

Odette's forehead hit the floor as she pointed her toes. She exhaled deeply, feeling the effects of her straddle wash over her. The knot in her lower back began to loosen, and her glutes began to scream a little. In a good way, of course. There was no better way to start a busy day than with a solid stretch.

A loud sizzling noise rang from the kitchen, and Odette pushed herself upright, keeping her legs straddled. The smell of vegetable omelets started to waft through the apartment, and she felt her stomach rumble. Instinctively, her hand traveled to rest on it.

"Smells good, Sol," she said.

"Gothiiaiiiiiiiiiii," Solene replied sweetly.

From her spot on the floor, perpendicular to the coffee table, she eyed Isaur as she slowly flipped through the TV channels. She was using the arrow buttons on the TV set itself, and she'd been at it for almost five minutes.

"Just put on the news and be done with it, goddamn," Odette said. She thought for a moment. "And where's the stupid remote?"

A hiss rang from behind her, somewhere near the table. She heard something slide across the floor, and it struck the back of her leg. She shot a look at it, only to see it was the missing remote. She narrowed her eyes before looking over her shoulder. Loïc was sitting under one of the chairs, staring back innocently.

"Very funny," she said.

"Kkkkkkkk," Loïc replied.

Odette picked it up and typed in the number for the news channel. The screen flipped over to it, prompting some annoyed grumbles to rise out of Isaur. The familiar jingle played over the speakers as she hovered over to the couch, and plopped herself down between Ange and Enora. Ange was blinking drowsily, still trying to wake up, while Enora took to idly grooming herself.

"There, was that so hard?" Odette asked.

"Fross," Isaur said defiantly.

"You know there's nothing good on TV on Friday mornings," Odette said. She sat the remote on the coffee table, next to her idle phone, before lowering her chest back to the floor. She exhaled, concentrating on her stretch while partially tuned in to the sound of the TV.

"We are still receiving updates in regards to the large sacrilege bust made early this morning. The Lumiose PD received a tip late last night, and made the bust early this morning," the reporter said. "According to the reports we have so far, roughly fifteen hundred kilograms of the drug were found at the Pangoro Packing Storage Facility on Crabhammer Road. Police Chief Bernard Cinq-Mars led the raid, and reported that no suspects were located at the facility."

Odette's head snapped up at the sound of her grandfather's name.

Sure enough, his familiar face popped into view: short, well-kept salt-and-pepper hair and a neatly trimmed matching beard framed a pair of tired-looking brown eyes. Nonetheless, he held himself confidently, and spoke with an air of determination that could only be found in somebody as passionate in their job as he was.

"We're still in the process of investigating," he said.

"Can you confirm that this stash belongs to a Team Enigma?" asked the reporter behind the camera.

Bernard's face fell ever so slightly as he contemplated the question, and finally he shrugged. "We're unsure," he replied.

There was a cut back to the reporter, who continued rambling through her report. However, Odette heard none of it, and her head had begun to buzz: first, with relief that her grandpa hadn't been hurt, and still seemed in good spirits. And then, with some concern: she'd scrolled through her news app for fifteen minutes yesterday on her lunch break, and only found the one repetitive OD story. Now, there was a new discovery. Fifteen hundred kilos worth of a discovery.

She began to scratch her cheek thoughtfully. "I should probably call--"

The words had barely left her before her phone began to ring from the coffee table. It morphed into its Rotom Mode, and floated up to her face.

"Bzzzzzzzt, incoming call from Marieanne Cinq-Mars! Bzzzzt!" it said.

She grabbed it hastily. "Thanks," she said, then answered as she wriggled out of her straddle.

"Are you watching the news?" Marieanne gasped on the other end.

Odette blinked rapidly, but couldn't help the slight smile that began to form. "Good morning to you too, Nana," she greeted hesitantly.

Marieanne laughed. "Oh silly me. Good morning, little Swanna," she said.

A cacophony of squeals and chirps filled the space as her team engaged in a rather disorganized greeting.

“Team says good morning too,” Odette said.

“Goodness, I’m dropping the ball on this morning greeting thing today.” Marieanne sighed. “Send my regards to your darling team. Now all that aside, are you watching the news?”

“I was. I was getting ready to call you myself,” Odette said. She stood up and wandered over to the couch, sitting down next to Enora. The Sylveon rolled over to rest her head in her lap, purring in the process.

“It’s that nana-granddaughter telepathy I guess,” Marieanne said in a sing-song voice.

“Have you spoken to grandpa yet?”

“I did, I did,” she said. “I didn’t sleep a wink last night. He didn’t come home! They were following this tip all night!” she exclaimed. “I said ‘Bernard, honey, you have to get some sleep,’ but you know him.” She paused, and Odette heard what sounded like glass clinking on the other end. “What would this city do without me?” she said, deepening her voice as if to mimic Bernard’s.

Odette chuckled lightly at the imitation. “Did he tell you anything?”

Marieanne clicked her tongue, thinking. “Hm, there wasn’t much to tell, honestly. They got a tip, followed it, found a bunch of sacrilege, and they’re no closer to finding these Team Enigma people,” she explained. “It was like whoever was there doused the place in cleaners. No fingerprints, no footprints, not even a hair. Just stacks and stacks of this crazy drug. Typical.”

“I just don’t understand how a drug gang could be so perfect,” she said. “They had to leave something behind.”

“That’s what the detectives are saying too. They’re stumped,” Marieanne said solemnly. “They want to call it drug-induced hysteria, but at the same time, how is every sacrilege user calling out the same group name?”

Odette shrugged to herself. “It’s like a fucking farfetched novel plot.”

Marieanne clicked her tongue again. “It might as well be. I swear, it’s going to be the end of your grandpa. Too much stress for a sixty-two year old.”

“He should retire, and you guys should move to Alola with us,” Odette said.

Marieanne laughed. "Saying that like Vienna hasn't suggested it a million times already. He won't hear it. Speaking of your mother, have you heard from her this week?"

Odette laid back on the couch. More sizzling sounded from the kitchen, and she turned her head just in time to watch Loïc spring up and run toward it.

