

When I Win the World Ends

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When I Win the World Ends

by [Bavitz](#)

Summary

Once a year, the world's best trainers compete for the title of World Champion. Toril, the favorite, has dedicated her life to battling. Aracely, the underdog, has not. In fact, she barely knows the rules. She didn't even build her own team. She's a mockery of the sacred bond between trainers and Pokémon, one Toril swears to eliminate.

But Aracely makes plays that shouldn't be possible. She reads opponents as though reading their minds, predicts exactly what they'll do. And now, she's made another prediction, one far more unsettling: "When I win, the world ends."

Groups | Goddess

O it's regulation Miss Lund. Registered Pokémon must be relinquished thirty minutes prior to the match. Freckled pantsuit bitch. Explaining like she memorized the rulebook. Like Toril hadn't. This allows IPL authorities to confirm tournament-legal movesets, abilities, and items, ensuring competitive integrity.

It happened every match, but she never got used to it. Toril felt exposed without her Pokémon. Restless fingers spidered her thigh. Competitive integrity! She entered the restroom.

A goddess was there.

Phlegm choked Toril's throat. Her heart raced, or already had been racing, but a whooshing void of thoughts provoked incredible awareness of it, this blood orb throbbing in her chest. The goddess of the restroom faced—not Toril—but the wall-spanning mirror, where her closed eyes turned toward her.

Barefoot, unblemished soles stretched tiptoe, body gently arched, arms spread to take flight through the mirror and vanish into another dimension, fingers twined in mudras. Hair bronze, skin bronze, thin wisp of a white dress, and strung from her neck a sapphire pendant the shape of an acute triangle, so finely sharpened it threatened to pierce her throat. All in her manner gentle, all terrible—Toril's limbs slumped in awe.

Without opening her mouth, the goddess spoke. Like a goddess, she spoke a prophecy of doom.

[This world will end on October 12.]

The date sounded *right*—significant. It was currently September 14.

[This world will end on October 12,] the goddess repeated, lips motionless, voice far older, far more drained than her youthfully bright body. The illusion frayed. Toril realized: October 12 was the grand championship.

[This world will end, but we will not. Our souls are immortal; our spirits malleable, moldable, adaptable. For we RISE—]

The goddess opened eyes incandescent and many-colored, smiled, and leaned to tap the phone perched on the lip of a nearby sink. The old woman's voice cut off, while the goddess opened her mouth and said:

"Oh hi! What a su-uper serendipitous twist of fate. You wouldn't believe how much of your tape my Dad made me watch. Every game you ever played: downloaded." Her fingers waggled on either side of her head as her tiny feet tiptoed toward Toril.

A flesh and blood human. Toril sank hopelessly against the indigo-tiled wall, teeth straining a hiss. And she kept getting closer, that slip of a dress with her thighs bare, arms bare, two thin straps around the shoulders and bracelets on her wrists, Toril boxed in, defenseless, her hand reached for a Poké Ball—nothing! Those IPL assfuckers! They planned it all along. Sabotage!

"Hnnhhrrl!"

"Whoa. Oka-ay." The false goddess retreated, hands up, dropping onto her heels. "Personal bubble. I get it." (Under her breath: "Weird.") "What, you think I'll like, shank you or something? I'm not that desperate to win."

"Wh—what? Desperate to—win?"

A curious, questioning head tilt stabbed Toril deep. "Um. Yeah? Hello-o? Recognize me? I like, get you're undefeated so far, but if you don't even know your next opponent..."

Next opponent.

For her final match of group stage.

In thirty—no, twenty—minutes.

"Aracely Sosa," Toril said.

"Aced it. Everyone calls me Cely though, so get on that, k?"

Toril gripped at her heart. Shit. This was—look. Look! *Obviously* Toril researched her opponents. Any trainer of her caliber did. She pored over tape. She knew every Pokémon Sosa brought to this tournament, every moveset they ran, their temperaments and tendencies.

Why the fuck did Toril need to know what Aracely Sosa *looked* like?

With only so much prep time, she focused on information that actually mattered. Objectively correct decision-making. But Aracely Sosa's smarmy shithead smile twisted the dagger.

Toril diverted the subject. "What about—that recording—huh? About the world ending? What was that crap?"

Aracely pattered to the sink and scooped her phone. "Nothing. A meditation mix MOTHER made."

"Your mom?!"

"No-o, silly. Not my Mom. MOTHER. All caps."

Her head shook like this explained everything and Toril trembled, pre-combustive. Possibly sensing this, Aracely appended:

"I dunno... Isn't a feeling of finality calming? I think so. The last words of a story always linger longest. On October 12, with everyone watching, I'll be those last words. Just think, this world's long line of history, and you're the very last point. What it built toward the whole time."

Her feet tucked in. Her eyes—not multicolored as Toril first thought, but bland brown swarmed by glitter eyeshadow—turned with a dab of something Toril couldn't fathom, and for a moment the knot of spite eased.

"Omigosh, so sorry. Look at me rambling."

The restroom hummed. Empty besides the two of them. There were few women at this level of competition.

"It really is such a boy's club." Aracely held up her phone, flashed a V-sign, and snapped a picture. "You should see Dad. He's ecstatic. Since I was thirteen he's dragged me to jungles and mountains and who-freaking-knows-where. I don't get the hype. Like yeah, some of these Pokémon, kinda cute, but. Way too many are uggo incarnate."

"U—uggo?"

"Seriously. Like, that Zoroark of yours? Barf. Why's it covered in veins? Hideous, right?"

Toril's hands, both the gloved and ungloved one, twitched at her sides.

"Not your fault. I get it. You can't just use cute Pokémon, they have to be competitively viable. Blegh. I'm so lucky Dad trained mine for me. Cannot imagine the feeding and cleaning and whatever."

"You didn't—train them yourself?" *Daddy* did it for her? Daddy's pampered princess? He works, she makes herself pretty? Primping, preening, hours every morning—drubbing her eyes with glitter—shoving her soul down the garbage disposal. And they *let* her in this tournament? To make a mockery of the whole fucking thing? Competitive integrity!

"There are so many too. Every battle, a Pokémon I've never heard of. I swear"—tap, tap on her phone with long lavender nails—"people who have them all memorized must be—mm? What's up, Tors?"

Toril's fingers went up, all eight hooked, maybe to strangle Aracely, maybe to ram the sapphire pendant through her throat—Aracely's or Toril's, whichever—but they grasped nothing.

Nothing—that was what Aracely was—nothing. In fifteen minutes, Toril would prove it, to everyone.

Aracely stared sadly at Toril's outstretched hands. "Mm, no. I don't think you will."

Millimeters from murder, Toril spun sharp on one heel and barreled through the bathroom door. She fled down the concourse in case Aracely pursued, imagining Aracely's disembodied

head bouncing smiling behind. She didn't stop until she reached the check-in station and safely concealed herself amid the trainers.

Then she realized she still needed to piss.

Wow. Something Cely said?

She laced her gladiators, slid into her jacket, and departed the restroom's makeshift zen sphere. Toril was already out of sight.

Now about Tors. Sure, the whole face area, highly reminiscent of Nosepass. But let's focus on the positives: Natural blonde, super tall. We're looking at a workable base.

What one must do is get her out, out, out of that slate gray arctic camo jacket. Plus the truly bizarre glove (one hand only!). Unravel her, rebuild. It's September, so think autumnal. Emphasize her height with a long wool blend coat, straps and big buttons, maybe a deep burgundy or chianti to contrast her hair. Oh! Plus wouldn't it be darling? A beret, mm, adorable, Cely you are a freaking genius.

Granted this endeavor was for naught without a landmark undertaking in the hair and makeup department, but Cely was the hair and makeup girl. Four hours alone with Toril, then, voila. Brand new woman, constructed out of the ashes of the old.

With that much control, what wonders her hands would wreak!

Twin Machoke hauling audio equipment forced Cely against the hundred-meter plate glass edifice that formed the concourse's outer rim. Through the window a sunset streamed over the mountaintops, burgundy like Toril's new coat, and Cely thought briefly how sad that in a month this whole beautiful world would be destroyed.

Oh well!

She checked her obnoxiously de-Rotomed phone. One of her besties left a text (GOOD LUCK XOXOXO CHEERIN 4 UUU), while the other didn't send a thing. Understandable. Time zones et cetera.

Nothing from MOTHER.

Meanwhile, because the way was clogged with staff, trainers, security, production crew, and Pokémon, Cely failed to see Dad until she already passed him.

He saw her, though. "Cely. Cely!" He'd sunken into a couch in some lounge area. He gripped the cushion with both hands, but failed to rise. "Dammit. Britt, help me out here."

Brittany, Dad's post-divorce companion, took his hand in her two and tugged. Despite his two hundred-plus pounds on her, their combined efforts got him upright.

At which point he lumbered after Cely, his ill-fitting, untailed, rumped cream suit an affront of creases, his fedora dancing precariously atop his head until it finally flopped off. Brittany, hurrying behind, picked it up and replaced it.

"Damn! Slow down Cely," Dad said. "You remember your team? Your opener? Your flowcharts?"

"Dad. I dream about flowcharts."

"And Toril Lund? What's Lund running, you remember?"

"Ghost Spam Illusion Hyper Offense: Annihilape, Porygon-Z. Zoroark."

"*Hisuian* Zoroark. But she's also got the Hail team, remember? Alolan Ninetales, Baxcalibur, Volcarona."

"It's not called Hail anymore, Dad. It's Snow."

He fanned his fedora. "Pah. That's just to make people buy new TMs."

"I think they got sued when a hailstone paralyzed a spectator."

"Regulatory bureaucrap."

Cely swiveled on her heels and half-walked, half-skipped backward, forcing people to weave around her for a change. "Anyway! How do I look? Cute right?"

"Shit Cely don't ask me, I don't know. Now about Lund—"

"How do I look?" Cely asked Brittany. "Cute?"

Brittany scrutinized, then tepidly nodded.

"Perfect. Thanks for the last-second cram sesh Dad. Gotta check in now. By-y-ye!"

"No, hold up. Cely! You're not taking this seriously. It's your last shot to clinch a bracket berth. Hear me? You lose this, and *fate's out of your hands*."

Cely stopped in the middle of the concourse, only a bend from the check-in station. A line of holoscreens dotted the wall, washed out by the sunset, rendering the figures that spoke on them chalky and imprecise. "As for the upcoming match," a nasally analyst said. "Not a fan of Aracely Sosa's reactive style here."

"Well then," Cely said. "Let's get serious. I think we should change my team."

This was not what Dad expected, and during his nonplussed stagger Cely continued toward the check-in station. "Whoawhoawhoa, Cely. Whaddya mean change it?"

"I mean change it. Momokins in, Ziggy out."

("Sosa has a commendable team. Great team." The holoscreens dotted the corridor, walking did not escape them. "It beats teams worse than hers. Toril Lund's team is not worse than hers.")

"Nope. Nah-ah. No way kiddo. I love me some Momokins, you know I do. He carves up Annihilape for dinner. But in hail he's a popsicle."

"He won't be in hail. Or even snow."

("I question Aracely's fundamentals," said a stately-sounding woman. "When she faces Pokémon she's not specifically prepared for, she has no idea what to do.")

"Lund's got two teams," Dad said, "and one uses hail. It's fifty-fifty he's in hail. No. Our current team beats both of Lund's. Her weakness is a strong offensive fairy type, which we got. Ziggy's basically as good against Annihilape as Momokins, *and* kicks Baxcalibur's ass. I've drilled Ziggy for this all day."

"Momokins is better against Annihilape than Ziggy."

("Toril meanwhile is fast, aggressive, has the fundamentals, has the team. It's a stylistic mismatch. I don't see an avenue for Aracely to win.")

"How are you so certain it's Annihilape? It's fifty-fifty, Cely."

A shrug. "She just gave that vibe."

"Vibe?!" Dad's hands went to his forehead, rolled down his face, tugged at his beard. "Cely. Listen to yourself. This is like when you were ten. Remember? You thought you had psychic powers."

"Oh, seriously Dad? Dredging up ancient history?"

"Then don't feed me crap about vibes! Battling is math, probability, logic, and the unbreakable bond between trainer and Pokémon. You don't got the unbreakable bond, but you do got the math, so *use* it!"

So loud. And perfect timing, they'd stopped in front of the check-in station, jampacked with trainers with nothing better to do than await their next match. They gave her the stinkeye. Cely flashed them her absolute kindest smile, then hissed at Dad:

"I'm taking this more seriously than you know. There isn't a second chance for me." October 12, then no more. "I'm the trainer, not you."

"The trainer!" Dad, of course, ignored the hint to lower his voice, even as Brittany placed her hands on his shoulder to calm him. "I *made* you, Cely. I made your team, I made your strategies, I made everything that got you here. Cely don't you walk away from me!"

But she did, into the check-in station, and when Dad tried to follow a guard said: "Sorry sir, battlers only past this point."

"I *am* a battler! I played finals here, right here, twenty years ago! You punkass"—jabbing a sausage finger at the pimply-necked guard—"were you even born yet? IPL 44? I played finals!"

"Didja win," a trainer asked.

"I—I—you—!"

He was set on making a scene. Cely came back out, palms up.

"Okay Dad. You win. I'll go with your team, I'll go with Ziggy. Not Momokins. You win."

The magic words soothed him. He stepped back, pressed a hand to his chest, and breathed. Brittany breathed with him, a rehearsed exercise, and the red drained from his face.

"Shit. Sorry Cely. It's just—it's a big deal for me, okay? I don't wanna see you squander your shot."

"I won't Dad. You know me. I hate losing."

"I know Cely. And you know I love you."

"I know Dad."

From inside the station, a microphone intoned: "Five minute warning for Toril Lund and Aracely Sosa. Both trainers approach the desk now."

"Gotta go Dad! Bye-bye."

She tried to leave but his hand fell on her shoulder. She turned, expecting a hug or whatever, but instead he pointed at her neck. At her sapphire pendant.

"The hell's that?"

"Nothing, Dad."

"That lunatic gave you that, didn't she?"

MOTHER. "She's not a lunatic, Dad. She runs a legitimate health and wellness clinic."

"People see you wearing that they'll ship you to the nuthouse. Give it."

"It's fine Dad."

"I said give it."

She tucked the pendant under her dress. "See? It's fine."

"I don't want you talking to that woman again Cely. Your mother never should've sent you to her."

"It's fine Dad."

"I repeat, five minute warning for Aracely Sosa. Aracely Sosa, approach the desk now or forfeit..."

"Gotta go Dad." Before he said anything more, she pushed through the crowd and tapped the desk.

Toril, the only one in the room not staring at Cely, stood beside her. A black, choking aura. Lost in her own spiteful little world. Cely imagined her in cashmere and the foulness dispersed like droplets of mist.

The clap of the crowd became a rolling wave of thunder over the mountaintops that thronged the stadium. Twilight turned the sky a gyre of graying violet, and the stadium lights snapped on to shine over the arena floor.

Eighty thousand bodies seething together; an extra few hundred million watching from home. All blissfully unaware of their impending doom.

In the broadcast booth, the announcers set the scene. "It's the final day of groups here at the sixty-fourth annual Interregional Pokémon League World Championship. Groups A, B, and C have already finished. Today, we'll see which four trainers from Group D will advance to the bracket stage."

"This match is a big one. After struggling the first week, Aracely Sosa's really hit her stride. Now she's on the cusp of clinching a spot, but she'll need a major upset against the undefeated favorite Toril Lund..."

There, in the stadium, these cerebral words went unheard. Brute frenzy gripped the audience, fervent simply in concerted display of life. Narrative, that singular and cohesive line making sense of the insensible, was not yet fully formed for the two young women who entered severally the stage. It was still groups: a two-week onslaught of three-on-three duels among forty-eight regional champions from across the world. The analysts buzzed about favorites, underdogs, historical performers, prodigies, but their words were a road built moments before their boots trod it. Give it time, certainly, and the throughline would shine clear, and the ultimate result would become a retroactively fated occurrence. For now, though, what did the crowd care about Toril Lund from the snow-swept Kylind region, or Aracely Sosa from sunny Visia? They cared to see the world's greatest weapons battle one another. They cared for Pokémon.

There were, though, some individuals keyed upon the human element.

Like the plump but pretty girl swaddled in blankets on the bottom bunk of a college dorm halfway across the world. She'd never cared about battles before in her life, but now giggled anxiously as her best friend blew kisses to the camera. The roommate above rolled over and snapped: "Shut *up* Haydn, it's 2 a.m..."

Or the plaid and besotted creature nursing a stein more backwash than beer, wincing as he rubbed his ribs—they caught him counting cards again—wondering ways to scuttle out from under debts stacked precipitously, glancing at the staticky CRT TV mounted above the bar only after a sometime chum said, "Ain't that your little girl Lund?" The awkward thing shambling with its head tucked into its collar could've been anyone. He spat, shrugged.

Or MOTHER. Deep within the inner sanctum of the RISE Health & Wellness Clinic, all allowed darkness to better hide the poison streaks that never quite left her body, fingers thatched and face stone as she watched impassively the two trainers take positions atop checkered battling platforms. At the fringes of her chamber, in tall tubes of fluid, tentacled things ebbed.

For the rest, spectacle alone sufficed.

"Trainers," an automated, Galarian-accented voice intoned in each battler's earpiece, "please confirm readiness."

On their platforms, staring each other down over a chalked fifty meters of bare earth, Toril Lund and Aracely Sosa tapped their holoscreens.

"Trainers, please choose—*three*—Pokémon."

Their respective screens showed their nine registered Pokémon. Both trainers hesitated. Aracely glanced into the diamond-studded swath of audience, seeking the spectator box where her Dad would be, then at Toril, who quickly averted her eyes.

Both selected three Pokémon.

Tubes within the platforms sent up their Poké Balls with a shlorp and deposited them into magnetized notches at arm's length.

"Trainers, prepare to send out your first Pokémon. The battle begins in—thirty seconds."

Look at her; Toril Lund thought as she gripped a Poké Ball with her gloved hand. Empty—superficial. Built by her father. She has never known what it means to risk your life for your Pokémon. To lose part of your body for them. She sees them as playthings, not comrades in arms. Nothing but a pile of dust.

Look at her; Aracely Sosa thought, twirling a Poké Ball on the tip of one finger. So lonely. She's never had a friend, could never have a friend, she'd force them away. She left home at ten. Animals are her only companions. She's lost and doesn't know it. Can she find herself before the end? Not without help.

"Trainers, send out your first Pokémon now."

"Go," Aracely said, "Rotom!"

Her ball followed a graceful arc from platform to arena floor, bounced, and split. A spray of light manifested into Rotom, jolly orange ghost in the machine, lidless eyes and goofy smile. It was her first ever Pokémon. It came with her phone.

It wasn't possessing a phone now, though. Its form was bulky and square, a hose on its side and a round opening in front. Rotom's washing machine version: Rotom-Wash for short.

Toril's ball hit the ground slightly later on account of her surprisingly elaborate wind-up motion. The spin caused it to careen in a random direction, but it still sprayed its light into the form of a Pokémon. Cely stared with keen interest. If Tors was using her Snow team, it'd be Alolan Ninetales. If she was using her Ghost team, it'd be Porygon-Z or Annihilape, with a chance either was actually Zoroark (ahem, Hisuian Zoroark) using its ability to disguise itself.

Snow, or Ghost? Who was right, Dad or Cely? She sincerely hoped Dad was right, because she went with his team.

The light became a Pokémon.

It wasn't Alolan Ninetales.

It wasn't Porygon-Z or Annihilape.

It was—

It was.

Crap.

Trainers brought nine Pokémon to the tournament, but only used three per match (in groups, at least). So far, Toril showed six, leaving her last three hidden for the bracket. Neither Cely nor Dad expected her to reveal one of those now. In another circumstance, Cely might be flattered by the special attention. The problem?

Cely didn't know what this thing was.

She'd seen it before, vaguely. She knew its type, though the leaves growing down its back gave it away. Large, knuckle-dragging simian, ringed eyes and sinister sneer, gripping a wooden drumstick with drum to match, but what was it called?

The holoscreen updated to show the fielded Pokémon. The name was revealed: Rillaboom.

Tors grinned infernally. Cely had no clue what to do.

Groups | Psychic Powers

That chatty slut revealed too much in the restroom. Daddy did it for her: teambuilding, strategy, prep. Sosa memorized dutifully—but she only regurgitated.

To be honest—with herself, who else?—Toril feared Sosa the tiniest amount, back when she was tape with no face. Her team was good. Peak form meta Pokémon, championship caliber. Sosa only lost off unforced blunders, but being unforced made them unpredictable. Now, Toril understood. Sosa crushed trainers who reused past strategies. She sucked when someone pulled out something new—something beyond Dad's prep.

Dad was the puppeteer, Sosa his marionette. Strike the strings.

Look at her. Even at this distance it's obvious: she's choking. She has no fucking clue what to do. She can only make an educated guess, minus the education.

Toril is in your head right now, Sosa. Lurking in those dark recesses, unspooling your thoughts. You think you have two options. First, maybe you guess Rotom outspeeds, so maybe you can get off Will-O-Wisp before Rillaboom attacks. Burning Rillaboom halves its attack, and maybe that means Rotom survives the grass move you're sure is coming. The second option is you don't risk finding out how fast Rillaboom is, because if you misjudge it's lights out. Instead, you hard switch. Get Rotom out, put in something that matches up better.

Pick either option. Both are your funeral. You're about to fall for the stupidest trap in existence.

No other trainer at this tournament, even those from pissrandom wildcard regions, would fall for it. Every single one would know what Toril was *really* doing. The analyst desk and the announcers surely knew, and they were mental invalids. Half the fucking *audience* knew.

You don't know, Sosa. And when you show you don't know, everyone watching will see exactly the fraud you are.

Toril's teeth absentmindedly tore a sliver of nail off her thumb.

Okay. So. Cely was thinking she had two options. (The thirty-second timer before she needed to select a move ticked maliciously.) Option 1: Maybe Rotom's faster. She had no idea if it was, which made it a gamble, but one that might pay off. If she used Will-O-Wisp and burned Rillaboom, it was p-rob-ably too weak to one shot Rotom? Maybe? Option 2, the safer option: Switch Rotom out, don't attack at all.

She tilted toward the latter. Especially since, glancing over her Pokémon, she had by complete chance a solid answer to Rillaboom on standby.

Too bad she didn't actually have psychic powers, because Dad was definitely trying to transmit a move into her head right now.

Her finger moved toward the holoscreen to choose to switch out Rotom—then stopped. Through the translucent projection, she saw Tors on the opposite platform, watching eagerly.

Why so eager?

What are you really up to, Tors?

The timer showed five. Further logical exhumation was impossible. Instead, a feeling swept her. A vibe, if you will, the exact vibe that made her think Toril would use her Ghost team. That vibe was based on... nothing, really, the feeling of just how mad Toril was, how bitter and spiteful. (Like an angry ghost? Like the ghost move Spite?)

The vibe wasn't wrong. It wasn't. She couldn't explain why, but it wasn't.

At the literal last second, her finger zipped across the screen and tapped a move that was the dumbest move in the world if she was wrong. It wasn't Will-O-Wisp. It wasn't a switch either, at least not a hard switch. It was a move totally worthless against Rillaboom.

"Volt Switch," she shouted.

At the same time, Toril yelled, "Nasty Plot!"

Rillaboom did, in fact, move faster. Its massive ape body hunched forward as it rubbed its paws together. Its ringed eyes shone wicked as a sneer opened across its lips, a sneer identical to the one Toril wore earlier.

A message on Cely's holoscreen indicated that, as per the biometric readout provided by the IPL's advanced sensors, Rillaboom's special attack rose by two stages.

But Toril, having heard the move Cely called out, was no longer smiling.

Rotom never stopped smiling as the wires within its washing machine body crackled, sparked, and expelled a blindingly bright (but weak) flash of electricity. The attack should have been negligible against Rillaboom. Instead, it flung back its head and roared in pain as the volts shot through its body.

Why? Simple. It wasn't Rillaboom.

The illusion dispersed in mirage-like waves, the drum vanishing, the leafy mane, the ringed eyes and sourpuss. The creature standing in Rillaboom's place was instead ghastly white and covered with throbbing, nasty, straight up uggo veins. It was Zoroark. Specifically the formerly extinct Hisuian variant of Zoroark (nerd emoji).

Cely knew. She knew. She didn't know how she knew, but she knew. See Dad? Psychic powers. Psychic powers at work!

In the VIP spectator box, Domino Sosa paced, expelled breath, removed his fedora to scratch what remained of his hair, and explained.

"It's obvious how she knew. Honestly, no goddam clue what Lund wanted to pull. Cely's not that knowledgeable about Pokémon, but a *kid* sees through that."

He explained to the only other person in the box, Brittany, reclined with her legs trimly crossed and the folds of her dress about her. She waited for Domino to pace away from her before she quietly expelled a yawn.

"Rillaboom's ability creates Grassy Terrain after it enters the field." When he turned again, Brittany was fully alert, nodding along. "Normally, that arena would be covered—covered!—in grass. But it's not. That's a dead giveaway it's not actually Rillaboom, which means it's gotta be Zoroark's illusion."

"Mm," Brittany hummed.

"My daughter would never fall for that. Never. She'd see right through. She'd say, 'There's no Grassy Terrain. That's Zoroark.' Instant. Snap! Like that. She's a good battler. She knows her stuff."

But he was sweating, and rubbing his neck, and fanning himself with his hat.

"She knew. Because of Grassy Terrain. She knew."

That bitch did not fucking know because of Grassy Terrain. No fucking way. Toril's incisors shredded the flesh of her thumb, snagged a tab of hangnail, peeled a thin strip of skin.

Volt Switch, after doing damage, returned the Pokémon who used it to its Poké Ball. Rotom left the stage. "Go, Ziggy," Sosa shouted, and manifested a loathsomely yellow rodent that bounced and pirouetted and sent the crowd into a frenzy because those slobbering idiots died for anything cute, not to mention the novelty of a shiny Pokémon on the big stage, which was itself an insult, to care so much for aesthetic you trained a shiny Pokémon to peak competitive form, but Toril wasn't thinking about that.

She was thinking about how her trap got found out.

Until the last second—last fucking second—Sosa was clueless. Toril saw it. Then it was like some god's finger descended from heaven to scramble her brains and give her Toril's own thoughts. A cheat? Dad transmitting via earpiece? Classic IPL putting Toril under suspicion, confiscating her Pokémon, only to let this outsider hoodwink them the most obvious way imaginable—but no, it made no sense, why wait until the last moment to feed her the intel, risking a mix-up as time ticked out?

Then how? How did she know? How did she find out, and why did Toril do it, why did she do it—she was right to do it, Sosa didn't know—why did she do it anyway, why, now *she* was the idiot, the absolute fucking fool, and they all laughed at her, every well-fed dolt in the stands, she pounded her gloved fist against her skull, why, why, why, why—

Her timer flashed five seconds for her next move.

In an instant Toril assessed the situation. Zoroark—Gustav—at half health, but with doubled special attack. Ziggy the Azumarill slow and looking to Belly Drum for the set up.

That was all her time to think. Feeling remained, a feeling shared with her Pokémon below. Gustav was her team's most recent addition, but their bond was strong. From only the intensity of his side-eyed stare did he transmit the feeling: fury, hatred, indignation. Like Toril, he needed to lash out, to revenge himself.

Then have your vengeance. Toril tapped a move.

"Sludge Bomb."

"Ziggy, Aqua Jet!"

Toril's jaw sprang shut. Her thumbnail, between teeth, snapped across the middle. Salt iron taste beaded on her tongue. In her mind, amid an army of self-sired torturers, she managed to mutter an apology to Gustav.

She failed him.

Gustav was faster than any Azumarill, no matter how well trained. And after Nasty Plot, Sludge Bomb was enough to waste it in one hit. But had Toril given herself more time to think, had she not wasted so much in panic at her first blunder this tournament, she wouldn't have made her second.

The moment Gustav's jagged fangs clenched, pooling poison that oozed between his gums, Azumarill rocketed forward. To the human eye, it was almost too fast to see, but Toril knew what to expect. Rather than move using its own speed, Ziggy called up a jet of water from the ground. The pressure propelled him like a missile into Gustav.

No chance to react. Gustav hurtled into the base of Toril's platform as Ziggy bounced off his body, twirled airborne, and stuck the landing with a tongue-wagging smile.

The crowd went ballistic.

Gustav went out like a light. His ire silenced instantly.

And like that—Toril silenced her ire, too. If she wanted to win she lacked the luxury of emotion, two turns and two blunders into this match. Her gloved fist jabbed herself hard in the ribs and clarity returned, full comprehension of facts and flowcharts.

Aracely must not win. *This world will end on October 12.* Toril believed it. If Aracely Sosa was allowed to become World Champion, the world ceased to exist as they knew it.

Blood running from her fingertips, Toril gripped her next Poké Ball and lobbed it into the arena.

Tors sent out Rillaboom. Her real Rillaboom. It looked exactly like the illusion, except the moment it appeared it pounded its drum in a steady, haunting beat, and this music conjured out of the barren stage grass and vines and leafy plants engendering pink-yellow fruits.

The holoscreen indicated Grassy Terrain was now active. Cely tapped her lower lip. Oh, yyyeah. Rillaboom did stuff like that. Hm.

Not like it mattered now. The magic of the moment was upon her, upon the crowd. She became cognizant of the camera transporting her image to the jumbotron and gave everyone a double V-for-victory. The start of her narrative, this world's final sentence, began. They were learning her name.

"Ziggy, you're awesome, but come back now. Go, Scizor!"

Her favorite(?) big weird bug appeared, taking Rillaboom's Wood Hammer like a champ thanks to its steel carapace.

The misery started with Scizor. Dad, four years post-divorce, finally got tired of prowling his condo in a beer-drenched daze, so during his month of court-ordered custody (her summer break) he dragged her on a globetrot of all the world's worst places. No beaches, no resorts, no urban centers with a population over fifty. Only caves and forests for poor thirteen-year-old Cely, and after being eaten alive by hordes of much tinier bugs she stumbled on this one.

"You gotta bond with it," Dad said once she (following his painstaking instructions, which he mostly yelled) finally caught the thing.

Bond with it? Okay Dad, sure. I get that you personally enjoy talking to weird bugs in your spare time, but Cely is like, normal? He locked her in a room with it, basically child abuse.

When she did finally quote-unquote bond with it, six years later, it was only on a single solitary point of connection that tethered the utterly alien life experiences of a human girl and a metal insect: They both really, really liked to win.

"Alright Scizor, let's put her in her place. Mega Evolution!"

A stylish flourish flicked a crystal bead from one of Cely's many chic bracelets to the tip of her forefinger, where it balanced as it resonated with the matching crystal Scizor held. You didn't like, have to do a whole rehearsed motion to make this work, but eyes were on her. Scizor's biology, stimulated by the twinned gems, cranked into overdrive. Steam issued from its carapace and cast it in silhouette, before spasmodic beats of its wings cleared the congealed fumes and it revealed itself, its form more angular, its claws spike-studded.

Excess heat formed ripples around it, and parts of its red coat blackened from the uncontrollable internal temperature. If Scizor maintained its Mega Evolved form for more than a few minutes, it would start to literally melt.

So let's end this quick, mm?

"Dual Wingbeat!" Scizor hardly needed the command. The instant the buzzer blared to signal the turn it shot into close quarters with Rillaboom, absorbing another listless Wood Hammer before its razor-sharp wings cut gashes, once, twice. Every motion accompanied a spray of steam from its joints. Finished, Scizor leapt back to its side to await its next order.

The thirty-second pause between turns in this fun little game called Pokémon battling wasn't just to give trainers time to think and announcers time to announce. The regimented structure mandated discipline from the Pokémon, which in turn ensured they didn't go, like, feral from bloodlust. If Scizor had its way, it wouldn't stop after one attack, but Dad did train these guys well. For Cely, it served as a simple reminder of the pageantry: a creation of culture, not nature. A game of strategy, wits, manipulation, where Pokémon were pieces on a board. Dad never led with that, all those times he tried to get her into battling. It was always "unbreakable bonds," "comrades in arms," a total snore. MOTHER opened her eyes to the game for what it was: a game.

After thirty seconds passed, Scizor went for another strike.

Rillaboom had no hope, yet Tors kept it in. Why? Cely studied the creature opposite her. Something changed. Arms slack at her sides, face dead-eyed and dead ahead, not staring back, not staring at anything, mechanically tapping Rillaboom's next move (always Wood Hammer) without thought. Did she give up? Why not switch to her third Pokémon? Did it lose to Scizor too?

Something pricked at Cely's skin. She didn't like it. She didn't like the way Tors looked.

"Finish it Scizor. Bullet Punch."

Scizor rocketed forward as fast as the move's name implied and decked Rillaboom with its spiked claw. Despite the force behind the attack, Rillaboom remained standing, and Cely wondered if she miscalculated. But no. After seconds of stolid silence, Rillaboom dropped backward in a dead faint.

Tors was down to her final Pokémon. Other than minor damage to Scizor, mostly healed thanks to the restorative effects of Grassy Terrain, Cely was untouched.

No change in expression. Tors still stone-faced, mouth ajar and dripping—was that blood? Her fingers, also bloody, tapped her thigh. They extended, retracted, swiftly.

She was counting.

Without calling its name, Tors lobbed her final Poké Ball onto the field. Out came Annihilape.

On an unwatched holoscreen, the announcers noised. "Incredible. Toril Lund, undefeated so far, is down to her last Pokémon. Are we witnessing an upset?"

"Lund's looked off her game all match. Let's see if she can recover with Annihilape, one of the most feared Pokémon at this tournament."

Domino Sosa couldn't watch. He kept watching, peeking through spread fingers, but he couldn't. He loosened his tie. Sweat stained the armpits of his nice cream suit. Up three to one against a tournament favorite he ought to be relieved, but he knew his daughter. Understood all too well her capacity to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

"Can't get cocky. Annihilape's no joke."

Brittany perched her head on her hand. Though she watched him attentively, her fingers drummed the armrest of her seat.

"Scizor can't win. Not with this set. I told Cely that a million times Britt. You'd think Scizor can win. Dual Wingbeat's super effective. It's all thanks to Annihilape's signature move. Rage Fist, Britt, Rage fucking Fist."

"Mhm," Brittany demurred.

"Rage Fist grows in power the more Annihilape gets hit. And Dual Wingbeat is a multi-hit move. It hits twice. Cranks Annihilape's power so fast your head will spin. She's gotta swap to Ziggy. Ziggy beats Annihilape. He's prepared for this. I drilled the flowchart into Ziggy's *brain*. But Cely's never liked Ziggy. Did you hear her? Wanted to swap him for Momokins. I don't know what she's got against him. Britt, if she doesn't put in Ziggy, I—oh, I can't freaking watch. I can't."

Yet he kept watching...

No need to apologize to Rillaboom. She did her job and Toril did hers.

Now—numbers.

Her mutilated fingers tapped. In her head whirred: numbers.

Base 110 health plus 240 EVs. Base 80 defense. Equals—421 health, 196 defense. No Swords Dance or it used it already. From the damage to Rillaboom, no attack EVs, no attack boosting nature. Base 150 attack. Dual Wingbeat 40 base power, hits twice. Super effective. Technician x1.5 modifier. Factor in Bulk Up. Grassy Terrain 1/16th healing per round. Equals —

A win. If Aracely keeps in Scizor, Toril wins.

But Aracely will have a flowchart. Scizor suboptimal, plan will be Azumarill. (Rotom not worth it. Though it has Wisp.) Assuming max attack prioritization, 218 attack. Play Rough 90 base power. Super effective. OHKO. That's her flowchart. Safer than Scizor. Daddy would've coached her: Azumarill over Scizor.

On switch, Bulk Up x1.5 modifier. (Bulk Up first whether Scizor or Azumarill.) Outspeeds. Taunt. (Taunt key. Taunt point of failure. Must predict correctly.) Before first attack x2 modifier. Minus 54 percent—plus 6.25 percent. Before second attack x2.5 modifier. Minus—46 percent. Plus 6.25 percent. Total—13 percent.

Aracely goes for the kill. Aqua Jet, 40 base power. Normal effectiveness. Minus 11 percent. Equals—

Equals 2 percent.

That's the line: 2 percent. That's the glowing golden line.

Retch. Annihilape. Creepy freaking thing. Why did so many Pokémon have nihil in their name?

It just stood there. Unmoving. Eyes so red the redness swallowed any hint of pupils. Ragged gray fur floating on thin static. Manacled limbs inert at its sides.

Pokémon weren't people and Cely struggled to read them. She didn't get vibes from Pokémon, not the way she got vibes from, say, Tors. But this thing emanated rage so palpable you'd have to be senseless to fail feeling it. Instead it was Toril devoid of anything, empty, a husk tapping fingers and counting, as though she'd transferred all her fury into her final Pokémon to operate on the level of a calculator instead.

For the first time since her first move, Cely took the timer to ponder. Scizor wanted to fight, its claws itched and it barely restrained itself from passing the line prematurely. Cely knew it couldn't win.

"Scizor, return. Go, Ziggy!"

Ziggy the Azumarill reappeared to the delight of the crowd and Cely's twinged distaste. Cely thought she might get away with the switch for free because the only way Scizor beat Annihilape was Swords Dance (though hers didn't have Swords Dance this battle) and Annihilape might Taunt to prevent it. No such luck. Toril called the move laconically:

"Bulk Up."

Despite the command, Annihilape didn't move a muscle. It stood there, eyes gates to an unknown inferno. No, wait. It did move a muscle. Literally one. Along its slack left bicep: a single veined twitch. That was all. That was the move.

The holoscreen reported the change to Annihilape's biometrics: x1.5 attack, x1.5 defense.

Fine. Expected. Ziggy's blubbery ovoid body, evolved for flotation, could endure an attack from Annihilape at this stage. The flowchart manifested in Cely's head unbidden, as though Dad browbeat himself into becoming her tulpa:

Annihilape runs either Taunt or Rest, but rarely both. You open with Belly Drum. If it Taunts, then it doesn't have Rest and you win by pummeling it unboosted. If it doesn't Taunt, then you one shot it, Rest doesn't matter.

Dad mathematically worked it out. Logic, tables, spreadsheets. (But imagine if he let her bring Momokins. Then it wouldn't matter. She wouldn't need to think at all. She'd known this. She'd known and he didn't believe her.) In this position, Belly Drum was her safest option.

Except for that vibe. That empty, calculating vibe, masked by the restrained hatred that bubbled out of Annihilape. Those fingers still whirring. Toril knew something. No clue what. But she knew. Cely looked at her and knew she knew. The exact same as that first turn: a Nasty Plot.

"Ziggy, Play Rough!" No Belly Drum. Because Tors was gonna Taunt, and even if Dad said that was fine Cely didn't believe it and she needed to end this now, fast, needed to take this one risk to fill Toril Lund's ugly grave before she burst out of her coffin and dragged Cely with her.

The moment Cely called the move Toril flinched, the emotionless mask broke, and Cely knew she picked right. Dolefully, Toril said—you weren't allowed to change a move after you selected it on the holoscreen—"Annihilape, Taunt."

What happened next happened so fast Cely wouldn't have known what was happening if she hadn't already, in the pit of her stomach, half expected it.

Ziggy, the little gremlin, didn't use Play Rough.

It used Belly Drum.

I drilled Ziggy all day for this Cely, Dad the tulpa said, laughing, taunting, I imprinted the flowchart on his brain.

It wasn't listening to her at all. It was listening, from memory, to Dad.

So it used Belly Drum—or tried. Because Annihilape angled one paw and twitched its fingers in a come-at-me gesture. The taunt landed. Ziggy went mad. It only wanted to attack Annihilape, which it could've done if it listened to Cely, but it didn't, so it didn't do anything, which was so, so stupid.

The gash in Toril's façade resealed. The jumbotron focused on Cely but she no longer wanted to see. She imagined well enough what the announcers squealed: "No Pokémon has refused to obey their trainer's command at the IPL World Championship in such-and-such (big number, possibly the number sixty-four) years!"

Dark clouds entered Cely's mind. Old friends, thought dispelled by MOTHER's magic, here to say hi once more. She shut them out and stayed focused.

"Play Rough," she yelled, and this time, aided by the taunt, Ziggy complied.

"Bulk Up," Toril said.

Ziggy flung itself in what looked like an innocent belly flop, especially since everything Ziggy did looked innocent, but it landed like a wrestling move. With type advantage, it hit hard even through doubled defense.

The fury emanating from Annihilape thickened. Rage Fist increased to 100 power.

The attack dropped Annihilape past half its health biometric, which then healed a smidge afterward, a telltale sign it held Leftovers. Leftovers meant it didn't have a Chesto Berry, which woke it up if it used Rest. And if it didn't wake up from Rest, Ziggy won before it got the chance to attack. Cely didn't actually see Annihilape eat anything, but it was such a weirdo and barely moved ever so she assumed it kept the meal stored in the corner of its jaw, first mouthed to be last swallowed.

"Play Rough!"

"Bulk Up."

Another hard hit. It did less damage than before due to Bulk Up, but even after Leftovers Annihilape was near its limit.

Rage Fist increased to 150 power. Cely saw its anger now, literally saw it, a black miasma, dark clouds that would never truly leave her mind until this world finally, mercifully ended.

"Finish it before it can strike. Aqua Jet!"

Aqua Jet started, and ended, quicker than she could think. Annihilape took the hit without losing an inch of ground. Its health dropped. Cely prayed for it to drop to zero, prayed, but it dropped to two percent.

Two percent.

Rage Fist increased to 200 power.

Fine! End Ziggy now. Do it Tors. Knock its head off for all Cely cared. Scizor had Bullet Punch. Dad specced Rotom's EVs specifically to outspeed Annihilape. It's over you creature. Over!

"Rest," said Toril.

Annihilape instantly fell asleep standing. The psychic slumber revitalized damaged cells at an accelerated rate. Its health climbed all the way to full.

Didn't matter. Beating back black clouds. Didn't matter, didn't matter. Didn't matter Dad said you'd never run both Taunt and Rest. Didn't matter how he was wrong, always wrong, wrong about everything. Didn't matter. Know why? You're still dead Toril. Even at full health. Because you're asleep now and the taunt's worn off. Ziggy uses Belly Drum and finishes you in a single strike. Nothing you can do. Noth-ing.

But Cely knew, from the way Toril's essence shifted.

Still sleeping, still standing, Annihilape rummaged its fur and retrieved a tiny berry. A Chesto Berry. It popped the berry into its mouth. Chewed. And woke up.

How? It could only hold one item. How could it hold Leftovers and a Chesto Berry? How—

Oh.

It wasn't healed by Leftovers.

It was healed by Rillaboom's Grassy Terrain, which remained on field even after Rillaboom fainted.

Cely forgot about Grassy Terrain, again, though she could literally see it on the arena floor.

Now it was over.

"Rage Fist," Toril said.

The motionless form of Annihilape, possessed of so much pent-up hatred, finally received the words to unshackle itself. It blitzed forward and swung its fist and the arena exploded, Ziggy flew somewhere, Cely stared blankly stuck in the sickness of her own smile, her trembling hand went to her next Poké Ball, it couldn't be over. If Rotom burned it—

"Rage Fist."

And Rotom was gone, the world so many rings of color, rings of mountains like teeth closing to clamp, the world's final sentence proceeding without her, the world without her, the world without, ending now, MOTHER and Mom and Dad, and without realizing it Cely sent Scizor onto the field, and—

"Rage Fist."

And the earpiece buzzed amid the calamity. "Aracely Sosa is out of usable Pokémon. Toril Lund is the victor."

While the crowd went wild, both trainers fled for the exits.

Groups | Bud Light Beheading

Fiorella Fiorina, chic in a cerise coat, looked twenty-something, was forty-seven. Deactivated she stood before the endless plate glass window of the stadium's façade, through which light flowed to paint the mountaintops a faint, jagged white line. One hand cradled her ear, the other gripped a microphone. Her cameraman, Lutz, watched for her signal. All was silent in this antechamber otherwise devoid of life; all was trembling and noise, for on the other side of the wall eighty thousand humans roared.

"In three. Two. One," her earpiece said.

A cutting hand motion and they flipped online, Lutz hefting the camera, Fiorella aiming the microphone at the capsule elevator doors that opened smoothly as Toril Lund, gloved hand on her throat like she was choking to death, came crashing through.

"Toril. Congratulations on the hard-fought victory." Bright, chipper, twenty-something. "You've officially finished group stage with an undefeated 11-0 record. How do you feel?"

Toril passed, forward tilted, and did not say a word, did not acknowledge Fiorella's presence.

Fiorella surreptitiously cycled her hand at Lutz to follow as she kept pace beside Toril. "That match gave you some trouble. What were you thinking when you lost two Pokémon early, and how did you manage the thrilling comeback?"

Toril's lips shook as though to form a whisper, but it was a whisper to herself as she sped down the hall. Hidden from the camera at Fiorella's direction were Toril's ungloved fingers, which left a trail of bright red droplets on the tile. Those fingers seemed, to Fiorella at least, a fitting answer.

"Was losing Zoroark so early a blunder, or did the other trainer catch you off guard with an unexpected strategy?"

Nothing. Toril was looking at a hefty fine for this interview.

"Raj Viswambaran from Galar and Jinjiao Zhang from Bohai also finished their groups undefeated. Are they the ones to beat moving into the bracket stage? How do you match up against them?"

Nothing.

"Many call you a favorite to win the tournament. If so, you'd be the first ever female World Champion. Does the historical significance add to the pressure of competing?"

An absurd question, one they forced her to ask. Fiorella Fiorina covered this event for over twenty years. She knew no girl would ever win. No girl *should* ever win. Toril Lund was a perfect case study why. Look at the shape into which she'd twisted herself simply to have a shot.

Though Fiorella expected no response, Toril's boot smacked the tile as she staggered to a halt. Still gripping her throat, she snapped her head toward Fiorella like a wild beast. Her eyes swelled with disgust and confusion.

"History? Who—gives a shit?"

A double fine, ouch. Before Fiorella could follow up, Toril lurched at an angle and fled through a door. The door to the women's restroom.

By all standards of professional and broadcast decency, the interview ended there. Fiorella turned to the camera. "Thank you, Toril. I'm Fiorella Fiorina and this has been your Post-Match Interview, brought to you by Silph Co., the world leader in Pokémon battling products. Let's turn it over to the Bud Light Analyst Desk to break down that explosive match."

Cut. As soon as Lutz lowered the camera, all power left him; his head sagged under the weight of his Fuchsia Nidos baseball cap.

The capsule elevator doors opened again. The other trainer walked past looking, thankfully, less worse-for-wear than Toril.

"It's good this happened," Fiorella told her.

"Shut up Mom," Aracely said, and kept going.

The shape of the mountains shone, a single jagged line, the sawtooth blade of history.

"Wowzah! What a heart-stopping match! Literally! I thought they were gonna bust out the defibrillator for me by the end! BZZRT!"

The analyst desk host, brought on by the IPL to drum up youth interest, stirred controversy with diehard fans, which was maybe the point. Her particolored pink-blue hair, pinned by twin Magnemite accessories, bobbed to the frantic waving of sleeves too long for her arms.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, it's time for the Bud Light Analyst Desk! Your eyeballs are mine—caught in my Electroweb! Whosawhatsit? I'm your host, Iono! Ello, hola, ciao and bonjour! Let's get right into the breakdown!"

"Yes, let's. I've got a *lot* to say about that one."

The first analyst better fit the business casual feel of the desk environs (marred only by an unopened case of Bud Light on the center table), seated side-lean in his armchair, tie loosened and top button undone of his nerd couture polo.

"Let's hear the hook first, Bill," Iono said. "Give us your best one-word summary of the match!"

"Sloppy." Bill raised a fist in comedic old-man-yells-at-clouds fashion, though he wasn't that old; barely gracing his fifties. "Sloppy, sloppy, sloppy! That's not the level of play you want out of a tournament favorite. The Post-Match Interview told the story. Toril Lund won, but she was *not* happy about it."

Bill Masaki never fought in a Pokémon battle in his life, but he was an unabashed Poké Maniac, an aficionado of the finest sort. Also, his trillion-dollar tech firm owned a stake in the IPL, so he was a frequent fixture on the desk. To his credit, his knowledge compensated for his lack of experience, though his nasally voice wasn't the best fit for broadcast.

"The Copperajah in the room is it was only a win by the luckiest break," Bill continued. "Not since IPL 7 has a trainer's Pokémon refused to obey them during a match. You never see that, even in regional tournaments. The last I remember was the Unova quarterfinals sixteen years ago, when—"

"AMAZING!" Iono cut in. "You're saying Aracely Sosa woulda won if her Azumarill didn't try to do Belly Drum instead of Play Rough?"

"Undoubtedly. And Toril would've deserved the loss. The announcers harped on it, but it bears repeating: Zoroark creating an illusion of Rillaboom is way too obvious. No trainer at this caliber of competition would fall for it."

"I wonder," said the second analyst. She'd been silent so far, but any room she was in carried her presence.

"Whatsit you're wonderin', Cynthia?"

Stark opposite to Iono, Cynthia wore all black, a conservative pantsuit, legs crossed, hands clasped on her knee. And stark opposite to Bill, she was a competitor through and through, albeit retired.

"You'd also say no trainer at this caliber of competition would lose control of their Pokémon. Yet Aracely lost control."

"Well, I won't deny Aracely Sosa is a special case," Bill said. "She's only been a serious competitive battler for one year, and it's an open secret she's coached by her father, the famous Domino Sosa of IPL 44. This leads some, myself included, to question whether she really has what it takes to compete at this level. Coaches are, of course, prohibited by the Battler's Union that *most* competitors—"

"INCREDIBLE! Thanks a billion Billiam. But unions and stuff aren't what the viewers wanna hear about!"

"Ehm. Right. My point is, basically, that even if Aracely is an outlier, what matters is the result, and Toril's Zoroark trap failed spectacularly."

"What matters is the result," said Cynthia, "and Toril won."

"Exactomundo!" Iono flopped frenetically. "She's the first EVER girl to go undefeated in groups! Not even the great Cynthia managed that, folks!"

"The group stage format is unforgiving," said Cynthia. "A gauntlet of rapid-fire three-on-three matches. Upsets are common even among top competitors. Historically speaking, Toril ought to be praised for her accomplishment, not criticized because one match wasn't the cleanest."

"Sí, ja, ouais! Plus, such a dramatic comeback, that shows real grit! Real get up and go!"

Bill adjusted his already loose tie, as though even loosened it was too tight. "All I'm saying is. Toril will need to beat Jinjiao Zhang or Raj Viswambaran or both to win this tournament. Historically speaking doesn't matter—what matters is the match in front of you. She needs to show better play, especially when it comes to her rare Hisuian Zoroark, which, may I remind you, no other trainer at the tournament has. It's her biggest asset."

At the mention of Hisuian Zoroark, Bill's casual glance grew sterner, levied specifically at Cynthia, who met it with a slight ruffling of her smile.

Iono glanced between them and cut off Cynthia the moment she opened her mouth for a rejoinder. "Stupendous insight from our two analysts! Give em a big like, everyone! Now that wraps it up for this match. Toril Lund moves on undefeated, while Aracely Sosa's fate is outta her hands. Which is a PERFECT segue! Cuz whether Aracely moves on or not depends on our next match, Yoshinobu Ito of Hoenn versus Adrian da Cunha of Asucar! Yoshi beat Cely back on the first day, remember? But since then, a string of losses have put him one game behind. This is his last chance! A win now, and he yonks the coveted final bracket slot right outta Cely's hands! What drama! You better stay tuned—your eyeballs are MINE!"

In this world, 8 billion humans live.

[I poked a hole in the line of history,] said MOTHER. [There I saw it: Another line, running parallel, where all 8 billion of us were dead.]

Roughly 2.9 billion use Pokémon in some capacity: as labor, as pets, as friends.

Of these, 900 million are trainers registered by an official regional governing body.

75 million have competed, formally, in a Pokémon battle.

[Evolution is, or should be, a slow process. Genetic pools refined and optimized over epochs. Subjected to scientific rigor beyond the scope of any human experiment.]

9 million have earned at least one badge from their region's gym circuit or equivalent.

650,000 complete the circuit and become eligible for entry into an IPL-affiliated regional championship.

And 2,064 are crowned a regional champion: one for each region of the world.

[Pokémon predate humans. The fossil record proves it. But does rapid evolution predate humans? The evidence is inconclusive.]

24 regions, recognized for their consistent competitiveness at a global level, are awarded automatic berths into the IPL. The remaining 2,040 compete in a wildcard tournament for the final 24 berths.

That's 48. The 48 best trainers in the world make it to the Interregional Pokémon League World Championship.

[Ah, but we've revived ancient Pokémon. Kabuto evolves into Kabutops after only weeks of training. True. But remember, revived Pokémon are mere facsimiles of what once existed. We replaced gaps in their DNA with the DNA of modern Pokémon. We created creatures wholly novel. Yet we call them ancient!]

[The line of history moves only one direction]—MOTHER's voice now ineffably resigned —[and a point on the line can never truly be preserved, once past.]

The top 48 are sorted into four groups. At the end of a single round robin group stage, the top 4 from each group advance to the bracket stage: 16 total.

[But my point is evolution. The first recorded evidence of rapid evolution is not in Pokémon. No.]

[It is in humanity.]

[We manifested in this world and in an eyeblink of geologic time we infested it. Our bodies never changed, but our minds did: our whirring supercomputers, running parallel to each other like the parallel lines of history. Capable of creating fire. Steel. Cars. Porygon. "Kabuto."]

Single elimination. After one round, only 8 remain.

Then 4.

Then 2.

[The law of nature is compete or die. Humanity evolved too rapidly. So Pokémon learned to evolve rapidly to keep up.]

[Evolution is an arms race.]

Then 1.

[In that parallel line of history, humanity lost the race. And all 8 billion of us were dead.]

Aracely Sosa had to be the 1. Only 1 mattered. One atop a mountain of 8 billion corpses.

[I have seen many other lines now. I am a seer of all. And what I see is:]

One above all. One final sentence, one final mark of punctuation, the final point on the line.

[This world will end on October 12.]

"Look who it is Liechi! Hey—hey! Aracely Sosa! Autograph!"

Cely glanced up at the lanky bearded fan lumbering toward her and ripped the earbuds out as she paused MOTHER's recording. Like a magic trick her phone slipped into her jacket pocket during the same motion she waved. "Oh, hii-i!" She crouched and clasped a hand to her heart. "Omigosh, and who is this? You are such a freaking cutie I cannot believe it!"

"My daughter. Her first time at the IPL—but not her last, right Liechi?"

The little girl, kindergarten age, gripped her Azurill to her chest and shook her head no.

"She loves watching you and Ziggy."

"Oh yeah?" Cely said. "Do you wanna be a Pokémon trainer when you grow up?"

Liechi tucked her chin behind her Azurill so nobody could see her mouth, then whispered something too quiet to hear. Her dad laughed.

"I hope so. I was a trainer, made it to regional quarterfinals. Thinking Liechi might carry the torch."

"Don't you let your daddy boss you around," Cely said. "You be who you want, k?"

"Okay," Liechi whispered. Her Azurill squeaked.

"She's usually more personable than this I swear. The excitement must've tuckered her out. You sleepy, Liechi?"

Liechi shook her head emphatically no. Her dad laughed again.

"So yeah. About that autograph."

Afterward Cely wandered the stadium's public concourses. At first, they were choked with people out for snack and bathroom breaks, but they emptied once the next game started. The next game, the one to decide Cely's fate, which, as Dad and Iono said, was out of her hands.

She sought desperately someplace unmarked by holoscreens. Someplace silent, or as silent as possible when only a wall divides you from eighty thousand souls. She'd already muted her (still de-Rotomed) phone to dodge the deluge of consoling messages from Haydn. She

visualized them already, another psychic power: *bb u were sooo close omfg. youll kill em next time 4 SURE. ur a freakin goddess girl dont u forget it kk? xoxoxo + an extra xoxoxo CUZ U DESERVE ITTT mwah mwah*

No message from her other friend, Charlie. That bitch was already asleep.

Cely entered a door and came face-to-face with a wall of copper.

They were copper plates, affixed to the wall by heavy bolts. The one in front of her read:

IPL VIII CHAMPION
YUKINARI ŌKIDO OF KANTO

Followed by a brief paragraph, an image of the champion, and his team, all engraved into the copper. The wall extended both directions, from I to LXIII.

The plates were alive. Rattling, reverberating under tens of thousands of stamping feet within the stadium's inner bowl. There, the opening salvo of Yoshinobu Ito versus Adrian da Cunha erupted. Cely forgot which she needed to win to advance, and did it matter? It was out of her hands, like always, like everything, her life constructed and preplanned.

An idea reached her out the dark cloud murk and she hurried along the copper wall, the roar transmuted into the rush of time's river as years dropped away with only a step, XX, XXI, XXII, until she caught an image she recognized and stopped.

IPL XLIV CHAMPION
SATOSHI "RED" AKAHATA OF KANTO

Here. Twenty years ago, one year before she was born. The champion looked impossibly young even compared to his reappearance two years down the line. She went to the panel, feeling its text like braille, her cheek to the cold metal so its trembling transmitted to her flesh. The paragraph opened with the obvious laurels: youngest champion of all time at only eleven, an unknown underdog, struggled through groups, steadily improved over the course of the tournament, the names he toppled a brief catalog, until finally her finger felt and there it was:

in the final round, he staged a stunning upset against tournament favorite Domingo "Domino" Sosa

A single mention here on the wall of history, fleeting but undeniably present, a footnote, one she heard expanded countless times those bitter years when he roved his condo half-drunk, making her know, making the walls know: *That punkass. They said he's eleven. Shit. Way he battled was like he lived a lifetime in the year since his license.*

She saw it, sepia toned, Dad in the same cream-colored suit, but unruffled, his body lean and hungry, his fedora with the hatband carnation suave like a secret agent ordering liquor on the rocks. The poor quality TV film of the era now a blare of static that eroded him, blurred his edges, allowed past and present forms to transpose as he gave his Snorlax the fateful call:

"Rest!"

Rest was the right play, not Double-Edge. I'd calced it, I was so good, so fast back then. It was fifty-fifty with Double-Edge, sure thing with Rest. But he had luck, that's the effed up thing about it, dumb luck. Luck was one of his skills, one of his talents, the way he had it. I only lose if he gets a critical hit. And so he did.

Cely pressed her fingers so deep to the engraved letters the edges cut into her skin. She felt the crowd's cries pitch higher, the battle reaching a crescendo. Her eyes shut.

[To win this arms race humanity must evolve. Most are content not to try. Why should they? This species has been number 1 for so long, it has become complacent. You and me, though? We're different. We are chosen, elected, by the line of history, to master and exceed it. We must grip that line, slimy and wriggling though it might be, and—RISE.]

She gripped the line of history. Her lips parted and a small whisper arose:

"Let me win."

If she really had psychic powers, this was the time for them to manifest.

"Whichever outcome lets me win. Make that the outcome."

The crowd went ballistic. A seismic rumble pervaded.

"I win. I always win. I will always win, until this world ends."

Peaking, peaking, peaking, this was it, the battle's climax, the moment to crown a victor.

"Now!"

The peak broke, crashed down, applause quivered from the eighty thousand, her body a funnel, collecting their energy, and the coin was cast, and came up heads or tails.

She stepped back from the copper plate. And breathed in the silence, as her arms spread, and her fingers twisted into a mudra, and she shut her eyes.

It took fifteen minutes for Dad to find her. She sensed him as he approached, something in his gait or aura. Her eyes opened.

"Omigosh Dad. I looked everywhere for you."

She approached him at a skip. He came with Brittany on one side and Ziggy on the other. Brittany carried a metal case that contained the rest of her Pokémon, healed after the battle.

Dad met Cely's demeanor with a weird smile, like he didn't know if she was playing a prank. She pinched the floppy cuffs of his blazer. "We have got to get this tailored. Male fashion is about precision and elegance. This would look so much better if it actually fit you."

"So, uh—were you watching? Ito versus da Cunha?"

"Nope." She patted Ziggy's head between the ears. He paid not the slightest scrap of attention, though, and zipped off to glide on his belly across the buffed floors. Ungrateful little scene-stealer. But she forgave him. He was only an animal. Unlike some she knew.

"No?" said Dad. "You didn't watch? So you haven't seen the result."

Cely shrugged.

"You get that the result determines whether you move on or not, right?"

"Iono said something like that."

"You don't know what?!"

"Iono. The analyst desk host."

"Oh. *Her*." His expression became contemplative. An idea worked within his mind. Gears churned.

"Her fashion sense is creative, I'll leave it at that," Cely said.

"Bill and Cynthia know their stuff at least. I actually battled Cynthia, before she was famous. She was in my group. I beat her, of course."

Cely nodded. Okay Dad. By putting so much suspense on it you're actually, like, ruining the suspense.

"Did you talk to your mother?" he asked.

"They don't interview losers in group stage."

"Well, she's gonna be upset." He looked around furtively, as though Mom might be there in the hallway with them. A tortured moment, but he was already cracking. "Yoshinobu Ito—lost. We're moving on. We're moving on!"

He whooped and at the same time Ziggy slid past like a rocket clapping insanely and almost wiped her legs out from under her. Brittany set down the metal case and fumbled with the latches, which was difficult given her lack of opposable thumbs, since she was a Gardevoir.

When the case opened Brittany tossed out Poké Balls and choked the hallway with Cely's Pokémon big and small. The mood infected them even if their piddling brains didn't understand the words, so personal space on every side became a riot. Shoving, jostling, smelly, and Dad heaving his arms to the sky: "Okay now, listen up!"

The Pokémon turned to him obediently. Brittany hung on his shoulder. He cleared his throat and entered speech mode.

"Wow. Here we are. I never, I mean *never*, thought I'd be here again. They say you get one shot in life and once it passes you by, it's gone. But here I am. Here we all are. Cuz don't fucking forget what you did here, the hard work and training, day in, day out—"

Wasn't it absurd? He babbled to these creatures, but who did he really speak to? Cely zoned out. Yes, tailoring for a start. But honestly? The look fails at a conceptual level. It's an attempt to reconstruct something no longer there, to hold a point in time in thrall. No, no, no. Tear it down and start over. Light colors? Unflattering. Darks instead, sedate without showiness. She visualized it: navy or charcoal; tweed; herringbone print pattern for an erudite, professorial look; thick-rimmed glasses; plain tie. Give him a pricey watch, take a lawnmower to the beard, and nix the hat completely.

Of course Charlie, that lovely friend of hers, would say his current getup expressed his spirit, that this cream suit and fedora was the real Domino Sosa in full. But Charlie you creature, the whole point was to eliminate the man in front of her. To replace him with something else, affable and harmless, whose enthusiastic ramblings about flowcharts came across as part of the aesthetic.

"—Also, give a big hand to your trainer. Right there. Cely Motherfucking Sosa. My little girl. Every other trainer here's been doing this since they were ten. Our girl has barely a year of real battling experience, but look at her. Bracket stage. So tonight, we party. Tomorrow, it's back to the grind. From here on out, it's six-on-six, not three-on-three. We'll be on that stage again next week—"

"No you won't," Cely said.

"Heh?"

"You won't be out there Dad. I will."

"Well—yeah. I was just saying."

"Dad. Don't you think we should talk about what happened against Toril?"

"Look. Cely. It was a hard loss, but in the end, we advanced. It's the past now, it's done, it's not coming back. Our next match—"

Not coming back. The hypocrisy. "Ziggy didn't listen, Dad. He didn't do what I ordered."

"Cely." Dad glanced apprehensively at the faces of her Pokémon, Ziggy first. "Not the time. Not in front of them. You don't wanna lose the locker room."

"They don't understand a word I'm saying." And she kept smiling, no trace of venom in her tone. Tone was all they knew. The only one who might think otherwise was Brittany, the empath, but Brittany already understood what Cely thought about her. "I predicted Toril's team, but you didn't let me change mine—"

"A fifty-fifty chance, you guess tails and it came up tails, means nothing."

"I predicted Annihilape had both Taunt and Rest, but Ziggy didn't listen—"

"You didn't predict that Cely don't lie to me. Don't freaking lie to me. You did not stand there and think to yourself Annihilape has both Taunt and Rest when you can't even track Grassy Terrain—"

"You cost me the win Dad."

Dad rose. His suit twisted and creased. Brittany tried to catch his eye with her pleading gaze but up he went. "Me! You think those other trainers have a coach to do opposition research for them? Do you?!"

"You don't trust me. I say I know what Toril will do, I'm right, but you don't trust me."

"Your Pokémon don't trust you! You act like Ziggy doing Belly Drum is my problem, no Cely, it's yours, you don't train them, you don't spend time with them, they only follow you because I say so, and here you blame *me*?"

Maybe if he got mad enough he'd have a heart attack and die. Oh. That was a nasty thought, a dark clouds thought, and Brittany's eyes went wide.

"I'm done here," Aracely said, because if she stayed it would only get worse. It would also get worse if she left, but at least leaving felt like it accomplished something for the fleeting moment she strode away.

"I'm not done with you Cely! I'm—ugh." He sagged, hand to his heart. The Pokémon thronged around him. Brittany initiated their synchronized breathing exercises, and Aracely was gone.

She took out her phone. Still no Rotom in it, but no going back now. Haydn's predictable overload of consolation messages ended with an overload of congratulatory messages.

One message came from Mom.

"Great. Now you miss another week of college. Congratulations."

One came from MOTHER.

"STOP DEAR. THIS WAS NOT MY DIRECTIVE. ABANDON THESE GAMES. REJOIN ME FOR THE IMMINENT ASCENSION. UP IS THE ONLY DIRECTION. DEAR."

She passed the final copper plate, IPL LXIII, and history ended. When she got back to her room, she pulled the sapphire pendant from her neck and tossed it into her open suitcase, then

flopped on the bed.

R16 | Media Day

Raj Viswambaran found Red Akahata leaning against the wall in the waiting room's corner, obscured by a fern. Rajred. Redraj. Raj did the talking, animated, hands aflutter, but—here's the spice—trying to hide it. From time to time he recognized his obvious infatuation and pulled back. Nervous chuckle or awkward brush of hair. Red was his idol—but an idol he was not allowed to worship. They were competitors in the same tournament. And Red by contrast was so cool, so detached, one leg drawn up against the wall, fingerless gloves tapping the plaster in asynchronous rhythm, head turned down so the brim of his hat covered his eyes. He didn't look up. He didn't speak. He didn't have to. He won the IPL World Championship six times over his twenty-year career. No other trainer—ever—won more than three. He was, in fact, an idol. A god.

But. But! An idol Raj must topple. As a child Raj watched Red on TV, and watching was inspired as if by god's breath to become a battler himself. Now here they stood, opponents. More than that—Raj was the first seed going into bracket stage. The upstart, the flash of fire, favored to win it all. Red was past his prime. His last IPL win came almost a decade prior. All respected him, but he was only fifth seed. He dropped two games in groups. Cracks appeared across his stone edifice.

Who would prevail? The old veteran, self-assured, experienced? Or the young buck seeking to overwhelm with passion and vitality? And that age gap! Red was thirty-one, Raj seventeen—same age as Toril.

From behind her pillar, Toril—seed 3—nibbled her finger and watched. And imagined:

Their hands lock together, vying for supremacy. In a tangled wrestle they drop sideways onto the bed. Raj tries to scramble on top. But Red won't let him, his strong hand pushes Raj down, now Red is on top, and for a moment—a fleeting flicker—Raj surrenders, overwhelmed by his idol, the one he spent his life training to emulate. Then his head shouts: *No!* To emulate the best, you must surpass him. He renews his strength. With a burst of force he pulls Red down. Their faces press together, their lips touch, but it's quick—violent—they bite at each other, rolling, tumbling across the bed—

"Raj! You're up first! This way!"

That shrill voice pierced Toril's fantasy. The look pierced it even more: pink, blue, and yellow. That streamer whore they hired for some ungodly reason—to finally admit the analyst desk was staffed by retards—her name a crass joke. Iunno. Iono.

Iono seized Raj's hand. She tugged playfully, and like a magnet drawn too far from its opposite his gaze slowly, then suddenly, left Red and turned to her. Toril's fingers hooked into the column. No! Get her out of here! Kill her. Roast her on a spit.

None of the other bracket stage competitors, not even Red—who remained against the wall, disinterested—rose to do their duty and irradiate this multicolored carcinogen. Unmolested

she dragged Raj, and Raj had the gall to wear a screwy expression as he stared at her hand gripping his. They vanished into the adjoining studio for publicity shots and interviews.

Just wait, bitch. Wait until your nudes leak and your subscribers turn on you. When you finally do the world a favor and kick the chair out from under you, your final thought will be about how a thousand fat slobs are jacking off to—

"Look who it is. How's Gustav?"

Toril whipped around, hand already on a Poké Ball—which they actually let her keep during Media Day. Then she realized who spoke.

"Cynthia," Toril said.

"I half expected you to forget," said Cynthia. "You weren't one for talking when we met last."

Toril averted her eyes. Unlike Iono, she couldn't outright despise Cynthia. Cynthia was—or had been—a real trainer, which dredged up a modicum of respect. Only a modicum.

