

Dim, gray skies loomed overhead Team Macro. Sprawled upon the back of the Gigantamax Auria, Alex had a surprisingly comfortable sleep. The salty air whipped around him and rocked his blubber, yet the chilly cold was but a mere breeze to his incredible girth. It was the first time he could remember throughout his journey not waking up in the middle of the night for one reason or another. When his eyes fluttered open, he'd thought that wasn't the case given the darkness that still painted the world beyond his reach. It only took him a slight shift to the right to realize something else had blotted out the skies above. All by its lonesome, on a giant stretch of cracked off ice, stood a palace unlike any he'd seen before. He'd heard rumors of architecture like this from a micro-continent called Terani, but this was a radical change of pace. A temple of some kind, no, a fortress! It was clear there was some sort of symbolic intent, what with the long connected roofs and simple white walls and blue support beams, but the amount of additions slanted two wings of the temple like a pincer. Even with some of the view blocked by the Lapras' neck fat, it was beautiful to overlook...though that beauty soon turned to abject shock. Red clouds blotted the sun out from the sky, a violet beam pulsated from the middle. Black smog surrounded the beacon in a menacing manner, warding away all Pokémon from its radius, if one were to put credence to the only noise nearby being the ambient waves.

"Awake at last?" chuckled the Lapras above Alex. "Delightful...I was about to catch a few winks of sleep myself."

The massive Pikachu rubbed his eye and stretched, his finger scooping at his shoulder. It came back empty, bereft of the comforted weight of his friend. Panic immediately shot through Alex. "Eki?!"

His sudden panic turned to confusion- he felt something squirm in that deep, deep navel he had. Out crawled his best friend, slightly slick with the sweat he accumulated naturally in that cavernous crack. "I'm uuuhp..." she grumbled, then rolled on her back partway through her exit.

It took him a bit to stuff away his feelings before he responded to her, but it did lighten his mood a bit that Eki remained a sleeping lump even as a Typhlosion. "I can't reach you from down there."

"Hm?" Eki blinked, then gasped at where she ended up. "Oh, DUH! Sorry! I couldn't get sleep with how cold it was up there."

"You're fine!" Alex nervously pulled himself up, sure to keep Eki right where she was. "You scared me is all."

The two made landfall on the sturdy ice, their only path forward the footsteps of various species that twirled up the drifts to the temple itself. Auria tilted his head down, then yawned. "Take your time you two, I'd prefer it. I'm going to make up for lost time..."

"See you soon, Auria." Alex waved off, before him and Eki turned back to face the hideout itself.

Cold, chilly air felt like pins and needles on the two. Sure, the bitter temperatures didn't drop, but their first of two stops towered over them. It felt strange to Alex, having something to look up at rather than look down upon. His steps were slightly shaky at first, but he pulled himself forward. So much rode upon this, he needed to see it through. Eki dashed beside her friend at a comfortable pace, low embers keeping the small specks of snow and hail out of her eyes.

"Hey, big guy?" Eki called up. "You sure you're ready for this? I could always just go down your gullet and try to fish that thing out of your belly."

Taken aback by the proposition, Alex couldn't hold back a snicker. "I'm...not risking digesting you. Besides, who knows if that'll even turn me back to normal?"

The door stretched on above and in front of them, even when Alex's belly finally pressed into the crack. He could feel the warmth counteract the winds of the outdoors. This was it. It was all or nothing now. The battle was upon them. All it took was one more press of his gut against the mighty slabs to push them open. The hallway that greeted both members of Team Macro stretched onward to an opening, the black smoke whipping around in the middle of a room, momentous arches holding up the roof above. Purple flames decorated the burning matter of upturned tree roots fashioned into unique sconces along their march forward. To Alex, he felt small again. Even if he had a gut that pressed into his feet from time to time, he felt like his old height after so long, the fortress so monolithic in scale that it could dwarf entire towns. Perhaps this was a sign, no, encouragement, to continue forward. Eki, meanwhile, felt microscopic. That's how she's always felt around Alex, but in this stretch that feeling was amplified, every stomping step of his equaling a dozen of her own. The sound of cutting waves grew muffled when the large iron doors pulled themselves shut. No way out but in. Team Macro stepped through the path, temporarily blinded by the sudden shift in illumination. What they were greeted with was something neither of them had expected.

Blinding light slightly stunned their other senses. When their vision came to, so did their sense of hearing. An abundance of disorganized, yet intensely excited cheering filled the immense dome the duo were in. In the middle of an arena that they found themselves in, Team Macro had become the star attraction in a sudden spectacle. The crowds were risen high up into the air by suspended bleachers, massive carved walls of ribbed stone lined with veins of glowing blue acting as barriers to protect them. The dirt floor was dry, the temperature seemed comfortably warm; it all seemed like the perfect conditions for a battle. Alex's eyes drifted to something he caught in the corner of his eye, an enormous throne. Upon it, a similarly enormous figure, even larger than the Gigantamax Pikachu, loomed in quiet observation while wreathed in shadow. Perhaps it wasn't even an individual- it could very well be a statue with how still it was. His curiosity piqued, he reached out toward the still observant-

"LADIES, GENTLEMEN, NONBINARY INDIVIDUALS, AND AAAAAALL GENDER NON-CONFORMING FRIENDS OF OURS!"

-only to be interrupted by a loud, booming voice from far up in the bleachers. The crowd only grew rowdier when they were addressed. Eki swiveled her head up toward the announcer, the small blip of a Loudred peaked over a small table, giant fuzzy coverings over his ears meant he could yell his heart out for a lot longer now that his hearing was protected. Beside him, a tubby Smeagle sat with a cobbled-together notepad and a Murkrow quill, eager to write about the upcoming brawl.

“WELCOME TO ANOTHER RAPID-STRIKING, EARTH SHATTERING, BELLY QUAKING BA-TTLEEEEEEE!”

“This can’t be the right place...” Eki mumbled to herself. “Alex?”

The gigantic Pikachu turned to look at the door they came from, only to see it drawn closed by a team of hearty, strong Machokes. “Heheheh, t-there goes our entrance...”

“IN THE GUEST CORNER, WE HAVE THE DOUBLE DECKER COMBO OF PORTLY AND PRACTICAL, OF MASSIVE AND MODERATE, TEAAAAAM MACROOOOOOOO!”

Cheers erupted from the announcer’s declaration, clapping from within the crowd. Chanting began in a rhythm of stomping feet at first, degrading into a din of noise, though the two could hear their team’s name splash through the sound waves. *‘Ma-cro! Ma-cro! Ma-cro! Ma-cro!’* In their excitement, the crowd gradually sped through the chant, before it devolved into more screaming and cheering.

“H-How do they know our team’s name?” Alex recoiled in confusion.

Eki stroked her chin. “Maybe they get mail up here?”

“Are we really famous?” Alex wondered. “We’re only a Bronze Rank-”

A slew of emotions hit him when he considered just where Team Macro was placed, even if it was theoretically. The reminder that all that work, helping other Pokémon, went unrecognized officially because of an ancient ban on Pokémon large enough to be Dynamaxed in the guild...it still didn’t make sense to him. He shook his head and hung it low.

“Forget it. I think a fight or two would actually help.”

Eki put her shoulder on Alex’s cheek fat and nodded. “Well, whatever they throw at us, we’ll make it through. C’mon, big guy, let’s beat some butts and get you back to your usual self.”

“THEIR FIRST OPPONENTS OF THE MATCH! YOU KNOW THEM, YOU LOVE THEM, THEY’RE THE SECOND BEST FROM A TEAM OF NINE!”

Bellows from the announcer flicked Alex's ears up. "Wait, a team of *how* many?"

Eki sniffed loudly. "Is that legal?"

"GIVE IT UP FOR THE TUMULTUOUS TRIO! THEY'RE SOUR, THEY'RE SWEET, AND THEY'RE ROUGH AND TOUGH TO BEAT! LEMON, PETRI, AND CO-AAAAAAL!"

A gate from the other side of the stadium pulled open just a tad, and out came a set of Eeveelutions. A Jolteon claimed by a spiked collar, a Vaporeon sporting a frilly hat, and a Flareon donning a helmet over his head. All three stood on the other side of the arena, while Eki slipped her way back down to the ground gradually. It was a struggle to slip down Alex's body fat given his size safely, though thankfully his belly touching the ground meant all she needed was a controlled slide once she made it past Moob Mountain.

