



Chapter 1

Act 1 - The Usurper

2000 AU (After the Usurper)

To the far east of the region of Equivos, across the vast ocean, the continent of Deitae remained at peace. A forest rose in the center of the numerous domains of the Legends: The Luminescent Woods. Golden lights emerged from the soil and floated into the sky, free of Pokémon to disturb them. Trees lay still, the oceans remained at rest, and the Legends slumbered. The miniature continent lay free of turmoil, and the blanket of stars shined down on the creators of Equivos and their home.

A jagged mountain crowned with snow suddenly lurched. The peak sent up a plume of snow, and the sky clouded over. The peak shook again, a large rupture cracking down the middle. A creature roared through the night--awakened by a silent call--and crashed through the inside of the Mountain of Rebirth. Two massive wings beat through the air, sending arcing bolts of lightning into the clouds. The storm broiled, and Yveltal, the Destruction Pokémon, careened upward to the heights of the world.

From the rubble that surrounded what remained of the mountain, a figure crawled out, looking up at the enormous Legend. A silent chuckle permeated through the air, and a

materializing claw reached for the gathering storm. The owner solidified, his fangs glinting in the fading moonlight, and his mane taking on its natural crimson hue.

He opened his eyes, the ice-colored irises focusing on the blackening clouds. His claws remained as sharp as when he first entered the Cocoon of Destruction. His sturdy limbs were still strong, and his fur remained a luxurious gray, stricken with streaks of white throughout the coat. The bead that tied his mane together shined bright, swaying in the growing breeze.

The Zoroark took a deep breath, a sensation he hadn't experienced for millennia. He exhaled, relishing the rush of air out of his nose. He cherished the smell of the fresh air. He enjoyed the forces of nature heralding his return.

He chuckled, walking out from the rubble and onto the soft soil beyond. He came to a spot next to a tree, feeling the succulent presence of energy. He dug his claws into the ground, absorbing the Life that lay deep beneath the surface. The golden bracelet that hung from his wrist grazed against the soil.

As he siphoned the power, the Usurper looked up at the glowing tree that stood in the center of Deitae.

He grinned.

Arthus had returned.

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The storm's intensity grew across Serenita, Deitae's neighboring continent. The rolling plains and forests blew back in the fierce winds as Pokémon, both wild and civilized, took shelter. Above a cluster of homes, near a secluded cave atop a hill, a cloaked figure trudged toward a flickering light.

It came to a door set in a cluster of rock and pounded it with a black fist. "Open up, please! I bear terrible news!"

A slit in the door slid open, revealing a glaring pair of ice-blue eyes. "What are you doing here? You should be inside!" The rain started to fall, pelting the cloaked figure.

"I've come to warn you about something!"

The eyes squinted, studying the figure with his hood drawn. They could make out a plume of red fur at the bottom, with a streak of white fur reaching up to the chest, and yellow surrounding it. Poking underneath the hood was more red fur, and they could see a small snout sticking out. The eyes remained unseen.

“Zaman Delphox? Why can’t this wait?” the one behind the door said, his eyes weakening their resolve.

“It has to do with your ancestor.”

The slit closed, and the door flew open. A young Zoroark stood behind it, wide-eyed with fear. “What about him?”

Zaman beckoned for him to come closer, his paw forming a crook. The Zoroark complied, moving toward him until their heads were nearly touching.

Zaman jabbed the Zoroark in the chest, driving it deep. The Zoroark gasped, falling to his knees. He looked up and stared in horror. Deep blue eyes shone from under the hood.

The Delphox yanked back his paw and stepped over the lifeless Zoroark. He sneered and tossed his head around. “Traitor...” He stopped, studying the humble abode his recent victim lived in.

A pair of chairs sat in the corner, warm and inviting next to the low-burning fireplace. In front of them was a small table, with a collection of berries set inside a basket in the center. A set of shelves between them held a collection of books. Moss covered the rock walls curving around the adjacent hallway. The wind rushed through a shuttered window to his right, the rushing air making a musty scent.

Zaman spotted a picture above the fireplace, showing a pair of Zoroark with an elder Lucario in a desert scene. He padded silently into the next room, frowning. Within, another Zoroark sat on a chair, fondling her mane as she read from a book emblazoned with a flame surrounded by an arc. A pillow lay next to her, and on the other side was a length of rope, a ball, and a wooden doll in a rough, humanoid shape. A candle burned on the table next to her, illuminating the text within her book.

She looked up and cocked her head. “Zaman? What are you doing here?” She tried to look around him. “Where’s Ryon?”

Zaman gestured to the room behind him, his brow furrowing. “I’m afraid he’s no longer here.”

She studied him suspiciously. “You don’t...sound right.” She looked outside, glancing at the beating rains. “You never go out in a storm. You told me yourself the last time we were in town. You even said you were going to close since one was coming soon.”

She turned back around, and Zaman stood in front of her, his paws parted and his eyes visible. She gasped at the light-blue eyes that stared back at her, a mirror image of the eyes that belonged to her late husband—only cold, tortured...murderous.

She froze, shaking. “R-Ryon?”

The Delphox’s eyes glinted. “No.” His paws cut into her chest, causing her to rear back and struggle for breath.

In her final moments, the Delphox hovered over her. “Arthus has returned.” The Delphox melted away, revealing a large Zoroark with white streaks in his fur, his limbs thick and strong.

He pulled away from his victim, allowing her to fall against the ground, still. He stared down at her, then took a cloth from the table, wiping his claws clean. “My lineage is now clean of—” He shuddered. “*Lucario*.” He looked up and considered the ceiling. “A few too many friendships in my family tree leads to it needing to be chopped down.” He tapped the side of his head, shifting his blue eyes. “All too easy when they all have my signature feature.”

He dropped the cloth and moved into the other room--careful to step over Rhianna’s body--and stopped next to the side-table. “What else did my descendants do wrong?” He picked up the decorated book, cracking it open and glossing over its contents. “Hmm...’The Arceist Tome: A History of Equivos and the Teachings of Arceus’.”

The cushion next to the side table shifted slightly, and a black-and-grey ball of fur stepped out, sniffing. It drew near to the female Zoroark, nudging her face and whimpering.

Arthus raised his head, his eyes wide. He looked down at the Pokémon and gasped. “A Zorua!” he hoarsely whispered. He set the Tome back on the table, biting his lip.

The Zorua whimpered more, pushing against her back with her paws, her eyes staring blankly across the room. It finally fell on top of her, crying out for its mother.

Arthus looked left and right, biting the end of his claws. He studied the Zorua watching it weep into her mother’s fur.

He reached down to it, then began to rub its back. “I’m...I’m sorry...that I made you suffer.” He inched his fingers underneath the Zorua, eventually lifting it, much to its disdain.

It tried scrambling out of Arthus’ grip to rejoin its mother, but Arthus’ claws kept it locked. He put one hand over its head, and it briefly flashed crimson. The Zorua fell still, closing its eyes and breathing gently.

Arthus sighed, setting it back on its pillow, turning back to the Tome. He picked it up, then quaked with fury. “If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have to do this!” He took it by the spine and ripped it in half, the pages billowing behind him.

He heaved, forcing himself to calm. He looked down at his victim, then at the Zorua. “You’re on your own now...without your parents...like I was.” He rubbed his chin, his lips curling into a smile. “I won’t let that happen.” He picked up a page of the Tome, then snapped his fingers, creating a scarlet spark. He threw it to the other pages, and they quickly set light, a sizeable flame growing.

He scooped up the Zorua, cushion and all, then rushed out of the house, meeting with the torrential rains. He covered the Zorua with his cloak, stopping near a deadened tree and sinking into the ground, carrying with him the last of his kind.

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In another part of Serenita, in the solitude of the Guild within the Iren Desert, the aged Guildmaster looked out the window of his domain, the Master’s Tower. His Pokémon were in their homes, whether it be the Azure Inn or the Expedition Hall, safe from the weather.

The Lucario was dressed in a brown cloak, covering his shoulders, chest, and legs in leather folds. On his head was a brimmed hat, with his ears sticking out, and in his paw, a decorated staff, stiff and smooth with age. Around his neck was an intricate pendant, with the Arc of Arceus embroidered within. The cracked jewel in the center pulsed with a soft azure light, a remnant of its former power.

He studied the room he stood in, still amazed by the fact that it was from the time of the founder of the guild. A staircase descended from the opposite wall, down to the base of the tower. To his right, an aged bed with the covers folded neatly over it, and to his left, a cabinet with artifacts from all the Guildmasters before him. A large table stood in the center, with a set of seven chairs surrounding it.

“I’m sure this place has gone through worse than this,” he sighed, looking out the window once more. Rain beat upon the cracked glass, and wind rushed through the open corners, bringing in a slight draft.

The door below him creaked open, causing him to turn. With the padding of wet paws, a voice echoed, “Guildmaster Calem, I’ve heard from Elsa that this storm has a dark meaning behind it.”

“Kaiser, aren’t you being a little dramatic? We’ve seen worse storms, and none of them had any sort of special meaning,” he argued, stamping his staff on the stone floor.

An Electivire pounded up the stairs, closing his eyes and shaking his head. “It’s different this time.” He leaned against the railing, the wood creaking under his weight. “The old bat went batty right when the storm hit, and she kept saying, ‘the Usurper has returned’, over and over again.” He growled, pounding his fists together. “Honestly, it makes me want to punch something.”

The Guildmaster sped toward his friend and pulled on his arm. “What did she mean when she said, ‘the Usurper has returned’?”

“It means that I have, *Guildmaster*.”

The two looked down the stairs as a Zoroark gradually ascended the steps, looking up at the leaders of Lucario Guild. “A marvelous place Laryon made, isn’t it? A fancy restaurant, a little school...” He sighed, shaking his head. “I hate it all.”

Kaiser clenched his teeth while Calem bared them. “Who are you?” they said simultaneously.

Arthus stopped, aghast. “Astonishing. You’ve forgotten about, after I spent two-thousand years of *wasting away in that infernal cocoon*.” He added the last few words with a sneer, glowering.

Calem stepped back, flinching. “You’re Arthus, aren’t you? No wonder Elsa said, ‘the Usurper has returned.’”

Arthus punched the wall, the stone cracking. “I don’t deserve that title.” He bared his teeth. “I merely tried to do what Arceus should have done himself!”

Kaiser slammed his fist, discharging several volts from his tails. “Well, aren’t you a smug little punk? I’d love to knock your lights out.”

Arthus made a mocking chuckle. “And I’d like to see a dolt like you land a punch on me.”

“Graah!” Kaiser roared, bounding down the stairs and rearing back his fist. Arthus leapt over the Electivire, allowing him to burst through the door at the base of the tower.

Arthus padded closer, taking light, graceful steps. “It shouldn’t be much trouble to reverse the damage my hated Riolu made.”

Calem clapped his paws together, a blue aura beginning to surround them. “You can’t tear down the legacy Laryon made. Not while there’s a Lucario alive.” He held up a paw and made a blue sphere of energy, throwing it at Arthus.

Arthus slid to the left and stepped toward Calem confidently. “That’s precisely why I have to kill you. You and all the other Lucario in Equivos.”

Kaiser burst through the ruined door and fired a bolt of lightning from his tails. Arthus looked back and ducked. Calem rolled away from impact, firing another Aura Sphere at Arthus.

Arthus held his claws together and gathered an erratic, crimson ball of light. He threw it at the Aura, causing an explosion of purple light when the two met. Calem was thrown back into the cabinet, causing the glass to shatter.

Kaiser bounded up the stairs and reared back his fist. Arthus wove around Kaiser and raked his claws across his back. The Electivire grunted, turning around and throwing another punch.

Arthus avoided all the blows Kaiser attempted to strike with, all the while clawing at his attacker. With each strike, a sliver of Kaiser's Life Energy drained into Arthus. His punching slowed, his breathing grew heavy, and soon, his body was crisscrossed with scarlet streaks, a thin mist trailing into Arthus' claws.

Kaiser glared at Arthus, covered with scratches and wobbling forward and back. "You're a coward...fight me..." He fell forward, at which Arthus stepped to the side. "Like a Pokémon." Kaiser slid down the stairs, stopping with a thud at the bottom.

Arthus looked back, sneered, then progressed to the top of the stairs. Calem was struggling to reach a crystal with a multi-colored leaf inside, unable to stand up.

Arthus grabbed his paw, then with his other claw held up the crystal. He studied it closer, then grinned. "You really think Arceus will save you now? That old fool stays holed up in a tree, oblivious to the world around him!" He crushed the crystal, then drove his claws into Calem's paw, causing him to cringe.

Arthus came to Calem's ear and whispered, "Your Guild is now mine." He drew Calem's life from the paw, causing him to wither. Within moments, he lay lifeless on the floor.

After the deed was done, Arthus removed his claw, wiped it across his fur, then gingerly took the pendant from around Calem's neck. The crystal within glowed a dark crimson, its imperfect jewel leaking white light from the crack.

Muttering to himself, Arthus put the necklace over his neck. "It looks like my plans will have to wait. Curse Laryon and his kin." He looked out the window, considering what to do with his newfound responsibility.

He brushed his claws against the base of the window, creating a long gash. "Time to form a new Guild." He dashed down the tower and toward the houses of the Guild, screams filling the air as he culled the traitorous from the loyal.

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The storms that heralded Arthus' arrival finally subsided, fading to a disastrous drone retreating to the horizon. Dead Pokémon littered the streets of Lucario Guild, hauled off by the few Pokémon that claimed allegiance to the Usurper. Far off, toward the south, the isles of Cretea lay deserted of life, flooded by the storm. All throughout the continent, no Lucario remained alive—as Arthus had sworn.

Within the Master's Tower—with Kaiser and Calem's bodies cleared away—Arthus took a deep breath in the center of the room. In his claws was a simple urn engraved with runes. His hand was clamped over the lid as he studied it with a smile.

He held it up to his face and said, "I think you've been in there for long enough." He pulled at the lid with all his might to no avail. He tried once more, then finally smashed the urn against the ground, shattering it and releasing a foul violet gas. It swirled and grew in front of Arthus, then condensed and darkened into a dark grey figure with a jagged maw and a single, crimson eye: a Dusknair, laced with faint scars across its body.

The Dusknair looked around briefly, taking in his environment. "The...the Master's Tower...where is Calem? How long have I been in there? How was I released?"

"It is me you should thank, Gardner," Arthus said, holding a hand to his chest.

Gardner noticed Arthus, then his eye widened. "You...you reek of death." He held up his fists and growled, "Who are you and why did you release me?"

Arthus waved a dismissive hand and paced around him, "Oh, don't bother with that; I have no interest in harming you—now, at least." Arthus came around Gardner's back and asked, "After my recent...purge, shall we say, I took the liberty of searching through the vault, and I found an urn with a certain Dusknair trapped inside it. I was about to leave it there, but after reading your profile...well, I became interested."

Gardner lowered his arms but continued to glare at Arthus. "And what interested you so much, Zoroark?"

"Please, call me Arthus." He held up a claw to stop Gardner's inquiry, then added, "From what I read, you used to be the late Calem Lucario's assistant Guildmaster, but given your cruel tactics in capturing and disposing of outlaws—along with an incident

with a team of cadets—you were incarcerated and replaced with Kaiser Electivire? Am I correct?”

Gardner crossed his arms and nodded his head slightly. “Yes. And why would you want me? If memory serves right, you *founded* the Guild, so obviously you have experience in running it—and I doubt you need an errand-mon.”

Arthus wrapped an arm around Gardner, causing him to stiffen. “I’ll fill you in on the details, but Calem is gone, and so are many others you likely knew.” He sighed and shook his head. “As much as I’d like to manage this Guild and use it to fulfill my goals, I’d rather not have a repeat of my failures—in this case, allowing the world to know that I’m back.” His eyes flashed, and he held a claw under Gardner’s chin. “You know what I mean, don’t you?”

Gardner gently pushed away the claw and replied, “Yes. It’s basic history.” He looked down and noticed the necklace around Arthus’ neck. “Using the Seal again, I see? And how do you expect that to work with it broken?”

Arthus seethed and tapped against his head. “*Exactly* why I can’t run the Guild! The Seal of Creation is the only way for me to take Arceus’ place!” He grabbed a ruff along Gardner’s neck and said, “I want *you* to become the new Guildmaster. Organize the Pokemon, handle the paperwork, all that; I simply don’t have time for it.”

Gardner yanked back and rubbed his neck. “And what makes you think I’ll do that? You are one of the most dangerous Pokemon in Equivos; my life is at risk at every moment. What would I receive in exchange?”

Arthus considered for a moment, looking up. “Well, you’d have a place in my world free from evil.”

Gardner crossed his arms and huffed. “As tempting as it is, that’s not very assuring.”

“I released you from the urn.”

“A welcome act but releasing a criminal doesn’t cut it.”

Arthus smirked and rubbed his fingers together. “I also read that you loathe Arceists and all they do. Is that correct?”

Gardner hovered away and shuddered. “...Yes. What of it?”

“Under my command, I would order you to exterminate all the Arceists and burn all of their ‘Arceist Tomes’; can’t have anyone believing in Arceus’ false teachings. I would ask for one or two be saved for research but do whatever you please in killing that religion.”

Gardner paused, then turned around. “And I’d be free to manage the Guild as I see fit?”

“Provided that they don’t go against my directives—which will be few and far between.”

Gardner stood for a moment longer, then turned back around. The maw on his chest tilted in a slight grin. “When do I begin?”

Arthus grinned, holding out his hand. “Immediately.”

Gardner accepted the hand and shook it once. Arthus broke from the shake and wagged a finger at Gardner. “I have the feeling we will get along *very* well.”

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2003 AU

In a brightly lit room, covered with stuffed Pokémon and toys of all sorts, Arthus curled on the floor next to a Zorua. He held a book out in front of it and pointed at the pictures, laughing. “And the Psyduck still couldn’t get rid of his headache, so then he—”

The door creaked. Arthus snapped the book shut, then snapped his fingers. A rush of wind flapped the curtains, and the cheery playroom turned into a forbidding stone mausoleum, desks covered in the artifacts at the sides and a flickering crimson flame hovering in the air.

Gardner entered the room, pressing his hand against his chest in salute. “Lord Arthus—”

Arthus stepped closer with a dour expression. “I thought I told you not to interrupt me at this time.” He passed through Gardner and held open the door. “Can’t this wait until later?”

Gardner exited, giving the illusionary room a studious look. “I only wanted to inform you about your last order.”

Arthus waved inside the room with a smile, then shut the door with a frown. “What of it?”

“The Arceists have been ‘managed’, and as far as I know, only two copies of the Arceist Tome exist; all the others were burned.”

Arthus smiled, giving Gardner’s hand a vigorous shake. “Well done, well done! Now all you have to do is keep the population in check while we search for a way to repair the Seal.”

Gardner yanked his hand away and scowled. “You mean you haven’t done it yet? I thought you said—”

“I know what I said!” Arthus shouted. His claws emanated red mist, causing Gardner to back away. The Zoroark closed his eyes and made a shuddering breath. “It is simply taking *longer* than I thought. That’s why I need you to search through the library to find something, *anything*, that could repair the Seal, while I search abroad. Does that sound reasonable?”

Gardner held his chin, looking down, then nodded. “Indeed.” He looked up and crossed his arms. “I hope that your little...*project* won’t take too much time. I would rather not delay your perfect world for too long.”

Arthus pushed Gardner away from the house, rolling his eyes. “I am *just* as devoted to fixing the world as I am to my child—you have no need to worry!” He waved him off and said, “Now go; I have important things to finish.”

Gardner narrowed his eye as he floated back into the Master’s Tower while Arthus returned to the hut, restoring the previous, lighter atmosphere and continuing to read the story to the Zorua.

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Darkness set over the Guild. The buildings lay just as they had before, but the brightness that surrounded them previously had faded to a dullness. The Pokémon in the houses no longer looked to the Master’s Tower as a place of strength and protection; fear and oppression whirled in the minds of the Pokémon forced to comply with Arthus’

dictated rule, all for a belief that would supposedly end with them living alongside the Usurper.

Arthus sat atop the spire of the Master's Tower, balancing perfectly on its tip. He did not care about their views toward him; he no longer cared about respect or prestige. As long as they obeyed his command, he was content.

He held the Seal aloft, and gasped. Reflected in the imperfect stone at the center was a silver Lucario, staring back at him with a vengeance. *"You may hold Equivos in your grip, Arthus, but mark my words: you will **never** set foot in the Tree of Life while the Seal remains broken,"* he said in echoed tones.

Arthus took a glance behind him, eyes wide. He sneered, covering the gem with his claws. "Your ghost continues to haunt me, Matheus, even outside of that wretched Cocoon."

The thought of Matheus caused more memories to be remembered. He saw two Lucario and a Riolu, just before his imprisonment, with a Zorua in their arms. He saw the fear in the Zorua's eyes and remembered how much he longed to be with him.

He clenched his fist. "Erik...stolen from me all those years ago...*by Matheus and his kind.*" He looked down at the Seal once more. "And then he imprisoned me—for two thousand *years.*" He leapt down from the spire and toward a shimmering box near the wall of the Guild. "They all deserved to die."

He entered the invisible door and held his hands out. "Come to father!" A Zorua appeared from behind the couch and yipped, running toward Arthus.

He shut the door and took the Zorua in his arms, ruffling its fur and playing with its ear. He flopped onto the couch and sighed, taking a book from a nearby stack. He stared at its cover and laughed. "Well, well, the Arceist Tome. Let's see what Arceus has to offer, hmm?" The Zorua yipped in reply, nestling into Arthus' lap as he cracked open the ancient covers.

Arthus cleared his throat, then began to read:

***Origin 1—***

*Before the Arms of the Creator spread across his creation, Equivos, there was an Egg. From this Egg came forth the Creator, Arceus. From his birth, Arceus created the Legends.*

*First came the Order: Palkia, Space; Dialga, Time; and Giratina, Distortion. They stabilized the raging emptiness, so that the first worlds may come to pass.*

*Next came the Lightbringers: Solgaleo, the Sun, and Lunala, the Moon. The light they shed would illuminate His great creations.*

*Then came the Makers: Kyogre, the Seas; Groudon, the Land; and Rayquaza, the Skies. They created the World, Equivos, and with their might, protect the Followers of Arceus—Pokémon.*

*Then, the Lifebringers: Xerneas, Life; Yveltal, Death; and Zygarde, Safety. The Followers of Arceus were born, and as with all of Arceus' creations, will end. Whether it be by Time or Destruction, all will be Judged at the Day of Destruction, and only those who prove worthy will follow Arceus to the Realm of The Keeper.*

Arthus cackled. “The origin of the world! What nonsensical drabble!” He looked down at the Zorua and grinned. “A wonderful read isn’t it, my dear?”

The Zorua said nothing. It stared at the vast illustration set on the page, depicting Arceus in the center of all the Legends of Equivos. Their eyes seemed to stare back, beckoning to the Zorua.

Arthus closed the book, and the Zorua looked up at him and whimpered. Arthus put a claw over his heart, closing his eyes. “Oh, I know you want to hear more stories, but it's time for sleep.” He set the Tome on the stack, then picked up the Zorua.

He set it on a puffy cushion, then snapped his fingers. The fire above them dimmed to a low glow, and Arthus opened the exit. “Good night...my little Zorua.” He left the room and shut the door behind him.

The Zorua continued to stare at the book, and finally, leapt off the cushion, then knocked over the pile of books. The book flipped to the page depicting Arceus and the Legends, toppling from the pile and landing open.

The Zorua continued to gaze at the picture and saw them move. Arceus seemed to draw closer; a wisp of light glowed from his arc and hovered in front of the Zorua's nose.

It played with the wisp of light, giggling. The light wrapped gently around its paw, then suddenly faded. The picture stopped moving.

The Zorua yawned and fell asleep on the open pages. Images of Arceus and a silver Lucario danced through its dreams, bringing hope and kindness outside of what it knew.

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2018 AU

Scraps of paper floated in the air, alongside rusted ashes and bits of flame. Giant gashes swept through the walls and splintered remnants of furniture lay scattered across the floor. In the center of the darkness, Arthus huddled on the ground, his chest heaving.

The charred door cracked open. Arthus glared at it and threw a ball of crimson flame, shutting it immediately.

"Leave me be!" He pressed his hand on his forehead and grunted. He pulled a golden thread from his head, and a faint image appeared in the air surrounding it. Two Zoroark hugged each other with smiles on their faces, holding a young Zorua in between them.

He bit his lip, then turned away. He held a shaking hand over the image, around the left Zoroark; she wore a golden necklace. *"Every time...every time I trust someone..."* The image faded.

Arthus closed his claws. *"They...betray me."* He stood up, holding the Seal of Creation in front of him, the flawed gem taunting him still.

He jabbed a claw at it and roared, *"I will not let her die in vain! I will rid evil from this world!"* He stomped the ground and held out his arms. *"I have suffered too much by your hand to fail now!"* The entire room was enveloped in a harsh red light, incinerating everything within.

Chapter 2

2020 AU

Castelia City, Unova Region

Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, bee--!

His hand tapped the screen and stopped the alarm. A face peeked out of the covers, blearily gazing at the time: 6:30 AM. He sat upright and stretched, then grabbed his Pokédex-- a slender black rectangle with a touch-screen surface and several buttons at the side—and avoided a large book labelled ‘*Pokémon and Evolution: A Scientific Study*’. He scrolled through his notifications and swiped them away.

Reminder: Call family at 7:00.

Reminder: Be at work by 8:00.

Reminder: Pick up milk on the way home.

A keypad came up, and he typed his password. The words ‘Hello, Lawrence’ flashed, then faded to reveal a collection of icons, ranging from a magnifying glass, a camera, and others.

A high-pitched whistle blew beyond the window. Lawrence opened his eyes and squinted them, noticing the sunlight. ‘*Better get ready to go,*’ he thought.

He turned off the Pokédex and flipped the red-and-black cover over it, leaving only a small square visible at the top. Setting it down, he got out of bed and took out clothes from the dresser, then exited the bedroom into the bathroom connected to it. He took a shower, dressed, and combed his hair, then went out of the bathroom. He took the Pokédex from the top of the bed, looking at its clock: 6:50. ‘*I still have time.*’

Lawrence walked back into the kitchen, considering what to eat. He looked down at his Pokédex and clicked a remote icon, then the "Power" button that appeared. The TV turned on with the morning news.

He dug through the fridge, settling to make cereal for breakfast, as the anchors went on with their morning drone. The female anchor with a little too much make-up said, "Welcome to UNN, Unova News Network! I'm your co-host, Melinda Meyers!"

The smug looking man beside her flashed a smirk and added, "And I'm Wallace Walsh. Today marks the ten-year anniversary of Team Plasma's defeat, after the Kyurem debacle that afflicted all of Unova with a deep freeze."

Lawrence glared at the empty gallon that he held. *'Guess I'll make toast.'*

Melinda nodded curtly and said, "That's right Wallace, so please, make sure you visit the Plasma Memorial to remember those who were lost to their acts of villainy." She brushed back her hair and continued. "In other news, Valence Tech has announced a brand-new program, which they have labelled 'Project Babel'. Experts speculate that it may refer to a language translation feature for their Pokédex 2.0 devices. Until more comes out involving their latest service, we are left with that."

Lawrence slathered butter on a steaming slice of toast, then opened his email and opened one labeled, 'Valence Employee Newsletter: 28th Issue—Behavioral Research Team.'

Wallace nodded and said, "For viewers who may not know, Valence Tech was formed seven years ago by Aaron Hanson, founder of the now-defunct Poketch Company. Valence's first product, the Pokédex 1.0, provided everyday people with the portable encyclopedia originally left to those selected by Pokémon Professors.

"Three years later, they released the Pokédex 2.0, which added features such as calling, texting, and Internet capabilities, as well as a constantly-updating line of applications, with their development team constantly creating new ways to interact with our beloved Pokémon." Wallace pointed off-screen and said, "And now for the weather..."

Lawrence took a bite out of the toast, half-listening. He read the announcement:

Project Babel Update!

You will soon have a new collection of Pokémon to study! They will be from a foreign location and have special qualities, so please look forward to it! More details will be given within a week by your director.

Lawrence looked up thoughtfully. ‘Wonder what type of Pokémon they are?’ He checked the time on his Pokédex: 6:55. ‘Better finish up.’

He gulped down the rest of his toast, turned off the TV, then sat down on the couch. He tapped on the video chat function, and several pictures showed up with names underneath them, all with the words ‘Call/Other’ underneath them.

A bright blue cloud rung, showing a scruffy man and thin woman came up, labelled ‘Mom and Dad’. He accepted the call, and the portrait began to move.

The large man with a scruffy chin exclaimed, “Morning, Lawrence! Did you wake up alright?”

Lawrence opened his mouth to reply but was interrupted by the thin woman with a wide smile. “Oh, hush Gerald. If he picked up, he’d be awake, right?”

“I woke up alright, Dad. How’s it going back in Sinnoh?” Lawrence explained.

Gerald sighed, scratching the back of his head. “Farm’s still goin’ smoothly, but uh...” He sighed, letting his arm drop. “I could use a bit of help getting the fence up. You know the Tauros don’t like being holed up for long. Could you take some time off work and come over?”

Lawrence looked at the corner: 7:02. “I don’t know if I can do that right now. Have you heard? Valence is working on something big, and they’re going to need as many people as they can get.”

His mom came closer to the screen and said, “But we haven’t seen you for months! They’d understand for family reasons, right?”

“This is Valence, Mom. They’re a big company. I don’t have much say.”

Her face drooped. “You’ve been so busy lately. You’ve been going to the little church branch down there, right? You can’t be too busy for that!”

A notification rolled across the screen, warning Lawrence to leave for work. He stood up and walked to the door. “Can we talk about this later? I have to get to work.”

“But Honey, you said you would!” his mom said before being cut off by the ‘Call Ended’ screen.

Lawrence pocketed the Pokédex and sped toward the door. He put on his jacket and shoes and slipped a pair of headphones over his neck. He opened the door and closed it, making sure to take his wallet with him.

He hurried down the hallway and entered the elevator. He pulled out his Pokédex, putting the headphones over his ears. He turned it on and tapped on ‘Music, then set it to ‘Random’, listening to his selection of somber piano music.

After going down the elevator and breezing past the exit, Lawrence stopped. Skyscrapers rose all around him, shrinking the people rushing to and fro along the sidewalks. Cars whizzed by the Pokémon that walked alongside the pedestrians, whether they be Machoke carrying packages, or styled Furfrou on their daily walks, or Sawks getting a jog alongside their masters. The skinny trees in the median and sidewalk rustled in the wind, their autumnal leaves breaking off into the breeze. The cold light above complemented the smog that filled the air, ranging in smell from cheap hot dogs to car exhaust, and everything in between.

Lawrence waited for a gap to form in the crowd, then dove inside, shuffling toward the crosswalk. He brushed past people, scarcely restraining a scowl. *‘At least I have my music.’*

He crossed from the residential district to the dining, and the smell changed from dirty smog to succulent meals, with sweet pretzels and cakes mixing with savory kebabs and sidewalk steaks as the different vendors vouched for their products.

Lawrence veered away from the stands, wrinkling his nose. *‘I can’t believe people eat this stuff.’* He suddenly smiled, drifting toward a large man wearing a stained apron and holding up a rolled pancake in the air. *‘But I know why he’s in business.’*

The man tossed the pancake between his hands and called out, “Crepes! Crepes a plenty over here, with plenty of flavors to choose! Only two bucks!”

Lawrence slipped off his headphones and reached for his back pocket. The man laughed, lowering his crepe and leaning on the stand. “Hi there, Lawrence. Your usual?”

Lawrence pulled out two bills, keeping them to himself. He made a small grin. “Yeah...how ‘bout we make a deal?”

The man chuckled, leaning in closer. “When *haven’t* you thought of that?”

Lawrence pulled out his Pokédex and tapped on a card icon. “Sell me two Cheri crepes for a dollar, and I’ll give you this.” He held the screen out to him, showing a card depicting a Sylveon in a flowery background.

The man gasped and began to spread Cheri sauce over a steaming pancake. “Sold!” he exclaimed. He finished one crepe then another and handed them to Lawrence, receiving a dollar in exchange.

The man pulled out his own Pokédex and typed his password, tapping on the same icon. He brought up a Rockruff card and tapped ‘Trade’. After several moments, the man had his Sylveon.

He laughed, slipping his Pokédex back into his pocket. “Thanks for that; I’ve been looking for that one for ages. Good luck at work!”

Lawrence walked away, looking back and giving the man a warm smile. “*“Talk for a moment and there’s a deal to make everyone happy,’ as they say in Sinnoh.”*” He looked around, noting the glum, emotionless expressions. He turned back around, his smile fading. *‘Shame that’s not how it is here in Unova.’*

He put his headphones back on and went to chomp his crepe, until he noticed a glum figure sitting in the alley next to him. The filthy man wore drab clothing and petted his Herdier sadly, sighing.

Lawrence looked down at his crepes, then back at the man. He stooped, holding out one of them to him. The man looked up.

“Here. One’s enough for me,” Lawrence explained. The man took the crepe hesitantly, and after ensuring there was no catch, gave Lawrence a slight nod. Lawrence stood up, and walked away, while the man broke his crepe in half, sharing it with his Herdier companion.

Lawrence continued walking on the sidewalk, taking a right turn at the intersection. Fewer and fewer people walked alongside him. Turning another corner, a magnificent tower rose into the air, a sign in front of it proclaiming in bold letters, “Valence Tech: Bringing Unity to All.” The plaza held a statue of their signature product, the Pokédex 2.0, tipped on its corner. Individuals wearing lab coats and business dress stood around it, talking about daily affairs, work responsibilities, and the goings of their favorite Pokémon.

Lawrence stopped, groaning at the sight of one woman standing at the base of the statue. She wore a simple white dress, with a golden medal in the shape of Arceus’ arc on her shoulder. Her red hair fell loosely around her shoulders, and her eyes kept darting around to people passing her by. In her hand was a stack of brochures, emblazoned with the same symbol as her medal.

Handing the brochure to a man in a suit, she said, “Please come to our church at 255 Reshiram Boulevard. We’ll be waiting!” As the man left, her eyes trailed over Lawrence.

He tried to walk away but was stopped by the woman’s grip on his arm. “Lawrence! I was wondering when I’d see you here!”

Lawrence groaned inwardly. “Hello, Erica. I thought you came to advertise around eight?” He checked his Pokédex: 7:20.

Erica sighed, rolling her eyes. “It’s not ‘advertising’; it’s trying to bring people closer to their spirits.” She slowly pulled a brochure off the stack, adding, “I know you avoid me by getting here before I do, so I came early.” She held out the brochure. “Can you come at least once? You’d fit right in with the Arceists; you help so many people already!”

He pushed aside the brochure, pulling free of her grip. “I’ve already told you, I don’t believe in that sort of thing. There’s never been any proof that Arceus or these ‘spirits’ exist. “

Erica frowned, running ahead of Lawrence and standing in front of him. “Can you at least *read* it? You’ve never taken one.” Lawrence looked down at the brochure, then back at Erica.

After several moments, he took the brochure. “If this will make you stop bothering me, yes.”

Erica continued to frown, adjusting the brochures in her arm. “If you decide to change your mind, just come to 255 Reshiram Boulevard. Anyone’s welcome.” She returned to the base of the statue, her initial zeal lost as she announced her cause.

Lawrence walked to the entrance, looking down at the brochure. ‘Arceism: A Belief Fit for All!’ it advertised. He looked up and huffed. *‘I don’t think so.’*

He pushed open the doors, halting to watch the bustling lab coats and Pokémon whiz through the lobby. People and Pokémon of all sorts entered elevators and crossed stairways in the pristine whiteness. On screens lining the edges of the massive room, the latest applications for the Pokédex 2.0 were featured, ranging from an incubation check for eggs, to a nutrition planner for Pokémon. People behind tables explained the Pokédex to new customers, with Pokémon at their owners’ sides.

Lawrence moved toward the elevator, pulling out his wallet. On reaching the door, he scanned the ID inside across a black bar with a red light. The light changed to green, and doors split apart.

He entered the elevator with a clammy man holding a box and a middle-aged woman holding a tray of Poke Balls. Lawrence turned around, and the door shut. He clicked a button labelled ‘4’, and they went up.

They stopped at the second floor, where people studying various machines on tables could be seen. The woman went out and began speaking with another man as the doors closed. After a few more moments of ascension, the door opened again, revealing dozens of cubicles, all with people clicking away at their keyboards. Aside from that and the occasional cry from a Pokémon, no other sound could be heard in the beige environment. The clammy man rushed out of the elevator, several papers flying out from behind him. The doors closed.

The doors opened again, and Pokémon standing on tables lined the aisleways. The people standing next to the tables studied screens beneath them, pointing out strange phenomena and details associated with the many species. The larger Pokémon stood at

the sides, where scanners constantly fed information to the nearby monitors. Various cries of complaint and joy echoed throughout, receiving treats, scolding, or nothing as their researchers spoke with their companions.

Lawrence breezed past them, making way to the only empty table—only it wasn't quite empty. Sitting on top of it was a burly man wearing a black trench coat and white hat, looking up at the ceiling. His beard was gray and matted, and his teeth were slightly yellow. At his belt was a collection of Poke Balls, covered with salt and grime.

The seaman noticed Lawrence and grinned. "Ahoy, Stephenson!" he announced, coming to his feet. He embraced the retreating Lawrence and squeezed him tightly. "I can't thank ye enough for helpin' out me little Debbie; I can't imagine livin' without the old gal."

Lawrence wriggled out of his grip, pulling off his headphones. "You're...welcome...Sheffield," he wheezed. "Aren't you...supposed to be...down at the docks?"

Sheffield combed through his beard, nodding. "I just wanted to let ya know that if ya need my services, I'll be willin' to bring whateva ya need."

Lawrence regained his composure, looking up at the sea captain. "Why would I need a cargo ship? I'm a Behavior Specialist!"

"I'm just holdin' the offer out to ya is all. Here." He shoved a paper onto Lawrence's chest.

Lawrence grabbed it, and Sheffield said, "That's my number if ye ever need it. I'll be a'waitin'!" He pounded past him and toward the elevator, greeting those he passed with a hearty 'ahoy'.

Lawrence set his papers down and sniffed, noticing a layer of salt on the table. "You help out a sailor with a Chatot's mood swings once, and they love you for life. How did he find me, Marcus?"

The dark-skinned man next to him groomed an Eevee on the table. He shrugged and said. "He came looking for you on his way to the shipping department; he works for Valence too, you know."

Lawrence opened a drawer and pulled out a cloth, wiping it across the table. “Well, I don’t really want to meet him again; his interest in Chatot concerns me. They aren’t any smarter than other Pokémon, and they aren’t all that sophisticated.”

Marcus stopped and leaned against his table. “I’m not sure I agree with you there; Pokémon are pretty sophisticated creatures.”

Lawrence looked to him and gave a knowing look. “I know what I’m talking about.”

“Let’s see you prove it then. Pop quiz: why do Lucario gather in packs?”

“It’s because they feel comfortable around Auras from their peers and use them to communicate with each other. They’re able to coordinate better with each other in such setups,” Lawrence replied, closing the drawer. He shook his head, leaning on the desk. “Why’d you ask a question about Lucario? They aren’t all that complex behaviorally.”

Marcus shrugged. “I dunno, they’re cool I guess.”

Lawrence turned around and took out his Pokédex. “Despite what people think, they aren’t. They might be strong fighters, but they don’t have much else going for them. From all the times I’ve studied them, they don’t do much more than stare at people and occasionally bark.” He checked the time: 7:30.

“Well, they’re at least smart, right?”

“As if. Hardly the ideal Pokémon to be if I had to choose,” Lawrence replied.

Marcus humphed, then noticed the brochure on Lawrence’s table. He smirked. “So, Erica finally got you to take one.”

Lawrence shoved Sheffield’s number and Erica’s brochure into the drawer, slamming it afterward. “Why does she think I’d be perfect with her ‘Arceists’, Marcus? I mean, she hasn’t seen what I do here!”

Marcus shrugged, returning to his patient Eevee. “I dunno, maybe because Arceists believe Pokémon should be treated like people, and you study how they act? I guess she just wants scientific proof, that’s all.” He looked up, chuckling. “Plus, I think she has a thing for you.”

Lawrence elbowed him playfully, opening another drawer and setting his headphones inside. “You and your ideas.” He looked around, concerned. “I should be working by now. Where’s the Pichu I’m supposed to study?”

“I’ve left her under another employee, Mister Stephenson.”

An elderly man wearing a gray suit walked up to them, holding his arms behind his back. His shoes shone brightly, complementing the small ruby inset on a button near his neck. His short-cropped hair was tidily swept to the left.

Lawrence stood up straight and bowed respectfully. “President Hanson! I, uh, wasn’t expecting to see you.”

He waved dismissively. “Understandably, considering that I was making this a surprise visit. I have a special assignment for you.” He turned around, casually walking past his other employees. “Follow me.”

Lawrence looked back at Marcus, then back at Hanson. “Guess I better go. I’ll see you later.” He took large steps toward the elevator, where Hanson stood waiting.

Lawrence entered, and the doors closed behind him. He turned to face the door as Hanson reached inside his jacket. He pulled out a silver keycard, much like Lawrence’s. “Remind me, where are you from? You have an accent I don’t usually hear.”

“I come from Sinnoh. I moved here to go to the College of Unova for their Behavior Science course.”

Hanson swiped the card in front of a black screen, causing a series of blue buttons with numbers to appear. “I see. Do you have family there? Friends, perhaps?”

“I have my mom and dad, but I haven’t seen them for a while. I don’t have too many friends outside of those I see around here.”

Hanson clicked ‘17’. “Do you have any pet Pokémon? Do you battle at all?”

“No, but I know how to. I used to be part of the Senior Pokémon League back in college,” Lawrence replied, unsettled by a jerk in their motion. The elevator went down swiftly, faster than he was used to. *‘Where are we going?’*

Hanson nodded sagely. “Good, good.” He remained silent until the elevator stopped. “Before we go out, I must warn you: anything you see from here on out is to remain

private between you and me. These are company secrets and are not something you'll see on the ground floors."

Lawrence looked at him dubiously. '*Ground floors?*'

Hanson clicked a button, smiling. "I'll take your silence as a yes." The doors slid open, and Lawrence gasped.

The light and beige of the building he knew was gone from the air, replaced with a stark black in a vast cavern of machines and vehicles. Men darted about in forklifts and trolleys, carrying equipment and Poke Balls wherever they went. Low-hanging lights provided the barest of illumination, giving slight hints of the activities surrounding a narrow walkway to a massive geodesic dome.

Hanson stepped forward, motioning for Lawrence to follow. He complied, twisting his head around to see what took place. Two workers argued with each other about where to put large cages, while others were huddled behind a table, where sparks belched into the air. In glass rooms to the side, scientists studied Pokémon, although not how Lawrence was used to: the Pokémon in question stood in tubes and had various wires connected to their brains, while the connected machines spat out results from their various tests. From behind a darkened room, pitiful shrieks wailed through the air.

Lawrence stared around the room, eyes wide. "What is this place?" he asked, horrified.

Hanson continued, undeterred. "This is Facility D, where all the *real* science happens. We are two hundred feet underground, away from the prying eyes of the Unovan League." He pointed up. "Everything that happens up there is what the public thinks we are: a humble company providing quality Pokédexes for them to use with their Pokémon. But that was what Poketch was. We're not Poketch."

He gestured to a cluster of scientists pushing a Magmar in a sideways containment unit, sleeping soundly. "Down here in Facility D, however, we strive to find meaning behind Pokémon. We want to know how they came to be, and how we can use them at their peak capacity.

“You see, I wasn’t content with simply providing a service; anyone can do that. No, I wanted to change the world as we knew it, and while the Pokédex 2.0 is a step in the right direction, it is not what I envision.”

He abruptly stepped in front of Lawrence, continuing to gaze at him with his squinting eyes. “So, here’s the big picture: what if Pokémon could talk?” Lawrence remained silent, still astonished by the environment.

Hanson turned around. “Many people think that Pokémon are loving companions that will stick with you to the end. That is not the case. Unlike humans, they don’t strive for the greater goals of life; they eat, sleep, mate...everything programmed into us by nature!” He lifted a finger. “But, that doesn’t mean that speech would be useless. If we could somehow make Pokémon speak, we could create ultimate cohesion with trainers, making a force that could communicate perfectly, with no drawbacks.

“Pokémon may be simple, but consumers don’t see it that way; they want to talk with them just as they would their sister or brother, regardless of what they might say. Sure, there is already technology that can supposedly translate what they say, but it is expensive, and how are we to know it’s accurate? It would be far more profitable to develop some machine or serum that will give these Pokémon this ability.”

Lawrence only half-listened to Hanson as he forced himself to focus. “What’s your point? Have you found a way to make them talk?”

Hanson sighed, massaging his temples. “Unfortunately, there’s no way you can give them speech with our current resources; all experiments have resulted in failure.”

Lawrence shivered when he said ‘experiments. “So, what’s the point in trying to do it if it can’t be done?”

Hanson grinned, showing perfectly white teeth. “I never said it couldn’t.” They finally stopped walking, standing in front of the black geodesic dome.

The doors slid open, revealing a series of tubes punching into the walls of a hallway. Men in lab coats carried papers and bits of machinery, studying them and applying them to their proper places. Various doors connected to the hallway, the end of which had a massive metallic ring.

Hanson walked amongst the scientists, ignoring their actions. Lawrence couldn't help but be fascinated with what they were doing, still perplexed as to what was happening here.

"Eight years ago, the Aether Foundation of Alola reported that other dimensions exist, the most notable being Ultra Space. But ever since the accidental release of the Ultra Beasts, no efforts have been made to discover other dimensions." He looked back at Lawrence, his eyes now fully open. "We, however, have."

He turned into a small room with numerous screens, all showing various environments: forests, mountains, oceans, and other sorts. A table with scattered papers lay in the center, showing images of Pokémon from an overhead view.

Hanson picked up one image, showing a bundle of small buildings in the middle of a grassland. "We obtained the Aether Foundation's dimensional technology and began to search for other dimensions ourselves. Most were empty and black, remnants of what they once were. Several yielded interesting results, but unfortunately lacked what we sought." He handed the picture to Lawrence. "Until we found dimension 3-9-1-V-0-S: Equivos."

Lawrence studied the picture, squinting to see the details. The buildings were made from stone and wood, rather primitive resources. Multi-colored figures walked in the aisleways, carrying carts, with some wearing leather clothing. The figures were of various shapes, reminding Lawrence of—

"Pokémon! A dimension full of Pokémon, with no people!" Lawrence exclaimed, the experiments temporarily leaving his mind.

Hanson grinned, nodding. "Precisely! From what we can tell, they're exactly the same as our own, even down to genetics—except for one small detail. Listen." He tapped a button on the counter, and a scattered, static-y sound emanated all around them.

In the midst of the static, a tiny voice whispered, "I...Draena...Marill..."

Hanson revealed his gleaming teeth once more. "They can speak. *Our language*, at that!"

Lawrence stepped away from the speaker, averted by the sheer...strangeness, of hearing a supposed Pokémon speak. His eyes narrowed as he put pieces together. “Wait...what do you need *me* for? You want me to study them from here?”

Hanson shook his head, chuckling. “No, no, nothing of the sort. I want you to study them *out there*.” His normally-gentle expression suddenly hardened as he glowered at Lawrence. “We’ve recently developed a new machine, one that can allow us to send objects across dimensions...or people, like you.”

Lawrence thought for a moment, then realized what he meant. “You want to send *me* there?” he exclaimed. He combed his fingers through his hair and sharply exhaled. “But why? Surely there’s another way, or someone else who can do it.”

Hanson’s gentleness returned as he sat on a chair. “I’ve done some extensive research on you, and you’re the best choice. Most everyone here is a city slicker, having no experience with the great outdoors. Those that *have* had some fresh air tend to be...” He tapped his chin for a moment. “...stupid. They are unsuited for research work like what *you* do, considering your extensive time studying Pokémon on Mount Coronet.” He held up a portfolio and tapped it. “Your application was *very* helpful.” He set it on the desk and flipped through the papers inside. He held up a newspaper clipping and said, “Let’s see... ‘accomplished survivalist Lawrence Stephenson completes study of Pokémon indigenous to Mount Coronet of the Sinnoh region. Two years previously, he earned his wilderness guide license after living off the land for over a week.’” Hanson chuckled, setting down the clipping. “A veteran of the wild, at such a young age! Whatever made you want to come here?”

Memories of the desolate peaks flashed back to Lawrence, and of his detailed thesis all about it. He wrote about the Pokémon and what they did there, and how all of this concluded to having Pokémon be on inferior ground to humans.

“I...wanted to expand my horizons...and escape from certain influences.”

Hanson nodded, gesturing to himself. “Reminds me of myself when I sold off Poketch; I wanted to develop other technologies like the Pokédex 2.0, but the investors insisted that I continue making the Poketch.” He waved dismissively. “Regardless, you

have proven yourself qualified for such a...harrowing mission. No one else under my employ could fit the job, what with your field experience, your education, and your slight interest in different cultures.” He smirked. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed your comparison of regions you made your sophomore year of college.”

Lawrence cringed. *“Why’d I even do that paper?”* He held his chin for a moment. *‘This is all so...strange. It **does** sound interesting to go to this place. I mean, it’s only got Pokémon there. It might be rather fun to see how it is.’*

Then the fear set in. *‘Whatever they made to get me there, it can’t be safe. I wouldn’t be able to see anybody until I get back, and where there’s Pokémon, there’s danger.’* He shuddered. *“Then there’s Hanson’s “tests”.”*

Lawrence shivered again. “Will the Pokémon be treated humanely? They are more civilized, right?”

Hanson sighed, massaging his head. “Until we have one here to study, we can’t determine how civilized they are. Sure, they can speak, and yes, they can produce.” He opened his eyes. “Whether or not they are civilized is unimportant at the moment. If we want to bring the world talking Pokémon, and we have the chance, let’s take it!” He grinned. “Besides, how different can they be? Outside of the ability to speak, they appear to be exactly the same as our world’s.”

Hanson closed the portfolio, smirking. “Another thing to keep in mind, Mister Stephenson: You’ve seen and heard some rather...conflicting things about my company. If you decline, then I’ll have to make sure you don’t say a word, no matter the means. I’d rather not get my hands dirty, but I have to keep a good public image.” He grinned once more. “Tell me, Mister Stephenson...do we have a deal?”

Lawrence paled, suddenly fearing the consequences. *‘Hanson’s one of the most powerful men in the world. If he wanted to make sure I don’t talk, he could do that.’* He stood straighter. *‘I guess it’s a choice between a chance of danger in Equivos or guaranteed danger here.’*

He sighed in defeat. *‘I should just go along with Hanson. At least I can avoid his bad side.’*

“When do I leave?”

Hanson made a low chuckle. “Two hours.”

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An hour later, Lawrence sat in a small room in front of a table, listening to Hanson as he listed precautions, while to the side, two men tweaked with Lawrence’s Pokédex from a computer.

Lawrence fidgeted in his seat, his mind buzzing to the point he was having difficulty following Hanson. *‘I still can’t believe I’m going to a different dimension—with only Pokémon!’* kept going through his mind.

Hanson pointed at a blurry map, around the center of the green mass. “We’ve spent months preparing for this, so don’t think we haven’t thought this through. You’ll land around here, based on what images we’ve gathered from the air. From this location, just catch a single Pokémon, and activate the beacon on your Pokédex, which will be shown to you once it’s ready.”

Lawrence wanted to sigh with relief but found his throat too tight. “What will I have with me?”

“We’re giving you several powerful Pokémon to capture with: Bisharp, Gyarados, Infernape—you get the picture. They, along with food and supplies, will be sent with you in a capsule. It’s designed to be wormhole-proof, much like the upgrades to your Pokédex will make it as well.”

Lawrence’s heart beat faster as his eyes widened. “Wait, wormhole?”

Hanson nodded. “Yes, a wormhole. It’s perfectly safe, I assure you. All our surveillance craft have survived the trip.” He rubbed his chin, looking up. “However, for some reason they go dead after a few months, so I can’t say they weren’t affected...maybe.” He shrugged. “Still, the suit we’ve designed for you should make you immune to the effects of the wormhole, along with the case we’ve designed for your Pokédex. “

Lawrence forced himself to nod. *‘I hope that’s true.’*

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Scientists bustled about, making last-minute preparations for the journey to Equivos. Laborers carried supplies and placed them into containers, while two dozen individuals sat in front of computers, typing away algorithms and coordinates. All the while, the giant, golden ring in the center hummed loudly.

Lawrence swallowed fearfully, looking up at the giant ring. He was inside a glass room with it, to keep the other workers from slipping inside. He wore a tight white suit, as well as a white helmet. His Pokédex was tucked in a case attached to his arm. A black panel covered the red and black cover, protecting the surface with solar panels.

A monitor behind him flickered on, revealing Hanson's face. Scientists scurried behind him, while he remained perfectly calm. "We've updated your Pokédex to act as both a signal beacon and tracker. It will alert you when there's a weakness in the fabric of the dimension, where we can extract you and your captured specimens. We'll send the Pokémon to use for their capture, as well as other supplies, after you're through the portal." He clicked a button proffered by a gangly man. "The weakness we are sending you through should last for nine-and-a-half hours. After that, the fabric will shift, and you'll have to locate another before you can return. Any questions?"

"Is it...safe, getting there?" Lawrence asked. *'Despite my experience in Sinnoh, and how much I want to see this world, I can't help but dread it.'*

Hanson turned aside for a moment, said something unintelligible, then turned back and replied, "The designers have assured me that it's perfectly safe—provided that you have that suit." He furrowed his brow. "Do you feel like you need more time to prepare? It has been at least five years since your time in Sinnoh."

Lawrence shook his head, swallowing uncomfortably. "It should come back to me once I'm there." He turned back to the ring and stared. *'At least, I think it should.'*

Hanson clapped his hands together. "Very well, on with the show!" The monitor turned off, and Lawrence began to regret his decision.

A man shouted, "Initiating wormhole generation!" The ring began to glow an unearthly red and hummed louder. It vibrated, slowly at first, but soon appeared like a failing illusion as it grew more vigorous. Another minute passed by, and electricity arced

from the rim into the center. A swirl of grey vapor centered on the stricken point, beginning to pull on Lawrence.

Lawrence began to skid against the ground, the vortex pulling him in. The glass around him began to bend inward, cracking slightly. The monitor swung toward the vortex, the screws coming loose.

Lawrence hesitated, struggling to step back. ‘*What was I thinking agreeing to this insanity?*’

Red lights flashed, an alarm following it. Hanson’s face appeared on the monitor again, distressed. “Go through, now!” The monitor was yanked from the wall, disappearing into the void.

The vortex pulled at Lawrence’s legs, causing him to fall backward. He steadily progressed toward it, covering his eyes as the glass around him shattered. It swirled into the void as well, but it wasn’t enough; the vortex demanded more.

Lawrence was now mere feet from the vortex. He reached behind him to prevent its victory, but it was futile; the concrete would not yield grip to him.

It abruptly yanked his head forward, throwing him into the void headfirst. He screamed helplessly as he entered the tunnel beyond.

A man that held Lawrence’s supplies suddenly refused to go forward. Tubes were loosened from their sockets, and coattails flapped as the vortex threatened to take the entirety of the dome.

Another monitor flew inside, and Hanson pulled at a scientist’s coat. “Shut it down, now! It’ll take everything!”

“But what about Lawrence?”

Hanson pushed him away, slamming on a massive red button. “He’ll come back, you’ll see!” The vortex screamed as it shrank into nothingness, releasing its hold on the objects around it. Lawrence was beyond their help.

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A yawning tunnel of cloud and dust circled around Lawrence, pitch-black and impossible to see through. He hyperventilated, having no control of his movement

through the tunnel. Lightning flashed around him, giving him a fleeting glimpse of the horrors that lay beyond the fog. He floated in a rush of wind, dragging him to where he would, presumably, end up in Equivos.

An earsplitting screech echoed past him, causing him to grimace and press his hands over his ears. A black mass inched beyond the clouds, far more massive than Lawrence. It split apart, revealing jagged rows of teeth and a snaking tongue. Another mass rammed into it, pushing it over the tunnel with a rumbling roar. Whip-like tendrils wrapped around it with a clicking scream.

Lawrence's heart pounded in his chest, and the hair on his neck raised. *'Those...those aren't from my world. Where did they come from, and why are they here?'* he thought, struggling to understand this bizarre series of events.

Through his travail, he heard disembodied voices, whispering unintelligible statements to him. Miniscule volts of lightning struck him, causing his body to go numb. With each strike, however, he felt...different. His body began to shrink, to change, to warp...but he couldn't see any of it. He wanted to scream with each unnatural motion, wishing that they would cease.

After what felt like hours of continual fear and panic, Lawrence saw a light. He sighed gratefully. *'Finally...it's over.'* He disappeared into the light, expecting to land on the ground.

He began to fall.

## Chapter 3

### *Act 2 - The Priestess*

#### **Equivos, Serenita**

A bolt of lightning struck the sky, igniting a swirling mist of cloud and vapor high above a sea of trees. It yawned over the orange and gold leaves, threatening to consume them all with its immense size. A black speck fell from the interior, screaming as it fell. Just as soon as it came, the vortex disappeared into a harmless cloud, as if it had never come.

Lawrence couldn't stop his screams as the trees came closer and closer to him. He felt unusually warm, and the breeze reached areas it shouldn't have. He felt denser, smaller, and his rear felt...longer, somehow. He could smell the approaching leaves far better than he could remember, and the rushing wind sounded far stronger than it felt.

He crashed through the branches, covering his face. A stray branch struck the Pokédex case, making a sharp snap as it did. He burst through the canopy and pounding onto the ground, landing with a plume of tan dust.

He craned his head upward, the impact leaving his vision blurry and his chest in agony. He reached forward to push himself up—he flinched. His hand wasn't there—a small, black paw with a spike above it was there instead.

He felt his face, feeling short, soft fur and a pointed nose. He looked behind him, seeing the vague shape of a blue tail. His legs were long and black, turning large and blue at the top. His chest had long, yellow fur, with a sharp spike set at the top.

His head fell to the ground as he stared in disbelief. His vision went black, and his hearing dulled. He lost consciousness.

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Muffled voices pounded Lawrence's head; light leaked into his eyes. The voices became clearer, as did a poking sensation.

"Ya think he's dead?"

"Nah, he's breathin'. Haven't seen one a his like before."

"Can we eat 'im?"

"Only if he tries to eat us first."

Lawrence groaned, holding a paw to his head. "What...happened?" he croaked. He remembered everything until he came out of the tunnel. After that, nothing.

"Yech, it talks! No eatin' him then."

Lawrence, despite his body's protests, opened his eyes, seeing an imposing purple blob, and another yellow. His vision cleared, revealing the black stripes lining the yellow's rotund frame, and the bulging muscles of the purple.

The purple blob leaned forward, sniffing. "Hmm, no scent. No smoke, no food, no nothin'. What are you?" Lawrence finally saw that it was a Machoke talking to him, giving him a studious look, while behind him, an Electabuzz made a half-crazed grin.

Lawrence--lost for words--scrambled back, holding up his paws. "H-How are you doing that?" He gasped, noticing the spikes set on the backs of his paws.

The moments just after he landed came back to him. The fall through the air. The crashing through the trees. The moment he realized--

"I'm a Lucario!" he screamed, falling onto his back.

The Electabuzz giggled, tapping the Machoke on the shoulder. "Hey boss, he's a Lucario! Didn't that Guild guy back in town say they were dead?"

The Machoke shoved him away, glaring at him. "He don't know that!" He made a warm grin toward Lawrence, but his eyes revealed a hidden maliciousness. "Ya look like ya need help. How's about we take ya to one a those Guild guys?"

Lawrence didn't answer since couldn't stop looking at himself, panicking. *'I-I'm a Lucario! How is this possible?'*

The Electabuzz pointed at the loose-fitting case around Lawrence's arm. "Hey, what's that doohickey? Look's interestin'."

Lawrence flinched. *'My Pokédex.'*

The Machoke rubbed his chin, eyeing the Pokédex. "Would ya mind if I see what ya have there? Haven't seen anythin' like that black box before either."

Lawrence stood up unsteadily, unused to the balance of his new body. He put a paw over his left arm, attempting to cover the case. "Uh, no, I-I can't let you--"

The Electabuzz stomped forward, electricity sparking from his head. "When da boss says he wants to see somethin' he sees it!"

Lawrence fell to the ground, tripping on his changed feet. He hid the case under him, hoping to keep the technology safe from their hands.

The Machoke punched the Electabuzz away, towering over Lawrence. "Lemme see it!"

"Graaaaaaw!"

The Machoke and Electabuzz looked behind them, their eyes widening. "Did you hear that?" the Machoke demanded.

The Electabuzz nodded nervously. "Yeah boss...w-what was it?"

"Grrrroomm!"

In the dark gloom created by the twilight, an ethereal red light shined from the trees behind them. It appeared in a jagged pattern, some parts brighter than others. Above the crack-shaped patterns, two red bars stared down.

A giant stepped forward, shaking the ground and shifting the light. The Machoke and Electabuzz instinctively stepped back, shivering.

The massive stone limbs took another step, quaking the area round it. The enormous arms pounded together, sounding like two boulders crashing down a mountain. A jagged crack across the creature's chest glowed with a fierce crimson. Part of the light was covered with a large metal brace, preventing the crack from widening.

Lawrence, still from terror, whispered one word: “Golurk.”

In response, the black Golurk reared back and roared, **“Graaaaawm!”** He hefted his leg upward and slammed the ground, causing the Electabuzz and Machoke to fall.

They stared terrified at the Golurk, scrambling to their feet. “Run!” the Machoke screamed, leaving a plume of dust in his wake. The Electabuzz followed, screaming as he went.

Lawrence could do nothing but stare as the Golurk approached, the reddened cracks and mossy frame invoking an ancient and powerful presence. The head of the Golurk had a chunk missing at the back, revealing crimson circuits coursing within.

The Golurk stopped mere feet from Lawrence, staring down at him, emotionless. Lawrence covered his face, expecting the worst.

The Golurk cocked his head and extended an arm to him. He grabbed the arm that Lawrence covered his face with, then lifted him to his feet. Lawrence looked at him with a mixture of perplexity and terror. *‘It’s...it’s not attacking me?’*

Turning his head, the Golurk said, “Grawwm.” Two blue eyes appeared in the woods behind him, approaching them.

A graceful white figure with green hair walked out of the woods. A large brown sack hung over her shoulder, bulging with materials. The Gardevoir’s eyes had an almost ethereal quality to them, being blue instead of the red usual of her species.

She walked forward with her hands in front of her, holding them up to her chest nervously. She cautiously studied Lawrence, her steps slowing as she drew closer.

The Golurk looked down and pointed at Lawrence. “Graawm.”

She looked up and nodded. “I can see that he’s a Lucario, Grom. Is he hurt?” Grom shook his head slowly.

Lawrence stepped back, jabbing a paw at Grom. “Wha...how? Where did you come from?” His sudden transformation and the events that had just transpired left him feeling faint and erratic.

The Gardevoir held her hands out, careful to keep them from Lawrence’s reach. “We noticed that you were in trouble with those other Pokémon. Do you need help?”

Lawrence wanted to say yes but stopped himself. *‘How do I know I can trust her? She could be like that Machoke and Electabuzz, wanting to...do whatever they wanted to do with me. I never got to see, but I hope I don’t.’*

The Gardevoir breathed in sharply, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t tell you my name. I’m Cassia.” She kept her hands close, keeping a close eye on Lawrence’s paws.

Lawrence felt a little more relieved, but he still kept alert. *‘That’s better, but that doesn’t mean I can trust her. Then again, I don’t know anything about Equivos. I’ll just have to blend in.’*

He looked around, searching for the box that should have been sent with him. “Um...would you know where I can find a little box? I...traveled here with it, and I’m not sure where it went.”

Cassia cocked her head curiously. “You lost it?”

‘I’m not even sure it made it here with me,’ Lawrence thought. He looked up, seeing the hole in the leaves that he had made on his entry into Equivos. “I was...climbing a tree, and I fell off. See?” Lawrence pointed up. Grom and Cassia studied the hole in the canopy, with Grom cocking his head.

They looked back at Lawrence. “I haven’t really seen a Lucario around, you know,” Cassia said.

Lawrence restrained a smile. *‘I can use that; I can act like a foreigner, giving me the perfect excuse to ask where I am and to learn more about this place.’*

Before he could reply, Grom pointed down the path and groaned, “Graw...”

Cassia sighed, turning to where he pointed. “Yeah, I know. We should be able to make it there by sunset.” She turned back to Lawrence and said, “Do you need anything else?”

Lawrence lifted a paw, covering the Pokédex. *‘I need to get back to Facility D, fast. It’d be better if Cassia was gone when I send the signal.’* He waved his other paw and said, “Yeah, I should be fine. You go on with whatever you were doing.” He turned around, falling onto his chest.

While he got up, Cassia and Grom looked at each other curiously, turning around. “Alright, well...if you need anything else, we’ll be at the clearing down the path until morning.” She and Grom walked away, with the Golurk letting out a questioning moan.

When they were out of earshot, Lawrence hastily popped the cover of the Pokédex and pulled it out, his paw gripping it awkwardly. He studied the casing, noticing a large dent on the side of it.

He looked at the sky and shook his head sadly. “Why’d I have to end up in the air?” he asked himself. He tapped the power button, then typed his password on the screen. He then selected the swirling icon, causing the words ‘Vortex Signal’ to flash by.

A dark green circle appeared at the top, with a light purple one at the bottom. He tapped the purple, making it say, ‘Sending Signal’. A red exclamation suddenly flashed, and in red text, the screen said, “No access point in range.”

Lawrence’s heart skipped a beat.

He tried again, receiving the same message. The green circle—the radar—showed no points of interest; there were no dimensional weaknesses nearby.

His eyes whisked toward the time: 8:30. He looked to the sky and saw the sun setting. *‘It can’t be morning...which means...’* His eyes widened, then he smacked a palm across his head. *‘It’s been twelve-and-a-half hours since I got here! I’m too late!’*

Lawrence looked out into space, paling. *‘What am I going to do now? I’m stranded here without supplies or a way back.’* He stared at his paw and narrowed his eyes. *‘And worse, I’m a Lucario.’* The irony of the words he had said hours before arriving came into mind.

Then thoughts of his parents came, and their unanswered calls.

He fell to the ground, dropping his head. *‘How am I going to get back? They’ll be worried sick about me.’*

He looked down the path. *‘Until I find another weakness, I ought to stick with someone who knows the place—like that Gardevoir, Cassia.’* He stood up, balancing on his paws. *‘And I’ll have to live like a Lucario until then.’*

He put the Pokédex back in its storage case, considering what he'd say to her. *'I can't just say I'm a human from another dimension; they'd instantly think I'm crazy and leave me alone.'* He groaned and thought, *'And I'll have to give a reason why I don't know about this place.'* He took an uneasy step forward, then another. He staggered back and landed on his rear.

He glared at the tail behind him and shakily stood up again, cursing his small paws. He took another step forward and said under his breath, "This is going to be a long day."

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The autumnal air rushed through the trees, whisking away the red and gold leaves. Sunset richened their colors, and the wind deepened their crisp, as they whirled away into the sky. A worn path wove between the trunks, an ancient relic from a time long past. In the vast sea of yellow and orange, a small clearing poked through, an island amongst the waves. The crackle of snapped twigs and crushed leaves emanated through the air, and the smell and taste of sap alongside it. Bird Pokémon tweedled their melodies, chirping alongside the autumnal foliage.

In the clearing, Grom hefted a log with little effort, then tossed it into the woods, grunting. "Gra-am?"

Toward the center of the clearing, Cassia dug through her sack, glancing at Grom. "Go on and recharge; I'll be alright."

The Golurk grunted agreeably, stomping toward the recently-tossed log. He stepped on it—turning it to splinters—then disappeared amongst the wood.

Cassia sighed, finally pulling a blanket out from the sack. "I really pack too much in here." She started to spread it over the ground but stopped when a shout of frustration echoed from the path.

She finished spreading the blanket and stood up, looking toward the path. She saw Lawrence flop to the ground, smack the dirt with his fist, then push himself up, grumbling.

He brushed himself off while he muttered, "Stupid paws, can't walk around—" He stopped himself, noticing Cassia. "H-Hi there! Uh...how long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to see you fall," Cassia replied. "Do you need help with something?"

Lawrence scratched back of his head, looking up casually. "Yeah, well...I can't remember anything. I must've hit my head pretty bad when I fell outta that tree."

Cassia hesitantly stepped closer. "How come you didn't tell me before?"

"I thought I could remember on my own, but that didn't work," Lawrence replied. His heart beat rapidly.

"Do you...remember your name?" Cassia held her arms at her side, the fear in her eyes turning to care.

The lump in Lawrence's chest lowered. "It's Lawrence. Lawrence Stephenson."

Cassia cocked her head curiously. "Stephenson? Don't you mean 'Lucario'?"

Lawrence's eyes widened as he realized his mistake. '*They must use their species as their last name in Equivos.*' Lawrence smiled, clenching his paw. "Right, right, sorry. Don't remember things quite right, you know?"

Cassia smiled slightly, then walked back to the clearing. "Come on over. You can stay with me."

Lawrence grinned and jogged to her. He stumbled slightly, causing his grin to fade. He avoided falling, much to his relief, and entered the glade.

Cassia sat on the blanket, pulling off her bag. She opened it up and began to dig through it. "Are you hungry?"

In response, Lawrence's stomach grumbled. He laughed nervously and sat down on the blanket. "I guess I am."

She pulled out two bright red apples and handed one to Lawrence. He took a large bite out of it, crunching on the apple awkwardly. His teeth were more pointed than he was used to, but he soon managed.

Cassia took small bites of her apple, holding it with both hands. Between morsels, she asked, "I guess you don't remember where you are, do you?" Lawrence nodded, eating his apple more eagerly as his hunger set in.

Cassia waved around her to the trees. "You're in Serenita, in a place called the Kaena Woods. We're miles away from any towns, so you're lucky that me and Grom found you." Cassia looked past the trees. "Things have been dangerous ever since the Guild turned for the worse." She trailed off, setting down her apple.

"Ever since what?" Lawrence asked, cocking his head.

Cassia cringed, shoving a hand into her bag. "I don't want to talk about that right now."

Lawrence looked up for a moment, wondering about her statement. As Cassia turned back around, he lowered his head. He searched the trees and asked, "So where's the Golurk? His name's Grom, right?"

Cassia pointed behind him. "He's over there. He doesn't like leaving me alone like this, but he needs to recharge every so often."

"Is he a bodyguard or something?"

"Yes...in a way. I helped him escape from his old master. Ever since, he's been protecting me while I've been traveling."

"Why are you traveling?"

Cassia looked away, studying the ground. "You'd think it's silly."

"It can't be that bad," Lawrence grinned. '*Can't be any worse than me turning into a Lucario.*'

She threw away the core of her apple and pulled a book out from the bag. "I guess you don't remember Arceus, do you?" Imprinted on the cover of the book, the Arc of Arceus shone with gold paint.

Lawrence's grin faded. '*I recognize that.*' He pointed at the book and said, "What's that?"

She opened it, revealing faded lines of text with pictures scattered between them. "It's called the Arceist Tome. It's a history of Equivos, and it tells us Arceus' teachings."

Lawrence's stomach churned. *'I had to get stuck with an Arceist, like Erica.'* He threw away the core of his apple and dourly thought, *'How do they even exist in this parallel dimension? It doesn't make sense! First the language similarity, then this!'*

She flipped to a page depicting a blast of red and blue energies, with the almighty myth, Arceus, standing between them. Within the blasts were two figures, each wielding the respective colors.

"He predicted events long before they happened. This shows the battle that Laryon Lucario and the Usurper had two thousand years ago," she explained, pointing to the figures.

Lawrence furrowed his brow. *'How could a non-existent Pokémon make such prophecies?'* He opened his mouth to comment but stopped. *'I can't say it isn't true; she thinks I have amnesia, so I shouldn't have any firm beliefs.'* Disgruntled, he thought, *'Might as well see what else there is in this tome.'* He pointed to the being within the red energy depicted. "Who was the Usurper?"

Cassia frowned, closing the book. "Not was: is."

Lawrence shook his head in disbelief. "You're saying that some Pokémon who fought some great battle two-thousand years ago is still alive?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Cassia set the book aside. Her eyes narrowed, and her fingers wrapped around the book's binding. "The Usurper is called Arthus Zoroark," she spat, "and it's thanks to him that the Guilds have turned on the very Pokémon they promised to protect." She traced the arc on the book, her hands quivering. "What he did—" She shut her eyes. "--is unforgiveable." She turned her gaze to Lawrence. "He *is* real."

Lawrence, not expecting her reaction, leaned away from her. "Sorry, I just don't...remember, any of this."

She took a deep breath, combing back her hair. "Right. You don't know any better." She pulled the Arceist Tome onto her lap, flipping to a page showing a Riolu and Zorua in a village setting. "Years before Arthus' battle with Laryon, he was friends with a Riolu named Matheus. The two grew up together, becoming explorers here in Serenita."

She turned the page, depicting a Lucario and Zoroark standing in front of a walled fortress. “They went on to create the Guild, a system that was meant to rescue those in need, and capture those who hurt others. For a time, there was peace in Equivos.”

The next page showed Arthus studying a scroll with a twisted version of the Arc. “But Arthus wasn’t satisfied with curing *some* of the evil in Equivos; he wanted *all* of it gone. He discovered the Prophecy of Life and Death, which said that an individual would come and take the Seal of Creation—a tool capable of taking the powers of the Legends—to rid the world of evil. The cost: all life in existence.”

Arthus now stood in front of a hoard of Pokémon, pointing his claw in front of him. “He corrupted the Guild, turning them away from assisting those in need, unlike what Matheus wanted. He searched for the Seal of Creation. He planned to take Arceus’ power, then kill everyone in Equivos, and replace them with his own version of life.”

Lawrence studied the picture skeptically. *‘How could he take Arceus’ power if he doesn’t exist? This all sounds like a myth, yet she says it’s true.’*

Cassia flipped the page, revealing a Lucario taking a golden pendant from a hill, running toward a village. “Matheus found the Seal and gave it to his nephew, Laryon, in their hometown, so that Arthus couldn’t claim it. When Arthus found out, he attacked the Pokémon within, along with the rest of the Guild. Matheus came in and saved his sister, Azure, and Laryon but couldn’t save anyone else. He brought Laryon and Azure to a hidden glade, where he thought that they couldn’t be discovered. He then went away to drive the Guild from the location, and later worked to destroy their influence in other areas across Equivos.

“Years after, Arthus discovered Laryon’s hiding place and attempted to take the Seal. This happened when Matheus was making his yearly visit; he managed to rescue Laryon and the Seal, but Azure got captured and taken to their headquarters. Matheus took care of Laryon and taught him the ways of an explorer while they went to save Azure, as well as to protect the Seal.” An aged Lucario walked alongside a Riolu wearing a golden pendant, directing his gaze to the ocean.

“Arthus tricked them, however. He knew they would come rescue her, and with his illusions, tricked them into giving the Seal. While they recovered, Arthus went to the Tree of Life, and stole Arceus’ power.”

The bursts of red and blue appeared, showing Arthus and Laryon in the midst of their mighty conflict. “Arthus returned to the Guild to reclaim a precious gift before he used the power within the Seal. Matheus rescued Azure and waited for him, and ultimately died fighting him. Laryon then went on to fight Arthus, and despite the odds, destroyed the Seal; Arthus never managed to use Arceus’ power. For his crimes against the Legends, Arthus was sealed within the Cocoon alongside Yveltal, until the final days of Equivos would come.”

She closed the book. “Laryon went on to reclaim the Guild, and all was well. That is, until Arthus returned.”

Lawrence gave her a suspicious look. “Wait, what?”

“You remind me of the Pokémon I try to teach,” Cassia sighed. “Twenty years ago, Yveltal broke out of the Mountain of Rebirth. Arthus escaped and changed the world for the worse.” She slid the book back into her bag. “He took over the Guild, and worse, he stole back the Seal of Creation.”

“But didn’t you say—”

“Its *power* was only destroyed. If he finds a way to bring it back...” She shivered. “I plan on doing something before that happens.”

Lawrence slowly shook his head. ‘*She reminds me of home: believing in myths like Arceus and trying to spread it. Some other Zoroark probably took Arthus’ name and used the fear behind him to control others.*’ He stared at the book, huffing. ‘*More believable than someone being trapped with a legendary Pokémon for a couple thousand years.*’

A coarse moan emanated behind him, causing him to jerk. Dark red eyes drew closer with pounding footsteps.

Cassia looked over and inquired, “You’re done already, Grom? I thought it took you longer to drain one.”

“Grooo...” the giant replied, shrugging slowly.

Lawrence pointed at Grom and asked, “How do you understand what he says? He just says ‘Grom’ all the time.”

Grom stepped to Lawrence’s left, then tipped backward. He slammed against the ground, landing on his rear. “Gro-om.”

Cassia smiled, nodding “Yeah, I know it’s hard for you to sit down.” She turned to Lawrence and said, “Grom and I have been together for a long time. We just...understand each other.” She looked behind her; the sun had sunk below the horizon. “We better get to sleep. We have a lot of ground to cover tomorrow.” She stood up and breathed in sharply. “Um...Lawrence?”

He shakily stood up. “Yeah?”

Cassia fidgeted with her fingers and said, “Could you maybe...sleep somewhere else? I like my privacy.” Grom turned his head, his crimson eyes burrowing into Lawrence’s mind.

Taking the cue, Lawrence nodded. “Sure, sure. I can leave.” He turned around and headed toward the trees. He stopped suddenly and turned. “You didn’t tell me why you’re traveling. Where are you going?”

Cassia laid down on the blanket, wrapping herself in it. “I’m going to towns and telling them stories, like the one about Laryon and Arthus.” She yawned. “It’s so...everyone...can be...saved.” She breathed slowly, lulled to the realm of dreams.

Grom continued to stare at Lawrence, until the Lucario finally turned away again. He marched toward another nearby clearing, shivering. “Why did he look at me like that?” he whispered to himself.

Soon he could only see Grom’s imposing figure in the approaching darkness. He sat down and took the Pokédex from its pouch. *‘ Might as well write down what happened today so people don’t think I’ve gone crazy when I get back. ’* He tapped on a notepad icon, causing a blank white screen to show. A small keyboard appeared on top of it.

Lawrence looked down at his paw and scowled. *‘ I haven’t tried typing with paws yet. ’* He looked back at the Pokédex. *‘ How am I going to do this? ’*

He set it between what would have been fingers, and painstakingly typed letters. He looked to the sky and thought, *'I can't wait till I get my real body back.'* When he finished, he tapped on the search function, making another vain attempt to find an access point.

Upon seeing the denial, he grunted and shoved the Pokédex back into its case. "Guess I'll be stuck here a while," he muttered. He lay on his back, setting his paws behind his head.

Lawrence considered his traveling companions. *'Cassia seems nice enough, but her belief in the Arceist Tome unsettles me. I don't want to get involved in the spiritual aspect of Equivos, if there is one. I've already had one version of Arceism proven false; I'd rather not get involved with another.'*

Then there was Grom. He grimaced and thought. *'I would've run away if I wasn't so scared. How did Cassia ever obtain such a monstrous thing?'* He took a glance back to Cassia, where Grom calmly stood watch. *'He seems gentle enough, though, despite his appearance.'*

He sighed, staring at the canopy. *'What am I going to do? By now, everyone will be wondering what happened to me. If I manage to get back, what would I tell them? Would I still be a Lucario?'*

He grimaced at the thought. *'I've never liked Lucario, and being one just makes things worse. I hoped that the way home will turn me back.'*

Yawning, he turned onto his side. *'Until I can find some way back to Unova, I'll have to live as a Pokémon.'* He furrowed his brow. *'With a priest, at that.'* The thought lingered as he drifted to sleep.

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Lawrence stood in a plain of blackness. All around him, dark clouds swirled, bringing unearthly voices with it.

A cruel chuckle echoed through the air. A vague shape stepped in front of him, holding a crimson flame. "What is this I see? You aren't like any Pokémon I've seen before."

Lawrence looked down at himself, seeing that he was back to his human form. He studied the shape, seeing from the flame glinting fangs and a hooded snout.

The being started to pull back the hood. "You're in my domain now, whoever you are. I advise that the next time you sleep, make sure that no one else rests here."

Before Lawrence could see its face, the being grabbed Lawrence's throat and began to choke him. His vision faded while voices shouted around him.

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"Wake up!"

Lawrence shot upright, breathing heavily. He clutched at his throat and looked around him. Grom stood over him, covered with tendrils of crimson light, while Cassia sat at his side, her eyes wide with fright.

"What...what happened? I saw this...thing, say that I was...in his domain," Lawrence wheezed.

Cassia put her hand to her head, moaning. She directed her gaze to Grom and shouted, "I knew you didn't drain everything out!" Grom put his hands up defensively, making a sad moan.

She sighed, removing her hand. "Sorry. I know you're doing your best." She turned back to Lawrence and explained, "Grom collects what's called Life Energy from the ground. It's what's left behind after someone dies." She pointed at the ground beneath Grom, where a low-pitched hiss protested. "Arthus uses these spots to spy on others, and, if there's enough, to move through them to other wells of Life." She pulled Lawrence up. "He hates having people block his vision, so he haunts them in their dreams."

Lawrence couldn't help shaking his head. "A Zoroark can't do that. They can make illusions and use Dark moves, but they can't teleport in any way."

Cassia stamped her foot. "This is Arthus! He's like no one else!" She groaned and walked toward the clearing. "Look, I don't like talking about this. I've said too much as it is." In the morning light, she faded into the glade.

Lawrence looked up at Grom, who gave him a disapproving grunt. Lawrence threw his arms up and exclaimed, "How was I supposed to know?" He kicked the ground, then walked toward Cassia.

She folded the blanket neatly and stuffed it into her sack. She sat on a stump, crossed her arms, and looked out to the path.

Lawrence stopped behind her. "You alright?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'm fine." She looked up. "Have any of your memories come back?"

Lawrence, expecting such a question, shook his head. "No, not yet. I'll let you know if any come up." He studied the trees that wound around the path. *"I wonder how far these go."*

Grom thudded forward and pointed ahead. "Gro-o-om."

Cassia stood up, pulling the sack over her neck. "You're right. We need to get going if we expect to get to the town today."

"There's a town near here?" Lawrence asked, his interest piqued. *'I'm stuck here anyway, so might as well see what these Pokémon have made.'*

"Yes. We need to pick up some more supplies, and I haven't taught about the Tome there yet." Cassia pointed at Lawrence's Pokédex. "What's that around your arm? I didn't notice it before."

Lawrence slapped a paw over it, wishing that it was more discreet. "It's nothing. Nothing at all."

Cassia eyed him curiously. "If it's nothing, then why can't I see it?"

He marched toward the path, shouting, "How about we get moving? I wanna see this town."

Cassia looked up at Grom, who looked down. She followed Lawrence and shook her head. "He'll show us eventually." She looked back briefly. "He seems trustworthy so far, right?"

"Gro-hom," Grom grumbled, stomping after her.

They kept a leisurely pace along the path, with Grom's speed being the biggest hindrance. Golden leaves fell, passing in front of the morning haze with each of their

steps. The smell of sap filled their nostrils, and birdsong echoed through the air, the Starly journeying to the Archipelago of Cretea for the coming winter.

Sometime after they started, Grom stopped, and looked to his left. “Mm-hmm,” he hummed, walking off the path.

Cassia grinned, putting her fingers against her lips. “Grom found something!” she whispered excitedly. She followed Grom.

Lawrence trotted over, finally getting used to his paws. He saw Grom standing in a small clearing, holding his right arm out. “What’s he—”

Cassia glared at him, repeating her hush. She directed her gaze back at Grom, looking up expectantly.

A Fletchling flitted over Grom’s head, then landed gracefully onto his arm. The Fletchling chirped contentedly, sat on his finger, and tucked its head under its wing. The Golurk sighed peacefully.

Cassia silently opened her bag and took out a string-bound notebook, with a pencil attached to it by a string. She opened to a blank page, and steadily drew the scene that lay before her.

Lawrence looked down at her drawing, admiring her detail. *‘I couldn’t draw like this in my life.’* He leaned over and whispered, “Do you do this often?”

“I usually draw landscapes, but this is too cute to pass by!” she whispered back.

Grom turned his head, pointing at the Fletchling with his other hand.

Cassia nodded. “You’re doing great!”

The Golurk chuckled, his booming voice radiating through the air.

Within minutes, Cassia had drawn a perfect sketch of Grom holding the Fletchling on his finger. She held it up for him to see. “What do you think?”

Grom nodded, looking down at the Fletchling. It woke up, yawned, and fluttered away, chirruping its thanks to the giant.

Grom waved to it, sighing. “Gro...” he moaned.

Cassia closed her book, walking back to the path. “You’ll see another one, I’m sure. At least it came to you, right?”

Grom grunted and pounded in front of Lawrence, looking up.

Leery of the Golurk, Lawrence ran to Cassia, then began to walk alongside her. “How often do you do that? I mean...that looked pretty good!”

Cassia blushed. “Thanks. I draw whenever we get to somewhere new. A valley, a forest like this one.” She gestured to Grom, who hummed merrily to himself. “Every so often, Grom gets into a moment where he doesn’t look like a big monster, like what everyone thinks he is.” She shook her head. “He *does* look rather scary, but he’s not so bad, right?”

Lawrence nodded his head in agreement. *‘He might be overprotective, but he is a rather gentle guy.’* He glanced at Grom, watching him kick a log in boredom. As it splintered against a tree, Lawrence cautiously looked away. *‘But he is terrifying at times.’*

They continued to walk through the woods, seeing no wildlife like the Fletchling. No rustling in the bushes, no twitter in the air. Not even the scattering of leaves by a running Bunnelby. Cassia, Grom and Lawrence seemed to be the only forms of life.

Unnerved by this fact, Lawrence asked, “Aren’t there any other wild Pokémon around here?”

Cassia’s head drooped. “No, sadly. They used to be everywhere, but given how dangerous many are, they’ve been practically killed off.” She looked up fiercely. “I think that Arthus might be to blame, considering his want for order and goodness.”

Lawrence coughed into his paw, looking up. *‘Despite that nightmare, I don’t think this Arthus guy is the one who supposedly destroyed the region. Zoroark are good illusionists, but they’re weak fighters...and certainly have no magical powers.’*

The path wound out of the forest into a small plain, dividing the Kaena Woods from a nearby pine forest. The wind rushed rapidly through the grass, scattering leaves from Kaena across the plain.

Grom swiped playfully at the leaves, catching them and crushing them in his grip. Cassia waved her hand through the air, the leaves brushing past the tips of her fingers. “Last fall wasn’t as fun for me and Grom. The snow came before all the leaves had come off the branches.”

“How long have you been traveling together?” Lawrence asked.

Cassia looked back at Grom. “For around two years now. We’ve been going to as many towns as we can before we go to Cretea.”

“Cretea?” Lawrence inquired.

Cassia reached a hand into her bag. “It’s across the sea. It’s not at all like Serenita.” She unfolded a bundle of paper, revealing a map showing two vast continents with a scattering of islands beneath them.

She pointed to the left continent. “We’re in the middle of Serenita right now, around the east side.” She pointed to the islands. “And here’s Cretea. There’s lots of islands with many Pokémon who live on them.”

Lawrence pointed at the right continent. “What’s that one called?”

“Deitae, home of the Legends. Mortal Pokémon like us can’t go there, so you don’t need to worry much about that.” She folded the map, smiling. “I plan on going to Cretea once I go to the last few towns here in Serenita though. I have to teach everyone I can about the Arceist Tome.”

“Why do you want to do that? I mean, will this make their lives better?” Lawrence asked, annoyance in his tone. *‘I don’t like Erica trying to convert me, let alone **her**.’*

Cassia’s smile faded. “Yes...but for another reason too.”

Grom suddenly quickened his pace, pointing ahead. “Graw-hom!”

A little way ahead, a town sprawled out in the center of the plain, with Pokémon rushing out of the walls and going about their business. The little buildings rose no more than a few stories high, with little chimneys poking out of their roofs. In the center of the town, a vast marketplace roared.

Cassia stopped, gripping her bag. She looked up at Grom, who stood just behind her. “Do you think there’s any Guild Pokémon here?” Grom shrugged.

“Guild Pokémon?” Lawrence asked.

Cassia slapped her forehead, groaning. “Right...we can’t let you be seen.” She dug through her bag, riffling through papers. “Um...you remember that Electabuzz and Machoke from before?”

“Yeah. What about them?” Lawrence asked uneasily. *‘I don’t like where this is going...’*

“Well, those guys are nothing compared to Guild Pokémon. Those thugs are more bark than bite, but Guild Pokémon won’t hesitate to rob you or kill you.” She stopped looking into the bag. She took a quick glance at Grom, then pulled out a dull black rock, tied with a length of string. It had a series of random engravings, covered with a red powder.

She held it out to Lawrence. “Here. This is an...Illusion Stone.”

Lawrence cocked his head curiously, accepting the rock. “An...Illusion Stone?”

“Put it around your neck...with your eyes closed. That’s when it’ll start working,” Cassia directed. Lawrence, confused, did as she said. As soon as he felt the clink of the stone against his chest-spike, he felt a strong breeze blow against him.

He opened his eyes and studied himself. He didn’t appear any different. “What was that supposed to do?”

Cassia walked down the hill toward the town. “You’ll see. Just come down with me.” Grom followed, staring at the Illusion Stone.

Lawrence held the stone up, eyeing it curiously. *‘What’s so special about this rock?’*

He took the Pokédex out from its case, checking for a dimensional weakness. No luck.

He growled and put it away. *‘Hopefully I’ll find a way home soon...especially considering the religious nature of these Pokémon.’* He watched them hurry down the hill and toward the town. *‘They’re nice enough, sure...but I don’t want to be involved in what they believe.’*

He walked down the hill, running to catch up with Cassia and Grom.

## Chapter 4

Upon reaching the town, Lawrence stood astonished, taking in the scene before him. Pokémon of all sorts trudged across the cobble roads, carrying food, materials, even children to the various buildings that cropped up. A dull haze hovered above the stalls and carts, generated by the belching chimneys above.

Grom crouched behind the edge of the exterior wall. “Growm.”

Cassia nodded and moved next to Lawrence. “We’ll be careful. We’ll meet you at the edge of the woods.” Grom stomped away, giving Lawrence a parting glare.

Cassia walked forward and prompted Lawrence to follow. He complied, studying the Pokémon around him. A Buizel family carried sacks of green berries, while a trio of Timburr hauled bricks behind them. Bibarel lugged cords of wood, and Spritzee hovered near a bowl and sprinkled powder into it; an Ambipom near the bowl scooped the pink water into bottles and stopped it with a cork.

He held one up and exclaimed, “Fresh Spritzee perfume for sale!”

Lawrence spun around, marveling this society. *‘This is incredible! I never thought Pokémon would be able to do something like this: a market driven by Pokémon abilities, all working together to make products!’*

A Mr. Mime held his hands up, appearing as if he was stuck in a box. Young Pokémon surrounded him, tossing an occasional coin into a hat at his feet.

Seeing the interaction, Lawrence asked, “You use money?”

Cassia pulled a tiny sack from the bag, shaking it. It clinked, and Cassia replied, “Yes, but I don’t have much.” She pulled away the lip of the bag, revealing eight simple gold chips. “I don’t think I can get everything I need with just this,” she sighed.

A shout of excitement erupted behind them, causing Lawrence to turn. A Flareon slapped down a pawful of coins and yanked a bag from a disgruntled Kecleon. “Thanks!”

The Kecleon grumbled as he watched the Flareon wander off. “Me being the generous guy I am...”

Lawrence eyed him and smiled. *‘Bartering here can’t be any worse than Castelia.’* He pointed at the Kecleon and said to Cassia, “Do we need anything from him?”

Cassia looked up for a moment. “Yeah, but—”

“Let’s go then!” Lawrence rushed toward him, leaving Cassia to hurriedly follow.

He stood in front of the counter, looking down at the Kecleon confidently. Cassia hovered behind him, looking behind her.

The Kecleon yawned, staring at Lawrence tiredly. “Whatcha want, Mister Watchog?”

Perplexed, Lawrence studied a polished pot sitting on the counter. The distorted reflection showed a beady-eyed Watchog with chubby cheeks.

*‘Must be the Illusion Stone at work,’* he thought, staring at the reflection for a moment longer. He cleared his throat and leaned over to Cassia. “What do we need exactly?”

She pointed at a bundle of apples, a sack of flour, and a basket of berries. “We need those, but I can—”

“I’d like the apples, berries and flour, please,” Lawrence requested.

The Kecleon plucked the items from their sections and shuffled back to the counter. He studied them closely and said, “That’ll be eight coins.”

Lawrence leaned on the counter with a smile. “Any chance we could lower that a bit?”

“Great, a haggler,” the Kecleon moaned. “Look, I’m not makin’ any discounts. You better give me somethin’ if you don’t got the cash.”

Lawrence looked behind the Kecleon and saw a large crate next to a step stool. “I’m a pretty strong guy. Need any help moving something?”



The Kecleon looked back at the crate, then back at Lawrence. He made a smirk and said, “Hmm...well, if you can budge somethin’ a mine, I’ll sell the goods to you for *four* coins.”

“Deal!” Lawrence exclaimed.

The Kecleon lifted the table blocking the entrance, then stepped out of the way. “It’s just ‘round back.” They walked through an open doorway into a small alcove. Crates and bags of all sorts crowded the tiny space, the only bare spot occupied by a tiny stump in the center.

The Kecleon pointed at it and scowled. “That stump’s what’s left of an old sapling that managed to poke its way in a while back. I cut it down to size, but the darn thing manages to grow back every time!” His smirk returned. “But if you pull it out, roots and all, four coins is all it’ll cost ya.”

Lawrence looked back at Cassia and said, ‘Might as well try, right?’ He studied his arms and thought, *“I’m a pretty strong guy; I carry things all the time for others to get a little deal, even if it wasn’t official. I can pull out a little stump.”*

He stooped over the bit of wood and yanked it upward. It shuddered slightly. He yanked it again, making an inch of bark appear at the bottom.

He took a deep breath and crouched low. He pulled it one last time, and a network of sturdy roots burst from the ground, spraying dirt over the Kecleon’s goods. Lawrence fell back, staring confusedly at the stump.

The Kecleon blanched and held out a shaking paw. “Th-That’ll be four coins, s-sir.”

Cassia gave the Kecleon payment while Lawrence figured out how he pulled the stump out so fast. *‘I remember pulling out a stump before, but I had to really pull and dig at it for a good while. This came out easily.’*

He threw away the stump, watching his paw swing it to the ground. He blinked, realizing what made the difference in performance: *‘I’m a Lucario, not a person. That measly stump was nothing.’*

He exited alongside Cassia, carrying the sack of food over his shoulder. “I did a pretty good job, didn’t I?”

They reentered the crowds and began searching for the next shop. “Yeah, I guess,” Cassia replied. “Just keep quiet about it. Watchog aren’t supposed to be strong like that.”

“I’m not the one who chose to be a Watchog,” Lawrence said, adjusting the bag.

“I don’t choose what the Illusion Stone makes you look like,” Cassia hissed. She pointed at a Leavanny standing in front of various fabric products. “I need another bag to keep things in; I have a hard time finding anything in this mess.”

Lawrence’s train of thought drifted to what Cassia had done before he encountered her. *‘I don’t expect to be with her for long, but I might as well figure out what type of Pokémon I’m dealing with.’*

They came to the stand, and the Leavanny’s soft voice pierced his thoughts: “Five coins for the bag.”

“Could you bring that down to three if we did something for you?” Lawrence asked, cutting in front of Cassia.

The Leavanny set a claw to her mouth. “Well...I don’t normally do this, but I do need a little help right now.” She pointed to a length of leather scrunched on a counter. “I need this stretched while I sew it, but my assistant is gone for the day. If you help me with that, then we can talk.”

The thoughts of the stump fresh in his mind, Lawrence nodded. He went through the now-open counter and pulled the leather apart, making it taut.

The Leavanny punched the leather with a blade and threaded a string through it, and carefully wove it into a small bag. Lawrence felt the leather want to snap back to its original shape, but his sheer strength refused its desire. *‘Normally, I’d be tired out after a few seconds, but now I could hold it forever.’*

The Leavanny snipped a thread and hummed happily. “Thank you for the help. I’ll take your money now.”

After giving her the coins, Cassia and Lawrence walked amongst the crowd again, moving toward an empty table next to the entrance of a pastry shop.

They sat down, and Cassia set her bags on the table. She pulled out the materials from one and began transferring some into the recently-bought one. “Thanks for helping me

get this.” She covered the Arceist Tome as she pulled it out. “You got along with those Pokémon better than I ever could.” She gloomily snapped the bag shut, leaning on it with her elbow.

Lawrence leaned forward and cocked his head. “What’s wrong?”

She sighed, gesturing to the crowd bustling behind them. “I don’t...get along so well with others. I can do fine one-on-one, like with you, but...” She patted the bag containing the Tome. “I’m not so outgoing in places like this.”

“Don’t you teach about...you know, the book?” Lawrence suggested, struggling with the words. *‘I hate bringing that up, but she shouldn’t be so down on herself.’*

Cassia nodded languidly. “Yeah, well I usually go to the Pokémon who aren’t as well off as here. Arceus is just a myth to practically everybody, considering what the Guild does.”

“What do they do?”

Cassia sprung upward, her eyes widening. “Not now!” She reached for Lawrence’s paw, then took her hand back, searching around her hastily. “Come inside, hurry!” she explained, entering the shop next to them.

Lawrence walked to Cassia’s previous seat and studied her view. He noticed a Feraligatr and Rhyperior trudging through the crowd, towering over the rabble and looking down on them. A black band emblazoned with a red arc of Arceus was strapped to their arms.

Lawrence walked into the shop, eyeing them suspiciously. *‘Were they what caused Cassia to be so worried?’*

Inside, Cassia hovered in the corner, remaining as far from the window as possible. A grinning Simisear stood behind a glass counter, which showed a menagerie of different cakes, pies, and other baked goods.

“Welcome to the Burnt Biscuit, how may I help you today?” the keeper asked.

Lawrence looked over to Cassia. She gestured to him, holding their last coin out toward Lawrence.

Lawrence took the coin, stepped up to the counter and said, “Got anything for a coin?”

The Simisear looked up, hawing. “Indeed, I do! Would you be interested in—oh!” He fell silent and pointed at the door. “I...I wasn’t expecting you...”

Lawrence looked behind him and restrained a groan. The Feraligatr and Rhyperior from before had thrown open the door and trudged toward the Simisear, scowling.

The Feraligatr stood next to Lawrence and exclaimed, “Yer rent’s past due, George. Where’s the money?”

George twiddled his fingers and made a nervous chuckle. “I-I don’t have it yet. Weren’t you supposed to come next month?”

The Rhyperior leaned on the wall, making it creak. “The Guildmaster thinks we’ve been too lenient on you. He demands payment today.” He snorted, brushing his knuckles on his chest. “Pay up, or we’ll be yer wreckin’ crew.”

George frantically rushed around the counter and fell to his knees in front of the Feraligatr. “Please, anything but that! This is all I have!”

The Feraligatr jabbed a claw at him and laughed uproariously. “Ya hear that Valder? He’s beggin’ us!”

Valder laughed himself, smacking the wall and making the entire structure shake. “He’s a funny one, ain’t he Derak?”

As George pleaded and the Guild Pokémon mocked his plight, Lawrence’s gaze grew harder. He noticed Cassia pointing to the door, mouthing, “Let’s go.”

He shook his head and pointed behind him. He clenched his fist, then turned around and tapped Derak on the shoulder. “Hey.” Cassia rushed toward him as the giant turned.

“What you want?” Derak grumbled.

“Leave the guy alone. He’s done nothing to you,” Lawrence explained. The Simisear shrunk back, gazing at Lawrence gratefully.

Derak growled and glared at Lawrence. “Yer tellin’ *us* what to do, chubby cheeks? What you gonna do, little Watchog? We’re part of the Guild!”

Cassia stepped in front of Lawrence. “He doesn’t know any better! He’s got memory loss!”

Lawrence clenched his teeth, restraining the urge to push her away. *‘How is she so helpful to me but not to George?’* he thought in aggravation.

Valder the Rhyperior eyed Cassia and stepped forward. “Hey...don’t we recognize you? Those eyes...”

Derak stopped him and rubbed his chin. “Hmm...maybe on to somethin’ there.” Cassia averted her eyes and shivered.

Valder pounded his fists together and growled. “Wait a minute, yer Cassia! Connivin’—”

Cassia gasped and suddenly disappeared from view. All looked around for where she had gone, but the Gardevoir left no trace.

The Feraligatr slammed the table and roared, “Blast it! She got away!” He glared at Lawrence and bared his teeth. “You! You’re with her, aren’t ya?” Lawrence moved toward the door cautiously.

Valder raised an arm and aimed it at Lawrence. “Better hold still unless ya wanna hole through yer skull.”

Lawrence looked back, wishing more than ever to know about Cassia’s origins. *“How in the world did she get on this Guild’s bad side, and how did she disappear like that?”* He held up his paws and strained a stern face. “I’m not going with you,” he stuttered.

Derak cackled and raised a fist. “I hate the mouthy ones. Let’s shut ya up a bit.” He threw a punch at Lawrence’s stomach. He flew into the wall, and felt a tingling sensation cover his body.

Valder and Derak’s jaws dropped. The Feraligatr raised a shaking claw and whispered, “Y-Yer a Lucario...yer supposed to be dead!”

Lawrence got up, groaning. “Yeah, well...I’m not.” He shakily came to his feet and ran through the open door, disoriented from Derak’s blow.

The Guild Pokémon stood dazed for a moment, then Valder slugged Derak on the arm and roared, “The boss’ll have our necks if he gets away!” They ran out the door, leaving George to huddle on the floor and hold his arms high.

“Thank Arceus...the Lucario have returned!”

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Lawrence ignored all the amazed faces he passed by, focused on reaching the forest, Grom’s waiting point. He heard a high-pitched whistle, then saw Pokémon pop out from the shadows, all wearing black armbands.

“You have to be kidding me,” Lawrence muttered as he turned into an alleyway. The Guild Pokémon followed him, roaring out threats to the fleeing Lucario.

A burst of flame blazed over Lawrence’s shoulder, singeing his fur. He looked back and saw a Growlithe shout, “Missed him!”

Lawrence took a passing crate and threw it at the Growlithe, knocking it underneath other Guild Pokémon. Many tripped over themselves, but a Weavile and Dodrio hopped over the heap and continued their chase.

He looked back again, noticing the remaining chasers. He looked to his sides, determined to lose them. He turned the corner, and the Weavile and Dodrio did the same.

They stopped at the tiny alcove and saw no trace of Lawrence. The Dodrio squawked, looking into the corners with its three heads. “Where’d he go?”

“He must’ve jumped the wall. Come on!” the Weavile shouted. They hopped over the nearby fence, much to the dismay of the Lopunny owner. They ran through the patch and continued through the alley, expecting to see Lawrence within several paces.

The Lucario rose up from the edge of the fence and looked toward the receding Guild Pokémon. He chuckled and thought, ‘*Works every time, just like in Sinnoh.*’ He turned around and crawled back over the fence, glancing back to ensure he lost them. He faced forward, and his paws were suddenly engulfed by Derak and Valder’s clutches.

Tightening his grip, the Rhyperior sneered and said, “The Guildmaster’s always lookin’ for someone new to beat up. I wonder how *you* ’ll end up?”

Derak bared his teeth. “Ya think we can do some of the job for him?”

Valder raised his other arm and aimed it at Lawrence's head. "I'm sure he'll treat a half-dead Lucario the same as any other!" Lawrence struggled to release their grip, cringing at his expected fate.

"Graaaawm!"

Black fists suddenly slammed Valder and Derak to the ground, pinning them underneath the weight. The cracks throughout Grom's body glowed fiercely, pouring crimson light across the ground.

He hovered just above the ground, with red jets of flame appearing at his feet. He raised his arms and held one out to Lawrence. "Ha-hawm!"

Lawrence hopped onto his arm and rubbed his wrists. "Thanks for the help." They rose into the sky, and with a burst of light, rocketed toward the forest.

Moments after, Derak moaned and clawed the wall, pulling himself upright. Valder pounded a fist and pushed, standing up and rubbing his head afterward.

Valder spotted the fading red streak of light left behind by Grom. He punched the wall and shouted, "You idiot! You should've seen that coming a mile off!"

"How was I supposed to know that some...thing, was gonna clobber us?" Derak retorted. He rubbed his eyes and growled. "But we can't just leave town either. Guildmaster's rules, ya know?"

They considered their options, then, at the same time, raised their heads. They looked at each other, smiling maliciously.

"He's off our land, so he's not our problem," Valder mused.

"He's the Guildmaster's problem," Derak chuckled.

A Weavile and Dodrio jumped over the fence, with the Weavile muttering, "Can't believe we lost--ack!" He shrunk back at the sight of the two commanders. "Captain! I-I didn't know you were there."

"W-We lost sight of the Lucario," the Dodrio stammered.

Derak held the Weavile by his neck and grinned. "Get a bird over to the Guild. Tell ole Gardner that there's a Lucario round here!"

"W-Will do b-boss! Would you...put me down?"

He dropped the Weavile and watched him scamper off, calling out for a messenger bird. The Dodrio fled from the captains, avoiding any further orders.

Valder chuckled and scratched his arm. "I'd love to see the look on that Lucario's face when Gardner catches him."

Derak looked up, a wicked grin spread across his face.

"For the glory of Arthus."

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Grom descended into a clearing opposite of where they had come from, his rocket-powered legs decreasing in thrust. Cassia sat beneath a tree in front of them, her bags behind her. She kept her head lowered, hiding her eyes.

Lawrence hopped down from Grom's arm and marched toward Cassia. "We have a lot to talk about! What happened back there, why'd those thugs want you, and how--"

Cassia raised her head, revealing a tear-stained face. Lawrence cut himself short, realizing how offensive he sounded.

He looked at Grom, who only made a tired moan, then stomped into the trees.

Cassia lowered her head again. "He needs to recharge after that flight."

Lawrence stood still for a few moments, then sat next to Cassia. She scooted away, but still leaned back on the tree.

Lawrence came closer, then stared at the ground and said, "I didn't know Grom could fly."

Cassia shrugged. "It takes a lot out of him, so he prefers to walk," she said with a slight croak.

Lawrence nodded his head slightly, then sighed and said, "I'm sorry I didn't listen to you back at the shop. I...I wanted to help that Simisear."

Cassia looked up and rubbed her eyes. "I know. I would've done the same...if it wasn't for those other Pokémon."

Lawrence turned toward her and asked, "Why do they want you? They seemed pretty angry once they realized who you were."



Cassia sighed and pulled the Arceist Tome out from the bag. “It’s because of this. The Guild’s been trying to convince Pokémon that Arceus doesn’t exist, that his laws are nonexistent, and that *they* wield true power.” She tightened her grip. “All because of Arthus.”

“Is it really worth the risk then? You said you wanted to teach Pokémon about the Tome, but if you’d die--”

“I won’t die doing what’s right!”

She stood up vehemently, throwing her arms back. “I’ve traveled over all Serenita, trying to bring Pokémon closer to Arceus, and I’ve had to deal with *them* at every turn! You don’t think I know what would happen to me if they caught me?”

Lawrence held his paws up defensively. “I didn’t mean to offend you! I’m just telling you what I think!”

Cassia raised her hand and opened her mouth, but promptly turned away. She breathed in deeply, then exhaled slowly. “Sorry...I didn’t mean to shout.” She slumped against the tree again. “I’ve done this for too long to just give up.”

Lawrence didn’t want to linger on the subject, so after waiting a minute, he said, “How’d you disappear like that?”

“Gardevoir can teleport. I guess you don’t remember, because of your amnesia.”

Lawrence nodded, remembering his protective lie. “Those thugs noticed I was a Lucario after I got punched into the wall. Why?”

“It’s...complicated. To put it simply, the Illusion Stone doesn’t work after you have hard contact. You can grab things and be touched, but once you have something like a punch, or you’re thrown into something,” Cassia waved her arm. “It’s done.”

Her explanation sounded familiar to Lawrence, but before he could focus his thoughts, Cassia said, “I like what you did for me back at those shops. I really needed a new bag, and I couldn’t have done that if you didn’t make a deal with that Kecleon.”

“You’re...you’re welcome.” Lawrence blinked and returned to staring at the ground.

Cassia stood up and picked up her bags. “Look, I know you don’t know much about me, but I hardly know you either. Today you helped me out, but if you want to know more about me, you have to prove that I can trust you.”

Lawrence wanted to comment out on his own ability to trust her, but instead he said, “I understand. I can’t tell you much about me either. You know...memory loss?”

Cassia smiled. “Right.” She held a bag out to him. “If you’re going to be with me, can you at least carry the supplies?” She narrowed her eyes. “I’m going to need more than a guy who gets me discounts.”

Lawrence smiled, restraining a laugh. A sobering thought came into his mind, and his smile faded. He put the bag over his shoulder and said, “Those Guild Pokémon said that I should be dead, since I’m a Lucario. What happened to them?”

Cassia gazed at the ground. “They’re all dead. Thanks to Arthus.”

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Far away from Lawrence, Cassia and Grom, along the western side of Serenita, a shadow watched from atop a tower. The canyon around the tower lay coated in lifeless brown grass, and the statues at its entrance reduced to rubble. The once-grand buildings that surrounded the tower—rotted to shambles. Miniscule shacks and huts cropped around the ruins, both Guild Pokémon and lowly citizens fighting for space in the desecrated plaza. Dust and decay permeated through the air, and only a low whistle of wind provided any sound but the silent cries of those who passed.

At the top of the tower, a Dusknoir sat in a chair in front of a desk, poring over a book. All around him on the walls of the room were shelves lined with various artifacts and other books, all covered in dust. The window provided the barest of light, but Gardner’s eye sent a menacing glow across the pages. Cobwebs and Bat Pokemon hung in the rafters, careful not to irritate the Guildmaster.

He turned the page, then rubbed the three jagged scars across his face with a grunt. One stretched across his eye, creating a silvery-white pupil across it. His free hand stretched and slammed the table. “When Arthus finds that traitorous wretch...”

Tap—tap—tap!

He looked up, spotting a Staravia sitting behind the window, a letter clutched in its beak. He closed the book and said, “Enter.” The Staravia pushed the window open and hurriedly flapped to Gardner, set down the letter on the book, then flew away, shutting the window behind it.

Gardner inspected the envelope, seeing his name in crude letters. He ripped it open and tore out the letter itself, his eye flitting across the sheet:

To: Guildmaster Gardner Dusknor

From: Captain Valder Rhyperior of Saunte

Subject: Lucario Sighting

Gardner made a curious grunt. “A Lucario? Arthus killed them all years ago.”

He read the rest of the letter, the scar across his eye flitting across the page. He crumpled it and threw it at a sleeping flock of Zubat, causing them to scatter through the various holes in the window. After their flaps dissipated, he sighed, continuing to read his book. *‘Arthus will be back before long...I’d rather delay the inevitable.’*

An hour passed, and Gardner found nothing of interest in *‘Legends of Equivos: Their Powers and Tales’*. He was about to give up reading it—until he saw a certain entry.

He clutched the book and held it up, his eye wide. “Yes...yes! This is *exactly* what we need!”

“What is exactly what we need?”

Gardner spun around and saw Arthus leaning against the wall near the stairs, studying his claws. The Zoroark brushed back his mane and said, “I came inside a few minutes ago, but you seemed deep in thought; I didn’t want to interrupt you.”

Gardner leapt off his chair and brought the book to Arthus. “I’ve found it! I’ve found someone who can fix the Seal!”

Arthus took the book and read the pages he left open. They depicted a round figure holding aloft two golden rings. Behind him, a violet creature extended its six arms, staring back at Arthus with emerald eyes. Around them, at the sides of the pages, it described their abilities.

As Arthus read, his smile grew wider and wider. At the end of his reading, he slammed the book closed and laughed, “Excellent work! Hoopa will do *very* nicely!” His face suddenly fell. “But there’s the matter of actually *finding* him. Even if I could go to Deitae—which I can’t with the Seal as it is—he won’t work with me.”

Gardner opened the book again and pointed out a passage. “Not if we follow this: ‘Hoopa was a mighty being in the distant past, granting wishes with hoops and his ability to mimic the gods. One day, he grew too prideful and challenged the Legends to numerous duels and succeeded, nearly killing them. As punishment, Arceus bound the majority of his power into the Prison Bottle, and left a calmer, humble form in his place. But his great power strives to rejoin him and is willing to grant a single wish to whoever releases him.’”

Arthus tapped his chin with a smirk. “So, if I find the Prison Bottle, I can repair the Seal and take Arceus.”

“That seems to be correct. I’ll search in the records for more details, but—”

“All well and good!” Arthus interrupted, tossing the book back to Gardner. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll be going.”

As Arthus started toward the stairs, Gardner reached out to him. “Wait, Lord Arthus!” The Zoroark twisted his head to him.

Gardner tapped his fingers against the book, then said, “A letter came from Saunte today. Captain Valder said he spotted Cassia there.”

Arthus leapt in front of Gardner and grabbed his shoulders. “*He did?* Why didn’t you say so earlier? I have to go there immediately!”

Gardner gently pushed Arthus away with the book. “There’s more. He said that after she disappeared, they found someone accompanying her.”

Arthus crossed his arms and held his head up “I am well aware that that accursed Golurk, Grom, travels with her. Don’t think I don’t remember.”

Gardner cringed. “No, there was someone else. More specifically...a...*Lucario*.”

The Zoroark suddenly punched the wall, his eyes wide and breathing quickening. “A *what?*”

Gardner tossed the book on the desk, holding up his hands. “A Lucario, but—”

Arthus roared, slashing the wall with Life-infused claws, leaving jagged burns across the stone. *“I killed them! I killed them all! And now one just **shows up!**”* His last statement finished with him slamming a wooden shelf, instantly breaking it and spreading its contents across the floor.

He forced himself to take deep breaths, closing his eyes and clutching his head. He soon calmed, holding himself up in a dignified manner. “Did Captain Valder say where they were going?”

Gardner let out his saved breath in relief. “No, since the Lucario managed to flee with Cassia. He had apparently been knocked down by Grom before he could determine their direction.”

Arthus sighed, rubbing his face. “I guess I’ll have to figure it out myself then.” He continued down the stairs, then stopped, looking up at Gardner. “Search for the Prison Bottle’s location. I’ll...I’ll see if I can take care of Cassia before then. I’ll be getting ready.” He exited, the door closing with a click.

Gardner sat down on his chair again, then took a thicker, aged book labeled, ‘Guild Index’ and scanned through it. As he passed through titles of other books, he thought, *“At least now his attention won’t be divided...hopefully.”*

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Lawrence lay on the grass away from Cassia, who slept behind Grom’s enormity. He typed away on the Pokédex his adventure within the town, growing more used to typing with paws with each word. *‘This would make a fantastic story when I get back—if I get back.’*

He tapped out of the notepad and searched for an access point again, receiving the taunting sign of failure, just like his previous attempts. Discouraged, he slid the Pokédex back into its case, and gazed at the stars of Equivos.

Sighing, he attempted to trace any constellations. He gave up and thought, *‘Can’t see any from Sinnoh. Yet another sign that this isn’t my world.’* He stared at the sky.

*‘Reminds me of my move from Unova from Sinnoh, three years ago.’* He grimaced. *‘From*

*small towns and false beliefs to big cities and closed-off people.*’ Sighing, he looked up. *‘And now I’m back.’*

Worse, he himself was a Pokémon. *‘How did I change? Why? Did some higher being do this?’* Lawrence groaned. *‘Look at me, blaming some god.’*

He sighed and closed his eyes. *‘Then there’s this whole business with Arthus. Cassia loathes him, but why? How did she come to preach Arceism? How does such a religion exist here, despite the odds?’* He rubbed his face and groaned. *‘This place just wasn’t what I was expecting. All the Pokémon talk, but they also act so...human.’*

He opened his eyes again and studied his paws. *‘I’m a Pokémon now, one that Equivos hasn’t seen since Arthus supposedly killed them all.’* He lowered his paws. *‘Does that mean that I’m unique in two ways in this world?’*

He gave up asking these questions and decided to fall asleep. *‘Despite being a Lucario, I’m just...tired out.’* Thoughts of him insulting the species came to mind as he drifted out of consciousness.

