

In the frosty, snow-coated tips of Coldcoal Mountain, a partially frozen river stretched and cut through the rocks and slithered its way further down. It pulled its way close to a settlement, part of it breaking off slightly to form its own natural lake in a deposit. That lake stood still, snow-painted pine trees making up its barrier from the outside world. Still, tranquil, silent, even for the strange rock formation that made up the center of the eighth-note carved lake. The town that rested a few rocks below it, however, had a bit more life to it. Pokémon of various kinds all strewed up decorations, a day of festivities well underway. Gligar took to pulling banners from one end of buildings to another, Chansey and Lopunny hung paper lamps about, Tangrowth finished last minute preparations on parade floats, while Mamoswine patrolled routes once more for good measure. Oshawott and Dewott brought down logs from pine, nearby Machoke and Machop covered in black soot stains drank and shared lively stories. All across these rustic, snow covered homes, a larger center seemed the busiest. Outside a massive building, a Furret with a top hat and a red bow aided other volunteers in wrapping pine-covered decorations across the looming lumber that held the front of town hall together. A Weavile sat on the steps nearby, her glasses flashing in the lantern light nearby, the cloudy overhead perfect to help the town sparkle and shine.

“Remember that your speech is in ten minutes, Mr. Mayor.” The Weavile flipped the pages of the note book with a flick of her wrist, careful to bring her glasses up with the tip of the palm of her claw. “After that’s the parade proper. Slide in a break for dinner, then you-”

“Sorry to cut you off...” that official looking Furret grunted as he pulled up a heavy decoration with his back, “You remembered to give the workers down at the mines their holiday notice, right?”

Further in the distance, cackling, soot stained Pokémon yucked it up with drinks in their hands, some still having their glossy yellow helmets on. “Yup.”

“Thanks Rona...!” A last huff helped pull the wooden facade up into place.

Admiring their handiwork, other Pokémon clapped at their grand efforts. Hung on a wooden wedge, the craftsmanship of woodworkers was up on display for all to see. Painted facades representing the mountains the town rested within, a wooden panel of a boxy, spruce-crate minecart stacked with coal as the centerpoint of the image. The Mayor hummed for a bit, before he snapped his paws.

“I know what’s missing!” he called out, then dashed behind the wooden portraits. Slowly and steadily, he rose up one last decoration into place. “Aaaand there!”

He zipped out to admire his handiwork. In place of where the sun would be, an oddly ghastly face rested defiantly among the less saturated whites, grays, browns and blacks. An orange beak, a green set of leaves, and a teal top, all striped with streaks of white...

...a mask ever familiar to that of Kannabi.

The silent Ogerpon contemplated her main heroic persona while Team Shonen led the way. Aspen couldn't hold back a hearty chuckle, his knuckles gently brushing the top of Sylv's ear.

"That is NOT true! I never went to Sweeton in my life!" he playfully refuted.

Sylvester couldn't help but giggle, Amie snorting with laughter right beside him. "A belly like that doesn't come from poor metabolism~" he teased, poking Aspen's tum and watching his paw sink in, "Cherry's as thin as a rail, and all she does is sleep!"

"Has to come from somewhere!" Amie piled on, "So why not the glutton capital of the whole world?"

Aspen grinned, then crossed his arms. "I can think of at LEAST two other places that fit that description! How about that Snorlax bigger than all of Dyneuria halfway across the world?"

"You mean there's a Pokémon the size of a continent...?" Kannabi stepped in on the conversation.

"There's two island sized Pokémon on this side of the world." Rory lifted up his claws for emphasis. "There's two continent Pokémon just outside of our region of the world, even if you can't see them on account of the world curving."

Sylvester turned to look back at Kannabi. "There's probably a lot larger Pokémon just beyond them, but we're all kind of locked in our own regions."

"Regions...?"

Aspen slowed down to reconvene with Kannabi. His ankle seemed mostly better, considering the mix of Kampo and cautiously treading off it the best he could. "Yeah. Dyneuria's pretty big, but it's not really a 'full' continent, you get me? All of Rainbow Ridge is what we call a region, from the polar ice floats in the north and south, to Sweeton Isle in the far west, and Megala in the far east."

"Of course, he learned that from yours truly." Sylv bragged. "Aspen was never good at geography. Give him a map, and he'll flip it upside down~"

Amie wrapped her meaty arm around Aspen to pull him into a squishy, soft hug. "Never seen a dork so sweet though!"

Kannabi smiled lightly, nodding with Amie's words. "Aspen is really kind, that much is true! I wish that..."

Everyone paused to let Kannabi finish her statement, though the words never came out. They lodged themselves in her throat hidden by her chubby cheeks. Her mouth was left agape and silence was its only release. The group's staring finally made her close her mouth and bring her starry gaze to the village down below.

"...We're here." Rory broke the silence.

"Woo, Rhythm Town!" Aspen pumped his fists. "Look at that, they're holding some kinda party!"

