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As always, thank you for reading.

[line]

Parking his Rapidash-drawn cart in front of his home, one Robert Johansson groans and stands before stepping off of the cart, his knees protesting the entire time. "Gonna need to find another ranch hand, soon..." he grumbles. Looking up, he finds the sun high above, telling him it's a little after noon. "We made good time on our milk run, eh, Stella?" he asks the Rapidash hooked to his cart.

The horse pokemon just snorts and throws her fiery mane, giving the tack and cart strapped to her a look that says, *"I'm so done with today."*

Robert can't help but laugh and start the process of freeing her. "Play ornery all you like, Stel, you can't hide that heart of gold from me."

The horse grumbles as Robert unfastens the last straps holding her in place. Once free, she begins to trot away to circle the house, but she abruptly stops, her hooves making an audible scratch on the walkway leading to the house.

"Stel?" Robert blinks and abandons organizing the cart tack for now. When he turns, he is just in time to watch a Staraptor wearing a mailbag drop a letter into his mailbox.

"Uh oh..." He frowns as the large bird takes off. "That's not city hall tryin' to get a hold of me, is it? Who in the world would send me express mail?" he wonders aloud, stepping towards the mailbox and taking the envelope out. When he finds no return address, his worry increases even further. After tearing open the envelope, he reaches inside and finds...

... A handwritten letter? It's in the same fancy cursive that the puffed up Pidgeys at city hall like to use. As he begins to read, Robert feels heat on his back and sees Stella's muzzle peering over his shoulder.

Hey Bob,

It's Julian. I'm real sorry for not writing sooner. We've been moving pretty quickly from place to place until we got to Oreburgh, and a lot has been going on. I'll try to summarize it without making this letter go on for ages.

Relief instantly spreads throughout Robert's body, before it's just as quickly replaced by excitement. Ha! That boy *did* remember to write! "Julian, you little squirt! Your fancy handwriting 'bout gave me a heart attack!" He scans the letter, which takes up the whole page. "Heh. Sure likes hearing himself talk, doesn't he?" The rancher grins at his Rapidash.

The horse's sigh is as fond as it is exasperated.

Me, Lulu, and another trainer we're traveling with named Paul stopped in Jubilife after we left Sandgem. I gotta tell you, being in such a big city after living in Sandgem for months was a bit of a shock, doubly so for Lulu. You remember what I said about aura, and how Lucario can naturally sense it? Sensing so many people and pokemon at once left her with a bit of a headache the first night.

Robert shakes his head. "Poor girl. Can't imagine what kind of migraine that would be. I get one just being in Jubilife."

She's tough, though, so after she got better, we went out and explored the city a bit. There is so much to do that it's insane. At the end of the night, we stopped by some sketchy gymnasium in a mall, and we met somebody pretty special. Can you guess who?

Aniki, my second pokemon.

The rancher pauses, trying to guess what kind of pokemon Julian would pick up, and why the name is so odd. "Must be a real character if he caught that boy's eye."

Stella nickers, as if saying, "*That's an understatement.*"

Aniki is a Machoke, and he was helping his trainer run the gym. After meeting Lulu and I, Aniki's trainer, Mr. Darkholme, wanted Aniki to go with us. Apparently, Mr. Darkholme was the kind of guy who trained with his pokemon, kind of like I do, and was the trainer of Aniki's late father. After sustaining a nasty, permanent injury from a botched spar with Aniki's father, Mr. Darkholme retired and opened a gym, teaching trainers and Fighting-types that control of your strength is something to be taken seriously. In recent years, though, the gym hasn't been doing too hot, and is steadily going under. Apparently, Aniki has been taking the 'control' thing so seriously that he's stunting his own growth, because I managed to tag him pretty good in a spar. That pushed Mr. Darkholme to release Aniki and tell him to go live his own dream, and not feel obligated to stick around for a gym that's in the red.

After doing a bit of soul-searching, Aniki decided that he wanted to go with us, and I'm glad he did. He's a swell guy and I think that you would like him.

Robert sighs and rubs his forehead. This boy is going to collect nothing *but* characters, isn't he?

We also met Zoey, a pokemon coordinator in Jubilife. She and I did a few double battles together, and after seeing her in action, we went to go see the pokemon contest at the Jubilife Contest Hall. She did fantastic, winning the whole thing. After the show let out, she approached Paul, Lulu, and I, asking if she could tag along. Apparently, she did her last journey solo, and wants to try it with friends this time. Of course, we said yes. Paul's not too talkative of a guy, so having someone actually open to conversation that isn't a pokemon is a nice change.

Well, good on them! Robert only briefly met the Paul boy, but he looked like he could do with smiling a bit more.

Then we made our way to Oreburgh. Paul and I got yelled at by a cop for mounted pokemon racing in city limits, but thankfully we got let go without a ticket. Not a whole lot happened between then and waiting for my match at the Oreburgh Gym.

Bob, if you didn't see it on TV, we swept.

"Dammit!" the rancher curses. *He missed Julian and Lulu's debut!* "I hope I set the TV box up right and it recorded the fight. I might need to call Lucas and see if he can help me find it on the Internet if not..." He looks at Stella. "Stella, can you remind me to dig out that old projector from the attic? We'll make a night of it and watch all of Lucas and Julian's fights on the side of the barn."

