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[line]

A million thoughts fly through Lee's mind all at once at the sight of Maxie's rival. The mental cacophony, spurred by panic, is practically deafening and paralyzes him.

Why did he approach us?

How the hell did he find us?

Is he here to recruit us? Kill us?

He's not honestly doing this in the middle of a populated town, is he?

'Lee!'

Ninetales' mental shout cuts through his rising panic, stopping the cascade of scenarios for a moment, just long enough for her to follow up.

'Remain calm, Beloved, and resume your answer! Don't give him reason to suspect that we are aware of who he is!' Ninetales urges, shoving a lid down on her own instinctual urge to growl. *'We cannot clash with him here, not so close to the Pokemon Center filled with bystanders.'*

Lee clears his throat and steadies himself as much as he can. "Sorry about that, I had something caught in my throat," he says, putting a small, false smile on his face. "Anyway, I was just speaking from the heart there, if you buy into sappy stuff like that. It's an answer I think a lot of people would give."

Archie scratches his bearded chin as he thinks up a reply, giving Lee time to inspect the other man.

The eco-terrorist is a tall, darkly tanned man. Even sitting down, he's several inches taller than Lee, and his musculature fills out his clothes. His wetsuit-like costume from the Omega Ruby game is absent, replaced with something much more inconspicuous. Dark slacks, black shoes, a blue bandanna lacking the Aqua logo, and an unbuttoned shirt make for a get-up that doesn't stand out too much. Hanging from Archie's neck on a golden chain is a large, anchor-shaped amulet. The amulet is where he keeps his Mega Keystone in the games...

... But the amulet here is missing its stone. The slot where the stone should sit is empty.

'Archie doesn't have his Keystone yet!' Lee realizes, nearly bringing his hands together and praising Arceus. *'Small mercies...'*

"You clearly have more faith in people than I do, then," Archie says, crossing his arms and leaning back into the bench. The wooden backrest groans slightly under his weight. "In my opinion, there's a lot of greed and shortsightedness among folks nowadays. Too many think of themselves, and *only* themselves. It ends up harming everybody in the end."

"I see..." Lee subtly signals Nine and Sylveon to keep their cool. "Well, it's only natural for people to think of themselves first and foremost. Looking after yourself is arguably the oldest and most important instinct that any creature can have. After all, if one doesn't keep their own best interests in mind, it makes succeeding in life substantially harder."

"I won't deny that, but the line between *need* and *greed* should be clear to everyone, and that doesn't seem to be the case anymore," Archie counters. "Lemme give you a scenario, one that happens more often than you'd think: a town begins to swell with people moving in, and the mayor needs to do something about overcrowding. Do they repurpose some of the land that they already have? Or do they tear down a section of forest and build over the top of it, sending all the pokemon there running for the hills?" The tan man's eyes darken. "I know the one you would pick because it would be the same choice as me. Nine times outta ten, though, they'd rather take more to the detriment of pokemon than make do with what they have."

Lee frowns, thinking of a reply as he scans his surroundings from his peripheral vision. *'Dammit all, Archie. What kind of games are you playing here? And why in the middle of a crowded street?'*

'He's betting on a sense of fair play or concern for bystanders to keep him safe,' Ninetales asserts, watching the eco-terrorist with narrow, unblinking eyes. Beside Nine, Sylveon *seems* placid, but the coiled muscles in the Fairy's legs are obvious. *'Any sort of rash action could cost innocent lives.'*

Lee doesn't let his nerves show on his face. *'Smart, in a bullheaded kind of way,'* he reluctantly concedes. Outwardly, he answers Archie. "I think we both know that in the real world, a scenario like that wouldn't have just those two options, nor would everything be that simple."

Archie smirks, seemingly amused by the answer. "Ha! I can agree with the simplicity part, but little else," he laughs. "You're quite the character. What's your name?"

"Isn't it polite to introduce yourself before asking for someone else's name?" Lee shoots back.

The snarky reply doesn't wash any of the mirth off of Archie's face. "You're right. Boy, where are my manners? Archibald Aogiri is the name, but my friends call me Archie. And you are?"

"Bruce Lancaster." Lee quickly combines his brother's name with the street of his childhood home, forming an alias. "It's... a pleasure to meet you?"

“Really? Bruce Lancaster?” Archie asks, unimpressed. “If you don’t want to tell me your name, you could just say so.”

