

Ice compacted by snow became a light gradient against the grayish green grass. Coldcoal Mountains lay further behind, through some more forest and over an enormous river that broke off further east. Ahead, icier, colder mountains, and a polar wastes with little civilization. Polarpoint Icelands was an impressively large location furthest north in Dyneuria, a place so cold and chilly that a decent amount of Coldcoal's snow came from these flats and the narrower, taller mountain ranges. The woodlands that were here were sprinkles of white, frosted pine trees, much more resilient than the pines down south. A light dusting of snow had sprinkled down from the skies, clouds hovering far above to bring more snow to these abundant stretches. Throughout the lonesome walk, the 'in-name-only' Team Macro solemnly strolled forward. The words they'd been smited by at the top of Coldcoal still rung through their head. Richard's gravelly voice, his sure glare down, that matter-of-fact attitude... Alex was still stung by the ordeal.

"Thinking about it again?" Eki's voice was a break from the mental clash. Alex's eyes drifted away, fixated on whatever snow mounds he could see. Whatever it took to get away from the conversation. "Hey, I've had it on my mind too. I'm sorry I wasn't-"

"Hey, it's okay." Alex looked up to the Typhlosion on his head, "You found yourself, and I'm happy that you did. I can take things on for you if you need me to."

"Alex..." Eki sighed, then slid down to her knees. "We're a team. I let you down by not being there."

The Pikachu let loose a long, drawn out sigh. "We're friends working together...we're not a team."

"To the Way-After with what Richard said." Eki crossed her arms, her butt now firmly pushed onto her feet. "What's he know? Tsk, the 'founding guildmasters went feral'...they practically banned Pokémon who had Gigantamax Genes!"

Alex felt a proverbial prick in his neck. His ears sprung up, scooping Eki into one of his paws. "Wait, what did you say?"

"Prophet Xatu's prophecy!" Eki rattled. "Don't you remember?" She sprung right back up onto her feet, then covered her right eye with her hand. "'Rillaboom, Cinderace, and Inteleon banished both of them to the opposite sides of the earths, and decreed that those with the Gigantamax Gene were to be banished as well.'" She dropped the act and snarled. "Richard's history book's either wrong, or he's having a senior moment!"

"...You don't think..." Alex hung his head low. "Maybe Xatu's prophecy is wrong?"

Eki crossed her arms. "Do you think it's wrong? If you do, then why're you heading toward the Northern Point? Desperate to see Toyland?"

“Because I’m out of options. I wanna be normal again...that’s, that’s all I want.”

“I believe in Prophet’s prophecy.” Eki clenched her fist to her heart. “He’s never had a reason to lie to us before. He’s a weirdo loner who sits in his hut all day waiting for something insane to happen! He’s practically oozing wisdom!”

Alex looked toward Eki, a slight glimmer of hope blooming in his chest at her speech, yet his tone was still forlorn. “Xatu’s visions come from stuff he sees in the future. Who’s to say it’s all set and stone? Something could’ve happened today that made my birth parents disappear, or...”

“Ahp ahp ahp.” Eki stomped on Alex’s palm. “We’re gonna get you back down to size. I know we will, and you know we will. You might be down in the dumps, but I know my best friend still believes in the light at the end of the tunnel!”

He couldn’t help but pull a smile. Alex was at least comforted by Eki’s persistent optimism. Placed back on his head, Eki looked toward the path ahead, and Alex proceeded onward. “Yeah...you’re right.” he relented. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, bud.” Eki grinned. “We’re Team Macro. We can do anything together!”

That genuine smile on Alex’s face was the first he had since the two of them departed. The enormous Pikachu continued to stomp along, snow melting atop his fat belly. “...Yeah, you’re probably right.”

—

Freezyfrost Village, a collection of homes built upon a practically frozen cliffside on the northern coast. The Polarpoint Icelands stretched for miles along the shore, and this little spot here was the only refuge a Pokémon could get for quite a long while. Because of the colder climate, most Pokémon that resided here had thick layers of coating, and were naturally able to handle constant freezing temperatures, or had nowhere else to slink away to. It was the end of the road for some. One building nestled between a bakery and a bank stood out to anyone who was in need of help, like a beacon that lit the way. Xander’s Detective Bureau, a wooden sign with pointed ears proudly advertised. There was one window that peered into the office if one pressed their face against the frosty glass. Inside, a desk with scratches and marks stood defiantly in the middle of the room. Atop that desk, a half-eaten donut gotten from this morning’s sale at the bakery patiently waited to be finished, a thermos full of coffee accompanying it. Papers were scattered all over the top in a clutter, a wax seal stamp rested by a box of red wax, and a paper opener had been pushed closer and closer to the edge of the desk. Two chairs were pressed close to the door; while behind the desk, one seat had been left unoccupied.

"I don't know what else to tell you." From the front of the desk floated an Abra, a Postmaster's badge firmly placed on his blue cap. "Guildmaster Gerald said you were the only Pokémon for the job."

Pacing slowly next to a bookshelf, a peculiar Pikachu pondered the offer presented to him. Under his eyes were crow's feet emblematic of age and shadows under the lids telling of sleepless nights, yet along his right eye was a massive scar that dominated his features and refused to be obscured. With one eye open and another shut, a monocle was placed in front of his bad eye to hide it away. His portly physique hugged his attire well, a dress coat draped over his belly fine and well, while his tie hovered over his navel. His dress shirt, though obscured, had a jelly stain on the left breast. He stroked his chin slowly, deep in thought over the proposal.

