

Chapters

HEART'S EGG

It's fine to live how you want to live,
It's fine to cut loose and play hooky sometimes! Don't push
yourself too hard

It's fine to live how you want to live! Adults don't
understand

It's fine to take the path you believe in! It's okay even if
you mistakes

He always thought such occasions were auspicious. In fact, if pressed to admit what his favorite duty as Director was, it would probably be this. In the center of a spacious room, an older gentleman stood straight, arms folded behind his back, exemplary in conduct in a way he hoped the creatures in front of him would notice, and follow as an example. Three bodies huddled close together, listening with rapt attention, though some made an effort to hide it. Try as Sprigatito might, Director Clavell's observant eyes noticed how its tail held upwards even if it avoided looking at him directly, the aloof expression unable to offset the friendliness of its body language. Quaxly's frantic combing of its feathers slowed, an incessant need to look its best and stay on top of its surroundings quieted by adoration for its caretaker. And sweet Fuecoco showed no reservations, stationed right at his feet, head looking upwards and mouth hanging as if it were trying to mimic a wide open smile.

Yes, caring for these pokémon, and seeing them off with freshmen who hadn't yet obtained a partner of their own, was something Clavell came to love. Some may argue such labor was better fit for a biology professor or those with the formal title of Professor, but he took the job on at his own insistence, fashioning his office to suit their needs. Underneath his feet, clear tiling giving way to cozier patterned flooring, machines that presented the biometrics of pokémon hosted within pokeballs in clear view of his oaken desk and polished bookshelves. As far as he was concerned, his newly adopted administrative duties were not to be leveraged as an excuse to leave his prior research behind, but all the more reason to continue it so as to impart such knowledge upon students. The clashing functions of the room left something to be desired aesthetically, but it was the price to be paid for

a workspace that let him host meetings with staff and students and watch over the growth of said students' potential partners. He'd long since learned to curb his attachment to the pokémon he'd raise for this purpose, but a certain bittersweet feeling still emerged as he knelt down to address the trio saddled before him.

"As I've expressed to you before, your time under my care has not just been to help us better understand and cooperate with you, but to prepare you for the day you set off on your own journey alongside our young students. I also owe you my gratitude for the time you've all shared with me, and part of me wishes it wouldn't have to end so soon." The man pauses as the pokémon huddled closer, his attempts to remain stoic broken by a smile at their show of concern and affection. "...But still, you'll accomplish far greater things out on the field, where you can test your mettle and grow alongside your trainer, than you will cooped up here. If you'd be so kind as to listen to my request, it would make me proud to see you watch over your partner as I've watched over you."

Three cries rang out in unison, a vow resounding through the room. The man hoped they'd find themselves in good hands.

At the behest of his beloved director, Fuecoco found himself trotting alongside a new human, as his caretaker wanted them to all become acquainted before she chose which of he and his friends she would share her travels with. While he was excited to be out on a walk with everyone, he still tried his very best to keep his gaze from drifting away from her for too long. He *had* just promised to do so, after all. A soft breeze carried through the gently sloping hills as 4 sets of footsteps made their way down a stone-paved pathway, traveling towards a particularly luxurious estate that served as the young student's next rendezvous point with the Director. Fuecoco waddled alongside her as the more boisterous Quaxly and independent Sprigatito sought to take the lead, but the Fire Croc thought it'd be easier to keep an eye on the human if she was in front of him and not behind him.

This also let him wonder about what it'd be like having to adventure with her all by themselves. He wagered she was maybe

3 or 4 apples shorter than the Director, so maybe she was a baby human? But then again she was still probably a whole 10 apples taller than he was, and he certainly wasn't a baby. Just like the Director, her eyes were big and shiny, but hers even had weird swirls on them! When she stopped along the path to fix the fur on her head, Fuecoco thought of how Quaxly often stopped to do the same with his feathers. The fire-type also caught onto how she liked the scent of the fruit trees littering the path, stopping underneath them for a second or two before striding onwards, so she must have loved how sweet Sprigatito smelled (Fuecoco likes them too, but getting too close always resulted his furry friend pushing his face away with a paw).

He hopes there's something she likes about him too. But his worries melt away as another set of orange trees come into view. They aren't terribly tall, but the tree tops still sit far out of his reach. But, if he can somehow figure out a way to get a hold of one, he can show the human just how dependable he is! Despite his determination to stay focused and make sure his new friend didn't trip on any pebbles or uneven steps, the pokémon's mind wanders as he tries to figure out just how to get his hands on the shining oranges that sit high above his head.