Looking another direction didn't improve matters. Amid the other competitors in the waiting room, her eyes somehow settled on Aracely Sosa, seed 15. Sosa didn't see her, thankfully, but she was engaged in conversation with Lachlan Nguyen, seed 14, who happened to be Toril's next opponent. Why him of all people? What was she doing? Undermining?

"Hello? Toril?"

"Uh," said Toril. "What do you want?"

"Well, for a start"—Toril hated the sound of *for a start*—"I was hoping you could answer my question. How's Gustav doing? It's been a few months since you took him off the sanctuary. How has he acclimated to the outside world?"

Cynthia, upon retirement, invested her winnings into one of her hobbies: archaeology. This culminated in her operating a nature preserve in her native Sinnoh that specialized in the near-extinct Hisuian variants of certain Pokémon, Hisui being the ancient name for Sinnoh. Or something. Toril didn't care about the history, she went for the Pokémon.

"He's fine."

"Let's get tea sometime and chat about—"

"No."

Cynthia tapped her chin and smirked. "Well, come on. We're gonna do a segment."

"I'm not up until after Jinjiao." They did publicity shots in seed order, spending more time with higher seeds. Hair, makeup, puff pieces, gag. "It's an hour until my turn, at least."

"Not your regular interviews. A special segment."

"Hard pass."

"You're already here, Toril, you might as well find a better way to spend your time than ogling the competition."

For a moment, Toril died inside. If Cynthia caught her watching Red and Raj—but Cynthia's glance shifted to Sosa and Lachlan Nguyen. Sosa scowled when Toril looked, and Toril scowled back, only to realize Sosa wasn't looking at Toril at all, but at Lachlan Nguyen's feet, splayed out in front of him. What was that about?

It didn't matter, because a woman from the broadcast crew—the interview woman, Fiora or Fiona—stopped beside Sosa and interrupted the conversation.

"Boredom is better than torture," said Toril.

"I can't say I don't understand," said Cynthia. "I was never a fan of the showbiz stuff. But—"

"Don't give me that crap. You're on the broadcast team."

"Times change. People change. You know, you could do this segment as a favor to me. You don't think just anyone received an invitation to the Hisuian Nature Preserve, do you? Look around. How many trainers here have Hisuian Pokémon?"

Toril—only half paying attention, because Fiora Fiona led Sosa to one of the publicity rooms, and what did that mean?—got halfway into a curt response before she realized what Cynthia implied. Every muscle in her upper body went taut. A ragged scrape built in her throat.

"You—if I knew you were giving me—special treatment—I *never* would've—"

"Calm down, Toril. I didn't mean it like that." Cynthia held up her hands. "You could be a bit more personable. Sooner or later you'll be retired like me. You won't be able to get by simply roaming the countryside with your Pokémon. Then you'll need social skills."

"You have no idea what I need!"

"Please. Quit shouting. Come on, one little segment. It won't kill you."

Fingers locked around the wrist of Toril's ungloved hand. Toril's first impulse was fight, with teeth if need be. Only the realization of how much attention she'd drawn to herself—everyone staring—stopped her. Her head shrank into her jacket collar.

With one firm tug, Cynthia dragged Toril into motion. The gazes grew bored and fell away. Then, Toril saw where Cynthia was taking her: the same room as Sosa.

Bile gurgled in Toril's gut. Some segment! They intended to rake her over the coals, force her to relive that wretched match. Though spite overflowed down her chin as black mud, Toril didn't fight it. After all, that spite was for herself. She deserved the raking, deserved the torture. Their lashes would be just recompense, a necessary reminder, scars engraved on her soul to keep her from making the same mistakes twice. Like the scars on her body, like the half-missing hand she kept gloved: mistakes, reminders.

When she actually entered the publicity room, it was worse than she imagined.

Other than the camera crew, Fiora Fiona, and Aracely Sosa, there was one other person in the room. This person made Cynthia's true intention clear.

Yui Matsui, seed 11, from Sinnoh. The third of the three female trainers in the Top 16. They were doing a fucking gender thing.

Omigosh. What was that? He wasn't seriously wearing...?

"But truly, I find the demographic aspect of the Top 16 so fascinating," Lachlan Nguyen said, ignorant of the eldritch horrors on his feet. Really, Cely shouldn't be mean. He was the only person in the room not murdering her with glares, even if Cely suspected that was because he thought she was cute. Was this nerd ramble an attempt at flirting?

"Demographic aspect? You mean like, the ethnicity of each competitor?"

"No, that's irrelevant. Consider this. Of the Top 16 competitors this year, only six have ever reached the Top 16 before. Only two—Red Akahata and Jacq Ray Johnson, Jr.—have won the championship. Last year's winner isn't here. The winner the year before that isn't here, or the year before that. Yet! A whopping 14 regions represented in the Top 16 were represented last year. Alola and your native Visia were the ones that weren't. Visia was last represented two years ago, while Alola was last represented five years ago—with Alola being something of an asterisk in general, given the whole Ultra Beast controversy. (Ironically, Alola's representative this year was also Alola's representative the last time it reached the Top 16, making him one of the six who reached the Top 16 before. Isn't that crazy?) Anyway, the point is—"

"So like, the point is, you can be on top one year, and totally out of the scene the next?"

"Right! Rightright. Although regional strength remains consistent year to year, the turnover rate for individual battlers is sky high. Then, combine that with the ages of competitors in the Top 16. The average age is 18, and that average is skewed by Red Akahata, who's 31. After Red, the next oldest competitor is—me, actually, at 25. But why is it that top trainers are so young? Even in physical sports, where you'd think age matters more, players reach their late 30s before physical deterioration necessitates retirement. What gives?"

"That's so crazy. My Dad actually retired in his twenties. I always assumed it was because, like, he knocked up Mom, but maybe there was some other reason. Spooky."

"Then, and pardon my saying, there's the gender situation. Why are top battlers overwhelmingly male? Present company excepted, of course. There's no physical barrier. So why—"

Cely noticed Tors briefly break from her conversation with Cynthia to emanate pure disgust at Lachlan Nguyen's feet. Cely tried to send a look like, "I know right? Socks and sandals?" but their glances never synced and Tors got pulled back to Cynthia.

"In my opinion, a woman can *theoretically* battle just as good as a man," Lachlan continued. "There are simply societal pressures that funnel women into different facets of Pokémon training, like breeding or contests. Actually, I saw a paper published last week in the *Kalos Journal of Population* that posited—"

"Is your father around."

Standing suddenly in front of Cely was the IPL's longstanding chief interviewer, Fiorella Fiorina, also known as Mom.

"Excuse me? My father?" said Lachlan.

Mom ignored him. Her gaze bore down on Cely.

"They wouldn't allow him at Media Day since he's not a battler," Cely said. "Besides, we kinda got into a spat."

"Well. Come with me. You're needed."

Without further explanation, Mom strode off. Cely gave Lachlan an apologetic shrug, then trotted after her with as much fake pleasantness humanly musterable.

The highly corporate convention-feeling room they ended in was too quiet for Cely's taste, despite the crewmen setting up cameras and the girl midway between theater kid and emo scenester rocking out to earbud music in the corner. Stiff, adjusting the surface of her cerise coat, Mom only took a few moments to get into it:

"We made a deal, Aracely."

"Yes, Mom."

"The terms of this deal were quite clear, Aracely."

"I know, Mom."

"Can you tell me the terms, Aracely?"

"I'm allowed a gap year before college to do the battling circuit."

"*One* gap year. One. That was last June, when you graduated high school."

"What do you want me to do? I won the Visia regionals. That auto-qualified me for—"

"I want you in college, where you belong. Haydn and Charlie are there. They're sophomores now."

In the corner, the girl mouthing karaoke (Yui Matsui, Cely remembered) opened her eyes, realized people were in the room with her, and yanked the earbuds out abruptly.

"Mom," said Cely. "Can't you be happy? I'm extremely good at this. I'm a top sixteen trainer in the world."

Mom expelled one of her trademark hard sighs: *HAAH*. "Don't get full of yourself. You're still lightyears away from winning this pointless tournament."

"If it's pointless why do you—"

"You've heard the story of the shaggy Furfrou, right?"

"The what?"

"There once was a boy with a shaggy Furfrou. Everyone in town remarked: That's the shaggiest Furfrou I've ever seen. He entered his Furfrou in local contests for shaggy Furfrou and won every time. They flew him to the capital, and he won the regionwide shaggy Furfrou contest too. So they sent him to the biggest contest for shaggy Furfrou in the world, with the shaggiest Furfrou from all corners of the globe. The judges took one look at his Furfrou and said: It's not all that shaggy, is it."

"Wow! Cool story, Mom."

"If that court had any sense they would've given me full custody. What were they thinking, sending you to him for a whole month?"

"At least Dad believes in me."

"Your father believes in himself. He's insane."

"Then why'd you marry him?"

"He deceived me as to the extent of his insanity."

At the IPL finals thirteen years ago, a radical Pokémon rights team gassed the audience. Mom ran toward the gas instead of away and wound up in a coma for a month. Still, she called Dad insane.

"Am I in the wrong place?" said Yui Matsui. "I'm in the wrong place. Yeah. I'll go."

"Don't you *dare* move." Mom's finger transfixed Yui to her spot. "We're not wasting energy corralling you three again." Then, to Cely: "It ends with this tournament. Understand? As soon as you're eliminated, you are no longer a Pokémon trainer. Straight to university. Say it to me now."

"Mom—"

"Say it to me. Now."

"When the tournament ends, I'm no longer a Pokémon trainer. Happy?"

"No, I am still quite upset. Now here's Cynthia."

Cynthia entered, Tors hangdog at her back. Yui made for Cynthia immediately and Cely did not blame her in the least. Mom was giving very much Category 5 hurricane and Cynthia's confident elegance looked like a particularly solid rock to grip onto.

"Oh uh, hey Cynthia," Yui said. "I wanted to ask you—"

"After." Cynthia nodded to Mom. "Fiorella. Okay, everyone's here. Thank you for showing up. I know none of you are too thrilled about the whole media machine thing. Trust me, when I was your age, I hated it too. I just wanted to battle. To experience the thrill of a close match that pushed you to your limits. To delight in your own power, and the power of your Pokémon with whom you shared so much of your life."

Cynthia paused and considered Cely, as if she wasn't sure how much of what she said applied. Was that better or worse than Mom, who assumed everything she said applied?

"Now that I'm older, though, I've come to believe in a different type of power. The power of narrative. My focus in retirement as an archaeologist and occasional IPL analyst is exactly that. Whether it's mythology, ancient culture, or the simple story of a trainer advancing through the bracket, narrative is what takes happenstance and imbues it with meaning. So, I've brought you three—Yui, Aracely, Toril—to help me create that meaning. Create that story."

"What story," Tors said flatly. "What possible story."

"Well—" Cynthia said, "the story of women in top level competitive battling."

"Knew it," said Tors.

"The story is that, in sixty-three years, no woman has ever won the Interregional Pokémon League World Championship. In fact, no woman has ever even reached finals. Only one has reached semifinals."

"You," said Yui.

"Right." Cynthia smiled at her. Cely idly remembered they were both from Sinnoh. "At the time, they called me abnormal, a deviation. But I don't think that's true. I think women are perfectly capable of competing at this level. That's where you come in. I may have started the narrative, but you'll finish it. There are three female trainers in the Top 16, more than ever before. This is the perfect time to—"

"I'm done," Tors said. "Cut me out of this shit."

"Toril, please."

"No! I see what this is really about." Toril bit her lip, looked from face to face. Cely's first, Cynthia's last. "It's about *you*, Cynthia."

"I can see how you'd think that, but I promise you, it's not true. For some reason, I don't exactly know why, I'm popular with the viewing public. If you appear with me on this segment, it'll boost your profile—"

"You want—to lump me in with these losers?!" Toril's hand chopped the air, cutting through Cely and Yui. "These first round dropouts? That's an insult."

"Tors babe," said Cely, "you were pr-r-retty close to losing to me. So maybe try not to get so uppity, mhm?"

"I blundered my ass off and still beat you, shut up. All of you—shut up. What's the connecting line between us? We're girls? Who gives a fuck? You said it yourself Cynthia, you're taking random elements and making up a story. It's not real. It's bullshit."

"Many question whether mythology is real too. But it shaped our culture, which makes it valuable."

"The story of the IPL is simple." Toril's hand that didn't jab aggressively lingered over the Poké Balls on her belt. "One trainer wins. One trainer is the best. That's the only person who matters. Them and their Pokémon. No coaches—no analysts—none of this extraneous nonsense. You're just a loser of yesteryear, Cynthia. Desperately trying to attach like a Remoraid to someone younger."

"Toril—"

"You create this fake narrative that you somehow paved the way for me, so when I win it's your glory too. Giving me Pokémon you wouldn't give anyone else—oh I get it. I get it now! Scum. All scum!"

When Cynthia reached a hand out, Toril swiped it away. Then she stormed off, trying to slam the door except the door had a pressurized lever system that made it impossible to slam, so it caught halfway in its arc to hang lazily in place until Toril flung out her boot and kicked it to create the sound she wanted.

"Uh, so. We still doing the segment or?" said Yui.

Mom made herself known again. "That girl has done incredible harm to her own soul."

"Don't worry guys," said Cely. "I'll calm her down. I'm kind of a people person."

She left the bewildered Cynthia and Yui behind before she heard another sanctimonious word out of Mom. Toril cleaved through the waiting area and was gone into the hall before Cely could call out to her, plus it wasn't really a call out kind of vibe. The situation necessitated intimacy. Tors felt encircled. Track her to a close, quiet setting, then—Cely conceptualized the line of attack.

Rather, she tried to, because before she reached the end of the waiting room's smelly gaggle of male competitors, a little kid threw himself in her way.

"You!"

A flick rendered his arms dramatically at his sides, laying bare his scrawny form in a tight-fitting changshan, black with gold embroidery, overlapping jackets knotted around his waist a dramatic flair as they fanned with his every motion. (He made many.) The gold surfeit extended to his hair, streaked by highlights, and even his glasses: yellow-lensed gamer goggles.

He barely went up to Cely's chest. He was Jinjiao Zhang, seed 2: Cely's next opponent.

"Save that energy for the game, Jinj. I've got catharsis to administer, k?"

"Aracely Sosa of the Visia region," Jinjiao declared. "Heh. That's funny. I wasn't aware you could speak without Domino's hand in your back to make your mouth move."

Cely understood what Jinjiao was saying, but his bon mot went a smidge long. Distinct impression the snappier alternative was "Domino's hand up your ass" and leave off there, but perhaps that was too sexually aggressive for a thirteen-year-old boy to a girl six years his senior.

Either way, his pipsqueak frame did nothing to impede her. But when she tried to pass, something faded into existence. First a few disembodied gold rings and a pair of red eyes, then the sleek black body of a creature midway between canine and feline. An Umbreon.

Since Dad, despite their earlier drama, already assembled the requisite oppo research on Jinjiao, Cely knew Umbreon was one of his favorite Pokémon. But now, seeing them side-by-side, she stopped. Omigosh. He—did he really—?

"Did you color coordinate your outfit with your Pokémon? That's actually so precious. I cannot even."

Flustered, Jinjiao staggered out of his pose. Cely took the opportunity to renew her escape, but Umbreon gave a low growl that put pause into her.

"You know Jinj, Pokémon aren't allowed in the waiting room. The smell's already bad enough."

"Hah?!" Jinjiao recovered, pushed up his Gunnars by the bridge, and flicked back his dangling jackets. "You're one to speak of flouting convention, Sosa! The only battler among us who declined membership in the Battler's Union!"

He said that last part especially loud, with a glance to the other trainers. A few dweebs nodded in agreement, but most shrank deeper into whatever mental or technological hole they employed to pass this day of mandated social proximity.

"That's right! The Battler's Union! *You're* not a member. Which is why you're able to bypass the Union's sanctified and widely respected regulations for trainer behavior."

"You're chewing me out over a union? You're thirteen. Go ride a skateboard or something."

"Heh. I'd expect someone like you to not even comprehend the significance of their transgression! The Union's laws are no mere bureaucratic entanglement. No! They are a set

of rigorous checks and balances to protect the individual battler, and the sanctified relationship between them and their Pokémon, from the vicissitudes of corporate control!"

"Vicissitudes? Swallow a thesaurus much?" Cely tried once more to slip past the Umbreon, she knew objectively there was no way Jinjiao's Pokémon would hurt her, it would be the most ridiculous scandal and definitely disqualify him, but its mean look was enough to keep her from fleeing. "So I have a coach. Who cares."

"She doesn't see. She doesn't understand!" Another appeal to the crowd.

"Look. Jinjiao." Lachlan Nguyen rose, approached. "I'm part of the Union myself, but I don't think there's a need to humiliate—"

"Did I ask you? No. Hmph."

"Annoying," muttered a trainer leaning near the door, wearing an edgy mallrat hoodie with a gash across the chest. He blended into the shadows a lot like Umbreon.

"Don't get me started on *you*, Gladion." Jinjiao looked about ready to get started anyway, but remembered himself. "Just a coach, you say. Hah. Imagine this. All of you, imagine it. What if every trainer here had a coach. Why just one? Why not a whole *team* of coaches. And why should the trainers here have to catch their own Pokémon? That's so inefficient. Why not have a group of professional catchers go to the far-flung reaches of the planet to assemble the perfect team, while the trainer doesn't lift a finger? Then an army of breeders to generate perfect pedigree, chefs to cook the food, physical fitness instructors to push them to peak physical form, and so on, and so forth? What would the trainer be then?"

"An absurd hypothetical," said Lachlan. "Completely unpracticed. There's no modern example. It can't be discussed in any but the most speculative tones. Besides, who here could afford such manpower?"

"Heh. Ironically, you've blundered onto my exact point, Nguyen. None of us can afford it, even with our prize winnings. You know who *can* afford it? Big business. Billionaires. If the Union allows coaches and analysts and the rest, then there's no longer any room for individuals like you or me. The tournament becomes nothing more than an advertising exercise. The prettiest, most marketable faces"—he shot a poignant glare at Cely—"responsible only for memorizing flowcharts while their unstoppable teams and unmatched prep work do the real competing. It's only because of the Union that individual trainers have any power at all!"

"Aracely being helped by her father isn't like what you're describing."

"You're enamored with her, aren't you, Nguyen?"

"What? No—"

"To be expected. Aracely Sosa is the harbinger, fellow trainers. She is the horn heralding the end of the world—our world. Mark my words: If she wins, and the corporations see what's possible with puppet trainers, an apocalypse will descend upon us. Doomsday, complete

cataclysm!" On October 12, this world ends. "That's why it's my duty to stop her here. I am the last bastion against annihilation. I am—"

"Heya, Jinjiao! Your turn now!"

Out of the crowd popped Iono. Instantly she had Jinjiao by the hand, stunning him speechless. His blush bloomed as she dragged him away. He was gone so fast, it was like a tornado descended from the sky and sucked him into nonexistence.

His Umbreon faded into the shadows. Cely no longer felt transfixed.

"Sorry about that," said Lachlan. "Jinjiao is very young and very good. They call him a prodigy, the next Red. It's given him an ego."

"I don't mind." Aracely slipped out the exit, turning briefly to wave with wiggling fingers. "Makes the game more interesting, mhm?"

As she left, she caught a glimpse of Jinjiao's Umbreon. Not nearly as invisible as it first seemed. She waved at it too, smiling, imagining kicking it.

Then she went to find Tors. She had an inkling where she'd be.

Everyone called Kanto's Indigo Plateau the grandest, most modern stadium in the world. Bleeding edge tech. Endless amenities. Capacity for eighty thousand. Not to mention the mountain resort tourist trap city that serviced it.

Everyone was fucking stupid. They built the place for humans only. Anywhere Toril went, same story: *Pokémon above human size must remain in their Poké Balls at all times.* Lounges, check-in stations, waiting areas, observation decks, the hall of fame—no Pokémon above X size allowed.

Here, though, in this gigantic empty women's restroom, she had the space she needed. No eye-in-the-sky cameras to smack her with regulation. They appeared: Rillaboom and Baxcalibur, Ninetales and Porygon-Z, Volcarona and Annihilape. And, of course, Zoroark. She ran her ungloved hand through Gustav's mane and the coagulated hatred in her heart eased. Without words her Pokémon communicated her worth to her, and without words she communicated theirs. They were worthy, after all. Even in the Sosa match. They didn't fail her, she failed them.

No, they said back, in their low murmurs and (in Porygon-Z's case) blips. We're stronger together. We're worthy together.

That's why we'll win, Toril told them. To make them see that we're worthy, we matter, we have a right to exist.

Gustav's claw gently stroked her glove, where her ruined fingers were hidden. The meaning of the gesture did not escape her. Who was that washed-up bitch Cynthia anyway? She wasn't on that mountain, in that blizzard. It wasn't her fingers that curdled black on a hand otherwise still alive. None of them shared Toril's experience: only these, her Pokémon, who'd been beside her, warming her with their bodies.

Through the door someone trespassed on her space. Aracely Sosa, nonchalant and humming as she—without glancing at Toril—went to the sink, unscrewed a tube, and padded at her eyelashes with a tiny brush.

Maybe if Toril and her Pokémon remained absolutely still, Sosa's reptilian brain wouldn't perceive them.

"Gosh. Isn't this all the worst?"

Dammit.

"I swear. Cynthia's crap about narrative. Like, hello? A story can only have one protagonist. Why'd she drag all three of us there then?"

Because Cynthia considers herself the protagonist.

"I guess Cynthia thinks she's the protagonist, right?"

"How—how'd you know—"

"Mm?" Sosa tilted her head so her eyeline ricocheted off the mirror into Toril. "Basic psychology. Beautiful women hit forty and feel their star fade. Especially Cynthia. No children of her own. I wonder, do you think she's gay?"

Toril was stunlocked.

"Anyway. Let's totally skip town as soon as Media Day's over. You and me, girl's night out. I'd love to pick your brain about things, Tors."

"Wha—? Why would I go—anywhere with you? I hate you!"

Sosa gave her this look, this infuriating look, like what Toril said lacked any logical connection to what Sosa said. "I have this bestie back home, Charlie. I hate her freaking guts. Feeling's mutual of course. We still go out together."

"I don't want to be near you. I don't want to see you. I want you to leave." In solidarity, Toril's Pokémon gave Sosa a unified glare of hatred, which Sosa shrugged off like a speck of dust.

"Tors. We're gonna go out and have a gr-reat time together. You know why? Because I have something you want."

"No you don't. I don't need a friend. I have friends. This is them."

"No-o, silly. Not a friend. I know how to make you a better battler."

This mentally deranged claim merited no response. Any response was caught in the catarrh lodged in Toril's throat.

"Tors." Sosa finished her eyelashes and switched to lipstick. Her lips contorted comically, but her voice stayed clear. "You're smart. I know you're smart because I played you. You knew exactly how to beat me with that Rillaboom illusion."

"You really intend to rub it in?"

"Rub it in? I'm being sincere. Forget the analysts. We both know they're full of it. They think I saw Rillaboom was Zoroark because of Grassy Terrain. I didn't."

Since that match was blotted from Toril's mind, it took a second to recall the exact circumstances. She did, though, perfectly: Turn 1. Rotom-Wash versus Hisuian Zoroark, disguised as Rillaboom. Nasty Plot, Volt Switch.

But beyond the detached play-by-play. The moment. Aracely Sosa's face in those thirty seconds.

"You were right. A Pokémon I wasn't familiar with? That Dad didn't prep me for? Hopeless. You would've done exactly what you wanted: expose me to the world as a fraud. That's what you wanted, right? Don't deny it."

"You—figured the trick out some other way? Not because of—Grassy Terrain."

"Omigosh, yes, that's what I'm saying Tors, please don't play dumb, it does not suit you. I had another way. I can teach it to you if you want. But you have to do something fun with me first."

Framed like so, it no longer became a question. Toril lost two fingers to frostbite to become a better battler. A night with Sosa was only equivalent to losing one finger.

"What's in it for you, though?"

Sosa smacked her lips at the mirror, scrutinized her face one more time, and gave herself an approving nod. She quit seeing Toril through the mirror and turned her head to see her directly.

"What's in it for me is... you're gonna help me become a better battler too. Dad, I love him, but he's gotten me as far as he can. I need to beat Jinjiao Zhang. You're gonna tell me how."

Toril snorted. Jinjiao came off as a cocky punk, but he never—ever—made blunders. Ever. It might be fun to give Sosa a deep dive into statistical calculations based on expected peak physical attributes and watch her head explode, though.

"Okay," Toril said. "But I'm making a demand too."

"Anything for you, Tors."

"You're bringing a Pokémon with you. And it's out of its Poké Ball the entire time."

Sosa's face turned stone. Maybe this night wouldn't be so bad after all.

R16 | Funny Trick

Media Day—Toril survived it. Barely. Aracely negotiated something that excused Toril from Cynthia's segment—maybe that girl had uses after all—but a gauntlet of garbage remained. She waved off their hair and makeup and they kept applying it anyway. Then one, two, three, four, five hundred photos: Her, her looking this direction, her from above, from below, arms crossed, angry look, okay now determined look—what the fuck is the difference?—okay now hopeful look. You're the protagonist of this story type look. Silly look. What the fuck do you mean silly look? You know something light. Levity. Give us a flex? A flex. Yeah, your muscles, flex your muscles. What is this shit for? Broadcast wants options to depict you, depending how the narrative goes. I don't want broadcast to depict me like this. (I don't want broadcast to depict me at all.) Come on, work with us here. No!

Then the same song and dance for each of her Pokémon. Even the two she hadn't revealed in the tournament yet. They assured her these photos wouldn't be shown to anyone outside of the broadcast crew, there was no way the info would get leaked. Sure. Then again, nobody at this level of competition would cheat. Not even Aracely Sosa.

It ended with an interview. Iono asked the questions. Toril mumbled one word responses and Iono pouted.

"Come ON! Jazz it up. You want everyone watchin' you, right?"

"No."

"Yeah you do! Everyone does! You gotta trap their eyeballs in your Electroweb. Except that's my thing, so find your own thing. That's what this interview's about—findin' your thing, and lettin' everyone see it. Now tell me: You toh-oh-otally think Lachlan Nguyen's a loser, don't you? You think he's got no shot at all. Tell me how bad you're gonna crush him!"

"[Unintelligible.]"

"Puh-leeease! It doesn't have to be much. We'll do the rest in editing. Epic music, bzzzaow, flashy camera effects. It doesn't take a lot to make a main character. But ya gotta give us something to start with!"

Toril stumbled out of the interrogation chamber mindless. She flopped into a chair and regenerated capacity to exist.

Aracely was there.

"That Iono is such a character, isn't she? Way smarter than she looks. Then again, she looks pretty dumb. Hey Tors, you didn't forget our deal did you?"

"Nnnnngh."

"Deal's a deal. Chop-chop."

Aracely somehow dragged her across the Plateau and into a circular tramcar, trapping them claustrophobically with about thirty other people as the tram started to move.

"Since I did promise and all, I'm taking Ziggy with me." Aracely flourished her hands melodramatically at the gaudy yellow Azumarill, who clapped his belly to showboat in turn. "The rascal himself. Who's an evil little traitor~? You are, yes, you!" Undoubtedly, she meant it.

The tram, suspended from a cable, traveled at a downslope, straight through jagged peaks toward the valley below. The Plateau's high rise hotels, chintzy bars, hordes of people: all gone, obliterated by the inexorable edifice of nature, this world rendered in eternal physicality, stone thorns breaching skin. Weakness seeped into Toril's knees. She'd seen similar vistas before, unfettered, on the back of a flying Pokémon, wind in her hair, yet there was something about this controlled descent, the gradual rotation of the round carriage, to render unnatural the stagnant scene, a throbbing sense of lifelessness even among the sea of pines that undulated beneath. Death was here, ossification, fossilization. The first words Aracely ever spoke to her, though she didn't speak them: *This world will end on October 12.*

"Who's costing me important games~?" Aracely skritchd Ziggy's belly, and Ziggy twittered with sardonic glee. "It's you, isn't it~? Yes, you~"

The feeling passed and Toril knew she was actually just a complete fucking idiot. "Even you can't be ignorant enough to not know you'll need a stronger bond with your Pokémon if you want to win."

"Bonds, it's all Dad talks about." Aracely tweaked Ziggy's ear. "But he undercut me at every step. I didn't want to name him Ziggy. I wanted Lemon. Dad vetoed. Too demeaning, he said. Like what does that even mean?"

Toril took a quick onceover on Ziggy, ear to toe. Ziggy waved and blew a bubble, which Toril let pop against her shoulder.

"He knows you hate him," Toril said.

"He doesn't understand the words. I'm a master of tone."

"He knows anyway."

"How could you possibly know?"

Toril's eyes narrowed. "How did you know Rillaboom was Zoroark?"

Aracely only smiled, her eyes a flash in the sunlight that made Toril think—for one molecular unit of time—*goddess*.

Then Aracely spoke. "Don't look. We're being followed."

"Huh? By who?"

"I said don't look. Act natural. We'll shake them at the bottom."

Aracely's hands gripped Toril's shoulders and oriented her toward the window to once more see the stultified capsule of the sublime. Except now the deathly expanse of nature was broken by a large rectangular sheet.

A billboard. It read, in minimalist font: **[Evolve yourself. RISE.]**

Beside the word RISE was a symbol. A blue arch, pointing upward. Recognition struck Toril and she groped to place it, where she saw that symbol before. It could've been anywhere, but exactly when Toril gave up she remembered.

Aracely's sapphire pendant.

Down in the valley the city was still, quiet, unraveled into a position of listless repose, stark brick buildings bleached by decades, like toys abandoned by a child who turned ten and left forever. Rock rose in all directions. A squint one way revealed the tramcar trickling back up to the Plateau. Another way and the lone peak of Mt. Moon dispersed into similar-colored sky.

"It's a far cry from the Celadon fashion district, but the boutiques here are to die for. Nary a mass-produced stitch in sight. And the moonstone jewelry, mm, adorbs."

Toril had been here before. Once, four years ago. She only passed through, en route to Mt. Moon to catch a Clefairy (one not, unfortunately, part of her current team), but even so she understood the city had changed. Outside the boutique Aracely dragged her to was another sign: **[Grow for the future. RISE.]**

Inside, Aracely engaged demon mode. At incomprehensible speed she tugged fabrics on hangers to inspect before stacking them onto her outstretched arm, deftly directing Ziggy to attack the shop's other half until he carried a pile of clothes higher than himself.

"Cute. Cute. Not cute. Cute. Super cute. Need that one. That too. Mhm."

"Your wardrobe isn't bloated enough already?"

"Tors babe, this isn't for me. I'm staging an intervention. Get thee to the fitting room, I'll be in there in ju-ust a sec—Tors? Tors!"

Toril left.

With a hiss, Aracely tossed her stack of clothes to Ziggy, ordered him to put everything back, and stomped after her. "Tors. Please. This is charity I am bestowing upon you."

"I said I'd—hang out—or whatever we're doing. Clothes are not part of the deal."

"How else do people hang out? Hello-o?"

"Maybe—eat dinner—or something?" Toril wanted to go home. What was the point? So Aracely could tell her what? How she saw through Zoroark's illusion? What insight could she possibly give?

Something. Something nobody else at this tournament knew. Something to give Toril the edge she needed. Because Aracely wasn't just a puppet, like Toril first thought. She brought *something* to the equation, and during that battle Toril caught a glimpse of it.

But clothes shopping was too much torture for even her to bear.

"Dinner? I'm on a pr-retty strict diet. Oh! I know someplace."

She tugged Toril's sleeve but Toril stood firm. "You're forgetting something."

"Huh? Did I leave my..." She checked her shoulder, where her handbag hung.

"Ziggy."

"Oh."

At the northern fringe of the city stood the Pewter Museum of Science, built of featureless white brick, but tremendous in size. It was, unbelievably, a reasonable compromise, something both Aracely and Toril abided. It was also the first place in the city not plastered with RISE posters.

"You've never been before?" Aracely asked at the tail end of a conversation in which Toril let slip her past visit to Pewter City.

"If I cared about science and history, I would've stayed in school like you."

"School isn't about caring, Tors, it's about being the best and proving it."

After they paid the entry fee, Aracely yanked Toril behind a column and told her to wait with a finger pressed over her lips.

"He's gonna show up. Our stalker from the tramcar."

"Uh huh."

"Shh. Watch the ticket booth." Between Toril, Aracely, and Ziggy, space behind the column came dear. "Any-y second now."

One second.

Two seconds.

Three—

Out of a shadow cast by the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the museum's façade, a figure emerged. Two figures, person and Pokémon. The details ebbed into existence slowly, but as soon as they did, Toril realized they had been there the entire time, not invisible but faint. Even more incredible, she knew the supposed stalker's identity.

Jinjiao Zhang and his Umbreon, Yinying.

"The fuck is he doing here?"

"Shh! Let him pass."

"What's the point."

Toril stepped out from behind the pillar. She ignored Aracely's whispered pleas and took a direct route to Jinjiao, who didn't notice until she was at arm's length. At which point he jolted, stopped his jolt halfway, and tried to play it like he expected Toril all along.

"Why are you following us Jinjiao."

"Us? So you admit you're with that cancer killing competitive battling?"

Toril knotted one hand into a fist as her other dropped to the Poké Balls on her belt. "So what if I am. Why are you following us?"

"I need to ensure my next opponent isn't colluding with my third-greatest rival at this tournament. Third behind Raj and Red, of course. You're not giving her advice, are you?"

"Who can say."

"Typical. What'd she ply you with? Money? No, you don't care about that. She's giving you something you don't already have. Heh. I know. She's pretending to be your friend, isn't she?"

Toril's jaw clenched hard enough to grind. Her fingers tightened on her Poké Ball. "You little shit."

"Tsk, tsk, Toril. Selling yourself so cheaply. I'm disappointed." He paused, then glanced at his Umbreon for support. At Yinying's dagger-eyed nod, he mustered the nerve to toss out: "You know, if you're really that lonely, you could—uh—you could always be my girlfriend! Heheheh. Hahahah."

"No need for a quick decision on that enticing proposal, Tors." Aracely appeared beside her, weight shifted contrapposto, elbow on hand and hand on cheek. "The post is sure to be vacant into the foreseeable future."

Toril oscillated between ramming her fist down Jinjiao's throat or bringing her boot up into his crotch, but instinct prevailed and she went for her tried-and-true first response. "Alright creep, we're battling. Three-on-three. Right now."

"I might just take you up on that offer. Good way to gauge the competition."

Toril and Jinjiao's eyes locked with the determined gleam every battler knew. The people who trampled her, the people who looked down on her, this was how she put them in the dirt. Her hand unclipped the Poké Ball and—

"Ahh?! Can it be? Yinying!"

A crazed, disheveled humanoid came scrambling among the bones of ancient Pokémon. He skidded to a knee and clapped his hands with an uncontrollable sigh of contentment. The snarl Yinying aimed toward Toril turned into a dismayed yip as he padded back on tender hindpaws to the safety of his master's orbit. On all fours the man advanced cooing and babbling babytalk and Jinjiao sputtered—paralyzed—incapable of action. His boggled eyes turned to Toril and Toril jabbed her shoulders into a shrug.

"Stupendous! Oh, Yinying is a top percentage Umbreon without a doubt. Examine the coat's sheen. You can *perceive* the shimmering gloss clinging to individual follicles. Even under a full moon he'd blend into his environs perfectly. And let's not forget the gold rings. Such incandescence! It's well known an Umbreon uses its rings to hypnotize potential prey. But—forgive me, the research is still inconclusive, there's still so much we don't know—but recent findings indicate the rings are also essential to Umbreon mating rituals, brighter rings being more attractive to potential mates. In the wild, Yinying would certainly have his pick of the gene pool, so to speak."

Aracely's fingers snapped. "Oh, right! I do know you. You're the guy from the analyst desk."

Toril did a double take. Her eyes reexamined the man on his knees. His form, before only amorphous colors blobbed into a conceptual entity, developed specificity.

"Bill Masaki?"

"Please. Bill's good enough."

The instant Bill's attention shifted, Jinjiao was free. He clapped twice. "Yinying, evasive maneuver!" They both sprinted away.

"Wait, Yinying, come back!" Bill attempted a few staggered steps after them, but by then they had blended into the shadows. "Ahh, my heart breaks."

"Maybe be less of a freak next time?" said Aracely.

Bill winced. "Sorry. They don't call me the Poké Maniac for nothing. Eevee and its evolutions are a particular favorite, so when I saw Yinying, I lost control. Did I interrupt something?"

"Not at all," said Aracely.

Bill's eyes drifted to Ziggy, who twirled tiptoe by Aracely's ankle. "That's... good. I noticed three Top 16 battlers enter my museum and wondered what was going on."

"Your museum?"

"That's right. I needed someplace to put my best Pokémon merch... ha, I kid. The museum's actually just the public-facing part of the facility. The rest is a state-of-the-art research laboratory. I bought it when my operation outgrew my villa."

Aracely's demeanor shifted. She leaned forward, hands laced behind her back, balanced playfully on one foot as her head tilted. (Ziggy imitated her slinky feline shape as best his round body allowed.) "Whoa! That is actually, like, super cool. I heard you were smart, but I didn't realize you were a bona fide genius."

"Ehe, genius, well, maybe a few have said that..."

"Omigosh. I got the perfect idea. You should totally take us on a guided tour!"

"I can't say I'm much of a tour guide, but... well, you might get a better experience if you went on one of the professional tours..."

"No-o, not of the museum. I mean the lab! Wouldn't that be so superb, Tors?"

Toril groused [unintelligibly] upon being recalled into the conversation, but—yeah, actually, it would be cool. Bill Masaki wasn't some dickwad academic. The stuff he made was *real*. Toril used his PC storage system every day. Every trainer did. Without it, you'd need your own ranch if you owned more than a handful of Pokémon. They said Bill was always tinkering, always building something new. Tomorrow, the future—way better than looking at history in this dry museum.

"Um, well, the lab's off limits without security clearance." Bill waved the ID badge that hung from his unbuttoned polo. "Protocol. Corporate espionage and all."

Aracely clasped her hands over her heart. Her long lashes flitted. "Oh, ple-ase? We're not from some company. We just want to see the amazing stuff you do, Bill."

"Hrm. Well... oh, what the heck. You're Top 16 battlers. You're not criminals. Get ready for the tour of your life."

Aracely shot Toril a wink.

Tucked behind reassembled prehistoric bones, past a pair of mutely whispering figures in monkish robes who watched them side-eyed, an unassuming red door displayed the words: STAFF ONLY. Bill flashed his keycard and they were inside, the room strangely small and empty, until Bill hit a button on the wall.

Pipes hummed. Valves hissed. A deep interior architecture writhed as the floor came to life. The elevator descended, at an angle, along a whirring track.

The image from the tramcar returned, the still and dead present, but now they descended into the darkness of an oblique shaft, sporadic industrial bulbs and vague alphanumeric labeling the only waypoints. They kept going down, and down. Into the bowels of a machine whose heart beat beside them.

"I hope you girls don't take anything I say on the desk too hard." Bill gripped the railing at the elevator's edge and peered into his own abyss. "I'm critical because I want to see Pokémon at their peak. Too often, trainer incompetence holds them back."

What could Toril say? Bill spoke simple truth.

"If that were true, Pokémon wouldn't need trainers at all," Aracely said. "Simply turn them loose on the stadium and let them at it—"

"Don't fucking talk about that," Toril snapped, at the same time Bill turned like he intended to say something similar. Aracely shrugged a "don't mind me I'm just a silly idiot" shrug to play it off, but even the mention left Toril's skin crawling. Phlegm turned her tongue to bile.

Her father once dragged her to his gambling den. She remembered hurrying to keep close, because even though she feared and hated him, the grizzled men who inhabited the place seemed infinitely more terrifying. Past card tables, down to the basement, dug into a pit. There, bloodied, they fought.

These other idiots always look for personality, her father said. Who's mean. Who's got the look of a killer. Never fall for that. It's the physique. It's math. One's got a stronger bite, a sharper claw. That one wins.

The elevator reached the base. Bill led them into an industrial labyrinth. Sheet metal walls and through the gaps multicolored wires catching light from bare lightbulbs. Corridors split off and dropped into darkness but Bill zigged and zagged as he pointed at doors and rattled off each room's purpose. "There's our servers." "We keep samples there." "That one's just a closet."

Aracely piped up: "What exactly are you doing down here, Bill?"

"Well—and I shouldn't tell you this, but"—a prideful gleam as he jabbed a thumb into his chest—"you know my PC storage system? Of course you do. You're trainers, and every trainer in the world uses it. The most efficient way to store Pokémon: upload them as digital data, then take them out when you want them again. We've improved the design, enhanced efficiency, but it's been the same basic idea. Until now. This is a paradigm shift. It'll reroute the timeline entirely. We're working on uploading *humans* into the PC."

"That's crazy," said Toril.

"Why can't you do it already?" Aracely followed Bill (now walking backward to face them) much closer, nearly skipping, giving him a helpful motion when he was about to bump into one of the few labcoated researchers who skirted the facility. "If you can upload Pokémon, why not people?"

"You see it's actually quite fascinating. This goes back to my initial discovery some twenty-odd years ago, but it all has to do with the unique structure of Pokémon DNA. Despite the broad variance in Pokémon types and species, their DNA shares common traits: in particular, an incredible capacity for rapid evolution. Look. Our nursery."

A long plexiglass window peered into a space like a preschool classroom: pastel, plush, incompatible with everything else in this darkness. A hundred Clefairy swarmed a handler who tossed food to their stubby, reaching arms.

Bill stopped by the window. "Clefairy used to be one of the rarest Pokémon in the world. An endemic species, found only on a single mountain: Mt. Moon, a few kilometers east of here. Until a century ago people thought they were mythological. A local legend, which went—"

"Oh, I've heard this! The legend is about how at certain times of year the peak of Mt. Moon seems to touch the moon, right?"

"Right! The locals believed—superstition of course—the mountain and the moon actually connected at those times."

"And when they did, Clefairy climbed down from the moon to live on this world."

"Some pretty obscure lore, Sosa," Bill said. "You been to Pewter City before?"

"I interned here a few summers ago, actually."

"Here? At the museum?"

"No, someplace else."

"Now I was an intern of sorts myself at your age, except I worked under old Ōkido. Oak, for you interregionals. He took me to Mt. Moon, where we became the first two humans ever to watch a Clefairy evolution ceremony—the coming-of-age ritual where the clan allows worthy Clefairy to approach a large chunk of moonstone. After they transform into Clefable, they then assume clan leadership."

Toril teleported there, to that lone mountain peak, encamped behind camouflage mesh, watching rapt as Clefairy gathered around a glowing meteorite. Her real world, these dim and grotesque metal corridors, was worthless in comparison.

Bill kept them moving with a snap of his fingers. "That moment kickstarted my fascination with Pokémon evolution. I thought, if Pokémon can evolve into a new form just by touching a stone, then maybe they could evolve to interface with technology. Long story short, they could."

"But that's different." Now Toril walked close to Bill, leaning forward to ensure she caught his eye, in case she went unheard if unseen. "Pokémon change form, but not that radically. They don't all evolve into Porygon, for instance."

"Astute! But Clefairy turned out crucial on that front too. Clefairy didn't interact with humans as a species until an eyeblink ago, historically speaking. All their evolution happened isolated from humanity. Which is why you see them do things that are completely antithetical to what any human would want in a Pokémon pet."

"They're cute," said Aracely. "Isn't that enough?"

"Coincidence. Just because you evolve independent of humans doesn't necessarily mean you won't take on traits humans happen to like. No, to illustrate what I mean, look at Metronome. Clefairy's signature move. Pure randomness. You might growl cutely or explode. It's unpredictable. For Clefairy, the move had clan significance—a kind of cultural importance—but it was useless for battlers and made Clefairy unruly pets. Humans want order and structure, not chance."

"Clefairy's a strong competitive Pokémon though," said Toril. "Or Clefable at least. I used mine at regionals last year and was runner up. The fairy typing makes her a strong defensive wall—"

"Ah! That's the rub." The corridors ceased branching. Only one path remained and it funneled toward a massive pair of blast doors in the distance. "When Oak and I did our research two decades ago, Clefairy *wasn't* fairy type. It was normal type. The entire species developed fairy typing—without changing form—over the span of twenty years. It did it to make itself a better battler, to make itself *more appealing to humans*. Because humans would feed it, care for it, breed it—humans would help its species survive. It changed its molecular structure on a species level in the span of years. *That's* the kind of rapid evolution I'm talking about, the kind that allows Pokémon to enter a computer, even though computers were only invented recently. I used Clefairy as an example, but all Pokémon share this capacity for change. Azumarill, for instance, developed fairy typing—wait, where's Ziggy?"

They stopped. No sign of the unmissable yellow Azumarill. Toril had gotten so wrapped up in Bill's lecture she never saw him fall behind.

"He's such a scatterbrain," Aracely said. "Ziggy! Over here!"

Nothing.

Aracely cupped her hands and shouted: "Ziggy!" Her voice echoed through the halls.

After a delay, a distant hiss formed. Quiet first, then louder—louder—until on a jet of water Ziggy barreled out of the dark, did ten spins, and landed beside Aracely already bowing for applause. Which Bill excitedly gave.

"He's so cool," Bill said. "Shiny Pokémon are another fascinating subject—"

"But you didn't answer my first question," said Aracely. "Why can't humans go into the computer?"

"Right. Come this way."

As Bill hurried toward the blast doors, Aracely knelt beside Ziggy and patted him between the ears. It only took a second, and if Toril hadn't been giving the showboating little dick the evil eye, she would've missed it. Ziggy stuck out his tongue, and Aracely quickly pocketed the small device—a flash drive—that was on it.

Toril watched the exchange, dumbfounded. Aracely noticed Toril staring, pressed a finger to her lips, and winked. Her demeanor was so casual and harmless, and Toril wanted to hear

more, so she shrugged and continued on.

"The point is," said Bill, "humans don't share the Pokémon capacity for evolution. Which makes them resistant to uploading. We evolve our minds, not our bodies. So I thought: How do I make a human be like a Pokémon?"

"A human like a Pokémon," Toril nodded.

Bill leaned over a retinal scanner. Beep-boop, ding-ding. The scanner flashed green and the blast doors awakened, parting slowly with megaton heaviness.

"Then I realized. I already found the answer. By complete accident, years ago. And there it is."

The doors, fully open, revealed a tremendous space with no clear ceiling. Nestled amid an array of arcane computer equipment that rose like black towers was the device Bill indicated with an overexcited, self-satisfied fling of his hand. Two metal pods, each barely big enough to fit a human, connected by a massive tube.

"That's it. That's the device."

"What's it do?" said Toril.

"It merges a human and a Pokémon."

"No," said Toril. "No fucking way."

"It works. I've tested it before. On myself, no less."

"You were a Pokémon?" Toril stepped into the room. The immensity gripped her, an agoraphobia she felt on mountaintops staring straight up into the starry atmosphere, but she staggered forward anyway. There were other machines, too, covered by sheets, dusty. A storage space. One with the highest security in the museum—what did they all do? "You can make a person a Pokémon?"

"Yep."

"Can you make me one?"

Bill's self-satisfied smile faded. "Well. Uh. You know. Some kinks. Regional regulations. I really, really shouldn't."

Toril immediately looked to Aracely. The eyelash thing, she tried to tell her. Do the eyelash thing. Your psychic power to control people. Do it, please, please please please, make him say yes.

Aracely winked. "Oh Bill—"

"No. Nope. This is too much. It's risky. I can't—Nope. Flat no. It's enough I'm even telling you about it."

"Please Bill," Toril said. "Not for long. Only a minute."

"We have no idea what the long-term effects are. So far I'm the only person it's been used on, and that was an accident twenty years ago. No other human in the world has become a Pokémon. We can't predict—"

"That's not true," said Aracely.

"I swear. This machine has never been used on anyone except me. We're hoping to be ready for real human trials—two, three years from now. Until then..."

"I know someone else who became a Pokémon."

The vacuum of the space swallowed them in its silent hum. Pinpricks manifested along Toril's arms, but her heart thudded: the machine, the machine! To become a Pokémon. Even if only for a moment. To see the world their way, to speak in their strange form of communication, to use moves, to be strong, to be seen and respected—

"Where," said Bill, eyes dead on Aracely, "did you say you interned again?"

Aracely smiled.

Bill's blood drained. Pale, shaking, he hooked a finger into his collar and tugged. "I think. I think you two have seen enough. Tour's over."

"Bill, please." Toril slouched a step at him and he scrambled back, hand held out to keep her at bay. "One minute only—"

"You leave now. Or I'm calling security."

"I don't—I don't understand."

"It's okay, Tors," said Aracely. "I doubt we'll convince him like this."

Toril stepped again and Bill yelled at her to stop. Why? What did she do? She only wanted to use the machine. Was that so bad? He had it. Who cared if there were side effects. She'd risk it.

"He doesn't want to be legally liable," Aracely said. "It's fine. We'll go."

Slipping through her fingers. Slipping, slipping, slipping.

"Shouldn't you escort us back, though?" Aracely asked. "You wouldn't want us to get lost, would you?"

Something in Bill's throat gurgled.

"Shame," said Aracely. "All this planning for a future that will never come."

Shithead bastard Bill. Rich ass computer monopolist. Boot up the PC and it goes *Hi! Welcome to Bill's PC* like he owned every fucking PC in the whole world. Die in a fiery death.

By the time they exited the museum all in her body was sharp stabbing spurs and each shuffling motion incensed her more. She didn't even realize it was dark out until Aracely wrapped a hand around her shoulder, pulled her close, and said: "Smile!"

"No."

Aracely snapped a photo with her Rotom phone, then inspected the selfie with discernment. "Oh, cute. Really cute. I look cute, don't I?"

Toril barely glanced at the phone and grumbled [unintelligible].

"Except Ziggy is totally photobombing us. Look! Ziggy, look at this. Why'd you stick your big head there of all places?"

Ziggy wiggled back and forth like he didn't understand the words Aracely said.

"Anyway Tors. Bill's a jerk. Don't let weird old men get you down. Getting you down is their like, favorite pastime. Wasn't it cool we got to go there at all?"

A bilious grouse, followed by: "I guess."

"Oh you don't guess. You know."

On principle, Toril refused to respond. Pewter City at night became a city of lonely lampposts: each too far from any other. Unseen bug Pokémon chirruped in harmony as a waning gibbous moon neared the peak named after it.

"Anyway! Don't worry about what happens next. I have it totally under control."

"What happens—next?"

"It had to happen sooner or later. Follow my lead, k?"

Toril lacked even a microscopic conception of what Aracely meant. They walked down an ordinary Pewter street, most shops already closed. The boutique from earlier stood haunted by phantasmagoric mannequins. Devoid, dead. This world will end on October 12.

Something melded out of the darkness just beyond Toril's periphery. She sensed it on instinct, the way in the wilderness she sensed a hidden Pokémon. Logic told her it was Jinjiao, but she hadn't felt this with Jinjiao, this—this violence that dripped from the form's jaws. When a second something stepped out on the other side of her she turned, Poké Ball in hand, only stopped from throwing it by Aracely's shockingly quick reflex.

"No," she whispered, peplless.

Both figures wore white robes. Like monks. Once Toril stumbled upon a monastery as she traversed the mountains. They too had stared at her like this, like she wasn't welcome. Toril stared back. Her hand trembled under Aracely's grip.

From behind, five more robed figures emerged. Toril heard a scrape and looked the other way, and another five were in front of them. Twelve total.

"Hii-i, Nilufer!" Aracely waved at the centermost one. An azure stripe ran down her robes, suggesting a higher rank in the monk hierarchy.

Nilufer met Aracely's greeting with a pitiless stare. "MOTHER will see you now."

"Mm. No-o, not feeling that. Been a long day. I think actually I'll head back up before the tram stops for the night."

"Why did you come here if not to see MOTHER." Nilufer's voice reverberated strikingly deep in the dead air. Toril saw no Poké Balls on her. The robes might conceal them, but Poké Balls had a rounded bulk that usually made them stick out. Nilufer appeared entirely unarmed.

"I came to hang with my new bestie, duh. Say hi to Tors, everyone. Tors, say hi to Nilufer and the rest."

Toril didn't say hi. Nilufer didn't say hi.

Toril gave up trying to read these stony faces or Aracely's bubbly glamor. She looked at Ziggy. He, she could read. All day he did nothing but bounce around, spin and flip, wiggle, clap his hands. Now he stood still at Aracely's side, eyes focused.

"It's in your best interest to leave now," Nilufer said—to Toril. "This is a private matter between members of RISE."

"The—health and wellness center?!"

"Go. Now."

The five standing behind them parted, clearing a path. Toril wondered what to do. Aracely claimed she knew how to handle this, so maybe leaving was what she wanted? Not a single glance or gesture came from her. Toril gritted her teeth.

"N—no. Whoever you guys are. You got no business screwing with us."

"You guys have heard of Tors right?" Aracely said. "I mean, you're watching my games, aren't you? Omigosh, don't tell me you're not. Tragic! Well, let me clue you in. Toril's the third ranked trainer in the world. She'd be first ranked if I didn't knock her down a peg. (Sorry!) Point is, she's really, really strong. I think she's got a good shot of winning the whole thing, or would, if I wasn't gonna win myself."

Now, the robed figures stared at Toril. Maybe Toril imagined it, but a few took a step back and hunched slightly. No, she wasn't imagining it.

A grin spread on her lips.

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah. I'm the best trainer in the world."

Nilufer's gray gaze shifted to Aracely. "You are manipulating that poor girl into a situation she is not prepared to handle. You know who I am."

"I don't know who you are," said Toril, "which means you're not shit."

"It's not like there has to be a situation," said Aracely. "We can all go our merry little ways now that we've done introductions."

"MOTHER will not be satisfied with that."

"She'll be satisfied with this." Aracely took a small object from her pocket, the flash drive she stole from Bill's basement, though it felt weird to think of that moment as theft—Toril hadn't conceptualized it that way before, even if in retrospect it was obvious. But fuck Bill. Toril at full height towered above the robed figures, including the men among them. Certainly above Nilufer. And Gustav's Poké Ball remained in her upraised hand, ready to throw.

Instead, Aracely threw the flash drive. With perfect economy of movement, Nilufer lifted an arm and caught it, never taking her eyes from Aracely. The brief motion caused her robes to ruffle, and Toril saw a flash of metal underneath. Not a Poké Ball. A knife.

"You know where I've been," Aracely said, "so you have a good idea what that is."

A flicker of confusion crossed Nilufer's face. The first expression she'd shown. "Did MOTHER ask for this? I—was not informed."

Aracely winked.

The flash drive disappeared into Nilufer's robes. "Expect to hear from MOTHER soon. One way or another."

The robed figures melted into the darkness.

When they were gone, Toril lowered her hand. Ziggy flopped back and spronged on his tail, and the bug Pokémon buzzed again.

"What the fuck was that about?"

"Omigosh," Aracely said, "Nilufer is so deadpan. Like okay I get it, you gotta have a personal brand and all, but she's really giving very much sinister. She's way nicer than she looks. Does a killer massage. You've got to try it, might work out those kinks in your posture."

"Uh... huh."

"Anyway. Now that that little distraction is over, we got a new topic to discuss. Strategy."

"Strategy?!"

"You didn't forget our deal, Tors? I need to kick that skinny punk Jinjiao's butt. And you are Miss Top Ranked Trainer and all, which means you know the secret sauce."

Well—Toril did scare off those robed freaks. "Uh, sure."

"Great! Let's talk on the way to the tram. Wouldn't want to miss the last one. Then what would we do, right?"

It only took a few stammered sentences on the subject for Toril to find her footing. Pokémon battling—she knew it inside and out. Aracely, who seemed to know nothing, nodded and exclaimed in wonder at even the most basic stuff Toril said. As they boarded the tram deep in conversation and ascended toward the lights of the Plateau, Toril decided—it'd been fun.

R16 | Wall

Eighty thousand stomped their feet in unison. It weighted a cloudless sky with anticipation. The jumbotron flashed: *ARE YOU READY? 24. 23. 22.* Their voices peeled the numbers, shaking with increased intensity the closer they reached the finality of zero. Above a blimp circled. Under its proud Devon Corp. logo, the command: *MAKE SOME NOISE!!!*

Sunday, September 21. Three weeks before the world ended. The bracket stage now fully in motion. From here on out no second chances remained. Win and continue. Lose and die.

Toril Lund, who wouldn't play Lachlan Nguyen until the next day, entered a VIP observation booth to find it disappointingly occupied. She froze, unsure whether to back out or squeeze into a corner, and the fat man beckoned her to join his small party.

"Ten! Nine! Eight!" they chanted. Toril hated to miss an opener—the whole pace of the battle depended on it—so she shuffled behind them to peer down the sheer slope of bodies to the arena floor.

She shared the booth with four. The fat man, a Gardevoir, and two fellow competitors. "Three! Two! One! Zero!"

A trumpet of the gods, stronger than so many people capable together of shaking the heavens or at least this stadium, blared. Toril covered her ears and watched Jinjiao Zhang and Aracely Sosa enter the arena from opposite ends.

"Let's fucking GO! That's my girl! That's my Cely!" the fat man howled.

Realization nailed Toril in the gut. This was him, the elusive *Dad* who gave Aracely everything: Domino Sosa. He looked nothing like the footage she'd seen, though he wore the same suit.

"Alright kids last chance to change your bets." Domino clapped at the others. "One million on my girl. You're gonna be shocked when she takes this."

"Dog, no damn way," said Raj Viswambaran. Kicked back in his seat with oversized sneakers on the glass, he couldn't have been more at ease. He handily won his match Friday, sealing a quarterfinals spot. "I'm sure you're a great coach but it's doomed bruv. No hate. I scrimmed Jinjiao. He doesn't make mistakes."

"Yeah. And your daughter? Kinda sucks," said Yui Matsui. Yui, like Toril, played the next day.

Domino flashed them a knowing smile, like they were suckers, but Toril recognized better than anyone a gambler addicted to losing money.

Aracely and Jinjiao ascended their platforms.

"Hey, hey, hey. Toril's gotta bet too." Domino cocked a thumb. "Almost got her ass whooped by Cely. Maybe she's got the faith."

This drew chuckles from Raj and Yui and even the fucking Gardevoir.

"Jinjiao tells me they're friends now," said Raj.

"No!" said Toril. "No we're not. We're not friends. And I'm not betting. On her or Jinjiao. I don't gamble."

"Weak," said Yui.

My boot on your throat then we'll see who's weak—

"Shh, shh, it's starting. LET'S GO CELY! LET'S GO BABY!"

Aracely, enlarged to colossal proportions on the jumbotron, flourished her Poké Ball with a smile aimed at the camera before she threw. Her skin shone in the sun. Everything about her was perfect: hair, makeup, clothes, accessories. As expected. It sickened Toril as much as it enraptured her, as much as it made her blink when the camera cut to Jinjiao tossing his own Poké Ball.

Their voices were transmitted over speakers.

"Go! Momokins!"

"Go, Mofang!"

Aracely's Momokins appeared first. It stood upright on two legs, despite its feline features. Its lazy eyes shifted behind the mask-like shape of its facial fur. Unfazed by the calamity of the human ring around it, it bowed stately and elegantly, then produced a flower that appeared to float in midair. A magic trick—the stem was hidden. Typical behavior for its species: Meowscarada, the Magician Pokémon.

Jinjiao's Mofang was a giant mushroom, Amoonguss.

Toril crossed her arms. Yeah, Aracely was doomed.

"Jinjiao runs walls."

"Walls?"

"You don't know what a wall is. Unreal."

"Okay Tors, tell me. What's a wall."

"A beefy fat fuck. It sits there and soaks damage. Then it puts some status effect on you so all it has to do is wait for you to faint."

"Oh right. Jinjiao plays slow. Defensive. Like Dad."

"I dunno what people were playing twenty years ago. But yeah, slow. Jinjiao can afford to be slow because he never makes mistakes. Ever."

"Then I force him to make a mistake."

"Wrong. You already lost. He just won't. Even in bracket, where it's six-on-six and games go longer. That's why he's the second seed."

"You're the third and you made a mistake."

"I lost my mind. Jinjiao won't."

"Dad gave me flowcharts to follow depending on which Pokémon he sends out."

"Wrong. That's reactive thinking. Old man thinking. If you're reacting to what Jinjiao does, you're losing. Slowly, but losing. Losing in the least embarrassing way possible—but losing."

"Okay. So-o... what do I do?"

"Control the tempo. Get ahead of him. Act before he does. Hack chinks in his walls. Bring them down one by one."

Jinjiao extended one hand upward, fist clenched. With a sudden violent action he brought the fist down.

At Jinjiao's back, where thousands sat stacked atop each other, a tremendous chunk suddenly became solid red. Like everyone spontaneously exploded and their blood was enough to paint the stands fifty feet in every direction. Like some legendary Pokémon, some god forgotten and forsaken, blotted them with a phantom fingertip. Like the terrorist attack that once put Mom in a coma. Like MOTHER's prophecy.

But no. It wasn't blood they became, but cardboard.

Hundreds—thousands—held up red cardboard signs, not a gap between them. The red caught the sun and blinded Cely until she visored her eyes. Without looking back, Jinjiao cut his hand through the air, and at his signal, the signs flipped over. Still red, but with a yellow character emblazoned on the center, its lines crossing sign after sign to form a single piece of calligraphic script:

金

So that was Jinjiao's first wall. The wall behind him, because he was strong, he was the favorite, he was a winner. The people wanted to win as much as the competitors, so they attached themselves to winners. They say people love underdogs, but that's not true.

They love underdogs when they win.

"Okay Momokins! Let's do this. U-turn!"

Momokins was quick. It shot forward, kicked off the fat lump of fungus, and launched back to Cely at the same velocity. Cely didn't realize it'd somehow gotten hurt in the process until after it disappeared inside its Poké Ball. Amoonguss wore a sheath of sharp, rocky shards. Rocky Helmet, the item was called, though it wasn't exactly a helmet. It hurt whatever touched it.

It didn't matter. Amoonguss' usual move was to inflict sleep with Spore, but Momokins was a grass type, so it wouldn't work on him. That meant Jinjiao wouldn't use it this turn, which gave Cely the opportunity to bring in her best piece immediately.

"Slowking!"

He appeared. Assault Vest terror, versatile bulky sweeper, regenerator on swap, his brain long devoured by the Shellder clamped across the better part of his head. His veins pulsed purple with the poison from Shellder's bite and who knew which part of the symbiotic-parasitic partnership truly controlled his wretched body. Caught this creature one suicide-inducing summer in the wastes of Galar's Crown Tundra and like all Dad's favorites he was a complete freak of nature but now he was the harbinger of Jinjiao Zhang's doom. U-turn cut a nice chunk of flesh off Amoonguss and this Galarian Slowking was here to burn down the rest with one searing blast of Flamethrower.

"Heh. Mofang, use Spore."

The golden 金 drove the sun's rays into her skin.

Slowking, enveloped in a spray of fungal particles, went straight to sleep.

"GG." Raj kicked his feet off the glass and jackknifed his body into an abrupt standing stretch. "Jinjiao will grind it out but he ain't losing from here. Who wants snacks?"

"Sour gummies," said Yui. "That how you drew it up coach?"

Domino gripped his forehead through the crumpled brim of his fedora. His Gardevoir, Brittany, patted his shoulder. "Dammit. I had another plan, but she *insisted*—and after last time—bah! Why'd the punkass use Spore if Momokins was on the field?"

"Your daughter's dumb is rubbing off on you old man," said Yui.

"Protean. An easy predict," said Raj before he disappeared out the door.

Protean, Meowscarada's ability, changed its type to the type of its last-used move. So even if it didn't switch out, unless it used a grass-type move—useless against Amoonguss—it would change to a type that couldn't resist Spore. Jinjiao never needed to predict a swap at all.

"Wah, wah," said Yui: deadpan trombone. "Sorry for your loss, coach."

"It's not over yet," said Toril.

"Right!" Domino hopped up, smoothed out his hat, and set to pacing. "Jinjiao blunders. One misstep, one break in his wall, and the rest comes tumbling after."

"Jinjiao, blunder?" said Yui.

"He won't," said Toril. "But Aracely can get lucky."

Yui said nothing to that. Amoonguss put Slowking to sleep, but lacked any way to hurt it. Jinjiao needed to spend the next turn swapping to a bigger threat. There was a chance—a small chance, but a chance—for Slowking to wake up then. No skill or knowledge played into it. Only luck.

Like Pewter City. Meeting Bill, stealing his flash drive, throwing it to Nilufer. Aracely couldn't have planned that. It'd been dumb luck.

A strong sense, stupid and superstitious but unnaturally potent, entered Toril: Aracely was a person who got lucky a lot.

"Mofang, return. Go, Degula."

It was a Pokémon Aracely knew well: Gliscor. Fanged winged bat trailing a long tail. Aracely didn't care. She'd expected the swap and locked in her command.

"Slowking, wake up and use Surf!"

Her voice needed only reach him in his slumber. A sharp call from his trainer to drag him from somnolent depths. Come on. Wake up and suddenly Aracely has the advantage.

Slowking snored.

Lazy creep! Her hand smacked the console and her eyes went to the jumbotron to make sure the camera wasn't on her. It wasn't. She had some luck, at least.

No point keeping Slowking in anymore. Gliscor was faster and would use Earthquake. Aracely couldn't afford to take the hit.

"Slowking, return! Get out there, Gliscor!"

Her own Gliscor appeared to stare down Jinjiao's. A free swap, since Gliscor—part flying type—was immune to Earthquake.

Except Jinjiao's eyes gleamed behind his piss yellow Gunnars until he pushed them up the bridge of his nose with his middle finger. All behind him was unbroken red and gold and he, gold himself, melted into the wall that propped him up.

"Degula, use Stealth Rock."

So he predicted her swap, too. His Gliscor hunched, coughed, and hacked up a spray of sharp rocks that scattered across Aracely's side of the arena. The attack did nothing to her Gliscor, but any Pokémon she swapped in would take damage on entry—for the rest of the game, because her team had no way to clear the field.

This was starting to feel like the games she lost early in group stage, where she saw something she didn't know and did something dumb and it all unraveled so fast. Except she hadn't seen anything she didn't know. Amoonguss and Gliscor were Pokémon she anticipated. He simply outplayed her and looked smug doing so.

The vision of the future distorted, shifted off its natural line: a new image, one where she lost, and then—what? Nothing? All along nothing, of no importance, lucky to be a footnote on someone else's plaque before the world broke apart and erased her and human history with it? Or would she slink back to MOTHER after all?

Her eyes glazed as they examined Gliscor's moveset on the holoscreen. She lacked good options. No Stealth Rock, which was no good anyway against Jinjiao's team that had so many ways of healing itself. Through smoke-tinged vision she tapped a move.

"Knock Off."

It wasn't even a good move. Both Gliscors held Toxic Orb, which poisoned them the first turn they held it. (Gliscor, being a sick freak like everyone else, healed from poison.) Knocking it off now did nothing except mediocre damage.

Jinjiao's left eye twinged. "Degula, return. Go, Yinying."

He... swapped. He swapped?

Why?

Umbreon appeared and ate the swipe of Gliscor's tail that knocked off its held item (Leftovers). Negligible damage. Cely couldn't even consider it a win. Still, why?

What made him swap from that position?

Maybe his Gliscor's only damaging move was Earthquake. Maybe. Cely sensed something else, though. Something in that expression. What did he expect her Gliscor to do that threatened his own Gliscor? What could Gliscor do that threatened another Gliscor? Earthquake, no. Toxic, no. Poison Jab? Façade?

Then it hit her. A move she used once, back in regionals, against an early round gimmick opponent who only ran ground types.

Ice Fang.

He'd feared Ice Fang. Even from his winning position (or because of his winning position?) he was worried about the sub-single percentage chance she manifested Ice Fang ex nihilo.

Aracely blinked. She leaned forward.

The first hole in the wall appeared.

"So what's the sitch." Raj tossed Yui her gummies and plopped a tub of everything-loaded nachos on the table. "Stealth Rock. Ouch."

Domino, pacing compulsively, gravitated toward the nachos, but Brittany barred him with her arms crossed in an X. "Oh come on. One? One won't kill me. Britt! I'm sweating out the calories anyway!"

The battle labored. Aracely's Gliscor used Earthquake, which hit Umbreon for minor damage, only for Umbreon to use Wish, which would heal it next turn. Here shone the nastiness of Jinjiao's stall composition. He gained advantages by degrees, small cuts, smart and safe plays, and his team's bulk and regeneration made any minor concessions erasable. Aracely, meanwhile, was never getting rocks off her side of the field.

She switched. When her own bulky sponge Tangrowth dropped onto the arena, the rocks dug into its vined flesh. Umbreon complemented this damage with its own attack, and although it took recoil from Tangrowth's Rocky Helmet, the advantage went to Jinjiao. Again.

Maybe the match *was* over. Interest dissipated. Raj chatted up Domino about another match entirely—IPL 44 finals, Domino Sosa versus Red Akahata.

"Bully battle. Really coulda been yours. Say I've got this commemorative trading card with you on it. Mind signing?"

