

Tab 1

Ashley knew hatred and rejection the moment she was born. Born as a male, Absol named Andrew. His mother Audrey, a shiny Absol, was only sixteen when she gave birth to him. Despite how young and weak Audrey was, she loved her son Andrew more than anything she knew. Despite being twenty-one, his father Lucas, a shiny Absol, had already become a well-known figure of power in Hoenn from the crime syndicate he inherited from his parents. He wore the fact that he was shiny like a badge of honor and pride, believing that only he and other shiny Pokemon were the only true race in this world. He sought and desired perfection in himself and expected no less from his son. He stood over his son at the hospital, looking down at him in absolute disdain and disgust. Andrew wasn't shiny like his parents—His skin was a soft navy blue—his face cuddled into his mom as he ate. Lucas growled as he glared at the failure of a son. The infant was no more than imperfect, and therefore a nobody in his eyes. “What a waste.” His voice was filled with hatred that was bitter like venom. Lucas’s crimson eyes bore into Andy with a suffocating intensity. Lucas’s taller-than-average frame cast a dark shadow over Andy and Audrey, Andy was unaware as he kept feeding. Audrey, who was still weak and recovering from birth, held Andy closer as she held her in a more protected manner. “He’s innocent.” Audrey’s voice was trembling, but she looked into her son’s eyes with all the love she could give. “He’s our son, Lucas. He didn’t choose this.” Lucas didn’t care—he was consumed by his vision of perfection, and this *child* took that away from him. “Innocence is of no use to me,” Lucas practically spat the words out in disgust, staring daggers he wished could physically plunge into him. “Power and perfection are what matter. You were supposed to be special. Instead, you’re a failure the moment you take your first breath.” The words dug into Audrey like the claws of a wild Braviary digging into its prey. She was still quite young herself, barely grasping the fact that she was a mother—Now her partner, the love of her life—was threatening their newborn son. As she continued to hold her son close, she could feel her heart wrench and ache not just for herself, but for her son. She knew that from here on out, Lucas would make her son’s life an absolute living hell. That would just mean that she’d have to work twice as hard to be his loving mother. And give him everything that Lucas refused to give him. She didn’t mind. She was going to work to give Andy the best life she could in this situation.

As early as Andrew could remember, he knew the harsh reality—Pain and suffering were always present in his life. All the while being enforced and executed by the very man who was meant to love and protect him. Lucas never saw Andrew as his child, and he never saw him as his *son*. Andy was nothing more than a burden and a mistake—an obstacle in Lucas’s path to perfection, power, and fortune—like all obstacles before Andy; he would break him. The first time Andrew tasted blood, he had hardly learned to walk. It was a brisk afternoon in the courtyard of Lucas’s manor—The smell of sweat and exertion wafted through the air as clashes and clangs rang throughout the yard. Lucas had been training with one of his subordinates; each movement was exact, vicious, and efficient—every strike meant to kill. Andrew, still wobbly on his feet, had waddled to them, his broad eyes watching with curiosity. Poor little Andy didn’t realize the world he was born into, nor the horrible beast he was born from. Without a single ounce of hesitation, Lucas turns and strikes Andy’s cheek with his claws. His father’s claws tore through his cheek like a blade through paper. A sharp, throbbing, burning pain spreads through Andy’s cheek. The heat from the cuts flared up as the chill breeze hit it. Blood—that warm and slick liquid—skated down Andy’s cheek in thick streams, dripping and dropping onto the shined marble flooring. Andy stumbled back and held his face with his small, quivering paws, his shaky

breath snagging on panicked gasps. His young mind hardly fathomed to grasp what had just happened. One moment, he was watching this amazing display, and the next? Pure pain and agony. Poor little Andy gazed at his father, searching for *something*— an apology of some sort, an explanation, some form of regret in his expression. *Anything!* Lucas didn't say a word, didn't even wince at his carnage. He loomed over him, his expression chilling Andy's down to his very soul. Andrew has always known fear, but never like this. This type of fear wasn't the same as the type of fear that caused you to wait for solace or send you running for your parents. No. This was something far more raw—primal, gut-wrenching, striking right into your very soul—the fear for your life. A fear so great it paralyzes you in your place. The raw emotion claws into his very being, making it hard for him to breathe. For the first time in his short life, Andrew fully understood. Lucas—his father—would never have the capacity or care to even think of loving him. He would never be safe around Lucas—but even that was not what scared him the most—His mother was never safe around him. Lucas nonchalantly wiped Andy's blood off his claws with a kerchief, walking past him without a second thought. As he spoke, his voice was scarily steady, apathetic—like he just finished overcoming a below-mediocre obstacle. "Know your place in this world, boy." Andy swallowed the little pride he had— the taste of metal and blood, thick in his throat. He didn't dare cry. He wouldn't scream. He just nodded.

The beatings had started to become routine. Almost as if it were on Lucas's schedule, he'd ask Andy to do impossible chores for someone his age, expecting only perfection from his small child. He'd ask him to clean the floors of the entire mansion until they were reflective, with no cleaning supplies. Move large crates far too heavy for someone of his age and stature. Memorize all the bookshelves in Lucas's grand library, and reorganize them to be in alphabetical order. If he made a mistake, there would be *hell* to pay. If Andrew cried, Lucas would hit harder. If he collapsed from exhaustion, Lucas would drag him back to his feet only to strike him down again. If he tried to run, Lucas would break his legs and force him to crawl. If he dared to talk back, Lucas would grab him by the throat and squeeze it until it hurt him to speak. "You should be grateful. No one else would ever tolerate a failure like you. You will never be strong. You will never be worthy. You. Are. **Nothing.**" Lucas always told him this when he failed, his voice dripping with hate and a seething bitterness. Andy did his best to ignore his words, but they always floated in his mind even after he healed from the wounds. The physical pain may have left, but he would always feel the lingering psychological and emotional pain. There was one light in his life, however, that kept him grounded and gave him a glimmer of hope. Audrey. After Andy got punished, in the dark of the night—when Lucas was out or asleep—Andy would drag himself, sometimes even crawling or limping to his mother's room. Her expression would transition to worry, concern, and guilt the moment she saw him. Her beautiful blue eyes softened as she looked upon him. "Oh, sweetheart," Her voice would remain soft, kneeling next to him as she petted his head. "Come here, baby." She softly scooped him into her arms, making sure to be careful of his injuries, holding him close. Andy would cling to her, shaking from pain and exhaustion, burying his face into her chest. She would make sure to hold him close, rocking him in her arms as she hummed a soft wordless lullaby. She was drawn to his legs this particular night—they were broken and shattered. He had tried to run from Lucas to escape his punishment. The pain shook him down to his very core, each ragged breath shooting misery through him. Audrey softly ran her paws over them, even the lightest touch made him whimper and tear up. "We have to get you to the hospital. I'll take you, baby. Just hold on." Her voice was

thick with guilt, she pressed a gentle kiss on his snout and then stood up with him still in her arms. She slipped out of the house in the cover of the night, pressing him close to her to keep him warm. Each step she took shifted his legs ever so slightly, shooting white-hot pain through him. He whimpered and sobbed into her, trying his best to push through the pain. When they both arrived, the nurses immediately rushed over and took him off her hands. Their gazes were thick with concern, as they asked her what happened. Audrey and Andy have been here multiple times before, to the point where the nurses can recognize them. She always had a lie at the ready—he fell down the stairs. He climbed up a tree and fell. He's bullied at school.—None of the doctors or nurses ever questioned it. They all knew. They were able to tell what was going on by how Audrey acted, and by how protective she was of him. They laid Andy in the soft hospital bed, then put casts on his legs to keep them in place so they could heal properly. They administered pain meds and the relief was almost immediate, as the worst of the pain subsided. Audrey stayed by his side the entire time, softly holding his paw and giving gentle squeezes of reassurance as she whispered to him. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I should have protected you. I should have gotten us out of there by now." Her voice stayed soft but started to waver as tears streamed down her face. Andy shook his head tiredly and squeezed her paw in return. "It's... not your fault." His voice was small and raspy. Audrey took deep, shaky breaths as she cupped his cheek. "I promise you, baby. One day, we're leaving. Just you and me. We'll have a home, a real one. Somewhere safe. Somewhere happy." He *wanted* to believe her. He **needed** to believe her.

Andy had been recovering in the hospital for the past few days to let his legs heal. The casts may have kept him from moving, but this was by far the safest he has felt. It always felt safe and welcoming in the hospital—the nurses were nice, he was able to eat normal food, and they were patient with him. Here he wasn't coerced to do impossible chores. He wasn't being watched by a piercing golden gaze, expecting failure from him. Even better, the entire time Audrey stood by his side. She never once left him, helping him when he needed it—Fluffing his pillow, petting him when he was anxious, humming him lullabies to help him sleep, calming him down when he woke up from nightmares—no matter the situation she'd help him through to the best of her abilities. Hospitals weren't safe forever. Audrey knew that the longer they would stay, the greater the risk of Lucas coming to track them down. And he *would* come to claim his property. She had to get him out of there before they happened. She helped him sit up one day, fluffing his pillows as she softly cupped his cheek. He seemed to be a lot better now—his bruises had faded a bit, and he no longer needed as strong a dose of the pain medication. Her pawtips rubbed his scars on his cheek softly, brushing his hair out of his face. "We are leaving today." Her voice was soft but had an underlying anxiety to it. He tilted his head in confusion at her. "But the doctors said I had to stay—" She sighed and held his paw. "I know, baby, but we don't have a choice. If we stay, he'll find us." The fear in her voice grew stronger with that last sentence, the inflection was enough to silence him. She helped him get dressed, moving with a gentle urgency. They've been through this before—Audrey taking Andy to the hospital for a few hours to heal and escape—but this time was different. His injury was a lot more severe, needing him to stay longer to heal. Her movements were filled with distress, a quiet terror causing her body to tremble that she was trying—but failing—to keep hidden from him. She helped him into a wheelchair, getting ready to push him out—only for it to be interrupted by the door swinging open. Audrey froze in terror as her eyes met with his golden, piercing glare—Lucas. His tall

frame stood in the doorway, preventing them from leaving. Just like that, the once safe room was suddenly plunged into dread. He took a step forward, his expression twisting to amusement as he took in what he was seeing. Andy was wrapped in bandages and casts on his legs, and Audrey was still holding the IV that was still attached to Andy. His golden glare met with Audrey's as he spoke. "You thought you could hide from me? Did you forget what happens when you try to run?" his voice was stuffed to the brim with mockery, as he clicked his tongue. "We weren't trying to *run*, Lucas. He was hurt." Her breathing was shaking as she white-knuckled the handles of the wheelchair, her voice was pleading and exhausted. "Please, you've done enough." Lucas cackled. "I'll decide when it's enough." He leaned forward and grabbed Andy's leg, squeezing hard. Andy cried out and screamed as tears flowed down his cheeks. Audrey growled as she pounced at him with all the strength she could muster. "Don't you dare touch him!" Lucas hardly stumbled back, delivering a hard backhanded slap to Audrey's cheek. She wobbled as her lip bled, but she didn't go down. She stood between him and her son, her claws at the ready. "I won't argue. I won't fight. Please, just leave him alone so he can *heal*." Lucas scratched his chin as he considered, and then he nodded. "Fine." His voice remained calm, which made it all the more terrifying. "Fine...?" Lucas walked over to her, pulling her into his grasp as his voice turned sultry. "I'll leave him alone. But, you come back with me and I do what I want to you with no complaint. Deal?" Andrew felt his stomach drop and twist itself in knots. "N-no—" Audrey cut him off, leaning into Lucas's touch as tears dripped down her face. "Deal," Lucas smirked as he then looked at Andy, his voice filled with condescendence. "Stay here, and rest. You've *earned* it." He pulled Audrey out with him, dragging her behind. She looked at Andy with a warm exhaustion. "I love you. Get well, my dear."

The beatings were the least of Andrew's worries. Lucas has enforced so many torture methods to see what makes him tick, or just for the hell of it. Almost all of these methods would start when he was young and continue far beyond when she became Ashley. Lucas believed in rehabilitation through pain and suffering, Andrew being his favorite project—a broken, malleable *thing* for Lucas to reshape how he wanted through torture. He had one favorite way to physically punish Andy—The Baton. This simple yet effective method made it so Lucas could enforce his will at any time. He'd tie Andy by the wrists and have him dangle completely nude. He'd strike with no hesitation into his chest, causing all the air to get knocked out of his small lungs. The second hit made him start to sob. The third blurred his mind with searing pain. These beatings were anything but random. Lucas would give Andy near-impossible tasks, relishing in the idea of breaking him yet again. Lucas would know exactly where to strike, making sure to inflict the most amount of pain while keeping him from falling unconscious. Bruises speckled his entire body—His arms. His legs. His ribs. His sides—the scars that formed a constant reminder of his father's impossible expectations. "Stand up." Lucas would force him down with his paw every time he tried to get up. Andy could only get up when Lucas allowed it. One of his other methods was that he'd tie Andy to a cold metal table, ensuring there was no wiggle room. Then... *Drip*. The first drop of water on his head was nothing. *Drip*. The hundredth drop started to crack at his mind. *Drip*. He'd be screaming and begging for help well before it ever became above five hundred. Hours, possibly days, would pass as Andrew trembled violently—his voice broken from screaming for help. Lucas smiled as he rubbed Andy's cheek. His face twisted with sadistic amusement. "It's funny. How something so simple can break a person completely." And he agreed with his father—only partially. Andy would make sure to never give him the satisfaction

of breaking completely. That water torture was nothing in comparison to the Brazen Tauros. It sat in the deep, dark, dank, expansive basement that had become a dungeon of torture for any who opposed Lucas. Andrew looked at it with curiosity, not quite certain what it was. Lucas opened the hatch on the side and pushed Andy into it as he locked the hatch behind him. "H-Hey! Let me out!" Andy pounded his fists on the interior of the Brazen Tauros, stopping a bit to catch his breath. *It's not that bad, I guess.* Almost as if Lucas could hear those very thoughts, he lit the fire underneath it. "D-Dad? It's starting to get a bit warm here." Andy whimpered as he felt the heat increase, starting to have trouble breathing from the suffocating heat. Then, he felt it. He screamed out in pain as he felt the heated brass sear at his fur, then at his flesh. Lucas would listen outside as Andy's screams and cries would escape the maw of the brass figure, turning any pleas and screams into warped and distorted wailing. As Andy started to feel himself slipping unconscious, the side panel opened as he was pulled out. Lucas barked an order at his maid Chansey to use Heal Pulse on him. Andy was badly burned, sobbing and whimpering as Lucas looked down upon him. "You're still alive? Good. That means we can go again after your burns are healed." Lucas held Andy's chin and smiled at him with pure condescendence. He tossed his head down and walked off to wait patiently for him to heal.

The day Andrew turned four, he already knew not to speak out of turn. Crying only made things worse for him and sometimes worse for his mother. Speaking out of turn could mean constant beatings over the next months, making sure he *couldn't* speak for a while. A misplaced word could ruin him and send him back to the hospital again. He had come to terms with being starved and what he ate—stale bread so hard it was like eating bricks. Meat that tasted sour and bitter. Food that Lucas and his cronies had picked apart, leaving behind what was considered inedible—he knew to never complain. Just to be thankful, and eat what was provided. Being an obedient slave was what kept him alive. That morning Andy sat on the floor of Lucas's study, unmoving and silent, ready to serve him when needed. He kept his posture straight as his paws rested on his knees, keeping his head bowed. Lucas enjoyed it when he was like this—quiet, submissive, and out of sight unless he was directly spoken to. Lucas didn't care enough to acknowledge his birthday. Nor did Andy ever expect him to. He could feel his stomach growling with hunger as it twisted knots. He was hoping when he was dismissed that his mother had snuck him some food. Hours on end of silence and being a mere decor item in his study, he didn't move an inch. "Go fetch me my tea." Andrew quickly sped to get on his feet and ran to the kitchen. Lucas hated to wait, so he had to be fast. He grabbed the tea set from the high shelf, his paws shaking. He had to focus and make sure to do it right. He made sure to pour it exactly how Lucas liked it. The flavor is right in the middle, with a pinch of sugar. He placed the cup directly in the center of the plate, having the full pitcher on the tray as he picked it up. He made sure to have the spoon face the correct way. Every detail mattered. It had to be perfect for him. He carried the tray back as carefully as he could, the weight of it causing his tiny paws to shake. He walked back into Lucas's study, placing the tray down and bowing. Lucas picked up the glass and took a sip, then growled as he smashed the teacup into the ground. Before Andy could even look up, Lucas had his paws around his throat as he lifted him from the ground, slamming him hard into the ground and knocking the wind out of him. "You idiot. Do you realize how expensive that teacup was?" Lucas's voice remained scarily calm. Andy couldn't breathe. He weakly clawed and grasped at Lucas's paw, his feet kicking as he whimpered. He could feel his vision blur and darken when suddenly he was released. He gasped and coughed,

curling up and trembling as tears stung his cheeks. "Clean this mess up." Andrew simply nodded as he got on his knees and started to pick up the shards of the teacup. His pawpads and pawtips were bleeding from the shards cutting into him. He bit his lip to stop himself from crying, knowing all too well it would only make it worse. By the time he had gathered all the shards in his paws, they were dripping wet and red-stained from blood. "Get out of my sight." Andy simply nodded as he walked out and discarded the fragments, immediately going to where his mom's room was as tears finally started to drip down. She gasped once she saw his state—not only were his paws badly cut, but his throat and neck were horribly bruised. She helped him get up onto her bed, as she started to bandage and clean his paws, holding him close. "I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so, so sorry." She wiped the blood away and off his fur, the stains disappearing slowly. "I-It's fine, mom." Andy hated that *he* was the reason she'd be crying. He was always hurt because he deserved it... right? "I-I made Father's tea wrong. I-I deserved it..." Andy smiled weakly at her, hoping to make her feel better. But it didn't. Her heart ached as she pulled him close, sobbing. "N-no Andy... Listen... you may do things wrong. But no *normal* parent ever beats their kid over it. You aren't the problem, he is." Audrey held him close, petting him, trying her best to reassure him. "S-so... if I had a normal dad... h-he wouldn't hit me...?" Andy spoke as if this was some sort of hard-to-believe myth. "Y-yes dear. You never deserved this..." She kept holding him close, not ever wanting to let him go. "One day, we'll escape. I'll take you somewhere safe. We'll run away, just the two of us. I swear on it, Andrew." Her voice was trembling, but she did her best to stay strong for him. Andrew closed his eyes tight and cuddled into her, holding onto that promise. He didn't want to imagine what an entire life with his dad would be like.

One night, the escape finally came. What both Andy and Audrey had wanted for so long. Past the midnight of Andrew's fourth birthday, the manor was deathly silent. Lucas sat in his office reading his books on artifacts and magic, the tall golden doors locked and guarded by his two top aides. The guards patrolling the halls and floors of the manor have become self-satisfied with their jobs and have started to slack, thinking no one would dare leave. Audrey had spent months thinking about the escape and planning. She had made sure to memorize the patrol patterns of the guards, see where there were breaks in the patrols, and stole a huge sum of money, food, and supplies and had them stuffed into a large couple of suitcases hidden in the tree line surrounding the manor. If she timed everything perfectly, they'd be able to leave in thirty minutes, no less, and not be noticed. She shook Andrew gently to wake him, pressing a claw against his lips before he could speak. Andrew's eyes widened in not fear but excitement. He went with her without question, knowing he could trust her. They made it past the first hallway, then the next one, then the final one. There it was—In front of them were the grandiose golden doors to the front yard of the mansion. Windows perpendicular to each other on each side of the doors had moonlight pouring in, filling the room with a white comforting glow. As Audrey walked down the stairs, a headache hit her. A vision. Without thinking, her legs froze in place as she heard footsteps from the stairwell. "Going somewhere?" Audrey shakily looked over towards the voice, she knew it all too well—Lucas. At the top of the large ebony stairwell, there he stood. His red eyes gleamed and glowed in the dark. The shadow cast onto Lucas's face, making his expression unreadable. His movement was the most terrifying aspect of this—He walked down each step slowly. It was very deliberate. He was enjoying every moment of their plan falling through as fear worked its way up Audrey's spine. Despite that, she didn't answer. She forced

herself to turn and continue running. *Slam!* Before Audrey could even reach the door, Lucas sent an X-scissor flying into Audrey's back. She screamed and cried out as she went flying into the golden doors. Pain shot through her back, despite this, she gritted her teeth and twisted her body so her back slammed into the doors, keeping Andrew safe from the impact. She fell to the floor as she tried to breathe, as her back and ribs ached in an agonizing, festering pain. She held onto Andrew, not ever wanting to let him go. Lucas walked down the stairs leisurely, his intimidating aura suffocating and choking. "You disappoint me, Audrey." Lucas mused, almost as if this was just a mere slight inconvenience. "I thought you were so, so much smarter than this." He cocked his head at her, most definitely in a condescending manner. "I *am* smart." She growled as she spat on his paw. "That's why I *am* taking our son and getting far away from here." Lucas smirked as if to entertain that thought. "Your son?" A low chuckle escaped his maw. "You think that *thing* belongs to *you*?" Lucas motioned, and Andrew, who was shaking and cowering behind his mother, gripping her as tightly as his little paws could muster. "He is *mine*. My blood. My *property*. And if you thought I'd let you just walk out with what is *mine*, then you are more stupid than him." Audrey had enough. She leaped at Lucas, her teeth bared and claws out. "Alright then, I'll entertain this." Lucas easily dodged each attack of hers, sidestepping and ducking when needed. Audrey started to tire, her punches and clawing becoming slower. Lucas chuckled and grabbed her wrist. "Alright. My turn." With one swift motion, he broke Audrey's arm and tossed her to the floor, the wind once again knocked out of her. She gasped for air as she felt warm blood pooling behind her head. Andrew let out a loud sob, reaching for her and holding her with his tiny paws. "Mama!" Lucas looked down at him with a twisted smirk, picking Audrey up by the throat. "You should've known better~" Lucas almost says in a sing-songy voice. He then chucked her into the far wall, and her back slammed into the wall with a shattering crack as white-hot searing pain surged through her entire body. She falls to the cold ebony floor, her body screaming in agony as she can't bring herself to move. Her vision blurred when she heard it—a small cry bounced through the halls. Her heart felt like it stopped beating as she looked up in pure horror and dread. Lucas had Andrew by the scruff of his neck, yanking him up with ease. Andrew screamed and struggled, kicking and punching, but to no avail in getting free. Lucas rolled his eyes and held him further away, spitting on him. "Pathetic." Audrey tried to get up, to crawl, to scream, to do something. *Anything*. But her body wouldn't move, in shock from the pain and paralyzed in fear. "You were never going to win this fight." Lucas raised his claws, a shadow ball forming at his claw tips. Audrey struggled to breathe. "No, please!" Lucas hurled the attack at her, the force knocking her back and through the golden doors, skidding onto the stone walkway. The moonlight was glistening on her bloodied fur as she started to shiver, the cold night air cutting through her fur. She could feel herself slipping unconscious. She couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Then she started to hear footsteps. She managed to force her eyes open as her whole body shook from the cold, pain, and shock. Lucas stood at the entrance of the manor, his body lit by the magnificence of the moon—Andrew was still in his grasp, weak, yet still squirming and kicking. Audrey snarled as she tried to get up. "Stop." Lucas held up his hand, something glistening in it. Audrey froze when her blurred vision was able to focus a bit more. He had a knife pressed into Andrew's neck. "Stay down. If you don't, I'll spill his blood here and now." Lucas's voice was surprisingly calm. Audrey's tears start to drip down, her tough facade finally breaking. Her body trembled as she felt her lungs struggling to breathe. She didn't move. She couldn't move. She *wouldn't* move.

Lucas let out a long, exaggerated sigh as if he were annoyed this was taking so long. He looked at the guards who had run out and gathered behind him. “Get her out of my sight. Remember Audrey. You chose to never see him again. Good day.” Audrey barely had time to react as two Machamps grabbed ahold of her—each grabbing an arm and a leg. They carried her to the large electronic gate out front as she weakly tried to struggle out of their grip. “ANDREW!!!” She screamed for him, her voice cracking with pain and wear. Andrew attempted to reach for his mom, sobbing and crying. “MOMMA!” Lucas walked back in with him, closing the golden door right as the two guards threw her out, her face stinging with tears as she looked up and screamed. She failed. Andrew was still with him.

One fateful day, when Andy was no older than five, he was caught in the wrong place and at the wrong time. A group of older kids decided to go after him, surrounding the small, meek Absol with smirks and teasing laughter. “Hey there, freak. What the hell are you doing here, eh?” One of the boys said with a growl, shoving him to the ground. Andy hardly had any time to react before the bullies were on him. They kicked and punched his small, trembling body as he whimpered in fear—too afraid and weak to fight back. He cried out and begged for them to quit, his pleas ignored as they only hit harder and kicked faster. His voice cracked with pain and terror as his pleading turned into full-on sobbing. Blood trickled down his nose and face, gashes from how hard they hit him littered across his entire body as his ribs were turning blueish-purple. Tears stung his eyes as his vision blurred. He wanted it to stop. He *needed* it to stop. **WHAM!** A blur of black and gold shot past his blurred vision. In what was faster than an instant, the lead bully was whimpering and crying on the ground, just like Andy was. His rescuer stood over the lead bully, growling and snarling at him and the others. Her small fangs shimmered in the sunlight. “I better not see you touch a hair on his head!” Andy’s vision started to clear up, and he was able to now make out his mysterious savior—A small female Shinx, her fur golden and black as she stood in front of him. The bullies cried and ran, their strong facade shattering as they sprinted home. Andy was still whimpering and shaking as his tears dropped down his face, only able to watch as they all ran off. The Shinx turned to him, her intimidating and bold appearance immediately softening as she kneeled and offered him a paw to up. Andy was curled up and choking on his sobs, backing up a bit as she reached for him. “Hey, it’s alright. I’m here to help.” Andy sniffled and wiped his eyes as he looked at her. She was young—she seemed a couple of years older than him—there was a confidence and warmth in her voice that made Andy feel... safe. “What’s your name? Mine is Dion! I’m seven!” She beamed almost proudly about it, smiling at him. Andy trembled and hesitated but finally took her paw and stood up weakly as he managed to find his voice. “I-I’m A-Andy... I’m f-five.” Dion smiled at him softly as she squeezed his paw to reassure him. “Just stick with me, Andy,” She puffed her chest out and smirked. “As long as I’m around, I’ll always protect you!” Andy was taken aback by her confidence and certainty at first. No one in his life has ever given him that safety—At least, not since his mom. His lips curled as they went from his cautious frown to a weak smile. Dion beamed with pride as she stood up and dusted the dirt off of her. “Come on! My house isn’t far—I’ll get you patched up.” Dion didn’t wait for him to respond. She guided him with her paw intertwined with his, letting him lean on her if needed so he didn’t stumble. The walk to her home was a decent walk—from Rustboro to Verdanturf—As Dion led him to her home, Andy hesitated and dragged his paws a bit. He had never in his life been invited to

someone's house. His heart started to beat with anticipation, Dion's soft yet firm grip guided him, giving him the strength to keep moving forward.

When both of them arrived at the comfortable one-story house and entered her abode, the air filled with the sweet scent of lilac and the full aroma of Pecha berries. From the kitchen, two Pokemon emerged. The first was a Mincinno with soft brown fur, his eyes sunk as he saw Andy's condition—Hazel. Besides him was a feminine male wearing a sweater and a skirt. He was a lot more calm and cool about the situation—Jamie. Andy didn't say anything but thought to himself. *That Vulpix is so pretty! I wonder if I'd look pretty with something like that on.* Hazel ran over and held his paws with worry as he looked him over. He darted his fingers over Andy's fur, checking over each bruise, cut, scrape, and gash. "Oh, sweetheart—look at you! You're covered in bruises! And this cut—Jamie, get the antiseptic, no, wait—the gentler one, his fur's so soft, it might sting too much—oh, Arceus, I don't want to hurt you, darling, I—oh! And some bandages, and—" Jamie placed his cool whitish-blue paw on his lover's shoulder. "Hazel dear, don't forget to breathe." After he said what he needed to, he was already off to fetch everything that was requested of him. Hazel was far from over with his fussing. "his paws! Oh, Andy, honey, your little paws—how long have you been walking like this? You poor thing!" Dion had to keep herself from giggling at her father overreacting. "I knew you'd worry." Hazel starts to hyperventilate a bit. "Of course, I'm freaking out! Just look at him!" Hazel crouches down and clasps his tiny face with his soft paws as his soft cotton tail twinges with concern, investigating the swelling. Andy flinched, a subconscious action—he's not used to such care—Not that his touch was aggressive in any form. Quite the opposite; it was impossibly delicate and feathery soft, and it could do anything but hurt him. The cute Minccino's eyes flicker with worry, his expression shifting from concern to deep sadness and pained empathy. "Oh, sweetheart, who on earth did this to you?" Andy tried to answer his question, but his words got caught in his throat. Hazel's ears flickered with a soft compassion, smiling softly at him. "It's alright, dear. You don't have to say a thing. Jamie dear? After you get the medical supplies, let's make some fresh squeezed Pecha juice for him." Jamie walked in and placed the supplies on the table as he knelt in front of Andy, inspecting the wounds himself. Andy stiffened as the Vulpix's cool breath brushed his face. He didn't know how to feel about this situation. The sheer amount of concern for his well-being was a new feeling—his mom was never able to fully take the initiative of this; if she did, they both would know Lucas's wrath—He didn't know how to react. It made him uncomfortable in a way he couldn't quite explain. "Hey there, sweetheart." Jamie's voice was soft like the sweater he was wearing. "What's your name, dear?" Andy hesitated but managed to speak. "A-Andrew..." Hazel smiled softly and placed a soft paw over his chest, where his heart was. "It's alright, sweetie. You're safe here. Let's get you cleaned up and disinfected, ok?" Andy sat on the cushioned couch, stiffly as he let them tend to his wounds. *What's the catch? What do they want from me?* As if Dion could hear his concern, she plopped onto the seat next to him, kicking her feet softly. "It's alright, Andy. They're truly nice. I promise." Hazel worked quickly, and efficiently, but above all, he was careful and tender. He cleaned the stained blood off of him as Jamie worked on patching up the wounds. "This might sting a little, but I promise it'll help," Jamie said in a calm voice as he applied antiseptics and other medicines to help. Andy hardly reacted to the pain, already used to such things back home. When Jamie started to apply the salve to the more brutal gashes and cuts, Andy's breathing stammered and skipped as he whimpered softly. "You're doing great dear! Just a bit more and you'll be all patched up." Hazel

smiled at him with a spark of genuine care in his eyes. As Jamie continued to clean and apply the ointments, his breathing hitched as he thought to himself, and his paws started to tremble. *He's already covered in so many scars.* His breathing hitched as his gaze traced the old damage on the young Absol's frame. There were so many various scars. Deep scars, gash scars, crisscrossing scars, even scars that looked like burns and old punctures. *These scars are more than just some kids being dicks. These are deliberate. Calculated. With full intent of harm.* A chill drove down into his very soul. These weren't the normal scrapes and cuts a kid would get from roughhousing or tripping. His throat became dry as he held back tears. *Who did this to you?* Jamie wanted to ask, but the words caught in his throat—almost suffocating. He didn't want to scare Andy or make him feel like he was cornered into answering. The poor boy was hardly able to keep it together through his front. Jamie pushed himself to take a deep breath. *I need to be careful. He doesn't need questions like this. He needs reassurance.* He softened his expression and smiled at Andy. "You're doing so well, sweetheart," Jamie said softly as he cleaned the wounds with a more tender approach. "I know this stings, but it'll be over soon. You're such a brave young man." Andy felt his heart skip a beat as he heard the compliments. He simply nodded as his eyes flicked in uncertainty. Jamie felt his heart wrenching. *What kind of life has he been living, where he flinches at kindness? Why does being taken care of feel strange to him?* Only then, has Andy fully processed what both Hazel and Jamie were telling him. *They have both been so nice. I think... I can relax a bit.* His shoulders loosened as he looked at the two, softly rubbing his thumb into his paw nervously. "Thank you... B-both of you." Hazel smiled and placed a paw on his knee as Jamie nodded. "Would you like something sweet to eat, Andy?" Hazel offered as he tilted his head. "Sweet...?" Andy blinked a bit, looking at him. Hazel giggled and held his paws, looking at him with a warmth he'd only seen with his mom. "We have poffins, berry tarts, even some pokè puffs! You can have whatever you want!" Andy looked at his paws being held and stammered as he struggled to speak. "A p-poffin please, sir." Jamie chuckled at his politeness and nodded. "Of course, dear." He had already gotten up to go fetch him a plateful of poffins. Andy shifted in his spot, unsure of what to do. He was the one who was always asking what he could do, never the other way around. Jamie placed the plate in front of him and smiled. "Eat as much as you want! We can always make more." Jamie picked one up himself and started to eat one. A small smile spread across his face as he reached for one, and took a small bite. It was sweet. It was warm. Tears welled up as he continued to nibble on it as his tail slowly started to wag. *This is amazing! I didn't know food could taste good!* He felt something growing in his heart that he couldn't quite place. His ears twitched attentively to the sound of clattering plates. Jamie stepped away for a bit, only to return with a plate that had a Pecha Tart placed on it. Andy's eyes widened a small bit, as his mouth watered. The tart was perfectly golden with a gooey pink filling. It was flaky and seemed to be buttered to perfection. The sweet scent of it twisted his stomach with yearning, but he forced himself to stay put. "You seemed a bit hesitant about the poffin, so I made you this!" Jamie smiled as they moved the plate closer. Andy felt his heart thump faster. *Did they make something for me?* His eyes flicked at the two adults, then at his new friend. "Yep! Papa makes the best Pecha tarts in Verdanturf. I mean, I guess Rustboro's tarts might be okay, but you're about to have your whole world rocked." Andy felt so small under their gaze, but he picked it up and took a small bite. The first thing he noticed was the flaky crust. It was buttery and fell apart in his mouth as it was full of flavor, and tasted like a sweet croissant. Then came the taste of the filling. It was full of a

cacophony of flavors. It was sweet with a bit of a tang, the flavors dancing along his tongue. He had never tasted something this... good before. Before he could stop himself, he finished it in a couple of bites. The crumbs landed on his lap and chest as the filling stained his face a deep pink. Jamie couldn't help but chuckle as they delicately cleaned the crumbs off of him, then wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I take it, you liked it a lot?" Andy nodded as his eyes sparkled, still on the high of the great taste. "I told you it was amazing!" Dion smiled and hugged his arm. Hazel winked at him and smiled. "There's plenty more where that came from. How about some dinner first?" Andy nodded and smiled, finally realizing the new feeling. It was a feeling he had almost forgotten since his mom was thrown out.

