

Chapter 50: A Moment of Peace.

“PFFFT, HAHAAHAH!!!”

Noctis slaps his knee: His tongue rattling, his eyes bulging. The lizard gazes at a gray round cat slapping a round-headed blue cat. The Alolan Persian slaps back, growling. The Purugly caresses their face, growling back: The two glaring at each other. And then a full on fight breaks out!

The Charizard covers his belly, wheezing. “Holy crap, this shit is so funny.” He elbows Ramon, a single tear sliding down his cheek. “Slapsticks are the best kinds of comedy, eh?” The dragon blinks, his necklace shuffling. “Kid?”

The Zoroark stares at the front door: Lips sealing, melancholy seeping. Noctis pokes his arm. “You alright?”

Ramon gasps, shaking his head. “Y-Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just...” Sighs. “There’s a lot on my mind, Noctis.” The fox turns around and curls, wrapping his arms around his legs while his ears droop.

“Ah, about Travis wanting to kill you?”

“...And the Prospective Institute in general: How it all leads to me.” Ramon eyes his right paw, the scar mark screaming at him. “It all happened because of *me*.”

“Bullshit.” Ramon keeps glancing at his palm, Noctis leaning close to him. “My god awful decision to evolve is what caused this. If there’s anyone to truly blame, it’s *me*.” The Charizard snarls. “If I didn’t evolve, Xander would’ve been alive and Travis wouldn’t go on this stupid ass revenge hunt.”

“I—” the Zoroark sighs, forming a fist. “I don’t know: I struggle to see it the more I think about it.”

Noctis shakes his head. “Kid, you yourself told me that you don’t remember *anything* from the institute. Why are you blaming yourself over it? Hell, you felt relieved that I don’t think you’re the cause like Travis does.”

The Zoroark whimpers. “R-Right.”

“So quit with the self-blaming, alright?”

Ramon slowly looks at the lizard. “Didn’t you do that though? Blaming yourself for Yvonne’s death and Travis’ revenge?” Noctis snarls, the fox yelping away. “Eek!”

The dragon then groans, folding his arms, closing his eyes. “Alright, you got me there kid.” Lifts one eye open. “I just think my case’s different.” He gazes at the ceiling. “I don’t know, like, I

should've expected him to help a dumbass like myself, knowing full well he'd fight tooth and nail to help anyone. And look where he ended up..." Sighs. "Maybe I should've lost that title of The Flaming Vortex long before I evol—"

"Please stop."

Noctis lifts his brow. "Eh?"

"You *just* told me to stop blaming myself over the incident, and now you're doing the same thing!" Ramon strokes his arm, staring off. "I don't care if your case is different: You still shouldn't bash yourself over something that's...possibly out of your control—*our* control." The fox whines. "I have no clue if you and I are at fault here, b-but regardless: Blaming ourselves isn't going to help."

Noctis blinks, shifting in place. "...Well shit: Throughout my time living, I didn't expect myself to gain some common sense from a kid of all things."

Ramon lowers his ears. "Sorry. I just...think it's best if we give ourselves the benefit of the doubt here. Again, going off from what you told me earlier." He rubs his head. "Which is kinda ironic since I was self-blaming first."

"Heh, it happens. And I needed that pep talk, anyways." He sets his hand on top of Ramon's head. "I understand that all of this shit is stressing you out. Because it's stressing me out, too." Noctis smiles. "We'll figure this crap out, eventually."

Ramon sighs, nodding. "Thank you..."

DING DONG!

The two eye the front door.

"You go get it." Noctis slouches over the sofa, his hands behind his head. "I'm feelin' too lazy to get it."

Ramon nods and stands, walking towards the door. He opens: Justin and Ada waving at him as 10 of their friends are behind them.

"Hey Ramon," Ada says.

"Doing alright, fam?" Justin smiles.

Tears climb the Zoroark's eyelids, sniffing. Ramon hugs the teens, clenching his teeth. "I'm—" he whines, the teens hugging him back. "I'm really glad that you're okay!" Something tugs his leg, the fox looking down at Mesmeren hugging it. The teens smile along with Ramon and

Mesmeren, tears rolling down the fox's cheeks. "I'm just...happy that *all of you* recovered from the Weakener."

"Thanks, man..." Justin sighs. "It was really unbearable to go through. Ain't gonna give it to even my worst enemies."

"Same here," Ada follows, keeping the hug going.

Roan throws his arms up. "Group hug!" he proclaims, rushing forward.

"Heck yeah," X follows, hugging the teens.

"Meh. Why not?" Courtney says, pushing Sylock forward. "Let's get on in there!" The Lopunny engulfs the Blaziken and the others with her arms, Sylock blushing while clenching his teeth.

D-Dammit, Courtney!

Everyone else joins in before they all fall over, blinking. "...Pffft!" X snorts before going into full on laughter, everyone following along in unison. Mesmeren, Sylock, and Ethan quiver their lips, embarrassment flowing throughout.

