It had been about two days since Jonah and Reese had left the town of Broken Creek in their dust upon the backs of their Rapidash steeds. They had only intended on being in town for a couple of days, a week at most. After all, they could only outrun their own infamous reputations as the Blazing Bandit Brothers for so long. Before them if one saw a pair of Rapidash tied to a hitch in town, one would think nothing of it. Rapidash were noble, but not terribly rare creatures. Now, seeing two in tandem was a near omen for any who saw them to hold tight to anything and everything they held dear. The Blazing Bandit Brothers were known for nabbing damn near anything that wasn’t nailed down or too heavy to carry on the back of a Rapidash.

“What a fucking bust,” Jonah whined as he began to load his belongings onto the back of his steed. “How could one town have so little loot?” Reese, the older of the two simply stayed silent and loaded his saddle bags. Jonah had a habit of complaining nearly every time the two of them left a town without enough dough to set them up in an inn in the next town they stopped in. This is what brought the brothers to a shaded clearing on the outskirts of a forest totally unknown to them, camping for the night before hitting the next town on their map.

To be honest, Reese preferred to camp. He didn’t trust innkeepers any more than he would trust some wild Pokemon that might try to attack them in the wild. At least with wild Pokemon, if they needed to, they could knock the creature out or even attempt to catch it and keep it locked in a Pokeball. If an innkeeper or maid decided they had a problem with you, they just called the sheriff or some muscle-bound relative to beat the tar out of you. Reese would happily take some mangy wild Lycanroc or Pidgeotto over getting chased by an Officer Jenny and her frustratingly fire-proof Growlithe. Damn those dogs and their flash-fire abilities.

“Don’t get so greedy and maybe next time we will be able to stay in town long enough to get a decent haul, shithead,” Reese growled at his younger brother. The man was nearly half a foot shorter than his younger brother, but easily the more handsome of the two. He was the poster boy for ruggedly handsome with amber brown eyes, skin tanned the color of golden honey, and a dusting of five-o’clock shadow that always managed to look effortlessly perfect across his chiseled jawline. The elder of the two held a steely resolve in his serious eyes that carried a bite like a Seviper, nearly daring those who he interacted with to try to work contrary to his interests.

One might have assumed that due to Reese being the shorter of the two that Jonah would have been the muscle of the pair. This was not true. He was neither the brain nor the brawn. Jonah was simply just the little brother and at the best of times, another set of hands to haul the spoils of their jobs. Not that Reese held this against his younger brother. They needed each other, even if Jonah wasn’t always the most intelligent or the most formidable fighter. It would be a cold day in the distortion realm before Reese would ever abandon his brother, or Jonah abandon him.

For what it was worth, Jonah was not without his unique skills. The larger man had an eye for value that Reese never really zeroed in on the origin of. He was perceptive and that made him a real ace in the hole when one was needed. Being able to spot what others did not had gotten them out of a few tight spots and net them at least a few hundred thousand dollars over the years just by the small treasures he found alone. The attention to detail and masterful perception did have its draw backs though. Jonah just couldn’t leave some things behind, like in this case, a weighty marble statue that had sat proudly in the office of Broken Creek’s mayor.

In Jonah’s defense, the statue was breath taking. It was a stone Umbreon that stood at about a foot tall, and a foot and a half long made of pure black marble, save for its markings that were made of a gold inlay (pure gold at that!) and two luminous almond shaped garnets that damn near bore into the soul of any who looked upon it. It was a beauty and for that reason and that reason alone, Jonah decided they had to have it. Unfortunately… well, let’s just say if desire was worth its weight in gold, the brothers wouldn’t have need to thieve any longer after the younger set his eyes upon this work of art.

“You’re gonna make leaving that statue behind up to me,” Jonah barked from atop his rapidash. They had managed to make off with two bags of lighter goods, as well as a satchel of cash, but none of this would make up for the statue that had caught his eye back in the mayor’s office. His frustrated stare at Reese said about all that needed to be said.

Reese, on the other hand, felt no remorse. He knew what bringing that statue along would have cost. Someone didn’t lose a treasure like that and allow the thief to get away with it. If he had let Jonah make off with the Umbreon statue, they might have gotten to keep it, but they would have been on the run for the rest of their lives. Not like how they were now. The Blazing Bandit Brothers were more of a legend or a piece of folklore than actual people the law could arrest. Stealing something that nice and that valuable would have shot them well past figures of stories whispered around the campfire or across the bar to entice a patron to buy another beer or two just to hear the rest of the tale. Taking a treasure like that would land them right in the fiery hot lap of infamy and once you were there, you either wound up behind bars or ran until you were nothing more than lunch for the Mandibuzz.