Unaware of Fuecoco's ruminations, the girl looks around. Sprigatito proudly trotted ahead to rest within a flower bed, putting on a nonchalant air but still opening an eye every so often to make sure the human was watching it. Quaxly strut with dance like movements and carefully maintained its coiffed feathers, perching in front of an outlook that gave way to a view of the dazzling sea. And Fuecoco..... Was suddenly missing from its spot at her feet. Bibi looks back to catch it dreamily staring up into a tree. Looking up, she takes note of vibrant, ripe fruit sitting in emerald leaves, and she whistles to catch the pokémon's attention. When he startles slightly and looks towards her, she uses one hand to punch an open palm. But Fuecoco only stares at her, befuddled.

"Y'know, on the tree."

Her words and gestures take a second to register, but the pokémon nods up and down vigorously, before delivering a shoulder check into the trunk. The thing rattles, sending a

couple Squawkabilly furiously taking to the air as a slew of oranges fall to earth. Fuecoco excitedly lets out a few flame-laden breaths, charring its rewards in the process, before obliviously grabbing hold of the blackened remnants and running to the human with its offering. Rather than start chowing down, she barks out a laugh and rustles the stem-shaped hairs on his head. Looking at the orange, her smile sharpens into a toothy grin, and she notes the pokémon's flames burn so red-hot that the fruit is scorched through thoroughly, a husk that will crumble into nothing if she tries to take it from Fuecoco's deliberate and delicate grip.

"Nyahaha, I think I'll pass this time little guy. Thanks for doing all that for me though!"

He's a little dejected that she doesn't want to eat, even when he cooked it like how other humans seemed to, but at least she seemed happy. The rest of the walk is fairly uneventful, though every so often, Fuecoco clutches at the soon-to-be trainer's ankles in order to draw her attention to some mundane sight, and the girl indulges every time, still not tired of the coastal landscape, or its flora and fauna. Arriving at her destination has the three pokémon breaking away in order to gather at the feet of Clavell, and another girl in a Naranja uniform whose smile and honey-colored eyes glistened in the daylight.

Bar the new student herself, all present held their breaths in anticipation of her decision, chills ran down Nemonia's spine, and pride welled up in Clavell's chest. It was common knowledge that Naranja's student body were given the choice to start their academic careers by picking amongst three native Paldean species, and so the girl had spent weeks upon weeks mulling over her choices, though a single preference remained strong over the course of that time. The morning's events bolstered her confidence in that decision multiple times over. A confident march takes her to the side of a certain fire-type, before she kneels down and allows it to clamber up her arm and onto her shoulders.

"Fuecoco, I choose you."



Despite how simple-minded the pokémon appeared, the teenager's heart melted at its surprisingly thoughtful efforts throughout the morning. She may have never liked being coddled, but it was hard to simply overlook its efforts to share in every peaceful moment with her, never thinking to leave her behind. Any pokémon could be a fighter, but Fuecoco had what it took to be a *partner*.

That was all reaffirmation though, and not the reason she sought to pick the Fire Croc from the beginning. Grass-types and water-types could be just as strong as anything else, but they lacked the destructive reputation of fire-types. Even gentle, bumbling Fuecoco could still be threatening, its unyielding appetite embodying the all-consuming nature of fire itself. Bibi wanted something that couldn't be so easily overlooked. Something offering straightforward power over precision or subtlety, and a fire-type starter was the answer she had been looking for. Her bubbling excitement must be palpable, because her new schoolmate interrupts her thoughts.

"Bibi... I can't believe you actually chose Fuecoco... I mean, like, way to make the perfect choice for you! You two make such a good combo!"

Clavell merely lets out a faint but fond sigh as Nemona gets going and doesn't stop, eager to raise Sprigatito and start from scratch alongside her new neighbor. The girls' eagerness to battle resonates, driving them to race off to the beach in order to test their compatibility with their newfound partners. He keeps up with them, proud of having maintained his running form even at an age where most were content to restrict themselves to slower paces. The academy director *does* find himself tiring out after hastening his footsteps however, as he has to quickly remind Nemona not to go full throttle against a fledgling opponent.

Up against a grass-type, Bibi and Fuecoco have the advantage, but even after severely handicapping herself, their champion-level rival poses a threat. With no intent to just roll over and let them win, Sprigatito uses its superior speed to outmaneuver Fuecoco, but the type matchup allows for ember to burn through leafage. Leering in between uses of ember leaves the Grass Cat pokémon more and more vulnerable to physical attacks however, and when Sprigatito is forced to come in close to clinch a victory with scratch, a nasty tackle shatters its defenses completely. Following their victory, Bibi excitedly sweeps Fuecoco into her arms once more, showering the croc in praise and adoration as it blinks a couple times, still not registering what just happened, and failing completely to keep up with the motor-mouth conversation that erupts between the two young trainers moments later.