Coleo is on his back before chuckling himself. "Yee lads and lasses ar' goofy bilges!"

The group looks ahead, a tall orange dragon stands before them. Noctis folds his arms, raising his brow. "Okay, I know about *half* of you here." He gazes at Coleo, then to Mesmeren, Courtney, Sylock, and Roan.

"Hello there, sir!" Roan says, smiling.

Ramon, being at the very bottom of the pile, chuckles in a nervous manner. "Right."

. . .

"Hmm...Gotcha."

Noctis nods, sitting on the middle couch after getting to know everyone. The group rests on the sofas as well: Some on the right, some on the left—others with Noctis. Delia's apron is also hanging on the kitchen's wall, the woman holding her hands together while sitting beside Noctis.

The dragon crosses his legs, staring at Justin and Ada next to Delia. "I get you two's situation. Along with Ramon and everyone else here."

Ramon and Mesmeren poke their fingers together, nodding. "Y-Yeah," the two say, Mesmeren scooting close to the Zoroark: They're both on the center couch beside Noctis.

Ada sighs, her shoulder nudging Justin's for a moment, staring at the ceiling. "I hope someday we'll find Terran and my father, too." Despondents. "They're the only two missing."

Merlin tugs his staff, sitting on the left sofa. "I hope so, too." He nods. "But we have to rest first. We've been through a lot since the village incident."

"Yeah, no cap." Justin groans, covering his face. "Almost died cuz of that Weakener, man. Shit's wack."

Delia taps Justin's leg. "And I'm very proud to see you pull through it. It was...scary. Thinking my son will die from such a deadly ailment." Stroking his leg, Delia weeps. "I...don't want to imagine it."

"You don't have to, Mom." The boy's hand rests on Delia's, frowning. "Cuz I'll never let that crap be inside of me again. Nor anyone else I care for."

Delia nods before hugging Justin, the boy returning the favor. "That's good to know."

Ada caresses her chin. "An ailment that can kill someone..." Squints. "The fact it's common for bad people to use is...nerve wracking."

Mesmeren holds her hands together. "T-Tell me about it."

"We...almos' died." Coleo glares down, being on top of Roan while the two are on the right couch. "I gues' Lycus is in some kin' of shady group since he got his hands on them."

"Yeah." Courtney nods, sitting on the right couch beside Sylock. "Like Justin said: Let *none* of us get into that Weakener mess." She forms a fist. "Knowing from experience, it's somethin' I don't wish on anyone."

"Very understandable," Merlin says, whimpering. "We saw you guys just...laying in bed. Almost *motionless*." Ethan shivers, curling up to his sister while on the left sofa.

"M-Mhm..." The Flareon's ears lower.

X stands up beside Serene. "Motionless is an understatement: You guys looked *dead*." Mesmeren and Ethan's eyes jolt towards the Buizel: Their teeth gnashing with dread. "Like, not even in a 'could be alive' way: Nah, you were very pale and just...not moving *at all*." Tears rise up. "It was scary. Real scary. Th-Thinking we'll finally get to see you guys again *only* to find you dea—"

A vine lands on X's back, rubbing. "Relax, X." Serene whimpers. "We were *all* scared of that possibility, but thankfully: It didn't happen."

“Yeah, man...” Justin sighs, staring off.

Ada gazes at Mesmeren and Ethan: The two trembling and quaking, the former nibbling her fingers. “Say, how about we, uh, change the topic. Since we all agree that the Weakener is dangerous. Also—” she rubs her head. “It’s scaring those two.”

Courtney nods. “Sounds like a good idea.” She shifts her sheath. “Hmm...”

Ramon tilts his head. “What is it?”

“...” Courtney stares blankly. “I ain’t got a clue on what to change the subject to.”

“Oh.”

Silence.

Justin clasps his hands. “Aight: Chips. Let’s talk about that.”

“What the—Are you *seriously* gonna make that the topic we move onto? Chips!?” Noctis scuffs. “Not even gonna ask me any questions about the Prospective Institute nor anything? Like you do realize who you’re talking to, right?”

“Uh.”

The Charizard points to himself. “Noctis? The guy who’s the whole reason why Project Transvian was a thing? Hello???”

“Hey man, that can be the next topic *after* this one. Trust me...” Justin frowns. “We absolutely have some questions over that, dude.” After a few minutes of staring, Justin closes his eyes and smiles. “Right now though: Chips!” He snaps his fingers. “Crocalos: Nacho or Ranch flavor?”

“Tch.” Noctis folds his arms. “Ranch. Not a huge fan of Nacho.”

“What the *hell* is wrong with you?”

X lifts his paw. “No no, he’s onto something here.”

Justin glances at the weasel. “Excuse me? Ranch doesn’t keep the cheesy flavor going and going like Nacho does!”

