



Ceniza Doesn't Know Jacques 'Bout This Town!

Snaking shadows danced across white marble walls as long strands of mint green ivy hanging from wrought iron balconies gently swayed in the breeze. The gale carried with it the distant ringing of windchimes and the honey-sweet aroma of warm bread. Lithe-bodied Vivillon clung to the surrounding buildings and slowly fanned their large green wings while they basked in the golden rays of light that pierced through the leafy

branches of a nearby birch tree.

Ceniza was spending a well-deserved vacation after landing a couple of gigs at a few small venues all over Mesagoza. It seemed like Artazón-style dancing was not entirely forgotten! There was still a lot of work to do in that regard, if Ceniza wanted to make her mother proud and keep the tradition alive. But that could wait! If Ceniza was going to succeed, the Paldean beauty had to get at least a little rest in.

And where else could one go for the most spectacular vacation other than Lumiose City, in the neighboring region of Kalos? Plus, it was in the middle of a renovation. How exciting! All these holograms and nicely charted out Wild Areas made the city feel more alive. But what Ceniza was really here for was a Contest. More specifically, the Lumiose Conference. Not exactly to participate, but to scope out some contacts and present herself to possible agents. Not just that — former Champion Diantha was going to make an appearance! What a dream come true...

The ever restless Oricorio walked beside Ceniza with endless loyalty. The feathered Pokémon was already expecting the next gig, the next show, the next contest... not because Ceniza overworked her partners at all, but because of Oricorio's own self-imposed expectations of excellence. A vacation was not in her plans, and her Trainer noticed as Oricorio kept looking around anxiously.

“¿Qué pasa, Ori?” Asked Ceniza, in a sweet dulcet tone. “We're just taking a quick detour! It's good to just kick back a bit, see the sights... catch a break! I know we've had a few busy weeks, so we deserve it, don't you think-?”

Oricorio looked down, not knowing what to think. The prissy Pokémon thought of herself too highly for something like this... but maybe she deserved it too. Her Trainer was taking her to such a luxurious location! This was the high life they both wanted for so long... Why not enjoy it?

With a shrug and a sing-song tweet, Oricorio acknowledged Ceniza's sentiment. The Dancing Pokémon leapt, and then flew over Ceniza, twirling around her in the air before landing on the dancer's shoulder, like the Pawmi from their favourite telenovela! Ori was a lot lighter, too, which was very comfortable on Ceniza's shoulder.

“Let's make the most of the day, Ori!” Ceniza proclaimed with joy, as they marched deeper into the streets of Lumiose... and in fact, deeper into the unknown.

A Fletchinder perched atop the blue tiles overhead and focused a beady eye on the two

of them as she wandered by. Perhaps it had a crush on Oricorio... never a bad time for love in the city of love, after all! The feisty Pokémon flew up to them, and chatted up Ori — before leaving, dejected. Was Fletchinder intimidated by Oricorio's intensity? Ceniza laughed this off, finding the exchange amusing.

It was April in Lumiose City, and all around Ceniza and Oricorio, time meandered at a quiet pace. April, Ceniza's favourite time of the year! After this trip, she had already lined up gigs at the annual Artazón Flower Festival, and she couldn't wait to put on her mother's old dress back on and dance her heart out in only two more weeks — no, no, no! This was a vacation! Dancing could come later.

There was something magical about the dazzling heart of the Kalos Region— even on Ceniza's first visit, its long boulevards and historic buildings always found a way to feel fantastical. So much, in fact, that Ceniza's constantly drifting mind distracted her, causing the dancer to lose her way, and end up in a maze of alleyways. Oricorio gave a few tweets of worry, while Ceniza tried to retrace her steps... to no avail. Ceniza was hopelessly lost, and she had no idea where to go.

The tall crown of Prism Tower looming over the surrounding cityscape seemingly taunted Ceniza and Oricorio, always in sight but forever out of reach. Even when she tried to walk directly towards it, there was no guarantee the road she was on wouldn't suddenly veer off in another direction and corral her into another winding alleyway that pulled her deeper into the urban labyrinth as it had so many times before.

A large flyer for Quasartico Incorporated and its bright blue star-like logo sailed on the wind, distracting Ceniza for just a moment as it continued on its journey. Quasartico... Ceniza knew they were in charge of the renovation effort. Perhaps they'd make the city a little more manageable for tourists once they were done!

The dancer was starting to run out of options. Maybe... the taxi system could help! Ceniza approached a nearby Gogoat station, but before she could call the large Grass type, a Gogoat dashed through the crossroads ahead of her in an eyeblink, ferrying its passenger out of sight before she could get their attention. Ceniza sighed with disappointment as the horned Pokémon skidded away.

With no other leads to pursue, Ceniza followed after the Mount Pokémon and hoped for the best. The trotting of cloven hooves against stone waxed and waned as she attempted to match the creature's pace and trace its steps through the maze. Ceniza turned down a narrow street, and as soon as she made it, the trail went cold as the sound of Gogoat's footfalls faded into silence.

Feeling weak of spirit, but never of body, Ceniza felt disappointed in herself. Oricorio's

disapproving stare didn't quite help — but in hard times, the flame must always keep burning!

“Minor setback, Oricorio! We'll get past this. Juuuust gotta keep trying alleyways... we'll be FIIIIINE!”

Ceniza elected to keep walking. She passed under a vine-covered trellis, past rows of carefully-sculpted plane trees, and came to the raised edge of a shallow canal where tiny Surskit skated over the small blue waves rolling on the water's surface. Ceniza picked a direction and followed the canal's length until it passed into a low tunnel, beneath a building, and out of sight. Not that far away, however... someone else was about to cross paths with them.

A lanky man crossed his arms over his chest as he leaned on one foot against the side of a nearby building. Behind him was a large sign advertising the Lumiose Reconstruction Project along with a map detailing future expansions to the sprawling city. A Venonat slept on the ground next to him, its fluffy purple body shrinking and expanding as it breathed deeply. From beneath the beak of the man's dark hoodie, a scruffy face and tired eyes were visible. The corners of his mouth curled upward in a slight smirk as his narrow pupils took note of Ceniza, who had just walked into the street. The past streets did not happen to have that many people, so the dancer was partially relieved... and a little concerned.

The skinny man loomed over Ceniza's 165cm frame in much the same way Prism Tower stretched above the city. The conscious reminder of her height filled her with a sudden feeling of vulnerability. With an awkward cough, Ceniza tried to walk the other way, before the lanky man acknowledged the unfortunate tourist.

(Two points.)

The man gave a lazy wave with a gloved hand. “Ah, ‘allo, leetle chum!” His voice is a scratchy baritone, and his words are drenched in a thick Kalosian accent. “I ‘ave not seen you around bee-fore. You must be new ‘ere, non?”

Ceniza forced a smile, still feeling somewhat intimidated. Oricorio stared daggers into the man already, not letting herself feel lesser than anyone. “U-Um... sí, it's my first time in Lumiose. I, uh, got carried away..”

(Three points.)

The man chuckled through his pursed lips. “I ‘ave an eye for zis beez-i-ness, y'know. Not many people would zink to go swimming down zere.” The man pushed away

from the wall and takes a step forward. “Not unless you can turn into an eety-beety Finneon.” He placed a hand over his heart and gestured to the sleeping Venonat. “But! I am a good neighbor, and my leetle buddy here loves helping people. We can guide you back to ze main streets. Taxis, Gogoat, wherever you want to go! I do zis out of ze, ‘ow you say, ze kindness of my heart!”

He offered Ceniza his hand. The man smelled like he was carrying an ashtray in his back pocket. “What do you say, my leetle chum? I shall be your tour guide for ze day!”

Having gotten a general bad vibe from Jacques, Ceniza shook her head and tried to turn him down as nicely as possible.

“I-I think I can find my way back on my own... ¡muchas gracias!”

With a fast walk, Ceniza went into the next alleyway. She walked, and she walked, one alley into another... and suddenly, she was right back in the shady man’s face again! Shaking her head, Ceniza tried once again, heading in the opposite direction... She resorted to checking her smartphone for directions, which for her was often a last resort, since she preferred discovering new places on her own — but unfortunately, due to a nearby blackout, there was no phone service in the area! Ceniza proceeded blindly, and ended up in front of the man once again.

With a tired sigh, Ceniza admitted defeat, recognising that without this man’s help, she’d keep walking in endless, aimless circles... and literally ALL other (metaphorical) avenues had been exhausted.

“V-Vaya vaya, I guess I’m back here again, huh...?” Ceniza piped up, trying to give this man the benefit of the doubt as she wondered why he had even stayed here for what seemed like 10 minutes, not even changing position at all. “Turns out, I might have to take you on your offer after all, buen señor.” Oricorio looked exasperated as she facepalmed.

