

11.

The old man straightened his military cap, then adjusted his large black coat, the tall collar jostling around his neck. An aggressively healthy gray mustache jutted out past his jawline, in an inverted 'V', covering nearly all of his mouth. He had no shirt to speak of, meaning the coat did the job, his blue jeans held up by a large black belt. The bottom of his coat tapered out into tatters, scars from countless exploits and battles, alike, too many to count. This was a tough man, all hard bark and grit.

Yet, even he hesitated, as he looked the odd pokeball over in his hand, silently reading it. It was a new design, so far as he knew. It looked heavy-duty, serious, with extra sealant in the lining.

"From Devon, you say?" was all he said, as he continued looking it over.

The tall orange-cream dragon nodded, her antennae bobbing along with the motion. She wore goggles, tailor-made, a large leather satchel hugging her belly as she used her thick claws to snap its top flap shut. Her answer came as a soft but powerful growl as she smiled.

"Strange, getting a handout from them, such as it is. That *is* what it is, isn't it?"

"Ruuarr."

"Heh. Well, you've always been straight with me, so...if you say so, then alright. I'll take you on your word, any day. I owe you that, and more."

The Dragonite grinned wide, coming in for a hug. At her 7-foot size, the old man only made it up to her feral chest plates, as she snuggled on him thankfully. At this point, the elder knew to just let it happen, and move on. It wasn't like he really minded it, anyhow.

"Hah! Right, still got that spirit, it looks like. Good! You take my appreciation with you to Devon, when you report back, then. They're lucky to have this good a courier!"

She flapped her wings a few times, snapping the goggles back on, then took to flight. The old man's mustache failed to conceal his smile as he waved the Dragonite off, just outside the Hoenn League's gym. She called out a friendly goodbye as she went:

"Ruuu!"

The sounds of the city and the birds and the ocean breeze returned, as he went back inside, though the calm didn't follow him in. Things like this didn't happen, without a serious cause. Drake knew better than to second-guess that big of a corporation, at least, out loud. He had enough brass in him to build an old-time band, but he still knew what world he was in. Besides, he had a match coming up, and one didn't keep in the Elite division by slacking.

"What do I do with *you*, though," he wondered, holding the ball up on aged fingertips. "I suppose they want someone with a little experience, handling...whatever you are, in there. So, will you help, or hinder me?"

His match wasn't until later in the day, so the old man quietly wandered the emptied halls of the Grand Pokemon League, coming to a stop in the arena. Vendors and patrons and spectators wouldn't be in for hours, meaning he had a little space to himself. No sense in spooking whatever was in the mysterious ball, after all.

"Alright, then," Drake said, plainly. "They must want data, so let's get this all settled and done."

With one arm behind his back, Captain-style, he lobbed the ball out with the other, and let it bounce once on the arena floor. As expected, it clicked along its center, and snapped open on a back hinge. What was less expected was what came out of it.

The flash of light from the ball cleared, to reveal a dragon, but a type Drake had never seen before, ever. The old dog had seen much in his time, but even his eyes widened—then narrowed.

"What in the age-old seas..."

There, looming over him quite thoroughly, was an all-black dragon, his head shaking awake atop a thick, bulging neck. His entire body shone, polished and scaly, under the high lamps of the arena, sparkling across humanoid arms and legs, all positively packed with unthinkably huge, swollen muscle. Drake surmised easily-enough the gender, just taking a quick glance between both massive thighs, catching a sudden glimpse of a package as big as he was, which flopped onto the floor openly.

"G-good grief! What...what kind of dragon-type is this!?"

What had those maniacs at Devon been up to?

"Mmmn," the bulky dragon rumbled, shaking his head again. A series of black flipper-like fins shook along with, before a pair of brilliant emerald eyes blinkered open, then fell upon him, down below. The giant regarded him sleepily for a moment, surprisingly unconcerned, before all that massive muscle shifted, and the man-dragon stretched high, snorting. "Hmm-hmmn...morning."

Cat-like to the point of casual indifference, he popped his thick, strong neck, and huffed in satisfaction, licking his muzzle over with a big, pink fork-tongue.

"Ah. M...morning, to you," Drake murmured, frozen in place. His stoicism held, but only barely.

"I must have been asleep awhile," the huge male rumbled, scritchng happily under his jawline with massive claws. All told, Drake figured him to be easily fifty feet tall. His salamance wouldn't have been much larger than this monster's pectorals, together, in width. "I don't see Figment or anyone around. Did they go off somewhere?"

"Ah...I...couldn't say."

The dragon's fins perked out, and he offered a wide grin.

"That's fine, don't trouble yourself. I can find them! You know, you...you don't look like a Viking, at all. That's funny."

"Ah...thank you."

"Hehe!"

His laughter boomed, his powerful chest swelling gently from the flexing inherent. Drake, still roughly speechless, searched quickly for the best words. If it were a battle happening, he would have been in trouble. He hadn't been this thrown in years.

"Well, uh. Uh. Pleased to...meet you, then. Name's Drake, Hoenn Elite. Welcome...to the Hoenn Grand Pokemon League, uh..."

The huge dragon's eyes were wide now, big and open and intelligent.

"Toothless," he answered, grinning, a mouthful of teeth instantly adding to Drake's confusion.

"Toothless. Yes. Well, as your trainer, I'm happy to have you here. You uh, don't act like the usual pokemon, I have to say. What with the...speech, and all, and the...anatomy..."

"Thank you!" Toothless chirped, his grin going cutely crooked, as he heavily shifted into a seated position, and cocked his head. "I just learned to talk recently! It's a little more bothersome than a good, clear roar, but it's not bad."

"Did...Devon teach you, then?"

Toothless' head cocked the other way, his fins flopping over.

"Who?"

"Well...Devon. The Devon corporation. They sent you to me. I have your pokeball, right over there, the one you came from. See?"

He patiently pointed, and Toothless saw the tiny thing on the arena floor, near his massive foot.