"I just can't see why he would need me, of all Pokémon." he shook his head. "Besides, you said it yourself, the crime happened nearly a week ago at this point. Why did he wait so long to come in contact with me?"

"There were holdups, Mister Xander sir." the Abra politely bowed.

A sigh left the Pikachu. "Look, call me Xander, just Xander." he insisted. "Anyway, I'm sorry, but a crime like this? Maybe you're better off with a local detective."

"Gerald insists on you sir." with his hands clasped together, the Abra shook his head. "I can take you at any time today, but if you refuse by tonight, I'm going to teleport back to Silveredge alone."

"I doubt I'm changing my mind on this one." Xander stood firm. "Besides, Silveredge is the one place I don't go."

With little room left to argue, the Abra floated over to the door and pushed it open. He gave one last look back to Xander, then nodded. "If you do change your mind, I'll be waiting in Cafe Connection." He took his leave shortly after, a bitter chill slipping into the office for a moment before the lock shut tight.

Xander pulled the fedora off of his head and hung it on his coat rack, where it sat next to a dusty deerlingstalker. It was then, in the stillness of his office, he stepped over to the bookshelf that pressed against the back wall. Globes of dust petrified the encyclopedias and tomes that were abandoned, aside from sparse spots along each shelf. One such spot was a locket, one heart shaped trinket placed precariously beside an unmarked album- in contrast with the disuse of the books, the metal of the locket had been worn smooth and brassy. With one click, the detective was whisked down memory lane for a somber, one-sided reunion. There he stood in a sepia-tone photograph, the flash of a disposable chargestone illuminated his and the face of another. Two Pikachu, both trim, both peppy, and both admiring the nightlife of the Silveredge Coastline. The disheartened frown spread when his eyes met the other Pikachu's. Sparkling eyes, a brown glow that glimmered when he saw them in the flesh. Now they were just a shade

of faded orange that melted in with the image. The locket slipped back in its place, approximately beside the album.

—

The cold shivers of the outdoors had finally gotten to a septet of less than fortunate fanatics. Bundled up together for warmth the best they could, their exile travels had led them through here. All but Jezebel's teeth chattered, though the plump Mimikyu shook and shimmied about in a manic manner. Livi's tail swished and shook, Vanny and Vik huddled behind Estella, Marshal sandwiched himself between Percy and Jezebel. Truly, these seven were going through the worst bitter winds of their lives. Scarves, aprons, and belts would do little to keep them warm in the cold. If only they thought ahead... It was too late to turn back now. While they wandered through the less traveled streets of Freezyfrost, little Pokémon paid them mind, used to foot traffic of Pokémon they would likely never see again

"W-W-We need to find a fire soon." Estella warned, "We're going to be electric icicles if we don't bunker down somewhere nice and warm... electricicles..."

"Why didn't we go south..." Percy griped, "Terani's beautiful this time of year..."

"B-But that's full of criminals..." whimpered Marshal. "At least, I heard the coast is full of criminals..."

"We ARE criminals now..." chattered Jezebel. "Brhhhr, c-c-c-cold criminals..."

"And, if we're wanted fugitives running from the law..." Livi stomped forward, "w-w-we need to stay somewhere that would only take fugitives..." her eyes turned over to a nearby inn, the sign was the first thing that stood out to her. 'Crooks Inn' painted in neat, red lettering. "There!"

The other six Team SIMP members were pulled in by their leader rapidly, they barely had time to admire the bizarre tilt of the inn's upper floors, or its swirled roof. The interior was lit by small candles that rested in copper holders, the fireplace even further illuminated the room with its radiant, warm glow- markedly more cozy and well-furnished than one would expect of a place meant to house outlaws. A Litwick spun around to see the group get pulled in, then raised his head.

"Welcome, customers." Despite his tiny stature, he had a deep, soothing voice, "How many rooms can I-"

"Ohhhh, open armed innsmen!" Livi plopped herself onto the front desk, which rattled the guestlog and keys. "We're just simple fugitives, running from the law! We can't find anyone with a heart, we're just running, running, running!" She pulled herself up, and pressed her face right

to the candle. The Litwick jumped back in shock. "But you, you're able to bring us shelter, right?! Please, let us crooks into your open arms!"

The Litwick blinked rapidly, surprised at this girl's theatrics to the point that their welcoming tone had fallen away. "...Y-You must be going mad from the cold." he chuckled nervously, "Rooms are five Poké each. How many will that-"

"Just one!" Livi slapped five whole coins on the counter. "ThankyouthankyouTHANKyou!"

"Here's...your key, ma'am." The innkeeper gently lifted a small key, wrapped by a tag, and plopped it into Livi's paws.

It was absolutely tiny. Two beds that were raised up by risers were pushed together, a stool sat in the other corner beside the beds, and some nesting lay in a corner next to the door. Couple that with a fireplace, and there was barely room for four Pokémon, let alone seven. The group didn't care. Marshal flung himself onto the warm straw bundle on the ground, Estella onto the stool, Vanny and Vik onto one of the mattresses, Percy and Jezebel on the other. Livi just flopped by the fireplace, already lit with a roaring fire. A tiny room like this warmed up quickly, and all of Team SIMP indulged in the blazes.

"Finally..." Marshal beamed from ear to ear, snuggled up in the bundle on the ground.