“I mean yeah, but like Ranch can have this sweetness to it that Nacho lacks.” X chuckles in an awkward manner. “So I get his taste here.”

Noctis lifts his claw, smirking. “For once, your taste isn’t crap, X.”

“Ok Mixturing Moves Hater.”

“I see nothing wrong with that insult.”

Justin pouts before eyeing Merlin, Serene, and Ethan. “Hey man, you think Crocalos’ Nacho is good, right?”

“Absolutely!” Merlin states.

“Not for me,” Serene says.

“I...hardly e-eat chips.” Ethan tucks his head.

Justin points to Merlin. “Yay.” Then to Serene. “Nay.” Then to Ethan. “...” AND then to Courtney and co. on the right. “Ayo: Nacho’s better than Ranch, am I right?”

Noctis quirks his brow. “You’re really going to die on a hill over chips, huh.”

“I’m trynna prove a point by not letting Nacho’s name go down in vein, dang it!”

Delia giggles as Courtney shrugs. “I mean, they’re fine?”

“FINE!?” Justin shakes his head. “Sylock, you’re a big fan of Nachos, right bu—”

“*Not interested*,” he signs, looking away.

“I...K then.”

Roan lifts his finger. “Fear not, Justin sir! As for I—” Justin gasps, awaiting the Axew’s answer. “Have not tried those chips at all!”

The boy rams his face into the couch momentarily. “Bro, why would you say it like you did try them, then!?”

“Oh.” Roan tilts his head, being mindful of Coleo. “Perhaps I shouldn’t always present my sentences in that manner.”

“Ya don’t say.” He squints at the Blipbug. “Oh Coleo! What abou—”

“How shoul’ I know? I was stuck at a cabin throughout me life.”

“Oh. Right.” Justin turns towards Delia, tears raining down his cheeks in a melodramatic manner. “Mom. Mommy. MOMMAAAAAA!!!!”

The woman moves her bangs to the side. “I’m...right here, Son.”

Justin slowly points at the Charizard. “Tell this mean man that he’s wrong, and you think Nacho’s better.”

Noctis rolls his eyes. “Oh cope harder, kid. Using your mother to disprove my preference.”

Serene eyes her toeclaws, deadpanned. “Not the first time he’s done that.” She looks at Noctis. “He once got Mrs. Phoenix in a discussion over pineapple pizza and how wrong I am for preferring it.”

Noctis blinks. “Really?”

Delia lifts her finger. “It’s true, and I have to agree with him there.”

“...Okay, fair point: I’m suspicious of *anyone* that prefers pineapples on pizzas.” Noctis huffs, folding his arms.

Justin throws his hands forward. “At LEAST you have some common sense there!”

Noctis quirks his brow. “I always thought despising pineapple pizza *is* common sense: It’s horrid.”

“Second here: Pineapple pizza is BLAGH!” X rubs his tongue, shaking his head. “Can’t STAND the sweetness on my cheese bread, dude!”

“Pineapple on pizza???” Coleo tilts his head. “What the Binacle?”

Serene sighs, rolling her eyes. “It’s really not that bad, guys.”

“Doubt,” Delia, Justin, X, and Noctis say at once.

Justin’s mother lays a hand on her chin. “Back to the chips though, hmm...” Smiles. “Well I think Nacho and Ranch flavors are both neat!”

“Argh!” Justin strokes his head, lowering it. “The Crocalos Nacho’s name is in shambles cuz of this. Thanks, everyone.”

Everyone laughs nervously, Merlin scratching the back of his head. “You’re...welcome?”

Ada, Ramon, and Mesmeren gaze at the boy, convoluted beyond belief. *He didn't even ask us...* they think.

The Charizard snorts. "Oh my god: You actually *are* coping hard over this." He covers his belly, kicking the air. "What a baby!"

Sylock glares. *Says the man who's kicking the air while laughing like a kid would.*

Noctis wipes away a single tear, smirking. "I needed that laugh. Thanks."

Justin folds his arms, huffing. "Hmph! Nacho's clears, and I refuse to believe otherwise."

"Sure."

"So, um..." Ada clears her throat, glancing at the Charizard. "Is it true that you wouldn't hurt Ramon? Even after knowing you're, uh...*the* Noctis Travis was talking about."

Noctis and Ramon look at each other for a moment before Noctis nods. "Yeah, I wouldn't. Because I don't believe he's the cause of the incident."

"Oh?"

The Charizard waves his hand around. "Granted, I don't have any evidence to believe he's not the cause. But judging by the way he acts and hearing his side of the story: Travis' petty revenge towards him makes less sense now."

Mesmeren pokes her fingers together. "A-At least that settles our worries, then..."

"Indeed."

Delia pokes her chin. "That reminds me: What's with the whole 'Flaming Vortex' situation? Why were you being so secretive about it?"

