

Tough Times
Part II
by Havoc

Even at night, the center of Veilstone City was as bright as day. The many businesses and buildings that remained open well into the early morning hours always had lights on, and of course the lampposts that lined the streets were lit as well. As a consequence, people who lived in the downtown area usually had to pull blinds down on their windows if they wanted to sleep. Even then, the noise could sometimes get a little overbearing for all but the heaviest of sleepers.

The same was not true of the outskirts of Veilstone, where Edwin and Valene's apartment building was located. They lived in a very quiet area of the city that could be said to truly have a night, as opposed to the bustling city center. Most people would see this as an advantage for a young couple with a newborn child, since the darkness and quiet made for a rather pleasant sleeping environment.

Aurelia, the child in question, disagreed.

Ed sat up as he heard crying again. "You've got to be kidding," he said. "Is this what every night is going to be like?" This interruption was the third time his daughter had started wailing, and it was only the first night she had been home!

Val woke up next to him, and groaned tiredly. "That child...", she complained. "She sleep so much yesterday. Why so difficult now?"

"Better go see what she wants," Ed said.

"Why Val?"

"Because I went last time."

Grumbling, the weary Zangoose got out of bed and walked out of the room. She followed the cries to Aurelia's room and looked into the crib. The infant stopped crying as soon as she saw Val, and laughed as her mother reached in and picked her up.

Yes, you woke up your mother, Val said in her own language. *You're a very funny baby.* She went to the chair that was situated in the corner of the room and sat down with Aurelia. *But this joke is getting a little less funny each time you tell it. What do I have to do to get you to stay asleep?* Aurelia peered up at Val, moonlight streaming into the window and glinting off of her peculiar green eyes. Val smiled a little. *What if I

sing for you? Edwin used to sing me this song when I was little and couldn't sleep.* She started to sing a soft, almost bouncy tune. She had heard the lullaby so many times as a child that she could remember every single word in English:

*Ho-ro-ro, hi-ri-ri
Sleep until dawn*

*Oh, hush thee, my baby,
Thy sire was a knight,
Thy mother a lady,
Both lovely and bright;
The woods and the glens,
From the towers we see,
They all are belonging,
Dear baby, to thee.
Oh, hush thee, my baby,
Thy sire was a knight,
Oh, hush thee, my baby,
So bonnie and bright.*

*Ho-ro-ro, hi-ri-ri
Sleep until dawn*

*Oh, fear not the bugle,
Tho' loudly it blows,
It calls but the warders
That guard thy repose;
Their bows would be bended,
Their blades would be red,
Ere the step of a foeman
Draws near to thy bed.
Oh, hush thee, my baby,
Thy sire was a knight,
Oh, hush thee, my baby,
So bonnie, so bright.*

When the song ended, Aurelia was fast asleep in Val's arms. She had put one of her claws in her mouth, the same way that a human baby would suck on her thumb. Val gently pulled the claw out. It was a dangerous habit to develop for someone who would soon have claws that could cut through metal. Aurelia didn't notice.

"Pretty song."

Val turned her head. Ed was standing in the doorway, watching her. "My

favorite,” Val said.

“I didn’t think you’d remember it,” Ed said. “It was a long time ago.”

“Val never forget.”

Ed nodded towards Aurelia. “How’s she doing?”

Val looked back down at their daughter. “Sleeping. For now.” She looked back to Ed. “Edwin go back to sleep. I stay here a little longer.”

“All right.” Ed walked back down the hall. Val heard the bedroom door creak open, and then latch closed as he went inside.

Aurelia turned her head, rubbing it against Val’s shoulder in her sleep. Val bent down and kissed her softly on the nose.

Precious.

On the street that was located outside of Ed and Val’s building, a dark gray van drove up, running without lights. The van stopped at the curb near the front door to the building. A door slid open on the side, and an oddly dressed woman emerged. She was wearing a combination of a black body suit and a gray skirt and boots. Her hair was a riotous contrast to her clothing; she sported an almost spherical hairdo with a spike protruding from the top, in a very bright red color. Two men hopped out of the van behind her. They were dressed in similar, but more masculine, clothing.

“Are you ready?” the woman asked, not turning around to face the men.

“Yes, ma’am,” they answered in unison.

The woman nodded. “Well, then. Let’s go get what we came for.”

Certain that Aurelia was finally asleep for good, Val replaced her in her crib. She lingered for a moment. Her little face looked so peaceful, unburdened by any sort of worry. Val envied that. She couldn’t remember the last time she hadn’t had some kind of stress. She supposed it must have been when she was as young as Aurelia. In the middle of that thought, she suddenly caught a faint whiff of smoke. Not like from a fire. More like smoldering paper.

A soft noise came from behind her. “Edwin?” she asked, starting to turn.

To her shock, a hand holding a cloth clamped down over her mouth, while both of

her wrists were pulled roughly behind her back. She had a split second to wildly wonder what was going on before she noted the sharp smell of some chemical. Then her vision went blurry, and she blacked out.

Ed woke up again to the sound of crying. He sighed. Aurelia must have woken up yet again. He supposed he'd better go help Val this time. Maybe two parents would help her sleep better than one. He swung his legs off of the bed, but stopped when he heard a whispering voice. A voice that did not belong to Val.

Getting out of bed quietly, Ed went to the dresser, on top of which sat the poké balls that contained his show pokémon. He selected the ball belonging to Li Ming, his Raichu. Gripping the ball firmly in his hand, he went to the bedroom door. He could barely hear feet shuffling along the thick carpet out in the hall. Slowly, Ed turned the doorknob and eased it open, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. He crept into the hallway.

Down the hall, walking to the open front door, were three figures dressed in the strangest clothing Ed had ever seen. There appeared to be two men and one woman. The men were unremarkable, but the woman had hair in what had to be the brightest red in the world. Ed could still hear Aurelia crying, but he was distracted by the intruders.

Outraged that someone would dare to break into his home, Ed mashed the button on Li Ming's ball, releasing the strong Electric-type into the hallway. "You three, stop right there!" he called. "Or you'll get a taste of what my Raichu can dish out!" Uncertain of the situation, but recognizing the seriousness of the tone in her master's voice, Li Ming suited actions to his words and let a warning crackle of electricity tingle over her yellow cheek sacs.

The woman stopped, her back rigidly straight. "I wouldn't, if I were you," she said, slowly turning around. The men turned with her. It was at that moment that Ed realized that the sound of Aurelia's cries was not coming from her room.

The woman was holding his daughter.

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing with my d-...with Aurelia?" Ed growled.

"Well, my real name would be of little use to you," the woman said, a sneer on

her face. "But you can call me Mars. And as for the child, we're taking her. I daresay we have more use for her than you do."

