

A big thanks to NurseBold, Nicolas H, Tim M, ncskeeter56, Thomas D, Avo, S. Nutter, Lucy B, Lars H, Jesper B, Frogsamurai, Ethan S, Bunny Waffles, Kalafalafakah, Fabhar, Zach C, Dicky W, Sashank U, Patrick I, MidnightJayguar, Tyric Gaias, No Thanks, Alex G, Meadow, Spencer S, Taylor V, Jeremy H, Scott E, Johnathan C, Josh T, marcellis97, Powernap, rooster196, Johnathan D, Sukaleska, Ampharos3, Nick R, Tiemi, Irene, Xegzy, Earthpatriot117, CheesePie25, Thundatwin, TwentyThousandCats, MooMoo195, itsawaffle, Rafael B, Esquire, Spencer K, Siphon Rayzar, Mrbucky92, wishindo, Sandesh, Obsidianking, ToolsOfTrypticon, Jorge B, Kyle P, Cynicalto, Friendship is Carrots, Tayler, Dominic M, Aidan S, Duncan K, Webmaster, Planetace, xydra22, Aros, Argent E, Orion D, Chris C, Vitruvius, Emeraldleafeon, Reviv3pls, Kiri, Michael S, Chaz, Swinter, Patroncrad, James M, Buzztech, Phillip N, V, Grant G, KessOrangesoda, Remi C, Zachary, VoidPhoenix, Kirsendarcken, Private Iron, Brendan Mewburn, Edward S, BlastwaveNorth, Faolen, Harp, Brad P, MettalicDragon, Evan F, LightAblaze, The Last Pucci, Anemone221, GaryD12, Kris N, Weise, Duncan, Sage B, Night Drifter, killbot E, Pearly, Janejpaik, Slothy, dakota j, Rairarku, n angstmann, Bobo Bo, and MentallySauced or being patrons.

An extra big thanks to Teigen S, K, Andres, Stays Secret, Paul F, VandheerXLorde, Dusks_Lantern, Jordan M, Sprektomegankai, Berd, Cristobal A, Uratan, Enderchangeling, Alder, Bacchin, Rincewind, 2ScoopsPlz, Alejandro G, MrPerson0 for being high-level patrons.

A special thanks to Spartanstoryteller, Eriermence, and Dewey08 for being mad-lad level patrons.

Last but certainly not least, a very special thanks to BrokenOlive, Cait R, and Nekusar for being top-level patrons, as well as a thanks to every donator who wishes to go unnamed.

Want to support me? See Fuggmann on the place of patrons. As a thanks for donating, patrons get to see updates a few days early and suggest edits to the final draft before it goes live.

“Merow?” Shinx mewls, twitching her ears as the metal probes in Lee’s hands touch her cheeks.

“Okay, baby girl,” Lee glances down to the multimeter in the grass beside him. From the meter are a pair of red and black wires, each leading to a probe in the trainer’s hand. “Give it all you got.”

Shinx scrunches her face up in concentration, her claws kneading the dirt in her focus. Golden sparks jump across her fur, and the multimeter beeps shrilly. Even through the thick rubber insulation on the probes, Lee feels them grow warm in his hands.

“Very good!” Lee smiles and pulls the probes away. He hides a wince when Shinx, not yet fully powered down, nuzzles his leg with a pleased purr and sends an unpleasant shock up his body.

Turning his attention to the multimeter and the notebook sitting next to it, he opens the notebook and thumbs his way over to the section dedicated to Shinx.

“Let’s see...” He takes the pen from the spiral binding and clicks it open, writing down what the meter says. “Six thousand volts at roughly...” He presses a few buttons on the meter’s display, changing the reading. “Two milliamps,” Lee jots down the numbers, noting the day-by-day increase by small, but noticeable increments. “You’re growing like a weed, you know that?” He says, reaching out and scratching her back. “Heh. Didn’t think I would need to start down the path of an electrician to be a pokemon trainer. Maybe you’ll be big enough to battle Winona when we make it to Fortree in a few months, eh? Could you zap all those birds out of the sky for me?”

Shinx purrs louder and arches her back into Lee’s touch, but otherwise doesn’t reply.

It’s been just three days since the TM demo for Silph Co. Lee, Brendan, and Zinnia decided to linger in Mauville for a while longer, taking in the luxury of the city before setting out on the daunting path to Lavaridge town for the next gym. With differing plans, everyone scattered for the day. Zinnia went to thrash a small local tournament for the prize money while Brendan decided to go to the annual Mauville Trick House event to try and win a year of free pokeblocks.

Lee debated on entering the tournament, loitering around a battlefield for a battle or two, or even going to the Mauville Game Corner to gamble a bit, but after the last week or so?

A calm day in the woods with his team is what he *really* needed.

The previous night, Brendan pointed out that the League tournament is still ten months away, and they’ve taken three of the eight gyms in only six weeks, so a slowdown wouldn’t hurt. Lee honestly didn’t realize just how urgent a pace he was setting until it was pointed out. The conscious realization that he has no deadlines, time clocks, or anything else breathing down his neck lifted yet another weight from the man’s shoulders.

Nearly a year to just... wander around and have fun, getting paid to do research that he was going to do anyway. Then he can take a shot at fame and fortune in the Ever Grande Conference. After that, he has a spot in academia waiting for him.

With a long-term roadmap laid bare to him, things just seem like they’re going to work themselves out. It’s no wonder the life of a professional trainer is the dream of countless people all over the world.

