

Trigger warning: Heavy topics of gender identity and anxiety. Depiction of a panic attack.

There's also fat stuff.

There was a strange, unexplained silence in the Silveredge Guild. The voice of that all familiar Gigantamax Pikachu was paired with the, comparatively much quieter, voice of the visiting guildmaster. The argument the two had was completely blocked out by Eki, whose brain was dense with thoughts of her own. She had curled herself away in her blanket, one that she refused to come out of. Not even the gentle knocks of a familiar set of claws could pull her out of her stupor. Behind her door was Felicity, who had finished plucking poisonous barbs out of her fur the moment she'd stepped back into the guild. The rim of her glasses reflected a small portion of the moonlight, enough to hide her concerned gaze. Behind her, her teammate Vale crossed his arms and leaned against the other side of the hallway.

"E...Eki?" Felicity's voice rattled with concern, before she gave another gentle knock.

Inside, the Quilava simply sat alone. The occasional jerk of her back that shot the blanket up, followed by her sniffles, indicated her condition. She was so caught up in her own emotions, the world seemed to fall away. She could not hear the light click of her lock, tampered by her concerned friend. The door soon opened up, moonlight poured in from the hall and the window itself. Vale was the first to step in, a gentle brush of his own claws gave away his expertise in breaking and entering.

"I couldn't stand watching you do it the easy way." Vale sighed, before he kneeled down to Eki's side.

With a slight rub of her arm, Felicity would slowly follow. "I, I'd feel bad about breaking the lock." She muttered to herself.

The two Sneasels slowly surrounded Eki, all they heard were her shivers and snivels. With exchanged glances, Vale reached over to cautiously crane the Quilava's safety up. The first thing the two got to see was the girl's tear stained snoot, the sides of her face were absolutely drenched with wetness. The exposure didn't get her to stop, but her paws gradually reached to cover herself back up. Vale stopped her.

"Hey, whoa whoa. We're not here to hurt you, Eks. Why'd you bail on us so fast back there?"

Eki grit her teeth, mucus in her throat made her voice moist with despair. "You don't gotta know, please just...leave me alone."

"I'm...starting to have second thoughts." Felicity blurted out. "Eki needs time alone, we should-"

"Sh." Vale glanced over to Felicity, then sat down in front of Eki, legs crossed. "You've been acting weird ever since we evolved. Were ya just...not ready?"

"I-I don't, I don't want...I don't want to evolve." Eki shook out.

A splash of surprise came over Vale. "A Pokémon that doesn't want to evolve? You rarely hear about that. Did you evolve too soon, or-"

"I-I said it's personal, alright! Now leave me alone!" Eki violently pulled the cover back over her head.

Vale took a deep breath, then shook his head. He let her get the rest of it out, the sound of Eki's tear jerked chokes - it left them gut wretched. Felicity soon came over, then rested to Eki's left. She glid her claws cautiously down her manic friend's back, followed by brief, tender shushes. The violent crying soon became small whimpers and wet hacks. "We're sorry, Eki...We just saw you run away, and, well, I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Team Clawful were surprised to find Eki's paw slowly poke out from her makeshift tent, then try to pull Felicity's claw closer. The Sneasel just took that as a sign to rub on Eki's cheek... After some silence, Eki soon pulled herself out of her blanket again. "...-I broke...I broke a promise."

"You wanted to evolve with Alex, didn't you?" Vale pieced it together right away.

Eki's body shivered, before she shook her head. "That...th-that's more complicated than you think..."

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Eki could remember the day she tried to get Alex to evolve. Her voice came out in a shaky mess, but it was clear by her eyes that the day Alex was presented with a Thunder Stone was seared into her memory. His adoptive mother and father were with him that day, in a clearing in the forest. Eki had slowly brought over the stone to give to her friend which was placed on a velvet pillow. That Thunder Stone glowed ever bright, imbued with power. She kneeled in front of Alex, who had a confident gaze on his face. He raised his paw up, slapped it down, then... then... nothing. He tilted his head slightly, then looked up to his mother. The young boy was so confused - so were his parents. Even the giant Tyranitar of a father had a puzzled expression.

"Maybe it's just not your time?" Alex's mom, the wonderful Kangaskhan that she was, suggested.

“No, that’s not how evolving works!” whined Alex, “I’ve read it so many times in our textbooks, it happens if you’re willing and ready! All Pokémon that evolve through stones need is to accept the stone’s power!”

Eki raised her head, then stood up. “Maybe, something different’s going on.” She suggested, before she gave her friend a reassured smile. “Don’t worry! If you can’t evolve, theen...I won’t evolve! Simple as that!”

“You shouldn’t force yourself down that road.” the Tyranitar gruffly responded. “Your parents want you to grow strong one day.”

“I’ll be alright.” Eki promised, then held Alex’s paw close. “Trust me, I’ll always be right beside you.”

Alex’s eyes twinkle, while he let his best friend’s words sink in. “Thanks, Eric.”

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The room was still after Eki finished her tale. Vale and Felicity glanced to each other. “E...Eric?” Felicity finally wondered aloud.

“That...that was my dead name.” Eki revealed. “I wasn’t born a girl. And...I’m scared of evolving. I don’t...I don’t want to become like...I don’t want to become like my da. Every man in his family evolved into an ancient line of Typhlosion...I don’t, I don’t want my da to compare me to the men in his life. I...I want to be like my ma. I’m I’ve been so scared I’ve been taking little bits off of an Everstone to eat just to temporarily prevent myself from ever evolving.”

Vale tapped his chin for a bit. “Everstone...that’s the rock Pokémon hold so they don’t evolve. I guess if you take small chunks of it, you only get a small, itty bitty portion of its power before you digest it. Still though, that sucks...”

Felicity took a moment before she brushed on Eki’s cheek again. “Except...you don’t have to worry about looking like your dad.” she reassured.

Vale slowly stood up, then thought to himself. He quickly came to his own conclusion. “Why don’t we show you?” he asked Eki. “Evolution’s a pretty cool thing. You got a LOT more choice in what you become than you think you do. Let’s guide you.” He revealed two shards of metal that he kept in his pouch, then stared at Felicity. “...Let’s bring her with us.”

“Y...You mean-”

“If now isn’t a better time, I dunno when a better time will come up.” Vale cut Felicity off, then put the slabs away. “Eki, let *us* help you. You and Alex have already done a lot for the two

of us. We wanna return the favor, cuz...we're friends, and all." The sappy talk was hard for Vale, he wasn't used to being so soft and open.

"You can hide in your blanket if that makes you feel better." Felicity bargained, "We just thought that..."

