I'm at the end of my rope with my job. We're going hard on writing until I can afford to do this as a part-time (or maybe full time) job and produce more stuff more often. If you'd like to help, you can keep this fast pace going possibly forever. See below.

Want to support me? See Fuggmann on the place of patrons. I do have goals on there that will hopefully allow me to cut back on work in favor of more writing. As a thanks for donating, patrons get to see updates a few days early and suggest edits to the final draft before it goes live.

[line]

Lee hums as he looks over to the faded, digital alarm clock on the hotel nightstand between his and Brendan's beds. *'We'll need to finish up here soon if we want to go out to test Ninetales' new capabilities **and** check up on Octillery before dinner.'* He nods more to himself than anyone else.

Several hours prior, after Lee composed himself and reluctantly pulled himself from his freshly evolved Ninetales, the pair, along with Grovyle, bid Moore and his trainers adieu. They didn't need to talk to decide that retiring back to their hotel room for some private discussion was warrented. After a promise to return and discuss Moore's commission, they left. Brendan, Zinnia, and Courtney didn't need any hints that Lee wished to be alone with his pokemon for a bit, and all three tactfully left to find their own entertainment in Lavaridge. Grovyle and Ninetales exchanged a few short words when they and Lee arrived back at the hotel, and the Grass-type excused himself by returning to his ball.

Of course, the first thing Lee wanted to do upon acquiring a new pokemon?

Give her a physical. The fox rolled her eyes with a smile and didn't fight it.

"Okay, one more time. All the way in and out...."

Ninetales slowly inhales through her nose, making the great golden tuft of fur on her breast swell and tickle the hand beneath it. Those glittering, ruby-like eyes of hers regard Lee with an amused sort of exasperation.

For a few short seconds, Lee keeps his hand on Ninetales' sternum, measuring both her heartbeat and the clarity of her breath. When she can breathe in no more, she slowly exhales.

"Resting heart rate of thirty-eight beats-per-minute, lungs perfectly clear…" Lee smiles and jots everything down in his notebook with his free hand. The too-soft hotel bed under the notebook forces him to write slowly lest he push his pen too hard and slip, but he finishes in just a moment. "Thirty-eight seems rather low, but we're more or less breaking new ground here, so…"

Ninetales physical #0 Initial Baseline

June 6th 3:34 PM 20XX:

Weight: 61.1 lbs
Height: 3'11" (Discounting ears)

Muscle formation even and consistent. Fur growth even and consistent. Temperature at 110 F. Free of illness/parasites. Ninetales alert during the whole process.

Mouth/Teeth: OK
Ears: OK
Eyes: OK
Lungs: OK
Heart: OK
Stomach: OK

Further inspections are required for an accurate baseline. Working from scratch.

“That’ll do for now.” Lee nods and shuts his notebook, only to feel a frown tug at his lips when he notices just how lopsided the spiral-bound book is. Only a thin sliver of pages remain. “Did I burn through three hundred pages already? I could have sworn I was barely at the half-way point.”

Lee flips the book back open to a random page near the middle, finding an anatomical sketch of Brendan’s Mawile, several scribbled calculations of her jaw strength, and theories on Steel TE naturally flowing in the Steel/Fairy pokemon. The page is dated over a month back, coinciding with their time in Dewford, and after reading a few lines, Lee remembers wondering how Mawile was able to wield her extra jaws without snapping the thin, delicate-looking termination point on the back of her head. Some sort of passive Steel TE reinforcement was the only thing he could think of.

“Huh, I thought I had more pages left…” Lee mutters.

‘You put your thoughts to paper more often than you think, beloved. I’m glad for it, for your head seems to be filled to bursting so often that I need to repeat myself sometimes.’

The words are quiet yet attention-commanding at the same time, and hearing them sends a goosebump-inducing shiver down Lee’s spine. He slowly raises his head back to Ninetales, who offers a small, vulpine smile.

‘I don’t want to cut your studies short, but you’re not the only one excited to learn what I can do now,’ the golden fox’s tails flick as one, though each tail goes in a different direction. *‘Also if you wish to pet me, you don’t need an excuse to do so,’* she looks down at the hand still submerged into her tuft of breast fur with amusement coloring her words.

Lee withdraws his hand quickly, his face growing warm in embarrassment. “Sorry…”

Offense flashes in Ninetales’ eyes, so she stands on the bed and takes a single long stride towards Lee. She slips her head under his chin and drapes her forelegs across his lap as she lays down, pressing her warm, silken coat to him. Around his back, Lee feels those nine long tails curl around him, and the warmth makes him want to lay back and sleep, to push off the rest of what he wanted to do today.

‘You’ve nothing to be sorry for, so please don’t say that,’ she ‘says’, her ‘voice’ firm.

Almost without meaning to, Lee wraps his arms around her and melts into the affection woven into each of her words.

Ever since her evolution just a few hours prior, the number of changes Ninetales went through has left Lee with a light head, and part of him still feels like he stepped into a vivid dream that might end any second. His ace pokemon’s transformation from a cute, fire-breathing fox to a majestic kitsune of legend had so many effects, but none more profound than what changed inside her head.

The most striking is her telepathy, the *words* she speaks. Before, the words had meaning and Lee got the gist of what Vulpix said by meeting her understanding of human words and concepts halfway. These words were only raw meaning fed into his brain, usually accompanied by some abstract thought or emotions for context. For these reasons, Vulpix always kept her sentences short and to the point. If Lee was feeling fanciful, he might have even imagined a voice in his head when conversing with her.

Ninetales, however, exists on a totally different plane of telepathic expertise. Lee *hears* what she says near exactly how she intends to say it. It’s like every depiction of telepathy in popular media, a reverberation of her speech inside of his skull, only so much more. Each word is honeyed with woven emotion and intent, and like a man savoring a delectable morsel, his brain eagerly takes in every single word and just *knows* what she means. A rich, feminine voice seems to accompany every transmission, and although Lee can’t describe the voice in words alone, it’s distinctly *Ninetales.*

Lee’s ’heard’ more from Ninetales in the past three hours than he has in the last week as well, for her mind is an open book to him and she delights in reaching out to him in turn. Each thought, each sentence, is interlaced with love and emotion so pure and unmistakable that Lee wonders if he ever misread Ninetales before her evolution. If he did, he silently ponders how often it happened.

Ninetales doesn’t shy away from reveling in the newfound insight between them, either. The demure and quiet shell of Vulpix has split open, revealing a more outspoken, more prideful vixen with all the tender love and firm spirit of her prior form.

She's changed so much…

"God, you're soft…" Lee murmurs into the tuft between Ninetales' ears.

One of her ears flicks, and Lee's eyes are drawn to the snow-white heart mark still on the back of her ear. Against the golden fur, it's a chore to pick out under fluorescent lights, but the mark remains.