“I think I’ll survive,” Reese huffed as he righted himself on his rapidash’s back. He had to be stern and harsh with his younger brother. Otherwise, he knew Jonah would get out of hand. They were both old enough to have children of their own, but Reese knew the closest he would ever have to a child was Jonah. The larger man somehow still needed babysitting, despite being in his late twenties. That much, Reese blamed on their mother. She had always been too soft on him. Such was her choice, that is until she passed away, leaving her eldest son to take over the mantle of caregiver to her beloved youngest.

“Lemme pick the next stop,” Jonah demanded, trying to catch his brother’s attention before he began to ride. Reese shot him an annoyed look. Since when did Jonah have any interest in choosing where they went? Usually, he was happy enough to follow along wherever Reese went like a loyal Herdier. “What do you have in mind?” Reese growled, already regretting even asking about his brother’s plans. Jonah appeared to puff up a bit at this chance to grasp the reins of their next job. “I heard talk about a hide out a few miles from the next town,” he said with an excited whisper. Why he was whispering, Reese could not surmise. “It’s supposed to be full of treasure and relics that were uncovered in the Desert Ruins of Unova,” he said, a dumb, excited grin starting to betray the mask of upset he was trying to put on for his brother. Reese silently weighed his options. On the one hand, it was highly likely that this rumor was just that. A rumor. On the other, if he agreed to his brother’s demand, it would get him to shut up and get him off his case about the dumb statue.

“Have at it, chief,” Reese said with a nod to Jonah. “But if this turns out to be a bust, you’re as good as dead. A ghost. You understand?” Despite Jonah feeling as though he had the upper hand in this conversation, he felt compelled to nod in agreement. Gods, he hoped this lead was real. Jonah raised his index and middle finger to his forehead in a mock salute to his older brother before closing his hand into a fist and lightly bumping it into Reese’s shoulder twice. It was a silent form of communication the pair had developed over the years. One bump for no, two for yes. The salute, on the other hand, was just him being cheeky.

The brothers rode in silence towards a town Jonah had stated was called Narrengold. The town itself was effectively a ghost town, but that fact was what made it a perfect location for stashing away loot, or so Jonah stated. The two rode right to the town limits before finding that their steeds refused to go further. No matter the coaxing, verbal or physical, the Rapidash would not move a hoof.

“Great start here, Jojo,” Reese said with a sly smirk reminiscent of a Galarian Meowth. Jonah hated the nickname, and his older brother knew it. “Shut it,” the taller of the men growled as he stepped down from his steed. “The treasure’s gotta be around here somewhere. They aren’t gonna just leave it out in the open, smart ass.” Despite the current situation quickly evolving into a certified disaster, Reese had been caught in a surprisingly jovial mood. Maybe it was a lack of sleep or being pushed so far into frustration with his brother that his mood flipped the scales and drove him to a lighter demeanor. Either way, he didn’t press Jonah further and simply jumped down from his Rapidash and joined his brother at the edge of town.

“You wanna do us the honors, boss?” Reese said with a chuckle, motioning to the town. “It’s your job, so you should be the one to cross the threshold. I can’t wait to see all this treasure you’ve led us to.” Jonah scowled and stomped past his brother and into the town. His mind was so set on proving Reese wrong that he scarcely noticed the strange shiver the rippled through him as he entered Narrengold. It was not a feeling missed by Reese who shivered at the sensation. He was not one to get cold feet and yet he could feel goosebumps rise across his skin, pleading for him to turn around.

Reese stopped for a moment, running his hand over his skin. They were in the middle of what was essentially a prairie and yet his skin was ravaged with goosebumps. For a moment he thought of calling out to Jonah to warn him or inquire if he too had felt this sudden case of chills when entering town, but his younger brother was nowhere to be seen. Likely, he was nosing around one of the abandoned buildings looking for something to pilfer.

“Better him than me,” Reese muttered as he roamed the dusty street of Narrengold. Nervously, he looked back, watching their Rapidashes that stood staring back at him with what looked like empty, unblinking coal black eyes. If he had not rode to town on the back of one of them, he would have thought they were mirages with the way they stood frozen upon the dry grass, both sets of front hooves in a perfect line as if shut up behind an invisible wall. The sight only made Reese more uneasy. He had a growing, uncomfortable feeling that he and Jonah were not meant to be here. That no one was meant to be here. The Rapidash knew this. In their resolute refusal to enter town they were trying to tell their riders to follow suit. They could see what the brothers could not and there was nothing more they could do to spare them of their quickly encroaching fates.