Sylv squinted at the decorations, all the paper lamps and painted wooden signs making for an inviting place to stay for the day. "I think they're having their Miner's Festival today."

"Really?" Amie grinned. "Aw man, I've heard but I never went! They say they've got these really tasty pastries they bake 'til they're black on the outside, but the inside's got this like jelly that boils inside!"

"That sounds...unappetising." Rory cringed.

"That sounds great!" Aspen grinned. "Race you guys down!"

The Gallade took off first, belly plapping against his thighs, with the Gardevoir and Meowstic not too far away from him. Rory looked back to see Kannabi lagging behind, before he stepped in front of her. Kannabi's belly pressed against the Zangoose's, who gestured her gently along. The two quiet types walked their way down to Rhythm Town while the others rushed along, blending into the crowd quickly. Aspen and Amie were quick to stop by a food stand to grab a pastry, Sylv quietly observed the sightline of Pokémon, Rory kept moving forward, yet Kannabi stopped in her tracks. So many Pokémon there, all of them shared levels of excitement she'd only seen in days of old. Young ones laughed and chased one another, adults walked side by side and conversed among themselves, some shared snacks with friends. One peculiar observation made the Ogerpon stare for even longer, amazed by the similarities. A small Ferfetch'd ran around with a crude stick, swinging it around without a care in the world, and affixed to their face was a mask vastly similar to Kannabi's teal mask, the one she used to express her heroism. A crude *CRUNCH* pulled her focus away just for a moment.

"Looks kinda like yours, huh?" Aspen remarked, "You know this place well, Kannabi?"

"It's...been a long time." she sheepishly admitted. "They remember me when I was their hero, if anyone remembers me at all."

Sylv turned his ear to the conversation. "...Pokémon don't typically live to be as old as you. Whatever drew you out of the village may have come to pass."

"Mizuchi seems to be the only one." Aspen took another bite from the pastry he bought, the crispy crunch and flakiness of the bread making for quite the collection of crumbs. "...If I remember right, you said they banished you. Then new guys took over, is that it?"

Kannabi shivered at the recollection. "The Loyal Three..." she grimaced. "A trifecta of Pokémon. They were con artists, only looking out for their master."

"Musta not lasted long." Aspen joked. "Otherwise they'd have festivals of them, not you."

"I think you should get acquainted with the locals. History is written by the winners, after all, and those Loyal Three are nowhere in sight." Sylv cajoled Kannabi while patting her soft side.

The Ogerpon glanced down to her teal mask, apprehensive at first to put it on. Her eyes met Aspen's, whom by that point had wrapped the rest of his pastry and brought it down. "...You don't need my permission to put your mask on."

"But, y-you said I needed to come out of my shell."

Lacking a metaphor, Aspen thought to himself for a moment, then pulled out the little marble he kept to himself at all times. "Think of your masks like Mega Evolution. Using it responsibly won't hurt you in the long run, right? But when you let that power consume you, let it take you over...are you really you at that point?"

"I...think I see what you mean?" Kannabi shook her head, then nodded. "No, I know what you mean. Just don't use my masks to hide the real me."

"Tactical positioning!" Aspen grinned. "How about we meet up with you later? I've got somewhere to be myself, so let's all meet up at the Rockin' Lock here, unlock some treasures, find some place to turn in for the night."

"Where might you be heading off to?" inquired Sylv, with his paws on his hips.

Aspen put a finger to his lip with a smirk. "Secret~"

Sighing, the Meowstic knew not to prod further. "Alright, but stay out of trouble, you hear me?"

Aspen chuckled as he walked away. "Trouble's practically my middle name!"

"Which is why I'm always concerned..." Sylvester sighed, before he turned to Kannabi. "How about I come with you? Friends make social events a lot less scary."

"You'd...consider me a friend?" Kannabi beamed, then excitedly jumped up and down, shaking the ground around her. "Oh boy oh boy!"

Sylv hollered while he lost his balance, pulling himself to Kannabi's side just to stand up right. She pulled her mask over her face quickly, temporarily dropping her lack of confidence and abundance of nervousness. Biei would take over, just for a little while at the very least. Her poncho mit grabbed hold of Sylvester's paw, then pulled him along the town. "Come along, we've got no time to waste!" she called out, her meek tone shifted to a boisterous attitude.

A festival like this was bound to be packed with plenty of enriching activities to participate in. Large slides made of smooth material to tumble down, rings to toss onto empty Moomoo Milk bottles, riding in a sturdy wooden ferris wheel powered by energetic electric types... This festival made Rhythm Town feel enormous! Merry-go-rounds, food stalls, gift stands with little coal pieces, it was a dream Biei got to zip through. Poor Sylv's fur grew more disheveled the more the hero jerked him around from spot to spot, Pokémon to Pokémon, it was chaos. Occasionally he'd spot Rory or Amie, all of whom seem to be let in on the plan to meet up at a typical vendor's locale, then he'd get yoinked away to another spot. Eventually, Sylv was pulled to a daunting part of the festival, set just outside of the town's limits yet still populated by the festival goers. Temporarily built into the mountain, a cross-section of wood planks held up a wide minecart track, made to spin and spur around the open caves at this section of the mountain. Something like that looked rickety to the anxious feline, but to the oger? It seemed like the perfect opportunity to try something new. The *ker-chunk-a-chunk-a-chunk* of the chains pulling the minecart along, the hollers and happy faces on the occupants...from a chipper Pangoro to a Sylveon whose butt engulfed most of his side of the ride, this was a level of fun Biei *had* to experience.

