



???????

You left her. Good for you.

Now it's just the two of us again. Just like old times, eh?

This is the way it *should* be. You don't need anyone else. You can't *trust* anyone else. Hell, you can hardly even trust yourself, can you. Falling for all her lies like that? Falling for *her* like that? So easily? Hand *me* the reins, squirt. Let *me* drive for a bit.

Don't worry if you aren't ready yet. You will be. Soon enough. So take your time! Relax! You'll know when it's time.

But don't wait too long, or I may just have to make that decision for you.

JERICHO

I was all too familiar with the smell in this tent.

It is not a scent that I had smelled in some time. And yet. I remember it as if it were yesterday.

Chlorine. Disinfectant. Herbal poultices. Blood. Sweat. Vomit.

It was the scent of the war-tents. The home of the medics and the morgues. The backline of the army. I remember the Audinos and the Chanseys, smiles wiped from their cherubic faces as they went about their bloody business. I remember their shock at seeing us there. We were never supposed to have gone there. No. Our lot in life was to do and die.

But this was a common medical tent. They said I was more than welcome here. Roseanne was not. The doctors had said that it would not be right for her to see the other Pokémon at their most vulnerable. They may be right.

And yet still I struggled. The Contract is an insecure and fickle thing. It always is. It pulls at your limbs. It drags at your very soul. To call it simply a contract is a lie. It is an obligation, bought and paid for in gold and blood.

If Roseanne could not come to me, then I would simply have to go to Roseanne.

So I tried to leave. And so I fell, acid-wormed joints not yet ready to bear my weight. Dora had webbed me to the bed shortly thereafter. I suppose it was justified, despite the indignity of it all. And so there I lay. On my back. Arms and legs thoroughly webbed to the great stony slab beneath me. The doctors - Grand Aid - would be along shortly, I was told, although they had a long backlog of patients from the toxins of the swamp. It seemed that most of the other Pokémon had experienced similar difficulties with the swamps' inhabitants. But they would be with me soon.

And so I waited. I stared up at the ceiling of the tent. I counted stitches in the fabric. Anything to distract from that scrap of infernal paper in my chest. It clawed away at my heart. It ran rampant in my chest. It begged for release. It screamed. It fought.

And so I thought of fights. Why was I here? Could I have fought better?

Yes. I replayed the fight in my head. Over and over. Slowbro after slowbro fired. Slowbro after slowbro fell. And yet they returned. And I could not fight them all. My fists flew without purchase, my hands reduced shells to rubble. And it was not enough.

I went searching through the modules. Moves upon moves. Everything a Golurk had ever learned. Everything a Golurk ever could. The three elemental fists of Castelia. The quakes that sank the Castle. The light that pierced the heavens.

Yes. The light would work well. More range. More *power*. More to keep Roseanne safe.

But my thoughts were interrupted by the squeaking of wheels. Noise, footsteps just outside the tent. A doctor, to free me from this prison at last. But when the tent flap opened, it was not to a doctor. No. It was one of the Espurrs. The green one. She was pushing a new stretcher ahead of her.

"Dora says she'll be ready to see you soon. Have some company in the meantime." And then she padded back out. Left me alone with the new Pokémon. She was a Meowscarada, a Pecha

juice feeder attached to her arm, a tear running slowly down her furry cheek. Her showman's vest was battered, tarnished. A fallen soldier.

"Why do you cry?" I asked. She turned to me as if seeing me for the first time. Wiped her eyes, bleakly.

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it." Her voice came out a half-whisper. Barely audible.

"Mm."

A moment passes. A small eternity. A silent eon.

"You know, lying there... You almost remind me of a trick I used to do." She wheezes out the shadow of a laugh. "I'd pretend to saw my trainer in half. They loved it. I loved it."

"Trainer?" I had heard tales of Pokémon like this, long before the war. Long before my time. They fought alongside masters. Friends. Partners. "You had one?"

"I did." Her voice is quiet. Thick. Slow with sickness. Yet it is sweet on the wind, light and airy. "Have you ever... Lost somebody before?" She spoke softly. Forced the words out through a daze. Slurred, slightly. "Like... Somebody important."

"Yes."

"Have you ever worried that, if you found them again... Well, if they'd even recognize you?"

"I can never find them again." Unless, I thought. Unless he had been correct. He had always believed in the old Golurk myths. Maybe he had been right. "Maybe one day, they will walk once more. A different Pokémon. Yet the same. That is what they believed."

"...Oh." She turned back to the ceiling. Rubbed her eyes. There was a long pause before she spoke again. "I suppose we aren't too different, then."

"Sometimes, all we may do is try to not lose anyone else."

And then the Espurrs return. Both of them this time. They wheel my gurney into the operating tent. The wheels scrape and squeak on the linoleum. But from the Meowscarada, there is nothing but silence.

The work is quick. I cannot see the Ariados as she stitches and repairs. But I can feel the concrete mix filling my wounds. I can feel the webs, holding the mixture in place as my body heals. Eventually I see her in the corner of my eye.

"It should all be done," she says. She is breathing heavily. A droplet of sweat rolls down her head. Or perhaps it is a stray piece of webbing. "Tell me if anything changes and we'll try to fix it back up again."

I feel the webs around my limbs dissolve as I stand, free once more, whole once more. "Thank you." I leave quickly. My head dips low under a beam. I pass by the Meowscarada as I go. She is asleep once more. Murmuring softly. Delirious with poison and Pecha still coursing through her system. Would she remember me when she woke? It was of little importance. I stumbled on through the flaps of the tent. Into the blinding sunlight. Into Roseanne's waiting arms. I felt the contract still as she cried into the rock of my leg, heard its complaints silenced as she blubbered out in greeting.

"I - I'm so glad you're ok! I tried to visit but they wouldn't let me, and they said that so many Pokémon got hurt in the swamp, and I was so worried -"

"Roseanne."

"Yeah?" She sniveled, wiped her nose on a sleeve.

"Until the day comes where you do not need me to protect you." I recited. "I will be alright. And by your side. There is no other option." The terms of the contract. Or were the words my own? I could not tell. The contract was me. It was my thoughts. It was my words.

"Really?" She looked up at me with eyes wide like saucers, round and bright as the full moon. Had she ever had anyone to rely on before? Had she ever had a protector? "You promise?"

"Yes." As I looked down on her now, I saw myself. A young child. An empty vessel. But she could not be like me. She *would* not. "The day is still young. Let us train."

"Out here?" We stood in the woods once more, where the Sawk had trained. Light filtered through the trees, golden sunbeams falling through the leaves. Roseanne stood in the middle of the clearing, clad in an ostentatious pair of black trousers, bedecked in glittering

trinkets. More practical than yesterday's dress. Not by much. She kicked at the leaves nervously as she looked up at me. "Are you sure?"

I could feel the trepidation in Roseanne's voice. The fear. I have failed her in this before and now she was unsure of if she could trust me again.

I would feel the same.

"I tried to teach you to fight as I do." I rumbled, staring down at the tiny girl. It was time for new beginnings. Time for different styles. Different fists. "You cannot fight like a Golurk. You are not a Golurk. You must fight in your own way."

"My own way?"

"Yes." It seemed obvious now. I had fought alongside Grovyles and Bisharp, with Lycanroc and Gallade. None had fought like the other. None had fought like me. I did not know how a Mawile fought. But Rosie would. "Your own way."

And she tried. First with a stick. She poked and prodded at my leg, dancing around it like a Bellossom, dashing in and out until the stick shattered against my shin. A Farfetch'd fighting style. Not her own. She had had a tutor once, she told me. A Galarian Farfetch'd, who had tried to teach her how to fence.

Then she tried with her jaws. They swung wildly, thrashing about harmlessly against my stony skin. Flailing like a Mankey, or any of the berserkers I had fought alongside so long ago. An undignified style, her parents had told her, not one fit for the heiress of the Driftveil fortune. But she tried anyway, until she tired and her jaws grew sore.

Then she came again with her fists, hammering and punching as hard as she was able, like the Sawk had so long ago. She tried. She tried for some time, racking her brain for options, pounding away at blue-gray stone. But it was not enough.

"I don't know." Roseanne sighed slowly. Then the floodgates opened, and words spilled from her lips like water. "I don't know enough yet, I don't know if I can. I don't know how to fight. I don't know how to fight like a Mawile, I don't know if Mawiles fight at all. I don't even know where to start!" She kicked a stick on the ground as she looked up at me again. "Teach me something you've seen!"

