me who apologizes.”

“Alright, what happened over here?” The nurse asked as she finally pushed her way through the small crowd and made it to the table. She pointed at the small splatter of blood on the table, and noticed its origin, “Sir! Are you alright? If it was this man’s Pokémon that did that to you, I can have them removed immediately—”

“No need for that… No need” his voice fell back to its reclusive tone. “Perfectly fine… I assure you. It was my fault, I shouldn’t have intruded… Do not punish them, I hold no grudge.”

“But sir—”

“Miss, this trainer’s Sneasel was merely acting on her right to protect herself and her trainer, if anything, it is I who should be reprimanded…”

“Listen,” Iruni said to the nurse, “I didn’t mean to cause any trouble.”

“And trouble you avoided, my friend,” said Galian, putting more insistence in his words. “Ma’am, I believe these two are in need of lodging during their stay in the city, if you could, provided them with a nice room, at my expense. You may charge it to my account.”

Iruni could hardly refuse in time, “I can’t accept tha—”

“I insist!” Galian said, standing. “Please, I insulted your Pokémon, such an act is unbecoming of myself and how the people of this fine city treat others. This is merely a token to help alleviate the guilt I feel, so please Iruni Thomas of Mahogany Town, take the room as a gift, and let no more bad blood be between us.”

“Uh… well,” Iruni looked at the worried woman, “Is this even doable?”
“Of course, but are you sure you want to do this Mr. Galian?”

“I am certain; it’ll help put my mind at ease,” he said solemnly.

“Alright, if you’re positive, then I guess that’s that. Mr. Thomas, I’ll be at the front desk whenever you’re ready to take down your information for your room.”

“Thanks, I’ll be up in a minute,” he said to the attendant.

“And Mr. Galian, be sure to see me for any bandages should you need any, alright?”

“I will remember that, Miss…” said Galian.

Iruni looked to his Sharp Claw Pokémon, who let out another low growl as Galian sat back down. She stared the black-haired man down as he settled back into his seat. Rikalia slowly edged back to her trainer’s side, reluctantly letting her posture relax at the comforting hand on her back.

“Rika, you alright?”

“No…” she shook her head. “Not till we’re away from him.”

“Well, let’s go and get our room now then? We can talk about this in private.”

“Fine,” Rikalia said. She backed up slowly, and turned back to Iruni. “Let’s go.”

Iruni stood up, letting Rikalia climb up to his shoulder, and picked up his pack, “Hey everyone,” he addressed the group, “I’m really sorry for all this, especially you, Galian.”

“No trouble… none at all…”

Jake walked over, talking quietly, “Hey man, sorry about that. Galian’s normally not that… weird. He’s a nice guy.”

“It’s fine trust me; I’m sure he’s not the worst out there.” He started toward the main desk, “Thanks for including me, you guys! It was nice meeting you all!”

“Any time!” Jake called.

Iruni crossed the short distance remaining to the front desk, trying to not meet the eyes of the various other patrons who watched as he left the scene. He caught Rikalia giving a last glance over at Jake’s table and rubbed her head reassuringly.

“He’s just strange, Rika. He’s not going to hurt us, stop worrying so much.”

“I still don’t like him…”

He sighed as he set his bag down in front of the desk, getting the nurse’s attention.

“Oh, hello there sir. If I can just get your information; here, here, and here… Okay, you’re all set,” she said with a smile, handing him his keycard. “And I am obligated to say that if your Pokémon will continue to be a problem while you stay here, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask that you keep her in her Poké Ball.”

“She won’t be, I promise. She’s normally much better around people, but we just started on our journey.” Iruni pet Rikalia’s head affectionately. “Something about that guy really spooked her.”
“Yes, Mr. Galian is… an odd one. I still find it odd that he stuck with Ostra’s group once he came into town, but that’s neither here nor there.” She gave Iruni a practiced smile, “I hope you and your Pokémon enjoy your stay here in Blackthorn City, Mr. Thomas.”

“Thank you,” Iruni said. “We’ll do our best to stay out of trouble.”

To be continued…
As she sat on her trainer’s shoulder, Rikalia finally let herself relax as they made their way out from the main lobby of the Pokémon Center. Once they turned down the long hall which led to the rooms, she shifted her posture, leaning to her side and resting her head against his. The blue-feathered Sneasel watched the wall-mounted lights scroll past her view as she drifted off in thought.

*That man...* she felt a shiver start to crawl up her spine, *he was so creepy, saying weird things...*

Partway through her musings, she noticed Iruni had stopped in front of their room.

“Well, here we are,” he said, looking down at the small envelop in his hand.

Rikalia watched Iruni take the small keycard from its paper envelope and inserted it into the lock. A small green light near the slot and a soft click proved his efforts successful. He turned the handle and pushed the door open. The lights were off in the room, but the window on the far wall had its curtains pulled, the cloudy outside world casting a dull gray tone on the room. Separating itself from the common assets of the room, a small kitchen area occupied some space on the left wall. Flicking the light switch as they entered, the room regained its color; breaking away from bland atmosphere the cloudy day provided.

“This room’s pretty nice,” said Iruni, closing the door with a push. “Now I really feel bad. Dad gives me all this money, and before I can even spend it—”

Mine!” Rikalia yelled as she leaped from her trainer’s shoulder, landing on the soft bed. Testing out the quality of the blankets, she kneaded the bedding with her claws. Satisfied, she laid on her chest, sighing contently. She looked up at Iruni, who was recovering from the sudden movement and making sure his heavy bag didn’t fall from his grasp.

Iruni took off his pack and coat, setting them on the small couch in the room, “Rika, you don’t get the only bed. You’ll share it with me and Kar like we did back home.”

“Too bad. This is *my* bed, so you two will just have to share it with *me* now,” she said playfully.

Iruni reached for Karros’ Poké Ball, amused at her sudden upswing in mood, “And that changes things... how exactly?”

“It sounds better in my head,” she said, rolling onto her back.

“Right...” he clicked the button on the red and white sphere, releasing a black furred fire-dog into the spacious hotel room. Karros shook his head and began roaming around the room, taking in the various new smells. Predictably, he jumped up onto the foot of the bed and made to lay down.

“So Kar, are you just going to sleep, or are we getting food?” asked Iruni.

“Yeah,” Rikalia said, going over to her teammate. “I wanna eat soon, so don’t get all lazy!”

Karros tiredly looked up at his trainer as his energetic companion shook his shoulder, trying to get him to stand. Then, he caught a peculiar scent coming from his eager Sneasel friend. He leaned over and sniffed her paws. Recognizing the smell, he jumped to his feet quickly, ears perked, and eyes alert, looking from Iruni to the Sneasel who just fell forward onto the bed. The scent clung to his nose, the familiarity of it alarming him.
“Easy Karros, easy… What’s wrong?” Iruni asked, kneeling by the foot of the bed.

The Houndour barked, nodding his head towards Rikalia.

After getting no further answer from his Fire type, Iruni looked down at his Sneasel as she sat up on the bed.

“Don’t say ‘again’ like that!” Rikalia said. She shifted her gaze to her trainer. “He says he can smell the blood from earlier,” Rikalia raised her right paw to her defensive friend and extended her claws, showing him the small bits of crimson that still lingered on them. “And don’t ever say it like I’m making this a habit, Karros. This was different.” She shyly began to wipe the drying blood from her claws.

“We’re not in any danger, Kar,” Iruni said, patting his head. “Rika was just being defensive.”

Karros whined and tilted his head, questioning what his trainer had meant.

“Well, we were—”

“There was this guy, and he was being super creepy, so I swatted him away,” explained Rikalia.

“That’s the short version, yeah,” said Iruni. “You know, before we figure out what we’re doing for lunch, we really should talk about what happened, Rika.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Iruni sighed, dragging a hand across his face. When he spoke, her trainer’s voice was stern and wary. “Because,” he said pointedly, “you cannot do that again. Do you understand me?”

“But I thought it was alright—”

“Rikalia!” Iruni yelled. “You attacked him for doing next to nothing! That’s not okay!”

The Sneasel backed away slightly at being scolded so harshly. Rikalia sat down on the bed and hung her head, idly cleaning the dirtied claws on her right paw.

“I’m not mad at you,” Iruni said softly. “I’m worried about you. You don’t think it’s okay to just attack anyone who annoys you, do you?”

“No…” Rikalia answered quietly, still avoiding his gaze.

“Back home, you were great with everyone you met. What changed?” he asked.

“I don’t know… he was—that guy was just… too weird, okay?” she looked up at him, fighting back tears of frustration. “I just… felt like I needed to protect… you and me. He felt like danger.”

To her relief, she saw Iruni smile at her words. He gently rubbed her head, lightly dragging his fingers through her fur.

“Well, that at least I can understand. Thank you for doing what you thought was right, but next time you have control yourself. Growl first, at least,” Iruni said. “If it happens again, I’ll have to recall you to your ball, and I know you don’t want that.”

“Please don’t!” Rikalia pleaded. “I hate it!”

“I know you do,” he said sympathetically. “But I’d hate it if you were taken away for attacking
someone who wasn’t as forgiving as Mr. Galian was. Do you get what I mean?”

“Yes…”

“There’s probably a lot of weird people out in the world, Rika. You can’t go around slashing at people you don’t like,” Iruni explained.

Karros whined and licked Rikalia’s face, trying his best to cheer her up.

She laughed, pushing the dog’s big head away from her.

“I’m sorry.” Rikalia looked up at Iruni, hiding her claws behind her back. “I’ll be more careful with these. I promise.”

Her human reached behind her and pulled her paws back in front of her, holding them in his hands. He gripped them firmly and smiled.

“There’s enough ugliness in this world, Rika. Don’t add to it, do good with what you have.”

“I…” Rikalia started up at his eyes, unable to find the words to fit what she felt. She eventually managed a short, “…I will.”

“Good,” Iruni said. “Let’s put all this serious talk away and—”

There was a knock at their door, catching the attention of the group. Iruni got to his feet and looking through the small porthole on the door. “Oh there is no way my luck is that bad…” he whispered.

“Who is it?” Rikalia asked. “Don’t tell me it’s him.”

“Well, who else knows we’re here?” he asked her.

“Say we’re not here!”

“That’s not gonna work. Don’t hate me for this, Rika…”

Before she could say anything else, Iruni opened the door. Her short fur stood on end as she saw who had decided to pay them a visit.

Galian stood in the doorway, hair matted and dripping with water. His pant legs had large splash marks around the ankles, and his leather coat shined in the light as small rivulets of rain rolled off his shoulders, “Hello… again, Iruni Thomas,” Galian said, struggling to keep his breath, “I hope I wasn’t… interrupting anything…?”

Iruni shook his head politely before speaking. “Oh, hey Galian. We just started settling in. The room’s very nice, by the way. Too nice.”

“That’s…” he paused. The black haired man coughed a bit, and swallowed hard. “That’s good to hear… Sorry to drop by… unannounced, but I felt this would be better done sooner rather than later…” His voice was a bit haggard.

Iruni looked down at a plastic bag in the dark-haired man’s hand, and started piecing together the other clues about the man’s appearance. “You didn’t just run to the store just now, did you? In this rain?” he asked, surprised.

“It was essential,” Galian said, trying to regain his usual calm and smooth voice. “The nearest store is three and a half blocks down the road… Besides, it wouldn’t do well to apologize without ample
“reparation on hand.”

“What’s in the bag?” Iruni asked.

“The crucial element to my coming here. If you’ll let me come in, I hope to make everything clear… May I?”

“Sure, come on in,” Iruni said, stepping back into the room. As Galian passed by him, he could see that, if the man abandoned his habitual slouch, Iruni might be a head shorter than him. “You don’t have to do anything else you know, you’ve already apologized—”

“To you, yes. However…” he said, coming to a stop at the edge of the bed.

Rikalia had moved to the opposite side, wanting to keep her distance. She sat staring out the window, refusing to acknowledge the man with the gray eye.

Galian pointed to her, “I can see she still holds me in bad opinion.” Karros, curious about the newcomer, and eager to see if he was as much of a threat as his cold friend had made it seem, slowly approached him. Galian extended his hand to the Dark Pokémon, “This must be your Houndour then. He has a name, I take it?” He took off his black coat, folded it, and set it on the bed. He placed the bag on top of it.

“Yeah, he’s Karros. I’ve had him since I was about… eleven I think.” Iruni moved over to the other side of the bed, letting his Houndour inspect their visitor while he saw to his other Pokémon.

“Rikalia,” he whispered, “What are you doing?”

“What do you think I’m doing?!” she hissed. “I’m not talking to him… I’m doing what you said, controlling myself.”

“He’s here to apologize to you because he doesn’t think you forgive him.”

“I don’t! Why would I? I don’t want to talk to him, I don’t want to see him, and I don’t want him to be here!”

“Why’re you so against him?” Iruni asked.

Rikalia slammed her fists into the mattress, “Because he’s creepy, weird, and, and—”

“At least he’s trying, Rika. He’s come here to apologize to you, he rushed out in that rain to get something that’s for you,” he put a hand on her shoulder, “So the least you could do,” he said, turning her around, “is humor him.”

She sent an angry look up at her trainer; they held their staring contest while the sound of rain picked up as it pounded against the window. Soon though, his stern gaze soon wore down her stubbornness. She slowly got to her feet and looked to the other side of the bed. Galian had since sat down and was currently petting Karros’ head.

Galian looked to his left, noticing the cautious movements of the Sneasel eying him with apprehension. “Hello there, Sneasel Rikalia. Come sit with me,” he said, patting bedding on his opposite side.

She looked back at Iruni with a pleading look on her face. Her trainer simply rolled his hand expectantly, then walked over to the couch and began to remove and organize his travel gear. As he worked, he soon became annoyed with his long hair. She watched him pull it back into a ponytail, letting his bangs fall over his face and get back to work. She sighed, defeated, seeing no further
assistance coming from her trainer. She slowly went over to Galian’s side, keeping a respectable distance from him.

“T’m glad to see you’ve come around,“ Galian offered his hand to her, as he did Karros, but a sharp hiss was enough for him to cease his efforts, “Not yet? Fair enough, I suppose.” He drew his hand back and ran it through his soaked hair. He combed his fingers over his scalp, revealing his pale-skinned forehead.

Rikalia wished he didn’t; his gray eye was now looking at her now.

“I would like to bring our quarrelsome history to an end as soon as possible. The fewer enemies one has at the end of the day makes for fewer knives in one’s back in the morning.”

“That’s… a little grim…” Rikalia said, transfixed on the man’s pale face.

“Ah, there it is… Iruni Thomas?” Galian asked as he looked to his left. Iruni had since become surrounded by various piles of clothes, supplies and miscellaneous objects. Even the couch was occupied with his belongings. “My, quite the load you’re bearing, is it not?”

“Yeah, I over packed when I left home,” Iruni said, rummaging through a pile of clothes for a sock he doubted he would find a match for, “I always over pack.”

“It does well to build a strong back, but not to break it. I recommend not overloading yourself so early on, especially with your injury…”

“Thanks for the ti— wait…” he said, turning back to him, “How’d you know my arm was hurt?” Subconsciously, Iruni’s right hand drifted to his left shoulder, which seemed to have picked an appropriate time to resume its chronic ache. While Iruni had agreed to leave home when his injury was healed, the projected timeframe eventually began to overlap his deadline to meet Professor Elm. Iruni made a convincing act of a healthy shoulder and was allowed to leave.

“It wasn’t so hard to notice. You pick up your backpack with your right arm and bear most of the weight on that shoulder as well. Your face betrayed a bit of pain when Jacob Ostra leaned down on your left side in the lobby as well.” Galian pushed a few locks of hair back on top of his head, “But I digress from my initial inquiry: You can understand Rikalia when she speaks, can’t you?”

Taken off-guard by the sudden change in topic, Iruni paused a moment before responding, “Uh, yeah actually. We’re not really sure how, but I can understand her just like we’re talking now. Her words actually sound like English to me.”

“Fascinating…” Galian said as his eyes widened with interest. “But that’s not why I came here.” He returned his attention to the Sneasel who was exchanging worried glances back and forth with her trainer. Galian reached into his bag, and revealed a clear, plastic container of pink fruit.

“Getting back to the matter at hand, I would like to formally apologize to you, Rikalia. My words weren’t of the proper tact,” his hand drifted to his face, tapping the bridge of his nose, “and you made sure to remind me of that.

“I have wronged you, and I felt that my earlier attempts at redemption were not satisfactory, at least to my own conscience. I may be overstepping my boundaries,” he said, opening the package, “but I think you would enjoy a Pecha berry.” Galian picked one from the plastic container, and offered it to Rikalia.

She eyed it warily, looking to her trainer for assistance; he motioned for her to take it.
“They aren’t the freshest,” he told Rikalia, “Only store-bought, but their sweet flavor and tender texture are quite good.”

The Sneasel held the pink, heart-shaped berry in her hand for a minute, turning it over and inspecting it.

“C’mon Rika, try it,” Iruni pressed, making his way to her side. “They’re not gonna kill you.”

“Well…” she brought the pink fruit close to her nose, taking in its scent, “it smells good, but…”

“Here,” Iruni said, reaching for a berry for himself. He turned it in his palm a few times, picking a suitable spot to take a bite. Sinking his teeth into the skin of the berry, his tongue was met with a gush of sweet juice as he dug into the soft flesh inside.

“There, see?” he said, chewing his bite. “They’re good.”

Rikalia tested the fruit by stabbing it with a claw, and testing the flavor by licking the juice that lingered there. Her eyes immediately lit up, visibly enjoying the sweet taste of the fruit. She took a small bite from the berry itself, finding it much more satisfying, and finished the rest of her snack in two quick bites.

She eagerly reached for another, but paused, looking up at Galian. He just smiled, and set the container in front of her, “Have as many as you wish, they’re yours.”

And for the first time, Iruni saw Rikalia smile back at the black-haired man. Abandoning her manners, she snatched up two more berries and voraciously tore into their pink flesh, relishing in the rich flavor. Partway through her third berry, Galian extended his hand toward the feasting Sneasel. She paused in her meal momentarily, but let him lightly pet her head.

“Apology accepted then?” Iruni asked.

“Yes, I’m not mad at him now,” Rikalia answered quickly, “Now, let me eat.”

“Hmm, Iruni?” Galian spoke up.

“Yeah?”

“This might just be me finding patterns that do not exist, but looking back on it, our situation seems remarkable reminiscent to that of an old story, The Nobleman’s clothes. Do you agree?”

Iruni thought for a moment, but couldn’t place what story Galian had in mind. “Can’t say I’ve heard it before.”

“I see… My father used to tell it to me as a child; it’s a story I’m quite fond of. Would you all like to hear it?” Iruni nodded, Rikalia simply picked up another berry and moved to Iruni’s lap as he sat on the bed. Karros came over to their side as well.

“Well, it’s a story set in medieval times; lords, kingdoms, knights and the like. The tale opens with a wealthy Earl; well liked, and affluent in material and social status. The Earl had a happy family, many friends, and held a great deal of influence in the city where he lived. Some held him in the same regard as royalty. An opinion that could very well have been the case; the city surrounded the King’s castle, and the Earl was always in good opinion with the King.

“One night, the King was to hold a celebration at his castle; a very exclusive event. Naturally, the wealthy Earl was to attend as the King’s guest. The Earl sent his family to the King’s castle ahead of
him and gathered a group of his closest friends to accompany him to the party. With his friends in tow, they walked through the town on their way to the castle.

“Along the way, however, they came across a man, garbed in strange, colorful, eccentric clothing. The group stopped and jeered at the man; ridiculing him, their minds bogged down by liquor. The Earl, in a feat encouraged by his friends, personally affronted the strange man, throwing him into the muddy street, threatening eviction from his home for blocking their path. His group laughed and they continued their way to the castle.

“They arrived at the party and began enjoying themselves. However, the Earl saw something that filled him with dread: the man in the strangely colored clothes was at the party as well. That fact alone wouldn’t have been enough to scare him, but the oddly dressed man was talking to the King himself. The oddly dressed man that the Earl had insulted and pushed into the mud had been the King’s brother. The King, voice booming over the noise of the party, called the Earl to his side. The noisy commotion of the celebration seemed to pause instantly.

“The Earl, fearing for his life, begged and pleaded for forgiveness. He blamed his actions on his friend’s behavior, the liquor, his own pride, anything to escape the gallows. The King’s brother, being younger and kinder than his older sibling, asked the King to be merciful, and requested the Earl’s punishment to be his decision. The King begrudgingly agreed, and the younger brother began to contemplate an appropriate fate for the Earl.

“The brother thought for a moment and decided that the Earl was to wear his clothes, and be paraded around the city. However, the King thought his brother to be too forgiving, and in addition to his brother’s sentence, stripped him of his status as Earl. His wealth was to be taken away, leaving the once wealthy Earl nothing but a pauper. As harsh as the punishment was, the Earl accepted the King’s final decision, thankful that he kept his life.

“The Earl’s friends disowned him after his attempt to selfishly save his own life at the cost of theirs. His family resented him for leaving them in a life of poverty. The town’s people soon hated him, admonishing him for being so disrespectful and causing his family to have such hardships. The Earl then became known as ‘The Unfortunate Jester’, as he refused to shed the colorful clothes he was forced to wear that day. He wore them as a reminder of the mistakes one can make when acting with only your own interests at heart.”

Galian cleared his throat and took a deep breath before continuing to speak, “Well, that’s the children’s version of the story. The original tale has a slightly different ending.”

“How does it end?” Rikalia asked. Iruni repeated her question to their guest.

Galian smiled at her, “The King ignored his younger brother’s pleas for the Earls life, and had him executed for his insult to the royal family.” He chuckled a bit at the group’s collective reaction, “Still one of my favorites, that one…”

“So,” Iruni said, wanting to break the tension, “how do you see us in that story? I think you’re the Earl, but am I the King or his brother?”

“I’ll leave that to your interpretation…” said Galian. He looked down at the package of Pecha berries he had brought, seeing it almost empty. “It seems my judgment was correct.”

Iruni laughed and got to his feet, stuffing the rest of his first Pecha berry in his mouth, “Looks like you’ve got a new favorite Rika. Good call on the berry idea, Galian. How’d you know she’d like Pechas though?” Karros stood and walked over to Galian’s folded coat on the opposite end of the bed.
“Some might say it was ‘intuition’, but I like to attribute it to my observatory habits,” the pale man said. He turned around, switching his focus to the Houndour sniffing his coat. “For example, your Houndour has a very mild and laid back manner, but is also alert in his senses, as he is already one step ahead of me. Karros would likely find a favorable opinion in a Chesto berry, should you find some.

“However, while I do not have any berries for you to sample, I did come prepared with something you might like,” he said to Karros. He slid his hand into the coat’s pocket, looking for what Karros had apparently been investigating. Removing his hand, he produced a small, black piece of charred wood. “This is a piece of Azalea charcoal. Fire type Pokémon seem to be attracted to the smell of the wood they employ in the craft. So, if you would like, you’re free to take it.”

Karros put his nose close to the man’s hand and sniffed at the piece of charcoal. Particulates of ash came loose from the small block, causing Karros to sneeze, shooting a wonderfully bright jet of flame up Galian’s arm. Rikalia stood up in shock, backing away from the sudden blaze. Never losing his calm smile, and ignoring the frantic worry of the Houndour’s trainer, he patted Karros on the head, “You’ve got quite the bit of fire power, don’t you? As you can see, the charcoal significantly boosts the potency of a Fire type.”

“Never mind that! Your arm’s on fire!”

Galian casually raised his arm, coolly observing the flames slowly crawling up the sleeve of his shirt. “Oh, so it is. No harm done…”

He reached into his coat without taking his eyes off his arm and removed a Poké Ball with a deep blue base that slowly shifted to white in a flowing, wave-like pattern. He tapped the button twice and released the Pokémon inside. A weasel with soft orange fur and a single cream colored spot on her back shook her head a bit as she adjusted to her new surroundings. Noticing the situation, she jumped up onto the bed and held her paws out to the burning arm. Rings of crystal clear water emanated from the Buizel's hands and enveloped Galian’s arm. The flames were quickly extinguished and the shifting bands of water soon coalesced into a clear veil just clinging to his skin.

“Thank you, Amé,” Galian said as he rubbed the fur on the Buizel's head. “These burns shouldn’t take long to heal.”

She replied happily, rubbing against his hand as he praised her quick action.

“Are you sure you’re going to be alright Galian?” Iruni asked frantically. “I’m so sorry; Karros has a bad habit of doing that. It was an accident—”

“Just as it was earlier,” Galian cut him off, “this wasn’t any fault of yours, I assure you. Just take it as a preview of how much stronger Karros’ flames can be.”

“Yeah, but—”

“No, no, it’s quite alright. Here,” he said, holding his water-cloaked arm up for Iruni to see. “They were small burns, and Amé is very capable of taking care of such minor damage.”

“Well, that’s good,” Iruni paused to catch his breath and sat back down on the bed. “What move is that? I didn’t know there was a Water move that can heal like that.”

“This is called Aqua Ring, and it isn’t really healing as much as it’s stripping the burnt flesh away, cleaning the wound, and encouraging the natural healing process,” he reached back and grabbed a Pecha Berry from the container took a quick bite, “so all that’s left is for my body to do the rest.”
“That’s really handy,” Iruni remarked. “I’ve never heard of any Pokémon—well, apart from Chansey or Blissey anyway—using a move to heal a human before.” Iruni then felt two clawed paws grip his arm; he could feel a slight tremble in his partner’s movements. When he didn’t respond to that, Rikalia dug her claws into his arm.

“Ow! I get it, Rika…” she pulled him aside to the other end of the bed. “What’s wrong?”

“His…” she kept her voice low and moved closer to her trainer, “His arm was on fire… and he just sat there… like it was nothing.”

“What? Just a second ago you were fine with him, but when he stops feeding you berries—”

“Shut up!” she snapped. “You know what I mean… he just sat there… don’t you think that’s weird?”

“Of course I do,” he whispered, “but it’s never good to overreact about someone while they’re in the room. Besides, not everyone’s as scared of fire as you, so he might be used to it; I know I am. And if he had reacted any worse, that fire might’ve caused more damage than his Buizel could manage.”

“I guess…” Rikalia said. She looked around her trainer at Galian, and watching him observing his healing wounds under the veil of water. She crawled over Iruni’s lap and got a closer look, curious about the nature of the animated water.

“I’m sorry my gift to Karros inadvertently startled you, Rikalia. It seems bad luck follows me wherever I go.” Galian motioned to his Buizel, finishing up the Aqua Ring treatment, “Pardon the late introduction, but this is my Buizel, Amé.”

Iruni spoke up, “She’s not from around here, is she?”

“Correct, she is from my home region. My luck uncharacteristically turned favorable on eve of my departure from Sinnoh. I found her almost as I left the region, or rather, she found me. She’s a natural at utilizing her Aqua Ring, an inherited move found in her lineage, I think. Which reminds me, Rikalia,” he said, looking at the Sneasel, “you might have some latent potential as well.”

As Galian finished his sentence, a loud ringing started coming from his coat, turning the heads of everyone in the room.

“Excuse me,” Galian said. He unfolded the coat and began checking the many pockets on its inside, and after a few more repeats of the beeping, he pulled out a black and green PokéGear.

After fumbling with a few buttons on the device, Galian answered the call, “Yes? What about him? Has he done anything? ‘Public’? How do you—… Are you certain? When will it be on? What station? I will, thank you.” He turned to Iruni and spoke in a hard, fast tone, “Iruni, the remote for this television, where is it?”

Going by his previous knowledge of basic hotel rooms, he found the remote in the drawer next to his bed, “Here it is. What’s wrong?”

“Something’s about to be aired on the news. Turn it to INS,” Galian said, turning toward the still-off screen. His Buizel sidled up beside him, questioning her master’s sudden change in tone.

“A bit pushy, isn’t he?” Iruni said under his breath as he powered on the television. He found a small cardboard card listing the channels that were available, and changed the channel to the International News Station. It was currently running a piece on a group of Pokémon activists, claiming that everyone should “liberate” their Pokémon from their “servitude”. This “Team Plasma” as the news
reporter called them, had been recently increasing their activity in the Unova region. The screen cut
to a home-made video of a rally that was held in Accumula Town:

[The video cut to a close up of a man standing on a stage. The picture zoomed out to show that he
was flanked on either side by five young men and women, each adorned in very old looking outfits,
almost medieval in nature. The two members at the ends of the precession held flags, bearing a
stylized ‘P’ over a ‘Z’-like pattern. The man speaking had pale green hair, wildly trailing down
around his shoulder and back. An odd eye-piece covered his right eye.] Iruni thought it looked like a
monocle made from a broken pair of gaudy sunglasses, its red visor flashed as a spectator took his
picture.

[The man wore a bright and colorful robe with a design that looked like two red eyes. The collar of
his robes seemed rather awkward, resembling what some would recognize as the battlements of a
castle, but they stayed square on the man’s shoulders as he paced the stage. He spoke in a loud,
pleading voice, booming over the speakers at the crowd before him:

[“—must open your eyes, citizens! How long have we kept Pokémon under our control like this?
Generations! To you, you see it as the norm, even to the Pokémon; they’ve grown used to the idea!
But this isn’t how we’re supposed to live with them! Pokémon are our friends and companions, some
even call them family, but not our slaves! Would you force your own brother or your best friend to
fight for mere sport? Of course not! That is why you must release your Pokémon! Set them free!
What you’re doing isn’t—”]

“What’re we watching this for?” Iruni asked. “This guy’s getting on my nerves…”

“It should be on any moment. A friend of mine said they ran the story earlier today, and this channel
reruns its stories all day. It should come up after this…”

The home-video cut away just as the man with green hair concluded his speech, the person filming it
putting their camera down and applause could be heard. The news reporter began to wrap up his
segment, stating that the group called Team Plasma, while having a few key similarities to groups
that had gained power in other regions, has not shown any violent tendencies or been caught in any
illegal activity. He finished his report by showing the projected number of Plasma supporters active
now, and a week ago: the number had tripled.

The reporter disappeared as a graphic of what looked like an ancient stone pantheon flashed over the
screen, but his voice began to read aloud the next segment Galian said in a low voice, “This is it.”

[“Another story coming from Unova today is the resignation of one of the most prestigious ranks in
the region. Officials at the Unovan Pokémon League report that they received a letter of resignation
from the third seat of Unova’s Elite Four, Dalton Drake.” The image of a man with bright, short,
orange hair, and a large larvae-like Pokémon covered in white fur with five red horns surrounding its
head sat on his shoulder appeared next to the reporter. The image began to shift between various
other pictures and statistics about the ex-Elite Four member.

[“After being appointed in 1993, Fire type master, and Unova native, Dalton Drake held his seat for
nearly seven years, where he was an avid supporter of increasing the required age limit of trainers in
Unova, until Champion Alder voiced his opposition to the movement.

[“This, along with other public disagreements with the Champion, lead some to believe that Alder is
the root cause for Dalton vacating his position, but the two’s strenuous relationship had been well
known for some time. Dalton had challenged Alder for the Championship a number of times, each
ending in the Fire specialist failing to take the title from Alder.”]
Dalton had been an active member in the Elite Four until the start of this year, where the Fire trainer had been requesting multiple leaves of absence. This resignation comes as no surprise to some, as rumors detailing the nature and reason behind his absence have been circulating.

Officials at the Unova League were unable to produce a statement regarding Dalton's replacement, but speculation points to Lady Caitlin, the Frontier Brain of the Battle Castle in Sinnoh. Sources say that she is considering volunteering for the position. The reporter began to close the story with a few more notable accomplishments that Dalton had achieved.

“That man…” Galian said, low and almost a whisper.

“Do you know him?”

“I’ve met him before, many times. I… I didn’t expect him to step down from his position. This isn’t like him.”

“I guess you met him on one of his ‘vacations’ then?” Iruni asked. He heard a disappointed grunt behind him; he looked and saw Rikalia staring at the empty fruit container.

“That’s right. While I was still in Sinnoh, and not long after I had caught Amé,” he said as he pet the Buizel's smooth, water-resistant fur. “But he was a harsh and cruel man… Not the kind I would like as an enemy, you could say.”

“Let’s hope you made a good impression then, eh?”

Galian laughed a bit, “Yes, one can only hope. Just as I hope I’ve cleared my name in your minds, Iruni and Rikalia.”

“Don’t worry about it, you’re good by us. I’ve never seen anyone apologize so much.”

“I refuse to leave room for error,” Galian said. He looked out the window for a moment, watching the rain batter and run down the glass. “I seem to have taken enough of your time today, so I should get going. Amé also enjoys being out in the rain, and I wouldn’t want to deny her such good conditions for much longer.”

Galian stood and gathered his belongings, recalling his Buizel into her Dive Ball. Iruni stood and walked him to the door, opening it for him.

“Be careful out there, Galian,” Iruni said. “Oh, that reminds me. It might not be any of my business, but could you tell me your name? Your first name, I mean. I’ll still call you ‘Galian’ if that’s what you want, but I’m just curious.”

The black haired man stared at Iruni with scrutinizing eyes, his expression on the verge of anger. Eventually, he sighed and softened his gaze, “I will, only if you promise to not tell anyone else, and if you confide in me one question as well.”

“Uh… Sure?”

“That scar—that bite mark on your hand…” he whispered, his vision shifting over to the bed for a split second, “Rikalia gave that to you, didn’t she?”

“Oh, that? Yeah, she did. It was somewhat of a misunderstanding back when we first met, but we worked it out.”

Galian looked surprised, and a bit amused, “I see. It seems we have that in common. Very well, I’ll
tell you my first name. Coralis. Coralis Odarius Galian is my full name. I trust you with that
knowledge,” he said as he turned and started to walk out. He paused just as he exited the door, “Oh,”
he said in a whisper, “you may tell Rikalia. I wouldn’t mind if you told her.”

“Oh? Why’d you change your mind?” asked Iruni.

“She, like you, is trustworthy; I’ve determined that from my time with her today. She is also far more
forgiving than I was expecting.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean what I say.”

“Well,” Iruni said, “Thanks. I’ll keep your name secret, but why’d you want to know about my
hand?”

“That was merely me being curious. I dislike leaving questions unanswered… Now, I’ll be off.”
With that, Galian walked down the hall, away from Iruni’s room.

Closing the door, Iruni went back to the bed to find Rikalia attempting to lick any remaining juice
from the bottom of the plastic container, “You certainly lightened up once he left.”

“Look,” she said. “I forgive him for being weird, I can tell he meant it when he apologized, but that
doesn’t mean I like him.”

“I guess that’s as good as we’re gonna get.” Iruni sat down next to her, “And if you want more
Pechas, we can pick some up before we leave town. Don’t go eating the plastic just to get at a few
bits of pulp.”

“But they’re so good…” she whined, flopping down onto the bed.

“How many did you eat?”

“Probably most of them. How many were there?”

Iruni looked at the empty container and counted the number of indentations in the plastic, “Twelve.
Galian and I each had one for ourselves. So yeah, ten is definitely most of them. You probably
should’ve saved some for Karros.”

“But that Galian guy said Kar would like something else anyway, and I would’ve given him some if
he wanted any.”

Iruni picked up the empty container and threw it into the garbage can beside the dresser. He went
over to his Houndour and picked up the piece of charcoal, “We’re definitely going to test how much
this helps. So Kar, you still want to get something to eat for lunch? I know Rika’s spoiled her
appetite.”

Karros answered his trainer, punctuating his response with a yawn. Rikalia translated, “He said he’s
still tired, and doesn’t really want to head out.”

“We’ve got some food with us; I’ll heat up some Pokémeal for you then.” Iruni walked over to the
couch, stepping over a few piles of his belongings, and rooted out a package of microwavable
Pokémon food.

“What about you, Iruni?” Rikalia asked as he came back to the bed, the drone of the microwave
clashing with the sound of the TV. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“A little bit, so I’ll probably get something out in town. Pizza, fast food, something… or just eat some of the snacks I packed if it means it’s less to carry.”

Rikalia looked to the giant pile of items to her right, “What are you going to do about that?”

“Well,” he said, sitting on the bed, “I’ll probably send some stuff back home. I was going to call Dad once we got in and settled anyway, so I can tell him to be on the lookout for a package of stuff. But I could just put the stuff in storage, which really would be the best thing to do… eh, I’ll figure it out.”

“Are we still going to call Kate?”

“Yeah, I’ll call her after we eat and talk to dad, just in case she has classes,” Iruni said. The microwave beeped, and Iruni got up and took out the platter of food.

“Can I be there with you when you call?” Rikalia asked.

“Sure,” he answered. “I bet you’re going to go right to sleep after you’re done with this, aren’t you Kar?”

His Houndour barked an affirmative and jumped off the bed to eat his lunch. Iruni went back to the bed after he set down the Pokémeal.

“Hey, Iruni?” Rikalia asked as Iruni laid back on the bed.

Iruni stretched on the bed, trying to work out an ache in his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“You said you’d buy some Pechas for me before we left, right?”

Sitting up, he reached out for the remote and turned off the TV, “Sure. We can get some on our way out for lunch if you want some tonight.”

His Sharp Claw Pokémon surprised him with a quick hug, “Thank you.”

“I’m going to have to thank Galian next time I see him. Oh, speaking of, he told me his name and said I can tell you.”

“Really?” Rikalia asked. She came around to Iruni’s side, “What is it?”

“Coralis Odarius Galian. It sounds really…”

“… Like a really old name,” she finished. Iruni nodded in agreement. “But why’d he say I could know it? Did he say me specifically?”

“Yeah, he said he thought you were trustworthy, and that you were a lot more forgiving than he thought you would be.”

Rikalia looked away from him, mouthing the words over once more, “… more forgiving…? Oh!” she suddenly burst into laughter, wrenching Karros’ attention from his meal. “I get it now.”

“What?”

Karros looked up from his food for a moment to ask what she had meant as well.

“Coralis thought I was like the King from that story of his.”
“Do you think so?” Iruni asked.

“Well, a little. I’m obviously not as mean as the ‘original’ King, but I find it funny that he didn’t think I’d forgive him.”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?” she asked.

“Well, you tried to ignore him and almost refused to even talk to him. Did you think you’d forgive him?”

“But—I was… he… shut up,” she looked away, embarrassed.

Iruni tried a few more times to coax her into admitting defeat, but Rikalia’s stubbornness won out. “Fine…”

—————

To be continued…

—————
While Blackthorn City continued to be battered by rain, a large and bustling city in the Kanto region gleamed brightly in sunlight. Many tall buildings stood to greet the sky, their windows shimmering as they reflected the rays of gold light. At the center of the city, the largest building towered over the others. Anyone on the top floor of the Silph Corporation would be able to see Saffron City in its entirety; a bright and golden center of business.

Blocks away, the lively afternoon sun streamed through the windows of an apartment complex. On the third floor, a Dratini sat coiled in a chair in front of the sliding glass door of a small balcony, enjoying the warmth of the spring day. Inside the apartment, Kate’s Glaceon, Tom, sought out the coolest part of the room for his afternoon nap, wanting to avoid any unnecessary heat if he could. Ruby was laying lazily on the kitchen counter watching a few Spearow perched on the roof of a building across the street.

Kate was in her bedroom, sorting some laundry she had just finished folding. Before she could finish her chore, she felt the touch of another mind on her own consciousness, ‘What’s up Ruby?’

Ruby was alerted to a notification on Kate’s laptop that she had left on the counter, ‘Someone’s calling you on your laptop. I can’t read who it’s from, but I have a bad feeling it’s your brother…Today was going so well…’

Kate threw down the shirt she was folding and walked back into the kitchen, “Quit it Ruby, you know you miss him.”

‘As long as he isn’t planning any surprise visits, I’m fine.’

“Whatever,” she said. She answered the call, and the image of her brother appeared in a new window on her screen. Kate could see other people behind him, carrying out their business at the Pokémon Center he was calling from, and a light-blue feather sticking up from the bottom of the screen.

[“Okay, we’re on now. Say ‘hi’ you two!”] Iruni said. Rikalia quickly pulled herself into the camera’s view and waved at Kate and Ruby. Karros stuck his head in the frame as well, barking at the participants on the other end of the line.

Instead of greeting him, Kate started her side of the conversation with, “Cut your hair.”

[“What? It doesn’t look that bad, does it?”]

“The ponytail just doesn’t do it justice.” Kate said.

[“Ponytail? Oh, dammit…”]

Ruby laughed to herself as she watched Iruni fumble about with the hair tie, evidently having forgotten that it had been in place.

[Why didn’t you tell me I still had my hair pulled back, Rika?”] Iruni asked. His Sneasel responded in her own tongue, leaving half of the exchange unknown to Kate.

[“It’s not supposed to be a regular thing, I only put it up when it gets in the way.”] Iruni said. [“I hate
“Oi, you two. Start talking to the person you called a few time zones away,” Kate said irritably. “And have you figured out how you’re doing that yet? The talking thing?”

[“No, not yet. But we might sometime soon.”]

“And the headaches? Those still happening?”

[“Yeah, but not as often or bad as before. We think they might be related, but we’re still unsure about the whole thing.”]

Kate nodded, “Be sure to let me know when you do, this could be a new way of communicating with Pokémon that you’ve just stumbled upon.”

[“Don’t worry.”] Iruni said, [“I’ll call you whenever I find out.”]

“So, how’re things so far? Rika hasn’t given you many more scars since last time, has she?”

[“Just one.”] Iruni said. He brought his arm into the view of the camera and pulled back the sleeve of his jacket. Kate could recognize the bite mark on his hand, as well as the four short claw marks he received right before she had left home.

[“This one,”] he pointed to thin, pale line on his upper arm, [“came from one of her toe-claws. She kicked me in her sleep.”] A quiet mumble just barely registered by the microphone sounded over the speakers from the Sneasel who was now looking down in embarrassment. [“Hey, this one was an accident, just like the others, you know that. I know you didn’t mean to.”]

“Yeah, don’t worry about it, Rika. So long as you keep away from clawing faces on purpose, no one’s going to think badly of you for a few accidents.” Kate saw the two currently in frame on the other end of the line exchange a nervous look, but she disregarded it.

“So, how’s everything? Holding up okay?”

[“We’re good. I just got back to the Center from a late lunch, and I called dad just before you. I’m surprised I managed to get Karros up before I called you, he was out like a light.”]

“Karros just wanted to see me, didn’t he?” Kate heard a short bark on the other end of the line. “Where are you guys anyway? Baring the obvious ‘at a Pokémon Center’.”

[“We just got into Blackthorn City this morning, or was it after noon when we got here? I can’t remember…”]

‘He’s taking his sweet time, isn’t he?’ Ruby said to herself.

“What?! How are you already at Blackthorn? There’s no way you’ve gone through seven gyms in two and a half months.”

[“Of course not, I just came this way on my way to Newbark Town.”]

_Oh, that’s right. I forgot about that._ Kate thought back to the memory Ruby shared with her about Iruni’s meeting with the Champion of the Indigo League, Lance. She decided to feign ignorance, “Why’re you headed to Newbark? You could’ve just gone through Ecruteak and went straight to Violet for your first badge, but you’ve wasted almost two months just roaming the region?”

[“I wasn’t wasting my time, this is good experience. Besides.”] Iruni paused. Kate half expected him
to fumble for an answer, but he continued, ["I want to see Professor Elm and see if he can help me figure out how I can understand Rika."]

“Oh,” she said, slightly impressed, “that does sound like a good idea. Speaking of experience; how’s the battle scene so far?”

[“It’s been good so far. Karros is a bit above Rika still, but she’s catching up really fast. Speaking of fast, you should see how fast she is now. Rika’s a bit faster than Kar. Hey— I’m sorry buddy, but she is.”]

‘Ask about his losses,’ Ruby suggested, ‘I bet he’s hiding something interesting.’

“So, Ruby wants to know—”

‘Hey!’

“Oh quiet you… Anyway,” she continued, “Ruby wondering about your battle record. Any losses so far?”

[“Well, there was this one—”]

Rikalia immediately protested his retelling of the loss, putting her paws over his mouth.

Iruni laughed it off, pushing her away. [“Rika, it’s fine. We’ve never had any practice with double battles,”] Iruni said as he rubbed his Sneasel’s head. [“It was right before we got to Ice Path, and these two trainers both came up to us, and a double battle would’ve saved us a lot of time rather than a one-on-one, so I accepted the battle.”]

“So, how’d it go?” asked Kate.

[“Not as bad as you’d think, but still a loss. They had a Marill, and a Ditto. I was expecting the Ditto to transform into the Marill to take Karros down quickly, but it copied Karros, and we got beat pretty bad. Rika still beats herself up over it,”] he said, directing his voice down at her, [“even when I keep telling her to not worry so much.”]

“Wait, so you still only have those two? No new captures?”

[“Right now, yes. I haven’t seen anything I wanted to catch yet.”]

‘He’s not going to last long.’ Ruby said.

“You do have a point…” added Kate.

[“What? What’d she say?”]

“Well, are you sure you’re going to be fine with just Karros and Rika?” Kate asked.

[“The worst I’ll have to worry about on the way to Newbark are the Skarmory on Route 45, so I think we’ll be alright. But I think Rika should be able to handle them.”]

“You sure? I can send Ruby over to you to help you along you know.”

‘No you can’t.’

“Sure I can.”
‘But you wouldn’t… Right?’

[“No, that’s alright. I have to be able handle things on my own now, but thanks for the offer. You’re
not too upset, are you Ruby?”] Even though Iruni couldn’t hear her response, her face alone easily
sent a message of relief, as well as irritability.

“Well,” Kate said, “what about your match with Falkner? You aren’t going to try and put Karros in
are you?”

The sound of Iruni’s Houndour whining could be heard over the speakers, [“Right now, no, I’m not.
I’m hoping to catch something before my first Gym match, but if not, Rika might be able to win it for
us. A little training with her Ice moves and she’ll easily cut through Falkner’s birds.”]

“A little risky letting a Gym battle ride on one Pokémon… How are her Ice attacks now anyway?”
Kate asked.

‘Tom tried showing her a few tricks when we were still back home. He said she had a hard time
maintaining any sort of form, but creating the stuff was simple enough to her. Without any tutoring
or help, he said it might take her quite a while to get the hang of it,’ Ruby explained.

Iruni answered not hearing what Ruby was telling his sister, [“She’s doing great, aren’t you Rika?
She’s almost got Ice Punch down, but it doesn’t last that long. The more we train, the easier it’ll
come to her.”] Kate could see her brother’s Sneasel give a warm smile at the compliment.

“Good to see you’re optimistic.”

[“Well, I think I’ll go back to our room before it gets too late and finish organizing the stuff I want to
keep on me when we head out. I over packed again.”]

Kate sighed, “You always do. How much longer are you going to stay in Blackthorn? You’re not
going to be an idiot and try the Gym are you?”

‘Now, I’d actually let you send me to him if I could see that…’ Ruby said snidely, Kate ignored her
Espeon.

[“I really don’t know actually. I wouldn’t want to take too much time, obviously, but I want to try
and at least get to Newbark in under a week. So definitely no more than two days, if that.”]

“Well, call me when you get to Violet and let me know how your Gym battle goes. I’ve got to finish
the laundry, and I’ve got a few papers to get a head start on for next week, so I’ll talk to you later.”

[“Alright. Oh, Dad mentioned that he was going to call you sometime tonight by the way.”]

“Oh cool, thanks.”

[“No problem, see ya, Kate,”] he said, followed by Karros’ and Rikalia’s own farewells. The
window holding the video-conversation went black as the connection was canceled.

Ruby followed Kate back into her bedroom where she resumed her menial task. Sensing unease in
her trainer’s mind, Ruby said, ‘He’ll be alright, you know. Don’t tell him I said this but he’s not
stupid. He’s not going to get himself killed out there. Rika and Kar are with him, they’ll be able to
protect him if anything happens.’

“I know,” she said, letting out a long breath, “I know. I just hope whatever Cartographer deals with
isn’t too dangerous.”
The sound of snoring rhythmically interrupted the noise of the rain splattering on the window of Iruni’s room at the Pokémon Center. Karros had taken over the couch in the room after it became available. Iruni had finished cleaning out his travel pack of all unnecessary items and repacked his gear. The resulting weight was far more comfortable with his recovering shoulder.

The TV was on, but muted, providing the room with the only light apart from the streetlights outside the window. Iruni was sitting on the bed, his back against the headboard. Rikalia was lying to his side with her head resting on his lap. He idly stroked her back as he held his PokéGear with his other hand. He was idly scrolling through the old messages still saved on the device, letting his mind wander and dwell on things.

He sighed as he thought to himself, *Maybe I am taking too long…*

“Hey… Iruni?” Rikalia spoke up.

“Yeah?”

“You need to stop worrying so much.”

“What am I worried about?”

“That deadline we have with the Professor. You keep brooding over it.”

_How did she…? “What makes you say that?”_

Rikalia jumped off the bed and went to the small fridge, grabbing a fresh Pecha berry they had bought earlier that day. She split it in half, saving one piece for her trainer, “You still haven’t said how long we’re staying here, and every time you talk about it, you never come to an answer.”

“It’s just that I keep thinking I’m making a mistake by taking as long as we are…”

“Why? You keep saying we have plenty of time. That Jake guy said we could get there in a week if we tried,” she said climbing back on the bed. Rikalia finished her half in a few quick bites. She passed Iruni his half, but he just held it in his hand.

“But… look at how long it took us to get here. We left home at the beginning of the month, and it’s already almost April. I’m afraid if we stay here too long, and if we run into any problems on the three routes we have to cover before we get there,” he dragged his hand across his face, “we’ll be replaced. And hell, I don’t even know what we’re supposed to do for them; what if it’s something I can’t even help them with? Why did I even agree to this, Rika? I’m not someone to trust with something like this… Or am I? I don’t know… I don’t—” a white-furred paw stopped him from continuing.

“Stop worrying about things like they’ve already gone wrong. They picked you because you were one of the best they could choose from. Do you think that teacher you had would have recommended you if he thought you couldn’t handle a hike in the mountains? No, of course not. Sure, they know what you can do, but I know you. You barely even considered turning down Lance’s offer. Just like the night you braved that snowstorm to find me.” she brought her eyes even with Iruni’s and let her hand fall from his face.

Even though he couldn’t see her clearly because of the glare from the TV, he could sense she had a serious expression.
“You went out without a second thought. Just like that time, you’re not going to give up on this. You can do it. The main reason you wanted to become a trainer is because you hated your normal boring life, right?”

“Yeah, that’s ri—”

“So stop acting like you’re about to just go back to that! You’re afraid before you even really start! So what if we’re late? So what if this project they have for us is hard or something we can’t handle? We’ll take it on, and try our best as it comes. Kar and I will be there to help you out, and we’ve already made friends out on the road you know…”

Iruni smiled, “You mean—?”

“Shut it,” she snapped, “I’m still not done. I may not like Coralis that much, but his other friends, they seem nice. And I’m sure we’ll meet others. I doubt this Elm guy would send us out without explaining what we’re supposed to do. He’ll help us. We’ve got Kate, Ruby, your father, and you’ve got me. I won’t let you give up, not for a second, you got that?”

The sound of rain had stopped, but Iruni hadn’t noticed yet. The TV faded to black for a moment during the show it was playing, and in that moment, the light from outside illuminated the room. He could see her red eyes staring back into his, and for a few seconds he couldn’t move. He glanced away from her as the TV brightened again and got off the bed. He walked over to the window and looked out into the deserted, previously rainy streets. He felt the juice from the slice of Pecha berry drip from his fingers, and slowly brought it to his mouth and ate it.

“Hey! Did you hear anything I just said?” she yelled at him.

“I did,” he said, swallowing. Iruni took a deep breath and turned back around to her with a wide smile on his face, “I heard you. Sometimes I wonder how we’d ever get along if you hadn’t started talking to me—but, that’s not the point. The point is, Rika, that you’re completely right.”

“Yes. I doubt you would’ve said those things if you didn’t think they were true. You’ve hit the nail on the head.” He let his voice carry around the room, momentarily waking his Houndour from his sleep. “I was too worried about all this uncertainty about what Cartographer is, that I completely forgot about something.”

“What?” Rikalia asked.

“I had always thought that when I would first start out on my journey, back when I got Kar and decided I wanted to be a trainer, that I’d be free to go about it how I wanted to. But with Lance coming to me with a job to do, it felt like something I was being forced to do, something I was meant or expected to do. Agreeing to their terms, meeting their deadlines, following their orders. But you said it yourself, I could’ve said ‘no’. I could’ve just gone with you two and had been a normal trainer, but I chose to take this path. This was always my choice, if I didn’t think I could rise to the challenge, I would’ve declined their offer. But I know that I can do more than just wander the countryside and compete in the League,” he turned back to the window, “I can do something to make a name for myself, to help out some of the most important people in our region.

“And you put it best, you know; they picked me, so I’ve obviously got something the next trainer doesn’t. And look at us!” he gestured around the room, “We’re here, in our first Pokémon Center room, just two Pokémon, no badges, and a novice trainer. And these people want my help! I’ll be damned if I just pass up this opportunity to show them how good we can be. I know we’ve got
potential. I just know it, Rika. And… Huh…” he trailed off, staring off into the dark sky. After a moment, a small chuckle came from the self-proclaimed novice.

“What’s funny? Iruni?”

He slowly turned his head back to her, “Come here, Rika…”

She did as he said, and came to the window with him. He picked her up in his arms and set her on his shoulder, “What is it?”

He pointed out the window and whispered in her ear, “It’s snowing.”

“…What?”

“Look! Out there, just look at the street lamp,” Iruni pointed to the nearest streetlight. The light spreading out from either edge sent a pyramid of illumination onto the street below, and slowly, snowflakes passed through the light. “We’re high in the mountains, and it just got cold enough to freeze the rain. But look, the ground’s too warm and wet to let it stick. It won’t last, but it’s still snow. Think about it Rika. When else did it snow this year?”

“It was snowing the night you found me,” Rikalia said, remembering the wild snowstorm.

“The night my life really started to get interesting. I found you, then once the snow passed, Lance came and found me. That was the last time I saw the snow, that huge storm. And now, just like that time—like you said—I just have to go and not stop and think about the consequences.”

“Huh?”

“We’re leaving here early tomorrow,” he said, looking at her. “And we’ll get to Newbark before the deadline with time to spare. That’s a promise.”

“What’s with you all of a sudden? Why the sudden enthusiasm?”

“Your little pep-talk really kicked me in the teeth,” he said. He walked backed to the bed, and let Rika jump down before he threw himself back onto the bed. “You’ve got a lot of stubbornness and determination, and that’s all I needed to get my head out of the mood I’ve been in,” he pet her blue-feathered ear, “Thanks for that, Rika.”

“You’re welcome, just don’t let it become a habit,” she said, laying next to him. “You’ve got to show some confidence on your own every once and a while, and you’ve got to help me and Kar if we ever have problems.”

Iruni fanned his right arm round on the bed looking for the remote, “Of course, what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t?”

“The worst,” she said. “Not to mention a failure as a trainer, not looking after your Pokémon like that…”

“Yeah, yeah… I get it.”

The two didn’t stay awake for much longer. It didn’t take long for their excitement to dwindle to drowsiness. They lazily began preparing for their early departure the following morning, with Karros back asleep on the couch, and started to get ready to sleep. Iruni took a quick shower to clean his hair that had gotten wet in the rain. As he came out of the bathroom, Rikalia was already asleep on the bed, facing the window. He checked the clock on his PokéGear, and saw it was nearly midnight. He
set his alarm to go off in seven hours, and quietly got under the sheets. Soon after he settled in to the bed, Rikalia, either in her sleep or awakened by Iruni’s movements, turned over and put an arm around his shoulder. Iruni pulled her close to him, and gently rubbed her back as he began to feel himself fall asleep.


The next morning, the snowfall had returned to rain and continued to drench the mountainous areas of northeastern Johto. The rain was warm, casting a blanket of fog over the town of Blackthorn and the surrounding routes. Outside the city’s limits on Route 45, two trainers were enjoying an early morning Pokémon battle.

“Faster, Bagon! You gotta be faster!”

“You’re not going to increase your Pokémon’s speed by yelling at it, Jacob…” Galian said in his usual calm voice. His Buizel circled its opponent, waiting for her next order. Jake’s Bagon stood panting and covered in mud, but it was quickly being washed away by the morning rain. Galian’s Buizel was easily out speeding his senior’s Pokémon in the rain, still not having received a hit in their morning duel.

“Ah, shuddup already! I know! What’s with you this mornin’ Cora? It’s like you’ve finally got some fight in ya!”

Galian smiled inwardly at the compliment, and ordered an Aqua Jet from Amé. The naturally impressive speed of the attack coupled with the increase in speed from the drizzle made the movement a fierce sight. The orange-furred Sea Weasel enveloped herself in a self-contained torrent of water and rocketed toward her target. Jake’s Bagon had enough time to lower its head in defense—or a last-ditch attempt at a Headbutt attack—before the bullet of water crashed into him.

“Fight?” Galian repeated. He extended a hand and held the palm to the sky, “No, I’d say I just found a great opportunity to let my strengths rise to the surface.” His Buizel sauntered back to him, enjoying the opportunity to train in the rain. “Quick as ever, Amé. Very good work.”

“Bagon!” Jake ran to his downed Pokémon, the tails of his orange and blue trench coat flapping behind him. Picking it up in his arms, Jake made sure it wasn’t terribly injured. After a few groans, the Bagon opened its eyes. “There he is! You okay Bagon?”

It dejectedly responded to its trainer, growling in defeat.

“Oh don’t beat yerself up over the loss. I doubt anything can stop that Buizel when she’s in the rain. Just too quick,” he patted his dragon’s head and returned it to his ball.

“I’m not so sure of that, Jacob. I bet I know someone who would like to try…” he turned to the wall of fog behind him. “Did you enjoy the morning performance?”

Footsteps closed in on the battlefield, “How’d you know I was here?”

“Iruni Thomas,” he addressed the younger trainer approaching him, “we may have only just met, but you should have easily figured out one thing about me: I notice things normally gone unseen.”

“’Ey! Iruni, good morning to ya!” Jake called.

Iruni cleared the remaining distance between them. He had on a lighter coat, more suited for the rainy weather. His backpack was noticeably less crammed. “That was a pretty impressive attack there, Galian. Amé’s a force to be reckoned with.”
“As my colleague would have me believe, she is among the fastest he’s seen.” Galian looked over Iruni’s appearance, “Where’s Rikalia then?”

“Here!” she popped her head out from her now familiar spot inside his coat, hiding her head from the rain under his chin.

Jake let out a hearty laugh at the sight. “You two make quite a pair, you do! I’ve not seen a Dark type so friendly before, have you Cora?”

“Rikalia is quite well mannered, and his Houndour is as well. But I doubt he’d enjoy walking in this rain.”

“Yeah, he’d hate it,” Iruni laughed. “What’re you two doing out training so early?”

“We’re usually the first out and about,” Jake answered. “It’s Cora’s idea, really. He always says to seize every moment at its earliest, but the others can’t seem to get their heads around the concept of early rising, eh?”

“The saying extends to more than training as well. My father always said to me: ‘Time wasted is time lost, and time lost is gone forever.’” Galian’s voice fell, “Time made a fool of me once, and I was made late for something very important… I intend on never letting that happen again.”

“What happened?” Iruni asked.

“If you keep talking to him,” Rikalia whispered to her trainer, “we’re going to be the ones wasting time…”

“A story for another day,” Galian said.

“Oh you always say that whenever you bring that up,” Jake said. “Well, what about you, Iruni? Why the early riser lifestyle?”

“I’ve got a deadline looming over my head,” he said. “And time is rarely ever on my side. I guess we’ve got more in common, huh Galian?”

“Perhaps so…”

The three exchanged a few more bits of idle chatter before going their separate ways. Galian and Jake continued to spar as the rest of their group began to gather and start the day. Iruni and Rikalia walked down the path that was the beginning of Route 45. The sun was still hidden behind the thick clouds and had yet to dispel the fog from their path, so he began cautiously. The decision to leave as early as they did proved to help their travel time more than Iruni initially thought. The late-morning rain delayed some of the wild Pokémon from venturing out for their dens for a little while longer, and there were no other trainers in sight.

Close to eleven o’clock, the rain had finally stopped and the sun began breaking through the clouds. Rikalia opted to walk with Iruni now that the rain had stopped. For the majority of the time, she would scale the rocky side of the path with ease or run ahead of him to perch herself in a tree and wait for him. One such time, Iruni had to wait for her to come down with an armful of fresh Pecha berries; the tree she found just happened to be bearing the fruit.

Towards midday, the rocky path began to split into two paths as streams that flowed down from the peaks of the many mountains combined into an impressive river. The water way carved a wide gorge which made up the majority of the route. The two halves of the route were connected by a series of land and man-made bridges. The roar of the rushing waters below caught Rikalia’s ear, and she
asked to stop on a nearby grassy hill for lunch and a rest.

The sun was high in the sky by the time they found a suitable spot; the place Rikalia had first picked out didn’t last long as a restful place to stay. A Skarmory nest in the cliffs above their small picnic soon turned their quiet afternoon meal into a screeching and screaming sprint out of the steel birds’ territory. Their current location was still next to the river, and far enough out of the Skarmorys’ way that they did not mind their presence. A few Aipom waved at them from a distant tree, but didn’t approach them.

Before they set off again, a pair of Gligar swooped in from the rocks above. Iruni thought this an excellent opportunity to get some ground-to-air combat practice under their belt. Luckily, Karros hadn’t been too startled by the winged scorpion-bats and joined Rikalia in a chance to improve their double battle tactics. The Ground/Flying Pokémon were especially susceptible to Rikalia’s Icy Wind, and even as weak as her Ice Punch was, it was proving effective. Karros’ Flamethrower carried much farther with the boost from the Charcoal, but the Gligar proved to be quicker than he could aim.

Iruni soon abandoned the fire tactic and ordered Karros on a physical offensive. The rookie mistake cost Karros a hit from one Gligar when a Thunder Fang proved completely ineffective against its intended target. The Gligar stung the Houndour with its poison-tipped tail, injecting enough venom in Karros’ blood to leave him gasping for breath. The Gligar that had stung him moved to execute an X-Scissor on the downed Dark and Fire type, but was met with a pair of claws ripping into his stomach and neck.

Rikalia sent the other Gligar off with an Icy Wind attack and left the one she had just slashed on the ground behind her and ran to her fallen teammate. Iruni was already by his side, his pack sat where it fell from his shoulders a few feet away.

“Karros! Are you alright?” Iruni frantically tried to rouse his friend, but was only met with a whimper. “Come on, Kar… You’ll pull through.”

“What happened?” Rikalia asked. “Why didn’t Kar’s attack work on that Gligar?”

“I’m an idiot, that’s what happened. I’ve always had it in my head that Gligar are Poison types, but no, they are Ground type!” Iruni ran over to his pack, panicking while hunting though the pockets, “Oh, but look what happened, Kar got poisoned by a Ground type! What the hell? What the hell!? Where are the antidotes?! I thought I… No… I remember. I just passed them while in the store. I remember thinking: Oh, gotta pick some up, and what do I do? I don’t buy them!”

“Iruni!” Rikalia put a hand on his shoulder, “Calm down. Karros’ll be fine, won’t he?”

“No Rika… I didn’t bring any Antidotes… I can’t cure the poison, and we’re too far away from anywhere to get him any help! All I have are potions, but that won’t cure— Wait…” his head snapped up. “I know I’m forgetting something… something obvious… something… something I forgot to mention…”

Iruni looked over his shoulder at his wounded Houndour, racking his brain trying to remember something he felt he was on the verge of realizing. *Come on… it isn’t that hard, just think… We were back in the room, and I thought about…* He smacked himself in the forehead, “Of course! Poison! Or rather,” he looked back to Rikalia, “what cures it. Pecha Berries are a natural cure for all poisons! Rika, you’ve still got some, right?”

“Yes! I made sure to save some for the trip!”
“Good,” he said, grabbing a super potion from the side pocket, “Find one, that should be enough.”

Rikalia didn’t search long—she memorized where she kept her favorite snack. She dashed over to her trainer and partner, Karros’ head was resting on Iruni’s lap. She held it out to Karros to eat, “Here, Kar. Iruni says Pechas cure poison…”

Exhausted, Karros took the berry into his mouth and chewed it up. He grimaced at the taste, evidently not as enthused at the sweet flavor of the fruit as his friends were. Iruni applied the potion to Karros’ various wounds—as well to Rikalia’s, though she managed to sustain far less than Karros did. Soon after eating the overly-sweet berry, Karros managed to get up on to his feet.

“Easy… Easy Karros, how’re you feeling?” Iruni knelt down next to his Pokémon.

He barked happily, letting a burst of flame out above their heads.

“You’re okay!” Rikalia flung her arms around the fire-dog’s neck. “Sorry about the pechas, Kar. I didn’t know you’d hate the taste that much.”

He responded with a loving lick to her face.

“That was too close…” Iruni said, falling back on the rocky ground. He caught his breath that he hadn’t even noticed he had lost as he relaxed from the experience.

“Too close…”

The final rays from the setting sun cast a brilliant ruby shade over the rocky terrain that bridged Routes 45 and 46. A high plateau lined with trees had already been covered in shadow, not to be illuminated again until the morning. In this darkened area of the mountains, Iruni had set up his camp. The path continued south and then took a sharp turn west, which marked an entrance to the Dark Cave—a shortcut he might’ve taken if he were headed to Violet City.

Karros was already asleep for the night inside his tent, and Iruni soon would be as well. He doused the fire with liberal handfuls of dirt, making sure no embers remained. The lack of sun proved to cool the night quicker than Iruni had expected, and he quickly got inside the tent. He set out his sleeping bag, maneuvering around Karros to do so, and set his alarm for the following morning.

Rikalia had taken up a perch in a tree since they had finished their evening meal. Worried about her sudden quiet nature, and because she hadn’t yet come down for the night yet, he stepped out of his tent and went to the foot of tree she was still sitting in.

“Hey, it’s getting late,” he called to her. “We’ve got to get to sleep soon you know.”

The Sneasel looked over the branch she was sitting on, “Alright…” She nimbly climbed down the tree in a few quick movements. She landed on the ground silently, keeping her head down.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” Iruni asked as he knelt to her level.

She looked up into his face, holding a serious expression, “Don’t lie to me.”

“What?”

“No, don’t say ‘What?’ Just say ‘yes’. I’m about to ask you something, and I’m telling you,” she stepped closer, “I’m asking you, to please tell me the truth. Okay?”
“Okay, I promise.”

“That mountain,” she pointed to a snowcapped peak in the east, still clinging to the last remnants of daylight. “Is that mountain called ‘Mt. Silver’?”

Already, Iruni could guess where the conversation was leading them, “Yes.”

“I want to go there.”

“We can’t Rika. We have—”

“I know, I know! I mean after we’re done at Elm’s! I want to go there and try and find my family. I’ve got to; I’m the closest I’ve been to them since they left me. I’m not going to let this chance go by!”

“Rika, I—”

“No! Just answer me, and don’t lie! Can we try and find my family?”

Iruni sighed and sat on the ground, ignoring the cold, “Rikalia…” he paused for a few minute. He beckoned for her to come sit on his lap, but she stayed where she was. “Okay Rika, I’ll answer you, but first, there are things you need to understand. Mt. Silver is… It’s one of the roughest places to live in the region. The Pokémon there are strong, and the Pokémon League only lets trainers with a lot of badges even set foot on the routes up there. We’re a long way from there… We’ve got this Cartographer business to deal with, but Lance said we would be given a lot of free roam, so that helps with this, but we have to be ready for that sort of wilderness.”

Anger slowly began to creep up in her voice, “You didn’t answer me…”

Iruni gave her a warm smile, “Sorry, but yes. I will. I promise, Rika. I’ll help you when we’re ready—as soon as we’re ready. We’ll look for your family, together. We’ll find them, and from there, I’ll leave it to you unless you want me there with you.”

His last words seemed to soften her composure. Her eyes softened, and she asked in with a subtle pleading nature, “Really?”

“Of course. All you would’ve had to do is ask for my help, and I would’ve said yes. I wouldn’t deny you this.”

“Then…” she said, coming closer to him. “When do you think we can? What if they move again before we’re ready?”

“If they do, a large population of Sneasel and Weavile migrating will cause some commotion, I’m sure. We’ll find leads here and there.”

“We’ll find them…?”

“We’ll find them, Rika. And if we don’t, well, they’re worse off for not knowing how strong their daughter is,” he pet her head, teasing her ear-feather. “Now, we’ve got a lot of hiking to do tomorrow, Rika.” He stood to his feet and started walking to the tent. “The rest of the path from here is a lot rockier than what we just went through, so we’ve got our work cut out for us.”

Rikalia stood in place for a moment and watched Iruni enter the tent. Hope welled up in her heart at the thought of finding her family, but as she watched the sun complete its setting and the peak of Mt. Silver sank into the purple and blue of the sky around it, the thought of the time it would take almost
sent her back into her depression. Oh well... she thought. At least he'll be with me...

“Rika! Come on, it’s starting to get cold out!”

It was true. The sun was completely gone from the sky, and a chilling breeze blew through the campsite. Truthfully, she wouldn’t mind sleeping outside in the cool weather, but ultimately, a warm tent seemed much more inviting.

“I’m coming, calm down...”

Walking back to his spot at the lookout station that bridged routes 29 and 46, Iruni angrily shoved the older-generation PokéGear back into his jacket’s pocket. His gear—along with Rikalia—sat on a bench underneath a skylight. The afternoon sun was streaming through and glinting off the Sneasel’s amber tinted gem on her forehead. She noticed Iruni coming back with the refreshments and hopped to the ground.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Lance just called to harass me to ‘get a move on’... Like we haven’t been running ourselves to death out here already, but he was really just checking up on us to see if we had even left yet. I actually surprised him when I told him we made it here from Blackthorn in just five days.”

“He’d better be impressed, my feet hurt...”

“You know you can rest in your ball if you-”

“Nope.”

“Thought as much...” he said. The trainer shouldered his pack again, letting Rikalia ride up on his shoulders while she drank her drink, and they set out onto the much more forgiving route leading to Newbark Town. Andrea—one of the women from the group of trainers he met in Blackthorn—had said that Route 29 was calm and peaceful, and Iruni had to agree with her description. As they walked through the grassy field that separated the route into halves, a warm breeze flowed through the area, shifting the grass as it passed by.

Taking the fork heading east, Iruni and Rikalia soon entered a spacious forest; their last obstacle before arriving at their destination. They saw a few young trainers—likely from the quiet town—playing with their Pokémon. Something began to stick out in Iruni’s mind as he walked along the path in the forest. He looked into the trees, between them, around them, above them.

“Rika...?”

“Yeah?”

“We’re in one of the tamest areas of the region. Pokémon like Pidgey, Rattata, and Sentret are really common around here because they’re not too strong, and rarely attack humans unless they’re provoked. Pretty much the perfect area to start a trainer career,” he said.

“Yeah? Hey, you’re not disowning your hometown, are you?”

“No, no... that’s not my point. The point is... Why are there Wurmple in the trees?”

He pointed to a branch above his head, where a bright red caterpillar Pokémon was silently chewing
on the leaves it could reach. On the same tree, cocoon Pokémon—Silcoon and Cascoon—hung woven around the branches.

“So? What’s the matter? They’re just bugs.”

“Those Pokémon aren’t from here, Rika. Not normally native to Johto, at least not that I remember.”

“Is that important?”

“I don’t know…” he trailed off. “Swarms and mass outbreaks happen all the time, but they’re small.”

Looking into the trees as he walked, he noticed more of the insects and their evolutionary relatives. “But the more I look at this, the more it looks like this is more than just a temporary appearance. I don’t know, I’m probably wrong. I’m not an expert at ecology anyway.”

Iruni heard a rustling sound in the underbrush a few feet ahead of him. A glint of silver broke through the shrubbery, a round metal plate with a band of metal above the eyes of a small quadrupedal creature. Its body was tan and bulky, short stubby legs ended in dull, white toes. Its back bore a similar material as a sort of hump. The majority of its head was the plate that the creature was now rubbing up against the tree it stood next to; the bark being scraped away without much resistance.

“A Sh… Shieldon?”

“Shiel-what?” Rikalia asked, but Iruni was already over kneeling next to the creature.

“Shieldon. Rika… this Pokémon is—at least used to be—extinct,” he looked off into the forest, tracing the path the living fossil came from; similar marks were on the trees for a hundred yards. “Few specimens have been ‘revived’ from fossilized remains, but here’s one now, alive and well, and leaving a path of destruction in its wake.”

Iruni cautiously extended a hand to the Shield Pokémon, to his surprise, affectionately rubbed its plate-like forehead against his palm. Amused, Rikalia came over to inspect the new development.

She gently raked her claws down the plate, causing an ear-splitting screech to fill the area. Rikalia and her trainer immediately regretted that decision, both holding their ears in pain. The Shieldon however, seemed to think it a joke, and laughed and encouraged Rikalia to play with it.

“Huh,” he smacked his head, desperately trying to get the ringing sound to stop, “That didn’t look like it bothered him at all. That little guy thinks we’re playing a game with him.”

“I wish I was… ow…”

“But what’re you doing here, I wonder?”

The prehistoric Pokémon called up at the human cheerily.

“Iruni! Look out!”

Iruni’s head turned toward Rikalia in reaction to her warning, when he should've turned to where she and the Shieldon were looking. A swift kick collided itself against the side of his head, sending him reeling backwards and tumbling onto the dirt path. Iruni vision blacked out for a split second, coming back to the sight of pair of clawed hands on his side, and a new voice among the trees.

“—you could get away with it, eh?!?” the voice yelled, the sound pounding into Iruni’s already sore head. “Well not today! Not to my Pokémon! Wallace, come.”
Iruni groggily sat up, Rikalia helped stabilize him. His eyes came back into focus to see a young man—a bit older than Iruni—with short, curly blond hair, a red t-shirt, gray cargo pants, and a blue vest. On his right shoulder, he wore a large section of padding or what looked like remnants of an old coat. A travel pack slung over his right shoulder. The young man’s arms teemed with muscle, and his skin was lean and tan. The Shieldon he had found happily scampered over to who Iruni assumed to be its master.

Iruni heard the sound of metal shifting against metal and looked up. A bird—a metal bird—came down from the sky and landed on the man’s padded right shoulder. The Skarmory was different than the ones he had seen in the mountains. Its blade-like feathers were scuffed and worn from battles, and it was overall larger than any of the ones Iruni had seen in the wild.

“Good work spotting Wallace, Panzer.” The young man looked down at the Shield Pokémon, “And you, stop running off on your own, you hear?! I swear the next time you do, you’re gone!” The threats fell on deaf ears and the Shieldon only gave a cheerful reply to his master. The blond haired trainer sighed and muttered something under his breath as he returned the Steel type to its ball.

“Hey!” Iruni got the man’s attention.

“What do you want?”

“Well, for starters, what the hell is wrong with you?! Why’d you kick me?!” Iruni stood up, but faltered and steadied himself on a nearby tree.

The blond trainer laughed, “Look at you, can’t even stand up on your own… I shouldn’t have panicked when I saw you trying to steal my Shieldon if I knew you were this bad.” The Skarmory on his shoulder seemed to sneer with its trainer.

“Steal? I wasn’t trying to steal anything! What the hell are you even— Who are you?!”

“Don’t try and play it off, kid. I can spot trouble from a mile away, and you were eying my Wallace like a fresh piece of meat.”

“I thought it was wild… I was only being friendly to it. Any normal person would at least call out to me to say ‘Hey! Get away!’ if they didn’t want me near their Pokémon,” he felt a wetness drip down the side of his head, he subconsciously wiped it away.

“A Wild Shieldon?” he laughed again. “What are you? I really mean it, what are you? Shieldon have been extinct for some time. Mine’s a rejuvenated fossil; expensive procedure, but well worth it. Why would you ever look at a one in a forest and think: ‘Oh hey, a wild extinct Pokémon!’”

“I didn’t know what to think, and besides, look at the trees! There’re wild Wurmple around here. As far as I know, there have never been wild Pokémon like that in this area. Then I found your Shieldon, and thought—”

“Save it, I don’t have time for your delusional fantasies about wild fossils in the forests,” he reached into his pocket and pulled out a bulky handheld device. Iruni watched as an upper portion extended with a camera. The blond trainer pointed it at a tree and took a picture, “But thanks for the Wurmple tip though, I doubt I would’ve cared to notice something so small and insignificant.”

“What was that? That thing?”

“None of your business,” he glanced down at the Sneasel angrily staring up at him. “Looks like someone’s rearing to rumble. What’s the matter, runt? Angry that I kicked your trainer around like the nothing he is?!”
Rikalia’s claws would’ve made contact with the trainer’s flesh, but his Skarmory blocked her Slash attack before she could even leave the ground. The Skarmory named Panzer forced her back with a stroke of his wings, effortlessly sending her into the bushes with a Wing Attack.

“Why you—!” Iruni took to his feet to retaliate, but the Skarmory rammed his head into Iruni’s stomach, sending him flat on his back, gasping for air. Spots clouded his vision for the second time, and when he gathered himself, he found his neck between two of the Skarmory’s red wing-blades.

“Great work again, Panzer.” The blond man said. He stood over Iruni, looking down with an air of pompousness and superiority. “As for you… you’re not good enough to even touch me. I guess you weren’t after my Wallace after all… oh well. I got a nice entry out of it, and Panzer loves to put the smack down on weaklings like your runt Sneasel over there.”

“You shut up!”

“And he continues talking! Oh man, I think I’m going to enjoy what I’m about to do…”

Iruni heard a screech from the man’s Skarmory, and reflexively shut his eyes. He felt a gust of wind, the weight on his chest disappeared. He opened his eyes and saw the Skarmory had landed on his master’s shoulder again. The blond man looked at him once more and turned and walked away.

“Hey! Come back here!”

He sighed, “He’s so bossy, isn’t he Panzer?” he turned back around. Iruni had gotten on his feet, and Rikalia stumbled out of the bushes, still dizzy from the attack. “Well?”

“Battle me,” Iruni demanded.

“Excuse me?” he asked.

“Right now, a fair fight. We’ll show you who’s weak.”

Regaining her composure, and anger, Rikalia let out an intimidating growl at that metal bird.

“No interested. Not yet at least.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s six to zero.”

“What?”

“Do I have to spell everything out for you?!” he pulled the left side of his padded vest out, six badges of the Johto league pinned on the inside. “See? I’ve got six badges to your zero. Panzer alone would crush your little Dark Pokémon and whatever else you have. You’re not in my league. I’d bet there’s even some sort of regulation against this kind of overkill.”

“You don’t know how many badges I have.”

“I don’t need to either! Someone at my level, and someone as mad as you’re letting on, would’ve just attacked me by now. If you did attack me, I highly doubt you would’ve actually done any damage of some sort. So, until you’re at least… two-thirds of my caliber now, I won’t even give you the time of day.”

“Is that a challenge?”
“Do you accept challenges, mister…?”

“Iruni Thomas. And yes, I do accept challenges. And I’ll easily overcome your little standards in no time!”

“I’m impressed, for someone with such an uninteresting name… you’ve got the determination of someone like me. I can relate with that… Wait, Thomas… I wonder if you’re…” he began taking a close look at Iruni.

“I’m what? Hey! Answer me!”

“Never mind, it isn’t important. Well, I’m off. I’ve got another two badges to clear and then I’m set for the league.” He turned away and started walking the way Iruni and Rikalia came. He stopped and looked over his shoulder at the still-angry pair, “My name is Carter, by the way. Carter Maximilian Altswalder, the future champion of this and the Kanto region! Don’t forget that name, Iruni, it could come in handy some day!” he laughed. He laughed until he was out of earshot.

As soon as Iruni was sure they were rid of him, Iruni dropped to the ground and knelt by Rikalia, “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

She gaped at him, “Iruni, look at you! You’re bleeding and you got rammed in the chest by that stupid bird of his. If anyone isn’t ‘okay’, it’s you!”

He shuddered at the image of blood running down his head, “I’m fine… or I will be.” He shifted and sat down on the ground. “But really, Rika… are you okay?”

“I… no…” she sheepishly hugged her trainer’s side, “No, I’m not… I was too weak to protect you.”

“You couldn’t have—”

“I even didn’t try!” she didn’t look up at him, she couldn’t bring herself to. “I just laid there after that attack. I saw you get pinned by that Skarmory. I saw you continue to stand against that guy, and I just… I just…”

“Come here,” he pulled her into his arms and set her on his lap, but she didn’t look up at him. “It’s okay, I know.”

“No you don’t…”

“Sure I do. I couldn’t stop you from getting hit either, how do you think I feel?”

“I’m…”

“Don’t apologize Rika… this is just… our first big loss, I guess. So, what do we do after we lose? We pick ourselves up and continue on.”

“But… I was so scared…”

“I know…” he rubbed her back. “I understand.”

She wrapped her arms around his chest and hugged him tightly. “Never again…” she whispered.

“What’s that?” Iruni asked.

“I won’t let that happen, ever again Iruni… I won’t just freeze up like that. I’ll never just give up like that again! Next time, I’ll protect you!”
He smiled, “Then, we’ll just have to get stronger and show that guy up, eh?”

“Yeah!”

“There’s your normal self!” he patted her head, and she nuzzled him under his chin. His hand moved up to the side of his head, “I swear… I’ll pay that guy back for that kick.”

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“After this gets better,” he pointed at the small cut and bruise on the side of his head, “I will be.” He could already feel a pounding headache starting to build, “Let’s get into town; I think we can wait until tomorrow to head to Elm’s. I think we need a break.”

Rikalia agreed, and Iruni gathered his things that had fallen on the road, and the two set off to clear the final stretch to Newbark Town. The welt from kick Carter dealt Iruni swelled considerably on the walk toward town. Rikalia surprised Iruni by concentrating her Ice powers into her paws and rode on his shoulders, using her icy hands to act as an ice pack. As the sun began its decent into the horizon, the small town came into view. Iruni decided, and Rikalia agreed, that they should forgo attempting to find Elm’s laboratory in their current state, and decided to head to the Pokémon Center for the evening. They would head to the lab first thing in the morning, and finally learn why they were called in to be a part of the project called Cartographer.

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End of Arc 1

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To be continued…
Spotty clouds drifted south from the mountainous part of the region and hovered over southeastern Johto. A strong breeze made its way through the area, rustling the grass and trees and turning the blades of the many small wind vanes that dotted the town. The streets of Newbark Town were as crowded as they would be in the usual noontime lunch rush. The town held little of value compared to most others in the region. The most imposing buildings being the Pokémon Center—small even in relation to the one even in Cherrygrove City—and the Pokémon research lab on the north edge of town.

The small Pokémon Center had few lodgings available at all, and Iruni considered it a lucky break that he managed to secure a room. The previous night, he had a nurse look at his newest injury—his painful, swollen side of a head, courtesy of Carter—and was relieved to have not suffered a concussion. She gave him an ice pack and some aspirin, the latter of which did little to ease the throbbing pain.

Sunlight streamed in through the closed blinds of the small room as he blindly reached to shut off his PokéGear’s alarm for the fifth consecutive time that morning. He was glad he reached it with his half-aware lunge, having knocked it off the end table the past few times. As he rolled over onto his back to once again try to escape from the waking world, he rolled into a pair of cold claws being pressed into his face.

“Stop! Doing! That!” he growled, looking to his left.

Rikalia sat on the bed next to her Houndour friend—who was awake, in contrast to his usual habits—trying to hide a smirk at her trainer’s sudden burst of anger. “Stop sleeping in and I will! It’s already…” she crawled over his legs and grabbed his PokéGear. She stared at the screen, trying to remember how to read the digital clock, “Uh… Well, it’s late!”

Rikalia handed it to him, and for the first time that morning Iruni consciously looked at the time, “Hoooo… man! It’s twelve-thirty! Why didn’t you two get me up sooner? Aren’t you two hungry? I’ll go make some— Ah!” His hands flew to his head, the pounding headache returning with a new pitch of agony. He reached over to the nightstand but found that his ice pack had long since melted. Thankfully, Rikalia quickly stood up and made use of her icy paws again, holding them against his right temple.

He let the cold numb the pain away before continuing, “Much better…” he said. “Thanks.”

“No problem. You okay?” asked Rikalia.

“Not really, but there is one good thing about this,” he brought her arms down and looked at his Sneasel, “this feels different than those headaches I’ve been having.”

“How is that good?” she asked.

“I don’t know. This just feels… bad. It’s hard to say that the others feel better, because they do still hurt, but those other ones feel like something else. I can’t really put my finger on it. But I know one
thing,” he pointed to his head, “I’d take more of those over this any day.”

“That’s still not helping!” she said. “Pain is pain, no matter how one feels compared to another. If I’m hurting you then I want it to stop!”

“I know Rika. I know,” he said as he stroked her head. “Those odd headaches have been getting better, but that doesn’t mean I’m going play them off as nothing. They’re still something to look into and today we’ll ask Elm about it. We’re going to get to the bottom of this, don’t worry.”

She nodded, “Alright… Oh, and I just ate some berries before you woke up. Kar almost slept as long as you, so he might want something.” She put a little pressure on his head before asking, “How is ‘this’ by the way? Any better?”

“If you could keep that up,” he said, holding her hands against his head, “I’d be better a lot quicker. But, I’ll have to manage on my own for a bit. I’m going to go take a shower and then we’ll be off to see Professor Elm, alright? We can get a good lunch in town on our way if it doesn’t take too long.”

She flicked the melting ice onto the carpet, “Alright… Hey!”

“What is it?”

“Look!” she held out her right arm, which was still covered in a sheet of ice. “I’m barely even trying right now! This used to take a lot of concentration to make it last this long.”

Iruni laughed, “So you acting as an ice pack is really a way to help train you to get better at using Ice attacks? Hilarious.”

“What’s so funny about that?”

“Nothing,” he said as he started for the bathroom, “It’s just an odd way of learning. I wouldn’t have thought about trying something so mundane.” Iruni got up out of bed and almost made it to the door to the bathroom before he turned back around, “Oh, and speaking of training… Karros?”

He walked over to his Houndour and patted his head. “I think it’s time we get a lot of training under our belts. I feel I’ve been neglecting that aspect these past few weeks, but it’s mostly been just us trying to get here in time. Now that the next step after this is our first badge, I want us to get our act together.”

Karros offered a short bark, sharing his trainer’s determination.

“But,” Iruni lowered his voice, “that means that we might have to work on your fear of ‘you-know-what’s, alright?”

Karros sat motionless for a moment, and just gave a stiff nod.

Iruni sighed, “It doesn’t have to be all at once, but yesterday…” he thought back to Carter’s Skarmory and how it easily stopped his Sneasel’s attempts. “There are just too many instances where a bird Pokémon might show up. They’re really common and you’re an important part of the team, we can’t have you out of commission if we really need you, Karros.”

“Yeah!” Rikalia chimed in. “I’ll help you too, Kar! I don’t want to have to take on the Gym by myself.”

“Don’t guilt him into it, Rika,” he chided. “Kar, you want to get over that fear of yours, right?”
Karros looked down, but eventually nodded.

“Then we’ll work at it as fast as we need to. No need to rush it, unless another flock of Fearow suddenly decides to come at us while we’re walking to the professor’s,” he laughed, but quickly stopped at the horrified look of his Pokémon. “Sorry, Kar. It was a joke, I promise.”

He tried to dodge a cross look from Rikalia as he turned and walked back towards the bathroom. Iruni took a change of clothes in with him as he shut the door behind him. The noise of the running water seemed to grind against his ears all the while he took his shower.

I’m really going to get that guy back… No misunderstanding is worth a kick to the head. But he’s already so much more experienced than we are… we’re going to have to catch up quick. Karros… The image of his Pokémon’s face stricken with fear at his casual comment flashed in his head as he scrubbed his face.

Idiot. Why’d I go and say something like that to him? I’m never mean to him about what happened. I never blame him for not being able to face his fear. I never even joke about it… He sighed, staring with closed eyes into the stream of water pouring down, I’m being selfish. Just because I lost, I’m trying to force him out of his comfort zone…

“What am I going to do? All this shit is coming out of nowhere all at once…” he said aloud.

“You’re going to apologize to Karros first, obviously. Then you can worry about all that other stuff,” a voice replied flatly. Iruni quickly shut off the water and parted the shower curtain slightly. Rikalia was standing on the sink, idly combing her fur with her claws after she would wet them under the running faucet.

I thought I locked the door! How didn’t I hear it open? How’d she get in? “Rikalia! What’re you—? I’m in the shower!”

“Clearly. And I’m doing my morning grooming too,” she said, keeping her attention to herself. Grabbing a washcloth from the towel rack to her right, she began soaking it. “You didn’t have to shut off the water you know. I could hear you just fine.”

“That’s not the point! Privacy Rika!”

“What about it?”

“You don’t just come barging into the bathroom while someone’s in here!”

“I didn’t ‘barge’ in,” she said. The blue-feathered Sneasel draped the wet cloth over her head and rubbed for a moment, “The door wasn’t locked, and I thought it’d save time if I didn’t have to wait for your slow self to get ready. We’re late enough as it is, and I want to get this over with.”

“Still though…” Iruni looked, but couldn’t see any towels within reach.

“What, are you embarrassed?” she asked, looking back at him.

“Well, yeah. Anyone would be.”

“Then don’t be. It’s not that big of a deal if I see you naked, is it? Besides, I don’t wear clothes, do I?”

“That’s— I don’t— It’s a human thing,” he pulled the curtain shut completely. “We don’t normally go without clothes if we can help it. When we do… well… it’s for… specific reasons would be a
good way to put it.”

“It’d make mating a bit awkward if you didn’t, right?”

“If you want to put it bluntly, yes.” Today’s off to a great start… “Hey, can you hurry up and finish? I gotta dry off.”

“You humans always make things so much more complicated than they need to be,” she said. Grabbing a full-size towel, she laid it on the floor outside of the shower, “Put that on if it embarrasses you.”

Iruni sighed and grabbed the towel, wrapping the it around his waist. He avoided looking down at his Sneasel while he dried his long hair with another towel, “No more of this ‘sharing the bathroom’ business okay?”

“Fine, baby.” She touched his side with a pair of cold claws, causing him to jump. “We’re still talking, you know… Why’d you joke around with Kar like that a minute ago? I might’ve been out of line with what I said, I’ll admit, but even I know that’s something you don’t mess around with.”

He hesitated before answering, “… I guess I’m being overly anxious to get back at that Carter guy, and I’m not thinking straight. How is he? Did you talk to him?”

“He’ll be fine. I told him you didn’t mean it, but you still gotta apologize.” She paused, “You still haven’t told him that we got floored by a Skarmory, have you?” Rikalia stared him down in the mirror. “Why not?”

“For the same reason I didn’t want you having him think that we need him for Violet Gym. I don’t want him to feel useless or that he’s holding us back. I do want to help him get over that fear of his,” he threw his second towel against the wall, “but I’m being too damn impatient. I know what it’s like to be afraid of something like he is, but I went and tried to rush him because I was being selfish.”

“But it’s true though, right? If we challenge that Gym, and we don’t get another member or you don’t help Karros enough, it’ll only be me going against it, right?”

“Yep, and he knows that. He doesn’t need us—especially not me—bringing it up all the time. I think,” he said, leaning forward on the sink, “our best bet will be to try and get a new Pokémon. We’ll work to help Kar along, and train the new guy at the same time. Either way, we’ll be ready for the Gym.”

Rikalia made a short yelp of surprise and tapped Iruni on the arm, “H—Hey, Iruni?” She was holding back a fit of laughter.

“W-What is it?” he noticed she was avoiding looking at him.

“Your… towel fell…” Despite her previous statements, she found herself a bit embarrassed. She made sure to cover her eyes as he frantically picked up the towel and covered himself back up. Rikalia jumped off the counter, “I—I’m done in here I think. Don’t take too long!”

Iruni stood perfectly still until he heard the door shut behind him. After he relaxed, he set out on drying off the rest of his body. Hopefully this awkward morning blows over fast. Too much on my plate already… He looked back to the doorknob, and saw that it didn’t have a lock at all. “Of course it didn’t.”

He looked back at his reflection, surveying his long hair. After a few minutes of arguing with himself, he decided silently that he should get it at trimmed a bit before they made their way to their
appointment with Professor Elm. His hair had grown almost too long for his own tastes, and keeping in mind to make a good first impression, made a stop in a local barber shop. When he left, his brown hair fell no farther than past his ears, and his bangs just above the midpoint of his brow.

“It looks weird now. I’ve only ever seen you with long hair before.” Rikalia said as she looked over his new image.

“I’ve still got to get used to it. It’s been a while since I’ve had to work with short hair. If anything else,” Iruni said, “this’ll surprise Kate next time we call her.”

While they continued walking, he spotted a small restaurant about three blocks away from the laboratory, and took the opportunity for some lunch. He released Karros and sat in the small booth the waitress showed him to. Glad for the air conditioning the place provided, Iruni relaxed into his seat with his Houndour at his feet, and Rikalia sitting beside him. He leaned forward on the table, silently waiting on his food until Rikalia broke the silence.

“Hey,” she whispered. “What’s wrong?”

“Just thinking…” he said.

She snickered a bit, “About your little towel incident?”

“No!” he accidentally raised his voice, earning him a few odd looks from the other patrons at the eatery. “Well, maybe a bit, but no, not that…”

“I still don’t know why you’re so embarrassed. It’s not like it’s that weird, right?”

“Well, for humans, it kinda is.”

“Why thought?” Rikalia asked.

“Do you really want to know?”

“Mhm. You made such a big deal about it earlier, so it must be something.”

“Alright.” Iruni cleared his throat and set his voice to a whisper, “Well, it’s one thing to be seen naked, and it’s another if a girl sees you. It’s not decent for guys to just expose themselves to girls like that unless it’s… you know, ‘called for’. You’ve gotta… Hmm,” he wracked his mind with an idea as how to best explain the concept of his species’ customs. “Like I said, people only—show themselves—when they’re romantically close. At least that’s how some people handle it; there are a lot of different ways that people handle their ‘relationships’.”

“You mean… like they mate with people without being their mate?”

“Yeah, that’s a good way of putting it, I guess. A lot of people value the physical aspect of sex differently than others do, and I’ll bet you’ll get a different answer from everybody when you ask their opinion of it.”

“What’s yours?” she asked.

“Why do you want to know?” Iruni could feel his face starting to redden.

“I’m curious. I’ve only been with you for a few months, it’s not like I know your whole life. Kar’s told me some things, but I’d rather hear stories about you, from you.”

Iruni looked at his Sneasel, and could see genuine curiosity in her eyes. Why am I being so
“Well, I guess there’s no harm in it,” he finally relented.

The server came around to the table and gave them their meals, and Iruni barely managed a bite in his burger before Rikalia started her questioning, “So, what’s your opinion on mating?”

He swallowed hard, “That’s such a… clinical term, Rika. I normally just call it ‘sex’, or ‘sleep together’—not like that. Humans have a lot of ways to say the same thing, trust me—but I guess ‘mating’ is nicer than ‘fucking’ like most people call it. Anyway, I guess I’m pretty laid back when it comes to the subject. Some of the more uptight people say it’s only for married couples—”

“‘Married’?” she asked.

“Uh… Well, it’s like you said, we like to make things a lot more complicated. People who’re married are essentially ‘mates’ as you’d know of it. But this is bound into our laws and it’s a very formal and official arrangement; but since it’s in that legal system, it can also be broken up just as quickly.”

“Humans don’t stay mates for life?” Rikalia seemed quite enthused with this current line of conversation.

“Some do, some don’t. Some get married on a whim, some just grow tired of each other, and some that get together find out they’re a terrible match and end it mutually. People can be rather… complicated when it comes this sort of subject.”

“How complicated?”

“Why’re you so curious in this, Rika?”

“I just am. I’ve never grew up in a human populated area, so all this is new to me. And I like it when you teach me new things, even if this is a bit confusing.”

“Oh, alright.” He ate a few more bites of his burger and chased it down with his drink. “Well, divorces—when two people split up—can be complicated and pretty emotional if they have kids. One side wants custody of the child, and the other complains, and it’s hell on the kid. Anyway, there’s the people who think sex is only for married people. Then, on the other side of the spectrum, there’s the kinds of people who flaunt themselves around and only see sex as only a pastime or even just an ultimate goal to strive for in a relationship. Those people don’t really have any sort of emotional attachment to who they’re pursuing. They’re just in it for the physical pleasure of it.”

“And where are you in all that?”

“I’m somewhere in the middle, I think maybe, at least I’d like to think. I think that sex should be something that’s taken seriously, but at the same time, looked at in a casual sense. Back home, well before I met you, I had a girlfriend named—”

“A what?”

“Ugh…” Iruni rubbed the sides of his head. “You don’t make this easy, you know that?”

“Hey, you’re the one who agreed to talk. So fess up! What’s a ‘girly-friend’?”

“Just ‘girlfriend’, and I guess, in your terms, it’d be the equivalent of having a mate, but not completely mated to them at the same time? No, that’s too vague…”
“Like… temporary?”

“More like ‘preliminary’. Having a girlfriend or boyfriend is a lot less serious than being married, but it’s still a romantic sort of relationship. It can lead to something more serious, but it doesn’t have to.”

“Wait… so, you’ve mated with someone then?”

He sighed, “I was getting to that, but yes. I had a girlfriend in high school, her name was Amber. We dated for a while, and after a while, we took our relationship farther and farther until, as you keep bluntly putting it, ‘mated’. Getting back to my stance on the matter, I think that if both parties are agreeable to the idea, then by all means, let them do what they will. We felt strongly enough to each other, and we just fell into it all, I guess.”

“Why haven’t I seen her before? You’ve never even mentioned her before!”

Iruni laughed at that accusation, which only just confused the curious Sharp Claw Pokémon.

“I don’t get it… What’s so funny?”

“We haven’t been together for a while, Rika. Her family moved away to Sinnoh almost two years ago.”

“So you two just… quit?”

“Well… that…” Iruni seemed to drift off for a moment before coming back into the conversation. “Sorry. We… tried to keep the relationship going. Just talking over the internet and phone, but we just… we both agreed we should end it. It was becoming too much of a hassle.”

“That’s it? You just… stopped?”

“I guess that’s what you could call the ‘benefits’ of the ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’ system, if you can call it that. It’s like you said; the couples are only together ‘temporarily’, and it’s a lot less serious. It’s a way to play the field, I guess, and if the pair doesn’t work out, the consequences of splitting up aren’t as severe. Some couples get pretty serious, and a breakup can be hurtful, but the odds of finding the one you’re meant to be with right off the bat is very unlikely.”

“What about yours? Did you two ‘break up’ well?”

“She… was against it. It was my idea in the first place,” he looked out the window, watching the clouds float across the sky. “She was pretty sad about it, but… I think she’s fine with it now.”

“Hey, you okay?” she asked. “Iruni.” She pawed at his sleeve, “What’s wrong? Did I say something I shouldn’t have?”

“No, Rika. You’re alright. It’s just… been a while since I’ve thought about that, I guess.” He felt Karros lay his head on his lap from under the table and heard him whine sympathetically. His Houndour was there during the rough transition in his only foray into a relationship, and had been someone to listen to all he had to say. Iruni scratched his ears, “I’m alright, Kar.”

“Are you?” Rikalia asked.

“Do you think I’m not?”

“You look really sad…” she said, crawling closer to him. “Did you love this Amber girl?”

He shrugged, “I might’ve, but it’s all over now. I haven’t seen her in a long time…” He snapped
himself out another lapse in thought, “I just overthink things sometimes. It’s nothing to worry about anymore, Rika.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. All that stuff’s been put behind me.” he took a last bite of his burger, and a few fries. “But I think we’ve stalled enough, don’t you?”

“Yeah. It’s time to get some answers.”

Karros decided to stay out and walk with Iruni and Rikalia as they made their way to their destination. Luckily the Elm Research Laboratory wasn’t far from the restaurant. Within ten minutes they spotted the building, its soft green roof easily visible from a few blocks down the road. Iruni ran his fingers through his new, shorter hair, glancing in a few windows as he passed by, trying to make himself look a bit more presentable. He gave up after the third gust of wind blew away his handiwork.

Rikalia clung to his shoulder, resting her head between her paws. “I can’t tell what you’re more nervous about,” she said playfully. “This meeting or trying to explain how ‘girlfriends’ work.”

“It’s this, trust me. Girlfriends and relationships are one thing, but this is big. Big enough to involve the Champion and apparently Gym Leaders from all over.” Iruni could feel his anticipation rising as he neared the building. Karros raised his head up, hitting one of his trainer’s palms. Iruni gave him a scratch behind his ears. “Let’s just hope it isn’t too big.”

Iruni wasn’t sure of what to expect when he arrived at the lab, but he imagined there’d be someone to meet him. When he came to the front door of the building, there wasn’t any sign that anyone was there. He looked into the windows, only finding them dark. He got no reply from knocking on them either.

Iruni tried pushing the doors open, but they were locked. “Okay… I’m confused.”

“We didn’t miss the deadline, did we?” Rikalia asked.

“No, we’re not late. It just looks like no one’s here.”

“Hey,” Rikalia said, climbing up to stand on his shoulders. “Back up a bit. I think I see something…” Her trainer walked a little farther back, letting Rikalia get a better look at the building. “Look!” she tilted his head up to the second floor. “There are lights on up there! I think I see something moving too.”

“You’re right. Someone’s home, at least.”

Walking into the side yard on the right side of the building, Iruni found a staircase going up to a door on the second floor. Rikalia hopped down to the ground with Karros, and the three ascended the small flight of steps. Iruni could hear noises coming from inside. Looks like this is it. He took a deep breath, and knocked on the door. A pair of footsteps came closer to the door, and the doorknob started to turn.

But instead of the man Iruni had seen in books and on the news countless times, the person who opened the door was a woman. “Yes, can I help you?”

“Well,” from what he could see behind the woman, the place didn’t look much like a research facility
at all. “I’m hoping I don’t have the wrong address somehow. Is this the Elm Research Laboratory?”

“Oh no, you’re in the right place, dear.” She offered her hand, Iruni shook. The woman smiled kindly as she spoke, “Hi, I’m Elise Elm.”

“Mommy, who’s this?” Iruni looked down to see a small boy clinging to his mother’s leg. His attention soon shifted to Karros and Rikalia, going to each of them and petting their heads.

“Careful Daniel, those aren’t your Pokémon.” Elise knelt down and picked up her son, “Might I ask who you are?”

“Oh, sorry. I’m Bart Thomas. I’m here to see Professor Elm, but it looks like the lab’s closed. Do you know when he’ll be back? We have an appointment with him, but I guess we’re a bit early.”

“No, he’s down there. He’s just gone and buried himself in his work and worked himself to exhaustion I’ll bet. My husband’s always been like that.” Elise walked in to the house with her son in her arms, grabbing a set of keys. “Here, I’ll come and unlock the front for you.”

Iruni walked behind her as they walked down the steps. “You know, I recognize your name now; my husband’s mentioned you. He’s been waiting on you since the last one came and went.”

“‘Last one’? So you know about this Cartographer business then?” he asked.

“Only what he’s willing to tell me, which isn’t much. You’re going to know more than I do by the end of today, I’m sure.” She set her son down on the ground as she unlocked the door. Iruni and his Pokémon walked in. Elise turned the lights on in the main room, revealing large machinery and tables stacked high with papers and various instruments. “Everyone else had the day off today, so it’ll just be you two. Good luck, Bart. He should be in his office, through the door in the back.”

“So, just go and wake him?”

“Yep. He’ll probably be at his desk, sound asleep.”

“Alright,” Iruni said. “Thanks for your help.”

“No problem dear,” she said. “Come on Daniel. He’s got to go talk to daddy alone for a bit.” Elise picked up her son just as he tried climbing onto Karros’ back. “It was nice meeting you,” Elise said as she walked out with her son, closing the door behind her.

Iruni stood alone in the brightly lit lab for a few moments, taking in the various sites around him. The clutter got denser as the lab went on. Papers that couldn’t fit on the over-stacked desks were placed on the floor and chairs. None of the machinery was running, but it all looked very complicated to him.

Rikalia snapped him out of his trance by jumping onto his back. “Hey, let’s get a move on.”

“Sorry.”

Karros padded along beside his trainer as they got closer to the end of the room. Rikalia edged over to Iruni’s right shoulder to avoid weighing down on his injured one. Iruni knocked a few times, but didn’t receive an answer. When he opened the door, he was met with a little resistance, as well as the sound of crumpling paper. From the light of the main room, he could see a fraction of the office from the crack of the open door. Filing envelopes, papers, books, and notes coated the floor of the little office.
Iruni parted the door a little more, just enough to let himself and Karros slip into the room without damaging much else, and turned on the lights. Floor space in the surprisingly spacious room was almost nonexistent. The main desk—the messiest part of the room—was pushed against the left wall with a row of filing cabinets lining the remainder of that wall and the back. A single chair stood in front of the desk, but it too was currently acting as another shelf. The drawers of the filing cabinets that were open were overflowing with sheets and documents, spilling onto the floor.

While Karros cautiously walked a bit farther into the room, Iruni stood by the door. He couldn’t see any sign of the professor in here. “Uh, hello? Is anyone here?” He could see the mound of papers on the desk shift a little, as if in response to his calling. The place can’t really be that messy, could it?

His answer came when Karros wandered behind the desk brushing against a pair of human legs.

“Whoa!”

Rikalia laughed a bit at the sight of a man erupting from a mound of papers. He bolted up from his chair, only to go right back down as he hit his knees on the desk, causing another torrent of white to fall onto the floor. Karros ended up with a new coat of folders papers.

“Ow… What the—?” His hands scrambled through the papers on the desk. One resurfaced with a pair of half-circle glasses. He put them on and looked down at Karros, who was shaking some very important notes off his body. “A Houndour? How’d you—?”

“Excuse me, Professor Elm?” Iruni asked.

Elm looked over at the door, just now noticing the person with a Sneasel on their shoulder standing there. “Oh, goodness.” He walked around the desk, hastily trying fixing his disheveled hair with one hand and extended the other, “Excuse the mess, it’s always like this. It seems I had gotten myself buried while taking a nap. Sorry. How do you do?”

Iruni took his hand, “I’m fine. Sorry about the uh, intrusion. Your wife said you wouldn’t mind.”

“Oh, not at all. Had a breakthrough last night with a theory about— Oh, you don’t care. Have a seat — Oops, hold on a second.” Professor Elm picked up the stack of papers and notes from the chair and moved them behind his desk. “There we are.”

“Not to be rude,” said Iruni, sitting down, “but how do you even find anything in this mess?” Elm obviously didn’t care too much about stepping on his own work. He just walked back behind the desk and sat back down, clearing a space by pushing a section of paper onto the floor. Rikalia moved down and sat on his lap, gazing curiously at a paper on the floor. Karros came and sat by his side.

“I’ve got a system. The older papers are closer to the floor, you see? So if I can remember when the note I want to find was made, I can get a general idea of where it would be based on the notes’ dates above it. I make sure to date all of my work accurately.”

“Seems troublesome to me, to be honest.”

“One would think…” Elm’s eyes suddenly lit up, as if he remembered something important. “OH! OH!! You’re here for Project Cartographer, aren’t you? Mr. Thomas?”

At least he remembered. “Yes I am.”

“I’m terribly sorry, I didn’t recognize you from the picture we have on file,” he extended his hand again. “Professor William C. Elm. An authority on Pokémon breeding and evolution, at your service.”
Iruni gave him a confused look, but took his hand again anyway, “Bartholomew Iruni Thomas, but don’t call me Bart. Pokemon Trainer.”

“Yes, I know who you are— at least I should. So,” Elm stood, walking to one of the few closed cabinets behind him, “I bet you’re wondering why you’re here. The rest all did.”

“How’d you know who I was if I didn’t match my picture?” asked Iruni.

“Your Pokémon.” Elm said. He was removing folders and sorting through some loose papers. He came back with a file, and laid it out on the desk. On it, Iruni could see the words [Cartographer Candidate #39] stamped on it. “Go on, have a look.”

Iruni opened the folder, finding his own face staring back at him. It was his last school photo. Beside it were various facts and figures about him; address, contact information, family, even his current registered Pokémon roster—this field was updated by hand. He found himself wishing the space labeled [Trainer Accomplishments] wasn’t blank, but that would be filled in soon. Under [Notes/Comments] was a handwritten passage: [While no practical experience is known or recorded, #39 shows tremendous potential in the course of Type Specialization (See Attachment #1).] Iruni removed the main file on him and found a copy of his essay, stapled and labeled [Attachment #1].

“Wow, Lance wasn’t kidding when he said this got your attention,” Iruni said, holding his essay out to the professor.

“OH, you’re the one he went to see! He never said—he never does, does he?—why he wanted to go in person. But yes. I was so surprised to see hear that the essay on Dark types that a few colleagues were buzzing about was written by a seventeen year old. Very professional for your age.”

“I’ve heard. Your people have done their homework, it seems.” He looked through the other pages of the file. “You’ve even got ‘Last Recorded Pokémon Capture’. How often do you update these files? Do you track everyone like this?”

“Oh no! Not at all. This was done to help map out our prospective candidacy for our little initiative. Once we narrowed down our choices, the records of those not chosen were destroyed. We’re not spying on everyone’s movements, just taking notes of a few select people. Just in case.” Elm nodded slightly when he finished speaking, reassuring that he meant what he said.

“’Our choices’, ‘Once we’, ‘We’re not’… I asked Lance this but never got an answer: How big is this Cartographer business? Who’s all involved? What’s my part in it?”

“Lance must’ve kept you in the dark to keep you on your toes. The others we’ve contacted for this operation knew at least how much manpower we were looking for.” He bent down and got into the side drawer of the desk. He came back up with a plain Poké Ball and a bulky handheld device that Rikalia recognized immediately.

“Hey, that’s that thing!” she pointed at it with a claw.

“What thing, Rika?”

“You know, that thing that Carter guy had. I remember the shape.”

“You’re right, they do look—” Iruni stopped as he looked back to Elm, who seemed to be frozen in place. “What is it?”

Elm’s still pose was halfway into the action of sitting back down and handing Iruni the device. He eyed them with much scrutiny. “Now, what was that?” Elm’s eyes lit up with interest. He leaned
over the desk, looking up and down at the two in the chair in front of him.

“This guy reminds me of Coralis…” Rikalia whispered.

“No need to whisper, Rika. He can’t hear you. But I bet he’s wondering how I can.”

“YES! I AM! How’re you two doing that?! That’s not a Mew is it? Transformed and using telepathy? No, that’s stupid, it can’t be…”

“What’s a Mew?” Rikalia asked.

“Yes, that’s definitely a Sneasel… but that blue feather is interesting…”

Iruni found it amusing watching the researcher’s eyes dart around as his mind raced trying to find an answer. He let out a short chuckle, “To be honest, professor, I was hoping you could tell me about all this.”

“Me? I’ve never seen anything like it. Or heard of for that matter— Wait… Tell me more.” He got up and went to a different filling cabinet.

“Actually, this can wait until after we—”

“No, no, no!” Rikalia turned around in his lap, griping the fabric of his pants tightly. “You said!”

“Alright…” Iruni waited a moment for the researcher to come back to his desk.

“Go on, I’m listening,” said Elm, pulling out various papers and discarding them to the sea of disorder. “More than listening, I’m enthralled!”

“Well, this past winter, during that big snowstorm up north, I…” he paused.

“What’s the matter, son? Something troubling you?”