"Comfort..." Percy face-planted into Jezebel's stomach, who hissed slightly at being touched, smooshing the Emolga's face with her claw before grumbling and giving up.

A long, drawn out sigh of relief left Livi while she let the blaze warm her body up. "We're gonna make it after all..." she gleamed.

"Hey though, how much do we have for more nights here?" wondered Vanny, who flopped up onto her tuckus.

Livi blinked, then nervously reached into the group's wallet she held onto. A click into the lock that held it in place, then a flap open. Some dust left the bottom of the wallet while the Pachirisu emptied out the contents. The whole group's relaxing day out had quickly become that of shock and horror. They were out of money and out of luck. Everyone's shocked expressions mirrored one another's, with tiny eyes, mouths agape, and bodies stiff as a board.

"...Well warmth's nice while it lasted..." Vik was the first to lose out hope, then shuffle himself under a blanket.

Concerned, Livi clasped the wallet tight. "Come on, guys," she attempted to raise the group's spirits, "maybe, uh, um, maybe...maybe this is our chance to start over!"

"We're wanted fugitives now!" Marshal yipped aloud, "We'll be hunted down, Arcanine will sniff out our trail! We're always gonna be on the run!"

"Okay, but, but hear me out!" Livi waved her paws about. "This place's a criminal's dream come true! It's- it's cold, so, Magnezone and his posse don't come around here! Arcanine are probably busy with LOCAL crimes anyway, and nobody knows we came this way!"

"Except that one inn keeper in Aridaria." Percy remarked.

"That dude was shady..." Vanny crossed her arms together the best she could. "And a REAL crook. Who charges a hundred Poké for a room?!"

"What I'm saying is that we can start over!" Livi emphasized. "We've all got talents! We can put SOMETHING to use here!...like, like, like you, Marsh!" she pointed over to the Dedenne, who still seemed downtrodden.

Marshal groaned, "What good am I gonna be? I can't farm here, everything's ice and snow."

"Don't say never!" Livi pressed her paws on his cheeks. "You told me so much about your farming expeditions back home, how you were able to help bring back your pop's old field!"

"Yeah, but that was near Castra Nova..." sighed Marshal, allowing Livi to play with his chubby face with practiced patience, "That place is right next to one of the most fertile spots on Megala. Farming in ice land would be like trying to find gold in a coal mine."

Livi shook her head. "There's some types of berries that can THRIVE out here, I know there are, and you especially know there are! We just...gotta find them and start cultivating them! All it takes is a stroke of luck!" she pumped her paws to her chest, then turned to Percy. "You could be a bouncer!"

"The only thing I'm bouncing is my belly across the ground." The Emolga sassed. "Besides, how would I be a bouncer for anything up here?"

"You're heavier than a decent amount of Pokémon I've seen walking around," Livi continued, "plus, you're better at fighting than a decent majority of us! You're still hard to hit, even weighing as much as you do!" It was then she turned to Vanny and Vik. "Once we all cobble up enough money, we could open up a diner or something with you guys! Vanny could be the chef, Vik could be entertainment!"

Vik gripped his shoulders and thwipped his head away. "I-In front of a crowd? With what pay?"

"That's the trick," Livi grinned, "Pokémon all over the Icелands are gonna come to hear you sing once word gets out, you'll help make oodles of money for the restaurant!"

"And I get to eat the ones who don't pay..." Jezebel cackled, a glint in her eyes evident through the hole in her disguise.

"You do NOT get to eat the ones who don't pay!" corrected Olivia, "If anything, you would make good security for the place! Once we have enough money, Marshal's stuff can go right back to the diner, and everything'll be fine! Heck, Estella, you could research ways to help out Marshal and get our names out there!"

The Togedemaru rose up from her spot. "So, you've dictated jobs for all of *us* to do...but what are *you* going to do, Olivia?"

It was there that the Pachirisu paused and considered the available options. She hummed slightly, then sat back down on the ground. "...What am I gonna do..."

"You've gotten up to here, but never considered that?" Estella sighed. "You could at least say a waitress or something. Heck, be an event planner or something if you're calling the shots."

"Sides, we gotta know how much opening anything here costs." Percy reminded the group. "We can't just squat in a vacated building and set up shop. Pokémon are gonna hound us for that."

Livi blinked for a moment, then brushed her paws a bit. "...I'm sorry. I, I feel like, I feel like I've gotten us into this mess."

"I mean, that's kinda on me." Vanny raised her paw up. "I got those Alcremie goons on board, and now we're stuck here."

"We also kinda pulled off a big stunt to get Alex in our cave," Percy chuckled. "Heh, that was fun too."

"Yeah, but I was the one who coordinated us to go ahead with it." Livi sighed. "I just wanna, y'know, spoil this cutie who saved my life. I'm, I dunno. I'm selfish." It was then the Pachirisu stood up and made her way to the door. "I uh, I need some air."

While she opened up, the most unlikely of voices peeped through the crackles of fire. "You...should come back when you're done."

Vik's words at least brought Olivia some comfort, even if she didn't fully believe them herself for the moment. Her pause in the doorframe was a moment of acknowledgement, before she slipped out the room and closed up behind her.