She's changed so much, yet so little.

'I think I have you to thank for that,' Ninetales makes that warm, familiar purr deep in her throat. *'Without a trainer to spoil me with homemade meals and all the grooming I could ever want, this envy-inducing coat would be beyond me.'*

Lee smiles but sobers a moment later. *'Ninetales?'* He begins mentally. *'How do you feel?'*

The vixen shifts in Lee's arms, raising her head enough to peer at him with a ruby eye. *'How do I feel? What do you mean?'* The question genuinely confuses her.

'Just… in general, I suppose.' Lee struggles to put his concerns into words, and after a moment, just opens up his raw worries to Ninetales, hoping she'll understand.

The fox takes the invitation wordlessly, reaching across the short but wide psychic channel between them to touch the deeper parts of his mind directly. Like a balm, her presence instantly soothes his nerves and returns him to relaxation.

'Oh?' Ninetales blinks, then smiles gently. *'I feel fine, beloved. Better than fine, in fact. I feel good,* ***complete.*** *Perhaps I was upset with Moore for springing a proposal with such a damning time limit upon us, but in retrospect, I find myself thankful.'* She pauses to corral a tail Lee feels moving on its own, covering the cold spot it left on his back. *'These tails seem to have a mind of their own, sometimes…'* She muses before returning to her other train of thought. '*If not for such a time limit, I might have hesitated for months, maybe years. I could feel my skills beginning to reach their limits as a Vulpix, and before long I would have begun to fall behind. I could* ***not*** *let that happen.'* Her brows furrow and Lee finds himself surprised by the range of motion her face has. *'While you have been conversing with Mable…'* The golden fox hesitates. *'I have been speaking to her Xatu regarding my own demons.'*

"Your own demons?" Lee doesn't recall ever actually meeting the aforementioned Xatu, but that takes the backseat to the pit he feels opening up in his stomach. "Ninetales? You said a while back that you wanted to wait until your telepathy was better before explaining why you've been losing so much sleep. I can understand you pretty well now, so…"

Ninetales is silent for a full minute. Then she breathes out a short sigh. *'I'm still not sure I want to say,'* she sends after some time, and the naked uncertainty in her voice prompts Lee to hold

her a little tighter. *'I don't want to burden you with my concerns when you've yourself to worry about.'*

"Knowing you have 'concerns' that warrant speaking with a therapist is already enough for me to worry over," Lee mutters. "I won't push you, but I wish you'd tell me."

The great fox's tails all quiver before settling, sending a rippling sensation down Lee's back. *'There were a few things, but now, I think I can put them to bed.'* Ninetales sets her head against Lee's chest, an ear pressed flat over his heart. *'The first was my birth.'*

'Your birth?'

'Yes,' she physically nods. *'I've spent weeks pondering it. How was I born?* ***Why*** *was I born? I know I'm flesh and blood, so I'm no Porygon, yet my appearance at your side happened just as your little game lost bits of data and ceased functioning.'* She blinks her luminous reds. *'The memories of the time before we truly met are long gone, faded into a mess of alien sensations devoid of meaning. For all intents and purposes, I did not exist until you opened my ball.'*

Goosebumps break out across Lee's skin despite the warm cocoon of fur around him. He barely even considered where Vulpix was before she was dropped into his lap. Was she suffering an *existential crisis* while he never noticed?!

'Shush, I'm the one who kept my woes hidden,' Ninetales growls and raises her head to nip the tip of Lee's nose, halting his spiraling thoughts. *'Besides, after all my sleepless nights spent looking for answers, I came to one of my own just moments before evolving.'*

'One of your own?' Lee rubs his smarting nose. *'What do you mean?'*

Ninetales' smile returns. It's a tender expression, one that fills the zoologist with contentment, both his own and hers. *'I decided that the hows and whys don't matter,'* she declares. *'I refused to leave your side after you endured such a horrific ordeal those months ago, and you repaid my loyalty thricefold with your dedication to me. You, Lee, give me purpose in this world. Goodness deserves goodness, and love deserves love, this I know to be* ***fact****. If a greater power was involved in my birth for a reason of their own, then I spurn their designs.'*

She raises her head, ruby eyes quite literally glowing. '*I exist to be here with you, to love and be loved, because that is what* ***I*** *have decided, and that is a choice* ***all my own****.'*

Between them, Lee can almost *see* the psychic channel widen to a degree they've never been able to accomplish before, becoming a vast gulf. Ninetales reaches out to him, and rather than transmit whatever it is she wants, she instead *reels his mind towards hers.*

The distance grows shorter and shorter, until finally the channel is needed no longer.

Lee and *Ninetales* touch.

A flood of rapturous sensations overwhelms the man's senses near instantly. His vision swims with a kaleidoscope of colors that he can't name, his nerves thrum, his ears are filled with the sound of a waterfall, and everything but the pokemon holding him ceases to be. The world around them falls away, shattering like glass, leaving behind a strange and new place where words fail.

He feels *Ninetales.* He feels her for who she truly is, and he knows every bit of raw ardor she holds within her.

All of it is for him.

Unfettered thoughts and urges flow freely between man and fox, and all is laid bare without shame or judgment. A small, lucid part of Lee laughs at a stray memory where they both claimed to know everything about each other. Hyperbole at its finest.

Lee lays down all his worries, fears, insecurities, and laments. Worries for the future, fear of failing her and everyone else, insecurity over his disfigured visage, and the lament of the burned world left behind. Like weights, they all seek to drag him to somewhere low.

Ninetales bears her own hurts. The dread of losing her trainer and teammates, the gnawing disquiet of peering into The End, the nightmares of seeing the end of a world, and the lingering doubt of her evolution and how Lee might perceive her. They all pull her in different directions, stretching her sanity until tears begin to form.

Then, pokemon and trainer entwine themselves around one another, quashing what plagues them simply by being together. Hand in hand, they stand tall and invulnerable, their individual troubles seeming so laughably easy to manage. It leaves them free to lay in a bubbling basin of shared adoration for a well-deserved break from the world.

For the first time in many months, *everything is okay.*

[line]

Lee isn't sure how long he and Ninetales are wherever they are, for time seems like a foreign concept there, in that blissful nexus where he and his truest partner meet. Slowly, though, sensation returns to his body and the colors without names draw back as Ninetales pulls her mind away from his with great reluctance. Part of Lee wishes to reach out and stubbornly grasp her once more, but he knows just as well as she does that they can't sit here all day. He still takes a greedy sort of solace in keeping his arms around Ninetales tightly, however.

After a long moment, the golden fox chuffs out a short laugh. *'While I have no issues sitting here and cuddling all night, we should be going. We've much to do.'*

“I guess…” Lee grumbles, letting her go. He watches his pokemon stand with a stretch, then a full-body shake, making her shiny coat ripple. “Ninetales?”