“No, it’s… I just remembered something. Well, during that snowstorm, I was just at my house, in Mahogany Town. During the night I was outside and I… heard something. It was a terrible scream of pain. At first, I thought I imagined it, but Karros here heard it too. So we went into the woods. I kept hearing the cry, and followed it pretty far in.”

“What made the noise?”

“She did,” Iruni said, gesturing to Rikalia.

Elm turned round, papers falling from his hand. “Your Sneasel?”

“Yes. She was in the woods, and a dead tree fell and her leg was trapped underneath it. So, like anyone would, she called for help. But I heard it all the way through those woods and back at my house, miles away. And it… the sound of it kinda hurt. Not my ears, but in my head maybe? The more I heard her calling, the more I could feel it.” Iruni looked down and met Rikalia’s worried gaze. He hadn’t exactly told her that detail. He put a hand on her shoulder and continued, “How is that possible?”

“Keep talking, I’ve got some ideas. And something that might solidify them…”

“Well, I found Rikalia in the woods that night and took her to the center. I ended up taking care of her after that, and capturing her eventually. But after a few days of me taking care of her—she was malnourished and a bit stunted, but nothing permanent—I woke up one day and I could understand
her. To me, I’m actually hearing her speak our language.”

“I see… Anything else?”

“Go on, ‘runi… Tell him.” She didn’t look up at him as she talked.

“I am. Well, not too long after I started hearing her voice, really only a few minutes after, I got this really bad headache. They’ve been pretty constant ever since, but they’ve been getting gradually less painful. It’s been going on for… about three months.”

“I see…” Elm had sat down in his chair again, looking over a paper before swapping it with another. “Anything else?”

“Well, it might be irrelevant, but I’ve got a ‘real’ headache now, and it doesn’t feel like the ones I’ve been getting since January.”

Elm smiled, “There it is. Here.”

Iruni took the paper that was handed to him. Rikalia craned her neck up to see it as well, disregarding her lacking an ability to read. “‘The Aura of Darks’? What’s this?”

“That, my friend, is could be your answer. It’s a theory written up by our very own Karen, of the current Elite Four. It hasn’t gotten much backing in the community yet, but there’s been little hard facts to go on.”

Iruni looked over the first few paragraphs of the paper. It opened with a general overview of the ‘Aura’ theory; the life force inside all living things. It connected that theory to a few examples: […A Fire Pokémon’s Aura is what the Pokémon unconsciously and instinctively utilizes to generate its fire based skills and abilities. This same principle applies to all other types, even the physically centric Ground, Fighting, and Rock types. The Aura of a being shifts into the type of element the Pokémon has an affinity to, tapping into some inherent knowledge we have yet to fully understand. Dark Aura (as well as Fighting) is usually only seen in physical medium. One of the few exceptions are what this theory focuses on: the technique known as “Dark Pulse”.


“Quite right. Read on.”

Iruni continued reading: [Dark Pulse is—at its core—the entire basis of the theory. It was once the only Dark type attack classified as “Special”, until the discovery of the technique Night Daze, found to be utilized by the elusive Zoroark family, or Snarl. It is one of few techniques to utilize pure Dark Aura and utilize it as the attack. (Night Daze can be seen as an altered Dark Pulse, swapping some effective range for more power and a blinding attribute, while Snarl sacrifices power for intimidation purposes). This idea is backed with the evidence that every Dark type Pokémon is compatible with the Technical Machine for the move (Technical Machines could be viewed at as a ‘Map of Aura’, and the Pokémon receiving the move is merely receiving the knowledge on how to manipulate and convert its natural Aura to conjure the attack). All Dark Pokémon carry the ‘Pulse’; they all have that brand of Aura, meaning that with the proper training or heritage, any Dark Pokémon can use Dark Pulse.

With the concept of this ‘Pulse’ existing within all Dark Pokémon, another quality of the pulse can be explored, and idea called “Dark type telepathy”.

“Telepathy? But I don’t hear her in my head. I know how Psychic type telepathy feels, maybe a little too well…”
“Read on. She explains it. At least some of it,” said Elm.

[We’ve already observed telepathic abilities in other types of Pokémon. For this thesis, I will focus on Lucario (a major subject of Aura in general). Lucario, after evolving from Riolu, become masters at manipulating Aura. They can even tune into the brainwaves of other life forms, using this tactic to ‘Read the Aura’ of their opponents in battle. They can also establish a similar telepathic bond with a human that has been observed in Psychic types (Humans have also been able to gain a modicum of control over our own Aura. A common modern day explanation of humans that exhibit any Psychic ability: such individuals have learned how to tap into that inherent power, and have it match the kind in Psychic types, usually brought on by exposure to Psychic type Pokémon in close proximity and relation to said persons).

Upon evolution, all Lucario have access to a wide array of Aura abilities. One of them is the knowledge to generate a Dark Pulse, identical to ones observed coming from Dark type Pokémon who have learned the technique naturally.

With this knowledge, we can apply the same manner of techniques to Dark Aura, as we’ve observed in Fighting (Lucario, Meinshao), Psychic (Alakazam, Gardevoir/Gallade, Espeon), and other Aura-capable Pokémon (Togekiss). Dark Telepathy is possible if we use the same understanding of Aura. However—as seen in my personal research—it can differ greatly from the conventional style of telepathy one might come to know.

Dark Pulse is an exertion of Dark Aura, focused and imbued with angry, frustrated, or mischievous thoughts (A common misconception is that they are ‘Evil’ thoughts. This has been disproven many times by Psychic types who can utilize the technique and describing its mechanics). This means that, unlike Psychics who have the ability to create links with their minds directly to the minds of others, Dark type Pokémon have to carefully control the Dark Pulse to have to tune and convert it into the brainwaves of another life form without damaging them. To put it simply, they can kill with words if untrained.

This Aura Conversion (or Dampening) is a complicated task. Untrained, the Pokémon would simply be aiming a Dark Pulse at their target’s brain, carrying along with it all of the destructive properties of Dark Aura. Even fully trained, the ‘Dark Telepathy’ would not be truly thought transfer (This is as far as my personal research has found. It is still possible that a Dark type may, with some external teaching or talent on how to control its mind or Aura, reach the same level of communication a Psychic type may have), but a transfer of complex emotions or intent. The Dark Pulse itself is no more than that: a blast of ‘dark’ thoughts and feelings that bring out the Dark Aura and focuses it into an attack.]

“Okay, I’ve gotta stop,” said Iruni.

“What is it?”

“I get where she’s coming from, and it makes sense, I guess, but this doesn’t really relate to our situation, does it? Rika doesn’t even know Dark Pulse, so how could she be able to use her Dark Aura that well? Especially to go beyond what Karen’s even thought to be possible?”

“I understand your reluctance to accept this theory, it’s fairly untested and mostly conjecture, but it has been some time since she has posted any findings on this. Karen may have found some more information.”

“Alright, but how does this explain how I heard her from miles away?” Iruni asked.

“Well,” said Elm. “This is just me working off her work here, so bear with me. I think that you were
able to hear her call from so far away because of your close proximity to your Houndour. You’ve been around a living source of Dark Aura for years, so you’re at least aware of it on some minor level. The fact that the calls even began to tax you physically links back to Karen’s line about how an untrained Pokémon can inadvertently harm someone with the ‘Dark Telepathy’.

“Still though, like I said, Rikalia doesn’t know Dark Pulse,” Iruni repeated.

“How do you know? Has she said she hasn’t? Have you asked? Maybe she just hasn’t done it before.”

“Well—” Iruni paused. The idea that he just hadn’t asked Rikalia to try a Dark Pulse before only to have her known it all this time seemed too unbelievable to him. “No, I haven’t asked. She’s never tried to use it in battle before, so why would I have cause to think she knew it?”

“Good point. Very good point. But…” Elm picked up the device from the desk and pointed the camera-like node at Rikalia. “Let’s find out.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Hey,” said Rikalia. “What’s going on? What’s a ‘Pulse’ and why might I have one?”

“Hold on, Rika. Professor, just what is that anyway?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. We got a bit distracted, didn’t we?” Elm held the device like a salesmen would a new product, making sure they all could get a good look. “This, my friend, is your new livelihood.”

Elm handed the device to Iruni. Rikalia moved his arms down to her level as he examined it.

“Wait… This is a Pokédex, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is! Not one of the consumer models either. Custom made for our purpose. Take a look.” Professor Elm gave Iruni a short walkthrough of what separated this Pokédex model from the other’s he’d seen. “This is one made explicitly for researching purposes, and it’s designed for work in the field. It’s got the complete International Database at your disposal. With that, you could look up virtually any information you want, about any kind of Pokémon in the world!”

The outside of the Pokédex was a tough, waterproof material. It had a touchscreen, which seemed fairly smudge resistant as far as Iruni could test at the moment. It had a few buttons below the screen, as well as a few on the sides. The backside wasn’t completely flat, as it supported the same style of scanner diode he had seen on the device Carter had. *I guess he’s one of the other’s Elm mentioned. Great, now I’ve gotta work with the guy who says hello with his foot.*

“But as I was saying before,” Elm continued, “Point the Pokédex’s eye at Rikalia.” He gave Iruni step by step instructions on how to navigate the various menus and applications the device yielded. “Now, under ‘My Pokémon Team’, look at Rikalia’s page, and hit ‘Update’. It needs to get a real ‘look’ at her first before it tells us anything.”

“Wait, it already knows her?”

“Of course,” said Elm. “This Pokédex has already been registered to your Trainer ID. It’s yours. It doesn’t have their individual names, I’m afraid. That’s a manual option you can enter on your own.”

“Really? This must be some pretty expensive technology, right?”

“Why do you think I was only given three to hand out?”
“Good point. But still,” Iruni turned the device over in his hand, admiring the look of it. Rikalia put a clawed hand on his arm, and he remembered the instructions the professor gave him. He found his Pokémon roster, but the data on each page was blank. He aimed the diode at Rikalia, and tapped the [Update] button on her summary page. The image on the screen refreshed itself and gave a new readout:

[No. 215: Sneasel (♀)]

[Nickname: “[Input Name?]”]

[Level: 14]

[Nature: Serious]

[Ability: Keen Eye]

[Moves: Bite, Scratch, Taunt, Icy Wind, Ice Punch(!), Dark Pulse(!)]

[Notes:]

“She does?” Iruni said, surprised.


“Sorry, but—” Iruni looked up. “She does know Dark Pulse, Professor!”

“There, you see? A Pokédex can look and determine a Pokémon’s moves and a plethora of other information about them. And this is the newest model; its firmware probably won’t be made public for a long time. It’s state of the art.” Professor Elm seemed proud of the gadget.

“But, how can she know that? I’ve never seen her use it. I don’t think she even knows how to.”

“Will you stop talking about me like I’m not even here?” Rikalia asked, standing in her trainer’s lap to get his attention. “What’s going on, Iruni? Explain.”

“Oh, sorry. I’m just trying to grasp all of this. So Rikalia, the way you’re talking to me, or the way we think you are anyway, is because you know the move Dark Pulse.”

“I do?”

“That’s what I asked.” He looked back to Elm. “How can she know a move she doesn’t remember learning?”

“Well, I am an expert on Pokémon breeding, and I think the answer is a simple one: Rikalia’s parents—one of them at least, probably the father—must have passed down the knowledge hereditarily. Newborn Pokémon take after their parents in terms of move retention. She’s always had Dark Pulse in her repertoire, but neither of you knew. It’s as simple as that.”

The answer was too simple for Iruni to take seriously. “Really? That’s it?”

“Why make things more complicated than they have to be? Weavile learn Dark Pulse naturally, so—provided at least one of her parents were fully evolved—it’s the most obvious solution to how she knows the move,” explained Elm.

“But what are these little icons?” Next to two of Rikalia’s moves were a flashing orange symbol of some sort.
“Tap the move, and it’ll bring up a notation, if there is one. The Pokédex’s newest software can also
gauge a Pokémon’s personal level of skill with a given move.”

“runi…” Rikalia spoke up, “Please tell me what’s going on.”

“Rika, we’re finding out just what might be allowing you to talk to me. I’ve got an idea…” Iruni
turned his attention back to Rikalia’s summary screen. Next to the entry for Dark Pulse, he tapped
the tiny annotation: [Dark Pulse: (7% Proficiency). Subject has little to no skill in handling the
technique. However, substantial potential in SPECIAL ATTACK skill has been measured.]

Iruni held out the device, “Professor, what do you think of this?”

Elm took the handheld and thought about how to interpret the comment. “Well, going by my
breeding expertise again, Rikalia here’s got some pretty impressive lineage behind her. Her mother
must’ve been exceptional at special oriented techniques and passed that skill to her. Even though she
might not know how to handle Dark Pulse yet—”

“So she’s subconsciously or inherently able to control what little she does have, right?”

“So she’s subconsciously or inherently able to control what little she does have, right?”

“Why’d you ask my opinion even if you knew the answer?”

“I didn’t think about that bit about her mother, but,” Iruni leaned back in his chair, letting out a deep
breath, “I thought it might be something she was doing on reflex.”

Rikalia snagged her claws into Iruni’s shirt. She pulled him back upright, “Stop ignoring me!
What’re you so happy about now? What about my parents? What about anything?!?”

“I’m sorry Rika. But, it’s good news.” He stroked her head, trying to calm her down. His Sneasel
eventually let his shirt fall free. “Look,” he held up his new Pokédex. “Your father knew Dark Pulse,
and he passed that down to you. Your mother passed down her skill with special moves—that’s why
your Icy Wind is as stronger than your Ice Punch right now. Karen’s theory says that a Dark type
Pokémon who can control its Aura—one who can use special moves really well like you can, are
able to mimic a sort of telepathy. But it’s different than Psychics, or a Lucario talking directly
through raw Aura. At least that’s what she thinks.”

“You said you can ‘hear’ me, not like how you hear Ruby in your head though.”

“Yes. Karen said that it’s mostly a signal of emotions. As far as her research in that paper said, she
said that she hadn’t been accomplish pure ‘telepathy’ yet. And I don’t think what you’re doing is
‘telepathy’ either. Maybe it is, and you’re just fooling my mind into hearing what you’re saying.”

“That is possible.” Elm chimed in. “It could be similar to the ‘Illusion’ ability, akin to the kinds
Zoroark and Zorua are known to create; though that may be pushing it too far. It could stem from the
Dark type’s basic trait of ‘fooling the mind’, and how Psychic types are largely powerless against
them.”

“So, Rikalia,” Iruni continued. “All you’re doing is subconsciously aiming a very weak Dark Pulse
at my head when you talk. Since you want me to hear you talk, I do. But I’m really hearing your
thoughts go to my head, and your Dark Aura tricks my mind into ‘hearing’ it all. That about right?”

“Sounds good to me,” said the Professor.

“So… I am what’s been giving you those headaches…” Rikalia sat back in his lap, defeated. “How
is that good news…?”
“Hey, don’t be like that. This is—”

Rikalia looked over to the professor, “You… is this… really hurting him?”

“Uhh, Iruni? Translation?” The professor seemed completely lost after having a Pokémon speak to him.

“Sorry. She wants to know if this ‘Dark Telepathy’ is seriously damaging in any way. To be honest, I’m wondering that myself. But it’s probably noth—”

“Shut up and let him talk!” Rikalia snapped. She kept her eyes on the man who seemed to have the answers.

Elm relaxed in his chair, “Oh, I don’t think it’s any more dangerous than a regular headache would be; just take some aspirin and make sure to get your rest. Mind you, it’s fine right now. That is to say, if Rikalia gains more control over Dark Pulse, but doesn’t keep it under control when she talks to you, it could potentially be damaging. She is sending thoughts and emotions along a pulse of Dark Aura, so she could literally “talk you to death”, as Karen put it, I believe.” He tried to ease the tension in the room by laughing at the humorous line. It didn’t work.

“But I’ve been gradually getting used to them though,” said Iruni. “Does that help at all?”

“That’s likely you building up a tolerance to the Dark Aura, I’ll bet. That’ll save you some discomfort in the long run, but to avoid any serious injury in the future,” he leaned forward towards Rikalia, “you’re just going to have to learn to control your power better. That shouldn’t be too hard if you can already talk to your friend there.”

Rikalia looked back at the man’s smiling face with a look of surprise, “That’s it? Just practice?”

“That’s right, Rika.” Iruni comfortably rubbed her back. “You’re not hurting me to the point of really damaging me yet.”

“I’m sorry.” She buried her head into his shirt, gripping the fabric to the point of tearing. She started sobbing, “It was me… I’m so sorry… I promise I’ll get better. I’ll stop hurting you. I promise… I promise… I promise!”

“Hey…” Iruni looked around at Elm’s surprised face, and Karros’ concerned one. He ignored the slightly more painful pounding in his head and looked down to his Sneasel again. “Rika, it’s alright.”

“I promise I’ll get better… I promise.”

“I know you will. It’s okay.” Iruni wrapped his arms around her, holding her head to his chest. “We know what we’re working with now. It’ll be easier from here on in. I’ll help you learn to control yourself.”

She looked up at him. “How do we do that? When can we start?”

“I’m not too sure. Professor?”

“Hmm?”

“Any tips?” Iruni asked.

“Oh! I’m sorry. Well,” he paused to think for a moment. He looked over a few of the papers still on the desk, shaking his head at them. “I think a good first step would be to try and train her to use Dark
Pulse in combat. The more familiarity she has with it, the better idea she’ll have in controlling its mechanics.”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” said Iruni.

“And while I can’t guarantee she’ll be available, I can also give you a number you can use to reach Karen. She might have discovered a bit more info on this topic since she published it, but she is a busy woman.”

“Easy. See, Rika?” he said. “We got it sorted out. And a lot easier than I thought we would.”

Rikalia laid back into his chest, wiping her face with her paws. “It’s still a problem. It’s not done till I’m not hurting you anymore… I’m not forgetting about it, alright?”

“That’s fine.” He looked down to his right. Karros was looking up at him with a relieved expression. Iruni got an idea. “Professor… Could Karros talk to me the same way that Rika does if I were to get a TM for Dark Pulse?”

“If he has the capability, I wouldn’t doubt it. He’d have to learn from scratch though, but I’m sure little Rikalia there could tutor him once she gets a better handle of herself.” Elm sat upright in his chair, “I’m sorry if all this talk may have removed any sort of ‘magic’ from your situation. But this is what we scientists do; Find the mysterious and the unexplained and put facts in their place.”

“Oh, it’s no problem. We came here for an explanation,” he patted Rikalia on the head, “and I think we gotten a good one.”

“That’s good to hear,” said Professor Elm. “Now, with that topic settled for now, perhaps we can get on with our business.” Elm straightened his glasses and leaned back in his chair, “So, as you can see, I’ve given you a Pokédex. That special field model has been carefully designed for our purposes and distributed to our operatives. Its features are essential to Cartographer’s success. Have you had any guesses as to what those are?”

“Well, I do know what the word ‘cartographer’ means. It’s a map maker,” said Iruni.

“Precisely. Why don’t you take a look at the info on a few Pokémon? Let me know if you see anything that sticks out.”

Iruni looked through the interface for a moment. Unsure of how to navigate the new piece of technology apart from what Elm had shown him earlier, he decided to look at the information on the Pokémon he had on hand; starting with Karros. A lot of the facts were what Iruni already knew: Houndour evolutionary line and the average level of evolution, compatible Technical Machines, scientific observations about the kinds of moves they could use.

“Wait a second,” said Iruni, noticing something. “There’s no location data. It’s blank.”

“Correct! That’s the whole point of Project Cartographer!”

Iruni couldn’t tell if the professor was a bit too enthused about his work for his own good. “So… We’re just mapping locations of Pokémon? Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“But that’s all been done. There’s information on wild Pokémon locations available to the public already. That’s all we’re doing?”
“What do you mean, ‘that’s all’?” Elm stood up from his desk. “How can you not see how significant this is?”

“I mean, yeah I'd say it’s pretty important, but you’re making it out to be some sort of catastrophe or something. A few Sentret out of place can’t be—”

“How can you be so ignorant!? There are so many more important things at stake here!”

Iruni sat still, staring back into the suddenly intense eyes of the professor who seemed so carefree moments earlier.

“Do you want me to show you? Maybe that’ll help you see,” Elm pulled open a drawer of his desk without looking, and pulled out a manila envelope. He pulled the papers out and looked over them. “Here: January 1st, this year. Reports of Wailmer showing up offshore of Cianwood City. The same time, populations of Wailmer were seeing record lows in the Hoenn region. Ten days later, Professor Oak receives a call from Cerulean City. A school of Feebas and Milotic have taken up residence on Route 25.” Elm paused for a moment and looked at Iruni. “Feebas are extremely rare. They’re found in remote parts of Hoenn and inside Mt. Coronet in Sinnoh.”

“And they found a whole group of them all the way in Kanto,” Iruni said.

“Yes. Pokémon populations are shifting and we don’t know why. We’ve seen outbreaks and swarms of non-indigenous Pokémon in various regions before, but those were just small and often fleeting groups passing through. These are entire populaaces moving across continents!”

“I think I get it now.”

“Do you?” asked Elm. “Do you really though?”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. You’re clever enough I think to see how dangerous shifting populations can be. And our focus isn’t primarily on poaching, though it’s likely to be a big issue.”

Dangerous... Iruni’s mind flashed back to the Lake of Rage. Those Gyarados were local, but they weren’t natural. And they sure as hell were dangerous... People have to be prepared. Otherwise... “I understand. If these population shifts are happening all over, what’s to stop a deadly species from moving to places humans aren’t expecting, or are prepared to handle them?”

“There it is. That’s exactly the point. Feebas are harmless, and Wailmer can be dealt with, but what were to happen if the Grimer known to plague Celadon City were to suddenly move east to Saffron? What would happen if Beedrill swarmed out of Viridian Forest and took over the forests surrounding Pallet Town? We don’t know! There’s a plethora of concerns on our minds, and Cartographer’s what’s going to help us understand how to deal with them. That’s why this project was enacted. To be prepared, to get a handle on things before they get out of our control.”

“And if an unprepared trainer came across a species they didn’t expect for that level of terrain...”

“The consequences could cost lives.” Elm finished. “Yes, I think you understand it now.”

“I do. Professor, do you know why these sort of migrations are happening?” Iruni asked.

“No. That’s something we would like to find out though. It could just be the natural order of things, but these cases are too close together for us to just attribute it to Mother Nature and let it sit.”
"How long have these been going on?" Iruni asked. "Would you say they go back a year?"

Elm looked carefully over the questioning trainer before him. "You’re asking a lot of questions. You’ve got something on you mind then?"

"Yeah." Iruni gripped one of Rikalia’s paws, "What do you know about a large population of Sneasel and Weavile migrating out of Ice Path towards Mt. Silver?"

Rikalia gasped and exchanged looks between Iruni and the professor.

"I can’t see why that’s relevant," he scanned his list. "That was recorded almost a year ago. Long before we started drawing these plans together, but we started looking back to see if any patterns were forming. It’s funny actually, it turns out—" Elm looked up to see a very serious look on Iruni’s face, and his Sneasel gripping her trainer’s hand tightly. "What? Why the long faces? Oh. Your Sneasel was…?"

"Abandoned."

"So she’s one of those unfortunate little ones…" Elm sunk in his chair. "I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to… be insensitive. The reports from that area… I’m so sorry."

Iruni let go of Rikalia’s hand and made sure she was alright. "You okay?"

"Y-Yeah. I just wasn’t expecting to get answers on this," said Rikalia. She shook herself, gathering her composure.

"Professor," Iruni said. "The population that migrated. You tracked them, right?"

"Hm? Oh, yes. It’s like you heard; they moved into the Mt. Silver area and surrounding forests. Whenever a big move happens, we people in the know like to keep a few tabs."

"Is there any chance there might’ve been a group that split off from the rest of the pack?" Iruni asked.

"No, I don’t think so. The numbers matched—well, barring, you know—what we were had for Ice Path, so I think it’s safe to assume that… her family?"

Rikalia nodded.

Elm smiled and leaned down to her, "Well then Rikalia, I’m sure your family is in that area. I bet they’ll be surprised when they see you again."

"Heh," Rikalia seemed to cheer up a bit. "I like this guy."

"So," Iruni said, bringing the topic to a lighter tine, "we Cartographers have these new Pokédexes, and we go out into the wilderness and…"

"Oh, right!" The professor settled back to his cheery, enthused mood. "These little puppies have a lot more tech packed into them than they let on. Their ‘eyes’ can take in very valuable data on Pokémon ecology based on images taken in the field. It’s all very technical, so I won’t bore you. What we want you to do is travel the region and record all wild Pokémon populations you happen across; familiar or otherwise. Then we’ll take that data, and begin to map the new populations. We’ll also be able to alert trainers to potentially dangerous communities that they might be unprepared for.

"As for how drastic any sort of changes we’ll have to make, we’re not sure. But that’s why we need Cartographers to go and see, firsthand, how things are changing out there. We’ll also be pooling in
various rumors and news reports on the issue as well, so this is a very wide net we’re casting.”

“The Gym Circuit would have to change if it gets bad enough, won’t it?”

“Funny you should say…”

“What?” Iruni asked.

“Oh, nothing,” said Elm. “Just agreeing with you. Oh! I almost forgot!” The professor walked around the desk, “I have to show you; may I see the Pokédex?”

“Sure.” Iruni handed the device over.

“This is a crucial part of Project Cartographer. Each operative must conduct an audio journal of their experiences. Every day, you must make an entry. Each of these messages are logged, date stamped, and sent back to my computer for perusal. It uses the PokéGear network, so signal should rarely be a problem. What data and pictures can’t tell us, gut human opinions and instinct can. That’s one of the reasons we’re making this mandatory.

“The other, is a little bit grimmer. These are potentially dangerous circumstances. Not only will we look over these messages for data purposes, but these could also be used as a call for help. And if we don’t get a response, we’ll send someone looking. These devices are equipped with a GPS for logging the populations, but could also be your lifeline.”

“Wow… You’ve thought this through.”

“It pays to, believe me. Here,” Elm brought up an application on the device, “this is where you start your entry. No need to do one until you actually hit the road, though.”

“Thank you. I’ll try keep up schedule. How, ah, personal should the entries be? Is it strictly for business, or is this like an audio diary?”

Elm walked back to his seat, “Oh, nothing too personal I wouldn’t think; at most, just a brief update about yourself and your Pokémon. I’d especially like to know how— Oh, I almost forgot!” Elm tapped the plain Poké Ball he had placed there earlier. He rolled it over to Iruni’s side of the desk, “It’s a bit out of tradition, but I think you’ll appreciate it.”

Iruni caught the sphere before it rolled off the desk. He expanded it to its full size and examined it. Nothing stood out apparent on the clean red and white Poké Ball. “May I?”

“By all means,” Elm said, gesturing to open desk space.

Iruni’s index finger instinctively drifted to the button again and tapped it before tossing it into the air. The Poké Ball flew into the air a few feet, and opened with a flash. The light poured out onto the desk in front of him, and began to coalesce into a coherent shape. At almost three feet tall, the creature stood on short, stubby legs. Its hide, pale green almost throughout its entire body, save for a ring of dark green growths around its neck. On its head, a large green leaf stood tall. As it opened its eyes, it extended its leaf into the air and took a deep breath.

“There you are,” said Elm.

The Chikorita turned at the sound of his voice and greeted the professor cheerily.

“Yes, it’s good to see you too, Chikorita. Now,” he pointed to Iruni, “why don’t you turn around?”
It let its leaf fall limp over its body and turned around, immediately showing its interest in the three new individuals it had never seen before. It leaned carefully over the edge of the desk, taking in the features of the two Pokémon and the boy in front of it.

“You’re giving me a Chikorita?” asked Iruni. “I thought people normally got a choice of a Pokémon they get from you.”

“Oh please, this isn’t nearly that mundane, believe me,” said Elm. “Going over the files and based on the data we had on the three of our Cartographer finalists, I decided which of Johto’s signature Starter families best suited you. It was the same for the others. Besides, this Chikorita isn’t one bred to be given to a novice trainer.”

“Really?” Iruni offered his hand out to the green Leaf Pokémon. Chikorita raised its leaf again and waved it over his hand. “How so? And what’s it doing?”

“She’s taking a good look at you. Their species can learn a lot from taking in air through their leaves. As for how she’s special, and believe me, she is, she’s got a few techniques already down pat that some of her kind wouldn’t be able to at this stage. And she’s a bit older than the ones we give out to starting trainers, so I’d guess she’s on par with your other Pokémon at this stage.” Elm leaned forward and rubbed Chikorita’s back, “Go on, girl. He’s alright; he’s your trainer.”

The Chikorita back up to the man who had raised her until now, asking something lost between languages.

“Yes. Meet Iruni Thomas, the third Cartographer.”

Chikorita’s demeanor changed almost instantly. She turned back to Iruni with a sunny look and extended her leaf again, like a person would for a handshake. Iruni chuckled a bit and gently grasped her leaf. She cheerily shook her head and pulled back with a smile. Chikorita readied herself and jumped down to the floor to get acquainted with the fire-dog on the floor.

Rikalia hopped off Iruni’s lap to meet her new teammate. “So, you say she was chosen for me? Why’s that?” Iruni asked.

“She’ll help fill out your team. As you are now, with just Fire, Dark, and Ice types covered, her talents will come as a refreshing change to how you’re used to training and battling with Pokémon. It does well to venture outside of your comfort zone every once and a while, you know.”

“Oh, I know that,” said Iruni. “I was never planning on training only Dark type Pokémon this early. I’ve had an interest in a few other types and Grass is one of them. With this talk about all these new Pokémon coming to live in Johto, there’ll be plenty of options.”

“Indeed.” Elm looked out the window, noticing the slowly reddening clouds of the early evening. “Oh where does the time go? I think I’ve kept you long enough for today. And I have work of my own to attend to at some point.”

“So, are we done here? Am I good to go?” Iruni asked as he stood up.

“There’s a few more things I should bring you up to speed on,” said Elm, “but those can wait. Just stop by again any time before you leave town. You’re not staying long, are you?”

“I don’t plan to, no. I’ll probably head out sometime tomorrow.”

“Alright then. Well Mr. Thomas, it’s been a pleasure. It’s great to have you aboard as a Cartographer.”
“Thanks Professor,” said Iruni. He knelt down to the small crowd of Pokémon, “Kar, you feel like walking back, or you want to take it easy?” Iruni could see the answer in the tired look on his friend’s face. He patted his Houndour’s head and recalled him. After Rikalia took her spot on his shoulder, Iruni looked to his newest Pokémon. “How about you, Chikorita? Want to walk with us?”

She replied eager and cheerily, clearly wanting to stay outside with her new friends.

“That’s settled then.” He stood back up and pocketed his new Pokédex. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Professor,” he said as he started for the door to the laboratory.

“Of course!”

[Cartographer Log: 4/4/00]
[Cartographer ID: C. M. Altswalder (31598)]

[“Figured I’d get my entry in early today, Prof., hope you don’t mind, but I’m done walking for today. I logged ‘em yesterday, but I haven’t really had a chance to get a close look at how many there are until today. Those Wurmple are all over the place. So far, that’s all I can see as far as where I am. Let’s see… I’m about halfway to Cherrygrove now. So far, I’ve seen mostly Silcoon and Beautifly coming out of these bugs, but there are a few Dustox flying around. Better make sure these new Poison types don’t cause a panic if they start flourishing.

“Craster’s doin’ fine. He’s a little antsy about all the changing scenery, but he’s adapting well. It’s kinda funny; my old team’s not intimidated by him at all. Kinda the other way around, but Panzer’s always had that attitude of his. I just wish Wallace would take after him just a bit…

“Oh, and I probably should’a mentioned this in yesterday’s note, but you know the third? That Thomas guy who’s our last leg? I ran into him coming into town yesterday, so if you didn’t see him, he’s coming.

“A misunderstanding might’ve occurred when we crossed paths. Whatever he tells you, not my fault. I was being cautious, that’s all. We ended up bumping heads enough to start up a contest, I guess. He’s going to be trying to surpass my badge count— my bad, get in range of me caring, and we’ll have a friendly battle. See if he’s anything more than talk. Anyway, I hope he’s what you’re expecting though. The guy’s got a lot of nerve and drive, but drive isn’t everything.

“Ahhh, I’m rambling. I’m gone.”]
While most residents of Blackthorn City were just beginning their morning routines, these select few have been hard at work since well before the sun crested the eastern horizon. Sparse cloud cover set the fields outside of the city in a splotchy pattern of light and dark. I leaned back against a tree and stared up at the clouds for a moment, watching their mass shift and sway with the wind. Recognizable shapes would appear at random and then distort into obscurity.

Not far from these trees, two of my comrades were in the midst of one of their regular training matches. A sudden burst of commotion grabbed my attention; it appeared that they were escalating their exercises. I looked back down to see a small blue dragon butting heads with a small bird of a similar blue, whose wings resembled the spotty clouds above. I had no need or want to join them; there was nothing to be gained from their style of training. I was far enough away so their noise isn’t unbearable. There was much on my mind today. Maybe too much, or maybe not enough. It’s difficult to tell at times, frustrating me to no end.

To live two lives to regain a life lost. There is much to do.

“C’mon Bagon! Hit ‘em hard! Dragonbreath!”

Jacob Ostra’s Bagon steadied itself after the blow it just took, taking a few deep breaths of humid air before it stood back up and faced its opponent. The small dragon inhaled, and locked eyes with the small Swablu fluttering before it. The small bird had been dodging rather than attacking for a large part of the battle. Its last hit had just winded Jacob’s Bagon with a strong Take Down, but the tiny Cotton Bird was tiring itself out; a victor would be decided soon. Building up the fiery energy in its mouth, Bagon started to close the ground between the two combatants.

“We’re not falling for that, Jake,” Tyler Nedile, the Swablu’s trainer, yelled back in an unsteady voice. “Swablu, hit it with another Take Down!” The little bird chirped in response, and flew to meet its opponent head-on.

I hope that Tyler wins this bout. He rarely shows this level of enthusiasm. He needs to free himself from his weak and reclusive state.

“Now Bagon!” Jake ordered at the opportune time.

The Rock Head dragon cleverly side-stepped the incoming attack, and unleashed the Dragonbreath attack on the Swablu’s vulnerable side. Blue and yellow flames of energy washed over the cloud-covered bird, sending it flailing onto the muddy ground. I could see Tyler’s Swablu trying to get back up, but it was far too weak, and it collapsed back onto ground. A pity.

“Dammit… I was so close!” Tyler said, defeated. He quickly ran over and scooped the tired, cloudy looking bird into his arms. “I’m sorry Swablu. That was a dumb risk to take.” His Pokémon cooed at him reassuringly as Jake made to cut in.

“That wasn’t dumb, just reckless. I had Bagon charge in too, ya know?” he knelt down to his small, blue dragon. “And you almost had us beat, just a little— Whoa!”

A bright white light suddenly began emanating from his Bagon, causing Jake to jump back on his feet in surprise. Jake and Tyler backed up to watch the process unfold as I merely watched from the trees. The hard and callous material that covered Bagon’s head began to grow and expand around his
body, creating a large, round shell. The light began to fade, revealing his hands had become front feet, and that his legs were the only parts of him to escape the shell’s growth. A pair of yellow eyes could be seen inside the dark interior of the shell. Flawless evolution. A single step forward, one of many.

Perhaps the step before we sprint?

“Well, would ya look at tha’! C’mere Shelgon!” Jake’s Shelgon struggled, but managed to look up at his master.

Shortly after kneeling back down, Jacob soon found himself flat on his back as his Shelgon tackled him, giving various exclamations of mirth. “Whoa, put some pounds on, did ya? Ah, that’s okay. The more our enemies have to take down, eh?”

“Hey, Bagon evolved!” I heard her before she made her way into my line of sight, which is quite an accomplishment. I look over in time to see Andrea Karson arriving on the scene.

“We’re all here now. I should prepare.

“You got it. Tyler’s Swablu almost got the drop on us, but Bagon— I mean, Shelgon won out! We should celebrate tonight!”

“You can count me out,” Tyler said, dejected. “No sense in celebrating when you’ve got nothing to celebrate…”

“Come on, Tyler. Come out with us tonight. We’re a team, all of us.” Andrea was always kind to Tyler. Perhaps she is the one to show him how to overcome his weakness and grasp at the strength he uses so little.

“Yeah, just because you lost to me doesn’t mean the end of the world, ya know? And your Swablu’s been leading our little group up until now, she’s raring to evolve any day now, just you watch.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, Ty. My little Nibbles has a long ways to go, and he can’t even see,” Andrea draped both of her arms around Tyler’s neck, leaning into his stance. “You and me can train tomorrow, okay? But tonight, let’s just relax. Maybe later… you and I could find some alone time…?”

Jake laughed, “Aw, don’t tease the kid, Andrea.”

“Who’s teasing?” she said, tightening her grip on Tyler’s neck. “I’ve always loved our little Ty.” It was hard to tell with her whether she’s serious with her flirting. She did seem to focus on Tyler more than others. There might be some genuine interest there. I wish them the best.

Tyler’s face is starting to visibly flush, “Andrea, please…”

“Hey, speaking of ‘us’, ” Andrea looked to Jake, “Where’s Galian?”

He gestured to where I sat. I suppose I had less time to prepare than I thought.

“He was all up in arms about trainin’ this mornin’. Said he wanted to take it easy today. Says he’s been thinkin’ a lot lately.”


“Mmm, well, you go over and see if he wants to go out with us tonight, and I think Tyler and I have
some… plans to settle on.”

They both laughed at Tyler’s increasingly nervous face, “Andrea… Not in front of everyone…”

Ah, there’s some initiative. Those two fit together well, I think.

She sighed, “Fine, I’ll save it for tonight then.”

Jacob started walking over to where I was sitting to leave his newly evolved Shelgon to get acquainted with Andrea’s Deino. After he was released from his Poké Ball, the blind dragon began sniffing around until he found a new object that clearly wasn’t a pair of human legs. “Nibbles” crept a little closer, cautiously circling the new scent. The blind, half-Dark dragon tentatively gnawed on Shelgon’s new shell, quickly discovering it isn’t food, and that his teeth make a painful grating sound when he bites it.

Shelgon barked in surprise, turning back around to face the Deino. He growled defensively at Andrea’s bewildered Pokémon. Not knowing what to do, Nibbles stuck his head out again, but ended up sticking his head inside Shelgon’s shell. Andrea and Tyler laughed at the frantic motions of the two before they helped separate the two dragons. That Unovan Pokémon needs training before it can become a contender in our ranks.

A curious thing, that Deino. The wanderer who traded it to Andrea mentioned finding it wild, just north of Johto. I may not be familiar with the migratory patterns of Dragon type Pokémon, but that fact alone seems peculiar. Whisperings of strange encounters are spreading with more frequency than ever. I’ve made it a habit to record them as of late, just in case. This world is changing, I think.

As I sat, leaning my back against a tree some feet away, I held a vacant Ultra Ball in my hands. Among a myriad of other things, I’m considering what other Pokémon to add to help my efforts. I’ve been weighing the odds of a dragon, but none of the local ones catch my eye.

“‘Ey Cora!”

I abhor that corruption of my given name that he uses. “Yes, Jacob?”

“You alright there, big guy? You’ve been sittin’ here all mornin’.”

“Just contemplating future additions to my roster… I see that Bagon evolved.”

“He sure did! We’re all celebrating tonight. You in?”

“To what end, Jacob?”

“What end?” Jake asked.

I stood up and faced him, “To what end does your Bagon evolving lead you to?”

“Whaddya mean? We’re trainers. Isn’t it normal to want my Pokémon to evolve and get stronger?”

“But do you have a goal? Why do you get stronger, Jacob Ostra?” Before he could answer, I started walking back to where the others were gathered and motioned for Jake to follow, “Come, this needs to be heard.”

Andrea’s Deino had since figured out the identity of the angry, hard-to-bite creature, and was playing a game of tag. Despite being blind, he could hear the loud romping of the bulky, shelled dragon, making wild leaps where he thought he’d catch his target. It’s a shame that his eyesight will not
return until he is a Hydreigon. What a long, arduous life that is…

“Andrea Karson. Tyler Nedile,” I made my voice loud and firm, which caught the two off guard. I usually dislike forward conversation. “I have something I would like to say.”

“Whoa, Galian’s talking? It’s about time you started coming out of your shell. Right as Bagon gets into his!” Andrea laughed at her own joke. She made to ask Tyler’s opinion, but I raise a hand to silence her.

“If I may, I’d like to speak without interruption.” The group all looked to each other, curious about what topic I was about to bring up. I wonder how well they’ll respond. “Thank you. Now, today is a day of note: Jacob’s Bagon evolved, a physical example of something I’ve been thinking on for some time. Jacob, you said that we, as trainers, train Pokémon to get stronger. But why do you train? For what goal do you strive for?”

“Uhh,” Jake thought for a moment, “Well, right now I want to make sure Shelgon here is as strong as he can be. That’s the best I can do for him.”

“But why?” I repeated. “When he finally evolves to a Salamence, what then? Do you have a dream or goal you hope to reach? A dream is something everyone needs in order to justify starting anything. What is it that drives you?”

“Well…” he looked down at his feet. Jake’s Shelgon gave him a happy look in return. Jake smiled and continued, “I’ve thought about it for a while, and I didn’t really want to say anything, but I think that, if me and Shelgon get strong, and get some more teammates, we could give Clair a run for her money and be the Gym Leader here.”

I thought as much.

“That’s great, Jake!” Andrea exclaimed.

“You’re going to have to train hard for that, man.” Tyler added. “But we’re a team, we’ll help—”

I raised a hand and spoke in a hard voice, “Everyone, if you please?”

Tyler and Andrea quickly stowed their comments and apologized.

“Thank you. Now Jacob,” I continued, “You plan on training and getting stronger to become this city’s Gym Leader. But you plan to do it here? Never leaving, never going so far as the perimeter of the city?”

“What, you talkin’ about leavin’ Blackthorn?”

“Correct.” Here’s where they might fight back. I must push them in the correct manner.

“Why would I do that? This is my hometown. I’ve got family here. I’ve got you guys, and the training around here isn’t as dull as you put it, Cora. There’s plenty—”

“And just who do you think the Pokémon League will consider for the position?! Some local who casually trains his only dragon? Or a hardened, seasoned, veteran trainer, with a diverse team, and one with some following behind him?” This is the first time this group has heard, and the first time in a long time I’ve had to raise my voice. The faces of the group before me betrayed a look of fear, and perhaps apprehension. It is fleeting however, I’ve long since gained their trust.

“It’s time we move on to greater things than this isolated mountain city. Your goal is here, but the
journey to get there spans far beyond this city. We should make our names known throughout the Johto region, perhaps more. We should go together, gym to gym, and earn respect amongst the trainers and Gym Leaders of this land. *This* is the way we’ll attain true strength. Because strength isn’t just what’s in our limbs or our minds, it’s everyone around us, working together, talking together, and fighting together.” I motioned about the group, “Allies joining to conquer a goal, combining their personal strength for the good of the group!

“Jacob,” I said, pointing to the city, “leaving your family behind is not something to dwell over, you know this.” I took a deep breath before continuing, I must pick my words carefully…

“Family will always be there, supporting you and your dreams, wherever they take you. Their lives are in the walls of the city, and yours,” I turned around, and spread my arms out to the wilderness ahead of me, “is out there. You just have to find the drive to live it yourself, and not let it stay a dream forever.”

I turn back to the group, “And we’ll be right behind you, supporting you.” My voice fell to its normal level, “It’s no mystery that we consider you the leader of our little troupe. It should only make sense that we follow the leader’s goal, and make sure it’s a reality. With you as Gym Leader, we’ll be what trainers will have to get through to face you. We as a team will bring a level of fame to the Blackthorn Gym that even Clair’s legacy cannot match.”

The others looked at their normally reserved member, shocked at how fierce I had become. However, my speech worked.

“Wow Galian,” Andrea said, “where’d all this come from? You were always so quiet before. I think I like this new you a bit more.”

Tyler cut in, “Never mind that, do you really think we can even do this Galian? I mean, I think I’m for it, but you really believe in us that much?”

“I do. Our group has too much potential for us to only use it here.”

“Well, I’ll be damned Cora,” Jake finally said. “You’ve really got some high hopes for us. And I think you’re right. We’re a good team, our Pokémon are getting stronger, but pretty soon, we’ll be too far above what this place can give us.”

“So,” Andrea said, “what do we do now?”

“You suggested it yourself, Andrea,” I spoke up, “We already have plans, or has this talk of leaving town killed your drive to celebrate? Perhaps we—”

“Whoa, whoa!” Tyler suddenly yelled. “Look over there!” We all turn to where Tyler was pointing to. On the mountainous edge of the clearing, just inside the tree line, a family of Haxorus and Axew were moving down the trail.

“Those aren’t local! We should—” Tyler almost made to run forward and battle one, but Jake put a hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, what a day this is…” I straightened my posture, push my unruly hair out of the way, up and over my scalp, and quickly grabbed Amé’s Dive Ball and my vacant Ultra Ball. I didn’t care if they followed, I merely saw an answer to another of my questions. It seems fate is falling into place all around me. I began sprinting toward the forest, gaining the attention of the family dragons. Releasing my Pokémon, I gave the order to begin distracting the siblings. I ignored the intimidating snarls of the parent Haxorus; wounds would heal later. Now, it is time to capture a dragon of my own.
The morning after his meeting with Professor Elm, Iruni woke up far earlier than he had the day before. While he had just spent the better part of a week scaling mountainous terrain just to get to Newbark Town, he didn’t feel much need in staying any longer. His new title of ‘Cartographer’ weighed heavily on his thoughts, bringing him to wonder just how much impact this project would have on the world. The professor had made it very clear to him the consequences of a worst case scenario, but there was too much uncertainty about how these migrations would start affecting people.

Iruni was the first awake in his room and managed to get through his morning routine uninterrupted before any of his Pokémon managed to rouse themselves. Already, Iruni began to revel in the convenience of having shorter hair. *So much easier to manage,* he thought, reflecting on his new image in the mirror.

Walking back into the main room, he noticed his Chikorita had woken up, and was lying on the floor at the foot of his bed. She was trying to sunbathe in what little rays managed to slip past the blinds. Iruni quietly moved past her and pulled open the blinds; letting bright rays of morning sun fill the room. “There, that’s better, isn’t it Anya?”

Anya—or Atanya, in full—called up to him happily, thanking her new trainer. She closed her eyes and raised her leaf to catch more of the sun. The longer she did so, the air in the room became a fraction fresher.

“Mmmh…” A noise came from the mass of blankets that sat curled up on the bed. The mound of cloth shifted a few times before Rikalia finally emerged. She squinted her eyes as she found herself caught in the bright sun. “Uhh, why does it have to be sooo bright?”

“Oh come on,” said Iruni. “It’s a great day out.”

“What’s got you up so early?” she asked.

“Probably still running off the excitement from yesterday, and besides; we said we’d stop by Elm’s lab again today before we set out, and he’ll be expecting a log for today, so I thought ‘The earlier, the better’.”

“You said we’d leave today,” Rikalia said. She buried her head back into the blankets. “I could’ve done with a resting day…”

“Oh, we haven’t had that hard of a time yet. I think you’re catching Karros’ bad habits. Anyway, we’ve got more work to do besides my duties as a Cartographer.” Iruni looked around the room, “Speaking of, where’d Kar go?”

Rikalia sat up and crawled over to the edge of the bed. A simple look to the floor ended the search for the still-sleeping Houndour. “I found him. He fell.”

Iruni asked Atanya and Rikalia to try and wake Karros while he started gathering his things. Unlike his departure from Blackthorn, leaving Newbark would see him with a nearly identical load on him, apart from the mental note to buy another ration’s worth of Pokémon food for his newest Pokémon. After they were all roused and packed, Iruni settled on getting breakfast for him and his Pokémon in the lobby of the Pokémon Center.

Atanya and Karros were returned to their Poké Balls, and Rikalia set out with her trainer as soon as they finished eating their meal. As they entered Professor Elm’s laboratory, they were met with a
very different scene. A staff of workers and other scientists were about the main room, performing their daily tasks and conducting their own tests. As he walked in, Iruni was greeted by one of the men in white coats.

“Good morning,” he said. “I’m Professor Elm’s assistant. Can I help you?”

“Yes. I’m Iruni Thomas. I’m supposed to see the Professor today.”

“Oh yes! I remember. He should be back in his office. He’s expecting you.” The assistant motioned for Iruni to continue on back.

“Thanks,” said Iruni.

The door to Elm’s separate workspace was open, and the papers that covered the floor were beginning to spill out into the main area. He looked in and saw the professor hard at work on his computer and tapped the doorframe with his knuckles to get his attention.

“Yes? Oh! Mr. Thomas, there you are,” he stood and went over to greet his visitors. “I didn’t expect to see you so early. I see you’re all set to head out,” he said, gesturing to Iruni’s gear.

“Yep. Just one last stop by the mart before heading out, and we’re off to Cherrygrove. What all do you still have to bring me up to speed with?” he asked.

“I didn’t mention him yesterday, did I? How’d you know?”

“I’m a good guesser.” Elm said. “Your Sneasel seemed to recognize the model of Pokédex Cartographers have been issued. Carter left here recently. So I drew those lines. Apart from that though, Carter mentioned meeting you on his way out of town two days ago in his most recent report. Some ‘misunderstanding’ happened between the two of you, is that right?”

“Yeah, a bit,” said Iruni. “He introduced himself by kicking me in the head.”

“Oh, the source of you ‘real headache’… Iruni,” the Professor’s tone dropped down, “Know that we must have cooperation in this initiative. I won’t tolerate the two of you being indignant against one another. This sporting rivalry you two have is fine, but nothing that might hinder the both of your performance as Cartographers. As professional as it sounds; you work for us now. Don’t take any unnecessary actions against your fellow teammates. If either of you are in trouble, I expect you two to rush to the other’s aid, no hesitation. Understand?”

“Yes sir,” Iruni said.

“Good!” Elm said, his demeanor shifting back into his bright-eyed, regular style. “Oh yes, the other. Her name’s Alice Wingborne. She’s from Hoenn—Fortree City to be exact, and she’s studying to be a Pokémon and human doctor! Can you believe it? Anyway, there’s been a document sent to all Cartographers about our newest member—you—and it contains basic info on your peers. I’d like you to read it, and have a general knowledge of them. Helps ease some of the awkward social situations, I’d think.”

“Sure, thanks Professor. When did Alice leave here?”

“Oh, well before Carter showed up. She lives up in Violet City, so it didn’t take nearly as long as it took you two boys to work your way here. So,” Elm changed the subject, “how’s Chikorita? Getting
along well, I hope?”

“Oh yeah, she’s great,” Irini said. “I’ve named her ‘Atanya’, but you’ll always hear me call her ‘Anya’. She took to my other Pokémon rather well, I think.” Irini knelt down, “How do you like her, Rika? I thought the two of you seemed to be hitting it off pretty good, right?”

“Huh?” Rikalia snapped out of her thoughts. “What? Oh, yeah. Anya’s alright. We were talking a bit last night... She’s fine around me and Kar, even though her type’s weak to both of us.”

“Trust me Rika, type advantages aren’t everything. And you’re teammates, why should she be afraid of you two?”

“I dunno. I kinda…”

“What?”

“Nothing,” she said flatly.

“Okay?” Irini stood up. “Anyway, yeah. She’s really friendly. I’m hoping to get some battle practice in with her today.”

“Good, good. Oh, that reminds me of the other thing I’m supposed to tell you,” Elm cleared his throat. “All Cartographers are given full access to any sort of field moves or otherwise restricted moves during the course of our operation. Just in case.”

“What do you mean?”

“In case of emergency, we can’t have you being hesitant to use a move you have to because you’re hung up on the possible legal ramifications. Just covering all of our bases again.”

“Alright. Well, is that everything?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Elm. “If any crucial information needs to spread, I can send messages to your Pokédex. You’re all set, Cartographer Irini.”

“Great. I’ll do my best.” Irini and the professor exchanged in one last handshake before he turned to leave the laboratory. Once they were outside, Irini asked, “Hey Rika, you want to ride on my back until we find a place to train?”

“No thanks. I’ll walk.”

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

“No.”

“Well, let me know if you change your mind. It feels like it’ll get hot out today.” He bent down to her level, “And if there’s something you want to say, say it.”

Rikalia looked at him with a solid gaze, not moving her eyes from his for a long moment. Without saying a word, she jumped up onto his shoulder and settled herself onto his backpack. “You’re right. It is a bit hot…”

Irini sighed as he stood back up. He waited for her to continue, but it soon became obvious that the conversation had died already.

“You waiting for something? Don’t we have to head to the mart for more food?” Rikalia asked, her
“Yeah,” said Iruni. “Food…”

The speeding wheels of the taxi hit a pothole, jostling the interior of the vehicle violently. The falling rain had obscured and filled the unnatural crack in the pavement, leaving the driver completely unaware of its existence. The force of the impact had awoken the single passenger riding in the back seat rather painfully; his head was against the cool, damp window when the car suddenly jolted. He groaned and could already feel his head pounding in protest.

“Sorry about that, buddy!” the cab driver called back at him. “These roads don’t see too much traffic, and I can’t say I’ve driven them much myself, either. I’m still goin’ the right way, right?”

They had been traveling along the winding, single lane road for the past ten minutes. The road was flanked on either side by dense woodlands, with the occasional winding drive to a house farther off the road. They had cleared the city limits some time ago. Their destination was well out of the way of anything.

“Quit your worrying, it’s just down this road. Keep going, you can’t miss it,” Dalton said. “And watch the fucking road, will ya? I’ve already got a fucking headache from this damn weather…”

“Sorry ‘bout that, buddy. Here, I’ll crank the AC for yeh, it always helps me.” The drive continued a ways before the driver spoke up again. “I didn’t think anyone actually lived this far outside the city. Must like it, eh? Being so far out of the way?”

“No really. I just moved there,” said Dalton.

Feeling confident in his own memory of the road, Dalton rested his head back on the cool window. If the driver were to hit a turn sharply, he would be ready for it. With potholes, he’d just have to rely on his luck. He kept drifting into sleep, only being woken up by the noise of the cab ride. He never could get used to sleeping on a plane, cars weren’t much better.

Thankfully, after another five minutes of nothing but rain battering the cab, the sight of the house came into view. The house could almost be accurately described as a mansion. It stood three, impressive stories tall, white in color, with a well-kept front yard. The drive leading up to the main roundabout in front of the main entrance. The face of the building was lined with brilliant white columns with ornate designs at their tops. The driveway had a split that lead to either a carport in the front, or a closed garage at the side of the house.

The cab driver let out a long whistle as he slowly crept up the drive, “Damn, son. Some nice digs you got here. Can’t say I wouldn’t mind the drive either if it was THIS I was coming home to.”

“Pull close to the covered walkway, will you? I don’t want to be out in this shit more than I have to.” Dalton began pulling his luggage resting in the back seat closer to him. He was already dreading stepping out into the humid atmosphere that clung to the area. Rain is easy to avoid if I have to. But when there’s water in the air… it’s just fucking miserable…

As the car slowed to a stop, Dalton didn’t give the cabby any time ask for the toll. He pulled out an amount of cash he that was sure would cover it from his wallet and handed it to the man. He opened the door and shouldered his large bag, grasping his smaller one in his hand. “Keep the change,” he said, stepping out into the humid air.

“Hey, thanks budd—”
With a backwards kick, Dalton shut the cab’s door and walked to the front door. He heard the car start to drive away and stopped. He stood, bags weighing down his arms, and stared on at the door in front of him. I’m tired. I’ve gotten minutes of sleep in the last fourteen hours. It’s raining. It’s humid as fuck. And my head hurts. All I want... is to just go in, set my bags in my room, head to kitchen, and pour a drink. I want to fucking relax. Just for a bit. That’s all I’m asking...

Without warning, the door flew open in front of him, revealing the disgruntled visage of one of his colleagues.

“Dalton!”

“No? You won’t let me have that much?!” Dalton yelled upwards. Ignoring his clearly livid partner, Dalton strode inside and started for his room.

“Dalton, don’t you ignore me...” Sebastian yelled after him.

Dalton wheeled around, “Hold onto your ass, will ya? Goddamn, I didn’t even walk through the door and you’re acting like I just shot you in the foot! Give me minute before you start throwing all sorts of shit at me.” He turned back around and started up the set of stairs and continued to his room. Once there, he threw his luggage onto the floor, and sat down on the side of the bed.

It’s like I’m a fucking amateur. Always harping on everything I do... Fuck it.

Dalton sat and let his anger die down before he got back up. Walking back downstairs to the foyer, he found it empty. He stood in the wide open room, listening to the rain battering the windows, waiting for Sebastian to assault him again. When no sound apart from the occasional roll of thunder came to him, Dalton gave up and walked into the kitchen. It annoyed him walking through the large house without knowing where the others who inhabited it were. He walked into the kitchen and began looking for a glass in the dark, “And he never turns on any fucking lights... the guy’s like a Woobat or something...”

The lights stung Dalton's eyes as they suddenly flashed on around him. “The dark helps me concentrate.”

Dalton turned back to the doorway, seeing his silver-haired comrade folding his arms. He held Sebastian's glare for a moment and turned away, worrying more about pouring his drink.

“Are you going to explain yourself, Dalton?” Sebastian asked expectantly.

“You tell me,” Dalton said as he poured the alcohol. “What do I have to explain this time? I just went on a pleasure trip back home.” Dalton leaned back on the counter and took a sip of his drink as he watched his partner let a sliver of anger through the normally calm façade he put on.

“Don’t patronize me. You just cost us a very important position in Unova! We could have used you as an information feed directly from—”

“Used me?!” Dalton exploded. “Don’t talk down to me like you’re the Alpha himself! I did what I did for some very good reasons. And not one of us has power over the other, if you’ll remember, Sebastian...”

“Very well, explain your ‘reasons’ then.”

Dalton took a long drink, and slammed his glass down on the counter. “Fine. For one? The long-ass plane rides to and from Unova to keep up appearances because of my position are a fucking pain. Not to mention having to come up with more excuses to leave and come back here. Eventually, they
would’ve started looking into where I’ve been going, if they haven’t already.

“For two? I’m sick of the Unova League! Having to go all the way there, just to be in the shadow of that man again and fend off a few measly trainers every so often. Yeah, that lifestyle was fine for a while. And I enjoyed it, sure. But the more time I spent away, the more I realized how little there is for me there.”

Dalton took another drink and set the glass down next to him once more. “Besides, we don’t have any business in Unova anyway! What sort of information could we get that’ll be useful? They’re half a world away!”

“That’s not true at all. I already told you about my interest in that region. My ‘V Initiative’ still stands as a—”

“Stop right there you son of a bitch!” Dalton cleared the length of the kitchen in mere instants, grabbing Sebastian’s shirt in his fists. “We agreed! You were supposed to drop that plan when we all agreed not to interfere with someone else’s safeguard! The thing we want to protect and keep pure! Mine’s just as significant as Coralis’, so don’t you dare think it’s any less important just because it’s in one of your little plans! You leave my family’s legacy out of your little schemes, you got that??”

“Look at you, protecting your family’s little secret.” Sebastian looked at him with a sneer. “Looks like you’ve got some stock in that place after all.”

“I don’t hate Unova! Or its people, especially not my family and what they’ve done! I’ve sworn to go on protecting what we have for generations. And not you, not Coralis, not what we’re doing will change my mind, got that!” Dalton let his hands drop and turned to walk away, picking up his drink as he walked past. Dalton walked into the large sitting room, and took a seat in a chair. Sebastian followed.

“I only hate that old man Alder and his old fashioned ways. I hate the League and the fact that they turn a blind eye to that hollow, decrepit excuse for a Champion.” Dalton set his drink on a small table beside the chair. “I may be your ally in this, but I’m a member of the Drake family. You come second.”

“Very well. But think of it, Dalton. You, as well as I, could benefit greatly from acquiring Vi—”

“I don’t want to hear it, you rat bastard! I don’t even know how you know as much as you do! But you’re always catching leaks wherever they spring up, don’t you? How did you find out about what’s hidden there, huh? You never told me.”

Sebastian sat on the couch across from him and looked him square in the face. “I did tell you, Dalton. My research is very thorough. While there might not be explicit documents leading to the conclusions I reach, my exceptional mind is what really points me in the right direction.”

“Oh, so you guessed? Is that it?” Dalton asked sarcastically.

“No, I’m just good at finding patterns.”

“Whatever. You swore to never go attempt anything and I expect you to hold to your word.”

“I promise,” Sebastian said.

“Good. So, we done here? Can I finally get some fucking peace?”

“Have you come across any new leads on Giovanni as of late?” Sebastian asked.
“Nope.” Dalton picked up his drink and pressed the cool side of the glass against his head. “Guy’s like a ghost. Something’ll turn up though, it always does.”

“Yes.”

“What about you?” Dalton asked, glancing over. “Find that kid who talked to him from your bird’s vision?”

“Unfortunately, no. And I wonder if it is a lost cause. I’m not sure what this person would be able to tell us, as they did not seem to recognize him for who he is.”

“Again, they’ll turn up. They always do.” Dalton took the last swig of his glass and started to head out of the room.

Sebastian stood up as well. “One more thing, Dalton.”

*This guy could have a thousand ‘more things’. I just want to fucking sleep… “What is it?”*

“News, from Coralis. He’s gone mobile.”

“Holy shit, really? So he’s finally got something working for him, huh?” Dalton actually felt good about that bit of news. “The sooner he gets those cronies of his into shape, the better.”

“And another thing he said to me,” Sebastian said, his tone shifting to a slightly more serious level. “He says he might’ve found a fourth.”

Dalton laughed, “A fourth what? Great-grandchild he’s never met?”

“No, and don’t joke about that.” Sebastian’s angry glare seemed to glance right off its target. “Anyway, he says he might’ve found a fourth Watchmaker for us.”

“Watchmaker?”

Sebastian sighed, “Tell me I don’t have to keep reminding you of our agreed upon title.”


“No. Just that he met someone who might have something they would like to protect. He’s unsure himself, so don’t hold too much to it yet.”

“Believe me, I won’t.” Dalton turned and walked back to the main entrance hall, and started up the stairs. “I just want to fucking sleep…”

Southwestern Kanto was caught in a fog; streetlights cast a dull gray atmosphere throughout Viridian City. Their light caught by the thick water vapor cascaded outward and down around the poles they were perched on. The late night did little to bring out any crowd in this city. The only sound that carried through the dark streets was a single pair of footsteps as they headed toward the suburban area of city.

A man walked alone down the eerily lit sidewalk. He moved at a slow, deliberate pace though he was more than on guard. Throughout his life, he had learned to strain his senses to try and find anything that might be coming towards him. His instincts weighed down on him about the fog, and
tried to put the feeling out of his head that he was being followed. He looked over his shoulder, looking through some of the long, bright red hair that sometimes fell across his face.

“Probably nothing.” The words came from his mouth with a hint of exasperation. Silver walked a few more paces before feeling the sensation again. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a Poké Ball. The flash of light would be a bit harsh in the darkness, so Silver waited until he was under the beam from one of the streetlights. Silver’s Pokémon materialized in front of him, already aware about his surroundings, claws extended and eyes alert.

“Jallen,” Silver said. His Weavile looked up at him, awaiting an order of attack. “It’s okay. I’m just feeling a bit… off. We’re almost home, but do you mind walking with me? Can’t shake this… feeling.”

The Sharp Claw Pokémon nodded silently and the two began walking down the road again.

Silver’s neck hurt from the plane ride—which had been delayed, resulting in such a late arrival—and he wanted some sleep. He had walked the streets of Viridian City in the dark plenty of times, usually thankful for the lack of people to annoy him, but tonight carried an unsettling air. His Weavile walked a few paces behind him, sharing his trainer’s attitude about the silence of the night.

They neared Silver’s small home near the edge of the city within minutes. The prospect of returning brought back memories of leaving. “I can’t believe it was all for nothing,” said Silver.

His Pokémon asked what he meant with a questioning growl.

“The lead, I mean.” Silver had just returned from following a tip that Lance had given him on the whereabouts of a very important person. Silver had rushed to the Sinnoh region, only to find the tip to be for naught. “The trail was months cold. Shouldn’t Lance have known? Why would he even send me there in person? Whatever he was doing in Sinnoh, it was over a long time—”

Silver stopped in his tracks. It was difficult to see in the dim light—even his Weavile was a bit confused at the sudden halt—but Silver could definitely see it; the front door to his home was slightly ajar. Someone had been there, and it was entirely likely that someone was waiting for him. Catching his trainer’s subtle motions, Jallen went on around the back of the house. Silver readied his Ursaring’s Poké Ball, and kicked open his front door.

Silver released his Ursaring and the two quickly made their way through the front room. Jallen used the commotion to enter the house through a back window, aiming to flank any intruder from behind. Silver dashed through his dark house, turning on the lights as he entered. His Ursaring stayed right behind him, caring little to avoid knocking anything over. The large Hibernator Pokémon stayed to guard the main room while his trainer ran from room to room, looking for anything out of place. As Silver was going up the stairs, Jallen met him halfway.

“Anything?” Silver asked.

Jallen nodded, and held out an envelope. He pointed up the stairs toward Silver’s room. Silver took the envelope, but Jallen turned it around in his hands, pointing at a small, green pin that pierced the middle. It was in the shape of a small tree; an Earth Badge.

Silver looked at the envelope for a moment, confused why a Gym Badge would be pinned to a blank envelope. Then, his mind started piecing things together. My house was broken into, and this was found in my room…? An Earth Badge, the badge of… his gym! He threw the envelope down on ran back outside, trying to see anything hidden in the dark.
“Where are you!?” he yelled. “Come on! Show yourself! Where are you, dammit!? You’re here! I know you are!! Come on!"

He stood panting for a few moments, his eyes and ears failing to notice anything out of the ordinary around him. Calming down, he pushed his hair out of his face and walked back inside. His Ursaring was waiting by the door, and gave a questioning growl as he passed over the threshold.

“We’re fine, don’t worry.” He closed the door behind him, slightly wincing at the dent in the wall the door knob made when he kicked it in. He took off his black jacket and threw it on the couch as he passed it, “Jallen, let’s have a look at what he sent us.”

Silver stood over the table in his kitchen, flanked by his two Pokémon. His Weavile was filling in Ursaring on the origin of the envelope in question. What could he want? Why did he show himself now? The timing of it all… Seeing no more reason to stall, he tore open the envelope as he walked back to the living room. The badge fell to the table with a klink and he withdrew the note inside. He set the note down on the table and read it:

[Silver,

I see you’ve been busy trying to find me. How about I make it easier for you?

As odd as this sounds coming from me, we need to talk. Alone. Come armed if you want, if only to make it fair.

I have a hideout in the Tohjo Falls area. I don’t doubt you’ll be able to find me.]

Just seeing his handwriting was enough to rekindle his rage. “Talk?” Silver said aloud. “Talk?! After all these years of nothing, what could he possibly have to say to me?! After all these years of hunting him down, all those bogus leads and almost catching up to him, he finds me?! Dammit!” he slammed his fist into the table. He stared down at the handwritten note in anger, feeling the tingle of pain start to plague his knuckles. His Weavile jumped onto the table and shook his shoulder. Silver could see the concern on his friend’s face.

“Yeah… I think I’ll be fine…” he let his muscles relax, and slumped to the floor. “The irony… spend all that time looking for him, only to have him invite you over for lunch.” He laughed.

His Pokémon looked down from the table and asked him what Silver intended to do.

“Oh, we’re going alright. My father’s never been one to sound desperate, but that note,” he stood back up, “I think he’s looking for something more than just seeing how much his son has grown up.”

His Ursaring growled apprehensively at the idea.

“Don’t worry, we’re not going to be walking blindly into a trap. We’ll take it easy.” Silver picked up the Earth Badge from the table, finally noticing that its paint had started fading away, the metal underneath was rusted and worn. Just like him, maybe. But still… He has a lot to answer for.

—————

To be continued…

—————
Hello there.

What I’m about to show you is an evening news broadcast that aired live throughout the Unova region, and then replayed around the world for weeks to come. The date of the event is June 18, 1993. And this is the story of how the Lava Walker got his name.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Continuing from earlier this evening, we’re covering live the unexpected and seemingly natural volcanic eruption of Mount Ashkenaz, the site of Unova’s new Victory Road. Earlier today, construction workers were reporting an alarmingly substantial increase in heat as they were excavating a new section of tunnels. Soon after, the workers were seen fleeing the network of paths inside the mountain. Flows of lava began pouring through the newly carved tunnels, destroying much of the heavy drilling and mining equipment, as well as costing a few workers their lives. Other casualties are reported to have mild to severe burns, but are expected to make a full recovery.

“Mount Ashkenaz was first made a Unova National Landmark back in 1934, when the Unova Pokémon League moved its headquarters from Undella Town to its peak. It showed no signs of having any volcanic activity—past or present—until early this morning, leaving many official geologists utterly stunned when they were asked for their opinion. Driftveil City’s own Clayton ‘Clay’ Collier had this to say:

The feed cut to a still shot of the Driftveil City Gym Leader, transcribed words filled the screen as an audio clip played. It was a phone conversation: “It’s just a mountain, I tell ya. There ain’t no way that a mound of dirt can just turn volcano like that without a single hint, or without a little seismic tremor. Nothing, then all this. It don’t make a lick of sense.”

The news reporter resumed speaking, “Just after the break, we received confirmation that both the regional Champion and the Elite Four are safe and accounted for, and the League headquarters has been evacuated. As of now, we can confirm that members Grimsley and Shauntal are working with authorities in Opelucid City to prepare evacuation contingencies there as well. While the lava flows are still miles away from the city itself, projected spread of the lava indicates that Opelucid may be in danger if the flows aren’t stopped.

“We’re receiving word now that our eye-in-the-sky reporter, Mark Stevens, is now on site just above Route 10. Mark, what can you tell us that we don’t already know?”

The video split, the second half of the screen now showing a man wearing large headphones sitting in a helicopter. He held a microphone close to his face, the background noise from the blades of the helicopter making it slightly difficult to make out what he was saying.

“John, what we’re seeing is nothing like what we would call a normal phenomenon,” he yelled into
“As you can see, there hasn’t been a telltale eruption. There isn’t any large plume of ash, or any earthquakes to cause rockslides. The newly dug tunnels, specifically the ones close to the top of Mount Ashkenaz, are openly spewing hot lava. The molten rock is then slowly cascading down the side of the mountain, clearing away trees and any man-made obstacle in its path.”

“Has anyone been able to pin down a cause for this strange volcanic activity?”

“Before we took off,” Mark said, “I had the chance to talk with one of the workers digging out one of the deeper tunnels. He told me they heard their machinery hit something much harder than the surrounding rock. By the time they could reposition their equipment, the intense heat began radiating out of that spot. The worker reported hearing what sounded like a roar just as the lava began filling the tunnels.”

“You mean to suggest this is the result of some creature? A Pokémon?”

Mark nodded as the camera panned back to him, “That’s what many who were in the tunnels are suggesting. They—”

**BOOM**

The live video feed showed the helicopter make a sudden lurch to the side and then cut to static. Audio was still working, but it was only the incoherent yells of the passengers, as well as a frightening roar. The news reporter in the studio sat his set desk in shock for a few moments before regaining his composure.

“Mark? Are you still with us?”

The video feed then reestablished. It showed what looked like the interior of the helicopter, at a ninety degree tilt. The camera man seemed to have lost his grip of the camera.

“…still here John,” came a voice as the live feed showed the camera being picked up, centering on the helicopter reporter. He immediately motioned to film out the aircraft’s door. Rocks and lava were now fountaining out of the mountainside, raining down onto the ground below.

“As you can see, thanks to our skillful pilot, we narrowly escaped the sudden blast of Ashkenaz’s very late eruption. Lava is now flowing much more quickly, as well as now coming out of tunnels farther down the— Wait a moment…”

“What is it, Mark?”

“There,” the camera began to zoom in close to the lava spout, “can you see that? Something’s moving, coming out of the— what in the world?”

The upward spray of lava began do die down as the creature broke the surface. Surrounded by the lava flowing down around it, the wide-mouthed creature emerged from the mountain. Its body glowed with a fierce heat. Its head shined bright silver, metallic and hard, while some of its body looked indistinguishable from the molten rock around it.

“That’s a… That’s a Pokémon?”

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” John said, “it does appear that a Pokémon has emerged from the lava flow on top of Mount Ashkenaz. We can only assume that it is responsible for this unexpected volcanic event.”
“John, we just heard from our pilot; he thinks that’s a Heatran. A Legendary Pokémon said to be born from volcanoes.”

“Why is it here, do you think?”

“We can’t be sure now, but if I had to guess, the workers must have found it sleeping, dormant, and disturbed it with their mining equipment.”

The video showed the Heatran walking around the slag-ridden summit of the mountain. Every so often it would rear back, open is huge mouth, and spew a fresh spray of lava into the sky.

“Hold on a minute,” Mark said. The camera then panned to the edge of the lava flow at the peak of the mountain. The road that leads to the Pokémon league headquarters was largely unaffected, apart from being covered in a minor amount of lava, the majority of which was flowing down the mountain. Standing on the road was a man, just at the edge of the molten rock.

“I believe that’s the newly appointed Elite Four member, Dalton Drake,” Mark said. “He’s— Oh my god!”

The impossibility of it stunned everyone watching, at home, in the news studio, in the helicopter, and for weeks and months to come. The man with orange hair began to step out onto the lava. The news reporter had to struggle not to look horrified as the scene unfolded, but then his face soon shifted into wonder.

Dalton did not burst into flames or hideously melt into the liquid rock. He stood on top of it.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “It appears Elite Four Dalton is walking on the lava.”

Adding to the spectacle, Dalton was not standing on any of the molten lava, rather the liquid rock had cooled around his feet. Shiny black stone radiated three feet around him. He began his pace forward, the lava in front of him cooling well before he ever came in contact with it. Behind him, his path of solid rock was melting again. He was surrounded on all sides by searing hot lava. And he was heading straight for its very enraged source.

“He’s—,” Mark’s voice came again, “Dalton’s actually walking up to the Pokémon. Wait, there’s Champion Alder!”

Being carried by his trademark Volcarona, Alder soon caught up with the Elite Four member, trying to stay clear away from the intense heat of the lava below. Their voices were lost due to the distance, but it was clear Alder gesturing for his subordinate to retreat. Dalton continued walking even as the Champion pleaded for his return. The Legendary Pokémon spotted the flying target and sent a stream of flames toward it. Alder’s Volcarona carried him to safety just as Dalton reached where Heatran stood.

The Lava Dome Pokémon finally took notice of the human standing on his handiwork and looked down at it.

“The Pokémon—Heatran, has stopped its rampage. It seems Elite Four member Dalton is trying to reason with it,” Mark said. “He’s holding something in his hand, something round.”

“Is he planning on catching it in a Poké Ball?”

“No, it’s too large for that. It looks like a stone, or a rock. A bright orange rock. The Heatran seems interested in it.”
The live feed zoomed in as much as it would go, focusing on the scene unfolding in the blazing heat. Dalton held out the large round stone in both hands, offering it to the creature. If he was afraid of what he was doing, the tiny image of Dalton didn’t show it. He just stood on his impossible black disk of rock, staring into the eyes of a creature that made its home in temperatures that would fry any human in an instant.

The two reporters were silent during this exchange, waiting on held breaths to witness the result of the confrontation. Finally, the standoff came to an abrupt end. The Heatran snatched up the offered stone in its mouth and swallowed it. A few moments passed, then the lava all around atop Mount Ashkenaz began to darken and cool. Dalton Drake then calmly walked up to the hulking Legendary Pokémon, reached up, and placed his hand on its silvery forehead. The Pokémon seemed to return the gesture by lowering its head closer to Dalton’s.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the news reporter finally spoke again, “I believe we just witnessed the taming of a Legendary Pokémon.”

People sitting at home all over the region watched as their newest Elite Four member became their strongest. The addition of a Pokémon considered Legendary makes for a fierce opponent. And a dangerous enemy, as I would find out eventually. He became known as Dalton Drake, the Lava Walker. He owes his reputation and his command over flame and heat to his oldest friend.

But that’s another story entirely.
Allan went from room to room, briskly walking through the house as he checked for various things: whether any lights were left on, appliances or electronics plugged into the wall, a mess he overlooked while cleaning. Always behind him followed a small, silvery, four-legged fox-like mammal that kept him company. Her presence in his mind served as a constant reminder of how he saw the world around him. Allan passed by the front door, now finished with his third sweep of the house, and glanced at his prepared belongings and went through his mental list of them, trying and hoping to remember a hastily forgotten article or necessity.

‘Allan, you’re done now. Let’s get going,’ Umari said, her voice was weighted with concern for her friend.

“I’m just being thorough,” he said quickly.

In reality, he was just trying to find one last excuse to delay what he had been anticipating for weeks. Allan had originally planned to depart from home nine days from now, but days of boredom caused him to accelerate his preparations. Now that the day was upon him, he found himself second-guessing all of his decisions and left him feeling overwhelmed with doubts. Among these new concerns was the fact that he was leaving his house unoccupied for an unknown length of time. His parents had called him while in the Unova region, as well as instructed him well beforehand on what to do, but his constant uncertainty kept driving him back to his routine checks around the house.

As Allan went into the kitchen on the start of his fourth pass, he felt another mind contact his.

‘Thorough doesn’t even do it justice, Master. You’re nervous.’

This second voice held a masculine tone to it, but a free spirited quality that came with the inspiration of flight. Xutan fluttered down on small wings from atop the refrigerator, landing on the kitchen counter. As the small Natu settled and folded his wings, Umari jumped up to join him.

‘Yeah, Allan,’ his shiny Eevee said. ‘Everything’s fine here. The house isn’t going anywhere.’

‘There comes a time when each hatchling must spread his wings and take flight. Your time in the tree of security is done, and dwelling here will do us no benefit.’

Allan sighed, closing the cabinet he knew contained no perishable food to go to waste. He slumped into the tall stool next to the counter, ruffling the short feathers on top of Xutan’s head. “You’ve gotta stop it with the bird analogies, Xutan. But thanks.”

‘I helped too!’ Umari protested.

“Yeah, but Xutan’s known me for a lot longer, Umari. He’s always had a way of reading me like a book.”

‘Cause he’s Psychic. I’d know you too if I was,’ she said.

“Well yes, he’s a natural Psychic type, but he’s gotten to know me better over the years, and can easily recognize what my thoughts are doing. You’ll get there, Umari,” Allan said, scratching his silvery friend behind her ears. “You’re like me right now. Still learning how to manipulate your mind. Soon you’ll be able to control it to do amazing things.”
Allan leaned back, thinking. He had befriended and acquired his first Pokémon, Xutan, ten years ago. It had taken about a year before Xutan’s thoughts made their way to Allan’s mind, but even then, they were just vague sensations or emotions. After another three years, they began to be able to converse with thoughts. Soon after, Allan discovered he had developed his own range of psychic abilities. It shocked no one that Allan decided to specialize in Psychic types when he became a trainer.

Three years ago, Allan’s parents had given him Umari as a birthday gift; with him instantly taking to acclimating her to the touch of his mind. Initially the situation mirrored how Xutan had first tried to contact Allan’s thoughts, but with the Natu’s patient assistance, they had established a link fairly quickly. Allan’s capabilities began to strengthen, and in time Xutan was no longer required for Allan to talk to Umari, and surprisingly, for Umari to touch Allan’s mind. For a while she could only contact his mind, or Xutan’s, but she managed to, within a few days, manage communication with Allan’s newest Pokémon, Duncan.

Duncan had been a present from his parents when they were at a similar conference in Kanto, a prize from the Safari Zone in Fuchsia City. Despite being made up of a multitude of minds—which perhaps even helped in some ways—Umari quickly grasped how to contact the Exeggcute’s singular minds, as well as address him as a whole. Her progress in such a short amount of time is largely unprecedented in non-Psychic types, which on the whole, pleased Allan a great deal. Even if he never made it to a place of prominence in the world, he already saw himself as an accomplished Psychic Trainer.

“If you evolved—regardless of type—it’d help you out, since your brain and mind would mature and strengthen just as your body would. If you became an Espeon though, it’d likely all come naturally to you after that. But really Umari,” Allan said, “you’re progressing surprisingly fast. Faster than I did. You even got the hang of sorting through the blur of minds that is our friend Duncan.”

‘I had you guys helping me, though.’

“I’m serious,” Allan said, standing. “You’re already getting used to contacting other humans. It took me more than two years to learn that trick, and sometimes I still get the wrong person.”

Umari hopped down to the floor, following Allan. Xutan flew and landed on Allan’s head as the human went through the doorway to the main hallway. The three made their way through the house one final time before Allan stood staring at the pile of travel gear propped against the front door. The world around him began to dull and deafen until the pounding of the blood running though his head was all he could hear. It muffled the sounds coming from outside his house, and focusing on it blurred his vision.

‘Allan? Are you alright?’

Blinking twice, Allan focused on the interruption that was Umari’s voice. He rubbed his eyes with a hand and said, “Yeah, I’m fine… Alright, if I stall any more, we’ll never leave.”

After one last check to see Duncan’s Safari Ball was safely stowed away—Exeggcute weren’t the most travel-friendly Pokémon to have on the road—Allan grabbed his backpack, checked to see if his camping gear was secured to it and put it on. Stepping out into the bright morning sun stung his eyes, but they soon adapted. He did an about-face and locked his front door. He placed a hand on the wooden door and let his head fall forward onto it.

“I’ll be back. It won’t be too long. And I’ll be in touch with mom and dad… It’ll be fine… I can do
this... I’ll come back...” he muttered a few more self-assuring phrases before he felt his Pokémon’s presences in his head, giving their sentiments. Nodding, he turned back around and took a deep breath, “Alright.”

After the first hesitant step, Allan began to move at a steady pace away from his home and walked towards the more modern part of the city. Umari kept pace with him while dodging the many towering sets of legs around her while Xutan kept a watch over the world from Allan’s head. A few choice people stopped to greet Allan and wish him luck; they weren’t particularly close to him or his family, but “the psychic boy with the specially colored Eevee” became his title since Umari had come into his life. A few who knew him well joked saying he was already late, playing on the fact that he had waited so long to start his trainer career.

Allan’s destination was the Poké Mart, to pick up a newer model PokéGear for navigational purposes. His model was woefully out of date, lacking the common GPS feature of most current devices. He would have done so sooner, but a newer model was set to be released just a few days before he had planned to, so he put it off until he was headed out of town.

The farther he walked into the city, the newer the buildings became, but they retained the classic theme of days long past. Ornate wooden roofs crowned almost uncharacteristically modern architecture, but flowed together in a way Allan couldn’t put a finger on. He preferred the genuine, old parts of the city. They were quiet and peaceful, well out of the way form the typical hustle of a functioning town.

Whenever he did venture out into public, he practiced a technique to strengthen his mental abilities. Allan would often shift his focus from mind to mind, scanning tiny bits of information from them, scanning his surroundings and familiarizing himself with various emotions, sensations, intentions, and the feeling of minds he could recognize. To test himself, he would sometimes pick a mind far away, and take a small sample from their current thought process, and match that to when he was closer to the person. Slowly but surely, his mental abilities were growing and becoming easier to call upon. A trait he hoped would come in handy in training, and even battling with his Pokémon.

Just then, his mental scanning of the city streets picked up a heightened sense of fear and desperation. Allan stopped and focused on the source of the sensation. Once again the world seemed to dull around him, but this time he focused on the pinpricks of activity in the distance. About one hundred feet to his right, he could sense two minds with malicious intent, as well as two frightened and worried sets of thoughts.

‘Why’d we stop?’ Umari asked.

“Come with me, Umari,” he said, starting to run. “I’m getting a bad feeling.”

Despite questioning the suddenness of her trainer’s worry, Umari made sure to keep up with him as he turned down an alleyway. She trusted him, she always did. She knew that he wasn’t stalling like before, something else brought on this distraction. ‘What’s up, Xutan?’ she asked.

‘I am not completely certain, Umari,’ the psychic bird responded. ‘But I feel something as well. Let’s trust our Master’s judgment from here on involving this situation.’

One of the frightened minds Allan felt then slipped into unconsciousness. Umari noticed Allan curse under his breath and break into a sprint down the deserted path, sliding once he came to another turn and sprinted up another back road. Umari caught up right as Allan came to a halt in front of a small group of humans and Pokémon.

Two men stood with their back to her group, Umari could see two Pokémon by their side; a Machop
and a Tyrogue. The four were surrounding a girl with long blond hair who was backed into a corner of a wall and a dumpster. She was cradling the pink and cream body of a Pokémon that Umari didn’t recognize, it leaned limply into the girl’s chest. The girl had tears streaming down her face, cringing the more the brutes closed in on her.

“Hey!”

The boom of Allan’s voice caused the five of them to recoil slightly; even Umari flinched at the ferocity of it. The girl’s eyes widened at the sight of his arrival, but she didn’t move. The two men turned to see who it was who had intruded on them. They wore plain clothes, gray hooded sweatshirts and torn jeans, each with their hoods over their heads.

“The fuck you want, kid?” one of the men asked.

Allan cooled his initial enraged attitude and eased his stance a bit. These guys won’t be much of a problem… He took a step forward, “Come on now guys, I think it’s obvious the nice lady there doesn’t want to enjoy your company anymore. Why don’t you call it a day, huh? You two look… no, I don’t think ‘sensible’ is the right word, but I think you see my point.”

“Naw, naw bro, you see? This little girl here lost a Pokémon battle with us, you see?” the second man said. In an attempt to seem friendly, he lowered his hood, revealing a head of wiry black hair and a smile of yellow teeth. The man wrung his boney hands together as he talked. “But you see, she didn’t pay up our prize money when we won.”

“A two on one battle? Hardly what I’d call a fair fight,” Allan said.

“Ah, but she agreed to it, bro.”

“Th-That’s not true! They attacked me!” The girl finally said. “I got lost walking around, and—”

“Shut up, bitch!” the hooded man yelled, his voice deep and baritone. The man’s Tyrogue lunged and dented the metal of the dumpster next to her head with a quick Mach Punch.

“Eyy, don’ I know you, bro?” the wiry haired man looked down to Allan’s right and noticed his silver-furred companion. “Oi, look who it is! Allan ‘I’ve got the shiny Eevee so I’ll flaunt it around town’ Relmstead.” The man’s false face of kindness contorted into a sneer. “Are mommy and daddy out of town again so you can leave the house again?”

The two men laughed but Allan just laughed along with them. “Now, now guys, no need to be hostile. I’m just here to pick up my cousin. She was on her way to meet me, but didn’t show up on time. Good thing I found her.”

“Bullshit,” the man with the hood said. “You’re just trying to save the poor ‘damsel in distress’ so you’ll look good. Trying to make yourself important and shit. If she’s your cousin, what’s her name?”

“Alice,” Allan called, watching the girl’s expression light up, “You should’ve called me once you got lost. How’s Aunt Sarah, by the way? We haven’t seen each other since the reunion in Fortree.”

“I… she’s fine.” the girl tried her best to hide her surprise. “Th—Thanks for coming to find me, A—llan. Sorry I’m late.”

“Not your fault, clearly,” he said, gesturing to the two dumbfounded assailants.

“Well shit…” the deep voiced man said. “Same hair, same eyes, same obnoxious attitude as her too,
“Like that shit matters. Listen here, pretty boy,” the black haired man edged closer, Machop at his side, “Here’s what’s going down. You see you’re going to turn right around and leave us the hell alone. But, we’ll let you go with your pretty little cousin here, if you hand over all your cash, eh? Bank card too, whaddya say?”

Allan shrugged and tossed his gear against the wall to his right. “No, that’s not how I see things working out. You two are going to either let Alice and I leave, or you’re going to spend the next few hours unconscious while Alice and I walk away.”

The large man with the deep voice laughed, his teeth a contrast to his dark skin, “Boy, you ain’t got no more muscle on you than my little finger. You’d be killin’ yourself before you end up hurtin’ us.”

‘Xutan, you and Umari take out their Pokémon. Attack once I make my move.’ Allan said with his mind.

“Bro, if you don’t get going, we’re going to have to up the price o’ our little agreement to include your little friend there,” the thug with the black hair pointed to Umari, who lowered her stance and growled back at the man. “Yes, she’s a pretty little gem, isn’t she Relmstead? You don’t want to lose her, do you?”

“No, I don’t.” Allan said simply. “Good thing you two can’t take her when you’re kissing pavement.”

“You serious, boy?” the two men began to edge closer to him. The deep voiced man shook off his hood and cracked his knuckles. “Tyrogue, make sure our pretty little lady don’t run off on us. Let’s get this punkass kid out of our hair already.”

As the two men started to advance on Allan, he made a short backward dash as Xutan flew down from his head and landed on Umari. Two small flashes of light caused the two to stop for a moment. The first was in front of them, then a fraction of an instant later, behind them. Xutan and Umari now took up a defensive position between Alice and the thug’s Pokémon.

“What the—?”

“I thought it’d be fair, you know. We’ll have our Pokémon battle while you two get what’s coming to you,” Allan said, popping his shoulders and neck with a stretch. ‘Xutan, keep what I’m about to do a secret from Umari. I don’t want her learning my bad habits.’

‘Understood.’

“You punk!”

The two men converged on him at once, Allan shifting into a defensive stance. The smaller of the two revealed a knife but the other merely came at him with fists covered in scars gained from prior confrontations. The large man swung his fist toward Allan, aiming for his face, but Allan took a half step back, letting the swing miss his head. Using little effort, Allan shoved the man in the back, sending him crashing into a pile of garbage bags. Immediately, Allan dropped on his hands and knees to avoid the blade of the thin man’s knife. Pushing up with his legs, Allan crashed into his attacker’s chest, knocking him backwards. The knife clattered onto the concrete below as the small man lost his grip of the handle. Allan quickly grabbed it and glanced over to his two Pokémon.

Umari didn’t have much trouble dodging the Machop’s slow blows, but they hit her especially hard. Twice now she had been caught off guard by a Low Sweep, tripping up her speedy movements. Her
Bite attacks did little damage against the taut, muscly skin of her opponent, leaving her to rely on her other physical moves and raw speed. After she dodged another blow however, she remembered a tactic that Xutan had showed her. Using her back paws, she kicked a small amount of dirt into the eyes of the Machop, it wailing in pain and frustration as the dust stung its eyes.

Xutan’s opponent was on its last legs, already exhausted from attacking and being hit by the bird’s Flying and Psychic type techniques. Since the start of the fight, Tyrogue was unsure on how to deal with such a small opponent. He constantly switched between various fighting tactics, finding none that could to hardly much damage against the Natu. Punches could be dodged, kicks rarely worked, and he was slower than the Tiny Bird Pokémon. An idea came to him just then, and after faking another lunge at his opponent, the Tyrogue changed targets and focused on the silver Eevee. With her out of the way, Machop could join and take out the bird with ease. Tyrogue never reached his friend’s scuffle, however. A flash of light in front of him was the last thing he saw before losing consciousness. Xutan teleported in front of the sprinting Tyrogue just after building up an amount of Psychic energy into his forehead and sent the untrained Scuffle Pokémon skidding across the alley with a Zen Headbutt. Gathering his wits, Xutan looked and saw Umari just on the verge of victory in her battle.

After an almost laughably long time, the two attackers recovered from their initial assault. Allan had closed the collapsible knife and tossed it into an open dumpster behind them, grinning as the skinny man almost made a leap to grab it before the big man grabbed him by his sweatshirt, pulling him back. The two began swinging haphazardly at Allan now, not even noticing that their Pokémon had long since been defeated.

Since the beginning of the fight, Allan had ignored his own personal code of honor when it came to the use of his psychic powers. He held constant contact with the two attackers’ minds and read their every move. Initially he was worried about the prospect of being outnumbered, but the longer the fight dragged on, the easier it became to manage. They soon began taking turns rather than attacking at once, allowing for a few redirected punches to hit an unintended target. Even easier to dodge a blow then land a few of his own.

The smaller man came lunging at Allan with a poorly thrown punch, which Allan caught. Tightening his grip in his hand, Allan twisted his arm around and pinned it behind him. Allan grabbed the man’s free arm and turned him around as a shield just in time for the large man to land a punch to his gut. Allan kicked the unconscious body of the thin man at his accomplice, causing him to stumble backwards with the dead weight of the thin man in his arms. Using the confusion, Allan sprinted behind him and swept his legs out from under him. The large man crumpled to the ground with the added weight of his friend, hitting the ground hard. By the time Allan had stood up, he was already out.

“So, what did we learn?” Allan said, panting. “Don’t pick on girls… in the hometown of the world’s next Psychic Master.”

As he sat in the lobby of Ecruteak’s Pokémon Center, Allan leaned back against his seat, two seats away from the girl he had saved just an hour ago. The short skirmish left him a little sore in his shoulders and his fists. The commotion from their back alley battle eventually drew a crowd, and in turn, the local law enforcement. With Alice’s corroboration, Allan was cleared of any charges he would’ve faced, and the men and their Pokémon were taken away. Alice and Allan were free to go about their business after a few more minutes of questioning. Alice’s Pokémon—an Audino—was badly hurt from having to fend off the two Fighting types the men had, and was currently being treated by the staff at the Center. Allan’s Pokémon were merely resting inside their Poké Balls for the
time being, already having been treated for their minor wounds and exhaustion.

After almost twenty minutes of silence, Alice finally spoke up. “So, um... how did you...?”

Allan cocked his head at her, “How did I what?”

“You just came out of nowhere and saved me. You knew my name, and you... knew me.” Alice sheepishly looked down. “You're not really my cousin, are you?”

“Oh, that. I'm sorry but, no I'm not.”

“Then how—?”

“I couldn’t think of any other way, so I tried to get those goons to just leave you alone if they knew you were my family,” Allan said.

“But what did you do? I knew I never met you before, so how’d you know my name and who I was?”

“I...” Allan thought for a moment on how to explain himself. “Like I said, I’m sorry, but...” He focused on her mind, ‘I did this.’

Alice immediately bolted to her feet in shock, holding her hands to her head. “You... y—you just... talked in my head!”

“I’m a psychic, Alice. I can read and communicate with other minds around me, more or less. I found you because I sensed your heightened level of fear and I... took enough basic information from your memories to make it seem like I knew you well enough.” He stood up and placed a hand on her shoulder. Alice followed his movements carefully with frightened eyes.

“I only did it to try and help you,” he said. “I’m sorry, I don’t normally abuse my powers like that, and I never enter another’s mind like that without their permission.”

Alice shook his hand off her, “What else did you take from my head? Tell me!”

“Nothing, I swear. I didn’t ‘take’ anything either, I just looked for a few simple things and picked up what first came to me; your hometown, mother’s name, your name, and how you came to be in that alley. I promise, I know what it means to have your mind open to another. That lost sense of security? I like personal space too. I’ve had to practice and train for years to make sure that when I touch other minds, they don’t see into mine. If you’ve got secrets, they’re safe. I didn’t go looking.”

“How do I know you aren’t lying?”

Allan sighed, “Why would I? I threw myself into danger to save you not two hours ago. If I didn’t do what I did there’s no telling where you’d be. I’m telling you the truth, Alice. I know what I did was shitty, but I only did it to help.”

Alice retreated a few steps but eased her stance, now aware of the stares from the people in the Pokémon Center now aimed at the two of them. She stood quietly for a moment, and then said, “You did help. I’m glad you did. Thank you, Allan. But... is there any way you could prove that you’re telling me the truth?”

Allan sat back down, and offered her the seat next to him. She sat down beside him this time.

“I can, but it would involve me letting you into my mind and let you ‘see’ what I know.”
“Is that hard?” she asked.

“Only on your end, really. I don’t know if you really have the…” Allan chose his words carefully, “‘ability’ necessary for reading through someone’s memories.”

“You could teach me, right?”

“Yes,” Allan said, “but it would take a lot of time. A simple solution would be for me to let you in and show you all that I’ve learned myself. I could guide you through what I saw.”

Alice turned in her seat to face him directly. “Let’s do that, then.”

“Well, do you trust me enough to not hide anything? That’s the whole reason we’re doing this, so you’ll believe me.”

“I do. I think you’ll be honest because of two reasons,” she said. “One: you mentioned your work to make sure nobody gets in your head, so I know on some level that bothers you. The fact that you’re offering to let me in, even though you don’t know me or my reasoning, shows that you at least trust me. I think I should return that trust in you.

“And two: your method is easily one that can be falsified, and you admit that, and are hesitant because I have to put my faith in you. This tells me that you’re planning on telling me everything I want to know, because you want to make sure I believe you.”

“You’re not a psychologist, are you?” Allan said, surprised by her sudden shift in tone and confidence.

“I know how people think. I’m a people person,” she smiled. “Now, let’s do this, alright?”

“Alright,” he said. Allan brought himself to face her on the bench and closed his eyes.

‘Can you hear me, Alice? Respond by sort of ‘thinking’ in the sound of my voice.’

The response came quicker than he was expecting, ‘Like this?’

‘Exactly like that. Keep contact with my mind. Now here, this is all that I saw…’

A little girl walks the streets of a town with such high trees, they obscure the sky. A Swellow flies toward her from a distance with a woman on its back. She has flowing lavender hair that ripples in the wind. She introduces herself as Winona … Now a woman comes running toward the little girl, crying but happy beyond measure. She wraps the girl in her arms and thanks the Alpha her little Alice is safe and sound. She gives her thanks to Winona, but she assures Sarah it was her duty, and pleasure… The little girl is now a young woman. She walks the streets of a town she is unfamiliar with. She turns to notice a strange man following her, and another blocks here path of escape.

“There,” Allan said, breaking their connection. “That’s everything.”

A few strands of golden blond hair had fallen in front of Alice’s face. She lingered in a sort of trance-like state for a few seconds. She blinked and brushed her hair out of her face, “Okay… Wow. Thank you.” She slumped backwards onto the bench, “Reliving memories like that is… different.”

“If you don’t mind, could you tell me what that was?” asked Allan.

“It’s…” she started, drifting off into the memory for a moment. She sat up on the bench and brought her knees up to her chest. “It’s a memory of when I was back living in Hoenn—we moved to Violet
about three years ago—and I got lost. I wandered the city for hours, and I was afraid. Winona found me and brought me back home… my mom was so worried… I thought I had forgotten all about it.”

“I’m sorry,” Allan said. “Those were just the quickest memories I could find.”

“If I had forgotten them, how did you find them so quickly?”

“I think because you were so afraid and alone in that alley, it triggered that memory in your subconscious, causing a similar reaction. Same thing, different place, more or less.”

“Yeah…” she said. “I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t even call on my other Pokémon when my Audino was hurt.”

“You have others?” Allan asked.

She nodded. She produced two more Poké Balls from inside her bag. She pointed to one, “This one’s Feraligatr—he’s scary—and this is Tropius—who doesn’t really listen to me. They would’ve helped out a lot, but I just… froze.”

After a few moments of silence between them, Allan brought out Umari’s and Xutan’s Poké Balls. He released them in front of her, startling her with the bright flashes of light. “These two you’ve met already, but my Eevee’s name is Umari and my Natu is Xutan. He was my first Pokémon. I’ve also got an Exeggcute, Duncan.”

Alice’s expression brightened as Allan’s Pokémon came up to her. Umari climbed into the seat next to her, and she allowed the Eevee to climb into her lap. Xutan flew to her shoulder. “They’re very friendly,” she said. “And she’s just so cute, isn’t she?”

‘I like you.’ Umari said as she nuzzled Alice’s hand.

“Sh— She can talk into my head too?” Alice brought her hands up for a moment in surprise, shooting a worried look at Allan.

“Yes,” Allan said, “but don’t worry, my Pokémon won’t go into your head either. That’s just telepathy; pure communication.”

“H—How? She’s just an Eevee.”

‘And our master is merely human’, Xutan said. ‘I helped him acquire his powers as he’s helped Umari develop hers. It’s a fairly simple process once you break it down.’

‘For you, maybe,’ Umari said.

Alice looked from Umari to Allan, “You taught an Eevee how to use telepathy? That’s amazing!”

“It was just an idea I had after I had gotten her,” Allan said. “If non-psychic humans can potentially hone their mental abilities, then so could non-psychic Pokémon.”

“Have you decided what you’re going to evolve her into?” Alice asked. “I’ve only ever seen a shiny Glaceon before. They look so pretty.”

“I’m a Psychic type specialist and Umari’s wanting to get better at what she does, so we’re working on her becoming an Espeon.”

Alice nodded, “Makes sense.”
“Hey,” Allan said. “Where’d you get the—?”

“The Feraligatr was a gift from home! Before I left Hoenn!” Alice blurted out.

Allan looked at her confused for a moment, “I… was about to ask about the Audino. That’s a pretty exotic Pokémon.”

“Oh… I’m sorry.”

“Something the matter?” he asked.

“Uh… No, I’m fine. My Audino, uh,” she paused, fidgeting with her hair. “My family are from all over, so one summer we went to Unova. I found her there.”

Allan studied her for a moment. Every time her eyes would meet his, they would dart downward and away.

“Alright then,” Allan said as he stood up. “I really need to get going.”

“Wh—What?”

“I was on my way out of town when I ‘ran into’ you. I’m off schedule as it is anyway.”

“But… uh… where are you headed?”

Allan bent down and picked up his backpack. Umari and Xutan returned to their trainer’s side. “South.”

“Oh… So am I! Can I, uh…” Alice gripped the edge of the bench nervously.

“Something on your mind, Alice?” he asked with a grin.

“Don’t peek!” she said angrily.

“I’m not,” Allan said plainly. “You’re just being obvious. Spit it out.”

“I… um…”

“Should I sit, or stand?” Allan asked.

Alice patted the seat next to her. Allan took his seat once more, with his Pokémon joining him.

“I… I’m heading, uh… south.”

“I gathered that much.” Allan said. “Alright Alice, what’s the matter? I’ll help if I can, but it looks like you’re too worried about telling me anything specific. All of your stories were vague, no real answers.”

“Okay…” Alice took a deep breath and straightened up in her seat. “I can’t really tell you all the details, but I’m… ‘important’. I’m a part of a team currently working in the region. I’m not sure if I can tell you what I’m doing or not, but I was on my way to Mahogany Town when I got word that we—my group—had gotten a new member. So, I turned around and was on my way back through the city when those thugs jumped me.”

“Right, that leaves us up to now.”
“I’m so… I’m scared that something will happen to me now. What if those guys have friends or what
if something else happens to me? I can’t let down… who I work for. It’s important. So, I was
hoping… you’d come with me. At least until I leave this city, or a bit further. I think… I think I can
trust you. You saved me and you were open about how you invaded my mind.”

“I see. Where are you headed?”

“South,” Alice said.

“I get that, but where?” Allan asked, getting impatient.

“I… don’t want to say. I’m sorry, I really am. I just… I really don’t know how much I can tell you.”

Allan sighed, “Alright, I’ll head with you as long as our paths keep us together.”

Alice surprised him with a very affectionate hug to show her appreciation, drawing attention to them
once more. After a less than comfortable exchange, the two fell back to casual conversation while
they waited for Alice’s Pokémon to recover. Allan learned a few key things about her, most notably
that she wasn’t a strong battler, or even wanting to compete for gym badges. Her goal as a trainer
being to see the world and learn more about Pokémon. She elaborated on her story about her
Audino, saying that after seeing it heal her broken leg as a child, she was inspired to become a
doctor.

“I really just want to help people who are in pain,” she said. “Pain is terrible. Emotional or physical.
But it’s universal. Everyone understands pain. Everyone hurts at some point or another. I want to
help relieve that when they do.”

“Noble cause,” Allan remarked.

“What about you?” she asked. “Do you have a dream? Or are you just, you know, a trainer for the
sake of it.”

“It’s a bit lofty, but I want to be the strongest Psychic specialist in the region.”

“Apart from Will, of course,” she said.

Allan looked at her, “I’m sorry?”

“Well,” she said. “You’re not really thinking you can be better than an Elite Four member, are you?”

“That’s the idea. Will’s my hero. He’s such a powerful psychic and a master trainer. He’s the one of
the best. That’s what I want to be, but better; I’ve got to surpass him.”

Alice stared at him in awe, “How? He’s super strong! I mean, you’re good, but he’s…”

Allan looked down at Umari in his lap and the two exchanged a few thoughts. “I’ve trained my skills
with my Pokémon for years. I’ve even been able to teach Umari how to use telepathy, and she’s
shown signs of other abilities as well. If that’s what I can do just by hanging around here, what will
the rest of the world teach me? Teach us? I believe I can surpass Will, but not alone, and not by
sticking in one place. I don’t know how long it’ll take me, but I’ll definitely get there.”

“Wow… you’re pretty cool, you know?”

Allan shot her an amused look. “Cool? That’s the word you chose?”

“What’s wrong with it?”
“Don’t girls normally call guys they’re interested in ‘hot’ or ‘cute’?” he said.

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just… complimenting you on your drive to accomplish your dream…” she slightly shook her head, letting her blond hair cover her reddening face.

“Sure you were.”

“But…” she started, “can I get your PokéGear number? Just… you know, in case we get separated?”

Allan laughed, “At least try and play it off, woman. You’re so obvious it hurts.” Allan continued to laugh as she playfully attacked his shoulder.

As the day wore on and slipped into the afternoon and the midday meal had been consumed, Rikalia found some seclusion in a tree near their camp. The sun shone into her eyes whenever the breeze would move the leaves above her head. She tried to ignore it. The only thing the day had yielded in terms of interesting events so far was a rather relaxing breeze. A late start and a lack of encounters with wild Pokémon left her in an anxious mood. She clawed into the bark next to her idly.

She looked down at the foot of the tree. Karros had lazily walked over and fallen asleep in the shade. He was the reason for her boredom, or at least a part of it. Her trainer had an idea after a revelation had struck him as they were eating lunch: in case they couldn’t cure Karros’ fear of all things avian, then he’d be left with only two Pokémon for his eventual gym battle in Violet City. His idea then was to find a Flying type Pokémon in the surrounding area. This would leave further increase his chances at the gym and their new feathered companion would hopefully help Karros get over his phobia.

Currently, Iruni was off somewhere with the newest member of their little team. The cheerful little plant thing, as Rikalia came to know her, was another cause for her annoyance. Her personality seemed to grate at Rikalia’s nerves whenever the Chikorita was around. Which was often. Iruni was eager to get to know her more and asked for her help in going to and find the supposed fix-all cure for Karros. Rikalia couldn’t help but think she could do a better job at hunting a bird. She’d done it plenty of times before—however successful she was back then, she decided, was irrelevant—so why pick the little green thing?

Rikalia didn’t see the logic in it Iruni’s plan either. Inducing Karros’ fear of birds wouldn’t help it, would it? Even if he became used to this one bird, would that extend to every other kind out there? Going by what she was told, Karros froze at the sight of any bird, regardless of threat or familiarity with it. Exposure sure hasn’t helped Iruni with his sensitivity to blood, she pointed out to herself.

A rustling of leaves to her left caught her attention, followed almost immediately by the frightened squawks of a dozen or so Pidgey as they shot into the skies to flee what appeared to be large, thorny vines. The tendrils were thick and warping, digging through entire trees and grasping branches wherever they pleased. Three of the vines seemed to randomly change course and head for Rikalia’s own tree. She quickly leaped down to the ground before the thorny creepers reached her. On the ground she saw they had pierced and grown into the tree, ripping into the bark and felling limbs.

Karros, startled by the noise, awoke and stood guard at Rikalia’s side. The two exchanged questioning glances and agreed silently that the vines had to be stopped. Karros began to build a mass of fire to attack as Rikalia moved into cover. Just before the attack was loosed, the vines went rigid and lost a fraction of their living green color. Suspicious of the once-angry vegetation, Karros held his mouth full of flames at the ready for a few more moments before calming down. Coming out
of her hiding spot behind her teammate, Rikalia looked up at the gnarled remains of the tree. Cautious, she sent an Icy Wind attack toward the mass of tendrils, coating the tangled confusion in ice.

Nothing came slithering after her.

“What are those things?” she asked. She looked to Karros for an answer, but he just shook his head and kept his eyes on what was just trying to strangle and stab them.

Rikalia looked and followed the path of the vines back into the forest, wondering if she should try and find the source of the attack. The thick vines snaked back into the trees for some distance, tearing into and passing through trunk after trunk in their path. Splinters of bark and tree limbs littered the ground for the next fifty yards. Rikalia climbed a tree on the edge of their camp which had thankfully escaped being entangled and tried to get a better view of the damage. Before she was halfway up the tree, another rustling sound caught her attention. Something else was heading their way.

Thankfully it wasn’t another volley of attacking plant life. Carefully making their way through the path of destruction that the vines had paved through the forest, Iruni was—as quickly as was sensible—returning to the campsite. Atanya, due to her smaller size, made it back before he did, looking rather worried as she looked around at the carnage the strange vines had wrought. When Iruni finally made it through the thick debris his arms were covered in small scratches, and small twigs and leaves clung to his clothes.

“Oh good, you’re both alright…” he said, relieved.

“Barely,” Rikalia asked. She pointed a claw at the mess of vines trailing into the forest. “Do you know what those are? You look like you might’ve fought whatever caused them.”

“Well,” Iruni said, “not ‘fought’, but I sure as hell saw it happen. Atanya did that.”

Rikalia looked over to her Grass type teammate for a moment, struggling to grasp the idea that such a small and seemingly weak Pokémon could have caused that much destruction. “No way. That couldn’t have been her.”

“It was,” Iruni said. He sat down on the ground and began picking the small bits of foliage off himself, wincing as he pulled a thorn from his arm. “Professor Elm said when we got her that she knew a few techniques already. And well,” he gestured behind him, “that’s what’s called ‘Frenzy Plant’. Needless to say, she’s a bit new at it.”

“Really? I didn’t notice…”

“On top of that, we missed our chance to catch a way to help you out,” he said to his Houndour. Rikalia thought she saw a look of relief on the fire dog’s face.

“Well,” Rikalia said, “you’re going to try again, right?”

“I guess I’m going to have to…” Iruni looked over to his Grass Pokémon. “So Atanya, ready to give it another go?”

She nodded.

“You’re using her again?” Rikalia asked.

“Yeah, is something wrong?”
“Well, you wouldn’t have lost the one you were trying to get earlier if I was there. She’ll probably just overdo it again.” She couldn’t help but notice the almost dejected expression that had Atanya. Then the leaf-headed creature grew determined and insisted on trying again.

“I can control what I do, just watch,” Atanya said, almost glaring at her.

“Right,” Rikalia said. “Good luck with that.”

“Rika, you’re not the most experienced either you know,” Iruni said. “If you want, you both can help.”

“But I’ll get it done. She’ll just mess up again.”

“Still,” Iruni said, “it’s fair for her to try. She’s the newest and need the experience in battle.”

Unhappy with his decision, but willing to help out Karros, Rikalia agreed. Once Iruni was sure things at the campsite weren’t disturbed by Atanya’s attack, he left Karros in charge to guard his things while they went off in search of a Pidgey that wasn’t scared away by the commotion. Deciding to head the opposite way, back toward Newbark, Iruni sent Rikalia ahead to quickly look for signs of Pidgey nests. Every so often she would encounter the strange red worms that she had no familiarity with. Iruni called them “Wurmples”. They weren’t native to Johto, and they were just one of the reasons why this Project Cartographer was started.

*Lot’s of Pokémon are moving. I wonder where I would be if I wasn’t left behind?*

The better part of the next two hours was mostly spent in silence. Despite Rikalia’s best efforts, she was having trouble finding the telltale signs of a Pidgey nest. She tried to push aside her worries for the time being. Iruni and Atanya were relying on her to track down their target first, and she was determined to show that she could, if only to show the latter she was more capable than she is.