“A very good decision,” the man grinned. “Yes, very good, you will see. My friends, zey call me Black Jacques,” here he really rolled the *J* for emphasis, *Zzzzha-, Jqcques*.

He whistled sharply, and Venonat leapt to its feet and shook itself awake. “And zis is my buddy, Venonat.” The Insect Pokémon wiggled its long antennae in Ceniza’s direction and bounced on the tips of its feet.

Black Jacques thumbed his pockets and raised an eyebrow as he waited for Ceniza to

introduce yourself.

“I’m Ceniza,” the dancer replied, “and this is Oricorio. We’re from Paldea!” Oricorio didn’t even stop to tweet at Jacques. She kept stabbing her eyes into the shady man. Ceniza was about to ask why exactly they call him “Black” Jacques, but the sight of Venonat distracted her.

“Awww! You’re adorable! Hey there, pequeñín!” Ceniza squatted down to check on Venonat as it approached her with a deceptively cheery disposition.

(Two points.)

At its Trainer’s command, Venonat raised its antennae high into the air and began hopping down the road. Ceniza and Black Jacques followed after it at a comfortable pace. As the party navigated the city, Black Jacques began to probe you with questions.

“So what brings a beautiful lady such as yourself to ze city today? Seeing ze sights? You are a Trainer, non? Are you on your way to challenge ze Gym Leader? What about ze Battle Institute? Tell me! Beneath zis hood, I am all ears.”

Ceniza replied to the compliment with a hearty –and in truth, rather concerned– chuckle, not trusting Jacques’ flattery at face value, but also not trying to brush him off, as he was likely her only way back to the main streets.

“Well, I came here mostly to catch a break from work... but I definitely wanted to watch this year’s Lumiose Conference, which will take place here two days from now. Diantha’s gonna be there! It’s gonna be spectacular, I can tell! Plus, I gotta get to know some agents, make a name for myself in the contest business... you know how it is.”

Oricorio tweeted happily for the first time in around 15 minutes. The Dancing Pokémon didn’t trust Jacques one bit, but thinking about the upcoming contest did make her happy.

(Three points.)

Jacques eyed Ceniza up and down and nodded. “It is no surprise, really. Beautiful people come to ze most beautiful Region of Kalos for a reason. Pretty people are like a horde of Exeggcute. So what does zat say about me, zen, ah?” He laughed at his own joke. “You must tell me your secrets, leetle chum. Zey say I am not stylish enough for

ze finer establishments.” He gestured at his own wardrobe, from his dark black hoodie down to his grey pants and black shoes. “Do you believe zat? Not stylish enough!”

“I-I, uh...” Ceniza didn’t want to outright insult Jacques to his face, but she agreed with this to a degree. The man was a giant fashion disaster! She could write a whole book with how much wrong there was with Jacques’ outfit, but she didn’t want to be too destructive. “Trying out new colours is a good place to start. I get that Black Jacques is your thing, but maybe try... Blue Jacques? How about Purple Jacques? You could match your style with Venonat that way!”

“Shu zink so?” Jacques inquired, with a chuckle. “Perhaps I shuld give it a try...”

“Yeah! An outfit is a HUGE part of your contest performance. It’s not just about what you wear, your clothes are powered by your attitude and your attitude is boosted by your clothes... it’s kinda like a feedback loop, you get me?”

Jacques stared on with a smirk, looking a little too invested for comfort. “...oui, go on.”

“H-Huh...” Ceniza didn’t quite expect Jacques to let her talk this much. She felt that he was staring way too hard and not particularly listening out of genuine interest, but the conversation was getting a little awkward, so she kept talking a little longer.

“See, contests are about showing off your self-expression. You’re making art on a big stage! The stage is your canvas, and when your partner’s with you, its moves, the space itself, your clothes, and your physicality... they’re all tools for your performance. And a performance is only as good as the performers! You’ve gotta know what you’re trying to show the audience, what kind of impression you wanna make, what they want them to take home after the show... but you also want to have fun! The best performers are the ones that have the most fun out there. And... and...”

Ceniza looked into Jacques’ face again. He was making the exact same face! A glint of frustration showed in the dancer’s face, when she recognised this was going nowhere. A conversation is a two-way street, and she felt boxed into a dead end! She shook her head, and decided to try and turn the tables.

“Actually, Jacques... contests are my thing, but what’s yours?” Ceniza asked succinctly, trying to move on with a somewhat abrupt transition.

(Two points.)

“Ah, me? I am just a simple jardinier. I water ze feesh and feed ze plants,” he waved Ceniza off dismissively, “I’m nobody, really. My buddy Venonat? Far too sensitive for me to be a proper Trainer, no. Oh, how poor little Venonat hates getting in fights. We are not so different, my Pokémon and I. I like to keep things friendly, always.”

Ceniza nodded along... she didn’t entirely buy the peaceful act from Jacques, but it was a little reassuring to hear at first. She wondered what a gardener was doing in that alleyway back there, and why he stayed there for so long, anyway...

“Oh, okay. That’s cool... reminds me of someone I used to know. I’m sure you tend to lovely flowers every day.” Ceniza answered with a smile, maybe dropping her guard down a little.

“Shure do, mon ami. Just like now.”

“Oh shush, you.” The unexpected compliment got to Ceniza a little this time, who couldn’t handle that quick shot of charisma from Jacques as readily as his usual flattery. The redness in her face clearly showed, and Oricorio shook her head in disapproval. Jacques shot the bird a glance, and they both knew they were in competition, unbeknownst to the blushing Ceniza. “I’m not exactly a battler either. Dancing and contests are more my style. I can battle from time to time, but I don’t enjoy it as much as my usual work.”

Jacques nodded along, his smirk flaring up as he confirmed Ceniza’s non-combative nature.

Soon, the group found itself passing by a small park. As they walked under the shade of a pear tree, a small Swirlix tumbled out of the branches with a bronze skinned fruit in its mouth and scampered away on its stubby hindlegs. Three more Swirlix pursued the first, their lightweight cottony bodies gliding through the air on a stiff breeze.

Jacques watched them with a sly smirk. “Some Pokémon have big eyes and small stomachs,” he said, “and zen we have zese leetle creatures who have big stomachs and tiny brains! Zat is why I like my dear Venonat—big eyes, big brain, tiny stomach!”

He turned to Ceniza. “Tell me, of all your Pokémon, which one do you like ze most? I do not mean which one runs ze fastest or punches hardest, no! Which one really speaks to you?”

Ceniza didn’t even think about it, petting Oricorio as she stood on her partner’s shoulder. “It’s gotta be my dear Ori! It’s not to play favourites or anything, but she’s stuck with me through thick and thin! We go way back, too. She was my first partner.”

Oricorio tweeted happily, returning Ceniza’s gesture, but she still seemed uncomfortable when Jacques got up close.

Jacques smiled, staring down Oricorio on Ceniza’s shoulder. “Ahh, y’know, I am somezing of a traveler myself. Zis one is not from here at all! Buuuut I guess it makes senze, shu bozh are foreigners. How did shu meet?”

Ceniza’s eyes lit up, remembering a special time from years ago — her childhood.

“Back in Artazón, there’s a special dance tradition. My mother was a great star in Artazón-style dancing, and the tradition states that a dancer must be accompanied by three partners: a drummer with a wooden box, a guitarist, and a passionate Pokémon! Oricorio is a special Pokémon — they love dancing, and hundreds of years ago, when they were first being imported out of the Alola region, they started learning and adopting dance styles from all around the world. At first, Oricorio only knew the Pa’u style from Alola, but the species adapted the Sensu style after the Kimono Girls from Johto started featuring them in their theatre plays, then the Pom-Pom style after Unovan cheerleader teams first brought them into their performances, and most importantly for us, the Baile style was inspired by our own Artazón-style performances!”

Jacques made the same frustratingly blank, yet exasperatingly smug face as before. “Oh, but I zought zey learned to danse from ze nectar of ze flowers?”

“That’s a curious case,” Ceniza elaborated. “It’s believed that the Oricorio species communicates with nectar. When an Oricorio passes through a flower field and drinks nectar, they leave some of their passionate energy around them for the nearby flowers

to catch. When another Oricorio with a different style drinks from these flowers, they'll be imbued with the energy from the last Oricorio that passed through, and they find the rhythm and energy so infectious that they can't help but dance along! Oricorio are incredibly adaptive and very quick learners, but they are also very dedicated to their craft. This is the only way for them to entirely change styles. Some Oricorio like switching it up every once in a while, and some stick with the same style for life."

"What about shur little ami?" Jacques asked, raising his eyebrow with curiosity. Oricorio did not seem pleased.