"No, she told me she was going to be out of commission until Saturday, and flying back to Kalos on Sunday. She and some other professors are up on Coronet as far as I know, so I can't imagine the signal's very good."

Marieanne muttered something incoherently. "This is news to me. She knows I hate her climbing mountains," she eventually said, more clearly.

"That's probably why she didn't tell you she was climbing a mountain."

"What are you doing today? It's trainer school day right?" Marieanne inquired, deciding to initiate a subject change.

"Look at you, paying attention to my schedule," Odette teased.

"Hey, I'm keeping up!" Marieanne sputtered. "Well if you're out and about, see if you can drop by the police station and pay your grandpa a visit if he's not swamped," she said. "I'm sure it'd do him some good to see you!"

It sounded like a good idea. She hadn't seen him in a few days; a visit was indeed overdue, especially given the new circumstances. Though, Noel's joking remark rang in her head.

Maybe next time he takes one, you can ask him why they're fudging info.

"Sure, I'll swing by when I get out of my last class," she said.

"Thank you, little Swanna," Marieanne said. Odette could hear the smile in her voice.

"Gothiiiiii!" Solene said happily. Odette sat up to see the Gothitelle prancing out of the kitchen with a plate of steaming omelets in one hand, and a stack of smaller plates and silverware in another. Isaur nudged Ange, and they both made for the table. Enora picked her head up, then followed behind them.

"Oh, Solene just finished cooking," Odette said into the phone. "I should get going."

"I find it so funny that your Gothitelle can cook so well, but you have trouble just boiling water," Marieanne chuckled.

Odette's expression fell into a scowl. "We're not doing this now."

"I'm just saying, it could really do you some good if you learned to--"

"Goodbye, Nana!" Odette said hastily. She hung up and shoved the phone back in her pocket, then made her way over to the dining table. She approached just in time to watch Loïc try to steal an extra omelet before Solene smacked him away.

"Looks good, Sol," she commented, pulling up a seat. She served herself, as did the rest of her team. Enora took up one of the other two chairs, while Ange and Isaur took their plates back to the couch. Loïc, on the other hand, sat entirely on the table.

"Telle!" Solene said in thanks as she sat down in the last chair.

They all ate in ravenous silence for a while, which gave Odette a chance to think about the day to come. Trainer school, going by the police station. Maybe she'd stop by the supermarket on her way home.

Had new information surfaced while she'd been talking with Marieanne? Out of habit, she retrieved her phone from her pocket and clicked into the Noble Roar, and scrolled through the home page. She eventually came upon a story covering the bust, but after a quick skim, she came to the conclusion it was more or less exactly what the news anchor had said before. Nothing new to add on to that, or what her grandma had said.

"Fifteen hundred kilograms, and nothing..." she repeated. "Noel's going to have a field day with this."

"Sylv?" Enora questioned, taking her nose out of her half-eaten omelet.

Odette shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. "I said what I said: there's no way a group is that perfect."

"Lasss," Isaur said.

"Grandpa's probably just super frustrated. Though I guess it's relieving that there wasn't anybody dead there, either..."

She thought back to what Marieanne had said before their conversation ended, and she frowned mid-chew, before gulping down the bite.

"How would you guys feel if I tried to cook dinner tonight?"

Her entire team looked up at her, expressions ranging from surprised to downright exasperated. Her eyes cut between them as she waited for some sort of answer, and they eventually settled on Solene.

“Tellllee...” Solene cooed with a level of faux-politeness that caused Odette to narrow her eyes.

“Don’t talk down to me. I could do it.”

“Chande, luuuureee,” Ange said teasingly. Eating had apparently woken him up a little more, just enough for him to make jokes. Odette glared over at him, watching as he and Isaur began to giggle among themselves; she knew what they were making fun of her for. She looked warily over at the kitchen, briefly remembering a time not too long ago when she tried to cook pasta for her mom. Apparently she’d done everything wrong. Didn’t put enough water in the pot, set the stove temperature too high, put too many noodles in...and sure enough, all the water evaporated, and the noodles dried out and caught fire. She had yet to live it down.

It wasn’t her damn fault she’d never properly learned how to cook. With school, dance, and singing lessons taking up her days as she grew up, the last thing she was doing in her spare time was standing in the kitchen watching Marieanne mince garlic.

Solene sure had, though. The omelets were exquisite.

She took another bite, resting her head in her hand pensively. “You know what, you don’t deserve my cooking anyway,” she grouched.

The room erupted into laughter.

It was colder today. It didn’t help that another round of thunderheads had come out to play. Odette had barely made it inside the building of the Santalune Pokemon Academy before the downpour started. Now, sitting in the lecture hall for Mr. Songmin’s Battle Tactics class, she could hear the rain pounding on the building outside. Thunderclaps would shake the classroom every now and then.

On most days, she was a very attentive student, especially in this class. Mr. Songmin was one of those young teachers who prided themselves on being on good terms with their students. He always put effort into making sure his lectures--no matter how boring the subject matter-- were at least moderately entertaining, so the moldable minds in his presence would be more open to listening. Odette particularly enjoyed his enthusiasm. She also loved how his Kantonian accent shone through his Kalosian words once in a while. She found it charming.

However, today her mind buzzed with thoughts of the morning news. No matter how much she tried to shake it off, it was like her brain had magnetized to thinking about it. She had to resist the urge to pull her phone out and see if there were any updates. But she doubted it would be that simple, and that was what made her so eager to delve more into it.

It doesn't make sense, she kept telling herself. From talking to Bernard about all the cases he'd worked on, she knew that most criminals always left something behind, no matter how thorough they were. Yeah, there were a couple of outliers, of course, but those were individual delinquents. Team Enigma was a whole group of people. Surely somebody would have a mishap--shed some hair, accidentally grab something without gloves, leave behind a footprint. Hell, even one of their Pokemon could have left a trace of something behind. Perhaps "Team Enigma" was only one person, then? But how could one person be creating so much of this drug alone? There had to be accomplices; it just didn't make any--

"Cinq-Mars, I didn't know the lecture was on the ceiling."