"Huh! How about that. No, they didn't. I came here with my friends, Figment, Spyro, Cynder, and this fuzzy dragon, Bartok. I know you don't know where they are now, but maybe you saw them earlier? I really should get back to them, after we got separated."

"I think there's some confusion," Drake interjected, sterner. "I'm your new trainer. I'm to see what you're made of, before putting you to any official matches. So, all that strangeness aside...what can you do, exactly? Let's see your power level, your moves..."

Now, it was Toothless that was squinting his eyes.

"My what?"

"You must be a pokemon, a dragon-type. A rare, *rare* one, to be sure, but still. What all can you do, in battle? Let's have it, friend. I want to know my pokemon, front to back, and back."

Toothless snorted, lidding his eyes in a bit of a bored manner.

"I can tail-whip, breath fire, barrel roll at high speed...my roar is quite good, too. Heh. But really, sir, I have to be going. Good luck to you, and all your pokery-balling and things. Pleasure to meet you, so long, farewell— "

At that, he stood tall, so tall that his head fins nearly bumped a few light fixtures set in the ceiling's framework. His huge feet twisted and moved along the cracked floor as he looked this way and that, then sighed.

"Don't suppose you know the exit?"

By that point, Drake had moved himself over to the side, getting near enough to scoop the pokeball up in one hand. By the time Toothless bothered to look down to the old man for an expected answer, that same ball sailed forth, bumped Toothless' leg muscle, then opened up wide. A great wave of light overtook the giant dragon so fast that only a flicker of bafflement managed to cross his face, before he was sucked back inside the ball. There was a moment of resistance as Drake collected it once again, holding it with both hands as it jerked this way and that.

"Incredible," he muttered, gulping, as the ball rested, then bucked around, frantically fighting in his grip, and making him purse his lip with wide eyes. "Hey, don't struggle now, hold on! You...shouldn't fight it..."

Undeterred, the ball leapt out of Drake's hands, rolling angrily out along the floor.

"Hey!"

The dignified leader had no choice but to scramble after it as it rolled along, as inside the ball, Toothless slammed up against the interior ceiling, straining his fantastic muscles so hard they bulged grossly bigger, by a few degrees.

"Hey! Old man, let me out! Whatever you just did, you let me back out, *right* now!"

As he ran into the adjoining hallway, Drake kept bracing for it; he was certain the strange pokemon would explode back out of the ball, at any moment, in a sour mood. Yet, the ball remained closed, throughout, even as it rolled and bounced off a far wall, skidding along on polished tiles.

Had Devon really done it? They actually had pokeballs that could keep a pokemon inside?

It was suddenly a small wonder, that they did, considering the cargo.

"Calm down, in there!" Drake ordered, sternly, as he collected the ball back up in both hands. "Listen! I'm just using this to move you somewhere better—you're too big, otherwise!"

Despite his struggling within, Toothless did hear. His arms tensed as he gave the lid interior another massive push, before huffing in irritation, and holding fast. This really wasn't his idea of a solid morning. As Drake held the ball, the resistance lessened, then grudgingly stopped, and went still.

"Okay," the old man huffed, nodding. "Thank you. Glad to see you're a reasonable sort. Tell you what: I need to battle in a few hours, and I want you to anchor my team. See what you're made of. I need to know you, your spirit, same as with all my pokemon. Otherwise, I don't know if you're the sort

of dragon I should really be helping, you understand?"

The ball rested silently, listening.

"Good lad. You help me out, and I'll absolutely help you back. Promise. And I can help you, without a giant dragon crashing around in an unfamiliar place, getting into trouble and causing damage. Doesn't that sound better than fumbling around in a foreign place?"

Inside the high-tech ball, Toothless' scaly brows were still furrowed, angry and low. His nostrils flared, but he didn't say no. It made sense, sure—he just didn't like having to abide by it, sans choice. His tail lashed around against the inside, like an upset pet, but abide he did.

"Excellent. If you'll just be patient, I'll get you to your friends. First, we've got a battle to win."

The pokeball (or whatever Anders called it), quite oversized in the human's hand, flared violet-pink at his command; neon contrails lashed over every etching, every crevice, casting a light from the surface that plunged all of storage into an unnatural light, both bright and dark.

Despite their greater size and bulk, both Spyro and Cynder winced, their eyes unused to such an oddity—and they had been around. All the confused pair really understood, at that moment, was that everything about it was utterly *wrong*.

"Maybe we should—"

The beginnings of a solid idea formed in Cynder's mouth, before the neon ball surged out even bigger than it already was, inflating to nearly twice its size, until it obscured Anders' entire hand beneath it. The glow increased ominously, as though whatever power it held were barely contained, wild, a beast on a breaking leash. Spyro sympathized.

Then, came the throw.

The ball didn't just leave his hand, it leapt. The momentum required to lob such a large object showed, as it sailed in an eerie slow motion arc, hurled not at Cynder nor Spyro...but right at Leon.

The orange dragon bellowed in naked delight as it struck his body, which in turn became...not so much whole, but pure energy, in the same shape. And that shape was expanding, quickly. The dragon-shaped mass of pink-purple energy swelled up a foot, trembled, then crackled with intensifying bolts of energy as his size pushed higher, again. Anders watched, wide-eyed and rapt, as Leon's shoulders rose to meet his head, looking progressively up as his partner rumbled deeper and deeper.

"Uh," Cynder started, as Spyro stepped forward, throwing his bulging chest out defiantly.

"Puh! That's cute, but we've faced bigger. *Way bigger*. Seriously, just let us go on our merry way, already. Or do you think this amateur hour growth spurt is going to turn things around?"

"I do," Anders replied, a humorless chuckle riding shotgun. As he spoke, the nine-foot Leon swelled to twelve, a greater gain pumping his energy-infused body up even taller. "Right, Leon?"

