When Hank awoke, he didn’t immediately know where he was. He saw a sandstone ceiling above him, and could hear the sounds of hospital equipment - heart monitors, beeping around him. His tongue hurt terribly, and he moved it in his mouth to find a sore spot at the tip, where a nasty cut had been opened in it.

He eventually became aware of a weight pressing down on the edge of his bed, and looked down to see the familiar form of Sickle lying there, his head resting against Hank’s hip and the rest of his body resting in a chair, fast asleep.

Taking a moment, he tried to remember what happened… He had been paired up with Azrael as his first opponent in round one… and then he remembered how the match went and he frowned, turning his gaze up toward the ceiling and sighing heavily.

“Shit…” He grumbled quietly. “Guess I pushed myself harder than I thought if I wound up here…”

At that, a Gardevoir poked her head through the curtains and looked his way. “Ah, you’re awake,” she whispered as she stepped in, looking briefly at Sickle and carefully moving around him so as not to disturb him, and turned her attention to Hank. “Right… Any lingering pain in your head or limbs?” she asked.

“Just a bruised ego,” Hank answered, still keeping his gaze toward the ceiling. “How long was I out for?”

“About eight hours,” Gallia replied, gingerly reaching over to lift his eyelid, shining a light in his eye and lowering it again when she was finished. “The first round just ended a little while ago.” She looked back at Sickle. “This one wouldn’t leave your side except to do his match, and then came right back as soon as he won.”

The Zoroark chuckled softly. “Yea, that’s about what I’d expect.” He said as he gently reached for Sickle’s claw and grasped it in his own. “That’s why I married the sexy bastard…~ He brought me outta my lowest point, and I wouldn’t be here were it not for him…”

Gallia smiled at that. “You chose a good man,” she said. “Anyway, I’ll need to bring you an antibiotic for your tongue there; you bit yourself while in the throes of a seizure, be careful with that. It’ll probably be sore for a day or two. But other than giving you a mild lisp for a while, it should be fine.”

“Thanks, lady.” Hank answered with a nod, turning his gaze to her and smirking. “Good to know I was in good hands while I was thrashing about.”

At that, she lost her smile. “You gave your friends quite the fright, though,” she said. “You may want to let them know you’re okay first thing tomorrow. And Azrael as well. He was the first one calling out for medical help when you began convulsing.”

At that, Hank remembered Azrael’s sudden horror before pleading with Hank to drop his illusions… He’d known; he’d *seen* what was about to happen and tried to warn Hank, but he’d been only a second too late. He sighed and nodded back to her before turning his attention to Sickle again, squeezing his claw lightly.

The motion seemed to rouse Sickle, as he began to stir. Gallia, noticing this, excused herself and stepped out, leaving the two to what privacy they could have. Sickle slowly opened his eyes and raised his head, turning his sleepy gaze on Hank. Immediately upon seeing the Zoroark’s eyes looking back at him, the Sceptile became alert and sat straight up, beaming at him.

“Oh, thank Arceus,” he said, squeezing Hank’s claw.

“Evening, babe.” Hank said softly, squeezing Sickle’s claw tighter. “You get a good sleep in?”

“Better if you hadn’t scared the seeds off me,” he retorted, eyeing Hank crossly. “What the hell happened? You’ve never had a seizure like that before… What did you do that brought on something like *that*?”

“Ehhhh…” Hank trailed off, averting his gaze slightly. “I guess I didn’t stress test my ‘Real Time’ hard enough. That was my first time usin’ it in an uncontrolled environment.”

“Real time?” Sickle asked, seeking clarity.

“My own little name for that trick I pulled off. What I’ve been practicing for this tournament.” Hank explained.

“So it wasn’t just my imagination,” said Sickle, “those weren’t just illusions you pit against Azrael. They were *projections* - actual, physical entities.”

“Yupperoonie,” Hank answered with a nod. “See, I can’t learn Double Team naturally, and my Illusions only fool sight and hearing. I figured hey, if that Wade kid could figure out how to do Water Shuriken, then I can figure out how to make actual copies of myself that fool *all* the senses. All I had to do was ramp up my Illusion ability to do that.”

“Right. Your illusions weren’t fooling Azrael, because he could see into the future,” said Sickle, “He knew which one of your illusory copies would actually harm him, and by that process of elimination, he knew which of you was real. But, when you made those projections, suddenly he couldn’t tell anymore - not even with Detect, since every one of them were capable of hurting him.”

“Right again,” Hank said with a proud smile. “Look at you being all private-eye and figuring out my new trick. Gonna be hard to pull the wool over yer eyes if we ever get into a spat.”

Sickle’s expression though, soured. “Hardly what I care about right now,” he said. “After what it did to you… It put you in the hospital, Hank… Did you *know* that could happen?”

“Well I mean… I just figured if I used it enough times, it’d lessen the strain it’d put on me.” Hank answered. “That’s how that shit usually works, right? You do it enough times and you build up a tolerance to it?”

“Not for everything,” said Sickle, frowning. “Hank… You were having a seizure, you were bleeding through your nose - that alone could indicate something was going really wrong in your brain. Who knows what kind of damage that could do?”

“I mean… yea it was strenuous, but…” Hank blinked a few times as he tried to think of a counter argument, but nothing came up that could back up his claim, and he ended up laying his head back into the pillow and looking up at the ceiling. “...Alright, fine. I won’t use it again,” he said before shaking his head a little. “So much for tryin’ to upgrade my arsenal of tricks.”

“There’s got to be a better way,” Sickle offered.

Again, he sighed. “I just wanted to have something that could let me at least keep up with my old crew.” He reasoned. “Luke’s got that aura thingie of his, Kats can use his ability whenever he wants, Froggie can change his typing mid battle, and even Mole Man can turn himself into a fucking *golem* of all things. I didn’t wanna be left in the dust and end up just being a one-trick Ponyta…”

Sickle gave him a sympathetic look. “I understand that,” he said, “but still… All of them achieved those things through great risk…” he reached out a claw to touch Hank’s cheek. “And I for one… Don’t want to lose you, or see you lose yourself, trying to catch up to your old teammates.”

Hank gently leaned into Sickle’s claw, closing his eyes and letting out a small purr-like sound as he nuzzled into his husband’s claw. “What would I ever do without you…?” He whispered before opening his eyes, smiling softly as he fluttered his eyelids at Sickle.

“Ah, no need to give me the girly eyes,” Sickle returned with a smile. “Besides… You’ll never have to find out.”

“That’s reassuring,” Hank said as he dropped the bedroom eyes and sat up so he could embrace Sickle tightly in his arms. “Sorry I made you worry, honey..”

Sickle put his arms around Hank and held him tightly in his arms. “At least you’re okay,” he said. “I love you, Hank…”

“I love you too, Sickle…” Hank whispered, squeezing him tightly for a moment before he pulled back to the Sceptile’s eyes. “At least tell me you won your first round.”

“I did,” Sickle assured him, “though it was close. I was… Distracted.”

“...Cause of me?” Hank asked, feeling guilty.

“Don’t think like that,” Sickle stated, “Regardless of the reason, I still won… And now, I’m ready for the next one.”

“And hopefully I’ll be in the stands cheering you on,” Hank added with a snicker. “Here’s hoping my voice is enough to push you further~”

Sickle chuckled. “We shall see. I’ve got some stiff competition next round, no matter who I’m put against,” he said. “Kaen made it to round two. Unfortunately, Blaster didn’t; his first opponent was Leon.”