The battle truly marked the end of anything resembling calm that day, as Fuecoco finds itself guarding its trainer from Yungoos, Spidops, as well as Fidough littering their path, facing off against a surly looking human and his Skwovet, and dealing with an upset stomach during a fight against a delinquent's Shroodle. Strangest of all is his newfound traveling companion, "Rairai", an imposing pokémon who seemed too weathered and beaten to do much, even after Coco offered to share lunch *and* dinner with it. He absentmindedly wonders just how much food Rairai's going to need to eat to get better. After all, the feathery pokémon was about as tall as 4 Fuecocos on all fours, and probably 100 times as heavy. But Fuecoco made a promise to watch over his trainer, so he'd make sure all of his teammates were taken care of too. It was his

duty as Rairai's senior to make sure his junior's problems were fixed with enough food, rest, and playtime!

On that note, the girl who picked him was pretty weird, even for human standards, but Fuecoco must have been too, most humans seemed to be drawn closer to Quaxly and Sprigatito than they were to him. That must mean he and his trainer must be on different wavelengths than everyone else! Unless wavelengths were just a water-type thing. But different is good, because no human, not even the director, had been as excited to teach him as she was. The pepper-shaped pokémon had probably learned as much in a single day as he had over his entire time in the labs, like how to attack with his voice, or how to grab onto the legs of faster pokémon to stop them from running too far for his short legs to keep up with.

"And see, see that Fuecoco!?! That's how even a big, round guy like Cetoddle can land gracefully, if you flip onto your side and roll at the same angle, it's not gonna hurt so bad the next time you get sent flying!"

Even late at night, after dinner, with Rairai snoozing in the corner of the room, Fuecoco's trainer is still eagerly trying to cram information into both of their skulls, pointing at a TV screen that had been running famous battles all throughout the evening. It's exciting, but when the moon sits high in the sky, that means it's probably time for bed. He lets out a yawn and tugs on her sleeves to get the trainer's attention, trying his best to drag her away from the screen and towards the bed.

"Mm? Oh, huh, guess we should be getting some shuteye huh? Didn't even realize it was almost midnight."

It was okay, the two of them were both absent-minded, but if he could remember when to eat and take breaks, and she remembered when it was time to train and study, then they could just be two halves of a whole brain. Fuecoco's no Torchic, but snuggling up underneath its trainer's chin provides her with a little extra warmth, lulling her to sleep easily despite all the excitement for the days to come still bubbling inside her. Her breaths in turn drag Fuecoco into a restful slumber, and thankfully, his snoring doesn't rouse his trainer.

The same cannot be said for Rairai, who groggily lets out a mutter of complaint before pulling its head underneath the pillow it rested on.

"For the love of..... How many times am I going to have to tell you to *knock it off*?!"

"Hmmm. I'm thinking at *leeeeeeast* 3 more times, I figured you'd already gotten tired of nagging me about it by now though. Whaddya have against whistling anyways?"

"In one ear and out the other with you, I swear if the word 'battle' doesn't crop up in a sentence your brain doesn't process anything. I have no clue how you survived so long with your level of selective hearing. Anyways, we don't whistle at night, no ifs, ands, or buts *outsider*."

As per usual, Carmine spits out the word with no shortage of venom, though it's rare for her to take a kind tone when talking to the younger girl in the first place. Babysitting her younger brother was trouble enough, looking after an irreverent foreigner with little grasp of the lay of the land was twice the headache. Having the opportunity to use her pokémon as target practice alleviated her grievances somewhat....

But not enough.

'It's for her own good, but honestly, at this point, it'd be my lucky day if some mountain spirit or the ogre themselves just decided to spirit her away.' The dark-haired girl almost feels bad for wishing something so awful on Bibi... Until the whistling picks up again.

"*That's it!* You can train out here in the dark by yourself! See if I care!"

The Blueberry student storms out of the forests surrounding the Wistful Fields. If the intruder wanted to ignore their rules despite being warned time and time again against it, then Carmine was more than happy to let her mess around and learn things the hard way. Her fuming retreat was mimicked by

the sun, as it hastened its descent in the sky. The final glimmer of daylight was eaten by the canopy of the trees and the silhouette of Oni mountain in the distance, leaving Bibi without even moonlight to guide her back home.

'This would be scarier if I couldn't literally just call up a flying taxi to get me if I wanted.' She thinks to herself, rolling her eyes at her sparring partner's dramatic antics. Low tech as Kitakami was, even they had emergency lines that worked in the rare case someone got lost out in the vast expanse of undeveloped land. It is a bit annoying having to carefully watch her step as she gingerly navigates with the light of Coco's embers, focusing on not tripping over rocks or overgrown roots. Whistling makes for a fun distraction from everything frustrating about the situation though, until her tune is cut off by a man's voice.

"Young miss, I don't suppose you're lost are you?"

"WAH!!"

Bibi finds herself scrambling to stay upright, jostled by the stranger's sudden appearance. Despite the fact that she took pride in her astute senses, she was completely unable to catch onto the fact that she had company. It seemed her whistling had covered the sounds of his approach.

"Jeez! You startled me!"