The glowing dragon answered with another rumbling burst of growth, continuously burgeoning larger, and larger, and larger. Already-thick haunches swelled wider, stronger, stretching loudly in time with his ovular belly as it ballooned bigger and fuller. In seconds, Anders stood only belly-height to the dragon, which huffed out a plume of neon as he pulsed up, up past 15 feet...18 feet...20 feet...

One second later, and Leon stood 24 feet high, outsizing Spyro altogether. Spyro's lingering bravado held fast, but as Leon trembled, balled his growing fists tight, then burst up to 48 feet, serious cracks began to form in the dyke.

"He's not stopping," Cynder gulped, as Leon huffed out an even larger streak of energy, his body trembling even deeper as bolts of power lanced through it. Even being roughly twice as large as Leon, Cynder sounded like she knew the gap was closing, and quick.

"I know," Spyro comforted, though the way in which he stepped back said much more. Indeed, Leon's belly was encroaching fast, and at a much more modest fifteen feet, that made the dragon's belly a wall—and the wall was getting *bigger*.

Leon snorted and shook all over, tensing tight, before booming uncontrollably to 96 feet, putting both dragons in his shadow in one thick, hard bulge of growth. His head and thickening neck thumped callously up into the lower vault of the ceiling, forcing the dragon into an evermore looming crouch as he adjusted. More and more weight piled onto the flooring, cracking and snapping tiles as the surface started to warp and sag under his girth.

"It works," Anders murmured, awestruck, even as he too backed away. "It really works! Incredible...I didn't think he'd get...so...big!"

Leon blew out a streak of pink-coated flame, as if letting off pressure that kept building and building; he hotly panted and grit his glowing teeth as his body quivered, pulsed, then billowed out even larger, again. His head slid out over the ceiling awkwardly, skidding and stretching as his inflated neck pushed it forth as his shoulders and teardrop belly and chest boomed up to join them.

In less than eight seconds, Leon had swollen from roughly 6 feet to nearly 200, his overpowered body bright and radiant as it filled the back quadrant of the storehouse wing. Even Anders' tiny self was left to crawl atop a single bulging toe claw for safety, as the walls groaned against his scaly bulk. Spyro could have fit in one hand, easily, Cynder in a full-on hug. The outer glow continued to cover and course through Leon's humongous body, alive, moving, knowing, *excited* to be free. Strange clouds formed and swirled around his bulging neck as he huffed a massive pink storm of energy loose, shuddering with an overload of confidence and size.

"Okay, that...that's actually pretty not-bad," Spyro rumbled, defensively flexing his mightier bulk out for show. That he was still backing away did admittedly harm the gesture. "Need to get one of those, heh..."

Wobbling to a stand, as authoritatively as possible, Leon pointed to Spyro and Cynder, and took a deep enough breath to holler with:

"Leon...Dragon Pulse!"

So he ordered, and, despite the sheer size difference at play, Leon obeyed.

Spyro and Cynder glanced to one another, with the split second's worth of morbid curiosity they were allowed, as Leon's massive jaws opened up overhead. A concussive shockwave tore loose, slamming into everything at top-speed, and the entire wing shuddered and rattled on impact. Stacked crates shattered, pokeballs flew free, and Spyro and Cynder stumbled back into a spin as splinters and glass and shrapnel flew wild.

Even Anders went flying back from the force of the attack (especially him, in fact). His back thudded into his Charizard's huge ankle, both catching and hurting him at the same time. The entire sector groaned in complaint, as the shockwave died out, leaving ruin in the massive, room-filling dragon's wake.

"Ho-okay," Spyro coughed, teetering upright among a forest of shattered wood and scattered plastic balls. He shook it off, then scowled, no longer interested in diplomacy (such as he was ever capable of). "OKAY!"

A quick flare of nostrils, a swell of plated pectorals stretching out, and Spyro blasted out a screaming pillar of fire, which crashed up into Leon with monster force, impacting hard into the giant dragon's chest—yet, the massive dragon took it, every single bit. It was only through compliment of Cynder's darkflame peppering in tandem with Spyro's attack that got the bigger dragon to actually flinch any. Really, though, the term 'flinch' might have been a gross kindness. All the mighty Leon did was twitch some, then shake it off with a deep snort and an over-satisfied smile.

"Hah!" Anders began, dusting himself off. "So, you're both fire types, too! My Leon's well-trained! Tempered! You both can do your worst! In fact...let's see how you do against the same! Leon, Fire Blast! Go!"

The few slight scratches their combined attack left up on Leon's looming chest vanished as his maw lowered over them, then opened once again. The name of the command, doubled with the bright blaze rising within the dragon's gullet left little doubt as to what was coming.

"Spyro, down!" Cynder shouted. Through enough time together, he knew well enough to drop low to the cracked floor, just as Cynder's colossal, scaly breasts descended. Both heavy, rounded globes crashed directly over him, flattening and dimpling warmly against his huge muscles; her humongous arms hugged around herself as she laid flat, covering him entirely, just as a column of volcanic flame spewed out, hammering down.

"Anders, this is Delta! We've got your position, report! What on Earth's going on, there?"

The voice crackled to life, hissing loudly over the man's communicator. He snatched it up with one hand, bringing it up to his face, even though his eyes never left the awesome sight of that much fire blasting forth from any living thing, let alone his precious comrade.

"Anders here. We've got two intruders, dragons, fire-types. never seen their species before. Leon's got them on the defensive, already, don't worry."

"Don't worry!?! What's your Charizard doing, in there? All the sensors have gone berserk, and the camera feed is...wait...he's huge! What did you do!?"

A deep rumble rose slowly, from within all that billowing flame, though Anders didn't seem to take notice at the moment.

"My job, that's what! Remember your rank, Delta! The R&D heads wanted a trial run of the new Dynamax ball, and I'm giving them valuable data, by the truckload. Just hang tight for backup, and watch the show!"