“Oooohh… Yea, that blows for Blaster. Getting someone like Leon first round,” Hank agreed, then rubbed noses with Sickle. “Still, yer gonna go far in this competition, babe.” He assured him.

“I hope so,” said Sickle, smiling. “I still want that rematch with Luke, after all~.”

“Knowing you? You’ll pull out all the stops to get it,” Hank said encouragingly. “Ain’t nothing stopping you once you zero in on the prize.”

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“Well, that was quite the first day, wasn’t it?” Romulus asked as he, Luke, Volcan and Ignus sat at the table.

“No kidding!” Volcan exclaimed. “Caulin against *Keldeo*? I never saw that coming. Sol being a mentor to that Quilava - even helping him evolve, *less* so. And that fight between Aegis and Luna? I mean, I kind of guessed Luna would win that but da-” he shut his beak, glancing over at Marilla, sitting observantly in a crib beside Luminara. “Dang,” he corrected himself, “Aegis held his own, and he didn’t even have Emeras nor can he Mega Evolve.”

“It just goes to show that your words hold true in any situation, love.” Luke said with a smile. “Power isn’t measured by having it, but by how you use it.”

“True that,” said Volcan. “Whatever advantage Luna had in power, Aegis made up for it with experience and sheer *toughness*. Seriously, now I’m sorry we didn’t get to see him fight Tristan or Katsu - that would’ve been a battle of attrition *and* raw power.”

“Didn’t Katsu fight Aegis at the other tournament?” Romulus asked.

“That was Wade, actually,” corrected Volcan.

“Ah. My mistake,” said Romulus, nodding.

“An easy mistake. They both are larger than your average Samurott, and both wear traditional oriental clothing.” Luke added. “I guess the only thing that would tell them apart would be their choice of colour. Katsu’s garbs are darker, with Wade’s being lighter and, after he and Hageshi took down Kyogre, sporting a coat on top of it.”

“Sounds like he’s trying to make himself stand out,” Ignus commented.

“Wouldn’t you?” Romulus asked, “He and Hageshi both seem to want everyone to know they’re Blessed. They don’t even attempt to hide the fact.”

“It’s not that they don’t want everyone to know they are Blessed, dear,” Luminara piped up. “It’s that they do not care if anyone knows or not. I may not be able to speak for Hageshi, but Wade probably feels like it’s not something to be ashamed or scared of. Just because he is friends with a Legendary Pokemon does not change who he is as an individual.”

“True. But it does change everyone else’s perspective of him,” said Romulus, “Speaking as an outsider, knowing someone has such powers tends to raise expectations. Hageshi doesn’t seem to care one way or the other, but Wade is more reserved.”

“On a different topic, I have a question that I think only you would know,” Luke stated. “...Why is Shogun Hizashi here? It’s my understanding that he usually keeps to his island homeland, with the exception being his and his army’s involvement against Calhoun.”

“He was invited here,” replied Romulus. “The local guild councillor suggested I send him an invitation, so I did. Whether or not he accepted it would be up to him, but he did. I haven’t thought to ask him why; it seemed like an invasion of privacy, so I held my curiosity back.”

Luke held his paws in front of his eyes as he narrowed them, humming as thoughts raced through his mind. “He had every reason to refuse, yet he came anyway…” He muttered as if he were piecing together a puzzle. “Someone of his status normally wouldn’t care for such events outside his borders… unless there was something he stood to gain from it.”

Romulus hummed as he considered Luke’s words. “You may be right… But what could he have to gain, then? Calyrex I knew came on a formality but if Hizashi has any reasoning beyond that…”

Luke then remembered the reason why Hizashi chose to be involved in the war, having heard an explanation from Katsu in a private conversation with him. His eyes widened as a realization hit him, making him look up from his paws.

“...He’s here because he knew Wade would be competing,” He stated. “He wants something from him.”

Volcan looked at him. “You think that’s why he’s here?

“It’s the only logical reason I can think of,” Luke answered. “Think about it. The only reason Hizashi ever got involved was *because* of what Wade did. I’m not sure what he would want exactly, but either way, he’ll want to speak to Wade about it.”

“As much of a stretch as that sounds… I do not have a better suggestion,” admitted Romulus. “It’s as good of a theory as any.”

“I guess we won’t know until we either ask, or Wade lets us know after the fact..” Luke added. “Not that I’m questioning his motives, but I can't help but feel worried about what he may want.”

“Do you think Wade knows that’s why he’s here?” Volcan asked.

“Wade probably has an idea,” Luke answered. “My concern is what’ll happen if Wade says no to whatever Hizashi would require of him.”

“Monarch or not, whatever Hizashi wants from Wade, it is Wade’s choice alone whether or not to accept it,” Romulus said firmly, “If Hizashi intends to enforce his will in *my* city, he will find his rule challenged.”

“If he is smart, he will know that and abstain from doing so,” Luminara added, gently picking up Marilla and moving to sit with Romulus. “But I believe we’ve talked enough about what-ifs and hearsay. Who’s hungry?”

“Me!!” Ignus barked immediately, tail wagging quickly behind him.

“I think we both have worked up an appetite after today’s matches.” Luke said, nudging his husband with his elbow.

“Sure have,” agreed Volcan.

“Dinner should be along shortly,” said Romulus. “What have you requested for us tonight, my dear?” he directed the question to Luminara.

“Well, given our boys' performance, I think they’ve earned the right to be spoiled a little.” She said with a smile. “Therefore, I requested a large platter of assorted meats and vegetables. Yes, I’ve even included your favourite, Volcan~” She added with a wink.

“You remember my favourites?” Volcan asked, his face lighting up with delight.

“Of course. Luke told me what they were a long time ago.” She answered with a knowing smile.

Volcan chuckled. “I suppose that’s fair,” he said. “So, who do you guys think will be up first tomorrow?”

“I for one would like to see who Leon faces next,” said Romulus.

“Oh come on, Romulus; don’t you have even an idea of who he’ll face?” Volcan asked, prying.

Romulus snorted. “Volcan, I arranged the fighter selection specifically so that I *wouldn’t* ever know. Even Hizashi and Calyrex won’t until the fighters receive their numbers for tomorrow and those two select them.”

Volcan shrugged. “Never hurts to ask,” he said. “For me, though, I’d be interested to see if Neilla gets that rematch with Luke we *know* she wants. Or,” he put up his finger, “who Caulin or Koa will face next. Caulin had an awesome first battle but Koa took *his* opponent down so fast I don’t think the audience even got to enjoy the fight.”

“I’m curious who Katsumoto will get. Doug too. I was surprised the latter got through, but at the same time, proud too.” Luke answered.

“I don’t think *anyone* was ready to see a Dugtrio build himself a *body* and rise out of the ground,” said Volcan, bursting out laughing. “I mean, did you hear those people behind us? I never heard so many ‘what the’ mixed with profanities from across the globe spoken all at the same time!”

“A lot of ‘em were saying a bunch of weird words, like ‘What the F-” Ignus began before quickly being cut off by Luke covering his mouth, surprising the Lycanroc.

“Uhhh, how about we change the subject to something more uhm… child friendly,” Luke said, looking at Ignus and jerking his head slightly to Marilla’s crib, upon which Ignus immediately understood and nodded in compliance.