We took the whole match without losing a round. I can't tell you how good it felt. Aniki took down both Roark's Geodude and Onix, while Lulu crushed Roark's Cranidos without so much as a scratch. Paul had his match just earlier today and won too. We are going to rest up a bit before we decide where we're going next, but it's probably going to be Eterna City. The real big question is, do we cut north through the mountains directly to Eterna or head back to Jubilife and take the scenic route through Floaroma and Eterna Forest?

Robert's reply letter is already formulating in his head. Julian and his friends *need* to take the path through Eterna Forest. *'It was twenty years ago I went with Wilma through that forest, and it was breathtakin'. Not only that, there are lots of pokemon that a trainer might want. Julian will be kicking himself in the pants later if he doesn't go.'*

Anyway, that's about everything that we've been up to. How are things back at the ranch? Anything new happen? Have you heard from your grandson, Lucas? The manager of the Oreburgh Gym said that he came through recently and beat Roark too.

Pride swells in Robert's chest. Lucas is doing the Johansson family proud. With his sponsorship from Professor Rowan, his big wins at the gyms, and how he dominates local tournaments on the way, the young boy is swiftly making a name for himself as a top contender for this year's Lily of the Valley Conference.

Lucas could write home more often, though...

*Wishing you the best,
Julian & Lulu*

(PS: Tell Stella and the Miltanks we said hi.)

His day brightened, Robert folds the letter and tucks it away into the pocket of his faded jeans. "Well, how about that?" he asks Stella, turning and petting the horse pokemon across her muzzle, making her lean into his touch. "At least the more danger-prone of the boys sends letters home."

[line]

"How fast do you think those courier Staraptors are?" Julian wonders as he, Lulu, and Aniki exit the Oreburgh post office, the bell upon the door jingling as it shuts behind them.

"Oh, they're quick," Aniki replies with a smile. "The only thing faster is teleporting right to who you want to talk to."

'Oh yeah, teleportation is real and feasible here.' Julian rubs his chin, wondering if he can make use of such a thing.

Beside him, Lulu smiles. "I take it we're off to investigate the aura to the north of town?" she asks.

Julian nods back, shelving his thoughts of teleportation for now. Turning, he begins to follow his aura sense to the north, prompting Lulu and Aniki to fall in step. "Yeah. Whoever it is, I'm really hoping it's a wild pokemon. With that sponsorship coming down the pipe, I think you two plus one more member would make a nice, even team. Most everyone seems to want to fight three on three at minimum."

"I can only wonder if there is significance to the number..." The Lucario touches a paw to her chin in thought, no doubt thinking of their match with Roark yesterday, and how they were nearly denied for not having a large enough team.

"Maybe not symbolic significance, but three pokemon is a common stopping point for a lot of trainers," Aniki chimes in, raising a hand and extending three fingers. "Three rides the middle ground between utility and burden for a lot of rookie trainers, who either don't have the time or resources to dedicate to a full team of six."

"That certainly makes sense," Lulu muses. "Ah, that reminds me. Julian, have you revised your list of favored candidates for the team?" she asks, turning her head to look at her trainer.

Julian thinks to himself for a moment. "Yeah, there are a few I would really like to have both for practical and..." He pauses, trying to think of an appropriate word. "...*meta* reasons. Mienshao are reportedly natural aura-users, so they're at the top of the list. Grapploct or Hawlucha for dedicated grapplers, Poliwrath, Chesnaught, and Blaziken for type coverage, Toxicroak for indirect fights, and Sirfetch'd, Primeape, Kommo-o, Bewear, and Medicham as wildcard picks." He hesitates slightly as he names Medicham. "Lulu?"

"Yes?"

"Can Lucario learn how to use Psychic abilities?"

If Julian is remembering correctly, then in one of the old Pokemon movies, there was a Lucario who knew how to use telepathy. That falls under "Psychic", right?

Lulu blinks in reply. "I... I suppose we can. I believe that Heal Pulse is categorized as a Psychic technique, but I cannot say for certain whether or not I possess the talent to make use of more traditional Psychic abilities. It took weeks of instruction under Mother just for me to learn Heal Pulse." She crosses her arms under her chest spike and tilts her head, thinking. "I don't believe anyone in the pack knows telepathy or telekinesis, if that is what you wish to know."

'Damn.'

Julian suppresses a frown. "That's fair. If we come across an appropriate teacher, or maybe a TM, would you have any interest in learning?"

"If it would please you, then I am willing to try," she says, giving him a smile.

Julian's hidden frown morphs into an open grin, and he bumps his shoulder against Lulu's. "You're the best."

The conversation dies down, replaced with a companionable silence as the man and his two 'mon walk through the streets of Oreburgh, slowly meandering their way to the northeast. This gives Julian some time to think over the day and make plans.

Paul's battle against Roark was just a few hours ago, and after visiting with Ash and friends for a while, the two groups broke up and went their separate ways for now. Zoey then dragged Julian, Lulu, and Paul to a nearby restaurant for lunch to celebrate Paul's win at the gym. The place was obviously built with trainers in mind, considering the enlarged interior, the pokemon section of the menu, and the wince-inducing markup on the food.

