

Mission 01.2

The fight was brutal, to say the least. It had lasted maybe seven minutes, but it was definitely brutal. Unless the medics they had were top notch the Machamp was going to die.

Blaziken had wandered closer to the cage, staring directly at him. Beneath the exhaustion Zeke saw an underlying emotion. The longer he looked the more obvious the emotion Blaziken was trying to hide.

Zeke lifted his duffle and headed for the reception area. Lynn had returned to the front desk and sat with her head propped on one arm, a magazine open on the desktop.

Glancing up at Zeke as he approached, she smiled. "Enjoy the match?" Zeke stopped and looked at her, moving only his eyes.

Seeing the slight paleness of his face, Lynn asked, "What's wrong? A little bloodshed make you queasy?"

He stepped up to the desk. "Doesn't it bother you to see pokemon fight simply for human entertainment and greed?"

The feverous look in his eyes and rigidly set jaw worried her. Scribbling on a notepad she said, "We can't really talk here. Meet me at the cafe on the roof of the Department Store." His eyes shifted to the paper then back to Lynn. "Just take it," she said sternly. Her coy smile brightening her eyes. "Think of it like a date."

Gamblers and spectators ascended to the front room, the general arguing and haggling growing louder as the mob of degenerates made their way to the exit.

Snatching up the bit of paper, Zeke stomped out of the Pit, slamming the heavy door behind him as best as it would allow. Up above, the activity in the casino had lessened a bit, if only just.

The day was turning out to be a cool one. A thin cover of clouds and stiff breeze from the south made a pleasant change from the oppressive heat Goldenrod was usually subjected to.

Lynn found Zeke sitting at a table close to the railing, staring out at the city, face looking into the wind.

"Beautiful from up here, isn't it?" Lynn said with a soft smile.

Zeke gave a short snort. "I'm not looking at the city. I'm looking at the forest."

"Forest?" Lynn looked beyond Goldenrod's order to Ilex Forest. "What's so great about the forest."

"At the academy, we had this month-long course: using just your gear and the forest itself, navigate your way through the forest to the rendezvous point. If you didn't make it there in thirty days they left you behind," Zeke chuckled at the memory.

Cold chills ran across Lynn's body as she watched Zeke chuckle darkly. "What the hell kind of "academy" did you go to? A military school?"

Zeke looked over at Lynn and with a blank expression on his face, replied, "Yeah. It was."

Lynn blinked twice and sighed. Sitting down in the chair next to him, she asked, "So, how many made it?"

He said nothing for a moment, his gaze staring a little over her left shoulder.

"Class... uh... twenty-seven," he continued to stare vacantly. Fingers twitched as he tried to recall the memory. "And only... ten of us made it to the chopper."

"Don't sweat it," Zeke chuckled at Lynn's horrified expression. "We only lost three students. They just told us it was life-or-death because they wanted to simulate a "behind enemy lines" scenario. There were wild pokemon living on the island, after all." His voice hardened, his gaze returned to watch the wind play through the lush foliage.

"And they didn't let you bring even one pokemon to help you?" Lynn had become enthralled by the range of emotions on Zeke's face.

Astonishment lit Zeke's face. "That was the whole point." Turning in toward the table, Zeke took a drink of his tea. "Our particular academy's main focus is to train potential militant trainers that could contend with pokemon in battle. So, we were taught and trained to use advanced tactics and superior strategy to best other trainers who's only fighting style was ordering pokemon around."

"We trained against combative trainers, too," he added quickly. "Would have been stupid to only train us in one thing, wouldn't it," Zeke laughed, his wide grin softening his angular face.

'Even though he's been through a lot, laughter comes so easily to him,' Lynn thought with a sad smile.

"Now, does this description of your childhood have anything to do with your bad attitude yesterday in the Pit?"

The laughter and softness faded away with his grin.

"Let's just say I didn't fit into their mold."

"Huh?"

"After being told that forcing pokemon to fight was weakness, I took it a step further, that forcing them to fight at all was wrong. Just because they can't tell us off doesn't give us the right to make them do our bidding."

His eyes hardened, jaw clenched. "Just because they're conditioned to not defend themselves against us doesn't mean we can torture them."

Lynn watched his fist clench so tight his knuckles turned white.

The feel of a soft, cool hand on his made Zeke look back at Lynn.

"What's the plan?"