Clearing his throat and changing the topic he voiced his next question. “So Grampa. Are you gonna host these kinds of tournaments regularly?” He asked.

Romulus actually laughed at that. “On this scale? I fear I will bankrupt this whole city before long,” he said. “Sporting events such as gladiatorial combat will remain but a tournament as grand as this one… I don’t see our economy supporting such a thing for long - especially when I commit every possible resource to the Union Railway.”

“Well, that’s a bummer… I was thinking of competing in the next one you hold.” Ignus remarked.

Volcan pointed at Ignus. “Not one of these, you aren't,” he said. “Not yet at least. You are far from ready for a competition like this. You've seen what we're facing out there.”

“Awww… But Dad, it looked like so much fun! You guys looked like you were having fun!” Ignus whined.

“Yes, but we are *much* more experienced than you,” Luke pointed out. “Everyone here is, except maybe Caulin, but he’s experienced enough to let him take that risk. You need a bit more training under your belt before you start taking on challenges as big as this one.”

Ignus pouted a bit and looked off to the side after that explanation.

“If you would like, Ignus,” Romulus said, “during the downtime between rounds… I could personally teach you a few things, possibly skills or talents your fathers cannot.” He looked between Volcan and Luke. “No offense intended, of course.”

“I *beat* you once, remember?” Volcan asked, indignant.

Romulus, however, didn’t miss a beat. “I am still nearly twenty years your senior, Volcan, and I have been fighting since I was nine years old,” he pointed out. “Furthermore, Ignus and I share a similar anatomy; could I not teach him how to use his body more effectively than yourself?”

Volcan didn’t answer, his eyes wandering as he struggled to come up with a response. None proved to be forthcoming…

Luke rolled his eyes to the side and gently nudged Volcan’s side. “...He’s not wrong. And technically you won because Hank was still in the ring. You two were both unconscious.” He whispered, no doubt earning him a scowl from Volcan. “...Shutting up.”

Ignus however, seemed to beam at the idea of being trained by Romulus, his tail wagging behind him as he suddenly put his paws on the table.

“When do we start??” He asked.

Romulus chuckled. “Well, to give fighters time to recover, the arena is empty tomorrow,” he said. “If you don’t mind an early start, we can go to the arena for a bit of practice.”

Ignus nodded quickly. “Hoo man this is awesome! I’m gonna get lessons from the Hound of Terror himself~!” He yipped, fidgeting in his seat as he grew more and more excited.

Volcan sighed. “Well, long as he’s happy,” he said discreetly to Luke.

Luke glanced back at Volcan with an arched eyebrow. “...Are you alright, love?” He asked with as much discretion.

“Eh, he’s just growing up really fast for me,” said Volcan. “I never thought I’d be a father… Expected even less how much I’d enjoy being one. But it’s all passing so quickly…”

Luke sighed gently and held Volcan’s hand in his paw. “Time flies when you’re having fun, Volcan; scarily so,” he answered. “He’s not a little boy anymore, and he’s going to start entering that stage in his life where he’ll want to make his own choices. As his parents, we have to allow him that option, or we’ll just smother him and drive him to loathe us…”

Volcan nodded. “I understand that,” he said. “Still… Only seems like yesterday I was playing with him when he was just a pup. Now… Well, we still have fun but our ‘play’ has become far more - shall we say… Direct?”

Luke tilted his head slightly. “You mean playing is more like sparring to him?” He asked.

“Well, he sure seems to love it when we spar, yes,” replied Volcan. “Not to say I’m not having fun too, of course. He keeps me on my toes.”

Luke smirked. “Oh, so you’ve found a new rival, have you~?” He asked. “I’m no longer fast enough for you~?”

Volcan barked out a laugh. “You kidding? You forgetting about Neilla, Minato, and even Sol?” he asked, half-joking.

“Sol tests you in overall strength, Neilla your dexterity, Minato… well pretty much everything, and I your speed.” Luke listed off, still smirking. “It sounds to me like Ignus is giving you more trouble than it's worth in the speed department.” He said, then dared to lean in and smirk even more. “Orrr…. Perhaps you’re starting to slow down, love~~”

Volcan half-scowled. “Oh, we’ll just see about that in the next round, won’t we?”

Luke chuckled softly. “That’s the spirit.” He answered, giving him a smooch along the beak, satisfied that he had given Volcan some fuel for his fire.

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Minato, Caulin, Lashanne and Koa entered the mansion with heads held high, recounting the day’s events as they had been since leaving the colosseum.

“Well, one thing’s for sure, this tournament is shaping up to be quite the show, isn’t it?” Lashanne asked. “Today went by so fast I can hardly believe there were actually thirty-two fights!”

“Some being far more interesting than others,” Minato added with a smirk. “Who would have guessed *SOL* would end up being instructor material?”

“I wasn’t expecting to fight freaking *Keldeo* of all guys!” Caulin added excitedly. “Man… If even he decided to compete, I can’t wait to see who else decided to put their mits into the mix!”

“And you should’ve seen Koa out there too,” said Lashanne. “That poor Infernape had no idea what hit him! Koa dodged every punch and then got him with that… Er…” she looked at Koa. “What’d you call it?”

“Plasma Fists,” Koa answered.

“Right,” she said. “Either way he went down *hard*.”

Caulin turned to Koa with an excited gaze. “Yo, you *have* to teach me that move sometime! The way you electrified all of your attacks after the initial attack was *epic!”*

Koa smiled at that. Then, his smile vanished as his ears twitched, and he looked behind them. “Who?” he asked.

The others turned, and Lashanne felt her stomach drop at the sight of who was following them. It was another Delphox - the same Shiny Delphox they had seen at the start of the tournament - the one she had called Talleon at the start of the tournament. Lashanne’s fur stood on end, her ears standing high in alert.

“So, it *is* you,” the male Delphox said. “When the announcer called your name, I had thought it a coincidence…”

The rest of Minato’s family turned partially to face the Delphox, eying him with suspicion. “...And you are?” Minato asked, even though he knew his name at least.

“Surely Lashanne has told you about me,” he said, crossing his arms, covered in thick dark fur. “Unless, that is, she’s omitted her former enrollment at the Academy.”

“Oh, we know her origins,” Caulin remarked, crossing his arms as well while sizing him up. “Never mentioned anything about you before. You a former classmate of hers or something?”

“I was the assistant headmaster at the academy when she was in attendance,” Talleon replied, uncrossing his arms to tuck them behind his back. “I also headed many of the academy’s archaeological expeditions… In which, she tended to be quite… Insubordinate.”

“Maybe if you didn’t have a stick rammed up your tailhole about doing everything by the book,” Lashanne spat, “You’d have found a lot more artifacts to uncover.”

Talleon cast her a dirty look, but he didn’t take the bait. “Regardless, Lashanne,” he began, “I had heard you made quite a name for yourself after you left us. An infamous ‘treasure hunter’, so I’m told.”

“What can I say?” Lashanne shrugged. “A girl’s got to make a living.”

“Yes, of course,” Talleon replied, sarcastically. “You might be pleased to know, many of the artifacts you collected for us are well taken care of; several have been donated to museums, others we are still studying.”

“Well, that’s good,” she said. “At least you didn’t throw them out.”