## Chapter 5

*Lawrence stood on a desolate peak, crouching behind a series of rocks. He watched a family of Furret huddle around one of the few berry bushes in the area, greedily taking the berries. He smiled. **'I love this place. I can see just how Arceus made Pokémon: to be like us.'***

*The ground rumbled, and Lawrence looked up. The Furret scurried away as a Gabite and Nidoking burst into the area, wrestling each other with vicious claws, each attempting to get the edge over the other.*

*Lawrence backed away, then tripped on a rock, falling onto his back. The roaring Pokémon drew closer, the Gabite landing a vicious slash on the Nidoking.*

*Lawrence scrambled to his feet, running from the scene. The Nidoking stomped the ground and punched the Gabite, the rocks wavering under his might. Lawrence wobbled unsteadily and fell once more.*

*The Nidoking swept the Gabite's chest with his tail, sending it flying over Lawrence. Dust and gravel ballooned around the impact, and Lawrence restrained a cough as to not be discovered.*

*The dust settled, and Lawrence gazed directly at the eye of the Gabite. He expected to see some sort of human emotion—anger, fear, pain—but nothing was there except a blank, staring abyss of black and gold. Nothing remotely human lay in this Gabite.*

*It hissed and leapt on top of the Nidoking, clamping onto its back with its claws. It stumbled away, and Lawrence finally ran from the scene, rushing down the mountain and returning to the alcove he had discovered only minutes ago.*

*He kept his hands close, almost praying to Arceus to thank him for saving him. The memory of the Gabite returned to him, however. The eyes—they defied Arceus' teachings of Pokémon. They were supposed to be creatures that felt just as he felt, but instead they were inhuman beings that held no emotion.*

~~~~~

He opened his eyes, realizing once more that he was a Lucario. A Pokémon, only with humanity. That dream, a memory from years ago, was the start of his separation from Arceism.

Leaving that thought he pulled out his Pokédex and tapped a Poke Ball icon, checking Grom and Cassia's location to ensure they were asleep. When certain, he scrolled through the numerous pictures of Pokémon, then finally selected a Lucario.

Reading through the information on his current species, the events with Derak and Valder came to mind. *'I have no idea how to fight like this, and I can't rely on Cassia and Grom to save me forever.'*

The page in the main Pokédex function, however, gave little detail on Lucario fighting styles. There was plenty on behavior, common locations and type advantages, but there was no mention of common Lucario tactics.

Lawrence turned off the Pokédex and put it away, considering what he'd do. *'I'm a prime target without Cassia's 'Illusion Stone', what with me being the last Lucario. I don't want to leave her—right now, at least—but if we get separated—like before—I want to do more than run.'* He frowned and stood up. *'Especially if another Pokémon's in danger.'*

He shook his head and pressed his paws against his face. The memory returned. *'That day on Mount Coronet.'* He removed his paw and shook his head. *'Arceus isn't real. How could a benevolent god make such savage Pokémon?'*

He removed his paws and scowled. *'How was I to know that Arceism was here? That I couldn't get back? I'd be back home by now if it wasn't for that wormhole.'* He cringed, remembering the experiments the Pokémon in Facility D were forced to go through.

‘Then again, maybe bringing a Pokémon back wasn’t the best idea...especially after meeting them myself.’

“Grraawwm?”

Lawrence flinched and spun around, then saw Grom standing several inches from him. “Gah!” He fell back and watched Grom chuckle in amusement. “How did you do that? You shake the ground whenever you move!”

The giant cocked his head, then pointed at Lawrence’s Pokédex. “Gro-ho-hawm?”

Lawrence looked down at it, then covered it with his paw. “It’s nothing. Just something I carry with me, that’s all.” As Grom studied him, Lawrence thought, *‘If I tell Grom about where I and the Pokédex came from, he’ll surely tell Cassia, then leave me because I’ll sound insane. I can’t let that happen, not when I can’t protect myself!’*

“Graw-hawm!” Grom shouted, reaching his hand toward it.

Lawrence stepped away. “No!”

“What’s going on?”

Grom and Lawrence turned and saw Cassia holding the two bags, cocking her head curiously. “We won’t be able to make it to Barash in the afternoon unless we get going now.”

Grom pointed at the Pokédex and stamped his foot. “Grom-gro-graw!”

“That black thing? Why do you want to know what it is?”

“Owm-gro,” Grom stated, his eyes turning a shade darker.

Cassia stiffened, then forced a slight smile, holding her hand out to Lawrence. “Grom has some...concerns. Can you...let us see the box?”

“Why do you want to know? It’s just something I keep with me is all,” Lawrence replied, crossing his arms.

“I just don’t want Grom to get the wrong idea about you,” Cassia replied. Her smile faded. “I don’t either.”

Keeping his paw on the case, Lawrence thought about her statement. He sighed, and reluctantly pulled out the Pokédex, and set it in Cassia’s hand, the screen black. “It’s nothing. How many times do I have to tell you?”

The Gardevoir inspected it thoroughly, pulling open the case and pressing the buttons, all with no effect. “Hmph.” She looked up at Grom. “See? There’s nothing from the Guild on this.” She gave it back to Lawrence and crossed her arms. “Where’d you get it? I haven’t seen anything like it.”

Lawrence sighed, grateful that he had turned it off. “I don’t really remember. I’ve had it with me since I hit my head on that tree.”

“Don’t you mean when you fell out of a tree?”

Cursing inwardly, Lawrence laughed and nodded. “Yeah, that’s right. See, my memory isn’t all that great.”

Cassia looked up at Grom, who stared blankly back. She looked back at Lawrence, then held out a bag. “Tell us when you start remembering things. You seem like a good guy, but...” She sighed. “Grom brings up some valid points.”

Lawrence accepted the bag and swung it over his shoulder. *‘I held them off that time, but I can’t keep this up forever; they’ll find out unless I’m careful.’*

They traveled along the well-worn path, the mood grimmer than the previous morning. Grom didn’t hum, and Cassia led with no zeal. The cheer of a new companion had faded, and now Lawrence felt that they were suspicious of him.

He took a glance back at Grom, who lowered his head and growled. Lawrence grimaced and faced forward, his first meeting coming back to haunt him. *‘Grom doesn’t seem to be trust me...if anything, he’s going to hurt me sooner or later if I do the wrong thing at the wrong time.’*

As they ambled along, Lawrence studied the onyx Golurk. *‘He seemed nice enough before, so what’s changed between us?’* He shifted his gaze to the Gardevoir. *‘Maybe it’s when I spoke with Cassia the past few nights? She wasn’t in the best mood afterward, so he might think I’m attacking her verbally. He’s her guardian, so of course he’d be concerned.’* Lawrence held a paw over his neck. *‘I don’t want to find out what happens to Pokémon he thinks are a danger to Cassia.’*

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The autumn breeze turned warm as the falling leaves turned to fine grains. Grass shifted to bare ground, coated with a thin layer of sand. Cacti sprouted in place of maple and pine, and the thick scent of sap was replaced with a dry, earthy smell.

A series of ridges sprouted up in the horizon. Lawrence continued walking forward, eventually seeing that it was a series of low-roofed buildings, colored a dull brown.

“Is that the town? Barash, right?” Lawrence asked. It didn’t appear as developed as Saunte; the crumbled bricks of walls and the disheveled remnants of homes dotted the surrounding landscape, and the sand whipped wildly through the air. No Pokémon could be seen from his vantage point.

Cassia looked back, her expression unrevealing of her emotions. “Yes. We’ll go inside, but this time, we’re going to teach Pokémon about the Tome.”

Lawrence’s stomach churned. *‘If I’m going to hear more stories from that book, I’d rather stay with Grom.’*

The Golurk grumbled irritably to himself, glaring at Lawrence. Cassia pursed her lips and exclaimed. “No, he may *not* stay with you! You might not trust him, but I do.” She turned away. “For now. I don’t want you scaring him off.”

Lawrence edged away from Grom and toward Cassia. *‘On the other hand, stories are safer than Golurk.’*

~~~~~

Deathly silence prevailed through Barash. Dust whipped through open windows, and shutters flapped in the wind. Underneath Cassia’s and Lawrence’s feet, bare remains of wood and stone crunched. The pale brown buildings stood strong against the warm gale, protecting a mere shell of what it once was.

Cassia studied the structures warily, keeping her arms at her waist. “Strange...last I heard, Barash was a busy city with no Guild influence.”

A sharp crack came from the roof of a building. They whipped their heads in its direction, seeing the fleeing remnant of a black garment.

“When did you hear that?”

Padded footsteps darted across another rooftop, and several figures rushed past.

“A few weeks ago,” Cassia replied, taking steps back. “Where’s all the Pokémon?”

A tiny brown-furred head suddenly popped up from behind a wall. “Get away from here!” she hoarsely cried.

Silver barbs and streaks of lightning suddenly erupted from the rooftops, all aimed toward Lawrence and Cassia. The Gardevoir elegantly dodged all the projectiles--circling her way to the entrance--while Lawrence ran away, struck by several of the thorns and bolts.

They hid behind the wall and waited for the assault to end. When stray electricity could no longer be seen, Lawrence wheezed and rubbed his back. “What just happened?”

Cassia craned her head, studying the retreating Pokémon above. “Cacturne and Galvantula. They must have taken over.” She looked back at the home of the one that had tried to warn them. “That Eevee is probably one of the few that survive here.” She turned back to Lawrence, determined. “We have to help them.”

Lawrence shook his head and crossed his arms. “We have no way to attack them! I don’t know--remember, anything a Lucario can do, and there’s obviously too many to fight single-handedly.”

Cassia gave him a cold look, then sighed, shaking her head. “You’re...you’re right. We can’t help them.” She walked toward a black pillar in the distance—Grom—looking back at Barash.

Lawrence followed, feeling that they had made the right choice.

~~~~~

They reached Grom, and Lawrence thought they would simply turn back on the trail and go to the coastline, where they’d hopefully go to their next destination, Cretea--where he hoped there would be a dimensional weakness.

Cassia sat on the sand and explained, “We’ll be sleeping here for the night.”

Lawrence’s jaw dropped. “But it’s not even sunset! We can still cover a lot of ground!”

Cassia calmly pulled out her blanket and said, “We’re staying here, and that’s final. Right Grom?”

“Grawm,” the Golurk replied, nodding his head. He tramped toward a patch of dark soil, then planted his feet under the sand. Red tendrils extended from beneath, and Life energy began to seep into Grom’s frame.

Lawrence stepped away and let Cassia set up the blanket beneath them. “But what about getting to the coast? There’s nothing left here!”

“Yes, there is: Pokémon. Pokémon controlled by Arthus and his followers, with no one left to protect them.” Cassia pulled out the Arceist Tome and opened it, searching its pages. “We’re not leaving until all those Guild Pokémon taken care of.”

“How? There must be hundreds of those guys back there! We can’t do that,” Lawrence refuted.

Cassia looked up and stated. “Arceus will help them. He’s done it before.”

Lawrence restrained a sarcastic ‘ha’. “How?”

She looked up with a puzzled expression. “Sending someone, of course.”

“Do you really believe that?” he replied.

“I *know* it. Why are you so negative all of a sudden?” Cassia asked, standing up.

Lawrence struggled for a reasonable explanation, saying, “Because...because...”

“Because what?”

Lawrence stood still. “Because what he supposedly said isn’t true.” He tapped his head. “I remember an experience I had. He doesn’t lie, yet he did.”

Cassia’s eyes widened, and she tightened her grip on the Tome. “You sound like a Guild Pokémon.”

“Graw, graw!” Grom shouted from his viewpoint.

Lawrence stepped back, realizing his mistake. “No, that’s not what I—”

“No. It makes sense now.” She stepped forward, setting the Tome on the ground. Furrowing her brow, she said, “You were sent by those Captains in Saunte. You thought you could earn my trust, then lead me in so they could capture me. When you failed, you kept on following me, that way the same thing could happen in Barash.” She nodded to Grom. “He’s been suspicious of you since we met, but I wanted to trust you, since you

were a Lucario.” She turned back to Lawrence, scowling. “But now I see that even Lucario can be loyal to Arthus.”

Lawrence shook his head vigorously, stepping closer. “No, that’s not true! I’m not—”

Cassia slapped his face, so quickly he could only feel the stinging left behind. As he reeled back, she glared at him and growled, “Get away from me.”

Lawrence stared wide-eyed at her for a moment, holding his cheek, then hardened his gaze. “Fine! I’ll go!” He turned away and snorted. “And here I thought we were friends.” Cassia inhaled sharply, then Lawrence ran for the trees, dust billowing behind him.

Grom pounded closer, setting a hand on Cassia’s shoulder. “Gro-grawm. Hawm.”

The Gardevoir slumped against Grom, closing her eyes. “I know...it’s for the best,” she sighed. “Keep watch for him. I don’t think he’ll come back, but...just in case.”

Grom raised his head, his eyes glowing more brightly.

“Graawm.”

~~~~~

Lawrence halted near the fringe, when dusk fell on the desert. He punched a nearby tree in frustration, making it shake vigorously and his fist scream in pain. He shook it wildly and seethed. *‘Me? A Guild Pokémon? I’m not a bully like that Feraligatr and Rhyperior were!’* He rubbed his cheek again. *‘And then that slap...’*

He whipped the Pokédex off his shoulder and checked for a weakness. No luck.

He silently cursed and stashed it away again. *‘I don’t need Cassia or Grom; I just need a way home, where I don’t have to be worried about being a Pokémon or paired with zealots...where I can be myself.’*

He sat down and leaned against the sickened tree, waiting for nightfall. *‘Why’d I even go with Cassia in the first place? I know how to take care of myself; I survived a week alone around Mount Coronet in high school!’*

The Electabuzz and Machoke came to mind, and their statement about him. *‘They said the Lucario are all dead.’* He looked down at the Illusion Stone, studying the black rock’s numerous cracks. *‘Even with this, I’m still a target. I can’t avoid everyone while I*

try to find a way back. A Watchog isn't much a threat, so they could jump me and discover who I am—then send me to the Guild.'

He cringed, then thought, *'Then there's this Arthus character. Cassia treats him like a threat, someone to avoid even speaking of. I don't necessarily agree, but there's definitely something...malevolent surrounding him.'* He held a paw over his chest. *'Like an Ariados waiting to strike.'*

Lawrence yawned. *'I wish I could stay with Cassia, but it's probably better like this. For now, I should head for the coast. There might be a way back around there.'*

He soon fell asleep, falling into murky shadows.

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*Darkness surrounded Lawrence on all sides. He was his human self again, looking toward a hooded figure. Red claws hung from its arms, and a red mane swished down its back.*

*"You've done it again, strange one. And this time, you were so daring to say that I'm not a threat." The figure turned toward Lawrence, his eyes covered by a vague shadow. "Let's discuss, shall we?" It faded, then fiery red spheres surrounded Lawrence.*

*Lawrence jerked in surprise, keeping his arms away from the burning crimson lights. "Who are you?"*

*A sharp cackle emanated through the air. "Who are **you**?" Lawrence felt a prick at his shoulder, and upon looking down, saw the sharpened claws of a Zoroark.*

*The figure spun around him, and the crimson flames circled as well. "A faithless coward. A lying fraud." The figure stopped, revealing a Zoroark, his eyes still dark. His hands clamped around Lawrence's head in the blink of an eye. "...Lawrence is it?" Lawrence shook, wishing desperately to bat away the hands, but found himself frozen with fear.*

*The Zoroark bored into his mind, until suddenly flinching and bellowing, "You've seen Cassia! And that Golurk as well!" He kicked Lawrence to the ground and loomed over him. His eyes came into view—cold, pale blue eyes, flickering left and right as he*

*studied the man. “But they’re not with you.” He held his claws underneath Lawrence’s chin. “Where **are** they?”*

*Lawrence backed away, but the circling flames stopped him. “W-Who are you?”*

*The Zoroark paused, then grinned. “I thought it would have been obvious by now, **Lawrence.**” A ball of red fire grew in his palm. “I am Arthus Zoroark. Many call me the Usurper.” He aimed the sphere toward Lawrence. “And I very much exist.” The sphere rocketed from his palm toward Lawrence’s chest.*

***Boom!***

~~~~~

Lawrence cried out and opened his eyes, then held a paw against his heart, ensuring that Arthus hadn’t dealt the killing blow. When this fear finally fled, he sighed waveringly. *‘It was just a dream.’*

He studied the ground, then leapt up at the sight of receding tendrils of rust-colored mist. As they sunk beneath the ground, Lawrence thought, *‘I must have slept on top of another Life Deposit.’*

Boom!

He whipped his head toward Barash. Bright orange light poured over the ruined walls, and the shouts of Pokémon carried through the air. The darkness of night only made the light even bolder.

Lawrence hastily came to his feet. *‘There must’ve been an accident...or an attack! They need help!’*

He turned away, closing his eyes. *‘But Grom is keeping watch. He’d surely attack me if I went close to Cassia again, if he isn’t already in Barash. And if he’s there, he might think I’m helping the Guild.’*

He looked back, screams resonating through the night. *‘But does that matter?’*

A jet of flame rose from the center of Barash, and Lawrence ran toward the town. As he sprinted across the sand, he thought, *‘Who cares what Grom thinks; I’m just doing what’s right!’*

He ran past a black pillar, ignoring it. Two sharp-cornered lights sparked in them, and the mighty limbs shook. “Hawwm.” Two jets of crimson fire suddenly threw it into the air. It leaned forward, following Lawrence.

Lawrence ran through the gate and stopped, taking in the fiery tragedy surrounding him. The thatched roofs of the buildings were aflame, weakening the already-brittle walls of the town. Galvantula and Cacturne surrounded a black-furred Pokémon whipping around in the center, striking down all who came near.

It stopped momentarily, slowing down enough for Lawrence to see what it was: a Zoroark wearing a white mask, the eyes glowing red.

The Zoroark turned toward Lawrence and lowered its head, stabbing a Galvantula’s leg. The spider moaned and fell to the ground, weakened by the red light siphoned from it. the Zoroark pointed at Lawrence, its white mask reflecting the golden flames back toward him.

He froze, the recent horror of Arthus returning to him. *‘He...he looks like Arthus. He doesn’t hesitate, and he’s attacking all the Guild Pokémon. Why?’*

A scream pierced through the air, and Lawrence turned to its direction. He ran into the alleyways, dodging the flames and running toward a cracked building.

The rough stone, surrounded by rising fire from the wood and thatch, began to crumble under the heat. The entire front side lay covered with burning timbers, knocked down from the house just in front of it.

“Help! Someone, please! We’re trapped!” a desperate voice called from within.

Lawrence sized up the building and scowled. *‘How? The timbers are too large, and they’re on **fire**! What can I do?’* He ran to the window. *‘I’ll try from here!’*

“Graaww!”

A black fist slammed the ground in front of Lawrence, then another slammed him into the wall, cracking it. The jagged openings in Grom’s body poured with crimson light, and the eyes trailed with rusted mist. “Graw-hawm!”

Lawrence groaned and came to his feet. “Someone’s trapped in there! You have to help them!”

Grom threw another punch, which Lawrence ducked under. “Gro-hum! Graw!”

Lawrence ran around the giant, but abruptly stopped when his tail was suddenly yanked. He fell back, then looked at Grom’s fist clamped around his tail.

Grom raised a fist over Lawrence, then shook his head. “Grooh...”

Lawrence looked at the house and shouted, "But let me help those Pokémon stuck in there! You can't leave them to die!" Searching for another reason, Lawrence added, "You can hit me all you want after that. You can say that I'm a Guild Pokémon all you want and make me go on my own! Just let me help them!"

Coughing echoed from the building, and Grom’s eyes suddenly faded to a dull glow. After a moment of stillness, he released Lawrence’s tail, then helped him onto his feet. Lawrence faced him, then the giant knelt down, lowering his head. “Grawm...” he moaned.

A sickening crack emanated from the roof, followed by a scream. Lawrence ran toward the timbers and exclaimed, “I know, you’re sorry, but please, help!” He reached toward the blazing wood but yanked his paws back from the heat.

Grom stood up and pounded his fists, making a slight bow. He stepped in front of the wood, pried his fingers underneath, then lifted them up, grunting.

Lawrence ran through the entry, his eyes watering in the streaming smoke. Huddled in the corner were two Minccino and a Cincino. The Minccino hugged each other and looked up at Lawrence, frightened, while the Cincino lay on the floor, her head bleeding.

Pieces of straw and wood fell from the ceiling, disintegrating from the heat. The timbers cracked and popped, sagging further as the stone deteriorated.

Lawrence studied the room swiftly and exclaimed, “Get out, now! There’s no time!”

“But, Mom’s not waking up!” the larger Minccino replied.

“Lucario...” the smaller gasped.

Lawrence slung the Cincino over his shoulders and shouted, “I’ve got her, just get out of here!”

The two Minccino rushed out of the room, and Lawrence did as well. The roof finally collapsed, the sudden impact forcing Lawrence to the ground. The walls imploded, sending a plume of dust into the surrounding area.

Coughing, Lawrence stood up, blearily searching for the Minccino. “Is everyone alright?”

“Grawwm!”

Grom emerged from the cloud, the Minccino sitting in his hands.

The smaller Minccino leapt from his hand and exclaimed, “Mama!” She ran underneath Lawrence and hopped up and down, reaching futilely for her mother.

The larger Minccino leaned out, studying her mother with concern. “Is she alright?”

Lawrence set the Cincino on the ground, noticing her staggered breathing. “She’s alive, but we need to get away from here.” He cringed when another innocent screamed. “How in the world did this happen?”

“This strange Pokémon showed up and said that those Guild Pokémon needed to leave. When they didn’t, he beat them up, and that mean old Toka Turtonator--the Guild’s boss--made everything on fire!” the older Minccino exclaimed.

Lawrence sighed in relief. *‘He was only trying to help everyone here...but still, why?’*

Grom leaned forward and set the Minccino down. “Gro-howm.” He pointed to the other houses.

Lawrence nodded. “Right, you go see if there’s anyone else, I’ll get them out.” He picked up the Cincino and ran toward the exit. “Follow me!” The Minccino followed, gazing at the flames around them fearfully.

Sitting on the wall, the masked Zoroark watched Lawrence run from the town, the Cincino family in paw. A slight smile appeared, then he leapt from the wall and toward a Turtonator spouting a flamethrower from his snout.

Toka stamped his foot and snorted. “You can’t defeat me, traitor!”

The Zoroark’s smile faded. He held his arm out, causing a growing orb of Life Energy to appear.

He slung it at Toka, who rolled out of the way. Toka charged toward the Zoroark, spitting a giant flame ball from his snout.

The Zoroark slid underneath the flame ball and Toka, slashing the legs of the Turtonator. He then whipped around and threw a Life Sphere toward Toka's back. The Turtonator erupted in a burst of flame, throwing back the Zoroark.

The Zoroark slid against the ground, the particles making up his shield disintegrating in the air. Toka flopped against the ground face-first, moaning in pain. The Zoroark flipped him onto his back, then stood on his chest.

Despite Toka's groans, the Zoroark leaned in close and lifted his mask.

"For Arceus."

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The flames across Barash faded, and the collapsing structures halted their descent. Little more than forty Pokémon stood around the smoking husk, nursing their wounds and caring for their young. Grom marched through the city, gathering the remaining Guild Pokémon and restraining them.

Lawrence fell to the ground, clutching his arm. Blackened fur surrounded his paw, and patches of red cropped around his body. A smoky scent hovered around him, and his eyes struggled to stay open.

He coughed and looked back to Barash, his vision fading. *'I...I should have been more careful.'* He struggled to see the Pokémon he saved. *'But at least...everyone's safe.'*

He fell flat on the ground, falling unconscious.

~~~~~

Mumbling voices and excited whispers floated in Lawrence's mind, stirring him to wakefulness. He opened his eyes and rubbed his head, feeling a peculiar roughness under his paw. He looked at his arm and noticed lengths of blue-stained fabric wrapped around it. His legs and side had the same gauze, soothing the harsh burns.

The Pokémon from Barash surrounded Grom, with many huddling around his legs and looking up. Lawrence stood up, then started to stretch. His burns protested the movement with a sharp spike of pain, and he pulled his arms close to avoid further harm.

The Minccino from before, who stood at the rear of the crowd, looked back and gasped. “The Lucario’s awake!” The crowd turned their gaze to Lawrence, studying him with a cross of wonder and awe.

He smiled weakly and waved a paw. “H-Hello.” He pushed a paw against his head, groaning.

Pokémon shifted as one made their way through the center, saying, “Let me through, please, he’s my friend!” The Pokémon around her parted, revealing Cassia, her Tome held in front of her chest.

She came close to Lawrence, checking the bandages. “You were badly burned when we found you out here. I thankfully had some Rawst berries, so I was able to make a healing gauze for you.” She looked back at the crowd momentarily. “I was...wrong about you. You helped everyone get out of the town while that Zoroark handled all the Guild Pokémon, including their captain, Toka Turtonator.” She shook her head sadly. “They’re all tied up now. They had their Life drained from them, so they’ll be too weak to do anything for a long time.”

Lawrence laughed with her, reaching out for her hand. “Thanks for...understanding, I guess. I didn’t act the way I should after you said those things, so...”

Cassia pulled back her hand, nodding. “It’s alright.” She turned back to the town Pokémon and said, “Do you want to learn about the Tome? I was just teaching them about it while you were sleeping.”

The two Minccino ran over and tugged on Lawrence’s arms, with the elder one exclaiming, “Come on, it’ll be fun!”

Despite his feelings toward Arceism, he shrugged and followed the Minccino. ‘*Why not? At the least, it’ll help me know more about Equivos.*’

He carefully stepped through the crowd and sat on a rock, wincing as he moved. A Helioptile leaned toward him and asked, “How’d you hide from the Guild? I thought they killed all the Lucario.”

Lawrence didn’t know how to answer, but before he could attempt to explain, Grom clanged a fist against his chest, catching the Pokémon’s attention.

Cassia cleared her throat, then opened the Tome. “Today I’m here to tell you about a Legend that the Guild today tried to hide from you, by destroying the other copies of the Tome, and silencing any who dare talk about him. His name is Arceus, and he created Equivos and all the Pokémon that live here.” She hesitated, turning to the wizened Grumpig to her right. “I must warn you that the Guild is trying to erase Arceus’ name, including by killing those who teach about him. Are you willing to suffer whatever may happen if they find out I was here?”

The Grumpig hawed. “They burned down our homes and took everything we had. As former mayor of Barash, I think I speak for everyone in saying, ‘What else can they do to us?’” The other town Pokémon nodded in agreement, with several calling out for Cassia to teach.

Cassia nodded, turning her gaze to the Tome. “Very well. I have two lessons for you today: one for the adults, and one for the children.”

“First, I will read a passage from Dictations 4, from roughly 1700 years ago:”

I, Arceus, creator of Equivos, declare that all Life is precious unto me, and that all who possess it must respect it in all ways to return to the Tree of Life.

All must treat the other like thyself, whether it be through dealings, relations, conversation, or discussion.

For I say that unless this be done alongside my other commandments, they shall not be saved upon the Day of Destruction, in the final days of my greatest creation.

However, those who do follow my commands will be taken to the Tree of Life, home of all who have borne Life and have fallen by Time or Destruction. Then, shall they be taken to the Realm of the Keeper, before the Final Desolation.

Cassia continued teaching the adults, but Lawrence shut her out. ‘Those words...they sound like they’re from Sinnoh’s book, the Arcean Texts.’ He sighed and set his chin against his paw, leaning on his leg. ‘Why’d I think this was a good idea?’

Despite his reaction, the Minccino at his feet smiled wide, while the Krookodile to his right began to tear up. All around him, Pokémon listened and accepted Cassia’s message

from Arceus. Lawrence agreed with Cassia's thoughts, but thought, *'All good words, but they can't be from Arceus. That's what's wrong with them.'*

Cassia stopped reading Dictations and held the book out to the audience. Grom lowered her to the ground, and the children drew closer.

She pointed at the picture in the pages: a Riolu walking alongside a Lucario in a set of leather clothing, in a dense forest. "I'll now tell you a story of a young Riolu named Laryon, and his uncle, Matheus Lucario.

"Laryon was an obedient Riolu, but one day, he forgot to follow one of Matheus' rules while traveling: never explore without checking for signs of wild Pokémon.

"In his time, wild Pokémon were *everywhere*, and many were dangerous." Cassia turned the page, showing Laryon standing in front of a large cave. "He entered a cave, ignoring the bones and smell that came from it. Inside, he discovered..." She flipped the page.

"A den of Charizard!" she exclaimed, forcing eeps of shock from her audience. Over a dozen Charizard lounged on massive boulders, spitting flames in their sleep and clutching bones in their claws. Laryon stood at the entrance with a face of shock.

"He didn't know what to do after that; the Charizard would have heard him if he walked out, and he couldn't fight them on his own. He was trapped."

Cries of fear and anticipation erupted amongst the children, all wanting to hear what Laryon did.

Cassia smiled, flipping the page. "Matheus felt his aura nearby and realized that he was in trouble. He ran to the cave where Laryon was--just as the Charizard woke up." Matheus ran across the forest, moving toward the distant cave.

The page turned, and Matheus was shown standing in front of Laryon, enclosed in blue light as the Charizard dove in for their attack. "Matheus was a master of Aura, and the founder of Lucario Guild, the Pokémon that protected us before it was taken over by Arthus Zoroark. He was a champion of many battles and was not afraid of the flight of Charizard."

Astounded ‘oohs’ and ‘ahs’ came as she flipped between pictures of Matheus fighting the Charizard with spheres of blue light, his fists, or glowing poles, all without taking a hit.

She stopped on the last page, showing Matheus holding Laryon on his shoulders, walking away from the cave, where Charizard lay on the ground, defeated. “Matheus saved Laryon that day and reminded him to always remember the commands given to him by his elders.”

She closed the Tome. “As you all know, Laryon would grow up to be a wonderful Lucario, saving many from wild Pokémon, Outlaws, and natural disasters--all because Matheus taught him the ways of Arceus.” She stood up, holding the Tome to her side. “Remember, Arceus’ word is law. Like Laryon, we must remember what he says to avoid calamity, like the Charizard. Some can save us from our mistakes, like Matheus, but on the last day, we must be obedient to him.”

Dozens of questions sprung upon her, whether they be about menial areas of life, to the biggest questions one could offer. She struggled to answer them all, even with Grom gently pushing them away.

Lawrence walked out of the crowd and toward the woods, slowly as to avoid hurting himself. *‘They’re so much like the congregations back home.’* He looked back briefly, then shook his head. *‘If I stay, they’ll just ask more about me—like if I’m an Arceist.’* He shuffled forward and sighed. *‘But I’m not, so why stay around?’*

Cassia laughed weakly as she parted from the crowd, waving to all the Pokémon. “Thank you so much, but I really must be going! There’s other Pokémon who need me!”

Grom pushed through, carefully shaking off a Minccino clinging to his arm. “Gro-howm...” he scolded, wagging a finger at her.

“Big...” she replied.

Grom chuckled, pushing it back toward her brother. “Gra-ham!” He stomped toward Cassia, looking over her shoulder.

Cassia pulled out a small book from her bag and, with a bit of charcoal, wrote 'Barash' in a page covered with other names. "Just one more left until we go to Cretea." She put the book away, noticing Lawrence walking on his own.

She looked up to Grom, then back to Lawrence. "Let's catch up to him."

"Gro-gro!" He picked up Cassia and burst into the air, rocketing toward Lawrence.

He abruptly stopped just in front of him, quaking the ground when he fell. Cassia hopped down from his hand and sighed, wiping her brow. "I haven't had such an enthusiastic crowd before! Kind of tired me out, really." She noticed his dark expression, then her smile dissipated. "What's wrong?"

Lawrence crossed his arms and sighed. "Sorry that I left. I just...I just don't like crowds." He thought carefully, then said, "I didn't have a very popular belief where I came from."

"You remember more." Cassia bit her lip, then said, "I should've been more considerate before. You really have amnesia, don't you?"

Lawrence felt a pang of guilt, then nodded his head. "Yes. Yes, I do." He rubbed his side, scratching at the itchy bandage. "Not being an Arceist made me a target. The other...Pokémon, told me that I was crazy, that I hated them, that I was..." He cringed. "That I was on my own."

Cassia looked up at Grom with a surprised expression, then back at Lawrence. "I...wasn't expecting that. I've heard about Arceists being driven out, considering what the Guild's done, but never a non-believer having that happen."

"I...lived somewhere where that was the case," Lawrence replied. Not wanting to blow his cover, he said, "So, that Zoroark back there...back in town. Is he related to Arthus?"

Cassia flinched, then held her shoulder. "What makes you say that?"

"It's that red light he used. I...I had another dream about Arthus. He somehow read my mind, and he wanted to know where you were" Cassia stared at him, wide-eyed. He continued, "He looked like he was going to kill me with red fire. It looked like what Grom takes from the ground...Life. Not all Zoroark can use it, right?"

Cassia blew her breath out slowly, then said, “Yes...he’s related to Arthus. From what I’ve heard, he ran away from him to serve Arceus. He comes around sometimes to get rid of the Guild, but other than that—”

“Graw!” Grom moaned, pointing ahead. A streak of crimson light shot across the desert from a stone landmark in the distance, coursing toward the forest. Lawrence felt a pang of fear.

Cassia paled, keeping a hand inside a bag. “He’s going to Saunte. Arthus...Arthus is tracking us.” She took a deep breath, then marched toward a section of deadened forest to their right.

Lawrence stepped in front of her, careful with his bandages. “Whoa, wait a minute. You’re going *toward* the guy who wants to catch you?”

“I’m not going to Saunte,” Cassia explained, stepping around him. “We’re going somewhere that...I’d really rather not be, to be honest.” She twisted her head and said, “Grom, you remember that haunted part of the woods we wandered into one time, right?”

Grom nodded, growling.

“Wait...haunted? With Ghosts?” Lawrence asked, curious.

“What else? Now, come on, let’s get going; it’s rather far away,” Cassia replied, throwing the supply bag back to Lawrence.

He caught it with a grunt, then followed her.

Chapter 6

The trees, devoid of leaves and covered with webs, seemed to creep toward Lawrence as he followed Cassia through the haunted woods, moving hastily to avoid their pursuer. Silence dominated the air; no wind, no rustle of branches--nothing except the padding and stomping of footsteps. Dark shapes danced behind the trees, occasionally moaning and making puffs of purple light. Cobwebs shook when they drew near, vibrating with the same energy as what belonged to the natives.

Grom swiveled his head, studying the trees around him. "Gro-grom..."

Cassia nodded, brushing past a tree covered with black goo. "I feel it too. There's an awful lot of Life energy around here."

"What's so special about this Life anyway? I hear you talk about it, but I don't really understand what it is," Lawrence said.

"Life is what makes us all live, to put it simply. It's the energy behind why our hearts beat, why our minds think. Without it, you're dead." Cassia studied her hands. "No one knows what it really is. It is a powerful energy, and many have tried to find uses for it." She closed her hands. "Unfortunately, there's only two sources: from the living and from the dead. Life energy doesn't just disappear when someone dies; it remains in the ground, waiting to be claimed by a Ghost."

"So, that's how Ghosts come about? From this excess Life energy?"

"Yes, and the shadow of their former life." She shook her head. "Anyway, up until two-thousand years ago, only Ghosts were thought to use Life energy, but even then, their use was limited; for them, it's food and little else, with occasionally powering

something with it.” She drew away from a sickly tree littered with dark holes. “It wasn’t until Arthus that anyone could really use it.”

“How come? Zoroark don’t naturally have the ability, right?”

“It’s never really been revealed, and the Tome doesn’t go into his life. There’s an old legend that a dark prophet named Gregorius gave Arthus a blade capable of giving this control, but it never mentions how.”

“You said that that Zoroark from Barash was related to Arthus. Did he inherit this control over Life?” Lawrence thought the red light that Zoroark used was remarkably similar to the energy that Arthus used in his last visitation. Considering its destructive power, no wonder Arthus was imprisoned.

Cassia nodded, looking around her suspiciously. “Yes. It’s proven useful in stopping those Guild Pokémon, that way I can go in and teach about Arceus.” She slowed, waiting for Grom. “I don’t like the feel of this place. Let’s get through as fast as we can, so we can avoid whatever lives here.” She turned to Lawrence. “Let’s not talk anymore until we get through. Something might already be following us.

Shapes scrabbled through the trees, red wisps of light in their wake. A light-hearted cackle erupted from the ground, then faded as a purple shape flitted to the background. Dead branches and leaves lay underfoot, crunching with every step.

Lawrence bristled, feeling watched. He felt vulnerable at his core, where he felt a strange, burning sensation, as if he was reacting to whatever may be in the air.

‘Is that Life? Can I sense it like Cassia can?’ Lawrence felt that that had to be the case. *‘Probably because I’m a Lucario...can I sense Aura then?’*

He blinked. *‘Is there a connection between them?’* Based on studies—which were theoretical at best—he knew that it was based on relationships with individuals, growing stronger based on the intensity of the strongest one. It wasn’t exact, but it at least explained why it can’t be manipulated by Riolu until they evolved through friendship.

He felt his arm flare up in pain, causing him to grab it and seethe. The burns were healing thanks to the Rawst berries, but their healing juices stung just the same. *‘Even if I wanted to fight, I’m at an immediate disadvantage.’*

A flash of green whizzed past him, disappearing into the fog. More green shapes flitted over them, and a red hovered faster than the rest. All moved in to the right, in what appeared to be an empty section of the woods.

“Hawm. Grr,” Grom stated, pounding his fists.

Cassia nodded, adjusting the bag over her shoulder. “You’re right; those don’t look like Ghosts.”

A high-pitched scream echoed through the air, suddenly cut off by a distinct hum. The Ghosts that lurked in the woods suddenly quieted, alerted by a new spill of Life.

Lawrence’s paws trembled, and his eyes narrowed toward the direction of the scream. “Someone got hurt.”

Cassia’s lip pursed, and she took a step forward. Her eyes went wide, and she looked to Lawrence. “You’re hurt. You can’t do much against whoever did that. Let Grom take care of it.” Grom nodded, then broke into a trot, throbbed the ground around him with his sluggish gait.

Lawrence shook his head, stretching his limbs. “He won’t be fast enough, even if he flies; you saw how fast those Pokémon were. I can take care of them before Grom gets there.” He stretched his legs briefly, ignored the burning sensation of healing skin, then ran toward the scream, nearly limping on his right leg.

“Lawrence, wait!” Cassia called, reaching toward him. She soon lowered her arm and sighed, the Lucario too far away to listen.

Lawrence ran ahead of Grom with no effort. Branches and leaves cracked underneath his feet, surely alerting the attackers just ahead. He didn’t care.

He stopped at the fringe of a small glade, clutching a wrapped portion of his leg. Between suppressed grunts of pain, he saw a group of battered Scyther band behind a Scizor with an eye missing, marching toward a trio of Buneary huddling behind a Lopunny with a large cut across her chest.

“You’re gonna give us all the gold ya got, and any food too! We don’t wanna hurt ya!” the Scizor warned, clapping his claws in front of the Buneary.

The tallest of them exclaimed, “We don’t have any! We were going to town to find a job!”

The Scyther surrounding the Scizor chittered angrily, with one stepping closer and exclaiming, “No food or gold? Yore mum must’ve been mad!”

The Scizor bludgeoned him back and roared, “*I’m* the one doin’ the talkin’ ‘ere! Get back in line!” His wings flitted spontaneously, and he turned back to the Buneary. “I’m gonna ask you one more time: give us your goods, or y’all gonna die for wastin’ our time!”

“We told you, we don’t have any!” the younger brother exclaimed.

The Scizor clamped the smallest Buneary’s ear, lifting her above her siblings. He held her out to a Scyther, who held back his blades. “I’m gonna chop her little ears off at the count a’ three unless ya cough up! One.” The Scyther raised a blade. “Two.” He reared back.

“No!”

Lawrence leapt past the trees and landed behind the Scyther, then punched him across the head, sending him to the ground. He whirled around and punched another in the chest, causing him to stagger back in surprise.

He reached back to punch one more time, but doubled over, clutching the bandage around his chest. Pain screamed throughout his body, demanding for him to stop.

A Scyther zipped over and batted Lawrence away with the flat of his blade. He collapsed on the ground, and all present gasped as his illusion failed.

The Scizor soon laughed, dropping the Buneary and allowing her to return to her brother and sister. “Well now, look what we have here! A Lucario who thought he was tough enough to handle us, the Butcher Squadron!” He reached down and clamped Lawrence’s ears, pulling him up to eye level. “We work with the Guild as assassins for ole Gardner. We don’t handle jobs like this, but I’m sure he’d give us a nice bonus if we bring ya to him!” He grabbed his tail and exclaimed, “Hey Johnny, let’s make ourselves a little souvenir from his tail!”

A Scyther with nicks in his blades raised one and chuckled maliciously. The Buneary looked on in horror, while Lawrence braced for the consequences of his rash mistake.

Johnny abruptly stopped, then fell over without another sound. The shouts and jeers of the Butcher Squadron halted.

Another Scyther leaned over Johnny, then exclaimed, “Somethin’ knocked him cold!” Immediately after, he froze and fell on top of Johnny.

One by one, the other Scyther fell by this mysterious hand. They swiped blindly in the air, grazing Lawrence’s fur and their teammates wings in the process. All but the Scizor fell unconscious.

The Scizor let go of Lawrence and fumed. “Come out and fight, ya coward! I know who ya really are!” He lurched backward and slammed into a tree, looking around wildly for the mysterious force that grabbed his neck.

In a shimmer, a white-masked Zoroark appeared, holding the Scizor up with one hand, and holding the other outward. In a deep, warping voice, he stated, “Wounded Lucario and widowed Lopunny are prime targets for Arthus’ assassins, hmm?” The Scizor raised a trembling claw, reaching for the Zoroark’s arm.

The Zoroark swiftly grabbed it and pierced the shell with his claws. Amidst the Scizor’s groans of pain, the Zoroark said, “The Usurper must have lost more of his sanity to have *you* be assassins.” He studied the arm he held, snorting. “You don’t have a Guild band. You’re just common thieves, picking away at those worse off than you.” The blackened eyes of the mask flared up with red light. “It is thanks to Pokémon like you that Arthus returned.” Cracks of crimson light flowed from the Scizor’s shell and into the Zoroark’s claws.

Gasping, the Scizor collapsed, wheezing and clutching at his chest. He drew his limbs closer, shivering, seemingly devoid of heat. His wings fluttered weakly, and he whispered to himself, conceiving how this could have happened.

The crimson in the Zoroark’s eyes faded. He approached the Buneary siblings, who pressed against a tree, hugging each other and trembling.

The Zoroark made a slight smile. “I’m not here to hurt you. Only those,” He gestured to the muttering Scizor, “that harm others for no reason.” He pointed to the sky, where Grom briefly zoomed overhead. “That black Golurk carries a priestess with him. Follow him, and she will take care of you.” The Buneary settled, now looking up hopefully at the Zoroark.

He turned to Lawrence, then grabbed his arm and pulled him up. He pressed a hand against his chest, and his eyes glowed red once more. “You are a brave Lucario, if a rash one. You have helped those in need, and in return, I will heal your wounds.” Lawrence felt vibrations radiate through his body, focusing on the burned portions. Red veins coursed from the Zoroark’s claws to the bandages, soothing the skin and restoring its vitality.

He stepped away, his mask dimming. Lawrence pulled away the bandages and found that no evidence remained that burns were there.

He looked up. “What’s your name?”

The Zoroark stepped away, adjusting his mask. “You may call me...Aleron.” He smiled once more, then faded in a shimmer. Lawrence and the Buneary looked around wildly for Aleron, but just as he came, there were no signs.

Lawrence stepped toward the Lopunny. She no longer breathed. ‘*Who’ll take care of her Buneary now?*’ he thought.

The oldest Buneary sniffed, tearing up. “Momma...” Her brother and sister followed suit, weeping over their dead mother.

Aleron’s words rang in Lawrence’s mind. He ushered the Buneary away from the Lopunny and said, “Come on; let’s go to Cassia.” He remembered Grom’s direction, and, with Cassia’s help, hoped to assist the orphans.

The Buneary obeyed and shuffled behind Lawrence as he headed toward Cassia. ‘*I wish I could give the Lopunny a proper burial...but her Buneary have to be brought somewhere safe first,*’ he thought.

Low moans came from behind the trees, and Lawrence realized that they came from tiny Phantump, their whiny faces full of sympathy for the life recently lost. Several

floated toward where they came from—presumably to take the Life just spilled—while others floated ahead of them, bobbing in the air and leaving wispy trails of black mist behind them.

The dark and gloomy atmosphere of the dead forest gave way to a lush and green glade, filled with bushes full of berries and dozens of Phantump floating throughout, eeping constantly. Cassia sat on a stump with the Tome in her arms, and Grom towered over her with his hands at his sides. Behind them, a decaying-yet-stable hut with dozens of Phantump surrounding it stood, creaking with each touch on its dilapidated frame.

A Phantump squeezed through a hole in the roof, then rushed toward Cassia. It hovered around her, wailing as it went. She laughed, stopping it gently. “There’s no need to be afraid. I follow Arceus.”

The Phantump’s face remained unchanged. It whisked off behind Lawrence and the Buneary, retreating to the dark reaches.

Cassia opened the pages of the Tome, then motioned for them to come closer. “Grom told me what happened.” She made a sympathetic smile. “Let me comfort you.” She traced her finger on the pages as the Buneary drew near.

Compassion 5-

[A message to Clorina Arcanine for the loss of her husband]

The Creator understands all pain. Just as his many arms create blessings for his creations, he in turn realizes their feelings, and sorrows with them.

All of this is to comfort them further, for none know better how to care than those who have suffered the same as yourself.

She reached down to the oldest Buneary and lifted her head. Tears stained her fur. “I promise you that Arceus knows what you are going through.” She looked away and closed her eyes. “I lost my mother when I was little. I don’t remember her well, but I know that she loved me, and would want me to stay strong.”

She removed her hand and gestured to the hut. “This house used to be the home of Laryon Lucario and his aunt, Azure. It is old, and needs repaired, but I’m sure that it would be a lovely place to live.”

“But what about the Ghosts? They’ll scare us!” the little brother Buneary exclaimed.

“My children told me your plight.”

They all looked above the house and froze. Towering above the ancient structure, dwarfing Grom and the trees of the forest, stood a giant Trevenant, bare-branched and covered with moss. His limbs stretched outward and his mouth hanged open, the single eye stared at them heavily.

Creaking, the Trevenant moved his arm in front of him, and Phantump swarmed around it, wishing to have the gaseous scarlet mist emanating from it. **“I am the Ancient. I am the first of the Ghosts, the Lifefeeders. From Arceus’ strength I gather mine, expanding my domain, the Revenant Forest, to protect Life from those who wish ill.”** He shifted his gaze to the Buneary, then to the house.

He pointed at the house, and Phantump wildly swirled into it, bringing branches, stumps, leaves—all sorts of discarded remnants of wood. **“Your loss is great, children of Arceus. I had no bringer but Arceus, yet I sorrow for you still.”** He closed his eye. **“My children will bring the home of the ancient Guardian to its former glory, and you shall be under my guardianship until the day you become Lifefeeders yourselves.”** He opened his eye, and his mouth extended to a lopsided grin. **“You will have nothing to fear as long as you remain in my domain. Those under my protection will provide for and protect you until their Life runs dry.”**

A Phantump separated from the core group and ran into the Buneary, whirling around their heads and wailing cheerfully. The Buneary gradually smiled, laughing when more Phantump encircled them.

Grom lowered his gaze, kneeling before the almighty Ancient. “Gro...gawm...”

The Ancient nodded, lowering an arm and enclosing Grom with his hand. **“You have been changed, child. A dark force corrupted you, yet here you stand, serving a Teacher of Arceus.”** He fingered the gap in Grom’s head. **“Your memories from your past have been taken, and your speech as well.”** The Ancient sighed, lifting his hand. **“I have not the power to restore either. Your missing self lies in the hands of another, waiting to be reunited. Be warned: while your speech would return with**

the joining, so would your memories. Your previous master will have control over you once more, and only your current master could bring you back to Arceus' light." Grom looked up and made a shuddering groan, nodding.

He turned to Cassia, pointing at the Tome. **"You carry one of the last books of Arceus. Only through you can Arceus complete his great work."** He began to hum, a purple light emanating from his eye. Dozens of Phantump swirled from the wood and encircled his head, creating a purple ring around the Ancient.

The Ancient's eye shifted to Lawrence. It lowered with a growl.

"A Keeper once was,

But now he becomes

A treader of realms

And deceiver of self.

The truth once held

Must take once more

In order for the Keeper

To be awakened for war.

Awaken Aleron

As well as the Keeper

And Equivos may be

Reborn to live on.

A price of mind

Must fully be paid,

Or the Realm of the Keeper

Will forever make slaves."

The Phantump stopped their dance, returning to the darkness of the wood. The Ancient shook, his limbs extending outward. **"I must restore my Life, to protect my children. Heed my words, for they come from Arceus himself. Do so, and the children of Arceus may be saved."** The eye's glare faded to a dim glow, then

extinguished. The Trevenant, the tallest of the Revenant Wood, made a sickening groan, then fell still.

Cassia stood open-mouthed, then hurriedly pulled out her sketchbook. “I have to write this down!” She scribbled inside with a charcoal pencil, leaving Lawrence to think to himself.

He furrowed his brow in thought. *‘What did the Ancient mean by those words? I used to be a Keeper? Why do I have to awaken Aleron, the Zoroark? Did he mean someone else? What was this price of mind? What war do I have to fight?’*

He held his head and moaned. *‘With this, it almost seems like I was meant to come here. Is he even right?’* He looked up briefly and sighed. *‘There’s really no point in him lying...’*

He lifted his head the same time Cassia lifted hers. “I wrote what he said down, to make sure we won’t forget,” she said. She watched the Bunearry run into the home, cheering on the racing Phantump and quickly forgetting their troubles. “I’m glad we went here. Those Pokémon going to Saunte were a blessing in disguise.”

Lawrence nodded, crossing his arms. “Does the name ‘Aleron’ mean anything to you?”

Cassia looked up thoughtfully. “Well...I know that it’s the name that Zoroark takes, but there is something more significant behind it.” She opened the Tome to the front page, showing an elaborate symbol signed with an ornate signature: *Aleron*.

“He was the compiler of the Arceist Tome. The books within are accounts from various time periods, and they used to be scattered across Serenita. Aleron took them and brought them together, then copied them all so that everyone could read them.” She traced her finger across the spidery signature. “He kept himself hidden after it was published. No one knows where he is, or even what species he is. All that is known is that he wrote many passages in the Tome and made it accessible to everyone.” She sighed, closing the cover and pulling her sketchbook onto her lap. “I would have loved to meet him though. The Tome was published over two-hundred years ago now; he must’ve passed away where no one would find him.”

Lawrence thought about her words. *‘Maybe the Ancient Trevenant wanted me to bring Aleron back from the dead?’* He shook his head in disbelief. *‘But how, and why?’*

He watched Cassia stare at the dormant Trevenant, with Phantump floating around and Buneary chasing them. She held up her charcoal and said, “I don’t want to forget this.” She began sketching in her pad, drawing the Trevenant, the house, and all the other Pokémon with great detail.

Lawrence continued to consider the the Trevenant’s words. *‘Who was this Keeper that the Ancient referred to, and what did he mean by “treader of realms and deceiver of self”? Who were they? Who were any of them?’*

He groaned. *‘There’s just too many questions. Does it matter anyway?’* He closed his eyes, resting his head on his paw. *‘I want to leave Equivos, so will his words even matter? Do I have to be part of this ‘war’?’*

His attention shifted to Grom, who held out his arms and emitted a wispy red mist, chuckling. Phantump surrounded him, then fought over his arms, packing in tightly to absorb the Life leaking from the Golurk. So many crammed under and above him that he began to float upward.

He rose several feet in the air, then the red mist abruptly dissipated. The Phantump all made a wail of confusion, then flew away from Grom. He hovered in the air for a moment, then dropped.

Earth flew into the air around the point of impact, shaking so much that Lawrence fell off his seat. The Buneary and the Phantump did not even notice Grom’s booming laughter or the red sparks jumping from his head.

Cassia looked over to him and clicked her tongue. “I’m trying to draw something, Grom! Try not to shake things up so much.”

Grom nodded, then proceeded to chase Phantump alongside the Buneary, his fingers touching their wispy tails.

Lawrence’s train of thought went to Grom and the Ancient’s brief words with him. *‘Is Grom’s appearance and what the Trevenant said about his corruption linked with his old master? Who was he?’*

“And...done!” Cassia exclaimed. She held her sketchbook in front of Lawrence.

“What do you think?”

Lawrence gaped at the picture. The Trevenant and the woods surrounding him appeared exactly as they did in reality, while the shambled shack looked pristine and new, ready for three little Buneary to live inside. Grom and herself stood together to the three Buneary’s right, while Lawrence stood to their left, standing over them protectively.

“It...looks amazing! I don’t think I’ve seen anything so great!” Lawrence replied. He was about to say something more, but noticed something strange: a vague, erased outline around Cassia. “What happened here?”

Cassia looked at it and frowned. “Oh, it was just something else. No need to worry about it; I can fix it.” She took a bit of clay from her bag and rubbed at the smudges, her fingers shaking.

Lawrence slid closer, staring at her trembling fingers. “Is everything alright?”

Cassia drew away and brought the book to her chest. “I’m fine! Never been better!” She turned away and walked to Grom, busily wearing away the smudges on the paper.

Lawrence frowned and took a stick from the ground. He traced in the coarse dirt the shape he remembered from the picture. He dropped the stick and peered at the drawing for details. It almost looked like—

“Gro-graawawm!”

Lawrence’s head shot up at Grom’s call. He saw Cassia standing next to him, holding the bag around her tightly.

“We need to get going! We don’t want to lead those Pokémon here!” Cassia exclaimed.

Lawrence nodded and left the drawing. He felt sure that it was unimportant anyway.

He caught up with Cassia, continuing to walk as they crossed by the Ancient Trevenant. Cassia turned to him with a smile. “Do you remember anything yet? About where you came from, or what that box is?”

Lawrence's paw subconsciously covered the Pokédex. "No...nothing yet." As she turned back around, he lowered his paw. *'She's been honest with me so far...mostly. Maybe I should do the same...just to show that she can trust me.'*

He looked down at his paws. *'No....I can't. She's never even heard of a human before. She'd leave as soon as he told her.'* He pressed onward, shoving aside his guilt. *'It's better for her not to know.'*

~~~~~

Inky blackness surrounded Arthus on all sides, with spidery lines of crimson light spreading across the emptiness. He travelled through one such line, zooming from a pinprick of light to another in the massive web. Interconnected between all the dots, the lines all centered on a massive red orb, pumping like a massive heart to the spidery cracks, above, below, and around.

Arthus travelled along the channels of Life, darting his head at each point. "Let's see, over there's the Xilo Mountains, the Kreon Abyss...there!" He centered on a particularly large point, flying through the wisps of Life that lay beneath the soil of Equivos.

Around the outskirts of Saunte, a plot of soil plumed outward. A crimson tendril erupted from it, emanating red mist, then sank back beneath the ground, depositing Arthus. He had a satchel over his shoulder, filled with food and supplies for his hunt.

He studied his surroundings, his eyes landing on Saunte. He shuddered, turning away. *'My birthplace...as horrible as ever.'* He shook himself briefly, then fell on all-fours, carefully inspecting the ground. He set a claw against the side of his head, and his blue eyes glowed red. He saw numerous trails of red footprints, all different sizes and shapes: The Life trails of the Pokemon who had entered or left Saunte.

He crossed over the dimmest ones for their age and continued around the perimeter. After searching for an hour, he finally saw two sets of footprints entering the city. "One Lucario...and one, Cassia."

He stood up briefly and looked up. "Valder had said that Cassia had disappeared, and that Grom had knocked him down. I'd imagine that he helped fly them out when they were spotted." He closed his eyes and twisted a length of his mane. "But *where?* Where

would they go?” He thought of his mental map of Serenita, remembering locations Cassia was previously. “Not Respit—thank goodness—not Cambeta, not the swamps...”

He heard a high-pitched ringing and groaned, twisting his arm in the air and causing a red-and-black banded gem to appear in his claws. He stared at it and growled, “I’m in the middle of tracking Cassia since your stooge couldn’t be bothered to find them, so this had better be important!”

The silhouette of a Dusknor appeared inside the gem, formed by the black bands. “Lord Arthus,” Gardner’s crackling voice said, “I’ve found more information about Hoopa. Apparently, his ability to grant wishes is based on his location. Depending on where he is, he can take the attributes of certain Legends. If he’s in deep seas, he can imitate Kyogre, or if in stormy weather, a being like Zekrom. For him to copy someone like Arceus—whose powers would arguably be necessary here—you need to find a place that has his presence and summon Hoopa there.”

Arthus muttered to himself, then said, “Nowhere comes to mind at the moment. You go ahead and keep searching; I’ll focus on hunting Cassia and the Lucario.” He crushed the gem and bared his teeth, smacking it against his forehead. “There must be *some* clue!” He froze. He lifted his head and smiled. “That’s right: the strange creature, Lawrence. If I remember right, he was near a deposit in the desert. He had memories of Cassia and Grom. If I go there, I should be able to find another clue.” He slammed a fist into the ground and caused several tendrils to surround him and drag him into the ground. A streak of crimson light coursed toward the Iren Desert—where Lawrence and Cassia had only just left.



## Chapter 7

Back in the Guild, Gardner now sat inside a room with rows upon rows of tall shelves, each filled with hundreds of books. In the center of the room was a series of low desks, each with a small Litwick stuck in a glass jar, barely illuminating the books. No other Pokemon remained inside, allowing no noise save for the muffled cacophony of the Guild's activity outside.

Piled around Gardner were other books, each with some reference to Hoopa or the Prison Bottle. As Gardner read from one, the Litwick on his table whispered, "Do I really need to be here? Can't you just use a regular old candle?"

Gardner glared at him, his scarred eye flashing a cross of piercing white and red. "You Litwick are far safer than any candle, considering you can control your flames. There's a good reason I wanted you to be here." He returned to his reading.

The Litwick propped his arms against his sides and muttered, "Guildmaster Calem didn't think so."

Gardner gave a cursory glance back. "And Calem is dead, so deal with it." He read for a moment longer and paused, reading a passage in the book. *Giratina's 22nd Day, 1400 Years After the Usurper; Cryus, Xilo Mountains.* He continued reading, then upon seeing a picture and its caption, his ethereal heart skipped a beat. There, standing with Fire and Ice Pokemon, was a silver Lucario wearing leather clothing holding an intricate bottle aloft.

His hand strayed to the gem on the table, but he yanked it back. "No...no, it'd be best to talk about this when he gets back." He winced, covering his eye. "He will *not* be

pleased.” He set a strip of paper on the page and closed it, remembering the picture’s caption well:

*Matheus Lucario with the residents he saved from an avalanche. He holds Hoopa’s Prison Bottle just before it is hidden.*

~~~

On the other side of Serenita, the gnarled and empty trees thinned, and orange and gold leaves dominated the sky. Yellowed grass poked up beneath the fallen leaves, receiving the fading remnants of evening’s light. Luscious red apples hung above them, ready for harvest after a season of growing. Their sweet scent filled the air, their taste longed for by the Pokémon crushing the fallen leaves, the crisp crunch reminding them of the sweet flesh of the fruit.

As he, Cassia and Grom walked along the path, Lawrence’s stomach growled. He chuckled, pointing up to the apples. “Do you think we can grab those for dinner?”

Cassia nodded, looking at Grom. “Would you please?”

Grom reached up, gingerly picking apples and setting them in his palm. After picking a dozen, he held them out to Cassia, who nodded appreciatively, saying, “You’re so nice to have around, Grom!” Grom chuckled, the apples bouncing in his hand.

Cassia gasped, hastily taking the bag off her shoulder. “They’re going to bruise!” She leaned forward, catching them in the sack.

The last apple thumped inside, and Cassia leaned precariously. “Wh-whoa!” With a thud, she landed on her chest, spilling its contents across the trail. Books tumbled, and papers flew, alongside other small articles that bounced on the compacted dirt.

Lawrence leaned down, holding out a paw. “Are you alright?”

Cassia waved away his paw, instead taking Grom’s outstretched hand. “I’m fine.” She brushed herself off, moping. “Can you get my things?”

Lawrence nodded, picking up a collection of books and charcoal sticks. He carefully stashed them in the bag, then checked around the trail for anything else. He noticed a small sack and reached for it. “Just one more thing!”

Cassia’s face dropped, then she rushed toward him. “Wait, no, I’ll—”

He lifted the sack and tested its weight. “What’s in here?” He began to undo the drawstring.

Cassia ripped the sack from Lawrence’s paws and held it to her chest. “That’s private!” She stuffed it back into her bag, shaking.

Lawrence gave her a suspicious look, narrowing his eyes. “But why? I mean, I’m sure that—”

“Graw.” Grom stamped in front of Cassia, his eyes flashing as he stared at Lawrence. “Gro-rawm.”

Lawrence backed away, taking the bag and holding it out. “Alright, alright! I get it!” Grom took the bag, and Lawrence turned away, giving Grom a dark look. “Shouldn’t talk about Cassia’s personal life,” he muttered.

Cassia sighed, putting the bag over her shoulder. “It’s alright, I’m just...not ready to talk about it yet.” She turned back to the path. “It’ll be dark soon. We better make camp.”

Lawrence nodded begrudgingly, putting a paw over the Pokédex. “Alright, I’ll just be taking care of some...business, if you know what I mean.”

Cassia cocked her head and looked to the sky for a moment, then cringed when she realized. “Oh...right.” She shooed Lawrence away, exclaiming, “Go take care of it then. I don’t want to know about it.”

Lawrence walked away from Cassia, who took a different direction off the path. “I’m going to need your bag as soon as I’m done with everything here, so don’t take too long!” she added.

Lawrence waved to her absent-mindedly, taking out the Pokédex when he was out of sight. He opened the notebook application, then hastily typed out what had happened in Barash, in the Revenant Forest, and what had just happened with the sack.

He drummed out the words, watching the black text appear on the screen as he focused his thoughts. He thought of the events that had happened yesterday. *‘Now that I think about it, both times I’ve met Aleron have been near where Cassia was. Is there some connection between them? Do they know each other?’*

His mind drifted to Grom's terse reaction toward the leather sack. *'And what about Grom, being so protective about Cassia, to the point I can't learn anything about her. Why? It wouldn't hurt to learn some more about someone I've been with for a couple days?'*

Then thoughts of Grom's attitude on the day they escaped from Barash's Guild Pokémon came back. *'Maybe it's because of my 'amnesia'. He thought it was trick to capture Cassia, and maybe he still doesn't entirely trust me, so he doesn't want anything about Cassia being known.'*

Lawrence rubbed his eyes, shaking his head. *'I held off Grom before, and maybe helped my standing with him by helping the Pokémon in Barash. But what else do I need to do? Spill the beans and tell him everything? About Valence and the fact I was human? They'd run faster than a Deerling from Houndour.'*

He stopped typing, staring at the words he just created:

I can't tell Cassia or Grom. They think they can't trust me until I tell them the truth, but they won't believe it once they hear it. I'm in a bad spot, one where I can't learn anything else about the Pokémon I want to know most.

He cringed, swiping out of the notepad and into the dimensional detector. He tapped the button and received the same error: 'No access point in range.'

He shook, holding the Pokédex tighter. *'No way home. No way to Unova. No way to an escape from this world. No way to escape from Arceism and its lies. No way to return to a place that he can understand—or at least attempt to. No way to—'*

"What are you doing?"

Lawrence froze.

~~~~~

Arthus walked through the streets of Barash, considering the burned remains of homes. Collapsed bricks and shattered earthenware littered the streets, along with charred food and ash. Deathly silence hung over the air, a haunting reminder of what happened there.

He stopped at the largest building in the center, where Captain Toka had made his command center—and where the former mayor held counsel. He stepped on top of a shattered wall and entered the room beyond it, finding chests thrown open around a large, stone table.

He passed a hand over the table, closing his hand. “We...we made the Guild here. The charter was signed, and he...he was made Guildmaster.” He tightened his fist and slammed it against the table. “Until he *left*.” He released a shuddering breath, then ran out of the room and into the ruined streets.

A shimmer surrounded him. He gasped, clutching his head. “No...no, not now.” Shimmering light exploded around him, and the city of Barash was bright and filled with energy. Ground and Grass Pokemon filled the streets, passing by various shops and stands. Other Pokemon types from across Equivos came to trade their wares, adding to the bustle of the city. All throughout, there was cooking, trading, and bartering abound—complete peace amidst the chaos.

Arthus twitched, recognizing this place well. “My...my first day here. *Why?*”

*“You doing alright?”*

He froze. “No.”

*“You look worse than a wet Sudowoodo.”*

Arthus slowly turned around, coming face to face with a young Lucario with a wide smile. Despite the simulated warmth, Arthus felt chills down his spine.

The Lucario set a paw on Arthus’ shoulder, leaving no contact. “*Don’t be afraid. I’ll always be with you.*”

“Always?” a different, younger voice replied.

The Lucario nodded. “Always.” He faded out of existence, and the activity of Barash in the distant past faded with him, leaving the ruined city in its stead.

Arthus breathed haggardly, looking down at his claws. “Always...” He hardened his gaze and clenched his fist. “A ghost that haunts me...*traitor*.” He sprinted out of the ruins and toward the haunted section of the forest, where Lawrence and Cassia’s Life Trails winded toward.

~~~~~

Lawrence turned around slowly, frozen with astonishment and fear. Cassia stood in front of him, giving him a look of concern and puzzlement, a bag in her hands.

She held it up, then pointed at the bag around Lawrence's shoulder. "I need yours to finish the camp, and you were taking a while, so—"

"How much did you see?" Lawrence blurted, hiding the Pokédex behind his back.

Cassia came closer, trying to look behind his back. "I saw the box glowing. What's going on?"

"It's nothing, just, go—"

"No, tell me what's happening."

"I can't tell—"

"Why not?"

"Because...because..." Lawrence stuttered, struggling for a reason.

Cassia crossed her arms. "Does it have to do with the Guild?"

Lawrence shook his head immediately. "No, no, nothing to do with them!" He looked left and right, attempting to come up with a reasonable explanation behind an otherworldly light coming from a black Pokédex.

Cassia continued to scrutinize him, taking a step back. "You better tell me right now. I let it slide before since you lost your memory and didn't know anything, but now it's pretty obvious that you know what it is—and who you are." She uncrossed her arms. "Who are you?"

Silence hung between them for minutes, simply staring at each other as Lawrence struggled for answers and Cassia waited for them. The sun set behind the horizon as Grom sat at the proposed campsite, waiting for Cassia and Lawrence to return, while they stood in their verbal struggle.

Finally, Lawrence sighed, dropping his arms, revealing the still-lit Pokédex. "I'll...I'll tell you. Can we...go back first? I'd...I'd rather have Grom hear this too."

Cassia stood still, then nodded. She turned away, marching toward the camp, her dress flowing past the grass.

Lawrence looked down at the Pokédex, seeing its taunting message: ‘No access point in range.’ His paw shook, and he reared back. *‘It’s thanks to this piece of junk and the company that made it that I’m even in this mess!’* he thought. He wanted to throw it, crushing the screen and destroying any evidence of his life in Unova, just so he could avoid telling the truth.

He blinked, lowering his arm. But what would that solve? He would have no way back, and they’d still ask questions. It would solve nothing, only make things worse.

He put the Pokédex back in the case, walking to Cassia, considering the best way to make him not seem like a maniac.

~~~~~

Blackness stretched across the sky, sparks drifting upward from the low fire of the three travelers. Cricketot chirruped, sitting in the trees and watching them sit around the blaze. The sweet scent of apples hovered in the air, and leaves continued to fall with gentle rhythm, occasionally burning to cinders by the heat of the flame.

Lawrence held a stick with an apple stabbed through the tip, leaning forward and watching the juices leak from the splitting skin. Cassia did the same, only watching Lawrence’s fearful expression instead. Grom towered over Lawrence, his arms fanned apart, maintaining a constant vigil over the path.

Lawrence took a deep breath, pulling back the apple and inspecting it. “I guess it’s time to tell you the truth now—who I am, where I’m from, what the...box, is.” Cassia nodded.

Lawrence sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m going to warn you now: it’s going to seem crazy. I have hard time believing it myself.”

“I’m sure I’ve heard worse,” Cassia replied, pulling out her own apple, then shoving it back into the fire.

Lawrence sighed once more, then started telling them about Unova, with numerous towers, humans, pet Pokémon, and technology. He told them about President Hanson’s plan to give their dimension’s Pokémon sentience. He told them how he accepted their

offer, and the means of how he came to Equivos, and how he had kept record of their actions throughout Equivos on his Pokédex.

He brought out the Pokédex and turned it on, showing the many icons on its screen. “This is a Pokédex 2.0. They’re everywhere in Unova. They help us with everything whether it be checking on what our Pokémon need, or where we should pick up food.” He held it out in front of him, forcing a smile. “We can even take pictures with them.” It flashed briefly, and Grom grumbled in surprise, while Cassia blinked, astounded.

Lawrence rubbed his eyes, unused to the sudden flash, and held out the Pokédex to Cassia. “See? There’s me.” She took the Pokédex cautiously, studying the image and moving her fingers across the glass surface, rearing back when the smiling Lucario within moved slightly.

Lawrence reached over and tapped the photo button. “Want to see yourself?” The Pokédex flashed, and Cassia blinked, averting her eyes from the strange technology. Soon after, the screen showed, and Cassia hurriedly covered it.

“H-How do you...get rid of them?”

Lawrence cocked his head curiously. “Just...tap the little red can at the bottom. Why?”

Cassia did so hastily, sighing in relief. “I just...don’t know what to think.” She held the Pokédex out to Lawrence, her hand shaking.

Lawrence took it gratefully, putting it back in his case. “Sorry, I guess it’s a little much.” He looked at the core of his baked apple, throwing it behind him. “So...what do you think?”

Cassia studied the fire, her blue eyes reflecting the orange flames. “You say you were changed when you came here. You used to be...human.” She looked up. “What did you look like?”

Lawrence’s eyes widened, and he took the Pokédex out of its case once more. He swiped to the photos, then went through his collection, pausing. He saw a picture of himself, in his pre-changed state, sitting with his mom and dad, smiling for a family portrait.



He shakily handed it to Cassia, nodding. She studied the picture, and Lawrence croaked, “I haven’t seen myself like that ever since I came here. I didn’t know I would be changed into...” He looked at his paws. “...this.” He clenched them. “I...miss my family. I miss my home. I miss...” He closed his eyes, tearing up.

“Me.” He covered his face, heaving. All the memories of Sinnoh returned to him in a flood, reminding him of where he belonged and that he would most likely never see those who knew him for who he really was.

He felt a hand set across his shoulder, causing him to look up. Cassia looked down sympathetically, her hand running through his fur in a strangely soothing way.

She closed her eyes. “I ran away from... my father, two years ago. He wasn’t the best Pokémon, but he loved me, and tried to make me as happy as I could be. For a time, I was.”

She sat down next to Lawrence, removing her hand then rubbing her fingers. “But then I found the Arceist Tome. I wanted to follow Arceus and help bring others to him. My father didn’t want me to leave him, so he kept it away. I knew that I wouldn’t be truly happy until I ran from him, bringing the word of Arceus to everybody I could.”

She sniffed, wiping her face. “It might not seem like it, but we’re pretty alike. We’re both away from what we know, we’re trying to fit in with those around us, and we just can’t know who to trust with our true selves.”

“Gro...gro...” Grom patted Lawrence as softly as he could, thudding him gently with his massive stone gauntlets. His eyes lowered to a dull glow, sparking abruptly with brief flashes of light—the closest he could get to tears.

Lawrence sniffed, shaking with tears in his eyes. “Thank you...thank you, so much.”

The Kricktot continued to chirrup their lunar song, moving alongside the gentle swaying of Grom as he hummed his own tune, gently stamping his feet to a dull beat.

Soon, Cassia hummed, then began to sing:

*“Child of Creation,  
Of Arceus Dear,  
Of warmth and love,*

*Hold no fear.*  
*His arms enfold you,*  
*As they always have,*  
*So, hold back your tears,*  
*And remember your home.*  
*Creator's son,*  
*Hold your head high,*  
*Creator's daughter,*  
*You mustn't sigh.*  
*Remember your place of birth,*  
*Remember the parents that held you,*  
*Remember where you now are,*  
*And how Arceus will return you."*

Lawrence blinked back his tears. He felt he knew this song. Once, long ago, he remembered his mother singing this very song when they moved to Celestic Town from Jubilife, and how it soothed his upset, eight-year-old self. This same song had come back—alongside the same beliefs.

The humming stopped, and Grom stopped his beating. Cassia stood up, keeping her hands crossed in front of her. "I don't know about your world, or how to get you back. I don't know how such a place can exist, just as you don't know how this one can be." She held out her hand. "But I know that everyone is loved by Arceus, even those from a different world. You have no need to fear me or Grom; we believe you and want to help however we can."

Lawrence remained staring at the ground, remembering the Arceists of Sinnoh. *'Are they and the Arceists of Equivos...*

*'The same?'*

~~~~~

Arthus stopped at the fringe of the Revenant Forest, where dead, spindly trees met with the coarse sand of the desert. To the north, fresh green trees grew, marking the dividing line of the haunted and the free.

He went to take a step inside. He looked up and saw a crown of leaves atop an enormous tree, its single eye trained on him.

Arthus clutched his head again as a deep, reverberating voice echoed in his mind. *“A crossroads in wait shall soon be trod, and in the wrong, you strive to be god.”*

The Zoroark held up a defiant fist and roared, “I am *not* in the wrong! I am doing what should have been done from the beginning!” He breathed quickly, looking back at the pale grey mass to the south. “To think that he’s here rather than there.”

Arthus shook his head, running toward the live trees to the north. “I won’t be tortured by a Trevenant again. Not after *that* wretched experience.”

He entered the quiet wood and strove to drive away the voice. But it kept repeating in his mind, warning him, taunting him. All the while, the somber tone made him drowsier and drowsier.

Finally, Arthus’ eyes drooped, and he leaned against a tree, yawning. He fought against it, shaking his head. “No...must find her...must...” He slid to the ground with his back against the tree, and he fell into a deep, deep sleep.

~~~~~

Lawrence slept on a pile of gathered leaves, studying the stars. Grom and Cassia remained at the smoldering remains of the campfire, preparing for sleep. The Krickatot continued to chirrup, slowing their pace and drifting to rest themselves.

He sighed contentedly. ‘I can talk about all sorts of things with Cassia now. About our lives, our worlds, even about other Pokémon. I don’t have to be so closed off any more.’

He fell asleep with this comforting thought, pleased to be himself once more.

~~~~~

Blackness. All that surrounded him was blackness. The Zoroark stood in what seemed to be the center, still. No sound, no wind, no existence.

A Zangoose materialized in front of him, a large red gash across his chest. “Why did you do this to me? Why?” he cried.

An Audino joined him, holding a hand up to her cut throat. “We trusted you! You were our friend! Our leader!”

The Zoroark involuntarily stepped back, holding his hands up defensively. “I...I didn’t want to! I never did!”

Hundreds of other Pokemon joined the Audino and Zangoose, surrounding him on all sides.

“Why did you do this?”

“We trusted you!”

“You killed us all, and for what?”

“Was there really no other choice?”

The Zoroark fell to the ground and clamped his hands over his eyes. “Stop it, stop it, stop it!”

The voices hushed. The Pokemon all disappeared. The Zoroark uncovered his eyes and stood up, then turned around, finding no one.

He turned back around and came face-to-face with a female Zoroark wearing a gold pendant, holding a black, rune-covered blade. She held it up with a pained expression.

“Was it worth it?”

~~~~

Arthus bolted upright, struggling for breath. He hugged himself and muttered repeatedly, “I’m sorry...I’m bringing you back...I won’t leave you...”

After several minutes, he looked up and squinted his eyes, the harsh sunlight shining into his pupils. “I’ve been asleep for too long.” He looked to the north, studying the sea of trees. “The only development that I know Cassia hasn’t gone to in that direction is Hydren. There’s little point in following her now.” He stood up and snapped his fingers, causing a small flame to ignite on the end of one. He turned back and forth, and the flame grew stronger or weaker based on his direction. He walked toward where it was strongest and eventually found a large fallen tree, dead for many years.

He dug his hand into the ground and stopped. He closed his eyes and said, “I’ll bring you all back...once I am finished.” As tendrils took him back into the soil, he looked down at the golden bracelet on his wrist.

“Especially you, Corrina.”

~~~~~

The sun rose over the apple trees, awakening the Fletchling and Tailow that slumbered in the boughs. They warbled their songs, pecking at apples and flitting between the falling leaves.

Lawrence sniffed, rubbing his eyes. *‘Better get going. We need to get to Cretea if I want to get home.’*

He walked toward the camp, watching Cassia stand up from a distance, folding the blanket she slept on. Grom stepped in, stomping the ashes of their fire and extinguishing the remains of their camp.

Lawrence stepped into view, and Cassia looked over with a smile. “Had a good night’s sleep?”

He nodded. “Better than I’ve had for a long time.”

Cassia stuffed the blanket into the bag, her smile disappearing. “Um...about yesterday...with the sack.” Lawrence narrowed his eyes, intrigued.

Cassia sighed, shaking her head. “I’m sorry. I overreacted. I’d like to show you what’s inside it, but...just not now.” She forced a smile. “Okay?”

Lawrence nodded his head slowly. “Alright.” Cassia let out her breath in relief, then went over to Grom.

Inwardly, Lawrence added, *‘Doesn’t help me understand why it’s so secret.’*

Grom finished crushing the ashes and the rocks that surrounded them, then pointed behind him—the direction they came from. “Gro-hawm. Hawm.”

Cassia nodded, finishing packing her supplies. “I know, we need to get going.” She tossed a bag to Lawrence, who caught it casually and slung it over his shoulder. “You feel alright, Lawrence...Stephenson?”

The Lucario nodded, grinning. “Feeling great.”

“Good,” Cassia replied.

They trod across the beaten path, toward the port city of Hydren, to the archipelago of Cretea.

## Chapter 8

Along the eastern coast of Serenita, few trees remained, instead replaced with sparse shrubbery and tossed driftwood. To the right of the path, coarse white sand stretched toward the gently foaming sea, grains flying in the brisk breeze. Salt hung in the wind, stinging Lawrence's and Cassia's eyes and nose. Grom, lacking a nose and organics in general, didn't notice.

Lawrence sneezed, taking a deep breath while walking along the path. 'I've only been to the sea when I was leaving Sinnoh. Everything tastes like salt—even the air.'

Cassia breathed in, undisturbed by the scent. "It's been so long since I've been in this part of Serenita. Even after two years, I haven't gone everywhere; the mountains, the swamps..." She shivered. "Places I'd like to go but are simply too dangerous." She turned to Lawrence. "How large is your world? Bigger than Equivos?"

"I can remember at least seven regions, and there's sure to be more," Lawrence replied.

"Wow, so seven continents? Around the size of Serenita?"

"Well, yes, but one of them is more like a few islands. Still, they're big."

"And there's...humans, on all of them?"

"Yep, all living with Pokémon too."

"Are they like wild Pokémon?"

"In a way."

"What do you mean?"

“Well, we have these little balls called Poke Balls. We can capture these wild Pokémon and domesticate them. You know, not hunt other Pokémon, do tricks, and, of course, battle.”

“You train them to battle?”

“Yeah, it’s actually pretty popular. We even have this thing called the Gym Challenge where a bunch of ten-year-olds get a team of Pokémon together and challenge eight people called Gym Leaders. After that, they go to the League and challenge four super powerful trainers called the Elite Four, then the Champion himself!”

Cassia stared at him, horrified. “That...sounds dreadful! Why would they force Pokémon to fight like that! Ten-year-olds too! Laryon was no older than that when he had to go with Matheus Lucario!”

Lawrence cringed, not realizing how sacrilegious it seemed. “They aren’t killed or anything...most of the time. We have gotten really good at helping them recover after a battle.”

“Is there anything else you do with these Pokémon?” Cassia asked, concerned.

“Well, yeah. We have Pokémon Contests, where trainers perform in front of a crowd with Pokémon.”

“Really?”

“Yeah...so?”

Cassia turned away, shaking her head. “Sorry, I just...have a hard time believing it. There’s hardly any wild Pokémon around here, so I don’t have a very good perspective.”

Lawrence nodded, seeing her point. *‘About as strange as me being here.’*

Cassia blew a sigh, turning back to him. “So, that’s how your world is like? Full of children battling each other for fun?”

Lawrence scratched the back of his head. “That’s really what it revolves around. I never took the challenge myself, since I was more interested in learning more about Pokémon.”

“Are there others like you?”

“Yeah, just like there’s people who battle in the league.”



“What do you study?”

“Pokémon behavior. The company I work for--”

“Company?”

“Right, you don’t know. A company’s basically a bunch of people who get together to do something, like selling something.”

“Like the Guild.”

“Yeah, but not so humanitarian. The company I work for makes the Pokédex and many...” he struggled for the right word, knowing that she wasn’t familiar with many of the terms his world invented. “Things it can do, I guess. People want things to play with their Pokémon or know what they need. I help with that by figuring out what Pokémon do in certain situations, then send the data to someone who can compile that into the Pokédex.”

“Unova’s very strange,” Cassia said, shaking her head.

Lawrence laughed. “I could say the same about Equivos.”

They both laughed together, with Grom adding in his own throaty chuckle. Wingull flew overhead, searching for little morsels to eat, while Sealeo lounged on the beach, resting under the noonday sun.

Cassia put a hand in her bag, still smiling. “Do humans have a religion?”

Lawrence shrugged. “If you consider Pokémon a religion. Most people just devote their lives to them, whether it be making the best team, putting on the best show, or helping people do just that.”

Cassia frowned. “So, nothing like what I teach then?”

Lawrence’s humor fled. “Well, there *is* something like yours...”

Cassia beamed, coming closer. “Really? What?”

Lawrence forced a smile. “Well, it’s...Arceism.”

Cassia cocked her head. “What? Arceism?”

“I know, it’s crazy. Back home, there’s this girl who keeps on wanting me to go to her church, thinking that it’ll be good for me.”

“Do you ever go?”

Lawrence paused, seeing where this was going. “If you want me to learn more about it, I don’t want to hear it.”

“I was just asking—”

“No. I don’t want anything to do with them.”

Cassia stopped in front of Lawrence. “What is it about Arceus’ teachings that you hate?”

Lawrence shook briefly but stopped himself. “He...doesn’t exist. Back home, the Arceists think that Pokémon should be treated just like humans...like they are on our same level.” He weakly laughed. “I’ve seen it for myself out there. It isn’t true.”

Cassia’s eyes widened. “But...it *is* true! All of it! What could possibly—”

“I *don’t* want to talk about it.” Lawrence gave her a warning stare.

She frowned, her hair falling in front of her eyes. “But...why?” Grom continued to stare, cocking his head.

Lawrence sighed, then said, “I need to think. Alone.” He ran ahead, running from the Arceists, just as he had done years before.

~~~~~

Hours later, Lawrence slumped against a tree, his arms around his chest and his legs drawn up. The sun began to set, the waves of the sea lapping against its bottom. Wingull called for their brethren, returning to their nests for the coming night.

Lawrence covered his face, contemplating. *‘I shouldn’t have run from Cassia...even if I didn’t like what she said.’*

He smacked the back of the tree, grunting in irritation. *‘They’ll catch up with me soon, and she’ll ask why I hate Arceism so much.’* He sighed, putting a paw over his eye. *‘But they wouldn’t understand...just like before.’*

Leaves drifted off the tree he sat under, falling onto his pointed ears. He brushed them away, then picked up a leaf that had managed to get underneath his chin. He noticed the blackened stone that Cassia had given him, cracked and dull, just as he had received it.

He held it in his other paw, studying the spidery cracks so intricately spread throughout the work. *'This thing's illusions are a lot like my "amnesia"—believable and deceptive, but one strike, and they dissipated.'*

"Much like how she'd see my beliefs if I told her," he thought, letting go of the stone. *'Why does she need to convert me? I've already seen what Arceus has to offer, and it's nothing I want.'*

Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.

Lawrence twisted his head, his scowl dissipating. *'She's here.'*

He looked up and saw Cassia standing over him, her face expressionless. In her arms, the Arceist Tome's pages ruffled, while her dress swayed slightly in the wind. Grom towered over her, the light from the cracks scattered about his frame dim.

Lawrence and Cassia stared each other for a moment, then Cassia held the Tome out toward him. He made no move to grab it.

She set the book down in front of him, hesitantly taking back her hand. She stepped away, her eyes focused on the Tome. "I know you don't like me talking about your beliefs, but..." She brushed back her hair, turning away from him. "My life is devoted to Arceus. I have to talk about him. Even if you don't believe in him, I have to be able to say my thoughts, regardless of what they are." She brushed her hair, forcing herself to look away.

"I don't care if you believe. Really. I've become good friends with those who didn't." She swallowed, gazing at Lawrence once more. "But they at least listened to me. I can't have you running away every time I choose to talk about my beliefs." She sighed, crossing her arms and walking away. "Just...try to read it. Even one page. If you can show me you're willing to be around what I love most, then you can stay." Grom followed her, his head swiveling to keep his gaze on the Lucario. They stopped at the edge of the beach, watching the tides sink into the sand.

Lawrence looked at them, then at the book. He knelt down, carefully opening the cover of the Tome. *'I guess I'll have to read it, whether I like it or not.'*

He let the cover fall, and he felt a slight tremor. He touched the cover page, tracing Aleron's scrawling signature. He felt a jolt of pain in his paw and yanked it back, staring at the book in surprise.

Cautiously, he touched the page again, but nothing happened. He furrowed his brow, wondering what could have caused the shock.

He turned the page, the thought leaving his mind. Line upon line of text stretched in front of him, small images littered throughout the prose. Notes and arrows drawn with charcoal crisscrossed between the white space, referring to other passages and underlining important messages. In between the pages, tags marked the different books, the one on top reading, 'Origin'.

Lawrence reached a paw toward the tags, preparing to flip to random section and get the reading over with.

Capture it.

He paused, retracting his paw. He looked around for a moment, then reached for the tabs once more.

Capture it. With the Pokédex.

Lawrence stopped once more, looking up curiously. *'Where'd that voice come from? It's not mine...'*

He looked to Cassia and Grom. The Gardevoir sat on a decayed log, sketching the sunset, while Grom stood in the waves, holding his arms out. Wingull perched on him, squawking their amusement.

Lawrence looked back at the book, lifting the pages.

Capture it.

He stopped. *'Why? What do you mean "capture it"? Like taking a picture? I can read it whenever I want with Cassia around—if I ever wanted to.'*

He turned back to Cassia. *'Actually, she seemed rather...reluctant, to let me see the Tome. I guess she doesn't trust others with it.'*

He looked down at the book. *'I can't even open it without "capture it" going again, and who knows if it'll just repeat. But why do I need to do this?'*

He pulled out his Pokédex, bringing up the camera function. *‘Maybe Cassia has something to do with it; she doesn’t want to be away from the Tome after all.’* He held the Pokédex over the book. *‘I can just take pictures of it, so she doesn’t have to give it to me to read—if she wants me to, that is. Anything to keep on her good side.’*

He took a picture, studying the result on his screen. He smiled, unsure of why he felt so great about taking it. He took a picture of the next page, and the pages after.

~~~~~

Cassia sighed, comparing her drawing to what lay on the horizon. On the paper, the sun had just started its twilight descent; now, it had long sunk beneath.

Grom sat next to her, looking back at Lawrence, who busily swept through the pages, holding his Pokédex over them as he went. “Gro-haw...hawm.”

Cassia nodded, closing her sketchbook. “Yes, he’s taking a while. Maybe he’s actually interested in it?” Grom gave her a blank look.

She made a nervous laugh, putting the book in her bag. “Yeah...he wouldn’t be.” She hung her head, watching the wind blow sand beneath her feet. “Do you think he’ll listen? I don’t want him to leave...not yet, anyway.” She looked back at Lawrence. “I just feel...connected to him, somehow.”

Grom picked up a pile of sand, letting it fall from his fingers with a shake of his head. “Gro?”

“I know, it’s silly. We barely know each other, and even then, he’s a human.” She brushed back her hair, pinching a length of it and twisting it around her finger. “But he got turned into a *Lucario*. Why would he turn into the Pokémon that Arthus hates more than anything else?”

“Hawm.” Grom threw sand above him, the grains colliding onto his body with a rush of clinks.

“It could be a coincidence, I know.” She looked up at the sky, staring at the single star that peeped behind a cloud. “But with Arceus, everything has a purpose behind it.”

“Gro-gro-hawm,” Grom added, brushing the sand from his shoulder.

“I know, I know, ‘don’t associate with anyone but your Guardian.’” She stood up in front of Grom, putting a hand under her chin. “But he needs our help. He knows nothing about Equivos, and he’ll probably never find a way home unless we let him be with us.” The sky darkened further, and Lawrence finally closed the back cover of the Tome.

“I just hope he’ll change.”

~~~~~

Lawrence hefted the thick book, surprised by its weight. *‘Taking those pictures was a good idea—even if I don’t really know why. At least Cassia will be glad.’*

He began walking toward her, studying a page on his Pokédex:

Through diverse means do I complete my work. The smallest of thorns proves more effective than the largest of fists against the mightiest of foes.

Quiet whispers ring louder than the loudest shouts; declare my word through persuasion and encouragement, not by force and compulsion, and great shall be your reward.

He shut off the Pokédex and awkwardly set it back in its case. *‘Sounds a lot like what Arceists believe. It’s...actually pretty nice, in retrospect.’*

He shook his head, frowning. *‘Maybe I’m a bit too harsh toward Arceists. There are some good things about them, even if they’re wrong about Arceus. I should at least give them that.’*

Looking down at the book, he sighed. *‘Even if he doesn’t exist, there are many things the Arceists here believe that are worthwhile listening to.’*

~~~~~

He stood in front of Cassia, setting the Tome in her hands. She sat on the log, with Grom standing behind her, staring down at the Lucario.

She looked up at him, then looked down at the Tome sadly. “Well...what do you think?”

Lawrence set his Pokédex on top of the Tome, turning on the screen, revealing the dozens of images from the Tome. He smirked, saying, “I figured that you should keep it for yourself.”

Cassia studied the screen, cautiously tapping an image. It expanded, the words and markings suddenly becoming clear, all of her notes and clarifications visible.

She beamed, opening her mouth to say something. Lawrence held up his paw, stopping her. “I’ll listen to you, but not because it’s from Arceus. I’ll listen, because it says how people--Pokémon--should be like.” He took back the Pokédex, exiting the camera. “If you want me to read, you don’t have to give it up anymore; I can just read from here.” He tucked it back into its case. “So...” He held out his paw. “Are you alright with that?”

Cassia smiled, standing up, holding the Tome to her chest. “Yes, I am.”

~~~~~

They continued their journey along the coast until the moon rose, illuminating the rushing seas with pale white beams. Zubat flew overhead, screeing as they searched for victims. The wind faded to a dull breeze, no longer lifting the sand from their dunes.

Lawrence squinted his eyes, seeing light ahead. “Is that Hydren?”

“Yes, but we’ll have to wait till tomorrow before we can go in and get to Cretea,” Cassia replied. She walked toward a patch of dirt in the lush grass that grew to their left. “We better camp until then.”

Grom swiveled his head, looking behind them. “Groawm—hawm,” he growled, his eyes flashing.

Cassia dug through her bag, nodding to Grom. “Right, you keep watch; I almost forgot about that Pokémon tracking us.” She gasped, pulling out a small sack, beaten and threadbare. “I forgot all about the flour! I hope it isn’t spoiled...” she said, inspecting it.

Lawrence kicked some twigs into a pile of rocks, one paw over the bag at his waist. “Better use it then. What will you make?”

Cassia tapped the side of her face, sighing. “I was hoping to try something new with it, but I sort of bought it without thinking.” She pointed to Lawrence’s bag. “There should be a bowl in there somewhere; be careful with the water bottle.” She propped her head on her lap, moping. “It’s been a long time since I’ve cooked anything though. What do I make?”

Lawrence opened the bag, sifting through the contents. Something squelched as he grabbed the bowl, and upon pulling it out, found the splattered remains of a Chesto berry, the skin sticking to the wooden edge.

Lawrence looked at the flour, the berries, the sticks, the stones, and the bottle. He looked up with a smirk.

“I know what to do.”

~~~~~

Minutes later, Lawrence scraped a piece of flint against the spike on his paw, sending sparks into the air. He knelt on the ground, aiming the flint at a structure of small rocks supporting a large, flat stone, with a bundle of dry twigs and broken branches underneath it. Striking the flint once more, the twigs immediately caught flame, beginning to heat the stone above it.

Turning aside, Lawrence nodded to Cassia, who stirred a sticky mixture in the bowl.

She handed the bowl to Lawrence, then asked, “Pretty clever with the rocks, but we can’t make bread with that. What are you doing?”

Lawrence blew the fire, increasing its intensity. “You’ll find out.” He took the spoon out of the bowl, grateful that Cassia had such a tool with her.

“Won’t the fire let that tracker know where we are?” Cassia asked.

“Not with the way I’ve got it. It’s low, for one, and it’s covered by the rock. It’ll brighten up the area around it and nothing else really.”

Cassia laughed. “You certainly know what you’re doing. Have you been in a place like this before?”

Lawrence chuckled, spooning out a portion of the batter. “Well, I lived on my own in the woods for a week when I was sixteen. I had to get pretty creative to make food and survive.” He poured the batter, which started to sizzle upon contacting the stone. “This warmed up faster than I thought it would, so we’ll be eating crepes before we know it.”

Cassia gave him a curious look. “Crepes?”



Lawrence grinned, ladling another portion onto the stone. “You’ll find out.” He set down the bowl and grabbed a handful of berries from his bag. “What’s your favorite berry?”

Cassia shrugged, taking a glance upward. “Cheri, I guess? Why?”

Lawrence picked out the Cheri berries and tossed the others back into the bag. “Like I told you, you’ll find out.”

While the batter cooked, Lawrence said, “You know, I had very different thoughts about this place before I came here.”

“Like what?” Cassia asked, stretching.

“Well, I didn’t expect much different from the Pokémon back home. Sure, I knew that you could build things and talk, but...” He flipped the cakes, sighing. “I turned out to be wrong. Equivos is actually a lot like my home region, Sinnoh. Lots of trees, few towns...” He chuckled. “There’s even Arceists. They’re all around the world, but Sinnoh’s sort of like a center for them. It’s always been a spiritual place for them, what with myths of Arceus first being discovered there.”

“What are your Arceists like? I haven’t met anyone outside of myself who knows much about Arceus,” Cassia asked.

“They’re done!” Lawrence exclaimed, scraping underneath the cakes with a spoon and setting them on a cloth. He ducked his head out of Cassia’s sight, then wheezed a sigh as he squished the Cheri berries across them.

He rolled the cakes, grateful that he could avoid Cassia’s last question. *‘Close call. The Arceists back home never treated me right after I fell away. I was lucky to get away with things like my wilderness trips—and moving away.’*

He held up the cloth, offering one of the crepes to Cassia. She studied them for a moment, then carefully lifted one, inspecting it.

Lawrence took the other crepe, checking his handiwork. *‘It’s not exactly a crepe; it’s really a gritty pancake with squashed berries, but she won’t know the difference.’* He took a bite out of it, then nodded his head. *‘Yep, gritty pancake. Not as sweet either, but it’s nice and tart still.’* He held it up and said, “It’s good! Try it!”

Cassia closed her eyes, then took a small bite from the crepe. She chewed, a smile coming to her face. She opened her eyes and said, “I like it. Does this come from your world?”

Lawrence nodded, continuing to eat his crepe. “Yep, it does. I eat them all the time for breakfast.” He paused, staring at the crepe. “That last time I had one was on the day I left.” Memories of his parents returned to him, how they had made crepes regularly themselves and had them for breakfast, sharing them with their pet Growlithe. *‘I didn’t even take the time to say goodbye.’*

Cassia leaned forward, cocking her head. “Are you alright?”

Lawrence briefly nodded his head, biting into the crepe quickly. A spurt of Cheri juice spurted around his lips, staining his fur red.

He chewed the bite of crepe while Cassia gazed at him with an amused smile, miming washing her cheek. Lawrence gave her a curious look, reaching up to his face. He dabbed at the side of his lips, his paw becoming sticky.

He chuckled, licking his lips and enjoying the juices. “Happens sometimes,” he said with a grin.

Cassia laughed, covering her mouth. She swallowed her bite, then said “I like you more now that you’re not pretending that you’ve lost your memory.” She ate some more.

Lawrence took another bite, then after swallowing, said, “And I’m glad you’ve been so honest with me.”

Cassia coughed, her eyes bulging as she covered her mouth once more. She cleared her throat, then said, “Sorry, I just choked on a bit.” She smiled again and nodded. “Thanks.”

~~~~~

Within the Guild, Arthus walked invisibly along the paths, crossing by the few guards that remained at the hour. The lanterns that hung from the posts glowed low, and the desert chill set heavily on the Pokemon. Most had returned to their dormitories, or in the case of a few, to the ruins that made the northern district—a place filled with life, twenty years ago.

Arthus glanced at the ashen remains of a home in the corner, then turned away, toward the Master's Tower. "I shouldn't dwell on such things...not now."

'What have you done?'

Arthus flinched. "*You.*"

*'You tried to erase me—the **real** me.'*

"It was for our own good!" Arthus hissed. "If you stayed in control, we would be nowhere close to throwing Arceus out of the Tree—just like before."

'I don't care. I've done enough horrible things to last eternity; I don't need anything else to haunt me!'

Arthus gasped and clutched his head, doubling over. "N-No! Not yet!" His head snapped the other way and he cried, "I have to make things right!"

He hurriedly snapped a hand against his head and sent a blast of Life into it, causing him to jerk. He paused for a moment, then sighed, lowering his hand. "While I might be your shadow, I still regret all of this. But unlike you, I know that all of this can be reversed once Arceus' power is ours."

He continued down the path into the Master's Tower, then stormed up the stairs to see Gardner resting on his chair, his fingers interlocked on his chest. His maw opened and closed with every breath, sending chilly air into the room.

Arthus pushed the chair forward and sent Gardner to the floor, waking him with a snort. "Wake up, sleepyhead!"

Gardner groaned, pushing himself up and dusting off his chest. "What was that for? Do you have any idea how late it is?" He took a glance out the window and added, "The moon's not even halfway across the sky!"

Arthus grabbed Gardner's collar and yanked him closer. "Have you found anything on the Prison Bottle's whereabouts? Cassia will be in Hydren in the next few days, so I can afford to search for it."

Gardner pulled himself away, readjusting his ruff. "Yes, I *have*. I don't need to be pushed around like some underling." He took a book from the table next to his chair and

opened the page at the bookmark. His eye flashed, then he closed it, holding his hand over the cover.

He slowly turned to face Arthus, who folded his arms and leaned against the wall. “I’m waiting.”

Gardner cleared his throat and said, “There was a report made roughly six hundred years ago in Cryus. It said that a certain Pokemon had taken the Bottle and hidden it within the Xilo Mountains, likely near the town. Outside of that it is unclear; I haven’t found anything else more recent.”

“And who, pray tell, was the Pokemon that hid it? It had to have been someone very humble to give up Hoopa’s power like that,” Arthus asked, studying his claws.

Gardner reached toward the chair to set the book on it. “Nobody important. Nobody at all.” Arthus gave him a harsh look and saw the Dusknor’s scarred eye flitting back and forth.

Arthus stood upright and marched toward him. “Liar.” He ripped the book from his hands and turned to the marked page. “It can’t be so bad that—” He took one look at the picture and dropped the book instantly, rearing back from it. He lowered to all fours and drew closer, his eyes wide. “No...it can’t be...I killed him myself...*I saw him die!*”

He studied the picture again and saw the silver Lucario holding the Prison Bottle, recognizing the smile and build well. The caption only confirmed his fear: “*He’s alive.*”

Gardner hovered back, holding his hands in front of him. “L-Lord Arthus, there’s surely a reasonable explanation. Someone was likely named after him, or—”

Arthus leapt on top of Gardner and pinned him to the ground, holding his claws inches from his neck with a crazed look. “No! He’s alive! No one else looks like that!” His features softened, and he loosened his grip. “No one...no one else has his...positivity.” He stood up and shook his head, twirling a length of his mane. “Arceus must have brought him back...and considering that he hid the bottle 1400 years after his *supposed* death, he must be immortal—a Legend.” He groaned and clutched his head. “I *knew* that he gained something from being Deity Elect!”

Gardner pushed himself up and cocked his head. “Pardon?”

Arthus glared at him once more, but turned away, shuffling to the stairs. “I’ll head to Hydren to get ready for Cassia and that Lucario. See if you can find a good location to summon Hoopa—along with somewhere more specific to search for the bottle.”

Gardner fingered his scar for a moment, then said, “You know she’s not going to listen to you.” Arthus stopped, remaining still. “She didn’t when she ran away.”

Arthus turned to face him, his shoulders slumped. “I...I can’t just leave her.” He continued down the stairs and exited, leaving Gardner to shake his head and sigh.

~~~~~

Lawrence placed his paws behind his head, lying on the lush grass. He slept several yards away from Cassia, who slept rolled up in her blanket. The sounds of the sea soothed their minds, making them prepared for sleep.

Pulling out his Pokédex, he checked for a dimensional weakness, like he had done many times before, to no avail.