"You put her down, or I'll-"

"You'll what? Attack us?" Mars laughed. "Go ahead, if you don't mind hurting the child. We could get just as much information as we require from her corpse, but of course we would prefer her alive. As I'm sure you would as well."

Ed snarled and Li Ming hissed, but neither of them made a move. As long as this Mars woman was holding Aurelia as a shield, they could do nothing.

"That's a good boy," Mars said, her voice a taunting singsong. "You just stay right there and don't worry your little head. Who knows? We just might return the child in one piece if you cooperate." A sinister smile spread across her face. "But follow us and I guarantee that the child won't live long enough to see her mother again." She turned again, and carried Aurelia out of the apartment. Her henchmen stayed for a second, to make sure that Ed was not going after her, and then they left as well.

Letting out a roar of frustration, Ed smashed a fist into the wall beside him. He ran to the window, and saw the trio of kidnappers climb into a van, which sped away into the night. He turned away, his head spinning. Li Ming looked at him, her face full of guilt.

"Don't feel bad, Li Ming," Ed said. "You couldn't have done anything without hurting Aurelia." He froze as he realized something. "Val! Where's Val?" He ran to Aurelia's bedroom. "Val!" His mate was lying on the floor, not moving. He knelt beside her and propped her back up. She was unconscious but breathing. After a few seconds, she began to stir, and soon her eyes fluttered open. The Zangoose flinched away from Ed's arms.

"No!" she screamed. "Stay away..."

"Val, calm down!" Ed said. "It's me! It's Edwin!"

"Edwin?" Val relaxed, but stiffened a moment later. "Aurelia?"

Ed wasn't able to meet her eyes. "I tried to stop them, but..."

"No..." Val's eyes filled with tears. She bent double, clutching her stomach as though she had been punched in the gut. She launched into a tirade of anguished cries in her own language. Ed couldn't understand all of it, but he recognized the words

“daughter”, “stolen,” and “Aurelia.”

Realizing what needed to be done, Ed stood up. He left Val with Li Ming, and went into the living room. Lifting the phone from where it sat on a corner table, he dialed a number. He listened as the phone rang twice, and then someone on the other end of the line picked up.

“I need to report a kidnapping.”

The nurse was out of sorts, and completely confused by what was going on. In the middle of the night, without any sort of warning at all, a woman from Team Galactic had showed up at the Pokémon Center and ordered her to leave. She had been instructed to bring supplies listed on a scrap of paper that the woman had handed her. The nurse was taken aback. She had been operating under the assumption that her role was done once she had given them information about the strange Zangoose that had come into the Center. After all, that was all they had told her to do all those years back, when she was offered money to keep an eye out for unusual pokémon. But she was told that if she wanted her payment, she would have to go along with what they wanted.

Now she was sitting in a locked room in the building that the Galactic woman had brought her to, her leg shackled to a bolted-down chair, waiting to find out what they wanted to do. The room was painted in dark blue and had a forbidding atmosphere. There were a few tables, and a small padded box that for some reason did not look like it was an original part of the room. She was beginning to doubt the wisdom of agreeing to come here. The money was beginning to seem less and less attractive. Just as she was considering banging on the door to try to be let out, the lock clicked and the door swung open. A red-headed woman that the nurse had never seen before walked in.

“Hello, miss,” she said. “It’s so nice to finally meet you in person.”

The nurse stood up, nearly tripping over the chain that kept her in place. “You must be Commander Mars,” she said. “I recognize your voice from the phone.”

“Correct.”

“Why am I here?”

Mars waved a hand over her shoulder. A Galactic member came into the room carrying something. The nurse saw that he was carrying the Zangoose that had been born

at the Pokémon Center just the day before.

“This little one is called Aurelia. You’re here to tend to this creature while she is...in our care.” Mars smiled. “Cyrus has been very interested to learn more about her since you informed us of her mother’s unusual pregnancy.” She gestured to the man holding the baby pokémon and he walked over to the nurse. The nurse held out her hands and accepted the Zangoose kitten. “We’ve already noticed something very odd, just from looking at her.”

“The fur?” the nurse asked, carefully cradling the baby. She looked at the pokémon’s golden-brown stripe patterns. “That’s nothing. She’ll grow out of it.”

“Not the fur,” Mars said. “The eyes.”

The nurse looked at the terrified pokémon’s face. “Why...they’re human eyes! Green human eyes.”

“Indeed.”

“But what could have caused that?”

Mars went to one of the tables and rummaged around in a drawer underneath. “To figure that out, we’ll have to run a few tests,” she said. She withdrew a small plastic case from the drawer. The Galactic Commander moved to the nurse’s side and opened the case. Inside were three hypodermic needles. She selected one and closed the case. “To do that, we need a blood sample.”

Aurelia started to wail at the sight of the medical implement, somehow sensing that the unfamiliar thing was bad. She shied away as Mars came closer, trying as hard as a baby can to get away from the perceived danger. She buried her face in the nurse’s shoulder. Mars grasped her left arm in one hand, and readied the needle. Suddenly, Aurelia swiped out with her free paw. Mars yelped in pain and jerked back, a thin red line appearing on the back of her right hand. She hadn’t expected the kitten’s claws to be that sharp already.

“Little weasel!” she growled. “You’re lucky you’re of use to us, or I’d...”

“She can’t help it,” the nurse protested. “You’re scaring the poor thing.”

“Just hold her still!”

Afraid of what the dangerous woman might do if she refused, the nurse complied. She held Aurelia tightly, pinning her right arm to her chest. Mars took the baby’s left arm

again and this time successfully inserted the needle. While Aurelia whimpered pitifully, Mars drew a full sample of blood. She capped the needle.

“That’s done,” she said, pocketing the sample. “Now, you brought all of the supplies requested, correct?”

“Yes,” the nurse replied, looking to the bag that she’d carried with her. “Pillow, blanket, and several days’ worth of baby pokémon formula. It’s all there.”

“Good. Keep the little brat relatively comfortable. We’d like her as calm as possible throughout all this. Do that and you’ll be rewarded as promised.” Mars turned and left the room, followed closely by the man who had come in after her. The door closed and locked behind her.

Aurelia cried loudly as soon as the woman was gone. She struggled in the nurse’s arms, thoroughly scared by everything that was happening. The nurse rocked her gently, trying her best to comfort the upset pokémon.

“I know that was scary,” she said. She was fast regretting ever getting involved with Team Galactic. “Just try to calm down. This will be over eventually.”

“And you’re sure they were from Team Galactic?”

