

Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Rest back first on the straw and feather nest, the now Weavile should have been excited to explore his new potential. Blitzing through combat, subduing enemies with rapid strikes, getting jobs done efficiently. All that and more was what *should* have been on Vale's mind. Instead, it was just an intense bout of worry and woe. The scene played over and over in his head, his gigantic Pikachu friend who demanded him and his partner stay at the guild, to prove themselves innocent by any means. What a fat lot of good that'd do for them. All Vale had done when the group got back was lie down, and throw a rubber ball at the ceiling. Felicity paced back and forth in any attempts to try and think, her frustration silent but clearly visible in the way her paws clicked against the ground.

"Have you thought of something yet, Vale?" she finally broke the silence, startling Vale for a brief moment with just how husky her voice had gotten.

Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. "Nope."

Vale's answer, paired with his continuous tosses, had Felicity's rather flat expression knit into clear annoyance. With a slight pout, the stacked Sneasler sat down on a nearby chair, almost steaming as her brain ran a thousand miles going nowhere. "Gerald won't even let us into his office to look around." she sighed. "Something about getting a dee-tech-tick."

"Detective." Vale corrected. *Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

Clap~

Annoyed with the constant ball tosses, Felicity had decided to put the game to an end herself. She plapped her newfound chest together to hide the ball from her friend, then shifted to her side to look down at him. "What's gotten into you?" she sighed, heaving a breath into her fleecy scarf. "You're the smart one between the two of us."

Those red eyes darted to hers. "Oh, you call me smart?" Vale hissed. "Apparently I wasn't smart enough to see that the Guildmaster got robbed." Annoyed, Vale finally pulled himself out of his bedding. "Now look at us. Being treated like we're crooks despite not even being here! All cuz of what, we didn't report back in?! The whole guild has given us the stink eye! I can't even look at the quest board without someone treating us like we're in the Klepto Club!" The Weavile threw his hands down onto the window sill, eyes fixated on the mountain far away they came from, past all the lush green fields and forests. "Have you *ever*, in your entire life, been this mad?! I haven't! We don't even have a chance to prove ourselves! How are we gonna help Alex if we can't dig ourselves outta this hole!"

In a fit of anger, Vale collided his foot with a nearby stool and launched it across the room. The impact wasn't hard enough to shatter it, though the unsettling crunch made it apparent that a leg had been snapped. While the Weavile dry heaved out of anger, his Sneasler friend decided to do the one thing she knew she could do. She placed her hefty mammaries atop the upset guy's head. A soft sigh left Felicity.

“Breathe.” she soothed- it was difficult for most, but Vale was an expert at hearing the tender sincerity under her monotone. Felicity was always expressing herself more with her actions than her words. “Remember how I used to calm you down?”

A hiss from Vale’s nostrils indicated he at least tried to calm himself down, but the power of compression and sharp air intake was more than enough to stop his fury. Out came an exacerbated exhale. The Weavile’s neck craned, his shoulders slumped forward, as did his body. He soon curled up into a corner on his side of the room and realized what he’d done. His mournful eyes were enough of an apology to Felicity, who gently pressed the blunt side of her pointer claw to his cheek.

“Take a breath.” her insistence was earnest and sweet, lidded red eyes looking purple and gemlike in the shade of their tent. “Lay back.”

Vale nodded gently to his best friend, then closed his eyes. He drifted back to two years ago in his head, the time he needed a moment to calm down like this.

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The dusty streets of the lowest district in Shade Split City, that’s where Vale used to fend for himself. Some of the roughest streets on the continent, where crime was just competition. Vale had gotten lucky with a score, a few goons that were headed to the highest district let their guard down and gave the short Sneasel a chance to swoop in and reap the rewards. A red, velvet lockbox was pressed tightly under Vale’s armpit into his side, while he swished above crowds and onto tent roofs of struggling merchants. One bounce had him run along the canyon walls, before he slipped back on top of canopies. While he could shake off most of the other grunts, one Machoke remained persistent. Eventually, he hucked a rock at Vale and chucked him into a small carving within the canyon, just big enough for him and the Machoke to stand in. The Pokémon towered over the Sneasel and punched his fists into his palm.