He put the Pokédex away, feeling strangely calm. *‘I’ll find one soon, I’m sure. Mom and Dad are probably wondering where I am, and Valence is probably trying to get me back. But I’ll make it home—soon, hopefully.’* He yawned, stretching. *‘Erica’ll probably be wondering why she can’t find me.’* He paused, furrowing his brow. *‘Erica? Why her?’* He considered the thought, closing his eyes. *“Cassia’s sort of like her, actually. They’re Arceists, they “wear” white, and they’re wanting me to change.’* He breathed out quickly. *‘But unlike Erica, Cassia isn’t irritating—most of the time. She’s rather nice, actually, especially compared to other Arceists. And she’s been the only person—Pokemon, I’ve felt like I could talk to in a while.’*

He opened his eyes and stared at the sky. *‘I guess that’s something I’ll miss when I get back home: talking with Cassia. I doubt I’d find anyone else like her in Unova—even if they’re an Arceist.’*

Lawrence held up a paw, gazing at it sadly. *‘But I wish I had my real body back. I’ve gotten used to moving around, but it still doesn’t feel...right.’* He shifted a bit and thought, *‘And I’d rather not have a tail.’*

He yawned, setting aside these thoughts. *‘Hopefully I’ll change back when I find a way home.’*

~~~~~

Sunlight stretched across the beach once more, the Wingull rising from their nests to search for sustenance once more. The clear waters stretched to a thin plot of land dominated by wooden docks and buildings, a thin haze obscuring it from view.

Curled up on the ground some ways away, Lawrence mumbled about wanting to sleep more. He turned onto his back and opened his eyes—and stared right into Grom’s.

“Grom.”

“Gah!” Lawrence shouted, scrambling back. The Golurk made a halting chuckle, standing straight.

Lawrence stood up and exclaimed, “Again, you sneak up on me! I don’t get it!”

The Golurk lifted a finger to where his mouth would be. “Graw-hawm,” he stated, an eye’s light going out and turning on again, like a wink.

Lawrence gave him a studious look. “Cassia never told me how you got that break in your head. Do you remember how?”

Grom fingered the socket, sparking the revealed circuits. “Graw-awm,” he said, shaking his head.

Lawrence wondered why he bothered asking him these questions when all he could say were variations of his name, but he persisted still. “What’s the first thing you remember then?”

Grom thought for a moment, staring at Lawrence, then pointed at the blue-eyed Gardevoir drawing closer. “Gro-o-om.”

Cassia came between them, the supply bags in her arms. “What are you talking about?” she said, offering a bag to Lawrence.

Lawrence took the bag, noting how light it was. “Grom said the first thing he remembers is you. Can you maybe explain why?”

Grom and Cassia looked at each other for a moment, then Cassia grabbed Grom’s hand and said, “I found him serving a Guild captain north of here. He was essentially his

bodyguard, and thanks to Arthus, became extremely powerful, so much that everyone in the town was frightened of him.” She pointed to the crack on Grom’s head. “Aleron came and bashed his head with a rock, causing part of it to come loose. He shut down afterward, but I came right when he woke up, then made me his master. He helped me stop the captain he served before and teach everyone there.” She laughed slightly, letting go of Grom’s hand. “He hasn’t been able to speak since then or remember anything either. He only remembers serving me.” She slapped him playfully, adding, “And you’ve done a great job of it for the past two years.”

Grom clapped his hands together, chortling. “Graw-haw-haw!” He leaned down and gave Cassia a slight hug, who hugged him back.

They straightened, and Cassia pointed to the buildings beyond. “We’ll pick up some supplies over in Hydren, then find someone who’ll ferry us to Cretea. There’s sure to be Pokémon there since the storms hit.” She turned to the town and began walking toward it, Grom following her.

Lawrence started as well and asked, “Wait, what happened? Storms?”

Cassia nodded. “Twenty years ago, when Arthus returned, a massive storm came. It created waves so large that they flooded entire islands, drowning everyone who lived on them.” She stared at the ground, tightening her grip on the strap of her bag. “I hope that Pokémon live there now. Twenty years is a long time, and it’s one of the few places that Arthus and the Guild don’t have control over. We’ll be safe from them once we’re there.”

Chapter 9

Drafty towers of wood rose into the air, shaking slightly in the brisk, salty wind. Wild Wingull soared overhead, above the throngs of Pokémon crossing back and forth, carrying nets and wagons full of assorted food and supplies. The walkways, dark and filthy with mud, were filled with clamor and shouts, a dull haze of smoke hanging overhead.

Lawrence wrinkled his nose, covering it. “Salt. You just can’t get away from it.”

“It’s good for Grom’s joints. He’s going to have a fun time in the sand while we get ready,” Cassia replied, pulling out her sketchbook. “Let’s see...we need to get supplies before we leave, but I’m not sure how we’ll do that without any money...”

She flipped back to a previous page, glancing at a picture. Lawrence set his paw in front of it and said, “I have an idea.”

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Cassia scraped the finishing touches onto the paper with her charcoal, then held it out for an aged Ninetales to see. “What do you think?”

The Ninetales scrutinized it, then nodded her head happily. “It looks lovely! Here, I’ll give you something for the trouble.” She craned back toward a sack that hung around her back while Cassia carefully tore the paper free of the binding.

The Ninetales held the sack out to Cassia, allowing the drawing to be carefully slipped into a pouch at her side. She walked off, and Cassia returned to Lawrence, who leaned against a wall with his arms crossed, a smirk across his face.

“I told you it would work,” he commented.



Cassia picked through the coins inside, giving him a knowing look. “You don’t have to rub it in.” She looked back to the bench she sat on before, saying, “I don’t normally sell my drawings, since I don’t think they look much good.”

“Who’re you kidding? They look amazing!” Lawrence exclaimed. “Back when I was in school, I saw plenty of people draw, but none of them were as great as you!”

Cassia blushed, pushing back her hair. “You really think so?”

“Hey, I’m done telling lies.” Lawrence took the sack and peeked inside, his eyes widening. “Yikes, I wasn’t expecting *that* much. You think this is enough?”

Cassia nodded her head, putting the book back and accepting the coins. “I think it should be. We probably have enough to even eat somewhere, if we wanted to.”

Lawrence surveyed the many buildings, pointing at one with an enormous fish-shaped sign. “Why not there? It looks like they have good stuff to eat.” The sign, labeled ‘The Greasy Feebas’ advertised gourmet meals—caught fresh daily, in fact. ‘*Rather odd for berries,*’ Lawrence thought.

Cassia leaned away a bit, leering at the doorway. A Machoke burst out of the doors and threw a Raichu out, the unfortunate rodent landing in a pile of mud. “And don’ come back!” the Machoke harrumphed, stomping back inside.

The Raichu carelessly popped out of the mud and staggered up, hiccupping and giggling. “It was only a *teensy* shock. Heh.” He bumbled between Cassia and Lawrence, the Gardevoir careful not to get mud on her dress.

Lawrence cringed, shrugging. “You might get some opportunities?” He lowered his arms, sweeping the area once more. “Besides, it doesn’t look like there’s anywhere else around.”

Cassia groaned, stepping ahead of him. “I’m starving, so let’s just go in and get some food. Better make it quick, as I *really* prefer to stay out of places like this.” Lawrence followed, and they pushed into the chaos.

Pokémon of all shapes and sizes crowded around tables, talking loudly amongst each other with food and drinks sitting in front of them. Low-hanging lanterns provided dim illumination, the orange reflected in the many bottles that lay tucked behind the barkeep

Ambipom, who glumly rubbed glasses with a dirty rag. Sitting next to the counter in front of the barkeep were several Pokémon swigging from bottles, while in the back of the establishment, a Machop was swamped by his Machop cronies, cackling as he boasted of his feats.

Cassia remained close to Lawrence, looking about the room with a fearful expression. Shoulders tensed, Lawrence walked up to the counter, and the Ambipom shuffled over.

The Ambipom set aside the glass and crossed his tails. “Welcome to the Greasy Feebas, best Cheri Juice this side o’ the Xilo Mountains. Name’s Lonny; what can I do ya for?”

Lawrence veered away from a Sableye snoring to his right. “What do you have?”

Lonny sighed, rolling his eyes. “Great, a newbie.” He leaned on the counter, staring at Lawrence. “See here, Watchog. Here at the Greasy Feebas, we don’ serve just the usual bread and berry stuff. Nah, we serve yah fish, caught from the deep just this mornin’. If you got a problem with that, beat it.”

Lawrence blanched, turning away and glancing at Cassia. He came closer and whispered, “Is that a usual thing around here?”

Cassia nodded, then whispered back, “Wild Pokémon are pretty scarce on land, but the ocean’s full of them. I remember reading that Arceus considers it wise to eat wild Pokémon since it is no different than them eating Pokémon.”

Lawrence nodded slowly, making sense of it. *‘Not a usual thing back home. Tried a fish once, though, and it tasted pretty good.’* He turned back to Lonny and said, “I’ll take the catch of the day, whatever it is.”

Lonny held out a tail, flexing his fingers. “Four coins for you and Miss Blue-Eyes.” Cassia averted her eyes, turning away.

Lawrence took the sack from her fleeting grip and slapped the coins into the Ambipom’s tail. Lonny pulled it back and stuffed it into a jar. “Lucille, double fish-fry, mediums!”

There was a rousing crash from the window behind him, and a scowling Ambipom peered through. “Alright, alright, I got it! Not like I need anything else to do!” She pounded the wall again, muttering something unintelligible.

Lonny gestured to the window, shaking his head. “She cooks, I take care a’ the business...it’s a workin’ agreement.” He gestured to two empty seats. “The tables are all full, so you’ll just have to deal with my ugly mug till yer food’s ready.” Lawrence and Cassia took their seats, the Sableye next to them snorting.

Lonny reached back to the bottles with a tail, continuing to stare at Lawrence, disinterested. “Drinks are on the house, thanks to that big galoot over there.” He pointed at the raucous Machamp, the heavyweight lifting a table with a single finger.

Lonny slapped the counter and roared, “Oi, hands off the furniture!” The Machamp and his cronies laughed as he slammed the table on the floor, lounging back into his seat.

Frowning, Lonny turned back to Lawrence. “Those boys are Guild guys lookin’ to have a little fun ‘fore they head north for Cambeta. Don’t see their sort around here otherwise.” He grabbed a glass and began polishing it with a rag, sighing. “Have to treat ‘em like Legends when they’re around. I’d throw ‘em out, but I’d rather not get on ole Gardner’s bad side.”

“That’s ‘because you haven’t got a spine!” Lucille spat from the kitchen.

Lonny flinched, shaking his head. “Ach, she’s in a bad mood. Doesn’t help that we have bouncin’ baby Aipom either.” He grabbed a bottle, studying the contents. “Want some Cheri Juice? Oran Pulp? I got the whole caboodle.”

Cassia tapped Lawrence’s shoulder and whispered. “Careful what you pick. Try and pick something that’s less...potent, or you’ll end up loopier than that Raichu.”

Lawrence nodded, glancing at the many drinks the Ambipom had to offer. He pointed at a dull yellow bottle. “What’s that one?”

Lonny plucked it from a shelf and sneered. “This? We keep it for the kids, since they can’t handle the adult stuff.” He shook it, watching the air bubble out of it. “Pinap juice. So sweet, one sniff’ll give you a cavity.” He held it up and shook it again. “You really want it?”

“Considering I’d prefer to keep my head, yes,” Lawrence replied, gritting his teeth.

Lonny shrugged, taking his freshly-polished glass and pouring a draught of the sickly-sweet substance. He set it down in front of Lawrence, giving Cassia a sly nod. “And what will you be havin’ today?”

“Nothing, thank you,” she replied, eyeing Lonny warily.

Lucille peeked through the window again, harrumphing. “You ain’t talkin’ to another girl again, are ya?”

Lonny backed away from Cassia, turning his head toward Lucille. “I’m not, I’m not. Don’t think I didn’t learn last time.”

His wife shoved two plates out the window and dinged a small bell next to it. “Fish fry ready, come and get it!” She stomped off, muttering about checking on the baby.

Lonny took the plates with his tails and placed them in front of Cassia and Lawrence. Lawrence stared at the singed Basculin, which stared back with dull eyes.

Lonny smirked and shuffled to the corner of the counter. “Enjoy.”

Cassia picked up the Basculin, studying it. “I’ve eaten fish before, but not for a while.”

Lawrence picked up his own Basculin, saying, “We try it at the same time. That’s fair, right?”

They nodded, and bit into the softened flesh. It was slightly sweet and buttery, along with a heavy salty flavor. Overall, not too bad.

Lawrence took another bite eagerly, relishing it. Lonny stepped back over, grinning. “I’ll give your compliments to the chef. The missus always likes that.”

“Hey Two-Tail!”

The barkeep ducked as a bottle flew toward him, shattering against the open wall. He glared at the direction it came from, where the Machamp impatiently crossed his arms.

“Me and my buddies need some drinks. The good stuff,” the Machamp growled, his black armband stretched thin over his top-left arm. His Machoke companions agreed, making hearty cheers for their leader.

“A pleasure serving you, Mored, as always,” Lonny sighed, turning to Lawrence and mouthing, “Not really.” He took a tray and loaded it with five bottles, one of them the dull yellow from before.

He walked to the edge and lifted the counter, moving toward Mored and his Machoke. Lawrence and Cassia enjoyed their meals and had nearly finished eating the Basculin.

“Blech!”

The Machamp threw the yellow bottle at Lonny, who narrowly ducked again, allowing it to smash against the wall, the liquid dribbling down.

Mored stamped toward the heavy-eyed Ambipom and spat, “That stuff tasted like you stuffed a Spritzee in a bottle. What’s the big idea?”

Lonny shrugged, continuing his walk back to the counter. “You never said what strong stuff you liked. I thought you meant sweet.”

Mored grabbed his tails, yanking back the Ambipom. Cringing, Lonny stared at the infuriated eyes of the Machamp. The Guild Pokémon jabbed a finger at him and said, “You’re going to regret that. Maybe it’s time *I* threw somebody out for a change, eh boys?” The Machoke behind him cackled, slapping each other’s backs hysterically.

Lawrence pounded the counter, catching the Machamp’s attention. The Lucario twisted and leaned against it, while Cassia stood up, stepping away.

“How often are you around, Mored?” Lawrence asked.

The Machamp released Lonny’s tails and scowled at the Lucario. “Every few months. Why you askin’, punk?”

Lawrence nodded sagely, turning his gaze to Lonny, who twisted his tails fearfully. “And do you treat your host like this every time?”

“None a’ your business. I treat him how I like, and he don’t complain.” Mored raised fist toward Lonny. “Ain’t that right?”

“Well...” Lawrence swirled his Pinap juice and took a sip, pausing to prevent a wry face from overcoming him, the overpowering sweetness proving too strong for his tastes. “I know a friend who doesn’t like Pokémon like you. He likes to make sure that bullies

like you don't hurt others." He set down his glass and smirked. "I think I'll take a page from his book today, and this time, I won't mess up."

The Machamp stared for a moment, then grinned. "And what are you gonna do? Slap me with those tiny paws of yours, Watchog?"

Lawrence shook his head. "Arm wrestle."

Mored broke into uproarious laughter, his comrades following him. After a minute, Mored wiped a faux tear from his eye and wheezed, "Oi, yer a funny one alright. Tell ya what: You win, I'll let myself get thrown out, and if I win, well..." He cracked his knuckles. "I'll have some fun with you as a new training dummy. I'll give ya ten seconds to back out since you made me laugh."

Cassia rushed to Lawrence and hissed, "Are you crazy? He's a *Machamp*. He'll break your arm faster than you can blink!"

Lawrence sat in front of a now-empty table, around which the other patrons stood waiting for the match. "I'm sure I can beat him. Besides, we can't let him be around; the Guild's sure to send someone like this guy to stop us from leaving," he whispered back.

"Isn't there something else you could do?"

"If there's one thing I know about Machamp, they only listen to force." Lawrence remembered watching two Machamp duel each other to settle an argument. Up until that point, they refused to budge on their viewpoints, but once one stood victorious, the other complied. Strength talked in Machamp society.

Mored held up his hands. "Take your pick. You'll lose either way."

Lawrence pointed at his top-right arm. "Good luck with the bad angle."

Mored grimaced, leaning down and holding out the arm. "Got a smart mouth, dontcha?"

Lawrence accepted the hand, tightening his grip. "It helps when I'm surrounded by guys like you all the time." As they got into position, Lawrence thought, *'Can't be worse than those supply movers I beat back in Unova—at least, now that I'm a Lucario.'*

Lonny came over and held a rag over their arms. "Alright boys, don't think this isn't the first time this happened. Mored, you know the rules: no breakin' arms, poppin'

shoulders...none of your funny business; I've talked with yer captain before, and he don't appreciate it." Mored gave him a slight nod, then grinned at Lawrence.

Lonny cleared his throat and waved the rag. "Have at it." Lawrence and Mored pushed against each other, the Machamp's muscles rippling as they fought for control.

Mored's arm began pushing Lawrence's down, and the Machoke whooped in his favor. The Lucario clenched his teeth, pushing it back up. *'Nope...nope, this guy's worse!'*

He felt something brush against his leg, but he didn't care; he had to focus on pushing Mored back, especially since his own arm was beginning to be pushed down again.

It now stood centimeters away from the table, and Mored grunted, "Yer strong alright...but not like me..."

"No..." Lawrence grunted, feeling warmth flow up from his leg into his arm. His arm wavered near the edge of the table, nearly sealing his fate. *'This...this thug...I can't...let him win. He's no better...than Team Rocket...a giant bully...exactly what I dealt with...back in Sinnoh!'*

He felt a spike of warmth and shouted, "No!" His arm shot upward and slammed Mored's down, flipping the Machamp onto his side and upending the table. Stunned silence followed.

Mored gave Lawrence an astonished look, then growled, rubbing his losing arm. "You cheated. I had it in the bag."

Lawrence rolled his shoulder, amazed that he ended up winning. "Well, that goes to show that the Guild isn't as tough as I thought it'd be."

The Machamp came to his feet and reared back his arms. "Why you sly little—gurk!"

He suddenly flopped to the floor with Lonny's tails around his legs, the Ambipom now glaring at him. "Hey, you had a deal: he wins, you get thrown out." He lifted the Machamp with a grunt, then with a whirl, threw Mored out the door, the Machamp landing with a splat in the mud.

The Machoke rushed toward their leader, while Lonny came up to Lawrence and shook his paw with his arms. “You finally gave me an excuse to do that. Thanks for getting rid of him.”

Lawrence nodded, catching Cassia’s hand move from his leg as he glanced down. “Don’t mention it. I just want to make sure everyone gets treated fairly is all.”

Lonny laughed, nodding his head. “Yeah, well, you did good at that. Those Guild Pokémon have been getting a little too pushy lately.” He walked behind the counter and waved a tail. “I think you ought to get goin’ now; ole Mored will come to his senses sooner or later you know.”

Cassia nodded her head briefly and lead Lawrence out the door. “Thanks for the food!”

As Lawrence and Cassia left, the Sableye suddenly perked up and moaned, “I’m gonna get tha’ ole Rhydon. You’ll see.” His head banged against the table.

Lonny leaned down to him with a smirk. “Hey, Jerry.” The Sableye twisted his head, revealing a single cracked eye. “I’m not supposed to tell you this, but ole Mored don’t like yer story.”

Jerry shot up and screeched, holding up a claw. “*I’m gonna kill you!*” He darted out the door and screeched again.

Amongst shouts of pain and astonishment, Mored cried out, “What’d I do to *you?*”

Lonny chuckled to himself, straightening chairs and cleaning a table. “Glad to see those bozos gone.”

“Landon, get in here! The baby needs feeding!” Lucille roared, a spoon flying out the window and banging into the back of Lonny’s head.

The Ambipom sighed, shaking his head as he pushed into the kitchen, his tails drooping. “And just like that, moment’s gone.”

The door burst open and a shrieking Sableye flew towards Lonny. He ducked, watching the unfortunate ghost crash into a table and groan. Lonny shook his head and entered the kitchen.

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“And then I just started feeling really strong, like I had some sort of battery! It was weird!” Lawrence exclaimed, walking with Cassia through the market area.

Cassia nodded absentmindedly, searching the stalls for what they would need. “Yeah, real weird. Want to help out?”

“Sure, why not?” Lawrence replied. They moved toward a Bibarel’s food stall, while Lawrence tried to pinpoint how that surge of energy could have come about. *‘I felt like that before when Aleron used his Life on me.’* He considered the possibilities. *‘Was he in the room? Invisible? Maybe a different look? I couldn’t tell.’*

He left these thoughts to barter with the old Bibarel, hoping to catch her goods for a decent price.

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Grom sat on the coastline across Hydren, scooping handfuls of sand and pouring them over his shoulders, relishing the gritty smoothness that his joints received afterward. Chuckling, he threw a huge plume of sand above him, listening to the clinks of the grains across his metallic frame. The sunset reflected across several of the grains, flashing in the sun.

“Having a good time?”

He swiveled his head behind him, noticing a cloaked figure watching from the top of a small hill. The cloak covered everything but the black legs beneath.

“I hope you have. I will need your help.”

Grom stood up, stomping his feet. “Gro-grow-hawm?”

The figure stepped back slightly. “Come on, you know me. I’m back to help you and Cassia.”

Grom’s eyes glowed more fiercely, as well as the cracks along his body. “Hawm...”

“You need proof. Very well.” The figure held out a black paw, and a burst of blue flame erupted from it, causing the Golurk to flinch.

Grom’s light dulled, and the giant stared dumbfoundedly at who stood before him. The figure began walking away, and Grom followed.

Looking back slightly, the figure nodded. “Good, I’ve made my point. I’ll need you farther up, so just keep following me.” His silver tail swished back and forth, continuing to reflect in the evening light.

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Lawrence hefted his bag, now completely full of supplies needed for their overseas trip to Cretea. No Guild Pokémon, not even Mored Machamp, had come to stop them. It looked like that they would be able to go without worrying about any sort of interference.

Cassia walked ahead of him, exclaiming, “I’ve asked around and found out that the only ferry left is owned by Charles Lapras. He hasn’t come out for a while, but they say that he always works for a reasonable price.”

“Good thing too; we’re nearly out of the money that Ninetales gave us.”

“I still find it hard to believe that she gave us so much.”

“Well, it’s a good thing she did. Do you think Grom will fit?”

“Ferries are supposed to be pretty large. I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

They stepped onto the pier, the sun below the horizon, providing the briefest rays of light across the ocean. The aged wooden planks stood on narrow poles rising from the water, coated with algae and relatively stable on the rocks below. All wind had stopped blowing the boats bobbing in the waves, along with the boathouses protecting both Pokémon and their crafts within.

They came to one such boathouse with a large sign emblazoned with a Lapras head, smiling above the name ‘Charles’ in faded letters. The structure was attached to the pier with large beams, a single, low-roofed dwelling that looked to have several rooms. Parts of the wall sunk into the water, with the back having a small tunnel leading into it.

Cassia knocked on the door, causing it to swing in with a creak. She and Lawrence looked at each other, bewildered.

“I guess he’s not able to close it himself,” Lawrence noted, going inside without another thought. Cassia looked around suspiciously, then entered, failing to notice the shadow slipping inside after them.

Lawrence studied Charles' home. Aged relics from beneath the sea—ranging from ship instruments to unique shells—covered the shelves, difficult to see thanks to the low light. Along the walkway, a channel of water wound, leading into the different rooms, each with a light curtain blocking two entrances—one on the dock, and one in the water. The channels had a thick wooden bottom beneath them, deep enough for a sizeable Pokémon.

Lawrence inspected a picture showing a Lapras tugging a raft loaded with a group of Pokémon, looking back at them with a smile. Standing amongst the Pokémon was a Lucario, only with strange, silver fur.

Before Lawrence could ask, a sharp snap came from a different room. He drew his paws close and exclaimed, "Hello? Is anyone home?"

Cassia stood behind him, holding her bag tightly. "Lawrence, something isn't right." The door slammed closed, making them jump. The handle fell against the floor, broken.

A shape whooshed around; a low chuckle accompanied it. Lawrence searched wildly, pacing around the room. "Who's there? Where are you hiding?"

"Oh, I'm not hiding, *Lucario*." Lawrence shot back into the wall, and his Watchog illusion dissipated.

"Lawrence!" Cassia cried, running to his side.

"Ah, so *that's* his name. Would he have anything to do with this strange creature that's been following you?" the voice asked.

Cassia paled as she helped Lawrence to his feet. "*No...*"

A graying Zoroark materialized in front of them, holding up his braceleted arm with a smirk. "Yes, my dear. We haven't seen each other for a *long* time, have we?"

"Wait, what?" Lawrence exclaimed. He turned to Cassia and said, "You *know* him?"

Arthus cocked his head in confusion. "Why of *course* she does! I mean, don't you see—" He cut himself short, then smiled. "Oh...she hasn't told you...or *shown* you either." He laughed, wiping a faux tear from his eye. "Oh, this is *rich*! You have to be the densest Lucario I've met!"

A vein throbbed in Lawrence's head. "And you've got to be the most unhinged Zoroark I've met, *Arthus*."

He stopped, holding his chin. "Ah, so she told you about me. Have you actually *met* any other Zoroark?" Cassia shrunk away, searching desperately for an exit—but all the doors had their knobs broken.

Lawrence thrust a paw out at him and shouted, "Yeah, Aleron, your descendant! He's been helping the Pokemon you've been killing off!"

Arthus laughed once more, and Cassia drew closer to Lawrence, whispering, "We have to leave, *now*. He's going to kill you!"

"Yes, despite my amusement, you have to come out of the picture," Arthus added. He turned to Cassia with a half-hearted smile. "Despite hiding from me for all these years, my door is still open to you."

Cassia scowled and held her arms out. "There's a reason I've run from murderers like you, Arthus."

Arthus sighed, holding up a hand and causing a sphere of erratic, crimson Life to gather. "We'll see about that." He grinned and aimed the sphere at Lawrence. "Regardless, all Lucario must die." The Life Sphere shot from his palm toward Lawrence's chest.

Lawrence rolled to the ground, narrowly dodging the sphere. As it shot through the wall to the outside, he scrambled to his feet and ran for Arthus with a yell, his paws curled into fists. He threw a punch at the Zoroark's face, but he deftly dodged it and circled around him. Lawrence threw a fist again, only Arthus caught it and twisted his arm, forcing him to his knees with a scream. Arthus leaned down and gouged his claws into Lawrence's leg.

The Lucario gasped and clutched the wound, gritting his teeth. Arthus cackled, grabbing Lawrence's dreadlocks and yanking him up. "Is this *really* what I'm up against? Not even a glimpse of Aura?"

Cassia ran around Arthus, digging into her bag. "Lawrence, I'm trying to help, but—"

Arthus twisted his head and tutted disapprovingly. “What’s the matter? Too frightened to attack your teacher?”

Lawrence cried out, pulling at Arthus’ claws. “*What?*”

Arthus turned to Lawrence and held his ear next to his lips. “Why yes. She happens to be—*auck!*”

Cassia swung her bag into Arthus’ head, sending him to the ground and releasing Lawrence from his grip. He clutched his bleeding leg, calling out, “Cassia, help me!”

The Gardevoir ran to him and hesitantly held her hand out. “Quick, before he—”

Arthus grabbed Cassia and pushed her aside, sending her against the wall. “I can’t have you taking him away; as much as I hate doing this with you here, I have to!” He held his claws high over Lawrence, red mist flowing from them. The Lucario struggled to stand, but the searing pain in his leg prevented him from moving more than a few inches.

Cassia grabbed his arm and pulled it down, crying out, “No! No, you’re better than this!”

Arthus tried to shake her off, saying, “You don’t understand! You *never* will!”

Cassia grabbed Arthus’ other arm and pinned it behind him. “I do understand, and it’s all thanks to you!”

Arthus yowled and pried himself from Cassia’s grip, then threw him off his other arm into the shelves set in the center of the room. She crashed into them and caused them to collapse, creating a thick cloud of dust and knocking her bag from her shoulder. It landed in the center of the room, spilling its contents onto the floor—including a leather bag with a white mask set within.

Arthus froze, putting a hand over his mouth. Lawrence, however, crawled into the dust cloud and cried, “Cassia!” He grunted as he came to his feet, limping over the fallen decorations to find her.

Lawrence coughed in the dust cloud, pawing for Cassia. “Where are you?”

Something grabbed his paw, and Cassia’s voice replied, “I’m here! Take us out!”

Lawrence complied, steadily going back through the dust cloud as to avoid hitting anything. He made it to the clear air, then looked down at his enclosed paw.

Red claws covered it.

“Gah!” Lawrence threw away the claws, watching them retreat into the dust. Arthus looked on, a smile creeping across his face.

Lawrence stepped closer warily. “Who are you? Where’s Cassia?”

The dust settled, and a Zoroark stood in front of Lawrence, claws held up in astonishment. Covered in dust, sleek grey fur covered its body, with a puff of black on its chest. The red mane hung off its head like a great crimson cloud, a jeweled bead keeping it tied at the end. The claws—fine daggers—partially covered the bright-blue eyes—which looked remarkably like Cassia’s.

Lawrence squinted his eyes, then said in surprise, “Aleron?”

The Zoroark looked up sadly. “Lawrence...it’s me.”

The Lucario’s eyes widened, recognizing the bright-blue eyes of the Zoroark. “Cassia?” She nodded shamefully.

He shook his head, stepping back. “No. That can’t be right. She’s a Gardevoir, you’re...a Zoroark! You’re like—him!” He turned briefly to Arthus and snapped back. He breathed in sharply. “Your eyes...they look exactly like his!”

Cassia came closer, pulling back her limbs. “Please, believe me! I--I had to keep it a secret, for safety, for--”

“While it’s nice to see my little girl being honest, I’m afraid I have other plans.” Arthus held up the Arceist Tome with one hand and held a Life-fueled fire underneath it. He started lowering it down. “Oh, how I’ve wanted to do this.”

Cassia leapt past the stunned Lawrence and grabbed hold of the tome. “No! You can’t!”

Arthus grimaced, pulling back the book. “This book’s affected you worse than I imagined!” He focused the fire in his free hand toward the tome. “There’s only one way to set you right!”

Cassia grabbed Arthus’ other hand with her own covered in red mist, extinguishing the flame. “You’re just too twisted to see the truth!”

As they fought for the book, Lawrence stood still, astonished. *‘How...how could she do this? She hid everything from me—even after I told her about me! How much more did she lie about? How can I even trust her?’*

Arthus roared and kicked back Cassia, sending her to the ground. “You’ve forced my hand!” He ignited another fire in his palm and threw it against the Tome, instantly incinerating the book.

Cassia reached out for the ashes futilely, weakening. “No!” She caught some in her palms and held them close, closing her eyes as her throat grew tight. “No...”

Arthus grimaced, brushing past her and toward Lawrence. “It’s...it’s for your own good.” He grabbed Lawrence’s neck and set him against the opposite corner, leaving Cassia to cry over the burned Arceist Tome.

Lawrence struggled against Arthus’ grip, prying at his hands. Arthus tightened his claws around Lawrence’s throat, making him gasp and struggle harder. Arthus shook his head in disappointment. “This is pathetic. I expected far more from you, and you can’t even use Aura. You should’ve been able to spot me outside, or even counter my Life.” He reared back his claws, his eyes glowing red. “At least it makes finishing you off even easier.”

A dull roar thrummed in the air, causing him to stop. His ears twitched as he attempted to source the sound, eventually turning to the wall on his left. “What in Equivos—”

CRASH!!

An onyx Golurk burst through the wall and threw Arthus away from Lawrence and through the opposite wall. He flew into the water with a cry and sank beneath the surface.

Lawrence pressed himself into the corner, inches away from the Golurk. The automaton turned to him and his eyes flashed. “Grawm?”

Lawrence’s eyes widened. “*Grom?* How in the world did you get here?”

“Thanks to me, and thank Arceus I intervened.”

Lawrence turned to the door and his mouth hung open. A Lucario with silver fur stood in the doorway, wearing leather clothing and a broad-brimmed hat. He tipped it to

Lawrence and nodded his head. "I'll save the introductions for later; Arthus won't be stopped by a bit of water." He knelt next to Cassia the Zoroark and gathered her remaining belongings into her bag. She didn't seem to notice, still staring at the remains of the Tome.

Grom pulled himself inside the house and revealed a large wooden raft outside, complete with a hut set in the center. He held Lawrence in his arms and carried him outside, ignoring the Lucario's lack of response.

The silver Lucario tapped Cassia's shoulder, stirring her from her trance and causing her to look at him. Her eyes grew wide as she dropped the ashes. "*Matheus?*"

The Lucario nodded his head. "Good to see you again." He pulled her up and hurriedly dragged her to the raft. "Now come on! I don't want to be here when he comes back?" He leapt through the hole in the wall and entered the open hut, where Lawrence sat on a cot. He tossed Cassia's bag to the floor and shouted, "Hit it!"

Grom shuffled to the roof and grabbed the sides. His feet sputtered slightly, then erupted with bursting red flame, jetting them across the water and to the south, hugging the coastline as they made way to the archipelago of Cretea.

Seconds after they rocketed away, Arthus erupted from the water and landed on the pier, coughing and sputtering. He fell on his back and seethed, "Curse that Golurk!" He caught movement toward the south and saw a raft speeding away, with Grom thrusting it forward. Barely visible was a silver-furred figure within the doorway of the hut.

Water dribbled down Arthus' grimace as he stood up. "*Matheus.*" He held up a crimson flame, causing the water on his palm to steam. "You want to taunt me further, Arceus? Fine." He threw the ball of fire into the house, causing an ever-growing fire to consume it. He stomped off the pier as the fire spread, his ice-blue eyes glowing red.

"I'll just take him with the Seal first."

Chapter 10

Act X - Special Episode

2000 AU

The storms of Arthus' coming had long since quieted, the raging rains finally stilled. Moonlight peeked through the clouds, and the wild Pokémon dared to venture from their homes, confident that the Usurper had sated his fury. The forests of Serenita spread across the center of the continent, enclosing a low boulder, the jagged entrance housing a single individual.

In the low-roofed cave, the entrance dark and the air musty, a Zorua slept on a pillow, blinking awake and yawning. She looked about, then froze, recalling the events from before she somehow slept. She whimpered, then began to cry.

Footsteps echoed into the cave, and the Zorua looked up. She saw a Zoroark with graying fur charge in, wheezing, holding his chest. She first thought it was a stranger, but saw the distinctive blue eyes, the eyes that looked so much like her father's.

"I'm here! I'm here!" he wheezed. His eyes softened upon seeing the Zorua, his rage hours ago gone.

The Zorua ran for Arthus pressing her head against his legs and weeping. Arthus stared at her, perplexed, then smiled, picking her up and cradling her. "You think I'm your dad, don't you? My eyes..." He looked up, forcing a laugh. "I thought he looked a little like me." He petted the Zorua, saying, "I am sorry for what had to happen. I never wanted a child like you to cry because of me."

He sat in the center of the cave, pulling up the cushion. “Do you know your name?” The Zorua cocked her head, sniffing. Arthus shook his head. “Right, how could I forget; you’re too young. They wouldn’t have named you until you cast your first illusion.” He set her on the cushion, then set his claws on her head, red light flashing beneath them. She fell asleep, but the light continued. “Considering the circumstances, however, I think that we can make an exception.”

Arthus thought for a moment, then made a small smile. “I know your name.” He lifted his claw, ensuring that she had no memory of her true parents. “I’ll name you what Corrina had considered for a name for a daughter...if we ever had one...” He lay on the floor, curling around the Zorua, then closed his eyes for sleep.

“Cassia.”

~~~~~

At the gate of a massive fortress, set in the center of a vast canyon, the morning had only just broken over the horizon. Murkrow already flew from their nests in search of shiny belongings. Rust-colored dust swept around the structure, coating the desolate scene with a metallic scent.

Cassia sat on the pillow, curled up into a terrified ball. Arthus held her aloft as he knocked on the gate. Afterward, he patted her head and said, “It’s alright Cassia; I think you will enjoy living here with me.” The door creaked open, and Arthus snapped his fingers, a rush of wind blowing past them.

Pokémon of all sorts carried sacks onto large carts, while others carried them over their backs and shoulders. Another group of Pokémon dug holes, helping the others throw the sacks inside. Rising high above the Pokémon, a marvelous tower stretched above, and perched atop it was a solitary Dusknoir—his eye a perfect red sphere--looking across the scene with a grim face.

Arthus waved his free hand and exclaimed, “Guildmaster Gardner!” The Dusknoir twisted his head with a dull glance, then his eye widened when he noticed Cassia.

The ghost leapt off the top of the Tower and drew close to Arthus and Cassia. “What are you thinking, bringing a child here! Do you see all—this!” He waved to the sacks, at which Cassia cocked her head, bewildered.

Arthus leaned close and jerked the Guildmaster toward his face. “Since when did you grow a heart? I made sure to disguise...you-know-what, before I entered. All she sees are sacks of berries.”

Gardner nodded his head slowly. “So, no blood, no—”

“No nothing! Keep it down!” the Usurper hissed. He looked down at Cassia and whispered. “I’d rather not have her discover my...admittedly, weaker side.”

Gardner grunted, then said, “Whatever you wish, even if I don’t entirely understand.” He leaned over Cassia, scrutinizing her. The Zorua crept back to Arthus, menaced by the crimson eye.

Arthus bared his teeth and swatted the Dusknair away, leaving him to rub his chin. The Usurper crooned over Cassia and exclaimed, “I want her to feel safe in this place, not like she’ll ambushed in her sleep!”

“As you said moments before, ‘when did you grow a heart?’ You’re the same Pokémon that—” he gave a glance to Cassia, “disposed of all these sacks, and took back the Seal of Creation! And now you want to raise *that*?”

Arthus pushed a claw into Gardner’s chest. “*Her* name is Cassia, and I don’t care for your tone. I didn’t release you only to chastise me.”

Gardner held up his hands defensively, backing away. “I only have concerns about how it could affect you. Have you ever raised a child? Will this hinder your plans?”

Arthus’ claw shook, then fell, his eyes losing their luster. “I had the chance, years ago. And I ruined it. Before all is done,” he clenched his fist, then with loose restraint, growled, “I want to prove that I can still be a father to someone, no matter what Matheus said.”

Gardner stared for a moment, then shrugged. “Whatever you wish, Lord Arthus. I have no say in your actions.” He gestured to the Pokémon carrying ‘sacks’. “This is nearly taken care of. What would you have me do next?”

Arthus tapped his chin. “You remember my previous offer, yes? Involving the Arceists?”

Gardner’s perfect eye glowed brighter. “Yes. Is it time?”

Arthus grabbed Gardner’s arm with a smile. “Go have your revenge.” Arthus’ face curled into a sneer. “Do whatever you need to get rid of those liars.”

Gardner nodded, chuckling. “Understood, Lord Arthus.” He hovered away, gathering Guild Pokémon to him.

Cassia looked up to Arthus, who patted her back, sighing. “I don’t enjoy talking about these things with you here. We must get a room where we can be by ourselves.” He pulled at a passing Jumpluff and said, “Can you gather up any toys and children’s books you can find? I want to ensure that Cassia is well taken care of.”

The Jumpluff nodded, then went off to do as he said. Arthus sighed, walking toward a small abandoned house in the corner of the wall. “It feels good to be respected again.”

~~~~~

2004 AU

Arthus sat on a chair in a brightly colored room, Cassia curled up on his lap. Toys of all sorts were gathered in the corner, tucked away for the coming night, while a pile of books lay stacked next to the chair.

The Usurper closed a book with a satisfied sigh. “Well, I think that is all the reading we’ll do tonight.” Cassia leapt off his lap and pointed to an aged book sitting midway through the stack.

Arthus studied it, his eyes widening with surprise. “You want to read *that*? Why on Equivos would you want to read about Arceus?” He shook his head, setting aside the book in his claws and picking up Cassia. “Even if I wanted to read that to you, it is time to sleep. We’ll be starting your training tomorrow; we can’t have a Zorua that can’t fool Pokémon.” He set her on her pillow and tapped her nose playfully, while she looked up sadly. “Good night.” Arthus walked out of the room, shutting the door with a gentle click.

The Zorua opened her eyes again, looking longingly at the Tome. Her eyes soon grew heavy, then she fell asleep.

~~~~~

Cassia now stood behind the house in a fenced enclosure, the heat of the afternoon seeping into her body. She and Arthus stood facing each other, with Arthus on all fours to better demonstrate to the Zorua.

“Listen closely, Cassia; I want you make yourself look like an Eevee. Do you know how an Eevee looks like?”

“What’s an Eevee?” Cassia asked, still getting used to speaking.

Arthus grinned. “An Eevee looks like this.” He snapped his fingers, and a brown-furred Pokémon appeared in front of Cassia, her ears wavering slightly in the wind.

Cassia came closer to it, then tried to touch it, her paw passing through the illusion. “But it isn’t there!”

“That’s what illusions are! They are only appearances. If we could actually create things like that, we’d be like Arceus!” He pushed Cassia gently away. “Now, look at where you want an Eevee to appear, then make a gesture to focus it. Myself, I snap my fingers, but given that you currently have none, you’ll have to make do with something else.” The Eevee faded, and Arthus stepped back, allowing his student more room.

Cassia studied the space in front of her, imagining Arthus’ Eevee standing there. She then waved her paw to the right, and the wind rushed, and a somewhat-fuzzy Eevee appeared in front of her, patches occasionally phasing out of the conjuring.

Arthus stood up and laughed, clapping his hands. “Bravo, bravo! Well done for your first try!” Cassia beamed, looking away from the spot. The Eevee quickly dissipated.

Cassia’s ears drooped. “It’s gone...”

Arthus tutted, coming next to Cassia and stroking her head. “Oh, it’s not your fault; it takes time, that’s all.”

“Lord Arthus!”

Arthus whipped his head to the fence, giving it an evil look. “Excuse me for a second.” He stood up and marched to the fence, where the head of a Dusknoir poked through the seemingly-empty scene.

Arthus shoved him back and crossed over the fence, leaving Cassia by herself. The Zorua focused her thoughts on the empty grass once more, saying to herself, “I want to make an Eevee...like Dad’s...” The fuzzy Eevee appeared once more, patches and all.

Cassia drooped once more. “No, like Dad’s!” The Eevee focused itself slightly.

She stamped her foot, red mist suddenly trailing out of the ground. “Look like Dad’s, please!” The red mist swirled around the Eevee, and all the detail of the Usurper’s handiwork appeared, complete with a warm smile.

“How do you do, Cassia?” the Eevee asked.

Arthus burst out from the fence, and asked, “Who said that!” His jaw hung as he noticed the red mist underneath Cassia’s feet, wrapping around the Eevee in an ethereal manner.

“How—when—” He held his head, muttering to himself as he thought. “Yes...he was in the room...that explains...” He looked up and grinned. “This changes things.” He stooped to Cassia’s level and grabbed her forelimbs. “Do you know what you just did?”

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked, shrinking slightly.

Arthus laughed, shaking his head. “No! In fact, you’ve done something better than I could have imagined: you used Life! I always thought there was a deposit around here, but it was so small that I didn’t bother with it!”

“What do you mean?”

“It means I can teach you not only what it means to be a Zorua, but also what it means to be a descendant of Arthus Zoroark.”

~~~~~

Arthus sat cross-legged in front of Cassia, his eyes closed, and his fingers interlocked. Cassia sat on her haunches expectantly, wondering what he was going to do.

Arthus opened his eyes and said, “In all Pokémon, there is this force called Life. Most are unable to use it, outside of the Ghosts, who feed on it, and the Lucario, who are able to derive another force called Aura from it. In the distant past, a civilization used it to power machines and even bring things to life but could never use it themselves. None were able to use Life until I made the sacrifice necessary to claim it. And now, this power

has passed on to you.” He held up and outstretched claw, red flame suddenly erupting from his palm. Cassia leapt back in surprise, never before seeing such power.

Arthus grinned. “This is a powerful energy, one that only you and I can use. I learned from my mentor, Gregorius, how to use it, and now you shall learn from me. It will take years of work, but you can become a master of it around when you master your illusions, if you practice.”

“What can Life do?” Cassia asked.

“Many things. It can be used to heal the sick and wounded, to travel across Serenita in a blink of an eye, and to augment your natural powers.” His face turned darker. “But there is more. Used in its raw shape, Life can be used to attack your enemies, as well as to take their own Life.” He shook his head. “But let’s not dwell on such things. That can wait for when I train you in combat, when you evolve. You’re around three now, so expect that to come ten years from now.” He dimmed the flame. “Until then, we will focus on how to draw it from the ground, and how to empower your illusions through it.”

“Where does it come from?”

Arthus paused for a moment, then quietly said, “The remains of those who have died—and, sometimes, the living.”

~~~~~

## **2006 AU**

Arthus nodded his head at the Eevee that stood before him, applauding. “Bravo, bravo! You’ve come so far!”

The Eevee faded, revealing it to be Cassia, grinning. “You really think so?”

Arthus scooped her up and laughed, “Of course! Why would I lie to you?” He suddenly stopped and twitched his head. He set her down, then sighed. “The Guild Council needs me again.” He pointed at a straw dummy and explained, “Practice your scratches on that while I’m gone. It’ll hopefully be short.” The young Zorua nodded sadly, then went on to scratch at the dummy methodically with her claws.

Arthus leapt over the fence and beyond the barrier, holding his arms behind his back as he muttered to himself. Crossing various Pokémon, he stamped up the steps of the tower and sat at a table where Gardner, a Bibarel, Hypno, and Wigglytuff all sat waiting.

“I have important business I want to take care of, so let’s make this quick,” Arthus muttered.

“We’ll certainly try; we don’t like taking your time either,” Gardner replied. He pointed at a map spread across the table, moving to various locations. “All ties with Calem Lucario have been eliminated; all Guild Outposts are loyal only to you. Cretea is without Guild resources, but none have returned since the storms came six years ago. Therefore, we see it unnecessary to form a new outpost there.”

“Agreed. Why do you need me here exactly?” Arthus sighed. All eyes turned to the Wigglytuff.

His ears drooped, and he cleared his throat. “Well, sir—Lord, we’re just curious if you have any other motives outside of the good of the world.” Arthus rose, his eyes growing wild. He stepped closer, and the Wigglytuff stuttered, “I-It’s not that we’re questioning your leadership, i-it’s just that Calem was a little more...” Arthus eyes pressed right against his. “*Direct?*”

Arthus backed away, scratching his cheek. “You’re lucky I want to keep a good appearance.” He gestured to the entire council, stepping away from the shivering Wigglytuff. “I haven’t been very forthright with you, have I? I’ve just been off in my own little world, letting Gardner take care of the Guild and allowing you to,” he fluttered his claws toward the Hypno, Wigglytuff and Bibarel, “do whatever you do around this place.”

The Zoroark shook his head, sighing. “You may think I’m not all there. Maybe I’m just a mad-Pokémon, doing things just because I can. You might even think that I don’t believe in the good of the world, and just want to watch it burn.” He swept to the Wigglytuff and grabbed his ears. “But I will tell you right now: I *want* the world to no longer suffer anger, fear, or sadness. I *do* have another motive, but I will let *that* secret



die with Matheus!” He released the Wigglytuff and huffed, brushing back his mane. “If there is nothing else, I’ll be leaving.”

The Council made no move to stop him from descending the steps.

~~~~~

The Usurper sat on his favorite chair, holding a pad of paper and a stick of charcoal. He gently drew lines, creating a graceful figure and shading it.

Cassia hopped onto the top of the chair, peering at the handiwork. “Are you drawing?”

Arthus nodded his head, keeping his gaze on the paper. “Yes.”

“Why are you doing that? I thought you liked illusions more?”

Arthus held up the sketch, showing a slight, female Zoroark with a simple necklace around her neck. Cassia gazed at it in awe.

He pulled it back, then continued adding the finishing touches. “Illusions may be a wonderful thing, but their purpose is to trick the mind, to make Pokémon believe something is what it isn’t.” He took a blob of clay from the corner, rubbing away a mistake. “But drawing is a way to show your emotions, to show what you think of something or someone. Illusions are powerful, yes,” he closed the pad, patting the cover, “but are no way to show your true feelings.”

Cassia leapt onto Arthus’ lap. “Can you teach me how to draw?”

Arthus looked down at her, patting her head with a smile. “When you evolve, I would love to.”

~~~~~

“And so, the Mightyena ran into the sunset, never to be seen again.” Arthus closed the book, setting it on the stack. He rubbed his throat, clearing it. “These books are getting a tad long for me to be reading like this every night,” he croaked.

Cassia hopped onto her bed, exclaiming, “Maybe *I* can start reading them!”

Arthus laughed, putting his claw to his head. “Of course, you’re old enough now! May as well; being able to read is important after all.” He opened the door, then said,

“We’ll start tomorrow, alongside your other studies.” He shut the door, and Cassia directed her gaze to the aged book toward the bottom of the stack.

*“Then I can read you again...”* she thought.

~~~~~

2014 AU

In Cassia’s room, by a flickering red flame on a candle, the Zorua read from the Arceist Tome, the words calling to her as they did when she was younger.

And the Usurper shall come and attempt to take my Life but shall ultimately fail at the hands of the Guardian. The Usurper, through his actions, shall lose all that he held dear, and will strive to reclaim them. From him, learn that my creations are free to make choices, but cannot choose, or change, their consequences.

A knock came at the door. “Cassia, I’m coming in!”

The Zorua hurriedly closed the Tome and shoved it underneath a shelf, then pulled down another book.

Arthus opened the door, laughing slightly. “Still have to get used to that; I haven’t had a little thirteen-year-old before.” He closed the door, then craned over Cassia, studying the pages. “Reading ‘The Pikachu and his Travelling Joltik’, hmm?”

Cassia nodded quickly, saying, “Yep, been wanting to for a while.”

Arthus nodded as well, sitting at his usual seat. “Lovely story. Anyway, how are you feeling about your birthday coming up? Ready to evolve?”

Cassia shifted uncomfortably, looking at her paws. “I don’t know. I like me right now; what if I don’t like being a Zoroark?”

Arthus pet her head, sighing, “Well, I won’t be able to pet you like this once you evolve, so I’m not looking forward to that.”

Cassia pulled away, giggling. “You know I don’t like that.”

Arthus gazed at her in mock surprise. “Really?” He made a small chuckle, then said, “I remember when I evolved. Me and my...best friend, evolved on the same day. We both had to get used to our new bodies together.” His cheerful demeanor vanished. “It was especially hard for me, since my parents had been gone for years. I didn’t know how

to get used to my body, or what things would change.” He shook his head, looking down to Cassia. “But I’m here to help you. I’ll make sure you won’t feel afraid when it happens.”

“You promise?”

Arthus nodded. “Promise.” He studied his claws, watching mist course between them. “After you get adjusted, we’ll start with your training. You can’t stay under my watch forever; the world’s still a dark place, and until I find a solution, I have to make sure that you’re safe.”

“What will we do?”

“Well, we’ll start with basic attacks, then upgrade to what you can do with Life.” He held Cassia’s paw, giving her a hard look. “I want you to promise me that you won’t question what I ask you to do. I am a very busy Pokémon, what with a Guild to run. Will you do that for me?”

Unsure of what he intended with that, Cassia nodded her head.

Arthus nodded back, then stood up. “I’ll let you get to sleep now.” He stood up, then opened the door.

“Wait, Dad?” Cassia asked. Arthus stopped, turning his head. “Do you know who the Usurper is?”

Arthus’ eye twitched, then he rubbed it, growling. “When did you hear that name?”

“I just...came across it while reading. I was wondering if you knew.”

Arthus gave her a suspicious look, then sighed. “That was a title given to me, years ago. I’m a lot older than you think, Cassia. I’d rather not speak of such things right now.” He exited the room and closed the door.

Cassia pondered on what he said, thinking of the Tome. *‘He’s supposed to be one of the cruelest Pokemon alive...he’d even bring Arceus down.’* She closed the book, shaking her head. *‘But he’s only even been nice to me. He just couldn’t be the Usurper.’*

She curled up on her cushion and closed eyes. After a few moments, she looked up fearfully.

‘Right?’

~~~~~

Days later, Arthus stood in front of Cassia in the center of the room, the furniture pushed to the corners to make room.

“Any moment now, your name will change from Cassia Zorua to Cassia Zoroark. How do you feel?” he asked.

Cassia smiled nervously, standing in front of him. “Excited, but scared. What will it feel like?”

The Usurper sighed wistfully. “Ah, like nothing else. It’s been so long since I evolved, so I can’t really say.” He looked out the window, seeing the sky turn from orange to purple. “Any moment now.”

Cassia began to shake. “I feel...light, like there’s nothing wrong with anything.” White light suddenly enveloped her, her shape becoming indistinct. The light morphed taller, leaner, and brighter, while Arthus looked on, feeling happier than he had ever felt in millennia.

The light faded, and a graceful young Zoroark stood in Cassia’s place. She gasped as she noticed her arms, no longer the paws she had been used to all her life. She reached for her luxurious mane, free of the bead that her adoptive father had for his own.

She looked toward him and stepped forward. “Look at—wah!” She tripped on her feet, unused to walking on two limbs.

Arthus dove forward and caught Cassia, holding her up. She looked up, and Arthus smiled. “If only Corrina could see this...”

“Who’s Corrina?”

Arthus’ smile dissipated. “My...wife.” He helped her stand up, then held her face, cringing. “You look so much like her.” He pointed to her eyes. “Except your eyes. They’re mine, of course.” He pointed to his own, quivering. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen her. I only want her at my side again.” He covered his eyes, a tear trailing out from under his hand.

Cassia looked down at her arms, then embraced Arthus, the Usurper falling onto her. He sniffed, then said, “I haven’t been hugged since before she died.” He continued to grieve, his chest shaking.

Cassia patted him, then quietly asked, “You never talk about her. Why?”

“...It is too hard for me to remember how, and why, she died.”

~~~~~

Several days later, Arthus and Cassia stood opposite each other in the training yard, crouching with their claws extended.

“Alright, day one. Come at me with what you’ve got,” Arthus stated.

Cassia hesitated, then with a yell, charged toward him, her claws ready to strike. Arthus deftly dodged, then pushed her to the ground, shaking his head with disapproval. “We Zoroark don’t make direct attacks...not like that, at least,” he chided. “Come in from the side and use your illusions to hide your direction. We have the element of surprise no matter what we do, if done right.”

“Lord Arthus, I bear good news!” Gardner appeared from behind the barrier, his eye wide.

Arthus leaned to Cassia, who had since picked herself up. “Watch me.” He disappeared, and both she and Gardner looked around, searching for him.

Gardner suddenly arced back with a grunt, his head pulled back. Arthus appeared behind him, chuckling, his arm pinned behind the Ghost. “That is how a Zoroark strikes.”

“Would you please let me go? I have news about your search for a bodyguard,” Gardner hissed, looking left and right.

Arthus promptly released him and whipped around to face him. “Ah, that is something I’ve been waiting to hear! Bring me to him!” Gardner exited the barrier, and Arthus motioned for Cassia to follow. “Come! It’s high time I showed you the rest of my Guild!” He leapt over the fence, the barrier of sky rippling as he disappeared through it.

Cassia blinked, following him hesitantly. She crawled over the top of the fence and gasped at what she saw: Black-banded Pokémon rushed to and from various buildings, all

talking and carrying goods with them. All the activity surrounded an ancient tower, the bricks cracked and the height astounding.

A troupe of Gurdurr pounded past Cassia, and she eeped, running toward Arthus and hiding behind his back. He forced a smile, patting her hand. “I guess I should have taken you out more often. Still, no time like the present to socialize.” He guided her across the grounds, all other Pokémon staying away from the Usurper.

She noticed many of the Pokémon give him fearful looks; they avoided meeting his gaze. All except an elderly Alakazam avoided looking at them. He stroked his mustache thoughtfully, narrowing his eyes.

Cassia drew closer to Arthus and said, “Why do they seem afraid of you?”

Arthus waved a nonchalant hand. “No reason in particular. Can’t expect everyone to be brave around their leader, can you?” He gasped, grabbing Cassia’s hand and running ahead. “Oh, Gardner has outdone himself this time. Just look at this!”

They came to the corner of the canyon, and Cassia stood in awe at the massive automaton leaning against the wall. A hulking Golurk, covered in moss and cracks, stood as if sleeping, its light out.

Gardner patted its leg and exclaimed, “As you know, there’s few of them left due to the high amount of Life needed to keep them going. I figure that you, with your control of it, can make him work again. Few would be able to challenge him and succeed.”

Arthus chuckled, holding up a hand. “Perfect. I can take care of myself pretty well, but one can always do with another protection. Besides, he will make an excellent training dummy for Cassia; claws will hardly hurt him, and we can siphon his life without fear of killing someone.”

Gardner huffed and rolled his eye. “Huh, ironic.”

Arthus grabbed his neck and shook him. “Quiet.” He turned to the Golurk, then pressed his hand against it. “Awaken!” Red mist coursed down his arm into the giant frame, the light within beginning to flicker.

Arthus pressed harder as Cassia stepped back. “Awaken!” Red tendrils erupted from the ground, feeding more into the giant. The cyan stone slowly turned black and grey, and

the yellow light turned orange, then red. He began to shake, then stood upright, rolling his shoulders as more Life surged into him.

Finally, he roared, shaking free of Arthus' grip. He fell back, and the tendrils sank back into the ground, the weakened Usurper no longer having his previous strength.

The Golurk stood still, studying his surroundings. Cassia stared at him fearfully, her eyes wide as the giant turned.

It fell to one knee, leaning forward and bowing his head. "Prepared for service, master. What are your orders?" it said in metallic tones.

Arthus coughed, standing up with a grin. "Ah, it works!" He covered his mouth and coughed again, stepping toward him. "What is your name, servant?"

"Designation: Gorson Rensil Orma Moccin."

Arthus cringed. "That's strange. Why do you have four names instead of one?"

"It was customary—*4000 years ago*—to receive more names as indication of prowess," the Golurk replied.

Arthus rubbed his chin, thinking. "Well, I can't be calling you Gorsonrensil-whatever-whatever all the time. How about a contraction, like...Grom?"

The Golurk's eyes blinked, then he nodded. "Nickname confirmed. I will respond to 'Grom' until you so choose to change it."

"Excellent!" He pulled Cassia closer. "Meet your new sparring partner! He will be extremely useful in training I'm sure!" Cassia looked up at the Golurk, frozen.

Grom stood straight, offering his hand to her. "Designation: Grom. What is yours?"

Cassia looked down at the hand, then cautiously shook it. "Cassia."

The eyes blinked, then he nodded. "Good morning—*Cassia*. It will be a pleasure to serve both you and the master."

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## 2018 AU

Cassia sat on a stump, drawing on a pad of paper. Arthus hovered behind her, catching glimpses of her handiwork.

"You have gotten quite good. I'm amazed how well you can draw."

Cassia held up her drawing of the Guild's gate proudly. "You really think so?"

Arthus nodded. "I know so." He looked up, noticing the sky turning orange. "Best be going to sleep now. I won't be able to visit tonight; important Guild business and all that."

Cassia closed the pad and stood up, hurriedly walking for the house. "No worries, I'll be fine!" She entered the room, Arthus giving her a curious look.

She set the sketchpad on the counter and pulled the Arceist Tome from underneath. She sat on the center chair, then opened the covers, pulling out a length of leather for a bookmark.

#### *Origin 4--*

*After the Starfall, peace reigned throughout the land. However, 1000 years after the creation, wild Pokémon grew more dangerous and many of the Enlightened wished worse for others.*

*However, this time of peace soon turned for the worse. In a time of great need, Arceus sent the Legend Mewtwo to save the village of Vaures from a horde of wild Pokémon. This was met with great praise, and upon returning to Deitae, Mewtwo became prideful of his powers.*

*He descended upon the wild Pokémon of Equivos and those who challenged Arceus with a fury, so much that he became the hero of Serenita and Cretea. Lavish gifts were given to him, and many began to worship the Legend instead of Arceus.*

*Mewtwo grew fearful of the very Pokémon he protected. He feared that the Pokémon he defeated would conspire against him, and so he dealt harsh punishments to the Pokémon of Deitae. Factions guided even by the other Legends of Deitae rose up against Mewtwo, while others more stood alongside the Rogue. Wars followed, and the land was devastated by their might.*

*In the mightiest of these skirmishes, Arceus exited the Tree of Life and punished Mewtwo for intervening in the lives of mortal Pokémon. He then proclaimed that Legends shall only come out of Deitae once every full moon, and only under his direction after that.*



*As punishment for if a Legend were to enter the mortal continents, Arceus crafted the Seal of Creation, a device designed to absorb Legends, and grant the user full protection from their might, even granting the abilities of those lost to its touch.*

*Mewtwo was banished to the Isle of Regrets for his crimes, and the Seal was hidden deep within Serenita, to avoid the Legends from using it themselves. Only one mortal will prove able to circumvent the price of its use: The Usurper, the Pokémon who will lay waste to the followers of Arceus, destroy his word, and even attempt to take Arceus himself.*

She turned to the door, thinking of Arthus. ‘Dad mentioned that he was the Usurper...did that mean he had done these horrible things? Killing Pokémon, destroying the Tomes, even trying to use the Seal?’

She set her bookmark in the Tome and promptly closed it. ‘There’s only one way to find out.’

~~~~~

“Again!” the Usurper bellowed.

Cassia nodded, rushing toward Grom with her claws extended, red mist enveloping them. She gouged the sides with one swipe, then spun to strike another, then did so again, circling the Golurk and preventing him from striking back. All the while, the red light in his eyes began to fade.

When it was at its dimmest, Arthus exclaimed, “Enough! We can’t have you draining him completely!”

Cassia complied, breathing fast and panting. Arthus stood up from his seat and touched the Golurk, holding his other hand out toward Cassia. She took it, siphoning her collected Life into Arthus, which then trailed into Grom.

Cassia averted her eyes and said, “Hey Dad, I was...wondering.”

“Ask away,” Arthus absentmindedly said, focused on Grom.

“Do you know about the Seal of Creation?”

Arthus' grip suddenly tightened. "How do you know?" He sighed, loosening it once more. "Yes, I know it well. Part of my role in the Guild is to use it to its full potential; only those with control over Life, or some form of it, can use it."

"So, it's here?"

"Of course, it is! Who do you think—" he stopped himself, gritting his teeth. "It doesn't matter how I got it. The point is, Martre is studying it to find out how to fix it after my last escapade with it."

"Which was when?"

"Is that really important?"

"To me it is."

Arthus gave her a harsh look, then said, "Two-thousand years ago, when I *nearly* succeeded with defeating Arceus." He let go of Cassia's hand, leaping over the fence and running toward the Master's Tower.

Cassia stared wide-eyed at him, then turned to Grom. "Do you know about any of this?"

He buzzed for a moment, then said, "Lord Arthus often talks to himself, possibly a side-effect from being alone for an extended period of time. He speaks of Matheus Lucario--an individual who died two-thousand years ago—often ranting about their failed friendship. He also speaks—" He fizzed, shaking his head. "He has restrained me from revealing more about another individual."

Cassia bit her lip, then said, "Is he the Usurper?"

Grom buzzed, his lights blinking. "Texts from my time period, known as the Gregorian Scrolls, describe a future disciple of the dark prophet Gregorius. Another text from a prophet known as Klaym also foretold this Usurper, predicting that he would rise from the shadows, then fall into them once more, deeper than ever before. He would slay thousands in his desire for not just revenge, but out of grief. His most distinct feature would be him following the Gregorian Texts, which, with the dark prophet's assistance, would allow him to become a master of Life." He held up a hand. "Given that Arthus is a

master of Life, and that he has previously mentioned being Gregorius' student, he must, therefore, be the Usurper."

Cassia brushed back her mane, sighing. "That...that can't be right! He's a good Pokémon! He's done so much for me!"

"It is not my place to say who he is. All I say are predictions," Grom warned.

Cassia shook her head. "I remember him telling me before that he was called the Usurper, and that he didn't want to talk about it." She clutched her fingers. "The To—I mean, a book I read, said that the Usurper would stand against everything Arceus teaches, and try to stop the world from believing in him. Along the way, he'd...kill thousands." She shivered.

Grom buzzed, then said, "I am merely a guardian; I am to hold no position or feeling about my master or other individuals." He lowered his head, his light dimming. "Until Lord Arthus returns, I will remain in sleep."

Cassia looked past the fence, which appeared to have nothing but buildings beyond. *'Dad said I wasn't supposed to go outside—he even made it look like there's nothing out there.'* She looked away. *'But I know that there's other Pokemon.'* She looked up, closing her fist. *'And I'm going to find out the truth.'* She waved her fingers, a rush of wind blowing by her. She appeared as a Lopunny, then, satisfied with her appearance, clambered over the fence.

Dozens of Pokémon crossed by her, ranging from Tauros lugging wagons, Mr. Mimes carrying papers, or Swellow with parcels swooping low. All activity surrounded the Master's Tower, where they remained distant to avoid the Guildmaster's gaze.

Cassia dodged between the Pokémon, making way to a round, low-roofed building with blue and purple stripes. The sign over the door said, 'Wenstrel Café: In Memoriam', but was marred by deep scratches.

She entered, covering her nose upon breathing in the foul air inside. Pokémon surrounded dozens of filthy tables, all jabbering about one thing or another, meals and drinks in front of them. A wall at the back opened into a cafeteria, where Pokémon rushed to prepare the meals throughout the day.

She studied the tables, then walked to one with a wizened Alakazam sitting with a Sawk with a sling over his arm. They talked with each other quietly but stopped once Cassia came by.

“What you looking at, Lopunny? Got a problem with us being here?” the Sawk seethed.

The Alakazam grabbed the Sawk’s uninjured hand and admonished, “Now Searle, remember what the Guildmaster said?”

Searle muttered, “Yes, Trias...”

The Alakazam nodded, then turned back to Cassia. “What can we help you with?”

“I was wondering if you could tell me more about how the Guild works. I’m...new here, and haven’t learned much yet,” Cassia replied.

“Ah, a new recruit! That explains why you don’t have an armband yet,” Trias remarked, pointing at Cassia’s arm. “Well, we’re quite busy, ensuring that criminals are caught, taxes are collected—” He stopped himself, lowering his hand. “That’s what I’d like to say, but...well, the Guild isn’t quite like it was when old Calem was alive.”

“Yeah, it’s better than ever!” Searle slammed the table. “Beating up Pokemon and taking what we want! That’s what it’s been all about since Arthus got rid of that old Lucario. He’s been sending teams to find out how to repair that little pendant, and he told us that he wants everyone to feel like the world is horrible! It’s the perfect excuse to beat them up every once in a while.”

Cassia’s throat tightened. “W-What do you know about Arthus?”

Searle went to reply but was stopped by Trias’ hand. The old Alakazam’s eyes narrowed, then he hissed, “We don’t speak of such things. He’d have our necks if we spread rumors.”

“He’s not around right now, so it should be fine,” Searle replied, taking a glance behind him. Trias groaned, then Searle said, “He spends most of his time in that little house in the corner of the Guild, telling us to stay away, or he’d kill us. Only the Guildmaster has dared to go near.”

Trias grabbed his arm, warning him to stop. “He is a ruthless combatant. He knows how to make everyone fear and obey him and wants nothing more than to end the world as we know it. He has made many claims, but is...honestly, thankfully unable to do that, for he has yet to repair the Seal.”

“Is he...nice?”

Searle sneered. “*Nice*? He doesn’t know the meaning of the word! He treats everyone like dirt, and only cares about that old Seal and his personal time in that house. He’d kill somebody for delivering a letter he didn’t like!” he hoarsely replied.

Cassia’s claws shook as Trias patted Searle’s arm. “Careful Searle; if he caught wind of what you said, you’d be drained before you know it.” He forced a smile. “Besides, he’s rather respectful as long as you listen to him. He even promised us a place in his perfect world, where no wrong can be done!” He gave Cassia a concerned look. “Are you...alright?”

“I’m...fine. What do you think goes on...in that house?” Cassia croaked.

Trias blew his breath out slowly. “It’s rather dangerous to be asking such things, but I feel I must explain. No one really knows outside of Arthus himself and the Guildmaster. Some years back, I remember Arthus bringing a young Zoroark with him to revive his bodyguard, Grom, but she hasn’t appeared since. I thought it may have had something to do with her, but after the recent rumors, I thought different.”

“W-What rumors?”

Searle leaned in close and whispered, “That it’s a torture chamber for those fools who believe in Arceus.”

Cassia gasped, then broke into tears, falling against the table. Trias’ eyes widened, and he stepped over and touched Cassia’s back. “What’s wrong? Was it something we said?” He looked down at his hand, which passed through the Lopunny slightly. “Hmm?” Cassia continued to cry, and the illusion faded, revealing her to be a Zoroark.

Searle raised a shaking finger, pointing at her. “Y-You’re a spy! F-For Arthus! He left one of you alive, that way he could weed us out and kill us! I knew—”

“Stop saying that!” Blinking away tears, Cassia leapt on top of the table and took Searle by the injured arm, twisting it back. Searle cried out as Cassia held her sharpened claws inches from his throat. “You’re wrong! He’d never kill anyone! He’s a nice, kind Pokémon! I’ve lived with him all my life!”

Trias cautiously stepped closer to them, holding his hands out defensively. “I saw you four years ago; Arthus was unusually kind that day. Have you ever thought that he never wanted you to see his true self? So that you would not be repulsed by him?”

Cassia gazed at him in shock, continuing to hold Searle. After several moments, she released the Sawk, then disappeared, the doors flying open as she fled.

Searle clutched his injured arm as Trias slipped it back into its sling. “Where did *she* come from? Why was she here?”

Trias watched the doors swing, the other Guild Pokémon staring at the evidence of Cassia’s visit.

“To know the truth.”

~~~~~

The Zoroark continued to weep on her bed, finding it impossible to believe that her father was a killer as those two had said. *‘He can’t be like that...he just can’t!’* But the nagging thought kept returning: *‘What they had said was true.’*

She sniffed, wiping her nose. *‘He never wanted me outside...because he didn’t want me to see who he really is.’*

The door creaked open, and Cassia twisted back. Arthus walked in with a grin. “Let’s get back to that combat practice; soon you’ll be tougher than—” He saw Cassia’s tear-stained face, and her sad, conflicted expression. “Me.” He shut the door, then approached her, concerned. “What’s wrong?” He made to sit next to her, but she scooted away, crossing her arms and leaning on her lap.

“I...I went out today. I went out into the Guild.”

“You *what*?”

“I talked with some Pokémon after Grom told me about you,” Cassia said flatly.

Arthus growled, clenching his claws under the bed. “Whatever that ridiculous Golurk or those goons said—”

“They told me you’re cruel to them. They told me you’ve killed Pokémon.” She hit her hand against the bedpost. “They told me you’re trying to kill Arceus!”

Arthus said while trying to embrace her, “Why do you—”

Cassia shoved him away, bolting to her feet. “I’ve read about you. You’re the Usurper, aren’t you? The one who tried to kill everyone in Equivos, the one who took Arceus, the one that killed the Lucario!”

Arthus stood up and spat, “How do you know these things? I never told you about them, and for good reason!” His eyes swiveled to the corner, focusing under the counter. “*I know...*”

He stormed to the counter, and Cassia paled. The Usurper reached underneath, yanking out the Arceist Tome and holding it up. “It’s this, isn’t it? I accidentally left it here, and you’ve been reading it, haven’t you? Reading its lies!”

“There are no lies! It said that you would kill everyone! The Lucario, the Guild, even your wife!”

“*Silence!*”

Arthus threw the book down, making deep, shuddering breaths. He held up a shaking claw, then hissed, “I admit it: I have killed Pokémon. I have killed so many that I can’t remember. All of it, because I hate Arceus and what he teaches.”

The Usurper lifted the Tome, tapping its cover. “I kept that from you, because I hate myself for it. I never like death; it is a necessary evil. Think about it: I want Pokémon to do only good. To do that, everyone must die, then be resurrected by me, without the choice to do wrong. It pains me every time I steal their life, but I believe...” He shook his head, holding a flame in his other claw. “No, *I know* it is the only solution to end sorrow!” He held the book over the fire.

“No!” Cassia ran to Arthus, pulling at the Tome.

Arthus kept his grip, glaring at his adopted daughter. He released the Tome, allowing both it and Cassia to fall to the floor. Cassia held her head, groaning, while he took the book back, extinguishing the flame.

He stepped silently to the door, then opened it. “You’re not in your right mind. This book has obviously affected you.” He inspected it, sneering. “Knowing how you’ll react if I destroy it, I’ll give it to Gardner for safe keeping.” He turned back to Cassia. “I have tried my best not to be angry at you, Cassia, but this time you’ve pushed me too far. I’ll have Grom keep you inside as you think about your mistake.” He stepped outside. “I’ll be back later.” He slammed the door, the floor shaking from the force.

Cassia shook her head, her heart beating rapidly. She ran for the back door and opened it, then gasped when she saw Grom standing against the doorframe.

“Lord Arthus is not pleased. I am to refuse all communication with you until he directs otherwise.” He pounded his knuckles together. “As for my directive, he allowed me to do no more than break bones to keep you from trying to steal the Tome. It is nothing but lies, and—”

She slammed the door, falling against it with a sob. She covered her face and heaved, struggling to breathe. *‘No...please, no...don’t be like this!’*

She considered his actions. *‘He was only ever kind to me...yet he’s murdered Pokemon. He didn’t even deny it.’* She let her head fall back on the door. *‘The Tome was right...it was always right.’* She sniffed, wiping her eyes. *‘I wish I could read it again...’* One passage came to mind, one of the few she had chosen to memorize:

***Just as gladness comes, sorrow shall follow. Behind lies and deceit, lives are lost, whether it be through death of body, or death of heart. This is all to my plan.***

***For without sorrow, how can one realize joy? All shall pass, so long as one puts their trust in their creator.***

After a few minutes of repeating this phrase and coming to terms with the truth, she forced herself to calm, taking in deep breaths and standing up. *‘I can’t stay here anymore...not now that I know who Arthus really is.’* She looked around the room, uncertain. *‘But...can I really do that?’*



Cassia considered her options. *'I...I could stay here...with Arthus. But he wouldn't let me read the Tome again...and he'd surely try to make me like him...a murderer.'* She shook her head vigorously. *'No. The Tome said you shouldn't kill unless defending yourself or others. I can never be happy here with Arthus like this...not now that I know.'*

She leaned against the wall, crossing her arms and bowing her head. *'But what else can I do? Run away? I know nothing about the outside! I can protect myself, sure, but how am I going to eat? Sleep? It's a dangerous place out there...if what Arthus said is true.'*

She gasped, putting a hand over her mouth; a dreadful thought came into her mind. *'Corrina died two thousand years ago...Arthus can't be my real father.'*

*"He left one of you alive!"* she remembered Searle Sawk saying. She stood straight, eyes wide. *'What...what happened to my real parents?'*

She considered it for a moment, then sobbed. *'He...he killed them...just like everyone else...then adopted me.'* In the midst of her tears, she wearily took a bag from the counter and pulled supplies and belongings into it.

*'I'm leaving...tonight.'*

~~~~~

The front door creaked open, and Cassia poked her head out. She slowly stepped out, holding a large sack over her shoulder, loaded with what supplies were within reach. She looked around, then stepped toward the tower.

A boom echoed from the backyard, then Grom thrust from it, his feet blowing away dust and grass. The scarlet cracks scattered throughout his body shone even brighter in the night air, the blackness hiding all but that.

He cracked his knuckles, cocking his head. "You have come out. Lord Arthus' directive is to keep you in the house. Comply now, and there will be no need for violence."

Cassia crouched, tightening her grip on the bag. "Never."

His eyes flashed, and mist trailed up from the cracks. “Reserves accessed. You will be unable to drain my Life to force me into hibernation. Prepare for conflict.” His arms reared back.

Cassia ran around him, throwing the bag behind her. The Golurk swiveled his torso, his legs remaining in place. He slammed his arms, the Zoroark leaping away from the impact.

Grom rushed forward, coursing ahead with his thrusters. Cassia leapt away, scratching his back, creating a trail of mist into her body. A ball of red flame appeared in her hand, and she threw it at Grom.

He lifted his arm and blocked the impact, shuddering. He knelt down, then held his arm out, a dark sphere growing at the palm.

Cassia ran toward him, and Grom fired the sphere. She jumped over it, then landed on Grom’s shoulders, grabbing hold of his neck. The Golurk stood up and swung his arms back, reaching for the Zoroark. She tucked her legs back, pounding Grom’s head to no effect.

Grom suddenly stopped, then fell backwards, expecting to crush Cassia. She let go of Grom and scrambled out of the way, taking a sizable rock from the ground.

The Golurk pushed himself up, then searched for Cassia, who was nowhere in sight. He scrutinized the surroundings, knowing that she couldn’t have escaped so quickly. He noticed a slight shimmer in front of him, then reared back his arms for a punch.

The shimmer broke as Cassia leapt from it with a yell. She swung the rock against Grom’s head, knocking a spherical chunk from the top, the sparking stone rolling on the ground.

Grom’s lights flickered and his head sparked. He wobbled drunkenly, then fell forward with a slam, dust ballooning around him. His eyes fell dark.

Cassia breathed quickly, picking up the stone that rolled from his head. The light within it faded as she took the bag and stuffed the stone inside, ensuring that Grom couldn’t be repaired so easily.

A light snapped on in the Master's Tower, and a silhouette descended the stairs. Cassia breathed in sharply, disappearing.

Soon after, Gardner burst from the door, looking around wildly. "Who did that? I demand to know!" His eye came to Grom. It widened.

The door slammed behind him, and he turned back with a grunt. "What?" He pulled at the handle, but the door was locked. He slammed it and roared, "Open this instant! Don't you know who I am?"

Moments later, the door burst open, batting Gardner to the ground. Cassia rushed out, the Arceist Tome poking out of her bag.

Gardner hovered upward, rubbing his chin. He noticed Cassia and growled. "You're not getting away that easily." He burst into puce fog, the vapor rapidly approaching the Zoroark.

It enveloped her, and Cassia tried to wave it away, coughing. Gardner chuckled. "You haven't met a Ghost before, have you?" A glowing purple fist appeared in the fog and punched Cassia, knocking her to the ground.

The Dusknair rematerialized over her, crossing his arms. "As much as I'd love to see you disappear from my life, Arthus wouldn't appreciate it."

Cassia rubbed her lip, baring her teeth. "Let. Me. Go."

Gardner growled, grabbing her arm. "What makes you think I'll do that? I listen only to Arthus!"

Grom's lights flickered.

Cassia scratched his arm, causing Gardner to grunt and grab her other arm. He pushed her down and shouted, "You don't think I am ready for such tricks? Your natural abilities are useless against me!"

Grom's eyes burst with flame.

Cassia pulled against Gardner, exclaiming, "I can't stay here! Not with him!"

"But he's your father. That precious Tome of yours must have something about being obedient to your parents."

Grom's inner workings whirled.

Cassia eyes drew close to Gardner's. "He killed them."

"Graaww!"

They both looked up, freezing in place as Grom stood up, his head sparking with red electricity.

Cassia forced herself to look away and pulled her arm out from Gardner's grip and scratched across his face, causing him to scream and cover it, dampening the violet mist flowing from the wounds.

Grom pounded forward, rearing back his fist. Cassia leapt out of the way as Grom threw a gargantuan punch at Gardner, sending him flying into the roof of the tower and through the tiles with a crash. The light inside went out.

Cassia looked up at Grom, her heart pounding as she shook. The Golurk—his face appearing upside-down to her—cocked his head. "Graw-hawm?"

Cassia cocked her head as well. "What did you say?"

His arm moved, causing Cassia to flinch. He lowered it, then held it out to Cassia. "Gro?"

Unsure of what to think, Cassia accepted the hand, then allowed herself to be pulled upright. She studied Grom, then said, "Can you...talk?"

"Gro-hawm?"

"Can you...remember anything?"

He fingered the gap in his head. "Gro?"

Lights came on in the other houses, and doors started to open. Sensing danger, Grom grabbed Cassia's sides and lifted her up. She eeped, holding on to Grom as he crouched. "Wait, wait! What are you doing? I want to—"

Bo-o-o-o-m!

Grom burst from the canyon into the open air, the Master's Tower rapidly shrinking as they fled.

The night wind rushed by Cassia's ears as she looked back despairingly. She remembered memories of her life with Arthus, and her tears returned.

"I'm sorry."

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Arthus stood outside the gates, holding the Seal of Creation in front of his face. “She’ll...she’ll get over it...she’s only a child.” He sighed and dropped it, pushing open the door. “I should go apologize.”

A boom echoed from inside the Guild, and Arthus burst inside, watching Grom thrust out of the walls and into the distance, his crimson flare barely visible.

Arthus ran to his launching point and shouted, “Where do you think you’re going?” He growled and threw his arm in the air. “Oh, forget it. He’ll be back before long.” He stepped toward his house and muttered, “I’ll just have to watch her myself.” He stopped, noticing the door open. He cocked his head and pushed it open. “What?” He entered, studying the room; nothing was out of place—except Cassia wasn’t there.

He paced around the furniture, eyes narrowed. “Cassia? I want to apologize. I shouldn’t have snapped at you earlier.” He twisted his head, scowling. “Are you invisible? Why are you refusing to talk to me?” He came to the counter, picking up a leaf of paper with his name in curved letters.

“Hmm?” He sat on his chair, his eyes flitting as he read its contents.

***Dad, or more accurately, Arthus:***

***You have lied to me. All my life, I believed you were a good Pokémon, one who showed others the same kindness you showed me. I know now that you are nothing like that. You kill and torture Pokémon, claiming it is for the better, when in reality you just want to vent your anger on them.***

***I’ve read from the Arceist Tome ever since I could. It teaches only truth, unlike what you have said. I’ve had it confirmed to me when I was young. Everything in its pages defies your ideology, and I refuse to live in it anymore. No, this is not my fault.***

***It is only yours.***

***Cassia***

Arthus’ claws quaked, the letter rippling. His eyes widened in sheer astonishment and rage. Red flames crackled against the letter, putting it alight.

“She...she left me.” He bared his teeth. “She *betrayed* me.”

Arthus rose, his limbs continuing to shake. “Are you happy now, Arceus? You have taken her from me.” His eyes glowed red, and his claws emitted mist. “*Just like Matheus!*”

He roared and crushed his chair. “I showed her love!” He pulled down the shelves. “I cried with her!” He ripped off the cabinets. “And this is what I get!” He flipped over the bed. “All of that, wasted!” He crushed and destroyed everything he could lay hands on, his blind rage encompassing all, just like the ever-growing flame.

It grew to consume the entire house, and Arthus charged through the wall out into the open. He stared at the bonfire he had created, then shaking his fist, roared, “Why do you have to torture me!” He fell to his knees and wept for the loss of his daughter.

## Chapter 11

### 2018 AU

In a clearing far to the east of the Guild, Grom slowly landed, his flames dying down and his feet thudding against the ground. The night was only illuminated by the stars, the new moon providing nothing. Deep within the forest, most creatures slept, despite the Kricketot chirruping around them, and the lights of Illumise and Volbeat dancing in the distance.

The Golurk set Cassia down, allowing her to step forward, astounded by the view before her. “I...never knew there was anything like this.” Her feet brushed against the soft grass, luxurious compared to the rough stone and weeds of the Guild.

She crouched down and brushed it with her claws, smiling slightly. “Why didn’t Da—er, Arthus, ever bring me here?”

“Because he was afraid.”

Cassia turned to see a pair of red eyes gazing from a tree, the owner a shadow leaning against it. “Ever since he lost his son, Erik, he’s wanted to have a family of his own—one done right. He killed your parents but didn’t realize you were there. He kept you out of guilt and expected you to love him without question—as well as obey him.”

Cassia furrowed her brow, stepping closer. “Who are you? How do you know all that?”

The shadow stood straight, the moon revealing silver fur. “You are right to be skeptical, considering where you just came from. I’ve been watching you for some time from the Tree of Life, waiting for the time you would eventually leave.”

“Tree of Life? You’re a Legend?” Cassia asked, her eyes widening. The shadow stepped closer, and Cassia saw in the dim light that he was a silver Lucario wearing leather clothing.

The Lucario bowed, taking off his hat. “You may call me—”

“Matheus, the Guildmaster!” Cassia gasped.

Matheus shrugged. “Well, just Matheus will do, but—”

“No one’s seen you for thousands of years!” she interjected.

He tapped his head. “Not quite. I’ve had a few adventures out and about and made a few friends along the way.” He sighed, replacing his hat. “Still, I’ve had to be more private than I like to be for the past few years.” He looked up at Grom. “That wound you made in his head,” he pointed to the recess, “it disabled some of his major circuitry. He won’t be able to speak, or remember his previous life, without that stone in your bag.”

Cassia pulled out the cracked stone, holding it up. “So, this will make him change back?” Matheus nodded. She stuffed it back into the bag, driving it deep. “He’ll just go back to Arthus. It’s better for him to stay with me.”

Matheus nodded again. “He can act as a protector. You are certainly skilled, and from what I’ve seen, rival Arthus.” Before she could ask, he held up a paw. “We can talk more in the morning. Arthus will still be reeling over your departure; we won’t have to worry about the Guild for at least a few days.” He lay down next to a tree, propping his head on a root. “Make sure you choose somewhere nice and flat; you’ll have a hard night otherwise.” With that, he closed his eyes.

“Wait, you’re staying with me?” Cassia exclaimed in disbelief.

“In the morning,” Matheus repeated, grumbling.

Cassia stood still for a moment, then turned to Grom. He leaned slightly, his previous robotic nature seeming to have gone. “I never really paid attention to you outside of—” She cut herself short. “Never mind. What I mean is, do you...sleep?”

The Golurk cocked his head. “Grawm?”

Cassia held her chin in thought. “Do you do anything on your own?”

Grom’s eyes stared blankly. “...Gro?”



Matheus opened an eye and said, “You won’t get anything out of him. Not anymore.” He closed it again.

The Zoroark studied Grom’s hand, then held it in her claws. “Arthus made you come back to life. I guess it’s possible with Golurk, but knowing now what he does, he probably changed you. Changed you to be a better slave. You didn’t want to do anything on your own and didn’t care if you did. You weren’t what Arceus would have wanted.” Grom continued to stare.

Cassia rubbed Grom’s hand, feeling the coarse conglomeration of stone and metal that made it. “I don’t want someone to order around; I want someone that I can talk to. I want someone who will help me not because they have to, but because they want to.” She closed her eyes, and without realizing, red tendrils extended from her claws into Grom’s arm. “I want...a friend.”

Grom’s eyes blinked rapidly, then suddenly flashed. He looked down at his arm, noticing tears falling.

She fell to her knees, letting go of his arm. “I don’t know anyone except you and Arthus, and he’s gone and you’re not the same. I’m alone out here. I’ve run away from everything.” She covered her eyes, unaware of Matheus’ gaze.

Grom held up his arm, fingering the gap in his head. “Gro...” He crouched and wrapped his arm around Cassia, gently hugging her. “Graw-howm.”

Cassia sniffed, then looked up at him. “What did you say?”

“Graw-howm,” he repeated.

Cassia paused for a moment, then laughed, holding Grom’s arm. “I...know what you’re saying.” She closed her eyes and shifted in Grom’s embrace. “You want a friend too.” She closed her eyes, the Kricktot lulling her to sleep. “I’ll be your friend.”

Matheus made a slight smile, nodding his head. He closed his eyes again, knowing now that he did the right thing.

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The dim forest turned bright, and the birdsong of Fletchling filled the air. They flitted through birch trees and pecked bright yellow berries from bushes, their sour scent filling

the air. A slight wind ruffled their feathers and disturbed their flight—as well as the slumber of a young Zoroark.

She snapped awake and shivered, unused to having the wind awaken her. She noticed that Grom still had his arm around her, and that her bag was no longer at her side.

“Choose a good spot?”

She looked to her left and saw Matheus sitting at a fire, pulling charred berries from a sharpened stick and tossing them into his mouth. Her bag sat at his feet.

He took more yellow berries from a pile at his other side, then stabbed the stick through them. “Better come get some before I eat them myself; I don’t like wasting food,” he said with a smile.

Cassia realized that she hadn’t eaten lunch or dinner the previous day. She ran to his side to take some berries. Grom stirred—his eyes dim—then went off into the woods, shuffling away.

Cassia went to take some berries but was promptly rapped on her hand by Matheus’ paw. She rubbed it as he said, “Roast them first; Wacan berries are too sour otherwise.” He took a stick from behind him and held it out to her. “Plus, it also teaches a lesson in patience.” He pulled out his own stick, then shoved it back into the flames. “Out here, you can’t be hasty to do things.”

The Zoroark accepted the stick and pushed berries onto it, then allowed the flames to lick their skins. “Where’d Grom go off to?”

“To gather Life, I’d expect. Golurk like him have to do that often, or else they go into hibernation.” Matheus gave her a suspicious look. “I’d never have thought that one of Arthus’ descendants would be able to control it like him.”

“Hmm?” Cassia asked, inspecting the berries she roasted.

Matheus scooted closer. “He had to do some awful things to use Life, and there was never any mention in those scrolls that it could be inherited.” He pulled off the berries, tossing one into his mouth. Cringing, he said, “Especially considering that Erik was already born by that point.”

Cassia turned to him and asked, “Do you know why Arthus turned against you? Why he wanted to...kill everyone?” She still found this truth difficult to believe.

Matheus sighed, rolling a berry in his paw. “As you may know, he had a difficult childhood, among other things. He wasn’t quite the same after his parents left, but he was still intact until I left to complete the Trials. When I came back months later, he had changed. He kept going on and on about how he’d make Pokémon do what’s right, and that the Seal of Creation would let him do that. I found out that his wife, Corrina, had died—because of him, no less.” He pinched the berry, the juices squirting onto the ground. “Anyone who knew what caused him to murder her or want the Seal are either dead or refusing to talk. Even Arceus refused to tell me. Outside of that, I don’t know much. Arthus distanced himself from me thanks to that cursed ghost, Gregorius, and I had to run away days later.” He closed his eyes and grimaced. “It still astonishes me still that he’d be willing to massacre thousands just to make everyone do good.”

Cassia plucked the berries from her stick, gazing at them sadly. “Was he a good Pokémon?”

Matheus halfheartedly smiled. “Oh, he was the best. We created the Guild together, years ago, all so Pokémon would be safe. He was happy, charismatic,” he laughed for a moment and said, “and the one who kept me in line. I was a rather reckless fellow in my youth.” His face darkened as he stabbed the stick into the ground. “But after I returned, he wasn’t happy. He was charismatic, but in a dark way. He was bearable before, but he turned into something far worse.” He grabbed the end and crushed it in his grip, closing his eyes. “His imprisonment certainly didn’t help matters.”

Cassia popped one of the berries into her mouth, puckering at the spike of sour. She cleared her throat, then, holding away the other berries, said, “What were those Trials anyway? The Tome didn’t reference them anywhere.”

Matheus blew out his breath slowly. “Well, that’s for good reason: only one Pokémon can complete them, so the directions to start them weren’t saved.” He tapped his hat and continued, “Basically, the Trials were a way to gain permission to enter Deitae, and earn a ‘great reward’, which ended up being my Legendhood. I was tested in three strengths—

Mind, Body and Spirit, or Wisdom, Power and Courage. Call it what you will.” He sighed. “I’d rather not go into what I had to go through, but the important part was that I succeeded. Of course, what felt like several hours ended up being several months. I left Arthus on his own for that long, letting him be influenced by Gregorius.”

Matheus growled. “I don’t like dwelling on the past. I’ve had two thousand years to try and forget it, yet still, it hurts.” He took Cassia’s berries and ate them in one bite, swallowing hard. He spit at the ground, wiping his lips. “Bah, I’ve never liked Wacan.”

Thuds echoed in front of them, and Grom returned, his lights bright and his arms swinging powerfully. “Grawm!”

Shaking free of the despairing story, Cassia waved her claws in hello. “I like that you’re more awake too!”

Matheus crossed his arms and gave her a curious look. “You changed him last night.”

Grom towered behind them as Cassia twisted her head in confusion. “What? I didn’t do anything. I just talked to him is all.”

Matheus stood up, tapping Grom’s arm. “You did it without realizing it. Life is more erratic than you think; it’ll do things without you realizing.” He pointed at Grom’s head. “Arthus could block memories, so it’s not too far-fetched to say he could change minds either. He’s not acting like a robot anymore; he’s acting more like a Pokémon. Even the Fletchling have noticed.”

Cassia looked up and her eyes widened. Grom held out his arms and craned his neck up, and Fletchling hopped around him, tapping his body and chirruping gladly. He made a contented chuckle, his voice shaking the earth.

Cassia looked back with a smile. “*That’s* never happened before.”

“Graaaw...” Grom replied, the Fletchling fluttering away.

Matheus held his paw out to Cassia and said, “We were given knowledge, emotion, and willpower by the Enlightenment Legends, but Arthus changed him so he would be the perfect servant by taking away his emotion and willpower. You gave it back.”

Cassia accepted the paw, then reached around Matheus and retrieved her bag. “That reminds me of something I read in the Tome.” She opened the bag and began to pull it out.

Matheus stepped back and said, ““And so the servants of Arceus bestowed a number of his creations with knowledge, emotion, and willpower. Knowledge to know his word, emotion to understand his word, and willpower to follow his word.””

Cassia beamed, removing her hand. “You’ve read the Tome?”

Matheus grinned. “It’d be ridiculous for a Legend of Arceus *not* to read it, wouldn’t it?” He craned his neck, his ears twitching. “I think there’s a river near here.” He started walking away. “Leave your things; we’d rather not have anything get wet.”

The Zoroark held up the bag, then reluctantly set it down. She followed Matheus along the path, while Grom stood watch over their miniature camp.

She looked around her, amazed by all the life surrounding her. The trees rustled in the wind, and the birds chirruped. Pachirisu jumped amongst the branches, carrying berries with them to their homes. Farther away, Sawsbuck with pink flowers on their antlers grazed on the soft grass.

Matheus looked back at her. “You haven’t seen anything outside the Guild, have you?” She shook her head.

Matheus sighed despairingly. “We chose that spot for its defensive nature, not for its appearance. I’d feel sorry for any Pokémon who was raised there. Dust and shrubbery don’t make for a pretty place to live.” He looked back at Cassia, then turned away. “I take it you haven’t eaten fish then.”

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At the edge of the gently flowing creek, Matheus pulled off his leather coverings, his silver fur reflecting brightly in the sun, contrasting sharply with the yellow and black elsewhere. He knelt next to the water, hovering over a school of red Basculin, the wild Pokémon staring back.

“About the only fish I see outside the ocean. A bit bland, but a few berries do them wonders,” Matheus stated, scrutinizing the fish.

Cassia sat on a stump, peering down at the Basculin. Her mane hung down into the water, and a Basculin drew close to it, its mouth opening.

She yanked back her mane, pulling it close. “You really want to...*eat* them?”

“Why not? It says in that Tome that Arceus allows it. Just read Dictations 23, then you’ll see.” Matheus snapped his paw into the water and pulled out a Basculin by the tail. It wriggled and flopped helplessly to return to the water, but Matheus gave it a punch to the head. It fell still.

Cassia cringed, leaning away. “I...haven’t really seen a wild Pokémon before, let alone eaten one.”

Matheus shrugged, setting the fish aside. “I tried my first fish when I was younger than you. Ain’t that bad once you get around the fact that your meal’s staring at you.” He grinned, returning to his catching.

Wanting to leave the subject, she asked, “What do you know about Life?”

Matheus gave her a sideways glance. “I know a lot about life, considering how long I’ve been around.”

Cassia shook her head, laughing slightly. “No, not *that* life. I mean Life, you know, like what me and Arthus can use.”

Chuckling, Matheus looked away. “Couldn’t help myself. Anyway, I actually know quite a bit, as I wanted to be prepared for when Arthus returned.” He pulled out another Basculin and gave it a quick blow. “From what I’ve found out, it is capable of many things: it can be used much like Aura can, in that it can be formed into explosive spheres. You can also enhance other Pokémon by touching them or drain them the same way. It can also be used to alter memories and change minds, but it usually takes a lot more effort to do so. It can even be used to travel to other Life deposits scattered throughout Equivos.”

He set aside the Basculin and focused on another. “It does have its limits though. You can’t give life to a dead object—except Grom, who uses it more like a battery. You also require a supply of Life stored within the body, or you’ll just use your own.” He stopped

for a moment, holding up a paw. “Unlike Aura.” His paw ignited in blue light, contrasting sharply with the red of Life.

He stood up, stepping closer to Cassia. “Aura is a calm energy compared to Life. Life is erratic and powerful, and it can’t really be contained once it’s out of control. Plus, Arceus never intended Life to be used in this way, and thus, is unpredictable.” He pressed his paws together, enveloping them in the light. “Aura, however, is different. It is fluid, soothing. It allows you to see the emotions of others, and to see their thoughts. It doesn’t require you to take energy from the living or dead, only needing a strong connection with another.” He opened his paws, revealing a tightly packed, azure sphere. “And, when needed, it can be used as a weapon.” He twisted to the creek and fired the sphere at a Basculin. It struck it on the side, driving away the others as the target floated to the top.

He took out the Basculin and held it up to Cassia. “Aura and Life are inseparably connected and are related to each other.” He threw the fish to her. “But they are not the same.”

Cassia stared in amazement as she caught the fish. Matheus smirked, then pulled on his cloak, taking the other two Basculin. He started walking back from where they came and said, “It’s been a while since I’ve shown off.”

She looked down at the Basculin, noting that the aura sphere left an impression in the Basculin’s scales. She traced it, astonished that Matheus could be so accurate with his shot.

“Aren’t you coming?” Matheus called.

Cassia blinked, then held the Basculin away from her, pulling a face. She stood up and ran after him, exclaiming, “Why’d you even give me this?”

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The Basculin, now stabbed through with sticks, lay planted in the ground, sizzling by the fire. Matheus carefully squelched Wacan berries on their scales, the juices seeping into the soft skin and spreading through the tender meat inside.

He leaned back and took a long sniff, then sighed contentedly. “Ah, perfect. Looks like those Wacan berries were some good after all.”

Cassia sat across from him, with Grom sitting between them, crouching and keeping his arms close. The Zoroark's mouth watered, while Grom simply scratched his head, stone grinding against stone.

Matheus glanced at Cassia and smirked. "You know you want it."

Cassia groaned then laughed. "It *does* smell pretty good."

The Lucario pulled up a stick and inspected the Basculin, then nodded his head. "Looks ready to me." He tossed it to Cassia, who caught it and froze, the eyes staring back at her.

Matheus took another Basculin and bit into it, ripping free a chunk of flesh. "Told ya you had to get used to it."

Cassia cautiously took a bite, trying to push away the fact that she was eating a Pokémon. She chewed doubtfully, then gradually chewed faster as the sweet and sour flavor sunk in.

She took another ravenous bite, her hunger from yesterday striking in full force. Matheus grinned, waving his Basculin. "Good, ain't it?"

Cassia nodded emphatically, turning to Grom. "You really have to try this!"

"Hawm?" Grom pointed to his head, where his mouth would be if he had one.

"Oh." Cassia paused, then shrugged. "Forgot about that." She continued eating her Basculin.

Matheus took another bite and swallowed. "Nice to see that you're willing to try new things. Starting today, I'll be teaching you more on how to live out of the comfort of the Guild. You won't have to worry about Pokémon bothering you with Grom around, but he can't help so much in making fires, gathering food, and finding places to sleep."

He handed the other Basculin to Cassia, who had since thrown away the skeleton of her previous meal. "After that, I'll hand you off to a good friend of mine to teach you more about the Tome."

Cassia stopped and looked up, flecks of meat stuck to her lips. "Wait, you're not staying with me?" she said, disheartened.

Matheus shrugged, taking a quick snap at his Basculin. “While I love keeping you company, I have other business to take care of. Arceus has to come first, and he’s given me assignments that I have to do on Deitae, which mortals like you can’t enter.” He set aside the Basculin and leaned forward. “Don’t think you won’t see me again though; you’re the first Pokémon I’ve really talked to in years, and I wouldn’t mind seeing you every so often.” He held out his paw, stretching over Grom’s legs. “Do we have a deal then?”

Cassia studied his paw for a moment, then accepted it, giving it a good shake. “Deal.”

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That night, Matheus opened Cassia’s bag and pulled out a thick blanket. “How’d you fit *this* in there?”

Cassia curled her fur around her claw, smiling sheepishly. “I, uh, packed well.”

Matheus laughed, spreading it on the ground. “Well, you’ve managed to do something better than me then.” He stood back up, his fur reflecting in the moonlight. “Now, lie down on it.” She did so, noticing how comfortable it was compared to sleeping on the bare ground.

“Now roll.”

“What?”

“Roll. In the blanket,” Matheus repeated.

Unsure of why he’d ask such a thing, she rolled, wrapping herself in the blanket. The warmth inside contained, the brisk night air did nothing to affect her anymore.

Matheus leaned down. “See why I asked you to roll?” He turned to Grom and patted his arm. “You’re on guard duty. Make sure you charge up.”

Grom saluted, then stomped off to find a life deposit. “Graow-howm!”

Cassia soon fell asleep in the blanket, resolving to use it from then on to sleep.

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Cassia was back in her room in the Guild, sitting on her bed. The chair in the center remained still, a red claw resting on its arm. Arthus sat in it, resting his head on his arm, his eyes dark.

“So...this is how you repay my love,” he calmly said. The eyes gleamed with cold blue light, then he bared his teeth. “Running away...running away from the only Pokémon who cared for you.” Dark tendrils encircled Cassia, pinning her to the bed.

Arthus stood up and slowly stepped toward her, his claws extended outward. “I still love you, however. But I can’t trust you. Not like before.” Mist flowed from the tips of his claws as he pressed them against her head. “Forget one thing...one thing only...” He pierced Cassia’s skin.

“Arceus.”

She screamed.

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Cassia bolted upright, breathing heavily and clutching her head. Ensuring that Arthus was away from her, she pulled away the blanket and crossed her arms around her legs, forcing herself to calm.

Grom turned his head, his eyes gleaming in the early morning light. “Graw?”

She sniffed, glancing at Grom. “It’s nothing. I...I just had a bad dream.” She shivered, feeling her head once more.

Grom twisted his body and trudged to her, then rubbed her back. “Haw-hawm. Gro.” Matheus continued to sleep on a tree, not noticing her plight.

Cassia looked up at him, smiling slightly. “Thanks.” Her smile faded as she remembered Arthus. “Do you think I’ll see him again? I want to stay away, but at the same time...” She considered all the wonderful times they had together. “He taught me to draw...to read...everything, really. He was always happy around me...and always sad when thought of Corrina.” She took a deep breath, then said, “He wanted to have a perfect family, yet he destroyed it. He blamed Matheus and Arceus...but he is the only one to blame.”

“Grawm,” the Golurk replied, shrugging. “Graw-grawm.”

“Yeah...it’s probably for the best.” Cassia rested against Grom’s body, the warmth of his inner workings heating him. “You’re surprisingly comfortable despite being made of rock.”

Grom looked at her curiously, then tapped at his frame, receiving clinks in reply.

“Graw?”

Cassia chuckled, the warmth causing her to be drowsy. “Sorry...I forgot...” She dozed off, and Grom stood on his own.

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Cassia felt a poke to her nose and brushed it away, mumbling. She felt the poke again, then drove it away more furiously. It happened again, and she languidly opened an eye, seeing Matheus standing in front of her, holding a stick.

“Rise and shine. Day one’s waiting,” Matheus said, throwing away the stick.

Cassia moaned, forcing herself to stand up. Arthus let her sleep in most days, mostly because he was too busy with his Guild agenda to wake her early. *‘If Matheus is going to be like this every morning...’*

She shivered. *‘I’m not a morning Pokemon.’*

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“You can tell what direction you’re going by looking at the sky. The sun’ll always rise in the east, and set in the west,” Matheus explained. He and Cassia walked through the woods, with Grom lagging behind and looking around him for danger.

“How long will it take for me to learn everything?” Cassia asked, turning her head toward rustling leaves.

Matheus picked up a stick and scraped it against a spike on his paw, creating a long, curling shaving. “Well, I can’t stick around for long, so it’ll be more of a crash course. Mostly what to avoid, how to get from place to place, and how to root around for edibles. There’s more to it, like shelters and tools and such, but given that you’ll likely be going to towns in the future, I doubt there’s much a need for it.”

“Wait, I’ll need to go into towns? Like the Guild?” Cassia shrunk, remembering her last experience with other Pokémon.

“It’s a fact of life. I go into town every so often so I don’t have to survive on berries alone, and so I can have a proper place to sleep.” Matheus looked back at her. “Besides, with what Arianne’s got in mind for you, you’ll want to go to town.”

“What do you mean?”

Matheus made a sly smile, then turned back. “I’d say it’ll take about a week. That’s about how far away Arianne is anyway.”

Sensing that Matheus wasn’t going to tell her what Arianne was going to have her do, Cassia chose not to continue with the subject.

They continued walking for several more hours, then Matheus abruptly exclaimed, “Pop quiz: what do you do when you’re in a surprise attack?”

Cassia cocked her head. “Why?”

Matheus suddenly swung his paw back, aiming for Cassia. She eeped and leapt back, narrowly avoiding the Lucario’s blow.

She brushed back her mane and shook her head in surprise. Matheus crouched, going low to the ground. He made a slight smile and said, “Because you’re in one. Time to see how well old Arthus taught you.” He pumped his arms and dashed toward Cassia.

The Zoroark faded in a shimmer, and Matheus stopped. His ears twitched, and he smirked. He snapped his paw to his ear, catching an invisible limb. “He’s taught you well.” He pulled her arm and swung her to the ground, her illusion dissipating.

“Graowm!” Grom thudded toward Matheus, pounding his fists and causing his eyes to glow.

The Lucario released Cassia as she held up her arms in defense. “He’s not really going to hurt me!” she exclaimed. The Golurk calmed, his limbs lowering. He muttered to himself, then ventured off the trail, watching from the sidelines.

Matheus laughed, stepping back. “Should’ve remembered that; I wouldn’t want to tangle with *him* unless I had to.” He twisted back and grunted with a grin. “Now, let’s try that again. Rule number one out in the wilderness: fight well to eat well.”

Cassia stared at him for a moment, then flourished her claws, stooping. “I don’t think I’m better than you.”

Matheus nodded. “Right, I could beat you easily. How about this: you draw blood, I make my specialty soup tonight, and if I pin you down, you’ll get nothing but Wacan berries for dinner.”

Cassia grimaced, stamping her foot. “But that’s hardly fair!”

Matheus shrugged. “Well, when you’re hungry, you can’t be picky. You can’t always have what you like out here.” He held up a paw. “No using Life or Aura this time; they don’t react well on contact, and I’d rather not overwhelm you.” He cracked his knuckles. “Ready?”

Cassia nodded, then disappeared, sweeping toward the Lucario.

Matheus waited a moment, then punched to his right, receiving a grunt of surprise and a reappeared Zoroark. “Don’t go with the same tactic twice!” he exclaimed. He took Cassia’s arms and pulled them back.

She threw up her legs and kicked him away, releasing his grip and freeing her arms. She dove underneath Matheus and held out her claws.

The Lucario leapt upward, rising several feet in the air. Cassia stood up and gawked as he fell and landed gracefully on his paws.

“You’re making this too easy,” Matheus complained, running forward. He swung out his paw, but Cassia deflected it with her own strike, then went to slash again.

Matheus halted and thudded the claw with his paw, proceeding to hit with another. The two parried each other through various strikes, Matheus pacing forward and Cassia back. The Lucario couldn’t get a grip on Cassia, while she couldn’t land a strike on the Legend.

Matheus suddenly swept a leg under Cassia’s, making her fall back. He dove forward as she clawed the air in front of her and cried out, landing in the dirt. Matheus pinned her arms to the ground and splayed her legs, ensuring that she couldn’t get up.

Matheus remained in that position, smiling. “Looks like you’ll be eating Wacan for dinner.” A razor-thin line of red appeared on his face, contrasting with the bright silver fur.

Cassia grinned. “No, you’ll be making your ‘specialty soup’.”

Matheus faltered and dabbed at his face, staring in surprise at the smear of blood that appeared. He remained still for a moment, then laughed, standing up and offering his other paw to Cassia. She pulled herself up as Matheus exclaimed, “Good show, good

show! You really had me for a moment.” He wiped his paws clean, then said, “Tonight, we’re having Tamato.”

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Over a steaming pot sitting over a roaring fire, Matheus crushed a spiny red berry in his paw, the juices and flesh dropping into the vat of similar color. He and Cassia sat on two sizeable rocks surrounding the fire, some distance away from a beaten trail. A burbling creek rushed behind them, while bushes with gleaming red berries surrounded them, avoiding an abrupt pile of loose dirt in the middle of the grass. The fire underneath the pot illuminated the area, providing a gentle glow for the three Pokémon.

A bandage now across his face and his paws washed, Matheus sniffed the concoction. “Ah, good thing I planned for this. That river we came across yesterday winded down over here, and I hid a pot near a bush just in case.”

Cassia hovered over the pot, her eyes reflecting the fire in the dark night. She took a sniff, then reared away. “It smells...hot.”

Grom, who had previously been throwing a cloud of dirt from the nearby pile, turned his head. “Hrawmm?”

Cassia laughed, shaking her head. “No, not like that.”

Matheus dipped his paw into the soup and took a drop, letting it fall onto his tongue. He blew his breath out slowly and exclaimed, “Hoo yeah, it’s ready to eat.” He reached behind him and took out two bowls, scooping a portion of soup out and setting them on another rock. He patted his leg and said. “Take your pick.”

Cassia took the one with the smaller portion and held it up to her mouth. Bits of berry flesh floated on top, the heat causing them to break apart and become one with the juice.

Matheus took his bowl and blew across its top, then took a sip from the edge. He sighed contentedly, leaning his head back. “Ah, it’s been ages since I’ve had Tamato soup.” He lightly shook his bowl at Cassia. “Go on, try it. It won’t kill ya.”

Cassia blew across the top and took a small sip. Her eyes widened, and she opened her mouth and fanned her hand across it. “Hot, hot!” she panted, setting down the bowl.

“Graw-haw-haw!” Grom chortled, holding his sides.

Cassia glared at him and said, “Oh, what do you know?”

Matheus chuckled, taking another sip. “It’s an acquired taste, I’ll admit. Still, once you get past the spiciness, it warms you to the core.” He looked up. “Sort of like Arceus, in a way. He admonishes you, but he loves you all the same.”

“How’s he like?” Cassia asked, intrigued.

Matheus thought for a moment, then said, “I’m not sure it’s my place to say. Technically, I’m not really supposed to be telling you that I serve Arceus; that’s for you to decide.”

“Why’s that?”

Matheus set aside his bowl. “Well, think about it like this. You know from the Tome that Arceus resurrected me after Arthus killed me. You also know that I am sworn to serve him until the Day of Desolation, which no one but him knows the day of.” He leaned forward. “Suppose I told everyone about that, including those who haven’t read the Tome. Arceus wanted Pokémon to base their belief in him on that book and his teachings, not the physical evidence of his work.” He pointed at his chest and slid a paw across his side. “Right there is the killing blow. It was a nasty piece of work, one that you wouldn’t live to tell the tale. It goes from my stomach, all the way to my back.”

Cassia grimaced, taking a closer look. Indeed, right where Matheus traced, a thick scar raised the fur above it, clearly visible. “Could you tell me how you got it?” she asked.

Matheus looked up briefly, then leaned back. “Don’t see why not. You ought to know anyway, as it also has to do with how Arthus ended up imprisoned with Yveltal anyway.”

Matheus leaned forward and clasped his paws. “A bit of background, to start. I had been with Laryon for several weeks, heading to the Guild to rescue my sister, Azure; she raised him after his parents died. We made it there expecting for Arthus’ Pokémon to attack us, but they had all gone—deserted, apparently.” He narrowed his eyes. “Little did I know that Arthus had already managed to go to Deitae and absorb Arceus.” Cassia’s eyes widened. “He had taken the Seal only a few days before. I had expected him to use it right when he captured Arceus.”

“Yet he didn’t. Laryon and I had ascended the keep of the Guild and met with Azure along with Erik Zorua—Arthus’ son. Not long after, Arthus came, and demanded that he be with Erik. He seemed to want to use the Seal with Erik at his side because he was his last reminder of Corrina.”

Cassia’s face fell. “I...never knew that. I always knew about her, but he never talked about Erik.”

Matheus nodded slowly. “Arthus loved Erik as much as he loved Corrina. He wanted to create a perfect world with him—which ended up being his downfall.”

He sat straight. “Anyway, back to the action. He wanted Erik so badly that he went for Azure, who Erik ended up growing closer to in Arthus’ absence. Laryon at first guarded him, but I took over, and we fought for ages.

“We traded blows, him trying to push past me to Erik, while I was trying to get the Seal from him.” He furrowed his brow. “I don’t know why he didn’t use it. He could’ve taken Erik after he made his ‘perfect world’, but he never saw it like that. He almost seemed...hesitant.

“He knocked me down and ran for Erik. Laryon came in again and tried to fight Arthus, but he proved too strong. Arthus finally held out his claws and prepared to kill Laryon.”

Cassia gasped. “Why? He was only a Riolu!”

Matheus shrugged. “Pure anger, I’d say. Laryon had kept the Seal from him for years, and that combined with him protecting Erik finally made him do what he did to so many others.”

He leaned forward again, grim. “I couldn’t let that happen. I loved him like my own son and would have done anything for him. So, I took the killing blow.” He pointed at his scar. “Right here.”

He sighed, tapping his foot paw. “There was no way I was going to survive it. Arthus was stunned by my move, and in his confusion, Laryon took the Seal and activated it—just as I died.”

He remained quiet, dwelling. Cassia crouched forward. “What happened?”



Matheus shrugged slightly. “Can’t say I know, since I was dead. Laryon told me he was given Arceus’ power, and that he had a choice to change the world, just like Arthus wanted. Instead, he destroyed the Seal and released Arceus.”

“Must have been a hard choice,” Cassia commented.

Matheus waved a paw. “Not for him. I taught him after all.” He leaned back and said, “Arceus supposedly stopped Arthus in his tracks. He banished Arthus into Yveltal’s cocoon for causing irreparable damage to his creations, yet still found the sympathy to keep him alive. There he’d stay until the final years of Equivos.”

Cassia held a hand on her cheek. “That’s a lot different than I thought it’d be. It was so...personal.”

Matheus leaned back, “I think that I could convince a few Pokémon about my story if I wanted to...but that’s not how Arceus works. He wants Pokémon to have faith in him and his teachings, not to have a perfect knowledge. Otherwise, it ruins his purpose in creating us.”

“And what’s that?”

Matheus tapped his snout. “Read, and you’ll find out.” He smiled, then took back his bowl, taking another sip. “It’ll be rather chilly tonight, so eat up.”

Cassia gazed at her bowl, then hesitantly picked it up. “You know, you’re not what I thought you’d be. You’re more...fun, and not serious all the time.”

Matheus laughed. “Well, I am when I need to be.” He held up his bowl. “To Arceus, for granting us this world, and letting me meet you.”

Cassia held up her own. “Same here. I’m glad you’re here, Matheus.” She winked. “Thanks for telling me about yourself.” The Lucario winked back.

They both took a slurp, and Cassia tried her best not to cough from the heat.

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Long after they fell asleep, Grom stood in the center of the camp, near the smoldering embers of flame and the scant remnants of Tamato soup. Cassia slept in her bedroll to his right, while Matheus slept on a tree, snorting occasionally.

The Golurk looked about, noticing nothing unusual. His eyes began to dim, and he slouched forward, drifting into sleep after days of wakefulness.

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*The Golurk stood in a vast desert, in his pristine, cyan self. He stood with hundreds of others like him, standing in rank and file. He turned to the other Golurk, expecting to see some sign of life. They stood still, not even lifting a finger.*

*One by one, they crumbled to dust, their powder blowing away in the wind. The crumbling tumbled toward Grom, daring to destroy him.*

*He groaned in dread and ran from his fallen comrades, the dust billowing in ballooning clouds. The earth cracked behind him, surging for his limbs. His feet ignited in yellow flames, jetting him upward. The cracks followed, creating onyx shafts in the air, all shifting toward him.*

*The cracks licked his feet, and his body began to rumble, focusing on his chest brace. He held it in place, moaning as he felt himself pulled apart. The black cracks enveloped the sky, creating a never-ending expanse of darkness. He crumbled further, and resolved to lose himself to the emptiness, his light dimming.*

*Red chains enveloped him, driving away the cracks. They tightened his limbs and held them in place, and Grom sighed in relief. The chains hung in the air, held by a pair of gleaming red claws. One handed an end of the chain to the other, then lowered toward Grom's head.*

*The claw enveloped the top of his head, and spidery crimson threads arced from its ends. They weaved between the cracks and sewed them together, then glowed with fierce red light. The cyan darkened into blue, then to gray, then to black, the yellow light remaining the same.*

*Grom groaned, attempting to move. The chains restricted him, keeping his arms and legs in place. He tried to tear free, but they refused to let him go, despite him being saved from darkness.*

*He looked up at the claws and saw the threads wrap around his eyes. He roared, reaching for the gauze and trying to wrench it free. The threads glowed, and his light*

*changed to orange. He felt his limbs become restricted in their movement, not by chains, but by some unknown force.*

*The web flashed again, and Grom froze. The orange had become crimson, and he felt a chilling emptiness in his core. His limbs refused to move, and he felt nothing. The chains fell away, and the claws removed the gauze, then hovered in front of Grom.*

*Grom wanted to tremble. He wanted to crumble with his comrades. They received their rest, yet he was torn from his fate, then warped and transfigured by an abominable creature. But now he had to serve some unknown master, free of will and of feeling.*

*The claws pointed to the right, and Grom lifted his arm. Beneath him was a Golett, his past. The claw pointed down, and Grom threw his fist down, shattering the Golett, the spirit inside screaming.*

*Grom screamed with it.*

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The Golurk wailed, his eyes dim and his limbs shaking. The brace on his chest shook, jiggling loose of the screws that bound it. His light began to rise, but his eyes remained out.

Cassia opened her eyes slowly, awoken by Grom. She gasped when she noticed the Golurk, then pulled free of her roll. “Matheus wake up!”

The Lucario lifted an eyelid, then snapped awake. “He’s having a nightmare!” He leapt to his feet and ran toward him.

The clasp rattled against Grom’s chest, and his limbs began to whip around. Matheus ducked underneath him and exclaimed, “He’s going wild! We have to secure his brace, or he’ll overcharge and explode!”

Cassia nodded, running toward the Golurk, ducking underneath his arms. She leapt on top of his chest and grabbed the brace, pressing it against him. She hurriedly spun one screw back into him, then the other. The limbs stopped spinning, and the Golurk’s eyes sparked open.

He looked down, his chest shaking. “G-g-grawm. R-raw-hawm.”

Cassia slid off his chest, her ears tilting down. “Grom? Are...are you alright?”

The Golurk shook his head, then fell to his knees, clutching his head. “Rawm! Raw, rawm!” His entire body shook, appearing as if he wanted to express his grief in some other way, but was impossible.

Matheus stared at him, aghast. He held up his paw and watched it envelop in blue light, then pressed it against Grom’s arm. He gasped, then lowered his head. “I...I feel it. His...sorrow. His pain. What in Arceus’ name did he do to you?”

“Graw-graw-grawm! Hra-hrawm!”

Cassia breathed in sharply. “Matheus, remember what you said about me giving back his willpower and emotion?”

“Yes, what of it?”

Cassia held his arm, leaning her head against it. “He says he remembered what happened to him. He saw Arthus taking it away. He was dying like all the rest of the Golurk, but then Arthus brought him back, then changed him. He...he was forced to serve him and feel nothing. Nothing but...cold.”

Grom moaned piteously, shaking his head. “Gr-aw-aw-aw-m.” He lifted a handful of dirt, then let it drop from his fingers. “H-h-h-haaaaaaw.”

Cassia closed her eyes and cringed. “He...he wanted to die. He wanted to die like the rest of his friends, so that he could be free.”

Matheus gazed at him, wide-eyed. He removed his paw, then solemnly said, “So...Arthus tested his ideas on you.” He put a paw to his brow, baring his teeth. “He took your will to ensure you did as he said, and your emotion so that you wouldn’t feel tempted to rebel. He let you keep your memory, and therefore, your spirit, so that you can realize that you are doing what is right.” He clenched his paw. “To experience that...is indescribable. It’s exactly what Arthus wants: a world where you are forced to do good.”

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The morning after they forced themselves to sleep, Cassia awoke, noticing Grom no longer in his spot.

She looked around for a moment, then noticed the Golurk on his knees at the bank of the creek. He made no movement, simply looking into the water.

Cassia pulled herself out, then walked to him. She looked at his face, seeing his eyes dim, then she studied his reflection, noting how clear it was.

Grom turned his head slightly and said, “Gra-gra-grawm. Haw-gram.” He pointed to the reflection, then himself. “H-H-haw.”

Cassia rubbed his arm, leaning against him. “I know...what Arthus did was wrong. He should never have done that to you.” She looked at his reflection again. “And seeing yourself changed doesn’t help either.”

“G-Grawm,” he replied, nodding his head. He paused, then said, “Ho-hawm. Hawm.” He wrapped his arm around Cassia, gently hugging her.

Cassia nodded, then replied, “I’ll be here for you. We’ve both been hurt by Arthus. We’ll go through it together.”

They remained still for a moment, then Cassia held out a little black sphere to Grom. He stared at it, the crack in his head fizzling.

She rubbed it sadly. “I wanted to keep this from you, since it’s what let you be with me...” She continued to hold it out, watching Grom stare. “But it also took away your speech.” Her hand shook. “I don’t want to give it to you, but if you want to be whole again...I won’t stop you.”

Grom’s hand hovered over it momentarily, then retreated. He closed Cassia’s claws over it, then shook his head. “Graow-graw. Graw-haw-graow.”

Cassia held it out for a moment longer, cocking her head. “You...you think it will make you forget me? You don’t want to be stuck with Arthus.” Grom nodded his head.

Cassia thought for a moment, then beamed and hugged the Golurk. “Thanks. I didn’t want you to go.”

They remained sitting at the bank, the sun rising over the trees and illuminating their new day.

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Six days passed with few things of interest. Cassia learned more of how to support herself in the wild, including how to track Pokémon if needed. They reached the Minute Plains, where Cassia saw a small house in the distance.

The wind rushed past their fur, and the sun hung bright overhead. The long grass rushed underneath their feet, and Skitty ran through it, their tails poking above the thrashing green blades. Matheus trekked ahead of Grom and Cassia, who walked alongside each other.

The Lucario suddenly stopped, the house in view. He turned to face Cassia and Grom. “This is where we part ways.” He pointed to the house. “You’ll find someone named Arianne Gardevoir in there. Tell her that I sent you, and she’ll take care of the rest.”

Cassia looked toward him sadly. “Do you really have to go?”

Matheus shrugged, forcing a smile. “It’s just the way it has to be. She’d do a much better job than I ever could helping you teach from the Tome.”

“Wait, *teach* from it?” Cassia asked incredulously.

Matheus nodded. “That’s the calling of any who possess it. Read Proclamation 18; you’ll see it right there.”

Cassia pulled out the Tome and quickly flipped through its pages, coming to the mentioned line.

Proclamation 18—

And I do this work for the benefit of all, to help my creations come closer to me. This work shall be brought forth to the world and shall reach its culmination when the Teacher shall come forth. All who possess this work shall teach of me, so that my word is not forgotten.

Cassia looked up. “But I don’t know anyone out there!”

“Arianne will help you out with that. I’m not exactly a social Beautifly either.” Matheus waved his paw. “I will see you in the future. So long.” He turned around and sprinted across the plains, leaving Cassia and Grom on their own.

Cassia felt a lump rise in her throat. She leaned against Grom and waved back.

Grom patted her shoulder, shaking his head. “Gra-grawm.”

Cassia sniffed, nodding in reply. “Yeah...” She turned to the house. “Let’s go see Arianne.”

Chapter 12

Cassia gazed up at the intricate arc set within the door of the cabin. The heavy oaken door guarded the humble building, black slate making the sloping tiles, with a brick chimney puffing smoke from its top. Cassia's feet stood atop a low wooden porch, where firewood lay stacked under a shrouded window. The sunlight reflected off of it, nearly into Cassia's eyes with the bright noonday sun.

Grom stood behind her, thinking it best not to stand on the porch. "Haw-grawm." He nudged Cassia, waving his hand toward the door.

Cassia adjusted her bag, nodding her head impatiently. "I know, I know!" She sighed, looking at her feet. "I just...don't know. Do you think she'll care that I'm a Zoroark?" Given her ancestor's reputation and the reaction of those Pokémon at the Guild, she figured that Equivos didn't view her species too highly.

Grom shrugged. "Graw, graw grawm." He pounded his chest, then pointed at the arc on the door. "Gro-hawm."

Cassia studied the arc more closely, then realized it was an intricate circle in the shape of the Arc of Arceus. *'How did she get away with something like that?'*

Knowing that she couldn't stand there forever, she rapped the door. After a minute or so, there was still no response.

Cassia knocked again, then exclaimed, "Hello? Is anyone here? I was sent by Matheus Lucario!"

Again, no response. Cassia slowly turned away and stepped toward the edge of the porch. "I guess she's out."

The door suddenly creaked open, seemingly inviting her in. She turned back around, disconcerted by what had just happened.

“Come in, come in! I’ve been expecting you,” an elderly voice said.

Cautiously, Cassia stepped back onto the porch, then peeked her head inside. The cabin was a single large room with two doors to one side, separating them. A small table with two chairs stood in the center, in front of a series of cabinets, a stove, and a bucket filled with water. To the right were two cushioned chairs, with a shelf of books between them, and a small wooden board with a sack on top. A series of lanterns with large candles inside hung from the ceiling, unlit. Along the walls, elaborate portraits showing a variety of Pokémon and scenes hung, freshly dusted and polished.

The Zoroark treaded into the dim atmosphere, feeling a sense of peace going inside. She heard a massive creak behind her and saw Grom dare take a step onto the porch, the wood sagging under his weight.

“I’m afraid that your large friend will have to stay outside; my old house wasn’t built for the likes of him.”

Cassia looked back at him and sympathetically said, “Sorry Grom; you just wait outside.”

Grom stepped off the porch and crossed his arms. “Hrm.” He trudged to a large oak next to the cabin and leaned on it, the trunk bending upon contact. “Gaw!” he pouted, slamming his fist against it, causing several leaves to fall.

Cassia turned back to the house and stepped forward, studying the home. The door closed with a prolonged squeak, and darkness shrouded her vision.

She squinted up at the lanterns, noticing that the doors to the candles lay open. She held up her hand, causing a tiny crimson flame to come into it. She steadily threw sparks onto the candles, causing them to light with a somber orange light.

Satisfied with the light level, she peered at the portraits, noticing a young Gardevoir predominantly among them. Amongst her, many other species posed alongside her in a variety of landscapes, and in one picture, she embraced a Gallade.

“So, you’re Arthur’s kin.”

Cassia whipped around her and eeped, meeting the gaze of an elderly Gardevoir. Her once-vibrant hair was striped with silver, and her face was lined with wrinkles. Her dress hung limply around her legs, and she stood with a slight hunch, supported by a wooden cane she held in her hand. Despite these infirmities, her eyes were still a bright scarlet, gazing at Cassia lightheartedly.

“Thank you for lighting my lanterns, but I’d rather wait for when I need them,” she croaked. She focused on the velvet curtains covering the large windows of the cabin. They parted, coating the inside with vibrant yellow light.

Cassia stared in amazement as the Gardevoir turned back to her. “You’re Psychic.”

She gave her a curious look. “You haven’t met a Gardevoir before?” she smiled softly, shuffling to one of the cushioned chairs. “Well, I wouldn’t blame you, given your upbringing. The Guild is a wretched place to be raised.”

Cassia gasped, pointing at her. “How do you know that? I haven’t met you before.”

The Gardevoir made a coughing laugh. “Us Gardevoir primarily use our psychic abilities for reading minds and seeing emotions. I can’t read Dark Pokemon like you very well, but I can manage.” She sat on the chair with a groan, then set the cane at its edge. “Plus, Matheus came by here over a week ago as he was going to the Guild; he filled me on the details.” She clasped her hands together. “As you said, we haven’t met, so I believe introductions are in order. I’m Arianne Gardevoir, and given your little greeting, you’re Cassia.”

Cassia nodded, adjusting the bag over her shoulder again. “That’s right. I came here with a Golurk named Grom. He, uh, doesn’t talk much.”

Arianne nodded sagely. “Well, all the better. Golurk don’t usually have much useful to say.” She held a hand to the side of her mouth and whispered, “To be honest, they’re rather dense.” She leaned back, acting as if nothing happened. “So, old Matheus sent you here. Wish he could’ve said a proper hello before he dropped you off, but I guess you’ll do.” She patted the chair next to her and exclaimed, “No need to stand there, I have room enough for you. Just mind the fur.”

Cassia, assured that Arianne meant well, sat in the other chair, pulling off her bag and setting it at her side. It suddenly floated in the air, and Cassia reached out for it.

Adrianne reached over and grabbed her claw, saying, “No need to worry.” It floated to a peg and hung from it. The lip opened, and the Arceist Tome hovered out of it, easing into Cassia’s lap. Arianne added, “Just want to make sure you have the tome is all.”

Cassia traced her claws over the cover, like she had done many times before. “I noticed that you had the Arc of Arceus on your door. Why is that?”

Arianne sighed, waving her hand. “I’m not in much a mood for telling stories at the moment. You happened to wake me up from my nap.” She leaned forward. “However, I’m interested in hearing yours. It’s a long way from the Guild, and old Matheus certainly wouldn’t let things be boring.”

“How do you know Matheus anyway? He told me he kept himself private.”

Arianne laughed, holding her chest. “Is that what he told you? My, he had you good. You met him, so tell me, do you really think he’s the hermit-y type? Living all alone and avoiding Pokémon?”

Cassia looked up in thought. *‘Well, he certainly likes talking. He likes making food and training with others too.’*

“Don’t keep it all in your head; I may be a mind reader, but I can’t do it so well with the likes of you,” Arianne added.

Cassia looked back down and laughed slightly. “Yeah, I don’t see him living on his own for long.” She cocked her head and frowned. “But why didn’t I hear about him until I left?”

Arianne waved a dismissive hand. “Arthus believed he killed him way back when, so do you really think he’d believe anyone that told him he came back from the dead?” She shook her head. “He’d likely run ‘em through if they even breathed a word about Matheus, so they just kept quiet about the whole thing if they knew.”

Cassia considered her thought, thinking it made sense. She went to say more, but Arianne held up her hand. “Before we talk about anything else, there are some ground rules we have to set. While I trust you because Matheus sent you, we can’t just have you

doing whatever you please.” She held up a finger. “One: unless I say so, you aren’t to go out of sight of the house. If you see anyone coming, come straight here; your status as a Zoroark would make you a prime target.”

She held up a second finger. “Two: read the Tome every day. I know you probably won’t have issue with that, but by ‘read’, I mean mark and annotate it, so you can make connections between the verses. Your job as a teacher will be far easier if you do.”

Cassia tried to interject, but Arianne stopped her. “Three: you are not to leave your bedroom when night comes. I’ve been taking steps to ensure Pokémon don’t find this place, and that’s part of my routine.”

She lowered her hand. “And four: your big galoot of a Golurk has to help out with chores, just as you will. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m rather old, so I shouldn’t be doing things by myself if there are younger and stronger folks around.” She clasped her fingers, tapping patiently against them. “Any questions?”

“Yes,” Cassia blurted out. “What do mean I have to mark the Tome? It’s too valuable for me to do that!”

“Really?” Arianne patted her lap. “Let me see. I have an eye for this sort of thing.”

Cassia hesitantly obeyed, the leather cover scraping against her claws. Arianne bent over it and opened the cover, then chuckled. “Well...I didn’t know you’d be bringing *this* copy.”

“What do you mean?” Cassia asked, coming around the chair and staring at the Tome. Arianne’s finger lay just under a faded, scrawling signature, the letters barely reading out to be ‘Aleron’.

“Like many Gardevoir, I can see glimpses of the future. I saw you coming here and bringing the Tome and made sure to prepare for such. What I was *not* expecting, was the very first Arceist Tome to be in your possession.” Arianne tapped the signature. “This was likely Aleron’s final writing, as none of the others were signed this way.” She reached for the shelf and pulled an identical book from it, except it appeared to be far newer. The pages were white, and the cover was smooth, the Arc of Arceus with the

burning blaze still shining. She cracked it open over Cassia's copy and showed the front cover. Beneath the title, Aleron's signature was absent.

Cassia gaped at the connection. "I *definitely* shouldn't write in it."

"What gave you the thought?" Arianne slapped her playfully, flipping past the title page. Beyond it, various lines and circles scattered the page, connecting the verses together in what seemed to be a haphazard way.

"Listen to what you can do if you connect them," she added. She opened to a random page, then after scanning it for a moment, pointed to a verse.

Dictations 10-

And my work is to have my creations return to me by the hand of my prophets, my priests, and my teachers.

She traced her finger across a curving line, meeting with a reference to another verse. She turned to it, then said:

Proclamation 4-

For the world obeys me and shall return to me. My Legends came forth, and returned to the Tree of Life, as should my mortal creations do.

Cassia gazed at the words, astounded. "That was...amazing."

Arianne smiled, tapping her head. "There's only so much you can keep up here." She pointed to the tome. "So, write it down here." She looked out the window, noticing Grom leaning against the oak. "How about you tell Grom that he can come by the back window and have a talk with me; he looks so grumpy out there."

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At the kitchen counter, Arianne offered a handful of walnuts through the window to Grom, who crushed them in his grip. He dropped the remains into Arianne's hand, chuckling.

Arianne put them into a bowl, then set to cutting lettuce with a knife. "Pokémon always seem to forget that other foods than berries exist in this world: bread, apples, cucumber, the whole like. I have some sent daily by a trusted Unfezant, along with plenty of berries."

Cassia watched from behind, sitting at the table. “Most everything I’ve eaten involved berries in some way. I even had some Basculin when I was with Matheus.”

“Did you now? I’ve always wondered how one tastes,” Arianne mused. She set the lettuce aside and started chopping Pecha berries, cutting their pink flesh cleanly. “I won’t deny that berries are delicious and nutritious. I just feel that so much focus is put on them that Pokémon don’t seem to notice the other good things in life.” She set the knife down putting the chopped berries into a bowl.

“So, are there a lot of...farmers, I guess?” Cassia asked.

“Not as many as you’d think. Berry bushes are very productive, so many just start up a field near a town and make that their main food source.” She opened a cupboard and took out a loaf of bread with a white cloth under it. “Berries also happen to be very travel-resistant compared to other foods, so it’s little wonder that they’re grown the most.” She set the bread on the table, then placed the berries and lettuce with it. “Still, Pokémon appreciate having more than the powerful flavors of berries, so we thankfully still have them.” She carried two plates and another knife to the center, then sat down with a sigh.