Eki's mind wandered for a bit, before she slowly, weakly stood up. She used Felicity as a rest for her body, her slow nod enough to give the two all the confirmation they needed. Vale, Felicity, and Eki left the guild that night...their destination lay at the second biggest mountain range on the whole continent.

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Night on Coldcoal Mountain was always dangerous for a number of adventurers to trek through. It wasn't just because powerful, strong Pokémon came out of the woodworks to stalk their territory, but it was also because of how cold and chilly it could get. Sub-freezing temperatures were not ideal traveling conditions, especially when the howling winds made for snow scatter at any elevation. Even the least intelligent of preppers made their attempts to hole up in a cave before sundown, and the entirety of Team EDM were lucky to have found a spot not inhabited by a Beartic or their cubs. Their trek through forests, plains, and now mountain paths had led them to this moment. Around three day's worth of exploration had pulled the group nearly halfway through their journey. Harper put the finishing touches on their tarp to keep a decent bit of the heat inside, while not flooding the cave with carbon dioxide from their campfire. Charlie casually prepared bedding for the three to rest in, a blank expression on his face, while Voluse...Voluse paced back and forth, panic in his eyes.

"I still can't believe it." He huffed, "I really can't! Our boss is going to expel us!"

"We're *fine*." Charlie exhaustedly grumbled out while he fluffed the bed he worked on.

V stomped over to Charlie. "Excuse me, fine?!" He roared, "How was stealing the whole looplet fine?! Our mission was to get the gem inside, not the whole looplet!"

"The gem wouldn't come out though!" Harper innocently recalled, "You saw it too, V!"

"Plus, I heard someone coming our way." Charlie walked over to another bed to put the finishing touches on it. "We had to bail as soon as we could."

"Our bail was a rush job!" V warned, "We didn't take the proper precautions, a single hair could spell the end of the whole operation!"

Fed up, Charlie stood up, spun around, then put his left paw on Voluse's head. "Can you use that thick skull of yours to do anything but bicker for just one second?" Maybe it was the

hike up the mountain thus far that had gotten to Charlie, but he hadn't the energy to yell or make a scene. "Breathe, dude."

The natural instinct of the Purrloin was to defy what his team leader told him, but he took a deep breath, his nostrils flared. He felt a little light, but slightly stepped back while his panicked huffs had turned to slow, gradual breaths.

"Listen," Charlie began, "the boss said we had to get that gem by 'any means necessary'. Whether it was breaking the looplet it was in, clawing it out, or just taking the looplet entirely, he never made it clear. Besides, if that gem was in the looplet to begin with, it clearly **needs** that looplet to work. We're not gonna get in trouble for the looplet at all, and before you mention anything about raiding the mess hall...I'm sure the boss wouldn't want us to come back hungry. Now." he pat V on his cheeks, and leaned forward. "Do me a solid and keep the fire tended to, okay? It's getting cold in here."

Charlie broke off from V to go back to the beds, while the Purrloin was left a little shocked. "I never thought I would be getting a lecture from you..."

"Yeah, well, I never thought I could dish one out." Charlie admitted. "We're tired and Krabby at each other, I get that. We just...can't turn on ourselves now, y'know? Otherwise what woulda been the point of all of this."

"You kinda sound like my pop whenever he'd try and calm my brothers down." Harper chirped, then turned around to face the others. She'd pull two sides of her fur tufts up on her head, then put on as best of a masculine voice as she could. "You're freaking out over nothing, you should just take a gander at the smaller things." The Pawmo then brought her hands back to her sides. "He says that all the time. At least, I think I remember that right."

Charlie cringed a bit. "The last thing I need is to be told I sound like *any* dad, let alone yours." he'd jest, then pat down the final bed. He took a deep breath. "Two more days and we're back home, guys."

"A reminder that we'll be headed East." Voluse finally got back to his normal tone. "Then we'll be back in Shade Split."

With his energy spent for the evening, Charlie slowly laid down on the bedding, then took a deep breath. With the sounds of a fire crackling to his left, and the sounds of the mountain winds further off, he felt it was the perfect ambience to fall asleep to. Time flew by while he listened to the ambience of the fire, even when it diminished it calmed him. The fire was nought but a crisp pop every so often, while the winds slowly died down. Voluse had drifted off to his left, while Harper's bug eyes had locked with Charlie's.

A little grumble left Charlie, before he rubbed one eye. A brief glance to the outdoors indicated there was still plenty of moonlight. "Harp, go to bed..." Charlie mumbled out.

"Why do you work for Hugo?" She questioned, almost like she was just as cognisant as she was a few hours ago.

The question took Charlie aback for a moment. He had to think about it for a moment, before the words left him on their own. "Cuz I got nowhere else to go. Now go to-"

"Why?"

Another brief pause. "What's with the twenty questions?"

"I feel like I don't know you like I do V." Harper pointed over to the sleepy Purrloin. "V loves books, he loves being the smart guy, and he's good at reminding me stuff. You're goofy, but, I dunno, that fight you had with V..."

"It wasn't a fight, just an argument." Charlie rolled onto his back and looked up to the cave's ceiling. "...I have nowhere else to go because no one else wants me. I don't got a dad or mom to go back to. They don't want me. Caused so much trouble as a kid they kicked me out. It was only a couple weeks ago I met Hugo, after jumping from bandit group to bandit group."

"What happened to them?"

"Same thing that happens to most rag-tag roadside thieves. They got in over their heads and got busted."

"Is that what will happen to us?"

There was another pause. Charlie couldn't help but feel that strange tug in his chest he'd felt a million times before. He was stupid for feeling it, he thought to himself, stupid for feeling like this would be any different. Maybe he just wanted it to be. "Nah. We're just built different."

"Oh!" Harper's tail wiggled at that response. "I don't know what that means, but I'm gonna say it's a good thing." She finally let out a yawn, then rolled further into a ball. "I think I can..."

It wasn't that long until Harper fell asleep with a loud, obnoxious snore. It was unfortunate that Harper's brief insomnia passed to Charlie. His eyes continued to be fixated on the ceiling again. The thought of his old crews filled his head in sequential order. Those who taught him along the way, but could never get through his behavior. He sighed softly to himself.

"At least...I hope we are."

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The early morning climb was something that Eki was not used to. Her little legs weren't fit for the mixture of snowy, rocky terrain at all. She squinted her eyes shut at various points to shield her vision from the snow shower up ahead. The makeshift robes she made out of thin blanketing helped not to warm her up. If it weren't for her guides in Vale and Felicity, she knew not what would come of her so far up. The three paced themselves well, at least, well enough for Team Clawful. When Vale and Felicity felt exhaustion get to them, they would pause to admire how far along they've come. There did come a point though where Eki had fallen further behind than they anticipated. Felicity was the first to notice - all she had to do was tug on Vale's shoulder for him to recognize how far they pushed themselves along.