"I have never seen a Mawile fight." I rumble. "There is nothing I can show you."

"But maybe, by putting together different fighting styles from Pokémon that are *like* Mawiles, I can figure out how I'm supposed to fight after all!" She looked up at me with those great round eyes again, like two great moons, glistening in the sunlight. "Please?"

"I fought alongside a group of Bisharp once." Now it was my turn to sigh. I could not say no. At least they were steel types. Maybe - just maybe - it would be close. "Before every battle, they would sit under a tree like this and dance." The memory was clear in my mind. Even if it was not a move I could ever learn, perhaps Roseanne could. "If they danced past every falling leaf, their blades would emerge sharper." I stared down at her. "Stronger."

"Like - a battle dance?"

"Yes."

"Okay... Okay! I can do that!" She smiled. It was a toothy grin, full of joy and pride, beaming in the midday sun. She ran to the tree as she found her footing. Breathed. And then slowly, she began. It was a twirling dance, her eyes closed, mouth drawn into a thin line. Around her the leaves fluttered, descending like so many golden feathers. And through them she danced. Twirling, stepping, dancing through the leaf-fall. How did she know the steps? How could she see the leaves? There are some questions that we may never answer. There are some questions even she does not know. She slips into a trance, swaying and weaving under the autumn cascade. I dare not speak. I dare not move. I only watch, stunned, as she dances with swords, as she weaves through the falling leaves. But all good things must come to an end. I watch as a leaf changes, buffeted by an invisible breeze. It lands on her nose. She stumbles. Falls to her knees. I feel my hands reach out as the contract spurs them forward. I force them to remain still as my heart screams in protest. Instead, I merely speak.

"Again." I cannot smile. But I try to impart the feeling in my speech. "You almost had it. Try again." Could she hear it? Could she see it? She rose, staring, smiling up at me as she nodded. She posed. Breathed. And started again. She twirls. She dances. I merely watch as her teeth grow longer, sharper, spittle shining, dripping from every tooth. But it was not yet perfect. I see the lump in the dirt before she does, see her feet about to trip. But I do not move. I cannot.

And so again she fell, crying out in shock and pain. Again every fibre of my being cried out as I watched, forcing myself into inaction. Again Roseanne rose back to her feet. But this time, there

was something different, Something was not quite as it had been before. She beckoned me over, a curious smile on her face.

“Jeri! Jeri!” She switched between the two names flawlessly, trying to decide which fit better in her tiny mouth. “I think I found something.”

I saw it plainly now. No mere lump. A tiny corner, buried haphazardly under a pile of leaves, wooden spars stretching into the dirt.

“What *is* it?” She asked.

“I do not know.” I answer.

And so we dig, moving aside loose dirt and leaves. Somebody had wanted this to stay hidden. But they had failed. We stood in front of a tiny door, barely tall enough to fit Roseanne, surrounded by an ominous purple glow. But that was it. A door. On either side there was now nothing but air.

“Odd.”

“I wonder if there’s any...” Roseanne’s hand crept towards the knob. Slowly.

“Do not open it.” I rumble, stopping her in her tracks. “We should forget this.”

“Why?” She looks back up to me, a half-smile on her face. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

I could think of many things. Explosives. Portals. Psychic blasts. But before I could mention a single threat, she had already swung the door wide. “Jeri!” She chirped. “There’s a tiny room in here! It smells like... Chesto berries! And dirty laundry!” She sneezed, rubbed her nose. “There are a bunch of posters here, a tiny desk, and a TON of empty Chesto juice boxes. I’m gonna look in the desk!”

In some ways, she is just like he was. Naive to the point of foolishness. A dreamer, ambitious. An incorrigibly poor fighter. And as curious as a Rattata in Nimbasa. Yes, in some ways, she was the exact same.

"I found a clipboard! It says the next round's gonna be a fight!" Her voice chirps from the yawning doorway, bringing me back to earth. It echoes in the air, sings, dances on the wind. "Says we're going up against Team Hokum. Who are they? I've never heard of them."

"A fight?"

"Yeah!" She poked her head back out of the door. "It says that the next round will be two-on-two duels on the sky isles! What's a sky isle?"

The sky isles did not matter. Nothing mattered. Except for the fight to come.

"Come." I said, trying to keep the quaver out of my voice. "Come. There is still much training to do."

A fight already?

Visions of the war swarm me unbidden. Horrors of battle. Things that I could not allow. Things that I could not let happen again. Faces burned into my memory. Fire licking at my armour. Blood soaking into my hands. Faces. Screaming names. Numbers. Names. Fire. Name. Blood. Name. Broken. Name.

Domino. Domino. Domino.

She was still not ready.

HUX

I found meself wanderin' through the camp in a way Bell would prolly absolutely *hate*.

We have to keep a low profile, Huxxy. She had said that, not too long ago,

Ah, but was that for her as well, or just you? She's ashamed of you. Doesn' wanna be seen 'round you. She's always the one on the stage. She's always the one who gets the cheers. Don't we deserve ours as well?

There it was, that voice again. That shadow, chasin' me throughout me life. Did erryone have a voice like this in their heads? Did erryone have a shadow that spoke, a shadow that told them all the wrong things, whisperin' in their ear? And now without Bell, it felt so incredibly loud. It didn't whisper, it hammered in my ears, demandin' power. Control.

Uhh, erm. Lemme think. Always throws me off, just a bit, when that happens. Never really get used to it. Where was I?

Ah, yep, there I was, now sitting outside the med tent. Big red thing, shaped a bit like Dora's head, right next to the food tent for some reason. I mean, it *is* the same team handlin' both, but it's always felt a bit weird to me still. Not my problem, though. So I waited for news from Bell, standin' in the shadows, tryna look – well, tryna look like I wasn't there at all. Low profile.

Pokémon filed in and out, lit by the orange sun. Some had bandages, casts – there was this one dude, a Charmeleon, with just 'bout his *entire* body wrapped up. Looked like he'd been hangin' out with a Cofagrigus, yaknow? Gave me a nasty glare as he walked past, sort that'd make any other mons blood turn ta' ice. I didn't shiver, of course. Hux knew no fear! Except for, uh. You see. The problem was - the thing that did scare me? There was still no Bell, even as the sun started to dip lower n' redder in the sky. There were Sawks, Snubbulls - even a whole 'nother Meowscarada, but no Bell. Eventually one of those lil' cats came out, the blue Espurr this time, sleepy lookin feller.

"Ah!" He said in a startled sorta way, lookin' up at me n' blinkin' himself awake. "Huxtopher, right? Your partner –"

"Bell?"

“Yeah, Belladonna – she’s gonna be in awhile longer. Dora said something about ‘intravenous poison taking more work than inhaled’, or something like that. Can’t say I understand it myself.” He musta caught my eyes, because then he continued on. “Hey, relax big guy. She’ll be ok. Dora does good work. Why don’t you go for a walk or something, take your mind off it for a bit.”

Walk.

Just like Bell had said not to do.

Buuuuuuut.

That had been yesterday. Yesterday, I wasn’t supposed to walk. Today, Bell would need me to do other things! Walking and finding out more about the other teams was probably a good idea. Scouting! Gathering intelligence! Probably definitely a good idea.

Probably.

Arceus above, it was always so much easier when I could just ask her. She’d have known the right thing to do, I’m sure. She always knew the right thing to do! The right thing to do, the right things to say, But she was in there, and I was out here, and, well –

Anyway, I was walking around the camp again. Gathering intelligence, scouting, blah blah blah. Point was, I was far from the med tent. There was a small fire at the centre of town, a little bonfire of sorts, where the other Pokémon had gathered. They shared stories, talking and laughing, running from the smoke. It was... peaceful, to look at. N’ so walked towards it, lookin’ for a dawg to cook, or a marshmallow. Surely dinner would be soon, I figured. I was starvin’! Bell grumbled day in and day out about the food, but she’s used to fancier stuff. I think Gran’s cookin’ is pretty mint, if ya ask me. Figure that before we end this whole adventure, I’ll have to ask him fer a couple of the recipes he uses. There was a real good Combee honey and Cheri berry mix he had put together at lunch - delicious mix of spice n’ sweetness. I think even Bell would’ve enjoyed it. But Bell was in the med tent still, and I was out here, and -

Anyway, hunger on the mind, I didn’t end up watchin’ my step like I shoulda. So many small Pokémon around here, eh? It’s lucky I didn’t step on the Joltik.