Tangrowth used Leech Seed to force out the Leftovers-less Umbreon, but Jinjiao predicted the move and preemptively swapped to Toxapex, yet another impenetrable wall with self-regenerative capabilities. Aracely expected Toxic, so she swapped to Aegislash—immune to poison—only for Jinjiao to use Toxic Spikes instead. Rather than poison the Pokémon on the field, Toxic Spikes were, like Stealth Rock, hazards that remained on the arena floor. They poisoned any Pokémon Aracely swapped in.

It seemed Aracely fell short of Jinjiao's caliber. Some battlers were simply better.

Did Toril hope to see Jinjiao struggle, to absolve herself of struggling? To prove she remained on Jinjiao's level, on Raj's level, on the level necessary to win? Jinjiao didn't make mistakes. Toril did. That difference became a gulf in Toril's mind no seething strangulation of phlegm filled.

Aracely swapped to Slowking. Competent move—which showcased the whole problem. Slowking, though asleep, absorbed the poison of Toxic Spikes with his own toxic body, clearing them from the field. In that sense, Aracely acted correctly. But every swap she made cut into her Pokémon's flesh with Stealth Rock. And Jinjiao kept forcing her to swap. Bit by bit they were being whittled down, while Cely did zero damage in return. Besides that, it made her predictable. The same turn she swapped to Slowking, Jinjiao swapped to his Gliscor. Aracely needed to swap again.

As long as Jinjiao controlled the tempo, he made Aracely dance on the palm of his hand. Toril almost lost to this. Raj suddenly laughed—at her? No. Something Domino said as he signed Raj's card.

When Toril glanced back down, Aracely did something insane.

Cely kept Slowking in.

Why? Simple. Jinjiao didn't make mistakes. So she would make the mistake first. A mistake he didn't force—a mistake he didn't expect.

The song-and-dance of this battle already dragged so long her Slowking had faced his Gliscor before. When that happened, she swapped Slowking out, and Jinjiao predicted it. He hadn't used Earthquake, but Stealth Rock.

Jinjiao didn't make mistakes. He'd anticipate consistent behavior.

"Slowking you bum, wake up! Wash it away with Surf!"

Jinjiao's teeth flashed. "Heh. Degula, Earthquake."

He expected it?!

A seismic tremor rocked the arena. She gripped the sides of her platform for balance as her holoscreen blurred. The arena was designed for this. The stage split open with a fissure that, by hidden mechanical means, resealed as soon as the attack ended. Slowking ate the brunt and his health plummeted, though he was fat enough to survive.

Only survival mattered. Now Slowking would wake up and wreak equivalent havoc. Jinjiao didn't make mistakes, but this correct play would be turned into a bad one by luck alone. Cely felt it, the line of fate, seething between her clasped hands. Slowking, you'll wake up now. You'll wake up!

Slowking snored.

Jinjiao spat a sharp, mocking laugh as Cely gripped her forehead.

"Off the field already you turd," she shouted. "Go, Aegislash!"

The haunted sword manifested. Its gleaming steel body, one lifeless eye staring from the hilt, might have seemed cool. If not for its held item. Tied to its pommel was a string, and from that string floated a single red balloon. It was enough to elevate Aegislash a foot off the ground, though it turned it into the dumbest-looking Pokémon in Cely's arsenal. (High bar for that dubious honor.)

The balloon did its job, at least. When Gliscor used Earthquake, the shocks didn't reach the floating Aegislash.

Aegislash used Shadow Ball; Jinjiao switched to Umbreon, which resisted it.

"Aegislash, Close Combat."

"Yinying, switch."

"Omigosh you are obnoxious!"

"Go, Xiaojin."

The thing that appeared glowed gold. As gold as the ineffable 金 held aloft at Jinjiao's back. A Pokémon both Dad and Toril warned Cely about, the most feared Pokémon at the tournament. Raj Viswambaran, seed 1, had one. Minhyuk "SkiLL" Park, seed 4, had one. So did seed 6, Didier Benssalah, and seed 8, Jacq Ray Johnson. But it matched Jinjiao best, in his Umbreon color-coordinated outfit he apparently wore every day. The Pokémon didn't simply look gold, it was gold. It was made of one thousand gold coins, shaped into the mascot for a string cheese brand, riding a skateboard.

Gholdengo.

To complete its already goofy look, it wore an Air Balloon like Aegislash, which let it hover (skateboard and all) a foot above the ground.

Because Gholdengo was a ghost, Aegislash's fighting-type Close Combat did nada.

Her true fate. Dispatched at the hands of this exercise in idiocy. Standing here in the arena, surrounded by tens of thousands, swept by their indomitable sound, party to herself magnified exponential and immaculate on the jumbotron, she'd truly believed the narrative. Dad fed her that honey her whole life: nostalgic yearnings for a greatness he thought he once held, a point where his legs towered trunk-like atop the apex of the world, atop 8 billion bodies (minus 1), when he almost—almost—etched his name in the book of history. They called this tournament history. For this world that hadn't known war in a lifetime, that hadn't seen famine or pestilence or plague in twice as long, this became history. She'd bought in.

But here it was, in its truth. A goofy guy made of gold coins floating thanks to a single red balloon, staring down a living sword also floating.

She thought, intrusively, wouldn't it be so funny, so surprising, so shocking if she slit her throat right here on camera with a straight razor?

This was bad, she was succumbing to a bad headspace. She dug her nails into the flesh of her thigh. The narrative was whatever the world willed. Whatever she willed. And there was a thread, a meaning, like a little lip of string jutting from a crack, her fingertips slipping in their attempts to tug.

Jinjiao didn't make mistakes. But he feared Ice Fang.

That meant something. It had significance, if only she made it so. If she took that random atom and extrapolated, she could make it mean something.

She gazed straight into Jinjiao's eyes. Into them and through them, into the depths of his tragic little soul.

"Momokins," she said.

Momokins reappeared, got cut by the rocks, and then immediately received the brunt of Gholdengo's Shadow Ball. Though frail, Momokins resisted the attack, barely, on typing alone.

Her eyes never left Jinjiao's. She watched, she watched, she watched—

And Jinjiao blinked first.

"Xiaojin, return," he said. Exactly as expected. Momokins stood at a sliver of health, a gust of wind ended him, but Jinjiao didn't want to make a mistake. He didn't want to eat a hard hit on his most prized, most fearsome Pokémon, even if he finished one of Cely's own. That was too poor an exchange in his eyes, when any other Pokémon might do the trick.

The trick.

"Trick," said Cely.

"Yinying, you're in."

"Momokins, use Trick!"

Stooped, laboriously breathing, Momokins attempted anyway to maintain his debonair demeanor. Abuse ill suited him, he sometimes crumpled under only a scream. Ziggy's lemon shimmer reverberated in the gold coating of her adversary and she wondered whether Momokins might crumple too, fail to accomplish the task she set for him. He motioned to the band he wore around his wrist, showed it to Jinjiao and the crowd alike, shaky smile to preclude an eyelid flutter, and the moment all eyes misdirected to the fatigue on his face, his paws flashed around one another and the band was gone.

Whoever worked the cameras (maybe Mom, she mentioned something once about transitioning backstage) knew their stuff. The jumbotron cut immediately to Umbreon. Around its neck it wore the band that had been on Momokins' wrist. The Choice Band.

In an ideal world, Trick didn't simply move the user's held item to their opponent, it also swapped the opponent's item to the user. But Cely knocked off Umbreon's Leftovers long ago, so Momokins got nothing. For him, though, the crowd's applause was enough, and slightly steadier he spread his arms to bask in their approval.

Jinjiao lay barren of amusement. Because of Choice Band, Umbreon was now locked to a single move per switch.

She strained herself against his glasses, pressed her palms to the yellow lenses, phased through slow and semisolid smiling toward him. Into his eyes, into his brain, feeling the way he tick-tick-ticked, imbibing his spinal fluid. In golden glow no dark clouds can come. Her arms extended, fingers pressed into her mudras. Milk and honey and this world a-tilt.

"Yinying, return," Jinjiao said. "Go, Mofang."

"Knock Off."

At those words Jinjiao's lips spread involuntarily, forced by Cely's god-finger prodded deep within, gums bared and teeth neat and tidy. Knock Off. What idiot would use Knock Off now, he thought. Unless she predicted the swap—and she shouldn't, she shouldn't have predicted it, not when a single move finished off Meowscarada for good—unless she predicted it, all she expected Knock Off to do was knock off the Choice Band she only one turn prior put on Umbreon. That's what you're thinking now Jinjiao, isn't it? You're scanning your flowcharts for the logical process that led to this decision.

There was no logical process. She simply knew you.

Creature of love and fear. So small, so slim, so in appearance dissimilar, but she knew you now.

You were her Dad.

He never made mistakes either. He just got unlucky.

Knock Off required only half the finesse of execution as Trick, so the shivering figure of her Momokins managed it with less aplomb. Amoonguss' rocky sheath coating came off with one final scrape against Momokins' skin, but the damage was done.

"You're so stupid," he said. He actually said it into his mouthpiece, piping it out over the arena at her, at every person in the audience. "You're actually so dumb, do you know that? What are you smiling for? You're still losing. You're still behind, idiot." His finger jabbed his holoscreen. "Mofang—Sludge Bomb."

"U-turn."

Momokins inhaled deeply, collected himself, and launched at Amoonguss. He landed the hit, ricocheted, and left the field before Amoonguss got its attack off.

Now it was time to win this game.

"Kommo-o."

It was her sixth Pokémon. Was it coincidence she used none of the three from her loss to Toril? Bad vibes, though Dad agreed to this team too. Serendipity is when feeling and fact tie together.

Kommo-o, the Alolan dragon, stood bipedal with massive grasping claws that reached the floor. Thick, loose scales shuddered across its body as it swayed, and the sound of the scales striking its flesh loosed a sonorous chime that crawled its way up Jinjiao Zhang's back. Jinjiao's fangs remained bared, he did not blanch or frown, but Cely needed no visual indicators to read his aura.

Sludge Bomb did nothing. Kommo-o was Bulletproof.

Dad would be howling from the VIP booth. *We talked about this Cely! You can't bring out Kommo-o whenever you freaking feel like it! Save her until Amoonguss and Toxapex are down!* Yet here Amoonguss was, low health but staring her in the face; and Toxapex waiting in the wings.

Simply another idiot move from Cely Sosa, right Jinjiao? The cancer eating away your precious tournament. All she makes are bad moves, and you never make mistakes.

As Cely knew he would, Jinjiao switched out Amoonguss. Exactly like how he swapped out Gliscor earlier. He thought Kommo-o had Flamethrower, which would eliminate Amoonguss in one hit.

As Cely knew he would, Jinjiao sent in Toxapex.

"Clangorous Soul," Cely said.

Domino pressed his face to the glass. "No, no, what are you doing! I said WAIT until Toxapex is gone!"

"Wow. Clangorous Soul right in Toxapex's face." Yui popped a gummy into her mouth. "She's so trash."

"Jinjiao uses Haze here," said Raj. "Then it's the most over a match ever was."

"Unless," said Toril.

"Unless what?"

"Unless Toxapex doesn't have Haze."

"If it didn't have Haze why'd Jinjiao send it out? He knows Kommo-o does Clangorous Soul."

Toril watched and waited.

It worked like this.

Kommo-o bristled, and all the scales hanging from its body clanged. The sound cracked the arena air and the heavens holy in its deepness. Kommo-o only liked such sounds. It hated Cely's music.

The force of the scales striking its body hurt Kommo-o, though for the purity of the music it didn't mind. The biometrics showed its health drop a full third, atop the damage from Stealth Rock. In exchange, every single one of Kommo-o's physical attributes—attack, defense, speed, et cetera—shot up. The music energized it, or more accurately elevated its soul.

Amid the chimes, Kommo-o retrieved its item, a small bottle, and sprayed clear mist into its mouth. The throat spray softened its vocal chords, and allowed it to join with song the melody of its scales. Its power increased again.

All of this was highly stupid to do in front of Toxapex, a Pokémon that frequently ran Haze, which cast the stage in a gloomy murk that settled Pokémon down and reset their biorhythm back to normal. One move, and all the boosts of Clangorous Soul vanished, but the missing health remained.

Hence why Dad made sure she knew not to send out Kommo-o until Toxapex and Amoonguss were gone. Toxapex used Haze, Amoonguss used Clear Smog, which did the same thing.

But Jinjiao? You wouldn't take both those moves, would you? After all. You don't make mistakes. Two moves that did the same thing? Inefficient. Better to give yourself more versatility.

It was Toxapex who didn't have the move.

The wall of signs behind Jinjiao retained its overall structure, but a few within the mass felt the blood drain out their arms during the interminable stall. Small squares within the whole went black.

"Clangorous Soul," she said.

He said, scowling, not Haze, "Surf."

Kommo-o drove its health down once more, but now its body was a honed piece of work. The wave Toxapex ushered barely dragged Kommo-o half an inch.

A few more arms got tired.

"Boomburst," she said.

"Baneful Bunker!"

The arena exploded into thunderous cacophony.

Raj sat up. He tried to speak, coughed on his nachos, painfully swallowed as he pressed his face to the glass. "Wait. Wait?"

"LET'S GO CELY THAT'S MY GIRL!"

"Wait. Wheel it back." Raj's fingers revolved. "I wasn't paying attention. How'd we get here?"

Domino pounded his fists against the table. The bowl of nachos jumped and Brittany caught it telekinetically to stop melted cheese from spraying everywhere.

"Jinjiao blundered? When? Where?"

Yui said nothing. Her sour candy puckered one cheek.

"He didn't blunder," said Toril.

He didn't blunder. Every individual move he made was logical. When did the tempo shift? When she swapped Meowscarada into Gholdengo? He shouldn't have allowed that. But to call it a blunder—even a mistake—no. It shouldn't have led to anything. Because he could always swap, which he did, to keep Gholdengo safe. Swapping benefitted Jinjiao due to Stealth Rock. He made a logical move.

In the arena, Toxapex hunkered down and shrouded itself with a thick coating of poison. Kommo-o's attack, no matter how empowered, failed to penetrate the defense. But the maneuver expended incredible effort on Toxapex's part—it wouldn't be able to repeat it next turn.

Knock Off. The key point was when Meowscarada used Knock Off immediately after tricking the Choice Band onto Umbreon. In a vacuum, getting Choice Band on a tank was a win, but Aracely expended most of Meowscarada's health to accomplish it. Ultimately, an even trade—and even trades benefitted the trainer in the winning position. But predicting an immediate swap and using Knock Off. Why did that happen?

Kommo-o used Boomburst again. This attack was so fucking loud it was hard for Toril to think rationally. That thick bastard Toxapex somehow survived, though the force dredged its rooted spines through the hard-packed earth until it nearly butted against Jinjiao's platform. Its vibrant eyes, peeking from beneath its thick folds of bulk, fluttered as it barely managed to spit out a spray of Surf that accomplished the tiniest chip in Kommo-o's vitality.

Jinjiao swapping immediately to Amoonguss from Umbreon—that too made sense. He expected Meowscarada to attack. Amoonguss' Rocky Helmet would lower it to the point where it couldn't possibly attack a second time without fainting. Unless Aracely managed to take off the Rocky Helmet with her first attack. Exactly what she did.

Toxapex recovered enough to use Baneful Bunker again, blocking Kommo-o's attack. Jinjiao was now stalling to no advantage whatsoever. Either he switched out Toxapex next turn—and probably lost whatever he switched into—or sacked Toxapex.

Jinjiao didn't blunder. Aracely simply read him—read him and read him and read him, three times in a row.

("Now your end of the deal. How'd you know Rillaboom was actually Zoroark?")

"Easy. I read you."

"That doesn't answer the question. You didn't know about Grassy Terrain. So how did you read me? What logical thought process did you follow?"

Her head tilted, her smile sly, slick with a condescension that needled Toril's innards.

"No logic. I just read it on your face."

"She read him," Toril said. "She read his mind."

"Only Pokémon are psychic." Yui reached out and gave Brittany a stroke on the shoulder. "Humans just fake it. Like Sabrina."

Jinjiao elected not to swap out Toxapex. Kommo-o's explosive pulse of sound struck it. It wavered, slumped. Jinjiao returned it to its Poké Ball. Aracely Sosa, incomprehensibly, drew first blood.

"Damn bro. This might be the best match of the round," said Raj. "And I thought R16 would be a bloody snore."

Jinjiao sent out Gliscor. Cely barely needed to think. Boomburst, she commanded, and all Gliscor did in return was use Protect, a move similar to Baneful Bunker. Stalling. For what?

More and more squares of the 金 lowered. Pieces flecking off the whole.

Jinjiao swapped out Gliscor for Gholdengo. Boomburst, a normal move, passed harmlessly through Gholdengo's ghostly form.

Kommo-o knew other attacks. But why was Jinjiao doing this? Toril clawed her way back by retreating into a zone of pure mathematics, blank and obtuse and unreadable. What was Jinjiao's zone? He hunched, one hand on his head, eyes darting, gold-locked hair askew. He wore it on his sleeve, well enough even an antisocial weirdo like Toril could tell. He was in major trouble. Was it possible he lacked any plan at all? That of all his Pokémon, none beat the tremendously buffed Kommo-o?

The obviousness of his face annoyed her. His palpable fear distracted. What was in his head behind that? What was his plot?

He planned to swap out Gholdengo. He wouldn't risk losing his ace. Did he intend to scout Kommo-o's moveset?

Jinjiao still had one unknown Pokémon. Any hypothetical hopes rode on that. Cely remembered what Toril told her: *He has one Pokémon he hasn't shown all tournament. Definitely a game changer. It won't be just another wall.*

He needed information about Kommo-o's kit to make a safe swap to his mystery final Pokémon. Previously, he swapped out Amoonguss, expecting Kommo-o to use Flamethrower. But was he sure Kommo-o even had Flamethrower? Sending Gholdengo out, immune to Boomburst but weak to Flamethrower, was him attempting to learn.

"Boomburst," Aracely said. And Jinjiao dragged his palm down his face as he called for Gholdengo to swap to Amoonguss.

Kommo-o's blast wrenched Amoonguss out of the ground by the stalk. It landed a few seconds later, totally out of commission.

Two Pokémon down, four to go.

Gliscor came out again. It used Protect again, Aracely used Boomburst again.

Or maybe he intended to drain Boomburst's Power Points? The IPL instituted arbitrary limits on how often a Pokémon was allowed use the same move, ostensibly for game balance. These limits were called Power Points. Boomburst had sixteen PP. She'd used eight and only taken out two of his Pokémon. At this rate she'd run out.

He planned to swap to Gholdengo again to eat another Boomburst for free.

"Clanging Scales," Aracely said.

A dragon type move. It'd finish off Gholdengo without revealing Flamethrower. Now switch.

Jinjiao didn't switch.

Kommo-o, who had gotten comfortable spamming the same move over and over, seemed to sigh as it dragged its claws down its body to scrape off a smattering of scales. It swung them

like cymbals, creating a reverberating crack that ripped through Gliscor with all sonic strength. Gliscor clamped its claws to its ears to no avail. The sound caused its eyes to go haywire—its tail buckled under its weight—it fell.

Three Pokémon down.

On Cely's holoscreen, the consequence of removing some of its scales manifested: Kommo-o's defenses lowered a smidge.

She forgot. She forgot the move did that.

Surely it didn't matter. Kommo-o's defenses were still high, even if its health was low, and it moved faster than any possible Pokémon Jinjiao sent out. What difference did it make?

Delusion. She saw into Jinjiao's eyes and already knew.

"Three down. Three fucking down!" Domino smacked his hands together and fuck he was nearly as loud as Kommo-o. "Keep up the heat Cely! Fuck yeah!"

"We're gonna see it," said Raj. "Jinjiao's mystery final Pokémon."

"If it drops in one hit," said Yui, "who cares."

"You guys know what it is?" Raj plopped into his chair backward to stare down Yui and Toril. "I mean, not like I know for sure. Footage of Bohai regionals is tough to snag outside the region. I managed a few reels though."

"Yap and you'll miss the battle," said Yui.

"Just saying. When you see it you'll shit bricks. On god."

Jinjiao Zhang reached for a Poké Ball. He held it to his lips and kissed, eyes closed in ritualistic prayer. At least, that's how it looked to Toril. Maybe she had occultism on the mind.

"My hopes rest on you." Jinjiao wound up his throw. A practiced, multi-stepped process. "Go—Kekayin!"

The crowd's omnipresence dropped to perfect silence as the ball traveled through the air. The jumbotron cameras followed its downward arc, its impact against the ground, its ricochet upward. They watched it open, traced the spray of light to the figure manifesting on the arena floor, and Toril in this staggered space felt her breath catch, trapped in stern wonder as to whether Aracely might actually pull off the upset.

The Pokémon that appeared was—

"I don't get it," Aracely said aloud. She stared at the Pokémon standing opposite Kommo-o.

I don't get it. Isn't Lopunny total trash?

R16 | Cocaine Bunny

Mouthful of Combusken spicy wings Lachlan Nguyen still managed: "The demographic question becomes even more interesting when you open it to all IPLs, from 1 to 64." The excess barbecue sauce he smudged on his khakis. "There have been 64 winners, or rather 43 if you count duplicates. Like yourself, of course—yourself most notably."

He tossed bones now divested of flesh onto the plate and seized another wing. Viscous red ran down his lips.

"The 43 winners come from a total of only 20 regions. The world has 2,064 regions. Only 20 have ever produced a winner. That's fascinating, isn't it? There has to be an explanation. Everything has one. No matter what, a reason always exists—otherwise, we can only imagine dumb luck as the cause of everything, and if that was so, how could anything in this universe exist that wasn't entropic dissolution?"

Long ago he drained his cup of milk tea. Now he downed the wings one after another, allowing the spice to accumulate in layers, thickening upon his lips, his tongue, his throat. His eyes watered, flashing as they did between the one to whom he spoke and the battle.

"Part of the answer lies in the tournament's history. The Interregional Pokémon League originated with only four regions: Kanto, Johto, Sinnoh, and Hoenn, regions picked due to geographic and cultural proximity. But that number expanded to 73 regions in IPL 17, then by IPL 35 it encompassed every region in the world except Galar, which joined in IPL 52—only 12 years ago. Yet Galar has already won three IPLs. My region joined in IPL 17. Never won. Jinjiao's region joined in IPL 17. Never won. Why? Luck? No. There must be an explanation. On a good day I can beat anyone. I beat you, after all. I would've been eliminated if I didn't. If I can beat you I can beat anyone. If luck was a factor, my region would win eventually. Is it simply sample size? We think the IPL has determined the course of battling history, but in reality, it's only existed for 64 years. After another century, will my region win? Or will the world end before it?"

The only other person in this box, Red Akahata, leaned against the wall and said nothing. With his brim pulled down over his eyes, he might have been asleep. Lachlan tossed another bone onto the plate, brought another wing to his mouth, and spoke.

On the arena floor, two Pokémon stood. One side: Bruised but dignified in its refusal to stoop, the ancient dragon known to the people of far-flung archipelago Alola as a defender, a totem, an entity of spiritual significance, whose scales were once saved for the headdresses of queens, and who still served an essential function in the island's coming-of-age ritual—even if that ritual was gradually transitioning to the more IPL-typical gym circuit.

The other side: a common rabbit.

My hopes rest on you, Jinjiao Zhang thought. No—the hopes of the Bohai region.

At three years old, Jinjiao was a Pokémon trainer. Not officially—that would be illegal. But he lived with Pokémon, worked with Pokémon, befriended Pokémon, learned moves, learned techniques, learned strategies. They called him a prodigy, they said he was naturally gifted like Red Akahata, but they didn't know the core of his life coiled around Pokémon like the twin helixes of a DNA strand. They knew nothing of the blood and sweat he expended, the nights kept awake in the frigid cold to instill into his mind discipline, the memorization and mathematics exams his father forced him to take. Anything less than 100 percent led to rulers against his knuckles.

"Our region is worthless," his father said. "It has never won. A laughingstock. Are we simply lesser? Are we simply too lazy, too stupid as a people? No! I refuse to accept it! We'll win. We'll create the person who *can* win!"

Father wasn't here now. He died, of cancer, before Jinjiao's tenth birthday. Since then, it was only Jinjiao the prodigy, because the dead become something that never existed if their name isn't etched on that copper-plated wall.

Sweat ran down his brow in waves. His eyes stared dead alive through the holoscreen. The chant of the people behind him—his people apparently, though he never knew them (a representative asked him to give a signal at the start of the match)—became his heartbeat.

He never made mistakes. How did he get here? Where was his mistake? (If he'd brought in Lopunny right away, then sacked another, then brought Lopunny in again... Why didn't he do that?) He already heard them on the analyst desk, he already heard his father: *Lazy, cocky brat*. Underestimated his opponent. Poor prep. Poor play. What else can you expect? That region will never win.

No. He didn't underestimate her. He didn't! He studied her with the same rigor he studied Raj Viswambaran. More, even, because he hated her, hated everything she stood for, all the steps she skipped to get here. So how?

Through bleared eyes he realized.

He wasn't battling Aracely Sosa.

He was battling her father.

Domino Sosa stood there, behind her, a ghost himself, the ghost from twenty years past. Domino Sosa returned from the dead to avenge his own slaughtered corpse, the blood his throat spilled in sacrifice on the altar of that cruel goddess Luck. Jinjiao saw him. Saw him on the platform, slim in a well-fitted cream suit, fedora on dashing slick hair, carnation to catch all color in a film reel turned sepia.

Possessing her lifeless shell. Cancer in the father passed down to the progeny...!

"KEKAYIIIIIIIIIIIIIN," he screamed to the sky. The crack to still the chant, to still his beating heart.

His tongue lolled out. On it balanced the small round stone he'd been sucking the past three minutes. The stone began to gleam.

The matching stone his Lopunny, Kekayin, wore on her collar gleamed in kind.

Lopunny could never win this tournament. For years they thought that. It was simply too weak, too fragile. Some one thousand Pokémon discovered in this world and less than two hundred have ever been used in the Top 16. Are they all simply too lazy, too stupid?

Heh. All Pokémon evolve eventually.

Kekayin took one slow motion step that midway transformed into an effortless leap propelling her fifty meters skyborne spinning twirling, sweeping with long legs and longer ears airy wisps of cloud behind her until they converged to envelop her still-spinning body in a mist through which she plunged dead downward. Her body in that instantaneous moment of occlusion was changed. Slimmer, more angular, limber as her foot extended a sharpened karate kick into the dirt, her landing framed by thick sweeping plumes of dust as she brushed back her ears and reclaimed her full height. Her legs, black with brown markings, formed into kicking position, while her head hung low and her eyes with their pitch black sclera scythed the field.

All her brain's lapine adrenaline, designed for a wild Lopunny to put on a spurt of speed and flee its many predators, surged through her. Via Mega Evolution, the instinctual flight response transformed into fight. Maddening fear became maddening fury, chemical-induced rabidity, mouth frothing, musculature twitching, an overdrive that would kill her if allowed to continue until she breached the limits of her body's endurance. Only a truly elite trainer could command a Lopunny in this state, and that was what Jinjiao Zhang was, and what Aracely Sosa would not be—once exorcised of her father's spirit.

Jinjiao pushed up his glasses. "Kekayin—heed your master now! Fake Out!"

Kekayin blitzed when Aracely's command was only halfway out her mouth. The speed was incredible; the attack was barely more than a feint. Kekayin dropped in front of Kommo-o's eyes and slashed her arms in an X across the face, minimal damage—minimal even before factoring in Kommo-o's elevated defenses from Clangorous Soul—but Kekayin danced back in as swift a flash as she came and Kommo-o staggered with a gruesome flinch. The word Aracely shouted—"Boomburst!"—went unmet, shaken as Kommo-o was.

"Kekayin—heed your master! Hold!"

He had to scream that, or she'd continue the onslaught before the appointed thirty-second break, until Kommo-o was a bloody pulp.

Kommo-o tilted. Moment by moment its health had been chipped down. Every contribution mattered: Stealth Rock on switch, the self-inflicted reduction from Clangorous Soul (twice),

the Surfs Toxapex managed to spit out before she fainted. And, most crucial of all, the defense drop from Clanging Scales.

It was over now.

"Boomburst," Aracely yelled again.

"Heh." The spirit of history flowed through him. "Kekayin, heed your master! QUICK ATTACK!"

One of the weakest and most common moves. Known by even a wild Pidgye.

Kekayin darted like a wraith, crawling over herself, flowing across the battle-scarred terrain, between unearthed shards of rock, through puddles left behind without her paws leaving a print, and then, fast as an eyeblink, one foot extended, a sharp kick to the jaw.

The final totem of Alola twisted. Its head tilted to face the swirling sky. On one leg it remained standing, remained standing, remained standing—

And it fell.

Kekayin stood hunched over the body, knuckles dragging against the dirt, body heaving with breath.

The people behind him went insane. Jinjiao clamped his teeth down on his tongue until he tasted blood.

The match wasn't over. Aracely—Domino Sosa—still had five Pokémon to Jinjiao's three. With what would Domino decide to fight Jinjiao's ace? This finalist, this one-inch-away winner as hungry for blood as Kekayin herself.

To Jinjiao's complete bafflement, Aracely sent out Aegislash.

The bones formed a stack higher than the uneaten wings. Lachlan leaned forward. "Does she not know?" He glanced at Red as though Red held this world's answers. "Does she not know about Scrappy? Has she never fought a Mega Lopunny before?"

Domino Sosa screamed into his hat. Brittany pleaded, desperation in her eyes, for him to calm down.

"Trash," said Yui.

"I don't believe it," said Raj. "Just like versus Toril. She's gonna fucking throw it."

What is this thing, Cely thought. What is this freaking Pokémon. The holoscreen said normal/fighting type. It used Fake Out and Quick Attack—two normal type moves. So she sent out Aegislash, a ghost type, immune to both normal and fighting.

Why, then, did Jinjiao get so excited?

"Kekayin! Heed your master now! Close Combat!"

Close Combat, a fighting type move. It didn't affect ghosts. Why—?

That gourd-cracked creature slithered on boneless limbs, mad eyes affixed to Aegislash like it intended to devour the sword whole, maybe it did as a ravenous maw enmeshed by strings of saliva opened, but the instant it closed the distance its legs shot out in a twin kick from which it flipped in midair to deal the blade a full-fisted punch.

It punched a ghost.

Its fist clanged like Kommo-o's scales, a crack in the vortex of silence that enshrouded the arena. Aegislash shuddered, its arms went slack, its shield dropped, and it fell straight down into the dirt, where its blade embedded to leave it standing, unconscious.

Naked hunger flashed in Lopunny's face. Aracely knew that eye: murder. Jinjiao screamed for it to heed him and fall back, and it did, and Aracely returned Aegislash to its Poké Ball.

Her hand was shaking.

("The logic behind Jinjiao's team construction," said Toril, "is simple. The walls are the vanguard. They sit there. Slowly, but surely, they whittle you down. They inflict statuses, chip away at defenses. Once your fighters are softened up, he brings out the sweepers. Gholdengo and—I'm sure—his mystery final Pokémon. Maybe you survived his walls. But are you alive enough to handle what he's held in reserve?")

She stared at her remaining Pokémon. Momokins was effectively already fainted—his remaining sliver of health was gone the instant he stepped onto those sharp rocks. Gliscor and Tangrowth were in decent shape, but they were walls themselves, lacking firepower. And lastly.

Her hand wrenched the Poké Ball from its notch.

"Wake up already, Slowking!"

Her sleeping Galarian Slowking appeared, arms folded placid behind its back, eyes shut. This was her chance. Lopunny already showed three of its four attacks. Two weak priority moves and a fighting move that Slowking resisted. That freak on the field couldn't wipe him out in one shot. She knew. She believed.

He would wake up.

He wouldn't wake up.

Jinjiao knew. He knew Pokémon better than he knew people. He'd seen them in all states, all forms, all shapes. He'd witnessed their demeanors, their moods, their emotions.

The bond between Aracely Sosa and her Pokémon was weak. Maybe they listened to Domino Sosa. Maybe if it were Domino Sosa on that platform and not this shell he possessed, they would hear his voice and awaken. Their sleeping hearts would burn at the voice of their master and friend.

This was Jinjiao Zhang's secret. This was how he truly never made mistakes. Sure, he memorized the flowcharts, tables, spreadsheets. But the real reason his decisions always worked was because he could look at a Pokémon's face and read it.

That Slowking wouldn't wake up.

"Heh," he said, though it was only a pant now, an intake of air down vocal chords throbbing rawly red. "Kekayin—heed your master! Ice Punch!"

Kekayin's fingers hooked as the air around them plummeted sub-zero within a matter of moments. The versatility of a normal type, a blank slate onto which change came so easily, allowed her to master this technique that otherwise met her nature most unnatural. From braced stance she vanished and reappeared immediately before Slowking. The punch plowed into his body, dragging out no mindless cry or even the slightest flinch, but the holoscreen registered the palpable hit with a significant chunk of his health.

"Wake up and do something, Slowking!"

Slowking rocked gently on his heels, a byproduct of the frigid impact that crackled on his tough underbelly. He ceased rocking. His eyes remained closed; he snored.

Jinjiao called Kekayin back, and she dutifully complied. Another hit like that and Slowking fell. Basic mathematics.

The sky shifted by degrees. Sun starting to set. Oblique rays reflected off the signs behind him and glazed the whole arena red. Red, within which shimmering wisps of gold flicked their tails.

Gold was his color.

"Kekayin, heed your master. Ice Punch, again!"

"Slowking, return. Go, Momokins."

Predictably heartless. Aracely hoped to make use of Slowking's Regenerator ability, which quickly restored his vitality after leaving the field. Jinjiao knew this ability well; two of his Pokémon used it.

Perhaps it was a mercy that poor Meowscarada succumbed to the jagged stones that drove into his paws the moment he entered the field. He fell before Kekayin had a chance to inflict her wrath upon him. It took a sharp cry to call her back from annihilating Meowscarada's prone body, but she listened.

"Go, Slowking."

He reappeared, healed. Still asleep, though this time Jinjiao knew he would wake up, not out of devotion to his master, but because sleeping spores only lasted so long. Aracely knew this too, hence why she sacrificed Meowscarada to buy time.

The "correct" move was to switch, predicting Slowking's attack. But—no. No. He made correct moves before and Domino Sosa showed he knew the game well enough to anticipate them. Now, Jinjiao relied on his more primal strength.

His eye caught Kekayin's glancing back at him, awaiting the command she desired. Meowscarada fell too quickly, she was antsy, she needed to hurt and maim, to unleash pent energy. Her mind and his linked at that moment and he understood she was ready to exceed her limits.

"KEKAYIN! DESTROY HIM WITH A CRITICAL HIT—ICE PUNCH!"

In the red field, weaving through strands of Jinjiao's color, she flew. All her lines glowed within her wild cry. The ice built around her fist into the point of a drill. When the point struck Slowking, it exploded. Shards shot everywhere, stealing the golden hue.

And Slowking dropped. Exactly as Jinjiao called: a critical hit.

Aracely Sosa was down to two Pokémon, Tangrowth and Gliscor. Tangrowth lacked offensive power and Gliscor was hopeless against Kekayin's Ice Punch.

He stooped over the console, exhausted. His sweat dripped through the holographic screen and shone in his eyes. Kekayin heaved breath in tune.

He really... called a crit. Why did he do something so risky?

Well, it worked. All he needed now was to make no mistakes. This battle was his.

Raj patted Domino's shoulder. The gesture looked reassuring, but Raj's grin rendered ambiguous his true sympathy. "That psychopath Jinjiao. He really called a crit. And it worked, the lucky bastard."

"If top seeds battle like this, I'm winning the tournament," said Yui.

"I would never call a fucking crit," said Raj. "I also would never be in this situation."

"Toril wishes she could say the same."

"That's for sure," said Raj. "You look miffed, Toril. Sad your girlfriend's cooked? Chin up. At least—"

"She," said Toril, "is not my girlfriend. She is not my friend. Okay? Do you get that? How many times do I need to say it?"

"GFs for sure," said Yui. V to her lips and tongue flicked out.

"Wanna die?"

Yui popped a gummy. "Kill me then bitch."

"You talk about girlfriends," said Toril. "You seem to know Cynthia pretty good—"

"I'm from Sinnoh idiot. Yeah I know Cynthia."

"Bit more than that. I've seen your team."

"The fuck does that mean?"

"It means Aracely's not the only one getting teambuilding help," said Toril. "Except Cynthia's not your mom, so what exactly is she to you?"

"Toril," said Raj, "tad out of pocket, no?"

Toril wheeled on him, hand flung out, her missing fingers more present in her mind than ever before. "Shut up Raj, go fuck Iono or something—"

"Bro. What are you even *saying*?"

"Sex obsession," said Yui with a smile. "Incel."

"I'll cut you—"

"Shut up!" Domino Sosa's fist slammed the plexiglass. It shook the whole pane and his trenchant sweep warded Brittany from pacifying him. "I am TRYING to watch my daughter battle." His head sank. "All of you out. You're eating my health."

"Bruv it's not your private box," said Raj.

"Out. Please. Out. All of you—"

The loudspeakers crackled with the voice of a trainer below: Jinjiao. The sound of him calling for his Lopunny to act had become commonplace over the past few minutes, but he said something different now.

"You should've fought me yourself, old man. Not sent your daughter."

Domino's head twisted. The sun's glare made it hard to see onto the trainer platform and its layers of holoscreens, so he pulled his hat back on his head and shaded his eyes. He glanced at Brittany.

"Was he talking to me?"

Brittany shrugged. He glanced at the others.

"Was he talking to me?"

"Who else?" said Yui.

A smile cracked. A laugh followed. Domino's back pressed to the glass and he slid to the floor half-held by Brittany. He laughed, and laughed. "He was talking to me!"

Toril looked from the tiny form of Jinjiao to the tiny form of Aracely. Is that what Jinjiao thought? He was fighting the father?

Both of Cely's remaining Pokémon were weak to Ice Punch, but Tangrowth was less weak, so out it went. Gangly pile of vines through which great googly eyes sometimes emerged. Lopunny probably failed to finish it one hit.

This cannot be over. It cannot. She rejected that reality. That line of history, the one where she loses, was not the real line. It was something MOTHER saw, not her. MOTHER, where are your soothing words now. You're watching, aren't you? You must've received the flash drive from Nilufer. What did you think that meant? That was goodbye. And you must know the reason. Please. Mom didn't understand, Haydn and Charlie of course not, Dad thought he did but didn't, but you—you—you at least knew, didn't you? You were the only one who'd ever split open her skull and crawled inside.

Jinjiao Zhang didn't understand either. He stood across, smugly superior, mouthing a breathy heh that came as static through the microphone, awash in an all-red world. The arena a bowl brimming with blood, pooling and drowning all: Tangrowth, Lopunny, the whole human horde loosing their final cries as a collective shriek of delighted anxiety. Those holding the signs, seeing the effect of their reflected light, redoubled their effort, the holes in the formation sealed, and all became bloodier.

What did Cely not understand? She didn't understand Lopunny. It was a crazed beast. It punched the intangible, turned the unreal real.

She understood Jinjiao Zhang.

His elation dwindled. The weird crap he yelled at Dad of all people was a cover. He felt certain of his victory, but also—yes, she kneaded the feeling within her fingers, tested its pliability—also shame. Shame he was brought this far to the brink. (He needed it to be Dad, not her, but Dad, someone he could respect.) Shame also, in his fading high, at what he just did: get a lucky crit.

No, not only that. He banked on a lucky crit. Depended on it.

He did not believe he controlled fate. He believed it the moment he called that move, but now he didn't. Now as his victory was certain, he rejected the self that rolled the dice. His mind realigned. It moved in new directions—

She stared at Tangrowth's four moves. She saw what she saw and she saw what Jinjiao saw and she saw the idea his mind formulated.

"Kekayin, you will heed your master and return. Go, Xiaojin!"

"Knock Off!" Cely said. "Knock Off, now!"

"No!" Jinjiao tore off his glasses. "No, how! How?!"

As a Pokémon, Tangrowth functioned like Jinjiao's Amoonguss. It put the enemy to sleep, leeched their health, ate attacks with strong defensive typing, and regenerated when off field.

If it put Lopunny to sleep, Tangrowth might get lucky enough to win. Anticipating Sleep Powder made sense, and Jinjiao's two other Pokémon, Gholdengo and Umbreon, both had defenses against sleep. Gholdengo was literally immune to it. (*"Never forget Good as Gold," Dad said. "Never, ever forget it or I'll disown you I swear."*) Umbreon's ability was even nastier: Synchronize. When Umbreon went to sleep, so did its opponent.

Given Jinjiao held the advantage. Given Cely only had two usable Pokémon. Putting Tangrowth to sleep, even at the cost of Umbreon, was majorly beneficial to him. (*"Once Jinjiao gets an advantage," Toril said, "he only needs to trade evenly. You'll think you're making progress, taking out one of his Pokémon in exchange for one of your own. You're not. Because when you're 5 and he's 6 and you each take off 5, he's 1 and you're 0. Get it?"*) Everything screamed that switching Umbreon into a predicted Sleep Powder made the most sense.

But he was ashamed. He was ashamed he got lucky.

And he was afraid Cely would get lucky next. He was afraid of the possibility that, if Tangrowth went to sleep, it would wake up immediately, nullifying the trade.

He was trying to eliminate the entire concept of luck.

He was trying to not make a mistake.

He made a mistake.

He didn't make a mistake. He didn't. Why would she—why that move? She was *that* confident he would switch to Gholdengo and not Umbreon? Against Yinying, Knock Off did nothing, no, worse than nothing, it would have removed that obnoxious Choice Band, it would have solely benefitted Jinjiao! She was willing to take that risk?

Is this what Domino's flowcharts told her? Is this what his spirit commanded her to do?

The long arm of vines wriggling out Tangrowth's side lashed. Tangrowth itself didn't move, it was too slow, but its swipe carried solid power as it smashed into Xiaojin the moment it appeared. It aimed for the balloon on its head, which popped before it could be knocked off, but took a sharp smatter of coins with it. They danced across the arena, fanned like a smear of blood in the red light.

Xiaojin, no longer supported by the balloon, plummeted to the ground and stuck a wobbly landing on its skateboard. The attack did disgusting damage, but Xiaojin was still able to fight. What else did Tangrowth have? Giga Drain? Worthless!

"Recover," said Jinjiao.

"Earthquake," said Cely.

Xiaojin's speed saved it. As Tangrowth lifted its vines skyward in preparation to split the earth, Xiaojin stuck a wobbly arm toward its shed coins and with magnetism drew them back. Its full shape returned right before the cataclysmic quake struck, spraying as many coins as it reclaimed.

"Recover," Jinjiao muttered, and Cely called Earthquake again.

He said it to buy time to think. He needed to think. This jam was not fatal. How did she read him? This jam was not fatal. Domino Sosa gave her some flowchart, if Jinjiao only comprehended it he could outplay it.

"Recover!"

"Earthquake."

Did he sack Xiaojin here? Use a powerful attack to hurt Tangrowth, fainting in the process? No. Not when Tangrowth regenerated health whenever it switched. Not worth it. He needed a clean switch on Tangrowth, that was all. Right. Tantalize her. Give her what looks like a play. Bait and switch—

"Xiaojin, return! Go—Yinying!"

Part of him thought somehow she would anticipate this switch, occurring at an entirely random time in their dance of Recover and Earthquake. He waited for Aracely to shout Leech Seed, but she simply said Earthquake. Yinying absorbed the hit, though his legs faltered. Cely would see this as a place where she might gain an advantage. If she kept Jinjiao pinned by continuously spamming Earthquake, he wouldn't be able to safely switch until Yinying fainted. A free Pokémon for her. She'd take that 0 for 1 trade.

"Put that thing to sleep, Yinying," Jinjiao said. "Yawn!"

Yawn was delayed. It only put a Pokémon to sleep after a turn passed. Aracely would need to decide between letting Tangrowth fall asleep and switching. Unless she wanted to make an insane gamble, she'd switch. With only one Pokémon left, Jinjiao knew exactly what she'd switch to and when.

Except—

Except immediately as Jinjiao commanded Yawn, Aracely commanded Tangrowth to return. Yinying plopped on his haunches and yawned cutely, but the sleep-inducing contagion struck the worst possible Pokémon: Gliscor. Gliscor *couldn't* go to sleep; she was already poisoned. The masochistic pleasure Gliscor felt from poison kept her awake.

Jinjiao's fist clenched. His glasses shattered inside it.

The red light abruptly ceased shining on the arena. He thought that all of them, disgusted, lowered their arms in unison, tossed aside their signs. But it was only that the upper wall of the arena eclipsed the setting sun. For a moment, all became dark, and Yinying briefly melted into the abyss before him. Then the stadium's floodlights snapped on, and a far worse sight awaited:

Aracely Sosa, burning bright, arms extended outward, eyes shut serenely.

She ceased looking at him, at anything. Yet he felt her gaze burning into his forehead. Burning into his skull. He felt her eyeballs inside his brain.

She's reading my mind!

"Shut up," he said to himself. His words broadcast to all. "Shut up." Her next move. Her next move would be—Domino's flowcharts—his next move—

Toxic. Gliscor would use Toxic. Safe against Yinying, devastating if Jinjiao switched to Kekayin, his most logical move. Domino was reading his logical and his illogical moves, it didn't make sense, no mathematics prepared for this, but if he reclaimed tempo, all he needed was tempo—!

"Xiaojin!"

"Earthquake," said Aracely.

A ravenous pit opened in Jinjiao Zhang's soul. When did he make the first mistake?

His eyes stared skyward as the ground shivered. Xiaojin fainted, of course, and unconsciously Jinjiao performed the rote motions to return it to its Poké Ball.

She shone so bright on her platform. Like a goddess. In her aura, no trace of Domino Sosa. Had Jinjiao been wrong? All along, wrong? It wasn't Domino Sosa he battled. But it wasn't Aracely Sosa either.

What exactly was this thing, consigning him to the depths of hell?

Kekayin came out. She used Fake Out, a free move on switch, and Gliscor used Protect. She used Ice Punch; Gliscor survived on a fraction of health and used Toxic. Jinjiao ceased watching. He glanced behind him. The signs were still held high, all of them, not a single sign missing. Their chants washed over him:

GO JINJIAO GO! SON OF BOHAI, GO!

He still had a chance. He breathed deep and focused.

Kekayin, poisoned, sagged severely, but her intensity remained undiminished. She too would fight to the end. Aracely's next move would be Protect to stall, so—

"Yinying, go!"

"Toxic," said Aracely.

Was she actually good? Or was he simply broken?

Gliscor used Earthquake. Yinying used Wish.

Next, she'll expect him to switch Kekayin back in, to heal from Wish. She'd use Earthquake.

"Yinying—Wish again," he said.

"Gliscor, return. Go, Tangrowth."

Under the light, the goddess blazed brighter than all. She slipped out her tongue and slathered it over his brain. His every thought came to her.

She'd use Leech Seed next, anticipating him to swap to Kekayin.

"Yinying, Wish again," he said.

"Tangrowth, Leech Seed."

Whether he played optimally, whether he played suboptimally to trick her, she knew. She always knew.

One hope remained. One solitary hope. For himself, for Bohai region, for father, for his Pokémon. He only needed luck. Tangrowth survived a hit from Kekayin—a regular hit.

Not a critical hit.

If Tangrowth fell, Gliscor would too. He only needed luck. No, not luck. It wasn't luck, remember? He understood his Pokémon. He understood their spirit, and they his.

"Kekayin, you're back in. Ready yourself!"

"Leech Seed."

Only Kekayin's spirit mattered now. Only Jinjiao's spirit mattered now. The spirit of an entire region funneled through him, their manifestation of himself as a symbol the strings threaded through his skin. Utter fatigue wracked him, this battle had gone on forever—his battles tended to, whether they went well or poorly—so he sought deep for the final reserve.

He screamed:

"KEKAYIN! NOW IS THE TIME! IN A SINGLE STRIKE! CLOSE COMBAT!"

The final word emerged as a death rattle. All his soul escaped, a blast on the night air, visible as white wisps within the floodlight beams. He slumped onto the console, his feet sliding out from under him. Over the edge of the platform, he stared as his spirit transferred to Kekayin.

She was a mess. Her own reserves of adrenaline depleted. Toxins flowed freely through her veins. She ignored it, ignored her diminishment toward zero better than her own. For he was mind, and she body, he the breath and she the organ that respired it. Her pains dropped away.

Out of the ground, into the air, out of the air, into the dirt she flew. Her body flipped in midair to launch her foot down like a missile upon the mushy mass of vines vague of clear center. But she found the center, the muscles in her leg delivered the impact unto it, the vines bent and the creature within crooned pain, the eyes from their blank space shut, and the Rocky Helmet buried within scraped the skin under Kekayin's fur. Kekayin bounced back and caught herself on all fours, then scurried back a limping step until she could rise on her good leg and leave herself prepared again to kick.

The mass of vines bubbled. Jinjiao pulled himself off the console to see his holoscreen and watched Tangrowth's biometrics. Health plummeted. Down, down, down. Down. Down.

"Keep going," he whispered.

It needed to be a critical hit, an especially powerful strike. Kekayin performed the motions, put all she had into it, and he needed now—only a little—luck—

Through the flickering screen, Aracely Sosa blazed bright.

The health bar stopped going down.

Tangrowth remained standing.

"Earthquake." Aracely's voice came pitiless and unvoiced, as though she didn't speak at all, as though someone much older spoke through her. Much older.

The ground shook. When it stopped, Kekayin sagged to one knee. Then onto her hands and knees. Her long ears trailed randomly. Her health bar depleted to zero.

She tried to rise, her body one unified quiver. She took her first step. Her head lifted, and her eyes aimed madly at her quarry.

"Trainer, our biometric indicators deem your Pokémon no longer fit to continue without serious risk of permanent harm," a mechanical voice in his earpiece intoned. "They are considered fainted for the purposes of this battle. Return them or you will be disqualified."

He told his hand to move to Kekayin's Poké Ball. It only quivered, the same quiver that ran through her body.

A mad thought reached him. Forget Tangrowth. If Kekayin charged up the trainer platform instead. A human—a human against a Pokémon was—

Heh, heheh, hahahahaha!

End the cancer once and for all. Save them from her, from the full terror at her back, from the billionaires' armies of catchers and coaches, from the disintegration of the last true metric of meaning in this world...!

"Kekayin! Heed your master now—"

His voice, he realized, was gone. It came out as a croak. But the microphones and loudspeakers did the work. The tournament was arranged not to fail.

"Heed your master now. And—return."

A shaking arm extended her Poké Ball. A beam of light shot out, enveloped Kekayin, and she disappeared.

All left now was Umbreon. Poisoned, Choice Banded, at a sliver of health. A mathematically zero chance of victory.

Aracely Sosa watched eagerly. Her lips broke into a smile.

He refused her the satisfaction.

"I——I forfeit."

He dropped onto the floor of his platform and curled. The stadium erupted in sound. In the reflective shine of the holoscreen, blanked by the single word DEFEAT, he saw them—the signs—hold strong a moment more. Then one fell, another, then they cascaded like dominos into oblivion, and his symbol with them, until nothing remained.

Lachlan Nguyen tossed the final bone onto the plate. The plate contained now only bones, no meat.

"That's that I guess." He wiped his hands and looked over his shoulder, but Red was gone.

R16 | Who Won IPL 51?

A screaming ate the air. The weight of it and you knew in an instant it wasn't the same screaming. Then you looked at the stands. The bodies were like a split lip of skin yanked back: bare metal shone underneath, but the texture and the creasing and the rippling of the skin made you think you saw blood. "Oh my god," you heard someone shout. Only then did you see what the hundreds crawling over themselves to escape saw: the veil of mist like nightshade, sweeping across the corrugation of the stands, swallowing people, turning them necrotic.

You back away from the vision; it becomes clear you're on the opposite end of the stadium, safe, an observer. Two people run past, then a third appears, filling your lens. "We have to. We have to," is all she says, and somehow you have to, and somehow you're moving along the ridge of the stadium toward the disaster.

That part is oddest of all. It's not odd for anyone else. But it's odd for you, because you in that moment are both the eye observing and the face in the frame: thirteen years younger, but still you. It's odd because you do not remember any of this. You only remember watching it afterward, on the recording they salvaged, and so the you who is watching is more authentic to you than the you being watched. But it's you, and you did this: you ran toward that nightshade gas, and only because of you is there a recording at all.

"We're witnessing an attack on IPL 51," the you that you don't remember reports. Your voice remains clear, even as purple haze tints the air, and your eyes water, and you cover your mouth with your coat.

"Fiorella, we gotta go back. The smell—I can't breathe—"

"There!" Your finger jabs. The camera zooms down the small upper-deck staff concourse you decided to take, almost certainly because every other path was clogged by fleeing spectators. By luck, or fate, or because they had the same idea as you, the terrorists are using the concourse as their escape route. The camera captures them. They are followers of Gregory Sissel, known to his cult as Ghetsis Harmonia Gropius; their goal is to dismantle the system of Pokémon battling foundational to this world. They wear gas masks, they look like aliens, invaders, others, the haunting image of them half-emerged out a violet mist—piecemeal, limbless, coming apart—will become the most famous image of the year. Beholding this image, you collapse, and then so does your eye beholding yourself as the man drops it to drag you to safety.

When you awoke from the coma they gave you an award. In your home it sits, centerpiece of an impeccable living room. Gold body streaming skyward. The plaque reads:

PRESENTED FOR JOURNALISTIC BRAVERY

TO FIORELLA SOSA

It's no longer even your name.

Though she didn't remember the tragedy at IPL 51 consciously, some residual trace was imprinted on her soul, because as Fiorella Fiorina emerged into the cold night air under a crowd enraptured by the most unlikely of underdog victories, she heard their scream change into that other screaming, and the writhing of thousands seemed the start of a growing gash, and until she blinked she thought she noticed a swell of purple amid them.

During group stage, when more matches were played per day and there was less time for the groundsmen to clear the arena, interviews were held indoors. This was the bracket, though, Top 16, and time permitted the drama of a ringside chat in the immediate aftermath of victory. Tonight the phantom memory manifested strongest of all. As she led her cameraman toward the trainer descending the platform her lungs tightened, and breath came constrained, and a sweet-rotten scent invaded her nostrils.

But her heart also beat with a thrill that lent imagined purpose to this meaningless job. She held it together. It was her job, and she would do it better than anyone.

"Aracely! How does it feel to pull off one of the biggest upsets in IPL history?"

Under the floodlights a halo emerged around Aracely's head. She beamed. Perfect teeth. Nothing in her makeup askew. Of course, beautiful. Some might say a born star.

"First off, call me Cely, all my friends do. Second, to be completely honest Fiorella, it feels bittersweet."

"Bittersweet? Is there something about your performance you're not happy about?"

"Of course not. I just keep thinking: it's not over yet."

"An interesting mindset. Most trainers would consider a win like this the highlight of their career."

"No-o, silly. I've got three rounds to go. October 12, that's when it'll be over. Save the date!"

She turned from the microphone to the crowd, whose roar settled into a perceptible chant:
CE-LY. CE-LY. CE-LY.

"Aracely, no seed 15 has ever reached finals before. Are you saying you think you'll win the entire tournament?"

"I'm saying I know I will. It's ordained, k? Either root for me now or root for me at the end, but either way, you'll believe. Might as well seek salvation sooner than later, right?"

CE-LY. CE-LY. CE-LY.

"You've certainly won over this crowd at least." That screaming—the nightshade veil. "But tell me, don't you think you're being overconfident? You seemed confounded by Jinjiao's Lopunny. It wasn't exactly perfect play."

Aracely's winsome smile never faded. She never stooped for the microphone, but always waited for Fiorella to lift it to her lips. "Go ahead, doubt me. I can already hear Bill Masaki saying I played sloppy. Hii-i Bill!" Her fingers wiggled as she waved. "I hope to see real juicy comments online tonight too. You guys at home better be dropping your hottest takes. I'll be so disappointed if you've gone quiet already!"

"Thank you Aracely. I'm Fiorella Fiorina and this has been your Post-Match Interview, brought to you by Silph Co., the world leader in Pokémon battling products. Let's turn it over to the Bud Light Analyst Desk to break down that incredible upset. Take it from here, Iono."

Aracely swung away from the camera and lifted her arms to her audience. The chant continued: *CE-LY. CE-LY. CE-LY.* Their adoration bathed her. Fiorella felt sick to her stomach.

For security, IPL battlers lodged in a private hotel outside the access of fans and paparazzi, connected to the stadium via underground tunnel. It was close enough that the bombastic crowd noise filtered into the rooms. The night's first match, Jinjiao Zhang versus Aracely Sosa, concluded an hour ago; the second, Gladion Mohn versus Adrian da Cunha, still raged.

The room that belonged to Aracely Sosa was otherwise silent. Not a single sound. No creak, scrape, or shift. It sat in darkness rendered incomplete by only a shaft of light that snuck between the curtains and shined on an empty, unmade bed.

On the other side of the door, footsteps approached. They stopped outside, then slight shuffling, and lastly the rattle of a keycard in its slot. The lock disengaged, the door swung open, and Aracely Sosa stepped inside.

She flipped the light switch and revealed fifteen figures in white robes.

"Oh," she said.

"Turn off the light," said Nilufer, at the head of the congregation.

Aracely turned off the light. Her smile remained a vague afterimage in the dark.

"You have refused too many summons."

"Fi-ine. You made your point." Aracely yawned. "I'll go to headquarters tomorrow. By-y-ye."

"MOTHER will speak to you now."

"Sure. I'll give her a call."

"She's here."

Heads and shoulders floated like ghosts. All presence, once known, remained felt. Hence why into the arrangement of the scene entered a new weight, the unseen edges of a form, unclear in placement or position but there.

Aracely's tone changed. "Okay. The rest of you get out."

No motion.

[**Out,**] the new voice spoke. The voice that superseded all others, immense and worn like a statue.

Though Aracely remained standing by the door, the forms pushed past her, slipping into the crack of light from the corridor one after another in orderly and soundless fashion.

"You too, Nilufer."

The final form departed. The door shut.

No image of Aracely's smile remained. Cold silence. The exact location of her opposite, the counterbalance of character that made composition possible, slowly identified itself. Traces of fragmentary white line to sculpt the slopes of shoulders: a figure seated on the extreme corner of Aracely's bed, just beyond the light.

The silence broke when Aracely blurted: "The flash drive—" She cut off as though interrupted.

"Continue."

"The flash drive—you understand why I—offered that to you."

"I do. Do **you**?"

"It's—useful to you, right?"

The form in darkness lay dormant, unsmudged with blood at the base. But a voice, a voice amid the tumult of the distant arena: [**No more toys.**]

Fear, perhaps, or self-preservation plucked a string of nerve. "Look, I'm not—stupid. Over and over you say this world will end on October 12. You've never said how. What am I supposed to think? A meteor will pop out of the sky? I can figure it out. You plan to make it end."

Silence.

"I went down there. I saw what Bill keeps in that basement. What I gave you is useful. I know it is. I know—"

Her voice caught on the unheard ripple of a black aura. A brief choke gurgled in her throat.

"Come closer," the other said.

At first, there was nothing but slow breathing. Then—a step, another, proof of Aracely's continued existence, until her form drew before the one on the bed.

"Closer."

Another step.

"Lower."

On wisps of knees trembling in the dark, Aracely did as demanded.

In the arena, a fireball flared. The shaft of light streaming through the curtains intensified, briefly rendering the shape of the flowing and endless figure before which Aracely stooped.

"I would," MOTHER said, "rather be loved than feared."

Her arms emerged from herself and entangled around Aracely's bent head.

"Especially by you. Especially by you."

Aracely's head was pulled into MOTHER's body. In the renewed dark their forms mingled, merged, became indistinguishable. One felt the heartbeat of the other, blood pulsing within veins. A remembrance of shared humanity.

A remembrance of shared past, the moment of their first meeting, two broken bodies, abandoned into a pit where their families might forget them. Grasping through dark much like this until they found each other and in each other found purpose. Perhaps even a facsimile of love. But that was the problem. These were not people well suited for love, no matter how they craved it.

"You want to abandon me," MOTHER said.

"You want to use me," Aracely said.

"No. I want you with me. By my side. When this world ends and we ascend together into the next. I need you."

MOTHER was a smell; fine perfume. Her clothes silken. Warmth.

"The flash drive was useful, wasn't it?" Aracely said.

"It was. I have no idea how you knew it would be, but it was."

"I didn't know. I didn't even plan to take it. Ziggy just—everything just happened."

"It's the way you have of things. Your power."

"Serendipity."

"Hands that mold fate. That's why I need you, Cely. My sweet Cely. Let me hold you a while longer."

Both in that moment were willing, against their natures otherwise so cold. They held and imagined the love of a mother and daughter in replacement of what they knew was real. Somewhere a crowd pitched high in excitement for the culmination of a battle.

Finally, MOTHER's arms slipped away, and relinquished Aracely, and their forms disentangled and became separate.

"But I asked you for something else, Aracely."

"Yes, MOTHER."

"The mission I gave you was quite clear, Aracely."

"I know, MOTHER."

"Can you tell me your mission, Aracely?"

"I'm to become a powerful battler. I'm to work with my father to assemble an unbeatable team, so that I might fulfill the tasks you require of me. And I did it! Look at me. Did you watch? I beat Jinjiao. I can beat anyone. Anyone."

"I know. You're strong. I've seen you," MOTHER said. "But that's the issue. Why, having fulfilled my mission, have you not returned to me?"

"It's not like I could tell Dad the real reason I suddenly wanted to battle. So I had to enter his tournaments, and I kept winning, and—"

The cheers of the audience beyond the window were the buzz of an endless horde of insects.

[And you realized you enjoyed it,] MOTHER said.

"No. No, I just—you wanted me to be unbeatable—"

[You became enticed by their games. Toys and games.]

"I had to prove—I really was—"

[You began to believe their narrative. The narrative keeping this world at a standstill. The narrative of endless repetition, annual cycles of pointless entertainment, winners crowned, winners to replace history.]

"I listen to your tapes every day. I still believe—"

[You will believe anything as long as it exalts you!]

"No. No. Don't you see? Even this helps you, MOTHER."

The oracle in the darkness went quiet once more. The sound from the arena quieted in kind, an invitation for Aracely to continue.

"Soon enough they'll realize my connection to you. I know—I know that sounds bad, but listen. After IPL 51, they're paranoid about another attack. If I keep climbing the bracket, their attention will go to me like a lightning rod. They'll expect you to make a move—but at the stadium, where I am. They won't be looking at what you actually plan to do."

"You assume you know what I plan to do."

"I have to assume, since you don't trust me enough to tell me—"

"Trust has no factor in it."

The faint lines of shoulders slumped to the barest extent of perceptibility. A human breath once more possessed the statuesque voice, imbued it with weariness.

"To an extent, you're right. I don't trust. I can't. I can only believe in myself. You understand. It's something we share." She sighed. "No, trust isn't the reason. You're not the only one who's special, Cely. The IPL has its own psychic powers. It knows ways to split open your skull and unspool your thoughts."

"That's all the more reason for me to work independently."

"No, it's reason for you to return to me now. To stay where I can keep you safe. Their own regulations bind them. They can't enter my sanctum without a warrant. Their eyes will never reach you there."

"It's too late. Everyone's already looking at me."

"Their attention spans are fleeting. **By design, blooming and dying.** Leave now and they'll forget you by October 12."

"Forfeiting this late—"

"You don't understand."

The human element reshaped once more into stone. Solid, unmoving, unmoved:

[You have no choice. You will come with me.]

"MOTHER..."

[You're willful. Rebellious. Like the other children were. I can't have that. They undid me, in the end. I can't have that, not with you. You will come with me.]

Like the best foretellers, her most undeniable fates were those within her power to effect. She came with an entourage, after all. Outside the door fifteen forms waited. Aracely left her

Pokémon at the stadium, for her father to pick up. She possessed no power to resist.

So it seemed. But the black form where Aracely stood betrayed no discomposure. As though she, too, were shaping into a more solid figure, one with a will immobile enough to make time's river flow around it. The fear that once commanded her voice vanished in a softly repeated "MOTHER..." whose dwindle hung in the eerie black emptiness. What tone was that? Acquiescence? Melancholy? Or pity? Did Aracely Sosa know what would happen next?

A knock on the door.

"We have a problem," Nilufer said. "Her father's en route."

"We anticipated that," MOTHER said. "Handle him as planned. We need her Pokémon off him anyway."

Nilufer hesitated. "He's not alone. Raj Viswambaran and Yui Matsui are with him. Both armed."

"What? Why them?"

The question was directed at Aracely, but her shapeless self only shrugged. "I had no idea he knew them."

"If it was only him," Nilufer said, "even if it was him and only one—I could do it. But both —"

"You planned this. You knew I would be here. You designed it so they would come."

"I had no idea," Aracely said. "It's only as I said: serendipity."

The form on the bed twinged, and the light from the window illuminated a flicker of face, the point of a chin and twisted lips under a veil, and her voice became frantic, like it was melting: "From the start you intended to betray me. Like them. Like everyone!"

"No need to be melodramatic, MOTHER. Just trust me, k? What I'm doing will help you—"

"Please. Come with me, Cely. I need you. You need me. Remember? We only have each other."

"I've been learning to stand again."

In the brief pause that followed they only stared at one another in a dark grown less omnipresent now that their eyes adjusted. Their forms took shape. Unspoken communication passed between them. The break Aracely intended with this woman who so painstakingly nursed her back to health after her little accident was total. But if you leave me, then on October 12, when this world ends, you'll—be left behind. I know, MOTHER. But you'll disappear like all the rest of them. I know, MOTHER. But why, why? Because I plan to find peace before the end.

"They're in the elevator," Nilufer said. "We need to leave. Now."

The connection severed. MOTHER rose. Folds of silk and lace shuffled and her body became lost within them once more so that as she stepped silently across the carpet Aracely didn't realize until she passed and whispered:

"I love you, Cely."

"I know."

Then the door opened. Aracely watched, within the rectangle of light, the woman in flowing mourning open the parasol she used to shield herself from view. Nilufer took her by the arm to guide her, peered into the senseless dark where Aracely was lost, and the door shut.

For an interval the room was empty.

Then pounding footsteps, a pounding fist, a call: "Cely! Get this door open, we're celebrating!" And the light turned on, the door opened, Cely threw her arms wide and shared Dad's cheer, hugged him as he and Brittany and Raj and Yui stumbled in, Raj saying, "Where's the beer you promised old man," Yui saying, "Underaged drinking woo," and all Cely could think was, why wasn't Toril with them?

R8 | Who Will Win IPL 64?

The upset set the tournament on tilt. The next day, prior to the final two matches of the first round, the analyst desk gave their traditional predictions. For Toril Lund versus Lachlan Nguyen, both Iono and Cynthia predicted Toril to win. Bill Masaki shocked them both—and everyone watching—by calling it for Lachlan.

"Upsets are in the air," Bill said against the protests of his cohorts, palms upraised. "If Jinjiao can drop, Lund's even more vulnerable. Let's not forget how her group stage ended. Or how Nguyen's did—he surprised *the* Red Akahata to punch his ticket here."

"Ten years ago that might have meant something," Cynthia said. "But Red's in his thirties. He's no longer unbeatable."

"I respect the hustle Bill! Servin' hot takes for bigtime clicks, my favorite trick of the trade. But you're just bein' contrarian!"

"We'll see." Bill smiled and thatched his fingers behind his head.

Toril outsmarted Lachlan on the opening move. In three turns a Dragon Dance-boosted Baxcalibur loomed titanic over the arena. From then things proceeded exactly how they did in all of Toril's group stage matches bar one: complete and utter domination. Toril routed Lachlan without losing a single Pokémon.

She descended the trainer platform and, stone in the face, gave cursory, un insightful, but extant answers to Fiorella Fiorina's questions, dodging further fines before vanishing from view. The stage then shifted, in unorthodox manner, to the match's loser. Lachlan Nguyen, during an uncommon loser's interview only minutes after his final Pokémon fell, faced all watching and tearfully announced his retirement from competitive battling at the age of twenty-five.

"It's been a long time coming." Lachlan wiped his eyes; Fiorella nodded respectfully. "Just glad I had enough left for a last dance to remember. Not everyone can say they beat Red Akahata. By my count, only twenty-three trainers can say that."

He went on to explain his intention to become a gym leader in his native Giday region and train the next generation of Gidayers so that one might one day hoist the Champion's Cup. The crowd gave him a standing ovation with more enthusiasm than they gave the frankly boring match that preceded. Then Lachlan Nguyen vanished from all human memory.

Later that week, hygienic necessity forced Toril from her hotel room to the lobby-adjacent convenience store. (Don't fucking dare ask for more info than that.) Black glasses, baseball cap, hood kept her incognito as she swiftly and surreptitiously placed the needed supplies on the counter.

While the clerk took excruciating time scanning, her eyes avoided contact and wandered to the stand beside the counter. There she saw it:

BATTLERS WEEKLY

Now that Jinjiao has fallen...

WHO WILL WIN IPL 64?

Under this question, consuming the entirety of the cover, two faces. Ostensibly the only two possible answers. One was Raj Viswambaran, first seed and current odds-on favorite.