“For the sixth time, yes!” Ed shouted. He was sitting in the living room with Val. It was morning now, and the sky outside was quickly growing lighter. Val had been crying for the last six hours, and he hadn’t been able to do anything to console her. Standing in front of them were two Veilstone police officers. They’d already looked around the apartment and now they were questioning Ed about what had gone on. “I told you already, I saw them very clearly. They were wearing the uniforms, they had the stupid little ‘G’ on their chests, they were from Team Galactic! It was a woman and two men.” He looked between the two officers. “You’re wasting time here when you could be out finding Aurelia!”

The officers looked at each other. “Son, Team Galactic is a much respected non-profit energy research corporation,” the one who had last spoken said. “Haven’t you seen them on the news? You must be mistaken about what you saw.”

“No, I’m not!” Ed insisted. “And I don’t care what the goddamn news says, *they were Team Galactic!*”

“Sure,” the other cop said, disbelief evident on his face. “Whatever you-”

From the direction of the front door came the sound of someone clearing their throat. All eyes turned that way. Standing in the doorway, still open because the door had physically been broken, was a tall, handsome man, with brown hair and piercing black eyes. He wore a brown trench coat over a black suit, and a frog-like Croagunk stood at his side.

“Who the hell are you?” the first cop asked. “This is a crime scene.”

The newcomer entered the apartment, and reached into his coat. He pulled out an identification folder, which he flashed at the police officers. “It’s my crime scene now. Take a hike.”

The cops looked at each other again. The second one shrugged. “Suit yourself. Less paperwork for us.” Both of the officers collected their things and left the apartment. The man in the suit watched them go, and then looked down at Ed and Val.

“Sorry about those local punks,” he said. “You’re not likely to get anywhere working with them. Team Galactic has the chief of police in their pockets.” He turned his head, taking in the surroundings. “I came as soon as I heard about what happened. I don’t have as many contacts in Veilstone as I’d like, but I have enough to know generally what goes on here.”

“Uh...who *are* you?” Ed asked, taken aback by how much the man seemed to know, considering he’d only just arrived. “And how do you know what happened?”

“Like I said, I have sources.” The man turned his eyes back to Ed. “As for who I am, I can’t tell you my real name. But you can call me by my code name: ‘Looker.’ I’m a detective with the Global Police.”

“The Global Police?”

“You may not have heard of us,” Looker said. “We’re kind of like a police department for the whole world. I work with the organized crime unit. A few years ago, I worked with the team that was working on pinning down Team Rocket in Kanto and Johto. Would have got them, too, if a couple of kids hadn’t taken care of them first.” He grabbed one of the living room chairs and pulled it up to the couch, sitting down. “For the past year, though, I’ve been focusing on Team Galactic. Officially, they’re like that amateur said: a non-profit group working on deriving forms of alternative energy through

advanced pokémon research. Legal and legitimate. But we've been collecting evidence that suggests they have some more sinister activities that the public isn't aware of. And it looks as though they just added kidnapping to that list.

"But enough about who I am. Right now I need you to tell me everything that happened here. Down to the last detail. Even if you think something is unimportant, tell me anyway. I'll be the judge of what's pertinent and what isn't."

Taking a deep breath, Ed launched into the same story that he'd told the local police. He recounted everything from waking up hearing Aurelia's crying to when the three kidnappers had walked out of the apartment. When he was finished, Looker nodded slowly.

"So you saw a woman with red hair. She doesn't sound familiar, but from the way you describe how she acted she sounds like she might be one of the higher-ups, and we've had trouble cracking their upper echelon." Looker crossed one leg over the other. His Croagunk, sitting in a chair next to him, imitated his posture. "And they drove off in a van. I don't suppose you managed to get a good look at the license plate?"

Ed shook his head. "It was still dark, and the van was too far away."

Looker frowned. "And you've told me everything? There's nothing else? No details that might have seemed trivial at the time?"

"Smell."

Ed and Looker both turned their heads to Val. "What did you say?" Looker asked.

"Smell." Val sniffed and looked up for the first time since the police had arrived. "Val remember strange smell. Smell it right before I pass out."

"Probably whatever chemical it was that they knocked you out with," Looker said.

"No, different kind of smell." Val struggled to recall exactly what it had reminded her of. "Smell like...something burning. Smoke. Paper burning."

A sudden expression of clarity passed over Looker's face. "I think I might know what you smelled." He stood up. "Wait here a moment." The detective rushed out of the apartment. He was gone for only a minute before he came back in. Ed and Val could see that he was holding something between two fingers. "I saw this when I was walking in. It was on the ground next to the door leading into the building. I thought it was just a piece

of litter, but it might be something more.” He held the object out so they could see.

Ed reached out and took the item. “A...cigarette butt?”

Looker nodded. “The cops must have missed it. Val, give that cigarette a smell.”

Val took the cigarette butt from Ed and sniffed it. “Same smell!” she exclaimed, her eyes widening.

Looker appeared triumphant. “One of the goons who broke into your apartment must have been a smoker,” he said. “He got sloppy and dropped the evidence right before, or right after, kidnapping little Aurelia. Being a smoker, of course, the smell of his brand would be infused in any clothes he’s had for a certain period of time. Val, you obviously caught a whiff of it before they took you out of the picture.”

“But how does this help us?” Ed wanted to know. “Can you find the people who took Aurelia from this cigarette?”

“Not directly,” Looker said carefully. “We could probably get DNA off of the filter end, but without something to compare it to that would be a dead end. And regardless, the closest crime lab is the one right here in Veilstone City, and apart from being a corrupt department the lab is backlogged like you wouldn’t believe. We wouldn’t get the results of the test for months.” He scratched his cheek. “Fingerprints are a no-go as well. You don’t hold a cigarette in such a way as would leave a workable print. No, the real way that this clue can help is actually through Val’s nose.”

Ed and Val met this statement with incredulity. “Val’s...nose?” Val asked.

“Right,” Looker said. “Your nose.” When he saw they didn’t understand, he explained a little more. “You see, the smell that you smelled is going to be unique to the person you smelled it on. Even someone who smokes the same brand isn’t going to smell quite the same as the person who attacked you. That means that if we run across that person, you, Val, will be able to tell.”

“Oh,” Val said, understanding.

“But how do we find one person out of the thousands that live in Veilstone City?” Ed asked.

“Ed, you just have to know where to look.” Looker tapped his chest. “And looking is what I’m best at. The perp was from Team Galactic, so logic dictates that the first place we look is the Galactic Veilstone Building.” He stood up. “If you’ll agree to

accompany me, Val, I think you and I should go have a look-see.”

Val was off the couch in a flash. “I do anything you want,” she said, fire in her eyes. “I go anywhere you say.”