Is it lucky? You are better than them. Stop hiding. These Pokémon should respect you. They should BOW before you. They should count themselves lucky to be in our presence. You should

rule over them. You should be their king, and instead, here ya are, goose-steppin' around peasants. Peasants.

The voice dripped with poison, like an Arbok's fang. It was louder than ever now, with Bell gone - he sounded like hammers in my ears, echoing around my brain. "Shut *up*, Hush!" I murmured. "Shut *up shut up shut up*."

Hahaha! You can't get rid of me, squirt. You can't keep me out forever. Don't you remember that day? Don't you remember?

Visions flash in the flames. A Hatterene - my mother - burns, fallen. And I am small again. Helpless. Naked. *Weak*. Smoke filled my lungs as I reached out, into the fire, swiping, clawing, burning, but I - I can't change a thing.

I'm part of you.

And just as suddenly as it began, it ends. Hush laughs as he vanishes into the smoke and shadows, and I pull my burning hand away from the flames, stumbling back, sucking on it to ease the pain, feelin' the ashes like firecrackers in my mouth.

"Oh, sorry, excuse me!" A small, portly Riolu ducked around one of me legs before walking haphazardly into the other, bringin' me right back down to earth. "Sorry, mijo! Got mixed up by your friend."

"My friend?" I asked, and I could feel my heart perk up. I think my ears did too. "D'you mean Bell? Is she outta the tent?"

"Ah, no, don't think so, at least." She fidgeted, stammered as she spoke. "I mean, he doesn't *sound* like a Bell, at least."

"Who are ya talkin' bout, then?"

"Hush, I think I heard you call him. Sounds a bit like you, but r-raspier?" Slowly, I lowered my burnt hand from my mouth. She *knew*. She knew she knew she knew she knew. "I - I'm sorry, I didn't mean to overhear your conversation!"

I could feel the colour drain right outta my cheeks as she spoke. She could *hear* him, the way he echoed in my head. She could just about *see* him, hanging in the air like a ghost. What would

Bell do? I asked myself, over and over again, frozen in shock. What would Bell do? What would she do? No, no, I remembered this. She had given a talk about it once, up in the cart, with a lil' flip-board and everythin'.

"Now, Huxley dear, if you're ever in some kind of trouble and your favourite Pokémon – that would be moi – isn't around to get you out, I need you to 'play DEaD'."

"Like – like a –"

"No, not like a Zigzagoon. You are more than such a base creature! No, you will follow the patented Belladonna method instead." And she flipped over to a new sheet of paper with a flourish, one that had three steps written on it in big, bold, red letters. "Observe!" She cried, gesturing. "Play DEaD!"

1: Deny everything.

2: EvAcuate the premises. (This means LEAVE, Hux!)

3: Disappear into shadows.

"Why's the A in evacuate so big?"

"So the acronym works, dear." She sighed, and put a hand on my shoulder, before looking me directly in the eyes. "Remember - *NOT* like a Zigzagoon!"

It was a flawless plan, a brilliant plan, a *Belladonna* plan. All I had to do was put it into action. I looked the Riolu dead in the eye! I fixed her with my most earnest, trustworthy, stare! And I stood tall, as I asked her -

"Hush? Who's Hush?"

"O-oh, I thought that was the name you had for, uh, you know," stuttered the Riolu. "The other you in your head."

I ran. What else could I do? Evacuatin' the premises was the next step, after all, and, well, I really *really* was not ready to talk to anyone about *that* yet. Almost anyone, at least. Behind me, a Mime Jr. had found the Riolu, and was pulling her back towards their tent. Good! Good.

Nobody would follow me. All I had to do was wait here, in the outskirts, in the woods. I could hide. I could -

Hiding again.

Have you ever stopped to consider how shameful it is? How shameful you are, how shameful your life is? Running, hiding, running, hiding, running, hiding. Over and over and over.

Things were never like this when I was in charge. People treated us with respect! They cowered before us. Trembled at our might. And nobody - nobody - told us what to do.

"Shut up."

Greheheheh, there it is. There's the fight creepin' back into ya. Good! I was worried that girl had taken it all. But it's always just right there, isn't it? Buried beneath the surface. You can run from me all you like. Hide, too. But I'll always be there with you. Always.

"Get out of my head!" A raging madman in the woods. That's all I was. My fists swung into shattered trees, my voice cried out like a Loudred at a funeral - anything, *anything* to remind me that I was in control, that I, me, Huxavier Aldous Wringlesley the Second, was the only voice in my head, the only one in control. To make myself believe the lie. "Please - leave me alone!"

Begging, now? Just when I had thought you had a backbone after all. You're even worse off than I had thought. Why, at this rate, we might have to do something about that so-called friend of yours.

So-called? So-called? That was a step too far. "Bell is *more* than my friend! She's more than you'll ever be, too!"

What is she then, pipsqueak? Come on, be honest with yourself. What is she?

"She's - she's - she's my partner!"

Ah, yes. Of course, squirt. That's how a partnership works, isn't it? You carry her as she hurls abuse and slander at your back. You fight for her as she gives you orders. She's not a partner. She's barely even your friend.

"IT'S NOT TRUE! SHE'S THE BEST PERSON I KNOW!" And I collapsed, chest heaving, fists pounding at the ground. "It's not true. It can't be. It isn't."

Greheheheh! But it is, and you know it. Here she comes now! Better pick yourself up, put yourself back together, or she'll leave you for somebody better. Maybe that Sawk back at camp. Or would it be someone back home? Kagi, maybe?

She wouldn't. She would never! She would never... right? Slowly, I picked myself up from the ground, brushed the dirt from my hair. I coulda swore I heard Hush's cackling laughter, fading away as a smaller figure made its way through the trees. A figure I knew all too well.

"Hux? Is that you -"

"Bell!" I said, crushing her into a hug. "You're ok!" Now, I thought, everything would be alright. Bell would be able to explain everything. Maybe she even had a Hush of her own!

"Yes, yes, I'm fine Huxie dearest, now put me down before you get me sent back to the med tent!" She squeaked, arms pushing against my chest.

I put her down slowly, gently. "Can we talk?"

"Of course." She sprang back onto her heels as she spoke, giving me a funny sort of look.

"What's on your mind, Hux? Find any new tidbits while I was, ah, indisposed?"

"No, it's – it's about me." I breathed, and continued. "Sometimes, there's a version of me – a voice in my head – that *isn't me*."

"An inner voice? Everyone has an inner voice, Hux, you oaf."

"Really?" Just as I spoke, though, the dinner bell chimed, a low, echoing, noise that rumbled through the camp.

"Look, we can talk more after dinner, ok?" Bell gave my arm a tug, pullin' me towards the food tent. "I'm starved. Let's eat first."

Everyone does have an inner voice, pipsqueak.

Yours is just the only one that hates you.

Dinner was a hearty potato, radish, and Shuca berry stew, served on a long table, made of the creaky kinda wood that Bell just *hated*. She didn't seem to be all too fond of the stew either - not that I could understand why. It was a simple thing, earthy and hearty, the slight bitterness of the radishes balanced with the salt of the Shuca berries. But Bell didn't eat. She was scowlin' away beside me, a stormy, scary kinda look plastered all over her face as she poked at her food with a fork. I gulped, quickly looked away, scanned the rest of the table instead. It felt so much smaller than it had that first night. How many Pokémon had we lost? They were just eating elsewhere, the Espurrs had said, but that somewhere else wasn't *here*. Were they even still at camp?

They're dead, you know. The voice in the shadows made me jump, pricked up the hair on my back. *If you don't smarten up, soon you will be too. Squirt.*

"Hush! Be quiet!" I replied under my breath, forcing myself to look away from the empty chairs. There were still plenty of Pokémon at the table – a Riolu chatted excitedly with a Larvesta even as their partners, a Scolipede and a soggy looking Mime Jr., gave each other death glares over their food. A Lopunny sat nearly alone, watching carefully as a nervous lookin' Raboot tried his best to make small conversation with an equally nervous lookin' Togepi. There was even a shiny Kirlia, a tiny blue thing, feeding a Meditite berries with her chopsticks. It was a sea of Pokémon, a whole bunch of em, right up to the judges at the head of the table. Maybe we'll be ok after all, I told myself. Maybe we'll be ok.

But a ringin' noise cut through me thoughts as Hoopa rattled a spoon in its glass, cacklin' quietly as it went.

"Thank you Hoopa!" Now the Zorua – Merriweather – got up and spoke. "I prefer not to use Hyper Voice indoors, it makes an awful sort of racket." She hopped up onto her stool proper now, perched where she could proly' get a good look at all of us. "Congratulations to all of you on making it out of round one!"