The fox turns her head to him after hopping from the bed to the floor, regarding him with a smile. *‘Yes?’*

The zoologist smiles back. All at once, a pleasant, tingling lightness of spirit that he hasn’t truly felt for months fills his chest, and his smile becomes a genuine, happy grin. “Thank you for telling me what was bothering you.”

‘You deserved to know,’ she sniffs. *‘We’re partners, now and forever,’* she says simply.

Lee stands and raises his arms in a pleasant, back-popping stretch. He watches in amusement as Ninetales arches her back for a second in response, feeling the pop secondhand. “Partners now and forever, eh? I like it, but that's another line we’ll want to keep between us, lest people get ideas,” he steps into his boots and laces them.

Ninetales rolls her eyes. *‘Goodness me, inconsequential strangers might have inconsequential opinions. How terrible…’*

Lee lets out a short laugh and steps closer, laying a hand on her head and rubbing his thumb over the heart mark on her ear. The white fur is somehow even softer than the rest of her coat. “No more secrets between us?”

‘Never,’ she shakes her head. *‘Now, let's be off.’*

Ninetales noses Lee’s hand towards the door leaving the room. Her ruby eyes take on a violet hue, and a telekinetic corona of the same color covers the doorknob. Then with a twist and a pull…

…The sturdy metal door comes right out of its frame with a jerk so violent that it shakes dust from the ceiling. The hinges make a tortured, metallic squeal before the threading of their screws gives way, letting the hinges pop free with a sound like a gunshot and leaving the door floating lopsided in Ninetales’ telekinesis.

Lee and Ninetales stand motionless, both still processing what just happened.

Across the hall, the door opposite of Lee and Ninetales’ opens up, and a grumpy Loudred stands with a scowl on his face. He draws in a chest-filling breath and opens his mouth, a hundred-decibel tirade likely ready, but the sound pokemon takes notice of the dislodged door. His eyes then move to Lee, then finally down to the still-surprised Ninetales.

Slowly, carefully, and with his breath hissing out through his nostrils, the Loudred steps back inside and shuts the door, the lock clicking afterward.

Ninetales hangs her head and sets the door down against the wall with painstaking slowness before letting her telekinesis fade. Even if Lee can't see it, he knows she's blushing beet red in embarrassment under her coat.

"Ahhh don't worry, I'm sure you can get the hang of it after a few hours," Lee does his best to keep his smile from being awkward and rubs Ninetales between her shoulders, though he doesn't feel her mood improve much. "Look on the bright side. You went from being able to levitate maybe twenty pounds to-" He eyeballs the door. "-to however much that door weighs and then some."

'And I just caused several hundred credits worth of damage that you're going to have to pay for…' She remarks sullenly, finally raising her head and frowning mightily.

With a sigh, Lee shrugs. "Shinx has chewed on chair legs and Grovyle accidentally carved up a lamp after he evolved." His thumb rubs a circle between the dejected fox's shoulder blades. "You were going to join the club eventually."

[line]

The visit to the hotel's front desk is less painful than expected. After confirming the damage was an accident, the young woman tending to the lobby only requires a flat 250 credit fee and a signature on an insurance form. Yet again, Lee finds himself surprised when he knows he shouldn't be, as it only makes sense for lodgings catering to pokemon trainers to hedge themselves against pokemon-related damage. The last few times (mostly from poor Shinx teething on anything she could), the damage was so minor that Lee just paid it out of pocket and insurance was never involved.

After a text message to Brendan, Courtney, and Zinnia, Lee and Ninetales begin the trek over to the Pokemon Center to both meet up with the rest of their traveling party and visit Octillery.

As they walk through Lavaridge, Lee can't help but smile with a childish sort of satisfaction as more than a few people and pokemon marvel at Ninetales as they pass.

Back in Slateport, something similar happened and they got to play witness to it. A man, obviously a pro-trainer from the medley of Greatballs and single Ultraball on his belt, strolled through town with a Haxorus at his side.

The Haxorus was a stunning pokemon to behold. Nearly seven feet tall and oozing menace with each step. He would slowly crane his head around, taking in the gaping people all around without truly acknowledging them, like they were beneath him. With each movement of his head, no matter the speed, the crimson axe blades lining his jaw would make a quiet whistle as

they sliced the air with their fine edge. The prized Dragon commanded the attention of everyone who could see him like a king, and his subjects rewarded him with the flash of cameras and awed exclamations of admiration. The world of pokemon revolves around power at its core, after all, and few things so boldly declare ***power*** like a Dragon few have seen in person.

If Haxorus was admired for his plainly visible might and rugged aesthetic, then much the same is happening to Ninetales for the mysticism and beauty her kind exudes.

'Well, the beauty part I already knew, but I don't think a rare pokemon would get this kind of reaction.' Lee tries to keep his face straight, but no matter the effort, a smile remains on his lips. He sweeps his eyes around, watching as people slow down to stare at both himself and Ninetales. More than one cell phone and PokeNav is raised to take pictures along with a number of pointed fingers and murmurs, but even the annoyance of their last vestiges of anonymity being stripped away bit by bit doesn't make the zoologist's face fall.

Ninetales pays the people in the streets no mind. She walks with her head held high and prowls across the ground on silent, dainty paws. Her long tails trail behind her, each one slowly waving and flowing through its own invisible air current, but never touching the ground. In the waning sunlight, her eyes glow with a vivid, inner light, and her fur shines with a glorious luster. She cuts so magnificent and dignified a figure, no one would ever guess she clumsily ripped a door down not twenty minutes prior.

The nine-tailed fox twitches. *'I'm going to be hearing about that for a while, aren't I?'*

'It's not often I get something to tease you about, love.' Lee smirks.

The annoyance radiating from Ninetales is quickly soothed when Lee reaches down and runs his fingers through the tuft of fur along her head, ending with a gentle scratch behind an ear.

They arrive at the Pokemon Center with time to spare, owing to the fact that the crowded streets parted before them without so much of a word of fuss. Walking inside, Lee and Ninetales approach the reception desk, finding Lavaridge's Nurse Joy in her usual seat diligently typing away at her computer.

Joy looks up, then smiles when she notices the pair. To Lee's admiration, she doesn't even blink at seeing Ninetales. *'She's probably seen crazier things.'*

"Good afternoon Mister Henson, Miss Ninetales," Nurse Joy stands and folds her hands in front of her. "Are you here to see Octillery?"

Having seen this particular nurse several times in the last week, Lee can finally pick out the differences between her and the Nurse Joy in Littleroot, the only other Joy Lee can say he's well acquainted with. Littleroot's Joy is a bit shorter, and her voice higher. The resemblance the Joy

family's women all share is still astounding, though. The genes governing their appearance must be truly overwhelming.

"That we are," Lee nods. "How is he doing?"