A sigh left Vale, who nodded. "Alright, take a break." He ordered, and immediately guided the others into a cavern nearby.

Eki struggled along, until she was finally hit with the warmth of a stony interior. While Felicity helped her Quilava friend get comfortable, Vale flopped down on his rear with his back to the stone. He squinted to the rocks below, only to find signs that there were others here before. He made nothing of it - Pokémon come and go through these mountains all the time. Eki's whole body shivered in her friend's embrace, the chilliness of the outdoors had gotten to her.

"Uh, sorry for asking..." Felicity's words cut through the teeth chatters and snow flurries. "You're a Fire type, right? Can't you just warm yourself up?"

"S-S-S-S-Sometimes it gets t...t-t-t-too cold to make heat." Eki commented. "I-I-I-I've done better geh...ge...getting up here, but...s-s-seems I r-r-r-reached my limit."

A sigh left Vale, who pulled his legs up to his shoulders. "No, we did you wrong." he half admitted, then thought to himself. "I did you wrong. Thought we could multitask this. We're um...we're on a time crunch."

"Wh-wh?" Eki perked up.

Felicity's claws rested her pal's back, she brushed her fur gently. "We wanna get up to the top right before sunrise." She explained.

"It's nothing we can't postpone until later," Vale promised, "but we thought, y'know. It'd be better if we tackled this now." he glanced out to the blizzard, glad to see that some of the precipitation had diminished. "Now I see I was rushing too fast...this whole world's about change, y'know? That doesn't mean I can't wait for my pals to catch up with it."

Eki's eyes drifted down to the rock while she let the Sneasel's words fill her mind. "I guess. I'm just...scared of what that change is going to do to me."

"*You* are in control of how you present yourself." Vale encouraged. "If Pokémon see you for who you are, who you show yourself to be, then that means you're doing a good job."

A little smile crept up on Felicity's face. "Aw, Vivi..."

Vale's cheeks grew rose-tinted, before he glanced away. "Wh?! Don't...wait, is, that how YOU feel when I call you Fifi?" A little giggle left Felicity at Vale's reaction. He took a deep breath, then examined the snow outside. "...A-Anyway, let's, just wait here for a bit, okay? Rest up, get warm. Maybe we'll have lunch."

The Quilava gently nodded to her companion, then continued to rest in Felicity's embrace. There was something warm about being next to a companion, something that reminded her of her one and only other friend. No matter what happened, she was at least glad to find compassion in the other two...

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The descent down the mountain was easier than the ascent for Team EDM, especially since their path was a bit more traveled. Footsteps in the snow had made for a well beaten path, traversed along every now and then by the odd trader or expeditionists. In the silence of presumably their last day out in the mountains, they could finally see the Aridaria Badlands just barely off in the distance. It reinvigorated their spirits, to say the least. None of them were arguing, nobody was in the midst of a fit, it was like a dream come true.

"So," Charlie relaxed back while he walked, paws shuffled behind his head. "What're YOU guys gonna do with the money you've made?"

Voluse put his paw to his chin and hummed. "Perhaps start a library. Shade Split City lacks proper education, so, maybe it's time someone gathered enough literature to-"

"Bo-ring!" Charlie cut him off, then looked down to Harper. "What about you?"

"I'm gonna buy a whole BAG of peanuts!" Harper struck a pose with determination. "Then? I'mma EAT them all!"

"Heck yeah!" Charlie chuckled, "That's a better plan. Imagine what you could do with-"

Charlie was slightly yanked back by Voluse, who had paused in his steps behind his leader. Harper had also frozen stiff, her ears twitched upward. The Aipom soon could hear the sounds of snow crunching further behind them, heavy trodden footsteps...All three quickly assumed formation, arms locked, heads butted together.

"What's the plan?" Voluse flatly pressed.

"Plan E - Eeee-timidation." Charlie pushed. "We press these punks off our backs and they'll move on."

“Oh!” Harper chirped. “E, for Intimidation!”

A sigh left Voluse. He just let them have it there, and broke the circle. The group could see a group of four make their way down. They were wide, especially the tallest member who was wider than all three of them. A giant Gardevoir in a nurse’s outfit, a Meowstic in nice stockings with wide hips, a chunky Zangoose with big pupils and a satchel, and a chubby Gallade with a cape and a Muscle Band. Team Shonen ended up getting lost on their way to Rhythm Town, all because the leader insisted on using the map himself.

“This goes to Aridaria, Aspen.” Sylvester glanced up to his team leader. “We’re heading the complete opposite direction. We’ll want to head west and-”

“Nah, nah!” Aspen insisted. “The map CAN’T be wrong. We just gotta keep going this way!”

“Aspen.” Sylv signed. “...The map is upside down.”

A little sigh left Amie, who covered her mouth with her hand. “If I didn’t find this kind of cute I would’ve snatched the map ages ago...”

“What’s stopping you from doing it now?” gruffed Rory.

“Look,” Aspen tried to calm his group down, “if we end up in Aridaria, THEN we’ll do it your guys’ way. Maybe there’s just a part of the mountain where...”

The group paused when they were within throwing distance of Team EDM. Charlie and Aspen practically had a stare down with one another, while the winds behind them blew and fluttered accessories around. Charlie had to choke down his intimidation - even with a soft physique, Aspen’s cape blowing and fluttering in the wind was intimidating to say the least. The luscious lashed Gallade looked up and down Team EDM, then scratched his head.

“You guys lost or something?” He finally blurted out.

A groan left Sylvester and Amie. “As if he’s one to talk...” Amie sputtered.

With another intermission full of blown air, Charlie smirked, then pumped his fists upward. “Well well well!” He crowed, “What’ve we got here? A couple of big shots who’re lost!”

The annoyance on Team Shonen’s end rapidly turned to confusion. Aspen turned around to get everyone’s opinions, only to be met with shrugs and head shakes. He turned back to face the opposing party. “Look, we’re kinda in a hurry. Unless you guys know where Rhythm Town is, we’ll-”

“Oh ho ho~!” Charlie put his hands on his hips, then stomped his foot in front of him. “Hey! What’s the hurry? Why the rush? You afraid of getting a beat down from the best crooks known to Pokékind?!” he practically leaned his body on his front foot, then slithered his head down and back up in an awkward, serpentine motion. Harper had poorly mimicked his actions, while Voluse stood in the back with his paws on his forehead.