"Uh, there might be some mistake here..." Eki chuckled, her claw extended. "See, we're not really looking for combat, just-"

"You came all this way, didn't you? We've been expecting you." The elegant, graceful voice of the Vaporeon cut off Eki's explanation. She flipped her tail in front of her hat just to adjust it slightly. "There's no turning back once you're in the thrall of battle."

"Yeah, don't be a coward!" the Jolteon grinned, her teeth themselves let little jolts of electricity streak across them. "Take your defeat like a proper fighter!"

The Flareon arched his back, then dragged his paw over his eye and stuck out his tongue to taunt Eki. It was clear all three of them had different styles of showmanship...some more dignified than the last.

"Well, uh, may the best Pokémon win?" Eki slid her claw back to her side, and stepped backward until her back met Alex's.

The Jolteon cackled. "Yeah, we will!"

"AREEEEE YOUUUU READYYYYYYYYYYYY!"

The announcer's call set the crowd off again. In the face of trained combatants, Team Macro were inexperienced. Alex had only faced battles with Pokémon who had grown feral, and Eki's only battle against a practiced opponent ended with her confidence boosted, less so with proper training in mind. Still, she could carry a battle, something she'd be prepared to do once more.

"CAN THEY OVERCOOOOOME? LEEEEET'S-"

"BA-TTLE!!!"

Finishing off the call to action, the crowd broke from their unification to roar and cheer for their preferred winner. Clapping, whistling, shrill screaming, a blend of chaotic cacophony. Still, the battle had commenced, and it was time to strike. Alex reeled himself back, taking it upon himself to try and land the first strike. He already had his eyes set on the Vaporeon, who leapt further back and eyed the giant Pikachu up and down, a smug grin sprawled across her face. Alex kicked a foot back, and threw himself down to his fours. Of course, he sprawled out a great deal of belly on the ground, needing to spread his limbs extensively to allow his gut the room it required while his instincts buzzed in preparation. He kicked up his hands and feet, charging his body toward the prissy Petri, electricity charging around and behind him. The massive wall of high-voltage rodent descended upon the prone Vaporeon like a tidal wave, assuredly about to knock her and a good chunk of the wall out if it connected.

“ALEX GOES FOR A DEVASTATING, WOBBLING VOLT TACKLE THIS EARLY INTO THE MATCH?! GET A LOOK AT THIS POWERFUL EYE CANDY, FOLKS!!”

Some chuckles and laughs erupted from the crowd, a strike of lightning streaked across the dirt pit and crashed into Alex’s forehead. More confused than harmed, Alex nonetheless skidded to a stop, the soft earth of the pit compressing under his mass. Lemon the Jolteon not only stopped Alex’s charge, she pushed him back. All the electricity that Alex charged up had been brought into the body of the punky vulpine.

“IT LOOKS LIKE HE’S NOT FAMILIAR WITH *THIS* TRIO’S STRATEGY MATCH UP!”

“Thanks~” she chuckled, already putting the displaced electricity to use.

A buzz of yellow static gleamed across the field in hissing arcs of hot wrath, Alex scrambling upright in a rapid motion. The titanic Pikachu bobbed and weaved on all fours as best he could around the sudden spikes of electricity, but the Jolteon looked snidely triumphant, a sneering grin plastered on her muzzle.

“SHOCKING! THE BATTLEFIELD’S A LIVE WIRE NOW!”

“Let’s mix it with a little water~” giggled Petri.

The Vaporeon swayed herself back and forth in a ballet twirl, belting out an ancient hymn that called to the heavens above. Eki immediately recognized where she was headed, and stormed forward through the pulsed terrain. Her clear target was then obscured with a scratchy, grainy kick of dirt to the eyes. She veered off course immediately, snarling in surprise and pulling her lips back to show pearly fangs. Coal stood by his friend with a huff.

“Careful girl, I fight dirty~” his voice was low and gravelly, betraying his cute exterior.

A rumble from above obscured the ceiling from view. Dribbles of rain soon turned to an outpour of precipitation; a Rain Dance had been fully set up.

“BOTH CORNERS HAVE TO DEAL WITH THE WEATHER *AND* THE TERRAIN! HOW WILL TEAM MACRO HOLD UP AGAINST THIS DEVASTATING COMBO?!”

“Really starting to hate the commentary from the booth!” Alex grumbled.

He prompted a squawking “I HEARD THAT, CONTESTANT! NO POINTS FOR BEING A BAD SPORT!” up on the lofty platform.

The massive blubbery Pikachu rolled his neck. “Alright, if I can’t get my electric moves out-”

“My turn!” Lemon zipped in a zig-zag motion, before she jumped up into the air.

“AND HERE IT COMES-”

Out from her bristly fur came static, doubled with electricity, bolstered by the electric terrain churning beneath her. The crackling from above in the clouds sounded out, a catastrophic streak of blue and yellow soaring to the earth below right at Eki’s feet. There was no way she could avoid this blow, thunder crackling and booming over the hollers of the crowd.

“-THE LEMON LIGHTNING LEAP! A DEVASTATING BLOW!”

Eki ragdolled across the arena, the blow of the lightning blast sending her careening against the wall. Alex quickly abandoned his previous move plan to rush to Eki’s aid, her tumbling stopped short by his large warm palm. Lucky for her, she packed a berry or two for the journey. An Oran Berry was enough to jolt some stamina back into her, but it was clear from the static on her fur that paralysis would impact her movement.

“These guys’re no joke...” she griped, “We have to focus on getting the Jolteon out of the battle first.”

“How?!” Alex cried, looking more distraught over Eki’s pain than anything else, “My electric attacks aren’t doing anything, and my Iron Tail might as well be a wet thud against another Electric-Type!”

Eki pulled herself back up, a jolt shot across her right shoulder twinging. “Nngh, Play Rough, dummy.”

The battle had grown overstimulating so early on, Alex had nearly forgotten he’d learned that technique. Even then, with the other two on him, singling out one Pokémon would be difficult. Coal charged ahead, fire erupting from his teeth, when he had an idea. There were only

two abilities that Alex was aware of that could absorb an Electric-type move. She stopped him from doing anything without even using a move. Maybe he ought to take advantage of that.

“Hey, idea.” Alex glared down at the Jolteon. “You’ll see where I’m getting at.”

That ginormous Pikachu charged again, he swiveled his trajectory lightly and aimed toward Petri. A hearty, silly giggle escaped the aquatic vulpine. She reeled her head back and focused her throat for a stream of cold water. Water so cold, it solidified into a freezing, solid chunk of ice aimed right at Alex. He took that beating well, the ice itself bouncing off his flab. His relentless charge was undeterred, turning her cool composure into striking panic.

“Lemon, get your rear end over here!” she cried out.

“I got it, I got it!” The Jolteon charged forward, easily outpacing Alex. “Hey butterball! Your electric attacks aren’t gonna work when you got ME to deal with!”

Once again, the two clashed together in a furious exchange of sparks. This time, Alex didn’t back down from the challenge, he just growled and pushed forward, a hot red-orange glow suffusing over his fur like evening sunlight. Even with this Jolteon’s tremendous experience and strength, he wasn’t deterred by her confidence. His red cheeks illuminated to a bright yellow glow, his crooked tail pulsing out more illumination across the battlefield. Suddenly, Lemon could feel a whole storm flow inside her.

“H-Heh, idiot!” she insulted, ignoring how she felt simultaneously overloaded and dizzy, “You already saw me absorb your attack, what’s another one gonna do?”

Alex pushed further, his nostrils flared. “What do you think I’m going for?”

Confused, Lemon tilted her head while she kept up the offensive front. Suddenly, a bulging in the Jolteon’s belly made her reconsider her moves. All that electricity had to go somewhere, and it was immediately being displaced inside her as calories she didn’t spend up on moves and movement. The girl’s cheeks puffed up, her legs thickened on her frame, even her neck felt rounder.

Panicked, Lemon tried to back away. “U-Uh uh, we’re not playing this game!”

“Tough!” Alex grabbed the Jolteon by her blimping back end with a huff and pushed her forward into his forehead. “Should’ve thought about that before you went and tried it!”