‘Still need to keep an eye out for Magma and Aqua...’ Lee leans back into the tree he and Shinx are sitting under. *‘Hopefully, Ash can deal with them,’* He glances to the left, where Vulpix sits.

The vixen sits silently with her eyes closed, her face a picture of focus. Arranged from smallest to largest at her paws are several rocks gathered from around the forest, the smallest barely a

pebble while the largest is the size of a bowling ball. A stone from the middle, maybe a pound in weight, hovers several inches off of the ground, suspended by a solid aura of pink. Slowly, the stone lowers to the ground, jerking unsteadily a few times. It lands with a muted thump, and the pink aura vanishes.

Vulpix sucks in a harsh breath, and although his bond to her is pinched nearly closed, so as to not disturb her, Lee can feel the fox's slowly mounting fatigue.

Her telekinesis is nowhere near powerful enough to be listed as the Psychic move Extrasensory in Lee's pokedex, a move high-level members of the Vulpix line can learn. The telekinesis is not even strong enough to be recognized as Confusion, but much to Lee's pride, Vulpix takes a deep breath and centers herself, closing her eyes once more. Slowly, almost unsurely, the next largest stone at Vulpix's paws begins to rise in stark defiance of gravity.

Already grand ideas and fantasies swim in Lee's head as Vulpix hones her newest power. He idly flips back to her section in his notebook and looks down at the next move he wants to create for her.

Name: Psychobellows (Better name pending?) (Ver 0 Prototype)

-Psychic type

Description: User creates a spherical (shape subject to change after testing) psychic barrier with the intent to trap air, then compresses the barrier while creating a small opening (add nozzle?), dumping air into ongoing Fire attack to increase intensity.

Notes: Still in the conceptual stage. Vulpix needs to better master her psychic abilities to utilize. Requires focus as this needs to be used in tandem with another attack, ideally Flamethrower/Fire Blast

Name: Forbidden Sun (Better name pending?) (Ver 0 Prototype)

-Psychic/Fire type?

Description: User generates an extreme amount of fire contained in a psychic shell and sends it towards foe at high speed. Upon reaching foe, the shell breaks and unleashes the fire inside as a terrific explosion.

Notes: Still in the conceptual stage. Intended to be an offset of Convergence with a low cast-time and alarming speed. The psychic shell should take out the necessity of carefully shaping the attack (Early versions of Convergence lost cohesion if charged hastily. See notes on pg 87) as the edge of the shell keeps everything contained. Will likely be unique to Vulpix since pyrokinesis is needed to maintain the fire in the limited-air shell. With both pyrokinesis and psychokinesis giving Vulpix two degrees of control, she should be able to move the attack at high speed. (Testing needed. Unknown if there will be any conflict between the Fire and Psychic energy.)

Addendum: Fair and Balanced.

Lee nods to himself and shuts his notebook. *'It'll take some time, but if anyone can make wild techniques like these a reality, it's Vulpix.'* Lee looks to his last pokemon.

Under another tree several yards away, Grovyle stands with his arms held in a ready stance, the leaves on his wrists glowing a verdant green with Leaf Blade. All around his feet are leaves from the tree above him, each one cut down the middle.

Grovyle lets out a short exhale, then turns and kicks the tree with a harsh *Whack!* Despite only being a little over three and a half feet tall, Grovyle's thigh muscles, the same ones that give him his explosive speed, let him kick with bone-shattering (or tree-shaking) force.

A shock runs up the tree, and from the branches falls a number of loose leaves that slowly flutter to the ground.

Grovyle's eyes narrow and his Leaf Blades hum. Around his body, a thin outline of white, just barely noticeable, begins to glow. His legs tense, then...

Whoosh!

He rockets upward, moving so quickly that the air whistles shrilly around his Leaf Blades. The grass around his feet is blown flat from the rushing air, and he rises so fast it looks as if he's going to fly up into the branches of the tree.

Grovyle grunts, Quick Attack flaring around him... Then he stops mid-air, his momentum gone and his speed halting on a dime. Before gravity can take hold of him, Grovyle's arm blurs, his blade slicing one of the falling tree leaves clean down the middle. Quick Attack flares again, and this time the Grass-type zooms down towards the lowest leaf, only five feet from touching the ground.

Once more, his white aura flares and arrests his momentum, giving him just a split second to cut the leaf in twain, then he's gone again, this time flying up to slice a leaf that strayed from the others.

As a flicker of green, Grovyle zips from one point to the next, never letting any of the falling leaves touch the ground before he can cut them in half, each one split down the middle and *only* down the middle.

'He's getting so fast...' Lee watches with no small amount of awe as the second-stage pokemon cuts every leaf like some sort of samurai. Well, if samurai could tell gravity to shove it, that is. *'Grovyle's movement is becoming so fast that he has to be approaching the speed of Andre's Absol. He's really taken Quick Attack and pushed it to its absolute limits. He's done nothing but focus on it for days now. I knew Quick Attack could be used to change directions even mid-air, but full-on never-touch-the-ground propulsion?'*

The last leaf is carved down the middle, so Grovyle lets himself fall back to the earth, twisting mid-air to land on his feet in a silent crouch. He lets his Leaf Blades power down and shifts his chewing twig around in his mouth, inspecting his handiwork on the forest floor with a neutral expression. Despite his cool appearance, Lee still sees the barely suppressed tremors running up and down Grovyle's limbs.

