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As always, thank you for reading.

[line]

Once again, a crowd swells around the battlefield as Lee and Wally take their places opposite one another. Between them, Gallade and Corviknight stride onto the field, their eyes locked on each other.

Amongst the bystanders, the anticipation is mounting, and it sits on Lee's shoulders like a physical weight. Corviknight has frightened away every single other challenger, but for a boy with a fully-evolved pokemon—a *Gallade,* no less—to rise to the challenge?

If anything from today gets posted to BattleNet, it's going to be this bout.

'Obviously, Corvi had to have been doing ***something*** *while he was gone, but to think he ran into someone like Wally?'* Lee shakes his head slowly. *'I know Giratina denied messing with our fate, but that's a pretty huge coincidence.'*

'We still need to tell everyone about our… divine experience,' Nine reminds Lee.

'We'll do a bit more research on Giratina first, then sit everyone down for that talk,' Lee sends back before returning his attention to the field. Clearing his throat, he addresses Wally. "Just a one-on-one today, Wally?" Lee asks. "Corvi versus Gallade?"

The green-headed boy nods, his timid face firming up. "Yes."

Lee then looks over to the older gentleman who ref'ed for the last few battles, and he steps back up to the side of the arena.

The watchers all press in as close as they can, and the tension ratchets up each second. Seeing two fully-evolved pokemon clash? Not an occurrence that happens every day.

"Corviknight versus Gallade!" the referee announces as he raises his arm.

Phones begin recording.

Wally's eyes narrow.

Lee takes a deep breath. *‘Lets see how Emerald’s more ambitious rival measures up.’*

The ref’s arm chops down. “Begin!”

“Hone Cl-!”

Before Lee can finish his command, Gallade blitzes Corviknight without so much as a twitch from Wally, an elbow-blade already humming with a shimmering pink edge.

“Abort! Iron Defence!” Lee swaps his order, recognising Gallade’s Psycho Cut.

Corviknight’s whole body shines with a metallic luster as Steel TE coats his feathers and armor, and just in time, too, as Psycho Cut bites into his chestplate a second later.

Gallade turns on his heel in a full spin, transitioning Psycho Cut’s slash right into an unnamed punch. His fist, crackling with orange sparks, smashes into Corvi’s armor with a sound like a gong, drawing a grunt from the great corvid.

“Up!” Lee calls, quickly trying to find the pattern in Gallade’s order-less aggression. *‘No verbal cues? That's advanced stuff for a kid like Wally.’*

Out in the arena, Corvi spreads his wings and takes to the air with a single, mighty flap, kicking up a miniature windstorm that forces both Wally and Gallade to cover their faces.

From his angle below, Lee can see just enough of Corvi’s front to assess the damage.

‘Shallow cut, probably less than half an inch, and a dent from the punch, which was definitely Fighting type…’ Lee narrows his eyes as he thinks. *‘The initial attack and transition from the slash to the punch was smooth as butter… but he attacked the thickest part of Corvi’s armor rather than a joint. Gallade is strong, but his power is lacking for such a bold, frontal assault. What game are they playing here?’*

Before the lull can stretch long enough for Wally and Gallade to take advantage, Lee fires off another order. “Hone Claws!”

Midair, Corvi brings his wings together with a flap, lacing his wing feathers together like someone might the fingers of their hands. Then he rips them away from each other, letting the edges grind together with a hair-raising sound and a shower of sparks.

At the same time, he grinds his talons together and chews on his own beak, making more sparks. When he’s done, all the edges on his body shine like fresh razors in the afternoon sun.

Gallade stares up at Corviknight with an inscrutable face even as Wally’s own expression becomes unsure. Then without an order, Double Team clones burst from Gallade, covering the field in illusory fakes. All of the clones then take a breath and focus, yellow arcing over their bodies as they charge what looks like Focus Energy to Lee’s eyes.

‘I see he used that TM I gave him. Sorry, Gallade, that would have worked on any other Corviknight.’ Lee smiles grimly. “Pursuers into Drill Peck!”