Joy's smile widens a touch. "Very well. Octillery's recovery is moving along smoothly, and he's remained both conscious and lucid the entire day today. After he passed some cognitive tests, we informed him of your timely rescue. He seems quite curious to meet you. Just one moment please…" Joy touches a button on an electronic badge hanging from her breast pocket, prompting the gadget to play a little jingle. "Rita? I have Lee Henson to visit patient Octillery in the aquatic ward. Can you send a technician to the front to escort him, please? He'll be accompanied by his Ninetales."

The badge crackles. "Yes, Nurse Joy. Kim is on her way."

"Thank you!" Nurse Joy sing-songs before releasing the button. "You may find a seat if you like, Mister Henson. One of our intern nurses will be with you shortly."

"Thank you, nurse," Lee smiles.

The Pokemon Center of Lavaridge is set up like most of the centers they've visited before it in that there are plenty of seats arranged in columns and aisles for pokemon owners and their pokemon without emergency ailments. In the corners are larger, more open areas with wrap-around couches along the wall forming lounges of sorts. Although Lee can't be sure if it was intentional, the different seating types are used by different sorts of people. The regular seating is dominated by average people and the pokemon in their lives, while the more comfortable corners are held by camps of road-beaten trainers.

Venturing over to one of the less occupied corners, Lee seats himself at a respectable distance away from the other three trainers there. At his feet, Ninetales sits regally and wraps her tails around her legs… Or most of her tails. One errant tail escapes and lays itself across Lee's lap, wiggling like a snake.

Idly, the scarred trainer lets his fingers run through the soft fur of the appendage, but he takes care to not fully wrap his hand around it. *'Is the curse real, I wonder? Can its activation be controlled if it's real? There's more folklore than scientific data on Ninetales as a species, so we have so much to do.'*

'You're thinking rather loudly, beloved,' Ninetales angles her head to look back at Lee with a smile. *'And don't worry about any curses. I think I would know if I suddenly possessed such an ability,'* she says, wrapping the tail in his lap around his hand with surprising dexterity.

‘Your tails are prehensile, too. There’s a lot we could do with that,’ Lee feels her tail squeeze his hand lightly. Silky fur doesn’t provide the best grip, but… *‘Maybe we should begin working on Iron Tail again.’*

‘It would certainly work better now,’ Ninetales comments dryly.

As he and Ninetales wordlessly communicate, Lee takes notice of the conversation happening on the other bend of the L-shaped couch from the corner of his eye. Or rather, he takes notice of how quiet the three other trainers have become. Two of them are teen boys in travel-worn clothes, and sitting between them is a teen girl maybe a year older with sun-bleached blonde hair. In the girl’s lap is a small Teddiursa who suckles on one of his forepaws and peers at Ninetales with open apprehension. All three trainers sport healing sunburns, but they don’t let any discomfort keep them from leaning toward one another to exchange whispers. One boy steals a glance at Ninetales, then Lee.

Lee doesn’t even need to ask, as Ninetales feeds him what her much sharper ears pick up.

“If you're gonna ask, now is the time,” One of the teen boys whispers to their female companion. *“He doesn’t look like the Contest type, though.”*

“Maybe, but look at that Ninetales!” She hisses back. *“That fur is practically **glowing** even in artificial light! How do you do that? That alone could be big points if you get the lighting right in a Contest!”*

“Okay, so ask Mugsy over there for hair-care tips and see what he has to say,” The second boy smirks.

“...” The teen girl looks at Lee. Without even directly looking at them, Lee can tell the trio, or at least the girl, are intimidated.

‘Mugsy?’ Lee frowns and resists the urge to rub his burn scars.

‘Perhaps say something?’ Ninetales prompts Lee with a yawn. *‘There were an impressive number of cameras following us here, and a drop of kindness in the sea of gossip will make bigger waves than most might expect.’* She lets her eyes scan the lobby of the Center, and through them, Lee can see that more than a few conversations have petered out as people notice them.

‘When did you get so people-savvy?’

‘One of us has to be,’ the fox teases.

Lee grumbles to himself about cheeky vulpines before speaking. “You three seem like you have something on your mind,” he says, finally turning his head to face the other trainers.

All of the younger trainers jump, visibly spooked. They all exchange hasty looks, then the girl speaks up. “Yeah, uh, hi! I’m just wondering what kind of grooming routine you use for your Ninetales? I’m trying for the Grand Festival this year, which is a big pokemon coordinator thing, but uh, you probably knew that haha,” her words rapidly spill out past her nervous smile, and in her lap, her Teddiursa shifts in discomfort. “The judges get real picky in the festival about a lot of things, and I heard rumors that one judge is on this fur obsession kinda thing recently, and the conditioner I've been using on Teddy hasn’t done much, so I was hoping for a hint if it’s not stepping on your toes or anything?” She says all in one breath.

“Is that all?” Lee blinks. “I’m not sure how well my advice will work for you, but I can share a bit before we have to go.”

The girl hugs her Teddiursa close and leans forward in open interest, nerves forgotten. Even her more battle-oriented friends seem focused on Lee.

“Ninetales’ grooming routine is nothing special, all things considered,” Lee begins, reaching out and stroking his ace pokemon across her neck. She leans into the touch with a smile.

“I only brush her coat once a week or after a battle, whichever comes first. One pass with a slicker brush, then another with a pin brush. This’ll remove dirt, loose hair, and fluff up pokemon who have medium to long overcoats with an undercoat. Pokemon are hardy creatures, so you don’t need to brush them often.” Lee leans forward and digs his hands into the fur on Ninetales’ shoulders, giving the skin underneath a rub that makes the fox pokemon visibly relax. “There’s nothing wrong with fancy shampoo and whatnot, but take care to not bathe your pokemon *too* often. Too many baths will wash out the natural oils in a mammal pokemon’s coat, which are produced by the skin. Conditioner, shampoo, or whatever else can dry out the skin as well, and there is no healthy fur without healthy skin, so ensure you’re not using products that are too harsh. It might be tempting to use the latest and greatest pokemon beautification product, but it pays big time to do your due diligence and scrutinize just what exactly you’re using.”

Seeing all of the kids, Teddiursa included, paying close attention, Lee smiles. “Diet plays a large role as well.”

“Diet? Like what a pokemon eats?” One boy on the left asks.

“Exactly,” Lee nods. “Regular Pokemart brand chow is fine… I guess…” He can’t quite keep his distaste for the pre-packaged food and their lack of ingredient transparency hidden. “But every pokemon has different nutritional and caloric needs that will fluctuate based on their activity level. If you’re wanting to ensure a healthy, shiny coat in mammals, then you’ll want to be sure their food has an appropriate amount of protein, vitamins A, C, and E, dietary copper, dietary zinc, Omega-3, Omega-6, and other fatty acids,” he lists each one off on his fingers. “Don’t neglect other vitamins, minerals, and nutrients to try and overcorrect any sort of deficiency, though, as that’ll only cause more damage. Deficiencies should be handled with marginal and

supplemental increases of the lacking nutrients. Never whiplash back or forth, or your pokemon's health will take a nosedive."