Noctis stares off, sighing. "It...relates to why Project Transvian was formed." Grunts. "I might as well tell you all about it." The Charizard explains: From when he was the reigning champion of the All Star Tournament to his popularity downfalling along with evolution being his biggest regret.

X lowers his head, shifting in place. "Jeez...That explains why those crooks trashed your home."

"Yeah..." Delia's hand presses her chest. "Sorry to hear about your regret, Noctis."

Noctis sighs. "It's fine. It is what it is—" he glances at the woman. "I doubt I'll get my Charameleon form back now that I'm this big, disgusting ass Charizard."

"H-Hey now, didn't we talk about this? About belittling yourself?" Ramon says, lowering his ears. "It doesn't help your situation..."

"Yeah yeah, I know." Noctis rubs his forehead. "I can't stop myself from saying those things, sometimes." Frowns. "I'll...work on bashing myself less, for sure."

"Thank you."

Mesmeren looks down, her ears lowering. *Ba-Bashing yourself less...*

Ada digs in her jacket, pulling out Dr. Yvonne's journal. "By the way, has Ramon ever told you about the scientist's journal?"

"Yeah. He said he found it at the facility."

Ramon sighs, eyeing down. "I was hoping it'll help me recover my memory, but...I guess not."

"Hoping you'll find that answer soon, kid." Noctis nods, eyeing the journal.

"Thanks." The fox perks up. "Say, how about you keep it?"

Noctis blinks, shaking his head. "What?"

"Since Dr. Yvonne was a close friend of yours', it'll be best if you keep his journal." Ramon goes over to grab the journal, presenting it to the dragon. "I...feel like at this point, I don't have any use for it. Plus there's some cool things Yvonne made that might interest you." Smiles. "So take it: It'll be your way of honoring your friend."

Ada nods. "Yeah, I think it's for the best, too."

Noctis sighs. "But what about your past? Aren't you still trying to figure that out?"

The fox stares off in silence for a moment. "Y-Yeah." He pushes the journal forward. "But like you've told me earlier: We'll figure it out eventually."

"...Okay." Noctis takes the journal. "Thank you, Ramon. I...honestly appreciate it."

The Zoroark smiles, his eyes closing. "No problem."

Noctis stretches his arms, yawning before grabbing the broken portrait on his table. "Welp—" Standing, he points at the window: The full moon shining through. "It's getting late now. So I'mma go kick the shit out of this hay. Goodnight."

Mesmeren flinches. “Wh-Why did you have to say it like that!?”

“She has a point...” Ethan mumbles, shivering.

Noctis snorts. “It’s a figure of speech. Don’t think too hard about it, alright?” He walks towards the hallway.

X lifts his paw. “But...But that’s not how that phrase wo—” Noctis closes his bedroom door. “Annnnd he’s gone.”

Delia giggles. “He’s quite the forward fella, huh?”

“Hmph, sure is.” Justin folds his arms. “The only thing forward about him is his *Noctistical* behavior.”

“Noctistical...” Ada facepalms. “Oh my god.”

Delia punches her son’s shoulder playfully as he, X, Courtney, Merlin, and Roan laugh, the others smiling. “Oh hush, Justin.”

Sylock scratches the side of his head, deadpanned. *Please.*

Ramon snickers softly, covering his maw before sitting beside Mesmeren again. “We should probably get some sleep, too.”

Coleo yawns. “Argh, ye’re right. Feelin’ ver’ sleepy, meself.” The Blipbug wastes no time sleeping on Roan’s head, curling himself.

Roan gives a thumbs-up, leaning on the sofa. “Goodnight, everyone!” He sleeps, everyone else following suit.

. . .

He’s back, surrounded in the familiar grassy field he keeps dreaming of. With the familiar blue tufted Zorua in front of him: Nomar.

Everything is the same.

Except...for the sky: The dark red takes over the usual bright blue, leading the atmosphere to feel void—*Uneasy*, even. The two stare up: Lips unmoving, the wind blowing Ramon’s hair. Silence persists between them as they stare. And stare...

"We're close, Ramon," Nomar says with little warning. The Zoroark eyes him. "We're very close to reuniting with each other." Nomar smiles. "Just us two...In person..." A frown follows. "Only then, we can finally ditch those 'friends'."

Ramon glances, bawling his fist. "Hmm..."

Nomar turns around. "What's wrong?"

"I...I don't know." Ramon caresses the grass. "I don't know if I want to ditch my friends. They've done so much for me since we first met. I wanted to repay in some way." Nomar squints, Ramon sighing. "After knowing their friends a little, I...feel like Justin and Ada aren't bad people. They just want to find their friends, their loved ones. They want to help others out, too." He stares off. "They're just...trying their best out there, you know?"

"...Tch." Nomar shakes his head. "That Justin fella makes me think he'll hurt you the moment you mention one negative thing to him, and didn't that Ada girl want revenge?" Glares. "Doesn't quite sound like good people to me."