The murmur of running water filled the kitchen as Jamie washed the dirty dishes and silverware. His mind lingered on the thought of the small Absol in the house with them. Dinner was nice and peaceful—the two kids chatted between themselves as Jamie and Hazel shared their pleasantries. Andy cautiously ate during dinner, flinching at the slightest of movements as if he were afraid of them taking his food away. As he furthered himself into eating the food, his nerves settled as he ate more, even helping himself to a second plate. Dion and Hazel both scoured the TV stand for a movie to watch—all four of them—So Jamie was left to clean the kitchen, unattended, with his reflections. His fluffy ears flickered as he scrubbed a sponge into a persistent stain on one of the plates, as the warm reds and oranges of the sunset filled the sky as it poured in from the windows. Jamie's ears perked up as he heard the sound of soft pawsteps on the linoleum floor. Jamie turned to look from his peripherals, expecting Hazel, instead he saw Andy walking up to him as his stare was focused downwards. He had his paws to his side as they trembled ever so slightly. His cheeks were tinted with a darker blue, a warm blush across his face. "Hey, dear. Do you need something?" Andy wavered a bit, his paws shifted in place. "Um...I just..." He trailed off as he gripped the hem of his newly gifted shirt—just a bit bigger since it was Dion's—as he gulped nervously. Andy's crimson eyes briefly flicked up, meeting Jamie's caring eyes before darting off yet again. Jamie set the plate down and then wiped his paws to give him his full attention. "Take your time, sweetheart," his voice was calm and patient as he smiled at him. Andy whimpered softly as his knees buckled a bit. Jamie, at first thought he'd retreat, but to his delight, Andy stayed. Just barely a whisper, almost too quiet to hear. "You're very pretty..." Andy mumbled as he clenched his entire body. Jamie felt their breath stagger as tears welled up. The small Absol's blush deepened as he gripped the shirt's hem tighter. "A-and I just... I appreciate you. And Hazel. And Dion..." Andy's voice lingered as he struggled to voice his feelings. ... I don't know how to say it right, but I just—" Jamie could feel his heart melting. Without a thought, he kneels to get down to his level. "Oh, sweetheart," he began as he reached out to him, stopping just before touching him fully. "That's the nicest thing anyone's said to me all day." Andy fidgeted in place, not knowing what to do with himself as Jamie showed him their empathy. Jamie gave them a reassuring smile as he moved his paw to cup her cheek. "You don't have to say it perfectly, dear. Just knowing that you feel safe enough to say it at all? That means the world to me." Andy whimpered as he looked down at his feet. "I do feel safe here. It's... different." He admitted in a hushed voice. Jamie's ears bent back as his chest started to ache from hearing those words. *How is it different? What are you used to?* He wanted to ask, but he bit his tongue and pulled Andy into a gentle hug. Andy tensed at first but then leaned into the cooling touch of his. "You're a real sweetheart, you know that?" Jamie's cold body had become warm from Andy's kind and considerate words. As little

Andy was in Jamie's arms, he took a deep breath as if he was getting ready to say more. Jamie parted from the hug to give him his full attention yet again. Andy's red eyes looked directly into his, unnerved yet determined. "I... I wanna say more about why this is different." Andy murmured under his breath. Jamie felt his breathing get caught up in his throat but didn't want to rush him. He gave the Absol a gentle nod and waited with a soft patience. Andy took a big gulp before starting. "At home, I don't... I don't get to eat like this," he confessed quietly, as tears started to stain his blue skin. "Most of the time, I only get food if it's stale or expired. If there's even anything left... And if I take something I shouldn't, I get in trouble." Jamie felt his grip tighten on his skirt as he listened. His chest ached as his heart broke over the thought of little Andy starving, and scavenging for old food. His gaze trailed to the floor and didn't meet Jamie's eyes anymore, as if he were scared of being yelled at or shown no sympathy. "... My mom tried to leave with me once. But my dad—he..." Andy's breathing worsened as he forced himself to continue. "He made her leave. Forced her to." Jamie could feel his heart twisting and straining for this poor boy. *His mom wanted to save him.* Andy held his paws close to himself as his tail tucked between his legs. "After that, it was just me and... **him**." Something about how Andy said *him* stuck out to Jamie. The inflection in his voice held a weight of unfathomable terrors. Jamie felt his blood start to boil at the thought of anyone being so vile to someone, much less a child. All the scars made sense to him now. They were from abuse. Pure unbridled hatred. Jamie knew what kind of *thing* his father was. Jamie pulled the small boy into another loving embrace. Andy didn't flinch as much as he fully leaned into Jamie's touch. "Andy..." His voice was delicate but dense with sentiment. "I'm so sorry." Andy shook his small head. "You don't have to be." Jamie had to stop himself from raising his voice with concern. "Of course I do. No one—especially not a kid—should have to go through that." Andy's eyes became wet with emotion, but he kept in his tears this time. *I need to be strong for him.* "You deserve so much better than that," Jamie's voice broke his thoughts. His voice was wavering and choked with tears. "And I hope you know that, at least while you're here, you'll never have to worry about those things. You'll have food, warmth, and people who care about you." His grip on Andy tightened with care. "You matter here." Andy felt his breath get caught in his throat. He couldn't hold it in anymore. He started to sob and held Jamie close with his tiny arms. "It's ok dear. I'm here for you. We all are." For the next few minutes, he just held and comforted Andy, petting his head and humming soft tunes. Once he had finally calmed down, he took a deep breath and spoke softly. "Thank you..." Jamie picked him up with a delicate touch, smiling at him. "No problem dear. You're always welcome—" Dion cut his father's voice off as she yelled from the living room. "Jamie! Andy! We picked out a movie! Get your fluffy butts over here!" Jamie and Andy both giggled to each other as he carried Andy out to the living room for movie night.

On a day like any other, Andy was walking through the grand mansion as he looked at the decor with wonder, his small paws barely made a sound as he walked. He would keep his head down around the guards and stay quiet to avoid attracting attention to himself. As he walked, he caught a glimpse of someone new. Standing about 10 feet away was a tall and beautiful Umbreon, her black fur was elegant and well-kept—She wore a crisp and tailored white lab coat with soft fuzzy tights. Rounded glasses sit on her snout as she carries thick books. Someone so smart and elegant seemed so out of place in a manor full of brutes and monsters. Strangers were a rarity in his father's home—usually fighters, bandits, mercenaries, bounty hunters, or the occasional professor or scientist. All of them were cruel or brutish, but

this woman seemed different. He took a step towards her. Then another. Then another. His heart pounded as he walked to her, but something about her made him feel the same safety that he felt at Dion's. He took a deep breath as he stood in front of her, fidgeting with his paws. "H-hello there m-ma'am! My n-name is Andrew! It's n-nice to meet you!" He awkwardly held out his paw for a pawshake, his ears twitched with anxiety. The Umbreon turned to look at him and smiled with a warmth Andy was now familiar with. Andy felt his heartbeat come to a more steady pace as he shyly smiled back in return. The Umbreon sets her books down and kneels to get to his level. "What a little gentleman!" She giggled and shook his paw. "My name is Tina. You're Lucas's little boy, right?" Andrew nodded quickly as his tail started to wag with excitement. "Well, I'll probably see you around a lot more often! He hired me to study magic and the phenomena known as Mega Evolution." Before Andy could say anything, Tina lovingly picked him up and held him close. Andy shyly nuzzled his face into her neck as she rocked him softly in her arms. The feeling of safety was nice. No claws digging in. No stinging slaps. No batons slashing up his back. From that day on Andy would follow Tina around and willingly help her with anything she needed. In return, she'd make him her famous lasagna filled with cheese. Andy finally had a motherly figure in his home again.

As Andy grew older, Lucas's cruelty and 'creativity' only worsened. Lucas had never cared for him, and he knew that. But even after all Andy had been through, he didn't think it could get *any* worse—Not worse than the Brazen Tauros. Not worse than the electrocution and tickle torture. Not worse than the crucifixion and Chinese water torture, or even the baton beatings—But it did get worse. So, so much worse. Lucas only ever saw him as a tool, someone to mold into his bidding and command that was flawed without his guidance. Lucas had made it very clear that anything less than perfect deserved no mercy. Andy had just turned twelve, and Lucas had made sure to cement his belief in Andy by *any* means necessary. As his punishments worsened, it became clear to Andy—that his father did not see him as his son, but only ever his tool to be used. Lucas no longer felt satisfied by the physical torture—he wanted more. And to take it, a new punishment twisted into something so much *worse*. Andy had been cleaning the dishes as Lucas was sitting at the table, reading the newspaper, and drinking his morning coffee. He reached into the warm sudsy water, grabbed a knife, and picked it up. He started to clean the blade, then yipped as he dropped the knife—he hadn't been careful enough—his soft pawpad had been cut open by the steak knife. It clattered to the ground, Andy's heart sinking. Lucas had looked at him, setting his newspaper and coffee mug down. "Andrew. Do you have any idea how much that cutlery set was *worth*?" Lucas stood up and walked to him, wrapping his paw around Andy's tiny throat. Andy squirmed and cried. His only chance was to apologize. "I-I'm sorry sir! It was an accident, I—" Lucas slammed him onto the table growling, the impact knocking the air out of his tiny frame, all he could do was try and breathe. His vision blurred as he felt his clothes get removed, his tiny body shaking as he felt the cold air of being completely stripped. "D-Dad...? What is—" Andy was interrupted by suddenly being thrust into, the pain and size excruciatingly painful. He screamed out in pain as his body shook, breathing heavily. "Stop, please!" Andy cried out and begged, just wanting it to stop. An hour passed—he couldn't tell if the warm liquid leaking out was his blood or something *else*. Lucas had left him on the table and sat back down, continuing to read the newspaper and drink his coffee as if nothing had happened. "Clean up the mess when you can get up, okay, Andy?" Andy simply nodded as he cried and shook, weakly sitting up and cleaning the table then himself. That was far from the

last time. Lucas made sure to make it clear that he didn't care how much pain Andy was in—He'd ignore his pleas to stop, his crying and sobbing. How he'd try to push his dad away—He'd just go harder, and most of the time it ended with Andy bleeding. But that wasn't enough for Lucas. Andy was just his tool after all, and would do whatever he asked. So why stop at house chores? Lucas squandered no time and immediately started to teach Andy how to manipulate others. With a bit of scientific readjustment to him, Lucas was able to teach him the spell Charm—A lot like hypnosis, but the effects were a lustful trance—Andy would charm individuals into being lovestruck puppets, asking them to give them all valuables on them—heirlooms, jewelry, and cash, of course—Then he'd have them lead him right to their homes and steal from them as they sat there. Andy always felt such crushing guilt after each robbery, and would often walk up to the person he had charmed, hugging them tightly and sobbing. "I'm so sorry... I don't want to do this. But *he* makes me... I'm so, so sorry..." Then he'd leave as he felt the suffocating consequence of his actions, all of the loot safely stored in his bag. But Lucas *knew*—he had eyes watching his every move, even when he thought he was alone—It would always end the same for him. He'd arrive back at Lucas's manor, one of the bodyguards would be awaiting him. "Master Lucas wishes to speak with you." The guard would close the front door behind him, then guide him to Lucas's study. *Talk to me my ass... He's never just talked.* Andy would step inside as the heavy gold doors closed behind him. Lucas would be doing different things each time in his study, but it'd almost always end the same—He'd try pleading and begging for mercy, but that would only end up in Lucas hitting—or thrusting—a lot harder. His body would be trembling from the fear and excruciating pain, his bruises and broken bones a testament to the fact that he failed for showing empathy to the people he robbed, but Andy didn't care. He'd keep showing them remorse and that he hated what he did, even though he knew he didn't deserve forgiveness. Andy would limp out, needing to go to the hospital for his severe wounds. The hospice staff would always greet and welcome him in—he was practically a regular at this point. Every other week, he'd bring back his large collection of stolen valuables and use Lucas's underground connections to sell them discreetly, then give the sum of the earnings to Lucas. He'd stand there silently in a bow, as Lucas counted up the total amount. It didn't matter how much money Andy made, Lucas would always take a majority and only give him a measly fraction of it—hardly enough for a meal a week usually. It would never be enough to buy his freedom, or ever be near the amount he'd need to escape. Lucas knew what he was doing. Lucas made sure that his son relied on him for *everything*—food, a roof over his head, a job, water—He was going to make sure Andrew was only ever his. Arceus bless his soul if he ever failed to meet his quota. He'd be met with severe and instantaneous punishment. He was lucky if it was beating him until he couldn't breathe. It was a simple yet effective punishment, but not nearly as bad. On the nights that Lucas had a shitty day on top of Andrew failing, he'd drag him down to the dungeon and break his toy only to fix him, and break him yet again. On the worst nights though? Those were the nights Andy dreaded the most. He'd walk into Lucas's study holding his breath only to see Lucas looking at him with a certain *gleam* in his eyes. The moment he saw it, he knew what was in store. The door would be locked behind him, and he'd feel Lucas place a paw on his shoulder, his breath warm on the nape of his neck. Andy had learned to disassociate while it was happening, trying to think of the few good things in his life to distract him from the pain. Lucas had shaped him to be his toy, his slave. And he knew there was no escape.

Andy had grown to be Lucas's best thief over a year, well-trained in stealth, sleight of hand, and lockpicking. He could slip into any building, crack any security system, use his hypnosis to have people lead him to their homes and willingly give their possessions, and vanish without leaving a hint of ever being there. He was quick, efficient, and cunning when he needed to be, using his words to help people part with things easier. But that wasn't enough for Lucas. Nothing would *ever* be enough for him. Sure, being a thief helped with a stable income of money for the syndicate, but Lucas needed more. He needed an assassin. And assassins need a weapon. Lucas never gave poor Andy a choice in this decision. The night after Andy returned from a successful theft, he was immediately called into Lucas's office. The golden doors stood over him, towering and intimidating. The doors creaked open, and he stepped inside. It always felt like he was walking into the jaws of a beast, the maw ready to snap shut and spit out his bones. Lucas sat at his desk, fingers interlaced as his blood-red eyes gleamed with unreadable danger. "You're getting older. You've served me well as a thief, Andrew. But now, I have a greater purpose for you." His voice was smooth, but filled with a sharp edge that could cut through a diamond. Andy felt his stomach twist to an infinitum of knots, knowing whatever Lucas had planned was far worse than whatever Andy could think of. Lucas walked him to the manor's forge and pointed at a huge pile of various metals and ores. "You are going to forge your weapon. Whether it be a sword or any other weapon, you need a weapon to continue to prove your worth to me." Andy felt his throat close up as he looked between the forge, Lucas, and the ores. He was far from a blacksmith, but he had no choice. Lucas made his decision. The sweltering heat became choking, billowing out with smoke as it wrapped itself around Andy as he worked, drenching him in constant sweat. The large weight of the hammer was alien in his grasp as he pounded the metal under his grasp. The slams into the metal sent constant oscillations up his arms, shaking his bones as his fingers grew numb. Lucas didn't instruct him whatsoever, or offer any help or guidance. He did, however, offer critiques and criticisms. "You're hammering is too slow." Lucas chastised when he noticed Andy's tired movements. "You'll never be able to kill with those weak arms. Again." Andy clenched his teeth and kept striking the metal with more force, ignoring the pain shooting through his arms. Hours have passed, his arms throbbing with pain as his palms stung from the blisters. His legs quivered under his weight, but Lucas made sure he never rested. Every single mistake he made was met with painful consequences. Andy always knew that was the case, ever since he was a pup, but his body betrayed him as he got tired and pushed to his limit. His hands could hardly stay still as his stomach roared for food, exhaustion being a ball and chain to his limbs. His fur had practically gone from its white sheen to dark gray from all the soot, his entire body screamed from the hours of labor, his breathing was shallow gasps for air, but he didn't dare stop. Andy had almost finished the blade, but accidentally let the blade cool too quickly. He hadn't even realized the mistake but knew he made one when Lucas grabbed him by the throat. Without saying a word, he grabbed the metal poker that had the tip of it lying in the embers—it was white hot—and pressed it deep into Andy's thigh, his nerves shrieking in pure suffering. Andy bit his tongue to keep himself from screaming out as he felt tears drip down his face, as he felt his body freeze up. His vision blurred from the tears, as his nostrils filled with the putrid smell of burning flesh and fur, making him want to vomit. Lucas pulled the iron away and tossed it to the side, causing it to clang as it hit the floor. He looked at him with his usual smirk—it was a cruel, cold smirk devoid of any sympathy—that made Andy's blood run colder than the point of

Mt. Coronet. "Make another mistake, and I will make sure you are going to remember it, just like this one." Andy had barely been able to nod as Lucas shoved him back towards the weapon he was working on—it had been ruined since he was pulled away. He had to start from scratch. His arm throbbed with merciless pain as he started over, continuing to hammer and pound the metal into the shape of a blade yet again. The next mistake he had made, it had been a few days of constant work, no decent rest unless Lucas wasn't paying attention, which allowed him no more than an hour at a time. The heat of the forge kept suffocating him, as sweat kept trickling down his face as he toiled to keep up with the pace his father had set. But then to his horror, he fumbled. The hammer slipped from his paws and hit the floor with deafening thuds, tolling like the bells of judgment. Before Andy realized what was happening, Lucas picked up his foot and hammered a white-hot nail into his pawpad. He screamed out as he held his paws over his mouth as his body trembled. Lucas released his ankle and shoved him toward the dropped hammer, forcing him to walk on his paw with the nail still in it. "You drop it, you pick it up." Every single step he took sent burning pain through his foot, but he did as he was asked and picked up the hammer. He felt as if he was going to puke, but swallowed down his bile and kept working. Stopping was never an option. By the time he finished, his legs could hardly let him stand. His body was covered in bruises, cuts, burns, and welts that would most definitely scar, as all four of his paws screamed in pain. But that didn't matter anymore. Lucas took the blade from Andy's shaky paws and examined it closely, before giving him a single nod. **Approval.** Andy agreed, now that he was looking at it. The machete was beautiful. With the metals Andy used, the blade was a navy blue much like his skin as it shone practically like a mirror, while on the opposite side of the blade were multiple different serrations for different kinds of tearing—meant to tear off flesh as painfully as possible. It was a weapon made to efficiently *kill*. Lucas kept admiring the blade, giving him a second nod of approval. *Finally, Something... he's proud of something that I've done.* Lucas gave Andy a pat on the head, his grasp tight enough to hurt him just enough to make him wince, as his smirk faded. "You've done well." He said with an eerie calmness as he twirled the blade effortlessly in his palm. "Now, let's see how well you use it."

The downpour fell in thick, heavy sheets, thrumming like nature's percussion instrument as the rain soaked and chilled Andy down to the bone, his clothes sticking to him. The cold wetness of it all numbed everything besides the hunger gnawing at his gut. He was used to the aching starvation. This kind of pain had been with him as long as Andy could remember, much like the scars that littered his entire body. Lucas only ever fed him scraps—picked-over leftovers, souring meat, moldy bread, moldy fruits—were enough to feed him, but never enough to fill him. Only the bare minimum to keep him alive. He felt his stomach making knots out of itself, not from hunger, but from the task Lucas had asked of him—His first assassination hit. Track and eliminate this target—a twenty-eight-year-old Braixen. If anyone was accompanying her, kill them too. Andy couldn't help but grip the hilt of his sheathed machete, needing to take deep breaths as he trailed behind her cloaked in the shadows. The streets were nearly empty from the torrential rain, as the street lights buzzed in the sheets of rain, casting flickering shadows as his paws stepped delicately in the puddles. The Braixen walked with a quick and relaxed stride, completely oblivious to his pursuit. *It will be quick. One swift motion. I'll be gone before anyone—* "Momma! Did you come to pick me up? Grandma said she'd take me back!" A small voice cut through the steady thrum of rain, causing Andy to stop dead in his tracks. A little

Fennekin ran up to the Braixen, her tiny paws hardly making a sound on the soaked sidewalk. She leaped into her mother's warm, loving arms as her tail wagged with furious excitement. The Braixen laughed softly, the warmth in her voice making Andy's heart quicken. "Of course, sweetheart. I wanted to see you. Plus, I didn't want grandma walking home in this rain." The small child nuzzled into her mom's neck, her blue eyes filled with love and warmth as she held her. Andy's grip was so tight on his machete's hilt that his paw throbbed and ached with pain. *She has a kid.* His breathing got faster as his heart pounded in his ears. *She isn't a criminal. She isn't a bounty hunter. She isn't dangerous. She's just a mother.* Andy wanted to just leave right then and there. Just walk away and not kill them, pretending that he was never there in the first place. Lucas wouldn't have to know. But he would know. He always does. Andy has tried to keep his failures secret from his father before, but it has always failed. Lucas had eyes watching everywhere—spies, paid informants, enforcers who made sure to tell Lucas everything and make sure he didn't disobey. The moment he showed he was backing out, his punishment would be sealed. If Lucas found out he'd let them go, both of them would be tortured and wish for death, much like he has many times before. Andy swallowed all his reasoning and doubts as the Braixen and her child walked past an alleyway. With a quick motion, he grabbed the Braixen from behind and slit her throat. A choked wet gurgle escaped her maw as she trembled in his arms, holding her paws over her slit throat. Blood oozed out from between her pawtips as she tried to stop the bleeding instinctually. There was no stopping it as the blood kept seeping out, and she finally collapsed to the wet cement, still gurgling as she choked on her blood. Andy stood over her, having to fight every urge to throw up and be thrown into a panic attack. Her eyes looked into his as if asking for an answer as her lips went to move, but nothing came out. Then, the lights in her eyes dimmed as she went completely limp. She's gone. Andy could feel his heart jackhammering into his ribs, as his vision blurred. He collapsed to his knees as he hugged himself, digging his claws in as he was stained with her blood. *It's done. It's done...* Before he could stand back up, he felt two tiny paws grasp his arm. The tiny Fennekin stood next to him, her small body trembling. Her wide eyes filled with tears as she looked into his eyes, her face filled with terror. Rain dripped down her small face, mixing in with her tears as they kept streaming down. "P-please..." Her voice was choked with sobs, hardly understandable. "D-dont hurt me..." Andy could feel his stomach twist itself into knots. The Fennekin clung to him like he was her last hope. Like he could protect her. Like he hadn't just ripped everything away from her with one motion. He can let her go, he *had* to let her go. *If I ran away with her now, she could live and be safe.* Then the reality of the situation hit him like a herd of stampeding Tauros. Lucas would find them. He always would. If he let her go, she would hardly make it out of the city before getting captured. And when she was captured—When Lucas got his paws on her—It would be anything *but* an immediate death. She would be tortured and broken. All the things Lucas had ever done to Andy, he'd do them to *her*. *I can't let that happen.* Andy forced his eyes shut, as he took a shaky breath trying to make himself feel better about this. *This is the kinder option. This would be a mercy to her.* The young girl sobbed and clutched his arm tighter. "Y-you don't have to do this. We—we can run! We can go somewhere safe! Please—please, I don't want to die—" Andy's entire body trembled as he pulled her close. He gave her a tight embrace as he held her trembling frame, pulling her into his chest. *She makes it sound so easy. To run away with her. To escape it all with her and live a normal life. There is no escape though...* He knew his place—Lucas owned him—he was no

more than property and a tool. He had tried running away on his own before, but Lucas always found him and pulled him back, making sure to break his toy twice as much as before. And now this poor girl—this horrified, broken, and now orphaned girl—was clinging to him, begging him to let her live. His tears dripped down onto her head, mixing with hers and the rain as he hugged her tighter, sobs choking out of his quivering maw. “I’m sorry.” was all he could manage to speak as sobs left his throat. Her small frame stiffened in fear as she felt his blade plunge into her side, going easily between her ribs. A weak gasp left her maw as she spasmed in his grasp, her tiny grip weakly holding on. She convulsed as her strength left her body. She didn’t even scream. The silence was so much worse. Andy kept holding her close. As her body went still, as her breathing came to an end, as life drained from her, he held her and rocked her in his arms. His claws dug into her fur as if that would bring her back and undo what **he** did. But he knew that wouldn’t work. There was no undoing what he had done. The scent of both the mother’s and child’s blood filled the air—thick, metallic, and suffocating. The rain dripped onto the pavement, mixing with the blood and causing streaks of red to go down the storm drains. His heart felt like it was going to burst out of his chest, as his sobs felt like they were choking the life out of him. He forced his eyes shut, wanting himself to wake up like this was all some nightmare. But it wasn’t. When he opened his eyes, they were still there—The mother back down on the concrete, and the girl still in his arms—he felt his stomach jump as he leaned forward and hurled, upchucking on the pavement. His vision blurred, his hands wouldn’t stop shaking, his ears wouldn’t stop ringing, and his body felt like it was under the weight of a Copperajah. Andy’s sobs grew louder as he held the fennekin’s body close, cradling her. The rain kept falling, washing away the blood, however, the guilt clung to his being, never leaving him.

At the age of 15, Andy felt a discomfort return that only grew louder and stronger as time went on. Deep down, he never felt comfortable with masculine labels. Anytime he was addressed with them his stomach would tie up in knots as he felt an overwhelming depression claw its way into him. For years he pushed these feelings into the dark recesses of his mind, thinking they were no more than just trauma responses. *Anyone would hate themselves in my situation.* That is what he kept telling himself. But with each passing day, since he was young, that disconnect only grew louder. It was far from *normal*. Any time he saw himself in the mirror, he wanted to crawl out of his skin, or he was addressed as ‘boy’, ‘son’, or ‘he’ it’d almost make her ill. She most definitely would never be able to bring this up to her father. He allowed her no free will, or no friends. She’d only met Dion by sneaking out while her dad was out of the region. Then a realization hit her. *Dad has a laptop in his study.* So she waited patiently. A few days passed, and sure enough, Lucas had to go to Unova for business. Andy snuck her way into Lucas’s study when the guards were in the middle of a shift change and got onto his laptop. Lucas was so confident no one would ever sneak into his laptop, that he never put a password on it. She had to be super careful. After she was done, she had to make sure to leave no trace, because her father would know. He’s possessive over everything he owns, including her. She had never been able to say it out loud, so it felt quite cathartic as she started to type her question out, her hands trembling. *“I don’t feel like a boy. But I don’t think I’m a girl either. What does that mean?”* She clicked the enter button and got to work. She scrolled through hundreds of forums, blogs, and articles—all written by people who felt different. Who felt like *her*. All of them had been trying to figure themselves out, each coming with different conclusions. Agender. Nonbinary. Genderfluid. Demi-Femme. *Demi-Femme... that one feels... right. Comfortable.* Not

quite a woman, not quite nonbinary. In between both, and connected to femininity enough. That made sense to her and made her feel comfortable still. She gave herself an entire month to fully let the idea permeate her thoughts before making her decision. She sat with these thoughts bouncing in her head, and by the time the month had fully passed, she had come to terms with it. *This is me. Andrew is not.* She immediately started to brainstorm new names for herself, something that wasn't *his*. She concluded that she liked the name Ashley. And shorten it to Ash. With the little money she had, she bought herself a journal. Finally, something she could call her own. That day she immediately started to write everything down—her discovery, how she waited, how she felt comfortable now with her new name and pronouns, and how maybe one day, she'd be able to escape or live as herself fearlessly. After a long work day, she had headed to her room to write down in her journal, only to see it on her bed with its pages disturbed. She felt her heart pounding into her ribs, hearing footsteps stop at her door frame. She turned and was met with Lucas smirking at her. "You thought you could hide this from me?" His voice was filled with mockery but was laced with a danger she knew all too well. He walked past her and picked up the journal, reading through it as she could only stare in horror. He started flipping through the pages, laughing to himself as if he were reading a joke book. "Demi-Femme, huh? *Ashley?*" The way he said her name was filled with intent to harm her more than just with his mockery, and that sent chills down her very being. "That's rich. Do you think changing your name makes a damn bit of difference?" Ash's body refused to let her breathe. She was locked in place as he walked towards her, grabbing her face and looking her in the eyes. "You will always be **Andrew.**" He dug his claws into her cheek as he gripped her face tighter. "My property, my choice of your identity." He threw her to the ground, ripping her clothes off with a smile as he thrust into her as rough as possible. "You want to be a girl, Andrew? Then get fucked like one." His voice was filled with joy as he filled her. And he would. Anytime she dared to feel confident, or she wore a bit of makeup he'd fuck her into feeling like nothing more than just his toy. He'd make sure to break her every time, then force her to lick him clean as he'd say the same thing every time. "You will never be anything but mine."

It got worse when Lucas started to show his 'creativity.' When Ash would fail one too many times—or as Lucas put it, "needed to blow off some steam"—he usually reserved it for when he cried, begged, and screamed too much. Lucas decided when that would happen, he'd enforce a punishment so Ash *couldn't* speak. Lucas held the needle as it glistened under the buzzing lights, and he gripped Ash's face with force. "Open your mouth." Ash tried to shake her head, but his grip only tightened as he forced her maw open. The stitches tore through his lips, searing with red-hot pain. He made sure to take it slow, relishing in her pain. Blood dribbled down her chin, blending with her tears as Lucas sewed her mouth shut, ensuring that there would be no sound escaping her quivering lips. "There we go! You're such a better toy when you don't beg." It rarely would end there. Ash knew he would never just leave it at a single punishment. Sometimes, her mouth would get sewn shut as she got thrown in the bull or when he forced himself on her. But one day, Lucas pushed it even further. He stripped Ash of her clothing after admiring the silence of her sewn-shut mouth and threw her into a large, dark room. The air was thick with a musk as she tried to look around in the dark. Then she heard them. Calls of wild Pokemon closing in on their prey—No. Their mate—Ash, froze as the realization sunk in. *The air isn't heavy with musk. It's heavy with the smell of... h-hundreds of wild Pokemon in heat.* Lucas smiled on the other side of the door and gave her one word of

advice. “Survive.” Before she could even react, she felt hundreds of claws from different Pokemon pin her down. The warm breath on her as she then felt it—A large shaft plunged deep into her tight hole. She wanted to scream out. She wanted to fight back. But her body betrayed her as she failed to move. She sobbed softly as she felt the large creature release load after load into her, then get off her and walk off. For the briefest of moments—she was able to catch her breath— Only to be interrupted by a different creature flipping her over and riding her with a monstrous, lustful force. *Please! I don't want to! PLEASE!* Ash sobs as her member releases into the creature. They aren't satisfied. None of them were. Days went by as she got passed around to breed and be bred. As the door opens, the creatures hide in the darkness as the light covers Ash's mangled body. Thousands of deep gashes from the creatures getting a better grip. Deep bites along her shoulders, neck, and horn. “This is all you'll ever be, Andrew. A toy. A breeding slut. You are nothing.”

It had taken Ash a few weeks to finally have the courage to say something to Dion. Constant second-guessing, rehearsing everything in her mind and out loud, and hearing her father make fun of her and invalidate her identity over that time. He'd laugh and mock her, relishing in her tears. But Ash knew that there was one person she could trust. His words kept echoing through her mind. *Do you want to be a girl, Andrew? Get fucked like one, then.* She had gone over to Dion's for a sleepover she kept secret from her father, watching movies and eating snacks with her. It's become her favorite thing, offering refuge from her horrid life. Fairy lights hung up all around Dion's room, shifting in colors and painting the entire room in a soft prism of colors as the movie played—Something about a chubby Kung Fu pangoro—lighting both their faces as Dion watched intently. Ash sat there with her claws clenching her PJs. She had hardly been focusing on the movie, trying to find the courage to speak. *This is Dion. She's not like him. She's always been there for me. She defended me against bullies. She's stayed by my side no matter what, even when I came to her so broken. She's not like him.* “D-Dion?” Her voice was shaky and trembling, finally getting the words out. She could feel her heart jackhammer in her chest, it felt like it was digging a hole of panic and anxiety into her very being. The moment Dion heard her tone of voice, she paused the movie and turned to give her friend her full attention. “Yeah? What's up?” Her chill demeanor now turned to concern. “I—” Ash takes a few deep breaths to steady herself, before continuing. “I have something I need to tell you.” Dion placed her paw on her thigh and smiled softly. “Of course, Andrew. You can tell me anything.” Ash took one final breath as she braced herself for whatever reaction Dion may have. She dug her claws deeper, the stress of the fabric giving in. *Say it. Before you back out.* “I'm... I'm Demi-Femme.” She felt a weight lift off of her chest as she finished her sentence. The words were still new to her, only having learned about it by sneaking onto her father's laptop when he wasn't around and searching up her feelings on sites, forums, and blogs. She always felt something was *off*. She just now was finally able to say it to someone she could *trust*. “I... I chose the name Ashley for myself. O-or Ash for short. I use she/her and they/them as my pronouns now.” When Ash finished speaking, she expected Dion to answer, but she didn't. The room was dead silent. Ash felt the lifted weight come crashing back down onto her tenfold as her breathing started to quicken. She could feel the sweat start to pool up as her throat felt like it had someone choking her. She was fully prepared for it—The mocking, the ridiculing, the rejection. She tensed up as she felt her ears start to ring when suddenly—Dion pulled her into a warm and loving embrace, nuzzling their cheek into hers. “Oh, Ashley. My sweet Ash.” Her voice was soft and tender,

almost immediately warming Ash's heart and soul, helping her calm down, if not slowly. "Nothing will ever make me stop being your best friend." Ash felt her heart stutter as Dion pulled away from the hug, and looked her directly in the eyes. "You can identify however you want. I'll love you no matter what. Do you understand me?" Now Ash was the silent one. She stared back a bit in disbelief. She had expected rejection. She had anticipated yelling and berating. She had been expecting *everything* but this. She didn't expect kindness. The love. The *acceptance*. She felt something in her snap, and then all at that moment she started to sob, tremble, and curl into Dion's arms. Her vision quickly blurred with tears and she soon felt herself choking on her sobs. Gasps of breath escape her throat as she fails to speak. Dion simply wrapped her arms around Ash, pulled the blanket around her, and stayed silent as she comforted her. Dion rocked Ash in her arms, as she softly ran her paw up and down her back. "Shhh... it's ok Ash. I'm here." Dion finally broke the silence, tearing up a bit herself. She kept her voice soft, warm, and steady as she petted her silky white hair. She planted a kiss on her cheek, continuing to comfort her. "I'm here. I've got you." Ash didn't want to let Dion go, holding onto her tightly as she continued to sob. Her entire body was still shaking from the overwhelming cacophony of emotions. Ash had once again felt that familiar feeling she had around Tina. She finally had a name for it: *Safety*.

Ash had taken the next few minutes to sob and get all of her emotions out, cuddling and hugging Dion as she shook in her arms. She once again felt lighter. Not healed, that seemed impossible at this point. But she finally felt... *free*. She could openly be herself around Dion finally, the sound of silence now a comfort; unlike before when it felt like it choked her out. There was still one last thing she needed to do. She had just come out to Dion, her only friend whom she trusted with her heart and soul. But there were two more people she had to tell, the two who had taken her in and loved her from the moment they met her—Hazel and Jamie. "I... I want to tell them too. They took me in... they have a right to know." Ash laid her head on Dion's chest, her body still trembling ever so slightly. "Do you wanna tell them now?" Dion asked with a soft yet reassuring tone. Ash nodded and her shaking worsened. "But what if—what if it changes things? What if they reject me? What if—" Dion held Ash's face in her paws and pressed her nose into hers. "It won't. They love you, Ash. You know that, right?" Dion's voice was certain, yet still soft and comforting. Ash tried to swallow her worries and nodded in response, though a small worry gnawed at the back of her mind still, her worries slowly building back up as Dion and she walked to the living room where Hazel and Jamie were cuddling and watching a movie about some mean girls. When Hazel saw them, his eyes lit up and he instantly paused the movie and smiled at the two. "Hello, dears! I was wondering where the two of you were. Do you need anything? I can make something for—" Jamie giggled to himself and placed a hand on his husband's shoulder. "Let the kids speak, hunny." Ash was ready to speak. At least, she *thought* she was. The warmth and care of their voices and demeanor choked her up. Even after ten years, she had never fully gotten used to such kindness and love. Dion held Ash's paw, giving it a gentle squeeze of reassurance. Ash took a deep, shaky breath trying to regain a bit of courage. "I... I have something I need to tell you both," Ash's voice was quiet but audible enough. Hazel completely turned to face her, his fussy nature dampening to full father listening mode. "Of course, dear. You can tell us anything." Jamie held his husband's paw, and nodded, encouraging her the best he could. "Take your time, sweetie." Ash hesitated and looked down at the floor, finally speaking. "I—I'm Demi-Femme. I chose the name Ashley for myself. Or—or Ash for short. I use she/her and they/them pronouns now." Ash braced herself, expecting them to

beat her like her father did, or at the least tease and berate her. But like before, Ash was greeted with warmth and love. Hazel covered his mouth with his paws as he started to cry tears of joy. "Oh, sweetheart..." His voice was dense with emotion as he pulled her into his arms, his cries turning to happy sobs as he gave her the biggest, warmest, and most loving hug she ever felt. "Oh, my sweet girl! I'm so proud of you!" Ash stiffened at first, not sure why she *didn't* expect this. Hazel nuzzled into her soft fur, which caused Ash to fully melt into the love as tears once again filled her eyes. Hazel rubbed circles on her back, causing her to cling tighter to him. Jamie soon followed suit, his composure was calmer and collected but that didn't stop him from having tears well up for him as he hugged Ash. Jamie's embrace was robust, and stable, like a buoy on a calm, windless sea. "You are so brave, Ash. Thank you for trusting us with this." Jamie's voice kept its soft and calm tone, now with a slight waver as his tears ran down his face. Ash let out a trembling breath, her grip tightening around them both. She had been so afraid of the outcome ending similarly to what happened with Lucas, but yet again she was proven wrong. Both of Dion's parents were holding her as if she were their own. Dion stood beside the three of them, grinning ear to ear as her tail flicked happily. "Told you they'd love you no matter what." Hazel pulled back finally and looked into Ash's eyes, wiping her tears. "Oh, my beautiful, lovely child—why did you think we would reject you?" Hazel leaned in and gave her head a bunch of kisses. "My dad, he... said no one would like me like this. That I'd be ugly and unapproachable. That—" Ash was interrupted by Hazel and Jamie tightening their grip on Ash as Dion now joined into the hug, wrapping her tail around them. Jamie kissed Ash's cheek and petted her head as he spoke. "You've always been family to us. That's never going to change." Ash couldn't hold it in anymore. She fully broke down in their arms, tears rushing down her face as she shook from emotion. For the first time in her life, she felt completely and fully safe. It may not be in her home, but this felt more at home than her real one. And for Ash, that was more than good enough.

