

You could have read this early!

I'm reader-funded, and need your help to keep writing indefinitely. If you like what you're reading and want to help out, see <https://www.patreon.com/fuggmann>. Patrons get to see updates early, suggest edits to the final draft before it goes live, and participate in polls to choose what gets updated next during my moments of indecisiveness.

If you want to keep up-to-date on releases, see <https://discord.gg/hive-of-degeneracy> and opt in to the fic-updates role for a ping.

As always, thank you for reading.

[line]

A glance at his watch tells Lee that it's nearly noon. Around this time, everyone - Brendan and Zinnia's teams included - would stop for a short break, but today noon marks the end of his team's training in the bowels of the Draconid crater. "Okay! We're done for today! Disengage!"

The gold and green blurs before Lee break off from each other with a final metallic crash, materializing into Ninetales and Grovyle respectively.

On one side of the square, pillar-formed arena, Grovyle breathes deeply, his Leaf Blade –

No, not Leaf Blade, Lee corrects himself with a prideful smile. Leaf Blade glows green. Grovyle's new *Siphon Blade* hums with a shade of sickly yellow, and is held ready to strike. Each stroke of the leafy sword, honed by days of continuous work, drains its foe, making every single slice a twofold setback for the victim.

Across from Grovyle, Ninetales rests in a low stance, three of her tails held before her. Each one of the limbs shines with a metallic gleam, the fur upon each one molded into different shapes.

To her left, the fluffy tail's fur is flattened into a broad, cleaving blade.

The middle is wrapped tightly in a spiral to make a stabbing lance.

The right holds the nastiest weapon of all: the metallic fur juts out into multiple, jagged spikes, forming a wicked club.

Yet, despite wielding thrice the number of weapons that Grovyle does, Ninetales bears just as many wounds as her reptilian opponent, if not more. She hides her pain well, but Lee can feel the phantom sting of an especially deep slash on his outer thigh, mirroring a wound on her flank.

As one, the pair of pokemon power down their attacks and incline their heads to one another, not unlike a pair of samurai breaking off from a spar.

*'Pokemon **are** kind of like samurai when you think about it,'* Lee muses. *'Honorable warriors serving a Lord that they could merc if they felt like it.'*

“So!” Lee busies himself with digging his berry case out of his backpack as his pokémon seat themselves at his feet. “How are we feeling after that? You two were really flying into each other there at the end. The sound of leaf-on-metal was starting to get deafening.”

‘Somewhat embarrassed that I was pressured so much the entire fight,’ Ninetales admits both aloud and via telepathy, punctuating her words with a sigh. *‘I am well aware that melee is not my specialty, but I did not expect to be on the defensive so often, especially not with three tails to defend myself with.’* She frowns. *‘I’ll endeavor to keep improving, perhaps by incorporating more tails. I believe my coordination to be sufficient.’*

If Lee was riding in the backseat of her mind and assisting, Ninetales could probably use all of her tails in tandem as weapons without them getting jumbled, but the pair have been consciously avoiding such measures for now. The better Ninetales becomes at splitting her focus and multitasking, the better she can utilize even more complicated techniques.

Like the still unfinished Fox Fire.

Oh, how Lee wants that move to work. During the few times he could get a data signal down here in the crater, Lee’s research delved into the complicated and poorly understood world of clone-producing moves. Substitute is the only widely known and commercially available move that makes solid clones, and it’s almost entirely used as a distraction. Substitutes are also limited to only unpowered physical strikes if they’re used offensively. Add in the prohibitive stamina cost of creating even one, and it’s no surprise that Substitute is a move rarely encountered.

After Lee realized that, it’s no wonder that the reveal of Fox Fire had Battlenet in such a clamor. Producing two proxy battlers was already novel, but proxies capable of both firing projectiles and a bastardized form of Self-Destruct? Unheard of.

Grovyle raises an eyebrow and makes an insulted chirp in his throat, drawing Lee from his thoughts. “*You didn’t expect to be on the defensive?*” Lee interprets from the noise.

Ninetales’ frown grows in reply. *‘Such a remark was not intended to be a slight upon you, but a reflection of shortcomings belonging to me.’*

“I think you did great, Nine,” Lee cuts in with a smile. “Just a few days ago, you were only able to go all-or-nothing with Iron Tail, and now you can modulate the shape, intensity, and even pick and choose which tails to use! Grovyle’s got the most refined fighting style of the team, so there is no shame in not beating him. You’ve made fantastic progress in my eyes,” he says, popping open his berry case and palming a Citrus berry. Holding the fruit in his upright palm, he holds it out to Grovyle. “Grovyle, if you could be so kind?”

Grovyle’s Leaf Blade glows, and in a flash of movement too fast to see, the Citrus berry is sliced into six equal-sized pieces that neatly fall apart in Lee’s hand.