"I-I think we should get back to town..." Sylv dismayed, "I think there's more fun things to do there, and-"

"And say no to a challenge?" Biei scooped Sylv in her arms, his butt firmly pressed into her arm fat. "A hero never says no to a challenge!"

Regret for his life choices crossed Sylvester's mind when he was stuffed into a minecart and fastened, overflowing the seat with his rear end and given a helmet for immersion...and maybe even his safety. The *ker-chink* of the gears in the tracks pulled the vehicles up a steep incline, Biei wiggling in her cart with excitement, somehow her force wasn't enough to budge it even slightly off course. Her friend would be given the front row seats to the growing tension of hearing the metal *chunk-ker-chunk-ker-chunk* underneath him, the wood *grroooan* following, the wind *browwwwwwl* in his ears...then it all came crashing down when his cart was shot down the incline. He could hear Kannabi break through her character and squee the whole way down, somehow over his wailing and crying. His fur spiked behind him, ears flapping and distorting sounds all around him. Light snow flickers pricked his face, his hollers lost to the winds.

Rory and Amie leaned over a railing overlooking the rollercoaster, on normal days this balcony on the southern exit of town overlooked snow topped pines and footprints dotted in the ground. Amie finished off her last of the seared pastry treats, pleasantly surprised with its quality. Rory flipped a yo-yo he won from a prize counter around in the air. His gaze was intense, nothing could break his concentration. His circular pupils swayed with the circular toy in his claws.

“Never knew you could yo-yo!” Amie gleamed. “Who taught you?”

“Self-taught.” Rory informed her, “Back home I taught other Pokémon for 50 Poké. It was a pretty good business.”

Digging in her apron, Amie produced a small handful of coins. “I got just about that. Think we can do an impromptu lesson?”

Finally, Rory retracted the yo-yo’s string back to whence it came, curling the toy into his palm. “...Maybe when we get back home.”

“Heh. Sweet.” Amie slipped her money back in her pocket and leaned forward. “So, how’s this place compared to home?”

The Zangoose shrugged a bit, then stepped back beside the wall of fat. “...It’s okay. Not used to the cold, to be honest.”

“Megala’s pretty warm in places, so I get that.” Amie chirped. “It’s only cold in like, what, ONE section?”

“I’ve never been outside of Whisperwoods until we became a team.” Rory casually admitted. “I wouldn’t know much of Megala outside of my hometown.”

“Phew.” Amie scratched the underside of her chin. “You say that, yet now you’ve climbed up and down Dyneuria. Any places you haven’t been yet?”

“None of the east coast deserts. You?”

“Never been there, either. I’d burn up probably, since I’m thicker than my dad is.”

“...You’re really the daughter of a Snorlax?”

“Is it really THAT hard to believe?”

“It’s just rare that Pokémon can...’make it’, outside their Egg Group is all...”

“Mm yeah?” Amie turned over to look down at Rory. “How would you know?”

Rory looked up to the clouds in the sky. "Mom and pop tried conceiving for years. I was the only one they ever had. When I hatched, my dad nearly fainted."

Reading the room, Amie lowered her snark. "Well, I assume you've got your dad's eyes? C'mon, what is he?"

"...A Wigglytuff." Rory sighed.

"Yup, that checks out." Amie ruffled Rory's head. "Soft voice, big eyes, still taking damage against being poisoned...you're a Wigglytuff's son alright. That's a cool thing though! Wonder how different I'd be if I was the daughter of a Wigglytuff...y'think I'd be a balloon instead of fat?"

"If you're anything like me," Rory slowly unrolled his yo-yo to entrance himself once more, "you'd be able to hold your breath for a really, really long time."

Smirking, Amie pulled her attention back to the sights beyond the rails. She knew the signs when Rory wanted to shut down, so she allowed him some brevity. That same brevity wasn't blessed to poor Sylv, who stumbled out of the minecart for a few steps, then fell ass-back onto the rock path beneath him. He was profusely whiplashed, dazed at the eyes, and unable to form a sentence. On the other hand, Biei hopped right out and hollered to the skies, adrenaline coursing through her.

"That was spectacular!" she praised, hoisting up her Meowstic friend back to his feet. "C'mon, let's go again!"

"NHOH-" Sylv slurred out, his claws dug firmly into a tree limb that hung above his head. Now that his body worked for its normal equilibrium, he could at least think straight. Talking straight would take some harsh breaths. "I mean...don't you want to go back up into town? I hear they have a costume contest for the best Ogerpon costume..."