The boy on the left is beginning to look lost, but the other two kids still pay rapt attention. The girl even pulls out her phone to quickly jot down what he's saying, though she has to hold her arm out quite a ways so Teddiursa's curious paws don't claw at the screen.

"I take it you're using your Teddiursa in your contests?" Lee asks.

The girl nods absently, still typing his words with rapid-fire thumbstrokes. "Yeah, I'm training my baby Teddy here for the contest up in Fallarbor."

Slowly, Lee rises and steps closer to the pair, making both the girl and Teddy go still until Lee bends down to one knee and catches the bear cub's eyes with his own.

"Do you mind if I touch you, Teddy?" Lee keeps his voice quiet and presents his hand, showing it to be empty.

The young Normal-type pokemon gazes down at the offered hand, then up to his trainer as if asking for support.

"It'll be fine, Teddy. He seems like a nice man," the blonde girl smiles and hugs her pokemon a little tighter.

Assurance in hand, Teddy returns his attention to Lee and offers a single meek nod.

With a smile of his own, Lee reaches the rest of the way out and gently strokes the cub across his crescent-moon-marked forehead up to the top of his scalp and between his ears. Once, twice, three times he runs his fingers through the cub's fur, feeling both the hair and the skin underneath.

Despite his earlier apprehension, Teddy relaxes under the touch. When Lee pulls away and stands, the cub even whines.

'So much easier than trying to pet a real bear.'

Ninetales holds back a foxy chortle as she watches *that* college memory from the back seat.

"While I haven't worked with ursids extensively, Teddy's skin and fur feel a bit dry. Otherwise, it looks like he's in excellent health." The former zookeeper comments with a grin. "Well done. That can be tricky for traveling trainers. I suggest double-checking whatever bathing products you're using to see if they're suitable for younger pokemon or pokemon with sensitive skin. If they are, then remember to not over bathe. I know it doesn't make sense that water can cause *dry* skin, but the shampoo is the real culprit."

“Mister Henson? Your Octillery is ready for visitors.”

Lee looks to the side, finding a nurse in blue scrubs standing and waiting for him. Under the electronic badge similar to the one Nurse Joy is wearing is a nametag with *Kim* scrawled on it.

“I’ve got to get going. It’s been a pleasure talking to you kids.” Lee smiles at the trio of trainers one more time.

The boy on the left, the one who grew lost during Lee’s miniature lecture, grins in return. His other male friend crosses his arms and nods, schooling his face into something neutral. Their friend in the middle though…

The blonde girl stares up at Lee with her lips twitching, as if she can’t decide on her expression. Her slowly reddening cheeks give away her thoughts, however.

‘Wonderful, another May…’ Lee doesn’t roll his eyes even if he’s sorely tempted.

Ninetales’ amusement is almost palpable as she rises and falls into step with Lee, following the nurse leading them to the rear of the Pokemon Center. *‘You did well with those three,’* she sends. *‘The tension in the lobby lessened considerably when you spoke up.’*

‘Did it?’ Lee wonders as they turn down a hallway leading to the different Center wards. *‘I didn’t even notice.’*

‘You were rather engrossed with your short lesson.’ A tail flicks and Ninetales blinks. *‘I was keeping watch, though. Your display of kindness and knowledge will go far, and people will remember it.’*

Lee moves to the side of the hall along with the nurse and Ninetales, letting a Chansey escorting a hobbling and grumpy-looking Croconaw pass by. *‘Not only people-savvy, but looking that far ahead? If we ever get famous for some reason, I might leave all the PR stuff to you.’*

‘I’m certain some nosy reporter who won't take no for an answer will appreciate me once fireballs are involved,’ Ninetales wryly states.

The Pokemon Center nurse, Kim, leads Lee and Ninetales back to the Water-type ward and leads them inside. The hum of pumps and the hiss of filters are familiar by now, but Lee is glad to see none of them are for Octillery.

Sitting on a low, metal table in a shallow, rubber-lined bowl of water the size of a kiddie pool, Octillery perks up and uncoils his tentacles as Lee, Ninetales, and the nurse approach.

“Hi sweetheart,” the nurse greets the octopus with a practiced smile. “Your trainer is here to visit you. I’ll give you guys some privacy, okay? I’ll be right outside the ward, so just let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks, nurse,” Lee thanks the woman, who nods politely before heading to the ward’s exit.

Octillery’s sharp eyes scan Ninetales intently, obviously sizing her up. When the fox returns his gaze unflinchingly, the octopus allows himself to focus on Lee. Octillery waves a tentacle at them and gurgles deep in his throat, ending the sound with a distinctly inquisitive lilt.

“It’s nice to meet you properly, Octillery,” Lee offers his hand for the red octopus to inspect, and Octillery wastes no time raising a curious tentacle to meet the hand halfway. The tentacle wrapping around his hand and between his fingers is a bit cold, soaking wet, and frankly a little unpleasant, but Lee soldiers on. “You were in quite a bit of peril when we first met, and I’m happy you’re looking so much better now.”

Octillery’s tentacle slows in its inspection of Lee’s hand, and the cephalopod gives a pointed look to the pokeballs on the man’s belt.

“I did have to catch you to safely move you, yes,” Lee admits without any shame. “I don’t know if you realized it or not, but the pond you were…” He almost says ‘hiding in’, but decides against it just in case Octillery turns out to be prideful “...laying claim to turned out to be toxic. It addled your mind and body something fierce, and we had to bring you here to be treated because I didn’t have the tools needed to help in the field.”

The red octopus’s other tentacles coil and uncoil in what seems to be self-directed irritation if how he looks down with narrowed eyes are any worthwhile tell. Before that irritation can be directed somewhere else, namely the wrist Octillery is still grasping, Lee makes his offer.

“I know you didn’t really get to consent on this,” Lee calmly continues. “So that's why I want to make you an offer.”

Octillery’s eyes narrow further in suspicion.

“You’re a powerful pokemon, Octillery, and my team would really benefit from your companionship,” Lee struggles to not fidget when the octopus’ hold on him tightens slightly. “*If* you want to stay and battle with us, then I promise to care for you and see you become the best you can be. If not, then say the word and I’ll take you back to the Valley and let you go.”

The warning grip on Lee’s wrist slackens, and Octillery makes no effort to hide his confusion. He tilts his head to the side with another gurgle, and Lee feels one of the tentacle’s suckers grip the underside of his wrist intently for some reason. Once more, Octillery makes the same inquisitive burble, staring directly into Lee’s eyes.

“I mean every word,” the scarred man promises.