Ramon flinches, his head tilting. "What? I don't believe anything you say about Justin!" Sighs. "He's a very chill and easygoing person, as far as I'm concerned. And sure Ada wants revenge, but she seems to think about her friends more than her revenge. Heck, I wouldn't be surprised if that becomes the last thing on her mind now that she's with them again!"

"Regardless: They're *humans*, Ramon. They're evil, plain and simple."

Ramon snarls. "Why are you judging them based on *your* past!? They're as confused about this world as I am!" He throws his hands up. "Even Mrs. Phoenix doesn't know everything! Since she recently found out about her ancestor's impact on defeating Dne!"

Nomar grits his teeth upon hearing the word 'Dne'. *Right*.

"So from this observation alone: Justin, Ada, Delia, and their human friends too show no ill-intention towards me—"

"THEY'RE HIDING IT!" The blue Zorua slams his paw. "Humans can hide their sinister side incredibly well, to the point where it gets harder and harder to distinguish their genuineness. They use this to trick any Pokémon on their side: I've seen it happening to every Pokémon that's in this 'friends' with humans like Justin and Ada!"

Ramon slams his fist. "Those two are *nothing* like those humans you've shown me! Nor the humans I've met along my travels!" His brows lower, his teeth gnashing. "Besides, you don't think us Pokémon are capable of deception? Especially with what happened at the Lake of Purity!" His eyes widen. "The betrayal my friends and I felt from Lycus..." His head shakes, tears rising. "He's a Pokémon too, Nomar!"

The fox points at himself before pointing at his brother. “Just like you and I.” Tears slide down his cheeks, Nomar gazing at him in disbelief. “The betrayal you felt from humans is similar to the betrayal I felt from Lycus.” He gazes at his hands. “The difference is that I almost died, but... that’s besides the point.”

“...” Nomar simply looks at the sky, lightning howling out of the clouds, booming everywhere. “He’s brainwashed by a human to backstab his kind. Because Pokémon could never betray each other.”

Ramon widens his eyes with fury. “That’s nonsen—”

With a blink of an eye, Ramon gasps from Nomar’s hug, staring down: The Zorua starts glowing white before increasing in size, his forelegs wrapping further around Ramon. Eventually, Nomar stops glowing: Evolving into a Shiny Zoroark, his blue hair flourishing.

Ramon blinks. “Nomar...”

“Ramon, I...” Nomar’s tone is calm and low. “I don’t want to continue this. I’m really stressed out and worried we may never be together again.” His eyes gaze into Ramon’s sorrowful ones, tears forming. “Regardless of how you feel about my plan: I *want* us to be together. Living free in the wild, away from civilization.”

“But—”

“Focus on Gloria Falls by the end of tomorrow. Dark out will make it easy for us to escape.” Nomar lowers his ears, whimpering. “Ramon...I know you feel unsure about all of this. But just know that I—”

The dream fuzzles, the red sky growing dark.

“Will *never* hurt you.”

GASPS.

Ramon’s eyes spring open from the red dream. Or the red nightmare? He...isn’t so sure, anymore. Mesmeren nuzzles his arm as the fox stares out of the window, his black scleras gone as the sun shines through. He lowers his ears.

Nomar...

. . .

Ada backflips from Sylock's kick, sliding across the concrete next to Justin. Sylock jumps back, Courtney preparing herself. The four rush towards each other, X and the others are on the clean porch watching the spar. The Buizel sips on his Citrus Berry juice from his cup, tugging at the straw, his eyes being back to normal.

Serene's ears twitch, X's sipping being louder than a thunderstorm. She jolts towards him. "Can you, like, DRINK quietly, please!?"

X squints, smirking and sipping *even* louder.

"Humph." Serene smacks X's cup with her vine.

"HEY!" X yells.

"Whoops, my vine slipped!" The Leafeon sticks her tongue out.

Courtney kicks Ada's leg, the girl falling down as Justin dodges Sylock's jabs and kicks. The boy grunts, blocking the attacks. Sylock then pushes him, having the teen sliding across the ground.

"Damn, fam. Fighting is hard without our Magic moves," Justin states.

Ada stands. "No kidding." The girl gets in a posture, smirking. "Thankfully, my father taught me some karate." She beckons her opponents. "So I'll use that to my advantage."

"Heh." Courtney jumps ahead, spinning around before kicking the girl. Ada blocks in time. "You sure talk about yer dad a lot." She leaps back. "What makes him so special?"

The teen dashes. "First off, he's my father, an important parental figure." She jabs, Courtney ducking and weaving her fists. "And secondly, he's been there for me ever since..." The girl trails, backflipping away. Everyone eyes her.

"Since what?"

Ada strokes her arm. "Since my mother passed away."

"...Oh." Courtney caresses the back of her head. "Sorry to hear."