Zoey released all her pokemon to join in, and Julian got Aniki to reluctantly join after assuring the brotherly fighter that money wasn't an issue. Paul...

Paul let Elekid and Chimchar join, keeping Azumarill and the rest of his team balled. Small steps, Julian rationalized. Certainly better than Paul not letting any of his team out, or just refusing the lunch out right.

For Julian, the highlight of the meal was definitely Lulu's curiosity over human cuisine and ordering sushi. He genuinely didn't mean to laugh when Lulu's broad paws struggled with a pair of chopsticks, but watching the supernaturally dexterous jackal pokemon actually struggle with something was surreal. The blonde teen did relent and help his starter once her flustered aura began to turn genuinely upset, though.

All in all, it was a fun time. After the food was had, and the bill was paid, everyone went off on their own, leading to now.

"Do we have any idea who this mystery aura signature is going to be?" Aniki asks as the shops on the street around them begin to thin out, leading to the industrial section of the city. "I really need to join you guys on that meditation stuff. The aura sensing thing sounds useful."

Lulu's muzzle rises into a smile, and her ruby eyes regard Aniki with clear approval. "We'd be delighted if you'd join us during our morning meditation, wouldn't we, Julian?"

"Oh yeah," the blonde agrees. "Once you can sense auras, it's like a whole new part of the world opens up to you. I don't think I can go back to living without it."

Ho, what an understatement that is. Working for the government made Julian quite adept at reading other people to ferret out lies and schemes, but even years and years of experience pales in comparison to reading aura. The feeling of certainty it brings is a treasure more valuable than anything. Without even meaning to, Julian focuses and reads both Lulu and Aniki.

Lulu, his partner, first pokemon, and best friend, is the same beacon of **Friendship** and confidence that she always is. He doesn't need to look any lower than the surface to see that selfless, heroic drive to be all she can be for the sake of everyone close to her, with *Julian* being at the top of that list. She's almost too good to be true, and her mere existence gives Julian faith in the benevolence of higher powers, something he's never had before.

Aniki, meanwhile, thrums with a protective concern for both Julian and Lulu. The potential for a daunting confrontation doesn't bother him nearly as much as the possibility of one of them being harmed. His is a different sort of heroism, one more quiet and nurturing.

To be able to tangibly feel such things, to know for *certain* that he is cared for, is something the displaced man still struggles to process.

Before too much time can pass, Julian returns to the present with a shake of his head, remembering Aniki's initial question. "To answer your question, though... I'm not really sure who the aura to the north is going to be," Julian finishes with a sheepish shrug. "It's definitely a pokemon from how strong it is. It feels like a Fighting-type, and it's been strangely immobile."

Aniki's mouth draws itself into a thin line. "That's all? It's not emitting any emotions, or whatever?"

In response, Lulu closes her eyes and focuses. Her dreadlocks free themselves from gravity for a moment and float, lifted by her aura, before falling limp again. "There is suspiciously little to feel now that you bring it up." She reopens her eyes and frowns. "Whoever it is, they're exceedingly calm or rather competent in masking their emotions."

'Exceedingly calm or good at masking themselves, huh?' Julian scratches his chin and narrows his eyes in thought. *'A Mienshao, maybe? That would be some crazy luck if it's a wild Mienshao.'*

"That's not all, though." Lulu's frown deepens, and she begins to walk a bit faster. "I sense people ahead. Distressed people."

The street the trio are walking down makes a bend to the right, and when they turn the corner, all of them are treated to a sight that stops them in their tracks.

The road, which leads to Oreburgh's northern exit, is completely closed down. Illuminated signs saying "Road Closed" block the street, and police tape is stretched between two tall traffic cones, which are pulled off to the side of the road for now. Behind the closure signs are a police cruiser and an ambulance, where a few police, paramedics, and men in hazmat gear mill about. Lulu, Aniki, and Julian are just in time to watch a paramedic ease a pale, shaken man in hazmat gear to the ground, where he leans against the ambulance.

"Oh geez..." Aniki looks at the hubbub with a wince. "What's going on?"

'Great. I should have known that this was going to be more complicated than needed.' Julian sighs inwardly. "Only one way to find out. C'mon."

As they approach, a police officer emerges from the throng of people to confront them, and in a stroke of bad luck...

"You again?!"

... It's Officer Jenny, the same one who yelled at Paul and Julian for racing a few days ago.

"Yes, me," Julian bites out, doing his best to keep his temper even. He stops a few arms lengths away from the closure sign. "I'm not flying down the street at a hundred miles an hour, so you don't have anything to yell about."

Officer Jenny places her hands on her hips and gives Julian a hard stare. "Good. Now, what brings you here? The road is closed."

"I can see that." Julian's reply is as dry as the hide of a Sandshrew. "Why is it closed, and what's with the hazmat guys? Some kind of chemical spill?" From the corner of his eye, he can see Lulu growing antsy, so he clicks his tongue and throws the poor jackal a bone. "If anyone's really banged up, my Lucario knows Heal Pulse and can help out."