"Apologies. I hadn't the intention. Are you lost though?"

"No siree, not lost at all haha," the laugh sounds a little more rattled than she'd like "just, looking for one last match I guess."

"Match?" The mystery man tilts his head to the side. Or at least, Bibi thinks he does. It's so dark out it's hard to see, and the girl can only guess at what he's doing. She has to squint to get a glimpse of him, his face seems so pale that she's pretty sure she can tell when his skin shifts around, in the light he must be sheet white, but the same goes for the robe he's wearing.

"Yeah! I'm a trainer you see! I just wanted to get one last scrap in before Coco and I head home for the night."

"Ah. Is that so... Say, miss, would you be interested in a test of courage?"

Ruby eyes light up at the proposition. A test of courage from a total stranger, in the murky blackness of a mountain said to be home to a legendarily powerful ogre, in a land still unfamiliar to her. An idea that didn't sound safe in the slightest.

Which meant she'd look extra super cool and hardcore when she cleared it no prob.

"I'm in. What're the rules?"

"Nothing complex I assure you. We engage in a one on one battle, with no tools or interventions allowed. I'll even impart precious knowledge to you if you win."

"That's it? You're capping."

"....Pardon me. I'm unfamiliar with that turn of phrase."

"Okay, you're pulling my leg for real."

"I assure you, I have nothing to gain from misleading you. A simple wager with simple terms."

Bibi squints at him. Which doesn't do anything because of how *stupidly* dark it is out here. She can hear a smile in his voice though, which irks her just enough to get her raring to go.



"We're doing this now then! Coco, you're up again!"

Fuecoco dashes from its place behind its trainer, nearly knocking her over as it crashes into her legs, the two blind as Zubats.

Bibi hears a cry, non-human, something shrill, fluttery, and cackle-like, rising and falling in pitch.

'15, no, maybe more like 10 feet away.'

She has the textbook memorized. Information is one of her greatest assets but it's been ripped away from her, caught in her opponent's guessing game. She has to think fast, and make Fuecoco move faster. The veil cast over her eyes is relentless, moonlight only daring to peak out from behind the mountains and cloud cover at irregular intervals. The cry is her best clue though, something she's seen before, several times even, or at least something she's seen used in league matches. She just needs to figure out what that something is.

can h-hahaha-hold though." Laughter leaks into the stranger's words uncontrollably, and Bibi's teeth sink into her lip so she can focus on how *pissed* she is instead of the shiver sneaking up her spine.

"Shame I don't have any straw dolls for this.... Curse, now."

Somewhere in the tall grass that shakes and whispers like a sea of vengeful spirits in front of Bibi, Fuecoco writhes and cries out, and so does the opponent.

'Curse curse curse curse curse' it runs through her head like a mantra, a grounding anchor in the realm of reality. 'A move that should normally help make your pokémon stronger, but a bit slower.... Unless....'

"Sit up and Leer Fuecoco!"

Picking itself off the floor almost seems too much for the battered pokémon, and its face crashes into the ground as it falls over in the process. From its spot on its hands and knees, its eyes dart around trying to lock in on the opponent, though the effort only succeeds in inducing a headache.

"Take solace in the fact that you've proven your bravery miss, but I believe we'll be proving ourselves the victors of this bout. They're defenseless now, Lick!"

A lifeline or a razor-sharp wire pressed against their necks. As if trying to grasp the Spinarak silk that offered passage from the underworld, the student grabs her only chance at salvation.

"They're coming at you now Coco! You have to bite!"

Clues like puzzle pieces fall into place. The familiarity of the cry, the fact that curse had hurt both of them, moves meant to scare just as much, if not more than they harmed. Gastly. A pokémon weak to the physical dark-type attacks they hadn't thought to use.

As Gastly's soft appendage makes contact with Fuecoco's skin, the Fire Croc pokémon lunges with all it has, its two large front teeth sinking as far and as deep as they can go into

their opponent's single vulnerable body part. Clouds part, as a single beam of moonlight reveals the body of Gastly, weakened significantly by its own curse, and close to fainting in the malicious grip of the Paldean pokémon's jaws. The spirit desperately tries to pry itself away from the fire-type, but only succeeds in tearing what little delicate flesh it has before succumbing and melting into the darkness around them as if it never existed at all.

Bibi withdraws Fuecoco, allowing it to rest and recover from its confused state. Inky blackness enshrouds her figure again before she can look over to see her opponent's reaction, the treacherous light of the sky teasingly refusing to reveal any more of the night's secrets than it had to. When the trainer across from her chooses to speak again, she writes her fast-beating heart off as the simple adrenaline rush of a battle well fought, hiding discomfort with bluster and bravado.

"Ahhhhahaha. What a shame...For me that is. Well fought young miss, I suppose I ought to hold up my end of the bargain."

"Uhh, you'd better! Otherwise I'll find ya and wipe that grin off your face myself!"