"Mhm. It's been rough for the two of us, and it's why he's working so hard to take care of me." The girl unravels her hands. "I have so much respect for him. For raising me to do the right thing." She forms her fists. "Despite being born as an Ordina."

"Wait, your dad's an Ordina?" Justin asks. The girl nods. "Yo, I didn't know that."

"That's fair." Ada waves her hands around. "It's why he preferred to not get himself into fights. Training me how to defend myself is the exception, of course."

"Makes sense." Justin lifts his thumb. "Your dad's pretty awesome, fam."

X nods. "Yeah!"

Ramon folds his arms, smiling. "I bet it wasn't easy raising a Sorcerous while being powerless."

Ada sighs, her head lowering. "Quite the understatement there, Ramon." She laughs nervously. "You see, I kept using my powers during karate training by accident. A lot."

Coleo cringes, being on top of Roan. "Ouch, the lad mus' hav' been in a lot of pain from it."

"Indeed, he has." The teen lifts her finger: Eyes closing, sweats dripping. "I can recall how many times I apologized to him over it." Gulping, her eyes open. "30."

"**30!?**" everyone exclaims.

"Yep." Ada scratches the back of her head. "Despite all of that, he's still willing to help me the best way he can."

Courtney holds her hands together. "D'aww, what a built-different dad he is! I wish more parents were as considerate as he is."

Justin points to Delia. "Ay, my mom is considerate."

"D'aww, thank you, Son!" Delia waves.

"And so is mine!" X scratches his head, chuckling awkwardly. "Although, a little too much and you guys know that by now."

Ada rolls her eyes, folding her arms. "Don't worry: *We know*."

X leaps back. "The heck are you implying there, Ada!?"

Everyone chuckles except for Serene and Ethan, the two eyeing each other with somberness. "... They look back at the group, forming a shaky smile.

"We're happy to hear that you three have such loving parents," Serene says with a shaky tone.

"Hey Serene and Ethan: You have loving parents too, do you?" Roan asks. The two look at the Axew in silence.

“...I’d rather not answer.” Serene looks away, patting Ethan’s head as he shakes. “Please.”

“Oh...”

Merlin raises his staff. “It’s...probably best if we move on, I feel.”

Roan nods. “Yeah, sounds like a good idea. My sincere apologies for mentioning it.”

Serene sighs. “It’s okay.”

Merlin taps the ground, eyeing Justin, Ada, Courtney, and Sylock. “So can you remind me again why you guys are sparring?”

Courtney puts her hands by her hips. “Training myself for the All Star Tournament tonight. Sylock’s joining us, too. Hence why he’s here.” The Blaziken nods.

X jumps up, gasping. “Ay, you’re signing up for the tournament!?”

The Lopunny smirks, lifting her thumb. “You betcha.” She forms her fists, jittering. “I can’t *wait* to win that tournament: I’ll be able to show the whole world how tough Lopunnys are!”

Ramon gulps, staring at Noctis. The Charizard folds his arms, glaring at Courtney. He sighs. “Don’t get too cocky with your victories if you do win. Otherwise, your failures will feel detrimental.”

Courtney stares back. “I’m aware.” Nods. “Even if I lose tonight, I still won’t give up on achieving my goal.” She points towards the sky. “I’ll keep on tryin’ and tryin’ til I *win*, baby.”

Sylock moves his hands, smiling. “*You got this, Courtney!*”

“...Hmm.” Noctis closes his eyes. “If you say so. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Courtney quirks her brow before eyeing the group. “So who here wants to watch the tournament at the stadium?”

“You bet your as—I mean, behind that I’m coming!” Justin says, looking at his mother.

Delia waves her hand. “Dear, I’ve told you that I’m not too strict over swear words. You’re fine.” She snaps her fingers, winking. “I appreciate the consideration, though.”

“Ah, thanks Mom. Then in that case—” the boy throws his fist in the air. “You bet your ass I’m coming, dawg! WOO!”

“So am I,” Ada follows. Merlin, X, Roan, and Coleo all raise their hands—setae in Coleo’s case, paw in X’s.

“I woul’ like to come, too.”

“It would be cool to see all those fights in such a huge stadium,” Roan says.

X hops up and down. “Heck yeah!” The Buizel punches the air. “I get to see some ‘pow pow’ and ‘wham wham’, if you know what I mean!”

Serene rolls her eyes. “Barely.”

“Shut up.” He and Serene snort afterwards. “Are you coming with us too, Serene?”

The feline shakes her head. “Nah. Would rather stay here.” She stretches. “I want to feel as comfy as possible after all that traveling.”

X sighs, lowering his head. “That’s fair.”

“I’m not going, either.” Noctis huffs, closing his eyes. “Would just watch the event at home instead.”

“Same,” Ramon follows.

“W-We’ll stay home, too!” both Mesmeren and Ethan say.