Lee grunts, fed up with the verbal spar. “Something tells me you already know my name, so why even bother with the song and dance?”

“Because, Mister Lee Henson, *you* already know who *I* am, so it’s only fair if I play dumb too, right?” Archie asks with a smirk. “Don’t look so tense! I’m not gonna hurt you or your pokemon. I’m just here for a chat, and to give you a well-deserved thanks.”

Lee takes a deep breath to steady his nerves. “A well-deserved thanks?” he parrots, turning his head to look the other man directly in the eye. “What are you talking about? I don’t think we actually have anything to chat about.”

“Oh, but we do!” the larger man insists before lowering his voice. He leans closer to Lee, uncaring of Ninetales and Sylveon each bearing their teeth. “I was watching from a distance when Magma raided the volcano, and I watched as you and your friends busted them.”

Unease flows through Lee’s being, and the mental bleedover makes Ninetales’ tails curl. *‘We were being watched the whole time?’*

“Maxie...” Archie’s face falls into disappointment. “He and I were friends once. He was one of those always-polite, upper-crust types, but he didn’t let that stop him from being a swell guy. Then he started changing...”

Archie pauses for a moment, his expression stormy. “It was weird stuff here and there, like shying away from conversation and suddenly despising the rain. Then he stopped showing up at gatherings and seemed not to remember a lot of people. In the end, he sold off everything he owned to fund some kind of ‘project’ he refused to talk about. I made the mistake of not forcing him to fess up, and I knew I had made a mistake when he came to me and wanted me to join Magma.”

“I see...” is all Lee can say, wondering where Archie is going with this. *‘This is not how I expected this to go...’*

“He shocked me with what he said.” Archie’s face darkens further, falling into a scowl. “He told me about his scheme, how he wanted to awaken Groudon and use it to rearrange the planet. He said he wanted to do it ‘for all the right reasons’, that he wanted to free the world from the whims of nature, but I saw that disgusting glimmer in his eye.” Archie’s eyes narrow into slits. “When he said ‘free the world from the whims of nature’, I know he meant ‘from the control of pokemon’.” He looks Lee in the eye. “That’s why I want to thank you. You stopped him on Mount Chimney, and I know you didn’t do it for us, but any setback for Magma is a win for Aqua.”

Unsure of how to reply, Lee nods slowly.

Archie smiles back, but the expression is decidedly grim. "Maxie and the rest of his goons are lying low for now, but he won't take the loss you gave him lying down. Eventually, he's going to try and do something about you, which is why I'm here today." He holds out an arm for a handshake. "I want you and your friends to join Team Aqua, both because you all seem to have the heart for it, and because I want to protect you from Maxie's backlash."

'And there it is,' Lee thinks. 'It all seems so earnest too.'

Where Maxie radiated an aura of menace that demanded respect, one barely hidden behind a polite façade, Archie is the polar opposite. The man is as charismatic as he is blunt, and even though he knows better, Lee actually entertains the offer for a second.

"It's appreciated," Lee begins, selecting his words carefully, "but I don't think an offer like that will be conducive to my team's *long-term* health, except for maybe my Octillery."

Archie sucks in a deep breath through his nose, his smile falling along with his hand. "Heh. You really *are* well-informed, aren't you? You're not going to tell me who told you even if I asked, are you?"

"You wouldn't believe me even if I told you," Lee says, sharing a brief look with Ninetales, then looking at the people walking by on the street without a care in the world. "Surely you understand the ramifications of your end goal? You can't alter nature to such a degree and not expect..." Lee hesitates. *"Mass extinction."*

"Oh, but that's exactly the plan," Archie says, his reply so casual that Lee's body breaks out into goosebumps. "I can't be too hard on Maxie now that I think about it, because he's the one who really opened my eyes and showed me what I needed to do."

Both Lee and Ninetales regard Archie in disbelief as he crosses one leg over the other, seemingly pretending he didn't admit to the atrocity he has planned. Sylveon, meanwhile, looks on in total confusion, not understanding where the conversation is going.

"What are you talking about?" Lee's voice is little more than a whisper. "Do you even understand what you're saying?"

Archie scratches his bearded chin. "I understand. I understand a lot of things. I understand that the world is poisoned and that everything needs to be reset. The last talk I had with Maxie made me open my eyes and *actually* look around. There are a lot of things in this world that don't fit, and I know a smart guy like you has seen it too. One of my boys in Dewford told me you visited a seafood farm there for some kind of private study. A guy like you wouldn't do something like that unless you had questions, right?"