The room erupted with noise, Pokémon cheering, whooping, hugging their partners as they celebrated their success. Beside me, Bell remained quiet, taking a deep swig of tea. I searched through my head for the phrase she had used earlier – apple something.

“Heh. Apple cleaners, right Bell?” The words felt wrong as they left my mouth, but she gave me a rare smirk anyway.

“Close enough, Huxxy.”

What was it about her smile? There was a kind of magic to it, a charm greater than anything she used in our shows, the sort that warms you right up inside, sets Butterfree to dancin’ in your chest. I smiled back, gap-teeth and tusks and all, and then watched the celebrating Pokémon . There was only one other ‘mon who remained seated, fiddling with her drink – a small Mawile, who looked like she’d much rather be about anywhere else right now. She wore a black pantsuit, stained with grass and dirt. Where was her partner? Had they been lost to the swamps? I started to get up, go and comfort her, but Bell quickly pulled me back down, grabbing a pawful of my hair.

“Trust me.” She whispered. “Not her. She looks like an easy mark – but she really, really isn’t.”

But in time, the cheering died down, and Merri cleared her throat to speak again. “Round two will start tomorrow morning, so make sure you all get a full night’s rest! I hope you’re all ready for some more, ah, *direct* competition!” We’re proud of you all, and can’t wait to see what you do tomorrow!”

And with that, she sat back down, digging back into her bowl of berries and oats, to a chorus of hushed whispers and murmurs.

“What does she mean by direct competition, Bell?” I whispered, before glancing at her. She had gone as white as a sheet, and her claws dug into me slightly as she gripped my arm.

“I think it’s a fight, Hux.” Her voice shook a bit, just the slightest quaver. Of course she was worried! Bell had never been a fighter, would never be a fighter. No, that was my job.

“Aw, don’t worry Bell! We got this!” I shook her shoulder gently as I gestured out to the crowd of Pokémon .. “Look at these guys! They’ll be easy!”

“Of course *you’d* say that.” She pouted, but loosened up a bit all the same, leaning a bony shoulder into me. “You’ll be fine. I’m much more fragile!”

“Don’t worry, Bell.” I stared at the assembly of Pokémon before me, wondering which would be our opponent. “I’ll take care of you.”

It was a long night for me, n' it was some time before I could properly fall asleep, tossin' and turnin'. Of course, I had to wait for Bell to sleep first as well – din't wanna wake her up with ma snorin'. That's why I woke up late, I figure. Couldn't find Bell when I woke up, which was a bit worrying, but I figured she was at the food tent for brekkie. Bout' high time to head there meself, I figured.

But, as it turned out, I was late – as a pissy lookin' Zangoose was more than happy to tell me. 'Pparently the announcement would be startin' soon, and so I had to head to the usual meetin' spot, the ol' stump where they had always yelled out their instructions. I'd be fine. Not the first time I'd missed a meal. What's more important was that Bell would be there. Bell! I hadn't even told her good morning yet. Unacceptable! I guess I was really focused on getting there, because I wasn't really lookin' at where I was walkin'. Nearly stepped on that Mawile from last night, but a big blue hand reached out and stopped me in me tracks. There was a big blue Pokémon next to her, the owner of the hand, stony lookin' thing, and they both looked over at me with completely different looks on their faces.

"Hi!" Chirped the Mawile. She looked... Curious. Adventurous, like she was wantin' to take the world by storm, figure out everythin' there was to figure. "I didn't know there was a Grimmsnarl at camp!"

"Hm." The big blue Pokémon – a Golurk! That's what it was! – anyway, he had a much colder look to him as he looked me over, searchin' for weaknesses, sizin' me up. A fighter, then. Like me.

But.

Bell had told me not to get into any scraps here. To keep a low profile! So I talked to the girl. She seemed better for talkin' anyway. "Just one. Me!" I leaned in, moving the Golurk's hand aside, and gave her a smile, but she seemed more interested in the rest of, well, my me.

"Is it really all hair?" She asked, reaching out a hand for my arm. "O-oh, sorry. Can I feel it?"

"Yeah?" This was new. It was an odd feelin', the Mawile's hand runnin through the hair that made up my arm, but it wasn't all bad. Most of the time when people met me they ran, or they tried to fight. "Greheheheh! Don't get too jealous!"

“Woah. That’s so cool! I wish my hair could do that.” She prattled on. I could only stare at the pair of gaping jaws on the back of her head. Were they tucked so far that she couldn’t see them? “What’s your name?” She asked, snapping me back to the conversation.

“Uhhh, James. From team, uh, team Faux.”

“Why would you name your team ‘team Faux’?”

“I dunno. You’d have to ask Bell.”

“Ok! I’ll keep an eye out.” The Mawile took a step back, and waved as she walked off, Golurk trailing behind her. “Thanks!”

But as they were walkin’ off, I saw the Mawile doin’ a weird sorta dance. Showin’ off for her bodyguard, or summat I figure. A dance of swords and blades, a dance of duels yet to be won and battles yet to be fought. It was one I had seen before – a ritual the Pawniard and Bisharp would do, a battle dance to sharpen their blades and bare their fangs.

Bell was right. I thought. That Mawile is a tricky mark.

Bell herself wasn’t far from where she had been last time, sitting on the edge of the clearing. “Hux! You forgot your disguise!” She hissed, and then sighed. “Ah well. I suppose it doesn’t matter much after yesterday’s dinner.”

“Oh.” Disguises! The one thing I had forgotten. “My bad, Bell!”

“What am I going to *do* with you, Hux?” She said, taking off her own disguise. I had no answer, and so we sat in silence for a bit. But I did have questions. Truths to share. Things that were still heavy on my chest. So eventually, I broke it. I break most things anyway.

“Say, uh, Bell.” I said. “You got a minute?”

“Not right now, Hux. Announcement’s starting.” She pointed at the Zorua as she spoke, who was just about to take the stage, Hoopa behind her as always. “After, ok?”

Merri hopped up onto the stump just like she had last time, and started yellin’ in the exact same way. “GOOD MORNING HYPERSPACE!”

The cheer she got back was somewhat more muted this time, full of nerves and fear. She plunged forwards anyway, though. “As some of you may have guessed, we’ll be having teams square up with each other in two on two battles – with a twist! But don’t take my word for it – come with me, and I’ll show you!”

And there it was behind her, a gigantic golden ring, a light summer’s breeze. She gave a soft sort of smile as she walked through, tail wagging behind her, and slowly, the rest of the Pokémon followed.

“Bell –“ I said, and she slowly turned around. The ring lit her from behind, golden light flowing through her green fur, and suddenly I couldn’t find the words to say.

“After the round, ok Huxxy?” She walked back to me now, taking one of me great hairy hands in her paws. “We’ll make this one quick. Knock it out of the park, eh?”

“...Yeah.” I sighed, and walked through the portal.

ROSIE

Have you ever gone outside, right after a thunderstorm, and you can still kinda feel the lightning in the air? The pungent, burning smell of ozone wafting into your nose, the latent power of the heavens raising goosebumps on your skin.

But here there was no rain-smell, none of the puddles and humidity that would typically come with a summer storm. No, the vista on the far side of the portal had clear blue skies, the light from the setting sun catching the leaves of the great tree, giving the whole thing an ethereal golden glow. I laughed from my perch on Jeri's shoulder as I gazed at it. This was what adventure was supposed to be all about! No more stuffy, toxic swamps, no more roving Slowbro with dumb accents, but floating islands and magnificent treasures! There was an absolutely *colossal* gem wrapped in the roots of the towering arbor, a great big white thing, one that shone brilliantly in all the colours of the rainbow. Small arcs of multicoloured energy occasionally shot out, tiny bolts of lightning, dancing amongst the roots.

Mom had brought me a crystal like this once, although nowhere near as big. "When you're bigger, you'll learn how to use it." She had said, snatching it away from my outstretched hand. "But not yet. These are very rare, Roseanne – we only find one every couple years." I had asked what it was, what it could do, and she had laughed, saying she would tell me later. I found out on my own soon enough, digging through Dad's books.

"...Infinity energy." I breathed, transfixed by the shimmering gemstone. This one was far larger than anything that had ever come out of the Driftveil mines, so big it made Jer look like a regular Pokémon beside it.