Humans were, unfortunately, unwise in the ways Pokemon were. If the brothers had been, the town of Narrengold would not have appeared as dead and empty as they saw it. Reese turned from the Rapidash and started to walk forward and further into town. As he did so, a loud shriek burst from below him. Turning his attention to the dusty ground, the man saw a Patrat with the tip of its tail caught beneath the sole of his boot. “Geeze, Sorry, little guy,” Reese muttered, lifting his foot to free the small Pokemon. The Patrat looked up at the human with wide eyes before unleashing a stream of chitters and squeaks. Reese simply looked down at the creature, lost as to what it was trying to say, if it was saying anything at all.

Two furry paws clapped over the Patrat’s muzzle, as if the Pokemon was surprised by its own chattering. Its large red eyes looked up at Reese before it started chittering again for a moment and once again stopping. It stared at the human man with unblinking, intense eyes. What did this thing want? The Patrat dropped to a quadrupedal stance and scampered away toward the Rapidash. It stopped just shy of the two fiery beasts and looked back at Reese. Those unblinking eyes were trained on him once more and the man could not help but think that the small Pokemon was trying to convey some sort of message to him. Did it intend for him to follow it? For a moment, he nearly did, but a jarring crash jolted Reese’s attention to a nearby building.

“Jonah!” Reese yelled as he attempted to force his way into the building. To his surprise, the front door was not locked. It was barely even closed all the way. The man attempted to catch his breath as he scanned the interior of the main room. Jonah was nowhere to be seen. What Reese did find was a pair of Pokemon scrabbling over a golden coin. A Meowth and a Murkrow, one with its paws latched around the treasure between them and the other with a portion of the coin clamped within its beak. The pair growled at one another, neither showing any sign of intending to give up the coin. It was not uncommon to see Meowth and Murkrow fighting over golden and shiny objects, but the way these two Pokemon fought seemed as though it was personal.

When the two Pokemon finally noticed the human man watching them, the Murkrow began to beat its wings furiously, mumbling half formed caws from its occupied beak. This appeared to catch the Meowth’s attention, which immediately hissed at the frenetic bird before turning to Reese.

“Meowrrrrr!” the feline Pokemon vocalized. Its large eyes narrowed at Reese, attempting to strike the fear of the Gods into him. The man could not do more than look down at the furry Pokemon with a look of discomfort and confusion. Sure, if the coin was left unattended, he would have happily taken it and slipped it into his pocket, but he had no interest in fighting two already angered Pokemon for it.

The Meowth did not appear to take his lack of response to its meowing as the silent surrender Reese had intended it to be. The cream-colored fur all over its body began to bristle and stand on end as the small feline began to walk slowly towards him. He was sure in the Meowth’s mind this was a terrifying show of dominance, but to the human, the Pokemon looked like nothing more than a stray house cat.

“Rrrrrr—” the Meowth growled as it stalked closer. Behind it, a curled tail whipped back and forth in irritation. “Meeeeerrrr---” it continued. If Reese had not known better, he would have thought the Meowth thought it was actually speaking with him. Like it was hissing out threats and taunts that he was simply ignoring in its eyes. Whatever the Meowth was saying, it wasn’t in any form that a human could understand.

It felt silly, but Reese raised his hands up before him and made a show of stepping backward from the hissing feline. If he had his Rapidash with him, he could have simply burnt the little bastard to a crisp, but Reese knew enough to know that wouldn’t be happening. The Meowth was unfazed by the human’s show of surrender and submission and appeared to still intend on initiating a fight with Reese. It was a bit silly on the Pokemon’s part. Yes, it had claws and fangs, but Meowths were a normal type. They couldn’t do much damage to a human besides biting or scratching. Besides, it was small enough that a hearty kick to the chest would most likely knock it out of commission enough for Reese to make his getaway. His attempts to surrender the fight before it started were more of a courtesy to the Meowth than a fear of it.

Behind the approaching Meowth, Reese could see the Murkrow it had previously been spatting with attempting to secure the golden coin within its talons. It’s beady red eyes darted between Reese and the Meowth, trying to gauge whether the fight between them would actually take place and if it did, who it would need to face off with next to ensure its treasure stayed in its possession. There was something in its gaze that seemed almost pleading. As if it wished to beg the human intruder to engage in battle with its previous feline foe so it could slip away unharmed with its prize.

