

Growing Beyond Roles

By: RaddaRaem

“You know, Quilladin,” the Frogadier sighed as a cloak and dagger were placed into his hands, “if I didn’t know any better, it’s almost like you’re trying to tell me something. Like... there’s some sort of implicit assumptions being thrown around about what I am and am not supposed to be good at.”

Humming to himself, the armored Grass type wagged his orange tipped tail to and fro. “Aww don’t be like that Frogadier! Who else could fill those shoes?” Arching his brows in surprise, the squat and rounded Pokemon looked on dumbly as a long blue tongue wrapped itself around the belt balanced between his stubby little hands. He wiggled his clawed fingers in the now vacant air. “What’s wrong with our setup now? We’re a perfect by the book trio! Braixen’s our mage, you’re our thief, and I round things out as our shining and charismatic knight, bravely leading us into and sometimes away from danger!” Growling, Quilladin flexed his non-existent muscles. “Besides, no one’s better than you are at sneaky sneaking and picking pockets!”

Ylowppping his tongue back, the belt and its pockets bounced against the blue frog’s palm, hand held up high. “Only because you keep pigeonholing me into it!” With a grump, he wrapped the worn leather around his waist.

“But you’re a Dark type! Or...” Quilladin twiddled his three clawed fingers against his flat face, his perky features and tufts of hair peeking out of a circular gap in his armor. “Well, you will be. You’re a natural!” Leaning to his side, Quilladin’s eyes and mouth went wide.

A tangled bush rustled amongst the sea oats and thicker grasses poking out of the transitioning shoreline, its thick blue limbs wrapped and gnarled around one another. Shuffling to the side in the loose soil it rose slightly, revealing red shoes that propelled it forward.

Eeeeeing to himself, Quilladin waved to the strange flora. Frogadier glared back at his companion, snapping his fingers to grab his attention.

Round white eyes stared back from between the foliage, the mobile bush freezing in place. A low whimper could be heard emanating from its grassy bowels before the Tangela hustled off in fright.

“Awwww...”

“Hey! Over here!” The frog’s fingers flicked at the Grass type’s rounded nose. “I...” Hands held out to his sides, Frogadier’s limbs trembled in place. “See, this is what I’m talking about. Do you... do you even see the gaps popping up in your own logic?” Webbed fingers clutched at the drab brown hood of his cloak and yanked it down. “I’m not good at stealing because I’m a Dark type! Errr because I will be.” Frogadier stroked at his chin in mock contemplation, his digits slipping off his wet skin, “It’s because this is the only role you ever assign to me. Of course I’m going to get good at getting the drop on others and emptying their pockets if it’s all I’m asked to do!”

“Are you two going to be-”

“Yes we’re going to be a while,” Frogadier rolled his eyes side to side in their sockets.

“Just checking.” Plopping down on her rear, Braixen twirled her tail, shaking loose her wand. She untied the pouch wrapped around the frail twig, coercing dried Oran and Pecha berries into her waiting hand. The taste of salt in the air accompanied the rhythmic and gentle pounding of waves against a distant

shoreline. Staring out at the ocean, the Fire type's black furred toes dug into the sand, watching their Lapras ferry disappear over the horizon, prompting stray Magikarp to flop into the air in its wake. In between chews, white capped waves washed against Pallet's shores and the fiery fox's feet. Bubbles fizzed upon her twiddling toes.

"Why can't Braixen be our thief?"

"Do I want to be a part of this argument?" Cocking her head to the side, she suspiciously eyed the frog gesturing towards her.

"Her illusions and fox fire magic make her just as capable a thief as I am. I mean think about it, baddies could be swatting at her conjurations while she robs them blind! Heck, why not you even?" Pointing towards Quilladin, the frog curled his lips down. "I'm sure..." Frogadier caught himself before elaborating further, tongue pressed against the top of his mouth. Hmm. Yellow eyes scanned up and down the Grass type's roly poly form. Okay, yeah, there probably was a reason why Quilladin never was tasked with being sneaky.

"Well if you're not gonna be our thief, then who would?" Slipping his scabbard over his head, the worn strap that had rubbed a groove into the Grass type's armored back caught against a pointed ear.

"I just explained this!" With a swat of his moist hand, the sword's strap was freed and slipped over Quilladin's rounded noggin. Slinging the scabbard over his own shoulders, Frogadier pointed a hand back at the beach. "Braixen can be our thief."

"Should I be worried I keep hearing my name dropped over there?" Soft and fluffy ears positioned atop her head swiveled like satellite arrays towards her two friends. Her eyes unable to peel themselves away from the ruby red gems glittering off the Tentacool drifting on the ocean's surface, letting the currents carry them where they pleased. Wingulls crooned overhead.

"Who would our mage be then?" Hopping up, Quilladin's nubby limbs barely reached up to the Water type's shoulders. They were poorly suited for the task of reclaiming his sword from the much taller Frogadier, who made no attempt to resist the armored Pokemon's vain attempts.

"Wellllll if Braixen's going to be expanding her horizons..."

"Why are you two making decisions for me?"

"Oh hush. I figure, maybe we should all take a crack at venturing out of our comfort zones. I can be the warrior for once," he said shifting his shoulders, the sword's hilt sinking through the scarf of bubbles wrapped around his neck, "and YOU can be our mage!"