She hadn't realized that she had leaned back against her chair, and was staring off into space. She slowly sat up.

"I don't have to be looking at you to be listening, Songmin," she replied easily, hoping to play off her inattentiveness.

Mr. Songmin smiled broadly as the class collectively chuckled. He sauntered over to his desk, which was stationed right in the middle of the lecture hall. He then sat down on it, crossing his legs and folding his hands politely in his lap. "Mm, then tell me," he said. "You have a Frosslass, correct? What are Frosslass known for in competitive battling?"

"Their speed," Odette answered.

"So how would you tactfully use your Frosslass's speed in a battle scenario? Say, you're up one, but the 'mon you currently have out is struggling."

She folded her hands on her desk in a somewhat mocking fashion. She started to tap her fingers on her knuckles as her mind began to run with adequate answers.

"I'd switch into her in a case of out-speeding. I'd swap her in while the opposing Pokemon was distracted, on account of whoever was in before, or charging up."

Mr. Songmin nodded along slowly. He didn't say anything for a short moment. "Fair, but what if the opposing Pokemon again out-speeds her? Frosslass most certainly aren't the fastest competitive Pokemon, and surely there are ways for your foe to knock her out in one hit?"

Odette pushed her glasses up on her nose. "Isaur's been training with a Focus Sash since she was a Snorunt. She can take a powerful hit," she said. "In which case, she uses Destiny Bond. Now my foe is stuck between switching out themselves or losing another Pokemon and being down two."

He pursed his lips and nodded slowly. "Good answer. I'll pretend I didn't catch you daydreaming, then," he said playfully before standing up again. He returned to the whiteboard and launched

into something else about using Pokemon stats to one's advantage. Odette exhaled quietly. She could shake off zoning out in lecture like this, but in battle class, she'd have to be on her A-game.

That class came to an end without much other incident. Odette could, at the very least, say she now knew that a Pachirisu could be a good staller. On the off chance she ever decided she wanted to deal with the pain of Electric types, she'd have to remember that.

The giant class filed out into the hall, where some other older students were loitering. As Odette exited, she was cut off by two youngsters, their Raticates in tow, as they bolted back to their classroom from gods know where. She sometimes forgot that kids as young as five were also attending the academy. The advanced classes were normally held in a building separate from the young kids, and Odette's classes had primarily older students. But, it wasn't uncommon for some Pokemon prodigies to end up in them. Hell, she had two eleven year-olds in her Advanced Monotype class. It was quite jarring to feel like she was back on a university campus, only to occasionally find herself sitting next to a middle school aged kid.

She scoffed at the thought, then withdrew her phone to check the time. 12:34, eleven minutes to Battle Class. She might have had time to get something to eat from the cafeteria, but her will to eat had faded when she remembered today was an exhibition day.

Every Friday, her battle teacher would randomly select two students to go head-to-head for an exhibition 3v3 match while the other students took notes on what they did right and wrong. Winner would receive extra credit. They were a month into the semester, and she hadn't been called on yet. Each Friday that passed, she was sure she was getting closer and closer to having to pit her skills against one of her talented classmates, while the others looked on.

It caused a hole to open in her stomach every time she thought about it.

It was so invigorating to witness other people go at it, taking in their expressions as they struggled side by side with their Pokemon, hoping to come out victorious. She was usually okay battling it out in her smaller classes, but...in Mrs. Chuquet's class of twenty-five students, that was quite the crowd to be performing in front of.

She rolled her shoulders. She wasn't sure what was making her stomach hurt the most. The thought of losing or the thought of battling in front of such a large group.

"RotomPhone, any updates on the latest sacrilege bust?" she asked her phone as she turned and started walking for the battle gym. Her screen displayed a loading screen before Rotom's frowning face popped up again.

"Bzzzzzt! Nope, nothing! Bzzzzzt!" it said. Her frown deepened, and she shoved the phone in her pocket.

“So much for that.”

Suddenly, her shoulder made contact with somebody’s arm. Somebody’s very buff arm. The person she’d bumped into was at least a foot taller than her, and was moving quite fast, so they sent her stumbling back. She would have very much fallen on her butt, had they not reeled around and caught her by her arm.

“Whoa!” he yelped as he grabbed her. He pulled her up to stand, slipping an arm around her back in a protective manner. “I am so sorry,” he sputtered once Odette was still.

She stood stiff, staring straight ahead and blinking as she tried to swallow the bout of rage that had shot up through her back. “Why don’t you watch where you’re--” she began as she tilted her head up to peer at the guy. Her gaze caught on a set of handsome green eyes, downturned with concern. A pair of expensive looking Praltz sunglasses sat on his head; the same ones this guy used to wear to school everyday.

The familiarity of his face caused her rage to subside tremendously.

“Dorien? Dorien Bonhomme?” she asked, cocking her head to the side.

His smile grew more excited with each passing second. “Oh my god, no way!” he gasped.

He released his grip on her and took a step back. “Odette Cinq-Mars!” he exclaimed. “Damn, I knew I recognized those braids. I haven’t seen you since graduation!”

Odette adjusted her glasses, taking a beat to look him over. Everything about him looked expensive. She was so used to seeing him in their assigned high school uniform, that she forgot he had the money to spend on such high end clothes. The prestigious logos embedded into his clothes seemed to shine like the diamonds they were probably worth. Praltz, Louis Vibrava, Roll-X...

“I...” she stammered. “Yeah,” she finished. “Big throwback to Rodin’s chemistry class,” she said, flashing something of a grin.

Dorien began to laugh, and he clapped his hands together. “Oh god, yeah! Best lab partner duo in that class.”

She nodded along. That was certainly true; the two of them never got anything less than A’s on their projects together. Where she sucked at math, she made up for with her fantastic presentation and powerpoint making skills. His strong suit was the numbers, and wooing the teachers with his gene-instilled charm.