The thought of seeing all the pleasant outfits that others made with her in mind sent Kannabi's brain buzzing. Of course then, Biei had to express this in the most heroic way possible. "An Ogerpon costume contest?! Well, what are we waiting for?!"

She pulled the Meowstic along for another journey back up into the main stretches of town. The branch Sylv desperately clung onto SNAPPED from the force a speeding Ogerpon produced. A part of him wondered if maybe she should have put on a more relaxed face...

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Winding up a secluded, silent spot in Rhythm Town, a cobbled staircase led Aspen away from the lights and games of the excited coal festival below. He climbed up to a sore thumb in

the scenic town's assortment of cozy old buildings; a boxy, wide building with an iron door, bolted together by means unknown to him. On the rooftop, what would have been a nice colorful tiling was replaced by obsidian glass, streaked with white stripes and iron framing. What hid this hideousness was something equally as hideous; the shape of a head. This structure had a wooden, painted sign affixed to the front in defiance of style and taste, a bright purple face, a beehive head, needles out the top and sides, and blinding blue eyes with an equally bright smile. Aspen had only been to this abode once before, but it was hard to miss a sore thumb such as this. He clacked his knuckles on the barrier between him and the interior, the thunking echoing within. A slit slid open at his eye level, illuminated eyes glanced out toward him.

"Password please." A tone befitting that of a smug, arrogant, pint-sized know-it-all rung out. Something slightly nasally, a tad immature, though even in just two simple words, it was evident there was a peculiar reverb to his voice.

"How about 'I'm-the-guy-that-saved-your-life', all one word." Aspen sassed back, leaning down to look through the peep-slit.

The figure behind blinked, then nervously giggled. "A-Aspen, I uh, wasn't expecting you..." the slit shut swiftly, then the iron door rumbled when it opened inward. Wisps of smoke poured out of the home, mysterious cyan lights breaking through the haze. "C'mon in! You and your friends enjoying the festival or somethin'?"

"Nah, it's only them." Aspen answered honestly, then sauntered inside.

What Aspen walked into was not a home, nor did it feel like something from his world. He stepped into a bizarre structure of metal. Sturdy sheets of metal lined the flooring and climbed up the walls, bizarre boxes of glowing lights spitting out foreign characters on mystical panels dotted around. Tubes of pure glass sat snugly in corners, oval tables contained items foreign to history and the culture at large. Steam shot out from various parts of the establishment, through grates along metal tubes that curled in and out of the ground. When the Gallade first came here, he was bewildered beyond belief. He still felt overwhelmed by the onslaught of stimuli, that there was never a second where something wasn't bleeping, blooping, or hissing profusely. All of this was home to that strange magenta and purple figure, the one with a long, thick tail, needle-protrusions out the top of his head, and a yellow tie that hung over his belly.

"That's a shame, I hear it's a lot of fun! Never been to the festival myself, always too busy to ever participate. But, then again, if I *do* show up, Mayor Furret'll probably think I'm up to some kind of mischief like usual. I only turned him into a mound of fat ONE time, and he will NEVER let me live it down, even after I fixed him! Mostly." the short Pokémon jabbered while he zipped around his lab, switching on levers in the process. "Uhhh, anyway! What brings ya all the way up here?"

Aspen put his hands on his hips. "I think you owe me that favor."

“...Yes, the ‘You saved my life’ cash in.” the Poipole pressed his hands together. “To what do I owe you the pleasure of doing?”

“A smart guy like you could probably whip up something real strong, can’t you?” cajoled Aspen, “Something that’ll leave your name in our world’s history books. Something that only a few really talented Pokémon can do?”

“I...don’t like where this is going already.” Miasma shivered.

Cutting to the chase, Aspen stepped up. “I want you to make me a looplet capable of Mega Evolution.”

The whirs of machinery took over for a beat, Miasma wincing at the suggestion. “Couldja maybe ask me to do something more in my realm of possibilities?”

Aspen pinched the bridge of his nose, or at least, where it would be. “Come on, M’asma...”

“Hey, I’d love to make you something.” the Poipole insisted, “Don’t get me wrong, I love the idea of making trinkets you can find in this world! But I can’t. This world’s method of Mega Energy requires a lot of fine tuning and specific mapping to replicate out of nothing. There’s *some* Mega Stones I can replicate!” he swished over to a shelf and dug out a little marble, an off-gray border engulfed a blue and black center. “This Glalitite was made in five days using a very sophisticated process, and works with fifty-eight-percent efficiency. But that’s the thing. Your world is stuck in the stone ages... or, I dunno, pre-industrial? Not the point. Making lab-grown Mega Stones on their own is hard enough, but a whole looplet? I’d need to actually find the source of Mega Energy in order to do so. Mega Energy needs a cataclysmic event in order to fully form, so the fact you guys have sparse bits alone should be a miracle!”

“Drop...the whole smart talk for a moment.” Aspen grumbled, rubbing his head in befuddlement. “Just give it to me straight.”