“Good.”

“What about me?” Ed asked.

Looker adjusted his coat. “You stay here. It’s not what I’d call likely, but there’s a slim possibility that the people who kidnapped Aurelia will try to contact you. For ransom, or just to taunt you, or whatever. If that happens, someone needs to be here to take that call.” He reached into a pocket in his coat and took out a small device. He handed it to Ed. “Use this to record a call if you get one. I’ll leave my Croagunk here with you. He can show you how to use it if the need arises.” He started for the door, with Val in tow.

“One more thing,” Ed called. “Why are you helping us like this?”

Looker turned back around. “You don’t want my help?”

“No, I didn’t say that. But, it seems like you could get Team Galactic any number of ways. Why are you doing it by helping us?”

“Fair question.” Looker considered Ed with something that looked like respect. “I’ve seen all kinds of things in my career. People use pokémon in really horrible ways in this world. I’ve seen criminals do things to pokémon that you wouldn’t think of even in your wildest nightmares.” Looker’s Croagunk nodded solemnly. “The things that Team Rocket did...listen to me. What Team Rocket did to pokémon was awful, but if the rumors I hear are true, Team Galactic is a thousand times worse. I don’t know what they intend to do with Aurelia, but whatever it is, no matter what the goal is, one way or another it’s going to be bad. And I’ll do whatever I can to make sure that not one more little innocent pokémon gets hurt by scum like them.”

With that, Looker left, taking Val with him. Ed sat back on the couch, putting his faith in the detective, and in Val.

Mars walked into research and development wing of the Galactic Veilstone Building, and walked past the normal experiments to a door that required a special key to unlock. She pulled out the keycard that high-ranking officers of Team Galactic were

given and swiped it through the keypad. She was prompted for her passcode, and she entered it. The light on the door flashed green and it slid open, allowing her to go through. She was barely through the door when it slid closed behind her again, locking once more. Inside the secret area was a host of Team Galactic scientists working around the clock on the most top-secret projects that her organization was involved in.

The commander headed for one station in particular. There, a woman wearing a gray and black bodysuit similar to Mars's own clothing was watching a scientist working with several high-tech analysis machines. She had purple hair with two ponytails, one on top of her head and the other at the back of her head. The woman heard Mars approach and straightened up, turning towards her.

"Mars," she said, nodding.

"Jupiter." Mars looked to the scientist. "How's it coming?"

Jupiter shrugged. "We are making some progress. The blood sample you provided was enough for us to run several tests at once." She laid a hand on the scientist's shoulder. "How much longer before you can provide us with the full results?"

"It may take a while, Commander," the scientist said. "The software is detecting some...abnormalities in the subject's DNA structure. If this was a pure sample it would already be finished, but the subject does not appear to be a full-blooded Zangoose."

"Hmm...not unheard of," Mars said. "It's long been known that many species of pokémon can interbreed. What is your estimate of the time remaining?"

"Tough to say. But I wouldn't imagine it being any later than tomorrow morning. We're dedicating this bank of units here to work exclusively on this project."

"Acceptable," Jupiter said. "Very well, good work so far." She looked back up at Mars. "You will inform Cyrus of the project status, yes?"

Mars nodded. "That's what I came down for. He's most interested in how this turns out. If you'll excuse me, then." She turned away from the pair and left the sequestered room, heading for the main area of the building to report to her boss.

Val got into a car with Looker, and they drove away from the apartment building and into the downtown area of Veilstone City. Looker drove at a fast pace, and buildings flashed by as they traveled through the streets. At one point, Val saw the enormous

Veilstone Department Store, where Ed worked. Before too long, the detective pulled into a parking lot outside of a tall, impressive-looking structure.

“This is it,” Looker said, stopping the car and shutting off the engine. He peered out the window. “The Galactic Veilstone Building. A monument to crime in plain sight of the general public.” They got out of the car and walked up to the building.

“Um, is front door best idea?” Val asked nervously.

“It’s no problem,” Looker assured her. “People visit this place all the time. It’s the mark of a good cover. When normal people are permitted to walk in and out, nobody would suspect that anything illegal goes on here. The building is open to the public at all times.” He amended his statement a moment later. “Well, the ground floor at least. That’s where the information desk is. You have to be an ‘employee’ to go higher up.”

They entered the enormous building and strode into the lobby. People in suits were walking about everywhere. There was an information desk in the center of the expansive floor, and potted plants dotted the area. Looker led Val to the information desk, where an attractive young woman in business dress was sitting.

“Can I help you?” she asked politely.

“I’d like to speak with one of your superiors, if I may,” Looker replied. “There are some questions I have.”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. “All interviews require an appointment. I could relay a message though, if you’d like.”

Looker sighed and dug around in his coat pocket. He pulled out his ID folder and showed it to the woman. Her reaction was both immediate and telling. When she saw the ID, she paled. Looker nodded slowly. “That’s right. You know who I am, don’t you? Your superiors, please.”

“One...one moment.” The woman lifted a phone.

In an office on the top floor of the Galactic Building, a man was looking over some paper files. Like his compatriots, he was another peculiar character. He wore a uniform typical of Team Galactic: black pants, black shirt, and a gray vest. He had his blue hair done in an odd style, with two “horns” sweeping up from the sides and forming a crescent shape with the top of his head. While he was in the middle of signing some

important documents, his office phone rang.

He picked it up. "This is Commander Saturn," he said. "And I'm very busy right now. This had better be important."

"Sir, there's a man here. And he has a Zangoose with him."

"And this concerns me how, exactly?"

"Sir, it's..." The female voice on the other end of the line lowered almost to a whisper. "...*him*."

A chill went up Saturn's spine. "*Looker?*" he hissed. "What the hell is he doing here?" He paused for a moment. "Wait, did you say there was a Zangoose with him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Dammit. Mars fouled up again somehow, I just know it!"

"What should I tell him?"

Saturn thought hard for a few minutes. He couldn't just have them make the Global Police detective leave the building. That would arouse too much suspicion. But letting him stay might be even worse. Then again, as long as he wasn't shown anywhere except the places that Saturn wanted him to see...

"Tell him someone will be down shortly," Saturn said. "I'll see him."

"Sir, is...is that a good idea? Shouldn't Cyrus be-"

"I won't bother him with something like this," Saturn insisted. "I can handle him."

The woman at the desk hung up her phone. "Someone will be down to take you up to Mr. Saturn shortly," she said, forcing a smile onto her face. "You can have a seat just over there." She indicated some chairs a short distance from the information desk.