Lee takes a breath to reply, only to stop and consider Archie's words once more. *'... He's talking about the presence of regular animals. That is strange, and no one has an answer for it. Most animals simply can't compete with pokemon in nature, but populations of wild critters are still found here and there. Yet there are also no small insects for some unfathomable reason. If any members of the animal kingdom*

could carve out a niche in a pokemon-ruled world, bugs would be the one by virtue of sheer numbers.' Lee's eyes widen. *'Arceus above, he has a point.'*

"You've seen it too," Archie concludes with a small smile. "In this world we live in, there are parts that simply don't belong, that don't fit. If there is some kind of divine plan, it's gone wrong and deviates further and further as time goes on," he says, his voice rising in intensity. "Humans are one of the pieces that don't fit, Lee, and I'm certain we're what's causing things to go sideways. As humanity advances, pokemon suffer. You don't need to be a genius to see that pokemon and humanity will eventually clash. Hell, we're already doing it!"

Archie spreads his arms. "What kind of pokemon would be here in Fallarbor if we let nature take its course? If we didn't stop the ash for the comfort of people? Every opportunity that humanity takes is at the cost of pokemon, and it'll keep happening until catastrophe strikes! When it happens, I can already see pokemon being the ones to suffer the most!" Archie's voice nearly rises into a yell, but he takes a breath and composes himself. The breath does nothing to stop the dangerous flash of his eyes, though. "We shouldn't be here, and we're destroying what doesn't belong to us. Along the way something went wrong, and I know that something is the rise of humanity. The world is due for a reset before we make things worse."

The leader of Team Aqua looks up towards the sky, his face set in stony determination. "I don't know what you've heard about me and Aqua, but let me lay any lies you have probably heard to rest. I **will** beseech Kyogre for her aid, and wash away the influence of everything that doesn't belong one wave at a time, giving it all back to pokemon. If humanity persists afterward, they'll do so from a place of humility and respect for the rightful owners of the world."

'He's just as insane as Maxie.' Lee shakes his head, dread pooling in his stomach. *'He fully intends to kill millions without a hint of remorse.'* For a brief moment, Lee sees Nine's mind go somewhere foul, down into the realm of murder. With Ninetales and Sylveon already out of their ball, they could...

'No. No, we can't. We could justify it all we want, but the chance of something going wrong is just too high.' Lee swallows a lump in his throat. *'Approaching in the open like this was a good move on his part.'*

Ninetales frowns, but doesn't argue. *'Do his underlings know, I wonder?'*

"Is that really your call to make?" Lee begins slowly, looking at Archie the same way he would a powder keg next to an open flame. "What about the pokemon? What about the people who live peacefully with nature? What about all the people following you? That's to say nothing about the morality of such blatant disregard for life itself."

"When my time comes, I know I won't be judged favorably," Archie replies calmly, "but if no one else will take accountability for what our race is doing, then I will. I'm heading things off before the point of no return." He looks towards the horizon, and Lee follows his eyes.

Far in the distance, a man astride a Flygon is flying towards the Pokemon Center.

"I can see our time is running short," Archie rumbles. Lee doesn't miss how Archie refused to answer the other questions posed to him. "I take it that you don't want to join Aqua?"

"No." Lee's reply is terse.

With a sigh, Archie stands. "Are you sure? You're one of the good ones, Lee. I think you'd be happy in the new world."

When Lee doesn't dignify that with a reply, Archie nods. "Alright, if that's really what you want, I'll respect your decision. Next time we meet, though, it'll be as enemies, and we won't hold anything back. I'm sorry it has to be this way."

With that, the eco-terrorist slips his hands into his pockets and walks into the foot traffic crisscrossing the front of the Pokemon Center. A passing Aggron obscures Archie from sight, and when the pokemon passes, the man has vanished.

[line]

Lee leans back into the couch behind him, having finished retelling the day's events to Brendan and Zinnia, including the hair-raising encounter with Archie.

The trio, along with all of their pokemon, are once more in their hut in the heart of the Meteorfall Crater. Around them, all of their pokemon are busy eating dinner in different parts of the sitting room, though it's clear that most of them are listening carefully to the conversation.

"No fucking way he tried to recruit you." Zinnia seems flabbergasted. She leans forward in her chair and rests her elbows on her knees. "After he talked about all of that insane shit, no less."