'I hope he's not doing this to make up for losing Corvi...' Lee bites his lip and runs his hand through Shinx's coat, making the little kitten climb into his lap. *'Not having a flyer sucks, but you don't need to try and fill a role you weren't made for. I know that technique is putting a lot of stress on your body.'* For a moment, he considers not voicing his concerns, then he shakes his head. "Grovyle?"

Grovyle turns at hearing his name, stepping closer with a short, inquiring hiss.

"Careful not to overwork yourself..." Lee pauses, trying to find words that won't wound Grovyle's pride, which has been especially sore since the Mauville Gym battle. "Until we fill our roster out some more, I need you in top shape now more than ever."

Grovyle rolls his twig around in his mouth and nods. He seats himself across from Lee, crossing his legs and folding his two-fingered paws in his lap. Grovyle gives the empty pokeballs on his trainer's hip a pointed look.

"Wanting to know who I'm planning on catching?" Lee asks, idly stroking Shinx. When Grovyle nods, Lee lifts his notebook again and turns to a page filled with names. "We haven't had a team meeting in a while, have we? I guess now is as good a time as any. It's about time for lunch as well." He looks over to Vulpix. "Hey, love? How about a break as we talk about plans for the future?"

Vulpix lets out a slow breath and lowers the rock in her telekinetic grip to the ground, only jerking it once. Opening her eyes, she re-opens her side of her connection to Lee, letting him feel her lethargy.

Lee smiles at her. *'I think lunch will fix that.'*

The fox stands and shakes herself before trotting up and sitting heavily beside Lee.

In short order, Lee pulls a pair of covered bowls from his backpack and peels the plastic lids off, letting the aroma of the food inside fill the clearing.

Both Vulpix and Grovyle perk up as Lee lays the food out for them.

Vulpix's bowl is much the same as it was months ago when Lee found a satisfactory mix for her. A medley of lean beef, rice, eggs, veggies, slices of Oran, and a small amount of crushed-up vitamins mixed into a thin, savory sauce to round out what was missed.

Grovyle's lunch is much greener. Inside are collard greens, turnip greens, shredded cauliflower and broccoli, lentils, mushrooms, thin slices of various peppers, and slices of Oran. The vegetarian mix is only lightly cooked to prevent the precious water-soluble nutrients inside from escaping.

Mixed into both meals however, is something Lee has been using for only a week, and already he's lamenting how quickly it's running out.

In both bowls are paper-thin slivers of Citrus berry, mixed in so thoroughly that they're unseen.

After discovering the miracle properties of the Citrus berry, Lee knew he needed to have one. Not to use as a held item for a fight, no, but to use as a long-term additive to his pokemon's food. A smaller than average but high-grade example of the nearly-magic fruit drained two thousand credits from his wallet. To his utter relief, Citrus didn't lose much potency when added to a mix. A test run with a salad for lunch several days ago with bits of Citrus left him feeling peppy the entire day.

'Regular food to provide energy, nutrients, and minerals, Oran to promote proper digestion and body homogeneity, and a tiny bit of Citrus for that utterly miraculous cellular regeneration,' Lee muses. *'Everyone definitely seems to be holding info about the higher-end berries close to their chest. A grand total of **no one** has documented info on how to promote a gradual release of the enzymes responsible for the regen.'* Already, plans begin to formulate in his head. *'The Oran has already done wonders for them, so here's hoping the Citrus takes it a step further. The better my team grows before they reach their final stages, the better... Maybe I can find a mix that better promotes Vulpix's psychic growth?'*

As Lee withdraws a baby bottle of Miltank milk from his bag and uncaps it for Shinx, the thought of his pokemon team's growth flows into another. *'I'll let everyone eat first. The conversation can wait.'*

Vulpix and Grovyle both down their lunches with a contained gusto, as neither wants to appear gluttonous. Shinx, however, has no issue sucking down her bottle like she's starved, and twice Lee has to remind her to slow down lest she ends up ill.

As everyone rests with full bellies, Lee clears his throat, getting Vulpix and Grovyle's attention. Shinx, however, lays dead to the world in his lap, lulled to sleep after her meal.

"So, I figure now is as good a time as any to discuss team matters," Lee begins, looking between his pokemon. "Grovyle wanted to know who is on my radar as a new team member, and honestly? I'm a little unsure."

Vulpix flicks her fan of tails, and her mind feeds Lee an image of an Eevee.

“Yes, Eevee is still very high on my list of wants,” Lee nods along. “Preferably an Eevee partial to becoming a Vaporeon. Really, any good Water-type would be nice to have since the next Gym is a Fire specialist.”

It's minute, but Grovyle's lips twitch downward.

Lee can't quite hide his wince. “I know, Grovyle. I know. Remember that I'll need you for the strongest gyms in Hoenn. I won't let your skill and hard work go to waste, I promise.”

The gecko pokemon mulls Lee's word over, then reluctantly nods.

“Vulpix,” Lee looks her way. “We've yet to actually fight another Fire-type seriously, as I assume most people think your ability is Flash Fire. I'm confident in your ability to no-sell fire attacks, but I think it would be a bad idea to rely so heavily on a single trick, hence wanting a Water-type.”

The vixen nods her head easily, accepting the reasoning without any fuss.

“Hoenn's native water pokemon are...” Lee waves a hand in a ‘so-so’ gesture. “I've nothing against them, but after seeing that Vaporeon back on the Dewford boatride casually shapeshift, it's going to take something pretty impressive to upstage that.” Lee sighs and crosses his arms. “I don't want to take in another teammate just for them to realize they were a second pick, a silver medal, and be stuck with that hanging over them, you know?”