Jenny's intense eyes soften somewhat at the offer of help. "Thank you for the offer, young man, but thankfully everyone's more shaken than hurt. There was indeed a chemical spill a day ago," she says, taking a little notebook from her pocket and flipping it open. She scans the notes within with a nod. "A truck carrying a lot of used-up chemical sludge from a local ore refinery crashed and spilled its load. City workers mobilized and showed up this morning to clean up the spill, but it looks like a pokemon has made its home in the contaminated ditch where the truck crashed."

"And said pokemon didn't take too kindly to their eviction," Lulu finishes, watching another officer jot down the words of a frantic hazmat worker.

"I'm going to guess this pokemon isn't wanting to move?" Julian asks rhetorically, already seeing the answer on Jenny's face. "What kind of pokemon is cool with hanging out in refinery runoff?"

Jenny sighs. "We aren't sure," she admits reluctantly. "The pokemon in question is quite fast, and beat back everyone sent to dislodge it before we could get a solid look at it. We need to get this mess cleaned *today*, as rain is in the forecast tomorrow, and we can't let the rainwater spread the runoff." Jenny shakes her head, looking genuinely distressed. "We've been trying to reach Gym Leader Roark for help, but we're having trouble getting a hold of him."

'Dude probably cleaned up the rest of his challengers and went down into the mines again to dig up fossils,' Julian muses. *'Oh well. This gives us a perfect excuse to go investigate. If this mysterious pokémon and the aura are one in the same...'*

"What if we go chase the pokemon off for you?" Julian offers, dialing up the charm in his grin to max. He reaches into his back pocket and withdraws a flat, silvery case a little bigger than a credit card. He flips it open and shows Jenny the Coal Badge inside. "Me and my pokemon beat Roark yesterday without losing a single round, so we're not pushovers."

The doubt in Jenny's eyes vanishes when she lays eyes on the shiny badge Julian presents.

'I need to thank Zoey for insisting I keep my badge case handy.'

The officer hesitates, then, "I suppose the longer we wait, the worse things get..." she mutters weakly. "Very well. Since you're a capable trainer, we'll let you take a crack at it," she says and beckons Julian, Lulu, and Aniki along. "We need to go over a quick briefing first!"

[line]

The 'quick' briefing is anything but. Jenny leads Julian's team to her overweight sergeant, the tired hazmat supervisor, a nervous-wreck of an official from City Hall, and a few of the people who rapidly decrease in importance as they're introduced. There is a lot of bickering and arguing over protocol, a bit of leadership jockeying, and a liability waiver is shoved in Julian's face by the City Hall official, only to be ripped away just as quickly by the red-faced, blustering police sergeant.

"What nonsense is this!?" the police sergeant seeths at the official. "You Ekans! The boy doesn't need to sign anything! Be grateful he wants to help!"

To Julian, who has only ever dealt with burnt-out or corrupt city cops, it's an immensely pleasant change of pace that a police officer is actually looking out for him. Not that he can be upset with the city official, as the guy's aura doesn't feel malicious at all, just overly nervous.

Eventually, though, a plan comes together.

1. Chase out or otherwise disable the hostile pokemon.
2. Signal the police and hazmat team to move in.
3. Stand guard as the worst of the spill is taken care of.

'We didn't need a committee of ten people to figure this out.' Julian clicks his tongue as the men and women around him reach a consensus and begin to back up. *'Some things never change.'*

"Okay, Mister Angelo." Jenny smiles and hands Julian both a radio and a gas mask she took from her patrol car. "We'll leave you to it. Remember that the sludge is highly toxic, so don't let any get into your eyes or mouth, and don't breathe in the fumes! In the meantime, we're going to keep reaching out to Gym Leader Roark, just in case things go south."

"You can count on us, officer," Lulu says, raising a paw and clenching it into a resolute fist.

'Man, Lulu fits the hero stereotype to a T.'

As one, Julian's team all turn and begin the walk to the spill site several hundred yards up the road.

"So..." Julian begins, clipping the radio to his belt and brushing stray locks out of his face as he dons the borrowed gas mask. "Are we thinking Steel-type or Poison-type? Those are the only kind of pokemon that can hang around toxic waste and not have an awful time," he says, voice muffled by the mask.

Aniki reaches out and tightens the back straps of Julian's mask, pulling the blonde's ponytail free when one of the straps pins it awkwardly. "Hard to say," Aniki says. "Let's just be ready for anything."

A minute of walking later, and the tipped over tanker truck Officer Jenny described comes into view. Just as the woman said, the tire tracks on the road tell a tale of the driver suddenly swerving to avoid something in the road, then tipping the whole rig over by accident. The scene is still littered with broken glass from the truck and metal shavings from where the tanker dragged across the asphalt before splitting open next to a drainage pipe.

As they look at the ditch along the side of the road, Lulu grasps her nose with a grimace.

The drainage ditch is filled with a noxious slurry with a color reminiscent of bile. Even after only a day of exposure, the grass along the side of the road has begun to wilt. The sludge is so thick that it's actually clogging the drainpipe it should be running off into.

Beside Julian, Aniki coughs and clears his throat, eyeballing the mess with disgust. "Oh man. The fumes are making my throat tingle," he says, turning and addressing Julian. "Jules, whatever you do, don't take off that mask. One breath will wreck your lungs in a hurry."