The moment felt so surreal. The hissing fluffed up Meowth challenging him as if they were combatants on equal ground. The Murkrow gazing upon him with eyes that spoke of knowledge not only of the Meowth’s behavior, but expectance of Reese’s as well. What was this town? Even the Patrat from earlier seemed so uncanny. The Pokemon weren’t just combative or disagreeable. There was something more. Something that felt wrong and possibly sinister. He had to get out of here. They had to get out of here. Jonah and himself. Belief in his brother be damned. Reese would have sooner tossed away his Rapidash’s reigns right then and there and gave up the bandit life completely than allowed himself and his younger brother to spend another moment in this ominous town.

“Look!” Reese shouted, pointing to the Murkrow who was now almost halfway out of the shattered window of the building. “Go! He’s got your coin!” The Meowth emitted a low growl before whipping its head towards the window. The moment after felt as though it was frozen in time. The Murkrow released a bloodcurdling screech and attempted to fly out of the window, but not before the Meowth pounced, closing the space between them, and knocking both Pokemon through the window. Reese heard a thud on the dusty ground below and muttered a soft apology to the bird. It wasn’t personal. It was either the Murkrow or Jonah and he had no loyalty to a Pokemon he had only just met.

A cacophony of yowls and squawking could be heard as Reese exited into the open air of Narrengold. The final moments of the Meowth and Murkrow’s tussle over their coin, no doubt. So much could be seen as a blur of cream and brown fur shot past him, shimmering slightly with gold in the hot, afternoon sun. As the frugal feline’s paws stamped across the dusty ground below him, he, just for a breath, turned his broad, whiskered head to look behind him. Clamped between his teeth was the golden coin, visible only for a moment before vanishing from sight along with the Meowth within the brush beside another of the weathered and deteriorating buildings of Narrengold.

“Well,” Reese muttered under his breath as he eyed the still shivering leaves of the bush the Meowth vanished into. “I guess we know who won that fight…” As if on cue, the defeated Murkrow came ambling around the corner of the building it had been thrown out of just minutes ago. The way it moved, which had not been something Reese had noted until now as he saw the Pokemon in the light, was awkward and unsteady, as if it was unfamiliar with how its body worked.

Reese didn’t fancy himself a bird aficionado, but he was sure Murkrows hopped when they were attempting to move without flying. This one appeared to be walking… or trying to do so. The bird sort of waddled and tottered as it walked, appearing almost drunk, if a Pokemon could be so. He had just seen this Murkrow though and unless the Meowth had hit its head pretty hard, he could not imagine what would have rattled its mind enough to render it so dazed. Maybe its leg was injured in battle. The man’s heart sank slightly, already knowing what it was that he had to do. He was a bandit, not a monster. A bandit with potions in his saddlebag no less.

Gingerly, Reese inched toward the Murkrow. It did not appear to have noticed him yet. It was far too preoccupied with its strange manner of walking and scanning the area around it. Maybe it was worried the Meowth would come back? “Buddy,” Reese called to the Murkrow. “The Meowth is gone.” The bird’s attention snapped to Reese, its large red eyes locking in on him. He would have thought the Pokemon was sizing him up, except a moment later it released a loud squawk which was apparently jarring enough to set its own feathers on edge. The bird looked down to the dusty ground below its feet and then back to Reese, cocking its head this way and that. It next began to examine its scaley, taloned feet, flexing its toes experimentally before moving the examination onto its pitch-black wings which it extended fully at either of its sides.

“Kurrowww?” the Pokemon cawed as it extended and retracted its wings. It’s cawing continued when it looked upon Reese once more, flapping its wings feverishly. “I know, you’re hurt,” the man said awkwardly, motioning to his steed in the distance. “I have potions in my saddlebag. I’ll carry you there and heal you up, okay?” Reese, while not having anything against Pokemon, was not usually this doting upon them. He was more often than not in a state of detached aloofness. The poor thing seemed to nearly be out of its mind though. It felt inhumane to just leave it to suffer from whatever bodily or brain damage the Meowth had inflicted upon it. Reese attempted to close the gap between him and the bird, but the Murkrow released a blood curdling screech, leaving the human unable to do much other than cover his ears in pain. The bandit could not help but worry, not about the Murkrow or even the Patrat from before, but that whatever madness they seemed to have succumbed to may find its way to him or Jonah.