"Thank you, no," Looker said. "I'll wait here." He turned his back to the woman and leaned back with his elbows on the desktop. Val tapped her claws rhythmically on the desk, impatience and worry for her daughter ripping at her heart. After a few minutes, Looker straightened up. A man in the spacesuit-like uniform of a Team Galactic member was walking across the lobby towards them. When he got close, Looker noticed that Val's nose pricked up and the fur on the back of her neck bristled. He dropped a hand down to his side and jerked it slightly, telling her to calm down.

“Hello,” the man said. “Welcome to the Galactic Veilstone Building. If you’ll follow me, I’ll take you up to Mr. Saturn’s office.” The man led Looker and Val to a set of elevators at the back of the lobby. They went inside, and the elevators began to ascend.

In the enclosed space, even Looker was able to smell the smoke on the man. That, combined with Val’s reaction when he had gotten close to them, meant that this must be one of the people who had kidnapped Aurelia. He glanced down at Val. She was staring right at the man’s back, as if trying to judge the best place to insert her claws, and was growling quietly. Looker nudged her with his elbow, and the growling ceased, but the malevolence remained in her eyes. Finally, the elevator halted at the top floor, and the doors opened onto a long hallway with doors spaced at even intervals, ending with a set of double doors directly opposite from where they were presently located. The man showed them down the hall, and Looker thought that they would be going through the double doors until they stopped at the last door on the left. He opened the door, and waved Looker and Val inside.

The office that they stepped into was very opulent, finished with a rich red wood and furnished with plush chairs. Books lined shelves set into the walls, and unless it was Looker’s imagination he could hear classical music playing gently in the background, although he could not see speakers anywhere.

The occupant of the office rose from behind his desk. “Good morning,” the man greeted them. “I am Mr. Saturn, the chief financial officer for Team Galactic.”

“It’s interesting to meet you, Mr. Saturn,” Looker said. “You can call me Looker. I’m a detective with the Global Police, and I have a few questions I’d like to ask you, if you can spare a few minutes of your time.”

“Please, sit,” Saturn said, gesturing to two chairs sitting in front of his desk. Looker and Val sat down, and Saturn sat back down behind his desk, lacing his fingers together. “I’m afraid I don’t know what the Global Police might want with us, but I’ll certainly listen to what you have to say.”

Looker nodded. “I’m investigating a kidnapping that occurred late last night,” he said. “A very young Zangoose was abducted from a local apartment, and eyewitness accounts indicate that someone from your organization was involved in the crime.”

“A kidnapping? How...terrible.” Saturn leaned forward. “And who might this

witness be?”

Looker snorted briefly with laughter. “Well, I’d be pretty big idiot to tell you that,” the detective said. “Suffice to say, I find the witness very credible. Mainly because he described the peculiar uniforms your...employees wear to a T, or rather to a G, I should say.”

“Oh, that’s hardly compelling evidence, Mr. Looker,” Saturn scoffed. “Anyone who watches television could describe that uniform.”

“The witness also described having a brief exchange of words with a red-headed woman who seemed to be an authority figure of some sort in your organization. Does that ring any bells?”

Saturn’s congenial expression seemed to have become fixed. “I’m afraid not, Mr. Looker. But there are many people in our organization. Many people, in many places.” His voice was slowly taking on a more sinister tone. “It’s entirely possible that there may be someone like that who I’ve never personally met.”

“Then you acknowledge that such a person was present for the incident in question?”

“Did I say that?” Saturn asked. “I’m merely stating that I don’t know everyone who works under me.”

Looker rubbed his chin. “Another question, Mr. Saturn. What sort of research is your organization presently engaged in?”

“I’m afraid I can’t discuss that.”

“Why not?” Looker asked, appearing surprised. “Isn’t your company officially working on projects that are to be beneficial to the general public?”

“Yes, but any research grants that we may receive from government sources depend on our research remaining exclusive to my company. And if any details of that research get out, those funds could be placed in jeopardy.”

“But you do your research on-site?”

“Well, naturally,” Saturn said. “We have an extensive research and development division here in Veilstone City.” He glanced at his watch. “And now, Mr. Looker, I’m afraid other business requires my attention. The gentleman who showed you up will escort you back to the lobby. I wish you luck in your investigation.”

Val and Looker were shown out of the building, and they began the walk back to Looker's car. Val looked back when they were about twenty yards from the front entrance. The Galactic member who had escorted them out was still standing at the door, making sure that they were really leaving.

"What was the point?" Val asked. "Not learn anything."

"Actually, we learned everything," Looker said. At a curious look from Val, he explained. "The man that you smelled before was there. That solidifies the conclusion, even though there wasn't much doubt, that it was Team Galactic that kidnapped your daughter. Since he's still here, it's pretty safe to conclude that the other people who were involved are here as well." They got to his car and closed the doors. "And the most important thing: what 'Mr. Saturn' said confirms what I've suspected for a while now, and that's that Team Galactic does all of its research here in their Veilstone City headquarters. And since now we know that, I'm certain that your daughter is in that building right now." At that, Val began tangling with the seat belt in a frenzied effort to get out of the car, but Looker reached over and held her back. "Don't. It would be pointless right now to try to do anything. They'd stop you for sure, and then you'd be in no position to help your daughter."

"Not going to just let them have her!" Val growled, still struggling against the detective's grip.

Looker shook his head. "No, we're not," he said. "But now is not the time. It would be best to wait for nightfall, when we can slip in without being noticed and sneak her out. I can kill two birds with one stone that way. While we rescue Aurelia, I can be gathering evidence to use against Team Galactic."

Reluctantly, Val settled down in her seat, still looking towards the evil building. "Fine," she said.

Looker got a cell phone out and began dialing. "But before we do anything, I'm calling Ed to let him know what's going on." He lifted the phone to his ear. "We'll need him tonight for what we're going to do."

Ed hadn't moved much from the couch since Val had left with Looker. He'd tried

to fix the door, but the Team Galactic kidnappers had practically dismantled the lock while breaking in, so he hadn't made much progress. Looker's Croagunk was no source of diversion, either. He just sat on the chair across from the couch, with that cheeky smirk that pokémon of that species seemed to perpetually wear.

Suddenly, the phone rang, making Ed leap about three feet straight up from his seat. He ran for the phone. The Croagunk followed, grabbing up the recorder in case Ed needed it.

"Hello?" Ed said into the phone breathlessly.

"Ed? Looker."

"Oh," Ed said, relaxing a little bit. "What's going on? Have you found Aurelia?"

"Yes and no. We know where she is, roughly, but getting to her is another matter."

Ed shook his head at the Croagunk, who was offering up the recorder. "What do you mean?"

"We can get her back, but we're going to have to do something kind of...illegal to do it. We'll need to break into the Galactic Veilstone Building."