"Wasn't planning on it, bro..." Julian says back, focusing on his sixth sense. He can practically see a huddled outline beneath the pond of chemicals. "I can feel 'em. The pokemon is down in the sludge. Hey!" he suddenly calls. "Whoever is in there, we need to talk to you!"

At first, there is no reply, and then a few bubbles rise to the surface of the sludge. Below the bubbles, something within shifts.

In a flash, both Lulu and Aniki are in front of Julian, their fists raised.

Slowly breaching the surface, a dark blue frog-like head with droopy yellow eyes rises. The yellow eyes blink once, slowly and lethargically, as they unhurriedly scan the trio before them. The soupy mess shifts further as the head rises more, revealing a mouth seemingly set in an ill-humored grin and bright cheeks of orange.

'A Croagunk,' Julian realizes with a blink. *'That explains why the aura felt like a Fighting-type.'*

"Oh?" Croagunk begins, masculine voice devoid of any tone or inflection, save the barest hint of amusement. "So this one wishes to speak? My, my, how courteous," he says, each word slow and deliberate. "Save your words, trainer. I don't care to hear them," he finishes, making his dismissal clear with how he slowly begins to sink.

"Oh no you don't!" Julian shoots back. "I think you'll care to hear what I have to say, and if you don't, we're going to be far less courteous."

Croagunk stops halfway, giving Julian a sharp, half-confused glare. "...Did you just...?"

"I can understand every word coming out of your mouth," Julian confirms, stepping forward so that he is shoulder to shoulder with Lulu and Aniki. "And I'm pretty sure you know why we're here."

With a great, heaving sigh, Croagunk raises his head once more. "Indeed I do. I've made my home here, and do not wish to move, so I shall tell you what I told every other unwelcome visitor." His eyes grow narrow. "Begone."

"I can't do that, man," Julian replies with a shake of his head. "The cleanup crew has to get in here and clear this mess out before it poisons the ground," he says, looking at the nearby tree line.

Yet another thing Julian likes about this world; people only take as much as they need from nature. While not a hippie or even particularly outdoorsy, he found it a little sad to see how much damage man had done to the world back on Earth.

That respect for the natural world here is evident with how close the tree line is to the road. The amount of foliage cleared out was only as much as needed, and not a tree more... But that also means that there is a lot more nature to be mindful of. With the tree line so close to the runoff ditch, it's only a matter of time before the mess seeps into the root network and causes havoc. If it's not cleaned up before the next rain, and the ditch overflows...

"C'mon, you know the spillage can't be good for anything around here," Julian tries to reason. "It's going to kill trees, poison the ground, make other pokemon sick, and it's going to be a lot worse if it doesn't get cleaned up before the next rain storm! Hell, people or pokemon could end up dead!"

Croagunk raises a single uncaring eyebrow. "And that is my problem how?"

The answer is so callous that Julian can't stop himself from gaping. It's an answer he would've expected out of another human, never a *pokemon*.

"You scoundrel!" Lulu blows up, her aura flaring like a bonfire with gasoline thrown on it, some of it radiating out of her in blue wisps. She clenches her fists, and grits her teeth. "You don't care at all?!"

Croagunk looks Lulu dead in the eye, his aura as flat and truthful as can be. "No."

The word is like a physical blow to the Lucario, who stumbles back a step in disbelief.

"Why should I?" Croagunk challenges, standing a little taller, his shoulders peeking out of the toxic gunk. "The other pokemon aren't me, so why should I care about them? What purpose do they serve to me?"

"A-Are you listening to yourself?!" Aniki exclaims, aghast. "Don't you have any empathy? What if you were the one to get sick because of someone else's negligence?! What if it happened to someone you cared about?!"

A shrug is Croagunk's answer. "If I fall ill and perish, then I have only myself to blame for being weak."

"And if someone you cared about fell ill?" Aniki asks once more, looking as if he dreads the answer.

"Are you thick? I already answered you." Croagunk shakes his head with a sigh. "If I fall ill and perish, then I have only myself to blame for being weak."

It takes a moment, but the implication finally hits Julian, and a cold feeling settles in his stomach. *'Arceus. Is this edge lord for real? What fucked him up so badly that he's doing lone wolf in a world where friendship equals power?'* Julian wonders, silently reading the frog pokemon's aura.

Croagunk's aura is still utterly Zen-like. He fully believes every word he's spoken.

Julian looks at Aniki, seeing the tall fighter's face frozen in shock. When he looks at Lulu, the burning anger he expected isn't there.

No. On Lulu's face is *pity*. The fire is gone from her eyes, replaced with a profound melancholy.

The pokemon still submerged in the chemical spill shakes his head. "Are we quite done?"

"No. No we're not..." Julian mutters, signaling Aniki to step back. "You can't stay here, Croagunk. Hell, why make a home in a contaminated ditch of all things? Don't you have a better place to stay?"

Croagunk chuckles, and it's a dry, humorless sound. "Oh, I did. Once upon a time," he says, his eyes narrowing. "In the past, I lived in the marshes of Pastoria with the rest of my ilk. Ours was the largest colony within the Great Marsh. With our size came the safety of the many, and the squabbles of those who desired power."

As he speaks, Croagunk begins to rise out of the toxic soup where he is sitting, slowly walking up the incline of the ditch.