Lee holds one of the slices out to his Ace. “We’ll work on something new tomorrow, okay, Love?”

The vixen smiles and eats the treat out of Lee's hand. Ninetales' satisfaction with his words and the tangy, secondhand flavor of Citrus coating his tongue draws a wide smile from Lee.

"And how about you, Grovyle?" Lee asks, offering a berry slice to Grovyle. "What are your thoughts after today's training?"

Grovyle takes the Citrus slice in his claws and takes a slow, methodical bite from the fruit, thinking over his words as his wounds slowly begin to mend. Then Grovyle sighs and hisses lowly. "*I could have done better,*" he seems to say, finishing off the rest of his Citrus.

His smile becoming unsure, Lee reaches out and pats the top of the gecko pokemon's head. Dry scales rasp beneath his hand. "A good attitude to have, but don't become too critical of yourself. Mastering a brand-new technique and fighting Nine to a standstill with it is some crazy progress for only a few days. In fact, I think you're about ready for the Swords Dance TM."

Grovyle crosses his arms and closes his eyes, not reacting to the hand upon his head. He does, however, smile at the mention of the new move on the horizon.

Cradling the sliced fruit in one hand, Lee dips the other back into his bag and pulls out a package of wipes, which he uses to clean the blood from Nine's fur and Grovyle's scales. By the time he's done, both pokemon's wounds have closed.

Lee then turns to Nine. "Love? Can you bring the walls down?"

Licking a smear of berry off of her lips, Ninetales nods and turns her attention to the eastern wall. As soon as her eyes fall upon it, the pillars making up the wall begin to retract into the ground, revealing the next pair of training partners.

Corviknight, zipping and diving through the air as fast as he dares, is the first one revealed, and Lee, Grovyle, and Ninetales are just in time to see a bolt of lightning shoot from the ground, zapping him. The telltale shimmer of Light Screen dulls the pain, but Corvi still winces from the super-effective hit.

In retaliation, Corvi turns and throws a glowing wing in a wide arc, spilling a barrage of Swift stars below.

As the final pillars sink into the ground, everyone is treated to the sight of a bruised and battered Shinx dancing around the homing projectiles, letting each one smash into the seemingly indestructible ground and explode. Not a single one manages to hit her as she weaves through them with complete confidence, with some missing her by mere millimeters. The entire time, she never takes her eyes off of Corvi.

A prideful smile returns to Lee's face.

Of all the pokemon improving down here in the secret Draconid training ground, Shinx has enjoyed the most explosive growth by far, baffling everyone. In just a few days, she's added Baby-Doll Eyes, Bite, *and* Roar to her repertoire, bringing her total number of moves up to seven. She uses every move on her aerial foe effectively.

...Except for Baby-Doll Eyes. For quite some time, Lee hasn't been able to confirm what special ability Corvicknight possesses, but when Shinx's first use of Baby-Doll Eyes on Corvicknight bounced back and left Shinx gasping for breath, he was finally given a definitive answer.

Corvicknight has Mirror Armor, the rarest of his line's special abilities. With Mirror Armor, any sort of effect intended to enfeeble Corvi is reflected right back onto the caster. It makes sense considering Corvi's noble pedigree, but the confirmation is sweet.

Back to Shinx. Even more astounding than her rapidly growing move pool is how a tactic used against her immediately becomes ineffective if she's seen it before. Case in point, Corvi's Swift completely missing her. Lee's baby must have something special going on upstairs, and Lee intends to find out with a round of cognitive tests in Shinx's next physical.

Back in the battlefield, Shinx sucks in a deep breath, filling her tiny chest, then she looses a deep Roar, one grossly unfitting for her small frame.

The invisible, sonic shockwave of Roar smashes into Corvicknight with a metallic *clang*, doing no damage but throwing him off balance. During the brief moment that he's forced to right himself, a lightning bolt streaks up to zap him once more.

Just a moment before it hits, Corvi vanishes with the crack of a sonic boom, reappearing behind Shinx with the aid of Extreme Speed. He holds one of his wings out, charging Steel Wing to smack his tiny foe upside the head.

Shinx takes only a split second to realize where Corvi is and leaps away, but is still clipped broadside by Steel Wing, sending her spinning through the air with a distressed mewl. When she lands, it's flat on her stomach, knocking the wind out of her.

That's when both take notice of one of the arena walls missing. As one, the raven and kitten turn their attention to Lee, Nine, and Grovyle.

"Magnificent work, you two!" Lee praises, stepping forward with Nine and Grovyle flanking him. "We've got that meeting with Anabel coming up, so we're going to call it for today."