Vulpix openly scoffs. *‘Yo*r h*art's too b*g. You co*ld no* make t*em feel u*loved even if you tri*d.’*

Grovyle warbles in his throat, leaning back as he reflects on Lee's words, then nods in agreement. His golden eyes fall to Lee's notebook, and Lee himself takes notice.

“There *are* a few besides Vaporeon...” Lee carefully takes Shinx's ball from his hip and recalls the sleeping kitten in a flash of light. After putting the ball back, he thumbs open his notebook to his ‘wanted list’, which has grown since he last reported to Nigel. “Squirtle and Totodile are easy picks. Both evolve into bulky, physically powerful tanks, a role we're lacking on the team. Too bad both are a pain to find in the wild and well-bred ones cost an arm and a leg...” He moves his finger down the page, tracing names as he goes. “A Gyarados would fill a powerhouse role well, but the Magikarp state is such a huge hurdle. Same thing with Milotic. Politoed is another tanky ‘mon with a decent movepool, but a King's Rock to trigger the proper evolution is not an easy find...”

Both Vulpix and Grovyle look more and more unsure as more names keep getting tossed. The fox turns to the gecko, a quiet inquiry passing through her lips. Grovyle just shakes his head in a negative.

Lee frowns. His own desire to avoid pokémon with unfamiliar biology or situational utility is cutting his prospects down much more harshly than expected. "Piplup is a decent choice I suppose. Many have attitude problems and they're cheap to adopt for it, but... eh. Marill is common enough, but they suffer from the issue of needing a stone to evolve. Octillery, maybe? They're slow, but they hit like trucks and learn a ton of moves. A Primarina would provide fantastic power and coverage with their dual Water and Fairy typing, but they're never seen outside of Alola." He sighs and closes his notebook. "I dunno guy and gal. It's a hard choice and we might be better off just praying for a Suicune to drop in my lap." He closes his eyes and crosses his arms.

...

After several seconds, he cracks open an eye and glances around, finding no free legendary pokémon. "Damn. I thought that would work."

Vulpix lets out a scratchy, vulpine chortle while Grovyle smiles slightly.

"Rock is also a choice, along with Ground," Lee turns a page in his notebook. "Rockruff is cheap to import and adopt, and they're much faster than other Rock-types. Trapinch is slow to grow, but a Flygon would make a great addition. A Nidoking or Nidoqueen would be nice, even if they're heavy investments given the moonstone needed."

Lee closes the notebook and stretches his arms over his head, a yawn escaping him.

"Well, it's not something we need to solve right now." Lee reaches out and takes Grovyle's empty bowl, then pauses with a faint smile when Vulpix's bowl shakily hovers into his hand on its own. "You two are some of the best pokémon a trainer could want. You're walking blessings, really. I know you can pull us through just about anything."

Grovyle crosses his arms and looks away, vainly pretending he doesn't care when he has to fight to keep his smile from growing.

Vulpix's expression melts into one of open adoration, her tails wagging slowly. She widens her end of their bond, and through it comes a gentle river of love that makes Lee's eyes sting just a little.

The zoologist smiles back and pushes forth his own mental affection, slipping it around Vulpix and tightening it like one might a hug. After a moment, he lets go and returns his attention outward towards the bowls still in his hands. He replaces the lids on each one and slips them into his bag. "Before I forget," Lee looks to Vulpix. "What are your thoughts on evolving, love? For Shinx and Grovyle, it's only a matter of time and they can't really choose unless they want to lug around an everstone, but you can."

The fox suddenly looks uncomfortable, the love she's telepathically feeding to Lee halting abruptly.

The feeling makes Lee flinch. "Vulpix?"

Vulpix turns to her teammate and murmurs something almost too quiet to hear, and Grovyle's reply is a short, crisp nod. The wood gecko swiftly reaches an arm out but pauses an inch away from tapping the button on his pokeball. He hisses out a sharp comment that makes Vulpix visibly wince, then hits the pokeball button. Grovyle is then sucked inside the ball as a flash of red, leaving Vulpix and Lee alone.

"Love?" Lee begins, his worry building. "What's wrong?"

Vulpix trots her way to Lee and hops into his lap, standing on her hind paws and planting her forepaws on Lee's shoulders for support. Then she presses her forehead to his, filling his vision with her brown eyes. With their heads touching, Vulpix opens the telepathic bond wide, and by doing so she can't hide the smidgen of dread that hangs on to her.

'Lee...' Her 'voice' is crisp and clear. *'How long does a Vulpix live?'*

'How long?' He recalls his studies back in the lab. *'Around sixty years.'*

'And how long do Ninetails live?'

'Several hundred, sometimes a thousand - oh.'

Vulpix's apprehension makes much more sense.

'I want to evolve, to become more powerful for you.' Vulpix blinks her large eyes. *'But... You're everything I know and love. I'm not sure I can stand watching you grow old when I'll... just stay young.'* A short whine makes it out of her mouth. *'I'm not sure what to do.'*

With their minds so close, Lee can feel the turmoil inside her even as she tries to hide it, so he wraps her in a tight hug. Her soft, furry body warms him to the core. *'You don't have to evolve if you don't want to. It's your choice.'* He tells her. *'If the legends are true,'* He exhales sharply through his nose in a half-hearted laugh. *'Then maybe you can evolve, then I can grab one of your tails and curse myself with a thousand-year lifespan, fixing everything.'*

Vulpix growls at the jest. *'That's not funny.'*

'Maybe not, but if you really wanted me to, you just need to say.'