"But...he shouldn't be that huge...and why...is he still glowing like that? That shouldn't--"

"Yeah, well, my Leon's *special*, isn't he--"

At that, Cynder's form burst out through the fire attack, swelling wildly out of control. Her bosom ballooned bigger and wider, mashing forth against the wall of Leon's belly, making the gigantic dragon clamp his mouth shut in surprise, cutting the attack short as Cynder blew up into him. Down under-breast, Spyro could only struggle against the escalating weight and heft of both mounds as they inflated rapidly, each groaning and swelling from comparative rooms to *houses*. Her muzzle loomed over the pair as she gasped and grit her teeth, shaking and trembling, before blowing up one last time, booming tight into Leon's stunned self as she fully matched his own 200-foot size.

This, naturally, left little room at all in that sector of the storage wing. That, in turn, left Anders with a female dragon foot wedged awkwardly over Leon's, her toes pushing him flat to Leon's big ankle for a second time.

"Anders? Report! The pressure sensors are going crazy, in the South wing! We can't have destruction of property, just so you can have fun screwing around!"

The dimensions of the quadrant spoke for themselves—400 feet, even. Both Cynder and Leon found no proper end to either party, as every molecule of available space was devoured by lighter and darker shades of scaly girth. With no room to move, the stalemate settled in, uncomfortable and tight, as Anders struggled to work his pinned arm up against the webbing between Cynder's massive toes.

"He's not answering—okay, activate safeguard X-7B! Deploy, right now!"

"No," Anders grunted, trying to lift the communicator up high enough. "They're...mine..."

"Get...off of my...chest," Cynder growled, fussing uselessly. Leon simply grumbled in reply, his voice so big it buzzed against her scales, almost pleasantly so.

"I outrank...you, you morons! Don't...you dare..."

Regardless, the ceiling and floor vents slid further open, and a stream of gas began to sneak in; it took some doing, considering how very little room there was to even fill, but after a moment's confusion, both Cynder and Leon's eyes began to droop low, struggle, then close. Anders, being somewhat squirreled away below, only lasted a moment longer, before he too passed out.

Though it had been a silent trip, Figment couldn't help picking up on Lucario's raw excitement. She seemed overwhelmed by the idea of being able to really free everyone under Devon's yoke of progress, and Figment caught flashes and flickers of it here and there. There was plenty of room to

maneuver about, given how ridiculously big around the expulsion pipes were, but every now and then the sheer emotion Lucario gave off would slam into Figment through her psychic link, and the little dragon's concentration would loosen, blowing him up bigger once again.

"I-I've got it, not to w-worry," Figment immediately soothed, as Lucario turned to see him booming up bigger, behind her. His muscles surged angrily, dead-set on expanding back to their real size, and Figment redoubled his efforts to imagine himself at a constant small size.

If you're really sure, she thought-spoke, watching the purple dragon's body erupt even larger, until his 20-foot body nearly blew up to fit the interior ring of the pipe. On the plus side, we're almost there, so just hang on!

Only a moment later, Lucario gulped, then went still. Figment had only just packed himself down to proper size, when he bumped into her, making his slender arms tremble and swell back out with stretching muscles.

This isn't right, she thought, cocking her head in the darkness. Thankfully, the pipe was fairly clean, but staying there any longer than necessary was...unwanted. Up ahead, they've blocked off the route. Was this pipe decommissioned?

"They shut it down?" Figment asked, forcing his bulk back in with an exhausted huff.

Maybe they caught on to me coming in through here, before...either way, we can't stay put here. If they do another flush of the system, we could get blown clear out!

"What?"

Lucario looked in every conceivable direction, biting her lip in much the same way Figment used to. She looked up, lastly, and stayed that way a moment.

Okay...they closed the pipe off, ahead...but they still need to flush it, so...yes! Figment, up above us! There's a runoff opening!

Figment was from a less-advanced world, but he still understood irrigation and plumbing structural systems; he needed no explanation on anything, and when he looked up at the hole overhead, hiding in the dark, he grinned.

"Ah, brilliant! Let's get ourselves up there!"

Well, that part I'm...not sure how to really do, Lucario sighed. Even standing on you shoulders, I couldn't get close to the ceiling of the pi-WHOA!

Figment was already hugging the blushing pokemon softly, letting himself tremble and blow back up to 10 feet, then 15. She only struggled a moment or two out of fresh shock, before she looked to him, and laughed, wagging her little tail about against his growing belly.

Of course! Figment, that's great!

"G-get atop my h-head!"

In seconds, Figment's head rose up into the aperture, followed by his overgrown neck; at 30 feet in size, his shoulders mashed into the topside around it, swelling into greater definition, as his biceps boomed out, in time with his expanding, stretchy belly, filling the pipe segment below. Lucario had easily leapt up off his pectorals, up his neck, so that she rested into a crouch atop his lengthening muzzle; the moment he overfilled the vertical pipe, Figment forced himself smaller, condensing down just enough to stand up on tiptoe, and force one semi-thick arm up into the pipe with his neck and head. He shrank a little more, until he had both arms in with his torso, then pulled himself North, Lucario settling in for the ride as she hugged his head and horns.

You're pretty handy, aren't you, she thought, chuckling internally.

"You think so?" Figment chuckled, in return; a soft blush burned against her fur as he climbed up, up, until they reached the cant point, wherein she climbed off onto the now-horizontal section, then waited to pull him up with her, when he forced himself small again. "I...*thank you*...I do what I can!"

Well, we're almost there, I think. Bit of a detour, but...I think we still head West at the nearest break, and we should be able to exit, then get into the main building through the air vents...

Figment's bulk blew up against the vent grating to the point of defeat, and it cracked and warped out, creating openings in between itself and the wall. The bulk shrank back, then a set of purple fingers wormed through, and forced the grate off entirely. Lucario squeezed past, then silently dropped down into a large warehouse. Figment tumbled down, somewhat less gracefully, blowing back up to a 10-foot ball of muscle and belly on landing.

