

The door slammed against the wall as I barreled through, several of the people inside jumping with surprise at the banging sound and looking at me in shock, though I ignored all of them, eyes locked on the pair of women standing at the counter that looked as though they'd been expecting me. The pink-haired woman in caretaker's attire behind the counter regarded me with a sympathetic smile, while the blue-green-haired officer in police attire looked to me with a concerned expression. "Where is he, Jenny?" I demanded even while the police officer opened her mouth to address me, her lips closing again as she looked to the nurse across the counter.

"He's in the back room," she said in a soft, gentle voice, though as I made to hurry toward the indicated door, Officer Jenny stepped to intercept my path, holding a hand out and stalling my progress.

"Wait, just... we need to make sure you're prepared to see him," Jenny insisted, wincing at the withering glare I threw her way.

"It's been six months, I've waited long enough!" I retorted angrily, making to push past Jenny again, though she reached out and grabbed my shoulder to stop me.

"I have to insist you wait just a moment longer, please," Jenny said calmly, and I had to close my eyes and take deep breaths to keep from shoving past her.

"Okay... I'm sorry, I just... it's been so long," I murmured, feeling Jenny pull me aside and sitting me down at a free table, taking a seat across from me while she pulled a file from her jacket.

"I understand. Did you read the entire letter we'd sent you?" the officer asked, seeming reluctant to open up the file in front of me.

I nodded slowly, staring down at the file with dread. "I-I did... I found it very hard to believe, though," I answered, fidgeting with a button on my denim jacket, "I mean... I thought he'd been stolen for some underground fighting or as a servant or something... but this... I don't know if this is better or worse."

Jenny watched me for a few seconds, before clearing her throat. "You're aware of his condition, then?" she asked further, fingering the edge of the file.

"I guess... I dunno. I mean, who does that sort of thing?" I demanded to no one in particular, gripping my shirt tight, "I can't even imagine... why would you do that to a Pokémon?"

The officer nodded slowly, lifting the edge of the file and sliding a photo toward me, face down. "It will be better for him if you aren't as shocked going in to see him. A sense of normalcy will help him in his recovery," Jenny stated, pulling her hand back and gesturing toward the photograph, "Whenever you're ready, please take a look."

I gave a shallow nod in reply as I gulped heavily, staring at the white back of the photo for long moments. Tentatively, my hand came up and gripped the edge of the photo, squeezing my eyes shut while I flipped it over and hesitating for the longest seconds of my life.

Slowly, I managed to open my eyes, letting out a gasp of shock at what I saw. I couldn't believe that the Lucario on the photo was the same as the one that I'd grown up with, the Riolu I'd raised from the egg. He looked so different, and it was only the subtle distinctions in his markings differentiating him from others of his species that allowed me to recognize him.

"O-oh, Rio... what did they do to you?" I breathed, hands shaking as I let the photo drop to the table, eyes closing tight once more.

I heard Jenny stand up from the table, walking around and setting a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sure he's eager to see you," the officer said gently, giving my arm a soft squeeze, "Whenever you think you're ready."

I was still shaking with shock by the time I gave another shallow nod, getting to my feet and allowing myself to be lead by a waiting audino toward the back rooms of the Pokémon Center. The hearing Pokémon smiled up at me as we stopped in front of the door, squeezing my hand comfortingly before letting go, leaving me to stare at the door for several minutes.

Taking in a deep breath, I steeled myself as best as I could, reaching a hand out and touching the cold handle of the door. "Master, wait," I heard a familiar, yet unusually timid voice in my head, and immediately my heart soared at the sound I'd missed so much, though I still did as I was told, gripping the door tight and resting my forehead against the wood.

"I know... they showed me," I whispered through the door, a long pause following my words. I could feel the shame flowing from my Pokémon, yet I reached out as best as I could with my heart, feeling as the lucario held tight to my familiar aura. "Can I come in?" I asked after another few moments, though I didn't get an answer.

Taking that as a go-ahead, my hand twisted the doorknob, pushing open the door and glancing around, gaze landing on a massive lump hidden under a white sheet on a hospital bed, the lump flinching as it felt my gaze land on it. I waited for a moment, before taking slow, tentative steps toward the bed, hearing the soft beep of a heart monitor and labored breathing from under the thin blanket. Grabbing a chair from nearby, I slid the seat up to the bed, sitting down beside the covered figure and watching as his grip on the blanket tightened, holding it over himself steadfastly.

"Rio, it's okay," I said shakily, reaching out and gently curling my fingers around the silhouette of a spiked paw that I could see under the thin sheet. The lucario flinched and pulled back slightly, before going still as he let go of the blanket, and I heard a soft sniffing come from under the sheet.