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Glorp went the cork on an old, dusty bottle in the detective's office. Xander had taken the afternoon to his biggest vice; a cup of coffee he brewed the other day. It was rare to get coffee beans in Freezyfrost, so he valued whatever he could. On his desk were some other pieces of memorabilia that loomed up at him. A piece of red cloth, a little pocket book with the etchings of names in them, and a piece of a black crystal that shimmered and shined in the light. Stale coffee and a rock hard donut. It wasn't the best lunch, but it was most certainly a type of lunch. A mundane time for him like this was cut off by a strange, obscure rumble from far away. Then another, then another. They weren't earthquakes, there were barely any plates to shake under the thick ice. It couldn't have been a sea storm either, for nearly that same reason. No, this was something else. He took a crunch of the donut and a slug of the bad brew, then rushed out the door into the bite of below-zero wind and dusting snow. Over the horizon of the small town, he could see something stomp past the sparse trees further off and far-off mountain. It was yellow, tall, wide, and...

Xander was pulled away when someone thumped into him. A Pachirisu, barely taller than he was. "Sorry!" she called out, "This quaking's throwing me off. Is everything good, mister?"

Quick thinking, Xander squinted back up to the behemoth beyond. Two spiky ears, red cheeks, and no telltale signs of feralization in his eyes... In fact, his eyes were kind of like his. His processing of the outside world halted just for a moment. Vibrations seemed to ignore parts of him, he just watched this creature get closer while he mulled over the possibilities. The sound of the Pachirisu's voice was blanketed by the empty static in the Pikachu's head. All possibilities were triangulated to one. One, singular possibility.

"There's...there's no way." he finally gasped.

Confused, Livi tilted her head. "N-No way to what?"

Xander jumped, his little lapse in clarity made him realize that the Pachirisu girl was still right beside him. "You should go back inside." he ushered, "I gotta go!"

It was then the chunky electric mouse frantically hopped on all four paws, then rushed through the paved roads. Olivia watched this man bolt away, before her eyes locked onto where he was running off toward. She'd recognize those chunky cheeks, flabby arms, and great big moobs and belly anywhere.

"Hey! Mister, don't hurt him!" Livi rushed off in a panic.

—

The chilly air around the quiet village of Freezyfrost had Eki's fur stand on end. She bobbed her head while Alex stomped along, each impact on the ground shaking the surrounding area lightly. Already, the Pikachu grew nervous about touching the village itself, given his bulk might destroy buildings if he brushed too close. The Typhlosion stared out at the buildings to make sure her pal got nowhere near them when she spotted something draw near. Little dots, off in the distance, their speeds kicking up snow from behind them. Eki lurched up and poked at Alex's cheek, then gestured onward.

"Some Pokémon are coming." she pointed out, "They might wanna talk with you."

"Oh boy." Alex stretched his arms up, then sighed. He turned his head over, then squinted. "One of them looks like...Livi?"

"Livi?" Eki scratched her head. "Wait, our school bully?"

Alex just shook his head. "It's a long story. I saved her the day this all started, now she's got the hots for me."

A snicker kicked itself out of Eki's throat. "Sounds like a pretty short story to me. Think you can tell who she's with?"

Leaning in, Alex squinted his eyes a bit more. "Well, they're...yellow?"

"Uh-huhhhhhh."

"They got a bit of a belly..."

"Okay, a decent chunk of Pokémon are tubby."

"They got red cheeks and a tail, and I think...they're..." Realization washed over Alex, confusion had washed to uncertainty, then muddled by excitement. "I think that's my dad!"

"Wait, what?!"

Alex's gentle steps and careful tiptoes on the village outskirts had turned into a shocking sprint. Able to cover ground quickly since there was *more* of him, matching the speed of the oncoming speedsters. Xander hadn't gotten a moment to speak at all before he was scooped up beneath his feet, the detective stumbled on the softer, warmer ground. He fell to his hind end and grumbled, with his one eye half open, Eki could observe him carefully.

"You sure this is him...?" she whispered to her friend.

"Awie my achin'..." Xander stood up to his feet, then stretched up. "You gotta be careful when you scoop up an old man like that!"

The glister in Alex's eyes made evident that he had made the connection the moment he saw Xander, now just hearing this geezer talk had him even more convinced. "I knew it!" his smile stretched from cheek to cheek. "You're my dad!"

"L-Look, son-"

Xander was cut off again when Alex hoisted him up onto his shoulder. "You're really him! I knew I'd find you before long, I just never thought I'd find you here!"

"Well, uh..." Eki forced her way in, before she offered a claw down to Xander. "Nice to finally meet my best bud's pops! Name's Eki, I've been Alex's friend for years!"

Just hearing his son's name made Xander do a doubletake, a feeling welling up in him that spoke to the antithesis of the colder climate. He felt like the wind grew hotter, the air warmer, the hairs on his back stood up tall like a bristlebrush. Alex. "Sh...Short for something, no doubt?"

"Yeah." Alex nodded. "When I was still an egg, the blanket I was in had Alexander on it! You and mom picked a good name." The big Pikachu rubbed the back of his head. "Speaking of mom, where is she?"

"I can explain that here in a bit, but-"

An exhausted, exacerbated gasp left Livi when she finally climbed up Alex's hand and rolled onto his palm. One could see her chest thump up and down, like a heart beat comically thumped against her ribs. "Finally...goddup...affer...all that..."

"Oh, that's the other thing I wanted to ask you about." Alex saw the swamped Pachirisu, then turned his attention back to his dad. "How come you know Livi? She's kind of like my childhood bully..."