Past the harrowing show of panic and hysteria that the Murkrow was putting on, Reese came to notice a chance in the scenery of Narrengold. Not all of it, but one building in particular. What at first had looked like thing more than a slight shadow, perhaps the form of a large passing cloud or Pokemon blocking out the sun, was growing into a festering haze. It hung around the building like a swarm of Ninjask before thickening into a dark, ominous miasma, all of which appeared to be slithering out of the building’s front door.

As Reese neared the building, the worn-out letters on its face could be seen through the thick veil of darkness. B-A-N-K. He loathed to consider the next thought that tried to force its way into his mind. Jonah, being a lover of all that was lustrous and valuable was likely inside. Reese’s heart began to race, his thoughts caught between worries for his brother and pure terror at the prospect of having to enter the building at all. Surely, Jonah could have been somewhere else, right? He wasn’t as dumb as he seemed, and he definitely wasn’t so dumb as to wander into gloomy looking building such as this… Reese hoped.

Before Reese was able to convince himself to turn his search elsewhere a terrified scream echoed through the bank before him, only to be suddenly muffled and followed by a loud thud. Reese knew Jonah’s scream and what he had just heard unmistakably came from his brother’s lungs. There wasn’t time to muse over what to do next or whether to run and leave Jonah prey to… whatever was within the shadow shrouded bank.

“Jonah!” Reese bellowed as he rushed into the dark building. As soon as he had, the man cursed himself for not bringing along a torch or a flashlight. Still, there was enough light filtering through the half-boarded-up windows to allow him a vague notion of the interior. What had once been an operational bank had been scrapped and gutted down to little more than the remnants of a tellers booth, swaths of torn curtains, broken chairs, and overturned boxes.

Behind the shattered glass and corroding desk that had once made up a teller’s booth, a large vault sat tucked into the shadows. Upon closer inspection, which Reese gathered by hazarding a few nervous steps closer to the belly of the abandoned bank, the vault was unlocked. Uncertain steps carried Reese closer until he was able to grasp the curve of the circular metal door. To his surprise, the vault door swung outward, allowing the door to open wide like a yawning maw.

Passing through the opening and into the vault did not make it feel any less so. In some way, Reese felt as though he was passing through the jaws of giant beast that was laid in wait to swallow him up. Not to mention, within the vault was even darker than the rest of the bank had been.

“Jonah!” Reese barked into the darkness. He was surprised to hear that his voice did not echo as much as he had expected. Instead, it seemed that wherever he was, the room appeared to be smaller than the area of the main part of the bank. Also, he wasn’t alone. A pained, deep groaning sound seeped through the darkness, followed by a pair of knocks and thuds. If Reese had not known better, he would have thought there was something caught in a trap before him, but this was a bank, not a tomb or a trapping ground for pokemon poachers. What sort of trap could have been lying in wait within a bank?

“Ree-EEEEEEEEE!” a voice screeched within the inky blackness before him. It started low and then hit a pitchy crescendo where it trailed off into a cryptic wail. Reese knew this voice. “Jonah!” he called into the dark. “I’m here! I’m gonna get you out of here! Give me a sign… Something to tell me where you are.” The elder brother held his hands out in front of him as he walked deeper into the vault. He groped the air around his body, hoping to find something that would give him a clue to Jonah’s location or even something that could give him a source of light.

The knocking and thudding continued. The sound caused Reese’s heart to race and no small part of him wanted to run out of the vault, out of this whole damned town. That wasn’t an option. Not without Jonah. Not even as the ominous knocking turned to the sound of fevered scratching.

“J-Jo-Jon—AH!” Reese shouted at the end of his stutter attempt at calling his brother’s name. Two glowing red eyes cut through the darkness, its black pinprick pupils finding the man’s location in an instant. Reese might not have been able to see whatever was laid in wait in the darkness, but it could see him. Quite clearly, in fact.

With each thud and fit of scrabbling scratches that loomed through the darkness, the eyes blinked or even widened, as if reacting to the sounds. Reese knew he had to keep moving forward. Whatever the eyes were connected to, they were the best focus he had at this point. Not unless he happened upon a light source. Reese continued his slow advance through the dark with arms outstretched, hoping, and somehow also not hoping, to find something solid. Anything to aid him in finding Jonah.

“I wouldn’t touch that if I were you,” a voice warned from within the darkness. “Unless you’re looking for a quick way to disappear.” Reese was unsure what part of the situation scared him the most, but the addition of an ominous disembodied voice was likely to be heading up such a list if he was looking to make one.