That seemed to finally strike a nerve, Talleon’s face darkening as his stoic mask fell, replaced by a hard leer. “You think *I* would ever just cast out priceless artifacts?” he demanded. “You are as insolent as ever, girl…”

“Can’t imagine why that’s the case...” Minato muttered out of the corner of his mouth, though the way he spoke, he wasn’t exactly trying to hide his sarcasm.

Talleon’s ear twitched, and his eyes fell on Minato. “Do you have something to add, good sir?” he asked.

Minato stared right back at Talleon, his expression neutral for a second before he spoke. “I was just saying I can’t imagine *why* she was as insolent as you claim she was, given how you present yourself.” He answered, more forward and straight to the point.

“Agree to disagree,” said Talleon, before looking at Lashanne again. “Regardless… My curiosity has been sated. I do wonder though, Lashanne… Was this really the path you wanted for yourself? To be an arena combatant?”

Lashanne scoffed. “I wanted a life to call my own,” she said, “and it got me so much more than just thrilling adventures.” She held out her arms, gesturing to the three males around her. “It got me a family.”

Talleon blinked, looking at Minato, Caulin and then Koa, then back to Lashanne again. A long silence fell between them, broken only when he began to turn away, and uttered, “Congratulations,” before he began to slowly walk back to the exit, leaving the four staring after him.

Once he was out of earshot, Lashanne’s frown deepened. “Even when he says ‘congratulations’ it doesn’t sound sincere,” she said, bitterly.

“If he continues to give you grief, should I put him in his place?” Minato asked, glancing at Lashanne. “It sounds like he’s the type to keep egging you on, especially if you’re alone.”

“No,” she said. “I don’t want him to have the satisfaction of knowing he still gets under my fur. Just ignore him.”

“If he keeps at it, I don’t think I’d be able to hold myself back,” Caulin remarked bitterly. “You’d think after so many years, he’d learn to drop a grudge.”

“He never was one to let things go,” she said, “least of all reminding people of when they disappointed him.”

Minato’s ear twitched softly. “...THAT’S why he’s upset with you?” He said incredulously. “...Okay, now I HAVE to give this asshole an earful…”

“Let it go, hun,” Lashanne reaffirmed. “He’s not worth the effort… I’ll just have to make him eat his words by winning my next round.”

Minato glanced at Lashanne, sighing and gently caressing her face. “You know I can’t stand bullies, honey…” He said softly.

“Yes, but sometimes all they want is attention, or to know they’re getting to you,” she replied, “so there are times the best thing to do is ignore them. No catharsis, they move on.”

“Hmph… fine.” The Lucario grumbled. “I just hope he gets his serving of humble pie soon enough…”

“Karma catches up to everyone, hun. Even him… It’s a slow-turning wheel, but it turns.”

During one of the days the team was together to explore the city, Tristan lamented about how they had no chance to see any gladiatorial battles between rounds at the tournament. A short investigation into the matter revealed that gladiator matches had been temporarily suspended for the tournament, and Tristan was far from pleased to find out.

But soon, the next round began, and the first few fighters went out. A few matches in, Katsumoto’s number was called - the first of the group to be selected for round two. His teammates all wished him the best of luck as the towering Samurott made his way down to the arena, to which he smiled and waved at them in return before disappearing down a flight of stairs, appearing in the arena a minute later.

As Katsu stepped out onto the field, he watched as the opposite gate was lowered, and could hear heavy footsteps echoing through the shadowed corridor as his opponent emerged. To his surprise, the figure that came out was none other than Tristan; the Aggron stepped out with his arms held high, calling out to the cheering crowd around him with a guffaw of laughter.

“The King of the Ring is back, Gladiator City!” he barked. “Ready to see me win another round?!”

To Katsu’s dismay, it seemed Tristan hadn’t even noticed him yet…

The Samurott allowed Tristan to have his moment, then he cleared his throat loudly enough for him to hear, smirking a bit once their eyes met. “You might wish to save your claims of victory until *after* you have attained it, my friend.” He stated confidently.

Tristan froze, and turned sharply to look at the Samurott. “Wait a minute, *Katsu?”* he asked. “I’m fighting *you* now?”

“It would seem that fate has deemed now to be the time we face each other in combat.” Katsu said with a nod. “Truth be told, I *was* hoping for our fight to commence far later in this competition, but alas… beggars cannot be choosers.”

“Eh, that’s the ring for ya,” said Tristan, putting his claws on his hips and laughing again. “Always manages to keep surprising you. But that’s what makes it fun! Especially without a bunch of greedy bastards controlling everything.”

Katsu smiled more broadly, then slowly reared himself back on his hind legs and cracked the knuckles on his forepaws. “Then let us revel in this fight.” He stated firmly. “It will be just like all of our scraps back in Port Azure: A test of raw might and strength.”

“I like the way you think, buddy,” said Tristan, taking his hands from his hips and clenching them into fists, where he slammed them together. “It’s time to show this audience a beautiful brawl.”

Katsu laughed heartily, hunching forward with his arms spread out, ready to charge once the go-ahead was given. Revane wasted no time, seeing the two were ready to begin, and called for the match to begin.

At his call, Katsu and Tristan rushed at each other, the two slamming into each other with enough force to send a shockwave rippling through the arena, as though a tidal wave had just collided with a landslide. Tristan’s metal-clad skull slammed into Katsumoto’s hard shellmet, their respective paws grabbing the other by the shoulders as they grappled.

Katsumoto was smiling throughout the whole fight, glaring at Tristan as he struggled to overpower the large Aggron. Every muscle in his body burned as he pushed against the rock and iron titan, but over the years of them sparring together, Katsu had grown accustomed to Tristan’s method of combat. Indeed he was a worthy opponent, as he was the only one that truly challenged his own strength, and that only served to make the Mighty Glacier’s blood boil with excitement.

Tristan, though, was more determined than he ever had been before. Unlike every other time he and Katsu had sparred, this time they were on the Aggron’s home turf, and Tristan was ready to fight with everything he had. With a grunt of effort, he pushed Katsu’s hind legs, and Katsu skidded over the sand, unable to hold his ground, as Tristan took a step forward. That push disrupted Katsu’s balance, and suddenly Tristan pushed through his guard, bear-hugging him and suplexing the Samurott into the ground behind him.

The Samurott grunted as he hit the ground, feeling the damage rattling through his body. Nevertheless, he remained resolute and managed to break free of Tristan’s grapple, rolling back to his feet and puffing his cheeks out before spewing out a pair of Water Pulses in retaliation. Tristan, now back on his feet, threw up a Protect before the Water Pulses struck him, blocking them both, before a glow filled his mouth, and he shot back with a Flash Cannon.

Katsu grinned wider, planting his feet into the ground and flexing his torso as hard as he could. The attack barreled into his chest, making him grunt, and he skidded back nearly a meter before he managed to hold his ground.

He then started to flex his muscles harder, a large ring of water forming around his feet as he forcefully activated his Torrent ability. With a mighty roar, his muscles swelled, almost ripping his top to shreds, and with that burst of power, he deflected the Flash Cannon around him, sending it crashing into the ground next to him. Katsu then inhaled deeply and lurched forward, discharging an empowered Hydro Pump with all of his might.

Tristan leapt to the side to avoid the Hydro Pump, narrowly missing taking a direct hit from it. Thinking quickly, he punched the ground, sending a Stone Edge arcing across the ground toward Katsu, a trail of blunt stones jutting up from the earth in a line, but Katsu was undeterred. He charged toward the Stone Edge with Aqua Jet and reared his arm back, throwing it forward and punching *through* the attack, his own Aqua Jet carrying him forward past the destroyed rocks and toward his opponent.