For a minute, Octillery looks down, lost in thought. Then he turns his attention to Ninetales, burbling a question.

The vixen responds with a gentle smile, and from her mouth comes a rich, rolling growl that tapers off into a warm purr. Her eyes shine, and Lee feels her affection for him bubble for a second.

The octopus’s eyes widen, almost bugging out before he composes himself. Gently, he pulls his tentacle away from Lee and settles back in his pool of water. He stares off at nothing, tentacles stilling in thought. He remains so for almost ten minutes, and just as Lee begins to wonder what is troubling the Water-type, Octillery snaps out of his little trance. He smiles as best as he can with his nozzle-like mouth before giving Lee a cheery nod of his large head.

“You want to stay?” Lee asks hopefully.

Octillery nods once more, actively reaching a tentacle out to the pokeballs on the man’s belt.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Lee intercepts the tentacle with a grin. “But the Center is wanting you to stay a few more days, and I’m in agreement. You were in serious danger of death or some permanent condition when we found you, and if there is anything I *don’t* want, it’s you suffering some sort of complication from being checked out early.”

Octillery scowls and the tentacle in Lee’s hand waves its tip in annoyance.

“I know it’s boring in here,” Lee soothes his newest pokemon as best he can with a sympathetic smile. “We’ll visit every day until you’re ready to go, okay? I’d introduce you to the rest of the team here, but the nurses might be a little irate if more pokemon popped in out of nowhere.”

Octillery lets out a gurgling, long-suffering sigh, one that inflates and deflates his body from the breath, but he draws his tentacle back and sinks into his pool.

“Tomorrow’s visit will be longer. We’d stay longer today, but there is a lot on our to-do list tonight,” Lee steps a bit closer and lays his hand on Octillery’s head, making the octopus look back up at him. “Hang tight, okay?”

The Water-type waves a tentacle in farewell as Lee and Ninetales step back and turn to leave.

Walking back to the front of the Pokemon Center, Lee reaches his mind out to Ninetales. *‘Hey, love? What did Octillery ask you?’*

‘He wanted my opinion on you. I told him exactly what I thought.’ She says simply.

[line]

Stepping outside the Pokemon Center, Lee and Ninetales come face-to-face with Brendan, Zinnia, and Courtney just as the trio is approaching.

“Hey, you two!” Brendan greets with a large grin. “You got here fast.”

“Or maybe you all were just slow,” Lee jokes. “Well, I’m happy to report that Octillery is on the home stretch of his recovery, and after talking with him, he agreed to stay on the team.”

“Alright!” Brendan cheers. “It’s about time you join the ranks of the best type!” Then he looks at Ninetales’ narrowed eyes and amends himself. “Er, no offense, Ninetales.”

Lee chuckles to himself. “Is now a good time to tell you that Ninetales can learn Solarbeam?”

Brendan’s face goes white at Ninetales’ smirk. Behind him, Zinnia holds her stomach and openly guffaws.

Beside Zinnia, Courtney blinks. “Can they actually learn Solarbeam?”

Lee realizes he misspoke a second later. In video games, Ninetales can learn Solarbeam no problem from a TM, but here where her kind are almost mythical? Knowing such a thing is going to look suspect.

“I have a few theorems on the subject of near-dual-type moves like Solarbeam that point to why other Fire-types like Charizard can learn it,” Lee doesn’t fumble for an answer on that one since he actually *does* have a few pages of thoughts on Solarbeam. “Ninetales is officially a Fire-type, but she can flex pretty well into Ghost and Psychic as well, so I see Solarbeam as perfectly possible.”

‘Remind me to not blab too much on your species, love. We need to wait a few weeks before I can pretend I know what I’m talking about.’

‘By then you’ll ***actually*** *know what you’re talking about, but I’ll remember regardless,’* she answers with a snuffle.

Lee inwardly scoffs even if her genuine confidence in him makes his chest warm. “Anyway,” he returns back to talking with the others. “Ninetales and I were going to go test out her new abilities before dinner. My Pokedex says she learned Double Team and Extrasensory upon evolving-”

‘Along with a wealth of “Unknown” moves. We’ll test those in private.’

“-So I was hoping to practice them along with her other moves to see if anything has changed.”

Zinnia grins a savage grin at his words and steps closer. “Testing everything out, huh?” The purr of her voice is grossly out-of-place with her expression. “Why not try everything out in a battle?”

Lee’s brows furrow. “A battle with a totally untested roster of techniques?” He crosses his arms. “I’m not sure about that. It took Grovyle a week to get back up to his rigorous standards after his evolution. I imagine Ninetales will be much the same.”

“Sometimes it’s better to learn how to run before you walk, and you’ve got a Gym battle here in about a week,” Zinnia points a finger at Lee, and in the hand pointing the finger is a shrunken pokeball. “Don’t tell me you aren’t eager to find out how well Ninetales fights.”

“I *do* want to know what she’s capable of, but I want to do so in a controlled manner,” with his arms still crossed, Lee drums his fingers along his arms in thought. “Zinnia,” he starts carefully. “I’m not throwing shade at you or your pokemon, but I *genuinely* don’t know how strong Ninetales is. She might injure another pokemon more than she intends to unless we know what we’re working with.”

“You’re worried about a Dragon getting beat up by a Fire-type? Really?” When Lee doesn’t budge, Zinnia slumps her shoulders. “Dolittle, you’re such a stick in the mud sometimes,” she moans, throwing her head back. “C’mon. Just a one-on-one, Shelgon versus Ninetales?”

‘It’s high time I repay Shelgon for the loss in Oldale, so I’ve no objections.’ Ninetales supplies to Lee. *‘I’ll take care to start slow, and if you decide the match is over for any reason, I’ll bow out.’*

‘Are you still upset over that?’ Lee wonders. He’s already put the event long behind him.

‘Perhaps a little.’

With both Ninetales and Zinnia’s desires in mind, Lee mulls everything over once more. “If you insist, Zinnia…” Lee reluctantly agrees. “But we’re going to take it slow from the start, and if it gets out of hand then the battle is over, okay?”

“Lee…” Zinnia puts her hands on her hips and levels him with a harsh glare.

Lee sighs and raises his hands in surrender. “Fine, we’ll do as best as we reasonably can.”

[line]

Zinnia can’t help but shiver under her cloak. Not from the cool evening air, but from the sheer anticipation of what might be her and Shelgon’s toughest battle to date.

She knew Lee would become something special, and here he is proving her correct. The crazy man got his hands on a million-credit Fire Stone and sent the potential of his ace pokemon into

the stratosphere. To think they're *only* going to go up from here is both humbling and excitement-inducing. How kind of him to aid her on the endless quest of Lorekeeper power consolidation, even if it's by accident.