"Well, my mother had an Oricorio before me. She started breeding them after her retirement, and when I was little, all I wanted was to be like her! I started copying her dance moves, I watched her old recordings and listened to all her music! She was a little hesitant, 'cause a dancer's life is kinda hard, especially these days... but when I was 8, she entrusted me with a leftover egg from her last breeding process. She told me that, if I raised it with care, I could keep it. And after a few weeks, Ori was born! We've been inseparable ever since."

"How lovely..." Jacques nodded in appreciation. It was a heartwarming story. "Did shu say a danser's life is hard?"

"Bueno..." Ceniza looked dejected. "Artazón-style dancing is going into a bit of a slump. Shows aren't as common as they used to be, children aren't learning to dance like that anymore... I guess kids up in the north are more into rap these days, but I digress. Ori and I have been carving a way for ourselves by finding spare gigs here and there, and the older folk are happy to relive the old days... but what we REALLY want is to make it big! And contests are the way to go for us. It's not the same as a musical performance, but we always bring so much of ourselves to every contest that it comes naturally to us. Plus, we're never alone. We have other partners on our side, friends and family... we're ready to eat up the whole world!"

Before she knew it, Ceniza found herself walking down a wide street lined with ornate black lampposts. On each tall lamp, two wrought iron bars curled outward in the shape of a fleur-de-lis. High above her head, dozens of Starly loudly chirped among themselves atop a crisscrossing net of string lights stretching over the street. One of the Starly descended from the hanging lights and perched on the pointed tip of a lamppost cover to get a closer look at Ceniza and Oricorio as they walked by. After a few moments, the lamp's fleur-de-lis decorations suddenly sprung upward and pinned the Starly in place. The rest of the Starly flock scattered into the air as the lamp flared to life with a dim purple flame. The disguised Lampent opened its beady yellow eyes and prepared to

burn the life out of its captured prey.

The Starly cried out in fear and pain as the predating Lampent's flames lit up, threatening to cook the poor little Pokémon alive. Ceniza caught wind of the situation, and was immediately sympathetic to the victimised Starly.

"Oh no! That poor thing!" An expression of sorrow swiftly shifted into a gaze of determination, as Ceniza pointed to the Lampent up ahead. "Oricorio, quick! Air Slash!" As she cried out, Oricorio flew off of her Trainer's shoulder, chirping menacingly as the Dancing Pokémon approached her target before flapping her wings with great strength, unleashing a gust of slashing wind that blew away the Lampent's heat momentarily and struck it right in the face, forcing it to drop the Starly, which quickly flew back towards its flock.

"¡Bien! Now, let's pounce on the opportunity..." Ceniza rummaged in her Litten badge for a spare Poké Ball to try and catch the Lampent and add it to her troupe of Fire-types, but it had already vanished before she could throw one or launch a follow-up attack with Oricorio. Ceniza, once again, sighed with defeat, as she signaled for Oricorio to come back to the backside of her hand, like a Bird Keeper would.

"Phew... Starly's safe, but a Chandelure would've been pretty neat to have! Oh well, Coco's got us covered in terms of Fire/Ghost types, I guess. You did really well, Ori! Buen trabajo." Oricorio chirped with pride, as Ceniza patted the avian Pokémon's head curls. "¡Olé, olé, mi Ori!" Ceniza continued this for around half a minute before Jacques interjected.

"I zought shu vere no fighter...?" Jacques inquired, now doubting his previous insight into Ceniza's willingness to battle.

"Maybe battle class wasn't my best subject in school, but I wasn't just gonna stand and watch as that poor Starly got hurt — or worse! That Lampent could've had Flame Absorb, so I had to make sure to attack with a move that wasn't Fire-type."

Jacques now considered that he may have underestimated Ceniza. What she didn't have in combative spirit she made up for in compassion, and she was clearly knowledgeable enough about battling and strategy to hold her own when needed. A little discomfort showed in his expression as he looked down at Venonat, almost as if asking it a question with just his gaze.

"Uh... you good?" Ceniza tilted her head in confusion as Oricorio jumped from her

partner's hand to her shoulder.

Jacques blinked in surprise and looked back at them. "O-Oh, oui. Desolée. Let's go on. Or allez-nous, as we say."

When the moment had passed, Jacques tugged at the loose collar of his undershirt and continued on leading Ceniza through the winding alleyways of Lumiose.

"Ze world, she is so vast," Jacques said, "she can be so dangerous. Maybe you have an air of danger too, says I. You must be getting into trouble all ze time, non?"

"All the time? Not really. I've known trouble here and there, but not often. Mesagoza is a big city, and Paldea is an even bigger region! So I guess it's kind of impossible to not get into trouble eventually. As for me, I've had run-ins with Team Star once or twice, but nothing I can't handle! Besides, that's all in the past now. I just live a normal life in a big city, trying to make it big someday... you know how it is."

(3 points, because this answer is kinda in the middle but I'm gonna be fair with it.)

By now, Ceniza was starting to feel a little more comfortable around Jacques. She found him to be a good ear to talk to, and even Oricorio seemed a little more calm. Jacques capitalised on this, like the sky Nickit he was.

"Oh? Non non non, I do not know vat ze life of a danseur is like. Tell, tell!"

"Bueno, I get up early, grab a coffee with Oricorio, check my emails, look up the next listings for auditions, then the next listings for local open-invite contests... the contest scene in Paldea is fairly small compared to Hoenn, Sinnoh and Kalos, but there's quite a few underground and indie see shows! After that I might go buy groceries, or maybe I'll shop for some new clothes, or I'll go visit Jacinta, my mom's tailor friend... sometimes Hassel, my former teacher, might ask me to substitute for his art class if he's busy with dragon clan stuff... I do a lotta stuff! I keep busy. O-Oh! I have to exercise a lot, too. I forgot, I have to get my morning run in before I buy groceries! Yeah, if I don't get my run in, I might put on a kilo or two from all the churros I scarf down, and that would be DISASTROUS! When I perform, I wear a special dress styled after one of my mother's classic dresses. You know how TIGHT those things are?! Everyone would notice! I might even get asked weird questions about it or I'll get weird looks and I'm NOT gonna go through all that again! I have to look my best, work my best, live my best! Day in, day out, 24/7, 365!"

Oricorio noticeably tweeted in tune with this chant Ceniza recited, almost as if they had a little ritual between each other. Jacques was floored by their level of effort and coordination.

“Oui, I see, I see... and vhat of shur family? Shur mozer?”

“I grew up with just her. Dad sailed away a long time ago and never came back. Big storm took his crew. I barely remember him now. Anyway! Mom was a big star, back when Artazón dancing was popular! But she slowed down after she had me. Nowadays, she just breeds her Oricorio and ships them all over the world. She’s also a bit of a dance therapist! Sometimes, people from far away ask her to help teach their Pokémon dance moves, like Swords Dance, Teeter Dance, or maybe even Quiver Dance! I wonder if she could teach Fiery Dance... I’ve always wanted to be like her. Even away from the spotlight, she’s so strong, and she helps light other people’s fires... mom shines bright every day! That’s why I gotta keep going. Right, Ori?”

Oricorio gave a proud chirp, feeling accomplished and ready for anything. All this talk of dancing was starting to make Jacques dizzy, but little did he know, this wasn’t even the half of it.

As the group walked, they passed by a street performer sitting on an overturned fruit crate in front of an apartment building’s oak door entrance. While the old grey haired musician played “Dors, Mon Amour” on his bulky accordion, a pair of Spinda danced an unsteady waltz together in the road, stumbling up and down the boulevard as they held each other’s paws.

“Aww, that’s adooooorable! Let’s go check ‘em out, Ori!” Ceniza piped up with excitement. Oricorio tweeted a tune in agreement.

“B-But wait, ze path...” Jacques hesitated. “Meh, I’m already lost. Might as well have some fun with it!”, retorted the Paldean beauty, already walking over to the street performer.

Despite Jacques’ efforts to avoid the scene and continue along his desired path, Ceniza was interested, and she approached the scene with a smile. The swaying dance partners stumbled toward Ceniza and tripped on a discarded potion bottle. The two Pokémon flailed wildly before grabbing onto Ceniza’s legs for balance. She gasped, finding this outcome a little sudden, but she helped both of them up with a smilez After finding their footing (to the best of their unflattering ability), the Spinda reached for Ceniza’s hands and looked up at her expectantly.