The silence just continued to permeate among the group. Sylvester just raised a brow, Rory looked on uninterested, while Aspen and Amie tilted their heads in different directions. Charlie continued his theatrics. “We aren’t just a normal team, we’re the best thieves money can buy! Hearts made of stone, constitutions ironclad! We’re Team...”

Charlie put both his hands up into the air, straightened out his body, then swished his upper torso sideways. His tail followed in the motion of his arms. “EVIL!”

Humiliated, Voluse sighed and went with his portion of the bit. He got beside Charlie, cupped his paws together up above his head like a curved line, then leaned in Charlie’s direction. “Doom...!”

Harper had to quickly get back on course when she realized it was her turn to make a letter, and to stop copying Charlie. She bent forward, and pressed her paws into the snow below. “Mischief!”

“That makes us...”

The three broke out of formation, Charlie balled his fists up with a flashy grin, Voluse swung his paw to his side, while Harper rolled to the unoccupied left side of Charlie with her paws outstretched. The group roared in unison, “Team EDM!”

“Do you think you’ve got what it takes to take down the most gnarliest of gnarly? Are you a bad enough dude?!” Charlie’s dare echoed out into the expanse, his confidence evident in that snarky grin plastered all over his face.

Another bout of silence from the unimpressed Team Shonen, before Aspen shook his head. “We’re good.” He concluded, then started to walk away.

For a moment, Charlie felt confident his plan worked. He snickered, then turned back to his partners. “See? Plan E always works.” he turned back to observe Aspen and company’s advance onward. “Heh, man... think he’s a nerd?”

“Undoubtedly.” Voluse agreed to placate his leader.

“I mean who wears a blue cape as lame as that?” Charlie remarked, without putting much thought into it.

The three weren't particularly being quiet about their comments - all of Team Shonen got to hear the snide comment Charlie had made. Even Aspen. The leader of Shonen froze in his steps, the light snow flurry that sprinkled around him seemed to melt in a small radius. His head cracked back to glare down the Aipom. "What did you say, you little punk?!" He tightened his fists, showing clear signs of anger.

Both Sylv and Amie rushed to Aspen's side, nervous at his near boiling point. "C-Come on, calm down..." Sylv nervously suggested.

"Yeah, these are just small fry," Amie continued, "really isn't worth blowing a gasket over!"

"I said your cape is LAME!" Charlie rebutted, with his arms crossed. Now V and Harper did their best to pull their leader back.

With a tug, V tried to get Charlie to budge. "C-come on, let's just ignore this guy." He begged.

"He looks way too tough!" Harper whined.

It was all in vain though, for both sides. Aspen was worked up and Charlie was unimpressed. To Aspen, this little Aipom knew nothing about fashion, looking cool, or even about being a hero! To Charlie, he was nothing more than a dweeb with authority. With both leaders seeing red, their parties were inadvertently forced to tag along.

"You're going down, punk!" Aspen readied himself, then quickly charged toward Charlie.

Despite knowing how to throw a good punch, Charlie knew something a little more useful; how to dodge one. He ducked under Aspen's fist, his tail grappled onto his chunky forearm to swing himself up onto Aspen's shoulders. From there, he held back none. His little claws were made useful in rapid, furious slashes against Aspen's neck. Constant scratches had the Gallade stumble and reach back, though he couldn't grab hold of Charlie during his assault.

Charlie pulled on the back of the cape that he abhorred so much, just to throw Aspen for a loop and briefly throw off his train of thought. "Plan B!" He commanded his friends.

"I guess we're getting involved too." sighed Sylvester, who readied himself for support. He held up his paws to set up a Reflect, before he felt something sock him in the face. It was a paw, a paw from a Purrloin.

V had quickly popped Sylv with a weak, low power move, but it was enough to throw him off and make him flinch. Rori retaliated fast, able to land a devastating double swipe against the little feline. The impact propelled him through six feet of snow - flurries of sparkling snow powder flitted the air around the battle arena. Harper rolled into action, able to whizz by Amie's attempts

to pull her up into a psychic attack, hellbound to land a hit on Rori. One could hear her yell with determination, before she took a sliding kick against Rori's leg. The Zangoose was shocked to feel his weight be the very thing that made him topple down into the snow below, a devastating hit from both being knocked prone, and from his blubber being his downfall.

"H-Huh," Amie stumbled back with a nervous smile. "I guess they're tougher than we thought...but not tough enough!"

After Charlie vaulted off of Aspen's head, he quickly rejoined V and Harper's side. These four were trained, and all of them seemed ready to let loose an attack. He glanced at his foes, then nodded. "Plan T!" he commanded.

The other fighters were astonished by the sudden surge of light from all three of them, a union of illumination. There was a sudden flash, a symbol for all three of them that neither Shonen member recognized, then the sounds of crystals that shattered abound. The sky had darkened in a radius around the battleground, all three individuals wore peculiar hats on their heads. The base started with a rounded edge, before it briefly zipped like a lightning bolt further up. A stained glass face, with purples, magentas, and reds at the body, and a malicious grin had perched itself up in their absence of sight. There was something bizarre about them now, like power had begun to course through their bodies.

"Right!" Charlie yelled, "Plan T-A!"

The first one up was Voluse, who started to run through the snow toward Rori. The short little Purrloin swished by a X-Scissor and landed a powerful bite right into his leg. An instinctual flinch was all Harper needed to bring an Arm Thrust right to his face. That was one of the Shonen down. Charlie singled out Sylv, and charged right at him. Sylv tried to lift the Aipom up with a brief flash of Psychic, only to find his opponent unaffected.

"T...That's impossible!" gawked Sylv.

He was down for the count seconds later, a well placed pickpocketing-jab in the move Thief brought out a flash of power not previously felt before. It was clear the weather had chipped Team Shonen away previously, but now? It seemed like things were impossible.

"Aspen, grab the Rori and run!" Amie stressed, while she stomped along to Sylv's body. "I'll teleport us out and-"

With a whack to the back of her head from a heavy item, Amie felt her own consciousness slip. A Toxic Orb Charlie had stashed away made for a great use of Fling. Three down.

Aspen weighed his options. He stepped back, infuriated at the fact he and his friends had met their match to a pair of pre-evolved chumps. He gripped something in his hand tightly,

before he stored it away in between his cape's knot. Without much else to lose, the Gallade charged in. All three of EDM knew exactly how to bring him down - while he slashed through the snow with a Psycho Cut at Harper, Charlie and Voluse prepared a team attack. Harper took the hit without even a sign of damage, then leapt back toward her friends. With all his upper body strength, V swung Charlie by his ankles and threw him toward their opponent. His brief airtime led him to somersault, then projectile toss Harper toward Aspen's chest.