“Gosh, how do I say it...” Miasma sighed. “You guys are running on limited Mega Energy. There’s only one continent where Mega Evolution is even somewhat common, but I don’t think there’s enough Mega Energy to go around to make you a looplet. Something earth shaking would have to happen if we’re gonna be able to make you something to control your evolution, but, until then...”

Disappointed, Aspen slung his shoulders forward. “I’m stuck hoping I don’t go feral if I ever have to Mega Evolve?”

“It’s not so bad.” Miasma floated over to the Gallade, giving him a consoling pat on the tummy. “Your world at least has the *option* of Mega Evolution. Even if it comes with its own risks!

In some universes I've been in, you need a Keystone to even think about Mega Evolving. Then again, there was that *one* incident further out where some Pokémon underwent Mega Evolution through spontaneous encounters with their own type of Mega Energy..."

"Look, sorry to bother." Aspen waved off, walking over to a lever. "I'll see myself out."

Miasma's eyes illuminated brighter when he saw where Aspen's hand reached to, a lever with a label written in a language his guest couldn't understand. "NO, NOT THAT-"

Ker-chik!

It was too late to stop Aspen. The blue lights around the two suddenly turned red, a tinny, droning, aggravating sound blared overhead. The door bolted shut, the little floating Pokémon zipped back to his computer quickly to try and undo the damage. More sigils flashed on that massive, glowing machine that whirred loudly. The Gallade turned his back to the wall to look up to the glass lanterns that flashed above, his face illuminated further in flashing red spectacle. He was quick to try and pull the door open, but no dice.

"What did you do?!" Aspen called out. "Y'coulda just said no and been done with it man!"

"I was trying to tell you not to pull that lever!" Miasma yelled, "That lever is only there for emergencies, in case I need to get out of here quick!"

A sudden coldness took over the room, a harsh winter breeze that not even the outside could claw into someone. Aspen's eyes shifted upward to see white cracks form into the ceiling, cracks that defied the very light they were in. They split apart the air itself, pulling it inside to further increase its size. The cracks soon took shape; a circle with rings and striped lines that pulled out of it, carrying with it a blue, purple, and cyan tinge. The suction grew stronger, and rattled unbolted objects inside the laboratory. The little Miasma clutched his sigil-engraving slab, while Aspen grasped onto the lever that started this mess.

"Ghh...Aspen, you...might...want to grab something...that's a little more-"

The Gallade bellowed, getting pulled up into the ceiling once the lever snapped right off. He tumbled out of sight, so quickly that Miasma couldn't even offer him his tail to grab in time. The Poipole did his best to at least contain the massive rift, something he was barely able to do by inputting a code. The repetitive cries of machines ceased, the red flashes tinged an unstable yellow, his machine in front of him groaned and beeped while displaying various errors. Miasma knew this was trouble, trouble he couldn't solve alone...

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Crowds of Pokémon gathered around the podium at the edge of town hall, many buzzing with excitement over the Ogerpon outfits in the crowd. Biei and Sylv slipped in anticipation of the

show, others ogling her appearance and whispering among each other. The Mayor behind the potemkin facade of mountains did last minute fixes of his appearance. He didn't need much, just a brushing and a straightening of his bow. The Weavile secretary dutifully held a mirror up and took occasional glances from behind the portraits.

"Should be ready to go." The Mayor nodded.

With a sigh, Rona put the mirror back into a satchel. "Good, cuz I think they're growing impatient."

"Let's soothe that audience, then!" cheered the Mayor, who trotted out to the front.

Once eyes were on him, Pokémon in the audience took turns hooting and clapping together. Burly miners, gourmet rock connoisseurs, travelers and native townsfolk alike, all clapped in approval of the mayor's arrival. The positivity was so infectious that Sylv found himself joining along, Biei belting a whistle beneath her mask. Six costumed Ogerpon stood at the front, having been hand selected prior to come up on stage. The Mayor took the podium set up for him and cleared his throat; it was going to be a big ask to reach out to everybody of all walks of life in the audience, so his speech would have to be pretty darn good..

"Welcome one and all!" he announced to the crowd, "I certainly hope you're all having a wonderful time at the Rhythm Town Mountaineer Festival! To previous attendees, I hope we've been living up to your expectations. To newcomers, I hope you're all enjoying yourselves so far!" The mayor clasped his paws together, keeping his optimistic smile. "Our Mountaineer Festival celebrates two things; one, the mining of our coal and how it's become a delicacy not just on this continent, but in all of Rainbow Ridge! Two? Well, admittedly, this tradition goes far, far back." The Mayor gestured up to the large, teal mask above his head. "The celebration of Coldcoal Mountain's most historical protector, the one and only Ogerpon!"

Biei jumped up in place with glee, Sylv meanwhile getting the brunt of a wobble. "They recognize me as a hero...!" Biei tried her best to keep her excitement down, but what should have been a whisper was a joyous squeal.