The fox pulls her head back and nips her trainer on the tip of his nose, making him cringe.

'No.' Vulpix growls once more. *'No cu*ses, especially not a*y from me.'*

"Understood," Lee mutters aloud, rubbing a finger across his smarting nose. "Just think on it, Vulpix. If you want to evolve, then I'll get you the highest grade firestone there is. If not, then I won't breathe another word of it."

She nods her head, thoughts still scattered and distracted. *'Lee..?'*

'Yes?'

*'I've been mea*ing to...'* The vixen stops herself short and lets her forepaws fall, dropping into Lee's lap. *'No, never*ind.'*

Why am I?

The confusing question Lee gleaned from Vulpix's sleeping mind several weeks ago comes to him once more, but he just reaches a hand up and strokes the fox's chin. "If you ever need to talk about anything, just let me know and I'll make time."

She huffs with a small smile, seeming terribly amused. *'Of cou*se.'*

For a time, Lee and Vulpix simply sit together under that shady tree, the tension of the uncomfortable conversation washing away in the breeze.

Lee and Vulpix relax in the woods for some time, no words needing to be exchanged as they enjoy the simple pleasure of just being together. As the noon sun begins to flow into the afternoon, they decide to rise to wander through the forestry. Grovyle is let back out of his ball as well, and the three aimlessly walk about, Vulpix and Grovyle flanking their trainer. They encounter a bush of Oran along the way, which Lee picks to replenish his perpetually low stock.

It was around this time that Lee's phone beeps, making the man glance down at his pocket. "Hmm?" He wonders aloud, wiping a bit of Oran juice on his pant leg before pulling the device out. "An email?"

Hello Mr. Henson.

Alec here. I'm reaching out to you about your spectacular demo with us at Silph Co. Upon seeing the footage and data readouts from our testing, the TM Committee was quite impressed! They've expressed an interest in one run of both Seed Blast and Seed Sniper as a trial with the possibility of future runs. They, unfortunately, decided to hold fast in regards to your cut of 4%...

Lee frowns.

...But seeing Convergence in action has intrigued not only the TM Committee, but a few Hoenn branch board of director members as well, which I think will open up future opportunities.

Lee shakes his head with a sigh. "Should have seen that coming I guess."

The TM Committee has hashed out the numbers with our finance and marketing departments, and they've decided to price your TMs at 3,500 credits with you receiving a 4% royalty for each one. Please swing by my office at your earliest convenience and we can get the paperwork rolling and have the moves copied.

Your friend and new Silph account manager.

Alec Aarons.

Senior Licensing Representative.

SILPH CO HOENN

5800 Junction Lane

(9790)-9856-1771

The numbers are run through his head, and Lee lets out a breath. "Holy shit, that's almost fifty thousand credits once all is said and done."

"Gro?" Grovyle raises one of his ridged eyebrows, looking at the phone in Lee's hand.

"Yeah, it was that slimeball Aarons," Lee nods absently. "Looks like all the red tape has cleared and they want the moves. We're about to have a *lot* more money in the coming weeks." He flips his phone between his fingers and looks between his pokemon. "Let's get going, then."

Vulpix hops to her favorite spot on Lee's shoulder and partially wraps around his neck. Meanwhile, Grovyle nods and falls in step.

During the walk back into Mauville and towards the Silph Co office, Lee browses his phone, flitting between websites belonging to professional breeders, to pokemon equipment manufacturers, to Silph and Devon, to berry farmers, evo stone sellers, and everything in-between.

Lee closes his browser and logs into his bank account, skipping past the cheerful Porygon icon reminding him his password is expiring in a week to look at the number inside.

Preferred PKMN Trainer Account ending in 4873

Checking: 10,982.25 credits

Savings: 5,200.00 credits

IRA: 2,000.00 credits (Learn more about your retirement account, yearly deposit limits, and annual returns by clicking [here](#))

'Even after years of working at the zoo, I can't recall a time when I had more than several thousand dollars saved. After spending thousands on pokémon care, supplies, transport, food, lodging, savings, retirement, and other things all while being taxed on top of it, I still have ten-thousand credits ready to spend after just two months of a low-level trainer career.' Lee flips back to his browser. *'With just a few years of being a frugal trainer hunting for paid battles, I could buy a two-hundred grand house outright with money left over. No mortgage, no loans, just a single money wire and the deed would be in my hands.'*

But the price of a house is utter chump change compared to the amount real pros throw around to make sure their pokémon are treated like kings and in top form. Full belt of Luxury Balls? Easily sixty thousand credits. Name brand food made for your pokémon's particular genus and type? Several hundred for a twenty-pound bag that any decently sized pokémon would gobble in just a few days. A full berry case? Lee already feels that multi-hundred credit-drain every week. Tailor-made training equipment? Land for your pokémon to live on? High-grade potions? TMs? Evolution stones? The costs *soar* into the hundreds of thousands.

Nothing is stopping a young trainer from keeping a few pokémon as pets or for low-level competition, but for the ones who dream of the gym circuit and beyond?

Pokémon training is *not* a casual sport. If you have no money, you've got to be resourceful and ready to hustle, otherwise, you're as good as sunk. The forty-seven thousand credits only weeks away from Lee's pocket will surely end up spent.