Cassia reached out to take a berry, but Arianne swatted it, giving her a scornful look. “Always thank Arceus for the food. We might grow it, but he’s the one who created it in the first place.” She clasped her hands and closed her eyes. Cassia followed.

“Great Arceus, let us be able to serve you in all your ways. We give thanks for your gift to us and wish to receive more until the final days.” Arianne opened her eyes, then took a plate, putting a handful of lettuce on top of it.

Cassia took the other plate and took a handful of berries. “I didn’t know you had to do that.”

Arianne shook her head, cutting into the bread with the knife. “Well, I wouldn’t blame you, given your upbringing. Even then, it isn’t necessary; it’s just a nice thing to do for the one who gave it to us.” She took the slice of bread and placed several berries on top of it. “The Usurper is the one who raised you, yes?” Cassia nodded, memories returning to her of his care.

Arianne sighed, pulling lettuce from the bowl. “He could’ve been a great Pokémon. He did so much good before that dreadful Gregorius came into the picture.”

“What do you know about Arthus?” Cassia asked, taking a leaf and nibbling it.

“Not much, but I don’t desire to know more. He suffered plenty of grief in his youth, starting with his parents, then to his own wife, even with Matheus. It went on to his son, Erik, then to you, I’m sure. He is such a sad thing.” She shook her head. “But I don’t sympathize with him. Parents aside, he caused his own misery, but he blames Arceus for all of them, claiming that his decision to let Pokémon have the choice to do evil brought them away from him. He is terribly misguided.”

“He was so nice to me though. I just...haven’t seen anything for myself. I’ve only heard about what he did.” Cassia set down the leaf, twirling a length of her mane around her claw.

Arianne looked away for a moment, then looked back at Cassia. “You’ve only seen his good side. You’re unsure of his true identity.” She massaged her temple. “I was hoping to avoid this, but it appears I will have to show you what he’s done to be the Usurper.”

After finishing their lunch, Cassia sat on a chair, now situated in between the table and the bookshelf. Arianne stood behind her, closing her eyes and hovering her hands over Cassia’s head.

“I can give you a brief vision of what he did when he returned eighteen years ago. I’m warning you now: given your experience with him, it may come as a shock. Are you sure you want to continue?”

Cassia nodded. “I’m sure.” She felt Arianne’s hands set on her head, and blackness overcame her sight.

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Bodies of Pokémon littered the streets of Lucario Guild, the buildings streaked with blood and what inhabitants remained shivering in their homes. Darkness overcame the Guild, the marvelous tower a beacon of a gruesome victory.

Between the hovels of the Pokémon, a figure slunk in the shadows. Its mane crept into a home, and in a flash of red light, slayed the Pokémon inside. It crept back out with a cackle, its claws scraping against the stone.

Something cracked, and it turned, revealing the pale, blue eyes of the Usurper. “I said no one leaves,” he seethed, sprinting toward the source. He found a Tangrowth ambling toward the gate of the guild, alongside a gathering of Tangela, wailing at the sight of Arthus.

Arthus held up a claw, crimson flame enveloping it. “Traitors!” He threw it at the Tangrowth, and the vine Pokémon erupted in flames, shrieking and rolling in an attempt to be rid of it. The Tangela scattered, only to be struck by the Usurper with the same deadly weapon.

Moments after, he walked amongst the ashes of his victims, tsking. “What a shame. I had to waste my Life on fools like you.” He looked up at the raging clouds, the rain halted hours ago.

“Now to kill those traitorous Lucario...just like Matheus.” He stabbed the ground, tendrils enveloping him and dragging him underneath.

The scenes blurred together, and Arthus now stood outside a cave, breathing heavily and looking up to the sky. His claws were still covered with blood, his Life still pulsing into the air.

He slowed his breathing, then searched the area around him. “I can’t let her see me like this.” He dove to a nearby stream and splashed his claws into it, rubbing them free of the crimson marks of murder.

He held them up, satisfied with his work, then proceeded to wipe away the rest of the remains on his fur. Rubbing a particularly large stain, he muttered, “I will make sure she loves me, no matter what it takes. Arceus took Erik from me; I won’t let him do the same with her.” He looked up, washing his claws in the stream once more. “She won’t need to see any of this. She can live a perfect life, free from all the pains of the world—even if I’m part of it.” He looked down for a moment, then ran to the entrance of the cave, winded from the sudden burst of speed.

"I'm here! I'm here!"

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Cassia gasped, standing up from her chair. She turned to Arianne, who closed her eyes and grimaced.

"I...I know now," Cassia croaked. She imagined all the other atrocities Arthus had committed, from the death of all the Lucario, to him standing up to Arceus and absorbing him into the Seal. The fond memories of her past were crowded out by these vicious thoughts. Tears fell from her face.

Arianne hobbled over and embraced her, patting her mane. "I shouldn't have shown you that. It was too much."

"No," Cassia sniffed, "I needed to see it. I know that now."

After an afternoon of silence and reflection, Cassia sat on the bed in her room, her bag at her side. She stared at a blank page in her sketchpad, the lessons from Arthus returning to her. The sparse furnishings in the room reminded her of the many belongings she had in the Guild, never to be seen again. The fresh air throughout smelled nothing like the iron-filled dust of the canyon, and the morning light shined over the plains instead of a vast wall. She was in foreign territory, away from what she had known all her life, and only now did she feel pangs of homesickness.

She took a black-smudged sack from the bag, a length of charcoal poking out of it. She reached to take it, but pulled away, setting down the bag. "Arthus drew all the time. I don't want anything to do with him." She lay the sketchpad over it, closing the cover. "Not after all he's done."

A knock came at the door, and Arianne stepped in, taking a brief look at her surroundings. "I meant to put more in here, but—" She stopped herself, noticing the drawing supplies. "I didn't know you were an artist."

Cassia shook her head. "Not anymore. Arthus taught me everything about it, and he's a horrible Pokémon. Why should I do what he did?"

Arianne sat on a chair next to the bed, leaning over her cane. "Is that what you think? That because an evil Pokémon drew pictures, that you shouldn't?" She looked down at



her cane. “My husband, Samuel, was raised by a neglectful father. He often beat him as a Ralts, and forced him to work, claiming that he needed to be disciplined. At night, his father often went to town and fought the local Guild Pokémon while in a stupor. He rarely lost.” She stared back at Cassia. “What do you think my Samuel did?”

“Ran away? Promised to never fight like his dad?”

“No. He became even better!” She stamped the cane. “When he finally evolved to a Gallade, he snuck out at night to train with the guards, then returned before his father ever noticed. He finally grew strong enough to restrain him and get him into prison. He saved many Pokémon who regularly suffered at his hand!” She gave Arianne a stern look. “Do you think his father would have been stopped unless Samuel decided to train himself?”

Cassia shook her head reluctantly. “No, but what does that have to do with me?”

“It has everything to do with you! Tell me, in all your lessons, what did you learn?”

Cassia struggled to remember, the memories of Arthus difficult to remain with. “He always said for me to put my full feeling in my drawing, so that it can make others who look at it feel the same.”

Arianne nodded, then said, “And tell me, why do you think Samuel fought his father?”

Cassia made no reply, only cocking her head curiously.

Finally, Arianne finished: “Love. He saw the Pokémon in the village and how his father affected them. He trained because he wanted to protect those Pokémon, because he loved them.” She tapped the pad with her cane. “Draw for your love of the world, for the Pokémon, and for Arceus.”

Cassia smiled, closing the pad. “I like that. I just...I just don’t want to be the same as Arthus.”

“You use Life, don’t you? As well as Arthus? Does that make you the same as him?”

“No, of course not!” Cassia exclaimed. “He uses Life to kill and control! I just want to help Pokémon with it!”

Arianne pointed at her with a grin. “There’s your answer. Just because someone bad shares a trait with you, it doesn’t mean you’ll end up like them.” Arianne lifted the charcoal sack with her telekinesis and held it in front of Cassia. “Now how about you draw something for me; I couldn’t make a tree for the life of me.”

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The wind rushed through Arianne’s pale green hair as she stood, looking to the right. Cassia sat on a chair, scribbling carefully on her pad. Grom remained near the house, taking logs and prying them apart, splitting them perfectly.

Arianne sighed, looking at a large depression in the plains. “Samuel and I often had picnics down there, on days like this. I haven’t done anything like that since he passed.”

Cassia rubbed away a line, taking a glance at Arianne. “What was he like?”

“He was like no one else. He was...smart. Strong, brave. Everything you’d want in a husband.” She held up her cane, rubbing the aged surface. “He gave me gifts. He saved Pokémon in danger. He used to work for the Guild before he died; he was the captain of the outpost down in Hereb, a village not far from here.”

“Really?” Cassia asked, holding up the drawing and comparing it to her subject.

Arianne sighed deeply. “Yes...before Arthus returned. After he murdered the Lucario, he sent Gardner to handle the Outposts, to ensure they were loyal to him. One day, Arthus came to Hereb disguised as a captain; that’s how he’s managed to avoid having others find out about his return. He came to Samuel and demanded him to swear loyalty to him.” She cringed, closing her eyes. “That night, the villagers returned with his body.”

Cassia covered her mouth. “I’m so sorry!”

Arianne waved her hand, shaking her head. “No need. They buried him on the hill behind the house. I go visit him, of course, but...” She took a deep breath, leaning on her cane. “I just wish I could see him again. Eighteen years is a long time to be without the one you love.”

Cassia stopped drawing, thinking of Arthus. *‘Corrina died over two thousand years ago, and Arthus is still pained by her death. He...he must want to see her again.’*

The Zoroark thought for a moment, then said, “I...I could maybe look at your memories, then make—”

“No. I...I couldn’t bear it.” Arianne cleared her throat, then said, “Are you done?”

Cassia nodded her head, then Arianne steadily walked to the house, leaving Cassia on the chair.

She entered the doorway, and Grom halted his chopping and stepped toward his master. “Gra-hawm?”

Cassia closed her sketchpad, looking up at the sky. “An illusion’s purpose is to trick the mind...” she muttered. She looked back to the pad.

“But drawing is a way to show what you think of someone...”

~~~~~

Cassia peered over Arianne’s shoulder, watching the Gardevoir cut carrots. The sun sank over the horizon, the lanterns now lit to provide their light.

After several moments of gazing, Arianne finally turned and said, “Despite my age, I am fully capable of making dinner. Why don’t you read the Tome, or...something of the sort, while I finish up?”

Cassia backed away and said, “Sorry.” She began looking at the many pictures that lined the walls, taking in the scenes that lay within.

Most of the pictures showed a young Gardevoir with a handsome Gallade, standing in front of some exotic location: a coastline, mountain, ravine, even a jungle. Some showed them sitting together, while others with them dancing.

Cassia came to what seemed to be the central picture, framed above the bookshelf. It showed Samuel Gallade looking up at the moon at a starry night sky, with Arianne sitting at his feet. Surrounding the moon, the Arc of Arceus appeared in silvery traces.

She continued to study it, amazed by the artistry. *‘That must have taken hours to make...I don’t think I could ever do something like it.’* She studied their faces in particular. *‘They’re so...detailed. I can see their wonder and happiness, like it’s really there.’*

“Dinner’s ready!”

Cassia blinked, shaking her head. She went to the dinner table, thinking of how she could help Arianne.

Later that evening, after dinner, they took to reading the Tome, finishing with Arianne reading a verse:

***And so, we learn that through my gifts to my creations, my works are brought forth. Let them be used for the benefit of all.***

Cassia carefully underlined the verse in her tome, while Arianne closed her own. The Gardevoir nodded appreciatively and said, “That should do for tonight.” She stood up, placing the tome back in the bookshelf. “I expect that you’ll take care of the lanterns?”

“Uh-huh,” Cassia said, flicking her wrist. The lanterns extinguished, their Life-borne light drowned by their master.

Arianne yawned, then shuffled to her bed. “I’ll see you in the morning.” She entered her bedroom, then closed the door.

Cassia smiled, then dashed to her own room, gently closing the door and hopping to her bed. She lit the candle on the nightstand, then pulled out her sketchpad, taking a length of charcoal from the bag and scraping across a fresh page.

At the window, Grom’s eyes shined through. He pushed it up with a finger, then craned his head inside. “Graw?”

“Not now, Grom, I’m busy,” Cassia replied, her eyes darting across the page.

The Golurk hmphed, then took a look at the page. “Hawm?”

“I’m making something for Arianne. Just watch and listen, okay?” Cassia grumbled, erasing a portion of the drawing with a bit of clay.

Grom hmphed again, closing the window and tromping off.

Hours later, Cassia crept out of her room, her sketchpad in tow. The moon half-full, it barely illuminated the floorboards as she opened the door to Arianne’s room. She peeked her head inside, finding that her bed was made, with her nowhere in sight.

She shut the door, bewildered. *‘That’s strange. She wouldn’t go to sleep elsewhere, and there’s no lights on.’* She looked out the nearby window. *‘Did she go outside?’* She stared out of it, but found nothing but bare, grassy fields.

She went to the kitchen window and studied the hill behind it. A gentle blue light shone at the top, the source blocked from view.

Her curiosity piqued, Cassia exited the house, disregarding Arianne's third rule. She walked carefully through the grass, the blustery gales of before now no more than a gentle breeze. It held a peculiar air to it, however, causing her to shudder occasionally.

She began climbing up the hill, passing Grom, who peacefully slept standing up. As she climbed the hill, the chilling wind grew colder, while the ethereal blue light grew brighter.

Cassia cocked her head, hearing a voice emanating from the top, and fighting the growing cold, heard the words clearly: "You worry too much; no one has come to hurt me for years."

Another voice whispered in low tones, and Cassia shivered, feeling that somehow, she was being referred to.

"No, that can't be right. No one knows about this spot except you and me," the other said, the grass whishing as they stepped closer to Cassia.

The low whisper came again, and Cassia froze, reaching for her chest. She choked for breath, stunned by the sheer cold surrounding her. She felt the heat seem to drain from her body and flow to some other place, leaving her to freeze in the wind's grip.

The whishing stopped, and Cassia heard a gasp. She looked up and saw Arianne holding her hand to her chest. She turned back and cried, "Samuel, stop! She's a friend!"

Cassia gasped, the chill suddenly disappearing. She saw a blue ball of flame encompassed by a black frame, then passed out.

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Cassia awoke in her bed, under her cover. She shifted her gaze to the left, finding her sketchpad on the side table, and Arianne sitting on a chair, her head lowered.

She looked up, and her eyes widened. "Oh, thank Arceus you're alive!" She embraced Cassia momentarily, then pulled back, shaking her finger at her. "I thought I told you not to leave your room at night!"

Cassia sighed, nodding her head. "I know, I know. I just...I just wanted to see you."

Arianne stared for a moment, then groaned, massaging her temple. “It was partially my fault that this happened. I should have introduced Samuel to you sooner.”

“Samuel? Your husband?” Cassia asked, confused.

Arianne nodded. She turned to the door and called, “You can come in now!”

The door swung open, and a Lampent hovered inside, low whispers emanating from its flame. Its frame dull and metallic, it swung as it drifted toward them, the cyan flame burning low and the golden eyes mere slits. The glass encasing the fire radiated the light, filling the darkened room.

Cassia shuffled to the headboard, cringing. “W-Why is *that* in here?”

The window shot open, and Grom shoved his head inside. “Graowm!” he bellowed, his light growing brighter upon seeing the Lampent.

Arianne stepped in front of it, holding her arms out. “He won’t hurt you, I promise!”

The Lampent whispered, drawing close to Arianne’s head. She nodded and said, “He didn’t know who you were, and started draining your Life when you came near. You lasted longer than usual because of your ability, so I was able to warn him.”

“Him?” Cassia asked.

Arianne held the Lampent’s arm, sighing. “Yes, him. Cassia, meet Samuel.” The Lampent nodded his head, waving his other arm.

Cassia stepped out of her bed, giving Samuel a suspicious look. “How did this happen? How do you know?”

Arianne looked back to Samuel. He whistled in a warbling tone, then wafted back, waving his arms. She sighed, then said, “I was hoping to keep him a secret, but I may as well tell you now.”

She sat on the chair and continued: “After Samuel died, I was miserable. I couldn’t be comforted by anyone, and I blamed Arceus for my loss, wondering why he’d take my Samuel from me. Well, soon after that, at night, I noticed a strange light outside my window. I went out to check, and I discovered a little Lampent—at Samuel’s grave.

“Naturally, I assumed he was just there to take the rest of Samuel’s Life. But when I went to leave, the Lampent followed me. I couldn’t shake him off, even when I entered

the house. I was ready to fight him if need be, as I didn't want him waiting for me to die. But then he stopped in front of the portrait above the bookcase.

"He seemed...distressed. I was confused by this reaction, and it got me thinking: what if he was Samuel as a ghost? It wasn't unheard of for Pokémon who died to become one, even if it generally happens at Life deposits. Maybe this Lampent was?"

She caressed the Lampent, stroking his top. "I began to talk with him, and found that he remembered his previous life, including me. He wanted to stay with me and protect me, as he did when he was alive. Since then, he drove off any travelers that come by here, and when needed, took their Life. I didn't want you going out at night because he might think you're a threat. I should have introduced you sooner so this could've been avoided. Forgive me."

They remained silent for a moment, Samuel's flame remaining dim, and Grom's eyes continually staring. Cassia held her claws together, closing her eyes, while Arianne bowed her head.

Cassia turned to Arianne, then look the sketchpad from the table, turning it to a page. "I can see why you didn't want to tell me; I really should've listened to you about going out at night." Arianne remained still.

Cassia folded back the cover, holding the pad out to Arianne. "I wanted to show you something I made tonight. I didn't want to wait till morning." Arianne accepted it, put a hand over her heart.

The drawing showed a Gallade standing with a Gardevoir, holding their hands and looking toward Arianne with a smile. Every detail, down to the folds of the Gardevoir's dress, to the nicks in the Gallade's blades, were captured perfectly.

Arianne turned to Samuel, then back to Cassia. "I...I can't thank you enough for this. I have many pictures of him but," she stroked the picture, "I have nothing like this."

Samuel looked over Arianne's shoulder, making impressed, and sorrowful whispers. Arianne held his arm, lowering her head. "I know...you miss being alive. We'll be truly together again when I pass."

Cassia turned to Grom, who made a romantic sigh. She smiled, leaving Samuel and Arianne to share their moment together.

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A week later as Cassia drew in her room, a knock came at her door. She closed her sketchpad and called out, “Come in!”

Arianne entered, holding a small leather bag. She sat down next to Cassia and said, “I have something for you.” Cassia watched as she undone the drawstring on the bag, then slipped out a pure white, wooden mask. Its surface was completely smooth, and the eyes had a black gauze, allowing no light to seep through.

Arianne held it out to Cassia. “Try it on.”

She did so, in awe of the handiwork. It fit perfectly over her face, and only slightly hindered her vision. She turned to Arianne and asked, “Why are you giving this to me?”

Arianne frowned, setting aside the bag. “Before you were born, I had that mask made for your father.”

Cassia pulled off the mask and exclaimed, “You knew my dad?”

“Yes. Ryon Zoroark, and his wife, Rhianna. They lived in a little cave around the other side of Hereb. They enjoyed doing service to everyone there, especially to old Zaman Delphox. He was an excellent fortuneteller.” She waved her hand. “But I digress. I had the mask made for Ryon as a late wedding gift. Unfortunately, after Zaman told him his future, he refused to let anyone in his home—even for me to deliver it.” She clasped her hands and closed her eyes. “That went on for several months, until one day, Zaman came to me and told me to go to Ryon, despite the severe storm. I went with Samuel as a light, and saw smoke coming out of their cave.” Cassia held the mask tighter, looking down at it.

“I discovered that everything inside had caught fire...and that Ryon and Rhianna had been in the blaze.” A tear rolled down Cassia’s cheek.

Arianne made a shuddering sigh. “After I returned, I learned that Zaman had caught pneumonia from being out in the rain. I came to him to help him recover, but he said it was his time to leave. He warned me that Arthus had returned, and that he had killed his



descendants as punishment for their friendship with the Lucario. He even told me that Arthus had taken Ryon's child to raise it as his own." She swallowed and said, "I was distraught to hear that, but Zaman comforted me and said that she would grow strong in her belief in Arceus—just like her parents." Cassia smiled, still crying. Arianne smiled back and said, "You're more like your parents than you'll ever know."

Cassia embraced Arianne, whispering, "Thank you....thank you..." Arianne hugged her back and closed her eyes.

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After several weeks of learning about the Arceist Tome and Arianne's life, Cassia now had her tome full of annotations, most suggested by Arianne, but all valuable for her next test.

She and Arianne packed a bag full of food, the morning light barely shining through the windows. "Laisha Unfezant didn't come today, so we'll have to go down to Hereb to pick up some supplies. We can also teach a few Pokémon down there as well."

Cassia gave a nervous smile. "You sure that's the best idea?"

Arianne nodded, placing a sack of coins in the bag. "Of course, it is. We have tomes, so it is our responsibility to teach them." She hefted the bag over her shoulder, then shuffled to the door. "Get your things; it'll be a long walk, and I don't plan on riding Grom there."

After an hour of walking across the plains, they came to a collection of low wooden buildings, surrounded by a wall made of timbers. Pokémon walked through the streets, crossing to stalls and huts to sell or buy goods. The air remained clear despite several chimneys poking in the air, smelling as fresh as it did out in the open plain.

Arianne stopped Cassia and pulled her to the wall. She looked back to Grom, he poked up his head behind a nearby hill, avoiding the gaze of the villagers.

Arianne took a glance to the entrance and said, "We can't have you going in looking like a Zoroark; you'll need to disguise yourself. Any ideas?"

Cassia thought for a moment, then nodded. She stepped away and waved her hand, and a Gardevoir with bright blue eyes appeared in her place.

Arianne stared for a moment, then laughed. “You could pass off as my granddaughter!”

Cassia chuckled, holding her hands behind her back. “Well...you’re someone I’d like to have as a grandmother.”

Arianne stopped, then held a hand to her cheek. “That’s high praise for an old hermit like me.” She headed through the gate, motioning for Cassia to follow. “Thank you for that.”

Cassia followed her into the crowd, beaming. Her smile soon faded when she crossed by several Pokémon desperate to avoid their touch as to keep her disguise. She couldn’t help but feel the same fear she did back in the Guild, of what the Pokémon would do to her, of how they share this reasonable fear of her species.

Arianne, however, acted nothing like this. She gracefully passed between groups of Pokémon, greeting them and offering to buy goods from them. Some complied, while others simply thanked and moved on. Not once did she falter in her movement or voice, completely confident in being in town.

Later, they stopped and ate at an outdoor diner, eating a small berry stir fry. Arianne calmly ate hers, while Cassia sat hunched over her food, still nervous about those around her.

Arianne gave her a bewildered look, then took a glance behind her. She returned her gaze and said, “You’re shivering more than a soggy Meowth. What are you so worried about?”

Cassia looked down at her hand, seeing it shake. She grabbed it and said, “I just...didn’t have the best experience back in the Guild. I never went out of the house because Arthus said so, and the one time I did, I found out he was an evil Pokémon.” She cringed, remembering her time with Trias Alakazam and Searle Sawk. “I let my appearance show, and they were frightened of me. I never did anything to them, but because of Arthus, they thought I was going to kill them.” She held her head up with her hand, sighing. “I wanted to stay away from Pokémon after that. Why would they listen to me if they’re so scared of me?”

Arianne grabbed her hand and said, “You’re Cassia, not Arthus. You’re the sweetest young lady I’ve ever met, and anyone who doesn’t see that is a fool.” She smiled. “As for you being a Zoroark, that shouldn’t matter. You can appear as you like, and no one will ever know the difference.”

Cassia stood still for a moment, then smiled, standing straight. “Thank you.”

They continued with their day, and soon, evening came down, and the village Pokémon settled into their homes, the restlessness of the alleyways before fading to a dull whisper.

In a disheveled home, Cassia and Arianne sat in front of a family of Gurdurr, their Timburr children resting peacefully at their feet. Arianne smiled proudly as Cassia read from the Tome clearly and passionately:

Let your strength and mind be used for the benefit of all, all while remembering the lessons I have given through my prophets. Remember your fellow creations, and cherish them, so that they may help you just as you help them.

Cassia closed the Tome, her eyes shining back the bright lantern light. “If you follow Arceus’ word, you will receive many blessings from him, and will be promised a place with him at the Tree of Life.” The Gurdurr couple nodded their heads and smiled, while the children began to snooze.

Arianne drew close to Cassia’s ear and said, “I must leave now, but you stay and answer their questions; you’re doing great!” She stood up and said, “I’ll leave my student to teach you now; I have important business to take care of.” She opened the door and stepped out, her staff clinking against the wood with each step.

Cassia continued the discussion for over an hour, until at last the Gurdurr had heard what they needed to and allowed her to leave. She went out amongst the other Pokémon with a newfound air of confidence, Arianne’s words encouraging her to be herself even with a different appearance.

She went to Grom, adjusting her bag over her shoulder. “Let’s get back to the house; Arianne will be waiting for us.”

She clambered onto his back, and Grom said, “Gro-gro, haowm.”

“It’s good that you offered to take her back, but you know she likes doing things herself. At least you’ll make it easier to get back,” Cassia replied.

Grom trusted toward the house, the wind rushing past Cassia’s ears. She let her Gardevoir guise fade. *‘I love being with her; she’s made a brand-new home for me.’* She looked up at the sky, her smile waning. *‘But...I’ll have to leave...soon. As Arianne said, Pokemon that have the Tome have to teach; I’ll need to go do that.’* She shook herself free of the thought and smiled. *‘But until then, I can have wonderful times with her. She can teach me, and I can give her company.’*

She studied the grass rushing underneath them, then gazed up at the stars. *‘She’s the mother I never had. I want to stay with her for as long as I can.’*

Minutes later, Grom landed away from the house, and Cassia slid down his back. She turned to him and said, “You go find a place to recharge; I’ll see you in the morning.” He went off to do so, while Cassia went up to the house.

She reached the foot of the porch and cocked her head. The door hung open, the wind whistling through the gap. Shattered bits of glass lay between it and the frame.

She gently pushed it open, and hoarsely gasped. Glass was scattered everywhere, Arianne’s many portraits thrown against the ground. Her cupboards hung from their hinges, their goods gone, and the bookshelf sat smashed and empty, the books ripped apart, including the precious Arceist Tome. The mighty portrait that hung above it lay in shreds. The furniture and lanterns smashed to pieces; nothing remained of her home.

Fearing for the worst, Cassia called out, “Arianne? Are you here?” She turned to the door to Arianne’s room, which lay in splinters beneath the frame.

She entered and put a hand to her mouth. All of the furniture lay demolished, from the dresser with its upturned drawers, to the bed, the bedding slashed and frame crushed. Underneath the remains of wardrobe, a pale white hand hung over two halves of a cane.

“Arianne!” Cassia cried. She ran to the wardrobe and pried her claws underneath it. She struggled to lift it, barely heaving it an inch over the ground. Red light enveloped her, and with a roar, she threw it aside, uncovering the elderly Gardevoir with a crash.

She fell over her, turned her onto her back. She lay still, her eyes closed and skin pale. No warmth radiated from her, no evidence of life. Dead.

Cassia cringed, bowing her head over Arianne's body. "No...not this." She cried over her, heaving with sorrow over the remains of her mentor. Memories of her discussion with her about Arceus, Samuel, and Matheus came to her, and the fact that she would never have them again. She thought of them preparing dinner together, drawing together, and everything that Cassia had ever imagined a mother to do, gone.

She looked up, her breaths heavy. Paw prints threaded across the ground, erratically fleeing through the open window. Beyond, a trail of coins and prints lead across the plains to a solitary forest.

Cassia shook. She set Arianne down, and stood up, tears continuing to stream. Red flame erupted from her claws, and she bared her teeth. With a yowl, she leapt through the window and ran across the plain, following the trail to who she knew were the murderers of her mother.

She bolted across the plains, all the peace and tranquility of Hereb gone from her mind. *'They killed her! They **killed** her! They're never going to hurt anyone else, not as long as I live!'*

She halted upon entering the woods, their silent dominance holding the excited chatter of several Pokémon. Growling, she turned invisible and crept toward their location, finding a duo of Weavile huddling over a pile of looted belongings.

A Weavile with a missing tooth sniffed, rubbing his nose. "You think that doin' this was a good idea? You know a lot of Pokémon liked that old Gardevoir.

The other Weavile held up a golden picture frame, grimacing. "We had to do it, Tyron. We haven't had a proper bite to eat for weeks!" She lowered the frame, staring at the ground. "Wasn't expecting her to come home early. Now—"

"You killed her!" Cassia screamed, throwing herself onto the Weavile. The other leapt away, astonished by the assault, while the other dug his claws into Cassia's arms, scrambling to pulled her away from his neck.

The free Weavile leapt onto Cassia's back, rearing back to strike. Cassia released the other Weavile and grabbed hold of the one across her back, her eyes wild and glowing red.

The Weavile froze, realizing now what he was dealing with. "Y-You're Arthus—t-the Usurper!"

Cassia vigorously shook her head. "No! I'm Cassia, and you're going to pay for killing Arianne!" She reared back her claw, and the Weavile closed his eyes and cringed.

"Raul!"

Cassia snapped her head to the right, seeing two other Weavile carrying a bowl of berries. The two females gaped at her, with three Sneasel hiding behind their legs.

Cassia lowered her claws, their crimson fury fading. The Weavile's words repeated in her mind: "*You're Arthus!*" Then one of Arianne's last words followed: "*You're Cassia, not Arthus. You're the sweetest young lady I've ever met.*"

She dropped Raul, letting him and Tyron run to their wives and children. She stood still for a moment, then disappeared, running back to Arianne's home, tears streaming down her face.

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Two hours later, Cassia sat at the foot of the remains of Arianne's home, now nothing more than ash and dust. Smoke continued to rise in the night sky, invisible to all but her. Grom stood behind her, stamping down the earth of Arianne's grave.

He finished his work, then returned to Cassia, placing a hand on her back. "H-Hawm. Gro."

Cassia sniffed, wiping her eyes. "I know...but I couldn't live here anymore. Not with her gone." She turned to the patch of brown soil. "I...I shouldn't have attacked like that. I was...furious. Uncontrolled. I couldn't control myself once I saw the tracks." She looked down at her claws, closing their grip. "I think I know how Arthus felt after losing them...his parents...Corrina...Erik...even Matheus and..." She closed her eyes. "Me." She held up her claws, allowing mist to trail from them. "I don't want to be like him. I

can't kill someone, no matter what they've done." She opened her eyes again. "But I can't let Arianne go like this."

Grom's light blinked, then he pointed at Cassia's bag. She opened it, then Grom gently pulled out the Arceist Tome and set it on her lap. She looked up at him, watching him nod.

She stood up, holding the Tome to her chest. "I know what to do."

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Within the forest, Raul Weavile coughed, his wife handing him an Oran berry. "That Zoroark came out of nowhere. About killed us too." He turned to his Weavile companion. "Why do you think, Tyron?"

He coughed, rubbing his throat. "Can't say for sure. Maybe it had somethin' to do with that last job we did, with that Gardevoir? Wasn't she named Arianne?"

His wife sat with the Sneasel, embracing and comforting them to recover from their fear. "That Zoroark might've been friends with her." She reached over and punched Raul's shoulder. "I knew going there was a bad idea!"

Raul rubbed his shoulder, shrinking away. "If it was, I hope we never see her again."

Tyron tapped his shoulder, fearful. "L-Look over there." Raul turned and froze.

A Gardevoir stood at the edge of the clearing, her eyes closed and a large book in her hands. She opened her eyes, revealing blue irises, still shining with tears. "I want to help," she said in a wavering voice.

Tyron hissed and exclaimed, "Who are you? How'd you find us?"

The Gardevoir stood her ground. "My name is Cassia. I'm a priestess of Arceus and a teacher. I want to tell you about him."

Raul eyed her and gasped. "Those eyes! She's that Zoroark!" He backed away, pointing a shaking claw at her. "S-Stay away! We're sorry about what happened to that Gardevoir!"

Cassia sighed, and the Gardevoir faded, a Zoroark standing in her place. The Weavile and Sneasel backed away, fearful of her retribution. She simply held up the Tome and said, "I want to talk to you. I shouldn't have hurt you."

Tyron gave her a bewildered look. “Wait, what? A-Aren’t you mad at us?”

Cassia took a slow step forward, causing them to jitter. “I—I was out of control. I didn’t know what I was doing.” She lowered the Tome, her voice cracking. “I nearly turned into him—into Arthus, killing Pokémon when they do something I hate. I promised myself never to do anything like that, but I was going to do it to you.”

She fell to her knees, the Tome falling to her side. “She meant the world to me, and you killed her. I couldn’t forgive you for that.” She hunched over and said, “But I remember now that she wanted to be with Samuel again. She’ll...she’ll be happy now. Thank you.”

Tyron and Raul looked at each other, then back at their wives. They sorrowfully gestured to the pile of loot, then to Cassia.

Raul sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. Cautiously, he approached Cassia, then said, “Look...I’m...I’m sorry for what happened. Me and my brother shouldn’t have taken your stuff. We just needed money to feed our kids. It’s hard for Dark Pokémon like us to get jobs, so we have to take what we can get.” He stepped away, gesturing to the pile. “We were just gonna take it and leave, but then she came back earlier than we thought. She attacked us, so we hit her back. We just wanted to stop her from following us, not...kill her.”

After a moment, Cassia stood up and stared at the pile. “You did it to help your families? Not yourselves?”

Raul nodded. “We don’t like it, but we had to.”

The Zoroark remained silent, then shook her head. “Give the money to everyone else who needs help. It won’t do me any good, and you don’t deserve it.”

Tyron ran around the pile and joined Raul. “But what’ll we do for money, or food? Nobody trusts us!”

Cassia thought for a moment, then took out her sketchpad and wrote on it. She carefully tore the page from its binding, then held it out to the Weavile. “Hereb trusts me. I’ll give you this, so you can show everyone that I trust you if you promise to not steal or kill again. Promise?”

Tyron and Raul looked at each other for a moment, astonished. They looked back at Cassia, then Tyron solemnly accepted the note. “Thank you. We promise to not do it anymore.” Raul nodded in agreement, and their wives smiled and held their children tighter.

Cassia retracted her hand and smiled. “You’re welcome.” She slipped her sketchpad back into her sack, then disappeared and ran out of the clearing, comforted by what she felt to be Arceus’ grace.

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Cassia and Grom stood at the foot of Arianne’s hill, getting ready to leave. She looked up at Grom and said, “We can’t stay here anymore. It’s time for us to go.”

“Gro-gram?” he replied, shrugging.

Cassia pulled a folded piece of paper from her bag and opened it, revealing a detailed map of Equivos. She traced a finger from their current location to another town. “We’ll do what Arianne taught me to do: bring Pokémon closer to Arceus.” She showed the town to Grom. “Can you go there?”

He studied it for a moment, then nodded. She put away the map and climbed onto Grom’s back. With a boom, he rocketed across the sky, away from Arianne’s grave and Hereb.

Hours later, Grom stopped at the edge of a ramshackle town in a barren plain, littered with stray rock and trees of all sorts. Cassia climbed the edge the wall surrounding it, finding that dozens of Pokémon from the Guild patrolled it, ordering the citizens around and torturing them in subtle ways.

Cassia reached into her bag and took out the mask given to her by Arianna. *‘Let’s see how well this works...’*

Later that night, she stood at the edge of the wall, wearing the mask. She cleared her throat and waved her hand.

“Testing...testing,” she said in a deep warbling voice. She nodded. It would work to ensure that Pokémon wouldn’t recognize her by voice, and thanks to the mask, not recognize her by her eyes as well. She stormed into the town and struck down the guards,

draining their Life enough to make them faint. She went on to confront the rest of the Guild Pokémon, until all were incapacitated. Once that task was finished, she fled to Grom, where she would hide until morning.

When she woke, she waved her hand and made herself appear as a Gardevoir. She pulled a mirror from her bag and looked into it, memories of her time with Arianne returning to her.

“Graw-hawm?”

She turned, watching Grom carry a rock away from its rest in the ground and into the water, rolling in with a splash. She laughed, then said, “I want to remember her for all she’s done for me. So why not look like her?”

She went into the town and taught them about Arceus, then when her job was finished, she wrote its name into an empty journal, then went on to the next. She continued this process hundreds of times across Equivos, keeping in mind the lessons she learned from Arthus, Matheus, and Arianne.

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Cassia lay down on a plain, studying the sky. Grom did the same, crossing his hands behind his head. Below them, the town of Saunte stretched, waiting for her to free them of Guild control and have the message of Arceus spread to them.

“We’ve done a lot together...haven’t we?” Cassia mused.

“Graw-graw.”

“We’ve taught a lot of Pokémon.”

“Hawm.”

“And had a lot of Pokémon say we’re liars.”

“Haw-hawm.”

She sat up. “At least we tried, right?”

Grom sat up as well. “Gro-haw!” he said with a salute.

Cassia chuckled, pulling out her drawing of Arianne from her bag. “I wish she was still here.”

Grom patted her back, shaking his head. “Gro-gram.”

Cassia nodded her head, putting the drawing back. “I know...she’s happier now.” She looked up and cocked her head. The clouds seemed to circle around a forest in the distance, what she knew to be the Kaena Woods.

The clouds funneled together, and lightning suddenly shot out from it with a boom. She fell onto her back, breathing quickly. She saw a black dot rocket from the center of the funnel into the woods with a crash, then the funnel swirled into nothingness, as if it had never appeared.

Cassia stood up again, turning to Grom. He gave her a blank look, pointing to the woods.

Cassia turned to them, furrowing her brow. “Let’s see what it is.” She and Grom walked toward the woods, passing by Saunte, unknowingly beginning another journey.

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Over the remains of Arianne’s home, a Lampent hung over it, swaying gently. Soon after another Lampent joined him. They linked arms, and faded in a puff of blue flame, returning to their almighty creator.

## Chapter 13

### *Act 3 - The Legend*

*Mud pits and hollows steamed, belching out noxious gases. Sickened willow trees sprouted up amid the foul concoction, struggling to remain upright in the mess. Around the perimeter, Litwick and Lampent lurked, providing lights for the living Pokémon outside—only to lead them into the center, feeding their Life to the massive deposits scattered within. No life dared remain with the Ghosts.*

*A solitary Duskull wove between the willows, his eye trembling. Gastly soaked up the gases, growing their already-bloated forms, while Gengar hovered behind them, ensuring that opposing guardianships stayed away. Misdreavus cackled through the night, practicing their charms and spells for when they go to harvest Life themselves, their Mismagius training them for the coming day. All the while, Phantump whined, watching the Ghost guardianships with careful eyes.*

*The Duskull stared at the sodden ground that whizzed past him. He stopped and jittered. One of the gas pockets belched out crimson particles—a sign of sustenance.*

*He looked around briefly, then dove in for the pocket. He greedily absorbed the Life, his limp and fluttering body beginning to plump up.*

***“Mine!”***

*The Duskull shot up and shrieked: a Banette scrambled toward him, skating across the bog, his three Shuppet flapping behind it.*

*The Banette swatted away the Duskull, hissing a laugh. “Where’s your guardian, Lifewaste?” It reached up for the Shuppet, carefully lowering them to the pocket. “Eat up*

now—I want you to be big and strong before you go sapping away the living!” The Shuppet laughed as the pocket tickled his sheets, while the Duskull crestfallenly limped away.

A Phantump hovered alongside him, whining softly. The Duskull didn’t acknowledge it. It whined higher, and other Phantump surrounded the pitiful Ghost, herding him from his course. The Duskull whipped and whimpered, fearing the worst.

The Phantump stopped in a surrounded copse of the bog, with no gas pockets or other Ghosts in sight—save the Trevenant rooted in the center, as tall as the willows that made the surrounding wall.

The Duskull swiveled away, shivering. “If you’re going to drain me, just do it now. I don’t have much...”

The Trevenant’s eye shimmered, and the Phantump drifted away. The massive wooden limb encompassed the Duskull, trapping him in its splintering and creaking grip. From its fingers, red mist flowed.

The Duskull stopped shivering, spinning around. It jittered and soaked up the mist, scarcely suppressing a laugh as it did. The Trevenant’s mouth cracked into a grin.

When the Duskull was full, the grip fell away, and the Duskull hopped in the air happily. It stopped suddenly, then drew close to the Trevenant’s eye. “Why’d you do that? I’m not your charge. I...I don’t even have a guardian!”

The Trevenant chuckled lowly. “I...in my many years...gave Life to those...who need it more...than me...” He gestured to his Phantump children, who now floated into the night sky, their whining echoing into the air. “My children...now go to search...for other forests...full of Life...to guard their borders...and inspire trees...making more children.” The Trevenant’s arm’s lowered, stiffening. “It is now my time...I may have lived...generations more...had I not...so freely gave...my Life.”

The Duskull hovered around wildly. “Then why did you give so much? The only way I can survive is if I keep it to myself!”

The Trevenant smiled sadly, holding up its hand again. “Because...Life is only worth...what you give. Those...who take Life...end up dying...in grief...” His hand

lowered again, and his eye began to dim. “While those...who give Life...die...in joy...” It sighed one final time, and the eye went dark. The leaves on its crown flew away one by one in the breeze, leaving behind the barren husk of the Trevenant. Gardner Duskull remained still, gazing up at the leaves fluttering in the wind.

A purple shape suddenly snatched him out of the air with a cackle, dragging him to the ground. The ragged Haunter opened its mouth wide and said, “A little munchie does the tummy nicely!”

Gardner struggled against the Haunter, pulling against his hands. A blob of black mist gathered in front of him and fired into the Haunter’s face. It screeched and let go, attempting to wipe away the mist.

Gardner’s eye glowed, then he puffed into gas and charged into the Haunter in a flash of light. The Haunter screeched once more and fell to the swampy earth, disfigured from the Shadow Ball.

Gardner reappeared, and the Haunter panted, his breath weakening. “Don’t...don’t eat me...please...” it pleaded.

The Duskull considered the Haunter’s cry, then his eye glowed brighter. “No...I’ve been weak for too long.” He sat on top of the Haunter and buried himself in its body. “It’s time I had my fair share.” He sucked away the Haunter’s wasted body, consuming what little Life it had and killing it.

Gardner huffed, then turned back to the remains of the Ancient Trevenant. He turned away and continued through the swamps.

The scenes melted together, and now a Dusclops stood in the Master’s Tower, where a Lucario wearing a broken Seal of Creation paced around him.

Calem eyed him warily, looking up and down. “Are you sure you’re up to the task? I know you’ve made yourself a life here in the Guild after leaving the swamps, but being an Assistant Guildmaster will be demanding.”

Gardner folded his arms, furrowing his brow. “I want to do more than simply be on a bounty team; I want to organize them and make them more effective—along with cracking down on criminals.”

*Calem sighed, rubbing his neck. “Right now, you’re my only good choice. Kaiser is a bit too hot-headed to serve well, and you have plenty of experience in the Guild. I don’t see why not.” He held his paw out. “Welcome to my council, Gardner Dusclops.”*

*Gardner accepted the paw and shook it gladly.*

*The scene faded again, and now a Dusknor sat at a table within the Tower, poring over crossed-out notices and posters. He checked off a list and hummed to himself, saying, “Soon, there will be no more outlaws, and I can focus my efforts on the wretched ghosts in the swamps.”*

*The door flew open and Calem Lucario stormed up the stairs, fuming. “Gardner! You have a lot to answer for!”*

*Gardner spun around and met the irate Lucario’s gaze. “What did I do wrong?”*

*Calem thrust a bundle of papers into Gardner’s face and shouted, “You ordered for the **execution** of petty thieves?”*

*Gardner huffed, rolling his eye. “The best way to stop crime is to deter it. The thieves would grow worse anyway.”*

*Calem seethed and ripped up the paper, shaking a paw in front of him. “I’ve been lenient on your methods up to now, Gardner, but this is where I draw the line. One more stunt like this, and I’ll see to it that Kaiser takes your place!” He stomped down the stairs and slammed the door closed, leaving Gardner to glower.*

*The scene transitioned again, and Gardner now stood in front of a raised platform, where Calem Lucario and Kaiser Electivire, along with an assortment of other Pokemon, sat. Calem clacked a gavel and solemnly said, “After killing an entire team of newly-recruited Ghost Pokemon—along with numerous warnings and punishments for cruel treatment against outlaws—you are sentenced to be imprisoned within an Ethereal Urn for thirty years. All in favor?”*

*“Aye!” Kaiser and the other Pokemon said.*

*A Gothitelle came into the room bearing a rune-covered grey urn, and Gardner backed away, his eye flitting between the urn and Calem. “I won’t do it again, I swear! Don’t put me in there! Anything but that!”*

*Calem slowly shook his head. "I am sorry, but this is the only way I see fit to change your ways."*

*The Gothitelle opened the urn, and dust swirled into the azure void within. She aimed the void at Gardner, where it sucked his very essence inside. In his final moments outside the urn, he bellowed, "I'll come back and finish you all!" He disappeared inside, and the Gothitelle twisted the lid, sealing it.*

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Gardner gasped, his eye wide with fright. He woke in his chair atop the Master's Tower, in the dead of night. Clouds covered the moon, preventing the beam from meeting with the Guildmaster.

The Dusknair rubbed his face, forcing himself to calm. *'Just a dream...just a dream...yet it was real.'*

He shook his head, curling his fist. *'A shame I couldn't kill Calem myself.'* He looked up, watching the moon. *'I just hope Arthus isn't as unreliable as he appears.'*

The tower's door flew open, and Gardner heard damp footsteps scramble up. He stood up and came face to face with the matted and salty fur of Arthus Zoroark.

Arthus breathed haggardly, glaring at him as he brushed back his frenzied mane. "Don't. Say. A. Word."

Gardner at first complied, but slowly looked away and said, "Why exactly are you here?"

Arthus sat in Gardner's chair and tapped his claws together, a ruddy aura steaming around him. "I had Cassia and that Lucario, Lawrence, right where I wanted them—then Grom comes in and scoops them up—" He gouged his claws into the padding of the chair. "And *Matheus* of all Pokemon is riding with him!"

"Hands off my seat!" Gardner shouted, prying away Arthus' claws.

Arthus whipped around and grabbed Gardner's antenna, his hand drawing dangerously near his scarred eye. "Don't make me rip it right out of your skull!"

Gardner immediately pulled away and held up his hands defensively. "Understood! But please...respect my property."

Arthus simmered, then sighed, massaging his head. “Cassia hates me more than ever now that I destroyed her Arceist Tome.” He leaned against the wall and bowed his head. “And after I attempted to slay Lawrence.”

Gardner rolled his eye and crossed his arms. “Priorities, Lord Arthus. Does this half-baked family matter really take precedence over the Seal?”

Arthus held up the Seal of Creation and groaned. “I know, I know—what do you think I’ve been doing for the past twenty years?”

“Doting on Cassia and eventually having to hunt her down?”

“Shut up.” Arthus dropped the necklace and closed his eyes. “I’ve got no idea where to go find the Prison Bottle, and there’s no good location to summon Hoopa.” He turned to Gardner and pointed at him. “Just keep searching for clues—especially for a place where Arceus’ presence is strong. If you want a world where evil is nonexistent, then that has to be done.” He drew back his hand and fiddled with a length of his fur. “In the meantime, I’ll see if I can pinpoint Matheus’ location; while Cassia might be lost to me, I can make a new plan to bring her back, if only to keep her close.” He descended the stairs, holding his head and shaking it.

Gardner huffed, sitting down on his chair and fingering the gash Arthus had made. “Sentimental fool. It’s almost as if there’s two of him in the same body—one sane and one not.”

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The full moon hung high overhead, the beams reflecting off the gentle tides. In the ocean south of Serenita, tiny islands cropped up, some harboring palm trees, others a collection of bushes, and others nothing more than a bank of sand. None of these islets had more than plants, as it had been for the past twenty years.

The raft floated near a small island, where Grom stood with red mist coursing from the sand, replenishing his depleted reserves. The window of the hut in the middle of the raft glowed with bright yellow light, and the small chimney on its roof puffed a steady stream of smoke into the air.

Lawrence sat in front of the wall of the hut, his legs drawn up and his head lowered. His injured leg was now perfect, healed by Cassia's control over life—but before she could say 'finished', he had stormed out of the hut and held the Pokédex in his paws, staring at the taunting notification: 'No access point in range.' He simply stared, deep in thought.

The door of the hut creaked open, and a blue-eyed Gardevoir crept out, stepping around the corner and stopping next to Lawrence. She cleared her throat, and Lawrence's eyes snapped to hers.

"I know you aren't a Gardevoir. Don't hide it," he growled.

She sighed, and the Gardevoir faded, a Zoroark standing in her place. She squeezed her hands, shifting uncomfortably. "I really meant to tell you."

Lawrence raised his head. "Tell me what? That you've lied to me the entire time I've known you, that you're a descendant of the vilest Pokémon alive, that you're the biggest hypocrite for making *me* tell the truth while *you* wouldn't?" He waved his paw, shaking his head. "Why did I ever trust you?"

Cassia stepped forward, holding out her hand. "I had to do it to protect myself and you! If anyone found out—"

"Just leave me alone!" Lawrence shouted, slamming his fist against the wall.

The Zoroark flinched, then, closing her eyes, shuffled back into the hut, then gently closed the door.

Lawrence took a deep breath, tucking the Pokédex back into its case, then lowered his head once more, closing his eyes.

The door opened again, and footsteps padded out to the raft. Without opening his eyes, Lawrence exclaimed, "I said I wanted to be alone!"

"No, you told *her* to leave you alone."

Lawrence looked up, his eyes widening. The silver Lucario stood in front of him, no longer with his leather cloak and hat. Thick scars shone through the pristine fur, and his muscles were thick and corded. His eyes glared at Lawrence as his tail swished impatiently.

“I don’t believe we’ve had a proper meeting, Lawrence Stephenson,” he stated, crossing his arms.

Lawrence scrambled to his feet. “Y-You know my name? My real one?”

“Cassia told me. Tell me, what makes you think you can treat a young lady like that?” The silver Lucario turned his head, studying Grom. “The name’s Matheus, by the way.”

Lawrence gave him a cold stare, pointing a paw at him. “Look Matheus, I have no idea why you’re here, but—”

“Oh, for Arceus’ sake!” Matheus brushed aside the paw. “I wasn’t called by our creator to save your hide for nothing. Now that that Arthus forced Cassia to drop her act, *I’m* the one who has to step in and make things right!”

“You knew about it too?” Lawrence said, blinking in surprise.

“Can you stop asking questions and start answering them?” Matheus snapped. “Why did you treat Cassia like that? That was completely uncalled for!”

“Wouldn’t you be angry if you found out your only friend was someone completely different!” Lawrence exclaimed, breathing heavily.

Matheus flinched, then closed his eyes. “Yes. Yes, I would be.” He leaned against the wall, crossing his arms.

“Why are you so protective of her? I...I know I should have treated her better, but still...” Lawrence trailed off.

“Who do you think taught her after she ran away? Arthus couldn’t be expected to teach her about that.” He turned away, scowling. “Not after what he did.” He turned back, closing his eyes. “Look, I don’t know anything about you except for what Cassia told me—and I don’t expect that it’s a good view, considering how she is at the moment.” He opened them again, his hardness gone. “But I know Cassia. She hates lying as much as any right-minded Pokémon. Let’s look at your little ‘amnesia’ story for example. Did you like it?”

“No, but—”

“Did you feel it necessary?”

“Yes, but what does that have to do—”

“It has everything to do with her!” Matheus stood up, growling. “She can’t have anyone know her identity! Do you think that anyone would trust a Zoroark teaching about Arceus, when the Usurper himself is trying to tear him down? They would never listen!” He sighed, then rubbed his eyes. “Plus, it is rather hypocritical to have her forgive you for lying when you refuse to do the same for her.”

Lawrence paused, then sighed shaking his head. “I...understand that.” He paced away, holding his arms out. “I just don’t like how she kept me in the dark. I wouldn’t have hurt her or anything.”

Matheus raised an eyebrow. “You’re sure? Even if you knew that Arthus was her ancestor?”

“I have a hard-enough time around here as it is. Why would I hurt the only person who actually cares about me?” The Lucario sat at the edge of the raft, looking into the water. “I don’t want to be angry at her. It just...came out like that.”

Matheus looked away for a moment, then stepped toward Lawrence, sitting next to him. “Looks like you’re a better Pokémon than I thought.” He held out his paw. “Sorry for my earlier behavior.”

Lawrence studied it for a moment, then accepted it. “I was being a jerk.”

Matheus grunted in agreement. “As we all are at times. I wasn’t the most reasonable Pokémon when I was your age either.”

They remained silent for a moment, then Lawrence said, “How did you find us? How did you get Grom?”

Matheus groaned slightly, rubbing his shoulder. “Not very difficult when you have Arceus helping you out. As for Grom, he knew who I was as soon as I showed him this.” He held out a paw, then an azure flame erupted around it, coating his fur.

“Whoa!” Lawrence exclaimed, shifting back.

Matheus nodded, extinguishing the flame. “About how he reacted. He thought I was a Guild Pokémon in disguise until I did it.” He gave Lawrence a studious look. “Most Lucario are able to use Aura soon after they evolve, but given your unique circumstances, I can see why you might not have it.” He leaned forward, swirling his paw in the water.

“It is a powerful gift and would be wise to learn.” He shook his paw free of the water and said, “Well, Cassia will be expecting me to come back in, as well as you. I made some soup for dinner.” He gave Lawrence a warning look. “Treat her well, or I’ll have you out for a midnight swim.” He stood up and walked into the hut, leaving the door open.

Lawrence remained seated on the edge of the raft, considering what best to do. *‘I hate what she did, but is it right for me to treat her like this?’* He sighed, rubbing his eyes. *‘I need to make things right...but the way I snapped at her...would she forgive me?’*

The Lucario stood up, then entered the hut, closing the door. Inside, the floorboards creaked with the gentle swaying of the craft. Five chests sat on the floor, along with a collection of beds, surrounding a small stone firepit, the fire within isolated from the wood. Several lanterns hung overhead, lighting the room with coarse yellow light.

Matheus and Cassia sat on two of the four beds against the walls, each with a bowl of bright red soup from the pot hanging over the fire. The Zoroark stared into her bowl, dwelling on her thoughts, while Matheus poured a third helping into a bowl with a ladle, holding it out to Lawrence. “Hungry?”

Lawrence shrugged and accepted it, taking a seat on one of the remaining mattresses. He studied the bowl of reddish soup in his paws, chunks of Tamato berry floating within it.

They remained in their positions for a minute or so, then Matheus exclaimed, “I didn’t make that Tamato soup for nothing. Eat.”

Lawrence nodded, then slowly took a sip. He regretted it.

He put the bowl aside, fanning his mouth and panting. “Hot! Hot!”

Matheus lifted the bowl and took a sip, then sighed contentedly. “You got a weak mouth. Hardly a kick to this one.” He turned to Cassia. “You ought to eat too, you know.” She remained still, a lock of her mane hanging in front of her face.

The Legend gave Lawrence a glance. “I think that Lawrence has something he ought to say to you. Right?”

After a moment, Lawrence nodded, then went to speak. Cassia held up a hand and said, “No. I understand why you’d be angry at me. I don’t want any apology. Not yet, at

least.” She sighed, setting aside her bowl. “You should know more about me...my past. And I think it's time that I showed you.” She stood up and sat next to Lawrence, the Lucario unused to her proximity.

She pressed two claws against her forehead. “You know that Zoroark like me are able to make illusions.” She pulled away, a golden thread appearing between her head and claws. “Arthus is able to do more. He can bring memories to life, far better than any illusion could, thanks to his control of Life.” The thread separated and fell limp, the golden light wavering in the air. “I’m able to do the same thing.”

She held the thread out to Lawrence. “It’s hard for me to talk about myself. I’d rather have you see it for yourself.”

Lawrence studied the thread anxiously, never seeing such a thing before. He looked to Matheus, who simply nodded, then at Cassia, who gazed expectantly. Hesitantly, he took the thread, and the ethereal matter surged into his arm. He felt lightheaded, then fell backward, fainting.

Cassia sighed, putting her hand into her hands. “I shouldn’t have gone into that shop; I should’ve known someone was waiting for me.”

Matheus set his bowl down and scooted to her. “It wasn’t your fault, Cassia. Arthus would have found you sooner or later anyway.”

“But he burned the Tome! Everything I live for is gone!” Cassia cried, throwing her arms into the air.

Matheus pushed them down and replied, “Are you sure? Arceus wouldn’t let his word be destroyed so easily.”

Cassia’s eyes came to Lawrence, then her eyes widened. “Lawrence saved the Tome with his Pokédex. He has everything I wrote!”

Matheus gave her a suspicious look. “Are you sure? It took months to write one, and he’s hardly been here for more than a week.”

“He showed me a picture of a page. He wanted to be able to read it without me having to give it away.” Her ears drooped. “Although, with what’s happened, I’m not sure that he’ll let me.”

Matheus clapped a paw on her back. “Nonsense! After seeing your memories, he’ll be all too happy to help.” He cracked his knuckles. “If he isn’t, well, I’m here.”

Cassia furrowed her brow. “Speaking of that, how *did* you get here? Where’d you get this raft?”

Matheus blew his breath out slowly. “Well, it’s a bit complicated. You see, there’s a certain Pokémon who wanted me to keep an eye on something for him. After I checked on it for him, he brought me here with his rings.”

Cassia furrowed her brow, then her eyes widened. “Wait, *Hoopa* helped you get here?”

Matheus nodded sagely. “Yes. He’s been a valuable friend throughout my years and has often helped me get to places. He’s been rather reclusive for the past few decades, though, so I rarely see him.”

“Must be nice being able to go anywhere you want when you want.”

“Bah.” Matheus waved a dismissive paw. “Walking till your paws get sore is part of the experience. Isn’t the journey just as important as the destination?”

They remained silent for a moment, then Matheus put his paws together and asked, “So how did you end up leaving Arianne? I figured you’d stay there for around a year, but then I heard about a Zoroark driving out the Guild from towns a few months after I dropped you off.”

Cassia looked up. “It...it was very sudden.” She stared at the floor. “She died after a bunch of Weavile looted her home.”

“What?” Matheus stood up, stamping his feet. “She was *killed*? I thought she had died of old age, not that!” He growled, pounding his fists together. “When I get my paws on them—”

“I forgave them! They were only doing it for their families!”

“Is that so?” Matheus huffed, crossing his arms. “Have you ever thought about why Arthus does what he does? He doesn’t want to stop evil just because he can; he’s doing it for the family he lost!”

He sat down, and Cassia cocked her head, bewildered. “What do you mean?”

Matheus took off his hat, groaning. “It took me ages to figure out, but once I did, I knew that fool was beyond hope. After I returned, he told me that his wife had died, and how he had new plans to ensure that nothing like that would happen again. I found out that he intended to bring Corinna back to life once he took Arceus.” He shook his head. “He might seem like a mad-Pokémon, but he’s just a guy trying to correct his mistakes—to reverse his consequences, really.”

Cassia held her sides, staring at the floor. “If he’s so dangerous, then why don’t we do something about him? He has the Seal, and—“

“The Seal is broken beyond repair; Laryon made sure of that. Arthus can never take Arceus again.” Matheus huffed, looking away. “He might be insane, but he’s not the worst of our worries. There are other things we must be focused on.”

Lawrence moaned, and his eyelid flickered. Matheus pulled on his hat and said, “Better get ready. Dealing with a bunch of memories that aren’t his own will make him feel disoriented.”

Before Cassia could ask more, Lawrence snapped awake.

He shot up, breathing heavily. He felt lightheaded, the remnants of the memories dancing in his vision. He held his head, groggily turning toward Cassia, seeing a vague, blackish shape.

Matheus, in a muffled voice, said, “You didn’t show him *all* of them, did you?”

He saw Cassia shift slightly. “Only the important ones...”

Matheus stepped over, holding up a pale blue paw. “Better clear your head before you pass out again.” He pressed the paw against Lawrence’s head, and he immediately felt better his vision crisp and his hearing clear.

Matheus stepped away, the blue glow fading from his paw. He nodded his head, then said, “Good thing Aura has a calming effect compared to Life. You feel better?”

Lawrence nodded. “Yeah...how’d you do that?”

“This?” Matheus held up his paw, causing Aura to appear once more. “Comes naturally, really.” He shook his head, lowering his paw. “But now’s not the time for that. What did you see?”



Lawrence closed his eyes, struggling to remember. He saw Cassia fleeing the Guild, soothing Grom's fear, and grieving over Arianne. Briefly, he saw the troubles Cassia experienced through her teaching of Arceus, all thanks to her lineage—a descendant of Arthus.

Cassia scooted closer, enclosing Lawrence's paw with her hand. "Do you...do you know why I hid from you? Why I appeared as a Gardevoir?"

He remained silent. The wood under the pot crackled, the sparks flitting up the chimney and out into the air. The waves beat against ship, gently rocking them. Grom's contented chuckle reverberated through the air, for reasons unknown.

Finally, Lawrence said, "I've had to go through a lot. I had to hide because I'm from Unova; I couldn't trust anyone because they'd think I was crazy, saying that I came in a vortex and got turned into a Lucario. I was afraid of losing what help I had—you."

He clenched his free paw. "But then, you found out. You saw what made me different, saw right through my lies. I knew you were going to leave me—yet you didn't. You understood. You wanted to help me."

He lifted Cassia's claw, looking into her eyes. "I found you out, and you thought I was going to leave you, because you're related to the Pokémon who wants to kill me, kill *everyone*. You even thought I was going to leave because you believe in Arceus and I don't. Is that right?" Cassia looked away, then sheepishly nodded her head.

Lawrence smiled. "Well...I won't." He released Cassia's claw, studying her astonished expression. "I've seen your life. You've had it so much harder than me. I never had to run away from my parents. I never had someone I love die." His smile faded, and he lowered his head. "But I have had to hide myself. Not just here, but back home, in Sinnoh. Everyone there hated that I didn't believe in Arceus, so I had to hide that, and worry about anyone finding out. That's why I left as soon as I could." He looked up. "I know how you feel. I'm not angry anymore. I'm just...glad that someone else has felt what I felt."

Cassia sighed with relief, holding a hand to her head. She suddenly hugged Lawrence, causing him to flinch and widen his eyes. He gave an astonished look to Matheus, who simply shrugged with a grin.

Lawrence cleared his throat awkwardly, then said, “Um...didn’t you have a ‘relationship’ with ‘Aleron’?”

Cassia pushed him away and scowled. “You heard that from Grom, didn’t you?”

After a moment of silence, they erupted with laughter, until Grom peeked his head in through the window. “Graow?”

Cassia waved a dismissive hand, straining to keep back her laughter. “N-No, we *weren’t* just talking about you.”

“Grm.” Grom shrugged, then pulled his head out.

They laughed once more, and after a while, they finally calmed to sniffles, then to sighs.

Matheus wiped a tear from his eye, the last trails of a laugh leaving his lips. “Whoo, nothing like a tense mood to make a good punchline.” He rubbed his snout, then said, “So, now that all is forgiven, I should probably explain why else I came here.”

From his cloak, he pulled out a ragged piece of paper, then unfolded it, spreading it across his legs. Cassia and Lawrence hovered over it, seeing it marked extensively by rough charcoal sketches, particularly in Deitae.

Matheus pointed toward the northern section of Serenita. “I’ve been keeping track of your progress from the Tree of Life.”

Lawrence blinked and waved his paws, “Whoa, wait a minute. What do you mean you were watching us at the Tree of Life?”

“I’ll explain later,” Matheus replied. He continued, “You’ve done quite well, but there’s one key section of Serenita that I know will need the Tome.” He tapped three different locations along the top. “Here.” He then pointed back towards the center. “And a little around here.”

Cassia studied them, shaking her head. “But those are in hard-to-reach areas. I haven’t had any experience there.” She wrinkled her nose. “And I’ll have to go back to Saunte. They’ll recognize me there, even with my disguise.”

Matheus pointed at himself. “That’s why *I’m* here. Two thousand years of going across Serenita, and you’re bound to know something.” He quickly circled the rest of the map. “Far as I can tell, they’re the only places you haven’t gone to. That’s important, given what will be happening soon.”

“What will be happening soon?” Lawrence asked.

Matheus tapped the side of his head with a smirk. “Read the Tome, then you’ll know.”

Lawrence groaned, then turned to Cassia. “Do *you* know?”

Cassia shrugged. “I might read it all the time, but I don’t know everything about it.”

Matheus waved a paw. “Ach, you’ll know soon enough.” He carefully folded the map again, stuffing it back into his cloak. “Regardless, we’ll first be going to the Xilo Mountains. Then we’ll go up around the peak, then to the Faylen Jungle. Then we’ll go around Mount Furnek and finish off with Saunte.”

“It should be easy with Hoopa around,” Cassia mentioned.

“You have Hoopa?” Lawrence asked, astounded.

Matheus shook his head, sighing. “Unfortunately, no. I convinced him to bring us to the Xilo Mountains, but he’s refusing to be outside for any longer. He loathes meeting any mortal Pokémon to their desire to have some...less desirable wishes.” Matheus shook his head and continued, “Either way, we’ll be hiking in the mountains for a while.”

Lawrence sat back on his bed, groaning. “Augh, I hate climbing mountains. Mount Coronet was horrible!”

“Where?” Cassia and Matheus asked.

Remembering their origin, Lawrence sighed. “It’s a large mountain over where I come from.”

Matheus nodded his head slowly. “Yeah...so we’ll leave tomorrow for the mountains, and it will hopefully take no more than a few days to get to Jareth. It’s supposed to have

Guild influence, so Lawrence,” he pointed at him, “you and I will be training together to have you be a proper Lucario.”

Later that night, Cassia slept peacefully for the first time in over a week, while Matheus snored away, an arm hanging languidly over his bed. The lanterns extinguished and the pot of Tamato soup empty, the raft lay soundly asleep.

Except for Lawrence. He stared at the window, watching Grom play in the sandbar he sat in. *‘So much happened today. Cassia’s a Zoroark, and there’s still a Lucario alive!’*.

He studied his paws, thinking of aura surrounding them. *‘Maybe he can teach me to use Aura. I never thought it would be useful—until Arthus insulted me.’* He growled and clenched his fist. *‘I’ll get back at him.’*

He looked away, remembering his real goal. He pulled off the Pokédex and tried seeking an access point once more. No luck.

He groaned, slipping it back into the case. *‘Equivos is a wonderful place, but I have a life to get back to. And Arceism...’* He sighed and shook his head. *‘Arceus said we needed to treat Pokemon like people in my world—yet they obviously aren’t. He doesn’t exist, and nothing will change that.’*

With that in his mind, he fell asleep.

## Chapter 14

*Lawrence sat at a desk in a suit and tie, listening to the instructor at the front of the room. Around him, other students sat at desks, some listening, others sleeping, and a few playing small games with each other. The room was brightly lit and covered with pictures of the various Legends, Arceus the most prominent of them all.*

*After the instructor finished his lesson, Lawrence stood up and walked through the doorway, entering the throng of other people. Other teens from his class caught up with him, gabbing about their life and who the best trainer in the league was.*

*“Hey Stephenson!”*

*Lawrence winced, then he turned, seeing the smug face of a particularly well-dressed boy, standing over him by a good few inches. His outfit was cleaner, smoother, and flashier than his.*

*He pulled a Luxury Ball from his belt and tossed it in the air. “I don’t hear you talkin’ in class anymore. What’s your deal?”*

*Lawrence turned around, attempting to join the crowd again. “Not now, Josh.”*

*Josh grabbed his shoulder, turning him around. “I’m just wondering! You haven’t been the same since you came back from that wilderness trip.” He looked up for a moment, then said, “What happened anyway?”*

*Memories of the vicious battle between the Nidoking and Gabite came to mind, and Lawrence suppressed a shiver. “I don’t want to talk about it.”*

*“Have you talked to Brother Morgan about it? He’s helped me out plenty.”*

*"It's different." Lawrence looked around him, noticing that the crowd had thinned. Most everyone was to their next meeting, leaving him and Josh behind.*

*Josh stepped back, putting the Luxury ball back on his belt. "What's different about it? He's an Arceist, like you and me. He knows how we feel."*

*Lawrence shook his head, turning away. "Not anymore." He stared at the ceiling, then said, "How does your Monferno act?"*

*"Manny? What about him?" Josh asked, taking back his ball.*

*Lawrence turned around and pointed at it. "You believe that you're supposed to treat him like a person. How do you know that he cares?"*

*Josh furrowed his brow, tightening his grip on Manny's ball. "What are you talkin' about? Of course, he cares! I feed him, play with him, even brush his fur every once in a while!"*

*"Does he remember any of that? Does he remember that you do all these nice things for him, or that you're just the guy who takes care of him?"*

*"What's your point? Why are you so talkative all of a sudden?" Josh asked, furrowing his brow.*

*Lawrence stood straight, giving him a cold stare. "I know how Pokémon really act, Josh. Manny just sees you as a source of food and comfort; he doesn't love you. He only does things for you to get what you give him. He doesn't remember all your times together, only that you're his caretaker. He's no friend; he's just a pet!"*

*"Shut it!" Josh pressed the button on his ball, expanding it. "I've had enough of you talkin' about Manny like that! Let's go out and fight!"*

*Lawrence stood still for a moment, then gestured to his waist: no Poke Balls hung from it. "Never have, never will." He calmly turned around, and walked away from Josh.*

*Josh growled, pressing the button again, causing the ball to shrink. "You're not an Arceist! You'd never say things like that if you were!"*

*Lawrence lowered his head, curling his fingers.*

*"Not anymore."*

*~~~~~*

Lawrence opened his eyes, the early morning shining across the floor. Cassia and Matheus were gone from their beds, leaving him to sleep. The lanterns swung above him, and the fire pit contained the embers of last night's fire. From outside, the cawing of Wingull echoed, the salty sea breeze rushing through the slightly-open door.

He sat up and swung his legs onto the floor, rubbing his face. *'The day...the day I said how I really felt...'* He closed his eyes and rested his head against his paw. *'I shouldn't have.'*

Something whooshed outside, followed by a duo of groans and shouts. Lawrence stood up and peered out the window, finding Matheus and Cassia standing outside next to Grom. The two furred Pokémon shook their heads and brushed their arms, sweeping off plumes of dust.

"Seriously Grom? When we're right here?" Cassia exclaimed, combing through her mane and brushing off the sacks hanging from her arms.

Matheus took off his hat and blew it free of sand, kicking Grom's leg. "Hardly a time to give yourself a dust bath."

"Gra-ha-ha..." Grom chuckled, rolling his shoulders and relishing the coarse, grainy feeling throughout.

Matheus turned toward the raft and noticed Lawrence. "You're awake! Come on outside; we're about ready to leave!"

Lawrence nodded, then proceeded out the door, hopping onto the sandbank, and joining with them.

He turned to Cassia, who continued to brush sand off herself. She noticed his gaze, then stopped, turning away and rubbing her shoulder.

After a moment, he cleared his throat, then said, "Are you...still upset over the Tome?" She nodded.

Lawrence took out the Pokédex, typing in his password. "You can read from here anytime you like. I wouldn't mind. Really." He held it out to her, the first page of the Tome visible on its screen.

Cassia cautiously accepted it, still wary of the foreign technology. Her claws grazed Lawrence's paw as she took the Pokédex from his grasp. He looked down at his paw, then said, "Still have to get used to you being, well, you."

Cassia swiped at the screen, forcing her stare of amazement away. "And I'm going to have to get used to *this*." She looked up, concerned. "Did you like me better as a Gardevoir?" Matheus and Grom turned toward Lawrence.

Lawrence stood still, then, considering his words, said, "I like you no matter what you look like. What you are shouldn't matter, right?"

Cassia sighed with relief and hugged Lawrence, exclaiming, "Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!"

Lawrence remained still, unsure of how to handle this sudden turn of events. He looked to Grom and Matheus, the latter with a grin plastered across his face, while Grom simply stood, his arms crossed.

"Hraw hraw..." Grom chuckled, putting a hand over his eyes.

Cassia lifted her head, then pushed herself away from Lawrence, tapping her fingers sheepishly. She stepped away, then, clearing her throat, said, "Isn't it time we get going?"

Matheus nodded, still grinning. "Yes indeed." He reached into his cloak, then gave her a wink. "Reminds me of another couple I once knew..."

Lawrence and Cassia took glance at each other and backed away.

"Haw-haw-haw-haw!" Grom bellowed, holding his heaving chest.

Matheus made a small chuckle himself. "Guess I *might* be making assumptions that aren't *quite* there." His smile dissipated, and he held his paw up to his lips. "Come," he whispered, a wisp of yellow light shooting into the sky.

A ring zoomed from the light's trajectory, and Grom's laughter halted. The golden rings topped in front of them, swirling mist within its center. The mist funneled out of it and swirled overhead, gathering together into a tightly-packed blob, then exploded with a pop. In place of the blob, a small purple figure hung limply in the air. Two tarnished, golden hoops hung from its horns, as well as around its chest and hands. Its lavender body was coated with grayish rust, and the eyes were dark and tired.



The figure lowered to eye-level, and his eyes opened, exposing bright-yellow eyes with green pupils, still sharp, yet exhausted. “You finally call me, Matheus.”

Matheus closed his eyes and sighed. “You’ve let yourself go. You used to look magnificent, but now...”

Hoopa waved a hand, shaking his head. “I don’t care to be seen anymore, so I find that appearances don’t matter.” He looked behind Matheus. “Where’d you get the raft?”

Matheus took a glance behind him and explained, “Well, old Charles decided he wanted to go on vacation, so he let me borrow his ferry. I was just going to leave it here for him to find on his way back.”

Hoopa gave Matheus a stern look, then turned toward the others. “And I take it that they are who you want me to bring?”

“Yes. Do you have any issues?” Matheus replied pushing the bottle back into his pocket.

Hoopa hovered to Grom, studying him with a careful eye. “Well, he’s unique. Size won’t be an issue, but are you sure you want to bring him along?”

“Graow!” Grom protested, stamping his foot.

Matheus held out a paw. “Easy there; he didn’t mean anything by that.” He wrapped an arm around the djinn and whispered something to him.

Lawrence strained to hear, but Matheus stood back straight, and the other Legend continued to scrutinize Cassia.

Cassia looked down at him then after a moment, exclaimed excitedly, “I can’t believe we’ll be having *Hoopa* take us somewhere!”

Hoopa shrugged. “Not every day I take a Zoroark either. From what I’ve heard, you’re a pretty good girl, so no concerns here.” He went on to Lawrence, then stopped his eyes widening. He turned to Matheus and hissed, “I thought all the Lucario were gone!”

“He’s not from around here, Hoopa; not even from this *world*.” He nodded to Lawrence, then said, “He’s trustworthy, if a bit ridiculous. He claims to not believe in Arceus.”

“Hey!” Lawrence shouted, offended that Matheus would so freely tell such things to a stranger.

Hoopa furrowed his brow, his hand raising to a hoop. “It’s unfortunately not my place to say what you should believe in; that’s the Tomebearer’s job.” Taking his other hoop, he looked back to Cassia. “You better convince him that Arceus is real.” He threw one hoop to the north, and it zoomed past the horizon with amazing speed. He set the other hoop down in front of him, and moments after, an image of a rough, mountainous landscape appeared.

Hoopa lifted his arm, and the hoop went upright. “Just step inside when you’re ready. Once all of you are through, don’t expect me to give you any more rides; I don’t want anyone releasing that...that *thing*.” He hugged himself, trembling. “He...he talks to me...he never stops.”

“Hoopa...” Matheus said, reaching a paw toward him.

Hoopa pushed it away, closing his eyes. “Just go.”

Steadily, they complied, Matheus stepping first into the hoop, then Grom, Cassia, and finally Lawrence.

As Lawrence crossed through, Hoopa turned to him and said, “Arceus exists...and you know it.”

Lawrence remained still, then stepped through the hoop the rest of the way, not turning back. Hoopa grunted, then held up his hand. The connection between the Hoopa closed, and the hoop in Xilo zoomed back to its master.

The travelers watched the hoop disappear past the horizon, then studied their whereabouts. They stood midway up a towering mountain, its brothers all parallel to each other, adjacent to a gravelly wasteland beneath them. Rough grass grew in the clumps of coarse, red earth, and very occasionally a tree or bush. Staraptor cawed above them, alongside their rivals, the Braviary, as they hunted the Togedemaru and Emolga that dared to run out in the day, hunting for the sparse berries and grasses that remained. Above all of them, the snowy peaks gradually melted to streams, trickling down the rough landscape.

Matheus stepped back and made a wide, sweeping gesture. “Welcome to the greatest range in all of Equivos, the Xilo Mountains. Plenty of rock and little else, so I suggest you get used to it.”

Lawrence stepped forward and seethed, kicking away a rather sharp pebble. “Consider it done. Reminds me of Mount Coronet, rocks and all.”

Cassia hovered near Grom, peering down at the seemingly-endless ridges of rock beneath them. “I-I’ve never been *this* high before.”

“Graow?” Grom said, cocking his head.

Cassia made a way face and slugged his arm. “That was when we were flying, not when we were on the ground!

Matheus stepped between them, holding his hat as a gale breezed through. “All the better to get used to it then!” He looked around for a moment, then held his paw out toward the sun, studying it carefully.

He directed his gaze back to the mountain, then said, “We appear to be a few hours away from Jareth. With luck, we’ll be able to cross this mountain and get to the next in that time.”

“Wait, the *next*? How big is this place?” Lawrence asked.

“There’s ten main mountains, and we happen to be on the farthest one to the east.” He pulled out his map, pointing out their location. Moving slightly to the left, he said, “And here’s where Jareth is.” He made a winding trail to the west end of the range. “Then we’ll take care of things here in Cryus...” He then circled the green next to it. “Then take care of Virona in the jungle and be off to our next spot: Mount Furnek.” He tapped a solitary peak farther south.

A thought suddenly came to Lawrence’s mind. “Do you think there’d be any place I could call home from?”

“Call? What, like yell to them?” Matheus asked with a bewildered expression.

Cassia stepped closer, pointing to Lawrence’s Pokédex. “You mean using that, don’t you?”

Lawrence pulled it from its case, bringing up the beacon application. Struggling to find words the Equivosians would best understand, he said, “My...boss, Hanson, said I needed to find a ‘dimensional weakness’ that leads to home. If we find one, I can...talk with them.” He tapped the button that appeared, and moments after, saw the taunting ‘No access point in range.’

Matheus stepped around Cassia to take a better look at the Pokédex. He shook his head in disbelief. “Amazing what you ‘humans’ came up with.” He scratched his chin. “Well, *I* don’t know much about this dimensional business, but I’m sure there’s a Legend who does. Palkia, maybe, but like Giratina and Dialga, he rarely remains in Equivos because of all the disturbances he has to fix.”

Lawrence’s face fell. “You mean *Palkia* might be making it so I can’t get home?” He had no idea how he could beat a Legend in returning home.

Matheus shrugged, stepping forward. “Not sure what else to tell you; it’s not like I can just go to Deitae and see if I can talk with them. You’ll just have to wait until we’re finished with what I’m here for.” He motioned for them to follow. “Come on then! Let’s talk while we walk, hmm?”

They began their trek along the rough trail set in the side of the mountain, and on a cleft above them, a Murkrow nodded its head. It flitted away, joining a troupe of other Murkrow headed southwest, toward the Guild.

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Arthus perched atop the spire of the Master’s Tower, tapping his fingers against his leg impatiently. “Why did I use Murkrow for this? Life Deposits are far more reliable.” He groaned and leaned his head against his hand. “Because Cassia and that bumbling Golurk can suck them right up.”

A cacophony of caws erupted overhead, and Arthus looked up expectantly. “Finally.” The flock swooped down and landed gracefully on top of the roof, all the Murkrow bobbing their heads, staring blankly.

Arthus held up a threatening claw. “I’ve dealt with the likes of you before, so I’m going to say it right now: *one at a time*, or I’ll skewer you faster than an Escavalier!” The Murkrow bobbed their heads excitedly, and Arthus pointed at one and said, “Report.”

“Nothin’ in the jungle, not one peep!” it cawed. Arthus pointed to the one on its right.

“All silent ‘round the desert!” Arthus continued to the next.

“The swamps are spooky as ever, but no Lucario!”

“Coast is clear, literally!”

“Nearly got roasted in Furnek, but nothin there!”

“Both east and west woods are free.”

“Even the plains are clean as a whistle!”

“And Cretea is boringer than—”

Arthus pinched the Murkrow’s beak shut, his eyes glowing red. “Enough.” He took a deep breath and smoothed back his mane, granting a desperate look at the final Murkrow. “And what about the mountains? Did you see anyone there?”

The Murkrow tapped its foot and clacked its beak in thought, then perked up and squawked, “Yep yep, saw a big ole Golurk, a couple Lucario, even a Zoroark, like you!”

Arthus snatched the Murkrow’s neck and roared, “Why didn’t you tell me in the first place?”

The Murkrow gurgled, struggling to breathe. Arthus cringed and set it down, then after catching its breath, the Murkrow said, “I would’ve, but you wanted us to talk one at a time, and I didn’t get picked till the end!”

Arthus narrowed his eyes and muttered, “Of course.”

The Murkrow squawked and said, “Anyhoo, found them all, took a peep and heard some stuff. They apparently are goin’ around Jareth and Cryus, takin’ a break in Virona and stopping off in Furnek, then going back ‘round to Saunte, all so they can talk about what’s in this black boxy-thingy.”

Arthus furrowed his brow. “A *what?*”

The Murkrow flapped his wings and shrieked, “I dunno, I’m just telling ya what I saw!”

Arthus pressed a hand against its head, calming it. “Alright, I get it! They’re going around the north part of Serenita. Is there anything else?”

He raised his hand and the Murkrow looked up a moment longer. “Well, that one Lucario said he wanted to ‘call home’, and it involved somethin’ called ‘dimensions’ or whatever.”

Arthus perked up and leaned closer. “Was it the silver one?”

“No, the boring old blue one.”

Arthus leaned back and tapped his head. “Hmm...dimensions. I read about Arceus apparently creating multiple worlds, and that he’s able to cross between them at will.” His eyes widened, and he slammed his hand into his palm. “And that strange creature from the desert was named Lawrence! Do you know what that means?”

“Nope,” the Murkrow replied, preening itself.

Arthus rolled his eyes and grabbed the Murkrow’s legs, holding him upside down. “I have no idea how traveling between worlds works, but Lawrence must have come from another one—and his spirit retained his normal form!” He tapped his chin. “I don’t know how he changed, but at least that explains how a Lucario slipped from my fingers.”

“Cool and all, but can you put me down?”

Arthus held up the Murkrow and said, “Go let the captain of Jareth know that I’ll be visiting. Make it there before nightfall and I’ll give you a whole bushel of berries.”

All the Murkrow suddenly began shouting, “Berries! Berries! Berries!” over and over again, flapping repeatedly and sending feathers everywhere.

Arthus growled and kicked all of them save the one in his hands off the roof. “Idiots!” He held up the Murkrow again and said, “Understood?”

The Murkrow nodded vigorously, its eyes unfocused. “Yep yep, deliverin’ message!” Arthus let him free, and the Murkrow flitted to the north.

Arthus wheezed a sigh of relief and leaned against the tower’s spire. “Now...what to do with Lawrence...” He thought for a moment, then a wicked grin split across his face.

“Oh...I know *exactly* what to do.”

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“The Ancient Trevenant really did that?”

Matheus looked up in bewilderment, walking between Cassia and Lawrence as they trekked across the mountains. Grom tromped just behind them, chipping away pieces of rock as he passed jutting boulders.

Cassia held her sketchpad in front of Matheus, revealing the picture she had drawn over a week before. “Really! Look, see, here’s the Buneary he adopted”

Matthews traced his paw over the picture, nodding his head. “Huh. I thought it was strange going there instead of in the Ythereal Swamps like he usually does, but...”

As he continued on, Lawrence thought of the Trevenant’s prophecy. The words came back to him clearly, despite it being nearly a well since he heard them: *A Keeper once was...a treader of realms...a deceiver of self. ‘What did he mean by that?’*

He massaged his head, thinking instead of the last half of the poem. *Awaken Aleron as well as the Keeper and Equivos may be reborn to live on. ‘How can Aleron be awakened if he’s dead. How could Equivos be “reborn”?’*

A gap came in Cassia and Matheus’ conversation. Lawrence hastily juttet in and said, “Matheus, what do you know about Aleron?”

Matheus stepped away, turning his head. “Where’d you hear that name?”

Cassia replied, “The Ancient Trevenant talked about him. Why?”

Matheus grunted, pulling his cloak over his shoulder. “Never mind.” He stopped, his eyes taking a far-off look. “I...I haven’t heard that name in a long time. I...I knew him well.”

Lawrence stopped alongside him, “Who was he? He seems to be important from what the Trevenant said to me.”

“What?” Matheus exclaimed. He pulled Cassia’s sketchpad close and rapidly scanned through Lawrence’s prophecy. His eyes widened, and he let go of the pad. “*Awaken Aleron...*” He shook his head, hiking once more. “He’s dead and can never return!”

Cassia stepped in front of him, holding her claws out. “But *you* came back to life!”

Matheus crossly stepped around her. “He didn’t just die *physically*.” He lowered his head, keeping his pace faster than his companions.

Lawrence turned to Cassia, bewildered. “He came back to life?”

Cassia cocked her head. “Don’t you remember the story I told you when we met?”

Lawrence remembered. Matheus protected Laryon and helped him stop Arthus in the past—two thousand years ago. He died but was brought back to life by the very legend Lawrence did not believe in: Arceus.

“That can’t be right. I can understand Arthus surviving with Yveltal—even if it is a bit of a stretch—but a Lucario living for two thousand years is too much,” Lawrence said in hushed tones.

“But he *has* lived for that long!”

“But that’s not--”

*“I have lived for two thousand years!”*

Matheus sprang in front of Lawrence, pressing his paw against his chest. “Don’t deny the truth! I’ve seen hundreds die of old age, and dozens of cities built and destroyed in a matter of centuries!” He stepped away, glaring at Lawrence. “Believe what you will, I won’t have anyone saying that I’m a fraud. I am the same Lucario that protected Laryon all those years ago—and suffered Arthus’ betrayal.” He clenched his paw, then strode faster. “Don’t talk any more about my past.”

Lawrence remained still, shaken by Matheus’ outburst. Cassia gave him a disappointed look, then continued past him. Grom also crossed, shaking his head sadly and dragging his feet.

Lawrence thought of all the different possibilities for Matheus’ extended life. *‘Maybe he’s...a descendant that took his name? Maybe hibernation?’* He shook his head. *“He simply couldn’t be resurrected by Arceus.”*

“He doesn’t exist...he can’t.” He looked up, watching a Braviary soar overhead. “I’ve seen it for myself.”

He ran to catch up with the Arceists.

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Hours later, after a long silence between them, they finally reached the one of the few settlements in the Xilo mountains: Jareth. A mighty river rushed down the peak, coursing

right through the center of the town. Low-roofer buildings made of chiseled brick cropped around it, bridges extending over the river. Drilled through the side of the mountain, various tunnels wove in and out of the developments, Rock and Water Pokémon weaving in and out of them. Pillars made of the same stone rose at the outskirts, the burning Arc of Arceus waving on their flags.

They stopped several yards from the gate, with Matheus leading them. He looked up at the flags and bared his teeth. “Those used to stand for the light of Arceus protecting Pokémon, always shining to save them from whatever they faced.” He lowered his head. “Now they’re only a symbol of Arthus’ tyranny.” His paw shook briefly, then subsided. He looked to Cassia and said, “It will be just as you’ve done before: investigate, dominate, educate.”

Cassia held her chin. “I never thought of it like that before—or made it rhyme.”

Matheus shrugged, motioning for her to hurry. “I’ve dabbled at writing for a time, but can you hurry? I don’t like the looks of those Golduck down there.” The two Golduck with armbands stood at the entrance, taking occasionally glances in their direction.

Cassia waved her claws over Lawrence, making his Watchog illusion return. She waved over herself, and her Gardevoir form appeared. She was going to do the same over Matheus but stopped. “Um...do you have any preference about how you look like?”

Lawrence scowled. “Why do I get stuck as a Watchog when he gets to choose? They’re paranoid little brats!”

Before Cassia could reply, Matheus said, “I’ll have you know that I’ve met plenty of respectable Watchog, and they are not ‘brats’.” He looked up momentarily. “Although I agree, they are rather paranoid.”

Cassia ran her fingers through what appeared to be green hair and explained, “I couldn’t very well ask you what you wanted to be earlier, considering that I was hiding!”

Lawrence cringed, stepping back. “Sorry. I should have remembered.” He made a sympathetic smile. “Can I still change?”

Cassia groaned, rolling her eyes. “It’s not that simple. It’s easier to work with an illusion I’ve made before since I’m already familiar with it; making new ones on the fly

is tiring, and actually makes them rather blurry. I had to use my Life to get yours right the first time, and I really prefer not to do that.” She sighed, turning to Matheus. “Anyway, what do you want to be?”

Matheus thought for a moment and said, “Hmm...how about a dashing Gallade, rugged and adventurous. Older, of course; wouldn’t want to be confused for your brother.”

Cassia gave him a curious look. “You seem to have an awfully clear idea of what you want.”

Matheus shrugged. “I’ve had plenty of time to think about it.”

Cassia smiled, then waved her hand. In Matheus’ place, a Gallade stood, his arms at his sides and a large grin across his face. Various nicks were scattered across his blades, and his body was covered in faded scars.

He stood still for a moment, then his smile faded. “The last time I had a disguise was when Arthus and I had to infiltrate a camp of bandits in the Kaena forest, years ago.” He put a hand to his forehead. “To think that I still remember that.” After a moment he shook his head, then pointed onward. “Come on, let’s not waste time.” He stepped behind the rocky outcropping toward the own.

Cassia and Lawrence followed. The Gardevoir turned toward Grom and said, “We’ll be back before long!”

“Gra-grawm...” he sighed, waving his arm languidly. He leaned on the wall, crossing his arms with a sigh.

Lawrence took a glance back toward Grom and said, “Does he ever go with you?”

“I can’t have Pokémon figuring out who I am; they’d know if they saw him with me.”

“But he went into Barash for you.”

“That was only because you decided to go in.”

“He’s just so lonely. Most Golurk tend to have constant training by their trainers to prevent them from overloading on energy; he must be bored out of his mind.”

Cassia stopped. “How do you know so much about Golurk?”

Lawrence remained silent for a moment, then said, “I’m a specialist in Pokémon behavior. I know how Pokémon act, and how intelligent they are, so I can better understand them.”

Cassia stared at him, then back toward Grom. “So...you know how Zoroark like me would act then? You know how everyone in Equivos would act?”

Lawrence continued forward, shaking his head. “No, I don’t. You have personality, thoughts. You’re nothing like the Pokémon in my world.”

Cassia furrowed her brow, following Lawrence. “You sounded like you did. Why did you want to want to be a ‘specialist’?”

Lawrence closed his eyes, clenching his paw. “To...to know how to protect myself from them.”

Cassia’s eyes widened. “Do you *hate* Pokémon?”

Lawrence halted and turned to face her. “No! No, I don’t!” He stared for a moment, then sighed, turning away. “I just...I just...” He cringed. “Feared them.” He stiffened, then turned away, running to meet Matheus, leaving Cassia to stare.

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Floatzel and Azumarill patrolled the streets of Jareth, keeping a watchful eye on the Graveler, Boldore and Dugtrio that lumbered through, carrying ore and food to the massive stone building at the forefront of all. Buizel and Azurill played in the outcroppings of the river, laughing merrily with their mothers holding berries in trays. Nearby, in the tiny caves of the Rock Pokémon, battered Roggenrola and Diglett huddled close, striving to remain free of the water.

Lawrence, Matheus and Cassia crossed through the gates. The Golduck gave them sideways glance, not sensing any danger from the troupe. Few Pokémon turned to look at them, the Water Pokémon too concerned with their business, while the Rock and Ground feared what would happen if they did.

Cassia paled at the sight of the Rock Pokémon, their surfaces rounded and scratched, and their eyes tired and limbs thin. The Gardevoir drew close to Matheus and hissed, “What is happening here?”

Matheus whispered gravely, “The Water Pokémon. Rock Pokémon fear water because it weakens their bodies and hurts their eyes, so naturally, the Guild took advantage of that.” He pointed to a large Azumarill standing at the entrance to the storehouse, who wore a red armband.

The Azumarill’s fur clean and immaculate, he held himself higher than the Graveler and Boldore that surrounded him. “All supplies have been brought to storage, yes?”

A thick and scarred Aerodactyl with bloodshot eyes sat on one Boldore, growling, “You know we need some for our families. How are we supposed to survive when you take all we have?”

The Azumarill glared at the Aerodactyl. “You’ll get what you need in a couple days; that’s when all the Guild members get their share.”

“But they get so much more than us, and we’ve been doing all the work,” a Graveler replied, holding his arms close.

The Azumarill opened his mouth and shot a jet of water at the Graveler, forcing him onto his back. In his moaning, the Azumarill clambered on top and sneered at the Graveler. “If you have a problem with it, talk to the Guildmaster about it; he’ll be coming around tomorrow for inspections. I’m sure he’d love to hear about it.”

The Graveler closed his eyes, holding a hand over the crumbling section of his chest. The Azumarill humphed in satisfaction, then leapt off, letting the other Graveler help their comrade to his feet and throw dust on the wound to dry it.

The Azumarill turned toward Lawrence and shouted, “Who’re you?”

Lawrence—caught off-guard—stuttered, “We’re—we’re just, passing through.”

The Azumarill studied him suspiciously, walking toward him and the others. “Pokémon hardly ‘pass through’ around here. Where’d you and your partners come from, Watchog?”

Matheus cut in and replied, “We’re just making our way to an old friend that lives past your town. We came from the Minute Plains to get up here.”

The Azumarill continued to scrutinize him. “A visit, hmm?” The Gallade nodded.

Cassia then said, “We’ll be on our way; we’d rather not bother you with our business.” She walked around the Azumarill and across the bridge, passing by the deprived Rock Pokémon. The aged Aerodactyl focused his gaze on Cassia, squinting his eyes.

Matheus and Lawrence followed, while the Azumarill waved toward a tall Floatzel. He walked to him and said, “Orders, Captain Loran?”

Loran pulled him close and whispered, “Watch those guys; Pokémon don’t just come up here for visits.” He pointed to the Aerodactyl. “Double the guard on the storehouse tonight. Old Aerav is getting too big for his wings.”

Matheus, Cassia and Lawrence calmly crossed the other gate, then when out of sight, rushed behind a series of rocks. Cassia dropped their guises and exclaimed, “He said Gardner will be coming tomorrow!”

Matheus groaned, massaging his head. “No, worse. Gardner *never* leaves the Guild. Likely they’re talking about Arthus and making sure he isn’t brought up to cause a scare.” He firmed his gaze and clenched his paw. “We’ll have to attack tonight and teach them in the morning, then be off before he can notice.”

“Are you sure that’s the best idea? What if he comes while we’re teaching?” Cassia said.

Matheus shrugged, gesturing behind him. “We can figure out what time exactly with a little of your expertise. Once done, we’ll just go beforehand. Would you mind?” Cassia realized what he meant, then disappeared, her footsteps barely heard as she ran back toward Jareth.

Matheus nodded approvingly, then took a glance at Lawrence. “While we’re waiting, how about we see if you have what it takes to be a real Lucario.”

## Chapter 15

*Lawrence sat on a bench, in a park set in a suburban community. He studied the trainers walking on the paths, walking around the battles taking place on the fields. Houses surrounded the curved fences, and a stream cut through the corner in a winding fashion. Spindly trees cropped up in the lush green grass, contrasting the coarse dirt of the training fields. The bright sunny day benefitted the Arcanine in its bout against the Luxray, their attacks arcing back and forth and scorching the dirt underneath them.*

*Lawrence simply watched their movements, leaning his head against his arm. He heard the commands of the trainers, knowing that some ulterior reward awaited the Pokémon after the bout was over. When the battle was finished, the Pokémon acted as if nothing had happened, save for a few scratches and burns. Lawrence felt sure that there would be no memory of this in the Pokémon's minds.*

*A man suddenly sat next to him. Without turning, Lawrence said, "What do you want, Brother Morgan?"*

*The sharply-dressed man carried a small folder with him, and at his side was a single Poke Ball. His face hadn't been shaved for some time, and on his head was a white, broad-brimmed hat.*

*Brother Morgan tilted the hat up, watching another set of trainers go up to the practice field. "I heard a few weeks ago that you had a bad time with Josh; I haven't seen you at meetings since. What's got your Gogoat?"*

*Lawrence remained still. "Pokémon aren't like us."*

*Morgan chuckled, leaning back. "Well, yeah. They don't talk, they breathe fire—"*

*“I mean they don’t have feelings. They don’t remember things like we do, and they do things only by instinct, not because they want to,” Lawrence sighed.*

*Silence rang between them, interrupted only by the newfound clashing of the Snorunt and Grotle fighting each other on the field, ice freezing the soil and leaves whipping in the wind.*

*Brother Morgan blew his breath out slowly, then said, “That’s a rather...strong thing to say. Especially considering what is said in the Arcean Texts.” He flipped open the folder, pulling out a small stack of paper in fine print.*

*Lawrence turned to see it. “Why’d you bring that?”*

*Morgan rubbed the back of his neck, flipping through the pages. “Your parents wanted me to come talk to you about your faith. They’ve noticed that you haven’t been the same since your wilderness trip, and since they haven’t been able to get a straight answer out of you, well...”*

*Lawrence turned away and muttered, “Well that’s encouraging.”*

*Morgan put a hand over Lawrence’s. “I’m concerned for you. It’s my duty in the church to ensure that everyone’s taken care of, and right now, you’re my priority.” He stopped flipping through the pages and took a breath to read.*

*“Arceus isn’t real.”*

*Morgan held his breath.*

*“There’s been no proof that he exists, all except for the Arcean Texts and some drawings in Celestic. Dialga and Palkia were sighted years ago, when Team Galactic was around, as well as all the other Legends at some point. But he never showed up—because he doesn’t exist,” Lawrence stated, refusing to meet with Morgan’s eyes.*

*Morgan took off his hat, shaking his head. “Where’d you hear about that? Certainly not around here.”*

*Lawrence replied, “It’s everywhere in Unova, even in Kanto and Kalos. Really, Sinnoh’s the only place that believes Arceus is real. I read some books about it in the library.”*

*“But they have no credibility—”*

*“Yes, they do. Archaeologists and experts made detailed studies, more than those Arcean Texts ever did.”*

*Morgan’s face flushed. “Alright, now that’s going a little too far.”*

*Lawrence stood up, maintaining his passive expression. “You just don’t get it. Just like everyone else here. It’s exactly why I want to leave.” He turned and walked away, leaving Morgan to dwell on the loss of a fellow Arceist.*

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Lawrence sat on a sizable rock, remembering that conviction well—and the persecution it led to. *‘No one believed me...they all hated me...but I fine with that....with where I was...’* He closed his eyes. *‘Until now.’*

Matheus had thrown off his cloak and went into a series of stretches, ignoring the other Lucario for a moment. Cassia still hadn’t returned from her reconnaissance of Jareth, and Grom presumably stood on the other side of the town, waiting for their eventual return. Lawrence and the Legend were the only ones together on the barren mountaintop.

Matheus finally stood straight and exclaimed, “Alright, let’s see what we can do.”

Lawrence got off the rock, shaking free of his thoughts. He stood in front of Matheus and said, “Alright, what do you want me to do?”

Matheus smirked. “Hit me.”

Lawrence nodded, then suddenly threw a punch at Matheus’ chest. The silver Lucario deftly caught the punch and deflected it with his own, sending Lawrence onto his back.

Lawrence groaned, and Matheus stood over him, shaking his head. “Let me clarify: land a *successful* hit. Every time you fail, I’ll punch you back. Your opponent’s not going to let off easy in the real world, so I won’t either.”

Lawrence pushed himself up, staggering slightly. “Well *that’s* hardly fair. Aren’t you supposed to be teaching me instead of punishing me?”

Matheus shrugged. “There’s all sorts of teaching methods. This one happens to be mine.” He crouched, putting up his fists. “I want to see how you humans tend to attack before I go about showing you how Lucario do it. Give it your best shot!”

Lawrence couldn't help but feel irritated toward Matheus' attitude. He let out a forceful breath and swung toward Matheus' chin. He stepped back and watched Lawrence miss, then grabbed the swinging arm and twisted it behind Lawrence's back.

Matheus leaned in close and said, "Stop being so predictable. How many fistfights have you been in?"

Lawrence seethed, pulling free of Matheus grip. "None." He swept his leg toward Matheus', but the Legend leapt over his head and pushed him to the ground.

Matheus sighed, brushing off his paws. "I was expecting more. So far as I can tell, we'll have to—"

"Stop talking like that!"

Matheus ducked, barely avoiding another blow from Lawrence. He continued dodging, the other hastily attempting to land a hit.

Lawrence swung too hard and spun, giving Matheus the few seconds needed to clout him over the head. He fell to the ground, then Matheus set a paw on his back. Lawrence looked up and saw the Legend's concerned expression.

"Stop talking like that? Why?" he asked. He stepped off of Lawrence, allowing him to stand up and brush the dust off his fur.

"I don't believe in Arceus. It was an unpopular opinion back where I grew up. So many people taunted me with that tone, saying, 'Prove it', or, 'That's not enough.'" He shook, closing his eyes. "They'd even say 'Let's work on that', as if I'd change my mind." He sat on the rock again, massaging the back of his head.

Matheus considered his words, looking down. He then said, "How does it feel to be in Equivos, where everyone—including you—is a Pokémon?"

Lawrence groaned, rubbing his face. "It's so...strange. For five years, I managed to avoid doing anything the Arceists would do. I've proven them wrong so many times that their religion should be dead." He stopped. "But here, I'm put into the same situation as before: a beautiful region overloaded with Arceists. And now, all of them are Pokémon, preaching the same thing." He closed his eyes. "I don't know what to think anymore."

Matheus sat next to Lawrence, crossing his arms. “What did they use to prove that Arceism was true?”

“Nothing. Just a few legends and the remnants of the book they used to have. They’ve been dying for the past few decades, especially once that book disappeared.”

“Yet they continued to believe?”

“Yes!” Lawrence turned to him crossly. “Why are *you* so interested? I thought you believed in Arceus.”

Matheus pressed his paw against Lawrence’s leg, looking him in the eye. “I don’t *believe* he exists, I *know* he exists. You are forgetting that what’s left of the book may be true. What about the world could have convinced you that it wasn’t?”

Lawrence thought of the Gabite and Nidoking, his first experience with the reality of Pokémon. He thought of his antagonization, his peers loathing him for his views. He remembered the terrible atrocities in the world, like what Team Plasma or Galactic committed, and how only a single, unlikely trainer could defeat them—none of them Arceus’ followers.

Matheus’ paw retracted from Lawrence’s leg, and the Legend grimaced. “I...understand what you feel.” He stood up, holding his head. “I’ve always believed in Arceus. I’ve even met him, when I completed his trials.” He picked up his hat from on top of his cloak. “But, for several days, I questioned his power. I wondered how he could allow so much pain, why Pokémon chose wrong, and why even...even your truest friend, can turn on you.” He wrinkled the hat, his paws shaking.

He looked down at his paws, then set the hat over his head. “I didn’t fully recover until I raised Laryon. He helped me rediscover Arceus’ wisdom, and, well...” He held up his paw, engulfing it in azure flame. “This.”

Lawrence focused on the flame, feeling his fears quelled by the cyan light. The gentle warmth reached into his core, a feeling of peace, familiar after what felt like years of silence. Despite his previous experience with Aura, he had never felt anything like this with it.

Matheus noticed his gaze and made a small smile. “You feel it. Good. You at least have the sense for it.” He doused the flame and the peace that lingered in Lawrence, causing his face to fall. He stretched his arms and said, “Just from your expression, I could tell you want to use Aura. Problem is that it appears you haven’t developed any serious relationships with anyone.”

Lawrence cocked his head curiously. “What do you mean?”

Matheus leaned on another rock, crossing his arms. “Riolu evolve by having a powerful relationship with someone. For Laryon, it came from his bond with me, while myself...” He cringed. “Well, it was my friendship with Arthus.” He furrowed his brow. “The reason why is because Aura grows stronger based on your connections with others. From the studies I’ve made over the centuries, I’ve found that it has to do with Life, in a sense.” He looked up momentarily, then shook his head, jogging toward Lawrence. “It’s easier just to show you.”

He stopped in front of him, then made a circle in the ground with his foot paw. He pointed at it and said, “Here’s a Pokémon’s Life. Despite the power it has, most Pokémon are unable to use it.” He made another circle, leaving a space between the other. “However, there is a way to tap into it, partially, by using another Pokémon’s life.” He finished the circle and pointed to both. “Two separate Pokémon, two separate sources of Life. Following me so far?” Lawrence nodded.

Matheus nodded back, then set his paw into the first circle. “When you interact with Pokémon, you leave behind traces of your Life. It’s like a mark to show that you have impacted them in some way.” He dragged his foot into the other circle. “As you interact with Pokémon, more and more of your Life is shared with those around you. More is focused on those you interact with often, particularly if it is positive.” He stepped away and pointed at the line. “The other also leaves behind portions of their Life in your soul, and when you both have high levels of shared Life, it creates a sort of charge, similar to what Electric Pokémon gather.” He tapped the ground. “*That* is Aura. It is what comes from two souls becoming one.”

Lawrence studied the image, realizing how much sense it made. *‘Even the best scientists in the world couldn’t figure out where Aura came from—yet it’s so simple.’*

Matheus stepped away from the image and sighed. “There’s the problem: you don’t have a strong relationship with anyone. I could see it when I touched you earlier, just as I felt your emotions; your Life is in a tight little ball, keeping its power away from others.” He shook his head sadly. “You can’t create Aura by yourself.”

Lawrence leaned back on the rock and groaned. “That’s not helpful at all! I’ve never been close to anybody!” He rolled onto his shoulder and muttered, “Didn’t help that they hated me...”

Matheus sighed, massaging his head. “Unfortunately, Lucario primarily use Aura in their fighting style. I can teach you how to detect other Pokémon, as well as how to see Aura connections; those things are usually taught to Riolu when they’re young, but it should come quickly to you.” He sat on the rock Lawrence lay on, clasping his paws. “But until you bond with someone, I can do little more than that.”

Lawrence thought of who he could have some sort of friendship with. *‘I’m not really close to anybody. Sinnoh hated me, Unova’s closed off, and I haven’t met many in Equivos. The only one I can think of is—’*

“Cassia! What did you find out?” Matheus exclaimed, bolting upright.

The Zoroark padded carefully toward them, looking over her shoulder. “Just so you know, Grom will be over soon, so be ready for him.” Across the town, a black shape dropped off the side of the mountain, then suddenly shot upward, barreling toward Cassia.

The shape slowed and turned out to be Grom, who landed just in front of her and embraced her. “Graw-graw-hawm!”

Cassia gently pushed away and said, “Yes, I know, you don’t like being by yourself for so long. We won’t let it happen again.” Grom, satisfied, stood obediently beside her.

Cassia sighed and continued, “Anyway, I checked around and found out that Arthus should be there late in the morning. I think if we go there early and get out of there on Grom, we should be fine.”

“Graw-unh!” Grom exclaimed, shaking his head and pointing at Lawrence and Matheus.

The Zoroark groaned. “Having all of us will be too much? You’re stronger than a Machamp!”

“Graw,” he grunted, pointing at his feet, then clanged his chest.

Cassia’s face fell. “Right, your weight. Wouldn’t want you running out of Life while you’re up there.”

Matheus smiled good-naturedly and waved his paw. “I can run on my own; I have to stay in shape after all. Lawrence can ride with you.” He wrapped an arm around Lawrence, who stiffly stared back. “Until then though, let’s teach you how to fight properly; humans are *so* predictable.”

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Within the Master’s Tower, Gardner painstakingly used a needle and thread on his chair, repairing the jagged tears Arthus had made. He pricked himself in the finger and scowled, watching thin mist trail out of it. “Foul, despicable Zoroark.”

“Shame. You were doing so well.”

“*Gah!*”

Gardner dropped the thread and fell onto his back, twisting behind him. Arthus leaned against the wall, studying his claws. The Gardner jabbed a finger at him and exclaimed, “Well it’s not *my* fault that *you* tore up my chair! It’s ruined!”

Arthus shrugged and walked along the undamaged arm of the chair. “Oh, that’s easily fixed.” He cut a delicate along the top of the arm, revealing the stuffing within. Gardner growled with rising intensity, his fingers curling as his eye glowed brighter.

Arthus grinned and laughed, “See? Symmetrical. Less work.”

Gardner held up the needle from before and tossed it behind him with a moan. “*Indeed.*” Gardner rubbed his eye and said, “Let me guess: you’re here about the Prison Bottle.”

“Why yes!” Arthus replied, wrapping an arm around Gardner’s neck. “But more specifically on where to summon him. I’ve narrowed down Matheus’ location to a few places in northern Serenita. Got any leads?”

Gardner shrugged Arthus away and sat down in his chair, fingering the newly-made tear. “No, not really; I’ve been having to rework the Guild to make it ready to take back the settlements Cassia had converted. All I’ve managed to go through was an old history book about Arceism.”

“Is that so? Do tell.” Arthus sat cross-legged on the floor, brushing through his mane for tangles.

Gardner ignored his actions and looked upward. “From what I read, there used to be several temples scattered throughout the region; they were places where Arceus focused his power and allowed for things like miracles to happen.”

“Sounds like the right place. Where’s the closest one?” Arthus asked, finding a writing Joltik buried in his mane.

Gardner sighed, slumping in his chair. “Well there’s the problem; the temples have been abandoned for centuries. I can tell you where they *used* to be, but actually finding them is a different matter.”

Arthus pierced the Joltik’s body and drained its Life, throwing away the dusty husk. “Just tell me where they used to be. I’ll go search the areas myself.”

“Fine. There were five temples: one near Cambeta, Barash, Virona, Saunte, and Respit. Considering that Barash was just destroyed, I doubt the temple is still standing there.”

Arthus twisted a length of his mane. “Hmm, yes. I’d rather not go back to Saunte or Respit, so that leaves Cambeta and Virona.”

“I doubt the temples are standing in those places anyway: Saunte has changed a lot in the past few decades and likely destroyed it to expand, and Respit’s temple was made of wood; it would have deteriorated without any care.”

“Anything about Cambeta?”

“Not really. They regularly get storms there, however, so it wouldn’t be an ideal place for such a structure.”

“It’s not even where Cassia and the others are headed.” Arthus stood up and clapped his hands together. “Right, Virona it is. Anything I should look out for?”

Gardner languidly took the book from his side table and glanced at the pages. He stopped at one and said, “Apparently the Virona temple was put into the denser section to the west of Virona; if anything, the jungle itself destroyed it given how much time it’s had to to grow.” Gardner set the book aside and shrugged. “But who knows? It was made of stone, so it could still exist.”

“Good, good. I’ll heading off now; can’t leave Jareth waiting!” Arthus ran down the stairs and left Gardner to grumble about both tears made in his chair.

Once Arthus was outside and invisible, he crossed by Guild Pokemon and toward the gate. “I know *exactly* where to go,” he said under his breath.

*‘This is simply cruel.’*

Arthus hissed and quickened his pace. “You again!”

*‘What you’re planning is low, even for you. And you want Cassia to come back to **live** here? She’ll never forgive me!’*

Arthus opened the gate and slammed it, then shouted, “It’s also to take care of Matheus and Lawrence! Don’t you want them gone?”

*‘Not if it costs my relationship with Cassia—with what little is there, thanks to you. There’s still time to have her trust us again if you stop this madness and let me come back.’*

“No. I didn’t spend two thousand years with Yveltal to just surrender the Seal.”

*‘You can’t be—’*

“And you didn’t kill Corrina in her sleep for nothing...did you?”

The voice stopped, and his presence retreated in Arthus’ mind. *‘No.’*

“That’s right. Now step aside until I’ve done my job. When the world is made perfect, you can feel free to spend every moment with her.” Arthus ran to the deadened tree at the wall of the canyon and had tendrils drag him down into the earth.

As he traveled across Serenita, the personality in the back of his mind thought, ‘*But she wouldn’t be the same—not without her feelings or strength.*’

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Lawrence flopped to the ground, splaying his arms out in exhaustion. Grom had taken to watching Jareth for activity, while Matheus took to testing the younger Lucario’s skills. Cassia sat on the ground, watching from afar while she tossed pebbles down the steep edge of the mountain.

Matheus put on his cloak and panted, “I think that’s enough for tonight; don’t want to be tired out before we go in there.”

“Agreed,” Lawrence replied, panting. He sat up, then wiped his brow instinctively. Cassia gave him a curious look.

He looked down at his paw, then realized why she looked at him that way. “Humans sweat; I’m used to wiping it off.”

Cassia nodded slowly, then moved to sit next to him on the ground, brushing back her mane. “You said earlier that you didn’t hate Pokémon, but you *feared* them. Why?”

Lawrence froze. He rubbed his face, saying, “Well...it’s...complicated.” He paused for a moment, then finally said, “I had a bad experience with Pokémon when I was growing up. I was a wilderness survivalist—someone who lives away from civilization for a time. Sort of like what we’re doing now.” He clasped his paws and continued, “Anyway, one day, I was caught in a fight between a Nidoking and a Gabite.”

Cassia gasped. “*Wild* ones? They could’ve killed you!”

“I know; I was lucky to get out of there.” He sighed. “When I was hiding from them, I saw the Gabite’s eyes. They were... soulless. They looked like they wanted to kill and nothing more. No anger, no fear, nothing but want.” He released his paws, watching them shake. “It was completely opposite to what the Arceists taught. They said that all Pokémon should be treated like humans.” He turned away from Cassia. “They aren’t even close to us.”

They stood silent. Grom’s head swiveled around, focused on them. Matheus continued to look toward Jareth, but his focus lay toward the human-turned-Pokémon.

Cassia blew out her breath slowly, then began to gently pull off the Pokédex. Lawrence grunted and put a paw over her claws, staring at her. He stared at her eyes, seeing the compassion and feeling they had—so unlike the Gabite.

He looked away and removed his paw. Cassia paused, then continued to take out the Pokédex. She removed it from the case, and carefully typed the password, then tapped the photos application. She reached the Tome's pictures, then began to read:

Two forms of life are present in my creation: one that holds knowledge of me, and the other that does not. Those that hold knowledge are to follow my word and grow closer to me, while the other cannot be held for their actions.

I have given memories to know my word, emotion to confirm my word, and willpower to obey my word. Those that hold no knowledge have no such gifts, and thus, cannot be expected to be like those who hold knowledge.

Cassia lowered the Pokédex, then said, "I know this might seem...strange...but, do you think that you received that commandment from Arceus so that you could treat the Pokémon of Equivos like humans?"

Lawrence considered her words. He continued to think, while Cassia added, "Arceus is the same no matter where he is; his power can surely be felt in your world just as it felt in mine. He...could have foreseen you coming here and wanted to prepare you for it."

Lawrence turned back to her. "But why give *everyone* that commandment? The other Pokémon are nothing like you. You're smart, kind, and—" He caught himself, then said with a sigh, "More trusting than I'll ever be." He took the Pokédex—Cassia allowing him to take it—then walked away from here, sitting on another rock and considering her words.

He thought of what the Arceists of Sinnoh believed. They believed that someday, he would restore their book of scripture and grant them the opportunity to live all his teachings. Until then, they were to follow the three key commandments: love Arceus, love your neighbor, and love your Pokémon, all like yourself. It would not be far-fetched to say that the Arceus of Sinnoh was the same as the Arceus of Equivos, considering the dimensional abilities he shares with the likes of the creators of time and space.

He held his head, sighing. *‘I’ve denied him for so long...but so much here in Equivos says he does exist: The Legends, the Tome, everyone’s belief. I could deny him before I knew all this...but now, I’m not sure I can.’*

He looked up. *‘They’re right; Arceus is real. But he’s not a benevolent deity, like they say he is. He doesn’t “spread his arms to grant blessings”. Pokemon like the Gabite and Nidoking have harmed people for generations...no just god would that.’*

He felt a tap on his shoulder and looked up to see Matheus. The silver Lucario pointed to Jareth and aid, “It’s time to go. I’ll let you know about my plan on the way over.” He stepped away and toward Cassia and Grom, who both started towards the mountainous village.

Lawrence stood up, slowly walking toward them. *‘I might have been wrong about Arceus’ existence—even if it was warranted. But I won’t believe in his goodness. Not until I see it for myself.’*

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Later that night, two Floatzel stood in front of the storehouse of Jareth, keeping a watchful eye over the iron doors. Burning torches hung in sconces, brightening the rushing river. Its sound crowded the area, blocking any other noises from being heard.

The two Floatzel kept a constant watch for Pokémon, squinting their eyes to see better in the darkness. They felt the ground rumble beneath them, then gave each other surprised looks. Two holes opened beneath their feet.

They fell with a shout, and Geodude hopped out of the holes, hovering toward the door. The two holes joined and expanded, allowing Boldore and Graveler to hop out as well. They surrounded the storehouse as stealthily as they could, watching as the aged Aerodactyl clambered from the hole.

He crept toward the door and turned to a chipped Boldore. “Is the area secure?”

The Boldore nodded. “No Guild Pokémon in sight, Aerav.

The Aerodactyl looked up at the door confidently. “We’ll have food for our families tonight.” He grabbed the door and pulled back.

From within, a jet of water thrust into the Aerodactyl's chest, sending him to the edge of the river. Six Golduck exited the and blasted the other Rock Pokémon with Water Gun, forcing them back into the hole. With moans, and screams, the Rock Pokémon fled the flooded tunnels, leaving behind the Aerodactyl leader.

Captain Loran Azumarill stepped out from the storehouse, smirking. "Good work crew; might let you have your share early at this rate." He bounded toward Aerav and set a foot on top of him, causing him to groan. The Azumarill turned to his comrades and grinned. "Figured that this old fool would try something like this." He leaned down to Aerav and said, "I think we'll have you skip your next round of rations. How does going two weeks without any food sound to you?"

Aerav groaned, looking up at Loran fearfully. "Y-You can't. We won't survive!" He struggled to push himself up.

Loran sucked in a breath and sprayed Aerav's face with a blast of water, causing Aerav to collapse with a gasp. "You don't control us! Ever since we started listening to Guildmaster Gardner, life has been great for us Water Pokémon! My kids don't have to worry about going hungry anymore, and we can settle in one place instead of having to wander scavenge the rivers!"

Aerav coughed, blinking away the water in his eyes. "But look at what you've done to us Rock Pokémon. We used to help each other, giving each food and support when we needed it. We kept to our own business, and no one suffered. Now you use your powers to make us slaves!"

Loran sprayed him once more, then turned to the Golduck. "I've had enough of this old Aerodactyl. Let's shut him up!" He hopped off Aerav and set a foot underneath his heaving chest. He lifted his foot slightly, edging Aerav toward the rushing river.

*"Graow!"*

A massive black Golurk fell from the air and landed in the center of the Golduck, stunning them. He punched two away and ran for the Azumarill, his eyes burning crimson.

Loran stepped around Aerav and toward the houses, pointing at the Golurk and shouting, “Get that *thing* before it kills us!” He fled toward the houses as his pursuer stopped in front of Aerav.

The Golduck snapped into action, running toward the Golurk and breathing in for another Water Gun. A flash of silver dropped in front of him, and a silver Lucario crouched with his paws up.

He grinned and exclaimed, “Lovely night to drop in, isn’t it?” He sprung forward and chopped a Golduck across the throat, causing him to choke and splutter on his stored water. He proceeded to battle with the other Golduck, dodging jets of water as he went.

Grom carefully lifted the Aerodactyl, remaining crouched. “Gro-ha-hawm.” Aerav managed a croak before Grom burst into the air, soaring toward the low peak above Jareth.

The Golurk left red streams of light in his wake, illuminating the scene below with eerie red light. Lawrence and Cassia stood atop the peak, and they nodded to each other. “Ready?” Cassia asked, donning her mask and deepening her voice.

They leapt off the peak, skidding down the side and rapidly descending toward Jareth. More torches went alight, driving off the red glow and illuminating the dozens of Water Pokémon streaming from the caverns and buildings. Poliwrath, Floatzel, Seismitoad—all sorts ran up to drive away the legendary Lucario at their storehouse.

The Zoroark gracefully landed on a Poliwrath and pierced his skin, draining Life from the unconscious warrior. She released her grip—leaving only enough to keep him alive—then proceeded to spin toward another target and strike it down.

Lawrence, however, lost his grip on his slide down and skidded on his rear toward a sizable Poliwhirl, bowling into him and the couple of Palpitoad behind him. He covered his face and cringed, imagining the scene entirely different than how it turned out.

Unfortunately, his rolling didn’t stop there. Just beyond the Palpitoad the stairs continued, and he continued to bash into more Guild Pokémon, knocking them with no more than his built-up momentum. He continued all the way down the village until he finally stopped at a run-down shack, away from all the action.

He groaned, pushing himself up and holding his head. “I think I’m going to barf...” he moaned, holding his stomach. He looked behind him, noticing that he completely missed his target—namely, landing with Cassia.

He brushed his dusty arms and growled, “That’s the last time I’ll listen to one of Matheus’ crazy ideas.” His ears twitched, then he turned toward the shack, noticing a pale blue light glowing within.

He looked back to the ongoing battle. The Guild Pokémon’s yells of defeat echoed, and he could see Cassia and Matheus speedily dispatching them. *‘They don’t need me.’*

Despite his urge to rejoin the others, he entered into the hovel, entranced by the light. He brushed past cobwebs and broken beams, ignoring the dried blood and ruined furniture all around him. At the far end of the ruin, a disheveled Pokémon stood in front of the source of the light.

Lawrence squinted his eyes at the brightness and asked, “Who are you?” The Pokémon turned, and the light dimmed, revealing it to be a Xatu.

The Xatu’s feathers were discordant and matted, and its wings were spread apart, revealing the dark and unintelligible symbols on its chest. Its beak chipped and crooked over years of misuse, the eyes lay hidden behind a thick white cloth tied around its head.

“You have come. As predicted,” he said in a monotonous tone, closing its wings.

“What do you mean? Who are you?” Lawrence said, holding his paws as if ready to attack.

The Xatu turned his head toward his paws. “You fear me. As expected.” He stiffly turned back around. “I am Tursha, a Prophet of Arceus. I paid my sight in order to see more clearly—” He lifted his wings. “—the will of the Creator.” The blue light appeared again, forcing Lawrence to cover his eyes.

The light faded, and Lawrence gaped at the disheveled Xatu. “You’re saying you can see the future?” Arceus or not, he knew that Xatu could see glimpses of coming events, and if trained, could make accurate predictions.

The Xatu jerked its head to the right, then nodded. “Yes. I see many things—a void in the sky...a realm of towers and machines...all created by a species not known to Equivos.”

Amazed that he knew of this, Lawrence went to speak, but Tursha held up a wing, halting him. “I have mere seconds to send my message. To find what you seek, go to the Arceist Temple within the Faelyn jungle, past the peaks of Xilo. I will await you there.” He clapped his wings together, and in a flash of blue light, he disappeared.

Before Lawrence could ponder the events that had just happened before him, a voice called out, “Lawrence, are you in there?”

He turned around and pushed past the cobwebs, finding Matheus standing at the entrance. The Legend sighed with relief, stepping aside. “Good. We were worried about you. All the Guild Pokémon have been taken care of; it's time for us to leave and wait till morning.” As Lawrence walked past, he clapped a paw on his back and chuckled. “Nice going back there. I’ve always wanted to see someone roll like that.”

Lawrence held his tongue, knowing that Matheus would make some smart comment about it. He ran up the side of the mountain, leaving Matheus at the shack.

The Legend went to follow, but stopped, giving the shack a suspicious look. “Something’s not right...” he peeked his head inside.

The ground beneath it suddenly shook, and he scrambled back out. The shack crumbled and the ground beneath it gave way to gravity, tumbling down the peak and bringing the grisly remains of the property with it.

Matheus stared at it in astonishment, considering the chances of such an event happening. Shortly after, he shook his head, then ran up to follow Lawrence.

## Chapter 16

*A knock came at the door to Lawrence's room. He sat in front of his desk, poring over a book in front of him. His bed was made and his shelves bare, and in the corner lay an empty suitcase.*

*The door opened. And his mother walked into the room. "Are you sure you want to go on this next wilderness trek? You've been missing meetings because of your training for it, and I'm feeling concerned for you."*

*"Don't worry; it'll only be a week, just like last time." Lawrence replied, still reading from the book.*

*His mother peered over his shoulder. "What are you reading?"*

*Lawrence flipped the page. "'Pokémon and Evolution.' Why?"*

*"That's a book from that Unovan university, isn't it?"*

*"Why do you care?"*

*"Because, Lawrence, they don't have the same standards as us. They see Pokémon as savages, and only bearable because we train them." She shivered and crossed her arms.*

*"Honestly, I don't see why they see Pokémon like that."*

*"Maybe cause they're right," Lawrence muttered.*

*"What was that?"*

*"Nothing." He looked at the clock sitting next to his bed, then closed the book. "It's getting late. I have to leave early tomorrow, so I'll be getting to sleep."*

*"Right." His mother sighed, putting a hand on her cheek. "Is there anything you want to talk about? You've just been so...quiet, since your last trip."*

*Lawrence shook his head, standing up. “No, I’m fine.” He took a glance at a pamphlet sitting underneath the book. It showed a large stone building with statues of a black and a white dragon. Underneath it was the words, ‘University of Unova’.*

*His mother held him close, hugging him tightly. “I love you.”*

*Lawrence stiffly allowed her to do so, wanting free, but at the same time, knowing that she needed it more than him.*

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Aerav Aerodactyl awoke in a cave, aching and sore. Around him, three Geodude hovered about and watched over him. The still-dark morning could be seen from the entrance of the cave and the chiseled window over his head. On the rock-hewn shelves, small vials and pictures sat, gathering dust and grime in the air.

The aged Aerodactyl stirred, leaning on his wing. A Geodude gently pushed him down. “You are weak. We should be grateful that those Lucario stopped Captain Loran when they did.”

Aerav coughed, his eyes widening. “Lucario?” he said in disbelief. “They were all killed when the Guild took over.”

Another Geodude shrugged. “It doesn’t change the fact that they came; we saw them ourselves, along with a black Golurk and a masked Zoroark.”

Aerav closed his eyes, remembering the blurred vision of the onyx golem. He remembered its strangely-warm grasp, and the rush of wind as he carried him away.

Another Geodude spat a pebble from his mouth. “I don’t trust the Zoroark. It had dark powers; it weakened the Water Pokémon, to the point that they could hardly walk. Who’s to say it wouldn’t do the same to us?”

“But it fought with the Lucario *and* the Golurk that saved Aerav. It must be some good.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that it’s a Zoroark. You remember what Arthus did.” The Geodude shuddered, dust falling from his body.

Aerav nodded sadly, lifting his head. Muffled voices could be heard outside, and Graveler crossed by the door speedily. “What’s going on?”

The argumentative Geodude floated to the door, then exclaimed, “It’s the Golurk from before! He’s with a Gardevoir and a Gallade!” He furrowed his brow in confusion. “And a... Watchog?”

“I must meet him; he may know where the Lucario came from,” Aerav exclaimed, waveringly standing up. The other two Geodude looked at each other, then pinned themselves underneath the Aerodactyl’s wings, helping him shuffle outside the door.

Upon exiting, the Geodudes’ jaws dropped. What seemed to be all the Pokémon in the village--Water and Rock--had come out to meet the Golurk and his companions. The Gardevoir sat on the Golurk’s shoulders, while the Gallade and Watchog stood next to them, keeping back the vast throngs of Pokémon from interfering with them.

The Gardevoir cleared her throat, then said, “You were recently freed from Guild control. Just last night, in fact. I know because our friend, Grom Golurk, told us of his fight here with the Guild. He wanted us to come teach you what we know about a Legend named Arceus, and have you learn what he would have you do.” She held up a strange black device and tapped it, then said:

I created Pokémon not only to grow closer to me, but also to themselves. Their powers that I blessed them with are to be used for peace and creation, not war and destruction.

For I say that unless you do these things, you shall not be saved on the Day of Desolation, the day the Legend of Destruction shall come and take back what I have given to my creations: the very breath of Life.

The Gardevoir lifted her head and exclaimed, “Both Water and Rock Pokémon must treat each other equally! We are not to use our abilities to take advantage of one another, said by Arceus himself.” She gestured to the crowd. “Do you understand?”

The Rock Pokémon nodded and agreed audibly, while the Water Pokémon shifted uneasily. One Lombre strode forward and said, “But what about Guildmaster Dusknair? He’ll be coming in under an hour!”

The Gardevoir slid down the Golurk’s arm, then stepped toward the Lombre. “As long as you follow Arceus, all will be well.” She looked toward the Gallade and

Watchog, who both nodded. She looked back toward the crowd and explained, “I’m afraid we must be going now. I would stay longer to answer your questions, but I must remain as far away as I can from Guildmaster Dusknoir.” The Pokémon made their displeasure known to her, shouting for her to stay and teach them more about this silenced deity.

She joined with the Watchog and Gallade, then started to walk down the path to the exit. The Golurk’s remained behind, searching through the crowd, then saw Aerav. He pointed at him and said, “Gra-haw!”

The Gardevoir looked back and saw who he pointed to. She smiled and said, “I’m glad to see you well. Grom’s the one who rescued you from Loran and his Guild Pokémon. “

Aerav nodded weakly. “Indeed. I wanted to thank him for his service. I was the leader of Jareth before Loran took over, and—unless otherwise said—I would like to take the mantle once more.” He looked toward the Water Pokémon. “is that alright with you?”

The Water Pokémon remained silent, until one Poliwrath stepped forward, scowling. His face weakened, then he knelt and rested his fist on the ground. “I’ve seen you with the Rock Pokémon. You treat them like your equals; more than Loran ever did for us Water Pokémon.” He looked up. “If you’d give us that sort of respect, then I will follow you.”

Soon, the other Water Pokémon followed suit, with only the imprisoned Guild Pokémon, including Loran Azumarill, not doing so. Now distracted by the restored leadership, the citizens of Jareth failed to notice Grom, Cassia, Lawrence and Matheus slip away.

Aerav, however, did. He wished to have been able to talk more with them, but knew, somehow, that he would have another chance.

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Lawrence leapt over the rock, dodging out of sight. Matheus and Cassia crouched next to him, the Zoroark peeking over the rock to look. “You think they’ll be alright?” she asked.

Matheus nodded. “Given that the Guild Pokémon are out of commission and that they seem to be unified, Arthus won’t stand a chance.”

“What’s this ‘Day of Desolation’ I keep hearing about?” Lawrence asked, confused by her statement in Jareth.

“It’s essentially the day Equivos will be destroyed.” Matheus answered. “Yveltal will come from his tomb and take the life of all who remain in Serenita, then the other Legends will raze the land. The only Pokémon who will survive are the followers of Arceus.”

“But didn’t you say that Arthus came out when Yveltal woke up?” Lawrence said, referring to Cassia.

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean he’d do that right away.” Cassia reached for the Pokédex at Lawrence’s arm.

Matheus stopped her and said, “Proclamations 21: ‘All work is done by my time, not by the time of my creations.’ I can assure you that Yveltal is very much awake but is busy making...preparations. Suffice to say, he’s stirring up something in the south.” He tapped his snout, then walked toward Grom. “Better get ready to leave. Gardner will be here soon, and I’d rather not fight him unless we have to.” He stopped, turning back to Lawrence. “You never told us if anything happened in that house.”

Lawrence remembered Tursha Xatu and what he said. *‘To find what you seek, go to the Arceist Temple within the Faelyn jungle, past the peaks of Xilo’*. He could only mean that he knew a way home; a way back to Unova.

Lawrence described the events that happened in the shack to his companions. Afterward, Matheus rubbed his chin, closing his eyes. “Hmm...the Arceist Temple is crawling with Guild Pokémon. It’s near the main settlement, Virona, so it wouldn’t take all that long to get there.” He shook his head. “Still, this Tursha character concerns me. I felt a dark aura near that shack, and likely would have found it if it didn’t collapse. I doubt that any good would come from listening to this Xatu.”

“But I haven’t had *any* leads on getting home until I met him! He might know where a dimensional break is!”

“Xatu are known to see into the future, but it’s always changing, and based on what I know, it’s no guarantee that he will get you home.”

Cassia came between them and said, “Regardless of whether or not he can help Lawrence, I think it’d be worth it to go to the temple. I’ve always wanted to see how the Arceists worshiped before Arthus took over.”

“Graw-graw!” Grom agreed, nodding his head.

Matheus groaned, throwing his arms in the air. “Looks like I’ve been outvoted. Very well, we can go after we’re done with Virona, but we’re going to Furnek straight after!” He stretched briefly then exclaimed, “I’ll meet you at the tallest mountain. Cryus will be at the top, but it’ll take too much of Grom’s energy to make the trip.” He sprinted down the across the narrow pathway ahead of him.

Lawrence turned to Cassia. “What’s his problem?”

Cassia shrugged, then turned to Grom. “You ready to go? “

“Graw-grawm!” he replied, saluting.

Cassia and Lawrence climbed onto his back, then with a flare of crimson light, they rocketed across the sky, making way to the tallest peak of the Xilo Mountains.