"I don't know..." Pouting, Quilladin leaned up against Frogadier, whining as he tried reaching for his blade. All he knew was how to swing and be swung at. "Should we really be changing things up so much? We are in a strange new land after all, m-maybe we should just stick to what's tried and true!" Arms twirling in place, he let out a soft noooooo as the frog held him back with a single hand papped against his forehead.

"We're in Kanto, Quilladin." Braixen brushed her hands against her legs, knocking away the grains of sand clinging to her legs. "The birthplace of civilization itself! It's not some unexplored backwater wilderness, like say Orre. No one's lived in these parts for a while is all." Reaching into her bushy tail, she fetched out a bundle of rolled together parchment. "Look, we even have maps and

everything.” Vermillion and Celadon city were highlighted in red on the crumpled parchment, the only cities of size that remained following the mass migrations to the new world.

“What, do you not think you’d be a good mage?” Taking on a teasing tone, Frogadier couldn’t stifle his growing grin.

“N-no! I’d be a great mage, bending nature itself to my very will!” Stamping his feet against the red railroad vines crinkling against his ankles, his soft tremors aroused the curiosity of a couple Digletts. “Might need some practice first, that’s all.” The tiny Ground types poked their heads through some gaps in the red vine’s roots, the broad leaves and purple flowers bobbing against the top of their heads. They meeped softly, eager to take in their fill of the newcomers.

“We all settled then?” Casting a worried glance towards Braixen, the fox merely shook her head and replied with a wry laugh to the frog’s inquiry.

“Behold!” Arms raised as high as they would go above his head, the flora at Quilladin’s feet beckoned to his call. Twirling together, the grasses and wildflowers tugged at their roots, forming into dense vines. The observing Digletts oohed and awed at such mastery of the esteemed Vine Whip spell.

As she sauntered past, Frogadier grabbed hold of Braixen’s thin and bony arm. “Hey umm... you sure you’re okay with this?”

“Can’t say I’m all too thrilled having these decisions made for me,” she sported a toothy smile, prompting a nervous laugh out of Frogadier, “but it’s fine.” Wand in hand, she twirled it between her white furred fingers before smacking his knuckles with it. “The show of confidence was appreciated by the by,” she quietly followed up, grabbing the former thief’s dagger and tucking it against her side. This time her smile was genuine, as was the sentiment behind it.

Still smarting, the Water type shook his hand furiously. “Thanks, Braixen.”

Hands held out before him now, Quilladin hrmmed loudly. Fingers wiggling, the nearby bushes that weren’t Tangelas swayed gently. One by one, leaves plucked themselves off their branches and lazily drifted through the air. Flabbergasted, the Diglett onlookers meeped ecstaticly at such effortless wielding of the dread Razor Leaf.

“You done yet?” Braixen smirked at seeing how clearly and quickly she had been outclassed and replaced as the resident mage. “Not like we’re going to find out more about the origins of Mega Evolutions just standing around here.” Her long and flowing crimson robe swished against the back of her knees, the sand sifting underneath giving way to gravel that crunched loudly underfoot.

Quilladin trotted after the foxy mage, but not before waving goodbye to his latest adoring fans. “I still don’t understand why we came here instead of staying in Kalos.” Waddling alongside her, even Braixen had a good head and shoulders on him in height. “Isn’t that where all the latest and greatest strides have been taking place?”

“Yeah. All of which are zealously guarded,” Frogadier was quick to remind him. “It’s not like this was something that was just stumbled upon though. Think about it; the Venusaur, Blastoise, and Charizard families were amongst the very first to posit and promptly exploit Mega Evolution. You don’t think it’s a teensy bit suspicious that every one of those families have roots here, in Kanto?”

“Nearly half of all those evolutions discovered so far all *coincidentally*,” her white furred fingers heavily emphasized the air quotes, “belong to ancient and influential families straight out of Kanto, now

that you mention it.” Braixen tapped her wand against her chin. “Gengar, Gyrados, Alakazam...” Those ancient families already lived several rungs removed from the common dredges of society. The boon to their power and stature brought about by Mega evolution had gone and set them worlds apart from the masses, distancing themselves that much further from everybody else.

“Like I said, that can’t just be generations of wealth and power talking.” Strutting besides his two childhood friends, the multihued blue frog cast a passing glance over the landscape. “There’s something to be found heeeEERE!” Webbed feet caught against a smooth slab of stone jutting out of the now solid earth.

“Careful!” Bumbling forward, Quilladin’s nubby arms wrapped around the frog’s, locking Frogadier in place and holding him upright.

“Owe you one, little guy.” Frogadier plopped a hand against the diminutive Grass type’s back, rewarding him with a thankful and gentle pat. Ushering Quilladin forward, he turned to look over his shoulder. Chin nestled against his foamy and bubbly scarf, he hummed aloud.

A series of bleached stone structures sat perched upon a hill overlooking the sea. Hundreds of feet away from shore, it was what little legacy that remained of this tiny coastal village.

“You’ve noticed it too?” Her wispy tail swished side to side, robe swaying with its movements. Scrunching her black furred toes, Braixen balanced herself upon a series of half-buried stones, worn smooth by erosion. “We’ve been trampling all over Pallet’s foundations.”

“Something prompted them to relocate to higher ground... but what?”

Quilladin’s claws clacked loudly against the ground as he wobbled along. “Maybe Groudon and Kyogre’s legendary brouhaha caused this?”