"Please forgive Gastly and I, it feels like it's been decades since we had such fun. As promised, I'll tell you something you should know if you plan to spend much longer on Kitakami's soil. It isn't for mere tradition's sake that we don't whistle while we walk through the evening you see. When a brave thing like you goes marching off into the woods, well, there's nothing a wandering spirit would like more than to whisk something so lively off who knows where, never to be seen again. At least, *not in one piece that is*. Those on the far shore do envy the living such. They have a bit of a hard time finding their way to you though, but whistling is just the thing you'd need to draw them right to your side."

The ominous warning was met by the girl blowing a raspberry, any trace of anxiety replaced by cheekiness.

"PPPPPTTT! Come ON dude, you didn't make me fight you in the dark just to tell me ghost stories did you? I'm like. 14!!!

I'm wayyyy too old to fall for campfire stories. Especially when there isn't even a campfire."

"Of course not. I wasn't quite finished. You seem like the type who enjoys whistling as they go about, so if you would like to remain safe, why not grass whistle?"

"Grass whistle?"

"Indeed. Certain pokémon even learn such a skill as a move, a wandering spirit may just pass you by and assume little of the noise, mistaking you for the wind or a pokémon. Who knows, you might even quell a foe and put them to sleep if need be."

"Well. I guess it can't hurt. How'd you even do it anyways?"

"Now, this may take a few tries, so do bear with me, miss, but...."

It does in fact take a few tries to even produce a sound at all, and on the first couple go-arounds, Bibi's half convinced the guy's just messing with her further and laughing at her spluttering, admittedly really *spitty* initial attempts when he thinks she won't notice. Eventually though, she gets a sound out, and once she figures out how to do that consistently, she can even get a couple of distinct notes to play. Her eyes are blown wide in bewilderment, surprised that such a thing could actually work, and she takes a minute to experiment with the odd yet whimsical noises before turning around back to her challenger-turned-mentor.

"Woah! Well thanks, mister, I didn't think this would actually work but it *is* pretty neat! You need someone to help walk you home mister?"

She gets no response.

".....Yooohooooooooo. Hello? Mister?"

Nothing but the rustling leaves and humid summer air. She experimentally waves her rotomphone around, flashlight turned on, though she can only afford a few seconds of searching given her how precariously low her battery life has dropped as she remained out in the wilds far longer than she initially

planned to. The light shines to reveal grass, trees, more grass, and more trees, punctuated by a wayward boulder here and there. A few charred patches of greenery burnt by Coco's embers marked the night's events, but otherwise, there was nary a trace of the odd company she had found herself in.

"Did he seriously just ditch me out here!?!... What is it about the countryside that makes people so weird.....?"

When she finally gets back to the Mossui community center, the caretaker was waiting outside the front doors, a sheen of sweat covering his face. Samue-clad shoulders immediately relax upon seeing her as relief overtakes him, sandaled feet carrying him quickly to the girl's side, eyes scanning her for any signs of harm.

"Oh thank goodness you're safe, I realized we were short a person during tonight's headcount, I had half a mind to organize a search and rescue!"

"Aw jeez, I'm sorry, it's just, there was this guy out in the Wistful Fields who wanted to brawl, and it was dark out, and I didn't wanna call a flying taxi cause like I was close by and it really wasn't an emergency or anythi-"

"Listen dear, it was our decision to allow open exploration of Kitakami for the duration of the trip, you don't have to make excuses, but you *do* have to promise to make it back by curfew from now on or otherwise we might have to start revoking your free reign."

"Yessir..."

"If you understand as much, good, it's quite late now, and you ought to head to bed."

Bowing slightly as she heads inside the community center, Bibi makes a mental note to make fun of Carmine for believing in silly ghost stories tomorrow morning. As always, she lets the team rest in the room with her, but she notices something off about one of them.

"Can't sleep Coco?"

Despite usually being out like a light at this hour, her starter merely shakes his head in response.

"They really put ya through the wringer, huh? Here, maybe this'll help some."

She traipses over to the window, trying to open it gently and quietly, before leaning over the sill to grasp at pieces of grass growing outside. A blade meets her lips, and a melody plays, she can only get about 3 different pitches in, but she tries to vary their length and space them out enough to make it less repetitive. Bibi glances back at Fuecoco a few minutes later, glad to see the haphazard little lullaby seemed to do the trick, and has to hold back her laughter when the pokémon snores in time with it. As it sleeps, something strange happens, in an instant, the room is filled with light, and Fuecoco goes from something small enough to carry to nearly being 3 quarters her height. The snoring gets significantly louder too, but Bibi dares not wake him, still in awe of what just happened.

Some questions will just have to wait til morning, she supposes.

