

“Listen, I really hate to sound obvious but... a boat?”

“Umm... yes. By the looks of it... a boat.”

“Eh, I think it’s more of a canoe, but where is it taking us?”

“...More importantly, is it taking us anywhere?”

The fog was dense around them so it was impossible to see beyond a few feet in whichever direction. The wood at their feet creaked a little at every move they made as the canoe the four found themselves standing on top of seemed to effortlessly glide over the water. The bizarre scenario could only be outmatched by the very occupants of the boat; a tall Gardevoir with red-dyed hair holding a map, a short Froslass carrying an umbrella, shielding them all from an invisible rain, a well-endowed Luxray girl who had her arms crossed as she observed her surroundings with rapt attention, and a completely white Lucario who happened to be carrying a brown sash with him.

“...I can’t make heads or tails of this thing.” The Gardevoir frowned at the map on his hand, then at the fog around him. “Bloody great, I didn’t even drink last night.”

“Last night?” The Froslass girl raised one hand from her umbrella to scratch her head. “...I don’t think I can even recall last night in the first place, maybe I’m dreaming?”

The Luxray snorted. “You think you’re the only one dreaming? What about the rest of us? And what makes you think this is a dream in the first place?”

They were all silenced by the Lucario, however, who silently raised his hand to point at the front of the canoe. The fog parted to reveal a small plateau as the canoe silently maneuvered to dock in it, and on the other side of the plateau a stairway leading up into the fog. “...Because of the silence.” He murmured softly. “The real world is never this quiet.” He spoke as he climbed down from the canoe and into the plateau, looking at the stairway.

PCA – The Brink of Time

Nigel Garkirl and Charla Rey © Kompy
Melody Lovelace and Heist Irving © Tallen
Pokémon © Nintendo/Gamefreak

“First a boat, and now stairs?” Nigel rolled his eyes as he got off the canoe and into the flat terrain. “Brilliant, had to be a dream.”

“Canoe, not boat.” Melody corrected him as she got out of the canoe, being aided by Heist as she continued to hold the umbrella over her own head.

“If this is a dream, then it must all have a hidden meaning.” Charla commented as she stepped out of the canoe, arms still crossed in front of her as she looked at the stairway leading into the unknown. “The fog, the canoe, the stairway, they must symbolize something together...”

The four stood on the plateau in silence, observing the stairs, until Melody smiled and turned to them all. “Well, what are we waiting for? There must be something up there!”

Nigel scratched his cheek with a finger. “Huh, Melody, I’m not sure about... whoa!” He yelped as Melody suddenly caught his arm and dragged him with her, laughing as she took the stairs two at a time, even though she could have simply glided upwards as Nigel was doing to keep up.

Heist silently observed the pair, then started to go up the stairs himself, pausing mid-way up only to look at the Luxray girl, who continued to keep her arms crossed in front of her chest at the base of the stairs. “...Are you staying?”

Charla hesitated, then shook her head. “No, I’m going. Just... looking at the surroundings a little...” A flat-out lie, seeing as there was nothing worth noting in the plateau itself. Heist, however, turned around and continued to climb the stairs indifferently. Charla grasped the opportunity to look down at her arm as she uncrossed them, looking at the handcuff linked to a chain in her right wrist that had been previously hidden from her crossing arms. For some reason, she didn’t want any of the others to see that handcuff. The Luxray shuddered as she started to climb the stairs.

Ahead of them, Melody and Nigel finally reached the end of the stairs. Melody stopped to look at the surroundings; yet another plateau surrounded by walls on all four sides. “Hmm... what’s this now?” She paused as she looked around, just as Nigel, still held by the arm, lowered himself and placed both hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

“You... could have... gone... a little... slower, don’t you think?” He gasped and finally looked up, noticing the walls and a surprisingly good-looking Xatu woman, standing shock-still in front of them and wearing what appeared to be an Incan set of clothes underneath her folded-down wings.

The group remained absolutely silent as Heist reached them, and soon afterwards Charla, arms once again crossed in front of her chest. The two parties faced each other for a moment longer, as the newcomers felt an odd urge to leave that place entirely as the Xatu stared at them transfixed.

Melody cleared her throat. “Umm... I think we should try to talk to her...”