"Okay," Ed said, without any hesitation whatsoever.

"Think about this, now. I don't have a warrant, so if we get caught we could get in a hell of a lot of trouble."

"Is Val going in?"

"Yeah."

"Then if Val's going, I'm going, too."

"She told me you'd say that. Okay then, it's about eleven now, so meet us one block north of the building twelve hours from now. And bring your strongest pokémon with you. My Croagunk will stay behind to keep an eye on your place, since it's kind of vulnerable right now."

"Wait!" Ed said. "I'm just supposed to wait here for twelve hours? Where are you guys going to be?"

"I figured we'd hole up in a restaurant nearby and while away the hours. If you get bored, well, my Croagunk likes to arm wrestle. See how long you can hold up against him. But I warn you, he can get kind of competitive." With that, Looker hung up.

A little frustrated, Ed put the phone down. He looked at Looker's Croagunk.

“Know any ways to pass the time that *don’t* involve arm wrestling?”

The Croagunk widened his smirk and shook his head.

Late that night, when darkness, or what passed for darkness in Veilstone City, had fallen, Looker parked his car on the side of the street in the location he had told Ed about. He and Val only had to wait a few minutes before Ed approached them, materializing rather startlingly out of an alleyway.

Looker rolled down his window. “Evening, Ed,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

“My shoulder hurts,” Ed said.

“I told you he was competitive. Did you bring a strong pokémon like I asked you to?”

Ed produced a poké ball from his pocket. “I brought Kennedy, my Kadabra.”

“Good choice. Okay, if we’re all ready, let’s get going. We walk from here. Just follow my lead.”

Looker and Val got out of the car. Val took a moment to hug Ed, and then they followed Looker down the street. The Galactic Veilstone Building loomed menacingly in front of them.

“How are you holding up?” Ed asked Val.

“Okay,” Val said. “Angry, but okay.”

“I’m pretty angry, too,” Ed said. “But we’ve got plenty of time to be angry afterwards.”

“Right,” Val said. “Need to focus on Aurelia now.”

Nobody said anything else until they were near the building. Once they were close, Looker told them all to crouch down behind some bushes. He spent a few minutes looking at the building.

“There’s a back door over there,” he said, pointing. “I don’t see any cameras or anything back here.” He dug around in the dirt near his feet. “Let’s do a little test.” He picked up a rock about the size of a human fist and hefted it for a moment. Then the detective threw it through the air. The rock landed a few feet away from the rear wall. He waited a few minutes. “Doesn’t seem as though there are any motion sensors, either. All right, let’s do this.”

Following Looker's lead, Ed and Val ran across the gap between the bushes and the building. When they got to the door, they flattened against the wall. Looker tested the doorknob, and found that it was locked securely. Not to be deterred, the detective reached into a pocket and pulled out a small set of lockpicks. After half a minute of concentrated work, he had the door open and they were inside.

"Alright," Looker whispered. "Ed, go ahead and let your Kadabra out." Ed did as he said, and the trio was joined by Kennedy, Ed's male Kadabra. "Now, there don't seem to be any directional signs on the walls, but I'd bet that the areas that Team Galactic doesn't want anyone to know about are near the top of the building. Let's head in that general direction and see what we run across." From beneath his coat, Looker drew a rather large handgun. "And if we run into any Team Galactic goons, I'm pretty sure I'll be able to convince them to give us more useful directions."

The group of four began to walk through the halls. The building was eerily quiet, and Ed and Val kept expecting someone or something to jump out at them from every corner, like it was some sort of video game or something. Every few minutes, Looker would pause and use a little can of what looked like clear hair spray. When Val asked what he was doing, Looker explained that he was checking to see if there were laser trip alarms in their path. He didn't spray everywhere, though, so Ed figured he had some experience in figuring out the likely places that they would be. Fortunately, they didn't run into any, which led Ed to realize that Team Galactic was so firmly established that they felt like they didn't need the security measures someone else might have deemed prudent. And while he thought that was rather arrogant of them, it also scared the hell out of him.

After climbing up several flights of stairs, walking through what seemed like miles of hallway, and not finding anything, Ed and Val began to despair of making any sort of progress at all. Then, all of a sudden, Looker held his hand up. They all halted and remained silent. Straining their ears, they could hear someone talking. They only heard one voice, so it sounded like someone was on a phone. The voice was coming from an office just ahead of them, and light was flooding from the crack between the bottom of the door and the floor. Looker and the rest of the group crept up to the office door and put their backs to the wall. Apparently, the conversation came to a close, because they heard

what sounded like a phone receiver being replaced on the cradle. Footsteps approached the door, and the doorknob turned. The door swung open towards Looker so that the detective was hidden behind the door from whoever was emerging. When the person came into view, they all could see that it was a run-of-the-mill Galactic grunt, probably finishing up some late-night work before going home, or wherever it was that Galactic grunts went when they weren't at work.

The woman had yet to see any of them, and Looker coolly placed the barrel of his gun against the back of her head. "Hold it right there," he said. "Don't turn around. Don't make any sudden motions."

Slowly, the woman put her hands into the air. She was visibly shaking. "What do you want?"

"Take us to where you people do all your research," Looker ordered. "And not the stuff that's already public knowledge. I want you to take me to the place where you're keeping the pokémon you people kidnapped last night."

"I...I don't know what you're-"

"Don't you lie to me," Looker said. He thumbed back the hammer on his pistol to let her know he was serious. "I have a charming young Zangoose here who is just itching to get her claws on people like you. And I'd hate to have to unleash her because I felt you weren't being entirely truthful with me." Val snarled viciously, obviously daring Looker to tell her she should attack the woman.

"Okay, okay!" the Galactic grunt half-shouted. "I'll take you! Just don't hurt me, please!"

Looker smiled. "That's a good girl. No tricks, now."

The nurse had finally gotten the little Zangoose to fall asleep after a very long day. The padded box that had been furnished for the purpose now held the baby, with the blanket and pillow that she had been ordered to bring providing extra bedding. Someone had been in twice to bring her food, and Aurelia had been fed once with the formula that had been taken from the Pokémon Center. Team Galactic members had been back a few times to make sure the nurse was not entertaining any notions of leaving, and to check that the child was still in the room. They needn't have bothered; Aurelia was too scared to

do much of anything besides cry and try to make herself as small as possible.

Just when the nurse was about to fall into an uneasy sleep, the lock rattled and the door opened. The woman who had been introduced as Jupiter came in, closing the door behind her.

“What is it now?” the nurse asked. “When do I get to leave?”