"I wuz...gunna get ta tha..." she lifted up a paw, then flopped it to her side. "Gimmie like, ten minuss..."

Finally, with a moment to break through, Xander spoke up. "I can explain it if you just, let me, okay?" He watched the eyes of his enormous son stay fixed on him, then his approving nod. Those chins and jowls jiggled triumphantly, and sent wobbly shakes through his shoulder pudge and chest fat. A moment to breathe was all Xander needed. "Son, you really shouldn't be up here. I came up here so I couldn't be found."

A response like that took the Pikachu aback. He blinked and flinched his head backward. "Wh...What?"

"You shouldn't be here." he elaborated. "I'm not upset with you, but you're getting yourself into a lot of trouble just being around me, you hear?"

"Wuhz he...sayin'..." Livi rasped out, a sharp exhale entered her lungs immediately following.

"I uh, I made some bad calls when I was young," Xander continued, "got in with the wrong crowd. Your old man's not just a detective, your old man's a retired fugitive."

"Whoaaa, hold on." Eki stepped forward. "You're just dropping that at our feet the moment you meet your son for the first time?"

Xander shook his head and sighed. "I get it's a lot to plop down, but your old man...I mean, he's hurt others. One of those Pokémon being your mother."

"What?" Alex leaned in, voice washing over Xander in a way that made abundantly clear how dauntingly huge the Pikachu was. "What do you mean you hurt my mom?!"

"We were running for our lives!" Xander threw his hands out. "We...I got too in over my head! Started running from the wrong Pokémon. They found us, and...and...it was between you or her. I, I-"

"Slow down." Eki loomed over the detective. "What's this about him or his mom?"

"She tripped when we were running from some crooks, some who would've stopped at nothing to get what they wanted. I- I had a choice between grabbing her or grabbing you, and..."

"You chose her." Alex finished his father's sentence, chin tilting down in some kind of bizarre shame. Like he had done something to deserve it. "That's a lot to take in, dad."

"That's why I don't want you around here. I don't want you getting involved in my mess."

"I wouldn't wanna be in your footprints, that sounds awful...but, I need to know." The large Pikachu glared at his father, firmly in his eyes. "...Do you regret it at all? The choice you made?"

Through the panicked retelling that only combed through his thoughts, Xander had brought himself back to that moment. Gauze wrapped around his right eye, the wound still fresh. Voices of concern from someone he adored, frantic and panicked over his injury. Shadows loomed in from outside the windows and darkened his abode. Blackness felt like a sharp tinge of red. He couldn't remember the words that left his lips then, just that they were frantic and desperate. The crashing of glass outside, the gathering of only the important items, a black feather that rested upon the countertop. Earthy orange shimmers illuminated the room, a silhouette in the corner. He stomped closer, the last flickers of fire refracted from a crystalline

dome that covered his hat. The harbinger of an end outspread his wings, tail feathers sprung up, ready to attack. He pulled his love out the door and rushed out the city in the dead of night. Pavement turned to dirt, turned to grass, turned to fallen pine needles. The shadow loomed overhead. The paw he gripped to for dear life let go. The only moment of clarity in his head was his darling to the left, and an egg wrapped in a blanket with their names on it to the right just further behind. He reached for his dear, and outstretched his paw to the egg. The stalking shadow that pursued him landed right before him. Even now, his heart contracted and tightened simply remembering the outline. Sharp at the top, round in the middle, sharp at the bottom. He pulled his darling away, one sentence repeating over and over and over and over in his head like a mantra, seared and whipped into his brain like she still shrieked it aloud, shrill, choked, and desperate.

Our baby. Our baby. Our baby...

Muffled from the outside world, nothing could pry him back into focus until Alex snapped his free hand at him. The vibration of wind with the crackle had shaken Xander's mind and gave him a moment to breathe. He could fixate on what was asked of him again. His regret. He raised his shoulders, then looked to the side with shame.

"...I don't know how to answer that."

Seven words that Alex didn't expect to hear. His ears flumped down, brows pursed up and eyelids slightly slanted up toward the middle. How could his father not have an answer? A yes would've been a relief, a no would have come with an explanation, but not knowing entirely? His heart sank. Eki's back sputtered with flames, Livi lurched up from the utter confusion of such a statement. Alex took the answer as a sign.

"...I'll get out of your hair then." he lurched down to gently place Xander back to the ground. "It was nice meeting you dad."

"I..." Xander was about to speak up, before he realized what had been done. He could tell just from his son's tone that his mind was solidified. "...Take care son."

With a slow pull back upright, Alex stomped along and was mindful of the area around him. Just as he towered over him as a pillar of judgment, Alex left Xander in the snow, fading into the whiteout like he'd never been there at all, like a memory that never was. Livi soon rolled her shoulder, eyes locked on the unobservant Pikachu, then bit right down into his arm. Out came a loud, shrill scream from the electric rodent.

"What was THAT for?!"

"Why'd you say all that junk to him?!" Livi pressed. "You know how much he hated not knowing who his dad was?!"

The detective rubbed where the bite mark was left, then glared down at the squirrel before him. "I'm guessing you used that as ammo to bully him," he hissed. "I said what I said. I don't want him getting himself hurt."

"Why?!" Olivia shook the detective lightly. "He's your SON! If he wants to help, let him help!"