A few days after Ash confided in Dion, she walked up to Tina. Ash felt like she was the only person in her dad's mansion she could trust with what she was about to tell her. "Tina? I have something I want to tell you." Ash said with a gentle tone. She had a slight tremble in her voice. "What's up, my dear?" Tina said as she closed the book she had written her research in, ready to give Ash her full attention. Ash takes a deep breath before she speaks, "I'm Demi-Femme. I... I go by Ashley now. Or Ash for short- I use sh-she/her and they/th-them." Tina picks Ash up and plants a gentle kiss on her cheek. "Congratulations, dear! Thank you for having the confidence to tell me. You'll always be safe with me, Ashley." Ash smiles and nuzzles in. "Sucks I don't have a dress or femme clothes.." Ash said under her breath. Then Tina realized something: in the 10 years she's been there, Ash hasn't had a single birthday party. "It's been a decade since I've been here... Why don't you celebrate your birthday?" She asks with a gentle and motherly curiosity. Ash thinks about it for a bit, not wanting to tell her more than she needs to know— after all, if she told Tina what Lucas had done to her... She didn't even want to think about it, "Dad is usually too busy. I've never had one before." Ash continues to snuggle into Tina, not thinking it's a big deal. "How would you like me to throw you your next birthday party? I'm sure Lucas wouldn't mind." Ash pulled away to look at her, shocked. "R-really? You'd do that for me?" Ash had to stop herself from tearing up again. "Of course! You deserve it! How about we get you those dresses and feminine clothes, ok? Got a favorite flavor for cake and ice cream?" Tina said with a smile. "Ever since you took me out for Ice cream every week, I've

come to enjoy triple chocolate. As for cake...? I've never had it. So I'd just choose chocolate as well." Ash said a bit bashfully, a bit guilty to be accepting so much from Tina. The motherly Umbreon placed her paw on Ash's cheek and kissed her forehead. "Alright, my dear. When your birthday comes back around, we will throw a huge party." Ash couldn't contain her excitement as her tail wagged faster. "Would it be possible to hold it at Dion's place...? I can give you Hazel's and Jamie's numbers." Tina nodded and pulled out her phone. "This is going to be your best birthday party ever, Ash! I promise it."

It was on the day of Ash's sixteenth birthday, the day was mild with a soft crisp breeze as the scent of fresh lavender and hyacinth lingered in the air, as Ash walked beside Tina as the two of them made their way through Verdanturf to get to Dion's. This small town was always so calm, a stark and welcoming contrast to the suffering and trauma that Ash has faced in her life. Tina was carrying a large stack of beautifully wrapped presents, her Umbreon rings glowing softly in the daylight. Ash could feel her heart warm as she took in the sight of Tina carrying her presents. This was the first time anyone had ever truly cared for her birthday, and it felt surreal. The only time Lucas would ever mention the date was in the cruelest form of father-daughter bonding. This felt so much different. This was love. "You know, I was going to get you even more, but I figured Dion's family might already be overwhelmed with cake duty. I hope they made what you asked for." She smirked to herself as she readjusted her grasp on the presents so she didn't drop them. Ash's tail flicked with uncontrollable excitement as she couldn't help but bounce with each step. "They promised they would! I have faith in them." Tina couldn't help but giggle as she nudged Ash's side playfully. "Then I suppose today is going to be perfect." Ash let out a light chuckle, but deep down inside her, she couldn't quite fully grasp that this was real. Happiness, Love, Acceptance, Family—All of these things in one place—it all seemed too good to be true, like a fragile flower ready to be uprooted by a storm. But for once, she could hold out hope. By the time they got to Dion's place, the air was filled with the scent of freshly baked chocolate cake. The door opened up before either of them could knock, Dion's beaming smile greeting them. Her fur was stained with chocolate frosting and batter. "You two made it! Both of you come in!" As Ash and Tina walked in, both of them were greeted by Hazel and Jamie who both gave Ash a loving embrace. "Happy birthday my sweet Ash!" Hazel cooed as he peppered her face with quick kisses, as he squeezed her tighter to his chest. "Oh, my sweet girl! My precious angel! You're sixteen now! So grown up! So beautiful!" His fluffy tail wagged behind him as he couldn't help but fawn over everything about her. Ash couldn't help but laugh as her heart warmed from his love. "Hazel, I—" Before she could even speak, Hazel continued his pampering. "Do you feel okay? Are you hungry? Thirsty? Did you sleep enough last night? Have you been eating enough? You look amazing, but I need to make sure you're healthy too, sweetheart!" Hazel kept fussing, looking her over as he held her face in his paws. "Hazel," Jamie interjected with a soft chuckle, kissing his husband on the cheek. "Breathe, my love." Hazel blinked a bit before sighing sheepishly. "Right, right. Sorry, love, just—oh! We have everything ready in the kitchen!" He turned to Ash as he vibrated with excitement, his tail wagging impossibly faster. "I can smell the cake! It's... chocolate. Just like I asked..." Ash's voice wavered as she nuzzled into Hazel and Jamie, her tail continuing to wag. "Yep! Jamie and I made it ourselves!" Hazel puffed his chest with pride, a cocky smirk spreading across his face. "Triple chocolate! Our best work, if I do say so myself!" Hazel mused to themselves. Dion stomped her foot and crossed her arms. "Heyyy I helped too! I did the mixing!" Jamie chuckled

and pulled Dion and Tina into the hug, smiling softly. “And that was some of the best mixing I’ve ever seen.” Dion looked at Ash, and hugged her close as she stroked her head. “What would you like to do first, Ashy?” Ash hesitated as she snuggled into the embrace, looking up at Tina before speaking softly. “Can we do the clothes first?” Dion giggled and hugged her tighter. “Of course!” She grabbed Ash’s paw softly and sat her on the couch. Her eyes widened as Tina set the large pile of presents in front of her. “I... I didn’t realize how much this was until it was in front of me—I... Tina, this is too much...” Ash’s voice was thick with emotion, still not able to fully process the kindness and sincerity of it all. Tina simply smirked at her as she brushed Ash’s hair out of her face. “Trust me, it’s worth it dear.” Ash took a deep breath and started to open the first box, her heart throbbed with suspense. Upon lifting the lid she could feel her breath hitch. Clothes. Her clothes. Flowing dresses, short shorts, adorable skirts, off-shoulder and on-shoulder blouses, cozy sweaters, comfy thigh-highs, and sexy crop tops—Each outfit had five variations in different fashions. Her paws couldn’t help but tremble as she felt the supple fabrics. For sixteen years, she’s only ever been Lucas’s pawn. Always forced to be what he wanted, having to pretend to be something she wasn’t. He’d mock her identity and weaponize it against her. But these clothes—they were *hers*. “I-I don’t know what to say...” Her voice was soft as she felt tears start to sting her cheeks. “You don’t have to say anything. You can just try them on.” Tina spoke with a soft love as she beamed. So that’s exactly what she did. For the rest of the day, Ash had turned Dion’s living room into a personal catwalk, showing off her new clothes as she spun and twirled to show them every angle. Dion, her parents, and Tina always cheered and showered her with compliments. Every moment of this was an absolute dream. She finally felt like herself and had people who *loved* her for it. She finally felt *happy*. Ash twirled in front of the mirror with a shy smile, the dress softly spinning with her. It was a light lavender dress with lace trim that fit her perfectly. She turned to Dion for input, who had been sitting cross-legged on the floor as she took in her beauty. “You look amazing!” Dion said breathily. Ash couldn’t help but blush as her tail flicked embarrassedly. It may have been well over a decade of being around these four, but Lucas had never given her the chance to get used to compliments. Usually all of his compliments were backhanded, or sarcastic. Ash glanced over at the three parents, all of them nodding and agreeing with Dion. “You really do look amazing, sweetheart.” Jamie laid his head into Hazel’s arms, continuing with a soft purr. “That color suits you.” Tina nodded again, and clasped her paws together. “You’re even more beautiful than I imagined!” Hazel smirked cheekily. “You’ve got a whole wardrobe now. What’s next?” Ash couldn’t help but hesitate as she looked at her options—she wasn’t used to having choices. This much choice was somewhat overwhelming to her. Dion noticed Ash having a hard time choosing, so she got up to help Ash look for her next outfit, rummaging through the pile. “Okay, okay! Try this one next!” She pulled out an off shoulder dark grey crop top—it had a triangular boob window, with purple and red flames at the base of the hems—along with a red pleated skirt, and black leggings. “This one *screams* you.” Ash took the outfit with a delicate grasp, then went into the bathroom to get changed. As she pulled the sweater over her head, she couldn’t help but feel the fabric. It was warm and soft, bringing so much more comfort than the simplistic and cheap tees and pants she’d been forced to wear by Lucas. After getting completely changed, she stepped back into the living room, only to be met by an over-dramatic sigh and gaping maw from both Dion and Hazel. “Yup. That outfit is absolutely the one.” Tina giggled softly. “You said that about every outfit so far, Dion.” Hazel mock-gasped and held his paw over his mouth. “Nonsense! She’s

beautiful in everything, so who are we to say that every outfit isn't 'the one'?" Dion nodded aggressively. "Exactly! She looks perfect in all of them!" Dion witted back at Tina, motioning obnoxiously towards Ash. Ash laughed at the exchange, her heart warming even further. *I didn't realize I could laugh so... freely. It feels nice.* This was so much *fun*. It felt so *normal* in comparison to Ash's life, and she craved more of it. *I finally found the place I know I belong.* The next few hours flew by, as she wore every article of clothing, even trying new combinations to see if she liked them. Her friend and the parents would always immediately shower her in compliments, as she'd show off her outfits. *They don't look at me like a mistake. They don't look at me like I'm just some broken husk. They see me for who I am, and they love me. They love me.* As the sun set outside, Ash sat near the window as she watched the sky turn from brilliant reds and warm oranges to deep purples and calming dark blues. Everything has been perfect so far—much more than she ever thought she deserved or could dream of. But as the quiet grew louder, so did her intrusive thoughts. *Is this really going to last? What if I fuck it up? What if I just... make things worse for them?* Dion walked over to her and sat beside her, wrapping her arms around Ash as she laid her chin on her shoulder. "Are you ok, Ashy?" Ash nodded softly, leaning her head into Dion's. "Yeah... Just thinking." Dion nuzzled in softly, letting out a soft hum. "Are they good thoughts?" Ash looked down a bit, letting her thoughts bounce around and permeate a bit longer. "Yeah, I think so." Dion smiled at her softly, giving her a reassuring squeeze. "Good. Because you deserve this. All of it." Ash could feel her breath get caught in her throat. She's always found it hard to believe whenever someone told her this, but hearing Dion say it made it feel so much more real. There was a moment of silence between the two, Dion interlocked their paws, giving Ash's a soft squeeze. "You are Ashley. My Ashy. You're home now. With your family." Ash could feel tears of joy start to well up, causing her to nuzzle into Dion with a soft smile. "Yeah. I think I finally am." The two of them shared this moment for a bit longer, only for Jamie to call for them from the kitchen. "Ash! Dion! It's time!" Dion immediately shot up with excitement, practically propelling her off the couch. She grasped Ash's paw and smiled. "Okay. Do me a favor and close your eyes for me." Ash's brow raised a bit in confusion. "Why?" Dion smirked and giggled. "Just do it, okay? I promise it will be worth it." Ash sighed playfully and closed her eyes. Dion pulled her to the kitchen and sat her down at the table, sitting next to her. Ash could hear the sound of a plate being set in front of her followed by a lighter igniting, the soft smell of burning wax filled the air. "Alright! Go ahead and open them!" Ash opened her eyes—In front of her was the chocolate cake, in the center of the cake was a one and a six candle lit. It was quite a large cake too, having two different sized layers, both covered in chocolate frosting as the chocolate trim was made from dark chocolate frosting. Just like she asked for. Even though they told her that they made it a few hours ago, she still couldn't believe it. "You really made it..." Jamie placed a paw on her shoulder, beaming quite proudly. "Of course we did! You think we'd half-ass your first real birthday celebration?" Hazel nodded and puffed his chest in pride. "You ask, we deliver." Dion went to the freezer and pulled out a large tub, walking it to the table and setting it down. "And don't forget the ice cream! Triple chocolate, just for you!" Ash couldn't help but stare at them, eternally appreciative and grateful by these gestures of love. It wasn't just the fact that they got her cake and ice cream, it was the fact that they *listened*. Tina motioned to the cake calmly and smiled. "Go on, dear. Make a wish!" Ash gulped, swallowing her nerves as she watched the fire on the candles flicker and dance. If she were to make a wish back a few years ago, it would've been to finally escape and find love.

And now... she had the love she wanted. She closed her eyes as she took a deep breath, and blew out the candles. *Please. I just wish for this to last.* As the candles went out, everyone cheered and clapped. "Happy birthday, Ash!" Jamie cooed softly, his gaze filled with warmth. Hazel reacted a *lot* more dramatically. He picked Ash up off the chair and hugged her tight as he twirled around. "Oh, my sweet little girl! You're sixteen! Sixteen!" Ash couldn't help but laugh, her tail wagging as she hugged Hazel in return. "Hazel, I need to breathe!" Hazel paused, if only for a moment, then set her down—only to immediately bombard her face with kisses. Dion shoved a plate of cake into Ash's paws, smirking. "Alright, alright, enough love attacks! It's time for the best part—cake and ice cream!" Jamie at that moment scooped out some ice cream, setting it next to the cake on Ash's plate. She looked down at the heavenly desserts in front of her, her stomach growling as if it doesn't want to wait anymore. She grabbed her fork and scooped a piece of the cake into her mouth, the rich chocolatey goodness melting on her taste buds. "Oh—" She had to take a moment to fully register it all—the richness, the texture, the sweetness—each flavorful note orchestrating an amazing harmony of taste. Her eyes watered a bit before speaking. "This is... AMAZING!" Ash's tail wagged faster as she took another bite, humming in ecstasy. Both Jamie and Hazel beamed with delight and pride as they made a plate for Dion, then Tina, and finally for themselves. "You really like it, dear?" Hazel asked as he felt his eyes water. Ash nodded with eagerness as she took yet another bite, her smile never having left her face. "I love it! Best cake I've ever had—Ignore the fact that this is the *first* cake I've ever had." Hazel sniffled and wiped his tears of joy as he nestled his head into Jamie's arms. "Our baby likes our cooking, Jayjay." Jamie giggled softly, kissing his husband on the cheek. "Of course, she does, Hazie." As Jamie and Hazel were basking in the pride of making a delicious cake, Jamie looked over at Dion and Tina, only to see a chaotic and messy scene—Dion and Tina were no longer using their forks, both of them using their paws as the two of them grabbed pieces of cake and ice-cream to shovel the delicious deserts into their mouths—Dion, who was usually cool and confident had abandoned that completely, grabbing a fistful of the cake a la mode, and swallowing it down her gullet, with a big smile and delight showing absolutely zero remorse. Tina wasn't doing much better, holding a dripping spoonful of ice cream in one paw while she used her bare paw to eat a piece of cake, caring more about enjoying the desserts than her manners. The mess was damn near immediate. Chocolate smeared all over their faces, frosting clung to their face, and ice cream stuck to their fur as tiny crumbs of cake littered the table. Dion groaned satisfied as she licked her lips, missing a huge streak of ice cream and frosting on her face. Tina, on the other hand, had now abandoned her spoon and started to eat with both of her paws, shoveling pawfuls of cake into her maw, not giving a care about her dignity. Jamie had been quietly watching the scene unfold, his eyes wide as a small smirk of amusement spread across his face. He rubbed the bridge of his muzzle and sighed, chuckling lightly. "It seems both of them really enjoy it too." Hazel, however, was having a full-blown meltdown. He gasped dramatically as his paws flew to his chest. "Oh, no, no, no!" His tail fluffed up as he hurried over to them, holding a napkin tightly in his paws. "I understand that this cake is delicious—*because*, of course, it was made by two of the most beautiful and talented people I know—but I *will not* have you both behaving like barn Pokémon!" Despite his scolding, he was met with zero guilt from both. Dion raised an eyebrow as she licked her paws clean, letting out a hearty burp. Tina smirked deviously as she grabbed a chunk of cake and shoved it into her mouth, chewing even slower now to tease him. Hazel whimpered as he shot Dion a glare. "Dion!

I raised you to have manners!” Dion was completely unbothered as she responded, her tail flicking lazily as she smirked smugly. “And yet, here I am.” Hazel’s eyes twitched as his patience ran thin, then he turned to Tina with a low growl. “And you, missy! I thought *you* of all people would have known—” Before he could finish his sentence, Tina grabbed a chunk of cake and forced it into Hazel’s mouth, making sure to be messy with it and get it all over his face. Large streaks of chocolate and cream streaked along his mouth as his ears shot up, his eyes dropping in betrayal. The room fell dead silent. Dion was the first to break the silence, bursting out in laughter as she lay her head on the table, her tail thrashing in amusement. Jamie, who was usually quite composed, had to hold in the urge to laugh out loud, pressing his paw into his mouth to stifle his chuckles. Ash had barely finished her last bite and had started to giggle and kick her feet. Hazel had started to chew the piece of cake he was force-fed, narrowing his eyes at Tina. He gave an overdramatic swallow as he lifted the napkin in his paw to wipe his face. Tina just smiled at her, completely guilt-free. “*You*,” Hazel growled as he pointed at Tina with a frosting-covered paw. “Are an absolute *menace*.” Tina shrugged as her smile widened, seeming completely pleased. “And you love me for it.” Hazel exhaled a long, over-dramatic sigh as he slouched his shoulders, continuing to clean himself. “*Unfortunately* for me, I do.” Hazel then joined in with the laughter, grabbing a slice of cake and shoving it into Tina’s mouth. “Haha! Revenge!!” Ash continued to laugh, watching this unfold. *I’m finally here. Home.*

It had only been a couple of days since Ash’s party, the fragile peace and tranquility that had finally nested in her life had shattered. Lucas had walked up to Ash as she was carrying boxes through the house to storage. “Andrew. I have a surprise for you. A present of gratitude, if you wish.” Lucas firmly placed his paws on her shoulders, squeezing them with a smirk. “Follow me.” Ash was terrified of what he had planned, she knew what his ‘gratitude’ looked like. But she didn’t want to make it worse. She simply nodded, and followed behind him with a forced eagerness. Everything down to her atoms was wailing at her to run from him, to attack him, to do *anything*. But she couldn’t... she had no choice but to follow. *I’m not strong enough to kill him. I need to be stronger.* He could easily overpower her. His Absol sense was well-trained and could detect any attack before she even tried. So she continued to walk. *I’m stronger now... in mental fortitude at least. I won’t let him break me.* She whimpered as she got a headache, flashes of what was to come filling her head—being strapped to a cold metal table. Lucas’s manic laugh. Searing pain in her chest. Her arm and eye were engulfed in searing hot pain—Ash had to stop herself from freezing in place, her arms starting to tremble. This only made her fear what was to come even more than she did before. After what felt like hours of walking to her hell, they entered a cold, cement room. Inside were Strange medical machines, the harsh smell of antiseptic stung her nostrils as she walked further into the room. Right smack in the center was a metal table, with weird rectangular indents at each side on the center, and down at the bottom. Before Ash could even think, Lucas slammed her onto the cold steel table, catching her off guard as the wind got knocked out, a silent scream escaping her maw. Suddenly, she felt restraints hold her arms and legs down as she slowly started to gather what was happening. *Just like in my vision... I’m in for hell...* Lucas just stood over her with malicious amusement, his shadow casting over her. “I’ll be back, ‘Ashley’.” He uttered her name mockingly, condescension full in his tone. “I’m going to go get someone~” He walked out laughing and cackling, causing her breathing to hitch and her body to run cold. As Lucas left the room, the door locked shut behind him, and a dreadful silence fell over the room. Her thoughts

started to spiral, filling the silence with every possible outcome as her breath quickened. *Who was he bringing? What is he planning?* When the door opened, Lucas's voice filled the cold cement room. "Look at this! A family reunion~" Ash's breathing hitched as she saw Lucas walk towards her, with Tina behind him. The moment Tina saw Ash's current situation, her eyes widened as she locked eyes with Ash, filled with bafflement and dread. She hesitated only for a moment before running to her with her hands shaking, and she tried to pull the restraints off. "L-Lucas! What are you doing to her?!" Lucas cocked his head with condescendence, as a twisted smirk curled his lips. "Not me, my dear. You." Tina froze, a pit forming in her stomach. "What...?" Lucas walked to Tina, gently placing his paws on her shoulders, his warm breath suffocating. "You finally get to see the fruits of your labor." Ash's stomach felt like it was twisting itself into an impossible amount of knots, her body helplessly shaking against the restraints. Lucas continued to speak, his voice casual as if discussing what happened at work. "Remember our conversation about the hypothetical of what would happen if we surgically attached a Mega Stone to someone's organ? Here is your chance to test that hypothesis." He grabbed a scalpel from the surgery tray, and placed it into Tina's paw. She flinched at the cold metal of the surgical knife as if it burned her skin. "But... I can't do this to her..." Tina's voice was a shaky murmur, her entire body starting to tremble. Lucas sighed, his patience running thinner with each passing moment. "You *will* do this to him." His words weighed down the air of this room with the weight of a Wailord. Then his smirk returned, wider and malicious. "Unless of course... you'd rather I add a certain Eevee to our test subjects?" Tina could feel her body freeze in place, almost as if every function in her body had skipped a beat. "Y-you wouldn't," her voice was no higher than a whisper. Lucas kept his smirk, showing no remorse for his threat. "You want to take that risk?" Ash felt her heart wrench for Tina. "Tina," Ash's voice was grave, as she craned her neck to look into Tina's eyes. "It's okay. I wouldn't ever ask you to choose me over Blaine." Ash forced a weak shaky smile despite how utterly fear-filled she was. Tina turned to look back at Lucas, a needful plea in her tone. "At least administer some anesthesia..." Lucas cackled as if Tina told him the funniest joke he had ever heard. "Anesthesia?" He wiped the tears that gathered in his eyes from laughing so hard, and shook his head. "Never heard of it." Tina felt as if her stomach was a bottomless pit. Her hands trembled as she looked back at Ash, tears streaming down both of their faces. Tina forced her eyes shut as the scalpel met Ash's chest. She bit her lip to do her best not to cry out in pain, Tina using her other paw to squeeze Ash's tightly to comfort the best she could. The blade of the scalpel cut deep, carving into her flesh like honeyed ham. Ash still squirmed, the metal cuffs biting and digging into her wrists as she pulled and squirmed. Everything *hurts*. Tina was sobbing as she did the surgery, her tears dripping down onto the metal table and cold cement floor. Her paw was constantly shaking as she cut deeper. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," She kept chanting repeatedly under her breath, her voice breaking and cracking from the pain of what she was *forced* to do. Tina took the Absolut with shaky paws, and placed it into the cavity she had created. The stone was so much worse—it didn't hurt, but it was so *cold*. The chill clawed deep into her very soul like it was spreading through her body and bones—She felt the stone bury itself in her flesh, fusing to her very body with ancient magic within itself. Ash's breathing had become shallow and shaky, her whimpers and tears no longer able to be held in. Tina shakily picked up the needle and thread, starting to sew the incision shut. Tina nearly dropped the needle multiple times due to her trembling paws, but eventually, it was done. "Th-there! I did what you asked! Now please... let her go." As if on

cue, the restraints went back into the table. Tina pulled Ash into her arms and hugged her tight, sobbing. Lucas spoke through the intercom, cutting through the relief of the moment. "We're only halfway done." Ash was barely able to register what was going on. Her vision and head were fuzzy from the pain, her breath was shaky and shallow. "Andrew? Activate your stone." Ash flinched at the use of her deadname but was too out of it and scared to correct him. She knew she had no choice. *If I refuse... who knows what he'd do to Tina.* She shakily reached her paw to her chest, taking a trembling deep breath. The reaction was instantaneous—A prismatic light burst out, consuming her entire body in glimmering light. She could feel the intense power surge through her veins, it felt raw and ancient. Her hair grew long, it was flowing angelically and softer than silk. Wings grew from her back, they flapped delicately. Her horn grew in size, becoming more curvy and wide as a small second horn grew out the other side. Horns jutted out of her kneecaps and shoulders, as her fluff around her ankles and wrists grew longer. When suddenly, she felt something shift in the magic flowing through her. She felt an explosion of light tear through her, the pain worse than anything Lucas had ever done to her. She *screamed* out in pain, shredding her voice. The power burst out of her arm, completely atomizing her arm and shoulder. She collapsed to the ground sobbing as blood poured out from the open wound. Her right eye practically burst, as prismatic light and a shower of blood poured from her socket. Ash collapsed onto the table writhing and screaming in pure agony. The light washed over her, turning her back to normal. Tina screamed as she picked Ash up into her arms, immediately starting to work on stopping the bleeding. Lucas observed through the one-way window of the lab and started to write notes down as he mused to himself. "Interesting. I'd say that was a staggering success!" He unlocks the door before walking off to go read over his notes. Tina tried her best to not panic, putting pressure on her wounds as her own body shook. "St-Stay with m-me sweetheart..." Her voice was no more than a shaking plea and whisper, as Ash weakly clung to her. Hours felt like days, blurring and stretching as Tina worked tirelessly cleaning, disinfecting, and sewing as Ash's blood stained her fur. Then Tina started to tinker with everything and anything she could find, making cybernetic prosthetics. "Thank Arceus I took biology and engineering..." She took a few hours to refine them and make sure they worked, then attached them both gently, and kissed her cheek. Ash slowly started to awaken, her voice was gravelly and weak. "T-Tina...? Are you... ok...?" Tina let out a trembling breath, and held Ash close to her, finally relieved that she was awake as she felt Ash's breathing cause her chest to fall and rise. "N-no I'm not... he made me..." Tina trembled as she squeezed Ash closer to her. Ash felt her new vision flick to life, the feeling was abnormal and quite seamless. The vision was as good as when she still had her biological eye, but it still felt... *off*. She looked up and was now able to fully take in Tina's face. *He broke her... like he did to me.* "Tina... It's not your fault." Tina didn't respond. She just held her close and nuzzled into her neck fluff. Ash took a deep breath and hugged her in return. "I... I can see again... It's... nice." Her voice was exhausted and soft, but filled with relief. Ash changed the subject, hoping to at least make her happy, if only just a bit. She pulled away from the hug and looked at Tina, with a weak smile. Tina trembled and sobbed as she looked at her, placing her paw on Ash's shoulder. "Oh, sweetheart..." Her voice cracked as more sobs forced their way out of her throat, the emotions claiming her—guilt, grief, love, relief. Without any hesitation, Ash nuzzled into her chest, a soft purr escaping her lips. Tina clung to her tightly, shaking and sobbing as if she would lose her if she let her go, as she hurried her snout into Ash's head. Ash didn't pull away. She wanted this

moment with her—a moment that numbs the pain with Tina's care and love. Where Lucas's torment was an afterthought. She just wanted to stay in the arms of the one person in this forsaken mansion who still loved her. In Ash's eyes, it wasn't Tina who did the surgery, but Lucas. He made the order. To Ash, he was the one holding the blade. Tina wiped the tears from her eyes, and shakily pulled away from the hug. She grabs the cybernetic arm and starts to attach it to Ash with careful precision. She lined up the connection points and then fully connected it to her shoulder joint. The arm wasn't perfect—Tina had made it under a stressful situation and quickly, but it was her best effort with the situation. Tina whimpered and wiped the fresh tears from Ash's face, then wiped her own as she smiled weakly at her. "It'll take some time to regain motor function in your arm, but you're all set now." Tina's voice was still wavering but she seemed calmer now. She immediately pulled Ash into another hug and kissed her face softly, stroking her head slowly. Ash curled up into her and swallowed, wanting felt like a rock in her throat, feeling the tears start to well up again. "... Th-thanks for not leaving m-me to die..." Ash's voice was extremely soft, wrung tight with exhaustion and emotion. She didn't know what to say—what could she say? Tina froze and grasped her arm tight, as tears dripped down her cheeks and onto Ash. "Ash, I would never—even for a second—think of leaving you like that. It was my fault this happened in the first place..." Without thinking Ash shook her head immediately, the motion slow and tired. "No. No, it wasn't." Ash's new arm shook as she tried to move it, but she managed to lightly grasp Tina's paw with it and smiled at her. "You did what any mother would do—you kept your daughter safe. I don't blame you in any way, shape, or form." Tina looked down at her face, searching her expression for any hatred or betrayal intended for her. But all she saw on Ash's face was care. Understanding. Love. Ash's face was still pale, the color had started to flush back to her cheeks, slowly but surely. The pain had gotten better since Tina administered the analgesia while she was out, her body slowly loosening up. Tina let out a quivering chuckle, and brushed Ash's hair out of her face. "How'd you become so good at being comforting all of a sudden..?" Ash blinked sleepily and gave Tina a tired grin as she snuggled in deeper to her warmth, slowly falling asleep. "I learned from the best."