Battling with Lee and Brendan nearly every day for months has done more for Zinnia's pokemon than *years* of wandering have. Swablu's evolution can't be more than a month away, Goomy is finally coming into his own as a Dragon, and Shelgon…

Shelgon has never been more determined in his life. He's thrown himself into each spar, and his place as the strongest pokemon of the group has been under attack by Vulpix and Marshtomp every single day. The pressure to remain at the top has magnified his growth to such a level that Zinnia finds herself awed by him sometimes. It's still far too early to tell, but Zinnia's instincts whisper in her ear, pointing out patterns and reminding her of just who Shelgon is.

The dragon blood rushing through her veins tells her that Shelgon could be a Yearling, a prodigal Dragon that sees his third evolution from the first in less than a year. All he needs to do is go just a little *faster.* The only thing that could motivate him more is being knocked from his place as the mightiest of their traveling band of misfits.

Ninetales… she might be the one to do it.

Across from her, Lee stands with his hands held in his pockets and his face masked with neutrality. Zinnia knows the dork is probably nervous under his torn-up mug and his hands are out of sight so he doesn't twiddle his fingers.

She can see why he's nervous. Off to the side with Brendan, Courtney, and the rest of the group's pokemon are more than a few onlookers from Lavaridge who followed along. Watching a group of obvious trainers and a gaggle of rare pokemon strolling through town towards a battleground gathered a small crowd of twenty or so people to watch. Lee, being so polite it straddles the line of being awkward, refused to tell anyone to buzz off.

On Lee's side of the rocky battlefield, Ninetales mirrors her trainer's faux-cool perfectly. She sits, aloof and almost bored-looking with all those tails waving around her. Despite how non-threatening the fox presents herself as, Zinnia's heart beats a bit faster, a bit harder, and those instincts in her dragon-rich blood hiss warnings into her ear with an urgency previously reserved for rampaging Dragons.

Danger hangs around Ninetales like a cloak, and Zinnia couldn't be more eager.

In front of her, Shelgon stands ready to fight. Even now, the stoicism of his species refuses to break, but Zinnia still sees the slight, anxious bounce in his thick limbs. For *any* Shelgon, it's akin to openly growling.

“Everyone, move back away from the edge of the battleground. This match may get out of hand and we don’t have a Psychic to maintain a barrier!” Lee calls out to all the onlookers, swiping a hand through the air.

Wisely, everyone heeds his words and takes a few steps backwards, Brendan and Courtney included.

“Brendan!” Lee turns to the kid. “Ref for us?”

The kid grins and runs up the side of the arena, his Marshtomp stomping along. He clears his throat into his fist. “This’ll be a one-on-one match! Lee and Ninetales versus Zinnia and Shelgon! The battle will go until one pokemon cannot fight any longer! Are both sides ready?”

Zinnia’s blood is beginning to scream for the battle before her, and she shows it to everyone. “**Ready!**” she roars, clenching her fists as a plan takes form in her head.

Shelgon growls.

Lee’s nod is short. “Ready.”

Brendan raises an arm, Marshtomp mirroring him. Then as one, both chop their arms down. “Begin!”

“Rollout!” Zinnia’s command is almost instant. *‘Ninetales was always a ranged attacker as a Vulpix. Close the distance and stay relentless.’*

Shelgon goes from still into a whirling steel ball kicking up gravel in less than a second. A second later, he gets traction and shoots across the ground like a cannonball, aiming to flatten Ninetales.

Ninetales’ eyes narrow into hateful red slits, and with a shimmer, a dozen illusionary clones surround her. Each fox rises to its paws and scatters around the arena with lightning swiftness.

“Abort and sweep with Dragon Pulse!” Zinnia switches gears seamlessly. *‘No command.’* She looks up to Lee, but he simply stands there with unfocused eyes. *‘Telepathy from the gate? Lee is getting bold.’* She tries to follow his eyes to divine the real Ninetales, but he keeps his gaze locked forward.

Shelgon throws his limbs out and stops himself cold, his claws pulverizing the ground. He opens his mouth, a tornado of dragonic blue energy forming in his throat. He spins in a tight circle, throwing the beam of Dragon Pulse in every direction.

The beam is fast, too fast for the doppelgangers. Some try to jump away, but Dragon Pulse shreds the flimsy illusions, leaving fluttering sparkles of Normal-energy that wink out like embers.

Zinnia grins madly when she sees the last Ninetales get enveloped by Dragon Pulse. *'First blood goes to us!'*

Then the Ninetales vanishes like tissue paper in a blender, rent down to nothing.

'...What?'

Shelgon blinks in surprise as well and cuts off his attack. He whirls around on his feet, searching for his foe frantically.

Zinnia blanks out for a moment, scanning the field intently for the fox, only to find nothing. She doesn't notice the ever-so-slight shimmer in the air behind Shelgon until it's too late.

Ninetales reappears from nowhere, dropping her Feint Attack cloak directly behind Shelgon. The coat of light-bending Dark makes a slight crackle as it falls, and Shelgon whirls around so violently that he tears into the rocky ground.

He turns just in time to stare into sinister red eyes that glow - no, *beam* with unnatural power.

The encased dragon grunts as his limbs fail him and he falls to his side, helplessly seizing.

"**Shelgon, snap out of it!**" Zinnia orders as loudly as her voice will allow. People on the other side of Lavaridge probably hear her, but Shelgon remains squirming like a Wurmple at Ninetales' paws. *'Shit! Was that Confuse Ray?'*

Before Shelgon can fight back. Ninetales' eyes glow again, this time a sickly purple. An aura of the same purple surrounds the Dragon-type as he's levitated right off the ground, held in the air several feet above Ninetales.

Shelgon strains against the telekinesis, but with Confuse Ray scrambling his motor functions so thoroughly, he can't muster the strength to break free.

"**Shelgon, listen to me and break free! You have to get out of there!**" Zinnia orders once more, but in her gut, she knows the battle is going downhill fast.

With a flare of Ninetales' eyes, Shelgon is slammed into the ground like the toy of an uncaring child, throwing shards of volcanic rock and knocking the breath out of the dragon with an explosive gasp. He's raised up again, slowly, then driven into the ground like a volleyball being spiked again, rattling his bones and innards.

As he rises a third time, Shelgon's pained eyes regain their lucidity and his struggles redouble, pushing hard against the telekinesis holding him aloft.

Ninetales growls and narrows her eyes, fighting to keep Shelgon in place.

'Think, Zinnia! Shelgon is out there getting stepped on!' Zinnia grits her teeth. "Shelgon! Crunch! Disrupt the TK!"

Motes of dark purple and black erupt from Shelgon's throat and coat his teeth at the command. Although his mouth is too far recessed in his shell for Crunch to be worthwhile as an attack, he still bites down.

Shelgon's Dark-infused fangs slice through the Psychic aura like butter, the Dark-type energy easily destabilizing the telekinetic hold. The entire purple aura buzzes and shatters like glass, letting the Dragon fall to his feet and turn to Ninetales with a roar…

…Only to meet a pair of glowing red eyes less than a foot away.