“Bwah... but Hoenn’s on the other side of the world!” Frogadier scratched at the back of his neck, hesitant to refer to either Legendary by name. “I mean, I know they’re both gods, but still! We’re talking about reshaping and burying entire shorelines here.”

Braixen kicked at faded red pebbles littering the still sandy ground, no doubt originating from the stray Staryu skeletons that clung tight to the ruined homes. “This place used to be underwater and now it’s not.” The fox’s gaze uneasily focused on an empty Cloyster shell jutting out of the earth, swept far beyond into Pallet’s borders. “A clash of egos between two gods seems like just as good an explanation as any.”

Frogadier led the party forward, wordlessly acknowledging his companions with a sigh. As they ventured further from the coast, looming evergreens poked up along and split through the ancient cobbled road leading north. Kakuna and Metapod carapaces were glued to their branches, the backs of the shed shells split open from where their evolutions emerged. The older, taller trees were bleached white at the base of their trunks. A fine white line melded into the bark, eye level with the taller frog and fox, marked just how high the salty sea had risen. “Let’s hope what we came here for wasn’t swept away in the tide,” the newly appointed warrior grumbled, swatting back at the bumbling Grass type riding on his heels.

Returning the gesture, Quilladin swatted back at the offending webbed fingers. Arms held out before him and head reared back, the armored little mage slapped Frogadier’s hand down. “What exactly are we looking for, anyway?”

“We’ll... let you know once we figure that out ourselves.” A high pitched buzzing interrupted Braixen’s train of thought and prompted the fox to curl her fingers tight around her wand. With a wave of her weapon, licks of fire wafted in the air above the trio, discouraging the curious Beedrill from investigating further. It circled noisily around them before vanishing amongst the trees. “Might not know what to look for,” she admitted while pointing to where the sloping route they walked melded into the horizon. A dense and impermeable wall of green could be seen in the distance. “But we do know where to look.”

“Is that Viridian Forest?” Even in Kalos legends of that lightless forest traveled along loose and oftentimes incredulous lips. Tree canopies packed so closely together, sunlight was utterly unable to permeate through to the barren floor. “W-wait you don’t mean we’re going to go rummaging around-”

“If there’s anyone in Kanto who would have known about Mega Evolution, it would have been her,” Frogadier solemnly stated. Situated at the forest’s base, resided a sprawling and formerly very well to do city. Once a proud jewel of the Kanto continent, it fell into disfavor, and disrepair, once the means behind its prosperity were revealed.

“To think, a single Pokemon controlled both the evo stone trade and Mastery gyms from behind the scenes.” Contempt, trepidation, and a little bit of admiration rang out through Braixen’s tone.

“Nidorina restricted access to stone based evolution for how many years?” Long lost to the unstoppable streams of time, Frogadier wasn’t hesitant to mouth off and call out the woman by name.

She was amongst the first to discover the transformative properties evo stones had on Pokemon. Her immediate response upon realizing their potential was to ruthlessly acquire, hoard, and dole out said stones to the highest bidder. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say her favor, or ire, could win or lose wars between battling kingdoms. She alone decided if one’s infantry were to receive or be deprived of a prompt and permanent upgrade in size and strength. The flow of stones trickled out under her supervision, the shrewd Nidorina keen to not let any one customer get too much of a lead over the other.

“And it took a good, what, century before anyone could trust the Mastery gyms again?” Brushing the side of a wet and webbed hand against his chest, his fingers tapped proudly against the teardrop shaped Coumarine badge, a proud and leafy tree engraved into its shimmering surface. Branches arched out like veins to the polished edges. It was a recognition of both his agility and fortitude.

Coumarine’s Mastery gym was a gauntlet comprised of two parts. First, challengers had to pass through an obstacle course while being constantly beset upon by Grass type magics from all sides. Oh, and they had to make it to the end unharmed. Second, was a one on one showdown with the leader of the Mastery gym. To claim his badge, Frogadier had to remain standing following three of that Gogoat’s fiercest attacks.

Stepping over Weedles and Caterpies crawling along the ground, Braixen’s lips flattened. “You have to admit, at the time, it was a clever cover. Use the Mastery gyms not only as bases of her evo stone smuggling ring, but to size up potential recruits into her operations.” She shot her froggy companion a wry smile. “Though once she was found out, it did poison the very concept of gyms. Anyone who was, or wanted to be, associated with them had their reputation ruined.”

His gait nowhere near as impressive as his friends’, Quilladin stopped before a Caterpie slowly scooching across the road. Pink antennae wiggled to and fro as it stretched its neck over the gaps between the cobbled stones. Swinging his arms back and forth, the armored mage hopped up and over the Bug

type. Head tilted back, he looked up to the fiery fox. “You think she wheeled and dealed Mega stones too?”

“It’s hard to say...” Braixen answered uncertainly. “But her empire spanned from Viridian to Cerulean, Fuchsia, even Cinnabar! If anything related to Mega evolution happened on this continent way back when, she would have known about it.” One furred foot set in the front of the other, Viridian City came into focus on the horizon.