“Show yourself!” Reese hissed at the pair of red eyes suspended in the darkness. Surely, if a voice was speaking to him, they had to be coming from whatever creature was watching him. It took the man completely by surprise when the glow of a small flame flickered a few feet to the right of the eyes. It hung in the air, bristling blue, filling the vault with warm light. It was not simply a flame, or even a will o’ wisp as its color and eerie appearance might have suggested. The flame was housed within a clear, transparent orb, topped with what looked like a wide brimmed hat. Below, a small black body with two thin arms reaching out to curl in front of itself. The flame was not alone though. Its light exposed the presence of another beside it.

To the right of the floating flame stood a human. His body language screamed of discomfort as he averted his eyes from Reese. Neither the human nor the flame, which he now saw was a Lampent, seemed to have Jonah in their custody though. Reese turned his attention forward to where he had seen the red eyes and jumped slightly in surprise. A Cofagrigus was leaning against the wall before him, giving him one of their signature toothy grins.

There was a pregnant silence that hung within the vault as all four individuals looked upon one another. “What is going on here?” Reese hissed. His eyes were locked upon the other human in the room as he spoke. Even if the other human wasn’t the cause of Jonah vanishing, they were the only one there he would be able to communicate with. Unfortunately, the other human looked as though he was too scared to even speak. They appeared to be about the same age as Reese, although slightly taller and there was something about them that looked vaguely familiar.

“You told me not to touch that thing,” Reese said, motioning to the Cofagrigus. “Why? What happens when you… ‘disappear’?” He had never heard of a Pokemon making people vanish just by touching them. Even if it could, where would the vanished people go?

The previous scratching and screeching noise picked up again. Now that the room was illuminated, it was clear to see that the sounds originated from the Cofagrigus. Its body shook with every haunting noise that howled from its form and trembled with each fit of scratching sounds. The other human eyed the Cofagrigus nervously, before looking back to Reese. He knew something. The truth was not terribly hard to parse, but the thought of Jonah being locked inside of a coffin shaped creature didn’t sit well with the older brother. Even if the Pokemon had attempted to trap Jonah inside, there was no way he could have physically fit. The Cofagrigus was nearly half a foot smaller than Reese and Jonah was that much taller than him.

“One way or another, I will find my brother,” Reese hissed, taking a step forward toward the other man. “So, if you know where he might be, now is a good time to speak up.” The man shrank back slightly and looked up at the Lampent. The spectral creature cooed softly in return. It was not uncommon to see humans and their pokemon communicating with one another, but the way the Lampent vocalized and the following defeated deflation of the human at the Pokemon’s utterances seemed deeper than most. Like the human actually understood his ghostly partner.

“What this is,” the man said, raising his hands up before him sheepishly in a sign of surrender. “Is an unfortunate case of your brother being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It could have been anyone.” The vagueness of the man’s words did little to calm the fear and rage building in Reese’s chest. He silently cursed himself for coming into this damned town unarmed. Normally, he would have called upon his Rapidash to aid him, but he already knew his steed would not beckon to his call while in Narrengold. He didn’t have any other Pokemon. They would have just been another mouth to feed on their travels. Two full grown Rapidash already ate enough for the brothers’ liking. Right now, Reese was silently wishing they had eaten the cost of another mouth or two to feed. He needed a Pokemon, especially if the other man had one.

“Elaborate for me,” Reese demanded. His hands clenched tight into fists as he starred daggers into the other man. “Why him? What happened to him?” Any previous fear for his surroundings had begun to fade as his mind became fixated on his brother’s wellbeing and safety. There was too much that wasn’t lining up and not making sense. “I can only imagine you know,” he added. “Seeing that you’re the only other human in this town and whatever it is that took my brother, it doesn’t seem like it has any plans to take you.”

At the mention of the word human, the Lampent jumped slightly. Inside its glassy body, its flame swelled for a moment. Not from anger, but from surprise, if nothing else. “Your friend seems to be a bit emotional over what I’m saying,” Reese pushed. “Wanna translate that for me?”

The sheepish man looked up at the Lampent with sorry eyes and exchanged sorrowful glances with the pokemon. Nothing in the ghost pokemon seemed as though it was preparing to fight or attack. It just looked despondent. At least as much as a lantern creature could. “I needed the help of someone,” the man said quietly. “For a job no one would ever willingly do. I needed bait and your brother looked like someone gullible.” For what it was worth, the man did not appear to be proud or pleased with his actions. The remorse could be seen across his features, although he had yet to apologize or tell Reese where Jonah was. “I told him about this town,” the man continued. “And how it was rumored to be a hiding place for treasure. He ate it right up.”