"Words have always been more important than might to my kind, but never did we allow ourselves to grow weak and soft... Until now." Croagunk sneers. "Pale-fingered fools who spent too much time around humans wurmpled their way into the inner circle of the Alpha male, using pretty words and platitudes to get their way, for they had no will to fight nor bleed."

By now, Croagunk is stepping onto the grass, bile-like chemicals sliding off of his body and pooling at his feet.

"One night, deep within the southern mangroves did I uncover a plot," Croagunk continues, sighing. "Treason, I believe the human word is, and how ugly it is upon the lips. The Alpha's second planned on that night for supporters of his to begin openly questioning the leadership of our Alpha. Should it result in a shift in power, or a schism, they did not care, for the gallant traitor would be there to restore order and condemn the Alpha for allowing such unrest in the first place."

All of the toxic slurry has dripped off of Croagunk, revealing his squat form. Upon his body are small scars here and there, not enough to notice at first glance, but enough to be proof of his nature as a fighter.

"I confronted the traitor, soft and weak as a hatchling." Croagunk slowly raises an arm, showing Julian, Lulu, and Aniki his hand. When the frog pokemon squeezes his fingers together, a thick drop of purple oozes from his dark orange middle finger before dripping to the ground.

The drop of poison hisses and smokes when it hits the ground, burning away the grass and dirt. As if death itself touched the ground, the grass all around the drop turns brown and crumbles, leaving nothing behind in a circle several inches across.

"I demanded satisfaction from him for his transgressions, and he agreed. He wore great, shameful marks for his loss." Croagunk's eyes shine cruelly before he tempers himself. "Do you know how I was repaid for preventing a coup? I was *banished*. Banished from the marsh, all because the traitor cried of brutality, of an unprovoked attack. Not only could he not fight, he could not accept the consequences of his own actions, either." Yellow eyes narrow down to slits. "*None* took my side. Not 'friends', not 'family', and even my mate looked at me with doubt before condemning me. None bothered to see past the lies or hear my pleas. You wish to know why I am here, why I do not care that I am putting others in peril, trainer?" he asks, staring Julian straight in the eye. "I am here because I am a wanderer without a home. I do not care because I opened my eyes and saw the world as it truly is. The only love that is true, the only love that matters, is the love that exists for one's own life. This, I know to be fact."

Both Lulu and Aniki are stunned silent by the tirade. Neither can form words, and Lulu stares at Croagunk as Aniki slowly shakes his head.

Julian, try as he might to think of a good retort, slips and lets the first words to come to mind slip through. "Arceus, *damn* you are fuckin' stupid."

Croagunk's eyes sharpen. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me!" Julian points an accusing finger at the frog pokemon. "You heard me, and don't act like you didn't! It sounds like you just had some shitty friends. Pal, your situation sucks, but declaring that love and friendship is fake is the *dumbest* thing I have heard in a long time. It's real, and it affects you more than you could possibly know."

Croagunk's face hardens. "And what would you know, oh wise trainer, about such matters? You can't be any older than sixteen springs."

'Holy hell, he actually hit me with the 'what would you know' line with a straight face.' Julian would have rubbed a hand down his face if not for his mask. "Look, how about a wager?"

"A wager?" Croagunk crosses his arms. "What could we possibly have to wager about?"

Julian points to the toxic spillage behind Croagunk. "We need to clean that up, and whether it's by hook or by crook, you need to leave, so here's what I'm proposing. If Lulu here can beat you, I capture you to prove to you that your gloom and doom 'friendship is fake' shit is wrong. If you win, we take off and tell everyone waiting for us that it's hopeless to get you out of here."

"And if I don't participate in this little wager?" The Poison pokemon raises an eyebrow.

"You still get your ass beat, but we dump you somewhere else so you can stew in your own misery," Julian replies back.

Croagunk huffs, amusement creeping back into his voice. "Very well. Challenge accepted. I look forward to seeing you broken at my feet." Then, without waiting a second longer, he springs backwards with a powerful leap, back flipping through the air towards a tree along the road. [Once his feet meet a low branch, he springboards back forward as a blur of blue.](#)

'Shit! Ever heard of a start signal?!' Julian inwardly curses. He quickly pulses his aura, relaying everything important that he can to Lulu. *Poison/Fighting. Weak to Ground. Resists Fighting.*

Acknowledged! she sends back, just barely dodging a flying palm thrust from Croagunk.

The frog pokemon agilely twists and lands on his feet, rushing back in to meet Lulu with a grin on his face.

In response, Lulu forms a glowing, blue Bone Rush staff between her paws and bats away a chop from Croagunk.

The frog and the jackal find themselves locked in a deadly dance. Lulu's Steel typing means she's going to resist any poisons slung at her, but that apparently bothers Croagunk none, as he practically lives within Lulu's guard, jabbing at her with lightning fast attacks. Each time Croagunk's fingers graze Lulu's fur, the poison oozing from his fingers burns away her hair, but thankfully leaves the steely skin beneath unscathed.

'I can barely help with this one...' Frustration gnaws at Julian as he watches the pair of pokemon exchange blows. Instead of despairing, he tries to analyze how Croagunk is fighting, hoping to find a weakness.