*Maybe I am out of practice? How long has it been since I needed to hunt? Hunt … Hungry… Food!*

Rikalia paused, sending a sign below to have her companions slow to a stop. She stood up and looked around in all directions, scanning the trees, trying to find evidence to use with her idea. It wasn’t specific details that she was looking to spot, but color. Or the distinct lack of, if she was right.

*That way.*

A tree to her left had far less red pigment when she just glanced at it. It had less berries. Without looking back down, Rikalia beckoned Iruni and Atanya where to begin heading. She went ahead, quietly now that she was on the trail. Within another few minutes, she began hearing chirping noises. An adult Pidgeotto flew close by, making her stop and hide in the shadow of the tree’s trunk. After it was past, she smiled inwardly at herself—she did it. Silently gloating to herself all the way down to the ground, she found Iruni and her teammate a small walk away. Apparently they didn’t see where she went.

“Found ‘em,” Rikalia said in a proud tone. “They’re about… thirty feet away. I can hear a few.”

“Really?” Atanya asked.

“Yup. It was easy.”

“Good work, Rikalia,” said Iruni. “Now,” he knelt down to his two Pokémon, “What’s the game plan? I don’t want to delay this again, so let’s think this through.”
“I’ve already got an idea, but she probably won’t like it,” Rikalia said, pointing at Atanya.

“Oh?”

“Mhm…” Rikalia looked over to Atanya. “How about it, girly? Want to try my idea?”

“You haven’t said what it is yet,” Atanya said.

“You can be bait.”

“Rikalia!” Iruni said shocked. “Don’t be like that.”

“I’m being practical. It’ll work. If she goes out there and threatens a nest, they’ll defend it. They can tell she’s an easy target,” she said. “And when she has one in front of her, I’ll attack it from behind. Easy.”

“Alright, but how is this different to what Atanya and I did earlier?” he asked.

Rikalia turned to Atanya, “You can’t use any of your stupid-strong attacks. It’ll scare all of them away again, and probably backfire. Again.”

“How am I supposed to defend myself?” Atanya protested. “I’m weak to Flying types!”

“Don’t you have any, you know, non-overpowered moves you can use?”

It looked like Atanya was going to respond immediately, but she caught herself. She stayed silent for a few moments, then looked at her trainer expectantly.

“Oh, well, let’s see…” Iruni brought out his Pokédex from his pocket. After a few seconds he seemed to cringe slightly at the results. “According to this, it looks like you can only use Tackle without really pushing it.”

Atanya seemed to be weighing the odds in her own head. The Chikorita would have to face a Flying type, and try to fend it off without any of techniques that she knew she can defend herself with.

“You can say no,” Rikalia said. Atanya looked almost relieved until Rikalia continued, “If it’s too much for you, then there’s nothing you can do. I guess we’ll have to waste more time and make another plan.”

“I see what you’re doing, you know. I’m not afraid.”

“So you think you can handle yourself without your special moves?”

“Yes!” Atanya stamped the ground defiantly, then gave a confident nod to her trainer.

After Rikalia gave her best directions on how to find the Pidgey flock in question, the next ten minutes were spent deciding on a much more specific plan of action. They settled on an idea that would leave Atanya in danger the least, and split up once again.

Rikalia headed north of their intended targets and doubled back to flank them from the side. Making sure to be silent and hidden, once there she waited for Iruni and Atanya to appear at the arranged spot. She looked up into the trees from the shrub she hid in at the birds which were still unaware of her presence. She thought how easy it was to hunt and find these Pidgey, finding a sense of satisfaction that she could survive on her own much better now. Not that she’d ever leave, of course.

Just as planned, Iruni and Atanya came within range of the protective birds still in their nests. Most
just squawked and flapped their wings in angry protest at the trespassing human and Pokémon, but a few took to the sky and fled. Rikalia saw Iruni grip an odd pink and beige Poké Ball in his hand and commanded Atanya to advance on their territory. Also as expected, one of the flock swooped down to meet the little green intruder before she made much more progress.

*I wonder if they know it’s her who wrecked up the forest back there?*

The Pidgey that flew to greet Atanya landed a few yards away, flapping indignantly at her. Hesitance was evident across Atanya’s face, but she stood her ground. For their plan to work, Atanya needed the enemy Pidgey to fully invest its attention in her. Then it was up to Rikalia’s own judgment when to join the fray. Knowing her part in this, Atanya took a ready stance.

“Tackle!” Iruni called.

The Chikorita did just that. She took the bird by surprise and landed a clean hit on the angry avian. It caught itself with its wings before losing too much ground and returned with prompt Gust attack. The sudden blast of air hit Atanya full force, stinging her eyes. When she opened them again, the Pidgey was in the air above her, diving down towards her. Her trainer’s call to dodge the attack was unnecessary, but she was trained to trust his sense of timing. When the call was ordered, the wild Pidgey had no time to stop itself from crashing into nothing but the ground.

Angered further from the botched assault, the Pidgey caught Atanya off guard with a Quick Attack, surprising her with speed. Seeing the advantage, the Pidgey began to use its agility against his opponent. It easily dodged the rest of the Grass Pokémon’s attacks and was gaining confidence in being able to clear out this annoyance without much more trouble. Deciding to quickly shoo the strange green creature away from its home, the Pidgey landed on the ground and sent a volley of Gust attacks toward Atanya. It dug its talons into the soft dirt beneath it to keep from flying away by accident.

Just as the wild Pidgey began questioning why its target wasn’t trying to defend itself, it became aware of a staggering drop in temperature. It became difficult to breathe and move his wings much faster than a gentle wave. A chilling wind was blowing from behind it, leaving a thin layer of ice to accumulate on its feathers. It struggled to twist its neck around to see where the strange and sudden cold wind came from, but the ice was rapidly spreading over its body.

Rikalia ceased her Icy Wind attack on the Pidgey and closed the distance to her target. The Pidgey was too sluggish with the ice coating its limbs to move out of the way as she slashed at it twice with her claws. Despite the hits it had taken, the wild Pidgey tried to gather itself back up, surprisingly to fight back at its new opponent rather than flee. Rikalia dodged the Pidgey’s frantic but slow Peck attacks, sidestepping to its side and landed a Faint Attack.

This time however, the Pidgey failed to get back up immediately. Knowing what was coming next, Rikalia backed away from the beaten bird just in time to watch her trainer throw the pink and beige ball. The Pidgey was swallowed up into the ball in as a mass of pink and blue light. After a few tense seconds watching the Poké Ball rock back and forth on the grass, it finally chimed and the capture was made. Then the ball did something Rikalia didn’t expect—the light-blue band across the sphere pulsed lightly for a few moments before the center button blinked twice. She made sure to remember to ask about that. Rikalia walked over and picked up the sphere containing yet another new teammate and tossed it to her trainer. She and Atanya started walking over to him as he caught it.

“Yes!” he yelled. “Good work you two.” Iruni knelt down and gave the both of them an appreciative head rub.

“Hey,” Rikalia said. “What’s with that Poké Ball? It glowed and blinked after it caught the Pidgey.
Did mine do that?

“You don’t know?” Atanya asked. “Oh, that’s right, you ran off before you heard that part of the plan… I almost forgot.”

Rikalia tried her best to ignore her comment.

“This is a Heal Ball,” he said, holding it up to her. “It’s designed to completely recover any wounds a Pokémon sustained before it was caught.”

“Why’d you use that one then?”

“Because I want…” he checked his Pokédex for a moment, “him to be able to help us now. Today. And I had a feeling you’d rough him up a bit, Rika.”

“Blame the bird; he wasn’t going down without a fight,” she said.

“That’s good,” said Iruni. “We’ll need that kind of determination. You know something?”

“What?”

“What is it,” Atanya asked.

“This guy here,” he said, rolling the Heal Ball in his hand, “is actually the first Pokémon that I’ve caught. Karros and you, Rika were rescued from the wild, and Anya was given to me. This means a lot, you two. Thank you both for your help.”

“You’re very welcome, Master.” Atanya said.

“No problem. I had fun with it,” Rikalia said. “So, now what? Are we headed for the next town yet?”

“Actually you two, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like for you to stay here.”

“I really just want to handle Karros alone, at least just for this first time meeting… I’ll need a name for this guy here soon. I’ll come find you two in a little bit, so stay close by.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to have Kar surrounded by friends if he’s going to face his worst fear?” Rikalia asked.

“Of course, and I expect the both of you to help him out in this. But he and I went through what caused his fear in the first place. I think it should be me alone when he finally tries to get rid of it.”

Rikalia eventually agreed but didn’t like the idea of spending an extended time with her Grass type teammate.

“So what are we supposed to do in the meantime?” she asked.

“Try training on your own for a little while—keep it light, Atanya—but really it’s up to you.” Iruni stood up and stretched his arms out, cringing a little bit as he twisted his left arm a certain way. “Shit… still can’t do that. Alright you two, I’m headed back. I’m not sure how long this’ll be, but I’ll come get you before dinner, definitely.”

Rikalia bid her trainer farewell and watched him start to walk off. Just as he was beyond the trees she
was assaulted from behind, landing hard on the ground. She quickly rolled onto her feet, claws extended, ready face whatever tackled her. She looked around, but no one was in front of her but Atanya. It didn’t take a second before she growled in anger at the Leaf Pokémon.

“What was *that* for?”

“Our trainer told us to train by ourselves,” said Atanya, casually looking around. “Or did you forget that already?”

“Well I wasn’t ready!”

“Then *get* ready then!”

Atanya charged her again, hitting Rikalia square in the chest. The Grass type backed away quickly before she could recover. Rikalia looked Atanya in the eyes and hissed sharply.

“What’s the matter, huh?” Atanya asked coyly. “Aren’t you going to attack me back?”

“Fine.”

Rikalia sprinted forward at her teammate, reaching back to slash at her face. When she got close enough however, Atanya started twirling the leaf on her head, conjuring a tornado of sharp leaves around her. Rikalia couldn’t stop her momentum and crashed into the wall of green. The leaves buffeted and nicked at her, forcing a retreat. The flurry of leaves sent the remaining bird Pokémon in the immediate area to scatter to safer ground.

“Hey, Iruni said to keep it light!” Rikalia screamed at her.

“I am,” Atanya said simply. “This is full strength!”

The Leaf Storm encircling the Chikorita then expanded rapidly, catching Rikalia off guard. She immediately brought her hands up to shield her face as the attack crashed into her. The force of the assault of leaves was great enough to pull her from the ground and send her crashing into a tree behind her. By the time she could recover, Atanya had her leaf pressed against her neck, staring intently at her.

“I win,” the Leaf Pokémon said.

“So what?” Rikalia spat back at her.

“So, said Atanya, “I’m better than you.” She smiled smugly at Rikalia.

“You think so?”

Rikalia inhaled and blew an Icy Wind straight at the Chikorita, causing her to stagger back. Rikalia jumped up and went to slash at her, but a thin green vine caught her arm. Atanya grunted and lifted Rikalia off the ground without much effort, staring angrily up at her as the helpless Sneasel flailed around in the air.

“Can I ask you something, Rikalia?” Atanya asked.

“Let me down, now!” Rikalia tried to claw at the vine, but another snatched her free arm by the wrist.

“Why do you avoid me?”
“Wh— What?” Rikalia stopped struggling and looked down at Atanya.

“You clearly don’t like being around me and I want to know why.”

The vines’ grip in her arms slackened and Rikalia was lowered to the ground gently. Rikalia gently rubbed her left wrist and looked back to Atanya, who had abandoned her previously angry demeanor.

“I… I don’t avoid you,” said Rikalia.

“Yes you do. You’ve acted different towards me since we met. I can detect that with my leaf.”

“Whatever.” Rikalia looked away.

“You also fight with me on every little thing. You try every way you can to just shove me around or ignore me.”

Rikalia was silent.

“You also had the nerve to just use me as ‘bait’ to catch our new friend! You could have joined the battle any time, but you just sat on your butt and watched me get attacked.”

“We wouldn’t have had to go after another one if you didn’t mess up the first time,” said Rikalia.

“Don’t change the subject! Answer my question: Why do you avoid me? Do you hate me?”

“No…”

“Then what is it?” Atanya asked. She shook her head and sat on the ground. “Do you feel threatened by me because I’m a girl?”

“What?”

“Well, as far as I know, it’s only been you and Karros until I showed up, and I haven’t seen you act this way toward him,” said Atanya. “I noticed you really reacted negatively when our Master asked me to help catch the Pidgey earlier today.”

Rikalia just stared at her for a few moments. She could feel herself getting warmer, but she tried to ignore it. She sat down on the ground and looked off into the trees.

“Did anyone tell you that you notice too much?” she asked.

“Oh, so it is that then. You’re just jealous? That’s good”

“No I’m not!”

“That’s textbook jealousy there, Rika,” Atanya said.

Rikalia turned head toward her. “Don’t call me that,” she said.

“Why not? Our Master does all the time.”

“And you’re not him! And why do you call him ‘Master’? He’s just ‘Iruni’ to me and Kar.”

“You are so jealous,” Atanya chided.

“Shut up, you.”
“Don’t worry about it though,” Atanya said.

“Why?” Rikalia questioned.

“Because I’m not angry about it, so that only leaves you to get over it as soon as possible. I’m not trying to usurp your spot as our Master’s ‘favorite’ or anything. I’m just trying to be a useful member of the team.”

Rikalia was silent for a few moments, then said, “What if I don’t get over it then?”

Atanya stood up, “Then you’re hurting the team!” Rikalia wasn’t expecting her to raise her voice. “You aren’t supposed to fight and plot against your fellow teammates! We’re supposed to be helping our Master out with the Cartographer mission—and anything else—together! And in case you’ve already forgotten, you just helped our Master catch another team member. We can’t afford to waste time fighting with you over every newcomer that joins us, so you better start getting over yourself now while the one you’re fighting against right now at least forgives you.” Atanya ended her rant with a huff and sat back down, fanning her leaf in the sunlight. “I mean it, don’t worry about this, and it’ll be easier for you.”

Rikalia stared at her for a few minutes, letting the words ring inside her head. She couldn’t argue with any of the points Atanya just made. It made her feel childish.

“If you’re not going to respond,” Atanya started, “at least answer this: Do you feel that our teammate Karros didn’t feel any jealousy when our Master got you?”

“I…” she stopped herself. She really hadn’t even considered it. “I don’t know. He might have.”

“Did our Master give you any special treatment when he first got you?” Atanya asked.

Rikalia could already see her point. She only nodded.

“Now, do you think that Karros hold that against you?”

“No. He wouldn’t,” said Rikalia. She sighed and resigned herself. “Alright, I get what you’re trying to do. I’m sorry.”

“Oh really? Just like that? No more pushing and fighting?” Atanya had to laugh and give her Sneasel friend a pat on her head with her large leaf to show she was only joking. “Enough of the constant back-and-forth, alright? I was only kidding around.”

“How’d you get so smart? You seem to know a lot about… a lot of things.”

“I read a lot when I was being raised,” said Atanya.

Rikalia failed to hide being impressed. “You can read?”

“Who raised me? You think anyone—Pokémon or not—would be able to be near that man without being taught how to read?”

Rikalia chuckled a bit, “Yeah, I guess. How long were you with him?”

“I’m just over three years old, most of them spent with the professor.”

“Do you miss him? Rikalia asked.

“Of course I do,” Atanya said. “He’s my father, and the other two Pokémon he gave out to the
Cartographers were like my brothers. I don’t remember much of my birth parents, so they’re my family.”

Rikalia nodded.

“So, are we good now?” Atanya asked.

“Yes, we’re good. I apologized, didn’t I?”

“Good, I didn’t want to use another of those Leaf Storm attacks on you. That one really almost went out of control.”

“It hurt like hell.”

“Well, it’s not supposed to feel good,” Atanya joked.

The minutes that passed after that were a contrast to what had just transpired. Rikalia and Atanya talked for a while more, sharing stories and joking around with each other. Atanya was particularly interested in the story of how Rikalia came to meet Iruni. They picked up their sparring session once the two were able, but twice they had to pause for Atanya to try and contain the strength of the techniques she tried. Rikalia gave her the best advice she could on how to moderate her power, but it seems her own personal intuition didn’t translate to how the Chikorita harnessed her Grass type abilities.

Sooner than they were expecting, Iruni came walking out of the trees to meet them. He looked a bit dejected, but otherwise pleased with what he saw. Their new teammate sat on his shoulder and nodded at them.

“Nice job you two. Make any progress?” he asked.

Rikalia relayed Atanya’s messages to their trainer about their training. She especially stressed her successes in controlling her techniques.

“Don’t expect to get them down overnight,” he said. Iruni put his hand out and the Pidgey on his shoulder hopped on. “Oh, I’ve decided on his name; Kreen.”

“How’d introducing him to Karros go?” Rikalia asked.

“About as good as you’d expect,” Iruni said, disappointed. “We think we’ve got him convinced Kreen won’t hurt him, but we’re a long way from getting through completely.”

“Don’t worry,” Kreen spoke up, his tone assuring an confident, “If a member of the flock has a problem, we work to fix it.”

“Well said!” Atanya cheered.

“You certainly adjust quick, eh bird boy?” Rikalia asked.

Kreen ruffled his feathers, “All that’s changed is the flock. My loyalty to my comrades is unaffected. You sought out my assistance, and I’m happy to oblige.”

The four then decided to head back to the campsite. Kreen left his perch on Iruni’s arm and flew ahead of the group, enticing Atanya to try and beat him in a race. The Chikorita’s small legs weren’t made for speed, but she rose to the challenge anyway. A few moments later, Iruni looked down at Rikalia, noticing the many small scratches she now had.
“Did things go alright with Anya?” he asked.

“Yeah, she just caught me off guard with her attacks a few times.”

“No, I mean you and her. You two talk it out?”

Rikalia groaned, “Let me guess, you noticed me sulking around lately too?”

He nodded. “I asked her while we were off on our own if she noticed anything, and she told me she was worried that you didn’t like her. I take it you sorted things out?”

“Yes, yes, we’re good.” Rikalia desperately wanted to leave the subject alone. “Hey, Iruni?”

“Yes?”

“You’re going to be giving Atanya training to help her control her attacks, and you’ll be training Kreen and helping Karros too, right?”

“That’s the plan,” said Iruni. “What’s up?”

“Well,” she paused. She wasn’t sure why she did—she knew what she wanted to ask, but the process of asking escaped her for some reason.

“What is it, Rika?” Iruni asked.

“Can you train me alone too? I… I want to get to be able to control that Dark Pulse that I have.”

“Why? Because you don’t want to hurt—”

“Not just for that,” she continued, “Atanya has moves she can use, but not control. I’ve got one that I can’t even begin to call on and it hurts you. I don’t want to have that sit unattended anymore.”

“That’s a good idea, Rika. We can start on it whenever you want,” he said.

“Today?”

Iruni stopped walking and looked at her. He seemed to be questioning her insistence on the matter, but he didn’t ask any more questions.

“Sure,” he said. “We’ll be spending most of the evening trying to make it to Cherrygrove City, but we’ll work on it as we go. How’s that sound?”

“Good.” She smiled up at him.

Rikalia and Iruni continued the rest of the way to their campsite in idle conversation. Rikalia asked Iruni’s opinion on their chances of being successful at the Violet Gym. He said he was confident now with Kreen they would at least stand an even chance without having to risk Atanya in the battle—though with her moves, she may very well be able to hold her own. Rikalia wasn’t particularly worried, but Iruni warned her that a Gym Leader’s Pokémon aren’t like the wild ones she was more familiar with battling. Rikalia thought that was part of the appeal; fighting more powerful Pokémon to show your worth. Iruni agreed, but cautioned her to still be wary when the time comes.

Once they returned to their campsite, Atanya was trying to coax Karros out from behind a tree while Kreen stood about fifteen feet from them. Iruni told them not to worry about it, but thanked them for trying. Iruni recalled Atanya and Kreen, then set about to gather things up to head to Cherrygrove. He was certain they would make it without arriving too late, but he was unsure on what the rest of
the route would offer. He doubted it would be anything that he and his Pokémon couldn’t handle.


[Cartographer Log: 4/6/00]

[Cartographer ID: B. I. Thomas (53142)]

[“Is it recording? Ah, there it goes. Sorry if the time of day is an issue with these things, Professor. We just got into Cherrygrove about half an hour minutes ago, and just now got settled in our room.

“We saw quite a few Wurmple and their relatives on our walk through Route 29, but not much else that we noticed out of the norm. Though I might’ve caused the local Pidgey population to consider relocating; Atanya is almost too strong for her own good! Why didn’t you tell me she only knew these really powerful moves? It took forever to catch one, but we managed to. I’ve named him Kreen.

“Really though, Atanya’s doing fine. She just hasn’t had any practical… practice with these moves yet. Once she does though, she’ll be damn strong.

“Well, I’m think this should do it for my audio log for today. I don’t think we’re going to be in Cherrygrove very long tomorrow, so hopefully we can get on the road and out fairly early.

…I’m not entirely sure if there’s any protocol for ending these things, so I’ll just end it.”]
One more day, and then it would be time to move on.

Giovanni walked along at a leisurely pace, staring up at the cave’s ceiling. He wasn’t headed anywhere specific, he was only passing time; his legs had gotten stiff from sitting and waiting alone in his hideout. Now he was traversing the uneven ground inside the cave system known as the Tohjo Falls. He was mindful of where his feet were landing, testing each step before moving forward again. A nasty fall caused by a clumsy slip would be such an unfitting end for someone like him. A change in illumination brought him to pause; the nighttime sky must have cleared up outside. An eerie glow streamed into underground cavern, scattering off the various pools of water rock formations.

The full moon’s gaze brought the dark interior to life in small ways. Puddles were now visible and paths were easier to spot. Zubat caught in the light existed for an instant before being absorbed once again by the dark of the cave. A large gap in the ceiling of the cave sent a column of white light cascading into the cave, the moonbeam visible in the air and surrounded by the darkness. Giovanni smiled as he saw it shine on one of Tohjo’s two waterfalls like it was put on display.

“Trying to tell me something?” he asked aloud, as if he was expecting something to call back and tell him to head back. Giovanni shook his head and began retracing his steps back to his small hideout.

He followed the path he had learned long ago in his youth, well before he was known as a disgraced Gym Leader and criminal. His hiding spot was known only to him as far as he could be sure. He walked the length of the pool that the waterfall emptied into until he had to reach out a hand to feel for the cave wall hidden by the spray of water around him. Above him a large underground river was emptying, coming from a source he never cared to find out. It ended and split, forming the two waterfalls of the cave’s fame. Each began a new river, heading in opposite directions. His waterfall eventually sent its water west, to Johto.

His palm hit cold rock. Giovanni turned to look back to where he had been. Only white spray and darkness met his eyes. Satisfied, he began walking forward towards the waterfall. Whether by nature or human hand, a smooth, flat slope ran behind the two waterfalls, almost completely hidden to any casual passersby. It only had one glaring flaw; the length of the hidden walkway that ran between the two waterfalls was uncovered. Anyone who would be below him would be unable to see the path, but left whoever was walking on it completely exposed. However, in the dead of night, Giovanni allowed himself the luxury of moving slowly across the damp ledge. He doubted many people other than him walked through these caves at night.

Before crossing under the second roaring torrent of water and into his hiding place, he chanced a look to the gaping hole in the cave’s ceiling. The bright white moon sat perfectly in the middle of the jagged tear in the rock. Giovanni stood in the moon’s spotlight a moment longer, appreciating the view from his perch. The cave would have been quiet and peaceful were it not the deafening roar of the twin falls beside him.

Continuing his secluded path, he took a memorized number of steps and into a crack in the stone wall. A wide recess in the wall served as one of his favorite hiding places. The entrance would have you believe it to be just a small, cramped space formed by water eroding stone over the years, but it widened further into the full room that it was today. Giovanni had brought his Pokémon—some long since passed on—and helped expand his little hideaway into a low-ceilinged cave the size of a common apartment. It stayed dry, for the most part. The first few feet stayed damp year-round thanks
for the waterfall that concealed it. Shelves of stone were kept at certain heights for certain purposes; seats, a bed, table. His belongings were scattered around the cave. A bedroll was laid out on the low, long slab towards the back of the cave. Across from it, was a tunnel, leading to a series of others, snaking through the mountains above. Giovanni had carefully excavated each one with his Pokémon over the years. He knew the twists and turns by heart. If nothing else, he always had a way out of his most hidden place.

Taking advantage the moon’s convenient position, he began changing out of his soaking wet clothes in the dim moonlight. One of the few drawbacks of this hideout; you never could quite get in or out without getting wet. After pulling on a dry outfit he laid his wet clothes on one of the flat rocks in the cave. He picked up his long brown coat and put it on, the cool night air was getting to him. Giovanni idly reached inside one of its interior pockets.

“Let’s see now…” he muttered to himself, pulling free a round, faceted diamond. The large gem glittered a soft azure hue in the refracted moonlight that pierced the waterfall. Each smooth side of the jewel spoke to him secrets that only a trained eye would see. Staring too long into the beauty of the orb in his hand was a mistake—one he learned the hard way—and he soon tore his attention away from it. He got what he needed, though he couldn’t shake the small headache that now pounded away in the back of his skull.

“Three minutes.”

Giovanni replaced the treasure in his coat, the only place he deemed safe for the relic. The moon had either moved far enough away from the appropriate angle, or a cloud obscured its gaze once again as the cave was swathed in darkness suddenly. Giovanni strained his eyes and carefully crossed to what made up his bed. He sat down, feeling through the darkness until he found a small gas-powered lantern and lit it. The cave took on an orange shade in contrast to the white glow it had moments ago.

Time ticked on inside his head, counting down. He sat calmly, preparing for what was coming. He hoped he was ready; time spent as a Gym Leader and boss of a crime syndicate left him terribly out of practice for this. Earlier confrontations with much more formidable opponents seem insignificant to who would soon be in his presence. Giovanni was anxious; not because of the power or position his impending arrival carried, but because he refused to peek at how this confrontation would end. He had gotten used to cheating time. He had done so enough to know that foreknowledge made things boring and stale. For this, he wanted to see events unfold before his eyes normally.

“Two minu—”

The sound of something crashing through water stopped him mid-sentence.

He got to his feet and looked to the entrance of his cave. Slowly, the head of a large serpent with glittering crimson scales came into view. It rose up, fighting against the torrential downpour of the waterfall and stuck its head and part of its long body into the cave. Off the serpent’s back slid a man with long, red hair. His feet hit the cave floor hard, followed by a pair of clawed paws beside him. The Weavile shook itself to dry its fur. In the small moment before his son pushed his wet hair out of his face, Giovanni let a small, proud smile linger on his face.

Still as brash as ever. Giovanni crossed his arms and took a relaxed stance. “I’m surprised,” he said. “You’re almost a full two minutes early.”

Silver stood and sent an annoyed glare back at him. He then turned to his Gyarados and placed his hand on its side. It was exhausted, possibly from the constant travel the past few days. Silver fed it a ripe, yellow berry and returned it to its Poké Ball after muttering a quiet word of thanks. With a wordless order, his Weavile came to his side and fixed its gaze at the older man, ready to pounce at
the opportunity or command. With his back to the cave’s entrance, Silver now faced his father for the first time in almost ten years. His silver-colored eyes burned with anger.

Many words could be used to describe his own emotion at that moment, but Giovanni settled on one: happiness.

“I’m glad you came,” he said. “I was hoping we could clear some of the air between us, as well as discuss other, more pressing matters. But first, I have something for you.”

Giovanni reached into another pocket inside his overcoat and pulled out a small, silver locket on a chain. He gave it one last lingering stare before tossing it in his son’s direction. It was caught in the air by Silver’s Weavile, who hissed angrily at him.

“Jallen,” Silver said, and immediately his Pokémon relaxed. Silver knelt down and took the trinket from his Pokémon, holding it up to his eye. “What’s this for? I hate to break it to you, but I’m not a ‘jewelry-wearing’ kind of person, father.” The distaste the word carried was evident.

“Don’t open it just yet,” Giovanni told him. “It’ll be easier that way.”

Silver stood back up, looking at the locket in his hand. Ignoring Giovanni’s advice, he found the tiny clasp at the top of the locket and opened it. The lid flipped open in his palm, the bottom half was a polished mirror, while the main body contained a small photo of a man with short brown hair, standing next to a red haired woman. In her arms was a sleeping baby that shared her bright hair color.

Giovanni looked for his son’s reaction, but whatever it was, it was well reserved. Silver only stared at the photograph for a minute before closing it back up, shutting his eyes and holding it in his fist for a few moments. His son surprised him when he pulled the chain over his head and tucked the locket inside his shirt. When their eyes met once again, he could tell some of the anger had left them.

“Why would you give this to me now?” he asked.

“Because I don’t know when I’ll be seeing you again. Not for some time, if my guesses are right. Forgive a father for trying to make use of what time he has left.”

“I’ll grant you that, but only that.” Silver’s expression suddenly hardened, “Jallen, grab him.”

The distance between Giovanni and where his son’s Weavile was took off from granted him three seconds before he would have to move out of the way. The Sharp Claw Pokémon dug its claws into the cave’s wet floor for more control, so he couldn’t hope for an extra second because of a slip—the rest of the cave floor was dry. Despite his expert eye, the bipedal cat-weasel was very quick on its feet, staying low to the ground, claws extended. At the third second after the Dark-Ice type took off, Giovanni took a calculated step back as a large blue blur flew out of the tunnel behind him.

A mass of scales, spikes and teeth collided with Silver’s Weavile, knocking the much lighter creature back with a swing of its tail. It watched as the small, clawed thing tumbled and slid across the cave floor. It took a defensive stance, crouching low as it circled its master. The Garchomp let out a fierce roar in defiance to any further attempts.

“Sazrah, I said to keep it light,” Giovanni said, sighing. “Poor thing looks like it might’ve gotten a broken rib.”

His dragon responded with an annoyed growl.

Silver was already at his Pokémon’s side when Giovanni turned his attention back to him. It
managed to get back onto its feet, but was grimacing as clutched its side. Silver pulled out some medicine and applied it to the wound, instantly alleviating his Weavile’s pain. He stood back up and glared angrily at his father, his Weavile ready to attack once more.

“So…” Silver said, noting the notch in the dragon’s back fin. “He’s new. Where’d you find the time to train a Garchomp?”

“Old ‘Gym Leader’s habit’, I guess.” Giovanni patted his dragon’s head, “He was a real life saver a few months ago. We had a little run in with—”

“Red. I know. He reported straight to me after you so bravely ran away.”

“Oh? You’re on the same level as the famous Hero of Kanto so soon?”

This only annoyed Silver, “Not everything boils down to reputation and notoriety. He just told me what I needed to know.”

Giovanni nodded, “True enough, I suppose. That part of my life is behind me; I can’t keep up with who’s who these days.”

“Behind or not, you’re too much trouble for the League to let you just roam about freely. And I’m here to bring you back in.”

“Is that the little assignment they gave you to keep you busy?” he asked.

“Personal request, actually,” Silver said flatly.

Giovanni smiled, “Ah, but do you really think you should focus on me,” he reached into his coat and revealed his treasure to his son, “when I’ve made away with this?”

“Th—The Adamant Orb!? That’s what you— You’re the one who—?” Silver stood, mouth agape at what his father casually held in his hand. “Red mentioned I should speed up my search when he said he found you… and that lead that took me to Sinnoh…” he shook his head. “What are you thinking?”

“So, which is it?” Giovanni asked, “Come and get this, or try and subdue me?”

“Doing one will accomplish the other! Jallen, Ice Shard!”

Ice quickly coated his Pokémon’s claws and forearms, crystallizing in sharp, jagged points. With two, lightning fast swings, Jallen flung the sharp hunks of ice at the very vulnerable dragon in front of him. Traveling too quickly to dodge, the Garchomp simply brought its arm fins together. The shards of ice struck and exploded in frost, leaving small cuts in his scales and coating the dragon’s arms in patches of thin ice. To Silver’s surprise, his father’s Garchomp simply shook the ice free of its arms, looking none too bothered by the attack.

“You’d be surprised what a steady diet of Yache berries could do to your dragon’s resistance to cold,” Giovanni said proudly. He put the Adamant Orb back inside his coat. “He isn’t too shabby in endurance either, so I don’t think a brawl is your smartest move. I called you here because I wanted to talk, Silver.”

Silver’s Weavile was about to launch another volley of ice at his target before his trainer put out a hand to stop him.

“You mentioned that already, but I’m not sure if I want to hear what you have to say.”
“I didn’t say you had a choice. You need to hear it,” he said dismissively. “I’m sorely out of the information loop inside the Pokémon League now, but I’m hoping you can help me out in that respect. How much do they know of the group that calls themselves ‘The Watchmakers’?”

“The who?”

“Watchmakers,” he repeated. “They’re a group currently active within Johto—maybe Kanto as well—and I want you to help me make sure they’re stopped. I already passed this information to Red when I asked for his help. Didn’t he let you know?”

“No, nothing. If they’re bad enough, we’ll stop them anyway. We don’t need to follow your plan of action,” Silver said. “In fact, we’d get the same result if we just beat the information out of you.”

“Maybe, but what if, let’s just say, that there was a spy? Someone who is very keen on dropping me crucial information on these people, but would withdraw their support if I were to be captured?”

Silver grit his teeth, “Who is it? Which side is the spy on, ours or theirs?”

“I’m your best bet against these people,” Giovanni continued. “You can’t afford to lose me.”

“What makes you so important?” Silver asked.

“Because these ‘Watchmakers’ are trying to enact one of my old plans. It’s flimsy, based widely on theory, but has enough potential to be very dangerous should they succeed.” He patted his coat, “This little gem is part the plan’s ‘back up’, but they’re not going to get it.”

“Because we’ll get it back from you once we take you in!”

“Out of the question. It’s safer with me until I know more.”

“What don’t you know already? You seem to know that they’re trying to use one of your old schemes, so you should know enough to stop them.”

“But I don’t know who they all are, where they operate exactly, when they’ll act out my plan, or how far along they already are. I don’t know how many they are either. I could be hunting down two people, or two hundred. It’s far too soon to act with any noticeable direction.”

“What about your spy?” Silver asked.

Giovanni sighed, running a hand over his short hair. “I must admit, our informant isn’t exactly… liberal with how much, or how often he drops important information. He helps, but only when it helps him as well.”

“Wait,” Silver said. “You said ‘our’. Who else have you already enlisted in your mad scheme?”

“Slip of the tongue, though I should clarify; I have an informant who gives me information, from a source they have within the group. Getting information can be tricky at times. It has to change hands so many times before it gets to me.”

“So there are moles on both sides? Who? I need names!” Silver shouted.

“Calm down, I assure you they’re no one of consequence. But if you believe anything I say today, know that they can be trusted.”

“Why?” Silver asked.
“Because I trust them.”

Silver took a deep breath and began going over the things he’d been told.

“So what, you’re just using your ability to help us as an excuse for your freedom?”

“You could say that,” Giovanni said.

“Why not turn yourself in and help us from the inside?”

“Because I work better when I’m not tied down by all those rules and regulations,” Giovanni said. He laughed, “It’s quite liberating.”

“I’m still going to try. Jallen, this time—”

“Silver, please, you already have tried. I’d rather not add ‘beating my own son in an unfair fight’ to my conscience.”

“Shut up!” Silver yelled.

“Face the facts!” Giovanni said, his voice rising in volume. “You stand no chance of beating me. Don’t let your anger get your Pokémon hurt in an unnecessary battle!”

Silver almost called Jallen to attack, but stopped himself. Both of his assaults were stopped, and his father’s Garchomp hardly looked fazed by any of them. Silver thought to his other Pokémon, but none would be able to move around in such a small space. He wasn’t going to give up, not when he came so close, not when he finally found his father. But everything seemed to be working outside of his favor.

“What,” Silver finally said, “would you have me do? You haven’t really told me anything about what these people are trying to do.”

“I’ll find ways to contact you with any more information I find,” Giovanni said. “In the meantime, learn what you can about the Shrine of Ilex Forest. The legend revolving around that forest and its guardian is what my plan was going to involve.”

“And the Orb?”

“Like I said, back up. Best not put all my cards out on the table at once, hmm?” He smiled, holding his son’s gaze for a moment.

“Any names I should look into,” Silver said, “or watch my back because of?”

“I have a list, but none are more likely than any others. I’ll let you know, Silver.”

Silver stood, fists clenched. He couldn’t think of any other way to somehow get the upper hand. He had gotten everything out of his father that he could.

“Can I trust you?”

“It would make things easier,” Giovanni said, “but I don’t think either of us expect that’ll happen.”

They stood in silence for a moment longer, both waiting for the other to say something more.

“I’ll get stronger,” Silver finally said. “And I’ll bring you to justice on my own one day. But until then,” he turned around, facing the roaring waterfall. “And if you’re lying, I’ll find you again.”
“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t,” Giovanni said. “And thank you. I can’t do this on my own, no matter how much you might think it. I’m not asking for your help, I need it.”

“Just be ready when the day comes when you have to fight me,” Silver said, still looking out at the running water.

“I’m looking forward to it, son.”

Noticing the stone walkway, Silver stepped outside of the hideout and walked along it, his Weavile lingering a moment to give a glare and bare his teeth at Giovanni’s Garchomp. Once he was finally alone, Giovanni finally let himself relax.

“Very well done,” said a man’s voice. “He sure is his father’s son.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you were dropping by,” Giovanni said, turning around to face his new guest, who was standing at the mouth of his exit tunnel. I would have, if I had peeked. Oh well, can’t change that now.

“Thought I’d listen to it live,” he said, stepping into the cave. His cape billowed behind him as he went up to the large, blue dragon. Instantly recognizing the human, the Garchomp gave a low, rumbling growl. The visitor placed a hand on the dragon’s snout, a gesture of affection, “Good to see you again, Sazrah.”

“So,” Giovanni said, “I take it from your warm disposition that you think that’ll suffice then, Mr. Champion?”

Lance nodded, “He’ll help. He might not like it, but he will. If only to see it as way to get up to your level. But as it stands, we now have one more for our cause.” The Dragon Master smiled, “The more, the merrier, as they say.”

Oh my god, I’m an idiot.

After the fifteenth time Allan Relmstead had gone over his “list of things to NOT forget”, Allan finally placed why he felt like he had forgotten something. The realization came a few seconds after he glanced at his wrist to check the time. Something seemed to be staring him in the face, almost screaming at him to notice. Then he did. His old, outdated model PokéGear was still securely strapped to his arm.

His bravado had gotten the best of him. He had gotten sidetracked while on the way to replace it, and even though he knew the alternative, a small part of him wished he hadn’t bothered with saving a pretty girl that afternoon.

“Oh, Allan?”

Of course he would forget perhaps one of the more crucial items that he needed. Since he hadn’t planned on leaving town without it, he didn’t even think of packing a separate map. He was walking blind with only a guess as to where he was headed. Of course he would be days away from any town or city when he remembered it. Turning around would be too much trouble at this point, even if he could find his way back on his own.

“Um, Allan?”

“Does he do this often, Umari?” Alice asked.

‘Yup. Just give him a minute.’
Allan’s concentration was broken as his Eevee’s mental voice rang through is head. He looked up from his arm at the blond girl holding his Pokémon in her arms. They were standing a few paces ahead him. He hadn’t even noticed he’d stopped walking.

“I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

“I just asked you the time,” Alice said.

“Oh, and it’s almost two-thirty,” said Allan.

“Is everything alright?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he assured her. “I just get caught up in my own head sometimes.”

“Because you’re a psychic?” she asked.

Allan shook his head, “Not this time. Something just caught me, and I got wrapped up in things.”

Umari wriggled out of Alice’s arms and landed beside her trainer. ‘You sure you’re okay? You only get like that when it’s something serious.’

‘Don’t worry about it, alright? It’s nothing,’ Allan sent back over their mental bond.

‘Fine…’

Three days had passed since Allan stumbled upon Alice Wingborne with his mind and came to her rescue. Their travel time had been severely cut short due to rain on their first day out, but Allan couldn’t help but think he’d be making better time without his newest companion. She may have been four years older than him, but she severely lacked in confidence. Most of the other trainers they came upon chose to battle her, thinking she the easier target; and they were right. She froze up in most situations, anxiously looking to Allan for advice. He could clearly see why healing, and not fighting, was her strong suit. Each time she did, Allan questioned the logic of why she accepted the battles at all.

Something else Allan couldn’t help but pick up on was that Alice was much more open with her flirting now than she had been when they first met. Not that he didn’t appreciate the interest, but she just would not relent in her advances, or take notice of his indifference to them. When they weren’t battling or asleep, she almost constantly had Allan in the middle of a conversation. She had questioned his childhood, family, history of girlfriends—she was particularly interested in this topic—and absolutely adored Umari. She often held her and gave her compliments on her cuteness or manners.

Allan suspected that she has been trying to grab his hand while they sat and ate a few times, but he wasn’t sure. He did wake up to find her sleeping closer to him in the mornings though.

“Heeeey, Allan?” Alice asked.

“Hmm?”

His attention was at his Eevee now walking beside him. When Alice didn’t respond immediately, he looked over to her. She was looking up at the trees and taking slow, relaxed steps. She held her arms down behind her back, hands cupped around each other.

“Yeah?” he said, louder.
“In Hoenn, we have these Pokémon called ‘Gardevoir’. Do you know them?”

“Of course I know them. I am trying to be a Psychic Master, you know,” he said. He debated to himself whether she actually thought he might not know of them, or if she was just drawing out the conversation for her own purposes. His mind went to a certain association that people had regarding that species of Pokémon, but he couldn’t imagine she was asking about that particular subject. He hoped not, at least.

“Why?” Allan asked.

“They say… that they can see into the future.” She looked back down at him, “Can you?”

“Sorry, no,” he said, though a bit relieved where the topic ended up going. “All I have is telepathy, which is reading other people’s minds, or communicating ideas and thoughts over a mental link. It’s all just data that my mind can perceive and understand.” If there was any topic he could go on about, it was psychic abilities, and the differences between them.

“What Gardevoir have is foresight, or future-sight,” Allan continued. “There’s way too much theory behind the ability in general, but a few Pokémon are known to have it.” He pulled off Xutan’s Poké Ball for effect, “The Xatu family are one of them. Their left eye has postcognitive sight, and their right has precognitive.”

“Huh?”

Allan sighed, “Their left eye sees the past and their right sees the future.”

“Oh!” Alice said. “That’s really cool.” Alice followed Allan’s hand as he replaced his Poké Ball on his belt, eyes lingering elsewhere before noticing Allan giving her a look.

“Yeah… well, some humans, with enough training, have experienced some clairvoyant abilities. Morty—the Gym Leader of Ecruteak—is one of them. But his abilities come from Ghost types; I don’t understand them at all.”

Alice nodded her head. “So, do you know Morty?”

“I’ve met him a few times, why?”

“Just wondering. Winona—the Gym Leader of Fortree—and I were really good friends back home,” she said.

“Let me guess, she gave you your Tropius?” Allan asked.

“Hey!” Alice stopped walking. She shot a hurt look at Allan, “I told you—”

“I didn’t!” Allan quickly interjected. “It was just a guess.”

“Oh…” she said. “Sorry, I just—I just can’t get over you and how you can read people’s minds.”

“That’s alright,” Allan said. He motioned down the path and they began walking again. “So, was I right?”

“Yep!” Alice’s anger all but disappeared instantly. “He’s a great flier and has support capabilities too. Lots of Grass types do, actually. Oh, that’s right. You have an Exeggcute, don’t you? Can I meet him?”

“Yeah, but he’s not exactly travel worthy, and we really should get going—”
“Oh, I just want to see him.” Alice clapped her hands together and have her most convincing puppy-dog eyes, “Please?”

Allan sighed, “Alright.”

Reaching behind his back, Allan felt for the Safari Ball on his belt. Duncan had been his newest Pokémon, and by far the hardest to relate to mentally. Multiple, separate consciousies that were linked and working in sync with one another didn’t exactly make it easy to understand when Allan first tried communicating with the bundle of sentient eggs. Thankfully after Xutan relayed a few tricks to their new teammate, Duncan soon fell into recognizable mannerisms and speech patterns.

Allan hoped for the best and tapped the activator button on the Safari Ball. Light poured out as the sphere split in half, pooling on the ground. It condensed into six, pink, egg-shaped seeds.

“Allan,” said Allan, pointing to Alice, “there’s someone here who would like to meet you.”

In unison, but not coordinated in any manor, all of Duncan’s heads rolled over and turned to look at the human now looking down at his collective body. A few moments passed in silence, broken by a surprised gasp from Alice as Duncan’s individual bodies hopped on top of one another, leveling out just above the girl’s full height. They leaned forward, staying together with their mental energies, glaring at her.

‘New girl?’ The top egg said, as an observation rather than a question.

‘Obviously,’ the third one down replied. ‘But who is she?’

‘And who’s she to want to meet us? No one’s ever done that before,’ another said.

‘Maybe she likes round, pink psychic-plants who can talk to humans?’

‘Shut up, you idiot. No one is that specific.’

“Guys!” Allan said.

“What?” the six heads said at once, turning to him.

“You’re freaking her out.” He gestured to the now shaking girl on the dirt path, holding her head in her hands. He then added mentally, ‘Good work.’

“They… he…” Alice was struggling to make a single thought out into words. She looked up to Allan, “So many voices at once… How do you handle it?”

He bent down and grabbed Alice’s hand, “Lots of practice. Trust me, he’s been worse.”

“I can’t imagine…” she said, still looking around in a daze.

The collective that was Duncan toppled down from their totem pole construct and regrouped on the ground. One of Duncan’s linked heads turned on the ground, pointing up at the sky. Soon after the rest followed suit.

‘Do we all smell that?’

‘Of course we do. It’d be too hard not to notice.’

‘But shouldn’t it go the other way though?’
‘Duh, that’s why we noticed it in the first place. Something’s wrong.’

“What’s the matter, Duncan?” Allan asked.

‘Look up, right behind you two.’

Allan and Alice both turned around, looking up at the impressive cloud formation that was behind them. Wind had picked up and was carrying the dark clouds closer towards them at an alarming pace. Something odd stuck out however; the clouds weren’t moving with the wind. The two were going in different directions. Even as he noticed it, the wind started blowing from another direction, even harder.

“That’s weird,” said Allan.

“Must be some strong crosswinds up there,” Alice said. At Allan’s confused look she added, “Winona taught me a lot about flying. You gotta know this stuff.”

‘Oh that’s right, the Two-Legs can’t smell it.’

‘Someone should let them know.’

Allan turned back around and looked down at his Pokémon, “What’s wrong?”

‘We can’t smell any more water in the air. A storm that size, you’d be able to feel a rise in the humidity. That’s not a normal thing up there, Master.’

“What do you mean ‘not normal’?”

‘Ask your lady friend, we don’t know.’

Allan looked back at the thunderhead now almost on top of them. The strange, opposite wind was picking up, sending dust and light debris into the air. Thunder rumbled ominously as the huge cloud rippled with brilliant light, sending arcs of lightning down to the earth in erratic angles. Rain still had yet to fall and if anything, the air felt almost uncomfortably dry. Flying Pokémon flew from their perches in the trees to escape the strikes of lightning. The phenomenon above him sparked a memory of an old legend—or part of one—he had been brought up on. One of the old stories the sages would say.

“If you find yourself in the path of a storm that defies the winds, then you must not relent, wither, or back away. The Herald of Storms may test those he finds on strength and will, and pass judgment.”

The sky above them was completely dark now. The wind whipped around at high speeds, howling through the forest.

“Alice,” Allan yelled, recalling his Exeggcute, “stand beside me!” He knelt down and focused on Umari’s mind, ‘You come here too, Umari.’

His Eevee crawled into his arms without question, sensing the urgency in his message. She tried asking him was going on, but her trainer’s mind was now on the sky above.

Alice came to his side, “What’re you doing?” she yelled over the wind and thunder. “We need to find shelter before the rain hits!”

“There won’t be any rain, this isn’t—”

Allan was cut off by the brightest flash of light any of them had ever seen. He and Alice had to close
their eyes for fear of being blinded. A huge lightning bolt broke free from the clouds above them and crashed into the ground, ignoring the much taller trees that flanked the road. Alice screamed, but the thunderclap drowned her out. Dirt and gravel shot outward from where the strike landed, stinging the exposed bits of flesh of the two humans present; Umari was effectively shielded by Allan’s arms.

‘Allan! What’s happening?’ Umari cried out with her mind.

‘Just be brave, Umari. Please.’ When he dared open his eyes, Allan was none too relieved to see a new Pokémon had appeared where the lightning struck.

It had sharp, curved fangs, a white and yellow coat of fur with jagged black pattern and a stormy mane billowed off its shoulders, flowing down its back like the clouds above. Four pointed crest on its feline face, whose eyes stared unblinking back into Allan’s own. The large—just taller than him—Thunder Pokémon, Raikou, growled at them all as electricity rippled over its body, discharging in random directions.

“I don’t exactly know what’s going to happen now,” he said, glancing at Alice. She was white as a sheet, visibly shaking on unsteady legs. She was looking at him with pleading eyes. “Just don’t run. You’ll insult him.”

All Alice could manage was give the smallest nod and look back at the Pokémon now walking slowly towards her.

Despite Allan’s advice, she shrunk back a bit when the Legendary Pokémon came up to her. She tried straightening up before it, but she cringed under its heavy gaze. Through her tears, she kept focusing on its fangs, its claws, the deadly bolts of electricity arcing off its mane and tail. She couldn’t look the terrible creature in the eye. How could Allan expect her to not back down from such a fierce predator?

Annoyed with the girl’s behavior, Raikou roared at her, breaking any remaining resolve she may have had, dropping to her knees. She covered her head with one of her arms—the other holding onto Allan’s hand for dear life—as she cowered before the large thunder tiger.

Allan heard Raikou give Alice a dismissive growl before the large Pokémon shifted its attention over to him. Unlike with Alice, the Thunder Pokémon circled Allan twice before stopping in front of him. Raikou’s height brought its head a few inches above his; Allan had to tilt his head slightly upward to look the creature in the eyes.

Raikou bent its neck down then to look at the small Eevee being held in Allan’s other arm. Umari tried her best to look tall and strong. Even after the Thunder Pokémon tried shattering her resolve like the human girl’s, she did not flinch, she did not cower into her trainer’s arms. The silver Eevee defiantly growled back. This seemed to satisfy and even amuse the legendary creature, a rumble that could almost resemble laughter emanated from the beast’s throat.

It looked back at Allan, roaring like it had at Alice; Allan did not flinch. Raikou sent more bolts of lightning down from the sky, letting them crash into trees around them. Allan stared back into the tiger’s red eyes.

Alice looked up in terror from her position on the ground, gripping Allan’s hand even harder.

A few moments of nothing followed, the only sound being thunder rumbling off in the sky above them.

Without warning, the legendary beast of lightning leapt into the air, jumping right over Allan. When
it touched down again, it took off into a sprint behind the two. They could hear the sound of Raikou’s feet as they ran on the road. The dark clouds above them started moving again, following the beast to the south. The sun began to break through the dark cover, bringing light back to the forested path.

Just as Allan was about to breathe a sigh of relief, he was knocked to the ground as Alice flung herself up at him. She held him tight around his stomach, pressing her head into his chest. She was still crying, but this time they were uncontrollable tears of joy. Umari struggled to get out from where she was pinned between them, flopping down onto the ground awkwardly.

“Oh Allan,” she sobbed, almost laughing. “I can’t believe you. You just stood there—and Umari growled back at it!—and we’re okay! I thought—”

“Hey, hey, it’s alright.” Allan propped an arm behind him, sitting up off the ground. “He was never going to hurt us, Alice. Well, if we ran, maybe.”

“B—but what was that thing? I haven’t seen anything like it since I came to Johto.”

“That,” Allan said, “was Raikou. One of the three Legendary Beasts of Ecruteak City. The story says, many years ago there was the Brass Tower, where Lugia used to roost before it fled to the seas. Lightning struck it one day, causing a great fire. Three Pokémon died in the fire before the rain finally extinguished it. Ho-Oh, the other mystical bird of Ecruteak, granted these Pokémon new life—who we now know as Entei, Suicune, and our friend Raikou.

“I was brought up on the stories. They say that the three roam the land, watching over the people of Johto. Sometimes, they’ll appear before people and test their mettle.”

“Why?” Alice asked.

Allan shrugged, “I don’t know. The old monks have a story and riddle for everything in this world. I’m just glad this one turned out to have some truth in it.”

“Are you suuure you can’t stay with me?” Alice asked, the desperation in her voice clear.

“Sorry,” said Allan. They were now standing at a fork in the road; Route 36 split into two opposite directions. Allan still had no idea where he was going. The forest path had a few twists and turns leading to this point, wreaking havoc on his sense of direction. He couldn’t remember on the maps he had seen which direction Violet City was in relation to this point. He had a fifty-fifty shot, and one of them made him continue on his journey with Alice. He already knew his decision.

“You’re not going my way,” he said. “I’ve got my own schedule to keep, like you do.”

Alice’s mood obviously fell when she could think of no other way to prolong her time with him. Both of her hands grasped the shoulder straps of her backpack and she stood staring at the left-hand path as if it were some dreadful thing she wished she could run away from. She sighed and shook her head, then turned back to face Allan.

“Thank you again for saving me back in Ecruteak. And for scaring off that Raikuuu,” she said with an honest smile.

It took a great deal of effort for Allan not to correct her pronunciation.

“I really hope we see each other again,” she continued. “And I think you’re really great… and…”
Alice leaned forward, placing her hands on Allan’s shoulders, and kissed him. She quickly pulled back before it had a chance to linger, grinning as she took a few steps back.

“Take care, Allan,” she said as she started down her path. “You were really cool! Bye!”

Few things have left Allan with the sensation of pure surprise ever since he gained his psychic abilities and understanding of how people think. That was one of them. Alice actually making a bold move in any sort of manner was at the bottom of his list of things he’d see today. His hands were slightly raised, he had reflexively prepared to catch her after today’s past events. But all he could do now was hold the pose comically as he watched the girl with long blond hair walk down the road ahead of him.

Once Umari snapped him out of his own head again, Allan started walking down the right pathway.

Initially, Allan breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the road ahead become nicer and almost paved. Road lights began dotting the sides of the path for when night fell, and more and more people were passing him on the way. He declined as many battles as he was able, picking up his pace and wanting to get into the city before the evening. The path again split off into two directions, leaving Allan nervous. He didn’t remember the path to Violet City being so complicated. It always seemed pretty straightforward when he looked at it on a map, but he chalked up any errors up to him running off an old memory.

Time ticked on and the sun started its descent towards the horizon. The path he had chosen wound out of what could be called a “road” steadily until he was just moving between trees. Umari could pick up on his nervousness and fear; it was practically screaming over their mental bond. The longer he was in the thicket, the shorter his temper was on every single obstacle; he’d swipe angrily at a low-lying branch and kick at the tall grass.

The sky above was turning pink, with hints of orange taking over minute by minute. He needed to be out of these trees before nightfall. He had no idea where he was and he couldn’t even begin to guess what wild Pokémon would be out when the sun fell.

Good graces fell just then, a break in the tree line could be seen in the distance; a large expanse without trees for a sizable distance. Hoping to finally get some bearings on where he might be, Allan broke off into as much of a run as the cluttered woodlands would allow. He finally burst free into the clearing. Nothing was ahead of him. The field before him held nothing but grass, and a small pond. Off in the distance was a road. Allan followed one of its directions, almost wishing he didn’t see the high buildings in the distance.

“But… that’s…” Allan dropped to his knees, letting his bags and gear fall to the ground around him. He slumped backwards a ways, his arms dangling just above the grass. “Goldenrod City?”

“Allan? Allan what’s wrong?” Umari stood up on his knees, looking up at him.

“I… We went the wrong way, Umari. Look,” he pointed off to the distance. “That’s Goldenrod City."

‘I thought you knew the way! How’d this happen?’

Allan sighed. “Because when we took the time to go help Alice back home, I ended up forgetting to pick up a new PokéGear,” he held up his wrist. “We don’t have a map. So… I guessed. I’m such an idiot… I’m sorry—”
Umari rammed her head into his stomach, knocking him over onto his back. When Allan tried to make a protest Umari just put her paw over his mouth.

‘Allan, it’s okay. It’s not the end of the world. We’re fine, aren’t we?’

‘But...’ Allan said mentally. ‘I messed up. I let my pride and my own sense of worth get in the way and made us lose a lot of time.’

‘So? We have time, don’t we?’

‘Yes, but I could have asked Alice how to get there. I didn’t.’

‘And even I could tell you were screaming to get away from her after the first day,’ Umari said, sending a mental laugh along with it. She removed her paw and let him sit back up, jumping to the ground beside him. ‘I still can’t believe she just kissed you and ran off!’

“Yeah,” Allan said, chuckling. “I can’t believe that girl...” Allan sighed and closed his eyes. Even though he’d made a colossal mistake starting out on his journey, Umari didn’t even blame him. She was just glad they were alright. Says the little Eevee who growled in the face of the Beast of Thunder...

‘Oooh,’ came Umari’s mental voice. ‘Pretty sunset at least.’

Allan opened his eyes but needed to squint almost immediately. The clouds had moved out of the way, letting the rays from the sun to pour down from the sky. The evening sun reflected off the small pond in front of them, bathing them in bright light. Allan looked down to his left, noticing a strange glittering in his vision. Umari sat there, staring off into the distance. The sunlight was shining in such a way that bathed the area in a bright, orange light, leaving Umari’s normally silver fur to sparkle a bright golden hue.

“Yeah... pretty,” Allan said. “You know, that color suits you Umari.”

Confused, Umari looked down at her own fur. He eyes widened with a mild surprise at the change.

‘It’s nice,’ she said. ‘But Espeon aren’t gold-furred when they’re shiny. You said they were green.’

Allan laughed, “You’re right. How could I forget?” He reached down and pet his shiny Eevee on her head.

“Espeon aren’t gold.”

[Cartographer Log: 4/9/00]
[Cartographer ID: A. J. Wingborne (79053)]

[“Professor, I wish you would have told me your region had Legendary Pokémon just wandering around! Allan and I ran across—or maybe it the other way around—Raikuu today. It just showed up out of a thunder cloud and scared us. Well, scared me. Allan wasn’t that scared. It just ran away after that though. I think I’m going to really look at this Pokédex thing to see what other beasts and things roam the countryside around here.

“Oh right, stuff. Okay. While Allan and I were walking, we were mostly just on Route 36 before we had to stop. I think he’s headed to Goldenrod for some reason. He didn’t say. I miss him already... I
wish he’d stayed—

“Sorry! Down to business! Okay… I did see a lot of Ledyba, but not as many Pidgey as the old reports say. I didn’t see any Growlithe or Stantler either. Lots of Spearow though. Allan said he saw a Nidorino, but it ran before I got a chance to see it.

“Oh yeah, rare things. I saw a few Plusle and Minun around the closer I got to the city. I instantly recognized the buzz in the air that their electricity makes. Comes with growing up in Hoenn and knowing what Pokémon might actually shock you if you get too close. That’s about it though.

“Well, I guess that’s everything. I’m going to be staying in Violet City for a while and see if I can’t meet up with that new guy.

“Bye-bye!”

[Priority Message: 4/9/00]

[ProfElm: to Cartographer ID: A. J. Wingborne (79053)]

[Please, as I have to sit through these audio recordings, please limit the time you spend updating me on your dating life (Though Elise is pulling for you, she’s been helping with organizing some of the data). I hope things go swimmingly, and I appreciate you’d want to share some updates, but that’s what a diary is for. You have a job to do.]

To be continued…
What you are about to see is an event I glimpsed after coming in contact with a certain individual. It has troubled me on occasion as I try and sleep at night. It is a little bit forward in time than what you are familiar with—my eyes sometimes see things that have yet to happen, even some things that I can change—but it is an important event. I hold no ill will towards the man, Giovanni, but he has tried to control my power in the past. He wasn’t too persistent about it, and he hasn’t tried to come after me for a long time, but it was enough to draw my attention to him.

He is older now. Alone.

And he is about to really feel that for the first time.

Giovanni had always been a cautious man.

While he was the head of Team Rocket, he made sure to keep tabs on all of his employees and high ranking members. He trusted some to do their duties and to manage the people under them, but sometimes it put his mind at ease to monitor everyone’s movements. It helped to find out when they were lying to him. Information had to be accurate and reliable. Bad information could cause him to lose control over a particularly useful asset, or as it more commonly happened, lose substantial amounts of money. He still kicked himself whenever he thought of how he was so thoroughly beaten and removed from his position of power. A youngster from a small town taking down a criminal organization just didn’t happen. Well... it didn’t happen to him anyway.

Until it did.

To be fair to Giovanni, Red did have help. The Pokémon League did rally behind the young man’s success in flushing Team Rocket out into the open. The organization’s resurgence in the Johto region three years later was not under his direction, and was stomped out quickly by a few of the League’s more experienced members. Giovanni did nothing more than watch on in silence as his loyal followers tried to find him. They believed that his leadership would have won them control over the Kanto-Johto area.

But things were different now.

Since he left in the aftermath of Team Rocket’s downfall, he’s been cut off from his large information network and list of contacts who could help him. The once respected businessman and Gym Leader of Viridian City was now an infamous criminal. Quite the fall from grace, as he had put it. He has been slowly developing new ties and links to important people and places in his mostly self-imposed exile. The League, being the ever vigilant guardians that they are—bless them for trying—kept tabs on him as best they could, but ultimately have no accurate account on his whereabouts and current goals.
With Lance being the borderline-treasonous exception.

Getting kicked down from your high-horse by a kid did wonders for Giovanni’s outlook on a lot of things, but nothing more so than his views on his failed family life. Giovanni had—only a few weeks ago now—had a very interesting conversation with his son. Silver has taken to the life of a Pokémon Trainer with as much of a chip on his shoulder as anyone could expect, given his background and childhood. Swearing to take down your rogue father must be tough to deal with during your downtime. It must have been infuriating for the poor boy; being invited to his father’s doorstep—figuratively.

It was the first time he had seen his son in almost nine years. His practiced face did well to hide the emotional turmoil hidden behind it. The conversation did lead where he had hoped, but finding out that the League at large weren’t actively pursuing the Watchmakers visibly worried him. Despite his past dealings and plans for control, Giovanni truly believed that the Watchmakers need to be stopped. Giovanni hoped that he pushed Silver in the right direction with his words, because no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t get past the fact that he needed help.

Resting in the pocket of his trench coat right then was a large, round diamond. The Adamant Orb is an object I personally wouldn’t give to a man like Giovanni, given his track record, but it isn’t really my duty to hunt down the Time Lord’s little homage to himself. Giovanni sought to find the shiny bobble and keep it safe once he heard rumors of someone attempting one of his older, less successful plans. I’m not sure what the Adamant Orb could do to me, honestly. Lord Dialga’s essence flows through the gem like a tap to a faucet. It can channel raw time. But if Giovanni thinks the Watchmakers shouldn’t have it, it’s probably for the best.

At this point, Giovanni began to wonder how long he’s been followed.

He had been walking through Pewter City, not really going to or coming from anywhere, just clearing his head. Messing with time often gave even the most formidable minds headaches. He made sure his coat’s collar was up and hat’s brim pulled down to hide his face. Still, he sensed that a presence was following him.

And no, in case you were wondering, it wasn’t me. I wasn’t there for this, I just observed the event through time. It’s complicated; don’t think about it.

One of the major skills Giovanni had honed over the years was paying attention to paranoia. He discreetly checked behind himself periodically, catching small shifts in the way a puddle reacted to passing movement, the particularly dark exhaust fumes from a large vehicle as it accelerated, movements in a nearby tree’s branches.

His pursuers are a curious bunch. Giovanni has met them before, but he’ll recognize them in about thirty minutes. They can do things most other humans can’t and are nightmarishly strong. I’m very glad they have no aspirations to come after me.

As far as I know, anyway.

Unable to work out who it is that has been tailing him for who knows how long, Giovanni takes a couple turns to maybe throw off their pursuit, but he has no such luck. He decides, for his own sake, to leave the town proper and head for a much more secluded area to confront his followers. Making a scene of any sort in a public place wasn’t in Giovanni’s day planner, so to speak. He technically shouldn’t be allowed to move freely around the region, and if the police or the League got wind of where he was…

Nearing the rocky terrain that surrounds Mt. Moon, he was picking up more and more hints on who
was following him. He was counting at least three. He left the beaten road and ventured into the woods for a distance, making sure no one was around.

“Not very many people can sneak around like you can,” Giovanni called to the trees around him. He knew whoever was following him could hear him. He stopped walking when he entered a small clearing in the trees. He turned around, preparing for an ambush from assailants he still couldn’t see. “Oh, do show yourselves. I promise I won’t make it boring for you.”

Very few things in the world could possibly startle a man like Giovanni. His son forgiving him, Champion Lance retiring to the life of a Pokémon Musical coach, or the Alpha itself manifesting in front of him to give him the keys to the world were probably in his top three. But when three men faded into view just feet in front of him, he couldn’t help but take a frightened step backward. They didn’t walk up, they showed up.

The three men that appeared before Giovanni are collectively known as the Shadow Triad. They wore similar, but varying clothing. The consistent things between the three were their headbands and pieces of cloth they wore over their mouths, obscuring their faces. Mostly black and gray cloth, a motley assortment of belts and other garments clung to their obviously thin but muscular bodies. Their hunched posture betrayed a lazy personality coupled with an identical facial expression shared among the three; neutral, reserved, blank. Apart from their long white hair differing in styles, he could see their emotionless eyes differed in color as well. That feature was how he recognized them.

“Well, well, well,” Giovanni said, relaxing a bit. Maybe overconfidence? “How are you three? It’s been what, five years?”

“Four years—”

“—seven months—”

“—and twenty-three days since you refused Ghetsis’ offer.”

Giovanni shook his head slightly, “Alright, that’s creepy, even for you three.”

He has a point.

“You have something in your possession that Lord Ghetsis desires,” the Shadow Triad member with the long, swept back white hair began to speak. “He is willing to make an offer for the exchange of the item in question.”

“And what item would that be? I’m certain the one-eyed wonder wouldn’t have sent you out to buy my hat.”

The three of them shuffled forward at once. Just one step, but the movement alone was enough to put Giovanni back on guard.

“The Adamant Orb.” The one who spoke was to Giovanni’s right, his hair combed neatly to one side of his head.

Giovanni tightened his grip on a Poké Ball in his pocket. He deepened his glare, “Aren’t you assuming too much? Why would I have something like that?”

The dark trio shambled forward again, causing Giovanni to step backwards. The member to his left with wild hair spoke, “Because Lord Ghetsis informed us so, and thus, is the truth.”

“Busy little bee, your boss,” Giovanni muttered.
“Your comments—”

“—are irrelevant—”

“—name your price.”

If you were to ask Giovanni what it was that made him so nervous right then, I doubt he could answer you. Something in the way their tones of voice resonated with each other, combined with their stoic gaze seemed to hit a nerve somewhere inside him. He went full on defense mode now. Giovanni couldn’t know if the Shadow Triad were aware of why he had the Orb, or why Ghetsis Harmonia suddenly had an interest in it, but he didn’t suspect any pure intentions. From his brief encounter with the green-haired visionary, who at the time promised a new world order and a nice spot in it, Giovanni could easily draw enough parallels to himself to see that kind of sinister gleam in his eye.

“Not for sale,” he said. To his credit, he kept his voice remarkably calm and true to his normal personality.

The Shadow Triad didn’t even try to reason with the ex-Gym Leader. In the blink of an-eye-that-doesn’t-see-all-of-time, two of the triplets teleported just behind him, leaving equal distance between them, forming a triangle around Giovanni. They lost their bored, slacking posture, crouching low to the ground, each gripping a Poké Ball in their hand. Giovanni, with all of his amateur skills at perceiving time, barely caught them removing the red and white spheres from their pockets.

Not wasting time—something I like about him, he truly appreciates what the Time Lord does—the Ground type master releases his newest Pokémon, a Garchomp with a fierce gaze.

“Resistance—”

“—is not advised—”

“—but still, irrelevant.”

The simultaneous bursts of light from the Shadow Triad’s Poké Balls didn’t distract Giovanni, but certainly made him recalculate his odds at the moment. A Houndoom, Cacturne, and Crawdaunt took up the space separating the humans, leaving Giovanni completely surrounded. I wish I could have intervened, really I do.

“Six on two. Not really fair, is it?”

“Life—”

“—isn’t—”

“—fair.”

For the second time, the trio surprised Giovanni. And quite frankly, I’m still impressed. The Triad themselves charged him and his dragon, leaving their Pokémon standing at the ready. Speed can only get you so far, Sazrah. The loyal dragon did his duty and moved to retaliate against his master’s opponents, try as he might. Two of the Triad caught both of the Garchomp’s swinging arms in a lazy-looking grip. Deceptively strong, the two lifted the bulky dragon over their heads, tossing him into the trees like he weighed no more than a few pounds. Trees cracked and snapped like twigs when the Garchomp collided with them. Concentrating on the impossibility in front of him, Giovanni didn’t see the third appear in front of him. The staggering blow hit him in the chest, sending him reeling backwards.
His momentum backwards was halted abruptly by a hard surface, then Giovanni felt his arms in a vice grip. The Crawdaunt held him up, refusing to let his arms free. The Cacturne held its arm to his neck, spines extended. The Houndoom had his left leg in its jaws, biting tight enough to hurt. The bite began to burn.

“Too slow, old man,” the long-haired member said lazily. The next instant, he was in front of him, and reached inside his coat. With the Adamant Orb in hand, the Shadow Triad stood in front of Giovanni.

“Time, to go.”

“Eventually, Plasma will be all the world knows.”

“There’s no room in this war for old men who can’t carry their own weight.”

“What war?” Giovanni choked out. “What are you fighting for?”

The three held out their Poké Balls and crushed them in their bare hands, another display of their supernatural strength. They didn’t so much as blink their half-lidded eyes as the shards of metal cut through their gloves and skin.

“We are—”

“—fighting for—”

“—our lives.”

The Shadow Triad phased out of existence before him, their Pokémon looking around in bewilderment. They abandoned their hold on Giovanni a few moments after the Triad disappeared. Without trainers to guide them anymore, they meandered off into on their own.

———

The story doesn’t necessarily end there, but I don’t think there’s any good in showing in detail an old man lying on the ground, trying to stand up for twenty minutes. Oh, maybe I just did. Oops.

Like I said, I’m worried about this event. It’s troubling to know that the man who can control those three now has one of the Orbs of the High Lords. Maybe he has all three by now? I can’t know right now. I can’t leave this time period.

Not until I fix things…
First of Many

“How much longer? I want to see it!”

I smile at my son’s impatience. He was so full of energy back then. He had just turned ten years old here.

“Soon enough,” I say.

My hands are covering his eyes and I’m walking slowly behind him, guiding him behind our home. His gift is waiting in my back pocket, but the suspense of it all is really what makes giving a birthday gift so exciting. After a few more steps, I let his head go. Benedicto frantically looks around at our yard, trying to spot whatever might be meant for him. Before he turns around with that disappointed and confused look in his eye, I kneel down to his level, and produce his gift from my pocket. These events happen the same way every time. I wouldn’t change a thing.

“Father, where is—?” his bright blue eyes come to rest on the item in my hand. The handle of a knife sticking out of a leather sheath. His eyes widen as he takes it in his hand, revealing the shining blade.

“Happy birthday, Benedicto,” I say. Again. “I received my first blade from your grandfather, Lutorius, when I was your age. It’s only fitting that you do as well.”

My son looks up to me with that look of pondering wonder. It soon drifts to excitement.

“My own knife!” he yells. “Thank you, father.”

Benedicto wraps his arms around my waist in one of his little hugs. I return the gesture, lovingly.

“But it is very important to respect that knife,” I say. “It is just as likely to cut you as what you wish to cut.”

I take the blade away from him and give him some basic instructions on how to handle the blade. He watches with rapt enthusiasm. A child receiving an object like this—a tool to sustain one’s self—is a large step in life. A knife can be a means to acquire food, a way to cut and weave plant life to make shelter or tools, and as a defense against anything that might threaten you. I teach him again, the proper way to slice to avoid hurting himself. Next, I produce a whetstone and hand it to him.

“This is now yours as well,” I tell him. “This is how you keep the blade sharp and neat. A dull blade can be annoying to use, and a danger should you keep it in a sorry shape. I expect you to regularly keep this knife in peak condition.”

“Yes, I will!”

So obedient. So willing to listen, to emulate his father. Oh how I miss him so, my only son.

“Coralis!”

The voice that calls my name through the wind makes even the most amazing chorus sound dull and out of tune. Clear, high, and beautiful. Her hair is caught in the breeze, like brass wires. My wife, Phaedra, leans out of the window that overlooks the back of our property. Upon noticing her, Benedicto runs straight for his mother, eager to show her his birthday gift. I walk slowly behind my
son, as I always do, and reach the window.

My wife always pretends to examine the knife that my son shoves into her hands—she had seen it before of course, but still she humors him. Yet for some reason, her enthusiastic face doesn’t come as it always had. It does, but all too slowly. She unsheathes the knife in what seems to take minutes. Why is she taking so long? Why have the birds gone quiet? They were singing just a moment ago.

The sky begins to gray, but not because of clouds. The trees lose their life and freeze into rock. The grass below my feet goes stiff. No longer do I feel the warm breeze on my face. I can only see a perverted still-shot of my old life in front of me. Everything is frozen now. Nothing moves. There is no sound. But I am here. Almost as if I’m outside of it all. My movement, my color, my being isn’t being restricted, so why is theirs? Why this dream? Is my memory finally starting to wither away? Will I now see fewer and fewer of these days while I sleep?

Oh no.

I turn away from my frozen family. There’s too much silence around now for it to go unnoticed.

That noise.

That feeling.

That stench.

It is not my mind that is polluting this scene.

“Tormenting a broken man even in his dreams,” I call out. “Is there no escape from your evil?”

Then, the only blip of color apart from myself becomes apparent to me. Off to my right, as if hiding behind a tree would save it face, a green head peaks out from behind the granite-like trunk. Oh how I hate those cold, blue eyes. So similar, but so very different from my son’s. So unlike my wife’s.

The little nymph meekly floats toward me, keeping its head low as if expecting an attack from me. As well it should. Were I in any plane of existence other than my own consciousness, I would run. I want nothing more than to leave right now. How is it that I am no longer alone inside my head?

“Hello, Cora.”

Rage, fury, and anger well up and explode out of my mouth.

“Do not call me that!” I yell. My voice makes it cringe. The thing is nothing more to me than the object of my hate. “You have no right!”

“I’m sorry. I know… I know this was special to you,” it says. “I just wanted talk and—”

“And I wished to live my life, but you saw to interfere with that as well,” I say. It recoils again. Funny. How can a creature capable of such error and evil be so well at feigning remorse for its actions?

“Please,” it talks to me again, “let me try and fix this.”

“One cannot fix what is so completely broken. You know this, and yet you still dangle the hope in front of me like food to a starving peasant!”

It floats closer towards me, pleading look in those terrible eyes. “I want to help you, Cora! You’re still my friend.”
That word. “Friend”. I thought I had taught it what that word meant, in a life I once had. It clearly still has no concept of its meaning. “You are no friend of mine. You are an error in my past, nothing more.”

“I’ll… I’m still trying to get better,” it says.

“You know that you cannot!” I say. “You confessed that to me long ago. Too long ago.”

“But you’re not letting me try.”

“Because I can fully appreciate what it is your disgusting powers can do! You tear things away from their natural place, their time, hurling them through the threads of the universe, to where they do not belong,” I turn away from the ugly thing. I can barely stand the sight of the green fairy. “I know that if you use your unholy ability again, it will undoubtedly only bring me more misery and pain; though I hardly believe that such a thing could ever come to pass after what you’ve done.”

I turn back around, glaring at the little thing that history has named “Celebi”.

I walk forward, reaching out for it. Looking to wring its neck.

“You will never redeem yourself for what you’ve done. You can only—”

It grabs my wrist and I am now engulfed in brightness. The suddenness of the light forces my eyelids to clamp shut in protest. I try and pull my arm free.

“Easy there, Cora.”

It was Jacob’s voice.

I opened my eyes slowly, realizing that I’m in our rented room in Violet City. Sunlight was pouring in through the window to my left. Glancing over at him, I gave a small jerk of my arm to release it from his grasp.

“What is it?” I asked, sitting up in my bed.

“Ya were, uh, talking in your sleep a bunch. I didn’t catch much, but you looked like ya were having a bad dream. Tossin’ and turnin’ a bunch. Then ya started reaching up like you were grabbing at something,” he said. He took a few steps back and sat on his bed. “You need to talk about it?”

I merely stared at him for a moment. Did he hear anything specific? He’s always so concerned with me. Always asking questions.

“No,” I said. “It was only a nightmare.”

“Ya sure you’re okay?” he asked.

“Hopefully, one day,” I muttered. I just waved a hand dismissively at his continued concern. “I’m fine.”

“Alright, if ya say so. But hey,” he said, “we gotta get up and movin’. I wanna get a head-start on gettin’ to Azalea Town ASAP.”

“Why?” I asked. I groan as I stretch out a sore muscle in my shoulder. Mornings hardly agree with me anymore.

“Well, it took us a long time for us to get all our badges from Falkner,” he said as he donned his
A glint of silver now marked the left sleeve—a badge of a pair of wings. “And it’s only going to get tougher. The sooner we get to Azalea, the sooner we’ll get a feel of the place and be ready to tackle our second badge.”

“I see…”

A quick glance at the foot of Jacob’s bed showed that he was already packed and ready to go.

“If you’re in such a hurry, why didn’t you wake me sooner?” I asked with a hint of distaste. If only I could’ve been spared a few moments from that thing’s influence.

“Well, I didn’t wanna wake ya. I only did when you started moanin’ and groanin’.”

I sighed, sliding off the bed. “Very well. Give me a few moments to dress. It shouldn’t take me long to pack.”

Amé’s and Fafnir’s Poké Balls were sitting on the bedside table next to me. After I washed and put on a new change of clothes, I took each of them and placed them at my side on my belt. Fafnir—my strange, little toothy dragon—has admittedly been a joy to train and raise. So strange to find its family roaming around the mountains of Blackthorn City. Perhaps a new territory for his kind?

Oh well, not my concern.

I turned on the television while I pack up my belongings. The noise in the background served to distract me enough so the tedious task didn’t bore me to sleep again. Life seemed exceptionally dull from time to time, but luckily there were distractions to that dullness in this new time period. It was on a local broadcast station, displaying trivial things going on around Violet City. The channel did however run live Gym Battles from time to time, I’d found. As I was finishing, the channel cuts away from its current program. Curious, I turned and observed the screen. It was a list of today’s scheduled battles against Falkner, the town’s Gym Leader. A name caught my eye; [B. Iruni Thomas]. The match was scheduled for early this afternoon.

“Jacob,” I say, quickly. “It seems our friend is slated to take on Falkner today.”

He leans close to the screen, looking at where I’m pointing. He soon places the name. “Well I’ll be, he’s sure covered a fair bit of ground since we saw him. Say, we should go cheer him on,” Jake suggested.

“Not to disagree, but I thought we were on a short time-frame?”

“Plans change, Cora. We’re gonna give our friend from Mahogany the proper support he needs for his first Gym Battle.”

“I really hope all my matches aren’t like this…”

Iruni Thomas stood in the challenger’s box on his end of the gym’s main battlefield. All around him were raised bleachers and seating for the spectators—a surprising amount of spectators. He’d seen a placard in the main lobby that stated the stadium seated—safely—five hundred people. Just by a rough guess, Iruni suspected the seating to be over half full.
An employee at the gym commented, “People really love watching first-timers take on the Gym Leader. In case it’s the start of some great battling legend, they can say ‘I was there when they just started out’. If nothing else, it’s great for tourism. It’s the same at Pewter City over in Kanto.”

That is, if the match would actually begin.

A quick glance at his PokéGear confirmed it. It has been twenty minutes now. The battle was scheduled to start twenty minutes ago. Falkner was late.

“Some example he is,” Iruni muttered. He took the opportunity to stretch out his back, stiff from standing for so long.

Thankfully, due to the design of the city’s Gym being suited for Flying types, it wasn’t completely unbearable. The upper walls of the building, just over the upper most levels of the risers, had large segmented windows. Their panes were retractable down into the walls beneath, allowing all manner of bird or other winged creature to enter and leave. This architectural brilliance also allowed for a pleasant breeze to flow through the interior of the main battlefield. It was a nice spring day, and the near constant wind billowing in through the building at least made the waiting almost comfortable.

Looking up and to his left, Iruni spotted the one person he knew would be rooting for him in the crowd. Alice Wingborne, the first official Cartographer according to Elm, was waiting for him when he arrived in Violet City a week ago. It had been nice to get to know his other partner; this one didn’t kick him in the head upon meeting him, a point which Iruni puts to her favor over Carter. After the two had gotten to know each other, they both agreed that their jobs as Cartographers seemed much more agreeable now that they had at least one friend working on it with them.

Alice seemed to notice Iruni looking up at her and gave him a reassuring smile and a thumbs-up. More for the sake of the match actually starting, than Iruni’s own personal nervousness.

In fact, he wasn’t too worried about how the match went at all. He was more concerned about Karros.

On the ground with him were his three Pokémon that he had registered to take part in the three-on-three battle. Rikalia and Atanya were sitting on the hard dirt floor, looking every bit as bored as he was. Karros on the other hand was standing at attention beside him. Whether mentally preparing for the battle or petrified at its inevitability, Iruni couldn’t tell.

Maybe this waiting is getting to him.

The past week of training had helped Karros make tremendous leaps in getting over his fear of birds. In the beginning, Kreen—while friendly and helpful in every way—would only cause his Houndour to tense up and immediately have a panic attack. Now, Karros could and would willingly approach and communicate with the Tiny Bird Pokémon. The idea of him as a teammate seemed to be enough for Karros to accept Kreen as a friendly addition to the team. But other wild bird-like Pokémon still brought out a typical fearful reaction from him.

The first round could go by very quickly.

Iruni bent down and patted Karros’ head. The sudden contact made him jump in fear. “Easy Kar,” he said. “You’ll do fine. Just take it as it comes.”

Karros only gave him a worried whine in response.

Cheers erupted from the crowd, stealing Iruni’s attention. In through one of the Gym’s large windows flew a huge Pidgeot. On its back clung the city’s Gym Leader, Falkner. The large bird
circled the stands twice before setting down on the opposite end of the battlefield. Falkner hopped off his bird’s back and it took to the air once again and flew out of the gym. Somewhere in his mind, Iruni was relieved that he didn’t have to battle such a formidable Pokémon in his first match. Falkner gave an embarrassed wave to the stands and began a brisk walk towards the center of the battlefield.

Iruni stepped out to meet him.

“I’m really sorry about all this,” Falkner said. “I had some business come up that I really couldn’t get out of.”

“Don’t worry about it. It gave me a bit more time to think about our battle.”

Falkner nodded and extended his hand. Iruni shook it. “Have you been told the rules of the match?”

“Yes,” Iruni said. “Three on three, no substitutions or withdrawals.”

“Good,” Falkner said, breaking the handshake. “I hope you brought your A-game.”

“So do I,” Iruni said.

With that, the two trainers turned and walked back to their respective ends of the field. The cheers from the crowd grew in volume once they both took their positions. The referee commenced the match, and Iruni called for Karros to take the first battle. Falkner kept a calm and serious expression and threw a Poké Ball, releasing a Spearow.

Shit …

Already Iruni could see Karros tense up. His sides were heaving with each deep breath the fire-dog took. But instead of being blinded by fear, he was focused on his opponent. Refusing to let it make a move he couldn’t see. Iruni guessed Karros wanted nothing more than to finish the round quickly. Luckily, Karros had the raw power to make it happen.

“Challenger gets the first move,” Falkner called over to him.

“Alright… Karros, Fire Blast!”

What followed might have been the fastest Iruni had ever seen his Houndour unleash the attack. Maybe Karros had already been preparing it. He couldn’t tell. The fire sprayed out in a large cone from the Dark Pokémon’s muzzle. The only sound heard over the roar of the tremendous flames were the shocked cries from a few spectators, and one enthusiastic girl cheering the challenger on.

The target had been fluttering in the air about twenty feet above the ground. Unfortunately, that gave it a wide angle of escape, and it did a short dive and sped toward Karros, keeping low to the ground. The column of fire passed by over the bird’s head, not singeing a single feather. Panicking a bit, Karros backtracked and let off a Flamethrower attack at the bird, which the enemy Spearow narrowly avoided.

The closer Falkner’s Spearow flew to Karros, the more frantically he ran around the battlefield to escape it. It swooped close by, aiming to peck at Karros, but to Iruni’s surprise, Karros retaliated by biting it. The Spearow’s wing was trapped in his jaws, clamping down hard. The bird squawked and hastily pecked at Karros’ side and head, inflicting minor damage. Ignoring it, he flung the bird down onto the ground, spitting out a few loose feathers.

“Now, Kar,” Iruni yelled. “Roar!”
A terrifying noise carried through the entire stadium as Karros let his fear of everything avian out in a single statement. The wounded Spearow was caught off guard and was sent reeling back as a mass of red light toward the Gym Leader. Shocked at the turn of events, Falkner was forced to send out another Pokémon.

“I hope you know,” Falkner said, “using Roar does not force me into a loss by withdrawal.”

Damn, I do now. Oh well. “That’s fine,” Iruni said back. He called for Karros to return to their side of the battlefield.

Falkner’s new Pokémon appeared in the same blinding light as the first, but it manifested as something much larger. A tan and red feathered bird appeared on the floor of the Gym, a cowl of feathers swooping over its head. A Pidgeotto now stood staring down Karros. The referee signaled the start of the second round of the match.

Unfortunately, Karros wasn’t as lucky facing the larger, and much quicker Flying type. None of his Fire type attacks managed to hit their mark, and he was too afraid of the Pidgeotto’s imposing size to try any of his physical attacks. After one successful Wing Attack on Falkner’s part, Karros could stand no more of the torment and ran back to Iruni, out of bounds.

“Infraction!” the referee yelled. “Call your Pokémon back to battle or be charged with a forced withdrawal.”

Iruni knelt down, placing a comforting hand on his Pokémon’s head. Karros was shaking visibly, whimpering softly. He looked up, ears laid back, an obvious plea in his eyes.

“It’s okay, Kar. You did great. I’m proud of you,” Iruni said. He patted Karros’ head and looked up to the referee. “My Houndour is unable to battle, sir.”

“Aww, shoot.”

Alice leaned back in her seat up in the Gym’s stadium seating. She had thought the battle was going great so far. Karros had actually stood and fought—against a Spearow of all Pokémon—and her idea to use Roar worked out great, even if it didn’t work like she thought. But the Houndour’s fear of birds finally got the best of him.

She watched Iruni recall Karros into his Poké Ball and send out his second Pokémon. When his blue-feathered Sneasel took the field with an enthused leap, a rather loud scream of enthused spectators came from another part of the stands. Alice looked around where she thought she heard it and saw a group of four people, most of them cheering for Iruni.

Curious, Alice made her way over to the group as the third round of the Gym Battle began. The man on the end of their bleacher looked up at her as she approached. She had to force herself from staring at his gray left eye.

“Uh, excuse me,” she said. The whole group now looked up at her. “Sorry, I just heard you all cheering loud for the challenger. Are you friends of his?”

“Yeah, I guess ya could say that,” the man with orange hair said. “The name’s Jake Ostra. We met Iruni a while back when he passed through Blackthorn City.”

“I’m Tyler Nedile.”
“Andrea Karson, pleased to— Look out!”

Alice turned just in time to see a something flying towards her. She was pulled down into an open seat by the man with long black hair. A few stray pieces of ice from the battle below whizzed by, just over her head. She looked at the man with surprise as he let go of her wrist.

“And you?” The black haired man finally spoke, almost ignoring what had just happened. “Are you a friend of his?”

“Oh, uh… yes. He is,” Alice said with a smile. “Thank you for that.”

“Think nothing of it,” he said.

“So,” Jake Ostra said. “How do you know our buddy from Mahogany?”

“Barty’s my partner.”

In unison, Jake’s entire group turned and gave Alice a very confused and questioning look.

“Barty?” the black haired man repeated slowly, as if wondering if that was how you even pronounced the name.

“Oh, that. It’s my nickname for him. He hates it,” said Alice, “but when I first heard of him, I didn’t know he preferred his middle name. So it just stuck like that. You know how it goes.”

Immediately, Jake chimed in, “Oh, you bet. I still get flack for calling this guy Co—” He failed to finish the name with a hand clasped over his mouth.

“I’d prefer to limit the number of those who call me by that name, Jacob.” The black haired man turned back to Alice and offered his hand, “Greetings, you may call me Galian.”

“Hi,” she said, shaking his hand. “I’m Alice Wingborne.”

A loud *oooh* from the crowd brought everyone’s attention back to the battle going on below them. Falkner’s Pidgeotto was just recovering from what must have been an attempted Tackle against Iruni’s Pokémon. It flew back around for another attack.

“So Alice,” Andrea said, still keeping her eyes on the battle. “When you say you two are ‘partners’, are you guys… you know, together?”

“What? Oh no, we’re not like that. We just work together.”

“Work?” Andrea pouts a bit. “That’s boring…”

Wing Attacks from Falkner’s Pokémon were sending gusts of wind all throughout the stadium. Iruni’s Sneasel was doing her best to dodge them all, sprinting around and leaping out of the way. If ever she got close enough, her claws always connected, if only doing minor damage. After another close-quarters confrontation with the Bird Pokémon, she immediately backed off and let loose a flurry of Ice Shards at it. Most of the jagged hunks of ice connected and Falkner’s Pidgeotto failed to get up once more.

“Yeah!” Jake yelled, standing up. “There ya go, Barty! Ha ha ha!”

Alice caught Iruni as he confusedly searched the stands, and then saw his annoyed look as his Pokémon made her way back to their end of the field.
“Why’d she have to spread it to those guys too?” Iruni complained. “Now I’ll never live that nickname down…” Iruni saw Alice say something, but it was drowned out by the noise of the crowd. He guessed it was an apology.

“What’s… up?” Rikalia asked, breathing heavily.

Iruni looked down at her, “Are you alright? You’re really out of breath.”

“I’m… fine… what’s up with… you?”

Iruni merely gestured up to where Alice was now sitting. Rikalia instantly recognized the group.

“Oh wow, it’s those guys. That Coralis guy is creepy even at a distance,” said Rikalia.

“Be nice… Anyway, are you sure you can go on?” Iruni asked. “You did great already.”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. I don’t want Atanya having to go against two Flying types. That’d be embarrassing on my part. Besides,” she said, flexing her claws, “if that guy’s smart, he’ll keep that Spearow for last to give it more time to rest, so she’ll have an easy target. Plus, I think that big bird of his was his strongest.”

“Alright. Get out there then,” Iruni said.

Rikalia quickly made her way back to the center of her end of the battlefield, eagerly awaiting the next opponent. They were only allowed a few more moments of rest before the fourth round of the match began. Falkner surprised her and her trainer by releasing the injured Spearow from the first round. It took to the air with its hurt wing, flapping frantically in the air to try and stay aloft. The Gym Leader’s Pokémon stared Rikalia down right up until the referee resumed the match.

“Spearow, Roost!”

Even before Rikalia had the chance to close the distance between the two, the Spearow landed on the ground and folded its wings. Its body glowed for a short time and then faded. The resulting effect was evident; Spearow opened its wings and fluttered high into the air, completely restored.

“That’s not fair,” Rikalia grumbled, feeling the soreness in her limbs.

Not wanting to waste time, Rikalia began gathering her Ice type powers into her paws. She ran forward, looking to reduce the chances of her missing her target. She flung an Ice Shard upward at the bird, striking it in a few places. Unfortunately, she already found herself tiring. She’d pushed herself too hard while fighting Falkner’s Pidgeotto. Spearow’s counterattack hit her hard. Its wing shone silver for a moment and crashed into her stomach, winding her. She slid on the rough Gym floor for a few feet before she recovered.

It came around again, wanting to execute another Steel Wing against her. She didn’t have enough time to fully prepare an Ice Shard to fling at it, so she decided to improvise. She would build up as much Ice type energy in her claws and hope for the best. She clenched her right paw into a fist, keeping her eyes steady on the bird diving down at her. If she were fully rested, she might have been able to execute her attack and have the time to move out of the way, but she was exhausted.

She threw her clenched, freezing fist at the bird just as it was right on top of her. It hit home, sending a blast of cold energy over it. But the hit wasn’t strong enough to stop much of Spearow’s momentum. Its Steel Wing attack hit Rikalia right in the chest again, knocking her back and onto the
ground. Her vision blurred, she couldn’t hear very well. Something loud was happening all around her. She lay on the ground for what felt like hours, but it must’ve only been a few seconds. She felt something picking her up.

“Mhmmm?” she groaned. “Wha…?”


“Did I win?”

“No, but you managed to knock out Falkner’s Pokémon with that last attack. It was a tie.”

Rikalia managed to give a smug smile as she felt like she was slipping back into exhaustion. “Good enough for me. Tell… Tell Atanya, if she messes this up, I’ll kill her.”

“I’ll pass it along,” he said. He recalled her into her Umbra Ball and set it to stasis mode. Rikalia wasn’t critically injured, but it would save her the time she had to deal with the pain.

Iruni reached his end of the battlefield and turned in time to see Falkner recall his Spearow. Once the referee had made his ruling and ended the round, the Gym Leader had rushed out onto the battlefield to see to his Pokémon as well. He gave Iruni an impressed look.

“You sure this is your first Gym Battle? Your Pokémon show a lot of talent and experience.”

“We’ve been preparing for this for a long time. Too long, if you ask me,” said Iruni. He looked down at his Chikorita, and she looked up at him. “Go get ’em, Atanya. It’s just you now.”

“Dang,” Jake said, leaning back in his seat. “I wasn’t expectin’ such a tough battle, what with that Spearow already being weakened.”

“Iruni’s Houndour has Ornithophobia,” Coralis spoke up. At his friends’ confused looks, he elaborated, “A fear of birds. While he did manage to do damage to Falkner’s Pokémon, his fear was what was holding him back. That Spearow was able to fully recover with only one Roost, after all.”

“How’d you know that?” Alice asked.

“I just saw how he acted differently. The signs all pointed to a phobia of some sort, and I could rule out a fear of crowds easily once the battle started,” he said simply. “Our friend ‘Barty’ didn’t tell me outright, but you’ve clearly confirmed my theory.”

“You sure take notice of the small things,” said Alice.

“The next round has started,” he nodded at the battlefield.

“Begin!” At the referee’s signal, the fifth and final round of the match began.

Falkner had sent out another surprising choice; a Doduo. The flightless bird easily doubled Atanya’s height, but more troublesome, it was nightmarishly quick. By the time Atanya could close the gap to try a Tackle, it had enough time to run half the length of the battleground, turn, and taunt her into charging it again. It was a war of attrition that Atanya was sure to lose quickly if she didn’t do anything to stop it. The Gym Leader’s Pokémon was employing a hit-and-run tactic of hitting softly, but often. Three minutes into the round, Atanya still hadn’t landed a hit against the thing.
Even with her newly learned Razor Leaf attack, any of Atanya’s attacks that connected weren’t doing much damage to the Flying type Pokémon.

“Alright Atanya, you’re free to pull out all the stops!” Iruni yelled. “Frenzy Plant!”

“Frenzy what?” Falkner asked. He almost laughed. “There’s no way a young thing like that can—”

He was silenced at the vibrant, green glow that was now rolling off the challenger’s Pokémon. He stared in disbelief as huge, gnarled, spiny vines sprouted from the ground around the little Chikorita. They burrowed and dug into the dirt field of the gym, breaching the surface as they closed in on Falkner’s Doduo. It tried to run out of the way, but a large vine cut its path off. By the time it turned around again, it was surrounded, even enclosed by them. Only a few gaps in the vines remained, the most of which were near the top. Doduo tried many times to climb up out of the tangle of thick plant life, but the thorns kept cutting into its feet. It couldn’t make more than a few steps without having to give up.

Atanya, climbed up the mound of vines she had conjured, unbothered by the thorns, looking for a good spot. She knew what her trainer wanted. She found a perch that looked down into the space below. Her opponent looked up at her, angry at losing its advantage. It tried a standing jump to get to the exit she stood at, but fell just short of reaching it. Atanya heard the command she had been expecting and gathered her strength. She let loose a flurry of leaves down into the hole, spinning and swirling inside the cocoon of vines. The Leaf Storm took what was left of her strength, leaving her tired, but still standing.

The construct of spiny branches began to wither and collapse from the assault of the leaves. She quickly jumped down to the dirt floor and watched it all crumbled away. The Doduo lay there unconscious. The Gym Leader could only look onward, stunned at the display of power the small green Pokémon just performed.

“Yes!”

Iruni’s triumphant yell was all Atanya could hear before the crowd exploded with cheers. He tried not to laugh at the shocked and incredulous faces of both the Gym Leader and referee, but he did shoot a look up at his group of supporters. They were the ones yelling the loudest. He walked to meet his Pokémon halfway and picked her up.

“You did amazing, Atanya. Thanks for keeping the crazy vines inside the ring.”

“You can say that again.” Falkner had walked over to them, having already recalled his Doduo. He shook his head. “I can’t believe your trump card was this cute little thing. Not many trainers with Chikorita do well here.”

“I was hoping I wouldn’t have to rely on her,” said Iruni. He let Atanya jump back down to the floor. “I even planned not resort to using her really powerful attacks. They tire her out and she’s still new at using them in battle, but your Doduo was too fast for us.”

Falkner laughed, “You were holding back? Now that I know that, maybe I’ll shoot a call over to Bugsy, tell him to really let you have it.”

“Isn’t that against some sort of regulation?” Iruni asked, jokingly.

“At least three,” Falkner said. “But, I lost. There’s no working around that. Here.” He reached into his pocket and held out a shiny, silver badge. “You’re officially one badge closer to challenging the Pokémon League than you were yesterday. It’s also your first badge. Congratulations.”
Before Iruni could thank him, a pair of arms flung around his neck from behind him. Alice almost dragged him down to the dirt in her enthusiastic hug.

“That was so amazing, Barty!” she said.

“Heheh, yeah Barty,” he heard Jake’s voice say. “You’ve really got some talent in battlin’ there.”

“Thanks for coming, you guys,” Iruni said. “I didn’t know all of you were in town. Come to see the sights?”

“You can blame Cora for both of those,” said Jake. “He really rallied us up to take on the League, and he’s the one who saw you were takin’ on Falkner here today, so we had to stop by.”

“Congratulations,” Coralis said quietly. “Your Chikorita is quite formidable.”

“Sorry to break up the happy reunion,” Falkner interrupted, “but we need to get to work cleaning up this field. We don’t normally have to, but some people…”

They all took a look around them, staring at the large holes and ditches that Atanya’s attacks had caused.

“Sorry about that,” said Iruni. “It was great to battle you though.”

“Same,” Falkner said. With a nod at his previous challengers, he bid them farewell as they started heading towards the exit.

“So,” Jake said, “You ready for tonight, my boy?”

“Tonight?” Iruni asked.

“Of course! We’re gonna celebrate until we see the dawn! First drinks are on me.”

Iruni smiled, “I’m all for celebrating, but we need to stop by the Center first. Rika’s still hurt from the battle.”

[Cartographer Log: 4/16/00]

[Cartographer ID: B. I. Thomas (53142)]

[Unknown #1: “What are you recording?”

Cartographer #1 (B.I.Thomas): “It’s just a… a diary of sorts, I guess. I log unusual wild Pokémon sightings.”

Cartographer #2 (A.J.Wingborne): “Yeah, we’re uh… we’re collaborating with someone who’s doing an informative documentary. They’re paying us basically to travel around and look at Pokémon.”

Unknown #2: “{laughter} That’s a fine easy job there, Barty. Who’s the benefactor?”

C1: “It’s not really… a production documentary. Private research, meant to keep it that way.”

U1: “If it’s strange enough, Fafnir was found just south of Blackthorn City. Does that help?”]
C2: “Wow, really? Those Pokémon are from way up north!”

U2: “You’re tellin’ me. And to think, Cora here spotted a whole family of ’em {more laughter}.”

Unknown #3: “He’s been such a dear, playing with my little Nibbles. They have Axew in Unova as well, so I bet he’s reminded of home.”

C1: “Well, that’s as much of an update as you’ll get for today. Not a whole lot of wild Pokémon roaming Violet City.”]

[MAIL]

[From: Prof.S.Oak]

[To: Prof.J. Elm]

[Subject: “Cartographer Log 4/16/00 (53142)]

[Where was this recorded? Lots of annoying background noise. “U1” hardly spoke loud for the mic enough to register. Did B.I.Thomas really drag A.J.Wingborne to a bar to compare notes or something? Who are these people, and who is “Nibbles”? Why are there Axew south of Blackthorn City? Needs documented sighting. Suggest forwarding request for detour for C.M. Altswalder.]

[MAIL]

To be continued…

[MAIL]
Tick-tock goes the clock. Or so the song goes, anyway.

Being me, I never had a chance—or any desire for that matter—to really understand what that meant. I guess it’s a human thing; recording time and history. That’s what a clock does. Thought up and made by humans, it measures time as it passes by. For me, that never really mattered. I could stay in one place for as long as I wanted, usually until it bored me. Being me, I was blessed at birth with an ageless life and a free pass through all of time. Lord Dialga saw fit to let me wander freely in his domain, under some kind of wisdom that I assume he would call “Above you” if anyone but his brothers asked. I was one of only two beings in the universe who didn’t worry about where I had to be because I could change when I was.

Being me, I loved it.

If I were to tell you of all the things I’ve seen, you would probably die of old age. I’ve been everywhere and almost everywhen. Some points in time are too chaotic for me to be; mostly the points before time started. Not even the Time Lord can venture to when he didn’t even exist yet. The end of time also feels out of reach for me. Can’t exactly swim without water, right? The fun one can have with time travel is without words. Seeing the runt of the litter become the leader of the pride. Empires changing rule when I last appeared to them. Courageous humans and their Pokémon companions being written into the chronicle of ages for their actions, when just five minutes ago I was watching as the event unfolded.

Whenever I found myself in a time period that had libraries, I grew ecstatic. Internet is faster, but I prefer books; less passwords to deal with. Humans love to brag. Libraries are some of the biggest halls of fame ever conceived. I would sneak around the shelves and aisles looking for anything in the tomes of the time that might interest me. They’re quick to write down wars, I’ve noticed. Who started it, who won, and how badly the others lost. I love finding and reading up on interesting events I missed since my last appearance. If I was lucky, I would get to go back and watch. I never have been, though. Lucky, that is.

Being me, and what I am, my plans for my own future never come about the way I like. I can see the past and future around me like how you could read the words printed in a book. But I can’t see my own future. Tomorrow is just a mystery for me as it would be to anyone else. I may have been given a great gift, but it always angered me. Going forward or falling backwards in time is easy to control. Time flows around me like sand. Where you are is “now”. The sand around you in any given moment is your “present”. If I want to go backwards, I follow along the current faster than it moves, arriving before time can get there to make it the “present”. To head toward the future, all I have to do is go ahead of where the little grains of moments are coming from, arriving ahead of schedule.

The annoying thing about what I can do is that I can’t ever manage to land exactly when I want. It’s infuriating sometimes. I can sense time as well as the Time Lord can. That rock over there fell from that mountain, and will not move for another fifty-three years. That’s easy stuff. But if I pick a point
ahead of me and slip into the time-stream, I may end up sixteen seconds before it or end up a hundred years after it had past! I can never get the pattern down. I never find out what it is I’m missing.

Being me, that shouldn’t bother me. But it does.

It used to bother me a lot less. Whenever it happened, I was sometimes lucky enough that I could wait it out and I would get to when I wanted to be. Other times, it would just mean a month stuck in a time period I didn’t choose before I could slip again. I usually found something to like whenever I landed, but still, it was annoying.

It’s been almost five years since my last timeslip. Five. Years. No one else but me could possibly dread the consecutive passing of one thousand, eight hundred, and twenty-six days as much as I do. All that will change is another anniversary—ugh, why did humans come up with that term?—of my great failure will have passed. You can’t take someone who lived like I did, witnessing entire ages sift past, and force them to watch Monday become Tuesday for years at a time. You just can’t!

But I did. I did this to myself. I could leave right now if I wanted. And I do. I do so badly. You have no idea how it was after my first month after we landed. I just wanted to run away from it. From him. But how could I live with myself if I did? I’m stuck here in a constant war between boredom and guilt. I can’t deal with the standard progression of time, but I can’t do anything to get myself out of here.

For the first year all I really did was wander around. Being me, I should have been used to that kind of lifestyle. But not like this. After I… lost track of him… I didn’t have anywhere to go. Sometimes I would just detach myself from the world around me and just drift. I’d lose months at a time. They still happen sometimes… I got to be more careful.

Everything changed for me when I found him again.

I can’t say I’m sure what I would have done if things went differently. I guess I saw him, and saw an end to my guilt, end to my boring prison. Maybe that’s something I did to push him away. I saw him, and I was happy. I smiled. I asked him a question I really shouldn’t have.

He yelled at me. Louder than he did when we landed in this time. He threatened to kill me. He wished for it all to end. He wanted to die. I knew he wouldn’t—at least not for a while—but the words were sincere. And that must have shaken some sense back into me.

In that short conversation, I saw his future. It was blurry, as could be expected from a chronologically-displaced person, but I saw a few things that gave me hope. I saw people, heard names, and watched events unfold.

Then, I made a plan.

Oh no!
Oh no…. no no no…
I let it happen again.
Dammit all
When is it? What is today?
Okay… It’s April now. Funny things, month names. That’s at least one thing humans made up that I enjoy. It helps to remember things if you can associate names to them.

Now… April…

Oh no…

No!

It’s already happening! He’ll die if I don’t do something. He’s my main link back to Coralis! He can’t die yet!

Where is he now?

Oh.

The Ruins.

Perfect.

I’m sure The Alpha won’t mind if I borrow the place for a bit. He’s tied up anyway. Old fool.

I think it’s about time I check up on my unwitting helper now anyway. His future’s changing today, after all.

I used to love new futures.
A frantic yell broke the silence. It carried on into the darkness, echoing down the tunnels for distances unknown. The noise slowly died down, swallowed up by the hollow void. Iruni could feel pain exploding from his head. Did he hit it? When was that? The pain distorted everything around him. He couldn’t see. He coughed as he tried to breathe; the air he took in was stale and dusty.

“You’re awake!” a voice called out to him. It was Rikalia’s. He could remember that.

Iruni tried to sit up slowly, his vision was still a blur. He blinked hard, panic beginning to set in.

“Rika?” he called into the dark. “Where are you? Are you alright? I can’t see.”

“I’m fine,” Iruni heard her say. He felt a pair of clawed paws grasp his outstretched arm, lowering it slowly. “Here. I’m right here…” she said.

“Wh— Why can’t I see?” Iruni asked, waving his hand in front of his face. His addled mind was panicking, placing a number of terrible conclusions to his current state.

“It’s too dark down here. Your eyes look… Well, your eyes are probably fine.”

“You can see?” he asked, thinking on it. His head was clearing up now. “Right. Dark types, and your species have great low-light vision.” Iruni took a few deep breaths, calming himself. He picked up a few more things from what Rikalia had just said. “Down ‘here’?” he asked her. “Where are we?”

“Remember? We fell.”

“Hours Earlier …

“What’s this drink called again?” Rikalia asked.

She stared at the pot of black, stinking liquid bubbling out of the machine on the counter. It had woken her up, with its bubbling noise and the pungent smell it gave off. She had planned on sleeping in this morning too. The groggy Sneasel looked over at her human trainer sitting in a chair, cradling his head in his hands. “Are you okay? You look sick.”

“Head feels awful,” Iruni said in a dull voice.

“My fault?”

“No,” he said, rubbing the side of his head. “This is what you get if you drink too much alcohol.”

“Is that why you didn’t let me have any?” she asked. Iruni had adamantly discouraged her curiosity the previous night regarding the many beverages their group consumed in celebration. “You guys looked like you were having fun.”
“You can’t have alcohol, Rika.” Iruni poured himself a mug of the dark liquid, steam rising from the cup. A fresh wave of the smell wafted towards her as Iruni blew on the hot coffee. He took a quick sip and set it on the table again. “It’ll really mess up your insides.”

“But humans can drink it no problem?” she asked. “That’s not fair. You guys were laughing your heads off.”

“Not completely, no. It’ll still get us drunk and hurt our liver if we overdo it,” said Iruni. He shrugged, “Don’t ask me on the specifics, I couldn’t really tell you.”

“What about that stuff then?” she asked, pointing to the pot on the burner. “It smells… good, I think.”

“There shouldn’t be anything in coffee you can’t have,” he said. Iruni poured her a small amount into cup. “Let it cool a bit, but it’s better warm.”

“Easy,” said Rikalia. She gripped the white mug with her claws, holding it carefully with both paws. She inhaled, calling upon a tiny bit of energy, and blew just like Iruni had. Her breath was much cooler, leaving a small layer of frost on the rim of the cup. The dark liquid inside no longer let off any steam. She grinned up at Iruni before bringing the cup to her face.

“Ick—bleh!” she managed to swallow the small amount she drank, but was cringing at the taste. Rikalia practically shoved the cup of coffee back into Iruni’s hand. “That’s awful! Too bitter!”

“It helps,” said Iruni, taking a longer drink from his own mug. “Plus it wakes you up.”

“I noticed…” Rikalia said, grimacing at the pot above her. She looked around the room, looking for what could replace the taste in her mouth. Relief came in the form of a few sweet berries she had saved. They disappeared before Iruni could take another drink of coffee. “So, what’s our plan now?” she asked.

“Well, for starters,” said Iruni, “Alice won’t be joining us. She’s going to stay here in town for a few days and we need to move on. Plus I got an email from Professor Elm saying Cartographers shouldn’t stick too close to each other.”

“What about the dragon people?”

“Who?”

“Coralis and his friends,” Rikalia said. It took Iruni a moment to understand the nickname.

“Oh right.” He took another drink, draining the mug. “They’ll probably set off today some time. That other guy… I think his name was Tyler? He was pretty far gone after last night.” Iruni stood up from his chair and walked over to the nightstand, picking up a folded bunch of paper. He unfolded the map on the bed, motioning for Rikalia to join him.

“This is Violet City,” he said, leaning over and pointing to a cluster of lines. “Roads,” he explained, “are your best markers to look for on a map, apart from the obvious mountains or bodies of water. I think,” Iruni said, dragging his finger over the laminated paper, “we should head this way, taking Route 36 a ways, and taking a detour south, through the Ruins of Alph. Then go straight to Route 32 from there.”

“But wouldn’t it make sense,” she said, pointing to the lines on the paper, “to just head down from where we are?”
“We could, but I’m not in that much of a hurry. Going straight to Route 32 would save us about a
day of walking, but I always wanted to see the ruins there.” He gathered up the map and folded it
back into a smaller square. “My job as Cartographer would really benefit if I cover more ground,
plus the extra time will be good for some special training.”

“Special?” she asked.

“For you,” he said, poking her forehead. “We spent the last week preparing for the Gym Battle, and
we mostly worried about Kar’s fear of birds. Kreen was brought up to speed to help with that, and
Atanya’s too strong for her own good anyway.”