“Which is why we came here,” Frogadier chimed in. His tone turned sour as he elaborated on, “Back home, if you keep your ear to the ground, rumors are circulating that Mega evolution is somehow stone based.” Black pupils bobbed against the sides of his yellow eyes, keeping a watchful eye on the armored little chestnut bobbing beside him. “The Viridian Mastery gym was Nidorina’s home and the stone trade was her bread and butter. Like Braixen said, Nidorina is our best lead. If that place is still intact, some of her old tomes and records are bound to still be there.”

Picking up the pace, Quilladin was eager not to be left behind. As he skipped forward, Braixen’s bushy tail brushed against his exposed face teasingly. “I know she left in a hurry for Johto and all,” in between coughs he pushed away her all smothering tail, “but wouldn’t she try and hide all of her stuff first?”

“I think you’re underestimating just how badly she was compromised by a certain Raichu.” Wand twirling between her fingers, she recanted the fantastical bedtime story passed down ever since Johto was first discovered and settled.

A stoic and nameless figure that was the stuff of legends, she had traveled all across the continent. Conquering every Mastery gym there was, the Electric type set out to prove herself the best of the best. At the apex of her journey, a certain Pikachu returned to where she started. Viridian’s gym was the most grueling and demanding challenge offered on the Kanto continent, and under Nidorina’s watchful eye, she passed it with flying colors. Thoroughly impressed by her strength, Nidorina offered the electric mouse a high ranking position in her smuggling operation, and sweetened the deal with a Thunder stone. The challenger accepted her offer, evolved, and the newly minted Raichu immediately reneged on their agreement. Playing Nidorina from the start, she had half-heartedly entertained prior offers from her agents stationed in Mastery gyms throughout the land. Cognizant of the corruption present and how deeply it was seeded, she relentlessly challenged one gym after another, making herself so attractive a prospect that the Pokemon in charge of the whole shebang had to present themselves before her sooner or later.

Her long game had played out beautifully as she handily defeated Nidorina within her own gym. But as Raichu prepared to cripple the dread organization that ran the continent from the shadows, the Gym leader pulled out her ace in the hole. A Moon stone. Nidorina had long since contemplated evolving herself, but always decided against it. She was powerful as it was, and was mindful not to let it go to her head. Raichu had forced her hand however, and her strength grew monstrously with her transformation into Nidoqueen. The tables turned and the battle lopsidedly weighed in her favor. Even though she emerged victorious after her second wind, the Raichu battered and broken at her feet, the damage was done. Irreversible and grievous, she had been found out and her operations exposed. Commandeering the first boat to Johto, she vanished into obscurity as her empire in Kanto crumbled, dragging down with it the countless cities and kingdoms that relied on her malevolent influence.

Braixen’s story told, she received an enthusiastic round of applause from the little Grass type that barely came up past her waist. Her snicker softened when Frogadier joined in his celebratory antics. The

insides of her fluff filled ears burned pink as a warm smile graced her lips. “Though...” Braixen’s smile waned when she tapped her wand against her chin.

“I know, I know, we talked about this on the ferry,” Frogadier acknowledged with a sigh. “We’re not going to be the first ones to have gotten it in our heads to go sniffing around her old stomping grounds. Even if-” The aquatic Pokemon’s jaw went slack.

Upon approach from Pallet, nothing had seemed amiss. The crumbling and abandoned buildings were to be expected after all. Nidorina’s departure had devastated the city. From a tiny hamlet up into a bustling cityscape; She, and her operations, were the lifeblood of Viridian. Facing out towards the ocean, the stone structures wore the expected wear and tear of time.

Just beyond them though, scant signs of previous habitation remained. The great forest encroached on and had begun reclaiming the city itself, casting entire city blocks under its dark and mossy shadow. Fledging pines and oaks burst up and through former stores and homes, their gnarled roots upending the paved brick streets.

With a gulp, Frogadier regained his composure. “Even if the place has been picked clean, it’s the best lead we have. Not like any of those older families can be counted on to disclose the ins and outs of Mega evolution.” Quilladin and Braixen at his side, he turned to face them. Curling his fist tight, the frog papped it against his chest. “It’s on us to figure it out for ourselves!”

“That little monologue of yours had already lost its punch by the second time you recited it on the ride over from Cinnabar.” Shaking her head, Braixen strutted past.

“So it could use a little work,” Frogadier reluctantly admitted, rubbing at his shoulder. A reassuring nod and smile from Quilladin lifted his spirits. “Still, it was more than enough to get the both of you to tag along!”

Wand held high overhead, her wrist circled round its bony pivot. “Please,” stifling a giggle, her bushy tail wagged to and fro, “we would have accompanied you regardless.” She eyed the silk spider web stretching from one side of the street to the other with a discontented growl.

“Blech, those pests are here too?” Shuffling behind Frogadier, Quilladin poked his head out from behind his friend’s back, his green and orange tipped horns brushing against the back of the Water type’s cloak. “Darn Spinarak are everywhere now.” Those repulsive things had a knack for showing up everywhere they weren’t wanted. Stowing away on the first ships to make landfall in Johto, the vermin hitched a ride back to Kanto. Without fail, they always managed to make themselves known on every new continent discovered since then.

A flame of ember concentrated on the tip of the vixen’s wand. With a flick of her wrist, the ball of flame sailed forward and exploded into the web. Licks of fire spread along its surface, the meticulously crafted silk spirals collapsing in on themselves in the searing heat. It silently peeled away from the walls, flakes of ash nestling between the cracks in the barren brick roads. “Let’s keep moving.” Sticking her wand back into her bushy tail, it rustled against the other contents tucked away in her fur.