When the light of dawn approaches, she's glad to see that an unforeseen evolution hasn't interfered too deeply with what she's spent so long drilling into her companion's head, and Coco, now Croccy, groggily shakes himself awake at 6AM sharp alongside his trainer. What hits the pokémon first is the extra weight behind his movements, and his large form scrambles to the mirror inelegantly, pulling at his face to see a row of sharper teeth line his maw, with a bow of his head revealing a hat-like wreath of flame sat upon his brow. He knows his trainer well enough to know that he's up first for the morning's training routine.

Come the rise of the midday sun, certain sections of the Kitakami Wilds are rolled flat and burnt ashen-black, but evolving was no excuse for Crocalor to shirk his duty of making sure Bibi looked after herself, and so the girl is forced to stop for lunch eventually. It's routine at this point for her to share the time with a local pair of siblings, regardless of a certain older girl's efforts to make a show of

disliking Bibi's presence. It doesn't stop conversation from breaking out between the two though.

"And then he's just gone."

"So let me get this straight. After I leave you behind, everyone starts panicking because you're gone til nearly 1 in the morning, and that whole time some guy just... Teaches you how to grass whistle? Yeah right, and I'm secretly not from Kitakami at all. Even Kiki lies better than this, just own up to the fact that you got lost. And maybe *stay lost* next time."

"Nuh uh! It totally happened, and he told me all about your silly ghost stories too! Didn't know my whistling was scaring you, you big *weenie*."

Carmine's just about to tell the younger child off for daring to insult her before the cogs in her head start turning faster.

'Everyone around here knows you can't tell dumb kids like her about the real reason we don't whistle since they'll just go around and do it on purpose... So who on Kitakami's green earth...?'

"Where did you say you saw that guy again, Bibi?"

"Basically where you left me in Wistful Fields. He must live out there."

"Not a chance, nobody's lived anywhere that wasn't Mossui since the old man caretaker's *old man* was running the place."

A beat of silence passes between them as Carmine ruminates on the implications of her own words, and before she can interject Bibi beats her to the punch.

"Hey how many ogre sightings do you think were *totally* just that hobo?"

Staraptor falls with a cry just as the young trainer across the court from Larry lets out a cheer, the Hakamo-o at her

feet puffing out its chest and roaring with pride. He catches it looking away from her, as if embarrassed, when she holds her hands up for a high five, though the dragon begrudgingly gives in regardless.

'There's more to life than being true to yourself.' His own words ring in his head at the display. Not all acts were born of world-weary cynicism. In its own way, putting on airs to save face was as much the mark of youth and naivety as laying yourself bare for the world to see was. Gloved hands move to adjust his tie and sweep through his hair as the crowd their match had drawn in all find seats for themselves at the Treasure Eatery's empty tables, eager to have dinner after being provided with a free show.

To be entirely frank, he had considered soft-throwing the match after Dudunsparce had fallen. He might not have made a show of being eager the way a more youthful work colleague might, but professionalism was one of his virtues, and regardless of enthusiasm he was serious about his job(s). But being faced with an uphill battle from that point onwards certainly wasn't doing anything to stoke a good mood. Komala had fared well, putting the challenger's Ribombée to sleep, catching Hatenna off guard with Sucker Punch, but in the face of a Mienfoo's flurry of palm-strikes, there was little it could do. Dudunsparce had done a good job of paralyzing the opponent, but the Mienfoo had pushed through their onslaught of drill-like attacks anyhow, expertly countering and using their own momentum against them. Just when Larry thought he could get away with quietly counting himself out for the evening, a voice cut in from the izakaya-style bar off to his right

"C'mon Larry, step it up a notch! We've got hungry customers waiting! Give 'em something to cheer for, y'hear?"

The warm and friendly smile of the blonde-haired head chef greeted him as she bounced with excitement, though remained careful not to send the dish she was chopping up astray in the process. When the whole restaurant joined in on the cheering..... Well, he was a little past the point of feeling festive at the climax of a battle, but he felt enough of a second wind to send him stretching his muscles in preparation for Terastellization.

When things draw to a close he feels his overstressed body relax as a sigh escapes him, glad to finally be relieved of his duties for the night. Measured strides, once practiced now natural, take the weary salaryman-turned-gym-leader to the girl as she withdraws her pokémon, his hands bearing a TM labeled "facade" that was withdrawn from his suitcase. A customary gift for any winning challengers, alongside of course, the Medali gym badge.

"You're rather strong, aren't you? Enough to bring out my poker face, even."

"Hehe, of course~ I'm aiming to make it to the top of the league in record time!"

In contrast to his impassive features and bland body language, the girl shoots him a pair of finger guns, twisting side to side to give the gesture even more flair. Bibi, however, refrains from mentioning she didn't realize any difference between Larry's usual face and his so-called "poker face".

Most people don't.

"I lost, so that means I have to give you a badge, but..." The older man continued, "That battle made me a bit hungry. Care to join me for a meal?"