Somehow, as he broke through the last of the rocks, Tristan was ready. The Aggron was already leaping at him, leading with his metal-clad skull with a powerful Head Smash to collide with the Samurott.

Katsu’s fist met Tristan’s metal head, resulting in a loud clang that echoed powerfully and even caused the sand around them to get blasted away from them. Katsu’s arm was shaking and his fist was in pain, but he pushed through it, growling as he struggled to overpower the Aggron’s nearly impenetrable defenses. Even with all his strength, though… Tristan would not back down.

He clenched his right claw into a fist, turned sharply to push aside Katsu’s punch, and drove a powerful uppercut into Katsu’s chest, roaring with fury. The Samurott gagged and staggered back, hunched over and clutching his stomach as he gasped repeatedly, struggling to catch his breath and fight through the pain. Eventually though, he stared to laugh while lifting his head up to meet Tristan’s gaze with a grin.

“A fine hit!” He declared before he straightened up and pounded his chest hard with his fist. “But a singular punch will not shatter this glacier!”

“Nor will one shatter this stone wall!” Tristan retorted as his body flashed with a bright glow, using Iron Defense to toughen his body even further. He then slammed his fists together as he faced Katsu once again. “Which is going to break first… The Glacier of Valiant, or the Shield of Phalanx?”

“Let’s find out, old friend,” Katsu answered in a challenging tone, hunching forward again, ready to charge in once more.

Tristan lifted his leg, taking a step forward and stomping hard, unleashing a powerful Earthquake that could be felt throughout the entire ring, the ground around Katsu splitting as fissures opened in the ground below. At first, the Samurott lowered himself to reduce the shaking, but when a fissure opened up directly under him, he jumped into the air toward Tristan, spinning and roaring as he fell toward his opponent with a double sledgehammer fist at the ready.

Tristan braced himself; the fists struck, but he barely moved, and struck back with a left hook to Katsu’s cheek, to which he took and recoiled from, spinning with the force of the hook and countering with a haymaker of his own to Tristan’s face that the Aggron took, winced, and struck back.

The battle had descended into an all-out brawl between the two, and the audience could only watch with bated breath as the two massive warriors battled. Even Volcan looked between the two studiously and grimaced when his gaze settled on Katsu.

“Luke… I think Katsu’s losing,” he said, “and I’m not just saying that out of bias… I think Tristan’s made himself so tough, he’s wearing Katsu out.”

Luke kept his gaze forward as he responded, wincing slightly every time the two combatants traded blows. “It sure looks that way…” He admitted. “Even with Katsumoto having his Torrent ability active, he can only last so long… At this rate, he’ll give out unless he changes tactics…”

“He should be using his Seamitars…” Volcan said. “Razor Shell’s the best move he’s got against someone like Tristan… Is he just determined to win on equal footing?”

“He’s always been one to engage in a fair fight. He will never fight an unarmed foe while being armed himself.” Luke answered. “The question now is how long will he hold to that core value? He has one attack that could clutch the victory for him, but he needs his swords to perform it.”

Volcan grimaced. “I hope he realizes that soon,” he said. “Tristan’s *not* fighting to lose this time…”

Katsu managed to land another punch on Tristan after forcing an opening in his guard. But his fist collided with the Aggron’s stone chest to no effect, and Tristan retaliated with a butt of his head, Katsu’s shellmet being jammed into his head and nearly falling off from the impact. This time, Katsu staggered back a good distance, grasping where he was struck and panting heavily as fatigue began to catch up to him. To top it off, his vision was getting blurry as he fought to stay conscious. He wasn’t going to last much longer at this rate…

“…Haha… You have… grown stronger, my friend.” He commented in between heart breaths.

“I never stopped training once I knew this tournament was coming,” said Tristan. “Even managed to finally score a win on Sol sparring with him. I wasn’t planning on losing when I came here.”

Despite the boastful words from Tristan… The smile he wore was forced. Katsu didn’t seem to notice the lack of joy in that smile, too battered by the ongoing fight.

“Then it seems I was staying my blades for naught,” Katsu answered, standing tall and flicking his arms out. His Seamitars slid out of the sleeves on his kimono and into his paws, spinning them once each before pointing them forward. “It is time I hit you with every ounce of strength I can muster!” He said as he began to channel copious amounts of water along his arms and toward the tips of his swords.

Tristan braced himself, briefly considering using another Iron Defense. Certainly, using that a second time would have made him capable of withstanding whatever Katsu had in mind, and he had time to do it… But, he chose not to, charging another Flash Cannon instead. Katsu continued to gather large amounts of water to the tips of his blades, the water condensing right up until he was fully charged. Then with a mighty roar, he discharged a massive blast of water in the form of a Hydro Cannon, the blowback from the attack making Katsu skid a little as he held his arms forward.

Tristan hadn’t fired his Flash Cannon. He could have thrown up a Protect at that attack; he had time. But, he didn’t… With a wry smile, Tristan continued with the Flash Cannon, firing it into the Hydro Cannon instead. The power difference was obvious; in physical might, Tristan seemed to hold an advantage against Katsumoto, but in terms of elemental power, Katsu was the stronger.

The Hydro Cannon pushed through the Flash Cannon, and Tristan was taken full-force by the watery blast, blowing him off his feet and sending him tumbling across the ground even as the watery onslaught ended. There, he lay in the sand, soaked and unmoving…

Revane called the match. “Winner! Katsumoto!”

Volcan’s hands were on the railing, staring intently down into the ring. Beside him, Minato likewise looked on in disbelief, the two of them watching their defeated teammate even as he rose.

“I’m not the only one who saw that, right?” Volcan asked Minato.

“What do you mean?” Lashanne asked from behind them. Despite being as attentive as Volcan, this had slipped past her; she didn’t know Tristan nearly as well as the two of them.

But Minato knew what Volcan meant. He had known Tristan even longer than Volcan; he knew the Aggron’s tactics - brutish though they were, he was smart when it came to fighting.

“No, I saw it too,” Minato added, looking at Volcan. “He just *threw* that fight.”

“He *what*?” Lashanne demanded, incredulous.

“Tristan could’ve easily stopped that Hydro Cannon with Protect,” said Volcan, “and no matter how dumb he is on principle, he’s never been stupid in a fight. He knows that if Katsu’s attack had failed, he’d have been wide open, and Tristan could’ve taken him out with one well-placed hit…” Volcan's eyes narrowed. “But he didn’t… He let Katsu finish him off. Made it seem like the thrill of the fight had driven him to make a mistake.”

“You don’t think Tristan could’ve actually just made one?” The question came from Neilla, sitting further up.

“No way,” Volcan said firmly. “Tristan is far too experienced to make a mistake like that. No matter how clueless you are, battle instinct - especially when it is honed across decades, is hard to break… Unless you do it on purpose.”

“But… Why then?” Luke finally asked. “Why would he just throw a fight like that after fighting as hard as he did? You said so yourself. He was fighting to win that whole time!”

“I don’t know,” admitted Volcan, “but I intend to find out… Come on,” he said to Minato as he turned and started for the stairs.

“Right behind you.” Minato said firmly, getting up and following after his captain.