One foot set in front of the other, Braixen, Quilladin, and Frogadier stuck out towards Viridian’s hollow heart. The clinks of their feet against the broken bricks were muffled by the layers of moss and grass subsuming all signs of civilization. Paying no heed to the countless buildings begging to be explored and burgled, they passed one boarded up shop after the next. In the abandoned Mart beside them, something could be heard shuffling inside. Some sort of undesirable Bug type, no doubt.

From between the planks of wood nailed to a decrepit shop window, an emerald green eye twitched unconsciously, suspiciously regarding the trio of intruders.

“More visitors?”

Pulling back from his peephole, the Furret brushed away bark and sawdust clinging to his forehead. “Three of them.”

The Rattatta scratched at his whiskers in disinterest. Purple furred fingers brushed up against the fleshy nubs that remained on the left side of his muzzle. “You know the drill.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just off anyone and everyone who sets foot here?” Leaning back in his chair, both back legs wobbled uneasily under the Buneary’s weight. His head swiveled towards Furret pacing towards the opposite side of the room, taking up sentry at a new window. “Get some rumors going that the place is haunted, make a couple bodies disappear to get the groundswell going. Would make our jobs all that much easier.”

“Not quite,” Furret replied, remaining stationed and attentive at his post. “We’d be liable to be overrun by academics from Sinnoh.” His neck bobbed back and forth between peepholes, keeping a close watch on the trio from Kalos. “So much as suggesting Ghost types linger here from time to time would draw them in droves. They’re already swarming around Lavender as it is.”

Buneary shuddered at the mention. “Something ain’t right with that place.” As if being a necropolis that had accumulated thousands of corpses over the centuries wasn’t bad enough, Lavender also had the dubious distinction of being the only place on the continent where Ghost types gathered en masse.

“It’s being dragged into another world entirely, apparently. From the sounds of it, those phantasms aren’t from here at all.” Most of the letters intercepted out of Lavender had proved fascinating reads, Furret mused. “Back in Sinnoh I’ve heard word that wherever Ghost types concentrate, portals to a... what did they call it? Distortion World?”

Purple eyelids draped down across Rattatta’s brow, crimson pupils glaring back from underneath. “Academics aside, if you want to disobey Nidoking’s direct orders that’s on your head, not mine.” His eyes swiveled towards the Furret pattering up the ladder to the roof, his long striped body vanishing in an instant. “We only act if anyone sets foot within his family’s old Mastery Gym.”

Letting his feet slide forward, the front legs of Buneary’s chair tonked loudly against the floorboards.

“Viridian is to remain as uninteresting as possible, a dot on the maps to be overlooked and forgotten. That means no disappearances,” his eyes darted towards the edges of his sockets before he continued on in a subdued manner, “if it can be helped, anyway.” Creaking rafters prompted the Rattatta to turn his gaze up towards the ceiling. Furret’s every movement shook layers of grime and dust free from the crumbling planks of wood holding the roof above their heads. “And no Ghosts. The less reason we give people to congregate here, the better.”

One arm set before the other, Furret crawled forward upon the fragile rooftop. Mindful not to sever the weak mortar bonds holding the tiles in place and reveal himself, he kept his head low. Ever so

slowly, he inched himself closer and closer towards the idle chatter that whispered to him from the alleys below.

“You don’t think it’s been swallowed up by the forest, do you?” Quilladin’s inquisitive voice echoed across the empty streets, prompting the Normal type’s flattened ears to perk to attention.

Content with his elevated position, he rested his chin upon his striped wrists. Those emerald eyes of his were the only things upon that roof that dared move.

Fingers twiddling against his thigh, Frogadier cocked his head to the side. “Half the city is already overgrown.” Cheek resting against his shoulder, the frog pressed up on the balls of his webbed feet and rolled back and forth across the cool mossy landscape. “It very well may be,” he conceded with a sigh.

Fledgling trees sprouted upon the dilapidated rooftops, their gnarled and hungry roots snaking their way down and inside the buildings like ivy. At the end of the soft green street rendered a dead end, a hollowed out stump lay splayed out, surrounded by what remained of the once lavish three story home that had collapsed beneath it. Large and reflective blue eyes peered out from the crumbled doorways of those musty buildings that remained standing, skittish Paras uneasily regarding the new arrivals.

“Even so,” Frogadier straightened his posture. “It’s still worth a look.” He let out a startled ribbit as Braixen’s warm furred fingers clenched around his shoulder blades, forcing him to hunch over.

Unfurling her map, she brushed the aside the sword sheath slung competing with her for real estate over his shoulders. Braixen spread the map flat against the Water type’s back. “Looks like we can’t take the main street all the way there,” she mused aloud. “We need to figure out some sort of detour.”

“Why don’t we just zig here and zag there?” Quilladin’s clawed fingers traced along the lines on the map, poking at the soft surface underneath.

“Is there not a better place to do this?” Frogadier croaked, craning his neck over his shoulder to try and see what all was going on back there.

“I doubt it,” Braixen hrrmmed, wand tapping against the side of her muzzle. “That’ll bring us even closer to Viridian forest. If it’s already this bad here we can’t count on anything remaining standing out along those back routes. How about...” She drew an imaginary route upon the faded parchment while Quilladin held it in place.