Lucas had been spending his entire life searching for ultimate power. He learned how to speak ancient languages, scoured through ancient texts, and sacrificed his bandits to dark magic to search for answers— Wanting to be the perfect Absol he knew he was. After all his searching, he has managed to find something on how he could achieve exactly that— Arceus. The Alpha Pokémon. Rumored to be the god of this very universe— no, this very multiverse. Legends have spoken of Arceus' omnipotent ability to change its typing at will, with the plates that Arceus had forged for itself. There are eighteen of these plates in total, embodied in the building blocks of the universe— Fire, Water, Electric, Grass, Ice, Fighting, Poison, Ground, Flying, Psychic, Bug, Rock, Ghost, Dragon, Dark, Steel, Fairy, and Normal. Arceus had used these plates to build the foundations of the multiverse. And now, Lucas would use them for himself. Lucas embarked on a nine-month journey, ready to accomplish what no one else had ever done, not even the most power-hungry of sorcerers. He was going to find the plates. *All of them*. He returned to his hidden laboratory with the plates in his pack and spread them out in front of him. Each plate thrummed with a unique frequency, each unique in its way— the water plate always being wet to the touch, its thrum reminding him of a severe tidal storm. Or that the fire plate was so hot it made the metal table, he set the plates on orange with the pure heat as its thrum reminded him of crackling fire. Lucas could feel his head start to pound and throb from

the sheer power of such artifacts in his presence as if they were trying to deter him. He would not bend to its will. There was one problem, however. One problem that infuriated him. The plates could only be used *by Arceus*. No one else could use them. He growled to himself. *As if this was going to ever stop me*. He thought to himself and smirked as he pulled out books on magic. The plates are of no use to him in this form. But he would *make them his*. His mind starts to race with an idea. What if... instead of using each plate separately, he combined them into one larger plate? One that he would bind to his very soul, allowing him to use them. A twisted grin spreads across his face. He knew this would work. It'd *have* to work. ***He'd make it work***. As the plates were spread out on the table, he channeled his magic into the plates, forcing them to fuse. Fire shot out. Lighting crackled. Shadows slithered and consumed the lights. Vines wrapped themselves around him and the table. Each element lashed out as if it were screaming in pain; the pulsing thrum now changed to high-pitched ringing. Lucas would not submit. With each chant, with each evocation and incantation, the plates started to melt and fuse in a rainbowy light. Swirls of the 18 colors in the puddled mass, as it slowly formed into a new single unified plate before him. It was around the size of a cutting board— the only difference was that it was far thicker. It pulsed and shifted between the different colors, was smooth to the touch, and had an iridescent glow, almost mesmerizing. Lucas, with bated breath, gazed at his creation. There was one last step. Wielding the plate would do nothing. Because even now, it was still bound to Arceus. For this to work, he had to bind the plate to him— to his soul. He picks up the plate and starts the chant. The plate vibrates and buzzes in his paw tips as if to resist his incantation. He keeps going, using every forbidden spell, ancient language, and incantations so old there are hardly any records of them. The plate vibrates and levitates out of his paws, hovering before him. He was in awe when suddenly— It slammed into his back, forcing all the air out of Lucas's lungs. The moment it touches him, it starts to melt into his body, the energy so white-hot it evaporates the flesh it makes contact with all to bind with his soul. Lucas lets out a pained, guttural snarl as he trembles... raw power pulsing through his veins. The feeling of his flesh burning off continued as the plate worked its way in deeper. He did not stop the chant. With his teeth gritted, he forced his way through the pain and continued the chanting. As he spoke the final words, the pain stopped. Silence fills the room. But then, he feels a pulse of power. His heart is beating steadily, gunshots, and a broken smile covers his face as he feels it. Power. His muscles thrummed with the same resonance as the plate— full of power. He walks towards the wall and punches it with full force. The entire wall crumbles in one punch. "Aha!" It seems the plate hadn't only granted him the power to change types but also granted him extreme endurance and physical strength. But what of his magical abilities? He formed a Shadow Ball in his palm as he took a deep breath. The plate on his back turned a deep dark black— similar to a black hole, it took in the light, never to return it. His horn becomes a similar color. With a flick of his wrist, the shadow ball flies at incredible speeds into a different section of the wall. It practically implodes, each fragment laced with a dark aura. He began to chuckle to himself, only for it then to turn into a manic cackle as he had finally reached who he wanted to become— A God. After thirty-seven years... he had done it. Suddenly, a vision hits him like a bolt of lightning down his very mind. This was different from all the visions his Absol sense had granted him before. He saw Tina helping Ashley escape. But it wasn't just a vague glimpse. No. He saw every detail. And even more wild to him, he saw *every possibility*. Every single way Tina would try. How Ash would play a part in each interaction. The branching paths

of endless possibilities are almost too much to take in. His breath slowed as he realized... He wasn't just granted the ability to change types. Not only was he stronger physically and magically. His Absol vision. The ability to see disasters has heightened to an omniscient level. Lucas smirked to himself. "Oh yes... Not only am I stronger. Not only am I able to change typings..." he paused a bit. His blood-red eyes sparkled with morbid amusement. "I've become... ***Omnipotent.***"

The night outside of Lucas's manor was still and silent, a fake calmness masking the terrible things within. Inside Ash's bedroom, she sat on the cold ebony flooring as her cybernetic digits twitched as she tried to master control of her new arm. It seemed like no matter how hard she tried, her new arm would never truly feel like a part of her. It was a constant reminder that Lucas would take what he wanted from her, no matter the cost. Sleep never came easily for her. The moment she closed her eyes, she was thrust into horrible nightmares—memories of her ripping the lives away from innocent Pokemon, their faces twisted and contorted as they pointed and blamed her, their screams filling her head. Her focus was interrupted by light tapping on the window. She shakily stood up, facing the window with fearful hesitation. Her heart pounded in her chest, as her mind filled with possible explanations. *Lucas has eyes everywhere. Is this a test to see if I'd run away?* She swallowed her anxiety and pulled back the tattered curtains. She felt her breathing get caught in her throat as she saw a familiar face outside of her window—Tina. Her black fur pelt blended in with the darkness of the night, her shining blue rings along with the silver light of the moon lighting her features, her beautiful amber eyes filled with concern, perseverance, and something else. Underneath her motherly worry and determination was hope. Ash haphazardly unlatched the window, pulling it open and looking at Tina with confusion and anxiety. Her voice was hushed, and filled with panic. "T-Tina? What are you doing here?" Tina reached for Ash's paw, her own paw was trembling but her conviction didn't falter. "I'm getting you out of here. Now." For a moment Ash froze. *Is this real? Am I finally escaping?* Tina grasped Ash's paw, helping to ground her back in reality. Ash forced herself to swallow her fears and climbed out the window with Tina. The moment both of their paws hit the ground, they ran for dear life. Tina led the way with Ash's paw in hers, her gasps and breaths tearing through the night as the manor disappeared behind them, the brush and trees whizzing past the both of them. Despite Ash's athletic build, she struggled to keep up due to her fresh and old wounds throbbing and shooting pain through her very being. But neither of them could afford to stop. The mansion was almost completely covered from the treeline behind them, as the ornate fencing of the property line came into view. *It's happening! I'm finally going to escape!* Ash widened her steps, practically able to taste the freedom. ***Bang!*** A gunshot rang through the silence of the night. Tina collapsed to the ground in pain, as a choked cry escaped her maw. "NO—NO! TINA!" Ash immediately stopped running forward and dropped to her knees, holding Tina close as she put pressure on the blooming stain of blood on her side. Slow, measured footsteps approached them. A shadow casts over the both of them, dark and threatening. Lucas. Ash's body froze as she looked up at her demise. He took another step forward, his golden eyes sparkling with dark enjoyment. He slid his pistol back into the holster, shaking his head as if dealing with a misbehaving toddler. "Tsk, tsk... Trying to take what's mine, Tina?" His voice was calm and steady, which only made the tension higher. Before Ash could even say anything, Lucas tightly gripped a handful of Tina's hair and yanked her up to his eye level. She clenched her teeth as her breathing wavered from the pain, but she refused to scream. That

only made Lucas grin. "What made you think you could steal from me?" His voice went darker, dripping with condescension and cruelty. Then without warning, he slammed his fist as hard as possible into Tina's gut. A loud, sickening crack rang throughout the night, as Tina gasped in pain. Her body jerked on impact, her body stiffening from the sheer force of the blow. She shook, but refused to break. Lucas sneered as he pulled her close to his face. "Don't worry. We'll have plenty of time to get you to break." His gaze then shifted to Ash, filled with disgust and disdain. She barely had time to react before he yanked her up by the hair with intense force. Pain shot throughout her scalp, but her fear drowned it out. He leaned in next to Ash's ear, his breath was warm as he spoke. "Since you love her so much, you're going to watch every single thing I do to her." His grip tightened further. "And then? I'll do the same to you—twice as bad." Ash started to twist and flail in his grip. "No! Please! Leave her alone!" Her struggle just made Lucas cackle. He then dragged them both by the hair back to his mansion, and down to a place Ash knew all too well—the dungeon. It was a place filled with despair and suffering, hidden underneath Lucas's grand estate where the screams of his victims never reached the outside world, only ever to bounce off the stone walls. The air was thick, stagnant with the stench of blood, sweat, cum, and burnt flesh. The walls were covered in the marks of past victims—claw marks deep in the stone, dried bloodstains splattered every which way. Tina and Ash were bound and chained across from each other, so they couldn't reach the other, but close enough so they could hear every sound of suffering, every cry out in torment would leave everlasting scars on the other's very being. Tina was strong-willed. Ash had always known that. It was why she found her so admirable. And now, her will was going to be put to the test. The electrocution was the first of many things Lucas subjected them to. The torment Lucas brought to his victims he saw as a form of art, something that you couldn't rush. He held the device in front of Tina, making sure that she knew what it was, and what was to come. He attached the electrodes, sticking them to her temples, her wrists, and her ankles. The wires snaked from her body to the control panel in Lucas's grasp. He pressed a button, and immediately Tina felt it. The shocks were short, stabbing sensations that shot through her body, forcing her muscles to tense and jolt against her will. Her body forcibly spasming against the chains holding her down—her wrists bound above her head, and her ankles bound as her paws barely touched the floor. Tina clenched her jaw, forcing down any noises of suffering, refusing to scream and give Lucas that satisfaction. Lucas however, was a very patient mon. He pressed the buttons on the control panel, turning up the intensity. The pulses lengthened, stabbing deeper into her muscles and nerves. Tina's entire body started to seize intensely, her back trying to arch as her tendons and joints strained against the restraints. She let out a choked gasp, her entire body feeling as if molten metal was her blood. The stench of burning fur filled the air. "Come on, Tina," Lucas's voice was soft, an underlying amusement laced his words. "I know you can do better than that. Let's see how long you last before you really start screaming." Ash pulled and yanked on the chains, her wrist and ankles cut badly from trying to escape. She could only watch on in horror as Tina spasmed, the pain getting worse each time Lucas pressed a button on the control panel. "Stop it! You're killing her!" Ash's voice was filled with desperation, it starting to go hoarse from her constant begging falling on deaf ears. Lucas chuckled with amusement, his golden gaze seeming to glow under the dim humming of the fluorescent lights. "Killing her? No, no... That would be a waste." He brushed his paw along Tina's cheek, her body limp and sagged in the chains as she panted. "But breaking her? Now, *that's* worth my time." And then, with an eased

and almost relaxed motion, he pulled the electrodes off of Tina, and attached them to Ash's cybernetic arm. The immediate moment Lucas turned on the current, her entire body felt as if she was dipped in the lava of Mt. Pyre. An ear-piercing, pained scream shot out from her maw as electricity shot through every inch of her body. The metal makeup of her arm amplified the pain, sending molten torment through her nerves. It felt like her body was getting cooked from the inside out, her muscles seizing and spasming as her spine writhed against her will. Lucas laughed as her body jerked, her eyes wide in terror. "See, Tina? That's how you scream," he smirked as he pressed the button to turn up the power. The agony was intolerable. It just kept building as if they were waves in a typhoon, crashing down into her city of nerves. Her throat was raw from screaming, but she wasn't able to stop. Just as her vision was about to go dark, the current stopped. Ash sagged in her restraints, gasping and panting heavily as her body trembled. Every inch of her skin tingled, waves of phantom pain still shooting through her. "Now. Let's see how much more the both of you can take." Lucas's voice was filled with a dark curiosity, as he reattached the electrodes to Tina, then turned them back on. When Lucas grew bored of electrocution, he moved to white-hot nails. Lucas's horn shifted to a deeper red, as the light of the white-hot nails shone bright, reflecting in Lucas's golden gaze as he held them in a crackling fire. Tina was exhausted from the days, possibly even weeks, of being electrocuted. Her sweat matted her fur, her body shook, but she still looked at Lucas with a defiant glare. He chuckled as he plucked one of the nails from the embers with his bare paw. "Still holding strong, are we?" He smirked as he held the heated metal between his digits. "Let's see how long that lasts." With a deliberately paced motion, he pressed the nail into her upper arm. The pain was immediate. The instant the nail pressed into her skin, a nauseated hissing filled the room, her body flinched violently as it nearly instantaneously burned through fur and skin. Tina's breathing caught in her throat as tears streamed down her face. Her glowing blue rings flashing sporadically as she arched her back, but she refused to scream. Lucas's smirk lessened. "Still being stubborn?" His voice was silky, impish, but there was a barely noticeable annoyance underlying. He grabbed another nail, and pressed it deep into her thigh. He held it there, Tina's body twitching and jolting from the pain as she panted and cried, but she still did not scream. Lucas's grasp on the nail tightened. "Fine." With a quick, calculated movement, he stabbed the nail deep into her genitals. He grabbed a hammer and struck the nail, driving it in fully with a single hit. She gasped and forced back a sob, her chest rising and falling in uneven breaths. She gritted her teeth and looked at him, her gaze still defiant as she refused to scream. He grabbed another nail, and hammered it into her ribs. It sent searing hot and intolerable pain throughout her very being, as her body spasmed and tensed. Lucas's eye twitched as he looked at her, a low growl escaping from his throat. "You're really testing my patience, Tina." He grabbed yet another nail, and ghosted it over her knee joint. He grabbed her by the chin and forced her to look at him. "You will scream." He drove the nail straight into her joint with a sickening crack of the hammer. She gasped and sobbed, trembling violently as searing pain shot through her body, but she still refused to scream. Ash had been sobbing uncontrollably, weakly pulling at her restraints. "Please, please, stop!" Her voice was raspy and ragged from screaming and begging at the top of her lungs. "She's had enough!" Lucas slowly turned to look at her, his scowl twisting back into a smirk. "Enough?" He tilted his head, his voice was soft as if talking to a misbehaving pet. "No, no, my dear Andrew. She may be resilient, but you..." He grabbed a nail from the crackling embers, enjoying the way the glow of it danced on Ash's

tear-soaked face as he took another step closer. "You're so much easier to break." Ash hardly had the time to react before she felt the nail press into her skin. Lucas slowly pressed it into her collarbone, tracing it along the grooves of it as he enjoyed seeing her twitch and squirm. The heated metal left behind a burned, singed, scorching line of burnt flesh. Then he pressed the nail into her shoulder, dragging it along her arm. She choked out a strangled scream as her body shook and jolted, trying to pull away from the agonizing pain. Her cybernetic arm twitched and spasmed robotically from the overstimulation of pain. Lucas smiled as if he were listening to his favorite music. "There's that beautiful sound." Then with all the force he could muster, he hammered the nail into her shoulder. Ash's scream echoed through the dungeon, filling the air with her symphony of pain. It sent waves of radiating misery through her body, her spine arching involuntarily. Lucas grinned as he grabbed a second nail, then traced it along her ribs as if he were a twisted artist brushing on strokes of burning pain. "Now, now, Andrew." His voice was sickly sweet as he spoke. "Don't pass out on me yet~ We're just getting started." When the nails failed, he moved on to one of his favorite and most effective methods; Tickle torture. Tina had gone through electrocution and nails being driven into her flesh. The shackles held her body taut, stretched, and positioned so every sensitive spot was available to Lucas. Her breathing was ragged and sharp, having endured his inflicted pain for a couple of months now, only being fed just enough to stay alive. She remained silent as her head was tiredly looking down, too weak to raise it. That fact only seemed to make his grin grow wider. "You're a stubborn one, aren't you Tina?" Lucas smiled as he stepped closer. His piercing golden gaze filled with impish malice. "It's admirable. But I wonder..." he flexed his fingers and moved them close to Tina's side, tracing them along the grooves of her ribs. "How long will you last this time~?" Tina tensed up as she felt his gentle paws trace along her, her rings flickering as her body twitched under his touch, her reactions were out of her control. She knew what was coming. Ash knew what was coming. Tina felt her stomach drop as she couldn't do a thing about it. Ash had been through this punishment before. The torment of being helpless, your body betraying you as your body reacted out of your control. Now, it was Tina's turn to be subjected to it. Lucas made sure to move slowly, dragging his claws along her sides and ribs with a featherlight touch. The feeling sent trembles up her being, as her body tried to jerk away from it to no avail. She kept her lips pressed closed, not breaking. "Oh? Nothing? Let's see how long that lasts." Lucas moves his claws up to her breasts and starts to squeeze and trace his claws along her underboobs and cleavage. Tina gritted her teeth as her body trembled even more, her body tensing from the sensation. The feeling was driving her near insane—how the feeling built up, how it never faded, how every part of her body wanted to react. Then Lucas reached down and started to knead at her thighs. Tina gasped sharply as her body started to tremble. "There it is~" With a revived joy, he dug his claws into her sensitive thighs—not enough to hurt, but more than enough to tickle. His claws scribbled into her inner thighs and danced out to her buttocks and hips. Tina's entire body was shuddering, her body jolted as she struggled to hold back a noise. Lucas could tell he was getting close. Ash jerked and pulled on her restraints, trying to scream for him to stop. But her voice had completely given out. Not that Lucas would've listened. His paws moved lower, skimming his paws over her sensitive paw pads. Tina flinched instinctively, gasping as she struggled to breathe and hold in laughter. Lucas smirked. "Oh, this is a good spot, isn't it?" He squeezed and rubbed her pawpads gently, tracing his claws in between them. "Ticklish paws? How adorable~" She let out a sharp gasp, her body tensing further. She was nearly at her limit.

“Still holding back? Fine.” He grabbed her tail gently and started to trace his claws along the length of it. Her eyes grew wide as she jerked hard, hopelessly trying to pull away. Lucas smirked deviously. “Ah, there it is~ I’ve come to find that each person has that one spot if they are ticklish. And I just found yours.” Then he dug his digits into her tail, tickling, prodding, and tracing all along the length and base of it. Tina tugged at the restraints as she bit her lip, hardly holding on. Then it happened. A soft exhale that was a mix of a gasp and extremely close to laughter. Lucas immediately caught on, his grin stretching from ear to ear. “Oh? Was that a giggle Tina?” Tina tried to grit her teeth, but it was futile. Lucas had won. Before Tina could brace herself, he started digging into every inch of her tail and tickling faster. The dam had finally broken. She let out a breathy laugh, once she started to laugh she couldn’t stop. Lucas’s claws danced all along each of her spots, poking, prodding, squeezing, kneading, and tickling. Her body convulsed and yanked against the restraints, the shackles cutting deep into her wrists and ankles as she helplessly laughed. Her laughs were panicked, broken, trying pleas muffled under her cries. But Lucas didn’t stop. Minutes turned to hours. Her strength has failed. She’d been reduced to a shaking mess of sobs and laughter, her brain fogging. Ash had sobbed so hard she felt blood in her throat. Lucas took his paws off Tina, her laughter dying down to residual giggles and whimpers. He stepped back and admired what he had done—Tina sagged in her restraints, breathing shakily as her body spasmed from the residual sensations. Her once bright and confident glowing rings had faded to a dim, flickering silent plea for help. Lucas was far from done with his tickle torture. There was still one more toy he wanted to break like this. He turned to Ash and walked over, a smirk forming on his face. She had been sobbing and trying to scream for him to stop, her throat shattered and raw from the force of her cries and pleas. But now, she was deathly silent. She knew what was coming next. “Please... Please no...” Her voice was small and whimpering, as Lucas took another step forward. “You think you’re in any position to tell me what to do, Andrew?” Ash felt herself tense up, large waves of panic surged through her entire body as she weakly tried to pull away from the chains instinctively. Once again, Ash was completely at the mercy of a man who had none. Lucas traced both his claws along her sides, ghosting the indents of her ribs. Ash immediately started to breathe heavier, whimpering and squirming under his touch. Lucas smirked. “Oh, Andy.” His voice was silky, laced, and interwoven with threads of false care. “You already know how this goes, don’t you?” Her breathing grew hastier and more sporadic, as her heart hammered into her ribs. *I know I know... Please, please, please just make it quick.* Ash had been through all these methods of torment before, but this was her least favorite. It was humiliating and made you feel absolutely powerless. No matter how hard she fought it, she always failed to hold it in. And Lucas knew this. He traced his claws slowly along the indent of her ribs, occasionally digging in and scribbling his digits into her sensitive skin and muscles. Her breathing would hitch every time as soft whimpers leaked out of her maw. Lucas chuckled. “You’re trying to fight it? That’s adorable.” He starts to press a bit deeper into her ribs, using his pawtips in delicate and ticklish strides. Her whimpers became more desperate and frequent, breathy near-laughs squeaking out as her body helplessly tried to move away. “There’s that sound I love. Laugh for me, boy.” His paws then danced to her belly, kneading a scribbling into her abs. She kept trembling and breathily gasping, tears slowly dripping down her face. Lucas traced his claw along her belly button, pressing and poking at all the right spots to make Ash’s body jolt involuntarily, her body yanking against the bite of the shackles. Shaky near laughs squeaked out, but Lucas wasn’t satisfied.

“Still think you can hold out? Fine~ Let’s try someplace new.” Lucas was familiar with how sensitive an Absol’s horn was. How It could send sharp intense ticklish sensations and cause an Absol’s entire body to react violently. He had abused that knowledge before by tickling Ash’s horn until she was a shaking, breathless mess of sweat and tears. He wasn’t going to her horn so soon; instead, he moved his paws from her belly down to her paws. Upon immediate contact, Ash jolted and instantaneously tried pulling away, the shackles drawing blood from the sudden jolt. “NOOO—!!” Before Ash could even beg, a huge eruption of scratchy laughs escaped as Lucas traced his claws along her paw pads, mockingly tracing hearts into her sensitive skin. Ash yanked on the chains as her entire body shook and tried to escape his touch, her attempts futile. “Aww, are little Andrew’s pawsies sensitive~?” Lucas spoke in a soft condescending tone, his claws digging in. “STOHOOHOOHOP!!!” Ash’s voice was a raspy shriek, her helpless laughter coming out in weak shaky gasps. Her cybernetic arm twitched spastically, haywiring from the overstimulation. Her biological fist clenched tightly as if she could stop her laughter from happening further, but it was hopeless. Lucas was more than thorough. His claws danced from her pawpads to her toe beans, making sure to get the spaces between her pawpads and between her toes. He’d trace along the pads and scribble in deep shapes. Then he would grab her toes, pinching and softly rolling them between his fingers as he watched her shriek in laughter; panting, and whimpering. Before Ash could catch her breath, he started to knead his claws into her sensitive thighs. “EEEP!!! NOHOHO PLEAHEHEASE!!” Her reaction was instant. Ash’s voice had completely given out now, only being a quiet rasp as constant wheezing laughs painfully leaked out. Her entire body trembled as she whimpered, which only made Lucas dog in deeper. “Aw such cute noises~” He kept his motions painless, grabbing and squeezing at her thighs as she kept sobbing with rasped laughter. Ash panted, her body trembling with exhaustion. When suddenly—he stopped. Weak, trembling, and rasped residual giggles squeaked out as she was limp in her restraints. But Ash knew what he was going to do next. She weakly shook her head, but Lucas’s cruel grin only grew wider. He grabbed her horn, and started to drag his claws from the base of the horn to the tip. Ash practically silently screamed, as choked laughter exploded from her. Her body shook tremendously, her entire body screaming for it to stop. The instant Lucas even barely dragged his claw along her horn, she trembled and screeched with frantic wheezing laughter. Lucas cackled as she suffered. “Aw, poor widdle Andrew~” He grasped her horn tighter, dancing his claws up and down her hypersensitive horn. “You should have learned by now~” Her cybernetic eye flickered and glitched, her entire body spasmed, her entire vision went blurry with tears as she was forced to be trapped in an endless cycle of laughing and tiredness. Minutes felt like they stretched for years. By the time Lucas had stepped back to admire his work, Ash was a mess—her body was drenched and matted from sweat, her body trembled and spasmed from the residual sensation as her cybernetics glitched from the residual overstimulation, and her chest was rising and falling in heavy, gasping bursts. She was barely even conscious, her eyelids flickering. Lucas grabbed her by the chin, and forced her to look at him. He leaned in, his warm breath nauseating as he spoke. “That was fun, wasn’t it, Andy?” When Lucas grew bored of tickle torture, he moved on to Chinese water torture. Without saying anything, Lucas unchained Tina and Ash, then he dragged them both down to a different room in the dungeon. Their bodies hurt from an eternity of torment, but both of them knew that resistance was futile—it would only make it worse. The heavy metal door squeaked open, revealing a scrupulously designed room of

torture. In the center of the room sat a row of metal tables, with electronically activated restraints. Suspended above each of the tables was a large funnel, positioned right above where a victim's head would be. The funnels were connected to a network of piping, with valves off to the side to control the flow. Lucas didn't wait a second longer. He slammed Tina onto the table, the clamps activating, holding her wrists and ankles in place with a biting force. Ash then received the same treatment, but she was far too weak and exhausted to fight back as the restraints activated and held her down. The metal was frigid against both of their skin. Once both of them were restrained, Lucas casually stepped to the control panel tucked against the wall and turned a valve. A harsh groan of metallic strain rang through the room, as the pipes pushed cold water into the large funnels. After they were filled to the brim, Lucas twisted the valve to stop the flow. The silence that followed was deafening, Lucas savored their dread before twisting the stopcocks on both their funnels ever so slightly. *Drip.* Ash felt a drop of water land right in the center of her forehead—it was frigid and unsettling. *Drip. Drip.* Another, then another. Each drip of water unraveled her mind just a little bit further, hitting the exact same spot each time. Tina gritted her teeth as the same punishment befell her. The first few drops were always the easiest. Just a slight irritation. But as the seconds stretched on into minutes, each drop grew more and more unbearable. The inconsistent pattern on both their heads became maddening, unfurling their will to something simple. Lucas grinned as he leaned into the doorframe, spectating as if he were watching his favorite show. He knew the effects of this simplistic torture—He had seen Ash get turned into a trembling sobbing mess only after a mere few hours. His grin grew wider as he spoke. “Let’s see how long you both can last.” After he walked out, the door slammed shut with a loud thud. The dim fluorescent lights buzzed softly, barely illuminating their tormented faces. But neither of them could focus on what was happening around them, all they could hear was the water. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* Each droplet sent a jolt of irritation as the water pooled on their foreheads. Ash helplessly attempted to slow her breathing, her chest falling and rising in deliberate choked breaths. She tried to focus on something—anything—to get her mind off the dripping water. But anytime she tried, a drop would pull her back to it—her only thought was the water. Her restraints ensured that she couldn't even shift her head to find any form of comfort. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* Tina softly whimpered as she bit her lip so hard she tasted blood, her fingers spasming and digging into the restraints. *I've endured worse.* She had to—needed to—believe that. But even then, she could feel her mind melt as her sanity slowly plummeted. The water wasn't just dripping onto them—it felt like it was drilling itself into their very psyche, the frigid contact of each droplet adding to the feeling of frustration and multiplying the ever-looming helplessness. Time started to lose meaning to them. How long have they been there? Minutes? Hours? Days? Months even? Their minds belonged to the nonstop thrum of the dripping water. Tears started to drip down Ash's face as she couldn't help but sob. *I can't handle this... it's all too much.* She tried to think about Dion, about Hazel and Jamie, her *real* family. But those memories felt so long ago, once again getting drowned out by the rhythmic drips. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* Both of their muscles had begun to ache from their tight restraints, but it wasn't possible for them to move, or even shift their position. Tina's breath had started to grow heavy, clenching her paws into fists. Every part of her wanted it to stop, to do *something*. But she couldn't. Neither of them could. Suddenly both could hear soft whispers. Not from anyone in the room, but from the darkest reaches of their minds. The drips had warped into Lucas's cruel voice, speaking with each drop that hit their forehead. Tina

could hear his voice echo in her mind, ever teasing and condescending. *You are weak. You are pathetic. This is what you deserve for stealing from me.* Ash's breath caught in her throat, as more sobs choked out of her. She could have sworn she heard her father too, his mocking voice adding to the frigid drips drilling into her skull. *You never get to choose who you are. You were always mine from the moment you were born.* The drips kept going. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* Tina finally made a sound—a whimpered sob as tears dripped down her face. Ash couldn't hold on anymore. She had started to sob uncontrollably, her voice still broken and raw from everything that had happened before. Her mind kept spiraling, her entire body shaking. That was the terror of this punishment. It had nothing to do with physical endurance or pain. It was about the slow spiral of losing your mind. And both of them had lost. The metal door creaked open. Ash didn't even recognize the sound. Her mind was gone, the only thought in her mind was the dripping, as if she had completely forgotten what life was like before the dripping. Tina's breathing caught in her throat as she heard the door. She willed herself to focus on the fact that something new was happening. Steady pawsteps walked to them both, when suddenly—the dripping stopped. Both practically sighed in relief at the same time. Tina had to stop herself from breaking down in joy that it was *finally* over, because she knew who was checking on them. Lucas. The faint sound of him tapping his claws into the metal table, the fluorescent buzz of the lights were the only sounds. But anything was better than the dripping. "Poor Andrew and Tina. How long has it been, hmm?" He gently cupped his paw into Ash's cheek, his voice was annoyingly calm compared to the hell they just went to. "Hours? Days? Weeks? I'll never tell." Ash immediately flinched at the sudden new touch, her eye dull. Lucas leaned close, his warm breath against her ear as he continued to speak. "Still with me, son?" Ash didn't have the strength to answer, not that she wanted to. He pressed his pawtip into the exact spot the water had been dripping on. Ash immediately tried to recoil, soft whimpers leaking out as tears continued to stream down her face. "Oh, you poor thing." His voice was soft, brimming with fake sympathy. "You're shaking. Did it get to you?" But he didn't wait for an answer. He knew that it was. Tina forced her head up ever so slightly to glare at him, letting out a low rumbling growl. Lucas turned to her, his smile wider. He let out a slow whistle, and rubbed her cheek. "And you. You looked like you had a lot of fun~" Tina had to force down the urge to spit in his face. Lucas trailed his claw along her ribs. "You lasted a lot longer than I thought you would. I'll give you that." She stiffened under his touch, gritting her teeth so hard it hurt. Lucas sighed dramatically. "Let's be honest. You both are crumbling. I can see it." He gestured to their ruffled fur, their restraints, and their tiredness. "The way you twitch at even the slightest movement. How your breathing is uneven. Oh, I love this part! How you both are almost broken." He stepped back over to Tina, and smirked. "Let's take it a step further, shall we? I wonder what happens if I do this...?" He reaches his paw down and gropes her breast. Her eyes widened immediately, as her breath started to hitch. He climbed up onto the table, and forced a kiss with her, continuing to squeeze and rub her bosom. For the first time, Tina didn't fight. She just laid there as her eyes and glowing rings dimmed, as tears streamed down her face. "Oh? Already breaking to this? I haven't even gotten to the best part." He had started to undress himself, and straddled her as he thrust into her with a quick, hard motion. Her entire body jolted as she gasped, choking sobs beginning to pour out. That just made Lucas's grin widen as he kept going, not caring about how much it hurt her and ignoring her sobs. She wanted to disassociate from what was happening, but the pain was too much. She felt every thrust, every touch, as he growled and filled her up. Besides her trembling, she

sat there limp as she stared up at the buzzing lights. Ash had been tiredly and weakly pulling on her restraints, scratchy and quiet pleas for him to stop and just focus on her falling on deaf ears. Until now. Lucas walked over to her, smirking as he grabbed her shaft tightly. She trembled at his touch, but knew what was going to happen. *I... I can make it through this... let him focus on me... so Tina doesn't get hurt anymore...* Lucas climbed up onto the table that Ash was restrained on and smirked. "Oh, your throat must be so sore from all that yelling. Let me help! I insist." Before Ash could even fully register what was happening, he thrust his entire length into her maw, the entirety of the shaft and the knot going down her throat. "Mph!!" She sobbed as he thrust roughly into her, his own mouth wrapping around her shaft. He kept his teeth close to her length so she felt the pain of them rubbing and grinding into her sensitive skin. Her cries were muffled as he kept thrusting down her throat, the minutes of what was happening blurring into an eternity as she felt her shaft get ravaged. Minutes felt like hours, when suddenly—a thick warm load coated her throat. The pain was unbearable. The salt from the cum stinging her torn vocal chords, as he pulled out. She sobbed and coughed as her body trembled, her neck weakly craning to look at Tina. She hadn't moved. She was a broken husk after what Lucas had taken from her. He simply cleaned himself off and got dressed, before deactivating their restraints and leaving with the door locking behind him. Ash practically crawled over to Tina and hugged her tight, both of their bodies a shaking, bloodstained mess. Ash had started to sob into Tina, the only sounds coming out were scratchy gasps and whimpers, her voice still severely damaged. Tina held her close, seeming to still be completely out of it. *He's won. We're both broken.* Tina looked down at Ash, then planted a soft cheek on her forehead. "It's... ok. Let it... out..." She spoke slowly, her brain still fried from the water torture and rape. But before either could get to comfy, the door opened again. Lucas stepped in, this time the expression on his face was... different. Ash weakly looked up at him, and immediately caught it. The way he was looking at Tina—how he stared at her like a used toy broken beyond repair—sent a shiver down Ash's being. He walked up to them with casual strolling steps, seeming like he had already decided on what he was going to do. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a switchblade, then placed it in Ash's palm. "You know what I want you to do." He firmly grasped Ash's wrist and guided it so the knife was pressed to Tina's throat. Ash's body trembled harder than it ever has before in her entire life. "P-please... D-don't m-make me..." Her voice was quiet and scratchy, trembling in sync with her body. Lucas let out a sigh of disappointment, then dug his claws deep into Ash's horn. She screamed—at least, what her injured throat could manage to make into a scream—as a constant stream of tears dripped down her face. "Do it. Or I'll make you wish you had." Ash's head turned to look at Tina, both of them sobbing and broken. She was barely conscious, but with her last remaining strength lifted her head to look at Ash. The fear was completely gone, and replaced with pained acceptance. "It's ok Ash..." *NO! It's not ok... it'll never be ok...* Ash hesitated before weakly raising the blade to Tina's throat, and pressing it in. Ash's sobs grew louder. With a single swift motion, Tina fell to the ground, motionless. Her once-glowing blue rings are now completely dull, no longer illuminated. Ash clutched her close and kept sobbing, her body trembling. Lucas simply tossed her some clothes and a shovel. "Make sure she's hurried before I get back." And then Lucas left, Ash left alone once again as she clung to her dead mother.

Not that long after Ash had turned seventeen, Lucas had ordered her to come to his office by one of his cronies. They simply told her, "Lucas says he needs you in his office."

Immediately.” Ash was used to not getting an explanation from her father, so she walked to his office with a pit in her stomach—Ash knew that whenever Lucas wanted her there, it was either for a personal mission, to punish her, or worse— She stood in front of two large pure golden doors that lead right into Lucas’s office. The doors were twelve feet tall and loomed over her with a reflective sheen. Carved into the golden doors were intricate patterns that, with closer inspection, resemble the eighteen elemental symbols of magic. The symbols were even in the wallpaper— a pale red with diamonds interconnecting. In the center of each diamond is a differing symbol of the same eighteen as shown on the door. Lucas sat behind his desk made of ebony, his presence cold and commanding. The room was dimly lit by his desk lamp as the fire crackled behind his chair, the glow of the light casting sharp reflections. Shelves lined the entirety of the walls, packed with ancient tomes, artifacts, and books all about different magics. It didn’t matter how many times Ash stepped foot in his office; she never felt welcomed. Lucas didn’t look at her—his piercing golden eyes focused on the book he was reading. Deafening silence between the two of them hung in the air. The air in the room is so dense you could cut it with a knife. Lucas finally broke the silence. “Andrew.” Ash’s jaw clenched as she stood ready. Never Ash or Ashley, always *Andrew*. Unless it was to mock her, he’d never correctly and genuinely call her by her preferred name. It hurt her even more knowing that she could do nothing about it. “I have an important job for you.” Lucas closed the book with a heavy *thud*. He locked eyes with her, his gaze cold and unfeeling. “I require knowledge. Specifically, about Keystones.” Ash’s pit in their stomach grew. *Keystones...?* She had heard of them—rare, beautiful stones that were a catalyst for Mega Evolution. But she knew that Lucas had much darker purposes. He never once had searched for powerful artifacts for goodness. “What do you need me to learn about them?” Ash forced herself to not shift uncomfortably. “Everything. I want to know how they work, how they interact with Mega Stones, and how one might... manipulate their effects.” Lucas’s voice held authority and command. Each syllable shot anxiety down Ash’s spine. *He wants to control it. Twist its effects for his sick gain...* She fought the nerves and spoke. “Where would you like me to start, sir?” Lucas walked to her and stood behind her, placing his paws on her shoulders. Ash tenses up but doesn’t dare pull away. He leans into her ear with a twisted, commanding tone. “There’s a little shop in Sandgem Town. The owner is rumored to be very knowledgeable about artifacts and stones—both the rare and magic properties. You will get me the information I need.” Ash was completely against this, but she dared not speak her thoughts unless she wanted to leave limping and badly wounded. “Yessir. Understood.” Lucas looked down at her, smirking and pushing himself close to her, his bulge pressing into her. “You may go.” Ash tensed up and forced her breathing to stay slow as she nodded and walked off. The moment the golden doors shut behind her, her breathing started to speed up as she trembled and made her way out of the mansion. She had a horrible feeling about what Lucas had planned.

The gem shop in Sandgem Town was smaller than Ash expected it to be, a shop in between the Pokémart and Pokémon Clinic on a cobbled street. The wooden sign was a bit worn, the once vibrant paint now dim with age and wear. An enchantment on the sign made the words glow as if they were neon—Obsidian and Holly’s Gemstone Emporium. Ash smiles to herself as she walks over and opens the front door, her nose filled with a welcoming smell. The bell at the top of the door jingled as she smelled a warm, sweet, earthy scent—like flowers and apricot wood. The shop was quiet, only being interrupted by the soft whirring of the overhead

fan. Ash looked around in awe—Shelves were lined along all the walls, filled to the brim with all sorts of beautiful gemstones, crystals, and precious metals as they were organized by size, color, and type. Lanterns were shown down on each display, casting a light that brought out each specimen to its fullest potential. She ran her fingers along the glass display case, lined with velvet and golden trim. Inside was a magnificent collection of deep blue sapphires. Her shoulders and frame were completely at ease here—such a quaint and lovely shop. “Greetings, ma’am! Welcome to my shop!” Ash turned to the clerk—A small Lucario, though this one was much different than she’d ever seen. The normally blue fur was a glossy grey-black, boldening his black markings. It looked to be soft, covering his entire delicate frame. He was lean and wore amazing makeup as he walked behind the counter with the cash register. He smiled with a warmth radiating off him, his tail wagging with excitement. “My name is Obsidian! It’s so nice to meet you! I’m the owner of this lovely establishment. What can I do for you today?” Ash was taken aback by his polite demeanor. *Such a polite gentleman. I’ve been around Lucas and his goons so long I forgot men could be this pleasant.* She cleared her throat and walked over to him with a soft smile of her own. “Nice to meet you, Obsidian! My name is Ashley, but you can just call me Ash!” The both of them shake each other’s paws as Obsidian continues. “Pleasures all mine Ash!” His eyes burned with passion for his craft and excitement for what she would need. Reaching into her bag, she pulls out a worn picture and places it down for him to see. The picture depicted a Keystone, its hues in the center surrounded by a clear glass-like orb. Obsidian’s ears perked up as he giggled with excitement, letting out an appreciative whistle of admiration. “Ahh! A Keystone! A fascinating piece of magic and history for sure!” He held the photo with a soft smile, looking at it as if in a trance of wonder. “Yes! My father is... interested... to say the least.” Ash’s voice trembled as she grasped her cybernetic arm, shaking softly. She knew Obsidian noticed—his red eyes flickering upon seeing her calm facade crumble slightly—but he said nothing to her relief. “Well, a Keystone is a magical conduit. It serves as a bridge between two Pokémon during Mega-Evolution. One Pokemon holds the mega stone, the other Pokémon holds the Keystone, and together, they unlock a transformation unlike anything else.” Ash nodded with intent, writing it down in her notepad. “The process is deeply rooted in connection. Mega Evolution isn’t about strength. It’s about trust between the two. The stronger the bond, the more stable the transformation.” He spoke with a knowing rhythm, dipped in excitement to share his love for artifacts, metals, crystals, and stones. “Would you like to see a replica? I have a full collection!” Ash’s focus was no longer on what he was saying—her eyes looked him over, able to see deep, large bruises and cuts just barely visible under the makeup he applied. Her heart ached with great sorrow and the need to help him. *Those aren’t normal bruises and cuts... I know those kinds of wounds all too well.* At that moment, even under her clothing, we’re almost hundreds of fresh new ones. “Hey, Obsidian...” Her voice was soft but concerned. “Are you ok?” Obsidian stiffened with shock. *She sees my bruises... my cuts... I didn’t hide them well enough...* his face shifting was barely noticeable, his guarded facade crumbling— if only for a moment, his dropped smile spread back across his face. “You don’t have to tell me anything.” Ash reassured him quickly, her voice still soft and full of tender care. “Bruises like *that* don’t happen accidentally.” Ash forced herself to swallow, trying to loosen the words and pain in her throat. “I know what it’s like to be in that situation. I lived through that for seventeen years.” Her voice dropped to a near whisper as she lifted her sweater softly to show him some of her bruises. She continued, her voice now hushed to a caring, tender whisper.