"Correct!" Chirped Merri, leaping to stand on the tree's roots. Her voice boomed out as she spoke, using some move or another (hyper voice, I think) to yell to us across the island. "Welcome to the Infinity Sky Isles! Like the name says, these isles are abso-posi-tilutely drenched with Infinity energy - particularly, these crystals! Scattered across the Isles are smaller crystals - a bit like what you may know as Mega Stones, Z-Crystals, Wishing Stars, and Terastal Orbs; we call these Energy Gems. Whoever smashes them briefly gains great power - regardless of species."

"Just don't smash more than one." Gran spoke quietly, but with an aura that commanded your attention. The crowd crushed in, making sure none of his words were lost on the wind as he continued. "We don't know for sure what will happen. But one stone is already plenty of power. Two is too much for any one Pokémon . We can't fix ya up from ev'rythin."

"There are *some* injuries you won't have to worry about, though! Right, Dora?"

"Web." The Ariados propped herself up against the tree, legs shaking. "Under islands. Safe... if fall."

"That being said, if you do fall off, you will be disqualified!" Merri chirped, before clearing her throat as an Espurr handed her a list. "Now, onto the matchups!"

Slowly, teams were paired off, sunny day shining through onto the pairs as they were announced. The shinies were paired off first, their partners trailing behind them. Next was the Tropius and her perpetually dour steed, fighting against two of the roundest Pokémon I had ever seen. Then came the inventors, a Pancham and a Jolteon, matched against a Growlithe and a Cubone that, frankly, looked like she would've rather been anywhere else. And then, finally, it was time.

"Team Rose Golden!" The heavens opened, bright sunlight shining down onto the two of us. "You'll be paired off against... Team Hokum!"

It took me a second to find the rival team. It wasn't one I'd heard of before - but it was one I'd seen. So-called 'James' grinned even as I glared at him. "Team Hokum? You said you were Team Faux!"

"Er, um. I'm sure it's just a filing mishap, dear." The Meowscarada by the Grimmsnarl's side shook her head a bit, trying to un-fluster herself as she spoke. "We're team Faux, but we *will* most certainly be your opponents here, nyohohoho! Isn't that right, Hux?"

"What? Uh, yeah!" The Grimmsnarl blinked - not a James after all, I noted - before staring right at Jer as he flexed his muscles. "Of course, greheheheh! You're gonna get knocked outta the park!"

Ugh. Showboats. I patted Jeri's armor lightly, rapping out an upbeat rhythm. "I don't know what you were worried about, Jer!" I chirped, trying my best to cheer the giant Pokémon up. "We can definitely take those two!"

"Hrmm." When you sat on his shoulders, it was easy to *feel* Jer think – he sort of rumbled, shook a bit, almost shuddered. "I am less sure."

"Don't worry! We'll be fine!"

"Again, you're to remain on your islands at all times." It was the Green Espurr speaking this time, her voice unmistakable, seemingly connected directly to each of our minds. "Leaving for any reason once the matches have started is cause for disqualification. You can win a match through knocking your opponent off the islands - technical knockout, regular knockouts, or surrender."

For the first time, I really looked at the other islands - the ones we'd be fighting on. They were smaller, mostly huge lumps of solid stone, with a few patches of wild grasses scattered on top like hair on a balding Mankey. Roots from the central tree held them fast, and rope bridges creaked in the air between them. Every so often the lip of a cave or crevice would jut forth, like stubby fingers coming from a great hand. A flat battleground for the larger Pokémon, and a Rattata's nest of tunnels and caverns for the rest of us. An adventure waiting to happen!

"Please make your way to your islands now, and get ready to *RRRRRRRRUUUUUUUUMBLE!!!!*" Merri was practically jumping up and down with excitement now, and slowly, the crowd dispersed, walking gingerly across the rope bridges. Team Hokum didn't take their eyes off of us as they left, the Meowscarada pulling the Grimmsnarl down to better whisper into his ear. But Jer didn't move. It wasn't hard to figure out why – the bridge barely looked like it could hold the Grimmsnarl's weight. It creaked and swayed as they crossed, clutching the ropes for dear life.

"Hmm." I thought for a brief moment, before calling over to Merri and Hoopa. "Can you portal us across? I don't think Jer can fit on the –"

"Wait." He cut in suddenly, rumbling and shaking even more than usual. "Hold on."

“Hold on?” I asked, confused. “To wha - woah!” I yelped, grabbing tightly onto the great blue obelisk of a shoulder spike as he took off, rocket thrusters sending us spiraling into the air. “You can *fly*?”

“Yes.”

And so we flew throughout the clear sky, rocketing through the great tree’s branches, careening off into an endless expanse of blue. From such a height you could see everything – the islands, great hunks of stone held fast by the roots of the great tree; the bridges, built of root, rope, and rickety wooden planks; and the tree itself, a great and gnarled thing, still crackling with limitless power. Light from the crystal nestled in its roots reflected into the air, throwing up the faintest glimmer of a rainbow that Jer seemed to want to fly straight into.

We shot past Ms. Mandarin as we flew, onwards and upwards, into the heavens. She chuckled as we flew past, nodding in our direction, even as the Zangoose – Zephyr, I reminded myself – scowled. But soon they were gone too, and it was just me and my partner, alone in a sea of blue.

“Roseanne.” He said, rumbling in his usual way.

“Yeah?”

“This fight is not for you.” Now he started to angle downwards, aiming for our island, and the rushing wind began to steal the words from my mouth.

“What?” I finally managed to shout. Was it that I hadn’t heard from the wind, or that I hadn’t *wanted* to hear? I’m still not sure. “Whaaaaat?”

“You are not ready.”

“Wait – I *am* ready! I’ve got new moves! You said I was doing well!” I crawled up the giant’s shoulder, closer to his head. “I can fight! Let me fight!”

“Not today.” He didn’t even look at me as he spoke, eyes transfixed on the ground below. “You hide. Stay safe.”

“But –“

"No." And now he looked up at me as we landed, orange fire burning in his eyes. He spoke with steel in his voice, a voice that made it clear there were no other options. A voice like dad's.

I shuddered as we landed, Jericho's feet turning back into, well, *feet* beneath him. Team Hokum stood across from us, the big Grimmsnarl clearly excited, bouncing on the balls of his feet as he stared at us.

"Hi!" Slowly, I climbed down from Jer's shoulder. Sucked in air, shakily. I could do this, whether he believed in me or not! I had to prove him wrong. I had to prove it to myself. "What are your names?"

"You can call me Bell." The Meowscarada sighed, jabbing a finger towards the Grimmsnarl next to her. "This is Hux."

"I'm Rosie! This is Jer." I breathed, trying not to let the tremor in my voice show.

"Jericho." He spoke, but did not move - flaming eyes fixed on the two Pokémon. My heart beat like a cannon in my chest as I watched those flaming eyes. What thoughts raced through those three minds? Did they sweat like I did? Did they have their own doubts, their own fears?

Finally, the countdown began, Merriweather yelling out from the main island.

"THREE!"

Jericho pushed me back behind him as he stepped forwards, Hux doing the same on the other side. I locked eyes with Bell for a brief moment. She looked nervous, almost afraid - but soon it passed, and a mask of steely calm rested on her face as she walked after the larger Pokémon.

"TWO!"

Jericho and the two Pokémon continued to stride towards each other, but only now was it clear how much bigger Jer was than either of them. Next to the Grimmsnarl, Bell looked tiny – and Jeri towered over him, standing at nearly double his height. Bell looked like she wanted to say something, to cry out instructions to her partner. I – I didn't know what I wanted to do.

"ONE!"

Finally, I remembered – my new move! I breathed in, exhaled, and shakily got to work, arms and legs moving before I could even think to remember the actions. The steps came naturally now, pacing in rhythm with my throbbing heart, twirling, goose-stepping, breathing. I could feel the power seeping into me. I could help! I could even see team Hokum almost flinching away from me as I danced, intimidated, afraid. They knew what I could do! They could see it! I could fight!

“F-FIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIGHT!!!”

And then the fight started, and I realized how wrong I was. This was nothing like the training dummies, or the fencing sessions at home, or even the fight with the Don himself. This was something else entirely, something far bloodier, far more vicious, far fiercer than anything I had seen before. Bell moved first, darting over Hux’s shoulders to land a nasty sucker punch to Jericho’s head, fur growing shades darker as she moved. It landed with a sickening crunch, and she pulled her hand back even as Jericho stumbled back, great footfalls kicking plumes of dust and sand into the air. Then it was the Grimmsnarl’s turn, and he rushed the floundering golem, and I cried out as I watched, reaching a helpless hand to stop it all. But it was Jericho’s fist that shot out, catching Bell as she flew towards him again, hitting clean with a gut-wrenching thud, and she was launched back even as Hux cried out for his partner.