Corvi lets out a horrid screech as wispy orbs of purple-black swirl into existence all around him. He throws his wings forward, and the seething balls all home into a Gallade on the far right of the field.

Once the attack is flying, Corvi brings his wings in close and dives low, his body swirling as he goes. In just a second, the crow's body is a spinning, drill-like blur that may as well be a horizontal tornado. The wind shrieks and wails as Corvi's bladed body rips through it, and Lee's ears pop as the living cyclone makes the air pressure dip.

Corvi then speeds towards Gallade, coming in from the side like a deadly drill while Pursuers race down from above.

Both Wally and his pokemon freeze as the Pursuers come down on Gallade like dark meteors. Then at the last moment, Gallade's eyes light up with a rainbow of colors as his body shimmers. A flash forces Lee to blink, and Gallade is gone, instantly Teleported to Lee and Corvi's side of the field.

Wally falters without an explanation, and Lee takes notice with a frown. *'Is he sick? What was that about?'*

Each Pursuer swerves to follow their target, and Corvi himself twists midair in a show of Drill Peck mastery to follow Gallade, but now that the tall psychic has had some breathing room, he's ready.

Pulling his fists back, Gallade scowls and punches each incoming Pursuer with his hands wreathed in the same Fighting move Lee can't identify. Brick Break, maybe?

Regardless, Gallade's Fighting attack plows through each Dark orb, popping each one and neutralizing the caustic TE within.

…But he focuses so much on the orbs that he forgets about Corvi's Drill Peck. Another puzzling amateur mistake.

When Gallade dispels the final Pursuer and finally remembers that Corvi is coming in hot, the psychic grimaces and focuses once more, glowing as he readies a Teleport.

This time, Lee keeps an eye on Wally, finding that the boy is also grimacing…

Alas, the Teleport isn't fast enough, and with Corviknight only feet away, Gallade abandons the plan to instead leap to safety.

He's too slow, or Corviknight is just too large. Gallade is clipped on the arm and the side by the crow, but even the glancing blow rips at Gallade, tearing skin open and sending misted blood flying in Corvi's gale-like wake.

Gallade lets out a strangled cry as he falls to the dirt, rolling to a stop as he clutches his savage wounds. He doesn't stay down for long, and forces himself to his feet even as blood pours down his side.

Wally brings his hands together and screws his eyes shut, as if praying, and Gallade's gaze grows hard as he brings his arm-blades to bear, watching the still-whirling Corvi curving around for another pass.

'Lee…' Ninetales begins.

'I saw,' He sends back with a deep frown. *'Looks like telepathy. Feels odd being on the other end of it in a battle.'* Then something else comes to mind. *'Do they know the risks telepathy has?'*

Without a physical face to frown with, Ninetales' uncertainty instead tugs Lee's lips downward. *'We should speak with them after the bout,'* the fox concludes, and Lee can't help but agree.

[line]

Out in the battlefield, the monstrous Corviknight and the underdog Gallade clash over and over. With each meeting, the Gallade leaves with another bruise or cut, and that's if he's not thrown like a ragdoll. With his injuries piling up, the crowd cheers each time he rises after a fall.

The Corviknight, by contrast, has mere scratches and dents on his armor. When the Gallade can manage a clean blow, the gigantic bird simply shrugs it off. The boy, Wally, and Gallade *are* making headway, though.

And then Lee Henson gives a damning order.

"Roost!"

The Corviknight lands and spreads his wings, gathering energy from thin air with them. His armor groans, and all the dents push themselves out as the scratches fade.

Both Wally and Gallade falter as their progress vanishes before their eyes.

Self healing. Such an annoying thing to deal with, but it's good to know that Lee Henson's Corviknight has that move. The intel is worth its weight in gold.

Then the pokemon clash again.

The fight is so intense that almost no one notices Norman Maple in the throng, watching with a frown. The longer he watches, the more intense his frown becomes.

The most stressful league year in recent memory isn't treating Norman well. His worries are many and are coming in from all over. From the orders to keep an eye out for Magma and Aqua, to sleepless nights wondering if he should call his children home, and that's to say nothing of the workload in the gym.