“Oh my! ¡Vaya, vaya! You want me to join in? With pleasure!” Ceniza stepped between the two, holding both Spinda’s hands as she spun with them, almost redirecting their dance with her own highly coordinated footwork. Oricorio jumped from Ceniza’s shoulder and flew in place next to her partner, overseeing the Spinda with curiosity. At some point, she helped both Spinda spin in place as she switched into her typical Artazón routines, with rhythmically tapping feet and hypnotically swirling arm swings. As she did, Oricorio joined in with her as they both danced around each other in a perfectly choreographed combination. Both Spinda were confused at these unfamiliar moves, but they spun around the two, trying to mimic Ceniza and Oricorio’s movements with little success. The performer was amused by this, and not just him — a few bystanders began leaving some coins, believing Ceniza was working with the man.

Jacques watched their performance for a while longer and sighed with second-hand embarrassment, finding the situation to be very out of his comfort zone. However, the music eventually stopped, and so did the dance. Ceniza and Oricorio said their goodbyes to the Spindas as they approached the performer. “That was lovely!”, Ceniza remarked. “Ah, merci,” said the man. “You helped me out, actually.” His accent was noticeably less thick than Jacques’.

“Oh! I didn’t mean to take away the spotlight from you or anything — I’m a dancer. I do these things.” Ceniza seemed a little sorry to have essentially hijacked the street performer’s way of life momentarily. “Here, let me add some sand to the Palossand for your trouble — it’s a shame people like you have to end up on the streets.”

Ceniza grabbed a few coins from a small purse in her Litten bag — around 500¥, and delicately left them in the performer’s hat. He seemed quite happy. “Merci beacoup, mademoiselle. I wish the world could appreciate the arts as much as we do — and don’t worry. You are quite welcome to dance along with my partners. My music is for everyone to enjoy.”

The passionate dancing duo waved the man goodbye and returned to Jacques’ side.

“Was zat fun?” Jacques asked with a coy smile. He didn’t want to let Ceniza know how impatient he was getting. Ceniza nodded. “¡Absolutamente! It’s not often that I get to share my love of music with people so casually, so I’m glad we gave that a try..”

“Ah, so jolly... dansing in ze middle of ze day, wizout a care in ze world... it reminds me of ze simple joys of love,” he said. “Do you still remember shur first love? Zose new and exciting feelings? Zere is no shame in confessing to your good friend, Black Jacques. We

have all loved and lost before, non?”

(Two points.)

Ceniza found that to be a little personal, but humoured Jacques anyway. “My first love... funny story, actually. During my second to last year at Naranja Academy, I started dating this guy — Trigo was his name. He loved flowers, just like you and your gardening.”

“Is zat so?” Jacques raised an eyebrow with interest. “He had good taste in zem to go with you.”

Ceniza chuckled. “Gracias. As I was saying, he really liked flowers, and he wanted to raise a whole garden... I learned a lot about Grass-type Pokémon thanks to him. But not everyone appreciated his passion as much as I did... he was very harshly bullied at the time. I stood up for him, I talked to the teachers, I supported him all the way... but eventually, he couldn’t take it anymore. He did something I couldn’t look over.”

Jacques seemed curious, but Ceniza’s tone got somber as she continued. “In Naranja, there’s this... gang. They’re called Team Star. They drive modified vehicles powered by Revavroom, and engage in vandalism and violence... but most importantly, they especially like to bring in people that were bullied. “Bullying the bullies”, they call it. Trigo... he got violent. Not with me — but he had this double life that he hid from me. One day I found out about all this when I went to one of their bases to rescue a friend’s stolen Pokémon... Some other kids handled most of the heavy lifting, but I had my run-ins with some of the grunts. At some point, one of them took off his helmet, and it was him.”

“And vhat did shu du?”

“We talked. He apologised. He was just feeling so hurt... so rejected by the world. I told him I didn’t care what people thought of him, that I loved him for who he was... but Trigo clearly didn’t feel that way for himself. He thought if we went out together, he’d feel more confident in himself, that a girl could magically fix any problems he had. But I couldn’t do that just by being there. I put in a lot of work, I supported him every step of the way! But he lied to me. He betrayed me. And I can’t see someone the same way after they do that... Trigo wasn’t actually the guy from my class I fell in love with after that day. He was like a stranger to me. So I broke things off. All things considered, he took it well... but I don’t really know what he’s up to these days.”

“Vhat about ze good times? Ze times shu shared zat made shur love worth living?”

“Hmm... yeah, I won’t say it was bad while it lasted. We used to travel around after school, seeing the sights of Paldea, riding on his Tropius and finding the best flowers... Trigo loved the Artazón Flower Festival. The dancing, the food, the scenery... ah, I remember his Sunflora! Poor thing, I really hope Trigo’s not in that crowd anymore — anyway. Our favourite place in the whole region was the Tagtree Thicket. We’d spend hours there after class, helping Pokémon in need, gathering seeds, or just talking... I was like his conservation assistant. It was very fun. That passion for something he loved so much helped me share my own passions with him. We were like Falinks in a line. I guess... I miss those times.”

“Do shu zink it is still possible to love like zat again?”

“These days, I think I’m a little too busy to pick up a boyfriend. I’m broke, and I need to make a name for myself... and honestly? I’m a bit worried that this kind of thing will happen to me again. My relationships haven’t always worked out... but you know what? I think it’s not impossible! Maybe one day.”

(Three points.)

(As per the writer’s in-thread suggestion to use altered thresholds, Jacques will initiate a battle. In this case, he will use his intermediate team.)

The roads and thoroughfares all began to bleed together as the sun began to set below the urban horizon. Ceniza was still not sure of where she was, or where she’s been, or if any of the posters and signs advertising Quasartico Incorporated were ones that she had already seen before.

Jacques was getting impatient. Ceniza had been so open with him all this time... but he couldn’t quite get a read on her. Was she actually a pushover? Or was she more trouble than she’d be worth? He pondered whether to continue with the plan or not, considering he might be at a disadvantage fairly quickly if he didn’t play his next cards right. In the end, Jacques reasoned that he had wasted far too much time dilly-dallying with this broad. He was gonna get something out of this, for sure.

“Do not worry, leetle chum,” Jacques said, “we’re almost there now.” For Ceniza, each hour had made it even harder to guess what “there” even meant at that point.

“E-Espera...” Ceniza said, with apprehension in her voice. “Almost there? Where exactly is “there” in this case?” Jacques ignored her question. Oricorio gave a concerned tweet.

Venonat took point, and looked back at Ceniza. It wanted her to follow.

Black Jacques ignored the question and began to lag behind, as Ceniza followed Venonat. “My poor feet, how zey ache,” he grumbled. “Do not worry about me, leetle chum, your destination is just around that corner now! Hurry, follow Venonat!”

“That’s...” Ceniza stopped for a moment. “Where exactly are you taking me now, Jacques?” She couldn’t really get out of the situation, but the dancer’s heart was starting to sink, as the gut feeling from earlier began to creep its way back towards Ceniza’s senses. There wasn’t much she could do but follow Venonat now, however...

Venonat quickened its pace and dashed around a blind corner. Following Venonat lead Ceniza to, rather predictably... a dead end at the back of a boxed-in alleyway. There were no windows, no doors, and no witnesses.

“¡Maldita sea!” Ceniza cursed, stomping her foot. “I should’ve known this was some kind of setup! Let’s just get outta here before —“

Black Jacques stood in Ceniza’s way when she attempted to turn around. A wolfish grin creeps across his face. Ceniza, however, did not seem pleased in the slightest. What Jacques expected to be fear in her eyes turned out to be anger.

“Tch! What game are you making me play here, Jacques?!” She proclaimed with fiery frustration.

He shrugged. “How silly—we must have taken a wrong turn at zat last crossroad. Oh well. If you go back and take a left, zen you will be back in civilization once more.” Ceniza raised an eyebrow. “Should I believe that? Why didn’t we just do that from the start?”

Jacques didn’t move out of the way. “But... I am so tired, I zink I will stay here.” He reached into his hoodie pocket and pulled out a bright red-topped Pokéball. “In Kalos, it is a courtesy to tip zose who have done a service for you. Comprendre? What riches can shu offer shur dear friend Jacques for all his hard work?”

Ceniza rolled her eyes and sighed. “Should’ve known you were one of those kinds of scammers. Sorry to tell you this, amigo, but I’m just as lost as I was before — if not even more now! What exactly have you done for me today?”

“I’ve been shur ear to listen, “ Jacques began to list. “A friend, a companion, a

chaperone... don't I deserve something for zat? Maybe... 1,500,000¥? Shuuust a little tip."

"Are you out of your mind?! Who even HAS that kind of money on hand? While doing TOURISM?!"

Jacques sighed with disappointment, as he twirled the Poké Ball in his hand. His face turned grim as he scowled.

"Shur wallet and possessions vill have to do zen. Go, Palpitoad!"

Jacques threw the Poké Ball, and with a burst of blue light, Palpitoad appeared, landing on the ground with a splash of water around its feet and threatening Ceniza. Oricorio tweeted with annoyance, but the Paldean beauty wasn't phased. She gave her partner a look as she rummaged through her Litten handbag once again.