I waited a few more moments, letting the Pokémon steel himself, before slowly pulling the blanket back, revealing Rio's face. His features were round and bloated with fat, rotund cheeks moist with angry, shameful tears as he stared up at the ceiling, trying hard to stifle the soft sobs that came from his throat. His muzzle looked shorter and more blunt from just how much flab coated his face, two extra chins bunching against his jaw as he turned his head in an effort to avoid my gaze.

I was glad at that moment that they had shown me the Pokémon's picture before I'd seen him; even with that preparation, I couldn't hide my shock from Rio, and not just because of his aura-reading capabilities. "Oh, Rio..." I breathed out near-silently, lifting a hand and hesitantly resting my palm on the fighting-type's forehead, rubbing the canine's head tenderly, "I missed you... I missed you so much."

A sob broke through the Pokémon's efforts to hold it back, and he turned to look at me with his expression crumpled with anguish. "Master... I'm so sorry," the lucario whimpered in my thoughts, "I couldn't fight back, I couldn't get away... I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

I quickly slid my hand under the sheet, feeling around until I found a fat paw, gently lifting the limb up and hugging it to my chest. "Shh, it's okay. I'm here now, and you're here now, it's over," I insisted through my painfully tight throat, "It doesn't matter, I know you did what you could. It's not your fault, it isn't. It's okay..."

The lucario stared up at me through his tears, sniffing hard and gulping down the lump in his throat. "I missed you, too," Rio said, his digits curling around my fingers, looking up at me with a pleading expression, shame still clinging to his words, "Master, I can't... I can't sit up on my own. Can you... help me?"

I nodded right away, withdrawing slightly and taking the lucario's paws in my hands, pulling with a soft grunt of effort. It was hard to believe the short Pokémon could weigh so much, but I had a truly tough time helping him upright, gritting my teeth as I felt Rio pulling against my hands. It took both of us working together to get the obese Pokémon seated upright, and I couldn't stop myself from staring wide-eyed at how the lucario's legs had to spread apart to give his flabby gut room, the mound of flesh rolling out beyond his knees and even halfway down his calves once he was sitting up, his blubbery chest heaving as he breathed heavily from the effort he'd put into simply getting himself upright. I found myself morbidly fascinated by how the spike that had once been so prominent on the fighting-type's chest had sunk between a pair of pillowy moobs, a white glint visible through his fur the only indication that the spike was still there.

Shaking my head, I forced myself to look into the Pokémon's eyes, seeing the shame and exhaustion in his expression as he avoided looking at me, and feeling my own guilt at the way I'd been regarding his swollen figure. I squeezed the paws that I held in my hands, waiting for my friend to eventually meet my gaze, hot tears soaking into the fur of his cheeks. "It's going to be okay," I said softly, the words feeling hopelessly inadequate, but I knew the aura Pokémon could feel the meaning behind them.

The lucario gave a soft snuffle, nodding shallowly as he squeezed my hands in return. There was quiet between us as I gently stroked the back of the Pokémon's paws with my thumbs, sitting at the foot of his bed while I felt Rio reading my aura, simply letting him take comfort in my familiar presence. The shame I could see in the fighting-type's expression slowly lessened, something akin to relief mixed with confusion coming across his face as he looked into my eyes.

"You're... not disappointed," Rio's voice came to my thoughts, the observation seeming to confuse the Pokémon as he stared at me with teary eyes, "Why aren't you disappointed?"

I couldn't help laughing, shaking my head slowly. "Rio, I'm just glad you're okay," I replied, gently gripping the fighting-type's paws again, "I was scared I wouldn't see you again... Just having you back is all I wanted. Why would I be disappointed?"

I knew the answer to the question, of course, but even as shocking as the change in Rio's figure was, it didn't matter nearly as much as having my best friend back, and I knew the lucario could feel that fact all too well, those shameful tears starting to dry as the corners of the Pokémon's mouth lifted ever so slightly. I gave the aura Pokémon's paws another ginger squeeze, letting them go as I got to my feet and stepped around the bed, taking a seat closer to the lucario and smiling as I rested my hand on his shoulder. Rio tensed as he felt my fingers sink slightly into the fat that coated his shoulder, canid ears folding back while he once again turned his gaze away and gripped the edge of his thin blanket.

With the shock of Rio's change wearing off, I found myself feeling unsure of what to say that could comfort the obese Pokémon, before my face lit up as I remembered the satchel at my side. "Hey," I said softly, rubbing the lucario's shoulder gently as I reached into my pouch with my other hand, "Remember when you were a riolu? And I'd groom your fur after we finished training for the day?"