All throughout his explanation, the man’s eyes continued to flick over to the Cofagrigus that continued to lean against the wall, grinning its unnerving toothy grin. Could they have been partners as well? If so, they did not appear to have the same ease in communication as he had with the Lampent. “There’s something here in this town… maybe it’s the town itself,” he muttered softly. “Something wrong… and sinister.” Again, his eyes turned to the Cofagrigus. His eyes were wide open with irises dilated in fear or anticipation. Reese could not divine which. “It t-took my teammates… my friends…,” he stuttered, shrinking into himself even more. “There were five of us… now there’s only m-me and…” The man looked up at the Lampent, which floated lower to nudge him in comfort. It appeared to do little good. He appeared to be on the edge of hysteria, despite the worried coos and contact from his pokemon partner.

“It took your Pokemon?” Reese asked. His mind drifted back to the strange pokemon he had encountered since entering Narrengold. The Patrat that tried to lead him out of town, the Meowth and Murkrow that had been fighting over the gold in one of the buildings closer to the edge of the town limits. “That must be why our Rapidash didn’t want to enter the town,” he murmured to himself. “Maybe them being out of their Pokeballs at the time caused them to—” The other man cut him off before he could finish his thought. “No! My team! My friends!” he wailed. “We stopped here a week or two ago looking for anything we could sell in Broken Creek for a bite to eat or a night at an inn. One by one, they all began to vanish until…” he looked up at the Lampent with pure misery staining his features.

As if on cue, a cacophony of thuds, scratches, and screeches began to emanate from the body of the body of the Cofagrigus. Its grin stretched even wider, causing its glowing red eyes to narrow slightly to accommodate. It sounded as though something was attempting to ram the creature’s coffin-shaped body open from the inside.

“Something’s in there!” Reese barked at the other man who was now doubled over and hiding his face against his chest. The pounding thuds continued, growing more frenzied and powerful. “Jonah!” Reese called, looking around the room anxiously. “Are you here? Tell me where you are! Let me know how to get to you! I’m going to get you out of here!” A deep, sinister cough-like laughing sound reverberated from the Cofagrigus which was now extending its dark, hand-like tendrils towards the two humans. Beneath the eerie laughter, two distinct knocks echoed from the body of the Cofagrigus. The world felt like it had frozen as soon as Reese heard it. Once again, two knocks. “Two knocks for yes,” he breathed. Jonah was inside that thing!

“Jonah!” Reese yelled before rushing towards the Cofagrigus. Although the other man made no move to stop him, the Lampent rushed forward and grabbed the back of Reese’s shirt, stopping him from making contact with the pokemon. “Let go of me!” he roared, trying to swing at the fiery ghost that had immobilized him. The Lampent uttered a small, pained noise, begging Reese, in its own way, not to get any closer to the Cofagrigus. The Cofagrigus’ shadowy limbs shot forward, taking the other man in its grasp and constricting his body. “Jonah…” the man said in a pained voice. “He says… Jonah is… no maaaah-re… no mor-eeeeep.”

The man in the Cofagrigus’ grasp paled as his words devolved into bestial bleats. Or so Reese thought. Instead, the man’s skin was taking on a blue tone, turning from a light tan to ocean blue. “No… ple-aaaah-se!” the man begged and bleated. “I ge-aaaaah-ve you whaaaaaah-t you waaaah-nted.” With each word that was twisted and remolded into the beastly bray of a Pokemon, the man changed further. While Reese had thought the man’s skin had been turning blue, it appeared that it was not his skin that had changed, but that a coat of short, blue fur was growing all over his body. As his form was being taken over by a furry tide of blue hair, it was also starting to shrink. His appendages appeared to be retreating inward toward his body as they shrank, causing his clothing to begin to drop from his body.

First, his shoes slipped from his feet, exposing feet with toes that were stiffening and merging into cloven hooves. His pants would have been the next to fall, but it appeared that something was keeping them up, at least for the moment. Something appeared to be wriggling where his behind was covered by his pants. “Whaaaaaahts thaaaaaat?” he bleated as he began to notice the sensation of something moving in the seat of his pants. The Cofagrigus simply remained silent, save for its low rumbling chuckle and the repeated set of two knocks echoing from its body. “Don’t do this to me-eeeeehreep!” he brayed, thrashing against the grasp of the dark hands holding him suspended in the vault. “I don’t waaaaaaahnt to beeeeeh aaaah Pokemehhh-n.” With the final word of his plea, the man’s face started to shift. His nose pushed out from his face, bringing his jaw with it to form a sheep-like snout. As his features rearranged, so did his eyes which darkened to a woody brown and migrated to opposite sides of his now longer, furry, snout tipped face.