“I-I’m just...not comfortable being around those many people.” Mesmeren trembles. *Already feeling uncomfortable by witnessing a lot of y-you guys....*

“S-Same here.” Ethan nudges his sister, Serene patting his back calmly. “PI-Plus the loudness of it all can sc-scare me, too.”

“Mhm...” Mesmeren pokes her fingers together.

Courtney nods. “I guess that settles it, then.” She smirks at Justin and Ada, lifting her fists. “Y’all ready to continue?”

“You betcha, fam!” Justin exclaims before he and the other three fight: Justin ducking Sylock’s kick while Courtney blocks Ada’s fists.

Noctis eyes the Lopunny, intrigue spreading across him. He huffs. *I hope you actually meant it, Courtney. About not giving up.*

...

The sun sets as Noctis guides Justin, Ada, and the other six over to Glory Pride's center. The nine roam around the large statues, passing by many bright and colorful stores along with the civilians inside. Some cars drive by, leading the group to spot a fairly large building nearby.

The All Star Gym: Containing an array of colors from red to blue to green, sprinkling across the building. There's a sign in front of the gym, having both a Pokeball and a Magic type symbol adjacent from one another. The gym has double doors along with four windows at the front, allowing everyone to see the fights within.

The group eyes the gym in awe, Justin whistling. "So that's what the All Star Gym looks like." His arms fold. "Shit looks pretty cool."

"Cool is an understatement, dude: It looks *colorfully* dope as hell!" X forms his fists, smiling while his tails wag. "I wanna head inside and see those lit fights!"

Noctis snarls. "Hey! No need to get distracted: We got a tournament to go to, remember?"

X chuckles nervously, rubbing his head. "Ah. Right!"

After walking by the gym, the nine descend further into the city until they stop in front of two buildings: Mouths gaping, eyes widening.

"Holy."

"Shit!" X finishes for Justin, gazing in shock.

Both of the blue and purple buildings widen in length, containing several windows along with double doors at the very front. The first building has a sign of a hand wielding a Pokeball while shrouding it in magical auras, being at the very top. The second building as a similar sign, but the hand and the Pokeball are facing the opposite direction from each other: Auras spawning around them.

A Conkeldurr and a Gossifleur enter the second building as Noctis says the following: "We're here: At the All Star Tournament Stadium." He scratches his nostril, eyeing the first stadium. "Erm, 'stadiums' I mean. I forgot there's two of them."

Courtney smirks, folding her arms. "Ya know, we could've just gone here ourselves since I've watched a lot of vids about its whereabouts before."

"Eh." The Charizard shrugs. "Just wanted to make sure you don't get lost along the way. You're new to this huge ass city, after all."

"Fair enough."

Noctis turns around. “Anyways, have fun.”

X lifts his paw. “Hey, wait! I wanna know what—” Noctis waves at the group as he walks away. “...the second stadium is used for.” The Buizel sighs. “Welp, guess I’ll know some other time.”

Courtney and Sylock walk in front of the first stadium, the doors springing open for them. Before they enter, Justin raises his finger.

“Ayo, gotta ask you two something.”

Courtney blinks, her and Sylock gazing at him. “That is?”

“When did you two sign up?”

“About right now. Sign ups happen as soon as the challengers arrive.”

Ada tilts her head. “Wouldn’t that be a bit...awkward for the participants?”

Merlin and Roan nod, the latter being mindful of Coleo. “I’ll have to agree here: The professionalism aspect of this doesn’t sound all that effective to prevent cluster.”

“Ye. There already is a lot o’ us here.” Coleo shakes his head. “Can’t imagi’n the ruckus goin’ on from landlubbers when a bunch o’ them wanted to sign up.”

Roan lifts his finger. “Mayhaps some precaution would be preferred in this scenario, Courtney ma’am?”

“Hmm...I guess so?” Courtney shrugs. “But like, I’d imagine the folks organizin’ this here tourney probably had some rules about not blockin’ the exits.” She waves her hand. “We should be fine.”

“Hmm...” Roan smacks his fist against the palm of his hand, smiling. “If you insist!”

Ada and Merlin eye each other before shrugging. “I guess we’ll take your words for it,” Ada says.

The eight then enter, the doors closing behind them.

...

Everyone is currently sitting on the middle sofa at Noctis’ home: Watching a man doing some kind of heroic pose while a woman swoons with heart eyes. Serene rolls her eyes, holding a bowl of popcorn with her vine, tossing one into her mouth.

“Mrs. Phoenix: I was told that this show has a lesbian couple in it.” She scoots the bowl over a bit for her brother, to which the Flareon shyly grabs a popcorn with his paw. “So far, I have yet to see that after like...three episodes, I believe?”

Delia giggles. “Patience is virtue, hun: They’ll appear in the fourth episode. And aren’t side characters, too.”