Zeke cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Come on," she said with her usual coy smile. "Considering how much the Pit seems to piss you off, you're planning on causing them a whole lot of hell, aren't you?"

With a sinister grin, Zeke told her his plan.

The Pit was loud again; the jeering, betting and cheering was a dim rumble to Zeke who had plugged the ear buds in before he had even opened the heavy steel door.

Private bets, group bets, money gained, money lost, battles won, enemies defeated. Amidst the ruckus were rumors. Rumors that spread like a plague about a challenger who had bribed the higher-ups for a match against the new champion.

With the last fight completed, the highlighting trainers were summoned down to the ring for the pre-fight meeting with the referee. As Blaziken and his two masters walked up to the referee, the pokemon noticed that his opponent's master was the human that had made him feel that strange emotion, that feeling of shame. He stood beside the referee with his hands in the pockets of his camouflage pants. From what Blaziken could tell he was about six feet tall. The shaved head seen incongruent with his unshaved, stubbly beard. Yet the way he held himself and the hardness of his eyes betrayed the fact that he had been trained, or at the very least been through much hardship in the few years he had been alive, the lack of wrinkles on his face suggested he was just entering his twenties.

In the years he had fought in these damned pits, Blaziken had learned that a fit trainer meant a fit pokemon. Most were either weak or disgustingly obese and those images had been conveyed onto their pokemon; but on the rare occasion, when the human was fit, in any meaning of the word, the pokemon they trained had some amount of actual skill. Just looking at the male, Blaziken knew this fight was going to earn him good experience.

"Alright, you all know the rules already," the referee told the three trainers. "Just 'cause this shit's illegal don't mean you can do whatever you feel like. I want a clean fight here, no cheap shots, no items and no boosters. Hey, new guy. Where's your pokemon?"

Zeke's lips twitched into a smirk.

"Hey, asshole! Who's gonna fight for you?" The burly referee's face was deepening to a dark crimson.

"He's gonna fight me," Zeke replied, still smirking.

The referee reached out to grab Zeke's shirt when one of the Blaziken's trainers spoke up, "It's alright, ref," taking the referee aback. "He doesn't have to show us. Lets just make it a surprise."

Lynn's insight hit the nail right on the head. This one was the brains – more or less – of the two. He was slender and very rat-like in appearance with an unnaturally pointed face. His upper incisors' size only added to the likeness, sticking out like from his mouth like a rattata's buck teeth. Number Two of the duo was the exact opposite of his partner, to Zeke's amusement. The second man was basically a brick wall made of flesh. Easily a whole foot shorter than Zeke himself, this guy was definitely three, if not four, times his weight. Having no visible neck, Zeke could only compare him to a runt snorlax, if one could have ever existed. Adding to the hilarity was the fact that someone must have told them that dressing in the same suit was a smart idea. Where the rat-man looked frail in his, the fabric of the poor suit on his associate looked as if it were a flex away from becoming tatters on his enormous figure.

The referee ground his teeth as he thought over the rules and whether he should care or not. It was a short argument and he told the trainers to get to their respective gates.

Cage keepers stood beside the open gates, ready to lock the combatants inside. Blaziken was already in the ring when Zeke got to his gate. As Zeke climbed into the ring the referee and the gate keepers began sputtering protests.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?! Get down from there!"

Zeke turned to the three men shouting at him.

"Rules say anyone can fight. I wanna fight."

The men stood dumbfounded. Glancing at each other warily, the referee put a finger to his left earpiece. Apparently using a private line, Zeke waited for the ruling. Seconds passed before the ref lowered his hand and looked at the gatekeepers. Looking up at Zeke, he nodded with a sigh, "He's got the go-ahead."

Zeke's face split with a small grin as he stepped further into the cage, away from the gate.

Blaziken blinked in confusion. The human had climbed into the cage and was walking over to him with a grin on his face. He was caught off guard so much he did not even get angry at the man's smile. When it had finally registered, Blaziken couldn't get angry; the smile on his opponent's face was not mocking or malicious. It was amusement. Blaziken tried to build up the small amount of anger that smile stirred in him, but failed utterly as he saw the human was simply entertained with the fight he had stepped in to.

Fighting for fun. The whole idea baffled Blaziken so much so it was border-line confusing.

Hearing the gates close and lock rattle against the metal made Blaziken aware that the round human that announced the fights was outside the ring.