"A Water-type... ah, I get what's going on here! You correctly assumed I use mostly Fire-types... but you don't scare me, "Black Jacques"! Give me a hand, Capsakid!"

Ceniza threw a Poké Ball of her own, and out popped Capsakid. He began to look around anxiously, growling at pretty much anything around, until he noticed the opponent.

"Keep your head in the game, Capsakid! I know you don't battle often, but I REALLY need some help right now!"

Capsakid turned to Ceniza and nodded, acknowledging her plight. He looked focused, taking on a tango-esque extreme pose as he stared down Palpitoad, who was already splashing around menacingly.

Jacques wanted to chuckle at the sight of such a puny Pokémon... but this one was green. A Grass-type? If it was really a Grass-type, he was in a terrible spot with his opening! Jacques had prepared for situations like these, however.

"Palpitoad! Use Sludge Wave!"

Palpitoad reared back, and its cheeks began to puff up as its mouth began secreting, and being filled with, some kind of liquid. Ceniza knew this could be bad — that was a Poison-type attack!

"Get out of the way, Capsakid!"

In time, Capsakid jumped with a twirl right as Palpitoad spit out a torrent of purple, noxious sludge out of its mouth. Ceniza capitalised on Capsakid's small air time with another order.

“Let's make the sun shine! Sunny Day!”

With a choreographed ballet twirl, Capsakid did some kind of cheer in the air before landing at one side of the alleyway. As he landed, the Habanero Pokémon began to radiate heat around itself, and for a moment, Jacques could swear that the clouds had parted. He protested, knowing that hitting the rest of Ceniza's team with super-effective damage would be difficult for some time, as the heat that Capsakid gave off would most likely evaporate some of the water used in Water-type moves.

“Not bad, not bad!” Jacques taunted. “Use Uproar!”

Palpitoad began to bob and weave, as the sphere-like structures on its body began to make a croaking sound. The croaking got louder and louder, causing Ceniza to cover her ears in discomfort, and Capsakid had been struck fairly hard by the sound waves.

“Hang in there!”, cried out Ceniza, trying to give Capsakid some encouragement. In no time, the Grass-type quickly recomposed itself, getting ready to retaliate.

“We've covered our bases! Use Bullet Seed!”

Jacques let out an audible “oh, non” as he quickly signaled for Palpitoad to dodge. Capsakid reared his head back, gathering some energy in his mouth, before running towards Palpitoad in a mad dash. Bursts of green light glittered out of Capsakid's mouth as he began to spit shining, speeding green pellets all over the alleyway. To his credit, Jacques was good at directing Palpitoad on movement paths. Palpitoad, while still using Uproar, managed to disorient Capsakid enough to throw off his aim.

“Keep firing, Capsakid! We've almost got 'em!”

Ceniza didn't lose faith in her partner. And that faith was well-placed, as Palpitoad couldn't run forever. The Water/Ground type jumped between the walls, ran around, and kept Capsakid guessing — but eventually, the spraying bullets ricocheted, and managed to strike Palpitoad hard in its stomach. Capsakid kept up the assault, pumping his opponent with grass pellets without mercy until he felt too winded to keep firing.

“¡Bien hecho, Capsakid!” Ceniza cheered for her verdant partner’s success. Capsakid got excited as well, probably too excited to notice that Palpitoad was starting to recover.

Jacques rushed to his Pokémon’s side, consternation showing in his eyes. Palpitoad was barely holding on, eventually rushing back to its feet to strike back with a vengeance.

“No more playing around, leetle buddy! Sludge Wave!”

Palpitoad jumped around, using the overconfident and disoriented Capsakid’s situation to his detriment. The Grass-type turned around, surprised to see Palpitoad trying the same maneuver from before.

“That was good, but let’s focus on the battle, Capsakid! Dodg—“

Before Ceniza could signal the order to Capsakid, Jacques did some kind of gesture, and Palpitoad fired sooner than it did last time, fully striking poor Capsakid with its vomit-inducing gunk, the Poison energies seeping into Capsakid and damaging him.

“Oh, no! Capsakid!” Ceniza gasped in concern. Capsakid cried out in pain, but seemed to be holding on. Not for long, however, as his body seemed to spasm every once in a while. Capsakid was slouched over, and it was clear to Ceniza that her partner was losing energy gradually —and fast.

“Hahahaha-HA!” Jacques chuckled from the other end of the alleyway, much to Ceniza’s dismay. “Shur leetle friend is most likely poisoned! Zat’s all I needed to seal zis fight. It’s a matter of time!”

Ceniza grit her teeth, looking at Capsakid. The little Pokémon looked back at her, and they both nodded in agreement. Capsakid did a twirl and posed, looking as sharp as ever, despite being in what was likely a lot of pain. Ceniza pointed her finger forward, as if to challenge Jacques directly.

“Double tempo, full force! SOLAR BEAM!!”

Capsakid clapped and raised his hands as green energy began to pour from all around, pooling in his hands as a sphere of light that began to glow and grow in both strength and brightness.

Jacques found this move perplexing. He chuckled, not losing sight of his victory. “Solar Beam? Hon hon hon! Don’t shu know how long zat takes to charge? I’ll be done with shu

long before shu take even half a minute for a full charge! Palpitoad — finish zis with anozer Sludge Wave!”

Palpitoad reared back, getting ready to unload another poisonous blast... before Jacques' demeanour changed entirely.

“Oh non... ze sun.”

Before Palpitoad could get off one more shot, Capsakid shrieked with the heat of battle as he pushed his arms in front of him, releasing an intense, verdant laser beam that entirely engulfed Palpitoad, leaving in its wake a trail of heat, a pile of smoke...

...and a fainted Palpitoad.

“¡Así se hace! Great work, Capsakid!” Ceniza patted her partner's head, who seemed just as excited to have succeeded as his Trainer was, despite the sickness he was currently experiencing. She patted his head lots, while Jacques grumbled to himself at the other side of the battlefield.

“Hmpf... shu did well, Palpitoad. We were outmatched this one time.” Jacques returned Palpitoad to its Poké Ball, as he took out another one. “And it looks like shur ami isn't in ze best shape, so I know someone who'll make zis easy — go, Clauncher!”

Out of the Poké Ball emerged Clauncher, which seemed eager to battle, already snapping its pincers at the sight of Capsakid, who was doing his best to hold on.

“Let's start this one on the right foot — Capsakid! Pump 'em full of seeds!”

Capsakid ran up to Clauncher, and began firing a barrage of Bullet Seeds. Now more focused than before, Jacques stopped commentating to give Clauncher non-verbal cues on where to dodge with his arms and body language. Capsakid wasn't letting up, but a smirk showed in Jacques' face all the same. Clauncher was keeping Capsakid guessing, as the Water-type was the faster of the two.

“Don't give an inch, Capsakid!” Shouted Ceniza, attempting to inspire her partner's fire to burn as much as her own. But due to her boundless optimism, or her passionate enthusiasm... or perhaps both, she didn't notice that Capsakid's candle was burning at both ends. Eventually, the Habanero Pokémon struck true, knocking back Clauncher with super-effective might — but he was barely holding on.

“Shuuust makin’ sure. Aura Sphere.”

In a rather anticlimactic sequence of events, Clauncher summoned an orb of blue energy in its claw, and fired at Capsakid mercilessly, knocking it down in an instant.

“Capsakid! You alright?!” Ceniza rushed over to her partner, who was laying on the bricks, inert. A quick check of his face, as Ceniza crouched down, revealed that Capsakid was down for the count. The dancer sighed, got back up, and called him back to his Poké Ball. She smiled, in a bittersweet gesture.

“You did really well, Capsakid. You’re getting a treat after this.”

“So?” Jacques waited for Ceniza’s next move with an obnoxious grin. “Was I correct about zat being shur only Grass-type? Now shur defenseless against Clauncher!”

Ceniza shook her head. “I may train mostly Fire-types, but I’m still not scared of you! Time to party, Larvesta!”

Ceniza threw her second Poké Ball, revealing the impetuous, yet stoic Larvesta. She wriggled around for a moment, as if to stretch, before staring down her foe, Clauncher. There was a mutual understanding of the gravity of this battle between both opponents. Neither was going to budge an inch.

But someone was going to shoot first.

“Larvesta! Use Flame Charge!”

Engulfing herself in flames, the Torch Pokémon dashed towards Clauncher, striking it with a flaming tackle that was far too quick for Jacques to react to. Clauncher shrugged it off, however, as the Bug/Fire type kept rushing around the battlefield, leaving trails of flame behind herself.

“I see what shur playing. It’s a race, zen. Clauncher! Aqua Jet!”