“Just... know that I’m here for you, ok?” She places her number on the table, written on a torn piece of notebook paper. Obsidian says nothing at first, staring at the paper as his eyes start to well up. He looked up at her and placed a trembling paw on hers, not being able to fully show how much he appreciated her. Ash saw it— his eyes told of a long, unspoken pain that wanted to be shared. “Th-thank you...” he whispered, a single tear dripping onto the counter. Ash smiled softly as she thought of a way to lighten the moment. “Everyone deserves love, y’know? Everyone deserves to know what genuine intimacy feels like if they want it. You’re no exception.” Obsidian smiled and nodded quietly, wiping his face. Ash chuckled to herself as she continued. “Honestly, I was thinking about asking you out, but my gaydar went off the charts.” Obsidian burst into laughter as if it was the first in a long, long time. “You’re not wrong about that, hehe.” Ash smiled and picked the photo up, putting it back in her pouch. *I’ve already taken too long... fuck you, Dad. It was worth it.* “I hope to see you around, Obsidian.” She waved over her shoulder as she walked out, smiling at him before walking out the door. Obsidian stood there in the now-empty shop, staring at where she once stood with her number gripped in his paw. “...See you around.”

Not long after Ash reports back her findings to her father, Lucas has already started to set up his next experiment. He had gotten his hands on a keystone and called for Ash to come to the lab. She walks in hesitantly, knowing that whatever is next won’t be good. “Andrew. I have called you here so we can discover something together. Mega evolution through a keystone is usually built on the strong positive bonds between two Pokemon. But, I’ve been thinking... what if I mega evolve you built on our hatred, hm? An interesting concept that can now come into fruition.” Before Ash could object, Lucas activated his keystone. What was originally a spectrum of colors turns a deep black with a red glow as it engulfs Ash. She crumpled to the ground screaming, the pain, unlike anything she’s ever experienced. Agony. Pure, true agony at its finest. Her back splits open as bones start to force their way out of her back, ripping her flesh open as skeletal wings drip with her warm ichor. Her hair starts to grow at an unnatural speed, the roots tearing through her now bloodied scalp as her hair grows longer... sending searing and burning pain through her scalp. That wasn’t even the worst of it... Her bones, skin, and muscles started to break and warp her body in different sections, forcing her into a feral, almost animalistic form. Ash screamed and cried, begging to stop... she just wanted it all to stop. It felt like her flesh was boiling as it was getting stretched and pulled apart. Lucas watched with an amused grin, jotting down in his notepad. “This is interesting! It still gives you wings and long hair, but it seems the evolution mimics how painful the relationship is. And turning your body into a feral animalistic form...? I do remember reading that mega stones are ancient. It’s as ancient as when all Pokemon kind walked on all fours. Seems it’s pulling that out of you too!” Lucas explained excitedly to his daughter, who was a whimpering mess of blood and pain. “Please... please.. please... make it stop...” Ash begged for all she could, despite the transformation finishing, she was still in vast amounts of pain. Lucas rolled his eyes at her and activated his keystone yet again. Ash starts to scream and tremble as the same thing happens but in reverse. Her scalp felt like it was collapsing in on itself as it broke the new joints it made in her arms and legs, forcing them back into being how she was. The wings forced themselves back into her spine, tearing at her flesh as they went back in. Lucas left her to bleed and feel the pain he thought she deserved. With what little strength Ash had, she slowly crawled her broken and bloodied body to the only person she could trust—Dion.

The night was like any other for Dion and her fathers. Every Friday they would all gather and have a pajama movie day, watching each of their favorite movies and splurging on eating a bunch of popcorn, snacks, and candy. Dion was curled up between both of her fathers, the faint glow of the movie lighting the living room with splashes of soft colors. Dion was wearing her favorite oversized pajamas, grasping a bowl of popcorn, and eating a candy bar as her tail flicked slowly in complacency against the couch. The smell of butter and chocolate filled the room, adding to the coziness and relaxation of the moment. Then there was a knock on the door. It was soft, barely audible over the action of the movie. Dion's ears twitched as she got up. *Who the hell is knocking at the door at 10 pm on a Friday?* She sighed as she grabbed the Blu-Ray remote and paused the movie. Hazel and Jamie exchanged confused looks, but Dion was already at the door and opening it. There was no one, just the faint sounds of wild Kricketot and Kricketune filling the peaceful night. Then she looked down, and almost felt her heart leap out of her chest. Ash was weak on the ground. Or, what was hardly left of her. She was on the ground, not even able to stand as the porch light shone down on her. Ash's entire usually white fur was stained red with both old dried blood and new wet blood, mixed with dirt and debris as deep cuts and gashes tarnished her entire body. Two large gaping holes soiled her back, raw and still bleeding where the bony wings once were, leaving her flesh warped and stretched agape. Deep open wounds circled her joints—her wrist, elbow, knees, and ankles—where the mega evolution tore her apart, and forced her into a feral physique before turning back. Her scalp was bleeding heavily, with thick rivulets of crimson streaming down her face and back. Her left temple had an open gash, where her secondary horn once forced its way out of. Her horn—once smooth and beautiful— was broken, scarred, and jagged from the sudden growth of her dark mega-evolution. The worst part of it all? Ash's eyes—her ruby and sapphire eyes once full of light and perseverance were now faint, foggy, barely even alive anymore. "D...i...o...n..." her voice was barely audible, soft and breathy. Then she collapsed on the ground, unmoving. "Ash? Ash?!" Ash was unresponsive, the only movement was her chest barely falling and rising with slow, weak breathing as she trembled in Dion's arms. She felt panic surge through her as her own arms trembled. "Dad! Papa!" She screamed as her voice broke from sobs. "We need to get Ash to the hospital—Now!" Both Hazel and Jamie were immediately at her side. Hazel gasped sharply, clutching his chest as tears streamed down his face. "Oh, Arceus, oh, Arceus—my poor baby—what kind of monster—" "Focus, Hazel." Jamie interrupted Hazel's panic, scooping Ash up into his arms with ease. His voice was stern, wavering with concern. "We need to move. Everyone in the car." Dion ran to her room real quick, grabbing a plushie for Ash to snuggle on the way there and as she recovered—a well-worn Hatsune Meloetta plush. It was Dion's favorite plushie, and always helped her through hard times. Now, it would be there to help Ash. They were out the door instantly, all piling into the car. Jamie drove them as Hazel sat in the back with Ash in her arms, Dion sat next to them holding her paw. She was cold. "Please..." Dion choked on her sobs. "Please... don't die..." The entire drive to the hospital was a blur. While Hazel and Jamie explained what they knew, the hospital staff put Ash on a stretcher and wheeled her away—Fortunately, Hoenn's healthcare ensured that everyone could be treated, being free to all. As Ash was rushed back, Dion tried to keep up and follow behind but got stopped by a nurse with a gentle smile. "Let them work, ok?" She gently grabbed Dion's paws and kept her soft smile on as she spoke. "She is in great hands." Dion wanted to push through and stay with Ash, but she kept a level head and went to sit with her fathers in the

waiting room. She gripped her arms tightly as her tail wagged with anxiety. Hazel paced back and forth frantically beside her, whispering every curse and prayer he knew of. Jamie stayed by Dion's side, holding her close as he waited with a clenched jaw. She couldn't help but clench her paws into fists as time passed, the anxiety and weight of the situation hitting her hard as tears stung her cheeks the entire time. It had been hours before the same nurse from before walked out and smiled at them all. "Good news! Ms. Ashley is stable. You can go back and see her now." Dion stood up in no time as she practically sprinted back to Ash's room. When she ran in, her heart broke as she saw her friend—Ash lying on the bed, almost completely wrapped in bandages as an IV dripped fluids into her through the veins in her arm. Her chest softly raised and lowered as she breathed slowly and steadily, machines beeping and whirring beside her in a robotic rhythm. Despite being so toned and strong, Ash looked so small and fragile now. Dion climbed up onto the bed, making sure to be gentle as she curled up next to her best friend, incapable of stopping herself from sobbing and burying her face into Ash's abs, her tears wetting her fur. Dion lay there and listened to Ash's breathing as she waited for her to wake up. Hours had passed before Ash started to stir slowly. "Dion...?" Ash's voice was soft and raspy, still having a slight waver. Dion's head shot up with relief, her eyes wide. Without thinking she tackle-hugged her, embracing her best friend as her sobs grew loud. "Ashy! I-I thought..." Her voice was choked full of sobs, as she shook that thought out of her head. "You scared the shit out of me, you fucking idiot...!" Ash whimpered in pain from the sudden tackle but smiled gently and hugged Dion close. "I-I w-was scared too, Dion..." Dion wiped her eyes and sniffled as she grabbed a tissue, cuddling into Ash. "I'm s-sorry, I just... when you showed up like that I thought..." Her voice trembled as she quivered. Her terror and worry turned to confusion and concern, trying to piece this all together. She looked deep into Ash's expression, trying to search for answers before finally asking. "Ashy... Who did this to you?" Ash stayed silent, but Dion could see the subtle tension in her body as her eyes darkened. The silence deeply unnerved Dion as she grabbed Ash's paws, squeezing them with reassurance. "Ashley. Please, tell me." Ash squeezed Dion's paw in return weakly but stayed silent. Dion felt her throat tighten and dry up. She recognized that look in her friend's eyes. Her expression was tormented, filled with exhaustion as she looked empty. She almost always flinched at even the gentlest of touches, like she was expecting something far worse. How she refused to speak about it sent chills down Dion's very soul, but she didn't push. She dug into her bag and pulled out the Hatsune Meloetta plush, giving it to Ash with a warm smile. "Just promise me Ashy. If something like this happens again, come to me. I may not know what's going on, but you don't have to go through it alone." She cupped Ash's cheeks with a gentle comfort. "I promise Dion." Ash's expression softened as her tail wagged weakly. She held the plush and Dion close, her eyes glossy. "You are the one thing I keep fighting to live for."

When Ash turned eighteen, Lucas had enough of her existence. He wanted her *gone*—if only for a while. He had business to attend to in Johto, and Ash had been too much of a pain in the ass for him for a while—Getting traumatized by his assassination requests, constantly trying to escape, trying to kill herself—Lucas had *enough* of her shenanigans. Recently, he had heard of a Flareon named Phoenix who had recently risen in the black market chain for the selling of his diverse options of sex slaves. Phoenix was twenty-four years old, with a severely successful business, almost all people in the underground scene were aware of. He would meet people he'd consider attractive or unwanted, then use his job as a waiter to easily slip in aphrodisiacs to

his target's drinks, then take them to his home after and turn them into his newest additions. They'd get chained up and constantly pumped with aphrodisiacs as they were denied food to keep them weak on the occasion that they broke out of the trance. Lucas was in his office on the day of Ash's 18th birthday, she was out with her friend so he was able to make the call without her ever knowing his plans. He smirked as he reached for the phone, dialing Phoenix's number. There were a few rings before someone picked up—A smooth, alluring voice spoke on the other end. "This is Phoenix speaking, what can I do for you?" Lucas leaned back in his chair with a smile as he set his cigar in his diamond ashtray. "Phoenix. I hear you provide... specialized services." There was a pause on the other end before he chuckled. "Depends on which of my services you want. But since you're here, you must already know what I provide." Lucas nodded to himself as his smile deepened. "Oh, I know exactly what you do. And I've got a job for you. Something different from your usual stock. A personal request, if you will." Phoenix was immediately intrigued. "Personal, eh? Alright, you've got my attention." Lucas took a drag from his cigar as he relished in the flavor, before taking an exhale and continuing. "I have someone who needs to be... put in their place. Properly broken. A pretty little thing, but extremely annoying for me—too damn annoying for my liking." Phoenix turned their tone into something more professional. "Ah, I see. So, you want me to soften them up for you? Make them obedient? Teach them to not be so annoying?" Lucas chuckled and took another puff. "Oh no. I don't need her abandoned or straightened out. It's quite fun to break her every time she steps out of line—I need her shattered. I need her to suffer. Strip away every ounce of defiance, every bit of will. By the time I take her back, I want her to be nothing but a hollow, whimpering husk. Can you do that for me?" Another pause, before Phoenix let out a satisfied and approving whistle. "You don't ask for much, do you?" Lucas smirked to himself and laughed. "I don't hire just anyone, either." Phoenix laughed in return, smiling. "I like you. You sound like a man who knows what he wants. Alright, tell me about this little toy of yours." He picked up a portrait of Ash and him—when they were both younger—off the desk, looking at her unblemished fur and neutral face. "His name is Andrew. He's an Absol. Handsome little thing, with silky white fur, soft features with a more toned physique. You'll love him. I guess *she's* technically trans if that makes it better." The way Lucas says 'she' is as if he was spitting out bitter and disgusting poison. "Oh? That does sweeten the deal. So, what's the plan? You want me to snatch her off the street?" Lucas shook his head as he took the finishing puff from his cigar, putting it out in the ashtray. "No, no. That would be too easy. He's expecting a business meeting. You'll meet him in a neutral place, make him comfortable. Gain his trust. Then, you'll drug him and take him home." Phoenix chortled and brushed his hair. "I assume you have a preference for the method?" Lucas walked to his personal wine stash and opened a white chardonnay. "Something slow. Subtle. I want him to realize what's happening just as it's too late to stop it. Your usual aphrodisiac technique should do the trick—something that makes him want it, even as he's screaming inside." Phoenix purred with delight. "I'm glad you like my style. How long do you want me to keep her?" Lucas didn't hesitate. "Four months. That's how long I'll be gone for." Phoenix let out a breathy laugh. "Four months? You're really trying to break this bitch, huh?" Lucas smirked, his eyes gleaming behind his glasses. "I don't try. I succeed." Phoenix hummed to himself in amusement. "And what about limits? Am I keeping her 'marketable,' or are we talking full degradation?" Lucas poured himself a glass of his wine and took a sip. "No limits. Whatever you or your clients want to do, do it. Just don't kill him. I want her alive when I take her

back.” Phoenix let out a satisfied sigh. “You’re one sick bastard, you know that?” Lucas cackled, it even sent a bit of a chill down Phoenix’s spine. “Tell me something I don’t know.” Phoenix grabbed a notepad and wrote everything down, as he spoke. “Alright, I’ll take the job. Usual rates apply, plus extra for special requests.” Lucas took another sip, smirking as he did. “Money isn’t an issue. You’ll be compensated well. Just make sure he’s utterly *ruined* by the time I return.” Phoenix grinned to himself, clacking his claws on the table. “Oh, trust me—when I’m done with her, she won’t even remember what it feels like to not be used.” Lucas finished off his glass of wine, savoring and enjoying this plan with every second that passed. “Good. Then we have a deal.” Phoenix wrote down the quoted amount on his notepad. “Pleasure doing business.”

Ash had been sent to a business meeting and told that she was meeting up with a Flareon named Phoenix. She arrived at a quaint and dimly lit cafe, ordering a hot chocolate as she waited for his arrival. She got her drink and sat at a booth, taking a sip with a soft smile. She saw Phoenix enter the cafe and waved him over, a warm smile on her face to be polite. His fur was a silky orange and his mane was a cream white, seeming to be softer than silk. He sat across from her, ordering his drink from a waitress as he reached his hand across the table and over her drink, with a warm and soft smile. “You must be Ashley!” His voice was as smooth as his fur. “It’s so nice to finally meet you.” Ash was immediately caught off guard by how nice he was. Almost everyone in Lucas’s circles never called her by her preferred name. She hesitated and then reached for his paw, shaking it. “...Lucas told you my preferred name?” She was confused but flattered nonetheless. Phoenix’s smile stayed strong as he rested his cheek on his paw. “No, actually. He called you by your deadname.” Phoenix rolled his eyes and growled at that fact, but then smiled. “I took it upon myself to look up your file and learn your real name. It’s such a pretty name, Ashley.” Ash couldn’t help but feel unnerved a bit by the overwhelming kindness from a complete stranger—someone who worked with Lucas no less—But she pushed those feelings aside, taking another sip of her cocoa. “Oh, my~ such a gentleman,” She then started to feel her head fog, as a deep insatiable horny heat filled her. Her eyes sunk in a bit as they turned a hazy pink. “H-Huh...?” She wobbled a bit as she laid back in the booth, feeling herself getting hard. Phoenix leaned closer, holding her paw. His voice was now sultry and smooth like moo moo butter. “You feeling okay, dear? Why don’t you come home with me? I’ll treat you real well~” He locked his lips as he leaned in and kissed her paw, impatiently waiting to satiate his urges. *No. No, no, no—FUCK!* Ash screams internally, wanting to fight and pull away from him, but her body and voice betrayed her—She could still think. She could still panic—but her voice and movements, she could no longer control them. “I-I’d love to come back with you...~” Her voice was heavy and dripping with artificial lust, low purrs erupting as she got up and clung to him. Her stomach twisted and knotted violently, as she tried to pull away and fight the drugs but to no avail. She couldn’t stop herself from leaning into him and giving him a full-on kiss, his paw reaching down and feeling her hard bulge as she thrust into his touch. *Please, Arceus, no*—Phoenix helped Ash into his car in the passenger seat, then got in the driver’s seat and drove her to his home. She rested her head on his arm as her body melted from his touch, purring with each pet he gave her. When they arrived, Phoenix held her paw and guided her into his home. She felt her heartbeat go faster as he walked her down the stairs to the basement. She wanted to throw up from what she saw—Men, Women, and everything in between were chained to the walls, starved to the point of being skin and bones. Some of them were hardly

moving, while others were being used—tears down their faces as they were constantly pumped with more and more aphrodisiacs. The air was thick with the stink of sweat, blood and cum. Ash wanted to scream and run. To beat the shit out of Phoenix and save these poor souls, to do *anything*. But all she could do was stand there as Phoenix stripped her down and chained her to the wall. *No, no, no—this wasn't happening—* The dim lights buzzed, causing her fur to shimmer as she felt the cold rusted shackles clamp around her wrists and ankles. Phoenix traced his claw down her side, tracing her shaft with a smile. “I love girls with cocks. Can’t wait to tell everyone about my new toy~” The following months were absolute hell. The entire time she was constantly being pumped with aphrodisiacs to not only keep her in constant heat, but to keep her compliant. Her thinking has dulled to being forced to want more, her body trembling constantly as she was torn apart. Phoenix was considered one of the “nicer” people that used her. He never did anything that gave her scars, not wanting to break his favorite toy. The others, however, were far from nice. Knives, digging claws in, fucking her so hard she bled, tickle torture, waterboarding, electrocution. Whatever it was, she never once left those sessions in the same condition as when they started. Her wrist had a constant deep gash around the circumference of it from the constant pulling on the chains, the metal cuffs digging deep into her wound making it more infected. Her tail had nearly been torn off from being yanked on too hard, blood dripped from her ass and cock most of the time, streaming down her legs. She, nor any of the others, were ever treated for their wounds. At the end of the fourth month, Ash was but a weak sobbing husk of her former self. Her white fur was now stained a rusty red from her dried blood. Her ribs were broken and jutting out of her skin, she barely even had the strength to sob. The basement door creaked open, Ash just barely able to crane her neck to look at who was coming down. It was him. Her father had just gotten back from a business trip and was beaming at Phoenix’s work. “Ah, Lucas! Welcome. Come see for yourself how well Ash’s been doing.” Lucas lit himself a cigar and took a drag, the dim glow lighting up his crooked smile. Ash was barely clinging on to life—her legs were shaking as she lacked the strength to keep her body upright, the chains rattling and digging into her wrists. Deep gashes, stab wounds, burns, and electrocution damage littered her frame, as she breathed shallowly. Lucas clapped his paws as he exhaled smoke, then reached into his pocket pulling out a large stack of cash. “Impressive! Here’s what I promised.” He placed the stack on the counter, then crouched down as he held Ash’s face, making her look at him. She looked at him with dull, hollow eyes. “Ready to go home now, Andy~?”

The moment Ash arrived back in Lucas’s manor in Rustboro, having hardly survived what Phoenix put her through, she didn’t hesitate and immediately started to make her way towards Verdanturf. She forced her broken, shaking body forward, her legs constantly feeling like they were about to give out beneath her as she pressed on with sheer determination and desperation—she needed to get to Dion. The entire walk there, people looked at her with heavy concern, some of them swapping sides of the street as they watched her walk past. Every step that Ash took sent searing hot pain shooting through her entire body, but she couldn’t care less. She had to go see Dion, she had to feel *safe* again. Constant tears blurred her vision as she approached the memorable home—She knew that here, she’d be welcome no matter how horrible her wounds were. She teetered up the path that led to the front door, each breath she took raspy and trembling. Her chest ached and throbbed in pain, the entirety of her fur was stained rust-red from dried blood as it clumped from sweat and dirt. The weight of everything

that happened to her was as crushing as a wild Wailord. But she refused to break until she was in Dion's arms. She went to reach for the door to knock, but it opened before she could. Immediately, Ash was pulled into a warm, and loving embrace that she had grown to appreciate. Dion's gold and jet-black fur shimmered in the sunlight, as her cool blue eyes were wide and panicked. She pulled away from the hug for a moment to take in her condition. "Ash?! What happened to—" Before Dion could finish asking, Ash collapsed into her arms, all the bottled up emotions flooding out as she clung to Dion and sobbed. Her weakened body trembled and shook as the weight she felt finally crushed her. Dion kept her close, pulling Ash into another warm loving embrace. Dion kept her voice calm, despite the anger she could feel boiling within her. "Shh... it's ok Ash, I'm here." Ash continued to cling to her like a frightened Pancham in a hurricane. Dion's warmth kept her grounded as she continued to sob. Dion scooped Ash into her arms, kissing her forehead softly. "Dad and Papa are out right now, so I'll be taking you to the hospital myself, ok?" Ash could hardly nod, but Dion didn't waste a second. Dion easily hooked her arms under Ash's legs and held her close. Ash had always been so strong and toned, but seeing her reduced to skin and bones broke Dion's heart. She carried Ash all the way to the hospital, going as fast as she could without rustling her too much. Immediately upon arriving at the hospital, the doctors and nurses ran Ash back to intensive care to assess her injuries. Dion sat in the waiting room refusing to leave as she sent her dad's texts to fill them in on the situation. Then, all she could do was wait. Hours passed, each moment feeling like forever. Finally, an Audino nurse walked over to her and smiled softly. "Ash is ready to see you now." Dion let out an exhale she had been holding in and rushed to Ash's hospital room. When she walked in, she felt her heart ache at the sight of Ash—She was so fragile and exhausted. But she was awake and alive. That's all that matters. Immediately she climbed onto the bed and curled up into Ash, gently pulling her close in a warm snuggle. Dion petted her head and ran her fingers through her hair. Her voice was soft as she spoke. "Ashy, if you're okay to talk about it... what happened?" Ash was shaking in her hold, as tears started to well up and sting her cheeks. "I... I was at a business meeting with someone." her voice was quiet and hoarse, with a waver as she spoke. "It feels like years ago now, but it was just... a café. I had gotten myself a hot cocoa. He walked in, sat across from me... we shook hands." Ash swallowed her nerves as tears continued to stream down her cheeks. "I took a sip... and then I realized... h-he sprinkled in a powdered a-aphrodisiac..." Ash's body trembled more violently as her voice was wracked with sobs. Dion held her tight, rubbing her back and kissing her forehead. Ash clung to her as she struggled to speak, gasping for air in between sobs. "Shhh... It's ok. Take your time." Ash nuzzled her face into Dion's neck, trying her best to compose herself and take deep breaths. It took a while before Ash was able to speak, her voice no higher than a whisper. "Being u-under the e-effect of an a-aphrodisiac... You can still think. But y-your b-body a-and words d-don't belong t-to you anymore... You j-just... c-comply... no m-matter how much y-you don't w-want to..." Dion balled her paws into fists as her tail flicked in barely bottled vengeance. "H-he pulled m-me into his a-arms... feeling a-and groping m-my m-member... A-and then h-he asked m-me... 'Would you like to go home with me?' A-and I t-told him yes..." Ash had to hold back from gagging, forcing her eyes shut. "I didn't w-want to... but I g-got in h-his c-car with him. I cuddled into h-him like I-I... loved him..." Dion felt ill. She could feel her rage starting to boil over, but she held back for Ash. She needed comfort more than anything right now. Ash took a moment to take a few trembling breaths before continuing, her voice cracking under the

emotion. “Didi... what I-I saw was horrible... P-people of e-every gender... ch-chained up... starved t-to near sk-skeletal... constantly p-pumped with drugs t-to keep them c-compliant a-and... horny. He ch-chained me up... had me u-used b-by h-him a-and others... f-for four fucking months...” Dion’s breathing hitched. Four months. Dion just thought Ash was busy with work, but in reality, the entire time she had been in hell. Ash’s paws gripped her legs so tight that her claws dug in and drew blood, the crimson stains blooming along her hospital gown. Dion gasped and quickly grabbed both of Ash’s paws. “Hey, no. I understand that you’re upset, but none of that, okay?” Ash looked at her confused, then glanced down at her legs. She went stiff when she saw her bloodstained gown. “I-I’m sorry, I... I didn’t...” Dion immediately grabbed a tissue and wiped her claws, with a soft smile. “It’s okay, Ash. It seems like you didn’t realize you did that... so let’s think of a way to prevent it from happening. How about whenever you get in this mood, you make sure to have both your paws in view, okay?” Ash nodded weakly and looked down. “Ashy... I’m so sorry. No one deserves to go through that. Ever.” Dion’s voice softened, yet it had a gentle firmness and determination behind it. “After you get out of here, you’re staying at my house to recover. Me and my dads will take care of you, okay?” Ash blinked a bit, caught completely off-guard by her kindness. Her tail started to wag softly, as she teared up all over again. “Y-you... you’d really do that for me...?” Dion gently pressed her snout into Ash’s, letting out a soft purr. “I’d do anything to keep you safe, Ashy.” The tears started to spill from her eyes, no longer from the pain and trauma she had faced, but from the love and gratitude of Dion being there for her. “Y-you sure I-I won’t be a bother...? I have night terrors, a-and—” Dion shushed her and placed her finger over Ash’s lips. “Ashley. It’s not your fault that you have trauma. We’ll get through this, okay?” Ash nodded, then hesitated a bit before whispering. “Um... can you keep h-holding my paws? It... felt nice.” Dion felt her heart melt as she gently grabbed hold of Ash’s paws, giving a soft squeeze as they shared this moment of peace, warmth, and love. Before the moment could linger, Dion’s phone started to ring. She squeezed Ash’s paw one more time before standing up. “I’m going to answer this. Remember, keep your paws in front of you.” After Dion stepped out her face deepened in color as she felt it grow warmer. *What is this feeling?* She had always loved Dion as a friend, but maybe... This feeling was something more. She stared at her paws as they still trembled slightly. She could still feel Dion’s warmth lingering on them. Ash took a deep breath. *I’m safe. I’m here. Dion is here.* She kept repeating those words in her mind trying to block out the intrusive thoughts that clawed deep into her—the feeling of shackles cutting into her wrist and ankles, rough paws grabbing at every part of her, the lustful heat—threatening to drag her back into a dark place. *No. I’m here. Dion is here.* The door squeaked as Dion opened it and came back into the room. Her expression held relief and warmth as she laid back on the bed, and held Ash close to her chest. “That was Papa. They’re on their way. Dad is—he is going to freak out.” Ash let out an exhausted chuckle. “That sounds like him.” Dion grinned but then grew stern. She paused before cupping Ash’s cheeks with her paws. Her touch was soft, but it still was enough to make Ash go stiff as their eyes met. Dion softened her gaze a bit before speaking. “Ashy... I... I’ve always cared about you. And after today... after seeing you like that, holding you in my arms again... I just—” She took a deep breath, shaking the thought away. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if I lost you.” Ash could feel her heart beating in her chest. Dion’s firm yet gentle touch made her head fuzzy, and her body feel warm. It was an entirely new feeling budding in her. “I-I’m not going anywhere.” Ash’s voice was barely even a whisper. Dion smiled as she

petted Ash's head. "Good." For a moment, time seemed to slow as the two of them sat there in each other's arms, Ash's face nestled comfortably in Dion's neck. This new feeling only grew stronger with each passing second—it was warm. It was terrifying. It was comforting. It made her heart beat faster and her stomach flutter. Suddenly, a frantic voice outside the room could be heard. "Where is she?! Let me see her?!" Dion groaned and looked down at Ash. "There he is." not even a second later the door flung open as a blur of chocolate cream fur ran over to them—Hazel. His fur was frazzled as his tail flicked anxiously. Jamie followed close behind, his expression calmer but still visibly concerned. Hazel gently grasped Ash's face and looked her over from head to toebean. Once his quick examination was finished he placed his paws on her shoulders. "Oh, Arceus, Ashy, are you okay?! What happened?! Who did this?! Why didn't you tell us where you were?!" Ash flinched but nodded. "I-I'm fine Hazel." Hazel nearly screeched. "You aren't okay! You look like you've been through hell!" Dion couldn't help but roll her eyes. "Dad, let her breathe." Jamie calmly placed his paw on Hazel's shoulder and pulled him back. "Hazie, let's not overwhelm her, okay?" Jamie then looked at Ash with a soft smile, his violet eyes filled with concern and warmth. "We're just glad you're safe." Ash nodded appreciatively. "Th-thank you..." Hazel placed his paws on his hips, still fuming mad. "I want names, Ash. Who the hell did this to you?! I swear, I'll personally rip them apart—" Dion flicked him a warning glare. "Dad." Hazel crossed his arms and growled, but backed down. "Fine. But that doesn't mean I won't be looking into this myself." Ash let out an exhausted sigh as she laid back into Dion's arms. "I... I don't want to think about that right now." Jamie nodded and placed a paw on her knee. "Then you don't have to." Hazel pouted and groaned under his breath but immediately softened after he saw how exhausted Ash was. He let out a sigh, his expression filled with guilt and sympathy. "I just... I hate that this happened to you." Ash smiled tiredly. "M-me too." Dion held Ash closer and kissed her forehead. She leaned into it with a soft purr as her tail lightly wagged. Hazel saw this exchange and raised his brow as he glanced between them. A coy smirk slowly spread across his face. "Hm. Interesting." Dion shot him a glare. "Dad." Hazel held his paws up, the smirk staying behind. "What? I didn't say anything." Jamie's face lit up as if he remembered something. "Oh! Almost forgot!" He set a plate wrapped in tinfoil on the table next to the headboard of the bed. Upon removing the foil, Ash was met with a familiar smell—Lasagna. It was in delicious layers, covered in warm golden cheese that was toasty brown along the edges. The cheese was even still slightly bubbling. The softness of Jamie's smile made her stomach twist into knots. "We made sure to bring you something good." Jamie's voice was as warm as the lasagna, layered with love and concern. "You need to eat, sweetheart." Ash's eyes flicked to the plate, the scent was making her salivate as her stomach churned, but there was an underlying feeling—anxiety, doubt, reluctance. It had been a long time since she had eaten a proper meal, made with genuine love and care. For months, she had been fed bread crusts and cold baked beans, barely enough to even be considered a light snack. She had been diminished to a trembling husk of mess, barely cared for outside of being barely alive. *Do I really deserve this?* "I... I don't know if I sh-should." Ash whispered as she looked away. "I don't deserve something so nice..." The room fell deathly silent, but only for a moment. Hazel's ears flattened to his head as his tail fluffed up. His honey-colored eyes roasted with a deep passion and protectiveness as he crossed his arms. "Absolutely not." his voice stayed firm as he spoke, not allowing a moment of disagreement. Ash meekly looked up at him, keeping her head down as she flinched from the sudden tone shift. Hazel stepped closer and

held her paw in his, holding an expression of loving determination and care. "Ash, listen to me. You deserve food. You deserve love. You deserve everything good in this world." His voice trembled slightly, unlike the confidence in his words which held strong. "And if I have to spoon-feed you myself, so help me, I will." Ash was completely caught off guard by how intense he suddenly became, blinking a bit in disbelief. Dion couldn't help but grin, and leaned into Ash's chest. "He's serious, you know. He did that to me when I was sick once." Jamie giggled softly and nodded. "It was the most dramatic thing I've ever seen." Ash felt her throat tighten. The gentle solemnness in Jamie's tone, Hazel's unwavering confidence, and Dion's quiet yet caring support just by being at her side—it was a crushing weight. This feeling felt different. It wasn't the crushing dread and fear she had felt for so long. This was much different. It felt safe and warm. It crushed her in the way that an unfamiliar familial love would. She wasn't used to it, but it felt nice. She shakily reached for the fork, taking a deep breath. Hazel flicked his tail in victory, as he kept his gaze on Ash. "That's a good girl." Ash blinked a bit then looked at him with annoyance. "Please don't call me that," Hazel smirked impishly, shrugging his shoulders in false innocence. "What? I'm just proud of you." Jamie placed a paw on Hazel's shoulder, and pulled him in for a kiss. "Hazie, let her eat in peace without making a fuss, ok?" Hazel's face darkened from the kiss, but he sat down with Jamie next to him as he crossed his arms in a 'fine, I'll behave' kind of manner. Ash took a small bite of the lasagna, and her eyes immediately lit up. The taste was amazing—warm gooey cheese accented the sausage, as the creaminess of the cottage cheese blended it all together. The unique taste of green bell peppers lingered on her pallet. For so long food had only ever been something she needed to survive, never anything she could take the time to enjoy. Her eyes teared up as she swallowed, her tail starting to slightly wag. Her breathing caught in her throat as she looked at the plate, taking in how much more she had left to eat. Dion saw this and gently placed a paw on Ash's knee, speaking softly. "Hey, take your time, okay?" Ash nodded and then made herself take slow, deliberate bites. Each small bite of food alleviated the apprehension in her, each chew spreading the amazing flavor across her taste buds. "It's really good." Her voice was hushed, but had an underlying appreciation. Jamie smiled proudly as he squeezed Hazel's paw. "I'm so glad you like it." Hazel grinned cheekily and nudged Jamie's side. "Told you she'd love it." Ash kept eating, the warmth and taste spreading through her body and keeping her grounded. It didn't feel real—being surrounded by people who loved her. Eating a warm meal made with love. Being free instead of being shackled or pinned. She wasn't being forced to eat. She was able to go at her own pace. And yet... She white-knuckled the fork, her paws trembling slightly. Her doubts didn't disappear. They clawed at her mind, digging in deep and taking hold. Telling her that she didn't deserve this, that she was tainted. No amount of warm meals would fix her or what she's gone through. She set the fork down on the plate, her appetite wavering. Dion saw this immediately, and placed her paw on Ash's rubbing the back of hers. "Hey... What's wrong?" Ash's breath hitched, before speaking in less than a whisper. "It doesn't feel real." Dion squeezed Ash's paw gently and gave her a reassuring smile. "It is real, Ash. You're safe. You're home." Jamie gave Ash a gentle pat on the head, ruffling her hair softly. "You don't have to force yourself to finish, sweetheart. Just eat what you can." Hazel surprisingly was quiet during this exchange. He then reached over and grabbed her cybernetic paw, squeezing it. "Listen to me, Ash. You are real. You deserve to be here. And no one—no one—is going to take that away from you ever again." Ash felt her breath get caught in her throat, as tears started to sting her eyes. *I'm safe. I'm*

loved. And for the first time, she truly believed it. Tears of gratitude started to stream down her face. “Thank you...” Dion pulled her into a gentle embrace, running her fingers through Ash’s hair. “Always, Ashy.” She didn’t flinch or pull away this time. She leaned into their love, with a soft smile on her face. She was finally home.