"Protect!" Zinnia screams, gripping Shelgon's ball so hard her knuckles go white.

The order comes far too late, as Shelgon chokes and seizes on his feet, giving Ninetales ample time to leap back to her side of the field in a flourish of tails and fur.

'...This is so fucked. How is anyone supposed to realistically fight against something like this?' The clash of titans Zinnia was expecting isn't playing out. Shelgon is still going to lose and find that motivation to break his limits, but…

…This isn't quite how Zinnia imagined it, and that's the most polite way she can put it. She glances at the onlookers.

Many of the random spectators have phones and what-not out to save the battle. A bright-eyed kid with a Pichu beside him even has a little handheld game-thing with a camera recording the fight.

Courtney, being a stoic, unflappable bitch, watches with that same flat expression she always has.

Brendan and Marshtomp both look on with dropped jaws, seemingly not believing what they're seeing. Marshtomp, however, stands partially in front of his trainer with his arms held at a low ready, still prepared to act if things get crazy despite his amazement.

With the pokemon, Lee's Grovyle watches the fight with twitching lips, as if he can't decide if he wants to smirk or frown. It makes the twig hanging from his lips dance. Shinx isn't with him, as Lee said something about wanting to introduce the baby to Ninetales somewhere calm.

Swablu, being made of sterner stuff than any would expect, watches the battle neutrally. Not yet a Dragon, seeing her Flight Lead lose isn't devastating for her.

Zinnia's heart sinks a little when she sees Goomy.

Goomy, her little booger, has *never* seen Shelgon in a fight so one-sided. Even back as a Bagon, Shelgon *always* gave as good as he got and made his few losses into pyrrhic victories for the other guy. Goomy sinks into a low puddle the longer he watches, his soul seemingly sucked out.

"Shelgon, focus on my voice and win this!" Zinnia barks at her maximum volume. **"Don't go down!"**

Shelgon's standing seizure comes to an end at the command, leaving the Dragon panting and stumbling on his feet, the confusion not fully passed.

Before the armored Dragon can get his bearings, Ninetales' eyes flash orange and all of her tails whip around violently. Behind her, Lee's face twitches before scrunching in focus.

In front of the nine-tailed fox, two fireballs bloom to life from nothing. The fires are fueled by nothing, and they roil and writhe more like liquid than anything else.

Then the fireballs begin to *change shape*.

From each one, four downward protrusions slowly drip out like melting wax. Then from the rear and front of the orbs of flame, another protrusion begins growing from each end, coaxed out by an unseen force. The balls themselves begin to elongate, then like clay being molded, details begin to carve themselves out in the not-fireballs.

From the front, a head adorned with a thin muzzle and pointy ears is shaped from pure fire. The muzzles split open, revealing jagged, flaming teeth and mouths with a white-hot glow.

Under them, the four waxy drips form joints, legs, and paws.

At the rear, a single tail with a curled tip forms an unmistakable calling card.

Finally, on the faces, two perfectly round eyes of blazing white snap open.

After seven seconds that feel like an eternity, Ninetales is flanked by a pair of single-tailed Vulpixes that look as if they crawled right out of hell.

'What the fuck kind of move is this?' Zinnia just *isn't sure* what she witnessed, and in her uncertainty, she hesitates to issue Shelgon an order.

Both of the flaming foxes snarl and rush at Shelgon, their paws leaving hissing burn marks in the dirt as they race across the ground at an alarming pace.

“Protect!” Zinnia calls the first move to come to mind.

Shelgon, now shocked out of his confusion, snarls back at the foxes as a translucent dome of protective green is erected around him, shielding him from harm.

Rather than crash into the emerald shield, the pair of foxes actually *abort* their charge and circle around like growling, glowing Sharpedos. Both open their muzzles wide, and from each one comes a cavalcade of Embers.

The Embers smash into Protect like a storm of explosive bullets, each one making a tooth-ratting *pop* that is certainly ear-ache inducing in a tiny dome.

The pair of faux-foxes keep running a tight circle around the protective dome, their Embers seemingly endless. With every second that passes, the Dragon trapped inside falters more and more under the barrage. The more he falters, the more Protect begins to waver.

*‘Fuck! Did evolving really make **that** huge of a difference?!’* Zinnia growls, frantically trying to think of something. Her eyes jump to Ninetales.

The great fox stands perfectly still, her eyes blazing orange and twitching tails spread out. She hasn’t moved at all since firing off this insane attack.

‘Can she not move and control the Vulpixes at once? We have to break her focus. Once Shelgon gets out we’ll use Smokescreen th-’

Before Zinnia can finish her thought and try to form a new plan, one of the fiery foxes backs off as its sister rushes headfirst at Shelgon’s weakened Protect.

The fox smashes into the dome and explodes with such force that Protect shatters like a glass bauble, kicking up a plume of dust and rattling the ground as if an earthquake struck for a single second. Much of the shockwave and its bone-shattering concussive force is lost breaking the luminescent green shield, but Shelgon still cries out and stumbles to the side, trying to regain his balance.

The remaining fox jumps through the dust cloud, and before Zinnia or Shelgon can even think of countering, it rams its skull into the Dragon and explodes in a spectacular suicide attack.

Zinnia raises an arm to cover her eyes as dust and shards of rock fly past. When the dust clears and the ringing in her ears eases, she lowers her arm.

In the field, laying in a blackened crater and breathing in short, harsh gasps, Shelgon sits prone with deep cracks and chunks missing in his armor. His legs sport burns, and the Draconid tribeswoman can see a deep, bleeding cut on his forehead.

Slowly, almost painfully, she looks back up to Lee and Ninetales.

Ninetales sits there, back in her aloof starting stance without a speck of dirt on her. Behind her, Lee rubs his forehead with a frown. “Brendan?” He says quietly, and that's when Zinnia realizes all the onlookers are stunned silent. “The call?”

“Uh… Oh!” Brendan finally shakes his head and comes to his senses. “Shelgon is unable to battle! The winners are Ninetales and Lee!” He declares, raising a hand high.

One person in the crowd, a young man, works up the courage to be the first one and slowly claps. Someone else follows, then a second later there is roaring applause.

Lee grumbles something under his breath and rubs his head again. As he does so, Ninetales turns and gives the man an apologetic smile.

Mechanically, Zinnia raises Shelgon’s ball and recalls her injured dragon in a flash of red before cradling the ball to her chest.

She joined her friends on their journey looking for worthwhile mountains to climb, but she didn’t expect to fall off of the newest one so spectacularly. Unbidden, a thought comes to mind and she lets the words fly.

“That sucked.”

END CH

This’ll be updated before it goes live. Feel free to add your name is it’s not on here.

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