Dust filled my nostrils, and I coughed, running, tripping, clambering over the rocks, hunting for anything that could possibly help. But what could I do? Behind me the sounds of battle rang out like cathedral bells, punch after punch, footfall after footfall. I could feel their shadows, cool on my back, feel the island shake beneath my feet as I ran, quaking with every punch like it was about to fall out of the sky, a single gem falling from the crown of islands. A gem! That’s what I needed, an infinity gem, a jewel of pure power. I breathed in the dust as I ran through the nooks and crannies of the island, smelled the blood like iron in the air. It smelled of burning, of latent energy beyond comprehension, but where was it? I nearly fell as I rounded a stony pillar, skinned my knees, bit back a whimper as my eyes scanned for a spark of light, a glimmer of hope. I had heard the stories, I had felt the power echo. One gem - one stone, and a new legend would be written here, today! One gem, and Jericho would be able to clean up both of Team Hokum without breaking a sweat. And then I saw it.

There was a gem, beautiful, shining in the midday sun, about the size of my head. I could feel the power in it from where I stood, raw power, raw energy, pulses, waves. I could feel it in my teeth, rattling in my gums. It was so much more potent than anything out of the mines! I could

feel its power, pushing me away – I could barely wrap my jaws around it, let alone pick it up, and so I kicked it, just gently enough to set it rolling towards Jer.

“Jer! The stone!” I cried, chasing after it as I went. “The gem! Crack it!”

And he blinked through space in an instant, leaving Hux grasping at empty air behind him. Three flaming eyes glanced at me, inner fire burning hot within, and he nodded in approval as he crushed the stone in a colossal hand.

I remember a blinding flash of multicoloured light, and then a crackling noise as crystals slowly grew to cover Jer's body. Chrome-white and steely grey, they shone, sparkling, in the evening sun, and the light they gave off spoke of violence and steel. Even his plume hardened, turning into a towering peak, a crystalline crown.

And then the fight began again in earnest, Jer flying through the air, tackling the Grimmsnarl, Hux's fists pounding away fruitlessly at Jer's crystalline body. I rushed in to help him, felt the heat coming off his engines, felt my teeth grow sharp and hungry as I dashed in. The Grimmsnarl was gigantic - nearly as tall as Jer, with hairy muscles that seemed frighteningly alive, but this was my moment, my chance! I wound up, and sank my jaws into his calf, and he groaned in pain even as Jer wrestled him into the dirt. I felt my teeth catch on the thick hair. It rippled between my jaws like it was flesh and bone, a mass of eels, a squirming cluster of tentacles, and I winced as I bit down, tearing and cutting what hair I could, feeling it go limp between my teeth – and above me, the Grimmsnarl crashed down to his knees. Jer glanced down, and he saw me! He saw me, and it was almost a flicker of pride that went through his eyes. He was proud of me!

And then his arm shot down, an explosion of greenery blasting a crater into it as it protected me from the attack.

“Nyohoho! Aww, how cute.” Bell's voice seemed to echo through the dust, mocking, laughing. Now I could see her, a stupid smirk plastered onto her furry face – and from behind her back, she produced not one, but two of the iridescent gems. Power radiated from her in waves as she spoke, summer soft, yet with a tongue of ice. “Look at you, protecting the girl. But I have to take care of my partner too.” And as she crushed a gem in her fist, it seemed to spread, crystalline armor slowly growing, encasing that which had once been fur. A shining crown of flowers, roses,

their thorns twisted and sharp, grew over her head, a halo of reds and greens, complimenting her jacket almost perfectly.

Terastalization. Just like Jericho had done. Just like any Pokémon could do here. She smiled as I stared, giggled under her breath. Almost casually she lobbed the other to her partner, with just a touch of showman's flair, spinning as it arced through the air. How beautiful it was! Rainbows shone, glimmering in the sky as it flew, an iridescent arc. And while it flew, while we watched it fly, a cavalcade of explosions erupted at our feet, brilliant bursts of green and pink, petals and leaves in a bloom of crystalline devastation. I felt the heat, the sheer *power* of the blast as it bit at my skin, smell roses burning in the crisp air, and my head throbbed as I struggled to keep my eyes open, open just enough to see Bell celebrating through the smoke.

"Ahaha, it worked! It worked! Watch the hands, not the pretty gem! I can't believe - I mean, o-of course it worked, nyohoho! The ol' razzle dazzle never fails!" She puffed out her chest with pride as she stood, silhouetted by smoke and dust, gold fixings on her jacket still gleaming. "And with the powers of *two* gems, we too will never - CRUSH THE STONE HUX WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?"

"Bell, I - I don't think this is a good idea." The Grimmsnarl stood hunched, staring at the stone like it was possessed. "I don't trust -"

"Hux, we need these powers to win!" Bell cut in, desperation tinging her voice. Slowly, I rose to my feet as she spoke. Arceus above, it all hurt! Everything hurt! But she didn't notice. She just kept going. "You want to win, don't you? You want to see the human world, just like me! Right?"

The human world. That's what she wanted - what we all wanted, I guess. A whole new world to explore, where no Pokémon had ever been. But as I watched the Grimmsnarl, he seemed less sure. Like he was hesitating, like there was something holding him back. He wanted to throw the crystal away. He wanted to throw it off the island, to pretend as if he had never seen it, as if he had never even known it existed. But for the Meowscarada, he hesitated.

And then Jericho rushed Bell, grabbing her crystalline head and crunching it into the dirt and sand, and the look in Hux's eyes changed - like the decision had been made for him. They grew black with rage, twisted and dark as his brow furrowed and creased. His muscles rippled as he snatched the gem from the ground, and it shattered to his touch, crystal shards flying throughout the air.

It was as if time paused for but a moment, glimmers of light suspended in the air. I could feel Jer's presence behind me, see Bell in the corner of my eye, prone on the ground.

And he grew. First it was the hair, growing and growing, wrapping him in armour, healing his wounds and bolstering his strength. And then it kept going, as he let out a primal cry, a snapping, guttural sound, voices layered on top of one another in a devil's cocktail of fear, agony, and triumph. And still he grew, until he towered over the very island itself, strands of hair crunching through the rocks and dirt. He laughed as he rose to his full height, hair and muscle becoming as one, rippling past two glowing red eyes, and a golden smile tore across his mouth like a great wound, a glowing, mocking, sort of smile. The smile of somebody that had *won*.

"I'LL CRUSH YOU ALL!" He cried, spit flying from his slaver's maw. It was a raspy cry, as if it were a voice that had not been used for years upon years, a voice that was beginning to find itself again. "ALL! I'LL CRUSH YOU ALL!"

"Roseanne." I heard Jer's voice behind me, heard the great engines hum to life. "Run." But still my legs held fast, still my eyes watched, transfixed, as the Grimmsnarl grew and grew. "RUN!"

"No! I can help!" I shouted up to him, and for the first time, I saw through the fire in his eyes. I saw a great and powerful sadness, a gulf of emotion - as if he were torn, as if there were something holding him back, and my voice broke at the sight. "Please. Y-you can't do this alone."

"Yet the contract demands it." If he could smile, he would've, I think. To lessen the blow, perhaps. A pained smile, the sort you give somebody when you break them bad news. Because then I realized for the first time that we weren't an adventuring team. We weren't partners - we never had been. He was a Golurk, bought and paid for in blood and gold. I was his charge. We were nothing more than that. We never would be.

And so I ran. Behind me, I heard the sounds of battle, the sounds of war. I heard each thunderous footfall even as I coughed and choked on their dust, I smelled the acrid burning from Jeri's engines, but I did not see. I couldn't. I couldn't bear to look. All I could do was run, because I wasn't strong enough, because I *still* wasn't ready, because maybe I never would be. There was too much to learn, too much ground to cover, too many skills and moves and abilities. These Pokémon had been fighting their entire lives - fighting for food, fighting to live, fighting to *survive*. Who was I to stand amongst them?

Jeri – Jer had said that one day I would be ready. He had said that until then, we would stand as partners. But what kind of partnership was this, where one fought and the other ran? What kind of partnership was this, where one had to constantly save the other? Where one partner's loyalty was bought, not earned? All that bound us together was a fistful of gold and a scrap of paper. He wasn't a partner at all, he was, he was - was an employee, a butler, a golem, a *robot*.