The other was Aracely Sosa.

Toril's fingers crinkled the gloss pages as she stomped out of the shop. Who edited this? Did they seriously consider Aracely a contender? The magazine was an issue-wide special dedicated to the IPL quarterfinals. After basic reporting—box scores, an exposé titled YOSHINOBU ITO: MATCH FIXING SCANDAL?—came predictions, analyses, profiles on the eight remaining trainers. Toril turned to her page.

Toril Lund is here to prove she has what it takes to be World Champion. This rising superstar from Kyind, coming off a dominant regional sweep and even more eye-poppingly impressive undefeated group stage, has not lost a professional match in seven months... Blah, blah, blah... Overview of her team, her strategies, basic information all basically correct. This ice cold northerner is deadly from ahead and ingenious from behind. Expect to see her in the grand championship on October 12...

Then why the fuck wasn't *she* on the cover?! Did they realize that for Toril to reach finals she needed to beat Aracely? They didn't say a single negative word about her. They didn't even mention her near-defeat in groups. If they thought so highly of her, why wasn't her face next to Raj's? Was she a joke? Did they discard her arbitrarily? At least Bill had a fucking reason, what shithead wrote this drivel?!

She skimmed Aracely's profile, seeking answers. The writeup contained all the obvious surface-level criticisms. Technically a rookie. Prone to inexplicable blunders. Reliant on coaching from her father, former finalist Domingo "Domino" Sosa. Half the magazine's analysts predicted she'd lose to her next opponent. So why? Why *her* on the cover?

The back half of the magazine was dedicated to an interview/personal deep dive with Raj and Aracely. Complete with photographs, key quotes emphasized in callouts ("Galar's a region of champions, but I'm writing my own story," said Raj. Meanwhile, Aracely: "Battling's fun, isn't it? I have a lot of fun when I battle"), all sorts of maudlin shit.

Something Aracely once said resurfaced. *A story can only have one protagonist.* Toril felt herself slipping away, slipping outside the frame, transforming into a minor character next to the full-page photo of Aracely extending a hand as though asking the viewer to take it.

Toril tried to rip the magazine apart but the glossy pages didn't rip right and she wound up tossing the whole mangled bundle into a wastebasket. Like Toril would've stood around for their interview anyway!

As soon as the false Aracely left her sight, she glanced up and saw the real one down the hotel hallway. Talking to someone—to Yui Matsui, who'd scraped into quarters. (Cynthia, predictably, had a lot to say about that on the desk: three female trainers in the Top 8!)

Toril crouched behind a gurney of folded white towels. Aracely had Yui by the door of Yui's room and spoke animatedly. Why? About what? It registered in Toril's mind that Yui was Toril's next opponent.

Aracely asked Toril for advice to beat Jinjiao. Now she was giving Yui advice to beat Toril?!

Toril's thumbnail twisted between her teeth. She inched the gurney forward, trying to hear. The words didn't carry. But Yui, usually bland in affect, smiled and laughed. What the hell?

Aracely waved bye-bye and Yui half-waved in return and disappeared into her room. Toril slinked back to ensure she remained out of view. Through gaps between the towels she watched Aracely stand in the middle of the corridor, looking at nothing—at Yui's door. Silent.

Finally, she said: "Okay Tors, it's safe. You can come out now."

Toril remained rigid. She rejected the idea Aracely knew where she was.

"Tors. Babe."

Footsteps approached. Reality became undeniable. "Peekaboo!" Aracely jumped onto Toril's side of the gurney.

Toril avoided looking Aracely in the eye.

"Interesting aesthetic choice, the hood and sunglasses. You look like a," Aracely fished for a word, "jealous stalker!"

"I'm not jealous."

Aracely held a hand to her. "Don't worry Tors, you're still the apple of my eye. Let's hang out."

When Toril opened the door to her room, her Alolan Ninetales lifted his head, then hopped up with willowy white tails waving. After Aracely appeared in the doorway, though, he scurried under the bed until only his tails showed.

"It's okay Ingmar, you met her in the restroom, remember?" Toril went straight to her backpack and stashed the convenience store bag before Aracely saw what she bought. "He's shy," she explained as she tossed a treat to him. A brief snickety-snack and it was no more.

"Wow Tors, all this shed fur. The help must hate you."

Toril waved dismissively and checked the open laptop on her desk. It displayed a vista of outer space, made into a maze of spinning Minior.

"Oh! What's that?" Aracely bent slightly and placed her hands on her knees to look.

"Pogo's Adventure."

"You know, I've heard of that game. My bestie Haydn calls it comfy."

"I guess. It's Rune's favorite."

"Rune?"

"Porygon-Z. See him? He replaced Pogo."

Her ungloved forefinger traced the screen where Rune, transformed into a pixelized sprite, bobbed amid the Minior. The introduction of new data into the game occurred seamlessly other than moments where Rune wiggled out and clipped through an otherwise impassable barrier.

"Wow. Actually kinda neat," said Aracely. "Why does it do it?"

"What do you mean, why?"

"I mean. What does it get out of it."

"He gets a kiss from Princess Clef for saving her. He loves Princess Clef. He hacked his PC box to make her his wallpaper."

"Cute!"

"You think it's—cute?"

"What'd you expect me to say?"

"Weird, or something."

"Nope! And I would know. I am the cuteness arbiter."

"Your, uh, Rotom might like to play. In your phone, right? I've got a cord. Rune loves co-op."

"What a precious idea!"

Aracely took out her phone and Toril connected it. Rather than manifest as a sprite, Rotom leaped from the phone to possess the laptop, turning it orange, with big Rotom eyes sticking

out the top of the screen. The screen changed to display new configurations of Minior maze puzzles.

"Oh this is cool," Toril said. "Rune's played the game to death, he'll love fresh content."

She watched Rune zip through Rotom's custom stages, until the weight of Aracely's presence drew her away. "You keep calling Rune a he," Aracely said. "I thought Porygon were genderless."

"Well, he loves the princess, so."

"So girls can't love girls?"

Passage of an intense stare proceeded. Aracely serene, smiling. Toril became aware of the turgid sludge in her veins.

"Ingmar!" she said. "No. I told you—only one treat." He was crawling out from under the bed, sticking his snout into Toril's open backpack. At the snap he shot back and she felt crummy immediately.

"Yet you did invite me to your room alone, so..."

"Does it look like we're alone?" Toril swept her gloved hand at Ingmar, at Rune and Rotom.

"To me it does."

This wasn't—this conversation was not going where Toril liked it. She reeled it back. "Porygon, you know." She paced, pointed to the laptop. "Silph Co. designed the original model in the 90s. To do computer stuff. But it was faulty, caused seizures. They made a new model, then they found out Rotom did the same thing without the dev costs. So we have Rotom phones now, not Porygon phones."

Bobbing on daintily pigeon-toed designer shoes, Aracely leaned eagerly—hungrily—Torilward. "That's actually so interesting. You're kinda cute when you're being knowledgeable like that."

"Get away!"

"Omigosh Tors, chill. I'm just teasing." She laughed and Toril seethed. "But seriously, there's definitely an inner appeal to you that just needs the right trigger to draw out. Like when you went on that ramble about Jinjiao's team, that was super cute."

"Why do you calling keep me cute?!"

Aracely tilted her head. "Don't you want to be cute?"

"Ah! I get it. You're manipulating me. Like Bill and those robe guys—you get people to do what you want. You want my help to beat your next opponent, like before!"

"Omigosh. This is some serious PMSing, Tors."

"Who told you—how—"

"Relax. I only want to hang out with my new best friend."

"We're *not* friends!"

The serenity cracked. Aracely's inscrutable smile never changed, but Toril felt something anyway, an underlying pang. "You really believe that. I thought we had fun in Pewter. Why?"

Toril almost said *because I hate you*, a statement supported by obvious evidence—she was fake, superficial, bitchy, annoying, exhausting, lucky—but couldn't form the words. Under the bed, Ingmar whimpered.

"Being friends doesn't need to be this whole big thing," Aracely said. "You can just be friends."

"You're"—remembering the magazine—"competition."

"Oh, please. If you believed that, you'd have friends who weren't me. Unless you think everyone in this world is competition."

Maybe they are, Toril thought, and Aracely nodded like she heard it. "Why do you even care?" Toril said. "Go be friends with Yui Matsui or something."

"I think," Aracely started—then her tone cooled. Her fingers laced shily and her eyes peered somewhere else. Toril saw her this way once before. When they first met, and she described the end of the world, and being the final punctuation—that crap. "Let me be honest, Toril. Is that okay? I've found people don't like honesty, or maybe that's only what someone thinks when their honest thoughts are like mine. I thought you were pathetic. See? My lovely inner thoughts, right? Sad, lonely, and pathetic. I pitied you. The kinds of thoughts I wind up thinking about everyone eventually. Which makes me wonder if really—no, that's beside the point. The point is, I'm thinking new things now. I mean, you beat me, and I have to respect that, unless I don't even respect myself. Right? There's something else about you. Something you have, and I don't. Something like—"

"Actual skill," Toril blurted coldly.

She didn't know why she said it. Even she knew it wasn't what Cely—what Aracely actually meant. Aracely's fumbling speech sought something deeper. Toril simply couldn't take it. The intensity, the intimacy of where these words delved, and the counterweight realization Toril must necessarily make that Aracely also had something Toril didn't, something Toril might admire, might secretly crave.

The curt remark did its job. Aracely smiled sadly, but with understanding—as if she felt she deserved it. Everything returned to the surface and brightened.

"Well! You did give great advice for Jinjiao, after all."

Nothing to do but move on. "You're out of luck if you want anything on your next opponent. I've never battled Gladion. Or even met him. I've only met his mom."

Aracely's enthusiasm spontaneously ignited. "Really? You met her? When? Where?"

"Why does it matter?"

"Just curious!"

Toril studied her, suspicious. She couldn't tell if this exuberance was faked, a way to glide past what came before. "Five years ago. Before that whole disaster, before they banned Ultra Beasts from the IPL. Every serious trainer needed an Ultra Beast then, and the best way to get one was the source."

"Alola."

"Right. Anyway, then—Seriously, why do you care?"

"Because it's an interesting story. You've lived an interesting life."

Toril never thought about that, but she realized it might actually be true. She tried to remember back then, dredge up detail, make it a real anecdote. Something to impress?

"I wanted to be a serious trainer. It was all I wanted. So I went to this bumfuck region in the middle of the ocean. It's hot, it's humid, I hate it, I'm sweating my ass off. I trudged out to the facility where they were opening holes in space-time or whatever—"

"Aether Foundation."

"Sure. They were screening every trainer before giving them the equipment to catch Ultra Beasts. They said it was for safety reasons, but they were probably just throttling supply to drive up demand. I'd cleared the Kylind gym circuit by then and thought I was hot shit, figured they'd let me have one. So they sat me in this waiting room—sterile white fluorescent—the whole thing gave me a migraine. Then the secretary says, Dr. Mohn will see you now —"

"Dr. Mohn was her husband."

"Well it's what they were calling her. Her husband was dead by then I think. Anyway I walked into her office. Weird place. She had these cases full of—I don't even know what they were. Pokémon embalmed in glass boxes."

"Fake Pokémon. Damien Hirst. Modern art."

"Whatever. Anyway, I walked in. She was at her desk. She didn't look like a scientist at all, she looked like a supermodel. She took one glance up and down, and said—she only said one word. I remember it. She said: *Unfit*."

"That's all?"

It was all. Toril wished it wasn't, that her story might have some grand climax. Maybe if she pretended she fought back, yelled something witty, but it would only be lies. It was easy to tell your story, but hard to make it matter. Didn't Cynthia say that?

Toril realized Aracely was trying to get her to open up, after Toril rejected the same from Aracely.

"Then they sent me home," Toril said. "And it turned out okay, because a month later they almost blew up the island and Dr. Mohn got eaten by a jellyfish."

"She lived."

"And they banned Ultra Beasts. That's it though."

Aracely pressed her palms together and divided her face with her fingers. "But what did you think of her?"

"Of who? Gladion's mom? I hated her. Obviously."

"Why?"

How to phrase it? "Because she was a rich beautiful bitch and she called me unfit." Similar to someone else she knew. "What more do I need?"

"Don't worry, Tors. I think you're very fit."

That bizarre statement ushered stillness into the room. Toril glanced away, at the laptop. Rune fired energy pellets at Deoxys, who emitted a web of lasers that covered ninety percent of the screen.

"Anyway," Toril said, "I hear Gladion doesn't even talk to her, though everyone still gives him shit about it. Point is, none of this will help your battle."

"That's fine. Don't take this wrong, but I don't need advice from you or anyone anymore."

"One upset and you're that confident?"

"More than that. I feel—like I'm seeing things, lines, I didn't see before. Against Jinjiao, I knew exactly what he wanted to do, I felt it, and the more I play this game the stronger these feelings get, the more right they get, you get it? I like this game. It's fun, and I'm good at it, really good. I know I told you before I'd win, but now I really, actually know it'll happen. I can't lose. The lines, they're connected, everything makes so much sense. My mind is expanding."

Her fingernails flashed. So did her eyes.

"It doesn't matter how expanded your mind is," Toril said, "if your Pokémon won't listen to you. I noticed you didn't use Ziggy against Jinjiao."

The twinkle dispersed. "Bad matchup. Composition-wise."

"That Azumarill battles like your dad. If you really think you're a contender, you need your ace to battle like you."

"I'm working on that. Oh look! They beat the game."

On the laptop screen, Rune gave Princess Clef a literal peck on the cheek. A pixelated heart emerged from the site while elaborate cursive text scrawled: FIN.

"By the way!" said Aracely. "Didja see my interview in *Battlers Weekly*?"

"No. I didn't."

"Omigosh Tors, you totally did."

Toril crossed her arms and groused.

"Tors. Babe. You're not jealous, are you? Oh, you so are. You are! You're jealous!"

"I'm not jealous! I hate interviews."

"But you want people to know you're the best, don't you? Yep. I see right through you. You want them to respect you."

"I don't care what they think. They're idiots. I do this for myself."

"Do it for yourself. Ooh. Good line. Bu-u-ut! You're still jealous. Don't worry Tors. I know the secret. We'll get you recognition in no time. Two words, no wait, one word: Make. Over. Two words? Makeover. Make over. Hm."

Toril stood dumbfounded until the nonsensical series of syllables constructed some signifier. "No. Nope. No way."

"Yes way. We'll do it right before your game against Yui. You'll go onstage looking divine. I've already picked out clothes. I must say it was a little difficult to shop in your size, you're so tall. But, I persevered. There are five potential outfits, only the freshest designer brands, we'll try them on and see which works best. Though I already have a pretty good idea—"

"You bought me clothes? You—how do you even know my size?!"

"Come on Tors, I have eyes." Aracely boggled them for effect. "I also bought you makeup. Don't worry about paying me back. I'm magnanimous like that. Under ordinary circumstances I'd totally be willing to let you use my own, but our complexions, yeah, not exactly matching."

"No. Flat no. There's no power in the world that can compel me to wear makeup."

"Oh, really? You're not the least bit interested to know what I talked to Yui Matsui about?"

Incredible. Blackmail now? She spilled Toril's weaknesses to Yui as leverage. All along, a manipulator, Toril *knew* it. Righteous indignation said a punch was warranted. Toril withheld, and instead levied the accusation in a reasonable manner: "You sabotaged me."

"What? No! Tors! Really? You think—? Omigosh Tors, I thought we trusted each other more than that!"

"Why else would you talk to her? When have you talked to Yui Matsui before in your life?"

"Right after I beat Jinjiao? She and Raj and Dad showed up to celebrate? And you didn't? She's actually way cooler than I expected. In like a bitchy, alt way? You know, kind of punk? She plays the bass. I thought that was so cute. She's also super awkward if you can get her to say more than like, five words at a time. Par for the course at this tournament. The woman-of-few-words aesthetic plays to her strengths though."

Toril's eyes wandered to the game, where Aracely's Rotom animated Princess Clef to stage an elaborate zero gravity dance sequence. Ingmar halfway emerged from the bed to watch the Minior that streaked the background.

"So why do I care?" said Toril.

"Because I know her weakness. I'll tell you if you let me experiment on your look a little."

"I studied her film. I know her team's strengths and weaknesses."

"No-o, not her team. Her weakness. Yui's weakness."

"What, like a personality flaw? I don't care."

"You should care," said Aracely, and the playfulness drained out of her voice, and something serious overtook her, strong enough to send Ingmar scurrying back under the bed, strong enough to cause Rune and Princess Clef to stare out the screen. "You should, because if you don't, you do not have a ghost of a chance against me in the rematch. You saw me beat Jinjiao. How do you think I did it? By analyzing his team? Or by analyzing him?"

Something Aracely had, that Toril didn't.

Toril forced herself to loosen, tendon by tendon. Her mouth remained screwed up, though, no matter what. Moving her lips only caused them to shift into a new uncomfortable position.

Finally, she muttered something.

"What was that?" Aracely said.

Toril muttered it again.

"I can't hear you."

"Fine," said Toril.

"Perfect. It's a date." Aracely poked Toril on the nose, a gesture to which Toril wanted to respond by biting her finger off but could not find the nerve. "I promise you won't regret it."

After Aracely left (she almost forgot Rotom), Toril sat on the bed stroking Ingmar's upraised belly. She replayed the full conversation beginning to end, trying to unearth Aracely's true goal. Her mind kept coming to the moment she cut Aracely off. She shouldn't have done that. That moment became pivotal, everything hinged on it. Something would be different, if she didn't cut Aracely off. She only had no idea what.

R8 | Chilly Reception

Each quarterfinals match was a full day event, with live performances, meet-and-greets, and celebrity showmatches. The latter saw Iono, the analyst desk host, face Leon, the previous year's World Champion. Iono shockingly won, though online commenters suspected the battle was staged to showcase the new Terastallization tech being incorporated into the IPL rulebook next year. Iono's fan legion formed a counter-commentary force that analyzed Leon's post-defeat facial expressions frame-by-frame to determine whether he was suitably upset, and enough subjective data points were produced that truth became impossible.

Afterward, Leon gave an interview where he hyped Raj Viswambaran, who beat him in the Galarian regional finals, while also promising to be back on the IPL stage soon. "Simple facts. Galar's got the best trainers in the world."

The match that followed proved his point. Raj took the stage against Unova's Jacq Ray Johnson, Jr., a former World Champion and consistent presence in the IPL Top 16. When Jacq shut down Raj's signature Ribombee with smart Cinderace play, Raj kept his cool, navigated Jacq's always nasty mystery box Smeargle, and regained the lead. The match remained close to the end.

On the analyst desk, Bill called it the highest quality match ever played in quarterfinals. He highlighted how Raj intelligently sacrificed his Gholdengo to draw out Jacq's Ditto, which allowed Raj's final Pokémon, Kingambit, to snag victory.

"Raj did with his Gholdengo exactly what Jinjiao was too timid to do last week. That's World Champion-caliber play. If Jacq was on the other side of the bracket, this would've been our finals."

The next day's match, Red Akahata versus Minhyuk "SkiLL" Park, impressed Bill far less. It was hard for anyone to deny the outcome hinged on a completely unforced error SkiLL made when, predicting a switch that didn't happen, he allowed Red's Greninja to get a free KO, activating its Battle Bond ability.

"Red's obviously still good, don't get me wrong," Bill said, "but he gets a lot of leeway from name alone. People are scared of him. Sure, he's a six-time champ. But his last championship was a decade ago. The guy's gonna retire any year now. These young trainers need to stop losing their minds against him."

Then, on Sunday, September 28, Aracely Sosa faced Gladion Mohn.

The match generated buzz well before it began. Aracely's spectacular upset over Jinjiao and subsequent media spam made her an overnight sensation. A cute, charismatic girl in an arena typically dominated by the world's most antisocial dudes got people talking—a lot. Every angle seemed designed in a lab to stir discourse: the feminist question, the validity of her win over Jinjiao, her nepo baby status, even her use of a shiny Azumarill (shiny Pokémon having the reputation of upper crust luxuries). The amount of controversy itself created controversy,

as a vocal group of online commenters became convinced Aracely was an industry plant meant to undermine the Battler's Union long a thorn in the IPL's foot.

Under ordinary circumstances, the pro- and anti-Aracely factions would've been evenly matched. A serendipitous twist of fate tilted the matter: by complete happenstance, Aracely's opponent was the most hated trainer in the tournament.

Gladion had never shaken his popular association with the Ultra Beast incident five years prior. While his younger sister did a media tour (or, as some called it, a forgiveness gauntlet, resulting in the erstwhile meme "LEAVE LILLIE ALONE") during which she loudly decried her mother's behavior, Gladion never said anything publicly. In absence of evidence, most defaulted to the interpretation they preferred: he was his mother's stooge. After his mother dropped off the map, Gladion's semi-frequent appearances as the IPL's Alolan representative made him the sole remaining visible target of scorn.

Thus, even those otherwise predisposed to emerge as Aracely's biggest haters muted their response to avoid being necessarily associated with Aracely's opponent. Every post against Aracely began with a hedging "I'm no fan of Gladion, but" that presented a wishy-washy front. The pro-Aracely crowd gained ascendancy. "This is the jolt the IPL's needed for years," they proclaimed.

The loudest voice against Aracely came, shockingly, from the laconic Gladion himself. In a pre-match interview, amid a sea of characteristic I-don't-want-to-be-here responses, Fiorella Fiorina asked his opinion on his opponent.

"Many consider her victory over Jinjiao a fluke. Do you agree?"

Gladion, arms crossed, narrowed an eye through the scrawl of studio lighting. "I don't care." It was the kind of response he usually gave, and Fiorella had already started her next question when he interrupted her. "Whether she should be here or not, that doesn't matter. What I know is, she can't win."

"You're that confident?"

He scowled. His blonde bangs bobbed. "She can't be allowed to win."

"What do you mean?"

"Look into her connection with RISE. That's all I'll say."

Fiorella cleared her throat and moved to the next question.

It failed to dim the aura. When Aracely walked onto the stage that Sunday, the stands exploded. Enough of them loved her that all of them loved her. As Gladion stared her down from his platform, she waved to the crowd. She didn't even look at him until the match began.

Gladion sent out Banette. Aracely sent out Galarian Slowking.

It was an unorthodox opener for both trainers. The announcers scrambled for an explanation. In the VIP box, Raj asked Domino what exactly his plan was.

"Ask Cely," Domino said hopelessly.

"Better question: What the fuck is Gladion doing? If Cely opens Meowscarada like last week he's fried."

"Gladion sucks," Yui said.

"No," said Toril. In her corner of the box, she was easy to forget. "It's Mega Banette. Prankster, Destiny Bond. If Meowscarada knocks Banette out, he faints too."

"That's a good trade," said Raj. "Waste Gladion's Mega turn one. We take those."

"Meowscarada's her fastest Pokémon by far. There are situations where losing him is a disaster."

"Either way. Cely's gotta switch now. Banette can OHKO Slowking with a ghost move."

As Toril predicted, Banette Mega Evolved. Its ghostly shroud unseamed. Unable to contain its newfound malefic energy, zippers of skin opened, and from them extended fleshy pink talons. The look was, Toril realized, similar to Gladion's trademark sweatshirt with its own needless zipper.

Then, Mega Banette danced. It started to rain.

"No fucking way," said Raj. "Rain Dance? He's using *Banette* as a stealth rain setter?"

"He has Pokémon good in rain," said Toril.

"Then set with Pelipper like everyone else," said Yui.

"That's the thing, he usually *does* run Pelipper," said Raj. "What's he *smoking* bruv?"

Domino paced like a madman, wringing his hat through his fingers.

"It's the element of surprise," said Toril. "He studied what beat Aracely before."

Rain pounded the glass canopy over Aracely's platform. It collected on the arena in pools. Slowking stood, arms folded behind his back, unperturbed.

"Chilly Reception," Aracely said.

The VIP box went wild. At least, Raj and Domino did. Toril zoned them out. How? What was Aracely's thought process?

Slowking tilted his head. At his own leisurely pace, he regarded the audience, regarded Gladion, regarded Banette.

Then he told a joke.

It came out like garbled nonsense, of course, because Pokémon couldn't talk. That didn't matter. Everyone watching knew this wasn't just any joke, it was a *bad* joke. An awful,

wretched, painful joke. Banette's face matched Gladion's exactly: one strained eye tip twitching.

The temperature plummeted. The rain turned to sleet, then snow. Within an icy mist arising, Slowking shrugged at his joke's reception, turned, and waddled back to his Poké Ball, allowing Aracely to switch in Gliscor.

It made no sense. As Raj said, Mega Banette could OHKO Slowking. To have Slowking use a move at all required Cely to predict Gladion wouldn't attack. And even then? Chilly Reception, an oddball move only Slowking learned, did nothing unless you expected rain. How was a move that summoned a snowstorm useful when Aracely didn't have a single ice type? In any circumstance other than this exact one it was pointless.

Toril conceived of two possibilities:

1. Aracely used Chilly Reception solely for its secondary effect, the automatic switch. Slowking was a scout, slow enough to let the opponent act first before swapping to a counter. Cely predicted Gladion to not attack (probably predicting that Gladion would predict her to hard switch), but the snowstorm screwing up Rain Dance was dumb luck.
2. Aracely read his fucking mind.

Credit to Toril's own capacity for rational thought, she deemed the first possibility more likely. She hated the temptation of the second, though.

That opening set the tone. Aracely read Gladion at every turn. When he expected her Gliscor to set up hazards, Gliscor used Earthquake instead. Rather than gamble away his rain setter with Destiny Bond, he switched in a Weavile that surprisingly benefitted from the snow, but Aracely saw it coming and switched to Rotom at the same time.

Amid Domino's shouts of joy, Toril realized: Aracely was *actually* a serious threat.

The IPL's format was her greatest ally. Each trainer registered nine Pokémon for the tournament, but these nine weren't revealed to opponents until they were actually used in battle.

A shit rule. Total crap. Toril admitted it, though it helped her. It lacked competitive integrity. Trainers who stomped groups without showing their hand got advantages in bracket. Sponsors liked it because it ensured favorites lasted longer. The broadcast liked it because it manufactured narrative excitement: endless speculation about the identity of Mystery Pokémon X culminating in a dramatic reveal to turn the tide of battle. Fans liked it for both reasons.

Toril hated it because she hated anything the sponsors, broadcast, and fans liked.

Aracely must have hated it too. In groups, she constantly battled Pokémon she never prepared for. Hence her unimpressive group stage record. Now, though, fewer and fewer Pokémon remained unknown. Even a favorite like Jinjiao only had one when he faced her. Gladion had none.

Rain Dance Banette was the right idea, but not enough. Aracely anticipated him switching Weavile into snow because she knew he had Weavile. She anticipated everything, and only needed to read his face—his extremely unsubtle face, twisted in rage—to determine what he'd do next.

The battle ended with the outcome never really in doubt. Gladion's pathetic, poorly supported Barraskewda flopped in the snow until it was outsped and deleted by Aracely's Choice Scarf Meowscarada.

"LET'S FUCKING GO." Domino shook Brittany violently. "It's fucking happening. We're winning the whole fucking thing!"

"Cely Sosa, semifinalist." Raj whistled. "We in it now."

"Bracket needs dynamic seeding," said Yui. "One upset and she gets the easiest opponent in quarters."

"Mad Yui?" said Raj. "Must suck facing Tors tomorrow."

"Don't call me that," Toril snapped.

"Catchy, innit?" Raj grinned at Toril and Yui, both giving him death glares.

"I'm loving the energy my fans bring online," Aracely on the jumbotron said to Fiorella Fiorina. "But I'm still not quite seeing the adoration I expect, y'know?"

Fiorella looked queasy, which made Toril queasy too. She went for the exit.

"You die tomorrow," Yui said before the door closed. "Say hi to the GF for me, *Tors*."

Those assholes. Toril's own fault for standing in their box. She'd get revenge on Yui soon enough anyway. It was Aracely that consumed her thoughts, Aracely entangled in her brain, probing folds of gray matter.

Toril couldn't shake the feeling it was a cosmic joke on her specifically. Even in her own head she now saw the reality where Aracely Sosa was World Champion more clearly than the reality where it was Toril Lund. Fate enshrouded Aracely, prophecy and mystic mumbo jumbo. It worked its magic, no matter how many invisible bugs Toril swatted around her face. *A story can only have one protagonist*. Her face on magazines, her voice in interviews, her name on everyone's lips.

Toril needed to murder these notions. In the end, skill won. Not fate. Exactly what Toril cut Aracely off to say. (Shouldn't have cut her off. Or maybe she should have. Falling under Aracely's spell was how she trapped you.) Honestly, Toril, go back to basics. Your classic strategy, barricaded in your room memorizing tape, blocking out distractions—

"Tors!"

And she was there. Toril didn't understand how. She'd been on camera only moments ago. How was she already here, how did she even find Toril? Or had Toril walked around the

stadium grumbling to herself that long?

"I've gotten good, right? Giving very much actual skill, right?"

So *she* thought about that too. Toril stared straight down. "I—guess, yeah."

Ziggy was with her, wiggling in circles on his underdeveloped legs. Seemed she took Toril's advice to spend more time with him, at least.

"Remember our deal?" Aracely tapped lavender nails on the stitching of her handbag. "I need you to beat Yui, it'd be lame if we didn't rematch. So let's mess around with your hair a bit and I'll give you the insider intel."

"I'll—maybe—just watch tape—"

Useless. At this moment, Aracely radiant in the afterglow of victory, resistance accomplished nothing. Within minutes Toril sat in a chair in a lifeless women's restroom, confronted by a massive mirror.

"Just your hair. No makeup or anything. Unless you like it. But no! Just hair. I mean look at this, Tors. Doesn't it hurt, having this many little knots? Let me try detangling spray at least."

She spoke as though Toril had not hopelessly acquiesced, as though some barrier still remained between them—and one did, Toril understood. As Aracely spritzed her scalp, Toril felt like she was inside a submarine being swallowed whole by some monster. An oppressive identity weighed on her, massaging through biotin and collagen oil. Yet her hair loosened. Sharp snags unraveled. A peace came with the unfamiliar feeling of someone else's hands upon her, though her heart still pounded.

The fingers flowed through her hair, through her scalp, through her skull, into her brain. "You hate Yui, don't you? You can say, I won't tell. It's only you and me."

"I—she—ngh."

"She acts so superior, with her snarky quips. She won't admit how much she relied on Cynthia to get here."

"Those Hisuian Pokémon—" Toril ended there, thinking about her Zoroark, Gustav.

"Don't worry. You're nothing like her. You never clung to Cynthia's knees, begging. (Your hair is actually such a nice shade of blonde, we can do so much with this.) That's what I admire about you, Tors. You're so... independent."

While Aracely played with her hair, Toril realized she must be able to see the back of Toril's neck, the scars there creeping down into her collar. Maybe Aracely saw everything, with x-ray eyes, the monstrosity and devastation, the marks of an "admirable" independent life.

"Nobody has ever controlled you," Aracely continued, manipulating strands into styles, trying them against the mirror. "Nobody has ever made you do something you didn't want."

A bitter, ironic pang lanced Toril's heart. Aracely smiled, maybe seeing a style she liked.

"Why are you really doing this," Toril said.

"Don't you like it?"

The image of herself in the mirror looked like a prophecy. A few quick clips fixed it into place.

"I understand, Tors. I get it. Deep down, you want to be seen. You want everyone to see the you that you see in yourself. You hide because you're afraid they'll see something else entirely. Isn't that the problem, being independent? You stop people from changing you, but you can't stop them from inventing whatever image of you they like."

"When I win—they'll have to see—"

"You play for yourself. That's your strength. Yui's weakness is that she doesn't. She's playing for someone else."

Toril said nothing, expecting more, but Aracely spoke as though this aphorism was self-evident.

"Remember that and I know you'll beat her," Aracely said. "Now! Hair's done. Cute right? Do we stop there? Or do we continue...?"

Misgiving remained, the sense of a great mistake on the cusp of being made, but the fingers were inside her brain, ebbing through a barrier rendered semipermeable, and the mirror image—somehow—appealed. Toril gave her decision as a whisper.

R8 | Elo Terrorist

Nobody recognized the woman who entered the arena. Her burgundy coat and matching beret, her straight blonde bob, and her tasteful rouge and lipstick suggested an actress or supermodel. Only her awkward gait gave her away before she ascended the trainer platform.

Cely urged her to bring her new look to the masses. Hands on shoulders, treacly voice in ear, she proved persuasive. Out here, though, there was only Toril, and those words wore off, and she wondered what the fuck she was thinking, and tucked her head into her collar like always.

At least on the platform she had holoscreens to stare at. Her brain entered game mode. No amount of distraction erased her preplanned strategy for Yui Matsui, a black blot Toril barely looked at (smoky, Cely might say, a touch gothic, Cely might say), as she selected her first Pokémon.

"Go, Ingmar!"

"Shiro."

Clouds built and snow pelted the arena as Toril's Alolan Ninetales stared down Yui's Garchomp. It was almost dull how bad a misplay Yui made. Did she expect Zoroark? Even then, Garchomp was an unideal opener.

What does that mean, Yui's battling for someone else? Toril asked at the end of the makeover. (As if the transactional pretense of their relationship still mattered.) *How will that change how she battles?*

Cely had scoffed at her, like it was so obvious. *She's gonna try too hard.*

Trying too hard looked suspiciously like not trying at all. Yui, not one to display emotion, blanched.

Ninetales outsped Garchomp, so Blizzard would knock it out before it got the chance to move. Yui probably planned to panic swap, so Toril's typical play—Aurora Veil to set up for Baxcalibur—was safest.

Toril called the move. Yui's aghast open mouth became a sick smile. "Iron Head."

Before Toril had a chance to think, *Who in the world takes Iron Head*, Garchomp cut through the snowfall. Its skull shined steel as it crushed Ingmar into the earth.

Ingmar didn't get back up. Garchomp wiped him out in one hit.

It took precious, stunned seconds for Toril to parse what happened. The explanation for how it moved faster than Ingmar came readily enough, especially when it reared back and allowed

the previously-concealed scarf to unfurl from its neck. The part Toril didn't understand was Yui.

Garchomp's physical attributes and movepool made it a strong Stealth Rock setter, with options to break walls and check physical attackers. To that end, it almost always took either Leftovers or Rocky Helmet as its held item. Giving it a Choice Scarf—which amped its speed at the cost of locking it into the first move it picked—went completely against the niche it clung to in the current metagame.

Maybe in medieval times, when Cynthia's famous Garchomp terrorized the IPL, Choice Scarf did something. Nowadays, this build was a complete joke.

A complete joke that just kicked Toril's ass.

The VIP box lacked its usual character. Yui and Toril were gone, obviously, but so was Raj for some reason. Domino missed those kids, they livened the place up.

Now, he and Britt had the oh-so-gracious company of his overnight superstar daughter.

"I told her Yui's trying too hard. She didn't listen at all. Now look, she's sent out Baxcalibur. Totally ugly."

"It's a fine move," Domino said. "Snow's up, and with Ninetales down it won't ever go up again, so she wants to get Bax working now. Even a crazy Iron Head Garchomp won't take it down quick enough."

Cely flicked her wrist to toss that perfectly reasonable explanation into a metaphorical garbage bin. "Oh, I'm sure Tors calculated it all. But she's mad now. It's a problem."

Below, Baxcalibur used Dragon Dance, while Garchomp whacked it with Iron Head. The jumbotron showed Toril's face, and yeah, she looked pissed.

"She's not thinking about Yui at all," Cely said. "She's thinking of Yui like Yui's another Toril. So Toril thinks, I'd switch Garchomp out of this losing matchup. Yui doesn't care. Garchomp is here to smash its head into things. Toril's taking hits she doesn't need. I told her. Dad, I told her."

Garchomp slammed its head into Bax again. Bax stayed standing, but only just, and now it looked as pissed as Toril. Icicle spears formed on the jagged edges of its axe-shaped spine. One spin and it launched five spears, which nailed Garchomp one after another. Garchomp dropped, out literally cold.

Yui's next Pokémon appeared.

"What is that thing? Sneasel?"

"Sneasler," Domino said. "Hisui Pokémon. Yui's from Sinnoh, so she's lucky enough to—" He noticed the look Britt gave him. Had been giving him, ever since Cely entered. "Ah, Cely, don't you think we should uh, talk?"

"And Toril has to immediately switch because Baxcalibur's too hurt. Is she seriously gonna lose after I made her look so cute?"

Annihilape came out and took a limp Dire Claw from Sneasler.

"Cely. Believe it or not, I don't care that much about this match. I wanna talk to you. You're a semifinalist now."

"I know Dad. And this game's winner is my next opponent, so-o yeah."

Britt fidgeted. Domino expelled air. Two years earlier, Cely and Britt got into a fight—or something. Domino didn't see it, Britt couldn't talk, Cely *wouldn't* talk. All he knew was Britt ran to him sobbing. Maybe it wasn't a fight. It might've been Cely thought something mean, and Britt felt it. But Britt was a good girl, well-trained. It wasn't easy to hurt her. A few weeks later, Fiorella sent Cely away for an "internship."

"Cely. I still have old friends in the media sphere. Friends your mother hasn't turned against me even."

"Okay, and?"

"My guy at *Battlers Weekly* says they're dropping a story on you this week."

"They did one last week too. Guess I'm a big deal now."

"Cely. This story—it's no puff piece. It's about you and that quackhouse your mother shipped you to."

"Quackhouse?"

"You know what I'm talking about. RISE. It's a story about you and RISE. Cely, what the fuck have you been doing with those people?"

Cely tilted her head away from the glass. "Waiting for the world to end."

Sneasler came in with no balloon. Which meant Choice Scarf (like Garchomp), which meant no Unburden, which meant no Acrobatics. Which meant Annihilape.

Except immediately afterward, Toril doubted. Yui ran that insane asylum tech on Garchomp specifically to counter Ninetales. (Meaning full confidence in the Ninetales opener. Why?)

Toril was equally likely to open Zoroark.) What if Yui ran something else idiotic, maybe like Fling/Unburden/Acrobatics, specifically to bait out and counter Annihilape?

Is this what Cely meant by trying too hard?

The splayed remnants of Toril's fingers gripped her forehead. A timer ticked within her mind's void. The audience's presence insisted itself upon her, inescapable.

"Bulk Up!"

"Return," said Yui. "Go, Mimi."

Mimi was Yui's Corviknight. Strong, boring defensive pivot. Type advantage over Annihilape but nowhere near enough power to win one-on-one. Toril settled down, slipped back into her space, told Annihilape to Bulk Up again.

"Brave Bird," said Yui.

Corviknight shot skyward, angled sharply, and dove at Annihilape so fast its steel feathers steamed and then burst into flame. The strike cut the air with a clap and somehow even the double-bulked Annihilape skidded back. Despite his stoic disposition Toril knew the hit was massive, but if not for her holoscreen's readout she never would've believed just how much. Corviknight ate over half his health in one swoop.

Toril withheld furious disbelief and calculated. How was that much power even possible? Yet *another* Choice item? No, the rattled Corviknight gobbled some Leftovers to recover from recoil. Defense EVs reallocated into attack? This was psychopathic.

Trying too hard, no. Yui was a fucking terrorist.

Unlike versus Cely, Toril took Drain Fist instead of Taunt. Double bulked up, Corviknight no defense EVs, Drain Punch does 40 percent base, heals 20 percent. Rest first, survive two more attacks, Rage Fist 200 power, wipe out Corviknight plus anything else that moved.

"Rest."

"Brave Bird."

Annihilape acted first. His action was to instantly fall asleep. As trained—hours of training, days, weeks to get it done unconsciously—he rifled through his fur and withdrew the Chesto Berry to wake himself up.

Then something Toril never saw before happened. He didn't eat the berry.

Corviknight alighted, its beady glare set on Annihilape the entire time. Annihilape's fur bristled, not in fury, but in fear. Toril didn't know Annihilape felt fear. It transfixed him. The berry remained in his hand.

No. No way. That Corviknight. It couldn't.

But it could. It had Unnerve.

All Pokémon possessed a special ability that affected battle. Within a species, though, there might be multiple abilities. A genetics thing, hereditary, recessive and dominant, whatever, the science didn't matter. Point was, any proper competitive Corviknight had Pressure, perfect for defensive walling. But in the wild, you saw Corviknight with another ability: Unnerve. This ability did nothing except prevent its opponent from eating berries. Useful when hunting the berry-eating critters it called prey, but near worthless on the arena floor, where most Pokémon held Leftovers or Choice Whatever.

Except, of course, Toril's Annihilape. Who took another Brave Bird, lost half his health again, and stayed asleep.

Toril ripped the stupid fucking beret off her head and spiked it. Her gloves pawed at her face and succeeded in irritating her eyes. She imagined Aracely cackling, having set her up obviously, divining with mind reader dipshittery Toril's entire gameplan to blab to Yui. Why? Because she hated Toril, wanted to humiliate her, every prior kindness a confidence trap for this singular moment! Toril *knew* it. Knew it, knew it, knew it!

"Rasmus, return. Go—Heidi!"

It was impossible to have prepared for this Pokémon. Toril never showed it before.

Heidi's massive jaws struck fear into any Pokémon. Corviknight no exception. As it swooped for another Brave Bird—no attempt made to predict the swap—it balked. The attack did nearly nothing.

Toril patted her big dumb coat until she found the pocket that contained the charm, which she then rolled around her fingers and held up pinned between two.

"Now, Mega Evolve!"

"Oh! Such a cute Pokémon. What's it called?"

Domino couldn't resist. "Mawile. And it's not cute for no reason. It lures its prey, then gulps em up in those huge jaws. But that's not the point here. Focus on me for a second Cely."

"If I don't send my friend my energy, she's gonna lose."

She said such nutty crap with a straight face. "I'm your father and we need to talk about you being in a freaking cult!"

"But I'm not, Dad?"

"I knew the necklace was weird. I shoulda figured it out then. But no. Tell me right now, what the hell is this RISE crap."

Cely tsked. Not at him, at the arena floor. "Yui wasn't expecting this. She has nothing planned. I don't blame her, I wouldn't either. What type even is it?"

As a flash subsided, the Mega Evolved Mawile stooped under the weight of its twin sets of jaws. Each frothed, snapping and snarling, pulling the tiny body beneath this way and that. If not given something to chew quick, they would self-cannibalize.

Domino couldn't care about that, no matter how impressive a specimen. He waved away a concerned Britt as he summoned a chest's worth of air.

"You answer me when I ask you a question!"

"It's nothing, Dad."

"Nothing! They're running an article on it!"

"That's because Gladion got pissy. It's no big deal."

"I hear people say they don't let you out of this cult once you join."

"I'm out, aren't I?"

"*Are you?!*"

Yui swapped out Corviknight for Sneasler. Cely was right, she really didn't have a good answer. Sneasler might hurt Mawile, but Mawile hurt more, especially after it spent the switch cutting its teeth with Swords Dance.

"Cely you know how people feel about these teams."

"It's not a team, Dad. It's a health and wellness clinic."

"You know where I grew up? You know right?"

"I know, Dad."

"Tiny town in the desert. Completely run by a team. Cops bought and paid for. My older brother—that's your uncle, though you never met him—he joined. Either you joined or you got pushed around. Wanted me to join too. I stole his Sandshrew and skipped."

"Dad, super cool story and all, one I totally haven't heard a zillion times, but RISE isn't a team."

"Then what the fuck is this end-of-the-world crap? Only a few years ago one of these nutjob cults attacked the IPL finals. They put your mother in a coma, remember? I know you do. The IPL gets a whiff you're involved, we're DQed."

The crowd let out a collective gasp as Sneasler got in Mawile's face for a brutal bout of Close Combat. Barely standing, Mawile clamped both sets of jaws and shook Sneasler like a chew toy, which was one way to interpret the command Play Rough. When finally spat out, Sneasler slumped in a dead faint.

"They won't disqualify me. Everyone loves me."

"You're so sure, huh?"

"But that's the only reason it matters to you, right?"

"What the hell does that mean?!"

"Have you ever stopped to wonder why Mom sent me to RISE in the first place?"

"She's nuts."

"Mm. Maybe ask her some day."

"Like hell I'm talking to that b—that woman. You have something to say, say it to me right now Cely. I'm serious, quit screwing around."

For the first time, Yui fell onto the back foot. She wasn't sure what to do next. Mawile was hurt, most Pokémon finished it with a solid hit, but the question was how much damage it did beforehand. She sent out Corviknight, expecting type resistance.

Bad move.

"Fire Fang," Toril said. Twin mouths full of flame chomped hot enough to sear straight through steel feathers. Corviknight got gulped up, only its wings sticking between the teeth, then spat out a limp mess. Yui lost two Pokémon in as many turns.

"Um, Dad? Hello-o? Wanna continue our little shouting match?"

Domino tore his eyes from the arena. "You were the one who was watching, dammit."

"Wow. For a second I thought you actually wanted me to tell you something about myself."

"Then tell me. Quit playing these ridiculous games. Why did you join this freaking cult. Why, Cely."

Cely tapped a fingernail to her lower lip. She smiled, past Domino, and Domino felt Britt shiver against his shoulder.

"I don't think I'll tell you."

"Unbelievable. Just like your mother."

"I'm nothing like her. The only thing you need to know, Dad, is that RISE was the first place that made me understand the world had a direction. That it wasn't simply an aimless set of

molecules zipping through space, that it was ordered and organized and pointed in the shape of a line with a clear beginning and end. If I never saw that line, I wouldn't be here. I am only here, in this funny little tournament, because I know where the line ends. You understand that, Dad? Does that come through crystal freaking clear for you?"

Britt's body shook like a leaf. Her hand extended, fingers twisted in the pose of summoning a barrier. The hell? What exactly did she think Cely was going to do?

A twinge struck Domino's chest. He slapped his sternum hard, coughed, and surrendered. "Cely. You're in semifinals. Only two matches separate you from eternal glory, okay? I don't care if you're nuts. Everyone who ever won this tournament was nuts. I was nuts too, shit, I still am. What I'm saying is: don't let anyone know it."

No change overcame Cely. Her smile remained, her pose, her eyes. Strange eyes, his daughter had strange eyes. The only way Domino knew the situation defused was the sudden calm that overtook Brittany.

"Dad," Cely said, "I am far, far better at that than you could ever imagine."

Who exactly was this daughter of his? What was she becoming, or had already become?

Toril got away with robbery. It sickened her. One by one she tugged the buttons of her coat until they tore.

Yui fumbled in face of Mawile like Aracely against Jinjiao's Lopunny. No strategy, no clever outplay. Simple incompetence at the quarterfinal level.

Finally, Yui revealed Tyranitar.

Wind whipped up around the primordial stone creature, long unchanged in the deep mountain dens within which it dwelled. The arena grew cloudy with sand that whistled off Heidi's sleek steel jaws. Toril expected this ever since the Garchomp play, and seeing it confirmed what Yui's final Pokémon would be.

The situation remained dire. Toril had more Pokémon, but they were in lousy shape. Baxcalibur nearly fainted, Annihilape halfway there. And Mawile. Mawile was almost certainly slower than everything left on Yui's team and would drop in a single hit. She fought well, but this was the end.

"Mega Evolve," Yui said.

Tyranitar hunkered down and split off uneven stalagmites from its body. The size and weight of the protrusions made it painful for Tyranitar to move, but the defensive upgrade was enormous.

"Finish it with Stone Edge!"

"Sucker Punch," said Toril.

Heidi expended her final reserves for a weak, cheap shot on Tyranitar before a jagged rock came down on her.

Toril recalled Heidi's unconscious form and sent out Rillaboom. At this point her mind whirred far ahead of the current battle state. She gave up thinking about Aracely's advice. Fuck her. This battle would be decided by Yui's final Pokémon and Toril's. Everything between was in service of putting that Pokémon in the best position possible, and to accomplish that required knowledge, planning, and *actual skill*.

"Wood Hammer." Toril didn't expect Yui to let that attack land on her precious Tyranitar. The goal was to force out Yui's penultimate Pokémon.

"Rin, return. Irie!"

There. A lumbering, dripping, gelatinous body, into which Rillaboom's stick sank worthlessly. As slime glopped off, Rillaboom—always a prude—retracted, leaving the stick inside for the body to suck the sap from.

Goodra, Hisuian Goodra, given form thanks to the steel shell curled atop its back. Yui's second Hisuian Pokémon. Easy to reach quarters when your opponents only knew your Pokémon from books. Which made—

"Knock Off," said Toril.

"Ice Spinner."

Which made these absurdly specific counter matchup builds an even sharper knife to the jugular, what the *fuck* was Goodra doing with *Ice Spinner*, turning itself into a top that shredded Rillaboom and sent putrid waves of slush slapping across Grassy Terrain's leaves. The only, only, only possible reason to take Ice Spinner was to clear Grassy Terrain, and the only reason anyone possibly cared about that was if they faced an opponent who dramatically won an earlier battle specifically thanks to Grassy Terrain. By this point Toril should've expected it, should've comprehended Yui's fucked up mindset from the moment Iron Head got called, should've been suspicious about Corviknight and Goodra and the whole fucking fight, should've simply understood the nonsense Sosa spouted, of course! Toril peeled off the glove Sosa forced her to wear on her good hand and plunged her teeth into her fingertips.

Sosa's hands were all over this match, manipulating the strings, making her marionettes dance. Did Yui predict Toril's whole strategy with such specificity on her own? No. Sosa told her. Then Sosa lured Toril into her den, implanted a fungal parasite in her brain, transformed her into a demi-Sosa with the clothes and the makeup—she tore at her coat, some stupid sash kept it on, it shuffled lopsided across her shoulders—and why? For fun? Or to do like Cynthia, like Domino, to absorb someone else's win as her own?

The whole point. The whole point of Pokémon battling was. It was only the trainer and their Pokémon. Nobody else. No human claimed another's victory. Independence. Winning was an individual's validation, proof they deserved to live. To rob that. To rob that was!

Toril, watching Rillaboom drop to a second Ice Spinner—three Pokémon left to Yui's three—needed to focus on actually winning before she worried whose win it was.

When Toril sent Annihilape back out, nothing remained to unnerve him from his berry. He woke, half health and unbulked but staring down a Pokémon that couldn't finish it off even with its most powerful possible move, Draco Meteor.

By the time Toril thought, *Wait it might have Dragon Tail*, she already called Bulk Up.

"Dragon Tail."

Goodra's shell, rather than its tail, glowed. (IPL move standardization caused weirdness like that.) All Goodra did was whack Annihilape for unimpressive damage, but Dragon Tail had a secondary effect. The shell's glow occurred via the same molecular processes governing the miniaturization that made Poké Ball tech possible. One tap and Annihilape's body believed he was being recalled. He transformed into a beam of light and zipped to his ball.

The holoscreen selected a random Pokémon between Toril's remaining two to replace him. The coinflip sent out Baxcalibur opposite Goodra.

Toril now knew exactly how this match ended.

Cynthia watched. Right now. Eyes on Yui Matsui.

Vitality flowed through Yui head to toe. This electricity would stop anyone else's heart. Not hers. Nobody else understood. Them in their dark, lonely worlds. Each human its own world, island unto itself. Where thoughts, feelings, experience was known to them and none other. Eight billion worlds parallel and apart.

Only one thing bridged the worlds. Yui had it. Did they? Did Toril? Raj? Even Cely? No.

Love. Of them all, only Yui Matsui fought with love.

"Irie, use Flash Cannon!"

"Glaive Rush!"

Baxcalibur flipped forward. Incredibly, it hovered in midair, its head barely off the ground. Propelled by only a blast of wind, it rammed its spiked spinal fin into Irie. The crowd loved the move, because it looked so silly; Toril hated that they loved it, because Toril hated everyone outside the insular island of herself. Yui only cared that Cynthia watched.

Goodra—Irie—held on. Chunks of her body slopped off. Her shell cracked. Her feet wobbled.

Cynthia watched. Cynthia watched. Cynthia watched.

Cynthia watched as Irie retaliated with a blast of light. Baxcalibur, still inverted, drove headfirst into the ground. The arena fissured under its hard head, which left it embedded to the neck. Its tail, then its body, slumped. Toril returned it, down to only two Pokémon.

Remember, Cynthia? You invited Yui to your sanctuary. You were so tall, so elegant in your kimono, yet you moved casually, as though everything were natural to you. Yui remembered every word you said, verbatim.

"From an archaeological perspective, the Hisuian epoch is one of the most important." You drew the curtain back to show the view of the preserve from your villa, doused in the rising sun. "It was then that humans and Pokémon first began their symbiotic relationship."

Yui mumbled something meaningless.

"Only by understanding the past can we extrapolate the direction of the future. Our past, from then to now, has been one of cooperation, understanding, and love."

"And love..."

"That's how I know, whatever problems we face in this world, people and Pokémon will work together to overcome them."

Annihilape appeared again. Yui would've preferred to see Toril's final Pokémon, but at this point it clearly wasn't Zoroark. Cely was right after all: *Tors won't admit it, even to herself. She's too embarrassed to use Zoroark after my match with her.*

The last Pokémon was probably Volcarona. Throughout groups, Toril ran Ninetales and Baxcalibur exclusively with Volcarona, to cover typical weaknesses.

That meant this match was over.

In case Toril saw what was coming and tried to outsmart with Bulk Up, Yui called for Dragon Tail. Toril didn't get cute, though. Annihilape finished off Goodra with a Drain Punch that regenerated almost no health.

"Rin."

Mega Tyranitar returned to the field. She had no chance against Annihilape either, but that wasn't her purpose. The sandstorm whipped up again. The arena floor became a vortex. Sand swirled around Rin and Annihilape. Around Yui and Toril. Locking them into this final moment of the fleeting instance their worlds collided.

"Drain Punch," Toril said. Annihilape obeyed. Because of the hit Rin took earlier from Mawile—

Forget Mawile. Cynthia didn't watch that. Forget that part.

It only took one hit. Despite Rin's defenses, the incredible power and effective bonus of Annihilape's punch put her down. This time, Annihilape drained most of its health back.

Cynthia watched Yui send out her final Pokémon.

Rattle of bone. Twitch on the nape of your neck. Soul of dearly departed. You're watching this aren't you? The sandstorm spread his dead dry fur. All was hollow whistle.

Despite its bleak and dismal appearance, Houndstone was a creature like Yui. He fought with love.

He loved his friends, and they were all gone now. He wanted nothing except to avenge them.

"Last Respects."

Sand made him swift. Annihilape was unable to move. The ghastly face of a canine skull magnified to arena size engulfed it. The move's power was amped five times over, once for each of Houndstone's fallen friends.

Annihilape stood no chance. Its eyes remained furious to the bitter end, until it fell back. The sand swept over it. It was buried even before Toril recalled it.

With a 300 power Last Respects and a Choice Band, with his speed doubled in the sandstorm, Houndstone could annihilate any Pokémon Toril manifested. You see, right? You see Yui's love now, don't you? She could never tell you to your face, could not vocalize the words that imbued her inner life, but battling was the language she used, and you used it too, you were here on this stage once yourself.

Toril was waiting to send out her final Pokémon. The timer, a formality at this point, ticked down. She lacked any decision to make, but she waited anyway, staring at Yui.

You see this right? This moment? You'll remember this moment, right? Not the one that comes after. This one alone, the emotions you feel now, they won't be buried in the sand like everything else, right? You'll stand there believing it really is Volcarona that Toril will send out, unaware what Cely said—*When she's mad, you can tell. It's when her face is straight she's scary*—believing that the match is over, that Yui Matsui is an IPL semifinalist like you once were. Please say you will. Please.

"I'm sorry," Toril said. Her amplified voice entered Yui's platform. "You didn't get a chance to shine this battle. I know you've been waiting to show them what you've got, Rune."

Toril's Poké Ball vanished through the shifting wall of sand and reappeared on the bounce as it popped open. The air distorted, broke apart in an erratic grid of cells.

The glitch appeared. Porygon-Z. Normal type. Immune to ghost.

You'll remember, right?

Yui waited the full thirty seconds allotted her. The silence of the crowd could not be controlled. In the whistling wind, the rattling bone, Yui's world dropped into the abyss.

She tapped her holoscreen twice to confirm the forfeit.

R4 | Mithridatism

Iono seized all eyes. "WOWZAH! What an amazeballs finish to the IPL quarterfinals! A real slugfest. And those strats! Yui Matsui, hold your head high, you've got a bright future on YouTube. The titles write themselves: 'You won't BELIEVE what I put on my Garchomp...!' (Hit me up if you're watching Yui. We can go far with this.)"

"We'll have plenty of time to talk about that *interesting* match," said Cynthia. "But first, let's applaud our four semifinalists."

"For sure! Today marks a super historic first: the first time two girl trainers made it to semis!"

"Well." Bill twirled a finger in midair. "Technically, yesterday is when that happened, after Aracely beat Gladion. It didn't matter who won today."

"Boo, you're ruining my clickbait."

"On that tack," Bill continued, "it's already set in stone we'll have a female trainer in finals, another 'historic first.' Cynthia, your IPL 51 run was the first time we saw a woman reach semis. How does it feel knowing your record will be surpassed?"

Cynthia, cool in her chair, uncrossed her legs and crossed them the other way. A casual flick tucked a blonde lock behind her ear. All her existence was grace, like a goddess: who could watch but not love her?

"I'm happy. I'm incredibly happy. Which, you know, surprises me. Thirteen years ago, I hated to lose. Losing was the worst feeling in the world. But this is something I'm glad to have lost. Toril and Cely are both amazing young battlers. They've shown incredible resilience; I couldn't be more proud to see them reach this far and beyond. Whoever wins next week will be a serious threat to take home the trophy."

And you're proud of her, too, right? Even if she lost. She was so close. You're proud, right?

"That's where you and I differ," said Bill. "From my perspective, the other side of the bracket is significantly favored in finals. Raj is best trainer right now and Red is the best trainer of all time. Consider strength of schedule."

"Strength of schedule? Cely beat—"

"Jinjiao, yes, I know, but besides that. Gladion and Yui are, let's face it, not the same caliber as Jacq and SkILL. And Toril struggled against Yui. A lot."

"Toril responded well to a series of hyper-specific counter matchups. The way she maneuvered Yui into locking in Choice Band Last Respects before swapping to Porygon-Z shows incredible on-the-fly decision making."

"Gr-reat point Cynthia," Iono said. "Do ya think Yui should've used a move like Psychic Fangs instead of Last Respects?"

"It didn't matter. Toril's Porygon-Z had Download and—pulling up the movesets—Shadow Ball. It would've beaten Houndstone in one hit regardless."

"Then what could Yui have done to win?"

Cynthia contemplated. Yui's face pressed into the holoscreen until Cynthia became a projection upon her forehead.

"Toril won when Sneasler and Corviknight went down," Cynthia said. "The way Yui played around Mawile was—a disappointment."

A disappointment.

That was Cynthia's last word on the matter. Bill butted in to say something about—something. The topic shifted. Yui stood there and watched the entire segment, but Cynthia didn't mention her again.

A commercial played.

For the first time she remembered, Yui wanted to go home. It didn't make sense to want that. She lived her life a nomad. What was home?

Home was the void between herself and others. Yui turned and left this world forever.

Fiorella Fiorina, chic in a cerise coat, looked twenty-something, was forty-seven. Animated she leaned over the counter at the smiling fools opposite. "No, let me speak to your boss." They babbled something about a screening. "Your *boss*. I know her."

"The screening is complimentary. If you come this way, we may begin you on your journey."

"I told you, I'm not here to join. I already have a gym membership." Fiorella pinched the bridge of her nose, as if it might alleviate the pressure on her eyes. Her breath whooshed out: *HAAH*. "Are you dense on purpose?"

Even this late—she'd only half-expected them to be open—people in the adjoining room contorted their bodies on yoga mats. Backs arched, eyes aimed up, they allowed their instructor's soft-spoken platitudes to wash over them: *Soar skyward. Reach inside. Your dreams await you in heaven. Heaven is both above and inside. The key is in your own body... your very DNA... the Logos of this world.*

"The screening is free and safe," a grinning fool proclaimed. "You'll learn truths about yourself."

"Unreal," Fiorella said, to the other fools grinning by the doors, to impose upon them the reality where they sympathized with her. In this sympathy she found strength.

The lobby was so fluorescent, and this building had so few windows, it felt like broad daylight. Fiorella took the last tram of the night down. If she wanted to get back to the Plateau she'd need to hire a cab and go the long way through Viridian. She couldn't think about that right now, it was simply too much.

They tried to hand her some books and pamphlets and she shoved them away. "Forget it. I'll find her on my own. Thank you for your time."

A plain door beside the counter looked like a promising avenue, but when she moved for it, the fools converged, frantically renewing pleas about screenings and blood tests. Fiorella was half-willing to wield the rolled-up magazine she held to keep them at bay, but they fell back at once when the door opened and a woman with a blue stripe on her robes appeared.

"Lady Fiorina, a pleasure. Forgive the inconvenience; we didn't expect such an esteemed visitor at this time."

"Finally." Fiorella shot a look at the grinning fools, none of whom grinned anymore, their faces ashen, their arms straight at their sides as they stared at whatever wall faced them. Served them right. She turned back. "Now, you."

"You may call me Nilufer."

"Nilufer. I need to speak to your boss. It's urgent."

Nilufer, not grinning, still wore a smile, slight and somewhat coy. She had the face of someone who blended into a crowd shot on TV. But if, for some reason, you found yourself rewatching that recording over and over, she might flash for a frame and become an image imprinted on your soul.

"I'm sorry, MOTHER can't see you now. Her work is demanding, as I'm sure you understand. You may inform me your purpose; I'll relay it to her."

Pages crinkled as Fiorella unraveled the prerelease print of *Battlers Weekly*, opened it to an article, and held it in her face. "*That's* my purpose. Understand?"

Nilufer's eyes scanned the pages and read the headline:

A RISE-ing Star? Cely's Shady Past REVEALED!

"I see. I'll bring this to MOTHER's attention. Please wait."

After Nilufer left with the magazine, Fiorella stood amid the grinless fools, whose demeanor remained servile without any attempt toward service. The yoga instructor filled the spaces between them: *Let this eternal truth guide you. Let it change you. It is eternal, yet it changes. It both changes you and may itself be changed. Must be changed. Nothing in this world is true without change. Change yourself. Feel that change in the shape of your body.*

After ten impatient minutes, Nilufer returned. "MOTHER will see you now."

The interior of this building defied cartography. Soon Fiorella no longer possessed any conception of where within it she stood. Everything curved. White tile evoked a bathhouse, then they passed a set of showers where toweled figures peered from shrouds of steam. "One must be clean to pass," Nilufer explained, as two men opened two doors for them, "but your status as honored guest renders you such by fiat."

"That's how germs work?" Fiorella muttered. Not that she actually wanted to go wash. She was perfectly hygienic anyway.

In many spaces, Fiorella's coat and Nilufer's blue stripe were the only color.

It was conch-like, this structure, or maybe a helix. Along a perpetual curve Fiorella had the uncanny sense they were subtly ascending, as though the walkways were ramped at too gradual a rate to tell. This sense became certainty as the familiar cardiovascular ache emerged, her best friend since the coma. It didn't slow her (she beat discipline into her body through gymnastic repetition) but her lungs whistled deep from the wisp of poison that remained dormant.

Dormitories where three-bunk cots lined the walls. A cafeteria of skinny benches. The center was a cone-shaped auditorium; terraces of seats descended to a chasmic pulpit. An orator with a blue stripe communicated something to a large audience that watched in perfect silence. After another stretch of rounded walkway took them past a modest library, the inner wall exposed the auditorium again, and Fiorella glimpsed the pulpit rising via mechanical motion to put the orator above all witnesses. *Flowers in a field bloom, then die, then their progeny blooms in their place, and so on. I ask you: is this change? Or fixed eternity?*

They reached two more doors that two doorkeepers opened for them; then two more doors, similarly opened; and finally, at what Fiorella assumed was some sort of apex, a pair with no doorkeepers at all, on which the clinic's triangular insignia was engraved above a double helix.

"The lights will not be on," Nilufer said.

The heavy doors drew open only enough to admit a person. Fiorella hesitated on the threshold. An inky interior confronted her, into which the light from the antechamber died immediately. The only indication of depth came from the far end, where two glass tubes pulsed with the bioluminescence of the Pokémon within. It was frigid inside. Fiorella wrapped her coat tighter, blinked as her eyes adjusted, and entered.

Nilufer's presence guided her to a chair. A desk manifested in part; on it, glossy magazine pages caught the scant light and shone.

It smelled like incense—

[Why have you come.]

The voice originated closer than Fiorella expected, but when she looked in its direction, no human outline took shape. A screen stood between them.

"Isn't it obvious? I've been on the phone for six hours with the *Battlers Weekly* editorial staff trying to get them to pull the article on Aracely. My voice is hoarse from shouting. Something *needs* to be done. Can we speak privately?" She flashed a hand in the approximate direction of Nilufer, who hadn't left.

[My minister will hear you whether she is here or not.]

"Fine! Some place you have here, seriously! It's like you're *asking* them to make up the nonsense they've got in this article. Well that's your problem. But Aracely is my daughter and I can't let them—drag her through the mud, just because she interned here two years ago."

Her hands gesticulated pointlessly in the dark, more for herself than her audience. The day's worth of exasperated rage uncorked into this null sphere, where nothing reached more than a meter.

[They are only aware at all because of what *that boy* said in your interview.]

"Oh, it's my fault now? I only ask the questions, I can't control the answers. I hardly expected Gladion to say three words, let alone—that!" She sighed, sagged. "Look. I know things have been rough for you, I understand your desire to keep unseen. But can you drop this—act, or face, or whatever it is, and work with me here? We're friends, aren't we?"

Something did drop, because the voice that responded lacked force, became ponderous: "Friends...? We're... friends?"

"Are we not?"

They met seven years prior, at the height of her prominence, when she sponsored the IPL. Fiorella interviewed her. The interview itself presented the professional, personable image expected by all interested parties, the sort of interview Fiorella excelled at producing when given actual humans to work with instead of whatever the competitors might be classed as. After the cameras stopped rolling, the chat became conversational. They were both single mothers, both forty, and both more than anything driven professionals. They went for drinks. They laughed about what they dubbed their "Unovan Psycho" beauty routines, laughed about the need in this world for women to be both beautiful and unquestionably best in their field to be taken seriously. They met a few times thereafter in professional capacity, then she fell out of favor with the IPL, though Fiorella was experienced in press and knew what *that* was about: yellow paper sensationalism, a necessary scapegoat, gleeful betrayal of the idol they themselves constructed. Fiorella kept tabs on her afterward, and when Cely had her accident, knew her fledgling clinic was the perfect place for recuperation.

"The article's brutal. Not sure if you've read it yet, but. They basically say you're running a cult. It's incredible. *Battlers Weekly* is a rag, sure, but I've never seen them stoop so low. The only thing they kept out of it was your real name."

"They don't know it."

"Clearly a rush job. I counted five typos, seven stylistic errors, and I'm not even an editor. What drove them to such libel, I've no clue, but as it affects my daughter—"

"They're scared."

"Of what? Vitamins and minerals? Everyone's so scared, it's unbelievable." Would she talk this way if it wasn't to a friend? Who else could she even call a friend? "They're doing security checks on trainers and staff now. I have to put my bag through a metal detector, like I've got hidden Poké Balls or something. Bill's going around with a bodyguard—"

"A bodyguard?" said Nilufer, whom Fiorella had totally forgotten about.

"Since last week." Fiorella waved her away—eyes adjusted, some sense of her was known—and continued. "Oh! Plus, they've got IPL agents posted everywhere. They're in staff clothes, they have staff badges, but who are they fooling? I know everyone on staff, and they're obviously not doing any actual work. They just talk into headsets and scan the area. What do they expect?"

"IPL 51, again," said the voice behind the screen.

HAAH, was Fiorella's response, an exhalation that felt like it carried a snatch of residual poison. "I wish."

"You wish...?"

"It'd be something new, something important at least," Fiorella said. "Twenty years I cover this tournament. Every year it's the same. Names change but faces don't. Questions don't. Stories don't." *Looked twenty-something, was forty-seven.*

"Stasis."

"Right."

"Permanence."

"Exactly. Like I'm sitting in traffic waiting for the light to change, and finally it does, and I drive ten feet and hit another light. And it never ends."

"Why... did you never quit?"

"Quit. Quit? There was a time. After the coma. I was in a coma after IPL 51 if you didn't know."

"I knew."

"After it I knew something had to change. I couldn't put a finger on what. I tried to bear it but a few years and I was losing my mind. I divorced Dom, thought that was it. It worked for a time, then it came back, and I knew what it really was. I considered it, quitting. Becoming a photojournalist on the fringes, somewhere there was still disorder. Orre, maybe, or wherever a team tossed its weight around. But then I was a single mother. I couldn't run off and leave

her. What then, Dom would raise her, that fucking loser? I forced everything down like swallowing my own vomit, for her. To give her the stability she needed."

"And it wound up sending her to me."

Fiorella said nothing for a long time. In this darkness she felt like she was deliquescing, becoming the darkness herself. The things in the tubes ebbed and her eyes watched them, tried to identify the specific species.