“Wait... what? Melody?” Nigel looked at her stricken as she stepped up towards the Xatu. “*Simui*, wait!” Heist stepped up and held her by the wrist. The Froslass was determined, however, and freed herself from his grasp and approached the Xatu. Charla continued to observe, silent, as the Froslass stopped in front of the Mystic, the umbrella still covering her from above.

“Umm...” She tried, then smiled up at the Xatu. “Hi, can you tell us what this place is?”

Heist stopped right behind her, one arm slowly wrapping around her shoulders in a protective matter as he eyed the stranger carefully. Nigel and Charla followed, the Gardevoir standing on Melody's side himself, all four wary of the Xatu's every moments.

The Xatu observed the minute Ghost-type for a moment before finally opening her beak to talk. "This is the place of being and nonbeing, of parallel roads and crossroads, of choices and consequences..."

"Mind giving us a straight answer?" Nigel commented loudly, and flinched slightly as the Xatu gave him a piercing look."

"A place of resolve..." The Xatu continued as though not being interrupted at all. "...and understanding. You have all been brought here because you have taken a new step in your paths, a change of direction. However, it is a darkened path..." It closed its eyes momentarily. "...And it is necessary to see your path in order to broaden your horizon and understand what has brought you here..."

"Broaden our horizon?" Charla commented, unflinchingly as the Xatu turned to look at herself instead. "What do you mean by that?"

The Xatu opened one wing to indicate the four walls around the group that composed the room. "This... was your horizon just a few years ago, to all of you. A shallow, enclosed world, incapable of piercing a single solid wall..." She lowered its wing, and the walls slowly disappeared, to be replaced by a sight of rooftops and bridges; a miniature city. "...that kept you from marveling at the complexity of the world." The Xatu nodded. "That first wall was broken, individually, by each one of you a few years ago, but now it is time to look beyond, and broaden the horizon further..."

"...How do we hope to do that?" Heist commented, quietly, as he slowly removed his protective arm from around Melody. The Xatu was obviously not going to try to attack them, and rather seemed to want to help.

The woman nodded to each one of them. "You each carry an object with you, your burden, the thing that keeps you from moving forward at the moment..." Nigel looked at the map he was still carrying in his hands; Melody looked at the umbrella, still shading her from a non-existent sun; Heist glimpsed the brown sash in his hand, and Charla peered into the cuff hidden between her crossed-out arms. "It may represent anything: the self-contained desire, the hidden guilt, the dependency of a second, or the fear of finding a path of your own..." The Xatu started to glow as she opened her wings, at the same time as a closed doorway seemingly appeared out of nowhere behind her. "Only by understanding and relinquishing will the door open..." She flapped her wings, raising herself off the ground slightly, glowing more and more until she disappeared in a flash.

Silence permeated the group. Melody slowly started to walk towards the closed doorway, the still-open umbrella held loosely by her side. Nigel looked at her, then turned to Charla, who in turn glared at him before turning the other way. Figuring it was

his safest bet Nigel walked up towards the Frosslass, who was right now caressing the door's surface with her fingertips.

"What do you make of this?" Nigel asked, quietly, as Melody reached out and tested the doorknob, which was locked. Behind the two Charla and Heist seemed to have engaged in their own private discussion. Melody sighed at that.

"I don't know, this is all so confusing..." She raised the umbrella up to the top of her head once more. Nigel noticed the movement and looked at the umbrella as the Frosslass continued to peer at the door.

"...Apparently, it all has something to do with that thing you're holding." He paused, then looked at the confusing map in his hands once more. "...This is supposed to represent something, something that is holding you down..." The answer came quickly to his lips. "...Charla, of course..."

Melody gave up searching the door to look at the Garde. "What is it? Did you understand something?"

Nigel nodded, indicating the map and showing it to Melody. "I'm... not sure myself, but I think this map..." He pointed at the confusing symbols and paths that seemed to lead nowhere in the sheet of paper. "...Was me, trying to understand what was happening in Charla's head..." He started to fold the paper. "...Trying to understand, I made things worse, and... bloody hell..." He raised one hand up to his face. "...Fleck, now I understand... this is why..."

He felt Melody suddenly hold his free hand. She looked up at his face as the open umbrella was still set next to her feet. "Nigel, it's okay. What's happened, happened for a reason..." She slowly nodded to him. "Things are rough between the two of you now, but I know things will turn out okay in the end, one way or another... Let yourself go of it"

The Garde nodded, albeit still feeling rather miserable. He gave a look at the map, then shrugged and crushed it into a ball, unceremoniously dropping it to the ground. He turned to look at Melody's umbrella. "Well, what about you?"