So why couldn't I just leave him? Why couldn't I just leave? Why couldn't I run? I - I don't know. I just couldn't leave him to fight both of them. That wasn't how the stories went. There were no adventures where the team disbanded halfway through, where the team gave up and ran away. But we weren't a team! We weren't partners! We weren't even friends!

But I *wanted* to be. I remember looking around the camp while Grand Aid repaired his poisoned body. I remember seeing the other pairs, the other partners - I remember a Sentret showing a Togepi flash cards, beaming with pride for every 'mon he named correctly. I remember watching a Joltik act as a Gardevoir's eyes, guiding him throughout the camp. I even remember seeing a Zorua and a Mimmikyu slinking off into the underbrush not far from our tent, definitely not to make out. On second thought, those two were probably more than friends. But every other team we saw, every other team at camp - it was as if they had known each other for years, and stayed friends through it all. What would it be *like* to have a friend like that? Someone you could trust? Someone to listen to you, to share your problems with, to laugh with and cry with and just *be* with?

I didn't know. But I wanted to. More than anything, I think. But I couldn't. How could I stand with them? Even now the shadows of battle loomed over me, the howls and thunder echoing in my ears. I couldn't stand with Jer. I couldn't be like him. It wasn't possible. It just wasn't.

Unless.

Unless I could find one last crystal. One last crystal to join the fight. Power. Unlimited, unending power. Enough power to be respected, to be seen, to walk and fight with them. Enough power to make him see me as a partner, as his equal, as more than just a kid. And I ran. I ran as fast as my legs could carry me, vaulting across the battlefield, hunting again, eyes peeled for any gleam of light, for even the smallest shard of infinity energy.

"Hey!" But it was Bell I saw in the corner of my eye, picking herself back up from the ground. Her crystalline body was chipped and scratched, and her crown was slung low over her eyes, but

inside there was a raw, primal sort of panic. Fear, anger, and pain, all mixed together into a razor's edge. "What did you do to Hux, you rat!"

And she was after me like a Zubat out of hell, racing, crystalline legs pumping as she sprinted. I felt the wind in my hair, felt my legs burn as I ran, heard her footsteps getting closer and closer. My legs ached as they juke, first left, then right, then I rolled, ducking into a cave, no, not even a cave, little more than a rocky overhang, full of rocky outcrops like teeth – but no crystals. I ducked behind one as her shadow fell over the field, dark and imposing. The sounds of battle echoed around me - explosions, cannon fire, echoing, shaking the entire cave. Had it always been so loud? Had it always been so close? I hugged my knees close to my chest, whispered the ghost of a lullaby that I had known once before, and suddenly I was so small again, so, so small, hiding in the covers of my bed. Suddenly they were fighting again, and I was helpless again, letting the waves of sound crash around me, and it was all so incredibly loud, and it was all so incredibly raw, and it wouldn't stop, I couldn't make it stop, all I could hear was yelling and crashing and fighting and footsteps and -

Footsteps. Furred paws on gravel and dirt. "Nyohohoho... Where could you be hiding?" Her voice was cloying, sweet as an autumn breeze, yet with all the ice of winter behind it. I held my knees tight to my chest, scarcely daring to breathe as the Meowscarada stalked through the rocky field. "Come on out, dear."

Was that... Pollen? I sniffed, itched my nose. I could just about see it in the air now, lime-green spores, drifting, wafting through the air, shaking with every thunderous footfall, every heavy punch. I felt it coming before it happened. A sneeze, a burst of sound and force, a small explosion of noise. The canary in the coal mine, the betrayer, the traitor in our midst. I couldn't stop it, couldn't run.

And so I sneezed, and the rock exploded to pieces behind me, petals and green crystals scattering in the dusty wind. "Found you, pet." Arceus above that voice! It was sweet like honey, a devilish charm that held me in place, just long enough for her to wind up her next attack. I could see it coming, and that was the pain in it, that was what hurt, that I could see her muscles winding up, her leg cocking back, but I couldn't bring my body to move, to duck out of the way. Finally, the Meowscarada's crystalline legs slammed into my midriff, and I spat out a bloody wad as I flew towards the cliff edge. Towards the cliff edge, and failure. Towards the edge, and the end of the tournament.

No!

Not today.

I reached for purchase, for a hand-hold, for a jaw-hold, for *anything* - and suddenly, my teeth were scraping dirt and stone, and it was as if I were plucked from the air by a psychic force, wrenched to a stop. It hurt. Everything hurt. I could feel the sharpened teeth digging into the cliff face, feel my jaws threaten to come away from my head. But at the same time - I could *see*. I could see it all. A whole world beneath me, waiting to be explored. A thin, silvery web, dewdrops catching the light just right underneath me. Fights on other islands - clouds of dust, rays of radiant light. And there it was, shining in all its glory, embedded into the cliff face. The final gem. My salvation - just out of reach. Just out of reach for any normal Mawile.

Haha, I can hear my mother's voice even now. "Roseanne Elizabeth Angelica Consetta Driftveil, you are *no* normal Mawile." She would say. "You are destined to do great things. You're going to change the world."

Once, I had thought that she was wrong.

But now? I'm less sure. I reached out with a power I still hardly knew. Something ancient, something unknowable. It would move. Because it had no other choice.

And it did. Barely, at first, and then the crystal wiggled more, faster, slowly dislodging itself from its stony prison. Then, finally, it broke free, glimmering, shining as it floated in the clear sky, and I pulled, and it came to me. Slowly at first, and then faster, and faster. It was so close. I could feel the power contained within, I could taste it!

"NO!" And then Jericho appeared, a new portal tearing a rift through space. In the distance the giant Grimmsnarl growled, swiped and snatched at air, chasing a Golurk that was no longer there. Instead, a great blue hand snatched the crystal from my grasp, and three flaming eyes focused on me anew. "I am sorry." He rumbled, and there was genuine sadness in his voice, sadness and fear and guilt. "But it is not yet your time." And he crushed the crystal even as he watched me fall.

And then there was only light.

BELLADONNA

The first thing I remember? Heat. A dry heat, thankfully, like the sort that washes off the city in the day. Heat and - light, light like the sun itself had descended onto earth. It really was just like Livega, just for a moment. Just like how it had used to be.

The Golurk – Jericho – had gotten another stone. The fool! Even now cracks spread across his crystalline body, steely crystal shell glowing red-hot as forbidden energies danced and arced across it, spitting and sputtering. Even Hux took a step back as he watched, arcane power drawing licks of rainbow lightning across the steely colossus' body. He fell to his knees, a grey sphere building around him - and then it all fell away, and a new Pokémon stood where he once had. It was majestic, jetfires roaring to life, wings unfurling around his crystalline body. Where he had once burned orange he now burned red, spiny shoulder pauldrons rolling down his sides, crackling and bristling with power. And when his great wings snapped to attention, he looked up once more, eyes burning with fire, sparking with rage.

"Hux!" I cried, but Hux didn't move, just watched, standing stock-still, as the twice-changed Pokémon fought his way upright, engines pulsing with unimaginable force. He was standing now, barely, bent over double, thrusters working overtime as they struggled for control. "What are you *waiting* for, Hux? Hit hi –"

Jericho may have been bent over double, but Arceus above he could *move*, jet-fires roaring to full strength as he charged, like a Noibat out of hell, as if he were trying to punch *through* Hux, and Hux fell back to his gigantic knees.

"There's no more Hux, Belladonna. It's only Hush now." He said, smiling even as he swatted at the flying rocket of a Pokémon. It was as if the Golurk - burning with all the energy of a newborn sun - didn't matter. He only spoke to me. "You never listened, did you?" Hush – no, it was still Hux. It was Hux's voice, Hux's body, Hux's soul. They couldn't take him away from me. They couldn't! He glowered down at me even as Jericho bombarded him with punches, ripped out swathes of hair. "You never listened, and now you never can. He's not *here* anymore." And he reached up a great hand and swatted the flying Pokémon out of the sky, before looming down to look me in the eye. "Hux fell down the well. He won't be getting out for a long, long time."

"What did you do to him?" I stepped back, reflexively reaching for another flower as he laughed.

"I won." And a great yellow smile slowly spread across his face. "You helped."

"I would never!"

"All the times you couldn't talk. All the secrets that you kept. The insults. The work." And now the smile turned into a sneer, awfully wide and terribly sincere. "It was easy. You made it easy."

"I - I - I don't care what I did or didn't do!" I felt the pang of guilt even as I said it. I knew it was all true. I didn't know what had happened. Maybe I never would. But I couldn't fix it like this.