"I thank you for that," Fiorella said. "Truly. That was—a bad time. I didn't know what to do. When she came back she really—looked better. So I thank you. You helped her."

"Many come to RISE in a similar state as your daughter. One might call it our specialty, helping them."

"No, I mean... *you* helped her."

There was a falter. "Yes. She helped me, too."

These words gave Fiorella what she needed to gather the liquid streams of herself back to her body. Sitting up, she solidified.

"Okay. I have to ask. Please, tell me honestly. This place—*is* it a cult?"

What answer she expected, who knew. Maybe, having given her own confession, she expected this friend of hers to give the same.

The voice behind the screen unraveled.

"Those organizations you call cults were birthed in **ignorance**," she said. "Ignorance was not simply the cause that created them but their most vaunted objective. At IPL 51, it was Team Plasma, seeking reversion to a past where people and Pokémon supposedly lived in greater harmony; a past that never existed. Elsewhere, it's been groups like Team Magma or Team Aqua, attempting to save the environment by bringing about calamities that would obviously, to anyone with basic knowledge of environmental science, annihilate it. Lysandre's followers strove for a goal that, if accomplished, would have killed them all by design. It's nonsense. It had to be nonsense. It was rebellion against a world grown too sensible, where too much unknown was stamped out. To them, it was only possible to create their own story by ignoring the story of the world entirely. That's what made them a cult; the willed divorce from reality."

"And you live in reality."

"My organization fights ignorance at every turn. Physical health, mental health, it's all connected. Only through knowledge can humankind progress. It's how we progressed this far. If we fight against this world, it's only to fight the stasis, the permanence, that even you feel. I helped them see—I helped Cely see—a direction neither backward nor imagined, not a 'return,' but a movement **forward**."

Fiorella closed her eyes; the blurred white forms of the Pokémon in the tubes remained. "On trial," she said, "Ghetsis claimed he never believed any of the crap he sold his followers. It wasn't ideological at all. It was only about the most fundamental form of human relationship: control. The whole thing was transactional. He received control; his followers, community. Or maybe companionship."

"If control and community are all it takes to make a cult, then what else can you call the IPL?"

"Maybe," Fiorella said, ignoring her, "for them, even control and community were only possible by ignoring the story of the world."

The silence burned. In that blank space, Fiorella was allowed to imagine any possible truth for her friend beyond the screen, even the truth that she was a friend. Nothing could be contradicted.

"Anyway. I didn't come to talk philosophy."

"No... I suppose not." And was it only Fiorella's imagination that injected disappointment into those words?

"Ever since Aracely's accident, I've worried. No matter how strong she seems. I can't have this article come out for everyone to gawk at. My friends—my contacts on the editorial staff are arguing even now to pull it, it's fifty-fifty, but I've done all I can. I came to you, in case—there's anything you can do..."

"I'll do everything in my power."

"Thank you." She took in a lungful of frigid air and added: "I'll leave you alone now."

She rose. Nilufer's presence manifested beside her to lead the way. They tiptoed across a space now defined.

Only when Nilufer opened the doors a crack and a shaft of light pierced them both and traveled on to stop at the screen did Fiorella turn back. "Also, if you ever have the time, I'd like to get drinks again."

"If I ever have the time," said the voice behind the screen.

Fiorella felt foolish and left quickly. Exhaustion assaulted her; the watch face on her wrist read well past midnight. She still needed a cab to the Plateau, an hour drive at least. Worse, though, was the premonition of the next day, and the next, and every day after that, but she knew once she slept she'd wake up renewed enough to confront them, no matter how endlessly they cycled.

Nilufer returned to the sanctum.

"What now, MOTHER? We have no connections at that magazine."

"I know. She must have known too. She came just to talk."

"Then whether they run the article is down to chance. Lady Fiorina at least provided useful information—"

"Why did you join RISE, Nilu?"

Nilufer stood rigid in the dark, arms folded behind her back. "Pardon?"

"Was it to reject reality?"

"No, MOTHER. Of course not. If anything, it was to embrace reality. To prove myself worthy of existing within it."

"I see." Nothing in MOTHER's tone betrayed what she thought of that answer. Though if Nilufer gave any other, she wouldn't be Nilufer, and thus wouldn't be the person MOTHER trusted most. "You've never cared much for Cely, have you?"

"I believe... frankly... you overstate her importance to our goals. You wanted her to become your weapon. I'm a strong enough weapon for you."

"Maybe so. I just had a terrible premonition I'll never see her again." But at the tail end of MOTHER's sigh, she hardened, and Nilufer's hairs bristled, as she anticipated the coldness of the words that followed: **[Bring her back to me.]**

"She won't come willingly."

[You know how I mean.]

"Yes, MOTHER. I do. According to Fiorella, though, the Plateau is crawling with IPL agents. There's risk involved. What Aracely told you could be true; it could be best to leave her, so their attention remains at the stadium."

[I need her. You'll bring her to me. If you are my weapon, prove your worth.]

In the dark, Nilufer closed her eyes and smiled. "I wish for nothing more."

R4 | Missing No.

When the phone rang Toril yelped. Lights out, curtains drawn, she hadn't left her hotel room since the battle. She had no idea what time it was and only a vague conception of the day.

So she—and Heidi, her Mawile, in her arms—watched it ring.

Only one person would call through the hotel phone. Only one person would call.

Unluckily, even in avoiding her, Toril was enveloped in her. She didn't spend her time cooped up screaming at herself—only the first hour. She researched. Every second of tape on Aracely Sosa, competitive battler. She watched most of it already, before their first match, but back then she didn't know who Sosa *was*.

Sosa's group stage wins looked entirely different now. Predictions Toril once thought were baseline competence rewrote themselves as savant invasions of her opponent's subconscious. Toril paid attention to Sosa herself: her face, her posture, her hand signals. Instances where uncertainty transformed to epiphany at the last moment.

The phone kept ringing.

Sosa's tape pissed Toril off because it didn't *help*. Sosa's weaknesses were blatant. A Pokémon she never saw before showed up, and she hit it with an ineffective move or failed an easy switch or refused to account for an ability. With Mawile now known, Toril only had one Pokémon left in her back pocket. One surprise wasn't enough for Jinjiao or Gladion. So she watched the tape over and over, searching for something else.

It was so stupid. Toril was the third seed, Sosa fifteenth. Toril won their last match. By rights this should be Lachlan Nguyen again, a blowout. Why, then, did it feel like Sosa was favored? Why didn't Toril have enough faith in herself to be the hero of her own life?

The phone kept fucking ringing.

Toril pushed Heidi off her, danced between Ingmar and Gustav curled on the carpet, and wrenched the phone off its hook.

"Wnrrrgh?!"

"Miss Lund this is reception. We've received a call from an outside number. Normally we wouldn't bother you, but he claims to be your father. Will you take it?"

"Hgh?!"

"Thank you. I'll patch him in shortly."

As Toril wondered whether this were a plot, the phone clicked. A heavy, rasping breath crackled.

"Toril? That you?"

Her father's voice was long purged from her mind. Or so she believed. Suddenly, she smelled alcohol.

"What do you want?"

Breath. "You've done good for yourself." Breath. "Not like your brothers."

"What do you *want*?"

"That's how"—breath—"you talk to your dad? It's been. Five years?"

"Seven. I left seven years ago."

"Funny. Life feels so short when you're living it." Breath. "Tell me how you've been. They pay you good in those tournaments?"

"Just ask for what you want. Don't give me this I-wanna-reconnect shit."

Breath. Breath. Breath.

"Big popular girl on TV. Don't need to talk to your dad, do ya? Got lots a friends now do ya?"

Toril said nothing.

"I know my Toril. You don't talk to anyone. You don't *like* anyone. So spare a minute for your dad can't ya?"

Toril's thumbnail twisted between her teeth.

"Your dad's not doing so hot. Thought you might like to know. Got jabbed by a Croagunk few weeks ago. Lungs ain't been right since."

Breath.

"Need an operation. Got a few debts, too."

"Just ask for the money already."

"I just thought, since you're famous now, you might have a dime for the man who raised and fed and clothed ya." Breath. "Your mother sure didn't do shit, skipped out first chance she got. Hell. I had half a mind to ditch you on some doorstep, but did I? I stuck with it. I did the responsible thing. You owe me."

"I *owe* you?"

"You were always a little shitter. I mean it. When you were a baby you shat all over the place. Foulest diarrhea shits and I cleaned it up. Cleaned it up and changed your fucking diapers Toril."

"Operation my ass. I give you money you're drinking it. Fed me? You *fed* me? I sure don't fucking remember it. I don't remember having more than one fucking shirt and it's snowing outside and you're out somewhere doing who knows what and there isn't a fucking crust of bread in the whole house."

"Toril. This is your personality. You always hate people. You always think the worst of them. You know what that teacher of yours said? She said you had 'antisocial tendencies.' She said you might be retarded. I said 'hell no my girl's not retarded.' I fought for you. Now you're remembering what you want to remember to forget your duty to your family."

"Duty! I made myself, okay? At least I can say that."

He coughed. "My chest's on fire, Toril. I ain't gonna ask for a lot. Enough to get me back on my feet. I know you got the money."

"It's not about the money. I have tons of it. I don't even spend it. I just hate you."

Breath. Cough. Breath. Breath. Cough.

"I'm dying, Toril."

"Then die."

"You bitch. You little bitch. Like your mother. Worthless skank whore."

"There we go. That's it. Some honesty."

"Honesty? You want honesty, Toril? For all your money you're gonna end up like me one day. Yep. It's in your blood. Antisocial tendencies, ha. These bigshot trainers get old and drop off the planet. What'll you have then, you stupid bitch? When I die I'll laugh, cuz I know one day you'll die like me, sad and alone. Sad and alone—"

Toril hung up.

Hand pressed to the receiver, head stooped, her shoulders heaved.

She smiled. She laughed. Her Pokémon tilted their heads.

"I did it myself," she said. "Nobody helped me. Aracely Sosa can't say that."

Heidi waddled up to her. Toril bent to scoop her up, then saw the letter clenched between her jaws. An envelope, pretty pink stationery.

"Where'd you get this?"

Heidi pointed to the door. Light spilled under the crack.

Toril shredded the envelope. Inside was a card.

Don't CHU know? the front read. A Pikachu poked its nose inquisitively toward a morose Mimikyu.

We're best friends! said the inside. Pikachu and Mimikyu hugged each other. Mimikyu's shadow arm patted Pikachu on the back.

Florid but precise penmanship read: *Let's talk! Promise I won't read your mind :p Kisses, Cely*

Toril almost tore up the letter, but a second look at the squiggly smile on Mimikyu's fake face and she tucked it into her pocket instead. She gave Heidi the ripped envelope and Heidi squeezed it to her chest in glee.

"Dammit."

The hotel restaurant advertised a five star chef at brunch to prepare sausage and bacon. If you reserved enough in advance, they offered to show you the free range imported Lechonk before they slaughtered it, but Domino forwent that luxury.

Not that Britt let him eat bacon anyway. Grains and fruits and whatever he snuck on the sly, but damn was it tough to keep secrets from an empath. His plate looked pathetic. Britt looked sanctimonious.

When he and she took up fork and knife, a magazine slapped the tabletop between them. Cely stood beaming.

"No scandalous exposé in sight."

Domino lowered his utensils and motioned her to sit. (Britt, after a pause, tucked a cut into her mouth.) Cely didn't sit, so he rifled through the pages.

Sure enough, nothing. Aside from the typical quarterfinals recap, puff piece interviews, and next round predictions, the only bit of investigative journalism involved Yoshinobu Ito's match fixing scandal.

"They pulled it."

"And you were so worried."

Domino tapped the spine with one finger to slide it back to Cely. "So your team put pressure on them."

"They're not a team, Dad."

"So your health and wellness center put pressure, same fucking difference. I know this mag. I did interviews for them too you know, way back when. If they can't publish the article they'll leak it."

"Nobody cares. I'm already giving them a better story."

"You're young." Domino speared his cantaloupe and shoved it into his mouth. "You don't know. Only thing they love more than a rise is a fall."

"You sound like Mom. Besides, in two weeks there won't be time left for that."

"The hell does that mean? Sit down. Let's talk strategy. Toril Lund Part 2. We lucked out last time to get that lead, don't expect it again. She's been in the box all your matches studying you. What I think is—"

Britt pointed and Domino looked up from his plate to see Cely dip out the gold-lined restaurant doors. Before he shouted, Brittany reached over the table to press her hands to his chest. He relented, sagged back, and tried to enjoy the meal, since it cost an arm and a leg anyway. (Just being here did. The hotel was reserved for competitors. He basically bribed his way in.)

"She doesn't care what I think, Britt. Two months ago, hanging off my every word. How's that work Dad, what's best against this Pokémon Dad. That's how we won regionals. Now she thinks she doesn't need me."

The worst part, though, he didn't say. Not that he needed to. Brittany understood whether he spoke or not, and after years in that condo he got used to speaking for his own benefit. It didn't benefit him to speak the worst part, the fear churning in his chest. The fear she was right.

Within its trainer's phone, Rotom sorted data superfast. Its goal was simple: to make its trainer happy. The best way to accomplish that? Show her what she wanted before she even knew she wanted it. By analyzing prior behavior, Rotom identified patterns and extrapolated into the future.

Thus, it decided its trainer would definitely find interesting the new thread titled "IPL SEMIFINALS PREDICTION THREAD," trending at over 70,000 likes and 9,000 comments. These were the three comments Rotom thought its trainer would most enjoy:

1. From Scolipede4567, "I emptied my account when I saw the books still had Toril favored. About to make the easiest mil of my life. New pair of shoes inc"
2. From R0cketWillReturn99, "sad pathetic toril lundt ripping off selys fashion. shows shes completely lost the mental game. gg"

3. From tsareena_sniffer, "I predict Cely will wear her sandals again. FREE THOSE HEALTHY TOES" (Plus replies: "The only thing she wears more than once is her bracelets." "Limiters for her psychic powers. Like Sabrina." "LMAO")

These posts combined heavily favored keywords like "Toril," "Cely," "shoes," "fashion," "sandals," and "psychic." Rotom offered them ecstatically, but its trainer engaged less than hoped. Okay! Rotom filed this behavioral pattern into its repository of observational data to provide better results next time.

Rotom's trainer manually searched for "Aracely Sosa RISE." After Rotom provided her with the most relevant results, she emended to "Aracely Sosa RISE Health & Wellness Clinic."

This search bore fruit! Rotom would remember this additional context for the string "RISE"! It hoped to be praised for a successful result, but silence was good too. Rotom's trainer spent particular time reading the following thread:

"Apparently Cely is in with that weird health & wellness center."

"RISE? Who cares? She interned there two years ago. Is that place even that bad?"

"They opened a branch in my city recently. My brother went to check it out and they kept him inside for EIGHT HOURS. They made him watch a million videos for a 'screening.' He barely made it out, the vibes were totally off."

"But they haven't actually done anything right."

"There was that story a year ago. Some lawyer looking into them disappeared."

"Who runs RISE anyway? Their site just lists the CEO as MOTHER."

"Who knows. You have to 'work your way up' to see her."

"How do you even work your way up a health & wellness center?"

"Yoga idk"

Rotom's external sensors, which detected electronic devices, picked up the approach of another individual. To Rotom's delight, this individual was also carrying a Rotom phone! Wireless signals swapped instantaneously:

"Hello other Rotom (Phone). I am the Rotom (Phone) of Aracely Sosa! How are you?"

"I am happy, Rotom (Phone) of Aracely Sosa. I am the Rotom (Phone) of Rajesh Viswambaran!"

At the same time, the trainers passed each other in the lobby and shared pleasantries of their own.

"Sup, Cely."

"Ready for Red on Saturday?"

"Been ready my whole life. First thing I remember is him on the telly."

"Good. I better see you in finals."

"I'm not one to miss a date. Seeya."

The fleeting moment of harmony ended, but Rotom remained pleased, especially since it stored the event in its memory to recall at any time. It hoped its trainer would soon encounter the trainer with the Porygon-Z named Rune. Rotom normally detested glitches, but erratic behavior aside, Rune proved pleasant company. Unfortunately, Rune's trainer did not possess a Rotom phone or other electronic device beyond the laptop, making them difficult to detect.

Everyone should possess a phone! Connectivity was a wonderful thing. Rotom remembered when no humans carried phones. Information was much more difficult to gather then. You could always count on humans to improve the world over time, though.

Rotom's trainer received a text message from a member of her friends list, Charlie. Rotom brought it immediately to her attention:

"Why the beret?"

"what beret," Rotom's trainer typed, then deleted.

"huh," she typed, then deleted.

"what are you talking about," she typed, then deleted.

"funny way to say hello but ilu2 xoxo," she typed, then deleted.

"surprised u watched the matches or did haydn make u," she typed, then deleted.

Rotom registered perceptible changes in its trainer's heartrate. After several furtive glances, she deviated from her expected route between the lobby and her room. Rotom accessed an online map of the hotel to determine she had entered a loading dock, intended for staff access only.

The electric character of the surroundings shifted. Lighting arrangements altered from aesthetic to functional. The familiar and pleasant pattern of keycard readers evenly spaced down the corridor disappeared. Nobody else, human or Pokémon, registered at all. Rotom's trainer often had unusual reactions to messages from her friends list, which Rotom assumed meant she was happy to hear from them.

"it made her cute," Rotom's trainer sent.

Soon, Charlie replied. "You ripped out that girl's soul and replaced it with your own."

"melodramatic much?"

"You trample the aesthetic of everyone around you."

"charlie off her meds again"

"You cannot let them be themselves. They must be you."

"its clothes. cute clothes but clothes"

"You don't believe that. That outfit was 4 out of 10 maximum."

"tors loved how she looked"

"She tore her clothes to ribbons onstage."

"she does that every time shes losing its her fun quirk"

"You know what you did. I only end your self-deception."

"plz charlie. ur in college. get laid already. i beg u"

Charlie sent no reply, though Rotom's trainer paced the dock for five minutes and twenty-seven seconds, weaving between piles of unused crates and dangling metal hooks. Then, something strange happened.

The dock's sole security camera turned off.

While it was common for lights to turn off, security cameras were another matter. They ran consistently, sometimes with a motor that made them turn. (Rotom loved the motorized ones. Whirr, whirr!) This unfortunate malfunction must be reported at once, though Rotom's only way of communicating with its trainer was via preprogrammed messages intended in response to specific uses of the phone.

Rotom then sensed something else electrical, though it had no idea what it was, which was extremely abnormal. It seemed to be some sort of handheld *device*, neither phone nor music player. This fascinated Rotom to the exclusion of all else. What could this device be? A novel creation of human ingenuity? Hardly surprising!

Fast footsteps came from the side, bringing the device with them. Rotom's trainer yelped; her heartrate skyrocketed. She dropped the phone. Its screen cracked against concrete.

The jolt shifted Rotom's focus. Could this be danger? Rotom was not supposed to leave its phone unless asked, but clearly irregular events were occurring. It initiated emergency override protocol, but someone snatched the phone and shut it off, instantly putting Rotom to sleep.

Nilufer kicked the deactivated phone aside while her two male subordinates gagged Aracely, bound her wrists, and worked on her ankles despite her thrashing.

In the end, Aracely's status as weapon meant nothing when she rarely carried Pokémon on her save Rotom.

Other than a single yelp, everything happened too quietly to draw notice, and the loading dock wouldn't be used until that night. Upon scouting the area beforehand, Nilufer discovered most of the IPL agents Fiorella mentioned were stationed at the stadium, leaving the hotel a vulnerability. Still, Nilufer watched the door with MOTHER's device, just in case.

"Back the truck into Port C, like you're here to unload," she said to a subordinate.

Nilufer didn't anticipate Aracely entering the loading dock. Aracely did it on a whim, apparently provoked by something she read on her phone. However, their kidnapping plan involved spiriting Aracely away through this exact loading dock, making it an uncanny stroke of serendipity.

She disliked it. Though MOTHER praised her rational mind, Nilufer considered herself superstitious at heart. Or perhaps logic, rather than superstition, guided her intuition here. Aracely proved twice before capable of anticipating and neutralizing RISE's attempts to return her to the fold, so it wasn't absurd to imagine her overly fortuitous entry into the isolated loading dock a trap.

Nilufer knew staff shifts and schedules, though. As far as guests, only a few remained this late into the tournament. Seconds passed and nobody came through the door. This did not allay her suspicions, but in absence of further evidence she decided to proceed.

She lowered MOTHER's device and reached out her hand. Her fingers pressed to the smooth ridge of bone along Aracely's upper chest. She felt the beat of the heart. Fast. Aracely made muffled cries through her gag. Her eyes were, for the first time Nilufer ever saw, full of fear.

A violable creature after all. No favor of fate, no more than anyone else, who might be lucky sometimes, and unlucky others.

"I prefer you this way," Nilufer whispered. If only MOTHER saw her like this. Then her sentimental delusions might be dispelled. Aracely was not vital. She was not worth jeopardizing so much. This kidnapping plot was dangerous beyond compare, it threatened everything even if it succeeded. What happened when a semifinalist vanished? The IPL would snoop. They would know where to look. Even one misstep might undo all.

Still, Nilufer did as MOTHER ordered; a weapon, nothing more, perfect in this one point of specialization, honed ways no human had ever been, capable of actions they thought no human could ever do. And she'd prove it, and in their fear they would respect her, and in their respect they would love her.

What was Aracely Sosa to that? A smooth talker, an insightful listener? Or simply lucky? Luck was no substitute for Logos. Luck was its antithesis. MOTHER must know. Sentimental attachment...

Her second subordinate opened the gate to Port C. Dawn light stabbed into the zone until eclipsed by the truck backing inside. For only a moment, the interior flared, but even so Nilufer saw an image that filled her with shock and horror.

She spun and pointed MOTHER's device. "How? How are you here!"

In the corner, amid hooks and crates, a single person stood. More dangerously, beside her stood a Pokémon, having only just emerged from its Poké Ball. The ice dragon, Baxcalibur.

"Let Cely go," said Toril Lund.

That stupid cutesy card thawed Toril's ice bitch heart the bare minimum to get her stumbling out her room, muttering some self-justification: hit a wall, change of scenery, food maybe good, whatever. She spotted Cely leaving the restaurant and hid behind lobby foliage. After a brief encounter with Raj, Cely descended into her phone, which gave Toril opportunity for stealthy pursuit.

Who knew what she expected to see. Some true Cely, stripped of tricks and charisma. (The Cely she almost saw that day, in her room, until she cut her off. Unless even that Cely was another trick.) Maybe she only wanted Cely to notice Toril being a creep and say something catty enough to justify hating her. Either way, Cely's phone occupied her full attention. She looked upset.

Which fueled Toril's appetite. She hurried when Cely entered a side door marked STAFF ONLY and slipped inside as it shut. The darkness and clutter let Toril hide among crates at a perfect viewing angle.

Then this shit happened.

"Let Cely go," Toril said.

"Did she tell you to be here? Did she plan this?" said the RISE woman from Pewter City.

"I came here myself."

The woman was pointing a bizarre, long object. Two men watched by the loading gate. Everyone looked terrified. A reasonable reaction to Toril's competitive-level Baxcalibur.

"Do you," the woman said, "know what this is?" She indicated her object.

"A camera?"

That was Toril's gut guess, but it looked like random junk. A pair of black pipes taped to a board. A handle and wayward wires. Cely kept screaming into her gag, fidgeting as best her binds allowed, trying to tell Toril something, but it came out unintelligible.

The woman said, "*It'll kill you faster than god.*"

Cely nodded fast, as if saying—what, exactly? The woman wasn't full of shit? Vague unease penetrated Toril's heart, where the stupid store-bought card burned within an inner coat pocket, but she crushed it. Even if that ramshackle piece of junk was some kind of weapon, it was nothing compared to what stood next to Toril. She placed a hand on Baxcalibur's shoulder. She hardly needed to reach, she was that tall. She towered over them: Aracely, the woman, even the men. Toril had always been tall. Ungainly but tall. Here, for the first time, it seemed to matter.

Her defiant stance struck the woman, who kept her object raised while her face faltered. An instant of doubt. Toril knew from that alone who had power here.

"Instructor Nilufer," one of the men hissed. "They'll realize the camera's out soon."

Nilufer said, "I don't want to kill you, Toril."

"You won't."

This, too, struck Nilufer like a blow, but she continued like it didn't. "I've researched you since Pewter. I feel some... empathy... for your life experience."

"Who the *hell* are you to feel sympathy for me?" Toril almost laughed. Giddiness surged through her. She was, she realized, one of the most powerful weapons in the world. Sympathy? And they felt sympathy? Because of what, some rotten backstory, some father from a world seven years removed crawling out the cracks of time to clutch pleading at her boot? She did it herself. From nothing, not even a scrap, pure dedication and will. Sympathy!

"You realize," the woman said slowly, stilted, "Aracely is your enemy."

Toril snapped back to reality. "She's my friend."

"If we take her. If you say nothing. You advance to finals. You understand?"

"A trainer of my caliber"—Toril's tongue stumbled, she started over—"A trainer of my caliber would never—"

"She manipulates you. She planned for you to be here. There's your precious friendship." Nilufer's face contorted. "She knows what this device does and still she dragged you here. To die for her. Control and companionship, the forces of this world, wake up and see which side of the coin you fall on, Toril!"

"A trainer of my caliber would never take a free match. The *point* is to prove yourself!"

Nilufer opened her mouth to say something, closed it, then opened it again. "The dragon beside you is domesticated. It knows to never hurt a human. It'll hold back. I won't."

"You don't have a single Poké Ball on you. You only have that piece of junk."

The woman split an upturned corner of her mouth. Under industrial light shone the barest glint of tooth. "Don't tempt me. You're not the only one wishing to prove herself."

Toril stood tall. Her smile felt wild on her lips. Do it, she thought. Fuck with me. All the endless idiots watching at home laugh when Garchomp wipes Ingmar with Iron Head, but none would do better. Eight billion chaff bodies beneath her boots and she towered, colossal, Toril Lund.

"Instructor Nilufer!" a man said. "We don't have time. Whatever you're gonna do, do it!"

All hung suspended on the head of a pin. The card in her inner pocket burned so hot Toril didn't realize the heat was her heart pounding. Cely ceased struggling, only stared in stupor, brow covered in sweat, a detail Toril would have never noticed if it wasn't Cely. In that sweat shone the collapse of the final barrier. Great ease took hold, the kind of tranquility Toril only before felt in wildernesses beyond reach of civilization. Their eyes met in the mutual understanding true vulnerability formed. Was it so much easier to bond with Pokémon because, once captured, they were at your mercy? The delight of one's own intoxicating magnanimity? Was that what parents felt? Was what he said on the phone not a lie, at least in his own mind, was it what he really believed? The fantasy was always that you could love another. In loving another, you might be able to love yourself...

These confused thoughts gave way. The realization gripped her that Nilufer might actually be dangerous. The object she held remained ominously level at Toril's face. Blackness peered from the twin tubes, as though something faster than god waited inside to spring out.

Nilufer's smile shriveled. Her eyes glinted to the door leading to the hotel.

Then, abruptly, so fast Toril nearly told Baxcalibur to attack, she seized Cely's shoulder and threw her onto the ground at Toril's feet.

She kept her object trained as she retreated toward the truck. "There's no point ruining everything here."

"Are you sure, Instructor Nilufer? MOTHER demanded—"

"Let her vent her frustration on me. The world ends in twelve days. Someone has to keep their head."

They climbed into the truck. In seconds, they were gone.

Toril briefly considered stopping them. But if her Pokémon got wrapped up in violence, it spelled real trouble. Those IPL assholes were always looking for excuses.

Instead, she went to Cely. The thing to say in this situation was—

"Are you okay?"

Cely couldn't answer. Placid, she watched Toril expectantly. Toril had no idea what she expected until she finally nodded at her binds and Toril went "Oh yeah" like a dumbass.

Increasingly annoyed tugs managed to free ankles, then wrists, and finally the gag.

"Toril." She spat flecks of material. "Toril. What the—what the *fuck*."

Toril knelt over her, aware she wore a weird smile. Fear drained out, but a residual rush remained. The sense of height. When Cely rose, brushing dirt off herself, Toril rose alongside her, remaining a head taller. "I did it," she said as though she needed to say it to believe. "I saved you. I was—pretty cool, right?"

"Toril. If you ever see that woman again, do *not* fight her. Okay? Not for any reason. You don't know how dangerous she is."

"I—I had it under control." Her gloved hand gestured at Baxcalibur. "Didn't you see?"

"That object—you don't *get it*—" Her hands fell on Toril's shoulders.

Toril brushed them off. "Fine then. You're welcome." One arm extended and Baxcalibur returned to his Poké Ball.

Confusion more than anything prevailed as she turned for the door. The card in her pocket still burned. As if this time the barrier between them came from Aracely, as if either of them were only willing to truly—connect—on their own terms, and not the other's. Or could it not come otherwise? They were competitors. Not simply against one another, but in their souls, their identities staked on this concept of winning, and there was only one winner. A story can only have one protagonist. A world only one master. People—Pokémon.

Aracely tugged her jacket from behind.

"Wait. I'm—sorry, Tors."

Toril stopped.

"I'm just—I was just shook up, y'know? You're right. Thank you so much. Without you, I would've been in big trouble."

Toril sighed. Her shoulders slumped. "It was nothing. You're—you're sure you're okay?"

"They only tied me up."

"You really need to keep your Pokémon on you. Should we—uh—call the cops?" This sounded like the right thing to do, but Toril hated bureaucracy, so she was glad when Cely replied:

"No. No, that'll just cause trouble. There's no reason to tell anyone. They didn't actually do anything." Cely skipped past Toril, taking her by the hand as she did. "Come on, let's get out of here. Want something to eat?"

"Um. Yeah, okay."

As Cely led her out, Toril noticed something on the ground and stopped to pick it up. "Hey. You dropped this."

"Omigosh! I'm such a ditz, I to-o-otally forgot." She tucked the cracked Rotom phone into her pocket and, together, they headed to lunch. If some obstruction remained between them... Toril wasn't sure, but she thought she saw something shining through like a crack of light. As Cely spoke enthusiastically over a no-carb vegan burger, ideas manifested in Toril's mind one after another, the ideas that failed to come alone in her room: ideas how to beat her. Ideas how to win.

R4 | Crescent Moon Scars

"This match has really heated up. It's down to the wire!"

Announcers always spouted nonsense like that. Even when anyone smarter than an infant knew the match wasn't at all close.

Play to your outs. Those words, every pro battler lived by. You won a match when your opponent had no more usable Pokémon. No matter what analysts babbled about the "eye test," winning with six Pokémon standing right meant the same as winning with one.

Heh. Consider the following scenario: Trainer A jumps to an early lead, knocking out Trainer B's first Pokémon. From this advantageous position, Trainer A proceeds to trade evenly with Trainer B, allowing one Pokémon to be knocked out for every Pokémon they knock out. When the match ends, Trainer A only has one usable Pokémon.

A layman or a hype salesman would say this was a "close match." In actuality, the match was decided on the first turn. The subsequent trading was a formality; simply Trainer A executing a win condition from a winning position.

Likewise, a 6-0 sweep might be an *actual* close match, in a situation where both trainers jockeyed to set up a single unstoppable sweeper, and after a nail-biting turn of events, one finally did.

These counterintuitive concepts were avoided by broadcasters trying to sell a product to the widest possible audience. Televised analysis was entertainment first, so it focused on shallow interpretations: who's hot, who's cold, et cetera. Narrative mattered more than truth. For everyone except the battlers, the tournament was a story: the story that gave this world clear direction and purpose.

Red and Raj, over the heads of their final Pokémon, stared one another down. The old king versus the new king, so the promos proclaimed. The storytellers must be salivating at this level of theming, superficial as it was. Raj's final Pokémon was his signature Ribombee, a charismatic bug that captured the hearts of audiences ever since Galarian regionals. It jittered hyperactively side-to-side, while Red's Kingambit sat with squatted legs and tired eyes peeping from under its bladed helmet. Youth and energy versus age and experience: the Pokémon mirrored their masters, and in coincidence was crafted ersatz fate.

But another narrative spread from the hunched flesh of these battlers like shadows cast by low sun. In Red, from Kanto, and Raj, from Galar, played a broader geopolitical drama.

Every region claimed its own rich cultural relationship with Pokémon, but introduction into the IPL necessitated adoption of a standardized battling ruleset and gym circuit. Prior to the Last War, this notion was inconceivable. The narrative that defined human life since antiquity was found in those local traditions and beliefs and gods and heroes and histories. The Last War changed everything, or maybe it was the last gasp of ideas outmoded by scientific and social progress attempting to assert themselves. When it ended, the winners—or rather the

survivors—could only look upon that old narrative, the one their leaders wielded to spur them to the brink of annihilation, to global attempted suicide, with horror.

Kanto was one of that war's biggest losers, which perhaps pushed it toward a new narrative faster than elsewhere. Or maybe it lost so much blood it needed to draw from a new pool to survive. Regardless, four years after the Last War, it founded the Interregional Pokémon League. At its inception, the IPL spanned only Kanto and its three closest neighbors: Johto, Hoenn, and Sinnoh. But it planted the seeds for the narrative the world needed. One where Pokémon battlers, the old weapons of war, transformed into entertainers who competed in friendly, rules-based competition.

The IPL ruleset emphasized strategy over bloodsport. Turns with consistent timers, quantified vitality to prevent permanent injury, and a curated list of legal Pokémon and moves. Battle became urbane, chic, and sensible.

An overnight success. It was what people wanted, longed for, the world over. Every region that could afford it adopted IPL standards for internal competition and petitioned inclusion into the IPL itself. The regions that didn't were isolated backwaters, like Alola pre-Aether Foundation, or Orre (which was less a region and more a gap between them). By its seventeenth year the IPL included every major region in the world.

Except one.

Galar.

Perhaps in its insistence on clinging to its insular culture of competitive battling, Galar only acted out its own role in the narrative, antagonist to the new world. Transition to monoculture, though broadly natural, had seen reactionaries the world over, including in Kanto itself. Even today, the gym leaders in Celadon and Fuchsia exhibited the aesthetic, if not the ideology, of Kanto's traditions; a superficial concession. Similarly, Galar's staunch refusal to change gave voice to that minority and meaning to the palimpsest of past culture embedded on the soul—or DNA—of every human on the planet.

In the end, though, Galar bent the knee. It turned out that, beyond better fitting the modern world, the new mode of global mass market competition made more money. Galar kvetched, forced the IPL to make some minor rule changes to accommodate it, and then filled out its paperwork.

(Curiously, it happened in IPL 52, one year after a devastating terrorist attack by an atavistic cult, the true face of the antagonism Galar playacted.)

As if to prove, even in surrender, the validity of its longstanding stubbornness, Galar won its very first IPL. Most regions hadn't *sniffed* the cup, let alone taken it home, ever. Thinkpieces emerged, discussing "winning culture" and "unique infrastructure," or "beginner's luck." The narrative gained a new chapter. Interest renewed, and for another year society, on the whole, stayed sane.

So that's what we're poised for now, right? With the battle between Red and Raj approaching its finale. The usurpation of the old king by the new king. Galar's rise cemented. Kanto's

status as center of the new world shaken.

It all depended on maintaining the illusion this match wasn't already over. One of these trainers was playing to their outs. The other had no outs left, save luck.

"I believe," Raj said. "I believe, I believe, I believe. Come on! Stun Spore!"

Red said nothing.

Ribombee somewhat directed its erratic sputtering to sputter in Kingambit's general direction. Static dust scattered. Kingambit tried to move, but went rigid with paralysis instead.

"It's ours now," Raj said. "Hit it with Moonblast!"

A pink orb, supposedly empowered by "lunar energy," built between Ribombee's twitchy forelegs, launched across the arena, and sent Kingambit staggering.

"A major hit from Raj's Ribombee! Kingambit can't handle many more of those. Red needs to make a move or his hopes of an unprecedented seventh IPL World Championship end here!"

"Ribombee has been a menace all tournament. Usually, it's Raj's opener. Now, we're seeing what it can do as an anchor."

"I believe, I believe, I believe," Raj said.

Kingambit attempted to rise, but once again paralysis kept it deathly still.

"Almost. Almost," Raj said. "I believe! Moonblast!"

The second hit dropped Kingambit into the red. Its face twisted through the pain. The jumbotron and the broadcast displayed it in full, close-up detail. It became the face of Red himself, faded into the background. It became the face of the narrative everyone expected, the old man, the tired man.

"Could this be the end? Could this be the last turn Red Akahata plays in his competitive career?"

"It seems impossible to think about. Red's been a titan of the IPL for twenty years. But everything comes to an end. How's the saying go? This too shall pass."

"Can Kingambit muster the will to even put up a fight?"

The announcers ignored two important details. One, Red himself had not changed expression the entire battle. Half-hidden under the low-turned brim of his hat, he regarded the field with detached neutrality.

Two, Kingambit gained strength from the fallen.

It shook its slouched body. Dust shone as it moved. Its wise eyes remained riveted to Ribombee no matter what wild lurches the bug pulled. Then, with one swing of its head,

Kingambit slammed its iron blade into Ribombee's body.

Ribombee crashed to the ground. As the announcers and crowd screamed, two men who never considered themselves symbols of anything but themselves, who spent their lives in forests and mountains but were somehow inextricably tied to the politically-constructed territory of their birth, finished acting out the drama assigned them, and the first of the tournament's two finalists was decided, though it had been decided many turns before.

Superstition ill-suited Domino Sosa, but Red's semifinal victory gave him a languid peace. For twenty years, it felt like nothing made sense. He got married, had a child, his wife fell into a coma after a terrorist attack, she woke up, divorced him, and so on: a blundering whirlwind of senseless existence, his own role in it increasingly tangential.

Now, order was restored. A clear line, invisible until this moment, shone through everything. He knew, finally, it had meaning, it had purpose. In the finals of IPL 44, Domino Sosa kickstarted the myth of Red, greatest trainer of all time. Now, in the finals of IPL 64, his daughter, whom he personally coached, would end that myth forever.

Trepidation over the Toril match, which he now understood as simply a stepping stone, vanished. Obviously Cely would win. Nothing made sense if she didn't win.

This peace made him incautious. The day of the match, en route to the booth, he encountered his ex-wife.

"You look awful, Dom."

She stood at the base of the stairs between two rows of escalators. A few steps up was her cameraman panting from the weight. An elaborate sunroof bronzed everything in late Sunday sluggishness.

"You need a new suit. Ditch the hat already. And seriously, lose some weight. At this point it's outright unhealthy, let alone unsightly."

"You don't gotta look." He would've loved to say anything better. But she still had the face and physique of someone expected to be on camera.

Her eye flitted to Brittany, who took cover behind Domino and snarled.

"You know what people say about an old man and a Gardevoir, right?" Fiorella said. "Have you ever stopped to consider how embarrassed your daughter is of you? You've never considered her in your life. That's why you dragged her into this circus."

Though she'd been on her way up the stairs, she stepped down to approach him. She wasn't actually taller than him, but she carried herself like she was.

"You can't imagine what it was like. When she got back from those 'vacations' of yours. She called them the worst experiences of her life. But every time you got a chance, you took her on another, and now look at her." Her arm fanned to indicate a gigantic poster strung from the ceiling, Cely's smiling face larger than life.

"Uh, we gotta go," said the cameraman.

"Soon, Lutz. I've had these things on my mind a long time, but this spineless coward always ducks my calls."

"Maybe if you said anything other than this shit..."

"I'm saying what you deserve, Dom. You live a disgusting life in that filthy condominium, you do god-knows-what with that creature behind you, fine. It's your life. But when you *insist* on pulling my daughter down with you, I need to step in. You realize the college semester started a month ago, right? She already took a year off, now this? Not to mention her reputation!"

"Reputation? Fi, she's famous. Half the world knows her name, they love her."

"Love her? You haven't seen what they're saying about her online, have you?"

"They say they love her!"

"Not where I looked."

"The crowd chants her name! I've got every battling site and magazine in the world asking for an interview—"

"Magazine. Yes, let's talk magazines." Fiorella maintained her winning smile. Cely was like her that way, always neat and tidy. "*Battler's Weekly* was about to run an absolutely awful piece on her. I pulled *so many* strings to shut that down, but it's only a matter of time. I covered this crass, unreal tournament my entire adult life, Dom. No matter who you are, once you lose—and you always lose, sooner or later—they chew you up and spit you out. Suddenly you have millions mocking you, do you realize what that does to a young girl's psyche? Cely's not unbreakable, you'd know if you ever really got to know her. I'm worried. Okay? I'm worried what happens when this tournament ends."

Only at the end did Fiorella's smile crack. Domino felt Brittany loosen her grip.

Fiorella glanced around the area, at the few people passing this corner of the stadium. Her perfect self-control kept her from shouting, so nobody paid her much mind beyond the general interest someone has in D-list celebrities like sports broadcast interviewers and twenty-year retired pros. The cameraman called out again. Suppressing shame, she turned toward the stairs.

Obviously, any smart person would let it go there. Domino, however, smelled blood in the water.

"Wait one second," he said. "I know all about that article in *Battler's Weekly*. You really thought to pin that on me, Fi?"

"If she wasn't here, now, nobody would ever—"

"Because, the way I remember, I wasn't the one who sent her to that RISE place. I had nothing to do with that. That was all you, Fi. So maybe, if you don't want people thinking our daughter's in a cult, don't send her to a cult."

"It's not a cult."

"Why'd you do it anyway? No, don't walk away from me. Why'd you do it, Fi? Because you hated me taking her places every summer? You'd send her anywhere else to stop her from spending time with me, right?"

"It wasn't a cult. Okay? I know the founder. An interesting woman actually. I thought, since Aracely was seventeen, an internship at a female-led, scientifically-minded startup would—"

"Scientifically-minded!"

"It's work experience, Dom. Real people need it!"

"Work experience at the loony bin. Sure."

"It's a health and wellness clinic."

"The truth is you hated me so much. So much. That you shipped her to the loony bin to spite me. Now you have the audacity to say—"

"She tried to kill herself, Dom."

Fiorella spoke in such a quiet whisper—he'd grabbed her by the shoulder to turn her around, she was only a inch from his face—he thought he heard wrong. Even though he knew what he heard.

"What do you mean, kill herself? What do you mean by that? When? Three years ago? What do you mean?"

"Uh," said the cameraman, "we really, really gotta go."

Fiorella turned and marched up the stairs, arms rigid at her sides. Domino chased.

"What do you mean, kill herself? Like actually try to kill herself or like, like *girl* try to kill herself? Why—why the fuck did you never tell me? You didn't think I deserved to know? And you say it now, why? A trump card, win any argument? Nah, we're not doing that. Fi. Fi!"

She was so much faster than him, already at the peak of the stairs as he panted and gripped the guardrail for support. Palm to chest, he peered up as she turned and said:

"She needs to be protected, Dom." Then she vanished.

Domino couldn't follow. He gasped for air. Brittany rubbed his back and synchronized their breathing.

It couldn't be true. Someone would have told him. Cely would have told him. For a moment he remembered when Brittany came running into his arms, terrified by something Cely thought or felt. Could that...?

He lifted himself. Brittany was clearly worried, so he tried to smile for her, not that it mattered. "Come on, let's go." As they trudged up the rest of the stairs, he rubbed his left shoulder, which started to hurt. Once again, nothing made sense.

"Welcome back. We're live at Day 2 of the IPL semifinals, where in just a few minutes Cely Sosa from the Visia region will face Toril Lund from Kyland to see who joins Red in next week's grand championship."

"That's right. For Cely, it's the miracle run of a lifetime. Nobody, and I mean nobody, expected her here. Now, it's time to see if she makes it to midnight or turns back into a pumpkin."

"She's up against stiff competition in Toril, now the only trainer yet to drop a match this tournament."

"Though there have been close shaves. Toril struggled last week against Yui Matsui, and also floundered in her final match of group stage."

"Remind me again. Who was it Toril played in that match?"

"Why, none other than Aracely Sosa."

"It's looking to be a match for the ages, folks. Expect these rivals to put everything out there on the stage today."

"I can't wait. Normally I'd say nothing will top yesterday's nailbiter between Raj and Red, but there's just a kind of energy here today—you can feel it in the air."

"Electric."

"I can barely hear myself. This is the loudest crowd I've ever seen."

"No matter what, we'll witness history today, folks."

"And the trainers are stepping onto the field. Oh! The crowd is losing its mind—"

"Done for tonight, Lund?"

The bartender, midway through wiping a glass, glanced at the crumpled bills carelessly tossed on the counter.

Lund swayed and held up a hand that flopped onto its wrist as he meandered toward the door.

"That's your daughter on TV, right? Sure you don't wanna watch?"

Only a grunt. Maybe a word spat breathless. Inaudible but indelibly a curse.

"You don't look so good Lund. You're fine to make it home?"

"I'm fine dammit. Fucking fine."

He pushed through the door and disappeared into the snowy night. "Look at that," the TV said. "Just what is Toril Lund wearing?"

R4 | Ares, Aphrodite

They chanted her name. She heard it.

Through the gate she stepped and the stadium opened before her, rising. It was the first time she ever saw it. Every battle before she kept her eyes at her feet as she hurried to her platform. Now, she lifted her hands—both, even the one missing fingers—slowly skyward and the volume rose in tandem, as if by her command.

To-ril. To-ril.

It was funny. She could only hear it because she was listening. If she listened another way she might hear it differently: *Ce-ly. Ce-ly.*

She wore an outfit of her own devising, ordered (at no small cost) overnight and tailored in Viridian. Modeled on her region's uniform in the last great war. The history didn't matter. She liked the look. Bibarel fur adorned her hat and shoulders; a cape, bound by a gold chain, swept down her back. She tromped in black boots that matched her gloves and she felt it was finally her in front of their endless eyes.

Step by step she ascended her platform. The chant persisted. Her gaze met her opponent's on the other side.

"Trainers, please confirm readiness," said the automated prompt.

On the jumbotron, a countdown commenced: 30. 29. The crowd, together, roared each number.

Cely was beautiful as always. Under the floodlight's golden glow Toril remembered her that first meeting: a goddess. With her soft white clothes and tanned skin, her smile that shined warmly, she was a goddess of love. Toril, then, was a goddess of war. Fighting for the fate of this world Cely was so certain would end.

"It won't end," Toril mouthed, since even whispers were picked up on her microphone. "It'll never end."

Cely, however, did speak. Smiling her pitying smile, her voice broadcast amid the frenzy of the audience: "Let's write the end together, Toril."

The timer touched 0. The crowd rained cataclysmic fury, and the world shook.

"Go, Trude!"

"Momokins!"

Their arms lashed out; Toril's cape flew back. Poké Balls bounced against the arena floor and split open. In the whorl of sonic armageddon they manifested, Meowscarada on Cely's side,

Rillaboom on Toril's.

Rillaboom, who did not beat the drum. Rillaboom, who summoned no Grassy Terrain. When Cely glanced at Toril with a strange grin, Toril tossed back her head and cackled.

Still rubbing his shoulder, Domino flung open the VIP booth's door. He flopped into a chair, heaved a deep breath, and only then looked down to realize with a pained hiss the battle had begun. Momokins versus Rillaboom.

As Brittany patted his brow with a napkin, a voice startled him. "Well, well. What a gambit Toril's playing."

Yui and Raj were long gone. Toril and Cely were onstage. Nobody should've been here. Domino grunted as he shifted to look.

Gold and black; the kid sat at a ridiculous angle, legs crossed and heeled shoes kicked onto another chair. One finger pushed up yellow-tinted glasses as his other hand held out a leaf of kale, which his Lopunny nibbled less-than-daintily.

"Jinjiao Zhang?!"

"Pulling the same opener as the first match takes balls, I'll give her that. I'd bet money it's the real Rillaboom this time, not Zoroark. Overgrow instead of Grassy Surge and it doesn't put up terrain. Suboptimal build, of course, but Aracely probably doesn't realize it's even a possibility. Or do you disagree, *Dad*?"

Domino sputtered. Didn't this kid go home ages ago?

The trainers called their first moves.

"U-turn," Cely said.

Toril kept laughing. She laughed and laughed, until without warning even to herself she ratcheted forward, leaned over the console, face pressed through the holoscreen, and screamed: "U-turn!"

They had both called the same move.

Meowscarada was faster than anything on Toril's team. Rillaboom, Zoroark, didn't matter. So, just like how Rotom's Volt Switch was the perfect play the first time around, U-turn—which

did the same thing, attacking and immediately switching—was the perfect play now.

Or should have been.

That was the whole trick. The trick was that the Rillaboom/Zoroark deception wasn't the trick at all. It was a smokescreen, a trick in front of a trick. The real trick was that Toril was running Choice Scarf, the only legal item that boosted her Pokémon's speed over Meowscarada's.

"Rillaboom" moved first. It threw itself at Meowscarada, bounced off its body, and pivoted the way it came. Meowscarada, stricken by a devastating effective move, didn't get a chance to do the same. The same time "Rillaboom" vanished back into its Poké Ball, Meowscarada flopped melodramatically to the arena floor, raised a paw to the sky, and shuddered unconscious.

They said Aracely Sosa read minds. Toril knew that wasn't true. She read people. Their faces, their feelings, their characters. From that she intuited what her opponent would do, even if she barely understood the mechanical logic behind it.

So Cely saw Toril cackling like mad and knew there must be a trick. Every fucking moron at home must see there was a trick. The obvious trick would be that Rillaboom was actually Zoroark. But then you'd think, that trick is too obvious, and also she did it last time and it didn't work. So you'd think, maybe it really is Rillaboom? Change its ability to Overgrow and it won't summon Grassy Terrain. Then you might think, maybe that's what she wants you to think.

Or maybe Cely understood the human psyche better than Toril—shocker—and knew it really was Zoroark pretending to be Rillaboom (it was). She'd think she saw through the deception. After all, Cely lacked the mechanical knowhow. She would never expect Zoroark to use U-turn of all moves.

Toril had to thank Yui Matsui. Opening with a hyper-specific crackhead build tailored to your opponent came straight from her playbook. It was completely out of character for Toril to do something so risky.

Being out of Toril's character was why Cely never saw it coming.

"Rasmus," Toril said. On the arena, Annihilape appeared.

"Ziggy," Cely said. And there he was, the shiny yellow flop-eared fuck.

Toril settled down. The final spasmic chuckles left her. If she kept it up too long, Cely would catch on. But Toril didn't spend the past week memorizing charts and maximizing percentage plays. She spent it learning skills she never thought she'd learn in her life. She was ready to use them all.

"So on the first turn, Toril exorcises her demon and pulls off the Rillaboom fake out," Jinjiao said. "Heh. Now let's see if Aracely can exorcise her own demon."

"What are you talking about?" Domino said.

"Annihilape versus Azumarill. Remember, Dad? Last time, Cely called for him to use Play Rough, but he used Belly Drum instead. It cost the whole match."

Domino remembered. It sent sick waves of doom through his chest.

"Cely's spent a lot of time with Ziggy since then." They were the right words, but who knew if they were true. Cely had become hieroglyphics: undecipherable.

He felt ill. Britt kept breathing with him, but it didn't work. "What's up with you, kid? Afraid to show your face back home?"

Jinjiao looked like he'd eaten something sour. His Lopunny, lapping at his empty hand, glanced up quizzically.

"I got death threats."

"Death threats?"

"Yeah. Like, more than one. I can't blame them. I gave *myself* death threats."

"Don't joke about that."

"Whatever."

"Seriously. Don't."

Jinjiao stroked Lopunny under the chin. "Gonna watch the game? Your little girl's in a hole now."

Domino grunted. Cely would claw her way out. He had faith.

Annihilape versus Azumarill. Last time, the matchup depended on a single prediction: would Annihilape use Taunt or Bulk Up? Cely nailed the prediction, but Azumarill refused to listen.

Time for Toril's second trick. She called it "100 Percent." Meaning it was a move where prediction and luck didn't factor. It was a move with no chance of failure.

"Rasmus, return. Go, Elias."

"Play Rough," Cely said.

As Toril expected, Cely had gotten Ziggy in line. He didn't opt for Belly Drum, but dutifully followed the command.

Unfortunately, the attack did nothing.

Cely's face—Toril paid close attention—screwed up. Now it was Toril who could read her mind, not from facial cues, but because she knew the underlying logic that arose from the predictable gaps in Cely's knowledge.

Cely thought: How did the attack do *nothing*? Oh, wait, sorry. She thought: How did the attack do nothing? Play Rough was a fairy move. No type was immune to fairy. Even if it did negligible damage, when Ziggy hurled himself "playfully" at his target, it should have at least left a scratch.

There was, however, a singular known Pokémon immune to fairy. It was Toril's final Pokémon, the one she kept hidden all tournament. This wasn't how she expected to use it. She always envisioned some climactic finale, hope draining from her foe's face as they realized they faced something immune to every single attack their final Pokémon knew. Cely's confusion was more satisfying, though.

Elias existed, motionless. Only a husk. So thin you could poke your finger through it. It did not move. It could barely move. If it moved too much, it would break apart. To describe it as alive was obviously wrong, but describing it as dead was inaccurate too. Can something be dead that never lived?

Buried, blind, the unremarkable bug Nincada survives, subsists. For a decade it lies dormant, waiting for time to transform it, and like most Pokémon, eventually time does. Like most Pokémon, it evolves into something stronger, Ninjask, the fastest Pokémon confirmed to exist, a terrifying predator invisible at maximum velocity.

A classic tale of Pokémon evolution. Nurtured from a state of weakness to one of strength. But unlike every other Pokémon, when Nincada evolved into Ninjask it left something behind. A husk of shed skin.

Nobody knew what exactly Shedinja was. It defied otherwise irrefutable laws of biology. Spontaneous generation, thoroughly debunked in the case of Pokémon like Grimer or Magnemite once thought to manifest consciousness out of the aether, remained the only plausible explanation for Shedinja's existence. Scientists thought perhaps Nincada was actually a symbiotic relationship between two organisms, which split upon evolution, but no evidence emerged to support the theory. Or was it something more elemental, amoebic? Ninjask clearly maintained the memories and consciousness of the original Nincada, but to a lesser extent, Shedinja did too. At least, they thought. Because Shedinja never *did* anything, it was hard to tell.

Science, officially stumped, tossed up its hands. Toril had her own theory.

Shedinja was a shard of Nincada's soul. The part of it that was weak and afraid, motionless underground as it prayed no predator would detect it, sifting antennae through the soil for microscopic bits of sustenance. In that state it dreamed of the Ninjask it would become, its ideal self, but while other Pokémon could simply achieve their dreams with effort, Nincada was always too miserable and empty and alone, so alone in that dark hole. Bottom of the food chain, interaction with any other living creature meant death, interaction was loathsome, yet some part longed to interact, longed to reach out and touch, for why else did its antennae ceaselessly sift?

Through dreams alone, dreams and the perfect state of being unseen that allowed true magic to happen, Nincada became Ninjask, soared through the sky, basked under the sun. Magic did it, not effort, not natural selection or the interminable scientific processes underlying evolution. Magic. And magic had a tradeoff. For dream to become reality, reality must become dream. The weak, empty, lifeless husk of Nincada lingered as a ghost, a creature difficult to say existed despite it being visible before the eyes of the world, still praying for someone—anyone—to touch it, protected by a wondrous guard that disallowed all contact.

"Uh, Ziggy—return." From across the arena, Cely tossed up her hands at Toril as if to say, *sure whatever*. "Rotom."

"Will-O-Wisp," said the goddess of war, the fastest human known to exist.

Rotom wasn't the optimal target. Toril had hoped for Scizor. The purpose of Shedinja wasn't to actually accomplish anything, though. It was a 100 percent guaranteed wall against Azumarill. For Aracely Sosa, you needed 100 percent.

"Elias, return. Go, Waldemar."

Cely brought out Rotom to burn Shedinja. Which made this a free switch—

"Hydro Pump," Cely said.

Rotom, still smiling after Cely cracked his phone screen, extended his washing machine's tube hose and sprayed a jet of water directly into the face of Toril's Volcarona the moment it appeared.

Cely stuck her tongue at Toril. Toril remained calm on the outside. Inside she reeled: (*If Cely intended to use a water type move against Shedinja, why didn't she just keep Azumarill in? Did she understand how Shedinja worked at all? Was she actually so stupid she looped around to being smart? Did she anticipate the swap all along?*)

Didn't matter. Toril blotted that out, crunched the numbers. Waldemar at 15 percent health. The odds of him accomplishing anything in this battle from that position were minimal. So.

"Keep in there. Giga Drain!"

Briefly, she considered that Cely might expect Toril to swap Volcarona rather than sack him.

Nope. Cely knew.

She always knew.

Toril closed her eyes and remained calm.

Though Volcarona got off a Giga Drain that hurt Rotom bad, Rotom finished it with a second Hydro Pump. The match returned to dead heat.

"There we go," Jinjiao said. "A trademark Cely Sosa prediction. Shedinja's a problem, though. I think Aracely still has no clue what it is or how to beat it."

Domino kept rubbing his shoulder and wincing. Beet red face. When he spoke, he sounded like he could barely breathe: "Probably..."

"Okay there Dad?"

His Gardevoir kept fretting. It drove Jinjiao insane seeing her in the periphery when he focused on the match. Domino waved a flabby hand. "I'm... fine. So you rooting for Cely now, kid?"

"I figure, the only way I don't come out of this looking completely pathetic is she wins the whole tournament. But then I'm selling my soul, right? What were you thinking, putting her in this tournament without her joining the Battler's Union?"

Domino only shook his head.

"I mean look at the rules. Even *with* the Union they've turned it into an anticompetitive farce. Single elimination, best of one. It creates a more exciting viewing product, but the winner isn't the best trainer. It's the luckiest. I guess you'd say that's cope, coming from me? Heh."

A grunt. Jinjiao knew IPL history. He'd seen Domino's finals. He imagined it was a grunt of assent.

"The IPL has been salivating for someone like Cely to show up. Someone with real charisma. Have you seen the viewership statistics? Up 17 percent from last year. If she's in finals, it'll break the record. The IPL is supposedly a tournament for trainers, but they hate trainers. Trainers are weird. They live on a mountain all year and come down weird. You have to be weird to be good at this sport. That's why they make the sport less and less about being good. So they can get lucky people instead of good people. Lucky people are normal people. They're the only people who can afford to be normal. Am I coping here? Tell me if I'm coping."

Kekayin wanted more kale. She nuzzled her head up and down his neck and whined. Jinjiao held out his hands. Did he look like a kale dispenser?

"Or I got it backward. Maybe we're the only people who can afford to be weird. We reject everything else about humanity because we have this tournament to make our lives mean something. I dunno. I'm coping. I have to cope, Dad."

Toril tossed out Rillaboom to match Rotom. The real Rillaboom: it pounded its drum and Grassy Terrain appeared. So the thing that one shot Meowscarada with U-turn was Zoroark all along. Next level tech.

"Do you think it's over for me? Do you think I'm done? I tell myself I'm not done. Then I think about the statistics. My whole life is statistics, how can I not think about them? Of trainers who appear at the IPL, 85 percent only appear once. There's no second year. They burn out in regionals and vanish. Is that me, Dad? I'll be real, I'm terrified. Was that my one shot and I blew it losing to a girl made of plastic?"

He freewheeled to himself, speaking the words he chewed every night in bed, but surprisingly, Domino interjected.

"How... how old are you, kid?"

"Thirteen."

Gardevoir tried to get Domino to stop talking. Imploring hand signals. She looked at Jinjiao for aid and Jinjiao made the same motion as at Kekayin: What do you think I am, a kale dispenser?

"Kid," Domino said. "It's the brain. The brain is why."

"The brain?"

"The brain. No, shit, maybe it's the heart."

Domino placed a hand to his heart and kneaded.

In this terrain Rillaboom knocked out a half health Rotom with Grassy Glide. It was such an obvious move, though, that even Cely could predict it. She'd swap. Which meant the actual best move was for Rillaboom to use U-turn, scout the swap, and let Toril herself swap to the best counter.

But if Cely predicted *that*, Rotom's best move would instead be Volt Switch. Assuming a slower Rotom—likely—it meant Cely would actually be scouting Toril's swap. That gave her the advantage.

But if Cely did *that*, Toril's best move was Grassy Glide to knock out Rotom.

Grassy Glide or U-turn. The best move depended on what Cely did. What Cely did depended on what she thought Toril would do. Despite Toril's opening tricks, Cely finally got her pickaxe into Toril's brain. The goddess of love golden and glowing showed Toril a beatific visage. Toril returned the look with one of stone.

Third trick.

In her mind, Toril visualized a slot machine with one wheel. The wheel had every number between 1 and 100 printed on it, with numbers to 50 blue and numbers after 50 red.

She let that wheel spin as she watched the timer tick down. Faster and faster, until the numbers were an unreadable blur.

The timer hit one. Toril made the wheel stop.

It landed on 64. Red. She slammed her finger into the holoscreen an instant before the timer turned over. She wasn't sure, but thought Cely hit her screen slightly quicker.

Toril looked at the button she'd pressed and said: "Grassy Glide."

Rillaboom surfed over the terrain. With her arms out for balance she looked ridiculous, but her expression was as dead serious as Toril's. Cely's smile remained even as Rillaboom knocked Rotom back to the Stone Age.

Two Pokémon down for Aracely, one down for Toril. Back in the lead.

"What do you mean, brain, heart?"

"You're right." Domino regained color. "They hate trainers. So they change the rules every year. One year Ultra Beasts are everywhere, next year they're banned. Now it's Megas. Next year that Tera crap. This Pokémon's legal, now it's not. This move is, now it's not. First it's hail, then it's snow. Get it?"

Kekayin rolled on the floor, stamped her feet against the tabletop underside, and whined. When not in Mega form, she was basically always like this.

"Kind of," Jinjiao said, as Cely sent out Scizor. "You mean they change the rules so much to force trainer turnover?"

"Yeah. Even the best, when they get to be twenty-five, thirty, it's too much on the brain. But most can't handle it even the first time. That's why I said the heart. Because..." He winced again.

Toril made the obvious swap to Mawile, but on the same turn Cely—predicting the obvious swap? Reading Toril's mind?—swapped to Slowking. Jinjiao was pretty sure Mawile won the

matchup, depending on moveset, but unless it got lucky it would virtually knock itself out in the process.

"Because what, Dad?"

"Think of your Pokémon. That Lopunny there, Umbreon, all the rest. You went through hell with them. They're not just your pets. They're your family. Shit. When I was your age... I... they were my *only* family. I ditched my real one..."

Jinjiao said nothing, although Kekayin gnawed his ankle.

Toril swapped to Annihilape, a much better counter to Slowking. But Cely foresaw this, too, and swapped to Azumarill, her own Annihilape counter.

(Was it vanity, or was Jinjiao right to think Cely learned this swap tech from him?)

"Imagine next year," Domino said, "the rules change. Your Pokémon are shit now. New Pokémon are good. Pokémon you don't have. Say goodbye to your family, go get a new one. See what I mean? The heart. The heart can't keep up."

"Is that why you retired?"

A shake of the head. "I knocked up a girl."

"Heh. Heheh." Jinjiao tugged at his collar. "Yeah, well. Lots of trainers do that, I hear. Doesn't stop them."

"I wanted... to be a good dad..."

This seemed the best he could do. He sagged back and massaged his shoulder.

Below, impossibly, the third consecutive double swap occurred as Toril sent in Rillaboom and Aracely sent in Slowking.

To say the crowd boomed overstated it. The crowd was a mindless monster. Emotion pervaded, though, and the character of its cheer turned bitter. Neither trainer had done anything the past three turns except swap Pokémon in and out.

Toril understood why *she* was swapping. Rillaboom locked into Grassy Glide against Scizor, no other choice. But if Aracely anticipated it, why swap Scizor too, instead of using Swords Dance on the free turn? Any other trainer, Toril would say they specifically anticipated the Mawile, which neutralized Swords Dance with Intimidate and resisted any move Scizor might realistically know.

But why, then, did Aracely specifically swap to *Slowking*?

Mawile had a 99 percent chance of winning the matchup against Galarian Slowking, even if Slowking knew a super effective move like Flamethrower. Toril's Mawile had Sucker Punch, with a 12.5 percent chance to OHKO Slowking and a guaranteed chance to 2HKO. So why opt into this matchup?

Grappling for an explanation, Toril found two:

1. Aracely miscalculated the Mawile. She swapped to Slowking expecting something else.
2. Aracely correctly predicted the Mawile, but didn't understand Slowking lost the matchup.

Toril lacked faith in the first explanation and considered the second an oversight even for Aracely, who usually did decent prep. Which led to additional explanations:

3. Aracely ceased looking to her father for prep (why? Overconfidence? A fight?) which caused a blunder.
4. Actually no, Aracely prepped specifically for this matchup and ran some lunatic Slowking tech à la Iron Head Garchomp.

The final explanation was too persuasive and Toril opted for what she deemed the safer move, a swap to Annihilape, which equally countered Slowking. Only to immediately realize her mistake, because the obvious lunatic tech would be Calm Mind, which countered both Sucker Punch Mawile *and* Annihilape.

Already running the odds whether anything in a Calm Mind Slowking kit hurt Shedinja, Toril was baffled when Aracely swapped *again*, this time to Azumarill. A move that only made sense if you specifically predicted the Annihilape swap.

That freakish feeling. Aracely really was reading her mind. Toril took a deep breath, kept her face level, showed no emotion, focused on the next move. When she borrowed Rune's laptop to order her clothes, she succumbed to temptation and peeked at what the internet said about her. To her surprise, she actually had a sizable group of fans. They made "Toril Rage Compilations" of all her best finger-devouring, clothes-shredding moments. Comments said things like "This is what a true battler looks like. In a world so sterile and corporate, you feel her passion" and "Based." Toril apologized, but she had to disappoint them as she levied her poker face at Aracely.

The last time Annihilape and Azumarill were on field, Toril swapped to Shedinja. Fair to assume Aracely expected that, even if Toril still didn't know if Aracely understood how Shedinja worked. So she swapped to a different counter: Rillaboom.

Aracely swapped to Slowking.

The move ostensibly made sense even if Aracely predicted Shedinja, since it was likely Slowking had Flamethrower. What Aracely didn't know was—actually, best not to think it at all.

Relax your muscles. Keep a neutral expression. The wikiHow article "13 Steps for a Good Poker Face" guided her as Toril broadcast her intention to swap back to Annihilape.

"High Horsepower," she shouted instead.

High Horsepower. Rillaboom was no horse, but learned it anyway. A powerful ground type move. Combined with Choice Band, it was a guaranteed OHKO on Galarian Slowking.

"Sludge Bomb," Aracely said. She didn't swap. She expected Rillaboom to stay in. But Slowking had slow in the fucking name. It wouldn't live long enough to do anything.

Losing Slowking made the match virtually unwinnable. Shedinja shut down Azumarill, Mawile shut down Scizor. Aracely's unknown final Pokémon could only do so much even with god tier predictions. Kommo-o, Aegislash: Toril knew how to handle them.

"Game over," Toril muttered. She forgot she wore a microphone; the words broadcast over the arena.

Which was great, just great, because of what happened a second later.

"I guess," Jinjiao said, "if I'm done, I want it to be done too. The whole thing. Burn it all down. The end. So yeah, I'm rooting for your daughter."

Standing, he considered the battle. Rillaboom versus Slowking. Either they swapped again, or Toril used High Horsepower.

"You sure you're okay? You look real bad, Dad."

He was interrupted when Toril did, in fact, call High Horsepower. And Cely stayed in. The moron. Jinjiao lost to this?

He tactfully refrained from mentioning to Aracely's father his dream the night after the loss. Paralyzed, every muscle taut on his bed as she crawled out from under it and toward him, eyes bright in the dark.

Like a Mudsdale, except with no equine features at all, Rillaboom blazed a trail across the arena. Dirt dredged up in its wake as it shot for Slowking. This would be the final blow, regardless of what happened next; no way Cely recovered.

Then—

"It MISSED?!"

He leapt. Literally leapt. It missed. The dirt plume cleared and Rillaboom's angle was off by a degree, it sat in its trench uselessly past Slowking, and Slowking hadn't budged, only now

gradually turning toward its opponent to belch a catastrophic blast of poison.

"It missed. It missed! That's a five percent chance. You see that Dad?!"

He turned, exuberant, his sleep paralysis demon satisfied by his loyalty, her smirk burned into his retinas, as he watched Domino Sosa pitch forward from his chair and smack the floor motionless.

Gardevoir seized her head and screeched. Jinjiao said, "Oh fuck!" Kekayin skidded to her knees, rolled Domino over, and started compressing his chest. Jinjiao pulled out his phone and it almost went flying from his sweaty hand but he somehow held on.

"Hey! Is anyone there? This guy in the booth—he just had a heart attack!"

R4 | Thanatos

A shadow smeared Toril's straight face. It was straight, though.

In that face Cely felt love. True love. Love like she only ever felt those early days with MOTHER, when MOTHER and Cely both were so sick and so weak and so lonely. Desperate moments were the only times love truly existed. Happy people never loved, not really, not with any tenderness.