“My boss man is gonna **hate** it if I don’t come back with that.” he growled. “You’re gonna give it up now, and maybe, just maybe, I won’t have to pry it out of your cold, dead claws.”

Vale scooched his back up to the end of the cavern, eyes darted for an escape opportunity. The Machoke just chuckled.

“Buddy, it’s just you and me now...”

He paused his advance for a moment. A weight on his leg had pulled him back. When he looked down to see just what it was, he saw a Sneasel a little taller than Vale was. Felicity, the little scamp. She gripped onto Machoke’s other leg, much to his astonishment, before he was hurled into the nearby canyon wall. The **THOOM** of dense muscle collided with rock echoed

in Vale's head over and over again, the fighting type groaning weakly in the crater made for his shape. That gave the Sneasel time to ditch the box and nod to Felicity. The box's contents? A weird meteorite that seemed to hum gently.

"Thanks a ton!" Vale chirped, then slipped his way out of town. Felicity watched him mingle back into the crowds, then seemingly disappear.

Rhythmically, the little thief tossed the meteorite in his palm. The gentle crush of dried dirt and rock beneath Vale's claws echoed through his ears, his eyes set to the road ahead. He rattled his canteen in his sash, then sighed. "I've got about half left, should last me 'til Highwind. Maybe I can bamboozle a guy for something-"

His journey was halted when he felt something weigh down his leg, something heavier, yet close to his weight. No attempt to shake it off was fruitful, so he begrudgingly looked down to his impromptu leg brace. There she was, in all her scruffy, fluffy glory. Felicity had gripped into his left leg and tagged along for the ride. A little sigh left the colder Sneasel.

"Came to gloat about how you can peel off a Machoke?" he griped, then dragged her along. "Well, I probably could've outrun him if I had the chance."

He was met without a response while he continued to shuffle along, the ancient-type Sneasel lovingly wrapped around his leg. Scrape, scrape, scrape... Vale continued to pull himself along, until he simply stopped. It was increasingly hard to ignore the way the thick-furred Sneasel's rear wobbled with each movement, the two mounds of dough impossible to ignore for Vale's poor mind.

"Can you let go?" he finally pressed.

"...You look like me." Felicity finally answered.

Her first words to him puzzled Vale. "Yeah, what of it?" he pushed. "There's plenty of Sneasel out in the mountains."

"We're friends now." Felicity looked up to Vale with sparkly eyes.

Shocked, Vale shook his leg about. "Wh-?! Get off'a me!"

Off the little Sneasel finally went, left slightly tumbled on the ground. She could tell then that Vale's stress had gone up. She didn't say a word. Quietly, she teetered back onto her feet and dusted herself lightly, before she grabbed the Sneasel's claws. Not a word came out of his mouth before both claws slid under the tight binder around her chest. It was then he paused for a moment and blushed deeply, he knew what the feelings of mammarys were like...but not these. These were soft, squishy, even soothing in a way. Felicity had Vale locked in place, until

Vale finally snapped out of his trance. She wasn't blushing or uncomfortable in the slightest as Vale's claws grazed her chest.

"Boobs calm Pokémon down." Felicity commented, then sat down just a little bit off the main path. "I think anyway. That's what the lady what works at the tavern said. Do you feel calm?"

"Y-Yeah, sorry." Vale scratched the back of his neck, then joined her in her seat. "Just kinda razzled. I've got barely a drop of water left, and-"

"Oh, hold on." his new acquaintance lifted up her claw to pause Vale, then dug around in a satchel she carried on her side.

When Felicity procured a sloshing, cool canteen, Vale's eyes lit up just for a moment...then he reconsidered the generosity. "What's the catch?"

"I get to be your friend."

"Deal." Vale didn't think of another word, he swiped the canteen and took a quick slug. Afterwards, he handed it right back to Felicity. Still plenty of water in there. "I'm Vale. Quickest and slickest claws this side of Dyneuria. Who're you?"

Quietly, Felicity pulled her arms around her knees. "Felicity."

"Fifi, eh?"

"Noh." The stranger Sneasel gave the more common one a slight bonk on the head. "Felicity. Uh...you know, like the bank?"