"Dear patrons of the Pit!" the announcer proclaimed over the earpiece speaker system. "We have an... unusual match for your viewing pleasure tonight. Hailing from Ecruteak, the challenger, Zeeek!!!"

Zeke smiled as he felt the gamblers' loud murmur rise to an outraged roar; the sound waves vibrating violently through his body.

"And his opponent. Our new champion! The Freak of Nature!! Blaziken! From! Hoooen!!!"

Blaziken cast a dark glance at the announcer; Zeke caught. That bone mask would normally make it nearly impossible for Zeke to read his opponent's mood. Thankfully, this pokemon wore his emotions on his sleeves. Anger made Blaziken's body tremble slightly, as if he was trying his damndest to keep it contained. Somehow it made Zeke a little uneasy.

While Zeke watched Blaziken, he noticed a buzzing noise. When Blaziken hunched over, Zeke took it to mean the fight was about to start. All of a sudden, the ear buds beat a static pulse into Zeke's ears.

"What the--?" he said, pulling one bud out.

A deep humming thrummed around the combatants. Zeke, keeping a wary eye on the Blaziken, pulled out the other ear bud and examined the fencing surrounding the cage. It visibly vibrated, the hum emanating from it reminded Zeke of those bug distractors they set up at big outdoor events.

"Huh... So the noise doesn't throw the fighters off," Zeke mused, holding his hand over the buzzing fence.

Turning back to Blaziken, Zeke saw he was ready to fight; muscles tensed, knees bent, fists raised. Retaking his place on the mat, a small smile spread on his face as he took a

calm, neutral fighting stance. With subdued eagerness, Zeke beckoned Blaziken to start the fight.

Taking the human's attention for readiness, Blaziken ran in, expecting a good fight and a quick finish.

Blaziken ran up to Zeke, cocking his right arm back as the distance closed between them. Sending out a straight right jab, he was startled when Zeke slid his right hand down Blaziken's arm and smoothly passed behind him. In his astonishment, Blaziken stopped, attempting to process what had just happened, something hard hit the back of his head and stars lit up his vision.

'That jab was so sluggish,' Zeke mused as he deflected the pokemon's punch. Stepping passed the attack, Zeke thought about the training regimes he had learned and almost felt bad about using his training to defeat a pokemon who had only learned to brawl. Back to back with Blaziken, Zeke lifted his right arm and snapped his elbow into the back of Blaziken's skull. It wasn't enough to be fatal, but he knew the blow would knock him silly.

Vision blacked out, splotches of white and purple exploding behind his eyes, Blaziken stayed down on one knee, his fists planted on the mat holding himself steady. When his sight finally began to return, Blaziken looked over his shoulder at the human, surprised at the blow he had landed; but also surprised by how his opponent had not capitalized on the move. He had had Blaziken at a distinct disadvantage.

Zeke watched as the downed pokemon stared at him over his shoulder. He knew keeping back was throwing Blaziken off, that the fighters that frequent the Pits take every advantage they could.

Wobbling slightly, Blaziken regained his feet, turning as he stood to face his opponent. Anger and frustration burned in his eyes, body trembling with emotion. Fists clenched tight, Blaziken rushed in again. Right fist cocked back again, Blaziken believed this feint would connect, having worked on multiple opponent's during his career. Within range, Blaziken planted his right foot, his left fist rose in a brutal swing for Zeke's face.

Too obvious.

Instead of simply transferring the pokemon's momentum and slipping behind him again Zeke snatched hold of Blaziken's arm just below the elbow, planted his right foot inside the pokemon's step, Zeke's right shin and Blaziken's left crossing, and twisted at the waist, pulling Blaziken and making him over-extend the lunge.

Caught off guard again and unable to set his other foot to catch himself, Blaziken fell with a crash to the mat.

"Faster."

Confusion swirled in Blaziken's mind. Did the human just instruct him? Was that all this was to him, a sparring match? Again he stood, slowly this time. Anger that had boiled in his veins reduced to a simmer. The human stood withing arm's reach, the smile gone from his lips but a hint of amusement remained in his eyes. Something within Blaziken calmed as he stood staring at his human opponent.

The gamblers and staff watched in awe as Blaziken exploded in a flurry of rapid punches. That alone would have pleased the crowd, yet the shouting, the cheering and the betting grew to monumental heights as they watched the human challenger match the pokemon's attacks with a stream of effective blocks, the din increasing as Zeke willingly and easily gave ground to this savage pokemon.