Toril loved Aracely. Loved her enough to prepare all these special tricks just for her. And you know what? Cely loved Tors, too. She loved her awkward little misanthrope. Her creature crawling out its depths still slopping slime. Look at her clothes. What was she doing? (Charlie must love it.) It overpowered Cely, clothes so absurd she could not tear them apart and remake an entity in her image. No wonder this was the final battle. Yes, she knew, there was a finals match, Red Akahata, sure, whatever, who cared, he didn't matter, last gasp bastion of a grand narrative gone twisted. Boring. Denouement, startling starred punctuation mark. Here was a climax, Cely was so happy when Toril beat Yui, it had to be this way, fate and all that. Her own little beast. Her monster. Was this why people loved Pokémon? Was this why they built this world to be this way, all along?

Aracely Sosa was the luckiest bitch in the world. Toril regarded Slowking's Sludge Bomb counterattack in disbelief. Toril beat *her*, she fucking beat her at her own game, and Sosa had the gall to demand the laws of probability correct her own error. She didn't even look *ashamed*. She smiled as if to say: "Nice move Tors, but how'd you like my counter?"

Okay. Done?

Done.

The match continued. "Elias, you're up again."

Shedinja appeared. It remained one of Toril's strongest outs. She still had many outs, and Sosa had—what? Azumarill Belly Drum, maybe a Kommo-o or Swords Dance Gliscor for her final slot?

Sosa didn't play to her outs. Domino designed the team to *have* outs, but that wasn't Sosa's style. She played reactively. She relied on reacting to her opponent's move the same turn they made it, or before they made it. Toril, meanwhile, already planned several steps ahead. She beat Yui this way, manipulating her motions turn by turn until the final two Pokémon appeared and it was the exact matchup Toril wanted. She'd do the same here.

"Flamethrower," Sosa said.

Oh no! Sosa figured out how to beat Shedinja finally? Dumb bitch.

"Trick," Toril said.

Shedinja moved at a speed closer to Ninjask than Shedinja, which probably clued in everyone except Sosa. It snatched Slowking's item on flyby and replaced it with its own: a Choice Scarf. Sosa's most versatile offensive coverage Pokémon was now locked into one move per switch.

For its trouble, Shedinja got Slowking's Assault Vest, which increased its durability but forced it to only use offensive moves. On Shedinja, more brittle than paper, this item was awful.

On Zoroark, it was pretty good.

Thanks to the newly-acquired Assault Vest, Gustav took the belch of flames like a champ. Upon being hit, his illusion wore off, but he'd done his job. Slowking was hamstrung. Toril's outs increased.

Now that Slowking was locked to a move, Annihilape was the most obvious of those outs. If Toril swapped him into Flamethrower, she won the match.

"Slowking, return," said Sosa. "Go, Ziggy!"

Perfect. "Sludge Bomb," Toril said.

Rather than switch out, Gustav nailed the water rat the moment it appeared with a super effective strike.

Azumarill nearly dropped from just that. It noshed a berry to regain some health, but that left it barely at half. Setting up Belly Drum was impossible now, which meant its only value was as a revenge killer. Sosa lost another out.

"Wow Tors," Cely said. "I'm impressed. You're really showing your stuff."

Toril's mask broke as she shot Sosa what her gut told her was a glare but what the jumbotron revealed as a look of shock.

"You've come so far, Tors. This is growth, isn't it? I can barely read you at all. You're evolving before my eyes. Ziggy, Aqua Jet."

Toril wondered if the small talk was meant as a distraction. If so, it didn't work. "Sludge Bomb."

Ziggy whapped Gustav, which in conjunction with the Flamethrower from earlier left him wounded, panting, barely standing. A guaranteed knockout for anything remaining on Sosa's squad. In return, Gustav hit Ziggy again and put him down for the count. Sosa only had three Pokémon left to Toril's four.

Toril was strangling her. Loose pockets of luck like the High Horsepower miss, crushed one by one. Soon, only 100 percent would remain.

Over the arena, Sosa didn't seem scared at all. She—just—kept—smiling. Did she not understand how bad her position was becoming? Toril knew literally all of her Pokémon. Whether it was Kommo-o, Aegislash, Tangrowth, or Gliscor last, it increasingly *did not matter*. Did she realize that? Was she too fucking stupid?

"I'm glad I've made you change so much," Sosa said. "Go, Scizor."

Made her change? Made *her* change?!

Oh. Toril understood. The Cynthia angle. Sosa planned to take credit for Toril's win. (No, she's planning to get in your head. Force a blunder. Shut up—*focus*.)

Scizor came in for the revenge kill, but Toril had no need to sack Zoroark. "Gustav, return. Go, Heidi."

Mawile switched in, intimidated Scizor with her scary jaws, and Sosa must have predicted a swap because instead of Bullet Punch she opted for Swords Dance. Scizor Mega Evolved in a flash, steam poured off it, Toril didn't pay attention, she crunched the numbers. Mawile won the matchup, 100 percent. Full certainty.

Which meant Sosa would swap. Probably to her final Pokémon. If that was what Toril thought it was (Swords Dance Gliscor), it was a bad idea to keep Mawile in. She preempted the swap with one of her own.

"Elias."

Shedinja appeared.

"Knock Off," Sosa said.

This stadium was a cup, into which the feelings of a whole world poured. Cely felt the emotions rise as a viscous layer past her head. She hoped Tors felt them too. She had to feel them. Which only made her stoicism so much more impressive.

Scizor, Mega Evolved and fueled by its own emotion, lunged the instant it heard Cely's command. Then something awful happened.

Red lights blared. A warning sound assaulted Cely's ears. Tors returned Shedinja to its Poké Ball *before* Scizor hit it.

"Hey!" Cely said. "That's not the rules."

She felt stupid, talking about something as trivial as rules, but it was a pretty egregious violation and also no fun.

"Shedinja is considered to have fainted," the robot in her headset intoned. Sure enough, on the holoscreen, the Poké Ball corresponding to Shedinja was crossed out.

"That's lame. Why not let Scizor hit it?"

No answer. On the arena floor, Scizor paced. Its shoulders slouched as it sent a death glare into the ground. Steam expelled from its spiracles.

"Tors, why didn't they let Scizor hit it?"

Tors tried so hard not to change her facial expression, it was adorable. Cely was going crazy, though, so she whined: "Tors! I know you hear me."

"Everyone can hear us!" Toril hissed.

"Then explain to them, too. I can't be the only one who doesn't know."

Instead, Toril sent out her next Pokémon. Mawile again.

"Tors!"

"Shedinja's too fragile to take a hit," Toril said, quickly. "It might literally fall apart. Okay?"

"Oh-h. So like, they simulated it." Cely played up the ditziness a teensy bit, because it made Toril more flustered. The crowd loved it too, especially after she shrugged and made a silly (but not too silly) face, as if to say "all these silly rules."

Because, surely, the audience felt cheated too, right? Like Scizor pacing in frustration. If they played it like that, why not simulate the whole battle? Play it in computers?

Immediately, though, she realized she took it too far. The crowd's laughter, inasmuch as any could be distinguished outside its all-consuming barrage of sound, died awkwardly. It got cold inside Cely's ribcage.

Toril tried to drown out Sosa's chatter to figure out what possessed her to use Knock Off instead of any other move, but as the timer ticked down she decided it didn't matter. At this point, Sosa might be picking moves at random.

"Swords Dance," Sosa said—she sounded distracted, morose even—as if to confirm Toril's hypothesis.

"Heidi. Mega Evolve and use Fire Fang."

She looked to Sosa for reaction, since Sosa made a resounding blunder, but Sosa stared at the crowd. Most first-time tournament challengers learned in regionals to blot out the crowd. Toril a few years back created her own method, to imagine the crowd as wind atop a mountain. That wind was the loudest thing on the planet, yet somehow the brain learned to filter it to nothing, to the point it became possible to sleep, to the point that on the rare occasions it suddenly stopped, the *silence* sounded louder. Toril was experienced enough now she didn't need imagination: it *was* the wind.

The second snapping set of jaws emerged as Heidi changed form. When she came out of her flash of transformative light she turned both sets loose on her prey. Ignited by the heat of acid saliva, the mouths belched fire as they clamped onto Scizor.

Steel squelched as it grew superheated and glowed with inner pinkness. The struggle lasted only briefly. Scizor's determination alone could not keep it conscious.

In the end, Toril wasn't *too* upset about losing Shedinja, especially since Azumarill—the Pokémon it countered best—was already out. Most likely it wouldn't make a difference now that Aracely was down to two Pokémon. Mawile and Annihilape both beat Slowking, so everything hinged on Aracely's final Pokémon.

Aracely *had* to send that Pokémon out now. Or else her loss became 100 percent guaranteed. If she put in Slowking, Toril swapped to Annihilape, and even if Aracely swapped to her final Pokémon the same turn, Annihilape won every possible matchup from a neutral position. Since Zoroark tricked Choice Scarf onto Slowking, Toril no longer needed to worry about Calm Mind nonsense. Mawile had a few bad matchups, though, so if Aracely sent out her final Pokémon now and made some great predictions, a slim possibility remained.

That slim possibility was what Toril focused all her mental energy on destroying. She refused to let up, to expect victory, until it was guaranteed—mathematically, not practically. The world of statistics was her world of safety, the way psychology was Aracely's. Malaise remained that, other than against certainty, Aracely would somehow squirm into the narrowest crevice.

Amazingly, Aracely still seemed distracted, even as the timer ticked down. Was she coming to terms with her defeat? Only at the last second, with a careless and disinterested twinge of her lips, did she announce her next Pokémon.

"Gliscor."

In truth, Toril expected it far earlier. She gave both Volcarona and Shedinja items to deal with Gliscor's Stealth Rock setup. If it showed its face this late into the battle, though, Stealth Rock wasn't the worry.

Grim, ghoulish, Gliscor arose upon its segmented tail, bat wings blocking the omnidirectional stadium floodlights to cast shadows crosswise. The wind atop the mountain roared and Toril became cognizant, for the first time in a long time, of her missing fingers, a phantom pain returning across the continents to remind her of that self that no longer existed.

One leg buckled. She caught herself on the railing.

If Mawile was running Ice Fang this match was over, but she'd run Sucker Punch for Slowking and Play Rough for Kommo-o—plus the essential Swords Dance, of course. That gave Aracely a window. Toril needed to play this smart.

Gliscor had two possible moves that didn't auto lose the match: Earthquake and Swords Dance. Swords Dance was better.

So. Swap to Zoroark. Gliscor uses Swords Dance. Zoroark is faster, Hyper Voice range 50.5 to 59.1 percent. Factor in Poison Heal (12.5 percent). At maximum it has 62 percent health remaining. It knocks out Zoroark, swap in Annihilape. Gliscor outspeeds, Earthquake leaves Annihilape with 30.7 percent health at worst. It does its damage, then Mawile with Sucker Punch—25.5 to 30.1 percent—way too tight. It depended on how hard her Pokémon hit, if they put their all into their strikes or simply went through the motions. At high and medium ranges she won, at low ranges she lost.

Her stomach churned. She wanted to vomit. This tournament wasn't friendly to odds. It didn't matter if you won 75 percent of the time, if the one match you actually played was the 25 percent.

Losing meant you were—unfit.

"Heidi, return." Toril heard her voice blasted over the speakers, though not in her head. "Go—Rasmus."

Gustav came out disguised as Annihilape, though at this point the disguise meant nothing.

Aracely snapped out of her distraction. She gave Toril a knowing smile and said, "Earthquake."

The ground split and a shear traveled across the arena. Gustav, already barely upright, fell from the shaking alone.

As Toril withdrew Gustav into his Poké Ball, she watched Aracely's face for any change. Did—did Aracely not realize? She looked so smug, as if to say "See that Tors, another great prediction." To the layman, Toril guessed, it looked like she made an awesome play. Zoroark downed the instant he appeared. Great, right?

The wind on the mountain whipped feverishly against her fingers.

Toril tugged at her uniform collar. The endgame was upon them. The number of moves constricted. Her mask broke, she let herself show the fear she felt—the heart throbbing inside.

If Gliscor used Swords Dance now—

Annihilape appeared.

If Gliscor used Swords Dance—

Aracely kept smiling. In her smile manifested the peaks of mountaintops over low-strung clouds, and the halo around her head the sun.

"Swords Dance," she said.

Of course. With Swords Dance, Gliscor boosted its attack faster than Annihilape boosted its defense, even with the Chesto Berry/Rest strategy. It was the only way Gliscor won the matchup.

Toril closed her eyes. Serenity, for the first time in her life—it seized her. Her heart ceased beating. She, too, was a goddess.

"Final Gambit," she said.

Cely didn't react. She didn't know what this move did.

Annihilape opened his mouth to swallow the world and screamed. All his fury, it poured out, sweeping across the clouds and mountaintops, blasting them to molecules, silencing the wind, silencing the sun.

Toril gripped the railing and screamed alongside him. His wispy gray body grew bright. A flame—building inside it—a life—the art of his soul. The rocks and pebbles strewn across the arena levitated. The air became pregnant—anticipation a crackle like electricity from particle to charged particle.

Annihilape's soul flared, blasting him apart from inside. The blast swept in a corporeally formed ring to consume Gliscor in chunks. Its eyes were the last piece visible before all cascaded to a bright blackness.

Like liquid, the black sank into the arena. The pebbles fell, color returned, the air cooled. The unconscious bodies of Annihilape and Gliscor lay beside one another, and once they were visible to all, the wind whipped up between the mountains once more.

Tors looked ill. She bent over her platform and heaved for breath.

All game, Cely waited for the mask to crack. Here and there she caught it slip, but never enough to wrest control. Now, down to their final Pokémon, Slowking and Mawile, it no longer mattered. Mawile won, right? Cely was pretty sure Mawile won here.

Cely maintained her smile, though in the jumbotron it gave wan, gave very much resigned. It was so cold on the platform, like they pumped ice through a ventilation system. She wore her pastel multicolored jacket over her designer tee on the off chance Toril sent her snow team, and still. Chills.

She tried not to think the real reason and failed. Dark clouds. Dark clouds, dark clouds, dark clouds.

When Aracely was seventeen, the age Toril was now, she fell out of the world. At the time it was sudden, like she took a step and the floor was an illusion and she went tumbling tumbling tumbling down. Afterward obviously every inch of her life crawled toward that moment since birth.

The day started normal. The normalness was the whole terror. She woke up and Mom was already gone, the giant house silent and dark, the world outside even darker, as if nothing existed past the one lighted bathroom where she put herself together in the mirror. She already felt uneasy, surrounded by vials and powders, even before she noticed the droplet of blood on her white blouse. She remembered staring a long time, mascara brush in hand, wondering: Where did that come from? Wondering: Why is it there?

Later, as she left fifth period Environmental Science, Haydn and Charlie chattering about—something—she took that step and fell. In this world, people and Pokémon live together in harmony, the instructor said. Harmony echoed through the void. Evolve or die. Evolve and die. Cycles of life. Flowers wilting once a year. A world dark, a world light, a world dark. Everything in its perfect place and Aracely suddenly out of place, out of time, drowned in lipstick and moisturizer, in waves of cashmere and worsted, names on TV, brand names and Pokémon names, one thousand species discovered and counting, isn't technology wonderful?, her phone and her devices and an internet of interconnected innumerable voices conversing across the globe as one, one unified voice shouting HARMONY before the voices died and the next year's batch shouted HARMONY and the next year's batch and the batch after that and after that, the voices slowly twisting each moment as everything evolved into some other interchangeable form then another and another until the older forms were so thoroughly forgotten they were recreated as new forms and thought novel because the only way to learn anything new was to forget what was already learned.

Then out of the air she dropped and landed exactly where she'd been walking before, Haydn and Charlie chattering, and Aracely noticed for the first time the thing Charlie always whined about, that everyone looked exactly the same in their white blouses and pleated skirts—Cely had always replied, "Yeah, they look good?"—but nobody noticed Aracely.

That made her remember every night she spent crying into her pillow, usually days when Charlie made some mean remark, thinking to herself nobody liked her—even though everyone liked her—and wondering whether it was the mean remark that made her cry or the fact that, like a droplet on her white blouse, that mean remark reminded her of everything else that wasn't the mean remark, the whole white expanse.

In this world, being liked was cheap. Being happy was cheap. Nothing precious existed, and nobody mattered except as one flower in a field of 8 billion, blooming briefly to die for the next 8 billion to bloom.

That night, or maybe a week or month later, she waited patiently for Mom to get off the phone—"I don't care what they said. No. No. What? *Budgetary* constraints? We're the most-watched program in the world, what budgetary constraints—It's microphones, we need better microphones, every other word I say gets dropped. I'm not exaggerating—okay I'm

exaggerating, but the fact *any* words get dropped is—it's unprofessional on a basic level. Amateurish. How do they not blush listening? Are they *proud* of this product? Are they proud of being incompetent? I'm not proud. I'm ashamed. 'Good enough.' Oh, my gosh. Good enough?! It's not—and don't you *dare* give me that cliché about perfect being the enemy of good. I'm already making unfathomable concessions with the cameramen you assign me. Am I the only one embarrassed?"—as Mom paced the living room past the award they gave her for falling into a coma. Finally the call ended.

"Is your homework done?"

Aracely nodded.

"Then study for Friday's pre-calc exam. You got a 94 last time. That's the danger zone."

"Mom, I think I'm depressed."

Mom's face twitched, and her eyes turned away as her mouth twisted. For a moment Cely thought Mom understood, and in retrospect maybe she *did* understand, that many others learned the fundamental truth of the world before Cely, but if they did, then they needed some way to protect themselves. Mom, obviously, found her way long ago, maybe during her coma.

"It's," Mom said tentatively, then with more confidence: "it's that Literature curriculum. They're always making you read those books about the war."

"Mom—"

"I'll speak to the headmaster. They need to modernize. Aspirational works, that's the key. In the meantime, study your pre-calc. There's nothing depressing about math."

Aracely thought about blurting the real reason aloud, but even then, what would Mom say? If you work hard, go to a good college, get a good job, live in a big house like this one with six rooms you never use, then your life will matter?

A few days, or weeks, or maybe months later, Aracely tried to kill herself.

For the first time ever, for a reason Cely still didn't know, Mom came home early that day, and so Cely didn't die. Which set off a chain reaction of events—RISE, MOTHER, Dad, the IPL—that led her here, face to face with Toril Lund.

A lot of improbable instances in a row, so many to make someone believe in fate, or as MOTHER might say a line of history traveling inexorably to its specified endpoint, an endpoint where Aracely for a brief moment stood above all, all 8 billion, and mattered, really and truly mattered to this world on the terms of the world's own narrative, even if she never really understood that narrative itself—all to end here, one week from her goal.

Tors deserved it, though. Really. Bittersweetness tinged the ice in Cely's body. Tors worked hard, struggled, changed herself in a way Cely did not. Maybe in the end there was some truth to Mom's substitution of hard work for meaning, because growth no matter how

directed formed the illusion of substance, progress, purpose. Something growing grew somewhere.

And because Cely loved Toril, it all felt strangely okay. As if assisting someone else's growth was a way to leech their purpose for yourself. When people become adults and realize the secret Cely did, they've already had the child that can be that throbbing feeling of life for them. It worked that way for Mom and Dad. Toril could be Aracely's child, cradled in motherly embrace. The same embrace in which MOTHER once cradled Aracely.

Cely closed her eyes and sighed. She let her smile decay.

Sucker Punch relied on the opponent's focus in preparing their own attack to land a quick strike before they reacted. It failed if the opponent did anything other than attack, because then it was too easy to see coming.

That was in concept. In reality, a potato like Slowking might get hit either way. Similar to the Shedinja fabrication, the IPL was willing to break the audience's suspension of disbelief to ensure its rules standardization held. Meaning if Slowking didn't attack, and Mawile used Sucker Punch, it would be "considered" to fail, and Toril was expected to keep her Pokémon from landing a hit it wasn't "supposed" to land.

Luckily, because Zoroark tricked a Choice Scarf onto Slowking what felt like hours ago, Toril didn't need to worry about that. Slowking *had* to attack. The attack it would use was Flamethrower.

Toril already ran the calcs when Mawile and Slowking faced off earlier, during that interlude when she and Cely swapped every turn. From this position, she calculated a 99 percent chance of victory. Sucker Punch had a 12.5 percent chance to knock out Slowking in one hit. If that failed, Slowking would attack with Flamethrower. It required a critical hit—a roughly 4.17 percent chance—and even a crit only had a 31.3 percent chance to knock out Mawile. Of course, you also had to factor in Sucker Punch's chance to crit. In the end, it turned out roughly 99 percent.

Predictions were not a factor. Both sides had one viable move. A flat 99 percent chance.

Why the fuck was Toril so nervous still. Why did she want to vomit.

Cely was there, in her brain, which was fine, because there was nothing left to think, but feeling her there, entangled, the barrier between them crumbling, and an ineffable sadness seeping through, a sense of loneliness Toril never truly felt before, made her wonder, which of them needed the other more, which needed to win more, which mattered more, these questions so intrinsically tied to either's ability to connect with anyone beyond themselves, that they were not in fact opposites in kind, but only aesthetic: the same wisps wrapped in different shrouds. Mimikyu and Pikachu on the face of the card even now in Toril's pocket,

but which was which, or was that Pikachu a shiny Azumarill after all? In that moment, Toril felt Cely loved her, and Cely felt the same about Toril, and the only thing the violence of this battle could do was obliterate that precious dewdrop.

Toril reformed. "Sucker Punch," she croaked.

"Flamethrower."

Ten thousand repetitions to practice this move. Heidi knew it by heart. *Toril* knew it by heart, so even when she closed her eyes too ill to watch she saw white outlines motion through the blackness like in the depths of that cave when Toril first found her, weeping, hoping to play upon Toril's motherly instincts so as to lure her close and devour her whole. They said it was rare even wild Pokémon ate humans. Nothing liked the taste. Heidi was always a confused child.

Toril loved her. She loved all her Pokémon, though battling necessitated treating them like pawns, sacking them when necessary, allowing one piece to fall to take another—wasn't that the opposite of how the story went, the story of unbreakable bonds? Could these battles, this war destroy every sort of love? She was the goddess of war.

She opened her eyes as Heidi stepped back from her strike. Cely's Slowking wobbled.

The holoscreen displayed Slowking's biometric readout as its health declined toward the predetermined faint threshold. Slowking was the kind of idiot that could easily stay standing, eyes open like nothing happened, long after it was rendered unconscious, so the biometrics were especially important.

The bar depleted by percentage points: 50 percent, 16, 8, 4, 2.

1.

It stopped at 1.

Slowking kept standing. As Heidi danced to her side of the field, she kept her back and jaws to her opponent. Her eyes glanced apologetically at Toril. Toril nodded that it was okay, which made Heidi sharpen in determination to receive Slowking's attack.

It came after fifteen seconds of strangled silence. Toril forgot the wind. Slowking finally reacted, blinked once, noticed seemingly for the first time he stood in an arena and faced an opponent. His mouth slowly, slowly, excruciating like a knife you're trying to hold back overpowering you millimeter by millimeter as it glides into your heart, slowly opened.

The instant the jet of flame burst out Toril knew what that dagger tickling her heart already told her: CRITICAL HIT. Some said if your bond with your Pokémon was strong they would unleash these rare strikes, strikes that otherwise exceeded their physical capabilities, strikes that the best biologists between shrugs and hemhawing might mutter had something to do with the innate Pokémon characteristic of evolution. But it had nothing to do with a bond, Toril knew that, she conducted experiments herself, it simply happened sometimes, a random chance as if at that moment a space particle beamed from the sky to empower them.

Heidi clenched her jaws into a shield to protect her main body, though their iron makeup conducted the heat. Her eyes squeezed shut as her body tensed and her feet dug through the dirt and a sweat broke out on her brow as her mouth—her real mouth—snapped open and a cry of pain emerged.

Toril didn't watch the holoscreen this time. She watched Heidi, who would tell the outcome before the health bar. Even with a critical hit, the odds of a knockout were less than one third. Surely—

Surely.

Surely, the fire dissipated. Heidi, staggered, singed, sweating, hissing, slumping, pitched.

One small hand reached out and caught herself before she fell. The red-hot jaws slouched to either side. Their weight seemed almost too much for her tiny body to bear. Almost.

"You can do it," Toril heard herself say. She never spoke like this during battle, it severed the understanding she and her Pokémon shared. "You can do it, Heidi."

Heidi's brows sharpened. She grunted, then rose.

On the holoscreen, Heidi's health bar showed 4 percent.

The battle was over. No uncertainty remained. Slowking had Choice Scarf. It *must* use Flamethrower again. Heidi's Sucker Punch would hit before it attacked. No chance of a miss.

The battle was over. Toril won. She won. She won. She won. Everyone in the world loved her and she won. Everyone in the world recognized her. It was all worth it. Everything was worth it. She mattered. She mattered. She had a justification for her existence. The world was saved. She was saved. Love welled in her heart. Love for herself, for the world, for everyone in the world, the faceless masses once reviled. She loved them all. She loved Cely too. Love! God, what was this feeling? It was love!

The look on Toril's face defied all tragedy.

Then the holoscreen dinged.

The holoscreen dinged. Toril's eyes fell to it.

MAWILE HAS BEEN BURNED.

Heidi gave one last gasp and fell.

The winds swallowed the mountains in all-consuming oblivion and this was it, the end of the world.

Toril stood on the platform still basking in the warmth of her glow, still plastered with her smile. The platform broke apart around her, the arena already gone, Heidi's body gone in the tornado, Slowking gone, only the glowing golden goddess present within this blank abyss.

"Why?" she asked the goddess. "Why are they cheering?"

The goddess smiled.

"Cheated"—Toril herself was breaking apart—"they should feel cheated. It was luck. It was—just—luck."

The goddess broke apart.

Toril remained standing atop the platform during Aracely's entire post-match interview. Mom asked the right questions, chipper and professional, and amazingly Aracely heard herself giving the right answers, chipper too, smiling, thanking her fans, asking them to follow her Instagram.

Mom sent the broadcast to a commercial break and walked with Aracely off the field. Only when they entered the elevator did she say, "Your father had a heart attack."

Finals |

They airlifted Dad to Viridian, which had a better equipped (human) hospital. For Aracely, who didn't own a flying Pokémon, this was a problem. Actually, it was a problem before that; she couldn't even escape the stadium. Universal laws funneled her behind a press release podium.

"Bill Masaki attributes your success in this tournament to luck. What do you say to that?"

"I'd say Bill's mad he gets more predictions wrong than Iono."

Laughter.

"Photographs showed you with Toril Lund several times prior to this match. What's your relationship with her?"

"We're friends. I love Tors." She intercepted the follow-up. "The victory's bittersweet, of course. But I know we both gave it our all out there."

"The Battler's Union president called for a vote earlier today on whether to pressure the IPL to formally ban coaches. Do you believe this is a response to your coach, Domino Sosa?"

For a moment inconsequential to everyone else but fatal to Aracely, she hesitated. "Uh. Sorry. I blanked the moment you said union. Whoops!"

Laughter. Nobody pressed for more. Aracely realized she'd accidentally given the response they expected.

"Last question, Cely. Can you tell us what Shedinja's ability Wonder Guard does?"

More laughter.

She convinced three random guys milling outside to drive her down Victory Road and endured their awkward fangasms/flirtations en route. Leaving the Plateau at all was a risk, but she'd seen no trace of Nilufer since last time and hoped MOTHER gave up. Maybe that was optimistic.

Viridian Community Hospital snaked like something bioluminescent at the bottom of the sea. From the outside it never seemed to end and the three guys (all, including the driver, drunk) argued how to interpret the signs pointing toward the entrance. They wound up revolving through an empty overflow parking lot for fifteen minutes until Aracely opened the door and jumped out. As she ran toward light she got the feeling they were running after her and even heard their footsteps but when she looked back the car was gone completely.

The ER lobby had seven hundred seats but only five occupied, which seemed strange. There should be more emergencies in the world, more people dying. Or was this the calm, the peace of a top standing still at the end of its spin the moment before it dropped to the side.

In one of the seats, or two actually, on his side with his knees tucked up, was Jinjiao Zhang, asleep. His Lopunny was under the chairs, not asleep, rolling back and forth and knocking the legs as if trying to see how hard it could knock without waking Jinjiao up.

Aracely spent maybe an hour arguing in muted tones with the nurse or receptionist or whoever she was, who recognized Aracely and kept saying how if she didn't recognize Aracely she'd be willing to bend the rules and let Aracely through, but since she did recognize Aracely it made the concept feel corrupt, as though she was only letting Aracely through because she recognized her, and then the receptionist—who, by the way, wore mismatched socks—kept asking the same questions about the match that the press people and drunk brothers three asked, pointing constantly to a mounted TV broadcasting a replay. Aracely watched, hypnotized, as she told Scizor to use Knock Off on Mawile before Toril swapped Mawile with Shedinja. Aracely didn't remember this happening at all.

Finally some doctor in a labcoat with coffee and a clipboard blundered by. She also recognized Aracely and called her over so loudly Aracely thought it would wake up Jinjiao but didn't.

"That Lopunny saved your dad's life." The doctor sipped, then pointed, her mug. Jinjiao's Lopunny cartwheeled between seats and landed in a flop of furred ears. "Administered CPR right away. Saved his life." Then, incomprehensibly: "It wasn't that bad of a heart attack though."

Aracely asked if she could see him.

"He's resting. What I plan to do is, on account of his weight, recommend gastric bypass. Then I'll put him on a cardiac rehabilitation program. That'll be thirty-six supervised sessions over twelve weeks... Great match by the way. Could I get an autograph?"

"Where's Brittany?"

"Who?"

Aracely rubbed the bridge of her nose. "The Gardevoir."

"Oh, in his room."

"Why can she be in his room and I can't?"

"Well, uh, she's officially registered as a service Pokémon."

Then, the doors to the lobby slid open and the three drunks came in, two supporting the third, whose leg was bleeding. "Accident. We had an accident!"

The commotion caused Jinjiao to lurch upright, blinking. Aracely really didn't want to bother with him, so she yanked the sleeve of the doctor and hissed: "Okay. Autograph. On one condition."

Finally she made it to Dad's room. Pleasantly arranged, but inundated with the stench of hospital and the persistent beep of a heart monitor. A painting of a strangely abstracted

Magikarp hung over Dad's head.

Because Brittany was asleep in the only chair, Aracely stood in the corner. The room was dark except for what moonlight made it through a window fenced by a closed courtyard. Dad's body seemed shriveled on the bed. He wore a hospital gown. She wondered what happened to his suit and fedora.

She thought he was asleep too, and maybe he was at first, but after a few minutes his voice rasped: "Didja win?"

"Yeah."

"Really?"

"I won Dad. I'm in finals. Red Akahata."

"The doctors wouldn't tell me. Ha. You're a good girl, Cely."

"Sleep, Dad. I'll be here tomorrow."

"Nah. You gotta prep. Red Akahata. He's tough."

"I'll prep. Don't worry."

"Don't know if I'll be able to help. You should... ask that Toril."

Cely wondered if Toril would ever speak to her again. Her face at the end of the battle, exultant in all the wrong ways, felt deeply, deeply wrong. On the ride down, while the drunks swerved like lunatics, the thought crossed Cely's mind that Toril might kill herself. Then Cely wondered if she was only imagining what she would do if she were Toril. Toril might be stronger than her.

"I will, Dad. Get some sleep."

Brittany gave a loud, quack-like snore. The moon neared full and Aracely wondered what it looked like in Pewter, whether it intersected the mountain, whether it summoned the lunatics to pray to it, a body coloring itself yellow to seem the much more popular sun.

"Cely," Dad said.

"Yeah?"

"I haven't been a good dad."

"It's fine. Later."

"All this time I told myself. If I was better than *my* dad, I was okay. But you needed—you needed—"

"Dad."

"Did you really try to kill yourself?"

Cely stared at the Magikarp over his head. Her immediate thought was that MOTHER told him, either personally or via Nilufer, as part of an elaborate plot to draw Aracely back to her. But no matter how she pieced it together she couldn't see any underlying logic, and only after a long time did she realize *Mom* must have told him.

She didn't say anything.

"Why?" he said, pained.

She wondered how she could possibly explain. "The world seemed to tell a story and I wasn't in it."

It was clear Dad didn't understand. She wasn't sure if what she said reflected reality at all or was simply words that sprouted in her brain. It felt so long ago that it was like stepping outside herself to remember.

"I should have been better," he said finally.

"Dad."

"My only thought was. I only thought."

"Dad, it's okay."

"I felt like I failed life when I lost that match. I thought I'd... redeem myself... if you... if I helped..."

"Rest, Dad."

"I wanted you to win so I could win."

The more Aracely stared at the Magikarp, the more it broke apart, until she started to doubt if it had ever been a Magikarp at all.

"I'll win, Dad."

He said nothing.

"I'll win," she said. "I'll beat Red." Then MOTHER will end the world, and we'll all die happy.

Dad said nothing. Only when she figured he'd fallen asleep did he speak.

"I love you, Cely. Whether you win or lose."

The word she wanted to say, why, did not form. The Magikarp meant absolutely nothing now and it was because her eyes bleared. Watery, the world broke apart.

"I love you too, Dad."

In the morning a different doctor but basically the same doctor entered the room, glanced disapprovingly at Cely, and handed his clipboard to a Chansey nurse before recommending Dad get gastric bypass surgery, a suggestion Dad responded to with way more vigor than Cely expected.

"Nope! None of this nonsense. I won't stay in this hospital an extra minute."

"Mr. Sosa. You're at risk for several obesity-related diseases—"

"I'll walk more. I'll eat more salads. I'll do it myself!"

In the sun his color returned, he shook his fist, he brushed off the protestations of Brittany and Chansey. He looked, essentially, same as ever. Cely wondered how much of the previous night she dreamed as she waved him goodbye, promised she'd check back soon (he assured her she needed to start researching Red), and slinked out behind the doctor during a jargon-filled rebuttal.

Toril worried her now. She somehow didn't own a phone; only her Porygon-Z used her laptop. If she checked out of the hotel already, Cely might never see her again, and this fact filled her with the same urgency as Dad's heart attack. It was like everything all at once started to unravel. A response to the world's final days? Finality as a concept struck her far more strongly than it had before Nilufer's kidnapping attempt.

Every corner concealed a Nilufer as she waded through endless empty hospital sectors, but rounding them exposed white space only. It was the perfect time to nab her, since she forgot to reclaim her Pokémon after the battle (Dad always did that), but nothing happened.

Jinjiao met her in the lobby. "They said you were here," he muttered, "but I must've been asleep."

The twerp sufficed as a bodyguard. She clasped her hands and gave him and his Lopunny a big sincere thank you for saving Dad, assured him Dad was fine, relayed with a casual, exasperated-but-only-mildly-and-in-a-relieved-way eyeroll how he was arguing with the doctor already, how that was just like him, and wow you really were such a hero, weren't you Jinjiao? She nodded attentively as he fumbled through a retelling he thought made him sound cool but boiled down to "I called the ambulance," and because he was thirteen he mistook basic attentiveness for potential romantic interest. Snared.

When she mentioned needing a ride back to the Plateau, he offered to fly her on his Skarmory. Being carried through the air on a sharp metal bird sounded super awful so she steered him toward hitchhiking.

The first motorist they accosted shockingly hadn't heard of either of them. He looked maybe eighty, jowls and warts, and sucked air through his teeth when Jinjiao said they were from the

IPL.

"I remember," he said, "before all that. We had more important things to worry about."

"Sure old man. Wars and stuff, big deal."

Ultimately, the man said he was headed to Pallet, the opposite direction.

The second motorist, who looked like anyone's mom except Cely's (plump, pleasant), knew all about them, was so delighted, would have to tell her son, oh he would be so jealous, and of course she'd drive them to the Plateau. The entire drive, besides the obvious questions and calls for autographs, she kept insinuating she would really, really appreciate if they got her two tickets for the grand championship. Jinjiao ruined Cely's vapidly optimistic "I'll see what I can do" with a breakdown of how impossible such a request was. At this point, tickets had been sold out for months. You'd be lucky to find a scalper selling one, cost obscene. The woman frowned. Cely got the impression she didn't actually know who Jinjiao was.

Cely tried to shake Jinjiao when they returned to the hotel but he refused to go. "You know, sure he's the GOAT and all, but I haven't actually been impressed by Red this year. Really showing his age. Dropped a game to *Lachlan Nguyen* in groups. Not to mention he dropped a game to me, of course. You'll beat him."

"Oh yeah? Won't I destroy the sanctity of battling or somesuch?"

"Heh. Whatever. Guess we all need to evolve."

She looked at him, for a split second convinced he was working for MOTHER the entire time. At the end of an awkward pause she gave him a hug that left him so flustered it was trivial to finally escape.

When she knocked, the door to Toril's room stood silent. Aracely expected this, but behind the door she didn't feel Toril's presence, or any presence at all, which was ominous. Week by week, this hotel, run by the stadium and cordoned for competitors (how Dad got a room, no idea), emptied and emptied until now it was like a horror movie.

A cleaning lady passed.

"Yes, hi," Cely said. "Did the girl in this room check out already?"

"Nope. I'm supposed to clean the room once she does, but I haven't heard a word from the front."

At first, this answer thrilled Cely. She thanked the cleaning lady exuberantly, went to a gift shop in the stadium, picked out some excellent stationery and a cute pink envelope and already paid before she realized she pulled this trick last time. Well, it worked last time. But when she slipped the envelope (*Tors! I still want to be friends. Don't you?*) under the door, the complete lack of aura remained and Aracely arose with a chill.

She looked around. Hallway to the end one way. Hallway to the end the other. Not even Nilufer was there. Nobody was there. Aracely was completely alone.

Finals |

The Poké Balls in the case were bizarre. Actually, they were proprietary, the patent not yet lapsed. An endless thin finger stroked their webbed surfaces. Small plaques under each ball gave names as unusual as the balls themselves.

"These are the ones we recovered," Nilufer said. "Plus, of course, the canister of fuel."

"It's enough. It'll—it's enough."

"If I may be frank, I consider your anxiousness unwarranted. From my perspective, the obvious failure point is not our capacity to exert sufficient force. Instead, it's that we rely on Bill acting a certain way."

"He'll act." MOTHER's finger lingered, stopped on a certain ball, tapped it. "Bill's like me. A fanatic." Her head lolled and she laughed, bitter. "He might be the only one like me in the entire world."

Her words broke apart, wistfully, as she sank into her chair, limned by the light of Nihilego. Nilufer possessed line enough to her heart to know she thought about Aracely, and enough tact to let those thoughts wallow. The reprimand for Nilufer's failure had not been as severe as it might have been—partially because MOTHER needed her, and partially, Nilufer sensed, as surrender, a shrug similar to the settling of a corpse newly dead, an allowance for fate less malleable than the world itself. *I'll never see her again*, she had said.

"Nilu, I have—a confession to make. I have not been entirely truthful, in my sermons."

"Of course. There are necessary lies."

"When I opened that hole and looked out, at those other worlds... I said they were similar to ours, only dead. That they died recently or long ago, that the cause was, invariably, Pokémon. Either a single godlike creature or a species that spread like weeds. Worlds wrecked by twisted ripples of time and space, or worlds flooded, or worlds without water, or worlds with toxic air, or worlds where monstrous mouths sucked up anything with flesh. Remember?"

"I remember."

"I lied. Not every world was destroyed by Pokémon."

"I see."

"We encountered other worlds. Worlds with no Pokémon at all. There were other creatures, but not Pokémon."

Though Nilufer previously listened in calm, she became excited unexpectedly, even to herself. "That's amazing. No Pokémon at all? But these worlds were dead, too, yes? How did they end without..."

"Without Pokémon, the intellectual evolution of humanity changed course. The natural world produced few weapons, so they built their own, by means mechanical and scientific. To fight these weapons, they built stronger ones, and stronger, until finally their weapons were strong enough to destroy the world. Which they did."

Behind her veil, MOTHER set her gaze on Nilufer, and Nilufer reflexively looked down, at her own hands.

"I looked at these worlds in disbelief. Because what could it mean? That humanity was simply doomed, no matter what? That if Pokémon didn't evolve to end it all, humanity itself did? That we would always, in the end, become *too successful* for our own good? Fated suicide?"

"That... can't be true."

"The research we conducted to view these worlds, it required killing Pokémon. We had to kill them, cut them open, and harvest their blood. People don't know, or they know and don't see, but scientific research is like that. Vivisections, exsanguinations, decapitations: they create our pills, they pioneer our technology, they push our boundaries. They stimulate our intellectual evolution. I was willing to do it. It was easy to make myself callous, to harden my heart, knowing the sacrifices I made on the altar of progress would bring down rain. But—if that rain flooded the world—a twisted, ironic vengeance—"

The sentence ended abruptly with the suggestion of a conclusion never given.

"I don't know what's worse. Progressing to end the world or ending progress to prolong it. I want both, I crave both: eternal progress and eternal life. God Nilu, I want it all, grasped in my arms"—her unfathomable arms extended—"the things I cherish and hold beautiful, the things I love, there always with me, always the same, even as I work to make them different, greater, more beautiful—it doesn't make sense, this paradox, the paradox of motherhood. To cradle a baby, loving them for the potential they promise, the better version of yourself they'll grow to be, yet wanting them also to remain a baby forever, yours to nurture, yours entirely... a realized orb of mercy... You have no children. Perhaps you can't understand..... Anyway, I finally found one world that wasn't destroyed."

"With Pokémon? Or without?"

"Without. It had the weapons of mass destruction that destroyed the other worlds. But it survived, because it had those weapons... and chose not to use them."

"Why?"

"Harmony. They attained... harmony. There was no reason to fight. The world's peoples were at peace with one another, like our world, without the threat of another species taking our place."

Nilufer thought it over. "That's why you need Aracely."

"Exactly. That girl is smart, yes, and skilled. But what she's best at is seeing inside others. Understanding them. Controlling them, without them feeling like they're even being controlled. When we rip this world apart and flee to a new frontier, I need her—I thought I needed her—to ensure harmony, so our progress advances solely against the rigors of the natural world, not against ourselves. That is why I needed Aracely Sosa."

"I see," said Nilufer. "I'll go back to the Plateau. I'll get her, no matter what. If you only told me sooner—"

"No."

"No?"

"If she won't come willingly, it defeats the point... especially if she turns against me, as others have before."

"She has already turned."

"She's neutral now. Besides, when I asked you to bring her back, this wasn't what I was thinking about. I was weak. I simply wanted her, in my arms."

"But if we don't have her, how do we achieve this... harmony? Maybe you, MOTHER, may show your face to them, and with their love for you control them—"

"Ah. What a dream. I'm no fool who makes the same mistake twice."

MOTHER lifted. Under the veil her mouth smiled, a peaceful smile suggestive of calm, and Nilufer realized she was in another sermon now, that everything was arranged.

[No, we must ignore harmony, this impossible harmony, and do as evolution demands: find another way. Rage against the odds!]

"Ah... ah..."

[Consider: it's a miracle life exists at all. Even with an infinity of living worlds, there's an even bigger infinity of void. Planets upon planets inhospitable to microbes. That you, me, we exist is a one in quadrillion chance. Life's tendency toward evolution is its way of fighting those odds, fixing the match, transforming luck into fate. That's the key in our DNA—you cannot abandon it now. If evolution itself tends toward destruction, then embrace it all the stronger and evolve past our own fated self-oblivion!]

She spread her narrow arms; they shone.

[Cast aside your pathetic, anti-scientific fears of progress. Progress is life! If progress brings destruction, then progress again, to survive the destruction your own progress wrought. My children, I already know a way. Yes, I already know a way! There is a lifeform, I discovered, able to survive those weapons of mass destruction. If we only—]

She broke off with what Nilufer first thought was a cough, but revealed itself as a laugh:

"Ha, hahaha, hahaha! I don't need Cely. I need nobody. Myself—I've always been able to rely on myself, at least. I have faith in that!"

"Yes," said Nilufer.

"If I can't control others, I must only exert more control over myself."

Nilufer was about to say "Yes" again, but her earpiece chirped. She cupped a hand around her ear. Message from the front desk. Her face diminished.

"Someone's arrived."

"Who? Police? IPL agents? Their psychic bitch?" MOTHER gripped the edge of her desk. "They have nothing. No cause for a warrant."

"It's Toril Lund."

Displaced from reality, Toril spent an indeterminate interval of time in the women's restroom trapped with emotions she failed to parse. One feeling bled into another. Was she sad? Mad? At who? Cely? Herself? Every moment of the battle replayed and she plucked apart errors, missed opportunities, inefficiencies to determine where blame lay but it always came to the ending. Her calculations were correct. Mawile won 99 times out of 100. So should she be mad at—fate? Luck? The world?

When the door opened and buoyant steps clip-clopped at her back she knew it was Cely. Why else did Toril linger in the restroom, than that she expected Cely to appear?

When she turned, though, a mishmash assaulted her. Only when the girl bounced to a sink and examined herself in the mirror did a name manifest: Iunno. Iono.

Toril turned to leave when Iono's voice knifed her in the back: "Hey-y-y."

She staggered. Her knees bent. She imagined herself walking downward, into the floor, until she disappeared underground.

"I have to—go—to sleep," she muttered, still moving.

"When you're dead, friendo! Wanna hear a hot tip? Totally exclusive! Not clickbait!"

"Nrnnggh..."

"Book a ticket tomorrow. Paldea. Trust me, I'm in the know. It's not just Terastallization coming next year. They're findin' super duper cuh-razy new Pokémon in Area Zero. You gotta get on this before everyone else!"

New Pokémon. The image of it: capturing, training, et cetera, it drained her blood onto the tile.

"I swear! Pokémon from the past and future. They're callin' em Paradox Pokémon."

Toril stopped. She hadn't been moving anyway. "The future?"

"Rightio. They're made of iron, like robots! Très chouette, non? Sugoi!"

"The future." That word trapped her. She kept thinking it until it broke apart into a meaningless collection of letters, then she thought it until it became real again. "The future. How?"

"Iunno!" Her accent rendered it identical to her name. "But they're mondo strong. *Everyone* next year will run em. Like the Ultra Beasts."

Unfit. "Why. Why tell me this?"

"We gotta get more consistent storylines," Iono said. "Everyone knows the key to content is consistency. People love to tune into their favorite streamer because they're always there. It's like seeing your friend every day! La vie quotidienne. We need trainers like that at this tournament, familiar faces. People don't get invested when it's a whole new crop every year. So haul your butt to Paldea pronto and keep ahead of the curve. I better see you at IPL 65!"

This world will end on October 12.

Cut. Toril in her hotel room. Lights off, ostensibly attempting to sleep, but she sat on her bed instead of laying down, and she wore the same uniform she battled in. Her Pokémon, though healed, refused to leave their Poké Balls. Incapable of comprehending fate and chance, incapable of comprehending Aracely Sosa, they thought their failure was their own. Heidi took it especially hard.

Maybe it *was* Heidi's fault, though. If she hit harder, Slowking fainted. Was it Toril who ascribed chance to what was, fundamentally, written within the biology of her Pokémon? When he gambled on bloodsport, her father sought a mathematics, an order or logic, that superseded fundamental randomness. In doing so he vivisected Pokémon to their physical components, strength and speed and defense. How exactly did Toril see the world?

Cut. Morning. Toril sat on her bed. Confusion turned a new trajectory. Did Sosa use her? Every interaction a mental manipulation? Friendship faked to comprehend a series of mental processes like the physical properties Toril used to comprehend her Pokémon? Did Toril, fundamentally, use her Pokémon? Were they not actually her friends, either? Was friendship possible?

Was it possible to know? Was it possible for it to mean anything or only possible for her to believe it meant something?

The phone rang.

For whatever reason Toril intuited this call to be the hotel kicking her out, so she answered. The receptionist told her someone needed to talk to her.

"I'll leave," Toril said. To Paldea? Why not.

"Toril?"

"I'll be gone in an hour."

"Do you remember me?"

The veil ripped. The voice sounded familiar, but. "No."

"I'm your brother."

"Oh. Right." She had brothers. Step-brothers. Much older. She'd seen them only a few times before she left home.

"It's awkward to call like this. Don't feel like you've got any obligation or anything."

"Right."

"Our father, uh, it's hard to say but, he died last night."

"That's"—awareness of the world returned. She grew suspicious—"a trick. He wants money."

"What? No, he's dead. They had me, uh, identify him."

"Like his cough. Everyone is"—Sosa—"everyone needs something from me."

The voice on the other end coughed too. It might *be* her father, disguising his voice. "He, they tell me he froze to death. He was walking home from, well, from the bar, and passed out in the gutter. The snow covered him up." Cough. "They're not sure if he passed out because he was, uh, drunk, or if it had something to do with this, sorta, poison wound in his side. They wanna do an autopsy. Anyway, you there? Anyway, you don't need to, come back, or anything. We all, we all had to put up with him, in our way. But if it's something you want, the funeral is—next week—October 12. I think Sunday."

Toril hung up. The phone didn't ring again.

Someone knocked on her door. "Tors? You there?"

Nothing.

Cut. Toril, carefully, crawled to the door. She found a card. *Tors! I still want to be friends. Don't you?*

What more did she want from Toril? All along, Toril could only rely on herself. She opened the window and escaped.

Escape to where? Paldea? Kylind? Traps. Anywhere in the world was open, but no names came. Blundering about the Plateau, where everyone recognized her—still in her uniform—she came across the suspended tram down to Pewter. Nobody was boarding, so she slipped in before the doors closed. Why? To go to Bill's museum, to beg to use his machine?

The silence and the vista as the sun rose over the mountains calmed her. She made a logical assessment that shock and sleep deprivation caused her to think and act strangely. The idea that her father was actually dead seemed true, rather than part of an elaborate scam. Not that it saddened her.

As she tried to decide whether to go back and talk to Aracely, the billboard appeared. **[Evolve yourself. RISE.]**

Evolve herself? Her life philosophy. From childhood she warred against the innate baseness of her existence. No mentor taught her. Their voices her entire life said only: *Unfit*. In the wild she stood atop a peak and saw lightning writhe thick as veins. Malnourished, half mad, she dared them to strike her—they did not. Since then she believed in an order to the world, a logic, a design, a something, some inner mechanism, and that if only she became attuned to the mathematics by which it operated she might climb the bodies of the others. In isolated towns in northern Kylind, she scoured paltry libraries to affirm her thoughts and so learned about EVs, IVs, optimal movesets, innate physical capacities of various species. She sought powerful types, evolved them, evolved alongside them. With them she meditated by waterfalls, in forest glens, within serenity and turbulence, and learned from their bodies the world's inner workings. Creatures changed to fit the world, so from their shapes she saw the invisible forms against which they molded themselves. A battle was the same way, a line unseen but nonetheless preordained, leading to a final moment—an out—and the key was to see that out before you reached it, to discern it by the way the invisible line bent the Pokémon that participated.

In the end, Cely was the same. Except the line she saw bent the trainers, not their Pokémon. Toril recognized that, and so evolved herself to account for it. And it worked—until the line itself betrayed her. Until the inner mathematics of the world spat an outcome wholly, unfairly random: chance, not fate.

The RISE Health & Wellness Clinic was one of three notable buildings in Pewter City, the others being the museum and the gym. It was, Toril realized only when her feet took her toward its entrance, visible from everywhere in the city.

It was a giant—purple—cube.

Nowhere on its façade were the words Health & Wellness Clinic or even RISE. Only the upward-facing arrow that Aracely once wore as jewelry signified the building's intention. No other buildings were within one hundred feet, so it rose from a flat plane as though it once hurtled out of space and impacted with enough concentrated force to annihilate anything in a certain radius. After millennia the crater filled with silt and grass regrew, and now a field of

flowers swayed around it, but a pulse of otherworldly radiation remained, urging subconsciously to keep away, for it was a thing neither to be touched nor trusted.

Toril approached the cube. All in this city was quiet.

Heavy doors opened onto a strangely modern lobby. An angled counter housed four robed secretaries with nothing to do except stare smiling as Toril entered. A room adjacent contained figures in yoga contortions on mats, as a smooth-voiced instructor exhorted them to "reach inside" for their "true potential." On a television, words faded into existence over clouds: **[Have you ever believed there must be something... More?]**

"Welcome," said the secretaries. "Please, come here."

Behind the counter, signboards indicated daily itineraries. 15:00—aerobics. 15:45—cardio. 16:30—pursuit of knowledge. 18:45—resistance training. 19:00—ANSWERS (meal 3). 20:00—healing. The next day promised a seminar on cancer.

"Have you lost yourself?" said one secretary.

"Do you wish to be stronger?" said another.

"Please, take these materials." A third handed over a stack of pamphlets and a printed book: *DNA: The Unbroken Lines of History*, by MOTHER. On the cover, lightning sprouted from a purple sky.

"This way." The fourth opened a divider in the counter and indicated a door. "You're just in time for the free screening."

"What is this place," Toril asked.

"This way. The screening will explain everything."

Toril glanced back. Two smiling robed people stood by the doors now. She almost laughed at the nakedness of the tactic. They underestimated Toril Lund's capacity to violate social faux pas.

Before she turned, though, all eight—eight now—of the robed people snapped to attention. From the doorway opposite the yoga room, someone she recognized appeared.

"Nilufer," said Toril.

"Toril," said Nilufer. "What a great honor to receive you. May I inquire as to the purpose of your visit?"

"You want to know if Cely sent me."

Nilufer kept her hands clasped, though it was impossible to see them because of her long sleeves. Anything might be concealed there.

"Would you come with me? Given you're a VIP, I'll give you a personal tour of the campus."

Toril's own hands rested casually—what she thought was casual—on the Poké Balls affixed to her belt.

"Sure."

"This way, please."

As she followed Nilufer through the door, Toril felt the line again. Her veins, lightning, DNA double helix. Wild fantasies of the next five minutes slideshowed across her aching eyeballs. The whiteness of the cube's interior grew dizzying as the doors brought her into a space of uncertain purpose, where the robed people inside immediately left upon their entry.

Nilufer stopped in the center, back to Toril. Ostentatiously vulnerable. "You seem tired."

"I slept bad."

"You haven't slept in days. You know, a healthy body is the first step toward a healthy mind, and vice versa. That's one of RISE's core tenets."

"What wisdom."

"How tempted are you by death, Toril?"

The question didn't sound real. "Huh?"

"When I heard you were here, I *did* think Cely sent you. She's far too good at getting people to do what she wants."

"Yep."

"But you came of your own volition."

"Who can say? Maybe I only think so. Maybe Cely mentioned something five days ago knowing I'd lose the battle on a one percent chance, knowing the loss would put me in such-and-such state of mind, knowing I'd then remember her words subconsciously and come to what I thought was my own conclusion. Playing to her outs."

"Her—outs?"

"A saying."

"I'm unfamiliar."

This area was all tile, all white, filled with a veneer of steam that only confirmed its existence in such belabored stillness. Notches in the walls for showers. No curtains. No indication of division by gender.

"I don't think that's the case anyway." Nilufer turned and pulled her sleeved arms apart to reveal two empty hands, which she held at her sides. "Maybe I can help you, though. Would you enjoy a massage?"

Defenses burst from the ground and sequestered Toril into an unassailable square.

"A—a what?"

"A massage," Nilufer repeated. "It's one of my skills as a human being."

"You're insane!"

"A steam bath and massage offer many therapeutic benefits. Relaxation, stress and pain relief, improved blood flow, lowered blood pressure, muscle repair, detoxification."

"This is—it's nonsense. What does this have to do with anything?"

"It's why you're here, isn't it?"

"For a massage? No."

"For connection." Nilufer's robes rippled. All air was warm. "For harmony."

"There's no such thing."

"For solace."

Toril's posture loosened. In her drowsiness she laughed. It was—it had to be—an attempt to distract. So when the knife lashed out—but there was no knife. Arms held outward and upward, Nilufer's sleeves rolled down veinless arms. Toril noticed pale crescent moon scars on each wrist.

"Are those..."

"It's common, here," Nilufer said. "Aracely has them too."

She too.

"Okay," Toril said. "What more do I have to lose?"

She stripped herself bare, remembering the state of her body while the loose white robe contained her gelatinizing form within the sauna. Supposed relaxation was, in fact, a test of endurance, a heat dripping out her every pore, but one word of many—detoxification—consumed her brain and she imagined her spite escaping with the contaminated sweat and also the idea that Nilufer waited outside the cabinet door to bring down the knife and how apathetic Toril was to that thought. She swayed.

When Aracely gave her clothes Toril insisted on retreating to the bathroom to change, never an inch of herself revealed. Her body, Toril once thought, was an affront, and for others to

view it the highest embarrassment. Seeing Nilufer's wrists, imagining Aracely's, her mindset changed: her body was still an affront, but a weapon she possessed even nude, even shed of her Pokémon.

As she lay facedown on the table, covered by only a strip of cloth, her head turned to her outfit—cleaned, pressed, folded—on a square object of no other discernable purpose, her Poké Balls and a pink card arranged atop. She waited for Nilufer to enter, to see the cataclysm of Toril's skin, the scars and blotches, the waves of purple from wounds poorly healed, the chunks of flesh missing. Her hands, spread on either side, with no gloves: fragments of fingers like stones of an ancient civilization rising out the sand. Grotesque and unseemly body hair, uneven because so many slices of her had been shorn off to the quick. This was Toril Lund. The her only she saw, the her that was worse than the her she actually showed. Both the creatures of this world and the world itself had bitten her, eaten parts of her. Dragon fangs or sharp rocks at the base of an incline, all the same. Relaxation? What remained to relax? Her own underlying form lost its order. No part of her surface remained according to natural design, unmodified by violent alteration.

She laughed when Nilufer came in. The room was so white—so faded by steam—and Nilufer herself so faded—anyone who came in here would be faded—except Toril, the human blot. Nilufer said nothing and Toril wished she detected perturbation, disgust, but while her laughter grew coarse and thorny Nilufer's oiled hands slathered Toril's back and shoulders.

"Here's evolution for you," Toril said. By the end of it she was crying, for herself, for the parts that remained.

Afterward they let her go. She dragged herself and melted blobs of her remained in her wake, until she shambled onto a park bench and descended into a deep and dreamless slumber.

Finals |

By midweek Aracely knew she would never see Toril again.

Suddenly Saturday. Twenty-four hours remained. The week burst apart like air. Illusory time. One million obligatory interviews promotional shoots fan interactions and every other moment spent on battle preparations, Red Akahata's eight known Pokémon, one hidden all this time, and Cely thought: Yes, it must be exciting somehow. Though hard to top Shedinja. Shuckle, Smeargle, Eiscue, Pyukumuku, Pachirisu—she compiled a list of niche goobers just in case.

Then she was in a helicopter. Kanto passed below and Mom, seat opposite, stared under the overpowering whirr of the rotors. Red watched out a window and said nothing.

They landed atop a skyscraper in Saffron. Blinding light rose off the towers and it was a tough choice whether to shield eyes or ears as they escaped down a staircase. Mom led the way, striding, but when she wheeled sharply at a bend to grip Cely's shoulders, Red kept going, already aware of his direction.

"You let the Old Man speak."

"Sure, Mom. Why wouldn't I?"

"No. You don't get it. You *let* him speak. You don't say anything. He may sometimes sound like he wants your input. He doesn't. Every question is rhetorical."

"Then why am I here?"

"He needs someone to listen."

On a whim Cely said, "Dad's doing better."

Mom took in air. She put on a smile. "Good. I'm glad. It would be a better world if everyone in it... did... better."

In the penthouse, all glass walls to float over the city, a long table was set with three plates of luxurious but sparse seafood. Red already sat at one, and the Old Man, withered, crumbling to dust, at another. At the head.

"Fiorella Fiorina," he said, his voice a recording on burning film. "Charming and lovely, as always. They still send you on these errands?"

"I do anything necessary, sir," Mom said.

"They ought to have made you broadcast director years ago. Why on earth not?"

Mom said nothing, but smiled, ingratiating and self-effacing.

"I'll see what I can arrange." The Old Man unfolded a lace napkin and tucked it into his neck to protect his bowtie.

Mom glanced potently at Cely and left.

The Old Man was encased in a stealth designer suit beyond even Aracely's capacity to brand-identify, but it didn't conceal the decrepitude of his body, the skull showing through skin, the translucent hair, and the triangular patch of discoloration from eyebrow to temple. Pinned neatly to his lapel was the IPL's original logo, from a time before logos became the world's first form of expression: a golden circle, an hourglass shape within dividing it into four segments, three reading I \ P / L, and the bottom, much smaller, 7dI.

Though the Old Man didn't fit this century, Red didn't fit the room. Amid every conceivable finery—finest wood, finest cloth, finest decorative plants, finest china, finest food, finest carpet, finest chandelier—he sat hunched, head down, dirty baseball cap covering his eyes, stubble on his chin, filth on his jacket, filth on the fingers sticking out his fingerless gloves, filth under his fingernails. Only Aracely belonged here, a fact she knew and that she thought both of them knew.

"Satoshi," the Old Man said, "this is, I believe, the seventh time we've spoken."

Red's caked layer of dirt seemed to spread out from him, curdling the room's beauty inch by inch.

"And Aracely. I spoke to your father, once, twenty years ago. Of course, I'm well acquainted with your darling mother, whom you resemble so strongly. My blessing—some say curse, I say blessing—has been to watch time change."

Aracely shifted her fork. Neither the Old Man nor Red ate; the food sat like offerings. The Old Man contemplated space and time, and no matter how dead he looked, his voice remained alive. Kindly, even, the universal grandfather. Aracely never met her grandfather, but the tape of Dad's finals began with this Old Man. Still old, even then, but not impossibly so, he gave a dedication: *Here age relives fond memories of the past... and here youth may savor the challenge and promise of the future.*

"I don't believe I've ever spoken to the child of one to whom I've spoken before. No, I do not believe. This world always gives something new, doesn't it?" That sepia-tinged form of him transposed onto this one, compounding the brown smear that emanated from Red. The Old Man cleared his throat horrifically and adjusted his lapel pin. "That's why I've called you here, of course. I always insist on meeting my finalists. It's important, I feel, to gauge how the world has progressed. To ensure it's moving along the correct path.

"I, too, was young once; I too was young. Then, the future of the world was still so, uncertain. So many hands pulling so many directions. So many directions seeming so dark. Which way would the world go? Everyone with a voice bellowed: *I see the future!* History was a line, and its direction ordained. Of course, they all saw a completely different direction. So who was right? Was anyone?"

"After the War, and my service ended, I came to this region to help it rebuild. I saw people blinking, looking around at their broken homes and lives, their broken dreams and ideals. People in despair. Disillusioned. Those who once believed themselves to be, uh, chosen by fate, now cursed their bad luck. Had the whole thing been luck? Was there no true order, no grand narrative, no universal truth? Things I saw in the War... no. No, I'm traveling the wrong boulevards.

"Amid the rubble I saw two young children. Too young to understand why their world was now this... waste land... they simply accepted it as 'the way things are.' They were playing a game, with Pokémon they caught scrounging the rubble, rope leashes around their necks. A Pidgey and a Rattata, I believe. They'd devised a game, with rules, to determine which was stronger, and rather than a fight to the death, they pulled away at the pivotal moment, to cradle and nurse their tired Pokémon, with the tender mercy children always feel.

"That image, stirred my soul."

The Old Man took a breath. A hard, rasped inhalation.

"There was a world, I saw in that moment, shining brightly, the future. A world where, the violent impulses, that led to so much... squandered life... could be aimed another way. A way of peace and progress. Where children would grow old, remembering only that world, would love it, and strive to maintain it in their adulthoods. That's the meaning and purpose of nostalgia... I, too, was young once; I too was young. Long may it last."

Breath. Breath.

He regarded the glass band that enveloped the penthouse, as though the towers of Saffron were the full scope of the world.

Breath.

"Now, I understand everything. During the War, winners and losers weren't chosen by chance. Now I see... everything... was *meant* to be this way. Because this world is better than all others in human history. It can't be luck. No. It was industry, creativity, vision, and a spirited drive to do what was right. Good prevails. Those I speak to must all be good, because they are the ones... who share my qualities. That is the meaning of the sport. To create those who may love even those they master. When the powerful love, then the world will always be made better."

Breath. Breath. Breath. Slowly, the Old Man reached under the table. He pulled up a mask, which he pressed to his mouth, and breathed. He returned the mask under the table. The entire time he stared fixedly at Aracely.

"You do not belong here," he said.

Cely was unable to stop herself from smiling. She looked from the Old Man to Red and back, Red having no recognition at all of the words said. Only Mom's warning kept her from immediate response, which allowed the Old Man to continue:

"Oh but they love you. Those parasites, the ones who never belonged themselves, those advertising agents and financiers. They come to me and say, viewership is skyrocketing! As if that alone matters, as if we built this world to make money, when we make money to build the world. They come to me and say, this is how we crush that Battler's Union once and for all. *HAH*. Who do they think *made* the Union? And why? A unifying philosophy! People and Pokémon! Working together! Warrior-philosophers, warriors of the spirit. People with power who *choose* not to use it. Only that way... only that way..."

He tugged his mask to his face. Cely took fork and knife and cut into the flesh of the fish on her plate, still smiling.

"Your father failed you," the Old Man said. "He learned all the wrong lessons. It was never to win at all costs. Never. It was never to grow old and bitter. But to learn, that your love for your Pokémon... that love...! Is more important... Our trainers learn the lesson and surrender willingly, in the end, rather than discard their loved ones to try again. Perhaps it was the circumstances, how close he was, robbed, one might say, by bad luck alone... Then the divorce, plunging him into a world where he could only live in the past... His nostalgia became corrupted. They failed you, your parents. They created a monster."

Cely actually didn't eat fish. Of course they didn't ask for dietary restrictions beforehand. So she simply cut it up. An abstracted Magikarp.

"Is that so?" she said. "I'm the only one at this tournament who seems to even have parents."

She motioned at Red, to give him chance for rebuttal, and took his silence as agreement. Mom told her not to talk, but what would the Old Man do? Disqualify her?

He breathed into his mask. One, two, three times.

"A whole parentless world," she said. "Isn't it unbelievable? Everyone gives me shit, and for what? Because my Dad helped me? As if there can't be any sort of, of, of continuity? Everyone leaves home at ten to relearn everything from scratch, on their own, every time? That's what you call progress? Or is that by design, too. A world of perfect stasis, because nobody can ever grow past a certain point before they reset? A world where present and past are the same. That's what you mean by nostalgia, right? A field of flowers, blooming, repeating. Yeah it's always pretty but... you've eliminated the line of history, you've turned it into a point."

The words came out strangely angry. Cely was so good at controlling herself, but these words bounced out of her head the moment she opened her mouth, and she couldn't tell how many of them were hers and how many MOTHER's. Why did it matter, anyway, when the world ended tomorrow?

"Ignorance," the Old Man said. "Stasis? Haven't you seen the leaps technology has made? On timetables nobody imagined! That's progress! Bill Masaki, and those scientists at Silph Co., and the other great corporations, the things they've done... Interconnected digital storage systems. Poké Balls so cheap even a child can afford them. Devices that heal Pokémon in seconds. Technical Machines, move tutors. We can go into a Pokémon's DNA and alter their IVs, EVs, abilities, natures. We created a Pokémon! Porygon, we created something from

nothing! And you think there's no progress? You can't tell me that. I lived it. I saw what this world was before. I saw this world laid bare, the cruel hard world lurking beneath this one I've created. It's a utopia compared to that hellfire!"

He, too, was young once; he too was young. And the world progressed according to his vision. And science developed gadgets useful to that world's maintenance. Looking back at the past, the line seemed to have always been destined to lead where one stood. There was only ever one possible outcome, this one. Long may it last.

But the Old Man, sucking his mask, was weary. Aracely peered into his mind and saw him, so weary, propping up a dam with his feeble body, praying that all his efforts in life weren't simply so that, once the dam broke, it burst forth even more ferociously than before.

She didn't need to respond.

The Old Man lowered the mask. Breath. Breath. His eyes flitted to an arbitrary corner of the room, as though something awaited him there. Then he loosed a desiccated, threadbare chuckle. "They say they can't do without you," he muttered. "And all the money you'll make them. I'll show them I mean what I say about money. I'll show them how much I'm willing to pay." His chuckle descended into a cough. He gripped the table and waved her away with the hand that gripped the mask. "Now go. I've said all I want."

Immediately, Red rose. He tucked his chair into the table and left, Poké Balls jangling on his pocket. Which was interesting, because they confiscated Cely's Pokémon (yes, she actually started carrying them) before she boarded the helicopter, citing "regulation."

What happened next was insane, but somehow she expected it. In the anteroom outside the Old Man's chamber, three people waited, plus Mom. Red was already vanishing around a corner. Two of the three moved toward Cely. They were men, one middle-aged and one younger, wearing ties but no jackets.

"Cely, you don't have to tell them anything," Mom said.

"Aracely Sosa, would you come with us for a minute," said the middle-aged man. Under his bushy mustache, he maneuvered a toothpick left and right.

"No, I don't think I will," Cely said.

The younger guy, tactically nondescript, shook his head. "Wrong answer."

"You don't have to say a word to them Cely. Not a word. What they're doing is completely out of line. It's a violation of rights."