Shinx quickly rises to her paws and scampers her way to Lee, eagerly hopping around his feet as if asking, "*Did you see me?! Did you see me?!*"

Chuckling, Lee kneels down and presents a Citrus slice to Shinx. "Oh, I saw alright. I can't believe how strong my baby is getting. If you keep this up, you're going to blow everyone else out of the water!"

Shinx gobbles up the presented fruit slice, rubbing her body on Lee's leg and purring up a storm the entire time. In just a few seconds, her scuffs and bruises fade.

Standing, Lee turns to Corvi, who struts over in the way only a raven can. "So, how do you think you and Shinx did? You seem to have Light Screen down pat," Lee says, running his eyes up and down Corvi's frame.

Two metallic feathers on his left wing are missing, and the skin the pinions used to occupy slowly weeps blood.

'We'll figure out how to fix up Extreme Speed soon,' Lee vows to himself.

Heedless of Lee's inner thoughts, Corviknight answers with a grumble-like warble. *"Shinx is excelling. I am likewise improving, but still have my own frustrations."*

"I only counted two missing feathers this time, so you're obviously doing something right," Lee answers with a reassuring smile. He reaches up and pats the warm armor of Corvi's chest. "I'll be honest, Corvi. You're in such a good place right now that I'm kind of struggling to come up with a good regimen for you. Once you have Extreme Speed and your general dexterity fixed up, we'll have to sit and brainstorm a bit on what direction you want to go in." Lee tosses a Citrus slice up to the massive bird, who snatches it out of the air and swallows it in a single bite. "Think about it some, and whatever you decide, I'll help you get there."

Corvi allows a small smile to rise to his beak.

'Nine?'

The next and final wall comes down, and when it falls, Lee sees that Sylveon and Octillery are already wrapping up.

Octillery sits still as two of Sylveon's ribbons hover above him. Between the ribbons, the star-like glow of Wish rains down golden sparkles on the red octopus. The sparkles gravitate to Octillery's skinned and cut tentacles, seeping into his flesh and regrowing the missing bits of skin.

When using her ribbons, Sylveon's physical reach is simply *ridiculous*. There isn't a safe place in the arena for anyone, as there seems to be no end to how far the ribbons can stretch. The only real weakness the ribbons have is how slow they are.

At first, Lee had worries about the durability of the long strips of woven fur, but it seems as if the ribbons are the strongest part of Sylveon's body by a wide margin. With that in mind, Lee decided that it would be best to focus on them for the time being, considering that it's best if Sylveon knows how to use them in a fight.

Octillery, having gotten his psychically-assisted ground strafing mastered to an appreciable level, actually suggested his next form of training to Lee. The octopus wanted to take his telekinesis to new heights – quite literally. He wished to move on to psychically-assisted *leaps* and surface clinging, to further make himself a bother to any foes. Octillery reasoned that such maneuvers would pair nicely with his newly-learned Thunder Wave, and give Sylveon a worthwhile foe to catch.

Lee agreed, but privately thinks that Octillery, after having a taste of what mobility is like, wants more and is looking for an excuse.

Not that that's a bad thing. After riding astride Corvi's back, Lee more than understands the appeal. As he thinks that, Lee looks around at the floor and the pillars making up the walls.

Clearly, Octillery still has a bit of learning to do, as his harsh maneuvers have practically worn his tentacle suckers down to nubs. The ground and walls are dotted with spots of blood. Considering his lack of bruises, Sylveon probably wasn't successful in her attempts to catch him.

"I take it that you guys heard me when I said that we're done for the day?" Lee asks, approaching and dropping to one knee.

Octillery nods languidly, gurgling a thanks to Sylveon as the Fairy lets Wish fade and steps away. He accepts the Citrus slice handed to him, stuffing the morsel into his hidden beak. The cephalopod evidently doesn't feel the need to elaborate on today's efforts, for he says nothing else.

Sylveon eats the final slice from Lee's hand, and once finished, gently nuzzles her cheek to Lee's knee. The friendly gesture is at odds with the frown on her face, however.

"Don't feel too bad about not catching Octillery." Lee smiles and scratches Sylveon behind her ribbon-bearing ear. "You're making great progress. It won't be long before you can win a fight without ever having to move from your spot. When that day comes, you'll feel incredible. I promise."

A ribbon curls around Lee's wrist, and Sylveon's dour expression lifts into a small smile.

Looking over his shoulder, Lee notes that the sound of combat from the other parts of the cavern has come to a halt. The roars, plumes of spores and dragon fire, and screeches of pain amid encouraging words are absent. "We're just in time. Seems like the others are winding down too."

In short order, the walls all descend back into the floor, and the rest of the gang can be seen. Both Brendan and Zinnia tend to their pokemon, who are all in various states of fatigue and injury.