Eki immediately recognized what Alex’s plan had become, too late for Coal to recognize the danger signs. She threw her body onto the Flareon and locked him into a tight grip, her claws digging into his sides. Coal could feel heat bellow up inside of his opponent, building and building as the seconds ticked by. Eki’s back erupted into flames, hot enough to evaporate the rain around her into a veil of steam. The strength of her attack would be muddled out by the rain

itself if it ever were to extend for a long distance, so why focus on taking it far away? The badger locked her lips with the fluffy tailed vulpine, then let loose her attack. The flames on her back flickered from red and orange during the start of combat to a pure set of blue and cyan, the heat of the flames sizzling the precipitation. The audience could see Coal's throat bulge, then see his belly protrude out from beneath his legs. Roars of applause and appreciative whistles rung out at the two's ingenuity and quick thinking.

"WHAT'S THIS?! THEY'RE USING THEIR STRATEGY AGAINST THEM, FOLKS!!!"

A low growl escaped the pristine Petri, who swung her tail around behind her. "You can't fatten up my polycule until we're done being champions!"

She threw back her head and took a deep breath. The burbles and rumbles in her body only clued Alex in on what was about to happen next. He'd seen Richard try a move like this before, a devastating propulsion of water so powerful, they might as well cut through their opponents. He wasn't about to have it. His free hand balled up into a fist, with only one finger pointed out. He plugged that finger right into the Vaporeon's mouth.

"My day's already been bad enough, can it!" he shut her down as she gagged around his finger, unable to help a little smile as she croaked in shock.

Now, much like the other two, Vaporeon's body started to bloat and balloon. There was nowhere for the water to go as it continued to replicate inside her, so all she could do was bloat up. Her paws stagger backward to try and get Alex's finger out of her mouth, but that just caused him to push just a tad bit deeper. Not enough to hurt her, but enough to keep her plugged shut.

"THIS IS OUTRAGEOUS! THIS TRIO'S BEING TURNED INTO PARTY FLOATS!"

All three of these Eeveelutions were subjected to a humiliating, heft-inducing fate. Lemon's choker strained against her neck as it swelled, tightened and holding as best it could against the torrential storm of tubbiness. Neck fat spilled across and smothered the spikes as she tried to output the electricity the best she could with small belches. Puffs of charged black smog, befitting of a stormy cloud, did nothing to slow down the onslaught of caloric electricity. The more Alex pumped in, the more her butt spilled out of his hands. Coal, meanwhile, had been locked in a fiery makeout expansion with his Typhlosion opponent. Inferno after inferno, Eki pushed out whatever flames her body could produce to further fluffen up this Flareon. His belly plopped to the ground, his cheeks pushed up against hers. The Typhlosion was doing the best she could to not let very confusing feelings about very soft Pokémon impact her desires on finishing the battle, but that didn't mean she couldn't sneak a clawful or two into this doughy delight, surely? Part of her wondered if maybe she'd been around Alex too long. Petri, oh that poor Petri! Forced to grow out like a garden hose kinked shut at the end. Everything from her neck, to her legs, to her belly and tail swelled up. The audience could hear her body glunking

and sloshing, they could see her eyes roll up into the back of her head, but they couldn't hear her moaning and cooing.

"THEY'RE EXPANDING AT RAPID RATES!"

Petri couldn't do anything as she was brought down to her belly in full. It pushed her legs away from the ground and glunked louder- the crowd falling over themselves to see bubbles form in her aquatic body. Her blue face lit up in a blush so bright it dyed her fluffy snout purple, cheeks sputtered out little bits of water able to just barely leak out, her paws smacked against her body in a mix of frustration and delight. Oh, to be humiliated this way was a defeat in and of itself! On the other hand though, going out like this buzzed the lady's mind with pleasure that she couldn't accurately describe. Her complaints soon died down into cute whimpers that those many audience members couldn't hear over their own whistles and screams. Her freakiness could be contained, at least a little while longer, by the fact she was made into a living adipose balloon. She could revel in the fact her legs had puffed up sideways rather than downwards, how her belly resembled that of a water bed fit for royalty, how her ass grew cushiony and cool, and even how her tail had gained a substantial amount of heft.

Coal's mind swarmed with bewildering feelings. All that heat down his windpipe certainly felt like a wild rush! The Flareon's mind blanked, unable to comprehend much of his surroundings. All his eyes could focus on were Eki's lashes, clenched shut during his expansion. The arena had become muffled noise, his own thoughts silenced. He'd been kissed before, but nothing like this. It felt a lot more passionate to him when the badger groped at his fatty rolls to keep him tucked close. She fought like he'd get away, but at this point, it was akin to a mama Liepard carrying away her kits by the scruffs of their necks; locked in place, limp, unable to do anything but stare. His helmet rolled off his head, the trickling of rain water that splashed in the only sound he could perceive at this point. Not the inferno belches down his gullet, not the sounds of smoke pluming up his throat after each one, not the groans of his body as he thickened up past the size his legs could carry him, no. Just the comfort of tin and copper meeting rain dribbles. His eyelids fluttered, and his head tilted into the ring of neck fat that had formed during the kiss. No struggle, just pure, blissful slumber. When Coal tapped out first, Eki let him fall to the ground before she furiously wiped her mouth.

"I-I didn't know I had that much freak in me, heheh." she poked her claws together and flopped to the ground, her feet pressed together. "No hard feelings?"

Soon enough, Petri's growth had to be halted when Lemon's fat ass could no longer be comfortably contained by one hand. The Vaporeon lay on the ground, flustered and bewildered, while her partner swelled up further. Even when her neck ring had grown thick enough to sink her head in, her collar still tightly clung to her.

"Just...give...up already!" Alex grit his teeth together and growled.

Lemon groaned, stubbornly pushing her head further against Alex. “Maybe...I’m just charging...for the final blow!” She hissed out, tongue lolling out of her muzzle as she huffed from the exhaustion of rapid fattening.

Static formed across the prickly body of the fat blob of fuzz, strings and strands of lightning sparkled off her form. Even while her belly filled Alex’s palms, and her cheeks pressed into his fingers, she wouldn’t give up yet. Out from her maw came what would’ve been an impressive roar, though instead all that could come out was an eruption of black storm smog in the form of a belch. She tried to sound impressive again, only for an even louder burp to follow up. Her body tried to charge to let loose power, which only made her growing problems worse.

“Nngh, what’s happening!?”

“Someone’s backed up!” teased Alex, his shoulders relaxing as the threat of her thunder became an impossibility, before he stuck out his tongue and clamped his thumbs into her stomach. “Maybe THIS’ll do the trick?”

Another powerful belch rocketed out the Jolteon, whose body wobbled and quaked in response. She spilled out of Alex’s palms, far fatter than either Petri or Coal were by this point. Perhaps her downfall was assuming she could out-electric a Pokémon far, far bigger than her? Maybe it was her arrogance in thinking her strategy would remain undeterred in the face of a Pokémon sharing her type? Or that she didn’t try to do anything different? Maybe the real downfall here was that she couldn’t do anything anymore, legs hindered by thick sleeves of fat where her gut and rump didn’t make them utterly immobile. Her body was too busy trying to charge an attack, and it couldn’t let one loose at all. She could hear the crowd call out for her opponents, cheer for them, stomp for them, the uproar an absolute madhouse. Her head spun, cheeks puffed so much they anchored onto her neck rolls. She could hear the creak of leather ring out louder than anyone else could, though the eventual snap of her signature collar was deafened by the flab that spilled out over it.

“I-I give!” she bleated out.

THOOOOOM!

Down came the absolute room-sized blob of a Jolteon, her avalanche flab wobbling and jiggling at Alex’s feet, pressed into by his leg rolls. He pumped his fist up into the air, a hearty grin across his face saying it all. He’d thwarted this combatant in a way he never had before. The feeling of pushing someone’s size out was kind of exciting- it wasn’t something he’d ever gotten to do before. Eki stumbled over to her partner and threw her own fist up, though only halfway when an electrical pulse shot through her body.

“WE HAAAAAVE OOOOOUR WINNEEEEEERS!!!”

A unanimous bellow of applause and cheers showered at the pair, Pokémon calling out Team Macro's name in celebration of their efforts, another rhythmic chant muffled away when it sped along. A Chansey hobbled down to the two with a small cart of snacks and vitamins, namely that of Leppa, Lum, and Oran Berries.

"Congratulations you two!" the nurse gleamed, "Nobody's ever beaten the second best third of Team Tailspin...except the best third!"

"Oh? Team Tailspin?" Eki chomped down into a Lum Berry and cooed, the pulses in her body subsided and disappeared. "Mmff...who might they be?"

The Chansey flipped her hand and chuckled. "Oh, they used to be an Explorer Team, actually! Then they had to retire when an incident happened with their leader."