"Whatever it was, I'm sorry! Just - give me my friend back!" And a look of pain shot across his giant face, for but a moment. "Please."

I can't remember the last time I had opened my heart like that. I blinked away tears as I stared up at him, a giant shadow silhouetted in the sky. I don't think I could've done it with anyone else. But as I stared up at him, I realized that in that moment, that was all I truly wanted.

My friend.

Hux.

Was he still in there, at that moment? Was he listening to me, trying, crying to break free? I think so. I really do. Because as soon as I spoke he moved like a 'mon possessed, twitching, shaking, falling to his knees - and I finally saw what was hidden behind him.

A great star in the sky, a burning light. It glowed like a second sun, shrouding the clouds in orange light like the fires of heaven itself. It was beautiful in its destructive power, glorious in its majesty, like the jewel of an emperor's crown, glimmering in the sky. Through the light I could just barely see the Golurk, cracking armor crumbling as he held the star aloft, crystal crown glowing with forbidden power. The air seemed to fill with ozone as I gazed upon it, the acrid smell of burning, of latent power in the air. And what power it was! Arcs of infinite energy spewed from the great star, crackling bolts running rampant across his body, and his eyes glowed with the strain of unimaginable power.

And then he brought the great ball of power and light down in front of his chest, and from it he cast a single move.

Hyper beam.

I had heard tales of this move before. I had seen it used, but never like this. Never like this. A great stream of energy burned through the sky, a river, no, a flood of pure power. It careened through the air like the sky-serpent of legend, a deadly blast of infinity energy marked for me and none other.

And for a brief moment, the world went white. And then, it went black, as Hux threw himself in front of the blow, like some sort of sacrificial guardian. Red flames licked through the sky, trailing from his hair, and he wailed in pain, and I wailed with him, throwing back my head in grief and anguish. It seemed to last forever. An endless rain of fire and light, of pure, concentrated infinity energy. A purifying deluge.

Finally it ended. The ground around us had been laid bare, scorched, flattened beneath the onslaught, but I was - I was fine. Hux toppled off of me, spent and burnt. Fallen. Because of me. He groaned - not quite knocked out yet. But already I could see the battle taking its grievous toll on him, the wounds which would not heal. I could feel my crystals beginning to chip and shatter.

The battle was over, I thought.

And then I saw it. One last shining gem, glistening, glowing with barely repressed power. I don't know how we hadn't seen it earlier – maybe it was the hyper beam that had burst it out of hiding, or maybe it had drifted over, coalesced from the air itself. Maybe it had been there the whole time, hidden in the dust and dirt. But now it *gleamed* with the light of a tiny star, and we saw it plain as day. I stared, transfixed, even as the Golurk fell from the sky - but Hux *lunged* towards the thing, a desperate hunger in his eyes. He was already starting to shrink now, to return to a normal size – he was just a bit bigger than Jericho now, a far cry from the monster he had been mere minutes ago. His hair was burnt, patchy, frayed and torn, unrecognizable as the gleaming mass it had been before. But he ran for the stone, hair undulating beneath him like a mass of vines, carrying him towards his forbidden prize. He ran, and I could only look at Jericho as he fell, look at the deep cracks and crevasses running across his body. He looked more like a ghost type now than he ever had before, arcane energies bleeding out into the air from the dents and gashes in his armour. What sort of Pokémon would I be to let my partner, my only friend, do that to himself? What kind of Pokémon could do that and live with themselves after?

Not me.

“Hux, no! It isn’t worth it!” I yelled, running towards him as fast as my feet could carry me. “We don’t need it! We *CAN’T USE IT!*” I tackled him, a sort of bear hug, trying to wrap my arms around him.

“NO!” And when he spoke it was a garbled growl, as if it were two voices speaking in hoarse harmony. “YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND! YOU’VE NEVER UNDERSTOOD! HUX, HUX ISN’T HERE RIGHT NOW! HE’S NOT COMING BACK, EITHER! THERE’S ONLY HUSH!” And I watched, dumbfounded, as he pulled his hairy fist back and hit me.

He... hit me.

It wasn’t a terribly hard hit, to be honest with you – there wasn’t much force to it at all, as if it had been pulled at the last moment. It was the shock of the thing that forced me off, that left me choking on dirt by the wayside. It was the betrayal that left me seeing stars. Lights, bright lights. So many of them, like an endless sea of fireflies, drifting in the night air. It was just like Livega.

I remember when I was just a Sprigatito in Livega city. I remember when I didn’t *have* to lie, to cheat and steal, to get my food for the day. I remember the bright lights, and the big crowds, and the sounds of traffic and *people*, running and eating and loving and *living*. I can’t remember my trainer’s name anymore – the names and the words and the tricks are lost to time. But I remember my trainer’s face, I remember her kindness. I remember how she would always steam a sea bass on my birthday, how she’d try to steal pieces from me with her chopsticks. I remember her smile, how she loved to make other people smile. That was why she got into stage performance, she said. To make other people smile. I remember how great that feeling was, how fantastic it was, climbing back out of that hat to the cheers of the adoring crowd. I remember the genuine *joy* we brought people.

I remember losing it all. Gone, in the blink of an eye. Waking up in a world where humans were a distant memory. Fighting for food, begging for scraps just to survive. I remember crying myself to sleep each night.

And I remember finding Hux for the first time, and finding hope again. Who knew that it would take the shape of a skinny Morgrem in a dingy alley? I remember *growing* with him. *Changing*. Fighting, running, scamming, evolving – it breathed life into me again, brought a joy back into my life that I had nearly forgotten I had lost. And through it all Hux had been by my side. When

we had starved, he had given me his food. When we had too much Poke to count, he had trusted me with it all. He had been with me every step of the way.

I couldn't lose him too.

"No, Hux!" I sank my claws into him, holding on for both our lives. "I don't KNOW who Hush is, and I don't CARE either! I need Hux! I - I need YOU, you big dumb oaf!" Were those tears in his eyes, or just a trick of the rainbow light that filled my vision? No, the tears were real - but were they his or my own? I couldn't tell. I don't think I could've told you much of anything right then. I could see the great flaming fist, blotting out the sun, careening towards us like a rocket out of hell, but I couldn't tell you what it meant. I could see Hux's hand, still outstretched, still reaching, grasping for the orb, just barely out of reach, but I couldn't tell you what would happen if he reached it. All I knew was that I was inches away from losing him. Inches away from being alone again. There was only one thing I could do.

"We surrender!" I heard myself cry, a cracking voice so hoarse it was hardly even recognizable as my own. I choke out the words again, feeling the tears hot on my face as I bury my face into Huxxy's hairy chest. "We surrender. It's over."

And just like that, it ended. The great shadow of a fist slowly retreated, and as it went the sounds of battle slowly faded into silence. Underneath me, Hux's breathing slowed, his great chest slowly heaving as he shrank back to size. Yes, the tears were his as well, and he choked out an apology as he held me, some nonsense about not being strong enough, about his other half. What did it matter? Everything that mattered I held here, tight in my paws.

I knew then that I would never, could never let go again.

ROSIE (again)

They didn't let me into the med tent, so I snuck in. He was there, of course. He had been there for days now, tubes and bandages covering his stony body. I remembered him fighting. I remembered him taking the stones. Both of them. I remembered him falling from the sky like a comet through the night, plummeting back to earth. Why? Why had it happened? Why had he done it?

It was as if he could hear my thoughts - or maybe I had just been standing there too long. Slowly, his eyes flickered to life, orange once more, dim flames of great sorrow.

"Roseanne." He breathed, wheezing. "I could not. Let you fight them." The tubes around him hissed angrily as his eyes glew, light gesturing to his core. "The contract. You were not ready."

"I don't *care* about the contract!" I could feel the tears running down my face unbidden, shuddered silently as I tried to stop them. Father had always told me not to cry. But he wasn't here now, and I let the tears flow free. "I care about *you*!"

"There is much. You have yet to learn."

"Exactly!" And now I pointed an accusatory finger, the way I had seen my mother do a thousand times. "If you think I'm not ready, you - you can't *hurt* yourself like this!"

"I once told you. That I would protect you. Until you were ready. To protect yourself." His arm slowly moved, sending a shower of sparks through the air until a great blue finger pointed back at me. "I can no longer protect you. You *must* be ready."

But I wasn't, I wanted to say. I wasn't ready. I wasn't even *close*.

But I had to be.

END