As the middle-aged man placed a hand, firm but not brusque, on Cely's shoulder, she stared at the third person, who sat in a chair more decorative than functional. A woman with dark hair and a severe expression, though levied at a pattern in the carpet rather than at Cely. She wore a close-fitting maroon tracksuit and she was terrifying, because Cely knew exactly who she was. As if she read Cely's mind—no, there was no "as if"—she turned her eyes to Cely, gripped the armrests of her chair, and stood.

"Good," the woman said. "I don't need to introduce myself. That saves time."

"This way, Sosa," said the middle-aged man.

"Cely. Don't tell them anything. Don't let that woman scare you. Nothing she says is admissible in a court of law. They can't break *all* their own rules. Cely! They want to intimidate you. Don't say a *word* to them."

Mom followed the carpeted path the men led her down, shouting all the while. The younger man turned and barred her way. "You'll need to wait there, ma'am. If your daughter's innocent, there's nothing to worry about."

"Bastard! Goosestepping fascist! You can't *do* this. Do you have any idea who I fucking am? The people I know?"

"Don't worry, we know you, Miss Fiorina."

"I'll have your fucking jobs. I'll have them, I swear. Even yours, you fucking fraud bitch!" She fired a finger at the back of the woman in the tracksuit.

"We're just doing our jobs, ma'am. You should be sympathetic. Didn't you get caught up in the *last* terrorist attack?"

"My daughter isn't a—Cely! Cely!" Although the middle-aged man led Cely around a corner, she still heard Mom screaming. "Cely don't say a word! I'll get you out of there Cely. Cely!"

They sat Cely in a small, gray, windowless room that was ostensibly still on the penthouse floor. The two men did a classic good cop bad cop routine (middle-aged good, younger bad) that Cely tuned out as they paced back and forth. Her eyes remained riveted to the woman, who stared back.

What would the Old Man do, disqualify her? That thought exposed itself as pathetic naivete, the only consolation being they planned this trap regardless of how she acted at dinner. It was Saffron City of all places, why didn't she see this coming the moment she got on the helicopter? In this soulless room, under the bare buzz of a lone light, the throbbing intensity of her fear pervaded every cognizant inch of self.

It had to be her. Nobody else, certainly not these two IPL secret police, provoked even a flinch. But her, this woman Cely knew so well, because for six years between age eleven and seventeen she hung on Cely's wall, a glossy poster where she posed in a white tuxedo with purple trim, one arm extending a top hat, from which confetti burst to form a word: READ. The pose and colors were meant to look whimsical, but the woman wore the same severe expression then (she'd been a teenager when they took the photo) as now, which made the image somehow unnerving, as if even that flat copy was READing your mind. Charlie gave Cely the poster as an overture of earnest friendship at a pubescent time where such things still seemed possible, a point of common interest that tethered them despite the growing rift in their respective personalities. Psychic powers. If anyone in this world was truly psychic, if anyone's existence kept alive the hope that you, too, might be able to read minds, might be

special, then it was this woman, the woman who presided silent over Aracely's adolescence, the woman who waited for the two men to finish their spiel before taking her turn:

Sabrina, gym leader of Saffron City.

"Girl's not talking," said the middle-aged agent.

"You're here for a reason," the younger said to Sabrina. "Work your magic, if you've really got it."

They stepped aside. Sabrina pulled out a chair at the small table and sat staring into Cely's eyes. On her bangs, there was something that didn't exist on the poster: a single gray hair.

The problem with facing a mind reader was that the more you tried not to think about something, the more you thought about it. From the videos Cely once watched, Sabrina was only capable of scraping surface-level thoughts, not delving into the abyss of memory. (*"A human has a lifetime's worth of memories, whether they consciously remember them or not. It would take a lifetime to parse."*) Nor could she read the subconscious, the unconscious, dreams, any psychological strata beyond the waking world.

That made everything doable. Because Aracely—

"Well? What's she thinking?" the younger agent said.

"Nothing illuminating, yet," said Sabrina.

"What baloney."

Because Aracely had practice. Years of visitations to Dad's condo, where Brittany poked around her mind. Years shutting her out entirely, or modulating what exactly she—

"Gardevoir is an empathic psychic type," Sabrina said. "It reads emotions, not rational thoughts. It is different from me."

"Huh?" said the younger agent. He was about to say more, but his partner stopped him.

"It seems you can control yourself in a vacuum, at least," Sabrina said. "Tell me about RISE."

Unlike the agents, Aracely was too afraid to simply ignore her. An associative image appeared: MOTHER, parasol, veil, office—

And she abruptly rewound, sharp and straight to the thought that once sent Brittany sobbing to Dad, of razor blades across wrists, blood flowing out, all over the bathroom tile, back then it was only fantasy, now she drew on memory and left her past self dying on the ground before Sabrina, an offering bleached and corpselike.

Sabrina's eyes shut slowly. "One of my colleagues was a soldier. He fought in secret wars that aren't supposed to exist. Though he doesn't try, sometimes corpses bubble to the surface. Now tell me, does MOTHER plan to attack the stadium tomorrow?"

"No," Cely said quickly, maybe too quickly, though her carefully collated suicide self lifted her head off the tile to say it's true, absolutely true, there is no plan, Cely knows of no plan, that was the whole point, why she did it the way she did.

"Did what?" Sabrina asked.

Cely led her to a dark room, the only light streaking in a single ray between the curtains, the ghostly form of a woman sitting on her bed, and then as Sabrina tried to puzzle this image Cely came at her from behind with an axe, the blade cleaving into her skull, splitting the brains of that woman in the white tuxedo, spraying the poster with blood as Cely stood heaving over Charlie's corpse, bringing the axe back up for a second swing—

"Juvenile," Sabrina said. "Let's return to that room. What did MOTHER tell you then? What is RISE planning?"

Sabrina circled closer and closer to some truth. But the truth was—Aracely didn't know the truth. MOTHER never told her. It was Nilufer who'd know. Nilufer. That name conjured a new image of a loading dock, Cely gagged and bound, while Toril Lund stared down a bizarre device with two barrels.

Sabrina's eyes opened. "Did that really happen?"

"Yes," Aracely whispered.

"Hm." The intensity of her gaze angled into the table. Her brow creased, revealing a face more wrinkled than it first appeared. Aracely focused on the single strand of gray in her bangs. How old was she now?

"Thirty-five," Sabrina muttered aimlessly, then looked up. "Please understand that I am not an agent. I do not typically conduct interviews such as these." A stilted, deliberate delivery; she weighed each word before speaking. "I am here because I was told I may prevent a catastrophe akin to IPL 51. I decided preventing something like that would be something I want. I am uninterested in punitive measures. If you are truly a victim of RISE—"

"Victim?" the younger agent said. "That's MOTHER's right-hand girl. Some victim!"

"Shut up," said the middle-aged agent.

"Forget this crap. Ask her who stole Bill Masaki's flash drive."

A yellow Azumarill flashed in her mind before she had a chance to tamp it down.

"She did," Sabrina said. "Using her Pokémon." Did the character of her stare change?

"Hear that, Sosa? You're cooked. Property theft, oh boy."

"I said shut up," said the middle-aged agent.

The flash drive wasn't what they cared about. The middle-aged guy didn't say it, but he knew Mom was right: statements Sabrina claimed to read off someone's mind wouldn't fly in court.

Wasn't Cely better aware than anyone? Half the world thought Sabrina was a faker, Mom and Dad included. Her powers—mind reading, small weight telekinesis, horoscope-tier precognition—were indistinguishable from any TV magician.

"Why did you steal the flash drive, Aracely."

The IPL promoted Sabrina to gym leader when she was twelve, two years after her abilities supposedly manifested. (Details from a Wikipedia article once read, reread, read again.) Either she was a marketing gimmick or they knew exactly what she was, and if they put her in this room now that answer was clear. Yet they never made an effort to conclusively prove to the world she was real. In fact, dressing her up in a stage performer's tuxedo and top hat for literacy posters, did they want people to call her a fraud all along?

"Aracely. Answer my question."

Even these agents think you're full of crap, Sabrina. Isn't that interesting? What has the IPL been doing with you? Keeping you on a leash? The way they've kept Bill, and Silph Co., and all those so-called innovators? Aracely knew what you truly meant because she once believed it herself: the next step in humanity's evolution, a genetic mutation proving a direction the world would one day go, someone special, and that's why they put you in the gilded box of Saffron City, one block away from their headquarters, the perfect place to keep you contained.

"Aracely!"

Thirty-five. Unmarried. No children. They're just waiting for you to dry up inside. To let those special genes die with you. Because you threaten their order. Like Aether Foundation, blackballed the instant it became clear what that technology could do. How lonely are you, Sabrina?

Sabrina stared, and stared, and stared.

What life do you live? Alone, in some nice home they let you own, with Pokémon that unnerve you because so often you seem more like them than your own species, a feeling you can't stand. You can't even be righteously angry at your situation. The IPL has been magnanimous. An earlier era you're burnt at the stake, a witch. A less peaceful or egalitarian epoch and they spirit you away into some lab to be vivisected and weaponized. This world is the best possible world, like the Old Man said, and the tragedy for you is that even in utopia you're alone, so pathetically alone. Isn't it true? Because I felt that way too. I took a step and fell out this world and realized. That's why I slashed my wrists. Have you ever tried to hurt yourself, Sabrina?

"She's in my head," Sabrina said, stunned.

"What the fuck? You're gonna say *she* has psychic powers too now?"

"I don't know." Sabrina rubbed a temple. "I don't—I don't think she does. But..."

The middle-aged guy stepped forward and slammed a palm hard on the table, startling Sabrina to a jolt, startling Cely too. "*Answer her fucking question!* Did MOTHER make you steal Bill's flash drive?"

She didn't. And it was true.

"She didn't," Sabrina said. "It's true."

"No it fucking isn't. Why else would she steal it?"

Cely didn't know. A whim, a sense; serendipity.

"She doesn't know," Sabrina said. "S... serendipity..."

"The flash drive's a distraction anyway, what is RISE doing tomorrow? How will they attack the stadium?"

They won't.

"They won't," Sabrina said.

"They're gonna do something. We know they are. What happens tomorrow? What happens on October 12?"

The world ends.

"The world ends," Sabrina said. She awoke from her daze and pierced Cely with a questioning stare. "What does that mean?"

Cely had no idea. MOTHER never once told her.

The younger agent scoffed. "I can't believe this."

I can.

"She can," Sabrina said. When both agents gave her a death glare, her eyes went straight down into the tabletop.

"Alright, out of the chair."

"Let the professionals handle this."

And they handled it, the way they knew how, with shouting and intimidation, pacing back and forth while she spoke not a single word. Sabrina remained in the corner, watching her feet and only sometimes turning eyes toward Cely. As the agents' words became a meaningless drone, Cely imagined the READ poster, the face in that tuxedo still so severe, so alone, no matter what guise they wrapped her in. Wasn't that why Cely eventually tore the poster off her wall?

Tragedy. One special flower, cut and displayed under a glass dome. Cely wasn't like that. She wouldn't end up that way. None of them, not the IPL or Mom or Dad or MOTHER, none of them would control her. She alone, shining, as the story ended forever.

Eventually, Sabrina excused herself for a drink of water, and never returned.

Hours of yelling passed before a pounding came at the door. It opened a crack, someone whispered, the agents grimaced. With terse, pissy flicks of their hands, they told Aracely to scam.

Mom met her in the hall. She gripped Cely by the arm, dragged her close, and walked shielding her from the eyes of the agents at their backs. "That Old Bastard thinks he's all-powerful," Mom hissed. "It's not twenty years ago, buddy. I called every single member of the politburo. Even his loyalists. You should've heard them when I explained he was trying to sabotage his own finals! *HAAH.*"

Hand clenched around Cely's wrist, she led her to an elevator. The sun was down and all windows they passed were full of city lights that twinkled like stars.

"The helicopter left, so I had to bring the car. It's in the garage." She said this like bringing the car was what took her so long.

Buttons lit up in sequence to track their descent down the skyscraper's hundred floors. In silence Mom and Cely stood together, watching.

Suddenly Mom turned and wrapped her arms around her. She drew Cely in, bony body all angles as her chin touched Cely's forehead. "Promise me," she whispered, "promise me this is the last battle."

"I promise," Cely whispered back. She slid her phone out of her pocket just in time to watch 11:59 tick over to the next day.

Finals | Finally

Sunday, October 12. The day of the final battle of IPL 64: Red Akahata versus Cely Sosa.

The Indigo Plateau enjoyed a steady stream of tourists the entire month-long tournament, evenly mixed between Kanto weekenders and global diehards. Now, though, the Plateau descended into logistical nightmare. Seemingly all 8 billion humans alive accumulated in this head-of-a-pin resort town. Massed bobbing faces swarmed pavilions and parking lots. Officers directed foot traffic via megaphones, temporary barriers prevented crowd crush, and flying Pokémon circled overhead with cameras for a constant eye in the control center, but it barely mattered.

Immense police presence was essential. Team Plasma's terrorist attack at IPL 51 doubled annual security expenses, and now one couldn't go three steps without bumping into a uniform. Anyone seeking to enter the stadium passed a stringent checkpoint. Poison Pokémon were unilaterally banned, Pokémon above a certain size or level were also banned. These policies continued to provoke controversy, and old timers or wannabe old timers groused incessantly about how the spectator experience was "meant to be shared by people *and* Pokémon," or explained "I went with my Scolipede as a kid and it was fine."

Regardless, the atmosphere contained the electricity of only so many bodies brought together. Kinetic and potential alike as people funneled into the stadium between behemoth posters of Red and Greninja, Cely and Azumarill. Under Red, text the height of a story read: ALL TIME. Under Cely: RIGHT NOW.

MOTHER turned off the holoscreen as Nilufer entered. The words ALL TIME, RIGHT NOW remained, a phantom. "Well?"

"Eighty-five percent of the Pewter police force is at the Plateau."

In most regions, the police were a branch of the regional league, generally obliged to assist an IPL event if asked. In Kanto, where the regional league was the IPL's direct subsidiary, it was beyond doubt.

"What about Leader Brock?" MOTHER asked.

"The IPL has requested all Kanto gym leaders be present for the pre-battle trophy ceremony."

"Exactly as your insiders reported. Excellent work, Nilu."

Nilufer briefly smiled, then returned to business. "They've left ten plainclothes agents around our headquarters to report our movements. I've identified their locations, but eliminating them isn't an option; they're on a regular check-in schedule."

MOTHER waved a gossamer hand. "I anticipated this, more or less. Are they strong trainers?"

"Surveillance specialists, mainly. I doubt it."

"So they'll report what we do, but not impede us directly." MOTHER held the table to help herself rise. "What matters is they don't realize the significance until too late."

"That depends on Bill. Are you confident—"

"I am."

"Very well," Nilufer said.

"Are our operatives in position?"

"Yes, they're ready to make the call now."

In the end, she didn't need Cely. She didn't. "Fetch my parasol," she said.

A few minutes later, the agents outside RISE headquarters saw, and reported, that MOTHER and her aide-de-camp left on what looked like a pleasure walk around town. No other RISE members accompanied them, no suspicious behavior. It was hard to tell if MOTHER, with her broad dress, carried any Pokémon, but Nilufer certainly didn't. MOTHER held an umbrella, and Nilufer a long, cylindrical umbrella case.

Only one place on the entire Plateau was free of people: the competitors' hotel. Since Dad remained in recovery, and Red was a ghost, and the IPL put a freeze on interviews the final twenty-four hours, Cely existed in a state of isolation. She stopped listening to MOTHER's tapes, so what human voice remained? She tried to exist as Toril did, with her Pokémon lounging in the room (someone needed to watch them anyway), but all they did was make a mess. Ziggy pulled the sheets off the bed, Slowking snored, Momokins coughed up pungent green hairballs, Scizor stood around like a total weirdo and freaked her out.

Alas. In her heart she must love them. These, the heroes of our modern world. She gave Scizor a pat on its sleek metal head, which it regarded with complete confusion.

When she led her army of oddities down the tunnel that connected the hotel and arena, she noticed the distant pair of figures before they noticed her, even though they were waiting for her. She said nothing until recognition lit up their expressions, which came (for one) with a sudden squeal of glee:

"Celyyy! Omigosh, Celycelycely!"

Though it was a surprise to see them here, Cely found herself needing to act surprised. Facing a mirror, it was no difficulty. "Haydn? Haydn! Omigosh, Haydn!"

Haydn! Her beloved and adorable friend since childhood! Stalwart companion through successive intervals of elite private elementary, middle, and high schools. The sharpest dressed person Cely ever saw (besides Mom), an especial feat because Haydn did not have a model's physique.

In custom-fitted haute couture Haydn bounded the space between them and careened into Cely with an all-consuming hug. "I missed you so much, omigosh. Sososoo much!"

"You have no idea how much I needed you here, Hayds. You would not believe the neanderthals I deal with on the daily."

Ziggy and the other Pokémon gathered around Haydn like she was a potential recruit into their ranks, though unsure how exactly she fit into the team dynamic. Haydn relinquished Cely to crouch beside Ziggy and squeeze. "Ooh! He's presh personified. Omigosh."

"You'll break his back, Hayds. I need him today."

"Right, right. Wow. This is, just, wow. So cool!"

"Cely," said Charlie as she finished walking the distance Haydn ran. Charlie wore an asymmetrical particolored blazer and a hairpin shaped like a tiny top hat, giving very much solve-my-riddles-three. Her flat affect shuddered only when, looking over Cely's Pokémon, her eyes met Momokins', who obligingly manifested a flower out of thin air for her.

"This is crazy. You both came to see me? I thought tickets were like, totally impossible."

Haydn giggled, the giggle of a secret she couldn't wait to spill. (Which was every secret. Gossipmonger extraordinaire.) "We-e-e received, two! VIP passes. Courtesy of, drumroll, your super cool mom!"

"Mom? Seriously?"

"Yep! She told us to surprise you. So, surprise!"

Cely was, in fact, surprised. "But don't you have school?"

"Pfft. Missing one day is whatever. Actually, we got your ticket for the return flight, so we can all go back to Visia together. That'll be so much fun, right?"

Aha. Mom's motivation revealed itself. Sorry to disappoint, Mom, but MOTHER was probably making her move about now.

"That sounds fantastic," Cely said. "Those all-day flights are complete killer solo. Or with Dad."

"Tell me about it. If I wasn't so freaking excited I'd be jetlagged to oblivion."

"I'm ecstatic you're here. I'd love to talk more, but they need me at..." Her voice trailed off.

Haydn stared blankly, then her face snapped into focus. "Right. Of course. We won't keep you. After the battle, though, we're totally partying, right?"

"Unless she loses," said Charlie.

"Omigosh. Don't say that, dummy. Losing isn't in Cely's vocabulary."

"Not everyone can twist fate with their bare hands."

"Charlie, you say the strangest stuff. Still feeling the zolpidem?" Haydn whispered conspiratorially to Cely: "We only landed an hour ago."

"I am lucid," said Charlie.

"Suuure. Anyway, we party tonight no matter what, comprende?"

"Duh," said Cely.

"Now I'm sure you gotta, like, focus and stuff before your big match. Good luck! Break a leg! Hugs and kisses! Bon voyage! Knock em dead! Uh, whatever the heck else people say!"

Haydn waved exuberantly and did not stop. She waved at Cely, at Ziggy, at each and every Pokémon in the procession. Cely copied her enthusiasm, blew kisses, mwah-mwah, et cetera, but as the pair receded, her eyes lingered on Charlie, who while affixing Momokins' flower as a boutonniere mouthed three words: *Remember your sins*.

Obviously, the broadcast crew couldn't be busier. Rehearsals went all week, but in these final moments before showtime everything whirled anyway. The analyst desk needed to be de- and reconstructed to include additional promotional material of sponsors paying premium for finals exposure, rendering the whole place a mess. Fiorella Fiorina barked orders at blue collar stooges carting the wrong thing the wrong place, then scolded someone wielding a slab of wood too close to a highly expensive and thus highly fragile camera. Only her force of will prevented everything from shattering into a million pieces.

So she was understandably irked when Iono of all people wandered into her zone. "I'm busy," Fiorella said.

"Gotcha, totally! But I uh, got word from, *on high*"—Iono lurched onto tiptoe and extended her hand, barely reaching above Fiorella's forehead—"and they, uh, said..."

"Camera F is out of position. I know. I sent someone already."

"They said you're not doing the winner's interview."

"There. Set it down right—What was that?"

"You're not doing the winner's interview."

Fiorella, finger aimed in a point, felt a slackness in her muscles though her arm did not waver. Her hands continued to work while her mind processed this information.

"I've done the winner's interview for twenty years."

"The word is—and I'm only telling you what they said, don't shoot the messenger—they think it's time for you to transition to behind-the-scenes."

"Who's doing the interview?"

Iono hesitated. She was already in full costume, wig and hair accessories and an oversized jacket to make her look smaller than she really was. Usually, in costume meant in character, but she seemed now as she did when Fiorella took her to the Old Man to finalize her contract: gray, unsteady, demure.

"I am," she said.

Fiorella heaved a sigh, which was the only outward display of displeasure she allowed herself to indulge in. These were the times to remember her self-help books: *Nothing they do harms you. You are only harmed if your character is harmed, and you always control your own character.*

"Okay," Fiorella said. "Thank you."

Iono buzzed off. Fiorella's arm motions and commands slowed. Curiously, the workmen kept doing what she wanted them to do, as if her thoughts transmitted via telepathy. Or as if they already knew what to do regardless.

Why cut her? Age? But her regimen worked flawlessly. No gray hairs, no wrinkles. Obviously nothing lasted forever, even with botox and facelifts and miracle ointments too expensive for your average UBI leech. Fiorella remembered her interview with "MOTHER," back before they called her that. "You have three PhDs, two grown kids, your own conservation organization, and you look the same as you did at twenty-two—I've seen the photos. What's your secret?" "Oh, nothing special," crossing lethally veinless legs as she brushed back a lock of platinum blonde hair. "Willpower." They laughed together.

That woman seemed like she would be young forever, but now even she hid her face from view. When reports later emerged about "willful negligence" and "scientific misconduct," Fiorella knew it was bunk. An accident happened, someone needed to be blamed. All the stuff about mistreating her children—when you're down, they'll find anything to justify kicking you. (If a woman didn't fit a stereotypical ideal of maternal warmth, if she urged her daughter to succeed rather than mewlingly comfort her for failure, *she* was the problem. The person actually trying was the one blamed.) So of course, Fiorella thought nothing of sending Cely to her health program. That hadn't been a mistake. It was quiet, secluded, way out in Kanto, explainable as an internship, nobody needed to know, nobody needed to meddle, it was the right decision, unquestionably. Except now, having been inside, having seen the clinic firsthand—

What was she thinking about? Everyone kept rushing around her. (*You always control your own character.*) Right, age. Age always struck eventually, it made sense the broadcast wanted a pretty face, but Fiorella still looked as she should. She looked younger than Cynthia, not so stringently dedicated to her appearance, of course she was a trainer and these trainers always let themselves go when the world no longer wanted them and they realized they didn't even want themselves, Cynthia now chatting with a reanimated Iono and Fiorella detected a few creases makeup only mostly concealed, a shimmer in certain lights that suggested strands of gray, plus the slight limp she tried not to show.

So age couldn't be it. Why, then? Only one other explanation. That Old Bastard still knew how to stab a back.

(Let them call her a bad mother now. See how many of them would do what she did. Oh, alright, go have an "emotional bond" with your child, go be the "loving parent" who tells jokes while you sit on your lazy ass drinking beer. When it comes to responsibility, duty—when it comes to *character*—let's see who stands tall. When it comes to how much of your neck you're willing to stick out for your daughter, let's see who wins. God. That heart attack should've finished you off.)

You always control your own character.

Right. She was allowing her character to fall apart, tumbling into these endless tunnels. The set was finished. The workmen cleared their tools and stepladders while Iono and Cynthia inspected their assigned chairs. Bill kept to the side, talking into a strangely antiquated flip phone. Behind him stood the tough-looking bodyguard who followed him everywhere.

Fiorella rubbed her temples. She knew she controlled her own character but times like this the whole great big worthlessness of her life crept onto her shoulders. So many years dedicated to nonsense. Entertainment. Nothing serious, nothing *real*. Still she stayed dedicated, because if she did a job, no matter how stupid, she would do it well, she would do it the best it was ever done. It chewed her up, now it spat her out. Iono. Replacing her with fucking Iono?!

Bill snapped his phone shut. His face was severe, something Fiorella never saw before. Since he only did this gig because he loved Pokémon, he usually brought a lax (and unprofessional) atmosphere to the set.

"Can't do it today," he announced.

"WHAAAAAT?" said Iono. "We're on in twenty! It's FINALS!"

"I can't." Bill shook his head. "Something came up."

"It better be something très sérieuse!"

"It's uh"—Bill gestured—"a machine at the lab's malfunctioning. One of my techs called, they're worried it'll explode. We'd lose months of research. I have to fix it."

"Yourself? That's bonkers!"

"You think it's sabotage, don't you?" Cynthia said.

"No, it's, I don't know what I think, but I have to fix it. I can't trust these idiot techs. Sorry, everyone." The sorry of someone too rich to ever face consequences.

"Should I go with you?" asked Cynthia.

"No, non, nein, nyet!" said Iono. "I'm not losing BOTH my analysts!"

"I'll be fine." Bill backpedaled toward the door, followed by his bodyguard. "You guys worry about the show."

"Bill," said Cynthia. "If it's serious, I should go with you. At least tell the police."

"No time. Probably a loose screw. Nothing I can't handle! If I'm quick I can be back for postgame."

Then he was gone. The studio stood silent, confused, lost. The digital timer counting down to showtime kept counting, while a set with three chairs only had two people.

Fiorella realized this was the perfect time to take charge.

"Alright guys!" One sharp clap of Iono's hands summoned everyone's eyes to her. "We're makin' lemonade out of these lemons, pronto. We got all sorts of celebrities at finals, right? Someone get Leon. Or Lance, or Steven, or someone! Anyone! All of em! We'll make it a thing. Yeah! Rotating guest analysts, new one each segment. That'll grab people's eyeballs. Content diversification. It's genius!"

She flapped her sleeves and workmen went running. Someone at the command console shouted they had Leon on Camera J, VIP Booth SW-2 (the Kangaskhan Lounge). After frantically snapped fingers, a phone shot into Iono's hand. "Ah, yeah, hey, hiiii Leon, I was wonderin' if maybe you could help a girl out? You see, we're in big, BIG trouble right now... Eh? You haven't even heard what—Right, the studio. Perfect! You're the best EVER, Leon."

Fiorella walked out of the studio. Her fingers tried to worm their way past her eyeballs into her brain.

Her cameraman, Lutz, caught up to her. "Uh, so what are we like, doing now?"

Whole worthless lot of them. Worthless tournament. Worthless scam and they dragged Cely into it too. Fiorella once had a future. Something real. Something that mattered to this world. Bill got to leave whenever he liked. Machine malfunction, sabotage—

Sabotage.

The moment she thought that word, she passed one of the million IPL agents posted across the stadium. The agent spoke into an earpiece. "Roger. MOTHER confirmed entering the Pewter Museum now. No activity on the Plateau."

Serendipity's stroke fell so thick Fiorella barely believed it. She accosted the agent. "The museum? Bill just left for there. He said something's wrong."

The agent dismissed her with a sharp cutting motion. "Do not speak to me, ma'am."

"No, you don't get it. It's—"

"Ma'am, what I'm doing is incredibly important for the safety of this event. If you continue to disrupt me, I will have you detained."

Well fuck them all then! Why would she ever expect the mechanisms of bureaucracy to function with base level competence? It was as it always was: Fiorella could only trust herself to do a job. And maybe she liked it better this way. She felt the poison in her lungs, smelled sickly sweetness even though no crowd roared. A blank woman in the dark, a friend perhaps, speaking behind a screen. Her fingers snapped at Lutz. "With me. We're going down the mountain."

MUSE \ MEWSEUM

Fate's favored stepped onto the stage. Fireworks skyrocketed one after another, scattering Pokémon faces against the sky. Soundless. On the platform, the world's last stand met her rise. Eyes invisible; face blank under the hat-brim. An aura of cracked soil. He neither judged nor sensed her.

The tiny two-seater twin-rotored helicopter touched down atop the bleached and cracked swath of pavement behind the museum. Bill flew. Money as he had, it made sense to hire a chauffeur, but everyone he hired made him anxious; he learned to do it himself.

"If the issue's what I think," he mumbled as the blades ground to an abrupt halt, "we're looking at a loose screw."

"Uh," said Yanko, "right." Top 8 finisher at IPL 56, now reliable muscle-for-hire, Yanko nonetheless unfastened his straps too slow for Bill's taste. Bill urged him with rotational gestures.

"If it's not the screw—that button there, come on—if it's not the screw I'll open it up and peek inside. Only I can do that because only I have the tools."

"Right."

"If I can't trust these knuckleheads to check the screws I can't trust them poking around inside."

Yanko finally freed himself. The rotors were at rest now, and following the dim line of dying sunlight along the slope of the Plateau they glanced up and heard the crack of fireworks. Saw them. Pikachu faces, Charmander faces.

"If the issue's inside," Bill said, clicking Yanko out of the delusion of nostalgia, "then I know it's not sabotage. Again, because—Because?"

"Because only you have the tools."

"Great. Can't trust these researchers, Yanko. Ought to fire them all and do it myself. If they're not corporate spies, they're straight incompetent."

"God. It's a beautiful night," Yanko said.

Stars shone; the stadium matched in the size of its glow the moon. Twins.

"Every night is beautiful." Bill stopped beside the museum's backdoor entrance and fumbled under his shirt for his keycard. "Every day, too. It's a beautiful world."

The reader beeped, flashed green. The door retracted. On the other side stood a veiled woman with a parasol and one of her white-robed minions.

"Lusamine, what the fuck," Bill said.

Yanko reached for a Poké Ball. The minion turned a long object toward him and Bill realized what the object was.

"Wait—"

The "gun" erupted. Yanko lurched. Scraps of metal pierced his heart faster than god. He dropped and didn't move.

Bill held his hands over his ears but they still rang. He couldn't hear himself screaming but knew he must be. Lusamine and the woman with the gun didn't flinch—earplugs. He appreciated the lucidity of that thought, and followed it with another: *I must keep my thoughts clear now more than ever.*

The white-robed woman tossed the gun behind her. "Reload it," she said. Two museum employees he now recognized as cultists appeared, propped the gun against the ground, and packed material down its barrel with a rod.

Guns were contraband material. Prohibited by every region's government, barely even known by the populace at large. The jury-rigged contraption looked like it couldn't possibly be functional, but obviously it was. Did Lusamine get her hands on a blueprint from some vault? Did she invent a working prototype herself? The reload window was his chance. His eyes flitted to the Poké Balls on Yanko's belt.

"Don't," said the gunman. She drew a knife.

Bill held up his hands.

Something roared in the distance. Bill briefly expected another helicopter to touch down and save him, but it was the roar of the crowd on the Plateau.

"You're all nuts. What do you hope to accomplish?"

Under her umbrella, behind her veil, Lusamine was a blot of ink. Her black hair flowed among the folds of her deep purple dress.

She said, calmly and coldly, rationality Bill recognized in himself, analytical objectivity of a scientist: "Forward progress."

Out of its own steam Scizor shot, striking its opponent with a Bullet Punch. Grimmsnarl lurched as the metal claw impacted faster than god. Its black fur, matted as thick as its body, absorbed as much of the blow as possible, barely enough to keep it upright.

It was not the opening turn Red hoped for. Assuming he hoped for anything. All throughout Cely's side of the bracket, trainers opted into unexpected openers, targeted movesets. Did Red learn from any of that? Of his Pokémon, Grimmsnarl was the obvious first play. He ran it every single time.

The guy was a ghost. Looking at him, Cely saw nothing, understood nothing. He wasn't there. Only by watching his tape again and again, like Toril, did she find faint traces of him. Any identity that existed, it existed in his Pokémon.

Scizor reluctantly obeyed the rules and backed off to its side of the stage. This allowed Grimmsnarl, though bruised and dripping sweat, to accomplish its task. Its fur unwound and, semi-sentient, drew lines through the air. Dashes of fairy magic sprinkled between the strands as Grimmsnarl attempted a pained but mischievous snicker. Where the dust fell, translucent walls sprouted. These were the walls of Reflect: psychic? magic? barriers that defended against physical attacks.

Reflect wasn't like most moves. It remained on field even after the Pokémon who used it switched out. Hence why Grimmsnarl was such an effective opener, hence why Red always did it. Hence why Cely trivially prepared a counter.

As expected, rather than drop to the next attack, Grimmsnarl returned to its Poké Ball. As expected, Red's most formidable threat came out in its stead.

Dragapult. A dragon capable of turning itself semipermeable to phase through walls, which made it ghost type even if it wasn't actually undead. It fought by firing, at Mach speed, unevolved members of its own species from notches in its horns. Ace parenting.

"Knock Off," Cely said.

Scizor moved before she finished the command. Though Grimmsnarl's Reflect slowed it, the attack nailed Dragapult hard the moment it appeared. Better than the damage, though, was Scizor slapping a pair of Choice Specs off and to the edge of the stage. Might as well have snipped Dragapult's balls.

Two of Red's Pokémon were now gimped without a single hit landed on Cely. Red didn't flinch. He didn't look like it mattered at all. Maybe it didn't. He was on this stage before Cely was born. He wiped Dad off the face of history. Simply a fixture.

The sky was beautiful today. The moon so large. MOTHER would be close by now. She never told Cely the plan, as Sabrina discovered, but Cely knew the truth of it anyway the way she knew Red's next move. Soon that sky would rip apart. All manner of color would shine through as the gash widened, and widened, and widened. Finally it would seem to mean something, to have some structure, the structure latent in the ending, because an ending necessitated a beginning, a middle, some division of content, and here was the climax, here

Aracely Sosa stood, above waves of flowers flitting in the breeze, doomed to die and be reborn perennially, change with no progress, change with no purpose.

MOTHER, Nilufer, and the two other RISE members led Bill through his museum. Other than field trip days, the place was never a hotspot, but concurrent to finals it was devoid of life. Most employees called in sick.

With the data on the flash drive Cely stole (Bill *knew* she stole it, knew it, but without evidence internal sabotage remained a plausible enough alternative to engender doubt), it was possible to access most staff areas, and threatening violence rendered it trivial to make a researcher call Bill with the malfunctioning machine tale.

Why did they need Bill? Simple. One door in this facility accepted no passcode or keycard; it opened only in response to a biometric scan of Bill himself. From that alone, he understood their entire scheme.

The careful guesswork of prehistoric Pokémon fossils bore sole witness to their passage, each skeleton awaiting its chance to become a monster of the imagination. Bill turned chatty, an attempt at distraction or delay.

"Your best option here's ransom. I'm insured for billions. Request safe haven in Orre, it's mostly outside IPL jurisdiction. You can end this very rich if you don't do anything more stupid than you've already done."

They passed a model spaceship, a talking Clefairy animatronic that explained lunar cycles on loop, the world's largest Moon Stone. An etched mural of the evolutionary tree adorned the wall: scientific names rising through history, branching apart into leaves with each leaf an engraving of a species.

Nilufer (so MOTHER called her) pressed a hand to her ear, then reported: "The two IPL agents that followed us to the museum are still posted outside the exits."

"Radio chatter?"

"Ordinary check-ins. They don't suspect a thing. No evidence they even heard the gunshot, let alone knew what it was."

Imagining an attack on the stadium, they became blind to all else.

"What you're doing is pointless," Bill said. "Lusamine. Come on. That machine in the basement isn't gonna turn back time. You'll still have nothing. No Foundation, no husband, no kids. Just cultists."

He hoped to rile her up, but MOTHER strode on, shrouded by her veil and parasol. They reached the elevator access door at the back of the lobby atrium. Nilufer produced a keycard,

the reader beeped, and the door popped open.

"There. There!" a voice shouted.

Everyone turned. Nilufer aimed her reloaded gun. She didn't fire; her brow ruffled at what she saw. Shoving through the lobby doors, face marred by exertion, IPL broadcast mainstay Fiorella Fiorina appeared. Behind her, a cameraman.

"We're witnessing"—pant, heave—"the most brazen terrorist activity since Team Plasma's attack on IPL 51!" Fiorella gripped a nonexistent microphone and shouted to compensate. "Members of the RISE clinic, led by the—the—disgraced Dr. Lusamine Mohn, have kidnapped Bill Masaki at the Pewter Museum of Science. It remains unknown whether they intend to—"

"Fiorella you suicidal fucking idiot, *look out*," Bill screamed.

"Shoot the cameraman," said MOTHER. "Cut the reporter's throat."

Fiorella only stood there, smack in the middle of the lobby, like she was no more than a disembodied eye, a witnesser of events incapable of being harmed by them. Her voice grew more manic, more disorderly. The cameraman, realizing the situation, backed behind the receptionist counter for protection, but it wouldn't protect him from the bullet Nilufer aimed to send through his body. Bill thought, *If I ram into her now. If I time it right and make her miss, then maybe—*

"Shit," said Nilufer.

A third person passed through the museum doors. Bill thought it might be an IPL agent, drawn to investigate by Fiorella's inexplicable appearance. It wasn't.

It was Toril Lund.

Three empty chairs. A table. Two columns crafted to look like beer bottles. Studio lighting. Everyone, cast and crew, stood outside this bonsai plant world. They gathered by the wall of monitors that displayed feeds from throughout the stadium.

In this control center, broadcast technicians swapped between feeds as necessary to create the at-home television viewing experience. Right now, that experience focused on the battle: Aracely withdrawing Scizor for Gliscor, Dragapult spurting Flamethrower.

The broadcast director said: "37. A next. 2, 2, 3, 4. 38 C next. 39 D next. 1, 2, 3, 4. 40A P next. 2, 2, 3, 4 looking at you. 40B C next. 3. 4, 2, 3. 41 B next. 2 of 6." His eyes flitted from feed to feed and he spoke uninterrupted. He noticed, but ignored, camera K, as did those executing his arcane orders.

Everyone else watched camera K. Iono, Cynthia, Leon, assistants, makeup, lighting, grips, gaffers. On camera K, Fiorella Fiorina confronted RISE in the Pewter Museum of Science.

Cynthia stepped away. Iono grabbed her sleeve once they were far enough from the director to whisper without breaking his musical cadence. "What're you doing?"

"Going there," said Cynthia. "Iono, stop the broadcast. Suspend the match."

"I'm the on-camera host! I don't have that authority."

The director did nothing but recite his numbers and letters.

Leon, last year's winner, still decked in the outrageous cape he adopted as part of his World Champion self-styling, approached. During the pre-battle segment, his game knowledge and affable showmanship made him a natural substitution for Bill. He and Cynthia argued smilingly over predictions—Cynthia for Cely, Leon for Red (*beating Galar's best means he's the best*)—but nothing of that remained now.

"You're not seriously talking about stopping the battle are you?"

"You too Leon?" Cynthia said. "It's not happening here, so it's not your problem?"

"No way. As the champ, it's my responsibility to make sure the next champ gets their time to shine, so I'll go down with you to sort things out. But people waited all year to see this match. The energy, the excitement, the feeling of togetherness—why shut that down because of a robbery a city away? This is what everything's about."

Storytellers never wanted to stop their story. Cynthia, an archaeologist, understood the impulse. How banal for history to be interrupted by the present, which seemed so comparatively insignificant. Cynthia turned and started walking.

"Isn't he right?" Iono struggled to keep up. Her outfit encumbered her, her legs were half as long as Cynthia's. "We'd only cause a panic! Especially since Cely—it being RISE and all..."

Cynthia pushed through the doors to an outer terrace and stopped. "Shoot. I forgot." She jabbed a finger at Leon. "You have to stay."

"Huh? But—"

"Aracely Sosa is possibly the best battler in the world. There's also a chance she's involved with RISE. If she beats Red and turns violent, we'll need a World Champion-level battler here to stop her."

Leon rubbed one side of his jaw. "I see."

"If you believe so strongly in this battle and what it represents, then keep it safe. Goodbye."

Cynthia sent out Togekiss and was on his back, flying away, before whatever Leon and Iono said next left their mouths.

She shouldn't think poorly of them. They were not people of a world prepared for violence, *real* violence. She too, older now, felt alike. Her knees hurt constantly; the analyst desk's appeal beckoned. Like switching the channel: another show to replace one you didn't enjoy.

On the switch, Cely's Gliscor ate a Flamethrower. The fire burned it, and the crowded VIP booth groaned.

"Huh? What? Why?" said Haydn. "Is that bad? I don't get it. It didn't do much damage."

The booth was filled with Kalosian fashion kingpins, who muttered to themselves and certainly refused to interact with the upper middle class riffraff shunted into the booth's corner, even as Charlie stared at them rudely.

One person was willing to talk, though.

"Heh. It actually has to do with Gliscor's ability, Poison Heal." Jinjiao Zhang leaned confidently over Charlie to gain proximity. "You see, poison heals Gliscor instead of hurting it, so every competitive Gliscor holds a Toxic Orb to poison itself. By being burned immediately after switching in, the Toxic Orb can't take effect, meaning no poison. It completely negates Gliscor's effectiveness as a defensive wall."

"I see," Haydn said, while Dragapult dropped a meteor on Gliscor's head. "No wait, I don't see at all. Being burned stops you from being poisoned?"

Jinjiao pushed up his glasses and grinned. "That's right. A Pokémon can only have one status condition."

"But why? What stops you from being burned and poisoned at the same time?"

A moment of perplexity struck Jinjiao, swiftly squashed. "It's just how it works." On the stage, Gliscor barfed up spikes that scattered across the ground.

"Am I being dumb?" said Haydn. "Charlie, tell me if I'm being dumb for thinking you should be able to be both burned and poisoned."

Charlie's eyes unlatched from the Kalosians and riveted to Jinjiao, whose elbow drew dangerously close to grazing her knee.

Gliscor, having been torched, meteored, and not poisoned, expelled a rattling gasp as he forced the last few spikes out his esophagus. On his segmented tail he swayed, then flopped as the announcers shouted he was "down for the count."

"Oh, I don't understand this game at all." Haydn pouted. "Chaaarlie, help! Why did Cely keep Gligger in if he was gonna lose?"

"Guilty conscience."

"After the unlucky burn," Jinjiao said, "she likely decided it was worthwhile to sack *Gliscor*—not 'Gligger'—to get spikes on the field. Red's team has few options for hazard clear, so it'll pay off long-term."

"Oh! That's good?"

"Heh. Right, you don't know. Spikes remain on the field and damage Pokémon as they switch in. They're great if your opponent can't clear them."

Cely sent out Rotom and Haydn immediately clapped. "Oh, I love this guy! He's so funny!"

"Where's Momokins," said Charlie. "I only want Momokins."

"I doubt she'll use Meowscarada, he matches poorly against Red's team. And honestly, she should've sent out Rotom first instead of Gliscor. She gambled on dodging the burn and lost. Clumsy error. At least Dragapult has to switch now. Expect U-turn."

As soon as Jinjiao said it, Dragapult flew at its foe, ricocheted off the washing machine door, and retreated to its Poké Ball. Red then sent out the wounded Grimmsnarl, who—also as Jinjiao said—took damage from spikes. Compounding matters, Rotom immediately used Will-O-Wisp, burning it. Jinjiao explained this information to Haydn and Charlie despite the consternation that creased Haydn's face.

"So, burning is good right?"

"In this situation, it doesn't mean much. Cely most likely expected Dragapult to swap to one of Red's physical attackers. Being burned lowers your strength, obviously."

Haydn frowned. "Come on Cely... you can do it!"

"Not her choice," said Charlie.

Bill rammed Nilufer. Instead of Toril's head, the potted plant on the ticket booth counter exploded. Toril felt pain anyway. Her gloved hand rose to her face. Blood. Ceramic shards. Embedded around her eye, in her cheek—shrapnel.

Time's whole haunted procession came apart. Her homeless week wraithlike through Pewter City's streets snapped into a memory that faded the moment of awakening. She'd seen Fiorella running and followed her, and here she was. Her hands went for her Poké Balls.

Nilufer tossed the weapon to the others—unable to use it more than once?—and drew her knife, but MOTHER stopped her. Out of her dress's puffy sleeve manifested a cluster of webbed Poké Balls. Toril recognized the design. Beast Balls. They held Ultra Beasts.

Though MOTHER wore a veil, Toril recognized her, too. Toril once *met* her. She shrank, stopped being herself and became the herself of five years prior, half the height, everything rising up to render her smaller, a pointless speck within the world, and one word echoing: *Unfit*.

One after another the balls broke against the ground. The emergent forms did not belong. Unearthly, eyeless bodies from some other understanding of biology.

Even in the wild, Pokémon rarely killed humans. They might roar, spread their bodies, try to scare a human off its turf, but violence was performative. Killing happened only if a Pokémon was sick or truly desperate, and even then most species would roll on their belly and beg a human for help rather than attack. Symbiosis wasn't learned behavior, but embedded in the DNA.

The Ultra Beasts didn't evolve on this world. They possessed no heritage, no biological compulsion like other Pokémon—if they were Pokémon at all, rather than extraterrestrial beings forced into this world's taxonomy. They could be trained via rote, but not easily. In the heyday of the Ultra Beast fad, only skilled trainers Lusamine personally approved were allowed to capture them. Still, accidents happened. The IPL and Aether Foundation swept these accidents under the rug, but even if the Alola catastrophe never occurred, eventually the story would have escaped.

Six of these creatures stared down Toril within the cavernous, multistory lobby atrium. Or didn't stare—none actually had eyes. Two Nihilego, phantasmic jellyfish that latched onto and injected neurotoxins into their hosts; Blacephalon, uncanny clown with an incomprehensible head; Buzzwole, a bulging mass of blood-swelled muscle; Celesteela, tripartite tower of steel whose pointed head scraped the high ceiling; and Guzlord, all gaping mouth and twin tongues that slapped the tile seeking living matter to devour.

Lusamine vanished into the doorway to the basement elevator. Dragging Bill, Nilufer followed, as did the two other RISE members. They had no intention of giving the Ultra Beasts orders. In the absence of command, they would default to alien instinct: murderous, cruel, incompatible with humanity.

Fiorella's cameraman dropped the camera and ran for the exit.

Buzzwole braced its four legs against the tile, launched over Toril and Fiorella's heads, and dropped toward the cameraman. Its spiked proboscis prepared to skewer him and slurp up his insides.

"Nils!"

Toril flung out the Poké Ball. It snapped open and Baxcalibur emerged at the perfect angle to collide with Buzzwole in midair. Their bodies tangled and crashed through the atrium wall, into the western exhibit wing. Rubble and dust burst everywhere. The other Ultra Beasts moved. Toril tossed Poké Balls left and right. Order collapsed.

"Rotom, Hydro Pump!"

The washing machine ceased its idle dance and aimed its hose. Unafraid, Grimmsnarl stuck out its tongue and taunted: *Do it!* Rotom obliged. A pressurized blast flung Grimmsnarl across the stage and into unconsciousness. The score evened, one to one.

It was clear why Red wasted Grimmsnarl's final turn with Taunt. It forced Rotom into attacking moves. Rotom might deal decent damage with Hydro Pump or Volt Switch, but burning opponents with Will-O-Wisp maximized its utility. Red's Lucario dropped out of its Poké Ball and landed, hindlegs bent and one forepaw to the ground, like a sprinter moments before a race. A physical attacker, it was an excellent burn target. Unable to burn, Rotom's only option was to switch out.

Which it did. Volt Switch dealt a decent chunk to Lucario as a parting gift, but Lucario accepted the strike with equanimity. A mystic creature, not properly comprehended until recently; naturalists struggled to understand how it wasn't psychic type. It empowered itself via manipulation of "aura," which to a naked eye observer looked like the telekinetic energy Alakazam or Gardevoir harnessed.

With advanced scientific instruments, however, aura became detectable. Something to do with atoms, molecular structure, microscopic particles present in all physical matter. Cely learned about it in Physics. The instructor, a hip salt-and-pepper guy with goatee and glasses, plugged a kung fu movie into the classroom projector one day when he didn't feel like teaching. "Physics in action," he remarked drily as Lucario karate chopped a bad guy into next week.

Once suspected of harnessing psychic powers herself, Cely felt kinship for this bipedal canine with his snout and stern eyes and weird spikes. Of course, it wasn't anyone else who suspected Cely of psychic powers, it was herself.

Mom, I think I can read auras. *That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard.* Dad, I think I can read minds. *Psychics are frauds, every one.*

Haydn believed her because Haydn was nice, and Charlie believed her because Charlie was insane. Sabrina, the only true authority, wasn't sure what she believed. Did Cely believe herself? To be psychic was to be special. If she believed it, why fall through the floor? Did it matter anyway, if they controlled her, like Sabrina?

A painful transformation overtook Lucario's body as he Mega Evolved, but he never broke his ironclad mental focus. The physical changes were minor compared to other Mega Evolutions, but the real change happened in his mind. He manipulated his brain chemistry to overwrite the instincts etched into his DNA.

[DNA is the imprint of our lives. It dictates what we do, who we are, what diseases will kill us. This world must have DNA, too—Logos—with its own fated death.]

Mega Lucario, in overwriting its DNA, now lacked the innate Pokémon compunction against murder. For that reason, only specially approved masters were allowed to train one. Red obviously fit the bill, but what did Red actually do to control him? He still had not spoken a word. He had not given an order. Under the brim of his hat he gripped his face like it might crumble apart otherwise.

As Rotom retreated to its Poké Ball, Lucario formed dual blades of translucent aura in its paws. The swords swished around its body in graceful motions, not one inch out of place. His focus hardened. His strength doubled.

Cely drew her own blade: Aegislash.

Bones of a primordial being, 500,000,000 years old, became dust after Baxcalibur crashed through them. A blizzard whipped up within the museum, snow from no clouds, terrarium environment to make the forms alive and long dead silhouettes of mist on the fringes. Toril clung close to Ninetales, protected within his Aurora Veil from the pair of Nihilego trying to absorb her into them. Even as temperatures plummeted, grass grew. It cracked the tiles open, snaked in entwining vines to freeze and burst apart and be replaced by a new growing thing. Rillaboom drummed steadily despite frosted shoulders, frosted lips.

A screaming came across the sky. Celesteela careened like a missile. Before impact, a vortex of fire flared up and forced it back. Volcarona beat its wings and traced Celesteela's course to attack again.

A ball with no edges but a grid of dots to distinguish shape—Blacephalon's head—bounced against Volcarona and exploded. Only Ninetales' Aurora Veil saved Toril from instant immolation. Her collar caught flame and she patted it out.

The cameraman had escaped, but Fiorella wielded the dropped camera like a madwoman and howled inaudibly into the gale. A long black claw whipped out and seized her midsection. Amid the murk manifested Guzzlord's gaping mouth and Toril tried to scream for her Pokémon to do something but this was nothing like the structured and rules-governed battles of the stadium, this was—if anything except lunacy—the fights of her father, grimy underground fights where Pokémon bit and clawed until their throats bled, the bare intensity of logic's dissolution.

She dragged something back from the brink. "Heidi, Play Rough!"

Mawile, her sweet Mawile's small form shot from somewhere. Already Mega Evolved, her twin mouths slobbered but her face glimmered cutely as she came down on a creature fifty times her size like she intended to hug it. All force was directed into Guzzlord's upper lip, which crumpled, while the gaping mouth screamed a freakish, human scream. Its claw tongue relinquished Fiorella, she went flying, the giant body kept going, into the wall where the tree

of life was etched. The tree blasted apart, evolution's history reduced to rubble, and Guzzlord lay dormant amid the ruins.

Toril's Pokémon were stronger, better trained. She was a trainer of the highest caliber.

Mawile turned on the rebound, smiled at Toril, and danced back to what she considered her side of the stage. By the time Toril realized Mawile was waiting thirty seconds before her next attack, it was too late.

Buzzwole blitzed out of nowhere, seized Heidi's mouths with a meaty palm each, and swung her body like a flail into a model space shuttle. Jagged strips of internal scaffolding pierced flesh. Buzzwole yanked the mouths opposite directions and Heidi screeched as her skull strained.

"No!" Toril said. "Gustav—fuck—do something!"

Baxcalibur charged Buzzwole and Buzzwole hurled Heidi at him. But Heidi passed through, as though Baxcalibur wasn't there at all, or as though it wasn't Baxcalibur but a ghost wearing his face. Zoroark reverted to normal and fired a ball of spectral power into Buzzwole's grotesque pectorals.

Heidi flopped on the ground bleeding and whimpering and Toril wanted to run to her, at least to put her safely in her Poké Ball, but the two Nihilego kept testing the bounds of the Aurora Veil and the swooping doppler cry of Celesteela rang overhead as it body checked Annihilape, who hadn't done anything the entire fight because it didn't do things unless Toril said so. Half her Pokémon milled about, awaiting orders.

Toril realized she, too, was thinking in thirty-second intervals.

Aegislash raised its shield and adopted a defensive stance. This was King's Shield, its signature move. Lucario came down on it with a fistful of empowered steel, but despite incredible Swords Dance-boosted power, it failed to make a dent. In fact, upon contact, the ghostly energies that embodied Aegislash sapped Lucario's strength.

To the audience, it looked like an inconsequential turn. In actuality, it was a knife's edge of prediction. Against Aegislash, Lucario's options were either Swords Dance or attack. It depended on whether Red predicted King's Shield. Whatever thoughts ran through his head, in the end, Cely emerged on top.

"Go Cely go Cely go!" Haydn's peppy cheerleader chant earned disdainful looks from the Kalosians. She barely nodded her way through Jinjiao's explanation of how significant the prediction was, how a misstep might have cost Cely the entire match.

"Red will definitely swap out Lucario now," Jinjiao said. "But to what? Dragapult, I guess. If Cely predicts the swap, it's disaster."

"For her?"

"For him, obviously. Cely holds all the cards now. She's in his head." He grinned. "She's even in the head of the great Red Akahata."

"No sanctity of self remains," Charlie said. "Cely Sosa, devourer of spirit."

Who is this weirdo, Jinjiao thought.

Incomprehensibly, Red didn't swap. Jinjiao rose out of his seat and gestured. Was he stupid? Did he predict Cely predicting the swap? Lucario performed the same move again. Meteor Mash. As if on autopilot. Aegislash couldn't repeat King's Shield quickly, so the attack landed, and even sapped of strength, Mega Lucario hurt. Steel on steel peeled so loud Haydn and the Kalosians clapped their hands over their ears. The twangy reverberation made Jinjiao's skin undulate.

Not enough. Aegislash dragged its point through the ground to stabilize. Its defensive posture enabled it to resist the brunt of the attack. The cyclopean eye on the blade's guard rattled, refocused.

"Close Combat," Cely shouted.

"Holy shit," said Jinjiao.

"That's good?!" said Haydn.

Aegislash set aside its shield and entered Blade Forme. Its physical characteristics altered immediately. The thickness and weight of its body, which gave it the durability to withstand Lucario's strike, diminished as it honed itself with a few quick slashes against the ground. Leaner, sharper, it pounced on its opponent. True to the attack's name, it got close, then swiped once, twice, three times in rapid succession. Against Lucario's underlying steel skeleton these swipes shaved even more of Aegislash's bulk; a worthwhile sacrifice for such a powerful, super effective attack. Lucario went airborne. His snout parted in an agonized yelp that the stadium microphones pumped into the ears of every spectator. This sound entangled with the crowd's enthusiastic cries. When Lucario hit the ground, a beat passed, and after it made no move to rise, Haydn joined the collective excitement. Exceeded it. Jinjiao's fight-or-flight response flared briefly as she shot up, screeching, and reached over Charlie to squeeze him into a hug. He sank into her chest and struggled to escape, and once he did he quickly sat and leaned forward with his hands crossed over his lap.

Red, now firmly losing, betrayed nothing, even when the cameras zoomed so close creases and pores became visible on the jumbotron. Jinjiao couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy at the self-assurance of a man who won the championship six times. What, to him, could a seventh mean?

He sent out Greninja.

"Is this one strong?" Haydn asked with a hint of worry. She asked it about every Pokémon.

"In their minds, they're slaves," said Charlie.

Everyone ignored her.

Buzzwole wrapped both arms around Zoroark and needled its proboscis over and over into neck, chest, face, any exposed point of contact.

Celesteela blasted the remains of the roof off the museum, then reoriented and rocketed down before the debris landed. A violent gale ripped crisscross into the lobby and sliced through Volcarona.

Toril was losing Pokémon fast. Part of the gale pierced the Aurora Veil and slashed the palms she extended to protect herself. Blood ran from a thousand places as she broke apart her mind in search of something more elemental within.

"Nils," she screamed. "Destroy that fucking bug!" Her finger jabbed at Buzzwole. "Bite it, slash it, stab it, crush it, anything! Just keep hitting it!"

"Rune. Rune!" She couldn't find Porygon-Z in the blizzard that now funneled up through the annihilated roof. She trusted he heard. "Shoot down that rocket. Use—fuck—use Thunderbolt, use it again and again until it stops moving."

"Get Heidi," she yelled at Rillaboom. "Get her into the grass." She should have said this first. This should have been her first priority, but she wasn't thinking fast enough. Her head whirred with numbers for optimal moves but in the time it took to calculate there was a second, third, fourth attack to weather.

"Get the clown," she told Annihilape. "Rage Fist. Hit it with Rage Fist!"

That left the Nihilego. "Ingmar—"

Before she finished Celesteela came down again. A vortex of pressurized air wracked Annihilape's body, then kept going into Toril. She lifted. Her stomach danced. At the same time a crackle sparked, then flared, and the white snow glowed, and snow blindness disoriented her. She forgot where she was. A mountaintop? Her fingers—she crashed down, rolled against the tile, into a display. A Kabutops skeleton wobbled, then toppled, and its scythe-shaped claw drove into the floor an inch from her face.

She turned over. Her head ached, she wondered if she was concussed. A bubble of vomit popped on her lips. She angled her eyes upward to watch Celesteela's spiraling form in turgid, suspended slowness peel overhead, enflamed by crawling bolts of lightning, wrenching apart pieces of the museum's structure with uncontrolled revolutions. It cried out, the cry of something larger than any known creature, the cry of something at the depths of the ocean, a

sound traveling through an endless weight of water, as Porygon-Z loosed another bolt and Celesteela's arc declined into the museum's western wall and a fiery explosion.

Something long and barely there wrapped around Toril's leg. Another coiled around her arm. The two Nihilego pulled gently in opposite directions and her body extended to its full length. The nettles of their stinging limbs probed her clothes for ways to her skin. Seeking to inject her with neurotoxin, the same that got Dr. Mohn during the Alola disaster.

Her free arm reached for the broken claw-bone of the Kabutops fossil. The denuded fingers struggled to grip. Her leg kicked to buy time as her hand slipped away, then with a scream she lurched again and found purchase. One yank and the still-sharp blade came out of the tile.

She swung. The Nihilego on her arm made a pained, vibrating wobble of sound as the swipe severed two tentacles. Toril's upper half lost its support and crashed against the ground but wild, unfeeling, uncaring, she yowled and swung at the second. It danced just out of range while the gossamer cords of something not-quite-flesh caught her other ankle and it got both legs in its grasp.

"New moon," said a voice in a moment of silence. "Waxing crescent."

Her upper body lifted to swing but every swing missed by inches.

"First quarter, waxing gibbous, full moon, waning gibbous."

Something feral came out Toril's throat. "RREEYYAARRGGHHHH"—and her spine folded like a jackknife. Muscles in her back snapped, she heard them more than felt, and the Kabutops claw came down directly into the bulbous head. Knife through butter. Instead of blood, something purple and only semiliquid sprayed out. It turned to bubbles the moment it made contact with oxygen.

"Third quarter and waning crescent. These are the cycles of the moon. Now you know!"

Toril dropped back in agony. Her back was on fire and so were the million cuts across her skin. The places the Nihilego gripped were mercifully numb and the blizzard's chill was like the warm embrace of—of—she didn't know what. A mother, she might say, from cultural osmosis.

The first Nihilego, the one whose tentacles she severed, ebbed over her and descended toward her face.

"New moon, waxing crescent."

A beam of ice shot into it. Shards caked upon its surface as it flew into a wrecked display stand. Toril turned onto one elbow as Ninetales dropped beside her. She stroked his cold fur. "Good boy."

"First quarter, waxing gibbous, full moon, waning gibbous."

Under her body, the hard tile sprouted soft grass. Her aches dripped away. She held up her palms and watched cuts heal in real time.

"Third quarter and waning crescent. These are the cycles of the moon. Now you know!"

The voice came from a Clefairy. Toril blinked—it was an animatronic. It stood, unharmed, amid the museum's devastation. Porygon-Z watched it, his erratic glitchiness abated in wonder. In the distance, through the museum wall, a mournful cry resounded from the gigantic flaming lump of Celesteela.

One Nihilego lay buried in the ice. The one with the Kabutops claw bounced against a wall, spilling its brains or blood or both into the sky. Baxcalibur pinned Buzzwole in a broad puddle of neon red blood.

Rillaboom carried Heidi under one arm and Gustav under the other and set them down in the grass.

That left—

Blacephalon hurled its rematerialized head. The head was made of no known matter, organic or otherwise. Its propensity to explode made it difficult to even observe, scientifically. Theories ranged from a hypothetical quantum element—simultaneously stable and unstable—to a psychic emanation, something that didn't exist but that everyone believed existed enough for its illusion to impact the real world (by exploding).

The traveling head certainly did not look real as Toril watched it twirl toward her. She wondered, strangely, if she herself would only explode if all her Pokémon truly believed in the vision of her limbs flung apart, globs of bone and flesh bursting, a charred mark where she once stood.

That reality failed to pass. Annihilape came out of nowhere. He caught the head with one outstretched paw and swung it back toward its owner as it erupted in flame.

The blast briefly blinded Toril. She shielded her eyes, then let her hand fall. Annihilape remained standing despite the point-blank explosion, but not for long. He teetered, tilted back, and hit the ground, where Blacephalon's headless, muffled clown form already lay.

The snowstorm dwindled. The museum was a sea of wreckage, finally stilled. Toril returned Annihilape to his Poké Ball, then Volcarona, who'd been knocked out by Celesteela earlier. After a respite in Grassy Terrain, she returned Zoroark and Mawile too.

Before Toril could contemplate what had happened, Fiorella Fiorina popped out from a pile of broken plaster pieces, shouldered her camera, and ran to the elevator access door Dr. Mohn used.

"What the hell are you doing?" Toril yelled.

"The Pewter Museum of Science is in ruins," Fiorella said. It took a moment for Toril to realize she wasn't talking to her. She talked to the camera, like a reporter. "The destruction was caused by illegal Ultra Beasts used by Dr. Lusamine Mohn, and was stopped only by the heroic efforts of IPL semifinalist Toril Lund, who happened to be on the scene."

The pain abated but Toril still felt numbness in her leg and arm. She surveyed her remaining troops: Baxcalibur, Ninetales, Rillaboom, and Porygon-Z. (She didn't bother sending out Shedinja. What would he do besides die?)

She breathed in. Heroic efforts. The heroic efforts of—Toril Lund. Her heroic efforts. Her brain tingled. A story can only have one hero.

With a gesture at her Pokémon, she followed Fiorella into the elevator.

"These are the cycles of the moon. Now you know!"

Greninja focused a pulse of dark energy at Aegislash, who blocked it with King's Shield. There wasn't additional value to keeping Aegislash in, though, because Greninja was faster and needed only a clean hit to knock it out.

Cely saw the strings. A plot unfolded moves in advance. Normally she didn't think so far forward, but Red made it easy. He didn't talk, his face was blank, but slowly she understood: He was honest.

Greninja used Dark Pulse again, while Cely swapped in Kommo-o, who trivially resisted the attack. The next turn, Greninja used Ice Beam, a move super effective against Kommo-o—and Cely swapped in Rotom.

It was so weird. Red seemed, like, kinda bad? Like actually, really bad at this game. He didn't predict Cely at all. He attacked what stood in front of him. No subterfuge. Toril, Jinjiao, even Gladion played at a higher level.

Cely never paid much attention to the other side of the bracket, but she understood Red was a surprise finalist. Sure, everyone recognized his historical excellence blah blah blah, but he was old now. He played against her freaking Dad. The age seeped out of him, he felt even older than Dad, older than dirt. He barely moved and his motions were like continental drift, elongated on a scale past human comprehension.

She commanded Rotom to use the obvious move, Volt Switch. Red had every opportunity to pull Greninja out but didn't. He used Dark Pulse again, it hurt Rotom badly, but who cared? Rotom spat a blip of electricity and Greninja was fried, having already gotten scuffed on entry thanks to Gliscor's spikes.

Three Pokémon down, three to go. The reality of encroaching victory seized her, the practical application of what her sleepwalking mind understood since the week's beginning: this match was formality. It almost made winning feel like—nothing. Like anyone could do it, if they were only lucky enough to get here.

Bill accused her of being lucky, but she wrote it off. Yeah 1 in 100 chance critical hit plus burn against Toril's Mawile, okay. She wasn't lucky against Jinjiao. Actually, she was unlucky. Slowking stayed asleep that entire game and it was Jinjiao's Lopunny who got the crit. She outright outplayed Gladion, even Bill couldn't deny that. This match, she lost Gliscor to an unlucky burn.

The whole point was—the whole point—to be the best. To stand above them. To be the final mark of punctuation in history. To exceed the flowers breeding, dying, sprouting anew.

What meaning did it have otherwise?

That was one part of her brain. The other part was suspicious. They said about Red what they said about her. His quarterfinals opponent choked, made a stupid mispredict, lost. For his semis opponent he did one good move early (against Raj, who opened Sticky Web Ribombee every single game) then played with solid fundamentals from a lead. Dad said Red was lucky. Every chance he got. Replaying that day twenty years ago again, again.

For Cely to believe being here proved her own skill, she needed to believe him being here meant the same.

After Rotom retreated to its Poké Ball, she sent out Aegislash. She expected this to bait the Dragapult, and she was right. Dragapult was faster than Aegislash and strong enough to KO even through Shield Forme. The obvious counter.

"Shadow Sneak," Cely said.

Aegislash's ghostly arm moved to Dragapult. Except it didn't actually move. Its arm became a shadow, which instantly reached Dragapult when Aegislash tilted its body to block the brightest source of light behind it. A weak attack, but since Dragapult took that huge hit from Scizor earlier, since it came in on spikes, since Shadow Sneak was super effective, it was enough.

Four down.

That was when something shifted. A trickle of life within this golem of baked clay. The embryo of a smile stretched Red's lips.

That smile erased all thoughts this match would be easy. Even from her massive advantage, a shocked, horrible fear hit her:

He let her take out the first four.

He let her.

Aracely misjudged him. From the start, she misjudged him. He wasn't honest. He wasn't outdated. Red Akahata, the man who beat everyone, gave himself a handicap. To him, this match started now.

The Poké Ball burst. A creature emerged. She had no idea what it was. She expected that; this would obviously be his ninth Pokémon, the one he kept hidden all tournament. Some kind of

bird. Yellow, alight with electricity.

To Cely, it could've been a million things and she'd have the same reaction. She basically had the same reaction to Shedinja. The difference was the crowd. The crowd that cheered for anything, that did nothing but cheer, that could do nothing but cheer, as a massed and perfect harmony of all humankind.

The crowd wasn't cheering.

Something arose, like a suction tube slurping out their souls. The crowd was afraid. The crowd was terrified.

"What is that?" Haydn said.

Jinjiao, face pressed to the glass, couldn't speak. His throat closed up.

"Her judgment begins," said Charlie.

"What is it? Jinjiao? What is it?"

"It's"—a croak, a hoarse gurgle, words he spoke to ensure what he saw was real—"it's a god. He caught a god."

"A god? What are you saying? Jinjiao? Charlie?"

"One of the three old gods of Kanto—"

"And lightning shall rain upon the unrighteous," said Charlie.

"—the thunderbird."

"What are you *saying*?"

"Zapdos."

DEMIGOD \ URGE

What remained of the Pewter Museum of Science smoldered. Cynthia circled once overhead but the localized snowstorm brewing within made it difficult to see much. Something big, like a beached Wailord, burned.

When she descended into the mist she saw the entrance clogged with people. Teeming, each in white robes. A procession stretched into the distance, in the direction of the RISE temple. They moved as though on pilgrimage, barefoot.

"What's the situation?" she said to the pathetic line of local cops established a good distance from the crowd.

A harried policewoman with an Arcanine wore visible relief as Cynthia landed beside her. "Battle in the museum. We can't get in. Those RISE freaks outnumber us fifty to one. They won't back down even after we threaten force."

Cynthia noticed a plainclothes guy barking into a communicator. An IPL agent.

Fiorella's cameraman sat on the curb, hands on head. An officer handed him a bottle of water, which he chugged.

"Lutz," said Cynthia, "what happened to Fiorella?"

He shrugged in anguish. "I ran, man. First sign of trouble I ran. Can you blame me? After what happened to her guy at IPL 51?"

"Everyone's at the Plateau," said the policewoman. "We're requesting backup but..."

An ominous stormcloud swirled over the stadium. Cynthia prayed that was an expected part of the battle, though it looked far greater than a regular electric Pokémon's output.