"Team Attack!" EDM shouted in unison. "Harper Fling!"

The Pawmo, like a meteor across the night sky, collided with Aspen's soft abdomen by her little feet, then crushed him into the snow beneath her. The four were fainted by the thieves' collective efforts. Silence came over them and their hats dissolved into the winds around them with glitters and sparkles.

Soon enough, Charlie puffed his chest out and hollered out to the skies. "We won!" he bragged, "We won!"

Harper threw around snow into the air, then danced around her team leader. "Yeaaa! We beat them up good!"

"A purely avoidable battle," Voluse criticized, though even he couldn't help but smile at the celebrations, "though it proves we can work together even in the most risky of situations. I can't believe your plans actually helped us out of a spot."

"Heh." Charlie rubbed his paw under where his nose would be. "Told ya they would. I'm a master battle strategist, y'know!"

Harper stopped for a moment, then put most of her weight onto one paw. The Pawmo leaned comically to her left, head in the snow. "But Charlie! I thought you said most of those techniques came from magazi-mmph."

Charlie's paws to Harper's mouth were what quickly cut her off. "Heheh! Uh, heheh, MASTER strategist."

"Even if you stole them from magazines," Voluse continued on, "the fact you coordinated us alone...mm. Perhaps this arrangement works out after all. Now, shall we go?"

"Oh, fiiiine." Charlie waved off, while the three started for the bottom of the mountain.

The chilly winds that blew behind them ruffled about the articles on the unconscious Team Shonen. Sounds of snow, crunched beneath weight, pittered feebly across the snow ahead. A strange individual, in what seemed like a poncho, must have taken pity on the group. Aspen was the first to be dragged away...

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The grays of a cloudy day soon melted to the cold chills of a black night, the sky devoid of all personality. The crunch of snow beneath the feet of Team Clawful and Eki were the only things that broke through the whoosh of the snowy onslaught. Vale helped pull Eki along, the girl exhausted from their now restless trek up the mountain. They'd seen the moon for hours on end - daybreak was sure to come soon. Even with the rest earlier, Eki felt like a candle burnt at both ends of the wick. Her eyes drooped, her grip on her makeshift cloak weak, vision slightly blurry from all the work she'd had to do. This was a sentiment met by the other two as well, yet they stowed away their worries and concerns to make it to the top with extra time to spare. Making it to the top of Coldcoal Mountains was far too important. Up near the top of the mountain, the snow pelted on the hardest. The lack of footprints meant no one had been here in quite a while. The three passed by a shrine blanketed by precipitation, one abandoned by time given the lack of traffic to it. Wilted flowers from long ago were crumbled in the shelter away from the weather, the text faded to obscurity. It was just another landmark to pass by for the three, yet they didn't realize that a set of eyes had fixated on them through the darkness of the ruins...

"We're almost there." Vale promised, a little wobbly from exhaustion himself. "The top's in sight. We just have to get there..."

Felicity whined, then plopped her head onto Vale's shoulder. The darker Sneasel's face lit up like a Blast Seed with a potent, red blush. "We're gonna nap when we finish this, right...?"

He hesitated at first, but the shorter Sneasel gently scritched under Felicity's chin. "Y...Yeah." He promised weakly. "We'll just snooze under that shrine."

Eki panted loudly while she stumbled upward more and more, her head swimming with insecurity. The stones of apathy hurled themselves at her confidence- even among friends, she felt worn down. Part of her felt like she couldn't keep going. What if she stopped now? Ran away, hid in secret and shame for not conforming to how she was born? Run away because she felt she'd never amount to what she wanted to be? If Eki wasn't so chilled to the bone, she would have bellowed out in tears just at the thought of this journey's end. All she could muster was a shiver, her breath spasming like a distraught child. She had grown now, but she was scared. Scared that she could never, ever go back. What would that entail? So stuck in her head, she didn't realize that she'd bumped right into both Sneasels. Their eyes broke through her tunnel vision, their gaze of worry, of trust. Eki still shivered in front of them, her sputtery lip bite indicative of her faltering mental state.

"I...I-I'm fine." Eki lied through her teeth.

Felicity's claw gently cradled under Eki's chin, her head tilted to the left. "It's...okay not to be." she promised. "You're going through a lot."

Warmth. Some slip of warmth was enough to bring a tear down Eki's snow peppered cheek. She felt comforted by these two- while Vale helped rub on her back, Felicity wrapped her arms around Eki in a hug. Everything felt calm, warm, and at peace again, just for a moment. Those thoughts of doubt weren't gone, they just...subsided for a second. Everything outside of the bristly fur of Felicity was muted. The Quilava felt like she could hear her friend's heartbeat... It was then, however, in that moment of genuineness and comfort, that Vale pushed the two aside. The perimeter of noise came back to the exhausted girl when she plopped down into the snow, a shockwave of flurry flying over her face and further back down the mountain. She lurched up, Vale and Felicity facing the same direction.

A foreign Pokémon had caught the group by surprise, his fist firmly planted in the ground by where they once stood. He had black and green fur, the green highlighting his muzzle, chest, hands, legs and feet past the ankles. His eyes were devoid of personality, practically feral in comparison to others. Marks of purple poison curved around his eyes, and a purple set of chains wrapped around his neck. The stranger thing was what was around his lower arm- tight, scruffy, red braces. In comparison to Clawful, the true trapezoid of a body this Pokémon had them dwarfed. He pulled himself up from his spot, then gave a sharp toothed grin.

"They say not many Pokémon who come up here live to see the peak." warned the large canine, before he swung his body up and beat his fist into his palm. His voice was gruff, gravelly and deep. He came across as a seasoned brawler or combatant just from tone alone. "Specially runts like you."

The three were caught off guard by a series of confident chuckles around them. When Felicity caught a glimpse of the figure above her, she scattered to her feet. Just a few inches taller than the Sneasels was a true pill-shaped simian. Much like his canine counterpart, he had black fur around the outsides of his body, with his feet, fingers, face and chest highlighted in a sickly blue. "Lost, lost, lost~!" He cackled, his voice nasally and irritating. Between his fingers, he spun a crooked old spoon. The chains around his head seemed to comfortably rest there, despite nothing securing them. "You've lost the moment you came up here!"

"I'd suggest you turn back now." A more refined tone from nearby accosted the group. Another figure from the darkness, though this was the most colorful of the bunch. Orange wing tips contrasted against the black body and feathers, similarly with the orange tail and legs. Yellow tufts of curled feathers contrasted its black face. The purple of his chains made for long eyelashes that curled midway around his white neck, his chains around his waist. He gripped tightly a gemstone, almost a whitish blue. "There's no hope for you to last one round against us."