"He wanted all of us, actually," Lee replies, watching Shinx eat.

The kitten seems to be listening more intently than anyone else, for she's eating the slowest, and frequently roams the room with her eyes.

"And as much as I don't want to admit it," Lee continues, "he did have one valid point that has me thinking. How in the world have animals persisted when they have to compete with pokemon? They should have been driven to extinction long before the invention of farms and nature reserves, and it doesn't really mesh with the rest of the world that they even exist at all."

"My dad proposed that some pokemon preserved habitats for animals as some kind of proto-farming a couple years ago," Brendan supplies from his place next to Lee. "That study went on the back burner, though, and I don't think he's picked it back up." He glances at Lee. "That doesn't sound too weird, does it?"

Lee shakes his head. "No. Back home, there were a number of animals who farmed other animals, most of them being insects. It's not outlandish to think that pokemon would do the same." He frowns. "That still doesn't explain *why* the animals exist in the first place. Back home, ancient humans either eradicated

or interbred with the other members of the Homo genus until the modern human was the only one left. The fact that the same didn't happen to pokemon and animals is striking now that I think about it."

Zinnia shrugs. "He might've just been trying to get into your head. I wouldn't give it too much thought."

A short distance away, Ninetales audibly snorts as she chews on the last bite of her dinner. *'I can't believe she told **you** of all people to not overthink something.'*

'Hey, I don't overthink things!'

'Whatever helps you sleep at night, Beloved.'

Lee grumbles under his breath about cheeky vulpines and resolves to worry about the animal question later. "How did the pokemon hunt go for you two?" he asks, eyes gravitating to Zinnia's group.

Sitting next to Altaria is an adult Noivern, Zinnia's latest capture by Lee's assumption. The bat pokemon has a wyvern-like body, with her wings and red-clawed forelimbs fused together. She timidly eats from a food bowl, keeping her large yellow eyes and even larger ears on Sylveon from across the room. Naturally, the fairy doesn't even notice the attention.

"Swell!" Zinnia grins, following Lee's gaze. "Noivern was a scrappy one for sure. I think she was the odd lady out for breeding this year, because her nest was empty. She was happy to take out her frustration on us, at least until Shelgon socked one to her. I don't think she expected Shelgon's Rollout to pinball off of the wall and nail her midair." Zinnia sighs and lets her shoulders slump. "I'm going to miss Rollout when Shelgon evolves."

Noivern's eyes narrow at the mention of her loss, but a growl from Shelgon makes her dip her head.

"I see." Lee nods. "I briefly considered a Noivern myself before I got Sylvy, so I hope you and Noivern don't mind if I study her a bit."

"Next time we do a swap battle, she's all yours," Zinnia says with a smile.

Lee smiles right back, then turns to Brendan.

The young trainer groans and leans back into the couch, mirroring Lee. "I found squat. Astis and I went to three Trapinch nesting tunnels, and none of them could stand up to Marshtomp even a little bit."

Lee pats the boy on the shoulder. "Well, Marshtomp is pretty strong, so if you're using him as your measuring stick, you might be at this for a while."

Shaking his head, Brendan elaborates. "No, like, they couldn't stand up to him *at all*. Every single one of the Trapinch went down after taking one regular, no-move punch. After the first tunnel, I had Marshtomp dial it back to half of what he was doing, and the same thing happened. The next tunnel we went down to a fourth, and after that, we ran out of time."

As Brendan speaks, Marshtomp sidles up to Mawile, sending her a smile and giving a macho flex of his (admittedly muscular) arms, which Mawile pretends not to notice.

"Huh." Zinnia tilts her head. "That *does* seem kind of weird. Maybe Astis was worried about you or something and took you down to the runt tunnels? I don't know her that well, but she seems that type."

Brendan crosses his arms and glances at Noivern, visibly bummed out that he didn't get a new pokemon today.

"Maybe Zinnia or I can go with you next time," Lee offers. "You know? To give you a second opinion. For all we know, Marshtomp actually *is* that strong. I know all the training down here is paying off for my team, so it's got to be paying off for everyone else."

Nodding easily, Brendan agrees. "Sure. That sounds good to me." He then turns his attention to Zinnia. "Say, Zinnia? How long are we going to be down here, anyway?"