The gangs are concerning, but they haven't been sighted in Petalburg, so he could push lookout duty to his Gym Trainers, and his children are traveling with some young experts in the form of Ash and Brock, so he can convince himself to close his eyes and rest most nights, but the gym is a problem positive thinking won't banish.

A record number of trainers are aiming for the Ever Grande Conference this year, and every part of the Hoenn League is feeling the strain. Norman and his fellow Gym Leaders have been battling day in, day out, trying to get to as many clamoring challengers as possible.

Poor Roxanne and Brawly were really feeling it recently, with both young Gym Leaders looking like warmed-over death in recent meetings. As the most inexperienced of Hoenn's Gym Leader lineup, trainers tended to test their luck in Rustboro and Dewford first, using their gyms as measuring sticks and whetstones at once. Roxanne took her post just a year ago, and Brawly two years before that.

Luckily for Brawly, he never had to deal with being the "first in line" as the Gym Leaders say. Brawly wasn't the only new leader during his first year. No, that honor went to Liza and Tate when the twins took over the Mossdeep gym at the tender age of ten.

The pair of psychic prodigies crushed countless dreams their first year. Some newbies quit, others ran away to other regions in shame, and a few beat their heads against the wall that was the Mossdeep gym to no avail.

By the time most trainers realized the twins were too much to tackle without prep time, it was already late in the year, and for the first time in decades, the Ever Grande Conference didn't need preliminary rounds, as only sixty-some trainers managed to get all eight badges.

Liza and Tate jumped up and pushed everyone other than Wallace down in their unofficial ranks. Winona took to being the new sixth with grace, but Norman couldn't help but feel his pride sting as he fell to fifth.

With how many trainers are getting through him, recently, he might drop to fourth…

In the arena, poor Gallade is brained by a Steel Wing that could derail a train, and the crowd collectively winces. *Oooohhhhh's* break out, and Gallade stumbles, struggling to stand upright as a swanna-egg swells on his head.

Norman grimly notes that Corviknight's Steel Wing hits with power only a few notches below his Slaking's Mega Punch. Not good.

What was he thinking about again? Right, the gyms. It looks like Moore's granddaughter might be the new starting point next year. The girl and her pokemon are head and shoulders above the average trainer, plenty strong enough to be a Gym Leader, and with a pedigree to match. Her new "Flame Burst" move also makes her slow pokemon frightful in their area saturation abilities, but the masses see "new" as "weak".

Like the Mandibuzz they are, commercial real estate types are sniffing around Lavaridge, hoping to cash in on the coming trainer rush, and Norman heard talk of Lavaridge's mayor petitioning the League for tax breaks in the name of infrastructure funding. Heck, there are even rumblings of Devon opening an office there.

At least Roxanne won't be pulling fifty or sixty hour work weeks next year. That'll be on poor Flannery instead.

Again, Norman goes back to all the trainers in Hoenn this year.

Tyson Rhyn embarrassed the Petalburg gym, there are no two ways about it. Norman and his pokemon were treated like *jokes* by a man fifteen years his junior. Just thinking about it makes his face burn.

Ash Ketchum, the friend of his children, was a harsh reminder on the dangers of underestimating young trainers, but at least that match wasn't a blow-out. To lose in front of his own children, though…

Remembering Max's anguished face when Slaking fell hurts worse than any defeat by itself.

Valorie Forrest, a Grass specialist with the confidence to take an unusual route through the circuit, collected her balance badge weeks ago. Norman narrowly won their first match, and she handily won the rematch.

There are other ones yet to visit Petalburg, like Lilycove's Katie Huffman, the mysterious Andre, and Clark "Conductor" White, but they can only be a few weeks away at best.

But now, two of the most worrying ones are in Petalburg.

Brendan Birch and Lee Henson.

Norman sighs and glances away from the battle towards the falling sun, suddenly feeling older than his thirty-five years.