“What do I need to train for? I’m fast, strong, and good with all of my moves, right?”

“Not all of them,” said Iruni. “Your Dark Pulse.”

Rikalia’s eyes widened at the mention. She had pushed that topic to the back of her mind these past
few days with their first Gym Battle coming up. Since the revelation of her knowing the skill, Rikalia
had tried in private to call upon the Dark type energy she seemed to naturally generate.
Unfortunately, she was at a complete loss on how to start. “You’re going to help with that? Really?”

“I think we’ve put it off long enough.”

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Now …

Sitting in the darkness all around him, Iruni couldn’t help but blink. It was like someone had taken all
light in the world away from him. Over and over again he opened and shut his eyelids, finding no
change in what he could see. Small dots of color moved around his field of vision, just tricks of the
eye.

“What—” he recoiled, pulling his hand away from his head. Another wave of pain washed over him,
wracking him senses. Noise was blotted out for a few moments before fading back into clarity.

“…—touch your head!” Rikalia tried to warn him.

Iruni felt around above his ears, finding a long strip of cloth tied around his head. As he explored the
new headwear, he pulled his hand back; it was damp with something. He shivered at the
implications.

“Okay…” Iruni finally said. He gestured in the dark to his injured head, “What happened?”

“You hit your head on our way down here. I’m not sure on what,” said Rikalia. “I noticed the blood
and did my best to wrap the wound tightly, just like you showed me.”

Iruni’s adverse and inconvenient reaction to witnessing any amount of blood was a concern of
Rikalia’s ever since she accidentally cut up his arm with her claws. Rikalia had been stunned at the
scene that unfolded; she had never seen someone so quickly shut down and collapse from the mere
sight of something. After voicing the concern to Iruni some weeks later, the two settled on a plan.
Iruni taught her, with some help from his father where his own knowledge was lacking, how to treat
most sorts of freely bleeding wound Iruni might endure. In case he were to lose consciousness from
the sight of his own blood out in the wilderness, he certainly wouldn’t have been able to patch himself up.

“Did I do a good job?” she asked.

“You did a great job,” Iruni said. He smiled, hoping she could see it in the dark. “Thank you, Rika.”

He wiped his hand on his shirt; he was going to try and get some light and he didn’t want to see any of that. He felt around his wrist for his PokéGear. His fingers hit jagged plastic. From his sense of touch, it was obvious the mobile device had been ruined in the fall. Maybe he had landed on it, or he unknowingly hit it off the stone walls around him as he fell.

“Damn…” He felt around in his pocket. With luck, he pulled out his Cartographer’s Pokédex. The device was tough as a rock just by looking at it. He hoped they were built to last. Iruni pressed the button to bring it back from its idle mode. 


Earlier …

“Alright, first we’re going to try a blind test.”

Iruni, Rikalia, and Karros were grouped just off of the well-worn road of Route 36. Violet City was about an hour’s walk behind them now, and after a late lunch the training for Rikalia’s hidden Dark type technique was beginning to take shape. It is a strange concept, when looked at on paper, that a human could know a Pokémon’s abilities better than they could themselves, but such occurrences were becoming more common in this day and age. Training to be a Move Tutor in one of various specializations has risen in popularity as a career path. Although Iruni himself was nowhere near as qualified to provide his talents professionally, knowing the ins and outs of Dark type techniques had become second nature to him.

“Gotcha.” Rikalia was standing in front of him, back turned, claws flexed.

“How you release the pulse is up to you. Some Pokémon release it from their mouth like a roar, others gather the energy in their paws or hands. I think that will work best for you.”

“Why?” she asked.

“It’s what you’re already used to when you channel your Ice type energy, though you have been getting better at the Icy Wind technique,” Iruni said. “But for now, just try your best to find the Dark energy inside you, gather it, and release.”

Rikalia nodded, and set her focus on the tree in front of her. She thought inwardly, searching for that switch in her mind. She knew what her Ice powers felt like. She knew what was like to call on that energy. She could call on them in an instant, even if her control was still a little shaky. It felt separate from her and a part of her at the same time, like flexing another set of claws. She stood, tense, for a long time before letting go of a breath.

“I can’t do it,” she growled in defeat.

Iruni knelt down to her, rubbing her back. “Hey, it’s alright. I didn’t expect you to anyway.”
Rikalia turned around and gave him an annoyed look. “Then why’d you make me try like that?”

“I said it was a blind test,” said Iruni. “You went all this time not knowing you had the Dark Pulse technique already within your capabilities. I wanted to see if it was going to be as simple as you actually trying it once you knew you had it. Clearly, it isn’t.”

“Oh. Then how do I do it?” she asked.

Iruni nodded to Karros, sitting a few feet away. “He’ll be a better tutor for you now.” Iruni pulled a small plastic case from his pocket, and handed it to Rikalia for her to look at. “You know what that is?”

“Uhh… isn’t this one of those music things? Dee-cees?”

“No,” he said. “It’s not a CD. That is Dark Pulse.”

“Huh?” Rikalia held the plastic case up to the sun, letting the light dance all over the colored disk inside. “This is in my head?”

Iruni chuckled, taking the case back. “No, no. This is one of the wonders of human technology, Rika. Here.” He waved Karros over. Iruni pulled his Houndour’s Poké Ball from his belt and recalled him. He made sure Rikalia could see what he was doing as he explained it. He removed the dark gray disk from its container and inserted it into a slot on the side of his bulky Pokédex.

“And now,” a notification on the screen popped up, “Kar knows Dark Pulse too!”

Rikalia’s jaw dropped, “What? How?”

In a burst of light, Karros was back among them. He shook himself from the disorienting experience, but it was one he was used to by now.

“A ‘Technical Machine’, Rika, is an artificial way that Pokémon can learn techniques. Not all moves can be taught this way, but the ones that can are relatively simple.” Iruni explained, in as much detail as he could, the process of how the data on the TM’s disk was imparted to the Pokémon inside their Poké Ball. “Now, Kar can give you advice on Dark Pulse with some firsthand experience.”

Iruni patted his Houndour’s head and asked for him to demonstrate for Rikalia. Turning around, Karros planted his four paws squarely on the ground. Opening his jaws wide, an orb of swirling purple energy began building. When Karros unleashed the energy, it sped towards the tree in a spiraling motion. Upon impact, a low note seemed to resound in the immediate area, dark waves of energy rippling from the point of impact. The bark on the target tree, as well as a few around it, was darkened and wisps of energy crackled and lingered for a few moments.

Rikalia stared wide-eyed at the technique’s aftermath. “That was awesome! I’m going to be able to do that?”

“That’s the plan, but there’s something else I want you two to do,” Iruni said, kneeling to his two Dark type Pokémon. He looked to his Houndour, “Karros, you’re going to be able to give Rika a much better understanding of what Dark Pulse feels like than I ever could. And when Rika can control it to the best of her abilities,” he turned to look at Rikalia now, “Then I want you to teach him.”

She tilted her head, confused. “What do I know that Kar doesn’t?”

“I want you to teach Karros how to talk to me, like you can.”
“Ow!” It was unclear who screamed in pain first; it hardly mattered.

After being submerged in pitch darkness, the sudden flash of light from the bright LCD screen was like a hundred suns appearing in the night sky all at once.

“Warn me first before you do that!” Rikalia yelled. Her anger was well placed. A Sneasel’s eyes could still see in perfect darkness and be unaffected by regular nighttime darkness. A bright flash in the void they shared really stung, but she wasn’t about to hold a grudge in their situation. After a few moments, they could finally see their surroundings.

The illumination that the Pokédex provided cast a slight blueish hue and sent sharply angled shadows over the walls. A low ceiling of stone loomed over their heads, leaving just enough room for Iruni to stand upright. He waved the dim light in front and behind him, seeing that they were in what seemed to be a long corridor or underground passage. He looked to the floor, instantly relieved when he saw his traveling gear a few feet away from him. Nothing seemed broken as he sorted through his belongings. It calmed him to know now what he did and didn’t have. He glanced at the Pokédex’s screen, and realized something else he didn’t have.

[Battery: 23%]

Time.

[ERROR 307: Message not sent. No service detected.]

[Retry?]  [YES]  [NO]
Earlier …

Iruni ran his bare hand over the hip-high stone beside him. He was shocked at the amount of weathered rock and gravel that clung to his hand. He nervously brushed the grainy dust off his hand as he looked away from the [“Keep Hands Off”] sign he had not noticed.

“You wanted to come here?” Rikalia asked him. The Sneasel stood on his shoulders, pushing herself up as she looked at the ruins around them.

Moss grew in places, crawling up the sides of some of the ruined structures. Low roofed buildings with entrances wide enough for many to come and go. Some were large, others small. Some broken foundations remained of buildings long since destroyed, either by time or another event. Small ponds were scattered around here and there. Trees lined the site of the ruins on all sides.

“It’s a dump.”

“A historical dump,” Iruni corrected her. “This place is one of the oldest sites of ancient civilization in the world.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, slumping down and resting her head on top of his.

The discovery and subsequent research of the Pokémon called Unown sent a surge of interest in the Ruins of Alph around the world. The strange, letter-like Pokémon communicated on telepathic wavelengths that continue to baffle researchers. The waves were first picked up on simple radios, the transmission of said waves further confusing many authorities on the subject of Psychic type Pokémon and brain wave patterns.

Iruni saw one—just one—float from one of the buildings and into another. Curious, he went in that direction. A few of the larger buildings in the ruins were open to tourists or the occasional Pokémon trainer who might want to try and capture one of the many Symbol Pokémon that lived inside.

Inside, it was impossibly dark. It took Iruni a few moments to realize that a few lights had been strewn up to allow passage through the decaying temple. The Unown he had been tailing was long gone, but he had wanted to venture inside one of these buildings anyway. He walked down the few corridors that were allowed public access, trying his best at deciphering the carvings on the wall.

“The symbols,” he explained to Rikalia, “are a lot like our letters. Some are different, but with a little concentration… ‘Ours is the voice of Him.’”

“What’s that mean?”

“I don’t know. I— Ah!”

A noise; sharp and whining, pierced Iruni’s head. The longer he listened, it went higher and lower at a rapid rate. It scraped around in his head and against his skull. He gripped the sides of his head, letting out a scream. His vision was blurry. Iruni felt clawed paws hold his hands, heard a voice that wasn’t the noise that was piercing his ears. Rikalia sounded confused, worried, scared.

Iruni saw lights all around him. The noise in his head came from those lights. He was sure of it. He
knew. He could see the sound. He saw the lights, where they spun, where they danced, and where they were not. The darkness looked inviting, almost as if it was calling to him. He moved where the lights were not, unable to hear the cries of worry and warning from the creature on his shoulders.

He finally reached the darkness, and it surrounded him.

He fell.

———

Later …

It was late afternoon now. Spotty cloud cover, a nice breeze, rain maybe on Thursday, but he would be long gone by then. Before opening the door and stepping out into the hall, Allan Relmstead checked himself one last time. Shoes; laced up tightly. Belt; pulled tight around his waist. He ran his hand across it; three Poké Balls were clipped to it, but only two were occupied right now. He never could bear to leave her confined for very long. Umari; happily perched on his shoulder. He took a moment to pet her head.

‘Are we ready now?’ the Eevee asked, her mental voice ringing through is head. She’d been waiting impatiently for the past half hour.

Allan was determined to not forget anything before setting out this time. His new PokéGear had been checked for three times now. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his badge case, opening it. He momentarily looked at the Zephyr Badge snugly pressed into its slot, relieved it hadn’t somehow flown away on its own with those tiny silver wings.

“Yes,” he said as he put away the case. “I’m sure that’s everything.” He walked out of the Violet City Pokémon Center, inhaling as a warm gust of wind blew his way. The gentle push of nature guiding him south, just where he was intending on going.

“The wind’s at our backs,” Allan said, walking down the road. “One victory already to our names.” He smiled wide, his eyes full of hope. “It’s all uphill from here, Umari. Azalea Town won’t know what hit it.”

———

Now …

Iruni sat in the darkness, alone.

Fifteen minutes ago, he had sent Rikalia off into the passageway in which they had found themselves in. The first big question they faced when they were calm enough to ask it, was which way to go in search of the exit. He was hoping that after this simple test, he would have his answer. Iruni instructed her to walk, not run, in one direction for ten minutes. After which time, she would return to him, regardless of what she did or didn’t find. Iruni continuously, autonomously, tapped the hard stone floor with the metal end of his pocketknife’s handle, giving Rikalia an idea of where he was.
The time alone had allowed him to think hard about their situation. The big questions sometimes came with easy answers.

“What do I do about my other Pokémon?” Lock them in stasis, there’s not enough food and I don’t need Kar for fire right now.

“What about Rikalia?” With all the Pokémon food I have, she’ll have plenty of food. Though I doubt she can eat Kreen’s. I need her with me though. I can’t be alone down here.

“What if Rika comes back without finding out anything?” We take our chances with the other direction first. Only turn around if we reach a dead end.

“What about splits in the tunnel?” Repeat our initial test.

“What happens if we run out of food?” Ration food we have. Preserve water as best we can.

“What if we never find an exit?” …

Iruni didn’t want to think about that last one. Not while escape was still technically viable. He lifted his PokéGear up and closed his eyes in preparation. He clicked the button to try to bring it back from its idle state, but no bright flash burned into his eyelids. He tried it a few more times before sighing in defeat. Its battery was dead, or it had been completely destroyed in the fall. Groping around in the dark, he put the device in his backpack and securely zipped the pocket back up.

“Hey.” He felt a sudden presence grip his hand.

His echoing scream carried on for hundreds of feet in the dark tunnels. “Don’t just do that!” Iruni said.

“You stopped your tapping. I didn’t know I was already here,” Rikalia complained. “The zipper scared me.”

“I was— Nevermind that. What did you find?” In his head, it felt shorter than twenty minutes since Rikalia went off alone into the darkness. He hoped she’d returned with good news.

A dry, hollow, rattling sound was his answer. He sat upright in Rikalia’s direction and felt around on the ground. He picked up was felt like branches or sticks. Old wood that was brittle under his touch. They were thick, sturdy, and carried a fresh earthly scent.

“They’re tree roots,” said Rikalia. “I found them breaking through the walls and ceiling. They’ve completely blocked off that way. I cut away some of them, just in case we’d need them.”

“This is great,” Iruni said. He told Rikalia to be prepared to cover her eyes as he rummaged through his backpack for his lighter. A few quick swipes of his thumb later and he held the gnarled root that became a torch. As his eyes adjusted to the newfound light around him, he stood and carefully put on his backpack.

“Come on Rika,” he said. “We’re walking out of here.”

Still wincing from the new source of light, Rikalia picked up the rest of the tree roots and joined her trainer as they began their newly illuminated journey underground.

“Here, hold this.”
Iruni passed the burning tree root to Rikalia, who recoiled at the heat it gave off.

“But it’s so hot…” she complained. It burned her eyes to be so close to a source of light in the pitch blackness.

“Then try and wedge it in some rocks over there,” he said, pointing at some of the destroyed walls around them. “Just make sure it doesn’t fall down.”

They found their first major change in scenery in days; a cave. A collapsed section of the tunnel system that opened into a small cave. Rikalia could see a shimmer on the ground, and Iruni was kneeling by it. Curious, she quickly found a break in the stone floor and jammed the tree root carefully in, securing it upright.

“It’s water,” she remarked. A small pool of water sat silently in the darkness. Iruni was filling up his water container.

“Must be some underwater stream. Maybe this place collapsed because of a large reservoir or sink hole…I don’t know.” He wasn’t really talking to her. Just stating what he thought. He did that a lot.

It was nice to see something that seemed like it was natural, Rikalia thought idly. She’d never been great at telling time, so she was unsure how many days they’ve been walking in the flat, human-made tunnels. The stones were making her feet hurt. The best she’d been able to remember events down here was when she remembered when they met a crossroad or found one of the odd chambers. They all had the strange symbols that Iruni could read. All talking about Alpha and his voice. His words.

Rikalia didn’t care about those old stories. Her life and the immediate problem in it was all that occupied her mind.

“I’m glad I don’t have to make you any ice for a while,” Rikalia said, sitting down next to the small pool of water. “And for me too, I guess.”

“I think now’s a good time to have some food,” said Iruni.

That lightened her spirits a bit. She was terribly hungry. She never really stopped since they fell down here. Iruni had been constantly warning her to not beg for food often. She understood, but that didn’t make it any better. They had to keep their food lasting as long as possible. She could tell they had run out of her specific food a while ago. The last things she ate definitely reminded her of Karros’ breath.

She lay back on the uneven earth, trying to relax in some way.

“We’ll be okay.”

“What’s that?” asked Iruni.

“I mean, we’ll be fine.” Rikalia looked over at him. “I know we’ll be getting out of this place. When I was growing up, one of the good memories that I have from then, was the story my family told us; my brothers and me.” She closed her eyes, thinking back the story she was told.

“The forest has a guardian angel. Not just our forest, but all of them. It loves the trees, the streams, the rocks, and the skies above them. It loves us all and will help us when we need it, not when we ask for it. It’s kind, gentle, and fair. When… When I was… alone, before you found me, I believe I was helped by the forest spirit. It was the first few months of winter… I was hungry… I was awful at hunting. I went to sleep hungry, in a tree that had been gray and cold since the snow began falling.
When I woke up, the tree was alive and green, but the snow was still falling. It was full of berries that were sweet to eat.

“I didn’t know until I was living with you that they were called ‘Pecha’ berries.”

She looked back to Iruni, who was setting out food for himself to eat.

“I know you’ll get us out. You were always going to. You’ve always done what you needed to. You brought me out of that blizzard, even after I was so mean to you. You’re trying to help me get the hang of my Dark type powers, even though it’s hurting you. You worked so hard with Kar and his fear of birds. You’re still working with him. You’re working hard with the professor on this Cartographer thing. That’s to help people. You’re not going to let whatever happened to us stop you from…”

She sat up, looking over at Iruni. He’s hunched over his open backpack, not touching his food.

“Iruni?” she stood up, walking over to him. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re out of food,” he said flatly. “When we fell, a lot of the Pokémon food I brought got ruined. Packages broken, torn, crushed.”

Rikalia looked down at what Iruni was holding. It was her Umbra Ball.

“I thought,” he continued, “we’d be okay. I had a lot. Enough to keep everyone fed, well past when we’d get to Union cave… but…”

“It… It’s okay, right?” Rikalia asked. “I—I mean, I can have some of your food.”

Iruni turned his head and looked at her. The look in his eyes said “regret”.

“You know why I can’t do that. I’d run out of food twice as fast. Then we’d be in real trouble.”

Her heart began pounding in her chest, knowing already what he was going to do. “I… I don’t mind. I’ll just go hungry. We’re going to get out of here soon anyway. I believe in you.”

“Rika…” Iruni stood up, enlarging her Poké Ball. “I can’t do that to you.”

“Well you can’t do this to me!”

Her voice echoed in their little cavern and down both ways the tunnels burrowed in the ground.

“You can’t put me in there… You’ll be all alone.”

“I’ll be fine, Rika.”

“What if you won’t? Wh— What if you don’t find a way out?” Her eyes were welling up with frantic tears.

“I will,” he said, giving her a kind smile. She wished with all of her heart that she wouldn’t be parted from it. “You said so yourself, remember?”

“But that… that was with me staying by your side.”

Iruni got down on one knee and cupped the side of her head in his hand, wiping away the tears there.

“You will be. I promise. When I make it out of here, we’ll—”
“No…” she backed away from him. She felt fear. Not of him, but of what might happen should he—
“No! You can’t! I don’t want to go!”

“Rika… please…” he held up her ball, aiming it at her. “You have to.”

“But… I—”

Iruni stood alone. Silent. He held Rikalia’s Umbra Ball in his hand. It didn’t move. Rikalia was in stasis. The next time he released her, it will have felt like no time passed for her.

*Rika…*

The light dimming in the small alcove brought him back to reality. The root-torch was dying down.

He swallowed hard and placed Rikalia’s Poké Ball in his backpack. He glanced down at the food he had set aside for himself moments ago, and packed it up again.

*It’s so quiet now.*

He gathered up his things as best he could and lit one of the remaining tree roots Rikalia had gathered for him.

He left the one burning in the small crevice turn to ash as he walked on, only his footsteps keeping him company.

Time moved on by, just like it always did. Steadily and silently. Iruni remembered something Coralis had said. Something about how time had once made a fool of him.

*Is that what’s happening now? Is time just slipping away in front of me?*

How long had it been since he last saw or spoke to someone? Anyone? A day? Two? He hated trying to tell. He was tired, both physically and mentally. He shambled onward, arm braced against the wall to his right. The smooth stone had turned wet some time ago, the air becoming humid to replace the stale taste it left in his mouth. He guessed this section of the underground was beneath a lake, or maybe a river. Puddles caught his feet every so often, always startling him with the sudden spike in background noise.

Iruni tried, as always, to strain his eyes at the perpetual void in front of him. He had burned the last of the roots long ago. With nothing to light his way, he could see no end to his prison. The darkness pulled him onward, beckoning him forward. The hope of a glimpse of light, a sliver of freedom, carried his legs forward whenever he might stop to accept the inevitable disparity. Despite there being nothing in front of his eyes, Iruni’s vision flooded with color from time to time. Hunger, the clawing constant sensation in the pit of his gut, began to fight against him once again.

Iruni grunted in exhaustion more than pain. He fell to his knees, thankfully landing on a dry section of stone. He stayed there, doubled over and wincing, for a time. When he got his wits about him again, he slinked his backpack off slowly. He blindly rummaged through his belongings, naming each one he could just by touch. He hoped, needed, and even prayed, to find some more food. He had lost track of his mental list of what he still had when he had fallen into these underground pathways. His starving mind just couldn’t think straight.
Over and over again he groped around this backpack, each time getting more desperate to find a ration he must have missed.

He stopped, shaking his head slowly. “No…”

He sat staring into the darkness for what seemed like an eternity. The realization of what he had to face now prevented him from doing anything. He had run out of food, despite how hard he tried to make it all last. He was still hopelessly lost in these dark tunnels. And he couldn’t hope to think he could send for any help. What could he do? What were his options now?

Just one …

With shaky hands and slow, deliberate movements, zipped up his pack. If only for the novelty of it, he slung it on his back. It took a lot of effort to stand again, but he managed somehow. He braced himself against the wall, relying on the smooth surface to keep him upright. He feared that if he went down, he wouldn’t get up again.

Progress was as slow as could be expected. Iruni’s breathing was rough and hard. He stopped once or twice in fear of blacking out. He could hear water dripping from the low ceiling now. Just drops at a time, but it gave him hope. Those drops were the first sounds he heard that weren’t his own in a long time.

Feeling confident in his stride now, Iruni pushed off from the wall, walking under his own strength. No sooner than he did, something caught his foot. He tumbled forward, trying to find anything to brace his fall. He landed hard on his hands, pain ringing up his arms and wrists. He lay on the stone floor for moment, nursing his arms as they tingled from the pain.

Then he shivered, hard. The air around him was suddenly freezing. Iruni rolled onto his side, and looked around; he could see his breath.

But more important than that, he could see.

Iruni blinked hard many times, afraid his hunger-addled mind was playing tricks on him more than it had been. But sure enough, there was light to take in the sights of where he was, but something had definitely changed apart from the temperature. He was no longer in the dark caverns, or at least it didn’t look like it.

The stone he now sat on was a dark color, a stark change from the light sandstone of the Ruins of Alph. There were drifts of snow in places around the room that he could see. A chilling breeze blew in from the entrance off to his right. He looked up, seeing he was in a large open room. The ceiling was tall, with columns lining the walls. Each column had a gargoyle of imposing and dignified nature. Each one different. He couldn’t recognize any of the shapes, his vision was blurring at that distance.

In front of him was what looked like a raised stage. He stood on shaky legs, using a statue to his left as a brace. The statue was one of six, set in even intervals in front of the stage. The one he was leaning on had the appearance of a great snaking dragon Pokémon, its strange wings looking more like tentacles. The dragon seemed to be roaring silently at the stage ahead. Iruni couldn’t recognize it or any of the other statues either. He could now see that the stage in front of him was triangular. As his eyes continued to adjust to the new level of brightness, he saw the ornate and intricate design on the stone platform. It was massive; concentric circles and triangles making a pattern that Iruni felt must have some significance.

“Hey! You there!”
The voice came without warning, startling him. Iruni turned around, raising his hand to his face when he came to the bright light streaming into the dark room. He squinted hard but he couldn’t see any more than a silhouette standing in the entrance. At his awkward angle and state of exhaustion, Iruni collapsed onto the cold stone floor once again.

Whoever it was that had arrived ran toward him, footsteps echoing in the empty space of the dark temple. Iruni was on his back, trying to catch his breath from his fall. A woman’s face appeared over his, her gray eyes were filled with shock and confusion.

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It was bright. Too bright. Still cold.

Where?

Movement. He was moving. No, being carried. She was carrying him. Slow, heavy footsteps. There was a crunching sound; snow.

I never … I was…

“Help me!”

That voice woke him up again. Another bout of darkness took him. There was wind; biting into his face. Tiny frozen needles pricking his skin. She was running, still carrying him. A lot of movement.

Who is it?

A hand cupped his face; a human hand. He was looking up at her face again.

“Can you hear me?”

Yes.

It was quiet now. No more howling wind. He was still. He can’t move. It was warm, but he couldn’t stop shivering.

“You don’t know ‘im?”

Someone else’s voice. An older man?

“He was just in the temple…”

Nothingness took him again.

Something was pulling him. Pulling his clothes. Warm water. Almost burning hot. His head hurt.

“Boy looks like he’s been through hell…”

He woke up again. A blond haired woman was speaking to him. It was difficult to understand her words. The world was spinning. He tried to focus on her.

“… —ook at me. Bart Thomas, you need to…”

She knows my name?

His head fell back, and the light disappeared from the world.
Iruni felt himself being raised up, now leaning back against a hard surface. A soothing voice was talking him through something. He followed the orders as best he could. The reward was sweet and hot.

His eyes opened, peering down at a brown, shimmering reflection of himself. He took a sip of the warm drink, letting it hit the back of his throat and warm his body.

“There you go,” the woman said. “Take it slow.”

“Who…” he said. Iruni tried his best to find his voice. It had been a while since he last spoke to anyone.

The blond woman gave him a soft smile. “Don’t worry about me. You’re still very weak.”

He looked around the room he now found himself in. A cabin of sorts, with heavy wood beams stretching from wall to wall above him. A few lamps were alight around the room, giving it a warm glow of life. On the wall to his left, the window had its curtains drawn, out of which he could see a vast winterscape of ice and snow. A tall mountain towered in the distance.

He was lying in a soft, warm bed. Heavy blankets covered most of his body, his upper body now leaning against the backboard. He was wearing a shirt he didn’t recognize. The blond woman was sitting on the bed beside him, making sure the mug of cocoa was within his reach. Her skin was a creamy white, not pale or very tan. Long blond hair fell behind her and over her shoulder, some obscuring her face. She wore a black sweater that hugged her body tightly, showing off her well maintained figure.

“More?” she asked with a smile. Her gray eyes were what caught Iruni’s attention. She was the one who found him.

“Y—You…” his voice was coarse. It still hurt to talk.

She took one of Iruni’s hands and wrapped it around the warm mug. “Finish this first, you need some calories in you.”

Iruni looked down at the white porcelain cup in his hand. He took a few slow, careful drinks. His savior sat by his side as he drank, ready to assist him if need be. He took a deep breath after he drained the mug, taking a moment to relish the warmth that now spread through him.

“That good, huh?” she asked, ending the question in a chuckle.

Iruni almost forgot she was there. He cleared his throat, needing to speak now. “Thank you,” he said roughly. He swallowed a few more times.

“Not a problem,” she said. “You had me worried. I’m not terrible at first aid, but you were pretty far gone for a while.”

“I… I’m sorry about that, it’s just…” he took another look around the room, and out another window across the room. He could see a path in the deep snow leading off to the north. The sun was setting. “I don’t recognize this place.”

The blond woman gave him an odd look, like she may have been expecting him to say something like that. “You mean you don’t know where you are?”
Iruni shook his head. “No, not at all.” He looked out the window again. The sun was setting. “How long have I… When did you find me?”

She crossed her arms, looking down at the floor in thought for a moment. She blinked herself out of her trance. “Well, let’s see… three days, this morning.”

“Th-Three…” Iruni said. He looked down at his hands, they were shaking.

“You need to eat, Bart.”

“Hey…” he looked up at her. “What’s your name?”

She smiled, standing up from the bed. “Cynthia. Now come on,” she said, helping Iruni out of bed. “Let’s get you cleaned up and some solid food in you. If you can stomach it.”

Cynthia helped Iruni walk shakily into the washroom. She re-bandaged his head wound, she explained, for the second time now. For the first time since his fall, Iruni could see what had happened. On the upper left side of his head, a bruised and jagged cut sat just under his hairline. It wasn’t even noticeable if his hair sat the right way, but it must have been in just the right spot to bleed the way it did. She said the wound has closed and on its way to healing. She discretely took the clothes he was wearing as he stepped into the bath. She stayed outside while he cleaned himself in case he needed help. Iruni spent a long time in the warm water, relaxing for the first time since his ordeal began.

They talked through the door to one another, retelling each of their sides of the story. Cynthia was explaining the past three days to him. “My uncle and I did our best to take care of you. You were awake here and there. You didn’t say much. But you responded more to food and water than words.”

“I remember a little bit of it,” said Iruni. “It’s all a blur, really…”

He stood up from the bath carefully, taking slow, deliberate steps out of the water and onto the floor. He looked at himself in the mirror. He was clean, but he looked hollow. He was exhausted still, despite being bedridden for days. His limbs shook. His vision shimmered from time to time. He braced himself against the bathroom’s sink. He almost lost consciousness again.

“Hey,” Cynthia called. “You alright?”

“Yeah…” he said. “I think I will be.”

“I don’t know how, but I was just there when I looked up after I tripped,” said Iruni. The smells of the food were heavenly. “Then I blacked out right after you showed up.”

The sun had set now. Cynthia helped Iruni into the dining room and kitchen of the cabin and sat him at the table, giving him some crackers to eat. Much else right away might upset his stomach. He had just finished retelling his end of the story of how he came to this strange, chilled place.

“I see,” she had her back to him, tending to a pot of sauce simmering over the stove. “You were in trouble even without almost freezing to death.” She stopped talking for a few moments, unsure of what to say next. “I wasn’t aware of such a vast array of tunnels underneath the Arcean ruins,” she said, shifting the discussion to a more lighthearted topic. “It would be a fascinating discovery if not so harrowing in your case.”
“I thought they were called the ‘Ruins of Alph’?” said Iruni.

“Both names are correct,” said Cynthia. “Those ruins are of the first major civilization of Arcean people outside of what is now the Sinnoh region.”

“Oh, I get it. ‘Alph’ is the Alpha.”

“There you go,” Cynthia said, smiling at him. She was placing plates around the table. “The temple you found yourself in is a part of the ‘Sinjoh Ruins’. Over time, the two sects of Arceans differed in their styles and beliefs, but when people from both groups met here long ago, they combined their ideas and style. The temple just north of here is a great example of it, but the more relevant evidence is still practiced today. Their shared beliefs are what’s closest to modern day Arceanism nowadays.”

“So, where are we now?” asked Iruni. The question had been eating at him since he started being able to think clearly.

“Too far from Johto for you to have walked here, that’s for sure,” said Cynthia. “Now, make sure to eat slowly. Your body will just spit it right up if you eat too much.”

The realization hit Iruni just as Cynthia began setting the food on the table. My Pokémon! His hands dropped to his sides reflexly, not remembering he wasn’t even in his own clothes. He began to panic. Where were they? Did they come with him when he inexplicably appeared in the cold, dark temple?

“My Pokémon! Cynthia, where are they!? They’re in stasis still! They might be—”

She closed the gap faster than Iruni was expecting. She put her hands on Iruni’s shoulders, staring at him with a surprising intensity. “Calm down, it’s alright. They’re still in their Poké Balls, still in stasis. They’re safe for now.”

“But they’re hungry too! I need to let them out.”

Cynthia gave him a sad, knowing smile and let go of his shoulders. “That isn’t possible, I’m afraid.” She reached into the pocket of her winter pants and pulled out a plain Poké Ball. In its small state, she tapped the activator button multiple times to no effect. “See?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“No one is really sure,” said Cynthia. “Something about this area causes Poké Balls to malfunction and not respond. Any Pokémon inside of one is perfectly safe and fine, but they cannot be opened.” She sighed, staring sadly at the ball in her hand. “I wish I had known that sooner.”

“They’re okay? Really?”

“Don’t you worry your little head off, sonny,” a strained voice called from the other room. An elderly man walked with a cane into the kitchen and took a seat beside Iruni. Cynthia’s great uncle Artemius, Iruni remembered. Cynthia explained how he helped bring him in from the cold. He groaned as he sat down. “Your friends will be peachy keen once you’re out of my neck of the woods.”

Iruni noticed an Abra slowly making its way into the room as well, then sitting down and nodding off to sleep against the wall.

“So,” the old man said, squinting at Iruni. “We ain’t had the chance to be introduced, have we?” The old man reached across the table and shook Iruni’s hand. “Shit, son; you feel light as a feather. You eat anything in the last week?”
“Probably not,” Iruni admitted. He almost didn’t want to ask about the date.

“Well, my Cynthy’s cookin’ isn’t too hot, but it sure is fillin’. Food is food, right?”

Iruni laughed for the first time in a long time. The infectious humor spread and the room began to feel buzzing and alive. Cynthia sent a remark back at her uncle and began serving the food. It was the best meal Iruni could remember eating, despite what old man Artemius said. He had to hold himself back and eat slowly, but the food stayed down. He filled up quickly on bread and pasta. Iruni let out a contented sigh as he finished all he could.

“On top of everything else, what I don’t get,” Cynthia said to him, clearing the dishes from the table, “is why you appeared when you did. A lot of this seems to be missing one key element.”

Iruni chewed as he listened to her. He swallowed his bite, “Like what?”

“Well, think about it,” said Cynthia, leaning against the kitchen counter. “You somehow managed to find yourself lost in those tunnels. You said some force caused walls to move around you. Then you’re here, as if because you were dropped off right when you needed to be, and right when I came to check out the temple no less.

“That temple has ties to myths and legends. So do the Arcean Ruins in Johto. There’s a link between the two, I’m thinking.”

“So, what? You think something brought me here on purpose?” Iruni asked.

“That’s a distinct possibility. Whatever brought you here—”

The Abra that had been asleep against the wall suddenly teleported onto the table. It stood up and opened its eyes wide. It murmured something lost on human ears, and raised its clawed arms to the air. Between them, crackling energy formed in the air. Abra’s eyes glowed with power, then the energy flashed and popped. The Abra lifted into the air on by unseen influence and drifted back to its spot against the wall, snoozing once more.

In the air hovered something else. Something new. Something green.

‘I brought him here.’

Its voice resounded through their minds like the most beautiful chimes in a calm breeze. The voice of the forest. Tiny blue wings fluttered, keeping it aloft. Long arms drifted to its sides, waving in a nonexistent breeze. Dark rings bordered its eyes; eyes of the brightest blue. The creature that hovered in the air smiled down at the people staring in shock and awe.

The humans present all reacted in alarm. Iruni and Artemius stepped back from the table, knocking chairs down to the floor. The old man was muttering something under his breath, Iruni guessed it was his Abra’s name. Iruni wasn’t completely comfortable with the gaze those blue eyes were casting on him. He braced himself on one of the chairs. Something about the creature’s presence weighed down heavily on him.

“Celebi,” Cynthia said, firmly and reverent. She didn’t seem afraid of the new arrival.

The green pixie twirled around to meet her, arms open wide. ‘And a warm “hello” to you too. Thank you again for being so predictable.’

“You brought him here, did you?” Cynthia asked, pointing at Iruni. She didn’t rise to the hovering Pokémon’s challenge. “Why? Who is he?”
‘Irrelevant to you,’ Celebi said. She—at least the voice sounded feminine— floated silently around
the room, stopping in front of Iruni. ‘But he’s very important to me.’ Celebi gave Iruni the kindest of
smiles, ‘It’s nice to meet you, face to face.’

“You kidnapped him!” Cynthia said with surprising anger. “What kind of purpose could he serve
you?”

The Legendary Pokémon turned back to Cynthia with an annoyed expression. ‘No hard feelings,
persistent meddler. I’m looking for company, not a crowd.’ Celebi waved a hand in Cynthia’s
direction and she lost consciousness, falling to the floor slowly under a telekinetic grip. Her uncle
met the same fate. ‘Good girl.’

Iruni backed up to the wall, putting distance between him and the levitating Pokémon. Those blue
eyes found his again, looking almost hurt.

‘Oh they’re fine,’ Celebi said, flying closer to Iruni. ‘They’re just asleep. I also had to rewrite some
memories too, of course. We’ll just be a half-remembered dream to them.’

“What? What’s going on?” asked Iruni. “You made me show up in that… these ruins?”

‘And the ones back in…’ Celebi stopped and thought for a moment, bringing a hand to her chin. ‘Ah! Johto, that’s what it’s called right now.’

“You— You did—” Iruni bristled at the Time Travel Pokémon. He had to hold back the urge to
lunge at the floating sprite. “You made me fall down into those tunnels? You put me— us through all
that?”

‘Yes.’

“I could have died!”

‘But you didn’t.’

“I was starving to death and—!”

‘And now you’ve been fed,’ Celebi said. She floated up closely to his face. ‘Don’t talk down at me. I
know my actions. I know why I made them. I know what they caused. I made sure you survived both
times that your life has been in danger.’

“What are you talking about?” Iruni almost yelled.

‘If you had gone on your merry little way,’ Celebi orbited him as she spoke, ‘you would have died.
All on your own. Your Pokémon too, I think. I couldn’t let that happen, so I helped you. I knew that
you would end up starving in the tunnels, so I brought you to a place I knew you’d be taken care of.’
Her voice was calm and kind.

Iruni kept her gaze as she drifted around the room. “How… How would I have died?”

‘It’s best you not know… That kind of knowledge can mess with your head.’

Iruni gave up trying to follow Celebi as she twisted around in the air. “So, what? Did you put me
through all that hardship to test me for something?”

Celebi came around in front of him again, looking agitated. ‘Oh, I’m so bad at this… Listen, and at
least try to pay attention. I. Saved. Your. Life. That’s it. If you don’t like it, that’s fine. But what’s
done is... is...' she stopped herself from finishing that sentence. ‘Either way, you—you yourself—you are in a very important place in time.’ Celebi looked into Iruni’s eyes, pleading with him. ‘And I need your help.’

Iruni wasn’t expecting such an answer. The emotion of Celebi’s words, and her expression looked sincere. Something was bothering this Legendary Pokémon, that much he could tell. This creature in front of him was capable of many things. He couldn’t really think of anything he was capable of doing to aid her.

“What do you need help with?” he finally asked.

‘I’m a time traveler. People sing songs and weave myths about me. “Celebi, timeless spirit of the forest and wood.” I used to not care about my decisions or the things I would do with my power. I… I’m not proud to say this...’ she said, closing her eyes. ‘But something happened that I didn’t expect, and I made a mistake that ended up hurting someone... someone I really cared about.’

“What happened?”

‘If I told you... you might not want to help me.’ Celebi rose into the air, spreading her arms wide. A ringing sound began filling the room. ‘So I won’t tell you. Just know this: I need you. Even if you decide later on that you don’t want to help me, you are still important to me, if only because I can use you. Maybe I can get to know you, even be friends if you want, but even if you don’t care about me at all, I’ll still help where and when I can.’

Celebi gave him another of her kind smiles. ‘You have a guardian angel, even if you hate her.’

———

Iruni opened his eyes and a short gasp escaped his lips, echoing down the dark tunnels. He could feel himself lying on his chest, his face against the cold, flat stone. He sat himself up and rubbed his head, thinking hard to remember what had happened.

He had tripped. He remembered that. He felt down around his feet, finding that a tree’s root had broken through the stone and grew across the path. He fell, then he—

Those other ruins! Cynthia! And ... Celebi.

He remembered that too now. He righted himself and sat in the dark for a few minutes. The memories in his head played back with enough clarity to rule out the possibility that it was a dream. He checked himself. He still felt full from the meal he had, he wore the clothes Cynthia had lent him. Beside him, he found his bag. Iruni found his Poké Balls, each still attached to his belt. It happened.

Okay ... everyone’s still here.

Iruni ran his fingers over Rikalia’s Umbra Ball, feeling the two scratch marks she had given it all those months ago.

Sorry. Again.

As he curiously wondered if his old set of clothes had been given back to him too, he found something that surprised him. Food, bottles of fresh water, and other such provisions were once again in his possession. He experimentally checked everything he found there. All of it fresh and new.

“Thank you.” Iruni said to the darkness around him. Nothing answered him back, but he had a
feeling he was still being watched.

“As for helping you, I’ll have to think on it.”

He stood, stronger than he had been in days. Iruni set off down the darkness again, confident for the first time in that he would be greeted by sunlight again soon.

[Cartographer Log: 5/17/00]
[Cartographer ID: A. J. Wingborne (79053)]

[Hey professor. Just doing my check in.

I know you said you would let me know… but have you had any updates from Barty? It’s been almost a month since I last saw him. And you mentioned you hadn’t gotten any reports from him either…

Sorry. I’m just worried, you know?

Anyway, back to business. I’m sitting outside of Union Cave right now. I say ‘outside’, because that place was just awful to get through. I don’t know if it’s been known for Steelix, but it has them now. Mawile too. One nearly bit my leg off with its head-mouth-jaw-thing. Is that place supposed to be so hard to get through?

And just coming out of there, I saw—

Wait, is that—?

Allan! Hey! Wait up!]

To be continued…
Well, it’s done.

I’ve made myself known to someone.

That’s… well, not exactly new. It hasn’t been for a while now. There are people that know who I am. They sing songs about me. Tell tales. Weave legends. But I haven’t appeared to anyone like that in what—five years? Little, innocent, Iruni Thomas, now sent back to live out his boring fate. For now, at least. He’ll thank me in the end. I’ve done nothing but push him along the proper pathways. He would’ve missed them otherwise and then run into one particularly nasty one. I’ve helped him, so he’s helping me whether he likes it or not. I will not lose this chance. I won’t mess this up.

Now he’s gone, and I’m alone. Again.

What is wrong with me? Am I that sentimental? That a little light-show and vague imagery constitute a… happy memory? Do I already miss him? He’s just a means to an end… Coralis.

Do I miss him? Oh of course I do… that’s why I’m doing all of this. I can already tell; just by meeting Iruni in person, he would’ve rejected me if he knew what I had done. He’s that kind of person. I know he’ll find out eventually, I just don’t want it to be from me. It’s better if he hears it from Coralis… Or would it be worse? I can’t even tell who’s more upset with me; him or myself.

I can’t think… my head is fuzzy. What’s the matter with me? Everything’s going how I wanted it to, right? I planned this out; everything’s going fine.

Then why am I so tense? Did I forget something?

I scanned the minds of Cynthia and her uncle, still lying on the kitchen floor below me. No traces of my or Iruni’s appearance here exist in their little heads. I made sure I placed him in the right section of the ruins. He’s not going to make a wrong turn, is he? No, he’s not that stupid. He wants to live. He is that kind of person.

I can’t place my finger on it, but something doesn’t feel right.

I closed my eyes, taking a moment to gather myself again. I let my emotions get the best of me all those years ago, and look what that got me? One big, five year long headache.

Surrounded by the flows of time, I am calm. I don’t move around in them, I just observe them. Moments crawl past, slowly. It’s silent around me. The sands of time flowing around me are moments I had glimpsed so long ago, only just now becoming the present. These seconds were ones I was so worried about; the crucial points. They’re going just how I wanted them to. Everything’s set to move forward.

Wishing to amuse myself, I look ahead, peeking at the moments yet to pass long before they reach
their time to happen.

Wait. When is *this*?

No, that’s not… that’s not right! That can’t be!

I have to see it with my own eyes. Reaching out into time, I find where I want to be. One instant, I’m in a warm kitchen in the middle of a snowfall. The very next, I’m above the trees of Ilex Forest. My forest. My only real home. I try and ignore the horrible sounds that echo up from below me. It pains me to see it like this. It was inevitable, but that doesn’t make watching it fall into such disarray any easier. I float above the chaos, looking for what caught my eye. It should be happening soon.

There. That. Who is that?

He wasn’t here before. What’s he doing here?

He can’t— he is!

Now the two of them— oh, it’s her! Then that means…

I have to leave. I can see their future and it… Why does it unsettle me? It’s… new! Unheard of! This wasn’t in my plans!

I’m panting, hard. My hearts are racing. Is this panic? Me of all beings in the universe! Afraid of tomorrow?

Time has changed. This isn’t what I saw. This isn’t what I worked so hard to make Iruni avoid. I was so sure of everything, but now…

I did it. It’s my fault. Time changed because I forced it to change. It’s not just Iruni anymore. There’s more people now.

I feel pressure all around me. Like time itself bearing down against me. It’s Him, I know it. His presence is stifling, and He isn’t even really here. The Time Lord is angry with me. Lord Dialga knows that His time was tampered with. Everything is different now!

I’m scared…?

I *am* scared.

I can’t do this alone, not anymore. I need some help now.
Allan Relmstead smiled, despite the itch that still stung in his throat. He had been yelling quite loudly. Just an hour ago, he wasn’t so sure about how today was going to pan out.

Waking up before the sun broke the horizon, Allan and his team of three Pokémon had left their room in the Pokémon Center’s adjacent hotel building to iron out their battle tactics and prepare for their coming Gym Battle with Azalea Town’s resident Gym Leader, Bugsy. Psychic type expertise against a highly trained squad of Bug type opponents didn’t produce favorable odds, a fact that Allan couldn’t help but dwell on as the sky grew brighter above him.

Xutan, his Natu, had the only clear advantage of the three, with the Flying type techniques that he brought to the team. He was also maneuverable enough to evade most attacks from any ground-based opponent. Allan decided Xutan was most likely his safest bet in the battle.

Umari’s skill set revolved around more physical and close quarters action than Xutan’s, leaving the Eevee more vulnerable to counterattack. While she wouldn’t be overly susceptible to their attacks, any hits were hits he’d like her to avoid. He urged Umari to practice dodging attacks at close range.

Duncan was the problem child, as he often was. His typing left him especially disadvantaged to any Bug related attacks he may be the target of, and his six separate bodies made evasion a problem. The opposite side of the six headed coin that was Allan’s Exeggcute, was that he had options to attack at long range.

The battle had, for lack of a better term, blown Allan away.

The first opponent the Gym Leader had sent out, after Allan had decided to choose Duncan to lead, was a Beedrill. While initially troublesome at first glance, being a fully evolved Pokémon, the Poison type fell quickly to Duncan’s Psychic type moves. The next two opponents fell to Allan’s counters almost too easily. Even with Leader Bugsy’s unorthodox gym rule—both trainers must switch out their Pokémon after each battle, and once a trainer was out of fit Pokémon to battle, they would lose—Allan came out on top; three wins to zero.

His throat was hurting from so much cheering.

Now, Allan was just waiting on Kurt to finish his work. The old man who lived far from downtown in a simple home made his living by crafting custom-made Poké Balls from Apricorns, a fruit native to the Johto region. The precise nature and quality of the specific capture spheres had given Kurt a reputation as an expert on many types of Poké Balls.

Lying back on the sofa in this old, wooden cottage in northern Azalea Town, Allan held up his brand new Hive Badge, admiring the shine of it. The day was still young, with the noonday sun pouring into the room he waited in. On the floor in front of him, a young girl—hardly in her preteen
years—was playing with Umari; silver twinkles of light danced off of her shiny fur and scattered around the room.

As Allan managed to pull his badge case from his pocket, and begin to place his new trinket in its slot, a thought alighted on his mind that made him smile even more.

‘And Alice wasn’t there to smother me after the match. It’s been a good day.’

Umari stopped playing her game with Kurt’s granddaughter, having picked up that stray mental thought.

‘I thought we liked her,’ she said. ‘Wait. You didn’t tell her the wrong time about our match on purpose, did you?’

Mentally kicking himself in the head, Allan sat up in his seat, going over thirteen different excuses in his head about why he did what he did. He also made a mental note to pay more attention when his mental link with Umari was open.

‘No, Umari. I just… I was just nervous about our battle this morning. I wanted to get it over with as soon as possible,’ Allan said.

‘Lying,’ Umari replied flatly. ‘I can tell when you do that, you know that, right?’

Allan flinched again, caught. He sighed, ‘Okay fine. But these past two days have been hell!’

‘Why?’ Umari asked. She sat down and looked into her trainer’s eyes, unaware of the little girl trying to get her attention.

Allan didn’t feel any anger or disappointment in her mental communications. Just curiosity.

‘It’s just…’ Allan paused, crossing his arms as he tried to place his thoughts properly. ‘You know what she’s after, don’t you?’

‘Well… All I’ve seen her be is really friendly to us.’

‘Not “us”, Umari. Me.’ Allan let a few choice memories float over their bond to help drive in his point. Her physical behavior around him. Constant attention. The kiss.

‘Oh!’ Umari said. ‘So she’s—?’

‘Yeah. And she’s not exactly the brightest star in the sky either…’

‘That’s mean,’ Umari said.

‘Not like that—well, kind of like that—but she just doesn’t get the hint that I’m not interested. It’s annoying to be constantly hounded on.’

‘Why are you so against… you know? You and her?’ Umari asked. ‘You have your eyes on another mate?’

‘I just don’t feel that way about her. She’s just a friend. You don’t date your friends. Do you get what I’m trying to say at all?’

‘Yeah,’ Umari said, standing up and stretching. ‘I think I do.’

Satisfied with having dealt with that awkward talk, Allan finally looked up and saw Kurt’s
granddaughter, Maisy, staring at him.

“Uhh, is something the matter? Umari just stopped playing and staring at you.”

“Sorry about that,” Allan chuckled. “Private conversation.”

“Huh? But you weren’t talking.”

“Well, you see, I’m a psychic—a telepath, specifically. I have special mental powers that let me communicate with other minds. Umari, and my other Pokémon, can talk to me that way.”

“Really?” Maisy asked. “Can you show me?”

‘Like this!’ Umari said to her, mentally.

Allan picked up on the message as well. He looked down at her, then to Maisy, who then lit up with excitement at the new form of communication she was feeling.

“Oh my gosh, that’s so coooool!” the young girl picked up the silvery Eevee, and spun around. “I’m talking with a Pokémon!”

‘A… dizzy… Pokémon… please… stop…’

Maisy hastily put her back on the floor and apologized.

‘Umari?’ Allan sent to her privately. He willed a desire to not bring about the girl’s suspicion on their discussion.

‘Yeah? What’s the matter?’ Umari went back to playing with the young girl while she spoke with him.

‘I didn’t connect my mind with Maisy’s for you to talk to her. You did that, and I heard it from your side.’

‘Yeah?’

‘You’ve never done that before…’ Allan sat for a moment, reeling at the implications. ‘You’re really advancing in your psychic abilities.’

He could feel Umari’s joy from his compliment. He hoped that she couldn’t feel his apprehension.

“Hey Mr. Allan,” Maisy said. “Do you think me and my Pokémon can learn to talk like that?”

“Well, that depends,” said Allan, “who’s your Pokémon?”

“Slowpoke. He’s right there,” she said, pointing. “You were lying on his fat belly.”

Looking to his left, Allan saw a large mass of pink that he had assumed was a large cushion. Craning his head, he saw that it was indeed a rather large Slowpoke, fast asleep. Embarrassed, Allan hastily apologized to the girl for potentially causing her Pokémon discomfort. “I didn’t think anything of it, I’m sorry.”

I didn’t even detect its mind…

“Nah, you’re fine. I do it all the time. He’s really fat and hardly notices when I do it.” Her smile helped dispel the air of regret in the room. “So, do you think I can?”
“Not until he evolves probably,” said Allan. “Their minds aren’t too advanced as Slowpoke.”

“Best not be disrespecting the Slowpoke kind, son,” came an older voice. “They’re sacred around here.”

The voice, followed by the sound of the back door closing shut stole the attention of everyone in the room. Kurt came into the house, wiping the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. In his hand was a plain wooden box.

“Don’t think you minded the wait, did ye?” the old man asked. He placed the box on the table to the side of the room and beckoned Allan over. “Here’s what ye paid for. Six Friend Balls.”

Allan opened the box and picked up one of the newly made spheres in his hand. The ball’s top half was mostly green, with four red teardrop markings, and a circular yellow one, making a tight arc on the face. Allan had seen the famous Apricorn Poké Balls before, but these were especially well made.

“They look fantastic,” Allan said, putting them in his bag. “Thanks a lot for the work.”

“Ye don’t plan on swapping your Pokémon into those, right? They don’t work like that.” Kurt warned.

“Oh, no,” Allan said. “I just decided to have all of them made, since I found so many Apricorns. I don’t plan on catching anything soon anyway, I don’t think.”

“Well, all the best luck to ye,” he said. Kurt slowly made his way over to the chair across the room, carefully sitting down and resting his weary feet. “Word from the wiser, son; be careful if you’re going into Ilex Forest. Something’s made the woods restless; agitated. I can feel it in the wind. Bad things happen when the forest is fightin’ ye.”

“Thank you, I’ll keep that in mind.” Allan gathered up his belongings and called for Umari to leave. “And thank you again for the Poké Balls, Mr. Kurt.”

‘Bye Maisy!’ Umari called mentally as she bounded over to Allan.

The two stepped outside and were greeted by strong wind, blowing from the east. As if to push them, and anyone else, away from Ilex Forest.

———

“Alright, looks like you’re good to go,” the receptionist said. He handed Allan a receipt for his time at the Pokémon Center’s hotel. “Thank you for staying with us.”

“Have a good day,” Allan said with a smile, shoving the scrap of paper into his back pocket without even a first glance. As he and Umari began to walk out of the building, Allan felt a mental ping from the various crowds of people walking the streets of Azalea Town. Alice Wingborne noticed him before he could react to her presence across the street.

“Allan!” she yelled, drawing all kinds of attention to herself. The blond girl made her way to the other side of the road, finding herself a little out of breath. “I’m—I’m sorry. I overslept and I missed your battle this morning.”

“It’s alright,” Allan said, silently glad to not have upset her. “We won though; three to zip.”

“That’s great,” said Alice. She shifted the large backpack that she wore, taking in that Allan too was
geared up for travel. “So, what now?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

‘You know what she means,’ Umari told him privately.

‘I know, but still…’

“Um, well…” Alice looked down, letting some of her hair fall in front of her face. “My offer still stands, you know; from before? About traveling with me?”

‘Just do it,’ Umari urged him. Before he could protest, she said to him, ‘If you want, I can talk to her about, you know, you and her. Unless you want to.’

‘You’re the best,’ Allan sent with all the gratitude he could. Blinking, he focused back on Alice’s hopeful eyes awaiting his response. “Sure thing, we can stay together for a while.”

Instantly, her face lit up and she smiled wide. Alice stood beside him and urged them to venture onward, her enthusiasm being far more infectious than he would like to admit.

Allan bent down and picked up Umari from the ground and the three started their walk through Azalea Town to the western exit gate. The sun was high in the sky, and the group decided rather quickly to eat before venturing out of town. They chose a restaurant that had a large outdoor dining section, one that allowed for larger than normal Pokémon to eat with their trainers.

Alice released her first Pokémon, a tall Tropius that towered over their table. He almost toppled over neighboring tables, leading to hurried warnings and scoldings from his trainer.

“He’s a pretty big guy,” Allan noted as he sat down. “How come you didn’t let him out last time we were around? I bet he could’ve gotten you out of that jam back in Ecruteak.”

Alice gently talked up to her large Pokémon, still trying to calm him down. She whispered something to him Allan couldn’t quite hear, and he didn’t eavesdrop. She placed a hand on his long neck, and rubbed it soothingly.

“Sorry,” she said finally, taking her seat as her Tropius settled down behind her. She released her Audino and Feraligatr to join her Fruit Pokémon. “He isn’t used to me yet, really. And… well…”

“Well what?”

“I’m… a bad trainer, Allan.” She looked at him with sorrowful eyes. “I’m… just not cut out for it, I don’t think. I wish I was— I really do. I can get along with Pokémon, but raising them… and battles… I’m just terrified that I’m doing it wrong.”

Umari looked up at Allan from his lap, exuding a feeling of worry. He felt the same, but questioned where this sudden revelation of self-doubt was coming from.

“Alice, it just takes time and practice. You’re not a bad trainer; bad trainers abuse their Pokémon and don’t deserve them. You at least want to do right by them, right?”

“Yes. But it’s just so hard. And I’m just… I’m awful at traveling alone with them. But… when I’m around other people, I relax more. I’m more confident and sure of myself. I feel like, even if I make a mistake, or I’m unsure, I’ve got someone there to help me.”

“So, is that’s why you—?”
“Yeah.” Alice said, knowing what Allan finally caught on to. “Mostly…”

The two sat in silence for the next few moments. When their order was ready, Allan got up and brought them their food, with Alice dealing out the Pokémon’s meals.

*Have I been misreading her this whole time?* Allan thought as he set their trays down. *Has she really just been afraid and lonely?*

“So, Allan?” Alice spoke up before he could begin eating.

“Well?”

“I… well… you don’t… do you?”

He stared at her for a moment, unsure of what she was asking.

“What was that? I didn’t hear you.”

“I said; You don’t find me annoying, do you?”

‘Don’t.’ Umari warned him.

‘I wasn’t gonna…’ Allan responded.

“No, Alice.” He said aloud. “You’re not annoying. You’re a good friend, and I think you have a lot of potential for being a trainer, even if battles aren’t your thing.” Allan thought he felt a twinge of sadness emanate from her, specifically when he said the word “friend”, but her happiness from his kind words overwhelmed that small emotion.

“Thank you, Allan,” she said. “That really means a lot, coming from you.”

“You’re welcome—” Allan felt a presence around him, moving quickly towards him. Whoever it was, they were urgently looking for him specifically. Allan casually kept eating his meal while he glanced around at the people coming and going past the restaurant. Umari could sense his increased mental alertness; he was ignoring everything else around him.

When the mystery pursuer finally showed up at their table, Allan almost immediately gave up worrying. A young man—younger than Allan by a few years—came up to their table, panting from running through the streets.

“You’re Allan Relmstead, right?” It took one glance at the shiny Eevee eating her meal to confirm the freshman trainer’s question. “Yeah, you beat Bugsy this morning! Will you come with me?”

Allan looked to Alice, who was just as confused as he was. Umari didn’t have any words of wisdom to share either.

“Well, first kid; what’s your name?” he asked.

“Oh, sorry. Ha ha,” he took a deep breath to further recover from his run. “Geoffrey Speckman. You’re going to be leaving town, right? Heading to Goldenrod?”

“Yes? What’s it matter to you?” Allan asked.

“Will you take me through Ilex Forest? A bunch of us want to go.”

Allan sat in his seat in silence, took a sip from his drink, and looked back at the hopeful face staring
back at him.

“What’s stopping you from going through on your own?” he asked. He saw a few Poké Balls clipped to the kid’s belt. “Don’t you have a Pokémon?”

“I do, but Bugsy’s not letting anyone through without his badge,” Geoff said. “I don’t train Pokémon for badges or anything, but I want to go to Goldenrod City. Bugsy said people with his badge can chaperone a group while they make it through.”

“Since when was this a rule?”

“Just a few days ago,” said Geoff. “A bunch of Pokémon live in the forest now that didn’t before. It’s rough unless you’re a pretty experienced trainer. At least that’s what they say.”

“What kind of new Pokémon?” Alice asked, surprising Allan with her interest. He watched her pull out a large handheld device as Geoffrey listed the Pokémon he’d heard about. “Oh wow… no one’s even… Hey Allan, let’s get going. I think I need to see this place now.”

“Fine,” Allan said. “Just let us finish our lunch, okay? Then we’ll go along with you.”

“Great.” Geoff sat down in the seat next to Allan, eager eyes looking up at him as he ate. Allan heard Alice giggle at the sight.

“So,” Allan said between bites, “what’s with you coming to me? No other trainers in town?”

“They already took groups in earlier today. There was one seven badge trainer who flew people with his two Pidgeot. That was cool.”

Allan endured the next twenty minutes of the young trainer’s constant conversation as he ate his meal. Alice tried to help take some of the attention once she noticed Allan’s annoyed mood. Allan went to pay for their meals while Alice began recalling her Pokémon. Once they were through with their lunch, Allan, Alice, and their new companion Geoffrey, started the walk to the west exit of Azalea town.

“Why are you so interested in going to the forest?” Allan asked Alice as they walked. “Are you looking to catch a new Pokémon there?”

“No, nothing like that. You know how I mentioned my job before? Well, I’m basically a wildlife demographist; I’m collecting a bunch of information for… some very important people,” said Alice.

“Sounds like this is right up your alley,” Allan said. “No pun intended.”

“I’m sorry, everyone.” Bugsy told the group of people standing in front of Azalea’s western gate. “I understand the inconvenience, but we need to make your safety our top priority right now.” The Gym Leader had been wrangling travelers for the past few days, leaving time only for scheduled matches back at the gym. “I’ve started making arrangements for escorts to be brought in to allow the safe travel through Ilex Forest. Until then, only trainers with the Hive Badge or higher can go through.”

He felt his head pound from the sounds of the unhappy crowd. Bugsy looked up through his purple hair when he heard the group starting to get loud again.

“So, this is what you do when you’re not collecting bugs?” Allan asked as he walked up. Alice and
Geoffrey kept a close pace behind him.

“Oh, you’re Allan Rellmstead, from this morning, right?” Bugsy asked. “Are you planning on going through the gate to Goldenrod City?”

“Sure am,” he said. Allan pointed to his two companions, “Geoffrey here tells me you’re playing gatekeeper, and allowing groups to go through. Do you need me to take some people through?”

“That’d be great if you didn’t mind.” Bugsy began to address the crowd, letting the people with the most pressing needs take the available spots. Five other badgeless travelers grouped up behind Allan. “Given my awful display this morning, you should be fine getting to Goldenrod.”

“Don’t sell yourself too short, I was having a good morning,” Allan said, smiling.

Bugsy didn’t so much as grin at the jab and simply moved on. “Right. Well, I’ll tell you what I’ve told the other groups; be careful, trust your instinct, and above all, trust your Pokémon. Make sure to check in at the gate on Route 34 to let us know you’ve made it.”

“Alright,” Allan said. He bent down and picked Umari up from the ground and set her on his shoulder. Allan beckoned the seven people he was now given charge over to the exit of the town’s gatehouse. “Okay everyone, we’re good to go on in. But first, I’d like to make this clear; I’m not some survival expert or a born leader. I’m a trainer, just like you. I expect all of us to watch each other’s backs if things get dicey.”

“Actually, sir? I’m not a trainer. I’m just trying to get to Goldenrod on business,” one of the travelers spoke up.

“Neither am I. I’m just meeting some family there.”

Allan stood on and listened as more of the people he had agreed to watch over revealed that they didn’t have a Pokémon to their names. With the unknown dangers that lurked in the forest beyond, he began to feel a little apprehensive to the idea of leading the group.

‘Umari, do you think I can do this?’

‘Of course. No matter what you think of yourself, you’ve been a great leader since you started training us; Xutan, Duncan and me. These people know what you expect of them, I think.’

Umari’s words, and the emotions behind them, bolstered Allan’s resolve. ‘Thank you.’

“Alright people; Listen up! There are eight of us and only four trainers. Simple math; everyone who has a battle capable Pokémon should keep at least one out of their ball at all times in case we run into any trouble.” The other trainers in the group—Geoffrey, and a younger girl named Valerie—released their Pokémon, a Geodude and Growlithe.

“Uhm, Allan?” Alice whispered to him. “Do I have to, too?”

“Yes. If you want to try to better yourself, you have to be willing to take that first step. Your Feraligatr could be of great use as a bodyguard, or you could use this opportunity to bond with Tropius.”

Alice nodded, and grabbed one of her Poké Balls, deciding to let Tropius out once they were in the forest.

The group of seven travelers, plus Allan, made their final farewells to Azalea Town, and began their
journey into Ilex Forest. Allan headed the group, and told the other trainers to spread themselves out in the group for safety.

In the hours that passed, Bugsy sat vigil at the western gate’s entrance. No more Hive Badge owners came forward to ferry people through, leaving him with very little to do apart from turning people away. He recalled letting the first group of trainers make their journey in the early hours of the afternoon. He checked in with the attendant at the desk inside the gatehouse to see how many groups had checked in at Route 34’s gate. So far, only one had, and it was the group that had flown over the forest.

“What could possibly be in there to delay anyone so long?” Bugsy asked himself, feeling worry crawl into his mind.

Just then, the phone rang at the gatehouse, and the attendant answered it.

“Excuse me, Leader Bugsy?” they said. “It’s for you. It sounds urgent.”

The first thing Allan noticed about Ilex Forest was something anyone else would; it was dark. Very dark. The trees had, over the many years, grown so close together that they blocked all but the smallest traces of sunlight from reaching the forest floor. Apart from the well-traveled path that wound through the wooded area from years of travel and the cutting of trees for firewood, there was very little room between trees for anyone to walk. A heavy wind blew through the area, sending a chill through the humans and their Pokémon.

Allan felt confined but he could tell he wasn’t. His mental senses told him of everything around him; the group of people behind him, the Pokémon on alert for any danger, and the wild Pokémon that surrounded them, living their lives in peace.

“We’re in the clear,” he told the group that stood behind him, waiting on his word. “Let’s get moving.”

Alice let go a sigh of relief, and released her Tropius, whose height almost reached the trees above their heads.

“You’re the trainer who beat Bugsy this morning, right?” one of his companions asked as they began their trip. “Won three to zip?”

“That’s right,” Geoffrey said. “He was great, you should’ve seen him.”

“I wish I could have,” Alice chimed in. “But I’ve seen him first hand before; he a really talented trainer. Managed to stare down Raikou. The Raikou.”

“Guys, really,” Allan said, trying to sound modest. “I’m not that fantastic.”

“Bugsy thought so, didn’t he?”

“He must have; they don’t let anyone lead people through dangerous areas like this. You said it earlier; you’re not a professional, but you may as well be.”

“They’re right, you know,” Umari sent over their mental link. ‘You really are great at what you do.’

‘And what’s that?’
‘Getting people to like you. To trust you. To believe in you.’ Umari relayed a few of her more pertinent memories on the subject. Alice’s immediate attraction to him, Bugsy’s request to lead and protect the group of people, and Umari’s own struggle to develop her own mental powers. ‘You can do the impossible.’

‘Wow, Umari… that’s…’

Before Allan could finish his thought—something he would find himself grateful for—he sensed something. He held up a hand to the group of people behind him, signaling to stop. He sensed a mind full of anger and aggression a few feet ahead of the group, holding its ground. He couldn’t see it; it hadn’t made a move yet.

“What is it Allan?” Alice asked quietly. Her Tropius craned his neck around, looking for the source of the holdup.

“A Pokémon, I think. Very territorial from what sensations I’m getting from it…”

Allan told the group to proceed slowly as they passed by the den of what they eventually found out to be an Arbok. Allan did his best to calm the hissing mass of coils and teeth as they cautiously moved on. Alice silently pulled her Pokédex from her bag and recorded the sighting.

The images Allan had received from the large snake made the reasons for its anger clear; it was a female, and she was protecting her brood of eggs. Once they were well enough away, Allan called for the group to speed up their pace. He didn’t want to see what trouble they would endure when the father came home.

“That was cool,” Geoffrey said.

“That was close,” Allan corrected him. “That Arbok’s den was really close to the road, and she was prepared to die fighting for her eggs.” He saw Geoff’s face as the young trainer recognized the tone in Allan’s voice, backing away and losing his excited expression. “We’re hardly in this forest, and we’ve already had a close call,” Allan addressed the group. “We need to keep on our toes.”

The next three hours were filled with more close calls with angry Pokémon. A wandering Pinsir came running at the group from behind a tree, but Alice’s Tropius managed to scare it off with a flap of its leafy wings and heavy stomps. The group praised Alice on her quick thinking and commanding of her Pokémon.

“Th-Thank you.” She looked to Allan, who gave her a smile and continued onward.

With the heavy cover the tall trees provided, Allan had troubling telling the time of day. He had to check his PokéGear every so often to keep track. As he did, he noticed that he didn’t have any data service.

“Does anyone have a connection out here?” he asked behind him to the group.

None of them did.

“We’ll be fine. We’ve scared off all the Pokémon we’ve come across so far,” Geoffrey said. “Do you think we’ll need to call for help?”

“No,” Allan said. “I just don’t want to need to, and not be able to.” Allan felt the sparks of fear spread through his group.

“Do you sense anything, Mr. Allan?” Valerie, the girl with the Growlithe, asked.
“No, we’re fine right now. I’m just being cautious,” he said.

Allan’s troupe of travelers came to a stop in the early evening, beside a small pond. A few of the more weary travelers began soaking their feet in the still water. Alice’s Tropius sat and rested, with his trainer following suit beside him. Allan stood watch, and began scanning the area ahead. The last hour or so of their journey saw very few wild Pokémon. What they did see however were more than a few felled trees, and uneven dirt. The few trainers in the group couldn’t make out what may have caused the damage, but they all agreed that the farther they were from the area, the safer they would be.

It was because Allan was focusing on the path ahead that he failed to notice one of his group straying away from their small rest site. He wasn’t aware until he heard him yell.

“Look at this everyone!”

It was Geoffrey, who appeared on the other side of the small pond, smiling ear to ear. He was holding a young Pokémon in his arms. Its skin was rough and angular, and was wriggling in the young man’s grasp, crying out in a high pitched whine. It had a single, short horn sprouting from the top of its head, and two black markings underneath its eyes. Allan recognized it immediately as a Larvitar. The young trainer began walking back towards the group, eager to show them the Pokémon he had found.

A Larvitar… Just a baby… Allan thought, stricken with fear. There’s never just a baby…!

“Drop it!” he yelled. The rest of the group’s attention snapped to Allan. “It’s calling its parents!”

No sooner than had the words left Allan’s mouth did the Pokémon in question appear in the small clearing around the pond. The Tyranitar stood, towering behind Geoff, growling loudly. Everyone was still; petrified. They watched in horror as the trainer slowly turned around to face the enraged parent—whether mother or father, no one could tell. Allan frantically sent a flurry of mental messages to the young man in danger, but his mind was blocked off from his intense fear.

The Tyranitar roared loudly at the group of humans, sending a freak sandstorm whipping around the area. Geoffrey yelled, dropping the infant Larvitar. As the Tyranitar’s child cried from the rough landing, its parent summoned a spike of rock from the ground, aimed straight at the human responsible. The jagged pillar pierced his chest, suspending his body feet above the ground. Geodude, in an effort to avenge its trainer, started flailing its rocky fists at the Armor Pokémon, only to be swatted down into the ground. The Tyranitar pursued its offender and crushed it with a heavy stomp.

Alice screamed in horror at the sight of Geoff’s lifeless body, dangling over the pool of water. The group was in a panic, scrambling in the sandy winds to try and get to safety. The Tyranitar began advancing on the group roaring as its mate came into the clearing, tending to their child.

Allan couldn’t make a move; he couldn’t say a word. His own fear and the collective responses from the people around him were clouding his mind. He couldn’t shut their voices out of his head; he had kept his mental sensory open to look for threats for so long, he was now being overloaded with sensations.

Another roar from the advancing Tyranitar finally broke his attention to the physical world. Allan saw the rage in the creature’s eyes, the heavy shakes he felt as it moved, the pain of the sand whipping around him as it stung his skin.
It was chaos. It was something Allan came across that he hadn’t before; something he knew, deep down on a basic level, he could not handle.

So he succumbed to his fear.

Allan bent down, scooped Umari into his arms, and ran. He ran as hard and as fast he could away from the chaos.

On his mind wasn’t that of the poor young man’s parents who would never see their son alive again, not the people he had just abandoned in the path of an angry parent, not even his friend; he only saw himself, and the Pokémon in his arms.

[Cartographer Log: 5/19/00]

[Cartographer ID: A. J. Wingborne (79053)]

[“Professor! We need help! Allan, these people and I! We’re in Ilex Forest— only it’s crazy! A Tyranitar just… it killed a boy! I don’t know where to go! No one’s phones are working either— Alpha please let this go through…

[“Hurry please! Allan’s gone— He— AH! No! Get away from—!”]

[Audio Ends.]

[Enclosed Picture Album: “Ilex Forest: New Sightings (5,19,00)”]

Allan Relmstead ran and ran, carrying Umari close to his chest. He kept running until his lungs burned and his feet ached. He desperately wanted to stop, but what kept him moving was something that he could sense in the back of his head; a constant presence was following him.

It had been roughly an hour since Allan had broken rank with his group. He was running almost blindly through the thick forest, leaving him unable to spot the web of an Ariados. He had stumbled into it, snapping back into alertness. While the Ariados had made an appearance and tried to attack, it hadn’t tried chasing him down after Allan got free of its web.

Allan finally came to rest at one of many trees in the forest and sat down by the base of the trunk. He let Umari out of his tight grasp for the first time since they had left the pond where the Tyranitar appeared.

‘Allan?’ she asked.

‘Yes?’ Allan sent mentally, not wanting to make any noise if at all possible.

‘What happened to everyone else?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know.’ Allan told her.

‘You— But we were supposed to help protect them. We need to go back for them!’ Umari urged.

‘Umari, please…’ Allan said. ‘I… I just… this is too much. I just need to make sure we’re safe right now, okay?’
‘But what about Alice?’

‘I don’t know!’ Allan yelled mentally. He saw Umari cringe and lower her ears at the intensity of the mental pulse. ‘I’m sorry, Umari. I didn’t mean to yell at you.’

‘Then what did you mean?’ Umari asked.

‘I… It’s just that your safety is more important to me than theirs is.’

‘That’s awful! I’m no more important than they are!’

‘You are to me!’ Allan yelled again, though this time more at himself than her. ‘If I let anything happen to you, I’d never forgive myself. You’re precious to me.’

‘But… Allan! Behind you!’

As Umari’s warning registered in his mind, Allan felt the close proximity of the mind that had been tracking them. The same Ariados whose web they had fallen in came crawling around the tree Allan was sitting against. Before Allan could react to call upon Xutan or Duncan, Umari launched herself at the Long Leg Pokémon, sending it crashing into another tree. The shiny Eevee winced at the damage she sustained from her Take Down attack, but was otherwise unharmed. The Ariados didn’t get back up on its thin legs.

“Wow…” Allan said under his breath. “Umari… that was…”

‘Look! On your backpack!’

Allan frantically swatted behind him, fearing some other Bug type menace about to get the better of him. His hand met sticky strands of silk. He pulled them off, noticing that the rope had been leaving a trail through the forest.

“That thing was tracking us…”

‘We should go now, right? There might be more.’

“There’s always more…” Allan said, darkly. He fought down a panic attack at how close he had come to being attacked. The two silently began making their way deeper into the forest, hopefully away from more dangers.

Nighttime had fallen an hour or so ago, or at least Allan’s PokéGear told him so. In the time since he had noticed it, Allan had discovered what he thought to be the cause of the lack of signal to the device. A large population of Magnemite and Magneton roamed throughout Ilex Forest. Allan assumed their electromagnetic force was disrupting the data signals entering or leaving the area. Getting lost was an easy possibility; his PokéGear’s map relied on a constant internet signal, which while useful, was useless now. Even his simple compass spun wildly if one of the Magnet Pokémon came close. A vague memory of a map of Johto were all he had to guide himself now.

The amount of light inside the forest had changed so little; it was a full moon and a clear sky above the trees, sending beams of gray light down into the forest where leaves failed to cover.

Allan had found some small cover; a few fallen trees and branches that provided him the first shelter he had since leaving Azalea Town. It gave him protection and a wall to put his back against as he rested. They had found the spot hours ago, and had since had no more attacks from any wild
Umari was asleep in his lap. She was exhausted. So was Allan, but a sense of duty and devotion kept him awake and alert. He kept his mind on a constant lookout for any life forms that ventured close to their location. One fact floated into his mind that he swatted away as soon as he could: He hadn’t seen another human since he had ran away from the pond.

In his hours alone, his memories of the fiasco replayed over and over in his mind. He saw Geoffrey get impaled again. He remembered Geoff’s Geodude trying in vain to attack the much larger Pokémon, only to be crushed as if it were made of clay. He relived the terror of witnessing the parent Tyranitar’s rage. Allan tried to think of ways that he may have been able to prevent what had happened. Something he could have done to save them.

Something in his mind snapped him out of his guilt-ridden state.

He sensed someone he knew.

He heard their voice as they screamed—in pain or terror, he couldn’t tell.

The commotion woke Umari with a start, with Allan doing his best to calm her down as quickly as he could. The two sat in their hideaway as silently as they could as Allan relayed what he sensed. Umari silently urged him to make himself known, but Allan ignored his Pokémon’s pleas. They could see the commotion from where they were hiding now.

Alice Wingborne was running through the dense forest, knocking against the trunks of trees as she ran by. She was being chased by a group of purple, scorpion-like Pokémon. The Skorupi were managing to move in the forested area much better than their human prey. They gained ground, some even leaping into the air at the girl. It was only a matter of time, Allan could tell, before they caught up to her.

‘We have to do something!’ Umari told him.

‘We’re staying put.’

Allan tried to block out Umari’s outrage at the decision. His attention was focused on the direction that the mass of poisonous Pokémon and the human they were chasing were going. He could sense, or rather couldn’t sense, a large moving gap within his mental scan. What that could mean, he didn’t know.

One of the Skorupi managed to get close to Alice and used one of its stingers to pierce the girl in her right leg. She stumbled, tumbling to a stop. She was five feet in front of where Allan and Umari were hiding, but she never saw their terrified faces as they looked on. The Skorupi converged on her. They stung and pinched her with their clawed tails. She screamed in pain and in terror.

“Stop! No! Get away! Help! Please! Anyone!?” she thrashed on the ground as the bed of Scorpion Pokémon descended upon her. “Help me!”

‘Allan!’

Allan sat there, holding Umari back with all of his strength. The source of the dark spot in his mental scans revealed itself. A hulking Drapion crawled up behind the horde of Skorupi. Its jaws dripped with a poisonous drool, adding a glimmer to the large white fangs they contained.

Another Dark type … not another… so many to deal with…
‘Allan! Please! She needs us!’ Umari cried.

‘I… I can’t. I can’t put you in more danger.’ Allan responded. He was frozen. Afraid but unable to look away from the scene in front of him. The Drapion drew closer to Alice.

Allan felt a sharp pain in his head. Blinking, he realized it was Umari screaming at him.

‘What if that was me over there!? ’

In an instant, a wave of hypothetical scenarios washed over Allan’s mind. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, now sure of himself in more than one respect.

“Okay,” Allan said in a low voice. He reached behind him, and held two Poké Balls in his hand, turning on the sensory perception of the one in his left hand. He looked down to Umari, who was anxiously staring at him. “Listen carefully, you two. I only have time to explain this once.”

In a few seconds, Allan relayed his plan to Umari and Xutan, who sat ready in his Poké Ball. On Allan’s signal, he and Umari burst from their wooden shelter with Allan releasing Xutan in a flash of bright light an instant later. Umari was the spearhead to their assault. As the Drapion recovered from the bright light that Xutan’s Poké Ball created, it was greeted with a Take Down attack to the chest, sending it reeling backwards into the trees. As Umari backed away, a green-topped Poké Ball flew over her, hitting the Drapion in the head and absorbing it as a mass of red light.

As the leader of the swarm was occupied with struggling to escape its confines, Allan had Xutan turn his attention to the Skorupi. Pinpointing each of their minds—and with Allan’s guidance, avoiding Alice’s—the Natu sent as powerful of a wave of Confusion as he could muster, crippling the scorpions before they could do any more damage. With the smaller threats neutralized, Allan took his chance to get over to Alice.

She was still frantically swatting at the unconscious Pokémon that littered her body. She was screaming and shaking; Alice hadn’t even noticed Allan’s presence before he knelt by her side and grabbed her shoulders.

“Alice. Alice!” he said, audibly and mentally. “It’s okay. I’m right here.”

“I— I—” she looked at him, with dirt and blood covering her face, and tears pouring from her eyes. “A—Allan?”

“Yes.”

“I— I—” she tried to speak, but she could only sob harder. She flung her arms around her savior and squeezed him tight.

“I’m right here…” Allan said again. He pulled her back from her embrace, trying to get her to calm down. “Alice, we need to move, okay? That Drapion—”

‘Um, Allan?’ Umari called, urgently.

He spun around in fear, but saw his Eevee standing alone in the grass. She was pointing with a paw to the Friend Ball that he had thrown. It was still and silent on the ground.

‘You caught it. What should we do?’ Umari asked.

‘We move on. That thing would’ve killed us if it had gotten free,’ Allan said. Umari didn’t argue.
Allan turned back to Alice, who was still looking in terror at the Skorupi, fearful that they might wake up at any moment. She didn’t recognize his touch when Allan took her arm, but she felt the needle as it almost pricked her skin.

“Ah! No, get away!” she swatted at him, hitting his face. “I—I’m sorry! I thought—”

“It’s okay,” Allan said quickly. “This is an antidote for the poison; you were stung a lot.” She didn’t struggle, and let Allan administer the medicine and tend to her many cuts and scrapes. “Come on,” he urged, trying to pull her to her feet. “We need to go now, okay Alice?”

“I can’t.” She tried to stand, but her legs kept failing her. She broke into tears again. “I just… I can’t anymore… no more! He… he left me… Tropius…”

“Hey,” Allan said. “Listen to me. You’re exhausted, lost some blood, and taken quite a bit of poison. That antidote should be enough to take care of that—and I have plenty more for us—but you need to rest. We also need to keep moving and get you out of this forest, okay? You might need a hospital; hell, I might. But we need to move. Right. Now.”

“I… I can’t do it…” she said hopelessly.

“Okay, how about this? I can have Duncan put you to sleep. I’ll carry you, so you can rest up and let the medicine do its job, okay?”

Alice cried silently for a moment more before she agreed. In a quick fashion, Allan released his Exeggcute and ordered him to put Alice in a peaceful slumber. He recalled Duncan shortly after his job was done. As he called Xutan back over so that the group could move on into the forest, a rock struck his Natu as he fluttered through the air.

Allan traced the projectile back its origin; one of the angry Tyranitar from the pond. Sand began blowing through the trees like it had back at the pond.

In a fit of quickly realized fear, Allan recalled Xutan’s unconscious body to his ball, set it to stasis, and picked up Alice’s sleeping body.

“Run, Umari! Ahead of me! Go!”

The two ran away from the loud roars and sounds trees being ripped from the earth.

———

He had almost thrown up twice since he had ran away, just from sheer exhaustion. It felt to Allan like days had passed since the Tyranitar last appeared. He wasn’t sure, he was afraid that if he took the time to look at his Pokégear, some new terror would come along. The only things he knew for sure were that his legs screamed at him to stop moving, his stomach lurched if he so much as jogged, and Umari was safe and sound, walking three feet in front of him.

Alice was breathing easy, blissfully unaware of things around her. Allan felt his arms wearing down; carrying her was becoming painful.

He was having trouble scanning mentally for and dangers ahead, having to rely on Umari’s sense of sound and smell now. Fear gripped him as the minutes and the trees passed by. What might he find next? What might find him?

Umari let Allan know moments before he saw it that they had come across a break in the trees. A clearing about thirty yards from end to end, and as wide, stretched out in front of him. In the center
stood a small wooden shrine. The tarnished and overgrown wooden structure looked older than the trees that surrounded it. The moon shone high in the sky, bathing the area in gray light. It was the clearest Allan had seen all night.

The grass here grew short, and made walking easier for a change. As they were half way towards the shrine, Umari’s fur stood on end.

‘I hear something! I can smell it too!’

Allan tried as hard as he could to sense where and what it was, but he couldn’t sense anyone but himself, Alice, or Umari in the field. They stood still in the open field, looking around for what might be lurking in the darkness.

‘It’s moving closer!’ Umari warned. ‘What should we do?’

‘Run!’

The two moved as fast as their bodies would allow them, running around the ruined shrine. As they made their mad dash to the tree line in front of them, Allan could see something moving. It broke through the trees in front of them, blocking their escape north. A bipedal, feline Pokémon with a crown of red feathers stood its ground, brilliant white claws shining in the moonlight. The Weavile called into the night and then advanced on Allan and Umari.

An Absol appeared from Allan’s left as they tried to run away. A Houndoom joined the two other Dark type Pokémon. The three closed in on the humans and Eevee standing helplessly in the open.

Allan heard the now familiar roar of a Tyranitar behind him, tearing down trees as it moved.

With a scream that tore at his already worn throat from the morning before, Allan fell to his knees in despair. He consciously let Alice down gently, and slumped down, staring into his own hands. They were covered mud, small cuts, and blood that was not his own.

“I… I just… I couldn’t do anything! I let down all those people—Geoff…” Allan cried, catching his head in his palms. “I couldn’t save anyone!”

He looked up, tears streaming from his eyes, and saw Umari looking back at him, matching his expression. She leaped into his arms, taking solace in his touch, shivering in fear—both of the situation, and seeing her trainer, someone who she thought was capable of doing the impossible, driven to his knees in defeat. It was the first time that night that she was genuinely afraid that she would die.

‘Allan? I’m scared…’ she said.

He focused himself only on her mind. Letting her light shine in his mind as brightly as he could. He closed his eyes, and held her close.

“Me too…” he said. ‘I’m so sorry, Umari.’

Allan could only see Umari’s mind in a haze of static. He let himself become lost in her presence; his precious Umari.

“What are you doing?”

A voice broke through Allan’s mental trance. He heard it, but he didn’t recognize it.
“Get up! It’s almost here!”

He looked up from Umari’s face to see a woman standing before him. She was tall, and looked to be older than him. Her hair betrayed her apparent age even more; shining silver hair framed her face and fell back behind her waist. Her clothes were tattered somewhat; had she been running through the forest too?

She stared at Allan with wide eyes. She beckoned him to stand up. “Move!” she yelled. “Weavile, Absol, Houndoom, protect him! It doesn’t look like he can stand!”

Allan looked on in awe as he was being surrounded by the Dark type Pokémon. The looks in their eyes were adamant and resolute; they would die protecting him under their trainer’s orders.

From where the Weavile had appeared in the clearing, came another new Pokémon. It stood as tall as the woman, and radiated a kind of blue energy from its paws. Steel spikes jutted from the backs of its glowing paws, as well as another from its chest. It wasn’t until the Lucario’s trainer came through the trees—the huge, muscular man actually needing to move some smaller ones out of his way—did Allan really begin to believe that he was right about the silver-haired woman’s identity.

“K— Karen?” he spoke with a raspy voice. “And… Bruno… of the Elite Four?”

The older woman knelt down to him, and beckoned her companion over. “Two survivors over here! May need physical assistance to move.” Karen turned her attention to Allan. “Are you alright? Is your friend?”

“I… we…” Allan started.

“We know what happened,” she said. “ Mostly, anyway. Are you alright? Can you stand?”

“No,” said Allan. “Too exhausted.”

Behind him, Allan felt the whipping sandstorm and heard the Tyranitar come into the clearing. As he and Karen stayed low to the ground, Bruno and his Lucario stood against it. The Lucario was much smaller than the hulking green creature, but it sent volley after volley of Aura Spheres towards it, keeping it from advancing further.

“Here,” Bruno called behind him, throwing a Poké Ball on the ground. His Machamp stood tall and awaited orders. “Take the wounded with Karen. We’ll follow.”

Allan was picked up with ease, cradled in one arm, and Alice in another, as the Machamp, Karen, and her Pokémon began retreating from the clearing.

“You two are lucky,” Karen said as they moved quickly through the trees, Bruno’s Machamp simply chopping down ones in his way. “You’re the first survivors we’ve found tonight.”

“Wh-What are the Elite Four doing here?” Allan managed to ask.

“Your friend there—Alice? She got a distress message out. We heard what your group ran into and made it here as fast as possible. We tracked her location using her Pokédex’s satellite signal.”

Allan looked over to Alice, still asleep in one of Machamp’s arms.

“She saved our lives…” he said.

“And you saved her’s, by the looks of it,” Karen said, noticing the bandages. “Our colleague Koga is
looking for other survivors still,” she went on. “Will is in Azalea making sure no one else comes in. Whitney is helping on her end…”

Allan could hear the Dark type expert continue to talk, but he didn’t listen. He could only hold Umari close in his arms, feel her fur, sense her presence, and be glad that they were alive.

——————

End of Arc 2

——————

To be continued…

——————
For the longest time I always played my game in secret. It felt only right that I’d keep it private; you’d understand if you knew. No one else needed to know.

But things got a lot more complicated. I thought I had things under control. Like I always did. But I guess I underestimated how… hard it can be to forgive someone sometimes. Someone who does something truly unforgivable. I guess that’s what I’ve become; unforgivable. Hated.

Coralis definitely said it to my face often enough. It must be true.

Now I’m feeling stuck for the first time in a long, long time. I have… or maybe had… someone to help me. Iruni Thomas. He’s still my best link. I don’t fully know if he’ll cooperate—this future is too new—but he still hasn’t shaken his place in time. His future is much longer now that I’ve intervened, even if it’s a bit more eventful. So what if it’s better for my own personal usage? I’ll need to keep checking on it. He’ll see Coralis again, at least. Hopefully.

But now…

A shiver danced up my back at the sounds below me. The Ilex forest was screaming. My home. It is no longer a place of life and growth. I can see its future in my mind. Fire. Smoke. Death. Fear. That’s how it will be known for a long time to come.

I’m not blind. I can see what my actions have caused. Maybe it took meeting and ruining Coralis’ life to make me really see, but he didn’t deserve that just to teach me a life lesson. That’s what I’m trying to do. I want to fix everything.

But the more I try, the more things seem to break.

All I’m doing at this point is stalling. I could stare at my ruined home for eternity and it wouldn’t change what’s already happened.

Every time I look at this new future, this new set of possibilities, I am filled with a sense of dread. I spent these past five years stuck in this time period planning and working towards a future that is irrelevant now. I’m left with the pieces of an old game on a brand new board. My old plans accounted for one extra player. But now, it’s obvious I need more help. I need power.

I’ll be the first to admit my own physical weakness. I’m not very strong-willed either, but that’s something I’m trying to change. But others in the world, in this time… they can be. They could be my sword and shield. A few choice individuals come to mind right away; important figures, both in my day-to-day, and in the human world. First thing to do is… find out my problems. Then I can find the key to those locks.

That shouldn’t be too hard. First, I’m fumbling around dealing with a mistake I made in the past; that goes to me to fix. Next, Coralis refuses to see me—for good reason, I suppose. That’s Iruni’s job to
fix, even if he doesn’t quite know the whole story yet. He’s easy to find, and through him, Coralis. 
Now… Iruni’s safety is a priority. I’ve already made sure to prevent one life threatening event in his 
timeline… but, look where that got me.

Then this is my first real problem then… dammit. How can I do something without directly *doing* 
something!?

Oh.

Right.

Iruni’s new future already exists… so maybe I can add to it, instead of changing its direction. How 
involved can I get without things getting too chaotic?

Closing my eyes, I concentrated and cast a bubble of energy around me to block out any sound from 
the world below. I have to be sure of what I see.

…

No. I can’t.

Too much of my presence in his immediate timeline would distort things far too much. That would 
hurt my plans more than anything.

This is frustrating… but maybe I’m looking at this the wrong way…

Instead of openly interfering with Coralis’ future, I simply looked to who he would meet. Coralis’ 
future remained mostly unchanged. So who does Iruni get involved with, I wonder?

Who can help me?

…

Him again? Yes, that’s *exactly* who that is. He sure bounced back from things quickly. He’ll go and 
made himself quite the celebrity, won’t he? And it only goes up, up, up from there. He’ll do fine. 
Now… how do I make sure he can deliver?

A quick look into my new target’s future spelled it out for me. I almost didn’t notice the connection, 
or possible connection at first, but then it all made sense. It will make sense. I can make it.

Losing my bubble and opening my eyes, I find that it’s been a few hours since I took to my 
meditating. Moonlight struggled to breach the cloudy night skies. The night is already half-over. 
Which is perfect; it should be daytime on that end of the world.

A stray thought passes through my head before I bid farewell to the one place I call home.

*He’s below me right this instant… the wild card.*

The next instant, I’m floating above a city of concrete and steel. The sunlight was bright; glaring off 
the shiny windows of the buildings. I don’t know this place’s name; not at this point in time. Names 
of places change throughout the years, humans tend to do that. But there is an island close by whose 
name I do know: Liberty Garden.

__________

A short flight brings me to the island home of someone I would probably call a friend, if he and I
conversed any more than a handful of times. Likable, energetic, and always getting into trouble with humans once every century or so. The lighthouse attracts a meager amount of tourists, I see. They shouldn’t be a problem. They don’t go below.

Another warp brings me into the basement of the lighthouse. It’s been… about a hundred of my years since I was here last. No telling how long it’s been for Victini though. It’s a dank little place; just like I remember. There’s a new, colorful rug down here now. New toys. The bed’s a bit nicer. But… where is he?

“Boo!”

I was outside again before I even realize I had teleported, my hearts racing. It took me a few seconds to collect myself before I could really process what had just happened. I teleported back inside the basement dwelling underneath the lighthouse to find Victini, the Victory Pokémon of lore, lying on the ground and struggling to breathe. From laughter.

“Oh my— Oh— That was very good!” he laughed, tears pooling around his eyes.

I tried to contain my momentary anger.

It didn’t work.

“What is wrong with you?!” I yelled. “Who just hides in a toy chest like that just to scare someone?”

“It worked, that’s all that matters,” says Victini. Gathering some sense of dignity, the mirthful Pokémon levitates into the air to become level with me. “Are you going to ask me how long it’s been since your last visit? Because I think I know the right answer it this time.”

“That doesn’t matter,” I said to him. “I came here for an important reason.”

“I’ll bet,” Victini said, dropping to the bed below. He really was a strange, childish fellow. He had a stuffed… him on the bed. He lifted it up to show it to me. “Look! Isn’t it cute? I got it for my ‘birthday’ this year.”

“Can you really be so ignorant to things?” I almost yelled. “Take this seriously! I need your help.”

“I can see that,” Victini said. “But you haven’t said what yet. So I don’t know how serious it is. Until then, I’m trying to lighten up the mood. Relax. Take a pillow, and just lie down.”

I clenched my jaw in frustration. How can he be so… happy? Stuck down in this dull, dim little world.

“I’ll do it!”

I looked back at him, completely lost. “I haven’t said what I need you to do yet…”

“No, but you already told me you’d need my help with something very important. Something that only I can do. You said I need to ‘protect someone and help them protect someone else for you’, right?” Victini grinned, showing off his small fangs as he finished mimicking my tone of voice.

“But… I didn’t tell you anything yet.” How did he know so much?

“You did. A future you. You were just here.”

Oh no.
“Stop!” I almost screamed at him. I covered my ears with my hands, “Don’t say anything else! Please!”

“Calm down, ya goof,” Victini suddenly became much more serious. “I know the ropes. You don’t mess with your own timeline. I won’t say anything. Probably.”

“So… you know the whole story?” I asked.

“Let’s see; I know what to do, where to do it, when you want me to do it, and why you want me to do it,” he said as he counted on his fingers. “But I don’t know ‘who’ or ‘how’ yet.”

“How what?”

“Well, I don’t know how I’m supposed to vacate this place without really causing a commotion. I need to be halfway around the world, but I’m not really supposed to leave my room here.”

I pondered this dilemma for a moment. This shouldn’t be an issue. Victini’s more than capable of protecting himself on his own, but to get across the globe in time would take him a while… I can’t just sit here and babysit him until the moment’s right and teleport him either…

“If it helps, Future-You said that you figured it out a solution here. Right now. Apparently I’m a big hint.”

I threw the ever happy creature of energy an annoyed look.

Foreknowledge can be a good thing, I’m convinced. But it also scares me. I can’t see my own personal future, but now thanks to Victini’s big mouth at least I know I have one. I normally make it a point to avoid copies of myself, so when my future-self interferes with my life, I can’t tell the motivation behind the action or what the outcome will be. If I don’t take it, will I end up like the future self that tried to intervene, or will it come to pass whether I do anything or not? Ugh, it’s just too confusing…

“Let’s see,” I said. It takes less time to blink before I see what is coming in Victini’s future. “Oh.”

“Oh?”

“Yes… oh.”

“That doesn’t sound good…” Victini said.

“It’s… a flux point in time. There are multiple futures ahead of you. Only one of them lets you get out of here and help me. The other… isn’t pleasant.”

Victini’s smile fades for the first time since I appeared in his little bunker. “Look,” he said, “I already agreed. Your future-self told me enough about what I need to do. It sounds like something worth going for; and not just to help you either. I need to escape from this place every once and a while. My keepers are… too paranoid about my wellbeing. They’re good people, but it’s suffocating sometimes. This person I’m supposed to protect and guide… I think he’ll do me as much good as I can do for him. I’m willing to take risks for my future, Celebi.”

I nodded and closed my eyes once more. I could see in great deal the point in his future where his timeline splits. Only one lets him go to Johto. And one person will help him get there.

“Alright.” I said. “Tomorrow, you’ll meet a human named Tristan Blake. He is your best hope to make sure you get to see what your future holds.”
Andrea Karson hasn’t stopped crying.

I shared her sentiment, but didn’t mirror her outward reaction. I sat and stared on at the television screen in silence.

We were among the plethora of people stuck—as if the word meant anything to these people—in Azalea Town. The Ilex Forest, the accursed place known in legend as the home of Celebi, has claimed the lives of innocents. An untold number. The prospect was chilling, even to my own admittedly jaded outlook on life. Children have died. More lives have been ruined on her watch.

I shouldn’t be surprised or angry anymore.

But I am.

I feared my teeth might shatter if I clenched my jaw for another minute.

The atmosphere of our hotel room was nothing but constant sobbing, monotone voices from the television, and the kind words coming from Tyler trying to soothe the distraught young woman. Jacob Ostra has been shocked into silence, something I would normally find a pleasing outcome. Not today. He hasn’t said a thing to our troupe since the news began playing on repeat, telling gruesome reports about the unnatural and unseemly Pokémon attacks in the forest.

[“—are the worst wild Pokémon attacks in recorded history in the region, says Professor Samuel Oak of Kanto.”] the reporter said. The face of a gray haired man with a wide face appeared next to some quoted text. A voice played over the picture as the news reporter waited silently.

[“This is a tragic and eye opening incident that my colleagues and I will be investigating at length. Over the past few months, Professor William Elm and I have been conducting research for just this sort of occasion; field researchers were sent to observe local Pokémon habitats and migratory patterns. Unfortunately, our efforts appear to be too late. But we will not let this deter us. If anything, this only proves the importance of our research—’Project Cartographer’, we called it—and it stands to say we need to double our efforts if we are to get a handle on the situation.”]

I had heard this quote three times since the news began to run on repeat throughout the day. “Field Researchers”. It could only mean what Bartholomew Iruni Thomas and Alice Wingborne were talking about back in Violet City. They had left before we had, both headed south. Here, to Azalea Town.

Are they alive, I wonder? Were they swept up in the wind of catastrophe along with the young and old alike that had lost their lives?

Either way, neither one of them have yet returned any of our attempts at communication, to mine and my friends’ worry. I can’t help but feel a pang of sadness, even for people I hardly knew, to think that they have lost their lives to the Forest Guardian’s continued negligence.

“Hey, Cora?”

It wasn’t really a question, merely a call for my attention. I looked up from my chair to Jacob, whose eyes didn’t inspire the optimism as they always had. He stood up in front of the bed in the middle of the room, now the center of attention.

“Yes?” I asked him. He didn’t continue his thought until he managed to get Andrea to stop sobbing into Tyler’s lap. It was clear this was going to be one of his speeches.

“Listen,” Jake started, only to look back at the television for a moment. He pointed a finger at it, “That. Those attacks. Those kinds of Pokémon roaming where they shouldn’t. There were no signs, not warnings. It just happened.” He paused for a moment, taking the time to look into each of our eyes. Testing our resolve. I didn’t blink.

“I just can’t sit here and watch it like I’m a civilian waiting to be told how to deal with it,” Jake continued. “The police, the Pokémon League, the Gym Leaders? They’re all in a scramble. They know about as much as we do. I say we get up off our asses and do something.”

“What can we do?” Andrea asked through her tears. “This isn’t something we can handle!”

“But it can be!” Jake said, suddenly brimming with enthusiasm. “You saw the same reports I did. Everyone’s on the same page with this. If we train hard, get serious, and make ourselves known, we can make a real difference. If we find what’s causing these strange migrations, maybe we can do something about them.”

“What exactly are you saying?” asked Tyler. “You said you wanted to be Blackthorn’s Gym Leader, didn’t you? How does this change anything?”

“Because this isn’t just about our little town in the mountains anymore. This kind of incident can happen anywhere. It can happen to anyone.” He turned to me, looking to hopefully bring me over to his side of the argument, if it could be called that. “Coralis, you know what I’m talking about, right?”

“What do you mean?” I had caught onto Jacob’s accusing tone before he finished his sentence. He spoke to me as if I had been caught stealing. “I don’t—”

“No!” Jake yelled at me, startling all of us in the room. “You know exactly what I’m talking about! I mind my own business as much as the next man, but it doesn’t stop me from noticing things. You showed up in Blackthorn four years ago with hardly anything to your name and a stare that could make a man question his own safety. But I took a chance and tried makin’ what was hurting you a little better. Giving you a place to live, helping you get on your feet, trying to be a friend.” He paused, exhaling through his nose. He braced as if his next line might be his last.

“But you’re not our friend, are you?”

“Speak your words clearly,” I stood up from my chair to meet his gaze. “Say what you mean and don’t dance around it.”

“We’re just a background gig, right? You’ll slip away for a day or two without warning, doing who knows what. Oh sure you’d always come back, but you’d never say where you went. One day after you come back, you suddenly have enough cash for your own place, but I’ve never seen you work a day in your life. You get those phone calls in the middle of the night, talking quiet and quick. You’ve never told us who you really are. Where you came from. It’s always ‘a long story’ to you.”
“Dancing, Jacob,” I warned him, but he was clearly not as thickheaded as I gave him credit for. Perhaps my actions had been too obvious.

“Who do you work for and how can we help?” Jacob asked. Were it not for the years that I had known the man, I might have taken what he said as a joke.

“Explain yourself.” I responded.

“Come on, it’s obvious; you’re into something big. And I think you might know that what you do can help the world around us.”

“Basing what you know simply off observation any my own unwillingness to divulge any of my private affairs with you three, and what you assume I plan to do, you want to supposedly join in my alleged activities?”

“It’s obvious to me you have some troubling issues,” said Jake. He sat down in a chair across the room as I still stood, now the focus of the room. “The way I see it, you managed to find someone who you think can help fix that. So you began coordinating some business in secret. But you’re using us as a secondary means of living so you can have some sort of normal life or something. Maybe a cover. My point is, if you know people who can throw their weight around, maybe we can do it for the good of people. This Ilex Forest fiasco is exactly the thing we can help prevent! We know things like this can happen, so we can take steps to help save people. We just need the means to do it.”

He turned to Tyler and Andrea.

“You guys with me?” he asked. The two nodded in silence. A majority was cast, leaving me the target of the night.

“Listen, Cora. If it’s really important to keep your private life private, then by all means, be my guest and clam up. But if what you’ve got going on with those secret buddies of yours can help people, then by the gods you owe it to those people that lost their lives that you feel so sorry about to do something about it.”

I felt their stares of curiosity and urgency as I stood silently listening to the repeating news reel. The longer I waited, the more obvious it became that I had already decided what to say to them.

“I will try to not offend anyone in this room. My business is, as you say, is my own. My past is my own. What I do, I do for myself, but that doesn’t devalue what we, as a group of friends, have. I have truly enjoyed our travels together, our time in Blackthorn, and you ever generous hospitality and patience with me. I—”

Before I continued with my own speech, the television halted its fourth rerun of programming. Something new started to play.

[“A new report coming to us from Goldenrod City has now been confirmed: Two survivors have been found and are now safely out of Ilex Forest. One Alice Jane Wingborne of Fortree City in Hoenn, and Allan Relmstead of Ecruteak City are now being treated at Goldenrod Central Hospital. They were both declared to be in stable condition, only suffering minor wounds, despite the terrible situation they managed to find their way out of. More updates as they appear…”]

I stood staring at the now irrelevant news playing on the screen after the live update had passed. I was shocked; more so than from when I had learned about the incident proper. Something about that revelation burned in my mind. A light in the dark. They were spared! Two of them! And I knew one
of them! The odds in play were too unfathomable; something told me that Celebi’s hand has played somewhere in this game.

“Two souls escaped…” I said, muttering under my breath. “And Alice! Spared from her negligence! Was it her directly? Has she finally felt some compassion in her eons of apathy?”

“Cora? What’re you talking about?” Jake asked.

“It can be done!” I smiled. I knew it now. In the back of my head, I knew I wouldn’t make sense to my friends in the room. But that didn’t matter. Soon, they would understand everything.

“Excuse me, you three,” I said, looking back to my friends. “I promise you, after I make a simple phone call—one that you may overhear—I will explain to you what I aim to do, who I work with, who I am, and where I hail from.”

I pulled my PokéGear out and called one of my subordinates. He didn’t pick up, as is his way.

“Sebastian. A word. Something has happened that I believe will work in our favor. It is all over the news stations, as I’m sure you’re aware. But I need you to go to Goldenrod City and meet with some friends of mine, I will be accompanying them as well. I also have my eye on a new potential ally. Her name is Alice Wingborne, and I believe we can help her as much as she can help us.”

As I shut down my device, the curious looks from my traveling companions were sending my direction invigorated me. They would listen. They would believe.

They would help me get home.

“I think the logical thing to do,” I said as I pulled my chair close to my friends and sat down, “would be to start at the beginning. But first there is a fact you must understand before we continue. I am two hundred and forty-one years old.”

It has been, in reality, two hundred and seven years since I last saw my wife and son. For me however, it has been only five years. I have been ripped out of my time, thrown into a world that forgot me. You three stare at me, questions almost leaping from your mouths, but rest assured that they will be answered in time.

Oh how I’ve come to hate that word; Time. The progression of existence, slowly marching into oblivion.

But I digress before I’ve even started. Here, is how I came to meet the Guardian of the Ilex Forest, Celebi.

I hail from the corner of the world known to you now as the Sinnoh region. There, the winters are harsh; shorter days, bitter cold nights, and heavy snowfall. My son, Benedicto, loved to play in the cold. He used to make small sculptures in the snow. When I would join in, we would try to hit each other with fistfuls of the white powder.

My family and I, my wife Phaedra and my son, lived on the eastern side of the mountains that split our continent. I believe the name of the settlement now is Et Rem City, but it didn’t have that name in my time. There the people revered the old legends of my country. The village was an hour’s walk from our modest cottage in the woods, perhaps two in the winter when you had to trudge through the
Living surrounded by trees made for many hearty fires in the cold seasons. It was on an early morning of gathering firewood that I managed to uproot my entire life.

I was carrying a long blade in my hand, useful for cutting thick, low-lying branches. That particular morning had been very peaceful. The cold seemed to pacify the local population of Pokémon, the few aggressive residents that there were. The blade I carried also served for defense whenever the time called for it; a memory of an irate Luxio comes to mind, but I would not recommend using anything metal to put down an electrical beast. For its intended purpose, it excelled. A strong swing would chop the branch off in one attempt, unless the wood was stubbornly dense.

One thick branch caught my eye and I deemed it the last one I needed. I set down the bundle of sticks I had accrued over the morning to finish my task with one more swing. As I reared my arm back, gripping the handle, I felt the short hairs on my neck straighten. A buzzing noise filled the air around me. All other sound seemed to fall away.

Just behind my back, I felt a presence unlike anything I can describe to you. I slowly turned around, needing to see.

Sparkling green gems seemed to be hovering aloft in the air a few feet above the white snow. The anomaly shifted and shone brilliantly in the morning light, humming all the while. I could not pull my eyes from it. Curiosity kept me place and then bravery drove me closer. Then something happened that I’ll never forget.

‘Aidez-moi…’

I halted in place. Words had invaded my head. I hadn’t heard the words, they came into my head on their own. They had a voice to them but they bypassed my ears and drove themselves into my mind. I didn’t understand the words, but they felt afraid.

‘Hilf mir…’

In my years, I had always thought of myself as a confident man. Not on that morning.

‘Tasukete…’

They pulled at me to come closer. These words I did not understand.

‘Ayuadame…’

I instinctively gripped my heavy knife. Fear had begun to creep into me.

‘Bāng wǒ…’

Whose words were these, I wondered? None sounded anything like I had heard in my life.

‘Help me…’

And there it was. Understanding.

“Yes! Hello? Can you hear me?” I called into the cold air, having no idea if the voice could hear me like I had been.

‘Please…’
Cautiously, I moved closer to the flowing and changing emerald rift. I could feel my body start to shake as I got closer to the rupture in front of me. My teeth itched. My eyes watered. It felt like I was witnessing something no mortal should; like it was above me on some very basic level. For a three-dimensional being to observe a four-dimensional object, it pained me to merely be around it. What must it have felt like to be inside? I soon found out, because it was then I decided on my action.

I thrust my hand inside it. Another thing I do not recommend.

It felt as if my arm had been skewered a thousand times by a thousand swords, like my flesh was being ripped and pulled apart in a million different ways. I clenched my jaw and reached deeper, not knowing if I was helping at all.

Then I felt a tiny hand grab my own, clenching weakly.

‘Pull…’

Perhaps against my better judgment, I reached into the ripple in the world with my other arm, pain doubling, and grabbed the small thing calling to me and pulled with all of my might, screaming as I did. The energy coming from the portal resonated throughout my body, shaking my heart, burning my eyes, and blistering my mind. I fell backwards into the snow, clutching something in my arms. It was frail and green; it had long arms, short legs, and a large head. Its body was marked with cuts and bruises. It seemed like it was having trouble breathing.

I should have left it die in the cold.

After rushing my hurt little friend to my home to seek care and comfort, I had ventured back into the wild to retrieve the kindling I had abandoned. When I returned to that spot, the green anomaly still remained, but it was much smaller. It hung in the air like a scar; a tear in the fabric of the world. It still made me uneasy to look at it, but I felt inexplicably drawn to it. Enchanted to stare into its shifting emerald prisms. My eyes watered and I turned away from it. I thought perhaps our visitor could answer me on why this was.

When I returned home I was met with a hectic scene. Before I managed to reach my front door, my son burst forth, calling for my attention.

“Father! The demon is yelling things!” Benedicto called to me.

“Watch your language,” I said, walking in from the snow. I put down the bundle of wood by the door and began undressing my heavy clothes. “No need to be rude.”

“Coralis Odarius! Save me from this monster that screams at me in strange tongues!” My wife Phaedra was usually one to be calm, patient, and kind.

“You must not have been kidding, then,” I told my son.

Entering the main room of our modest cabin had never been so challenging. Dinner plates, chairs, various other hazardous items flew in the air around my wife and our wounded visitor.

“She was well behaved enough, but she just started doing this!” Phaedra called to me. She was on her knees, arms held over her head for protection. Her golden hair was flowing wildly in the ethereal wind. “I don’t understand her; these voices in my head.”