"Alrighty, everyone," Lee rises back to his full height, prompting Sylveon to pull her ribbon away "let's get you all some lunch and a well-deserved rest. Corvi, I'll need you here in a bit to fly me to Fallarbor. Are you feeling up to it?"

Corviknight almost looks insulted.

"Just checking." Lee smiles. "C'mon."

As a group, the man and team of pokemon walk over to the center of the chamber. Once there, Lee drops his backpack at his feet and digs around inside, pulling out six cellophane-wrapped bowls, one notably larger than the rest, along with a sandwich for himself. Once the bowls are unwrapped, Lee sets them down and smiles. "Dig in!"

Each of Lee's teammates dive into their lunch with gusto, any conversation forgotten in favor of happily munching on their homemade meal. Shinx, thinking she's being sly, tries to surreptitiously dip her paw into Corvi's extra-large portion, only to be chased away with a loud "Scraw!"

'Looks like a hundred-and-thirty percent of everyone's usual calorie count was about right for our little training trip down here,' Lee muses, sitting and digging into his sandwich. *'Might bump it up to one-forty just to be safe. Everyone has been working damn hard.'*

Brendan is the first to finish up tending to his team's wounds, and they join Lee's team in the center a minute later, followed shortly by Zinnia and her dragons.

"Jeez, hard to believe a week has already flown by," Zinnia remarks as she finishes feeding her own pokemon. She sits down on the ground heavily and leans forward resting her chin in her hands. "Seems like it's all blending together."

"Maybe a little," Brendan agrees. The youngest of the trainer trio falls back to lie on the floor, his arms behind his head as he relaxes. "I totally understand why this place is secret, though. It seems like all of my pokemon are jumping forward so fast that my training plans for the next month might get eaten up by the end of next week!" he exclaims, sending a none-too-subtle glance towards Marshomp.

Lee follows Brendan's eyes.

Marshomp is sitting with the rest of Brendan's team, eating a specially-blended meal of Brendan and Lee's creation from a bowl, handful by gluttonous handful. Looking at his head, the split beginning to form in Marshomp's fin is all too obvious.

The mudfish's final evolution is on the horizon.

Mawile and Breloom don't appear to be too different, but Electrike is *even larger* than he was before. The pup has seemingly sprouted an extra inch of height in only a few days.

Lee turns his eyes to Zinnia's team, but finds no significant differences. Goomy is a bit bigger, maybe, but if there has been any significant improvement, then he's not seeing it.

'They're dragons. I imagine that when they do show off their improvement, it's going to be profound,' Lee muses.

"Because of that," Brendan continues, "we're going to cut today short and go hunting for a fifth team member."

"Oh?" Lee perks up. "What sort of pokemon are you going to be looking for? A Dragon?"

Brendan nods with a bright smile. "Yeah. I've been thinking pretty hard about it, and I want a Flygon. My dad's Flygon is a swell pokemon, and I'd love to have one of my own."

"Dragon hunting, eh?" Zinnia is suddenly all smiles. "Well, you're in the right place for it! Hell, I might join you. I've been meaning to add at least one more to my team. There is a Flygon nest down in one of the lower chambers, and quite a few of the Trapinch down there have to have evolved by now, so you can skip the painful ground-pounder phase."

“Sounds great!” Brendan agrees, sitting up with a grin. He takes his pokedex from his pocket and opens the entry on the Flygon evolutionary line. “You’ve got some kind of meeting today, don’t you, Lee?”

Lee nods, feeling a thrill of apprehension for the coming conversation. “Yeah. We’re meeting with Anabel from the Battle Frontier. She’s a natural human telepath and best equipped to help Nine and I with this side study your father wants us to do.”

“Wow, a Frontier Brain?” Brendan blinks. “Dad must have pulled some serious strings to make this happen.”

“Probably,” Lee agrees, taking another glance at his watch.

It’s almost time to go.

“It’s about time for us to get going.” Lee stands and stretches, pleasantly popping his back. “Good luck on your pokemon hunt, you two.”

“Seeya, Lee!”

“Later, Dolittle. There should be a tribesman by the pond to escort you to town.”

By now, all of Lee’s pokemon have finished their meals, and Ninetales has stacked the empty food bowls by Lee’s side, letting him toss them into his backpack to be cleaned later. Once his bag is zipped shut, Lee takes his pokeballs from his belt, two in one hand and three in the other, and recalls all of his pokemon besides Corvi for a rest.

With his giant raven by his side, Lee makes his way through the cavernous tunnels and back to the great central chamber of the Meteorfall Crater. As Zinnia said, one of her tribesmen stands by the luminescent pond with a Flygon. After a short exchange with the man, Corvi is saddled up by Lee, then the pair take to the air, bound for Fallarbor.

[line]

“I return at four o’clock here, yes?” Lee’s Draconid escort confirms. “Take you back to Metron’fall crate.”