"What happened to their leader?" Alex wondered, scooping up an Oran Berry and plopping it down on his tongue. He took that little crumb like a mundane capsule.

"You'll see them here shortly." promised the Nurse. "Ready to go?"

"What, we don't get downtime?" Eki questioned, "We didn't even sign up for this fight, heck, how do you guys even know our team name?"

"That lovely Lapras outside told us all about you!" the nurse proudly confessed, "You two are Team Macro!"

Alex sighed, "That's the last time I ever keep an old guy waiting..." Down went a Leppa Berry, just to recharge the energy he could put into his moves. "Eki?"

Gently, the Typhlosion brushed her cheek of the leftover sand from her earlier blinding. Now that the rain, which had finally subsided, flushed it out, she could see clearly. "Well, if we're just gonna power on through, I guess we're ready. Especially if everyone is gonna keep ignoring our questions, we'll just have to make them listen."

"Wonderful!" The nurse extended a hearty up to the announcer booth, and barreled her way out from the arena.

"LADIES, GENTLEMEN, NONBINARY INDIVIDUALS, AND AAAAAALL GENDER NON-CONFORMING FRIENDS OF OURS! LET OUR NEXT OPPONENT THROUGH!"

In the other corner of the arena, heavy stomping shook the earth beneath the other two fighters. The metal doors rattled, chains that held them together clanked against every link connected to one another. The door ahead of them groaned open, a massive silhouette filled the halls behind them. Heavy, thooming stomps drew ever closer. Whatever the opponent was, their mighty silhouette seemed only a slight head tilt shorter than Alex. Another equal fighter in

size, perhaps? The first thing to break from the darkness was a striking brown eye, then a glimmering white glint of teeth from a smug snout, and the slow roll of a puffy belly spilling through giant legs. Out from the shadows first came a spillage of peanut-brown fur, blubber rolls no doubt. Then, a pair of heavy stomping paws, before upturned cream fur tufts emerged with it. Finally, Alex could properly identify the face of his opponent; an Eevee, smug as all be. Long ears, puffy cheeks, hair so unkept it was easier to swoop a tuft in front of their right eye than it was to actually comb it. Behind that, their massive tail, and an utter wall of behind that loomed over their head. In the war of heights, Alex would have won if it weren't for that tush tying them both to the exact inch.

"They're just like..." Alex's thoughts petered out when they gazed upon their opponent in astonishment.

There they were, an Eevee capable of Gigantamax without a looplet, calm as could be. They flipped their hair tuft away from their eye, then stuck out their tongue. "What brings a cutie like you so far up north?" they inquired, "Not everyday you see a Pikachu and his friend take on the gauntlet here."

"We're just trying to get my friend back to his normal size." Eki arched her back up. "If you're gonna stand in our way, then I guess we gotta fight you."

"Why would you EVER wanna be normal sized again?" snickered the Eevee. "You look much better like that."

Alex couldn't help a slight tinge of orange blush spread across his cheeks, small shocks of static roared across his face. "D-Do you have to keep flirting with me?"

"Uh, duh?" chuckled their opponent, before they kicked up dust behind them with their wagging tail. "How about you and me spend some alone time after the match?"

"UM-"

"Hey, bud." Eki's flames on her back flickered. "I don't appreciate you trying to dig under his skin. You ready to fight, or not?"

The Eevee shook their head, then grunted. "You're a fun killer. Alright then, short, sweet and to the point."

"WEIGHING IN AT WHO-KNOWS-HOW-MUCH, AT A STAGGERING SIXTY-EIGHT FEET TALL *INCLUDING* THAT BUTT BEHIND THEM, THEY'RE SO BIG IN SIZE, THEY'RE CONSIDERED THE BEST THIRD OF THEIR TEAM! SUGAAAAAR THE EEVEEEEEEEEE!"

They got into battle poses, and Eki's poise faltered as she did some mental math. "Wait. There's nine of them, we just fought three, this giant's another. That's five making another third, that's just...wrong. Like really wrong?"

Alex's ears twitched at the realization, his eyes shifting down to his companion's. "Hey wait, why didn't I realize that before you did?" He cupped his hands over his mouth and swiveled in the direction of Sugar, who brought up their paw flirtatiously. "Hey! Can your team count?!"

The crashing of clapping splashed through the arena, the stomps of an enthralled crowd layered on more percussion. Eagerly, the strong opponent swished their behind toward the audience to shake their entire baking factory toward them, each goliath cheek clapping like a landslide of butt blubber. Slightly coordinated cheers rippled into wild, excited squeals. Alex couldn't help but feel just a tinge of second-hand embarrassment, or perhaps it was sheepishness.

"T-This Eevee's insane..."

"AREEEEE YOUUUU READYYYYYYYYYYYY!"

The announcer's roar shook Alex back into focus. He had to beat this opponent in order to move on. He had to see that fabled Urshifu for himself.

"CAN THEY OVERCOOOOOME? LEEEEET'S-"

"BA-TTLE!!!"

A snarky grin twisted itself on Sugar's face, their muzzled twisting with confidence as they pulled themselves back. Alex grabbed hold of his tail, ready for the Eevee to charge forward. Both stared at and circled each other slowly for what felt like an eternity, one waiting for the other to strike. Eki's head twisted from her friend to her opponent, annoyed that neither of them were doing anything.

"IT SEEMS THEY'RE STARING EACH OTHER DOWN!"

"Oh forget this!" Eki griped, before she took a running charge on all fours.

Her flames flickered bright, a bright orange and yellow glow streaked across the arena before she let her inertia take control of her momentum. Back into a ball she went, the ground and rocks rolled up onto her fur for a potentially devastating rollout. Sugar didn't seem to mind it, in fact, they simply stood still in preparation of the impact. Alex squinted his eyes, feeling like he'd seen this technique once before. One time when he was fighting a student much more adept than him, they braced themselves for an attack just so they could-

“Eki!”

The moment of realization hit him too late. She crashed right into the Eevee’s blubber and bounced off, the speed of the collision caused further acceleration. She could easily tilt herself around to go in for another hit. That’s when the Eevee hopped back, the torches lit all around rattled in their sconces as their multiton body lurched.

“Cool move~ Lemme borrow it.”

Sugar galloped their way forward, then tucked as much of their blubbery body in on itself. The buildup of speed caused them to roll slowly, then quicker once they could pick up momentum. Faster, faster, faster, on course with Alex. The fat Pikachu’s gut was slammed into, enough to push him further backward and nearly knock him off balance.

“THERE’S THE COPYCAT! A ROLLOUT FOR A ROLLOUT!”

Alex gripped into the rolling fluffball and grunted, trying to push Sugar back the best he could. All that weight on him, pressing his body against the great stone entrance Team Macro entered from, tons of ‘vee and tons of ‘chu pushing against each other. Roars from the crowd exemplified there was more than just a desire to see these two duke it out. Some were expressly interested in just how these fatties could collide together.

Alex kept his footing the best he could, then push against the fatty. “Nngh! H-How’re you not feral and Gigantamaxed at the same time?!”

“Duh. Cuz I ate a Wishing Star.” Sugar answered so plainly now that all their movement had practically ceased. “You musta too, right?”

“O-Okay, great, yeah! Now how do I get back to normal size?!” Alex puffed, before he tried to shove Sugar right off. Strangely, Sugar just pushed themselves closer.

“Man, you’re such a broken record~” Sugar teased. “The fact we’re like this in the first place makes us the lucky few, huh? Now, why don’t you come here for some quality time?”

“THEY’RE GOING FOR IT! THE DEVASTATING, MIND TINGLING, BEWILDERINGLY SOFT-”

THOOOOOOM!!!

Sugar pressed their full body into Alex’s frame, before they rubbed their cheek on Alex’s frame. A crushing blow to the Pikachu for sure, given how much weight he had to hold up, but a confusing one nonetheless. Something tingled within his belly, chased up his spine and colliding with his brain while he was forced under the absolute delight of a snuggle like this. Sugar was adorable, and all that flirting seemed to finally get to him. When Sugar pulled themselves off,

Alex's head spun around, his ears gone droopy, a little line of drool down his chin, eyes swirling like a Poliwhag's belly.

"- G-MAAAAAAX CUDDLEEEEEEEEE!!!!"