Fed up, Xander gripped Livi by her tail and pried her off of him. With a foot-long side swing into the snow, he stood over her with an intense glare. "...He doesn't know Hugo and his goons like I do." The Pachirisu sat in the snow, staring up at the older man in shock. "It was around a month ago. I was dusting off some of my old knick-knacks, when **he** came in..."

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A much more fresh, yet equally searing memory was easy to unravel in Xander's head. He had just opened up for the day, ready to take in requests to dig around in and finish up the scant couple he'd taken on. The door to his office rang out, the chime of the bell ever familiar. He hadn't looked back to his customer yet, still absorbed in cleaning the place just a little bit.

"Welcome on in," he greeted, "I'll be with you in just a—"

His heart tensed. His hairs spiked. The weight of his legs grew heavier and heavier, his good eye fixated on the one thing in the room that shook him to the core. Flickers of a room barely lit by a fireplace came back to his mind, to a shadow that swished over him, to a presence that severed his ties from civilization. All the figure had to do was take a step forward, and Xander was down on the ground scurrying backward. The old man's breath became quick and panicked, he practically dug his claws into the wood flooring beneath him as he scurried backward. Another talon scraped forward, those black thin limbs contrasted with his rounder midnight blue body, accented by red plumage here and there, along with a white tuft of well-kept down. That yellow beak was sharp, though the stare in his red eyes cut like a sword. The words couldn't make it past Xander's rolling tongue, but his guest knew exactly what his intentions were.

"The last time we met, I had hoped to simply smother you with my wings 'til you breathed your last." Despite the threatening remark, the Honchkrow was rather calm. There was a genial kindness to his voice that belied his presence as a looming shadow. "I don't usually let my prey run away..."

"Plea...ple...please..."

"Sh." the bird craned his neck forward, then lifted up his wing to his beak. One claw gently pressed against Xander's mouth, quickly forcing him to shut up or risk skewering his tongue. "You're lucky, Xander. The threat you pose's been diminished." While the Pikachu shook

on his floor, his guest diligently stepped around him toward his prized possessions. "...Ah, sorry. You know my type. I see glimmering, and I can't help but snatch it."

A quick swipe of the locket kicked up dust in the air. Xander's throat tightened when the ghost of his past snapped open the trinket, then dangled it in front of him. There, in two heart frames, were young Pikachus illustrated. One with a notched tail and soft eyes, one with a flat tail and a big grin.

"Your wife's such a pretty woman, isn't she?" mused the avian, clucking his tongue curiously. "Such a shame she isn't with you anymore. I couldn't find her anywhere from the coast to the front entrances. Such a shame to see young couples broken up..." the locket was dropped to the detective's feet, before his tormentor stepped over to the files. "...Keep yourself out of trouble. It'd be a shame if you were upgraded back to enemy number one, ol' Xandy. You know how the boss reacts to big trouble, and, frankly, I'd rather not try and find a good burial site for you in this tundra."

With a gentle tip of his hat, the crow sauntered out with one file, a simple theft that occurred not too long ago Xander had been studying. Once he was gone, the rodent fell to his side. Air, crisp and cold, rushed down his lungs, but his lungs burned. He hadn't dared to take a breath that whole time- it might have been his last.

—

A stern, serious gaze fixed on Xander's face while he recalled the tale in his head. "If you knew what Hugo and his goons are like, you wouldn't get involved, kid. Sometimes you just...have to push others away so they don't get caught up in the collateral." Climbing up from her spot in the snow, Livi dusted off the flecks off her body. She huffed, then stomped her way back into town. Xander sighed, then followed. "Where're you going, kid?"

"Don't call me kid." Olivia insisted, "If this's what running away from my problems is like, then I'm done. I'm gonna tell him I'm ready to get turned in."

The Pikachu paused for a moment, then shook his head. "...Good luck with that."

—

Silence met Alex when he sat down by the icy shores, his eyes fixated on the darkened mid-afternoon skies. Eki quietly leaned her cooled-off back on her friend's chin stack, broken-hearted like him. The shore splashed gently on the tough ice nearby, a calming push and pull that ate away at bits of slushy snow. Beyond the tide, the water was still to the point of a mirror reflection, without a hint of wind to rustle their fur. A sharp inhale, Alex turned his head up to the sky.

“...If you wanna let it out, let it out man.” encouraged Eki, her claw gently pressed onto a safe spot of Alex’s cheek.

“That prophecy’s a load of bologna.” Alex remarked. The sudden quip had Eki taken aback, though those reassuring eyes of Alex seemed to brighten the murky skies around them. “Cuz that’s not who I’m meeting under a tree.”

The Typhlosion couldn’t help but snicker a bit. “Heh...maybe you’re right then. The future’s not all set and stone...but, seriously-”

“I’ll be okay.” Alex promised. “One blow after another isn’t gonna break me. It’s just a root to stumble on. You just gotta pull back up.”

“It’s okay to fall down on your face, man. You don’t gotta act tough for me.”

That last comment made Alex smile a little, before he turned his head back to the skies. “...If you hear me cry, then you can console me. Besides, I already got a dad at home.”

“One who’d be proud of you no matter what you chose.”

“Yeah...” Alex took a moment of repose. “I’ll be normal again someday soon. Hopping on stools and jumping on shoulders. I might be on your shoulder soon, too.”

“What, think you can just hitch a ride for free?” Eki pat Alex on the chin stack. “This shoulder’s got a fee, y’know.”

“Oh yeah? What’s the fare, ferrywoman?”