"This marks our one-hundred-ninetieth celebration of the Mountaineer Festival," added the mayor, "and while I expect it to be the same as it ever was, following this tradition helps bring us all together! Young, old, hard working and hardly working! Rhythm Town is your safe haven, to all of you."

The crowd erupted in light applause, the Mayor continuing on with his speech while attention was retained on him. Something crossed Sylv's mind, his attention turned back to Biei. "Now that he mentioned it, how...old are you, Kanna-...sorry, Biei?"

"Three-hundred-fifty-seven!" Biei bragged, "Soon to be a year older once spring time comes along."

"Th...wow." Sylv felt stunned to his core. "You might be older than this whole village!"

"I was here to see it get built!" Biei chirped. "Back then it didn't have mayors, it had village leaders! You should've seen it, it's so much different from what it's like now."

"Do you miss the old Rhythm Town?"

"Only the Pokémon that lived in it." Biei glanced over to Sylv. The sobering solemnity was detectable even through the mask. "You can replace buildings and their meanings, but not the lives of those from back in the day."

"I think I see another eager volunteer in the audience!" The Mayor called out, breaking Sylv and Biei's concentration. "Could the Pokémon in the fifth row of the crowd come up on stage?"

Parting the sea of Pokémon in the crowd, the split stopped with Biei in the middle. Sylv gently stepped out of the way, paws pressed together. He gestured to the girl to go up on stage. Maybe it was the excited part of her persona, perhaps it was the eagerness deep down to at least try to open up more, but Biei's peets *tapped* against the ground, and her thighs *spapped* together with each excited step. She rushed past five other Pokémon, all in varying levels of Ogerpon costumes. Ponchos made of cloth, masks carved from wood or plaster, paint that went from faded to overly saturated. Plump, thin, tall and short, these were the best five that Rhythm Town picked from. She adored their imitation, but already in her heart, it'd feel wrong competing. She took a sudden turn up on stage, the Kannabi behind the mask dictating what to do. Surprised, the Mayor lowered his tail and tilted his head.

"Oh! You should wait your turn." he suggested, "We'll have you up here last for everyone to-"

"I appreciate it, mister Mayor, but I can't in good conscience participate." Biei fully admitted.

The crowd murmured with confusion, the Mayor raising an eyebrow. "Oh? Well, how come?"

"Because..."

This was it. Biei swiveled right beside the mayor and reached up to her mask. Already, in her head, she was **flooding** with thoughts. Whether this was the right thing to do, if she should reveal her secret or not. Unlike yesterday, she knew that deep down she should open up, stay away from her reclusion...but facing a crowd like this? It was impossible for Kannabi...but not for Biei. Off came the mask in a twist of her poncho, her chubby cheeks jostled from the sudden movement. The stars in her eyes glistened, her smile stretched across her face.

"I *am* Ogerpon! Hardly fair for me to compete, isn't it?"

Immediate eruptions of claps and hollers echoed about the crowd, some Pokémon even throwing their fist in the air with jubilation. As she went to put her teal mask back on, Biei could feel the merry rush of flattery bounce from head to toe. On impulse, she raised up her cudgel in her right mit to further spur on excitement from the crowd.

"For this year, I want to watch over the costume competition!" Biei cheered aloud, "Everyone dressed up did so well!"

"Well, you heard the woman!" the Mayor raised up her arm. "This year's judge of the costume contest will be none other than -"

When the crowd's uproar had slowed down, the drones of the siren from all the way up the hill swept over the audience. Everyone stood in confusion and shock, wondering exactly what was going on. Given where the sound originated from, Sylv had a good idea what it could be. He rushed on off, and the moment Biei saw him do so, she pulled her mask off in shock.

"Aspen!" Kannabi squeaked out, then rushed behind the fat bottomed Meowstic.

The audience was left in confused silence, with the Mayor left behind to pick up the pieces. "...Folks, we're going to have to postpone some of our festivities! Can't compete without our brave hero to witness it, right?" he called out, "Everyone please follow the lovely Rona and I, we'll bring you to the Note Rest right on the edge of town!"

From behind the wooden decoration up on stage, the Weavile secretary stepped out to help guide the populace along. "Come along, folks!" She hollered out, "This isn't a drill! Keep calm and follow along!"

The audience was ushered along, though a couple burly miners broke from the mass to try and help guide along other Pokémon around the festival. Kannabi and Sylv, meanwhile, rush up the various stairs and paths that wind along the village. Rory and Amie happened to pass by, both with teal mask styled cookie treats on sticks. The blubberballs rushed by in a panic, and once their ears followed the direction of the sirens, they knew why.

"Move!" Rory directed, and joined his friends swiftly.

Amie, however, struggled to keep up, huffing and wiping sweat from her brow as her tubby legs kicked her belly along. "C'mon, guys! We're not built for speed...!"

Once the four pulled themselves up the winding mountain stairs, the wails had ceased. Their panic, however, did not. Not hesitating for a moment, both Rory and Kannabi used their upper torso strength to bust down the door to Miasma's lab. Caught off guard, the Ultra Beast

assumed battle position, flailing his arms around and kicking his legs in the air. He took a moment, then sighed. "Oh. It's only you guys."