"We don't take kindly to punks in our territory." threatened the largest of the trio, who cracked his knuckles again. "Wanna end up as an example? Or wanna get goin'?"

Shaky, Eki stood to her feet. She stumbled backward, her head swimming with thoughts of danger. Adrenaline had given her second wind, yet she could not run. Something anchored

her in place. "W...We'll...we'll go!" Eki whined, "W-We'll leave, we won't come back, we...we swear by it!"

"I ain't going anywhere." growled Vale, who was the last to pull himself up to his feet.

The three powerhouse foes took one glance at Vale, then back to each other. Each of them erupted with laughter. A bellow from the canine, a cackle from the simian, a trill from the avian. That confident stance Vale had was mirrored by Felicity, a smidge hastily. Eki was the only outlier. She pulled Vale's shoulder gently. "Y...You don't mean that! They're out of our league! We...we don't stand a chance."

Vale paused for a bit, before he glanced back to Eki. "I made a promise to Felicity." he stood there with determination. "When we were finally ready, we'd make the journey up to the top. We'd see the sunrise, we'd come back changed. I'm not stepping down from my promise."

"A...promise is..."

"Promises aren't just about keeping true to your word." Vale interrupted Eki. "They're about keeping true to yourself, and your friendships. Words mean nothing. They don't bind ya. Sometimes you gotta break a promise in order to get closer as friends. Something my old man taught me when I was a kid."

The larger canine gripped his paw shut, then rolled his neck around. "All this talk of 'promises', 'friendships', 'binds', you bore me." his amused snarl gave way to another sharp toothed grin. "Wanna know the real thing that 'binds' you? Power. Allow me to demonstrate."

Without a warning, Vale was broken from his gaze with a brutal Force Palm to his chest. He was rocketed across the snow, a ravine with his width left in his wake. Angered, Felicity pulled her glasses up and readied to retaliate. She charged quickly, claws ready to strike, only to be surprised by the thumb of a simian.

"Made ya look!" He teased, then jabbed his fingers into the Sneasel's side. She recoiled back.

The attack didn't hurt too bad, but it made her recoil. There was an opening that the avian zipped for. With the gem crushed in their wings, they performed an acrobatic stunt to stun potential onlookers with pizzazz and finesse. Now with that gem crushed, it hurt the poor girl more than it would've with the weight of the item...though that item itself seemed to boost the attack to higher levels. Felicity was tossed into the air from the blow, and landed on her back. She sputtered and coughed, then tried to get up. Already, she was dangerously low on stamina.

Eki simply shook in place, fear had taken hold of her. One could hear her breath run hot. Her vision grew blurry in the face of the impossible, darkness creeping up in the corner of her

vision. The giant canine stomped up to her, smug as could be. He squatted down to the shivering Quilava.

"Heart's racing." he taunted, digit on her chest. "Heh. Let's make this quick." he reeled back for a slow, powerful strike, before his palm collided. Snow flung out all around them, the field obscure for just a few seconds.

In place of Eki, Vale stood in place. His claw curled up into a punch, ice shielded around it. Annoyed, the larger foe went for another strike, only to be countered by another Ice Punch. It barely did damage to the figure, who kept going for more strikes.

"Eki!" Vale called out. "Lock! In!"

Vale slipped under an oncoming Force Palm to land his own jab. He slipped beneath his foe, claws slipping on his bracers to slide them off his arms. The shock of it all had the canine glance back and forth, then over to the cocky, confident Sneasel who dangled them teasingly. With a gravelly growl, that wall of muscle stampeded toward Vale. His attacks, while slightly weaker, were now slightly faster. Vale had to consistently dodge, like he played a game of keep away from a young child.

When Felicity finally pulled herself back up, she unfurled her claws again. Even at such low stamina, there was still fighting spirit in her. Her attention went to the simian, who she didn't hold back on. She slashed right into him, the power of her attack seeming practically unreal. He was knocked backward a good few feet, then chortled to himself.

"Oh, I see how it is." He teased, "I've got you figured out! Your ability is clear as day to me. Strange~ Never heard of a Sneasel who had Huge Power before. Usually Pokémon who carry an ability unnatural to them had to go through extensive training- they'd be too elderly to even use it properly!"

With her gaze fixated on her psionic foe, she shook her scarf out of her face. "I'm built different." She confidently remarked, then threw another slash at the simian.

The chain around her foe lifted itself up into the air, a psionic force pulsated through the air, and locked Felicity in place. "Built inefficient." retorted her foe, before she was flung right into Vale.

The impact alone was enough to knock poor Felicity out cold, though another tumble along the snow had Vale in a terrible spot. What's worse, he finally noticed the burbles of poison about his scratches. Simply combating against these brutes was enough to badly poison someone. The avian made a quick beeline for Eki, who used her last bit of adrenaline for the moment to block a Cross Poison attack with her arm.

“Your foolishness brought you up to this mountain,” teased the bird, “and it was your friends’ arrogance that kept you here. Such a shame, girlie. I’m sure you would have made a fine Typhlosion one day.”

Eki’s foe went for another Cross Poison, only to be met with the paw of the Quilava who caught his talon. Something in that sentence awoke something in the girl. Time stood still for her on those mountaintops, the howls of the wind gone in her mind. Her vision cleared, those mocking voices in her mind parted...she saw these Pokémon for who they were now. Strong, arrogant foes that she couldn’t win against...not in this state.

“You see it too, huh?” Eki grumbled, while the avian’s leg was in her grip. “Good.” Her head had drooped down by that point, but she soon lifted her head back up to present a smirk. Her grin alone radiated a positivity she hadn’t felt in days, a comfort. “Glad the world sees it my way.” With a bellowing roar, Eki began to spin her assailant by his talons. At first, he was dragged along the ground and plowed the snow beneath him with his back. The tank of a dog and the thumb of a monkey were both distracted by the sudden change in tone- that gave Vale enough time to pop in a Pecha Berry for himself, and a Revive Seed in Felicity’s mouth. While he helped her chew, the Sneasel’s eyes opened once again.