"Ah! S-sorry!"

Lucario didn't respond, too focused on the surreal sight of the storage wing. Figment shook off the landing, dwindling back down to her size yet again, when he saw it for himself: the place seemed freshly swept, yet still devastated, cracked and split and half-shattered, from within. The walls were bent out and snapped, the top segments sunken awkwardly over the lower, gravity forcing them and the ceiling to settle all wrong overhead. Piles of bagged debris rested by a more or less intact shutter door.

Despite it all, Lucario seemed more focused on one further aspect, something more specific.

"What in the world happened, here?" Figment wondered.

They're gone, Lucario finally said, processing slowly. *All the pokeballs...A good portion were kept in storage, by R&D, but...they've been moved. Something happened here, and they moved them all. But where?*

Figment opened his mouth to comfort her, but stopped. Instead, he sniffed at the air, then made a little face. He sniffed louder, drawing Lucario's attention at last.

What is it?

"I smell them," Figment muttered, before his tail began beating around in a full wag. "That scent, that's...Cynder's flame attack! And Spyro, I can smell him, just faintly! Haha, they're okay! They must be here!"

Okay? Lucario thought, balking openly. *Figment, the entire area is trashed! Look! There was clearly a fight, or an explosion here, or something bad. Er, I don't mean to worry you, sorry...but—*

"Don't worry about them," Figment interrupted, smiling. "Those two are good friends, comrades even! They're tough! Whoever tried to stop them, if anyone did, is probably regretting it. If we can find them, I'm sure they'd help out, too!"

More allies with that much power couldn't hurt! Okay, then...can you sniff them out?

"I imagine I can—"

Before he could finish being clever, the shutter door at the side rattled, then stuttered to a slow open, struggling to manage its one function. Lucario was behind the massive pile of bags by the time Figment finished jumping at the sound of it all, and he hustled to follow along after.

He started to speak, but Lucario's paw met his muzzle, quieting him.

You're the one I have the link with, at the moment, Figment, so let me communicate, okay?

Figment blinked, then nodded slowly, as they watched on through a small gap between the bags. The door opened fully, or close to it, as late afternoon light spilled in, silhouetting a dragon-like shape. Several armed humans in tac gear stomped over to it, one using some sort of gun to motion it inside.

That Dragonite there? That's their top courier, Lucario explained, briskly. *She runs Devon's deliveries, mostly on her own. She's that fast, yes. We better sit tight here, and let whatever this is pass.*

"Welcome back," one soldier said to the Dragonite, as she stepped inside, then lifted her comically-large flight goggles up, just shy of two long antennae. "Mr. Stone says that something important was missing from the storage manifest, this morning, and he'd like to see you. Right now."

The Dragonite blinked, then coolly nodded her consent, following the smaller humans as they lead her into the next room.

"You know her?" Figment whispered.

I've seen her around, Lucario answered, perhaps a bit quickly. *Let's get you to your friends, though! We'll get back up into the vents to move around, you do whatever you were going to do, to sniff them out!*

"Right!"

"No, Steven is currently out at the moment," a serious voice began, drawing Figment's attention as they crawled through the vent nearest to a large sort of break room. He peered through the grating, spying two adult men in conversation—the kind of conversation that, going off every hint thrown, was not meant to be public. "Though I would imagine he'd want to know about the change up, sir."

"My son has his own business to attend to, Davis," the older of the two men said, sharply. He

had a shock of gray hair and a smart business suit, the executive type. Figment knew a man in charge when he saw one, especially having been a resident of the Scientifica-Lucidus for so long. "Let's not interfere with that. This is purely company business, at hand, and we'll keep it that way. Besides, he has his full attention on today's exhibition match. He gets his funding for his hobbies, and he's happy. I'd rather have him rooting around for his stones and getting into matches, anyhow."

"...Yes, sir, of course."

What is it, Figment? Lucario asked, scooting back over to the dragon, watching on with him. *Oh. Oh, that's Stone! The President of Devon! What's he doing over here? Why isn't this meeting in his office?*

"Now, keeping focus: the subjects are all safe and accounted for? I don't want them harmed."

"No sir, they're all fine. Vitals are clean. We currently have Leon, Sgt. Anders' charizard, and two foreign pokemon in custody. The latter two, we...we've never seen, before. No pokedex can identify them. It's the other two pokeballs that were smuggled out, this morning. Those are the missing parties. We're all but certain it's espionage."

Mr. Stone sighed, long and low, looking out through a large cafeteria window, out over the R&D labs. He turned back to Davis, and nodded.

"That's common, with new inventions, yes. We'll see what that Dragonite has to say about it, any deliveries outgoing were under her shift."

"She's on her way now, sir, under escort."

"This...is truly remarkable, Davis. Truly. We could change everything within a day's time, if this new operation runs as it should. It's imperative to have all of these newly-affected pokemon on board, for shipping. They're much too powerful now, clearly, to keep here, on land. Even Leon. That Dynamax energy...I saw the CC footage. He grew far too large, too fast. It's too wild. Better to keep this power to more...social uses."

"Infinity Energy, you mean."

Mr. Stone smiled, in a heavy way.

"It would be so much better, yes. I truly hope."

Figment looked to Lucario, confused.

I don't really understand this, myself, to be honest, she thought, shrugging lightly. Let's keep going, okay?

As they moved quietly overhead, bits of conversation followed up into the vents, after them:

"You've always been of great help to Devon, and we see you as a valued asset, yes...can you tell me, please...what *specific* pokeballs did you deliver, on your route, this morning?"

"Rrrr?"

The Dragonite's voice rumbled gently, unassuming. Lucario stopped, up ahead, and looked back—not at Figment, but at the voice itself.

"Relax, please. We just want to know what was taken out of the department, today. Alright? Now...who exactly did the deliveries go out to? Won't you explain, please? You are aware of your obligation to explain. If you don't..."

Figment saw Lucario's eyes widen.