Lee nods. Evidently, his escort doesn’t speak much Galarian, and Lee has to reiterate the time and place once more. “Yes. Here at four o’clock.”

The tribal man, still on his Flygon’s back, nods with a smile. “Okay. I return later. Belin guz yara, Naraikvejor.”

With that, the tribesman and his Flygon take to the air, rapidly shrinking into a green dot in the sky.

With a shake of his head, Lee turns and walks through the sliding glass doors into the Fallarbor Pokemon Center with Ninetales on his right.

Together, they make their way down one of the side hallways of the Center. The third door down is the meeting room scheduled, and Lee knocks on the door. When there's no answer, he cracks the door open and peeks inside.

It's empty.

Lee glances at a wall clock down the hall, his eyebrows rising to his hairline. "Damn. That Flygon really hauled ass to get us here. We're a full fifteen minutes early."

'Just as well.' Ninetales noses the door open and steps inside. *'You wished to call Steven Stone and arrange a meeting to address the Draconid prophecy, did you not? Better sooner, rather than later.'*

'Ah, I knew I was forgetting something. Thank you, Love.'

Lee steps in after his fox, taking in the room. Unlike when he was attending therapy, the room is now furnished more like a typical meeting room.

In the center is a table surrounded by leather office chairs, and on the table is a round conference phone. Besides the furniture and the light fixtures, the room is otherwise barren.

Lee seats himself and takes his phone from his pocket. With his other hand, he takes out his wallet and quickly finds Steven's business card. After dialing the number, Lee puts the phone up to his ear.

Riiiiiiing...

Riiiiiiing...

Riiiiiiing...

There is no answer, and the phone rolls over to voicemail.

"You've reached the voicemail of Steven Stone, Pokemon League Champion of Hoenn. If this is an emergency, please hang up and dial 911 –"

Lee blinks incredulously. *'Does Steven get enough calls that he has to add a line like that?'* he wonders.

"– Otherwise, please leave a message, and I will return your call within several business days. Please include your full name, the nature of your call, the urgency, and the best number to reach you back at. Thank you, and have a great day."

'Not optimal, but beggars and choosers and all that...'

After the phone trills in his ear, Lee clears his throat and speaks. "Hello, Champion Stone. This is Lee Henson. I apologize for disturbing you, but I need to arrange a meeting with you. This is in regards to a matter similar to the one we discussed in Lavaridge. I'm unfortunately going to have limited cell phone service for the foreseeable future, which is why I would like to make this a face-to-face meeting. If I miss your return call, I will respond within a day. The best number to reach me at is..." Lee then quickly

rattles off his phone number. "That's a cell phone, so text messages work as well. I can also be reached by email at L Henson at hoenn P, K, M, N, lab dot org. Thank you."

Lee hangs up the call and slides his phone back into his pocket. "Here's hoping."

Ninetales, who spent the entire call trying to get comfortable in one of the rolling chairs, gives up and kicks the seat away with a huff. Instead, she sits on the floor and sets her chin on the table. *'Steven Stone doesn't strike me as someone foolish enough to ignore such a dire warning. If he does, then perhaps we have greater issues.'*

Lee and Ninetales are not forced to wait for long. Only several minutes after they make themselves comfortable, the meeting room door swings open on squeaky hinges, making both man and fox turn to look.

Through the door steps a teenage girl, no older than fifteen. Her short hair and her eyes share the same lavender color, and her pale skin almost blends in with her frilly white shirt. Standing by the girl's feet is an Espeon, who regards Lee and Ninetales coolly.

'So this is Anabel, huh?' Lee meets the girl's eyes. *'You wouldn't be able to tell that she's an Elite trainer just by looking.'* He clears his throat. "Anabel, I presume?"

"That's me," she says with a smile before it melts off her face. "Oh goodness! I didn't keep you waiting, did I?"

"No, no, not at all." Lee shakes his head. "We arrived a lot earlier than we thought we would. You're just in time."

Anabel sighs in relief as Espeon rolls her eyes. An instant later, Anabel shoots her Espeon a despondent look for seemingly no reason, prompting the purple-hewed Psychic to shrug her withers.

'Ah, so that's what it looks like from the outside.' Lee observes the unheard telepathic exchange with interest. He unzips his backpack from where it lies at his feet and takes out his notebook, already flipping to a fresh page. *'Curious.'*

'I like to think our conversations are faster and more streamlined,' Ninetales says, also watching.

Both of them miss the sharp intake of breath from Anabel.

Lee nods, more to himself than anyone else. *'You know, we still need to re-create that slowed time perception effect that we experienced during the Lavaridge gym battle. Perhaps we'll work on that next when we get back to the Crater?'*

'I was under the impression that you wished to work on Fox Fire? You have pages upon pages of theory and stratagem for the technique, and I admit I find the idea of battle minions quite amusing.'