“Come to me, I’ll calm her.” I stood in front of our dinner table, held aloft by unknown means, as it
floated toward me. I grabbed the legs, using it as a shield, letting my wife leave the vortex in safety while I took her place at the center.

The being that called to me from her rupture in space was huddled in the corner of the room, shivering, spouting words in many different languages. I could see the few successful attempts my wife made at applying care to her wounds, but some were freshly bleeding. Something else caught my eye about her which drove me to press closer to her; she was in tears.

“Achaicus Erela, please stop this!” I called to her. “You are safe here! There is no need to cry!”

‘No! Please leave me alone!’ she said, in a language I could understand.

“We only want to help you,” I pleaded. I put a caring tone to my voice to soothe her. “My wife, my son, we wish you no harm.”

‘I wanted to go, but she tried to stop me! I’m finally free, I won’t be trapped anywhere again!’

“And we don’t wish to keep you, but you’re hurt, and it’s the peak of the cold season. Please, stop this chaos, Erela.” I held out the hand she had grasped onto in the void, palm up.

“I promise I won’t hurt you.”

She finally looked up at me, shaking and crying, and fluttered on her small translucent wings into my arms.

‘Please don’t.’

I cradled Achaicus Erela—a name from a language my Father had taught me once—in one arm as I helped my wife pick up our dining area. I made sure to be careful of my passenger’s wounds, not moving too quickly or harshly.

‘I’m sorry…’

“You should be, little one,” Phaedra scolded her. “It’s terribly unappreciative to throw a woman’s home at her when she tends your wounds.”

‘I’m scared of your life-mate,’ she said to me, and I suspected, only to me.

I laughed, smiling for the first time that day. “Now, now, let’s put this noisy morning behind us, shall we?”

On our replaced dinner table, I laid my precious cargo down on a clean towel so my wife and I could see to her wounds in full.

‘You called me a name,’ she said to me. ‘I didn’t recognize that language. What does it mean?’

I smiled and calmly ran my hand over her smooth head, “Weeping angel, Achaicus Erela. Do you like it?”

‘The angel part is nice…’

“Then I shall call you Erela, unless you have a name you prefer?”

‘Celebi.’
“Well then, Celebi Erela, you are welcome to stay here under our care until you feel it is time to go.”

I saw the relief spread across Celebi’s face at my kind offer. It was plain to see she was uneasy about the situation, but she put her faith in my words.

Time and time again I dream of this moment. In the dreams I change my fate, and snap her neck. I am happy in these dreams.

And then I wake up…

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Yes, as I see you about to ask, I had indeed come in contact with such a legend. The things tales are written about, of which songs are sung, the source of those cautionary tales we tell our children at night; a time-traveling sprite.

My mind never fell to seek fame or fortune at my chance encounter. Even back in my time, courageous men and women sought out the truths behind the myths we grew up on. To bring them down to our level, tamed and real for all to see. To have their own names added to these legends was their dream.

Mine was just to provide for my family. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. They were my dream come true. They were…

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I would do you all a disservice if I held my tongue; by withholding the whole of the story, you may fail to understand. That is far from my intention. I want you to see.

Celebi Erela, as I had named her, was a part of my life that I did truly enjoy. Her arrival in my home brightened up the days that winter. My son had a new playmate. My wife had someone to carry conversation with when I was out of the home. She had become a great family friend, and her advice managed to save my sanity on more than a few occasions.

The most pressing being the side-effects from the efforts put toward rescuing her from her self-imposed predicament; that crack in the universe she had gotten herself stuck in.

I had asked her time and again what had brought her to be trapped in a rift in time. The time I had gotten the most information, she told me.

‘Before that, I was… imprisoned. By people; humans. They wanted to take my power from me and use it for themselves. They had me drugged, I couldn’t think clearly… I couldn’t jump through time. I was hurt. But I got out somehow, I can’t remember what happened. I managed to escape that time, but couldn’t land in a new one. Until you pulled me out, Coralis.’

“It was my pleasure, Erela.”

As I had said the words, my vision blanked, and I was then staring down at Celebi. She was unconscious, lying on a cold stone floor. Chains and shackles binding her to corner of a dark and cruel looking room.

In an instant, the sight vanished, and I was back in my home. Celebi was still hovering in front of my face as if nothing had happened.
'What’s the matter?’ she asked.

“What’s the matter?” I said, hoping to drive away any unneeded concern.

In reality, it had unnerved me greatly. What I had seen was too vivid, too real to have been a mere daydream, or to be blamed on any overactive imagination. I saw it. I was there. I saw her in her most vulnerable state.

I soon learned that particular episode was my one look into the past.

Continuing on into the spring, I would have visions that took over my sense of sight, even invading my ears. I had no clues to go with, no idea what was happening to me. They even started to fill my dreams. Sleep was beginning to elude me. Sometimes, I would see the next day; I would see tomorrow’s sunrise and the minutes that followed. And when that day would finally come, I would fear whether or not I was hallucinating again. I did my best to hide my affliction from my family. I could not bear to hurt them; to give them grief on my behalf. If I were to lose my grip on reality itself, if I were to lose my mind, I would do so privately.

One warm night, I lay awake in my bed. My wife was asleep beside me, her calm breaths being my only thought. Visions of her alone and crying kept me awake. They were frequent now. Some minutes apart.

You may find my next decision to be a bit rash, for even now I curse myself for even thinking it.

I wanted to throw myself into the river. I needed to stop the visions.

All I wanted was peace.

So I stood from my warm bed and left my home, walking into the night. I marched on like a man possessed, for I was. My eyes flashed; day to night with each step. Soon my grip on today would be gone.

I saw the running water, I heard the rapids. I stood on a cliff, prepared to fall into the river’s depths. Relief seemed so close. Until something pushed be backwards onto the grass.

‘Coralis, don’t!’ Celebi screamed in my mind.

She hovered above my chest as I lay on my back, but I could no longer see her. Only the bright blue sky of a day yet to come.

“H-Help me… I can’t see anything anymore, but I see strange things. Every day.” I could feel my eyes burning as I spoke.

‘Why didn’t you tell me you were having visions?’ Celebi placed her hands on either side of my head, their presence soothed me momentarily. ‘I was afraid this might happen. I could’ve helped you.’

“Can… Can you still help me?” I asked. Visions began speeding up. Playing rapidly in my mind as well as before my eyes. “My eyes have failed me. The things I’ve seen— I do not understand. I don’t know what I’m seeing even now! They’re inside my head! What is in my head!!”

‘It’s the future.’

Celebi pressed her forehead against mine and I heard the most beautiful sound. A tone from a bell rang through my mind. It silenced everything, leaving nothing but the presence of Erela holding me
in an intimate embrace. My breathing slowed. My sight began to return to the present day. I was looking into the deep blue eyes of my friend from out of time. I didn’t realize I had been crying until she wiped the tears from my face.

‘It’s okay now, I’m here.’ Celebi allowed me to sit up in the grass, but stayed close by. I could tell she was afraid I may try and leap into the roaring waters again.

“What happened to me?” I asked her.

“When you saved me, you reached into time— literally sifted through the sands of existence. You were lucky to pull out both of your arms when they were still the same ages.’ Celebi flew in front of my face, examining my features with a studious eye. ‘You were exposed to energies you’re not meant to; at least not on your own. You absorbed a lot of temporal radiation. That power has been slowly leaking out of you these past few months. Causing you to see flashes into the future.’

“You said you were afraid this would happen. You knew that this would happen to me?”

‘I wasn’t sure, but I had my own worries. I knew you had been exposed to those energies, but not how much you’d retained. If you’d spoken up sooner about them, we could have worked together and helped you deal with them.’

“So what can be done now?” I asked. “And what about you? Don’t you have to deal with these as well? You were in that rift longer than I ever was.”

‘Oh please, remember who you’re talking to,’ Erela said proudly. ‘Visions into time are like daydreams to me.’

“Forgive my simple mind then,” I said. “My question remains urgent though.”

‘We’ll tackle them together. Your mind is struggling to deal with the flashes of time you’re experiencing. Whenever they come around, just let me know. With my mind with yours, we’ll ride them out until all of the time energy you’ve absorbed dissipates. And it will, I promise,’ she held my hand with both of hers, putting my palm to her small chest. ‘Cross my hearts.’

And gods save me; I believed every word she said.

Do you see it yet? Do you understand?

Some of you may; you’re certainly clever enough. You may already know what has happened to me, and what I’m about to tell you.

All that I ask is that you know that revealing all of this to you has been very difficult for me. My past, much like my own future, is precious to me.

Now, to finish my tale.

“You two look adorable,” my wife Phaedra’s voice drifted past my ears.

Almost two years had passed since Celebi had come into our lives. Despite mine and my family’s urges, she wished to stay hidden from our neighbors and the townsfolk in old Eterna. She called it “reducing her footprint in this time”, something none of us really understood, but we adhered to her
wishes to stay anonymous to other humans. The main reason for her extended stay, or so she kept insisting, were my infrequent looks into time itself. As my wife came across us, Celebi had our minds locked in a psychic embrace as we rode out my latest look into tomorrow.

“Once you get acclimated to the temporal displacement of one’s mind, it is a remarkable experience, Phaedra,” I said, borrowing some of the admittedly strange words that Erela used. “I’ve seen the stars; we go to them! Our own Moon, the red planet—”

“Coralis, you’re rambling again,” she said, wearing that expression that told me everything I needed to know. She had need of something, and it was best not to keep her waiting.

Erela and I were tending to the small garden that we had behind the house when the vision came. It had been weeks since my last; the longest time between them yet. As they became less frequent I was both simultaneously excited and remorseful. I had come to enjoy and take interest in the things that I saw. It invigorated me to know that doomsday was not around the corner, and that we continue to endure in the decades and centuries to come. The thought of losing the visions entirely also held the idea that Erela would then leave soon after, her self-imposed obligation fulfilled. Back then that was the only thing I could say that I dreaded; the loss of my friend from an unknown time.

“What is it, beloved?” I asked, adding a flourish as I stood. I took her hand, kissing the back of it. It made her laugh, which made me smile.

“Benedicto says he heard from his friends in town that a terrible storm will be rolling in tonight. I thought you and Erela could fix that leak in our ceiling before we need to learn how to swim in our house.”

“Alright, the garden can wait.” I stood and began following my wife to the front of our house. “This rain will do us all some good.”

‘What can I do?’ Erela asked.

“Your levitation will prove invaluable, I’m sure,” I said. Looking back, I saw that Celebi was frozen in place behind me. Her eyes aglow with green, sparkling energy.

“What’s wrong with her?” my wife asked.

“She’s having a vision of her own. Celebi’s connection to time is inherent, part of her nature.”

“Shouldn’t you help her? Like she does for you?”

“I’ve offered,” I said, “but she insists hers are often private, and tied to her own future. And her mind is much more accustomed to these things than mine ever will be. She can handle it.” As I said those words, I saw tears fall from Erela’s eyes. Immediately, I was concerned. “Erela? Erela, are you alright?”

‘I… Yes. I’m okay.’ She rubbed her big eyes, gathering her composure. Celebi forced a smile ‘I’m sorry about that.’

“What did you see?”

‘I won’t bother you…’ she said, her mental voice still conveying a sense of dread and dismay. ‘Let’s get ready for that storm.’
Erela and I managed to fortify my home for the impending weather just in time. Perhaps we were a bit overzealous if I were to offer an opinion. Extra wooden planks were placed over all of the windows, anything heavy was taken down from high shelves, and even the main structure of the building was enforced by enchanted vines that Erela had conjured from her own power. Her paranoia for our safety had concerned me at the time, but I didn’t inquire further; I merely wrote it off as concern for my family and myself.

My wife, son, Erela and myself were seated on the floor of the main room, huddled around our fireplace. We sat listening to the rain beat down above us when the unexpected reared its head.

A set of frantic knocks pounded upon my front door a few hours after the storm began. As I stood up, I felt Erela’s tiny hand pull me back, urging me to return to my seat next to her.

She spoke to me in private; I could tell from the acute tone in the psychic voice that rang in my mind. Her eyes betrayed her emotions. She was afraid.

‘No. Stay.’

“I have to at least answer the door, my angel.” I undid the various locks on my front door and opened it, letting the elements into my home briefly.

“Coralis Galian,” a man stood on my doorstep, covered in a cloak that whipped around him in the wind. “The mayor has called for any able-bodied man to help the town! The dam upstream is beginning to fail, and the town is in risk of flooding. Can we count on you to help us?”

“Of course,” I said. “I’ll make my way there as soon as I can.” The messenger ran off, in search of the next home to find help. I closed the door and began to prepare.

As I gathered my outdoor gear, including a heavy coat and thick boots, Erela assaulted my mind while she sat in silence next to my son.

‘Please, stay here. They can handle things without you, can’t they?’

‘That is not the point,’ I told her, following her thoughts back to her mind. ‘I need to help because I was asked to. How can I not answer their call? How could I live with myself if the whole town suffered from my cowardice?’

I hugged my wife and son after I finished gathering a few supplies I thought I would need; a length of strong rope, an ax, an extra pair of thick gloves. I ignored Celebi’s constant pleas for my safety and opened my door again.

‘No, don’t go! If you leave now you will never come back!’ She hugged my arm, trying desperately to pull me back.

You see my friends, when you make friends with a time-traveling sprite, you tend to listen when they start to speak up about the future. But here, she broke our own rule. One we made early on in the days of our arrangement: Never reveal the other’s personal future, should we come across it. Doing so could irreparably change the course of history. Or the fact that the knowledge itself is known is what cause that future to come to pass. Believe me my friends, time can be very confusing and delicate.

“What?” I asked her. I couldn’t resist, even then. For her to use “never” chilled me to my very bones. “Never” is definite and absolute. I held my voice to a whisper, to not alarm my family. “What did you just say?”
In my vision—the one from earlier, I mean—I saw that you leave today, but you don’t come back tomorrow. Or the next day. You never come back here. You never see your family again.’ She looked up at me, despair painted across her face. ‘I’m so sorry.’

“You cannot be sure,” I said. “I have to go.”

‘I am sure! Please! Don’t abandon your family! Don’t… leave me too.’

“Do not do that to me.” I pulled free from her grip. “Never put that kind of guilt on my shoulders. People are depending on me. That is enough.”

I stepped outside into the inclement weather, leaving my friend in silence.

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“I’m trying again, be ready!” I called across the river. I retied the end of the rope to a hefty stone, ready to throw the line across to the other side of the dam.

When I had arrived on the scene, most of the men, and some women, of the town and surrounding area were trying their best to fortify the failing wooden structure. The dam was created to divert the river and allow more land for settling and the planting of crops. If it broke, untold amounts of progress would be undone. Potentially lives would be lost.

I threw the line across the river, watching it sail through the air. I could hardly make out the man on the opposite side of the dam, but I managed to see that he had caught it. I watched carefully for him to secure it on his side. Once he did, I carefully whipped the rope to catch one of the misplaced logs. My aim was to pull it back into place, hopefully bringing integrity back to the wall. With luck, the loop caught on my intended target.

With help from my neighbors, we pulled hard, hoping to set the piece back in place. Unfortunately, the movement only jostled the piece loose. More water broke free from its containment. The rope flew from our hands, leaving a sharp burn on them.

“It’s hopeless!” I heard someone yell.

The dam made an unsettling creak, more of the wood beginning to buckle under the weight of the water.

“What about the town?” I asked, around. “Can it be evacuated?”

“There’s no time! Look!”

The rumble we all felt in the ground seemed to spell doom for us all. But what we thought was the dam breaking free from itself were in fact great vines shooting forth from the ground. They were green, new and full of life. They snaked their way through the beams and filled in the gaps. The vines became one with the dam, making the whole structure a living plant.

A miracle.

Beside me, I looked to find Celebi Erela with her hands pressed into the mud. Glowing green energy pulsed from her, each wave strengthening the new foundations of the dam.

“You came to help!” I exclaimed, kneeling to her. “I cannot thank you enough.”

Erela released her hold on the plant-life and looked up to me. ‘I had to. You needed the help. That
was enough for me.’

“Coralis, your Pokémon saved us!” a towns-person called.

Initially, Erela was immediately shy and hid from everyone’s adulations, but on my urging, she accepted the thanks of the people. I could tell in her actions, she was very surprised at the kindness she was receiving from complete strangers.

Erela and I left the new dam and began the journey home.

I was immensely pleased and proud of my time-traveling friend for overcoming her fear of other humans to help save them. The selfless act didn’t lift her spirits however, the vision she had experienced still weighed heavily on her mind.

‘Cora, I can still feel that future. You don’t make it home.’

“We’re nearly there now, Erela,” I said. The rain was still coming down hard, but any sense of dread had been washed away by the magnificent sight I had just witnessed.

I didn’t expect it at all.

‘But...’ Thunder boomed above us, further exacerbating her anxiety. ‘I’m sure of it. Please, we have to do something!’

“I am. I am going home. That will erase your vision and give me a new future.”

I should have seen it coming.

‘Coralis!’

I could see my home in the distance, partially obscured by the rain. I picked up my pace. Then, in that moment, I felt the need to prove destiny wrong.

‘I’m sorry for this!’

I didn’t think to fight the presence of Celebi’s arms wrapping around my body.

The next thing I felt reminded me of the sensation I had experienced when I pulled Celebi’s helpless body out of that rift in time. Except this time, it was like I was flung forward off of a cliff at an unimaginable speed. Days seemed to play out before me in a bizarre dream, blindingly fast. The days played on without me, bleeding into weeks, months, years, decades.

When Erela finally let go of me, it was a bright and sunny midday. The air around me was hot and humid. The trees all seemed different.

In the distance, my home was nowhere to be seen. At least at a glance.

“Wha— What just happened?” I asked. I walked forward, looking for my home. I stood where my front door should have been. Some stones of the foundation still remained, but weathered and broken down. “Erela, what did you do?”

‘I saved your life.’ She floated next to me. She closed her eyes took a deep breath in. ‘Right now, we’re about two-hundred years ahead of where we just were. Now we missed what would’ve killed you.’
“Two… Two hundred…” I fell to my knees in the grass. “And what of my… my family?”

“What do you mean?’

“My family!” I yelled at her. “What happened to her? My wife? My son!?”

“I don’t know. I guess they died—’

“Take me back.” I stood up. “You’ve done it; you’ve saved me, so take me back now.”

“But I can’t,’ she said, shying away from me a little. ‘I can barely even control what direction I jump in time. I can’t go to a specific date. It doesn’t work like that.’

I stared at her in silence for a long minute.

“I never came home,” I finally said, voice shaking. “That’s what you said you saw, correct?”

‘Yes. I—’

“You idiot!” I screamed at her. “You did it! It was you all along!” I grabbed her small hand, pulling her close. “I never came home because you stole me from my own time!”

“No…” I could tell in her voice that she now understood the gravity of what she had done. ‘No I was sure something else was going to happen!’

“Nothing happened! There was no danger in the first place!” I threw her by the arm, but she caught herself with her wings. “You caused the future you saw to happen! Why didn’t you just leave it alone!?”

I fell to my knees, staring into my shaking hands. I couldn’t comprehend it. In an instant I was ripped from my family and home. All because of a paranoid mistake. I cried. I couldn’t hold it back anymore. I pounded the dirt of my old home, screaming curses at the demon that did this to me.

‘Coralis…’ Erela said. She kept her distance. ‘Believe me. I never intended for this to happen.’

“Shut up!” I leapt from my spot on the ground, grabbing her by the neck. “You’ll fix this! Now! Take me home!”

‘Cora! Stop!’ she gasped, unable to physically get free. Her eyes shone, and she teleported a few feet away. She looked on at me in fear. ‘Don’t do that! I said I’m sorry!’

“You can’t possibly think that is enough, can you!?” I lunged at her again, but she floated away. “How can you think this is acceptable? Why didn’t you wait and see that nothing was going to happen? Why didn’t you look more carefully?!”

‘Because… I didn’t want to lose you…’

“What gives you the right to steal me away?” I asked. “Did you think saving those people back in my time allowed you be so— so selfish?”

‘No! I did it because I care about you!’

“Then why did you tear me away from all that I held dear? To know that they are dead and gone, and that I have to live on… What worse fate can you bring me?”

‘I’m sorry…’
Erela tried to come forward and comfort me, but swatted her away. She reeled at the pain I inflicted her.

“There is nothing in this world that I could hate more than what you’ve done to me, Celebi Erela. I hate you.” I said.

Her mouth hung agape. She fought back tears and began to glow.

“No! You don’t get to run away from this!”

But she slipped away in a flash of light, and I was alone in the forest of my previous home.

The immediate days after being left alone in the wreckage of my life was the time I was closest to darkness, my friends. I barely ate; nothing had any taste. My dreams were filled with my family, making the mornings without them unbearable. I didn’t go into the new city, for everything had changed too much. Solitude seemed preferable to everything. Until one day life itself seemed undesirable.

I cannot tell you how long I lived in solitude in those woods, only that one day I decided to leave them. Walking from the land where my family had lived, I retraced the steps I once took before, finding myself at the banks of the roaring river I almost threw myself into when my sanity left me. This time, Celebi was not here to pull me back. I fell into the water and let my breath escape me.

To my initial dismay, I woke up on the riverbank a few miles downstream. I coughed up water for what felt like an eternity. Once I sat up on the muddy ground I saw my savior. A Buizel.

My Buizel, yes. Amé.

She pulled me to safety and revived me, somehow seeing my life as being worth saving. For some reason I didn’t argue the fact and didn’t try to end my life again. She never left my side from that day on.

As I sat in the mud, gently and affectionately stroking the Buizel’s fur, I had a vision of the future. Once again, without Celebi around to help me. So I writhed in agony as my mind was torn asunder by temporal energies beyond my comprehension. A pain I had come to trust in a friend to alleviate.

But this vision did more than wreak havoc on my mind. It showed me things. Important things. People I should meet. Things I should say. It was like a road map. Steps in a grand master plan.

The last thing I saw was myself, opening the front door to my home. Seeing my wife and son again.

Then, I realized that if Celebi’s foreknowledge allowed the future she saw to come to pass, then I would do the same.

I would do what was required of me.

I would do anything.

Anything.

And I will.
But now, the question remains; Jacob Ostra, Andrea Karson, Tyler Nedile, will you help me?

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To Be Continued…

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“You think this is going to go over well?” asked Karen, crossing her arms. She had trouble shaking the sense of defeat that hung over her head the past few days. The woman with long, silver hair rested her back against the wall as she scanned the crowded lobby of Goldenrod City’s Pokémon Center.

A stage had been prepared for this afternoon’s announcement. Chairs and reporters filling them sat before a podium affixed with many microphones. Cameramen, and women, were buzzing around while they set up their equipment to televise the address across the regions of Johto and Kanto. The Pokémon League hadn’t yet given an official statement on the events of three days ago; what was being dubbed as the “Ilex Forest Disaster”. The public face of the organization—the Champion of the League, Lance—was set to give a speech to the masses on what had happened, as well as the League’s plans to prevent potential disasters like it from occurring in the future.

“We really need a win today,” she said.

“It will be what it will be,” said Lance. The Dragon Master straightened his cape, pulling his clothes in line. “It doesn’t matter how well it goes. We’re doing all we can right now.”

“We could just tell them what they want to hear,” Karen suggested. “People rarely react well to the truth.”

“There’s no point in debating this right now,” Lance started, but Karen shook her head.

“I’m not debating what we all agreed on; I’m just reminding you that you can’t please everybody. Get ready to answer a bunch of heated questions,” Karen smiled weakly. “I’m just glad it’s not my job to look those people in the eye to tell them that certain trainers aren’t coming home.”

“It’s our job to tell them that it’s safe to leave home,” Lance said. “And when it’s not, we do what we can to make it so.”

The two said little else before the anticipated time came upon them.

The Champion of Johto and Kanto stepped up on the small stage a few minutes before the cameras began rolling. He wanted to be on-screen as the feed went live. He needed the regions that he represented to see that he was ready to face them, no longer waiting on the League’s orders. Behind him was a plain background canvas with the Pokémon League’s crest right behind his head. He stood in front of the podium prepared for him, staring out over the sea of reporters and trainers who had gathered to hear him speak. As he took his spot on stage, the low level of commotion in the Pokémon Center began to die down, silent anticipation replacing the hushed discussions among the reporters.

Lance let his mind wander momentarily about what kind of day tomorrow might be. The director off to his left caught his eye, giving a silent countdown to when their press conference would be live. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Good day, ladies and gentlemen,” Lance addressed the two nations. “I say this to you knowing full well that we have put a very bad day behind us.
“For those select few who may be caught unawares: Almost one week ago today, Gym Leaders Bugsy of Azalea Town and Whitney of Goldenrod City had been told of some new and unusual wild Pokémon sightings in Ilex Forest. Doing their sworn duty, they erred on the side of caution and advised that only seasoned trainers be allowed to walk within its borders until the situation could be properly assessed; with the exception of a trainer escorting an untrained civilian.

“Unfortunately for us all, things took a turn for the worst. To our knowledge, ten people—some of them Pokémon Trainers and their Pokémon—have lost their lives inside the forest in the past three days alone. Advanced populations of very powerful Pokémon have recently taken up residence within Ilex. Said Pokémon, as we have been shown these past few days, have proven to be very dangerous for what was once known as such a peaceful area.

“Two known survivors, both recovering here in Goldenrod City, managed to brave the atrocities that befell them. One of the survivors, Alice Wingborne, was a member of a field research team that I oversaw and helped recruit for. ‘Project Cartographer’ was created to help prevent a disaster such as this one. It was thanks to her fast acting that she and her friend, Allan Relmstead, managed to survive their ordeal.

“It pains me to admit that only ‘two survivors’ was the best result we could produce. To say that it is a disappointing result doesn’t even begin to describe it. More could have been done to help the people trapped inside the forest. That much is obvious. It wasn’t until the Elite Four and myself arrived in both Goldenrod and Azalea that we could begin to get a handle on the situation.

“In the wake of such a calamity, the Elite Four, the Chairman of the Pokémon League, and myself have spent what little time we could spare these past few days coming up with what could begin to help prevent any future events such as the one in Ilex from happening again. We eventually arrived at such a solution that we believe will alleviate some of the worries we all now share.

“Previously, the Gym Leaders of Azalea and Goldenrod were numbers ‘two’ and ‘three’ in the Johto Gym Challenge circuit; a fixed pathway of challenges that lead to earning eight Gym Badges and the right to challenge my colleagues and I. Gym Leaders train Pokémon of their own specialty with this circuit in mind, and cater to a certain kind of trainer experience level when dealing with challenges for their Badge. This meant the Gym Leaders of Azalea and Goldenrod were just as incapable at handling the crisis as the men and women it affected, simply because they were tied down by outdated regulations set by the League decades ago.

“Today however, the League and I are pleased to announce this will no longer be the case.

“In conjunction with the Kanto region and its Gym Leaders, Pokémon Gyms can now be challenged in any order that a trainer may wish. A new sixteen badge requirement is now required to participate in the Pokémon League Championship. The stage now spreads across our two regions.

“The goals behind this notably radical change are twofold: The first being that with sixteen badges to strive to attain, a trainer’s journey is now much more fulfilling, and can prepare those who brave the harsh wilds for anything they may find. The other is something I felt was a long-overdue oversight on our own internal policies, but it will now allow all Gym Leaders within our two regions to keep and train Pokémon on a level equal to that of the Elite Four and myself. Non-native Pokémon species will also be allowed to be used in their daily challenges as well.

“Giving our Gym Leaders the freedom to train such a wide range of Pokémon, they may be able to react to situations much faster than the Elite Four might be able to. It will also be the Leader’s duty to evaluate a challenger’s skill set and prior Gym Badges before selecting their own terms of battle and which Pokémon they bring to battle.
“Due to the nature of this change, the League will also be increasing options for trainers to travel between our two regions, to help accommodate even the most peculiar strategy of taking on the daunting gauntlet before them.

“It isn’t perfect, but it is a start. Now, I believe at least one of you has a few questions for me?” Lance addressed the news reporters below him.

Lance stood diligently at his post for what felt like hours answering questions in front of the cameras. He did his best to quell the early concerns and fears that the people gave him, but he couldn’t answer them all. He had no idea how well the two regions would adapt to the change.

It was when the barrage of questions neared its thirtieth consecutive minute, a surprising interruption came bursting into the Pokémon Center’s lobby.

“Help me!” A young man yelled as he stumbled through the lobby, covering his eyes with his right hand. He was trying to make his way to the receptionist’s desk at the far end of the room, knocking into people as he went. His shoulder-length hair was matted and greasy. The young man’s hands and forearms were caked in dirt and mud, as were his clothes. He clutched a torn and tattered backpack to his chest, doing his best to keep it from spilling out onto the floor. His voice was hoarse and shaky. It appeared that this travel-worn arrival had little to no idea where he was, or that a live broadcast was going on a few feet away.

“Please, anyone, help me!” he called out again, spinning around the room. No one said a word to him. “Please, I don’t know where I am. I need help. There are people here, aren’t there?”

While most onlookers backed away from the peculiar display, Lance stepped down off of his stage to lend his hand, ignoring that he was still on camera. He approached carefully, still unsure about this unexpected arrival. A small thought rose in the back of his mind that maybe another survivor from Ilex Forest had somehow appeared without him being alerted.

“Sir,” the Champion said. At the sound of his voice, the dirt-caked traveler snapped his attention toward Lance. “It’s alright. My name’s Lance, the Pokémon League Champion. You’re at a Pokémon Center, everything is going to be alright.”

“L-Lance?” the young man slowly brought his hand away from his face, revealing to the Dragon trainer his identity. He squinted his eyes in the bright light, trying to see. He took a step forward, putting a hand on Lance’s shoulder. “Is that really you?”

“Iruni Thomas, is that you?!” The Champion looked over the young man’s condition as the reporters and cameras focused on the two of them. “What happened to you? You’ve been missing for almost two months!”

“I’m really out?” Iruni asked, trying to look around the building through his eyes that rejected the light. “I’m really here!” he yelled. Iruni, the Cartographer that had seemingly disappeared over a month ago, collapsed onto the floor of Goldenrod City’s Pokémon Center. He had a smile on his face, mumbling something only for him to hear as exhaustion finally took its toll.

Lance cast off the swarm of cameras and reporters with a wave of his hand. He signaled Karen to help carry their unexpected guest off to the hospital.

The water was heaven.

Iruni knocked back his fifth cup of the ice cold liquid before he ever touched the meal in front of him.
on the hospital bed’s tray table. He had been given strict orders by the doctor to stay hydrated, and to wear his prescription sunglasses during daylight hours. His eyes had become very sensitive to light during his extended stay in the catacombs beneath Johto. The doctor was happy to report that he likely hadn’t suffered any serious or permanent damage from his brief exposures to bright light earlier that day.

His room was a few stories above the ground as far as Iruni could tell at a glance out the window. He’d woken up in the room less than an hour after collapsing on the floor of the Pokémon Center; which occupied the bottom few floors of the building, he later found out. His Pokémon were given a clean bill of health by the technicians, and were still locked away in stasis inside theirPoké Balls. Iruni had feared that prolonged containment had potentially harmed them, but the nurse who had brought his them up to his room assured him that modern Pokémon capture spheres could maintain a stasis lock for up to a year before risking the health of the creature inside.

“Oh my god,” Iruni said as he finally took a bite of his plain noodles. “This is great. I ran out of food a few days ago; this almost makes it worth going hungry for so long.”

“You’re in good spirits,” said Lance as he hung his cape on one the coat hooks. The Dragon Tamer took a seat in a chair along the opposite wall. “That’s very good. The doctor’s said you’re a little malnourished, and then there’s that nasty looking cut on your head, but otherwise unharmed. I’m glad.”

“I almost forgot about this,” Iruni said, his right hand brushing over the new bandages he’d been given for the blow he’d taken falling into the Ruins of Alph. “It’s been a while since I’ve had anyone to point it out to me.”

“I’ve been hoping you’d be willing to fill me in on your, ‘sabbatical’,;” said Lance. “Professor Elm tried contacting you and locating your Cartographer’s Pokédex when you went missing, but when that didn’t turn up anything, we sent out a few search parties in the area. Did something damage the device?”

“No,” said Iruni. “I just couldn’t get any messages out.”

The younger man began to tell Lance his troubling tale of his time in the underground tunnels of the Ruins of Alph. Iruni explained how he seemed to disturb the mysterious and still misunderstood domain of the Unown and found himself far beneath the surface, without any way of escape. Lance leaned forward in his chair as he listened to Iruni tell his story, nodding and making a few comments.

“Those tunnels don’t sound like any that are already discovered,” Lance offered in explanation. “It’s no wonder you were lost for so long.”

“I don’t think you would want to go down there,” said Iruni. “I know I don’t want to go back.”

“How in the world did you get out?” asked Lance. “How did you even survive that long down there?”

“I—” Iruni started, but he caught himself. “I had to eat my Pokémon’s food.” He trusted Lance a fair degree—there was no reason not to trust him—but still felt it necessary to omit his unexpected visit to the Sinjoh Ruins, and his meeting with a woman named Cynthia and that legendary Pokémon, Celebi. The former had had her memories of the incident changed, and the latter was still too much of a mystery to him. Iruni had plenty of time to think over her peculiar plea for help with whatever she had planned. He still hadn’t landed on an answer.

“I locked them all into stasis,” he continued, “and even then I had to spread everything really thin.
When I finally ran out of food and water, that was when I really started to panic. I didn’t want to die down there all alone in the dark.”

“You didn’t,” Lance said, “that’s all that matters.”

“I guess,” Iruni said. “I just feel like I could’ve done more to help out with Cartographer if I just went straight to Azalea instead of taking that detour to the Ruins.”

“You might want to rethink that.” It was Lance’s turn to fill in the gaps. “While you were MIA, a worst-case-scenario for Cartographer became a reality.”

Iruni sat in shock after listening to what Lance had to say. The Champion described in as much detail as he could stomach the events that transpired just days ago in Ilex Forest. As he listened, Iruni’s mind drifted back to that cottage in the snow, face to face with a time-traveling forest sprite.

I would’ve died there.

“And you showed up just short of hearing my announcement of combining Johto and Kanto into one, sixteen badge long circuit. Gym Leaders can now train Pokémon as powerful as I can,” Lance finished. “Sorry if that’ll put a hamper on your plans for taking on the League.”

“No… No not at all,” said Iruni. “What about Alice? Is she okay?”

“She’s,” Lance said, hanging his head, “alive, to say the least. She’s really shaken up about the whole ordeal.” He looked up, grim expression on his face. “I’m worried about her emotional wellbeing. I don’t know if she’ll be able to function very well as a Cartographer.” Lance stood up, retrieving his cape from the hook by the door. “I’m glad you’re alright, Mr. Thomas. More so that you managed to escape the fate that awaited you in Ilex. I suggest you go see Alice whenever you’re feeling up to it. She needs friends right now.”

“What about the guy who actually saved her? You said they traveled together, right?” asked Iruni.

“He’s another story entirely,” said Lance as he walked out of the room.

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Elsewhere within the same hospital, another young man was attempting to deal with a completely different challenge: leaving.

Allan Relmstead managed to survive his ordeal in the Ilex Forest without receiving any major injuries. When he was brought in, he was both physically and mentally exhausted, but the former was easily and quickly remedied. Unfortunately, the events of and immediately following his harrowing venture into that forest weighed heavily on his mind. The hospital psychiatrist that evaluated him as they had done with Alice deemed him as still being in shock about the situation and the things he had seen.

The doctor had prescribed him some medication to help calm his newfound anxiety, but Allan turned them away. He felt that medication that affected his state of mind could potentially affect his psychic abilities. Whatever his mind was going through, he vowed to get through it without potentially risking everything he’s worked for. Regardless of his stance on taking the medication, the doctors at the Goldenrod Hospital had declared him healthy and able to be discharged. He was leaving the hospital this evening.

Except Allan couldn’t find the drive to even get out of the chair.
He sat, slumped against the back of the lone armchair in his hospital room. He was wearing a fresh set of clothes and his belongings were all gathered and packed up and ready to join him on the way out of the hospital. Allan let his head lean on the back of the chair as he stared at the clock on the wall. As he watched the seconds tick by, a previously unknown feeling began to well up within him. He first felt it back in the Ilex Forest when all had seemed lost.

It was fear.

He could tell, somewhere deep within himself, that he was afraid. Not of more dangers lurking in the shadows; it cut deeper than a physical threat ever could. His life before now was already planned and set according to his goals. The days were dictated by his strengths and desires and Allan knew above all else in this world that he was on the path toward his happiness. A career of training to become a Psychic master, striving to surpass Will, and ultimately taking that spot on the Elite Four.

Back in the forest, the fear he felt wasn’t for losing his life, or the future he had sought out for himself, but the fact that he would lose what he held most dear to his heart. Now, Allan was unsure of whether or not a successful career was all that he wanted for his life, and he was afraid of what that could mean.

His silver-furred Eevee, Umari, was sitting in his lap, doing her best to show her concern for Allan’s current dejected state.

‘Allan, please talk to me,’ Umari said, bridging their two minds with telepathy. ‘I know something’s wrong with you. Please let me help.’

“I want you to help,” said Allan, looking her in the eye. “But before that, I need to understand what’s really on my mind.”

‘We can work it out together, like we always do.’

“Umari, I—”

Before Allan could turn away his overly curious and concerned friend another time, a knock came from the door to his hospital room. He stood up, setting a frustrated Umari on the bed as he let in whoever it was. Allan assumed it to be a nurse coming to check if he’d left yet. He wasn’t expecting a visit from one of his idols: Will, Psychic Master of the Elite Four.

“Salutations, on this fine day,” said Will, smiling bright from behind his peculiar mask. His outfit stood out from what one would expect a Pokémon trainer might wear, a bright purple suit with an accompanying black vest over the long-sleeved purple shirt. He had a white scarf tucked into the collar of his shirt, which Will tugged and straightened before he bowed with a flourish. “It’s a grand pleasure to meet you in good health, Allan.”

The brief moment of speechlessness sent a spark into the air, leaving Allan moments to take in the situation.

Koga, Poison type trainer of the Elite Four, stood behind Will, an expression of reserved respect solidly on his face.

“Good afternoon.”

“C-Come on in, I guess,” Allan said, shakily laughing under his words. Umari perked up on the bed, reading her trainer’s surprise and excitement over their mental connection. He moved over and picked her up into his arms. “Why are you here to see me?” Allan asked.
“Destiny!” Will said, rising up from his bowed pose, holding his arms in the air. He moved around the room with exaggerated movements and pointed to Allan. “Destiny, Mister Relmstead. It’s pure providence that you are in this very room today! For you to have done the things you did, when you did them, only glorious coincidence on a universal scale can be to blame for us meeting today.”

“What my young, complicated comrade is saying is that because you showed some exemplary skill in the Ilex Forest, you managed to save someone very important. And because you survived, we’ll be saving even more lives. That’s work worth noting,” said Koga.

“So, from the bottom of my heart, and top of my head, I would like to personally thank you,” said Will, unfolding his hand and offering it to Allan. “You are an aspiring Psychic trainer, I’ve come to understand. Were these better circumstances, I might have offered you an apprenticeship.”

“That’s… That’s very flattering, Will Sir.” Allan returned his hold on Umari, helping her up onto his shoulder. “But, I would decline it even if you were offering. My goal is to take your job, not study under it.” Allan sent forth his mental presence toward Will’s, a small show of force to drive home his statement, but found nothing but resistance in his way. He felt something latch on, holding him in a mental lock for a moment before letting him go abruptly.

Will wore a thin smile and crossed his arms. “Impressive, if blunt, for a self-taught mystic. I look forward to what progress you can accrue on your way to the Indigo Plateau. Now however, you are beside yourself with doubt and it holds you back. Be true to yourself, and think inwardly about your own desires, and let us lock minds again when you are whole again.” Will bowed and began to make his way out of the room.

Allan stood in shock for a moment before shaking out of his daze.

‘Why would you attack him like that?’ Umari asked him, knocking her head against his.

‘To make sure he took me seriously,’ Allan said to her. ‘It wasn’t anything I knew he couldn’t throw back in my face.’

“Apart from our unending gratitude and mysterious displays,” Koga continued, “I’m here on official business. We found one of your Pokémon in the forest during our sweeps for, well, survivors.”

“What are you talking about?” Allan asked. “I got out of there with all of my Pokémon.”

Koga gave him a curious look, tightening his gaze. “In any case,” he held out a small, green-topped Poké Ball. The top half of the sphere had four red teardrops and a single yellow circle framing the activator button. “Here is your Drapion. It’s a very strong specimen. It will serve you well.”

Allan took the small sphere in his hand and smiled, “Oh, of course, right. Thank you, Koga. I thought he was gone forever.”

“Right. I’ll be off; my comrade doesn’t do well in hospitals. He likes to tell patients their futures with very vague and curious riddles.” Koga gave a short, respectful bow and left the room.

As the door closed, Allan let his hand drop, letting the Friend Ball containing the Drapion clatter to the hard floor. He stared at it intensely, a sensation of disgust and anger rising up in his gut. Unable to stand the sight of it an longer, he quickly picked it up, opened the window to this room, and reared his arm back.

‘Allan, stop!’ Umari ran across his arm and plucked the Poké Ball from his grip. ‘What were you planning on doing?’
Umari, that thing almost killed Alice. It would’ve eaten you and me too if it had the chance. We have to get rid of the ugly bastard,” Allan growled.

‘But he’s with us now! You caught it! And he’s in one of those balls Kurt made; he’s gonna be friendly and nice.’

“I don’t care about that! It’s about what he did and what he represents! That thing gets to survive everything that awful place had to offer, but not anyone else? They get to die while this thing gets to be taken care of by the very person it tried to kill!” Allan took a deep breath, drawing his hands across his face. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to yell at you.”

‘You shouldn’t just throw him away... He’s not evil, he was just hungry.’

“Well, he is a Dark type though,” Allan said, taking the Friend Ball. “He’s got no place on our team.” Allan hooked the ball onto his belt, far away from Xutan and Duncan’s capture spheres. “He’ll stay, for now.”

‘You shouldn’t think about what we went through like that, either.’ Umari stood on the bed on her hind paws and put her front feet on Allan’s chest. ‘We made it through the forest, and we saved Alice too. Don’t think we shouldn’t have just because others didn’t make it. I’m sad about them dying too, but we have lives to live, so stop beating yourself up over not protecting the others. You protected me.’

“But,” Allan put his hands on her paws and touched his forehead to hers, “what if I can’t anymore? What if I fail?”

‘You should listen to what Will said. You’re not yourself when you’re unsure. You’re much better when you know you can do what you set out to do. Don’t be afraid to fail, everyone does. You need to be afraid of what you’ll become if you never try again.’

Allan closed his eyes, letting Umari’s kind words wash over his mind a few more times. “Who taught you to be so insightful like that?”

‘You know.’

“You’re right,” Allan picked up Umari in his arms. “Let’s get out of this hospital. The lights are starting to give me a headache.”

‘Can we go visit Alice again before we leave?’ Umari asked, hopeful. ‘I want to see if she’s getting better.’

Allan agreed and gathered up his belongings from the floor and table. He was immensely glad to finally find the drive to leave that accursed room that seemed to stifle him. He shouldered his backpack, let Umari walk on her own on the floor, and headed up the hall to the intensive care ward of the hospital.

Alice had shown signs of severe mental anguish from her experience in the Ilex Forest. She hadn’t been very forthcoming about her time before coming into contact with Allan and Umari at the swarm of Skorupi and the Drapion that was now on Allan’s belt. She had mentioned losing control of her Tropius, but Allan wasn’t aware if it had been found and returned yet. Allan and Umari visited her a few times, but she spent most of the day curled up on her bed. Other times she would break into tears, mumbling words between sobs.

As Allan reached the room, he noticed someone in the room sitting next to Alice’s bed. He had long, shoulder length brown hair, and pale skin. He was holding one of Alice’s hands and talking to her.
Umari ran in ahead of Allan and jumped on the bed. ‘Hi Alice!’ she called, looking at the other human with her. ‘Oh, hi to you too!’

“Hello there,” the young man said, letting Alice’s hand fall to the bed. “I’m Iruni Thomas, one of Alice’s coworkers, I guess you’d call me.”

“Allan Relmstead,” he shook Iruni’s hand. “I was with Alice when… yeah.”

Alice was sitting upright in her bed and staring at the wall ahead of her. It wasn’t until Allan spoke that she showed any sign of recognizing that she wasn’t alone in her room.

“Hi…” said Alice weakly. “How are you?”

“We’re doing good now,” said Allan, placing a hand on her knee. “We wanted to say ‘hi’ before we left the hospital.”

“Oh… you’re leaving…” Alice lowered her head. “This is Iruni,” she said, pointing at him. Allan and Iruni gave each other a confused glance. “He’s like you… he trains Dark type Pokémon though… and he has a Pidgey and Chikorita…”

“You train Dark types as a specialty?” Allan asked him. “Can I talk to you out in the hallway for a second?”

“Sure,” Iruni said, a bit surprised at the request from a total stranger. He stood up and followed Allan out of the room. Umari stayed behind and tried to talk to Alice. “Man, Alice is really shaken up from what you guys went through.”

“That’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about,” Allan said, unclipping the Drapion’s Poké Ball from his belt. “I won’t go into specifics, but this is a Drapion from Ilex Forest. It was one of the Pokémon that attacked her. I caught it by accident while trying to get it away from her, but I can’t keep a Dark type on my team. If you’re a Dark specialist, you’d know how to at least give it a good life.”

“That’s very generous, and considerate,” said Iruni. He took the Friend Ball from Allan, looking it over. “Are you sure you don’t want to keep him? He won’t be the same creature you saw in that forest.”

“I know, but I want to keep my team entirely Psychic type, and well…” Allan looked back at Alice’s room, “It’d be better for me to not carry around baggage from this ordeal. I know I would end up neglecting the Pokémon otherwise.”

“Alright,” said Iruni. “I understand. I’ll take him off your hands.”

“Thanks. I mean it,” he patted Iruni on the shoulder. “By the way, stop procrastinating. Talk to her.”

He left Iruni in the hallway with his cryptic message and entered Alice’s room once more.

“Come on Umari, we’re going.” Allan waved goodbye to Alice and began walking down the hallway. He passed Iruni still standing in the same spot he left him in, giving Allan a questioning look. “Psychic,” he said as he passed by. “Oh, and don’t show Alice who you have there just yet. I doubt that’ll do good for her mental state.”

Allan and Umari continued down the hallway and got in an elevator. As they rode it down to the ground floor, they took the solitary state of the moment to relax for a moment.
‘What was that about?’ Umari asked.

“I was just trying to help out,” said Allan. “Also, he’s going to look after that Drapion, so that’s one less thing to worry about.”

‘Okay… Well, what’s next? Are we going to continue our training right away?’

“Not ‘right’ away, no. I think we’ve deserved some time off.” Allan walked forward as the elevator doors opened again. He and his shiny Eevee walked out of the hospital into the late evening sun, not looking back behind them. “It’s starting to get hot around here.”

A soft thud and loud click followed as the door shut behind him. Iruni stood alone in a hotel room in Goldenrod City, which was just a few blocks away from the hospital. He had been cleared of any major health concerns, and given a few extra-potent vitamin supplements to take with his meals for a few weeks to replace what he had lost down in the underground. His belongings sat in a new, heavy-duty backpack that hung on his shoulder, the weight straining the muscle beneath. The words that the other trainer, Allan, had said to him stung his mind. They felt like lies, but Iruni couldn’t find fault in them. Maybe he just wanted them to be.

“Am I procrastinating?” he asked the empty room. He let his heavy pack fall to the floor and walked over to the single bed. Iruni sighed as he sat down the plush surface, letting himself fall back and stare at the ceiling. “Why would I be doing something like that?”

Iruni’s hand drifted to his hip and grasped the miniaturized capture spheres that were clipped onto his belt. He held all five of them in his right hand and admired their shine in the artificial light cast by the lamp on the bedside table. He loosened his grip on the handful of Poké Balls, letting them fall onto his chest one by one; Karros’, Atanya’s, Kreen’s, and the Drapion that he had received a few hours prior. The colored spheres rolled off of him and onto the bed. The Pokémon inside were still in a state of suspended animation, they felt and experienced nothing.

Iruni felt a sense of guilt that he might be neglecting his other Pokémon by not releasing them yet, but another feeling was pressing into him far more.

The final Poké Ball in his hand was mostly white, but the paint tricked the eye to see black along its perimeter. A small, black crescent symbol sat front and center framed by two thick curved lines. This Umbra Ball was unique; no other will be exactly like it. Across its face, two distinct claw marks slashed through the designs along the surface. They were a keepsake of when a certain young Sneasel first experienced being contained inside the ball for a few seconds. Now Rikalia had been confined, in stasis, for much longer.

“I’m afraid that you’re going to hate me,” Iruni finally said to the unresponsive ball in his hand. He gave the red activator button a single tap, letting it expand to its full size. “I really hope you’re not mad at me for what I did, and I guess I’m afraid to find out.”

He let the words hang in the air for a few moments, letting the silence set the tone for what he was about to do. Iruni sat up, letting his legs swing down to the floor. He switched off the lights in the room and took off his doctor-issued glasses. The ambient light from the busy city outside that poured into the room from behind the curtained windows stung his eyes only slightly, but he soon got used to the dim glow. He knew Rikalia’s eyes could potentially react even more to the sudden change than his.

Iruni closed his eyes and held his right arm out, pressed and held the activation button on the front of
Rikalia’s Umbra Ball. The few moments of contact unlocked the ball from stasis mode and let the bottom half of the sphere fall free with a flash of bright light. The energy released from the ball pooled and took form on the floor in front of Iruni. As the light dimmed, there stood the same frantic and scared Sneasel that Iruni had last seen nearly a month ago.

“—snya yaan!” Rikalia’s eyes widened, her paws snapping to cover her mouth. She stared up at Iruni with fear and shock in her eyes. She lowered her arms as she blinked at the vastly brighter room she found herself in. She rubbed her eyes with her white paws, trying to get used to the light.

“Hello, Rika,” Iruni said hesitantly. He knelt down to her level, leaning an arm on his knee. “How are you feeling?”

“Yaaan…” the Sneasel glared at him through squinted eyes. She spun on the spot, taking in her surroundings as her eyes managed to adjust. Rikalia ran up to the window and pulled aside the curtains, taking in the sights of the city before her. “Yaan ast tarn ah! Yaan inna… yest en arlama! Yaan meh onda ala! Ohc ah yan nasa ama?”

“Rika…” Iruni stood up, unsure of what he was hearing. “What are you saying?”

“Yaan ama sele yan dama tah!” she yelled, bearing her teeth. “Nya thal acara na me… atara na acar ya… ormara hata? No ata!”

“Rika, I— Slow down,” Iruni said. “I don’t—”

“Yaan tyan mah?!”

“—understand you.”

“Yaa—” Rikalia relaxed her posture, momentarily unsure of herself. “Yaa tya mei?”

“I’m sorry Rika,” said Iruni. He knelt back down and gently drew his hand over her light-blue ear feather. “I can’t understand what you’re saying anymore.”

“Mah!? Manai?”

“I don’t know why,” Iruni said, merely guessing. “But we’ll figure it out, I promise.”

“Manah yan talai ana nya?” she asked, grabbing onto his arm. Tears began welling up in her eyes, but she squinted past them. “Na dona a loma eh irameya!”

Iruni sat down on the carpeted floor, and pulled Rikalia into his lap. He held her in his arms, stroking her head with his hand.

“Rikalia, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for putting you into stasis like that, I know you hated it. And I’m sorry I can’t understand you now,” he hugged her close to his chest. “I missed you so much down in the dark. If I could’ve had you with me I would have, but I didn’t think of any other way to save you. I didn’t—couldn’t stand the idea of you starving to death down there. But wanting to see you, and everyone else, again drove me to keep going when it really got bad.”

“Ya raina ora na atta?” Rikalia asked him, even knowing the words were alien to him.

“We’re safe now, Rika. I’m going to do all that I can to make up for what I did to you. I feel awful… I know you just wanted to be there for me.”

“Nyar doma cara etta mo…” Rikalia buried her face into his shirt, gripping it in her claws. “Yanama
fara. Ama te onmada.”

“I’ll figure out how to understand you again,” Iruni said again, leaning back against the side of the bed. “I will.”

It was late now. It felt like hours had passed since Iruni last checked the clock, which now read almost midnight. In the back of his mind, he knew his sleeping schedule would take some time to readjust to its normal pattern after being trapped in a pitch-black environment for so long. The tiny noises that went on throughout the night that he had taken for granted before now sounded too loud to him. From the footsteps that came from outside of his room’s door of another patron going here or there to the sounds of vehicles going up and down the streets outside his window.

He felt exhausted after having to deal with such a busy and stressful day of returning to society, but he was having trouble falling asleep.

Iruni was sitting on top of the bed, leaning against the backboard. The room was still dark, the only light streaming in from the window or from beneath the door to the hallway.

Rikalia had finally fallen asleep, lying beside him with her head in his lap. For a while, she would wake up with a start every few minutes and frantically look around for Iruni. Once he calmed her down, she would snuggle up closer to him and hold onto him with her arms. Just before falling back asleep she would mumble something unintelligible before slipping back to sleep.

Iruni let his head rest against the wall behind him as he idly stroked her fur with his right hand. His mind kept going back and forth, going over the newfound challenge he had been given: What happened to his ability to understand his Sneasel? What was different from before, to now? Had something happened to him in the dark underground? Did his mysterious trip to the Sinjoh Ruins affect him, or maybe even Rikalia even though she was in stasis?

While he went back and forth with himself with questions, Iruni began to absentmindedly tap his fingers on his leg. The repetitive rhythm of his movements began to awaken the sleeping Sneasel lying close by. She grunted and slapped a paw onto his hand to stop his fingers from moving.

“Sorry,” Iruni said quietly, but he got no response. He didn’t think the tiny pulses of movement and sound would’ve been enough to wake her up. “Pulses…” he whispered.

A smile slowly spread across his face as his train of thought went down an avenue he hadn’t explored yet. He had been separated from Rikalia for weeks, abruptly cutting off the very thing that he and Professor Elm theorized was the reason that their communication was possible: Dark Pulse. Rikalia had been discovered to inherently know how to use the technique, due to it being passed down through her parentage. She had been using it on a subconscious level, entirely on reflex. It seemed to mimic the process by which humans could converse with Psychic Pokémon, or Aura-sensitive Pokémon like Lucario.

“I just need more time…” he said quietly. He let his shoulders relax and took a deep breath, focusing on how peaceful his mind felt without the constant assail of Dark Pulse it had grown used to. As he did, he began to feel something. Something he hadn’t felt in a long while. Iruni sat straight up on the bed and looked around the room for anything amiss. A faint presence grazed his mind, like an exploratory touch.

“You should already know this,” said Iruni in a low voice. “I grew up with an Espeon. I know what it feels like when a Psychic type Pokémon touches my mind. Come on out.”
The response came as a pair of blue-tipped antennae poked up over the edge of the bed. Their owner slowly rose higher, fluttering silently on tiny translucent wings.

‘I’m sorry,’ Celebi said, landing at the foot of the bed. ‘I wasn’t sure if you were ready to talk or not.’

“Then just ask…” Iruni glared at her. “Why are you here?”

‘Just talk like this,’ Celebi offered, tapping the side of her head. ‘You wouldn’t want to wake up your little bundle of claws and teeth, would you?’

Iruni closed his eyes, focusing on the connection Celebi had with his mind. ‘You’re right,’ he sent over the telepathic link, ‘I don’t want to wake her, and you wouldn’t want to either.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Celebi crossed her arms.

‘I’ve had plenty of time to think, thanks to you. About who you are and what you mean. You’ve done this to me before, haven’t you?’

‘Done what?’

‘You’ve interfered in my life—our lives before our trip to those ruins, haven’t you?’ Iruni accused.

The Time Travel Pokémon shifted uncomfortably in place, breaking eye contact with him.

‘I thought so,’ said Iruni. ‘I think you owe me some answers. And an apology.’

‘I don’t owe anything to you, but for what it’s worth… I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t think it was absolutely necessary.’

‘So you’re sorry for barging in here uninvited, but not for manipulating us? Just what is “necessary” to you anyway? Making me get lost in an underground labyrinth for a month and a half? Or maybe causing a tree to fall in the woods at the opportune time?’ Iruni breathed heavily as he finished saying that last accusation. The thought Celebi having had influence from the very beginning sent chills up his spine.

‘I’m just… making sure you two stay on the right path! You’re still living your life, I’m just making sure it’s going the right way!’

‘And I’m asking; Why? Why do any of this? What is the point?!’ Iruni silently gestured toward Rikalia. ‘Why did you involve her in my life?’

‘Well you see… You two are… a “package deal”, so to speak. You needed to get together at some point.’

‘We’re a what?’ asked Iruni, unsure of what she meant.

‘Well let’s answer that with different question; do you want to know what she said when you finally let her out of her Poké Ball? She almost managed to say it when you two were in the underground together, but you cut her off. Now it fell on deaf ears.’ Celebi floated into the air and hovered close to Iruni’s face with a smug grin on her face. ‘I’ll agree to answer your questions and all, so long as they don’t jeopardize what I have in store for you, but you need to be sure you’re ready for what the answer might be. What do you think I mean by “package deal”, huh? What was she saying to you, in tears no less, when she was afraid of being separated from you, leaving you down there alone?’
Iruni felt his face flush at the implications. ‘I... I mean, it’s been weeks since that happened. I don’t exactly remember—’

‘You do, and you know it.’ Celebi grinned wide, floating backwards in the air. ‘I’ll not bore you with the details. Those are more fun to find out on your own, I’ll bet.’

‘But that— Okay, so what do you “need” us for? Why push us together and steer us in some path that you deem fit? You told be that you needed my help, but you wouldn’t tell me “why” before. If you want me to cooperate you’re going to need to tell me what exactly is going on.’

‘I don’t need to tell you anything,’ Celebi said. ‘You’re already helping me without knowing a thing, so why fix what isn’t broken?’

‘But I’ll bet I would be a lot more useful to you if I knew what was going on. If you don’t tell me, what’s stopping me from unknowingly working against you?’ said Iruni. ‘Friends work together better than enemies do.’

‘Are you threatening me?’ asked Celebi with a smirk.

‘I’m just stating facts. And think it through; sure, I might be serving whatever purpose you have in your little head just fine right now as an ignorant pawn, but if you made me a partner, I could be actively trying to help you get whatever you need done, done.’

‘Don’t you think I’ve thought of that?’ Celebi clenched her small fists. ‘I’ve... I’ve messed up too much in my life to risk someone else’s happiness for my own.’

‘It’s a little late for that now, Celebi...’ Iruni put extra mental weight on his words, letting some of his anger bleed into the psychic link. ‘It’s our lives you’re risking right now. You’re dragging me and my Pokémon around on a leash to the point where you’re willing to almost make us starve—TWICE! Now try and tell me you couldn’t have done that better if I had just known what was going on.’

Celebi crossed her arms and spun to face away from Iruni. She slowly floated back down onto the surface of the bed, sitting in silence for a few moments. ‘I ruined my best friend’s life, and right now, I can’t fix it. So I’m trying anything I can think of that might make things better while trying to figure out a way to fix things.’

‘What did you do?’ asked Iruni, a little surprised how quickly she opened up.

‘I... took him away with me. I pulled him out of his place time and into this one. He lost his family, a wife and son, because I was too protective of him. I thought I was saving his life, but...’

‘Okay, slow down a bit,’ said Iruni. ‘What did you do to him?’

Celebi turned to look at him, a few tears forming around her big, blue eyes. ‘I took him! I was selfish! I saw into the future, and I saw that he was going to be gone one day. So, I jumped in time with him to save his life. But what I was seeing was the aftermath of me taking him away! I acted without thinking, I didn’t look harder, and I messed up, okay?!’

Iruni started to finally consider who it was he was talking to. Celebi was a time-traveling legend, something on an entirely different level than anything he had ever seen, and she was feeling guilt for what her actions caused. ‘You... care about your friend a lot, don’t you?’ he asked her.

‘Caring about him put him into this mess...’
‘But it’s also driving you to fix it.’

‘He wants to kill me. He wants nothing more than to wring my neck in his bare hands for what I did, and I don’t blame him.’

‘Why? You’re probably just about the only thing that can get him home.’

‘Aren’t you paying any attention?’ She stood up on the bed, frustrated. ‘I can’t fix this! I don’t know how! I can’t take him home, without potentially making everything worse!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘When I… travel in time, I can more or less control the direction I go. Forward in time, backward; I’ve got that down. But I can’t ever grasp how much. It all feels the same to me. It’s like I’m missing some major aspect about my ability. Going forward one day feels the same as if I went forward a thousand years. I feel like I should be able to, but I can’t…’

‘And so you need Rika and I to do— what, exactly?’ Iruni asked. ‘You’re not being very clear on why you need us or what we could even do for you.’

‘Look… as much as I would like to think of myself as a master of time, I’m just a being who can sometimes ignore the straight path it goes on. Its intricacies are still lost to me. I’m merely able to bounce about it and enjoy the ride. Even looking into the future isn’t an exact science. All I know is that you two are there in the future when I finally confront him. I don’t know any specific details, because if I know too much ahead of time, it can alter the outcome. I don’t know what I’m going to do… but I know I need you there.’

‘Why is it “us” that you need?’ Iruni asked. ‘Couldn’t you ask anyone else?’

‘Like I said, you’re there in the future. Because you already know him.’

‘Know who?’

‘Coralis Galian. My friend, or at least he used to be.’

“What, really? Coralis is from the past?” Iruni asked aloud.

The sudden outburst stirred Rikalia from her slumber momentarily. The Sneasel stretched and yawned, giving Iruni an annoyed look. “Snyal alra…” Rikalia lay her head back down and fell back asleep moments later. Iruni and Celebi both let out the breath they had been holding in relief.

‘Why don’t you want her to know about me anyway? You were the one who was pressing me to share information, wouldn’t you want to keep your better half in the loop too?’ Celebi asked.

‘Now that I now even Coralis has been keeping secrets for me, I’m even more unsure about this whole situation. I don’t want to be involved in something that’ll get me killed, or worse, her. Plus, if she knew you’ve been influencing our lives together all this time, I sincerely doubt she’ll be as forgiving as I am.’

‘You seriously plan on keeping me a secret from her?’

‘At least until you can give me a real answer for what you need us to do,’ said Iruni. ‘But, Coralis should be brought home, I know that much. For now, you’ve got my help. You just need to be direct with me from now on. Got it?’
‘Your call,’ Celebi said, shrugging. ‘Don’t let Coralis know I’ve spoken to you either. You don’t want him to think you’re his enemy.’

‘Just focus on trying to find a way to help him,’ Iruni said, leaning back onto the bed.

‘Say, have you figured out why you can’t understand her yet?’

‘Of course,’ Iruni said, closing his eyes. ‘What kind of aspiring Dark type master would I be if I didn’t figure it out?’

‘I’m… happy for you. In every future I’ve seen, the two of you are happy,’ said Celebi. ‘Thank you for agreeing to help. I promise I’ll do what I can to make sure you’re not in any danger.’

‘Just don’t send us down into any more ancient catacombs without at least some warning, okay?’

‘Sure.’ Celebi giggled slightly, smiling. A silent flash of light filled the room and she was gone.

In the silent room, Iruni lay in the dark, still unable to sleep.

Until a familiar pressure began digging its claws into his head. A repeating, pulsing sensation.

He fell asleep soon after that.

_________

To Be Continued…

_________
The Best of Intentions

Alone.

I’m alone and he’s gone now.

He never woke me up.

What do I do now? How can I go on?

Why did things end up this way? I only wanted—

Rikalia’s eyes snapped open as she awoke with a start. She was falling. She nearly landed face-first onto a floor she didn’t recognize before a pair of human hands caught her.

“Whoa there, Rika. I got you.”

The Sneasel felt a wave of relief wash over her at the sound of his voice. She wasn’t alone.

Her human trainer lifted her back up onto the seat next to him, where she had been asleep moments ago. She turned around to look at him, but was surprised at the face she saw. Rikalia got up and stood on Iruni’s lap cautiously reached out and touched his face.

“What’s the matter?” asked Iruni.

“Where did your hair go?” she finally asked, running her claws gently over his scalp.

Iruni’s hair was now far shorter than Rikalia had ever seen it. Formerly long enough to touch the human’s shoulders, now it was hardly a few inches long in places and trimmed very short in others. His head wound, while still covered in bandages, was now in plain view. Rikalia could hardly recognize him at first glance but as she stared past the dark sunglasses he wore and into his eyes she knew it was the same human who had found her all those months ago in the snow.

“Your ears look funny,” said Rikalia. She saw Iruni’s face light up and he chuckled slightly. He put on a warm smile.

“It figures that the first thing I hear you say in such a long time is something like that.” Iruni smiled wider, lightly stroking her feathered ear. “Hi, Rikalia.”

“Did you understand what I said?” she asked, her eyes wide and hopeful. “Can you understand me right now?”

Iruni nodded, “Yes, I can. I think it’s—”

Rikalia cut him off, throwing her arms around his chest and burying her face into his neck. She hugged him tightly, gripping his back with her claws simply on instinct. She shut her eyes, nuzzling her human and leaning her body into his. Tears broke free from her closed eyes and fell onto Iruni’s shoulder, but these were far from tears of sadness or anger. They were out of danger now and he could hear her words, how could she be sad?

“I’m so glad,” she said, knowing he could hear her. “I was afraid. I thought we lost what we had.”
Iruni comforted her, hugging her back and continuing to stroking her head.

“That won’t ever happen, no matter how your words sound to me.”

Pushing off of him reluctantly, Rikalia wiped her face with her paws. She began to take in her surroundings for the first time since waking up and once again found herself in a brand new place. Fear began to swell up in her chest for a brief moment; had Iruni put her in her Poké Ball again? How long had she been locked away this time?

Her fears and suspicions left her momentarily as something sped by the window to her left. It was a flash of green, lasting only a moment, but she definitely saw it. Curiosity stole her attention away from her human and she walked over the empty seat next to them and cautiously crept up to the windowsill. At first she only saw blue sky and clouds outside the window but soon another streak of green appeared. It was the top of a very tall tree.

Rikalia looked down and soon realized it wasn’t the trees that were moving at incredible speeds, but her. Or rather, the thing she was inside of. A white and silver tube that appeared to be hovering over metal rails was rocketing forward faster than Rikalia thought possible. The track that the train ran on was elevated above a thick forest, but occasionally roads and clearings zipped on by beneath them. Even with her keen eyesight the Sneasel had difficulty keeping track of the objects that sped on by.

Iruni chuckled slightly behind her, seemingly amused at her reaction. The noise made her snap back to the moment at hand and Rikalia remembered her suspicions. Everything she experienced since waking up pointed to something she didn’t want to believe.

Her human trainer suddenly looked different, she was in a different place again, he could somehow understand her again, and they were going someplace and she didn’t know where or why; she didn’t want to think it. But as she did, her fur bristled and she dug her claws into the plastic of the windowsill. She slowly looked back at him, one red eye piercing his dark sunglasses and shattering his previously cheery mood. Iruni immediately stopped laughing once Rikalia glared at him and his smile faded to a look of worry and concern, but that alone wasn’t enough to calm her down.

She turned back around and looked him in the eyes, scowling as she did. She kept her head low and crossed her arms in front of her chest defensively. Rikalia even found herself letting slip a low growl at her trainer.

He looked shocked and a little hurt.

So was she.

“Where…” she had trouble finding what she wanted to say first. Rikalia let her voice rise as she spun her accusations. “Where am I? What is this thing that can go so fast and where is it taking us? Why did you cut off your hair? What day is it even? Did you put me in my Poké Ball again while I was asleep? How long did you keep me in there this time?”

“Rika!” Iruni said, in a hushed voice. He held his hands up, a thin effort to calm her down. “Please, you don’t need to yell. There are other people riding in this car.”

“I don’t care about them, I care about us!”

The two stared each other down for a tense moment before either said anything else.

“I…” Rikalia started, shivering. “I don’t know— Just tell me.” She broke their locked gaze finally, staring over at the passenger’s seat in front of her. “No lies, no tricks. Just tell me the truth and I’ll believe you.”
“You really think I did that to you again?” Iruni finally asked her. “Did I lose your trust?”

“Think about it,” she pleaded. “Can’t you see how this all looks to me? It’s like I’m being thrown around, missing everything important, like I don’t matter anymore! Now tell me! Please.”

“I’m sorry,” said Iruni. He sighed hard and leaned back into his seat. “I’ve gone and messed things up, I guess. I didn’t think you would react this way,” he looked over at her, taking off his glasses and looking her right in the eyes.

“I didn’t lock you in stasis again, Rika. I promise.”

Rikalia could tell it was causing him pain to keep his eyes open in the direct sunlight that streamed in through the window. He had explained the night before how his eyes needed to adjust back to regular conditions. She gently reached up and pushed the darkened glasses back onto his face.

“Alright… Don’t ruin your eyes…” she let herself forgive him a little.

“I can prove it, I think,” Iruni said, standing up. Rikalia watched him rummage through his luggage that was stored above their seats. He sat back down and showed her the Pokédex he was given as being part of Project Cartographer.

“Yes, here. Do you remember the things I taught about how to read?” he asked her.

She did, but Rikalia also remembered why she never went out of her way to read anything by humans. Their written language seemed so simplistic, it just bored her. A word written the same way always meant the same thing. She knew she could carve much more interesting words with her claws than anything she’s seen a human write.

“See here?” he pointed at the screen and left his finger just underneath what he wanted her to see:

```
[No. 215: Sneasel (♀)]
[Name: “Rikalia”]
[Level: 21]
[Nature: Serious]
[Ability: Keen Eye]
[Active Time: 11:46:10]
[Moves: (Tap to View)]
[Notes: (Tap to View)]
```

“See?” Iruni said, highlighting the [Active Time] tracker that constantly ticked upwards a second at a time. “It’s the next morning since I let you out in the hotel. I didn’t put you in stasis, or even recall you. I carried you the whole way. The nurses at the Center in Goldenrod said that fatigue might be a side-effect of being locked in stasis for as long as you were.”

Rikalia took the device from his hands and stared at the screen. She had heard the words he said and understood what they meant, but something in the back of her mind still seemed to bother her. She looked at the time and glanced out the window of the train, guessing the time of day was what it should be. The date that was displayed on the screen was farther ahead than it should be, but she expected that to be the case from being shut in stasis. The suspicious Sneasel looked throughout the
many different pages and readouts the Pokédex had to offer and didn’t find anything out of the
ordinary, save for a new Pokémon she didn’t recognize. As far as she could tell, everything that she
could see and everything she had been told checked out.

If that was the case, why did she still feel like Iruni was hiding something from her? Why did she
desperately feel the need to find out?

“Okay,” Rikalia finally relented, giving back the Pokédex. She didn’t look at him. “I believe you.”

A tense moment persisted until Iruni spoke again. “Do you?”

“I can’t see any reason to think you’re lying about this, so I guess so.”


She glared at him. “Because guessing is all I can do, apparently. I thought that we’d pick up where
we left off and continue with our lives. Now here I am, being taken someplace I don’t know and I
don’t know why. You went and changed how you look and I don’t know why. You haven’t even
released Kar, Kreen, or Atanya yet,” she pointed a claw at the Pokédex still in Iruni’s hand, “and you
even have a new Pokémon I don’t even know about! Who even is Draypeeon?”

Rikalia covered her eyes with her white-furred paws, doing her best to stop herself from bursting into
tears of frustration. She took a few heavy breaths, clenching her clawed fists.

“I just…” she continued. “I feel like I’ve skipped forward in time and missed so much of my own
life. Does that make sense?”

“Y-Yeah,” Iruni’s words seemed to catch in his own throat. “I didn’t think that— I’m sorry. There’s
nothing I can do to take back what I’ve done, but I can at least try and gain back your trust. So, you
obviously have questions. Ask and I’ll answer them. I want you to be at ease with all this.”

Rikalia eyed him warily; something in his words caught her attention. “Why’d you react that way?”

“What way?”

“Don’t,” she warned.

Thankfully Iruni understood right away. “I didn’t realize you would take what I did—and what’s
happened to me without you—this way. I never wanted you to feel that way, Rika. I really feel bad
about this and I’ll do whatever I can to fix it.”

She listened to his words and his voice, discerning their intent and credibility. She could find no fault
in them, which began to relieve her somewhat.

“Alright. What about this thing? Where is it taking us?”

“This is the Magnet Train,” Iruni began a basic explanation of how the vehicle they were in could
reach incredible speeds and travel distances remarkably fast. “It was made to help connect the Johto
and Kanto regions, and it connects each of the regions’ largest cities; Goldenrod and Saffron.”

“Saffron. I know that name, right?” Rikalia asked.

“Yep. That’s where Kate lives right now. We’re going to see her, and hopefully stay at her place
while we’re in town.”

“Does she know we’re coming?” Rikalia thought to ask.
“No, not yet. I figured I’d surprise her.”

“Does she at least know you’re alright? That we all are?”

“No,” Iruni paused. “I… I just hopped on the first train there without thinking about it.”

Rikalia stared at him, words failing her for a moment.

“Iruni, what happened?” she grabbed one of his hands and gripped it. “I mean it; what happened to you? You’re acting like— like you’re running scared from something.”

“I am scared,” said Iruni. “Last night, after you fell asleep…” he paused. “I started to panic. About everything that happened to us and how to deal with it, it all came crashing down on top of me and I ran to the nearest place I could find help.”

“Why not go home to your father?” asked Rikalia. She had a vague idea on how far away Saffron was from Johto and she couldn’t just accept that it was actually the closest or that distance was even the reason for the choice in destination. “Going back home would be closer than going to where Kate is, wouldn’t it? What else is in Saffron that you are ignoring the rest of the team just to get there so soon?”

She could see that her constant barrage of questions was wearing on Iruni, but Rikalia couldn’t yet shake all of her suspicions.

“It’s a little…” he stalled. “I don’t know. Childish? Embarrassing? I don’t know.”

“Tell me, please.”

“Well, it’s the Gym Leader in Saffron. Sabrina, I think her name is,” Iruni explained. “I didn’t tell you this yet, but yesterday the Pokémon League announced that the Kanto and Johto gym circuits are being combined into one big one.” He went on and described the reasons for the merger to Rikalia as well as mentioning something that happened in a forest called Ilex.

“Anyway, we’re going to Saffron because I… we, need a good thing to happen right now.”

“What makes Saffron’s Gym so appealing?” asked Rikalia.

“It specializes in Psychic types, so I figured it would be an easy win if we’re going for our second ever badge,” Iruni said with a shrug.

There it was. The uncertainty in his voice betrayed him. The reasons that Iruni told her made sense, but not for him. Rikalia had never known Iruni to handle his Pokémon battling career that way. To take an easy win over the one that would make the most sense, there were likely many more gyms in their home region they could go and challenge, but Iruni sought out this one specifically. Why, because he said he “panicked”?

“Oh, okay. I get it!” Rikalia knew that he would only continue to back up his claims if she pressed any further, so letting him think she believed his half-hearted excuse would have to do for now. “So, why haven’t you at least let everyone else out of their Poké Balls yet?” She saw him relax his shoulders and lean back in his seat in relief as she changed the subject. She knew he was lying about his reasons for going to this Gym Leader.

“I don’t really have a good excuse for that,” he admitted. “I honestly feel bad about it but I really needed to get moving as soon as I could. I definitely will once we get to Saffron City. Oh yeah, you haven’t had any breakfast yet,” he said as he stood up and began looking through his luggage
As he did, the train took a turn and caused Iruni to sway slightly, leaning against a seat to keep his balance. This knocked Rikalia’s Umbra Ball off of his belt and it fell onto the now vacant seat next to her. Iruni didn’t seem to notice and kept looking for whatever else that lay hidden in the backpack above. The gray Poké Ball bounced on the cushion of the seat and almost hit her, but Rikalia swatted it away with a quick slap of her paw. The sphere bounced against Iruni’s thigh and caught his attention.

He saw how she was growling at the inanimate capture device that now rested on the seat. Iruni bent over and picked up the Umbra Ball and sat back down in his seat. A concerned face stared at the Sneasel from behind the dark sunglasses.

“Are you afraid of this?” he asked, letting the Poké Ball rest in his palm.

Rikalia stared at it for a moment before looking up at him. “No, not really. I just hate what it can do to me… It can control me and I hate that. I’ve always hated it. I hate that I need to be tied to it to be your Pokémon.”

“I know, but it has its uses—”

“I already know what it does!” Rikalia snapped. “I just… hate having my life not in my own control. I mean, even without the Poké Ball, you let me choose if I wanted to stay with you. Can’t that be enough?”

Rikalia sat down in her seat with her back to her human and stared out the window, feeling exhausted from the conversation. She felt Iruni’s hand gently stroke her head and she debated with herself whether or not to bat his hand away from her. She decided to let him continue petting her; he did often stroke her feathered-ear, her favorite spot to have touched.

“I don’t know if I can do what you’re suggesting, but if it will make you feel any better, you can have it,” Iruni said after a little while.

She cocked her head in confusion and looked behind her, unsure of what he meant.

Iruni held out the Umbra Ball in his hand—it was in its compact, smaller form—and he had a sympathetic look on his face.

“What?” she asked him.

“If you want,” Iruni continued, “you can have it. I don’t think ‘releasing’ you would be smart, but I can let you decide when I can use it on you. I don’t know if it’ll make you feel better but I thought I’d at least ask.”

Rikalia turned around and took the miniature Poké Ball from Iruni’s hand carefully. On the surface she could see the two striking claw marks she left on it. Running a digit over the surface she accidentally tapped the activation button, causing it to expand to its full size. Though she was startled, she didn’t drop it. An experimental tap of the dark red switch made it revert back to its smaller state and she relaxed.

Maybe she could control it.

“Will you…” she started, looking up at her human companion. “Will you teach me about it? How it works and everything?”
“Of course I will,” he said, smiling. “We can even get you something to be able to carry it around easily if you really want to hold onto it from now on, but we can figure that out once we get into the city. How about that?”

She looked from him to down to the Poké Ball in her paws for a few moments. She felt some suspicion towards him still, those feelings weren’t completely gone. But this, this gesture really meant a lot to her.

“That sounds… good.”

Rikalia sat next to Iruni and leaned against his side, still gripping her Umbra Ball in one paw.

“So how can you understand me again?” she finally asked. She was beginning to run out of questions to ask him. “I’m not complaining, I just want to know in case it happens again.”

“That’s actually something that I can answer pretty easily,” Iruni said with a chuckle. “Because I had you recalled for so long, and in turn being cut off from your Dark Pulses, I guess I lost the ability to understand your words for a little while. A few hours after you fell asleep I began feeling them—your pulses—again. I figured I’d understand you again, but not this soon.”

“How long were you still up after I feel asleep?” she lifted her head up to look at him. “What were you doing?”

“Oh, just— I was writing some notes down in my Pokédex for a while. I had trouble falling asleep. Actually, once I started feeling your pulses again I fell asleep right away.”

“If being in my ball made you stop understanding me, then I’m never going into this thing again,” she said, defiantly. “Unless I have to.”

“Right. Unless you have to.”

Iruni’s mind swam in a panic. He imagined a set of eyes following his every move as he walked out of the Magnet Train station and into Saffron City. He had no real idea if Celebi was watching him right at that moment or if she even could with being so far away from where they met in Goldenrod City, but he felt as if he was skipping out on some important obligation by running for help all the way in Kanto. His idea had to work.

In reality, he couldn’t really place why he felt so afraid of the time-traveling Pokémon that had recently—or perhaps not—involved herself in his life. He had no idea if she were particularly strong or threatening, or what the extent of her powers over time were.

That was it, he decided; Iruni didn’t know anything about Celebi, and now that she had shown herself to him and because the scope of what she could be asking of him was so unknown, he could only be scared. He was afraid of what his life could become if he got involved with Celebi.

After all, look at what happened to Coralis. Just by accident.

Now here he was, running scared; running to the nearest glimmer of hope he could find.

“Sabrina, right?”

The voice came from above Iruni’s head, from the Sneasel who was sitting astride his shoulders. She rested her head on one of her arms, which was atop Iruni’s own head and clutched her Umbra Ball in
her paw.

If Rikalia had said anything beforehand, Iruni didn’t hear it. He panicked and hoped he could hop into the conversation without seeming lost.

“Yeah, her.”

“What’s so special about her that we went to just her right away?” Rikalia peered down at Iruni from above him. “I bet there’s plenty of easy Gym Leaders we could go beat right now.”

Why is she being so questioning still?

“Well, like I said, I haven’t seen Kate in a while, and she needs to know we’re okay.”

“Yeah,” Rikalia agreed with heavy insistence. “She does.”

“Anyway,” Iruni said, stopping off at a small grassy area outside the train station. He began pulling out every Poké Ball he owned, save for the new Drapion, and prepared to release them. “I think it’s time everyone else got a chance to stretch their legs for a bit.”

Pressing and holding the three buttons on the Poké Balls in his hands unlocked them from their suspended animation modes and released the creatures inside out onto the grass in front of Iruni. A Houndour, Chikorita, and Pidgey pooled together from flashes of light and took in their new surroundings. Iruni breathed a sigh of relief seeing them again. He had been told they wouldn’t suffer any long-term effects from being in stasis for as long as they were, but seeing them alive and well in front of him took a weight off of his shoulders.

A real weight then leaped from his shoulders and down to the ground, running up to her fellow companions. Rikalia eagerly hugged Karros around his neck and even greeted Atanya and Kreen warmly, despite being much newer additions. Iruni smiled, sitting on the ground among his Pokémon and giving them some much overdue attention.

“Everyone, welcome to Saffron City. Or in Karros’ case, welcome back.” Iruni patted his Houndour’s head to quiet the momentary unease he saw flash in his eyes. Karros calmed down quickly at his trainer’s reassuring touch.

“Hey, that’s right,” Rikalia spoke up. “Karros said he was from here once.”

“Really?” Iruni stood up and looked around the city, trying to get his bearings. “Yeah, Route 7 is just down this road and then you make a right.”

At a worried whine from Karros, Iruni knelt back down to his first Pokémon and pet him comforting.

“Don’t worry, Kar. I’m not in a hurry to go back there either. We won’t go that way if you don’t want to,” said Iruni.

Impatient noises coming from his right pointed toward his Chikorita, Atanya. She eagerly held the leaf that grew from her head high into the air, trying to grab her trainer’s attention while still keeping a small amount of respect for her senior teammate’s time with him.

“You don’t need to ‘raise your leaf’ Atanya, you can talk to me whenever,” said Iruni. “What’s up?”

Rikalia quickly took the hint and relayed the concerns of her Grass type comrade. “Atanya wants to know why we’re so far away from where we were last.” At Atanya’s insistence, she added, “She
Iruni took a moment as he looked over to his Chikorita and Sneasel, who both had expectant looks across their faces. Kreen, his Pidgey, seemed less interested in the reasons behind their cross-region trip to focus on the flock of Pidgeotto that flew above.

“Okay, I figured I would have to explain this at least one more time today so let’s all go to Kate’s place, and we’ll all get caught up. How’s that?” he asked. No one objected, so the group made their way to Iruni’s sister’s apartment.

Karros walked on the ground beside him, as did Atanya—after some arguments with Rikalia about who would be held by Iruni as he walked. Atanya relented but didn’t stop herself from extending a vine from the buds around her neck to wrap around Iruni’s free hand. Kreen perched on Iruni’s right shoulder, keeping a watchful eye on the skies and tweeting at any passing bird Pokémon. Iruni held Rikalia close to his chest, her arms clutching his forearm, letting her feet fall free in front of him. She assured she was comfortable and urged him to worry about getting to his sister’s apartment.

As the group walked through the streets of Saffron City, they gathered quite a bit of attention. It was apparently rare to see a Pokémon trainer out with all of their Pokémon at once, especially when they weren’t training out in the wilds. Bringing so many Johto native Pokémon with him made quite the impression with passersby. Many people stopped to greet the traveling trainer and to see his batch of foreign Pokémon, asking whether he was planning to battle Sabrina for her badge, or to even battle them right there on the sidewalk.

“Sorry, but I’m in a bit of a hurry,” he had to say to the few battle requests he received.

In the minutes and blocks it took to get to his sister’s apartment building Iruni ran through a few scenarios in his head about how he was planning to proceed with his secret agenda. He had a plan, but it hinged on one extremely important and wildly unpredictable variable: the mood of a characteristically uncooperative Espeon.

One thing he didn’t plan for was the reaction he would get from his sister as he showed up at her door after nearly two months of going missing.

After the door had been opened and the look of shock went away on Katelyn Thomas’s face, anger welled up and spilled out in the form of a swift slap to Iruni’s face.

“You… Asshole!”

The slap sent his special sunglasses—and the Pidgey resting on his shoulder—flying from their previous positions.

“Where. Have. You. Been, Bartholomew!?” Kate fought back tears to maintain her angry demeanor. “I’ve tried calling, Dad has called, we’ve looked for you, we’ve called others to look for you, but no one could figure out where you were!”

“I’m sorry,” Iruni said, eyes straining in the light in the hallway. He bent down, picking up his sunglasses, letting Rikalia onto the floor, and made sure Kreen was alright—the Pidgey recovered from the sudden jostling of his perch and waited on the floor. “Things… got out of hand. Can I come in? I’ll explain everything.”

Kate took a long, hard look at her brother and took a deep breath. “You do look awful. Come here,” she said, wiping her eyes. Kate pulled him into a hug, holding Iruni close. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Iruni and his Pokémon followed Katelyn into her apartment and gathered in her living room.
Immediately, Iruni was greeted by Azula, Kate’s Dratini, almost being pushed to the floor demanding a “hug” of her own. Ruby and Tom, Kate’s Espeon and Glaceon, were nowhere to be seen for the moment. After a few minutes of his sister getting reacquainted with the Pokémon she knew, as well as meeting the ones she hadn’t, Iruni began explaining the events that caused him to lose contact with the rest of the world for a month and a half.

The last time Iruni had contacted his sister was just as he had gotten settled in Blackthorn City, before he had taken up the job of being one of three Cartographers for Professor Elm. He explained a rough overview of his job as well as the potential risks of the changes to Pokémon habitats.

“Ilex Forest is still all over the news,” Kate said. “Don’t tell me you were caught up in that somehow.”

“No, we actually missed it entirely,” Iruni said.

He told her that just after he had defeated Falkner in Violet City, he had met misfortune, or perhaps a stroke of luck, at the Ruins of Alph. Iruni described the weeks spent lost in the dark and the eventual moment of freedom where he dug through a collapsed tunnel and out into open air.

“I was watching Champion Lance’s newscast yesterday, and it cut out when someone barged in and started yelling…” Kate said, putting the pieces together. “Oh my god…”

“Yeah…”

Iruni and his sister sat in a tense silence for a few moments. Without saying a word, they hugged again, letting go of their respective angers and fears.

“I thought I was gonna die down there,” said Iruni. “I really did.”

“Shut up.” Kate tightened her embrace. “You’re safe. Don’t worry about what could’ve happened.”

As they split apart, and Rikalia joined them by jumping to Iruni’s lap, Kate decided to change the subject.

“So why did you come here instead of calling first? Did you even call Dad and tell him you were okay?” she asked.

“I— We needed to get away from things back in Johto. The Cartographer work and my ordeal in the ruins really put a toll on all of us. I figured I’d take advantage of the new gym circuit they implemented and grab an easy Kanto badge. And see you guys,” Iruni added. He looked around the apartment, pretending not to notice his sister’s skeptical look. “Where’s Ruby and Tom?” he asked.

“They’re back in my bedroom, caring for the little one,” she said.

“They’re doing what?” Iruni asked.

“Oh!” Kate jumped up, urging Iruni to do the same. “That’s right, I never did tell you!”

Iruni, Rikalia, and the rest of the Pokémon followed Kate back to the single bedroom of the apartment, which had the door shut. She asked everyone to be as quiet as possible as they did so. Kate opened the door as silently as she could, showing the group the cause for such care.

Ruby and Tom were lying in a large plush Pokémon bed on the floor in the corner of the room. Tom immediately stood up and took notice at their visitors, but calmed down right away. Ruby continued to lie on her side, looking absolutely exhausted, and nursing a newborn Eevee.
‘I thought I told you, no surprise visits.’ Ruby opened a single eye to greet the group. She relayed a similar message vocally to Rikalia and Karros, though with a noticeable hint of kindness.

“Someone was pregnant for a while and didn’t tell me,” Kate whispered. She carefully knelt down near the happy family of Eeveelutions and their newborn and gently stroked the brown fur of the new arrival. “Everyone, meet Molly.”

After everyone took their own turn acquainting themselves with the newborn Eevee, the group all returned to the living room.

“So, I’m not the only one with a surprise new Pokémon,” Kate said. She pointed to the fifth Poké Ball attached to Iruni’s belt. “Who’s that in the Friend Ball there?”

“I was… given a Drapion yesterday.” Iruni pulled the green Poké Ball off of his belt and held it out for everyone to see. “I don’t really know what to think about him yet.”

“A Drapion? God, how big is he?” asked Kate.

“I don’t know. I haven’t even let him out yet.” Iruni immediately felt the glares of confusion from every set of eyes in the room. “I’m sorry, I’ve just been through a lot and I wanted to get here as soon as possible. Want me to let him out right here?”

“Sure, let’s just make some room.”

Iruni and Kate went about moving some of the lighter pieces of furniture in the room to make way for the impending arrival. As they did, the bedroom door opened with a push of telekinetic energy and Ruby and Tom came out to see what all the commotion was for.

‘She’s just gotten to sleep, and that means I get a few precious minutes of peace and quiet. What are you doing?’ Ruby asked.

“Iruni’s got some trainer responsibilities he has to attend to,” Kate explained.

“Har har,” Iruni said mockingly.

Iruni’s and Kate’s Pokémon moved to the edge of the room and prepared for the release of Iruni’s new Pokémon. A tap of the Friend Ball’s button sent out a bright flash of light that coalesced into a large, hulking insect-like beast. It was huge, large even for a Drapion. Long arms that ended in pincers hung down to the floor, bracing its long upper body. Its four legs and tail were strong and menacing, as was its face. Terrifying fangs seemed to spill out of its mouth. Its eyes stared down at its audience as it scanned the small room it found itself in.

“He’s a… big guy, that’s for sure,” Kate said.

“Did I mention that he was apparently caught in Ilex during that bad attack?” Iruni asked.

‘I swear if you just let loose a killer bug in our home with my newborn daughter in the next room I will literally make sure you never have another thought again,’ Ruby warned.

Tom took a defensive stance between his mate and the newcomer, shrouding himself in chilly air and freezing the floor beneath him.

“Guys, chill out,” Iruni said. “No Tom, not literally. He’s just getting a good look at all of us. Right,
big guy?”

Iruni took initiative and stepped forward, only coming just short of the Drapion’s height. To his surprise, the Drapion lowered itself and to be even with Iruni, eyes widening getting a better look at the human who came close to him.

“Iruni, be careful!” Rikalia said in a harsh whisper.

“He’s doing fine,” said Iruni. He brought a hand up and gently patted the Drapion’s head, being mindful of the potentially poisonous barbs on its head. “He’s not acting aggressive hurk—!”

The Drapion lurched forward and wrapped Iruni up in its arms, bringing him into a surprisingly affectionate and nearly suffocating hug. It growled affectionately as it accepted the panicked adoration of his new trainer. Iruni quickly waved off the many attempts to free him from his sister and the other Pokémon in the room.

“I’m fine! I’m fine! There, there, it’s okay. Please let me go!” Iruni pleaded. “You’re okay, Drapion.”

Finally letting Iruni out of his grip, the Drapion then took to greeting everyone else in the room. It seemed he didn’t know very much about interacting with humans, opting to just grunting and grinning at Katelyn before interacting with the Pokémon next. When he tried going near Ruby and Tom, the latter growled defensively, sending ice crystals flying into the air. The Drapion recoiled and almost seemed to cower in response.

“Tom, easy,” Iruni said. “He’s just being friendly. He was caught in a Friend Ball, so he’s lost a lot of his natural aggression.”

“But he was given to you, right? He should have imprinted on his original trainer.” Kate noted, comforting her Glaceon. “I wonder why he didn’t?”

“I guess he never let it out of its ball since catching it,” Iruni wondered.

The Drapion made its way around the room, greeting and getting to know the rest of the Pokémon there. Rikalia seemed to be showing off her claws at the Drapion when he turned to see her, a budding rivalry being formed. The Drapion seemed to chuckle at her displays of bravado.

‘Hey, Ruby? Can I talk to you in private?’ Iruni asked, hoping he caught the Espeon’s train of thought. He counted on the fact that everyone else would remain too preoccupied with the Drapion to notice their psychic exchange.

‘You already are, so go ahead,’ Ruby responded. ‘What kind of stunt are you trying to pull anyway? You seem tense; and not because of your hug-monster over there.’

‘That’s putting it lightly, but no matter what happens for right now, can you just please not ask any more questions? I swear I’ll never ask anything of you ever again. I mean it.’ If he could, Iruni would be on his knees begging.

‘You’re… really messed up right now aren’t you?’

‘You have no idea.’

‘Alright, fine. I’ll play along. What do you need?’

‘I managed to catch your attention pretty easily because we’ve known each other for a long time, but
I need to be able to mentally speak with someone who I’ve never met before. The good news is they’re a Psychic master and all that, so that’s not an issue. But I’m probably terrible at it. All I know is just from talking to you over the years.’

‘What, are you trying to talk to Sabrina about some top-secret mission you’re on?’

‘Yes, actually.’

‘Oh. You’re not kidding.’ Ruby walked over next to Iruni, after assuring her mate she was safe. She pretended to finally accept a greeting from the Drapion, rubbing a large claw with the fur of her face. ‘How long do we have?’

‘I’d like to meet with her today, this afternoon if we can. I need to catch her as soon as possible.’

‘Fun. Okay, rookie; Psychic Communication 101 starts now. You will be graded on your performance.’

These next few minutes might make or break me, Iruni thought. I have to somehow get in touch with her without Rika figuring it out...

He kept his hopes high however; ever since entering Saffron City’s Pokémon Gym, Iruni could feel a slight mental buzz, different from Rikalia’s Dark Pulse, persisting in the air. The large number of trainers and their Psychic type Pokémon that were in the building were saturating the immediate area with psychic energy. With Ruby’s tips, and the fact that he could feel the faint telepathic static helped bolster his resolve.

Iruni and Rikalia waited outside the gym’s main battle arena, which had its doors closed, sitting in a pair of chairs in the lobby. Iruni found it surprisingly painless to register for a battle with a Gym Leader from another region. The changes to the structure of the Pokémon League’s gym challenge went into effect remarkably smoothly. As he set up an appointment for his battle he simply had to add how many of the sixteen available badges he had already owned. The leader would then prepare a team for him to battle against.

As the act of actually battling a Gym Leader came to mind, Iruni began to run through some battle options in his head. Early on he decided to not use the Drapion—who he also made a note to find a name for him soon. Even though he was immediately friendly and docile Iruni had no idea how he would be in a battle after only spending a few minutes with him.

His answer came quickly from the Sneasel sitting to his left.

“So, you’re going to let me battle today, right?” asked Rikalia eagerly.

A little surprised at her insistence, Iruni shrugged.

“You really want to?” he asked. “I’d understand if you weren’t feeling up to it.”

“Are you kidding?” Rikalia stood up on her seat and flexed the claws on her right paw; her left held onto her Umbra Ball. “I haven’t gotten to really do anything in….” her mood soured a bit. “How long was it again?” Her voice had a slight accusatory tone in it that Iruni was sure that she let him pick up on.

“More than five weeks since Violet City,” Iruni said.
“I meant—” Rikalia stopped herself. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.” Iruni patted his Sneasel’s head lovingly. “I thought you meant just Pokémon battles. You were in stasis for four weeks, if that’s what you meant.”

“Four weeks…” Rikalia murmured. She tightened her grip on her Poké Ball.

“What about that?” Iruni asked, pointing to the very item she was holding. “Are you going to hold it in battle? Or do you want me to hold onto it?”

“I’ll hold it. I can win with one arm,” Rikalia said defiantly.

“That’s what I like to hear,” Iruni said.

‘At least the battle will be the easiest part of today.’

“I would suggest you keep such boisterous thoughts to yourself,” said a voice in front of the two. “I never mean to intrude, but you were practically screaming your thoughts into the air.”

Caught off guard, Iruni quickly looked up from his Pokémon to see a tall woman with medium length black hair. Her face was framed by the dark locks and her expression looked annoyed and unimpressed. She wore very casual clothes fitting the late spring weather; a sleeveless blouse and light khaki pants with a simple black belt. Around her wrists were large green bracelets that glowed with a mysterious ambient energy.

‘Yes!’ Iruni thought as loud as he could. ‘Sabrina, please, I need your help. If you can hear my thoughts, show me a sign; please cross your arms after shaking my hand and tap your left index finger twice. I need to be as discreet as possible. Please, there’s no one else I can turn to!’

“Ha ha, Sorry,” Iruni said aloud as he stood. He wore a bright smile and held out his hand to shake the leader’s. “I’m getting ahead of myself.”

‘Please?’ Iruni tried again. If Sabrina picked up on his stray thoughts then she surely could hear him now.

The Gym Leader’s stoic expression quickly betrayed a slight bit of concern as she did in fact shake Iruni’s hand, then crossed her arms and tapped her finger.

‘What is the matter? Are you being watched? Can we not speak even in front of your Pokémon there?’

‘I’m doing by best to be as careful as possible. The fewer that know anything about this the better, but I can’t handle this “situation” on my own.’ Iruni sent the plea as fast as he could. He didn’t want Rikalia getting suspicious at any strange silences between the Gym Leader and himself.

“I see,” Sabrina said. “I suppose I can forgive the audacity of a young trainer. Shall we proceed to the battleground for our match?”

Through a set of double doors they walked into the main auditorium of the Saffron City gym, which was surprisingly plain and simple. The lights were brightened as they walked into the arena, revealing only a small podium at opposite sides of the battlefield for each trainer as well as a small raised chair for the referee, who waited for them in the center of the ring, to sit and judge the match. The walls were a dull gray, darkening as they reached the floor and a machine similar to the ones found in Pokémon Centers used to heal and revitalize Pokémon sat against the far wall. Iruni’s previous gym match had spectators seated around the battle arena as well as cameras to broadcast the
battles across the region. When he asked about the difference, Iruni learned it was the leader’s personal preference to keep her gym clear of such noise and distractions.

“My disciples and I spend time here to hone our abilities along with our Psychic Pokémon. Such things do not help our training, so we do without them. Our rivals next door, however...” she trailed off, a tone of distaste lingering in her words as she described the loud and apparently aggravating Fighting Dojo that sat just next to the Saffron Gym. “They insist on trying to contend for the status of being this city’s Pokémon Gym and go about it in all the wrong ways.”

‘Why have you come directly to me, young trainer?’ Sabrina asked mentally. ‘I sense there is something you need to know.’

In another time, the conversation would likely catch Iruni’s interest and further push him toward his own lofty and far off goals, but Iruni had to press his opportunity now to seek help with the more immediate issue at hand.

‘Listen, I might be overstepping my boundaries, but I’m a part of Project Cartographer and well, I have access to certain information. Are you still the current caretaker of the Legendary Pokémon Mewtwo?’ Iruni asked.

“So, my attendant informs me that you are from Johto, taking advantage of our new regulations.” Sabrina’s betrayed none of the surprise her mind transmitted over their unsteady mental link. ‘That is very sensitive—as well as personal—information you have. I would like to omit any details and merely confirm your statement. I did recognize your name as one of the Cartographers but I did not expect this topic to be relevant to one like you.’ She continued her vocal explanation of how the impending battle would be handled. “You have previously defeated Falkner and obtained his Zephyr Badge, so for the battle for your second badge, it will be a simple one-on-one bout. Is this agreeable?”

“That sounds great,” Iruni said. “I don’t need to know anything about Mewtwo really, you’re just the only one I could find that would know anything about another Psychic type Legendary Pokémon. I’ve... become “involved” I guess you’d say with Celebi.”

“Ile— ” Sabrina almost slipped from maintaining her dual conversation, but righted herself just as quickly. “That is, I’ll let you choose your Pokémon while I choose mine.” The Gym Leader turned her back and began to walk to the far side of the battleground while continuing to converse telepathically. ‘Ilex Forest’s guardian? The one said to travel throughout time?’

Iruni and Rikalia took their place at their designated end of the room. Iruni knelt down next to her and patted her head.

“So, you said you wanted to battle today, right? You okay with being my one choice?” he asked. ‘Yes, that’s right. I bet you can see why I’m being careful.’

“Absolutely!” Rikalia cheered. The excited Sneasel leapt from her trainer’s side to the battlefield. “I can’t wait.”

“Attention Challenger Iruni Thomas,” the referee spoke up as he approached the challenger’s side of the arena. “I should remind you that the use of Poké Balls in official matches is prohibited.” He was clearly talking about the Umbra Ball that Rikalia had gripped in her paw.

“But I still want to hold onto it,” Rikalia protested. “Tell him I’m not gonna use it, I just want to keep it.”
“Rika…” Iruni started, but relented. He sighed, and turned and faced the referee. “She wants to keep holding onto it. She won’t be using it to battle her opponent or anything.”

“Well,” the referee pondered the situation for a moment. “Vanity items and personal accessories are permitted, however not recommended for Gym Matches, and usually tend to be worn in some capacity. Leader Sabrina?” he called over to the opposite end of the gymnasium to ask for her opinions on the matter. She simply nodded and levitated a Poké Ball from a case of many like-colored spheres into her hand, clearly her choice for the battle.

“Alright then,” the referee said. “Use of the item in question in any fashion during the battle will result in an automatic disqualification and loss. I also recommend that in the future you and your Pokémon find some way to safely secure any personal items so as to not interfere with any future Pokémon battles.”

“We were supposed to…” Rikalia grumbled.

“Right,” he apologetically patted her head and offered an apologetic smile. “Thank you,” Iruni said to the referee, who nodded and made his way to his post to judge the match. Moving to his designated place to stand, Iruni wished his Pokémon luck and brought his gaze to the calm looking Gym Leader.

‘Celebi has been interfering in my life for… I don’t know how long, but she appeared to me last night and asked for my help.’ Iruni explained to Sabrina.

“I hope you are ready for this,” Sabrina said. Gently letting her Poké Ball fall to the floor in front of her, a bright flash heralded the arrival of the opponent Rikalia would soon face.

‘Help with what?’ Sabrina asked.

The Pokémon never touched the floor, instead holding an elevated position in the air. Its blue legs were folded and its feet aligned and were pressed together. Its hands mimicked a similar position, blue palms touching one another. The Pokémon’s large head had round, swirled ears and wide eyes, which it kept closed.

“I will say,” Sabrina said, “our neighbors do sometimes have common ground with us.”

‘Shit.’ Iruni didn’t care whether or not Sabrina had heard his mental curse, he meant it all the same.

Choosing Meditite, a dual type Fighting and Psychic Pokémon was a move that Iruni hadn’t anticipated. His perceived advantage of choosing a Dark type Pokémon to battle now has been turned against him two-fold. Rikalia would be at a severe disadvantage if she took any clean hits from her opponent.

“Rika!” Iruni called. “Focus on speed in this fight! Dodge anything it throws at you if you can. It’ll hit hard!”

‘Celebi wants me to help her bring someone back to their original place in time. She took them from the past and can’t get them back without help somehow.’

“Both Pokémon are now present on the battlefield. Trainers, are you ready?” the referee asked. At both Iruni’s and Sabrina’s affirmative he signaled the start of the match.

“Begin!”

‘I have very little knowledge of any myths regarding Celebi. Did… “she?” mention exactly how you
could help her?

Rikalia broke into a sprint toward her enemy, keeping her head low and arms raised in front of her. She circled the floating Meditite that seemingly refused to acknowledge her presence a few times before retreating to her side of the arena.

‘I don’t know and neither does she, apparently. She just told me that I’m there—in the future, mind you—when she finally confronts her friend and she’s going to figure out some way to help him before that happens.’

“Iruni!”

His attention snapped down in front of him to an impatient Rikalia.

“What. Do. I. Do?” she said slowly. “It doesn’t have any openings, and it won’t move! I keep getting close and it won’t even open its eyes. The leader isn’t even doing anything either!”

“Sorry, Rika. I was thinking on it,” he lied. “She’s probably giving it commands telepathically. Just… try and hit it hard and end the match as fast as you can.”

“Oh of course,” she said, turning back to her opponent. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

Readying the claws on her right paw, Rikalia ran off toward the Meditite that was still floating silently in the air.

‘As luck, or perhaps even fate would have it, I believe a colleague of mine is at least somewhat versed in these matters. He can be trusted with sensitive information. I’ll contact him to see if he’s willing to talk to you, and if so, I can give you his address,’ offered Sabrina.

Rikalia swiped her claws down at the Meditite’s head but they never reached their mark. With lightning fast reflexes the Psychic Pokémon’s eyes snapped open and caught Rikalia’s paw mid-strike. What happened next was punishing and cruel; without her left arm being free to block the incoming attack or to free herself from the Meditite’s grip, Rikalia’s stomach was woefully unguarded from the incoming Focus Punch, which the Meditite had been preparing throughout the fight.

For the first time during the battle the Meditite’s feet landed on the floor of the battlefield, bracing itself as it reared back its clenched fist. The punch connected square in the panicking Sneasel’s chest, knocking the wind out of her lungs and sending her body skidding back toward her trainer.

“That sounds great!” Iruni said to Sabrina. ‘Really, I can’t thank you enough. This has been weighing on me a lot lately.’

“You are truly untrained in the ways of mental communication…” Sabrina said, disappointed. She closed her eyes and shook her head. ‘You cannot even pay attention to the battle in front of you while speaking with me.’

A flash of fear and worry shot through Iruni and the only thing he saw on the battlefield was the Leader’s Meditite silently levitating in the air with a calm expression on its face and Rikalia’s Umbra Ball lying on the floor with Rikalia nowhere to be seen.

“The challenger’s Pokémon is unable to battle! The victor is Leader Sabrina!” the referee called out. Iruni stared on, almost unable to move.
Katelyn Thomas climbed the stairs up to her third floor apartment after attending her mid-afternoon class at Saffron University. She expected to be welcomed home by an excited younger brother and an over-embellished retelling of how he won his second ever Gym Badge against Sabrina. Her expectations fell far short however, as she walked down the hallway her apartment was on she felt the ever familiar touch of her Espeon’s mind reach out and contact her. Ruby would usually wait until Kate was inside the door before talking to her, to help maintain the illusion of speaking as humans do, but this time was an apparent exception.

‘Oh good you’re home!’ Ruby said in a cruel sort of excitement. ‘Guess who managed to mess up and throw away a sure thing?’

‘Oh what did he do?’ Kate asked, but she didn’t get a response.

She pulled out her keys and picked up her pace in a hurried walk to her door. Stepping inside, she instantly noticed the sullen and questionably soaking wet face of her brother sitting in a chair at the small dinner table she had next to her kitchen area. A mostly gray Poké Ball sat on the table in front of him. Ruby was sitting on the table, smugly looking to Kate as she walked over.

‘May I present to you the upset of the century! A Dark type trainer who lost to the Psychic Gym Leader of Saffron City!’

“Ruby hush,” Kate scolded. “You’re not helping.” She sat down in the other chair at the table and sighed as she looked over her brother. “Do I even want to know why you’re all wet?”

Iruni’s face lit up momentarily, a mocking grin began to spread across his face. “Here, watch this.”

He stood up from the table and walked over to the sliding glass door that led to the small outdoor balcony that hung off the side of the apartment building. He pulled the door open gently and stuck his head outside briefly.

“Rika, are you ready to come inside?”

Before he could finish his sentence, a pair snowballs flew and hit Iruni’s face. Without wiping the fluffy white snow from himself, Iruni slowly pulled the door closed and sat back down, sending the frozen water down his chest and pants.

“She’s getting better with her aim,” he said.

‘Her form is so much better too.’

“What happened?” asked Kate, handing him a small hand towel.

Iruni didn’t use it, leaving the towel sit on the table. He gave a heavy sigh, letting his head fall down onto the hard surface of the table.

“Well, we lost. You got that much, right?”

“Yeah…” said Kate. “Why is Rikalia so pissed off? Did you throw the match?”

“I may as well have…” Iruni said, sitting back up. He finally took the towel and wiped his face and head, drying himself as much as he cared to. “I’m such a shitty trainer.”
“Since when? You’ve never neglected your Pokémon before. What happened in that battle?”

“I was so preoccupied with…” he lowered his voice, perhaps afraid of certain Sneasel overhearing him, “meeting Sabrina that I didn’t pay attention in battle and Rikalia got hurt. She lost hard to Sabrina’s Meditite.” Iruni shook his head. “I needed Sabrina’s advice on something… personal. I didn’t want anyone else to know I was talking about it, so I spoke with her mentally, telepathically, so Rika wouldn’t know. But I didn’t give her the attention she needed in the battle.”

‘He had me help out with that, actually. Swore myself to secrecy as a favor.’ Ruby added. ‘I’ve since changed my position on that.’

“You used a gym battle as an excuse to just have a chat? Why are you being so secretive? It’s not something Lance put you up to, is it?” asked Kate.

“No it’s—” Iruni stopped. “Why do you think Lance has anything to do with this?”

Katelyn smiled, putting a hand on her brother’s shoulder. “You’d be surprised at what I know, or at what Dad knows.”

Iruni stared on with a blank expression on his face.

“Look,” Kate said, “We’re not spying on you or anything, but Dad and I are more in-the-know than your typical civilians. You are too now, aren’t you?”

“I… don’t really know what to say.”

She laughed, “I can tell. But what I can’t tell is what’s gotten under your skin. What’s so secret that you can’t tell me, or your Pokémon, but you can go ask one of my professors?”

“I didn’t know Sabrina taught at the University,” Iruni said.

“Add it to the list,” Kate said dismissively. “Now what’s going on?”

‘I can keep this non-vocal if you want, you know,’ Ruby spoke up. ‘We can help out too. You don’t need to tackle anything on your own.’

Kate wore a concerned face as she looked at her brother. Iruni seemed to ponder the offer for a moment, but ultimately he shook his head.

“I’m sorry, but I’m too afraid of involving anyone else I care about in this, not without knowing more,” he stood up. “I really appreciate all of the offers to help, but I reached out to Sabrina for a reason, and she may have a lead for me to seek some actual answers. If things go south and I need your help, I’ll call you. I promise. But I’m doing my best to keep… casualties to a minimum. I don’t want anyone getting hurt in this.”

“You’re scaring me,” Kate said, standing to meet her brother’s troubled gaze. “More than that, you’re alienating your Pokémon and they’re starting to suffer for it. You and Rika are so close, don’t risk that by shutting her out. Tell her about this, and try and make up for what happened today.”

He sighed, admitting defeat. “I will. Tomorrow.”

The setting of the sun and the arrival of the moon did nothing to abate Rikalia’s anger. The Sneasel sat outside on the small balcony that was attached to Kate’s apartment. The late-May air was still
warm from the heat of the day, leaving a pleasant atmosphere for such an irritated and hurt Pokémon.

She hadn’t said a word to anyone yet. She didn’t have the words. Karros and Atanya had attempted to comfort her, but she shrugged off their kindness. She needed to be angry right now; it was the only thing that made sense to her. From what she could hear inside, everyone had gone to bed for the night. She didn’t think she could face anyone right now. Rikalia felt as if she were on the verge of tearing something to shreds with all her might.