The darkness of night had started to fade away for but a moment, Eki’s body beginning to illuminate a bright, flashy white glow. Rays of white light shot from her and struck the snow around. The precipitation itself made way to give Eki center stage. While her height stretched upward, the spinning of the bird got higher, went faster, even made him dizzy. When the light fully faded away, a Quilava she was no more. The hues of her body hadn’t changed, she hadn’t fallen into the worries of becoming like her father. No, instead, she had that confident glare her mother had. By the time her assailant was thrown at the signal of her roar, she built up enough speed and force to torpedo him in the direction of the simian. He shrieked loudly- there wasn’t a move he could do that would avoid the full frontal force of the fling. Snow scattered with a **THOOM!** Eki stomped forward, eyes locked up to the canine who was only inches taller than her. Fire shot from her back, an orange glow broke through the snow and melted it before it could touch her.

“Leave my friends alone!” she warned, then reeled her neck back.

Realistically, they could’ve probably beaten her, but the three weren’t prepared for one of them to evolve mid fight. “N...Next time we see you! It’s on sight!” warned the canine, who ran with his proverbial tail between his legs. He scooped up his friends and made his way down the other side of the mountain, both his pals dazed from the collision.

While his stomps grew further and further away, Eki glanced over to her pals with a soft smile. Vale was pulled along by Felicity, revitalized by her Reviver Seed, dashed to the now Typhlosion. Her eyes fixated up to Eki’s, who curled down to meet her pal at eye level.

“...You guys were right.” she smiled. “I’m...I’m in control of who I can become. Nothing...nothing’s gonna stop me from being the woman I was meant to be.”

“Hff...heh...thatta girl.” Vale puffed, then pulled himself up. “That...took a lot out of me, personally. How’re you feeling?”

“A scratch or two.” Eki admitted, while she glanced down to her claws. “I...I never thought I’d get to this point. Never thought I’d look like my mom. I’m...I’m ecstatic!”

Gently, Felicity wrapped her arms around Eki’s lower torso, snuggled in her new fur. “...You’re really warm now.” she remarked, which was enough to make the Typhlosion chuckle.

“Hey...” Vale puffed, then pulled Felicity away.

Eki watched Team Clawful stagger up, further and further past the arch of their vision, then followed suit. The snow storm had parted away, the stillness only broken up by wind. The three Pokémon were only mere yards away from their destination, and what a destination it was. The darkness of the night had slightly faded away and the makings of dawn had begun. The orange of the sky had faded into place in front of them, the slight peak of the sun over the ocean of clouds a reminder that time was of the essence. From Vale’s bag, he pulled out two, sharp, pieces of metal. Wordlessly, Felicity took one. Vale slipped his bandana off his head, then stowed it away in his bag.

“Ready?” Vale wondered one last time. Felicity just nodded in response.

The two Sneasels gripped those razor sharp metal chunks tightly, then interlocked their arms together. While the sun slowly rose up further, and night faded faster, Vale’s body was the first to glow and Felicity joined him in illumination. The sunrise consumed the light their forms emitted, though Eki squinted on through their transformation. They both began to morph upward, each of them more exaggerated in form than before. The first thing to fade out of the light was their claws, both now permitted three digits instead of two. Further up their body, Vale was notably a normal looking Weavile now. Short still, but only by a couple inches. Felicity, however, was notably different. The bind on her chest and stomach was gone- all that remained of it was the waistline portion that resembled a pair of panties. It hugged her waist to emphasize her chubby belly and plump thighs. Her scarf was pushed up by her revealed breasts, thick handlebar piercings coming through the fur. That little gem on her head had slipped into a rhombus of sorts, her claws now long and sharp. Vale noticed Felicity’s boobs first, then nervously looked away.

“W-When did you get THOSE sweater puppies?!” He gasped.

With a smirk, Felicity bopped her friend on his forehead, the red feathers of his swayed about. “Oh I’ve always had them.” She teased, “You never asked to see them.”

A hearty belly laugh left Eki, who watched the two all throughout their change. "So that's it then?" she stepped in, "Your promise was to evolve together?"

After some time to compose himself, Vale cleared his throat. "We, uh, we promised each other that when the time came, we wouldn't leave either of us behind. This took about three years of planning, coming up here, evolving during the swap between dusk and dawn..."

"Normal Sneasel can only evolve at night." Felicity mentioned. "Ancient Sneasel like me can only evolve during the day. Vale said dawn was that perfect in between."

With a smile on her face, Eki pulled Team Clawful into a hug. "So...you wanted to show me that you two were in control of your evolutions, even in the face of the impossible."

"Ghk, hhhhkff..." Vale groaned out. "Ek...iiii...can't...breathe...too...tight..."

"I'm...actually fine." Felicity pulled herself closer to Eki. "Mmph, still warm."

A silly little chuckle left Eki, before she let go of the other two. This moment seemed almost perfect, even if she ran on fumes by that point. Almost perfect though, wasn't exactly perfect. "I...guess that I just...I just wish I could-"

"Ekiiiiii!"

The familiar thooms and thuds, followed by a young man's voice, broke Eki out of her thoughts for a moment. She turned wildly in the direction of the voice, glad to see a familiar, worried face. Alex stormed over to the Typhlosion with tears in his eyes, while Eki got down on all fours to charge over to him. That enormous Pikachu practically belly flopped to the ground, while Eki tackled his blubbery chin. She hugged her friend with delight, her head nestled up on his blubber. The two shared their worried, exasperated, and relieved laughter. Team Clawful watched on, glad their own journey had brought Eki to the conclusion of hers. Alex quickly hopped back up onto his feet the best his bulk would allow, his best friend now held carefully in his paws.

"I...I thought...I thought-"

"Hey, big guy." Eki comforted Alex, with a smile on her face. "Sorry for runnin' off like that. I, uh..."

"I know what you're about to say..." Alex whimpered, then rubbed Eki on the space of his cheek furthest from his electric sac. "I don't care that you evolved! You're still Eki, no matter what, okay?!"

"Yeah...it took a bit of realizing for me to agree." Eki pat her pal again, then turned to Vale and Felicity. "I owe them for that."

Vale blushed, then chuckled. "W-Well, uh..." He rubbed the back of his head. "I know you, saved our lives and all once, but-"

"We can call it even if we spend a night with each other." Felicity butted in. "Maybe a uh...a date?"

The idea had Eki rose tinted too. "Um...~ I won't say no!"

Everything felt peachy keen, like their journey should have ended there. However, the huffs and puffs of another familiar voice had broken the levity of the situation. Guildmaster Gerald stomped out from behind Alex, pushing his spectacles back up with his claws. "Now...just...a moment!" he puffed. Each stomp caused his flabby frame to quake about; not a bit of cold could penetrate his blubber.

"Guild...master Gerald?" Vale tilted his head.

"Look...you two..." He pointed, then up to Eki. "Her too...we...hff..." he took a quick swig from a canteen he hid under his moob, then slipped it back under. He cleared his throat. "You two, and her as well. What. Happened."