Another thing she remembered vividly about him--he was easily the best-looking straight guy in their grade. She had been sure the fact he came from such a wealthy family had something to

do with why every girl--herself included--at Lansat Preparatory High School had a thing for him, but he had the looks to pair with the money.

She remembered how stoked she was to have him as a lab partner. But, she also remembered how her crush had tapered off at some point during the year. She couldn't quite remember why. But it didn't seem to matter now, because she felt some heat starting to travel to her face. It startled her, but she figured that not acknowledging it would be the best bet.

She scratched her cheek, deciding to ask the age old question. "What are you doing here?"

Dorien raised his shoulder gleefully, then flashed a piece of paper that depicted a class schedule. "Late enrollment! I start today. I kind of hit a rough spot in my training and decided I was in need of divine intervention," he added dramatically. "I'll admit, I was kinda worried at first, but I'm so glad to have a familiar face here."

A smile began to curl her own lips. "I guess you were jogging because you're late?"

He exhaled sharply and peered at the slip of paper. "No, actually. Well, not yet. If I can't find the room, I will be," he said. He handed the paper to her. "Can you direct me, oh wise one?"

She leaned over to examine it, roving her finger over the 12:30 time slot.

Battle Performance - Building A Gym - Tania Chuquete

She blinked in surprise. "Oh, lucky you," she said. "We're in the same class."

Dorien's face lit up, brighter than it already was. "Lucky me for sure," he said eagerly. Almost too eagerly. He was always easily excitable, but she didn't remember it being this excessive. She raised her brow dubiously.

He must have seen her arched brow, because he rubbed the side of his neck bashfully. "Sorry, like I said. Excited that I know somebody."

Odette shook her head, deciding to brush it off. "No, don't worry about it. I am too," she said. "I'm headed there anyway, so you can just follow me."

"Lead the way, then."

She walked ahead, and decided to keep up with the small talk. Asking how he'd been, how he was faring the weather, small stuff. He had no issue talking her ear off, and frankly, she didn't mind. She'd rather ask him about himself than vice versa, lest she end up in that bad place again.

"What kind of team do you have together?" she inquired as they rounded a corner, maneuvering through a crowd of loitering teenagers.

"Well, I have a thing for Steel and Fighting types, surely," he said. "But, I'm trying to keep my group well rounded, you know? Counters for all the types."

She pursed her lips. "That's always smart," she said. And so baseline, she thought.

"That being said, I've got my Ferrothorn, my Togedemaru, my Corviknight, my Pangoro, my Toxicroak, and my Bewear," he listed, raising a finger with each passing name. "I tend to swap between them though, because I also have an Excadrill, Poliwrath, and Conkeldurr I like to use."

Odette nodded. All primary and secondary Fighting and Steel types; an interesting combination. If and when she ended up in a battle with him, she'd have to watch out. Those Steel moves would send Enora, Loïc, and Isaur to the emergency room at a Pokecenter if she wasn't careful. But, she could solidly counter those Fighting types...

"What about you? I know you always had a Gothorita and that shiny Eevee, right?"

"Oh," she said. "I still have them. Well, they've evolved since then. Gothitelle and Sylveon. I also have a Chandelure, Frolass, and Mimikyu."

Dorien nodded in approval, then began to scratch his chin as a thought seemingly occurred to him. "No sixth?"

"I'm having a hard time finding someone who'd fit into my team dynamic," she said quietly, like she was embarrassed about it. "Loïc..." she paused. "I mean my Mimikyu," she corrected. "Was a fluke as it is. My mom kind of saddled him on me, but he's made himself useful. Even though half my team wants to kill him sometimes."

"Well, I was going to say," he chuckled. "A shiny Sylveon would bring in enough money to last you a lifetime if you sold it at an auction. But, maybe not the best idea if you're only running five."

Odette's eyes went wide. What an absolutely audacious thing to say.

"Excuse me?" she said. A mix of intense anger and an undying urge to laugh stirred in her chest. She started to let some of those laughs go, but she stopped herself upon remembering just how the Bonhomme family got their fortune.

Dorien came from a family of shiny hunters, and they were active members in the shiny trade--reminiscent of the stock market, but highly centered around the buying and selling of

shiny Pokemon. Hunters searched day in and day out for the coveted shiny Pokemon, and would sell them to willing buyers for ridiculous amounts of money.

Now she remembered why she stopped having a crush on him. She had decided somebody so involved in the trade wasn't somebody she should be kissing on.

How the fuck had she forgotten that so easily? Suddenly, her mind was racing again, this time with the thoughts of what Noel had found yesterday.

The wealthy, plus shinies...sounds like some shiny trade bullshit.

"It's not the best idea, period," she said. "I'm not a proponent of the trade. It should have been abolished years ago."

She watched as Dorian rolled his eyes. "Come on, you sound like the rest of the world."

This time, she let her laughs out with no stops. "It's almost like the rest of the world is right."

The shiny trade was rumored to send Pokemon off to people who were, in polite terms, not fit to own them. Big names in the trade always made huge efforts to debunk the rumors, but Odette wouldn't trust it. Money made people greedy, and greed could make people do some terrible things. Like, say, force-feeding a synthetic drug to a Pokemon.

Dorian's brows furrowed momentarily, but he smiled through it. "Ah, I guess we come from different worlds. Somebody in my family comes across a shiny, it's on the market within a day," he explained.

"Do you want my honest thoughts, or my sugarcoated thoughts?" Odette said harshly.

"Sugarcoated, please." He added a smile that she assumed was supposed to be charming, but something about it rubbed her entirely the wrong way. She was getting ready to chew him out for his involvement in such a deplorable establishment, and he was grinning at her like she was flirting with him. Not that she could pull off flirting even if she wanted to, but that wasn't the point.

"That's a dickbag move."

He held his hand over his heart, turning his head away dramatically as if he were offended. "Goodness, I'd hate to know what your honest thoughts are, then."

She slowly sucked her teeth. The pleasantries of reconnecting with an old flame were fading very quickly. All she wanted to do now was beam her water bottle at him. Perhaps she should have let her anger roll, and decked him when he ran into her.