Rio blinked as he looked over to me, then at the old, familiar brush I brought out of my pouch, his cheeks dimpling as he gave a little smile. "You still have that old thing?" the lucario asked incredulously, though his expression clouded as he looked up to my face, "I can't... fit in your lap, you know."

Wincing at the lucario's words, I quickly waved a hand through the air. "I-it's fine! You can just, uh... rest against me, then," I replied, taking a moment to scoot around behind the Pokémon, his neck folding into rolls as he tried to glance back and keep his eyes on me.

"Master... I know what you're doing," Rio said in my head, his gaze lowering as he stared at his own flabby form, "Thank you, but... I don't... want to hurt you. I feel like I weigh as much as a snorlax now..."

The lucario flinched as he felt my hand against his ear, rubbing the sensitive member delicately. "Shh, it'll be fine," I insisted, spreading my legs out so that the rotund Pokémon had room to rest his back against me, "Come on, Rio, I just bet this'll help."

Hesitating for another few moments, the Pokémon's head eventually bobbed down shallowly, before he grunted heavily with the effort of scooting back, his tail laying over my leg as he tried to slowly lower himself against me, though I still had to quickly catch his shoulders when his own weight quickly overwhelmed him, letting out a soft gasp as I felt just how heavy, the lucario was once more. "M-master, you don't have to—" Rio started, though I shushed him again quickly.

"Lay down, I'm brushing you," I half-ordered, half-laughed, the lucario caught off-guard by the sudden mirth. I had no idea what I was laughing for; perhaps the ridiculousness of my own attempts to reassure the Pokémon, or just how glad I was that I had my friend back, I had no way of knowing. Regardless, my hands gently held onto the soft shoulders of the steel-type, guiding him back until he was resting his back against my front, the sheer weight of his figure pushing down on me more than I had expected, yet after a moment to get used to the feeling, it wasn't uncomfortable at all.

"See? It's okay," I insisted again, taking up the old brush in my hand and setting the bristles against the top of Rio's head, starting to brush through his short fur gently.

The lucario held an uncertain expression on his rounded features, tilting his head back to look at me while I groomed his fur with tender care. I smiled warmly to him, carefully curling my hand under his lifted chin and rubbing softly, pausing as I felt him gasp and flinch away from the contact at first, before letting out a soft whine as he averted his gaze. "I-I'm sorry," Rio apologized, a pang of sympathy in my chest as I set my brush aside to gently curl my arms around my Pokémon's chest, still just able to complete the embrace around the breadth of his figure.

"Shh, I understand," I cooed into his ears, slowly swaying side to side with my best friend held close, "You're safe now, Rio. They can't get to you here, and you'll never see them again." I could feel the soft fat of the fighting-type's figure ripping against me, the odd sensation filling me with only sympathy and concern, rather than any sort of disgust.

The lucario was silent as he reached up his paws, curling them around my arms while his eyes closed tight, little whimpers escaping his throat despite his clear attempts to subdue them. We held that embrace for long moments, letting my Pokémon calm himself as he rested back against me. "Master?" Rio quietly murmured into my mind, slowly tilting his head back again as he looked into my eyes, "Are you going to brush my fur?"

Smiling warmly to the Pokémon, I gave a little nod while I gently pulled one arm free from his paws to take up the brush once more, setting the bristles against the lucario's brow and carefully brushing toward the back of his head, his eyes closing once more as he tried to relax again. "There you go, buddy," I hummed as I slid the bristles through the lucario's fur, carefully sliding my other hand out from around the Pokémon's chest. Resting my palm against Rio's shoulder, I

made sure he could feel my hand sliding across his fur this time, brushing up his softened neck to rub under Rio's chin. It was unbelievable just how many curves I could feel on the lucario's collar and neck, the sensation so foreign and unusual, yet the closeness I shared with my friend was all too familiar.

Rio let out a low sigh, and I realized that he'd been holding his breath for a while, concern in my heart as I made to pull my hand away. "N-no, it's... it helps," Rio insisted, his paw coming up and touching against my hand to pull the limb back to his chin, "I'm sorry, I just... I need to get used to it again."

Holding still for a moment of uncertainty, I eventually gave a little nod as I returned to the gentle brushing, my free hand gingerly rubbing the soft flesh that padded out the underside of the lucario's chin. I could feel Rio tensing against me even through the flab that coated his form, biting my lip slightly at the obvious discomfort I was causing my beloved Pokémon just from my attempts to soothe him, yet he kept on insisting that I was helping regardless.

Though much to my own relief, I could feel those moments of tenseness starting to become more spaced out, and I even felt the lucario's tail wag ever so slightly a few times. Smiling at my friend being able to relax at least a little bit, I carefully slid the brush over the fighting-type's canine ears, my other hand scritchng slowly along Rio's soft neck. It really was fascinating just how different the once-toned Pokémon's form was, the rolls on the lucario's neck feeling so strange and foreign compared to the memories I had of rubbing down the Pokémon after a long day of training, yielding flab covering up the solid muscles I remembered so clearly.