Jupiter smiled. “You’ll be leaving shortly,” she said. “The results from our testing have just been sent to Cyrus, and we are waiting for what he concludes from them. In the meantime, we have decided to move the child to a different location, and you’re going with her.”

“What? I most certainly am not!” The prospect terrified the nurse. She didn’t want to go anywhere with these people. “I’m taking my payment and getting out of here.”

“You have that option, of course,” Jupiter said. “But it would be a shame if some accident were to befall you before you could make it home. And if you were travelling with us, I can guarantee that you would be safer.”

The nurse choked down the heated retort she was thinking of making. The threat in Jupiter’s statement had been none too veiled, and if she said the wrong thing it might mean her death.

“Now,” Jupiter said, “I want you to-” She stopped, a frown on her face, as a sudden commotion started outside of the tiny holding room. “What the hell is going on out there?” She went for the door.

The female grunt led the intruders up several more flights of stairs to an area on what was, if Ed was keeping track correctly, the eighth floor of the Galactic Veilstone Building. The place looked like a laboratory area. There were rooms separated by glass partitions, and scientific equipment was contained within them. Each room was dark and empty. Looker, Ed, and Val were shown to a door near the rear of the area that had an electronic lock.

“Open it,” Looker demanded. When the woman hesitated, he tapped the back of her head sharply with the barrel of his gun. “Now! I’m not messing around, here!” Her hand shaking, the grunt pulled out a card of some sort and swiped it through the keypad next to the door, and then she input a six-digit code. A light on the pad flashed green, and

they all heard the lock click open. “There. Isn’t cooperating a lot easier than fighting?” Looker hit the grunt hard at the base of her skull with the butt of his gun, and she fell to the floor, unconscious.

Looking behind to make sure that Ed, Val, and Kennedy were ready, Looker grabbed the door handle and swung the door in fast and hard. The room inside was bright, and like the dark area outside there were many scientific devices situated throughout. Unlike the room they were coming from, this room was populated by about six scientists who were hard at work. When the door opened, the scientist nearest the door glanced up, and then did a double take when he saw an unfamiliar person carrying an intimidating-looking firearm.

“Everyone, keep quiet and don’t move!” Looker ordered. “I’m not interested in harming anyone, but anyone who reaches for anything, whether it’s a weapon, a pokémon, or an alarm, is going to be in a whole lot of trouble!” When it became clear that the scientists were too terrified to do anything but stare, Looker turned his head back to look at Ed and Val. “Keep an eye on them for me. I’m going to get some pictures of what they’re doing in here.” He tucked away his gun while Ed, Val, and Kennedy made sure that none of the scientists tried anything. Looker dug into a pocket and pulled out a miniature spy camera, and proceeded to roam about the room taking pictures of the experiments that the scientists were working on. He was careful to get several pictures of the experiments and the scientists together, taking extra care to ensure that the scientists’ Team Galactic ID badges were included in the frames.

Val and Ed couldn’t hold themselves back anymore. Walking over to one of the scientists, Ed grabbed him by the collar of his lab coat, hauled him out of his chair, and slammed him against the wall. “Where is she?” he demanded. “What have you people done with her?”

“What are you talking about?” the scientist squeaked. “I...I don’t-”

“My daughter!” Val screamed. She was shaking with fury, and swiped her claws towards the scientist, halting just short of cutting his neck open.

The man seemed paralyzed with fright. His eyes darted back and forth between Ed and Val, and his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. He turned his eyes to Looker, but the detective shrugged helplessly. “I...I...uh...”

Just then, a door at the far side of the lab opened. Framed in the doorway was a purple-haired woman in Team Galactic uniform. She froze with the door still open, staring at the scene that lay before her. Then her hand darted for her waist, where a set of poké balls was clipped. Before Looker could clear his gun from its holster, Val had raced to the other side of the room and was on the woman in a flurry of claws, fur, and blind rage. She screamed and fell to the floor, with Val striking at her again and again.

“Easy Val, easy!” Looker ran to where Val was and grabbed her around the middle, pulling her off of the unfortunate woman. There was blood running from multiple cuts all over her body, and she seemed to have been knocked out from the force of the Zangoose’s tackle. “Calm down, calm down!”

In the commotion, Ed had run up to the room. While Looker was occupied with keeping Val from killing the woman, he took a look around the tiny space. His eyes first fell on another woman, who he realized with a shock was the nurse who had tended to Val in the Pokémon Center. Next, he saw something that nearly made his heart leap out of his throat.

On the floor, placed with all the care of a mother into a small box, was his daughter, Aurelia.

He knelt down on the floor beside her. His arms shaking, he reached in and picked her up. Aurelia’s wide, scared, beautiful green eyes were staring up at him. He turned around with her so that Val could see.

“Aurelia!” All blood lust forgotten, Val tore herself out of Looker’s grasp and went to Ed’s side. She took her daughter into her arms, holding her as close as she could without smothering her. The little child knew that she was finally in the right set of arms again, and she mewled her relief at being held by her mother.

Ed looked at the nurse, cold anger making his voice unnaturally steady. “You did this,” he said.

“I didn’t know what they were going to do,” the nurse moaned.

“What did you think they were going to do?” Looker asked, his voice stern.

“I...I didn’t think-”

Val cut her off with a sharp growl and a venomous stare. Ed stood back up, all business now that his daughter was found. “We need to leave.”

“Good idea,” Looker said. “Let’s get out of here before someone raises an alarm.” They all turned to leave.

“Wait!” the nurse called, straining against the chain keeping her connected to her chair. “Take me with you! Don’t leave me here with them!”

Val turned her head, her gaze full of ice. “You make choice,” she said. “Now you live with it.”

After leaving the nurse in the room where they’d found Aurelia, they paused only long enough for Ed to recall Kennedy back to his poké ball. Then they made a break for the stairs, passing by the Team Galactic who had let them into the secret laboratory. She was still out cold on the floor, and offered no resistance. The group made it down to the second floor before an alarm began to sound. But by then, it was too late. They were already too close to the exit for any alarm to matter. Scarcely ten minutes since leaving the eighth floor, they were out of the building. After that, it was a short run down the street and to Looker’s car. Ed and Val jumped in the back while Looker got in the driver’s seat. The doors had barely closed before the detective started the car and hit the gas. Tires screeched as he shot off down the road, taking them all away from danger.

As soon as they were driving, Val allowed all anger to drain out of her body, replaced by relief at having her daughter back. *I’ll never let you go again,* she whispered to Aurelia, hugging the baby tightly. Aurelia’s little arms came around her neck, clutching at her mother, as the little Zangoose started crying. Ed encircled both of them in his arms, tears starting to course down his face.

Looker glanced back in the rear view mirror at the scene in his backseat. “I love happy endings,” he said to himself, turning his attention back to the road in front of him.