“He just stood there…” she grumbled to herself, chewing her claws. She bit and tore at her scythe-like talons in frustration, chipping away at their length and sharpness but never being truly satisfied at their condition. Her paws would bleed every now and again when she bit too close to her flesh, but she fought through the momentary stings of pain and continued biting.

“You’ll end up really hurting yourself if you keep that up,” came a concerned voice from behind her.

Rikalia didn’t turn around, keeping a claw between her teeth, but she knew who had come outside to see her.

Ruby, the ever nosy and confident Espeon, closed the sliding door to the balcony with telekinesis as silently as she had opened it. She sat down next to the troubled Sneasel but kept her distance. She stared out at the city, idly trying to find what piece of scenery Rikalia may have been looking at during that moment.

“Shouldn’t you be taking care of Molly?” Rikalia accused, hoping Ruby would leave.

“It’s late, she’s asleep. Plus, you look like you need some care and you won’t let Iruni talk to you. I can’t read your mind,” said Ruby, stating the obvious, “no one can. So if you want to get something off of your little chest, you need to talk about it, sweetheart.”

Rikalia bit down on her claw again, harder this time, unable to respond. She shivered, but not from any cool breeze.

“I know you’ve lost Pokémon battles before, so it can’t be that.” Ruby was a head taller than Rikalia while they were both sitting down, she could clearly peer over the shorter one’s shoulder and see her troubled face. “I know you just went through a terrible ordeal in those ruins, so right now I bet you feel pretty fragile, don’t you?”

The Sneasel closed her eyes, trying to fight back the tears.

“At least know that he went through those things too,” said Ruby. “Iruni has a lot on his mind, so I’m sure whatever happened today was just some side effects from that—”

“You don’t get it!” Rikalia finally snapped. She gripped her head with her paws, almost hiding from the words she was about to say.

“I love him…”

Rikalia sobbed into her paws for a tense few moments before Ruby moved closer to her. At the motion, the Sneasel flung her arms around Ruby’s neck, hugging her with what strength she had in her.

“I love him, and he just… stood there and watched me get beaten. I saw him, staring off at that Gym Leader,” the venom in her words hung in the air. “That woman. Since those ruins he’s been… different. I thought… that maybe… we would… I don’t know. But then I wake up, and we rushed to get here, just to see this Sabrina and he was just focused on her…”
“Oh sweetheart, no.” Ruby said hurriedly. “Put whatever thoughts you have about that away. He’s not interested in her like that.”

“How do you know?” Rikalia pushed herself away to look Ruby in the eye. The caring Espeon nuzzled her and began licking away her tears.

“Because,” she hesitated. “He didn’t come here to just battle her, he also needed to talk to her. Privately.”

“But how do you know?!” Rikalia pleaded.

“If I tell you what I know, promise you won’t be as mad at me as you are at the knucklehead asleep in the living room?” Ruby asked, trying to lighten her mood.

“Ruby, please!” Rikalia begged. “I don’t care about any of that, just… tell me.”

“Alright, so…” the Espeon looked around and sighed, defeated. “He didn’t come to Saffron just because of Sabrina, he needed to see me too. I had promised to keep this a secret from you, but he said there was something he had to do, and he needed my help to do it.”

Rikalia looked up at her with disbelief on her face.

“While he was showing off your new Drapion buddy, your faithful trainer frantically got my attention and practically begged me to rapidly train him how to psychically—as in mentally—communicate with other humans. He had to discuss something in secret with Sabrina, the Gym Leader you seem to think you’re in competition with.” Ruby closed her eyes, expecting a paw full of claws hitting her in the face, but no such strike connected with her. When she opened her eyes she was met with a very close view of Rikalia’s face, who had silently stood up to the now startled Espeon.

“What did you just say?” Rikalia asked in a low voice.

“Look, he wouldn’t tell me why, or what he was doing, just that he needed to talk to Sabrina—it had to be her, by the way—about something very important. Something only Sabrina could help him with. He said it was to protect you and everyone else. Even Kate and I. That’s all I know.”

“Ruby…” Rikalia slowly raised up a pair of bloody claws to the Espeon.

“Hey! I told you the truth, so I don’t think any sort of violent response is very appropriate. I’m a mother now.” Ruby said cautiously. “Besides, do you really think you can take me on?”


“Well, what do you want me to do about it? I don’t know any more than you do right now. You’d have to ask Iruni.”

“I can’t ask him! He’ll lie! He’s been lying to my face about something ever since we got out of those ruins, I know it! I can tell!” Rikalia turned and gripped the railing of the balcony with her claws. “Protecting me by lying to me? What an idiot…”

“Hey, you’ve known he’s an idiot this whole time but you stuck around anyway,” Ruby teased. “Look, either he’s going to tell you once he figures out what he needs to, or you have to confront him about it.”

Rikalia shook with anger and frustration. At worst, her fears would be confirmed, or she would make
herself look like a fool.

“Wait a minute,” Rikalia said, turning back to ruby. “Can you read?”


“Exactly,” Rikalia said. “But I can. It’s super easy to read what humans write.”

“Okay, honey, I’m very proud of you, but where is this going?”

“Iruni said he was writing things down in his Pokédex last night, but he wouldn’t tell me what. I bet he’s got something written about what he’s hiding in there.”

Ruby let out a long sigh of contempt, eying the scheming Sneasel warily.

“You know,” the Psychic type said, “I’m probably the last Pokémon to scold anyone on this, but humans value their privacy very highly. If you go and break his trust like this, he might not forgive you very easily. Do as I say, not as I do.”

“Duly noted,” Rikalia said, dismissing the warning.

If he’s upset at me for this, Rikalia thought as she slid the door to the apartment open quietly, he’ll just need to get over it.

In the dark apartment, the Sneasel’s eyes could clearly make out the layout of the room before her. Tom, who had been dozing off on a chair lifted his head and looked at her as she passed by. Rikalia did her best to plead to him to stay quiet without making a sound, holding one of her bitten and raw claws up to her mouth. A lazy look to Ruby and a nod from her was all Tom needed to cooperate.

Rikalia crept through the kitchen to the living room, where she knew Iruni to be sleeping. He was lying on the couch, back turned away from the rest of the room, fast asleep on his side. She scanned his immediate surroundings to see if his Pokédex was close by. Luckily, it was lying on the floor just in front of the couch. She quietly snatched it up off of the floor, hoping that he wouldn’t wake in the middle of night and try and find it.

She soon returned to the balcony with Ruby and shut the door behind her.

“Got it,” Rikalia said, determined. A few moments of trying to access the device soon renewed her frustration however. “Why won’t it work?”

“What’s wrong with it?” Ruby asked. She couldn’t read anything on the screen, but there were blank spaces and a keypad to be typed on.

“It’s asking for a… ‘password’. What’s that?” asked Rikalia.

“It’s like a key to a lock. You need to put in whatever word or number he chose to use that thing.”

“Why would he need to lock away whatever is in here? Is he that paranoid?” Rikalia grumbled.

“It’s a common thing for humans to do, you know. Privacy,” Ruby reminded her.

“I know,” Rikalia spat. “Sorry, I’m just… so close.”

“What do you think he’d use as a password?” asked Ruby. “People tend to use something they’ll always remember or something important to them.”
“It wants numbers, but I see little letters under most of them… but there’s multiples?” Rikalia stared at the keypad and tried making sense of the system. Not only would she need to figure out if the password was a “word”, but also how to enter that word in this strange number form. She began to take back her initial distaste for how humans wrote things down; they had her kind beat when writing things in code.

“So,” Rikalia thought out loud. “These numbers count as any of the letters underneath them, I guess.”

She sat back against the door and tapped out a few words she guessed that might be right. She tried his name, his full name, last name, Kate’s, but nothing worked.

…something important to them. Rikalia remembered Ruby’s words of explanation about humans and their passwords and had an idea. She felt almost childish and embarrassed to be so hopeful that her idea was the correct one, but she tried it anyway.

“7, 4, 5, 2, 5, 4, 2…” Rikalia said to herself as she typed the numbers in. She let out a short gasp in surprise as the Pokédex unlocked at her suggestion.

“Hey, you figured it out!” Ruby said, sitting close to Rikalia again. “Good job! I’m impressed. So, what was his password?”

Rikalia shrunk down and felt her face grow hot.

“I think it was… my name,” said the embarrassed Sneasel. She winced at the predictable response from Ruby.

“Aww,” gushed the Espeon. “Look at that, he does care. He’s got your name protecting all his little secrets.”

“Shut up.” Rikalia began going through the device’s many menus and screens, careful not to damage the seemingly delicate screen with her sharp claws. She had looked through it a few times, like this morning, but this time she didn’t have much idea what to look for. She had to replace it within a few hours as well, so she couldn’t take her time as much as she wished. The device served many purposes, an annoying one of these was that it would make a series of loud noises at the same time every morning—most mornings, anyway—which awoke anyone around it.

“Maybe he keeps a journal,” suggested Ruby. “It’s like a… record of personal thoughts.”

“He does one of those for his work, I think,” said Rikalia. “He talks into it and he says his words are sent off to Professor Elm.”

“I don’t think it would be like that if he’s keeping it private,” said the Espeon. “Are there any things in there like… notes or something like that?”

“A journal…” said Rikalia as she tapped the icon to the [Notes] icon. She forced away the momentary pangs of contempt and annoyance of reading plain human words, but she seemed to find what Ruby was describing. “It’s a bunch of blocks of text with some numbers before each block. I think he said they’re called ‘daytes’?”

“Those just say when he wrote them. You think those are what you need?” Ruby asked.

“I think so,” Rikalia said, counting backwards in her head. “This first one was done the day he came out of the ruins!”
“Sounds like we hit the jackpot,” Ruby urged. “If you think he’s hiding something, there’s probably where he hid it.”

Rikalia nodded and began to read through the entries:

[5/23/00

[Alright, so I guess the best way to start one of these is to just jump in.

[I can’t really tell what is real anymore. So much has happened, or at least I think it did. It’s all so impossible. I’m going to keep this private journal for a while, just to get these thoughts down somewhere. I’m scared. I’ve never faced anything like this. A Legendary Pokémon? What does she want from me? What could she even want from me? What could I even do? I just hope Cynthia is alright. She called herself, what? A ‘guardian angel’? Hell of a way to show it. Spying on and manipulating us.

[I guess… she did end up saving our lives, but how else am I supposed to take what happened? We almost starved to death.

[I saw Alice—and the guy who saved her gave me a Drapion. One more thing to the pile of stuff that doesn’t make sense. She looks awful. I feel bad for leaving her, but I don’t think there’s anything I can do to help her.

[Good news finally: I’ll be out of the hospital soon. They’re not keeping me overnight. Hooray… at least there’s something looking up. I guess I’m not as bad as I feel.

[ [I hope Rika isn’t too mad once I let her out. I know she hated the idea of being locked up in her ball. Now she’s been in there for weeks. Can I even tell her about what happened?]

As she finished the first entry, Rikalia found herself asking many questions. There were many things that she hadn’t been told of and she soon guessed why.

“Something must have happened while I was put in my ball…” she realized. “But who’s been watching us?”

Another journal entry was dated for early that morning, a few hours after the initial entry:

[5/24/00

[She was just here. Here, in front of me.

[After being down in those ruins, then that strange place in the snow, I wasn’t even sure if any of that even happened. But she just popped up, right in the hotel room like she had a damn room key!

[I can’t believe I’m being roped into something that’s way out of my league, AGAIN. Cartographer work is one thing, but this? What she’s done to Coralis—hell, even to me? Maybe even Rika?]

“What? Who did what to me?” Rikalia asked aloud. Ruby could only offer a concerned look. What could Iruni be talking about? Did something happen to her while she was in her Poké Ball, or sometime sooner?

[I don’t know how I’m going to handle this. Why didn’t I just say no? I don’t need to do this. Oh but
she says I’ll end up helping her regardless so I guess this is the best course of action, isn’t it? I just I had some help.

[What do I do? Who could even help with this? It’s not like I can call for— Wait, maybe I can call for help. Maybe. Hopefully. Gotta check.]

“This last entry is from this morning too…” said Rikalia:

5/24/00

[I really lucked out—I guess, relatively, or whatever. Can anything that happens to me be considered luck anymore? Thoughts for another time…

[Magnet train tickets were usually pretty pricey but thanks to the league changes we’re free to come and go at a nice discount. But I wouldn’t need to go to Kanto on a whim if I wasn’t being… what? Coerced into helping some time-traveling—]

“Huh?” Rikalia stared at the screen, confused. “Ruby, what does ‘time-traveling’ mean?” Rikalia knew the words when they were separate, but didn’t know what they meant together like they were.

“That means… something impossible. It means being able to move forward, or backward, in time and history. Why?”

“He talks about it in here…” Rikalia said as she continued to read.

[—some time-traveling little sprite? I guess I’m to blame. I could get help and keep her away from me if I really wanted to. But here I am, dropping practically everything just to find out anything I can about her. Well, it’s not just about Celebi, Coralis’ life is at stake too.]

“Celebi…?” Rikalia muttered.

Ruby’s fur stood on end at the mention of the name, but didn’t speak up.

[It’s almost funny. I’m not really scared for my own life, but I really don’t want my family or my Pokémon getting wrapped up in this. If what she said is true… god I don’t know what can happen if anything goes wrong. Rika, Kar, hell even my family could get pulled into this if I’m not careful. Rika might already be… I hope I’m wrong about that. Celebi’s not that cruel, right?]

“There it is again. What happened to me?” Rikalia frantically read on.

[Then that other thing she said about Rika and I. Could she really mean it like that? It’s not that I’m opposed to that kind of thing, I guess, but I don’t have that sort of thing on my mind right now. I have to focus on what’s at hand. I guess we’ll be in Saffron in a little while.]

[I should probably wake up Rika. She’ll be surprised to be somewhere new again, I bet.]

The entries stopped there.

“For someone who cares enough about me to work behind by back to protect me from who-knows-what is going on, you’d think he’d actually tell me about all this stuff!” Rikalia growled. She stared at the glowing device in her paws in frustration, wishing more answers were hidden inside it somewhere. “I hate not knowing things…”

“So, now you know what he’s been up to,” Ruby said. “Do you feel better?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” She turned away and stared out at the city before her. “He’s… trying to
“keep me safe from something. Everyone. Karros, you, Katie. Is Celebi dangerous?”

“If what I’ve heard is true, it’s possible,” Ruby warned. “What’s he getting himself into?”

“I don’t know. He still pissed me off today,” Rikalia said. “But… I guess he had good intentions.”

“He must have,” Ruby nudged the Sharp Claw Pokémon’s head with her own affectionately. “He cares about all of us to try and handle this all on his own. He’ll come around soon.”

“He will. I’ll call him out on all this,” she said, gripping Iruni’s Pokédex. “Tomorrow.”

[Cartographer Log: 5/25/00]

[Cartographer ID: A. J. Wingborne (79053)]

[Cartographer #2 (A.J. Wingborne): “Good morning, Professor.

C2: “I’m sorry I haven’t given a Log update in a while… or seen any new Pokémon recently.

C2: “I’m still in the hospital.

C2: “I don’t… they don’t think I’m well enough to leave.

C2: “I’m… I keep having nightmares. I keep thinking I hear things. I’m so… afraid.

C2: “I was never cut out for this. I was chosen poorly. I’m an awful trainer.

C2: “I don’t know if I can keep doing this work you have for me, but I know how important it is. I know more than anyone else.

C2: “But I can’t!

C2: {sobbing}

C2: “I’m, I’m, I’m—

C2: “I know I have no… right to do this, but I’m sending you… the contact information of… someone who could do my job much better.

C2: “I’ve talked about him before, his name’s Allan.

C2: “He’ll do a much better—

{Knocking}

C2: “Oh, Yes? Come in?”

Unknown #1: “Good morning, Alice Jane Wingborne. I’ve heard you were under some distress recently.”

C2: “Galian? Is that you?”

U1: “It is. I wondered if you might want some assistance.”

C2: “With what? Who are these people? Where are your other friends from Blackthorn?”]
To Be Continued…
Iruni bolted upright from the couch at the sensation of something very cold being pressed against his neck. He brought his hand to his neck, feeling the cool, damp spot with his palm. He looked down to his right to see a very annoyed looking Sneasel with ice covering one of her paws.

“Your alarm has been going off.” she said curtly. “For an hour.”

“Shit…” Iruni said groggily, not realizing that Rikalia was now speaking to him again after the previous day’s events. He reached down and picked up the Pokédex off of the floor. Once it was in his hand he noticed that it was only vibrating, not emitting the jingle of noises that normally would play when his alarm would go off. “Sorry, I guess I set it to silent.”

Rikalia was already across the room, sitting in a chair and staring out the window.

“I don’t remember doing that…” he said quietly. Iruni turned the device over in his hand to see if the small switch was indeed turned to silent. Doing so revealed small but distinct red smears and stains on the outside of the casing. The dark crimson color was something that he immediately recognized as blood. He quickly tore his eyes away from the sight before he lost his composure.

_I guess some blood got on it from when I hurt my head down in the ruins. I gotta get this cleaned up._

“Kate’s gone already.” Rikalia spoke without turning around to look at him. “She said to make sure you lock the door behind you when we go out.”

Alright.” Iruni stood up and stretched his body, working out a neck that was particularly sore due to the size of the couch he had slept on. “Hey, Rika? Listen, about—”

“We’re going to find a better way for me to keep this with me all the time, right?” The Sneasel held up her Umbra Ball over her head in its full size so she knew Iruni could see it. “Right?”

“Y-Yeah. We can do that.”

“Good.”

Iruni idly looked around the apartment as he got ready for the day and didn’t see any of Kate’s Pokémon. He assumed they must have all gone with her wherever she had gone. The rest of his team were still inside their Poké Balls from being recalled the night before. He wanted to spend time with all of them after being forced to keep them in stasis, but he knew he’d hurt Rikalia’s feelings with how he had handled his battle at the Saffron City Gym. Iruni silently decided to spend the day with her alone as much as he could to try and make up for what he did.

Once he had carefully cleaned and wiped off his Pokédex as best he could, he sat down at the table and looked through a list of shops in the city that might provide custom clothing and accessories for Pokémon. He had a few ideas in mind for a solution to Rikalia’s problem, but he was sure there were other such trainers who had dealt with this sort of thing before. If he could find a shop that did things like that, he wouldn’t have to do much more than pay for it.

After finding what he hoped to be what he was looking for, his attention was brought to Rikalia when she pushed the Pokédex down onto the table.
“I want to fight that thing again,” she said to him.

“What thing?” Iruni asked.

“I don’t know, you weren’t paying attention enough to tell me…” she growled.

He quickly understood what she meant.

“I know you’re probably really frustrated about what happened,” he said. “But do you really want to go again so soon after—”

“—I got beaten so easily?” she finished for him. “Yeah, I’m sure. So long as you promise not to ignore me this time…”

“I do! I promise!” Iruni nearly yelled, surprising her. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to raise my voice. I’m just really sorry for yesterday.”

“I heard you.” She got up from her seat and waited by the door. “Are we going?”

Iruni sighed slightly, not wanting to further worsen her mood, and stood up from the table as well. He quickly grabbed his wallet, sunglasses, and his belt of Poké Balls, before making sure to lock the door to the apartment as they left.

The tailor’s shop that Iruni had picked out was located on the southern side of the city, and even though he would have liked to take the time to enjoy the nice day and walk, Rikalia’s increasing impatience drove him to get a cab to their destination. The building was small; looking like it had been smashed between the two other, much larger buildings on either side of it. It also looked as if it were much older than the surrounding businesses, the owners perhaps unwilling or unable to remodel to keep up with the development of the block.

Before Iruni could step through the door, Rikalia ran inside the dimly lit clothing shop and leapt on top of the front counter.

“Hey, old man!” she called to the worker currently repairing the sleeve on a jacket in a smaller room in the back of the store. Rikalia held out her Umbra Ball brazenly, “Make me a thing so I can wear this!”

“What’s that?” the older man called back at her. He put down his work and slowly made his way out to the demanding Pokémon. “This your noisy cat?” he asked Iruni.

“Yes, sorry about that. We’re just in a hurry,” said Iruni. “I was wondering if you did custom jobs for Pokémon clothing.”

“So long as it isn’t a full wardrobe, yeah. What did you have in mind?” the tailor asked. “Is it for ‘Noisy’ here?”

“Hey, I can understand you,” Rikalia hissed.

“Easy, Rika,” Iruni put his hand on her shoulder. “Yes. We’d like to have something that will hold her Umbra Ball. I was thinking a glove or bracelet might be the easiest thing.”

“Bad manners aside, that sounds reasonable,” said the older man with graying hair. He ushered the two of them behind the counter and into his workshop in the back of the building. He offered them a
pair of chairs to sit in as he looked for some basic tools. “I’ve gotten plenty of requests for these sort
of accessories ever since trainers began dolling up their Pokémon with ‘mega-rocks’ or whatever
they’re called.” The tailor knelt down in front of Rikalia and gently took her paws in his hand and
made some measurements with his tape measure. “That Poké Ball should fit right into one of our
docks, so long as it’s kept small.”

“Is it too much to ask for it to be easily removable and secure at the same time?” asked Iruni. “It’s not
just some memento; it’s her current active ball.”

The man looked up at him over the head of a blue-feathered Sneasel, peering over the rims of his
small spectacles. “You sure that’s safe?”

“Well, I’d like to try and make it safe, yeah. That’s why I came to get it professionally made.” He
explained in brief Rikalia’s newfound ownership of her own Poké Ball, and how it might hinder her
in battles if not properly secured.

“I don’t see why you’re going through such a fuss, but I don’t know your life. Or yours, eh?” the
man said, gently petting Rikalia’s head with a smile. He stood, going back to his workbench with
various tools and materials stacked on top of it. “It might take some doing to make a release that’ll
trigger if the ball needs to activate on its own in case of an emergency.”

“What about one of these?” Iruni asked as he stood, pointing to his belt. He showed the jeweler the
type clasps that held the four other Poké Balls in place on the strip of leather. Iruni demonstrated how
much force it was needed to remove a ball from its grip, which proved to be no more than a light but
deliberate tug.

“Yeah, those could work, but I don’t carry those kinds of grips in the store. I’d have to order it in for
you. Could take a few days, that alright?” the man asked.

Iruni glanced down at Rikalia, who was already looking more upset by the second. “Can you use
one of these then?” he asked, pointing to the few unoccupied clips embedded in the belt. “They
could probably be cut out of this out pretty—”

Rikalia jumped up and stood on her small chair, grabbed Iruni’s belt firmly in her paws, and pulled
him closer to her. She swiftly carved her claw into the material and cut out the metal mechanism that
was used to secure a Poké Ball to the belt, leaving a shallow hole in the belt’s length. She shoved the
Iruni away from her and held out the clip to the tailor, impatiently staring up at him.

“Well, that’ll work,” the older man said, carefully taking the clasp from her claws. He rummaged
through a drawer in his work desk and pulled out a sheet of paper. “If you have any other
preferences or specifications, write them down here. Color of material, design suggestions,
whatever.”

To Iruni’s surprise, Rikalia was very engaged and involved with the discussion about her soon-to-be-
made garment. She made most of the design suggestions as she knew exactly how she wanted it to,
or to not, affect her paws in battle. The final product would be a light bracer, made of both cloth and
faux-leather material, that would cover her left arm from her paw to her elbow. A strip of material
would go between her two claws and a set of fasteners would line the side to help secure it to her
arm. Her Umbra Ball would be set in a raised metal ring, partway up her forearm, locked in place by
the generous donation of a ball-clasp from her trainer. The material would be kept thin and light, to
further combat any restrictions to the Sneasel’s movement, as well as avoid any infractions on any
League regulations regarding armoring one’s Pokémon.

“Alright. I’ve got what I need. If you want it by the end of the day, give me a few hours and I can
get started on it for you. I still have other work I have to do. I can patch up your belt for you if you want too."

At his Sneasel’s annoyed growl Iruni shook his head. “No, that’s alright,” he said. “We’d actually like it as soon as possible, if it’s alright with you. We have a gym appointment this afternoon.”

“Rush job’s extra,” the tailor warned.

“Deal.”

“Then you gotta grab me some coffee from the café down the road,” the tailor said as he began drawing out the preliminary designs for the garment. “Tell ‘em ‘Greg wants his regular’.”

———

Rikalia grinned to herself, despite the bad mood she had been in for most of the past twenty-four hours.

Her new armor was finished and now being worn on her left arm and she couldn’t stop admiring it. It had never occurred to her how satisfying it could be to envision something in your mind and then have it be real and your possession. It was perfect; just the way she wanted. The bracer was made of flexible, smooth material. It bent when she wanted it to, but it didn’t slip off her arm when she attacked.

She stared down at her Umbra Ball, locked in its place on her forearm. She didn’t tell Iruni what it meant, or the tailor even if he could understand her, but in the patch of blank leather that she’d asked to have included in the design, Rikalia had carved a pattern into it. She did so with her own claws—the tailor’s tools couldn’t have made the same design even if he’d tried. The pattern meant a lot more than just being aesthetically pleasing. The symbols that surrounded her Umbra Ball were something that any Sneasel or Weavile could read, but only Rikalia would appreciate:

“Control.”

The Sneasel swung her arms around as she walked down the sidewalk toward Saffron Gym, attacking imaginary targets that just happened to look like the thing that had punched her so hard yesterday. Iruni had called it a “Meditite” when she had asked him about their impending rematch, but Rikalia didn’t care very much what it was called. As far as she was concerned, all that remained to do about her opponent from the previous day was to knock it down onto the battlefield and beat it until it lost consciousness.

And now, I can.

She flexed her claws, testing the resistance her armguard gave.

“So, you think that’s going to work out?” asked Iruni a step behind her.

“Oh yeah,” she responded, finishing a set of slashes. “I love it.”

“That’s great,” he said as they turned a corner. “Although, we probably should’ve gotten it made as soon as we got into town.”

“No, I’m glad you…” Rikalia chose her words with care. “It was a good thing I got to ‘practice’ fighting without this. It helped me figure out exactly what I needed.”

“Really?” her trainer asked.
“Yeah,” said Rikalia. She turned around and walked backwards so she could face him. “Even if you were paying attention yesterday, I still would’ve been fighting with one set of claws instead of two. I should’ve thought of that before I decided I wanted to hold onto this all the time.”

“So,” Iruni started, “you forgive me for yesterday?”

“Well,” she said, looking over her new bracer once more. “This is pretty good, but there’s still one more thing you owe me, right?” Rikalia pointed over her shoulder at the building she was now standing in front of: Saffron Gym. “One… ‘Marsh Badge’, wasn’t it?”

“You got it.”

The instant Iruni pushed open the door to the building, Rikalia immediately felt relief from the warm weather outside. She shook herself and enjoyed the chill of the artificially cooled air that blew out from the doorway. Gently taking her claws, the Sneasel ruffled her fur, shaking free the small droplets of sweat that clung to her.

This time, the two challengers didn’t have to wait long before the Gym Leader graced them with her presence. Sabrina, the woman with black hair and strange glowing bracelets, approached them almost immediately.

“Mr. Thomas,” she said as she walked up to them. “How are you this afternoon?”

“Eager to get to our rematch,” said Iruni. “If it’s alright with you, we’d like to get that started as soon as possible.”

“Is that so?” Sabrina asked, looking down to Rikalia. “I see you’ve found a rather elegant solution to your problem from yesterday.”

“Enough stalling!” Rikalia called up at the tall woman. She flexed her claws in anticipation, “Let me fight!”

“Are you sure you would rather not take some time to prepare for the battle?” asked Sabrina, crossing her arms and tapping her finger against one of her bracelets two times.

“I think we’re more than prepared,” said Iruni. “I don’t want to waste any more of our time.”

Sabrina nodded, leading their way to the main gymnasium. “Then, if you’ll follow me; the battleground is already open for our battle.”

While the Gym Leader took her time walking to her side of the battleground, Rikalia gnawed at her claws, trying to bring a particularly dull edge back to proper form.

“Nervous?”

She looked up to find Iruni kneeling down next to her.

“I understand,” he said to her, “but don’t lose your focus. It’ll be alright.”

“Sorry,” she said, finishing her trimming quickly. “So, are you gonna watch this time?”

“I’ll do more than watch,” Iruni stroked her head. “We’ll beat her Pokémon together. You trust me?”

“…Yeah, of course,” said Rikalia.

“I’ll be trying something different this time, so keep on your toes.”
“Challenger Iruni Thomas,” the referee called to them as he approached. “Please present your Pokémon for inspection of its new garment.”

“I can present myself, you know…” mumbled Rikalia. She walked over to the man who had tried to take away her Umbra Ball before their last attempt, removed her gauntlet, and held it up for him to scrutinize. She watched him turn it over in his hands and test the security of the ball-lock mechanism. Satisfied, he let her put it back on, and he gave it another look over, testing how it fit on her arm.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” he said as he finished. “Mr. Thomas, I’ll go ahead and register your Sneasel’s new bracer as her ‘official accessory’. If you decide to change or alter its design, or wish to register a different kind of item for official battles, you’ll need to consult a League official beforehand.”

“Thank you,” Iruni said.

“I hope you understand that I will not show you any consideration because of our last encounter,” Sabrina said to them from her side of the field, holding out a Poké Ball in her palm. It opened with a flash of bright light, revealing the same creature from the previous day. “My purpose as a Gym Leader is to test and challenge any trainer who seeks my approval, whether it takes them one try or twenty to defeat me.”

“Let’s not let it get to twenty…” Iruni muttered.

“They won’t!” Rikalia ran out to the middle of her side of the battlefield. “Ready!”

The referee checked with both trainers and then signaled the start of the match.

Rikalia leapt forward into her opponent’s side of the field, determined to make her target wake up and take her seriously. Following the same tactics from their previous battle, the Meditite floated above the floor, eyes closed. Rikalia knew it was merely a front; it was already preparing that same heavy punch from before.

She crept close to it, its unwavering, statue-like concentration already starting to irritate her. Rikalia was about to swipe at it with her claws when she was interrupted.

“Teeth!” Iruni called out.

In the moment it took for her to look back to her trainer, the Meditite took the opportunity to land a quick strike, punching her in the side of the head.

The startled Sneasel reeled from the impact, clutching her head in pain. When she opened her eyes again, her opponent was back in its tranquil and relaxed state.

“What was that?” Rikalia called back to her trainer once she retreated a safe distance. “‘Teeth’?”

“You know, ‘Bite’. Well, now we know close-range isn’t what we need to do here. You’ll need to break its concentration by attacking outside of its range.” Iruni told her.

The Sneasel wondered how to accomplish that while she considered her trainer’s careful wording. She knew that Iruni obviously didn’t want to let the Gym Leader know what he had in mind, but that meant she didn’t have the specifics either. Rikalia wondered if he was giving her his same half-attention from yesterday, but one glance at his determined expression proved otherwise. He was relying on her to fill in the blank; he had given the command, but it was up to her to choose how to carry out the order.
“Remember to stay cool and calm, Rika!” Iruni called. “Surprise me!”

Cool… Surprise… Oh!

Rikalia knew her opponent was a Psychic type, but its mental abilities could only help it so much against her; it couldn’t read her mind or sense her movements. With its eyes closed, it could only rely on its big ears to track her. She grinned and flexed her claws. She guessed at the Meditite’s arm length, remembering how it caught her paw last time she attacked it. She closed in on her opponent, running straight for it. She focused her attention on its small movements, its regular breathing, how it tensed its muscles as she drew near. Just like before, she reared back her right arm, claws extended, ready to bring them slashing across the thing’s head.

The Meditite uncrossed its legs, landed on the ground, and prepared to catch the Sneasel’s bold assault. Once it opened its eyes, it was met with a sharp chunk of ice crashing into its forehead.

Rikalia had flung the Ice Shard with her left paw, having already prepared the attack as she ran forward. The sound of her clawed paws scraping against the battlefield floor hid the sound of the ice forming between her two claws.

Sabrina’s Meditite stumbled backward, covering the point of impact with one hand, glaring angrily at the Sneasel.

“Hit you,” she teased, grinning.

With its focus lost, and its temper rising, Meditite lunged forward with its free fist, intending to knock a fang or two loose from the cocky Sharp-Claw’s mouth.

“It’s not fun to fight one-handed, is it?” Rikalia mocked again.

Meditite sent a flurry of wild punches and kicks at the agile Dark type, but without any restrictions to her own movement, Rikalia easily dodged and attacked whenever opportunity showed itself, nicking and scratching her opponent with her claws. With each attack it received, the Meditite lost more of its composure. A quick glance showed that even the Gym Leader herself was unsure about the outcome of the battle.

“Eyes!” Iruni called.

Rikalia was beginning to catch on to the loose ‘code’ Iruni was speaking in now. She ducked to the right of a particularly wild attack, blowing an Icy Wind into Meditite’s face. The frosty blast of air chilled the Leader’s Pokémon where it stood, leaving it open for Rikalia to return the punch she had been given in their last battle. Solid ice coated her right paw, claws clenched tightly. She sent the Ice Punch crashing into the Meditite Pokémon’s chest with all of her strength.

Despite taking the repeated Ice type attacks, Sabrina’s Meditite continued to move. It had endured the hit and grabbed hold of Rikalia’s right arm with its own, slowly clenching its left fist in retaliation. It leaned forward as it threw its punch.

“Fall!”

Following her trainer’s command, Rikalia pushed back with her legs and fell backwards onto the floor of the battlefield. The Meditite, who already had its own forward momentum from launching its attack, was easily sent flying over the prone Sneasel with just a little effort. After crashing into the ground headfirst, Meditite tumbled to a stop on floor of the battlefield.

Rikalia jumped to her feet once the Meditite’s grip on her arm loosened. She turned around, staring at
its motionless body, unsure if the battle was over or not. She readied a set of Ice Shards in her claws, waiting for it to get up and attack her.

But an attack never came.

“Sabrina’s Meditite is unable to battle!” called the referee. “The winner is the challenger, Bartholomew Iruni Thomas!”

The next thing she knew, she was suddenly lifted up into the air. Rikalia let the blades of ice she had prepared drop to the floor of the battlefield. Iruni lifted her up, smiling ear to ear, laughing.

“That was amazing, Rika!”

He pulled her into a hug, which Rikalia couldn’t bring herself to refuse.

“You did it!”

“We did it,” she said, hugging him back. “Together.”

“Congratulations,” the Gym Leader said as she walked over to them. She had recalled her defeated Pokémon and was carrying its Poké Ball in a field of telekinetic energy. “A much better performance than yesterday. Night and day, even.”

“Thank you. We really appreciate the opportunity to try again so soon after losing the first time,” Iruni said.

“My pleasure. Though I feel I should mention; you needn’t hold back on giving your Pokémon commands because of my psychic abilities. It would be incredibly unsportsmanlike of a Gym Leader to spy on a challenger’s thoughts during a match.”

“I never assumed you would,” said Iruni. “I knew that if I had called out detailed instructions, you would be able to think of ways to counter them. I wanted Rikalia to choose how to beat your Pokémon because I knew she wanted to fight her own way. As the fight went on, I only needed to give her a few hints here and there. I trust her judgment.”

“Well, your trust has been rewarded,” said Sabrina, handing over her badge. “It’s clear you learn quickly from your mistakes. That is a sign of great potential. If I might make a suggestion for where you head next, why not try Viridian City?”

“Oh, thank you, I’ll keep that in mind.”

———

“Now this is much better,” said Rikalia, sitting on Iruni’s shoulders as he walked along the road back to his sister’s apartment. She held the newly won Marsh Badge between the claws on her right paw. The gold, circular pin shone brightly in the sunlight as she flipped it between her white talons. Watching the Meditite’s shocked face as it flew over her and fell onto the ground had been satisfying on its own, but knowing that their win today came from the combined efforts of her trainer and herself made Rikalia feel better than she had in a long time. She gripped the badge tightly in her paw, knowing she would soon have to drag the mood down into unpleasant territory.

Today—right now—was the moment she needed to seize.

“I’m sorry it took us two tries,” Iruni apologized for the millionth time that day. “I swear, I didn’t look away from you for a second.”
“I know you didn’t,” said the Sneasel. She never said so, but she had taken as many chances as she
could to glance back at her trainer during the battle to check where his attention was focused.
“You’ve always kept your promises, even if you’ve been slipping a little lately.”

“Yeah…” Iruni looked down at the sidewalk as he walked.

“Hey, I didn’t mean it that much,” said Rikalia. She pointed toward a bench sitting in the shade
beneath a tree. “Actually, can we sit down over there? I want to talk to you about something.”

“Right now? We can just head up to the apartment. We’re just a few blocks away.”

“Please? I want it to be just the two of us,” she said.

Iruni took the slight detour and sat down in one of the empty spots with his Sneasel still sitting on his
shoulders.

Despite taking the initiative of getting him to sit down to talk with her, Rikalia had trouble starting
her conversation with Iruni. She didn’t want to make him feel any worse; she’d done plenty of that.
As she idly chewed on one of her claws she could tell that her stalling was making him nervous,
watching her human shift uncomfortably and try to focus on anything in front of him. She realized
just needed to come out and say it. This wasn’t the time for lies and subversion anymore.

“You’ve been lying and hiding things from me.” Rikalia’s voice was soft, almost sad. She hugged
his head. “Something about what happened to you down in the ruins and why we came here. Don’t
try and deny it anymore. I want to get this settled. Now.”

“What makes you think I’ve kept anything from you?” he asked, voice wavering slightly.

She rested her head down on his. “It wasn’t hard for me to guess the password to your Pokédex.”
Rikalia felt him jump as she said that. She knew she had him caught now. “I read your notes…the
ones you keep private and separate from work.”

Iruni sighed, at a loss for words. “You must hate me,” he said, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“No I don’t,” said Rikalia. She got down from his shoulders and stood on the bench next to him. “I
read what you said in those notes you wrote, so I know that you’ve been doing this to protect me,
right? Well, don’t you think I’d be able to help with whatever is going on if I knew?”

“I… dammit.” Iruni looked away from her. He hung his head and covered his face with his hands.
Iruni said something quietly under his breath, but Rikalia could only hear him say, “…just as bad as
her…”

“I’m not mad, really. I gave it some thought, and I’m actually… glad you’ve been doing this for me.”
Rikalia pulled his hands away from his face and gave him her kindest and most genuine smile.
“You’ve been sneaking around behind my back and keeping secrets all to keep me safe from
something. I really like that, actually.”

“That’s not it. It’s not just about you, it’s everyone—everything. I’m afraid that everything in our
lives could be in danger if I make even the slightest mistake. I don’t know what to do. I don’t even
know who I can turn to for help.”

“Well, hey,” Rikalia took the Marsh Badge she still held and put into Iruni’s palm. “You see this
badge? I couldn’t beat Sabrina’s Pokémon alone, because when I tried it just thrashed me. It took the
two of us,” she closed his fingers around the small metal pin, “working together to beat the little
annoying bastard into the dirt. You got this sleeve made for me so I could keep my ball with me and
now I can use both paws in battle. You watched my battle and told me what to do when I couldn’t think of anything."

The Sneasel gripped his hand with both of her paws, leaning up close to his face. “We work best as a team, not when we’re alone.”

“That’s just it,” Iruni shook his head. “I haven’t been treating you or anyone else like I should have. After the whole ordeal we went through in those ruins, I learned what really happened. And now I see I’ve been treating you the same way she’s been treating me. I’ve pulled you around without your choice and I’ve kept it all from you because I thought I knew what was best. You don’t deserve that.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Rikalia. “What could be doing those things to you? Is it… uh…” she struggled to remember the name she had read in his notes. “Celebi?”

“Well, so you did read my notes,” Iruni said.

“Did you think I was bluffing?”

“I was kinda hoping,” Iruni admitted. “But, yes. Celebi has been… I don’t know everything about her or what she’s done, but she is the reason I’ve been so cautious lately.”

“Ruby seemed to get really uncomfortable when I mentioned that name,” Rikalia said. “Said she could be dangerous. Who is she?”

“You roped Ruby into this?” her trainer asked.

“You did too!” she protested. “Mr. Private-psychic-conversation-with-the-pretty-Gym-Leader!”

Iruni sighed heavily and leaned back against the bench. “Okay. What don’t you know?”

“Plenty,” Rikalia nudged Iruni’s arm to get his attention. “Come on, look at me and talk to me. This doesn’t have to be hard.”

“I know, but,” Iruni looked down at her, “you know that I wanted to tell you all about what happened, right?” he asked. “It’s just such a strange situation that I panicked and kept everything to myself. I didn’t know what to tell you because I really don’t know that much myself.”

“Just tell me what you do know, it’s okay.” She sat down on his lap and pushed against his chin gently with her head. “You can tell me anything, you know.”

“I know that, but…”

“What? Do you think I won’t believe you? Did you do something else that would make me angry?” Rikalia asked.

“Not me, no…”

“Come on, you’re being difficult about this. Alright fine, how about this; I’ll ask you a question, and you answer it. Just don’t lie. Easy. How’s that?” she asked.

“Okay.”

“Great! Now, let’s see… Uh…” Rikalia turned around in his lap to look at him, “Can I go through those notes again? I’ll know what to ask better if I can ask about whatever confuses me.”
Iruni chuckled as he handed his Sneasel the device, “Sure. I guess you know how to find them, huh?”

Rikalia shot him an annoyed look, “I wouldn’t have had to snoop around if you had just been open with me, you know…” She tapped away at the screen, smiling to herself as she finished entering in the password. “Hey… it is my name, right?”

“Huh?”

“The numbers that unlock this,” she pointed a dulled claw at the screen. “It ends up spelling out my name, doesn’t it?”

Rikalia thought she saw her trainer’s face flush with color for a moment before he spoke again.

“I mean, it is easier to remember a word than a string of numbers, at least for me,” he averted his gaze for a moment. “How, uh, did you figure it out anyway?”

“Ruby said that humans make passwords something that they’ll always remember, or something that’s important to them,” she said, staring into his eyes.

“Did she now? She’s become so helpful since she became a mother,” said Iruni.

“Is she right?”

“About what?” Iruni asked.

“Am I something important to you that you’ll always remember?” she asked. When Iruni didn’t answer immediately, Rikalia added, “Remember? I ask a question, you answer. Don’t lie.”

“Rika, I— This isn’t doesn’t have to do with what was in those notes—”

“I don’t care,” she stood up so her face was even with his, leaving the Pokédex lying on the bench beside them. Rikalia put her paws on his shoulders, gripping them tightly, but not enough to pierce his skin with her claws. “Please, answer me. Am I really that important to you that you’d use my name before yours, Kar’s, or Kate’s?”

Iruni’s seemed to struggle keeping his eyes front and center.

“Yes or no?” Rikalia asked.

“Yes,” he finally said. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Not all the time…” Rikalia looked down at her claws and the damage she had done to them the previous night in her nervous fit. “But… it feels good to hear you say it.” She hugged his neck, rubbing her face against his. “I’m sorry I got all mad at you.”

“I deserved it—”

“No you didn’t.”

“I still messed up big yesterday,” Iruni said. “I promise that won’t happen again.”

“Because now we’ll be honest with each other, right? No need to keep things a secret because we think it’s right for the other?”

“Right. I’ll tell you everything that happened, and we’ll work together; you, me and the others.”
Rikalia pushed away from him to look him in the eyes once more. “Before you tell them, just tell me. If you were unsure whether you could tell anyone, just practice with me.”

“I don’t—” Iruni cut his sentence off as his eyes drifted upward, looking on at something in the distance.

Before she could take the time to ask what had interrupted him, the Sneasel caught the putrid smell of smoke.

“That’s not good…” Iruni picked Rikalia up with one arm, hoisting her up to his shoulders again, and swiped his Pokédex up from the bench. He began quickly walking in the direction of the smoke and dialed a number in his PokéGear. The road they walked along had become congested with traffic and many other people were moving in the direction of the troublesome smoke. Iruni tried his PokéGear again, “Come on, pick up, pick up, pick up!”

Rikalia tried getting his attention, “Hey, what’s the matter? Why are we running towards that?” As Iruni rounded another corner Rikalia had her answer. While she didn’t quite understand human cities or the way they built them the way they did, she could at least recognize buildings she had been to before.

Kate’s apartment building was now dead ahead of them, being devoured by flames and spitting out a column of suffocating black smoke from many of its upper floors.

Iruni broke into a sprint, running faster than Rikalia had ever seen before. Rather than fight to keep her balance, she leapt down to the ground and ran alongside her trainer.

“Kate’s not answering her phone! I don’t know if she’s alright!” Iruni yelled, answering a question that didn’t need to be asked.

A crowd of people had gathered in the street below the climbing flames, yelling their worries and concerns to one another. When the two arrived on the scene, Iruni and Rikalia frantically looked around the mass of people for any sign of Kate or any of her Pokémon.

“Maybe they’re still out?” Rikalia suggested.

“She should still have her phone…” Iruni muttered. “Where is the fire department?” he asked one of the bystanders.

“We don’t know,” they said. “A bunch of us have called them, but they’re still not here. The traffic this time of day is awful.”

“How did this even start?” Iruni asked.

“No one knows. This fire just got way out of hand really quickly.”

Damn …

Iruni looked up at the burning facade of the building, worry and panic rising in his gut.

“Hey, whoa,” another person beside him said. They had a hand against their head and wavered in their stance. “I’ve got… an Espeon talking to me? It says it’s stuck in the building! Its owner and other Pokémon are still inside!”
‘Ruby!’ Iruni did his best to catch any stray psychic links that might’ve remained, trying to remember the tips she had taught him. ‘Is that you?’

‘There you are! I thought I felt your mind down there! Where are the damn firefighters?’ Ruby felt terrified. ‘We’re trapped in here! Kate’s knocked out!’

‘What— sorry, no time. You’re in the apartment still? Can I get to you easily?’

‘How should I know?! Just get us out of here! I don’t care how!’

Iruni took a few steps back, looking on at the burning building.

“Rika…” Iruni said in a low voice. “Kate and everyone are in trouble. We need to get into the building as fast as we can. How do you think we could do it?”

“In there? Wait, is everyone really in there? Are they alright?” she asked, gripping his leg.

“Rika! I need you as my partner here,” he knelt down to her. “We need to get them out of there now!”

Rikalia looked from her trainer to the building a few times, “Why are you asking me!?"

“Because I don’t know what I should do! I need your help, please! I trust your judgment, but I’m… too scared. I can’t think. Please.”

Rikalia stared at the building for a tense moment, eyes darting around the immediate area. “Going up all of those stairs would be too slow, even if they’re not blocked by fire, so why not climb up on the outside? We could get in on the floor below Kate’s room and head up through the floor? Drapi could carry us up and claw his way through easily, couldn’t he?”

Iruni considered the option seriously for a moment. The building had visible flames starting on the third floor, unfortunately right were Kate’s apartment was located. The first two floors looked fine, but there was no guarantee of that just by observing from the ground.

“Well, could that work?” asked Rikalia.

“It has to, come on!” Iruni ran forward without another thought and Rikalia chased after him. He pushed through the crowd as quickly as he could, coming close to the front of the building. He ripped the Friend Ball from its spot on his belt and released its occupant. The large insect-like creature materialized with a confused and troubled look on his face.

“I’m sorry about this but it’s an emergency! I need you to get us into the building, below the fire,” Iruni pointed up to a balcony on the second floor. “From there, we need to rescue my sister and her Pokémon. Do you understand? Do you think you can do that?”

Drapion looked up the side of the building and then back to his trainer, nodding silently. Without needing further orders, he grabbed Iruni and Rikalia with his large arms and placed them on his back. A quickly translated direction from Rikalia told the two of them to grab onto the long, slender part of his body as he began to climb. Using his four legs, two clawed arms, and his clawed tail, Drapion scaled the side of the building with what Iruni considered surprising ease.

Below him he could hear startled onlookers calling up to him; some with words of encouragement, others concerned for his own safety.

Reaching their destination on the second floor, Drapion crashed through the sliding glass doors of an
apartment’s balcony entrance. Once inside, they were all relieved to see that the fire had not spread to where they were. As they quickly made their way through to the hallway, Iruni grabbed a few stray dishtowels from the unsuspecting person’s apartment.

“Listen up!” Iruni yelled as they ran toward the stairwell that would lead them the rest of the way to the third floor. “We’ll try the stairs unless they’re blocked. When we get into the burning areas, try to breathe through these,” he tossed a towel to Rikalia and Drapion. “Breathe as little smoke as you can,” he held up the rag to his mouth. “Rika, ride on my shoulders and try and use your ice to fight any flames you can! Haradah—that’s your name now, big guy!—you’re in charge of any large debris in our way, got it?”

Haradah the newly named Drapion grunted in affirmative and Rikalia got into position as well.

Iruni climbed onto Haradah’s back once more as the Ogre Scorpion climbed up the stairwell toward the entrance to the third floor. Flames could be seen through the small window in the door. On Iruni’s order, the large Drapion ripped it from its hinges with a clawed arm. Already prepared for what would happen, Hadarah conjured a Protect barrier for himself and his comrades as the blast of fire and hot air that erupted from the hallway in front of them. The group’s fears worsened as they saw what looked like a sea of fire covering the entire hallway leading toward Kate’s apartment, where it looked like the waves of flames were coming from.

“Rika, shoot the floor with ice so he can walk. Haradah!” Iruni yelled, “Step where Rikalia disrupts the flames!”

The Sneasel did as she was told and threw shards of ice onto the floor as quickly as she could, which would then melt and temporarily extinguish the flames that burned the floor. Haradah stepped on these freshly cooled spots and the group slowly made their way down the burning corridor. The doorway to Kate’s apartment was partially collapsed with the door itself mostly burned away. A quick swing of the Drapion’s large arms cleared the entrance for them.

Inside was a large, mostly melted dome of ice trying to be maintained by an exhausted Glaceon. Azula—doing her best to avoid touching the ice walls that Tom was creating—was curled around Ruby, Molly, and Kate’s unconscious body.

“Hey, we’re here,” Iruni called into the room. “Let’s go!”

“We can’t carry Kate, dumbass. Otherwise we’d have gotten out when that asshole started this mess!” Ruby yelled through their mental connection.

“Is she okay?” Iruni asked, kneeling next to his sister. Her face was bruised and bloody and her arms and legs had burns along them.

“We can worry about that when we’re out of here! Now let’s—”

The flames that had been eating away at the walls caused a portion of the ceiling to collapse, blocking off their only exit.

“Oh, fucking fantastic!” Ruby cried. She nuzzled her terrified daughter. ‘I’m so sorry, sweetie…’

“Hey! We’re not dead yet,” Iruni yelled through his cloth. “Ruby, tell Kate I’m sorry for this later!”

Thinking back to Rikalia’s suggestion of climbing up the building to save time, he thought that the best way to get down that should be even faster. He reached over and grabbed Azula by her Everstone collar, pulling it off. The instant the plain stone was no longer in contact with her body, the Dratini’s body began to shine intensely with bright light. The Dragon Pokémon’s body elongated
and coiled around them all, shattering Tom’s ice walls. Azula’s scales darkened and the fins on the sides of her head changed to wings. A Dragonair now surrounded the group, looking surprised and curious about her new body.

“Azula, I’m sorry I did that without asking, but you can get us out now! Everyone grab on and Azula can fly us right out the window!”

‘She can fly now?!’ asked Ruby.

“I hope so! Azula! Hurry!” Iruni looked to Rikalia, “Recall yourself!”

“No! Not while you’re in danger!”

“Fine!” Iruni groaned.

Iruni recalled Haradah and gently picked up Kate and carried her over his shoulder. Ruby levitated over hers and her teammate’s Poké Balls and Iruni recalled them all as well, save their transport out. He and Rikalia held onto Azula’s body as best they could, and the newly evolved Dragonair blasted the sliding glass doors with a Dragon Rage attack.

“Go!”

With such speed that Iruni would remember it for the rest of his life, Azula darted out of the apartment building and took to the air, spiraling up into the open air over the crowd of people below. Cheers and clamor rose up from the ground as they descended onto a patch of grass half a block away, the sounds of firetrucks could finally be heard approaching from the distance.

After they landed, Azula let her passengers disembark before rising to the sky once more, coiling and twisting in the sky above the apartment complex that was burning to the ground.

Iruni set his sister gently down on the grass, relieved to see her still breathing.

“What’s she doing?” asked Iruni, looking up his sister’s Pokémon in the sky.

“Helping,” Rikalia said simply. “That’s what she said when she took back off.”

As the Sneasel finished her sentence, dark clouds began to build in the sky above the Dragonair. A heavy downpour of rain fell over the immediate area, quenching the flames as much as they could before the firemen and ambulances arrived.

———

To Be Continued…

———
What happened? Where is he?

*He was just here a few days ago, resting and well, and now he’s gone! He’s nowhere, not for miles!*  
*He should have been weak and tired, so where could he have gone? Iruni Thomas wasn’t supposed to leave Goldenrod City until he fully recovered and made things right with his little claw-beast. I checked. I’ve always made sure to check!*

Floating around the obviously empty hotel room I frantically looked for any sort clue. He really should have still been here! I wanted to talk to him about an idea I had…

The bedding was clean and neat and everything in the room was in its proper place. The staff must’ve already cleared the room…

*He might be long gone but that doesn’t mean I can’t follow him!*

*If he’s not here now, then let’s wind things back, shall we?*

I began to stare the vacant room ahead of me, focusing on the seconds that passed by. The boy was gone, so I couldn’t look back on *his* timeline, but I can look at the past of his room. What had happened here after I left?

Slowly at first, and then very rapidly, time started to play in reverse in front of me, rewinding the history of what transpired here. It’s easy to find points in time where I’ve been to, so I skipped straight there. There I was; I left him under nice circumstances, right? He even made a joke about everything that happened; I didn’t get the feeling that he was afraid or anything at all. Was he planning something already? He didn’t get much sleep that night. He spent a lot of it messing with that device he and that Wingborne girl carry. Looks like he was keeping a little journal.

*Oh?*

It looked like he had a breakthrough just then… Now what was he looking for?

*Help?*

*He wanted help? With what? Me? Like I’m a threat?*

*That’s absurd!*

But, I look at him then… and he’s acting like I’ve threatened his life. Genuine panic.

And then he cut off all his hair—so that what—that I’d have trouble recognizing him?

*Ha! Your looks aren’t what I care about; it’s your place in time. You’re too important, Barty. I’ll always find you.*
So, you figured that woman could help you just because she takes care of that half-made monster? Well, you’re not bad at guessing. She probably does know a thing or two about me, or maybe she knows someone who does.

Let’s see if I can guess what happens next, huh? I don’t need the vision of the past for this. You packed like a maniac and picked up your lovey-dovey Sneasel, ran out of the room, and hopped on the first train to Saffron City you could find. At least that part of you is predictable.

I don’t understand; you’re quick thinking and quick to act. I need this kind of action on my side, not working against me! I wish you would just stop it! Stop making this so difficult! I just need your help to fix things! Is that so selfish? What is making you fight back so much?

Or maybe, it’s what you’re fighting for?

I slowed replay of the past to a crawl just as Iruni stepped up onto the Magnet Train.

I need to see something.

With one hand, he was handing an employee his train ticket, gaining entry into the car. With his other, he was holding Rikalia. She was somehow asleep through all of this, her head resting on his shoulder. Just before he entered the train, Iruni took one last look at the Sneasel carefully held in his arms, then behind him at the crowded train station. The past version of him stared right back at me—through me—and although he didn’t see me back then, I could definitely tell.

He was absolutely looking for me.

And now I know it isn’t for his sake. Seeing Rikalia safe and sound urged him to look out for her safety just then.

That idiot. Doesn’t he get it? He has to by now, he’s a smart boy after all. She isn’t safe unless I am. How do I get that through your head?

But hold on…

I made the ghosts of yesterday freeze.

How did this—any of this—happen?

I checked everything! I saw what the future was supposed to be! It wasn’t like any of this. Iruni’s future was calm and predictable after he surfaced from the underground. I’ve been pushing and pulling things just to make it happen that way.

What did I overlook? Something altered his likely potential timelines… made him take one I didn’t plan for…

I rewound time again, back with him in the room. I remember this. He was slowly realizing the trick to Rikalia’s translation gimmick. At this point, everything was fine. Then…

Oh no.

That was when… I showed up.

It was me. I changed things.

The future of Iruni’s that I had seen—the one that I had planned for—was one where I didn’t meet him in this room on that night.
Of course it’s my fault. What isn’t anymore?

I can’t see my own personal future. I didn’t know I would visit him. I just… did. I felt I had to check up on him. I thought it would’ve been fine, just like back in those snowy ruins. I never thought I’d affect him so much by appearing… when she was in the room with him…

Oh, you hopeless moron.

He had Rikalia sound asleep in his lap, and the instant he knew I was in the room, he went on the defensive. I bet the reason I couldn’t get an accurate reading on his feelings was because he’s so saturated in Dark aura all the time.

Fine.

It was all my fault.

Well, sorry for giving you a life worth fighting for! Ungrateful child…

I sighed, shaking my head.

This isn’t getting me anywhere, is it?

Already knowing my destination, I teleported myself to the skies above Saffron City. I also already knew what beast lurked down in those city streets. It could pick a mind out of a million in the time it takes to blink. Luckily, time is my forte. Before I dove into the proverbial lake of mental activity that a city of that size produces, I quieted my mind and isolated my thoughts. My arrival couldn’t make so much as a ripple in the water, or else I risked being discovered by someone I’d rather not provoke.

I’ve had to do this before.

When no questioning presence seized my mind and no preemptive attacks found their way to me, I opened my mind up to the city, blending into the natural ebb and flow of the many minds that lived in Saffron.

Night had fallen but the city was very active beneath me. One mind in particular was full of activity: my target.

Gotcha.

Whoa, what?

That’s him, but…

I hid in a tree across the street, watching him. Iruni was sitting on a bench outside of a hospital, but he looked fine. Wait, no he didn’t. He had a few new wounds; small but definitely new. Keeping him company were two of his Pokémon—his Houndour and Sneasel. Iruni was staring off into the distance, troubled expression weighing heavily across his face. He was lightly petting his Houndour’s head with one hand and holding his Sneasel’s claw with the other.

He wasn’t hiding it now; fear was spread across his face as plain as day.

I could see Rikalia occasionally say something to him—What is she wearing? Is that armor?—but Iruni only mumbled in response.

Now I’m very lost. Something happened in the two days since I last saw him and it’s shaken him pretty badly.
Come on, you’ve been through worse! Remember the ruins? What could’ve happened this time?

A cab pulled up in front of the hospital and Iruni immediately jumped to his feet. A gray haired man stepped out of the vehicle and spotted Iruni coming over to him immediately.

He saw his son.

Iruni and his father hugged each other fiercely for a moment before the older of the two sternly spoke to the younger. A quick conversation played out below me.

“And you’re sure you’re alright?” asked his father.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just had a few minor burns and a little smoke inhalation. All our Pokémon that were caught up in it were in similar shape, but they’re all patched up.”

“What about Katelyn?” The worry that hung on that last word told a story all its own.

“She’s… still hasn’t woken up…”

What happened? It’s been two days! How could things go so wrong in two days?!

A short replay of the events around Iruni answered my questions well enough. That family has been through so much hardship… am I only adding to it?

…

No!

No, this wasn’t me!

This all was set in motion before I became involved! Sure, technically it’s all still my fault, I suppose, but this was always going to happen! Look! That man would have always come here and started that fire!

Except now… She lived.

Katelyn Thomas is alive because her brother was there to save her.

And he was only there because I pushed him too much.

…

Well, now what?

What will he do?

What can I do?

I got too close, but now, I might need to be even closer.

No doubt Iruni is running a thousand different scenarios through his head, and once they figure out who started the fire and why he was there, where will the blame fall? On me, like always.

He should be thanking me! Again!

Fine … Then I’ll give him something to be grateful for.
Iruni and his father have already gone inside the hospital now, making their way to Kate’s room in the intensive care wing.

Time is still on my side.

In an instant, I’m in her room.

Oh, this poor girl.

Kate’s arms and legs were bandaged heavily from extensive burns. I looked at a clipboard hanging the foot of her bed that featured, among others, the words “severe nerve damage” and I shuddered at the thought of how she must have suffered. Her face was bruised and swollen, her nose in particular was corrected and braced. She had a mask worn over her face providing her with oxygen, but her breathing was rough and slow. Most of her hair had been burned away by the flames as well.

She didn’t deserve this. No matter what timeline.

Alright. I can do this. For him, and for Coralis.

Commit.

I floated over her body, coming to a stop above her chest. I placed a hand over her heart, another on the side of her face, and touched my forehead to hers. A well of energy rose up within me and I expelled it through the points of contact. Waves of green energy pour out of me and into the human girl, doing what human medicine could never dream of accomplishing. During this process—which lasted mere seconds—a curious side effect occurred; the sound of a single bell tolling.

Oh lords above…

I broke contact and fell backwards onto the bed, unable to keep myself aloft with my wings. When was the last time I’d done that? My head was spinning…

“Her room is right here…”

Iruni’s voice ripped my attention away from myself just before the doorknob finished turning.

I popped back outside, just on the other side of the wall to Kate’s room. I could hear their shocked voices.

“Kate? Dad’s here now— Kate!”

His sister groaned and woke up, her voice muffled by the oxygen mask, “Where am I? What happened to me?”

“Katelyn, honey?”

“Dad!”

No doubt they’ll be scrambling for answers now.

I tried my luck and peeked around the corner into the room. Iruni had gone and ran for a nurse while Bruce Thomas comforted his confused and daughter. Tears of relief were always bittersweet. It would’ve been better if none of this had occurred, but it did. Nothing I can do can change that now.

When Iruni returned with a nurse who didn’t believe a word he had just told her, I caught his attention like I had back in Goldenrod City. A simple mental nudge, but he recognized it instantly.
His eyes snapped to mine just outside the window. For one tense moment we stared at one another, both of us unsure what the other would do next. I only had one thing to say:

‘You’re welcome.’

I teleported away before he could respond.

That was too close.

But he needed to know it was me.

He needed to understand that I’m on his side, and that I need him on mine.

And now, I’ve learned something; always check his future after I’ve left him.

Let’s see, where do we stand now?

…

To Be Continued…
It was an agonizingly slow elevator ride, and as much as he wanted it to be over, Iruni Thomas knew something much worse awaited him and his father. He could imagine just how his father would react when he saw the state Kate was in. He had gone through the same ordeal himself, after all, and dreaded seeing his father experience it.

*This is worse than telling him over the phone.*

Iruni leaned back against the wall as he ascended from the ground floor of the hospital. He had just met his father for the first time since resurfacing from his time in the strange underground tunnels beneath Johto. It should have been a joyous occasion, celebrating Iruni’s good health and being thankful a greater misfortune hadn’t befallen him.

However, neither of them could even think of celebrating at the moment. Earlier that day, a sudden and powerful fire had broken out in Katelyn Thomas’s apartment building, leaving her hospitalized with terrible burns and other injuries.

Despite being very late in the evening, Iruni’s father had made the trip from Mahogany Town to Saffron City without a second thought. Concern for his daughter radiated from him.

“Did you see anything that might’ve caused the fire?” asked his father.

Iruni had already been asked this question—by the police, the fire department, and his father once before—but he answered anyway.

“No. Everything was fine when we left earlier this morning, and we were gone for a while,” he said, looking down at the Sneasel and Houndour at his feet—the only Pokémon he had that really knew Kate. “No one knows anything.”

“Did the doctors say when Kate might wake up?” asked Bruce.

“They said it was too soon to tell; she was in and out of consciousness while they were treating her, but she’s been out ever since. They said they might have a better idea in the morning.”

The elevator doors chimed as they opened, revealing the fourth floor of the hospital. Iruni led his father and Pokémon to the nurse’s station and let them know they were here to make a quick visit, then proceeded onward toward his sister’s room in the intensive care wing.

“Bart.” His father used his first name, giving the impending sentence more weight and importance than usual, “What you did today was… great and terrible at the same time.”

“I know.”

“I mean it!” Bruce pressed but kept his voice low for the other patients. “You just came back from your own life-threatening experience. I almost lost both of my children today because you ran into a fire without waiting for the proper people to take care of it. You need to be more careful.” He stopped his son and hugged him. “Of course I’m glad you ran in to save your sister… I couldn’t be more proud of you or more thankful you saved her. But I can’t stand the thought of losing either of you.”
“I know…” Iruni hugged back. “We’re safe though. Kate’s alive, I’m alive, and all our Pokémon made it and are all healthy. I’m focusing on that, because if I don’t I’m afraid I’m not going to be able to handle everything that’s happened.”

Being as late in the day as it was meant only a few hospital staff were in the halls, leaving an eerie silence surrounding them. They continued down the hallway, each step toward their destination echoing through the quiet building, carrying on behind their conversation in flat repetition.

“If you need to take a break, I understand,” suggested Bruce. “Come home, relax, and recover.”

“I can’t do that,” Iruni said. “But thanks. It’s good to know you’re there if I need you, really.”

As the group turned their last corner, Iruni heard a sound similar to the chime the elevator made when opening its doors, but they had walked too far away to have heard it. The sound of a single bell rung out through the hallway, low and clear. He looked down and saw his Pokémon had heard it too; both Rikalia and Karros were looking around for the source, but neither could seem to place it.

“Might’ve been the hospital’s intercom acting up…” Iruni dismissed. He walked a few paces faster than his father to open the right door. He reached out for the knob, “Her room is right here…”

Iruni pushed the door open gently, walking into the room, “Kate? Dad’s here now—” The sight waiting for him on the bed sent shivers up his body. Kate looked great, perfectly healthy and uninjured. Even more, she looked like she was simply waking up from a deep sleep. “Kate!”

Her brother’s loud voice shook the last remnants of grogginess from her in an instant. Kate’s eyes opened wide with confusion and surprise.

“Where am I?” her words were muffled slightly by the oxygen mask she had been wearing. She had needed to wear it to ease her troubled lungs, though it hardly seemed necessary now. “What happened to me?”

“Katelyn, honey?” Bruce asked as he pushed into the room. Relief washed over his face as a smile spread wide across his aging features.

“Dad!”

Iruni told Rikalia and Karros to stay in the room as he turned and ran out of it. The slow and heavy walk from the nurse’s desk before flew by in a few seconds at the speed his legs carried him. The evening shift staff all looked up from their tasks at the frantic looking young man that ran up to them.

“Someone, please come quick! My sister is alright!” He needlessly pointed in the direction of her room, as if any of the nurses needed directions. “Katelyn Thomas, burn victim, intensive care? She’s fine!”

“She is in stable condition, yes,” a nurse said, trying to get Iruni to lower his voice. “That’s how she was declared a few hours ago.”

“No, she’s all better! She’s fine! Completely! I know how this sounds, but just come see!”

“She shouldn’t even be awake,” the nurse said, standing.

Iruni hurried her along and showed her into Kate’s room, who was trying her best to undo the bandages on her arms.

“Oh my goodness!” she said, rushing inside.
Iruni followed her in a few steps before stopping dead in his tracks. Something had just touched his mind.

Something he recognized.

Along with the presence was the general location, as if to say “Look over here!”.

Taking the hint, Iruni turned his head to look out the window to the right of Kate’s bed. There, just on the other side of the glass, four stories up, was Celebi.

The two held each other’s gaze for a tense moment. Iruni tried to make sense or her appearance here, but soon pieced things together when Celebi sent him a single, short message with her telepathy.

‘You’re welcome.’

‘You! You did this?’ He tried to respond but she had already disappeared by the time the thoughts formed in his head.

“This is incredible! I can’t believe what I’m seeing!” The nurse had completed a short exam of Kate to confirm her sudden change in condition. “I’m going to get the on-call doctor, please stay put!”

“I’m—!” Iruni blurted out, unsure of what to even say. His father, sister, and Pokémon all looked at him. “I’m going to call the police! They’ll want to hear what you have to say about the fire, right?”

“Oh, you bet,” said Kate. “I know what happened.”

“Great!”

Iruni turned on the spot and ran down the hallway again, taking the stairs this time to reach the ground floor. He heard a pair of clawed paws following him as he rounded the corners of the staircase.

“Iruni, wait!” Rikalia yelled for him. She didn’t need him to wait—she could easily catch up to him—she was more confused at his actions than anything. “Where are you going? Can’t you call them in the room?”

On the main floor of the hospital now, Iruni ran outside onto the sidewalk. He turned around a few times, looking both ways and even up into the air.

“Come on, then!” Iruni yelled into the night air. “You want to talk? You want to butt in more, huh? Come on! Let me thank you properly!”

His Sneasel grabbed and tugged his hand, trying to get his attention. “Hey! What’s going on?”

“I’m right here, dammit! Come on!”

He stood still, fists clenched, breathing hard and fast. Iruni looked around the street, up in the trees, in the sky, but saw nothing.

“Gone… Dammit!” Iruni punched the air with his free hand, his frustration getting the better of him. “She’s doing it again.”

“What?”

“Celebi…” he said, defeated. Iruni knelt down on the sidewalk next to his Sneasel, holding her paw gently. “She’s the one who healed Kate. I told her to stop going behind my back and interfering with
things, but now she’s involving my family, Rika! Even after she said she would stop…”

“Why are you even considering work with her then?” asked the Sneasel. She gripped Iruni’s hand tighter, “I read what you said in your journal. I wouldn’t stand it if someone kept manipulating my life just to get something done.”

“I don’t like how she’s going about handling this,” Iruni said. He paused, letting out a defeated sigh, “But, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to help her. That guy we met in Blackthorn, Coralis, do you remember him?”

“Yeah, you mentioned she did something to him, right?”

Iruni nodded, letting go of Rikalia’s paw and petting her head, more for his comfort than hers. “He’s in a much worse place than we are because of a mistake she made. I’m apparently the only one she could go to for help, but she won’t even be open and talk to me about anything.”

“I still don’t understand what it is she can do,” Rikalia said, “or what she’s done, but you’ve got me with you to help. You don’t have to do this alone anymore.”

“I know…” Iruni rubbed her head again. “Thank you for being patient with me. Not like I deserve it.” He stood and pulled his PokéGear from his pocket and dialed the number for the Saffron City police department. “I’ll explain everything soon, Rika. I swear.”

[CONFIDENTIAL DOCUMENT]

[SAFFRON CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT]

[TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS STATEMENT]

CRIMINAL INCIDENT IN QUESTION: ARSON (Case: 0637 Type: AI)

DATE OF INCIDENT: 5/25/2000

DATE OF STATEMENT: 5/25/2000

STATEMENT OF: Katelyn May Thomas (Age: 21 Born: 9/12/1979)

STATEMENT FOLLOWS:

Okay, so I was in my apartment—it was mid-afternoon, I think—and I was making a meal for my Dratini. She has to have a special diet to help with her scale shedding. She’s developed a condition because we’ve kept her unevolved for space reasons.

Anyway, there was a knock at my door and I thought it was my brother over there coming back from his gym battle. He was staying with me while he was in town.

So, I open the door without a second thought, and there was this tall man—he had short orange hair, but he had a hat on. He said he was from building maintenance—he was wearing a uniform like them anyway. He said there had been reports of damage through the building by some Pokémon, and wondered if any of mine had gotten lose lately. He asked specifically if I had a Dratini and asked to see her. I don’t know why.

I told him no, but he wouldn’t leave. It’s not maintenance’s job to handle that sort of thing. He barged his way in despite me trying to keep him out.
He started asking about other things—something that happened back before I even moved here—which was creepy, so I started to try and push him out of the apartment. He grabbed my arm and twisted it, asking his questions again. He told me not to scream for help and he just wanted information.

He asked about my Dratini and where we had been back in January this year. He asked about some time when I apparently saw some guy in a trench coat and what we spoke about—which didn’t happen, by the way. I told him over and over I didn’t know the guy, but he wouldn’t leave.

So I punched him in the face.

It knocked his hat off but he didn’t seem hurt by it.

But without his hat I recognized him.

It was—and I am not kidding—Dalton Drake. Yeah. Ex-Elite Four member Dalton Drake. Unova. He let go of my arm and picked up his hat, and looked like he was getting ready to leave, but… I was stupid and said I knew who he was.

I told him I would call the police about him harassing me, but he turned around and shut the door to my apartment. Before I could call my Pokémon for help, it was like I blacked out for a second. I guess he punched me as hard as he could, because suddenly I was lying on the floor with a bloody nose and my face felt like I had ran head-first into the wall. I did see him reel back and kick me in the stomach though. That hurt.

Things got really fuzzy after that.

I couldn’t hear him very well, but I heard something like a Poké Ball opening. It looked like a big moth with six wings. It started to catch everything on fire, but I blacked out not too long after that.

Oh, I have an Espeon, she could give you a statement, yeah. They’re being kept at the gym right now. My Pokémon were in another room at the time, they apparently found me in the fire and tried to help me as best they could until my brother showed up.

He had a Drapion to help. And—Oh. That’s right. My Dragonair got us all out.

END STATEMENT.

REPORTING OFFICER(S):

1. FLYNN #7980
2. BENNETT #4541

Kate sat silently on the hospital bed, watching the pair of police officers finish up the paperwork for her testimony.

“I’m really sorry about Azula,” her brother said. “It was the only thing I could think of at the time, and we had to hurry.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “Really. She was itching to evolve, literally. That Everstone was really bothering her.”

“Miss,” one of the officers spoke up. “I don’t know if it will be relevant to the case or not, but why
might Mr. Drake have thought you met this specific man on a particular day in January?"

“I honestly don’t know,” Kate said. “He must’ve mistaken me for someone who did though.” She glanced at her brother, who sat with a Sneasel in his lap and a Houndour to his side. “I never really took my Dratini on walks in the winter because of the snow.”

She saw Iruni’s face flash with concern, but the police were focused on her.

“Anything else?” she asked.

“I don’t believe so. The hospital hasn’t told us when they plan to release you, but when they do, we would like to speak with your Espeon for a few details between you losing consciousness and your brother arriving. Eye-witness reports verify most of what happened after that. Thank you for your help identifying the suspect.”

The police left the hospital room, leaving the Thomas family alone.

“Dad, can you close the door?” she asked.

Doing as she asked, Bruce got to his feet and shut the door to the hallway. Once the door closed completely, Kate leaned out of her bed and pulled her brother out of his chair to grab his attention. The Sneasel that had been sitting on his lap fell to the floor from the sudden movement.

“Talk!” she hissed in a loud whisper. “And don’t tell me you haven’t pieced it together!”

“Katelyn, be careful. That’s his bad arm.” Her father moved to the other side of the bed, gently putting a hand on her shoulder. “Calm down, please honey.”

“My Pokémon and I almost died in a fire because someone thought I was him!” Kate accused. “Don’t tell me to be calm! Tell me why!”

“I don’t know, okay!” Iruni said, pulling free. He looked at his sister, then to his father, and then to the two confused looking Pokémon on the floor next to him. “I swear, I don’t.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I told the police Dalton’s name right away to distract them from the details, but do you know who the man was that Dalton was asking about? It was Giovanni. As in leader of Team Rocket, Giovanni, Iruni. That’s who you met that day at the lake!”

“Pryce did seem concerned at your description of him,” Bruce mentioned. “You’re sure that’s who he was asking about?”

“Yes. He practically laid out the events just like Iruni told them back then,” Kate said, glaring at her brother. “Only he thought it was me and Azula who were there.”

Iruni sat back down in the chair, now the center of attention in the room. His Sneasel put her claws on his leg, saying something Kate couldn’t understand. “It was before I found you, before that heavy snowfall.” Iruni told his Sneasel a short summary of that day. “It’s odd; he mentioned Team Rocket and even himself when he spoke to me, but I didn’t think that’s who he was. At the time, I didn’t think anything of that guy really. I was just glad to get home.”

“Why would someone like Dalton Drake be looking for you just because you happened to speak to Giovanni?” asked Kate.

“I have no idea. I don’t know who this Dalton guy is or why he wants anything to do with Giovanni. Really.”
“Bullshit. You said yesterday you had things that were bothering you—You wouldn’t tell me, Ruby, or even your own Pokémon! Then, here comes some crazy pyromaniac ex-Elite Four looking for one of the most notorious criminals in the region’s history, and he just so happens to be asking about the time you happened to meet him! What is this about?”

“Bart, please,” said Bruce. “This isn’t the time for secrets anymore.”

“This has to do with what you had to see Sabrina about, doesn’t it?” Kate asked.

Iruni sat in quiet thought for a moment, his Pokémon urging him to go on with what was on his mind.

“It might.” Iruni finally said. “No, I’m sure it does.” He looked up at the rest of them. “Look, there is a lot that I don’t know, but there’s too much lining up to be coincidence.” He told Rikalia and Karros to hop up onto Kate’s bed. “You two have been with me the longest, so you deserve to hear the explanation too—I’ll tell the others, don’t worry. Something I learned today lines up with everything else, so it’s hard to think it’s not all connected. Alright, I guess to start, I have… Iruni took a deep breath, “been visited by a Celebi; the time-traveling Legendary Pokémon.”

“…What?” Kate said, disbelief obvious on her face.

“Be serious, Bartholomew!” Their father admonished. “These are dangerous criminals!”

“I am serious!” he yelled back. “Celebi is the one who made me disappear for almost two months. She’s been interfering in my life so that I can help her save her friend. She says she needs my help to bring her friend back to his proper place in time. I still don’t know what I have to do, but she says I’m the only one who can help her.”

“How do you expect us to believe this?” Bruce asked.

Iruni gestured to his sister.

“Look. Celebi healed her, I assume so I could move on and not be stuck here worrying about her getting better. She even admitted to it to me! That’s why I ran out of here earlier, to try and find her.”

Rikalia spoke up, forgetting the other humans couldn’t understand her. “Tah maya otta naya. Nyah rette.” Her words sounded supportive of her trainer, agreeing with what he was saying. Karros nodded as well.

“Believe me, I know how this sounds… but there’ve been strange things proven in the world before. Hoenn had their deities rise up and cause that mess for all the world to see a few years ago, remember that? Well, Johto has myths too,” Iruni offered.

“He’s not wrong there, Dad,” Kate said. “Sabrina has first-hand experience with Pokémon of ‘Legendary’ status… Hey, is that why you came here?” she asked her brother.

“Yep.” He pet his Sneasel’s head, “I blew my first gym match with her just to have a private psychic conversation about Celebi because I knew she might have at least some knowledge about her. I needed advice on what to do, where to go. She told me that Giovanni, old Team Rocket leader, once had plans to use Celebi’s time travel powers, and that if I needed to know more, she told me to meet with his son.”

“What you need to do is stop putting yourself outside of your own depth,” Bruce warned. “I take it you had no choice being stuck in those tunnels, but time travel? Dealing with violent men like Dalton and Giovanni? No, no more. You’re coming home and I’m going to keep you safe, both of you,” he
looked to his children. “We’ll leave the country if we have to. You can’t be getting involved with things like this.”

“Dad, I’ve already agreed to help Celebi get him home,” Iruni explained. “I have to do this. No one else can.”

“Then no one will! I can’t sit by and let my son risk his life over and over again!”

“If I don’t do anything, then eventually more and more people will get caught up in Celebi’s mess, just like Kate! We can only assume the worst, but we know Giovanni had plans for Celebi in some way, and if this Dalton guy’s looking for Giovanni, then he’s might have similar plans. Coralis—the guy that got stuck here in our time—needs to get back home before anyone else gets hurt.”

“And when you get hurt? Or killed? What happens then?”

“Na nyara tareh kah!” Rikalia responded, flexing her claws defiantly and taking a stance in front of her trainer.

“See?” Iruni said. “I’m not alone in this. I have my Pokémon with me.” Iruni got up from his chair and stood at the foot of Kate’s hospital bed, his Pokémon standing in front of him. He rubbed his Sneasel and Houndour’s heads, “These two got me to Newbark Town, where we met Atanya and Kreen. I was just given Hadarah, my Drapion, but he’s already shown he’s a valuable member of my team. With their help, we can handle it.”

“I don’t like it,” said Bruce.

“Neither do I, but this entire situation has been going on outside of my control since the very beginning, and I need to get a handle on it. I know what I’m dealing with, at least in a broad sense. I told Kate yesterday and I’ll say it again; If I can’t handle it—I mean really can’t handle it—then I’ll get help. That’s what I’m doing right now. I have a chance to get some real help from someone who might know something.”

Kate watched as her father met Iruni’s determined gaze head on, “You shouldn’t be risking your life for people you don’t know… but I’m proud to have a son who will. What do you know about Giovanni’s son, since you plan on meeting him?”

“I know he hates his father,” Iruni said. “He’s historically been anti-Team Rocket and has been actively looking for Giovanni since his disappearance. Sabrina told me a few other bits, but I think he’s trustworthy.”

“Promise me,” Bruce put a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Promise me and your sister right now. Promise us that if you can’t handle this, you come home. Don’t look for help or another way to fix things, just come home. Be done with it.”

“I can’t leave this unfinished, Dad.” Iruni looked away from his father. “Coralis deserves to go home to his family.”

“Well what do we deserve?” asked Kate. “Did I deserve losing everything I own and nearly dying because we can sometimes look alike?”

“No,” said Iruni, shaking his head. “Of course not. But this is just… how things have to happen. If I go against what Celebi wants, you guys could be dragged into this again. I have to… We have to do what we can on our own to fix things.” Iruni stepped back from the bed away from his father’s reach. “Even though he hates her, Coralis wants the same thing Celebi does; for him to go home. I’m sure we can get him to work together with us too if we figure out how to fix this.”
“You… really won’t drop this?”

“No, I won’t,” Iruni said.

“Then, promise us you’ll be careful at least.” Kate held out her arms, waving for her brother to come and give her a hug. “There’s dangerous people looking for the same thing you are,” she held her brother tight. “Make sure you don’t cross any of their paths.”

“Don’t forget,” Bruce spoke up. “You have people you can rely on, even if it isn’t us.”

“That’s what I’m counting on,” Iruni said. “I promise, I’ll be careful.”

“Everything is alright,” said Allan.

The sun was still climbing into the sky above southeastern Johto, but without much of a breeze or cloud cover, the air had already become warm. The weather left a sense of unease that lingered on the mind.

[“Are you sure, honey?”] His mother’s voice came from the speaker clearly, but was preceded by a short delay. [“You’ve been through so much, no one would—”]

“I’m fine,” Allan said, more pressing. “Umari, Xutan, Duncan; we’re all good.”

[“That’s what I want to hear,”] his father’s voice came over the phone. [“You get that third badge yet?”]

“Not yet,” Allan sat down in the shade of a tree, letting his silver-furred Eevee hop into his lap. “I’m still a bit shaky after what happened.”

[“Take your time,”] his mother said. [“Don’t push yourself too much, Allan.”]

“I won’t.”

[“And we’re sorry we can’t get home right now.”] she continued. [“There’s something happening in Unova right now and they’re restricting travel—”]

“Look, I get it!” He surprised himself with how he raised his voice. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell.”

[“It’s okay, we know you’re upset. You’ll do fine, like you always do.”]

[“Your birthday’s coming up,”] his father said. [“We’ll probably be stuck here until after then, but we sent you a gift already. It should be at the house by then.”]

“What’d you get me?” Allan caught himself smiling at the lighthearted question.

[“Let’s just say—”] his father started.

[“—We thought your three little ones might be getting lonely,”] his mother finished.

“Oh, you guys…” Allan shook his head. “Thanks. I’ll take good care of them once I get home.”

[“M-Make sure to wait and pick it up if you get there before it arrives!”]
“Well, yeah. I wouldn’t just let some Pokémon sit in its ball,” Allan tried to ignore the look Umari shot him just then.

[“Well, it’s getting pretty late here,”] his mother said. [“If you need anything, even just to talk, let us know, okay honey?”]

“Yeah, mom. I will.”

[“Good luck in your next gym battle, Allan. We’re rooting for you.”]

“Thanks.”

Allan hung up the call and let his arm fall down to his side. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the trunk of the tree, trying to quiet his anxious mind. In the days since, the events that transpired inside the Ilex Forest had been playing on infinite repeat in his head. Any new story or news report about the catastrophe was quickly dissected and added to the collection of facts and figures he had gathered up.

Something was pulling him back toward the forest. A strange urge—almost an instinct—kept Allan from challenging Whitney for her badge and moving on from Goldenrod City. As the days went by, however, Allan could not find the answer as to why, or what, was drawing him to such a source of danger and bad memories.

Something soft pushed against his cheek, first from the left and then from the right.

‘Are you really okay?’ Umari asked, her front paws on his chest.

Allan opened his eyes, blinking from the bright sunlight streaming through the leaves of the tree.

‘Did you hear me?’

“I did, yeah,” he said, petting her head. “I’m just… still trying to process everything that happened. How something could go so wrong…?”

‘Don’t worry about it so much,’ said Umari. ‘It’s in the past now. It can’t hurt us.’

“It’s not that easy! I can’t just leave this the way it is! Something still feels wrong!”

‘I’d be worried if you thought it felt right,’ Umari teased him. ‘It’s alright, Allan. You don’t have to be okay with everything right away.’

“It’s not that,” Allan said. “It’s like I keep missing something… something not adding up…”

‘I can help, can’t I?’

“I’m not—” Allan stopped what he was saying. “Help…”

‘With what?’

“No!” Allan stood up, setting Umari down on the ground. “Someone needs our help! Come on!”

Allan and Umari ran down the beaten path of Route 34, a new wind blowing at their backs, toward the northwestern entrance of Ilex Forest.

“I was going over everything in my head,” Allan said as they ran. “Reports of people going into the forest and not coming out. Their bodies being found… There’s some still unaccounted for, and one
of them is calling for help!"

‘I don’t hear anyone.’

“It’s not their voice, it’s their emotions. Their fear and desperation; I can feel it and it’s close!”

The trainer and his Eevee continued along the dirt road, looking for the source of the disturbance Allan had felt. At the top of a hill, the two looked out toward the tree line of the menacing forest. The wind blew from the sea to the west, whipping the limbs of the trees and sending leaves into the air. Tall grass waved in time with the gusts.

“This… feels big.”

‘What is it?’

“Something— a huge presence is in there…” Allan closed his eyes, focusing on what he felt. “It’s aggressive. Hunting, maybe.” He looked down when he heard Umari let out a low growl. She had her eyes shut tight, as if she were mimicking her trainer. He smiled, despite the looming sense of danger. “Do you feel anything, Umari?”

‘No… just you.’

“Consider yourself lucky, then.” Allan looked back to the restless trees ahead of him. “It’s not just odd how big it is—it’s that I can’t even tell what it is. It feels like one being one second and then a hundred smaller minds all thinking the same thing the next…”

The trainer and Pokémon walked down the hill slowly, carefully making their way closer to the edge of the forest.

“How could someone have survived in there all this time?” Allan wondered.

‘Wait!’ Umari told him. ‘I can hear something now!’ The silvery Eevee ran off into the forest, her large ears picking up sounds her trainer couldn’t.

As he followed her, Allan could feel the strange mental presence getting closer, but also two smaller and more defined minds. A faint buzzing in the air gradually increased as they made their way into Ilex Forest and metallic clangs could be heard in the distance. Focusing his mind so far away from his immediate surroundings, Allan didn’t fully notice the person he was trying to help until they ran right into him.

He kept his balance, holding the young girl in his arms, and recognized her right away; Valerie, the girl with the Growlithe that Allan had been assigned to escort through Ilex Forest. She carrying her faithful Pokémon in her arms, it seemed unconscious.

“You’re alright!” he said, smiling. Allan bent down to the younger girl’s height, trying to calm her down. “Valerie, right? It’s me, Allan Relmstead.”

Valerie tried to pull from Allan’s grip, “Let me go! They’ll catch up!”

‘Allan? What are those?’

Turning around, Allan first saw one, then many red glowing lights in the distance. The large mental presence was now focused directly on him.

“Something bad,” he said. “Come on, we’re getting you to safety.”
Allan stood and guided Valerie out of the forest as fast as he could, Umari helping find their way without getting lost in the dark trees.

“I’ve been lost for days,” said Valerie. “Growlithe kept me safe as long as he could, but… When I ran into those things there were just too many.” She held her Pokémon tightly in her arms. “They took his Poké Ball.”

“What are they?”

As if to answer his question themselves, two of the red orbs flew past the humans and hovered in front of them. Surrounding the red glowing light was hard and metallic flesh, rotating on a joint that connected to a three-clawed limb. The two eyes scrutinized the party before zipping back behind them.

“Beldum.”

“They had us surrounded, but then it seemed like something was distracting them, and that’s when I made my escape.”

’Was that because you tried to read them with your mind?’ Umari asked Allan.

“Possibly. That means they might be mad at me spoiling their hunt.”

Allan hurried Umari and Valerie along, reaching the open field as fast as they could.

“They move like one big creature,” the girl told him. “They hit hard and move around you so you can’t escape. I don’t know what I did to them…”

“Probably just territorial… I don’t think they— Never mind that,” Allan pointed up the hill Umari and he had walked down earlier. “From up there you’ll see the road that leads to Goldenrod. Go, hurry!”

“But, what about you?” she asked. “You can’t beat those things!”

“That doesn’t matter right now!” Allan clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white. “Look, back in the forest, I ran away and abandoned the people I said I would protect! Not again, not anymore. They’ll follow us both of us if we head to the city. You need to get safe.” He gently turned her toward the hill, “Go on, I’ll take this from here.”

“I… Thank you!” she turned and ran away up the hill. “Don’t die, okay?!”

“We’ll try,” he said, mostly to himself. Once Valerie slipped from view, Allan turned to face the incoming threat from inside the forest.

’What should we do?’ Umari asked.

“We’re making sure she gets to safety like I should have done in the first place.”

’But what about us?’

“We’ll—”

A single Beldum shot out from the tree line and crashed into Allan’s chest, knocking him off his feet and falling to his back.

’Allan!’
While the trainer struggled to breathe, the single Beldum flew back away from its prey. It was joined by another, and then two, four, sixteen, soon more than a hundred metal arms and eyes floated in the open air. The mass of eyes and claws closed in together, moving with single purpose and rhythm, forming a large limb to strike down Allan where he lay.

Umari tackled him out of the way of the strike, but now a wall of angry metal arms separated her from her trainer.

“Umari—…” Allan struggled to get to his feet, still having trouble catching his breath. He ran at the many Beldum, trying to force his way through their ranks, but they knocked him back to the ground. “Return!”

Allan tried recalling his Eevee into her Luxury Ball, but the Beldum blocked the signal.

“Fine,” he stood again, this time trying to focus his mind as a weapon to draw the Beldum away. “Come on!” his efforts managed to pull the attention of a few Beldum away from the mass, who flew at him with great speed. Allan dodged their attacks as best he could, the Beldum slamming into the dirt with their heavy bodies, but he took a few more blows to the shoulder and chest.

“Come on…” he tried to lead the Beldum away from his separated Pokémon, but he was running out of room to move. Behind him was a cliff that dropped off to the sea, ahead and to his right was Ilex Forest, and he had to give Valerie enough time to get to safety. “Come on!”

‘Allan, it's not working!’

Umari was now encircled by a dome of Beldum, the lone Eevee doing her best to avoid the individual attacks the swarm launched at her. Before long, two enemies began attacking at once, and taking a hit from one would leave her vulnerable to the next pair.

‘I can’t fight these things!’

“Return!” Allan tried again, but the outer wall of Beldum merely pulled the ball from his hand with their magnetism. “Like Valerie said… No!”

The entire swarm began to rotate around Umari, slowly closing in on the helpless Eevee. A single Beldum, one larger than the others, singled itself out from the group, landed on her back and pinned her to the ground.

‘I can’t get up!’

“No…” Allan shook with fear. The same fear he had felt when he watched an innocent little boy stand between a mother Tyranitar and her child. He felt powerless in the face of overwhelming strength.

You can do the impossible.

The words drifted through his mind, a memory from before Allan let his fear take control of him.

Umari’s words.

“No! No more!” Allan held a hand out toward Umari, “I can do the impossible! Umari, bite its eye! Now!”

Doing as she was told, the shiny Eevee struggled under the large Beldum’s weight, turning over and biting its red eye as hard as she could. The pain sent it recoiling off of her, and the rest of the swarm
reacted in kind, compromising the structure of the dome.

Allan pushed his psychic abilities past their limits in order to attempt something he had never done before. He grabbed his Eevee with telekinesis and pulled her into his arms, safe from harm.

‘You did it! That was incredible! I thought you couldn’t use telekinesis?’

“I… I…”

Umari turned around in her trainer’s arms and gasped.

Allan stared off into the distance, blood streaming from his eyes, nose and ears.

“I think… I broke something…” he barely managed to speak. “My head… feels…”

‘Allan? Allan! Can you hear me?’

“I can’t… I…”

‘Allan! They’re getting back together! We have to do something!’

He tried to focus, but his vision was blurry and red. A buzzing bundle of red dots flew above him. Were those the Beldum? They were dangerous, he knew that much. They moved toward him, so Allan did all he could think of; walk backwards.

‘Allan! Stop! Look behind you!’

He couldn’t stop, he knew that. He had to keep Umari safe. Keep her away from the angry balls that hurt when they hit you.

Can’t go to the forest.

Can’t let the dots go to the city.

Can’t let Umari get hurt.

The other voice in his head called out to him again, but he couldn’t understand what it said.

It sounded scared.

One option.

Another step back. No more ground. The world disappeared.

Please live.

Sudden stop. Wet. The taste of salt.

Something pulling his shirt, that same scared voice.

———

“I think I’ve got it.”

Rikalia looked up from her chewing, quickly pulling her paw down from her mouth. She’d gotten lost on another train of thought again, worrying about their new objective. She looked down at the torn claw on her left hand, wincing at the state of it. She would have to fix it later.
Iruni had been focusing his attention on a new map he had bought earlier that morning. Save for what he had been carrying at the time, everything they had with them had been lost in the fire, so nearly everything had to be replaced. A brand-new backpack, new clothes, food, medicine, and supplies—it hadn’t been a cheap shopping trip.

“What do you think?” he asked her, standing up from the table they were seated at. They had taken a table in the busy Saffron Pokémon Center for themselves to plan the next leg of their travels. Iruni insisted on being where people could see him; the people that attacked Kate had done so when she was alone, and Iruni was betting that they weren’t bold enough to make a move in the public eye.

Karros was lying at their feet, doing his best to look asleep while he listened for any potential threats that might approach them in such a crowded place.

Iruni spun the map down on the table for Rikalia to see. “Saffron’s in an odd spot if you want to get to the western part of the region, which we do. There’s no direct route there; we either head north to Cerulean, then through the mountains to Pewter, then south to Viridian, or go all the way down to Fuchsia City to catch a boat to Pallet Town and head north from there.”

The Sneasel stood up on her seat and stared at the paper large paper map before her. She visualized the two potential journeys in her head, judging their distances across the land. Neither of the two seemed any better or faster than the other as far as she could tell. Rikalia leaned forward, putting her paws on the table as she poured over the map of the unfamiliar land.

“What’s that?” Iruni asked.

Before Rikalia could react, Iruni’s hand grabbed her paw. She nervously watched him examine the damage her teeth had caused.

“When did this happen?” he looked at her worriedly. “If you were hurt, you should’ve said something. We’re at the Center after all.”

“I… I just messed up trimming it,” Rikalia said, declining the offer.

“Is everything okay?” Iruni still held onto her paw. Rikalia simultaneously wanted to leave it there and pull it away.

“I just feel so powerless!” Rikalia yelled before reluctantly breaking eye contact. Sitting back down in her seat, she closed her eyes, “I couldn’t do anything when we were trapped underground, I barely helped saving Kate from the fire, and now there’s Celebi and these people that are after you and I don’t think I can do anything to stop all this from happening!”

When she felt Iruni let go of her damaged paw, Rikalia expected a comforting pat on the head and some reassuring words. Instead, she was picked up from her seat and pulled into his arms.

“It’s okay,” Iruni told her. “It’ll all be okay.”

“How?” she asked, her face pressed against his neck. “I can’t do anything!”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, setting her back down in her seat. Karros abandoned his post to show his concern as well. “You’ve done plenty; everything you could have done, you did it.”

“I know, I just want us to go back to how things were,” she raised a claw and dragged it gently across the wound on Iruni’s forehead. “Before… she came into our lives, you know? I hate this… sense of danger hanging over us now. I miss us just traveling, seeing new places, meeting new people, fighting battles…”
“I miss it too,” said Iruni. “You know, watching you fight Sabrina’s Meditite helped me forget all about Celebi. Even if it was just for a little while.”

“Well?”

“Yeah,” Iruni smiled. “It was really, really, nice to get that off my mind. And that was thanks to you, Rika. You were strong and fierce yesterday, and I’m going to need that strength if we’re going to want to get through all of this.”

The Sneasel nodded, wiping her face with her paws. “Okay.”

“Good,” Iruni rubbed her head. “Because, there’s something we have to do that you might not like.”

“What is it? I already don’t like that we have to help because she says so.”

“Well, also because Coralis deserves to be brought home.” Iruni stood and turned back to the map still spread across the table. “Both of the obvious routes to Viridian are long and time consuming. So, I thought, how about something off the beaten path?”

Rikalia watched Iruni point to a small mark on the map south of where they were.

“What wouldn’t I like about… oh,” her eyes narrowed at the name her trainer was pointing to. “Do we have to?”

“It’s really our best bet. Trainers use it all the time, it’s a much more direct route to that part of the region, and it’ll be good to keep my eyes out of the sun for a little while,” he explained.

“But… underground?” Rikalia glared at the words “Diglett’s Cave” on the map one more time.

“Fine,” she said as she held up her gauntleted arm. “But I’m staying with you. The. Whole. Time.”

“What?” Iruni asked, looking down to his Houndour. “Watching Azula yesterday made me realize it, but none of you guys have evolved yet. How about we work on that?”

A weight pressing on his stomach woke him up.

Allan coughed and coughed, spitting up water and blood onto the dirt. He gasped for air, rolling onto his side in agony. His head felt like it had been hit by a truck. Every movement, thought, or sound resulted in jolts of burning pain.

“Ah! Stop!”

A psychic touch to his injured mind felt like salt in a wound. He pushed himself up from the ground and backed away from whatever had touched his mind.

“Stop!” Allan clutched the sides of his head, hunching over in pain.

A gentle lick across his nose and a soft whine brought Allan back to reality.

He opened his eyes to see his Eevee, fur matted and wet, standing beside him in the dirt.
“You’re okay…” Allan stroked her fur with an unsteady hand. “You’re okay…”

“Ah, please!” Allan winced. “My head… really hurts from…” All at once his memory caught back up to him. The forest, the girl, the Beldum, “I used telekinesis…”

Umari nodded, pointing a paw up at the tree he had backed up against. A lone Natu was perched on one of the branches, looking down at his trainer.

“Xutan…” Allan stood. “I guess you helped get me to shore?”

The tiny bird shook itself side to side, denying the claim.

“Umari, you did it yourself?” he asked, kneeling down to her. “Thank you,” Allan slowly pulled her into a hug. “I save you, then you save me… thank you.”

His Eevee nuzzled his face, mewling softly in his ear.

Setting Umari down next to him, Allan pulled his PokéGear from his pocket, glad that it was still there at all. The map showed they were nearly a mile south of Route 34’s main road, just inside—

“Ilex…” he said under his breath.

Allan took in his surroundings as best he could in the darkness. Much like his previous venture inside its borders, the tall trees of Ilex blocked nearly all traces of sunlight from reaching the ground below. They were in a small clearing of grass and shrubbery with dense forest all around them. The coast was close by, he could hear the waves, and he spotted the small path of broken foliage Umari must’ve dragged him through.

“You must be exhausted…” he said, petting her head.

Umari simply shook her head, putting a paw on Allan’s knee.

“I’m fine… or… will be.”

The Natu above tweeted a warning to his two companions on the ground.

“Beldum?” Allan asked.

A short chirp confirmed his worries.

“Damn.”

Umari whined, asking what they could do, Allan guessed.

“I…” Allan closed his eyes. The pain in his head made it difficult to think. “Alright… just let me… Yes, I got a plan.”

He called Xutan down from his branch and released his Exeggcute, Duncan, from his Safari Ball. Allan had to quickly quiet down the excitable bundle of eggs before their multiple minds tore his weakened one to shreds.

“Guys, we’re going strictly vocal for a bit, okay?” His three Pokémon—including all six of Duncan—nodded their heads. “Okay, these guys might’ve kicked our butts earlier, but now it’s time for payback. One of you, stay with me,” he pointed to Duncan, “The rest of you scatter yourself around
here, but keep even spacing and keep out of sight. Umari and Xutan, you too. Go hide.”

His Natu whistled at him inquisitively.

“I’m sick of taking losses.” Allan wiped his face as best he could with his soaked shirt. “We’re coming away from this with something to show for it.”

At their master’s words, the Pokémon took their positions around the small grassy patch of land. Allan stood up, picking up the lone egg of Duncan that stayed behind.

“Sorry I can’t explain the plan too detailed for you,” Allan said, knowing his other Pokémon could hear as well. “If we’re all thinking the same thing, the Beldum might catch on. My brain’s fried as it is, so they probably won’t figure it out.”

The egg in his arms frowned, rocking side to side.

“What? It’s a good plan, I swear.”

A rustling of tree branches heralded the arrival of the Beldum swarm. The formation was lead by the largest of them, as they slowly descended before Allan. Its eye was dim and flickering, still recovering from the hard Bite it had received from Umari. The swarm came to a halt a few feet from Allan, all eyes glowing and staring him down.

“Hey you guys,” Allan smiled. “Glad you could make it. Especially you, big guy.” He pointed to the main Beldum. “You broke off from your formation and hurt my Eevee. Makes me think you’re the boss of these guys around you. That right?”

The larger Beldum floated away from the shifting mass and met Allan’s gaze. It buzzed menacingly, as if challenging the human who stood before it.

“I know, I know, didn’t do much, did it?” Allan asked the leader of the swarm. “It wasn’t supposed to damage you,” Allan ducked down, covering his head. He yelled, “The rest of Duncan, Sleep Powder!”

The Exeggcute spat out a small brown seed from its mouth, striking the Beldum and releasing a white powder. The Iron Ball Pokémon recoiled slightly, rejoining its swarm. It twisted its eye back and forth while the rest of the Beldum also investigated their leader.

“I know, I know, didn’t do much, did it?” Allan asked the leader of the swarm. “It wasn’t supposed to damage you,” Allan ducked down, covering his head. He yelled, “The rest of Duncan, Sleep Powder!”

From out of the bushes and grass, and somehow from out of a tree, the five other Exeggcute eggs spat out clouds of blue powder at the mass of Beldum. They condensed and grouped together defensively in response to the ambush, but one by one, the Beldum began to fall to the dirt fast asleep.

All but one.

A few seconds after the last thud had met his ears, Allan stood and let the head of Duncan roll and rejoin the others.

The main Beldum looked around erratically at the rest of its group lying on the ground.

“Worry Seed,” Allan explained. “Makes you unable to fall asleep. I wanted you alone.”

Allan snapped his fingers and Umari leaps out from behind a tree, tackling the Beldum down to the
ground. The Eevee bit the hard steel body over and over.

"Xutan!" Allan pointed at the scuffle on the ground. "Ominous Wind!"

His Natu flew down from above and flapped his small wings, sending gusts of purple air down at the Beldum and harmlessly passing over Umari.

"Not so fun when you’re outnumbered, is it?" Allan yelled.

The Iron Ball Pokémon writhed in pain at each blast of ghostly wind, screeching a metallic cry.

"Let go!"

Umari jumped off the Beldum just as the Friend Ball hit it. The green and white sphere absorbed its target and rocked around on the ground for a moment, then went still.

"Gotcha…"

Allan sat back on the ground, letting go a breath he had been holding since throwing the Poké Ball. His Pokémon joined him on the grass, wondering if he was alright.

"Just need to rest," he said. Allan pointed at the remaining Beldum, "Look."

The members of the swarm, their leader now completely cut off from them, awoke at random and went on their own ways back into the forest. In their wake were various metal objects they had stolen from trainers.

"Guess the leader was the brains of the operation," Allan said. "They might not be so bad now."

"Easy, Umari," Allan said, petting her head. "Try and ‘whisper’ if you can, please."

His Eevee’s mental voice came to him at a much lower volume this time, ‘Sorry. Are you going to be okay now?"

"Yeah," he said, standing. Allan walked to the pile of objects and picked up Umari’s Luxury Ball, and another ball he assumed belonged to a girl and her Growlithe.

“I just need to practice telekinesis a bit before doing something like that again," Allan said. He raised a hand toward his new Beldum’s Poké Ball, trying to lift it with his mind, but he recoiled at the effort.

"Not today, though.” Allan walked over and picked up the Friend Ball, “Come on. Let’s go give Valerie her Poké Ball back.”

‘Does this mean we’re back to training now that we got a new teammate?’ asked Umari.

“One step at a time, Umari.” Allan started walking toward the shoreline, motioning for his Pokémon to follow.

“I need to get out of these clothes first.”
To Be Continued…

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A sharp, stabbing pain shooting up her arm jolted Rikalia awake. The Sneasel looked down at the claws on her right paw, both of which had been gnawed into misshapen, dull hooks. She could see streaks of red running through her white fur and taste blood in her mouth. Rikalia winced as she looked over the damage she had done to herself in her sleep.

*This is really bad … What did I do…?*

She sat up and noticed she was alone in the tent, so she got to work doing her best to clean and trim the claws on her right paw back to working order. Her other claws were of little help; they were still dulled from the last time her nervous habit had gotten the best of her. She carefully bit and tore off the loose bits of her ruined claws and licked the blood from her fur as best she could. Her efforts left her with thin, pale imitations of what used to be her claws. They would take some time to regrow on their own, but could be quickly mended if she were to be brought to a Pokémon Center for care.

*I can’t do that… he’ll know I did this to myself…*

From inside the tent, Rikalia could hear Iruni talking about her to someone else. “You guys can get to work once she wakes up.”

“Who else is up?” she asked herself.

She put on her armguard, double-checking that her ball was still locked in its socket, and stuck her head out of the tent. Rikalia saw Iruni pointing to his Pokédex, showing something to her first teammate, Karros. It was uncharacteristic of the Houndour to wake up before her, but he seemed very much alert and attentive to whatever Iruni was explaining to him.

*He must be taking this “evolving” thing seriously.*

“Our best time to leave will be in a few hours, so—” Iruni heard Rikalia step out of the tent and walk over next to him. “Good morning, Rika,” he said to her. “Sleep okay?”

“I guess,” she said, trying to keep her right hand out of his sight. Her night had been filled with many anxious and worried thoughts. She wasn’t sure when she had fallen asleep or how long she had actually slept for. “Any breakfast left?”

While she ate, Rikalia listened to Iruni explain his plans for their impending trip underground through what was known as “Diglett’s Tunnel”.

They were currently camped out on a stretch of land east of Vermilion City, lined with trees and tall grasses. The entrance to the underground passage was fairly close by, according to Iruni’s description, and the tunnel would lead them through the mountains to the other side of the region much faster than going around them. The trip was expected to take them five days, four of them spent entirely underground.

The thought of that brought unpleasant memories rushing back to Rikalia, and she couldn’t help but wonder why Iruni was being so insistent on this particular route. After all, he had experienced much more of the unforgiving dark underground than she had.

Beside her, Karros began sniffing her right paw as their trainer continued to talk, no doubt picking up
the scent of fresh blood that still clung to her fur. He stared at her with concern on his face, but she quietly told him to not bring it up.

“If we leave by ten o’clock, we’ll be right in the thick of it by noon,” Iruni said, now gesturing to a map of the cave system he had bought in town the previous day. The main path through the cave system was very long, but simple; it was mostly a straight shot from one entrance to the other. All around and intersecting with the main tunnel were smaller connecting pathways that burrowing Pokémon travel along. Iruni pointed to an intersection where many small paths branched off of the main underground road, “Around then is just about the time that Diglett and Dugtrio go to sleep for the day. That’ll be when we go hunting, Kar.”

“I’ll be there too,” Rikalia reminded him.

“Of course,” Iruni smiled. “You and Atanya will be with me while Kar takes the lead. He should be drawing the most attention, but if any little moles get past him, you two can send them packing.”

“But why aren’t I fighting with Karros at the same time?” she asked.

“I want to get as many of you guys evolved as soon as possible,” Iruni pointed to the lineup of the stowed Poké Balls attached to his belt, “and Karros is the closest. This is his time to shine, and Atanya’s next. I’d like it for the two of them to be evolved by the time we’re out of the tunnels.”

“When will it be my turn?” groaned Rikalia, annoyed she was put behind one of the newcomers in their group.

“That I don’t know, Rika. Sneasel evolve differently to how Houndour or Chikorita do; they do so after learning how to use a certain tool well enough.”

“What is it?” Rikalia sat forward and waited eagerly for his answer.

“The shed claw from another of your species,” Iruni told her. “It’s been observed in captivity and in the wild that Sneasel carry discarded sharp claws from their elders, and when they can use them as well as their own claws, they evolve into Weavile. The exact reasoning behind it isn’t fully understood, but…”

She had stopped listening halfway through his explanation, slumping down where she sat. His answer was something that was unattainable as far as she knew. If she had stayed with her family and her own kind, it would have been fairly easy to find a claw for herself. If she were still with them though, she wouldn’t be with her friends and human trainer, and despite the hardships and looming sense of worry she constantly felt, Rikalia couldn’t bring herself to think that she would be better off anywhere else.

“Hey,” Iruni got her attention back. “You okay?”

“What about…” she started, looking down at her paws. “Could I use one of my own?”

“I think there’s been evidence of solitary Sneasel evolving without a pack to give them a claw to practice with. How are your claws? Still taking good care of them?” he asked, trying to get a better look at his Sneasel’s hands.

“Yeah, they’re fine.”

“Then I don’t know what to tell you other than keep any that might fall off on their own,” he said, apologetically rubbing her head. “If we meet another trainer with a Sneasel or Weavile, maybe they can help us out.”
Iruni stood up and pulled a Poké Ball from his belt, releasing Kreen. The Pidgey took to the air and circled above the campsite.

“I’m going back into town for a little while to pick up some extra supplies, just in case,” he said. Iruni whistled for Kreen to come down and accompany him on his short errand. The Tiny Bird descended quickly, landing on the ground in front of his trainer.

“You won’t see much action underground,” he told his avian Pokémon, “so we’ll try and get some training done for you this morning while we’re out stocking up.” Kreen cooed and flew up and landed on Iruni’s shoulder, ready to go. “While we’re gone,” Iruni continued, looking back to the Dark types present, “the two of you should try and work together and figure out how to use your Dark Pulses like the other can.”

Rikalia was a bit surprised; she had forgotten that Iruni wanted her to even attempt such a thing. Thinking back on it however, she soon remembered why the prospect was put on hold. Not long after Karros had been taught Dark Pulse, they had fallen into the underground tunnels of the Ruins of Alph, and they hadn’t had a chance to try since.

Karros sat up straight and nodded sharply. “I won’t let you down,” he spoke firmly and adamantly.

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” Iruni said, petting Karros’ head. “Keep an eye on the camp while I’m gone. We’re still looking to leave by ten, so I’ll try and be back before then.”

With her left hand, Rikalia waved goodbye to her trainer as he walked down the road. Once Iruni was out of sight, she could feel a strange sense of unease crawl up her back, like something staring her down from behind. Before Rikalia could turn around to see what it was, her right hand was grabbed and lifted up, twisting her arm uncomfortably. She looked behind her to see Karros gripping her arm between his jaws, eying her right paw intensely before glaring at her and growling quietly.