On cue, the sound of a stomach growling cuts through the restaurant, answering for the girl as her grin turns mareepish, and she hugs herself slightly.

"W-well, if you insist! Oh, what was that you were saying earlier? Something about a bit of lemon making things tastier?"

The two take their place among the other customers of the restaurant, the court behind them rearranging itself back into a sitting area, the main event of the evening closing out. Pulling triple-duty with his jobs meant that his salary could comfortably afford treating challengers to dinner at his favorite restaurant, the Treasure Eatery's name reflecting its status as a true gem among the various bustling and busy restaurants in Medali's commercial district. A haven for

foodies that served any palate, though his own was partial to foreign dishes more common across regions such as Kanto and Johto rather than local cuisine. He watches as Bibi pulls a bit of a face as she picks away at the umeboshi served for the two of them, before she resolutely begins chowing down in earnest.

"That TM I handed you earlier, I was hoping a child like you wouldn't have a need to put on its namesake... Don't force yourself to eat any of that if you don't like it. We have plenty of rice balls, or I could order the adzuki bean soup if you'd prefer. It's sweet."

The bespectacled girl simply shakes her head vigorously, despite her cheeks being full of food like some kind of greedy Pachirisu.

"No, no, no! I do like it, I've just never tasted anything like it before!" She says after hastily swallowing "Just sour is all... Besides, it's not like this is health food or anything, who'd force themselves to eat it if they didn't like it?" She pauses and contemplates for a moment before swallowing "Well. Mom gets mad when I don't finish everything on my plate, but you're not half as scary as she is, no offense Mr. Larry"

A breath leaves the salt-and-pepper-haired man that carries with it the barest hint of a laugh.

"I've been told I'm not the imposing sort no. It'll be to your advantage to learn when to mask your feelings though. There are plenty of reasons to do something even when you'd rather not. You're still a student, but in the working world, paying a bit of lip-service to the boss is necessary. Maybe your friend gets a bad haircut or something, but you don't tell them the truth since it'd hurt their feelings."

He watches as her smile drops, though with those opaque glasses in the way, it's hard to tell exactly what she's thinking.

"That's dumb. Facades are dumb. My friends and I don't need to play pretend about anything."

He hums in response to her defensive tone. Maybe she's being honest, it isn't really his place to pry. Or play therapist. Heaven knows he isn't about to pick up additional shifts as some sort of league circuit counselor. Geeta had a tendency to sniff out an individual's talents and put them to use, borderline strong-arming professionals into taking up additional posts as gym leaders, and at this point he knew better than to let anything slip. The sound of a pokémon leaving its ball catches his attention. It seemed that, in the middle of their dinnertime conversation, the younger trainer's Crocalor had its interest piqued. At least that's what Larry thinks, but there's something in the way its eyes are creased as it looks up at its trainer that looks more like concern than curiosity about what sat on their plates. It starts crying out in a melodic way its species was famous for, the soothing sound momentarily distracting the girl from her thoughts.

"Ah, Croccy, didja want dinner too?"

He can tell the Pokémon's more worried about its trainer than it is with feeding itself right now, but he'll take the opportunity to change the subject more naturally.

"We're just about through the rice balls and umeboshi I fear, and I think the crowd we drew in will have you waiting until the end of the night to get an order in if you aren't quick about things. You'd better get the head chef's attention right now or try your luck elsewhere."

"Miercoles.... I know that food is kinda Medali's whole thing, but do you have any other restaurant recommendations Mr. Larry? No beating the league in record timing if I can't keep these guys full."

"Hm. Well, it's like you said, you can find just about anything you'd want to eat in Medali," he takes a look at the Fire Croc pokémon, who sits patiently beside its trainer, gently swaying and crying rhythmically alongside the music filling the restaurant, "but why don't you go try some soul food?"

"Soul food..." Bibi's hand presses up against her chin and lower lip as she thinks for a brief moment before bringing down a

fist on her open palm "I got it! Thanks for the meal Mr. Larry! You'll be seeing me in the papers soon!" And just like that, the kid had shot out of the restaurant and into the dying light of the sun, Crocalor ambling after her.... Only for her head to pop out behind the door a second after.

"Oh and as a future champ, I think if your boss is being a jerk you should tell 'em to shove it."

And then she was gone again.

Something told Larry that she didn't actually know what he was referring to when he said "soul food" but it was far too late to explain anything now. Loosening his tie, he sits back and looks at the drink menu for the night, no longer having to worry about setting an example. A part of him wonders about how freeing it might be to tell his boss off next time he found himself pulling overtime. What a worryingly courageous thought for a sober mind. The entire notion of mouthing off like that was absurd, but a part of him dearly missed the days when he hadn't cared what such brash honesty would put at risk. The kid was being a bad influence on him. She paid her price for it by rushing out though, he didn't even have the time to tell Bibi she still had some rice on her face before she'd bolted.