“Oooh I get it. The closer the streets are towards Pallet, the better chance they are of being in one piece?” The Grass type’s orange tipped tail swished side to side.

“If it gets us to Nidorina’s Mastery Gym, that’s all that matters,” Frogadier groaned as his companions continued drawing out paths on his backside.

Furret’s black pupils quivered in place as the trio came to their conclusion. He remained motionless, patiently waiting for the strange and unwanted visitors to venture out of earshot. Scrambled gesticulations and kicks of his legs ripped away countless tiles that tinked loudly against the green ground below as he shuttled in reverse, revealing the blackened and rotting frame of Nidoking’s Viridian outpost in the process.

“Did people really used to live here?” Little more than a whisper, Quilladin was the first among his friends to shake off the sense of awe that had taken hold. Before them lay Nidorina’s gym, the only thing remotely approximating a man-made structure that remained along the uneasy border separating Viridian City and Viridian Forest. Flanked on both sides by mossy building shaped mounds, sprouts of grass and flowers relentlessly smothered any and every vestige of civilization. Knee high grass scratched at Quilladin’s legs, the flora’s shallow roots catching against his clawed feet. “There’s hardly anything left!” He stamped his feet against the ground, no longer able to feel the bricks he knew were buried beneath, and alerting the nearby wandering weeds to their presence. Handfuls of Oddish and Bellsprout rustled through the tall blades of grass, leisurely sauntering away from the trio.

“Better question: How are we even going to get in?” Frogadier approached the ancient wooden two story structure cautiously, masses of vines draping down from its sloped roof. They coiled around and over every door and window. Glancing upwards every other second, he refused to take his attention away from the gargantuan pitcher plant Victreebels that hung like bulbous fruit from the sides of its walls.

“Carefully,” he answered himself as he daintily set his foot down on the first stair step leading up to the entrance. It crumbled to splinters instantly when he placed his weight upon it. “Crap.” The pitcher plants above shuffled in place, sensing fresh prey. Eyes gone wide, the Water type remained still, hesitant to dole out any further clues to his current position. Those things were as big as he was, and had a terrifying and well-earned reputation.

Watching on from a safe distance, Quilladin alternated between chewing away at his fingernails and shooing off a particularly curious Oddish. Braixen on the other hand readied her wand, a crackling ball of flame concentrated at its tip. “I’d rather go home empty handed than short a friend.”

“Easy, easy!” He waved at the fox, urging her to restrain her pyromania just a bit longer. “Let me at least try to get in before you raze this place to the ground.” Bending at his knees, energy coiled up in his legs. He leapt up the flight of stairs in a single hop, just barely avoiding smacking his head against the awning above the door.

Braixen bared her clenched teeth as the Victreebel continued to shuffle in place.

Frogadier’s pounding heart rattled between his ears as he tried forcing a sliding door open to no avail. “These vines won’t even budge.”

TUNK

Flakes of wood rained down upon Frogadier, catching in his bubbly scarf. A very loud shuffling of leaves indicated just what had landed on the frail awning above him. Silently, he unsheathed his borrowed sword and breathed in through his nostrils. “Slow and precise movements.” That thought repeated in his head while he brought his foot up to the sliding door. Legs aching from the amount of kinetic energy building up, he craned his neck over his shoulder to check that the coast was clear.

A single three pointed leaf dipped down from the awning behind him, held up by a thin wooden branch.

“Aaaaaaaaand that’s my cue.” Sweating bullets, he pushed himself off the door. Dragging the sword beside him as he exploded off its surface, the blade swung freely through the frictionless air for all of half a second. His wrist locked up as the blade slowed and grew heavy in the air, catching against the Victreebel’s side. Inertia carried him and his weapon ever forward however, that drag and added weight shaken off in an instant as the polished metal carved through the man eater. Tumbling to a halt before his

friends, he let out a long breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. Behind him, the Victreebel split horizontally tipped over and crumpled to pieces, its acidic stomach contents burning holes into the ground.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Braixen tucked her wand back into her tail. "Well then, shall we take a look?" Brows furrowed, she shot a glance at the Victreebels shimmying along the vines towards the back of the structure. After coming to relabel the Kalos adventurers as predators instead of prey, the remaining carnivorous plants wanted nothing to do with them. "Come on Quilladin, I have a feeling this is your time to shine as our latest and greatest mage!"

"You betcha!" A light bop on the head sent the persistent Oddish he had just befriended waddling off, the stalks of leaves on its head blending in with blades of grass swaying in the breeze. Trailing alongside Braixen, both the Grass and Fire type came to a halt before the ruined stairs. Quilladin took a step forward and dug his fingers into the second step in an attempt to pull himself up and onto it. The plank of wood ripped off the sides of the stairs, hanging from his pointed nails. "Ummm... Frogadier?"

"I'm coming, I'm coming." The multihued frog sheathed his sword on approach, quite pleased with his first kill as a warrior. Dropping down to his knees, he knocked aside the stray plank before curling his arms under Quilladin's own. "Ready?" After receiving a confirmatory nod from their newest mage, the frog's legs sprung into action. Even with the extra weight, Frogadier handily cleared the gap, touching down right before the entrance ensnared in a mesh of vines. After ensuring Quilladin's safe arrival, he turned his attention towards the fiery fox below. "Care for a lift, Braixen?"