I knew Rio could feel my reminiscing, though I wasn't sure exactly how he would react to my memories of his once-lean form. Setting the brush aside for a moment, I gingerly curled my hands around the lucario's chest once more, feeling him tense just slightly again, though he quickly subdued the reaction, his paws coming up and again curling around my arms as he returned the embrace in silence. "I've missed you so much," I repeated, trying my best to ignore the way my arms pressed into the Pokémon's loose flesh, resting my cheek on the top of the Pokémon's head and feeling his ears flick slightly against me.

I heard soft snuffle from the lucario, worry flashing through my heart as I looked down in concern, before I saw the look on Rio's face. He was smiling, even with tears forming in the corners of his closed eyes, my own starting to sting slightly with moisture as I let out a soft chuckle. "I was really afraid of how you'd... take this," Rio admitted after a while, curling his paw around my hand and squeezing softly, "All I could think of was our dreams of making it to the League some day, or going to a Pokémon fashion show, or just... enjoying a walk. I thought you'd be... horrified, disappointed, disgusted, I don't know."

Quickly shaking my head, I pulled the lucario in closer against me, feeling my arms sinking further into his soft fat, yet not caring in the slightest. "Hush," I said softly, patting the steel-type's chest lightly and feeling the impact rippling out against me through his back, momentarily baffled once more by just how fat the Pokémon was, though I was able to push through and continue my reply, "You're still Rio. You're my best friend, and League or no League, I'm so, so happy I get to see you again."

The lucario's smile broadened a bit, once again dimpling his cheeks. Strange and unfamiliar as the sight was, there was part of me that found those dimples quite endearing. Rio's eyes snapped open, looking up at me as I realized he'd picked up on that feeling, looking at me with a confused, uncertain expression. "S-sorry!" I quickly apologized, averting my gaze as I lifted up my arm and rubbed the back of my neck.

Rio stared at me for a moment, before lowering his gaze as he reached up a paw and touched his cheek, his expression unreadable. "That's... what they thought, too," the lucario said quietly within my thoughts, guilt wracking my whole form as I bit my lip again.

"I'm sorry, I didn't..." I tried to excuse myself, realizing I'd unintentionally drug up the trauma I was trying to help alleviate. "Do you need me to leave you alone?" I checked, regarding the lucario with deep concern.

The Pokémon didn't answer for a while, obviously attempting to come to terms with what he'd just felt in my aura. "No... it's okay," Rio eventually replied, lifting his head and looking to me with the slightest hint of a smile, "I just... wasn't expecting it. I guess of all the reactions you could have... this one isn't the worst."

A bit of relief came over me as I let out a little breath, unfreezing from my stiffened pose and gently curling my hand around the Pokémon's paw. The lucario once more squeezed my hand in his paw gently, before tilting his head back to look at me quizzically. "You really think... the dimples are cute?" he asked disbelievingly, and though my first instinct was to deny it in an attempt to spare the lucario embarrassment, I knew better than to lie to the aura-reading Pokémon.

"I guess so," I admitted, flushing slightly with my own abashedness, "You know I've always thought you were adorable."

Rio actually laughed, a sound that filled my heart with joy. I could never truly say in words how much I'd missed the Pokémon's laugh, but I took comfort in knowing that those words weren't necessary between the two of us. "Arceus, I hated that so much when I was a riolu!" the lucario said, bringing back memories of the little fighting-type that always insisted that he was fierce, never cute, "But now... I'm glad that hasn't changed. I never thought I'd be relieved to feel that from you, master."

Smiling once more, my hand lifted from the steel-type's chest, making sure he could see it coming this time, before gently resting my palm against Rio's cheek. The lucario's features flushed slightly with embarrassment, yet he still closed his eyes and rested his cheek into my hand, the soft curve surprisingly warm against my palm. "It's like I said," I reiterated gently, my palm brushing over the Pokémon's plush cheek, "You're still Rio. And nothing is going to change that."

I felt the fighting-type's head rest more into my palm, once more filling my heart with warmth as my thumb softly brushed over the silky fur that coated Rio's supple cheek. I started to hum softly as I swayed side to side with my Pokémon, able to feel as he relaxed steadily against me. I was surprised when I heard the sound of more gentle, steady breathing, though I only smiled when I realized the lucario had fallen asleep, holding him close as he rested. There wasn't much else I could do, pinned under the corpulent Pokémon's form as I was, yet I found that I didn't mind at all, the stillness of our reunited calm all I needed to know that things would be alright.