By now, the man’s nose had melted into his bestial features, leaving nothing left of its form except two twitching slitted nostrils that were anxiously trying to take in air. “Meeeeeeh! Meeeehhreeeeep!” the man cried, only to wail louder at the complete loss of his human speech. By now, the Lampent had released Reese who was watching the transformation taking place in front of him in complete awe. He had never heard of a creature having the power to turn humans into Pokemon. Regardless, it was happening right before his eyes.

The former man in the Cofagrigus’ grasp let out another agonized bleat as he felt his fingers stiffen and begin to merge into cloven twins of his now hooved former feet. The fevered wriggling in the man’s pants intensified, making it appear as though something was trying to break free of the cloth that covered his behind. When his pants could not contain the fevered movement any longer, they tore at the seams and fell to the floor, exposing a long, yellow and black striped tail with a shining pearl-like orb at its tip. The tail thrashed back and forth, rocking the man’s still changing body as it slowly lost its definition. Long legs and arms turned stubby, and his shoulders and hips cracked and shifted him into a quadrupedal stance. His torso, neck and head began to become covered by a thick coat of curly, yellow fur as his bones continued to snap and morph into that of a small, four legged Pokemon.

Finally, his ears began to lengthen and twist into a point before hardening and taking on a yellow and black striped sheen. Soon, nothing was left to change, save for finishing diminishing his size to that of an average Mareep. The sheep bleated and brayed in fear and despair all the while, agonizing over its fate. Just when it was nearly shrunken down to the proper size, the body of the Cofagrigus burst open. This caused the shadowy hands holding the Mareep to dissipate, leaving the small Pokemon to fall to the floor. The Lampent flew forward, grasping the Mareep’s tail just before it collided with the ground below. This was largely missed by Reese, who had his attention locked on the figure emerging from the body of the Cofagrigus.

Like a newly formed Butterfree emerging from the body of a Metapod, a small creature scuttled out of the Cofagrigus. It was barely over a foot tall and in the dim light of the Lampent, it appeared to be covered in gemstones. It approached Reese in a creeping, hunched over stance and turned its two large, gleaming eyes up to meet the man’s gaze. Reese knew he did not know every single fact about Pokemon, but he thought he knew enough to know Sableyes, what this creature appeared to be, did not typically come into being by busting out of the body of a Cofagrigus. They were cave dwellers and usually found wherever natural gemstones could be found.

“What are you?” Reese asked, kneeling before the small creature to get a better look at it. The way it looked at him felt so familiar. Like it was awaiting orders or… a scolding. “No…” Reese breathed, feeling his eyes begin to brim with tears. “No… not you. Not…--” The Sableye reached out slowly, as if it was still learning how to use its limbs and knocked on Reese’s shoulder twice.

“Jonah…” Reese muttered, slumping to the ground, defeated before the Pokemon. “This is all my fault. I should have researched…” The Sableye reached out and knocked on his shoulder a single time. “It’s really you…” Reese whispered between stifled sobs. “How could this have happened?” The Sableye looked over its shoulder to the Cofagrigus that laid crumpled over itself against the wall, then to the Lampent and Mareep, and then back to Reese. “It did this to you? You and…” he looked to the other two Pokemon in the vault. “The Meowth, Murkrow, and Patrat… they were his team… his friends.” A few feet away, the Mareep let out a pained baa at the reminder of he and his friends’ fate. The Lampent quickly attempted to soothe the agonized sheep, but with little success.

At the edge of Narrengold, Reese stood between he and his brother’s Rapidash. The two equines had calmed considerably on his return. He suspected it was due to the fact that the danger in town had been eliminated. Gathered around him and the Rapidash was a small collection of Pokemon. A Patrat at his feet, a Mukrow perched on the back of his Rapidash, a Lampent hovering at his side, a Mareep cowering behind his legs, and a Sableye standing upon his shoulder. Although they had tried, the Meowth had objected to being collected, both verbally and with a show of his claws across the back of Reese’s hand and forearm. The feline then scampered off into the prairie, presumably far away from Narrengold and his former friends.

“Rapidash, use Flame Charge,” Reese said in an empty and flat tone. The two equines obliged, setting fire to Narrengold. As they galloped through its empty streets, in the last slivers of daylight before sunset, Reese and his newfound team of Pokemon watched as the accursed town was reduced to nothing but ash and sagebrush.