Over the next six months, Ash had been staying with Dion and her fathers, recovering and relearning what it meant to live without fear, but with love instead. Every day she woke up in a real bed, under warm sheets and next to her best friend, which was a stark contrast to the usual cold metal bed frame and log she used as a pillow. Every night she ate full meals, they were always fresh and never tarnished—Hazel would fuss over it and make sure to feed her enough, while Jamie used a gentle encouraging voice to ask her to take one more bite. The kindness was overwhelming when she first moved in. She was so used to everything being taken from her that she expected every gift of kindness to follow suit, that eventually the mask would be lifted and her suffering would start yet again. Ash had been led to believe her entire life that kindness and comfort were fleeting and would lead to cruelty and torture. The first time Hazel set an extra plate of food in front of her, she hesitated and stared at it. Back home, she had never gotten to eat much—Only ever being fed to just barely keep her alive. Ash had learned to never take her time when eating, to never enjoy it, as she never knew when her last meal would be. Hazel softly pushed the plate a bit closer, then ruffled her hair before giving a gentle peck on her forehead. Ash hesitantly picked up the fork and started to eat, expecting a strike against her face. But it never came. The first time Jamie handed her a freshly cleaned blanket, Ash flinched as she shakily took it, expecting it to be yanked away. Jamie’s paws gently cupped her cheeks, as he gave her a patient smile. “It’s yours to use, sweetheart.” He softly took the blanket and wrapped it around her, the gentle nature of his touch making her stomach twist. It took her hours of lying in bed under the comfy weight of the blanket before fully relaxing. Ash had already gotten somewhat used to Dion’s touch, but most of the time would stiffen and tense up whenever she’d reach for her. She would always be expecting a hit or claws to dig into her and be pinned down. Touch has never meant anything safe for the majority of her life. It meant pain. It meant misery. It meant torture. Even the softest traces and pokes along her frame were always cruelty. Her father would only ever softly touch her whenever he’d tickle torture her, or he’d trace his claws only to slowly dig them deeper and deeper. When Dion’s paws held hers, Ash’s breath caught in her throat as she expected the same to be true. But the pain never arrived. There were never any cruel twisted punishments, no cackling at her trauma. There were no huge expectations put on her or any repayment for being kind to her. It had taken nineteen and a half years, but she was finally allowed to exist. To enjoy life. Dion made sure to always keep a caring eye on Ash, noticing every flinch, every reluctance, every pause of caution. Dion never made Ash tell her what was going on. She would just hold her quietly and comfort her, running her paws through her hair or wrapping her tail around Ash. When Ash would wake panicked and sobbing from her night terrors, Dion would simply pull her into a hug and rock her in her arms, never once expecting an answer. Ash would stay in her arms until her breathing slowed and was able to sleep again. To help Ash heal and not stay cooped up in the house, they’d take small walks around Verdanturf, and Dion would let Ash lean on her if needed. Slowly and surely, she got better over time. They then both started to venture out further, experiencing things Ash had only ever heard of. In Lilycove, the two of them marveled at the towering department store, getting entranced by the hundreds of shelves of different objects, but things

Ash could only dream of owning—her own plushies, decor, spell scrolls, and spell books, and even some of her own medicine. In Slateport they participated in the Trick House, Ash easily solving each puzzle faster than Dion, who would pout playfully in defeat. And in Ash's new favorite spot in Pacifidlog, she'd sit in the warm waters of the ocean, feeling the waves lap at her scarred legs as the two watched the sunset together. It was... liberating. By the time the full six months had passed, Ash had become strong enough to be able to walk with no assistance. All this time Dion never once saw Ash as broken, she saw her how she had always seen her—As Ash. On a mild and warm afternoon, the pair were walking through Mauville, the city was bustling with life. The sounds of the city were a chaotic symphony of voices, music, laughter, and vehicles, and for the first time in her life, Ash was just another face in the busy crowds of the city. Dion had planned a date at the Mauville Salon, so Ash could experience what it's like to go out for a girl's night. As the two were strolling along the walkway, Ash had stopped in place suddenly. Dion then turned to her, tilting her head with intrigue and a gentle worry. "Ashy?" Ash looked down at her feetpaws, rubbing her arm with her cybernetic grasp. Ash's breathing remained consistent, but Dion saw that Ash had something eating her up on the inside. "Dion...? There's something I need to tell you. It's really important..." Ash's voice was just barely loud enough for Dion to hear. She took a step closer and gently held Ash's paws, squeezing them gently with reassurance. "What's up, Ashy?" Ash paused, her heart beating like a drum in her ribs. Ash kept her eyes looking down, afraid of Torchickening out if her eyes met Dion's. "I... I love you, Dion. E-ever since you saved me from those bullies. I've loved you for so long, and I—I understand if you don't feel the same way since I'm not really a woman and—mmff?!" Before she could complete her sentence, Dion cut her off by pulling her into a loving kiss. Ash immediately froze, her body unmoving. Her breath caught in her throat, and her mind went blank—The kiss was warm and welcoming. It was soft. No reluctance or second guessing. Only love. Ash then let herself melt into the kiss, leaning into the warmth as their tongues intertwined and got familiar with each other. By the time Dion pulled away, both of them were lightly panting. She pulled Ash into a warm hug, holding her close. "You listen to me, Ashy." Her voice was confident. "You may be Demi-femme, but that will never stop me from loving you. Do you understand that? I love you, Ashley." Then with zero hesitation, Dion turned to the crowded streets and shouted at the top of her lungs. "I LOVE YOU, ASHLEY!" Ash's breathing hitched, her eyes widening as tears streamed down her face. She nuzzled into Dion's neck, clinging to her as if she would disappear. But for the first time in her life, she was crying because she felt loved. Dion held her tight and rubbed her back, kissing her neck and cheeks all over. "I've got you, Ashy. I always have." Ash let out a soft chuckle as she sniffled and wiped her eyes. "I guess this salon appointment would be our first date?" Dion grinned as she booped Ash's nose with her own. "Absolutely~ Shall we, my princess?" Ash's face darkened as Dion scooped her up into her arms bridal style. Too flustered to object, Ash buried her face into Dion's shoulder as she carried her to the salon. For the first time since Tina's death... since her escape... Ash finally felt like she was home.

Dion walked into Mauville Salon as the scent of hair products and sweet-smelling shampoos filled the air. She held Ash in her arms gently as one of her paws stroked her hair. She placed Ash in a waiting chair and ruffled her hair softly as she went up to the front counter to get them both checked in. The receptionist was a friendly-looking Kirlia. She smiled at Dion and spoke with a calm, welcoming tone. "Hello there, ma'am! How can I help you?" Dion smiled

at her in return and looked back at Ash, who was looking in awe at the different products. "Hey! I reserved a spot for Dion and Ash?" The receptionist nodded softly as she started to flip through her reservation booklet. Her eyes lit up as she landed on their names. "Yep! Jane is ready for Ash. You'll be getting me. You two follow me back, please." The Kirlia gave them a patient gesture ready for them to follow. Dion scooped Ash back up into her arms, Ash blushing slightly. The Kirlia cashier talked to one of the stylists who was cleaning, who nodded as they set the broom down and took over the register for her. She led them into the styling area, turning to look at both of them. "Ash will be in this seat here; you'll be in the spot next to her," Dion nods and softly sets Ash in the chair the receptionist instructed, giving her a soft peck on the lips. Ash felt her face flush with warmth, as she looked away to the side. Ash's stylist then walked over to her with a huge smile—A short shiny Sneasel with plump thighs and a lean body walked over. Her hair is long with a slight curl at the ends, and her eyes are as orange and reflective as ambers. Her uniform was pastel blues, purples, and pinks. Her excitement was noticeable as she practically squealed with delight just by looking at Ash. The Sneasel ran her fingers through Ash's thick and white hair. "Oh. My. GOSH! Hiiiiiii! I'm Jane, and I'll be your stylist today!" Her voice was bubbly and full of life. "Like, oh my Arceus, you and your girlfriend are such a cute couple! And toots—your hair is SO soft and GORGEOUS!" Ash could feel her brain fry at this woman's outgoing personality. "O-oh um... th-thank you!" Ash stammered as she glanced at Dion, her eyes begging for help. "I-I confessed o-on my way here to her..." Dion, who had been watching this unfold, smirked at Ash with delight, only to then turn her head ever so slightly to give Jane a glare from her periphery. Dion then softened her expression and held Ash's paw, intertwining her fingers with her new partner. "Ash and I have known each other since we were toddlers," Dion said with gentle firmness, reminiscing on the memory. "We've had each other's backs since then, and I wouldn't have it any other way." Jane gasped dramatically as she looked at the two of them. "OmiArceus, that is, like, so romantic! Childhood besties turned lovers? I love that for you two!" Ash giggled nervously to herself as Jane spun the chair to have Ash face the mirror as she worked. Over the next hour, Jane worked hard and efficiently as she meticulously styled Ash's hair, trimming off the ends of the strands, and shaping the bangs of her hair to fit her facial shape perfectly. Ash's features were emphasized by Jane adding a shimmering powder to her hair and cheeks, then she added some red mascara above her blue eye and some blue mascara above her red eye to give her a small pop of color. Jane stepped back as she finished and looked over at Ash, who was practically jostling with excitement. Jane then turned her to look back at the mirror, and Ash stared in awe, her mouth agape. "No way... This can't be real... can it?" She stood up and walked closer to the mirror, taking it all in. She did a twirl as she looked, her hair and face shimmering in the lights of the salon. She truly couldn't believe it, even though the proof was right there. She took a moment before finally saying it. "I look amazing!" her voice was filled with disbelief and awe. Dion stood up after her stylist finished, then walked over to her, and hugged her from behind as she rested her arms on Ash's toned waist. Dion placed her chin on Ash's shoulder as she kissed her neck. "You look stunning, my love~," She said softly as she kept planting kisses on her neck and cheek. Ash's face just kept deepening in color, not used to all this praise and affection. "Y-you look amazing too, d-dear!" She compliments her love shyly, not able to stop her gaze from looking anywhere but the mirror. For the first time in her life, she looked beautiful and she believed it. *I am beautiful. I finally am.* Jane broke the silence as she clasped her paws together. "Alright, gorgeous, you're

officially one of my favorite clients now,” she held Ash’s paw and winked at her. “You *have* to come back and let me do this again sometime!” Ash chuckled and nodded, as she felt the warmth of Dion through her embrace. “I’d love to! This place is so friendly and cozy.” Jane smiled as she pulled out her phone. “That’s like, perfect! Let’s totally exchange numbers! That way, whenever you want a fab appointment, I can like, toats squeeze you in, even when we’re like toats booked!” Ash nodded as she pulled out her phone with eagerness and excitement, and then the two girls exchanged their contacts. “If you ever need styling advice, or like, just wanna chat, shoot me a message! You’re too cute to not be a regular here!” Jane grinned ear to ear, which caused Ash’s heart to flutter even more. Just a few weeks ago, she had no confidence and didn’t think people could love her. But now? Not only do Dion and her parents love and adore her, but a stranger is cheering her on too! *I have a girlfriend now. A stylist is cheering for me. I’ve never felt so... confident!* Today has been perfect.

Ash sat on the far edge of Jane’s bed as her cybernetic fingers fidgeted with the hem of her sweater. Ash had been spending the past hour at Jane’s trying to hype herself up, as she ran through every outcome in her head—every possible answer, every possible reaction, she tried to think of, and how to react to each—She felt her mouth go dry right as she was ready to talk about it. She could practically feel her heart about to burst out of her chest. Jane laid on her back as she scrolled and typed on her phone, swaying her feetpaws slightly. She had no idea of the internal fight Ash was having within herself. Jane hummed softly as she started to sway her head, a lazy smile plastered on her face. Ash swallowed her anxieties one final time. *Jane is my friend. I can do this.* “Hey, Jane?” Ash takes an unstable breath, placing her paw on Jane’s ankle. “Mm?” Ash took another deep breath as she continued. “I need to tell you something. It’s... important.” Jane stopped what she was doing and inclined her head with curiosity. “Ooooh, serious talk time?” She set her phone to the side and placed her paw on Ash’s as she grinned, bouncing with intrigue. “Spill the tea, babes. What’s up?” Ash hesitated at first, her words caught and stuck in her throat. But she kept pushing through her anxiety and fear. “I...I’m trans. I’m... D-Demi-femme...” Her voice was tiny and trembling. Silence. Jane sat still, then blinked a couple of times. “...Wait, really?” Ash nodded and curled herself into a ball, biting her cheek. She braced herself for anything—confusion, questions, berating, name-calling—Whatever Jane had, she was ready. Jane gasped dramatically, clasping her paws together. “Oh my gods, babe, that’s amazing!” She grabs Ash by the shoulders, shaking her a little with excitement. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I knew you had something going on, but I didn’t want to, like, assume, y’know?” Ash was caught off guard by her excitement. “... You’re ok with it?” Jane nodded as she held Ash’s paws. “Of course, I’m okay with it!” Jane brushed her hair to be behind her head and smiled. “Honestly? It *totally* suits you. I mean, you already had the vibe, but this? This is *iconic*.” Ash felt herself finally be able to breathe, taking a deep breath. Ash felt all the tension in her body slowly melts. Ash was afraid of confusion, or even worse—rejection. But she was fortunately met with... excitement? Jane flopped onto her belly and kicked her feet in intrigue. “So, is Ash your chosen name? Or are you keeping it from before?” Ash’s demeanor changed completely from reserved to being a lot more comfortable. “Ash is my chosen name. Andrew is my dead name.” Jane giggled and kissed her cheek. “Cute. Pronouns are She/Her?” Ash nodded. “And They/Them. I don’t mind either.” Jane’s eyes sparkled as she pressed her face closer to Ash, their cheeks touching. “Love it. You’re gonna slay, babe. And oh my gods, we have to go shopping. Like, immediately.” Ash blinked at Jane a

bit confused. “What?” Jane gasped obnoxiously. “Ash, please tell me you haven’t just been wearing the same stuff this whole time. We need to get you some cute clothes! And, like, accessories. And, oh my gods, maybe even some makeup—” Ash started to laugh. “Jane, slow down!” Jane stood up and started to write down a list of things on her phone’s notepad to get Ash. “No slowing down! This is so important! We’re going all out, babe. Full transformation. Shopping spree. The works.” Ash felt herself hesitate. What Jane was suggesting—Shopping to get a bunch of clothes to embrace her femininity—It felt like a huge moment, like she was leaving her old world and starting a new one. Jane’s zeal and excitement were contagious. It helped Ash feel... normal in this situation. She felt like this wasn’t some big scary thing—that she wasn’t alone. “...Okay,” Ash said finally, her voice was soft, yet compliant. “That sounds fun.” Jane practically lifted her off the bed in excitement, hugging her. “Yes!” Jane clamored with excitement, already pulling her phone out and typing like a madman. “We’ll make a day of it! I’ll invite the girls, we’ll hit up that boutique in Mauville, and by the time we’re done, you’re gonna be stunning.” Ash smiled, her body filling with a warm and cozy excitement. On top of the hope she felt with Dion and her family, she could feel even more than she ever expected to feel with Jane. She trusted Jane, and little did she know, that was a mistake she’d soon realize.

Only a few months before Ash’s nineteenth birthday, Ash had gotten swept up in a bunch of exciting plans—She planned to have a girl’s night out and go on a huge clothes-shopping spree with Jane and her friends. It had only been around a week or so since she came out to Jane as trans and Demi-Femme. Jane, fortunately, *seemed* to be excited and supportive about it. Ash was, and still is relieved at her response. Ash’s disaster sense had even warned her of what was to come. The vision filled her head—strangers pointing at her, laughing at her, as she was fully nude and exposed to everyone—Ash felt her blood run cold, but went to Jane for reassurance. “H-Hey... Jane?” Ash’s paws were shaking as Jane stayed behind with her. “What’s up, babe?” Jane held her shaky paws and smiled at her with a gentle comfort. “I had a v-vision about what’s coming... It wasn’t good. Not all visions come true, especially if you take the steps to make sure the disaster doesn’t happen... So, please... I just need some reassurance.” Ash looked into Jane’s soft amber eyes, searching for comfort. “Ashley, I promise I won’t let something bad happen. You are my friend, ok?” Ash took a deep breath as she felt her worries slowly melt away. “Thank you. I appreciate it.” Ash and Jane caught up with the others, continuing to talk about everything fashion-related. The group of girls arrived at the Mauville Boutique, one of the most well-known fashion shops in all of Hoenn—Filled to the brim with all sorts of styles in clothing and accessories—That Ash had always looked at through the windows as she walked by whenever she could. Ash had been making sure to save up on this—She’d been working twice as hard for Lucas to get more money, and skipping out on buying herself food by instead eating at Dion’s—She had enough finally to get a few outfits. Finally, she could fully embrace her femininity with someone she could trust. All of the girls split up in no time, each wanting to go and try on different things as each of them picked out their outfits and headed to the changing rooms afterward. Jane gently grabbed Ash’s paw with an overwhelming bubbly confidence. “C’mon, babe! Let’s share a changing room! I can help you match your choices~!” Her voice was filled with a sweet twinge, only to then turn soft. “It’ll be fun, yeah?” Ash wavered but nodded as she went into a changing room with her, and a shy grin spread across her face. The moment Ash had fully stripped down, Jane lunged forward suddenly, the shock and speed of her action unable to make Ash react in time. When Ash

opened her eyes, she saw that she was in the open—in front of *everyone*, completely naked—The world around her almost seemed to start to move in slow motion. The store was crowded too. The other shoppers—men, women, kids, everyone in between—turned to look at the racket. Within seconds, laughter started. Pokemon pointed, gasped, whispered, and even some of them pulled out their phones to take pictures and videos as Ash stood there in pure terror and humiliation. As her heart pounded in her chest, she could feel her ears ring as her body trembled, and her voice and breath caught in her throat. Then she heard Jane's voice call out—her once sweet voice now turned bitterly poisonous, thick with mocking and teasing. "Oh my gods, **Andrew**, you actually thought you were one of us? You still are just a dumb boy!" Ash felt her stomach drop into a pit, feeling bottomless shame and humility. The misgendering felt like a sucker punch in her balls, but the *name—the wrong name*—hit her body like a high-speed semi-truck. She felt her anxiety and emotions splatter out, as she trembled like injured prey. Her mind pushed everything out, becoming blank, as her throat felt like it tightened so much she was having an allergic reaction. She would rather have. *Anything* would've been better than this. *No. NO NO NO!!* It wasn't just Jane's voice she heard—It was *his* voice too—Lucas's voice. Lucas's unbridled and unadulterated hatred for her was thick in his voice. How he'd growl and mock her. How he'd humiliate her in front of his subordinates. *You will always be weak, Andrew. You can't run from who you are. You are NOTHING.* The laughter grew louder, digging and clawing at her, seizing her heart. She wanted to scream. She wanted to vanish. She didn't want to live anymore. Jane walked out without a single care, looking at her with a smirk as she crossed her arms. "Look at *him*! Isn't this hilarious?" Tears stung her face and blurred her vision, as she felt the overwhelming dread crush her. Ash had enough. Her legs finally moved as she shoved past Jane and ran into the changing room, slamming the door and locking it. Her hands started to shake violently as she scrambled to get her clothes on, starting to hyperventilate. *I need Dion.* She looked down at her phone as tears dripped onto the screen, starting to type. *Dion, please please please I need you now.* She hits send and then sets her phone to the side as she curls up and starts to tremble, as her back pushes back against the door, their laughter and taunts still echoing in her ears. Her hands continued to tremble as she gripped the hem of her shirt, keeping the promise of making sure her paws stayed in sight. She kept trying to slow her breathing but kept failing. It was impossible. Her phone lit up in her lap, and she picked it up to hold it close so she could make out the words through her tear-blurred vision. *Dion: I'm coming, dear. Stay there, I'll be there as soon as possible.* Ash couldn't hold it in anymore, she started to sob uncontrollably as she held her phone to her chest, crying. *Dion's coming. She's on her way...* Outside, Ash could hear the murmurs of people. Snickering, cruel remarks. "Did you see *him*?" "What a *freak*." "What was *he* doing in the *girls'* changing room?" Ash put her paws over her ears and growled to herself as she tried to block them out. But she could still *feel* and *hear* it—Their eyes, their judgment, their ridicule, their remarks, the way they looked at her like some sort of... *thing*. It felt like it's been hours when she heard a knock, followed by a familiar voice. "Ash? I'm here." Dion's voice was strong, protective, and confident. Before Ash could even finish a thought, she scrambled to get up onto her feet and opened the door. Ash stared at her savior and lover—Her golden and black fur, her blue eyes, her confident frame—Before Ash could even say anything, Dion pulled her into a warm embrace. Ash sobbed into Dion's neck and held her with shaky arms, taking in her protector for everything that she was and is. Ash finally felt like she was able to breathe yet again. Ash gripped her lover tighter

as if she were to let go, she'd fear losing her forever. Dion placed her paw on Ash's back and started to rub comforting and gentle circles, humming a soft tune as she did. "Shhh... it's ok. I got you." Dion kept her voice steady and soft. "I'm here now. You're safe." Ash kept her eyes squeezed tightly, wanting to finally feel better now that Dion was here. But all she could hear was Jane's voice ringing in her ears. That mocking, conniving teasing voice. "She—She used my d-deadname..." Ash managed to speak, but it was hardly audible through her sobs. Dion could feel her blood start to boil. "She sh-shoved me out... I-I was naked... i-in front of e-everyone..." A low growl started to build up in Dion's throat as she held Ash tighter in her arms. Ash's body kept trembling as Dion held her close, continuing to rub her back. "I'm so sorry, dear. I'm so sorry..." Ash just stayed in her arms, as she started to speak again. "They took p-pictures... a-and videos... they l-laughed at m-me..." With no hesitation, Dion hooked her arms under Ash's legs and picked her up effortlessly, kissing her cheek. "Shhh, it's ok my love. You're safe now." She turned and started to head toward the door, ready to take Ash home and cuddle her as much as she needed, but then—She saw **her**. Jane stood with her friends gossiping and laughing about the situation. Her trademark smirk was drawn across her face as if this was all some funny joke to her. As if, she hadn't just absolutely shattered Ash's trust. Her ears were pinned back as her tail flicked with a red-hot rage. Dion got a better grip on Ash and then glared directly at Jane. "Ash, take a moment to rest your eyes, ok?" Ash just nodded and laid her head on Dion's neck, still crying softly. Dion walked towards Jane as the entire boutique fell silent, all eyes glued to the scene about to unfold. Dion didn't care. "What the *fuck* is wrong with you?" Dion's voice was at a normal level but held the weight of a barely contained vengeful anger. Jane scoffed as she ran her fingers through her hair like this was no more than some petty bickering. "Oh, come on, it was just a joke—" "**That**," Dion growled and leaned her face closer, "was not a joke. That was cruelty." Jane rolled her eyes and chuckled a bit. "Whatever, it's not that big of a deal—" "IT IS A BIG DEAL!" Dion finally snapped, taking a deep breath to calm herself, if only by a bit. "You humiliated her. You shoved her naked into a crowd and laughed while she begged for help. Do you even realize what you did?" Jane's smirk disappeared, as Dion put her mouth next to Jane's ear, but didn't lower her voice. "Did it feel good? Watching her panic? Watching her cry? Did that make you feel powerful, Jane?" She released a chilled, resentful laugh. "You're pathetic." Jane scrunched her nose a bit in disgust, like a child looking at her veggies. "Oh, please, Dion, don't act like you're some hero. She's not even—" Dion didn't let her finish. "If you ever speak about her like that again, I swear on everything you hold dear, you will regret it." Jane's face drained of color as she gulped. Dion gave her no more of her attention, as her focus immediately went back to Ash. She let out a deep breath and carried her outside as if she were the most important thing in the world. Ash didn't look back, she just kept her head nestled in her lover's neck. *I don't want to see Jane ever again. Or her stupid smirk... or her stupid pastel uniform... I don't want to go back to that stupid place ever again... I just want to go home, cuddle with Dion, and forget everything...* As Ash thought to herself, Dion helped her into the passenger seat of her car and buckled her seatbelt. Before going to the driver's side, she leans in and kisses Ash on the forehead. Dion gets into her side but doesn't start the car. Instead, she places a paw on Ash's paw and rubs it gently. "I love you dear. I'm so sorry that happened... I'll be here to protect you. None of those people or their opinions matter. You are beautiful, and you are loved. **No one** can take that away from you. Don't ever let them." Ash looked at her, and had to stop herself from sobbing again—this time,

however, from joy and comfort—and she softly smiled. “Thank you... I love you, Dion.” Dion held Ash’s paw to her lips and kissed it as she smiled at her. “I love you too, Ash.”

It had been 2 full years since Ash and Dion started dating and a year and a half since she started working for Lucas again. In that time, Ash has stopped going back to Lucas’s manor altogether and instead has started going to Dion’s place—her real home. Dion and her fathers welcomed Ash with open arms, treating her as a *real* family would. But with that new change, came an unnerving realization. Not once had Ash ever come home in a good condition. Every single night she arrived with fresh wounds, scrapes, bruises, gashes, burns, broken bones, and would sometimes even come home limping. And sometimes, she’d arrive with a disassociated humiliation on her face as her legs would tremble, stained from blood dripping from her sphincter. They didn’t need to ask about it on those nights. They knew she had gone through worse than they could ever fathom. Every time Ash would always shrug it off like it was no big deal. She treated it as if it was simply a minor inconvenience to come back home too. Almost as if she’d just accepted that it would always be present. To Dion, Hazel, and Jamie, however, this was everything. Hazel would always be the one to patch Ash up. His paws were soft and gentle, however his expression was filled with worry and anger. As he saw just how bad the wounds were, his movements would get harsher, and he started to ask questions—What happened? Who did this? Every time Ash would shrug it off, or simply respond with, “It’s not that big of a deal.” Jamie would calmly sit next to her, kissing her cheek and whispering affirmations to her, his voice was always gentle—you are loved. You are such a strong girl. You are so brave. None of it is your fault—He hardly ever pushed as much as Hazel did, but Ash could always see the concern and tenderness in his expression, by how his snow-white ears would waver at the sight of her flinching, or how he’d wrap his fluffy blanket of a tail around her. Dion was always immediately by her side to help her, she would hold her close and kiss her cheek, take Ash into her room, and cuddle Ash until she fell asleep—if she could sleep—with all the night terrors she had. She’d silently be hoping and begging for Ash to tell her what was going on in her head, so she could fix it all and make her happy like she deserved. And one night, she finally spilled it all. It had been like every other time that Ash arrived—she walked in through the front door, her normally white fur stained rust-red from dried blood, with deep gashes and blood-stained tights. Hazel immediately ushered to the sofa and started to treat and bandage her wounds, immediately fussing and asking the typical questions as Ash shrugged it off. Dion sat beside Ash and grasped her paw gently, nuzzling into her neck. Then Hazel growled and stood up, looking at Ash. “This isn’t normal, Ash,” He clutched the rag stained in Ash’s blood tighter, his paws trembling as he spoke. His voice was sharper and filled with an irritated concern. “You don’t just trip and fall into these kinds of injuries or get them from simple scuffles!” Ash tensed but stayed silent, keeping her eyes down as she pulled her paw away from Dion’s and gripped her skirt tightly. “Sweetheart, we just... We need to understand. We want to know what’s happening to you.” Jamie’s voice was softer than Hazel’s, but had a slight caution to it, as if he didn’t want to push too much. Dion reached for Ash’s paw and squeezed it, giving it a soft kiss. “Ashy, please.” Silence. Thick and dense filled the air as expectant gazes settled on Ash. Ash finally spoke. But it wasn’t in her usual tone or even an upset tone. It was detached, unfeeling, and monotone. “He’s sewn my mouth shut more times than I can keep track of. Doesn’t like it when his favorite little toy speaks back.” You could hear a pin drop. Hazel froze as his face twisted to pure terror, Dion’s breathing got caught in her throat, and Jamie started to tremble as

he held his paw over his mouth. Ash didn't notice how they reacted—she was still looking down at her paws, squeezing Dion's tighter. "He always made sure they were thick and tight. He'd do it slowly. He'd make sure I wasn't able to speak. If I tried, it'd tear the wounds open." Hazel was *fuming*. His paws trembled with anger as his tail fluffed up in rage. "Who? Who does this to you?!" Ash whimpered and curled up a bit, her lip trembling as she spoke. "M-my father. L-Lucas." Jamie gasped as they pulled her into a gentle embrace, Dion joining in on the hug as well, gripping Ash's paw tightly. Hazel snapped, growling as he paced back and forth. "That bastard—" His claws unsheathed as he stomped his foot, his tail flicking furiously. "Th-that absolute MONSTER—" His pacing back and forth grew faster, his paws clenching into fists. His claws dug deep into his palms, but he didn't care. "I knew something was wrong—I knew you weren't just getting into fights—but this? This?!" He turned to Ash, grabbing her shoulders as tears of rage and worry flooded down. "And you just let this happen?!" Ash shuddered and curled up, burying her head in her legs. "I... I d-didn't... I..." Jamie stepped in, placing his paw on Hazel's and squeezing it. "Hun, breathe. Let her speak, ok?" Hazel sighed and took a deep breath, his tone a bit softer now. "What else has he done to you?" Ash couldn't help but hesitate. She didn't want them to yell at her. But... she's already started to tell them. *Might as well tell them the rest.* "The crucifixion isn't new. He's been doing it since I was young." Hazel looked like he was about to be sick, Jamie turned his head with his paw over his mouth, stifling his sobs. Dion just sat there, in utter disbelief. Ash didn't notice their reactions and just kept speaking. "He liked to use white hot nails. Said it made them stick in better. I think he just liked to see me squirm in pain." Dion's paw trembled as she placed it on Ash's thigh. "Ash..." Ash didn't glance over; she just kept speaking. "Tickle torture was his absolute favorite. He'd strip me down and tie me down in his study. It's so much different than pain.... It's humiliating. It hurts in a way that never leaves. He would do it for hours... use a spell to keep my endurance up..." It all made sense to Dion now. It wasn't some random assaulter. It was her own father. "That's why you panicked so much. Your dad does it to you so many times..." Dion held Ash's paw tight and gave it a soft kiss. Ash's lip quivered, as she refused to make eye contact. "I-I'm s-sorry I lied... I..." Dion hugged her and nuzzled in, petting her head. "It's ok. I'm not mad. Keep going, ok?" Ash simply nodded as she squeezed Dion's hand in return. "The Brazen Tauros was fun. He made sure it wasn't lethal. Didn't want to break his favorite toy..." Hazel stopped pacing altogether and looked at Ash with wide, tear-filled eyes. Jamie's ears flattened as his tails curled around his leg. "He liked to do electrocution too. It's like being fried from the inside out. He'd attach the diodes to my metal arm so it'd be more painful." Ash's voice was hollow and detached, the only thing keeping her grounded was Dion holding her paw. "Baton beatings were his go-to. He'd whip my back and hit my kneecaps as I trained, making me push myself." Ash rubbed her cybernetic digits into Dion's paw, tears starting to sting her eyes. The three of them stayed silent, listening grimly. Ash continued, "Chinese water torture is a lot worse than it sounds. You get strapped down to the point of being immobile, and there is a constant cold drip of water on your forehead. The first few drops are nothing. But the thousandth...? It's maddening. Then he'd break my bones, and make me continue to work. It was never enough to break me completely. I still had to be efficient." Ash chuckles hollowly and wipes her tears, her paw thrumming against the cushion. Hazel went to reach for her, wanting to hold her close and protect her forever, never letting her go. "When I turned 12... that's when *it* started. I... I was cleaning dishes. I went to clean a steak knife, but accidentally cut my paw. I dropped the knife

and... a-and... before I-I knew it he p-p-picked me u-up by th-the throat a-and s-slammed me o-onto the t-table. My v-vision went d-dark as the a-air left my l-lungs. As I-I opened m-my e-eyes... I c-could f-feel the a-air on m-my fur and sk-skin. Before I c-could ask w-w-what was h-happening he... h-he... raped me." Hazel forced himself to bottle his fury as he hugged Ash, making sure it wasn't too tight or accidentally making her uncomfortable. Dion and Jamie joined in on the hug. Ash's tears dripped down her cheeks as she hugged them. "That was hardly the last time... in the thousands now... I think... then... sometimes h-he'd... throw me to his wild Pokemon... While th-they were i-in heat... I'd be there f-for hours... D-days even..." The three held her in their embrace, trying to offer solitude and comfort the best they could. Ash's breathing was shallow, she dug her claws into her thighs as she spoke. "Dad, he... made me into an assassin and a thief. I still remember my first hit... I was only twelve..." She took a deep shaky breath, clutching the three of them tightly as she continued. "The rain was heavy that night. It was cold, but I barely felt it. I—I was hungry. But that was normal." Dion's tail flicked as she listened, but didn't speak. None of them did. "She was a Braixen. Twenty-eight years old. Just some woman walking home, probably thinking about what she was gonna make for dinner. Maybe she had a long day at work. Maybe she was happy. Maybe she was just tired. I don't know. I never got to know." She shifted her body in unease, soft whirrs came from her cybernetic arm as she held Dion's paw tightly. I followed her for a while, waiting for the right moment. I—I told myself it would be quick. That if I just—if I just did it fast, it wouldn't matter. It wouldn't mean anything." Ash let out a whimpering, trembling breath, tears already forming again. "And then her kid ran up to her." Hazel clenched his body as he looked her in the eyes, wide with horror. "A l-little Fennekin..." her voice stayed shaky, not able to look them in the eyes. "She ran right into her mother's arms, and the Braixen held her so tight, like—like she was the most important thing in the world." Ash tried to swallow her guilt but only felt it rise back up as she forced the story out. "And for a second, I thought... I thought maybe I could just leave. Just walk away. But I knew Lucas would find out. He always found out. And if he did—if he thought I failed—he'd make them suffer for it. He'd make sure they wished I had just killed them." Ash's breath caught in her throat, and her whole body started to tremble. "So I grabbed her when they walked past an alley. And I... I slit her throat." Jamie held his paws over his mouth, letting out a choked whimper. Dion squeezed Ash's paw tighter, and Hazel started to cry as he held Ash to his fluffy chest. "She didn't die right away," Her voice was no louder than a whisper, trembling and filled with guilt. "She—she tried to stop the bleeding. But she couldn't. She just—she just looked at me. Like she was asking me why." Ash held back a sob, digging her claws into her legs, tight enough to nearly draw blood. "And then she was gone." Her tears stained Hazel's clothes, as she clung to him and continued. "I fell to my knees. I couldn't—my head was spinning, I couldn't breathe—and then..." Her claws pierced her skin, and her legs started to bleed slightly. No one noticed—they were too intrigued and mortified by Ash's story. "The little girl... She grabbed my arm." Hazel held her closer, as he started to quietly sob, while Dion leaned into Ash and hugged her arm. "She—she was trembling. But she didn't run. She just held onto me and begged me not to hurt her." Dion's breathing audibly got caught in her throat, her body stiffening. "She was so small. She—she wanted to run away with me. She thought I could keep her safe." Ash let out a bitter and hollow laugh. "Like I wasn't the one who just took everything from her." She clenched her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, her breathing becoming shallow. "I should've let her go. I wanted to let her go. But if I did—if I let her

run—Lucas would've found her. And when he did—he would've torn her apart. He would've done things to her that—I couldn't let that happen." Ash opened her eyes, and hugged herself, sobs starting to make themselves present."So I hugged her. I held her tight, and I—I told her I was sorry." She choked on her sobs, curling into herself. "And then I drove my knife into her side." Dion winced, but placed a gentle paw on Ash's shoulder, squeezing it lightly. Jamie's frame started to tremble, nuzzling into Ash and kissing her forehead. Hazel couldn't stop sobbing and laid his head into Jamie's arms. "She didn't even scream. She just—she clung to me. And then she stopped moving. I rocked her in my arms like if I held her long enough, I could bring her back. But I couldn't. And when I looked down—when I looked—I saw the blood washing away in the rain." Ash broke. She started to full on sob, clinging and clutching the three of them as if they were more precious than her own life—which to Ash, they were. Dion shook violently as she held her lover close, kissing her cheek and crying softly. Hazel was crying nearly just as hard as Dion, clutching her to his chest and planting kisses on her head. Tears dripped down Jamie's face as he held his family close and protectively. Ash finally spoke again, her voice barely audible. "And through all of it, I still did everything he ordered me to do. The assassinations. The thefts." Dion held Ash, petting her head to try and soothe her. "Ashy..." Ash's voice cracked under the weight of her emotions, trembling violently. "I hated it. I tried to research my targets. Tried to make sure they deserved it. That they were guilty of something—anything—to make it feel less awful. But most of the time, they weren't. Most of the time, they were just... people." Dion looked to her parents, wanting them to say—to do *anything* to try and help her love feel better, but they were just as stumped as she was. "I've had night terrors since I was twelve." Ash nuzzled in and tried to take deep breaths. "Dion has helped me through them more times than I could count. She'd hold me tight and sing soft lullabies, rubbing my back and kissing my head." Ash chuckled weakly and looked at Dion with a soft smile. Her smile then faltered as she looked at her own paws in anger and grief. "All of their deaths... it's all my fault." Dion immediately grabbed Ash's paws and held them tight, a stubborn fire in her eyes. "Ashy, look at me." Her voice was stern, but filled with empathic care. Ash hesitated before looking at Dion, focusing in on her sapphire blue eyes. "It's not your fault. It's never been your fault." Ash let out a humorless laugh, hollowed out with her despair and guilt. "I know you say that... But at the end of the day, I still did it." Dion immediately pulled Ash back into her warm embrace, hugging her tight and nuzzling her snout into her neck. "You survived it. You're here now. You're safe." Ash stayed silent as she curled into Dion's arms, wanting to disappear. *I... can't let them do this. They're in danger the longer I stay with them. Dad... he will break them.* Lucas wasn't just some Pokemon. He was a powerful figure across many regions, with connections. He would kill them without any hesitation. Especially if she ever gave him a reason to consider it. And she had already given him too many. Ash spoke, her voice was low and dreadfully calm. "I can't stay here." Hazel looked at Ash, confusion scrawled over his face. "Ash, what—" Ash stood up and backed away from them, gripping the hem of her skirt. "I can't do this to you. If I stay, I'm putting you in danger. If I let you help me, I'm putting you in danger. If Lucas ever finds out that you know, that you care, he will kill you." Her voice cracked, but she kept working through this, even if it hurt her. "And I can't—I won't let that happen." Dion stood up and took a step towards Ash, her ears pinned back. "No." She shook her head violently. "No. You don't get to do this. You don't get to decide what is best for us, Ash. We love you. We're not just going to let you walk away!" Ash looked her in the eyes, holding back tears and standing firm.