Melody reached out and grabbed the object again. "I've been thinking it over myself... And I think I know now..." She raised one hand and stroked her long, silver hair. "...Have I ever told you why I keep my hair long like this, Nigel?"

The Gardevoir was thrown off by that unexpected question. "Eh... I think not. Why?"

"Because Ember has it... my teammate, Ember." Melody said, quietly. "Ember... is always grinning, fooling around, and in general being outgoing... I wanted to be more like her, so I let my hair grow long and started to act like her..." She slowly shook her head. "Shade, my captain, was always so easygoing, so enthusiastic, so carefree... I wanted to be like him, too..." She gave Heist a fleeting look. "...and Heist, he is always so calm, so confident, so certain of himself..." The Frosslass shook her head and turned to Nigel once more. "I just realized that all this time, I've been admiring them, wanting to be them, acting like them, but..." She hiccupped momentarily, and Nigel got

worried she would start crying once more. "...in reality envying them, and with that forgetting to be... me..."

"Hey, hey..." Nigel knelt down in front of Melody, wiping the tears from her eyes with his fingers. "Don't... don't cry again, please..." Melody sobbed and hiccupped, doing her best to stop crying. She let go of Nigel's grasp then turned to the umbrella once more, and nodded.

"I realized..." She took a deep breath and collapsed the umbrella. "...It is time I stopped living in my own teammate's shadow. It's time to walk with my own feet now..."

She let go of the umbrella, and suddenly the door by their side opened, revealing a blinding white light on the other side. The pair, the Frosslass and the Gardevoir, both looked at the doorway and, not without a moment of hesitation first, stepped inside and disappeared in the light.

A few moments ago, Charla took a few tentative steps towards Heist. Truth was she wasn't sure what to ask the albino 'mon in the first place. He appeared so distant; it looked as though he wasn't even aware of her presence... "Eh... excuse me... Heist, right?" She asked tentatively, and the white Lucario turned to look at her, slowly. "Uh, just wanted to ask... what do you make of this?"

Heist gave her a piercing look. "...We are here to understand, whatever that means, with the object we are carrying right now..." He gave his sash a fleeting look, then turned to Charla again. "...Or that is the idea. What do you think?"

The Luxray hesitated, and then nodded, uncrossing her arms and raising her right hand, evidencing the handcuff in her wrist. "I ask you. What do you think this is supposed to mean?"

Heist slowly raised one hand and held the chain. "...Curious. Imprisonment of some kind, lack of freedom, and by consequence perspective." He slowly let go of the chain. "...However, I'm thinking you are the only one who can understand what all of this truly means." He stopped, and looked at his sash once more. "...Think..."

Charla sighed as she looked at her handcuff. She knew who it must symbolize: Nigel, of course, but not the why. She gave up thinking of her own situation to turn to Heist again. "Well... what do you make of your own object, that sash..." She realized suddenly that the sash wasn't entirely brown, and there were blood stains in it on some spots.

"This... used to belong to my sister, Ruby..." Heist unfolded the sash in his hands and extended it. "Just before I moved to Kanto, she gave this to me, when we were still in Sinnoh..." He kept his eyes firmly on the sash. "...I've been carrying it around with me ever since, as a reminder of what happened to us..." He broke off, then looked at his feet. "...Of course, I always carried it around with me..."

The Luxray tilted her head curiously. “Eh... Heist?” But the albino ‘mon had started to walk towards the edge of the plateau, just outside the rooftops and streets beneath him.

“...Eyes always on the past, I never really stopped to realize...” Heist extended his hand that still held the blood-soaked sash. “...That if I wanted to move forward with life, I would have to stop looking at the ghosts that still haunt me...” With a wave of his hand, he let go of the sash. “...And looking at such ghosts blinds me from the people in front of me...” He spoke as the sash slowly started to fall off the plateau, moments before a gust of wind picked it up, carrying it away and down to the streets below. “...And unconsciously, I’ve been shoving away the very people who were best to offer me comfort...”

His task done, he turned to Charla. “What about you? Do you understand your burden now?”