Down below, Katsumoto and Tristan were still on the field. Medics had come out to see the Aggron, even though he was able to stand without any help. The fight had certainly battered him, but not crippled him.

Yet, even to Katsu in the highlight of his victory, sensed something was off about it… He couldn’t place it immediately, but it left a nagging feeling at the back of his mind. Using what little strength he had left, he slowly limped toward Tristan and waited until he had noticed him before speaking up.

“...Why did you hold back?” He stated as firmly as he could.

Tristan didn’t miss a beat, chuckling. “What’cha talkin’ about?” he asked. “You got me. Not even I was going to take that Hydro Cannon.”

“But that is the problem,” Katsu stated. “You could have used *any* other attack. You could have used Protect to shield yourself. You could have even *dodged* my Hydro Cannon… yet you decided to take it head-on.” He went on, his frown deepening. “Clueless as you may be out of combat, you are *not* a simpleton in the heat of battle. You have far more experience than I… So why did you opt for a clash when you could have dispersed my attack and claimed victory for yourself?”

At that, Tristan shrugged. “In the heat of the moment, I must’ve forgot,” he said.

Katsu narrowed his eyes at that, a low growl escaping his throat. “...Tristan. Did you not hear what I said…?” He asked. “You are not a fool in battle. Battle instincts do not just disappear like that.”

Still Tristan did not miss a beat. “Mistakes can happen to anybody in the heat of a fight, Katsu,” stated the Aggron. “Nobody’s above them. Not even the most seasoned veteran. In any case,” he continued even as he turned away, “make sure you keep going for both of us, Katsu. If you don’t win next round, you’ll be getting an earful from me. Got it?”

He ignored Katsu’s other attempts to reach him as the Aggron walked out, escorted by the medics, while the rest of the audience cheered the Samurott’s name. Katsu still wasn’t satisfied with Tristan’s answers, however, narrowing his eyes as his suspicions grew of Tristan’s real reason for losing that battle. For now though, all he could do was turn and leave the arena himself. He had injuries far more grievous that need tending to…

“Tristan!” Volcan’s voice cut sharply across the stillness of the corridor as he and Minato approached the Aggron, both of them wearing the same suspicious looks as Katsu as they approached their teammate. “What the hell was that?”

Tristan looked at his captain. “What’re you talking about, cap? Katsu won. It’s hardly the first time he’s beat me.”

“Don’t give me that,” returned Volcan, glowering at him. “It’s because you’ve fought Katsu so many times I *know* you threw that fight. You *had* him… If you had Protected yourself against that Hydro Cannon, he’d have been wide open - and don’t pretend you don’t know that. You may be a lunkhead outside of combat, but you’re more experienced than me *or* Minato; you know this as well as we do.”

Tristan finally dropped the mask and looked at Volcan with absolute seriousness. “It’s his last run, Volcan,” he said. “He only came ‘cuz Serena wanted him to, because she knew how much it meant to him. He wouldn’t have come if she hadn’t told him to. Do you disagree?”

Volcan hesitated to answer and looked at Minato, seeking some clarification. Minato glanced at Volcan for a moment, then back at Tristan and furrowed his brow. “So you mean to tell us that you didn’t trust Katsu to take the loss well?” He asked accusingly. “Who cares if it was his last run?? Katsu was fighting with everything he had, and you proved you were still stronger! He wasn’t going to be butthurt about it! He would have at least walked away with his head held high, knowing he gave his best!” He stated, then pointed at Tristan. “By letting him win like that, you’ve no doubt attacked his pride as a warrior, *and* you-”

But Tristan cut him off. “It wasn’t for *him*, Minato,” he stated sternly. “Katsu came for Serena, and she sent him because she knew he wanted to come…They both did it for each other. But,” he smiled as he went on, “isn’t it a better story for those new young’uns of his… If he makes it further in the tournament?”

That brought a pause to both Volcan and Minato, as the truth of Tristan’s words settled over them. “You mean you did it… For his kids?” asked Volcan.

“Kids that’re going to look up to their dad,” said Tristan. “For all we know, one of those little ones are going to take after him,” he looked at Minato, “the same way Caulin takes after you, and aspire to be just like him. Think of it like this… If Caulin wasn’t competing in this tournament, and just you were, and you made it all the way to the finals, what would *he* do?”

Minato’s eyes widened as he gave serious thought to Tristan’s words, blinking a few times as they registered in his mind. He even had to shake his head to make sure he wasn’t imagining things before he spoke up. “...That… has to be the most forward thinking you’ve ever been… and that’s *saying* something.” He admitted.

Tristan chuckled. “Broken clocks, pal,” he said, “still right twice a day.”

“You want the kids to be able to look up to him,” said Volcan.

“And they’ll be more inspired if they know their dad made it far in this tournament, against the best fighters the world has ever known,” Tristan went on. “Losing in the first or second round, though? That ain’t worth scrap.”

Minato sighed softly. “Be that as it may, does Katsu know this?” He asked. “If not, you should tell him… He’d be far more understanding if you were upfront and honest about it.”

“You said it yourself, Minato,” said Tristan, “warrior’s pride is a strong thing. Still, I don’t doubt he already suspects it… He’s way smarter than me, after all.”

“You aren’t worried about him resenting you for it?” Volcan asked.

“He’ll forgive me,” replied Tristan with confidence. “It ain’t going to be *my* last fight, but if it’s going to be his, then it ought to be one his kids will love to hear about.”

“You’re taking quite a gamble, man,” Minato remarked, shaking his head. “But… It’s your call to make. I just hope it pays off for you.”

Tristan shook his head. “My concern was ensuring the next generation has something to look up to,” he said. “At least one of Katsu’s kids is going to want to be like their dad. That one, ought to want to be as good if not even better than him, just like Caulin. With that, the next generation produces even greater warriors… Greater heroes, even.”

“That’s… Wow, when did you become so philosophical?” Volcan asked.

“Eh, that’s probably my twice a day right there,” he said, shrugging. “Either way, it’s done. And you two,” he added with a grin, “You’ve still got a ways to go yet. Don’t let Team Phalanx go down with its lunkheaded shield now.”

Minato snickered a little. “Ah, there he is.” He remarked, chuckling louder before smirking and nodding back at Tristan. “I’m not planning on losing anytime soon. Unlike you, I’m far from being over the hill just yet.” He joked.

“Don’t push your luck, Minato,” Tristan retorted, never losing his grin even as he turned and continued on his way, seeing to his injuries before he would join the spectators.

Volcan allowed himself a small laugh as he watched Tristan leave. “I guess now, neither of us can afford to lose,” he said. “When falls the shield wall, the phalanx breaks… But that doesn’t mean the swords and spears are out of the fight. Am I right?”

“Not by a long shot,” Minato answered, still smirking as he watched Tristan depart. “Just means we need to work harder and get as far as we can in this thing.”

“Exactly,” said Volcan. “Let’s get back up there in case they call our numbers. Plus, I don’t want to miss the action for the next match either.”

“Right behind you.” Minato agreed.

When Volcan and Minato returned to the stands, they found a few of their fellow spectators missing. There was no sign of Lashanne, nor of Neilla; the seat previously occupied by the Lopunny was vacant, leaving Sarth seated alone on the bench, aside from Azrael sitting right beside him. Yet, the Flygon and the Absol both wore the same shocked expression as they watched the arena below, waiting for the gates to be lowered.