Blaziken halted his assault as he realized his opponent was blocking his punches with apparent ease.

Standing with four strides between them, Blaziken's breath came in ragged gasps, his feathers in some combination of frizzy and dripping with sweat. Zeke breathed deeply, a light sheen of perspiration covered his face and made his shirt cling to his body.

After a few more breaths, Zeke said with a grin, "Good. Faster."

Blaziken stopped breathing when he heard his opponent's words. *Faster?* Was he crazy? The pokemon's breathing started evening out when an idea hit him. Since learning it he'd only used that move once. It had seemed redundant to use it in the pits when he could win with pure physicality. Plus, he didn't know if there would be any adverse after-effects now.

Breathing steady and even again, Blaziken decided it was worth it.

In one moment Blaziken stood before him and the next he was gone from Zeke's vision. Zeke blinked, his eyes snapping left and right. Then the noise started. With a metallic rattle, the chainlink fencing shook violently as if they were under barrage by a hurricane.

'Agility,' Zeke mused, muscles tense, slowly pivoting to keep his eyes on as many spots as he could. After one rotation he stopped, his head facing left, panning to the right.

In that instant Blaziken struck.

With a cry to battle, Blaziken ricocheted off the chainlink fence, kicking off with his right foot, he set it ablaze and kicked his challenger in the head, his shin plates tearing the flesh from the human's face, the fire guaranteeing the scar would last.

Hit by the Blaze Kick with such impact snapped Zeke's head to the side awkwardly and sent him flying into the fencing to his left. Crashing heavily, Zeke began squirming frantically, clutching his burned and bruised face.

Zeke screamed.

The gate closest to Zeke swung open and three burly referees with a man in a white doctor's coat rushed in, the roar of the audience flooded in with them. Two of the muscular men stood between Blaziken and Zeke, blocking the combatants.

Rummaging through his med kit, the doctor skimmed over bottles, fingers twitching, while the third referee tried to wrestle Zeke's hands from his face. Eventually he pinned Zeke's wrists to the mat and upon seeing the blistered, angry wound, shouted at the doctor "Burn Heal! Now, dammit!"

Finding the appropriate bottle, the doctor twisted the top, enabling the aerosol lever and attempted to keep Zeke's head still without aggravating the burn.

Spritzing Zeke's face three times, the Burn Heal acted fast, cooling the burn, halting the pain, but causing a soft, white smoke to rise from the scar.

"What's the damage, doc?" the referee had walked to the gate to speak with the doctor who was packing the kit away.

"Stop the match," he replied, sighing. Seeing the ref scowl, he quickly added, "We can't be held accountable for this. Injured pokemon are common, but a human with wounds that appear to be of pokemon origin will bring investigations. It'd turn into a witch hunt. Plus, if he recovers, he could expose us to the authorities."

Blaziken growled, having been sent to the furthest corner away from his opponent. Not that he didn't need the rest; he in fact did! Using Agility to such extreme had depleted everything from him, making him both physically and mentally exhausted. What he witnessed next, though, made his draw drop open and almost wish the referees had made him leave the ring.

He stood. Head hung low, he advanced on the two referees who had their backs to him, dutifully watching the aggressive pokemon, making sure it didn't try to finish off the challenger. Much to their surprise, a heavy blow sent the guard on the right reeling and made the second yelp. Gripping the second by the shirt, Blaziken's opponent pivoted, heaved, and bodily tossed the large man at the open gate, slamming into the head referee who had been conversing with the pit's doctor, knocking both men completely out of the ring. The guard who had been hit first stumbled and held his head, trying to gather his wits, when the burned man grabbed the back of his shirt, almost dragging him to the gate and tossed him out on to the other two referees. The doctor stood to the side, mouth gaping open like a fish's.

Unhitching the lock from the fence, Zeke yanked the gate closed and locked it from the inside. Gate locked and the rabble of the gamblers silenced, Zeke turned, facing Blaziken.

An unsettling new feeling washed through Blaziken as his eyes locked with his opponent's. Fear steeped his weary body in a chill that came from nowhere. Tremors shook him to the core, causing his hands to twitch and knees to wobble.

Zeke stared, his cold gaze emotionless, a trick he learned that instilled fear into his opponents.