Clauncher covered itself in rushing water as it, too, dashed around the battlefield at intense speeds, cutting off Larvesta’s aimless approach. Ceniza tried to say something, but the two Pokémon clashed so quickly that now she was on the other end of the situation. Both Pokémon collided and were knocked into opposite ends of the field, both showing some wear — but Larvesta had clearly come out the loser of that struggle.

“H-How are you keeping up with Larvesta’s growing speed like that?!”

“It’s simple, my leetle rose!” Jacques chuckled to himself. “While shur Larvesta may be boosting its speed with Flame Charge, moves like Aqua Jet let a Pokémon strike at unimaginable speeds for a short instant! What use is there to outspeeding me ze whole match, if shu can’t consistently outmaneuver me every time?!”

Ceniza grunted, showing clear signs of frustration. Larvesta was becoming faster and faster, but Clauncher could surpass any speed boost in short bursts. Plus, Aura Sphere was a homing move — there was no way she could throw off Clauncher’s aim with that one! Ever the quick thinker, Ceniza came up with a new angle for her strategy on the fly.

“Larvesta! Run in circles around Clauncher!”

Jacques raised an eyebrow in curiosity, as the burning missile that was Larvesta now circled Clauncher at blinding speeds, making the Water Gun Pokémon dizzy. Jacques was ready to give an order, but before he could make a move, Ceniza moved on to the next part of her plan.

“Now! Consecutive String Shots!”

Before Jacques could retort, Larvesta started spewing out webs all around Clauncher, effectively webbing it up and entirely pinning it to the ground, unable to move. Larvesta stopped as soon as her work was done, and Ceniza watched with excitement as Clauncher struggled to even move.

“That’s how it’s done! Beautiful work, Larvesta!”

“Clauncher!” Jacques shouted, not expecting this unorthodox strategy. “Get outta zere! Use... erm... darn, if only shu could learn Aqua Cutter!”

Ceniza capitalised on the momentum. “Let’s keep it up! Leech Life!”

Larvesta pounced on the webbed up Clauncher and bit into the side of its neck with surprisingly sharp jaws. Clauncher shrieked, and eventually Larvesta rolled away, looking refreshed and ready to pour on more gasoline to the proverbial fire.

“Non, non, non! We need some damage while I figure zis out — Clauncher! Aura Sphere!”

“Crap!” Ceniza protested, but no matter how much Larvesta tried to outrun the fierce projectile, it followed the Torch Pokémon and struck it in the back. “You can do it, Larvesta! Let’s get back on the Rapidash!”

Larvesta shook off the attack, but before she could look back, Clauncher had already freed itself from the web prison by using its pincers. The leftover Fighting-type energy had given Clauncher’s pincers a momentary burst of strength that allowed it to cut itself free.

“Nice, Clauncher! And now — Aqua Jet!”

“Dodge it, Larvesta!”

Larvesta steeled itself, attempting to spin out of the way of the move, but the splashing missile struck Larvesta too fast, leaving the Bug/Fire type reeling.

“Oh no!” Ceniza was upset for the wellbeing of Larvesta, but in the meantime, she had an idea. “So, you sure like to strike outta nowhere... Larvesta! Will-O-Wisp!”

“What?!” Jacques was surprised at the call of this move. He motioned for Clauncher to take a defensive position and dodge, as Larvesta channeled purple, wispy flames that flew off towards the Water type. However, since Larvesta’s speed was consistently higher than Clauncher’s, she was quicker on the draw, and Clauncher couldn’t avoid being struck by the spectral embers. It wasn’t as much of a direct attack... but the sheer spite of the flames had left a mark.

“Shoe’s on the other foot now, isn’t it?” Ceniza wasn’t as condescending as Jacques was earlier when he managed to poison Capsakid, but she was clearly happy with herself. Jacques could only take this as a bit of —frankly deserved— karma.

Clauncher attempted to shrug this off, but those burns stung. And they kept stinging. Jacques knew he had to try and turn this around. This was Water VS Fire, it was practically already won! But between Larvesta’s resilience, and her ways of sabotaging Clauncher’s offensive capabilities, this one was gonna be tough.

“Aqua Jet! Rush in at full speed!” Clauncher nodded as the water that surged around it momentarily calmed its burns, before rushing towards Larvesta with blinding speed.

“Flame Charge! Right back at ya!” Larvesta began to burn up, turning into a scorching projectile in her own right.

In no time, both bullets clashed in mid-air. The struggle created shockwaves, ripples in the air that burst all at once in a fraction of a second... and much like clashing samurai, both Pokémon landed at opposite ends of the field once again. Larvesta was winded... but Clauncher was left unable to battle.

“Way to go, Larvesta!” Ceniza cheered, running up to snuggle her insect partner, giving the Bug/Fire type a tight hug. Larvesta seemed satisfied with her accomplishment. Jacques groaned, kneeling down to check up on the knocked out Clauncher. “Oh vell,” he said between sighs, “shu can’t win zem all. Shu worked hard.” Jacques returned Clauncher to its Poké Ball.

“Shu might be more formidable zan I zought at first..” Jacques chuckled to himself. “Why, thanks!” Ceniza replied with a cheeky grin. She then shook her head, shifting her demeanor. “O-Oh no, wait, you’re still trying to mug me... is that all ya got?”

Larvesta waited expectantly for her next opponent. Jacques gestured to Venonat, who jumped in front of its Trainer, standing by for battle. The furry insect Pokémon shook its body around, attempting to appear intimidating. Larvesta wasn’t particularly phased.

“So your Venonat finally shows up!” Ceniza commented with amusement. “Let’s go, Larvesta! Use Flame Charge!”

With her call, Larvesta dashed in a blinding rush of flame towards Venonat, who couldn’t dodge in time, being sent flying by the high-speed burning tackle. “Let’s keep the momentum! String Shot!”

Larvesta steered, shooting several web shots at the fallen Venonat, who became ensnared in sticky webs.

Jacques snorted. “Shu zink zat vill work twice, ma fille? Venonat! Bite through the string with Poison Fang!”

Venonat’s fangs began to radiate a corrosive purple energy as it began to tear the webs to shreds in seconds, much to Ceniza and Larvesta’s dismay.

“Darn! Larvesta, we’ve gotta think of something else! Will-O-Wi—“

“Sleep Powder!” Jacques interrupted, using the moment to get a leg up on Ceniza and exploit her momentary lapse of confusion. Venonat pounced too quickly for Ceniza to

give an order. “O-Oh no! Dodge!” She cried, but it was too late, as Venonat shook its antennae and spread a cloud of scales and dust into Larvesta’s face, swiftly putting it to sleep. Ceniza bit her lip in frustration.

“Hon hon hon!” Jacques celebrated. “And now, shu are open for attack!” Venonat’s jaws snapped repeatedly with anticipation. Ceniza was in a pinch, and she knew it.

“Crap! Larvesta, wake up! Wake uuuup!” Even Oricorio, still on Ceniza’s shoulder, tweeted with concern. Jacques snapped his fingers, shooting his next order to Venonat. “Poison Fang!”

Venonat dug its mandibles into Larvesta, injecting poisonous energies into her as she woke up with stinging pain. “Shake ‘em off, Larvesta!” Ceniza commanded, as Larvesta shook her own body, shooting flaming scales all around herself and momentarily stunning Venonat, leaving enough time for the Bug/Fire type to sneak away. However, Larvesta seemed impaired by something.

“Hah! It would seem zat shur Larvesta is poisoned!” Jacques remarked, crossing his arms in a confident gesture. “How does zat feel? Ze shoe’s on ze ozer foot now, ma fille!”

“Again?! Just my luck!” Ceniza clenched her fists. Things didn’t seem good for Larvesta... but they both had to fight on. The fire inside Ceniza, the fire inside of her partners, wasn’t going to die out so easily!

“We’ve gotta recover, Larvesta! Leech Life!”

Larvesta shook her body with abandon, feeling battered from the previous battle and even more from this encounter. She sped up, attempting to lunge towards Venonat, but the opponent was prepared.

“Finish it! Psybeam!” With Jacques’ pointing finger, Venonat intercepted the reckless, speeding Larvesta, and fired a ray of mental waves at Larvesta, causing a colourful explosion. Ceniza held her breath, and when the dust cleared... Larvesta was down for the count.

“Deux-per-deux!”, Jacques remarked with accomplishment. Venonat returned to Jacques’ side, and he lightly pet his partner, which to Ceniza, that couldn’t possibly look healthy at all. She shook her head, feeling defeat once again. However, Ceniza’s smile didn’t fade this time.

“You did wonderful,” Ceniza said, complimenting the knocked out Larvesta. “We’ve gotten ‘em buttered up. We can finish the job!”