Serene widens her eyes, jolting up. Her bowl jiggles, Ethan yelping. “Wait, really!?” She stares, adjusting the bowl. “Ah, sorry Ethan.”

The dark brown woman gasps, covering her lips. “Oh dear: I think I’ve said too much.” Giggles.

The Leafreon’s tail wags, her eyes glued to the TV containing the same man shaking hands with a Clefairy. “Okay: Super Convolved Clown Muscle Man has piqued my interest.”

Ethan and Mesmeren shake their heads in bewilderment, blinking. “What a name...” they say.

Delia snorts further. “I know, right? I don’t quite get it myself, and that’s why I plan to look into it soon.”

Serene shrugs via her vines, her eyes closed. “Meh. The writer probably has a thing for muscles.”

“Considering this man and his Lucario partner having exaggerated muscles, I can see that.” The woman twirls her bangs. “Every man and woman *swoon* for their pecs and biceps whenever they see them. It’s a genuinely funny sight to behold.”

Ramon eyes the front door, tapping on the edge of the couch. “...” Stands. “I gotta go.”

“Hmm?” Delia blinks. “Where are you—” the Zoroark already books it to the exit, the woman tilting her head in perplexion. “Huh. Well that’s strange.” Mesmeren blinks for a moment before hopping off the couch, rushing towards the fox. Delia scratches her head. “What’s going on with those two?”

Serene and Ethan shrug, keeping their eyes on the screen. The woman caresses her chin, crossing her legs. *Hmm...* She turns around, eyeing the Drowzee.

The Zoroark reaches the front door: His hand on the handle, his eyes at the window.

“Um...” Mesmeren’s voice says, the fox’s ears flickering. He looks back, the blue ribbon Drowzee sitting there poking her fingers together.

“Oh. Um...” Ramon caresses his arm. “Hi.”

"What are you, erm, doing...?" Mesmeren shakes her hands and head. "I-If you don't mind me asking, of course!"

The fox sighs. "Getting some fresh air. Wanting to get out more and...soak in this city's environment." He scratches his snout. "Erm, as much as I can."

"O-Oh. I see, then."

Silence.

"...So." Mesmeren caresses her head, eyeing away.

"...So???" Ramon tilts his head.

Mesmeren blinks: Sweats dripping, her lips quivering. "W-Well, uh, erm..." She puts her arms behind her. "So our pasts are quite s-something, eh?"

Ramon blinks. "What."

Mesmeren simply smiles. ...AAAAAAH!!!

"Well, I mean—" he shakes his head. "I get what you mean: My past has loopholes I'm still trying to figure out while yours' is making you think you're an awful person."

The Drowzee's smile persists. *Phew. Good...H-He saved me there.*

Ramon lowers his ears, looking down. "Which I get: Both of our species seemed to be capable of deception, so I...I know how you feel." Mesmeren's smile fades as Ramon grits his teeth, gripping the handle. "I'm not even sure if I'm a good person, too. I just...*struggle* to see it."

"...Same." Mesmeren moves close, holding the fox's free paw. "W-We have friends, though....S-Somehow." Her eyes half-close. "A-A lot of them are willing to help us through our troubles and a-all...I don't get it." Whimpers. "They should've run the other way and not help some no-good Drowzee like me."

Ramon stares at the Drowzee's hands. "I feel the same way when it comes to Justin and Ada saving me from Travis. But...at the same time..." A small smile forms. "I'm glad that they did save me. I, uh, guess it gives me another chance to fix my evil ways. If I even can, anyways." Blinking for a moment, the fox covers his face. "Ugh, I don't know. I...Again, I just have a lot on my mind and need to go out to get some fresh air."

"U-Understandable..."

Ramon stares out of the window. "I do wonder: What *do* I believe about myself?"

"I..." Mesmeren looks down. "I wish I knew the answer, Ramon. I-I'm sorry."

"..." Ramon leans down, hugging the Drowzee. Mesmeren blushes. "It's okay. Don't blame yourself for something beyond your control, alright?"

The Drowzee gasps, staring ahead. *I...shouldn't blame myself...?* After what feels like hours, Mesmeren hugs back, nuzzling the red fluffy hair. "A-Alright..."

"..."

"..."

The two pull away from the hug: Staring at each other, lips sealed. Ramon stands, scratching his head while his face reddens.

"...Thank you," Mesmeren utters, looking away. "F-For understanding me, Ramon." She pokes her fingers together. "It means a lot to me." The Zoroark simply smiles with the blues, twisting the doorknob before leaving. Mesmeren stands there, gazing at the front door. She lowers her ears. *That was pretty idiotic of me to say.* She whimpers. *Oh...*

Delia lowers her head, the blues painting her. *Poor things. I wasn't aware of them thinking this way about themselves.*

...

Ramon rushes by the sidewalk near the Pokémon Center, gazing at a large waterfall from afar. He glares.

That must be where Gloria Falls is, Nomar says. Let's do this.