~~~~~

Arthus crept along the borders of Jareth, carefully inspecting the now-unified city. Graveler lined up at the top of the hill to roll down to the entrance, and Marill and Floatzel gathered around the rooftops to fire Water Guns and Hydro Pumps. Seismitoad and Boldore stood in the alleyways, ready to charge out and beat him to death. All the while, a Noctowl flew overhead, which Arthus knew had to have Foresight—one of the few moves that could destroy his illusions.

He nodded, impressed. “Nice preparations, but little match for someone like myself.” He shook his head and continued around Jareth. “But I have no time. While I might have a location to summon Hoopa, I still have to get the bottle itself, and it could be anywhere here. The sooner I find it, the better.”

‘First time I’ve seen you dismiss the opportunity to kill someone—Arceists especially.’

Arthus seethed, nearly slipping on a loose patch of gravel. “You’ve got some nerve to insult yourself. Remember, I’m just your shadow; I’m everything you would’ve done had you not hidden it behind your precious facade.”

‘At least I had the decency to respect Life. Corrina was not worth control over it!’

“But you didn’t know that at the time. Remember what Gregorius had done?”

‘...Yes.’

Arthus clambered across the narrow path, looking to the other peaks. “Then you know exactly why you had to take the chance.” He bared his teeth and added, “And if you ever want to see her again, leave me in peace! The Prison Bottle only has to be found and we’ll be set!”

‘Hoopa is a malicious trickster, and he will surely know that the Seal can be used against him; he always demands a price for feats of strength, so what do you think he’ll require, and how do you plan on paying him?’

Arthus blinked, staring up for a moment. He scowled and continued. “I’m working on that.”

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Minutes after Arthus’ contention with himself, Grom landed on the plateau, just below the harrowing ascent to the highest city in all of Serenita: Cryus. The early morning light did nothing to mitigate the swirling and raging appearance of the peak. Surrounding the isolated settlement was nothing but ice and snow, slickening the rock beneath it, causing outsiders to think twice about visiting such a location.

In the shade of the cleft above, Lawrence clambered down the Golurk’s back, followed by Cassia. The giant then turned to them and pointed to himself. “Graw-gro-hawm.”

“Go ahead and find a Life deposit; we can wait here,” Cassia replied, digging through her bag. Grom stomped off to find a recharging location, leaving Cassia and Lawrence on their own.

Cassia pulled out her sketchbook, then flipped to a blank page. She sat on a rock and said, “It’ll take a little while for Matheus to make it over here, so might as well work on something.” She pulled a piece of charcoal out of her bag, then began to sketch.

Lawrence sat on the ground next to Cassia’s rock, leaning his back on it. Careful not to draw too close to the edge of the trail, he stretched his arms.

Still sketching, Cassia said, “I want to understand your feelings about Arceus a little better. We’re you a very active Arceist?”

Lawrence restrained a groan. “I’d rather not talk about it.”

Cassia scowled. “I’m only trying to help. It’s my job.”

“I left them a long time ago. I don’t remember that much.”

“Were they like me?”

“Nobody’s like you.”

“In a good way?”

“Yes, in a good way! You’re the only person I can be open with!”

“Then be open with me on how you were as an Arceist.”

Lawrence looked up, knowing that he was caught in her trap. She looked down, waiting for his answer.

He sighed and looked back down, huddling his legs close to his chest. “Well...I was actually pretty good. I didn’t have any problems. I attended every meeting, I listened to every sermon...I even had plenty of friends. Life was good.” The smile that formed faded. “Until I realized it was all a lie. Arceus may be real, but he never really did anything for me. He didn’t help me in the good or bad times, and never will.” He lay his head against his knees, then closed his eyes.

The Zoroark above him looked up, scratching the charcoal against her cheek. She raised the length, then said, “Have you ever prayed? Did you ever read those Arcean Texts?”

Keeping his head low, Lawrence replied, “No, and no. Those Arcean Texts held little of value, even to the priests. As for praying...well, I never thought of it.”

“You never learned about it?”

“I never thought it would work.”

Cassia came off the rock and sat next to Lawrence. “You never had faith? Even then?”

Lawrence looked up. “Yes, but why does that matter?”

Cassia reached over Lawrence and pulled off the Pokédex, receiving no restraint from the Lucario. She quickly brought up the Tome and scanned through it quickly. She began to read:

*A certain Timburr wanted to grow a tree, so that he might have wood for his house. He found a seed, then planted it in the ground, expecting to have a grown tree in the coming days.*

*When no tree came about, he left the seed and planted another, hoping for better results. As more days passed, he continued planting seeds, all to what seemed to be no results.*

*Eventually, he stopped and bartered for his wood, believing that seeds never grow to be trees.*

*Years later, all the seeds he had planted became mighty trees, fit to build a whatever house the Timburr would have wanted. But he had long since moved away, living in a small house, never to return.*

She lowered the Pokédex and said, “So, was the Timburr foolish by planting the seeds?”

Lawrence, not seeing the purpose in the story, replied, “No, he wasn’t foolish in that way. He just didn’t wait long enough or *do* enough for that matter.”

“Would it have been better if he didn’t plant them at all?”

“No, he made a forest! It surely would’ve helped himself if he simply waited long enough.”

Cassia poked Lawrence on the chest. “Exactly. The seeds are your faith, and the Timburr is you. You grew up expecting something for your faith, but you failed to notice what it brought since you left it behind. After your experience with the Nidoking, you left it all behind, including the blessings from Arceus you would have gotten.” She held a

hand to her chest. “For me, it didn’t seem like a blessing to leave Arthus at first, or for Matheus to leave, or even for... Arianne to die.” She held her breath, wiping her eyes. “But...but I know all of that needed to happen. I’ve become a stronger Pokémon because of it, and I’ve helped bless so many Pokémon because of it.” She looked back at Lawrence. “And you probably would have too, if you didn’t leave him when you had hard times.”

Lawrence stared, processing what Cassia had said. She stared back firmly, completely confident in what she had just said. Finally, Lawrence turned away and groaned, rubbing his eyes. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?” Cassia replied, cocking her head.

He slapped his paws on the ground. “That! Figure out exactly what people think, then say what they should’ve done! You just do it so perfectly, like when you fight, or when you draw! I’m just the guy following you around with no idea of where to go and what to do!” He let out a sigh, leaning back on the rock and letting his legs fall flat on the ground. “I just want to be home. To be myself. I have to do all this just to get there.”

Cassia—blushing because of Lawrence’s compliments--turned away, holding a hand to her face. Her face brightened, then sidling closer to Lawrence, said, “Don’t be so hard on yourself; you’re more than just the guy who follows me. Who helped me buy a new bag? Who helped save the Pokémon in a burning town? Who stood up against the Guild when I wouldn’t? You might not be the best fighter in the world, but you have one of the best hearts I’ve seen.”

Lawrence gave her a sideways glance. “Don’t forget that I’m the one who got beaten by a bunch of punk Scyther.”

“All to save Buneary who had just lost their mom! You know so much about how Pokémon act, like with that Machop back in Hydren. You knew how to make him listen, and I’m sure that you know a whole lot more than me about how to do that.”

Lawrence let a small smile split across his face. “You...you really think all that?”

Cassia nodded. “Most of all, you’re just so...open. You can go up to someone and talk with them like you’re good friends. Me, on the other hand.” She cringed, brushing



her claws through her mane. “I...can’t. I’d like to, but I’m always so afraid of them finding out who...*what*, I am. I don’t want to get close to anyone in case I’m found out. They’ll be... afraid of me.” Her ears drooped. “That’s not what I want. I want them to listen to me, so I always need to hide...hide what I really am.”

Lawrence thought for a moment, then said, “Well...I figured out that that you’re a Zoroark, and I wasn’t afraid of you.” She gave him a knowing look.

He shrugged and added, “Alright, I was at first. You caught me off-guard, what with Gardner trying to capture us.” He shook his head. “Point is, I figured it out, and even if I was angry at first, I knew you were a good Pokémon, and you never wanted to hurt me. It doesn’t matter if you’re a Zoroark; you are a great Pokémon no matter what.”

Cassia put a hand over her mouth, then with a wide smile, hugged Lawrence. “Thank you...thank you so much.”

For once in a long time, Lawrence didn’t retract from the embrace. He slowly wrapped an arm around Cassia, not noticing the dreadlocks on his head slowly rise with a blue glow.

“Grom?”

“Gah!” Cassia and Lawrence leapt away from each other in shock. The ill-timed Golurk stared down at them, standing behind the rock with his head tilted to the side.

Lawrence stood up and hastily exclaimed, “How do you keep doing that?”

“Graaw...haw-haw-haw.” The Golurk put one hand over his mouth and pointed the other at them. He then put his hands together and chuckled.

Realizing what he meant, the Lucario and Zoroark stepped away from each other.

“Graw-haw! Haw-haw-haw-haw!” Grom bellowed, stamping his foot and holding his sides. Lawrence and Cassia smiled at each other awkwardly, then looked away, blushing.

“Whew...what a hike! Don’t remember the trail being *that* long fifty years ago.” Matheus came up the trail, steadily trekking upward. He stopped at the edge of the shaded cleft and propped an arm against the wall, giving the still-laughing Grom a perplexed look. “Say, what’s got him howling harder than an Emboar at a drinking party?”

“Nothing!” Cassia and Lawrence both exclaimed.

Matheus gave them a studious look, then turned to Grom, who finally started to calm, wiping a faux tear from his eye. The Legend shrugged, then paced toward Lawrence and Cassia. “I dunno, but it must’ve been good. Shame I missed it.”

*“Actually, it would’ve been worse if you were around...”* Lawrence thought to himself.

“Right then, “ Matheus stepped back out from the cleft and gazed up at the peak. “Since up there isn’t very good climbing weather at the moment, Lawrence, how about we get some more training in? Always does good when we likely have a bunch of Fire Pokémon to get back in line.”

“Fire Pokémon?” Lawrence asked, groaning inwardly at the mention of more training with Matheus.

The Legend nodded. “Yep. Some years back, I took a visit to Cryus and found that the Fire Pokémon were the leadership, likely because of their natural advantage against the local Ice Pokémon. There’s not too many of them, but the Fire Pokémon are feared and respected around there.” He shook his head briefly and pounded his fists. “But enough talk. Let’s fight.”

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Gardner put the finishing touches on the needlework for his chair. He pulled out the needle and tossed it away, then sat on the chair. “One of my few real comforts...”

The door opened, and heavy, metallic footsteps followed. A densely rusted Metagross ascended the stairs, a pile of books and papers sitting on his head. His cold, black eyes flitted around the room as his internal computer whirled.

He stopped next to Gardner with a shudder, loosening some rust. “The books you requested, Guildmaster,” he said in a deep, robotic voice.

Gardner leaned forward and hefted the stack of books with little exertion. “How has the library been for you, Martre? As dreary as ever?”

“Being Assistant Guildmaster requires high levels of organization and analysis. If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t have found any of the materials you showed Arthus.”

Gardner humphed, setting the stack on the floor. “And you don’t how grateful I am. I’ve been threatened to no end by that Zoroark.” He searched through the books and collected a leaf of paper. “Not to mention his desire to irritate me to no end.”

Martre sighed, his metal plates shuddering. “If it weren’t for his ability to make good on his threats, he wouldn’t be the one pulling the strings.”

Gardner crumpled the paper and threw it away. “Right. It doesn’t help that my Guild Pokemon are useless in stopping Cassia and that Arthus is too attached to her to actually finish her off.” He pointed outside and continued, “Not to mention that we’re isolated here. If we were located somewhere like Saunte, we could coordinate our actions better. Now we have dwindling supplies and a loss of Pokemon.”

Martre’s eyes flashed. “Have you considered a coup against Arthus? The combined might of the Guild would give us a greater chance against him, and if we succeed, we wouldn’t have to devote resources to his insane plans.”

Gardner rubbed his chin, looking up. “Hmm...before recently, I would’ve disagreed. But after seeing how useless he is at actually completing his goals, it might be better if he’s out of the picture entirely.”

“And we wouldn’t need to worry about him slaying us all just to bring us back to life—with no free will at that.”

Gardner hovered upright with a laugh. “Yes, yes! That part of his plan has always been the most unbearable.” He tapped against Martre’s head and added, “You know I selected you primarily for your brains, right?”

Martre looked up at Gardner distastefully. “As always.”

Gardner moved away and folded his hands behind his back. “Good. Now, let’s consider what to do when he comes back...”

Chapter 17

Eighteen-year-old Lawrence lay under a carefully crafted pile of branches, a notebook, and pencil in his hands. He watched a herd of Stantler graze in a lush field close to the almighty Mount Coronet, the desolate landscape a stark contrast to the emerald grasses and shady trees. Cricketot chirruped happily, and Pachirisu hopped through the trees, rivaling the Pikachu in their hunt for berries and nuts. All the while, the Stantler grazed, paying no attention to the other wildlife—or Lawrence.

*He couldn't help but admire the simple atmosphere. **'Even after two years, it's all the same: the breeze, the grass—even the Pokémon. They always remained the same, searching for food, shelter, and mates, just as they had always done.'***

*He felt a vibration at his leg and scowled. He pulled out a rectangular box and unfolded it. A series of buttons lay on the bottom half, and a screen illuminated on the top. The text box in the center had a message: **Will you be home for church tomorrow? – Mom.***

Hurriedly, Lawrence typed, 'No, too far.' He tapped the 'Send' button and cringed; the button's click reverberated through the air.

The Stantler stopped their grazing and huffing. They lifted their heads and searched for the source of the sound. Ears twitching and eyes scouring, the jewels on their antlers began to glow with an ethereal light.

Lawrence silently put the phone back into his pocket and closed his notebook. The Stantler stamped their feet, agitated by being unable to find the source. Lawrence held

the notebook closer, remaining as still as possible. The largest Stantler called out and stamped his feet—right in front of Lawrence.

The leader charged forward, narrowly avoiding the bump in his way. The other Stantler followed, each hopping and prancing around Lawrence as they fled. He lay under the cover, desperately wishing that none of the Stantler's hooves would crush his body.

They continued to rush by him until, finally, the final Stantler clopped away. Lawrence waited for a minute, then pushed himself up. The branches and leaves fell away from him, untouched by the startled Pokémon.

He wheezed a sigh of relief, looking back toward the Stantler's direction. "Last time I'll use the phone out here again..." He turned back around and froze.

A Houndour growled at him, baring his teeth and stooping low. Two other Houndour stood behind him, and another two approached from the side, all focused on Lawrence.

Lawrence took a step back. The leader huffed out smoke and howled. Lawrence turned and ran, and the Houndour followed, barking and howling at their prey.

Lawrence reached into the pack on his back and pulled out a silver spray can. He shook it vigorously, then sprayed its contents into the face of a Houndour. It whined and tripped on its feet, rolling on the ground and trying to rub off the substance.

He sprayed another Houndour with similar results, but on the third, the can weakly spat and fizzled. Lawrence cursed and threw it at the Houndour, causing it to growl more fiercely. Its mouth opened wide, and fiery sparks gathered into its throat.

Lawrence reached into his bag again, reaching for anything he could. His fingers met with a metal rod, which he pulled out and extended into a large pole. He focused the end on the Houndour, then swatted its head.

The gathering fireball flew out of its jaws and into the leaves, bursting apart and catching the branches on fire. The flame grew, and a column of smoke rose into the air.

Lawrence beat the Houndour away with the pole, then did the same with the other. The leader however, grabbed it with his jaws and yanked it from his hands.

A cliff suddenly came into view, and Lawrence was forced to stop. He kept against the wall, reaching for a sizable rock beneath him. The Houndour barked and growled, then leapt for Lawrence's throat.

"Keeaw!"

A rush of grey feathers pounded into the Houndour, knocking it aside. It stood up, searching for the source of the attack. The rush came again, revealing itself to be a giant Staraptor, larger than any Lawrence had seen.

The Staraptor landed on the ground, then flapped its wings powerfully toward the Houndour. The dog kept its legs rooted in the ground, the ground scraping underneath him as it slid back. It opened its mouth and gathered another fireball, aiming for the Staraptor.

The Staraptor halted its flapping and charged toward the Houndour. It scratched the Houndour with its talons and pecked into its hide. The Houndour's fireball flew into the rock wall behind Lawrence, completely missing its target. Finally, the Staraptor relented, and the Houndour limped away, whining.

The Staraptor turned to face Lawrence. It studied him for a moment, then turned its gaze to the cliff. "Keeaw!"

A man clad in green suddenly appeared at the edge of the cliff, looking down towards Lawrence. "You alright down there?"

Lawrence looked up and made a sigh of relief. "Yeah...I'm fine." He turned back to the Staraptor. "Thanks for the help."

"Don't mention it." The man hopped down the wall and stood next to the Staraptor, petting its feathers. "Striker and I were just doing our rounds when we saw some smoke around. I left Spray, my Pelipper, over there to deal with it, but decided I should probably see what caused it. Turns out it was a bunch of Houndour!" He shook his head. "Haven't seen any around here before."

Lawrence walked past the man and took back his pole. "If a Ranger didn't see them before, then that means I'm right."

"Right about what?" the ranger asked.

“That the lack of predators in the area has led to a Stantler explosion, and now Houndour are moving in from the south to balance things out.” He held the notebook out to the ranger. “Feel free to take a look.”

The ranger accepted the notebook and flipped through it, nodding his head as he read. “Looks about accurate to me. You’ve got all the usual Pokémon around here too.” He looked up. “How long have you been studying the Mount Coronet Reserve?”

“About a week.”

*“A **week**?” the ranger handed back the book, shaking his head and laughing. “Better work than I could’ve come up with. You’ve got a head on those shoulders for knowing how Pokémon work.”*

“Thanks.” Lawrence took back the notebook, then looked behind him. “Better find that can of Max Repel I threw away then. It ran out just as the Houndour came around.”

The ranger sighed. “Bummer.” Lawrence began to walk away, then the ranger said, “Those Houndour wouldn’t have been so much trouble if you had a Pokémon with you. Don’t you have one?”

Lawrence paused. He turned back to the ranger with a grim look. “I like studying them. I like seeing how they work. But I don’t like using them or interacting with them.” He continued through the woods, ignoring the ranger’s stark surprise.

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The two Lucario stood apart from each other, each holding up their paws in a combative stance. Cassia sat next to Grom, scribbling away in her sketchpad, while the Golurk sat on the ground, sapping away some Life deposited below him.

Matheus rolled his shoulder and said, “This time you’re on the defensive. After seeing me and how I defended myself from your attacks the last time, this shouldn’t be too hard.”

“But I didn’t pay much attention to that!” Lawrence exclaimed.

Matheus shrugged. “Your loss.” He rushed forward, raising his paws high.

Lawrence beat away the swinging blow, then another, clumsily stepping back. Matheus swept for his legs, but Lawrence made a small hop in response, then sent a fist toward Matheus' face.

The elder Lucario caught the blow and sent another toward Lawrence's chest. The other stepped to the side—narrowly dodging it—then punched Matheus across the jaw.

The Legend stepped away, rubbing his mouth. He grinned. "Well done. Managed to hit me."

Lawrence grinned in response, lowering his arms. "About time."

Matheus shook his head and chuckled. "You messed up."

"Messed up what?"

Matheus kicked Lawrence in the chest, forcing him to double over and wheeze. "Don't let your guard down."

"Graw—Haw—Haw!" Grom bellowed, clapping his hands heavily. Cassia looked over from her sketchbook, unimpressed.

Matheus bowed for his performance. "Thank you, thank you—"

Lawrence grabbed his leg and yanked it back, causing him to fall onto his chest with a groan.

He rolled onto his back in amazement. Lawrence shakily stood up and wheezed, "Don't—let your guard down."

"Gah-haw-haw-haw!" Grom rolled onto his side and shook with laughter, his light shifting in magnitude with every heave.

Cassia giggled as well, covering her mouth and looking away. "Hahaha—You certainly—hahaha—got him there—haha!"

Matheus stood up and good-naturedly smiled, brushing off his chest and back. "Yes, very good, very good. Certainly more than what Cassia managed to do to me the first time we met."

At this Cassia stopped laughing. "I managed to scratch you!"

"And I managed to pin you, so I'd call that even," Matheus replied. Cassia muttered to herself, returning to her sketching.



Grom pushed himself up, choking back his laugh. “G-Graw-haw. Gro-hawm!

“No, we are *not* bringing *that* up!” Cassia exclaimed.

Matheus sighed, then turned back to Lawrence, who now had recovered from Matheus’ blow. “You’ve certainly gotten better, but you’ve got a long way before you have a chance of beating me in a proper duel.” He patted him on the back, then took several steps back. “Let’s go again, and this time, don’t worry about me getting in a cheap shot.”

“You had it coming for a while,” Lawrence replied, stepping back as well.

They clashed once more, and Grom continued to watch. He heard a scraping sound behind him. He looked back and saw Cassia rubbing at the paper with clay, removing the charcoal mistake.

He pushed himself up and came around to her, leaning on the rock she sat on. “Graw-gro-grawm?”

Cassia sighed, setting down the clay. “Yeah, they’re having fun, aren’t they?” She lifted a charcoal length, scratching at the end to make it sharp. “They get along pretty well, being Lucario and all. What do you think?”

Grom swiveled his head toward the Lucario, watching the two push at each other’s paws in a wrestling match, each with a smirk. “Gro-graw.” He shrugged, turning back to Cassia. “Ha-hawm-hawm.”

Cassia continued on the mountainous landscape on the page. “We haven’t been talking to each other much, I know.” She sighed and looked up. “I’ve just...I’ve just been helping Lawrence. He just...*feels* like the sort of Pokémon to follow Arceus. Yet he doesn’t.” She looked back at him, watching the Lucario practice a swinging kick next to Matheus. “Plus, he’s leaving. That Xatu will help bring him home, and he’ll hopefully be changed back to a human.” She stared off in space, then stared back at the page, her charcoal remaining still.

Grom put an arm over her shoulder. “Gro-graw-graw-grawm. Graw-gram.” He pointed back at Lawrence. “Gro-haw-haw-hawm.”

Cassia blushed, looking away. “He’s just a friend. I don’t...” She considered what she was about to say, then lowered her claw. “Anyway...you’re right that I don’t really want to see him leave. He’s...he’s the only Pokémon I’ve really felt comfortable around—aside from you and Matheus, of course.”

Grom gave her a nudge, chuckling. “Graw—*haw*.”

Cassia slapped his arm, jabbing a claw at him. “I told you, it’s *not* like that!”

Grom continued to tease her while Matheus and Lawrence settled down. They sat next to each other on the ground, panting and recovering.

Matheus pointed at them, their conversation unable to be heard from their point. “She’s different. Not so shy, and definitely more playful. She’s had to worry so much about herself that she hadn’t really made any friends.” He chuckled, nudging Lawrence’s arm. “Until *you* came around. Amazing how two weeks can help out a girl, huh?”

Lawrence nodded slowly, considering his words. Cassia laughed, leaning back and giving Grom a playful slap. The Golurk shoved her off the rock in response, laughing as well. Cassia leapt onto his back and jabbed her claws into his neck, causing him to laugh uncontrollably and totter onto the rock with a crash.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

Lawrence pulled himself away from the play-fight. “What?”

Matheus smirked. “Travelling has a funny way of making you grow fonder of the Pokémon you travel with. Same goes for fighting, eating, sleeping...everything really.” He cleared his throat and sheepishly looked up. “I, uh...never got along well with the ladies, though, so...another thing you’ve done better.”

Lawrence gaped and stuttered, “I-I hardly know her! I don’t even know any girls at home!”

Matheus clapped a paw on his shoulder and shook it. “Probably because you haven’t gone looking! Tell me, what did you do in your spare time back home?”

“Well, I read books, listen to music...” Lawrence trailed off. He wasn’t used to talking about himself in *that* sense.

Matheus yawned, waving him off. “Yeesh, no wonder you don’t have a love life.” He pushed Lawrence’s head back to Cassia. “Now tell me this: how’ve you been spending your time since you got here?”

“Walking till my paws get sore.”

Matheus rolled his eyes. “Besides that. I noticed when we stop for Grom’s charging breaks that she goes and reads the Arceist Tome to you from the Pokédex. Even if it’s only for a few moments, she wants to do that.”

“She just wants to prove that I should be an Arceist...” Lawrence replied. He couldn’t help but feel unsure in his conviction of the religion—especially after his continued discussions with the priestess.

“She does that because she cares. Why would she spend so much time on a stubborn Pokémon like you otherwise?”

Lawrence scowled. “I’m not *that* stubborn.”

Before Matheus could reply, Cassia walked over and said, “It looks like the storm’s cleared up over there. Think we should get going?”

Matheus nodded. “Indeed, we should, but first, I’d like to take a look at the Trevenant’s prophecy.” He pointed at Lawrence. You have some rather interesting stuff going on.”

The Zoroark brought out her sketchpad and flipped to the page with the prophecy, then set it on Matheus’ lap. He scanned through it, with Cassia and Matheus studying it over his shoulders.

Matheus rubbed his chin. “Hmm... *A price of mind must fully be paid, or the Realm of the Keeper will forever make slaves.*”

“Who’s the Keeper?” Lawrence asked.

“The Keeper is the Pokémon who will come on the Day of Desolation and bring all the surviving Pokémon of Equivos to a place of safety.” Matheus scratched his ear, giving the prophecy a strange look. “But forever make slaves? Doesn’t sound like anywhere *I’d* like to go.”

Cassia pulled the sketchpad up higher. “This entire thing’s about the Keeper, I mean, just look at the first few lines: “*A Keeper once was but now he becomes a treader of realms and deceiver of self.*” She looked over to Lawrence. “Lawrence, aren’t you a ‘treader of realms’? You *did* come from a different dimension.”

“But I’m not a ‘deceiver of self,’ and I know nothing about this Keeper,” Lawrence replied. Saying ‘deceiver of self’ caused Lawrence to wince. He hurriedly pointed at another portion of the poem and said, “What about ‘*Awaken Aleron as well as the Keeper and Equivos may be reborn to live on?*’”

Matheus’ paw slammed on the page. With a wavering voice he said, “*Aleron* is dead. He can *never* come back.” He forced the pad into Cassia’s claws and stormed toward the mountain. “We’re leaving soon. Get ready,” he growled.

Cassia and Lawrence stared at each other, perplexed about Matheus’ behavior. They and Grom followed him to the peak, then began their ascent.

Few words crossed between them on their way up the icebound peak of Cryus. Rarely was there a defined trail along the way, but despite this, a handhold always seemed to be near. Matheus always remained ahead, warning those below of what dangers lay ahead, while Grom steadily clambered below, ready to catch them if they fell.

By evening, Lawrence dragged himself up the final ledge and rolled onto his back, panting and heaving on the edge. Cassia already sat on a rock, panting just as he did, while Matheus lounged against a scrawny pine, laying his hat across his eyes.

He lifted it and eyed Lawrence. “Oh, come on, the Mountain of Rebirth was a *far* worse climb than this tiny peak.”

Cassia stretched her arms and growled, “Says the two-thousand-year-old Legend! That has got to be the most exhausting thing I’ve ever done!”

Lawrence crawled over by her and exclaimed, “I’m *way* out of shape.”

“Rather surprising, considering you have a new body and all,” Matheus commented, standing straight.

Lawrence groaned. “That doesn’t mean it isn’t tiring!”

Grom clambered over the edge, stepping awkwardly over the edge and stumbling past Lawrence. He looked down at him, then over toward Cassia. “Gro-grow-grawm?” he said, scratching his head.

Cassia sighed and put a hand over her eyes. “Unlike you, we actually get tired. I’m amazed you haven’t noticed by now.”

“Now now, let’s not be irritable; we’ll have to keep a good mood on our scouting of Cryus,” Matheus chided. He walked up to Grom and patted his arm. “I want to talk with you for a little bit about this mission.” The Golurk followed him behind a copse of snow-covered pines, their voices muffled by the distance.

Lawrence sat up and looked toward them, bewildered. “Does Matheus understand what Grom says?”

Cassia shrugged. “I think it’s mostly guesswork. Matheus doesn’t have the same connection that Grom and I have.” She sighed, rubbing her shoulder. “That climb was a lot harder than I thought it would be. Don’t you think so?”

“Yeah. Just like Mount Coronet.” Lawrence studied his surroundings. A thin layer of snow coated the ground, from the whippy pine branches, to the jutting mountain rocks. The evening light poured over the snow, making it appear tangerine all around. Beyond, a collection of tall stone buildings lay surrounded by a thick wall of ice, perched near the edge of the peak.

Lawrence felt his tiredness leave him at the sight. “I haven’t seen anything like *this* though. Back in Sinnoh, we got snow roughly once a year outside Snowpoint, and it wasn’t near as nice as this.”

“What is Sinnoh like? You don’t talk much about it,” Cassia asked, brushing her claws through her mane.

Lawrence blew his breath out slowly. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been there. I guess everyone’s...nice. They aren’t really afraid of each other. You can talk with someone like you’re old friends, even if it’s the first time you’ve met.” He looked up and smiled. “I miss that about it.”

Cassia cocked her head. “Why?”

“Unova’s different. Over there, you only talk with people if you need to, and that’s it. Sure, you talk with friends a lot, but everyone else gets left in the dust. Everyone has different values there, so there’s really no trust amongst strangers.” Lawrence sighed, massaging his temple. “It’s something I’ve learned after living there for a couple years.”

Cassia leaned over toward him. “So, what makes Sinnoh different from Unova? Why is everyone there so friendly, yet everyone in Unova not?”

Lawrence lowered his paw. “I...I guess it’s because practically everyone believes the same thing. Unova has a bunch of people from everywhere, while Sinnoh mostly has natives.

“And what do they all believe in?”

Lawrence lowered his head and closed his eyes. “Arceus.” He imagined how Unova would be if everyone were Arceists like in Sinnoh. *‘People wouldn’t kill or steal as often. Cities could feel safe instead of dangerous. Even Pokémon would live better, because Arceists value them in a far different way. There would be disagreements, but they wouldn’t be as serious as they could be. All of this, because they would believe Arceus would want that from them.’*

He couldn’t believe he never made the connection before. *‘Everyone in Unova always thought it was odd that I’d just go up to someone and talk to them, like friends. I thought it was something about me, but Sinnoh is like that in general. Unova could’ve been like Sinnoh—or Sinnoh like Unova, without Arceism. It is a drive for trust, and without it—’*

He stopped himself. *‘It...feels true...even if Pokemon aren’t like they say. He made no sense in treating Pokemon like humans, but he at least helps us treat each other better. He has **some** good at least.’*

Cassia’s claw held tight to Lawrence’s paw. She shook it and said, “You see it now. You see what Arceus is all about. That look in your eyes...it’s what I see in the other Pokémon I teach.”

Lawrence looked down at her claws, then back toward her. “I...guess it isn’t as bad as I thought it was.” He turned away, pulling back his paw. “But I still don’t get it. If Arceus wants people to treat Pokémon like humans, why don’t Pokémon act like them?”

Cassia's ears lowered briefly, then rose again in understanding. "You're talking about in your world...not mine." She moaned, holding her head. "Sorry, it's just so...confusing, every time you bring your world up. I never even knew such a place existed until you told me, so..."

Lawrence set a paw on her arm, then said firmly, "I would *never* say that about Equivos. You, Grom, Matheus, and everyone else here are far better than anyone I know in Unova."

Cassia paused, then set her hand across Lawrence's paw. "Then why do you want to leave?"

Lawrence opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. He turned away, considering her words, and thinking more about his reasons for seeking a way to escape this foreign world.

Before anything more could be said, Matheus and Grom returned from the pines. The Lucario pointed to Grom and said, "All done here, so let's get going." He stopped, noticing Cassia and Lawrence's glum expressions. "Is there something wrong?"

"No," Lawrence said, "nothing at all." He stood up and proceeded toward Cryus. "Let's get this over with." Matheus looked over to Cassia, who simply nodded her head, and followed Lawrence.

On the bare and icy path to Cryus, Lawrence bowed his head, struggling to think of a suitable answer to Cassia's question: why did he want to leave? *'I miss my parents; I never got to say good-bye, and they're probably panicking about me not talking with them for two weeks. And Valence probably wanted me back, if only to keep the press off their case.'*

He held up a paw, studying the soft, black fur that covered it. *'And I miss having my real body back. There're advantages to being a Lucario; I don't get tired as easily, and I'm faster and stronger. Plus, there's the ability to use aura. I can say I enjoy it now.'* He lowered his paw and closed his eyes. *'But what do I lose? It still feels strange to have a tail, or fur—or to not wear clothes. It just feels more natural to be human.'*

He brushed the bunches of black fur on the back of his head. *'Is it worth leaving Equivos? I don't know if I can even change back, and if I end up with Hanson like this...'*

He shivered. *'I could have lived with giving them a Pokemon before, but now...I just can't, no matter what they do to me. They're just too...human.'*

He felt a paw slide across his shoulder and turned to find Matheus, a small smile across his face. "You doing alright?" he said. Lawrence nodded.

Matheus nodded as well, then sighed. "Just...keep in mind that I'm here to help. Arceus didn't send me just to train you, or to clear out the Guild with Cassia. You're a good Pokémon, Lawrence," he tapped the younger Lucario's head, "Even if there's some work to do up here." He chuckled, then waved his paw toward the rapidly-approaching wall. "Come on; let's see what damage the Guild has made." He ran farther ahead, leaving Lawrence to smile at the eccentric silver Lucario.

They all stopped at the heavy iron gate that covered the sole entrance into the city. Rough stone rooftops poked above the waving and warping sheet of grey ice. The sconces set in the stone surrounding the gate were unlit, as were all the torches that could be seen beyond the wall. No Pokémon were in sight, and no sound emanated from within.

Matheus eyed the sconces and torches curiously. "Strange...last time, they kept them lit, and Fire Pokémon patrolled the area. Ice Pokémon kept making repairs to the wall, even if there was nothing to be fixed." He pressed an eye against the wall for a moment, then leaned back and hmphed. "I see a crack on the other side. Something's not right."

Cassia walked up the iron bars of the gate, looking left and right. "Maybe things have changed since then."

"And Xerneas isn't stuck in a tree. I doubt they changed much in the last thirty years, even with the Guild as it is," Matheus replied, crossing his arms.

Cassia and Matheus continued talking with each other, while Lawrence continued to study the wall. He looked toward the ground near the brink of the peak, and noticed disturbed snow, piled and thrown in disarray.



He stepped to the pile and dug into it, finding blackened flakes and sticks amongst the snow. Digging farther, he gasped and drew back, putting a paw over his mouth. Continuing to stare at the pile, he croaked, “Matheus...”

The Legend held up a paw, stopping his and Cassia’s conversation. He padded toward Lawrence and the pile. He peered into the pile and froze.

Inside, a frostbitten and lacerated Typhlosion curled into a ball, long dead. Propped against him was a sign with a single line engraved in it:

***Freeze the flame!***

~~~~~

Arthus Zoroark ascended the vast peak toward Cryus, forcing himself to climb through the bitter snow and turbulent winds. Dark clouds clustered all around him, and cold penetrated his body despite his incorporeal frame. Ledge after ledge he lifted his hands, clutching onto them for fear of falling.

After several agonizing minutes, he pulled himself over the lip and rolled inside, breathing heavily. He pulled his limbs close and shivered, his teeth chattering. He formed a small ball of life in his hands and kept it close, warming himself to fight back the bitter cold of the storm. When he stopped shaking, he stood up and surveyed the cave he ended up inside.

The entire room was coated in ice, harder than the rock underneath and slicker than the snow outside. Translucent stalagmites poked up from the ground, their sister stalactites reaching down to touch them. The wind whistled across the entrance, ominously complementing the warped reflections of the Usurper.

Arthus paced toward the wall, stopping near a stalagmite. “Knowing Matheus, he’d want somewhere nearby to hide the bottle, yet obscure enough to keep it hidden.” He inspected the wall, tapping against the ice and peering inside. “This goes much farther, but someone—or *something*—built up a barrier.” He held his hands out, wrists together. “Only one way to find out.” A searing stream of crimson fire pulsed from his palms, driving into the ice. It stood unfazed, completely nullifying the heat.

Arthus stopped and huffed, combing back his mane. “Regice or Kyurem really did their work.” He looked up and sighed in defeat. “Maybe this isn’t the right place. Maybe—” He stopped, discovering a small hole in the corner of the ceiling.

He slid just underneath it and looked up, noticing how perfectly round it was. “That’s no natural formation.” He looked around briefly, then ran to the other side of the cave. He sprinted toward the hole and leapt up, grabbing onto the ledge.

He pulled himself up and peered inside, finding a small, stone plate set in the wall. He let go of the ledge with one hand and reached inside, gathering a Life Sphere “A secret entrance? Let’s find out.” He fired the sphere and pushed the plate. It clicked, and the floor began to rumble.

Arthus fell from the ledge and watched as the icy cavern shook, stalactites falling randomly. The Zoroark narrowly dodged them, noticing the the hole expanding in the center of the ceiling.

He stood underneath it and saw a long, dark tunnel, stretching into the mountain. He looked down at his claws, then sprung up inside, digging his claws into the walls. He squeezed inside and shimmied up, panting and scrabbling to ascend.

As he crawled up, the light below faded, and he was left in the dark. He squinted and muttered, “He really outdid himself this time.” After hours of climbing the tunnel, light came at the top and he pulled himself up to meet it, splaying his hands to keep him secure on the floor.

A tiny alcove lay inside, made completely of clear ice, revealing the onyx rock beyond. Just in front of Arthus was a short pedestal, and resting on top was an ornate, pearlescent vessel, built in a hoop-like shape. Six rings enclosed the hoop, and a magenta neck cropped from the top, ending with a cap looking like a demonic figure.

Arthus grinned and pushed himself out reaching for the bottle. “The Prison Bottle. Finally!” His hands hovered over it momentarily, then snatched it. The eye on the figure flashed, and Arthus gasped.

“You hold the prison of the mighty Hoopa the Djinn, granter of wishes and champion of Arceus. Release me, and I will grant a single wish. It can be for seas of

wealth, vast glory, or death upon your foes. Anything, as long as you allow me to go free.”

Arthus’ claws inched to the cap, his eyes wide. “Y-Yes. Anything.” His claws curled around the cap.

‘What are you thinking! He’s over fifty feet tall!’ Arthus jerked back and threw down the bottle, and the eyes stopped glowing.

He took deep breaths, holding a hand over his brow. “For once...I’m grateful you still exist.”

‘I’d almost rather die if only to stop your insane plan.’

“Taking down Arceus was your plan in the first place.” Arthus reached down for the bottle again, then stopped himself. “He’ll just put me under his spell again.” He searched the room and saw a small indent in the ceiling.

He came to it and pushed against it, causing the wall to move. He pushed harder, and it swung into another larger tunnel, spiraling even higher. A rope stretched from the top down to the bottom, where the rest remain coiled.

Arthus smirked. “Of course, he’d make another way in; the climb up here is nearly impossible.” He cut off a length of the rope and brought it down into the room. He carefully threaded the rope through the hole in the Prison Bottle, then wrapped the rope around his waist, securing the treasure.

He looked down at it and grinned. “Now all I have to do is find the temple.” He hopped onto the rope and climbed toward the exit.

Chapter 18

Lawrence stood on a dock, watching passengers pile into a ship ahead. They carried suitcases and bags of all sorts, all rushing to board. Workers crossed to and from other docks despite the early morning, loading crates and other goods onto their own ships just as passengers loaded onto theirs.

The young man lifted his own bag, filled with little more than clothing and books. His mother and father stood behind him, each gazing sadly at their son. No other friends or family gathered for his send-off.

His mother hugged him tight and said, "You should've told us sooner."

Lawrence restrained a sigh. "Mom, I know what you think about Unova, but they have the best Behavior Science course in the world! I have to go."

"But we have a perfectly acceptable course here in Sinnoh," his father replied. He tilted his broad-brimmed hat back and added, "Plus, we need your help on the farm. Tauros don't just herd themselves, and, well, your mom and I aren't getting any younger."

His mom let go of Lawrence and said, "Your father's right; you ought to stay here. Leaving everyone you know behind without even telling them is simply rude!" She huffed, crossing her arms. "Plus, there's hardly any Arceists in Unova, especially in Castelia. Where will you go for church?"

"Mom, I haven't been going to church for years."

“But that was because of all your wilderness trips. You’ll be within a couple blocks of a little branch, actually. The daughter of a friend of mine has a place over on Reshiram Boulevard. She’d be happy to have you there!”

The ship’s horn sounded, and the seaman on its deck shouted, “Last call to Castelia!”

Lawrence looked back at the ship, then back to his parents. “I’ll call you once I’m there.” He gave them each a brief hug, then rushed to board the ship, leaving his mother to cry into his father’s shoulder.

Soon after he boarded, the gangplank pulled up, and the ship drifted from the dock. The engines turned on, and he soon went on course to Unova.

In his room, he opened his bag and found a wrapped parcel with a note folded on top of it. He opened the package first and found a copy of the Arcean Texts, signed by Alfred Morgan.

Lawrence set the work aside and read the note:

Lawrence,

I know that the other kids your age haven’t been treating you all that well. I’ve tried to help them understand that you are unsure about Arceus, but they see your arguments as attacks. I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.

I had your mom, Catherine, put this in your bag, as well as the Arcean Texts, should you change your mind. I hope to see you again.

Brother Morgan

Lawrence stared at the paper for a moment, then set the note on top of the texts and wrapped them back up. He stuffed it back in his bag, then looked out the window, toward the receding Sunyshore City. Two years after leaving Arceism, he finally escaped the believers who thought he was wrong—and the former friends.

~~~~~

Claws gouged into the ice wall, rapidly scrabbling up the slick surface and leaving punctures behind. Black and red fur swirled up the barrier, and following it was blue and yellow flying higher. The two shapes landed on the snow on the other side, the red gracefully, while the blue with an unsteady wobble.

Cassia swept back her mane and huffed. “This fur is so irritating sometimes.”

Lawrence shook his head briefly, noting the black fur gathered on the back. “Glad I don’t have to deal with it.”

Silver and gold fur landed in front of them, the leather clothing covering portions of it. “Just wait till it gets wet,” Matheus replied. He pushed past them and tapped on the ice wall, catching the attention of the black Golurk on the other side. “Thanks for the throw; I’ll let you know if we need you!”

Grom saluted. “Graw!”

Matheus saluted back then turned back to Lawrence and Cassia. “Alright, let’s go find those Ice Pokémon.”

“Already found,” Lawrence stated, pointing at an enormous stone structure that stood in the center of Cryus. Standing in front of the iron doors at its entrance were two Cryogonal. Their eyes glowed ominously from their icy bodies, catching the sunlight and warping it into beads of freezing energy. They remained stationary, their backs facing the intruders.

Matheus’ eyes widened. “I haven’t seen any Cryogonal for years. I didn’t know any were left.”

Lawrence stood alongside, just as surprised. “Those things can freeze you faster than anything. We can’t let their chains catch us.”

Cassia raised her claws and waved them in the air. “I’ll hide us so we can go in for a look.” A shimmer surrounded them, hiding their movements as they crept toward the small window on the side of the hall. A single, tenor voice echoed within, full of conviction and contempt.

The Zoroark slipped her claws into the frame of the window and pulled it away, allowing it to swing outward. Dozens of Ice Pokémon sat on pews inside, ranging from snow-colored Ninetales and Glaceon to powerful Beartic and Sandslash scattered amongst them. The entire hall was covered in frost, including the magnificent chandelier, all of its candles unlit.

Standing on a chipped and battered Avalugg on a platform on the side of the room was a Delibird, whose voice rang all throughout. The shrunken sack-like tail of the Delibird hung limply behind him as he pranced on the back of the Avalugg, his red and white feathers splayed out in an unkempt fashion.

He held himself higher and exclaimed, “As you know, it was thanks to *my* leadership that we wrested power from the villainous Fire Pokémon, who for generations ruled Cryus with a burning fist! But no longer!” He stamped on the back of the Avalugg and continued, “My compatriot and I killed their leader, Irik Typhlosion, just two days ago, and with *your* help, imprisoned the rest of the Fire Pokémon!” He raised his wings, expecting some sort of praise. None came from the stone-faced Ice Pokémon.

The Delibird didn’t seem to notice, continuing with his speech. “Now I, Fresnic Delibird, sole prophet of Arceus, will give you a message from the almighty creator!”

Cassia and Matheus gave each other surprised looks. “A prophet of Arceus did *this*?” the Zoroark asked.

Matheus leered at Fresnic and growled, “He couldn’t be, considering he said that he was the ‘sole’ prophet. Let’s see what he has to say.”

Fresnic hopped up and exclaimed, “Arceus wants us to be our own Pokémon, free of obligations and tyranny! We are to do as we please, forcing others to do what we want, to ensure that we aren’t beaten down, like we have been for many years!” He flapped his wings and shouted, “You can only become a follower of Arceus by not relying on him for your needs! You have prayed to him for years for the Fire Pokémon to be beaten down, and only after I came to you did you do anything! He will not help you! We can only help ourselves!” He froze, focusing on the Sandslash edging for the door. “Why are you leaving our celebration? Surely you appreciate it?”

The Sandslash looked about, his ice-covered quills quivering. “I-I just want to see how the Fire Pokémon are doing i-is all.”

Fresnic remained still. “Oh. Is that all?” He leaned down to the Avalugg’s head. “You hear that? He wants to go see the *Fire Pokémon*. Why?” He jabbed a wing toward the Sandslash. “Because he wants to see them back in power, after all they did!”

The Sandslash held up his claws in defense. “No, no, nothing like that! I didn’t really think they did all that bad stuff to us, b-but—”

“Graah!” the Avalugg bellowed, pounding his feet on the stage and shaking the room. The Sandslash and the other Ice Pokémon reared away from the ‘prophet’ and his pet Avalugg, fearing the worst.

The Avalugg opened his mouth, and a slender spear of ice slid out from it. The Delibird grinned. “We can’t have any apostates in *my* congregation.” He stomped his foot, and the Avalugg fired the spear—right into the chest of the Sandslash.

He fell without a sound, still and unmoving. Fresnic shook his head sadly and said, “Does anyone else have a complaint?” No one made a move, frozen with fear.

Fresnic held out his arms. “Then let’s carry on!” He continued making his vigorous exclamations, rapidly circling the Avalugg. Lawrence stared at him in puzzlement, while Matheus’ features hardened. A red mist hovered around Cassia as her hands shook, her fangs bared.

The Zoroark reared back a hand, causing a pulsing sphere of Life energy to hover above it. “He’s a lying piece of—”

Matheus forced her arm down and hissed, “Are you insane? We can’t just go in there and take him out!” He growled, looking back toward Fresnic. “As much as I’d like to.”

As Cassia forced herself to calm, Lawrence scrutinized the Avalugg and the other Ice Pokémon. “Fresnic won’t be an issue; Delibird like him are practically harmless. That Avalugg, on the other hand, can do some damage.” The Avalugg snorted, mist jetting out his nostrils. Lawrence stepped back and said, “They’re slow, but they’ll crush you once they set their mind to it.”

Cassia took another deep breath and said, “What are we going to do then? We can’t just let him say those things!”

Matheus pulled them closer and said, “We find the Fire Pokémon. We’ll have greater numbers and their natural advantage over ice. That should hopefully be enough to take care of that Avalugg and all of the Delibird’s followers.” He pointed in separate directions. “Split up; we’ll find everyone faster that way. It shouldn’t take too long given



the size of the place. I doubt there's many Ice Pokémon out and about with how many there are in there but keep on your toes. Got it?"

"Got it," Lawrence and Cassia replied. They each ran in different directions, weaving between the bare grey stone of the houses.

Lawrence peered through the windows of the homes he passed, hoping to find some sign of the Fire Pokémon. Instead he found simple buildings with tables and chairs all made of the same hard stone. Few pieces of furniture were made of wood, which Lawrence realized was because both the scarcity of the material and its flammability—hardly an aspect Fire Pokémon would want.

He crossed by a somewhat small and disheveled dwelling and noticed a bright blue flash in the corner of his eye. Carefully, he looked through, and saw the still figure of Tursha Xatu through the window. He stood with his wings down and head up, his blindfold seeming to gaze at Lawrence's eyes.

Lawrence opened the door of the hut and closed it behind him. "What are you doing here?"

Tursha made no movement. "Where Arceus needs me, I go." He shuffled over toward Lawrence. "You...you are not of Equivos. A foreigner. An invader."

Lawrence took a step away from the Xatu, feeling a sense of dread rise in him. "What do you mean?"

"You do not belong here," Tursha monotonously said, raising a wing and pointing it at Lawrence. "I feel a disturbance in Equivos. The energies that surround your arrival...I feel them even now. They are slowly ripping apart the Creator's work, and unless something is done, will surely bring about the end of Equivos. The Day of Desolation."

Lawrence grimaced, looking away from Tursha. He could scarcely believe his words. He had seen nothing that proved his claim, but then again, what did he know? He didn't have the psychic powers of a Xatu, or some deep connection with the world. He could very well be causing damage from his mere presence without anyone realizing it.

Tursha continued forward, his beak nearly touching Lawrence's nose. "Unless you come to the Temple of Arceus, all will be lost. You will be able to return where you

belong, with all you care about safe.” His head twitched. “I assure you that everyone you hold dear will die a miserable death unless you leave.” He stepped back. “I expect to see you soon.” He raised his wings, and bright blue light encapsulated him, temporarily blinding Lawrence. When he was able to see again, the Xatu was gone.

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Matheus slunk around a corner, scouting ahead for any hostile Pokémon. With none in sight, he sped toward an iron door set in a rocky outcropping set in the wall. Unlike the other structures, no windows could be seen.

The Legend pulled on the door’s handle and found that it was locked. He glared at the door and set himself into a crouching stance. He pulled his paws back, then thrust them right into the lock in the side. The door burst into the hallway beyond, clanging and banging against the floor.

Cringing, Matheus looked back toward the meeting hall. The Cryogonal appeared to be talking to each other, but they made no move to investigate. The Lucario sighed with relief, then ran down the hallway. Empty torches lined the gradually descending tunnel, wrapping with it into the bowels of mountain.

Blinking in the darkness, Matheus raised a paw and summoned an Aura Sphere, illuminating his surroundings. He sniffed and took a deep breath, then coughed, covering his nose. Soot and ash plagued the air, coating the walls and floor in inky blackness. He pressed forward, focusing on the dull reflection ahead. He reached it and found yet another iron door, also locked.

Matheus sighed, enlarging the sphere in his paw. “Why can’t they just use wood?” He launched it into the door, causing it to burst from its hinges and slam to the floor—revealing the astonished eyes of Arcanine, Infernape, Delphox, and their children in an expansive dark room.

The Lucario formed another aura sphere, causing gasps of shock to come from the imprisoned Pokémon. An elderly Typhlosion sat in the center, holding a Chimchar and Fennekin in her arms. Her grizzled fur reflected in the pale light, revealing a gaunt frame and tired eyes. She gaped at the sight of Matheus, keeping the children close to her.

She rose a hand and gasped, “A ghost...coming to haunt us. What have we done to deserve *this*?”

Matheus looked down at his silver fur, noting how it seemed to shine with the aura’s light. He looked back to the Typhlosion and said, “I’m here to help. What happened with that Delibird, Fresnic?”

The Typhlosion shivered. “He just showed up a week ago from another peak with that Avalugg of his. They claimed to have been sent by Arceus to educate us about what he wants us to do. We all bought in to his claims—even my husband, Irik. As he stayed, the Ice Pokémon grew more violent toward us Fire Pokémon, until Fresnic eventually demanded that we be imprisoned. Naturally, we resisted it, but once that Avalugg...k-killed Irik...” She sobbed, wiping her tears. “We got thrown in here with no light, no warmth—nothing but some food and water. We couldn’t keep any fires going, and they refuse to light the torches...we’ve had nothing but darkness...” She continued to cry, hugging the Fennekin and Chimchar tighter, who hugged back.

Matheus stepped forward, causing the Pokémon around him to flinch. “What was everything like before he came?”

The Typhlosion sniffed, forcing a smile. “Oh, it was wonderful. The Ice Pokémon climbed down the mountain to find berries, then when they came up, we cooked and prepared it for everyone. We watched for Braviary and Staraptor from the wall, and even drove back the Guild Pokémon when they came to take us over. We Fire Pokémon did our part in cooking and building, and they did theirs with the wall and food. It was perfect...until Fresnic came.” She cringed, lowering her head. “Irik was only trying to do what was right. He never threatened to hurt the Ice Pokémon, like what Fresnic thought. He only wanted to keep everyone happy his whole life.” She continued to cry, matching the crestfallen faces of the other Pokémon that surrounded her.

Matheus looked to the left and right, then sighed. He stopped in front of the Typhlosion and crouched. The Chimchar and Fennekin in her arms looked up at him in wonder and fear, the aura sphere spreading a feeling of warmth across them.

He held out his other paw. “I came to help you...not to hurt you. I can drive out Fresnic, but I’ll need your help to do that.” The Aura Sphere faded into a glow surrounding his paw, radiating through the premises.

The elderly Typhlosion paused for a moment, then sighed with relief. She accepted Matheus paw and said, “My name is Telda.”

A slim figure descended the stairs, the aura revealing it to be a Gardevoir with bright blue eyes. Unlike Matheus, the other Pokémon did not veer back in fear, but instead looked on in relief.

Matheus looked back to her and said, “Go find Lawrence; I’ll get them out.” The Gardevoir nodded, then went to turn away.

The Chimchar in Telda’s arms swiped for her dress, passing through it harmlessly. The Chimchar flinched back in surprise, then looked up at Cassia with a bewildered expression.

Cassia’s eyes widened, then she closed them and ran toward the stairs. She tripped against the first step and fell onto them, her head cracking against the stone. The Gardevoir illusion immediately dissipated, revealing a beautiful young Zoroark, clutching her head.

The Arcanine, Infernape and Delphox gasped, the mothers clutching their children while the fathers stood in front of them protectively, their inner flames flaring up. Cassia rolled onto her back and held up her claws, noticing the failed illusion. She drew them back, cringing, then scrambled to her feet and ran up the stairs, tears streaming down her face.

Matheus gaped at the stairs, then furrowed his brow. He whipped his head back toward the Fire Pokémon, causing them to flinch. He held up his aura-covered paw.

“She is not your enemy. She is Arceus’ true priestess.”

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Lawrence slumped against the wall of the dilapidated room, holding his head. Him staying here would kill everyone he knows? All because he made some disturbance in this dimension? He could scarcely believe it.

He held a paw over his eyes and groaned. Now he had to leave, as much as he regretted it. Regardless of his want to remain with Cassia, Matheus and Grom, he would rather leave them than have them die because of him. The Xatu seemed serious in his conviction, and with what he knew about them, they were rarely wrong.

He looked up. Claws clattered against the walkway outside. He turned and saw Cassia running wildly through the street, panting and searching left and right. Her mane splayed out in disarray, and a faint red mist surrounded her body.

Concerned, Lawrence stepped out of the room and said, “Cassia?”

“Lawrence!” she gasped. She burst into Lawrence’s chest, forcing him back into the room. The door closed behind them as she finally cried out, pouring out her sorrow into the Lucario’s shoulder.

“They saw me! T-They saw what I really am! I tripped and f-f-fell, and th-then I saw them, angry and afraid! At me!” she howled. She looked up and exclaimed, “They hate me, just like they hate Arthus! What am I going to do *now*?” She continued crying on Lawrence, heaving and sobbing while he thought of what to say.

Carefully, he rubbed her back, then softly said, “They don’t hate you. They only see what there isn’t.”

Cassia sniffed, pushing away from him. “My eyes! They make me look just like Arthus!”

Lawrence pulled her back, renewing his efforts by stroking her mane. “Arthus killed Pokémon; you never did. They’re only afraid of him, not you.”

Cassia calmed barely, making a deep, shuddering sigh. “My...my looks...my powers...everyone hates them...I’ve had to deal with it ever since I found out the truth...”

Lawrence now pushed away and exclaimed, “*Who cares what they think?* For four years, I had to deal with people hating me for not believing the same things they did! My friends left me, my parents didn’t understand, and even after I moved a *continent* away, *I never felt like I belonged!*” He breathed heavily, staring into Cassia’s still, sorrowful eyes.

He backed away, then sat on a decrepit chair. Staring at the floor, he said, “Trust me... I know what it's like for people to turn their backs on you.”

They stood silent. The wind rushed outside, blowing past a flurry of snow and ice. The evening light shined through the window, casting shadows across their features as they stood.

Finally, Cassia crept closer and wrapped an arm over Lawrence’s shoulders. She pulled close and quietly said, “I-Is that what you really feel like? Really?” Lawrence nodded slowly.

Cassia came close to his ear. “You said that more than anything else, you missed being yourself. Well...” She sat on the floor, wiping her face of her dried tears. “I just want to be myself around everyone I teach. I just want to touch Pokémon, feel what they feel, help them go through it. But I never can, because I’m too afraid.” She closed her eyes, the crimson mist around her fading from sight.

Lawrence’s breathing calmed. “It’s...it’s never easy. Being alone. You’ll always be like that in some way, where you can’t tell someone your true feelings. I’ve had my share of it.” He set a paw in Cassia’s claw, then looked straight at her. “But you can *always* tell *me*.” He tightened his grip on her hand. “Just like *I’ve* told *you*.”

Cassia sighed into Lawrence’s shoulder, remaining there. “I...I don’t want you to leave, Lawrence.”

He winced, Tursha’s warning coming to mind. He his paw through her mane and said, “I...I don’t *want* to leave...” Silenced passed between them as they remained in that position.

### ***Crash!***

A Cryogonal burst through the window, hissing and steaming as it glared at its targets. It threw a chain around them, encasing them in its freezing touch. Cassia reached out toward the Cryogonal, a Life Sphere gathering in her claws. The chains glowed blue, and the Life Sphere fizzled back into her body. Freezing cold surged into their bodies, and both Cassia and Lawrence fell limp.

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Matheus stood outside the entrance to the Fire Pokémon's prison, directing them out of the halls. Lit torches now arced up the tunnels, illuminating the passing Pokémon as they ascended.

Telda stood next to Matheus, hunched over and holding her arms close to her chest. "I never thought we'd get help so soon."

"It's a good thing we came here," Matheus replied. He eyed her suspiciously. "I trust that Cassia won't be an issue?"

Telda grimaced. "It is just...unusual, to trust a Zoroark. You surely know about Arthus." She squinted and said, "You never told me your name. What is it?"

The silver Lucario cleared his throat and stepped away slightly. "It's unimportant," he coughed. He stepped forward and searched the streets, finding no sign of any Pokémon. "Cassia and Lawrence should've been here by now." He turned to Telda and said, "I'll go find them. You bring the Fire Pokémon over to the meeting hall as soon as you're ready." He sprinted through Cryus, looking into the different houses in search of his companions.

He stopped midway, a dark thought entering his mind. He looked toward the meetinghouse, noticing that the Cryogonal that guarded it were no longer at their posts—and the windows seemed to be covered with panels.

He cocked his head curiously. "Odd..." He ran to it and checked each window, finding each of them blocked by iron panels. When he pushed at the door, he felt a bar spread across it.

He put his palms together and closed his eyes. "*There's only one way to know,*" he thought. The black fur on the back of his head rose, and he felt the mind of those within the house. He recognized two: one lying on the stage, and another shoved to the side.

His eyes shot open and his fur fell. "They got captured," he growled. He reared back his fist and punched the door, causing it to shake violently. The frame held still, however, preventing him access.

Muttering to himself, he raised a paw and gathered an Aura Sphere. At full size, he turned away and pointed it at the sky. It fired off into the distance, creating a stark streak of light across the twilight sky.

He looked up to ensure it worked, then ran around to a window and punched it, breaking the glass, but not the panel behind it.

He continued to the next, and the next, thinking to himself, *“Keep them safe, Arceus! Keep them safe!”*

~~~~~

*Boom...*

*Boom...*

*Boom...*

*Boom...*

Cold. Sheer cold. Darkness-crowded vision.

At the center...an ebbing flow. The core, weakly pumping warmth through the all-surrounding chill.

The Lucario awoke, but only in mind. He felt himself slipping away into the cold, never to awaken. He felt loss, shock, remembering nothing but this sudden encroachment of freezing cold. He prepared himself to fade into the chill, his core barely beating to fight back—

Until he remembered.

*Where is she?*

Boom.

*What happened to us?*

Boom.

*We were together.*

Boom...

*We're in danger.*

Boom...

*She needs me.*

...

*I need her!*

***Cra-a-a-a-ack!***



The core became enveloped by a piercing blue light, siphoning into the dying core. The core beat faster and faster, driving away the heat. Cyan flashes burst from the core, lighting the endless darkness and bringing forth light.

The Lucario awoke!

~~~~~

Breath. Hot, moist breath. High-pitched ringing. Blurry figures—red, white, black, crimson. Numbness retreating; feeling returning. Frost melting. Hearing clearing. Vision sharpened.

A Delibird stood in front of him, next to a massive Avalugg, shouting and holding his wings aloft. A crowd of Ice Pokémon shrunk away to his right, staring at the Avalugg. The giant stamped his feet and growled, opening his mouth and producing a slender spear of ice.

The Avalugg stepped away, revealing a Zoroark slumped on her knees, her arms tied behind her back, and her legs tied together. Her eyes closed, her chest rose and fell quickly, her head facing the Delibird.

The Delibird yanked the spear from the Avalugg's mouth and roared, "*And so **dies** the spawn of Arthus the Usurper!*"

"NO!"

The Lucario pounded to his feet and extended an arm; a sphere of blue flame grew from the palm, then fired into the air—straight into the chest of the Fresnic Delibird.

He squawked and shot into the wall, cracking the stone behind him. His spear shattered against the iron curtain of the window. The Delibird's eyes closed as he slid down the wall.

The Avalugg turned to the Lucario, mouth opened wide as white light poured into it. The Lucario shot another Aura Sphere into its mouth. The creature exploded in a burst of blue-white light, sending shards of ice spraying everywhere.

The iron doors behind the Ice Pokémon burst apart, a giant black fist sending them away. The onyx Golurk stomped forward, surging with red energy. Behind him, a silver Lucario padded forward, his face contorted into one of hatred.

They both froze, staring at the Lucario. The black fur behind his head rose, blue fire suspending it. The same fire wrapped around his arms and legs, strengthening the awoken warrior.

The flames suddenly died, and the Lucario's eyes dimmed. He fell on his side. The last thing he saw:

Blue eyes.

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Lawrence saw fire. Dancing flames, skating across the burning wood. Mud and gravel surrounded it, driving back the frost and snow. Beyond, a clear, black sky stretched over the distant peaks of Xilo.

Behind the fire, Matheus' head hung low. Grom stood to his right, crouching with his back facing them. In front of the Golurk, a bundle wrapped in a thick blanket rose and fell.

The younger Lucario's leg flinched, and he noticed he was wrapped in a blanket as well. He pushed himself up, groaning with the exertion. Matheus' head lifted up.

He slid around the fire and toward Lawrence, gently pushing him down. "Easy there. You've been through a lot, and I wouldn't want you blacking out again." He looked over to Grom. "Cassia's not much better."

Lawrence coughed, then croaked, "Where...are we?"

The Legend turned back to Lawrence. "Outside Cryus. After I settled the mess between the Fire and Ice Pokémon, Grom and I brought both of you out here; we didn't want any...unnecessary attention." He pushed closer. "What *happened* back there?"

Lawrence held his head, still feeling groggy. "Don't really know...I remember meeting with Cassia...she was crying about...everyone hating her...then after that...this Cryogonal came and—" He shivered, the cold feeling returning to him.

Matheus sat back in on the ground, holding his chin. "You've been awfully cold...same with Cassia." He groaned, shaking his head. "You're lucky it didn't kill you. Their chains bring your body heat down dramatically, sometimes until there's ice on your fur!" He held his head taking a glance toward Grom. "Cassia had her Life to fight it off;

the heat from that was enough to revive her.” He pointed at Lawrence. “You...you should’ve died.”

Lawrence nodded, pushing himself upright again; Matheus made no move to stop him. “I remember...being in the meetinghouse...but nothing else. What did I do there?”

Matheus blew his breath out slowly, then said, “Well...I got there late, thanks to that cursed Delibird blocking the door. From what I heard from the Pokémon who saw the entire thing, you and Cassia got dragged in there. Cassia woke up pretty quickly afterwards, but she was still weak. She got bound up, and Fresnic started demanding answers from her. She started answering them and countered all of his accusations—even of killing Pokémon, like Arthus.

“Fresnic became furious toward her and was going to kill her for being a ‘blasphemer against Arceus.’ He was going to kill her with a spear from his pet Avalugg before—” Matheus stopped himself, blinking.

Lawrence leaned in closer, keeping the blanket wrapped around himself. “Before what?”

Matheus shook his head in disbelief. “Before you woke up and shot both Fresnic and that Avalugg with an Aura Sphere.”

Lawrence stared at him, unmoving. “I...I did? I thought I couldn’t?”

Matheus clasped his paws together, looking straight at Lawrence. “Hold out your paw.” Lawrence did so. “Now, think of someone you are close to. Not simply friends, but really, *truly*, close to. Then focus on that love you have for them.”

Lawrence focused on his paw, concentrating. He knew who to think of, and upon focusing on the love shared, he felt heat rise in his chest, then flow into his arm. It became surrounded with a bright, cyan light.

Lawrence jerked away from his paw breathing heavily. “H-How did I do that?”

Matheus enthusiastically pointed at the light. “That’s it! That’s Aura! You’re able to use it!” He calmed, crossing his arms. “Now, who is it?”

Entranced by the aura, Lawrence jerked away from it in surprise. “Hmm?”

“Who is it you love? Laryon loved me as an uncle and friend all those years ago, and I—” He stopped himself, then muttered, “Loved Arthus like my own brother.” He grit his teeth for a moment, then shook his head and said, “Who is it for you?”

Lawrence stared, then took a glance toward the covers behind Grom.

Matheus nodded, smiling. “Just as I thought. You know, she’s done a better job than I ever could have softening you up.” He chuckled. “You know, for Aura to work, it has to go both ways; Cassia has to love you back.”

Lawrence shrunk down; his paw no longer glowed. “She doesn’t love me. Two weeks is—”

“Enough time to know, especially if there’s not much else to distract you.” Matheus chuckled again. “Although, I’ll admit, it took me a few years to see... Arthus, in that light.” He took a look over to Cassia, then said, “I’m not supposed to tell you this, but after you blacked out, Cassia came over to you and—” He rolled his eyes. “Grom’ll have my hide if he found out, but she kissed you, right on the cheek.” Matheus tapped his cheek and sighed deeply. “Ah, lucky you, having a girl fall for you.”

Lawrence swallowed, holding a paw up to his own cheek. “Really?”

“Why would I joke about this? It’s romance!”

Lawrence held his shaking paw away. “It...it’s just what Tursha said.”

“Tursha? You mean that Xatu?”

Lawrence nodded. “Just before Cassia found me, I found him in an old house. He said that I needed to leave, or that you’d all...die.” He looked away, holding a paw to his head.

Matheus’ face grew stern. “You can’t always believe what those Psychic Pokémon say. The future’s changing all the time, and—”

“He said that because of me, the entire world’s out of whack, and unless I leave, it’ll tear itself apart!” Lawrence exclaimed. Grom’s head shifted, twisting to face Lawrence. The Lucario didn’t notice.

Matheus rubbed his temple, muttering to himself. Finally, he said, “That—that can’t be right! I would’ve known back at the Tree of Life!” He opened his mouth as if to say

more, but paused, then said, “However, I will admit, that because I haven’t been there, things might have changed.”

Lawrence sighed, lowering his head. “I...I really don’t want to leave. Not just because of Cassia, but this entire world. I’ve missed being in Sinnoh, and Equivos reminds me *so much* of it. And I...I just *can’t* go back there.” He raised his head. “But if I have to leave to keep everyone alive, I’ll go.”

Matheus remained still. “Let’s get to sleep. You’ve been through a lot, and we have to get down to Virona within a week.” He lay down on the ground, then shifted for his back to face Lawrence.

Lawrence looked over to Grom, who continued to stand vigil over Cassia. Knowing that now wasn’t the best time to meet with her, Lawrence followed in Matheus’ example—but his mind continued to rush.

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Within the Master’s Tower, Gardner scribbled sentences onto a series of papers, working by the light from the candle to his left. He scooted away from the desk and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eye. “Those idiots Valder and Derak are making a mess of everything in Saunte. The sooner I get these letters of dismissal delivered, the sooner I can get someone else better for the job!”

The black-banded ruby on the desk pulsed with red light. Gardner picked it up and Arthus’ silhouette appeared within. “Gardner, I’ve claimed the Prison Bottle and am making my way to the temple. Do you have any information on Hoopa’s tactics in battle?”

Gardner furrowed his brow. “Why would you want to know about that? You’re only wishing for him to repair the Seal, are you not?”

“Yes,” Arthus sighed, “but I’m more concerned about what will happen afterward. Hoopa is a very manipulative Legend, and I need to be prepared to face him in case he attempts to take the Seal.”

“You really think he’d do that?” Gardner asked, sitting on his favorite chair. “Can’t he mimic the Legends already?”

“That’s my point: he can only copy other Legends’ abilities in their domain. He’d surely want their power for himself, so the Seal is in great danger if I just give it to him. I bet he wouldn’t ask for much of a price considering what he could do with it.”

Gardner flipped through a book, shaking his head. “Even with your experience, Hoopa would easily outmatch you. He apparently uses his hoops to send a flurry of punches from all sides, along with some rather...grisly tactics of *bisecting* Pokemon with his teleportation skills. Not to mention he has the power of what Legends’ domain he is within. In this case, he could use Arceus’ creative abilities to do what he pleases.”

Arthus groaned, holding his head. “If I could repair the Seal any other way, I’d do it.” He thought for a moment and said, “Is there any way to send him back into the bottle?”

Gardner flipped through the book faster, thinking, *‘I’d leave him to die if Hoopa wasn’t the worse of two evils.’* He abruptly stopped and slammed his finger on the page, depicting the Legend shrinking into the bottle. “Yes, here. If you can make him break his word, the sealing of the bottle comes back into effect, and Hoopa will be forced inside.” He closed the book and set it aside, tapping his fingers. “If Hoopa is the manipulator you say he is, then it will be very difficult to do that—especially if he is so set on coming free.”

Arthus remained still. He muttered something illegible, then said, “I may have an idea, but you must be present. Do you think you could come to the temple with me?”

Gardner rose from his seat and threw his arms out. “I can’t just drop everything and leave! It’d take at least a week to arrive on foot, considering how dense Faylen is! And I have no idea where to find you!”

“I have a hunch on where the temple is. Leave Martre to lead the Guild in your place and meet me in Virona; I’ll spend time preparing for Hoopa.”

“Couldn’t you just come here and carry me through the Life network?”

“It’s not that simple. It takes skill to keep one source of Life—myself—from bleeding into the Tree of Life, and it’s considerably more difficult to handle another. I would only do so in the direst of circumstances.”

Gardner hovered to the gem and held it in the air. “So be it. It will take a few days to prepare, then another few to arrive on my sled. I’ll be there within a week.” He covered Arthus’ face and the gem returned to normal, falling back into patterned bands.