The walk to the Silph Co office takes almost an hour from the outskirts of Mauville, and Lee spends the time idly chatting with his pokémon, looking at an intriguing breeder site advertising rare "Hisuian" breeds in Sinnoh, and reading a news article about the Global Pokémon League considering full membership for the Ferrum region despite their unusual battle style.

'The use of augmented reality headsets and brainwave-sync tech that Ferrum is so fond of sounds interesting. Kind of like a heavily nerfed, bastardized version of telepathy.' Lee puts his phone away and pushes through the revolving door to the Silph office. *'Maybe we can go to Ferrum after graduating from Rustboro TS and show them what a **real** synced pair can do, eh, Vulpix?'*

The fox yawns.

The receptionist at the front desk looks up as Lee, Vulpix, and Grovyle approach, not even bothering to try and enforce the 'no loose pokémon' rule she stated last time. "Hello, Mister Henson. I'll let Mister Aarons know you're here," she smiles, typing away at her computer.

Lee smiles back. "Thank you."

The wait isn't long, as Aarons steps through the elevator and whisks Lee and his pokémon away with a smile and a handshake, leading them up the elevator and to his office.

As Lee sits down in one of the guest chairs in the office, Grovyle opts to stand beside him while Vulpix just lazily remains on Lee's shoulders. All three watch Aarons seat himself behind his desk with a pleased sigh.

"Lee, thanks for coming by so quickly," Aarons smooths a non-existent wrinkle in his suit and laces his fingers together. "How are you doing today?"

"Well enough," Lee answers, scanning the walls of Aarons' office briefly. On the left wall is a trophy case and a framed diploma. Although the glittering trophies are too far away to read, the diploma, a degree in business awarded by the 'Castelia University of Commerce', is just close enough to be legible. "We were using today as a sort of 'unwind' day. Nothing planned until you emailed us."

Aarons nods pleasantly. "I see. Even experts need a day off every now and then. It's important to not burn out." His chair squeaks just the slightest bit as he leans back into it. "If you don't mind me asking, Lee, what did you do before becoming a pokemon trainer?"

Both Vulpix and Grovyle become guarded, something Aarons watches with a raised brow, but a little wave from Lee makes both pokemon calm.

"I was an animal handler," Lee begins slowly, picking his phrases with care at Vulpix's silent behest. "I worked with large carnivores in a zoo."

Confusion flits across Aarons' face but is gone again in an instant. "Sounds like an interesting profession," he smiles disarmingly and waves at someone behind Lee in the office doorway. "Why an animal handler, though?"

'What are you digging for?' As sorely tempted as Lee is to ask what the point of the small talk is, he resists. "It's rewarding work. Pokemon are filled with logical and emotional intelligence akin to and sometimes surpassing humans, so being an entry-level trainer is as easy as being friendly. Animals, though, force you to think differently, they change how you see the world." Lee smiles, a bittersweet note growing in his voice. "You can't find success unless you're willing to respect, understand, and grow. Without knowledge of their mindset and the ability to shift yours to match, I think you'd find even teaching a mundane canine how to sit on command maddening."

Aarons eyes narrow slightly as he nods and looks over at his trophy case, seemingly reflecting on Lee's words. "Interesting..." He mutters.

Vulpix's ears flick, making Lee turn to the office doorway just as an attractive young woman in a black dress suit walks in, a pair of steaming paper cups in hand. "For you and your guest, Mister Aarons," she says coolly.

Aarons openly grins. "You're a doll, Jill. They don't pay you enough." After a moment, he adds; "That dress new? Black looks good on you."

The woman smiles thinly. "Thank you." She says nothing else, simply setting the cups down before Lee and Aarons before leaving.

Aarons' reins in his expression and lifts his cup, taking a silent sip from it. "Ah, unknowable is the mind of the fairer sex, eh? I don't suppose knowing how to train animals gives you some kind of special insight, does it?"

Vulpix's body temperature rises in her offense, making her unpleasantly warm, so Lee soothes her ire just by letting his own discomfort bleed through to her. Outwardly, he simply replies; "No."

A small smile rises on the blonde man's lips. "Are you sure? Your lady friend Zinnia was awful-quick to speak on your behalf during your last visit." He shrugs his shoulders minutely. "Keep your secrets, then."

Lee frowns as he raises his own paper cup and sips the coffee inside. *'Not bad. Rather good, actually. No way the guys in the cubicles outside are getting anything quality like this.'* He sets the cup back down. "Well, what did *you* do before Silph Co, Alec?"

"I practiced law," Aarons' smile slips when Lee smirks, and Aarons realizes he seems to have lost some game of wit. He quickly recomposes himself and continues on. "I worked under Nooj, Pauling, and Sons in Jubilife city, specializing in fraud, but that's a boring story for another day. Let's get on to the real reason you're here, hmm?"

Relieved, Lee nods and watches as Aarons withdraws a number of forms from his desk.

"Let me tell you," Aarons extends his pointer finger at Lee. "The committee was blown away by your demo, dropped jaws in the whole room. Usually, these demos are nothing worth talking about, just a kid showing off a move their pokemon mastered to an unusual level. They get a percent or two and are sent on their way after copying, but Seed Blast and Seed Sniper?" Aaron's smile is all too pleased. "Very much worth the investment."

Lee raises an eyebrow. "You take move copies from... anyone?"

Aarons lets his smile dim, though only slightly. "We do. I'm not at liberty to say much, but the storage media used to hold the move data degrades over time, necessitating fresh copies from time to time. Silph Co is happy to offer a bit of money to young trainers for good copies. Now, for brand new moves we can be much more generous."