Hurrying down the still-bustling streets of Medali, passing by people and their partners, Skwovet and Lechonk pressing themselves up to the numerous food stalls with pleading eyes, Bibi finds herself in front of Go-For-Broke Grill, one of many restaurant chains lining the town.

"If there's anywhere that'll have Paldean treats it'll totally be here!" Bibi says to Crocalor, who simply turns to its trainer and tilts its head when she stops to catch her breath by the restaurant entrance. "Soul food" could've only meant one thing, a special treat reserved for this specific time of year, where the barren trees looked ready to curl in on themselves as the early winter winds blew through their branches, creating a sound like nature itself was voicing its lamentations. While there was no sunlight left to keep the chill away, the restaurant's bright lights, lively atmosphere, and toasty temperature wrap around Bibi and Crocalor like a warm embrace as they make their way to the counter.

"S'cuse me miss, don't suppose you'd happen to sell Huesos de santo here?"

Emerging from the restaurant with a bag of sweet treats, Bibi finds an open table at the many sitting areas littering the city, a heated lamp providing visibility and warmth for her and her Crocalor. The pokémon sniffs at the odd-looking treat skeptically when the girl holds one out for it to eat.

"Nyaha, don't worry, I know we've been trying to load you up on calcium whenever we get the chance, but I'm not crazy enough to feed you a REAL bone! Go on, try it, we totally earned it with how hard we've been working lately!"

It hits her then just how long they've been hitting the grind. Hakamo-o's valiant stand against Atticus, Hatenna pushing her psychic powers to the limit against Kofu and Crabominable, and today, Larry.

"Y'know... I was wondering for a while. What was it gonna take for you and me to get even stronger huh Croccy? We've both been like this for a while."

A snout presses into her side, snuggling up to its trainer. Even if it's quite a bit below room temperature, the combined

warmth of Croccy and the heated streetlamp sitting above them is enough to make it hot enough she doesn't even need her cardigan. Combined with the weight of her prior meal and the adrenaline from the day's excitement rapidly fading away, it's hard to keep her eyelids from fluttering closed. She pets Croccy absentmindedly and drowsily as it contentedly nibbles on the Huesos de Santo.

"But I mean... We've gotten real far real fast haven't we? We're totally gonna smoke Nemona's record and show her up for that loss a million times over. But for now, I just wanna say I'm sooo super proud of you! No matter how hard I push you, you always keep up pace somehow..... You're the best partner a girl could ask for!"

Crocalor's eyes shine as it looks up at its trainer, before it excitedly cries and babbles, trying its best to vocalize its happiness. Before the giggles and a "Settle down!" can even leave the girl's mouth, a familiar glow overtakes the fire-type. Limbs elongate and develop musculature, but they remain practically stubby compared to the creature's torso, which extends and expands into a bulky reptilian mass ending in a long, thrashing tail. The egg on its hat-like head bursts open in a flurry of flames, taking a small, avian-like shape as it wanders through the air before perching on the pokémon's snout. Strikingly, white sclera are dyed an inky black, and onyx irises turn a gleaming, ghostly gold, rimmed by heavy crimson eyelids. A trait no doubt meant to intimidate, but Bibi can recognize the crinkle of her Crocalor's face as it tries to shift into an approximation of a human smile, and it's all the reassurance she needs to know that, at least on the inside, her friend is as he always was.

Bibi stares in awe at the billowing wreath of flames that escaped the pokémon's mouth. Every fibre of her being itches to hit the nearest route to see just what it was good for. She feels like her soul's burning brighter than the flames around it, begging to engulf the world. And at 6AM sharp tomorrow morning, that's probably exactly what she'll do. For now though, under Skeledirge's weight, she's pinned in place, and has to settle for following her partner's laxer tempo. She glances at the pokédex entry automatically displayed on her rotomphone, and then at the half-finished bag of sweets in her hands before breaking out into a fit of laughter.

"We're totally gonna have to go back for seconds huh?"

Bonus notes

- Coco->Croccy->Skelly, as per usual, Bibi mostly just calls her pokémon shortened, cuter versions of their names
- Initially very silly and carefree, Fuecoco becomes increasingly attentive over time, and generally tries to keep up team morale. Kilowattrel and Ogerpon might put a stop to any interteam fights that break out, but it's Skeledirge's singing that actually puts hostility to rest.
- Evolution comes only *after* bombastic moments, never during, since I think at its core Skeledirge is more concerned with making sure its trainer doesn't burn herself out than it is getting stronger. It's important to take life slowly from time to time, and time enjoyed is never time wasted.
- Skeledirge are known for gentle, soothing voices. Bibi asks Skelly to sing for her every time she sits through one of Alto's screaming sessions. He's got a bit of a friendly rivalry going on with Primarina.
- Bibi isn't very fond of ghost-types until Croccy's evolution.