"Aspen wasn't here, was he?!" Sylv remarked. "He didn't come to you, did he?!"

"...Why, was he uh, not meant to?" Miasma nervously chuckled.

Sighs and groans came from the three Team Shonen members, while Kannabi was left in confusion. "Wh-where's our friend?" she whimpered. "Where's Aspen?"

"Right now?" Miasma pulled up his monitor again. "He's on a collision course with another, unidentified universe around twenty-two-billion-six-hundred-thirty-million-one-hundred-and-four-thousand-five-hundred-seventy-seven light years away from us."

"Tw-tw...twenty-two-billion?!!" Amie pushed down on Sylv's head and leaned over him, putting most of her belly weight on his back. "That's seriously far away!"

"Considering our solar system is about three lightyears in diameter, I think 'far away' is an understatement." Sylv added, his breathless, distant tone indicating he was saying it more to cope than to correct her. "Miasma, how did you send him off like that?!"

"WH?! Okay, I don't tend to SEND Pokémon off on Ultra Wormhole adventures!" the Poipole barked, "He pulled my escape hatch lever when the machine I built had no proper coordinates placed in! He didn't just open up one wormhole, he opened up a good DEAL of wormholes! He could be ANYWHERE right now! Your friend could be in-"

The temperature dropped, and a hush fell over the lab. The massive screen beside the Poipole beeped and flashed, sigils in an unrecognizable language to everyone else but the Poipole. He froze, stunned by the sudden message. On the glowing tablet before them, a grainy image of a bizarre creature appeared on screen. Swaddled in darkness, one could only make out the jagged bumps of their horn and peculiar headshape. It wasn't a Pokémon anyone in that room recognized, no one but the shivering Poipole anyway.

"Kzzrkzzzt... I fouuuund you, worm~" Their voice was venomous, the sound of oil running down glass, the sound of a drill bit grinding into stone, the sound of a nerve seizing up and leaving you wrought with paralytic fear. "I toooold you I would always be able to trace your position, and here we are. Thought you could tumble ten-million light years to get away from me, did you, Miasma?"

"Me...Me-Meph..." the Poipole cowered backward toward the wall, stunned by the visage he saw before him.

Team Shonen slowly stepped forward to look up to the projection, confused by its communication. “Who, no, *what* are you?” Amie wondered out loud.

“...Do not presume that you may speak to me, you mouthbreathing backwater specimen. This is the hole you chose to infest, wormling?” insulted the voice. “One full of plump and lethargic dumplings, from the looks of your new friends. So much... soft tissue laid over their sinew and marrow...”

Kannabi stepped forward, puffing her cheeks up and glaring at the image. “Give us back Aspen, now.” she demanded.

“I’ve so many victims I hardly keep track of them... perhaps I’ve already erased him?” toyed the individual, their movements and speech so stilted that they seemed to be less a Pokemon and more an...existence, approximating speech. “...I jest, of course. Judging by the trajectory of your coordinates, I’m to say that was the Gallade heading to the F-03 quadrant, and not the Mawile specimen tumbling your way. If I were you, I would have much more important things to worry about.” Up came a claw of a sort, shining with anti-light that absorbed all other warmth around it and positioned in a vice grip. “You shouldn’t have been so careless as to open that Ultra Wormhole, wormling. You’ve lit a beacon for Ultra Beasts to swarm to. I, myself, am rather *ec-stati-c* to finally wrap my claws around you... and to squeeze and extract until I pllll-uck your voice from your... throat.. While I’m at it, I’ll see if this new world is worth ‘studying’. I arrive soon. Make sure to celebrate. Ha-ha.”

Just as sudden as it appeared, the visage shrunk into a blip, no longer visible to the others. Team Shonen’s remnants slowly turned to the hyperventilating Poipole. His ears ringing, his breath shallow, his heart thumping against his ribcage. Seeing nothing but his machine, he rushed right to it. Rory gripped onto his tie and yanked him back, his feet scraping into the ground just to hold back the tiny Pokémon.

“Let me go!” he pleaded, “We’ve got to close that wormhole NOW!”

“Not while Aspen’s out there.” Rory growled. “You want him to be lost in that dimension?”

“We’re about to get invaded by one of the most ruthless Ultra Beasts ever to blot the multiverse, and you’re worried about your friend?!”

“Of course we are!” Kannabi stomped her foot down. “We...we also can’t abandon that other Pokémon heading our way in that...thing, she’s in!”

“You don’t get it.” Miasma shivered. “The whole reason I have that emergency escape is because of *him*! He’s beyond the power of *any* Pokémon I’ve ever seen! He...he...” his flailing grew weak, he simply hovered in the air and hung his head in despair. “He destroyed my world...” Silence gripped the four occupants, the room filled with a whiplash of wind and a waver of breath. “He’s... he’s insane. He’s constantly chasing after power, to push beyond the

limitations of a normal Pokémon. Whatever emotion and reason you can think of, he doesn't have it."