'We can do both.'

“Oh wow... It’s seamless...”

Anabel’s awed whisper draws Lee and Nine from their conversation. As one, they look towards the girl, who blushes under the sudden scrutiny.

“Sorry about that,” Lee apologizes, a sheepish smile on his face. “Ninetales and I can get lost talking to each other sometimes. It’s nice to meet you, Anabel. I’m Lee Henson. I presume Professor Birch gave you a rundown on what this is all going to entail?”

Anabel seats herself across from them, with her Espeon crawling up into one of the office chairs beside her. “In broad strokes, yes.” Anabel nods, the extra color fading from her face. She returns Lee’s smile. “The professor informed me that you and your Ninetales share an extraordinary telepathic bond, and that you need a bit of help exploring and managing it. I’ll be happy to offer whatever I can! When you’re ready, we can go over the preliminary courtesies that telepaths observe.”

“Preliminary courtesies?” Lee asks, already positioning his pen on his notebook. “Do tell. Ninetales and I have never delved into the professional practices of telepaths beyond making sure we don’t run afoul of the law.”

“I’d be happy to!” Anabel seems delighted to be given the opportunity to teach. “There are three big ones. Consent, boundaries, and confidentiality.” As she speaks, Anabel raises a finger for each point, and Lee dutifully writes each one down. “The consent one should be obvious. Don’t ever touch someone else’s mind without explicit permission, and permission obtained under duress or from someone who’s impaired does not count.”

Anabel lowers a finger. “Everyone has different boundaries and comfort levels when it comes to telepathy, and those should be clearly communicated and respected.”

The last finger falls. “Anything a telepath learns from someone else’s mind is confidential. No buts.”

Anabel folds her hands on the table. “There are a couple of other rules like how you should be professional and ethical, but I don’t think those are going to be problems here. The big three are the ones we should focus on.”

Lee nods, jotting everything down. “I see... Interesting...”

“Oh! And one last thing!” Anabel shares a glance with her Espeon. “There is also the ‘three knock’ rule. If a telepath wants nonverbal permission to initiate contact, they need to ‘knock’ and be let in. When they get permission, both sides set boundaries before delving deeper and then continuing. It should feel a little something like this.”

From nowhere, Lee suddenly feels a phantom finger tapping against his skull. The ephemeral touch is gentle and he nearly misses it at first, but once he realizes what it is, he involuntarily stiffens up. From how Ninetales suddenly sits straighter next to him, she must feel it as well.

Reaching a hand up, Lee rubs his forehead, over where he felt the psychic tapping. "Wow. That's, uh, a strange sensation to say the least."

Unprompted, Ninetales wraps her mind around Lee's, shielding him.

Anabel's smile is all sympathy. "Don't worry, Mister Henson. It feels weird to everyone at first."

"Lee is fine, no need for any 'Mister Henson'," Lee waves the girl off.

"Sure thing, Mister Lee!" she cheerily replies, pulling a sigh out of Lee. "I'll let you take it from here. What kind of things do you need help with? I noticed earlier that your and Miss Ninetales' telepathy is so smooth that I'm not sure what I can really do for you. I didn't even notice any lag!"

'Moment of truth.' Lee pauses and wonders how to word everything. "Before I go any further, I do have a couple of questions about the limits of telepathy."

Anabel and Espeon look at each other for several seconds, a silent conversation passing, before Anabel turns back to Lee. "Of course. What kind of questions?"

"Is it possible to share senses with telepathy?"

The teen girl blinks, obviously not expecting that question. "Share senses? You *can*..."

'Here comes the 'but',' Ninetales anticipates.

"...but due to the inherent differences between the minds of humans and pokemon, a lot of it would just be a jumbled mess," she says with a shrug. "There are few pokemon who can do it with some coherency, but that's usually from a special predisposition and not general telepathic talent."

Anabel shakes her head. "Communicating with telepathy is one thing, but bridging the gap between human and pokemon so thoroughly would be like mashing a square peg into a round hole; it won't work, and you might break something trying. Some have tried in the past and..." She looked away, uncomfortable, "...It seldom ends well."

Lee sets his pen down and scratches his chin. *'I guess my metaphor of plugs and prongs is apt, at least. What to ask next?'*

'Ask her about the effects of prolonged psychic contact,' Ninetales supplies, nosing his arm. *'Evidently, the impossibility of what we share is exaggerated somewhat, as many sources, Professor Birch included, stated it was outright impossible when Anabel has a contrary opinion. Perhaps she will be able to shine a light on these particular questions.'*

'Good idea, Love. I wish trainers were more prone to sharing their findings so we didn't have to stumble around this long.' Lee smiles at Nine and turns back to Anabel. "I've got another one for you. What would happen to a human and a pokemon who spent a long amount of time telepathically connected? Think weeks, or even months."