Charla looked at her handcuff once more. No, she didn’t. She still didn’t understand why she was still in that place... “Don’t you think you can help me...?”

“It is your epiphany alone, your realization. You cannot ask someone else to understand in your stead.” He turned to look at the doorway Nigel and Melody were before, just as it opened and revealed a blindingly white light beyond. “...I hope you can understand before those doors close.” He commented quietly as Nigel and Melody stepped inside the passage. And with that he slowly started to walk in the doorway’s direction himself...

Charla looked at her wrist. Understand? Understand what? “Oh, great...” She looked up, and was panic-stricken when she realized that the door was beginning to close as Heist crossed it.

“Hey, wait!!” She panicked and started to run in the door’s direction. For some reason, she knew that once the door closed, it would be closed for good. “Don’t!!”

Heist stopped inside the doorway as he turned to Charla, silently looking in her direction as the door was almost completely closed, showing only a part of his face. The Luxray’s eyes were open with fear. “Don’t, don’t let it close...”

With a snap, the doors closed entirely, leaving only Charla still outside...

“...No...”

Monday morning, bloated thing. Nigel sighed as he picked some books from his locker. Thankfully, that was the very last week of school. *Summer vacation would start soon, and maybe I’ll finally get to relax a little...* He thought as he closed the locker, looking at his reflection in its polished surface for a moment. He suddenly began to think about that dream he had a few days ago, but even as he tried, the details of it were already slipping away from him like sand between his fingers. *Someone was there... Melody?*

“Nigel!” He heard the familiar, enthusiastic call from the other side of the hallway, and couldn’t help but smile as the minute Frosslass ran up in his direction. Only someone like Melody could be so cheerful in a Monday morning. The small girl stopped in front of him and beamed in his direction. “So, how are things?”

Nigel shrugged as he fitted his lock. “Eh, nothing much...” Then, something in the Frosslass caught his eye. “Say, Melody, when did you cut your hair?”

A few feet away from them an albino Lucario eyed them carefully, just as Melody ran her fingertips between her now short, silver hair with a smile. He heard someone approach him from behind, and noticed a Luxray girl walk in his direction.

“Eh... I know we’re not really friends or anything but... could we talk?”

Heist looked at her from the corner of his eye. “...Curious dream we had, didn’t we?”

Charla looked at him dumbfounded, and then nodded. “Uh, yeah, I meant to ask... How was that possible? I mean...” She shook her head. “It was a dream, but we were all there...”

Heist nodded slowly. “...I have been wondering exactly that myself, and I believe it has something to do with your friend there...” He nodded to Nigel, who was complimenting Melody’s new hairstyle.

Charla instantly pouted. “Forget that, he’s not my friend right now.” She looked the other way, feigning annoyance but actually trying to hide the longing in her eyes. “...But I get your point. He’s psychic, so maybe he had the dream, and sort of transferred it to all of us at that time...”

“...Maybe, but maybe it was something else...”

Charla looked at him. “Something else? What else could it possibly be, then? You can’t mean that it was all some kind of wacky destiny thing, can you? That Xatu, those hidden meanings, that whole ‘being and nonbeing’ crap...” She suddenly faltered, as if unsure herself. “...I mean, it couldn’t have been REAL, could it? It was all in our head...”

Heist slowly turned to look at her. “Of course it was all in our head, but ponder this: does it really mean that it wasn’t real?”

Charla paused, trying to understand what the albino ‘mon had just told her. Heist, on the other hand, started to leave. He finally understood it all, finally realized what it all meant. He slowly allowed a smile to show up in his face as he reached a Lopunny girl nearby, who seemed to be having trouble with her own locker.

“Silk?”

The Lopunny gasped in surprise, accidentally dropping all her books in the process. She turned to Heist, blushing a deep red. “H-Heist! W-what do you want?”

He, on the other hand, simply smiled benignly at her. “You dropped your books, need help picking them up?”

Charla looked at the albino Lucario and the Lopunny silently for a moment. It became obvious in a matter of moments that the Lopunny in question, Silk apparently, had a thing for Heist. She turned around as Melody and Nigel started to walk down the hallway, away from her. She felt an odd feeling around her, a mix of claustrophobia and desperation. *I need time, I need to be alone right now...* She pressed her books up to her chest. *I need to get out of here...* She thought, thinking about what to do during summer vacation...