Rory slipped Miasma's tie from his grasp, then stomped back into position. "You need to start explaining some things, little guy." Amie demanded.

Raising his shoulders, Miasma sighed. "He used to be a normal Poipole, in a community full of 'em. I didn't know him much back then, but he usually just kept to himself and studied. He was so much smarter than me, and one day, he built a device that let any Pokémon, Ultra Beast or not, travel from dimension to dimension. He used it, and just...disappeared. I thought that was it. A few years later he came back, fully evolved and just, *different*. He was bitter, I think, toward everything... but it was also like he came back wrong. Jittery, cold, talking through us like he was seeing...something behind us. He started saying that we were stunting ourselves, not progressing through evolution. Started going off on how he saw worlds end when evolution stopped, just, the whole nine yards. There was this big fight, and he just...he razed everything. We weren't anything to him anymore, just warm bodies in his way. I used his machine to escape, I stole his blueprints so I could copy the machine. I've been on the run ever since...this isn't the only world I've jumped to, y'know? But it was the last. The only reason I recognized he could keep up with me is that he has a device that detects anomalies in Ultra Space, when Ultra Wormholes open that aren't supposed to. Now I'm pretty sure he wants to finish off the job."

Sylvester took some breaths, calming down once he realized just how horrified Miasma was. "...Were you...?"

"I don't know." Miasma hung his head. "The only one he knows about at least. I just know that world's nothing but rubble now. It was a small world, but, still, it was our home. Now it's gone."

Kannabi offered a pat on the back to Miasma. "...We'll keep you safe." she promised. "Whatever comes through that hole, we'll fight it."

All the Poipole could muster was a smile to Kannabi. "If...If you're sure. I mean, you're new, but those three over there beat a Gigantamaxed Machamp. You should've seen it..."

"If I knew you were a refugee, I would have been lighter on you." A calm voice broke through the focus. There stood Mayor Furret in the open doorway, paws to his side. "My guess is that this wasn't your doing, then?"

Miasma shook his head. "No sir, it was an accident."

"An accident with quite a drastic set of consequences." The mayor sighed. "Alright, let's work to fix this situation before anyone gets hurt-"

The sirens blared overhead again, the wormhole spun and stirred in place. Miasma's head whipped to the monitor, red sigils flashing on the screen. "Crud, right, that Mawile! Everyone hold onto something heavy!"

Team Shonen all had the same thought, as their mitts gripped onto several spots of Amie's body. Kannabi meanwhile backed up to let the Mayor hold down on her blubber. The iron grate retracted quickly, and down came another body. She fell to the ground with a thud, the maw hung on her head slightly opened. A looplet wrapped around the throat of her massive jaws slunk to the side, a peculiar gem set in a slot closest to the blue orb in the middle. Said looplet was a bright shade of magenta and pink, contrasting with her pale cream and gray body. Wrappings around her chest and arms indicated an aura of toughness, and one gentle poke would reveal a sense of tension common with those who built themselves up. This Mawile was definitely not of this world. Once the girl landed, the Wormhole ceased its gravitational anomaly. The bars were shafted right over it once again.

"Lemme check her." Amie stepped up and sat down on her belly to better reach the patient.

She opened the girl's eyelids, red pupils darted around to signify life. Her pulse beat just as healthily as anyone else's. Her heart thumped against her chest. Her breathing circulated as normal as ever.

"She's just fainted." Amie concluded, then threw her arms back for someone to assist her up. Kannabi and Rory grunted, pitching the massive blubber ball back to her feet with a hefty jiggle. "I'll probably check her again just so there isn't any brain injury. Looks like her jaws broke her fall at least..."

"Why don't I bring her back to Town Hall?" suggested the Mayor. "She'll be safer there than she would be in here."

"Good plan." Amie approved, before she could hoist the girl up with Psychic, the Mayor simply hoisted her up on his own.

"Please, I'm used to carrying things over my shoulders." He smiled sweetly back to the others.

Out came the mayor and this new Mawile face, stepping through the quiet Rhythm Town. Its decorations and stalls felt less like an exciting sign of wonder and merriment, and more like a reminder of the current situation. Uncertainty, confusion, chaos... the Mayor, at the very least, would be willing to work through these conditions. Miasma, meanwhile, begrudgingly typed in some glyphs on his device.

"Maybe that Mawile showing up is a good thing," he suggested, "if she's from a different dimension entirely, she could be the key to tracking down Aspen."

"How would you know?" Rory wondered.

"Every Pokémon functions just slightly differently depending on what world they're from, they carry similar, but just barely different cells and bacteria." The little Poipole looked up to the screen with a small grin. "If we can get her DNA sample, then we can maybe trace Aspen back to where he is."

"Wouldn't it be a one-way connection?" Sylv pondered.

"That's the problem with opening the emergency escape." Miasma slowly turned his head back to the Meowstic, neon eyes pinched and worried "We didn't just open up *one* Ultra Wormhole..."