Anabel's expression begins to creep into discomfort, which is mirrored by Espeon. "That can be rather dangerous. People and most pokémon need time alone in the sanctity of their mind for their own health, and shouldn't be connected longer than a few hours a day." She taps her fingers on the table. "Prolonged contact can cause control to slip, cognitive fatigue, social skills getting rusty, and a lot of other nasty things. If worse comes to worst, it may even result in an inability to disconnect, dependency issues, or death by gestalt."

'Oops,' both Lee and Ninetales think at once, briefly meeting eyes. They'd already flubbed hard, it seems. Then Lee replays Anabel's words, driving a spike of shock into both him and his fox.

"Hold on, *death* by gestalt?" Lee questions, shaken. "I'm going to need a bit more info on that one. How does that cause death?"

Anabel leans back in her chair, a grimace taking form on her face. "T-That's really not a pleasant subject, Mister Lee. Are you sure you want to talk about it?"

"Yes, we're sure," Lee insists. "We need to know this."

Once more, the Frontier Brain and her pokémon take ten seconds to themselves, silently conversing. Finally, Anabel lets out a sigh and begins to explain. "It goes back to the differences between human and pokémon minds I talked about earlier. A lot of pokémon form one-personality gestalts as part of their evolution, but they do so knowingly and combine into one body afterward. They can do it safely because there are no leftover physical bits, and the new individual is made up of similar participants."

Lee nods along and gestures for her to continue, following her words.

"In the case of two different parties who do it on accident, like when they can't disconnect and inevitably get jumbled..." Anabel gulps. "The stronger mind subsumes the weaker one. The weaker side is effectively left brain-dead, and the stronger side suffers irreversible ego death from the overload of memories and experiences that they aren't equipped to process. The new individual... doesn't usually last very long after that..."

The room is left in a chilled silence. If a pin were to hit the floor, it would sound like a thunderclap.

Both Lee and Ninetales are left frozen. The first instinct of each one is to reach out and comfort the other, but they don't. Instead, they're left in a state of dread-filled paralysis.

"Mister Lee?" Anabel begins after a long minute, giving Lee a searching look. "These aren't hypothetical questions, are they?"

The zoologist swallows a lump in his throat. "No. No, they aren't," he says, needing a moment to find his voice again. Being careful to keep his mind to himself, Lee instead reaches an arm out and wraps Ninetales into a tight, physical hug, one she leans into. He looks down at her.

Horried ruby eyes stare back.

“Ninetales and I have been connected for months.” Lee continues. “Just recently, we discovered that we couldn’t actually disconnect anymore, and we’re not sure where one of us ends and the other begins. I can feel her emotions, experience her senses, see her memories, and more, just like she can with me. We’ve even touched our minds together in the past, letting the edges overlap.” The man looks away. “This meeting is both a study, and us needing help mediating our connection before disaster strikes.”

Anabel’s narrow shoulders slump, and she shakes her head, making her lavender locks bounce. “This is a lot more than I thought it would be...” she complains, raising a hand to her forehead and giving it a rub.

Beside her, Espeon leans over and nuzzles her face to Anabel’s cheek, restoring the girl’s smile.

“I understand.” Lee exhales sharply and runs his fingers through the thick tuft of fur on Ninetales’ chest, taking the edge off of his nerves. “Frontier Brain or not, I’m not going to put all this nonsense on a teenage girl. Thank you for coming here today. I’ll talk to Professor Birch about – !”

Anabel stops Lee short with a raised hand. “Hold on, Mister Lee. I never said I wouldn’t try. With your permission, Espeon and I would like to feel out the connection between you and Miss Ninetales. We’d like to know what we’re working with before going any further.”

‘After hearing what she might be dealing with, she still wants to try?’

“Are you certain?” Lee asks, a frown tugging at his scars. “Things are never as normal as I would like with me and my pokemon, and I know that kind of insanity is not for everyone.”

‘Not as normal as you would like?’ Ninetales snorts, some of the tension in her shoulders leaving. *‘My dearest trainer would prefer me to be more normal?’* She jokes.

‘Hush. You know what I mean.’

The lightning-fast exchange between the man and fox is not lost on Anabel nor Espeon, and the girl gives Lee a resolute smile. “Don’t you worry, Mister Lee. I’ll do everything I can.”

Once more, Lee finds himself praising Arceus for making a world with so many good people in it. Relaxing, Lee lets out a breath of relief. “Sure thing. We just ask that you don’t go deeper than you need to, and avoid any memories.”

“Got it!” Anabel says. She holds out a hand towards Espeon, and the purple-furred psychic drops her paw into the offered hand without a word. Both then close their eyes and begin to focus.