The blue frog is *fast*. Not only are his movements quick, but his reactions are absolutely blistering. Every time Lulu is about to land a worthwhile blow, Croagunk either twists out of the way or parries the incoming attack with a webbed hand. His eyes are always shifting between Lulu's forepaws, hindpaws, and her staff, never focusing on her body or face like a professional fighter should, yet he holds his own despite it all. To top it all off, Croagunk's punches and chops always gravitate towards a vulnerable area, like the kidneys or throat, despite him paradoxically focusing on Lulu's limbs. The sheer calm of his aura makes it damn near impossible to read, so trying to predict his attacks is just not happening.

The most puzzling thing, however, is Croagunk's completely bizarre guard. *Or lack thereof.*

The Poison pokemon's arms are all wrong, leaving glaring holes in his guard that any amateur should be able to exploit, yet...

Croagunk once more leaves his left side completely open, and Lulu, gritting her teeth, swings her Bone Rush in a telegraphed right hand feint, before rapidly transitioning into a thrust at Croagunk's left side.

The frog smirks, grabbing the staff and giving it a yank so Lulu overextends. His other hand then buries itself in Lulu's stomach in a wicked knifehand.

"Ka-haaa!" Lulu's eyes bulge as all of the breath is driven from her lungs. Her Bone Rush is dropped from her limp fingers and vanishes as she's thrown onto her back, rolling across the ground.

“Lulu!” The cry bursts from Julian’s mouth on total accident, and only Aniki’s hand on his shoulder keeps him from trying to jump in himself.

Croagunk leaps after the Lucario. As he flies through the air, Croagunk’s throat begins to swell, and after taking a gurgling breath, he fires a Mud Bomb down at his prone foe.

Lulu sucks in a harsh breath then rolls out of the way, letting the Mud Bomb crash into the ground like a cannonball. Ignoring the flecks of hardened dirt bouncing off of her, Lulu jumps back to her feet and raises her fists just in time to deflect a knifehand that would have jabbed her in the windpipe. In her haste to deflect that strike, though, she fails to do anything about the chop to her kidney, which leaves her wincing. With Croagunk now in her face, Lulu isn’t given any time to form a new staff, and she instead has to fight her bizarre opponent hand-to-hand.

*‘He’s baiting her...’ Julian realizes, trying to calm his heart. ‘Croagunk’s guard isn’t wrong by mistake, it’s wrong on purpose! That son of a bitch! Lulu hasn’t ever gone toe-to-toe with something like this before!’ Julian bites his lip and tries to think of a way out of this mess. ‘We don’t have a good way to bleed him and there’s no telling if he can outlast Lulu, so it looks like we’re doing this the simpleton way. With any luck, actually calling out the attacks will give Lulu the **Named Attack** boost she desperately needs.’*

“Lulu! The holes in his guard are bait! *All of it* is bait!” Julian hollers. “You need to outspeed him or blow completely through his guard! Use Power-up Punch!”

Lulu’s clenched fists begin to crackle with off-red Fighting energy, and Julian can see the exhaust wisps seeping into her arms. With a roar, she throws a humongous punch square at Croagunk’s face.

Raising his hands near instantly, Croagunk deflects the punch with a slap. “Please, you’ll need to – ”

“Again!” Julian calls

“–do better than tha-!”

Croagunk is almost slugged by the follow-up punch, and only a near instantaneous deflection saves him from a broken jaw.

“Whatever you do, don’t let up!” Julian orders from the sideline. “Don’t even give him a chance to breathe! Force him to put everything into getting out of the way!”

Lulu grunts, drawing her fist back again and rushing Croagunk furiously.

Smack!

Smack!

SMACK!

SMACK!

With every punch deflected, Lulu only strikes harder and faster, growing stronger and stronger the longer Power-up Punch is active. What started as crackles around her fists have grown into roaring, jet-like auras. Julian can see Lulu’s paws begin to steam from Power-up Punch vaporizing her sweat.

Croagunk's grin is gone, replaced with a grimace as he transitions away from deflecting to simply backpedaling.

Then in a dirty move Julian kicks himself for not anticipating, Croagunk slings a hand forward, shooting a spray of noxious purple droplets right into Lulu's eyes.

"Gaaaah!" Lulu cries, letting one of her Power-up Punches fade to reflexively paw at her face. "Damn it!"

Croagunk doesn't waste the opportunity and launches himself forward. "Steel-types, always such a pain," he sneers. "You'll find that poison as potent as mine will still hurt, even if it cannot ravage your insides. No matter, I am content breaking what is on the *outside*." He raises a glowing red hand. "Brick Break!"

Croagunk chops Brick Break right into Lulu's jaw, and Julian's own jaw aches when he hears a low *crack!* The blow has such strength that Lulu would have been thrown off her feet if she didn't instinctively brace herself.

Lulu staggers back, spitting a glob of red onto the ground, but she doesn't let herself remain idle and reignites Power-up Punch. Even with her burning eyes closed, her aura flares, and her fist rockets towards Croagunk's face, guided by her sixth sense.

Ducking the fist with less than an inch to spare, Croagunk sighs. "Ah, yes. Aura. Now I remember what your ilk are famed for... No matter," he says, slipping a glowing red hand behind his back. This time, rather than dodge completely, Croagunk allows Lulu's fist to just barely graze his cheek.