"You have to." Hazel then stood up, his tail bristling with desperation in his eyes. "No, we don't! Lucas had already taken so much from you! Don't let him take this too!" Jamie took a step to her, his voice quieter yet just as firm. "You don't have to protect us by pushing us away." Ash laughed, filled with a bitter sharpness. "That's exactly what I have to do." Dion took another step closer. "No, it's not—" Ash finally snapped. "Yes, it is! You don't get it, Dion! You don't understand what he's capable of! He doesn't care about rules, or morals, or anything other than power! He enjoys destroying people—he enjoys taking everything from them! And if he finds out that you matter to me—" Her breath caught in her throat. "If he knows how much I care about you, he will ruin you." Dion's breath wavered, but she stood her ground. "Then let him try." Ash looked away from her. "Look at me, Dion. Take a good, long look at me. You don't want this. I won't let this happen." Hazel took another step towards her, reaching his paw out to her. "Ash—" Ash turned towards the door, not looking back. "I'm leaving." Dion shook her head. "No, you're not." Ash clenched her fist, not really wanting to do this. *This is what must be done to protect them.* Dion reached for Ash's paw. "Ashy, Please—" Ash pulled her paw away, tears reforming. "I'm breaking up with you." Silence. Dion froze in place, her mouth opened as if to speak, but no words came out. Hazel exhaled sharply. Jamie's expression showed heartbreak as he placed his paw over his heart. Dion's body has started to tremble. "No." Ash pushed herself to make eye contact with Dion. "This is the only way I can keep you safe." Dion grabbed Ash's paw, tears streaming down her face. "Then I don't want to be safe!" Ash jerked, holding Dion's paw tightly. "I want you." Ash's words caught in her throat, clenching Dion's paw tighter as she forced herself to not break. "You deserve better than some husk of a woman. You deserve better than a criminal. You deserve better than a murderer." Dion held Ash's paw to her lips and kissed it. "We can work through it together, Ash. You aren't either of those things! Lucas was the one who made you do those things. You are what I deserve!" Ash couldn't do this. She didn't want to do this. But she had to do this. Her voice was barely audible. "I'm sorry." Dion's eyes widened with pleading as she fell to her knees, trembling. "Don't... don't do this!" Ash gently pulled her hand away, not looking back as she walked towards the door. Dion let out a broken whimper as she crumpled to the ground, starting to sob. Hazel and Jamie didn't move—they wanted to stop her, but they did not know how to. Dion looked up, her voice choked full of sobs. "Are we still best friends?" Ash stopped in place but immediately responded as she looked back at her with a soft smile. "Always." Then she walked out the door, not looking back.

Ash sat in her quiet apartment, the only sound was the buzz of the singular bulb over her head and the buzz of traffic through the paper-thin walls. The apartment was quite small—a snug kitchen area, a grungy bathroom, along with two mostly bare rooms. One of them was completely empty, while the other came with a noisy, uneven mattress on a rusty bed frame. Ash had just settled in and was seated on the edge of the bed, staring down at the creaky wooden floor, her cybernetic paw thumping against her thigh. *The air smells... old... like mildew. This place isn't much... but it's mine. I still can't quite believe it.* Ash recalled what Lucas had told her before sending her off: "You are an adult, Andrew. You pay for your own place, your own food, everything. That will be the only change. I will still have my informants keeping a secret eye on you." Ash had no idea what caused him to change his mind, but she at least knew that no matter what, he'd instill control over her life still. Lucas only gave her one day to gather the bare necessities and move in somewhere. If she hadn't, she would have either been forced to stay within his estate, or left to live on the streets. She gritted her teeth as a low growl

rumbled from her throat. *Lucas letting me move out would've been great a year ago... back when I was still living with... Dion. Did he... know...? Is that why he waited...?* The familiar ache of being alone hung heavy in her soul, as her mind filled with the longing for what used to be—Dion's room lit with beautiful fairy lights, Ash being nuzzled into Dion's arms as they shared a bowl of popcorn watching old cheesy horror movies. The faint scent of butter and Dion's perfume was in the air as she sat behind Ash, braiding her hair. Dion's tail would be flicking softly as they shared gentle kisses and intimate touch—Ash could still feel her lover's delicate paws running through her hair, so real that she almost looked behind her, expecting to see Dion. *This would have been an Arceus send if this happened a year ago... But I'm not with Dion anymore... Nothing can change that now.* Ash took a deep breath through her nose, forcing herself to focus on more important matters. "How am I going to survive now? I just barely had a bit over enough to make the first month's rent." Ash spoke to herself, thrumming her paw faster. Speaking to herself always helped her understand better what she needed to do, and made it feel not as overwhelming. "How am I going to make next month's rent...? Or every other month...?" She rubbed the bridge of her snout, racking her brain for any possible solution. If she failed to find a way, she'd be back with Lucas—and she'd die before she'd let that happen. "Father won't let me get a normal job... he still wants to be in control. I can't leave a paper trail... hm... What if... I do a job that isn't considered a job to—" Her phone started to buzz, interrupting her train of thought. Ash blinked a bit before reaching into her pants pocket and checking the caller ID. *Dion.* Ash's breathing caught in her throat, her finger hovering over the answer button as a genuine smile spread across her face, then she pressed the button. "Hey, Didi. Sorry that I missed our call time by an hour..." Dion's beautiful face lit up the screen, her own face lit up by the soft glow of the fairy lights hanging from her ceiling and walls. She was lying on her belly, her paws kicking softly behind her as her tail flicked. "No, It's ok Ashy." Dion's voice was in its familiar calm tone as she spoke, a warmth starting to swell in Ash's heart. "I'm just happy you answered. Um... what are you doing right now?" Ash let out a sigh as she turned on her own camera, showing that she had still been clad in her thief attire—a black catsuit, black gaiter, and a black utility vest—Dion had seen her in this attire many times before, a subtle blush resting on her cheeks. The skintight clothing was originally for being under the cover of the night, allowing for incredible dexterity, yet surprisingly the outfit was quite comfortable—so much so that Ash hadn't bothered changing. Ash undone the utility vest and tossed it to the side, the different assortment of tools clinking in the different pockets. "Getting settled into my apartment," she leaned back into the scraggly pillows on her bed, slipping her legs under the scratchy sheets. "I didn't believe it when he told me, but Father actually let me move out. It's insane." Dion's face immediately brightened from joy, her tail swayed faster as she kicked her paws faster. "That's great Ashy! Did you manage to bring all your clothes with you?" Ash giggled to herself. *Arceus, Dion is still such a cutie.* "Yeah. It took a few trips, but I got all of my clothes. I still need to get a few other personal belongings and save up for some actual furniture, but it's a great start, at least." From Dion's feed, Ash could make out two familiar voices—Hazel's panicked fussing, soon to be followed by Jamie's gentle and soft tone to try and calm him down. Ash's heart couldn't help but ache for it—the chaos of Hazel fussing over her. Jamie's soft reassurances and amazing cooking, as he reminded his husband to calm down. Dion's warm embrace as they stuffed Jamie's treats in their faces—she missed it more than anything. But she can't have it back. At least, not for a long time. Ash reached into one of the bags that she had packed earlier,

her paw brushing against the fabric of something soft. She gently grabbed ahold of it and pulled it out, a warm smile tugging at her lips as her eyes met with a felt gaze—A Hatsune Meloetta plush. The same plush that Dion gave her in the hospital when she was so broken from the failed mega-evolution experiment her father had conducted, she had given Ash her favorite plushie to keep in her darkest moments for whenever she couldn't be there to keep her safe in person. Ever since their breakup, Ash had kept the plush in her arms to cuddle as she slept, it practically being mandatory at this point. Ash closed her eyes softly as she held Hatsune close, the smell of Dion deep in the fibers of the plush helping to calm her. "I still got it, Didi." Dion's heart melted as she saw her love hold the plush close, her gaze as warm as her voice. "That's good. She'll keep you safe until we meet again in person." Ash's breathing hitched as she held Hatsune closer, the guilt sticking to her conscience more than honey on an Ursaring's paw. "Dion, there isn't going to be a next time." Ash saw Dion's tail become motionless, her paws kicking starting to slow to meek and anxious ankle flicks. Dion's welcoming and soft smile faded as a flash of heartache added to Ash's guilt. "R-Right... yeah..." Dion forced a smile, but the hurt peaked from under it. "I'm still here if you need anything... Okay, Ashy?" Ash held the phone to her chest as if to hug Dion despite being a couple of towns away. "I know, Didi. Thank you." Dion took a trembling breath to try and steady herself. "Alright, Ashy. You make sure to get a good night's sleep, ok?" Ash tiredly nodded, a soft yawn creeping out as she rubbed her eye. "I will, Didi. I'll call you tomorrow when I wake up." Dion kissed the screen softly in return and smiled before hanging up. Once again, the silence of being alone filled the air, weighing on her like a relaxed Snorlax. Ash curled into herself as she hugged the plushie tight. The fabric was well-worn, and the stuffing was uneven from years of being loved. She needed a way to think of how to get money, fast. She brainstormed different ideas, each one leading to nowhere until—"Sex sells..." Her body started to tremble at the thought of it. She absolutely hated that idea. She's been Lucas's toy for so long, and surely it wouldn't be any different. Her stomach twisted into knots as her breathing became shallow, hugging the plushie as her eyes became glossy from unshed tears. "Guess... I-I'm going to be a s-sex for hire..." She could feel the bile rising in her throat, but she forced it back down. Survival was never about being comfortable. It was about living by any means necessary. She nuzzled her face into the plushie, trying to ground herself with Dion's scent as she closed her eyes, sleep starting to overtake her. The next morning Ash woke up with a groan as she stretched, her body still aching from all the trips back and forth to move her belongings. She let out a groggy sigh as she forced herself to sit up, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes before reaching for her wallet. She flipped it open and started to flick through bills and coins to get a total sum of everything she had. It wasn't a lot. Her tail flicked softly as she sighed softly. "I have enough to get a cheap meal... maybe something at McPaneola's..." She reached over grabbed her phone from her bedside, and shot a text to Dion. *Ash: Are you up?* Not even a moment later, her phone buzzed from getting a response. *Dion: Yeah I'm up. Wanna call?* Ash smiled tiredly as she pressed the call button. Not even a full ring went by before Dion picked up, her voice was soft and joyous. "Hey, Ashy. How did you sleep?" The screen lit up with Dion's face as she turned on her facecam, showing that she was wearing a cute pink tee, her hair adorably messy from a well-rested sleep. Her sapphire blue eyes held a soft warmth as she smiled at Ash through the screen. Ash let out a soft chuckle, enamored by this beautiful Luxray who still cared for her as she turned on her camera. "I slept okay. Just... trying to figure out what to eat." Ash let out a breathy sigh, running her fingers through her hair,

the long strands slipping through her claws. Dion cocked her head ever so slightly, worry flashing in her eyes. "Well, whatever you decide, I hope it's good." Her smile eased. "I don't wanna keep you if you're hungry. But I'll see you tonight, right?" Ash's face softened, and she nodded. "Yeah... I'll see you tonight, Didi. Have a good day." Dion purred softly, planting a kiss on the screen. "You too, Ashy." Dion said, giving her a small wave before hanging up. Once the call ended, Ash flopped back on the bed with a loud sigh, staring up at the chipped popcorn ceiling. Her mind started to drift, not wanting to get up and start her new 'job', so she gave herself a couple more minutes before getting up. She stripped from her thief attire and put on a blue off-shoulder blouse that fit her frame perfectly. She hadn't grown much taller since her 16th birthday, so her clothes from then still fit her quite well. The fabric had a slight wear on it, her femme clothes one of the last things in her life that felt... good. She paired it with a black miniskirt and grey tights, twirling softly as she looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her remaining eye was a faint glow, dull from the exhaustion of her big move. Her cybernetic eye stayed at a consistent teal glow as it hummed gently, scanning the background in the mirror before settling on her. *I look... ok. That's good enough.* Ash unlocked her phone and took a deep breath as she went to a job listing app. "*Offering Sexual satisfaction services. Any time. Price negotiable. Apartment 2, 672 on Apricot Drive, Mauville.*" For a moment, she hesitated. She took a deep breath, and pressed the post button, then tucked her phone away. She could feel her stomach flip, but she just ignored it. She grabbed her purse and tucked her wallet into it before walking out of her apartment. She pulled the door shut, and the door clicked gently. The stairway leading to the front door of the two-story apartment house creaked under her weight. The roads outside were bustling with traffic—people heading to work, and shops starting to open. The air was fresh, the smell of hotdogs and fries wafting from a nearby food truck. Her stomach started to growl and churn from hunger in response to the smell, a reminder of why she was out in the first place. McPaneola's was just down the block, its golden arches standing tall on the sign next to the street. The doors slid open automatically as she stepped inside, the smell of coffee and fast food filling the air. There were only a few people littered throughout the tables, sipping on their drinks or eating their meals. She walked up to the front counter, her tired eyes scanning over the menu as she spoke steadily, despite her empty and gnawing hunger. "I'd like a double cheeseburger with only cheese and ketchup, a large fry, and a large Diet Poke with no ice." The cashier was a young Leafeon, who smiled softly at her while she put in her order. "That'll be ₱13.69, ma'am." Ash pulled out her wallet and counted the little she had left. ₱15. She just barely had enough. She gathered up ₱14 and handed it to the Leafeon with an exhausted smile. "Keep the change." The Leafeon nodded appreciatively, her tail wagging gently. "Thank you! Your food will be out shortly. Here's your cup for your drink—feel free to take a seat while you wait." Ash nodded with a warm smile and took the cup, heading to the soda fountain, and filling it to the brim with Diet Poke. The carbonation fizzed softly as she took a sip, the sweet flavor covering her pallet. She walked over to an empty booth and sat down, taking another sip. Before she could fully relax, a large presence sat on the opposite side of her table. She looked up and felt her blood run cold. It was a large male Feraligatr, the sheer size of him made the booth look like it was too small. With a neutral expression, he set his phone down, facing the screen towards her. Her job listing illuminated the screen. "You're Ashley, right?" Ash felt her breathing hitch. *Arceus, this dude will split me in half.* She had to force herself to nod, her grip on her drink tightening. "Yes, I am. Are you interested?" He spoke with zero hesitation.

“Yes. The entire night, I do what I want. You get ₱50 upfront, and the rest—₱450 after our session.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled-up ₱50 bill, and placed it on the table as he waited for her to respond. Ash could feel her mind racing as she did the math in her head. *That’s enough to cover food for the month... and if I keep getting jobs like this, rent won’t be an issue.* She let out a breathy exhale before nodding. “Alright. It’s a deal. The address is on the posting. Be there at 7:30 PM.” The Feraligatr nodded and pushed the money towards her, before standing up and walking away without saying anything else. Ash’s gaze was fixed on the crumpled-up bill on the table, her heart pounding so hard she could’ve mistaken it for construction noises outside. With a trembling hesitation, she grabbed the bill and tucked it into her wallet. *I gotta do what it takes to survive.* The Leafeon called to Ash with a soft voice. “Ma’am! Your food is ready!” Her gentle voice grounded Ash back in reality. She turned to see the Leafeon holding her bag of food, wearing a polite smile. Ash forced a smile of her own, standing up and grabbing the bag from her. “Thank you. You have a nice day!” Ash walked back over and sat in the booth from before, reaching into the bag and pulling out the wrapped-up burger and carton of fries. She unwrapped the burger with slow, deliberate movements. She took a bite of the burger, the warmth grounding her. *This is more than enough for now.*

It had been a long, exhausting day for Ash. She flopped onto the lumpy mattress, exhaustion sinking her into the uneven cushioning. A faint glow was cast over her room from the single overhead bulb, emitting a soft buzz. On her desk was an assortment of stolen goods—crumpled-up bills, stolen loose coins, different kinds of jewelry, and unique knick-knacks. Her heart was still pounding in her ribs, the adrenaline of the heists just now starting to come to a decline. The guilt clung to her like brambles, digging in deeper anytime she tried to shake it off. Her hands reached out to her Hatsune Meloetta plush beside her, and she pulled it into a tight embrace. Her claws dug into the soft fabric, as she tried to calm down. “Father really assigned me a lot of jobs today...” She nuzzled into the neck of the plushie, each inhale taking in its comforting scent that reminded her of simpler times—of Dion. Ash whimpered softly clutching the plush even tighter. I’m going to put you away for this,” Her voice was hushed as she spoke. “Don’t want you getting any stains... or getting stolen. You don’t want to see me like this.” She placed a gentle kiss on the plushie’s forehead before setting it in a wooden box that was tucked away under her bed. She placed some clean clothes on top of it to make sure it wasn’t visible. She let out a tired sigh as she stripped from her thief outfit, the black, skin-tight fabric clinging to her from the sweat of the day. The clothes dropped down to the floor, only wearing simple black boxers and a bra. She felt the light chill of the air on her scarred body, a refreshing change from the warmth she had felt only a few minutes prior. She grabbed her phone from off the bed, checking the time. 7:29 PM. Then, there was a sudden knock at the door that made her breathing get caught in her throat. Her tail flicked nervously as she felt her stomach churning. Her gut feeling screamed at her. *Just ignore him. Lock the door, and DO NOT let him in.* Her body moved before her mind, walking towards the door and cracking it open to see who was knocking. But she knew who it would be. The same large male Feraligatr that she met earlier that day was standing outside, looking down at her with an unreadable, yet expectant expression. She felt her stomach tie itself into knots as he spoke. “May I come in, Ms. Ashley?” His voice was baritone, booming, yet had an eerie stillness to it. Her paw gripped the doorknob so hard her knuckles were white, as her body trembled violently. *Just say no, and give the money back. Just get rid of him!* Despite her thoughts, despite her horrible gut feeling, she

stepped aside and opened the door the rest of the way, letting him enter. The Feraligatr had to duck slightly to pass the doorframe, his heavy build sending loud creaks through the floorboards. He turned and closed the door behind him, the latch making a soft *click*. Without saying anything, he started to unbutton his shirt, the slight rustle of fabric and the gentle buzz of the bulb overhead being the only sounds filling the gaps between them. Ash sat on her bed, her joints stiff as her body trembled in genuine fear. She held herself tightly, failing to calm down when suddenly, he spoke again. "I'm Jonah." Ash was caught off guard. Her gaze shifted up to his face, the causal tone feeling out of place. "Wh-what...?" Her voice was barely audible, no louder than a whisper. Jonah turned to look at her, his length on full display. *ARCEUS THAT'S HUGE!* "My name. It's Jonah. Don't worry, I promise to be gentle." He walks over to her, pinning her to the bed. Her body kept trembling as he leaned in and kissed her passionately. "Loosen up. Just try to enjoy it." Jonah pulled off her bra and boxers, smiling to himself as he groped her breast. Ash let out soft whimpers, occasionally being interrupted by small moans. Before Ash could even fully process what was happening, she felt his large claw wrap tightly around her throat as he thrust hard into her. Ash gasped and cried out, only causing his grip to tighten as he propped her leg against his chest, pulling her into hard, and painful thrusts. "P-please...! It h-hur—" Her plea got cut off by another yelp of pain, her throat bruised badly from his chokehold. Jonah growled lustfully as he leaked in her ass, digging his claws into her side until she started to bleed. He leaned in and bit her shoulder hard, his sharp teeth digging in deep. "Your blood tastes amazing, Ashley~" Just when Ash thought he couldn't get any more rougher, he started to pick up speed and thrust his entire length in her. "St-stop! It's n-not gonna—" She cried out in agony as he filled her up, her insides crying in pain from the tearing and salt entering her wounds. Ash lay limply on her side, sobbing and trembling. *I-I can't... M-move. It hurts...* "Th-there... I d-did what you... wanted..." Ash's breathing was ragged and shaky, looking at him with a pained face. Jonah shook his head and grabbed her shaft which caused her to whimper. "I said the entire night. We still have a couple of hours until midnight. Unless you don't want the money, that is." Ash's entire body was shaking, but she already knew the answer. She nodded her head and looked down, holding back a whimper. A smile spread across Jonah's face, his claw starting to jerk her off aggressively. Immediately Ash started to whimper and moan, tears streaming down her face, as her body trembled more aggressively. *Fuck... I hate this... but it's for the money. Just let him have his fun.* Her moans only grew more frequent as he rubbed her off faster, her tip started to leak as she held herself. *I-I don't want this... why... Why is m-my body reacting th-this way...? Do I a-actually w-want this...?* Ash let out a loud moan as she climaxed, her fluids covering his claw and her bed sheets. She panted softly as Jonah let go, holding his paw out to her. "Use your tongue. Make sure to clean up every last drop." She whimpered softly but leaned into his claw and started to lap up her seed. Jonah let out a satisfied huff, then reached into his bag as she kept licking him clean. "I have some toys I brought with me too. We have a good amount of rope, a spider gag, and a blindfold. Let's try them all at once, shall we~?" Before Ash could protest, the gag was forced into her mouth. "Mff?!" Jonah held her down tightly and started to hogtie her. The moment she was bound, Jonah put the blindfold over her eyes and grabbed her by the sides, thrusting his entire length down her throat. Ash's jaw immediately started to hurt, being forced open to take such a girthy circumference as he trusted repeatedly into her mouth. Ash gagged with each thrust, her body hating every second of this. As he picked up speed, Ash could feel his tip rubbing against the

walls of her throat. "You feel amazing, dear~!" Jonah lets out a loud moan as he coats her throat in white, pulling out with shallow panting. She lay on her bed, limp and trembling as Jonah placed the money on her pillow with a satisfied smirk. He then untied her wrists and ankles, setting her back down on the bed before starting to clean himself off. The rope left deep, red burns on her body, but Ash was too exhausted to rub them to try and soothe the wounds. Once he had completely cleaned himself off in the bathroom, he walked back out whistling a soft tune as he started to coil up the rope to be used for another day. He tucked it into his bag along with the gag and blindfold, then started to get dressed as he turned and spoke to her. "It was a pleasure doing business with you, Ashley," His voice was casual as if this was a normal business exchange. As if he isn't about to leave her trembling, bleeding, and hardly able to move. "I'll make sure to tell my friends about your extraordinary services. Have a good night." And with that, he turned to the door and walked out not saying anything else. The lock on the door clicking shut after he left sent a wave of relief through her. *He's gone... he's finally gone...* Ash just laid on her back, her blurry vision staring up at the ceiling. Her body wouldn't stop trembling as the pain kept getting worse, sinking into her like a bite from an Arbok. When she finally felt like she had enough strength to move, she sat up as trembles ran through her, propping her back against the wall as she sat on her bed. When she tried to swallow, she felt a sharp, searing pain shoot through her, causing her to whimper softly. *"My th-throat..."* she tried her best to speak, but it came out in a trembling, breathy rasp. Her throat felt like she deepthroated sandpaper, the taste of iron washing over her tongue. *I think I taste blood...* Her paw trembled as she grabbed her phone off the side of her bed, the bright screen stinging her eyes a bit. Despite that, she ignored it and typed out a message to Dion. *Ash: Are you up? I need someone to talk to.* She had the slightest hesitation before pressing send, letting out a pained breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding in. Once again, at her darkest she needed Dion. Her warmth and love always made everything better, and the thought of it was keeping her together. She whimpered in pain as she lay on her chest, reaching under her bed and pulling out the box that had her plushie, hidden and safe from what she had gone through. She reached under the clothes that had covered it and grabbed the plush pulling it to her chest. The moment she held it close, everything came crashing down. She started to sob softly, holding it tight as her body kept aching. Her tears dripped onto the fabric of the plush as she muffled herself by nuzzling into the plushie. Her phone started to vibrate softly next to her, playing a gentle ringtone. She shakily picked up the phone, just staring at the screen, her mind still foggy. Her movements were slow as if in a vat of molasses, as she swiped to answer Dion's call, immediately putting it on speaker phone. "Ashy...?" Dion's voice was immediately soft but held worry which nearly broke Ash all over again. Ash opened her mouth to speak, but when she did she felt an abrupt, searing pain shoot through her throat that made her whimper in pain. "Didi..." Her voice was raspy and quiet, barely even audible. "Gods, Ash, your voice... What happened? Are you okay?" Dion's voice raised slightly, her concern growing. Ash clutched the plushie tighter, her forehead nuzzled into the soft fabric as she took a pained, shaky breath. "I..." She tried again to speak but yielded the same results. Tears dripped down her face as she failed to speak. "Hey, shh, don't force it," Dion gently cut her off, her voice was soft and patient. "It's okay. Just breathe, alright?" Ash nodded to herself as if she needed to reassure herself that she was safe now. "I can stay on the phone with you, okay? As long as you need." Dion continued to speak, and Ash's heart started to warm just a bit. She closed her eyes, the sound of Dion's

voice making her feel just a bit safer. "Can you tell me what happened?" Dion spoke softly. "Or... if you can't, just tap the phone once for yes, twice for no." Ash took a shaky breath, hesitating a bit. The concern in Dion's voice was very prevalent. If she told Dion what had happened, she would worry and panic. And would most definitely try to come over and help her, risking herself. Ash couldn't let that happen. So she gritted her teeth and tapped her phone twice. "Alright, I understand. Do you need anything? Water, food, medicine?" Ash tapped the phone twice again, whimpering softly as she pulled the covers over her. Dion hardly sounded convinced about what Ash was communicating, but sighed and didn't push any further. "Do you want me to stay on the phone with you for a bit?" Ash tapped the phone a single time, her tail wrapped around her leg. Dion wasted no time with her answer. "Alright. I'll stay as long as you need." She didn't ask any further details about what had happened, but instead filled the void with banter, speaking in the soft yet confident tone Ash was familiar with. She told Ash about Hazel's cooking shenanigans—How he is a novice baker, and attempted macaroons only to have created a baking tray of charred black bricks. She talked about how there was a new salon that opened in Mauville, describing every outfit she thought would fit Ash perfectly. She even brought up an old childhood memory of them where they both snuck into Hazel's and Jamie's room to try on her dads' oversized work clothes, only for her parents to walk in on them tangled in aprons and shirts, both of them laughing so hard they couldn't breathe. Ash didn't speak much during the call, but she didn't need to. The softness and familiarity of Dion's voice helped to ground her, dulling the pain shooting through her, even if it was just a bit. As time went on, Ash's grasp on the phone started to lessen, her eyes getting heavier with each blink. Her breathing slowly turned to soft snores, her phone dropping to the pillow beside her with a barely audible thud. Dion didn't leave the call though. She listened to Ash's gentle snores, refusing to hang up until she knew that she wasn't alone, even while she slept.

The warm, earthy smell of fruits and vegetables wafted in the air as Ash walked through the local farmer's market, the store bustling with the chatter of other patrons, children running around and laughing, and the occasional rustle of crates being moved mixed with the light hum of traffic outside. She held a woven basket in her cybernetic digits, the smooth metal of the attached prosthetic gleaming in the rays of the sun, as her organic paw ghosted over the different fruits and vegetables all laid out in front of her. The view of bright red razz berries, golden pecha berries, and a large variety of leafy greens helped her feel a presence of normality, which was a stark contrast with the constant whirlwind of thoughts twisting in her mind. She exhaled softly. "I wanna eat a bit healthier..." she muttered to herself softly, her voice barely above a whisper in comparison to the background chatter of everyone else. Her dress fluttered softly with each step as she walked to the next stall, her bare paws padding quietly on the cobbled path. The hem of her sundress brushed against her calves as she grabbed a bundle of grapes. She looked over the grapes with a gentle grasp, the deep purple color was rich under the afternoon sunlight. *I love buying simple things like this. It feels like I finally have control over my life for once.* Just as she put the bundle of grapes in the basket, her phone vibrated in her pocket, the sudden buzz sent a jolt through her. She went stiff for a moment, her heart pounding as a gut feeling of nervousness crashed down on her. She felt her stomach twist around itself as she looked at the notification. *"A client wishes to meet up ASAP! Tap this notification to send them a message!"* She froze in place as her breath got caught in her throat. Seeing that notification immediately caused her blood to run cold. The last thing she wanted to

do right now was another client—and a client asking for an immediate meetup always meant bad news. Suddenly, the basket she was holding felt a lot heavier as the world darkened and blurred around her, besides the light of her phone screen as she stared at the notification. *I don't have to answer. I don't even have to open it. I can pretend I didn't see it, just this once.*

Someone passing by and bumping into her accidentally caused her to snap out of it. The stranger was a young adult Quilava, wearing a dark red crop top, with jean shorts and tights. "Sorry about that, ma'am!" The Quilava said with an apologetic bow. Ash looked at her and rubbed the back of her head in embarrassment. "No, it's alright. I zoned out and probably got in your way." She forced a soft smile, but her body was still trembling slightly. The Quilava noticed and tilted her head as her expression showed visible concern. "Are you alright ma'am? You're shaking a bit." Ash took a deep breath and held her arm gently. "Yeah, I'm fine. It's just been a long day... after this, I'll finally be going back to my apartment." The Quilava gave her a sympathetic nod. "Ah, I get that. I've been there before, too. Hope you get some good rest when you get home!" She waves with a smile before walking over to the next aisle. Ash took another deep breath and then shifted her gaze to the checkout line. There was only one person in front of her, and it'd be a few minutes before the cashier took notice of the line again. *It's just going to drag on if all I do is wait. I can just send a message and get it over with.* The thought was more of a compromise to her, but deep down, she knew she didn't really have a choice. She sighed softly to herself as she stepped in line, finally giving in to what needed to be done. With a soft tap, she clicked the notification, immediately navigating to the applicant's form as if she were on autopilot. Her eyes quickly skimmed over the details, not really sure how to feel about them.