Eki came to a screeching halt when she saw her friend collapsed on his back. The flame badger whipped her head over to the smug Eevee who shook off what little rocks that slipped into their fur. She felt the fire on her back erupt, searing flames across the arena. All Sugar had to do was sway their body away from the swirl and trajectory while they recovered a bit of stamina, an easily avoided Inferno. All that did was anger Eki even further, so much so that she whipped their head backward, then swung back toward the Eevee. From her screaming maw came an onslaught of bright white light, speckles and bright stars blooming out from within. Surefire projectiles, too swift to dodge, too persistent to shake off.

"HERE COMES A SWIFT, FOLKS! WHAT'S SUGAR TO DO?!"

Sugar simply stood still, or didn't have the speed in their flabby body to run, so the impact of the stars caused an impact so strong it kicked up dirt and dust all over the arena. A brief dust storm subsided soon enough, only to reveal the Eevee still standing in the same position they were in before. Those swift stars did make an impact, but not against their target themselves. They were embedded in a massive teal barrier, rippling with bright blue rings and interlocking hexagons around it. Eki's eye twitched- everything she'd done so far had either been copied or canceled out.

"A MAX-GUARD ON SUCH A SIMPLE MOVE?! SUGAR'S JUST PLAYING WITH THEIR FOOD!"

The Eevee licked their lips hungrily at the mere mention of a meal, meaty belly grumbling. "Heh, that reminds me. I haven't had fifth lunch yet. You wanna make me some when we're done?"

"Yeah...how about a searing CHOP!"

Eki threw herself toward the Eevee with her palm outstretched, firmly clasped in a chopping motion. She landed it before Sugar could bring back up their defenses, and caught the Eevee off guard. They winced loudly, having been decently damaged for the first time in the entire fight. The impact made their belly fat puffed out at the front wobble tremendously, a ripple effect that cascaded to the back of their body- even through the pain an attack like that caused, the fact Sugar jiggled through it all made the Eevee moan excitedly.

"AN UNEXPECTED BRICK BREAK TO THE BELLY! EVEN A STOMACH THAT MASSIVE CAN'T STAND FIRM AGAINST A BLOW LIKE THAT!"

Alex grumbled while he pulled himself up, his balance thrown off at the majesty of Sugar's grace. He couldn't seem to focus on much more than observing the way they rippled about, entranced by such a quaking form. Eki couldn't help but huff, before she whipped her head around.

"Do something other than just STAND THERE!" she demanded.

"I can do something if you like~!"

A jolt in Sugar's leg muscles had them five feet up in the air, a short leap compared to their size with not that much distance, though still impressive that they could lift off the ground like that at all. The destination? Right on top of Eki's body. The Eevee crashed down onto their opponent and engulfed her in their blubber; a soft impact might have cushioned most body slams, but the sheer weight of this one had Eki collapsed beneath all that bulk. Up came the enormous opponent off that crumpled Typhlosion, her body sparked with electric paralysis.

"N-Not again!" her complaints rasped out, "How many times am I gonna get paralyzed this whole match, ghghh!"

"E-Eki!"

That finally had Alex snap out, even if for a brief moment. He quickly whipped his tail toward the ground in the other corner, who hadn't expected their opponent to break out of infatuation that moment. Steelspikes cascaded toward Alex's foe, their iron will and surging speed too fast to properly prepare a Max Guard. All they could manage was a quick, small Protect against their form, a weak barrier that couldn't fully protect them from a Dynamax-powered attack. The impact sent Sugar backward toward the other wall and onto their fat ass, their advantageous position having crumpled on pure chance.

"Ghh, sheesh, I wasn't expecting fighters!" Sugar griped as their paws wiggled in the air. "Where's the chivalry?"

Eki slowly pulled herself up, a little flame flickering out the side of her maw. "Wish I could catch a break right about now, ghghh."

Such a strike raised the guards of both members of Team Macro, granting them just a little bit more safety in the battle to come. Sugar whipped their head around and huffed, kicking up dust with their back leg as they righted. They expected this team to crumple! In they went for another Body Slam charge toward Alex, cluing in Eki on exactly where they were going.

"No you don't...!"

Her flames burned bright, then surged out onto the field again. The incinerating Inferno wasn't something the Eevee could sidestep this time with their tunnel vision. They winced loudly, their paws caught ablaze with a nasty burn.

"WHOOAAAA! AN INFERNO BLAZES ACROSS THE BATTLEFIELD!"

"Hot, hot, hot!" Sugar bounced around and tried to blow out the flames on one paw.

Eki tried to follow up with another attack, but her muscles locked her in place. She grunted, then fell to her knee. "That's it, I'm getting Cheri Berries the first chance I get."

Alex watched this Eevee dance their little head off, all that blubber quaking in such glory serving as a mighty distraction. Part of him knew this infatuation was fake, just a ruse to get him riled up and useless in the fight, but maybe another part of him deep down was discovering something about his own preferences? It was hard for him to realize just how soft and cuddly he was, but other Pokémon being soft felt like being carried away on a giant string of fluffy clouds. That heightened sense of desire in his brain wanted to act out so bad, it needed to be enabled. Alex puffed his nostrils, then positioned his feet.

"You want me to love on you so bad?" he challenged, "Fine! Have ALL of me!"

Alex roared while he stomped toward the singed Sugar, his cheeks tinged from a bright orange to a deep, crimson red.

"LADIES, GENTLEMEN, NON-BINARY INDIVIDUALS AND ALL THOSE INBETWEEN! I THINK WE'RE ABOUT TO SEE SOMETHING UNBECOMING OF AN ATTRACT VICTIM! IF YOU'RE FAINT OF HEART, LOOK AWAY! IF YOU'RE INTO IT, LEAN IN CLOSER!"

Sugar craned their head toward Alex, who barreled toward the massive quadruped with a determined look in his eyes. He squashed his belly into theirs, then shoved them against another wall in the arena. His belly pushed further, further, and further, the Pikachu gripping onto Sugar's fat rolls tightly. The charging battler squinted his eyes shut, not wanting anyone to see the more-than-likely blooming hearts where his pupils should be, but boy, could everyone hear him whimper like a Houndoom in heat. Sugar lost stamina fast, being hug-crushed like this running completely outside of their expectation.

"ALEX IS USING HIS INFATUATION TO HIS ADVANTAGE?! I'VE NEVER SEEN SOMETHING LIKE THIS BEFORE, FOLKS!"

Sugar pressed their paws into their belly and moaned- treatment like this was sublime, all they could ask for from someone their size. Their tongue lulled out as their final move was forced out of them, a sparkle of their eyes to accentuate their cuteness. Unfortunately for them, they had no target, just an audience in uproar at the excitement of Team Macro pulling themselves out from another corner once more. Alex knew this wasn't enough, but he couldn't

think of any other way to defeat the Eevee, just pin them and stun them for just a bit longer. This prolonged contact had shot electricity through the Eevee's body, a static jolt locking them in place. Eki pulled herself up to see what Alex was doing. He was never this forward unless he had a plan, and it was incredibly obvious to her he got stuck in the 'finishing off' phase of the fight.

"Oh for the love of-" she cupped her claws to her mouth. "BLOW ON THEIR BELLY!"

"L-Like this?...Freaky..." Alex took a deep breath, then shoved his face into their stomach.

Sugar was sent on a rollercoaster of emotions when Alex started to motorboat the Eevee he pressed to the wall. *Prrbrbrbrbrbrbbbpt* reverberated across the arena, only broken up when Alex had to take a break. Even with the audience going wild, some might say this was the raspberry heard around the world, and for Sugar, it was more than enough to get them to back down. Maybe it was from the excitement of it all, or the slow chip of their stamina, but they fell over on their side with their eyes rolled up into the back of their head. That mighty body of theirs crashed into the ground, a smoke cloud of dirt pluming across the arena. Their left hind leg twitched from the pleasure of marshmallow hell. All that exertion and affection had been worked out of the Pikachu's system- he smacked his cheeks and shook his face to further pull himself back to reality. With confidence, he turned to the announcer and nodded.

"AND THEEEERE GOOOOOES THE BATTLEEEEEEE!!!"

Alex could see Pokémon of all kinds stand for him in united cheering. He could hear his and Eki's names bounce about the stadium, an admiration like this something he never thought he could accomplish in a long time. To him, for the first time, it felt like he had a place to belong. Someplace that would accept his massiveness without question. He was a star attraction in a place that admired him for what he's become. He basked in it for a moment longer, eyes shut so he could cement the sound in his brain forever. While this was fantastic to him, he knew where he *truly* belonged. Helping other Pokémon. He stomped toward Eki and sat down by her, the nurse would be out any second now.