Eki crossed her arms to give it some thought, then blushed a little. “...You keep the belly.”

“Pff...” Alex was caught off guard for sure, evident by the pink that flushed around his electric sacs. “You like the belly?”

“I mean!” she cleared her throat briefly, “It’s, it’s cute...”

“Maybe if I had a way to switch from fat to thin.” he compromised. “...being big’s got its advantages. I’m always warm. Though I thought I’d get super hungry...”

“Guess it’s got something to do with all that Dynamax energy?”

“Maybe.”

“A-leeeeeeeex!” A sudden voice called out behind the two. The Pikachu craned his head back to see Olivia stood determined, eyes pointed right up to his. She threw her paws out, then

took a breath. "That pathetic pleb you woulda called a dad convinced me I should stop running from my problems. I'm willing to turn myself in, and whatever bounty is on my head...I want it specifically given to the others in the Crooks Inn, room number seven. You leave them out of this arrest."

An awkward beat of silence was exchanged between Eki and Alex, both of them shared glances. "Is she actually a criminal?" wondered the fire badger.

"Er..." Alex rubbed the back of his head. "Well, I might have forgotten to report her and her friends to the guild?"

"What'd she even do?"

"She tried trapping me in a cave and fed me a cake made by the Sweet Sisters."

"You mean those weirdos who rob Pokémon and turn them into blobs?"

"Yeah. They tried telling me that they didn't know who they were, but like... who gets a rubber cage from outta thin air?"

Eki blinked, her brow furrowed from bewilderment. After she craned her head up, she stepped closer to the edge of Alex's shoulder. "Hey, Liv!" she hollered out. "You regret what you did?"

A bit surprised, Olivia gently lowered her paws. "I mean...yeah. I never thought anyone would try and save my life like that, and when I realized it was Alex, that gave me a wakeup call of, y'know...how much of a brat I-"

"Not that." Eki waved her claw. "Trapping my friend in a rubber cage and stuffing his face."

"Oh." Livi recoiled a bit. "Yeah that was uncalled for on our part..."

"Alright." Eki nodded. "Scram."

"...Eh?"

"I'm telling you you're no longer considered a criminal threat, you or your crew."

There was a brief beat before the Pachirisu could understand what it was Eki said. She started to stomp in the snow, her serious scowl had turned into a bright smile. "YOU MEAN IT?!"

Alex pressed his paws together. "You guys should get back home, we got a lot of stuff we have to do."

“THANKYOUTHANKYOUTHATHA-” she started to jump up and down in joy, before a sudden realization paused her right where she hopped. “...Eh, um, wait. I was kinda hoping to use the ransom money we had to have them start their lives over. We’re um...flat broke.”

Down came the Pachirisu from the air, while Eki shook her head. She dug her paws under Alex’s chin flab, which startled the ‘chu just a tad. Out came a small bag of coins, not all of what they earned, but a small sum. Eki under-hand tossed the bag down Alex’s girth, bouncing off his belly and landing a good several feet away from Livi, where it careened down into the snow with a klunk. “That’ll cover you.”

Livi’s eyes sparkled, before she nodded and swooped the bag into her possession. “Y-You guys are way too nice! I- I still haven’t proven I can be a better Pokémon!”

“Well...” Alex smiled down at her. “Prove it by putting what you have left to good use.”

“You bet I will!” the Pachirisu promised. “You’re gonna be the most famous Pikachu ever recorded in history!”

She skipped and hopped away in the snow, her little comment confused Alex enough to cup his paws together and holler back. “NOT LIKE THAT!” No response, she might’ve just been stuck in her own little world. “Hah...man, she’s strange.”

“Not every day your bully falls for you.” Eki snickered.

Both friends were shaken when the ice and seas around them began to quake. A red pulse of energy flickered in the deep blue, tinging the waters magenta and bright purple briefly. Alex jumped to his feet, prepped for what might lurch out from the deep blue below. The first thing he saw were two curly ears and a large horn, both a bright sea blue, eyes of a bright baby blue, followed by a pale yellow mouth curled into a smile. Towering rolls of long neck pulled themselves from the depths, which covered a ship-like shell on its back. Alex’s guard was lowered when the beast did not immediately attack, and soon pacified further when he saw the Pokémon’s right flipper. There fastened to its limb was a large looplet, with the Dynamax symbol glowed in the middle.

“I presume you’re here to cross the sea?” His voice was deep and relaxing, like a lullaby for all. Around him, thin bars of ice bent and contorted like sheet music, giant icicles and snow flakes carried along like notes.

“Y...Yeah.” Alex hesitantly answered. “Sorry, just rare I don’t have to fight a Pokémon with the Gigantamax gene.”

“My looplet keeps me from undergoing the effects of overexposure to the Dynamax phenomenon.” insisted the ferryman, droplets of water freezing on contact to his soft abundance of flesh. “I am Auria, a Lapras who lets Pokémon ride from one continent to another.”

“We got one place to go.” Eki insisted. “Can you take us to the northernmost piece of land?”

“You want to go to the fabled stronghold of one of the Urshifu brothers, do you not?” Auria pieced together. “I can take you there. It may not be a guild sanctioned trip, but I have been quite curious as to go there myself, and the good prince of the oceanbed has often insisted on exploring its scape.” He swished around and offered his back to the two. “Please, hop on. It may not be comfortable for someone of your size, but I assure you, your weight is something I can handle.”