“Ow— Hey! What’s the matter with you?” she pulled her arm from his jaws easily; he hadn’t been biting down hard at all. Rikalia hopped up to her feet, hiding her right hand behind her again.

“I’m perfectly fine, Rikalia, but what about you?” Her Houndour friend continued to stare her down, barking out his words fiercely and loudly. “Are you taking any of this seriously? At all?”

“What do you mean, ‘this’?”

He snarled louder, “I can’t believe this! Not from you!” Karros took a short step toward her, forcing the Sneasel to take a step back. “You know what’s going on as much as I do and you’re still determined to act like a selfish child. Look at yourself; you made Iruni go out and get you that ridiculous armor to make you feel better and you’re still ruining yourself by destroying your own claws.”

“Shut up, Kar! You don’t know what’s going on!”

“Yes I do,” he said, stepping toward her again. “And I’ll tell you this; it doesn’t matter. Not right now.”

“Wh—What?”

“I saw your face when you came out of the tent,” Karros sat down in front of Rikalia as he spoke, still staring intensely at her. “You were surprised to see me awake before you, weren’t you?”

She kept quiet. Karros was much more perceptive than she gave him credit for.
“I thought so. You want to know why I’m taking this training that Iruni’s planned out for me so seriously?”

“… Fine, why?”

“Because I feel weak and helpless.” He leaned forward, “Remind you of someone?”

Rikalia looked down, unfamiliar with being forced into a corner like this.

“I know how overwhelming this whole ‘Celebi’ business is. It makes you feel so small and powerless when you think about it. The difference is that I’m not turning to self-mutilation as some twisted way of coping with all of my worries. I’m trying to better myself and get stronger so I don’t feel that way anymore.” Karros huffed, his words hanging in the air for a moment before continuing. “And here you are, focusing on ‘you and him’ instead of the bigger picture.”

Her head snapped up and she locked eyes with the Houndour, “How do you know about that? Who told you?”

“You’re not exactly subtle, you know,” Karros said. “Look, I like you. I’ve liked you since Iruni took you in when he found you. Don’t take how hard I’m being on you right now as me hating you, because I don’t.” He lightly licked Rikalia on the cheek, “But please, try and put aside whatever feelings you might be having. They’re only going to complicate things and we all have enough to deal with right now.”

“I can’t just— stop, you know.”

“No, I bet you can’t. I don’t know how you feel, but I’ve seen how you act sometimes around him,” Karros said. “You’re going to have to focus on what matters right this second instead of what might happen in the future. If you don’t, we might not have a future.”

“But,” she protested, but then caught herself. As much as Rikalia didn’t like the idea, she couldn’t find any fault in his words. “Well, you know, it isn’t just Iruni that I’m always worried over…”

“Then you tackle each thing one at a time and don’t get stuck in your own head and make things worse. Ask for help too, why don’t you? You’ve never opened up to me about anything before. I can help. I want to help. I don’t want one of my teammates to be hurting and weakening themselves just because they’re trying to solve all of their problems alone.”

The Sneasel groaned, uncomfortable with hearing her faults being laid out in front of her. She raised her left paw to her mouth without thinking, but Karros slapped her hand down before she could chew on her still-recovering claws.

“Sorry, you’re right. I’ll try and… ask for help more often. Okay?”

“That’s better,” Karros nuzzled Rikalia lightly. “Come on, let’s try and train for a bit. If we both can get stronger, that’ll be one less thing to worry about.”

“What, just like that?” she asked curiously.

“We don’t have a lot of time before we leave for the tunnels, so yeah. Let’s do it.”

“You’re fine with training with me even if I’m,” she raised her right hand and showed off her overly-trimmed claws, “like this?”

“Of course,” Karros said. He got to his feet and motioned for Rikalia to follow him. “If you’re
training, you’re not biting your claws.”

“How should we start?”

The two of them walked a short ways away from the campsite, making sure that it was still in view. Karros told Rikalia to watch as he demonstrated an offensive Dark Pulse. Much like how she watched him do so before they fell into the Ruins, Karros built up a swirling ball of black and purple energy in his mouth and released it in a spiraling beam toward a tree’s trunk. The blast tore away at the bark and bored a few inches into the wood, sending splinters flying into the grass.

“Last time,” Karros said, wisps of Dark energy still clinging to his muzzle, “you tried but couldn’t make a damaging attack with your Pulse.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Rikalia, once again impressed by the damage that Karros’ attack could cause.

“Do you know what it feels like when I use it?” he asked her. “It feels like a great mass of frustration and fear building up in my throat, and when I can’t hold it back anymore, I let go and it comes rushing out of me.”

“Frustration and fear?”

“Yep. Pretty common feelings, but when they build up, they can be pretty powerful, can’t they?”

She frowned, “I get it.”

“That wasn’t a jab at you, but I guess it could apply to this. I mean, look at that tree,” he nodded in its direction. “I focused on everything bothering me right now and let it strengthen me.”

“Well, I feel those things all the time, so why can’t I use Dark Pulses?” Rikalia asked.

“Have you tried making it an attack?” Karros asked. “I mean, really tried?”

“Nnnn… I guess not.”

Rikalia turned toward the same tree Karros had used as his target and looked down at her paws. She focused on the dull claws on her left hand, then to the armguard she wore, and then to the freshly ruined claws on her right.

So much has been awful lately. The ruins, that gym battle, the fire, Celebi, my claws…

She shut her eyes, her thoughts beginning to spin out of control.

Fear … frustration…

She clenched her hands, extending her claws, and focused on gathering all of her bad thoughts into a single mass.

I have to … put aside… how I feel… but I don’t want to!

“Rikalia, that’s it!” she heard Karros cheer. “Keep going!”

When she opened her eyes, she saw the same swirling purple and black energy held in between her two paws, waiting to be released.

“Wh— What do I do?” She started to panic as the collected Dark energy started to lose its shape.
“Pick a target and let go!”

*Pick a target … pick a target…*

Before she could focus on a point ahead of her, the Dark Pulse ruptured and rippled out around her, sending waves of Dark energy out and down along the ground in a large radius. The Sneasel stood in place, her arms shaking a little bit from the effort.

“That felt weird,” she said finally. “Are you okay?”

Karros was standing in the same spot, cringing from the blast, but otherwise looked unharmed. Beneath him the grass was still healthy and green, unlike the rest that surrounded Rikalia, which had become black and gray.

“I’m fine,” he said, looking around. “That was weird.”

“That’s what I said! You felt that too?”

“No, not at all.” Karros moved to the side, looking down at the ground. “That’s the weird part.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you did it,” he began walking around the damaged ground. “You used the Pulse, but you released it all around you evenly instead of concentrated toward a single point. That’s actually pretty smart. I’ll have to remember to use it like that; I’ve been thinking of it like a Flamethrower. The weird thing is that I didn’t get hurt by it at all, even though I was in range. The ground underneath me wasn’t touched either.”

Rikalia thought about it, but couldn’t think of why such a thing would have happened.

“Can you even be hurt by it?” she asked. “We’re both Dark types.”

“Let’s find out.”

Karros gathered a small Dark Pulse and launched it at Rikalia suddenly, too quickly for her to dodge. The small beam struck her in the shoulder, sending her stumbling backward a few steps.

“Hey! That stung…” she rubbed her shoulder.

“Yes, and you definitely felt it…” Karros sat down and concentrated in thought.

“Why’d you want to hurt me?”

“The point wasn’t to hurt you, I just needed to see if I could, but that doesn’t…” Karros looked up, seemingly realizing something. “Wait. You don’t want to hurt me at all, do you?”

“Of course not.”

“Maybe that’s all it is…” Karros stood and circled the area once more. “Think back; remember back home, when Iruni first brought you in?”

“Yeah…?”

“What was something you wanted?”

“There wasn’t much, really. My life got so much better after coming to live with you guys that I
didn’t really want much else. I had food, shelter, and a family.”

“No, not anything physical like that. Remember? Ruby was leaving the house and you still wanted to talk to Iruni.”

“Yeah…?”

“Well, didn’t that frustrate you? The one way you could talk to him being taken away?”

Rikalia gasped, finally understanding. “Was that all it was?”

“I think it might be!” Karros grinned. “And even before that, when you got stuck under that tree. What frustrated you then?”

“I… I wanted help… No, I wanted to be heard! And Iruni heard me from so far away!”

“That’s right! Think about it; you didn’t want to hurt me with that blast, so you didn’t because that’s what you intended. Your desperate cries for help were heard because that’s what you wanted. You wanted to talk to Iruni and couldn’t on your own, so that frustration came out as a Dark Pulse that Iruni could understand, all because that was your intent.”

“So it’s all about what I want?” Rikalia let the idea play about in her head, comparing it to her early memories of living with Iruni at his house in Mahogany. “I… think this is right, Kar! Ever since I learned my Pulses were hurting him, I think I started hurting him less because I wanted to hurt him less!”

“So, it’s a matter of will and intent…”

“This is great!” Rikalia jumped up in the air, grinning widely. “Now we know what to do to let you talk to Iruni, Kar!”

“Are you sure you want that?” Karros asked. “I might tell him you’re ruining your own claws.”

“Wha—! No! Don’t!” Her good mood was shattered in an instant. Rikalia ran over to her Houndour friend and frantically shook his shoulders. “Please, don’t tell him!”

“Hey, okay! Just stop for a second!” Karros shook his head once Rikalia had stopped her assault. “Look, you know that you shouldn’t be doing that, right?”

“Yes, but sometimes I just can’t help it.”

“I know,” said Karros. “Alright, how about this? If you keep doing it after I’ve managed to talk to him, you bet I’ll tell him.”

“But…” she looked down at the ground, defeated.

“I’m not doing this to get you into trouble, Rikalia. If he found out, sure he might be disappointed or even a little angry, but you and I both know he would drop whatever he’s doing and do whatever he could to help you.” Karros raised her head with his own, pushing his nose under her chin, “But like I said earlier, we all have enough to worry about with Celebi and these people that are trying to find her. We need to focus.”

Rikalia nodded to him and looked down at her own paws. “I have to be strong if we’re going to get through this.”

“Exactly.” Karros began to walk back to the camp. “Just make sure you hide your claws while they
“I’ll… just hide them,” she said, looking over her armguard as she walked. “Somehow.”

Once Iruni returned from his short trip to Vermilion City, he and his Pokémon packed up their small campsite and began their journey to the southeastern entrance of Diglett’s Cave. Just before reaching the grassy fields of Kanto’s Route 11, Rikalia spotted from a distance something that she described as a rather unimpressive mound of dirt. As they neared it, she soon changed her tune. The cave’s entrance was down a shallow incline off of the main path, surrounded on all sides by a tall pile of dirt. The larger-than-usual molehill would seem unsafe to enter if not for the well-traveled walkway leading down to the underground, and the signboard advertising the cave as a safe passage from Vermilion to Pewter.

Entering the dark of the cave system, Iruni took off his sunglasses and let his eyes relax. He noticed that along the main pathway, there had been lights installed to better accommodate traffic through the cave. The lights were very dim compared to the sunlight still streaming in from the entranceway, but Iruni suspected they would be more than enough to light the way once they reached the inner depths of the underground passage.

Rikalia and Atanya walked along beside him on the dirt, while Karros was a few paces ahead, alert and ears up, sniffing the ground in search of targets to take out as he went.

A soft crackling sound down by his feet caught Iruni’s attention, and he looked down to find Rikalia coating her paws in a thick shell of ice that mimicked the shape of her claws.

“I know you’re eager,” he told her, “but I don’t think we’ll find many opponents this early on. You don’t plan on keeping that up the whole way, do you?”

“Yeah, I do.” She stubbornly took a step ahead of Iruni and Atanya, demanding to be second in their line. “I’m still not that good with my Ice moves, and this’ll help. I want to get better too.”

“Fair enough,” Iruni smiled. “Just don’t wear yourself out too much with all the ice though. You have your claws to rely on too.”

“I know,” she said. “I’ll be careful.”

The sound of flapping wings snagged Iruni’s attention. Following it up to the ceiling of the cave, he spotted some strange Pokémon he hadn’t seen before. Gathered around a small formation of stalactites were balls of blue fur with large noses and black wings. Iruni remembered that historically, only Diglett and Dugtrio lived in these caves, but there was clear evidence against that hanging just above him. He pulled his Pokédex from his pocket and identified the creatures, finding they were called “Woobat”.

As he looked over the various bits of information on the screen, Iruni found himself feeling a strange sense of unease. He had been out of commission as a Cartographer for quite some time due to being stuck underground. More time was then spent recovering, and then he had made the trip to Saffron City. After being inactive for so long, Iruni’s mind began to wander with questions about the job he had agreed to take on. Had he been replaced? Was he even still needed? Was traveling to Kanto a mistake? With Celebi now involved in his life, could he even manage to do what was required of him?

Stumbling over a plot of uneven dirt snapped him out of his mental roundabout.
“Are you okay?” asked Rikalia.

“Yeah.” He nodded, adjusting his backpack on his shoulders. Iruni was glad he had lost track of that line of thought; he was sure he’d have started asking himself questions he wouldn’t have liked the answers to.

“Let’s turn here,” Iruni spoke up, pointing to his left. “I recognize this path from the map. It should lead us where a lot of Diglett are.”

The hole in the cave’s wall was a little short, so Iruni had to crouch slightly to enter the new path. The ground was much rougher than the main pathway had been, and without the dim lights, much darker. Immediately Iruni felt a similar sensation to how he had felt underneath the Ruins of Alph, but Karros lit the way with a low flame burning in his mouth. Beside him, Atanya extended a vine from the buds on her neck and wrapped it around his wrist. From the glow of the small flame Iruni could see the silhouette of Rikalia and her ice-covered claws a few steps ahead of him, the light glittering slightly off of her icy gauntlets.

The group continued down the dark pathways for the better part of an hour, running into more opponents as they delved deeper into the maze of tunnels. Karros took on any aggressors far ahead of them, Rikalia caught any from their sides, and Atanya fought off any that dug their way up behind them. Slowly, the ceiling was getting progressively taller as they went, relieving Iruni’s steadily tiring back. They entered a tall, rounded chamber, whose walls were dotted with countless holes that had been made by Diglett coming and going. The reason why was apparent; hanging from the ceiling and dangling down toward the cave floor were many long tree roots. Some of the roots nearly reached down to the floor, where Iruni and his Pokémon spotted a few Diglett and Dugtrio nibbling on the lowest hanging roots.

Upon noticing the intruders’ arrival, the Mole Pokémon became very aggressive, growling at the new arrivals to leave one of their apparent feeding grounds.

“Just what I was hoping for,” Iruni knelt down and patted Karros on the back. “You ready? Try and rile them up!”

As Karros barked and took off into the feeding-dome of the Diglett, Iruni stepped back into the tunnel they had come from, ordering Rikalia and Atanya to stay close by.

Without the fire to help him see, Iruni was stood in the dark, listening to the sounds of his Houndour running through the loose dirt of the cave floor, howling and barking at the wild Pokémon, trying his best to attract their attention.

“What’s he doing?” asked Rikalia. “He’s not attacking them.”

“He’s doing what we laid out earlier this morning, before you woke up.” Iruni looked on out at the dark ahead of him, watching for the small bursts of flame and embers coming from Karros as he tried to draw in more and more targets. “He’s going to push himself past his limits fighting all these opponents at once.”

“Yeah, but how?”

“All those holes they’re digging crisscross under the dirt.” Iruni remembered how the walls and floor of the dome looked while it was illuminated, and with the many new Diglett and Dugtrio moving around trying to attack Karros, new tunnels were being formed. “Kar! Give us a little warning first, got it?”
“Warning?”

“It might get a bit bright and hot in here, so we’re going to need a little cover. Think you can make an ice wall?”

“I’ll— I’ll try!”

A few moments after Rikalia responded, a final howl came from the dark dome, and the glowing maw of Karros could be seen moving around in the room. The Houndour began lighting up the underground chamber more as the flame in his mouth grew in size and power.

“Now, Rika!”

“Ah!”

The light from Karros’ building fire shone into their passageway, and Iruni saw his Sneasel slam her paws onto the ground in front of them and conjure up a wall of ice tall enough to crouch behind. The effort left her out of breath but still standing.

“This’ll have to do,” Iruni said. “Atanya, get beside me. Kar! Go for it!”

Peeking over the edge of the barricade, Iruni watched Karros as he ran toward the center of the round chamber and plunged his head underneath the dirt into one of the fresh holes the Diglett had made. A faint rumbling could be felt from where they were crouched in the passage, then jets of fire began to shoot up from the floor and walls of the feeding dome, and the sounds of anguish from the many caught Mole Pokémon could be heard echoing throughout the tunnels.

As many of the Diglett and Dugtrio fought to escape beneath the earth, a howl carried on throughout the caves, this time one of triumphant victory, rather than one to goad them into attack. The howl soon began to deepen and gain a bone-chilling quality to it.

Iruni stood up from his position behind Rikalia’s ice wall to watch what was about to happen. The underground dome was being illuminated by some of the thicker bundles of roots that continued to burn.

“Here we go,” Iruni said to himself.

Karros’ body had already started glowing white with transformative energy, changing and growing in response to the feat he had just performed. His legs grew much longer and now sported sharp, white claws on each paw. The bone-like ridges that ran across his back grew in size and number and a skull-like protrusion sprouted from the base of his neck. A pair of twin, curved horns grew from his head and curled backward. A long, pointed tail grew from where his short, stubby one had been, and whipped the air as the light from the evolution died down.

Now a Houndoom, Karros howled one more time into the dark cave, delivering further warning to the many wild Pokémon that resided there.

“Wow, look at you,” Iruni said, walking forward. He knelt down on one knee and looked eye-to-eye with his newly evolved Pokémon. “How do you feel?”

“Tall.” The voice was fearful and overbearing, adding to the surprise that it caused.

Karros had just spoken and Iruni had understood it.

“Whoa, what was that!” Iruni laughed in disbelief. “Say something again, Kar!”
“Working?” his Houndoom barked, a bit surprised himself at the new development.

“Yes! It’s just single words right now, but I can understand you!” Iruni grinned and wrapped his arms around Karros’ neck, laughing happily. “I’m so glad you got it to work!”

“Helped,” Karros nudged Iruni’s face to look back at the entrance to the dome where Rikalia and Atanya still waited. “Still me.”

“We know that,” Rikalia said, uneasily stepping into the dome. She kept her eyes on the ceiling. “There’s just a lot of burning roots up there.”

“Rika,” Iruni said, standing up. “Thanks for helping Kar learn how to talk to me. I mean it.”

“No problem. We both figured things out,” the Sneasel said.

“I’m serious,” Iruni walked over to her and picked her up into a hug. “Thanks for this. You did great work today. I had no idea you guys figured out so much already.”

“Are you mad that we didn’t tell you?”

“No, the surprise was worth it. I guess evolving made everything click, huh Kar?” Iruni turned around to look at Karros, finding him staring up at the ceiling of the underground dome, sniffing the air with an urgent look on his face. “What’s the matter?”

Without saying a word, Karros leapt over to where Iruni and Rikalia were and began taking in the human’s scent vigorously, smelling him all that he could.

“What is it?” asked Iruni.

“You.” Karros went back to sniffing the air in the dome, and then stopped suddenly, pinpointing what he had found. “There.” The Houndoom looked straight up at the ceiling, locking his eyes with something in the dark.

“What’s he saying, Rika?” Iruni asked. “I’m not really understanding what he’s trying to tell me.”

“He says he can smell you, or something like you in here.” The Sneasel stood on Iruni’s shoulders and looked up to where Karros was pointing.

“Cut down.”

“I can try.”

Rikalia formed a few handfuls of sharp icicles and began throwing them up at the ceiling, her target apparently a larger bundle of interwoven tree roots that hung there. After a few tries, the ball of plant life came tumbling down to the cave floor, falling apart on impact with the hard dirt. Immediately, Karros ran to it and began to dig through the debris, eagerly searching for what he had smelled.

“What is it, Kar?” Iruni asked, helping Rikalia down to the ground.

“Yours.”

Karros grabbed something with his mouth from within the broken bundle of roots and brought it over to Iruni. The burning roots above had begun to die down, so it was too dark to really see what it was that his Pokémon had given him, though without being able to see it, the object felt strangely familiar. Unsettled by the feeling, Iruni took a moment and took off his backpack, then took out a
lantern he had bought earlier that day in Vermilion. In the new light, he could clearly see what item his Pokémon had given him, but Iruni was at a loss on how to react.

“Is… Is this—?” he looked up to Karros in disbelief.

“Positive.”

Iruni held in his hand an item common among traveling Pokémon Trainers. A flat, hinged case with the Pokémon League’s insignia of a stylized Poké Ball on the top, used to store a trainer’s Gym Badges. Its exterior was dirty and worn, scuff marks and soil caked onto it in places. Turning around to its back confirmed what shouldn’t have been possible; it belonged to “Bartholomew Iruni Thomas, Trainer ID: 53142”.

“What is this?” Iruni dropped it onto the ground in shock. “How— How did it get up there?” Iruni turned back to his large backpack and began looking through his belongings for his badge case, determined to prove the one he had just seen to be a fake. As he came up empty, he fell down to his knees in defeat. “I… I know I saw it in my bag when I left this morning with Kreen. I went through my pack to grab my wallet… and it was there! Were you guys gone from the campsite at all?” he asked Rikalia and Karros.

“Yeah… When we left to practice Dark Pulses…” Rikalia admitted.

“Worked,” Karros said. “But how?”

“I don’t know!” Iruni picked the badge case up from the ground and looked it over again. It definitely seemed to him like that it was genuinely his badge case, just much dirtier and worn than the last time he had looked at it. Dreading what he was about to do, he pressed the latch and opened up the case, surprised when the hinges broke and the case itself fell apart in his hands. Two badges fell down to the ground with a metallic clink.

“Hey!” Rikalia swiped them up with her paws quickly, looking dismayed at their messy appearance. “These are ours. They’re ours!” She looked up to Iruni. “What does this mean?”

While Rikalia had been preoccupied with the badges that had fallen from the decrepit case, Iruni had found something else inside. It was a piece of paper, thicker and softer than common notebook paper, folded into a neat square. Unfolding the piece of parchment brought on the scent of fresh flowers.

“What’s that?” asked Rikalia.

Iruni read the note over and over, and each time he reached the end his hands would shake in anger more and more. He crumpled it in his hands and threw it to the ground, walking a few steps away from the light that the lantern provided.

“I can’t believe this!” he yelled, kicking the wall of the cave. “How can she be so full of herself?!”

He could hear the crinkle of the note once more. He turned back to see Rikalia smoothing out the paper and reading it for herself. He didn’t stop her; he wondered how his Sneasel would react.

“What?!” Rikalia looked up at Iruni in disbelief. “Is this from her?”

“Yes.” Iruni walked back to his Pokémon, sitting down on the dirt floor. “It’s always her.”

“Well, what are we going to do about it?” asked Rikalia. “We have to do something about this, right?”
“What can we do?” Iruni said, more in defeat rather than asking a question. He pointed to the letter his Sneasel held in her paws, “That thing being here is proof we’re powerless when it comes to her. Always playing into her hand…”

Karros stepped forward, exhaling heavily through his nose before talking. “Wrong. Blind. Key.”

At Iruni’s confused glance, Rikalia gave a more thorough translation, “He said, ‘You’re wrong. We can blind her, and we’re the key.’ Not sure I get what he means either.”

“Us Rikalia.”

Iruni stared at the note in his Sneasel’s paw, going over the infuriating words written on it in his head. Karros’ speech was rough and loud to his ears, leaving a dull ringing whenever there was any silence in the room. No doubt a side-effect of Karros only just now managing the Dark Pulse translation trick.

“Kar, do you mean how you can talk to me?”


It took hearing all of their names out loud for him to realize what Karros meant.

“Of course,” Iruni said, standing up. He looked back over to the entrance of the dome, where Atanya had dutifully stayed watching over their exit. She looked worried about what had been going on. “You did a good job keeping a lookout here, Anya. Listen; everything’s fine. I just need to have a chat with these two and Hadarah. You okay with going in your ball for a little bit? I promise you’ll see some more action soon.”

The Chikorita smiled at her trainer’s reassuring words, agreeing quickly. Once she was recalled into her Poké Ball, Iruni released the much larger Ogre Scorpion Pokémon into the round room. Hadarah looked around at his new surroundings, as well as his newly evolved teammate, but didn’t seem too anxious at the moment.

“Kar, Rika, Hadarah.” Iruni walked back to the middle of the room and looked from each of his Pokémon to the other. “I only have one idea about what to do, but I’m afraid it’ll make everything worse for us. I won’t do it unless we’re all agreed, and if we don’t take my idea, I want to hear your thoughts on how to handle this.

“This affects all of us, and as much as I want Atanya and Kreen here, they’re at risk of letting it slip if they know. Only the four of us can know.”

Iruni quickly laid out what had happened to his Drapion, who quickly shared the rest of the group’s opinion about the sender of the note. He then told his Pokémon his idea, and how it could solve their problems or make matters worse.

“I don’t even know if my plan is even possible, but the three of you are the only ones who can help me do it.”

Iruni looked to his Pokémon one last time before asking, “Any objections?”

Hadarah shook his head side to side slowly, exhaling sharply as if to punctuate his answer.

“No.”

“No,” answered Rikalia, defiance in her eyes.
“Good.” Iruni took the note from his Sneasel and looked over it again. “Because Celebi gave us the best hint on how to beat her right here.”

Elsewhere …

“Listen.”

‘Are you sure you should be talking to me right now?’

“I’ll be fine. I need to ask a favor of you.”

‘Why so formal? You know you can ask me anytime.’

“It’s… not something I should ask, especially not right now.”

‘I do not understand.’

“I need you to look into my— no, our future.”

‘You know that is outside of my ability, don’t you?’

“I don’t care if it’s possible, I just need to know. Please, just try.”

‘Why are you so insistent? Are things between you two… troubled?’

“Not right now… but once she evolves…”

‘Understood. I will try, but I cannot guarantee any result will be to your liking.’

…”

…”

…”

“Well?”

‘It is… difficult to make sense of it, but I could see some things.’

“Like what?”

‘Sadness. Desperation. Conflict. Centered around you.’

“All of that… coming from her?”

‘Yes, along with great pain and regret from yourself.’
“And…” Allan dreaded asking his last question. “When will this happen?”

His Natu closed his eyes again, struggling to tap back into his fledgling ability to see into the future. Xutan’s mind responded, ‘*During a time of high temperatures. Perhaps the hottest day of the year.*’

Allan looked out in front of him to where his other Pokémon were, playing in the grass with their newest teammate, Sontos the Beldum. He saw Umari happily running around and leaping at the floating metal arm, trying her best to pin him down in their little game. He brought a hand to his face, covering his eyes.

“Summer is already here… We don’t have much time, do we?”

‘*I expect not,*’ Xutan said. ‘*What will you do now? I apologize that my vision was not more precise.*’

“Don’t be,” Allan said. “I just… need to be careful from here on out.”

‘*You know that knowledge of the future could be exactly what brings it about, don’t you Master?*’

“I don’t believe in destiny,” said Allan defiantly. “I’ll stop whatever conflict is coming between Umari and I however I can.”

‘*And you’re sure that her… impending change is what sparks all this?*’

“I’m sure.” Allan rubbed the sides of his head, feeling a headache coming on. “I won’t be able to hide from her when she evolves. And when she sees how I really am… she’ll want to run away.”

‘*I think you give her too little credit. When has she ever gone against you or your wishes?*’

“This is different and you know it.”

‘*Perhaps, but you are too hung up on the potential negative consequences to even consider she might accept you.*’

“That’s just it,” Allan corrected his Natu. “All those things she feels after she evolves are proof that I’m right. I asked because I… hoped… that I was wrong and over-thinking things, but now I know for sure.”

‘*Why not let me ask what she thinks of the matter?*’

“Absolutely not!” He let his voice raise too high, momentarily drawing Umari and his other Pokémon’s attention towards them. “We’re not ready for the battle with Whitney yet,” he tried to mask his outburst as best as he could. ‘*You are never to tell Umari about what we talked about today. Is that understood?*’

‘*Very well, Master.*’

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To Be Continued…

________
I really had to applaud the actions of the newest addition to our group of Watchmakers. Their honesty may very well lead them to an unsavory end one day, but not without first bringing others down along with them. A silent electronic message sent to me by Alice Wingborne—that poor, scared girl—had told me exactly what I had needed to hear before I could begin resolving the latest hindrance to my plans: Dalton Drake had been located.

Before I continue, I feel I must make something perfectly clear: I bear no grudge against the people of this “world” that I’ve found myself trapped in these past five agonizing years. They, as a whole, have done nothing to earn my wrath. Much like I had been when I was being plagued with visions of the future, I often find myself in awe—and greatly appreciative—of the many advances and triumphs that humanity has accomplished in the centuries since my birth. Alice’s message was one such boon. This “time” that I now live in is innocent to my anger and my righteous crusade against the one who has stolen such irreplaceable things from me.

After the initial bitterness and fury that I experienced after being stranded here had subsided, I had vowed to follow a single, unwavering rule: Until a guarantee presents itself that proves beyond all doubt that I may finally leave this place and time for good, I must treat it as if it were my home. I must not let the world around me fall to ruin on my behalf, lest I end up being the sole reason I become permanently trapped in it.

This rule that I keep in my mind helps further my goal of one day returning home and seeing my family again. I cannot let anything persist that might one day cause me any misfortune or potentially extend my time here. That includes severing ties with people who may no longer be useful to me—doubly so if they prove to become an obstacle blocking me from reaching that goal.

Before the deplorable actions of my subordinate came to light, I had been on a short journey of my own to a city known as Ecruteak, a place steeped in old legends and lore. Such a place surely would surely hold some library or other store of knowledge about my enemy that I could make use of, I had thought. Instead, I was met with local residents who were less than willing to share their secrets with an outsider such as myself. I had chosen not to pry too much. Even without their knowledge it soon became clear that I had misunderstood the relationships of this region’s deities and mythical creatures.

Unlike the creatures in the stories of my homeland that all seemed to connect to one another, Celebi is singular and alone, just like I had found her on that day. No other myths of the Johto region seemed to intersect with hers in any meaningful way. Only one other legend—Sinnohan in origin—connected to hers, and she was merely a guest in their domain. I was certain of that.

While I had been spending time in the old town, I happened to see in the news: “Arson: Ex-Elite Four Member prime suspect in attempted murder of multiple Saffron City residents.”

Investigating further, I had learned the ugly truth of the incident and cursed the irony of the world.

Dalton had taken it upon himself to try and extract information from someone, and had sloppily tried to cover his tracks, clearly failing in every aspect of his mission. I had known beforehand about his journey east to the Kanto region, but I foolishly had not thought it important at the time to inquire as to who his intended target had been. I had cared only about the information that they potentially held. Thus, it pained me even more to see that Dalton’s failure and incompetence had brought harm to the
family of someone that I knew. How in the world Dalton had targeted Iruni Thomas’ sister was beyond me, but I intended to find the answers.

Ever since learning of the incident, I had had the others in my group of collaborators trying to find out where the rogue Dalton had disappeared to. The answer had been so painfully obvious I had thrown it out as an option. One must never overlook the obvious.

Alice had been staying in the house that we had designated as our base of operations to further recover from her traumatic ordeal in the Ilex Forest. The overly-ornate building was on a plot of land north-west of Ecruteak, accessible only by a single, winding road. Dalton had bought the property ahead of abdicating his position on the Unovan Elite Four and leaving the country, offering it as our safe-haven after joining Sebastian and I on our quest. Alice seemed to have alerted me to his return no sooner than Dalton had “just walked in the door”, as she had put it. Very admirable, I thought. I asked her to keep me apprised and to message me again if he seemed to be leaving the house.

From Ecruteak City I walked on foot along the paved road toward the house. I knew that a vehicle would announce my arrival prematurely and I worried that Dalton might flee rather than face my wrath. I arrived just as the sun began to set, walking quickly up the main pathway to the front door. Before I could grasp the handle and enter the home, someone else opened the door in front of me. Jacob.

“Cora, listen.” He tried to cool my anger, which I assumed was plain on my face. “I know this looks bad, but you don’t gotta do anything rash.”

“I will be the judge of that,” I said, pushing past him despite his extra height. Behind him, standing mid-way up a flight of stairs, was the shaking form of Alice. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I told Jake you were coming.”

“Think nothing of it,” I told her. “You’ve already done your part. He is still here, yes?”

“L-Living room,” she pointed.

“I thank you, Alice.”

Stepping through the entryway and into the main household, I walked with purpose and ignored the continued pestering from Jacob Ostra behind me.

“Look, the guy messed up, there’s no reason to go ballistic on him,” he pleaded.

“I find it hard to believe that you could possibly be on his side,” I turned to him. “He caused harm to the family of a friend.”

“You don’t know the whole story yet,” offered Jacob. “Just let him explain.”

I found Dalton in the middle of watching something on a portable viewing screen—a “laptop” as I’ve heard them called—that sat on a low table in front of him. He was sitting in a chair, some kind of alcoholic drink in his hand, leaning forward and staring intently at shakily-captured footage, apparently from inside a sporting venue. The point-of-view looked to be that of one of the many thousands of spectators, rather than a professional’s. The screen was filled with chaos; people
screaming, falling debris, and in the center of it all, a great flaming moth.

Annoyed further by his not noticing my arrival, I quietly made my way next to his chair and reached toward the laptop. Truth be told, I did not know much about the device as a whole, but one thing I had learned from observing their use was that the screen was on a hinge. A swift swipe of my hand slammed the laptop shut and silenced the video. I had now gained Dalton’s full and undivided attention.

“HEY!” He shot up from his chair, tossing his glass of whiskey onto the floor. “I was watching that!”

“Surely, a great tragedy for the ages. Your poor drink has become an unwitting victim, as well.” I stared into his eyes and met his anger one for one.

“Oh, I get it.” He slowly walked toward me. “I follow one bad lead and now I’m put on the chopping block? Well, go ahead. Swing away,” he held his arms out to his sides. “Let’s get this over with.”

Dalton expected a physical correction of some kind. Something he could retaliate against.


“What?”

“Apolologize, now. I am waiting.”

“Make me,” Dalton said, adding “… Grandpa.”

It must have been a very trying few days for me. I usually have much more composure and self-control. I really should not have hit him. It only made matters worse.

I will admit that in my time spent in this “world”, I had neglected my own physical wellbeing. My muscles had weakened from disuse, and thus my punch barely seemed to harm Dalton, who just stood in place, head slightly cocked to the side from the impact.

The moments that followed were filled with wild and frantic swings, punches, and kicks, that slowly lead outside though a back door. The first lull in the fighting came when I was thrown down to the grass, my back aching almost immediately from the impact.

I could only imagine how pathetic I must have looked, being beaten down to the ground by a man younger than myself.

When no more blows came to meet me, I tried to push myself up off of the ground. I saw that Jacob was now holding Dalton back—having a much easier time overpowering him than I did—and that Alice had come out into the yard to my aide.

“Are you okay?” she asked with more life in her voice than I had heard since her traumatic event. “Are you hurt anywhere?”

“My own pride, to be sure,” I said, only to her. Dalton’s punches and kicks had hurt, but the pain would eventually fade. I had damaged something more important than that by striking my subordinate and I needed to fix it. With the young girl’s help, I managed to get to my feet.

“Dalton!” I found it difficult to raise my voice after receiving so many punches to the stomach. “I… have acted foolishly, and was met with an appropriate response. I apologize.”
“Damn straight!” he barked, shaking off Jacob’s grasp, who recognized the situation would not escalate further. “I worked my ass off and it blew up in my face, okay? I get it. I fucking it all to hell. I’m sorry, okay? Damn.”

“As…” I groaned, clutching my gut. “As it is clear you recognize your error, I assure you so have I.”

“Yeah, I bet you do.”

“Hey!” Jacob smacked Dalton square in the chest with the palm of his hand, making him stagger backward. “We’re done! Got it?”

“Fine.”

“N-Now,” I spoke up. “Shall we go inside? There is business to discuss.”

“Joy,” Dalton rolled his eyes, being the last to come back inside the house.

Back inside the main sitting room, Alice helped me into an armchair and quickly went to get me some ice for worst of my quickly swelling injuries. She seemed to find drive in helping those in pain. Worthy of applause indeed, I thought.

“You know Galian,” Dalton said, picking up the spilled glass from earlier, “that was actually a bit of fun, to blow off some steam like that. Let’s do it again, sometime. How ‘bout you, big guy?” he asked Jacob. “Want to go a few rounds?”

“Let’s not,” I said.

“Here you go,” Alice returned with some ice cubes wrapped in a small towel. “It’s the best I could find right away. I don’t know where the first-aid kit is.”

“Thank you.”

“So, boss-man,” Dalton said, picking up his spilled glass. “What’s to discuss? You want the long, shit-filled version, or just the shitty highlights?”

“As colorful as your retelling might be,” I said, pressing the chilled rag to my cheek, “I just have some simple questions.”

“Shoot.” Dalton didn’t even look toward me.

“Did you succeed in your mission? As I recall, you were trying to track down an individual who may have come into contact with Giovanni earlier this year.”

“Nope, wrong person.” He had gone to pour himself another drink. “Sebastian’s info turned out to be no good and the girl clearly didn’t know anything.”

“Did you by any chance glean any useful information from who you interrogated?”

“No, but listen—”

“Why then,” I said, trying to hold back my temper, “did you employ such reckless force in trying to escape your failed mission?”

“Hey, hey, I get it; I know the main reason why you blew up at me was because I roughed up the sister of some guy you know or whatever, I get it. Shouldn’t have done that.” Dalton sat back down in the seat I had found him in when I had arrived, fresh glass of alcohol in hand. “I know it might not
look like it, but I am a bit better at staying hidden than you guys think. I didn’t run away right after it happened; I stayed in Saffron for a few days, right? I was trying to feel out just how screwed I was—whether or not anyone knew it was me, if anyone died, the whole shebang. Anyway, it was obvious that someone leaked it was me, since it ended up all over the news, but I was sure the only one who recognized me was that Kate girl. I thought to myself ‘there’s no way on this green earth that she’d be in any shape to talk to the cops’, so I did some digging to figure out who really ratted me out.”

“And?” I asked, wondering where he was going with his rant.

“This was what I was talking about, Cora,” Jacob spoke up. “Listen to him.”

“Turns out, it was the girl I roughed up,” despite discussing likely the single worst action he had performed as a human being, Dalton had a smile on his face. “Look, I made sure she stayed down and lit her apartment on fire with Roku. The whole building went up. So how could she have gotten out of there and somehow talked to the cops?” He leaned forward toward us and took a drink from his glass, “That brother of hers you guys are pals with swooped in right in the nick of time and saved her.”

“Really?” I asked, unable to hide my shock. Such an event was an incredible coincidence on the surface. Perhaps too incredible.

“Look, I’ll show you.” Dalton lifted the screen on the laptop back up and turned the machine back on, beckoning us all to gather around him. “I watched through this a bit before you showed up. It’s crazy. This the guy you know?”

I watched as Dalton navigated a sub-screen that displayed short video clips, selecting a small segment of a local Kanto news station. The clip played and showed the face of the building Dalton had left ablaze, along with a reporter’s worried commentary on the situation, mentioning something about some brave citizen that had rushed into the building with their Pokémon. Suddenly a blast of yellow and blue flame burst from one the one of the windows, and soon after a blue serpent flew out of the burning building, landing safely upon the grass below. At the distance from which the film was recorded it was difficult to discern individual faces, however it was clear that the serpent had carried out two young people, as well as a blue-feathered Sneasel.

“We do know him,” I said, struck by the daring act of bravery I had just borne witness to. I sat back down in my chair, trying to piece together the unlikely chain of events that led to what had happened.

*How could Iruni have been there at the exact time he needed to be, I wonder?*

“Th-That’s Iruni?” asked Alice. “That was incredible.”

“So,” Dalton continued talking, pausing the news clip as it confirmed the names of the people involved, “the girl lives. Whatever. She’s beaten to a pulp and got burns all over. Sent *straight* to intensive care. Unconscious. But still I get ratted out? I *had* to figure that one out. And trust me, it’s a bit hard to believe.”

“Continue, please.” An idea, small and impossible had crept into my head. Surely, I thought, it couldn’t the truth. But, much like the obvious, one must never discount the impossible.

“I went around, trying to listen to any gossip and rumors that wouldn’t make the news. I manage to overhear some nurses waiting at a bus stop who just got off of their shift at the hospital the girl was sent to. They said that Kate Thomas, when no one was around or paying any attention, miraculously woke up from being in critical condition with not a single damn thing wrong with her. She fully
recovered the second everyone turned their backs.”

“Elaborate!” I had stood up from my seat fairly quickly, earning a surprised look from everyone in the room. “Please,” I added. “There is a chance you have stumbled upon something very important and I need to hear as many details as you can give me no matter how small.”

“Well, she had a ton of injuries, and next thing the nurses know, she’s awake, not a scratch on her. She even had a full head of hair that had just been burnt off. Then the first thing she does is start asking to talk to the police.”

“Details. Anything. Literally anything else?”

“I don’t fuckin’ know man, what more do you want from me? The only other thing they said before they got on their bus was how ‘miraculous’ everything seemed and one of them said they thought they heard some gong or bell ringing right before her hero of a brother came running to tell her she was all better.”

Incredible. It seemed that he actually did listen when his life depended on it.

“A ‘bell’? You’re sure they described it as such?” I asked, holding my breath.

“Yeah?”

“It was her!” I yelled. “She was right there in that city and you missed her!”

“Whoa, easy now Cora,” Jacob leaned in and put a hand on my shoulder. “I thought you’d be glad Barty’s sister was alright. What do you mean ‘it was her’?”

“Celebi,” I said, hating the sound of the name. “The noise that confused the nurses is a telltale sign of an ability she possesses. It’s a means of healing incredible wounds, physical and mental, in a matter of seconds. It is the only means by which Kaitlyn Thomas could have recovered so quickly.”

“Shit… you sure?” Dalton asked, seemingly aware of the opportunity he had missed.

“She once used it on me during my— It doesn’t matter.” I cut the thought short, turning away from my comrades. Many thoughts were running through my head. I needed to get them in order.

“But why would Celebi just heal her like that?” Jacob asked, probably thinking out loud. “What’s Celebi even got to do with that family?”

“What if that kid’s got her?” Dalton joked, laughing bitterly. “We’ve been hunting the little imp for so long and someone we know just has her in his back pocket? Wouldn’t that be a kick in the nads?”

“He…” Alice spoke up. “He actually… might.”

I turned around and looked at her, “Why do you think that, Alice?”

“Uh, well.” It was clear that the poor girl was very unsure of her own words. “He should have still been in Goldenrod recovering from being lost down in the Ruins of Alph, but then he just suddenly leaves and goes to Saffron City and saves his sister? How would he know to do that unless he knew the future?”

“I can see the logic in your suggestion, but the dates don’t quite match up,” I said. “From what you told us, he left the hospital the day after he reappeared from the underground, a full day before Dalton’s involvement.”
“Yeah, but he still showed up right when he needed to to save her.” Alice suddenly seemed determined to defend her idea to the very end. “It was Iruni who told the nurses about her once she was healed too! Plus, he should’ve made it to Azalea Town a little after I did, but instead he got lost in the Ruins. He missed—everything. He missed that forest, he made it in time for the fire, and everything seems to be working out for him and—”

“Easy, Alice, take deep breaths.” Jacob comforted her, “That’s a big leap to make off just some coincidences, you know.”

“I agree. It wouldn’t make sense for Iruni Thomas to allow Celebi to put his own sister through such an ordeal if he were actively working with her in some way.” Not two breaths after the words had left my mouth, the solution seemed to piece itself together in my mind. “But, perhaps that is the point.”

“What is?” Jacob asked.

“With Celebi, you must never overlook coincidences. It could very well be nothing. Over-thinking, easily. But Alice does call attention to a good point. For him to avoid such a widely devastating event in Ilex Forest—her fabled home, I should remind you—and then flee across the region to another and be instrumental in averting a crisis that would surely have left him in despair, and ultimately have his own sister be so graciously given such care…”

“Cora?” Jacob asked. I had trailed off in thought for a moment, it seemed.

“As unlikely as it sounds, Celebi could very well be involving herself in Iruni Thomas’ life, for reasons I cannot comprehend. Whether or not he is aware of her actions isn’t clear.”

My three comrades sat in silence for a moment considering what I had proposed to them. The first to speak on the matter was Alice.

“It’s funny,” she said quietly. “I was… going to suggest we ask for Iruni’s help with your—I mean our plan, Coralis. I figured he’d want to erase being lost in those underground tunnels or stop his sister from being attacked just as much as I want to never have set foot in that forest. He has perfect reasons to join us.”

“All the more reason to be cautious,” I said. “If Mr. Thomas is aware of Celebi—if she is in fact meddling in his affairs—there also exists the chance that he has allied with her.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Jacob asked, defiantly. “Barty’s a good kid, you know. When you walked in the door you were fired up about anything happening to his sister, and now you’re talking about him like he’s your enemy all based on some crazy ‘What If?’ scenario.”

“I understand the full weight of my words, Jacob. I trust you remember, don’t you?” I looked him square in the face, “My best friend ruined my life in just the blink of an eye. I have seen evil appear in one so dear to me, so yes, I do believe he could be an enemy. I do not want to believe such things, but if Celebi twists events in her favor and wins over his heart with her fake tears, then he is an obstacle and nothing more.”

“But… Iruni wouldn’t do that. There’s no way he would work with Celebi if he knew what she did to you,” Alice pleaded.

“I wish that were the case,” I said. “I truly do. I don’t want to believe anyone would willingly align themselves with that traitorous sprite. However, the possibility remains until proven otherwise.”

“How would we prove that? How could we?”
“As much as I dislike the prospect, Sebastian’s current mission may uncover those answers in addition to his primary objective.”

“Wait, where’d brain-boy go this time?” asked Dalton.

“To clean up his mess,” I told him. “He is of the mind that a simple mistake may have led you to come up empty-handed, and is now following along a secondary lead in the matter.”

“Simple mistake?” Dalton repeated. “How simple?”

“You may have had the wrong sibling,” I said. “I’ll need to contact Sebastian and provide him with additional questions to ask.”

As Jacob and Alice expressed their opinions and doubts to me, I silently wondered just how many pure coincidences this world could produce on its own. At which point did it become certain that there was in fact somebody pulling the strings?

I would soon have my answer.

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To Be Continued…

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“I don’t like this,” the anxious Sneasel complained, worry creeping into her voice.

Until a few moments ago, Rikalia had been sitting next to Iruni on the bench, quietly enjoying the pleasant weather along with her trainer. Before, she had been passing the time watching the numerous white clouds lazily drift on across the sky. Now, she nervously looked around at their surroundings, following anything that moved with her keen eyes.

“We’re too exposed out here.”

“It’s just two blocks away from the Pokémon Center from here, plus there are lots of people out today,” Iruni pointed out, leaning back against the bench.

In the distance ahead of them there were many different kinds of people enjoying their time in the park. Parents and their children playing and spending time together, runners and bikers alike getting some exercise using the pathways that ran through the plot of land, and even others like them were just relaxing in a quiet spot they had found in the park.

“Remember; we’re out in the open for a reason.”

“Because we were ‘told to’, I know,” Rikalia said with distaste. “Feels like we’re always doing what we’re told lately.”

“If this pays off, it’ll be worth it,” said Iruni. He looked down at the PokéGear he wore on his wrist. 

\textit{Should just be a few more minutes …}

After all of the help that she had given him while in Saffron City, Iruni had come to the realization that Sabrina was a much kinder person than her cold persona would lead someone to believe. When he had last spoken to her she had warned Iruni that Silver was a very cautious and paranoid individual. That description had proven to be a significant understatement given the reality that Iruni was now dealing with.

Even though Silver had agreed to meet with Iruni, it was only while he adhered to a series of very specific instructions and conditions.

Since contacting Silver while he was still in Saffron City, Iruni had been required to constantly update the man on his whereabouts and travel plans. He was not to follow or be followed by anyone for more than ten minutes at a casual walking pace, intentional or otherwise. He was not allowed to electronically communicate with anyone other than Silver—starting from three miles outside of Viridian City limits—until the conclusion of their meeting. Any and all instructions sent to Iruni must be followed or the meeting would be canceled.

Above all else, Iruni was assured that while he may not see anyone monitoring his actions since nearing the city, he was absolutely being watched.

“There might be eyes watching our every move, but at least these ones are friendly,” he added.

The most recent set of instructions he had received from Silver had read: [You are to wait on the fifth (5th) bench from the north located in the park southeast of Viridian Gym. You are to stay seated on
the bench for one (1) hour, and you will be given directions to our meeting place. If you are unable to follow any and all directions then you are to consider our meeting terminated and to never contact this number again.

“I’ll believe that when we meet him,” Rikalia said, looking around the park one more time. “I just hope we aren’t being used as bait.”

The bench they had been instructed to wait on was placed so that it offered a view of the entire park in front of it, the last in a line of seats along a gently curved bike trail that ran through the plot of land. Directly behind them was a short patch of well-maintained grass before giving way to the many towering trees that surrounded the city.

“Are you looking for whoever’s watching us?” asked Iruni. “Or something else?”

“Just checking for her,” she answered him, as if it should have been obvious. “I’m going to catch her spying on us one day.”

“You won’t find her,” Iruni said, trying not to dismiss her too harshly. “She shouldn’t be around for a little while longer.”

“Do you actually believe what she said?” asked Rikalia, turning around to look at him.

“To her credit,” Iruni admitted, “she hasn’t lied to us yet. She’s given us vague warnings and has been intentionally withholding, yes, but no outright deception.”

When no response came from the usually talkative Sneasel after a few moments, Iruni looked to his left, wondering what might be occupying her. Beside him, Rikalia was standing on the seat of the bench, frozen in place, looking off in the distance behind his back. Her short fur was standing on end, ears folded back, and she gripped the back railing of the bench so tightly that her arms shook. A worried growl rumbled in her throat, her eyes fixed on whatever she saw in the distance.

“What is it?” he asked, trying to keep his composure. He silently pulled Karros’ Poké Ball from its space on his belt and held it loosely in his hand. “Celebi?”

“It’s…” Rikalia kept her voice low, choosing her words carefully. “…definitely not her.”

Just as Iruni was about to turn around and see what Rikalia was seeing, he received a new message on his PokéGear: [Arrive within the next fifteen (15) minutes. See associate for final instructions.]

“I have to talk to him!” Rikalia yelled, vaulting over the back of the bench and ran off toward the trees that bordered the park.

Iruni got to his feet and spun around, still ready to send Karros to assist his ambitious Sneasel, but relaxed his posture somewhat once he saw who had just shown themselves to Rikalia. No wonder she ran to them, he thought.

Rikalia halted her approach, stopping a few feet away from the treeline, wary of the new arrival to their quiet corner of the park. Their visitor was a Pokémon whose species Rikalia knew very well. Standing a full head taller than her—not counting the crown of bright-red feathers—was an elder of her kind: a Weavile. The longer feathers that grew on his ears denoted him as a male. The collar of feathers around his neck along with the ones on his head were at rest and he wore a calm and neutral expression on his face. The Weavile regarded the younger Sneasel with little interest, only giving her a short sidelong glance, then choosing instead to lock eyes with Iruni from where he stood.

Without looking away from the human, the Weavile carved a series of symbols into the bark of the
tree with rapid swipes of his claws. Once he was done, he pulled his claws from the trunk and turned away from the two.

“Hey,” Rikalia spoke up, “I know you don’t know me, but— Hey wait!” she called out to the Weavile just as he abruptly ran off into the trees. “Wait! I need to ask you something!”

“Rika, don’t follow him!” Iruni ran forward, but luckily didn’t have to go chasing her down.

Rikalia stopped a few steps from where she had been, staring off into the trees, arm outstretched in the direction the Weavile had ran off.

“I… just wanted to talk…” she said, almost too quietly for Iruni to hear.

He knelt down in the grass next to his Pokémon, putting a sympathetic hand on her back.

“You alright?” he asked. Iruni knew this sudden meeting had to have meant a great deal to Rikalia; this had likely been the first time she had even seen one of her own kind since being left alone in the forests near Mahogany Town. “Rika?”

“Did…” she slowly turned to him, looking up a bit to lock eyes with her trainer. “Did I do something wrong? Did I miss my chance?”

That “chance”, Iruni guessed, was the possibility to grow and evolve, something only a member of her own species could give to her.

It was also something that Iruni knew that she wanted desperately. It had been plain discussion when they were planning their trip through Diglett’s Tunnel, but Iruni could see in her behavior how she grew envious of her teammates as they grew more mature and stronger bodies. When it happened to Karros it had been easier. The Houndour—now a Houndoom—had been with Iruni for much longer than she had after all. However, it had been much harder to justify when Atanya became a Bayleef. With the many easy targets they had to deal with while traveling underground, the Chikorita groomed to be the companion of a Cartographer changed form just a day after Karros had.

The feeling of being left behind by her teammates was building, Iruni knew, and was only adding to the sense of powerlessness she felt when it came to Celebi interfering with their lives.

“I don’t think so,” he said with a smile. “I have a feeling we’ll be seeing him again before the end of the day.” Iruni gestured behind him, pointing to the tree that had been clawed up. “Pretty clever to leave us directions only you can read.”

Rikalia rubbed her face with her paws, walking over to the tree the Weavile had carved into. She looked over the scratches a few times before clawing the bark herself, rendering the original marks indistinguishable from her own.

“It’s an address, and a warning to not be late!” Rikalia said, turning around. “How much time do we have?”

“Silver said fifteen minutes when he messaged me—”

“Well now it’s less!” The Sneasel ran back and grabbed Iruni’s hand, pulling him back toward the open air of the park. “Let’s go!”

“You got it,” Iruni said. Rikalia told him the address she had quickly memorized and they set out to follow their final set of orders.
Considering the short time-frame given to them, he and Rikalia ignored Silver’s earlier warnings to act as inconspicuous as possible and the two instead ran along the side of the road to make it to their destination on time. Perhaps they weren’t as out of place as they felt, and simply looked to the people in suburban Viridian like a trainer and their Pokémon taking a lively jog. Had Silver anticipated this as well? It was impossible to know for sure how well prepared Silver was for their meeting.

The address led the two of them to one of many similar houses on a rather uninteresting street. The house stood two stories tall with two neighboring homes on either side. Its front yard was bare of anything other than grass, while a few tall trees could be seen behind and on the left of the house.

With all the hoops he had been instructed to jump through that day, Iruni had expected a more elaborate hideout.

Knowing time must be short, Iruni all but ran up to the front door and knocked, hoping he hadn’t done so too aggressively.

In the few moments of silence that passed, he felt a clawed hand grip his own, and he held onto it until he heard the sound of many locks being undone.

The door slowly opened a few inches, revealing a sliver of an annoyed face peering back at the human and Pokémon standing on the doorstep.

“This is a surprise. I thought you’d be late,” a man’s voice could be heard from inside. After a moment’s pause, the door was pulled open. The man behind it was clearly a fair number of years older than Iruni—*Late twenties, maybe?* the latter thought. Silver stood and blocked the doorway as he stared at his guests expectantly, his gray eyes looking them over from behind a few strands of long, red hair that fell across his face.

“Let me say this before I let you inside; I only agreed to meet with you as a favor from a colleague,” Silver spoke again, crossing his arms. “When I agreed, I wasn’t aware of what a celebrity you would become overnight. I was half-tempted cancel our meeting all-together, you know. I don’t like attention, or people whose name has been all over the news in the last week.”

“I don’t see how that’s my fault,” Iruni fought back. “I followed your directions enough to show up here, or is that not good enough?”

“Well, you did manage to meet my partner’s standards,” Silver shrugged. “He had the final say whether or not you would come here today, not me.” He stepped back into the house and waved the two of them inside.

Iruni heard a short gasp and felt a pair of clawed hands grip the leg of his pants. Lounging in a tree off to the left of Silver’s modest home was the same Weavile that had given Iruni the coded address.

“Something wrong?” Silver asked him expectantly. “I invited you inside, didn’t I?”

“One second,” he told the red-haired man.

Iruni knelt down to his Sneasel, much like he had back in the park, and offered an encouraging pat on the back.

“Go ahead,” he said, keeping his voice low and private with Rikalia. “Just be careful. You don’t want to ruffle any feathers, do you?”

Iruni put on a kind smile when his Sneasel turned back to him, which grew wider when he saw her relax at his lighthearted remark. Rikalia looked into his eyes for a short while before nodding slightly,
a newfound resolve behind her expression.

“Got it.”

Rikalia ran off and Iruni stood back up, walking into Silver’s house.

“Going back to what I said before,” Silver continued, eying Iruni carefully, “I don’t like celebrities. You’ve been put into the spotlight once before, isn’t that right?”

“Again, not my fault,” said Iruni, closing the door behind him. “I almost died down in those tunnels.”

“It happens,” Silver said, unimpressed. He motioned for Iruni to continue and proceeded to guide his guest through his home, watching his every move all the while.

The interior of the house itself was dimly lit—so much so that Iruni could see comfortably without his darkened glasses. As he noticed that the curtains and blinds pulled closed and covering all of the windows, Iruni suspected with confidence that Silver did not care much for any prying eyes or curious neighbors. Any doors that might have led to other rooms that Iruni could see were kept shut. Something conspicuously absent from anywhere in the house were any photographs of friends or family.

After arriving in what looked like a small library, its walls covered with many shelves filled with books, Silver motioned to an armchair that had its back to the door for Iruni to sit in.

“Now, I’d like to get down to business and have you out of my house as soon as possible. Sabrina only gave me a very brief summary of your predicament,” he picked up a small notebook from the lone desk that sat in the room. Silver cleared his throat, “So, I’d like you to answer a few questions, just to clear things up for myself. You have been approached—perhaps multiple times—by the fabled Time Travel Pokémon, Celebi, to help her accomplish some sort of task. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” said Iruni, taking his seat. “I’d like—”

“I’m not done,” warned Silver. “Simple answers, please.”

It took Iruni substantial effort not to talk back, wondering if Sabrina was mistaken in believing this man could help him at all.

“Now then,” Silver continued, looking over his notes again. “Have you seen Celebi in person?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know Celebi’s current whereabouts?”

“No.”

“Do you know why Celebi has visited you, out of anyone else in the world?” asked Silver, looking up from his papers.

“…”

“Is something the matter?”

“I don’t have a simple answer for that,” Iruni shot back.

“Fine,” Silver gave an exasperated sigh and tossed the notebook over his shoulder, sending it flapping through the air before falling to the floor loudly. “I’ve about had it with this professional act
too. So, why you? What makes you this Legendary Pokémon’s go-to person for help anyway?”

“Well,” Iruni said, thinking back to Celebi’s own words. “She says it’s because I’m the only one who can help her. Something about how events line up in the future.”

“So you don’t even know?” Silver looked at him in disbelief. “How the hell am I supposed to help you if you don’t even know that much?”

“Look,” Iruni put his hands up, “I asked Sabrina for help and she pointed me in your direction, so why is that? Mind filling me in?”

“It was never me who—”

The sound of a doorknob turning and footsteps coming down the stairs halted the conversation in its tracks. The footfalls were uneven and slow, accompanied by a third impact and the creak of the banister on the stairwell groaning between the irregular thuds.

“If you turn around,” Silver said in the quietest of whispers, “I will kill you. Understand?”

Before Iruni could even nod, the sound of someone coming up right behind him froze him in place.

Is it this person? Iruni’s mind raced. No, she said it won’t be who I think it is…

“I told you to stay upstairs,” Silver said to the person who had come down the steps.

“You should know how well I follow the rules,” said an older man’s voice. “Who’s this?” something struck the leg of the chair Iruni was sitting in. “I didn’t know you had friends.”

“That’s none of your concern, now go back upstairs,” Silver ordered.

“Now, hold on,” the older voice said. “You told your guest that I was here, didn’t you? Are you that ashamed of me?”

Silver fumed and said nothing, only clenching his fists.

Iruni felt a friendly hand lightly clap his shoulder as the man took a few shaky steps into the dimly lit study. The older man walked with a cane, but it was clear he was unfamiliar with it. He made his way over to Silver, who had now turned away and crossed his arms, and tapped him in the back with the butt of the cane.

“Now son, why don’t you introduce me to Mr. Thomas?”

“You know him?” Silver wheeled around, pointing to Iruni.

“Of course, I never forget a face,” the older man turned to face Iruni now, eyes narrow and piercing. “No matter how many scars he gets or how he cuts his hair.”

“Wait, you’re—” Iruni shot up out of his chair, recognizing the man who had so heroically rescued him from a Gyarados attack at the Lake of Rage.

“My father,” Silver announced, defeated.

“Giovanni, former Viridian City Gym Leader, among other ‘former’ things,” he said, extending his hand openly. “Nice to meet you again, Bartholomew Thomas.”

———
“Go ahead,” Iruni told her, kneeling down close so only she could hear him. “Just be careful. You
don’t want to ruffle any feathers, do you?”

Letting go of a breath she had been holding, Rikalia looked over to her trainer one more time, losing
herself in his loving expression for what she felt was all too short, then nodded her silent thanks. She
knew somehow this would be her best chance to change, to grow and become better. Rikalia swore
to herself she wouldn’t let this opportunity slip away.

“Got it.”

Knowing the Weavile lived here bolstered Rikalia’s hopes. If he was Silver’s Pokémon, he had to be
at least somewhat nice, and if Silver agreed to help Iruni with their problem, his Pokémon should
help her as well.

She eagerly ran off to the side of the house, coming to the foot of tree and calling up to the other
Sharp Claw Pokémon above her.

“Hey!”

The Weavile in the tree didn’t seem to react to her greeting, merely shifting his position on the branch
he sat on.

“Um, hello?” Rikalia called up again, receiving nothing in response. Growing impatient, she hooked
her claws into the bark of the tree, preparing to climb up and meet the Weavile head-on. Immediately
following the sound of her claws digging into the wood however, Silver’s Pokémon suddenly
dropped down from his branch and landed in front of the Sneasel.

Rikalia jumped back in shock, eyes wide.

“I am not deaf, nor am I blind.” Silver’s Weavile stared her down, moving closer as he spoke. “I am
your elder, not elderly.”

“What?”

“When I ignored you in the park, did you think my eyes failed to notice you?” he asked.

“No?”

“Did you think I could not hear you when you so pitifully called out to me?”

“Well, no… I thought—”

“I do not care what you think.”

Silver’s Weavile waved Rikalia off and turned around, walking off behind the house.

“Hey!”

Rikalia followed Weavile and ran past him, blocking his path.

“I want to talk to you!” she demanded.

“No you don’t.” The Weavile looked down at her with a disinterested glare. “I doubt there is
anything of interest you could tell me. Right now, what you really meant to say is that you need
something from me.”
An objection caught in her throat, leaving Rikalia’s mouth hanging open for a moment. More than enough to confirm the Weavile’s accusation.

“It’s obvious and expected, don’t be too surprised. I can see that ambition on your face. What’s your name?”

“Rikalia,” she answered him.

“I’m called Jallen.” The Weavile held his right hand in front of Rikalia’s face and extended his three sharp claws. “You want one of these, don’t you?”

“Yes!” Rikalia almost jumped in excitement. “I—I mean, not one of your current ones, but if you—”

“I don’t keep any discarded trimmings around, if that’s what you were hoping for.”

“Oh…” Rikalia looked away, disappointed.

“What, is that it?” asked Jallen, letting his arm fall to his side. “Do you really give up that easily?”

“You just said you didn’t—”

“I said, ‘You want one of these’,,” Jallen repeated himself and flexed his claws at her again, “‘don’t you?’ You can have one to you if you can rip it from one of my paws. You seem to be pretty good at it already.”

Rikalia clenched her paws shut and hid them behind her back, but her efforts were in vain.

“Are…” she looked away, stepping back a bit from the older Pokémon. “Are they that obvious?”

“For anyone who is paying attention, it’s plain as that blue feather on your head,” Jallen said, leaning back against the side of the house. “I can’t help but wonder how your trainer could miss them. He must not care too much.”

“Yes he does!” Rikalia yelled defiantly. “He cares a lot!”

“Just not about you, huh?” he asked. “Is that it?”

“Is what it?”

“I mean, this—” he grabbed her left hand, forcing it up in the air. “This ‘glove’, this ball of yours, and your little self-destructive hobby; are they all some poorly thought out plan to beg for attention?”

“No!” Rikalia pulled her arm back, gripping onto her armguard. “This is something I wanted for me! The ball is mine! And my claws… I’m working on it! I’ve just been worried so much about so many things I just chew on them without thinking about it, and I end up ruining them. I’m trying to stop!”

“The solution to any problem can be found at the source,” Silver’s Weavile crossed his arms and tilted his head. “What caused you to start your little ‘habit’?”

“I…” Rikalia started, but caught herself. She felt a wave of embarrassment wash over her as she thought back to the time she first gnawed at her claws in an anxious fit. “I thought…”

“Your trainer’s eyes were focused somewhere other than you?”

Rikalia looked up into the Weavile’s in the eyes, disbelief pushing past her shame. “H—How?”
“Does it matter?” he asked. “Your reaction tells me enough.”

“But— I don’t know you! I only know two other Pokémon who know that I… you know…”

“I was told where you two would appear,” Jallen rolled his eyes as he began explaining. “So I waited outside of that hole in the ground that you crawled out of. I followed your little group as you traveled to this city. I saw how you would cling to him every moment you could, and how disappointment would flash across your face when he focused on your teammates. You have the drive to be the alpha of your pack, but keep getting left aside.”

“Oh…”

“Does hearing it out loud make you feel any better?”

“No…” She couldn’t look him in the eye anymore.

“Thought so.”

“But—”

“You want his eyes only on you, but he’s unable to right now. So you so childishlly lash out against yourself because you think you’re not worth it.”

“I told you that it’s not just about that stuff!” Rikalia shouted. “It’s about everything! It’s about ‘Runi and these people who might be after him now, and Celebi and what she did to Coralis, and how ‘Runi wants to help Coralis more than anything, and now everyone on the team is getting better faster than I can, there’s just so much stuff!” She looked down at her paws and the still-healing claws at the ends of them. “I feel like I’m getting swallowed up by everything at once and I don’t know what to do! I just want to be better!”

“When you have sharp claws, others expect you to use them. If you have more claws, that expectation only grows.”

“Huh?” she looked up.

“It’s a matter of responsibility,” he said. “You, as you are now, are so lost in your own head that you would be a terrible leader. That horned canine or leaf-headed creature would be far better choices.”

“Hey!”

“It’s the truth whether you believe in it or not. You feel like you’re powerless to change the things that bother you, so you neuter yourself and let your fears get the best of you!” Jallen pointed two of his claws at her, “Two—no, less than two claws are all that you’re worth right now! An infant with dull claws crying to the adults for help! Unless you can prove yourself worthy of having a full crown of feathers—worthy of being the leader of your pack—by being better instead of just wanting to be better, you’ll only receive exactly what you deserve! Nothing at all!”

Jallen leaned close to her and whispered, “Were you abandoned when you were young, I wonder? Is that what you’re really afraid of? Being left behind again?”

“Shut up!” Rikalia pushed the older Weavile away from her. She flexed her claws and crouched down, ready to pounce. “You don’t know me! You don’t get to decide what I deserve!”

“Ready to try and take what you want instead of expecting a handout?” Jallen asked, showing his teeth with his grin. “I’m ready. Come on! You seem so desperate to prove yourself, after all!”
Before Rikalia could give into his challenge, she caught the scent of a new human. Someone unexpected had come to Silver’s house.

Jallen noticed the new arrival an instant later. “You were followed!” he accused in a harsh whisper.

“Yeah, by you!” Rikalia matched his tone. “You didn’t catch them either!”

“Whatever. Listen up, you; enter the house from the upper floor. There’s a window to the northeast that is easy to unlock even with your dull hooks. I’ll be entering from one of the side rooms. We’ll both move against the intruder at the same time, so don’t move until I give you the signal. Understood?”

“I’m through taking orders from you or your trainer!” Rikalia spat back. “I have my own responsibilities! Don’t get in my way!” Rikalia climbed up the side of the house as quietly as she could manage, rushing toward the window.

Please don’t be late! I can’t be late!

———

“I thought you hated your father,” Iruni said, very confused by who had just came into the room.

“Oh, I’m sure he does!” Giovanni laughed, but stopped quickly, wincing as he lightly clutched his side. “I bet he’s absolutely furious at me right now. No one’s supposed to know I’m here, you see.”

“And here you are, just exposing yourself to whoever drops by!” Silver boomed. “I should turn you over right now!”

“You won’t,” said Giovanni, slowly making his way over to the chair Iruni had stood up from and taking the seat for himself, groaning loudly as he did. “You’re still too soft.”

“Don’t tempt me!”

“What happened?” Iruni asked. “I mean, I don’t mean to sound rude, but you were… healthy when I last saw you.”

Giovanni laughed, this time a low chuckle, “That’s one way to put it. I had a run-in with some… rather interesting fellows. Let’s just say, I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“Then one day I find him in my house with multiple broken ribs, internal bleeding, fractured bones and a burn on his leg that won’t heal right,” Silver chimed in. “The once feared and respected ‘Boss of Team Rocket’ beaten to a pulp and begging his son for help.”

“And his son said yes.”

Silver growled in frustration. “I only agreed because if I’m ever going to bring you to justice for all that you’ve done, it’ll be because I beat you with my own power, not some mindless freaks working for a madman.”

“See, he loves his old man,” Giovanni smiled. “So, until I’m done licking my wounds, I’m hiding out in my son’s spare room. Not how I pictured things playing out, but you can never be one hundred percent certain one hundred percent of the time. Unless…”

“…you knew the future?” Iruni finished.

“That’s right. I had a pretty good run of things when I had my little cheat-sheet, but the damn thing
gave me the worst headaches. If Mr. Harmonia wants more of those, then by all means,” he waved a hand dismissively. “But you, Mr. Thomas, have your own ‘time troubles’, don’t you?”

“I do,” Iruni nodded. “It’d be easy to blame you,” he nodded to Giovanni. “After all, these people who are after Celebi are using your old plans, aren’t they?”

“Guilty,” the ex-Gym Leader raised his hands up. “Although they’re just running around half-cocked. I never spent more than a few weeks cooking up this scheme they’re trying to pull. I don’t think I can be of much help to either side, even if they tried to beat the answers out of me.”

“Well we know they’re willing to go that far,” said Iruni. “My family has already caught their ugly side already.”

“So I saw,” Giovanni said, his voice low. “Which makes me wonder if they’re getting desperate. Desperate men can be more dangerous than they appear.”

“All the more reason to get this living target out of my house,” Silver pointed to Iruni. “Go ahead, ask your questions.”

“So, these people, whoever they are, came after me and my family because I happened to meet you,” Iruni laid out. “That means you’re their real target. What could you have that they want?”

“Pay attention,” Silver said. “He already told you he doesn’t have anything else to give them.”

“Not entirely,” Giovanni corrected. “Ever since I caught wind of these ‘Watchmakers’ and their actions, I’ve thought back to those old plans of mine. To the thing that was missing.”

“And?” Iruni asked.

Before Giovanni could answer, a sound interrupted the three men in the study of Silver’s home.

A knock at the front door, calm and respectful.

Almost immediately afterward, Silver shot a deathly glare at Iruni. “You were followed!”

“Wouldn’t your Weavile have spotted that if we were?” Iruni shot back.

The knock came again, the same polite three taps.

“Stay here,” Silver said to his father, then to Iruni, “You too.” He walked out of the room and down the hallway with hurried steps.

Iruni did as he was told, but also pulled Karros’ Poké Ball from his belt and released the Houndoom. “You know what to do, Kar.”

“Loud.”

“Now, where’s Rika?”

The sound of the front door opening slowly made Iruni hold his breath.

“Yes, what is it?” he heard Silver ask impatiently.

“There’s somebody here I wish to speak to. May I ask that Bartholomew Thomas come to the door?”

Iruni didn’t recognize the voice; it sounded entirely unfamiliar.
This has to be him.

He swallowed hard, and then waved to Karros to follow him. Iruni walked out of the study and left Giovanni behind, walking down the hallway to the front of the house. He reached the entryway right as Silver began to deny knowing what the stranger was talking about.

“You have the wrong—” Silver shot a look behind him as he heard Iruni’s footsteps.

“I’m right here.” Iruni spoke past Silver’s shoulder and furious stare. “Come on in.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” the tall man stepped forward and pushed the door open with a wave of his hand, not touching it but forcing it to move with some unseen method. He came to a stop and looked to his left at Silver, “This won’t be long, I assure you.”

“Get the hell out of my house!”

Silver’s yell was just the call needed for his Weavile to make his move. The sharp-clawed cat rounded the corner from the kitchen and leapt at the intruder, silent and swift. He was met with a green blur from behind the tall man with silver hair, the punch sending the Weavile backwards and hitting a wall.

“And here I came with peaceful intentions,” said the man, shaking his head. A tall green and white Pokémon stepped out from behind his trainer, relaxing his fist. A Gallade, fierce anger on his face, stood in front of the intruder valiantly. “Now then, shall we start over?”

“Jallen!” Silver moved to check on his Pokémon, leaving nothing in front of Iruni and the man.

“My name is Sebastian; any more than that is not important. We know how damning last names can be sometimes, don’t we Silver?”

“You work with Dalton Drake,” Iruni said, stepping forward. “Are you his leader? Did you send him to attack my sister?!”

“Now, now, there isn’t any need for such anger, now is there?” asked Sebastian coyly. “I came primarily to apologize.”

“Wh-What?” Iruni blinked hard. He felt a pair of clawed paws pull on his clothes, his Sneasel climbing up his back and at the ready.

“Sorry I’m late!” Rikalia whispered.

“You’re fine,” he said.

“I meant that with complete sincerity,” Sebastian bowed. “Our leader wishes to extend his deepest regrets about how our colleague acted and the injuries you and your family suffered. They were not our aim.” He stood back up to his full height. “However, it turns out that you are.”

“And what could you want with me?”

“Any potentially useful information to aid in our cause,” he said simply. “What did Giovanni tell you that day at the Lake of Rage. I know you were there. There’s no sense in lying. I can tell when someone is lying to me.”

“Nothing important,” Iruni spoke truthfully. “We just talked.”

“Then why are you here, today?” asked Sebastian. He gestured toward Silver, “I think it goes
without saying that I am aware of this particular man’s identity.”

Silver glared at his unwanted guest.

“I,” Iruni started, slightly fidgeting the shoulder that Rikalia was clinging to, “spoke to Sabrina, leader of Saffron City Gym, about who Giovanni was, because my sister was targeted over that information. I needed to know what was going on. She pointed me in this direction. To his son.”

“I see…” Sebastian rubbed his chin, staring intently at Iruni. “I sense no deception… but the coincidence still troubles me. Let me ask one last thing…” Sebastian held out a hand toward Iruni, as if gripping him from a distance.

Iruni immediately felt an intruding attempt to peer into his mind, causing him to stagger back a step. He didn’t fight it; instead he let his Pokémon protect him in secret.

“Have you had any involvement with the mythical being known to some as ‘Celebi’!? Tell me now!” Sebastian demanded.

Gritting his teeth, Iruni shook his head and stared back at the man interrogating him.

“No.”

His answer seemed to disappoint the long-haired man, who frowned and narrowed his eyes.

“Very well. You seem to truly be just an innocent bystander.” Sebastian lowered his hand slowly, then directing it toward Silver. “On the other hand, you. The prodigal son. Where is your father?”

“I don’t know,” Silver said, shrugging. “Why don’t you find him yourself!”

Silver’s Weavile, who had long since recovered from the Gallade’s punch, but had been feigning unconsciousness, leapt from his spot from beside his trainer and snarled loudly, hoping to catch the two enemies off guard.

Sebastian’s Gallade extended the blades on the ends of its elbows in the blink of an eye and slashed at Jallen’s attacks, matching them blow for blow.

“Rika, help him!”

On her trainer’s call, Rikalia leapt down from Iruni’s shoulder and took up arms next to Silver’s Weavile, lending a helping hand in fending off the much taller Pokémon’s flurry of attacks. The young Sneasel caught an overly ambitious swipe by the Gallade and gripped its long green blade in her clawed paws. Rikalia used her strength to pull on the Gallade’s arm, throwing the Blade Pokémon’s rhythm off and leaving its left side open to attack. Jallen quickly mimicked Rikalia’s tactic, wrenching the opponent’s right arm away from its body.

“Karros!”

With both of its arms in the grip of the two Sharp Claw Pokémon, Karros then took a running leap at the Pokémon’s open chest, ramming into it with all of his might.

The Gallade staggered backwards and collided with his trainer, sending Sebastian and his Pokémon tumbling backwards out of Silver’s home and onto the grass. When the two righted themselves the doorstep was guarded by the three Dark type Pokémon, all ready to attack and their trainers standing behind them.
“Quite the reaction for people with nothing to hide,” Sebastian said with anger rising in his voice. His Gallade took on a fighting stance in front of him, “Perhaps you need a more thorough interrogation!”

“It’s because you came to my son’s home uninvited and started a fight on his doorstep,” called Giovanni from behind Silver and Iruni. “Goodness, boy,” he said, walking past his son and clapping his shoulder. “If you need your old man to scare off a bully, just tell me.”

“G-Giovanni!” Sebastian gasped, jaw dropped. “It’s you!”

“Or what’s left of me,” replied the wounded man as he hobbled outside. “You want something from me, you don’t go through my son to get it, understand?!”

Giovanni’s voice seemed to silence the neighborhood with its ferocity.

“Th-Then, tell me!” Sebastian jumped to his feet and frantically got his words out, as if Giovanni would disappear if he didn’t speak quick enough. “Operation Clocktower; the last step, what is it!? We have everything that you hypothesized was needed except how to use them! The body, the mind, but what else?”

“I never figured it out,” Giovanni said simply. “Go ahead, see for yourself,” he said, pointing to own his head. “I gave up those plans to use Celebi because they were incomplete and a waste of time! You and your little club of fools are chasing something you don’t even understand how to use!”

Sebastian looked on in shock, clearly convinced Giovanni’s words were the truth.

“I see…”

The man with silver hair silently ordered his Pokémon to abandon his battle stance and return to his side.

“Then we will need to forge our own solution from now on.”

Sebastian released another Pokémon, this one a Xatu, and put a hand on its head.

“I should say, Mr. Thomas,” he called back before leaving. “Any further action taken against myself or my associates in regard to the events in Saffron City will be met with retaliation. I assure you.”

A dull glow quickly encompassed the man and his two Psychic Pokémon, and then blinked out of existence.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Silver yelled in a panic. “Get back inside before anyone—”

“Before anyone what?” asked Giovanni. “Sees me?” The old man grinned and pointed over Silver’s shoulder, to the various people who had gathered around outside of Silver’s property. Giovanni smiled and waved, “Sorry to disturb you folks. Just a minor disagreement.”

The various townspeople of Viridian City all waved back and continued on with their daily business.

“See?” Giovanni said, patting his son’s shoulder. “It doesn’t matter if people see me if they already know I’m here.”

“But how—”

“Excuse me, sir?”
A police officer called over to the group standing on the lawn, whose patrol car was pulled over on the side of the road a few houses down. “I received a call about a domestic disturbance a few minutes ago. Is there anything that I can help with?”

“Not at all, officer.” Giovanni waved the man off. “Taken care of.”

“Very well. Good to see you again, sir.” The police officer nodded and walked off back to his car and pulled away.

Silver’s defeated face only made his father laugh.

Iruni stood back and took a look around the neighborhood, finally watching the police car take a turn down another street.

“Just a small town where everyone knows everybody else?” Iruni asked.

“Something like that,” Giovanni said with a smile. “Now, let’s go back inside. I don’t think we got to the bottom of your troubles.”

Once the excitement from the intrusion of the Psychic man called “Sebastian” had died down, Rikalia felt a nagging sense of having unfinished business. She wanted to finish her talk with Jallen. Since she didn’t feel needed as the humans began discussing the problems she knew full well in her mind, she set off on her own to find where the older Weavile had gone after the battle.

She soon found him in a room on the upper floor of Silver’s home, sitting on a bed.

Rikalia crept into the room quietly, though she didn’t feel the need to sneak up on him. She just felt it was the respectful thing to do.

“Um, hello?” she asked from just inside the doorway.

“You can come in, Rikalia.” Jallen’s voice was polite, with just a hint of annoyance. “I could hear you coming up the stairs, so I figured you were looking for me.”

The younger Sneasel took the initiative and jumped up on the bed to join him. “Look, I—” she started, then noticed the bloodied fur on one of Jallen’s paws. “Does… that hurt?”

Jallen looked down at the paw she pointed to. A thin but deep gash crossed two of his three claws on his left paw, likely from a clash with the Gallade a few minutes ago. The two claws on that paw had become ruined and the Weavile had been in the process of trimming them to be healed.

“Not so much. I’ve fought my fair share of battles in my life and have been left with wounds worse than this.”

“I didn’t mean the wound,” she said. “What about… being without them?”

“Ah,” Jallen nodded in understanding. “A torn claw or two aren’t the end of the world. They grow back in time, if you let them.”

“I know that, but don’t you feel bad when you aren’t at your best?”

“Listen to me,” Jallen said. “It is impossible to find anyone—human or Pokémon—who is at their best all the time. No one is perfect; everyone has flaws, everyone trips and falls, everyone makes mistakes, some even take unnecessary hits in battle. See?” he raised his bloody hand to her. “I’m just
like you. Flawed.”

“Really?”

“Did you think I was perfect?” he asked.

“No, but,” she stumbled on her words. “I thought you were better than me.”

“You didn’t seem to think so when you disobeyed me,” Jallen offered. “I told you exactly what to do and you told me off like I was just child bothering a parent. You aren’t worse than I am,” Jallen told her. “You’re just younger.”

“I…”

“Your instincts in battle aren’t the worst I’ve seen either,” he added. “Stopping the enemy’s movements and means of attack at once was the right call for the situation. You deserve credit for that.”

Rikalia sat on the bed and watched in confusion as the Weavile in front of her raised his left hand to his own mouth and bite and chew at the one intact claw that remained on the paw. One final snip with his teeth and Jallen freed the scythe-like claw from his hand in one piece.

“Here,” he tossed the shed claw onto the bed in front of Rikalia. “I think you’ll need that.”

“But—” Rikalia gently picked up the claw, staring at the edge and curve of it for a moment. “Why now?”

“Because it takes more than just a few days of stalking and a heated conversation to fully judge the character of someone. Before, you did not strike me as being worthy of being a leader; not worthy of a full crown of feathers. But you showed me a drive to stick to your own convictions even when someone who you considered to be above you tried to tell you otherwise.” Jallen looked over his injured hand as he continued.

“But don’t think I’ve just handed you some miraculous solution to your problems,” he told her, licking the fur clean of the blood that clung to it. “If you try and use that claw to change before your own claws even match that one’s edge and quality, you’ll always think to yourself,” Jallen looked over to her. “I could have done better.”

Rikalia sat in silence at his words.

“Regret is a poison that takes its toll eventually. Do not let it into your life.”

“I understand,” she said, gripping the razor sharp claw carefully.

“What you have in your possession is the chance to undergo a rite of passage, a challenge to understand what it means to have three claws on each hand,” Jallen stood and approached her. “Practice with it under the night sky, and when you can wield it as well as your own—your sharpest, not those dull infant claws you have now—then you’ll wear a crown of your own.”

———

Downstairs, Iruni and Giovanni had just finished discussing Iruni’s plan to deal with Celebi’s apparent meddling in his life.

“It’s a risky plan,” he told him. “But I like it.”
“That probably means you shouldn’t do it,” Silver warned from the kitchen table.

“I’ve got to. This is my only shot,” Iruni defended. “Look, I’m sorry I caused you—"

“I don’t want to hear it!” Silver cut him off. “You got what you came here for, so please just leave before you bring any other annoyances to my front door!” He groaned, holding his head in his hands. “I’m going to have to move now, aren’t I? Too many people have this address now.”

“They won’t be bothering us again,” Giovanni said. “I’m not the shining beacon of villainy I once was. I’m of no use to them anymore.”

“But, you lied, right?” Iruni asked. “You do know what’s missing in your old plan.”

“Of course I lied. You don’t get into my line of work without figuring out how to fool a mind-reader. Having said that, no, I don’t know for sure,” he said. “It’s like I told you before; no one can be one hundred percent certain one hundred percent of the time. But, I might just be right about this.”

“So, what is it? What’s missing?”

“Direction.” Giovanni said, taking a seat opposite his son. “Simple as that. Direction.”

Later that night …

Iruni Thomas sat still on a patch of bare ground, staring blankly into the campfire a few feet ahead of him. He had chosen to set up his nightly camp to the west of Viridian City, not quite stepping foot onto Route 23’s rocky terrain. The fire had been built some time ago but it still burned and crackled with plenty of wood to fuel itself. He had been sitting in silence for nearly an hour, listening to the sounds of the forest around him. A gentle breeze blew through the trees, rustling the leaves and blowing the smoke from the fire away from the campsite, bringing with it a gust of cool fresh air. A noise that didn’t come from his surroundings was the slow and steady breathing of the Sneasel who had laid down beside him, resting her head on his thigh.

Come on.

Overhead, the sparse cloud cover was constantly shifting with the light wind, obscuring the moon above at random. Iruni looked up through the trees and watched the bright light disappear and reappear.

Come. On.

The campfire crackled loudly as some of the firewood broke apart and settled, pulling his attention back down to the ground in an instant.

Even though only a few moments had passed since he had looked up, his surroundings felt incredibly different. Iruni listened closely and scanned the area, looking for anything out of the ordinary.
“Just checking in?” he asked quietly. “Or did you have something you wanted to say?”

From behind a tree to his left, Iruni spotted a pair of blue eyes peek out at him.

“You’re being too loud,” Celebi scolded him, slowly revealing herself. ‘You don’t want to wake up little Rika, remember?’

Celebi took to the air and fluttered on over to where Iruni sat, landing on the ground between him and the campfire.

‘Just like in Goldenrod, you found me out really quickly. I thought I was being discreet this time too. I’m impressed.’

‘Save your compliments’, Iruni shot back at her. ‘You knew full well I’d be expecting you here. You said so yourself.’

‘When did I say that?’ Celebi looked genuinely confused.

‘Did you forget about your elaborate way of getting in touch with me already? You owe me a new badge case by the way.’

‘You’re not making any sense. Did you hit your head again down in those tunnels?’

‘This!’ Iruni pulled the folded up note out of his pocket and tossed it on the ground in front of Celebi. ‘Your little message to me that warned me about what was going to happen today!’

‘I would never do something like that,’ she said, and reached down for the folded paper. Before her small fingers could touch it a spark of energy arced from the note to her hand, shocking it and causing Celebi to recoil in pain.

“What the hell…” Iruni said under his breath.

Celebi rubbed her wounded hand, which had gone numb and limp from the spark of strange energy that had shot from the seemingly normal piece of stationary. She looked over the paper carefully, and then gently unfolded the single page with telekinesis. Here big blue eyes widened as she read it.

[Hello, Iruni.

[I’m sorry that I had to get in touch with you this way. It’s usually too risky to even try, but you need to know what I’m about to tell you. I only went this far because I couldn’t risk being discovered by who you’re about to run into. So I’m staying away for a little while. Far away. You won’t even have me looking over you—you haven’t since you left Saffron. Take some comfort in that, if you want.

[As you can probably guess from my words above, another unfortunate meeting lies ahead of you while you’re in Viridian City. I can’t say who they are, but I can say it won’t be who you think it is. I’m sorry, but even though I know how it all plays out I can’t bail you out of this one like how I once diverted you away from Ilex Forest. You need to go where you’re going. I can’t even tell you anything else about it, or it will change the course of events too much. It’s all my fault, so feel free to blame me.

[But even if I can’t intervene, I can hopefully put your mind at ease a little bit. Please believe me when I tell you these next few words: You will survive. You will be okay. You will be safe. It will just be a little tense for a bit.

[Just remember to stay calm and keep Rika and Kar close to you. If you do that you’ll all make it out
okay.

[I won’t see you again until it’s all over. Stay safe. I’m betting everything on you, you know.

[I know you won’t let me down.

[—C]

‘This is bad.’ Celebi slowly stepped away from the page sitting on the ground, staring at it with distress plain on her face. ‘I’ve made a perfect loop.’

“What?”

‘This…’ Celebi pointed the page lying on the ground. ‘This note? I haven’t written it yet. But now that I know that I do write it, I have to write it, or else it’ll break the loop and cause a paradox. Any inconsistency in time can be dangerous, no matter how small.’

“You haven’t written it yet?” Iruni repeated her words. “But I found that note inside my badge case days ago. It was buried in the dirt in Diglett’s Cave before I got there. It looked like it had been there for a really long time.”

‘I must have gone back in time,’ Celebi pondered out loud, ‘taken that case from you, then went forward and put it in a place I knew you’d find it on your own.’

“But you have no memory of doing any of that?”

‘Of course not. I told you; I haven’t done it yet. You can’t remember what you haven’t done yet. I must do it sometime in the future, obviously. Judging by how “I” worded this letter, it might be a while off.’

“So now some future-you is messing with me now?” Iruni shook his head, “Just how long is this all going to go on? When does it end? When do you stop trying these underhanded methods and just work with me?”

‘Hey, easy. Keep your voice down.’ Celebi held her uninjured hand up, putting a finger to her lips. ‘You’ll wake her up.’

“No I won’t,” said Iruni. “She was never asleep.”

‘Wha—’ Celebi’s eyes darted down to the Sneasel that was still lying on the ground. A pair of fierce red eyes were staring back at her.

Without making a sound, Rikalia slowly and calmly stood up on her feet, flexing her claws and staring down the Time Travel Pokémon.

‘Hey now, what’s the idea here?’ Celebi backed away as the Sneasel advanced on her. ‘Iruni! Call her off!’

“No.”

At her trainer’s word of defiance, Rikalia swiped forward with icy claws at Celebi, the latter flying up and landing on the opposite side of the campfire from the human and Sneasel. Eager to not let her prey escape, Rikalia circled the firepit and chased after the Time Travel Pokémon.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Celebi demanded, defensively keeping the fire between her and her aggressive pursuer.
“I’m doing what any other trainer would do when a wild Pokémon poses a threat to their wellbeing,” Iruni stood back and crossed his arms, “A Pokémon battle. You might want to fight back.”

‘What!’?

“Throw!”

Sharp, thin shards of ice flew through the air through the flames and struck Celebi in the chest and head, causing her to fall backwards onto her back. Rikalia stayed her ground across from her, waiting for her next command.

“Dowent ahndahestamate me, boyee. I’m treyeing tew.” Celebi spat out awkward, uneven words as if they left a bitter taste in her mouth. She got to her feet and stood her ground on the other side of the pit, glowing with psychic energy.

“Wow, you taught yourself how to talk?” Iruni asked mockingly. “What a coincidence.”

The shifting of burning wood caught Celebi’s attention a moment too late, as a Houndoom leapt out from underneath the campfire and pinned her down on the ground.

‘Let me go!’

“No.”

Karros began building up a mouthful of flames, holding his muzzle above Celebi’s head. Before he could strike her with the burning blast, Celebi called forth a flurry of tree roots from the ground and pushed her captor away. As Celebi scrambled to her feet, Rikalia intercepted her with a blast of cold air, pushing her back toward the trees surrounding the campsite.

Backed up against the trunk of a tree, Celebi floated above her two opponents, looking to Iruni for answers.

‘Why are you doing this? You know that note wasn’t me, right?’

“No, but it will be you, and that’s point of all this. I’ve run out of patience.” Iruni walked forward, stepping over the ruined fire pit—which had been dug far deeper than it seemed so as to conceal Karros—and stood between his Houndoom and Sneasel. “Now, I’m taking control of this whole situation. You, me, Coralis, my sister, everything that’s happened,” he reached behind his back and revealed a black Poké Ball with an orange band around its middle and large, green circles covering most of its surface. “It’s a good thing you’re so predictable. Giovanni himself recommended using one of these since you’re always showing yourself at night.”

Iruni looked Celebi in the eyes, gripping the Dusk Ball tightly. “I gotta ask; Did you see this coming?”

‘Oh no you don’t,’ Celebi fought back. ‘Just because you think you’ve had it rough these past few months, you think you get to control me? Think about how I feel! Or how Coralis feels!’

“I’ll worry about that when you’re no longer a problem.”

‘Good luck catching me then, trainer.” Celebi crossed her arms defiantly. ‘No one’s succeeded in hundreds of years. I’ll just teleport away from here the second you throw that Ball.’

“Well, I have thought about that,” said Iruni, tossing the Dusk Ball in the air a few times as he spoke. “We don’t want you going anywhere, right Hadarah?”
Immediately after his name had been said, the Drapion that had been hidden on the other side of the

tree that Celebi had poorly chosen to back up against wrapped his long, clawed arms around the

trunk, pulling tight against the Time Travel Pokémon’s body, trapping her against the tree.

‘I—’ Celebi struggled, unable to move. ‘I can still teleport like this, you know!’

“Rika, Kar?” Iruni pointed to Celebi. “Pulse.”

Twin beams of swirling black and purple energy assaulted the trapped Celebi from two directions.
Rikalia’s Dark Pulse was unsteady and erratic, having only just began practicing that particular
method, but Karros’ attack was focused and precise. Their target yelled in pain and convulsed
violently as the two attacks battered her body relentlessly.

“Stop.”

On his command, Rikalia and Karros stopped their combined attack and stood at the foot of the tree
on either side of the restrained Pokémon that hung there.

‘Chee… eep… trik…’ her mental words were uneasy and scattered, likely due to the large amount of
Dark energy she had been exposed to.

With one slow and deliberate motion, Iruni raised his arm and held the Dusk Ball out in front of him,
its activator button pointed right at Celebi’s forehead. The small green Pokémon struggled with what
little strength she could still muster but was unable to break free from the Drapion’s tight grip. Her
motions got more frantic as Iruni’s hand drew closer and closer.

‘Please… You don’t know what you’re doing! This is a mistake!’

“I’ll take that chance.”

‘Just stop! Please! You don’t have to do this!’

“Let’s do it the count of ‘three’,” he said, drawing closer still. “One…”

‘Let me go now!’ Celebi screamed with her mental voice, her composure all but gone now. Fear and
anger were plain on her face and behind her words. ‘I’ll make you regret this, you mundane human!’

“Two…”

‘Your life wouldn’t be a tenth of what it is now, you ungrateful child! Don’t you know that I’m the
one who—’

Before Celebi could finish her thought, Iruni forcefully—and in a small part of him he hoped
painfully—smacked the face of the Dusk Ball against Celebi’s head, pushing it hard against her skin.
The Time Travel Pokémon only had time to gasp in shock before being enveloped in a deep purple
light, being pulled inside the capture sphere. Once the Ball snapped shut and began to rattle, Iruni
gripped it in both hands, fighting back against the rocking of the ensnared creature inside.

Iruni clutched the shaking Poké Ball with all his might, gritting his teeth.

It shook for what felt like minutes.

Until it stopped.

The sudden absence of movement between his hands caught him off guard. He froze, holding his
breath until he slowly opened his clasped hands to reveal the green and black Poké Ball was still and
its target had been successfully contained within.

“We… did it.” He let go of his held breath, letting the ball unceremoniously drop to the ground. “It’s done.”

“What do we… do now?” Rikalia asked.

“We have her under control now,” Iruni said, feeling as if a great weight had just been lifted from his shoulders. He took a seat on the ground, letting his muscles relax for what like the first time that night. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to try and settle his nerves. “That’s all that matters.”

A metallic click caught his attention. Worried that Celebi might’ve escaped somehow, Iruni looked down to the ground to see that Celebi’s Ball had disappeared. A wave of panic immediately shot through him until he saw that Rikalia was holding Celebi’s new Dusk Ball in her left paw and had pulled her empty Umbra Ball out from the clasp on her armguard. She held her own ball out toward Iruni and he accepted her offer, unsure of what she was doing.

“She won’t get away from me.” Using what she had been taught about Poké Balls, Rikalia collapsed the Dusk Ball and locked it into its stasis mode. Then she set the captured Celebi into place in the slot on her gauntlet. “Under control,” she repeated.

“Rika…”

“Now you won’t be the only one in charge of watching her. I won’t let her out no matter what,” she said proudly. “At least until we know what to do with her.” Rikalia lifted up her left arm and scrutinized the new ball locked into her gauntlet.

Iruni put a hand on her arm, covering up the ball on her armguard, and gently pulled his Sneasel close to him. Wrapping both arms around her, Iruni held Rikalia close to his chest and kissed the top of her head.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Rikalia stayed still for a moment, then put her paws on Iruni’s chest and slowly lifted herself up, locking eyes with his as she moved. “Y-you’re welcome,” she said and then paid him back in kind. Rikalia leaned forward pressed her mouth up to his lips, giving him her best attempt at a kiss. She pushed against him for a few seconds before backing down, looking away sheepishly.

“Was that… bad?” she asked, looking down at the ground.

“No, it wasn’t bad,” Iruni said with a smile. He rubbed her head, dragging his fingers across her feathered ear a few times.

“Time.”

“Sh-Shut up, Kar!” Rikalia spat back, hiding her face.


Karros and the Drapion both came over to their Trainer, the latter also lowering his upper body to everyone else’s level. Iruni threw an arm around his Houndoom’s neck and patted the hard shell of his Ogre Scorpion Pokémon.

“Thank you both—no, all of you three. We couldn’t have pulled this off without everyone doing their part,” said Iruni.
“Now?” asked Karros.

“I don’t even know.” Iruni let himself fall backwards onto the grass, looking up to the night sky. “But you know what?” he asked his Pokémon.

“What?” Rikalía responded.

He pointed to the Poké Ball that sat locked and secure in his Sneasel’s armguard.

“I bet Celebi doesn’t either.” Iruni said with a grin.

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End of Arc 3

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To Be Continued…

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“It’s coming around again, Umari! Get ready!” Allan called to his Pokémon from the challenger’s side of the battlefield.

A fair amount of spectators had gathered in the brightly-lit gym to watch as he competed for his third league badge, though Allan suspected that most were just there to escape the summer heat. The two-on-two match had been going in his favor until the Gym Leader brought out her ace in the hole: a Miltank that had made quick work of his lead Pokémon. Now, the outcome of the battle rested on his own Normal type.

‘This is the move that took out Xutan. Watch carefully, and wait for your opening. We can still win this.’

She replied audibly, momentarily forgetting that her words were lost to him. ‘Alright, but this is getting annoying. If all it keeps doing is rolling around, then I can’t get a good hit in. How can—?’

She had to leap to the side as the bovine came barreling towards her. Once it finished another round, she planned to go on the offensive.

This is taking too long. I can’t keep dodging forever, thought Umari.

She was running out of breath and growing weary from avoiding such high-speed attacks. The Miltank had completed another cycle of Rollout attacks, and stood waiting on the opposite end of the field.

At the word of its trainer, it started running towards the small Eevee.

‘Umari, it’s going to use Rollout again. We can’t let it gain too much power, or you’ll be worn down in no time. Try to knock it on its side just as it reaches you,’ he paused a moment, contemplating any sort of edge they could exploit. Allan blurted out the first idea that came to mind, “Try a Sand Attack! The less it can hit us, the better!”

Umari ran out to the center of the battlefield to meet her opponent. The distance between the two Normal types closed rapidly, each one not willing to break away from their charge. Umari kept watching for her opportunity; Allan had left it up to her judgment to decide when to attack.

Her moment came once the Miltank was only feet away. It dove forward to begin its Rollout attack. Just as it started to roll up, Umari turned and kicked what dirt had accumulated on the gym’s floor into her opponent’s eyes. The Gym Leader’s Pokémon recoiled and fell face-first onto the floor. Umari took the opportunity to land a Quick Attack before the Miltank got back on its feet.
“Mil Mil, keep your distance from it,” Whitney called to her Milk Cow Pokémon, “back away and try Rollout again!”

Disoriented from being temporarily blinded, the Miltank regained its composure and backed away enough to avoid any more close range attacks. It then began to run in circles around Umari, gaining momentum before rolling up into its attacking position. It circled the silver-furred creature a few more times before going in for a strike.

Luckily, thanks to the Sand Attack, the Miltank had trouble making the turns it needed to hit the more agile mammal. Going off the instructions Allan had been sending her, Umari prepared a Take Down attack. “Once the Miltank missed another pass”; that’s when she would execute the maneuver. If things went as planned, it would be just enough to knock the Miltank off its angle of rotation, and coupled with its ever-growing momentum, the resulting crash may be enough to end the fight immediately.

Unfortunately, even the best plans can fail. The next pass Miltank made was right on target, and hit Umari with full force.

“Umari!”

The small Eevee flew backwards with tremendous speed, and tumbled to a crash a few feet away from her trainer. She tried to stand, but after taking such a harsh blow, her legs kept ignoring her commands. The rough landing from the impact had dirtied her silvery-white fur and her vision was starting to blur from exhaustion. The Miltank had returned to its trainer’s side of the field, confident that it had finished off its opponent.

“Listen kid,” Whitney called from her end of the field, “I love Normal types too much to see this continue. Quit now, and try again later,” she made to reach for her Poké Ball, but Allan stopped her.

“Don’t count her out just yet, Whitney. We’ve come out of worse situations than this,” ignoring the enraged comments from the Gym Leader. Allan turned his thoughts to his Pokémon. ‘Umari, are you alright?’

‘I’ve been better. That really hurt...’ After a few moments, she sat up and shook her head, trying to regain her composure.

‘Are you hurt anywhere? I won’t risk keeping you in battle if you’re not up for it. Only if you think you’re able to.’

‘It’s up to me?’

‘Of course it is. It’s always been up to you. We just got back on our feet, so I’m not expecting any landslide victories anytime soon. You’re worth more than some gym badge.’

Umari continued to catch her breath while she considered her trainer’s words. She wasn’t sure if she could defeat the tough opponent she was faced with, but was driven by what Allan had said. She wanted to prove her own strength in this fight. She had been carried around and protected when they faced the terrifying Pokémon in Ilex Forest, and she caused Allan a lot of pain when he rescued her from the swarm of Beldum.

She glared at the Miltank across the field. I am worth more than this.

‘I—I can keep going, Allan. I wanna win this.’

‘Are you sure? I’m not sure what else we can try. That Miltank just might be too strong for us right
‘It might be, but I don’t care. You taught me “Psychics never give up”, didn’t you?’ Umari shook herself once more and stood up straight, staring defiantly down the battlefield at her opponent. ‘I’m not going to start now.’

“Umari…” Allan whispered, only loud enough so his Eevee could hear. “I thought you hated that silly catch-phrase that Will uses.”

‘It’s starting to make sense now,’ she told him. ‘It’s like you said; we made it through much worse than this. Why should we quit when we can just win?’

“You’re going to make a great Espeon, you know that?”

‘Of course I am. I’ve had you training me all this time. Now, let me prove that I’m better than that fat cow.’

Allan had to stifle a joke at Whitney’s expense, ‘That’s my girl.’

He turned his attention to the ever-impatient Gym Leader, “Sorry Whitney, but we’re not done yet. Umari wants to keep fighting until she’s been deemed unable to continue. Do you have any objections?”

“Don’t go making decisions you’re going to regret later. How do you know she wants to keep fighting? I have half a mind to disqualify you for negligent treatment of your Pokémon!”

“I’m a Psychic type trainer. What more do you need to know? Now, do we have a battle, or not?”

“Fine! Mil Mil, finish them off! Rollout!”

Wasting no time in contemplating the command, Whitney’s Miltank began to run straight for the other end of the battlefield. Umari took a defensive stance as her opponent rolled up and started speeding towards her. The next clash would end it.

‘Well Allan, it’s now or never. When should I attack?’

‘Do you trust my judgment?’

‘Of course. You’ve never let me down before. I’m sure you can think up a way out of this.’

‘Alright. Here it comes, get ready!’

Miltank was closing in. Only feet separated the two normal types when Allan called out the attack, “Now, Umari! Return!”

Umari sidestepped the Miltank just before its attack hit, then pivoted and rammed hard into the side of the spinning bovine. The power of the Return brought the Miltank out of its curled-up form and, due to its previously-acquired momentum, sent it crashing into the far wall of the Gym. When the dust cleared, the once-energetic Milk Cow lay unconscious on its back, which prompted a response from the referee.

"Gym Leader Whitney's Miltank is unable to battle! The round goes to the challenger's Eevee, and the match is over! The winner is Allan Relmstead, from Ecruteak!”

Umari felt an immense sense of pride swell in her as she heard the cheering of the spectators and watched the Gym Leader tend to her downed Pokémon. Unfortunately, she could also feel her legs
starting to give out on her. She began to fall, only to be caught in the arms of her trainer.

“Easy, Umari. I’ve got you,” He knelt by her and laid her down. “Are you alright?”

‘I’m fine. Just dead tired. I did good, didn’t I?’

“You did great,” Allan gently stroked the fur on her head. “That Return of yours won us our third badge. I’m proud of you for sticking it out.”

‘I’m glad,’ she said as Allan pulled her into his arms. She cuddled into his chest and closed her eyes as Allan carried her over to Whitney. ‘I’m going to rest a bit, okay?’

“Take your time,” Allan took care to walk as smoothly across the auditorium as he could.

The Gym Leader had already recalled her Miltank and set it in the gym’s recovery machine.

“You know,” Whitney said with an annoyed tone, “I don’t usually care for reckless trainers like you, but you were good enough to beat me. It takes a special kind of trainer to bond with their Pokémon enough for Return to be that powerful. You win.”

“Thanks,” Allan carefully held his Eevee in one arm and shook the leader’s hand. “Bet you wish we threw in the towel after all, huh?”

“Don’t be an ass— I’m serious. Your little Eevee is strong. She’s gotta be if she has to put up with you.” She reached into her pocket and revealed a badge in the shape of a simple beige diamond.

Whitney cleared her throat and, steadying her voice, declared, “Allan Relmstead, I hereby award you with the Plain Badge of Goldenrod City.”

Her voice fell back into its usual casual tone as she passed the pin to him and continued, “Now, before I kick you out of my gym forever, you should take care of your Pokémon. Especially this little cutie.”

She patted Umari on the head, who shifted about in Allan’s arm at her touch. “You can use the facilities here once my Pokémon are all better.”

“Excuse me?” called a voice from behind them. “Can I talk to you?”

Allan and Whitney turned to see a young girl with brown hair pulled into a ponytail walking along the sidelines toward them. Following along at her side was a Growlithe, his head held high and eyes wide open, diligently surveying the area. Even after his trainer had come to a stop and he had sat down beside her, the Fire type Pokémon did not relax his rigid posture. Not far behind the two new arrivals was an older woman with the same colored hair as the girl.

“That was a really good match, Mr. Allan,” the young girl said. “Do you remember me?”

Umari turned her head up to see who had come over to them, her eyes lighting up in surprise.

‘It’s her!’

“You’re Valerie,” Allan said, tensing up. He hadn’t seen her since rescuing her from the swarm of Beldum. He guessed the woman who had come with her was her mother. “How’ve you been?”

“Better.” She looked around nervously. “Listen, I didn’t really get the chance to say this, but… You and your Pokémon are really amazing. Thanks for coming back for me.”
“You’re welcome,” he said, feeling suddenly more on display than he had been in the challenger’s end of the battlefield. Allan forced himself to look up at her mother’s face. “I’m sorry I—”

“Don’t,” she shook her head, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder and smiling kindly. “You got my little girl home safe, that’s all that matters. You did all you could, and I can never thank you enough.”

“I’m glad you’re back training again,” Valerie spoke up. “I’ve been… really nervous about it. If you can do it, then I know I can too.”

“Look at you,” Whitney said, slapping Allan on the back. “You already got a fan club!”

Allan stumbled forward a step from the hit, quickly holding Umari close to his chest before she tumbled to the ground. The startled Eevee groaned, both at being thrown around in her current state and at the human who had caused it.

“I’m surprised you know what one looks like,” he shot back, earning an annoyed look. “Seriously though, I just wish I could have saved more than two people.”

“Two’s better than zero, you know.” Whitney turned back to the recovery machine and removed her Pokémon. “All yours.”

“Well, we’d best get going,” Valerie’s mother said. “I’m glad we could catch you today. Please don’t let what you could have done weigh you down.”

“Thank you, I’ll try and remember that.”

‘I’ll remin…d you if… you for…get,’ Umari said, her mental words beginning to lose their clarity.

Allan smiled, gently petting her head. ‘I know you will,’ he told her privately.

“Uh, well, thanks again… Allan.” Valerie smiled sheepishly and waved, then looked down at the tired Eevee still cradled in Allan’s arm. “And you too, little Eevee. I know you helped a lot too.”

He waved goodbye to Valerie and her mother—letting them both know that Umari gave them her best wishes as well—and then turned back around.

“All right then, see you in a few minutes Umari,” Allan recalled her to her Luxury Ball, and placed it, along with Xutan’s plain one, in the machine. He watched as energy danced over the colored spheres, revitalizing the creatures within.

“You know,” Whitney said, leaning against the wall. “If your attitude didn’t suck, you’d probably make something of yourself.”

“What, you think I won’t?” he challenged her.

“You got plans?”

“I might; what’s it to you?” Allan asked, crossing his arms.

“Nothing much,” Whitney pointed to the girl and her mother still exiting the battle arena. “But you mean something to someone. That’s something, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” Allan shrugged. “But what are you trying to get at?”

“I’m just saying you could be more than just some trainer who thinks he’s funny. Think about it.”
She moved past Allan—bumping into his shoulder on purpose, he suspected—and left the auditorium of the gym.

A few minutes later, his Pokémon were fully recovered thanks to the treatment. He released Umari back into the open world.

She noticed his quizzical daze, ‘Allan, what’s up?’

“People acting strange, nothing new.”

After recovering his Natu, Allan left Goldenrod Gym one badge closer to the league. At once, he felt the scorching summer heat assail him as he left the air-conditioned building.

‘Allan, what are we going to do now? We were going to head home soon, right?’ Umari followed the leisurely pace of her trainer through the city.

Now that he wasn’t calling out battle strategies, he could speak freely to his Evolution Pokémon, “Well,” he said, “that was the plan, but I think we deserve break after this morning. Let’s stay in the city and enjoy ourselves for the rest of the day. How’s that sound?”

‘Sounds great! Where’re we heading to now?’

“The underground of the city. There’s a few places down there that I want to check out before heading home. Plus I want to stay out of this heat.”

‘I’m perfectly fine out here. You’re just being whiny.’ She jumped up and took her regular spot on Allan’s shoulder as they reached the entrance.

“But you’re wearing fur. I can’t imagine how you’re so used to this heat.” The two entered the covered stairwell, and made their way down into the underground.

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A short while later, Allan was sitting in a chair at the Goldenrod Barbershop. He had surprised Umari with an appointment to celebrate their victory. Allan had made the reservation earlier that day, deciding that Umari deserved something nice whether they won or not. It had been a while since they last treated themselves to anything. Aside from the trip to the salon, he had stopped at a few of the other stores that caught his interest. Umari had spotted the photography store, and had vehemently insisted on a victory picture with Xutan. He was absorbed in a magazine on Steel type Pokémon, looking for any useful tips for his newly caught Beldum, when a voice seized his attention.