"What?" he whispered.

I think she's in trouble, Lucario thought, gulping.

"You know her," Figment replied, staring. "Not just *of* her. You know her, personally?"

Slowly, fearfully, Lucario nodded.

She's...a comrade.

"What?" Figment balked, nearly swelling back up in the vents. "She...works with you!?"

Sort of. We should move, quickly. I shouldn't have thought anything, sorry.

"Well, is she in trouble?"

Probably...but we can't help her just yet. I didn't think she'd get caught this fast.

"Well, why is she working for Devon, then? Is she a double-agent? I've read so much about them, their exploits! Oh, how exciting!"

Not exactly, no, Lucario sighed, fidgeting. *We can go over this later! Come on!*

The sound of a pokeball snapping open rang out, followed by a bright flash of energy, and Lucario froze to the spot.

Oh, no...oh no! That sound...

"Was that one of those pokeballs?"

It's not an ordinary one...Devon uses a special type...it's the same kind you and those other pokemon were in. They aren't like the usual ones, you can go in and out of those. These...are prisons!

"He said 'shipping', and 'land', a moment earlier...the water, perhaps?"

Lucario's fearful stare hardened into a glare, before she took off, wriggling quickly down the vent shaft, and Figment stifled a surprised yelp, before scrambling after her.

"Left, up ahead," Figment whispered, over the slight sounds of her shuffling. "Uh...right, after! This right!"

Out popped the vent, and out the two dropped, landing softly (enough) in a large, low-lit room, with a row of massive transparent tubes lining the back wall. Gauges, knobs and lights all cast green-blue hues that warped and bounced against each cylinder, momentarily obscuring their contents.

Here?

"Here."

With the benefit of enough staring, the reflected lights began to parse from the insides, and Figment all-but slammed up against the glass of the first relevant cylinder.

"Cynder!"

Lucario stayed where she was, slack-jawed, at the sight of it—or, rather, of Cynder. Multiple tanks had been cosmetically fused together, in order to fit the 200-foot dragoness within them, laid out lengthwise, suspended in fluid. It took Figment a few moments to jog down past them all, in order to reach Spyro's single tank. As he stopped, Lucario rand past, to the tank next to that.

"Spyro! It's me, Fig! Do...ah, can't they hear?"

They're suspended, Lucario replied, breaking into his thoughts as gently as possible. *They're being prepared for shipping out, all of them.*

"Can we get them out, somehow?"

I know a good amount about this place, but I have no idea how to operate the machinery.

Her paw was on the tank containing a humongous orange dragon, easily as big as Cynder was. In fact, he had just as many tanks to him, joined together in a hurried, makeshift fusion. Figment saw the way she stared into it, and his heart sank.

"You know that one too, then."

She sighed aloud and nodded, looking down. He waited for some kind of follow-up, only nothing came his way.

"Alright, then," he continued. "Stand back. I'm going to get back up to full size, and—"

No, don't! These casings are impact-proof, no amount of force you put on it will break the material! They only break from within, and even that takes massive pressure to do. I've seen it myself.

Figment had already ballooned up to roughly twenty feet high, his belly bloated out tight against the side consoles, nearly tapping the opposing wall and all its buttons and lights. He snorted, then obediently forced himself back down, shaking his head from the repeated efforts.

Are you okay?

"It does take a bit of strain...but I've got it, now! Practice, and all, heh. So, how do we get them out, then? They're fast asleep, it seems. Chemical induced slumber, I suppose."

I'm not really sure. We have almost zero chance of waking them, from here.

"Right. In that case, drastic times..."

Figment reached into his strapped on pouch, pulling out several small orbs.

Candies?

"Candies! Now, where would the solution pump in from...there! Good, good!"

Lucario watched along, following Figment's stare up to a series of tubes, all of which fed into a large console at the corner of the room.

"That must be it! The filtration and exchange unit! We just need to introduce these to each line, as they pump into the tanks...see the water flow on each? It's timed individually."

You know about this sort of thing?

"I know enough, sure," Figment answered, grinning. "I've really read quite a bit, you know!"

At that, he crushed a candy on one hand, then one in the other, using all his strength. He snuck over to the filtration console, then snooped out a hatch, and nodded for Lucario to help force it open. It slid out with a pneumatic hiss of pressure, a long cylindrical tube, in which Figment dumped the first handful. They watched as it traveled into Cynder's feed, momentarily dyeing the solution. It faded out, and Figment repeated it for Spyro, as well.

This candy...it'll get them free? Lucario asked, watching in fascination.

"It should, yes!"

Then, please...send one to Leon. Er, the charizard, there!

"Of course, if he's your friend!"

Lucario, once again, failed to respond. Still, despite the moment's doubt that stirred, Figment still crushed another candy, then dumped it into the feed, watching as it moved down the line to the charizard's tanks, dissolving into the mixture around him.

Thank you, Figment, so much!

"Comrades help, hehe," the dragon chirped, sliding the tube casing back into the filtration console, and pressing it fully shut.

You think of me as a comrade, so quickly?

"Should I not?"

Haha, well. Fair point. So...what happens now?

Figment waited there, perfectly content to let the reaction explain for him—only, nothing much happened. The steady hum of machinery and the clicking of automated dials filled the lab once more, leaving them to an unsure quiet.

"Well, er," Figment stammered, cocking his head. "It should have started by now, that is a bit off. Is it too diluted by the solution, perhaps? Maybe...maybe I should add more—"

Lucario's ears perked high.

Figment, hide!

He did so, on reflex, ducking behind the console along with Lucario. The two slid around and hugged to its siding, just as a tall door slid open, sideways, and the soft tromping of boots filled the lab.

"Let's get them ready to move, we're doing this quickly," one voice said. "Mr. Stone wants this done as soon as possible, understand? We need them on that ship, and bound for Neo Mauville, no time wasted."

"Sir!"

Neo...