Vale leaned out of the way while his new pal pulled back her claws. It certainly wasn't a harmful bonk, just a playful bap. "Ah, eh, well...I'll keep it memorized." he glanced off in the direction of the sunset then sighed. "So, what're you on the run for?"

"Nothing."

That brief response caught Vale's eye. "Nothing at all? What, just a nomad or somethin'?"

"Nope." Felicity drug her claws along the sand beneath her. "Just don't have a place to stay, really. My mom left me in a box on the side of the road... or I think it was my mom anyway. It wasn't too hard to find food, so it wasn't that bad. But, um, I don't got nobody who looks like me to go back to anymore."

Vale felt his heart sink and his throat choke. Maybe the two were more alike than he gave her credit for after all. "...'cept me, huh?"

His new friend stopped her impromptu drag-doodling, then stood up and nodded. "Yuh!"

"Alright then!" Vale sprung up with her. "We still got a bit of energy in us, Highwind Village's like, what, a couple days away?" The cheeky Sneasel flung his arms behind his head and walked toward the south. "We'll just take our sweet time getting there now that we've got triple the water! Probably snag some goods off a schmuck."

Felicity paused briefly, then shook her head. "We shouldn't steal."

A little annoyed, Vale whipped his head around. "What?! Come on, I've been stealing ALL my life, you think I'm just gonna stop...for..."

It was then Felicity pulled the meanest, most manipulative trick in the book. She batted her eyes and tilted her head down, fixated on Vale. She made her eyes look a LOT larger than they were before, and the way they sparkled in the sunlight only added to the illusion. One could hear her whine and whimper under her breath like a wounded Houndour. Her thieving compatriot shook his head slowly, but that only intensified the whines and the eye flutters. Eventually, Vale had all he could take.

"Alright, fine! Now will you quit looking at me like that!? You'll give yourself a hernia!"

Instantly Felicity dropped the act. "Good." she happily skipped beside him down the road, stood side by side. "...Hey what's a hernia?"

"I dunno." Vale admitted. "Probably that thing where you laugh really hard and you pop something in your gut?"

"Ew..." Felicity shivered, crossing her arms behind her back and locking into step alongside Vale.

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"...Man." Vale sighed when he lifted himself up off Felicity's chest. His eyes fixated on the moon outside. "The day I met you really changed a lot, huh?"

"Hard to believe it wasn't that long ago." Felicity smirked down at him, her fangs peeking out over her bottom lip. "I'm just shocked you actually tried to stop stealing."

"Hey, it EVENTUALLY worked." Vale snarked, before he leaned into the window. He felt Felicity walk up behind him. "...Sorry. For earlier. You didn't deserve that."

Slyly, Felicity slid Vale into a hug. Just as soft as her personality. "Water under the bridge." she promised. "I know you're thinking about them."

"I'm just upset I can't do anything." Vale sighed.

His companion would have given him some level of reassurance, until a knock on their door pulled both of their attention away. In stumbled a Pelipper, a single letter in his wing. "Mail call!" he chirped. "Guildmaster Gerald's left Team Macro's mail orders under your supervision."

"Hey, wait." Vale lifted up his claw. "Is any mail outgoing tonight, or-"

"Outgoing mail went this morning." The Pelipper explained. "I'm just delivering the letters that I haven't gotten to anyone yet."

"So that means...Richard's letter is probably already in the hands of the guild. They're really gonna vote on this, huh?"

"Eh, I wouldn't worry about it." The Pelipper shrugged. "Stuff like this never usually gets through. Anyway, happy trails!"

Down went the letter onto a table, and out the Pelipper went. The last rounds of mail were always a long, arduous task, so it was no wonder that they got mail so late. Felicity curiously picked up the letter and looked at it intently, it was a plain envelope with a simple Litwick-inspired wax stamp, addressed to Alex and Eki from a Raine and Roq of Pricklepine. The lettering was marked in red ink, hand painted on delicately. She glanced over to Vale, as if he'd know exactly what was on her mind.

"We can find time," he promised, "we were heading west anyway soon. Might as well stop by and say hello?"