“Oh, is zat so?” Jacques inquired. Ceniza nodded with her same old cheery smile. “I think I know just the answer to this problem!” Ceniza rummaged in her Litten bag once again, before throwing out another Pokéball.

“Fuecoco! It’s your time to shine!” With a burst of light, the little Fire type came out to play, landing on the pavement with a light thud. He looked around, before noticing Venonat, who stared at Fuecoco intently. Fuecoco then turned to Ceniza and tilted his head with confusion, and she knelt down to talk to her partner.

“Sí, that’s the opponent,” Ceniza said. “Do your best out there, ‘kay?”

Fuecoco tilted his head in the opposite direction, gave a satisfied grumble, and then turned to face Venonat. Fuecoco didn’t quite seem all that aggressive, if anything Venonat might have thought its opponent would rather play than fight.

“Zat’s adoorable!” Jacques interjected with sarcasm. “It doesn’t even know where to look! Shu’ll fall for my trap easily. Venonat! Hit it with another Sleep Powder!”

Ceniza would’ve reacted with fear, but she seemed confident this time around. Venonat’s scales reached Fuecoco, who fell asleep while still standing on his hind legs. A ball of fiery mucus, almost like lava, started popping up on his snout with Fuecoco’s snores.

“No reaction? No problem. Poison Fang!” Venonat ran up to Fuecoco, but before the furry insect Pokémon could act, Fuecoco snored so loudly that he woke himself up, as if nothing had happened. Ceniza grinned, recognising that she had the upper hand now.

“Flamethrower! Point-blank!” Fuecoco’s lava bubble burst, as flames began to erupt from his mouth. Jacques gasped, not realising the mistake he had just made. “Venonat, NO!”, he cried, as Venonat was engulfed in a line of scorching embers, knocking it back.

“V-Vat was ZAT?!” Jacques exclaimed in utter shock. Ceniza crossed her arms, as she now took the role of the smug one in this match-up. “Tsk tsk! My dear little Fuecoco is so easy-going, that falling asleep in a battle is actually natural for him. Plus, he’s a loud one — you’ll see!”

Jacques raised up his sleeves, not knowing what to do next. Ceniza’s team was stumping

him. Partially due to type match-ups, but also because their personalities and strategies were throwing him for a loop. But he wasn't just going to throw all his day's work away!

"Tch... fine! Venonat! The gloves are off — Signal Beam!" Venonat nodded, and began to rub its antennae together, creating a cacophony of shuttering sounds that manifested as a line of waves composed of Bug-type energy, aimed straight for Fuecoco. Ceniza had to cover her ears, but she seemed ready for this.

"Showtime, Fuecoco! Let out that VOICE!"

Jacques blinked, not knowing at first what this order was, but he wouldn't take too long to learn. Fuecoco began to belt out an opera-like tune in a growling voice, which grew louder and louder, and eventually became waves of pure sound. The shockwaves clashed with the buzzing sound, and they both cancelled each other out for a moment.

"What?! Venonat! Fight back!" Jacques remained adamant on winning this sound battle, but he didn't know who he was going up against. Ceniza, still covering her ears and flinching from time to time, reassured her partner, whose voice was... not particularly pretty. "You're doing GREAT! Keep it up, Fuecoco!"

The resulting clash of sound waves ended with Venonat becoming exhausted from making its cricket sounds, and eventually being overcome by Fuecoco's booming Hyper Voice. Venonat stumbled, then fell over itself, knocked out.

"¡Buen trabajo, Fuecoco!" Ceniza cheered, clapping her hands for her partner, who waddled on over back to her for pets. Jacques had, once again, lost one of his Pokémon to this chick. Just who was she? For someone who wasn't particularly a battler, she was no slouch!

"Tch. Très bien! Merci, Venonat." With a sarcastic cheer, Jacques returned Venonat to its Poké Ball. "Shur gonna need a lot more zan zat to finish me off. Here's my next Pokémon!" Jacques threw another Poké Ball, bursting into an explosion of light as the speedy Ninjask appeared on the scene, shuffling around and dashing from one spot to the next. Fuecoco grumbled, staring at his new opponent with a blank smile.

"Let's start off on the right foot! Use Flamethrower!" Fuecoco reared back, blowing yet another line of flame towards his opponent. With a masterful wave of his hand, Jacques instructed Ninjask on where to dodge. Ninjask's speed was without equal, and the slow and mellow Fuecoco was no match for it. Fuecoco tired himself out, and Ninjask danced in the air with grace and blinding speed.

“Shur not ze only one zat can danse!” Jacques exclaimed. “Swords Dance!”

Ceniza shook her head as Shedinja began bursting around the alleyway, in a speedy choreography that sharpened its claws and made it ready to pounce at any moment. Fuecoco was still tuckered out from the blast. “Let’s take a breather,” Ceniza said, encouraging Fuecoco. “When you’re ready, let’s try to land another Flamethrower!”

Fuecoco snapped back to life, running around and trying to find his mark before blowing more flames. Ninjask dodged with no issue, and it danced and dashed with precision and ease — getting faster and faster each time.

“Crap... how are we gonna land anything on this guy?” Ceniza lamented with disappointment. Jacques chuckled. “Ninjask gets faster the longer it fights! You can’t get past its speed with such a slow Pokémon!”

“Oh, really? Then what are you waiting for? Hit us with something!” Ceniza goaded Jacques, trying to make him reveal his cards. She still had her own cards to play, after all.

“Avec plaisir! Use Dig!” Ninjask slammed hard into the pavement, making a crater that would then turn into a hole as it burrowed into the stone and dirt. Fuecoco looked around for his opponent, not knowing what to do...

“I’ve seen enough. ¡Vuelve, Fuecoco!” Ceniza held up Fuecoco’s Poké Ball and opened it, returning the Fire-type to his enclosure. Jacques shook his head with bewilderment. “Ah, I see. Shu’re switching out? Really?” He tried to be coy about it, but knowing which Pokémon of Ceniza’s he hadn’t seen in this fight yet... Jacques knew he might be in a bad spot now.

Ceniza clicked her heels together and clapped her hands before posing confidently, in a manner very reminiscent of her own Artazón-style dances. “¡Es tu turno, Ori!”, she declared confidently, as Oricorio flew off of Ceniza’s shoulder, staring down Jacques and tweeting with excitement.

Jacques groaned, confirming what he feared before. “Merde! Should’ve known shu’d get me like zat. Ninjask!”

Jacques called for his Pokémon, which dug out of the ground and attempted to slash at Oricorio with its seismically-empowered claws. Oricorio avoided the attack with extreme ease, twirling in the air as if mocking her opponent, before Ninjask returned to

Jacques' side of the field.

“Zis must be shur ace in ze hole..” Jacques said, almost as if trying to parse out if this was Ceniza's last Pokémon. His poker face showed no hints of weakness, as he himself hid if he had any aces up his sleeve. “Good zing zis is also mine!”

“Sure! Give us all you've got, Jacques! We're not scared of you!” Oricorio landed on the ground, and both Pokémon and Trainer twirled and posed with passion. Jacques rolled his eyes. “X-Scissor!” With the order, Ninjask blitzed Oricorio, attempting to slash the Dancing Pokémon with dual blades. “Let's throw 'em for a whirl!”, Ceniza shouted. “Teeter Dance!”

Just as Ninjask was about to strike, Oricorio pushed her enemy out of the way and moved the Bug/Flying type past her in a show of great coordination. Ninjask, undeterred, attempted to strike again, but as Oricorio copied Ceniza's tempo and movements, the Fire/Flying type led her opponent into a revolving, dizzying dance.

“Get outta zere, Ninjask!” Jacques made a signal for Ninjask to dodge, but his partner was too entranced by Oricorio's ensnaring Teeter Dance. Finally, Ceniza waved and posed again, leading Oricorio into letting Ninjask go. However, the fast-paced twirls and turns had left the speedy Pokémon seeing stars, and now it couldn't focus on the battle properly.

“What did shu just do?” Jacques asked in shock. “Your Ninjask can dance, sure... but dancing is our thing. This time around, we're leading this waltz!”

“Tch... Ninjask!” Jacques snarled once again. “X-Scissor! Don't waste time!” Ninjask dashed wildly, trying to find its mark... but it crashed on the pavement, missing Oricorio by a mile. “MERDE! Get shur head in ze game, Ninjask!!!” Jacques protested, as Ceniza and Oricorio laughed at their opponents' desperation. Ninjask eventually came to a stop, as the headache became too distressing to focus. “Let's finish this!”, shouted Ceniza. “Air Slash!”

As Ninjask attempted to get back its bearings, Oricorio rose up, spinning and flapping her wings as bursts of wind sliced the air around her, before one mighty flap fired a single slashing shockwave at Ninjask. The blow was too powerful, and Ninjask fainted in no time.