The word echoed through Figment's thoughts, as Lucario mulled it over, thinking. Her eyes widened right after, and her canine teeth revealed themselves in a grit. Figment stayed silent.

*Neo Mauville! They couldn't be...they're trying it **again!**?*

She turned to him, as the sounds of lifts rumbled into the lab from a larger cargo bay door.

We have to get on that boat!

"Tail whip," Drake flatly commanded; to Toothless, the mouth suggested, but the man's eyes demanded. "Let's have it."

For someone so very-much smaller than him to bark orders, polite or not, was nearly intolerable. The man seemed a tough sort, sure—but it hardly made him want to do whatever he said. Still, the contract was clear enough. The 50-foot colossus rolled his eyes, but stopped halfway around, when he heard Drake's throat clear.

"Alright, alright," Toothless relented, aloof and dull. He put his freshly humanized motor skills to work, spinning on his huge black heel, and sending his thick tail into a cruel arc that cracked the air. The sail-tip of his tail slashed overhead, kicking out a mean snap of wind that would have blown Drake's hat back, had the old dog not already had a hand on it.

"There you go," Toothless mumbled, before turning away, scratching indifferently at a fin. "Anything else?"

Drake cut such a glare that, despite the silence, Toothless found himself snapping to attention.

"Not the best attitude I've encountered," the old man growled, unimpressed. "Nor the best attack, even remotely. Your form's lax. Loose. Uncaring."

"I care about what I care about," Toothless countered, folding his monstrosly thick arms. "If I don't care very much about this, then what of it? You could always let me go. I'm not here to embarrass you, you know."

"You won't."

Despite being so new to speech, there was something in the way that response carried that could have been taken multiple ways. Rather than bother with that, Toothless took the straight line:

"I'm very good at what I do, when I feel like doing it. If you want me to do this little show so bad, then I will. I'll do it to get to my friends."

"If you can be bothered to do it 'for your friends', then what good is a half-cocked effort?"

Toothless jerked back, as though something unpleasant had smacked him.

"Well—"

"TAIL WHIP!"

Toothless' mouth pursed flat, his green eyes going spherical, and on some latent reflex, the yelled-at beast twisted into a high kick, lashing his tail out at such speed that Drake staggered back on old sea legs, righting himself just in time, as a gale-force wind smashed past. A perfect landing, a half-twist, and Toothless was back in place, his posture flawless. His wings, having tucked for optimum aerodynamics, relaxed and whipped back into shape behind him. He looked up to the ceiling, eyes lidded coolly. He might have flicked them down, for a moment, to make sure Drake had seen.

The old man straightened back up, and tugged just once on his coat.

"...Okay."

Toothless closed his eyes and half-nodded, grinning wide.

"That was *marginally* better."

Two scaled brows furrowed low, up above. It was a lot more fun when his friends praised him. The sour old bird seemed a tougher crowd, by himself.

"Listen, up there. I ask for the best, for good reason. You strike this cocksure posture, and I want to see why. You have yet to explain yourself properly. Shouldn't be that hard, for you, should it?"

"Look, I'm a *giant*. I have claws and a tail, and fire breath. If *you* can't tell, then why explain?"

"I asked for a tail whip. Blaming isn't a legal move, in battle! This arena is about to open to the public, to the young and old alike. Hundreds and hundreds will flock here, to get a taste of real spirit! Human spirit! Pokemon spirit! They're coming to feel alive! What are you, dead?"

"I...no."

"No?"

Toothless snorted, flaring his pectorals out, with an annoyed grunt.

"NO."

"I think you've been talking back too much to listen. All I've been asking from you is to really see it, to see your spirit! Look at you, you're massive! You're built like a swarm of tanks!"

It suddenly became that much tougher for Toothless to maintain his annoyed look.

"Yet you're like a big cat! You're fine when things are easy and you look good, then turn disinterested or turn off when you aren't instantly rewarded! That's hardly a real champion, to me! Now, this is an exhibition match, a formality, a show, as you said. It's a benefit for a local mining charity, and it means a lot to Hoenn, to its history. Miners put everything into taking this hard land and making it—*making* it a real home! They have pride, they earned it. We aren't here to show off some prancing ponies, you understand? You're part of a great opportunity to really bring that spirit back, and you don't care. You think I'm just putting you down? Have you even once thought of what you could be, with just a little improvement?"

Finally, Toothless softened, and unfolded his arms.

"What I *could* be?"

"Oh, yes. I want you to be as great as you look. And I'm fool enough to think you can do it. I can't ask for you to improve by leaps and bounds in one afternoon session...but I can ask you to go into this event with her head on right. Can you do that?"

Toothless inhaled, loudly, held...then sighed, nodding. A smile came at the end.

"Y...yeah. Yes. I can do that."

"I know it."

"You've still got it, Drake, you really do."

The youthful voice that cut in made both Drake and Toothless turn, as a silver-blue-haired young man entered from the side portal, smart in a full suit ensemble. He brought both hands up from both pockets, and clapped a few times—unironically.

"Steven," Drake spoke, giving a firm, amicable nod. "Good to see you here, so early."

"I was hoping to be here earlier, but the charity had so many stone samples, it was hard to pull myself away," the youth admitted, stepping in, only to stop and gawk up at the towering black dragon. "Goodness! So, the mutterings I heard from the staff were true, there's a rare dragon-type here, after all! You really are a colossus!"

Toothless might have blushed. This kid was alright.

"I've actually been a whole lot bigger," he laughed, switching somewhat back to braggadocio for a moment. "Pleased to meet you, boy!"

"Steven Stone is hardly any boy," Drake corrected, sternly, making the giant clam up. "He's the son of Devon's President, as well as a pokemon champion. Let's have some respect, shall we?"

"Right, right," the huge dragon conceded. "Good to meet you."

Throughout, Steven was staring up at him, unblinking.

"Wow, even speech, as well. Good speech, at that. This really is something! He'll surely be brought up in the match, I take it?"