He set down the gem and held his chin, looking up. *“If I’m going to be present when Arthus uses the Seal...hmm...”* He blinked, a grin expanding across his chest. *‘I can use the Seal myself...’*

~~~~~

Deep within the Faylen jungle, amongst the towering tree and sprawling vines, a series of bridges stretched from bough to bough. Scattered between the hanging planks were round, wooden houses hanging by thick vines, each with a surrounding platform. The houses and bridges remained clustered together above a clearing below the trees. Berry vines wrapped around one house, while another hung intricate cages containing Pikipek, each chirruping loudly to be released. The other wild Pokemon within the jungle didn’t dare come into sight as the watchful sentries in their low-hanging turrets watched for predators of any sort. Mothim fluttered above, collecting honey from the Combee hives scattered throughout the area. Cherrim gathered berries in bright daylight, and Ribombee created their signature pollen puffs and readied them for market. Pacing along the bridges were Decidueye and Roserade with arrows and thorns ready.

Arthus crushed the gem in his claws and watched fragments scatter below. He sat in a tree high above the town, focusing on an Audino going from house to house, searching for the sick.

He rubbed his chin, then leapt off the bough and held onto a vine, sliding down. He shimmered and turned into a hunched Sceptile, its tail partially eaten away and its eyes heavy-lidded and irritated. He landed on a far-off platform and wandered amongst them, careful to have his eyes only partially visible.

He looked about, watching a Scyther wearing a Guild band slice a length of rope and hand it to a Bellossom, chatting cordially. He watched a Slurpuff squashing berries delivered by a Swellow, giving coins in exchange. He watched the same Audino press its

hand against the injured leg of a Breloom and envelop it in light, healing it instantly. All throughout Virona, no ill deeds or evil acts came about—against Arthus’ desire.

He shuffled to an empty bridge and abruptly fell off the edge, only to grab onto the low-hanging vines and support himself underneath. He dissolved his illusion and tapped his claws together. “This...this isn’t how it should be.”

*‘How should it be then? As cruel and miserable as the Lawless Era?’*

“As horrible as our time was, it drove Pokemon to change. Tell me, would you have created the Guild had Damon Decidueye not killed your parents?”

*‘...No.’* Arthus smiled, then the voice added, *‘But that would be because I wouldn’t have met Matheus, who actually brought the Guild together.’*

“And he regretted it ever since!” Arthus seethed.

*‘Only because you corrupted it not once, but **twice!**’*

“*Enough!*” Arthus dug his claws into the vines, breathing heavily. “You see my point. For everyone to see that Arceus has to go, they have to see that he isn’t helping Serenita anymore.” He swung off of the vines and wandered to a fallen tree, digging his hand beneath the earth. “Martre’s little inventions might be useful here.”

As the crimson tendrils rose, the voice said, *‘You’re planning something. Something I want no part of.’*

The tendrils dragged Arthus under as he said, “As if you have the choice.”



## Chapter 19

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

Lawrence stirred, wiping the fur on his face.

*Drip.*

Lawrence groaned, wiping away more. He opened his eyes, grouchily staring above him.

“Grom.”

Lawrence flinched and slid away from the source, feeling moist earth underneath him. He stared upward again and found Grom leaning over him and staring. Water dripped from his head and rolled down his shoulders, steaming upon entering the various cracks along his body.

The Lucario sat upright, causing Grom to step back. He looked about and saw palm trees stretching high into the sky, their trunks and roots overcrowding the ground beneath them. Cawing over the distant rush, Toucannon swooped down from the canopy and pinched nuts off branches, their child Trumbeak warbling after them. Liepard lurked through the branches, keeping a watchful eye on the Emolga that drifted and chittered on the wind.

The Golurk pointed behind Lawrence, his eyes flashing. “Groawm.” The foot of the Xilo Mountains stretched in front of them, far higher than any of the trees. A mighty waterfall cascaded down the slope, fanning out to a wide sheet of rushing water. It

expanded outward into a pool, which funneled into a coursing stream, wrapping between the roots and trees. Swanna paddled in the pool, pecking at the Magikarp and Feebas that helplessly swam about. A Zoroark stood at the bank of the pool, holding her shoulder and looking down into the water.

Lawrence looked back to Grom, who nodded his head over to Cassia. Lawrence exhaled slowly, then padded to Cassia, the earth squelching underneath him with each step.

Cassia stared at her reflection in the pool, the water rippling outward with the rushing falls. “You’ve been asleep for a long time.”

“Must have,” Lawrence replied. He marveled at the environment, gazing up at the mist that gathered around the falls. “I’ve never seen anything like this. Where are we?”

“We’re at the fringe of the Faylen Jungle. Grom brought us down here because Matheus was worried that Arthus would catch up with us; he didn’t want him attacking while we were recovering.”

Lawrence spun slowly, searching. “Where is he now?”

Cassia remained staring at the water. “Hunting. He wanted to get us something better than berries to eat.” She combed back her mane, tilting her head. “I...I shouldn’t have broken down like that back in Cryus. I could’ve fought off that Cryogonal if I had been paying attention. We...we nearly died...because of me.” She let go of her mane, watching it fall across her shoulder.

The crashing waves was all that sounded between them. The Swanna flapped out of the pool and into the air, cawing as they went.

Finally, Lawrence said, “It wasn’t your fault; you’ve worried so much that Pokémon would discover you that when it finally happened, you couldn’t stop yourself.”

Cassia shook her head, pulling back her mane. “But I’ve been with them for *two years*. I should be used to being around them, even if...even if I look normal.” She huffed, closing her eyes. “I don’t belong here. Why should I keep going if no one cares about me?”

Lawrence thought to himself for a moment. He considered what best to say. He crouched to view his reflection in the pool, his fur matted and covered in dirt—well-traveled in comparison to when he first came to Equivos.

“When I moved away from Sinnoh, the first thing I wanted to do was make friends. I joined the university’s most popular club—the Senior Pokémon League—hoping I’d find some people I could be with. And, for a time, I did.” Lawrence passed his paw through the water, watching the water ripple outward. “But they noticed I wasn’t quite like them; ‘I always borrowed Pokémon’, ‘I never said nice things to them’, ‘I always thought of what to do if they turned on me’...” He sighed. “They thought I was too negative, and, well, they found out my thoughts on Pokémon. I didn’t really see them again after that...just like in Sinnoh.”

He looked up to Cassia. “I’d been in slumps before, but after those ‘friends’ left me, it hit me hard. I didn’t know what to do with myself; nobody seemed to like who I was and what I did. I became so hateful of myself that I was willing to do anything to stop it: I prayed to Arceus.” Cassia gave him a surprised look. “There had always been some part of me that thought he was there, that thought that maybe, *just maybe*, he really did exist.”

He shook his head sadly, looking back at the water. “I didn’t get any answer. No comfort, no words. I just got over it after a while, and after that, I stayed true to who I was. But I never felt...happy. Any hope I had was gone.”

Lawrence stood up, letting the water around his paw drip back into the pool. “You said to me a while back that we’re pretty alike. We’re trying to fit in with those around us, and they end up pushing us away, for one reason or another.”

He held up Cassia’s hand, causing her to look down. “I feel like...like we were *meant* to meet each other. I was meant to help you, and you were meant to help me.” Cassia looked up once more, her mouth open in astonishment.

Lawrence held up his other paw, allowing it to glow with aura. “I think I got my answer to that prayer. You.” Cassia stared, then beamed.

Lawrence enclosed her other hand. “Don’t say nobody cares about you. I do. I’m always here for you, no matter what happens.”

Cassia exhaled in relief, then embraced Lawrence, falling into his shoulder. He paused for a moment, then embraced her back, closing his eyes.

Moments later, heavy hands wrapped around the couple. They looked up and saw the brightly glowing eyes of Grom shining down on them. “G-G-Graw-haw-haw...”

Cassia giggled and rubbed Grom’s arm. “You always knew, didn’t you?”

Grom reared back his head and chuckled to himself, then winked. He stepped away, and Lawrence and Cassia separated.

The Golurk set a hand on Lawrence’s shoulder, then nodded solemnly. “Gro-graw-graw-grawm. Gra-grawm.”

“What did he say?” Lawrence asked.

Cassia set a hand on his other shoulder. “He said he’s glad to see you’ve changed.”

Grom reached down and squeezed Lawrence, popping his back. The Lucario wheezed and said, “Love you too...big guy.”

The Golurk slowly stepped deeper into the water, causing Cassia to look at him curiously.

He let go of Lawrence.

*Ker-splash!*

“*Grom!*” Cassia exclaimed.

“My idea—it was too good to pass up!”

She whipped around and saw Matheus standing on the fringe of the jungle with a large Trumbeak hanging over his shoulder. He waved his paw in front of his nose and said, “We all whiff a little, so Grom volunteered to help.”

Cassia gave him an offended look and said, “What do you mean I—*wha!*”

Grom picked her up by the waist and threw her near where he dropped Lawrence. Water cascaded into the air, splashing all over Grom and scaring away the fish beneath.

As they both resurfaced, Grom turned back to Matheus, who had set down the Trumbeak and shed his leather clothing.

He gave himself a quick sniff. “High time for me too.” He waded into the water, sighing contentedly.

Cassia coughed, paddling haphazardly. “You know I can’t swim that well, Grom!”

Lawrence paddled on his back, swimming around Cassia. “I can help you out. Want a ride back to shore?” he said with a smile.

Cassia grinned, pushing him away. “In your dreams.” She knocked Lawrence underneath the surface as she rocketed forward.

Lawrence surfaced again and spat out a stream of water. “Oh, it’s on!” He sprung forward, tailing Cassia.

She suddenly turned and splashed Lawrence’s face, laughing. Lawrence sputtered, wiping his eyes. “Foul move!” he cried, blinking.

“All’s fair in love and war, right?” Cassia laughed, swimming around him once more.

The Lucario continued to trail her, both laughing as they went. Matheus watched from afar, sitting on the bank with Grom. “They’ve grown up a little, haven’t they?”

Grom lifted a chunk of dirt from under the water and threw it over his legs, shifting it around.

“Gro-awm?”

Matheus sighed, shaking his head. “Yes, I’m aware that they’re over twenty. Just trying to make a joke is all.”

Grom stared for a moment, then abruptly pushed Matheus forward, sending him face-first into the dirt. The Legend coughed and gagged upon standing up, wiping his now-muddy face.

The Golurk chuckled, pointing at Matheus. “Graw-graw-haw-haw! Graw-haw!”

“First, just because I asked you to do it to Lawrence and Cassia doesn’t mean you can do it to me.” He crouched and rubbed the mud free in the water. Between splashes, he added, “Second, that wasn’t funny.”

Grom grunted, rotating his head away. “Gi-gr-graw.”

Matheus perked up and gave Grom a sideways glance. “Could’ve sworn you said ‘hypocrite’.

The Golurk hummed to himself, pretending not to hear.

Later, Matheus, Lawrence and Cassia huddled around a fire, eating roast Trumbeak flesh and drying themselves, while Grom stood behind them and threw rocks into the pool—some as large as boulders.

Matheus nibbled on a wing and pointed at the roasting bird stuck through with a spit over the fire. “Been a long time since I’ve had Trumbeak. Very sweet flavor, thanks to all the berries they eat.” Lawrence and Cassia heartily agreed, ravenously eating the wild Pokémon.

The Legend lowered the wing, chuckling. “Good thing I got it. You must be starving after being nearly frozen to death by that Cryogonal.”

Cassia swallowed, cocking her head. “How *did* we survive? I thought they freeze Pokémon to death?”

“For you, I believe it had to do with your stored Life,” Matheus replied. “As its name implies, it likes to keep its host alive. Plus, thanks to its erratic state, it could easily provide enough heat to drive out the cold.”

“What about me?” Lawrence asked.

Matheus grinned. “After further thought, I think yours has to do with Aura. See, they are remarkably similar, even if they’re opposite energies. So, whenever you got your full Aura, it drove out the cold just as Cassia’s Life did.” He put a paw over his heart. “Ah, love melts even the iciest heart. How sappy can it get?”

Cassia edged up to Lawrence. “Guess you made the right choice then.”

Lawrence chuckled, biting into his Trumbeak leg.

After their fur was dry and their stomachs were full, Lawrence and Matheus stood apart from each other in the sand. Cassia sat with Grom on a boulder, sketching the magnificent waterfall and the Swanna that inhabited it.

Matheus smirked. “You’ve been getting better, but you have a long way before you can call yourself a master of Aura.”

“I’ve managed to get the better of you before,” Lawrence remarked.

“Yes, but that was because ‘A’, I let you and ‘B’, I wasn’t using my Aura. Fighting with aura is a whole lot different compared to standard techniques.” The fur on the back

of Matheus' head rose, and his paws glowed cyan. "Let me explain how it works in combat. As you know, Life is an explosive and draining force, seriously damaging any Pokémon it hits." Matheus raised his arm. "Aura, however, is different. It's hard to explain, but spheres aside, it exhausts the target's mental state.

Lawrence cocked his head. "That...doesn't make sense."

Matheus groaned. "I told you, it's hard to explain. To put it simply, it increases your strength, and every time you hit your opponent, it exhausts their mind and spirit—essentially their Life. But unlike draining it, this simply tires them out faster than standard techniques. Catch my drift?"

Lawrence shrugged. "I guess."

Matheus rubbed his chin, thinking. "Hmm...you need a demonstration..." He grinned. He waved to Lawrence and said, "Come on over here for a moment."

His student tramped over, giving him a suspicious look. "Why do I feel like this is going to hurt?" He stopped in front of Matheus, eying him warily.

Matheus shook his head. "You have no faith." He clipped Lawrence across his jaw, knocking him onto his back. "But you were right, it'd hurt."

Lawrence groaned and stood up, rubbing his face. "I don't like your 'demonstrations'."

Matheus held his paws up in defense. "Sometimes the hard way is the best way!" He narrowed his eyes. "Now...do you feel *tired*?"

The younger Lucario rolled his shoulder, admittedly feeling that they felt heavier, like he had been lifting something heavy for a long time. "Yeah...so that's what Aura does?"

Matheus nodded. "You get it now, good." He paced away again, snatching a branch from the ground. He tested its weight, then twirled it in the air. "I can teach you those techniques on our way to Virona, so we'll worry about that later. Your next lesson is on Aura Spheres."

He held the stick under his arm, pacing left and right. "Now, an aura sphere is essentially a compact form of a simple punch, only it's made entirely of aura, and it can

hit a whole lot harder.” He pointed the stick at Lawrence, tapping his snout. “The longer you concentrate on it, the farther and harder it’ll hit. Keep that in mind.”

Lawrence pushed away the stick, rubbing his nose. “Alright, alright, I get it. So, what do I do?”

Matheus retracted the stick. “Put your paws together.” Lawrence did so. “Now, think of your aura link.”

“You mean Cassia?”

“Yes, I mean Cassia.”

Lawrence’s paws glowed.

Matheus nodded, circling the stick. “Good, now, sort of...*concentrate* it, in your paws. It’s difficult to describe, so just try.”

Lawrence closed his eyes, centering his thoughts on his paws. He tried to will the aura to flowing there. He felt the warmth in his chest flow into them, then felt the heat grow—so much that it felt like it would burn. He parted his paws, revealing a tiny sphere of pure light. Unlike the Life Spheres that Cassia used, it swirled and circled in a perfect ball, rather than sending jets of light out at random occurrences.

The sphere continued to grow, and Lawrence said, “How long should I do it?”

Matheus waved the stick, looking up. “It’ll keep going as long as you concentrate on it. When you’re ready to let it loose, just focus on where you want it to go, and aim at it.” He threw the stick into the air. “Aim for that!”

Lawrence quickly focused on the falling stick and juttied his paw at it. The aura sphere zoomed forward and thrust into the stick, curving as it fell. The stick splintered in two, its center singed and smoking.

Matheus inspected the stick, nudging it with his foot paw. “Hmm...not bad on your first try. Aura Spheres will follow inanimate objects, but for them to follow Pokémon, you need to focus on them more.” He held up a paw and caused an Aura Sphere to materialize instantly. “Let’s try again.”

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At night, Lawrence, Cassia, Matheus and Grom all sat in the jungle, sitting around a small fire on the bare ground. Illumise and Volbeat darted through the trees, stray lights shining through the darkness. Trumbeak warbled contentedly, resting on a full stomach of berries, nestled with their elder Toucannon warming their Pikipek with their beaks.

Matheus reclined on a root with a groan. “You’re getting better, Lawrence. A lot better.”

Lawrence groaned as well, rolling his shoulder. “I can tell...you’re getting in more cheap shots.”

“Hey, desperate times call for desperate measures,” Matheus remarked.

“You’re getting desperate to beat a Lucario who barely knows how to use aura?” Cassia asked.

Matheus waved a paw. “Nah, I’m only making it *look* like I’m getting desperate.” Cassia and Lawrence gave themselves knowing looks.

Matheus leaned up and said, “Well, better get to sleep. We have a long trek ahead of us to get to Virona.”

Cassia reached for him. “Wait, Matheus.” He looked over to her. “Can you tell us about Aleron?”

Matheus winced, then rubbed his eye. “What do you want to know?”

“Like what species he was, or what he was like.”

Matheus sighed, leaning forward. “Well...I don’t like talking about...him. Too many hard memories.”

“Tell us what you can then. I’d love to hear more about the creator of the Arceist Tome,” Cassia explained, leaning on Lawrence’s shoulder.

The silver Lucario closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Well...I guess I can tell you a little bit.” He opened his eyes. “He was...perfect, for sake of a better word. He always taught Pokémon what was right, helped the poor, and, of course, made the Tome. I—I often helped him.”

He sighed. “But...Arceus asked me a *difficult* question. After I answered, it turned out that I wasn’t really the servant that Arceus deserved. I had to serve him in other ways...”

He hung his head. “That was the day he died. I still don’t feel ready to remember him, let alone talk about him.” He lay down on his side, rolling away from Cassia and Lawrence. “It’s going to be a long day tomorrow. Just get to sleep.”

Lawrence and Cassia looked at each other in surprise, then followed Matheus’ example, sleeping apart.

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Over the week, Lawrence, Cassia, Matheus and Grom traveled through the Faylen Jungle, with Matheus training Lawrence, Cassia drawing pictures, and the lovers growing closer to each other. Now they were only one day away from Virona—and Lawrence’s departure.

The morning before they would reach Virona, Lawrence woke before any of his companions. His dreams were haunted by Tursha and his visions of the future, the warning that he must leave. Contrasting this were thoughts of Cassia, and how he wanted to remain with her, here in Equivos—regardless of the consequences.

He shuffled to a nearby stream, kneeling and splashing water onto his face. His reflection barely came through, showing a strong, young Lucario, still tired and worn from days of travel. Twenty-two days of it.

He rubbed the spike on the back of one paw. *‘If I go back to Unova...would I even change back? Would I still be a Lucario and be like all the other Pokemon in Facility D? Would I even see my parents again?’* He stopped, staring into the pool. *‘I’ve already been gone for over three weeks; Valence has surely said I’m missing...or dead.’*

He considered these choices. *‘If I ignore Tursha’s warning, I’ll still be with Cassia, Grom and Matheus and be safe from Valence—until the world eventually gets destroyed. I don’t know what will happen, but everyone in Equivos would die—because of me.’*

He grimaced, torn between these options. His ear twitched, and he looked back, finding Cassia behind him. Twigs and leaves stuck in her mane from a night of rolling.

She knelt next to Lawrence, beginning to pluck them out as she studied her reflection. “Sleeping out here isn’t the best for my look.” Lawrence didn’t reply.

She plucked out another twig, then set a claw on Lawrence’s paw. “What’s wrong?”

Lawrence turned away. “It’s nothing.”

Cassia’s ears drooped. “You’re thinking about leaving, aren’t you?”

Lawrence nodded. “I don’t think I can stay here...in Equivos.”

“Why?”

“I miss my mom and dad, for one. They must be worried sick about me. I usually call them twice a day, but ever since I left...” He pulled out his Pokédex and searched for a dimensional weakness, realizing he hadn’t done it for the past week. ‘No access point in range’.

Cassia stared at the Pokédex. “But...what about me? I can’t teach Pokémon without you; you have the last copy of the Tome.”

Lawrence looked back to Matheus, who snored on a tree root, his cloak’s splayed across the ground. “Matheus seems to have the entire book memorized. Just use him.”

Cassia took a glance at him and said, “Well, what if you don’t change back when you go?”

Lawrence winced. “As much as I like being a Lucario, I think I’ll turn back...hopefully.”

“If you don’t?”

“Then I’ll just have to deal with it.”

Cassia blew her breath out slowly, then said, “What if I come with you?”

Lawrence leapt up and exclaimed, “What?”

Cassia stood up. “I’ve always wondered how your world looks like. The forests, rivers, deserts...even the towns and Pokémon.” She curled a claw through her hair. “Plus...I wouldn’t mind seeing how you really look like.”

Suddenly, Lawrence thought of the implications of being in love with a Pokémon—in Unova. He shook his head vigorously and said, “No, no, you can’t! It’d be too—too—”

“Weird?” Cassia sighed.

Lawrence moaned. “*Yes*. Plus, when I left, I told Valence I’d bring back a Pokémon—”

“Then everything should be fine!”

“No, it wouldn’t.” Lawrence corrected. He took Cassia’s shoulders and said, “Look, I’d almost certainly end up back in Valence. If you come with me, they’ll take you away and find out how you’re able to talk.”

“I talk the same way you do.”

“But Pokémon don’t talk in my world. Valence sent me to take one of you, so they could...experiment on them.” He let go of Cassia and slumped. “They...they do horrible things to those Pokémon. I’ve seen it. I couldn’t live with myself if I brought anyone to them...let alone you.” He shivered, hugging himself. “They’d do the same to me if I stayed as a Lucario.”

Cassia stared at the ground for a moment, then said, “But...but you said you’d always be with me.”

Lawrence sighed, nodding his head. “I know...and I’d love it to stay that way.” He looked up to Cassia. “But I need to leave.” He lowered his head and closed his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Cassia sniffed, a tear going down her cheek. She turned and ran back to the small clearing, leaving Lawrence to groan and press a paw against his head.

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In the dark of night, no moon illuminated the sky. Woven within the tallest trees were dozens of platforms and capsules, all suspended with vines or attached directly to the trunks. No Grass or Fairy Pokémon traipsed along the narrow walkways and bridges, and no candles or lanterns burned. Only the dull flutter of Dustox occupied the pitch-black night.

A lithe shadow whisked between the supporting vines of Virona, wrapping a coarse, black thread around them. The threads all hung overhead, wrapping together in the center to hang low to the ground, forming a large bundle.

The shadow stopped at the door of a house. It peaked inside, watching two small Audino rest in their beds, smiling. The shadow turned away, its ice-blue eyes narrowed. The Zoroark leapt off the bridge and landed on the ground, the Prison Bottle smacking

against its thigh. He paced to the bundle of black wire and held up a claw; a crimson flame sparked on the end of it. He reached down to set the wire alight.

'This is wrong.'

Arthus froze, inches away from the wire. "I'm saving these Pokemon. Cassia is coming; they'll be converted to Arceism and trust in that Legend's lies." He held his hand closer.

He flinched and stopped, then stared at his arm. *'This is proof that good Pokemon can exist without following Arceus! And you just want to burn it down?'*

"Yes!" Arthus yelled, extinguishing the flame and pointing his claw at the city. "With every settlement lost, Arceus grows stronger! The world is tired of misery, so now it's a war between me and Arceus—and I plan to win."

'You promised that I'd only kill those who stood in my way—and it has gone far beyond that with killing all the other Arceists.' Arthus' arm jolted down, and the Zoroark grimaced, baring his teeth. "We are going—to the temple—" he said with clenched teeth. He mechanically stepped away from the wire and toward the thick jungle. "And *that's—it!*"

He stopped and turned to the wire. "I'm finishing—this first." He held up a Life Sphere and aimed at the wire.

He pulled away and fired it into the air, scorching leaves as it soared into the night. He kept aiming at the wire and firing Life Spheres in the wrong direction, all the while pacing back and forth between the city and the jungle.

"You're insane! Everyone knows it! Even you!" Arthus exclaimed.

"Genius is never appreciated in its time! Everyone will praise me in the future!"

"After being robbed of free will?"

"As long as everyone comes back to life, yes!"

Arthus shifted between his two personalities, his eyes shifting from the cold everyone known him for to the fire he had in the past. He screamed, clutching his head and falling to the ground. His vision went black.

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*Pure black stretched over the sky, hanging over the endless trees below. A clearing opened in the center, where a gnarled stump grew from the ground, impossibly large. The air sparked, and an orb of crimson Life came into existence over the stump, creating a ruby haze across the entire landscape.*

*A Zoroark appeared on one side of the stump, pure black save for its cold blue eyes. They flitted back and forth, studying itself in horror. “He’s...he’s challenged me for control.”*

*Another Zoroark appeared on the other side, perfectly normal in its appearance save for his blue eyes. “It’s time I put an end to this madness.”*

*The black Zoroark laughed half-heartedly. “This won’t be any different from before. I will still exist, and I will take control once more, if only to make sure you don’t ruin it like before, Arthus.”*

*“You’re my shadow—all of my hatred and rage gathered into an opposite of me.” Arthus held out his claws, creating an onyx haze around him. “And shadows are supposed to follow in their master’s footsteps.”*

*His shadow laughed, following his same movements, only creating a foul red mist. “Weak-willed and afraid, yet here you are, standing up to me. I look forward to driving you back once and for all.” The Life-fueled sun began to lower, and they both charged toward each other.*

*They bashed into each other and locked claws, the red haze pushing against the black. Arthus’ feet scraped against the wood of the stump as his shadow pressed forward, his mouth in a wide grin. “You forget that I still have all your passions—but unlike you, I’m not afraid to get them back.” He released his grip and caused Arthus to stumble forward, then punched him across the jaw, blowing him back.*

*Arthus rolled across the ground, but dug his claws into the wood, stopping himself. He stood up and looked up at the sun; it continued to lower. His shadow stood underneath it.*

*He ran forward and clapped his hands together, generating onyx sparks of electricity. “I’m not afraid; I just know there are lines that shouldn’t be crossed!” He fanned out his*

*arm and released a wave of pitch-black energy, clipping the shadow across his waist. He doubled over and clutched his chest, then Arthus slashed his legs twice and punched him back, making himself stand underneath the center of the sun.*

*The shadow seethed, covering the viscous black that flowed from his wounds. He stood up and shambled toward Arthus tapping his head with a smile. “But you can’t help it when bad memories haunt you.” A black wave radiated toward Arthus, emanating over him and crowding his mind.*

*He gasped, clutching his head and hunching down. “C-Corrina! Erik! Matheus!” His shadow’s Torment pulled up the dark memories of him betraying all he had loved—all for what he thought was the greater good.*

*His shadow grabbed Arthus’ mane and threw him aside, laughing. “You’re weak! Helpless! Without me, you would never have come this far!”*

*Arthus opened his eyes and aimed his hand at his shadow, cringing. “Without you...I’d be with Corrina...in the Tree of Life...instead of the Cocoon.”*

*His shadow knocked away his hand stamped on it with his good leg, crushing it and making Arthus scream. “But she’d still be dead, thanks to you! I had no part in that! I loved her as much as you do!”*

*Arthus forced himself to breath slower, pulling back his hand. “But you’re twisted...obsessed...you’re nothing like me...Cassia saw that...”*

*The shadow waved a dismissive hand and returned to the lowering sun, now only feet above his head. “I realize that; why do you think I let you take control and raise her? I’m not fit for such things.” He reached up, the sun only inches from his claws. “And if I have my way, I’ll make sure she doesn’t preach about Arceus ever again!”*

*“No!” Arthus cried, coming to his feet and running toward the shadow.*

*The shadow’s claws met with the sun, and the entire area was caught in crimson light.*

*~~~~*

*Arthus gasped, sitting upright and holding a hand to his chest. He woke below Virona as the moon began to sink beneath the horizon, beginning the dawn.*

He looked up, listening for anything. He smiled and came to his feet, to the fuse he had made for Virona. He snapped his fingers and held the flame out to it. “Don’t worry, *Arthus*; I don’t plan on killing her. I share your love for her.” The flame caught on the wire and created hundreds of sparks, all becoming a tiny, yet powerful flame, darting through the wires and making all the vines and branches keeping Virona in the air catch fire as well.

Arthus curled his claws together, grinning. “Everything’s coming together...you’ll see.” The Grass and Fairy Pokemon of Virona ran through their burning home to the rope bridges that stretched to the ground—yet none were there, cut by Arthus. They all screamed, struggling to douse the fire that plagued them. Two child Audino hugged each other and cried, pleading desperately to be saved.

All the vines snapped, and one-by-one, the structure fell, instantly killing whoever remained with them. Virona became a raging inferno on the jungle floor, incinerating everything and belching smoke into the new day’s sky.

Arthus’ eyes flickered, and his ears drooped. *‘This...this is never what I wanted. I wanted to save everyone from evil not...become that evil.’*

His features returned to a face of malice as he turned away and faced the south, where metal clinked against metal and drew closer. “The ends justify the means.”

Six Houndoom burst from the plant life, barking and snarling as they pulled a large metal sled, mounted with chains. A Dusknor held onto the handle at the back, his scarred eye wide with horror at the burning city of Virona.

The sled came to a stop and the Dusknor hovered after Arthus, pointing wildly at the disaster. “What—what *happened*? I heard a crash on my way here and thought it was a tree, but *this*?”

Arthus pulled him back to the sled and made him grab on. “I’ll explain on the way there. Now go!” He wrapped around Gardner and grabbed onto the handle as well, then swung the chains that hung on the Houndoom’s chest. They barked and ran into the jungle to the west, where deep within, they sought the ancient Arceist Temple.



## Chapter 20

“You destroyed an entire town because there was *a chance* they’d become Arceists?” Gardner roared. “That is idiotic and insane!”

Arthus and Gardner zoomed through the narrow passageways created by the dense jungle, all through the night and into the morning. The trees gradually grew less dense, and the cawing of birds grew quieter as they drove deeper.

Arthus held on to the sled around Gardner’s girth, struggling to look around him. “Would you let it go? They weren’t even acting like the rest of the outposts anyway!”

“That doesn’t change anything! I thought you were crazy enough slaying a servant for bringing the wrong drink, but this is a whole other level!” Gardner groaned, rubbing his eye. “Augh, never mind. Can’t change anything anyway.”

The sled lurched and Arthus pulled it to a stop, and the Houndoom quieted, waiting for orders. Towering in front of them was a massive stone structure, engraved with thousands of drawings and coated entirely with vines. Balanced on top of it was a broken Arc of Arceus, split in half. No birds sung, and no movement could be heard; not even the wind whistled. The building exuded a somber aura, almost ordering a place of peace.

Gardner broke away from the sled, looking around warily. “So...this is the temple.”

Arthus nodded slowly, following him. “Indeed.” He stepped toward it and began cutting through the vines.

As he did so, Gardner came closer and cleared his throat. “Why do you need me here? Aren’t *you* supposed to be dealing with Hoopa?”

Arthus cut the last layer of vines, revealing the yawning entrance into the temple. He stepped inside, holding up the Prison Bottle by its rope. “You play an important role, Gardner. Just come inside.” The Dusknair hesitantly followed.

Inside, massive pillars rose up to meet the ceiling, all carved with depictions of the Legends. Sconces of all sizes lined the walls and pillars, dark. There were no other doorways or windows to speak of; the entrance they went through was the sole opening. A massive stone slab hung over the door, supported by two giant timbers. A massive mural stretched across the floor, depicting all the Legends, Arceus standing chief among them. Along the walls were various levels of benches with stone ladders leading up to them, creating an auditorium. At the far end, a single podium stood, shaped in such a way to hold scrolls or books for the lead priest to preach.

Arthus stood at the podium and set the Prison Bottle on top of it. Gardner stood next to him, holding his arms behind his back. Arthus took a deep breath, then took hold of the bottle’s cap. The eyes on it lit up.

Arthus leaned over to Gardner and said, “I promise not to kill you.”

Gardner furrowed his brow. “What do you—”

Arthus pulled off the cap and violet gas erupted from the neck, filling the entire room. Beyond, a Pokemon screamed, shooting through the entryway. It appeared in the center of the violet clouds and turned out to be the smaller Hoopa, the rings on his chest and arms suspending him in the air.

As the gas enclosed him, he noticed Arthus and screamed, “*What have you done?*” The rest of his pleas were muffled by the gas as it grew to consume the entire room, coming the scrape the ceiling. The mist stopped flowing from the bottle and solidified, darkening. Its feet hovered slightly above the floor, crossed. Its six arms lay tucked in its body, a single giant hole within its chest. Purple hair exploded from its head, flowing from the shining silver armor of its chest and legs. Its eyes glowed emerald, and its wicked grin revealed rows of pointed teeth.

The Zoroark held the bottle high as the clouds finally formed into a solid shape. Its feet hovered slightly above the floor, crossed. Its six arms lay tucked in its body, a single

giant hole within its chest. Purple hair exploded from its head, flowing from the shining silver armor of its chest and legs. Its head nearly touched the ceiling, standing over ten times higher than Gardner, who shrunk behind Arthus.

The eyes opened, and rows of pointed teeth revealed themselves. **“You have unleashed the mighty Hoopa, granter of wishes.”** He bowed his head, two arms popping out and pounding together. **“I will grant a single wish for the wielder of my prison.”**

Arthus kept his grip on the bottle, his hands shaking. “Before I ask my wish, I would like to ask you some questions. I trust that will not be an issue?”

Hoopa frowned, his eyes narrowing. **“I am obligated to answer any question while you are my master. What do you wish to know?”**

Arthus scarcely hid a sigh of relief. “Will you be released from the Prison Bottle upon granting my wish?”

Hoopa leaned back, popping out four of his arms; two positioned themselves behind his head, and the other two rested on his chest. **“For three days, I am free to do as I please. Once the third sun has set, I must return to the bottle, and my true power is concealed until someone awakens me once more.”**

“Can you destroy the bottle?”

**“No. Only if a master commands me to do so. But that would require a wish, and none are so selfless—or foolish—to do so.”**

Arthus rubbed his chin, closing his eyes. “I may be willing to release you.”

Hoopa swung forward and rested his six arms on the ground, smiling wide. **“Really? You would release me?”**

Arthus took an involuntary step back, and Gardner hovered in his shadow. “W-Why yes. But in exchange, I will need you to fix this.” He held up the Seal of Creation with his free hand, revealing the cracked sapphire in its center.

Hoopa’s eyes flashed, and his mouth hung open. **“The Seal of Creation. Arceus’ means of eliminating my kind.”** He leaned back again, tapping his fingers together. **“You have done well in choosing this place; Arceus’ followers built this temple long**

ago as a means of contacting him and begging him for blessings. I can tap into his power to complete this feat.” He leaned forward once more and pointed all his index fingers at Arthus. **“I am no fool. You plan on taking me into the Seal, just so you can use my power!”**

Arthus dropped the Seal and held up the bottle. “I don’t! I promise I won’t!” Hoopa lowered his arms, leering at the Seal.

Arthus wheezed, then brushed back his mane. “How about we make a deal?” Behind his back, his fingers twisted around, forming a gem between them. He tossed it to Gardner and quickly wrote a message in pale red light: *“Place your Life inside.”*

Gardner cocked his head and went to say something, but a warning look from Arthus made him hold his voice.

Hoopa continued to stare, folding his arms. **“I’m listening.”**

Arthus turned back around with a forced smile. Here’s my proposal: You repair the Seal and promise not to harm me, then I will release you and promise not to harm you.”

Hoopa held up his fingers. **“The process of repairing the Seal will significantly tax me. I will require more on your part for such a bargain to be worth my while.”**

Arthus waved a dismissive hand. “Understandably. After making my wish and before you repair the Seal, you can drain my servant of Life.” He waved to Gardner and slyly took the gem from his frozen hands, now glowing red.

Gardner eyes whisked back and forth between Arthus and Hoopa. “What? I never—”

Hoopa laughed, its echo reverberating through the room. **“How entertaining! Very well, I accept.”** He growled and pound his fists on the ground. **“But what happens if you *do* take me with the Seal?”**

Arthus held up a claw, his smile gone. “I expected this. If I harm you, then—then Arceus can kill me where I stand.” The floor rumbled, and Arthus paled. He hurriedly added, “B-But if you harm me *or break the order* of our deal, then you return to the bottle instantly!”

Hoopa hummed to himself, resting his head on his hand. He nodded curtly and held out a hand. **“A reasonable bargain.”**

Gardner hovered forward and sputtered, “What—What do you mean I’m going to be—”

Arthus’ hand met with Hoopa’s, and they both shook. A wave of violet energy radiated from them, and Hoopa snatched the Seal of Creation from Arthus’ neck. He pointed at him and said, **“Make the wish.”**

In a clear voice, Arthus said, “I, Arthus Zoroark, wish for the Seal of Creation to be made whole.” He rubbed the glowing gem behind his back.

Two of Hoopa’s arm snatched Gardner and held him in the air. Despite his screams, Hoopa held him over his mouth and opened wide. Crimson mist flowed from Gardner’s body into Hoopa’s mouth, until he closed his eye and fell limp and silent.

Hoopa smacked his lips and gently set Gardner’s body on the ground. **“Delicious.”** All six of his arms surrounded the Seal, with two delicately holding it up in the air. **“Now for my end of the bargain.”** Hoopa grunted, and with two hands he sent a beam of light into the gem. The single shot fused into the Seal, a tiny pinprick of many. He then continued with another, methodically restoring the single weakness to the almighty Arceus. With a third hand, he wove a mystical thread through the cracks, and with the fourth shone a violet light across it.

Hoopa grit his teeth, hovering around the Seal occasionally and leaning close to ensure his hands made no mistake. Arthus watched him work, entranced by the many lights used to fix it. Little by little, the jagged crack through the sapphire sealed, until only a faint outline remained.

Hoopa held his four arms away and bellowed, **“It is done!”** He clamped his hands around the Seal and exploded with bright light. It faded, and Hoopa delicately held it out to Arthus, as perfect as the day it was made.

Arthus graciously took it with his free hand, a smile widening across his face. “Finally...”

Hoopa reared back his hands, grinning as well. **“Allow me to destroy the bottle and secure my freedom.”** He snatched the bottle from the podium and bludgeoned it with his

other five fists, cackling wildly. The ornate container remained undamaged, its green eyes glowing fiercely.

Hoopa faltered, holding it away. **“What is this? Why does it not break under my might?”**

Arthus slowly revealed the gem from before, still glowing with crimson light. “The deal was that you’d kill Gardner before you repaired the Seal. In case you haven’t noticed,” he threw the gem at Gardner and caused it to shatter on his chest. The red light enveloped him, then Gardner shot upright and gasped, holding his head.

Arthus waved to the Dusknor. “He’s still alive.”

Hoopa growled, clenching his fists. He suddenly roared and bellowed, **“*You deceived me! I will make you suffer a thousand deaths!*”** His arms shot toward Arthus, only to dissipate into mist. The cap of the bottle opened, and Hoopa little by little flowed into it.

Arthus shrugged and lowered the Seal around his neck. “You broke the rules, you go back in the bottle. Simple.” Hoopa roared again as a small figure hovered up from the mist.

Hoopa’s last free hand wrapped around the figure and called, **“I will not allow you to go free!”** The figure screamed as he too faded into mist and funneled into the bottle, until at last all of it was caught within, and the cap closed.

Arthus let out all his pent-up breath and fell against the podium, forcing a laugh. “I...I did it...the Seal is fixed...and Hoopa is still trapped.”

Gardner advanced toward Arthus, his eye burning with hatred. “You *used* me! You would’ve had me *killed* to fix that accursed Seal!”

Arthus forced his arms down and said, “I told you before, I wasn’t going to kill you! I had it all under control.”

Gardner humphed and said, “You were shaking like a leaf.” He eyed the Seal and said, “So, what now? Are you headed for Deitae now?”

Arthus shook his head. “No, not yet. I have some unfinished business to take care of.” He patted Gardner on the back and said, “But feel free to go now. You’ve done your part.”

Gardner spun around and grabbed Arthus' shoulders. "*That's it?* You wanted me to be some *tool* to fool Hoopa?"

Arthus ducked under Gardner's grip and yanked his antenna to force him down. He held a claw dangerously close to Gardner's maw. "Don't take it personally. *I mean it.*" He let go of Gardner and said, "Just go. Take a vacation if you need. I'm sure Martre will manage."

Gardner rubbed his antenna and remained silent as he floated out of the temple, leaving Arthus to disappear in a shimmer. The Dusknor mounted the sled and whipped the chain, then swerved south, careening through the trees.

He furrowed his brow and said under his breath, "I swear, *Zoroark*, you're going to regret using me like that."

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Lawrence, Cassia, Grom and Matheus continued their trek to Virona in solemn silence. Cassia stood close to Grom, hiding behind him, while Lawrence stood ahead, following Matheus as he blazed a trail. No Trumbeak sung and no Emolga chattered; the very movement within the Faylen jungle seemed to have stopped.

Matheus pushed through a thick cluster of vines ahead of him. "Virona should be just past here," he explained. He pushed past it and froze. Grom, Cassia, and Lawrence joined him in astonishment.

Smoldering husks of wood lay tumbled across the forest floor. Smoke rose high in the air across hundreds of feet of ash and charcoal. No Pokémon were visible amongst the remains, all burned away by the massive flames of the previous night.

"What...what *happened?*?" Cassia whispered, putting a hand over her mouth.

Matheus treaded carefully through the remains, searching. "Virona must have caught fire as recently as last night. We couldn't see anything because of the thickness of the jungle." He held up a singed fabric doll, the eyes of the Oddish staring blankly back. "Knowing the height it used to hang from...no one survived." He dropped the doll, then took off his hat and lowered his head. Everyone else followed suit.

After around a minute of standing, Matheus put his hat back on and said, “Well...there’s nothing else to do here.” He looked back to Lawrence. “Just...just one last thing. The temple.” Lawrence slowly nodded back, while Cassia hugged Grom.

Matheus lead the procession past the graveyard and to an unkempt trail, brushing past low ferns and patches of grass. A thin haze of smoke hung overhead, causing their eyes to water.

The massive stone temple loomed closer, and all Lawrence could think of is how he wished to stay. *‘I...I want to be part of Equivos...to be with Cassia. I missed so much while hating Arceus...I want everyone else to realize their mistake. Some aspect I still have issues with, yes, but still...I was wrong.’*

He grimaced and thought back to Castelia and its environment. *‘How can I go back after this? Equivos is so much better than Castelia. I don’t have to worry about Hanson or his technology changing the world.’* He shivered. *‘Especially with what he planned to do with one of the Equivosians. I can’t leave.’*

He sighed and rubbed the side of his head. *‘But if I stay, I’m dooming everyone, even myself. Tursha’s seen the future, and what he says makes sense; I caused dimensional disturbances, and the only way to fix them is to leave. This world wouldn’t stay perfect for long.’* He bit his lip and bowed his head. *‘I can’t let that happen.’*

Finally, they stood at the entrance of the giant stone temple. They entered the darkness within and saw a single tattered Xatu standing at the podium, his back facing them.

Matheus paused in front of the door, then turned around. He motioned for Lawrence to continue, then followed him inside. Upon entering, they saw that the temple had no other doorways or windows to speak of; the entrance they went through was the sole opening.

When Grom entered the temple, Tursha turned around mechanically. The bandage still wrapped around his head, completely covering his eyes. “You brought companions. Friends.” He nodded his head. “That was expected.” He waved his wing. “Come closer, Lawrence Stephenson.”

Lawrence did so, his steps becoming shorter and shorter. He stopped, his paws quivering. He turned back to Matheus, Grom and Cassia, then turned back to Tursha. “Do I...do I really have to leave? Isn’t there some other way?”

The Xatu remained still. “To save this world, there is none. It will not be tomorrow, not even the day after, or even next year or the year after, that we shall succumb to the unraveling of this world. But this is your one opportunity to leave, and unless you do, certain death lies ahead.” He motioned for him again. “Come within wing’s reach, and it shall be done.”

Lawrence swallowed fearfully and took another step. Cassia exhaled sharply and ran to Lawrence, embracing him. “You can’t leave! You just can’t!”

The Lucario forced himself to push her away, bowing his head. “I’m sorry...but I don’t want you to die...because of me...” He rubbed her tears away from her face, forcing himself to smile. “Just remember...I’ll always be with you. Even if I’m in a different world.” They embraced each other once more, while Grom and Matheus bowed their heads sadly.

“How *touching*.”

The stone slab fell in front of the entrance with a crash, plunging the room into darkness. All raised their heads, bewildered by this turn of events.

The sconces erupted in crimson light, brightly illuminating the temple. Tursha cocked his head, putting his wings together. “I gather you together...I remain in the shadows...I nudge here and there...all of this hard work...”

Tursha straightened, his blindfold starting to slide down his head. “Now, what do I witness? A *Lucario* in love with a *Zoroark*? How...*loathsome*.”

Matheus stared at Tursha, squinting his eyes. “You sound familiar.”

Cassia nodded, eyes wide. “He *does*.”

Tursha reached up for his blindfold. “Oh, so you know me?” He ripped away the blindfold. “I know you *very* well.” Two bright blue eyes glared harshly at them, quivering.

Everyone took a step back. “Arthus,” Matheus hissed.

The Xatu disappeared, revealing a graying Zoroark wearing a perfect, golden pendant. He grinned and held his head high, his mane trailing the floor. “And I have *exactly* what I need.”

Lawrence’s head turned back and forth, then he finally exclaimed, “How? Why? You *tricked* me?”

Arthus cackled, leaning back. “Oh, it was all too easy. I mean, seriously, ‘the energies that surround your arrival are destroying the world’? Arceus would never let that slide!” He narrowed his eyes. “Isn’t that right, *Matheus*?”

Matheus growled, his paws beginning to glow. “So all this time, you just *lied* to Lawrence about him being able to return home? For no good reason?” He jabbed a paw at the Seal. “And how did you fix that? It was broken beyond repair!”

Arthus wagged a claw. “Not true. I had a little...*divine* help.” He held up the Prison Bottle, the eyes glowing green.

“He’s...he’s *loose*?” Matheus shouted, paling.

Arthus laughed and let go of the bottle, allowing it to smack against his thigh. “No, no, no, even *I’m* not crazy enough to let Hoopa Unbound free. No, I managed to trick him and got him inside.” He shook his head and stepped off the podium. “But I digress. Let’s get down to why I tricked all of you into coming here.” He pointed at Matheus, grinning. “*He’s* priority number one. After I learned you were alive, I wanted nothing more than to send you into the Seal—even more than Arceus.” He gestured around the temple. “And *this* is the perfect place. No way to run or hide—just you and me.”

Matheus growled and held up his paws. “I’m not going down without a fight. You still have to touch me with it to take me.”

Arthus smirked. “Just wait.” He looked over at Lawrence. “And you. I was rather surprised to find out you were really from a different world, but, like the other Lucario, you must die.” He clenched his fist, his eyes glowing red. “Plus, there’s this little *romance* with my daughter.”

Red mist rose around Cassia as she crouched, holding out her claws. “I’m *not* your *daughter*!” She and the others failed to notice her bag rustling.

Arthus scowled and crossed his arms. “I raised you. I cared for you. I taught you everything you know.”

Cassia faltered, standing straighter. “Y-Yes, but—”

Arthus pulled at his mane and screamed, “I gave you *everything!* And what did you do? *Abandon me*, the only one who ever loved you!”

Cassia shrunk away and covered her face while Lawrence stepped forward and said, “Leave her alone! You’re the one who’s made everyone hate her! You’re a mass murderer! Why *shouldn’t* she run away?”

Arthus suddenly calmed, tapping his claws together. “Why, Grom happens to agree with me.”

Lawrence blinked and narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean—”

“GRAAWW!”

Grom threw his arms out and stepped backward, grasping the air in front of him. Arthus melted into the air and reappeared on Grom’s chest, climbing it quickly and holding a black, spherical stone in his claws.

Cassia gasped and turned to Lawrence. “The Illusion Stone! Where is it?”

Lawrence groped around his neck, only to find an empty string, cleanly cut. His head snapped to Arthus as he recognized the sphere as the illusionary artifact, clambering up to Grom’s head. He held it high and slammed it into the crack in Grom’s head, fitting perfectly. Grom froze, then lowered his limbs, falling still. His light went out.

“Grom!” Cassia ran in front the Golurk, shaking his arms and trying to make him move. Arthus slid off his back and disappeared once more.

Lawrence and Matheus came next to Cassia, each with the fur on the back of their heads rising. “Do you sense him anywhere?” Lawrence asked.

Matheus closed his eyes and slowly turned his head behind him. “Yes...right *there!*” He swung his paw behind him and clashed with Arthus’ arm, narrowly blocking the Seal from hitting his chest.

Arthus pressed closer, causing Matheus to stoop. “Don’t delay the inevitable; we both know how this will end, *brother.*”

“Get away from him!” Lawrence shouted, running forward with fists covered in aura.

Arthus pushed Matheus aside and dropped the Seal, meeting Lawrence’s Aura with his Life. They traded blows, and Arthus cackled, growing faster and faster. “You’ve gotten stronger, but you’re still nothing compared to—*urk!*”

Matheus punched Arthus’ side from behind him and forced him to the ground. The Legend took a quick breath. “Lawrence—we can’t stay here. We have to go!”

Arthus groaned and brought himself upright. “Talking about your plans out in the open again...always worked out for you.”

Lawrence slugged him across the chin and caused him to stagger backward, revealing the Seal of Creation. “We have to take it back!”

Arthus cackled and rubbed his chin, his eyes glowing red. “Now *that’s* more like it!” He met with both Matheus and Lawrence, swapping between them and trading blows, straining to touch the Legend with the Seal.

Cassia stared back at the Lucario, grimacing. “I...I can’t leave Grom.” She turned back to him. “Please...*please* be alright.”

Grom’s eyes flickered, then flashed. He whirled and rolled his shoulder, focusing on Cassia. She stepped back and said, “Are you...alright?”

Grom stared for a moment longer, then suddenly grabbed Cassia around her shoulders, pinning her arms to her sides. “Directive continued; restrict target until command received.”

Cassia screamed, pushing against her companion’s grip. “No! Grom, please, come back!”

Lawrence beat back Arthus’ claws and saw Cassia’s plight. “He’s...he’s like he was before!”

“Why of course!” Arthus kicked Matheus away and grabbed Lawrence’s neck, dragging him closer. “That missing piece was all I needed to bring back my servant—and you brought it right to me.”

“Raaagh!” Lawrence kneed Arthus in the gut then clouted him with his paw, stunning him. He then ran to Grom and shouted, “Let her go!”

Grom's eyes flashed as he repositioned Cassia to be held in one arm, then took a step closer. "Threat detected. Disposing of target now." He threw a rocket-powered kick at Lawrence and sent him flying into a pillar, cracking the stone.

Matheus stood over Arthus and reached for the necklace around his neck. "You have no idea what will happen if you use this!"

Arthus groaned and slapped Matheus' paw away, hastily coming upright. "Wrong! I'll make this world like Arceus should have years ago!" He held up the Seal and leapt for Matheus. Matheus rolled backward and ran for the blocked entrance. Arthus followed.

Lawrence slid down the cracked pillar and moaned, rubbing his back. Grom threw a punch at him despite Cassia's cries. He ducked underneath the Golurk and grabbed onto the arm holding Cassia, struggling to pull her free.

As Matheus and Arthus knocked the Seal back and forth, Cassia pushed against Grom's might with Lawrence, doing nothing against the Golurk. "I have to change him back!"

"He'll just lose his memory again! There has to be another way!" Lawrence replied, releasing his grip just as Grom punched in his direction.

Grom swung for him again and spun on his feet, stumbling. He let go of Cassia to steady himself, sending her rolling on the ground. She shook free of her dizziness and watched Grom continue to assault Lawrence and Arthus chase Matheus, each threatening to kill the other.

She looked at Arthus and his firing Life Spheres, then at Grom and the filled socket in his head. She blinked and remembered: *'Arthus used his Life to change Grom.'* She sprinted toward Grom and jumped onto his back. *'I can too!'*

Lawrence saw Cassia on the Golurk's back and said, "What are you doing up—"

Grom punched him across the jaw and sent him into the wall next to the entrance. He weakly attempted to get up but lowered his head and fell still.

Arthus and Matheus pushed against each other, paw against claw. Arthus brought his face close to Matheus'. "Do you still feel guilty? Ashamed?"

Matheus eyed the Seal of Creation, dangling from Arthus' wrist and nearly touching his own. "...Yes." He abruptly let go and clouted Arthus over the head. Arthus' arm lifted as he fell to the ground, and Matheus grabbed the Seal by the chain on his wrist. He stared at it briefly, then turned to the slab covering the entrance.

He considered both as Arthus came to his feet and reached for the Seal. Matheus threw it to the other side of the room and ran for the slab. Arthus ran for the Seal and screamed, "You were always an *idiot!*"

Matheus grabbed the rope hanging by the pulley above the slab and began to pull, grunting. "Cassia, have you brought back Grom?"

Cassia held on to Grom's neck with all her might as the Golurk floundered to grab her, stamping around in a circle robotically. "Almost...there," she said, setting a hand on his head. She closed her eyes and the top of Grom's head flashed crimson. He stood completely still as the light faded.

Arthus scrabbled for the Seal in the corner of the room, the light covered by being facedown. He looked back briefly and shouted, "I'll deal with you after Matheus is mine!"

Cassia slid down Grom's back, holding her hands together. "Can...can you hear me? Grom?"

The Golurk flinched, then slowly turned his head toward her. "...C...Cassia?"

The Zoroark sighed in relief and stepped forward to hug him. "You can—"

The Golurk stepped forward and swung his arms back dangerously while his head swiveled back and forth. Cassia rolled out of the way and panted, shocked.

Grom locked up again and shuddered. "I...I can't control myself. I have to follow Arthus' directive...to capture you."

Cassia held up her claws and reached out for him. "I'll just—"

"No!" Grom stomped again, forcing his fists to the ground. "Arthus has done too much; you were lucky to free my emotions." He sighed. "And I can't break free. I'm...I'm sorry Cassia."

Cassia's throat bobbed, then she speedily climbed onto his back. "I'll just knock out that piece again!"

Grom's eyes flashed weakly. "No...you won't get it a second time. You'll destroy my mind, and I'll be no good for anything."

Behind them, Matheus wheezed, taking choking breaths. "This...this door is heavy." He looked over at Cassia and Grom. "I wish I could help."

"Oh, Matheus..."

The Lucario slowly turned his head, where Arthus stood to his left, dangling the Seal in front of him. He groaned, dropping the rope. "Why don't you just hit me with it already?"

Arthus laughed and reared the Seal back. "I want to remember this moment!" He swung the Seal forward—only to be blown back by a lone Aura Sphere.

Matheus turned to its direction and saw Lawrence with his paw thrust out, his fur matted and blood dribbling down his lip. "Don't. Touch. Matheus."

Arthus got up from the ground and chuckled, rubbing his side. "Oh, *now* you fight." He set the Seal around his neck and ran toward him, claws extended. "I might as well take care of you first!"

Matheus yanked back on his mane and shouted, "Not if I have anything to say about it!" He continued to wrestle with the Zoroark as Lawrence leapt into the fray, weakly punching the Zoroark.

Cassia turned between Grom and the brawlers, cringing. "Grom...there has to be something you can do. *Anything*. They need help."

Grom looked down at his chest, then his eyes flashed. "There is one thing." He shakily reached up for the brace on his chest.

Cassia's eyes widened as she tried to push down his hand. "No. Not that. Anything but that!" As she spoke, Arthus swept under Matheus feet and sent him to the ground while he traded blows with Lawrence, continually advancing on him.

Despite her pleas, Grom dug his fingers underneath his brace, revealing the bright light beneath it. “You can’t bring me back.” He looked down and tugged at the brace. “And I can’t serve Arthus!”

Cassia pulled at Grom’s arm harder, crying out, “Don’t! You’ll die!”

Matheus got off his back and ran to intercept Arthus and Lawrence, but a dozen Arthuses suddenly appeared around him. They all grinned and held out their hand. “It was all thanks to you this happened, right?” Matheus froze, shrinking to the ground as the fake Arthuses advanced.

Arthus slashed the air in front of Lawrence, driving him into the corner of the temple. “Matheus is a fraud, Grom is a minion, and Cassia is mine! Where are *you* in this story?”

Lawrence wheezed, his vision becoming blurry as the pain in his body grew. “I...I don’t *care*.”

Arthus spun around him and drove his claws into Lawrence’s side, making him gasp. He fell to the ground and clutched at the wound, doing nothing to stop Arthus from standing over him. The Zoroark smiled as he held his claw up to strike.

Cassia and Grom watched as Lawrence was about to be killed by the Usurper. Grom tugged at the brace once more, pulling loose a bolt. He jerked, and in a struggling voice said, “It—it was a pleasure to serve you—Cassia. You gave me my greatest memories—and taught me—to be a friend.”

Cassia pulled herself away from Lawrence and croaked, “You don’t have to do this.”

Grom’s eyes dimmed as he pulled the brace a final time. “Lawrence will protect you now.” The brace came free, and Grom threw out his arms and bellowed, “*Remember me!*” As the brace and bolts clattered against the floor, his arms spun around rapidly, advancing toward Arthus. “***Roa-raw-raor-raaaaaaahh!***”

Arthus’ illusions faded, and Matheus gasped and rolled out of the way, while Arthus stopped midswing and paled. The onyx Golurk roared and charged toward him at full speed, his arms spinning faster than the eye could see.

Arthus sprinted away from him, nearly running on all-fours. “What have you done?” He circled around a pillar and Grom bashed into it, instantly destroying it. Arthus circled another with the same results.

Cassia broke free of her shock and gathered Grom’s brace and bolts. She cautiously approached him, holding out his safety components.

Matheus stood up and stared at Grom chasing Arthus, destroying yet another pillar. He looked up and grit his teeth; the ceiling shook, and the remaining six pillars were struggling to keep it up.

Matheus started toward the slab. “This place will collapse at any moment!”

Lawrence groaned, reaching out for him. “Matheus...”

The Legend swerved around and sat next to him, putting a paw over his mouth upon seeing his wound. “You need help. Now.”

Lawrence grabbed onto Matheus’ cloak and pulled himself higher.

“Where’s...Cassia?”

“*Grom!*”

They both snapped their heads toward the shriek, where Cassia stood in front of a pillar with her arms out, holding the Golurk’s brace. Arthus ran toward her, having no other option thanks to the Golurk’s pursuit.

Arthus tossed his hand to the side and yelled, “Get out of the way! He’s gone berserk!” He tripped and skidded against the floor, only to get stomped on his leg by Grom. He screamed in agony and struggled to push himself up despite the flattened limb.

Cassia remained still as Grom advanced, not caring who his target was. Realization came too late to her as Grom’s spinning fists slammed into her and threw her into the wall next to the crushed Arthus. She lay still, her bag caught in Grom’s hand and his bolts still in hers.

Lawrence abruptly stood up and cried, “*Cassia!*” He limped toward her, clutching his wound.

The bag caught in Grom's hand slung toward Lawrence's head. Matheus caught it in the air inches from contact, then grabbed Lawrence's arm and shuffled toward the exit. "I'll come back for her once you're out!"

The walls of the temple began to crumble, revealing a small hole next to the stone slab. Matheus and Lawrence toward it as a fifth pillar fell to Grom's rampage.

Arthus crawled to Cassia and flipped her onto her back, eyes wide with fright. "Talk to me! Say something!" Her eyes fluttered as she struggled to lift her head, but she fell back, unconscious.

The Usurper cursed and forced himself to his feet, screaming as he put weight onto his broken leg. He took Cassia's arms and dragged her toward Matheus, far slower than the other. He reached for him and cried, "*Help her! Don't leave her to die!*" He gasped as Grom advanced toward him once more, destroying a sixth pillar. The temple's ceiling crumbled, showering stones around them.

Matheus reached the crumbling hole and pushed Lawrence out, then threw Cassia's bag. He darted back inside as he said, "I'm going back for Cassia!"

Arthus fell to the ground and held up his hands pleadingly toward the incoherent Grom. "Stop! Stop! *Stop!*" He lowered his head and cringed as Grom threatened to beat him down.

Matheus ran toward him and threw and Aura Sphere at Grom. It swerved around and knocked into his side, making him stumble to the left and bash into not one, but two pillars as he fell next to the last in the center. He spasmed as his internal light grew whiter and whiter.

Matheus fell next to Arthus and Cassia, leering at Arthus' Seal. "How can I trust you with *that?*"

Arthus pushed Cassia to him and hung his head low. "Just take her. Her life is more important than mine."

Matheus stared for a moment, then stood up and hefted Cassia, setting her over his shoulders. He ran as hard as he could to the exit, while Arthus limped after him, wincing and moaning with every step.

Grom stood upright and held his arms out, his chest becoming blindingly bright. **“GRAAAAAAAAAAWWW!”** He exploded, blowing back everyone still left in the temple and destroying the final pillar. As black fragments of his body fell, the roof sagged, and stones continued to fall.

Cassia and Arthus landed near the far wall away from the exit, their fur singed. Matheus rolled across the ground and stopped near the sole exit from the temple. He stood up and looked around him, his face falling with every moment. He took a final look at Arthus and Cassia, then turned away and closed his eyes. He ran out of the temple just as the exit covered over.

Arthus looked around him, defeated. “Arceus...you’ve won.” He turned to Cassia and closed his eyes as stones the size of boulders fell around him. “But it was an empty victory...”

Lawrence stood just beyond the temple, holding Cassia’s bag. Matheus ran toward him and dragged him away from the imploding temple. As they retreated, Lawrence cried, “Where’s Cassia? Where is she?”

The top of the temple fell, and a deafening crack rung out. Matheus and Lawrence were blown away by the sheer force of impact, rolling into the dense trees nearby. The Arceist temple roared and groaned as its entirety rumbled on top of those who remained, their booming cacophony ringing out for miles.

The dust billowed high into the sky, and the Temple now stood twenty feet high, little more than several tons of rubble and scrap.

Minutes after, Lawrence shook his head free of the leaves, then froze. “No...” He forced himself to stand, then hobbled to the remains of the Temple, finding no sign of life.

“No, no, no!” He pulled free rocks as large as he could lift, but to no avail. Arthus lay buried, ending his conquest to usurp Arceus.

But at the cost of Grom and Cassia, two of his only friends.

He fell to his knees, then fell across a boulder, crying out uncontrollably. Matheus merely lowered his head, dropping the last belongings of Cassia Zoroark.

Chapter 21

Act 4 - The Keeper

All hope is now gone,

All love now buried.

The darkness has fallen,

Just as light has done.

Silver and Cyan,

The Master and One,

Are now all alone,

On their journey travail.

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Silence. Only silence. No leaves rustled. No birds sung. A dark and clouded sky ruined the otherwise warm and soothing evening, forcing it into a dark and forbidding tone.

Matheus placed a stray plank of wood atop a careful formation of loose rocks from the temple, situating it in front of the former entrance to the temple. Lawrence stood stiffly, cautiously shifting the bandages wrapped around his chest.

The Legend clapped his paws together, the fur on the back of his head rising. He parted his paws and a narrow stream of blue flame jetted from one. He carefully passed it along the wood, leaving behind a black streak with every pass.

After branding several lines, Matheus blew away the smoke, allowing Lawrence to see his work:

*Here Rests**Cassia Zoroark—Priestess of Arceus—Beloved by All**Grom Golurk—Guardian of the Priestess**Arthus Zoroark—The Usurper—Friend and Father*

Matheus made a shuddering sigh, then said, “Too many...just too many...” He held a paw over Cassia’s name. “Of all the Pokémon I’ve known, you were the most faithful...even to the end.” He passed his paw over Grom’s name. “I wish I had known you longer. You were a true companion, one that could never be replaced.”

He paused, then lowered to Arthus’ name. “Arthus...” He sighed and shook his head. “You...you were still there...in the end. We could have still been friends—brothers, even. But then...” His paw curled into a fist, then relaxed.

He stepped back and turned to Lawrence. The silver Lucario paused, then sighed. “I’m...I’m sorry, Lawrence. There...there wasn’t enough time, and well, it was too dangerous. You could’ve—” He cut himself short then shook his head. “I’ll just...I’ll just go look for some berries.” He trudged past ferns and roots and went into the trees, leaving Lawrence alone.

Lawrence remained still. His face remained blank.

He winced. He saw the temple. He saw Arthus, holding the Seal for them to see. He saw the scattered fragments of Grom on the floor. He saw...Cassia.

Lawrence closed his eyes and made a shuddering sigh. He held out a paw, gazing at the weak glow that surrounded it. He hugged himself and hunched over, closing his eyes.

He saw himself walking with a Gardevoir through a forest path, first joining this world.

He saw himself with a Gardevoir, in a vale guarded by a Trevenant.

He saw himself with a Gardevoir, pouring his fears out to her.

He saw himself with a Zoroark, reading the Tome across mountains.

He saw himself with a Zoroark, traveling together for the benefit of the world, and each other.

All the while, a black Golurk watched from afar.

All of it for nothing. For death.

He thought of all the time he had spent with her, in the meantime of their travels. Three weeks felt too short a time. He had only just known her, known her troubles, and realized his own...and how she could resolve them.

It would never be.

He felt something rise in him. Anger. Despair. Gathered together. It continued to rise, and he thought of what Cassia had devoted her entire life to:

*Arceus.*

Lawrence's paws shook. He saw the sufferings of Pokémon at the hand of the Guild—at the hand of Arthus. He saw the grief of Cassia throughout her life, all through the viciousness of others. He saw himself, insulted for his lack of belief, isolated through his whole life. He had finally found someone to empathize with—and she was taken.

Lawrence grit his teeth, then shook a fist into the sky. “*You’ve done **nothing** for me! **NOTHING!***” His fist surged with aura, then he threw it into a nearby boulder. The aura burned into the very center, splitting the rock in two.

He panted, slowly removing his paw. He stared at it, watching the aura recede. He fell to his knees and continued to cry. All the while, Matheus watched from the fringe of the palms, bowing his head.

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Later, Lawrence sat at the base of the tree, holding his Pokédex and studying the screen: “No access point in range.” Yet again, that message taunted him. Never had it felt so insulting.

Matheus came out from the trees, holding a cask dripping with water. He took a long draught, then wiped his lips and coughed. “Arthus really did a number on my throat. Don’t remember him being the throttling type.” He took another drink, then held the cask out to Lawrence. He didn’t move.

Matheus pushed it closer. “You’ve been sitting there ever since we left the temple; you need to sustain yourself, especially after what Arthus did to you.”

Lawrence glanced at the cask, then looked away. He sighed, put away his Pokédex, then accepted the cask and poured water into his mouth. He finished, gave it back to Matheus, and turned away.

Matheus set the cask into the bag. “Look, Lawrence...we can’t stay here. We still need to get to Furnek and Saunte. There’s not much—”

“What’s the point?”

Matheus bristled. “Excuse me?”

“What’s the point of going there?” Lawrence replied. He lay back on the root, ignoring the burning pain on his chest. “Arceus won’t protect them. He didn’t protect Barash, Jareth, Cryus...he’s done nothing. Believing in him won’t make it any better.” He sat straight again, glaring at Matheus. “You could’ve done something. You’ve been alive for two thousand years! You could’ve fought Arthus again and stopped him from taking over! You could’ve kicked the Guild out of Equivos! *You* could’ve saved Grom and Cassia! *Yet you didn’t!*” He inhaled sharply, holding his chest and cringing.

Matheus remained still, giving no response. He lowered his head, gazing at the ground.

Lawrence stood up and growled, “Let’s go. Anywhere’s better than here.” He scooped up Cassia’s bag and pushed past Matheus. The Legend pulled the supply bag over his shoulder and followed Lawrence to the south.

Hours passed, and the cawing of Trumbeak and chittering of Emolga returned as lively as before. Lawrence failed to notice, completely absorbed by his march through the Faylen jungle. He took no rest stops, ate no food, and drank no water. He kept pushing between the trees, dwelling on the loss of Cassia and Grom, and how they could have been saved.

Night fell, and Matheus looked up, frowning. “Getting late. We should stop for the day.” Lawrence refused to reply.

Matheus caught up with Lawrence and grabbed his arm. “You’ve done nothing but walk for hours! You haven’t even changed your bandages.” He looked down at Lawrence’s chest and groaned. “They’re filthy. We have to change them.”

Lawrence glared at the Legend, then begrudgingly sat on a root, setting down Cassia's bag. Matheus sighed, then pulled off his own bag and dug through it for the roll of bandages. He pulled it out and pulled away a layer of Lawrence's bandages, recoiling after. "It's going to get worse before it gets better. I'll need to clean it before anything else." He took out a cloth and a cask of water, then soaked the cloth.

He pulled away the rest of the bandages. He took a glance up to Lawrence, who looked away. Matheus started to clean the wound, then said, "Years ago, after Arthus betrayed me, we had a long, drawn-out battle. I managed to win, and I took the Seal from him. Then I ran, ignoring the dozens of scratches he gave me." He held up his arm, the silvery scars visible in the approaching moonlight. "That's where I got most of these."

He lowered his arm and finished cleaning Lawrence's wound. He wrapped the roll around Lawrence's chest, his paws shaking. "I kept going for days, hating myself for Arthus' change. I didn't eat, I didn't sleep—exactly what you'd do if I let you. And do you know what happened?" Lawrence glanced at Matheus.

He ripped the length of bandage from the roll and exclaimed, "I keeled over! I nearly died because I refused to take care of myself!" He tied the ends of the bandage together, shaking his head. "If those Phantump didn't find me when they did..."

He stood up, frowning. "I don't want you wasting your life...the life I managed to save. Cassia wouldn't either." He turned around, then paced out of sight. "I'll go find food."

Lawrence remained still. He considered the Legend's words, thinking of Cassia and Grom. *'I only just accepted Arceus again...but ever since...the temple.'* He lowered his head sadly. *'I've just been the same as before.'* Suddenly, he heard Matheus' words in Cassia's voice: *"I don't want you wasting your life...the life I managed to save."* He sat straighter. *'She worked with me till the end to make me this way...yet here I am, back at square one.'*

The sadness and anger from the temple rose up once more. *'I won't forget what she did for me...I'll keep myself strong, so her memory can be.'* He curled his fist. *'But it's thanks to Matheus that she isn't here.'*

Lawrence kept his fist tight for a moment, then froze. *'Or was it me?'* He flinched. *'I listened Tursha's—Arthus' words. I brought everyone to the temple.'* He leaned down and pressed his paws against his head. *'Matheus might not have saved Cassia, but it was my fault that we even ended up there. Arthus might've had the Seal, but Grom and Cassia wouldn't be...dead.'*

He sat straighter, clutching his head. *'It was my fault. I shouldn't have listened to him! I shouldn't have listened to him!'* he thought, the words repeating in his mind. He teared up, regretting ever following the words of the false seer of Arceus that ultimately lead to his own demise.

His thoughts were interrupted as Matheus came out from the trees, carrying a bundle of small green berries in his arms. Lawrence quickly composed himself as Matheus held one up. "Found a bunch of Lum berries," he said. "Pretty bland, but they're filling, and they're good medicine too." He popped it into his mouth and shrugged. "Better than nothing."

He handed some off to Lawrence, then sat next to him continued to eat his berries. As they ate, he pointed to his right and said, "We keep heading south for two days or so and we'll be in the Iren desert. Two days after that, we'll be in the Velcan Range, where Mount Furnek is. Then it'll take three days to cross the desert and get over to Saunte." He lowered the berries, concentrating. "I...I think I'll be going to sleep now." He threw the remaining berries in his mouth and finished them, then slid off the root onto the soft earth below. He pulled his hat over his eyes, leaving Lawrence to finish eating.

The younger Lucario ate several more, then looked down at the berries. He wrinkled his nose, then threw away the rest. He slid down the other side of the root and made himself comfortable. He felt all the day's tiredness hit him at once, setting him swiftly to sleep, despite the nightmarish thoughts that plagued him.

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*Gray. Lawrence saw only gray. He didn't notice himself in his human form, only that this dreamscape appeared to be a haze of darkness.*

*A bulge appeared in front of him, then extended skyward, darkening into coarse brown bark. Two massive limbs stretched from the center, sharp claws separating into digits. A plume of emerald-green leaves erupted from its top, and the bottom separated into a series of root-like feet. A hanging black maw opened beneath the leaves, and a single, ruby eye flashed awake above it. The Trevenant of the Revenant Woods.*

*The Trevenant's eye narrowed. **"The end of days approaches, and the Keeper has not come to be. Even now, the Tree of Life absorbs the Life that remains in the soil, preparing for this final calamity."** The Trevenant stopped, noticing the tears that stained Lawrence's face. **"Why do you suffer so?"***

*Lawrence lowered his head, avoiding the piercing gaze of the Trevenant. "Cassia's gone...Grom's dead...two of my only friends here." He made a shuddering sigh, then looked up to the Trevenant. "Why did you give me and Cassia that prophecy? I don't know who this Keeper is, and Aleron can't be awakened. And with Cassia...dead..." He shook his head. "I should've known that Tursha—Arthus—lied. Then they'd still be here."*

*The Trevenant enclosed Lawrence with a claw, moaning and creaking. **"The Usurper's tricks manipulate the mind. Many have fallen to his lies; in his mind, the ends justify the means."** He raised his arm, pointing at the sky. **"I am deeply sorry for the suffering he put upon you...however, the words of the prophecy must come to pass if Equivos is to be saved."***

*"But how am I supposed to do that if Aleron is dead? Matheus said he couldn't be brought back!" Lawrence exclaimed.*

*The gray sky darkened, and pinpricks of light clustered together, forming the constellations that Lawrence knew from Unova and Sinnoh. The Trevenant's mouth creaked into a grin. **"Stars are a wondrous gift from the Creator. He made them to guide us, to show us the way to what we seek. Just as stars, the influence of the guides of this world shine bright, leading Pokémon to where they should be."** He gestured to himself. **"I am a star. The Legends are stars. Aleron is a star. Arceus created us to be guides to all who seek him, and to know the best course to return to him, and to those***

*we love.” He held his arms out and bellowed, “**The truth once held must take once more for the Keeper to be awakened for war. Awaken Aleron, as well as the Keeper, and Equivos may be reborn to live on.**”* The Trevenant narrowed his gaze once more. **“Remember my words.”**

*Lawrence stepped forward, holding his arms out. “But Aleron’s dead!”*

*The sky lightened to gray once more, and gray mist wrapped around the Trevenant’s limbs. “**Matheus Lucario is a servant of Arceus. Ask him what you will in Arceus’ name, and he is obligated to answer. Heed this counsel, and Aleron may awaken once more.**”* The Trevenant faded completely into mist, then the cloud surrounded Lawrence’s vision. He woke.

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Lawrence’s eyes opened slowly. He shifted his arm and felt what seemed to be rope. He looked at his chest and saw glowing red tendrils receding from his chest and sinking into the ground, their light dimming.

He pushed against his chest, feeling no pain. He peeked under the bandages and saw pristine fur completely untouched by any wound. Sighing with relief, he pulled off the bandages, grateful for the Trevenant’s coming.

“Who did it?”

Lawrence sat upright and twisted around, finding Matheus standing behind him, his arms crossed, brow furrowed. “Who healed you? Those gashes would’ve taken weeks to heal, yet here you are, like new.”

Lawrence scraped his paw against the ground, remembering the dream. “The Trevenant...he came to me and must’ve healed me.”

Matheus’ eyes widened. “The Trevenant of the Revenant Woods?” Lawrence nodded.

The Legend turned away with a grim expression. “So...it’s come to that.” He closed his eyes. “What did he say to you?”

The Trevenant’s words rang clearly in Lawrence’s mind. He recounted what the Trevenant taught him, from the environment of the dream, to the last words of warning.

After he finished, Matheus set a paw on Lawrence's shoulder. "None of it was your fault, Lawrence. I was fooled too. I should've seen Arthus' aura under that disguise." He rubbed his chin. "Still...what he said is true. The last day is approaching."

Lawrence lowered his eyes. "You mean the Day of Desolation, don't you?" Matheus nodded. "When is it?"

Matheus shrugged. "Even I don't know. The signs just point to it. Life is indeed leaving the ground and going to the Tree of Life. Yveltal awakened years ago, and a priestess has come forth to preach his word one final time. The only sign left is the final one: The Legends calling one final time, saying that they have come to destroy Equivos." Matheus shook Lawrence and said, "*That's* why we have to go to Furnek and Saunte, even without Cassia. Every Pokémon in Serenita needs the chance to embrace Arceus before that day, no matter how far it may be in the future.

Lawrence looked around him sadly. *'I don't all this to go; Sinnoh and Unova are only shadows of this place because of how men developed it. Serenita was free from that. Yet it's going to be gone.'*

"Will...will everyone die?" Lawrence asked.

Matheus forced a smile. "No...but unfortunately, many will." He took a deep breath, then pointed to his right. "We best get going. Furnek is a three-day trip, then another three days to Saunte. We can't waste any time." He leered at Lawrence. "But we'll still be taking breaks. Understood?" Lawrence nodded sharply in reply, then they continued their journey to the volcanic Mount Furnek.

Over the next two days, they continued in relative silence. Lawrence still felt the stabbing pains of being without Cassia and Grom. Each time he closed his eyes, he hoped for the childlike Golurk to pop behind him and say his signature phrase, 'Grom,' to make him jump, or for Cassia to come over to him and show him another phrase from the Arceist Tome. But neither happened. Only Matheus' occasional babble about the environment came—none of it a replacement for what was lost.

Finally, after two days, the tall and winding palms of the Faylen jungle thinned out into stout and sturdy cacti, rooted in coarse, arid sand rather than moist, rich soil. A

seemingly-endless sea of sand stretched before them, the occasional Trapinch or Sandile skittering across its surface. Vibrava jittered in the breeze, veering away from the Vikavolt that soared high above them, seeking a suitable meal to zap.

Matheus stopped next to Lawrence, then pointed to their right. Across the sand, a hump belching black soot rose, surrounded by a patch of black rock. “There’s the Velcan range. Real far away, despite how close it looks. Rather not be in such a place, to be frank, but it’s the last major settlement outside Saunte that never heard about Arceus.” He raised a paw and said, “Did you know that Cassia spent most of her two years finding all the smaller settlements scattered around? There’s not too many of them, but they’re real far apart, and with Pokémon in dire need of some help.” He grinned, pushing back his hat. “Even if they weren’t on the map, she still found it in her heart to help them.”

He noticed Lawrence’s glum expression at the mention of the Zoroark. He held his head and grit his teeth, then said, “Sorry...I know it still hurts.”

“It’s fine,” Lawrence croaked. He stepped onto the warm sand, turning to look study the horizon. Parallel to the distant Mount Furnek was an outcropping of reddish stone, forming a valley in the center. “What’s that over there?”

Matheus scowled. “The Guild.” He spat on the sand. “Arthus and I chose that place because of its defensibility. An underwater spring, fresh soil, and only one good way in or out.” He clenched his fist. “If it wasn’t for the underground escape tunnel we built into it, I could never have gotten inside with Laryon all those years ago.”

“What was Equivos like in your time?”

Matheus blinked. “I...well, it’s...changed...” He groaned, massaging his temple. “Well, there were more wild Pokémon around. Dangerous ones, at that. It was such a problem that Pokémon were hiring mercenaries to rescue them if they got trapped. I made the Guild to make the entire process more organized.” He walked toward Furnek, waving his arms behind him. “Of course, since then, pretty much all the wild Pokémon are docile. Nothing like my day. You had to constantly worry about Arbok coming in your sleep, or a stampede of Tauros tearing across the plains. All of them are gone now, along with the outlaws that defied Guild control.” Lawrence followed the Legend as he mused.

“Ah, what a day to be alive,” Matheus said. “It was a golden age once the Guild was restored. Two thousand years of peace, with only wild Pokémon and the occasional Outlaw to ruin someone’s day.” He growled. “Until Arthus returned.”

Knowing he was treading unstable ground, yet still wanting to learn more, Lawrence asked, “Why was he put into the Cocoon? Why wasn’t he just executed?”

“Me personally, I never wanted to see Arthus dead; in that time, he did horrible things, but I still loved him like a brother...mostly.” He shook his head. “Arceus didn’t see fit to kill Arthus either, despite what he did. While I don’t know all his reasoning, I believe he thought that Arthus would change over his incarceration.” He snorted. “If only it wasn’t for the worse.”

Sensing that Matheus had answered enough questions, Lawrence backed away. The Legend continued to scowl, dwelling on age-old events harrowed up by the inquisitive Lucario.

The continual grief for Cassia once again returned, the momentary distraction doing nothing to stop it. *‘She could have helped me so much—with my thoughts, my fears, everything. Even to awaken Aleron, as impossible as it seems.’* He kept thinking about the impossibility of these events, why he even had to complete them, and why he should even care. All the while, Cassia kept circling in his mind, even until the late evening, when Matheus finally halted their trek.

“Well, we made good progress today. Might be able to make it by noon tomorrow, actually.” Matheus set his bag down and dug through it. “Might as well rest up here. Could maybe get some training done in the morning.” He looked over to Lawrence. “You think you’d feel up to that?”

Lawrence sat down, nodding. He went to open the bag over his shoulder but stopped. He hadn’t inspected what she left behind until now. It might prove too much for him to bear.

He left the bag alone and set it on the ground. A sheet of paper poked out of it, folded together. Curious, Lawrence carefully pulled out the paper and unfolded it. The prophecy of the Trevenant lay within.

He sat down, reading it. Cassia had underlined portions of the text, adding in notes of what she thought each of the lines meant. Toward the bottom, she heavily circled the line ‘Awaken Aleron,’ and wrote to the side ‘*Ask Matheus.*’

“What are you in the mood for tonight? Lum, or Lum?” Matheus asked, taking out a sack. He looked over to Lawrence with a sly grin, which disappeared upon noticing the paper. “What is that?”

Lawrence set a paw over the circled text. “Who was Aleron?”

Matheus lowered the bag of berries. “I told you what I was willing to say.”

“What else is there?”

“It’s not your business to know,” Matheus warned.

“It *is* my business to know,” Lawrence replied, his grip tightening on the paper. “The Trevenant wanted me to find him. I don’t know why, I don’t know how, but I need to do it!”

Matheus stood up, holding his paws apart. “*He. Is. Dead.* End of story. I *will not* talk about him!”

Lawrence fumed and held the paper in front of Matheus. “*Cassia* thought it was important! She wanted to know more about him, and you told her nothing!” Lawrence exhaled sharply, then said, “If you really want to help me, you will tell me more about him.” Matheus glared at Lawrence, barely shaking his head.

Lawrence remembered his dream, and the final advice the Trevenant had given him. “In the name of Arceus, you *will* tell me everything you know about Aleron.”

Matheus’ eyes widened in surprise. He furrowed his brow, then rocked his head back in forth. He growled, then sat on an opposing rock and took off his hat. He set it on his lap, then rubbed his temple “It’s...more complicated than you think.” He held up the hat, inspecting it, then sighed. “You see...I really haven’t done that much to help Equivos. Sure, I helped imprison Arthus years ago, but I’m the one responsible for creating him. I created the Guild to help Pokémon, but it ended up hurting them instead.” He lowered the hat. “Even after I was resurrected, I felt like I did little to deserve it. I helped Pokémon, sure, but it was only rarely. Honestly, I spent my time watching from afar, in the Tree of

Life...away from the Pokémon I failed.” He crimped the edges of the hat, avoiding Lawrence’s gaze.

He brushed a paw through his silver fur. “It wasn’t until Arceus gave me a certain assignment that I felt like I truly was making up for my mistakes. I became the perfect example of what an Arceist was supposed to be: selfless, caring, obedient, and humble, all because I felt like I was forgiven.” He set his hat back on his head, “I was to go out into the world and gather the writings of his prophets. Then I needed to bind them into a book, then make copies for all Pokémon to read, to know his word.”

Lawrence blinked, then cocked his head. “Wait a minute. I thought—”

“Yes, yes, Aleron did those things,” Matheus sighed. He winced, then said, “You see...”

“I am Aleron.”

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Across the eastern ocean of Equivos, on the continent of Deitae, a magnificent golden tree towered over the Luminescent Woods. The glowing bulbs of light popped from the soil and into the sky, shining over the domains of the Legends of Equivos.

The golden bark of the tree reflected the multi-colored leaves, all coursing with peculiar energy. The roots ingrained themselves in the center of the woods at the center of the continent, spreading across the entire clearing. Pulses of crimson light shot through the roots, soaking into the source of life itself.

Perched atop the tree was a giant onyx creature, its wings folded over its chest. Its claws clamped around the uppermost boughs, its crimson underbelly pulsing with each glow of the root. Its silvery-blue eyes gazed across the continent, then to the distant coast of Serenita beyond.

***“Remain watchful, children of Arceus. The time draws nigh for the end of Life, and I shall not be prevented from ending those unfaithful. All within Serenita shall fall...”***

He spread his wings and fanned his tail, surging his Y-shaped body with Life energy.

***“At the wings of Yveltal.”***

## Chapter 22

*Aleron is known,  
A death of mind.  
The Keeper now awakens,  
For all to find.  
The love still remains,  
Just and kind.  
Let Arceus be praised,  
For leaving misery behind.*

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Matheus averted his eyes from Lawrence's gaze. They sat across from each other, ignoring the sand that swept through the air by the wind.

After moments of silence, Matheus finally said, "Yes, I'm Aleron. I used that name as a pseudonym while I traveled; my reputation as the guardian of Laryon Lucario would have brought too much attention upon myself if I went by my own name."

Lawrence leaned in closer. "Why didn't you say any of this before?"

"Because I'm ashamed, that's why!" Matheus exclaimed. "I never wanted to tell anyone because of how I left them!" He exhaled, then shook his head. "I didn't want to tell you, but now that you know...might as well."

He shifted uncomfortably on the rock. "When I was first assigned by Arceus to assemble the Arceist Tome three hundred years ago, I thought I was useless. Equivos remembers me for training Laryon and helping him save the world by taking a fatal blow

from Arthus.” He spat. “It wasn’t as noble as you think. Sure, I trained him, but only out of duty; it wasn’t until the end that I actually loved him as my nephew. I would’ve just wandered Equivos as a broken Pokémon, reeling over Arthus’ betrayal till the day I died. Instead, I was dragged into a quest to save a little Riolu’s dear aunt—my sister.” He stared off into space, distant.

He blinked, then said, “Anyway, about Aleron. I hadn’t done much but look out on Equivos through the Tree of Life since I got there; the last time I interacted with any mortal Pokémon was when Laryon was alive. He’d been dead for generations when Arceus requested for me. So naturally, I was hesitant.

“But as it was my duty to obey him, I complied. I started gathering writings, and when they asked for my name, I came up with Aleron.” He looked up, reminiscing. “That was when I finally felt like I was doing something worthwhile. I began helping the towns out with the outlaws and wild Pokémon, sometimes working with the Guild. I became enthralled in the work that I had left for centuries.” He sighed contentedly.

Matheus paused, continuing to look to the sky. After a few moments, Lawrence asked, “What changed?”

Matheus’ grin disappeared. “After a hundred years of gathering the writings of Arceus’ prophets and making dozens of copies, Arceus asked me if I enjoyed serving Equivos the way I had. I said I did.” He grimaced, leaning forward. “He said he was pleased with the great service I had done. He told me that Legends such as myself were not supposed to have regular interactions with mortal Pokémon, due to the great influence we tend to have over their activities.” He clasped his paws together. “So, he gave me a choice: I could continue roving Equivos, or I could return to the Tree of Life, coming out once a month to serve. The cost...” He turned away. “My immortality.”

Lawrence’s eyes widened as he leaned back. “That’s...that’s surprising.”

Matheus nodded. “I know. I asked if something else could be done, but he said no. He set the laws on how Legends could interact with Pokémon, and even I, a former mortal, had to obey them—and he could do nothing to change them, considering that the other

Legends would have taken advantage of it.” He pulled his hat over his eyes. “You can guess what I chose.”

“But why?” Lawrence blurted. “Didn’t you like what you did? What’s the point of living if you can’t do what you love?”

“Because, Lawrence, I’m a shoddy brawler,” Matheus groaned. “Look, I know I can beat up a bunch of Guild Pokémon with little trouble, but I was on even grounds with Arthus and I couldn’t handle Grom when he went berserk.” He readjusted his hat, staring at the ground. “It doesn’t help that my aura’s been weaker ever since Arthus went off the deep end. If it wasn’t for Laryon, well...” He rubbed his eyes. “Point is, I chose immortality over service. Oh, I still got to go around for a little bit, but it just wasn’t as often or...satisfying.”

He stopped and looked at Lawrence. “The reason why I did was because I’m reckless. That’s how I’ve always been, always will be. I’d go in and do the craziest things just to save a couple of Pokémon, and half-killed myself each and every time.” He growled and shook his head. “If it wasn’t for Arthus keeping me in line, I’d have been dead the first day out of Quantus.” He rubbed his shoulder, looking away. “So, I wanted to make sure that if I did anything stupid, I’d at least live to tell the tale.”

Matheus held up a finger. “But if I had the chance to change my answer, I would. At least if I had said no to immortality, I’d have been more careful...and, well, I wouldn’t have to live through Arthus ruining the world twice over.” He grimaced. “It was painful enough the first time.”

Lawrence remained silent, considering his words. After a moment, he said, “Did you ever...go back, after that?”

Matheus sighed. “No. No I didn’t. After I realized the choice I made—myself over others—I didn’t feel worthy. It just reminded me of when I isolated myself for ten years, regretting my decision to complete the Trials and allowing Arthus to become who he is.” He shivered. “That was a dark time. I only thought of how I could have made things different, how I was the reason Arthus’ wife died, how I caused Laryon’s parents to die—even if I didn’t know how or why they happened.” He exhaled waveringly. “I know now

it was really Arthus' fault, in some way...but I couldn't help but feel that. All because I thought I was strong enough to defeat Arceus' greatest challenge." He swallowed. "I was. But I wasn't for the consequences."

Matheus' gaze hardened, then he sat straight. "*I can't* be Aleron. Not anymore. He was selfless, kind, and devout. I'm none of those things. Not since I refused Arceus' will." He stood up, stormed away from Lawrence, then sat on the side. He lay on his side and tersely said, "Get to sleep. We've got a long way to Furnek."

Lawrence stared at Matheus, processing what he had admitted to. He got off the rock and lay on the cool sand, rolling onto his side. The distant green of the Faylen Jungle stood in view, reminding him of Cassia's fate.

He slept fitfully that night.

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The next morning, Lawrence woke up to see Matheus standing on a boulder sticking out from the sand. His back faced the younger Lucario as he stood, looking out toward the distant canyon walls of The Guild.

Lawrence carefully approached Matheus, studying the hazy vision. The ruddy brown of the sheer cliffs contrasted sharply with the bland yellow and white of the fine grains of sand. Black shapes flitted in and out of the walls, all going different directions. The rising heat formed what appeared to be vast pools of water around the walls, what Lawrence knew to be a mere mirage.

He stopped at the foot of the boulder. The Legend gazed at the cliff, his eyes squinted and jaw firm. His tail hung limp behind him, not standing tall as it once did.

Without turning, Matheus said, "I remember the day Arthus and I saw that canyon. We had just escaped from some thugs in Saunte and had found Barash. After we recovered, we saw the canyon walls and wanted to see how it was inside."

Matheus smiled. "Some Trapinch pits and Charjabug nests later, we found it. We were amazed by the sheer size of it; you could keep an entire town in it." He raised a finger. "And Arthus said to me, 'Someday, we'll come back here. We'll live here, have families, and help others, side by side.'" His smile disappeared. "We made the Guild. He

married. I left. When I came back, nothing was the same. It was all twisted and corrupted, thanks to Arthus and his accursed servant, Gregorius.” He stiffened. “I confronted him. I won, but I didn’t feel like it. I ran. I blamed myself for what happened, and it’s thanks to me the world is...was, in danger.”

He faced Lawrence. “I don’t deserve to be a Legend, Lawrence. I failed you. I failed Cassia. I failed Grom, Arthus...everyone I’ve known. Yet here I am, still serving Arceus, like I actually matter.” He held up a paw. “Don’t talk to me about this. Just...just leave me alone.” He hopped off the boulder and brushed past the other Lucario. He picked up the supply bag, then steadily paced toward Mount Furnek. Lawrence followed with Cassia’s bag, his head low and eyes narrowed.

No words passed between them throughout the hike. Except for the occasional food and water break, Matheus remained several paces ahead of Lawrence, never looking back.

This continued until evening fell once more, when they finally stopped. The charred and burning environment of the Velcan range now spread across the edge of the Iren Desert, surrounding the enormous volcano of Mount Furnek. Sparks and smoke spat from the vent into the sky, raining down on the crowded town wrapped around it below.

Matheus set down the supply bag, his face dull. Lawrence carefully did the same with his own, then approached the other bag. “What’s for tonight?” he asked.

Matheus didn’t reply. He turned toward Mount Furnek. “I can’t do it.”

Lawrence cocked his head. “Do what?”

“I can’t teach Furnek. The last time I saw the place was centuries ago, yet there’s one Pokémon who’d surely remember me: Vignon. He’d be a Darmanitan by now, likely in stone form. But he’d remember me. I helped him get adopted into a kind Simisear family in Furnek, and I promised to see him every month after that.” He bowed his head. “A few weeks later, Arceus made his offer. I never came back.” He groaned. “He’s surely told them stories on the mighty feats of ‘Aleron’ through the entire Velcan Range. They’ll know the truth of my identity if he saw me, and I can’t live through that.” He shook his head. “But we can’t leave them. Lawrence, *you* have to teach them.”

Lawrence stepped back, holding his paws out. “But I’ve never done that before! What makes you think *I* can do it?”

“You listened to Cassia, didn’t you? Use her as an example.”

“Yeah, and I’ve only believed again for a little over a week!”

“You believe, don’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

Matheus grabbed Lawrence’s shoulder and pulled him closer. “Do you trust in him? Trust that he knows what is best for you, trust that what he does is right?”

Lawrence blinked. He looked away, remembering his experiences before he came to Equivos—the Nidoking, the church, the Houndour. The feelings of loneliness and distrust rang clear in his mind from those alone.

Then the loss of Grom and Cassia.

Lawrence pulled away, setting a paw on his head. “I-I’m not sure. It’s...it’s hard to say.”

Matheus narrowed his eyes. “It’s one thing to believe in Arceus and to realize he helps us. It’s another thing to trust in him to do what’s right.” He turned away and crouched over the supply bag. He dug through it and said, “That trust is what separates Arceists from the non-believers—or Arthus, to an extreme.” He pulled out the water casks and held them out. “I’m going to fill these up. I don’t want the Pokémon of Furnek to have a faithless teacher, so consider my words.” He brushed past Lawrence and went south, moving away from Furnek.

Lawrence sat to himself, dwelling on what Matheus had said. His thoughts gradually turned to Cassia, and what she had done to preach to Equivos. And himself.

*‘She always took a story from the Tome,’* he thought. *‘Then applied it to the issue they had in life.’* He took his Pokédex and entered the files from the Tome—only to realize one crucial thing:

*‘I don’t know any stories!’*

He turned off the screen and growled, holding his head. *'I'm useless for this! I don't even know if I should trust Arceus!'* He stopped. He looked down, focusing on Cassia's bag.

He stared. *'I haven't looked inside since she...died.'* He reached for it, then drew back his paw. *'Should I? This is her personal stuff...I've only really seen inside once.'* He thought back to that fateful day, picking apples with Cassia, when her mask fell into view.

He swallowed hard, then reached for the bag. *'I—I think I should.'* He pulled the flap off the bag, revealing the darkness inside.

Lawrence took a deep breath, then carefully placed a searching paw inside. He felt around for a moment, then grabbed a small parcel. He pulled it out and found it was the mask he remembered only minutes before.

He opened the drawstring bag and allowed the mask to slide out onto his paw. The white mask reflected the moonlight, surrounding the pitch-black gauze of the eyes. He held the mask up to his face and looked through it. The gauze made the environment slightly darker, but otherwise fully visible.

He lowered the mask. *'This was Cassia's last reminder of Arianne...the one who taught her about the Tome.'* He rubbed its surface, smiling. *'She always wore this to hide her eyes...'* He put the mask back into its bag. *'I wish she didn't have to hide herself like that.'* Reaching into Cassia's belongings once more, he grabbed what felt like a long rod.

Lawrence lifted the rod and found it was a small, ornate mirror. The frame and handle were both made of polished silver, and the oval surface of the mirror was polished as well.

He gazed into it, finding it odd that Cassia would have such a belonging. He flipped it around and saw there was a message inscribed on the back:

*To my dearest Cassia,  
A daughter more precious than the world.  
When you look into this mirror,  
Don't think of anyone else.*



***Don't think of their lies, their deceits, their illusions.***

***Think only of the purity that is you.***

***Arthus Zoroark,***

***Your Father***

Lawrence held the mirror away, amazed. *'I always thought Arthus was just a monster. But...maybe he was more than that?'* He remembered the brief glimpses Cassia gave of her past, and how much she had loved Arthus.

He passed his paw over the message. *'I can agree with him on one thing: Cassia was pure.'* He sighed. *'I wish she didn't have to hide herself.'* He set the mirror down next to the mask. *'I guess she wanted to remember all the good Arthus had.'* He reached into Cassia's bag once more, finding a small book.

He opened it and saw dozens of names, all lined through the few pages inside. Most of the pages were filled with names of Pokémon, while the last two seemed to indicate entire cities. All but two had a line crossed through them: Furnek and Saunte.

*'She wanted to reach everybody, everywhere...no matter how long it took.'* He looked down at the bottom of the last page and blinked. 'Lawrence Lucario' was circled and had a line through it. The line appeared more recent.

*'She...she fought so hard...for me to believe. Even when I refused.'* Lawrence thought of the times she sat next to her to read from the Tome, learning scripture and how he should apply them to his life. He unfortunately remembered few, but their messages still rang true to him.

He set down the book and reached into the bag once more. He pulled out a small sack, covered in black dust and patches. Peering inside, he found a collection of various lengths of charcoal, along with several blobs of clay and a small knife.

*'Her drawing utensils,'* Lawrence thought. He thought of her drawing in each new environment, perfectly capturing the details with her charcoal. Whenever she wasn't teaching, she was always sitting with Grom, drawing and chatting with the black Golurk.

Lawrence swallowed hard, setting down the bag. *'Now that can't happen anymore.'*

He felt three pads of paper within the bag, with two smaller and newer than the other. He brought the newer ones out and flipped one open, seeing scattered drawings of various figures, such as a flower, an Eevee, and a house.

Lawrence smiled. *‘These must be from when she started out.’* He turned the page and saw more practice drawings, each getting progressively better. He flipped through the other, finding more of the same, then reached into the bag, meeting with a leather-bound pad of paper. He gingerly pulled it out, knowing it to be Cassia’s sketchpad. The beaten leather cover had her first initial, ‘C’, printed on it—likely because of Arthus—and the brown thread binding the pages at the top still had faint traces of red in its weave.

He passed his paw over the aged leather, then flipped over the cover and saw a massive wooden gate set in rock, with limp branches and leaves sticking out from the top. Although he had never seen this gate, he knew where it was: *“The Guild.”* Despite the harsh environment he envisioned for it, the gate held a somber, almost beautiful quality to it, like it was meant to be a guardian to those within rather than a jailer.

He turned to the next page and saw a Gardevoir standing in a vast plain, looking toward the horizon. Lawrence knew her to be Arianne, Cassia’s former teacher. He remembered how much Cassia loved her, and how she had taught the Zoroark to be the perfect priestess.

The next page showed the Gardevoir with a Gallade, and Lawrence remembered the brief glimpses he saw of Cassia the night Arianne died: of her running across the plains into the forest, attacking the Weavile. But then she calmed, understanding that the aged Gardevoir would be at peace.

*‘At peace,’* Lawrence thought. *‘Just like Cassia.’* No more worries, pains, sufferings, prejudice. She never had to worry about these afflictions anymore, untimely as it was. Cassia set aside her hatred, because she chose not to blame Arceus for the troubles of the world—unlike Arthus had done—but instead trust Arceus to somehow remove them.

Lawrence blinked, connections forming in his mind. He flipped through the next few pages, going through the various portraits and landscapes until he found one he recognized: a Golurk holding a Fletchling on his finger in the middle of a glade.

He set his paw over the picture. He remembered that moment well. It was such a little thing then, but now he wished he could relive it, if only to see Grom again. And Cassia.

He turned the page and saw the Iren Desert, overlooking the city of Barash. The first day he saw Cassia's true form.

He turned again and saw himself standing in a glade with Cassia and Grom, along with the Buneary they had saved. The second time he saved Pokémon.

He kept turning pages, remembering the Eastern Coast and Hydren, where he discovered Cassia's lie. Xilo and its peaks, where his aura finally awakened. The Faylen jungle, where he finally realized that—

*'I loved her.'*

Lawrence stared at the image of the jungle. *'She was always doing what was best for others, even if they hated how she really looked like,'* he thought, *'Even for me, someone who hated what she believed.'* He held up his paw. *'She didn't care what happened to her...as long as she could bring Pokémon to Arceus.'* He closed the pad. *'She trusted in him completely to save them...and herself.'*

He paused. He *did* remember a story: the Timburr and the trees, where he planted them, expecting to have wood to harvest. When none came after weeks of waiting, he left them, only for them to grow into a mighty forest. But he never returned, because he thought that seeds never grew to be trees.

*'He believed...he **trusted** the seeds to grow...and they did.'* Lawrence held a paw to his head. *'I used to trust Arceus, but then I didn't. And I've been miserable since.'* He held up the pad. *'Cassia trusted Arceus...she was happy.'* He lowered the pad. *'Until the end.'*

A folded piece of paper slipped out from the back of the pad and fell on the ground. Lawrence cocked his head, picked up the paper, then unfolded it. Inside was an intricate drawing of himself, Matheus, Grom, and Cassia. Lawrence stood in the center, while Matheus was to his right, Cassia to his left, and Grom standing behind. Matheus and Cassia both wrapped an arm over Lawrence's shoulders, while Grom crouched and leaned forward, embracing everyone. All of them smiled at Lawrence.

Lawrence's stared in amazement at the portrait. 'When did she draw this?' He looked down and saw the words 'Remember us, Lawrence!' elegantly drawn at the bottom—along with another piece of paper behind the drawing.

He shuffled the drawing behind the other, revealing long, spidery letters lining the paper. Lawrence read:

*Dear Lawrence,*

*By the time you read this, you'll probably be back home in Unova. I understand why you had to leave, but I'll still miss you. I was hoping we could make a life here in Equivos after we were done in Saunte, but now that you're gone, well, I'll have to stay with Grom.*

*But I don't want to find someone else. You're one of the few Pokémon I've really felt comfortable around, and the only one that wasn't old or a Golurk. There's too much hatred toward Zoroark like me to find someone who will appreciate me like you.*

*I wish I could have come with you to Unova. I've seen everything in Equivos, and as much as I love this place, it won't be the same without you. I don't care what your world would think of me; I just want to be with you.*

*I know that it's dangerous for me, and you'd never let me go because of that. So I didn't push that. But I hope—no, want you to come back. You came here once, and you can surely come here again. I'll wait here with Grom until you do.*

*I trust Arceus that he'll help us see each other again,*

*Cassia*

Lawrence looked up from the letter. 'You trusted Arceus...that we'd see each other again.' His paws shook. 'I...I remember. The Tree of Life. Everyone who dies...returns.' He let the drawing fall from his paws. 'I...I can see her again. When I die...she'll be waiting for me. For me to return.' Tears brimmed his eyes. "I've been thinking about it all wrong. Arceus **does** love me. He **does** care." He stared up adamantly, looking at the stars of Equivos—where he knew he belonged.

His eyes widened as he remembered. He crossed his arms and bowed his head, then squeezing his eyes shut, said, “Thank you, Arceus. Y-You’ve helped me see so much. I love Equivos and what it has brought me.”

He tilted up his head and opened his eyes. “Cassia helped me and so many others see the truth. I’ll miss her for her smile, her company—everything about her.” He came to his feet. “She died trusting you’d do what was right. And through her, you have.”

He raised a paw and thrust it into the sky. “I’ll finish what she started! I won’t forget her, or Grom, or anyone else! I won’t forget what she’s done for me!”

He lowered his paw, then sighed. “And I won’t forget what *you*’ve done for me.”

The cross of despair and gladness that filled Lawrence’s heart swept away in exchange for peace. A deep, wholesome calm, as if nothing could be wrong in anything. All the sadness, all the pain—vanished.

He fell to his side, exhausted. He immediately fell into a warm, sustaining sleep. One that he had never experienced since Cassia’s fate.

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Light. Warmth. Wind. Sand. The bright morning light reflected off the smooth grains. Vikavolt burrowed back underground for their next flight, while Vibrava resurfaced, filling the air with light-hearted buzzing. The brisk breeze churned up the sand, coating the fur of the two Lucario on its banks.

Lawrence took a deep breath, opened his eyes, then sat up, stretched, and shook off the sand in his fur. He looked to his left and saw Cassia’s bag, packed with her belongings.

A stab of guilt and sadness struck Lawrence’s core. She was still gone. Just like Grom. No more surprise hugs, no more silent footsteps from either the Zoroark or Golurk. It was just him and a legendary Lucario. Alone.

He shook his head. *‘I’ll see her again...even if she’s not here now.’* The despair fled from the peace that gradually filled his chest.

The Lucario stood up, picked up the bag, then turned around expecting to see Matheus sleeping nearby. He searched for a moment and saw Matheus sitting away from him, his head tilted down.

Lawrence cocked his head and approached the Legend. Upon reaching Matheus, Lawrence noticed Cassia's letter in his paws.

Matheus gazed at the letter, unmoving. "You're awake." He glanced at Lawrence. "Good." He nodded his head, then continued staring at the letter.

Lawrence looked around momentarily, then cleared his throat. "Don't you think we should...get going?" Matheus didn't respond.

Lawrence looked at the other side of Matheus and saw the supply bag, with the casks poking out from the top. "Did you find water last night?"

"Hm?" Matheus perked up from his letter, staring up in space. He shrugged his shoulders, then said, "Yeah, I found it...like always." He trailed off, muttering.

Lawrence sat down next to Matheus, pulling off Cassia's bag. "Are you alright?"

Matheus blinked, then slowly turned toward Lawrence. "I could ask the same about you. Why are you suddenly in a good mood?" He grumbled, turning back to the letter.

Lawrence bit his lip, turning away. "I've just...come to terms with reality is all." He sighed. "No use being sad for the rest of my life. I'll always miss Cassia and Grom, but at least they don't have to worry about anything anymore."

Matheus paused. "You've...you've already come to that?" He cringed, folding the letter down. "More progress than I've ever made."

"E-Excuse me?"

Matheus threw down the letter. "Yes, you've done better than this miserable old coot of a Lucario ever did!" He stormed upright. "For most of my life, I've thought of nothing but how I *failed* Equivos! I hid away in the Tree of Life, sorry for myself for creating the most vicious Pokémon Equivos has ever seen—and losing my home and my friends with him! I don't even know what made him change!" He tore off his hat and smacked against his other paw. "Everyone I know dies! No matter how much I try to protect them! First

my Guildmembers, then my village—” He took a deep breath, then lowered his hat. “Then Cael...my brother.”

He knelt on the ground, then held up Cassia’s letter. “She cared so much for you. She believed in you. She knew you’d do what’s right.” He lowered the letter, then his head. “No one’s ever said that about me.” The letter fell from his paws. “I’ve failed you. I could’ve saved her, yet I didn’t. Another mistake made with thousands of others.” He held up his hat, then let it fall to the sand. “I don’t deserve to be a Legend.”

Only the wind passed between them in those long moments. Matheus hung his head, eyes closed, while Lawrence stared at the ground, watching the individual grains of sand shifted with the others.

Lawrence raised his eyes, a small grin coming across his face. “Alright, you, *Matheus*, have made mistakes. You did things wrong, and I agree with you.” Matheus exhaled, his head dipping closer to the ground.

Lawrence set a paw on Matheus’ shoulder. “But let’s look at what Aleron did.” Matheus opened his eyes.

“Aleron saved hundreds, *thousands* of Pokémon. He made the Arceist Tome, helping others know the truth!” He shook Matheus slightly. “If it weren’t for you, *Aleron*, none of that would’ve happened.”

Matheus shrugged him away. “But Arceus could’ve easily chosen someone else.”

Lawrence shook his head. “No. He couldn’t have. No one else could’ve trained me like you.” He came to his feet and stood in front of Matheus. “If you weren’t a Legend, then all the Lucario would’ve been dead when Arthus came back.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“But since *you* were still around, you saved me and Cassia from being captured by Arthus. You trained me to fight like a Lucario. You taught me how to use aura—and how to find it.” Lawrence held up his paws. “Before I came here, I hated Lucario; I thought they were creatures just driven by instinct, learning to fight only to attack others.” He shook his head, lowering his paws. “But now I know they’re more than that. They learn

to fight so they protect those they love. They evolve because they love their partners. Everything about them involves loving others.”

He sat next to Matheus once more, wrapping his arms around his knees. “The Pokémon in my world might be wild...but I can never look at them the same. I can see where Arceus was going with his commandment to love Pokémon like humans: they have the same capacity to love as we do.” He turned to Matheus. “And you helped me realize that. I don’t think anyone else could have done that. You *deserve* to be a Legend.”

Matheus stared at him for moments after. He abruptly held out his paw. Lawrence accepted it, then Matheus quickly embraced him. “Thanks for that.” He shook his paw, then pushed away from Lawrence. He smiled. “Hard to believe you didn’t believe in Arceus.”

Lawrence grinned. “Helps to have a miserable old coot of a Lucario beat it into you.”

Matheus’ eyes widened, then he chuckled. “Yeah...I guess so.” They laughed together for the first time in nearly a week.

Soon after, they continued their journey to the fiery Mount Furnek, with Matheus leading the way with renewed vigor. Lawrence trailed behind, reading the Tome from his Pokédex in preparation for what lay ahead.

In a matter of hours, they crossed the border into a steaming, boiling environment, complete with hot springs and vents belching out vapor. Salandit skittered across the blackened ground, spitting poison as they went, while Torkoal lounged around the vast baths, soaking in the heat. All the while, Durant screeched across the landscape, hunting down what few berries lay in the heat.

Lawrence panted, Cassia’s bag feeling heavier on his shoulder. “Is it usually this hot around here?”

Matheus nodded, unfazed. “Welcome to the Velcan Wastes, full of mineral-rich hot springs, all warmed by lava chutes just below.” He pointed at one of the steam vents. “Every so often, one of those will go off and blast a Slugma to the surface. The unlucky sap turns to rock on contact, so the nice thing to do is to just toss it back in the vent and hope it lands back in lava.” He noticed Lawrence’s discomfort and sniffed. “It’s just a bit

of steam. Be grateful it isn't all smoky like it was a couple hundred years ago, when the ole volcano blew its top. Had to evacuate Furnek for that."

"I'm just not used to steam with a fur coat," Lawrence panted.

Matheus shrugged. "You'll get used to it."

They continued on through the steaming wasteland, passing scanty Rawst bushes and beaten trails marked with metal-plated signs. Eventually, they reached the base of the volcano, and sprawling across was a series of interconnected metal frames. Box-like houses stood atop the frames, open-roofed, while stalls of all sorts popped up around the bridges between them.

The Lucario stopped at the platforms, looking up at the single ladder up to the metallic realm. Covered in soot, it appeared to have not been used for years.

Matheus paused for a moment, looking up. He stepped aside and gestured to the ladder. "I can climb up another way and watch from above. If Vignon is still alive, I'd rather not meet him." He sighed. "But if you need help, just say the word. I expect that the Guild Pokémon shouldn't be much trouble. I'll wait up on the tower."

Lawrence nodded, then climbed up the surprisingly-cool ladder into Furnek. Matheus ran around the structures to a single tower that rose up from the ground. He steadily climbed up the posts embedded in the side to the roof—one of the few in Furnek. He then sat, watching Lawrence pass through the town.

The younger Lucario passed by disheveled Blaziken and Magmar, all shying away from him. Darmanitan stood between the houses, backing away from him, glaring as he progressed to the center. Steadily, the Blaziken and Magmar followed him, daring not speak about him.

He reached the central platform, which held little more than a shaded canopy decorated with small statuettes and dried food. Sitting on an intricate mat in the center was a massive stone statue in the shape of a Darmanitan, cracked and weary with age. The eyes were shut, and the mouth remained slightly open, as if it hoped to open once more.

Lawrence stopped in front of the statue, and the Pokémon behind him stopped as well. The statue's eyes ground open, a gentle pulse of white light shining from the stone.

“You...” the statue said, its voice echoing from its mouth. **“A Lucario...yet not.”**

Lawrence looked about him, expecting to see the signature black armbands of the Guild on the Pokémon; none were in sight. He turned to the statue and asked, “Where’s the Guild?”

“All gone. The life of the Velcan Wastes proved too difficult to stand, so they returned to the land from which they came.” One of the statue’s eyes lowered. **“Why are you here, Lucario-Yet-Not? How? They all died years ago.”**

“I survived,” Lawrence replied. “And I’m here to remind you about Arceus.”

The statue’s eyes lowered. **“We know him. We worship him. The Guild forced our trust, but when they left, we knew that Arceus held mercy, even within our desolate home.”** He sighed his eyes closing. **“Despite this, I don’t hold full faith in his servants. They make promises they cannot keep, even to themselves.”** His eyes opened again. **“Leave this place. The time of the Lucario has passed. They and their deeds should be forgotten.”**

The Fire Pokémon parted, creating a path back to the ladder. Lawrence turned around, noticing their distrustful faces. The Darmanitan in particular considered him warily.

He looked up to the tower, expecting Matheus to be there. He was absent.

Lawrence looked around him. The Furnekian Pokemon all stared at him as if he didn’t belong, staying several feet from him.

He took a deep breath, then turned back to the Darmanitan. “You say you worship Arceus...yet you don’t trust his servants?”

“One in particular,” the Darmanitan replied, his eyes remaining still.

Lawrence slowly paced around him, holding an arm up. “Let’s look at why Arceus gave us prophets. He wanted us to learn how he wanted us to act, but he couldn’t give us his instructions himself, so he called Pokemon to do that for him. And not just any Pokemon—good, loyal Pokemon that he could trust.”

“What about Gregorius, the dark prophet? Or Aleron, the one who abandoned his work?” The statue rumbled at the mention of the latter name.

Lawrence resisted the urge to look at the Tome in his Pokédex, aware of the consequences. “As far as I know, Gregorius wasn’t a real prophet; he might’ve seen the future, but he wanted to tear down Arceus, just like Ar—the Usurper.” Pokemon muttered illegibly around him. Lawrence hoped it was for the better.

He continued and said, “And Aleron...well, he had important work to do. Very important. So much that he couldn’t stay; he got invited to Deitae and was there until he—” Lawrence cut himself short, not wanting to reveal Matheus’ identity, yet not wanting to lie.

The Pokemon stepped closer yet kept a tentative distance. The Darmanitan raised an eye in confusion. **“Until he what?”**

Lawrence held his breath a moment, then said, “Until...he got permission to leave. I don’t know what happened to him...but know that he wanted to serve everyone as long as he lived.” More whispers permeated through the crowd, and they drew closer. The Darmanitan’s eyes closed, and a gentle rumble emanated from his feet.

Feeling more confident, Lawrence faced the towns-Pokemon and said, “And isn’t that what all the prophets wanted to do? To help others? Look at what they’ve done! They saved lives when the Legends lived among us and guided the kingdoms to peace! And when times grew dark and they left, they came back after Laryon made the Guild, and with them, the Arceist Tome came! We have a whole history of Equivos and Arceus’ teachings—and none of it would have happened without them.” The whispers grew more positive and supportive as he spoke, and the Darmanitan’s neutral expression seemed to brighten.

Lawrence stopped in front of him and knelt. “I might not belong here—in more ways than one. But Arceus had a plan when he created this world; the prophets were a key part of it.” He bowed his head and looked up at him. “Don’t let the actions of one ruin your perception of the rest.” The Darmanitan’s mouth creased into a slight smile.

Astonished gasps erupted from the crowd as they parted for a silver Lucario solemnly stepping forward. Lawrence stood up and walked away from the Darmanitan, eyes wide. The Darmanitan's eyes were lowered as Matheus stopped in front of him. **“You look...familiar.”**

Matheus held a paw out toward the statue. “Vignon. It's me.”

The statue's eyes widened. **“Aleron?”** He hovered above the mat in shock, then gently lowered, controlling himself. **“You are still living, after all this time?”**

Matheus nodded, stepping closer. “Yes Vignon. I am Aleron—a Legend of Arceus.”

Vignon's eyes closed. **“I should have expected as such.”** They fluttered open. **“I have told many tales of what you did for those here in Furnek, hundreds of years ago. Rescuing Pokémon, gathering food, defeating outlaws. None of those feats are as well-known as evacuating Furnek in its last great eruption.”** He sighed. **“I am the only one to have lived through that time, when I was a Darumaka.”**

“And I helped you find a family.” Matheus stopped in front of him, kneeling. “I told you I'd visit you every month after, helping you. I was unable to keep that commitment, and for that, I am sorry.” Vignon's eyes remained still. Matheus continued, “But I'll tell you now: I wanted to come. I wanted to help you. And our priestess wanted to come to you as well.” He set a paw against Vignon's head. “I made many promises to you, and I regret not being able to fulfill them. You reminded me so much of my nephew, and I am sorry to have disappointed you...like so many others.”

Vignon's eyes closed, and a tear escaped from one. **“You are more than Aleron...Matheus, protector of Laryon.”** He shifted, disturbing the mat. **“I always hoped to see you once more. And with this other Lucario's assurances, I understand why you left—and why you are still a true prophet.”** The eyes opened, their light dimming. **“Thank you.”** The light extinguished, and he shrunk in a gentle crackle of stone. He became the same size as the other stones that surrounded him, at peace.

Matheus and Lawrence gazed at each other and nodded. Matheus walked around the altar and joined him, then they passed through the crowds, exiting Furnek with Pokémon sustained in their faith.

They remained silent until Furnek lay out of sight, when Lawrence finally asked, “Why’d you come down? I thought you didn’t want to see Vignon?”

Matheus smiled. “When I saw that they didn’t see the prophets of Arceus in the best light, I knew that I was to blame.” He sighed. “It wouldn’t be right for me to ruin the memories of the other prophets. Plus...” He lowered his head. “I was Vignon’s hero. I needed to show that I was worth looking up to.”

After a moment, Lawrence set a paw on Matheus’ shoulder. He looked up, and Lawrence smiled. “I was hoping for that...Aleron.”

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At night, after leaving the Furnek Wastes and traveling part of the way through the Iren Desert, Matheus and Lawrence stopped for the night and bedded down for sleep. The cool sand proved relaxing after the heat of the harsh environments, and along with the chitter of Grubbin returning to the surface, they felt relaxed for the first time in what felt like forever.

Matheus dug through the supply bag and pulled out two thin blankets. He tossed one to Lawrence and said, “Should be easy-going until we make it to Saunte. Best sleep for now though.”

The blanket landed next to Lawrence with a soft thump. He sat with his legs up against his chest, looking up at the full moon.

Matheus looked away for a moment, unfolding his blanket. He soon dropped it and shuffled next to Lawrence, sitting down. “You’re thinking about Cassia, aren’t you?”

Lawrence nodded. “She would’ve wanted to see me back in Furnek. Me, of all people, teaching from the Tome.” He smiled, but it soon fell as he lowered his head. “It’s...it’s still hard to believe that she and Grom are gone. I keep waiting for her to just reappear, like she was invisible. Or for Grom to just wander back from somewhere, just...doing what he does.”

They remained silent for a moment, then Lawrence asked, “Matheus...if Arceus really loves everyone, why doesn’t he just save everyone? Why couldn’t he have stopped Grom from destroying himself, or Cassia from dying?”

Matheus raised an eyebrow. “You sound rather...uncertain, which is surprising, considering how you were earlier.”

“I know,” Lawrence groaned. “But I wasn’t thinking about it much then, just...feeling, for lack of a better word. Now that I’ve had time to let it sink in...I just can’t help but wonder.”

Matheus blew out his breath slowly, tapping his paws together. He stopped and said, “I don’t know what to say here—at least, not anything obvious. I guess it was just their time. Arceus has intervened on rare occasions, but that usually happened when someone’s life was in danger because of the actions of another. Grom caused his own death, and Arthus’ and Cassia’s with it.” He rubbed the side of his head, staring out into space. “Although, consider what would have happened had Grom *not* destroyed himself, or the temple for that matter. Arthus would likely have taken me with the Seal, he would have killed you, Grom would be his servant, and Cassia would have been miserable for the rest of her life.” He shuddered. “And Arthus would have had nothing preventing him from going through with killing Arceus.”

Lawrence blinked, then narrowed his eyes. “That’s...right. If anything, Grom...*had* to die. And Cassia was just...in the wrong place.”

Matheus grabbed Lawrence arm and said, “Don’t go thinking anything *had* to happen one way or another; there’s always another way.” He let go and lay on his back, setting his paws on his chest. “Although, given the circumstances...I’m not sure what that way would be.” He turned to Lawrence. “But do you feel a *little* better about it?”

Lawrence shrugged with a sigh. “Not really. But at least I can understand why more.” He smiled and looked down at Matheus. “At least you’re here, Matheus.” He lay down on his blanket and turned away for sleep.

Matheus remained on the ground for a moment, then sat upright and smiled. “Thanks.” He returned to his blanket and rested with Lawrence to be ready for their return to Saunte.

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Over the next three days, Lawrence and Matheus crossed the Iren Desert once more, passing around the northern side of the Guild and into the Kaena Woods, where they passed a disturbed patch of soil, but little more of interest.

Lawrence stopped at the fringe of the Kaena Woods, remembering it well. On the other side of the plain, he first met Cassia Gardevoir and Grom Golurk, beginning his journey across the entirety of the Serenita, now over a month ago.

He remembered himself from that time, so concerned about being able to return home. Now he didn't care, save for being able to see his parents again. That old, faithless self was gone. Now, the Arceist had returned.

Matheus joined him at the fringe, following the sled tracks. He looked over to Saunte and gave it a curious look. "Awful lot of smoke coming out from there." A giant plume hung over the center of Saunte, gathering above the massive crowd in the plaza.

Lawrence nodded in agreement. "Think it's safe?"

Matheus turned to Lawrence, hefting the supply bag. "Only one way to find out."

They began walking down to Saunte, all while Lawrence relived the same trek, thinking only of one thing:

"I wish Cassia was still here."

Chapter 23

*The ashes of evil,
The tinders of light,
May still burn,
Through darkness and night.
The Guild is mighty,
And their leader as well,
But even the hardest souls
Have hearts of gold dwell.*

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### ***Four days prior...***

Within a small, well-lit shack, a stack of heavy leather books settled onto a shelf, narrowly avoiding the nearby rack of glass tubes. The desk lay clear of debris, newly polished, the early morning light reflecting off it. No dust, no grime, no mess of any sort lay in the research center.

Martre Metagross shuddered and sighed in relief. Rust sprinkled off his body and pattered to the floor, a solitary mess on the newly swept wood.

He held a claw in front of his face, noting how neglected his iron frame was. Orange powder coated everywhere on his body except the silvery 'X' across his face and the claws on his legs. Twenty years of researching for Arthus, isolated from all other Pokémon, led to a lack of care toward his own appearance.



“*Well,*” he thought. A set of wire brushes and a bucket of powdery liquid floated from the floor to him. A sponge rose out from the bucket and wrung itself, then splatted against Martre.

It rubbed across the rust, then the wire brushes began scraping it away. Martre closed his eyes.

*“If Gardner’s going to leave me here, I might as well look the part.”*

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Outside the well-kempt command buildings at the southern end of the Iren Canyon, the families of the north end of the Guild—the former civilian district—woke up and carefully began their day. Breloom rushed through the dark alleys to trade for food, Murkrow watching their every move for their Honchkrow boss. Pokémon of diverse species all collaborated with each other, keeping in mind what happens to those that defy the Guild’s rule.

A Sawk tread carefully through the ruins of a once-grand multi-story smithy, stepping over rusted iron tools. The forge imploded on itself and any semblance of a bedroom in the loft had long since disintegrated. Nothing remained here save for ruins.

The Sawk stumbled and scraped against the dusty wood of the stair banister. He grumbled and wiped off his Guild band. “Trias, why are we even here?”

An Alakazam hovered over the debris and gently lowered onto the ground. He stood up and stroked his silvery moustache, his hand brushing the silver spoons hanging from a string around his neck. “Searle, you’re aware that things have been growing worse around the region.”

Searle pointed behind him and flicked his head to the right. “Uh, yeah. The only major city we have under control is Saunte, and—”

“Not that,” Trias interrupted. “Far, *far* worse things. Have you noticed that there’s been no wild Pokemon for miles? Not even the Vikavolt at night?”

Searle shrugged. “So what? They’ve been goin’ downhill for years.”

“It’s worse. Remember when you took guard duty for Harish two nights ago?”

Searle rubbed his back and groaned. “Do I ever.”

Trias folded his fingers together. “The lights you saw....those were ghosts.”

Searle’s eye grew wide. “Wait...all of those...were *ghosts*?” He shuddered and shook his head. “There were *thousands* of them! Where did they come from?”

Trias closed his eyes and lowered his head. “They came from the Ythereal Swamps—and they’re hungry.”

Searle stared up in thought, then blinked. “That’s...that’s not right. They never go out because of all the Life that’s there. Why go now?”

“Because there’s no more Life. It’s going away.”

“Where?”

Trias rubbed his eyes and said, “The Tree of Life.”

Searle stepped back, aghast. “You’ve...you’ve got to be wrong! There’s no way it’s—”

Trias grabbed Searle’s arm, and he fell silent. “I’m not wrong. I’ve felt it coming for a long while, and now it’s here. The Day of Desolation is upon us, and Arceus is preparing Equivos for it.”

Searle stood still, then sat down on a pile of rubble. He threw one aside and leaned his head against his arm. “Great. We’re all gonna die.” He looked up at Trias sadly. “Are you going to tell everyone else?”

Trias folded his arms and turned away. “No.”

Searle came to his feet and threw his arms out. “You’re just going to let them live out their lives like nothing’s happening?”

“Yes,” Trias replied, turning back around. “Because of Arthus. He’s dead set on killing Arceus and taking his place, and if he learned that the Day of Desolation’s nearly here, that’d only serve to hasten his plans. We can’t have that.” He gestured around them. “That’s why I’m telling you here.”

Searle rubbed his chin and sighed. “I guess you’re right, as usual.” He clenched his fist and growled. “But Arthus hasn’t been seen for weeks. It’s not like he’ll find out.”

Trias hovered into the air with his legs crossed and ducked under the ruined entryway. “Whether or not Arthus returns, we must keep my premonition to ourselves. It is

something that has been prophesied for generations; the time for change has nearly ended.”

Searle followed him toward the light beyond the dark and disheveled buildings, beyond the dead streets of the north district. “What about everyone here? I mean, won’t there be some Pokemon who survive?”

Trias remained silent until they breached the light of the south district. “Yes. But the prideful that make our ranks will pass.” They watched Tauros cross back and forth, guided by Machoke. Bisharp ordered Pawniard into formation. Cacturne rooted themselves on the canyon wall, keeping a watchful eye for intruders. But none except them noticed the preemptive chill in the air.

Trias walked forward, and Searle followed. Trias only walk forward, yet everyone else seemed to flow around him, unaffected by his presence. Searle kept bumping into shoulders, struggling to keep up. Eventually, they both stood next to the Master’s Tower, where Trias bowed his head and closed his eyes.

He looked up. “The Guildmaster has returned.”

The gates suddenly swung outward, and all the Pokemon scrambled away to avoid being crushed. Gardner passed through the gate and growled, pointing behind him. “Go back to your kennel!” A pack of Houndoom dragging a sled rushed along the path toward a secluded corner of the Guild, barking as they went.

Gardner huffed, then looked over at the Searle and Trias. He came up to them and growled. “Did anything happen while I was gone?”

Trias stared at his scarred eye. “Nothing to report.” Searle shrunk away, holding ah and to cover his face.

Gardner waved them off. “Very well. Go about your business.” The Alakazam and Sawk did so, and the Dusknair reached for the door to the tower. He stopped. He turned around and studied the masses crossing between the scattered storehouses and dwellings, all circling the Master’s Tower. Meanwhile, to the north, few Pokémon dared to come out into the light to ruin the attitude of the south.

Gardner shook his head. “This isn’t even worth saving.” He hovered to a secluded shed covered with metallic pipes and old lanterns. The curtains were drawn, the only sign of movement within being a loud scraping.

Gardner knocked on the door curtly. The scraping abruptly stopped, and the door swung outward, batting Gardner across his face and pushing him out of the way. A massive, shining Metagross glowered at him, dripping with solution and remnants of rust.

“I swear, if you’re pranking me—” He cut himself short, noticing an irritated Gardner rubbing the side of his head. Martre averted his eyes and muttered, “I...suppose I should have warned you about the door.

“Won’t matter before long.” Gardner entered and shut the door behind him just as the main gate was also closed. He took a brief look around and wiped a finger across the desk in the center of the shack. “I see you’ve cleaned up—finally.” He rubbed his finger and returned his attention to Martre. “You look like a civilized Pokemon instead of a depraved hermit.”

Martre’s eyes flashed. “I hope you’re here to do more than insult me.”

Gardner crossed his arms and hovered around the desk, sitting on the edge of it. “I got to Arthus, and he managed to make Hoopa fix the Seal without releasing him.”

“Wise move. Now we only have an insane murderer to worry about,” Martre nonchalantly said, making a basket of berries hover from the desk toward him. He psychically lifted a berry and brought it to his mouth.

“I was there so he could have Hoopa kill me.”

Martre choked on the berry and coughed, his metal clanking with each heave. He calmed himself and exclaimed, “He used *you*?”

“Yes,” Gardner grumbled. “He managed to fool him, but he didn’t tell me beforehand. I was practically dead!” He smacked the desk and shouted, “The next time I see him, I’ll rip that precious pendant from his dead body!”

Martre set aside the basket of berries and stomped closer to Gardner. “That’s suicide. You’re lucky he isn’t here, or he might’ve just killed you right there.”

Gardner blinked, sliding off the desk. “Wait, he’s not back? He was only taking care of Cassia and her posse of outcasts. Why in Equivos would he not have come back?”

“Maybe he went directly to Deitae?”

Gardner shook his head, holding his chin. “No, that can’t be it. If he did, we would know; we’d all be dead.” A dull roar came from outside, and Gardner looked out the small window to see all the Guild Pokemon running toward the main gate, calling out for someone.

Gardner and Martre rushed out of the room and saw the main gate thrown open, with everyone gathered around what lay in the center. The Dusknor hovered over the crowd and bellowed, “What’s this all about?” He saw the focus and his maw hung open. “*Oh.*”

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Minutes earlier, in the Faylen jungle, an early morning breeze passed over the remains of the Arceist temple. Trumbeak warbled once more in the surrounding canopies, flapping through the leaves in search of berries and nuts. Emolga flitted alongside them, chittering away.

Far below, deep within the crumbled temple, the many broken bricks and statues created a compact network of narrow tunnels and caverns, each slowly collapsing from the weight above them. No light reached the lowest of the caverns, where the floor of the temple used to be. The air grew staler as dust choked the interior of the mountain.

Within one of the few pockets that remained after the collapse, a still form stirred. Flat on his back, his claws twitched, and his eyes fluttered open. He opened ice-blue eyes and pushed up against the rocks that buried him. He emerged with a cough, then searched the darkness as his vision grew clearer.

Arthus held his head as he rolled onto his back, then started to push himself up with his other hand. He seethed and clutched his leg, still swollen. He looked up, ignoring the blood dripping from the gashes across his body. Dust and pebbles fell from the cracks between the rocks that formed his prison.

A blue light came from his chest, and he held up its source: The Seal of Creation, as perfect as it was when Hoopa had repaired it. “At least I still have—”

He stopped. He dropped the Seal and studied himself. “I’m...I’m back! He’s gone!” He laughed but stopped as he realized something. “Cassia.” He groped in the darkness, crawling around in search for her. He found nothing of her.

Arthus forced himself to stand despite his injury and held the side of his head. “*Cassia!* Can you hear me?” No response came as his voice echoed.

Arthus snapped his claws, creating a small flame on the end of one. *‘I’m not leaving without her.’* He doubled over and doused the flame, clutching his chest. He soon stood again and studied his hand. “Out of Life energy,” he croaked. He looked down at his injured leg, which looked marginally better than he last remembered. The cavern shook, and Arthus froze. It soon settled, but several larger rocks fell.

Arthus hastened his pace, crawling through the narrow passageways. He managed to get into the next room and saw a dull red glow spread across the floor.

He set a hand on it and gasped as Life rushed into him, healing his cuts and soothing his leg. He forced himself away, retracting his arm. “*Grom’s Life energy.*” He looked toward another passage, limping toward it. “*But Cassia.*”

The cavern shook again, and Arthus avoided the falling rocks, leaning against the wall to relieve weight from his leg. “*Cassia!*” he called. He made it to the next room and stopped.

Underneath a boulder was Cassia, her back facing Arthus.

Arthus ran to her and pushed against the boulder, grunting. It moved slightly but rolled back to its previous position. Arthus’ body glowed red as he pushed again with a roar, throwing off the boulder and slamming it against the far wall. The cavern quaked, and even larger boulders fell.

Arthus held Cassia and supported her with his shoulder. He grit his teeth, the pain in his leg growing as he pressed on to the exit. He looked up and saw pebbles falling and ceiling loosening above the tunnel.

He rushed through, making it inside just as it was covered. The tunnel itself started to collapse, and a dull roar echoed through what remained of the temple as the higher levels crashed to meet the bottom.

Arthus made it to the mouth of the tunnel and was thrust forward by the force of it collapsing. He and Cassia fell against the floor, more Life energy seeping into them. Arthus grabbed Cassia's claw and punched into the stone with his other hand. Crimson tendrils emerged and dragged them under the earth just as the remains of the temple buried them.

Arthus instantly felt a pull as he entered the Life network, and saw that the epicenter was a monstrous entry, sapping away the rest of the Life in Equivos and destroying what remained. Even the pathway he traveled through was deteriorating quickly—as was Cassia.

He turned to her and saw a bright white glow fading into the stream. He pulled her closer and embraced her, protecting her Life with his own. They arced toward the surface, the tenacity of the Tree of Life nearly drawing them in.

They emerged at the gate of the Guild, skidding against the coarse soil. Arthus groaned, pushing himself up as his vision blurred. The gate was closed.

He crawled toward it, dragging Cassia with him as he dug into the ground to pull himself closer. His vision grew dimmer and dimmer as he knocked against the door with all his might, then passed out as it was opening. He heard the muffled voices of Pokemon surround him, then silence.

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Three days later...

Gardner waited outside a beige building, crossing his arms and bowing his head as he leaned against the wall. The other Guild Pokemon continued with their day, attempting to ignore the fact that Arthus Zoroark was in critical condition—along with his adopted daughter.

The door opened and a Comfey drifted out, holding a small piece of paper in its hands. Gardner stood straight and turned to the Comfey. "Well?"

The Comfey studied the paper, her flowers hanging behind her. "Arthus and Cassia will recover—barely. I'm not familiar with how Life energy works outside of Ghost types, but it seems to be helping their healing process." She rolled up the paper and

picked up her flowers again. “Still, Cassia’s suffered a nasty head injury, and Arthus’ leg looked like it was crushed. Ordinarily, I’d keep them here for at least a month, but I have no idea what will happen with Life.” She floated off and said added, “Some Ghosts will be coming by to give them more Life; I’ve noticed that they stop healing as quickly when that glow goes away.

Gardner turned away from the Comfey and toward the door. He looked down at his hand. *‘It’s now or never.’* He clenched his fist and pushed open the door.

In a tiny room coated in beige paint, sunlight leaked through the open window. Beds lined the opposite walls, each with white linen and soft pillows over its frame. On the tables next to them were bowls and platters, ready for their future occupants. On the wall adjacent to them, cabinets loaded with medicine and supplies surrounded the windows, hanging above a counter with a bucket of water and a set of cloths.

Cassia slept in a bed on the far wall, lying on her back with a bandage wrapped around her head, along with others scattered around her body. Arthus was on top the bed next to her, his back turned toward Arthus. His leg was set in a cast, and he appeared still.

Gardner rolled his arm and approached him silently. He slowed his gait, opening his maw. His hands exuded a chilling aura, and they came within inches of Arthus’ back. Gardner could almost feel Arthus’ Life seeping into his body. *‘This is for—’*

He stopped. Arthus held Cassia’s limp hand with both of his own. He studied her sorrowfully, his normally-cold eyes having a warmth that Gardner had never seen—until now.

The Dusknor closed his maw and dissipated the chill in his hands. He clasped them together and stared at the side of the room. He cleared his throat, and Arthus looked up at him.

“Oh,” he said. He sat upright with a moan, letting go of Cassia’s hand and turned to face Gardner. He set his cast down gently, the hardened Ariados silk keeping it strong. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“...Well...I am a ghost,” Gardner replied, forcing a smile. Arthus smiled back, chuckling. Gardner’s smile disappeared immediately after. *‘He...he never laughs...not like this.’*

Arthus wiped his nose and looked over at Cassia. “I’ve been keeping an eye on her to make sure she recovers well. I don’t think she’ll have any memory loss, or anything else really; our control of Life makes us rather durable.” He set his hand over Cassia’s and sighed. “Still...I wish this never happened in the first place.”

Gardner sat on the bed next to Arthus’, unsure of how to react. “How did you get hurt? I don’t recall you getting a scratch since you released me...until now.”

Arthus winced, holding his casted leg. “I managed to trap everyone inside the temple, as planned. Matheus and Lawrence proved more troublesome than expected, and right when I had them, Grom had pulled off his brace.”

Gardner’s jaw dropped. “*What?* That’s suicide!”

Arthus nodded, grimacing. “Indeed. He started chasing me and began destroying the temple. I tripped, and he stepped on my leg. Cassia was in front of me trying to get his brace back on.” He closed his eyes tight. “I thought she died right there. Grom wasn’t in control of himself, sure, but I wouldn’t have hesitated to attack him if I could.”

Gardner pointed at the Seal of Creation, which still hung from Arthus’ neck. “So you didn’t capture Matheus?”

“No.” Arthus held it up, giving it a disapproving look. “And honestly, I want to be done with this entire business. It’s caused nothing but grief for myself and others around me.”

“You...mean capturing Arceus?”

Arthus dropped the Seal carelessly and rested his head on his arm. “No. I’m considering just throwing it into the sea and forgetting about it.”

Gardner narrowed his eye and stood up, towering over Arthus. “You’re not the Arthus I know. You might look and sound like him, but you aren’t as—”

“Callous? Temperamental? Murderous?” Arthus finished, tiredly listing them off.

Gardner blinked, lowering himself. “Well...yes.” He rubbed his arm and stared at the ground. “It’s just...I obeyed you because you were all those things. I always feared for my life whenever something angered you, and even when you were calm, I never knew when you’d come around and nearly pull out my eye.” He sat on the bed again and rubbed his eye. “This is all so...disconcerting. I don’t know what to think.”

Arthus sat a moment longer, then cautiously stood up and smiled. “I’m not sure what to think either.”

Gardner uncovered his eye and cocked his head. “What changed you? Why are you suddenly so...so...” He rolled his eye and spat, “*Nice?* You don’t even care about the Seal anymore.”

Arthus gently paced up the hallway, holding his hands behind his back. “*This* is the real me. The Arthus you’ve known was my...shadow, so to speak. He’s all my worst qualities but magnified.” He tapped his head and said, “He must’ve been driven back when the temple landed on me. I’ve no idea if he’s truly gone, but at least my mind is free of him for the time being.”

“And how did this...*shadow*, come to be in the first place?”

Arthus forced a smile, turning away. “That is a story I’m not ready to tell yet.”

Cassia took a larger breath, shifting slightly. Arthus gestured to Gardner, then to the door. “Would you give me and Cassia some privacy? I have some things to clear up between us.”

Gardner blinked and shook his head briefly. “Er...yes, Arthus, sir.” He stood upright and began toward the door.

Arthus grabbed Gardner’s shoulder, causing him to turn. “Please, call me Arty.”

Gardner only stared at him, wide-eyed. “Yes...*Arty*.” He broke away from Arthus’ grip and rushed out of the room. Arthus only shook his head, sitting back in his bed and holding his hands.

Gardner burst out of the double doors and panted, holding his head. “I must be going mad—a world where Arthus isn’t waiting to kill someone? Or even use the *Seal*?” He

grabbed his head and groaned. “This place must be getting to me. I have to get out of here.”

He saw Martre walking toward the medical center with a pair of Lampent hovering behind him. Gardner came between them and asked, “What are you doing?”

“Giving Arthus and Cassia more Life energy. What’s got you so wound up?” Martre asked.

Gardner eyed the doors, then looked back at Martre. “I’m warning you now: Arthus isn’t quite right in the head.” Martre gave him a cold look. Gardner shrugged and said, “Alright, more so than usual. He’s suddenly treating others nicely and insisting on being called, ‘Arty’. He doesn’t even want to use the Seal anymore.”

Martre stepped back, and the Lampent looked at each other with confused expressions. The Metagross clamped his teeth, then said, “He did mention having the temple collapse on him. Maybe he’s suffered a head injury?”

Gardner humphed, moving away. “Don’t know, don’t care. I’m headed off to Saunte to deal with those idiot captains, Valder and Derak—and to clear my head. Arthus was just—” He shuddered. “Bizarre.” He hovered to the far side of the Guild, where the Houndoom had previously brought his sled into storage.

Martre’s insides whirled for a moment as he considered the implications of Gardner’s claim. “I must evaluate him to see if he is...well, any worse than he was before.” He gingerly stepped inside, and the Lampent followed, carrying more stores of Life for the Zoroark to consume.

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*A Zoroark stood in blackness, still. No sound or sight crossed its path for what felt like hours. A black Golurk glowing with Life appeared, standing at attention.*

*“Grom?” the Zoroark asked.*

*Grom didn’t hear. The brace over his chest loosened and fell off, dropping into the black void below. The crack in his chest surged, and he crouched, leaning toward the Zoroark.*

*He bounded forward, making no sound except a high-pitched whine. The Zoroark attempted to jump out of the way, but Grom diverted his path to meet it. The Golurk grabbed the Zoroark, his victim fully expecting to die from the oncoming explosion. The Golurk lowered his head and whispered five words:*

*“I’ll always be with you.”*

*The blackness was consumed by white, and the Zoroark awoke.*

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Cassia stirred under her covers. A bandage wrapped around her head, chest, and limbs, each fresh and clean. Her fur was shiny and smooth, brushed free of imperfection.

She sat upright and gasped opening her eyes. She breathed heavily, looking around the room in confusion. “W-Where am I?” She turned to the table and noticed two brass bolts sitting next to a small bowl of Oran berries.

She picked up one of the bolts. “...Grom...” Her eyes widened. “Lawrence?” she called. “Matheus?”

“They aren’t here.”

She froze.

“They escaped before the temple collapsed. I have no idea where they went after that.”

She knew that voice.

“We were lucky to get out ourselves. If it weren’t for Grom—” He stopped himself. “I’m over here, just so you know.” Cassia slowly turned to face the other Zoroark. Bandages were wrapped around his chest and arms, and a sizable cast was wrapped around his leg. his fur was disheveled, and around his neck was a simple golden pendant glowing with pure blue light. “Arthus?”

He smiled. “It looks like your memory’s intact despite the nasty hit you took.” He stood up shakily, rubbing his arm. “You would’ve been asleep for weeks if it weren’t for the Life that Martre brought it. It’s only been three days, and you’re nearly right as rain.” He winced and sat down on the bed again. “Of course, I suffered more. But we’ll both be

right as rain within a few days.” He chuckled. “Oh, I forgot.” He took an Oran berry from the bowl and held it out to her.

“Welcome home, Cassia.”

Chapter 24

*The Priestess is taken,
The Usurper reveals
The weakness of self
In his years of old.
The prison now broken,
The true mind commands,
But the Usurper still lurks
To fulfill his demands.*

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In the medical bay, Arthus held the Oran berry out closer to Cassia with a smile.

“Aren’t you hungry?” She rolled on her either side in the bed, facing away from him.

Arthus frowned, dropping the berry back in the bowl. “I understand if you’re upset—”

“Upset? *Upset?*” Cassia turned back around and threw off the covers, then stood up and jabbed a claw at Arthus. “You tried to kill Matheus and Lawrence, and it’s thanks to you that *Grom died!*” She breathed in sharply, sitting back down and breathing heavily.

Arthus stood up and reached over to her. “Careful, you’re still weak!”

Cassia pushed him back onto his bed. “Stay away from me!” she breathlessly said.

Arthus grimaced, clasping his hands together. Once Cassia’s breathing slowed, he said, “I...I never meant for any of this to happen. Really.”

Cassia glanced at him coldly, then turned away. “No. I don’t believe you.”

“This is far more complicated than—”

“Complicated?” Cassia exclaimed. “What’s complicated about it? You tricked all of us into going to the temple, and you said exactly what you wanted to do.” She fell onto her side, her back facing Arthus. “What do you want with me? You’ve got the Seal. That’s all you cared about.”

Arthus looked down at the necklace, then shook and tore it off his head. He threw it to the ground, the gem illuminating the air around it.

Cassia slowly turned around and stared at the Seal, then at Arthus, perplexed. Arthus exhaled slowly, combing a hand through his mane. “I hate Arceus. There’s no changing that. He shouldn’t have let us be free to choose evil.” He slowly pointed at the Seal. “But it’s thanks to *that* that my life’s been ruined. I want nothing more to do with it.”

Cassia gawked at the Seal, then at Arthus. “...Is this a trick?”

“If I was trying to trick you, why would I use the Seal?”

Cassia sat upright and crossed her arms. “So...so I’d trust you.”

Arthus blinked, then turned away. “Oh.” Both stayed silent, the only sound being the activity of the Guild outside.

Finally, Arthus turned to face Cassia. “I know why you wouldn’t trust me. I destroyed the Tome, I deceived you in the temple...and I killed your parents.” He held the side of his head. “Not to mention what I hid from you while I raised you. You had every reason to run away—and stay away.”

Cassia leaned closer and cocked her head. “You...you’re different. You always blamed others for doing something wrong, not yourself. You even said killing was fine because you’d bring everyone back anyway.”

Arthus grabbed the post of his bed tightly. “That wasn’t me. Not the *real* me, anyway.” Cassia continued to look at him in confusion.

He groaned and held his hands. “What I’m going to say here is going to be different than anything else. I know you don’t trust me—or love me either, if I assume correctly.” Cassia went to object, but Arthus held up a claw to stop her. “Just...hear me out. Say all you want afterward...just let me have my piece.”

Cassia stared, then reluctantly lay down on her bed and motioned for Arthus to continue.

Arthus nodded, leaned down, and began to speak. “There is a lot more to my story, but I’m...not confident that I’ll be able to say all of it. What you must know, however, is how I gained my power over Life—and, eventually, my split personality.

“I won’t go into detail about what lead me to seek such a thing, but I will say that I was tired of the constant suffering in the world. Even the Guild, what was the most perfect solution, failed on occasion. Towns got ransacked, Pokemon got trampled or starved. It happened far less frequently, yes, but it still happened.” Arthus grit his teeth. “It didn’t help that Matheus had gone off on his own selfish venture when things turned for the worse. I wanted to prevent that, and in a time of grief, without anyone to help, I determined that only one thing could help me: The Edge of Despair.”

Arthus searched around for a moment, then opened the drawer to the table next to his bed. A pad of paper and a several pieces of charcoal lay inside. He took them out and briefly sketched on the paper, then held the drawing out to Cassia. It showed a rune-covered dagger with an aura about it.

He tapped it and said, “This was a tool designed to give Pokemon control over Life. I don’t entirely know how it works, but the fuel to grant the power over Life was simple: The Life of the one you love most.”

Cassia paled, covering her mouth. “...*That’s* why you killed Corrina.” Her face burned, and she shouted, “You selfish, horrible—”

Arthus held his hands up and and exclaimed, “No! I never did it for myself! Believe me!” Cassia quieted but continued to give Arthus a cold glare.

Arthus set aside the pad and continued, “It is a long story on how I found it and worked up the nerve to actually use it. However, on the night my son, Erik, was born, I was told that Corrina was ill—that she’d die within hours, and that nothing could be done.” Cassia lowered the sketchpad, her anger turning to anxiety.

Arthus squeezed his hands together. “It...it was my last chance to use the Edge. Matheus was the only other one that could work, but by then...our relationship was



already souring.” He sighed and pinched between his eyes. “And I doubt I could have done it anyway.”

Cassia sat upright in disbelief. “So...that’s why you did it? Corrina was just dying anyway?”

Arthus paused for a moment then his eyes glowed red. He growled and rubbed his eyes. “Yes...but it doesn’t change the fact that I killed her myself.”

Cassia crossed her arms and frowned. “I know this sounds harsh, but wouldn’t have been better to...let her die?” Arthus winced, then Cassia hurriedly added, “I mean, she’d still be fine in the Tree of Life, I’m sure, but then you...” she trailed off as Arthus stared at the floor, his hands shaking.

He held one up. “She...she would’ve been fine.” He closed his hand. “But...I wouldn’t have. I never told you this, but almost every time I’ve slept, even when I was a child, I was tortured by nightmares. They changed over the years, but I still had them. Only Matheus and Corrina knew how to help me when I wake. And with Matheus gone...” He choked up, holding a hand over his eyes. “I just...I just couldn’t live without her! Erik would’ve been without a mother, and I would’ve gone insane from my nightmares or my work at the Guild.” A tear trailed down his cheek as he uncovered his eyes. “It...It was only supposed to be temporary. She would’ve been back after I found the Seal and used it. In fact, I didn’t care if I kept Arceus after that; I just wanted Corrina back!” He sobbed, covering his face and heaving. Cassia cringed, nearly hugging him despite how she felt about him.

After a minute of crying, Arthus forced himself to calm and wiped away his tears. “It...it wasn’t that simple. Gregorius had put a...*safety feature* into the Edge. Upon use, it would give the owner control over Life...but it would also awaken his shadow.”

Cassia cocked her head. “Shadow?”

“Yes, shadow. A Pokémon’s shadow is all their worst qualities—and, to an extent, their opposite—all bundled into one personality. Some things remain constant, such as feelings toward others, but they are blown out of proportion—especially hatred.” Arthus shuddered, holding his hands over his ears. “He came without warning. Suddenly there

was another voice inside my head, always goading me to make decisions I'd never make. I resorted to speaking to myself to make sure he didn't interrupt me mid-thought."

Cassia shivered as well, the very idea of her shadow spooking her. *'All my worst qualities? What would I be like?'* She shivered again. *'Dreadful.'*

Arthus hung his head, his eyes growing distant. "But that wasn't the worst of it. The shadow does more than simply toss his voice into your thoughts; it tries to destroy you." He winced, holding his head. "He...pushes his will...into my body...he tries to be...the dominant mind..." He gasped, falling to his knees.

"Dad!" Cassia came next to Arthus and watched as Arthus grunted, clutching his head. He gently, barely shook his head, his muttering illegible. He grew louder, and he dug his claws into the wood of the floor. "Stay back...*stay back!*" He shot upright and screamed, his eyes wide with fright. Cassia fell onto her back, holding an arm in front of her and breathing quickly.

Arthus twisted his arms while his pupils dilated smaller. *"Idiot! Your actions will doom everyone!"* He twisted around, his eyes growing larger again. "I'm trying to *save* their lives!" Cassia's eyes whisked to the Seal of Creation, which sat just behind Arthus' feet.

Arthus twisted around again, cackling wildly. "Says the one who failed not once, but *twice!* You even failed to kill Matheus when you had the chance!" He screamed again, clutching his injured leg. "Because I was trying to save Cassia!"

Cassia dove under Arthus, reaching for the Seal. He stamped on the necklace's chain just as Cassia snatch it back, pinning it between them. He leaned down and smirked, his head jutting to the side. "Can't have that, now, can we?" Cassia panted, pulling at the necklace, still weak from recovery.

Arthus shook again, and he panted, grimacing. "You have to get out of here!" My shadow's...nearly in control!" He seethed, lifting his leg and allowing Cassia to take the Seal. "Take it away! Far away! You can't let me use it!"

Cassia scrambled back, holding the Seal up to her chest. She stood up and swallowed hard. "What about you?"

Arthus winced, looking up at her. “Just know that I love you, and if I had the chance—” He stiffened, and his eyes closed. “I would’ve given up...everything...for you.” He collapsed and fell still.

Cassia looked left and right, unsure. She ran to her bed and scooped Grom’s bolts from off the side table, then made herself invisible as she opened the window. She gingerly crawled out, granting one final look at Arthus. “...I wish it didn’t have to be like this.” She ducked out and closed the window, then entered the throngs of Guild Pokemon.

Moments after, Arthus’ eyes snapped open. He shot upright and twisted his neck, popping it. “Where did you go?” He looked under the bed and growled, his eyes glowing red. “*You let her escape with the Seal!*” He threw a nearby bed up, sending it crashing into another.

He gasped, clutching his leg. He glared at it, then sat on his bed and sliced right through the silk, revealing the still-swollen limb.

He wrapped both claws around it, then made it glow red. He clenched his teeth and seethed, “Must...get...that...girl....”

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Cassia passed between the thronging Guild Pokemon, ranging from Jumpluff delivering messages to Rhydon marching to the training ground. Tauros lugged enormous carts behind them, while Lycanroc snapped at their heels to direct them. Cassia tried her best to avoid them all, but her weakness from waking combined with her invisibility made several stumbles inevitable. Several times she fell, narrowly dodging contact from another. All the while she kept the Seal of Creation tight in her grip.

She tripped on a dip in the road and spread her arms to catch herself. Her claws grazed the back of an Alakazam in front of her, causing him to stop. Cassia scrambled up to her feet and tried to exit the crowd. The Alakazam lifted a spoon.

Cassia restrained a yelp as she was swept off her feet and forced to dangle in the air, completely helpless. The Alakazam looked in her direction and walked into a dark alley. Cassia followed, her heart beating rapidly.

When inside the alley, the Alakazam looked about briefly. He turned back to Cassia's direction. "Show yourself."

Cassia hid the Seal behind her back and let out a shuddering breath. Her illusion dissolved, and the graying Alakazam shook his head. "You shouldn't have come back." He lowered Cassia back to the ground.

She waved her free hand and said, "No, please, don't say—"

"What's behind your back?" The Alakazam grabbed a spoon hanging from his neck and made his eyes glow blue. Cassia's other hand shot out from behind her back and revealed the Seal.

The Alakazam stepped back and dropped the spoon, aghast. "How in Equivos did you get that away from Arthus?" he hoarsely said. Before she could reply, he pushed her against the wall. A pair of Heracross passed by the entrance to the alleyway, not noticing them.

The Alakazam let go of Cassia and looked out the alley. "As much as I want to hear your story, this isn't the place." He turned back to her. "I'll take you to my home. You can tell me everything there." He grimaced and pointed at the bandages layering her body. "And I can help you heal."

Cassia shuffled back, holding the Seal close. "How do I know I can trust you?"

The Alakazam looked over his shoulder, then pulled down his armband, revealing a weathered, folded piece of paper. He took it out and unfolded it, revealing a younger version of him standing with a Lucario, Electivire, Gothitelle, Conkeldurr and Blissey, all in front of the Master's Tower.

As Cassia studied it, the Alakazam said, "I am Trias, Guildmaster Calem's former advisor."