“Excuse me, Mr. Relmstead?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve finished grooming your Eevee,” the young barber said with a hint of pride in his voice. “I have to say; it was really nice to work with her. Eevee with her color are a rare sight.”

‘How do I look?’ Umari asked, hopping up into an empty chair next to Allan. She pranced about and posed to show off her freshly cleaned coat of silvery-white fur.

“You look amazing, Umari.” He lightly stroked her head, immediately impressed at how much softer she felt.
“You did a great job,” Allan said to the salon worker, before reaching for his wallet and asking “what do I owe you?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to charge you for getting to treat a Pokémon like yours! This one’s on the house, but don’t tell my brother,” he laughed, “he hates when I give freebies.”

“I’d feel bad if I left without giving you something. And yes, I do have to.”

After a few more compliments and persuasions, the young hairstylist finally accepted his money. Allan and Umari left the barber shop with the afternoon ahead of them. A good deal of which Allan hoped to spend in the air-conditioned comfort of the Underground. Checking the time on his PokéGear, he noticed it was almost time to pick up their victory picture from the photography store.

From a distance, Allan noticed many people crowded around the entrance. He worked his way through the crowd to try for an employee’s attention. After several unheard calls, the employee apologized that their order was not ready, and would be a while longer. With little else to do, he and Umari took a seat on one of the benches that spanned the length of the Goldenrod Tunnel.

“Umari,” Allan said after a few minutes of people-watching, “Given the choice, what would you like to evolve into?”

‘That’s a dumb question. What else have we been working for all these years? I want to be an Espeon. Why would you even ask that?’

“Well, like I said, if you were given the choice. You could be anything you wanted, but you would want to be an Espeon?”

‘Of course. I want to be useful to you and help the rest of the team. I feel weak as I am now, but when I evolve, I can finally stand on my own.’

“Cut that out, you know full well that you’re just as useful on our team as any of the others, and you aren’t weak, no matter how you feel. Don’t forget that it was because of your strength that we were even able to win today. Now, are you sure you want to be an Espeon?”

‘Why are you asking me this? You still haven’t told me.’

“I— Well,” he paused, “I’ve been thinking on it lately, and if you wanted to, you’re welcome to be any of your possible evolutions. I would accept you no matter what you chose, but I didn’t want you to choose because you just want to impress me, or think you’ll be less of a valuable teammate as something else. It’s your choice.”

‘What’s the matter? You’re making it sound like you don’t want me to be an Espeon.’ She had lowered her ears, and had a hurt expression that looked as if she had been betrayed. All she wanted was to be the best she could be for him, but it seemed to her that he was hiding something.

“Oh no, no, it’s not that, it’s just that, since evolutionary stones are so expensive, what would you do if you evolved into an Umbreon instead?”

‘That’s easy!’ she leaped up to Allan’s pack, and began to root through one of the pockets. She brought out a small, dull rock, and laid it in front of him. ‘I’ve always carried this Everstone around whenever it gets dark. I don’t want to be an Umbreon; I don’t want to be anything else. I want to be an Espeon. And that’s my choice.’

“Well, if that’s what you want, then I’ll support you.” He leaned back and sighed, running his hands through his short blond hair. *Well, there goes that idea…*
‘Allan, really, what’s the matter? You’ve been acting skittish ever since our battle at the Gym. You take me out to celebrate and everything seems alright, then you ask whether or not I want to evolve into an Espeon, which I know you initially wanted. What’s changed? Don’t dodge my questions anymore. What’s been bothering you?’

She was desperately trying to probe his mind with what feeble psychic abilities she had developed, and it was some time before he could face her. She had a concerned look on her face, and her insistence on knowing what he had on his mind only cemented his fears.

“Allan, let’s just leave.”

Umari tried to pull her trainer’s attention away from the man but her words failed to reach him.

“No. Now please leave us alone.”

“Are you quite positive? I’m sure that I can set you up with a very generous offer. I am a salesman, a dealer, a trade organizer - all at your service. Now, how high should I place the starting bid?”

“Let me save you some time, alright buddy? Not now, nor will I ever, want to trade or sell my Eevee. She’s a valuable member on my team, and I would in no way benefit from any offer you could ‘set me up with’,” Allan’s angered words carried out to the surrounding crowd of people, causing some turned heads, “Now, please do us a favor and kindly leave us alone.”

“Now, now sir, there’s no need to be upset. Being a trade organizer is only one of my many talents. Now then,” he held out his briefcase and opened it to Allan. Its contents glittered in the artificial light of the tunnel, gaining some awed comments from the slowly gathering crowd. “I have a wide variety of stones for sale, as you can plainly see,” he seemed to not notice Allan’s expression shift to one of pure anger.

“Now, what could I interest you in?” The salesman continued his routine, expertly showing off his wares to his potential customers that continued to gather. “A Water Stone? I think a Vaporeon would suit you very fine. No? Well, how about a Thunder Stone? A Jolteon would have quite the advantage against any Flying type you might run into. How about a Moon Stone? They say it can evolve an Eevee into an Umbreon, though—”

“Shut your mouth, dammit! It was bad enough when you were trying to buy and sell off my Pokémon, but now you’re flat-out lying to try and pawn off some of your overpriced stones! A Moon Stone wouldn’t do a damn thing to an Eevee and anyone who trains one would know that!
“Now listen to me, and hopefully my words get through to you this time. Leave me and my Eevee alone, unless you want to know what it’s like to be tossed around like a ragdoll for a few hours.” Allan hadn’t noticed that he had stood up during his rant, or that the entirety of the crowd around him was fixed on the scene. The immediate area of the underground mall was nearly silent; a few echoes could be heard from further down the tunnel.

Umari had never seen him this angry, even after all the annoying offers and suggestions they’d dealt with in the past. Something must be deeply troubling her trainer, she thought to herself.

“Well then, I can see you’re quite adamant about denying yourself a wonderful business opportunity. I believe I will take my leave now. Are you sure that—?”

“Get out of my sight. Now, before I—” he stopped. Allan was alerted to a heightened sense of fear and confusion coming from down the tunnel, and could hear screams as whatever was causing the commotion came closer.

“HEY, HEY! MAKE WAY!” A young man was speeding through the underground pass on a bike, with a few security guards failing to keep up a ways back. As he rounded the corner, the salesman didn’t have the time to react to the incoming speeding rule violation. The cyclist clipped the salesman with his bike, causing him to fall forward onto Allan. The man on the bike managed to keep his balance and continued through the tunnel, soon to surface on the other side. As the salesman fell, his open briefcase spilled over the floor and the benches that Allan and Umari had been sitting on.

Before Allan could get the dazed peddler off of himself, he heard Umari cry out in shock.

‘Allan! Get it off me!’

He pushed himself up off the ground as quickly as he could and looked to the bench. One of the Fire Stones from the man’s case had landed on her, glowing a brilliant, orange light.

Allan lunged forward to try and grab the stone, but it burned with an intense heat that caused him to pull away. He could just barely see Umari’s silhouette just through the blinding light.

‘Allan, help me! Please!’

“I’m trying!” Allan reached out with his hand again and attempted a telekinetic pull like he had when fighting the swarm of Beldum, but the effort shot a jolt of pain through his skull.

Umari struggled to make a desperate move towards her Everstone that sat in Allan’s empty seat, but cried out again as the light intensified, and her body began to change.

She grew taller—nearly three times her original height—and much longer from head to tail. Her ears elongated and her fur became unkempt, growing out and becoming wild. Her collar and tail became a light cream color, as did a newly-formed tuft of fur on her forehead. The rest of her fur changed from once silvery-white to a brilliant, glimmering golden shade.

Once the light faded away, Umari stood up, and looked down to see that she was far larger than she had been previously. To her right were the smoldering remains of the Fire Stone that had struck during the confusion, its elemental energy spent and transferred to her.

“Umari?” Allan choked out her name, his heart beating heavily. “Are you alright?”

She didn’t respond, merely continuing to look around at herself and her surroundings.

“You can still speak to me, can’t you? Use your mind! Don’t forget everything we worked on,”
Allan pleaded.

A small burst of fire escaped her mouth, giving her a slight start. The crashing realization of what had happened finally dawned on her.

‘A-Allan… Did… Did that just—? Did I just evolve?’

“Yeah… you did…” he said, almost a whisper. Relief that she could still communicate mentally with him washed over him. He absentmindedly pushed the salesman, who was nursing an injured shoulder, so he could be next to her.

She was on the verge of crying.

‘I— I just breathed fire… didn’t I? I evolved into a Flareon didn’t I?’

“Yeah, that’s what it looks like. Are you—?” Allan couldn’t finish his sentence; she had broken into tears, and was refusing any contact from him. He tried to calm her with his mind, but she was shutting him out completely.

“Ah, a Fire Stone. Quite the fine choice if I do say so myself,” the salesman picked himself up off the floor, admiring the newly evolved Umari.

“I do believe the evolution went rather well, such a beautiful golden coat of fur. An improvement, if I were to give my humble opinion. Now, sir, if we could discuss a method of payment.”

Allan got to his feet, and calmly reached for his back pocket, “I guess I do owe you something.”

A flash of light revealed a metallic, three-clawed arm with a single red eye. It slammed into the man’s neck, pinning him to the wall, leaving just enough room to breathe.

“Do you have any idea what just happened here?! How could you even think that I would give you anything for this? I never wanted any of your damn stones, and now my Eevee evolved by accident. She was going to be an Espeon! There’s no way in hell that I would ever pay you for what you’ve done to her. And,” he punched the smug man in the stomach, “that’s for making her cry!”

He ordered Sontos, his Beldum, to release the man onto the floor. The crowd was silent and standing in a full circle around the scene, not wanting to interfere or make a sound. The man writhed on the ground for a bit, before stumbling to his feet. He seemed to try and find his voice, but a sharp glare from Allan stayed his tongue.

“Not. Another. Word. You piece of shit. Get out of here with your stolen goods and fake credentials before you see what I do to people who continue to hurt those close to me…”

“B-But, h-how did you know they were stolen?” he choked out.

‘Try and figure it out, I’m sure you’ll catch on soon enough…’ Allan’s sudden intrusion into his mind startled the man. ‘Also, I bet that the police would love to catch you, wouldn’t they? They’ve been on your trail for some time, from what I can see inside your slimy head. Good thing they’ve sent a few officers down here to investigate the disturbance.’

Allan watched as the thief tried to make his escape through the crowd, frantically scooping up what fallen stones he could as he went. Allan caught a momentary sense of amusement as the man was apprehended, having run directly into a police officer who had been in the crowd. The remaining people watching the scene unfold soon dispersed and left the trainer with his distraught Flareon. Allan recalled Sontos, and knelt down in front of the seat Umari was in.
She was facing the back of the bench, with her paws covering her face.

‘Umari. Can you hear me?’ Allan asked her.

‘Yes…’

Allan was glad that she answered him so quickly, though the sound of her mental voice had changed. It was now clearer to him, more confident, and despite her current state, held a certain fire to it.

‘Are you alright?’

‘No… just no.’

‘Come on, Umari. Look at me. Please?’

She reluctantly turned to face him, tears streaming down her face. ‘I’m so sorry, Allan!’ she leapt at Allan and redoubled her crying into his chest.

‘Why are you sorry? There’s nothing you could’ve done to stop this. If anything, it’s that idiot on the bike, or that bastard salesman’s fault. Hell, I could’ve done more. I could’ve reacted better, but I didn’t. Blame me, blame them, but never blame yourself.’ He brushed the tears from her face and brought her into an embrace. She continued to cry softly for a few moments, before looking back at him.

‘So… you’re not disappointed? Now I’ll never be an Espeon for you… I know, I said I wanted to be one for me, and I meant it, but I also wanted to make you proud of me…’

‘Umari, what were we talking about before all this happened? Don’t you remember what I said? In no way could you ever disappoint me. I said that you could be anything you wanted, and I would be proud of any of your choices.’ He brought her closer to him, and softly said aloud, “Now please, stop crying. I can’t bear to see you cry anymore. Let’s get out of here.”

‘Okay…’

Allan picked Umari up from the bench, gathered his pack, and began to head out of the underground.

“Excuse me, sir?” Allan turned to see who it was that interrupted him. Thankfully, his preemptive rage was wasted. The clerk from the photography store cautiously said, “Here’s your order. I’m sorry for the wait.” She handed him the package and the frame he had picked out. “Also, if it means anything, I’m sorry for what happened here.”

“Thank you,” he said. He gave the clerk some money, not checking to see if he overpaid or not, and turned away from the scene. He carried Umari in his arms as he reluctantly made his way back into the blazing heat.

[MAIL]

[From: Prof. J. Elm]
[To: Cartographer ID: B. I. Thomas (53142)]
[Subject: Newest Acquisition?]
[Mr. Thomas, it’s great to see that you’re active once again after your harrowing experiences. Your report of Woobat and relatives in Diglett’s Cave were quite the surprise last week. I hope things are going well for you and your family.

[Getting to the point, if you’ll excuse my bluntness, what exactly did you just catch? Your Pokédex registered a new capture late last night, but it is having trouble identifying the species for some reason. The device had been fully up-to-date when we gave it to you, in addition to any new information pooled together from other Cartographers.

[Project Cartographer was always designed to monitor shifts in Pokémon habitats and monitor potentially invasive species, but it was always a possibility—and admittedly a small dream of mine—to find a brand new species as a result of our efforts. If you’ve actually accomplished this, Professor Oak and I would very much like it if you would bring them into one of our two labs (Pallet Town isn’t too far from your last recorded location).

[I hope this isn’t just some glitch in our OS or something less exciting like that.

[Still, all the best!

[P.S. I do realize the Kanto-Johto gym circuit is rather appealing, but as of late we’ve only had 1 active Cartographer in Johto. A. J. Wingborne hasn’t been keeping up with regular reports for some time, and C. M. Altswalder has expressed frustration at being the only trainer in the region “pulling their weight”. I understand that the two of you have had your fair share of incidents, and we are sympathetic to that fact, but we would greatly appreciate it if you would traverse some of the less-traveled routes of Johto if you could find the time. Kanto has its own team of Cartographers, so rest easy knowing the region is in capable hands.

—Elm]

To Be Continued in Part 2: Burn…
The sun beat down mercilessly on Johto’s Route 35, its stifling heat taxing to those without the grace of shade. Following the trend of the previous days, the temperature showed no signs of dropping. Travelers were few and far between during this intense summer weather. Despite this, two—a trainer and his Pokémon—trudged along the winding path, heading north.

One of the pair, a young man, had a hefty backpack slung across his shoulders, the weight of which was becoming more bothersome with every step he made. The two large bags of food and drinks he had clutched in his hands only added to the strain on his back. Every few minutes, he would stop and place the bags on the ground for a moment to reach up to wipe the sweat from his brow. His blond hair had become a tangled, matted mess.

He felt miserable, though not exclusively because of the weather or his aching muscles.

He looked down to his right at his companion, who was not bothered by the heat.

Beside him walked a Flareon with shimmering golden fur. Draped over her shoulders was a large, wool blanket—an important component of any picnic. Umari had calmed down a great deal since their ordeal in the tunnel. After a quick check up at the Pokémon Center, she had been given a perfect report. This had relieved Allan a great deal, but Umari still held her sullen attitude, unable to be brought out of it by Allan’s efforts to cheer her up.

Allan at least took it as a good sign that Umari was still determined to travel so soon after her sudden evolution.

Despite everything that had happened to her, a part of her refused to go along with the rest of her depressed thoughts. Even with the heavy blanket she was carrying, she felt absolutely at home in the hot summer weather. She could feel the flame within her—its heat radiating throughout her body—and it gave her a sense of fulfillment just by reflecting on it. Thinking back on it, even when she had been an Eevee, she remembered never minding a hot day as much as her trainer did. Though she wouldn’t admit it out-loud yet, Umari felt positively amazing as a Flareon, and was starting to believe that she was meant to evolve the way that she did.

She still had regrets—deep regrets—about her accidental evolution, but she was starting to think she might be able to make use of her fiery form.

Their current destination was a small clearing off the beaten path of Route 35. Allan and Umari had stumbled upon it by accident while on the way to Violet City back when they first started their journey. He had planned this small party as they neared Ecruteak City to celebrate how far they had come since leaving home. Now, it doubled as a victory party in light of their win at Goldenrod Gym.

Allan had decided to call it off after the incident in the Underground, but Umari had insisted that they go through with the day’s outing, not wanting to ruin the plans for the rest of the team just because of what happened.
‘Allan, how much farther is it to that field?’ Umari asked.

“It’s been a while,” he said. “But I think the path we have to take is just before the entrance to the National Park. It was near the large pond, you remember it don’t you?”

‘A little; we only stopped for a bit after we took the wrong path on the way to Violet.’ Umari looked up at him, ‘You were more worried about running away from Alice than going the right way.’

“We were just starting out,” Allan defended himself. “I didn’t want to have someone follow us wherever we went.”

His mind on the subject, Allan realized that he hadn’t heard from Alice since she had been discharged from the hospital. Before he could mention the uncharacteristic behavior to Umari, she spoke up again.

‘I hated how close we were to the National Park, but we never actually went there…’

“You want to walk through it on the way home? We actually have some spare time, and we wouldn’t have to worry about wild Pokémon until we’re almost home.”

‘Sure…’ Umari looked down at the ground as she continued walking, slowly falling behind her trainer. His suggestion did very little to raise her spirits.

As a worrying thought crept into her mind, Umari stopped walking altogether—so suddenly that it took Allan a few moments to realize she had fallen behind.

“Umari, are you okay?” he turned around and asked her.

‘Allan…do you…?’ Umari kept her eyes on the ground.

“What is it?” Allan started to walk back, concern for her obvious on his face.

‘Do you think they’ll…hate me?’

“How?”

‘The rest of the team. They’ll probably hate that I didn’t turn out like them. I bet Duncan and Sontos will even be afraid of me burning them! I hate this! I’m never going to be accepted like this!”

She collapsed on the dirt road, crying anew. She covered her face with the blanket, refusing to look at anything.

Allan wasted no time going to her side, letting the bags of food fall onto the ground. He had hoped that she had made it through the worst of her ordeal since leaving the city, but it was clear to him now that his new Flareon held onto more worries than she had been letting on.

“Umari,” he said, kneeling down, “do you honestly think anyone would hate you because of an accident? They’re not the kind to just hate someone like that. Besides, you’re still the Umari they’ve known all this time. If they have any problem with what happened, I’ll deal with them. Here,” he lifted the blanket up, and rubbed her back comfortingly.

“And ignore Duncan if he acts like an idiot, all those heads of his don’t help with social interaction as much as battle. And Sontos already saw you back in the tunnel. I doubt anyone will have a problem with your evolution any more than I do. Please stop worrying yourself so much.”

‘I’m so sorry… I don’t mean to cause you so much trouble. I just—’
“Umari, that’s enough. Stop apologizing already. I keep telling you, it wasn’t your fault.”

‘I’m sorry…’ She couldn’t help herself.

“Umari, stop it!” Allan’s harsh voice snapped her out of her depressed stupor. The frustration he felt after seeing his once-cheery and optimistic Pokémon so distraught finally got the better of him. He had never raised his voice to her before, and it was clear that doing so now was a mistake.

Allan tried to console her as she stood up, but she quickly backed away from him, her ears pulling back in worry.

“Listen, I’m sorry. I really am. I didn’t mean to yell at you.” She held a glare at him for a moment before turning away. That short turn of her head sent a jolt of fear through Allan’s body, causing him to tense up. He began to panic; he didn’t want to make things any worse than he already had.

“Umari please, look at me.”

She did, though not without giving him a hurtful glare. Umari couldn’t believe he would yell at her like that, especially considering everything that had happened.

Through their basic psychic link, though, Umari could feel genuine regret from her trainer, and she relaxed her defensive posture.

Allan tentatively reached out to the golden fur on her head, which she allowed.

He felt a fraction of the weight on his shoulders leave him, thankful that she was willing to forgive his outburst. He took a deep breath, picking his words carefully this time.

“I know you feel bad about what happened, but I just don’t want you to keep blaming yourself. I didn’t mean to snap at you. What happened was an accident, that’s all it was. I told you I’d always accept you no matter what you decided to evolve into, and I meant it. This changes nothing.”

‘But I didn’t choose this!’ It was Allan’s turn to be surprised at his partner’s ferocity. Her evolution seemed to have awakened a new, bolder side of herself.

‘I don’t feel “bad” about it, I’m not “sad” about it; I’m pissed off! I only wanted to evolve into an Espeon, not this! And now I can’t go back! Not ever! I’m stuck like this… and I can’t ever…’

‘“Ever” what? Be useful to me? Umari, trust me, just because the circumstances don’t match from what I said earlier doesn’t mean I’m going to think less of you for not being an Espeon.”

‘No, that’s not it.’ Umari shook her head, taking a deep breath before continuing.

‘I think I can be a good Fire type. My internal flame, I can feel it. I mean really feel it. It’s hard to describe, but it feels like a raging inferno, just bursting with power. I think I finally understand what other Pokémon feel when they have a real connection to an element. But no matter how much I try, I’ll never be what I could have been to you as I am now. And you know it!’

“What do you mean? You’ll be the same as you always were to me, Umari.”

‘That’s just it! If I had become an Espeon, I could’ve been more than I had been. I’ll never have that bond that you have the rest of the team. The bond that all Psychic Pokémon develop with their trainers, the kind of bond where their two minds intertwine and act as one. Everything that you taught me, everything that I’ve looked forward to for years is all gone now. That’s what I’m regretting the most. I’ve always wanted that kind of connection with someone, something real, and
meaningful. Now I’ll only just be a useless, extra member on the team. Someone you have to go out
of your way to even talk to…”

“That’s not true! I enjoy talking to you, I always have. I’ll admit, the bond with a Psychic type is far
more advanced than anything I could sustain by myself, but not having it isn’t the end of the world.
And don’t think for a second that you’re useless. In fact, with your evolution, we’re probably even
better off now.”

“What?” Umari blinked, unsure she had heard him correctly. She had thought that he couldn’t upset
her any worse than when he had yelled at her, but Allan was apparently determined to prove her
wrong.

Allan’s voice caught in his throat for a moment as he scrambled to explain his clumsy words.

“I mean, I wasn’t planning on catching a Fire type anytime soon, so now we’ve got that much more
—”

“Even better off”?! She flung his words back at him, her fur bristling in anger.

“What the hell are you saying?” she growled along with her mental voice.

“You’re Allan Relmstead! Remember? You’re a Psychic trainer. Your dream is to be the best
Psychic trainer in Johto. Your idol is Will, a Psychic master. And now that I’ve become a Fire type,
you’re suddenly better off?! NO!”

Unlike her depressive and intrusive thoughts, which shifted from one paranoid scenario to the next,
her anger at Allan was clear and focused. In a way it was sobering; she couldn’t feel sorry for herself
if she was furious at him.

“For years we’ve been training to be the best. I’ve been dreaming of the day when I’d become an
Espeon. We’d always talk about how once I evolved, we’d keep challenging gyms, and eventually
challenge Will for his title rather than go for the championship. But now that I’m a Fire type you’ve
given up! You even seem to be happy about it!”

“I’m not happy about it, but I’m not that put off by it either. We still have the potential to become an
Elite Four team; don’t put yourself down just because—”

“STOP IT! There! Right there! You just said ‘Elite Four’, not ‘Psychic Master’. You really have
abandoned your dream because of me! I know it. Don’t try and deny it either, you’ll just make this
worse. Why not just give me away then? You’d be able to go about your business just fine with your
team of mind readers.’

“I’m not abandoning my dream, Umari,” he matched her ferocity with his own stern tone.

“I still want to be the best Psychic trainer, but not if that means I can’t have you with me. You’re too
important to me to just forget about because you’re different from the rest of the team. I wouldn’t
think of just giving you up after all we’ve been through. If I have to, I’ll let Will keep his position
and just be an ordinary trainer for you. But I don’t think it’ll have to come to that. We can still
challenge him for his Elite Four spot, which is what we were striving for anyway.”

“But you’ll still have just a pure Fire type on your team. You think anyone will respect you for that?”

Umari suspected Allan’s kind words were just for her own benefit; Allan couldn’t be willing to
throw away everything he had always dreamed of just for her.
“And why wouldn’t they? A lot of ‘Type Specialists’ around the world have a few exceptions to their teams. Even Lance has a few non-Dragon types on his team. Besides,” he smiled at her, “people had better think twice before they start to judge you by your fluffy exterior. We’ll leave them all in pile of their own ashes, just you wait Umari.”

She looked up at his smiling face and couldn’t believe a single word he said.

‘How?’ she cried. ‘How can you be okay with this? Your life’s dream is gone in an instant, and you’re fine with just giving it all up? Just like that? For what? Why are you so damn accepting of this? I’ve ruined your life so much… Why⁈’

“Because you’re worth it, Umari.” He brought her into a hug, and redoubled his message with his mind as well as his voice.

“You’re not just a Pokémon on my team who battles for me, and you’re not just some result of a freak accident. You are Umari. You’re one of the best things to happen in my life in a long time. All those nights where we just talked, all those times were we comforted each other, all the good, and all the bad. You’re invaluable, you’re irreplaceable, you’re the one who’s always been there for me, and who I want to be there in the future.”

Allan felt a sense of unease creep into him as he began to express his feelings to her, but pushed it to the back of his mind, knowing that Umari needed to hear what he had to say.

“You’re a great friend, a great fighter, and someone I would never dream of abandoning. You’re precious to me, and despite what you keep thinking, you’re important enough to allow some compromise,” he set her down on the ground, wiping what tears still remained from her face.

“Now, can we please drop this? I don’t want to see you upset anymore.” After everything that had happened to them, Allan desperately wanted to move away from any more hardships.

‘I-I’m…’ She found herself hung up on a single word he had said. Precious.

“And don’t apologize, Umari. It’s alright. Are we good now?”

‘Y-Yeah…’ Umari wiped her face with her paw, not minding that Allan had misunderstood her.

‘I think so. I didn’t mean to doubt you. I know you care about me, I was just—I don’t know… upset, angry, confused, sad… I’m sorry.’

He chuckled, “What did I just say? C’mon, let’s get our picnic started before it starts to get dark.”

Allan gathered up the food and put the blanket back over Umari’s shoulders before resuming their walk down the path under the blazing sun.

“Umari, pull the blanket tighter on your side. There we go,” Allan set down the bags of food on one end of the blanket, his large backpack on the other.

With their seating arrangements taken care of, the two took a moment’s rest, each taking a spot on the blanket and watching the sunlight dance along the surface of the pond.

Umari laid down on the soft blanket and stretched out her body, trying to let go of some stress. The
rest of the walk to their spot had been much more pleasant. After having put aside some of her doubts, she could finally appreciate her trainer’s prods at merriment. Before, she had also been too nervous to try out her Fire abilities, but after their talk, she’d spent much of the walk experimentally spouting short bursts of flame. Unfortunately, no trainers were to be seen to try them out in battle.

“Well, I think it’s about time we brought everyone up to speed. You ready?”

“Well, we have to, don’t we? I’ll just,’ she sheepishly moved around behind his back. ‘I’ll just be over here... don’t stand up please...’

“Alright, I’ll ease them into it.” He reached to his side and grasped three of the multi-colored spheres that rested on his belt.

From the plain Poké Ball, Allan’s first Pokémon emerged. Xutan fluttered in the air on his tiny wings, taking in his new surroundings for a moment before settling down on the blanket in front of his trainer.

The second, coming from a Friend Ball, was the same metal arm that had shown itself in the underground tunnel. Sontos the Beldum was no longer the aggressive leader of an invasive population of his kind that had taken up residence in Ilex Forest. Thanks to the Friend Ball, he had warmed up to the rest of the team very quickly. His intelligence had also been developing at an astounding rate; Allan attributed it to having been exposed to more than just his own kind.

The third, Duncan’s Safari Ball, released the historically annoying cluster of six pink eggs. After few moments, and many bumped heads, the Exeggcute found a reasonable spot on the blanket to settle down.

‘Hey, Master,’ one of Duncan’s heads spoke up. ‘What’re we doing today?’

‘We wish we could do this more often. This weather is great,’ said another, rather perky egg.

‘What’re you saying?’ a not-so-amiable head chimed in. ‘It’s hotter than it was back home. The sooner we get to old Two-Legs’ house, the better.’

“Guys, settle down—”

‘C’mon, this isn’t so bad. We’ve got everything. Food, friends, and a good time. What else is needed in this world?’

‘You gaining some damn sense for once. Why don’t you—’

‘Hey you headache of an egg pile, I think our master has something on his mind, so why don’t you stop your constant hexagonal bickering for a few minutes, and try and work on some coordination for once!’

The group of eggs turned in tandem to Xutan, the team’s habitual peace-keeper. Being the first of Allan’s Pokémon, his experience had gained him a leader’s status among the rest of the team. Duncan soon quelled his objections. Being wild in the Safari Zone had stripped him of his natural instinct that drove the “pack mentality”, but that hadn’t lasted long with Xutan’s goals to lead a strong team. Having dissent in the lower ranks was not tolerated.

“Thanks, Xutan. Now, everyone,” Allan addressed them. “Before we get to the food and whatnot, there’s something I need to tell you all.”

‘We’re still going back to your home, right master?’
“Yes Duncan, that’s still the plan, but I need to talk to you all about—”

“We’re not going to face that Gym right away, are we? Ghosts aren’t exactly our forte, if you haven’t noticed,” a few more heads added their resentment towards their next Gym target. Duncan’s multiple heads often had conflicting opinions, and occasionally came to a near standstill in decisiveness.

“We’ve still got a chance, you three. Don’t just resign us to a loss just because of a bad outlook. Remember Azalea? That didn’t bode well for any of us, but we still won. All we have to do is believe that our trainer will—”

“Stop it with the happy-go-lucky attitude, you always spout your stupidity at every turn, but you need to be realistic. Ghosts are a no-go. No one here has any sort of advantage except Umari. At least she’s immune to them.”

A sharp glare from Xutan silenced any further retort, and it was Sontos who spoke next.

“Master Allan, why is it that Umari is absent from this meeting? It is my understanding that an explanation is the reason for calling this assembly.’

“I know, Sontos, I know.” Allan sent a mental nudge to Umari over what bond existed between them, ‘Go on Umari. You’ll be fine. But I can’t guarantee Duncan won’t explode with a thousand questions.’

‘Alright…’

Allan hit the nail on the head as he watched his team’s reaction when Umari walked from behind his back. Duncan was, not surprisingly, the first to comment on the revelation.

“Well, hello there Flareon. Nice choice master, a Fire type will fry those ghosts!

‘One of another color too! A lucky break and a lucky catch! We’re surprised you went for a non-Psychic though. We thought you were going to be purely a Psychic trainer?’

‘Not to mention the fact that it’s another Eeveelution. We doubt Umari is going to like this very much…’

‘Where is she anyway, Master? We think she should be here to meet our new member too.’

‘Yeah, we thought she was your favorite, why’re you leaving her out?’

“Guys…”

‘Really now, you go out of your way to improve the team, and you don’t think to include one of its main members? Seems inconsiderate to us, Master.’

Sontos shifted his eye to look down at the very confused Exeggute, ‘Do excuse the interruption Teammate Duncan, but you’re denser than I am, and I’m made of metal. Do you really not see what is in front of your own eyes?’ He turned to the small bird sitting at the opposite end of the group, ‘Teammate Xutan, you’re the voice of reason on the team; is it safe to assume that what has happened here is obvious to you?’

The psychic avian ruffled his small wings, ‘It is, and although I would like an explanation, I think it would be best for Duncan if his collective heads actually put two and two together on this one.’
‘We don’t get the big deal here. We just thought it’d be nice to include Umari on this little debriefing, since she’ll have to get along with th— oh man…’

‘Yes, ‘oh man’ indeed,’ Xutan said to the now-shocked egg creature.

A few awkward glances, silences, and private conversations later, one of Duncan’s heads turned to Umari and spoke up, ‘Alright, we’ll bite. What happened?’

‘I evolved.’ Umari sat down in front of her teammates. ‘There was an accident in the underground tunnel. A Fire Stone hit me, and well, it just happened. So, I’m a Flareon now,’ she took a moment to gather herself, ‘and I’m going to make the best of it.’

They turned to Allan, ‘And you’re okay with this?’

“Of course I am,” he ruffled the fur on Umari’s head as he spoke, “She’s still Umari, and isn’t any less important now than if she had evolved otherwise. And I don’t want to see any of you treat her any different, got it?”

‘Understood, Master Allan,’ was the response from Sontos. Xutan gave his affirmative soon after.

“Duncan, why the pause?” Allan had been wary of what his Exeggcute might do or say; the six individual minds were notoriously difficult to predict.

The group of six eggs remained silent, but rolled up close to Umari. Duncan’s heads each gave a scrutinizing glare as they stared her down, ‘Well, she looks alright, but can she control her flame?’

Allan made to retort, but Umari was quicker on the uptake, ‘Of course I can. I might’ve just evolved, but I’m not some clumsy Magmar setting fire to people’s houses.’

Allan watched the events that followed, as his Exeggcute showed a surprising amount of compassion, ‘Oh really now? Your evolution seems to have sparked more fire than just typing in you. Think you can stand a little target practice?’

‘Against you? You’ll be burnt to a crisp! You’re not exactly the fastest thing on no legs you know.’

‘Then you should have no problem scoring a few hits. Come on, let’s see what you can do,’ they all rolled off to the distance, keeping close to the water pool for safety. After a quick glance at Allan, Umari rushed over and started firing off small Ember attacks. Duncan surprised her by splitting off into six separate targets, bumping into her as she missed.

While the two played their dangerous game of tag, Sontos lowered himself to the ground, silently watching the event play out.

Xutan, however, had something more on his mind.

‘So, Allan,’ he said, landing on his shoulder. ‘This seems remarkably close, don’t you think? I certainly wasn’t expecting an evolution like this. Neither were you, I would think.’

“You got that right,” Allan said quietly.

‘Keep in mind; what I saw was never clear to begin with.’

“Don’t remind me…”
Suddenly wrested from his afternoon nap, Allan awoke to his Flareon gently nudging his head. He had fallen asleep as his Pokémon ate their food that he had brought for the outing. He realized that his nap had far exceeded what he had planned for the day; the sun was barely above the tree line in the distance.

‘Are you alright? You looked like you were having a bad dream until I woke you up. What was it?’

He dragged his palms across his face in an attempt to focus, “It’s nothing…”

‘Come on, you can tell me. You seem pretty shaken up about it.’

“No, it’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“What’s the matter? You’ve told me about your dreams before; you’ve even shown me a few. What’s so bad about this one?” Umari had never seen her trainer so closed off before—least of all to her.

“Umari. Really, it’s fine. I’m okay. Whatever it was, I can barely remember it now anyway. I’ll be fine,” he hugged her.

“Thank you though. I didn’t mean to worry you.” Allan felt awful to be dreading how thoughtful his Pokémon was being. He knew that if he didn’t steer the conversation away soon, Umari would never let up.

‘You sure you’re alright? You’re always able to talk to me about anything, you know that.’

“I know, thank you.” Allan saw that his team was too tired to take on another route.

“Well, it’s too late now to start heading home, and the National Park is closed by now. Sorry we couldn’t get to it today.”

“It’s fine. Are we going to head back to Goldenrod for the night?”

“How about a camp out? We’ve basically set up a spot already, and I think we’ve spent enough nights indoors lately. Besides, we’ll be taking a break for a little while once we get home anyway. I’ve got some things to take care of.”

“What things?”

Allan turned away from her, looking out at the field around them. He grit his teeth, kicking himself for not being more careful; he had brought the conversation back to exactly where he didn’t want it.

“Well, things that I’m not too sure about, to be honest. I’m hoping this break will help me sort them out. But, let’s not worry about that right now. We’ve got to set up camp for the night.”

‘You sure you’re okay Allan? What’s bothering you? You can tell me.’ Umari was sure he was hiding something from her now, she just needed to get him to open up to her like he used to.

He turned to look back at his partner, her concern for him pervading the look on her face.

The rest of his team had stopped their activities, and were watching the sun slowly set behind the trees. Sontos looked on, ever watchful, never blinking, into the blinding light, Duncan's heads took turns at watching the bright display. Xutan was focused on another fiery matter, carefully watching his trainer dance around the questions of his Flame Pokémon.
“Umari,” he said as he stood up. “We’ve got to set up camp. These problems can wait. It’ll be dark —”

‘Problems?! What problems? Why are you hiding things from me? What is so damn important that you can’t tell me? It’s troubling you enough to have bad dreams about it, so why won’t you let me help you?’ Desperate for answers, Umari tried to see into Allan’s thoughts with her feeble psychic abilities. Just when she thought she finally found something, Allan shut her out completely.

“Don’t pry into my head!” he shouted, both vocally and mentally.

Umari had initiated a mental connection with him before, but she had never been so invasive. She had always just wanted to communicate with him, not read his innermost thoughts. Allan hadn’t been guarding himself very well and hastily blocked off his mind from all outside influences.

The sudden psychic shock forced Umari out of his mind, making her flinch. It didn’t hurt—not physically, at least. Allan had never refused her mental touch before, a fact that worried her even more. Allan was hiding something important—that much was clear.

“Look,” he started after a tense moment, “I know you’re worried about me—and I’m sorry that I yelled at you again—but you don’t try and invade someone’s consciousness! I’ve tried to make that clear ever since I began training you. I know you want to help, and I wish you could, but right now, I need to deal with these problems by myself,” he knelt down, but didn’t approach her.

“I apologize for being forceful, but I meant what I said. You are to never force yourself into someone’s mind.” Allan had taught his Pokémon that one golden rule throughout all of his years training them for the benefit of others’ privacy; he had never expected to be the one who might have their mind intruded upon, though.

‘I already know all that, but what else can I do? You’re scaring me Allan! You’re refusing to let me help when you’ve never hidden anything from me before. It’s something serious, I can tell that. Is it about me? About my evolving? What is it?’

“Umari… please—”

‘No! No more of your stalling. I want to know right now! What’s been bothering you so much? If you won’t tell me what it is, then at least tell me why you can’t bring yourself to say it. If I’m as ‘precious’ to you as you say I am, I think I deserve that much.’ Umari knew that using Allan’s own words—words she that was happy to hear no less—against him was playing dirty, but she was running out of ideas.

“I don’t— I mean, I can’t tell you—” he let out a frustrated sigh. Umari’s relentless pressuring was unnerving him.

“Listen, I know how frustrating this must be, but you’re going to have to let me handle this on my own. At least until I know I can’t handle it by myself. If it gets to that stage, I promise I’ll come to you. So until then, can we forget about it?”

‘So I’m just being pushed aside, just because you say so? How’s that going to solve anything? How do I know you’re not lying to me?’ She was getting him to cooperate, at least partially, but it wasn’t good enough. She needed to keep pushing.

“Because,” ‘I mean it Umari. I really do.’ His message to her was imbued with a sense of assurance and trust.

“I’ve never broken a promise to you before, have I?”
‘No…’ her posture eased as she calmed down a bit from her slight panic.

‘So, you’re sure you’re okay? I’ll never drop this if you show any doubt. I mean it, okay?’

“I know you do, and thank you,” he reached out and gently scratched behind one of her ears.

“I promise I’ll come to you if I need anything. So,” he addressed the small crowd that had formed behind him, “if the rest of you are done eavesdropping, I think it’s time to get ready for the night.”

Umari giggled as she watched her teammates’ collective reactions to being caught. Duncan hastily tried to scramble away from his teammates, and Sontos simply levitated upward until he was out of her view. Xutan flew off to the blanket, and started to fumble with gathering it up. She was glad for a break from the serious conversations, even for a brief moment.

The sun had finally fallen behind the tree-line when the group got settled in for the night. Allan rolled out a light sleeping bag—he had opted to leave his tent in storage. The strange weather of late made the nights all too hot for one, anyway.

The team had taken up their rest in their respective Poké Balls, aside from Umari. She took her normal spot, though now she lay only partially on Allan; her evolution had made her too large to simply lie on his chest. The sky had accumulated a few clouds, enough to obscure the moonlight every few moments. The night was hot, as to be expected due to the heat wave. But tonight, Allan was sleepless for other reasons.

_Dammit, at this rate … it’ll really be me that does cause it… unless it already happened… No, it’s still possible… Dammit._

The pair had gotten up early and decided to spend the morning hours by taking the longer, safer path to their home by cutting through the National Park. The day had been uneventful and calming, until Umari suddenly asked, ‘Why is Bugsy here?’

“What?”

‘Bugsy, you know? Purple hair, likes bugs a bit too much? He’s right over there. He’s going around looking for something.’

Just as she directed him, Allan saw the Bug type Gym Leader of Azalea Town strolling about the park. He would every so often glance around pointedly, and stopped occasionally to ask a passerby an unheard question.

‘What do you think he’s—? Hey, what’re you doing?’

Allan quickly ducked down behind a bench and started hastily rifling through his pack.

“Hat, hat, hat, I know I have one… There we are. Yeah, backwards isn’t me, this’ll work. Umari, you make sure you’re close to me, alright?”

‘Sure, but why?’

“He doesn’t know you’ve evolved yet; no one does. This’ll work to our advantage.”

‘I’m still confused, what’re we working for?’
“Well,” he said as he adjusted his cap, “Unless I miss my guess, and I rarely do, I’m thinking Bugsy’s on the hunt for us, on word from Whitney. Bugsy’s a bug fanatic, and comes here often, so Whitney probably sent him here to intercept us on our way to Ecruteak. If it were any other time, I’d love to find out what that crazy girl was talking about, but now isn’t the time to mess with those people after the interest they showed back in Goldenrod.”

‘Why not?’ she asked.

‘I think now’s a perfect opportunity, and I think it’s good that Whitney’s getting back to us this soon. She made it seem like it would be a while before we heard anything more from them, so why aren’t we dealing with it now?’

“Because,” he sighed, “I have enough to worry about right now. Anything else just isn’t a priority to me. I want to get home as soon as possible, they can find me any time they want, but I don’t want it to be now. Now, stick close to me, and we should be able to get out of here without him recognizing us.”

‘Got it.’ Umari decided that if it meant getting closer to resolving Allan’s troubles, she would be willing to go along with whatever he had planned.

They resumed their previous path, casually avoiding Bugsy’s search pattern. Unfortunately, the park was far less crowded this early, and places that broke line-of-sight were fleeting at best. It was not long before a careless turn on Allan’s part brought him right in the path of the Bug trainer.

“Excuse me, sir? I’m looking for someone who may have passed by here recently. He has an alternately colored Eevee, and was heading for Ecruteak City. Name of Allan Relmstead, have you seen him today?”

Trying his best to act surprised, he made an attempt at disguising his voice and responded, “Allan, shiny Eevee, going to Ecruteak… Hmm… Can’t say I’ve heard of him. I’d remember someone else with a shiny Pokémon with them,” he paused, “Hey, aren’t you Azalea’s Gym Leader?”

“Nice guess! The name’s Bugsy, I come here every so often. I love the Bug types they have here, and I love watching the contests, even if I don’t compete.”

“So what’s a Gym Leader doing looking for a random trainer? This Relmstead isn’t one of those problem trainers the League has to ‘correct’ every now and then, is he?”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that. I’m just a messenger boy today. I don’t think I remember you coming by the Gym before, are you new to the region?”

“I’m from Kanto. The name’s Carson. Five badges. I thought I’d head to Johto for a while and test the Gyms over here.”

“Well, I hope you make it to Azalea soon, I’d love to battle you for your sixth,” he checked his PokéGear, and made to walk away.

“Sorry to leave so soon, but I’ve got to find this guy. Head to Azalea Gym when you’re in the neighborhood, you hear?”

“Can do!” He waited until Bugsy was far enough down the path before moving again.

After making sure they were well away, Allan removed his cap.

“That was close. Gotta hand it to my natural acting skills, I thought he’d catch on for sure.”
‘Acting skills? You were nervous the whole time and made all that up on the spot. Just be glad Bugsy didn’t have pictures to show people. He’d have recognized us straight away if he knew it was me too. He never did like the fact that we beat him.’ Umari felt a familiar warmth begin to return between the two of them. She didn’t realize how much she missed it until it was missing.

“All right, we were lucky, I’ll give you that. Now let’s get a move on, I want to get home as soon as we can.”

Unlike his optimistic Flareon, who was dreaming of reviving the past, only one thing was on Allan’s mind:

The future.

After their run-in with the Azalea Gym Leader, Allan and Umari enjoyed a very calming and peaceful morning in the National Park. The crowds had amassed to their usual sizes, and with them brought quite a few admirers who wanted to get a better look at Umari. The frequent stops were costing him time, but Allan was grateful that she was enjoying the extra attention.

Soon, the day crept into early afternoon, and the decision to skip breakfast was bearing down on the two. To Umari’s surprise, the National Park had a small outdoor restaurant. There was a pair of them, Allan told her, one on either side of the park itself. Trainers made up most of the clientèle, but some regular patrons also frequented the restaurants.

Before venturing on to the next leg of their trek, they agreed that a break from the heat of the day would do them well. Surprisingly, evolution hadn’t changed much of Umari’s choice in food. She did surprise Allan by asking for hot sauce to add to her meal, but she still requested a small side of ice cream for dessert.

“So Umari,” he asked between bites of his sandwich, “Did you have fun today?”

‘Yes. This place is beautiful. I’m glad I finally got to see it, but something’s been bugging me for a little while…’

“What is it?” Allan’s shoulders tensed up, worried she was going to bring up one of their earlier arguments.

“Well, how did you know that Bugsy was looking for you?”

“I told you, it was a guess.” He let out a small sigh of relief that it was something so simple.

‘Liar. You read his mind from a distance, didn’t you?’ Umari wondered how her trainer would talk around this.

“I, well, you know, I wouldn’t really count it as reading his mind, but… yeah…”

‘How not? Seems pretty mind-reader like to me.’

“Well, I didn’t go looking for him; it was kind of on reflex. You know I’ve made it a habit to constantly scan the surrounding area for any potential danger. After you pointed him out in the crowd, I just happened to catch my name at the front of his mind. Like right now, the lady three tables to our right is wondering why her date is late, and the waiter just realized he mixed up the bills of two customers. You’re currently exuding a sense of amusement and a little bit of jealousy,” he eased up a bit at that.
“So I take it you’re not angry?”

‘Not really, no. I find it funny how you bend your own rules and somehow make sense of it. Don’t pin me as being jealous, but I do wish I could be as good as you some day with psychic abilities. You’re a human after all; you’d think I should be able to pick up on it quicker than you would.’

“Don’t worry so much, it isn’t easy for non-psychics to just become psychically able. I’m sure with enough practice; your skills will improve greatly.”

‘Would you help me, you know, like we used to back when you first learned you could talk to me? Soon too, I’m sick of having Duncan always one-up me.’

“Sure, I’d like that,” he lied.

The rest of Allan’s meal was filled not with musings of the memories of old, but with dreadful thoughts of what awaited him.

I’m running out of time.

———

‘Remember this spot, Allan?’

“…”

‘Allan. Hey Allan! Wake up!’

“Sorry,” he said, “What were you saying?”

She pouted, ‘Thinking about your ‘problems’ again?’

“Y-Yeah, a bit. Sorry, I didn’t mean to ignore you. What were you saying?”

‘This place, this route, you and me. Doesn’t this all bring back good memories?’

He smiled, “Sure, but I remember going through more than a couple rough patches just after we left home.”

‘I know, but I loved those first few days, even if they didn’t go as planned. We found our way soon enough, and the feeling of seeing Violet City come into view for the first time… can’t beat it.’

“You remember things like that?”

‘Don’t you? You’re supposed to always cherish the time you spend with the ones you love.’

“I remember things just fine, like that one day you woke up to an empty house bawled your eyes out until I got back from the store.”

‘Hey, that’s not fair. I didn’t know where you went, and I had just met you. I thought… I thought you left me.’

He stopped to pat her on the head, “You and your abandonment issues, I swear. You really have to ___”

“Hey, Blondie. Eyes front!”
Aww, dammit all, Allan thought. He looked up from his Pokémon to see a trainer holding out a Poké Ball towards him. Standing up and facing the newcomer, Allan glared at the young man.

“What do you want?”

“Think hard, genius. I’m itching for a battle. I just beat the Gym Leader of Ecruteak, and I’m on a roll,” he tossed the Poké Ball and released a Swinub onto the ground.

It was energetic for such a small pig, hopping up and down and snorting aggressively toward Allan and Umari.

‘Alright! I’ve wanted to try real battling ever since that target practice yesterday.’

“Hold on Umari, let’s have Sontos handle this guy.” Seeing Umari so eager to go into battle worried him; she had been determined to win their gym battle in Goldenrod to the point of driving herself to exhaustion. If she were to battle that way with her untrained, newly evolved body, Allan was certain someone would get hurt.

‘Why? That thing doesn’t look like it’s too tough; I’ll fry that tiny thing in seconds, just watch.’

“Hey buddy! Are we going to fight or what?” the intrusive trainer asked as he tossed the empty Poké Ball in the air a few times.

“You need to calm yourself, kid. We’ll hand you your loss in a second.” Allan shifted his attention to his Flareon’s mind, ‘I want to get more training in with Sontos if we’re going to battle. He’s still new to the team, and I like to keep you all as close to each other as possible, you know that.’

‘I know, but I wanna battle.’

‘We’ll see what else he has in store. Until then, I want to give our new guy a chance to catch up.’ Allan hoped he could stall Umari and keep her from out of the fight. Luckily he wasn’t lying when he told her he wanted to focus on his newest Pokémon; Allan needed Sontos for something, but he didn’t want Umari to think he was playing favorites.

She just needed to buy his excuses for a little bit longer.

‘Fine…’ Umari sat at her trainer’s side, thoroughly disappointed.

“Alright kid, here we go,” grasping the Friend Ball to his left, he released his Beldum.

“Sontos, come on out! We’ll show this kid what happens when people rush us!” Getting the affirmative from his Pokémon, the battle was underway.

The Swinub was very agile, as Allan had guessed from his observations. Whenever Sontos moved in to attack, it would hop away, scoring a light but slowing hit with an Icy Wind. As quick as the little pig was, Sontos’ levitation eventually won out in the battle of mobility. The battle lasted no more than a few minutes, and Allan ordered a swift Iron Head to finish off the Ice type.

“Great job Sontos. Let’s see what else this joke has to offer next.”

The trainer recalled his Swinub and quickly sent out a young Smoochum.

‘Allan, this kid is pathetic. Please, let me fight. It looks like he only has weak Ice types; I’d clear his whole team in a flash.’

“Sontos can still go a bit longer. I told you I need to train him.”
‘I know that, but—’

“Good,” his hasty cut-off caught her by surprise, and left her unable to continue her bargaining.

“Sontos, same plan as before. Let’s finish this quick!”

It didn’t last very long. The cocky trainer tried ordering his Smoochum to use Fake Tears, but Allan’s Beldum was unaffected by such attacks. A single Iron Head attack knocked out the Kiss Pokémon, eliciting a worried look from the young trainer.

“I hope you realize that you brought this on yourself, kid. Losing is part of being a trainer, but don’t go around challenging people who are out of your league.”

“Don’t call me out just yet; I’ve saved the best for last!”

‘Allan! Allan! Talk to me!’ She stood on her hind legs and pushed against his side.

“What is it?”

‘What do you think? Let me battle, please. I—’

“No.”

‘No? Why not? Your only excuse so far is that you want to train Sontos, but look at him. He’s getting tired. Let me switch in. This guy is using only Ice types. I know I can win, so why won’t you let me fight?’

‘Because,’ he switched to his mental voice, ‘I don’t want you to get hurt, okay?’ He felt heat rushing to his face, having nothing to do with the sunny day.

‘Is that all? Really? You sent me against Fighting types back when I was an Eevee, and you didn’t seem to have much trouble then.’ Umari couldn’t make sense of her trainer’s behavior. She suspected there must be more driving his actions.

‘Fighting types are almost exclusively physical centric, and you’ve always been good at taking physical hits, but I don’t want you going up against a special user. Let’s just—’

‘Don’t give me that crap! You know as well as I do that battles are decided during the fight, not the pre-battle banter! Who cares if it’s a special type? Do you think I’m too weak? Sontos has plowed through this kid’s entire team so far, and ‘he’s so far below me’.’

‘I care about your safety, not whether you’re strong or not. I already know you’re strong, but I have a bad feeling that he’ll send out something you won’t be able to handle. You’re not used to your new form yet and I don’t want to risk it.’

‘A bad feeling, huh? You sure you’re not just ‘scanning’ him for what’s in his party?’ Umari didn’t want to think that Allan would do something so dishonest during a Pokémon battle, but she had heard from his own mouth how he bends his own rules. With how Allan has been acting lately, Umari wasn’t sure of a lot of things.

‘Of course not! I’m just being reasonable; you could get yourself hurt if you go rushing into any fight you come across.’

‘And I’m being reasonable by understanding that risk and being prepared to deal with it.’

Allan merely stared back at her, his face growing uncertain.
‘Allan, please let me fight,’ Umari continued.

‘If you really care about me, at least try and understand why I have to do this. I need to know that I can still fight for you like this. Let me show you what I can do. I want to make you proud, but you aren’t letting me. So please, can I fight?’ She hated twisting his arm like this; she wished Allan would just open up to her. She needed him to talk to her.

There was a tense moment of silence and blocked feelings between the two—Allan grappling with a moral dilemma and Umari agitated and confused as to why he refused her. Sontos and the other trainer had been watching the quiet argument play out, intense stares and spontaneous movements gave somewhat of a clue as to the nature of the silent conversation.

“You going to forfeit, or what? I guess you’re too scared to face my last Pokémon. Don’t worry though; I get this all the time. It’s a curse really, I mean—”

“Kid, if you want to keep your clothes in an un-charred state, I’d shut up. Sontos, you’ve had enough for today… Get in there Umari.”

‘Quit your worrying, I’ll be fine,’ she strolled proudly to the center of the makeshift battlefield. Without turning back, she added, ‘Thank you, Allan.’

The trainer looked a bit surprised at the appearance of the Flame Pokémon; he had assumed that the Beldum would have continued its battle. The look soon turned to a grin of overconfidence.

“Alright, come on out, Cloyster!”

The Bivalve Pokémon fazed into existence in front of Umari, the grin on the strange spherical head matching the one of its trainer’s.

‘Don’t say it, I know. You were right, but I’m still staying, got it?’

Allan wanted nothing more than to call off the battle, but he couldn’t disappoint Umari after the appreciation he had felt from her when he finally agreed to let her fight. He just couldn’t let her down.

“Just be careful, you got that! Keep your distance and—”

‘No thanks, I’m taking charge of this. Just sit and watch me dazzle you, ’kay?’

With that, she sprinted towards her opponent, a streak of white energy trailing behind her. Quick Attack was a speedy move, and the Cloyster had no time to react. The attack landed, with minimal results due to the rock hard shell, but the damage was sure. The Cloyster backed away, and coated the spikes coving its shell in spears of ice, readying an attack.

“Umari, get ready to dodge!”

She ignored Allan’s warnings and charged the oyster with a Fire Fang erupting from her maw. Her speed won out again, and she latched on to the shell of her opponent, chomping down hard and sending flames through the cracks.

“Umari, move!”

The Cloyster grinned wide from behind its shell and unleashed the torrent of icicles point-blank at Umari. Her fur’s high temperature weakened the blows somewhat, but she was knocked back a ways. Before she could counterattack, another volley of Icicle Spears came down on her. She had
just gotten back on her feet from the first assault and couldn’t hope to dodge all of them.

“Umari, try a Flamethrower. Cloyster should be weak against special attacks.”

‘Shut up already, I’ve got this.’

In reality, it was difficult for her to contain her nervousness. Between volleys of Icicle Spears, the Cloyster would fire off Water Guns if she tried to get close. The battle was dragging on much longer than she would’ve liked, and she feared more than anything that she would lose after being so confident. Soon her exhaustion caught up with her, and her opponent hit her with a Hydro Pump that sent her reeling back into a soaking wet heap on the ground.

Allan couldn’t control himself any longer.

“Umari! Umari, are you alright?” he made to rush to her side, but a sharp glare halted his advance.

‘I-I told you to shut up and let me handle this. I’m—’

She coughed up a mouthful of water.

‘I’m fine… I just need a new plan.’

‘Umari, I’m calling the match; you’re hurt. We’re done here.’ He didn’t care anymore; Allan couldn’t bear to see Umari hurt again, even if she hated him for it.

He hated seeing her in pain even more.

‘No.’ Giving up was the last thing on the Flareon’s mind.

‘I get it Umari, I do. I’m sorry I didn’t let you battle earlier, but this isn’t—’

‘Stop it Allan.’

She found her legs.

She stood, the billowing wind alleviating the sting of the cold water a bit.

‘Let me ask you something; what if we had quit back when we fought Whitney?’

“I… I don’t—”

‘I might not’ve evolved into this.’

Umari took a deep breath, blowing out a short jet of fire into the air.

‘But we’ll never know. I am what I am now. And I refuse to run away from what I am. If I lose because I became a Fire type, then I lose. But that punk over there is smiling so hard I can’t believe he has that many teeth. I’m confident that I can wipe that smile off his face, and make you smile even bigger than he does. Now, will you let me, or am I going to have to go alone?’

“But, what can you do?”

‘You know,’ she smirked, shaking some of the water from her fur, ‘something amazing.’

The confident Flareon took off toward her opponent, a plan already in motion.

“Umari, wait! What’re you doing? Come back!”
Ignoring the calls from her trainer, she began running in a circle around the Cloyster, keeping out of its field of vision. The clam couldn’t turn itself fast enough to keep her in its sights. After gaining enough speed, she tried her idea. Breathing in deep and heavy, she ignited a Flamethrower. She began to release it in front of her at a low speed. The flames flew back onto her as she ran, catching and building on her fur, slowly covering herself in fire.

She continued to circle her opponent, keeping the flame at a constant level, her fur catching the fire effortlessly. Soon, she seemed like a living ball of flame jetting around the road. Rather than circle behind the Cloyster one last time, she caught it by surprise and waited until it turned to face her.

“Umari, don’t! You’re going to hurt yourself! Back down now!”

“Oh crap! Cloyster, Withdraw!”

With the roar of the combustion around her, and her own determination, Umari failed to hear her trainer’s calls for her safety. She bounded toward her opponent as fast as she could, roaring as she went. The Cloyster retreated into its shell, but was moments too late. A magnificent explosion erupted from the collision point of the two Pokémon. A tempest of fire, magnitudes greater than Allan thought possible, streaked across the road, scorching the worn pavement and singeing plant life all around. The opposing trainer had taken sanctuary behind a tree far from the blast, his cocky attitude lost in the abrupt end to the fight.

Unable to form any words, Allan rushed to the crimson scene. The heat of the flames kept him at bay, and angered him to no end. The blaze had created a tower of fire climbing far into the sky, and a crater nearly a foot deep and six feet in diameter. The bright inferno made it impossible to see the outcome, though the sound of hissing steam could be heard.

The moment Allan started to brave the flames in search for Umari, the wind picked up again, revealing the victor of the clash. Umari stood atop the Cloyster, whose insides were badly charred and burned. The fire continued to lick at her fur, only to be harmlessly blown away by the wind.

For a few, endless moments, the two locked eyes.

Umari’s expression was filled with pride, Allan’s with anger.

“Umari, what the hell were you thinking?! That was incredibly reckless! I told you time and again to back down, and you still ignored my orders. You could’ve seriously hurt yourself, or worse!”

She was crushed. That was all Umari could feel. After such a long ordeal, after exhausting herself to prove that she could take down her opponent despite its type advantage, he had yelled at her. Almost afraid to move, she jumped down from the unconscious clam as its trainer came to recall it.

“Hey there man, calm down. You won, and your Flareon did the impossible to do it. You shouldn’t yell at her for it—” the trainer found it hard to continue talking with a fist colliding with his jaw.

“I’ve had it with your mouth. Now get out of here, and I’d hurry too. Your Cloyster’s got some pretty bad burns,” he stared menacingly as the shell-shocked trainer ran off in the direction of Goldenrod City.

Allan turned to begin walking towards Ecruteak.

“You coming?”

‘I… I’m… What did I do wrong? Didn’t I make you happy? I won. I learned a new move and it worked! I beat it! Why are you angry!?’
“You ignored my orders, you put yourself in terrible danger, and you could have seriously hurt another trainer’s Pokémon with that attack.” Allan shook his head and turned back to her.

“It’s time to go... come on.”

‘But I won though! I promise it didn’t hurt, I’m fine. Don’t hate me for this, please. What did I do? Tell me! What did I do wrong!?’

He outstretched his arm towards her forcefully, causing her to flinch. Not at the motion, but at what he held in his hand; her Luxury Ball.

“Umari, you either come along on foot, or I recall you. We’re going home, with or without you by my side, got it?”

Unable to say another word, Umari nodded and began to follow her trainer, unsure if he was still her friend. The entire rest of the way to Ecruteak was quiet. No trainers, Pokémon, or unexpected Gym Leaders. Just a trainer and his Pokémon, both regretting ever accepting a challenge from a cocky Ice trainer.

Though the both of them didn’t know it, their minds were united in one line of thought that repeated itself over and over inside their heads.

Why … why did it turn out like this…?

———

[MAIL]

[From: Cartographer ID: B. I. Thomas (53142)]

[To: Prof. J Elm]

[Subject: RE: Newest Acquisition?]

Hey Professor,

[I’m not exactly sure what to tell you about the odd capture record. I can see it on my device as well, but I haven’t actually caught anything in a while other than the Drapion I was given not too long ago.

[All I can think of is that I might’ve dropped a Poké Ball or two while I was down in the underground beneath the Ruins of Alph (or even my recent trip through Diglett’s Cave), and the ball could’ve caught something on its own, or got broken and started sending a glitchy signal.

[The listing in my Pokédex doesn’t really bother me, but it might cause issues if I do catch a sixth Pokémon. I wouldn’t want the new catch sent to the storage system for no reason.

[I’ll just erase the capture record on my end.

[P.S. I’m actually on my way back to Johto now. I had some business I needed to take care of in Viridian City, but now I’m headed back to Vermilion to catch a boat to Olivine City. Hope you don’t mind if I challenge a few gyms along the way. My Pokémon and I feel like we’ve fallen behind.

—B. I. Thomas]
To Be Continued in Part 3: Heat
A lazy mid-afternoon breeze blew through Ecruteak City; it was the closest thing to relief that the city had felt from the ever-stagnant heatwave since it had begun. The light wind managed to gently pluck some of the discolored and dying leaves from the trees throughout the town, giving the area an early autumn-like appearance. Children who ventured outside sought swimming pools or other cool activities to avoid the oppressive heat. Trainer traffic had been slowed to a minimum during the peak hours of the day.

Blocks away from the center of town, a Beldum hovered just out of sight of an open window, taking note of the conversation being had inside. A small bird sat on the windowsill, thankful for the breeze when it came, as his hysterical companion repeated her question.

“Show me, please?”

“I will not.”

“You have to,” she pleaded.

“Ever since I… changed into this, Allan and I kept getting into a bunch of stupid fights, but the way he looked at me after we fought that Ice trainer… You’ve already seen how bad it’s gotten! He’s never been this angry before! You have to help me!”

“No I don’t,” Xutan’s voice held an uninterested tone.

“Show me or else…” she warned.

“And what would you do if I don’t?”

“I’ll burn you,” she growled.

“No you won’t. We both know that.”

“Please Xutan, don’t do this… not now,” she begged.

Umari was running out of options; she felt like the world was closing in on her. She had tried everything she could think of to get her friend to help her, but he would not budge.

“Please just show me!”

“I will not, because I cannot!” Xutan stared his teammate down defiantly. “My abilities are too immature to accomplish anything similar to what you’re asking of me.”

“Just show me what’s going to happen to me! I need to know… I— I’m afraid he’s going to… release me. I need your help. Please just show me if he does or not!”
Xutan steadied himself on his perch near the window; a sudden gust of wind had caught him off guard. “Umari, I’m not at liberty to discuss our master’s feelings, but don’t you think he would have released you by now if that was the case?”

Two days had passed since Allan and Umari had accepted the challenge to battle on Route 37. The trainer and Pokémon had traveled together in silence after their heated argument over Umari’s performance during the fight.

Since returning to their home in Ecruteak City, Allan had barely spoken to Umari, only doing so to alert her to meals. He spent most of his time out of the house or in whatever room his Flareon wasn’t. They were stuck waiting at his childhood home until a package arrived from his parents, who were still overseas in the Unova region.

“Wait, what do you mean? Does that mean you’ve talked to him about this? When?”

“I have discussed several matters with our master at length since we arrived here. I have only given my advice as an impartial observer and nothing else. Please understand that I will not betray his confidence on these matters, not even to you.”

“You’re telling me now! What did he say? Is he still mad? Why is he mad? What did I do to make him angry?”

“I cannot say,” he said solemnly.

“Did he say if he hated me?”

“I cannot tell you, Umari.”

“Did he have you use your powers? I know you must have some ability to see into time by now! What did he talk to you about? Please Xutan… tell me… anything…”

Xutan paused, choosing his next words wisely. “I will admit that our master has asked me to attempt to activate my precognitive abilities prematurely, but when and for what purpose I will not say. He expressly told me to never tell you what I saw for him. I am sorry.”

“He told you… not to… Why? Why!? Why can’t I know? How long have you been keeping these secrets from me? You know how much he means to me, don’t you?”

“I do, but unfortunately I am not allowed to tell you. Please, for your sake, cease your endeavors; questioning every little thing like this will only make matters worse. I think it is best for you to wait until these difficulties between you two to work themselves out.”

Umari huffed at him, and made for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To find Allan.” She looked straight ahead, continuing forward. “If you won’t answer me, maybe he will.”

“You and I both know that talking to him now may have an unsatisfactory end result. My advice is —”

“You know,” she shot him an angry look, “for someone who can’t tell me anything, you sure like to dish out advice. For once, I think I’ll go and take care of this myself.” She reared up and pushed on the door handle, opening the door and rushing out of the house.
Xutan sighed and fluttered his wings, watching as the wind blew the door shut. “Did you get all that?”

Sontos floated down to his level, thinking over what he had just heard, “All of it. Considering your previous comments on the matter, it seems like this is getting to be quite troublesome for the two of them.”

“True, but all we can do now is hope this doesn’t spiral out of control any more than it has,” Xutan sighed. “You’re new to our group Sontos, so you wouldn’t know. Before you joined us, their relationship was slowly becoming more and more strained. This new development is now accelerating their issues with each other. I’m not sure how they’ll handle it; they’ve been through enough as it is.”

“What can we do to help?”

“Personally? I’d steer clear of the house tonight. Pass that along to Duncan if you would please.”

“And what of Master Allan’s family? Surely their influence would only complicate these matters further.”

“His parents are still away on their travels. It is highly unlikely that they will cause any problems. Now, if you would please go and roundup that pile of trouble, I have to prepare for our master’s eventual return…”

The evening light intensified the color of the trees to the north of Ecruteak city. Much of the leaves bore their fall colors, every shade from red to yellow. Standing tall above the forest was Bell Tower, the golden monument to Ho-Oh shining brightly atop the pagoda. The sounds from the city failed to reach Bellchime Trail, leaving the place respectfully, and serenely silent.

Umari had caught the scent of her trainer while hastily scouring the city for his whereabouts. After being ignored and avoided ever since returning home, Allan’s scent reminded her of the time they spent together before she evolved. She didn’t want to lose that; she didn’t want that to become just a memory. She needed to find out what had gone wrong, and to fix it if she could.

She stayed off the main path once she entered the trail. While she was desperate to find him, she did not want to be spotted before she did. Why Allan had sought sanctuary in Bellchime Trail, she didn’t know.

Why did he come here of all places? I don’t remember coming here at all before we left on our journey, but he might’ve kept this place a secret too…

After following the path through the trees for a few minutes, she found what she was looking for. She saw Allan sitting on the edge of the stone walkway, his head slumped forward and in his hands. Umari could see him mouthing some words, but no sound escaped his lips. His eyes were wide and darted back and forth. Every few moments his hands would switch between being pressed against his face to running through his hair, and being clenched into fists.

He’s really worried about something… I’ve never seen him like this. He must really be—

“Goddammit!”

Allan slammed his left fist into the stone at his side, his shout momentarily shattering the silence of the area. Recovering from the initial shock, Umari cautiously looked back up to see him, fist still
planted, panting and holding a fierce gaze with the ground. He slowly brought his hand up, lightly flexing his sore fingers. He covered his face with his right hand, exhaling harshly.

“Dammit all…” she could see a stream of tears escape past his hand.

Taking her chances, she edged closer to him, still careful to remain hidden. She extended her consciousness towards him, finding it surprisingly easy to enter his mind.

*He’s so worked up; he’s dropped all of his mental barriers… This is my chance to find out what he’s been thinking, but I have to stay hidden. He can’t find out about this…*

Her connection was steady, but weak. Her rudimentary skills gleaned only small fragments of his thoughts.

‘… she was… but… that battle was too in—… she could have b—… she ignored my… I shou—… she’s been too persis—… she might… I can’t let Umari know th—… her… but I’ll have to do it soon… the longer it’ll be for the bo—… she won’t take it well… can’t tell her… have to… I can’t let… on her own… I’ll have to… tomorrow… nothing left… without her… has to be done… too long…’

‘I have to get closer, the connection is—’ she hit a mental wall.

He was shut off from her.

He had felt her presence.

Allan shot up from where he had been sitting, clutching the side of his head with his right hand as if he was defending from further psychic infiltration.

“Umari! Where are you? I know you’re here! Get out here now!”

Mortified, she made her way towards him. He turned toward her at the sound of the leaves crunching under her footsteps. She was afraid, but held her head up, looking into his angry stare with sad, lonely eyes.

“What are you doing here? I didn’t ask for you to come here.”

‘I came to find you.’

“Why?”

‘We—I mean, I haven’t… I—’ she fumbled with her words. Nothing seemed like the right thing to say.

“What were you just doing?”

‘Nothing! I—’

“Don’t lie to me. You were invading my thoughts a moment ago. What did you hear?”

‘… I—’

“Answer me!”

‘I just—I only heard small bits! My powers aren’t as good when I’m alone… I promise I didn’t hear anything…’
“I’ve told you time and again… never intrude into someone’s mind, and now…” he glared at her. “Look at you. I never thought you would do something like this…”

‘I had to! You’ve barely said two words to me since we got home! You won’t tell me why you’re mad, you won’t tell me what I did, and you’re even having Xutan keep secrets from me! What else could I do?’

“I’m heading home. Come back if you want,” Allan said as he started down the path. He paused, without looking back, and said “Let me ask you again, Umari. Why did you really come here tonight?”

‘I’m afraid!’ she cried. ‘I’m afraid that you hate me now! I’m afraid that you’re going to release me, or abandon me! I was afraid, so I came here to find out for myself. I don’t want to be left behind. Please— I’m… so scared… don’t leave me…’

He turned back at her, a sorrowful look on his face, “Wrong answer.”

Umari didn’t move from that spot for a long time. The sun had set, and no matter how hard she wished, her beloved trainer never came back to get her. She cried until the tears stopped flowing, and hated herself more with every painful sob.

———

The moon was high in the night sky when Umari finally gathered her courage to return to the house. For what seemed like hours, she stood in front of the door, too afraid to test if it would open for her. To her eventual surprise, or perhaps even despair, it did.

The house was dark; the glow from the digital clock on the oven provided a dim green bloom to the scenery. No sounds could be heard throughout the household; only a slight breeze that rustled the curtains provided any disturbance to the tranquility of the scene.

“Wrong answer.”

The phrase resounded in her head over and over, deepening the wound again and again.

“Wrong answer.”

It hurt. She could feel a pain in her chest, and while many have exaggerated the concept of a broken heart, Umari felt it all the same.

“Wrong answer.”

Each time the words played out in her head, she wondered what the “right” answer could have been. Why should she have come to find him? What other reason could there be? Try as she might, no matter how many times she asked herself, she could not find the right “answer”.

The suddenness of the question itself was alarming. Allan had let go of his anger in that moment. He had looked almost regretful for not asking the question sooner. If Umari had said the right thing, her nightmare might have ended right then.

But I didn’t… she lamented. I made things worse. Again.

She debated whether or not her ordeal was worth all the pain that she was feeling. Ever since she evolved, she felt that her connection with him had started to become strained, and no matter how much she tried to cover it up, she had to accept the fact that he had hurt her. Allan had never done
that before—not once had he shown any sort of hostility towards her or any of her teammates. Thinking back on it all, there was only one thing she could think of that must’ve caused it: that day in the Underground.

The day she evolved had been the worst she could remember; worse than that terrible night in Ilex Forest. Everything had fallen apart all because of an accidental exposure to a Fire Stone. She could no longer be of use to him. She would always be a second choice, and even when she tried her best to show how capable she could be, he lashed out at her for it.

He won’t release me. I won’t let him. I’ll leave on my own…

That decision weighed heavily on her, and for a few moments, she couldn’t breathe.

I don’t want to… but he’ll be better off without me…

It would be hard, she was sure of that. But when she considered the facts, she decided that it would be easier than weighing him down and breaking her apart.

—————

Walking up the stairs to the second floor of the house, Umari found the door to Allan’s room hung slightly ajar. Careful not to make any noise, she slowly crept into his room. The heat wave refused to relent even on this calm, clear night. She found him lying on his bed in only a pair of boxers, close to the window. The blankets and sheets were scattered every which way in an attempt to stay cool. The open window allowed for a warm breeze to flow through the room, but did little to change the temperature.

Umari cautiously made her way to the edge of the bed. Allan lay sleeping on his side, turned away from her. She climbed up onto the bed as softly as she could manage, and looked over his sleeping form.

Why? Why did this happen? What went wrong? I thought … he cared for me… but look at him… he doesn’t care. Now I— I don’t know if he ever did.

She looked over to the nightstand. Propped up was the framed picture the three of them had taken that day in the underground.

Look at us. We were so happy then, and it wasn’t even a week ago. Evolving into… this… ruined everything… Why can’t I go back to when that picture was taken…? Why?

She looked back to Allan.

Why do you hate me now? I’ve done nothing but try my hardest for you, and all you’ve done is throw it all back in my face, she thought, her rage growing.

I … hate—

He rolled over in his sleep then, shifting to his other side and nearly knocking Umari off the bed. His expression was one of pain, contorting over some unknown grievance.

I love you.

Tears began pouring from her eyes. The sound of the impacts on the bare mattress infinitely magnified in contrast to the silent night. She looked over his sleeping face, taking in every detail.
I’ve loved you for so long, I can’t even remember a time when I didn’t… A time when I didn’t wish that you’d love me back. But we’re not the same anymore. I changed… and I guess you did too. I just didn’t see it. I wish I could tell you… but, you’d just hate me even more…

She laid herself down quietly, getting closer to him. Looking at his face, she wondered what had caused his sudden change in behavior. She had guessed that it was her evolution, but the more she thought back on it, she remembered that before the accident in the tunnel, he had been troubled about something—even during the gym battle.

Maybe— Maybe he doesn’t hate me… She didn’t realize that she was slowly inching closer to his face.

He had such a caring personality before… so kind… She edged closer still, but stopped when she realized what she was doing.

Umari remembered watching from the ground as Alice had surprised Allan with a quick kiss. Even back then, she knew what that kind of action meant between humans. Alice had the same feelings for Allan that she did. Umari envied her; Alice had been able to show him how she felt so easily.

Umari wanted to do that too. She wanted to try it, and when she thought about what else she had to lose, she began running out of excuses not to.

I— I know I shouldn’t. He’d never forgive me… But he’s asleep, so maybe… just this once. Before I leave…

She shut her eyes, slowly closing the distance between their lips.

If he could love me, I’d be so—

“Umari? What are you doing?”

Her eyes shot open and every muscle in her body tensed up, freezing her in place.

Allan’s eyes bore a confused look, while Umari’s were filled with terror.

Without thinking, she shut her eyes and lurched forward, pressing her mouth against his in a forceful kiss. Umari pushed Allan onto his back and straddling him, pinning his shoulders to the bed with her paws. After a few tense seconds, she released the kiss and looked into his shocked eyes.

‘Please! Please don’t hate me for this! I’m— I mean, I didn’t mean to— I just,’ she stammered vocally in time with her mental voice. ‘I love you so much Allan. Please, don’t hate me anymore. I’m sorry for whatever I did, but please— I don’t want to hurt anymore.’

She kissed him again, gentle and caring this time, and tried her best to pour her love for him over what feeble bond they shared. She shifted some of her weight off of his shoulders, and leaned into his chest. She felt his hand touch the side of her head and flinched, expecting to be pushed away, but it was a loving caress. Allan sent a calming sensation over their bond and kissed her back. Umari broke the kiss abruptly; staring back at him is an incredulous look.

‘Umari,’ he said after she pulled away in shock, ‘I think we need to talk.’

Allan stayed on his back for a moment, closing his eyes and taking a slow, deep breath. Almost everything that had been plaguing and clouding his mind these past few months—perhaps for even longer—had just been blown away in an instant.
Before Umari backed away, Allan had tried to show her exactly what he was feeling. He had wanted her to feel the relief that washed over him when he had heard her say those words:

*I love you so much.*

He had been so worried.

Allan opened his eyes and saw Umari anxiously looking at him, her eyes begging him to continue.

‘This time,’ he told her, ‘I promise to tell you everything.’

Letting Allan sit up, Umari situated herself in his lap.

‘So… You’re not mad at me for this?’ she asked nervously.

“Of course not,” he said, switching to his actual voice. Allan immediately felt a fresh wave of regret hit him as he was reminded of how he had treated his Flareon. “It might be hard to believe but, I was never angry with you.”

Allan sighed, looking away from her for a moment.

“I— Where do I even begin? Well, before I say anything else: I’m sorry Umari. I’ve been horrible to you, and I can never take back what I’ve done. I hope you can forgive me, but if not, I at least want you to understand me.”

‘Wait, you weren’t angry with me?’ she asked, confused at what her trainer had told her. ‘I thought you were mad at me for my evolution or that battle with the Cloyster.’

“No, it wasn’t anything you did.” He began stroking her back, trying to put her at ease. “I tried to hide the real reason I was upset by yelling at you. I never should have done that.”

Allan swallowed, pushing past his reluctance.

“I just couldn’t control myself after seeing you in danger like that.”

Umari had been beginning to relax a bit, leaning into Allan’s chest as he rubbed her fur, but backed away from him in confusion. She remembered him saying something similar before he finally let her into the battle, but she didn’t think it had worried him that much.

‘But I was fine. Sure, those water attacks hurt a bit, but it’s not like that annoying trainer’s Pokémon was going to kill me. What made you so worried?’

Allan brought a hand up to Umari’s face and looked into her dark blue eyes.

“Ever since… Ilex… the thought of losing you has been stuck in my head, and every time I think about it, I…”

‘Allan...’ Umari had never seen her trainer look so emotional before. Even without their psychic link, just seeing his face and the pain behind it was enough for her to understand how he felt.

“I just can’t bear it.”

He hung his head, “If I lost you, I don’t know what I would do.”

Despite her fiery core, what he said sent a chill down Umari’s spine.
‘What are you saying?’

“I’m saying, I love you Umari,” he let her absorb the statement for a moment, and gave her a gentle kiss. “I know I’ve made it seem quite the opposite recently, and I’m surprised you’re still here to be honest. But if you’ll let me, I’ll try and explain everything.”

She nodded eagerly for him to continue, her mind racing, ‘Please do, I want to hear it.’

“Well, we’ve been together for years now. We were always close. The night I taught you how to use telepathy was one of the best nights of my life. I was so happy,” he said as he brushed the golden fur on her face. “But it was after we won at Azalea when my feelings toward you began to change.”

‘Ilex Forest.’

“It was on that horrible night, where I truly saw you for who you are, Umari. I was terrified anything happening to you, and I almost let Alice get killed because of it. When we were being chased by that Tyranitar, and I thought we— before we— All I could think of was you.”

Umari thought back to the night in question. The attack had come so suddenly, and Allan was all but helpless. She had never seen him so afraid before, and it had affected her as well. When she had seen her trainer broken and lost, it had taken all of her resolve to stay brave for him.

“It was during the time we took to recover that my thoughts started getting out of control. I fought with myself for days trying to make sense of my feelings for you. I eventually came to terms with what I felt and tried to put in the back of my mind, but I couldn’t.”

Allan shook his head, “I was letting my fears get the better of me.”

‘What were you afraid of?’ she asked.

“Of what you’d… think of me,” Allan choked out. “I was so… sure you’d be disgusted when you learned that I… wanted you.”

‘O-Oh…’ Umari’s eyes widened at the words her trainer had just said. ‘W-Well, what made you, uh, think that? I’ve never said I wouldn’t, or you know, didn’t like that idea. It’s never come up.’

“I… had Xutan look into the future, to see what would happen after you evolved. He couldn’t see much, but he saw that you were upset at me, and that I was filled with regret.”

“So you assumed the worst.’ Umari looked up at Allan’s face in a new light, understanding him more than she had before. ‘And after I evolved, those things happened anyway, but for different reasons.’

He nodded slowly, “And I made it all happen.”

‘No you didn’t.’

“Yes I did,” Allan said.

With the major hurdle already cleared, Allan found it much easier to talk to Umari about what he had been keeping to himself. He knew she loved him now. That was enough for him.

“First, I tried to get you to choose to evolve into something else on your own, but I knew deep down you only wanted to be an Espeon. Then when the accident happened… I actually felt relieved. When I saw you turn into this,” he stroked the side of her face and down her neck, running his fingers through Umari’s fluffy mane of fur.
“I thought I had avoided the future that Xutan saw, but I felt awful being relieved about something that upset you so much. It was incredibly selfish of me to want anything other than whatever made you happy.”

‘I don’t care about any of that now,’ Umari nuzzled her human under his chin. ‘What’s important is that we’re not fighting anymore.’

The idea that the two of them could go back to how they once were, without the secrets or the arguments, filled Umari with hope, but she knew things would never be exactly the same again. Things were going to be different—but Umari was determined to make sure they were different for the better.

‘Besides, I really like what I’ve become now. I can’t even imagine being an Espeon.’

“And I wouldn’t want it any other way,” Allan said, looking down at her.

He could hardly believe she had accepted his feelings for her, let alone that she felt the same way about him. His fears of Umari rejecting and leaving him had been making it impossible for him to even entertain the idea that it could ever happen.

“Besides,” he leaned down and kissed her. “You’re beautiful the way you are now.”

‘I wasn’t beautiful before?’ she asked playfully.

Umari decided it was time to move away from the heavy and serious discussions and wanted to see if a light-hearted approach might help Allan get more comfortable with her. He might be talking to her finally, but she could see that he was still a little tense.

‘Didn’t you say you fell for me before I changed?’

“I did, but back then, I was… It’s not like I could’ve— or we could’ve, well…” he glanced away.

‘Come on,’ Umari got up from his lap and moved along the bed to follow his gaze. ‘You’ve already told me everything, haven’t you?’

Umari couldn’t help but find seeing her usually-so-confident trainer acting so flustered to be a little bit cute.

“Well, you know… You were an Eevee, and well… Now that you’ve gotten— bigger… then…” in the low light, she couldn’t see that his face was reddening with every fumbled word.

‘Allan, you know you can tell me anything. What is it?’

“Don’t make me say it— Here,” he sent a mental image of what he meant over their psychic bond.

Her response wasn’t one he was expecting.

She fell onto her side, laughing uncontrollably. It took her a moment to find her words.

‘Allan…’ Umari looked up at him as she lay on the bed.

‘You’ve fought some of the toughest trainers in the region and survived rampaging Pokémon, but you can’t bring yourself to talk about mating?’

The Flareon sat up and giggled again, the image in her head still fresh on her mind.
‘That’s a… vivid imagination you have, isn’t it? Have you thought about this stuff a lot?’

“Umari… please…” he said dejectedly.

The desperate tone of his voice told Umari that he wasn’t as amused as she was.

She stood up and moved closer to him, laying a paw on one of his legs.

‘You really are embarrassed about this. I’m sorry; it just surprised me that you’ve thought about this for so long.’

Umari wished she hadn’t laughed; she didn’t want Allan to be ashamed of how he felt anymore.

“So,” he looked back at her, “you don’t hate me because I think of you that way?”

‘I could never hate you. Plus, you know, I’ve thought about it too.’

She moved back into his lap and put her paws against his chest, giving her a temporary height advantage over him. As she looked down at his shocked face, the ideas lingering in her head that Allan had shown her struck her as more than just fantasy.

‘You want us to be together, like mates, right?’

The thoughts of what they might do together were making Umari’s heart pound and her breath heavy. From what she could feel through her paws, Allan was experiencing a similar reaction.

“I— Well, I do. But, it’s not like I’ve had any experience in this… do you?” He knew—at least, he thought he knew—but couldn’t help but ask anyway.

Allan’s nervousness was slowly shifting to excitement as Umari continued to encourage him. He could hardly believe that what he had feared being rejected over was about to happen, and that it was alright.

A smirk spread across her face. She really did love seeing his flustered side.

‘How could I? I’ve been with you this whole time, remember?’ Umari leaned in closer to his face. ‘But I’m willing to give it a try with you.’

She closed the gap between them with another kiss, but felt her human partner tense up.

‘It’s okay, Allan. Just relax more. We’ll figure it out as we go along.’

She leaned into the kiss, using her weight to push Allan back down on to the bed. She was initially surprised when she felt his tongue tentatively make its way into her mouth, but soon found she enjoyed the sensation, and began mimicking the curious action herself. It felt completely different than their previous kisses. The additional motions and movements made the act much more intimate and exciting.

Umari felt another spark of satisfaction as well; Allan was starting to try things on his own.

She ran her paws over his chest, while he enveloped her in a loving embrace.

As he held her close, Allan could feel her warmth; her hot, dry fur felt surprisingly nice against his skin compared to the humid air and his own sweat. The comforting heat relaxed his muscles, further melting away any apprehension he still held onto.
It was Umari who finally broke their heated and sloppy kiss. She wasn’t worried; they’d have plenty of chances to practice. As she caught her breath, Allan made to sit up, but she put a paw to his forehead, telling him to stop.

‘Stay.’

Umari grinned at him, wanting to keep him at ease. She had waited a long time and had gone through so many hardships to get where she was now. She wanted to take her time and enjoy this. She laid down on his chest, nuzzling his neck and taking in his scent. Slowly pushing herself up from him, Umari took in all the details of Allan’s body. She slowly backed up, smelling and licking him as she moved down, enjoying the little twitches and reactions she got out of him as she went.

Allan did as he was told and stayed as still as he could on his back. It was a strange sensation to be at the mercy of his own Pokémon. His breath caught in his throat each time Umari rubbed or licked some sensitive area.

Finished exploring his chest, Umari continued downward, only to stop suddenly when she realized just what was left for her to discover. She slowly got up and sat off to the side of her human, who sat up to see why she had stopped. Umari stared down at his groin—more specifically, at what had changed since she had first entered the room.

“You don’t have to—” Allan started, but Umari stepped forward and stared him down.

‘Let me try, at least. Okay?’

He nodded, lying back down on the bed. Allan wasn’t too sure exactly what she wanted to try, but he was glad that his Flareon was willing to experiment. As much as Allan wanted to finally be intimate with Umari, he was having trouble moving past his hesitation and making any moves of his own.

Umari turned away and faced back down the other direction, feeling utterly lost. Until now, she had been going from each new thing to the next and had felt confident enough about what she was doing to continue. With what lay ahead of her, however, she felt a wave of hesitation holding her back.

She thought about the vivid images Allan had sent her earlier, but they were all from the human perspective—not from hers.

Every second that ticked by without any action from either of them pushed Umari to make a move; if she didn’t do something soon, she worried the moment would be lost. She wanted it to be now. Right now.

Swallowing her nervousness, she reached out with a paw, gently prodding at what had risen to the occasion.

‘L-Let me know if I do anything wrong, okay?’ She kept her eyes straight ahead of her, trying to figure out how to best approach what she was about to do.

The nervous Flareon leaned forward and nudged his still-covered member with her nose, noticing that the scent coming from Allan’s groin area was noticeably different than his chest or arm. It spurred her onward, and with her breathing heavy, Umari took some of the fabric of his underwear in her mouth and tried to pull them down his legs. After a few frustrating attempts, she found she couldn’t get them to move very well.

‘A-Alright,’ she relented, backing away from him again. She felt a small wave of inadequacy wash over her as she admitted defeat. ‘You can help now. Please.’
“Y-Yeah, hold on.”

Allan stood up and faced away from the bed. He took a deep breath, knowing that if he went through with what he was about to do, there would be no going back. Thinking about where they had just come from in their relationship, Allan decided he didn’t want to go back. He still refused to make eye contact as he discarded his last piece of clothing, however, the act of exposing himself alone draining what little confidence he had built up.

Umari sat on the bed and watched closely, taking a lengthy look at him—all of him—for the first time. Seeing Allan fully naked in the dim light of his room was what finally cemented it in her mind; they were about to become true mates.

She moved aside to let Allan back onto the bed, once again feeling awkwardly lost.

’S-So,’ Umari started, her heart pounding in anticipation. She reached over with one of her paws and lightly stroked his member, earning a surprised gasp from Allan.

‘Did you have anything you wanted to… try out?’

“What do you mean?”

‘Well, you imagined me like…’ Umari moved further down the bed and raised her rear end into the air, ‘...this’.

She glanced back at him, unsure if she was doing the pose correctly, and feeling incredibly exposed. She felt somehow smaller and more vulnerable, and it made her a bit nervous.

‘Is this okay?’

“I— Well, you— We can,” Allan sat and stared at his Pokémon presenting herself and couldn’t string together a coherent thought.

‘N-No good?’ Feeling all the more exposed by Allan's reaction, Umari hastily covered herself with her tail.

Eager to move on, she decided to suggest something a bit less extreme.

‘How about if I’m on my back?’ Umari rolled over on the bed, letting her legs curl in close to her body. Once she settled into the position, she could feel her own heartbeat begin to pound quicker as she lay there, a small part of her quietly hoping that Allan would choose this position.

Unfortunately, as she continued looking up at Allan, she could see that he was still too nervous to make a choice.

‘Maybe not one of those for right now,’ Umari stood back up and moved closer to him, doing her best to hide her slight disappointment from him. ‘Do you want me to… take the lead?’

Allan merely nodded, and laid himself back onto the bed. He hated that Umari was having to make all of the decisions on her own just because of his hesitation.

‘Oh-kay, then.’

Umari found herself staring at what awaited her for what felt like an awkward amount of time. She wasn’t sure exactly how to begin, especially in the position they had settled on. She finally climbed on top of him, planting her front paws in the middle of his chest. She attempted to straddle him as
best she could, but was unable to comfortably position herself. She looked back over her shoulder at her hind legs and tried to find the right placements and angles to achieve what she wanted, but had an even harder time than trying by feeling alone. She stopped for a moment, resting her rump over his groin.

‘I don’t really know what I’m doing, so, bear with me.’

Umari was beginning to feel as if they had moved on a little too quickly from the two of them—mostly her, now that she thought about it—going over each other’s bodies, to the main event. Even without the changes brought about by her recent evolution, doing something so physically intimate for the first time made her feel out of place in her own body.

“You don’t have to do everything yourself,” Allan said, willing himself to become more involved.

Seeing Umari trying so hard to make things go smoothly pushed him to fight through the nervousness he felt. Trying his best to look confident, Allan locked eyes with her. He brought his hands up to her sides and slowly worked them down her body, stopping at her hips.

Holding onto Umari like this sent a wave of excitement through himself and over their shared psychic bond. Allan felt a similar sensation come from her as well.

Allan helped guide and position her, seeing where she couldn’t and holding her weight when she lost her balance.

Eventually, through some trial and error, Umari ended up lying down on Allan’s stomach, letting her legs spread and extend as much as was comfortable. The first hint of contact came as a surprise, but one that helped give them both the courage to continue.

Umari tried her best to recreate that accidental connection by shifting her hips back and forth, and the feeling of something hard rubbing against her entrance sent waves of arousal and excitement up her entire body. She closed her eyes as she rocked herself against him, enjoying herself and the new sensations she was experiencing.

Allan’s hesitation was slowly being replaced with anticipation as he watched and helped Umari grind herself against him. He could feel her wetness building and catching in the fur around her crotch, leaving him slick wherever she happened to rub herself against him. The more she ground her hips on him, the more Allan noticed how much warmer she was down there. It sent his mind racing, wondering just how she would feel on the inside. He startled her a bit as he let one of his hands drift from gripping her rear to beneath her.

Umari’s eyes shot open at the unexpected movement between her hind legs. She looked at Allan and could see as well as feel over their mental connection he was eager to move on.

‘Oh, sorry,’ she lowered her ears in embarrassment. ‘I was getting a little too into it, I guess.’

“It’s alright,” Allan said, brushing the side of her face and dragging his hand along her ear. “Well, I think I’m ready if you are.”

‘Y-Yeah, let’s do it.’

While Allan gripped her hips to steady her, Umari began pushing against him with her front paws, moving herself back and against what was prodding at her nether region. Slowly, and very carefully, she began to take him inside of her.

Umari closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on what she was doing. Even though she desperately
wanted to get this right, she felt a familiar uncertainty return as more pressure built up at her entrance; she didn’t know how this was going to feel, and a little bit of fear began to creep into her mind. What if she didn’t like it? What if he didn’t? What if they weren’t able to make it work?

Thankfully, she wasn’t alone on the bed.

Allan felt her nervousness and sent a reassuring message over their psychic link. He would be there for her no matter what happened.

Bolstered by his support, Umari pressed on. As soon as the head was in, she stopped pushing, adjusting to an intrusion that her body wasn’t quite meant to handle. She had taken a few good looks before she had gotten on top of him, and knew she had a bit more to go before she had all of his length inside her, but she was unsure if she could take much more. It felt much larger entering her body than she had guessed from just looking or touching it.

As unsure as she was, she didn’t want to give up either. She wanted to be the best mate she could.

Allan tried his best to be careful with how much he pushed on her hips, despite how it felt to finally be inside her. It was incredibly tempting to thrust himself up into her further, but it was obvious that his Flareon was having trouble handling him. Allan brought a hand up to side and stroked her fur, hoping it might help her relax.

‘Thanks. I’m gonna keep going.’

Letting her own impatience get the better of her, she decided that going slow might be what was making everything so uncomfortable. Steeling herself, she surprised Allan by suddenly pushing herself back against him as hard as she could, taking him into her nearly all the way.

Regret immediately struck her; going all at once was so much worse. She found herself wishing once again that they had experimented a little bit more before trying this. She immediately tensed up, cringing in pain and digging her short claws into his chest.

Umari had been focusing hard on her mental connection with Allan while she attempted to force herself onto him, and in doing so sent a wave of shock and pain over their bond.

Allan had been ready to support Umari if she needed it, and was met with the sudden rush of sensations Umari poured into him. He responded with a similar pulse of emotions and feelings. The sudden tightness and intensity of her body temperature had caught him off guard, adding onto everything Umari was sharing with him, Allan couldn’t hold back thrusting his hips up against her.

Umari yelped audibly, exhaling sharply and accidentally shooting a small jet of flame onto Allan’s chest. The air was tinged with the slight smell of burnt flesh.

‘I’m sorry, Allan!’ Her mental voice was frantic, the pang of pain she felt over the bond troubling her.

She looked down in panic at what she had done to his chest with her fire and her claws.

‘I didn’t mean to— You just moved so suddenly and it just slipped out! N-Not that it’s your fault, but —’

Allan lifted her chin and caught her attention, giving her a calm smile and petting the side of her face.

“It’s fine Umari, really,” he said, doing his best not to wince too hard. Allan lightly patted his bare chest, showing Umari that she hadn’t seriously injured him.
“See? It didn’t hurt that bad, I promise. I kinda deserved it for moving when you weren’t ready. Are you alright?”

‘I-I’ve been better. I didn’t think you’d be that big. Just let me— get used to this, okay?’

She awkwardly tried to adjust herself on him, but every movement sent more pain across their shared over their bond, causing her movements to be shaky and uncertain. Before she could even ask, Allan was already helping keep her balance, letting her take the lead in finding a comfortable position.

“You’re— really hot, you know that?” He was also a bit shocked at the how tight she was, though he suspected he might be a bit different than what her species was designed for. He began stroking her back, trying to help her to relax.

‘Wh-What?’

“Sorry, I mean your body temperature. It’s almost unbearable, but I think I can manage,” he said with a playful grin.

’S- Shut up,’ she said, nudging his face with her nose. She gently laid her body back down onto Allan’s chest, trying to alleviate some of the pain she was feeling.

“You didn’t have to do that, you know,” Allan said, stroking the tuft of fur on her head. He left one arm still supporting her on top of him, just in case. “You could’ve gone as slow as you needed to.”

Umari looked away from him, embarrassed that she got ahead of herself again.

‘I know… It was just taking so long, and I was afraid we weren’t going to be able to mate, so… I just forced it.’

“Well,” Allan said, turning her face towards his, “it worked.”

He leaned forward as much as he could without moving Umari and kissed her softly.

“We’re mates,” he said after pulling back.

Umari’s face lit up at hearing him say it out loud.

‘You’re right.’

She nuzzled her human under his chin, the realization that they had finally made it work filling her with a warm, contented feeling.

‘We figured it out after all.’

Umari lifted her head up and looked into Allan’s eyes and the loving gaze he was giving her. It was so unlike the way he had looked at her earlier that day on that secluded trail. They had almost lost each other, but now they were closer than she ever thought possible. Allan had her in the most primal of ways, completely in his control, but she knew he would never force himself on her.

With every breath she took, every slight motion from either her or him, she was slowly growing accustomed to the joining of their bodies.

She could also feel how much Allan was enjoying being together with her over their shared bond, even though they were just lying together. It gave her a sense of fulfillment she hadn’t felt before. She was more than just a good Pokémon to him; she was a good mate. She was good enough.
As Umari leaned forward to kiss him, her body shifted slightly to one side. She prepared for it to send another jolt of pain through her, but this time it was much more pleasant than painful. She moaned slightly as she kissed her human, hesitantly trying another little rock of her hips. The second attempt was much like the first; tight and stiff, but pleasurable enough to make her want more.

‘I’m so glad,’ she told him as she swayed from side to side in a slow rhythm. ‘We can make this work.’

“Me too,” Allan kissed her cheek, wrapping his arms around her body. He stroked her fur down her back, along her sides, and her rump. Allan ran his fingers through the fluffy, pale-gold fur of her tail and mane, marveling at the softness.

He made sure that he kept enough of a grip to keep Umari steady as she experimented with moving for the first time.

‘I think I want to move more now,’ Umari said, her confidence growing after a while spent gently grinding. ‘Will you help me?’

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to do anything you’re not ready for,” he brought his hands closer to her hips, just in case she suddenly moved on her own again. “I’m fine with staying like this if you want to.”

Umari shook her head, ‘No, I’m… I’m ready this time. I won’t rush it, I promise.’

Allan sighed, nodding.

“Alright, just tell me what you want me to do.”

‘You don’t have to hold onto me that tightly. Just be ready to catch me in case I slip or something,’ she told him. ‘I’m going to try and go forward a little bit.’

Once Allan loosened his grip on her body, Umari slowly pulled herself up along his chest, letting him slip out of her partially. She felt a small wave of pleasure wash over her at the sensation of him moving inside her. After a taking a moment to prepare, she carefully pushed herself back down onto him.

Umari grunted as she hit bottom again, shivering at the mix of pain and pleasure that ran up her spine. Like the way she felt when she rubbed herself against him, or when she moved back and forth with him firmly inside of her, the good feelings urged Umari to keep going.

She tried again, pulling forward a little further this time, and sunk down again.

The sensations she felt coming from Allan helped drown out some of the pain she still felt from the initial insertion. She began to focus on the pleasure they were both experiencing, giving her enough courage to quicken her pace.

‘Th— There we go… That’s much better…’

“Mnn, yeah.”

Allan was starting to get lost in the moment. He laid his head back and let every sensation that Umari felt flow over their bond, her growing arousal matching and adding to his own.

The combined feeling was incredible; both of them could feel the emotions and senses of their partner rush into them, only to send out their own in response.
'You know,' she said, panting a bit. 'You can move too. I can take it, I think.'

‘Alright, let me know if it’s too much,’” he rocked his hips up to meet hers, eliciting a growl of pleasure as he hit her deepest parts.

Allan took that as a good sign, and pushed against her again. The two soon developed a rhythm; him thrusting up as she pushed down. Between the hot and humid air of the night, and Umari’s own intense warmth, Allan found himself panting and sweating profusely.

He began to notice Umari slowing down her own movements, taking a pause every now and then to catch her breath or adjust her position on top of him. Hearing her quiet moans begin to shift into stressed whines gave Allan doubts as to whether their current position was even comfortable for her for very long.

He didn’t want her to hurt anymore.

“Umari,” he whispered. “Do you want me to move some more?”

‘…—nn, sure.’ She stopped moving, preparing for whatever Allan had planned. He surprised her by wrapping both arms around her and rolling her over onto her back, all the while staying inside her.

‘Ah! Allan, what’re you—?

The sudden movement and impact onto the bed made Umari tense up, bracing herself against Allan’s body as best she could. When she settled onto the soft surface of the bed, she let go of the breath she had been holding and opened her eyes. Looking up at him, she was a little shocked that he made such a bold move on his own.

No longer needing to support herself, Umari pulled her front paws closer to her chest and let her hind legs stretch and spread out as she wished. She shifted around beneath him, adjusting to lying on her back. Their new arrangement let her lower body loosen up, Umari no longer needing to strain to keep her balance on Allan’s lap. Almost immediately she felt what discomfort came with the change in position fade away.

‘What made you want to try this?’ she asked him.

“When you were asking how we’d do this, you suggested doing it like this, didn’t you?”

Allan leaned in close, “Is this how you imagined it?”

‘Maybe…’ Umari covered her face with her front paws. ‘I… wanted to look at you. While we mated.’

“Then look,” he pulled her paws down. After having been so embarrassed and hesitant about everything, Allan wanted to take charge and indulge in his own desires.

“I’m going to take the lead for now,” he kissed her passionately, holding her face in his hand. He planted his other hand beside her head, looming over her and pinning her beneath him. As he leaned forward and began to move, he made sure to keep his weight off of her.

Umari returned his heavy kiss, exploring his mouth with her tongue. She found herself enjoying this new position more than she was expecting. It was easier on her body, but it was a stark contrast from being held in her human’s arms to being pushed down into the bedding as he thrust himself inside her. She couldn’t move away; her legs grew weaker with every motion he made.

Not that she wanted to.
Unlike when she was on top, having to pay attention to her balance and positioning, she was completely free to look up and watch as Allan truly gave into his secret passion. The weight behind his movements, the sound of his grunts and breathing, the look in his eyes whenever they broke a kiss to breathe, the strong sense of desire that radiated from him over their psychic link; everything he did told her just one thing: he loved her, and everything about her.

_He looks so happy... just to be with me._

A thought that made Umari’s own happiness explode as she continued to take in everything about the moment around her.

As time went on, Allan found it easier for him to move inside of her, Umari’s body slowly becoming accustomed to his size and movements. After feeling how much Umari was enjoying herself, he began to speed up, the sensation in his loins growing with each motion. The amount of movement was beginning to become taxing, his breath lost to the urgency his body demanded. While caressing his loving Flareon, he was also keeping himself from putting too much weight on her, which added to his physical exhaustion.

He was beginning to feel the urge to release, the powerful waves of pleasure that came from Umari helping push him closer to the edge.

‘_Umari, I’m getting close._’ Allan focused on her mind, showing her the meaning behind his words.

He tried his best to last as long as he could against her hot, tight body.

‘I can feel something too,’ she told him. ‘And I can feel you. It’s incredible...’

She had wondered before, if they ever came together as mates, what an actual mating would feel like. She wasn’t expecting the initial pain, but as the act itself progressed it had become far beyond anything she could have expected.

She could feel a new sensation building as Allan’s movements became even quicker and less reserved. Intense spikes of pleasure would rise and fall in time with his thrusts. Umari arched her back reflexively once the increase in pleasure didn’t fall, instead continuing to climb higher and higher. Her mouth hung open as she gasped for air, her mind swimming as she tried to make sense of all the feelings she felt over their bond.

‘A-Allan, I think— I—’

She howled in ecstasy as her climax hit. It was far more intense than anything she had ever felt. It erupted and sent waves of pure elation throughout her body. She braced herself against his chest, scratching him with her claws once again.

Allan felt as if the mental connection they shared seemed to strengthen tenfold. The feeling of Umari’s first orgasm flowed over Allan with unimaginable clarity, pushing him to the edge as well. With Umari’s climax, her walls tightened around him, urging him to finish. Allan had held off as long as he could, and with one final, hard thrust, reached his own peak with a loud groan.

Their momentarily strengthened bond heightened his orgasm immensely, pushing himself into her erratically as the waves of pleasure wracked his body.

Unable to hold himself up any longer, Allan fell onto his side, keeping Umari held close in his arms as he rode out the rest of their shared climax.

Umari pushed against his chest, creating some space between them on the bed.
‘No, don’t…’ she said as he tried to pull out. ‘Let’s stay like this… just a bit longer…’

No words. Just a kiss was her answer. Unlike the passion and lust driven ones, this was a simple, gentle touch of their lips. In the minutes that followed, the lovers took advantage of their expanded bond, though they could feel it start to wane back to its normal quality.

Umari nuzzled into his face, ‘I love you Allan. I’m so happy…’

“I love you too,” he said before kissing her again.

Umari curled into his chest as much as she could, wrapped in her lover’s arms.

Allan held her gently, kissing the top of her head.

The two slowly drifted off to sleep in a dreamy haze. Each forgetting, if only for a moment, that the past few days had happened at all.

Allan awoke the next morning to the feeling of cold air blowing across his bare chest from an uncharacteristically cool breeze. After sitting up in his bed, he realized he’d woken up alone. A quick glance around the room erased any short-lived fears, however. Umari was lying in the windowsill, looking out into the backyard and watching a pair of Pidgey fly about a tree.

“Morning, Umari,” Allan said.

‘Hey…’ she said solemnly.

“What’s the matter? It isn’t about—” he paused, fearful of what she might be troubled with. “You don’t regret last night do you?”

‘No, of course not. Don’t ever think that. I was just thinking about what I almost did last night.’

“What do you mean?” Allan stood up from the bed and quickly grabbed the underwear he had tossed aside last night. He walked over and knelt down next to her, gently rubbing her head.

‘I almost ran away. I almost left you, and now…’ she leaned into his hand.

‘I can see how close I was to making a terrible mistake. I’ve been looking outside for a little while now, and I’ve been thinking on how much of the world there is to see. How different it all is.’

Umari turned to him and smiled, ‘And for the first time in a long time, I truly appreciate the fact that I’ll see it all, with you.’

She couldn’t have stopped him from kissing her then if she wanted to.

“Did you practice that all morning?”

‘I might’ve went over it a few times,’ she looked down to his chest and gave him a tender lick. ‘Does it hurt?’

He looked over damage for the first time. It was a slight burn, but the mark it left spread across the left side of his chest. Umari’s claws had scratched him a handful of times as well during the previous night’s activities, but not enough to draw any blood.

“It looks worse than it is, trust me. Besides, it was an accident.”
The two spent a few moments enjoying each other’s uninterrupted company, before Umari asked, ‘Allan… What about your parents? Do you think they’ll, you know, find out about us being mates?’

“Well, I’ve never been one to lie to them, so if they ask about that for some reason, I’ll have to tell them. How they’ll react, have no idea. This kind of thing has never came up before, but I think they’ll understand eventually.”

‘But, what’ll happen if—’

“If they have a problem with it, then that’s that. We can make it on our own if we have to.”

She nuzzled his face, comforted by his return to confidence. ‘Thank you… Hey, Allan?’

“Yeah?”

‘Last night… What was the “right answer”?’

“Oh… that. That was just me being selfish again. When I saw that you had come to find me last night, my mind raced trying to figure out why you came looking for me after what I did to you. I decided to ask, to see if you loved me back. But you said you were afraid. I thought that if you did love me, you would have said it then.”

‘I’m sorry… I was too afraid of what you would do if you—I don’t know—took it the wrong way. Guess we both get wrapped up in our own heads too much. But I’m sick of thinking about all that. It’s all behind us now, right? Let’s just be together. Like we were supposed to be. No more fighting.’

“I wouldn’t want anything more.”

He took her in his arms, and carried her back to the bed. They stayed enveloped in each other for some time, watching the sun continue to rise. She rested her head on his chest as she listened to the sound of him breathing.

‘So, what’s next?’ she asked, not wanting to move. ‘We’ve got plenty of time on our hands now.’

“Well, my original plan, before I needed to figure everything out, was to stay here until after my birthday. But how about we challenge Morty and head off again once that package arrives? I think we should get back on the road as soon as we can.”

‘We’re just leaving? What about your parents?’

“They’re stuck halfway across the world; they wouldn’t make it here in time anyway. They’ll understand. And after you scorch your way through Morty’s ghosts, we can let Sontos speed through Chuck’s gym at Cianwood.”

‘Why’re you so insistent on training Sontos so much? He can’t be that far below the rest of the team.’

“It’s part of an idea I had to help you and your psychic abilities. I want Sontos to evolve as fast as possible because I think he can help us perfect your powers. A Metagross is exceptionally intelligent and I think that with his help, and my bond with you, we can work to strengthen it to match one a Psychic type might have with me. The kind that feels like what we had last night. I know how much it meant to you before you evolved.”

‘Allan…’ Umari lifted her head up and looked at him. ‘Thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me. Thank you so much… But where will we go after Cianwood?’
“Cianwood has beaches, doesn’t it? It’s important to relax and enjoy ourselves whenever we can. Olivine City has plenty of sand too, though. Which do you want to see?”

‘Both. Then I can speed through that Steel gym, and we can go to Mahogany and I’ll melt those Ice types too. And no stopping me this time if I try my Flare Blitz, okay?’

“Agreed.”

‘Oh,’ she said as she got an idea.

‘Make sure you remember to bring that tent with us. We could use the extra privacy, don’t you think?’ She surprised Allan with the seductive tone in her voice.

“Y-You do have a point…” he said, slightly embarrassed.

Two days later, in the dark and cool interior of the Ecruteak Gym, Allan and Umari stood victorious on their side of the battlefield. After a tough but quick fight, Allan had won his gym battle.

“Well done, Allan.” Morty said as the match officially ended. “You’ve grown into a remarkable trainer over the years. I see that the troubles you’ve faced on the open road have not broken your spirit.”

“Of course not,” he said, smiling as he thought of Umari. “I’ve got my Pokémon with me every step of the way.”

“As it should be,” Morty nodded, handing him his Fog Badge. He closed his eyes and clasped both hands around Allan’s.

“I sense your path may be changing soon, Allan. Be prepared for what lies ahead of you.”

“We’ll take it as it comes,” Allan looked down at Umari, who looked up at him with a loving gaze.

“Worrying about the future won’t change it.”

“Indeed,” Morty let go of him and nodded once more.

Allan and his golden Flareon left Ecruteak Gym and made their way home, both of them noticing a small package had been left on the doorstep while they had been gone.

“Alright,” Allan picked up the pace reach the front door. “Now we can get going!”

‘Don’t you think we should celebrate winning our gym battle before we go?’

“Oh, alright,” Allan relented. “We can have a victory party with our new teammate from Unova tonight.”

To Be Continued in Chapter 34: A New Future
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