The red aura around Croagunk's hand surges.

*'Revenge? Can Croagunk learn Revenge?' Julian's eyes widen as he figures out what Croagunk is aiming to do. 'Revenge increases in power every time the user gets hit, it doesn't care what the actual damage is, just that the user sustained **some kind of damage!** He's going to go for a one-hit knock-out once Revenge is juiced enough! We need to end this **now!**'*

"Lulu! We need to end this now!" Julian yells at the top of his lungs. He shuts his eyes for a moment, mustering up every bit of feeling he can for her.

Lulu, his first pokémon.

Lulu, the one who believes in him the most.

Lulu, his first and truest friend.

Lulu, without whom, life wouldn't be the same.

"Take him down in one hit! I believe in you!"

Croagunk scoffs as he hears the words. "I don't think –"

"Raaaaaagghhh!" the Lucario roars, throwing all of her weight into her punch.

Brilliant blue aura explodes off of Lulu in waves, and before Croagunk can even *think* of uttering another word, a furry, gauntlet-armored fist is buried in his solar plexus.

The strike throws a shockwave that blows away the dirt around Lulu's hindpaws and knocks loose leaves from the nearby trees. When it hits Julian, he can feel the concussive blast rattle his bones.

For a moment, time seems to freeze with a shocked Croagunk suspended by Lulu's fist, then the frog is launched across the ground like a rock skipped across a lake, bouncing several times and dragging a trench behind him. He skids across the ground, tumbling to a stop on his back.

"Holy..." Aniki gapes behind Julian. "Did you see that?"

"Yeah..." A grin stretches across Julian's face. "Yeah, I did," he says, marching up to Lulu's side.

Lulu's aura fades, and she pulls her fist back before falling to her knees, wiping her eyes. "Goodness." She winces, holding her bruised side. "I wasn't expecting him to be that tough."

"Me neither," Julian replies, smiling. Trying to be mindful of Lulu's injuries, he kneels at her side and beckons Aniki over. "Aniki, can we get some water to flush her eyes?"

The Machoke is by Julian and Lulu's side in a flash. Gently taking Lulu's head, he tilts her face towards the sky and holds a fist over her, charging an Ice Punch. Frost builds around the large fist before the technique fails, letting droplets of cool water drip into Lulu's squinting eyes. Once most of the burning purple is washed from her bloodshot eyes, Lulu stands unsteadily.

'One of those bottomless Silph Co backpacks is next on my list,' Julian swears to himself, watching as Lulu exhausts herself further by repairing her jaw with Heal Pulse. *'I need to be able to carry Potions and everything else my team needs with me all the time.'*

Once Julian's starter pokemon is finished healing her fractured jaw, Julian quickly steps in and allows her to lean on him. "Hot damn, Lulu. You really went above and beyond," he says, wrapping her in a one armed hug.

The Lucario huffs. "It was either win and fulfill our obligation to the spillage cleanup crew, or lose and return in shame. I won't allow something like a tricky opponent to turn me into a liar."

"Speaking of said opponent." Julian looks over to where Croagunk lies. "Let's go see how he's doing."

With Lulu leaning on Julian and a watchful Aniki bringing up the rear, the three cautiously make their way over to Croagunk. When they arrive, Croagunk is somehow, somehow, still conscious.

Drawing shallow, painful breaths, Croagunk turns his eyes to them. "This..." He takes as deep a breath as he can, wincing. He tries to stand, but gives up with a wheeze. "This was not what I expected."

"It *is* what I expected," Julian says, pulling the gas mask off his face and crouching down to the injured pokemon's side. "I'm telling you, friendship is the furthest thing from fake. Now, do you want to see it firsthand?" he says, taking the empty pokeball from his belt and holding it out to Croagunk.

The poison-type's brows furrow. "What are you..." He pauses to take another wheezy breath. "What's the meaning of this?"

"I'm not a complete dick; I'm not going to force you to join my team if you really, really don't want it." Julian rolls the ball in his fingers. "You can lead a Ponyta to water, but you can't force him to drink. I know that you're wrong, and I know that for a fact, but unless you're the kind of guy who is okay with being proven wrong, then what's the point?"

"I see you listened to not a word I said, if you believe I wasn't willing to accept the consequences of my loss." Croagunk coughs and shakes his head. "What's your name, trainer?"

Julian taps his chest with a finger. "Julian Angelo, Fighting-Type Specialist now, and greatest trainer who has ever lived later."

"Julian Angelo..." Croagunk tests the name. "Listen well, Julian Angelo. You'll learn the greatest part of being a pessimist is you are only either correct, or pleasantly surprised, and it's often the former," he says, slapping a hand on the pokeball in Julian's hand.

The ball snaps open and sucks Croagunk inside in a flash of light. When the capsule snaps back shut, it doesn't even shake in the blonde's hand before making a quiet *ding!*

"Preaching to the choir yet again, pal," Julian snorts, pressing the button and shrinking the ball. "Start thinking of a name in there, the history books need something to know you by."

The aura inside the ball swells, then contracts, as if letting out a regret-filled sigh.

[Line]

Below are the names of some patrons who got to view this chapter early and felt like signing it. A huge thanks to them and everyone else who supports this story and everything else I write.

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