An expression shared by both Luke and Ignus, their tails twitching absently behind them as they waited. Volcan, seeing the shock on their faces, looked between the four of them. “What’s going on?” he asked, puzzled, turning his gaze down to the arena briefly; he saw the marks from Tristan and Katsu’s battle had been cleared but the next fighters weren’t out yet. “Why are you all looking at the ring as if Giratina just came out of it?”

“Well… you’re about to find out for yourself,” Luke answered.

Volcan tilted his head, and then realization seemed to dawn on him. “Wait… Where did Lashanne and Neilla go?” he asked, though his tone suggested he already knew the answer.

Ignus piped up at that. “Their numbers were called. They’re next to fight.”

“Oh…! Oooooh!” Minato remarked, then his face blanched a bit. “...Oh shit…”

“Gone five minutes…” Volcan muttered, not finishing as he returned to sit by Luke, watching the ring below as the gates were lowered.

Neilla was the first to run out onto the field, making a brisk jog out from the gates until she reached the center, where she skidded to a stop, letting Revane introduce her. Meanwhile, as the other gate dropped, Lashanne stepped out, walking more casually with her branch already in her hand as she crossed the field, lifting a paw to wave as Revane introduced her.

The cheers for her, she noticed, weren’t as loud as those for Neilla. But that didn’t surprise her; the Lopunny was, after all, a captain, whose name was certainly more known than that of the Delphox. She didn’t take offense to it, focusing instead on what she knew was going to be one of the hardest fights of her life…

She *knew* Neilla was tough. Strong enough to square off with her captain, maybe even her boyfriend… This was an opponent to whom she could not let her guard down.

“Never thought I’d see the day you and I met in the ring, huh?” Neilla asked the Delphox.

“Were it up to me, I sure wouldn’t have picked you as my opponent,” said Lashanne, shrugging. “I mean, lady to lady, sure, but against the lady I saw beat my captain’s hubby in a brawl at least once?”

“I don’t really count that time,” said Neilla, paws on her hips. “Luke wasn’t himself. For that reason, I aim to level the playing field right here in this tournament.” She removed her paws from her hips then, losing her smile as she regarded Lashanne. “Which, unfortunately, means I’m not willing to lose here.”

“Neither am I,” said Lashanne, flourishing her branch. “So, I guess it's time we both put our Poks where our mouths are and do this.”

“You read my mind,” said Neilla, shifting to her fighting stance as Lashanne did the same, standing with her wand held readily before her.

At Revane’s call, Lashanne made the first move, casting a Psybeam at Neilla. The Lopunny, though, reacted immediately, ready for Lashanne to open with a ranged attack. Over her body, a reflective sheen covered her, the Mirror Coat sending the Psybeam back to its caster, forcing Lashanne to duck to the right to avoid being struck by her attack.

At that, Neilla - using Agility to amplify her speed - raced across the ring toward Lashanne, closing the distance between them in the span of a heartbeat. Lashanne parried an incoming kick with her branch, briefly throwing Neilla off balance, and lunging at her with a Fire Punch. The punch almost connected, but Neilla threw herself backward, avoiding the arc of the punch and landing on her paws, sprinting back onto her feet before facing Lashanne again.

With that, Neilla dashed at her again. She kicked; Lashanne blocked, only to be hit by a second kick that went under her raised guard, her leg buckling under the blow before Neilla made a back step and punch that caught the taller Delphox in the chest as she tried to stand, sending her stumbling backward.

*‘Damn she’s fast,’* Lashanne thought.

Changing her approach, Lashanne ignited the tip of her wand, holding it above her head and rotating it in a circle, causing ribbons of fire to fall around her with Fire Spin. She continued doing this even as she ran at Neilla, forcing the Lopunny back to stay away from the heat. With her feint having succeeded, Lashanne dropped the fiery shield and cast another Psybeam at Neilla; this time, she was too close for Neilla to use Mirror Coat again, and the Lopunny took the hit to her torso, knocking her back.

Unfortunately, Neilla was back up again in a second. But she didn’t immediately rise to her full height, standing in a deep crouch, tensing her legs…

And *jumped*.

The Lopunny shot into the air with a jump that would’ve made even a Blaziken envious, kicking up dust from where she had been standing before. She rose until she was directly in line with the sun, and then dropped with her foot outstretched; Lashanne barely had time to see the attack coming, the Lopunny hidden by the sun’s glare, before she dove out of the way, and Neilla hit the ground like a falling meteorite, sending up another cloud of dust in the process.

Lashanne couldn’t see Neilla in the cloud until the Lopunny emerged; she was on her in a blink, and scored a punch to Lashanne’s knee that stumbled the Delphox again, only to fall victim to an uppercut that struck before Lashanne had even fallen. Finally, Neilla struck her with a Triple Axel, landing three, consecutive, ice-fueled kicks that chilled Lashanne to her core until the third one finally knocked her onto her back…

She did not rise.

“Knockout!” Revane called. “The winner is Neilla!”

The voice of Caulin was nearly lost in the roar of applause from the audience as he called out to his stepmother. “NOO! C’mon, get up, Mom! Get up!”

Minato winced and turned his head away. “That’s going to wound her ego a bit…” He muttered under his breath.

Volcan shook his head as he watched. “Good try, Lashanne,” he said, still coming to terms with the result. It was not Neilla winning that surprised him, but the magnitude of which she had won.

He dreaded to think just how powerful Neilla would be once she used her Mega Stone… As it was, he was fairly sure he had just seen a glimpse of Neilla at her peak strength. “She's stronger than ever before,” he thought aloud.

“Indeed. She has *not* been slacking,” Luke commented, overhearing his husband thinking out loud. Despite that, a small smile crossed his face as he looked down at the Lopunny. “Fighting her at full strength is going to be fun…”

“She might end up being the hardest opponent we face in this entire competition,” Volcan commented, “no matter which of us face her.”

“I’d argue she’s *one* of the hardest,” Luke answered. “Or did you forget who else is competing?” He asked, glancing around at their friends and family.

“Fair point,” agreed Volcan, “But keep in mind, she still hasn’t even used her Mega Stone yet. The boost from that might make her a match even for Luna.”

“That’s true,” Luke admitted. “Still, it does fill me with excitement seeing how far she’s come.”

“Me too,” said Volcan, chuckling.

“Hey, if you guys don’t mind, Caulin and I are gonna head down and see how Lashanne’s doing,” Minato stated, already halfway out of his seat.

“Okay,” said Volcan. “Hurry back; the next match won’t be long.”

“We’ll be back before you can blink!” Caulin stated with a wink, as he followed his father to the stairs.

Lashanne walked, her chest sore from the last blow—Neilla’s kick had knocked the air from her lungs, leaving her winded and a little dizzy. It wasn’t the loss that bothered her. No, it was just her luck that she’d run into someone stronger. It could’ve happened to anyone. She’d made it to the second round, after all.

But of course, that calm thought didn’t last long. Not when Talleon decided to waltz into her path.

“Well, you put on quite the show out there, didn’t you?” He said, his voice like smooth, well-trained silk.

Lashanne’s eyes narrowed, and she forced a tight smile, feeling the sting of his words more than the bruises. “I try,” she muttered, not even sparing him a proper glance. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Talleon, my boyfriend is waiting for me.”

“Of course,” he said, stepping aside, but his voice followed her like a shadow. “I suppose now you’ll go back to treasure hunting, now that combat’s not your thing, huh?”