The next round of checkups went by smoothly, but the Pikachu couldn't help but keep his eyes on the statue he'd caught a glimpse of before. That stone cold, almost ursine figure on a massive throne. An intimidating figure for sure, something he felt glad not to go up against. He could breathe a sigh of relief, their next opponent was sure to be on pace with the last couple, right?

A shiver went down his spine when he saw the glint of an eye through the darkness.

"You two have had such a good run so far." the nurse complimented Eki, dabbing cotton soaked in a medicine mixture over her scratches. The paralysis had finally been shaken off. "Are you positive you want to keep going?"

“Guess we gotta, don’t we?” Eki wondered. “We gotta see the Urshifu that lives here.”

“Well, I’ll be outside ready to swoop in when you two go down.”

The nurse’s comment made Eki’s fur stand on end. “What, have you got no faith in us?”

“Oh, I have faith!” she clarified, “I have faith you two will stand against Jihi the longest! Not that you’ll beat him, hon, no one ever has in this fortress. Good luck!”

Like a Zubat out of a volcanic mountain, she ran back to safety as quick as her little feet would carry her. Shockingly, it was pretty damn far, a speed Chanseys could never hope to exert in battle. The audience’s cheers had simmered down vocally, a thunderous rumble of stomping in the bleachers echoed about, rattling both skulls of Team Macro. Eki had an uneasy feeling, while Alex couldn’t pry his eyes away from the throned statue off in the corner. Its stillness felt like an illusion to him now, or maybe he was just getting in his own head? After observing for so long, his head imagined the careful rise and fall of a chest, the slow crane upward of a head, the light tap of claw digits against the arm rests of the seat. Still as a statue, or just a plain statue? He couldn’t tell anymore.

“LADIES, GENTLEMEN, NONBINARY INDIVIDUALS, AND AAAAAALL GENDER NON-CONFORMING FRIENDS OF OURS!”

“Hey.” Eki pressed her claw against Alex’s side, grabbing his attention just for a moment. “We got this.”

A careful breath left Alex, before he nodded.

“TEAAAAAM MACROOOO HAS COME SO FAR AGAINST THIS GAUNTLET, FARTHER THAN ANY OTHER CHALLENGER FOR CERTAIN! BUT NO ONE, AND I MEAN *NO ONE* HAS EVER SURPASSED *THIS* OPPONENT!”

Alex felt his heart stop for just a moment. The claws on the statue gripped down into the stone throne, the tassels on their body swished and rose upward, the glint of white in their opponent’s eyes shimmering bright. What felt like a monument once before rose like a rumbling mountain now stood as a monolith above Alex’s head. Stomping over with a measured surety, silent and lethal, fifteen feet over Alex, a monster of an Urshifu. White fur, blue accents, golden claws and maw. They marched with purpose onto the arena, the ominous stomping had turned to shrill cheers in the audience. Over and over, Pokémon screamed out for the next challenger.

“*JI-HI, JI-HI, JI-HI, JI-HI!*”

Alex gulped, intimidated by the behemoth before him. Not an ounce of soft pudge, just pure, unbridled determination, focus, and cut muscle. The two locked eyes with one another wordlessly, Eki standing by Alex's side.

"THE ONE, THE ONLY, THE GREATEST RAPID-STRIKING URSHIFU TO EVER HAVE LIVED AND CONTINUES TO LIVE! JIIIIHHIIIIIIIIII!!!"

Whistles, stomps, claps, hoots and hollers. The audience became a swath of noise, unintelligible in all their excitement. Evident by their reaction, Jihi actually fighting was a rarity to be cherished. Stowing away his fear for just a bit, Alex outstretched his paw in the mighty fighter's direction. The massive ursine warrior bowed briefly at the waist, before a breath sent a ripple through the sandy arena.

"Uh, h-hey." he nervously chirped, "Hope to see a good, clean fight on both sides! Actually, um, we were hoping if-"

"Alex, duck!"

The surging impact of a swift, speedy attack to Alex's stomach knocked the wind right out of him, knuckles embedding into the giant mouse's stomach. Such a close punch propelled Alex backward like a crumbling building, nearly knocking him off his feet in just a single punch. Applause and chanting followed Jihi's rapid punch, the plumes of wind from the impact finally caught up with his arms and ricocheted across the arena.

"The battle began the moment I set foot in the arena." Jihi's voice conveyed confidence and authority, a deep tone that resonated cool, calm, and calculatingly cold. "I would advise you to keep your head on your shoulders. This is combat."

That massive Pikachu shook himself, then stole back his focus. "A-Alright, fine!"

He'd grip onto his tail and roar, charging forward to bring down a Max Steelspike strike against his opponent. The added defense would be a benefit to them for certain, even if the attack would have been chip damage comparatively. Jihi's eyes glinted like stars as the ground surged toward him, raising his forearm quickly against the tide of oncoming metallic strikes. Each spike landed true against the Urshifu, who was briefly launched in the air from the impact. Alex smirked, his and Eki's guards were brought back up.

"UH-OHHHH! DO I SMELL A COMEBACK?!"

Comeback? Alex watched in horror as Jihi's sailing landed him against the wall, and with a push that rendered the stone structure into pulp, propelled himself forward into him, palm extended to strike into the massive Pikachu's chest. Alex choked, blood rushing to his head and feeling his heart beat like a drum behind his eyes. The air in his lungs had been knocked right

out, tightness filling the void. A devastating impact like that tumbled him backward again; he was losing stamina in this battle fast, especially more so after such a-

“COUNTERRRRRR!”

“Never let your opponent use your attacks against you, youngling.” Jihi instructed sternly, his voice resonating across the open stadium like a clap of thunder.

Eki howled as she circled the brawling titans-, she knew her Rollout and Inferno schtick wouldn't work at all against this opponent, so she decided to play him at his own game. Down at his ankle came a quick chop with her claw digits pressed together. A chop from someone small like her still carried a good amount of power to it, even if her opponent might as well have been a brick wall. She kept chopping away wildly while Alex regained his balance. Eventually, amid parrying Alex's tail slaps with redirecting slaps that exhausted the Pikachu more than it injured, Jihi took notice of Eki chipping his stamina slowly. He decided the battle was over for her. In a bright flash of sparkling water, a streak of aquamarine jetted past the fire type, dousing her in a pressurized jet. Her body sizzled, steam billowing off her form while she was pulled away in the current. For another battle, she was once again crippled into not doing anything. Here she thought all her evolving would help her climb forward, to help be Alex's equal, but Jihi was clearly a fighter who needed more than just fervor and friendship to take down.

Her unconscious body tumbled out from the massive ripple of speedy water, and plopped itself into a corner, safe from potentially being stepped on. Alex had watched on in horror at how quick his friend was taken down, then growled. He went right back in to try and at least hit him. His tail surged with lightning, his red cheeks illuminated yellow, electricity flying about in the arena. Fury fueled him, bracing himself to strike.

“PIIIII...”

“ARE WE ABOUT TO SEE SOMETHING TREMENDOUS?!”

“KAAAAAA-”

Jihi readied himself for the potential impact, rolling his neck and loosening his claws while the audience erupted in an outroar. There was little room to dodge with two Gigantamax users present, as it made for a more entertaining spectacle for the audience.

“CHUUUUUUU!”

Down cracked his tail, and, for a moment, there was only silence. Then, there was the sound of plasma screaming and searing in a concentrated star of energy, a thunderous sonic boom crashing into Jihi's guard like a supernova. A powerful G-Max Volt Crash, practically Alex's signature move by this point, surging electricity through his body. Jolts in the massive legendary's body brought on by paralysis, designed to keep him on a slower pace with Alex, but

the confident stare in his eyes made it clear he trained for moments like these. Surging, surging, surging electric energy throughout the Urshifu's body...yet he still stood tall. The only sign of wear were the burn marks on his forearms and the rigid set of his severe expression.

"An admirable attempt. In time you will be strong." Jihi remarked.

"AND JIHI TAKES IT ON THE CHIN! OUR HERO IS STILL STANDING PROUD AND TALL!"

Pulling his arm back against his hip, Jihi raised his other hand with a slow, intentional transition, a change in stance. Eighty-five feet tall, and yet he disappeared like a ghost's whisper in the space between seconds.

"NO WAY! HE'S GOING ALL OUT?!"