She had a much more nasty remark lined up, but they arrived at the gym before she could let it loose. She quickly decided that that was for the best. She certainly wasn't one to shy away from confrontation, but she was focused on keeping herself in check for this class. She didn't need to get so riled up over Dorian's absolutely fucked views of the trade. At least, not now.

She pushed the heavy double doors open, and was met with the sight of some of her classmates sitting on the bleachers. The gym itself wasn't what a standard school gym would look like. No basketball hoops, no volleyball nets--just a practice battle arena. The walls and ceiling were even padded with protection for stray projectiles. The bleachers themselves also had a protective barrier that could be activated whenever a showdown was going to occur. Truly, no expense was spared by the academy.

"Huh. Seems standard," Dorian commented. There was an air of poshness in his voice, and it made Odette's nerves prickle in disdain. Maybe getting a little riled up wouldn't hurt.

"Must be nice to be so rich that 'state of the art' is just 'standard' to you," she cracked, her tone wavering on the line between reserved and downright biting. He appeared oblivious to her less-than-friendly demeanor, because he let out a small chuckle.

"I guess it just comes with the territory."

"Are you sure you're not just a spoiled brat?" she queried as they walked across the vast space. This prompted another chuckle, this one a little louder.

"Maybe?" he offered. That same attempt-at-charming smile made a comeback, and she began to wonder if he actually was in the mindset that this was flirting. That didn't make any goddamn sense to her. Not that she was the flirting expert; quite the opposite actually. But she wasn't so emotionally unintelligent that she'd take rude banter as something in the same vein as courting. She somehow didn't remember Dorian being so oblivious, but what did she know? She'd forgotten why she stopped liking him in the first place, so forgetting how he was as a person wasn't entirely farfetched in comparison.

A couple of the students already sitting there sent friendly waves and soft "Hey's" toward her as she trekked up the bleacher stairs to her usual bench. Dorian sat next to her and leaned back against the seats behind him, folding his arms behind his head.

"So give me the rundown. How does it work here?" he asked.

Odette took to diverting her attention toward digging through her bag for her pokeballs, which she began to shove into the pockets of her joggers. "It's a battle class," she said. "You battle. I would think it's pretty self explanatory."

He scoffed. "Yes, but what, no gimmick?" he said. She could hear the grin in his voice.

She inhaled deeply and slowly turned her head to face him. As expected, he was flashing his teeth at her. She couldn't help but notice how perfectly straight they were.

"Every Friday the professor picks two students to showcase a 3v3 battle," she explained. "In case your servants didn't remind you when you woke up this morning, today is Friday."

The intended insult flew right over his head. He seemed to show more interest in the idea of the showcase battle, judging by the way his eyes brightened. He turned onto his side, fully facing her, and rested his cheek on his palm. "Oh, that sounds fun," he said slyly. "What are the chances I'll get grabbed today?"

"I haven't even been called. So I highly doubt it." With that, she turned her head back toward her bag.

"Oh, so maybe you'll go? And I get to watch you battle it out with your fairies and ghosts?"

She flinched. His voice had suddenly grown louder and...closer. As if it were right next to her ear.

With her brows furrowed and a deep frown on her face, she turned toward him again, only to find that he'd leaned in close to her. Too close to her. Her cheek was mere centimeters from brushing his nose as she turned her head. Green eyes were narrowed in an all-too sultry fashion, and his toothy smile had shrunk down to a smirk.

Instinctively, she raised her hand and pressed her palm to his nose, forcing him backwards and out of her personal space.

"You can watch me from back there," she said, emphasizing her last word as she pulled her hand away. "I'm not a fan of people getting so close to me, thank you."

She watched him cock his head to the side, his expression growing sad. But, it wasn't any sort of sincere sadness. It was a mocking sadness. Like one somebody might give a Farfetch'd for throwing a tantrum over their leek losing a leaf. A fire lit in her veins, and she grasped the strap of her backpack to refrain from backhanding him outright.

"What?" he said, feigning a pout. "You've never had a guy get close to you before? I'm surprised." He exhaled deeply and leaned back into the bench behind him again. "Every guy I knew in high school wanted to get in your bed, myself included. So that's kind of baffling."

Surely, he meant that as a compliment. But the words hit like a Froslass' ice beam.

Everything about the statement threw her for a loop. People wanted to sleep with her in high school? Including Dorian? Why was he making it sound like she had a pack of suitors following her around school? Did he think she would be flattered by learning that information? She was

the exact opposite of flattered--she was fucking mortified. Though, she could thank the gods that she didn't know of Dorien's feelings before her crush tapered off.

Her grip on her backpack tightened. She was sure the skin on her knuckles was going to tear open, but she didn't care. If she let go, his pretty little nose was going to break.

Maliciously crafted words threatened to spew out, but the double doors opened again, and the remaining students filed in with Mrs. Chuquete in tow. She held her usual clipboard under her arm, and a baseball cap sat on her head of fluffy red hair.

Odette exhaled the shallow breath she was holding, almost feeling relieved that the start of class would save her from this absolute trainwreck of a conversation. It would also save her from the probable expulsion that would come with absolutely pummeling a new student half to death.

"Huh, class starting?" Dorien commented, like he was trying to fill the tense silence that had swelled between them.

Yeah, no shit, she wanted to yell. She bit her tongue instead.

Breathe...keep it together.

"Alright, settle down, trainers," Mrs. Chuquete called, silencing the low chatter. "I'd like to get this started quick, so we have plenty of time to discuss and practice ourselves. I know we also have a new student in here today, so this'll be a good chance for him to see how we do things in here."

Dorien clicked his tongue in response to being acknowledged. It took everything in Odette to not growl at him.

Mrs. Chuquete lifted the front page on her clipboard to look at whatever was under it, before dropping it again. "So I'll keep this quick. First up on the chopping block, Odette Cinq-Mars."

Odette's heartbeat, which had already started to ring in her ears, picked up. She suddenly felt very glad she didn't eat, because she surely would have lost it at that point. Her skittish appetite did come in handy sometimes.