"If you'd be so kind."

In a matter of moments the warrior was at her side, politely offering out a hand to hold.

Careful not to let a smile slip free, she clasped her furred fingers around his own while his left arm cradled her waist. Her tail betrayed her intentions however, swaying gently side to side.

"Now how did I do this before?" Frogadier and Braixen's landing rattled the ground, causing Quilladin to wobble on his feet. Arms crossed about his armored green chest, he bobbed his head side to side. "Ah, that's right!" Eyes lit up and an eager smile spread wide upon his exposed face, Quilladin raised his nubby arms as high as they would go. The ivy's wooden hooks ripped themselves out of the structure, loudly scraping against the door as the broad leaves and arching branches compacted and crunched together. With a twirl of his wrists and clench of his fingers leaf blades tore to pieces, their moist remains serving as the glue keeping together the branches twisted beyond their breaking point.

"Uhhh Quilladin? The goal here was to make the vines disperse and recede, not condense them into some-" Frogadier shooshed himself when the grassy green tentacles burrowed their way into all four corners of the door frame. Hairline cracks erupted into fissures that coughed and belched sawdust. Where they met, glimpses into the interior of Nidorina's gym could be seen. With a final sputter of wood chips and plaster the door collapsed backwards with a creak and thunderous thud, finally granting entry to the trio. "Well then." The Water type swatted away the clouds of dust wafting towards them. "I'm not complaining!"

Tussling Quilladin's pointed horns, Braixen smiled to herself. "If I recall correctly, all of a couple hours ago you were shy to take on the mantle of mage."

“I knooooooooooooow.” He tried waddling out of her range, but those thin furred fingers of hers remained plopped atop his head, noogying him teasingly. “What about you? I haven’t seen you do anything particularly sneaky as a thief yet!”

“In due time,” she retorted with a pat upon his head. Stepping through the gaping hole into the Mastery Gym, the moist and heavy smell of musty wood assaulted her nostrils. A gaping hole in the roof allowed copious amounts of sunlight to filter in, moss and mushrooms cropping up where the sun’s rays struck the floor. The planks of hardwood creaked with the fox’s every footfall, layers of dust and grime clinging to the bottom of her padded toes. “Would you look at this place...” Jaw agape, the weight of history weighed down heavily upon Braixen’s shoulders. This was where it happened. Nidorina’s Mastery Gym. This was the backdrop, the setting, for those bedtime stories she never tired of hearing. It was admittedly starker than she had imagined it to be.

There was the entrance, the battleground, and Nidorina’s podium. Chipped and worn chunks of marble served as the boundaries for her proving grounds, filled in with a loose layer of sand and gravel. Only the hardiest of weeds had managed to sprout through its surface.

Braixen gasped as her eyes drifted up towards the podium at the rear of the gym. Black veins had been burned into it, tearing it asunder and knocking back the statue once positioned atop it. An inky darkness lurked just beneath, the Mastery Gym’s true heart no doubt. “Of course it’s a statue of herself,” the fox smirked. She scowled at Nidorina’s likeness leaned up against the wall, back of its head caught against the hole it had punched into the wall during its descent. Its milky white eyes shone in the reflected sunlight. Behind it, veins continued to arc up along the wall towards the hole in the ceiling, rafters cracked and blown back up towards the sky. “Raichu! That’s her handiwork!” The fox smiled giddily to herself. To think, she was standing right where her childhood hero once had! A lass of legend who took down Nidorina’s foul empire singlehandedly!

Frogadier tugged lightly on one of the many vines snaking down from the hole in the roof, sending a Butterfree perched atop a rafter fluttering off into the forest canopy looming high overhead. His gaze darted back and forth between the pulpy rope and the podium. “Assuming there’s a hoard of evo stones down there, that would explain all the Victreebels.”

“Think that’s where we should start looking around then?” Stooped over besides the frog, Quilladin did his best to wear a brave face. His smile kept fading no matter how hard he tried to keep his lips creased upwards. From beneath the podium, Nidorina’s legacy glared back at the diminutive Grass type from within the darkness. “Frogadier?” The response he received was a hurried series of pats against his back, accompanied by creaking of the floorboards. The grime covered planks of wood whined under the weight of an unfamiliar gait.

With her back to her companions, Braixen’s brows furrowed as she brandished her wand. The sound of a sword slipping free from its sheath resonated reassuringly behind her. Sand shifting between her toes, the Fire type had been forced onto the proving grounds to maintain a safe distance between herself and the trio of Normal types that approached with ill intent. “Looks like Nidorina’s influence lingers yet,” she mused aloud, Frogadier and Quilladin rushing to their friend’s side.

“You two know what needs to be done,” the Rattatta plainly stated, nodding back towards his support.

“Well aren’t you blunt and to the point,” the frog replied, warily eyeing the intruders as they drew their weapons.

“The less said the better.” Going through the motions, the purple bucktoothed mouse kept to his script, mindful not to divulge who decided or what had prompted the showdown.

“Dibs on the rolly polly one,” the flop eared rabbit sneered, cracking his bronze knuckles together.

Arm held out before her, a weak purple flame just struggling to maintain its form had coalesced upon the tip of the frail fox’s wand. “We’ll be sticking together, mind you.” Tiny licks of the Will o’ Wisp tapered off Braixen’s wand, slowly surrounding the adventurers from Kalos with a protective field of purple flames that had gradually grown in size and magnitude.