It hit Alex suddenly, then continued to batter him in an onslaught of punches. Jihi's left fist jabbed into the chunky 'chu's face, his right arm hooked into his shoulder, followed by a twist of his left leg along with part of his body to collide right into his gut. The right leg shot soon after into his plump chunk, Jihi twisted himself around again to land a dangerous blow into Alex's side with his left leg once more, his shin connecting with Alex's ankle to send the Pikachu to the ground with a kick that would surely have mulched a weaker mon's bone. Critical blow after critical blow, the sediments in the arena had bloomed up into heavy smoke. Alex had been flung backward into the wall once more, nearly depleted of everything he's got. All that extra fat had been useful for something, padding out his defenses in this battle alone. Were he a few hundred pounds slimmer, perhaps he couldn't tank his opponent's constant attacks. Even with it, his vision was bleary and the hearing in one of his ears was ringing.

"A RIPPLING WAVE OF SURGING STRIKES! WHAT INTENSE BLOWS!!!"

Frustration and anger built up in the Pikachu's heart. He'd come all this way to make himself normal again, so he could look up to his friend, so he could save Pokémon from dungeons, so he could explore the nooks and crannies of ancient caverns undiscovered by other Pokémon. He didn't come here to crumple like wet paper, to have nothing to show for all his suffering. He felt an energy surge within him, similar to when he first swallowed that strange rock. A pulse of Dynamax energy unknown. His heart pulsed and thumped while the clouds cleared in the arena, his second wind surging bright. Something wild inside him desperately tried to claw its way out, but his mind and heart kept him in check. A primal instinct that wanted to erupt. Just for now, he would indulge the beast.

An electric right hook collided into Jihi's side, a speed even he couldn't contest with his taut, buzzing muscles forcing his paralysis to kick back in. Alex went in for three quick jabs with his left, then threw his head right into Jihi's forehead. The focus on those fists had thrown him off just enough to not expect such a brazen attack! Alex dashed forward to roll his knuckles off the massive bear's left pec, a rapid light jab similar to pawing. One, two, three, four, five, Alex

just needed to build the inertia to keep going. Let his body do the talking, keep everything else in check with his focus, ignore his exhaustion and his damage and the steaming breaths raggedly pumping out of his mouth. Soon enough, he had just enough of a break to swing a left hook into Jihi's face. The Urshifu quickly countered by gripping into Alex's fist. Even with all that belly in the way, Alex managed to hoist up his leg and crash it into Jihi's side. A powerful impact like that swept the Urshifu to the right of the arena, just enough for his electric rodent opponent to take a more unexpected route. He lunged onto the Urshifu and sunk his teeth into his neck, billowing electricity further into his body. Both opponents were haggard, exhausted from this quick battle of rapid exchanges. Jihi had taken a lot of electric damage for one of his Type, and Alex was outmatched in every aspect except his Type, and his desperate will.

"ALEX IS KEEPING GOOD PACE AGAINST JIHI! CAN HE TAKE DOWN THE LEGENDARY URSHIFU OF THE NORTH?!"

The electricity that held back Jihi's muscles had shaken themselves off for just a moment. Alex felt a familiar fist in his navel that knocked the wind out of him before, a Close Combat jab to the gut. Alex had but a single moment to register all the breath leaving his body before his momentum from the punch was halted by Jihi grabbing his head, massive palms encircled in a tight grip.

"That is as far as you go. It was admirable."

With a grunt, followed up by the shaking of sand, stone and the very glacier under them, the crowd fell silent and watched in slow motion as Jihi flung the Pikachu over his shoulder. Alex himself could barely feel a thing, eyes facing the open sky. Endless blue and fluffy white clouds, the beginnings of sunlight breaking through a storm.

"OHHHHH! HE'S FINISHING OFF THE BATTLE!!!"

Alex hit the ground in a heap, his impact sending the entire ice sheet into a quaking frenzy that threatened to bring down the audience's seats high above from Alex's sheer weight. Jihi stood over the downed rodent, his distant figure obscured by the shadow of his enormity. "Concede, youngling. You, as you are now, will not surpass my strength."

"WHAT A BLAZE OF GLORY! SO CLOSE TEAM MACRO, BUT NO ONE CAN BEAT JIHI!"

A tremendous cacophony of praise and cheers filled through the arena for such a grand, epic fight. The nurse charged back through to gather up Eki, leaving clouds of dust behind her pitter patters before she circled back over to Alex's massive body. Eki was revitalized through the mystical powers of a Reviver Seed, the Chansey doing her best to help bandage up some of the nastier scratches on the badger's frame. She made to trot over to Alex, before something caught her off guard. Sniveling, whimpering, a pathetic voice, and large globs of tears running down larger cheeks.

"I-It's...it's not fair..."

Alex struggled back up to his feet, his claws dug into the sides of the arena.

"It's not fair!"

His wail broke the excitement of the arena, all those audience members petered out fully, for once in the entire show. Jihi swung his massive frame around, eyes glaring down on Alex in icy disappointment.

"A true fighter does not blame his own inadequacies on luck." he lectured. "He takes his defeat in stride."

Alex swung his head up toward Jihi, his eyes wet with tears. "This isn't about the fight! It, it never was!" He clenched his teeth together and hissed through the miniscule gaps. "I never wanted to be your challenger! All I wanted to do was be normal again! I'm...I'm STUCK like this! Stuck taller than any building I could ever want to fit into! Stuck not being considered a guild member just because of some STUPID old rule! Stuck being someone I don't WANT to be!" Finally, with enough strength, he pulled himself back on his feet. "I don't want this! I never did! Just take it away from me already! You earned it! You deserve whatever strength I have more than I do!"

Sniveling from Alex's face evolved into streaks of tears, snorting mucus that built up from the welling of an emotional outburst too long subdued. He stomped toward Jihi, who stood still as the Pikachu pressed his forehead against the ursine's shoulder and crumpled against the bear's brick wall of a body. Eki couldn't help but stare up at him solemnly, her best friend, once able to keep an easy smile on his face, now reduced to this. Alex clung to the Urshifu's side in desperation.

"I just want it GONE... please, please, pleasepleaseplease!"

Each plea was followed by a shake across the titan's upper torso. Alex couldn't hold back anymore, any word that would come out after had turned into a bellowing, haunting cry. Eki's heart sunk out of her chest and weighed down her stomach, her breaths had turned shallow.

"...Alex..." she shook her head in defeat. What was she to do? She'd already failed her friend before. She'd humiliated herself in front of others in this combative game, she was the first to go down in the grand fight. Even after finding herself, even after evolving, she was still picking up the pieces of herself.

Jihi turned to face the crying Pikachu, his firm, monstrous hand gripped tightly into the softie's shoulder. With the other, he motioned up to the Loudred announcer to part the crowd,

giving Alex a berth of space so the onlookers wouldn't see his breakdown. "You wish to rid yourself of this gift you've been given?"

Coughing up phlegm, Alex tried to collect himself enough to respond. "Iss, ihs, iss nodd GIFF!"

"You have the power to protect those you care about. Perhaps it was granted to you for a reason." Jihi pressed down his other hand into Alex's shoulder. "You have potential, something I have yet to see in a Pokémon your skill level. There is a strength deep within your soul you called upon in battle today. Something the world has not yet seen before. Yet you wish to throw it all away?"

"Ihh, I juh-"

"Your abnormality is what allows you to do things others cannot, youngling. I would not so easily wish away the tool that has given you a unique chance to help." Jihi warned. "What you hunt is not normality. You desire conformity." He'd pull his hand away to lift up Alex's face in a firm, but not unkind grip. "You must be an adventurer for your own sake, and for others. If what you desire is your old way of life, then perhaps there is a way you can recover it. Alas, I do not have this wisdom. My brother more than likely cannot grant this upon you either. Know this, however. You will never achieve your goal unless you have pride, have belief in yourself. What you have is disdain for what you are now." Jihi slowly pulled his fist to his chest. "You must find strength from within, Alex."

Sniffing, Alex wiped away at his nose with the back of his hand. Looking up to Jihi reminded him of his father, his adoptive father. Whenever Roq spoke to him, it was always with calmness and assurance. His stern persona would drop just for a bit to allow warmth in the household even more. Jihi had a similar mask he put on, the mask of being a fighter, and the face of a mentor behind it all.

"I...I dunno if I can..."

"You are not strong enough now to beat me as you are. What you are now is what you need to be." Jihi reminded, "That strength will come later. I can see it in your eyes, you're destined for something great."