Carefully, Alex stepped off of the shore and sat on the back of such a ginormous Lapras. His massive rear end was pushed between the three bumps of the massive shell, a little uncomfortable, but it was something he could handle for the time being. The massive courier seemed unbothered by such a hefty rodent, though then again, he was also pretty rotund, fittingly shaped like a glacier in that a vast sum of his girth glided under the surface of the water. With a gentle nod, the vessel began to venture off. Alex had one glance back to the land, then smiled. One step closer to losing his form, but he could at least use the down time to enjoy the ride.

—

It shouldn't have sat in his mind for as long as it did. Livi just pulled herself up from the snow effortlessly, then chased responsibilities. To Xander, he wondered if the youth of his adult son's generation was just raised with more opportunities. He sat alone in his office, the sunlight lurched closer to the other side of town. His coffee had gone cold, his cases remained empty and defiled. He took a sharp breath and slouched back in his chair, mind racing with oodles of possibilities. Eyes were on him, he knew that getting involved might just cause more trouble than it's worth. Then again, if he didn't at least try then more Pokémon might get hurt. He thought back to when he first got the scar, what his immediate gut reaction was to do. No. Alex's generation wasn't raised any better than his, they were raised the exact same. They were raised to do right.

“...I'm gonna live to regret this.” he grumbled, then pulled out a sheet of paper to write down on.

Around the edge of mid-afternoon and evening, the detective finished his parchment and rushed out his door, sure to flip the 'CLOSED' sign on the way out. He casually walked by the excited and relieved Team SIMP, busy buying supplies for their trip back to the city. He took a glance at Olivia, who paid him no mind. Heck, it didn't even seem like she noticed him. He tipped her his hat anyways and went on his way. Down the corner was the Cafe Connection that

the Abra who visited his office told him to meet up if he changed his mind. It was sparsely populated, Mama Kangaskhan worked on an espresso for another customer while the Abra drank diligently from his cup. Surprised, he turned his head over to Xander.

“You actually changed your mind, detective?” he questioned.

“Yeah.” Xander nods, then lifts up the letter. “One condition! You gotta drop this by the post office. It’s going to Frigid Freshet Coastline in Megala.”

“Pretty similar town to this one.” the Abra nodded. “Alright, Trampler should be starting his rounds there soon enough. I’ll have this in his hands soon enough.” He got out of his chair and levitated in the air, legs and arms stretched outward. “Glad you came by when you did, I was about to head back.”

The detective stepped up to the little yellow psychic, then offered his paw to him. Both held hands, then in a flash of purple and blue light, they disappeared from the Cafe. The only evidence Abra was there was his bill, the Poké he left to pay plus a tip, and the half-finished cup of coffee. Sat just a few chairs away, leaned over the counter in a dark black coat, one could see the muzzle of a Pokémon peak through the hood. Pointy red claws came from the sleeves, balled up into a fist that knocked on the counter table.

“Check, please.”

Her voice was hoarse, scratchy, and deep. One could see a slight flash of blue beneath the hood if they peered past the gray muzzle. Beside the figure was an empty cappuccino and a small, cleaned off plate. Trace one’s eyes up their cloak, and they’d find a shiny, black button, with the swooping Dark-type sigil painted right on.

—

The moon arched up into the sky above, the grand blue sea now a dark blue. The only form of illumination was Alex’s tail, which bounced light about the measures of ice and snowflakes that balleted slowly around Auria. The ride along had been calm and quiet, up until the starry skies above them had become consumed. Glares of magentas and teal greens started to flare in the sky diligently, the black blues now contrasted by brightness untold. Both members of Team Macro couldn’t help but affix their gaze upward, the rupture of light creeping about the sky in a methodical, ethereal manner. To them, it seemed like the sky had ripped apart and hummed with an untold depth of millions of humming stars. Taken aback, Auria let his eyes wander about the ocean, which danced much like the brightness above.

“Ah, I hadn’t expected the northern lights this time of year,” he calmly remarked. “This usually only happens in the winter time.”

“It’s so beautiful...!” Alex gawked, “We don’t get something like this in Pricklepine...!”

Auria chuckled lightly. "Pricklepine is a little too far south. From Polarpoint Icelands to the iceland we're on course to, these auroras glow bright. You know, it's because of them that we derive the name of the move 'Aurora Beam' from."

"We've got to tell Vale and Felicity about this when we get back..." Eki reached her claw up to the skies. "I bet they'd be so jealous!"

"Hmph~ Here I am, trying to be a teacher again." chuckled Auria. "It's like I never left the classroom..."

"Eh?" Alex leaned over. "What do you mean?"

"In my heyday, I was a professor. Ever heard of a town called Hueshif?"

Eki hummed to herself thanks to her captain's query. "Nope, doesn't ring a bell..."

"Then you must not have ever been to Vivilid." Auria concluded. "Hueshif is a wonderful town, with quite a large academy. It holds quite a number of would-be explorers and their would-be guildmasters. Perhaps you should enroll someday!"

"Maybe we will." Alex considered, "So, you know about these auroras? Well, what causes them?"

Auria grinned from ear to ear, then kept his gaze straight forward. "My boy, I thought you'd never ask."

The team listened patiently to their captain and impromptu instructor, while the northern lights danced above their heads. The sea might be cold, and the air might be chilly, but the inquisitive mind that piloted them around kept the two invested in such a wondrous topic! They'd listen on and on, all the while, their journey continued northbound.