If she weren't so angry, she probably would have had a harder time getting up and walking to the front of the bleachers. But, she happily took it as a chance to get away from Dorien, and bounded up out of her seat.

Mrs. Chuquete scanned her board for a moment, before speaking again. "The slated opponent today was Muraoka Knowles, but she's called in sick today. So I will give somebody a chance to volunteer, before I just move down the list."

Odette's foot had just hit the floor of the arena when Mrs. Chuquete spoke. She stopped dead in her tracks, taking the moment to inhale a deep breath. Her eyes slipped shut as a grimace took hold of her features.

For the love of fucking gods, she thought bitterly.

"I'll go!" she heard Dorien's voice say.

Odette had half a mind to grab somebody's backpack and throw it clear across the room. She was trying so goddamn hard to not explode, and she couldn't remember the last time it had been this difficult. Singing 'Jellicle Songs' wouldn't solve this dilemma.

"Oh, the new student is eager, huh?" Mrs. Chuquete queried, raising her brow. Odette didn't move from her spot, as she was too busy trying, and failing, to blink the red out of her eyes. She only came back to her senses when she felt a hand fall on her right shoulder.

"Odette's a friend of mine, so I'd never pass up a chance to battle her!" he said.

She jerked her shoulder away from his grasp and craned her neck to glare at him. The cocky smile he returned put her on the verge of an anger induced heart attack, if she wasn't at that point already. She stomped forward, out to the middle of the arena, to configure which of her Pokemon she was going to send out for the battle. Something to keep her hands and brain busy for the time being.

"Fat chance," she muttered to herself, shoving her hands into her pockets.

"Oh, friendly rivalry? I like that," Mrs. Chuquete said. "Dorien, was it?"

"Yes ma'am," he said. "I'm really looking forward to this class, even if I did show up a little late in the quarter. Hopefully you'll be the divine intervention I'm looking for in my training journey." The way his voice inflected upward in such a playful fashion made Odette roll her eyes. That's how he used to talk to their chemistry teacher too. Did she find it as annoying back then as she did now? Probably not, because that suave-speak had a huge hand in their straight A's. But now? It sounded like Mawile teeth on a chalkboard.

She heard Mrs. Chuquete chuckle. "Flattery will get you nowhere, but I like your enthusiasm." Despite the words she spoke, she sounded bashful. There was an almost unnoticeable waver in her voice, but Odette picked up easily. That seemed to be the same response he got every time.

She shook her head to herself as she stopped within the left side of the battle field. She withdrew the three balls from her left pocket; Loïc, Isaur, and Ange. Enora and Solene were in her right pocket. She really had to think this over, because she was realizing, in the haze of her rage, that she was in a precarious situation.

One of the pluses of fighting a classmate was that she'd had the chance to observe them in previous classes. She could confidently say that she'd started to pick up on at least half the class's mannerisms whenever they battled, just from standing by and watching them work. She'd figured that by the time she was called for this exhibition, she'd be lucky enough to get paired with somebody she'd watched. But no, there had to be a fluke, where she ended up battling the guy she'd never seen go at it once. It was such a travesty too, because she could read Muraoka like a book. It would have been such a smooth victory.

The thing that amplified this problem was Dorien's preference for steel types. He also had fighting types, which would prove to be a better matchup. But, she was hung up on the fact that steel wiped half her team if she didn't play her cards exactly right. This was a 3v3, and she wasn't sure if that would work for or against her. She had to clear her head and really think.

An obvious choice would be to pick Solene as a lead, as she usually did. Psychic didn't do much to Steel, but Steel wasn't that much of a threat to Psychic either. Plus, Solene could whip a Fighting-type easily.

She began to calm down a little, knowing that at least that part of her usual strategy wasn't contested.

Another no-brainer pick was Ange. Fire being one of the only weaknesses to steel-types, she'd be stupid to not send him in. He packed enough punch to take on whatever Dorien might throw at them, unless he decided to send out a Poliwhirl...that would be an issue. She'd have to hold her breath and hope he left that particular Pokemon at home today.

That left slot three, which is where she found herself stumped. Should she risk Enora or Loïc for the fairy advantage against fighting? If Dorien decided to go primarily steel, though, it would be a terrible time for both of them. Isaur also saw the same problem, but didn't have the same advantage with fighting. Perhaps that just eliminated her from the running? Dammit, what a pain in the ass...

She'd been lucky enough thus far to have only run into the steel-types among rounded teams, but an almost-specialized steel trainer was rough terrain she actively tried to avoid, at least until she could find a counter that would fit her team. She'd done her best to steer clear of the two that were in her Monotype class, but there was no backing out of this unless she wanted to see a hit to her grade. She definitely didn't want to give Dorien that satisfaction, either. If she couldn't backhand him herself, she'd do it through battle.

"Trainers! Ready yourselves!" Mrs. Chuquete called excitedly. "The first three pokemon you send out will be the only ones you can battle with. Choose wisely!"

She hadn't noticed that Dorien had trekked to his side of the arena. He was spinning three pokeballs in his left palm, tapping his foot as if he were waiting on her. When she finally caught sight of him, his smile widened.

"Much luck to you, Odette," he said mockingly. Her jaw clenched, and she pocketed the balls she was holding, and grabbed hold of Solene's.

"Don't need it," she replied.

"You know what to do! Battle to your best abilities!"

Odette exhaled.

"Begin!"

"Come out to play, Excadrill. Swords Dance!" Dorian declared as he threw his ball forward. With a flash of light and a roar, his Excadrill appeared.

"Cadriiiii!" it yelled. It crossed its arms over its chest and began to spin around. A soft glow took hold of its claws as it did so.

"Solene, reflect for incoming attacks," she said simply as she tossed her ball out. Solene emerged in a beam of pink light.

"Gothi," Solene said, sounding serious. She clasped her hands together, as if in a prayer, and held them to her lips. "Gothitelle." A shroud of more pink light fell over her.

"Now, Iron Head!" Dorian said.