Name: Lacy. Age: 24. Species: Zorua. Gender: Trans Female. She breathed a small sigh of relief. *She seems like she'd be nice.* But then she felt her doubts cling to her. *You thought the same thing about Jonah. Look at what happened to you.* She gritted her teeth with a soft growl, her grasp tightening on her phone. *Remember. Expect anything.* She didn't give herself a chance to waste a moment longer and sent Lacy a message. *Ash: Hello there, Lacy! I saw that you were interested in my services as soon as possible. I'm currently out getting groceries, so once I get home, I'll shoot you another message, and you can come over.* She pressed the send button right as the customer in front of her grabbed their bags and left. She took a step forward and started to unbag her different produce. Her heart started to pound into her ribs, as all she could do was wait for a text as the cashier scanned her items. The gentle beeps of the register went unnoticed; her gaze glued to her phone screen as she saw three dots appear. Then, a message popped up. *Lacy: Of course! It may take me a bit to get there. I'm in Mauville. I have a bit of a... different request that I'll go into more detail about when we meet.* Ash felt her breathing skip. *A different request...? Different how?* Her pulse started to speed up as her body shook slightly. *Different in the way that Jonah was...? Different as in it's something more taboo...? Does she like something more intense...?* Her digits shakily hovering over her screen as she quickly thought of what to do next. But she knew she had to answer. She had no choice. *I need the money. It doesn't matter if I don't want to.* Ash swallowed what little pride she had left, and sent another message. *Ash: Alright. What are you willing to pay?* She waited with bated breath, watching the three dots appear and then go away. The seconds felt like hours before her phone vibrated again. *Lacy: I have ₺300. Will that be enough?* Ash's eyes grew big as she read the message, the amount echoing in her head. *₺300...?* Ash fluttered her eyelids in disbelief, her heart beating even faster than before. The proposal struck her like a power-up punch, a

blend of disbelief and hollow shame filling her mind. “£300?! That’s enough for two months!” Ash exclaimed to herself a bit too loudly, the words tumbling out before she could stop it. A few people turn their heads to look at her, confused and curious. Ash’s face darkens in embarrassment, her face becoming warm. She cleared her throat, darting her eyes around anxiously before sending a reply. *Ash: Yes, that’s more than enough! I’ll see you in a few, then.* She hit the send button and placed her phone back into her pocket, taking a deep breath. “£300, eh? Did you get a good deal or something?” The cashier, a middle-aged Linoone, smiled softly as he finished bagging her food. Ash let out a soft sigh and ran her fingers through her hair, her mind still overwhelmed and thinking. “Y-yeah you could say th-that.” The Linoone smiles as his tail sways softly. “Well, I wish you luck! That’ll be £85.” Ash fumbled with her wallet, nearly dropping it a few times. “R-right.” Her fingers skimmed against the smooth paper of the bills, struggling to keep her anxiety under control. Her cybernetic claw made a soft clicking sound as it worked her wallet open, handing the cashier the money. *What does she want? What does ‘different’ mean?* Her organic claw dug into the softwood counter as the Linoone placed the money in the cash register, and handed Ash the bag of produce along with her change. “You okay, ma’am? You seem a bit out of it.” His face was sympathetic, but he didn’t want to pry too much. She sighed and nodded softly, forcing a smile. “Yeah... it’s just been a long day.” The Linoone chuckled softly. “Been there. Hope the rest of it goes smoother for ya.” Ash shifts her eyes down and gives a polite bow. “Thanks.” Her voice was soft but extremely appreciative of his brief exchange of compassion, then she rushed outside. The summer air outside hit her like a wall, the suffocating humidity of Mauville clung to her fur as she walked down the sidewalk. The hum of the city was constant, but her thoughts were still focused on Lacy’s request and offer. *What did she mean by ‘different’?* When she entered Rustboro, the familiar sights hardly helped her anxiety as she walked to her apartment building. People in suits hurried between different office buildings, and students ran to class, as the usual rush of the city continued around her. But she couldn’t take the time to take any of it in. Lacy’s message still bounced in her head. And the £300. *It’s just another client. It will be fine.* But she didn’t feel fine. She felt anything but fine. By the time she got to her apartment building—a crumbling five-floor building wedged snugly between a corner store and a laundromat—her prosthetic arm had started to buzz and whirr from the strain of carrying the groceries. She changed her grip and unlocked the door to the lobby, the constant soft buzz of fluorescent lights overhead the only sound she could hear as she made her way up the stairwell to the fourth floor. Her apartment was hidden away at the end of the hall, the numbered ‘408’ almost completely worn off her door. She pulled out her keys from her handbag and unlocked the door, stepping into her dark, musty apartment. She flicked on the lights, the single bulb overhead buzzing to life as she walked over to the kitchenette and placed the bag on the counter. The floor of the empty living space was still cluttered with boxes, but it was her home. She took a deep breath and tried her best to shake the stress off of her as she put the produce in the fridge. Once she was done putting all the food away she pulled out her phone, her pawtips hovering over the keyboard, then let out a breathy sigh and finally typed a response to Lacy. *Ash: I just got home. You can start heading over whenever you’re ready.* She trembled and her heart started to race as she saw the read receipt appear almost immediately. Then three dots appeared. They blinked, then went away, then reappeared again. She felt her breathing get caught as the response came through. *Lacy: Okay. I’ll be there soon. Thank you...* Ash looked at the wording, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Thank you? No one has ever thanked me before even arriving. Her stomach felt like it was doing flips, but she took a deep breath and sat down, sinking into the uneven couch, and zoning out at the ceiling. Now, all she could do was wait.

There was a gentle knocking that echoed through the living room, just barely disrupting the quiet. Ash sat on the edge of her couch with her phone in her paw, immediately tensing at the sound of the soft knocks. She took a deep breath, forcing herself to stand up. She cautiously made her way to the door, her heart beating the only thing she could hear. As she opened the door, what she saw made her heart twist. Lacy stood there in the hallway—She was a small, trembling Zorua who nearly disappeared in the darkness of the hallway. The stark contrast between what Ash had thought of compared to what she was seeing couldn't have been more opposite. Lacy was much skinnier than Ash had thought she'd be—her frame was frail and emaciated, her small body quite nearly skin and bones. Her blackish-grey fur clung to her in uneven matted patches, the natural shine of her pelt completely gone from neglect. Her hair was long, untidy, and was tangled in multiple knots as it hung down on her shoulders, past her neck. Lacy took off her oversized hoodie and stepped inside, letting out a shy squeak as Ash closed the door behind her. Ash's gaze traced over the bruises that tarnished her visible body—a few of the bruises had faded and yellowed, but most others were recent, and dark colors of blue and purple. There were even smaller, more unnoticeable marks. They were tiny and circular, unmistakably remains from needle pricks. Her entire body seemed to droop under the weight of intense exhaustion, her knees gently rattling, seeming to hardly be able to handle the weight of her body. Ash cleared her throat and tried to continue with it professionally. "Ok, you said you had a special request, right? What can I do for you? Bdsm? Gagging? Thigh fucking?" Lacy blushed softly and shook her head meekly, rubbing her foot on the other. As she spoke, her voice was hardly above a whisper. "A-Actually..." she swallowed a growing lump in her throat, her small paws gripping the now folded-up hoodie tightly, with an overly scared desperation. "I-I d-don't want to d-do anything s-sexual. I... I w-want you t-to hold me, a-and give m-me cuddles. Wh-whisper m-me reassurances..." Ash blinked in disbelief, her body still as her mind went into overdrive. *I've been expecting the worst. Rapeplay, Non-con, anything. But this...?* Lacy's nervous, gentle request was nothing like what she expected. Then Ash looked into her eyes. Her wide, begging eyes were foggy with unshed tears, having seen unspeakable things. Ash knew that look all too well. She saw herself in this small Zorua. Without thought or wasting another moment, Ash gently grasped Lacy's cold, trembling paws. With a soft pull, she led Lacy to her bedroom and spoke with a gentle yet steady tone. "Come here, please." Lacy stood still at first, her wary and terrified gaze flickering between Ash and her paws as if being afraid this was all some ruse, yet she still followed—with deliberate steps, each one hesitant. Ash walked into her bedroom and sat on her bed, then softly patted the side beside her. Lacy stood still for a moment, her breathing light, before fully giving in and laying into Ash's embrace. Her small body easily curled up into the larger mon's fluffy chest, her entire body trembling from barely held in sobs. Ash remained considerate still and softly wrapped her arms around the small Zorua. She softly rested her chin on Lacy's head, running her fingers through her clumped hair with deliberate, comforting motions. "You don't have to pay me for this," Ash said in a soft, comforting whisper, hoping to reassure her. "From the sounds of it... you've been through a lot. I would've done this for free." Lacy's breathing got caught in her throat, her entire body trembling as what Ash said sunk in. She shook excessively, the first tears dripping down

her cheeks, more tears following until her entire body wracked with sobs. Ash stayed silent at first. She held her close, feeling the stress slowly melt from Lacy's body as she let everything out that she had bottled up. Ash's own breathing stuttered as she held her tighter, her gaze tracing over the bruises, the injection marks, and how Lacy would wince whenever Ash moved as if she was afraid of getting hurt. *She's been hurt before.* Ash empathetically rubbed soothing circles on her back—Ash only hoped it wasn't as bad as her situation. Lacy's sobs had only started to grow worse, but she had finally started to speak, each word crumbling with every sob. "M-more than j-just a l-lot... I-I was i-in college f-for astrology and a-astronomy... b-but I h-had to m-move t-to afford living s-somewhere..." Lacy stopped for a couple of minutes to catch her breath, clinging to Ash's shirt with desperate paws. Ash gave Lacy a patient nod, giving her the time she needed, her own heart was breaking for this girl who went through a similar situation. Ash looked around at her run-down apartment, taking a deep breath. "I know what that monetary struggle is like," Ash spoke softly, her voice stable but understanding. "What happened next?" Lacy wiped her tears, sniffing a bit as she took a shaky breath. "M-my friend, n-now boyfriend... h-he let me st-stay with him a-as I studied o-online. A-after a y-year... we started d-dating..." Ash felt her heart ache for her. She knew what was going to come next. She had seen enough to know what was going to happen—how it would turn dark. But Ash stayed quiet and gave Lacy a gentle, patient smile as she gently squeezed her paw, giving her the time that she needed to speak at her own pace. And then, the floodgates opened. Lacy's breathing tripped on itself, and in a trembling gasp, everything spilled out in between sobs. "E-everything ch-changed since th-then... he's b-become abusive. S-says I o-owe him e-everything and... a-and..." Her voice broke under the weight of what had happened in her past, her sobs worsening as she clung and curled into Ash, her frame trembling intensely as her tears dampened Ash's shirt. Ash kept quiet and held Lacy in her arms, rocking her gently, letting the small Zorua get everything out that she had bottled up for so long. Ash grabbed her comforter, and wrapped it around her shaking body, making sure she felt safe and warm. "Shh..." Ash's voice remained soft, nuzzling into Lacy's forehead. "You're safe. It's ok." She slowly rubbed soothing circles on Lacy's back, guiding the small Zorua through deep breathing exercises, her voice staying steady. "Deep breaths. In... 1... 2... 3... 4... 5... Out... 1... 2... 3... 4... 5... Can you do that for me?" Lacy gave her a weak nod, her body still trembling as she attempted to follow the rhythm. She took a deep, shaky inhale, then exhaled, repeating the cadence over and over again until her shaking subsided a bit more. Lacy's voice came out quiet and filled with shame. "S-sorry about th-that..." Lacy muttered, too scared to make eye contact with Ash. Ash frowned a bit, holding Lacy's face in her paws and tilting her face up so their eyes met. Her voice was soft and full of care. "Hey. Don't apologize for that. Ever." Before Ash could continue, a loud, hungry growl cut through the quiet—Lacy's stomach, booming and churning with hunger. Ash was caught off guard, then chuckled softly. Lacy's face darkened in humiliation, looking away. "S-sorry—" Ash gave her a playful smirk before cutting her off gently. "How about some dinner first?" She lifted Lacy easily into her arms, causing her to let out a startled squeak. "You must be starving." Lacy curled into Ash's hold and clung to her, still startled quite a bit, but Ash's warm embrace and gentle smile helped to reassure her. The small Zorua trembled in her arms, her anxiousness not faltering, but Ash's grasp stayed steady—soft yet tight. She walked into the small kitchen, her actions calculated and continuous. As both of them reached the table, she gently sat Lacy in a wooden chair. The cold touch of the chair immediately contrasting with

Ash's warm touch, increasing the discomfort Lacy was feeling as she instinctively clung to Ash's fluffy waist, unsure of where to put herself in this new setting. Ash could practically feel the waves of tension radiating off of Lacy, her anxieties hanging in the air like a morning chill. She waited for a moment, Her eyes softened as she saw Lacy's gaze dart everywhere, uncertain of where she belonged in the new environment. The last thing Ash wanted to do was to make Lacy feel like a burden, but she could sense her affliction. Ash gave a warm and reassuring smile to Lacy, standing up and walking towards the fridge, speaking in a soft, steady tone. "Do you like eggs?" She kept her tone casual, hoping to ground Lacy just a bit more with some normalcy. "I can make you an omelet, or maybe just some rice with whatever I've got left in here..." her voice trailed off as her head disappeared into the fridge, scanning the shelves. Lacy's eyes gaped with confusion, shaking her head immediately, her ears flattening so far down they nearly disappeared in her fur. "Th-this is t-to m-much," she stuttered, her voice small and thick with uncertainty. "I-I came h-here for..." her voice wavered, as she gripped the hem of her tee shakily, as if trying to ground herself. "...and n-now you're c-cooking for m-me? I—I c-can't ask for th-this..." Ash stood still for a moment, her eyes softening as she turned to face Lacy. She leaned on the fridge, crossing her arms loosely, a gentle smile forming on her lips with a playful amusement. "Lacy. You didn't come here for sex in the first place, remember? You came here because you needed comfort." She gave Lacy a comforting yet steady gaze, not giving the Zorua the space to look away. "And the food? That's part of offering comfort. You're not asking for anything. You're just letting me do something nice for you." Lacy shrank at the words, her tiny paws squeezing the fabric of her tee shirt tighter as her eyes set on the table in humiliation. She looked as if she wanted to say something else, but no words came. Her mind was spinning from the kindness in Ash's words, completely unsure of how to react. Ash sighed gently, her smile softer as she shook her head. "If you think this is 'too much,' then you have no idea how much I want to do for you right now," Ash spoke softly as she turned back to the counter, cracking a few eggs and pouring the yolks into a bowl. "You're skin and bones, Lace. When's the last time you had a real meal?" Lacy shifted in her seat uncomfortably, her paws unmoving from the fabric of her tee that she held onto. When she spoke, her voice was barely a whisper, looking down at her quivering lap in embarrassment. "I-I dunno. A day or two? Maybe three..." Ash's expression hardened just for a moment, her jaw tightening as she grasped the whisk tighter, but she kept her tone the same—steady, calm, and reassuring—as she kept whisking the eggs. "Yeah, that's what I thought," she murmured, her movements slow and elegant as she continued preparing the meal. "You're eating, Lace. No arguments." Lacy didn't respond, her face flushed with embarrassment and confusion. She wasn't used to tenderness like this—there's always been an ulterior motive or having to give something in return. Yet here was Ash, offering a home-cooked meal for no other reason besides that she wanted to, offering love and care without any conditions or obligations. It was terrifying and alien, and it horrified Lacy. Her paws trembled lightly in her lap as she watched Ash practically glide around the kitchen with ease. The sounds of eggs sizzling filled the room, the soft whirr of the stove adding to the calm stillness. Ash's cybernetic arm moved with artificial ease, graceful and efficient as it worked with her biological arm. The gentle glow of the buzzing bulbs overhead cast a faint light on Ash's toned body, illuminating the scars that peeked out from under her clothes. Lacy's heart throbbed as she watched Ash—they were both strangers to each other, yet here Ash was, cooking her a home-made meal, and offering Lacy warmth and love that she had long forgotten how they felt.

Lacy shifted in her seat awkwardly, her thin legs crossed under the table as a typhoon of thoughts whirled in her mind. *I need to say something, don't I? I can't just sit here and not say anything as she does all the work!* Lacy swallowed her nerves, the words spilling out in a soft, quiet murmur. "A-Ash...?" Lacy's voice was barely audible, her words shaky and unsure. Ash looked over her shoulder, her face softening as she paused her cooking to give Lacy her full attention. Lacy's heart beat faster as she struggled to get the rest of the words out. "Th-thank you." The words felt small and unfitting for such a heartfelt gesture, but Lacy didn't know what else to say. Ash turned completely to face her and gave Lacy her full attention, giving her a soft, reassuring smile as she set the whisk aside. "Anytime, Lace," Her voice was alleviating, as she spoke with certainty and no pause. With one swift motion, she picked up the bowl of eggs and poured it into a pan that had been on low heat, the eggs starting to sizzle. "You're anything but a burden. I'm more than happy to do this for you. You deserve this." Lacy's tiny paws curled and uncurled in her lap as she started to fully process what Ash had said. An unfamiliar warmth spread from her chest to her face, something she truly hadn't felt in a long time—the sense of being safe, and loved. That for once, maybe she could trust that there were no ulterior motives. As Ash let the eggs cook in the pan, she turned to Lacy with a smile, almost playful in tone. "So, what do you like in your omelet?" her tone was jovial as she reached into the fridge, pulling out a package of shredded Monterey cheddar. Lacy was caught off-guard by the question, blinking a bit in startlement. Despite it being such a normal question, she hadn't thought about what food she liked in a long time. "U-um..." her words stumbled as she spoke, her paws squeezing the hem of her tee tightly as she looked at her trembling lap anxiously. "I-I don't know... I-I don't really g-get to be picky..." Ash's playful smile faltered for a fraction of a moment, her brow furrowing with concern, however, she chose not to pursue the matter any further. "Okay, let's work on changing that," She spoke with a warm tone, her manner weighed with subtle determination as she reached into her cupboard, pulling out a cutting board. Ash once again turned to the fridge and looked through the produce she had bought earlier that day. "I have cheese, onions, bell peppers, and—" She pulled out a large red tomato, smirking at Lacy. "Or some tomato if you're into that." Ash's tail wagged gently as she spoke, causing Lacy's ears to twitch in contentment. Lacy's body slowly started to relax as she watched Ash. She took a moment to hesitantly answer, her voice was small and quiet as she spoke. "I-I like cheese... A-and onions..." Lacy admitted softly, her gaze flickering as she made eye contact. Ash's smirk grew bigger, her expression keeping the gentle reassuring tone as she spoke. "Those are some great choices. You can't go wrong with a cheesy onion omelet." She giggled softly as she grabbed a knife and started to dice the onion with ease, her cybernetic paw moving effectively. Lacy's gaze followed the calculated movements of Ash's robotic arm, unable to look away. How Ash moved, it was almost like it was still her real arm. But even then, Lacy couldn't stop thinking about what Ash had told her—Someone had hurt her, ruined her in a way no one ever deserved. Her stomach felt like it was in agonizing knots, her thoughts whirling with pure confusion and guilt. *How could someone who has gone through so much still stand there and cook for me like it's nothing?* Ash noticed her staring, so she stopped what she was doing and glanced at Lacy with a playful smirk. "Something on your mind?" Her voice was slightly mischievous, laced with a faint hint of entertainment as she slid the chopped onions into the sizzling opened omelet, as she met Lacy's gaze with a gentle expression. Lacy's face darkened as her ears pinned back in embarrassment. "I-I'm sorry. I d-didn't m-mean to st-stare..." her

voice was no higher than a whisper as she looked away fast, her heart beating quickly in her chest. "Don't worry, you're all good," Ash shrugged nonchalantly, the warmth in her smile unwavering. "I get it. The arm and eye are hard to ignore." Lacy's feet paws rubbed against each other nervously, not knowing how to reply. She grasped the frayed hem of her tee again, the soft fabric bunching up in her hold. She bit her lip, willing the intrepidity to ask what had been on her mind for so long. "U-Um... D-Does it... still h-hurt?" There was the faintest of pauses as Ash's movements stilled, her gaze watching the bubbling omelet. "It doesn't hurt that much anymore." She let out a breathy sigh, grabbing a generous handful of cheese and sprinkling it onto the golden omelet. "I still get phantom pain sometimes, but I've gotten used to it." Lacy didn't speak, the heaviness of what Ash said sinking in. *She's gotten used to the pain? I can't imagine how that must feel.* The thoughts of what Ash had gone through made Lacy's heart ache, but at the same time, gave her a sense of hope. *Maybe I can get used to something better too. Maybe I can finally find a way to get out, a way to heal. Even if... it all feels so impossible.* Ash turned to face Lacy, taking a deep breath as she walked over and grabbed the Zorua's paws gently. "It's like what I said before, what had happened to me, to us, doesn't have to keep happening to you. You don't have to feel like you're stuck in that situation anymore." Lacy whimpered and leaned her forehead into Ash's chest, shakily taking a deep breath. "I... I-I don't kn-know if I c-can escape..." Ash squeezed her paws gently, resting her chin on her head. "You can, Lacy. You just need help. And I'm willing to give it." Her voice was steady, filled with promise. Lacy glanced up at Ash as she snuggled in further, tearing up. "Wh-Why...?" Her voice was quiet but heavy with emotion. Ash sighed softly, and for a moment, Lacy heard the waver in her breath. "Because..." She paused, thinking of what she should say before continuing. Her voice went quieter, carrying the heft of previous experience. "I wish someone had helped me when I was in your position. Don't get me wrong, I had a girlfriend and her parents who helped me out a lot, but... I didn't know how to accept it. Like you, I felt there was no way out, no escape. I didn't deserve it." Ash's grip tightened ever so slightly on Lacy's paws as she let out a defeated sigh. "I loved them more than anything. But I pushed them... I pushed her away. I broke up with her... to keep them all safe." Lacy felt her chest tighten at the vulnerability in Ash's words, the weight of regret laced and woven deep in her words. A few minutes passed of neither of them speaking, both holding the other close and just enjoying the warmth of the other's company. The only prominent sound in the apartment was the faint hum of the overhead lights, and the sizzle of the cooking omelet. Ash exhaled a deep breath she didn't know she had been holding in, and softly let go of Lacy as she headed back to the stove, folding the omelette and placing it on a plate. "Enough of the heavy talk. Your omelette is ready." Ash said with a smirk, looking back at Lacy as she placed the plate in front of her. She quickly wiped away the tears that stung her face, a small, genuine smile spreading across her lips. "O-okay..." Ash sat next to Lacy and rubbed her cheek, humming softly as she softly placed a knife and fork next to the plate. "There you go, Lace. Eat up. You deserve it." Lacy shyly picked up the cutlery and cut into the omelet, the melted cheese stretching as she pulled the halves apart. Thick steam rose from the insides, and the crisp edges of the omelet complemented the fluffy interior. Lacy inhaled the pleasant scent of gooey cheese and sautéed onions wafting, blending with Ash's floral scent. Her throat tightened as she stabbed her fork into a small piece and held it up in front of her, taking in its scent. "I-It smells... a-amazing." Her voice trembled with her body, as she still processed what was being given to her. Ash giggled as she rested her head in her

palm, watching Lacy with unbothered amusement. "Then go ahead and dig in, ok? There's no rush." Lacy's tiny paws trembled as she gripped the cutlery with all the strength she could muster, as she pulled the fork to her mouth and took a bite. Her eyes widened immediately as she let out the quietest of pleased whimper—first, the warmth of the home-cooked meal washed through her maw. Then a moment later, the taste hit—The melted, gooey cheese and the light notes of onion washed over her taste buds. *It's been so long since I've had something like this. I can... taste the love in this meal.* Ash smirked playfully, her tail wagging faintly behind her. "It's that good, is it?" Lacy didn't answer right away. She took yet another bite, chewing the food slowly and enjoying the warmth and taste of the omelet again, it nearly overwhelming her. She took a deep breath and swallowed, blinking in disbelief as she spoke in a voice even quieter than before. "I-It's been s-so long since I-I've had s-something home-cooked..." Her voice trembled as she looked at her plate, trying to hold back stinging tears that she could feel welling up. Ash's heart broke seeing her like this, but she stayed calm and kept her expression soft. "You don't get to cook often?" Lacy shook her head, too ashamed to make direct eye contact with Ash. "A-Alex doesn't I-let me cook..." Her voice trembled as she spoke. "H-he says I-I'll mess u-up his kitchen, S-so I j-just... eat wh-whatever he gives m-me... if h-he even gives m-me anything..." Ash felt her metallic paw's grip tighten on her leg, gritting her teeth as she felt her rage pulse through her. *That bastard...* She took a deep breath and kept herself calm. "You have a right to eat whenever you're hungry, Lacy. No one should control that." Ash spoke softly, her voice determined. Lacy felt her lip starting to tremble as she looked at her half-eaten plate of food. "I-I know... b-but..." Her voice was small and shaky as she bit her lip. "I-I'm... scared..." Ash softened her gaze and reached across the table, placing her paw on Lacy's. "I get it. Believe me, I do." She gave Lacy's paw a soft, reassuring squeeze. "I know that you can get out of this. You deserve so much better than this." Lacy's ears pinned to her head as she rubbed Ash's paw in return, her thoughts swirling. "Wh-where would I-I g-go though...?" She tried to blink away the tears welling up in her eyes, looking at Ash. "I... I d-don't even h-have a j-job... I d-don't h-have any s-savings... I h-have nothing..." Ash exhaled deeply before leaning into her chair, thinking about anything and everything to help her. After that brief pause, she looked at Lacy and spoke with a voice of certainty. "You can live here if you want." She said it with simple confidence, no regret in her gaze. "As long as you need." Lacy's head immediately shot up and looked at Ash, surprise and disbelief etched into her face. "Wh-what...?" Ash shrugged her shoulders, but despite that, her voice was still filled with sincerity. "I mean it, Lacy. You need someplace safe to stay, and I've got more than enough space for you." Her voice didn't waver as she held Lacy's paw. Lacy searched her face for any sinister tones or lack of sincerity—she only saw someone who genuinely wanted to help her—the held-back tears started to spill down her cheeks. "Y-you'd really d-do that... f-for me...?" Ash smirked softly, her gaze brimming with empathy. "Yeah. I'd do anything to help you." Lacy looked back down at her plate, her lip trembling from the weight of all the emotions she was feeling. "Th-thank you..." The words were hardly audible from how soft she spoke, but Ash smiled and nodded in response. "Of course, Lacy." She gave Lacy's paw another reassuring squeeze, before pulling her into her arms and giving her a loving hug, softly petting her head. "I'm going to take care of you. You don't have to be afraid anymore. I won't let anyone hurt you ever again." Ash spoke softly, nuzzling into Lacy's cheek. Lacy squeaked shyly, letting out a shaky breath. "B-but... wh-what about y-your w-work...?" She asked meekly. Ash's soft strokes on Lacy's head slowed slightly. *I've never had*

to think about this before. It's only ever been to survive. But now that I have Lacy living with me... so some things need to change. Ash continued to pet her, hugging Lacy a bit tighter. "Instead of all the clients coming here, from now on I'll go to the clients' houses instead of having them come here. I don't want them trying anything with you here. You've been through enough." Lacy shifted in Ash's arms, looking up at her. "B-but... I d-don't want t-to be a b-burden... y-you already h-have s-so much going o-on..." Her voice was filled with guilt. Ash's petting paused once again. What Lacy thought of herself sunk deep into her, causing her heart to ache. "Lacy, you are not a burden. You matter more than any job or client. I'm not going to risk *you* getting hurt because *I* have to survive. I'll make this work no matter what." Ash's voice was certain and didn't waver. Lacy didn't say anything at first, but Ash could feel her tense body slowly start to relax. "I-I d-don't know wh-what to say... No o-one has ever c-cared this m-much for m-me before." Ash felt her heart ache for the Zorua. *How many times have I thought the same thing? How many nights have I laid in my bed, doubting the kindness I got from Dion and her family...?* She readjusted her grip on Lacy and pulled her into a soft cuddle. "You don't have to say anything. Just know that I'm here for you. I'll never leave your side." Lacy continued to eat without saying anything, the faint clinking of the utensils making contact with the plate, or the sound of Lacy sighing in contentment and loosening up with each bite. Ash kept her close in her arms, looking down at her with a subtle concern. Lacy let out a breathy and full sigh, setting the fork on the plate as she pressed her paw to her belly. Her voice was breathless almost, with a satisfied tone behind it. "I'm s-so full..." Ash grinned and gently set her back on the chair, grabbing the plate and utensils as she spoke with a soft, yet slightly teasing tone. "Good! You needed that. I'll clean everything up. You take it easy, ok?" Lacy nodded softly, a slight hesitation and tensy still present. "O-okay..." With a quick yet elegant efficiency Ash cleaned the dishes, looking at Lacy when she could. The small Zorua looked absolutely exhausted, her body sagging with drowsiness. With a gentle swipe, she cleaned her paws using a soft cloth and then made her way to the bathroom. Grabbing the body shampoo, body conditioner, and a fluffy washcloth, she set them down in a spot that was just the right height. Next, Ash strolled into her bedroom, carefully selecting an outfit designed to keep Lacy as cozy as possible. Once satisfied, she returned to the kitchen, where she leaned down to softly stroke Lacy's cheek, a tender smile spreading across her face. "Hey, Lacy?" Lacy had her eyes closed, opening them and looking at Ash with a shy smile. "I know you're tired, but how about you get a shower too? I already have everything set up for you." Lacy whimpered softly and nuzzled into Ash's abs. "A sh-shower...? I-I d-don't want t-to bother y-you..." Ash gave her a soft, patient smile. "You're not bothering me at all Lacy. You have every right to feel clean and comfortable. It's ok to let someone take care of you." Lacy's ears drooped scarcely, as her body tightened. Ash could see it in her eyes—the fear of being taken advantage of again. The longing to finally be safe, clean, and full—Ash knew this battle all too well. "Look, I'll even leave the door open a crack if It makes you feel safer. I want you to feel like this is a place that you are safe in, ok? There's no pressure." Ash kept her tone soft and soothing, rubbing Lacy's cheek. Lacy looked up into Ash's eyes and swallowed her anxieties. "I-I... d-don't want t-to mess th-things up... I h-haven't been a-able to take c-care of m-myself in s-so long... I d-don't want t-you to th-think im u-useless..." Ash felt her heart break for the poor girl. She pulled Lacy into a soft embrace, wrapping her tail around the Zorua's tiny frame. "Lacy, you are anything but useless. You are not a burden. You never have to go through this alone again, ok?" Ash's voice was calm and steady, helping Lacy

calm down even just a bit. She took a deep shaky breath, tears just barely on the edge of spilling down her cheeks. But instead, she walked into the bathroom and left the door open just a crack. "I-I'll be q-quick..." Her voice was a whisper, spoken as if needing permission. Ash stood outside, sighing softly. "No, Lacy. You take your time. I'm not going anywhere." Lacy nodded to herself and started to undress, turning on the water to be warm. Ash released a breath that she hadn't realized she'd been holding in. She ran her paw through her fur, looking around the apartment absentmindedly. She traced her paw along her old scars, just barely peeking out from under her sleeve. She occupied herself by cleaning up the apartment and unpacking some of the boxes, trying to push out Lacy's broken expression and not linger on it. About fifteen minutes later, the sound of running water in the bathroom died down. Before Ash could linger too long in the silence, there was a faint knock on the other side of the door—Lacy. Ash was immediately at the door and returned a soft knock. "Hey, are you ok?" She spoke softly. There was a moment of silence before Lacy spoke. Her voice was soft, but a lot steadier than before. "Y-yeah... im just.. t-taking a moment." Ash took a soft breath of relief and smiled, pressing her forehead into the doorframe. "Alright, there's no rush. Just take care of yourself at your own pace." There was another brief moment of silence before Lacy spoke again. "Th-thank you... for e-everything." Ash swallowed the emotion building up in her throat. "Anytime, Lace." A couple of minutes later, the door opened with a creak, and Lacy stood in the doorway. Her fur was still wet, but it was clean now at least. The tangled mess from before was completely gone and looked a lot softer now. She had a towel wrapped around her tiny frame covering her breasts, her paws shifting awkwardly at her sides as if she didn't know what to do next. Ash gave her a warm smile and offered her a paw. "Do you feel a bit better now?" Lacy didn't answer at first but then gave a shy nod before taking Ash's paw. Ash giggled and helped guide Lacy to her bedroom, where she had the clothes set out for Lacy. "Let's get you all dried up and dressed, ok?" Lacy blinked in disbelief, before nodding. "Th-that sounds... nice." Ash grabbed the pile of clothes she had set out for Lacy and placed them next to her. "I'll be outside the room while you change. Let me know if you need anything, ok?" Lacy's ears wiggled, her gaze searching Ash's face for any insincerity—but she found none. *Ash really means everything she's saying.* She nodded meekly as a flicker of hope spread through her. Ash left the room, and with that Lacy dropped the towel down and started to get dressed. Ash sat on the sofa in the living room, awkwardly shifting her feetpaws back and forth as she heard the faint sound of the fabric rustling from Lacy getting dressed. She felt a pang of uncertainty. *I really want to do more for her and help her heal. But things like this are delicate. I can't rush it. Just offer help where I can.* Lacy stepping out of her room interrupted her thoughts. She was wearing simple black baggy sweatpants and an oversized tee that had Lycanrocs howling in front of the moon. Ash couldn't help but melt at her appearance—her entire body was swallowed by the clothes. It was endearing, seeing the sleeves hang so low. Or that the collar of the shirt was so big that her shoulder was peeking out. Lacy curled her tail around herself shyly, fidgeting with her paws. A faint blush rested on Ash's cheeks, as she gave her a warm smile. "That looks a lot more comfortable." Lacy looked down at the shirt and sweatpants, gently running her paw over the soft fabric. "Y-yeah... it i-is really c-comfy..." There was a brief pause between them before Ash spoke—her voice cautious. "Would you want to talk about your boyfriend?" Lacy froze in place, tremors shooting through her body. She shook her head quickly and whimpered. "I c-can't... I d-don't even kn-know what I-I'd talk a-about... O-or h-how to..." Ash simply nodded and placed

a paw on Lacy's shoulder. "That's alright, Lacy. You don't have to talk about anything you aren't ready to talk about. I just want you to know that you are safe here. I'm not ever going to hurt you." For the first time, Lacy started to cry not from the overwhelming kindness, but from hope. "Th-thank you. I d-don't know h-how I'm e-ever going to r-repay you..." Ash shook her head and pulled Lacy into a warm embrace. "You don't have to repay me. The only thing I want is for you to take care of yourself, and live a happy life from now on." Lacy gripped Ash's back weakly, trembling and whimpering. "I don't kn-know what t-to do anymore... I've been r-running on empty for s-so long... I feel... b-broken..." Ash felt her heart breaking for her. She hugged her tighter and held back tears of her own. *I know exactly what she means. How exhausting it feels. How it feels so hopeless... how you only feel like pieces of a whole that made you who you once were.* "I understand what you mean, Lacy. I'm still there myself... But, it's ok to feel like you're breaking or broken. But that doesn't mean you can't put yourself back together. And that certainly doesn't mean you have to do it alone." She gently rubbed soothing circles on Lacy's back, taking a deep breath. Lacy looked up into Ash's eyes, her own wide and vulnerable. "I... I don't kn-know how t-to let someone help m-me..." Ash pressed her chin to her forehead, and looked at her with a smile. "It is hard to do, but you're no longer by yourself, Lacy. I promise." There was a silence that spread between them, heavy with unstated sentiment. Lacy's eyes darted to the bed that she could see from the door frame, then back to Ash. "I-I don't want to b-be a burden, b-but I... I d-don't want t-to sleep alone t-tonight..." Ash gently tilted Lacy's head so they looked at her in the eyes. She held her paw softly and smiled. "You're not a burden. You don't have to sleep alone tonight. We can share the bed if that will help you feel safer." Lacy's eyes widened, not expecting her to be comfortable with this. "Really? Y-you're ok with th-that?" Ash nodded and rubbed her cheek. "Of course I am. I'd rather you get some sleep than spend the night scared." Lacy stared at her in disbelief. When she spoke, her voice was quiet. "I don't d-deserve your k-kindness." Ash guided her to the bedroom and sat on the bed with her. "You do. You deserve rest. You deserve to feel safe." She spoke with assurance, pulling Lacy into her arms softly. Lacy blinked away her tears, swallowing down her emotions. "Th-thank you, Ash... I h-haven't felt safe in s-so long..." Ash pulled the covers back and laid down, motioning for her to lie down. "Then let's change that, starting tonight." Lacy crawled under the covers, still having a slight hesitation. Ash soon followed suit, giving Lacy the space to feel safe while still being close enough for comfort. The silence that hung in the air was different now—instead of the air being uncertain, a gentle comfort was in the air. The silence was cut off by Lacy's soft voice. "Ash...? C-can I a-ask you something..?" Ash turned to look at Lacy, smiling softly. "Of course, Lacy." Lacy fidgeted with the edge of the blanket as she tried to find the words. "It's about y-your... previous partner, D-Dion." Ash was caught off guard by the question but gave a nod. "Yeah... Dion." Lacy turned to make eye contact with her, still staying a moderate stretch away. "You've mentioned h-her before. What was sh-she like?" Ash sighed, reminiscing about their time together. "Dion was... my first real love. She was the first person who showed me what it was like to be loved and expect nothing in return. So much of my healing was because of her helping me. Dion was strong. She was patient and kind in a way that motivates you to be a better self. She understood everything that happened, even if I didn't say it. She never left me. Not until I called it off..." There was a momentary pause before Lacy spoke. "D-did you love her?" Ash's breathing hitched for a moment. "I did. I think I still do. But we couldn't stay together. Not after everything that happened to me. I wasn't going to let her risk getting hurt to keep helping me."

Lacy whimpered softly and shakily held Ash's paw. "That s-sounds... painful..." Ash let out a defeated chuckle and smiled. "It was... and still is. We're still best friends, and we call each other every day... but hearing her voice hurts." The silence that settled over them was heavy, but not unbearable. It was tangible. The both of them lay there for a long while, unspoken. Then, Lacy scooped herself closer—just enough to feel Ash's warmth. Ash rubbed her paw as she closed her eyes and whispered. "Goodnight, Lacy. You're safe here." Lacy let out a trembling breath, whispering in return. "G-goodnight Ash. Th-thank you, for everything."