“That detective has managed to make complete fools out of us,” Saturn muttered, reviewing security tapes from the break-in. It was five hours after the fact, and he was sitting in his office, staring at a computer screen. Commander Mars was seated in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

“At least we managed to get some of our analysis completed before they stole the child back,” Mars said. “That’s something, I suppose.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Saturn sighed. “But this breach of security is inexcusable. Jupiter will have some explaining to do about how they managed to get in. Once she gets out of medical, of course.” He looked up at Mars. “What did you do about the nurse?”

Mars shrugged. “Cyrus ordered her to be dealt with,” she said. “So I did.”

Saturn suppressed a shudder. He knew what it meant when Cyrus ordered someone to be dealt with. “So I guess all that remains is to go after them and kidnap the child again.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

Mars and Saturn both jumped at the voice that came from the door to Saturn’s office. They looked to see a tall man dressed in clothes nearly identical to Saturn’s. He had a gaunt, impassive face and spiked blue hair. The man was feared and revered by all of Team Galactic. His name was Cyrus, their leader.

“The child is inconsequential,” Cyrus said. “I have already learned everything I need to know about her. She was but the final piece to the puzzle that I needed to complete in order to put our ultimate plans into motion.”

“I don’t understand,” Saturn said.

“The child’s DNA structure revealed everything,” Cyrus said. “Her DNA contained not pure pokémon DNA, but a mixture of pokémon and human genes.”

Mars and Saturn looked shocked. “What can that mean?” Mars wondered.

“Is it really that hard to figure out?” Cyrus asked. “It means that her mother, the Zangoose, mated with a human and produced offspring.” Disgust spread across the faces of both Saturn and Mars, but Cyrus’s face remained blank.

“So what does that tell you?” Mars asked.

“A look at history makes the conclusion simple,” Cyrus said. “A long time ago, as legends would have it, humans and pokémon used to live lives that were much closer than they are today. At some point, although records are far from clear on the matter, the deities deemed it necessary to separate humans and pokémon.” He allowed the tiniest hint of a smile to show on his face. “The fact that a human has now had a child with a pokémon confirms what I have suspected for some time now: that the gods are preparing to make themselves known to humans and pokémon once more. The time for us to begin

the steps for creating a new universe has arrived. Soon, the power of the gods will be in my hands, and our might will go unchallenged by all.”

“What do you want us to do?” Saturn asked.

“You will stay here until I send for you,” Cyrus told Saturn. He looked to Mars. “You shall travel to Floaroma Town in the West, to the Valley Windworks. Once you are there, I shall send further instructions. Go now.” Mars nodded and rose from her seat, walking past Cyrus and out of the office. “Once Jupiter has fully recovered, I shall send her to our facilities in Eterna City.” Cyrus laughed softly. “No one, not even our friend from the Global Police, can stop us now.”

Ed and Val were back in their apartment with Aurelia, safe, at least for the moment. Looker and his Croagunk were still with them, and the detective had been talking on the phone with his superiors on and off. They’d arrived home soon after leaving the Galactic Veilstone Building, and for the last eight hours since leaving that place behind they hadn’t let their daughter out of their sight. She had gotten over her fright quickly after being rescued, and now the baby was sleeping in her mother’s lap.

Ed brushed her face with one hand. “She seems to sleep when she knows we don’t need to,” he said.

“She does,” Val acknowledged, smiling a little.

Looker closed his phone with a snap. “I’ve got good news and bad news,” he said.

“Good news first,” Ed said.

“Good news is we’re not getting in trouble for what we did.” Looker pocketed his phone. “I transmitted the photos I took to my boss, and he’s agreed that Team Galactic deserves an official Global Police investigation. He’s written a special retroactive warrant to sanction our little break-in, so we’re on the road to bringing down Team Galactic.” He sat back in his chair, looking pleased with himself. “In fact, I’m to remain in Sinnoh until further notice to conduct the official inquiry. I leave for Jubilife City tomorrow morning to follow a few new leads.”

“That’s great,” Ed said. “So what’s the bad news?”

Looker’s face sobered. “The bad news is pretty bad. I’m afraid we don’t have much direct evidence to immediately arrest anyone in connection with the kidnapping of

Aurelia.” At the astonished looks on Ed and Val’s faces, he elaborated. “Think about it for a minute. We have your eyewitness testimony, which, in and of itself, isn’t going to convince a judge to issue arrest warrants. We also have a cigarette butt, and a bunch of photographs of experiments that are pretty damning, but not directly damning for the crime in question. Sure, the eyewitness accounts and cigarette were enough to justify our search, but we need a bit more than that for actual arrests.” The detective shrugged. “In short, it means nobody is getting arrested right now, and *that* means that Veilstone City, and probably the Sinnoh region as a whole, is not safe for you two anymore.”

Ed and Val looked at each other. “So, you are saying...?” Val prompted him.

“That it would probably be best for you to leave the Sinnoh region,” Looker finished. “Today, if possible. Is there anywhere you can go on short notice?”

“Well...I suppose we could go back to Slateport City,” Ed said slowly. “That’s where we’re from, originally, and my parents still live there.”

Looker nodded. “Hoenn is good. Team Galactic has no influence there. The worst out there is Team Magma and Team Aqua, and they’re much too concerned with fighting amongst themselves to worry about anyone else. You’ll be safe there.”

“Then I guess we’d better get packing,” Ed said, standing up. Looker stood too, and Ed held a hand out. “Thanks for everything. Really, you have no idea how much it means to me that you helped us.”

“Wouldn’t be much of a Global Police agent if I hadn’t helped,” Looker said. He shook Ed’s hand. “Just make sure you take good care of that daughter of yours, Ed.”

Ed and Val both went rigid with shock. “You...how did you...?” Ed stammered.

Looker pointed two fingers at his eyes. “I told you,” the detective said, a grin on his face. “Looking is what I’m best at.” He beckoned his Croagunk and started out the door. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell.” Looker paused just before passing out of view. “Don’t stick around too long. Get going as soon as you can. Good luck.” With that, the detective and his pokémon were gone.

Still a little shaken, Ed sank back down on the couch next to Val. He looked down at Aurelia. She had woken up in the middle of the exchange, and was happily playing with one of her own long ears. Ed laughed a little at the sight. “I guess we’d better get a move on.”

“Yes,” Val agreed.

“We don’t have much to pack,” Ed said. “Just my clothes, the team, and that’s about it. We should leave the other stuff; it’ll weigh us down.” His Zangoose mate nodded. Ed leaned over and kissed her. “I love you, no matter what happens.”

“Love you, too.”