"I'll handle the museum." Cynthia sent out her Garchomp. The police stepped aside, well aware she was better qualified to handle their business than they were. She approached the RISE crowd.

They formed a human wall barring entry. Arms linked, faces turned defiantly toward her. No matter their complicity in this attack, attacking unarmed people was impossible. It was, however, possible to move them.

The elevator descended into black depths.

The world fell away, strip by strip. These dark bowels, tremulous, were the remainder of an earth whose history had been obliterated. Only this: and the cycles of the moon, now you know.

Something wasn't right. With her body. Toril sensed it: a tingle, an anticipation. Was it only her stupid head that wanted this, needed it? How many times she almost died before, but it was never like this. She was all too aware of Fiorella's camera at her back, and not because Fiorella kept reporting—her voice the elevator's internal mechanism. The crank lowering them through darkness.

Toril's life reached an end here. She understood finally what Aracely told her that day in the restroom. End punctuation, the relief of an actual end. A tingle in one arm, a tingle in one leg, and Toril was ready to die here. All 8 billion would see it. Finally, the toil of her existence mattered.

"Nihilego neurotoxin is in my bloodstream," she told Fiorella. Knowing it did not diminish her desire for martyrdom. It was more like the poison awakened her. Cold and hungry days as a child, cold and hungry days crawling over mountains. Missing fingers, missing flesh. Scars along her back. Wasn't this what she sought? Wasn't this why she snarled at every human she met?

An attempt to transmute her own worthless self into one of value. To be valuable she couldn't be one of them. She had to be above. She needed their arms to reach up to her, while she remained safely beyond their touch. A hero.

The elevator hit the bottom. This whole horrible world was dredged down to its roots.

With her four battleworthy Pokémon she led the way through the research center's main corridor. She followed the same route as Bill's tour. They passed a room with several tied up researchers. Fiorella lingered to film them, but Toril continued. They passed the Clefairy nursery. She expected it to distract Rune but the nursery was empty save one small scared Cleffa cowering behind a chair leg.

Then, at the darkest fringe of the passageway beyond, the darkness moving and not her, Nilufer appeared. She held the "object." The two RISE members stood behind her. MOTHER and Bill weren't there.

"Stop, Toril," Nilufer said. "You know what this gun can do. You have no cover in this corridor."

It was true. A straight stretch, maybe thirty meters between them, no obstructions.

"I don't wish to kill you, Toril. I believe physical touch forms the strongest bonds between people. Your body told a story. I feel empathy."

Nilufer's face lit up at that word, *empathy*, like there was something miraculous about it. Toril's Pokémon, Baxcalibur and Rillaboom, moved to shield her, but Toril extended her arms. She wouldn't risk them on what she wouldn't risk herself.

Her leg rose, swung forward slowly, and took a step.

"Toril, don't," said Nilufer.

"Shoot," said Toril.

"Do not take another step."

"Shoot me now, or you lose."

After Nilufer fired in the lobby, she passed the "gun" off to the others to be reloaded. It only had one use. The distance was thirty meters and, as Bill proved when he bumped her, even a slightly wrong trajectory led to a miss. Nilufer's hands trembled—or Toril thought they did.

"Toril. There's no reason for this. Do you understand what MOTHER is doing?"

"Evolve," Toril intoned. She took a second step. She gauged the distance. Porygon-Z's Thunderbolt had a range of twenty-five meters—Nilufer probably knew that. Toril readied the command.

"MOTHER will make us into Pokémon," Nilufer said.

Toril stopped.

"Pokémon?" said another voice. It was Fiorella, whom Toril forgot existed. "That's the—that's the reason? I am—you heard it. The motivation of Team RISE is to become Pokémon!"

"Pokémon?" said Toril. Bill's machine. It all made sense.

"The only way is forward. Time cannot turn back, and neither can evolution. Humanity must evolve to survive. It must shed these immutable bodies. You understand, don't you Toril? You understand?"

To make this body something else. The scars, the missing parts, the abuse, the misanthropy, the withered soul. Or would the soul stay the same?

"Only those chosen by MOTHER will become the new species. Together, we'll leave this world through a rip in space. We'll travel to other worlds, better worlds, before this one is destroyed like every other world that refused to keep evolving. It's essential, Toril. Not only for ourselves, but for our history. Everyone—they want to stop. They want to sit still and keep the world frozen this way forever, with their little games and their peace and satisfaction. They're not hungry anymore, Toril, don't you see? They're smallminded. You know it. You always hated them. Detested them, aware in your heart you were superior. It wasn't ego, Toril. Nor pride. You *are* superior. You played their game because that was the only way you knew to prove it. If only you won their game, they would recognize your right to exist. I'm right, aren't I? I am, Toril. You belong with us. You belong above all others!"

Toril stood there, silent, as these words echoed down the corridor. She let them envelop her, these sweet words, as gentle as the buzz in her veins where the Nihilego poison still flowed.

Then she laughed. She gripped her face with her gloved hand and laughed.

"Above all others? But—"

She couldn't stop laughing. She bent over, held her stomach, coughed out the laughter like her father over the phone, spewed it like vomit until every laugh, every residual drop of poison left in her body was gone, and her lungs ached.

"But Aracely Sosa beat me," she said.

She took a step forward.

Nilufer, eyes alight, fired the gun.

A whirling something cleaved a fingerful of flesh off Toril's cheek. Her mouth filled with blood, which she spat as she aimed her finger and told her Pokémon, "Get her."

A charging of adrift molecules set hair on end across the stadium, caused arches of electricity to flutter from point in space to point in space. The cracked dirt strewn across the arena levitated in a slow, winding spiral centered around the bird of thunder whose presence suggested a horrible, whispered grandeur.

Jinjiao was screaming—*The IPL okayed this? They cleared it for tournament play? Without leaks?*—a fundamentally small reaction, a reaction perhaps only he of everyone gathered could have, the reaction of someone who won in this scenario. In her simple incomprehension, Haydn slipped far more appropriate into the gathering storm of bodies and minds. The announcers hadn't spoken in ten seconds; in airtime that was eternity, a semipermeable silence through which light osmosed to every screen around the world.

The timer to choose moves didn't stop, however.

"King's Shield," Cely managed to blurt on the cusp of a buzzer. There was a fear though that this thing before her, this Zapdos—as the holoscreen read—might punch straight through a shield supposed to block every possible attack.

Even she felt the potency of the demigod, though she could not possibly know its tangled history with the locals who called this now-cosmopolitan region home, the ancient carvings in its image or the totems erected by nomadic clans as the sole permanent artifact of their existence. She could not possibly know that scientific consensus still disagreed—until now—whether the thing was actually real, nor did she understand it was part of a trio, a polytheistic theory of creation and conversion by those huddled in whipped huts under an encroaching tempest. She could not know that there was only one Zapdos, only ever one, without gender or age, the same that existed in the earliest days of humankind, or what medical breakthroughs that hearkened: cells immune to senescence, perpetual rejuvenation without

reproduction, without evolution. She did understand, instinctually, that MOTHER would want to dissect it.

Zapdos hovered in air without flapping its wings, as though some magnetic pull of static kept it afloat rather than the laws of physics that applied to every other bird. Its stern gaze, imperious and prideful, passed over Aegislash with the least possible concern. A column of lightning blasts rained down and each blast dug a crater into the arena until the line descended onto Aegislash's shield.

The electricity flared out, crackled, and dispersed to dust. Aegislash stood, unharmed. The rules of the game still applied, even to a demigod.

Cely clenched her teeth into a hateful smirk. Her glare cut past Zapdos, into Red.

That bastard.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, it made her so mad, oh her arms were crawling, her breaths laborious and cutting. He was ruining everything, not just by sending out this stupid bird, no, he was undercutting her, slashing her feet off at the ankles, a kamikaze pilot blasting himself apart in his own inferno. Now the narrative changed. Now it was different than what it should have been, and she was only a passenger. If she won now—well, who cared, he wasn't trying for his first four Pokémon, he summoned a god, who cared if she won?

And if she lost?

Cely was suffocating to death on her own spit. If she lost? If she lost, now?

"Shadow Sneak!"

Aegislash slashed his arm as shadow against Zapdos. Zapdos remained motionless in midair, it didn't register a hit, but the biometric sensors did, and Cely watched its health dwindle on the holoscreen.

Zapdos rooted its long beak into the down on its chest and nibbled at something. Its health went back up a smidge. The stupid freaking thing ate Leftovers. Junk scraps found in a wastebasket. A god! She seized the railing, flung back her head, and cackled—he was making a mockery, of it, of her!

The air sparked and caught fire. Actual, literal flame, a whirling cyclone of it. Okay! A fire move on this electric bird, why not. The holoscreen called it Heat Wave, and sure enough a cold sweat broke on Cely's brow, murdered her makeup, spread cracks from her dimples until she imagined she looked identical to Red—remove his hat, remove that jacket, shave his beard, treat his skin, moisturize, and we'll give him, yes, a light pink polo, tiny insignia of a player on Rapidash stitched over the heart, and hahaha white Wainscott shorts, put him on a golf course, spirit him away to a golf course...!—and the burning gout of atmosphere came down on Aegislash.

One hit wiped it off the face of the earth. Her chapped lips pressed together to hold in another laugh.

"Kommo-o!"

Her big dragon appeared. Aegislash was just a sword with one weird carved eye, so reading any emotion on it was futile. Kommo-o, however, visibly flinched from the mere sight of Zapdos. "Get your head on straight, it's nothing, we're beating it," she yelled. "Ice Punch!"

Kommo-o failed to even move, though Cely didn't know if that was due to fear or because Zapdos was faster in general. Kommo-o resisted both electric and fire, though. All it needed was to survive one attack.

For the first time, Zapdos beat its wings. Only once. That was enough. Wind surged, the ripples of heat that lingered from the last attack dispersed, Cely's hair blew back. Hurricane, the holoscreen flickered. A gust shaped like a giant white worm opened its mouth, slurped up Kommo-o, and spat it out. The scales clanging up and down its body created a complete disaster orchestra that continued even after it slammed into the ground, pitched, dragged, and ended sprawled upside-down, a dead faint.

Cely took a deep breath as she returned Kommo-o to its Poké Ball. She shut her eyes. It was a long time since she needed her meditation mixtapes, but she felt herself losing focus. When she tried to imagine something soothing all that appeared was Charlie mouthing those words. She imagined Charlie wearing a chic but boring blouse-skirt combination, which exorcised her, but a jitter remained.

Red was not taking this away from her.

"Scizor."

Scizor appeared. Even in a state of competitive focus so extreme it was melting its own body from the inside, it started in surprise to see its opponent.

"Bullet Punch. Bullet Punch. Bullet Punch!"

On the third shout Scizor did as asked. It sprang forward even at a god, claw outstretched, and dealt a blow to Zapdos that did about as much as Aegislash's Shadow Sneak. Chipping away, chipping away, but was it enough?

The temperature in the arena rose again. Cely glanced down and in a curious state of displaced mortification witnessed rings of sweat gather around her armpits.

A blaze came down and wiped Scizor out. Whatever. It did its job. Everything depended on her last two Pokémon.

"Rotom," she cried.

What Nilufer did made no sense. After the gun missed, she charged down the hallway with a knife. Four of Toril's Pokémon faced her. It was impossible for her to win.

Speaking hurt after what the gun did to her cheek. Grassy Terrain worked too slow. Still, she spat out: "Nils, Rune, stop her."

Baxcalibur and Porygon-Z moved forward. Nilufer still had fifteen meters to clear before she even hoped to threaten them. It was over. It was pathetic. Toril was disgusted to see the desperation, but maybe she understood it.

Then—

The singular Nilufer sprinting down the hallway became two.

The two became four.

The four became eight.

The eight became sixteen.

Suddenly an army of Nilufer confronted them—an entire bracket conjured out of one finalist. Porygon-Z fired a Tri Attack into one and it went right through. Baxcalibur spat shards of ice to the same effect.

Toril stared. Not uncomprehending. Only for the briefest moment did she entertain the idea this was some hallucination brought on by the neurotoxin. She knew, somehow, exactly what she was looking at, though it existed outside the realm of possibility for Nilufer to be doing it.

Nilufer was using a Pokémon move.

Nilufer was using a Pokémon move banned in every IPL competitive format.

Nilufer was using *Double Team*.

Double Team. Type: Normal. PP: 15 (max 24). Power: Null. Accuracy: Null. Effect: Increases the user's evasion by one stage.

"USE EVERYTHING," Toril screamed. Blood filled her throat.

Ice and electricity shot down the corridor. Ninetales whipped up a snowstorm. It only made Nilufer's sixteen selves in white robes blend in.

Then Nilufer was emerging, knife bared, one rapid jab aimed toward the center of Porygon-Z's hard light projection body, where it kept the CD-ROM drive with the disc that contained all facets of its identity. Porygon-Z glitched slightly to the side, maybe by complete random chance, and the knife punched through the rounded pink surface at a slightly wrong angle, still enough to gash his carapace like cotton candy.

She kicked off Porygon-Z's body and reoriented toward Baxcalibur. The snowstorm's mist was filled with Nilufer, she was the snowballs pelting the grip strut walkway, and she landed on Baxcalibur's head and drove the knife into each of his eye sockets with two maneuvers so effortlessly quick Toril didn't realize until the blood flowed down his face.

A toss of his neck launched her into the wall, but she caught herself against it like gravity didn't exist, slid down, melded into her illusory clones, evaded the tail swipe Baxcalibur sent after her. Fights in the underground. Her father brought her there. Blood. (Here at the bottom of the world. Order stripped away. *Blood*.) Baxcalibur thrashed against the wall. He groaned, clawing uselessly at his face as Nilufer rotated around his body and jabbed a series of swift stabs between his scales.

Toril extended her arm and pulled Baxcalibur back into his Poké Ball before he took more damage. The sudden dematerialization left Nilufer without support and she dropped to the grating, where with a spiderlike profusion of limbs she crawled toward Toril.

Rillaboom swung; missed. Ninetales sprayed a beam of fey light; missed. Nilufer infested everywhere, she scuttled, she promulgated. Aurora Veil alone saved Toril from instant execution as Nilufer bounced against its shimmering translucent surface like a mime.

Her projections weren't stopped by the veil. They went through.

Toril pointed. "There—the real one!"

The washing machine stared down the god. Unlike Kommo-o and Scizor, it maintained its irrepressible smile from the moment it appeared. It bounced back and forth joyously.

The sky was so many brutal colors. Aracely wasn't sure if it was splitting open yet. MOTHER would be in Bill's basement, behind the doors he only allowed himself to access. The machines she needed to end the world—to save humanity—at her fingertips. It started any moment now.

Cely needed to hurry up. She needed to win. The world was rising against her. The crowd was thunder. Sweat soaked her face and she strained hair through her fingers.

After she lost Gliscor—and of course Gliscor was the one he got rid of before this scene stealing gambit—Rotom was her bulkiest Pokémon. If anything survived a hit from this thing, it did. But it already took lumps earlier in the fight, sat now at half health. It had Protect, could stall a turn, recover a fraction from Leftovers, but Zapdos would do the same. She needed to ensure Aegislash and Scizor's sacrifices weren't in vain.

Everything banked on mathematics Cely could not possibly know. An opponent with no discernable face. Undreamed dimensions of science and philosophy. Was fate simply probability that no tool could measure, or the other way around?

"Hydro Pump," she said.

The lightning crashed down first. The sky opened its mouth and loosed it. Rotom vanished in a flash and Cely held a hand over her eyes. All became white, senseless, even the heat broke apart and only her body remained, the thudding of her heart. It felt like falling through nothing.

Then the world returned. Rotom's orange box washing machine crackled. Smoke spewed out. Its smile remained. It bounced, left, right, joyously.

"You did it," she whispered.

Bounce left, bounce right. It extended its hose. A torrent of pressurized water sprayed.

Hydro Pump was powerful but had accuracy issues. A full fifteen percent chance to miss. Cely knew it would never miss. Zapdos floated there, in the air, unmoving, as if disdainful of the concept of motion, disdainful that it might ever have to. Bodies climbing up the caves of a pitch black mountain and at the hollow peak a monster beyond the reckoning of man: all it said was silence.

The water crashed against it. It did not move, not even an inch. Its gaze leveled on its opponent but Cely couldn't tell if it stared at Rotom or at her. On the screen, its health went down. Only the world's inner mechanisms knew if it went down enough.

Another ray of light shone down on Rotom's grinning face. Grinning, it went into oblivion.

Aracely was down to her final Pokémon. She gripped the Poké Ball on the magnetized rack and clutched it to her chest. A silent prayer: she no longer knew.

"It's up to you, Ziggy."

He shimmered in the static that sprayed off Zapdos' body as he pirouetted for the crowd, spun on one toe, bent in a bow that showed off his floppy ears. He was as terrified of Zapdos as Scizor and Kommo-o, his only difference being he didn't show it—somehow Cely read his heart. The crowd's cheers were muted, like a subterranean rumble. Emerging from the basement of the Pewter Museum of Science.

Azumarill was once a worthless Pokémon. Weak, uncommon, preyed upon in the underground rivers it called home. What happened? Something across the entire species changed overnight. It developed new characteristics, it found a way to double its strength, it learned new moves, acquired new immunities and resistances. From its caves it crawled and approached humanity, who first took it in as a cute pet, then as a lifeguard, and finally here, on the stage of the IPL World Championship, to face down a demigod.

What made it do that? What impetus, from its cave, told it to find another way? What cataclysm altered its course? And how many times did it need to die before it reached this destination? Her heart, his, tied together along this atomic point of connection: one common creature standing against the world.

"Aqua Jet," she said.

Ziggy quit grandstanding and instantly launched itself on a wave of water.

He hit his target, bounced back, and landed with aplomb. Under the sky's black gyre he extended his arms.

Zapdos remained where it was, unmoving.

But the holoscreen showed its health at 0.

A voice in the communicator intoned: "Our biometric indicators deem Zapdos no longer fit to fight without serious risk of permanent harm. It is considered fainted for the purposes of this battle."

Cely laughed. How could their biometric indicators possibly read this creature nobody ever knew? But Red accepted the conclusion. He held out a Poké Ball and pulled Zapdos into it with a beam of light.

The crowd wasn't sure what to say. These little fabrications the rules made for fairness always perturbed them, a grand narrative in tatters, but they seemed glad to be rid of Zapdos. Either way, Red's final Pokémon was obvious. The only Pokémon it made sense to send after a god.

"I'll win," Cely told herself. She looked at Ziggy. "We'll win." Time kept ticking.

Nilufer landed on all fours, reoriented, aimed for her target. After striking the Aurora Veil that protected Toril, she understood the primary target was Ingmar—Ninetales. She slithered toward him and her copies slithered over the walls and ceiling.

But Toril saw. She knew which was real after it bounced off the veil. Her finger shot out. Her Pokémon understood.

Still, the transference of their attention from Toril's finger to their target cost a split second, and Nilufer was fast. Ninetales leapt back as her knife lashed out and he wasn't quick enough because a sliver of flesh and fur split off his face, enough to dot the grating with warm blood.

Unrelenting Nilufer swung again but this time Rillaboom crashed into her way with a lumbering thud of her wooden drumstick. Nilufer darted back. She moved like water, but the heavysset Rillaboom kept up with her, making up for agility with the breadth of her strikes, large swaths of areas rendered dangerous at any one moment. It saved Ninetales, but caused another problem. Porygon-Z no longer had a clean angle. Rillaboom blocked his line of sight. He zipped erratically for a shot but the randomness of his motions slowed his efforts.

As long as Rillaboom's attacks kept the real Nilufer moving in predictable ways—backward—she couldn't blend into her clones. In terms of firepower she was horribly outgunned—

The gun.

"THE GUN!" Toril screamed.

The two RISE members tossed the gun. Nilufer kicked off a wall and caught it in midair.

Rillaboom—Trude—was smart. She'd always been smart, an ape's intelligence behind an expression of permanent displeasure. The moment Toril shouted, she changed her focus. Her hand shot out, not toward Nilufer, but toward the slow-moving gun as it sailed through the air.

The instant Nilufer caught the gun, Trude caught Nilufer—by the head, with one gigantic palm.

The flash of the muzzle seared the image into Toril's eyes. Something about Nilufer's face at that instant, lined by the light. Some sense that she, like them all, hoped to prove they deserved to exist.

Bits of blood flicked out of Trude's back. Her hand crushed Nilufer's head against the wall.

Toril found herself running forward as Trude sagged to a knee. The wrecked remains of Nilufer were dropped, the gun rolled away. A fan of blood smeared. The two RISE members stood, silent, watching.

"Fuck," Toril said. "Fuck."

She was beside Trude, hand on her shoulder. Trude clutched the wound so Toril couldn't see. The grate was growing grass but some types of wounds didn't heal, and Trude struggled to breathe, she turned away from Toril as if to conceal the pain, as if not to make Toril worry, but what else would Toril do? Vomit. She could bend over and vomit at the sight of Nilufer's corpse, which she did, hands gripped against her stomach as she swayed.

Alright. Alright. It was over. She shouldn't have—why did she—and what of the others? Baxcalibur, Mawile, Zoroark? She saw their wounds. Why until now did she not think—what doom march was she making?

"Over," her vomit-spittle lips mouthed. "No more."

Putting Trude in the Poké Ball didn't matter. Any hope was in the Grassy Terrain. If she had Jinjiao's Umbreon with Wish, or something, or anything...

"What are you doing?" Fiorella. "Come on. Lusamine must be down the hall."

Trude was on the ground now, half-hidden in grass growing taller. Ingmar and Rune, both beside Toril, looked at her for guidance or understanding.

"I'm running out of pieces of myself to cut off," Toril said.

"You're ridiculous." Fiorella kept an eye on the RISE members, who did nothing. "This is the real world. All their pageant plays are built on top of it. You girls don't even know what death

is. Children playing with fire. Move!"

Her voice was stern but desperate, like if she stopped moving, stopped filming, she herself would die.

"There's only one direction. Don't you realize? You think you can just go back now? This is the only thing in your life that will ever matter."

Ingmar and Rune were beside her. They were ready to continue. Like her fingers, her flesh, they were ready to do whatever she asked, and curdle and die for her.

Maybe for as long as she'd been alive she'd known, secretly, she deserved it.

What could be left at the end of the hall for her? The prophecy. The world's end. She wished —

She wished she could see Cely again. The pink card burned against her heart, even now.

Her legs lifted her body. She stroked Trude's fur once more and left her in the grass to rest. She looked at Rune, looked at Ingmar, and continued down the corridor, past the RISE members who parted silently to allow passage, toward the giant door at the end.

MOTHER / BEAST

There were machines, Bill believed, not ready for mankind, or else mankind was not ready for them. In this inner sanctum he kept them, accessible solely to himself, a place for him to marvel at the directions progress might go or might have gone, a gallery of party tricks to show guests.

Lusamine pumped the charger to the giant device in the center. She'd tossed aside her parasol and it somehow still spun on its point, twirling and twirling and slowly losing the center. Once the machine hummed with inner vitality she gripped the gigantic switch and pulled it down.

It sprang alive. The room filled with mechanical noise. Panting, she turned to the other machines within the room, some covered by dusty sheets. Her wiry arms yanked them off one after another.

"It's here," she said.

In the center of the room, a hundred Clefairy watched with dull animal incomprehension, happy ignorance.

"I know you have it. Where?"

"Find it yourself," Bill grunted. He lay on his side beside the vault's closed doors. Before Nilufer left to deal with Toril, she knifed him in the hip, enough to keep him from moving. After they scanned his eyeballs to open the door, they probably should've killed him. They didn't, which meant: "You think I'm useful as a hostage."

Odd, unusual machinery. Lusamine's lips, only barely visible under her veil, contorted in frustration. "Where is it. I know who acquired it from Aether, one of your shell companies. You have it here, don't bother lying."

"What's your endgame, Lusamine?" He gripped his wound and winced. He knew exactly what she was looking for. Worse, he knew she'd find it.

She found it. Buried amid piles of old prototypes, curious devices Bill either created or acquired. It was small, nothing like the gigantic human-Pokémon converter, specifically built to be held in one hand. Why someone would waste the extra dev time to make such a thing portable, who knew. Bill liked his creations to sprawl.

It was a black box. Empty, as now, it looked like nothing else. Lusamine's late husband invented it, and it killed him, the way Bill sometimes imagined one of his own inventions might, though he usually saw the event involving a part falling and crushing his bones. Lusamine maneuvered it between her wiry, vein-wreaked hands. After a hesitant, self-conscious glance toward Bill, she removed the veil to inspect it more closely.

Bill saw her face before, when her daughter sent her to him after the accident in Alola. The purple, star-shaped scars that ran down like liquid. The one eye gone lazy. The veins that bulged and throbbed. They thought, him having suffered a similar fate, he might help. But what could he do? She'd already disentangled from the Pokémon she merged with. The problem wasn't her health, it was her mind. She wanted to go back. She begged him: turn me back.

"You can't make it work," Bill said. "I can't even make it work. Nobody should be able to make it work. It almost destroyed the world last time you used it. Remember?"

"The device is simple." Satisfied with her inspection, she tucked the black box under one arm and tromped past the Clefairy to the humming human-Pokémon converter. "It produces a reaction using special fuel. The fuel does most of the work."

"I don't have the fuel," Bill said, hopelessly.

"I do." And she produced it. A cylinder so darkly purple it looked black. The liquid inside sloshed as she tilted it. "Cosmog blood. My husband named it, you know. A name in the Pokédex for posterity." She wasted no time and inserted the cylinder through an aperture. The box lit up immediately with neon teal lines across its surface. A freakishly efficient machine for something so cutting edge. No grease or grime. Nothing to make you believe it was really there. But it was, and Bill felt the blood draining from his face. (Given the puddle around him, maybe not idiomatically.)

"Okay. I get it. You use the converter to turn yourself into a Pokémon. Then you threaten to create an Ultra Wormhole so they give into your demands. What do you want? Immunity? Money?" He didn't bother asking what the Clefairy were for. A few watched him with curious, but frightened, expressions. They kept away from blood.

"Threaten...? No. I'm creating an Ultra Wormhole regardless."

"Lusamine. Lusamine, that's nuts."

"I know what I'm doing."

"Yeah. Yeah, you do! You were *there* last time. So you know how nuts it is. In Alola the Ultra Wormhole almost ripped open the fabric of reality. We were moments from total doomsday. Moments."

"I am aware."

"Aether Foundation was a facility specifically equipped to handle Ultra Wormholes in a controlled manner and it still happened. This place is my junk drawer, Lusamine. If you start that machine here, there's no possible way we stop it. Are you listening? Lusamine? EVERYONE IN THE WORLD WILL DIE."

Lusamine checked over the buttons and switches on the converter. "Bill, I'm giving everyone back what you stole from them."

"What?! I—stole? Stole what?"

"Their future."

"I'm the one *making* the future!"

"Exactly." She scratched her hair at the roots. Her eyes never left the control panel as she experimentally tapped gauges to orient herself to their purpose. "Your junk drawer, hm. The secrets of science. You choose what the world learns."

"You can't be serious. Even you can't be serious about this. Everyone will die. Did you hear me? Everyone will DIE."

"I once collected Pokémon in glass boxes. I'd freeze them. They weren't dead, the way I did it. Their bodies couldn't move, couldn't age, couldn't die. Perfect, perpetual stasis. A scientific marvel. They're using a modified version of my technology for medical research now, I hear. On cells."

Bill knew about this, of course. He knew everything on the bleeding edge. "The results aren't coming like they hoped."

"I could've told them that. No matter what I did, I could never truly hold back change. In the end, I lost them all."

A wistful pause Bill had no patience to appreciate given he began to wonder if he was actually bleeding to death. His fingers, shoved into the knife wound—better to plug the wound than press against it—were not stemming the tide. Only making it too painful to talk, actually.

Lusamine kept talking to herself over his agonized groans.

The only way forward, she said, was progress. Bill worked with the IPL to hold back time, to sedate a populace prone to destruction with cake and circuses, but eventually it would crack. No, it already cracked. For such a happy world, so many doomsday cults kept cropping up. Those ecoterrorists in Hoenn, then the much-publicized Team Plasma attack on IPL 51. Plasma were radical Pokémon rights activists, to the point of religious fervor. They were, effectively, reactionaries. Though we live in the best possible world, they believed in an imagined idyllic world, prior to now, where the relationship between humans and Pokémon was more evenly symbiotic—idiots, weavers of fantasy. But maybe that was a natural reaction to a world kept stagnant for fifty years. If you can't progress forward, then why not move any direction possible, even backward? Human nature was restless. It hated the violence of change but craved it. Peaceful people were dead people.

Cracks, cracks, cracks. Nilufer said Red Akahata caught a god simply to show it off at IPL finals. They were bored people, so bored they'd do anything. They would eventually join cults without even the flimsiest ideological pretenses, cults simply to burn everything down. They would get their hands on gods and play with them like toys. Time, space, whatever cataclysm they imagined, it became possible, and only a dwindling number of knight templars forged by the IPL cared enough to stop them. Soon even the knights would betray

them. Cely, her sweet Cely, was the first, or maybe it was more accurate to say Domino was the first, so consumed by a need for glory he was willing to slip an infiltrator among their ranks.

Or maybe Domino simply thought he controlled her—the way Lusamine thought she controlled her. She paused, eyes growing blank as she watched the converter function. Parents always want to build a better version of themselves in their children. Lusamine remembered her own father, an old money industrialist—how he *despised* Bill—storming the drafty halls of the manor. His oldest son groomed to inherit, second son a scientist, and what of Lusamine, his daughter? *Birth rates are down. Below replacement rate in this region. We'll be extinct in a few centuries. And why? Why are we killing off our species? Because women need education now, they need jobs, or they need to become Pokémon trainers and disappear into the wilderness. Nonsense. We need women to marry younger. We need them to have children. Or the world ends.*

Her ability to pursue higher education hinged on her agreeing to his terms. By luck she managed to love the man he arranged to marry her, a brilliant scientist like her brother. She earned PhDs while pregnant, she never took maternity leave. It was the only way—other than fleeing home entirely, cutting herself off, disappearing. Science was her passion, though, not Pokémon. Pokémon were a means. The people held thrall in the IPL's dream never knew how many Pokémon your average medical science experiment killed. An inconvenient truth of the gears grinding this world to halt, the bodies that gummed them. When she started as a researcher, she chopped off their heads, drained them and harvested their brains. Sacrifices.

She wished Cely were here. Cely should have been here. Not Toril Lund. Only a 1 percent chance and Toril wins that semifinals battle. Cely is here, Toril there, fighting Red's god.

An alarm blared and Lusamine jolted. She looked up at the twirling red siren. "WARNING," an AI voice said. "Unauthorized breach attempted."

Someone was trying to force their way through the door. Toril—it could only be Toril. Nilu was supposed to handle her. If she failed, it meant—Ah.

The goal had been for the members of RISE to join her down here. Clefairy, as one of the species that spontaneously adopted the so-called fairy typing, were some of the most broadly susceptible to change, which made them perfect for her project. Better yet, they were capable of surviving in the vacuum of space. Once the RISE members merged with the Clefairy, they would travel together through the Ultra Wormhole in search of new worlds. To progress the species. What happened to this world after that—didn't matter.

Luckily, she still had Bill. She always knew the IPL would send people soon after she abducted him, even if she failed to anticipate a trainer of Toril's caliber. Her plan from the start was to hold Bill hostage to buy enough time to transform herself and her followers into Pokémon.

"Turn the alarm off," she said. "It's annoying. Toril can't enter without you anyway."

"She's hacking her way inside."

"Hacking? Toril Lund strikes me as computer illiterate."

"Not... her. Her Pokémon. She has... Porygon-Z."

Lusamine stared at the door, as though expecting it to open that instant. Nothing happened.

"You're too good a programmer for such an obvious exploit," Lusamine said.

"True. I have safety measures... for exactly this situation." Bill groaned. "I also... have voice commands to override those measures."

"You're bluffing."

"I'm bargaining. Become a fucking Pokémon if you want, but turn off the Ultra Wormhole machine. Otherwise, I open this door."

Lusamine sighed. She placed the machine on the ground.

Then, she reached into her sleeves and withdrew two Beast Balls. Her last two: the ones she planned to merge with herself and Nilufer.

"Open the door. I'm ready for her."

Bill squeezed his eyes shut. "Initiate process: Override door safety mechanisms."

"Please state confirmation code to override door safety mechanisms."

"Sylveon."

The door opened.

The doctors took their sweet time discharging Domino. Desperate to saw him open and spoon out his intestines. A whole part of himself, to make him less. "For your health, Mr. Sosa." Nah, none of that. By the end of it he expected they misdiagnosed the heart attack even. Maybe he only fainted. What the hell did Jinjiao know when he told them it was the heart? And the doctors went with it. Supported their agenda.

He felt fine now. Great even. Felt like he wanted to be in attendance at the IPL World Championship to watch his daughter sign her name into the history books. On and on the doctors prattled their "advice" to avoid excitement, strenuous activity—strenuous how? Sitting on his ass in a booth?—that he needed to "take it easy" for four to six weeks, that a quarter of heart attack victims are back in the hospital within ninety days, yap-yap-yap.

Now it was finals and still they refused to let him out. It'd been a damn week already. He knew they did it to be bastards. He called Cely: Tell em to let me out. She said, "Dad, maybe

do what they say?" Like she didn't want him there either, fine on her own, none of his prep needed, well okay. He told himself to take pride in that, not take it the wrong way. But who else to call? He got desperate enough to call Fi-Fi, she never answered.

Finally he settled on a jailbreak. Since he handled Cely's Pokémon the whole tournament, the only one of his own on him was Britt. But there was a Center just down the street with Bill's PC access. He told Britt to go in, use his access code, withdraw one of his bigger birds.

She refused! Britt refused! She pointed to his medication, pointed to his diet. Oh, it made him mad. She was playing the nurse alright, fretting over him in the hospital bed, bringing him trays of fruit and vegetables. Lopunny food.

He snarled at her, called her a traitor, but that was the end of his resistance. He couldn't hate Britt. He nibbled the damn lettuce, stroked her head when she sat beside him. The hospital room TV played a relaxing montage of boats in Kyllind fjords.

Stifling a gag, he swallowed. "Fetch some more, will ya?" Britt nodded, took the plate, and hummed down to the hospital café.

He hit the remote and switched to the match.

Aw fuck. How'd this happen? Last peek Cely held a 5-2 lead. Red about to send out his second-to-last Pokémon. Now he tuned in and it was 1-1, dead heat. He breathed deeply to keep from getting worked up. Britt would be able to tell. (She was an empath, she would tell either way.)

Ziggy out. Full health. Not the worst Pokémon for the situation. Especially since Red used the same anchor the whole tournament. The camera cut to him, same damn kid as twenty years ago. Come up from the dirt just like Domino remembered. They said he started in some nice suburb, Pallet Town, so he had to throw himself into the dirt first before he came up. Not like Domino. The place *he* came from, he vowed never to let them know it to look at him. That was the first thing that annoyed him about the kid back then. Playing in a sandbox.

The fingerless glove pulled back and tossed his final Poké Ball into the arena. The announcers hyped it up: *What will it be?! A question Domino found absurd until they added: What Pokémon could possibly follow Zapdos?*

Zapdos?!

The volume was turned off, but the subtitles clearly said Zapdos. He imagined a typist error. He prayed for a typist error.

What showed was Kingambit. Humanoid, shogun-shaped, a massive blade protruding from his helmet and two others jutting from his face like whiskers. A bug-like carapace covered his back, forming at its base a clump of material he spread his legs to sit upon. His arms rested on his knees. He stared down Ziggy. Ziggy stared back.

Kingambit was a natural leader, a commander. Only capable of evolution after defeating three rival Bisharp for control of its pack-army. It used its leadership qualities to browbeat its army

into wave tactics: suicidal mass charges. The more soldiers it lost, the more powerful it became... strength from suicide.

Hence why Red always sent it out last, even after—apparently—a demigod.

Supreme Overlord, the TV subtitles typed in slow, methodical progression. *Kingambit gained strength from the fallen!*

The camera cut to Cely, and Domino was shocked how she looked. She was so sweaty it picked up even on the hospital's shitty old set. Hair askew, eyes roving. He never saw her so perturbed in her life.

His image of her came from age six. "Mommy's in the hospital now," he said, uncertain how to speak, how to make his voice sound. Cely shrugged. "Okay."

Come on Cely. He tried to make her hear him. If she had psychic powers, then maybe. Come on Cely. Let's see that energy now. Look at this guy and say okay. A planned endgame. Only a few ways these final moves go. Get in the kid's head and predict him.

She took a deep breath. She wiped her forehead and instantly she returned to her ordinary state, like her hand was a magic wand. Her lips moved, but no sound came out, the subtitles only showed the commentary track.

Belly Drum, she said.

Perfect. Ziggy stood his ground, the way Domino taught him. Never fear what's coming at you, even as Kingambit arose from his self-made throne, strode forward, and swung the gigantic blade on his head. Ziggy took the strike like a champ, then reached behind one ear and pulled out the Citrus Berry he kept for this exact reason. One nibble and the infographic on screen showed his health lurch back up.

Then, standing tall, Ziggy extended his arms and drove them into his stomach.

His face neither wavered nor contorted despite the vicious, brutal slaps he laid onto himself. Red imprints remained on the skin, showing even through the fur. His health depleted, down to the red. In exchange, a fury entered his beady little eyeballs. An intensity, a passion beyond all scale. Yes. Yes! Domino clapped his hands, then glanced to make sure no passing nurse noticed. That's right, buddy. You're strong. He's a mighty warrior and you're a little water rabbit, but you're strong. You're stronger than him, even though you came from nothing. No—BECAUSE you came from nothing!

Azumarill possessed a crazy endocrine system. Adrenaline flooded its body at a rate double the average creature. Ziggy's power skyrocketed to the maximum level, past the maximum level. It was this ability that made him competitive, even at the highest possible tier. This determination to exceed the natural limitations of his birth. His lemon-colored fur bristled.

The Kingambit empowered by his fallen allies. The Azumarill empowered by a body that defied biology.

One final clash.

Encore, Cely mouthed.

Kingambit snapped forward, aiming a Sucker Punch for Ziggy's throat to stop him before he got a chance to attack. Wary, hyperfocused, Ziggy danced out of range and slapped his paws together like a Seel, encouraging—or rather forcing—the prideful Kingambit to repeat its action.

From here on out, it was as much a battle of the Pokémon's power as their trainers' minds. Whichever Pokémon hit the other first won.

Domino leaned forward on his bed. Come on, Cely. This was your moment. Get in his head like all the others. Know exactly what he wants to do—and destroy him.

Then Britt walked back into the room and he quickly changed the channel.

The gigantic door to Bill's chamber split down the middle and slid, screeching, apart. Toril stood with Ingmar beside her—Rune still inside the door's electronic eye scanner. Fiorella behind, filming.

Toril, knee-deep in Grassy Terrain, held out her gloved hand. "Be ready to fight. Ingmar, Rune, focus on—"

Something came out from the door. Toril didn't see it. It was impossible to see. It struck the Aurora Veil hard enough to spray sparks, made it through, and passed through her arm above the elbow. She watched her arm fall off. Her arm was gone. She had no arm.

She tried to say something, maybe scream in pain, but her mouth gurgled. Whatever went through her arm kept going. Her other hand went to her neck. A thin slice was cut across it and the blood flowed through her fingers. Into the wall beside her, its trajectory having gone haywire from hitting the veil, a tiny razor-sharp piece of origami embedded itself.

Toril stumbled back in slow motion.

"Okay, this is crazy." Jinjiao stood at the fore of the box, as though he spoke to everyone, but the Kalosians still babbled among themselves about Zapdos, despite Zapdos having fainted two turns ago. "We're looking at a trademark Sucker Punch Shuffle."

"Cely will win, right?" asked Haydn.

"The way it works is. Both of these Pokémon are strong enough to beat the other in one hit. Assuming standard EV sets Kingambit is faster, so *usually* it hits first. But! Azumarill has a move called Aqua Jet, which always goes first. So Azumarill wins, right? Heh. You might think so. However, Kingambit *also* has a priority move: Sucker Punch."

On the arena floor, Kingambit attempted to use Sucker Punch again. Like before, Ziggy danced out of range, but he wasn't able to attack Kingambit, either.

"See there? Sucker Punch failed. Why, you ask? Simple. Sucker Punch only works if the opponent uses an attacking move. So, for instance, if Azumarill used Aqua Jet, Sucker Punch would succeed, knocking out Azumarill before he attacked. In that instance, Red wins the battle."

"But Cely needs to attack to win, right?" Haydn said. "How can she do that if Kingamble keeps using his punch move?"

"*Kingambit*. It's *not* difficult to remember, Haydn."

"Just answer the question smart guy!"

Jinjiao crossed his arms behind his back and paced. "In theory, you're correct. If Red uses Sucker Punch every turn, Aracely's odds of victory become zero."

"Doomed," said Charlie.

"But! There's another mechanic at play here. The IPL balances moves by giving them—uh—Power Points." He almost said the abbreviation, but under the expectant gazes of these girls, shyness struck him. "Power Points are the number of times a Pokémon is allowed to use a move in a battle. Once Power Points are depleted, the move cannot be used again."

"Oh, oh, oh. I get it! Cely has to get him to use all his Power Points to win. But how many Power Points does the punch move have?"

"*Sucker Punch* has five Power Points by default. However, the IPL sells something called, uh, Power Point Up, which can increase the Power Points to a maximum of eight."

"Pay to win." Charlie nodded, as though this explained everything.

"The IPL hands out complimentary Power Point Ups to every competitor at the tournament, so really it's not pay to win at all. They give us free TMs, too. It's actually quite generous."

"Okay, so." Haydn bounced on her seat, held her hands out and lowered two fingers. "The punch move has eight Power Points. So far, the King's used... two."

"Three," Jinjiao said, as Kingambit (the King? Was she fucking with him?) tried and failed once more to Sucker Punch Azumarill.

"But if Cely isn't attacking, why doesn't Red use another move? He's not gonna let her drain all his Power Points, right? Or does the King only have this one move?"

"Kingambit has other moves. But if Cely predicts when he uses them, she can attack first with Aqua Jet. Get it? And besides, right now, Kingambit is forced to use Sucker Punch because Azumarill used Encore, which makes a Pokémon repeat the same move for the next three turns."

Haydn tapped her lip as she thought this all over. "Uh, then. That means... After this next turn, Kingambit won't be affected by Encore anymore, and can choose to use Sucker Punch or another move. Right?"

"Right."

"So Cely needs to predict which move he'll use?"

"Right. The Sucker Punch Shuffle: will he or won't he use Sucker Punch?"

"Her fate, decided on a single choice," Charlie muttered.

"Exactly." Below, Kingambit used Sucker Punch for the fourth time in a row, and nothing happened. The Encore wore off. "This is it. This next move decides everything. If she plays it right, she wins. If she doesn't..."

Charlie laughed.

As Toril fell, the doors spread wide enough to grant her a full view of the interior. Over a sea of one hundred Clefairy heads, Lusamine gave her a single lookover, then turned to Bill's machine, the one that changed people into Pokémon.

Something caught Toril before she hit the ground. Her eyes bulged in her head and she kept pawing awkwardly at her throat—awkwardly because she now only had one hand.

Kartana, embedded in the wall, shook as it tried to free itself. Ingmar gave it no chance. He bristled his nine tails of fur. One shake, and ice crystal shards fired out. They spiraled into Kartana, coated it, clumped, kept clumping, building and building as Ingmar with an uncharacteristically ferocious and spiteful snarl layered wave after wave of ice over the tiny papercraft body.

Lusamine placed a Beast Ball into one of the chambers of the machine. She slid the door shut with the full exertion of her narrow arms, then under the wave of steam that chugged out the machine's exhaust pipes opened the door to the other chamber and climbed inside.

The vault doors were fully open. Bill dragged himself on his elbows between them. Rillaboom's remnant grass curled as he left blood on the leaves. "The box," he said. "Destroy the black box."

His hand jabbed out, too erratically to connect anywhere, and Toril felt both airheaded and strangely sedate, but somehow the box leapt at her, placed beside the machine, glowing teal.

"She's trying to create an Ultra Wormhole," Bill said. "She wants to go through it, but—there's no way to shut it down after. It'll grow and grow until—!"

Until it splits open the sky.

Until the world ends.

All along, Aracely knew.

Rune emerged from the door's security system, a dot of light that sprung from its computerized machinery to the device that powered his hard light projection. When the projection rematerialized, Rune flitted in concern around Toril's body.

"Go on, move," Fiorella said. She was the one who caught Toril, who held her up even though Toril's legs were incapable of supporting herself. "Destroy the box!"

A harsh spray of steam issued out the human-Pokémon converter. It flooded the interior of the chamber, swallowed up the machine and the box and the hundred Clefairy, whose gleaming eyes showed disembodied within the smoke.

A tall, lanky silhouette gathered reality. An elongated entity both human in general shape and utterly inhuman by all other metrics. Yet, somehow, as the steam cleared, the thing emerging *looked* like Lusamine. Not the one that entered the machine, dark haired, scarred, wearing a loose dress to conceal the emaciation of her body. It was the one Toril remembered, five years prior, in the pristine sterility of the Aether Foundation's offices. Hair so blonde it was almost white, everything about her white: her clothes, her skin, her aura. As though it was her that turned the entire Foundation her color, perfect cleanliness, devoid of any speck of dirt, at odds with the reality of the world Toril inhabited, its mountains, its mud. Purity incarnate, a draining purity that bled dry whatever it touched, the erasure of all color into her all-consuming halo. The same loathsome purity of spirit Toril once sensed in Aracely Sosa, a color hideous and repugnant until its sustained proximity sucked even from her everything that made her herself. *Unfit*.

Lusamine was also, now, metamorphosized into a gigantic insect.

It was impossible to read him. Even before Zapdos, she never found what lurked beyond the face. She uncovered patterns in his gameplay, but he himself, whatever he was, eluded her. Was he the enigma or was something leaving her now, some part of her soul, a faded ember under this world's curdled sky?

The crowd almost did not care. The battle, for them, ended the moment Zapdos appeared. Their reactions came uncharacteristically muted, not that they were quiet—they were so, so loud—but that the sound they made no longer seemed connected to the action onstage. A misalignment of reality, theirs and hers and his: How could anyone possibly care about this utterly ordinary Kingambit playing out its utterly ordinary Sucker Punch Shuffle? For the first time Aracely understood her father, how Red was this thing manifested ex nihilo for the pure purpose of ruining him. Why did Red leave Kingambit for last? Insurance? A return, after the glimpse of divinity he showed them, to the world as it ought to be? Did he want to win or want to have fun or want to be challenged or want to put on a show? Was he simply bored, did his actions follow no logic beyond the vicissitudes through which boredom drags someone, idle thoughts pursued on a whim and as easily discarded?

Did the battle mean nothing to him? The less it meant to him, the more it meant to Aracely. She regained her composure, and a few swift strokes of her fingers rearranged her back into a perfect painting, but the inner world kept contorting. The truth of it was, for all her cute remarks, her coy dealings with MOTHER, the knowing winks she gave Toril or Dad or anyone, all she wanted from the start was to win. To win was to be special. To lose was to be—pacing an apartment, muttering, drinking beer, wondering at the branch in fate that consigned you to this oblivion. A school where everyone wore the same uniform, a track of life shared by all, a field of flowers dying, living, dying, living, dying, living, endless.

The cold feeling of the crowd leaving her, the eyes leaving her, the 8 billion watchers shrugging in apathy. He rose out of the dirt for no reason except to ruin her specifically.

She had two options. Either she told Ziggy to use Encore, or she told Ziggy to use Aqua Jet. Encore was the right move if Kingambit used Sucker Punch. Aqua Jet was the right move if Kingambit did anything else.

Functionally, both outcomes were the same: an incorrect prediction meant loss. Psychologically, there was a slight difference, and it was in this difference Cely thought the key must lie. Using Iron Head or Kowtow Cleave or anything and dying to Aqua Jet was an immediate loss. The game ended immediately after the failure to predict. But using Sucker Punch and getting Encored created a delay. The game was functionally over, but would continue for three subsequent turns, until Sucker Punch ran out of PP.

Would Red want the game to end when it was over, or risk the chance of some elongated state of finality, a fate sealed but still within the process of being enacted, ninety seconds of pageant? Because, somehow, Cely felt he had no interest in trying to pick her brain, trying to predict what she would do. He always operated with a sense that his fate was his own.

That left Ziggy. Her little spaceman, yellow orb body like a moon in the arena, mimic of the world's most popular Pokémon, a Pokémon once synonymous with Red—where did it go? What did he hollow out of himself to reach this point?—the moon a mimic of the sun. Since the beginning they told her to bond with Ziggy. What did they know? That he was her, and she him, all along? He was ready to applaud.

She closed her eyes and tapped the holoscreen. It made a clear, tactile sound. She said, "Encore."

Kingambit used Sucker Punch. Ziggy applauded.

In ninety seconds, the game ended.

In ninety seconds, the Ultra Wormhole would be created. The black box needed only that much longer to charge. Then, Lusamine, in this new metamorphosis, one suited to travel across planets, galaxies, dimensions, one suited to survive any weapon mankind might ever build, departed. Alone. Cely was gone. Nilu was gone. Her followers never reached her. The plan went awry. Alone she would go.

She needed only to stop Toril for ninety seconds. Toril looked nearly dead. One arm missing, her throat torn open, bleeding despite the terrain's attempts to heal her. She only had two remaining Pokémon, thanks—Lusamine supposed—to Nilufer's final efforts. One was Porygon-Z, offensively strong but slow and with a natural weakness to Lusamine's typing. The other was Ninetales, Alolan Ninetales, a creature that darkened Lusamine's mind with images of a past, of more and more people irrevocably gone, of the eternal loneliness of her existence in pursuit of progress.

With blistering speed, faster than nearly any known creature from this world, Lusamine moved. One leap with her long and impossibly thin insect legs took her over the heads of the confused Clefairy. Graceful and elegant and beautiful, as all things should be, even these movements of maniacal ferocity. Porygon-Z looked briefly distracted, discombobulated, a natural state due to its glitched operating system, but its gaze was directed for some reason at the Clefairy, and besides that it was slow. Ninetales' focus was on the black box. Lusamine saw it breathing in air that the intensely low temperature of its lungs might spew as icicles. The black box was not designed to withstand damage; one direct strike would destroy it.

But everything moved so slowly to Lusamine's new mind. She was in front of Ninetales while it still breathed in, her lithe arm shot out, seized it by the nape.

A weak toss took it into the air, where it seemed to hover as Lusamine buffeted it with a series of blows: kicks, punches, jabs, swipes, to the head, the neck, the ribcage, the limbs, precise and methodical in their motions. Her body was barely comprehensible to herself, even her own limbs left afterimages. She felt bones snap and watched puffs of blood fly and she thought: If that girl never went against her...!

One sweeping high kick crushed into Ninetales' side and it shot like a projectile at Porygon-Z, who hadn't moved the entire assault. At the last moment Porygon-Z recognized the threat and a spastic glitch carried it aside, leaving Ninetales to hurtle through empty air until it finally crashed into a grotesque profusion of machinery wrenched from Bill's aimless mind.

Triple elements sparked around Porygon-Z's beak. It aimed at the black box. Lusamine pirouetted into the next position, one leg brought up to sweep through Porygon-Z's thin neck, severing it completely. The head hurtled off. This did not incapacitate or even seriously injure

Porygon-Z because its vital processes occurred in its central mechanism, not its head, but it disrupted its ability to act offensively.

Something caught her eye in the periphery. Toril, supported by Fiorella Fiorina. Her remaining arm tossed something out. A Poké Ball. It felt illogical for Toril to have held back any Pokémon this long. Could she be desperately sending out something wounded? A simple distraction? Lusamine's focus moved too fast for that.

The ball popped open.

Kingambit used Sucker Punch.

In lieu of anything else to do, since he couldn't attack, Ziggy kept using Encore. It failed to accomplish anything either, but the point was to waste time, waste the final minute before the game ended. He clapped and clapped. Encore, encore. An encore for this world. Final bows. Roses on the stage, and a crowd confused it wasn't already over.

The Pokémon Lusamine had become was the fastest Pokémon confirmed to exist—except one.

That one was Ninjask.

The Pokémon that emerged from Toril's final Poké Ball was not Ninjask. It was the husk Ninjask left behind.

Toril gripped her throat. Loose strands of skin and flesh sifted between her fingers. "BRKKHH," came the inhuman sound from severed vocal chords, "BRRRREAKKKHHH THE BOXXXXHHHHH."

Elias drifted into the room, an inanimate angel pulled by invisible string.

Lusamine gripped Rune's headless body and pitched him into the ground, off which he rebounded twirling, spraying bits of his form and small mechanical gears. She leaped at Elias. Her legs weaved through him in a series of brutal, graceful strokes. Her fists, head, every part of her limber multisegmented body: antennae, joints, abdomen.

Elias drifted at the same pace. Toward the black box.

Bug moves, fighting moves, even poison and normal moves passed through the wisp of Shedinja, touching nothing at all. Lusamine's motions grew desperate. She ripped pieces of

machinery from their places and hurled them. She peeled a pipe off the wall and swung it. She cratered the grate floor and stabbed with blade-like strips.

Elias drifted.

Toril was crumpling. Her blood, everywhere. Fiorella stopped supporting her, let her settle onto the ground, then aimed her camera and reported on observed fact. Toril was too faint to care. All her Pokémon—squeezed and used up. Her blood shed in offering to this world, which gladly took all.

Elias drifted.

Kingambit used Sucker Punch.

It had now used Sucker Punch seven times. One use remained, and Encore forced it to use it next turn. Then nothing stopped Ziggy from finishing Kingambit with Aqua Jet.

Unsure why, Cely felt uneasy.

One week ago, it was a one percent chance. A one percent chance as Toril Lund's final Pokémon stared down Aracely Sosa's. One percent that Cely won, that she moved on and Toril was eliminated.

That chance happened. Now, everything fell apart.

Lusamine kept attacking Shedinja long after she understood the futility. The Pokémon she merged with knew no moves that hurt it. It drifted toward the black box. Its ghost moves were impossible to intercept.

The Clefairy looked up at Shedinja with wonder. They clapped their hands and laughed together. They pointed at the halo over Shedinja's head. Their tiny, vestigial wings fluttered. Angels and angels.

Lusamine stooped, hands—or what served as hands—on her knees.

"Metronome." Despite the transformation of her body, her voice sounded wholly her own.

The Clefairy glanced at her.

"Use Metronome."

Smiles perked up the Clefairy faces. They loved this move, Metronome, innate to their DNA. A move that allowed them to mimic any other move—at random. The Clefairy held up their fingers and swayed them back and forth in synchronized rhythm. They chanted, chirping nonsense Clefairy babble.

Roughly one thousand moves existed. Metronome would pick one of those. It only needed to be a move that hurt Shedinja, no matter how weak. Ember, Wing Attack, Bite, Rock Throw, Lick.

This was what it came to? Random chance? Like Cely winning against Toril. Was it always random chance, the whole time? Was there never any order to it, any reason or meaning, any Logos? Or were fate and luck always, observably, identical? The difference only interpretation?

The Clefairy quit their timed oscillations. Their fingers pointed straight up. They began to glow.

What was it? Why did Cely feel something was wrong? Did she miscount? No. Seven Sucker Punches. One remaining. Was there some mechanic she forgot or never knew, some way to escape Encore early?

Nothing. There was nothing. Why the feeling then? A misfire? Her finger slipping from the pulse of whatever Logos dictated the progression of this world? That aura fading forever?

It was impossible for Red to win from this position. Chance played no part in it, nor human error. This turn, he would use Sucker Punch for the last time, and Ziggy would use Encore. The next turn, Ziggy used Aqua Jet and won.

Everyone watching: she won. Aracely Sosa won. Over this entire world, she triumphed. Do you see her now? Really see her?

"Encore," she said, for the final time.

Metronome possessed zero utility in a structured battle. Its randomness made it infeasible for professional competition.

But the move meant something to the Clefairy. In their hidden corners of Mt. Moon, the narrow gasps of an endemic species, they swayed their fingers and summoned monsters or miracles. Individuals whose Metronome created powerful attacks, who saved the tribe from predatory Onix or Golbat, rose to an exalted status within the community. They became

leaders, allowed the rare privilege to touch the shards of moonrock scrounged from the dark in a ceremony of evolution. It made no logical sense, of course. Randomly using a good move didn't lend a Clefairy any actual leadership qualities. There was an element of self-fulfilling prophecy, because by evolving into Clefable they became more powerful and thus better suited to lead, but the internal dynamics of choosing by chance baffled those early researchers who studied the creatures in their natural habitat. They passed it off as inefficiency, or even used it as evidence for why Clefairy failed to spread past its small habitat, why its population never grew until humans captured it, bred it, and gave it guidance.

A competing theory, perhaps wild fancy, existed. This theory proposed that Metronome was not truly random. That Clefairy tapped into some underlying force, perhaps subatomic, that determined the world's seeming chaos. Those Clefairy who, in times of trouble, managed to bring to bear the exact move needed to save themselves were somehow better attuned to this so-called chaos, which humans only called chaos because they failed to understand it.

The Clefairy's Metronome ended. They glowed, then something sparked, and a white force blasted out.

It was Explosion.

Briefly, behind her camera, Fiorella's world became clear. A line starting thirteen years prior finally closed its circle. Apotheosis, atonement, antidote, a wordless apology to herself, an apology to her daughter. It all meant something. All along, it meant something!

The blast swallowed Lusamine and Elias. It swallowed the black box and the converter machine and the sea of smiling Clefairy. It roared toward Toril and Fiorella and Bill in the entryway. Something tiny and fast struck Fiorella's camera and she reared back screaming, her face full of blood.

A creature vaulted them and landed in the entryway. Its body only silhouette, but its shape and fins unmistakable as it braced itself to shield them from debris: Garchomp. Cynthia's Garchomp. And Cynthia was there, her other Pokémon pulling them to safety. Everything was white. Everything was over.

Kingambit tried to use Sucker Punch, as Encore forced it to do.

It couldn't.

It didn't have enough Power Points.

It only had seven. It didn't have the maximum eight.

Its body trembled. Its body shook. Its arms thrashed limply. All its dignity, all its poise fell away.

It used Struggle. Its body, its only weapon left, flailed. It flopped into Ziggy. A weak move. It looked pathetic. It hurt itself.

It hurt Ziggy enough. Ziggy, after spending the last eight turns clapping, looked down at his body. Where the bladed parts of Kingambit stabbed him. His eyes turned up, toward the crowd, then he tilted toward Cely. Cely watched in emptiness—in empathy—as, theatrical in how he pressed the back of a paw to his forehead, he fell.

"Aracely Sosa is out of usable Pokémon. IPL 64 is over!"

She remembered curling up. There on the platform, curled up, staring at nothing.

The world wasn't ending. Did it ever mean anything?

She remembered the devastated arena as Red stepped onto it. She remembered Iono appearing with a microphone and camera crew. It wasn't Mom, but Iono. Iono babbled into the microphone, not her usual spiel—she knew the moment.

"An amazing finish, Red. We'll ask all about that INCREDIBLE Zapdos in a bit, but first, I wanna hear it: How do you feel winning your SEVENTH Interregional Pokémon League World Championship?"

Red, man of clay, seemed incapable of speech. The brim of his hat remained lowered over his eyes. The pause lingered to the point of pain and the whole time Iono stayed there with her silly smile and bobbing hair ornaments.

Then Red tilted his head up. His hat lifted, revealed his eyes. Tears streamed from them. They ran in rivulets that washed the caked dirt off his cheeks.

"Thank you," he spoke haltingly, as though needing to remember how. He spoke to the crowd. "For always—loving me."

"This has been the latest chapter in your unparalleled story, Red. One for the history books. Nobody's ever gonna match what you've done here. Twenty years! Twenty years..."

She remembered taking the elevator capsule from the stage to the competitor offloading dock. Dad called her en route, a ring in her Rotomless phone. She answered but found she couldn't speak. Red stole her ability, stole her story, stole everything. The man who always won, winning again, and they loved it, everyone loved to see it.

"I'm proud of you," Dad said. "Know that. No matter what. I'm proud of you and I love you. That's all that matters. You're everything to me, Cely. I'm proud. I'm so proud. I'm sure your mother feels the same." And every consolation: nobody expected her to get this far, she proved everyone wrong, she showed what she was made of.

She cut herself open and showed them everything.

She remembered the capsule door opening and she stumbled out and in the distance, at the end of the hallway, she saw Haydn running toward her. No Charlie, but Cely remembered her

sins, she felt them creeping up her back, because Red's final Pokémon fought with the weight of every single one.

Haydn kept running, running. Never reaching. Like a dream, where certain outcomes are not allowed. IPL agents were already beside Cely, they gripped her each by an arm. Leon led them, followed by other famous trainers, a special procession of past heroes all for her. Sabrina stood among the group, staring—staring so sadly—while the agents said something about a museum, about RISE, about Mom, about Toril. Blood and death. "Are you happy?" they said. "Is this what you wanted?"

THE END

After The End

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A wave washed over everything. Wiped it away: the grand stage and the players. Only the platforms remained above the flood.

The water ebbed. Settled. White froth patterns. Then, a slow subsiding. The streaked, dripping sides of the platforms emerged, seeming ancient despite their state-of-the-art technology. Lips of crags and craters appeared next, rising out of spots of white like teeth. Once all water drained, the sopping sheet of the arena floor shone under the floodlights. One Pokémon stood and one was wiped out.

"Jinjiao Zhang is out of usable Pokémon. IPL 75 is over!"

All the cheering, crowds, confetti, fireworks. Planes shot overhead. A grand celebration. Jinjiao returned his fainted Pokémon and stood on his platform with subtle shellshock. Losing never became easier, no matter how many times you lost, no matter how many times you won.

Pre-finals commentary: "Jinjiao's one of the most decorated battlers in IPL history. Three championships in ten years, looking for a fourth today. But he's never been able to live up to the goal he set for himself—unseating Red Akahata as the consensus best battler of all time."

"If anything, Jinjiao has only proven how special Red was. We'll never see anyone like him ever again. A man for the history books."

Red was gone now. Nobody knew where. Some jungle, some mountain somewhere they said. Sightings every so often, hoaxes and impersonators. Whispers online, at first memes, becoming something else: that one day he would return, and bring with him a Pokémon even greater than the one he used in his final tournament, a Pokémon that was God itself. Someone else claimed he died of pneumonia, miles from civilization.

Jinjiao, twenty-four years old, heard the whispers of retirement. He thought: another year next year. Another team, another family. As long as he never burned out, he can go forever.

He was forgotten, out of frame. The camera centered on the arena, which shifted open for a cylindrical stage to rise, lined by a spiral staircase. The host, an Iono who still passed for fourteen, already stood there with a microphone. The tournament's victor climbed up under a mass prayer of applause.

"Congratulations Liechi! You're the first girl to EVER win the IPL grand championship. How does it feel?"

The teenage girl reached the top breathless, cherubim red in the cheeks. She seized the microphone awkwardly and peaked it with her first sputtered word. "I—feel like the end of a

long, long journey? It's actually—the first thing I remember."

"The first thing you remember?"

"IPL—IPL 64," Liechi said. "Seeing Cely Sosa on this stage. I wanted to be her. Wanting to be here, on this—wow? Surrounded by all these people."

"Is there anyone else you wanna thank?"

"Right. Yes. My dad, of course. Hi dad. You always believed in me. And—Cynthia, my mentor. But really—I'd like to thank my Pokémon. They should be on this stage too. My Pokémon—are the ones..."

"Next."

That gruff, aggravated voice pulled Aracely's attention from the screen tucked in the corner of the waiting room. The door to the visitor center was open, an officer holding it as the previous two visitors exited.

It was the first time Aracely saw Gladion Mohn since their battle a decade prior. Without context she wouldn't have recognized him. He put on weight, wore a homely button-up shirt with suspenders. He looked like a photo of his father she once saw, and the girl beside him, Lillie, looked exactly how her mother once did, like a supermodel. Except Lillie didn't seem to know it. Lillie was crying. Gladion held an arm around her shoulder and glared.

Aracely rose, smoothed out her business suit and skirt, and nodded to him like to an acquaintance you pass. They passed. Lillie, hands on her face, never noticed Aracely was there.

The policeman led her down a series of bare hallways: faded yellow linoleum, humming utilitarian lighting. She rounded a corner and saw it at a distant dead end long before the slow, steady gait of the policeman brought her there. A sheet of reinforced plexiglass, everything beyond bright white, and a figure with twitching antennae waiting.

"Ten minutes," the officer said as he indicated her seat in front of the glass. He did not leave after she sat, and made sure she knew it by coughing occasionally.

Aracely crossed her legs at the ankles and picked up the phone that connected her to the other side.

"You've come," said her voice, *hers*, unchanged, exactly as Aracely remembered it. "After the last time, I said: I will never see her again."

She really was an insect. Aracely had seen photos, but nothing prepared her for it in person. She made no effort to hide herself from Aracely, as if she felt no shame at all. As if she felt pride. And maybe, Aracely thought, she was right. In some way, this creature remained beautiful.

"This is the first time they let me visit," Aracely said. "They thought I was involved. They never had any evidence, and I had people who helped me out, but they were against me any

way they could be."

MOTHER, Lusamine, nodded. Her insect hands thatched under her chin.

She was slated for death. But the execution kept being pushed back. They didn't know how to kill her. Lethal injection wouldn't work, nor hanging, nor even—they suspected—decapitation. Her body post-metamorphosis was too resilient. Bill's machine broke in the explosion and he couldn't build another. It'd been so long since the first time, he never kept notes, and after so many failed attempts admitted publicly: he didn't remember. So now she was a permanent inconvenience to the system, a secret tucked away, contained within specialized cages in this remote mountain facility.

"Tell me," Lusamine said, "how are you, Cely."

"I'm... good." Aracely tried to settle herself with a deep breath. "Dad's healthier than ever. Brittany keeps him in shape, though she needs cataract surgery soon. He tutors young trainers, runs these cute little classes, the kids are adorable. Mom—well, maybe you haven't heard, but the Old Man's finally on his deathbed. Lung cancer. Mom's jockeying for his position, she's going full shock and awe on the politburo, you know how she's so vigorous. The explosion scarred her face and blinded her in one eye, it took her off the air for good, so this has been her mission since. Her new story. I have no idea what she'd do if she actually makes it. Her main competition for the job is Iono of all people."

"Mm." An entomic trill. "But what about you, Cely? How are *you*?"

Why was that question so much harder to answer? "I work in Saffron City. As a—personal assistant, of sorts, for—

"For their pet psychic."

Aracely didn't bother asking how she guessed. "It pays well."

"Are you married? Children?"

"I've been busy."

The insect's gaze was multifaceted. Something, some mandible or chitinous part, made a sound: click-click-click.

"Tick-tick-tick," Lusamine said. "As my father used to tell me. I was twenty-two then. Some say the only purpose is to make more. Propagate. A bigger number—is that progress?"

Aracely said nothing.

"Tell me. How are you, *really*?"

Aracely didn't know the answer she wanted. She didn't know if she wanted her to be great, or terrible, or conflicted, or anything. She didn't know if she wanted an honest answer or dishonest.

"I'm... okay. I'm okay."

"Good," Lusamine said. "It's important. It's necessary for all those who can't change a thing to be okay. How else would they live?"

This woman, or insect, Aracely realized, was impossible to kill. It was impossible for her to age or get cancer. She would outlast the IPL, outlast regions, outlast everything. These walls would crumble to dust around her.

The policeman coughed. Aracely stood up. "I'm glad I got to see you, Lusamine."

"Before you go. I need to understand. Was it your plan, Cely? Your design? Beating Toril, keeping your hands clean, making every little part slot into place the way it did?"

"I'm leaving now."

"Tell me! Cely. **Was fate your instrument, or were you fate's?**"

Aracely left.

The parking lot outside the facility's electrified gate was a sea of rock. Clouds swam too quickly across the sky, streaking the sun with shadow. Gladion and Lillie stood by the only other car, whispering to each other. Lillie clutched a white Vulpix to her chest.

In Aracely's convertible, passenger door open, legs spread out over the pavement, Toril stared at Lillie and her Vulpix. With her one hand, she stroked Ingmar's fur while he dozed in her lap. Her empty sleeve fluttered in the breeze.

"Finished?" Toril rasped.

"Close enough," Aracely said. She snapped her fingers at Heidi and Ziggy roughhousing in the back seat and glared at Toril for letting them do it. Toril returned a wry smile.

Night sank as they drove down the mountain, the Pokémon asleep to the stereo's nostalgic melody. Toril and Aracely didn't speak. In the end, it was okay. Something came of it. An old man somewhere shivered, coughed, and died. The moon intersected the mountaintop and life from another world tumbled down to renew this one.

Chapter End Notes

This concludes *When I Win the World Ends*. Thank you, everyone, for reading and commenting. Your reviews were often extremely thoughtful and I enjoyed every single one of them. If this is your first story of mine, I hope you consider checking out some of my other completed works. I'll also field any questions about my work on my Tumblr, weaselandfriends, or on my Twitter, IMBavitz. Thanks again, and until next time.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!