His best friend and childhood rival's son is in his city, and Brendan looks to be as fantastic a trainer as his father, if not better. Brendan and his pokemon handily defeated Roxanne, Brawly, Wattson, and Flannery, never needing a rematch, and all at the age of twelve. With mighty pokemon and a chess master's brain, Nigel prepared his son as much as he could without outright handing the boy a veteran pokemon, and it shows. There are even rumors abound that Brendan someway, somehow, captured a *Latias*.

The Gym Leader's fists clench.

Never in their rivalry did Norman ever trump Nigel. The other man was just too good, his pokemon too strong. All the training and strategy in the world broke across Nigel Birch like a clod of dirt hurled at the wall of a fortress.

'Nigel should have been the champion. He had it right there in his hands!'

Norman takes a breath and banishes the thought before it can spiral.

The power of a legendary dragon directed by Nigel Birch's firstborn?

How is anyone expected to face such a thing?

But despite all that, one Lee Henson is still the greater concern.

No records, no history, the man appeared out of thin air in Nigel's employ as a Lab Trainer and researcher, with Nigel refusing to utter a peep as to his origins. If what little of the man is available is correct, he wasn't raised to be a trainer, and missed all the milestones every child is expected to hit during their customary journey. It's like someone handed Lee everything he needed to be a terror as a demented joke.

That wouldn't explain the plethora of strange, new moves his pokemon throw out like candy, nor how his team shines with health to a nearly unnatural degree. Some cried foul and said his pokemon were on stimulants, but Lee rebuffed that by posting the results of a Pokemon Center drug test online, complete with a League seal.

So then, where does all this power come from?

A Shinx, born premature, yet fighting like a Salamence today.

A Sylveon strong enough to pull the limbs off of her foes like a child breaking a toy.

A record-breaking behemoth of a Corviknight, as tall and unyielding as a castle.

And his Octillery, Grovyle, and Ninetales haven't been spotted in weeks. There is no telling what they could be capable of.

The Gym Leader bites his lip.

Just having a Ninetales willing to follow orders is a feather in the cap of any trainer. Having one that can manage a win against the living legend that is Moore's Ty? The fox's ego should be so huge that she should fight a newbie trainer like Lee at every step, yet she's as obedient and cuddly as a hand-reared Growlithe.

Norman has followed all the high-flying trainers this year, silently thanking all the armchair aces of the internet for doing much of the work for him, but none of them can make sense of Lee Henson either.

What secrets is he holding? Did he stumble across some Holy Grail training method?

The screech of Lee's Corviknight pulls Norman back into the fight.

By now, Gallade looks as if he's just crawled out of a man-sized blender. The psychic pants, sagging and shaking in exhaustion as he bleeds from slash wounds all over his body. Still, though, he stands proud, defiant, even. One of his arms is limp, but the other is raised and humming dangerously with a Psycho Cut.

Corviknight, disregarding some new scuffs on his armor, looks fresh. The great crow stares down at Gallade, and the respect in his beady red eyes is plain for all to see.

"What do you say we call it here, Wally?" Lee says to his young opponent, the unmarred side of his face rising into a small smile. "Gallade has done wonderfully, and I-"

Corviknight turns and gives his trainer a squawk of protest, one that Gallade mirrors with as much venom as he can muster, making Lee blink in surprise.

“Sorry, Mister Lee,” the boy, Wally, smiles back, “but we don’t want to give up and run away when the going gets tough. We want to see it through.”

Corviknight perks up, and even without having seen a Corviknight in the flesh before, Norman can’t miss the approval on the face of Lee’s pokemon.

Lee doesn’t miss it, either, and instead nods. “If that's what you both want, then who am I to say no? Corvi! Finish this properly with Steel Wing!” He orders.

Landing on the ground with a rumble, Corviknight raises a black wing up like an oversized guillotine, shining with an edge promising pain.

Gallade growls and raises his own arm, his Psycho Cut extending up his forearm until it forms a translucent, broadsword-like blade.

Both pokemon tense. Gallade bends his knees, and Corviknight’s free wing loosens to flap.

The standoff silences all the onlookers. *‘Like a scene out of an old kanto samurai movie,’* Norman supposes.