"I see..." Lee nods slowly. "And you're saying these moves developed by my team are worth only four percent?"

The businessman's face drops into one of regret. "I know, you should be entitled to much, much more, but even after arguing with our financial director, I couldn't secure anything greater than four percent. If we had more to give them..."

'Absolutely not.' Lee shakes his head with a sigh. "Convergence is off the table, I'm afraid. It's a move developed exclusively for Vulpix's use."

"Well, you mentioned a Dark-type move you wished to show a week ago. Another demo might change some minds." Aarons offers, his smile returning. If not for the slightly amused twitch of his lips that Vulpix keys Lee in on, he might have missed the condescending air of Aaron's smile. "When will that move be ready to be shown?"

Grovyle's eyes narrow, and on his shoulder, Lee feels Vulpix's hackles rise.

'You motherfucker.' Lee openly scowls. "The pokemon who knows that move is currently away," The scarred zoologist grounds out, trying vainly to put Corvisquire out of his mind for now. "He won't be back in a reasonable timeframe."

Aarons shrugs. "I understand, Lee. I can't do much else without more from you. The process of TM creation is one where both parties need to bring an equal amount to the table."

"Very well," Lee stands, drawing a raised brow from the other man. "I apologize for wasting your time."

"You aren't going to sign?" Aarons' confusion becoming plain as understanding dawns on his face. "Mister Henson, I assure you that this deal is a fantastic step towards lucrative contracts with Silph Co in the future. I understand this negotiated amount isn't exactly what you want, but-"

'Back to 'Mister', and not Lee, hmm?'

"But nothing," Lee cuts in, annoyed. "This is not just my work you're trying to buy, but my pokemon's work as well. Every single one of my team members is worth their weight in gold, and their efforts *will* be properly compensated. If you can't offer a proper payment, then perhaps Devon can."

Aarons' face twitches, like he's not sure if he wants to snarl or smile. "Mister Henson, I totally understand. I saw your matches with Roxanne, Brawly, and Wattson, and I was beyond impressed. You're one of Hoenn's rising stars, and you *do* deserve more, but my hands are tied."

Grovyle hisses.

Lee snorts. "Bull. I can do math, Alec. I know Silph stands to gain nearly two-million credits from the TM sales." He turns towards the door. "If we can't get a proper share, then Devon might like the moves."

"Yes, *but!*" Aarons raises a finger, making Lee pause and look back. "You need to factor things like labor, making the copies, quality assurance, shipping them to our distributors, things like that. It's not instant-profit for Silph Co!"

"Ok, how much of it *is* profit?"

When Aarons hesitates, Lee starts walking.

"Wait!"

The zoologist stops and turns once more, not hiding his irritation.

Aarons takes a deep breath and smooths out his suit once more. "If we frame this the correct way to the people upstairs..." He begins carefully. "Then perhaps I have some wiggle room."

Lee meets Vulpix's narrowed eyes, then Grovyle's apathetic glances. With a sigh, he returns to his seat and sits heavily. "Don't jerk us around on this, Aarons. The psychic fox on my shoulder can sniff out lies easily."

Aarons finally lets a grimace cross his visage.

Brendan Birch looks between all the people around him, wondering just *how* he got into this mess.

Earlier today he entered the Mauville Trick House contest hoping to win the year's supply of pokeblocks. Even if he didn't win, the trick house sounded like fun anyway. Or it would have been fun if a bunch of jerks didn't cheat and sabotage all the obstacles...

The maze was easy enough. No one said you can't use pokemon to help you, so Marshtomp's air-flow-sensing fins and ability to feel vibrations in the ground lead them to an exit.

The next obstacle, several rolling logs leading through an indoor waterfall and over a pool of water was more tricky. The slick logs needed careful balance, but a woman with ridiculous red hair stood at the end laughing to herself as she rolled the logs by hand, sending a few kids into the drink below. Brendan even saw Ash Ketchum, May Maple, Max Maple, and Brock there. All of them took a spill.

Fed up, Brendan let out Breloom, and the mushroom pokemon leaped across the entire pool of water to hold a log steady for Brendan, making the redheaded woman freak out and flee.

The next challenges were much the same. The redheaded woman, a man with blue, shoulder-length hair, and a *talking* Meowth made themselves into giant pains by getting past every challenge first and fouling up everyone else.

Each time, Brendan borrowed his pokemon's abilities to even the odds.

In the last room, where he burst in at the same time as Ash and his friends, a pair of trick house employees, a man and a woman, were there with a jump rope. The pair said they, the contestants, just needed to skip rope ten times to advance.

Something seemed fishy to Brendan, so he hid Marshtomp's small, travel-sized ball in his palm and played along. Quick as a flash, though, the pair holding the jump rope moved and tied everyone into one giant bundle. Before Ash's Pikachu could retaliate, he was stuffed into an apparently insulated bag now held over the employee woman's shoulder. After a few zaps failed, Pikachu restored to fruitless struggling.

"Let us go!" Ash struggles harder than anyone else, and Brendan winces as an elbow is driven into his side. "Just what do you think you two are doing!?"

"Take it easy, Ash," Brock says tersely. "You're just making the rope tighter."

May and Max don't chime in, but they don't need to speak for Brendan to know how frightened they are.

Brendan, meanwhile, remains silent. Rather than struggle, he wiggles his hand up from its place caught in the cocoon of rope, slowly working Marshtomp's ball free. Once the mudfish pokemon is free, he can clobber these crooks and free them.