~~~~~

In a dilapidated house in the corner of the Guild, a smug Sawk chopped fresh lettuce on a chipped countertop, humming merrily. No doors lead in or out of the room save for the main entrance. A bunk bed sagged in the corner, and the kitchen that the Sawk worked within set a stove and washbasin next to each other. On the other side of the room

was a table with several stacks of ragged cards, a stuffed chair with a rickety wooden one next to it, and a great window granting a view to the entire rest of the guild. A skylight above allowed the sun to peek out and illuminate the room.

The Sawk scooped the lettuce off the cutting board and plopped it into a bowl. He held it up and plucked some grape tomatoes out of a basket, then tossed them in the bowl. He then drizzled a bottle of viscous white sauce over it.

He chuckled and pulled open a drawer. “I love Tapu’s Days.” He pulled out a fork and hopped over to the bunk, then slung himself onto the top and set the bowl on his lap. “Ma always said to eat my greens—and boy, do I!” He stabbed into the salad and held the bite up to his mouth, sighing.

The door opened, causing the Sawk to lower the fork and frown. Trias hurriedly walked in and waved, a smile plastered on his face. “Afternoon, Searle! I see you’re having your weekly salad bowl.”

Searle’s eyes flitted between Trias and the bowl. “Uh...yeah.”

Trias drew the curtains across the window overseeing the Guild, then promptly closed the door. He stroked his silvery mustache and said, “Would you happen to have a problem with...a *guest* coming over?”

Searle shrugged and lifted the fork again. “Nobody comes over, so why not?”

Trias nodded sagely and flicked his head forward. “Go ahead.” The air behind Trias shimmered, then revealed a bandaged-up Zoroark with bright blue eyes sheepishly holding her hands behind her back.

Searle’s jaw dropped, then his fork. He scooted back in the bed, leaving the bowl to tip over and drench the covers in ranch. “I-It’s you! You nearly killed me!” He focused on Trias and jabbed a finger at Cassia. “What is *she* doing *here*?”

Trias held up his hands and said, “Easy, Searle. She’s on the run from Arthus, and she happened to take something we’ve been after for a long time.”

Searle eyed her suspiciously. “What do you mean?”

Trias gestured to Cassia. “I mean this.” She held up the Seal of Creation, its perfect gem shining bright.

*“What?”* Searle shot upright, only to knock his head against the ceiling. He groaned and held it, seething. “How did she get it?”

Trias waved down quickly. “Just come down and talk to her, she won’t bite.” Searle cautiously crawled around the spilled salad and climbed down the ladder. He kept his palms straight and ready for attack.

Cassia lowered the Seal and held her hands behind her back. “Thanks...thanks for telling me about Arthus...about who he really was.”

Searle blinked and lowered his hands. “...Really? Weren’t you upset?”

Trias came over to him and set a hand on his shoulder. “Searle, if she didn’t come to us that day, she wouldn’t have spread Arceus’ words across the region as she did. Without her, all of Equivos would be lost.”

Searle paused a moment, then rubbed the back of his neck and looked away. “Well...that’s true.” He shrugged and slowly let out his breath. “I guess we’re good then. Sorry I put it so rudely before, but I wasn’t in the best mood then.”

Trias patted Searle’s arm and said, “He got his arm broken by Gardner as punishment for tampering with the tax records of a poor family of Dragonite.” He stopped and looked over Cassia again, remembering her bandages. “Gracious, I’ve had you walk the entire way here and not even offer hospitality.” He turned to Searle and pointed at the door. “Would you mind getting a bag of Citrus and Oran berries from the warehouse? She is still recovering from some terrible injuries.”

Searle looked at Cassia up and down and nodded in agreement. He came close to Trias and muttered, “Fill me in on the Seal.” He jogged out of the room and into the Guild, careful to swiftly close the door.

Trias motioned to the cushioned chair. “Go on, sit.”

Cassia did so, her tired limbs aching. “Can we trust him?”

Trias promptly nodded and dug through the cabinets underneath the counter. “Searle might be rash at times, but he is as loyal as can be.”

She looked around for a moment, then furrowed her brow. “What do you do in the Guild, anyway?”

Trias pulled out a collection of small bottles and began swirling them, inspecting their contents. “I now work as the treasurer for the Guild. I know everything there is to now about finances.” He gave Cassia a hopeless look. “And what a boring subject it is.”

Cassia picked at a loose thread in the armchair. “So, you’re pretty high-ranking then?”

“What are you implying?” Trias replied, closing his hand over a bottle.

Cassia gestured to the room around her. “This just isn’t very...nice.” She cringed and shrunk into the couch. “Sorry, that was rude.”

“Say no more, say no more.” Trias took a rag from under the counter, came to Cassia, then sat on his knees, uncorking the bottle. “Even for my humble tastes, this is a rather sorry place to live.” He looked up and sighed. “How grand this Guild used to be. Now it is barely a shadow of its former self.”

Cassia leaned her head against her hand and said, “I thought that since the Guild was taking everything that they’d use it to make their lives better. I guess I was wrong.”

“The fools who do the taking don’t use it responsibly, that’s why.” Trias dabbed the contents of the bottle on the rag. “They burn the art and woodwork, gobble the food and drink.” He corked the bottle and slammed it on the floor. “And desecrate everything else.”

“How did you avoid Arthus when he...massacred, everyone?” Cassia struggled to say such things, now that she knew his true nature.

Trias gave her a suspicious look, then said, “As you may know, Alakazam such as myself are extremely intelligent. My kind strive to constantly learn so we can keep our minds sharp, and that often leads to reading—and a lot of it.” He held up the rag and said, “Would you mind if you took off your bandages?” Cassia began doing so gratefully; they had grown very irritating against her skin.

Trias continued. “I’ve always been an avid reader—even when I was an Abra—but the one book I constantly returned to was the Arceist Tome.”

Cassia tore the bandage off her head and smiled. “You read the Tome?”

Trias nodded. “Indeed, I can quote the entire book by memory!” He twisted his mustache and looked up wistfully. “But it isn’t as satisfying as reading it personally and experiencing the...peace, it has within its pages.”

Cassia took a deep breath and lay her head on the back of the couch. “I feel the same way.”

Trias looked back down and held the rag close to Cassia’s leg. “Would you mind if I used this? It has healing properties.” Cassia nodded quickly, and as Trias rubbed her bruised limbs with it, he said, “There was another skill I learned: healing. I’m quite the herbalist, you know.” He shook his head. “Anyway, back to how I’m still here. While reading from the Tome about a year before Arthus returned, I began making connections with the events prophesied and the present time: weather patterns, rumors, the like. The unusual events that year all began to come together, and I knew that the final age was coming for Equivos. So, naturally, I tried to warn Calem.” He stopped, continuing to apply his solution on Cassia.

Cassia shifted slightly, unused to such contact. “What happened?”

He sighed and lowered the rag. “As honorable a Pokemon Calem was—bless his soul—he was very stubborn. He didn’t believe Arthus really existed, let alone that he was coming within a year. Despite my pleas, he ignored me, even if he listened to my advice otherwise.”

Cassia curled her finger around a length of her mane. “I’m sorry for what happened.”

Trias waved a hand and continued his application. “Don’t be. You had nothing to do with it; Yveltal was set to come forth at one particular time, one that none could change.” He uncorked the bottle and spread more across the rag. “When the storms hit Serenita, I teleported to my meditation cave in Xilo, and I hid for over a week as I watched Arthus from afar and saw how I could trick him. I introduced myself as a new Pokemon, and I got instated as Treasurer, with Searle as my assistant.” He lowered his head as he rubbed the solution along Cassia’s arms. “I wasn’t sure that I could. Calem was a dear friend, along with many other Pokemon in the Guild. But I knew that I would be needed to help however I could.” He dwelled on that for a moment, then faced Cassia. “But enough



about me. I want to know how you got the Seal out of Arthus' clutches—and how you ended up in such a terrible state.”

Cassia hesitantly recounted what had happened within the Arceist Temple and what occurred in the medical bay. She highlighted Arthus' transformation of personality, and how he may not be the Pokemon he appears to be. Trias finished applying his solution on Cassia and had since put away the bottle. He paced around the room and stroked his mustache in thought. Cassia felt heavy and drained as she considered all that had happened to her—such as the loss of Grom.

When she finished, Trias stopped and held his hands behind his back. “So...Arthus is of two minds...literally.” He closed his eyes and tapped his fingers together. “This makes sense. In the few records that remain from Arthus' time period, he was described as suffering a sudden change of personality in times of stress or anger. This ‘shadow’ must have taken over at some point and refused the real Arthus any control.” He pointed at the Seal laying on Cassia's lap. “We can't allow him to have that. Despite the diminishing Life supply, he can still travel to Deitae and take Arceus' power. Once you have your strength back, you have to go.”

“But how?” Cassia asked, shakily coming to her feet. “I have nowhere to go and I have no idea where my friends are if they survived!” She held a hand over her face and sighed, “I can't even finish teaching about Arceus without a Tome.”

Trias stopped tapping his fingers. “You need a copy of the Tome?” She nodded.

He considered for a moment, then said, “I have access to one.”

“Really?” Cassia ran up to him and said, “Where is it?”

Trias paced away and bowed his head. “As treasurer of the Guild, I have permission to access the vault to keep track of its inventory, including rare artifacts. Gardner had secured another copy of the Tome to be studied by Martre, but when he found nothing of use, he had it stored away. I read it when I do my daily rounds, so it won't be much issue to give it to you.”

Cassia gave Trias a brief hug. “Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!”

The Alakazam regained his composure and cleared his throat. “However, the vault is within the Master’s Tower, and given that Arthus has likely brought the Guild into high alert to find you and the Seal, that may prove difficult.”

Cassia wrapped the Seal’s chain around her wrist and kept it tight. “I can hide us both when we go for it, then I can head straight for Saunte afterward. Sound good?”

The door burst open and Searle rushed in, holding a satchel next to him. He closed the door and shouted, “Better get going quick! Arthus is going to turn every house inside out before long!”

Trias snatched a spoon around his neck and caused the satchel to fly from Searle’s hand into Cassia’s. “Eat quickly. There’s no telling how long we have before Arthus comes.”

Cassia looked inside and saw two bags of berries. She opened one and started eating the Oran berries inside, her strength gradually returning to her. All the while, the joy of obtaining a new Arceist Tome, the sadness of her losses, and the fear of Arthus’ shadow conflicted with each other.

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All throughout the Guild, Pokemon of all shapes and sizes searched for Cassia and the stolen Seal of Creation. Lycanroc and Mightyena tracked her scent, Murkrow flew above, and there were constant checks given to Pokemon entering or exiting their homes to ensure that, disguised or not, Cassia would be found.

Cassia crept through the pacing crowds of Pokemon as Trias hovered overhead, both completely invisible. Searle paced ahead casually, taking occasional glances above and behind him. Cassia and Trias made way to the Master’s Tower as Searle marched on to the main gate.

Cassia froze as a Lycanroc squeezed by her, constantly sniffing the ground. It walked away, not seeming to notice her. Cassia stared at it curiously. *‘How didn’t he smell me?’*

‘My healing solution masks your scent as well—at least with how liberally I used it.’

Cassia looked up at him in surprise. Before she could say anything, he thought, *‘It’s not impossible for psychics to breach a Dark Pokémon’s immunity; it is only very*

difficult, hence why I have yet to stand up against Arthus.’ He pointed ahead with a spoon. *‘Stand near the entrance and wait for my signal.’*

She made it to the doorway of the tower, which had echoing clangs emanating from it. Trias hovered higher and looked through the window. He held his hand out for Cassia to stop.

The door swung open and Martre tromped out in a huff. “Curse Arthus for his irresponsibility.” He soon melted into the crowd.

Cassia caught the door as it closed and looked up at Trias. He gave a nod and brought himself down. They both slipped into the tower.

Cassia cast away their invisibility as Trias locked the door. The stairs ascended immediately in front of them while a small hallway wrapped to their left. Trias cautiously stepped into it and thought to Cassia, *‘The vault is just down here.’* She followed.

At the end of the hallway was a square iron door set with five dials, all with a ‘0’ above them. Trias held his spoon forward and made the dials spin, finally setting them to ‘9-4-3-1-5’. The vault clicked and had a panel slide back, revealing a key-shaped hole. Trias stuck his spoon inside it and thought, *“I would ordinarily request for Gardner to open it, but I know how to lock-pick with my powers.”* The inside of the lock clicked, and the door swung outward.

Cassia peeked inside, expecting to see overflowing piles of coins. Instead, scant bags of gold remained, alongside various weapons and scrolls. At the back of the dark inside of the vault was a gold-colored gate. Beyond it was a vast array of artifacts—along with a familiar book.

Trias stopped next to the gate and held his spoon up to the lock, but then stopped. He stepped back from the gate. *‘This metal blocks telekinetic abilities; I can’t affect it.’*

Cassia stood in front of the gate. *‘I have a way.’* She held onto the bars and willed Life into her hands. They radiated with energy and made the bars glow red. She grunted and pushed away, and the heat emanating from her hands softened the bars. They pushed apart, allowing enough room for her to cross through.

She carefully stepped inside, studying the items on the shelves. A wide array of weapons, jars, and other artifacts resided within, all with some vicious aura surrounding them. But she wasn't focused on those. She cared only for the most important object in the room: the final copy of the Arceist Tome.

Cassia gingerly picked it up, the arc emblazoned on the cover seeming to glow in the dim light. She smiled and held it tight against her chest. She stared at the shelf it sat on, then at the object covered with a white sheet. Curious, she peeked underneath. Her eyes widened, then she uncovered it completely, revealing the Prison Bottle, the eyes on its cap glowing dimly.

Trias noticed and thought, *'Best leave that be, Cassia. Gardner had that secured in here after you and Arthus returned.'* He shuddered. *'Hoopa is even more dangerous now that Arthus had managed to trick him.'*

She stepped as if to leave but gravitated back to the bottle. *'Trias...I feel like I need it.'*

'Why? He won't listen to reason, and anything he could grant would come at a severe price.'

Cassia paused, unsure of what to do.

My servant is needed. Take him.

Without hesitation, Cassia took the sheet and wrapped the neck of the bottle in it, negating the vile voice within. She set the bottle next to the Tome, still wrapped in the cloth. *'I feel as if...Arceus, needs it. Maybe he needs Hoopa to do something for him?'*

Trias sighed and started to turn back. *'Better it's out of the Guild's—'* He froze.

Martre hovered at the door of the vault, his eyes glowing brightly. "Wrong move, Trias." The door slammed shut and whirred as it locked.

"No!" Cassia and Trias cried, both running to the door. Cassia beat against it with her hands while Trias attempted to undo the locks, but both were to no avail. Martre's muffled shouts came from outside.

Trias strained against the bolts, but dropped both his arms and said, "It's useless. Martre's restricting the bolts and door with his own powers."

Cassia breathed quickly as she searched for some way out. She beat against the walls of the vault scraping away the gold and scrolls on them. The vault made no echoing clangs, unlike the door itself.

Cassia stopped and considered it. "Trias, what's behind this wall?"

"Nothing except the outside," Trias said, closing his eyes. They snapped back open. "Of course!" He held up both his spoons and focused on a single point on the wall. His eyes glowed blue, and the point started to bulge outward. Sweat beaded across Trias' brow and his hands shook as the wall continued to push outward.

Cassia noticed the strain and grabbed Trias' shoulder. Life flowed from her into Trias, filling him with power. He bellowed and slammed the spoons together, sending a psychic surge into the wall. It stretched into a large hole, revealing the dusty exterior of the Guild. Dust and broken bricks littered the ground in front of them, yet no Pokemon seemed to be visible.

Trias fell to his knees and let his spoons fall. He breathed haggardly as he looked up at Cassia. "Go." Voices rose beyond the vault as they moved toward the outside.

Cassia stooped and helped Trias back to his feet. "You can't stay here; they'll kill you!"

Trias broke from her grip and pointed at her bag. "You have to carry the Seal as far away from here as possible! My life isn't worth that!" He wearily picked up his spoons and crossed them against his chest. "Now go, before they can see you!" Shadows raced toward the vault opening.

Cassia groaned and turned invisible just as Martre and a mass of Lycanroc and Mightyena surrounded the exit. He burst into the hole and quickly looked left and right. He came up to Trias and stared him down. "*Where is she?*"

Trias' eyes glowed. "Gone." He roared and sent out a burst of bright violet energy toward Martre.

Martre dug his feet into the iron and sent out his own burst, and the two clashed, pushing against each other. As the clash continued, Trias' spoons began to bend, while the cross on Martre's face shined.

Martre forcefully stepped closer and said in struggling tones, “You’re foolish...brash...and most of all...” He punched Trias across the chest and made him crumple. His psychic burst immediately dissolved, allowing Martre’s to engulf him and scaled his skin.

He screamed as Martre punched him over his head and crushed his chest with another leg. He leaned down and made Trias’ squinted eye level to his. “You were always the weak link.” He raised a leg and made the claws glow yellow.

“*Get away from him!*” Cassia reappeared from the darkness and leapt on top of Martre. He stumbled back and roared, struggling to reach her. She clawed forward and slashed Martre across his eyes, making him scream in agony and clamp his legs over them.

The Lycanroc and Mightyena snarled and leapt after her, fangs bared. She dodged each one and scratched each one, making their Life stream to her in gaseous red strings. They fell to the ground and shivered, left with only enough to survive.

With her foes defeated, Cassia fell next to Trias and lifted his head. She cringed and said, “I—I should have done something sooner, but I—”

Trias lifted a burned hand, stopping her. He forced a smile. “Martre is...” He stared at the still-screaming Metagross. “...*was*...a powerful...opponent...you stood little chance...head on.” He held on to Cassia’s hand. “Leave now...before Arthus comes.” He coughed weakly as his eyes lowered. “Arceus...be with you.” He breathed out a final time.

Cassia cringed as tears came to her eyes, but shouts from the outside caused her to regain her composure. She turned invisible once more and sprinted out of the vault and toward the gate, leaving the other Guild Pokemon in the dust.

Searle leaned against the gate impatiently, staring at the Tower. “I hope they’re alright...” He felt someone grab his hand.

He yelped and scrambled away. “Gah! You’re here!”

Cassia briefly appeared. “Hurry! Get the door open!”

As she disappeared, Searle squinted his eyes and said, “Where’s Trias?”

He felt a push against his shoulder. “Just do it!”

Searle pushed against the door with Cassia’s help and said, “Alright, alright! You can tell me later!” The gate opened just wide enough for them to slip into the outside.

Both ran toward the deadened tree just outside the gate. Cassia reappeared and started to run down the path to the tree’s right.

Searle stopped next to the tree and yelled, “Where are you going?”

Cassia came to a stop and said, “I’m going to Saunte, where else?”

Searle groaned and pointed to the tree. “This is the way! There’s a big Life Deposit here just waiting to be used!”

Cassia ran back to him and tugged at his arm. “I can’t go that way!”

Searle tugged back. “Why?”

“I never learned, that’s why!” Cassia cried.

“*What?*” Searle pulled them both back and caused Cassia to stumble and fall next to the tree, causing the contents of her bag to be visible.

She coughed, and Searle rubbed pinched the bridge of his crest. “Augh, I should’ve seen this coming.” He knelt next to Cassia and pointed at the base of the tree. “I saw Arthus do this sometimes while I was on guard duty. All you have to do is put your hand in the ground and sort of...hitch a ride, I guess, then just get off at the deposit you want to.” Shouts rose up over the wall, causing Searle to turn back. “Better be quick, or else—”

He gasped, falling back. A shimmer appeared behind him and darkened into a Zoroark, breathing haggardly and burying his claws into Searle’s back.

Cassia gasped and scrambled back, focused on the Sawk. “Searle!”

Arthus tossed him aside and grinned maliciously, crouching low. “Disobedience only leads to Pokemon getting hurt, Cassia.” He held his claws out, shaking like the rest of him. “Give. Me. The. *Seal*.”

Cassia briefly turned to the bag, then to the ground. “You told me to take it away.” She dug her claws into the ground and forced Life into it. “And you won’t stop me!” Giant red tendrils rose up around her and threatened to engulf her.

Arthus roared and snatched the revealed Seal from Cassia's bag. She managed to grab hold of the chain as it flew through the air, and the two fought to keep hold of it as Cassia was being forced into the ground by the crimson tendrils. The veins in Arthus' arm bulged as he was dragged forward by Cassia. She grit her teeth as she slowly pulled it forward.

The tendrils collapsed over the chain and broke Cassia's grip, fully enclosing her in its trap. Her wail was cut off as she became a beam of red light and surged to the east.

Arthus breathed heavily, then smiled as he held the Seal up to his face. "Finally." His eyes widened as he realized his mistake. "No...Cassia!" He pulled at his mane and screamed, "Not now! *Not now!*" He dug his claws into the ground to follow Cassia, but no tendrils rose up to meet his call.

He shook and stared at the deadened tree. "Curse Arceus..." He stood up. His shoulders tensed. "*This is all **your** fault!*" He punched the tree with such great force that it instantly turned to splinters at his feet.

He seethed as he lowered the Seal around his neck. "No matter...even if she is taken by you, I'll bring her back." He ran across the rest of the canyon and to the south, his ice-colored eyes burning.

"I'm only one deposit away from taking your place."

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In the Revenant Forest, the enormous guardian Trevenant looked beyond his domain and toward the southern sea. Dark clouds roiled in the distance, booming and flashing as the tumbled toward the mainland. The spindly trees rustled in the chilling wind, and the Phantump ducked underneath his branches.

Hanging from his head was a small hut, where the Buneary children lay nestled, fearing the worst. With his Life, the Trevenant kept them warm, and fed his Phantump with it as well. Despite the world growing darker, he remained a light for their young lives.

The Trevenant rumbled. "**Desolation shall soon come.**" The soil churned beneath him. "**Yveltal will descend.**" His roots rose up, groaning as they lifted the Trevenant. "**I**



**must protect the next generation.”** With giant, lumbering steps, he made way to the coastline, his Phantump children following his footsteps. Other ghosts of all sorts followed as well, sustained by his vast well of Life.

The Trevenant looked to the east. **“I shall return, Creator. As will the children of Equivos.”**

## Chapter 25

*Loss affects all,  
But some even more,  
Despite the faith and trust  
They may hold dear.  
Yet all will be well  
After this time of woe,  
For soon Arceus will come  
And return his children to him.*

~~~~~

Cassia coursed through the spidery veins of Life, completely terrified by the scene before her. Crimson threads all interwove within each other in a vast blackness, all joining together at a maelstrom of Life, constantly pulsing in the utter darkness. But as she traveled, the Life unraveled, leaving fewer and fewer threads to travel through—including her own.

She felt the constant pull of the maelstrom to bring her closer, the light within her core throbbing in response. She struggled to keep her mind focused on finding a means to escape, but the threat of the maelstrom was ever-present in her mind as she traveled eastward.

She saw the vein she traveled through branch off to different points of light, all fading gradually. *'Where do I go, where do I go?'* she pleaded, completely within the network.

There.

Her eyes snapped to a point of light above her. Its channel was soon approaching and would soon unravel by the disintegrating stream Cassia traveled through.

Left with no other clues, Cassia willed herself up into the stream and into the dot of light. She shot into it just as the light died.

She erupted from the ground and gasped for air. She crawled out from the soil and lay on her chest, completely worn from the ordeal. As her mind grew clearer, she recognized the environment to be the fringe of the West Kaena Woods...yet it wasn't.

Even well into the autumn, Cassia had never heard the air so still. The trees were all bare of leaves, yet no musty scent accompanied them. No apples or berries were present, no wild Pokemon rushing past. All was lifeless and grey, just like the overcast sky.

The Minute Plains stretched in front of Cassia and resting in the center was the familiar city of Saunte. Smoke billowed from throughout the city, and light flashed alongside the cries of Pokemon. The grass—bright only several weeks ago—was dull and pale. No wind blew, allowing a foul odor of sickness linger. Autumn hadn't yet ended, yet the season felt it had.

Cassia rolled onto her back and forced herself upright. She felt too tired for much else. All she could do was rest.

She opened her bag and reached for the remaining bag of berries but stopped. The clean leather cover of the Tome caught her attention and held it. Her mind filled with recent events, and a heavy weight set in her chest.

She reached deeper into the bag and retrieved two worn, brass bolts. She covered them and closed her eyes. *'Grom...'* Her memories of the Golurk came rushing back, from their first meeting, to his ultimate demise. *'He...he was always there for me...'* Her hands shook. *'But now...he's gone...'* A tear trailed down her cheek. *'Just like Arianne.'* She held her hands up to her face. *'Dad is out of control...I've lost Matheus and Lawrence...and Trias and Searle died protecting me.'*

Grom's bolts fell from her hands. *'And now...I'm alone. Completely alone.'* She sobbed and pulled at her mane. *'I...I could've saved them. If I had gone with her...if I had put back his brace...if I wasn't so unsure.'*

A connection formed in her mind. She looked up at the blank, grey sky.

“Arceus...*why?* Why did they have to die? Why did Dad have to change, why did I lose Matheus and Lawrence? I’ve devoted my life to you...and here I am...” She stared at the bolts on the ground. “Alone.” She picked them back up and held them close to her chest. *‘I’ve saved so many...’* She lowered them back into the bag. *‘But I can never save the Pokemon I love.’*

She kept crying for the next few minutes, caught in hopelessness. She felt nothing could bring her out of this pit of misery and loneliness—not even Arceus.

A glow emanated from inside the bag. Cassia wiped away her tears and peered inside, curious. The pages of the Arceist Tome glowed with golden light, so brightly that Cassia squinted.

She took the Tome out of the bag, and the light dulled. The light gathered into a single point in the pages, then crept into the air, becoming a familiar wisp of light. It swirled in the air, coming level with Cassia’s eyes. She studied it, entranced.

The wisp pointed at the book and dove between the pages. Cassia blinked and opened the Tome, flipping to the page. *‘Where are you taking me?’* she thought. She came to the page where the wisp resided, and she read the passage it highlighted with itself:

Pokemon that bear knowledge, emotion and willpower have power to choose evil as much as good. The consequences of any choice affect not just those who make the decision, but those who are directly affected. Evil subjects my creations to pain of all types, and that cannot be changed.

The wisp shot in between the pages once more, and Cassia followed, gathering an idea of what it was. *‘Arceus?’* She turned to the passage it landed on:

But I, Arceus, sorrow with those afflicted by others, no matter their pain. I wish only for joy amongst my creations, but the unrighteous desires of the world taint their lives.

The wisp moved once more, and Cassia began to realize what it was doing.

Do not think I am not present in your doings. I ensure that no pain is too great and no trial too daunting. Many are lost to the darkness of the world, but those who follow

me are saved in the Tree of Life, returned to their loved ones and awaiting those yet to come.

The wisp moved once more, but before Cassia turned to the page, she considered the words it had shown her. *'When I felt this way before, there was always someone to help me—Matheus, Arianne, Grom, even Lawrence.'* She rubbed her eyes. *'They always said I was a good Pokemon, that I did nothing wrong....that I mattered to them.'* She set her claws between the pages the light defined. *'I always felt better after they said those things...but...do I need them to know that those words are true?'*

She opened the pages and beheld a magnificent work of art depicting Arceus enveloping a Sandslash in hundreds of threads of light. The Sandslash sat behind the body of a young Sand shrew, and tears could be seen on the Sandslash's face.

Cassia set a hand against the wisps surrounding the Sandslash, suddenly feeling ashamed. *'Arceus inspired them to help me. I could never have changed Grom before without him. Arianne would have died alone if Matheus hadn't taken me to her. Trias and Searle...well, I didn't know them for long, but at least Trias was content.'*

The wisp circled the words accompanying the image, and as Cassia read them, the weight in her chest grew lighter and lighter.

Light cannot be seen without darkness to contrast it. Push is known with pull, and good is known from evil. Just as all of these, joy can never be known without despair. As surely as Pokemon will bear the consequences of others, so will they experience my blessings and the joy they bring.

Know now that you are never alone. I am always present, always listening; whatever trial you may be facing, I will always assist when you call on my name. My arms stretch across the whole of Equivos, touching upon Pokémon's lives and making them for the better.

The wisp faded. Cassia studied the words, her smile broadening with every pass. She looked up toward the sun, which now shone through the overcast clouds. *'I made Grom and Arianne feel joy in the time I knew them—and now they've returned to Arceus and the Pokemon they love.'*

She closed the book and stood up, holding it close to her chest. *‘Arceus has always been with me, even as a Zorua! He showed me the light and brought me out of darkness! He helped me show others his light!’*

She swung her bag over her shoulders and set the Tome within. *‘Arianne and Grom are always with me, just like Arceus! I am never alone!’* She ran down the hill toward the smoking city of Saunte. *‘I will find Lawrence and Matheus again, even if I have to go across Equivos all over again!’*

She neared the walls of Saunte, and she narrowed her eyes. *‘And I will bring back the real Arthur.’*

She stopped at the edge of Saunte and coughed, the smoke filling her nose. The buildings crumbled, and bodies littered the streets. Cries and screams echoed from the center of town, alongside the roars of a certain Guildmaster.

The plume of smoke passed, and Cassia instinctively reached into her bag. Panic flashed across her face as she realized something. “My mask! It’s still in the temple!” She considered what she’d do, but the peace she experienced before soon returned. She stood straight and secured the bag over her shoulder. “No...I don’t need it.” She turned invisible and ran through the streets, one thought repeating in her mind: *‘I am Cassia Zoroark, daughter of Arthur Zoroark and priestess of Arceus. Arceus is with me, no matter how I appear!’*

She ran through the alleyways and climbed up a stone tower near the plaza. At the top, she saw hundreds of Pokemon crowded together below her with dozens of Guild Pokemon keeping them back. Gardner Dusknor stood in front of the now-destroyed castle that stood in the center of Saunte, and a certain Rhyperior and Feraligatr lay on the ground in front of him, scrambling away from him. Both were badly wounded, unlike Gardner, who remained free of injury.

Gardner’s fist rumbled with electricity as he approached them, his scarred eye glowing fiercely. “An entire city destroyed by *your* antics! I should have killed you long ago!”

Derak Feraligatr came to his feet and backed away, holding his wounded shoulder. “I-I-It ain’t our fault! Nobody listened to us!”

“*Liars!*” Gardner puffed into violet gas and surged toward them, a glowing fist within the center of the cloud. Valder and Derak both screeched and shot into the open door of a shack and slammed it shut. Gardner funneled into it and made the entire shack shake, along with making Valder and Derak scream further. It fell still and quiet, just like the remaining population of Saunte.

The cloud streamed back out and formed into Gardner. He rolled his neck and returned to the plaza. “Now with *them* taken care of, it’s time to bring this place back to order.” He paced in front of them and held his hands behind his back. “I have obviously grown soft to allow such *idiots* manage this place, but no longer! *I* will personally command the Guild here in Saunte and make it worthy of being the new Guild headquarters!”

“But what about us?” a certain Simisear cried.

Gardner searched the crowd for him, but to no avail. He held two fingers in front of his eye. “Either you’re with me.” He pinched them together. “Or you’re dead.”

Amidst the horrified gasps, a red ball of light gathered at the top of the tower. Gardner looked up and his maw dropped. “Arthus!” The Life Sphere shot toward him, threatening to consume him. The Dusknair rolled to his right and watched the sphere bash through the castle and create a sizable hole through the solid stone.

All looked up to see a Zoroark standing at the top with a single hand extended. It leapt from the tower onto the roof of another house, then down another, and yet one more, until it finally leapt in front of Gardner and towered over him.

Gardner’s brow furrowed as he stood level with the Zoroark. “*You.*”

She leaned forward and said, “Leave. Now.”

Gardner reared back his head and laughed, much to Saunte’s confusion. He whirled on Cassia and swatted her away, then crossed his arms and said, “I don’t listen to the brat that scarred me for life!” He pointed at the jagged white scar across his eye and added, “Not to mention Arthus’ traitorous whelp!”

Saunte instantly murmured about Cassia's identity, but she ignored them and stood straight, unfazed by Gardner's blow. "Enough is enough, Gardner! You've ruined Pokémon's lives for too long!"

Gardner slowly approached her, cracking his knuckles. "What, because I wiped those lying Arceists off the face of the earth? Because I burned all your precious Arceist Tomes?"

Cassia backed away, her claws glowing red. "Hate only leads to more hate. History repeats itself because Pokemon like you refuse to change."

Gardner stiffened. Violet mist surrounded him. "So that's it...*hate*." He quaked as the mist grew larger. "I was imprisoned for over a decade...for snuffing out the children of the ghosts that *tortured* me. The ghosts that killed my guardians, the ghosts that nearly starved me. I scraped my way out, only for them to try and *steal* my success." A pitch-black ball of electricity grew in his palm. "And you expect me to let weaker Pokemon conquer me?" He aimed the sphere at Cassia and spat, "There's only room for one law: *mine!*" The sphere shot toward Cassia.

She ducked under it and ran forward, leaving the sphere to explode on a ruined shop and make it explode, causing Saunte to cry out in fear. She met Gardner head on and slashed across his chest. He melted into mist just as she struck and formed around her head, causing her to cough and wheeze.

A glowing fist thrust toward her face. She ducked once more and took in breaths of clean air. He dove toward her again, but she rolled across and shot a Life Sphere into the cloud. He screamed and spiraled back into the form, crackling with red electricity. Cassia leapt up to strike him, her eyes glowing red.

Gardner swung a left hook and clipped Cassia across her jaw, sending her into the roof of a tavern. Gardner hovered toward her and sent another punch toward her head. She twisted out of reach and made Gardner punch into the roof. He swung again with the same result. He finally swung his head forward and forced Cassia to slide farther underneath him. The entire roof collapsed on itself as Cassia leapt off and rolled onto the streets.

As the dust settled, Gardner erupted from the ruins and bellowed, throwing another Shadow Ball at Cassia. She narrowly dodged it and ran for him again. He threw another and clipped Cassia across her shoulder, causing her to cringe as she leapt forward. Gardner puffed into mist again and allowed Cassia to land right in his noxious body.

She coughed and wheezed once more, scrambling to escape his grasp. Gardner's fist appeared once more and slugged Cassia across her face. Another did the same, and another. She fell to the ground and coughed as blood fell from her lip.

Gardner rematerialized and laughed haggardly, cracking his neck. He stood over Cassia and caused his arm to become enveloped in bright, crackling lightning. "I expected more from Arthus' pet!" He threw his fist down toward Cassia's head.

It passed through her and made her dissipate. Gardner's eye widened, then narrowed as he searched. "You can't hide forever, *brat*." He kept his fists up, ready to contend with her.

Claws raked across his back, leaving viscous, black gas. Gardner seethed and whirled around, throwing a series of Shadow Balls behind him. All flew harmlessly into the air.

Gardner stood still, then held out a hand and belched out a puce fog, filling the entire area. He peered through it and saw a shape crossing through it, sprinting toward him.

Gardner swept to the left and allowed the shape to pass by him harmlessly. He grabbed its 'tail' and yanked it back, causing Cassia to scream and rematerialize. Gardner grabbed her neck and held her high. "Is that *really* the best you can do?" He threw her into the air and shot a Shadow Ball into her chest, sending her beyond the walls of the city and into the Minute Plains.

She landed in an explosion of soil. She groaned slowly pushed herself up, barely standing. Gardner barreled closer, but his slow gait allowed Cassia time to think. She looked to the heavens and cried, "*Please*, Arceus, do something!" A shadow ball spiraled directly toward her.

She leapt back and began running toward the forest. Gardner followed and continued throwing shadow balls, his scarred eye flaring with each one. She soon disappeared, but Gardner knew that she would inevitably go into the forest.

He entered and carefully searched around him “I know you’re here, brat.” Wind whistled through the bare branches, and the skies darkened with the thickening clouds.

A twig snapped. Gardner swung around and threw a shadow ball. It exploded against a tree and consumed it in a black explosion. Leaves rustled, and Gardner continued throwing shadow balls, each one failing to meet their target.

A blue light blinked into existence. Gardner extended his hand to throw a sphere but froze. His eye widened. “It can’t be.”

The light drew closer, and it revealed itself to be a Chandelure, moaning with the wind and creaking with every movement. It waved its many flames threateningly, each jetting forward to singe the Dusknair. Gardner drew away, bumping into a fabric-like wall.

He swerved around and gasped, discovering that it was a large Banette, its floppy hands thrown into the air. Its zipper mouth opened and let out a mad cackle as it tried to snatch Gardner’s hand.

Gardner cried out and shot through the branches into the sky. He breathed quickly, his life rising to a high.

A sword swung toward his throat.

Narrowly ducked underneath it and saw it was a Doublade, spiraling through the air with three others, all with their blades drawn. They all screeched a single word:

“Liiiiife!”

Gardner returned below and puffed into gas, scrambling to run away. Other gaseous shapes joined him—a giant cluster of Haunter, all cackling wildly. Other denizens from the Ythereal Swamp followed it, all hunting down the Dusknair.

Gardner threw back a shadow ball as he ran, which bashed into a Haunter and made it explode in black light. Two others replaced it and continued to close the gap between them. Their ethereal hands snatched Gardner out of the air. He screamed one final time.

Cassia oversaw his ordeal from the top of one of Saunte’s watchtowers. She turned away and muttered, ““So shall your choices haunt you for destroying the lives of others.”” She slowly climbed down, eating the last of the berries she had.

Back in the plaza, the Guild Pokemon grew uneasy. A Gumshoos' teeth chattered, a Hitmonlee's legs quivered, a Skuntank nervously released noxious gas. That final, haunting scream lingered in their minds. Gardner had yet to return, and without his terrifying presence, their confidence waned.

Cassia suddenly appeared in the center of the plaza, and all turned to face her. Her face was bruised, and her body was scraped, but she was otherwise unharmed. "Gardner is dead." The Guild Pokemon paled.

She pointed west. "Go back to the Guild and never come back, or I'll *make* you go."

They took off into the streets with no hesitation. They all ran into the plains toward the woods and the desert beyond, all wishing they never encountered her.

The Pokemon of Saunte remained standing where they were, unsure of what to think of Cassia. She took a deep breath, then sat on a pile of stone bricks at the edge of the plaza. She held a hand up to her face and made it flash red, much to Saunte's surprise. She pulled it away moments later, and her face only had minor scratches, all closing rapidly.

She looked over to Saunte and smiled. "I can heal anyone who's hurt." She held a hand out toward them. "I won't hurt you."

None stirred. Faint mutterings spread throughout the crowd, and Cassia's smile faded as her fears set in.

An Eevee emerged from the gathering, limping forward. She kept a foreleg close to her chest as she drew closer to Cassia. The Zoroark saw no fear in the child's expression but could sense anxiety—especially from the Leafeon at the front of the crowd, who she figured was the Eevee's mother.

The Eevee stopped at Cassia's feet and looked up at her. She held up her injured leg. "Mama says I sprained it. Can you help me?"

Cassia smiled and gently lifted the Eevee onto her lap. "Yes." She gently held the Eevee's leg up and let Life flow from her palm into the injured limb.

The Eevee stared at the Life in wonder, but soon faced Cassia. "What's your name?"

"Cassia." She could feel the tissue beneath the Eevee's skin healing.

The Eevee lowered her ears and turned away. “Mama always said I shouldn’t trust Zoroark.”

Knowing that they could both be heard, Cassia replied, “Well, what do you think?”

The Eevee hopped up and exclaimed, “You beat up that mean old Gardner for us! A bad Pokemon wouldn’t do that!” She winced and returned to sitting as Cassia continued to heal. “You even sound nice...not like that Arthus guy I hear about in stories.”

Cassia finished healing the Eevee’s leg, then leaned in close and said, “There’s good in everyone—especially Arthus.” She waved her off. “Now how about you show your mama?”

The Eevee stared at her leg in astonishment and flexed it, feeling no pain. She beamed and hopped off Cassia’s lap and to the Leafeon. “Look Mama, the nice Zoroark made my leg better!”

The Leafeon nuzzled her daughter’s head and laughed. She briefly looked over to Cassia and said, “Thank you.”

Cassia smiled and nodded. “You’re welcome.”

Slowly but surely, other Pokemon from the crowd came to Cassia with all manners of injuries—cuts, bruises, broken bones, stomach pains—anything that they thought could be healed by her. And she did, draining her stored life until she only had a small fraction of what she formerly had.

After the Pokemon of Saunte quieted their talk about their miraculous recovery, Cassia took the Arceist Tome out from her bag and leafed through it. “I have a message from Arceus for you. In Proclamation 21, Arceus tells us that light cannot be seen without darkness, good cannot be known without evil—right cannot be without wrong. There will always be Pokemon who choose the wrong decisions, just as there are those who make the right.” She closed the Tome, smiling as she studied its cover. “Whether we’re as happy as can be, or are in deepest sorrow, Arceus is with us. In this time of trial, Arceus saw your pain. He sent me to stop Gardner, and now that he and the Guild are gone, you are free.” She looked up and saw gracious smiles across everyone’s faces. “If you remember nothing else from me, please know that Arceus is always here. Many have

tried to make you forget him, but they are wrong; he is as real as you and me.” She returned the Tome to her bag. “Do you understand?” Murmurs of agreement rung out throughout the crowd, and Cassia bowed her head and smiled.

Excited whispers and murmurs rose up from the back and traveled to the front as a someone passed through them toward Cassia. She lifted her head to see who it was. A silver-furred Lucario pushed through the crowd, wearing a leather cloak and hat.

He turned around to a Watchog and said, “Could you tell me what just ha—” He saw Cassia and stopped. His arms fell limp. “...Cassia?”

Cassia stood up in astonishment. “Matheus?”

Matheus processed her presence for a moment, then a smile stretched across his face. He held his arms out and exclaimed, “Cassia! You’re alive!”

Cassia ran up to Matheus and laughed, hugging him close. “I missed you!”

Matheus returned the hug, wincing as he wheezed, “I can tell. I missed you too.”

Cassia pulled away and laughed again, then said, “Where did you go to? And where’s—” She stopped, her smile dissipating. Standing behind Matheus, several feet away, was Lawrence Stephenson, holding a bag in either paw.

The bag dropped from his paws. “You’re—you’re—” He struggled to speak as he staggered forward, his eyes wide and jaw slack.

Cassia turned to him, breathing only one word: “Lawrence.”

At the sound of his name, Lawrence sprinted forward and swept Cassia off her feet. They spun briefly as Lawrence hugged her tight, tears brimming his eyes.

They stood still for a moment, then Lawrence whispered, “I thought you died.”

Cassia shook her head slightly. “Nearly.” She nuzzled into Lawrence’s neck. “I missed you so much.”

Lawrence rested his head on top of hers. “I missed you too.”

Everyone was silent, allowing them their time together.

Matheus stared upward, idling toward them. He tapped them both on the shoulder and whispered, “I know this is your sweet moment, but how about you catch up with each other,” he took a glance behind him, “*away* from prying eyes?” He nodded his head

toward the crowd of Saunte Pokémon who couldn't stop staring at the Lucario and Zoroark pair.

Their faces burned as they exited the walls of the city and sat against the southern wall, sitting apart from each other. The plains sprawling in front of them rustled with the growing wind, enormous dark clouds looming in the distance. The trees to the east and west trembled with the gale, their bare branches whistling in seeming fear.

They sat quiet for a few moments. Lawrence shuffled his feet uneasily while Cassia combed through her mane nervously. Despite longing to see each other for so long, they were lost for words.

Lawrence broke the silence and said, "How'd you survive? How did you get here?" Cassia told her story, from when she woke up to when she defeated Gardner.

At the end, she shakenly said, "I never realized how...conflicted Arthus truly is. He literally has another mind controlling him, and it's thanks to his own grief that he did all this." She hugged herself, bowing her head. "I wish there was something I could do to help him."

Lawrence leaned closer to her. "There...might still be a chance?"

"...Maybe" They smiled for a moment, the Cassia said, "So, how did you end up here?"

Lawrence explained what happened after he left the temple, from his grief, to his rediscovery, even Matheus' feelings of him being a Legend.

"You went through my stuff?" exclaimed Cassia.

"I didn't know you were alive!"

"That's no excuse!"

"Actually—"

"Aw, forget it." Cassia threw her hands down, laughing. "I'm excited that you've changed, Lawrence! I knew that you would make a great Arceist!"

Lawrence smirked, nudging her. "And you thought I was a Guild Pokémon trying to capture you."

Cassia playfully slapped him and sternly said, "That was before I really knew you!"

Lawrence chuckled, leaning back on the wall. “Grom didn’t like me at all. Good thing I—” He stopped, noticing her glum face as she reached inside her bag.

She pulled out Grom’s bolts, closing her claws over them. “Managed to save these. They’re all...they’re all that’s left of him.”

Lawrence empathetically wrapped his arms around Cassia. “I miss him too, Cassia. I’m sorry I wasn’t more...considerate.”

Cassia put Grom’s bolts back into the bag. “It’s not your fault.”

They remained hugging each other, Grom’s death hanging heavy over them. The storm in the south rumbled closer, lightning arcing between the clouds in flashes of white light. Deep, roaring thunder followed, making the ground shake.

They parted from each other to look up. “I haven’t seen a storm like that since...ever,” Cassia explained.

“Same here.” Lawrence thought for a moment, looking away. “We should probably get back to Matheus.” Lawrence made as if to stand up.

Cassia helped him to his feet. “I saw him as we were going away; he was going to the south part of the city.” They walked together through the now-crowded streets, making way to the southern wall.

At the top of the southern wall, Matheus sat on a large brick, deep in thought. The citizens of Saunte had since begun gathering their belongings from the wreckage, their livelihoods ruined by the Guild—but their hearts were full, thanks to Cassia and Lawrence.

Lawrence and Cassia came up to him. Matheus turned around, grim. Lawrence said, “Matheus, the storm—”

“Is getting worse by the minute, I know.” He groaned and said, “As you said, that isn’t any ordinary storm. It heralds Yveltal’s flight across Serenita. Soon, he’ll take the life of every Pokémon here; nothing will stop him.”

Mortified, Cassia exclaimed, “There must be something we can do! There’s so many good and honest Pokémon living here! It wouldn’t be right for them to die!”

Matheus looked down at sighed, slapping his paws against his legs. “There’s only one way: The Prison Bottle. Hoopa was supposed to go retrieve it and complete his duty, but now that he’s entirely in the bottle, he can’t.” He rubbed his face and moaned.

Cassia perked up, then hurriedly reached inside her bag. “Wait, Matheus!” He turned to face her. She held up Hoopa’s prison with the cloth, it’s eyes continuing to shine fiercely.

Both Matheus and Lawrence staggered back in surprise. The Legend scrambled to his feet and pried the Bottle away from Cassia. “When in Equivos did you get this?” he exclaimed, holding his paw over the cap.

“I felt compelled to take it back when I was in the Guild, but I didn’t know why,” Cassia explained. “But I guess I know now.”

Matheus sighed in relief and smiled. “Thanks to you, many will live.” He started down the stairs of the wall, toward the gate of the city.

Lawrence and Cassia followed, with Lawrence rearing away from the bottle. “Are you sure this is a good plan?”

Matheus solemnly nodded. “It’s the only one we have.” They exited the city and stopped in the middle of the field.

Matheus held the cap of the Prison Bottle, and after a moment of hesitation, he held it high and pulled off the stopper. Thick violet mist spewed from it and swirled around the Legend, collecting in front of him and bellowing menacingly. The Unbound Hoopa materialized in front of them and threw his six arms out from their sockets, his eyes brightly glowing green.

“I have been robbed of my freedom by that deceitful Zoroark!” Hoopa roared, the air crackling around him. **“I know well what my duties are, puny Lucario, and I refuse to comply until I have my freedom—and more!”**

Lawrence pulled at Matheus’ free arm. “What are you doing?” he hissed. “How is *he* going to help us?”

Matheus set a finger against his lips, then turned back and proclaimed, “Hoopa, regardless of your personal issues, you must complete your duty of gathering all the

followers of Arceus to the Tree of Life in preparation of Yveltal's coming, as prophesied in the Arceist Tome."

Hoopla grinned maliciously, leering at the Lucario. **"And who's going to make me? Arceus has no energy to spare to prepare for the final desolation, and the Seal is in that Zoroark's claws."** He leaned back and crossed his six arms. **"Until I am recompensed, I will not gather the followers of Arceus."**

Matheus quaked, dropping the Prison Bottle as the fur on the back of his head rose. "As a servant of Arceus, you will save them! I didn't spend the last two thousand years saving lives just to lose them all because of your arrogance!"

Hoopla continued to grin. **"My freedom, my price, or no saving grace. I shed no tears for the loss of life, as you know from my trial, Matheus."**

Matheus seethed, his eyes temporarily glowing blue. He soon calmed, his paws balled into fists. "I'll grant you your freedom," he growled, "but what's your price?"

Hoopla balanced a loop on two fingers, purple mist flowing from their centers. **"A simple one."** He stacked the loops together. **"A heavy one."** He set them over his head. **"All I ask is for one thing."** He lowered one hoop over his head, causing it to appear in the higher one, leaving an enormous space between his head and body. **"One far more amusing than a mere parlor trick."**

He pulled back the loops and made his eyes parallel to Matheus'. **"I want, from one of you, your most precious love."**

Matheus blinked. "What?"

Hoopla chuckled, leaning back and crossing his hands behind his head. **"You heard me: your most precious love. One of you come to me and offer it, and once I have it, I will gather the followers."** He straightened and sat on crossed legs, his arms reentering their crevices. **"Once the storm clouds cover the entirety of Serenita, Yveltal shall come. I suggest you make your decision hastily."**

Matheus nodded dazedly, then returned to his companions. "You heard him. Unless we sacrifice our greatest love, all of Arceus' work will be for nothing."

Lawrence held Cassia's hand. "If I go...I'd be giving up Cassia." He shook his head. "I can't lose her again."

Cassia held a hand over her heart, touched. "And I'd lose Lawrence..."

Silence. None seemed to be willing to give their most precious love, even if the lives of the entire region were at stake. The storm clouds rolled overhead, migrating further and further north, and spreading still to the east and west.

Matheus suddenly grimaced, taking off his hat. "I'll...I'll do it." He faced Hoopa. "It's high time I did it anyway." Without waiting for the word of his comrades, he boldly marched to Hoopa, and planted himself in front of the djinn.

Hoopa eyed Matheus, his grin growing wider. **"Ah, the Guildmaster offers himself as tribute. What a delectable surprise."**

Matheus replaced his hat, holding his paws out. "Just do it."

Hoopa chuckled, his claws glowing violet. **"Your wish is my will..."** He tapped Matheus' chest, and he breathed in haggardly, holding a paw against his chest. Pure white light flowed from him into Hoopa's finger, growing dimmer with each passing moment.

Matheus fell to his knees, his silver fur losing its luster with the light. His breathing became ragged, his limbs shook, becoming frailer each passing moment. Cassia went to support him, but Lawrence held her back, his eye narrowing as the light extinguished.

Hoopa retracted his finger, inspecting it. He scraped it against another claw, then gingerly picked up the Prison Bottle. **"Now for the other half of our agreement."** His claws glowed violet, and the bottle shattered into millions of pieces, exploding outward.

Hoopa stood straight and took a deep breath, a warm glow surrounding him. **"I will now complete my duty. Then, I shall join my fellow Legends in the final destruction of Equivos."** His six hoops flew from his arms, one going to the far east.

He pointed at Lawrence and the others. **"Don't let this be for naught. Complete your duty, Keeper."** A hoop swept over and scooped him inside. Another two hoops followed suit, capturing Lawrence and Cassia and sending them to Deitae.

Hoopa laughed, sending the hoops all across the world. “All thoughts and wills are known to the mighty Hoopa, my freedom allowing my full power. No unfaithful will arrive on Deitae.” His eyes glowed a brighter emerald.

“All on Serenita shall fall at the wings of Yveltal.”

~~~~~

*Cold.*

*Weak.*

*Foolish.*

*Me.*

Matheus stirred, his vision clearing in the dim light. He saw a vague blue shape, accompanied by a black-and-red one. “Are you alright?” a muffled voice asked.

Matheus moaned, holding his chest. “Been...better,” he croaked. He struggled to his feet, clutching onto Lawrence and Cassia for support. He looked around him, recognizing where he was.

Dark, massive trees surrounded a large clearing, the grass underneath them completely black. The occasional yellow speck of light popped out from the ground, only for it to die soon after contacting the air. The wind was strong, and black clouds overhead boomed their arrival. To his right was an enormous, rainbow-colored tree, its bark pulsing many colors to the golden leaves. A single entrance lay embedded in its trunk, guarded by a familiar ‘X’.

Matheus made a grim, hoarse laugh. “It’s finally here...the Day of Desolation.”

“Matheus, what did Hoopa take from you? You look awful,” Cassia said, inspecting Matheus’ paw.

He gently pulled it away. “It was what I held most precious...once.” He coughed, then said, “We are in Xerneas’ Glade, where the Tree of Life grows.” He held his paw out grandly, noting the frail bones beneath. “Welcome to Deitae.”

All but Matheus gazed in awe at the marvelous tree, the many spiraling lights a sight to behold. “Isn’t this place lethal for non-Legends? You know, the glowing lights?”

Cassia asked

Matheus pointed at a dying light sprouting from the soil. “With the Day of Desolation, the lights are no longer alive. You have nothing to fear here—provided that Arthus doesn’t reach the Tree of Life.” He coughed again, pounding his chest. “While he is certainly a danger, he is second to the real task at hand: bringing all the remaining Pokémon of Equivos to the Realm of the Keeper.”

“The final prophecy...” Cassia muttered.

Matheus nodded weakly. “Yes. Any moment now, Hoopa will bring them here.” He looked around, then sighed. “Although that will be meaningless unless the way to the realm opens. Once Yveltal finishes his work, the Legends will destroy Serenita, and then Deitae—and us along with it.” He rolled his head, seething. “I don’t even know who the Keeper is, let alone how the way opens.”

The Trevenant’s prophecy rang clear in Lawrence’s mind: **“A Keeper once was, but now he becomes a treader of realms and deceiver of self. The truth once held must take once more in order for the Keeper to be awakened for war. Awaken Aleron as well as the Keeper and Equivos may be reborn to live on.”**

Lawrence paused. “Cassia said a while back that I had to be the Keeper...”

**Beep—Beep—Beep!**

Everyone jumped in fright, searching wildly for the source of the alien sound.

**Beep—Beep—Beep!**

Matheus pointed at Lawrence. “It’s coming from you! What is that infernal noise?”

Lawrence’s heart skipped a beat. “It couldn’t be!” He scrambled to remove the Pokédex from his arm, then flipped open the case. A rush of excitement overcame him from the words on the screen:

Incoming Call from Valence HQ.

~~~~~

On the southern coast of Serenita, near the islands of Cretea, the winds grew as the clouds advanced to the north. The seas rose and stirred to meet the gathering storm. No sea creatures fought against the tide, for all had gone, to the safety far beyond the borders of Equivos—where there may be none.

Arthus meditated above a dark circle of sand, gradually feeding the deposit beneath to keep it in existence. All while he did, he thought of those he had lost—first Corrina, then Matheus, Erik, even Cassia. All to the same, uncaring god: Arceus.

Arthus clutched the Seal, the pulsing light growing brighter with each passing moment. “Soon, Cassia...soon, we’ll be together again.” He swung his head to the left and seethed, “And *you* won’t be there to stop me. I’ll make sure of it!” He slammed his claws into the sand, and tendrils rose up to drag him into the earth. A beam of red light surged under the seas toward the continent of Deitae, all to complete the Usurper’s final desire.

As he coursed through the vast network of Life, the small, weak voice in the back of his mind thought of only one thing:

‘I have nothing to live for. Let me die so I don’t ruin the lives of everyone living and dead.’

Chapter 26

*The Day has come,
The Flight has begun,
The Usurper has but hours,
To fulfill his mission.
The Priestess has spoken,
The Bottle has broken,
The Keeper has awoken,
The Day of Desolation.*

~~~~~

Hoopa cackled as he hovered high above Serenita, watching four of his hoops scooping up Pokémon through one in front of him. He carefully avoided the Pokémon unfaithful to Arceus, leaving dozens behind after finishing a village.

Abruptly, he clapped his hands together, and his hoops immediately returned to him.

**“It is done.”**

***“Krreeeaaaaww!”***

Hoopa smirked, noticing that the storm clouds had fully covered the continent. **“Just in time.”** A Y-shaped object soared over him, rapidly upon Serenita. A deep, booming voice rang out across the land:

***“The Day has come! All who failed to follow the words of the Creator shall be claimed by Yveltal!”***

~~~~~

“I-It’s a call from Unova!” Lawrence exclaimed, nearly dropping the Pokédex. He and Cassia and Matheus stood away from the growing crowd of Pokémon surrounding the Tree of Life.

“What do you mean ‘a call’?” Matheus asked, his voice growing stronger. The Pokédex continued to beep, waiting for Lawrence to accept the transmission.

Lawrence pointed at the Pokédex excitedly. “Look, this might sound crazy, but I have a way to get everyone out of Equivos!” He breathed in sharply. “The...the realm of the Keeper.” He fell still, suddenly realizing the Trevenant’s prophecy. *“I’m a traveler between worlds...I’ve protected so many. I gathered everyone—and the Arcean Texts. Only one message remained from them: to treat Pokémon like ourselves.”* He looked around him, everything coming clear to him. *“Those words were never meant for the Pokémon of **my** world...they were meant for the Pokémon of **this** one!”*

He stared at the Pokédex and quietly said, “I’m the Keeper. I was meant to come here.” He lifted his head and said more clearly, “I...I can bring everyone to safety—to my world.

“And how would you do that?” Cassia interjected.

“The same way I came here: a wormhole.” Lawrence remembered the horrifying experience of entering the region, the screeching of the beasts beyond the clouded tunnel, causing him to shiver.

“Kreeaaww!”

Everyone around the tree screamed, panicking at the shadow soaring above them and toward the continent.

Matheus pulled Lawrence closer. “Once Yveltal’s done with Serenita, the other Legends will destroy it and come here to finish the job! And that’s not even accounting for Arthus’ madness!” He stepped away and added, “Plus, there’s the matter of getting outside the region. How are you so sure that this ‘Valence’ will take us out of here?”

“I’m contacting them now.” Lawrence tapped the answer button, and the text on the screen dimmed.

Cassia cocked her head. “What now?”

“Now we wait,” Lawrence replied. He turned to the other Pokémon. “We need to get them ready to leave. It won’t be long before they come in.”

“We haven’t seen any sign of Arthus; someone has to go to the coast and stop him from reaching the Tree of Life,” Matheus reminded them.

“Is Arceus really in there?” Cassia asked, awestruck.

“Yes, but the protections he put up are useless against the Seal; it can counteract anything created by the Legends.” Matheus separated himself from them, stepping to the west. “I’ll handle him while you two help distribute supplies. They’re in a storage compartment under the Tree.”

“What?” Cassia grabbed Matheus’ arm and pulled him toward her, adjusting the Tome in her grip. “You’re too weak! You can’t—”

“Just hit me with Life and I’ll be fine.”

“But you’re a Legend! He can take you!”

“Not anymore.”

“All the more reason!

“I’ve beat him before.”

“I don’t want you to die!”

Cassia let go of Matheus and threw down her arms. “We need you. We all do. If we’re really going to Lawrence’s world, we need someone to look up to, someone we respect.” She held the Arceist Tome out to him. “We need Aleron. Not Matheus.”

Lawrence’s Pokédex continued to ring as Matheus gazed at the Tome. Lightning flashed, and rain pelted the ground.

The Legend turned away from Cassia. “No. Matheus would run from this fight. Just like he did when Arthus first took power. He would be a coward, hiding away, regretting his actions.” He closed his eyes. “Aleron would protect those who cannot protect themselves. He would charge in recklessly, beating back whatever dangers awaited him, no matter the cost.” He pushed the Tome back to Cassia. “You are a better example than I could ever be. You lead them.” He let go of it. “I’ll save them.”

Cassia held the Tome close to her chest, then nodded. Matheus went to turn back but was stopped by Cassia's hand again. She set it on Matheus' palm. "I'll give you what I can spare." Life surged from Cassia's arm into Matheus' causing him to stand taller and breathe clearer. His coat retained the dull sheen gained from Hoopa's price.

Matheus raised his paw, warmed by the rush of energy. "Thanks." He turned and ran into the dark woods, leaving Cassia to her work.

She caressed the Tome, walking back to Lawrence. "Do you think he'll be alright?"

Lawrence looked away from the Pokédex. "He knows Arthus best. If anyone's got a chance to stop him, it's Matheus." He turned back to the Pokédex, gripping it tighter. "I just hope we can do our part."

Cassia cocked her head, looking over Lawrence's shoulder. "Why?" The Pokédex continued to flash, waiting for someone to pick up on the other end.

"No one's answering."

~~~~~

### **Unova, Castelia City, Valence Tech**

In the dark hallways of Facility D, scientists solemnly pulled white sheets over the various instruments of the dimensional research center. Others gathered what data they had on Equivos, and others more worked on dismantling the wormhole generator, its golden ring gathering dust. Machines scraped and ground in the background, muffling the pitiful whines of the Pokémon in cages throughout.

Aaron Hanson bit his fist, his head low and eyes shut. "He was so promising..." he sighed. He glanced at the communication module, a single red light blinking below the slim microphone and blank screen.

Two engineers inspected the module. "That Lawrence fella's been gone for nearly a month," one said.

"Likely dead by now," the other replied.

"And we've been sending a signal ever since he got sucked in."

"Must not've been in range before he died."

Hanson grimaced. *“Yes, and I’ll have to break the news to his friends and family. I’ll have to explain that he died in a lab accident, but no need to go into the details.”* He groaned. *“I can’t afford to discredit the company any more than I need to.”*

The engineers set to work on disassembling the giant communication module, going behind the contraption. The red light suddenly glowed green.

Hanson sighed, massaging his forehead. *“Years of preparation...a perfect employee...and weeks of putting off the board...”* He tightened his fist. *“Wasted.”* He looked to the ceiling, shaking his head slightly. *“I had such high hopes...a world full of talking Pokémon...”* He sighed and lowered his head. *“I suppose it was never meant to be.”*

As the communication hub began to be taken down, Hanson took another hopeless glance over at the module. His eyes widened. He ran to the module and shouted, “Stop! Stop! We have contact!”

The engineers stopped in their tracks and backed away, looking around the front. One pushed back his helmet and blew his breath out slowly. “Well I’ll be. He’s alive!”

He pushed him away and hunched over the computer. “Tell everyone to stop what they’re doing! Lawrence has responded!”

The engineers nodded and ran through the dark hallways, shouting for everyone to stop. All around, the scientists halted taking down the equipment, even the enormous wormhole generator.

Hanson pushed a button on the module, allowing a cacophony of static to ensue. He stepped back and cringed, waving over to his men. “Get this thing to work!” A pair came to him and hurriedly twisted dials and clicked buttons, clearing the static and making voice come clear.

Finally, in a crackling tone he said, “This is Lawrence Stephenson—Repeat—Lawrence Stephenson—Can you hear me?”

Hanson pushed away the scientist and hovered in front of the microphone. “We hear you loud and clear, Lawrence!” Hanson wiped his brow, grinning. “Thank heavens you’re alive! You dropped off the grid after you disappeared, and we’ve been sending a

distress signal ever since!” He looked behind him, his grin fading. “We were just about to take everything down, in fact.” He turned back around. “What *happened* to you?” He tapped the blank screen behind the microphone. “Did your camera break in the entry? Why can't we see you?”

A short breath blew through the crackling speaker. “Not a good time—have to hurry! World’s falling apart—need wormhole!”

Hanson shook his head in bewilderment. “What do you mean the world’s falling apart? It was a stable dimension—”

“There’s thousands of Pokémon in danger! How quick—wormhole?” Lawrence’s voice kept breaking, losing itself to the static.

Hanson pulled a scientist closer. “If what he says is true, we don’t have time to waste! Get the wormhole generator running and target his current location!” He turned back to the monitor. “How many Pokémon are there with you?”

“Thousands—hurry!”

As the wormhole generator hastily had final adjustments made, Hanson smiled. “This venture wasn’t a total loss after all.” He paced to one of the blue-suited guards standing by, several Pokéballs at his hip. He leaned down as Hanson said, “Get the cages ready. We’re about to have a lot of Pokémon come from Equivos.”

~~~~~

Amidst the thundering of the storm, a portion of the coastline emanated red light. Soaking sand erupted into the air, and Arthus was thrown out from the ground. Sand coated his fur as he took deep, desperate breaths. He wearily came to his feet and studied the turmoil around him. He faced the Tree of Life and grinned, then knelt down and held his hand under the sand. He absorbed the rich well of Life the Tree had gathered, so much that he felt fit to burst.

He stood straight and looked up at the Tree once more. “Soon, this will all be over.”

“Yes, it all will.”

Arthus spun around and froze. Matheus leaned against a tree, his arms folded, and his head lowered. The Tree of Life rose behind him, the lights continuing to shine as a beacon to those beneath it.

The Zoroark narrowed his eyes and sneered. “Here to stop me again, are you?” He slowly approached the silver Lucario. “For the third time. First you betrayed me, then you took Erik, then you took Cassia!”

“That was never my fault, Arthus. Just as you drove me away with your change, you drove away Erik and Cassia.” Matheus stood up, straightening his hat. “You’re blind to what you’ve become. You’re a murderous mad-Pokémon, not even flinching at the prospect of slaying someone for dropping your food, when you used to be someone who would forgive even the most wretched criminal!” Matheus bared his teeth. “You became the evil that you wanted to stop!”

“*Enough!*” Arthus bellowed, his eyes glowing red. He stopped then closed his eyes, taking slow, deliberate breaths. After a moment, he uncovered his eyes, pure, ice-like blue. “If you *think* that I enjoy this terror...then you’re wrong. I hate it as much as I did in the past.” He stooped forward, extending his arms. “But unlike before, I know that this needs to happen for the world to be saved from itself. When I take Arceus, all will be resurrected; it won’t matter if I kill them now because they’ll die anyway!”

“At what cost? With no choice but the right one, they won’t be alive!”

Arthus’ claws emanated Life. “This entire discussion is water under the bridge. We’ve had it twice before, and both times we clashed.” The Seal glowed brighter as he removed it from his neck and wrapped the chain around his claw. “It’s time I took you with the Seal!” He sprung toward Matheus, the Seal outstretched.

Matheus leapt back and threw down his fists. They surged with Aura as he pressed them together, causing the light to gather inside. Arthus came to his feet and sprinted after Matheus. The Lucario threw an Aura Sphere toward him.

Arthus’ claws glowed crimson as he beat the sphere away, causing it to explode with violet light against a tree. He snarled, both his hands glowing with Life. He held them outward, continuing to run for Matheus.

The Lucario pressed his paws together once more, then slowly spread them out, creating an elongated rod of Aura. He thrust it outward and met with Arthus' claws, creating sparks of purple as they ground against its surface.

Arthus pressed close, the Seal growing closer to Matheus' paws on the rod. "Only a matter of time before we all die, isn't it?"

Matheus pulled away and pounded Arthus in the chest, causing him to stumble back. Arthus growled and beat against the rod, sending out another explosion of violet. He did so again, and again, approaching Matheus from all different angles in an attempt to graze him with the Seal of Creation.

He halted, breathing heavily. He grinned, and various copies spread from him and surrounded Matheus. They reared back to strike.

Matheus dove to the ground, his rod dissipating. He closed his eyes and saw vague outlines surrounding the copies, noticing only one true Zoroark as a blob of red. He swept Arthus' legs and rolled underneath the falling Zoroark, then darted into a dense cluster of trees.

Arthus clambered to his feet and snorted, the Seal still in his grip. "You can't avoid your fate!" He rushed for Matheus, slashing at trees, still reaching out to touch his fur.

Behind them, soaring over Serenita, Yveltal roared.

~~~~~

Within the Guild, Pokémon forced themselves through the torrential rains and thundering lightning, taking shelter in the storehouses and barracks. Some dared to go out to secure the unprotected rations and supplies, but most felt a deep foreboding, as if, somehow, this storm was an ending.

Within the Master's Tower, rain leaked through the rafters and splattered over Martre's head, rolling down his face and coating his bandaged eyes. He prodded them, sensing his surroundings with his psychic abilities rather than using his physical.

He faced the window, his metallic teeth grinding. "Curse that traitorous Zoroark." He looked up, as if seeing the raindrops rocketing to the ground. "Unlike any I've seen before..."

A void-like shadow passed his psychic vision, causing him to flinch. He shook his head, disbelieving it. “Tales were all they were...legends...”

Screams echoed from below, and Martre looked out to see a crowd of his subservient Pokémon escaping from a giant column of crimson energy spiraling into the sky. It rapidly enveloped the Pokémon and absorbed them, burning through the structures and leaving only destruction in its wake.

The column circled closer to the Metagross catching each of its victims. Martre cleared his mind as his research center shone with red light, the pillar just beyond the window.

It crashed through the glass and burned the wood instantly, melting stone and disintegrating the books in its path. It surged toward Martre and caught him in its light, bringing the Life of the Metagross to Yveltal, the Destruction Legend.

~~~~~

The rain on Deitae only worsened. The trees of the Luminescent Woods blew backward in the mist. The Lake of Enlightenment lost its luster in the fierce winds. The ruins of the Mountain of Rebirth crumbled further in the onslaught. All the landmarks of the Legends wore away as Yveltal completed his first and final work.

Lawrence distributed small packs of supplies to the displaced Pokémon of Serenita underneath the Tree of Life, the multi-colored leaves continuing to shine bright despite the storm. Lawrence distributed the supply bags from the shed while Cassia lined them up, preparing for the wormhole. Just as with the Guild, the end lingered in their minds.

Inside the supply storage, Lawrence continued to dwell on the preparation for the wormhole, how everything seemed to come together despite the circumstances. He looked up at the Tree of Life, wondering if some higher power was at work.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Lawrence turned around and saw Aerav Aerodactyl from Jareth standing outside the door, his wings bent on the ground with age. “Arceus is the wisest and most powerful being in Equivos. He has a purpose for everything he does.” He gave the Lucario a warning look. “So don’t go to him. We are not worthy to stand in his presence.”

Lawrence nodded, picking up the final bag and strapping it onto his back. “Don’t you think it’s strange that I happen to come just as the world is ending? That I have the only way to save everyone? That Cassia—”

“None of that is important now.” Aerav smiled slightly. “Just focus on bringing us to your place of safety.” He lumbered back to the Pokémon of his village, leaving Lawrence to dwell further on the circumstances of their return.

He stepped out of the now-empty storage underneath the tree and closed the door, looking up the boughs one more time. *“I’ll figure out why you did this. One way or another.”* He turned toward the eastern edge of the woods. *“I hope you’re alright, Matheus.”*

“Lawrence!”

Lawrence turned around to see Cassia coming toward him, sopping wet from the rain. Cassia pointed at the end of the line of Pokémon. “We’ve organized everyone and got them ready. Where’s the wormhole?”

Lawrence glanced at the Pokédex on his arm. “I haven’t been able to contact Valence since the connection gave out. We’ll just have to hope they do it.”

Cassia squinted her eyes, looking up. “Better make it quick. It looks like Yveltal is finished.”

The Legend flew over their heads in a rush of wind, causing many of the other Pokémon to jump or scream. Yveltal seemed to disappear into the sky, vanishing into the distance.

From the southern edge of the trees, a giant Trevenant rose above their boughs. A hoard of Phantump followed in his wake, surrounding his body and swarming for his precious Life. On the side of his head, a cluster of Buneary huddled inside a small house, fearfully staring out into the rain. As he approached, the remaining population of Serenita steadily backed away, unsure of the ghost.

The Trevenant marched toward Lawrence and Cassia, his arms lowered and scraping against the soil. **“The day has come. Yveltal has flown, and soon, his fellow Legends will follow in his wake.”** He lifted his hand and placed it against the edge of the hut. The

three Buneary cautiously climbed out, covering their heads from the rain. The Trevenant placed his other hand over them as he lowered them to the ground.

His maw curled into a smile. **“I have cared for you as long as I am able.”** His Phantump drifted away from him and swarmed over the three Buneary, creating cover from the rains.

The Buneary backed away, the smallest one sniffing. “Do you have to go?”

The Trevenant blinked, nodding his head. **“The Realm of the Keeper is not for the likes of me. I am to remain and receive my rest.”** He turned to Lawrence and Cassia. **“My word has come true. The betrayal was fostered, the bottle was opened. Aleron has awoken, and now the Keeper has come to complete Arceus’ work.”** His claws hovered over the ground, rising higher. **“Now, Keeper, ensure that he did not save his Pokémon only for them to become slaves.”** His hands sunk into the ground, and the cracks in the bark glowed red. His leaves fell away, and his head disintegrated, funneling into the grass. The rest of his body followed, removing any remnant of the Trevenant.

The entire crowd stood still, astonished by the arrival and the death of the seer. The Phantump mewled mournfully, their erratic nature slowed by the passing of their parent. The Buneary hugged each other in their loss of their second caretaker.

From the edge of the line of Pokémon, a certain Ambipom stepped out, holding a slumbering Aipom in his tails. “Alright, what in Arceus’ name is goin’ on! First, I get dragged away from my wife and get stuck with the kid, then some *thing* comes out and scares the livin’ daylights outta us, and *now* some giant tree comes and goes!” No reply came.

Lawrence’s Pokédex rung again, blaring out despite the rain. Lawrence hurriedly picked it up and answered, “Do you have it ready?”

“Yes—get to a good—position! Send—the word!”

Lawrence briefly glanced at Cassia, nodding his head. He ran to the front of the line of Pokémon, his steps heavier due to his soaking wet fur. The population gazed at him in awe, never having seen a Lucario after Arthus’ takeover of the continent.

He planted himself at the edge of the clearing and held the Pokédex in front of his face. “*Now!*”

The rain stopped over his head. The clouds swirled, funneling toward the Lucario and arcing with electricity. Lawrence moved away from its targeted ground and watched the funnel expand into a disc of roiling cloud. It stopped, then the center sunk inward, disappearing into a void. The back remained flat as the inside of the vortex spun once more, opening into a dark and forbidding abyss, revealing nothing of what lay beyond.

Lawrence studied the wormhole, remembering his first encounter well. Unlike before, it didn’t pull everything toward it, but instead remained stagnant in the air, patiently waiting. Despite this, Lawrence could feel its antagonistic aura.

The Pokédex crackled and said, “We’ve refined the generator and made it so you could enter at will. You best hurry and get everyone across; I can’t guarantee it will last long!”

Lawrence shook his head and turned to the Equivosians. He pointed to the wormhole and exclaimed, “Go inside, now! This is your only way to safety!” They shifted uneasily, gazing at the wormhole in fear.

R-R-R-UMBLE!

All around them, towering giants sprung from the singular mountains and lakes that formed Deitae. Groudon burst from the enormous Crack of Formation, spreading magma through the air and shaking the earth. Kyogre emerged from the Abyss of Darkness, sending a fountain of salt water to mix with the rain and strengthening the already-mighty torrents. The oceans rose and fell, rising beyond the coastlines and threatening to drown the vast tracts of land. Dialga and Palkia materialized from the Ruins of the Cosmos, joined with Azelf, Uxie and Mesprit from the Lake of Enlightenment. Time and space warped all around them, their presence disturbing the work they had so carefully made. The Legendary beasts—Entei, Raikou, and Suicune—roared from the Trinity Peaks, sending the call for their final work.

All the Legends that assisted in the creation of Equivos came from their domains, each calling out their final duty:

“Yveltal has finished what must be done, and now our time to destroy has come! All of Serenita now must fall, and then our home, Deitae, shall join it all!”

Simultaneously, the Legends marched from their abodes going around the Tree of Life and the one Legend that failed to emerge: Arceus, the creator of all. The entire pantheon prepared to destroy their greatest creation, wiped clean of life by the Destruction Pokémon.

Immediately after their call, the line of Equivosians advanced toward the wormhole, guided by their elders. Many voices cried out to escape:

“We can’t stay here! Let me in!”

“Why would Arceus do such a thing?”

“Listen to the Lucario, go through that thing!”

Cassia hastily joined Lawrence at the foot of the wormhole, blocking it from the onslaught of Pokémon. Lawrence held out his arms and exclaimed, “One at a time!” The Pokémon stopped, looking over Lawrence’s shoulder uneasily.

Once they fell still, Lawrence stepped away from the portal and gestured to it. “I don’t know what will happen if more than one goes through, so just...keep it reasonable.” He retracted his arm. “And be quick. The Legends will be back soon.”

The Linoone at the front of the line hurriedly jumped in, a squeak of fear emerging as he disappeared into the void. His family followed, and the others as well, as they warily entered the wormhole.

Lawrence stood at their side, his thoughts focused on only one thing. He stood straight and said, “I have to go help Matheus.”

“What?” Cassia exclaimed. “But he’s—”

“Probably in trouble with Arthus!” He jumped across the line of Pokémon and held Cassia’s hands. “Look, I know we don’t have much time, but we can’t leave Matheus here.” He held her hands tighter. “He’s...he’s our friend.”

They stared at each other for a few moments, with Cassia considering his words. She finally pulled away and sighed. “You’re right. I don’t want to leave him either.” She

turned back on him and pointed a claw at his face. “But I don’t want to lose you either! You need to come back before those Legends do!”

Lawrence smiled, nodding his head. “I will.” He then nodded toward the wormhole. “Just make sure everyone gets across.” He turned around and ran into the forest toward Matheus and the desolation of the Legends.

Cassia remained behind, but inwardly, she fought between going with him and maintaining her position. *‘I can save him...I can save Arthus.’* Reluctantly, she turned away toward the fleeing Pokemon of Equivos. *‘But I must make sure they are all safe.’* She bowed her head and held her claws together. *‘Oh Arceus...save Lawrence...save Matheus.’* She opened her eyes.

‘Save my father.’

~~~~~

Hanson and the other scientists stood behind the control panel, anxiously waiting for something to come through their wormhole. The generator hummed, growing in intensity as time wore on.

The CEO of Valence Tech waved to the men clad in black security vests. “Keep ready for the Pokémon. There’s no telling how they’ll react here. Just get them into the cages as soon as you can.” They each nodded to him, holding Pokeballs in their hands.

A scream emanated from the wormhole, and a Linoone shot out from it, skidding against the concrete floor. He opened his eyes and gasped, shrinking back down. “T-This isn’t how imagined it to look like.”

Hanson grinned, pushing back his ruffled hair. “Jackpot.” He swung his arm toward the Linoone. “You know the drill.”

A guard threw a Poke Ball in front of the Linoone. It cracked open and sent a flurry of white light in front of him, forming and dimming into a snarling Mightyena, barking at the Linoone.

The Linoone backed away, lowering his head and shivering. “W-Wild Pokémon!” He looked around at the foreign humans, paralyzed. “What *are* all of you?”

“Keep quiet!” the guard exclaimed. He pointed at the Linoone and shouted, “Mightyena, get the Linoone!”

The wolf growled and ran after it, its eyes wild. The Linoone screamed and swiftly ran away, darting around the legs of the guards toward a dark corner of the room. At the wall, he found himself surrounded with bars, unknowingly running into a cage.

The Mightyena hovered at the entrance, barking at the Linoone. He remained in the corner, clamping his paws over his head. “Arceus, save me!”

His family followed, each screaming as they sprawled to the ground. A cluster of Machoke followed, and many others as well. The other guards deployed their Pokémon, ranging from Luxray to Machop, Arcanine to Pangoro—all powerful Pokémon, trained to capture.

Hanson couldn’t stop a smile from spreading across his face. “Project Babel is underway.”

The generator zapped, and the wormhole warped, disrupting the funnel inside. Hanson’s smile disappeared as quickly as it came. He jabbed a finger at a scientist. “Keep it stable! We must let Lawrence and all the other Pokémon through!” The scientist plinked away at a keyboard, shouting orders to his associates. The wormhole soon calmed, allowing more Pokémon to follow those who were herded away.

Sweat rolled down Hanson’s brow as he clamped his fingers on the railing. “*Come on...bring more, Lawrence...bring more!*”

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Across the ocean, the Kaena Woods burned by Reshiram’s almighty flames as he soared over the atmosphere. The Iren Desert turned to glass by Moltres’ fury, the Faylen Jungle froze by Articuno’s and Kyurem’s frost, and Mount Furnek raged under Entei’s roar. The islands of Cretea sunk into the ocean at Kyogre’s bidding, and the Minute Plains fractured under Groudon’s might. All around the physicality of Equivos, Dialga unraveled the stream of time, forcing the environments into a flux of birth and death, while Palkia warped matter from under to above and vice versa, ripping to pieces the vital balance of space. Yveltal’s oblivion provided peace to those who had inhabited the

continent, saving them from the despair of the destruction of their home—all to cleanse the countless generations of darkness and evil caused by those who refused to serve Arceus.

On Deitae, Lawrence ran through the Luminescent Woods, leaping over fallen trees and heading for the explosions of crimson and azure in the distance.

Arthus struck against Matheus' aura rod, driving him to the ground. "You. Will. Die!" He charged his claws with Life and struck against the rod once more, forcing it disintegrate in an explosion of violet.

Matheus' was blown back, the soil churning behind his paws. Arthus ran forward and roared, swinging the Seal toward him once more. Matheus struck the Zoroark's arm and punched him in the stomach, causing him to double over and breathe heavily.

Matheus cautiously stepped away, keeping his arms up. "Not as long as the Tree stands."

Arthus suddenly sprung forward and slashed Matheus' thigh. He screamed and fell to one knee, clutching the bleeding leg. Arthus stood and kicked him to the ground, a wide grin plastered across his face.

Matheus panted on the ground, struggling to get up. Arthus set his foot on his chest, dangling the Seal over him. He grinned. "Time's up, Guildmaster."

"No!"

Arthus' head shot up as Lawrence ran from the edge toward him, aura flowing from his paws. He snapped up the Seal and turned back to Matheus. "I'll finish you, then I'll finish that human!" He slammed the Seal against Matheus' chest.

Lawrence stopped, thinking he was too late. The Seal glowed against Matheus' dull fur, edging against his spike. The rains continued to pelt them, weighing down their bodies.

Arthus blinked. Matheus remained present, a smile creeping across his lips. Arthus lifted the Seal and stared at it, then pressed it against Matheus again. No reaction.

Arthus growled, lifting the Seal once more. "How! It's exactly how it was before!"

Matheus chuckled, his eyes glowing blue. “It only works on Legends.” His paws glowed blue, and he grabbed the Seal and came to his feet, favoring his uninjured limb. “And I’m not a Legend.” He reared back his paw, surrounding it with Aura.

Arthus hurriedly slashed Matheus’ paw on the Seal, causing him to release it and allow him to leap away and wrap the Seal around his hand.

As Matheus clutched his paw, Lawrence ran to him, asking, “Are you alright?”

Matheus lowered his paw, ignoring the scratch. “F-Fine.”

Arthus lowered the Seal around his neck and scowled. “You’ve just been wasting my time, knowing that I couldn’t take you with the Seal.”

“And it’s nearly too late,” Matheus replied. He grabbed Lawrence’s arm. “For all of us. You need to get out of here!”

Lawrence pulled away grabbing Matheus’ arm. “Not without you!”

“I’m old, weak, and foolish! You don’t need me!”

“Yes, I do! Who else will—”

They both stopped as Arthus ran around them and toward the clearing, the Seal illuminating the path.

Matheus pulled away from Lawrence and chased Arthus, his injured leg severely slowing his gait. “We can’t let him get to Arceus!”

“I’ll stop him!” Lawrence exclaimed, swiftly running ahead of his elder. Matheus’ cry was drowned out by a sudden boom of thunder as Zekrom unleashed his power on the Xilo Mountains, instantly reducing them to rubble.

Lawrence quickly caught up to Arthus and gathered a sphere in his paws far slower than Matheus’. The Zoroark looked back and snarled, charging a Life Sphere in his hand. He threw it back at Lawrence.

The Lucario dodged away from it, then narrowly avoided a tree. He threw the Aura Sphere at Arthus, clipping the Arthus’ legs.

Arthus gasped and tumbled to the ground, coating himself with mud and grass. He clambered to his feet and began to walk away, the clearing edging closer and closer into his vision.

Lawrence punched Arthus over the head and knocked him down. “You won’t take Arceus!”

Arthus throatily cackled, turning around. “Oh, I remember your dreams well, when I cared. You were a faithless young fool, wondering why Arceus would allow such horrible things to happen in the world.” He gestured around him at the rain, destruction, and waste. “And look what’s happened! Terrible, horrible death, more than I could ever achieve!” He held up the Seal. “And all of it could be stopped with this. No more faith, no more hopes, just a pure and simple trust that all will be well!”

Lawrence remembered his previous beliefs, that Arceus didn’t exist, that he was contradictory, that he never wanted the best for everyone. “You’re wrong! You’re looking only at the bad, Arthus, at what everyone else has done wrong!” He pointed at the storm. “He saved everyone that held faith in him! He prepared my world for them to come! Horrible things happen, but they aren’t because of him!” He jabbed a finger at Arthus. “It’s all because of Pokémon like you, who are too self-absorbed to care about anyone else!”

“I’ve had it with you!” Arthus bellowed, slashing at Lawrence. The Lucario stepped back at each subsequent slash. “You’re ignorant!” He charged his claws and skimmed against a tree. “Flawed!” He slammed the ground. “And deceitful!” Lawrence backed away with each blow, struggling to find an opening against the maddened Zoroark.

Arthus swept Lawrence’s legs and pinned the Lucario’s arms to the ground. “*It’s thanks to you that Cassia died!*” He raised a claw, aiming it at Lawrence’s heart.

“*Father!*”

Arthus stopped inches away from the killing blow. His head snapped up to see Cassia standing at the fringe of the woods and the clearing, her drenched fur billowing in the growing gale.

He stood straight, allowing Lawrence to scramble back to his feet and to Cassia. Arthus took a single step forward. “You’re alive...I thought you died...when you travelled through the Life.”

Thunder boomed across the sky. Cassia lowered her gaze and said, “Let me talk to my father. *Now.*”

Lawrence leaned close and hissed, “What are you doing? He nearly *killed* me!”

Arthus’ head jerked to the left, then to the right. He seethed and pulled at his mane. “No, no, ***no!*** *You’re ruining everything!*” He jerked back to the left. “Cassia! I’m here!”

Cassia held on to Arthus’ hands. “Fight him! Fight the shadow! Come back!”

Lawrence stepped back, horrified. “What is *wrong* with him?”

Arthus’ head snapped to the right, then he grabbed Cassia’s hands and bellowed, “*What have you done?*” He snapped to the left and pushed her away, falling to the ground. “It’s too late for me! You have to go, now!”

Cassia returned to him and tried to help him back to his feet. “No! It’s not too late! You can still come back!”

Arthus snapped back to the left and snarled, then clawed Cassia’s arm. She grunted and backed away, holding the injured limb.

Lawrence pulled her away and held her close. “What is he doing?”

Arthus spasmed a moment longer, then fell still. Cassia wheezed a sigh of relief. “Arthus—the *real* Arthus—is coming back.”

Lawrence dwelled on this, but soon looked back to the clearing. “Has everyone made it out?”

“Yes, everyone. I was going to run out to you and—” Her eyes widened. She held onto Lawrence’s arm. “Where’s Matheus?”

Arthus gasped and sat upright, his eyes closed as he breathed. Cassia broke away from Lawrence and sat next to him. Lawrence reluctantly followed as Arthus held his head.

Cassia sat close and said, “Dad...are you alright?”

He sat still. The rains pelted their fur. The Legends marched closer. The ground shook.

Arthus slowly opened his eyes. “Yes...” They opened wide, revealing their cold, malevolent nature. He pushed Cassia and Lawrence away and stood straight. “He’s

dead!” He reared on Cassia and snarled, “That weak, idiotic fool won’t stop me anymore!”

Cassia grabbed onto his arm and cried, “No! No, he isn’t gone! He can’t be!”

Lawrence came to his feet and surged Aura into his paws. Arthus whirled around and threw Cassia into Lawrence, sending them both sprawling. He faced the Tree of Life and crouched for one final sprint.

“Arthus!”

A silver blur bashed into Arthus and rolled across the ground, binding him with his limbs. Matheus bound him with his body, each rendered immobile by the other. The Seal lay buried between them, wrapped around Arthus’ neck and hidden behind his back.

Matheus grunted and growled as he fought against Arthus, his muscles tight and strained. “Go! I’ll keep him down!”

Lawrence and Cassia came to their feet, distressed. “We’re not leaving without you!” Lawrence cried. Cassia stood in shock at what Arthus had become.

Krreeaaaaaww!

At the triumphant cry, a rush of wind flowed from the east. They all now knew that the Legends had finished their work, and now were turning back to Deitae to complete the Day of Desolation.

Arthus gnashed his teeth, attempting to bite Matheus’ paws. “Let me go! I can stop this! All of it! I can save everyone!”

“Lawrence has already done that!” Matheus spat. He glared at the younger Lucario and Zoroark. “The Legends will be here in moments. You have to leave, now!”

Despite the logic of Matheus’ command, Lawrence shook his head, tears brimming his eyes. “We can’t leave you to die.”

“Father...” Cassia whimpered, staring at the savage face of Arthus’ shadow.

Matheus narrowed his eyes, all anger gone from them. “I want to die. I want to see Laryon and the rest of my family again.” He rolled his head back over Arthus’, restraining his neck. “And I want to make up for the biggest mistake I ever made.” He

looked back at Lawrence. “Go...take care of Cassia and everyone else. They’ll need you in your world. They don’t need me.”

Lawrence cringed, squeezing his eyes shut. He briefly nodded, then ran around the former Legend and took Cassia with him, leaving him to restrain Arthus despite the coming death. She reached back toward them and screamed, “*Father!*”

Fissures opened around Lawrence’s feet, Groudon’s fury encroaching the continent early. Trees fell all around him as he desperately charged toward the clearing, narrowly outrunning the desolation. He never faltered despite his vision blurred by rain and tears, all the way to the Tree of Life.

At the edge, the wormhole warped and tore the air around it, growing more unstable with each passing moment. The wind and rain blinded Lawrence as he charged toward it, the warping, twisted light his only guide. Cassia looked up at the sky gasped, noticing the great dragons of Equivos swarming across the sky and gathering light into their maws.

Lawrence dragged Cassia with him to the portal, the ground breaking underneath them. The wormhole cracked with yellow light, splintering under the dimensional energies. It glowed bright white and squealed, the funnel swirling too fast to see.

The dragons sent their attacks down on the continent, sending a wave of fire and immolation into the air. It blew Cassia into Lawrence, sending both of them into the exploding wormhole, winking out of the decimated world.

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The dragons flew overhead, and Arthus’ struggle to come free became more desperate and frantic. “It’s not too late. It’s not too late!”

Matheus panted haggardly, tiring from Arthus’ struggle. “It is, Arthus. You failed.”

“No!” Arthus shifted and faced Matheus, eyes wide with panic. “I can’t go! I can’t! I must save everyone!” His voice became a whisper as he suddenly stopped. “I...I just want my family back.”

The fire descended upon the continent and Matheus gazed into Arthus’ eyes, smiling. “And you will.” He closed his eyes, and the orange wave of pure energy enveloped them, becoming a bright white as they turned to nothingness—just as the rest of Equivos.

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Light.

Pure light.

All that could be seen was pure light.

Standing in the brightness, Lawrence struggled to see, turning about. “Cassia?”

“Lawrence?”

Lawrence turned to the source of her voice and saw her dark fur. He shuffled forward, unsure of whatever lay on the ground.

They finally met, their hearts racing from their escape. They held each other warily, unsure of their environment. “Where are we?” Cassia asked.

Lawrence cautiously looked around. “I...don’t know. I’ve never seen any place like this.”

They remained quiet for a moment. Cassia lowered her head.

“Matheus...Arthus...they’re...they’re gone.”

Lawrence swallowed, his throat tightening. He made a shuddering sigh, lowering his head. “I...I wanted to save them...but...but Matheus”

Cassia set a hand against his face, forcing a smile. “It—it was his choice.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “He was always reckless...and Arthus.” She fell into Lawrence’s shoulder and sobbed. Together, they mourned for the loss of their dear friend, and Cassia’s lost ancestor, in the vast emptiness of white.

“Do not sorrow, my children.”

They both looked up and turned to witness a marvelous sight. A magnificent Pokémon with pure white fur and golden appendages towered over them, looking down with gentle, scarlet eyes. Green gems sparkled on the arc around his chest, and his hooves hovered with splendid grace, their tips just above the floor.

Cassia and Lawrence struggled for the word, but each managed to say it: “Arceus.”

Arceus made no motion, his fur flowing despite the lack of wind. ***“My servant has completed his work and returned to rest within the Tree of Life. His loss will be felt, but rest knowing he is at peace.”*** He lifted a hoof. ***“And now, the Arceist Tome is fulfilled.”***

The Day of Desolation has passed, and the children who are faithful have passed on to inhabit another of my worlds.” He focused on Lawrence and seemed to smile. “Do not fear, Lawrence; your unbelief of your youth is forgiven. I will no longer remember when you come to be judged.”

Cassia broke away from Lawrence and knelt before him. Lawrence followed, feeling a greater warmth in his chest than he ever had before. The Legend took no notice. *“You may speak in my presence, children.”*

Cassia slowly looked up, eyes wide. “What...what is this place?”

“A world yet to be created,” Arceus replied. *“One that has no time or place with the others in existence.”* He lowered his hoof. *“I have brought you here to congratulate you for your continued faith in me. Among all my children, none have shown so great as yours.”* He looked sadly at Cassia. *“I sorrow for the many pains you suffered through your life and am pleased to see you still hold me close to your heart.”* He turned to Lawrence. *“And you as well, despite your troubled past.”*

Although pleased to hear such praise from his creator, Lawrence felt a question nagging at his mind. “Arceus...why did you let Arthus become the Pokémon he was?”

“He was such a good Pokémon...before he changed,” Cassia added, her ears drooping.

Arceus lowered his head and looked away. *“As with all my children who fall away, I felt a great loss. He could have been the receiver of many blessings, yet he chose to reject them, believing that I failed to do what was necessary to have a perfect world.”* He turned back to Lawrence and Cassia. *“But let me ask you, my children: if I had forced Arthus to change, or had intervened to stop him on his path, would the belief of my children be made on faith, or on certainty? Would I have been any better than Arthus in forcing everyone to choose me? Would everyone really do what I desire them if I showed myself to all? Would I be seen as benevolent and just if I had killed someone because of their unbelief in me?”*

Neither could argue with his logic. Sensing other concerns, Arceus continued, *“Even if I intervened to halt his senseless killing of everyone he loved and more, it would go*

against the plan I laid for this world and the others I have: allowing them choice. Follow me, and they are given blessings. Otherwise, they choose a life of sadness and grief, all through the others that have chosen the same path. My followers at times suffer such grief, but the grief they bear is nothing compared to the happiness they hold.” He glared at them. *“Do not ask his fate. He has defied me in many ways, even going so far as to use my own tool against me. He will be punished, far more than any others who had defied me. But he is also a conflicted, broken child.”*

“But what about everyone he killed? Their choice to live was taken from them,” Cassia interjected, feeling guilty for contradicting her creator.

Arceus remained still. *“There is also the matter of those that Hoopa never saved; despite the efforts of my servant, even he couldn’t save them. Even still, there are those who were unable to hear your voice. What of them?”* Cassia paled, realizing her imperfect coverage of Serenita.

He raised his head higher. *“Those who died before their time who would have accepted me, and even those who had their choice taken from them, shall still reside with me in the Tree of Life. Only those who would reject me in any circumstance are isolated from me.”*

He shook his head. *“Do not dwell on such matters. Now, you must look to the future that the world of man holds for those of Equivos.”*

Lawrence rubbed his head, groaning. “Right...Hanson. He’s going to—” His head jolted up. “He’s going to use them. Make them slaves.” He grabbed Cassia’s arm staring at her. “I can’t let that happen!” He looked down at himself and sighed. “But...he’ll just use me too. I’m a Pokémon just like you, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Arceus raised his hoof again. *“When you first passed through the barrier that separates the dimensions, I changed you to be the way you are. From your human self, to the Lucario you now are.”* He narrowed his eyes. *“Do you now know why?”*

Lawrence considered his question, thinking deeply. “I...I used to hate Pokémon. I thought they were just beasts to study, to help us in time of need...but little more.” He held up his paw, studying it. “When I became a Pokémon, I thought it was the greatest

irony, to be the very thing I loathed.” He smiled, turning his paw around. “But then I saw the wonder of Pokémon. I saw that they were really no different from me. At home, they could become the best of companions and act just as we would. But in Equivos, they can stand with us as equals.” He clenched his paw and lowered it. “You changed me to make me realize how wrong I was. I would never have listened to Cassia if I was human. I would never have talked to everyone like a friend. I needed to change, not just as a person, but as a whole.”

Arceus smiled, his eyes still narrowed. ***“And now that you have experienced life as Lucario, do you wish to remain one?”***

Lawrence’s jaw fell. “You mean...you mean, I can go back?” Arceus nodded. He stared down at himself, holding up his paws again. “I...I would like to see myself again...have my fingers, my face...everything. It’s who I am.”

He turned to Cassia, who smile faltered as he spoke. His own fell away. “But...if I turn back...” He held Cassia’s hand. “I could never be with her...at least, not in the way I’d like.” She beamed.

He cringed, closing his eyes. “But I can’t leave Valence, or help everyone else, if I remain a Lucario.” He let go of Cassia’s hand, and both stared at each other, dwelling on the prospects.

After a long moment, Lawrence slowly turned back, his mind set. “Arceus...you gave me the option...” He bowed to him. “But I will let you choose. Whatever you see fit for me, I will follow.”

Arceus’ eyes opened, and he nodded. ***“Very well. You have indeed changed from before you entered Equivos.”*** He regarded Cassia, who fought the urge to kneel once more. ***“And you, Priestess...do you wish to follow Lawrence, whatever path he follows?”***

Unflinching, Cassia nodded. “I’d love for him to stay as he is...” She faced him. “But as long as I’m with him, I will follow him.”

Arceus nodded again, lifting his hoof higher. ***“Both of you have passed my test to prove your faith by leaving your lives in my hands.”*** Tendrils of light erupted from his

arc and surrounded them, causing them to glow. ***“Your fates have been intertwined ever since you were born. And now, they will be closer, with each following the other.”*** He held his hoof high, and Cassia and Lawrence both glowed intensely. ***“Save my children, Keeper and Priestess, with my blessing and gift.”*** He stamped his hoof, engulfing the world in light. The mortals felt a change, only it felt soothing, pure...welcome.

Just as Arceus had been in their lives.

Chapter 27

Act 5: The Aftermath

Darkness.

All he saw was darkness.

He felt heavy, as if he had been through a great ordeal, only it had happened instantaneously.

He forced his eyes to open, his vision blurry in the dim light. He lay on a pad in an empty room, free of instruments and furniture. As his vision cleared, he saw a light buzzing overhead, and a series of windows revealing a dark, technological underworld, full of whirring machinery. The buzzing seemed quieter, duller, as if his hearing had worsened. The smell of oil and smoke also seemed muted compared to his previous experience.

He craned his head up to see through the window better. He felt a chill in his arms and legs, despite not usually having one. He rubbed his face to rid the tiredness from his eyes.

He stopped.

He held out his hand, noticing the pearlescent, smooth, sturdy fabric that covered it. The digits were long and well defined, unlike the paws he remembered.

His breathing grew heavy. He carefully pulled off the glove, studying the furless, pale hand underneath. He pressed it against his face, feeling no snout, no fur. Only a mouth, nose, and eyes.

He passed his hand through his hair, a long, unkempt brown mess. His elation rose as it fell from his fingers, unlike the short, velvety fur that covered him for over a month. He

looked down and saw himself in the same white suit he had entered Equivos in, perfectly clean and shiny, even in the low light.

He looked up and gasped. “Which means—”

A shout echoed from the window to his left. Others followed, each furious in their cries. Lawrence shakily stood up, unused to the balance of his former self. He shuffled toward the window and froze.

A dozen guards surrounded an Ambipom as he threw punches everywhere, but the Mightyena forced him into a cage with an infant Aipom. His shouts were drowned out by the cries of the more Pokemon were forced into cages, all to be carried away.

Lawrence’s jaw fell. “No...” He looked to the left and breathed in sharply. Two Machoke each took one of Cassia’s arms as she was dragged across the room, each listening to the shouts of their masters. He mane trailed along the ground, her eyes closed and head bowed. She soon panned out of view, her dark, Zoroark fur clutched in the arms of the Machoke.

Lawrence’s heart beat rapidly. Sweat beaded on his brow. “She’s...she’s...” His face hardened. “They can’t do this.” He turned around and marched toward the door, finding renewed strength. “*They can’t do this!*”

He slammed open the door, his eyes locking with an elderly man in a suit. His eyes squinted up from a book in his lap, his white hair flowing over his bald crown. The ruby around his neck glinted in the flickering light, matching the smart, black suit he wore, and the crimson tie underneath the coat.

The man grinned, shutting the book. “High time you woke up!” He pushed himself up and heartily took Lawrence’s hand, shaking it vigorously. “Thanks to you, Valence Tech will rise to new heights!” He pulled Lawrence’s tense arm closer and muttered, “And under such strenuous conditions. I have no idea how you survived there for as long as you did, but rest assured that you will be handsomely compensated for it.”

Lawrence didn’t reply, scarcely restraining his anger toward President Hanson. “*Let Cassia and everyone else go!*” he wanted to scream, but he knew that such an action could lead to nothing. For now, if he wanted to reason with Hanson, he had to force

himself to say, “Thank you.” He looked back at the window. “What will happen to them?” he asked with barest restraint.

Hanson cocked his head, his continually squinting eyes contorting in confusion. “The Equivos Pokemon?” He waved his hand, shaking his head. “Don’t know why you’re so concerned, considering their savage nature.” He folded his hands behind his back and cleared his throat. “Don’t worry; they are being put into holding cells as we speak. Within hours, we will begin the research and experimentation phase.”

He wrapped an arm around Lawrence and guided him away from the door, their footsteps clapping against the coarse concrete. “You know, I thought you wouldn’t make it because of the instability of the wormhole. After that Dusknor came through, it was warping so much that it threatened to destroy the facility.” He smiled, looking across to Lawrence. “But you managed to come through with a Zoroark—quite a rare specimen. You’ve only been asleep for several minutes while we took care of it.” He turned back toward the hallway, grim. “That Ambipom was making things difficult...along with some others.” He shook his head gently. “There’s always complications, but they’ll soon be gone. They are just Pokemon after all.”

Lawrence carefully hissed through his teeth. “*They aren’t **just** Pokemon...*”

Hanson patted Lawrence’s shoulder, chuckling. “Regardless, they will make excellent subjects for Project Babel.”

A cry of anguish echoed through the hallway. Lawrence tightened his fist. “What are your plans for the project?”

Hanson looked up thoughtfully. “We’ll likely spend the next several months, or years even, on extracting the DNA sequence from these Pokemon that allows them to speak. Then it will be used to create a serum or machine capable of granting our Pokemon speech capabilities.” He smiled wide, his eyes opening. He lowered his arms, staring out into space, breathing deeply. “After mass production and distribution, we will have a world with perfect communication between man and Pokemon.”

Lawrence realized that Hanson couldn't simply be convinced to release the Equivosians; he not only had a profit in mind from them, but also an ambition, one that he seemed entirely devoted to.

Lawrence forced himself to calm, then said, "Is there any way to do this *without harming them?*"

Hanson's eyes squinted again, and he eyed Lawrence with suspicion. "Why so concerned? From my observations, you saw Pokemon as savages, like myself. There's no humanity in them, so why should it matter?"

Lawrence never remembered being willing to harm Pokemon, but he did remember his previous views on Pokemon and regretted them. *'I was right that this world's Pokemon weren't supposed to be treated like people, but the Arcean Texts never said that; it was meant to make way for the Equivosians. Everyone else never realized that—only I made it a reason to leave Arceus.'*

Hanson looked away, disinterested. "I can't guarantee they won't be harmed while we extract their DNA. But after it is set on the assembly lines, we'll show them to the world as part of the advertising campaign of Project Babel. They will be assurance that the project will work for their Pokemon."

"But that's a lie! I brought them from Equivos!" Lawrence fumed, wondering how extensively Hanson planned this entire scheme.

Hanson held up a finger and smirked. "The public won't know that. We'll use the completed Project on our own Pokemon, yes, but why not use Pokemon that have already been prepared?" He focused his eyes on Lawrence again. "And if you really *are* concerned about their fate afterward, they'll be given the best life we can offer: food, enclosures, nests, toys—everything needed to make Pokemon happy." He turned away and shrugged. "Who knows? We might be able to integrate them with our own Pokemon. We could find them owners and train them, just like any other."

Lawrence ground his teeth, scarcely believing his employer. *'They **aren't** like ours! They **can't** be forced to live that life!'* He slowly let out his breath, watching Hanson

smile and wave to a few engineers walking by. *‘You might seem like a good person, but you’re not. You don’t care about Pokemon, least of all Equivos. You and your company.’*

A long window extended to their left, revealing the massive warehouse that Facility D housed. He stopped to study the whirring machine lifts and workers rushing back and forth, all working to carry the cages that housed the Pokemon they captured. Their cells were formed into a rough rectangle, stacking on top of one another in a jigsaw, accommodating all sizes of Pokemon. And sitting on the highest cage, gently lowering onto the top of the others, was a Zoroark, clutching a set of bags in her arms.

Lawrence held onto the railing beneath the window, focusing on Cassia. She stared at the floor of the cage, looking down at the Pokemon she had saved from destruction. She looked around her, watching the alien people cross by her, all shouting various orders to their subordinates. She looked up, staring at the window. Her eyes widened.

Lawrence cringed, leaning closer to her. “Cassia...” he whispered.

Their eyes met, and Cassia put a hand over her mouth. She looked away and hid her face, her back rising and falling with her heaving.

Hanson stood next to Lawrence, scrutinizing his crestfallen face. “What is the matter? They are being given the best treatment possible in the current situation. We were expecting only a dozen at most when you first entered Equivos, not over two thousand!”

Realizing his mistake, Lawrence stood straight and forced himself to look away from Cassia. “Please, e-excuse me. I’m just...I’m just feeling tired, that’s all.”

Hanson didn’t move. “Considering what you’ve been through, I’m not surprised.” He gave the cages another glance, then turned around, pacing toward the door at the end of the hallway.

Lawrence turned back toward the Cassia, who still covered her face. “I’ll get you out,” he assured her, knowing she couldn’t hear him. “You and everyone else.” He stared for a few moments longer, then returned to Hanson, passing through the door.

The dark environment brightened, no longer so grim and forbidding. To the left of the simple lamp hanging from the ceiling, the elevator doors waited for service, while to the

left, two doors marked ‘Men’s’ and ‘Women’s’ stood, perpendicular to the doors Lawrence and Hanson came from.

Hanson waved to the Men’s room. “Go on and get freshened up; I’ll have your belongings sent down from your station.”

Lawrence strode past him, pushing open the door. Hanson’s eyebrows lifted. “Oh, and by the way...” Lawrence stopped.

Hanson set a hand on Lawrence’s shoulder. “I made sure to take care of your finances while you were gone. It wouldn’t be right to have you go through trivial matters after your ordeal.” His hand slid off, then he walked to the elevator and pressed the up button.

Lawrence continued into the room, feeling no kindness from Hanson’s gesture. The concrete of the facility changed to pristine white tiles. Going around the corner of the door, bathroom stalls and urinals lined the left and sinks with mirrors lined the right. Beyond them, a massive wall of lockers stretched, prepared for the hundreds of employees under Hanson’s control. All of it was lit with elongated light bulbs, seeming brighter due to the slight smell of bleach and cleaner.

He walked into the locker room and looked to the left, where showers rose from a massive web of walls, none in use. He wove through the lockers, searching for his own—then realized he had forgotten the number.

He groaned in frustration, not surprised to have forgotten it with all that happened. He almost went out of the locker room altogether, then noticed a neat pile of clothing sitting on a bench, a note on top of it.

He gathered his clothes—remembering them to be his own—then read the note:

Lawrence,

I had my janitors take out your clothes after we assumed you to be gone, but I had them sent here when we heard you were alive. Nothing has been taken, I assure you; I would trust my employees with my life.

Aaron Hanson

Despite his thankfulness, Lawrence couldn’t forgive Hanson in the slightest.

He went into the closest shower and pulled the door shut, finding a mirror on the other side of it. He saw his face and how alien it appeared after being a Lucario for so long—the small, round nose; the angular chin; his dark blue eyes and the brown eyebrows above them. All of it contrasting the subtle, handsome features of a Lucario.

He pulled off the top of his suit and stared at his chest and arms. Toned muscles replaced the thin body from before his time in Equivos, as if the training he had undergone as a Lucario had somehow transferred into this body—almost as a gift from Arceus, now that he thought about it.

He passed his hand over the smooth skin on his left arm, then came to his wrist and stopped. On the underside, he felt a strange, raised section at the base of his hand. He flipped it over and saw the fleshy, pink arc of Arceus, roughly two inches across. It was intrinsically etched into his wrist and raised into being.

Lawrence considered the reason for such a symbol, feeling a strange want to touch the center. His finger hovered over it, then his mind abruptly shifted to the task at hand: cleaning himself. He left the mark alone and finished undressing, then took a long, hot shower in the stall. But he felt no peace.

His indignation toward Hanson now cooled, he considered what he could do to break the Equivosians free from their prison. But his mind kept returning to the mark, and Arceus' promise to him: ***“Your fates have been intertwined ever since you were born. And now, they will be closer, with each following the other.”*** Surely, he couldn't have meant only *one* of them changing? With them apart, with one imprisoned and the other free?

He closed his eyes and thought of the surest sign of her love toward her: Aura. He wanted its warmth to comfort him, to bring assurance that not all his Lucario self had gone. But none came. He was as human as he was before he left.

He turned off the shower and dried himself, then dressed in the clothes he left behind, wincing as the fabric contacted his bare skin.. He shook his head free of the feeling as he zipped up the blue jacket over his green collared shirt, then walked out of the locker room in his jeans and brown shoes.

He pushed open the door as he brushed back his hair, taming the wild mess that he woke up with. Hanson waited at the elevator with a black bag in his hand, and two guards in navy outfits stood behind him, each with three Pokeballs at their belts.

Hanson smiled in satisfaction as Lawrence approached them. “Good to see you back; the white of that outfit was a tad overdone.” He held the bag out to him. “Here’s everything from your station. I watched the guards myself to make sure nothing was taken.”