"Against you, I might need to, hah!" Drake said, actually laughing. In the short time he had known him, Toothless realized that was a first.

"We're going up against him?"

"A champion, yes. And an avid stone collector and traveler, as well."

"Huh. Well, it's a pleasure. I'll go eas—I mean, I, uh, look forward to a great match!"

"Likewise!" Steven offered, cheerfully overlooking things. "I've got a surprise for the match, myself, truth be told. This just got all the more exciting, didn't it?"

"Hmm. Here's to a stellar match, then!" Drake replied, his arms folded. "We'll see you back here, within the hour!"

Steven took another fawning look at Toothless, then nodded, and turned to leave for his dressing room. Drake looked ready to lash the dragon with a few more lectures, but restrained himself, and sighed instead.

"Just, don't forget what I told you, alright? I'll be with you, throughout."

He held the pokeball back up, and once again, Toothless quietly fussed, knowing what was coming next.

Steven popped his back with a little grunt, then calmly unpacked his case on his dressing room table. The case snapped open, and the young man regarded its insides curiously.

"This really will be something," he chuckled, earnestly eager.

The fans piled in, in droves, packing the Ever Grande City arena to capacity in record time. The ads, the coverage, the two competitors, locking horns—all of it had driven the populace into a frenzied anticipation for a legendary match, and they had done their part in arriving. When the lights died low, the audience roared with such force and joy that the spotlight had to put all its focus on the announcer, lest they forget he was even there, trying to talk over them:

"Ladies and Gentlemen! Welcome, welcome, to the major event! Yes, folks, we have a monster lineup for you, this time and this time, only! A one-of-a-kind bash, the likes of which you will never witness in real time, again! Get ready, because tonight, it's...Drake!"

The crowd bellowed, as the spotlight zoomed over, in time to catch the old man's entrance on the far right of the arena floor.

"Versus...the one, the only..."

The spotlight whipped fervently across to the far left, where a set of curtains parted, leaving the darkened doorway open, like a mouth gawking in disbelief, awaiting the entrance of...

"Steven...Stoooooooooone!"

The crowd went from bellowing to hurricane, as the youth stepped into the spotlight, waving humbly, all smiles and appreciation.

"It's classic battle rules, tonight, with one major twist: both participants have altered their lineups, slightly! We might even see someone battling, out of their type! Who knows!?"

Drake nodded over to Steven, who cordially nodded back.

"Trainers, ready! Begin, with your first selections!"

"He'll begin with one of his Steel-types, for sure," Drake murmured, explaining things to the specialized pokeball nearby, so that Toothless could hear it better. "I'm all dragon-types. Likely, he'll start on a solid showcase selection, something that can handle a dragon-type's heavier attacks, like his Armaldo, or Aggron—"

"I choose you—go, Aggron!"

Toothless just listened on, inside the ball, as the crowd roared on with every chosen fighter, with every sound of fire and steel clashing. The more he listened, the more he found himself pressing his fins to the side, to hear better. The more he listened, the more fired up he became. Whatever Aggron looked like, it was going up against a 'Shelgon', and the battle wound everyone up so bad that Toothless was almost trying to pry the ball open, to see it for himself.

By the time Shelgon fell, he was fighting to imagine it all; Drake called on something called a 'Flygon', to which he heard Steven counter with a 'Skarmory'. The idea that such a tough bird as the old man could be pushed back by such a young man truly drove it home—this Steven must have really

known what he was doing!

There had been fights and battles, back home, in his world, sure. Quite a few. Yet, the idea of some gladiatorial game of conquest had never really entered into the mindset of dragonkind, in Berk. Usually, that was for whelps and the like, for babies, playing together. This, however, actually sounded pretty exciting.

When Skarmory locked in battle with Flygon, Toothless started rocking the ball with his wagging. Each attack shook the arena, to the point where even he felt it, which only furthered his excitement. He imagined Spyro and him, shoulder to shoulder, blasting fire and punching through foes, with Figment cheering on or handing out refreshments, the way he heard staff members doing. That seemed about right.

Suddenly, something called a 'tie' was called, and before Toothless' confusion cleared, the ball opened, and out he came, with a rush of energy and motion; when he formed, at full size, he could see over the arena stand walls. He could see the massive crowd, some below him, some rising up above. All of them went silent, in abject awe. Then, the cheering hit, so furious, so renewed, so awesome, that even Toothless winced a bit, his fins dipping back defensively. Not to say he was upset. Not at all.

Now, he *really* saw himself and Spyro there, soaking up the attention.

"And I'll call my fighter, as well," Steven shouted, via his attached microphone (Toothless just thought he had a seriously strong voice). "I choose you!"

Toothless froze in place, his every huge muscle tight, as another specialized ball appeared in the youth's hand, just like his. It snapped open, and after the flash of energy cleared, a humongous white dragon appeared, fur and scales, with long bat-like ears, and a pink tipped snout. His bulky muscles were impressive, though not anywhere near as massively overgrown as Toothless'.

"B...Bartok!?" Toothless gasped, as the gigantic dragon-bat shook his head sleepily, then looked at him—rather, *down* at him. Once everything settled, it was clear: Bartok was big. Exceedingly big. He loomed to nearly the lighting rigs, even on all fours, outsizing even Toothless with no trouble.

Yet, that wasn't what made Toothless gasp. It was the fact that Bartok, still coming to, was already rumbling all over, deeply, heavily, his huge body groaning with a sudden release of pent-up, stored power. His body shook and swelled out hungrily, almost furiously, his clawed feet spreading out bigger and wider over the arena. His haunches burst out larger, his neck swelling and lengthening as he fluttered his pink eyes sluggishly, then moaned and blew up another ten feet in size, then another, still.

It was clear, what Figment had said before, at Baba Yaga's home: all the held-off growth from Bartok's potion was finally kicking in, and he was getting bigger.

Much...*much* bigger!