Where Lee felt like someone was gently tapping his forehead before, it now feels as if... as if... He grimaces, unable to put words to the odd sensation of Anabel and Espeon probing up and down the telepathic channel between him and Ninetales. The closest thing he could liken it to is a tiny hand gently brushing its fingers up and down his arm, but even then, that’s still a gross oversimplification.

As the seconds slowly pass into a minute, Anabel and Espeon's combined wills probe a little harder, dipping a metaphorical finger into the stream of thought and emotion constantly surging between Lee and Nine, only to withdraw as if burned. Physically, Anabel's brows furrow.

Once more, they try again. The tiny hand lengthens out into a tendril, one that wraps around the telepathic bond. There is a slight squeeze, but no give. Slowly, the tendril slides down to Ninetales, then comes back, pausing once more in that place where the man and fox are one and the same. They continue on, the tendril groping up Lee's side until it brushes his mind.

Lee bites his lip, doing his best to keep his thoughts empty.

Back and forth, back and forth, they grasp and touch along the entire length of the psychic bond, sometimes using two, or even three tendrils of thought to inspect multiple places at once. As Anabel and Espeon work, Anabel's features unconsciously grow awed.

"What is this?" Anabel whispers, her words so quiet that even Ninetales barely hears them. "What... What is this?"

After several minutes, they withdraw, and Lee lets out a breath he didn't realize he was holding.

Anabel blinks her eyes and shakes her head as if trying to clear a mental fog. Espeon, meanwhile, stares at both Lee and Ninetales as if seeing them for the first time.

"You should be a gestalt..." Anabel breathes, looking at them in wonder. "It should have already happened. You should have cascaded into a gestalt, but you haven't. You already feel what the other feels? You already know what the other knows? Totally and entirely? Either one of those alone should have caused a cascade!" She exclaims.

"We should have already merged?" Lee asks, his unease making way for confusion. "What's stopping it?"

Anabel shakes her head once more. Despite looking ready to faint, her marveled expression remains. "I don't know. I don't think something like this has ever happened." She goes quiet, glancing towards Espeon. "You said that you've let your minds overlap before? And you came back just fine?"

Lee and Ninetales both silently nod.

"Wow..." Anabel whispers. The amount of disbelief she can stuff into a single word is staggering. "That's incredible... unreal, even."

Espeon addresses Anabel with a rolling mawl, making the girl sit up straight. The pair of psychics lock eyes, and another exchange takes place. When it comes to an end, Anabel's eyes light up.

"Yeah, you're right, Espi. They might be the real thing! Oh my gosh, this is insane!" she replies, turning her head and addressing Lee. "My teacher was a professional psychic, and some of his colleagues who went into academia and stuff had a phrase for this kind of theoretical, meta-stable gestalt, and I think you and Miss Ninetales might be the first ones ever!"

“Really?” Lee leans forward, eager to finally have a name for what he and Nine share. “Don’t keep us in suspense. What are we?”

Anabel’s smile turns radiant.

“They called it a Concordant Singularity, the holy grail of bonds between man and pokemon.”

[Line]

Below are the names of some patrons who got to view this chapter early and felt like signing it. A huge thanks to them and everyone else who supports this story and everything else I write.

Planetace, Nithalys, SenrabMJam, Ash The Kitsune, UmbraBree, Maestro, Appl, Sulphurcat, Dicloniuslord, Emilowish, Omakehell, Latscry, GordianVapCat, Luc, Cynicals, Berusella, Lady_Vesfynn, Purple Floof, Javidom, Tezral, Paper Crane, Nickerdoodle, Kammight, RGBDRAGON, OmegaEntertainment, Hazel Kings, MrPerson0, LorkhansLeftNut, Phoenix Bugg, Auroz, HolyChomper, TheTankiestTrain, Emeraldleafeon, Cat, Siver110, AMeek, speedyzman13, DarkReader- 14, puppy0cam, xydra22, TitaniumPhoenix, Sinnohan, DaysOfGrays, Spice_King, demonmonkey89, rizen, PAX AMERICANA, ncskeeter56, KaurisAzurai, Green0Photon, Strongraider101, WiseKitsune, Bunny Waffles, Titch, Dusks_Lantern, Azunth, Arcaryx, Gavinfoxx, MikeNP, Pixel, JustALurker, Moonlit Chaser, Rémi C.,Adean23, Siphon Rayzar, Shrimperium, Thelon, InfamousVenous, Meadow, Peter D., King Eevee, Zany Old Coot, soup, Shaydrall, Fabhar, Tzeneth, MidnightJayguar, ShaRose, RaptorusMaximus, Derpydude9001, Bruv, Autocharth, BrokenOlive,