Lashanne stopped mid-stride, her eyes flashing in irritation. She spun to face him, hands on her hips. “Give me a break, Talleon. You’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I know that you crave thrills,” Talleon responded smoothly, his gaze cool and disapproving, “and that you absolutely hate authority. You refuse to admit when someone knows more than you.”

“Find me someone who does, and I’ll gladly listen to their advice.” Lashanne’s smirk was laced with contempt. “I’ve fought with *real* combatants—ones who don’t sit around reading textbooks, thinking they’ve mastered the world.”

Talleon’s eyes sharpened, the flicker of irritation evident in the way his lips tightened. “Does your insolence truly know no bounds?”

Lashanne didn’t back down. “Does your ego fill up the doorway when you enter your little study at the academy?” she shot back. “A study that’s only yours because you kissed the right ass?”

Talleon’s eyes blazed with fury, the weight of her words hitting a nerve. “How dare you!” he spat, taking a threatening step toward her. “I earned my position!”

Lashanne didn’t flinch. “Yeah, ‘cause your dad was the headmaster before you.” Her voice dripped with mockery. “I wasn’t born yesterday, Talleon. You think I didn’t notice that? Just because your dad wasn’t a Delphox doesn’t mean nepotism didn’t grease the wheels for you.”

Talleon’s rage flared, his tail flicking behind him in fury. “My relationship with my father had nothing to do with my rank!” he snapped. “He wasn’t even my real father! If you had half a brain, you’d know that!”

“Yeah, he married your mom. I know that,” Lashanne shot back, the words biting. “Doesn’t change the fact that you were handed everything. You didn’t earn a damn thing.”

Talleon took another step forward, fists clenched angrily; he looked as though he wanted to slap her. “Why you—!”

Minato and Caulin, drawn by the raised voices, arrived just as the tension peaked. They exchanged a sharp glance before Minato stepped forward, arms crossed, his presence commanding.

“…Do we have a problem here, pal?” Minato asked, his voice calm but unwavering.

Talleon paused, glancing at Minato, then straightened himself. “Merely a discussion, sir,” he replied smoothly. “A bit of bad blood between Lashanne and me. Nothing to worry about.”

Minato’s gaze hardened. “Anything concerning my future wife concerns me, especially when you act entitled like you’ve earned anything.”

Caulin couldn’t hold back, his voice sharp. “Yeah, all you’ve done is sit on your high horse, acting like you’ve worked for everything, when really, it’s been handed to you. You wouldn’t know real sacrifice if it hit you in the face.”

Talleon chuckled, a dismissive sound. “Sacrifice? You have no idea what hardship is. Look around. This city was built by blood and sweat. You come from some tiny backwater, never seen real danger.”

Minato’s eyes narrowed dangerously, and he finally could take no more of Talleon’s mouth. In a heartbeat, he closed the distance, gripping Talleon by the throat and slamming him into the wall. His gaze burned with the intensity of a thousand unspoken words. If looks could kill, Talleon would have been shredded by Minato’s fury.

“Here’s some real history for you,” Minato growled, his grip tightening. “I’m not from here. I’m from Arc Island. A place we called home until it was ripped away from us by the same monster who started a war just to watch the world burn. I lost everything when he attacked—my home, my friends, my wife. I became a ghost.”

He pressed harder, his voice low but fierce. “You wanna know what brought me back?” He pointed at Lashanne. “Her. The ‘insolent wench’ you can’t stop griping about. In the time I’ve known her, she became my son’s stepmother, second-in-command to my team, and the love of my life. She’s more than a treasure hunter. She’s a hero—someone who’d sacrifice everything for those she loves. Something you wouldn’t understand.”

Minato released Talleon, watching him gasp for air, then continued with a steely edge. “While we were fighting in the Boglands, she defended a town that was under attack. She planned the defenses, the evacuation; she fought against an enemy she *knew* she couldn’t beat on her own.” His red eyes looked upon the Shiny Delphox with disdain. “And what were *you* doing all that time? Hiding in your academy, dictating the lives of aspirant academics, while the world beyond your walls *burned*?”

He spat on the ground, then fixed Talleon with a final glare. “You want to talk about sacrifice? You want to claim the moral high ground? Look no further than us. We’ve been through hell and back, earned our place in the world, and rebuilt our lives from nothing. What have you done, aside from living in luxury, reading your books? You’re nothing more than a coward; you have *no right* to talk to her about hard work and sacrifice, and I for one, will not stand for it.”

The male Delphox stared up at Minato in disbelief for a moment, unable to formulate words as he looked up at the furious Lucario. After a long moment of silence, he forced himself to regain his composure, straightening his attire once again before he turned to start walking away. “If you will excuse me, I have… Other duties to attend to. You keep you- *Ah!*”

He went down, holding his nose too high to see the foot sticking out at the corridor ahead of him. He hit the dusty floor with a thump, and sneezed when he accidentally inhaled some of the dust.

“Oops,” came a familiar female voice as a Lopunny stepped out from the corner. “Sorry. I guess I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

Talleon huffed angrily as he lifted himself to his feet with Psychic, glaring at the Lopunny before he stormed away, with steam practically erupting from his ears as the others stared after him.

“Sorry I didn’t jump in sooner,” said Neilla, looking at the family. “You boys kind of beat me to it. I was ready to put that snob in his place too.”

“Who knows? Maybe you’ll get your chance later,” Caulin said with a chuckle. “I mean, if Dad didn’t react first, I was gonna punch that guy square in the gut before basically saying the same thing.”

“Felt kind of familiar, didn’t it?” Lashanne asked, coming to stand by her boyfriend and future step-son. “I seem to recall giving *you* the same kind of earful when we first met,” she reminded Minato.

“Guess I learned a thing or two from that day,” Minato responded, turning his gaze to meet hers and smiling warmly. “...Should I have decked him, though? Or would that have been too good for him?” He asked in jest.

“Eh, unlike you, he probably can’t take a hit,” Lashanne returned with a wave of her hand. “You’d most likely have splattered him across the floor, then this place would stink of ‘snobbish asshole’ for the rest of the year.”

Both Caulin and Minato laughed at her comment, the latter wrapping an arm around her side to bring her closer to him. “True. Can’t exactly have that kinda smell roaming the halls of this place.” He commented.

“Yeah, it already smells bad enough of blood and sweat,” Neilla added, and the trio -despite smiling - didn’t laugh. “...Okay, yeah, jokes are not my thing,” she admitted with a shrug.

“A for effort,” Caulin said with a nod.

At that, Lashanne’s ears twitched. “Oh… They just called up the next round,” she said, “Number… twenty-six?”

“Ooop! Yup, that’s me! Wish me luck!” Caulin exclaimed as he bolted out of the room, leaving a trail of dust behind.

“Wow. That guy who fought Sol lasted even less time than I thought,” remarked Neilla. “I figured if he made it through round one he’d at *least* give him a workout.”

“You don’t know Sol, then,” remarked Lashanne.

“If there’s anyone that can match Tristan in terms of strength and durability that *isn’t* Katsumoto? It’s Sol,” Minato added. “He *is* the guy that killed the Black Titan after all.”

“Better get topside if we want to see who he’s fighting then,” said Neilla, before looking at Lashanne. “No hard feelings?”

“None,” Lashanne assured her, before looking at Minato. “Let’s go cheer on our boy then.”