“Tch!” Jacques bit his tongue in regret, finding this situation unthinkable minutes ago. He was on the back foot — but Ceniza didn't know that, as he returned Ninjask to it's

Poké Ball.

“¡Olé, mi Ori!” Ceniza celebrated, as both her and her closest partner danced together, believing themselves to have won already. “Not yet!”, Jacques piped up, as the two dancers stopped in their tracks. Jacques took out one final Poké Ball, revealing the menacing Shedinja.

“¿Pero qué narices?” Ceniza uttered in confusion. “I thought that was your last one!” Jacques smirked. “Well, I lied, my leetle chum. Now shur up against my Shedinja!”

“Darn...” Ceniza knew a Shedinja could be a difficult opponent. If they landed just one hit, the battle would be done — but the hard part was landing the hit. “Oricorio! Air Slash!” Always at her beck and call, the Dancing Pokémon fired another blast of slicing air at the spectral husk, which dodged by melting into a shadow on the floor.

“Huh?!” Ceniza was blindsided by this. Jacques waved his arms in an intense gesture. “Shadow Sneak, now!” Out of nowhere, Shedinja burst out of Oricorio’s shadow, striking with phantasmal strength. Oricorio turned around, attempting to retaliate, but Shedinja was gone once again. “Keep it up! Just one hit — ¡solo uno!”

Oricorio flew around the battlefield, firing off shots here and there as Shedinja vanished after each and every one, only to strike back with sneak attacks. Ceniza was starting to get frustrated by this, but in a flash of inspiration, she knew how to turn the tables.

“Ori! Down, girl!” With her command, Oricorio swooped back down to the pavement, patiently awaiting her Trainer’s directions. “Let’s Roost for a second.” Jacques raised an eyebrow. “Oh, is zat so? Shedding some plumage vill weaken shur Flying-type attacks for some time. Be careful, cherie!”

Ceniza shook her head, smiling confidently. Oricorio took a few steps and performed a short choreography as she began to shed some Flying-type energy, becoming lighter and, therefore, healed and refreshed. Oricorio tweeted with comfort as Jacques grumbled. “A minor setback... doesn’t matter! Shadow Sneak!”

Ceniza had finally put Jacques on the offensive. She shot Oricorio a glance, and they both posed in unison. They just posed... without doing anything else.

Shedinja suddenly burst in and out of nearby shadows, attempting to confuse Oricorio with its fast movements. Oricorio didn’t lose sight of her foe for one second.

“Steady... steady...” Ceniza said, almost as if she was waiting for something. The time came when Jacques finally saw an opportunity to attack, signaling for Shedinja to reach Oricorio’s own shadow.

“NOW!”

“Revelation Dance!”

As Shedinja burst out the dark, Oricorio and Ceniza twirled once again, and several pillars of dancing flames ignited all around Oricorio, spinning and charring everything in their path. Shedinja had fallen right into the dancers’ trap, and a super-effective attack had struck it point blank. Shedinja landed on the stone pavement, down and out.

Ceniza and Oricorio were now holding the same pose, and they both clapped in perfect coordination as they twirled again. “¡Tacatá! And that’s all she wrote.” Oricorio tweeted with joy at the same time.

Jacques looked down, in disbelief, while he sent Shedinja back into its Poké Ball. He had lost in a rather embarrassing fashion, to an opponent that he had previously underestimated. He looked back at Ceniza with an uneasy posture, with his hands in his pockets and an uncomfortable grimace.

“H-Heh... guess I lost, eh, mon ami?” He shrugged, not knowing how to salvage the moment as Oricorio still remained on the field, effectively threatening his disarmed self as she stared daggers into the shady man.

Ceniza’s celebratory spirit quickly faded as she remembered the gravity of the situation, her face now turning stern. “Yep. You lose. Now, leave us alone, creep.”

“Shu are strong, it is unfortunate fate had us meet as foes, non?” Jacques asked with a coy smirk. Ceniza shook her head. “What are you going on about?! You just tried to mug me after scamming me all day! Now I’m even MORE lost than I was before, and it’s all because of you, “Black” Jacques! I think I get why they call you that now.”

Jacques tried to reassert himself. “Maybe zere is no hard feelings? Shu showed me shur talents, and I made a mistake with my target. C’mon, what do shu want out of Black Jacques, my leetle chum? Money? A gift?”

“NO!” Ceniza walked up to Jacques, shoving an accusatory finger on his chest angrily. “You’re an actual petty thief! I should honestly call the cops on you — I want you to

LEAVE!”

Noting Ceniza’s intensity, Black Jacques wisely stepped out of her way before she made good on her threats. He waved Ceniza goodbye, before putting his hands back in his pockets and walking away from her back into the labyrinth that was Lumiose.

“Farewell, today, my leetle chum. I will be cheering for you in ze shadows!”

Ceniza was left speechless. Never had she seen such a bold-faced bastard, toying with her all day and getting her into such a mess... Ceniza sighed with relief, as she called Oricorio back to her hand.

“Qué caradura... honestly, Ori, this whole day has been awful. That guy could’ve been REAL trouble... we were lucky that he mostly used Bug types. You all need a good rest after all that, but... I’m still so lost!”

Oricorio shook her head, and flew off of Ceniza’s hand to look over the buildings. “Did you see anything interesting, Ori?” Ceniza asked from below. Oricorio tweeted with excitement, turning towards the very same direction Jacques had given her before.

“Huh... maybe he was telling the truth after all.” Ceniza called Oricorio back to her hand, and she walked to the alleyway.

True to his word, following his directions from before the battle lead Ceniza back to the safety of the bustling North Boulevard. Taxis lined the road’s curbs, Gogoat rested on its sidewalks, and scattered groups of tourists gathered outside of the Lumiose Art Museum and around the lavish hotels. The familiar red roof of the Pokémon Center called to Ceniza and her tired legs like a lighthouse beacon. Ceniza sighed with immense relief, knowing she had finally returned to civilisation.

“We did it, Ori! We’re back! Finally, a place I recognise! We’re not lost anymore!” Oricorio tweeted happily, sharing the joyful moment with her Trainer, before Ceniza’s gaze shifted to the Pokémon Center.

“Phew! Let’s rest up! I’m so relieved... Maybe Jacques wasn’t so bad after all. I mean, aside from the fact that he tried to mug me...”

“Got time for a drink, amiga?” A cool, relaxed and slightly deep feminine voice piped up from behind. Ceniza turned around, recognising the voice, and gasped from surprise

when she saw just who it was.

In punk blues and purples, Ceniza's old Naranja classmate, Escarcha, made her appearance. She held an aura of unmatched cool vibes that made her the most confident girl around. But to those who she had a problem with, she was an ice cold chick.

“Escarcha?! What are YOU doing here? And just at the same time as my trip?!” She asked, in bewilderment.

“Well, it's no surprise. I came to compete in the Lumiose Conference. What about you?”

“I, erm, didn't come to compete... just to talk to some agents, show them my past work... I don't think I'm good enough for this show yet.”

“¡Tonterías! You're just as good as me, if not better.” Escarcha chuckled. “C'mon, let's get you rested up, and I'll sign you up for the Conference. You're just in time — entrants close tomorrow.”

“¿¡QUÉEEEE?! Me, entering the Lumiose Conference?! Are you insane, Escarcha?! I could never! I have to practise my footwork, and set up the choreography, and...”

“Pshh. You've got a day or two! You can work it out. Oricorio's counting on you, and what better way to put yourself out there than competing in the biggest free entry Contest in the world? You don't have to make it far, you don't have to win — you just have to show off what you do best.”

Ceniza looked back at Oricorio, who nodded with determination. The dancer was at a complete loss for words. She didn't plan to compete at first, but Escarcha had a point: if she wanted to get a leg up in this business, she had to put herself out there. And her partner was ready to shine with the brightest in the world!

“Bueeenno, if you say so...” Ceniza relented. “I don't think I'll get that far, but I'll cheer you on too, Escarcha. Thanks for the pep talk. I needed it.”

“Claro, amiga. Now, let's go get yourself freshened up. I have no idea what you just got yourself into, but you look all ruffled up!”

“So, I was getting lost a couple of hours ago, and then I met this guy... he said they call him Black Jacques, and then I...” Ceniza and Escarcha went through the sleek, automatic doors of the Pokémon Center, ending this episode of the dancer's struggles.

THE END!

Author's note: FUUUUUUCK this took me a LONG time to finish. I hope you're happy, Archivist-sama. And also, this might be longer than Dragon Whisperer Chapter 1, which means I could write Chapter 2 whenever I want, but I don't sit down and do it! WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

Thanks for reading!