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Ripples and roars of an ocean carried on for a great span, the open sea was one place that Richard felt the most calm at. Even if his rapid spinning tore through the waters like fine mist, he'd done this sort of travel so often it had become second nature to him. Maybe that's why he got trapped in a Dynamax Den for a month, his own carelessness and negligence to bring his looplet. Rather than dwell on it, he had one stop to make before he crossed the seas and made it to Megala; a little crescent island just in the middle of both continents. No sailor or Lapras would EVER stop at Moonrise Islet, it was a cursed place where even passing by the place would bring one into a state of nightmares. This, however, wasn't Richard's first time on the island. Heck, it wasn't his second, his third, fifth, seventh...he'd been going to the island for a long while, around twenty-six years or so annually.

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It had all started when he was a Wartortle. It was his duty to babysit Gerald when he was still a young boy, but a strange noise had pulled the Wartortle away for a bit. He'd issued the Munchlax to stay near the boat and yell if he saw anything scary. The thing that pulled the man away? An injured Pokémon lay face up against some rocks. It grumbled and winced at its pain, a decently sized set of scratches and sprains along its abdomen. The Pokémon's appearance was offputting and strange, any normal Pokémon would have run away just at the sight. They were wispy, black like a new moon night, with a red collar and a billowy white smog head. Part of their body felt almost cloth like, as if they were a puppet. Those soulless, white eyes, and daylike blue sclera were also unnerving to most Pokémon. Richard was not most Pokémon. He threw himself toward the injured creature with utmost care.

"Show me where it hurts." he ushered. "I'll see if I can't help."

"Who...who are you?" though lips didn't move on this being, their deep voice rattled out. "Stay away...!"

Richard shushed the being, then shook his head. "I'm not here to hurt you. I see you're hurt, now, let me help."

Reluctantly, the Pokémon slightly raised up their arm to show the major injury. A wound from their back all around to their front. Without a second thought, the Wartortle dug through his bag and pulled out some old remedies. The creature hollered once they were applied, but Richard used a free hand to gently grasp their's.

"It's going to sting just a bit more before it gets better." He promised. "It WILL get better, trust me. Kampo's no quack science."

Application soon became bandaging, where Richard stood over the injured Pokémon for a little while longer. The last thing he did was make sure the creature was at least comfortable, he spared an extra blanket for them to use as a makeshift pillow to rest their head on.

"Okay, I have to go now." Richard nodded. "I hope you get better soon."

The Wartortle tried to leave, before the being cleared their throat. "W-Wait, young one." they outstretched their hand toward the retreating tortoise. "Your name. Isn't knowing the name of someone like you common courtesy in your culture?"

After a brief pause, Richard craned his head over to the Pokémon. He gave them a little nod, and a toothy smile. "My name is Richard, and...I'm going to be a Guildmaster one day!"

That last sentence was all that Richard had told that Pokémon before he left for the first time. Curiosity led him back once again, before the two had developed a bonded friendship. That strange burlap creature had turned out to be a Pokémon called Darkrai, and one who cherished the blanket from Richard so dearly, it was never without it. By this point, Darkrai had draped it around their arm after they accidentally gashed a hole through it...it made for a somewhat comfortable robe, at the very least. The creature of nightmares gazed off into the dark black seas beyond, only to light up when they saw Richard's shell torpedo through the waves. By the time Richard screeched to a halt, his feet were already on land. Darkrai's legs casually tipped into the ground while he stepped down to greet his ally.

"I began to worry something happened to you, friend." Darkrai remarked. "This visit was off by a few weeks..."

"Well, something did happen." Richard rubbed the back of his head. "You got a minute?"

Like they'd always do, the two would sit underneath palm trees and discuss what they'd done the past year. For the Darkrai, it was always simple. They didn't do much but survive off the fruits of this island. Threats of sailors coming to hurt them were a thing of the past, after all, that nasty injury only came about after Darkrai had sent one of the attacker's friends into a coma of never ending nightmares. A harsh defense mechanism when they felt threatened, and to Darkrai, a lot of the outside world was scary. That was, until Richard began these talks with them. While Darkrai continued to steal away from sightseers, they were at the very least soothed by the excited stories Richard had to tell. Time passed, and Richard evolved into the older gentleman that blessed Darkrai's shores. Not a moment with him wasn't cherished, though. Even while Darkrai sat through the recountings of Richard's absence, the explanation of Dynamax Dens, and the phenomenon that had encapsulated the continent of Dyneuria.