Lawrence accepted it, then Hanson looked up at the two burly men behind him. “Given your experience, I thought it best to give you a week paid vacation. It is only fair.” His positive expression suddenly turned serious. “But I warn you: don’t say a thing about this project. We can’t have the public know there are Pokemon that can talk...or their origin.” One of the guards plucked a ball from his side and tossed it in the air, catching it threateningly.

Hanson stepped away from the elevator, and the guards followed. “Oh, and don’t come back until your vacation is over,” Hanson added. The other guard lifted a Pokeball and tossed it in the same manner as the other.

Lawrence nonchalantly walked past them, hiding the confirmation that he knew he wasn’t welcome. He pushed the elevator’s button, entered, then shot up into the main lobby, leaving Hanson and his beloved project. He then exited the quiet, pristine lobby of Valence Tech, and entered nighttime Castelia.

He strode past the bronze statue of the Pokedex 2.0 and entered the main walkway, orange lights flickering over his path. No one but Lawrence crossed the sidewalks—no cars hummed, no Pokemon called, and no people came. Sewage, gasoline and grease hung faintly in the air, evidence of the traffic hours earlier. The unusual quiet joined with the eerie dominance of the skyscrapers in the sky, replacing the trees and mountains of Arceus’ design.

Lawrence looked around him, the bag bouncing on his back. ‘*This...this isn’t right,*’ he thought. ‘*I don’t belong here. I need trees...*’ He looked up, the stars invisible from the

various lights of the city. *'I need clear skies.'* He passed a sign advertising the Pokedex 2.0. *'I need isolation...'*

The edge of Castelia became visible on his left, and Lawrence stopped. He stared at the horizon, the black night and sea joining as a single entity. *'I need Equivos.'* He turned back onto his path. *'I need...home.'*

He reached his apartment building and ascended the stairs, then opened the door. The door slowly swung outward, and as he entered, he studied the place he had called 'home': the solitary couch and TV, the underused kitchen, the unappealing bathroom, and the near-empty bedroom. All inside a space no more than thirty feet across.

Lawrence's chest ached. *'Do I really live here?'* He swept his hand across the counter, still clean. *'Why would I want this place? Why did I work for Valence?'* He pulled out his Pokedex from his pocket, opening it. He tapped on 'Call' and swiped to 'Missed Calls'; his parents had left over fifty since he had gone.

He sat on the couch and set his bag next to him, then tapped on his parents' picture, calling them. *'Why did I leave behind what made me happy?'*

The phone continued to ring, until it suddenly showed a large, scruffy man and the woman next to him. Each wore large, broad-brimmed hats, and their faces were streaked with sweat.

"Lawrence!" they both exclaimed in relief. "We've been trying to call you for the past month! Where in Arceus' name have you been?" Lawrence's mother continued.

Lawrence's throat grew tighter. "Mom..."

His father pushed a little closer. "And why are you calling *now*? It's the middle of the day over here! We're usually outside, but...after you didn't pick up, we've been taking more breaks...hoping you'd call." He pulled off hat, his bald head shining in the bright light. He noticed Lawrence's pained expression. "Son...what's wrong?"

Lawrence struggled to keep his voice even as he said, "I had to go somewhere...somewhere far away. I...I made new friends...saw new places..." A tear rolled down his face. "But I didn't realize until I left how much I missed you. I...I couldn't call you from where I was. It was *so* much like Sinnoh: the trees, the

mountains...everything.” He wiped his hand over his eyes. “I can’t work with Valence anymore...I can’t live here anymore...not after being in that place.”

His parents fell quiet. A Tauros lowed behind them, and several passed behind the window. His mother leaned closer, sympathetic. “We missed you Lawrence...even before you left. Talking to you once a day was never enough, but then we couldn’t see you at all.” His father hugged her, rocking her. “Can you...can you come visit us? You’ve already been gone for years, and you’ve never come back. Can you now?”

Lawrence nodded, slowly at first, but then gradually faster. “Yes...yes I will.” Despite his joy of going back, he felt a stabbing pain in his chest. “Mom, Dad...about how I’ve been...with the Arceists.”

His parents looked at each other, then his mother said, “I know how hard it’s been, and I’m sure you have questions...but we’re not the ones to talk about it with you.” She weakly smiled. “Remember that little church in Castelia...the one we kept telling you about?”

Lawrence blinked. He pulled his bag closer and sifted through the unimportant employee material and found what mattered: a brochure emblazoned with the arc of Arceus, labeled, ‘Arceism: A Belief Fit for All!’.

Lawrence turned back to his parents. “Yeah...I remember.” He flipped it over, revealing the address of the closest building and its owner. “I’ll go get some things, and...and I’ll visit.”

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In Facility D, the Equivosians huddled together in their cages, avoiding eye contact with the guards who forcefully shoved them in. Their Mightyena and Arcanine prowled around it, watching for anyone who dared to try and escape. The Equivosians, however, held no faith that they could, what with their Keeper gone and their home destroyed. Now all that awaited them was the dark and oppressive Valence Tech and their dreams of granting speech to all the Pokemon in their world.

Cassia sat in the topmost cage, staring at the iron floor beneath her. Her bag sat in her lap, while the supply pouch she had worked to distribute lay at her side, its contents

untouched. In the corner of the cage was a metal bowl filled with brown chunks of grainy substance that smelled vaguely of meat. She dared not try it.

The Zoroark's mind wasn't focused on food, or even the loss of her friends and home. She thought only of the human that looked down from above, longingly, like he wanted to come to her. She recognized his face, from when he had shown her long ago. Lawrence Stephenson, a human. And herself, a Pokemon.

"Hey."

She looked down the bars and saw Lonny Ambipom pressed up against the ceiling of his own. His little Aipom lay nestled in his arms, sleeping uneasily.

He held up some of the brown chunks and narrowed his eye. "Don't try this stuff. I learned the hard way." He tossed it to the corner of his cage and slumped against the bars, groaning. "And here I thought we'd be in paradise." He spat in the corner. "And we've got no idea where Lawrence is.." He sighed again, looking down at his son. "Do you think that he might have...betrayed us?"

Cassia shook her head in astonishment. "What, no! He wouldn't!" His human body returned to her mind, and her features twisted into doubt. "He...he loves me...he loves everyone."

Gardner continued to stare. "He might've changed back on the return and sold us out. He doesn't seem like the sort of guy to do something like that, but considering the circumstances..." He closed his eye and shook his head. "This isn't what I thought his world would be like. I was expecting open skies at the least. Not this."

Cassia held up her right wrist, tracing the white fur that now cropped on it. The arc of Arceus shown prominently through it, leaving a raised impression in her skin. She had no idea why she had it, but she expected Arceus to have an explanation. That is, if she could talk with him again.

**Crrreak!**

The door of a cage swung open and two Machoke lunged for the Bibarel inside. The hapless Pokemon was dragged by his arms, his beady eyes darting everywhere.

"Where're you takin' me? Tell me, please! I thought this was supposed to be a paradise

fer us, not this!” The Machoke took no notice of his pleas, continuing past the circle of guards to an unseen corridor of Facility D.

Cassia clutched her wrist, horrified. “Arceus preserve us.” The Pokemon below her murmured, each wondering if they were the next to be taken. Children were held by their parents, wondering if Arceus truly wanted them to be in this forsaken place.

Cassia looked down at her bag, focusing on the book that lay visible within. She carefully pulled it out, revealing the final copy of the Arceist Tome. She opened it and studied its pages, a sense of peace overcoming her as she read.

Slowly, carefully, she read aloud, and the murmuring stopped. Despite the grinding and whirring surrounding them, her voice rang out beautifully and clearly, projecting the Creator’s message of peace and goodwill to all his creations, human and Pokemon alike. She started from the beginning, the creation of Equivos, and read on through the ages, recounting the vast tale of the region to its final survivors. The peace she felt spread to them, and despite the danger that awaited them, they felt that all would be well in the end.

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In a circular room in a lower level of the facility, Hanson watched as men in white lab coats tuned machinery and prepared wires around a large chair with straps, the screens around them blank and ready for listing information. The deafening noise outside was muted, leaving them to work in relative peace.

Hanson couldn’t stop himself from smiling, despite the fact he knew it unsettled his employees. *‘A world full of Pokemon that can speak. A way to not only add to the world, but truly change it.’*

He thought back to his youth, when he tinkered with circuitry leftover from computers and Pokeballs in an attempt to create a successful product. Not until years later, when he produced the Poketch, did he succeed. He was successful, but he saw little impact from it; people used it, but it made no meaningful change to their lives.

He pushed himself and others to create the Pokedex 1.0 years after that, and later the 2.0. Now everyone is interconnected with one another, using the universal remote to

complete all they must. He had made a difference, but many still went on through life without its advantage, instead staying true to their ways before the new modern age.

And now, years after resolving to change the world, he could do it. Everyone, young and old, man and woman, would buy speech for their beloved Pokemon. And no one could create a competitor.

He chuckled, imagining the perfect world further. *‘No need for sign language or translators, just have a Pokemon tell you what’s wrong. How much easier could life get?’*

The doors behind him burst open and a pair of Machoke carrying a Bibarel entered, strapping him into the chair. They exited, and Hanson clapped his hands together. “Time to work, everyone! The sooner, the better!”

An aged, balding scientist hobbled over as his associates placed wires on the blubbering Bibarel. He anxiously swallowed and said, “Are you sure this is...ethical? I mean, he seems as intelligent as you or me.”

Hanson set a hand on the man’s shoulder, tightening his grip. “Doctor Vaun, they’re just Pokemon. We’ve done this before with other subjects, and you had no qualms.”

“But this is different. They never spoke or—”

“We must ensure the machine works, no matter the circumstances.” Hanson flashed Vaun a dark look. “Are we clear?”

Vaun nodded reluctantly, then shouted orders to his subordinates. A generator began to spin, and the Bibarel cried out in pain as the process began.

Hanson turned away and closed his eyes, grimacing. “A needed sacrifice, but a regrettable one nonetheless.” He pushed past the stricken employees and entered the elevator, it’s door closing. He looked up, remembering his dream. “But it is a small one to bring unity to all.”

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Lawrence crossed the streets of Castelia, looking at the back of the closed brochure. He occasionally glanced up passing the numbers and street signs of the various towers until he came across a sign labeled ‘Reshiram Boulevard’. He turned left, a small black book in his hands, imprinted with three golden words: ‘The Arcean Texts’.

He came to number 255 and saw a tiny house squished between two apartment complexes. Lights shined behind the windows, and the arc on top of the spire on the roof glowed a soft yellow. The soft red paint on its walls seemed to invite him in, despite the late hour.

He ascended the steps slowly, feeling guilty for avoiding the church for so long. He went to knock on the wooden door decorated with the Legends of the world but stopped when he saw it open a crack.

He pushed it open the rest of the way and entered a darkened chapel, the bulbs in its chandeliers off. Rows of pews extended toward the stand at the front, which had a podium and rows of chairs behind it. An organ sat to the left of it, and to the right was a donation box, stuck between the corner of the chapel and the entrance to a foyer. Light poured out from within.

Lawrence walked toward it, passing his hands on the tops of the pews. He remembered the meetings he had when he was young, how the Pokemon sat with their masters on the pews to listen to the priest and those he had asked to speak that day. Testimonies of those who believed rang out from his mind, and the soothing, yet powerful notes of the organ during the hymns brought peace to even the most troubled soul.

He stepped into the foyer, where a collection of doors lined the walls, all labeled as 'Classroom'. A door labeled 'Library' stood locked, and the bulletin board to the right had various events listed, all their dates long passed. The light from the lamp in the room emitted a soft, pink glow, and just down the hallway connected to the foyer, Lawrence heard someone cry.

Concerned, Lawrence approached the hallway, passing various paintings of Arceus and his Legends. In some, he created the world and Pokemon; in others, he stood with his followers against the darkness, his arms holding back the fears that lay so prevalent in the world. They stopped at the end, where a door labeled 'Office' lay open, and where the woman could be heard.

He stood at the open door and saw a red-haired woman in a long, grey coat, piling clothes into a suitcase, fighting back the tears that came. A pull-down bed had numerous papers and books thrown across it, and the desk lay clear, fitting only the massive suitcase that she loaded everything into.

She stopped briefly, then fell back into the rolling chair behind the desk, sighing. “What am I going to do?”

Lawrence took a step back, realizing that he likely came at the wrong time. *‘I could go back. But what can I do? I don’t know how to break in, and even if I did pull everyone out, where would they go? Moving two thousand Pokemon out of sight is nearly impossible.’* He shrugged and stepped forward. *‘Until I figure it out, might as well talk to her.’* He knocked on the open door.

Erica gasped and stood up from her chair, eyes wide with panic as she turned toward the door. She cocked her head in bewilderment. “Lawrence? What are you doing here this late?” She waved at the mess and sighed, wiping away the tears on her face. “You came at a bad time.”

Lawrence peeked inside the room, noticing a bag full of hygiene supplies tucked next to the suitcase. “I came by to talk. What are you doing?”

Erica sat back down on the chair and crossed her arms, then grumbled, “Nice to see *someone* come here other than me.” She blinked and gave Lawrence a suspicious look. “I thought you hated me? I haven’t been able to see you for the past month, and none of the guys you worked with seemed to know where you were.”

Lawrence cautiously stepped inside the office, sitting down at the strangely-empty chair in front of the desk. “It’s a long story.” He looked around another time. “Seriously, what’s going on? Are you...moving?”

Erica stood up and picked up a pile of clothing. “Yes. I haven’t had anyone but a few elderly couples come for the past year, and even they eventually stopped. Without the donations, I couldn’t afford to pay the mortgage, so the bank’s evicting me.” She set the clothes inside the suitcase and picked up a Pokeball on the dresser behind the desk. “I’m a waitress over at the Simisear Grill and Chill, but I could only afford food and supplies

for me and Roselia. I was hoping to move back with my mom in Sinnoh, but I don't have enough money saved up. I'll have to rent an apartment until I can." He fingers passed over the button of the ball, decorated with a tiny arc of Arceus. "I really wanted to be a priestess here..." She tucked the ball inside a coat pocket, then patted it. "But I guess there's just not enough people who believe."

She turned back to Lawrence, scowling. "Why am I telling you this? You never cared about me. You never cared about this church or anyone who went to it."

Lawrence silently cursed himself and held up his copy of the Arcean Texts. "I just have some things I need to talk with you about. You know about this a lot better than I do, so I need you to help me confirm it."

She raised an eyebrow. "Confirm what?"

Lawrence flipped to a bookmark, scanning the page. "See, I'm technically a member of the church already; I've just been inactive for the past seven years. Now I want to start getting into it again, but I want to help correct a big mistake."

Erica closed her suitcase and leaned over the desk, curious to see Lawrence's notes. "What mistake? Is it some policy that the presidency made?"

"No." He set the book on her case and pointed at a lengthy passage, where he added his own notes. The sentences were interrupted by large gaps, indicating the portions of the texts that were lost through the years.

He pointed at the paper and said, "I think I figured out what this is meant to say. I underlined what I think should be added." Erica studied his changes:

***"And I, the Creator, have made worlds without number, but they do not affect the salvation of this present one. However, one will impact this one upon its end. This world holds my children, just as this one, but contains only Pokemon, and no men. They hold the memories, emotions, and willpower that the men of this world have, and so, must be treated as such. At the conclusion of that world's journey, these Pokemon will have a new journey within this one. Treat them as men, and they shall treat you as them. Respect all life, but treat the children of Equivos as equals."***

Erica studied the page, her face unchanging. At the end, she leaned back and interlocked her fingers, shaking her head in disbelief. “This...this is ridiculous. Yes, he created worlds without number, but one with only Pokemon? That can speak? And they’re coming *here* for some reason?” She blew out her breath and continued, “This changes our longest held belief: to treat Pokemon like ourselves. According to you, we were really supposed to just respect our Pokemon, and treat these Pokemon from ‘Equivos’ as equals—not ours.” She eyed him suspiciously. “Where’d you come up with all of this, and why are you showing it to me?”

Lawrence passed his hand through his hair, considering the best way he could explain. “Let’s just say that Valence managed to find it, and I...*may* have brought these Pokemon here.” He winced, hoping that word wouldn’t spread.

Erica simply stared. “I’d say you’re lying if I didn’t know you were horrible at it.” She stood up and held a hand on her head, scarcely believing it. “This is...just too much.” She dropped her hand and shook her head in defeat. “Why are you telling me this? What can *I* do? I’m just a waitress-slash-priestess!”

Lawrence threw his hands in the air. “I don’t know either! Look, Valence is planning on doing something with the Pokemon from Equivos, so I have to get them out!” He slapped the brochure on the desk and groaned. “I just want to say sorry for all the times I shrugged you off. My life’s been crazy for the entire month, and I just want to set things right again, even if I sound crazy while doing it.”

Erica crossed her arms, considering his exclamation. She looked down at the brochure and cocked her head. “Hey, what’s this?” She took out a slip of paper tucked between the folded pages and inspected it. “‘Sheffield’? Who’s he? And why’s his number on here?”

Lawrence blinked. He took the paper and stared at it, remembering the captain’s intrusion well—and his promise.

He thought of an idea.

He shot upright and shoved the paper into his pocket, then took Erica’s hand and looked directly at her. “I know this is going to sound strange, but I have a way to get you



back home—free of charge.” She jerked slightly, caught off-guard by his gesture and his statement.

He continued, “I don’t have the time to explain, but get down to the docks and wait for me there. I have a friend who can help.” He darted toward the door.

She looked down at her hand, then back at Lawrence. “Wait, why are you wanting to help me? Why are you doing *any* of this? You’re making no sense!”

He stopped at the door and thought for a moment. “I guess I want to make up for running away from Arceus for so long...and running from you in the process.” He shrugged. “Plus, I wouldn’t want anyone to be stuck here in Castelia. Would you?” He ran down the hallway and burst out the door, his feet clattering down the streets of the city.

Erica held the side of her face, bowing her head. “Is this really true?” She stood still for a moment, then leaned forward slightly. She stood straight, and a smile slowly crept onto her face.

“You know...maybe it is.”

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Lawrence slammed his apartment door closed and pulled out Sheffield’s number. “I hope you like staying up late.” He then pulled out his Pokedex and went to type the seaman’s number. He stopped. He set his Pokedex down on the counter with the number and sighed. “But I still don’t have any idea on how to save Cassia and the others! What am I supposed to do?”

Touch the arc.

Lawrence looked around, remembering that soft, quiet voice from when he took pictures of the Arceist Tome. “...Arceus?”

Touch the arc. Hold it.

Lawrence pulled back the sleeve of his left wrist, revealing the arc-shaped scar. “Might as well.” He held his right finger against it, and for several seconds, nothing happened.

A fire burned in his core.

He pulled his finger away, and his body became absorbed in light.

He felt himself shift and change, a welcome, if unexpected, feeling.

The light disappeared, and Lawrence opened his eyes. He looked down.

A black-furred paw rested on the counter.

Lawrence gaped, then felt his own face, feeling the snout and ears of a Lucario. He looked down at himself and saw the proportions of a Lucario through his clothing. His legs were notably thinner than before, and he appeared to be taller to compensate for his human form. His feet rose out from his shoes, now with small points of contact, and his tail hung above the rim of his pants.

Lawrence studied his left paw, studying the white fur that made up the arc of Arceus. He held the arc again, and the same bright light enveloped him. Moments after, he was back to being a human, albeit with his shoes now underneath his feet.

His mouth hung open, then he closed it and looked up gratefully. “Arceus...thank you. You never separated me from her after all.” He picked up his Pokedex and carefully typed in Sheffield’s number, a plan to rescue Equivos from Valence forming in his mind.

Chapter 28

At the top of Valence Tech, a finely decorated office perched atop, as dark as the night seen through the windows. The spacious penthouse held few furnishings, save the desk in the center and the portraits surrounding. Four pillars stood between the corners of the desk and the corners of the room, each with an object implanted in them: a watch-like device, a wide tablet, a sleek tablet, and a picture of a Pikachu speaking gibberish.

The desk faced the elevator on the far wall, and sitting in the chair behind the desk was Aaron Hanson, hunched over the surface. He gazed at the few belongings he had, his eyes flickering between each. To his right, faded pictures of a boy with a Lillipup, an Axew, a Roggenrola, a Ferroseed, a Rufflet, and a Tepig, standing in front of a woodland town. Next to it was a picture of a young man with fully evolved versions of all them, gathered together in the same positions in front of a gargantuan stone temple, decorated with Pokeballs and the Legends. To his left was a folder, open and showing various newspaper clippings, depicting moments of his past life.

Hanson looked away from the clippings, now staring at the center of his desk. A disc with six hemispheres on top of it rested on the felt center. Two Pokeballs sat inside them, one with emerald engravings, another with ruby. The remaining four bowls had an gold, onyx, silver, and opal bottom, long covered with dust.

Hanson's hand hovered over three of the bowls, shaking. "I am sorry I couldn't do it before you passed. You were my most trusted companions."

The elevator at the far end of the room pinged, and Hanson closed the folder. A man with pale skin and balding hair shuffled inside, the tails of his long, white lab coat trailing the ground. A small metal box rested in his frail hands, held up to his scrawny chest.

Hanson leaned forward in his seat, looking at the box. “Ah, Doctor Vaun! I assume that the procedure turned out well—for both Pokemon?”

Vaun adjusted his glasses and set the box on the desk. “W-Well, President Hanson, the subject for the procedure—the Bibarel, as you know—suffered from severe...shock, and fell unconscious. The machine strained his body, nearly to the tipping point.” He patted down his balding hair, stepping away from the desk. “H-However, the Bibarel is recovering well. Within a few days, he may be ready for another.”

Hanson’s hands hovered over the box, then he sighed and set them down on the desk. “Vaun...this is unacceptable.” Vaun swallowed hard.

Hanson stood up and paced around the desk, circling Vaun. “As simple as these Pokemon may be, they are still Pokemon. They were displaced from their home dimension hours ago, and thanks to that machine, we nearly lost one of them!” Hanson clamped his hand on Vaun’s shoulder and shook him. “We have the only known population of talking Pokemon! We cannot lose any of them!”

Vaun’s fingers visibly shook as he pulled his glasses back up to his eyes. “U-U-Understood, sir, but you can’t expect the procedure to work perfectly on the first try. Especially considering that it was developed from deceased—”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Hanson interrupted, sitting down in his desk once more. “Look, we have to use each Pokemon numerous times in order to have any chance of granting speech to all our consumers’ Pokemon. If we have them nearly die after every treatment, they won’t last for more than several procedures.” He gave Vaun a warning look. “Test it again with a Pokemon that isn’t one of my own, and make sure that the Equivosian doesn’t go under.”

Vaun nodded vigorously, then turned around, shuffling to the elevator. His head perked up, then he turned back around. “I nearly forgot: that Zoroark that came through

with Lawrence is reading from some sort of book. It seems to be a form of scripture for them.”

Hanson arched an eyebrow. “Really? They have a written language? And a religion as well?” He rubbed his chin momentarily, then stopped. “Make sure she is captured first with the Master Balls I ordered from Kanto; research the book after and see if there’s anything that can be used to help them become more trusting of us.” He narrowed his eyes to thin slits. “And be careful with the balls. As you know, one alone is extraordinarily expensive. Buying enough for all the Equivosian Pokemon cost a fortune.” Vaun nodded once more, then entered the elevator and descended, wringing his clammy hands.

After a minute, Hanson opened the metal box, revealing a Pokeball with gold engraved into the top. He gingerly lifted it and held it close to his face, closing his eyes. “When we lost, all those years ago, I promised that we would fight again once I fixed our one problem.” He forced a smile as he set the ball in its bowl. “I’ve finally done it, but now no one remembers what I did. I’ve become famous for the inventions I made to better connect with all of you, not for the experiences I had.”

He glanced outside the window, then lowered his gaze. “I am aware that Pokemon aren’t what most make them out to be: a friend like no other, able to understand you like a person. Years of serving that consumer world taught me that.” He turned back to the Pokeballs, focusing on the gold. “But that doesn’t change the fact that you got me where I am. And now, I’ve repaid you. You shall live to fight another day.”

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In the dark of Castelia, wheels clattered along the sidewalk panels. A figure in a long brown coat turned visible in the orange street lights, her heels clacking toward the harbor. Only the occasional Purrloin meowed in the alleyways, and the sea beat against the edge of the city—otherwise, it was quiet in the night. The five stone extensions that rose up from the sea were caked with salt and grime, its smell filling the air.

The red-haired woman stopped several feet from the cement platform that jutted above the dock and panted. She looked below: small fishing vessels and speedboats

bobbed next to the docks, tied to them with lengths of thick rope. Wingull roosted on top of them, occasionally calling out to drive off a pushy neighbor.

The woman pulled out a pink Pokedex from her coat pocket and turned it on. Past the clear window, she saw that the time was 11:20. She tucked it back in and growled, “Where is he?” She stamped her foot and shivered, crossing her arms. “Brr, it’s cold...” She looked around the alleyways, finding nothing. “He said I should meet him here!”

***Clank-clatta-clatta!***

She eeped and twirled around, pulling out a Pokeball from her coat. She focused on the garbage can lid that rolled out from the alleyway, then the Purrloin that sauntered out and mewled, sitting down and licking its paw.

She sighed in relief, putting her Pokeball back in her pocket. “Thank Arceus. That gave me a scare.” She folded her arms again and muttered, “You better not have pulled a fast one on me, Lawrence!”

Padded footsteps echoed speedily behind her, and she turned around. A dark shape darted into the alley, then a bright flash shone from it. She drew her Pokeball again, advancing toward it. “Who’s there?” she called out nervously.

She kept advancing toward it, only a shuffling sound coming out in reply. She kept moving forward, pressing the button on her Pokeball and expanding it from one inch to four. She reared it back, ready to throw.

A brown-haired man in a blue jacket stumbled out, pulling on his shoes. “There’s *got* to be—*Erica!*”

“Ack!”

They backed away from each other, Erica nearly dropping her Pokeball. She wheezed, putting a hand to her chest. “What are you doing there!”

Lawrence kicked his shoe on, looking about. “N-Nothing.” He leaned closer. “Did you...see anything?”

“I saw some guy run in here and take a picture of something, I don’t know!” Erica exclaimed. “Was that you?”

Lawrence blew out his breath and nodded. “Yeah...yeah, that was me.”

Erica groaned, shrinking her Pokeball. “You scared me worse than a Haunter!” She pocketed it and asked, “Why didn’t you come over to me?”

Lawrence held up his hands defensively. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.” He looked behind her, noticing her suitcase. “Looks like you’re ready to go.”

“Go where?”

Lawrence walked over to the luggage with Erica following. “I called up a friend of mine and asked him to get a liner ready to go to Sinnoh.”

Erica’s jaw dropped. “A *liner*? You mean one of those huge passenger ships?”

“Yeah, that kind. He had to pull a few strings, but—”

“Why in the world would you need a *liner* just to get me across to Sinnoh?”

“It’s not just you.” Lawrence pointed toward a skyscraper with a dully glowing ‘V’ on its front. “I’m going to Valence and getting the Equi—the *talking Pokemon* out of there and bringing them here. They’ll load up on the ship, then we’ll make our way to Sinnoh right under their noses.”

Erica raised an eyebrow. “But how are you going to get them across the street with nobody noticing? How many are there?”

Lawrence seethed, looking away. “Over two thousand.”

Erica’s eyes widened. “Over two *thousand*? You’ll *never* get that many out of there!”

“It’s a work in progress, okay?” Lawrence sighed, holding his head. “Look, just keep an eye out for the ship when it comes around. The captain’s name is Sheffield; just tell him I sent you, and we’ll be off to Sinnoh when I come back.” He turned toward Valence’s tower. “I’ll hopefully be back in a couple hours.” He started running down the street toward it.

“Wait, Lawrence!” Erica shouted, reaching out for him. But he was too far away, and his task crowded out everything else from his mind.

When he got far enough away from Erica, he darted into an alley and pressed his mark. He shined with light and turned into a Lucario, all his senses growing stronger as a result. His tail sat over the seat of his pants and his chest-spike protruded slightly inside his shirt.

He wrinkled his nose and coughed as he pulled his paws out of his shoes, then tucked his socks inside and tied them together. “How do people *live* here? It smells *horrible!*” He draped the shoes over his neck and ran down the streets even faster than before, still dressed in his other clothes.

Minutes after, Lawrence reached the Valence Tech building, its gate closed and windows dark. He considered jumping over the fence and breaking through the door, but quickly dismissed it; it would be far too noticeable, and even if he got inside, the elevator required a different keycard than he had to access Facility D. There had to be another way.

He looked to the right and saw that the road surrounding the walled tower descended, leading to a bright orange light. Men chatted with each other, droning on about something. Lawrence crept toward it, his sensitive ears picking up their conversation:

“Yeesh, half an hour till the end of our shift, and just like every day for the past three months, *nothing.*”

“No one ever said this was a fun job.”

“I wanna throw my Lycanroc at something. Anything to make things interesting.”

“You know we aren’t supposed to do that unless they’re suspicious-looking.”

“I’ll just say they had a Pokeball and they wanted to force their way through.”

“But what if—”

“Aw, be quiet.”

Lawrence peered around the corner. Underneath a bright orange lightbulb, two men stood in navy Valence uniforms. They each had a keycard clipped to their shirt pocket, along with a single Pokeball clipped to their waist. One was shorter and the other was taller than Lawrence, each staring glumly around them. They stood in front of a large iron drop-down door, and to the right was a smaller door with a black scanner on its handle. In the corner of the alcove, a camera swung back and forth, recording every moment near the entrance.

The smaller man rubbed his nose and tapped his Pokeball. “I’m tellin’ ya, *nobody* comes here ‘cept the delivery guys, and they came ‘ere an hour ago!”



The taller man shrugged, his hat falling against his ear. “Well *someone* needs to make sure no one gets to you-know-where without the president’s say-so.”

The short man groaned, pulling off his cap and scratching his head. “Don’t remind me. Good thing they put elevators in, or I’d—”

“Careful what you say, Bernie.” The tall man pointed at the camera. “You know they can see and hear everything.”

Bernie growled, glaring at him. “Yes, Vincent, *I’m aware.*”

Lawrence grit his teeth and smacked a paw against the wall. ‘*Can’t get in that way; they’d notice if I knocked out the camera or the guards. I’ll have to find another way in.*’ He felt a breeze down his neck and looked up; a vent gently blew cold air, a tube with a grate angling it downwards.

Lawrence blinked having an idea. He wrapped his paws around the edges of the grate and pulled, careful not to shake it too much. It didn’t move.

Lawrence furrowed his brow and tried again to no results. He silently growled and pulled once more, causing the solder to break off with a metallic snap.

Lawrence wielded the grate awkwardly, pushing all his weight forward to prevent him from falling backwards. He froze as the guards spoke up:

“Hey Bernie, did you hear that?”

“Yeah. Sounded like some cat hopping on a garbage can lid.”

“That’s not what I thought.”

“If you want to check it out, I’m not stoppin’ ya.”

Boots clacked forward, and Lawrence sucked in his breath. He looked down at the grate, then back up to the vent. The boots continued advancing. Lawrence leapt around the corner and hid in the shadows, holding the grate behind his back.

The guard peered around the vent, casually looking around. He shrugged, then returned to the door. “Just some cat probably.”

Lawrence wheezed a sigh of a relief, setting the grate against the wall. He returned to the vent and saw how small and rigid it was. He looked down at his clothes. ‘*I’d be lucky*

*to fit inside, let alone with these.*’ He sighed reluctantly. *‘I’ll have to work it out when I get in there.’*

He pulled off his clothes and gathered them in his jacket, then tucked it underneath the grate, somewhat-satisfied with the results. Feeling somewhat colder with his fur uncovered, he clambered into the vent, careful to minimize the sounds he made.

He crawled through the vents, weaving through the mazelike structure. Thin, metallic walls surrounded him on all sides, a dark, chilling wind all throughout it. He passed over the sheer drops that led to the facility’s lower levels.

Lawrence worried that he might wander the vents for hours without any end, until the end of one vent had bright light leaking from it. He came up to it and peeked outside, revealing a bathroom similar to the locker room he had been inside only several hours ago, albeit without the showers or lockers. No one seemed to be inside.

Cautiously, Lawrence pushed out the grate, clutching it in his paws. He slid down onto the freezing tiles and set the vent back into its position. He stood still, keeping watch for anyone.

Satisfied, he went into the corner of a stall and leaned against it, staring down at his Lucario body. *‘I won’t be able to get down to them like this—but there’s **no way** I’m changing unless—’*

The door squeaked open and Lawrence held his breath, hoping that whoever entered wouldn’t see. A tall guard clomped in pulled off his hat next to the sinks, staring into the mirror. “Do I *really* have Pecha jam on my lips?” he muttered, setting a length of rope attached to his waist onto the counter. “Better be quick; that Tauros isn’t going to lead itself.”

Lawrence stared at him and blinked.

He had an idea.

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In the pyramid of cages the Equivosians resided in, Cassia was in the midst of reading them Dictations from the Arceist Tome. They all listened peacefully, temporarily leaving the fear of the strange world behind. Even the children sat still and quiet, the words of

their creator proving enough to calm them. The guards that surrounded them had long since left, confident that none could escape from the bars.

“Heed my commandments, and prosperity shall follow. A plan of happiness lies in wait for all my children, but it may only come to pass if they put their trust in me and leave behind the misconceptions and misdeeds of the world.”

Cassia tossed back her head and sighed. “What’s going to happen to us? They can’t just want us to sit here.”

Lonny looked over to the Bibarel slumped in a cage and covered with bandages. “Not if Thomas is anything to go by.”

The door on the far side of the room lifted, and two guards stepped in with the gangly Doctor Vaun. The scientist smoothed back his receding hair and calmly said, “Deeply sorry for the trouble, but can I speak to the Zoroark?”

Cassia closed the Tome on her lap. “What do you want?”

Vaun’s eyes swiveled to her and widened. “Ah, most unusual, showing yourself in your natural state. Zoroark tend to use illusions to hide while they protect their young and hunt for food.”

Cassia slid the Tome behind her back, her brow furrowing. “I have nothing to hide, unlike you.”

Vaun swallowed, adjusting his glasses. “A sharp one, I see.” He focused on the Tome, its spine still visible. “And that book. Who wrote it?”

Cassia hurriedly put the Tome back into her bag. “Only the best Pokemon in the history of Equivos.” She stared at him firmly. “Will Thomas be alright? His family’s worried about him.”

Vaun rubbed his head, frowning. “Unfortunately, the...tests, were more strenuous than we expected.” He removed his hand. “Although I can assure you that it won’t happen again.” He weakly smiled. “I would appreciate it if I could have a volunteer, that way the procedure is less stressful...for all of us.”

Cassia lifted an eyebrow. “What would we need to help you with?”

Vaun’s eyes darted left and right. “Oh, blood and fur samples, little more.”

Lonny hawed sarcastically. “Oh sure, that’s all you took from old Thomas!”

Vaun shook his head slowly and rubbed his eyes. “Again, we are sorry for what happened to him. The next procedure will not be as stressful.” He turned back to Cassia. “I would prefer to have *you* be a volunteer. Would you be so kind?”

Cassia held on to the bars of her cage. “You’ve given me no reason to trust you.”

Vaun furrowed his brow. “All I can give you is my word.”

Cassia held out a hand and waved it in front of her. “Then I won’t go. You just reek with dishonesty.”

Vaun sighed and turned away. “Very well, we’ll do this the hard way.” He slowly walked back to the door. “Take her down to the machine.” His two guards unclipped their Pokeballs from their belts and prepared to throw them.

Cassia focused on the Pokeballs; her eyes flashed red. Both Pokeballs became engulfed in flame, and the two guards dropped them and cried out, waving their hands to get rid of the flame.

Vaun turned back around and shouted, “Well, get on with it!”

The flames disappeared, and the guards stared at each other, bewildered. Vaun harrumphed and stomped out of the room.

The guards reached down to pick up their Pokeballs, but they suddenly transformed to Voltorb and screeched as they flashed white. The guards screamed and scrambled out of the room to avoid the explosion, never to come back.

The Voltorb disappeared, leaving only the Pokeballs. Cassia curtly nodded her head and relaxed, resting her back against the cage.

Lonny chuckled and smirked. “*That* was fun.”

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Lawrence—in a navy Valence uniform as a human—finished tying a rope around the undressed guard in the bathroom stall. He made sure the length of rope as a gag was good, then marched out of the stall, turning the bolt after. He adjusted his hat and ensured that the security card was clipped to his pocket. With that, he exited the bathroom.

In the dim environment of Facility D, engineers passed by metal crates and machines, inspecting for damage, while navy-suited guards stood watch, their Pokéballs ready at their belts. Scientists darted between them, carrying folders and boxes, rushing to and from the numerous elevators that lined the walls, the primary three residing on his right.

Lawrence saw two Machoke pushing a crate closer to the warehouse elevator as its doors retracted into the ceiling. One of the two guards next to the elevator waved off the Machoke. “This is just a bunch of balls; we don’t need you on the job. Go find something else to do.” The Machoke obeyed, wandering away and standing to the side until they were directed otherwise.

As Lawrence steadily approached them, they attempted to push the crate themselves, only budging it slightly. They huffed, and one groaned. “Don’t like those Machoke; do nothin’ but stare at me.” He looked around briefly and waved over to Lawrence. “Hey, can you give us a hand? We’re takin’ these Master Balls down to the talking Pokémon!”

Lawrence’s eyes widened, then he nodded vigorously and ran to them, positioning himself between the two guards. The one on his right studied Lawrence up and down. “Your uniform looks a bit big.” The shirt hung loosely around his chest, and the legs of his pants were rolled up against the black shoes. The belt—absent of Pokéballs—was pulled to its last loop.

Lawrence laughed nervously, his heart thumping in his chest. “Last one they had.”

The guard shrugged, turning back to the crate. “Eh, don’t worry about it. Happens to the newbies all the time.” He leaned against the crate and pushed, grunting. “Push!”

The guard on the left joined him in grunting, the crate inching into the elevator. Lawrence joined them, and the crate slid smoothly inside, straining his arms, but perfectly manageable.

Once the crate lay inside, the guard pushed a button, and the elevator doors closed. Lawrence descended, knowing exactly what these guards planned to do with the Master Balls. He turned to each of them, each panting and wheezing, while he stood still.

The guard on his right stared at Lawrence and wheezed, “You’re not tired out? What kind of guy are you?”

Lawrence smirked, adjusting his over-sized cap.

The elevator Lawrence stood inside was made purely of metal, a rough metal slab and slick wall making up its interior. A grate hung at the top, allowing cool air to flow inside, along with the grinding of the cable and smell of oil and fuses. It sped upwards quickly and smoothly, no jolts coming on their way down.

Lawrence pulled up his pants, checking to make sure the other guards didn't notice.  
*'The sooner I take care of them, the better.'*

The guard on his left dusted off his knuckles and replaced his hat, nodding. "Right, now for the Pokemon."

The guard on the left looked over to the one on the right and said, "Doesn't this whole thing seem a bit...off, to you? I mean, the president's never wanted to use Pokemon for one of his inventions."

"We're here to follow orders, not ask questions. If the president wants something done, we do it," the guard on the right replied.

"But all the other stuff we did never hurt anybody. We just guarded the building and asked for ID, not anything like this."

"What are we supposed to do? Don't you think it'll be nice to have our Pokemon talk to us?"

"Yeah, it would. But we know what's really going on. I don't know if I could live with it if I knew a Pokemon got hurt doing that."

"Yeah, but what are we going to do? Most of the guys around here probably think the same as you, but they don't speak up cause Hanson's too powerful; he's so obsessed on having Pokemon talk that he'll take down anybody, even Vaun, and he's the head scientist!"

"I guess there really isn't much we can do. Better take care of the job, even if we don't like it."

"Yeah, we should. Especially that Zoroark; the president seemed to want it pretty badly."

"They're pretty rare Pokemon."

“Yeah. Shame it’s gonna end up like that Bibarel.”

Lawrence snapped. “That’s it.” He took the guard’s heads and pounded them together, instantly knocking them out. They lay on the floor in a daze, completely unaware of what just happened.

Lawrence sighed, taking off his Valence cap. “Great. Now I have to make sure they don’t find you.” He shook it and put it back on his head. “Couldn’t keep you around anyway.”

The elevator pinged and the door rolled up, revealing the wall that barricaded the Equivosians from the rest of the world. Cameras swiveled on their posts, keeping an eye on all that occurred near the single door to the Pokemon.

Lawrence looked down at the crate of Master Balls. For a split second, Lawrence thought to destroy them. But as he studied them for a moment longer, a smile extended across his face.

“I can use these.”

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In the Equivosian room, Cassia had a claw inside the lock of the cage, jiggling it to make it come loose. After several tries, she pulled it out with a groan and sat on the floor of her cage. “It’s no use; these locks are nothing like ours.”

Lonny held his baby Aipom close and groaned. “What did you expect? These guys have stuff we never dreamed of.

Cassia slid her bag onto her lap, reaching inside and stroking the tome. “I don’t like this place. No one really sees us as Pokemon. More like...objects.” She held up her claws, allowing a spark of Life to jump between them. “I’d break out of here if I knew what I’d have to deal with out there. I don’t even know where I could get more, or where I could find...Lawrence.” She lowered her claw, then after a moment said, “Do you think Lawrence will come back for us?”

Lonny shrugged, setting the Aipom on top of his bag. “Who knows? Even if he did, how could he get us out? He’s a human now—no Aura, no strength, no nothing. He’s just like everyone else around here.”

Cassia held her right wrist in front of her, studying the white fur that made the arc of Arceus. “He *can’t* be like everyone else...” She lowered her wrist and bow her head. “...Arceus said so.”

The metallic door rolled open, and all the Pokemon turned to it. A single guard pushed a crate into the room, grunting with the exertion. The door slowly dropped behind him, and he stopped, standing straight.

Lonny Ambipom came up to the edge of his cage and shouted, “Who’re you goin’ to take *this* time?”

Other Pokemon kept shouting, all fueled by the fear driven by their treatment. Throughout all the cries, one message was clear: “*What will happen to us?*”

The pink gas hovering around the ceiling gathered next to the guard as he stepped around the crate. He pulled off his hat and stared into Cassia’s eyes. “It’s me, Cassia.”

Cassia stared for a moment, sliding lower in her cage. “I know...Lawrence.”

There were collective gasps of astonishment and whispers, all dark and distrusting. Lawrence fully expected this, considering what had happened to them thanks to Hanson.

Cassia held herself taller, and the other Pokemon stopped. “Lawrence...why? Why did you leave us? Why did you talk with that man? I saw you in the window when I was first brought here, talking with him.” She turned away, shutting her eyes. “I didn’t want to believe what Gardner said...about you betraying us to them.” She turned back, her eyes locking harshly with Lawrence’s. “But after seeing that...” She gripped the bars tighter. “Are you our Keeper? Or did you trick everyone into falling into a trap?”

Lawrence stepped closer to the cages. He continued looking down as he said, “Hanson only wanted one of you, not all. If I wanted to betray you, I would have saved only one and taken them directly to him—not be stuck in a room and thinking about how I could save you.” Cassia’s grip on the bars remained firm.

Lawrence pulled up his right sleeve. “I can say all I want, but I know you want proof. Proof that I’m not here to take you to Hanson, proof that I’m not like every other person here.”

He held up his wrist, holding out the mark. “I met with Arceus, and he told me that Cassia and I would be closer to her, always following her.” He held his finger over the arc, gazing at Cassia. “If I wasn’t loyal to you, Arceus would never have let me do this.” He pressed the center of the arc, and he became absorbed in bright light, causing everyone in the room to gasp.

The light faded, and Lawrence stood as a Lucario, still dressed as a guard. Everyone gawked at his transformation, with even Lonny at a loss for words.

Cassia held up her wrist, studying the white fur that created the arc. “You’re...you’re still one of us.”

Lawrence held up his arc once more and nodded. “I will take you all to where you are supposed to be—if you trust me. Do you?”

Cassia clasped her claws together and smiled. “Yes.” The Pokemon around her agreed, hopeful now that the Lucario had returned.

The Lucario bounded up the cages to Cassia, studying the lock. “Once you’re out, go get that can down there.” He pointed at a large, wheeled trash can in the corner.

The Zoroark stood in front of the door, her bags in her claws. “What do we need that for?”

Lawrence’s paw glowed with blue fire, and he trained it onto the lock. It sparked and fizzed, blasting apart from the door. He stepped away and swung it out, nodding his head toward the crate.

“We can get everyone out—unseen.”

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***One hour later...***

In Hanson’s office, the president held the gold-engraved Pokeball, it’s center button still glowing red from its recall. He tapped the button and caused it to shrink, the layered metal folding back into itself into a compact sphere. He then set it back in its bowl.

He rubbed the side of his head, sighing. “Not the result I was expecting...but at least it’s a start. The machine just needs to be improved.” He tapped the wood next to the bowl, staring out into space. “But it will at least make a difference.”

“President, sir!” a crackling voice proclaimed.

Hanson frowned, pulling open a drawer on the right side of his desk. Amidst the smattering of paper and pens, he pulled out a black radio and clicked a button. “Yes, what is it?”

“Situation, sir! An employee was discovered inside the bathrooms without his uniform; he said he was ambushed!”

Hanson gripped the radio tighter. “Did he see who it was?” he asked, his voice rising.

“He said—he said—I can’t remember. Just come down and ask for yourself!”

Hanson stood still, his face dark. “I’m on my way.” He released the button on the radio and set it back in the drawer, slamming it closed. He came to his feet and scooped the three remaining Pokéballs off his desk, then pulled back his suit coat, revealing a black, magnetic belt.

He held the Pokéballs away and dropped them one by one, each one zipping onto the belt with a click. He pulled down his jacket and marched to the elevator, pulling his golden key card out.

“I won’t let some robber make a lifetime of work go to waste.”

## Chapter 29

The elevator doors of Facility D's second floor split apart, revealing Hanson's glowering face. He strode to the module on the far side of the room, weaving around the crates of materials. Most of the scientists, engineers and guards had left, leaving only a fraction of security for the nighttime. The whirring machines of before now lay silent, only the occasional clang from the bowels of the facility.

A balding, crooked figure came into his path. He raised a shaking fist over his head and exclaimed, "It wasn't my fault! I was on the way with that Zoroark when she—"

"Yes, yes, Doctor Vaun, I get the picture," Hanson seethed. "I have more pressing matters than you at the moment." He pushed past him and toward the gathering of guards around a collection of monitors.

Vaun's face fell as he shuffled toward him. "B-But sir, the experiment—"

"Can wait!" Hanson fumed, turning his head. "I appreciate the concern, but we have an intruder! Go make yourself useful!" Vaun nodded his head in defeat and slunk away.

Hanson shook his head sadly, then returned to the monitors and guards. Various video feeds of Facility D showed across them, each showing employees going about their duties. The ten guards around the monitor did not focus on the screens but on the man huddled on a chair, wearing little else except a blanket over his shoulders.

A guard noticed Hanson and waved over to him. "President Hanson, here's the man who was ambushed!"

Hanson made his way to him and noticed a bandage wrapped around his head, keeping a bag of ice in place. He frowned. "When did this happen? Did you see who?"

The man winced, pushing the bag tighter on his head. “Can’t say for sure. I was just going in the bathroom to clean myself up when I felt something hit me across the head. I passed out, then a few moments later, I was sitting in a stall in nothing but my skivvies, wrapped up in the rope I brought in with me.” He shivered, pulling the blanket tighter. “It’s *cold* in there. *Very cold.*”

Hanson smoothed back his hair, staring at the ground. “Did you see anyone as you passed out? Do you remember their color, their hair, anything?”

The man furrowed his brow and looked up. “Hold on...I remember seeing the guy as I hit the floor. It was all hazy, but I could’ve sworn he looked...blue.”

Hanson raised an eyebrow and leaned closer. “...Blue?”

“Yeah, and a big furry jacket, with a silver thing on his chest. He...he even had red eyes.” The man groaned, holding his head. “Oof, he just hit me once too. Didn’t feel like some regular joe either. He was real strong.”

Hanson held his chin, considering the detail. He turned to the guard sitting in front of the monitors and said, “Bring up the security footage from the past hour for the main entrance.” He obeyed, typing on the keyboard and dragging the mouse to a certain screen, showing a pair of guards of differing heights near the warehouse door.

The screen panned back and forth as they chatted, going between the lightened entrance to the dark driveway leading to it. Hanson studied it, watching for anything unusual. At double the speed, nothing appeared to happen—until a shape appeared briefly in the dark.

Hanson gripped the shoulder of the guard and pointed at the screen. “Pause the footage and go back, slowly!” He obeyed, and steadily, the shape reappeared behind the wall, barely visible in the dim atmosphere.

Hanson narrowed his eyes, catching the colors of the figure. It appeared to be human, but the triangular...ears, he determined, set it off, and the arms were the wrong proportions. There was also the lack of feet, instead replaced with...paws. That, along with the dog-like head, in addition to the guard’s description, lead him to conclude:

“The intruder’s a Lucario. He got inside somehow and wound up in the bathroom just as our unlucky fellow went in.” Hanson shook his head in bewilderment. “But there’s no way it could have avoided detection, even if...” He stared, realizing. “Why would it want his uniform?” He held the guard’s shoulder again and said, “Go to the camera closest to the bathroom and watch for anyone leaving it in a uniform.”

He obeyed, and a visual showing the main floor of Facility D. Employees darted back and forth, making it nearly impossible for one to follow. But Hanson narrowed his focus on the bathroom doors, barely in the corner of the camera. He saw the now-under-dressed guard enter, holding only his rope. Minutes later, a markedly-different individual exited, without the rope—and he looked familiar to Hanson.

The president leaned closer, the guard becoming more distinctive as he paced toward the Master Ball crate. The brown hair, blue eyes, his posture. Hanson’s nails dug into the seat of station’s chair.

Hanson released his grip, tossing his hand aside. “Lawrence,” he muttered. It all became clear to him, thinking back on his concern for the Equivosians’ wellbeing when he returned, as well as his interest in that Zoroark that he saw as they passed her.

But in Hanson’s mind, this didn’t make sense. *‘Lawrence didn’t have a Pokeball, and the Lucario wasn’t in the bathroom when the man was found. Even if Lawrence followed the Lucario, his clothes would’ve remained behind.’* He tapped his Pokeball and lowered his head. *‘There’s something missing.’*

Hanson perked his head up. “Lawrence managed to get inside...and I know why.” He pointed at the screen showing a sturdy wall and a set of elevators opposite to it. “Show me the footage from the Equivosian room.” He looked at the black square to the left of the room and scowled. “Why can’t we see in the room itself?”

“Electrical short. Happens sometimes with the older ones,” the guard explained.

Hanson sighed, massaging his temple. “Fine. Just bring up the elevator footage.”

The camera footage rewound, and he saw Vaun exit through a door in the wall. Minutes after, a solitary guard pushed a crate. He looked around briefly, and Hanson grit

his teeth. He saw the face of Lawrence Stephenson, clearly entering the most important room for Project Babel.

And he had been inside for the past hour.

Hanson spun around and snapped his fingers. His guard stood at attention. “All of you, follow me down to level four. We have to intercept Lawrence before he releases the Equivosians.” He strode to the elevator, and all ten followed. They entered the elevator and descended to level four.

On their way down, Hanson considered the ways Lawrence could have gotten inside. *“There’s only the main entrance and the building’s elevator, but he couldn’t have gone through either without the right access card. Even then, none of the cameras saw him go inside; they only saw the Lucario—which appeared to be taller than most, actually.”* He tapped the side of his head, ignoring the guards around him. *“It makes no sense. There had to have been a sign of him. The Lucario likely got inside through the ventilation shaft—I should have made the architect change that—but Lawrence came out instead of it. There is clearly something amiss.”* He kept his hand on the Pokeballs on his belt, hidden behind his gray suitcoat. *“Regardless of how he got inside, I can’t let him take the Equivosians. It would devastate the company; I invested a significant amount into the Master Balls, as well as the advertising for the project. I would be a laughingstock to cancel it because of him.”* He gripped the gilded Pokeball tighter. *“I’ve worked most of my life to create a world with perfect communication. I won’t let it end like this.”*

The elevator dinged, and the doors split apart, revealing the wall that guarded the Equivosian Pokemon. Hanson and his guards filed out and wrapped around the warehouse door, the metal gate the only thing standing between them and the Pokemon.

A guard took his keycard from his pocket and swiped the scanner next to the door. The red light on top flashed green, and the door began to lift. It suddenly spat and struggled, falling to the ground with a clang, its engine smoking.

Hanson gawked at the broken engine, then pointed at the door and exclaimed, “Bring it down!”

A guard unclipped his Pokeball and pressed its button, causing the folded pieces of metal to expand outward and form a perfect sphere. He threw the ball in front of the door, and upon hitting the ground it flew open, a blinding white ball of energy flowing out. The ball rebounded into the guard's hands as the energy warped and dimmed into a Machoke, flexing its arms and emitting a throaty grunt.

"Punch the door down!" its owner ordered. The Machoke nodded, then punched the door, creating a sizable dent in the metal. It continued in tandem, each blow bringing them closer to their prize.

Hanson stared ahead but cocked his head at a low rumble that emanated from the corner. His guards noticed the rumble, all craning their heads to find the source. Hanson continued to hold his Pokeball, finding the source to be the wall to the right of the door the Machoke punched.

The rumble grew louder, and the wall bulged, glowing red. It suddenly exploded outward, a crimson flamethrower blasting it apart. Hanson and his guards stepped back, stunned by the destruction.

Plastic clattered behind him, and a large wheeled trash can sped out of the massive hole, its lid clanking against its body. A Zoroark and Lucario teamed up behind it, pushing it as fast as their legs could allow. The Lucario held out its paw and shot a sphere of blue light into the left elevator's control panel, then the right, frying them completely. They both dove into the warehouse elevator, then the Lucario pushed a button, making the doors close.

Hanson's head swung between the Pokemon and the wall, then he roared, "What are you *doing*? Get the Pokemon!"

The guards clustered around the warehouse elevator, each speaking into their radios. One turned to Hanson and said, "We aren't going anywhere till this elevator comes back."

Hanson growled, striding to the cooling hole the Zoroark had made. "Brilliant." He peered around the hole, thinking.

In the room, all the cages now lay empty, either ripped apart at the bars or opened with their destroyed locks. Nothing remained save for scraps of food and a discarded uniform, which strangely lacked the belt.

Hanson studied it, his rage at losing the Pokemon tempered by his bewilderment. *“Now Lawrence is nowhere to be seen. Without...clothes.”* He shook himself, refusing to dwell on it. *“Regardless of his circumstances, I have to stop him and that Lucario.”* He glanced around the room and noticed a door in the corner, barely big enough for a person.

Hanson lowered his head and ran to it, throwing the door open. A tiny elevator hung inside, tools and supplies scattered within. A spindly lightbulb hung above it all, flickering to life as the door opened.

Hanson threw off his suit jacket, then clambered inside and pressed a button, causing the elevator to creak and groan in protest. It painstakingly crawled up, leaving behind the confused guard and the room of empty cages.

Hanson pulled a Pokeball of his belt, grimacing. He pulled a Pokedex from his pants pocket and typed a number into the dialer. After a few rings, a tired voice asked, “Yes, what is it, President Hanson?”

“Vaun, get the rest of security on their feet! A Zoroark and Lucario are headed up the warehouse elevator to the top, and they have all the Pokemon—” He cut himself short, realizing how ridiculous he sounded. “In a...trashcan.”

Vaun paused. “A...trashcan?”

“Yes. They must’ve used the Master Balls to capture them, then tossed them inside to make them easier to carry.” Hanson shook the Pokedex and bellowed, “I’m on my way up now through the service elevator; the Dusknoir destroyed the scanners of the other three. Be ready for them!” He ended the call and continued to hold the Pokedex, closing his eyes as his visions of the future clashed with the complications of the present. All of this melded with the pain of the past and the utter discrepancy of the infiltration of Lawrence and the Lucario.

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Back in the elevator, Lawrence and Cassia breathed heavily, each winded by the sudden run. They looked at each and laughed in spite of the tension.

Once they caught their breath, they remained silent as they ascended. Lawrence tapped his paw against the top of the trashcan, while Cassia adjusted the strap to her bag. They both wanted to talk, but the opportunity felt...wrong.

Lawrence looked around briefly, then took a Pokeball from the can and held it up. "You know that these capture Pokemon, but do you know how they work?" Cassia shook her head. He pointed to the button between its two halves. "If there's a Pokemon inside, just press the button to expand it, then throw it on the ground; it will release the Pokemon and bounce back to you." He pointed at a white button on the bottom half of the ball. "If you want to put it back in, just point the main button at it and press this one; it'll send out a beam and bring it back inside."

Cassia scrutinized the Master Ball. "But how do they get trapped inside in the first place."

"You can throw an unassigned ball at a Pokemon, and it'll pull them inside. They can break out of the ball if they destroy the containment mirrors before the ball stops shaking." Lawrence set the ball back with the others. "But Master Balls are different. Their mirrors are designed to be practically indestructible. Only a Legend would have any chance of breaking it." He closed the lid and blew his breath out slowly. "I'm surprised that Hanson managed to get this many. Most people can't afford even one because of the materials they're made from."

Cassia shivered. "They're so...unnatural."

Lawrence shrugged, leaning against the elevator wall. "I agree, but it's our only chance of getting everyone out of here. We can release them on the ship."

They remained quiet, the hum of the elevator filling the room. The box occasionally jittered, shaking the security card clipped to the belt around Lawrence's waist. The thousands of inch-wide Master Balls clattered against each other, each holding the life of an Equivosian.

Lawrence shifted in his position, looking down. “I’m...I’m sorry for what happened. I should’ve known Hanson would do something like this. I wanted you to be happy when you came here, not...afraid.” He closed his eyes, grimacing. “If there’s anything I can do to make up for it—”

“Lawrence.”

Cassia held Lawrence’s paw, pulling closer to him. “You came back for us. You’ve made up for it already.” Lawrence relaxed, standing upright. Cassia continued, “I want to see what this world *really* looks like—the trees, the sea...all of it.” She smiled, resting her head on his shoulder. “And you’re just the one I want to see it with.”

The elevator dinged, ending their talk. Cassia let out her breath quickly, brushing a hand through her mane. “It’s just going to be us against the guards. Do you think we’ll be alright?” Lawrence nodded.

“We will.”

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On the ground floor of Facility D, Vaun paced stiffly in front of the thirty guards that remained for the night, holding his head high. They stood in front of the warehouse elevator, waiting for their target Pokemon to come out.

Vaun pushed back his hair and held his nose high. “President Hanson wants these Pokemon reclaimed as swiftly as possible. Just recapture the Pokemon swiftly and efficiently, for the company’s sake and your own.” He turned around and stopped. “Am I clear?” There were muted grunts of approval from his subordinates.

Vaun eyed them sternly. “I am aware that many of you don’t agree with the...processes behind Project Babel. But rest assured that these talking Pokemon were being given the best treatment possible in our current situation. They would have been put into a better living area—in time.”

The elevator dinged, and Vaun shuffled to face it. The doors split, revealing a Zoroark and Lucario standing behind a large trash container, the Zoroark with a leather bag over her shoulder. They carefully advanced, the Lucario steady in his steps and the Zoroark uncertain.

Vaun frowned, holding his hand behind his back. “You, Lucario, have trespassed on Valence premises and have attempted to steal company property. Leave the Master Balls and the Zoroark, and I can promise you’ll still be treated well.”

Lawrence set the trashcan down and stepped around it, glaring at Vaun. “*Treated well?* Like being stuffed in a cage and nearly killed by machine?”

Vaun flinched, adjusting his cracked glasses. “Y-You can talk? How? You came from the outside, and—”

“That doesn’t matter!” Lawrence fumed. “You nearly killed a Pokemon, all for some insane experiment! What you did before was bad enough, but then *this?*” He grimaced and shook his head. “How can you stand yourself?”

Vaun’s face turned pink as he exclaimed, “I’m just doing what I’ve been told! Yes, I have concerns about their well-being, but these experiments will be tuned and adjusted to not be so taxing!”

“Has it worked?” Cassia calmly replied.

Vaun faltered, his face returning to its natural, clammy complexion. “E-Excuse me?”

“Has your experiment worked? Have you made Thomas’ pain worthwhile?”

Vaun struggled for words, the guards behind him loosening their grips on their Pokeballs. He looked back, his eyes growing wide. “Y-You can’t expect things like this to be right on the first try. We’re trying our—”

“You.” Cassia pointed at a guard with graying stubble, who jumped slightly at her claw. “Do you agree with what he’s saying? Do you think that Pokemon should be hurt to make some fantasy?”

Vaun hurried to the guard and hissed, “She’s a *Pokemon*, Carlisle! She has no idea what she’s talking about!”

“I’m asking *him*, not you,” Cassia reaffirmed.

Vaun turned back, aghast. He gave Carlisle a final look, then shuffled away, giving Carlisle a perfect view of Cassia and Lawrence.

He rapped his fingers against his Pokeball, studying the ground. He cleared his throat, then looking up to Cassia, said, “I...I don’t usually speak up about what the President

does, or what his plans are. Up until recently, it was all fine; it was just gadgets and stuff.” He pulled off his hat and wiped his brow. “But when he started bringing in Pokemon and saying it was for a new project, I found it hard to keep following what he said. He’s done a lot of things, but he never hurt nobody. But when I saw what he was doing to them...” He shuddered. “I signed up for this job to protect people and Pokemon. Not watch them get hurt. I was willing to put up with it since I thought it was temporary, but then Vaun and his other scientists got to saying it may go on for years—and when I heard them Pokemon talk...”

Carlisle lowered his hat and stared at the floor, ashen. “I couldn’t watch that. I would’ve up and gotten my resignation ready, if it weren’t for me needing this job and...what the President made me agree to.” He looked to his fellow guards, all with their hands at their sides. “We never wanted this. The President’s gone too far this time. We were just too afraid of him to say no.”

Vaun’s head flicked back and forth between them and the Pokemon. He sputtered and shouted, “Y-Y-You signed the contract! You’re to obey orders and—”

“And what?” Another guard replied. “And treat this like any other job?”

“Like the time you took my pet Herdier and tested ‘medicine’ on him? He was sick for over a week!”

“Or that time you split open that Magmar’s head to see how it ticked?”

“Or when you had a bunch of Rattata get some implant in them? None of them survived!”

Vaun paled, stepping back. “I-I was only following the President’s orders!” The guards surrounded him, ignoring Cassia and Lawrence.

Carlisle replaced his hat, studying Vaun coldly. “You’re his right-hand man down here. He might give the orders, but he doesn’t know what he’s asking for. You’re the one who gives him what he wants.” He nodded to his fellow guards, and two took Vaun’s arms. “I don’t care if I’m fired. Neither do they. At least we won’t have to send a bunch of Pokemon to die.” He began walking to the exit and waved for the others to follow. “If anyone else doesn’t like what this Sneasel or the President has us do, follow me out. I’ve

had it with watching Pokemon die.” He gave a finally glance to Cassia and tipped his cap. “You’re certainly not like any Pokemon I’ve met. Keep making guys like me think, and you guys’ll do fine.” He opened the exit door, the entire troupe of guards following. Vaun was dragged through the crowd despite his feeble attempts to flee, pleading for them to release him. His cries were silenced by the shut door as the guards went out to the streets and left Facility D out of their lives.

Lawrence turned to Cassia and made a small smile, holding on to the trashcan. “Some guards said they were too afraid to speak up. They just needed someone else to do it for them.”

Cassia smiled back, holding on to the trashcan. “Lawrence, you’re as smart as ever.” They slowly rolled the trashcan toward the warehouse door, their final obstacle to Sinnoh.

***Clang! Clang!***

They froze, looking to their right. A section of wall rattled, the bolts around it coming loose. It clanged and shook again, a bulge appearing in the middle.

***Clang!***

The sheet burst from the wall and clattered on the ground, revealing Hanson wielding a sledgehammer, panting heavily. He glowered at the two Pokemon setting the head of the hammer on the ground. “Congratulations,” he seethed, “You managed to get past all my security and planning in one night, all to steal away a bunch of Pokemon.” He slowly stepped to the warehouse door, dragging the hammer behind him. “But unlike my guards, I won’t have the wool put over my eyes by a Zoroark.”

Lawrence noticed the Pokeballs on his waist and lowered into a defensive stance. “Careful, Cassia. He looks ready to fight.”

Hanson hefted the sledgehammer with a grunt, his eyes wide. “Oh yes, Lucario. To protect my company, my fortune, and my dreams.” He swung the hammer on the scanner for the warehouse door, causing it to explode in sparks and blare out an alarm.

Hanson threw away the hammer and leaned back, groaning. “I haven’t had to do anything like that in years.” He stood straight again, frowning. “Then again, I haven’t had

*Lawrence Stephenson* and a mysterious Lucario work together. Despite my records, a Lucario was not among the Equivosians, yet here's one now, talking right to me." He clutched the side of his head and said, "And Lawrence *bewilders* me with what he's done!"

Cassia took Lawrence's arm and growled "He's done more for us than you'd ever know."

Hanson stopped. He scrutinized the Lucario, his eyes flitting back and forth. "Wait...the clothes...the hiding...the *voice*." Lawrence's heart pounded as Hanson leaned forward, mouth slightly agape.

He closed his mouth and coldly said, "You...you were *changed*. By the wormhole. No wonder you survived so long in such savage lands—and why you care so much for these Pokemon." He brushed back his wild hair, his eyes squinting once more. "It all makes sense. Now I just have to figure out how to harness such a unique ability—after I give every Pokemon the power of speech."

Lawrence overcame the sinking feeling of dread in his chest and shouted, "How can you be so callous to torture these Pokemon, just to have our Pokemon do something that's impossible?"

"Impossible?" Hanson spat. "*Impossible*? We're practically there! Everyone in the world sees them as companions, talking to them like they actually understand us! Like my teenage self thought, challenging the Elite Four!" He snatched an emerald-topped Pokeball and held it next to his head. "Before I became an inventor, I was an aspiring young trainer, what all the children in the world want to be. I was renowned in Unova, and everyone thought I would become the new champion." He widened his stance. "I lost at the final round. I was forgotten, just like so many other unlucky challengers. If it wasn't for the language barrier between me and my Pokemon I would have been victorious. And so many others would have been too."

"So that's what all this is about? Making up for some match you lost ages ago?" Cassia exclaimed.

Hanson took the ruby-topped Pokeball from his belt and smiled darkly. “Oh, it’s for more than that. I want to see a world with perfect communication for all, just as I’ve done with the Poketch and my Pokedexes. This is the final step. If you escape me, all my time, effort, and money would have been wasted.” He clicked the buttons on his Pokeballs, causing Lawrence to step back. “Those Master Balls cost a fortune, and my company will take a major blow if I fail to return on my investment. People are wanting my latest product, and I can’t leave them waiting.” He reared back the Pokeballs. “I *can*’t let you go!” He threw them both toward Lawrence and Cassia, their buttons glowing.

Lawrence grabbed her claw and ran to the corner with the trashcan, avoiding the ruby Pokeball. It clacked against the floor and snapped open, throwing out a blinding sphere of light. It grew and morphed into a thick, musclebound Pokemon, the light fading into orange and black fur. Silver scattered in its coat, especially around the roaring fire that made its beard. Its eyes materialized, and it glared at the two Pokemon before it, snorting and scraping its hooves against the concrete floor.

The emerald Pokeball did the same, sending out a sphere of light. It sat lower on the ground and formed into a metallic pod with three vined limbs, each with their own thorned casing. Spikes coated its body, the ones on its feet driving themselves into the concrete. It held itself lower, the thorns on the top of its body retracting to launch.

The balls bounced back into Hanson’s hands, and he grinned. “Meet two of the surviving members of my team all those years ago: Bruiser, my Emboar, and Sniper, my Ferrothorn.” The Emboar bellowed throatily and clapped its paws together, reverberating in the air. The Ferrothorn emitted a crackling, shrieking cry as it vibrated, rattling its thorns.

Cassia crouched, darkness spilling from her claws. “We don’t have to do this, Hanson. Just let us leave, and—”

“And what? You’ll disappear, never to be seen again? I can’t afford that; Equivos was the only world I knew of with talking Pokemon, and now that it’s gone, you are my only hope.” Hanson pointed at them and roared, “Bruiser, Sniper, go high!”

Bruiser the Emboar grunted, picking up Sniper the Ferrothorn by its sides. It rattled eagerly as Bruiser stooped, then thrust upward, sending the Ferrothorn to the ceiling. Its pods drove into the concrete and kept it hanging, the thorns on its bottom half retracting and hissing. Dozens rocketed out and zoomed toward Cassia and Lawrence.

Lawrence's paws flared with aura. "Avoid the thorns!" He and Cassia sprinted out of the way, all the thorns embedding into the floor.

Bruiser bounded forward, his beard growing to consume his entire body. He bellowed and veered toward Lawrence, the force of the flame propelling him forward. The Lucario narrowly leapt over the Emboar, his legfur singed from the heat.

Cassia dodged more thorns from Sniper, deflecting some with her claws. She turned invisible, causing Sniper to lose target and look back to Hanson.

He waved to where Cassia disappeared and said, "Swing-Bash Strategy!"

The Ferrothorn rattled in reply, its vines lengthening and lowering it closer to ground level.

Lawrence weaved between Bruiser's slow and powerful blows, beating his paws into his fatty exterior. None of his punches seemed to have any effect on the hardened Emboar, each rippling his skin and little more.

Sniper hung only a few inches from the ground then started to circle. It spun faster, its arc growing wider and wider. It kept circling its thorn-covered body as its legs scrabbled across the ceiling, beating away crates and searching for a Zoroark in its path.

Lawrence ducked beneath one of Bruiser's punches, only to be blown back by another. He skidded against the floor as the Emboar charged forward again, elbow dropping toward him.

Lawrence rolled out of the way, causing Bruiser to land on his chest. Lawrence summoned an Aura Sphere and fired it into Bruiser's head, causing him to squeal and grab Lawrence's leg. He swung him into the floor, stunning him as Bruiser swung him again, and again, and again.



Cassia—invisible—ducked underneath Sniper's sweeps and advanced to Bruiser, driving her claws into his side. He squealed once more and swiped at her origin, only for her to strike at a different point.

He threw Lawrence behind him, only for him to be swung into by Sniper. He slammed into the wall and slid to the floor with a groan, his eyes closing.

"Lawrence!" Cassia called. She grabbed onto Bruiser's arm and allowed him to swing her into the air, right toward Sniper. She soared just above its menacing swing and into the vines that held it in place, grabbing onto them. Sniper rattled viciously as it slowed to stop its assailant. Cassia sliced the three vines at once, causing Sniper to fly into a wall and ingrain itself, the remaining vines on its head whipping wildly as they gradually grew back. Cassia landed on the ground and turned invisible once more, running toward Lawrence and leaving Bruiser to cauterize the cuts on its sides with his flamethrower breath.

Hanson grit his teeth, his aged heart beating rapidly. *"I haven't felt this exhilarated in years. Lawrence is down, but so is Sniper until he can grow back his vines. Bruiser won't be stopped by a few measly cuts; the Zoroark stands no chance. Soon, Project Babel will be back in order."*

Cassia stopped next to Lawrence and rolled him onto his back. "Are you okay? Is anything broken?"

Lawrence coughed, his eyes fluttering open. "Only my pride. Those Pokemon are strong." As Cassia soothed his wound with what Life she had left, he pointed at the rejuvenating Ferrothorn. "Those things might have tough shells, but with a hard enough hit, they'll crack open and lose all their thorns. They'll hibernate until they can repair themselves, so I'll try and take it on."

"Lawrence, we can't fight here forever. The ship's waiting for us," Cassia warned.

Lawrence came to his feet, holding his head. "I know, but we can't have Hanson send these after us. Just focus on distracting the Emboar while I hit the Ferrothorn."

The pods on Sniper's vines regrew and pounded into the wall, each straining to push the Ferrothorn out. Bruiser snorted and caught sight of Lawrence. He looked to Hanson.

He pounded his fist into his palm. “He’s too fast for you to charge into; hit him from afar!”

The Emboar stared blankly, then leaned toward Lawrence and let his flames envelop him. Lawrence ran away from the wall as Hanson groaned audibly, pressing his hands against his head. “No, no, no! I meant use *Flamethrower*, not *Flame Charge*!”

Cassia ran out after Lawrence, forming a blob of inky-black gas in her claws. She threw it into Bruiser’s eyes, causing him to bellow and barrel ahead, charging into every crate in its path, completely missing Lawrence.

Sniper finally pushed itself out and clambered to the ceiling, letting itself hang several feet from the wall. As Lawrence sprinted, Sniper showered thorns below it, scratching Lawrence’s body. Lawrence grit his teeth and generated an aura sphere, aiming it toward Sniper.

Hanson hissed and shouted, “Sniper, drop! Drop now!”

The Ferrothorn obeyed, shaking loose of the ceiling. Lawrence lost concentration and released the aura sphere prematurely, causing it to spiral into the wall. The Ferrothorn slammed next to him and threw him into the air, its vines pushing itself upright in the floor. It rattled furiously as a glowing green sphere formed in front of its eyes, gathering energy from the air.

Cassia danced around Bruiser, narrowly avoiding the focused breaths of fire it blew from its snout. She glanced at Lawrence and gasped as he slowly got up, Sniper’s energy ball aimed directly at him.

She held out her claw and gathered a crimson sphere, then launched it at Sniper. The sphere exploded on Sniper’s iron shell and sent it flying toward Lawrence, the energy ball dissipating. Lawrence reared back his fist and punched Sniper between its spikes, puncturing the shell and causing numberless thorns to flow out.

Sniper let out one final rattle as its amber eyes closed. Hanson quaked as he pointed Sniper’s ball at the Ferrothorn and tapped the recall button. A red stream of light struck the Ferrothorn and formed it into light once more, travelling along the line into the

Pokeball. He shrunk it and set it on his belt, pointing at the Emboar. “Bruiser, you can finish the job!”

Bruiser grunted and continued swinging around him, narrowly missing Cassia each time. He finally squealed and leapt into the air, massive flames surrounding him on all sides.

Lawrence paled and shouted, “Cassia, get out of the way! That’s a Heat Crash!”

Cassia looked up and cried out as Bruiser rocketed to the ground, the heat so intense that neither could look at him. She leapt away, Bruiser’s fire exploding outward and catching Cassia’s back. She screamed, crashing to the ground and rolling to rid herself of the encroaching flame.

“Cassia!” Lawrence yelled. He ran to her and cradled her head as she struggled to keep her eyes open. Bruiser struggled to push himself free of the sizable crater, everywhere within five feet of him black with char.

Hanson clapped his hands together, grinning. *“Yes, yes! Finally, my Pokemon succeed once more!”* He noticed Lawrence leaning toward Cassia’s ear and whisper something, but they were too far away for him to hear.

He snapped his fingers and said, “Bruiser, get them before they go on the move again!” Bruiser squealed in understanding, still trying to push himself up.

Lawrence stood up, stone-faced. Cassia lay on the ground, her hands folded over her chest. The Lucario ran to the Emboar and roared, leaping upward. He reached the peak of his arc just above Bruiser, grazing the ceiling. He flipped upside-down and pushed against the ceiling to shoot toward Bruiser’s unguarded head. He held his paw out and struck home, cracking the concrete and driving Bruiser deeper.

He pushed himself off of Bruiser and landed on his feet. The Emboar’s eyes dazedly focused on Lawrence. The concrete around him sunk slightly, then cracked again. It suddenly dropped out from underneath the Emboar and crashed into the next floor, carrying him down with a slam. Buried underneath tons of concrete, the Emboar did not rise again.

Hanson gaped at his Pokemon's defeat as Lawrence advanced to Cassia and held out his final Master Ball. He pressed it next to Cassia's side and absorbed her in a flash, clicking closed. He shrunk it and snapped it to his belt, then faced Hanson. "You'll pay for what you've done."

Hanson stared for a moment, then pinched the bridge of his nose, shaking his head sadly. "Lawrence, Lawrence, Lawrence...I have done nothing wrong. I told my subordinates I wanted Project Babel to progress as quickly and effectively as possible, and they have done so. That is not to say there have not been missteps..." He gripped his third and final Pokeball. "But a tremendous amount of money has been invested into this, and the public has no idea how badly they want Project Babel."

He unclipped the Pokeball. "I will not let you walk out of here with those Pokémon...not when I can use them to do so much good for the world!" He held up the gold-engraved Pokeball, a grin plastered on his face. "And now...the Pokemon I began and ended my journey with, the one who failed to obey me when I needed it most—the first to experience the fruits of my labor." He expanded the ball and threw it at Lawrence, sending out yet another ball of light.

It grew to tower over Lawrence, standing over four times his height. A long, bladed tail grew, and its head included to large blades. Golden armor coated its body, and charcoal scales coated its face, hand, and arms. Sharp red claws penetrated the scales, and cold, staring eyes bore into Lawrence. A Haxorus.

The Haxorus stood straight, its tail sweeping back and forth. It opened its mouth:

"I live to obey...Master."

## Chapter 30

Down at the docks, Erica sat on her suitcase, tapping her feet against its side. She bundled her coat tightly around her, the breeze growing stronger on the shore. The five docks remained free of ships, with only the Wingull perched underneath them any indication of activity.

She coughed, covering her nose. “I *hate* staying out here like this.” She looked out to sea briefly, finding nothing. “When is that ship supposed to be here? I’ve been waiting for hours!” She sighed, then muttered, “Lawrence better not have been pranking me...”

Erica perked up her head; a low rush echoed from beyond the harbor. From the right, a white prow jutted out from behind the buildings lining the coast. A massive white ship with three decks along its sides churned the water, edging forward as the prow tipped toward the harbor.

Erica stood up, eyes wide and jaw dropped. The liner stopped along the center dock, its engine quieting and crew rushing. Several men sent out a gangplank, and a burly man wearing a black trenchcoat strode down, a colorful Chatot sitting on his shoulder.

He continued up the dock and stopped in front of Erica, his matted, grey beard and grimy exterior more visible. He tipped his cap and said, “Good evening, young lass! Would you happen to know where a man named Lawrence Stephenson is?”

Erica shook herself briefly, regaining her composure. “Y-Yes, but he’s not here right now; he’s getting the rest of the...passengers.” She took a step back, eyeing the staring Chatot. “And you are?”

“*Rawk!* Debbie talks, Debbie talks!” the Chatot squawked, flapping its wings.

Sheffield chuckled, stroking the Chatot's note-shaped head. "Aye, that's her name alright. As for mine, call me Captain Sheffield. I was called by Lawrence to take him to Sinnoh, and he said for me to bring an *ocean liner* of all things!" He laughed heartily, craning back his head. "I thought he was kidding, but when he explained that there were more coming with him, I went ahead and got one for him." He blew out his breath, scratching his beard blankly. "Although, it wasn't easy. Had a few friends who were able to snag one for me, but I won't be able to use it for long—upcoming cruise and all that. I'll have to leave tonight if I expect to make it all the way to Sunyshore."

"Lawrence said I could come along too," Erica added, grabbing her suitcase.

Sheffield studied her for a moment, then nodded. "Won't deny anyone the pleasure of riding a ship such as this—especially if they're a friend of Lawrence." He waved over to the men walking about, carrying crates and other ship materials. "My crew will treat you well, no need to worry about that. Go on aboard and choose a room, and we'll wait for Lawrence together."

"Thank you very much, sir." Erica curtsied as she took her suitcase and rolled it toward the deck, still finding it difficult to believe that Lawrence indeed managed to hire an ocean liner.

She stopped at the foot of the gangplank, then turned back to Sheffield, who followed some distance away. "Um...just so you know, he told me all about this today, so if I seem a bit skeptical..."

Sheffield nodded sagely, stroking Debbie's feathers once more. "You have every right to be. I mean, look at me, some old grimy man inviting one such as you aboard!" He chuckled momentarily, then said, "Seriously though, you can trust me. If I do something wrong, feel free to walk off whenever you please." He grinned, stroking his beard. "Until we cast off, of course, but Lawrence and whoever he's bringing with him ought to be fine."

"He...he hasn't told you who he's bringing?" Erica asked dubiously.

“Said it was on a need-to-know basis. Honestly, I’d rather know, but I guess we’ll find out the crowd when he gets here.” Sheffield stepped around Erica and marched back onto his ship. “Now come on aboard! Lawrence surely won’t take long!”

Erica paused, then slowly advanced onto the gangplank. Midway up, she looked back at the Valence Tech building, the glowing ‘V’ eerie in the cloudy night sky.

“I sure hope so...”

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At the top floor of Facility D, Lawrence gaped at the Haxorus that towered over him. Despite the unlit atmosphere, its scales seemed to gleam—yet its eyes were soulless, just like every Pokemon he had seen in this world. And it could speak.

Lawrence stepped forward, away from the crater behind him. “How...how can it do that? *How?*” He kept a paw close to the Master Ball around his belt, where he had stored a burned Cassia.

Hanson stood behind the Haxorus, looking around it to study Lawrence’s expression. “Astounding, isn’t it? After forty years of being an inventor, I’ve finally found the means to grant speech to Pokemon.” He smiled, looking up at the Haxorus. “Isn’t that right, Razor?”

“Yes, Master,” the Haxorus replied, scraping its feet against the concrete floor, screeching and sending sparks.

Hanson sighed, pacing around Razor and closer to Lawrence. “Unfortunately, the process still needs adjustments. He has *some* personality, but certainly nothing like the Equivosians.”

“*How did you do this?*” Lawrence roared. “You said you couldn’t! You said you needed a Pokemon from Equivos! All other ways failed!” He stamped his foot and bared his teeth. “You put all of them through that for a lie?”

Hanson pointed at Razor and wagged his finger. “Careful, Lawrence. He may be a bit lacking in intellect, but he makes up for it in strength. And I’d rather not end this moment with his way of doing things.” Razor snorted, the blades around his mouth cleaving in the air.

Lawrence seethed, crossing his arms and stepping aside. “Why?”

Hanson held his hands up as he continued toward Lawrence. “I’ll admit, I should have been more open with you. You deserve an explanation—as much as it pains me to say, considering how much trouble you’ve given me.” He pulled the ruby-embedded Pokeball from his belt, tossing it in the air and giving the still Razor a glance. “Would you mind if I recalled poor Bruiser? Razor and I would appreciate it.”

Lawrence did nothing at first, then stepped further away, allowing Hanson to stand at the edge of the enormous hole in the floor and point the ball at the Emboar buried beneath the rock, unconscious. He tapped the white button on the balls underside, causing a red stream of light to come from the main button and strike the Emboar. The Emboar turned into a ball of light, then streamed back into the ball.

Hanson shrunk the ball and clipped back into his belt, nodding his head toward Lawrence. “It is good to see a gentleman in battle.” Now mere feet from Lawrence, the Lucario could see the president’s eye studying him, whizzing left and right, surely thinking of the sheer conundrum that was him.

Almost as soon as he came, Hanson returned to Razor, his pace slowing as the Haxorus drew nearer. “It started a year after the Pokedex 2.0 released. I was searching for the next big leap in communication, one that could dwarf even the Pokedex. I won’t bore you with the details, but I eventually came to the conclusion that we had to make a product to allow Pokemon to speak—a dream I’ve had ever since I failed the Pokemon league as a young man.”

Hanson rested a hand against Razor, reaching his side. “By the way, don’t think of going anywhere while I talk; Razor will strike you down faster than you can say ‘ouch’.” Lawrence glanced at the trashcan in the corner, knowing already that he couldn’t afford to do that.

Hanson continued, “I had a series of basements built with the main Valence building for storage and lab purposes, but I had yet to use them. I ended up converting them into the research facility we call Facility D—the ‘D’ representing ‘discovery’. I set my scientists to work on developing a machine that could translate speech.” He frowned.

“That came to nothing. Against my better judgement, I directed Vaun and the other scientists to experiment with Pokemon to devise a means. Nothing worked.

“This continued for around two years, and I was running short on my patience—until I noticed an article. It advertised that the Aether Foundation was selling its dimensional technology to help offset the costs of allowing the Ultra Beasts to ravage their region. I went ahead and bought it, thinking I could use it to further my project—even if I had no idea how.”

“What does this have to do with the Haxorus?” Lawrence seethed, eyeing the trash container.

Hanson held up a finger. “Patience.” He lowered it, then said, “After training my employees on how to use the technology, we set about searching for different dimensions with it. We found many worlds while the generator was still being built, and several contained the known Ultra Beasts. Nothing held a clear view, mind you, but with the glimpses we had of these worlds, we had a good idea of what it had.

“Several months after I acquired the technology, we found a lush dimension, full of Pokemon—at least, from what we could tell from our overhead views. By that time, the generator had finished construction, and so we decided to test it in this dimension.” He grimaced, standing away from Razor. “It worked well—so well that we accidentally brought something here.”

Lawrence’s eyes widened. “You mean...you took a Pokemon? From Equivos?”

“Yes...but it was completely accidental. We never meant for it to happen.” He blew out his breath and said, “The wormhole was close enough to the ground to drag in a Marill and bring her to us. When she came, we were all shocked, and I sent for medical help—she was covered in wounds of all sorts.”

“Where is she now?” Lawrence asked, suddenly worried.

Hanson lowered his head. “She died soon after, unfortunately. But before they did, we discovered she could speak. She said, ‘What in Equivos is this place?’ Stunned, I asked if she had a name. In her last breaths, she said, “I...Draena Marill.”

Lawrence grit his teeth. “So that’s how you got that file...”

“Yes. We later sent satellites into Equivos’ atmosphere, as we wanted to see the terrain. We didn’t want to try taking another Pokemon until we could guarantee it would be safe.” Hanson held a hand against his head. “The Marill’s death was tragic...but not entirely in vain.”

Lawrence narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

Hanson paced next to Razor, folding his hands behind his back. “When I learned that the Equivos Pokemon could speak, I had my scientists investigate the Marill’s DNA. Upon comparing it with a standard Marill’s DNA, it turned out that there was another set of genes embedded there, likely to allow speech—but they were severely damaged from the radiation in the wormhole. It was determined that the genes could be copied to other Pokemon if they were intact, provided that we develop new technology and obtain another subject.

“So you made something to copy the genes...” Lawrence suggested.

Hanson smiled. “Yes. Up until we hired you to capture the Pokemon, I had the facility developing the machine and tweaking the wormhole, so that we can be ready to test it.” He gestured to Razor. “When you came with the Equivosians, I had one of them used for the first extraction—and the recipient was Razor. It was a success, if at the cost of the Bibarel’s health. With time, the machine can be perfected, so that it won’t be near as stressful or painful for the Pokemon involved.”

Razor huffed, scratching the back of his neck. Hanson sighed and looked away. “Although, I can’t say I am entirely pleased. He is now able to speak, yes, but he lacks a certain...charm.” He shrugged. “Something that can be fixed, I’m sure.”

“How would that even work? Everyone will see the Pokemon and not want to use it!” Lawrence exclaimed, his anger rising.

“Yes, the approach I mentioned before wouldn’t work. Instead, I’d have customers send in their Pokemon for a few days, and when they get them back, they will be able to speak just like you or myself,” Hanson said. He stepped back, retuning to his position from the previous battle. “This is where I stop my little tangent and ask you nicely: stand

down, or I'll have Razor make you." He leered at Lawrence and said, "And this time, the language barrier won't prevent me from succeeding."

Lawrence remained still. Wires fizzed and fans whirled, muting anything else in the background. His tail hung low, and he kept himself in a combat-ready stance. "You were never planning on giving them a better place to live, were you? You just wanted to keep them down here, giving all your Pokemon something unnatural to them."

"Unnatural?" Hanson asked. He turned to Razor. "Do you think having speech is unnatural?"

"No, Master. My mind is clear; I understand what you are saying, and I remember my life more clearly than before." the Haxorus said in a neutral tone.

Hanson stared for a moment. "Hmm..." He rubbed his chin. "As I've said before, there isn't the same...spark, like the Equivosian Pokemon have. It's as if there's something missing, something that needs to be present." He shrugged. "It matters little. Given enough time, the process can be perfected, and that spark will come."

Lawrence crouched, holding his paws up defensively. "I won't let that happen. They need to live their own life, not satisfy yours."

Hanson sighed, shaking his head. "And here I thought you were a reasonable man—or Pokemon, I should say. It is a shame to have to do this to one of my former employees." He pointed at Lawrence and called out, "Razor, use Dragon Pulse!"

"Understood. I will destroy this opponent!" Razor reared back as purple light grew in his mouth, gathering into a ball of violet flame.

Lawrence ran forward, aura coating his paws. Razor fired the Dragon Pulse, rocketing toward Lawrence. He deftly leapt to the right, narrowly dodging the beam. He gathered an Aura Sphere and shot it at Razor, striking across his chest.

The Haxorus angled back slightly but was otherwise unharmed. His eyes suddenly brightened. "Bluepaws...are no match for me!" he bellowed, stomping forward and roaring. He swung his tail powerfully, meeting with Lawrence's chest and throwing him to a wall.

Lawrence shakily pushed himself up from the floor, groaning. Razor continued stomping toward him, holding his head high as his blades glowed white. Lawrence cringed and ducked under him, the Haxorus head clipping just above his own.

Lawrence clambered onto Razor's leg and onto his back, struggling to hold on to his scales. Razor attempted to reach back and strike him with his tusks and claws. Lawrence held on, latching onto his neck. He wrapped his legs around him and punched repeatedly at his head, creating dents in his hardened armor.

"Use your tail to bat him off!" Hanson ordered, his fists tight.

"Yes!" Razor's tail swung toward his own head, meeting with Lawrence's back. Lawrence wheezed as his chest was crushed between back and tail. Razor swung his tail again, and Lawrence fell off his side, holding his side.

The Haxorus turned around and held his head high, readying to strike. "With Master's mind, I cannot lose!" Lawrence held his paws out, wincing. Razor swung, and a rod of pure blue light appeared between Lawrence's paws, blocking the tusks just before they could strike.

As Razor continued pushing forward, they locked eyes, each trying to overpower the other. Razor huffed and seethed, "You cannot win. Master wishes others to have my gift. I no longer have to remain untested." The Lucario's eyes drifted to the corner, where the trash container was. The corner stood empty.

Lawrence smirked, returning his gaze to Razor. "Thanks for the distraction," he wheezed. He shouted and pushed the Haxorus' head away, causing him to step back awkwardly to regain balance. Lawrence jabbed the pole into the Haxorus' chest, pushing him onto his back with a slam.

Hanson eyes whizzed left and right as Lawrence advanced, his Haxorus rolling back onto his feet. He looked to the left and froze. The container was gone—and all the Pokemon inside.

His breathing quickened. "Where are they?" he muttered. He focused on Lawrence and bellowed, "*Where are they?*"

Lawrence beat away Razor's claws with his pole, taking glances back at Hanson.

"Wouldn't *you* like to know?"

Hanson gripped Razor's Pokeball so tight his knuckles turned white. "*He couldn't have taken them himself...unless...*" He narrowed his eyes and shouted, "Grab the Master Ball on Lawrence's belt!"

"Understood!" Razor called, reaching toward Lawrence's waist. The Lucario leapt out of the way and cracked his pole across the Haxorus' head, receiving a guttural roar.

Hanson rushed to the warehouse door, searching suspiciously. "*You won't get away with them that easily...*"

In the midst of their traded blows, Razor spun around and beat his tail across Lawrence, throwing him to the ground and dissipating his pole. Lawrence attempted to push himself up, but was pinned to the ground by the Haxorus' foot, which narrowly avoided his belt.

Razor reached down and took the Master Ball, then threw it toward Hanson. "As requested, Master."

Hanson deftly caught the ball and nodded to Razor. "Well done. Now I can confirm my suspicions." He enlarged the ball and threw it to the ground in front of him. It bounced upward with no reaction.

Hanson scooped up the ball and yelled, "I knew it! You never caught that Zoroark! You just had her make it look like you did." He eyed the walls. "She's still lurking around here, and she's got the Pokemon with her as well! Well, your little plan isn't going to work!" He tossed the ball in his hand, removing his other from Razor's Pokeball. "I can just capture her—or you even." He stared, considering it as Razor kept Lawrence on the ground, nearly pressing him to death.

Hanson tossed the ball again and caught it at its peak. "Yes, far simpler. Zoroark are tricky, but they can hardly be considered strong fighters. Razor can keep her at bay quite easily. Isn't that right?"

Razor looked over to Hanson. "Yes. Shinefurs are only tricksters."

Hanson sighed, carefully walking toward Lawrence. “I really have to have your personality worked on, Razor. It isn’t at all like talking with a person.”

Lawrence forced a laugh, holding his palms away from Razor’s leg. “Yeah...a world full of Pokemon like him...a dream come true.”

Hanson stopped, frowning. “You can still change your mind, you know. Just give me the Pokemon, and—”

“And what? Expect to be imprisoned for the rest of my life? Like everyone else?” Lawrence wheezed. “Not gonna happen. Ever.” He jabbed the spike on the back of his paws into Razor’s foot, driving them deep.

Razor screeched and stepped back, stepping back toward the hole in the floor. Lawrence weakly pushed himself up and punched Razor’s chest, pushing him back further.

Hanson’s eyes widened. “No, Razor! Fight back! Fight back!” He reared back the Master Ball, aiming toward Lawrence.

Razor attempted to gain footing, swinging his arms to counter Lawrence’s blows. “You will pay!” The Lucario dodged them, continuing to push the Haxorus toward the hole.

Hanson’s brow beaded with sweat. “This can’t be happening...” He reached for Razor’s Pokeball. *“I can recall him and send him away from—”*

He groped empty space, then looked down. The gilded Pokeball was gone.

The Master Ball was knocked from his hand, suddenly floating away. A Zoroark appeared and ran away from him, her back missing patches of fur and revealing raw, red skin.

Hanson looked down at his hand, then back at Razor. “Don’t fail me, Razor! We can’t lose, not again!” he bellowed, running awkwardly toward Cassia.

The Haxorus—now perched at the edge of the hole, suddenly punched Lawrence across his jaw, knocking him to the floor. His mouth glowed violet once more, preparing to strike Lawrence with another Dragon Pulse.

He suddenly glowed red, then shrunk into a sphere of light. He returned to the Pokeball in Cassia's outstretched claws, which hung over the edge of the pit. She dropped it.

Hanson fell to the edge of the pit and reached out to the falling ball, his finger grazing its surface. "*No!*" It clattered against the rubble below, useless to its owner.

Hanson seethed, holding his hand in the air. "That's...that's..." He leered at Cassia and hissed, "Conniving, deceitful, savage—"

Cassia held her claws underneath his chin, cutting him short. "You just described yourself." She studied the Master Ball, then dropped it into the pit as well. "You say you want the best for the world, but you're willing to do the worst to obtain it." She removed her claws, then set them against her bag. "If it wasn't for me, you would have made the worst mistake in your life."

"If it wasn't for you, every trainer in the world would have exactly what they wanted!" Hanson roared, standing up. "I devoted my life to creating communication between Pokemon and humans, and you are taking away the only way to that!" He jabbed a finger at Lawrence, who now stood straight with his arms crossed. "And you! You betrayed my company, leaving it for *Pokemon!* You left me for *pets!*"

"They are *not* pets. You know it," Lawrence replied. He paced around the pit and grabbed Hanson's collar, bringing his eyes close to his. "I'm warning you now: *don't* try to find us. I'm taking them somewhere far away, somewhere where they can be safe from men like you." His other paw glowed blue. "I'll make you pay if you do." He released Hanson's collar, then looked over to Cassia. "I'm sick of this place. Let's get out of here." He walked away from Hanson, leaving the shaken, defeated man.

He and Cassia stepped in front of the warehouse door, where the trash container materialized. He leaned over to Cassia's ear and whispered, "Good thing you had those Rawst berries." He held an aura sphere in his paws and sent it straight through the warehouse door, punching a sizable hole inside it. They rolled the container out into the cold air of Castelia, hastening their pace to the dock.

As the can clattered away, Hanson quaked, staring at the hole. “All that money...all that time...wasted...” He balled his fists, continuing to stare. “Mark my words, Lawrence Stephenson, I *will* find you and take my Pokemon back. Project Babel will continue, no matter what it takes!”

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On Sheffield’s ship, he and Erica stood on the railing, looking out across Castelia. Debbie the Chatot flew overhead, occasionally squawking as the crew paced across the decks.

“When do you think he’ll be here?” Erica asked.

“Not got a clue. Ought to get here soon though; I’m just loaning this beauty till she sets sail for some fancy cruise,” Sheffield replied. He pulled at his collar, coughing slightly. “Yeah, I had to pull a few punches to get the guy to lend it to me. Good thing he trusted me with it—for a little while at least.” He squinted, gripping the guiderail. “Oi, is that Lawrence coming?”

Erica squinted as well, noticing a large, clattering shape approaching from the darkness. They grew closer, and a bruised and battered man came into view, pushing a trash container alongside an equally beaten Zoroark.

Sheffield waved his hands and bellowed, “Ahoy, Lawrence! High time you showed up! I was about to set sail without you!”

“Get ready to leave, now!” he cried, carefully wheeling the container down the steps to the dock.

Sheffield nodded and stomped away, shouting. “Oi, you heard the man! Get this ship ready for leavin’!” As his crew shouted orders and prepared to leave, he turned back and cocked his head curiously. “Erica here said you’d be bringin’ a bunch of people with ya or somethin. Where are they?”

Lawrence and the Zoroark wheeled the container up the gangplank, heading toward Sheffield and Erica. “Just go!” Lawrence said as he stopped in front of him, the container screeching to a halt.



Sheffield stepped around them and tipped his cap off to the Zoroark. “Pretty Pokemon you have there, Lawrence. I wasn’t aware you had one.”

“Thank you,” she replied, smiling.

Sheffield’s jaw dropped. “Did...did she just—”

“I’ll explain later!” Lawrence hastily said, pushing Sheffield toward the stairs. He looked back to the Zoroark and said, “Erica, could you help Cassia get the Pokemon below deck?”

Erica, equally stunned, nodded slowly as Lawrence ascended the stairs with a stricken Sheffield. She turned to Cassia, who gripped the trashcan and adjusted the bag over her shoulder.

The Zoroark looked over to the stairs, then leaned over Erica. “Erica, right?”

Erica blinked, then shook herself and said, “Y-Yes.”

Cassia held out her claws, beaming. “Cassia Zoroark. It’s nice to see a friendly face around here for once.”

Erica accepted her hand dumbly, shaking it. “Nice to meet you too.” She fiddled with a length of hair and said, “When Lawrence said there were Pokemon who could talk, I didn’t believe him. But now...”

“Everyone else is in here.” Cassia opened the trash can lid, revealing the thousands of Master Balls inside.

Erica’s eyes widened. “T-That’s a lot.”

“I know, and they’re sure to want out,” Cassia said, closing the lid. “Can you take me down to the...hold, was it?”

Erica swallowed, then nodded her head and said, “Yeah, sure. Had the tour and everything.” She pointed down the deck with a quivering finger. “Just head on that way and go to the big door. Can’t miss it.”

Cassia began pushing the trash can, then came next to Erica and said, “Could you, um...help me, a bit later?”

Erica eyed her curiously. “With what?”

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“You never told me you had Pokemon that could talk!” Sheffield blasted, storming up the stairs and past sailors rushing back and forth.

Lawrence struggled to keep up, feeling uneasy as it was. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but I was sort of pressed for time. Plus, you wouldn’t have believed me anyway.”

Sheffield, threw open the door to the navigation room, then pointed Lawrence. “Darn right, I wouldn’t. Till now.” He crossed around the table covered in maps and around various navigation systems to the single wheel at the front, with a full top-down view of the ship and the ocean beyond. “You better tell me what you’ve been doing for the past month!” He adjusted some controls, and the ship lurched backward.

Lawrence stumbled to a seat as Sheffield remained as still as a plank. He sighed and zipped up his jacket. “It’s a long story...”

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Bright, orange light flooded the sky, brightening for a brand-new day. The ocean remained still, the waves barely coming across. Wingull cawed above, flying over the sea in search of food. Goldeen and Wishiwashi swam beneath the surface, cutting between the seaweed and rocks. Kingler and Krabby bubbled on the sandy seafloor, skittering past Mareanie and other deep sea Pokemon.

A triple-decked liner cleaved through the ocean, leaving behind the distant coast of Unova. Its pristine white reflected the sun’s rays, meshing with the dark windows of the numerous suites. Occasional footsteps clattered against the salt-covered deck, mostly quiet except for the thrumming motor in its heart. Trolleys laden with food wheeled to the various doors on the decks, all being pushed by Sheffield’s crew. They silently entered each room and visited the Pokemon inside, offering them refreshment on their long voyage to Sinnoh.

Lawrence sat on the deck at the prow of the ship, breathing deeply. His brown hair was neatly swept to the side, and his face sported several bandages. He was unbothered by the smell of the sea and the swaying of the ship—comforted by the fact he was returning home.

Boots clapped across the deck behind him, and Sheffield appeared, holding two glasses of dark liquid in his hands. He chuckled, sitting alongside Lawrence and setting the glasses between them. “You tell some tall tales, Lawrence, and I like that. A whole tribe of talking Pokemon, in this very ship. Can’t say I saw it coming.” He pointed at the glass closest to Lawrence. “Want one?”

Lawrence shook his head. “I don’t drink.”

Sheffield shrugged, taking them both for himself. “More for me then.” He took a swig from one and sighed contentedly, then looked over to Lawrence. “You told me where you’ve been. Now where are you heading? You brought nothing except those Pokemon from ‘Equivos’—you didn’t even bring an extra shirt.”

“I didn’t have all that much in my apartment, so I didn’t bother packing; I have more clothes waiting for me at my parent’s house.” He leaned his arms against the floor and continued, “I’ll just head over to Solaceon town and bring everyone with me. I plan on making a home for them in the Mount Coronet reserve. There’s plenty of space there, and as long as we lay low, the rangers won’t be any trouble.”

“And how do you plan on doing that? I doubt you’ll be able to just hide in the bushes with that crowd you’ve got, and you certainly can’t build a few houses.”

“Funny thing; there’s this cave system I found one day that’s connected to the range. With enough money, I can convert it to a colony of sorts. Rig it up with lighting, buildings, all sorts of things.”

Sheffield chuckled, taking another drink. “While clever, it ain’t cheap, and in case you weren’t aware, you’re out of a job.”

Lawrence smiled, sitting straight. “I’ll be fine for a while. Turned out that Hanson paid me soon after I came back. I just transferred it to a separate account so he couldn’t take it back.”

Sheffield laughed again, patting Lawrence on the back. “Well played, and serves ole Hanson right.” He leaned over and said, “How much did he give you?”

Lawrence came closer and whispered, “Five-hundred grand.”

Sheffield gawked, leaning away. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m serious. He said he was giving me a bonus for me going to Equivos, but I never thought it’d be that much.” Lawrence leaned back again, his smile fading. “You know...Hanson isn’t that bad of a person. He did some bad things, but he was always trying to do the right thing.” He sighed. “But that doesn’t mean I can just let him do what he likes.”

They remained silent for a moment, then Sheffield raised his glasses and said, “Well...I’ll be headin’ back up to the wheel. Feel free to come up and have a chat when you get the chance.” He plodded away, with Debbie flapping down and landing on shoulder with a squawk.

Soon after, soft footsteps echoed behind Lawrence. He looked behind him and saw Erica, wearing a light blue shirt with a white skirt, with a Pokeball clipped to the belt. Her red hair was bundled together and lay across her shoulder.

She sat on her knees, looking out to the sky. “Thanks.”

Lawrence cocked his head. “For what?”

“For letting me come. I’ve been wanting to go home for years now, but I could never pull together the money to do it. Now I can see my family in person again.” She smiled, nodding toward the suites. “Plus, there’s also your ‘company’.”

“You like them?”

“Of course I do! They’re all wonderful Pokemon, all with their own stories and interests! And they all believe in Arceus too!” She huffed, tapping her fingers against her knee. “Honestly, I wish I had a people like them in my church.” She stared for a moment, then asked, “I asked a bunch of them about you, and they all said you were a great *Lucario*, even greater than some other one named Matheus. Why’s that?”

Lawrence straightened, smiling sheepishly. “T-They really said that?”

“Why would I lie about something like that?”

He blew out his breath, then held out his wrist and pulled back his sleeve, revealing the mark of Arceus. “I can turn into a Lucario by holding this symbol down.”

Erica gawked at it, then closed her eyes and shook her head, backing away. “One crazy thing after another...” She looked around for a moment, then said, “I’ll...I’ll be

going down to see if Cassia's doing better." She paused, then added, "I'm surprised she grew her fur back so fast with that red light." She walked away, leaving Lawrence alone once more.

He remained for several minutes, until feet padded up from the same direction Erica left. Without looking back, Lawrence said, "How's Cassia doing?"

"I'm doing just fine."

Caught by surprise, Lawrence looked behind him and froze. A pale-skinned woman stood with bare feet, wearing a simple white dress and a golden brooch in the shape of the arc of Arceus. Her hair was a dark, pure red, with black streaks scattered throughout it. She smiled beautifully, complementing her warm, blue eyes.

Lawrence stood up, studying her eyes. "...Cassia?"

She held up her wrist, revealing a symbol exactly like Lawrence's. "Looks like we're joined together after all. Just like he said." She stepped forward unsteadily, stumbling. Lawrence caught her, and she laughed uneasily, looking down at her fingers. "I'll have to get used to having hands like this." She stood straight and rubbed the skin on her arm. "And it's so strange not having fur."

Lawrence remained still, considering his own hand. "Similar sort of thing with me—except I had to deal with a tail"

Cassia laughed and sat at the prow, gently pulling him down to sit next to her. "I'm a lot like you. In a strange place, filled with people I have never known—all in a body that's unfamiliar to me." She hugged Lawrence across his shoulder, closing her eyes. "And you happened to meet me, to have me be your guide." She nestled her head onto his other shoulder. "And now I want you to be mine. Will you?"

Lawrence's surprise melted away for peace, and he returned the embrace. "Of course."

They sat together at the prow, journeying to their home, fully trusting in Arceus that all would be well.

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Years Later...

In a different world, a vast sea stretched on for eternity, crystal-clear and endlessly deep. The sky was a pure light blue, yet no sun could be seen. A slow, gentle wind blew, yet no tides appeared on the water's surface.

An island rose from the depths, made of pure, white stone. An enormous, shining tree grew on top of it, its roots wrapping eternally around the stone and its branches fanning to great distances. Light threaded through its bark, pulsing at varying degrees. No mark or blemish lay anywhere on its surface, completely perfect.

Pokémon roamed through the vast canopy, crossing walkways made solely from the branches. Plateaus arose from the trunk and other branches, and spires sprung up. Berry bushes and fruit trees erupted from the bark, and springs of pure, fresh water flowed into pools. An entire world of Pokémon resided here, each with an aura of light surrounding them.

The Pokémon spoke and played with each other, no purer joys to be found. No houses or belongings existed in the tree—Pokémon rested in the nests of leaves when needed, only to continue their life of peace. They could craft what they wished with only a thought, from a plaything to a delicious meal, thanks to the wisps of light that rose from the center of the tree and sought to assist.

The Legends trod amongst them, each sharing glimpses of their storied past. All had completed their duty, and now they were free to be with the Pokémon they had helped create and protect. Water Pokémon swam in the pools, flying Pokémon soared through the trees—every environment a Pokémon would need existed here.

Near the center of the tree, a Lucario sat, watching others of his kind congregate and laugh with each other. He waved to them, receiving a wave back from them. He passed by a group of Golurk, where one told of his time with a young Zoroark.

At the center of the canopy, where a natural stairwell descended. Veins of light pulsed all around. The narrow stairwell wrapped continuously around itself, descending for what seemed like eternity. A single exit appeared in the center of the soft wooden steps, then continued to descend.

The circuits of light gradually dimmed, the bark of the tree turning coarse and rigid. It was dark save for the spheres of violet light that floated above sconces of wood, flickering.

A gate of intertwined branches stood between the stairs and a hallway. Beyond it, numerous hallways stretched before him, all with rooms and gates of their own. Each held only a single Pokémon, with no light surrounding their bodies. Instead of a peaceful, cheering demeanor of those in the canopy, they were silent, ashamed, and miserable.

The hallways branched and extended downward, the atmosphere turning grimmer the farther he went. One held the mighty Mewtwo, languishing in his cell for attempting to control the world. Farther down, a Xatu stared in contemplation, dwelling on how he proposed a world without evil, and created the blade necessary to make it come to pass.

Down toward the bottom of the cells, a Zoroark sat in the center of the ridged, rooted room. His thoughts seemed to echo all around him, free to float after years of madness: “I failed...but I don’t care. Arceus has won, and now I have no chance of seeing my family again...ever.”

Arthus made no movement, staring at the floor. “I only wanted everyone to be free from sorrow, the sorrow that I brought upon myself and others. I wanted to prevent that, but no one listened.” He let his head fall against the wall. “And now here I stay, to waste away for the rest of eternity.”

Time passed, and he did nothing. Nothing but consider his actions, and the situation he now stood in. “The afterlife is...brighter, than I expected. In the branches, at least. In the brief moments I had there when I died, it felt joyous. But when I came here...” He shuddered.

He remembered the crowd he saw surrounding those that died in the final destruction of Equivos. He thought he saw his beloved wife, standing amongst them and witnessing his banishment. He cringed, clutching his head. “If...if I had followed through with Arceus’ plan, none of this would have happened. Even with Corrina gone, I could have turned a new leaf, renounced everything Gregorius ever taught me. Then, I would have at

least been together with her in the canopy, along with Cassia and the rest of my descendants.”

He glared at the wall. “But it was never to be. Not with what I did.”

More time passed, and his memories haunted him. Every death, every betrayal, every evil act remained in his consciousness on their own accord. He tried to block them out, using his mental strength, but they continued to bash against, as if they were empowered by an unseen force. He screamed throughout the nightmares, the guilt and shame empowered by the roots of the Tree of Life driving away any justification he may have had. The sadness of never seeing his family—the core of his actions in life—only amplified his pain.

In a brief moment of peace, he huddled in the corner, rocking on his feet. His eyes closed, he couldn’t bear to see the realm he had doomed himself to, all while saying in his mind: “I deserve this—all the death, carnage, and loss brought me here. All of it.” He dug his claws into his skin, but nothing bled; his body was immune to harm. He cursed and thought, “Let me fade and die...I don’t deserve to exist. I should never have been born.”

The nightmares returned, and he screamed once more. He banged his head against the walls, feeling no pain, yet receiving temporary respite from the plaguing memories. Yet it did nothing to drive away the overflowing guilt of his life, no matter the good he had done before his spiraling downfall.

In one moment of agony, Arthus stood erect and screamed, “I should never have taken you, Arceus! I should never have denied you! You are the only way to joy! You are the only way to peace! I beg of you—*make it stop! AAUUGH!*” He pounded his fists against the floor and sobbed, his final memories with Cassia returning to him in a torrent.

What felt like years later, the memories stopped. He kept praying for Arceus to save him, just as he had done as a child, years ago. He realized that his torture had ended and stood upright.

Unsure he looked up. “Ar...Arceus? Is it...over?”

The gate of his cell lifted, and the Zoroark paused, opening his eyes and lowering his arms. The pure, blue eyes stared at the Lucario, no anger or chill in their gaze.

Arthus wrapped his arms around himself, looking away from the Lucario.

“Matheus...you’ve come.”

Matheus remained still. “Yes, Arthus. I’ve come.”

Arthus turned away from him, burying his face in his arms. “Leave...please. I can’t bear seeing a Pokémon I hurt—especially you.”

Matheus stepped inside. “You aren’t the same Pokémon that died.”

Arthus paused. “Torture...that’s what it was. All the Pokémon I killed return to haunt me. All the lives I ruined, all the families I broke...all because I claimed I had a better way.” He shook his head. “But I couldn’t rely on myself in that torture, or anyone else. Only when I pleaded for Arceus did I feel peace.” He slumped his shoulders. “It feels...strange, for me to say it. Arceus never made a mistake; I did. I strove for good things, and good things happened. He let us have choice so we could make a better future than he ever could. He can create, but we can aspire.”

He turned back to Matheus, avoiding his gaze. “I always knew it...I just let the darkness of the world crowd my vision.” He pressed a hand against his forehead and groaned, “You...Azure...Cassia...Erik...Laryon...everyone suffered because of me. I became the darkness I wanted to destroy. Gregorius tempted me, and I took his bait. I acted under his beliefs...and look what happened.”

He fell to his knees, sobbing. “Just leave me, Matheus. I’m worthless. Pathetic. All that rage and death was a means to hide my sorrow. The only thing that made me happy after I emerged from the cocoon was my sweet Cassia...and even she saw the monster I was.”

Matheus remained silent. He slowly walked to Arthus and set a paw on his shoulder. Arthus flinched, staring at Matheus, then at his paw.

Matheus stood still. “Arthus...do you remember what we always said about each other?”

Arthus sniffed, nodding. “That you kept me from madness—”

“And you kept me from killing myself. We meant it in a joking way, but it was true. We kept each other in check, with your concern for others’ wellbeing countering my recklessness, and my positive outlook on Equivos countering your negative. Without each other, we both fell from grace.”

Matheus lowered his head and closed his eyes. “It was my fault you changed. If I had never left for the Isle of Regret to complete the Trials, none of this would have happened.”

“No.” Arthus pulled away. “I’m the one who found Gregorius. I’m the one who used the Edge. I’m the one who stole Arceus. None of it was your fault. None of it.” He retreated to the other corner and said, “If you’re here to apologize, then it’s no use. I’m the one who needs to apologize. Not you.”

Matheus remained at the corner. “... You remind me of myself. Broken, dejected—I felt like no one loved me because I had abandoned them in their time of need, and to an extent, it was true. I wanted to hide, to be destroyed, to become nothing if only to avoid guilt.”

“Unlike you, I deserve it,” Arthus croaked.

Matheus stood at the door and pointed at Arthus. “You do. There is no denying that. But unlike most Pokémon here in the roots, you have a chance to redeem yourself—all because you realized that Arceus could save you.”

Arthus’ eyes widened. He threw himself at Matheus’ paws and pleaded, “Please, please, let me be free! I will do anything, *anything*, to get rid of this guilt, this sadness, everything!”

Matheus grimaced, shaking his head slowly. “If only it were so simple. First, I must ask you a question.” He leaned in close and held Arthus’ head still. “Will you renounce everything you previously believed, and proclaim Arceus to be your only path, even if it means you remain down here forever?”

Arthus hesitated. He considered all he had fought for in the past two-thousand years: to fight Arceus and bring his own vision of perfect world to be. It had been all he wanted,

but his ulterior motive was to reverse the consequence of his worst mistake—of killing Corrina.

He thought of this—but then of when he followed Arceus. In his youth, he imprisoned outlaws, created the Guild, had his family. He had everything he had longed for and could wish for nothing else.

Yet he had fled the individual who made it all possible: Arceus.

Slowly, Arthus nodded his head.

Matheus stared, then smiled. He stepped away and held up his paw. “I cannot guarantee you can exit the roots...but I can assure you that I will come once every month, to reeducate you about Arceus. If and when he sees fit, he will call you to the canopy to join his other followers.”

Arthus remained on the ground, tear-stricken. He shakily looked up at Matheus. “Can...can I see Corrina? Or Erik? They are all I’ve wanted since I’ve come here...I don’t know how much more I can take without them.

Matheus’ smile faded. “Those in punishment are not allowed to see those who have proven worthy for Arceus’ presence.” Arthus closed his eyes, fully expecting it.

Suddenly, Matheus smiled. “But, as servant of Arceus, I asked him to make an exception—but only one.” He rapped his paw against the gate, and it rose, revealing a young female Zoroark wearing a golden pendant around her neck.

Arthus froze. She stepped inside, bright, contrasting with his stale appearance. He stood up slowly, completely stunned.

Quietly, Matheus said, “This is the one time you may meet with her before you must continue with your confinement. With time, Arceus may release you.” He paused, then smiled “I look forward to when we can stand together as friends once more.”

Arthus embraced his wife, rocking with her in his arms “Corrina...I’ve...I’ve missed you.”

She nodded her head, crying as well. “I missed you too.” She stepped back and clutched his shoulders. “Promise me...come back. Live with me, and Erik, and everyone

else. I've gone two thousand years without you, and I don't want to wait two-thousand more."

Arthus nodded his head constantly as she stepped away, falling to his knees once more. "Yes...yes...yes..."

Corrina stepped out of the room, and Matheus followed. As the gate lowered once more, Matheus said, "I will see you next month."

The gate gently fell on the wood, and Arthus forced himself to calm. He looked up at the ceiling, and for once in his afterlife, he smiled. "Thank you...Arceus...for letting me see her again...even if it will take me an eternity to truly be with her..." He sat cross-legged in the floor, a familiar wisp of light entering through the gaps of the gate and touching his chest.

In the center of the tree of life, Arceus watched Arthus from a clear sphere, motionless. He stood in a room with walls thick with books, drifting in and out of their shelves to be written into by golden threads, all joining with Arceus' arc. They wrote golden letters inside the different works, recording the events of entire worlds in their pages. The shelves spiraled high into the canopy and low into the roots, spreading even into the branches.

In front of Arceus was a table with designs of all the Pokémon he had created, interwoven with humans amongst them, all beautifully intertwined. A thick tome lay on top of the table, its last few pages being written into by several threads.

As the last words trailed onto the paper, Arceus said, ***"All may be brought to happiness as long as they follow my direction, one of peace and love. Treat others like yourself; a simple, yet powerful way to live. If all follow these words, evil shall be no more. Some who follow my words—the most devoted and worthy—may earn the privilege to learn my works, and to create worlds of their own."***

He closed the book, and another materialized next to it, its pages blank. ***"The children of Equivos live on with their Keeper and Priestess. Their story has ended, only for another to begin."*** His lights began writing rapidly inside as he stamped his foot.

"My word shall never die, and my work shall never end."

End of Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Unequivocal