Then as one, both pokemon *move.*

Metal screeches as the pokemon zip past each other, practically trading places on the field. A moment later, both allow their attacks to power down.

Gallade stumbles, his hand slapping over a new, deep laceration in his side. Falling to his knees, the psychic turns his head to peer over his shoulder.

Norman follows Gallade’s gaze all the way over to Corviknight, who lifts a wing to inspect his own side.

There, a clean cut is gouged through the crow’s thick armor. From the wound, beads of red well up, then slowly run down the dark metal in thin rivulets.

Looking away from the cut in his side to Gallade, Corviknight croons a deep note, one that sounds of pride. *‘Do Corviknight and Gallade have history?*’ Norman wonders.

A weak smile rises to Gallade’s face, then he lets himself go limp and surrenders to unconsciousness, hitting the dirt with a muted *thud.*

The referee of the match counts to five, then raises a hand. “Gallade is unable to battle! Corviknight wins!”

The onlookers erupt into cheers as Wally recalls his beaten pokemon, then meets Lee in the center of the battlefield for a handshake.

Slowly, Norman backs away, gently pulling himself free from the small crowd and starting the walk back to his gym.

'I can't give Lee a standard match. I have to hit him with something new, something fresh,' he realizes with a frown. *'The entire gym system is based around the leaders losing, but…'*

…But the reputation of the Petalburg gym is on the line. Losing with his loaner team from the League is no big deal, but suffering true loss after loss to rising stars?

If Norman's gym loses its mystique as the great roadblock of the Hoenn circuit, he hasn't anything else to fall back on.

Officially, the League doesn't track popularity as a metric, but unofficially? There's a reason the Rustboro gym's funding jumped after Roxanne, a personable and beautiful young woman, took over and replaced her aging, crotchety predecessor. One just needs to look at the uptick in interest in the Rustboro gym following her appointment to see it.

All of the other gyms have something unique, be it style or power, but Petalburg just has its status as the great filter. The gym that separates the wheat from the chaff.

Without that, he'll just be average Norman again, the man who didn't make Champion even *after* his rival gave up.

[line]

"C-Can that actually happen?" Wally hesitantly asks as he accepts the offered can of lemonade from Lee. "The whole 'one brain eats the other' thing?"

Lee lets out a sigh as he sits down on one of the sofas in the Pokemon Center, with Wally following suit at his side. "That's what every expert I've spoken to says. I'm not telling you to outright stop using telepathy with Gallade, but give it due caution, and don't neglect other forms of communication. It's a wonderful, useful thing, telepathy, but if you stay connected too long, it'll get harder and harder to disconnect until you can't anymore. You and Gallade need some time alone in your own heads from time to time. You understand?"

The young boy nods rapidly, making his green mop of hair bounce around. "Yes, I do!"

"Good," Lee takes a sip of his own drink. *'After having both, I think I still like lemonade made with actual lemon flavor over aspear berries.'* Swallowing, he sets the can down on the coffee table before the sofa and reaches into his backpack, which is on the floor by his feet. Taking his notebook and a pen out, Lee scribbles down his phone number and tears the corner it was written on free, handing it to Wally. "If you have questions or run into anything weird with your telepathic practice, give me a call, okay?"

"I will!" Wally promises, folding the scrap of paper and stuffing it into his pocket. "How do you know so much about this, Mister Lee? Are you a scientist of some kind?"

“Researcher, actually. For the Hoenn Regional Pokemon Lab,” Lee corrects. “As for how I know…”

Ninetales chooses that moment to stretch her legs, her pokeball expanding and popping open on Lee’s hip. Once the light of her release fades, the gold fox is seated at Lee’s feet.

“It's first-hand experience,” Lee finishes, petting Nine as she looks into Wally’s startled, silvery eyes. “Nine and I know a thing or two about telepathy.”