"I'm glad you were saved, at least." Darkrai remarked, legs tucked daintily against the ground. "That boy, he seems to have a kind heart. Your friend Gerald, too. He sounds like he's grown into quite a respectable man."

That's where Richard sighed, then rubbed the back of his head. "I guess so." he harrumphed. "Honestly though, I came to you for quite a selfish reason on top of our usual sea-side chats."

"Something is troubling you, friend?"

"I'm having some...issues with Gerald." he took a beat, then sighed. "Oh, what am I saying? I've completely shattered his trust. It started with that boy. The moment I reminded Gerald he can't be considered a proper member of the guild, he went on the defensive. Then, when his looplet went missing, and we had a set of Pokémon leave the guild near the same time as the report came out, I pinned the blame on them. The last straw was when I mentioned to him I was leaving. I reminded him that we weren't a team either, because our rescue efforts were unsanctioned by the guild."

"Yet, they were still real to him." Darkrai recalled. "I remember you told me one day that he was overjoyed with aiding a lost Skitty home. That being someone who needed his help, someone he could provide with his help. Just because that help wasn't given approval, does that make it any less real to him?" Darkrai turned their head over to Richard, who was lost for words. "Or better yet, does that make what the Pikachu did recently any less heroism simply because he isn't sanctioned? You mentioned that Dynamax Pokémon without a looplet are subjected to turn 'feral', as you put it...yet, he hasn't."

"I worry about the inevitable."

"You can only prepare for the inevitable and hope for the impossible." Darkrai responded, quietly, sagely. The dark figure put their hand to the sky against the setting sun, watching streaks of pink sunlight streak through their fingers "To put it into other terms... you guide yourself through preparing for the worst possible outcome, yet stay optimistic the best possible outcome comes through. This Pikachu, he showed no signs of losing himself. Why worry? You may have found your outlier. Besides...weren't you the one who said that your records on Dynamax are...loose? You know the basic definition and what happens without proper precautions. You don't know if there are multiple other precautions that he could have taken."

Richard sighed, then flopped to his back. "Maybe I'm just worried for no reason." he shook his head. "Do you think I see things too rigidly?"

"This is the first time you've come to me with a story like this." Darkrai admitted. "Perhaps there is some aggression still inside you after your transformation. Perhaps there is jealousy that someone younger than you is more in tune with themselves than you are. Perhaps...you can't let go of the past."

"I see myself as a mentor-"

"Gerald is far beyond the days of needing a mentor." warned Darkrai. "He is as old now as you were when you first found me. Perhaps it is time to look at him in a new light."

Solemnly, Richard hung his head low. "...I'll do my best to. All I can promise is that I'll try to open up more and see him as an adult. It's going to take a lot of effort on my part, and I may slip into my old habits."

Darkrai took note of that comment, then turned away. "Richard."

"Yes, Darkrai?"

"Did you want to say that to me, or did you want to say that to Gerald?"

The old tortoise paused again, gobsmacked by Darkrai's wisdom. He soon found the words that broke through the crashes of waves. "I guess, I guess to Gerald."

"Then say that to him." Darkrai urged. "The next time you see him, apologize for your behavior. Promise you will try to do better by him."

A small smile appeared on Richard's face. "Y'know...I ought to thank you. You've helped me in many other ways than I've helped you, old friend."

"Only because of you." Darkrai remarked, then stretched up. "Your canopy is always ready for you to retire to." With the advent of dusk, their blue eyes gleamed all the brighter, but they looked softly at Richard. For a moment, their mind was years in the past, looking up at the offered hand of a young Wartortle's act of random kindness. Darkrai reached out, only to find their claws resting on the Blastoise's heart instead of that head they'd become so used to petting. Ah, they were getting needlessly nostalgic... when all they could ever want was right here. "Do you require my assistance?"

"Not tonight." Richard shook his head. "There's a big decision about to be voted on soon I have to be present for. If I'm to start apologizing...I should do it sooner, rather than later."