"We ran off to go evolve," Vale mentioned, "this was important for us. Plus-"

"Not, that." Gerald waved his paw away. "I need to dot my i's for a moment. Do you three know **where** my looplet is?!"

Alex blinked, then glanced down to the Snorlax. "Was that the only reason you kept following me this whole time?!"

"Your looplet?" Felicity wondered. "What, didn't leave it on your wrist?"

"So you don't know where it is." Gerald sighed. "Good. I was just worried that-"

"You give up far too easily, Gerald old boy." Growled a wisened old Blastoise, who had tailed the duo along this whole time.

With a grumble, Vale pinched the bridge of his nose. "Are we gonna have any MORE surprise guests?!" He complained, "This was supposed to be like, OUR thing, y'know?"

"Evolving without informing the guild is a grave penalty," warned Richard, "something that all teams should do the moment they get back. Consider this, if you're still a team, Clawful."

"If what?!" Felicity squawked.

Richard arched himself up. "Guildmaster Gerald's looplet has been stolen. The moment I was informed of this, the two of you, along with Eki, disappeared. That makes you both prime suspects in the grand theft of an important piece of equipment. In the wrong hands..."

"Wait." Eki glared down to Richard. "What about me? I came back to the guild having evolved, and you're not pointing it out. Why single out Clawful?"

"I've already told your friend." Richard growled, "Term I-23-E-GM, under no circumstance should any Pokémon-"

"Richard, come off it!" Gerald griped. "These two might not be an official team, but you don't have to pull out such an old ruling!"

"No, wait." Eki stood up straight. "Let him finish."

With a huff, Richard continued. "Under no circumstance should any Pokémon over fifty feet tall, wide, or long, be recognized under the Explorer's Guild Society as a team."

"He told me this a couple nights ago..." Alex mentioned, "The night you disappeared. I still don't get it though. What caused this rule in the first place?"

Richard had a grim scowl on his face. "Gigantamax Pokémon without looplets are uncontrollable. You saw what happened to me, a seasoned fighter, when I'd been stuck under Gigantamax. I was feral! Now that I'm back down to size, I'm back to normal. Gigantamax is a dangerous phenomenon!"

"Look at Alex!" Eki threw her claws out toward her friend. "He's perfectly fine! Perfectly sane! He's been helping Pokémon non stop! Yet you wanna say that he's a danger to everyone?!"

"How long before the Dynamax energy takes control?!" Richard snapped back, "What then?! When you have a seventy foot stomping monster?! Term I-23-E-GM isn't something that's on the books for prejudice! It stands for International Twenty-three Emergency: Gigantamax! The twenty-third international emergency term the Explorer's Guild Society conjured! Want to know when it began?! When the founders of the Silveredge Coast Guild turned feral!"

A realization hit Alex, before he hung his head. "...The Cinderace, Rillaboom, and Intelleon that were from our village, huh?"

"Precisely!" Richard stomped his foot. "So now you understand WHY Team Macro is not an officially sanctioned guild!"

Gerald hung his head, and sighed. "I'm...sorry kid." he relented. "My claws are tied on that."

"You've let a LOT slide, Gerald." Richard stomped toward Team Clawful. "Especially electing these ruffian thieves into our fold! Now look what happened, they've stolen something priceless from us! I bet you've sold it, hm? Given it away to some low life criminal!"

Furious, Vale stepped up first. "Now you wait just a moment, old man! We came here to evolve, that's it! We had every intention on returning to the guild!"

"I know it wasn't them!" Gerald spoke up the best he could. "I, I've given them my full trust. I know Vale's turned around. He's not a crook anymore!"

"Do you really expect me to believe that?" The Blastoise got closer to Vale's face. "After the criminal history I've dug up on you? Stealing from shrines, stealing from the rich, you're a real piece of work, 'Swift-claw'."

Felicity bumped her body into Richard, then slipped in between Vale. "Back up, old man." She growled, raring for another fight.

After deliberation, the Blastoise glanced back to the Silveredge Coastline's guildmaster. "You have a **choice**, Gerald. Which are you bringing back? The false team you've paraded, or these thieves?"

The silence in the air was palpable. Gerald's head hung low in thought. It was a moment to think, a hard decision to make, but eventually, he took a breath, then decided. "Alex, Eki...I'm really sorry. If things were different-"

"No." Alex glanced down to Gerald. "I understand. You don't have to explain yourself."

"You can't just kick those two out!" Vale griped. "If they leave-"

"You guys HAVE to stay." Alex demanded. "Prove yourselves innocent! I know neither of you are mean, you wouldn't hurt anyone unless they left you no choice..." he glanced back to Gerald, then innocently smiled. "Thanks...it was nice to be Team Macro for a while."

With that, the giant Pikachu stomped off the other side of the mountain, Eki in tow. She looked back to her friends distraught, wanting to reassure them that they'd meet again, but in that moment, she just wasn't sure. Vale's throat grew tight, choked up on the account that his friends were forced out of his home. He wanted to say something, yet nothing came out. Felicity tried to run after them, but Vale's claws pulled her back by the arm.

"Let me go!" she bellowed, eyes misty. "We're not leaving them!"

After a bit of time to deliberate, Vale rested his head on Felicity's arm. "They...want this." he tried to reassure her. "They wanna let us prove ourselves. They'll be back someday. They...they gotta be."

Gerald watched on at the situation before him, then squinted at Guildmaster Richard. The Blastoise simply gave him a side eye. "I know that look. The look of anger, hatred, dismay over me doing my job. Maybe next time, you should keep a closer eye on the things that are **truly** important, rather than being a mentor figure. We have roles to play, Gerald. I hope you realize them soon enough." the Blastoise turned around and thudded back off where he came, while Gerald went to comfort Team Clawful the best he could.

Alex and Eki began their descent down the mountain, Alex's eyes fixating north. The Typhlosion curled up on her friend's shoulder, despondent. "So...what's our next move?"

"We can only be a team if I'm not stuck in Gigantamax." Alex concluded. "So...we have to find a way to shrink me down."

"Alex..."

"What choice do we have?" the Pikachu responded, then clenched his fists tight. "...I want you to be happy too, y'know. We'll be the best team ever."

The uneasiness of their journey ahead lingered in Alex's mind, but he was sure to return to the Silveredge Coastline a changed Pokémon. He knew his goodbyes wouldn't be long, that he would be back sooner than any of them expected. Still, his heart sank when he had to part. Barely able to see how far his friends went, but he was certain they'll be okay. Question was, will he and Eki? Only time could tell.