The pair smirk, and from the rafters above them, a beige form hops down.

"Meowth!" The beige shape stands up, showing off the same Meowth helping the troublemakers from earlier. "Boy, you twerps really aren't da brightest bulbs around, are yas?" Meowth raises a paw with a smirk.

Recognition lights up on the faces of Ash and his friends before all four scowl.

The pair behind Meowth both laugh. "It was almost too easy," the man exclaims in a smooth voice. "I almost feel bad, right Jessie?"

“Indeed it was, James,” The woman replies, one hand reaching down to grab the hem of her shirt and the belt of her pants. Her other hand reaches for the shades on her face and the bangs of her brown hair.

In a dramatic flourish, both ‘Jessie’ and ‘James’ pull their disguises off and throw the extra clothes and wigs into the air, showing off a shared white uniform emblazoned with a red R underneath.

“Team Rocket!” Ash yells accusingly.

Brendan stiffens. “Team Rocket?”

The Birch heir knows about the old crime syndicate, one Kanto police still struggle with to this day. Pokemon theft and trafficking, smuggling, money laundering, anything they could do, they did. Rumors of their leader, a shadowy man said to be an Elite level trainer, grow larger every time they’re told.

What makes Brendan so wary of the Rockets however is not this scheme or the stories he's heard...

...It's how Lee speaks of them with *open hatred*.

Team Rocket only came up in conversation on the road twice before, but Lee's distaste for the criminals is so powerful that his Vulpix had to calm him lest he devolve into a tirade. Knowing the man after weeks of traveling together, Brendan had no idea Lee even had the capacity to hate. He spits the name Team Rocket like the words coat his mouth with poison, calling them pathetic thieves, terrorists, cowards who break up families for profit.

“These three have a fascination with Pikachu,” Brock explains to Brendan, his brow furrowing. “They're slippery too. No matter how many times we send them packing, they find us again.”

Brendan blinks. “This is a *regular* thing?”

“Ha!” Meowth laughs. “Yous makin' me blush, twerp. Ain't no jailhouse that can hold Team Rocket!”

Brendan scowls. “I won't let you get away,” he wiggles Marshtomp's ball with more urgency. “All three of you are as good as busted once we get out of here. As a Hoenn Lab Trainer, I'm not letting you go!”

“Aren't you just adorable,” Jessie comments dryly. “It's been fun, truly,” Jessie titters haughtily with her hand held in front of her mouth. “But the time for tricks is over, and the time for us to get this treat to the Boss is now!” She shakes the bag with Pikachu in it, making the mouse pokemon cry out and squirm.

“Ta-ta, twerps,” James smirks. “Someone will find you here before long!” The three turn towards the door leading to the exit of the Trick House, leisurely strolling away as the trainers left in the rope bindings struggle.

Brendan grunts and tries to push Marshtomp’s ball out faster. “C’mon...”

“...You’re not going anywhere.”

Team Rocket all yelp as one and jump back when a plume of *lava* smashes into the top of the doorframe they were just about to walk through. The lava hisses and bubbles, dribbling down until it covers the whole doorway in glowing, cooling rock.

Brendan whips his head around.

There, standing in the doorway from the last obstacle is a woman beside an enormous pokemon.

The pokemon, a Camerupt, resembles a ‘camel’ that Lee told Brendan about with its humps replaced by miniature, rocky volcanoes giving it a height of six and a half feet tall. Both volcanoes gurgle with molten rock and plumes of smoke. The pokemon’s shaggy hide is a rusty red in color, covering everything but its brown muzzle and large, cloven hooves. Its body is built more like an elephant than a camel, with a large body and short, muscular legs. The pokemon snorts, releasing wisps of black smoke from its nostrils.

To the Fire camel’s side is a young woman, one who draws Brendan’s attention more than the Camerupt.

The woman is youthful, in the same nebulous teen to young adult age that Zinnia is, but her stoic expression would be right at home on someone thrice her age. She’s clad in a red, pullover hoodie with a small flame decal in the middle of her chest, and a black-and-red skirt that comes down to her thighs. On her feet are simple black and white high-top sneakers. Her magenta eyes, the same color as her neck-length hair, are dull and bored, observing Team Rocket like one might an interesting bug from the shade of her large hood.

Just looking at her makes the hairs on Brendan’s neck stand up. It’s the same feeling he gets when Zinnia breaks out into a feral, violent grin, or when Lee’s face darkens.

This woman is *dangerous*.

“J-Just who might you be?!” Jessie pulls a pokeball from her belt nervously, voicing the unspoken question from the equally unsettled James and Meowth.

The mystery woman tilts her head back, looking down at them. "...Courtney is my name. Don't worry about that, though." She raises a hand and Camerupt snorts another plume of acrid, black smoke. "Do you surrender?"

Jessie grits her teeth. "Seviper, go!" She lets the ball in her hand fly.

"You too, Cacnea!" James pulls a pokeball from his pocket and tosses it.

In a pair of flashes, the snake and cactus pokemon materialize before the Rocket members.

Seviper hisses menacingly, mouth open to show off his huge, poison-dripping fangs as he brandishes his bladed tail.

Cacnea, being much smaller, looks at the massive Fire-type across the room with fear in his beady eyes. Nevertheless, he holds up his spiny arms threateningly.

Courtney expresses no disappointment, fear, or even eagerness. There's nothing. "You've chosen poorly," she mutters, letting her hand fall.

Camerupt bellows and charges, thundering the whole way.

END 28