Odette watched as the ground-steel type lowered into a crouch, before propelling itself forward. In a split second, its head made contact with Solene's stomach. The Gothitelle stumbled backwards, grimacing, but she wasn't fazed otherwise.

"It's close enough to Charm, go!" Odette said.

In a swift motion, Solene unclasped her hands and used them to blow a kiss. This sent a stream of pink mist into the Excadrill's face, causing it to stumble too. It shook its head violently, trying to ward off the fumes. But the damage had been done. It reopened its eyes with dilated pupils, and stared in awe at the Gothitelle before it.

Dorian gasped deeply. "Snap out of it, Excadrill! Iron Head again!"

"Hold," Odette instructed quickly.

With slight hesitation, the Excadrill crouched backward again, before launching into Solene's stomach again. She trembled with the force of the attack, but exhaled slowly before lifting her head.

"Itelle," she said.

"Good stuff, Sol," Odette praised. She cut her gaze from the Excadrill back to Dorian. He had that nasty little smirk on his face, but his brows had lowered in concentration.

"Wear off that Reflect, don't stop hitting."

Excadrill cooed in protest, but quickly shook its head. The Charm had definitely done its job; as long as Solene kept her Reflect going, and Excadrill remained charmed, its attack power wouldn't be nearly as intense as normal.

Just a bit longer, Odette thought.

Excadrill flew forward again, and went to town. Butting its head into Solene, slicing away at her skin with some hefty uses of X-Scissor. Solene took each hit like an attack dummy; progressively getting weaker, but nowhere close to falling. She made no moves to attack back, allowing Excadrill to land hit after hit after hit. Odette made no move to instruct her otherwise either. She kept her eyes on the opposing Pokemon, watching its every move.

With a final punch, the Reflect barrier shattered, its glassy pieces of it falling to the ground before dissolving into a translucent dust and fading away. That was the punch that sent Solene sliding back into Odette. Odette caught her with ease, and exchanged a look with her.

"Telle," Solene said, sounding tired. There was still an air of determination in her voice.

"You're doing great," Odette told her. "I think we've backed them into a corner."

She shot a look back at Excadrill. It retreated back to Dorian's side of the arena, panting heavily. She noticed that one of Dorian's brows began to twitch, and this time, she let her own smirk take over her face. Was he frustrated already? Good.

Solene nodded. "Gothi-telle," she agreed breathlessly.

"Hold out for one more," Odette said, patting Solene on the shoulder. Solene nodded, then stomped forward again. She puffed her chest out, and clasped her hands together once more.

"Teeeeeeeeeeeeellllleeee!" Solene yelled.

Dorian lightly shook his head, exhaling with a sharp edge. "She's weak. You can knock her down. Final Iron Head!" he hollered.

Odette slowly dove her hand back into her pocket, thumbing over Ange's ball. She'd need to time this just right.

Excadrill let out a roar. It crouched, before running forward.

"Solene, return!" Odette said suddenly.

Solene was absorbed back into her Pokeball, only to quickly be replaced by the Chandelure.

"No mercy, Ange!"

Ange manifested just before Excadrill's head made contact. It cried out in pain, before scrambling backwards. A blue flame took hold of its head, and no matter how much it tried to fan it out, it was no use.

"Chandeeeeeeeeeeeeeeelure!" Ange cried. He puffed out his cheeks, engulfing himself in a periwinkle flame that built and built and built, until it shot forward and made direct contact with Excadrill's face. It flew backwards, and hit the ground with a loud thud.

Odette could hear the deep breath Dorien sucked in, as gasps echoed from her onlooking classmates. The tension filled the arena as Excadrill stumbled back to its feet, blue fire spreading up its arm.

"Can you still battle?" Dorien questioned evenly.

"Ex...ca," Excadrill replied, resting its hand on the burn. It glared intently at Ange, who chirped politely. It waved at the Excadrill, before turning to look at Odette.

"Deluuure?" Ange asked.

"It's already burned, so it won't hesitate to headbutt you again. But it might have an ace up its sleeve. Smoke it out before we can see it," she said.

Ange nodded, then suddenly flew toward the mole pokemon. Excadrill appeared to be caught off-guard by the sudden movement, and dodged the oncoming blast of fire. They were soon trapped in a dance, Ange shooting flames left and right, while the Excadrill did what it could to avoid another burn. It was already struggling from the first one, and Odette knew it was only a matter of time before it couldn't go on. Even if Ange couldn't get another hit off, Excadrill was as good as out.

She watched as Excadrill ceased in its dodging to stare Ange down. Ange held its gaze, rocking slightly from side to side, waiting for a retaliation. It crouched before running.

"That's iron head!" Odette yelled. It seemed that her observation phase had paid off.

Ange puffed his cheeks out, and a beam of fire shot from his mouth. Excadrill roared again, powering through the heat to land its head on Ange. He was sent flying backwards, hitting the ground head first. Excadrill, on the other hand, entirely collapsed, and remained unmoving for several seconds. It showed no signs it was planning to get back up.

"Excadrill is down and unable to fight!" Mrs. Chuquete declared. The students on the bleachers began to applaud. Dorien's smirk was gone now. He was quick to whip out his next ball.

"Conkeldurr, I have a battle snack for you," he said darkly as the large Pokemon manifested from its ball. It looked to have the same exact smirk Dorien was wearing just moments before. But that's not what Odette was hung on at this moment.

What? she thought frantically.

Something about the way he said it sent a chill up her back. Did nobody catch that? Did nobody find that concerning? She thought back to the case she'd read about the drugged out Coalossal eating a Vaporeon mid-battle. She thought back to Noel's finding, and her immediate thought.

Was Dorien joking?

...or was there a chance he was being serious?

The wealthy, plus shinies...sounds like some shiny trade bullshit.

If Dorien truly was involved in sacrilege as a part of the shiny trade, there's no doubt he'd give it to his regular Pokemon too, right?

Ange floated back up in front of Odette. He was hurt, but still up for battle. But she didn't care.

"Return, Ange," she said. Ange dissolved back into his ball, and Odette threw Solene back out.