The tanned woman hums under her breath as she thinks. "We've been down here for a week already, so we can probably get away with four or five weeks more before we've officially overstayed our welcome," she says before her expression sours. "If we're lucky, the old coots on the Elder Council will quit fighting long enough to actually fulfill everything I wanted from them."

Before Lee can ask her to elaborate, there is a knock on the door, drawing everyone's attention.

"Weird. We're not expecting any visitors, are we?" Lee asks. *'Is it some ironic timing from the elders?'*

"No, we're not, but I think I know who it is." Zinnia stands and weaves through the pokemon in the room to the front door of the hut. Taking the squeaky handle, she throws the door open and reveals the person on the other side.

Or rather, the *people* on the other side.

Isis and Astis are both instantly recognizable. The girls look as they usually do; that is, mostly identical save for their hair color and for the shoulder bag Isis carries.

Standing between the twins is a woman so elderly that using the word *decrepit* almost seems polite. The elder is hunched over a walking stick, making her thin, bone-white hair fall down her shoulders, and making her age-shrunken form even smaller. Her hide clothes are like a tent hanging upon her thin limbs, and the thoroughly weathered skin of her face droops on one side, a telltale sign of having suffered a stroke. Her one open eye, however, is a strikingly sharp red, nearly pink.

The old woman scans the room behind Zinnia before smiling as well as her face can. "Thelban," she begins, her voice whispery, "it is heartening to see you once more. Might an old woman disturb you for but a moment?"

Zinnia steps aside and gestures for the group to come in. "The Crater is kind of your place, Madame Oracle. I don't think you really need to ask."

'Madame Oracle?' Ninetales questions with only Lee to hear her. *'Is this the Draconid oracle Zinnia spoke of?'*

'Must be,' Lee sends back, vacating his seat on the couch to give the elderly woman a place to sit.

The Oracle shuffles inside, her walking stick tapping on the floor as both Astis and Isis hover by her side, their arms partially extended to catch the woman should she fall.

Once the old woman settles on the couch with a sigh, she takes her time looking at each one of the pokemon in the room, then turns her gaze to Lee and Brendan. "Naraikveja Birch, Naraikveja Henson. Allow me to bid you a late welcome. I am Hakea, Oracle of the Draconid tribe for ninety long years. I beg forgiveness for being a poor host and not greeting you sooner. Dialga's march is felt acutely in mine bones these days."

"It's no problem at all, ma'am," Lee insists, raising his palms and waving away the apology. "We're just grateful to be allowed here. We know that a lot of rules had to be bent to allow this to happen."

The Oracle smiles once more. "Ah, but I am here for a reason twofold, so withhold pleasantries and platitudes. Thelban Zinnia believes you and Naraikveja Birch are worthy of our tribe's greatest treasures, worthy to succeed her should she fail. This evening, I am here to judge as much as I am to greet."

Zinnia looks like she wants to bite out something rude, but stops herself short, instead settling on a silent scowl.

"So you're giving us some kind of test?" Brendan asks with an unsure blink. "That's fine with me. Whatever you want to throw at us, I'm sure we can do it!"

Lee remains silent. *'Here to judge just as much as she is to greet, huh?'* he thinks. *'One side of her face is paralyzed, and Zinnia said the Draconid prophecy hit the Oracle so hard that she had a stroke. Can seer powers have that kind of backlash?'*

'If it's Psychic in nature rather than something spiritual, it would make sense.' Ninetales rises from her place and walks to Lee's side, where she sits and leans into him. *'Psychic powers are limited by the brain, after all.'*

"The fire in thine veins will serve you well, Naraikveja Birch, but I haven't a challenge for you, merely mine own curiosity." Hakea rubs a gnarled thumb over the worn, knobby top of her walking stick. "I ask you both, speak from the heart, as lies will serve no one. Tell me, what do you love most in life?"

"My pokemon," Lee answers without any hesitation, making the Oracle's eye shoot to him. "They're everything to me."

Ninetales and Corviknight smile, while Grovyle and Octillery bashfully look away. Sylveon blinks in apparent surprise, while Shinx beams.

Brendan takes longer. "... well," he begins, looking away uncomfortably when the Oracle levels him with an unblinking stare. "My knee-jerk reaction is to say my loved ones, but doesn't that seem kind of broad? I don't know if I can narrow it down."

"It is as fine an answer as any," the Oracle soothes. "Now, another. Is mercy worth it?"

"Always," Brendan answers with a resolute nod.