Slowly, Alex would be pulled off of his grip. The doors at the front groaned and grumbled, being forced open one last time to let the two leave. Reluctantly, Alex waddled out, sure to scoop up Eki along the way. With his tail tucked between his legs, he'd trudge out from the arena and back into the hallway. The doors slowly pulled themselves shut behind him, before they creaked to a halt.

The Chansey nurse was sitting outside the massive door, collecting the notes from the Smeargle commentator on any notable injuries, before being startled by the Dynamaxed mouse

stomping by her. “Ah, Alex, Eki! Congratulations on your run! If you need some recovery items for the road, we supply them in the rest lounge- it’s just down this big main hall and to the right. It’s big enough to fit Jihi comfortably, so it should do the same for you.”

Alex, feeling like he’d been rubbed raw, scratched her tearstained cheek. “Oh, uh, thank you. Probably good to...check, at least. Eki still might have some lingering muscle tension.”

Eki, who rested on his shoulder, poked his flabby neck playfully. Alex’s long and slow strides took them over to the aforementioned fork in the road, dipping to the right. Rather than the carved grey stone and azure glow of the arena, this wing was a frostier blue with warm beige flooring that bowed in like a dugout on one side, and hosted a cluster of beds on the other.

“Nngh, dang it...” A familiar, snarky voice caught both of them off guard.

There in the dugout sat Sugar, being squished slightly by the width of the rim. Even sat down, their huge rump leaked out over the back. Alex turned his head away, not one for conversations at his lowest and muggiest.

“Hey, cutie!” Sugar called out. “I got to see some of the fight. The way you kicked back against Jihi was insane!”

Alex’s eyes wandered past the giant yapping fox, over to the cohort of Pokémon tending to Sugar’s scratches. The blobbed up Petri, Coal, and Lemon sat together, whining about their loss to the less combative members of their polycule. The Glaceon, identified as Cinnamon by Petri’s gentle shushing to calm down, bounced around the trio like a caffeinated Yanmega, his plush belly hanging and wobbling between soft thighs. The Leafeon, a slender thing that Eki catalogued as Basil by Lemon’s demands for her to calm Cinnamon down, turned to the dozing tubby Espeon who turned at the name Jasmine for Basil to whine brattily at. They promptly went right back to sleep, flanked by an equally fat Umbreon, Chocolate apparently, who tucked her head over Jasmine’s belly to blow a raspberry at Basil.

It was all so chaotic, so messy, so much. Eki didn’t think she could stay here for long without starting to cry, all the noise on already fraught nerves.

The Typhlosion pressed her hand on Alex’s palm, before she looked back to Sugar. “Hey, he’s not in the best mood right now.”

“I heard.” Sugar confirmed, looking at least a little apologetic. “I don’t know you two, would love for that to change, but you seem like great Pokémon. Sorry if I stepped on some toes...”

They'd stomp forward to Alex, then hop up on their side rolls the best they could. They'd at least send Alex off with a gentle lap of the tongue and sincere smile, wiping away another tear from falling before they'd slam back down.

"Crying doesn't suit you, but let it out if you gotta."

With that, they'd turn around to THOOM back next to their polycule, playfully nudging at their bratty Leafaeon and whining when their partner play-bit them on the nose. They were about to get into a whole new slew of pathetic gooberisms before Jihi's looming presence in the doorway stunned them into silence.

"Sugar. Your rest was sanctioned on the grounds that you would be recovering, rather than flirting." Jihi pointed out tonelessly. "I'll be taking these two for a moment, so I ask you to be quiet."

Sugar nodded to their superior, and whispered to their maintenance crew as Alex and Eki absconded, Cheri Berries forgotten. The iron doors of the recovery wing creaked loudly, then slammed shut behind them.

A deep breath followed before Jihi spoke again. "I misinterpreted your reasoning for this journey. Taking this in mind, I must apologize for putting you in an untenable position. Had I known your only purpose was to lose the power of Dynamax, I simply would have sent you on your way, and my error lies in miscommunication that I did not attempt to rectify. For that, I am deeply sorry, but know this. You are not leaving here empty-handed."

Alex slowly turned his head in Jihi's direction. The ursine pulled one fist behind his back, another up past his shoulder.

"Thine hand abandoned by God."

Perplexed and wide-eyed, Alex could only grunt out a mumble. "Wuh...wha?"

"You have shown honor in your combative efforts," Jihi explained, "something befitting that of a warrior who would have wished to surpass me. Long, long ago, I stood in a shadow similar to your own. When I tried and tried again to follow in my superior's footsteps, I was struck down countless times. Soon enough, I realized it was not my body that needed training. It was my mind. I let defeat overwhelm me, grief over what I could not control, listlessness that I was someone who did not have a place in the world."

Alex blinked, then shook his head. "I, I just...I just want to be able to save Pokémon. I'm tired of being a giant. How am I supposed to go into Mystery Dungeons like this?"

"Perhaps there are dungeons big enough to house you, or perhaps those who truly need you may not be in Dungeons at all. Danger lies not only in the abnormal, but in the shadows of

our normal ways of life.” Jihi’s solemn words hit hard in Alex’s heart, like they were the key to a pathway he’d yet to discover. “Tell me, what else weighs on your mind?”

Eki stood up and dusted herself. “Look, Alex is going through a lot. The guild’s rejected us, his birth dad’s a mean old fruit, and he just wants to go back to normal.”

“The answer is plenty, I see.” Jihi stomped forward. “We all have and will encounter suffering, though I hope we may yet learn to grow from it, or instead let the scars fade. I learned letting my emotions control me never worked in my favor. Simply secluding them from my being isolated me from those I loved and the goals I strived for.”

“So then what do I *do*?” Alex choked out, “Everything seems so hopeless.”

Jihi lifted up Alex’s claw in a tight, sure grip. “Perservere. You fight for the positivity of the future, do you not? There is somewhere in the world for everyone, Alex. You carve it yourself, if you must.”

Something so simple struck through to Alex somehow, like hearing it from the perspective of someone so much more powerful than him made it finally click.

“Your emotions are not in control of you, but you are not in control of them. You must learn to cohabitate with them. Then and only then can you surpass me in combat.” He slowly let go. “Take what I have granted you. It is one half of a passage passed down to my brother and I. I know not the other half, so please, piece it together.”

Alex sniffled, then slowly nodded. “...P...Perservere.” he repeated. “Right. I’ll do my best.”

“That is all anyone could ask of you. I am satisfied that you know what to do. I am proud of you, in the short time I have come to know you.” Jihi nodded, then tightened his fist up to his chest. “May we battle again someday soon, Alex.”

A moment of reprieve. Alex’s heart didn’t feel as heavy anymore. All this time he felt like he was fighting against himself, the only time he ever came close was when he let his body and soul take over. Maybe his thoughts were getting in the way. He gave Jihi a respectful bow, then turned back around. The cold, bitter air whipped him and Eki once again, the dull grays of morning had slightly brightened, a white blue blanketed the skies above. The storm had broken. There lay the sleeping Auria, whom yawned once Alex set foot outside, finally awoken.

“There you are...” he whipped his neck upward. “Here I thought that you two would be crawling out sooner than this. It’s wonderful that you managed to push for so long.”

Eki glanced to Alex, then back to the massive Lapras. “He did all the work. I didn’t do much.”

Alex's eyebrows bunched. "Don't say that. I would've given up ages ago if you weren't here." Turning to Auria, he boarded the Lapras with a stabilizing hand on the giant's neck. "Can you take us to Highwind Village?" Alex wondered. "I wouldn't mind a little bit of heat for once."

All he needed to do was ask. The Lapras unbeached himself and pushed his body back into the water. "Climb aboard, young man."

Alex nodded, then straddled back onto the massive vessel's back. The snow had died down, and the wind now nipped instead of biting. Off the group went, headed back for the mini-continent of Dyneuria once more. The waves crashed beneath them, enough ambience to tune out the world so Alex could reflect. Life was crumbling around him, yes, but maybe he was right. Maybe what he wasn't hunting for was normalcy, but more over, conformity. He wanted to be like others instead of doing things his own way, and all that chasing normality had gotten him was misery. Maybe he needed to dig out a place where he could be what he is now. His eyes glanced down to his massive paws, and for the first time, they felt like his. Finally, after so long, he smiled at himself. Eki turned to see a glowing grin return to her friend, and she couldn't help but share one herself.

The storm had subsided, and sunlight was breaking through.