"Telle!"

"Attack," she commanded. Solene's eyes widened briefly. Odette understood why, as this was wildly out of typical strategy for them.

"Gothi...telle?"

"Knock it the fuck out, Solene," Odette said, the concern in her voice becoming more evident. "Psychic, Psybeam. Stay away from it, though."

She cut her gaze back to Dorian, who was now watching her intently. When their eyes locked, something in his gaze struck her as threatening. Like he was begging her to come at him herself.

She didn't like it one bit. In fact, every single part of her brain was screaming at her to run.

She narrowed her eyes. The chill in her back was replaced by the familiar hotness of her typical rage.

Nobody fucking threatened her, non-verbally or not.

"Full out."

Solene turned toward the Conkeldurr. She held out one of her hands, and a rainbow beam shot from it, striking the fighting-type Pokemon head on. It stumbled, groaning, before shaking off the hit and running at Solene. Solene stuck to her trainer's words, keeping herself out of grabbing range of her foe, as she continued to shoot beam after beam.

It didn't make any sense to her. Why would he send a pure Fighting type out knowing she had a pure Psychic type on hand? It wasn't like he didn't know she was using Solene at all, that's who she led with! That had to have meant he had something else in mind, that perhaps his words weren't a joke. Or, maybe he was just stupid, and figured she wouldn't bring Solene back out? She'd battled some trainers who were that brainless in the past. It was a relatively common thing.

But, why say something like that? Why was he looking at her so menacingly? Why was she so ready to turn heel and bolt?

A loud thump brought her back to reality. Dorian's Conkeldurr hit the ground, a panting Solene standing several feet away.

"Conkeldurr is down and unable to fight!" Mrs. Chuquete yelled.

Relief blanketed the knot that had taken hold in Odette's chest. The battle wasn't over, but the imminent threat seemed to be gone for the time being.

Dorian was silent for a moment. He sighed deeply, before sending the fainted Conkeldurr back to its ball. He lazily threw out the last one, and with a loud squeal, a large black bird emerged from the pokeball's beam of light.

"Rise, Corviknight," he said. "You're the last hope."

Odette could hear her heart pounding in her ears again, and she wasn't sure what was causing it. Anger? Concern? Fear? Why was she scared all of a sudden? Moments ago, she wanted to punch this guy, and now, all she wanted to do was run from him.

Solene wobbled up to her, still breathless.

"Thiii?" she queried.

Odette placed a hand on her head. "You did so well," she praised. "You can relax now." She pulled Solene back into her ball, deciding she didn't need to worry her anymore than she already was. They could talk later, when she had time to collect her thoughts. Because boy, were they running amok.

So much for the third slot, she decided. The fact she managed to power through without sacrificing Solene and having Ange only somewhat hurt was a position she didn't think she'd find herself in. Ange could burn the Corviknight, and the win was theirs. She sent the Chandelure back out.

"Chaaaaaan!" he cried. He didn't seem to pick up on her current state of mental turmoil, as he was more concerned with finishing off the battle.

She was okay with that. The sooner this finished, the better.

"Same as before, Ange. No mercy."

He sure as hell kept to those words. Flamethrower, fire blast, even a shadowball...the Corviknight put up a solid, clean fight. But Ange was a powerful little pokemon. The bird soon fell, leaving its trainer standing, defeated.

"Battle over! The winner, by three Pokemon, is Odette!" Mrs. Chuquete said. Applause from the class followed immediately after.

Odette pulled Ange back into his ball at the same time Dorien returned his Corviknight. She hesitantly moved her eyes back to his, expecting to see him giving her that same malicious look. But no. He was back to being all smiles.

He approached her, that same teeth-showing smile reemerging. "Great battle, Odette!" he said. "I thought I'd had it in the bag given my typings, but I guess you're just a stronger trainer overall."

He held his hand out to shake, but she didn't accept it. Instead, she stared him in the face. Scanning, hunting for remnants of that hostility. But it was gone. He was back to cocky, spoiled smiles. Acting like everything was okay. Back to thinking they were probably still flirting.

Odette turned, leaving him with his hand outstretched, and speed walked back toward the bleachers.

“Excellent work, you two,” Mrs. Chuquete said as Odette approached. “I saw some interesting things.”

Odette brushed past her, clamoring up the steps, to where she’d been sitting. She quickly shouldered her bag, then rushed back down, skipping steps as she went, before beelining for the doors. She avoided making eye contact with Dorien again as she passed him.

“Odette! Where are you going?” Mrs. Chuquete yelled after her.

“Bathroom. I’ll be back,” she replied, the words coming out in a rapid-fire slur. She was out in the hall after that.

That wasn’t necessarily a lie. She was headed to the bathroom. But, the latter part was still up in the air. She wasn’t sure if she could sit through the rest of the class with Dorien in there.

She was thankful to find that all the stalls were empty upon kicking open the door to the girls bathroom. She rushed to one of the sinks, where she threw her bag down on the counter top. She then leaned against the sink, allowing her head to dangle and giving herself a chance to come down from wherever the hell her head was.

She couldn’t even bring herself to bask in her victory. She was far too worked up about everything else that had happened. From the conversation beforehand, to the battle itself, to the way he was just...perfectly fine afterward. Well, as perfectly fine as he could be. There was clearly something very wrong with him.

She couldn’t get over that cold feeling that came over her when they locked eyes in that moment. Every hair on her body stood up, like she was looking at some horrific horror movie character. She hadn’t felt a sense of fight or flight like that since...Fleurrh. But she didn’t need to go there.

She brought her head up to stare at her reflection, watching herself take deep, steady breaths. Slowly, but surely, her heart slowed, and her brain stopped spinning.

Maybe she wouldn’t go back to class. It was her last one for the day, anyway. She could tell Chuquete she had a bout of sickness and had to go home. She had a soft spot for the illness stories, and Odette knew she could pull it off well.

Right now, she didn’t want to be in there. She didn’t want to be in the building.

So, she supposed it would be a good time for her to go pay a visit to her grandfather instead.