Now it's Lee's turn to be put on the spot. "I want to say 'yes', but my real answer is 'it depends'." Saying that earns him a surprised glance from Brendan.

The old woman nods along, accepting the noncommittal answer. "Do you sometimes feel as if you don't belong?"

Brendan shakes his head. "No?"

"...I used to," Lee admits.

"Most interesting..." Hakea rubs her chin. "What is it that you fear most?"

This time, neither Brendan nor Lee answer right away. They meet eyes for a moment, and after a silent conversation, Brendan goes first. "I guess my worst fear is letting everybody down, now more than ever with all the meteor business."

Lee licks his lips and searches within himself. There are a *lot* of things he fears, but if he had to name one thing above all else... He looks down at Ninetales, who stares back up with her large, ruby eyes.

Between them, the psychic bond thrums like a plucked guitar string.

"If there's anything I fear—" Lee gulps, looking around the room at his pokemon, then to Brendan and Zinnia. "It's being alone."

Hakea draws in a deep breath. "I see... I see..." she repeats, her bright red eye becoming glassy. "I've only one more for you. When your journey comes to a close, what is it you hope to accomplish?"

'Of course she saved a doozy like that for last.' Lee bites his lip as he thinks how best to phrase what he wishes to say. He looks to Brendan, and the boy seems to be struggling just as well.

"I think peace is what I want," Lee finally says, somehow finding this exchange more exhausting than the one with Archie. "One way or another, I want my team, my family, to live in peace and comfort, with all of their wants met."

Brendan is quiet for another few seconds, and then, "When everything is said and done, I want me and my pokemon to be strong. Strong for us, strong for friends, and strong for everyone else who needs it," he says, his face hardening into a visage of determination, one Lee would expect to see on a man thrice Brendan's age. "Especially the ones who can't be strong for themselves."

Marstomp, from his place next to Mawile, can't contain himself and lets out a proud laugh, punching his fist in the air.

Lee can help but huff ruefully. "Jeez, Brendan. You're making me sound awful greedy over here."

The boy flushes in embarrassment, his hard expression gone in an instant. "What?! There's nothing wrong with anything you said! A-and I was told to talk from the heart and all that junk, so I did!"

"Madam?"

All the eyes in the room turned to the elderly Oracle, who is staring off into space. Beside her, Isis gently gives the old woman a shake. "Madam Hakea? Are you okay?"

"I see..." the old woman replies after a long moment. "I see..." She suddenly turns her head towards Lee and Brendan, moving so fast that Lee flinches.

"O, Lonely Outsider... O, Hero Yet Realized..." the Oracle speaks, her words no louder than a whisper, yet perfectly audible from across the room. Her eye seems to glow. "O, Lorekeeper... One who is two and two yet to know, all shall learn and shine blindingly in joy. We unfortunates stand in awe of the unity. Yes..." She takes a deep gasping breath, blinking away whatever spell overcame her. "Yes..."

"Madam, please!" Isis shakes the old woman's shoulder once more, concern on her face. "Are you all right? Did you have a vision? What did you see?"

The old woman waves Isis away, but does so with such lethargy that it's clear whatever happened has taken a lot out of her. "Hush, child," the Oracle mumbles. "I have seen all that I need. Bring out the case."

Isis takes her hands away and looks down at the bag on her shoulder, seemingly unsure. "You're certain, Madam? Won't the elders be upset?"

Hakea clicks her tongue and taps her walking stick on the ground. "I care not. I have seen what I need to see, and these gifts are mine to give. Dear girl, the case!"

Isis ceases arguing and opens the bag on her shoulder, letting her sister reach in with both hands and withdraw a rectangular box of peeling, aged wood. Astis then sets the box down on the low table of the sitting room.

"Thelban," Hakea addresses Zinnia, who looks beyond shocked by what she's seeing. "They are worthy."

Zinnia's surprise and disbelief begin to fade, replaced with a wide, overjoyed grin. In the candlelight of the room, her expression is radiant.

'Worthy for what? What's going on?' Lee wonders, leaning in.

Isis unclips the front latch on the box and pulls it open, filling the room with flecks of refracted, rainbow light.

Zinnia vibrates in place, Brendan's jaw drops, and Lee's breath hitches in his throat. 'Those...!'

Sitting in the velvet-lined box are three shining Mega Keystones.

"Thelban, Naraikvejo." The Oracle inclines her head. "My gift to you. I know you will use them well."

[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.

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