He had taken a step! He was approaching! Blaziken watched the challenger walk ever closer, then realized he, too, was walking; his irrational fear pulling him closer to this scary, new human.

Half way across the mat, Blaziken's rational broke. Running head-long at the human, Blaziken brought his right fist up for a wild haymaker that was too "wild."

Expanding his militarily trained body and skills to their maximum, Zeke snapped his left hand out, heel of his palm cracking square into Blaziken's sternum. Mercilessly, Zeke punished the pokemon. Reflexes lightning-fast, Zeke punched Blaziken's forearms at the elbow and sternum with the heels of his hands. Alternating between the arms and chest, Zeke beat at the pokemon.

Zeke pounded into the pokemon numerous times, so much so that no one could tell how many blows had landed.

At some point Zeke decided to stop, but he hadn't finished. Jumping in to the air, Zeke brought his hands together, laced his fingers, and as he descended connected his clenched fists with the top of Blaziken's head, between the bone's crests.

Blaziken fell to the mat cold, blood leaking from his mouth.

Zeke stood for a moment, maybe longer, then walked over and sat against the fencing. No more than five minutes passed when Blaziken made a noise. Hearing the sound, Zeke stood back up, strode to the downed pokemon and squatted next to him, staying up on the balls of his feet.

"You hear me, yes?" Zeke asked coldly. A groan rose from Blaziken.

Roughly grabbing a part of Blaziken's crest, Zeke pulled the pokemon's head off the mat and repeated, "You hear me. Yes?"

A single bob of his head was all Blaziken could manage.

"You're wasting your potential here. With real training you could be amazing. Do you want out of here?"

Blaziken froze, holding his breath. Weak still, the pokemon cracked an eye and stared at his opponent. Beneath the male's stern expression was a hint of sadness. Mouth dry, Blaziken bobbed his head again, a cascade of emotions flooding through him, none which he could identify.

Zeke smiled darkly, "Then lets give 'em a hell of an end and get the fuck out of here."

Releasing Blaziken's crest, Zeke righted and moved to lean in his corner.

Body sore and shaking, Blaziken slowly stood. Drawing in ragged breaths, he fought to stay on his feet. Moving slightly, stretching and testing his bruised muscles and strained tendons, Blaziken took measure of his flame. It was almost gone, but he had enough to pull this last stunt off.

Taking a few more deep breaths, Blaziken set his fire free. Wisps of flame leaked from his body, following their usual paths over his feathers and out into the air. The wisps slowly built, more fire seeped from his body. Minutes went by and soon he was engulfed in an aura for flame.

He stood there and Blazed. Blaziken could feel the familiar heat through his feathers, but he could also feel the chill within him; the dark cold that told him that he had used too much of his fire. It had to be now, before he lost too much heat, making his attack too weak to do the deed. Channeling fire to his right leg, Blaziken readied his stance. Using Blaze Kick set fire in a specific area, so Blaziken had to concentrate more to keep the flame down on his foot.

The time to act was now. Bringing his foot up, Blaziken leaned back on his left to keep some balance, then, with all his might, brought his burning foot down in an ax kick straight into the mat.

Surprise and shot flooded the room, followed quickly by shouts and screams of pain and rage. Blaziken's foot came down on the mat and the cage was torn asunder. Fractures spread from the impact, Blaziken the epicenter, fire catching on the fabrics and flammable parts. The links in the cage itself snapped and melted.

Amid the dust, smoke and chaos, Zeke and Blaziken made a break for the exit. Even with the crowds of gamblers to contest against, both human and pokemon made it to the

reception area, up to the Goldenrod Casino and out on to the main street before the fires were even beginning to be extinguished.

They ran hard, Zeke, having left his duffle in storage that morning at the gate to the National Park, was unburdened. Blaziken, sore and worn out from the fight, lagged behind, breathing heavily, yet determinedly keeping pace with Zeke.

Twenty minutes had gone by when they finally arrived at the National Park main gate; both man and pokemon collapsing in the grass.

Blaziken sucked in ragged breaths next to the human, body heaving, claws digging into the ground. Barking laughter sounded next to him. Glancing to his left, the pokemon watched his former opponent laughing raucously.

"That was amazing," he said, still breathing heavily. "I knew you could pull it off." Zeke punched him lightly on the shoulder.

Chuckling some more, Zeke stretched out and lay back on the grass, closing his eyes against the sunlight playing through the lightly clouded sky.

E_{ND}