‘...Now that I’ve had more time to ponder the concerns therein, is it correct to tell Wally and Gallade to distance themselves from one another? Or Brendan and Latias?’ Ninetales suddenly asks, looking over to Lee, some melancholy leaking from her into him. *‘What you and I have is a joy like no other. Should others be denied it?’*

Lee’s smile slips. ‘*We aren’t sure why you and I are in the metastable state that we are. Until we figure it out, it's safer for everyone to not try. Even if we knew how to make a stable bond, we shouldn’t push others into it. It's a lifelong commitment that we both carry biases about.’*

‘I suppose…’ The fox’s heart isn’t entirely pleased by the answer, even if she sees the logic. *‘I would not oppose learning how we came to be one in soul, however. Passing the knowledge to others feels a noble goal to me.’*

‘Another project for my endless pile of research,’ Lee answers back with a chuckle.

Wally apparently doesn’t notice the lightning-quick exchange, but he does understand the implication and nods. “I promise I’ll let you know if anything comes up,” he says.

“Good,” Lee says, casting a glance over to the line by the Pokemon Center’s front desk.

Corvi didn’t even need to be checked in. After the match with Gallade was over, he simply used Roost to close his sparse wounds.

Gallade, though, fought to the bitter end, withstanding twice the punishment Lee expected him to take. Slashes, bruises, a dislocated arm, a concussion, and he still stood tall. Lee had never seen such pride in Corviknight’s eyes before today. Whatever state Corvi left Wally and Gallade in, they must be a night and day change.

“How long is Gallade going to be in the center, Wally?” Lee asks. As an afterthought, he adds: “Do you have any other battle-ready pokemon?”

“Don’t worry about me, Mister Lee. Nurse Joy said Gallade should be out in a day or two with another two days of recovery,” the young trainer smiles. “I have Skitty, Swablu, and Roselia with me, too, so I’ll be okay!”

The elder of the two smiles back. “Good.”

Lee and Wally settle into some small talk from there, with Wally telling Lee about some of Petalburg’s highlights, like Wally’s favorite Unovan diner and a family-owned berry farm on the west-end of town. In turn, Lee regales Wally with some of the battles he and his team faced,

with Wally hanging on to every word with large eyes. Ninetales occasionally chimes in, aided by a translation from Lee, but is mostly content to let her trainer talk for them both.

Eventually, Wally finishes the lemonade Lee got for him and says his goodbyes, waving to both of them as he leaves the Pokemon Center.

'An interesting boy,' Ninetales comments as she takes Wally's spot on the couch and drapes herself over Lee's lap.

'I'd hope so, considering he's a named character,' Lee sends back, deciding to doomscroll his phone for a bit before heading toward the diner Wally recommended.

As expected, his BattleNet thread is exploding now that he's back in the public eye after weeks of no activity. He scrolls to the newest page and finds… A picture of the back of his head?

Lee looks over his shoulder with his brows furrowed, staring directly at a woman with her phone raised towards him.

The woman, who is holding a snoozing Azurill in one arm and her phone in her free hand, looks past her screen to see Lee's unamused face. Smiling sheepishly, she puts her phone away and makes herself scarce by power walking right out of the Center.

"This fame shit is for the birds," Lee grumbles.

Ninetales' gekkering laugh draws the attention of another phone camera.

[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.

soup, Ultra-Anon, Spice_King, Adean23, Planetace, Cat, speedyzman13, Luc_99, OmegaEntertainment, Nickerdoodle, WiseKitsune, Marthdovah, AMeek, Fabhar, Zany Old Coot, Kyubei, Dicloniuslord, Ttran2323, Moxie, Derpydude9001, Moonlit Chaser, SparkzVultrix, Aelias, Maestro, KaurisAzurai, Wing Shot, Latscry, MrPerson0, TheTankiestTrain, Siphon Rayzar, ShaRose, Shrimperium, Ninjadanimo, Zazs31, BrokenOlive, Tread Carefully, Part-Time Prick,WhatAFungi, Gavinfoxx, drykeon, Sinnohan, Ash The Kitsune, Papito12495, PAXAMERICANA, Berusella, demonmonkey89, Rémi C., Nithalys, Ray, Priam, Grey, Emilowish, Bruv, Iskierka, Cynicals, IAmYourKingAndMaster, InfamousVenous, Randythecheeseeater, Kevin,

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