“Quaint.” The Rattatta ringleader smacked the back of his hand against Furret’s shoulder, the contents of the pouches lined along the pale ringtail’s belt clinking softly.

Furret flicked open a pouch and cautiously poked his furred fingers down inside. Claspings his digits together, his hand reemerged with three throwing knives nestled between his fingertips. His lanky arm curled back behind his shoulder, the Normal type’s emerald eyes focused intently on the Fire, Grass, and Water type that watched on worriedly.

“Scatter!” Darting into the field of flame, Frogadier winced as the embers licked at his cloak. His moist skin dried and cracked painfully in the searing ambient heat. Out of the corner of his eye he noted Braixen following his lead, veering off into the other direction while the flames contorted and rearranged around her fluffy form to allow safe passage. He sighed at the sight of Quilladin simply dropping to the ground, pulling off his best Defense Curl.

Furret hurled his arm forward, the three knives whistling while they sliced through the air towards their intended targets. The frog opted to burn rather than bleed, throwing himself into the flames. He rolled around on the sandy ground to extinguish them the instant his cloak erupted in a flash of purple. The fox barely sidestepped the sharpened metal, losing a tuft of fur poking out of her prodigious ears. And the... chestnut-turtle thing remained hunkered down, Furret’s blade harmlessly bouncing off his thick hide.

“Like I said before, dibs on the rolly polly!” Bounding forward Buneary hipped, hopped, and triple jumped over the entire fiery playing field. Twirling in midair, he angled his body down towards the ground on a collision course with the stationary Quilladin. Eager to crack that green chestnut whatever the hell it was wide open, his right arm glowed red, Focus Punch ready to be deployed. His brass knuckles shattered upon impact, Quilladin’s elastic armor bending beneath the blow before bouncing it back in full at its source. “Yeeeargh!” Buneary yelped, his right shoulder buckled out of its socket from the recoil.

“Braixen!” Disengaging his Defense Curl, Quilladin rolled backwards and onto his feet. Waddling forward he bashed his head into the rabbit’s chest, sending him stumbling back into the Will o’ Wisps. With a swish of her wand the fox answered her friend’s call, a bevy of purple flames converging upon Buneary’s position and smashing together in a bright and fiery purple explosion.

When the smoke cleared, Buneary lay devastated on the hard and reflective ground, the sand beneath his feet melting into glass. Fur singed and smoldering, he was out for the count.

“You could pose a problem,” Furret hummed to himself, gaze settling upon the cheering Grass type. Dropping to all fours the ring tail rushed forward, kicking up clouds of sand as he went. Tucking his head in against his chest, he tumbled forward. Undulating his spine, Furret’s Rollout continued to pick up

speed as he barreled forward, brushing off the wisps that sizzled against the layer of air circulating around his body.

“Quilladin, eyes ahead!” Frogadier belted out, staying low to the ground to avoid the fires flickering overhead.

“Eeep!” He hastily curled back into his defensive shell, an instant before Furret slammed into him. The little armored chestnut was sent flying, his balled up form denting into the back wall of Nidorina’s gym before sinking to the ground with a meteoropic impact. Uncurling his form, Quilladin grunted when he found himself staring up at the ceiling, rays of sunshine tickling at his eyes and nose. “G-guys?” He wriggled uselessly, the planks of wood and nails crumpled beneath him pinning his back into the floor.

The long tailed Normal type’s emerald eyes focused intently on the perceived threat.

“Leave him for now,” Rattatta yelled out. “Focus on those who can still fight back first and foremost.” Those crimson eyes of his locked gazes with the frog’s yellow ones. Purple curled tail swaying back and forth, Rattatta dove into the proving grounds. Every swing of his heavy tail lurched his body this way and that, deftly maneuvering around the floating purple landmines.

Frogadier followed his lead, belching streams of water onto his arms while he zigged back and forth. Steam wafted off his form every time the wisps licked against his body.

“Why hasn’t she dispelled these flames yet?” The purple mouse pondered as he closed in on his prey. “They’re as much a hindrance to her companions as they are to us.” He swung down with his sword, kicking up a wall of sand and gravel that scraped against Frogadier’s legs.

“You’re going to have to run out of knives sometime!” Braixen barked. She skidded upon the sand, desperately avoiding one volley of projectiles after another.

“That would explain it,” Rattatta smirked, his coworker keeping the fox far too preoccupied to wield her spells effectively. He contorted his body around the Will o’ Wisps and swung horizontally, the sound of steel clanging against steel registering in his ears. The frog held his blade out inches before his chest, his grip shaky and weak.

Committed to a long distance approach, Furret emptied his pockets. One by one, nearly his entire supply of throwing knives whisked by the fox.

Panting, Braixen caught her breath when the torrent of blades slowed to a trickle. Her eyes darted to the corner of her sockets, wincing at the sight of Frogadier struggling to survive. The brief lapse in her attention did not go unnoticed by her opponent.

Sword quivering, the frog’s arms wobbled uneasily as his own blade was pressed against his chest. The Rattatta’s strength was nothing to scoff at. Goaded on by an all-powerful sense of self preservation, Frogadier’s neck bulged but for a moment before his cheeks puffed out. “I’m not playing dirty, just smart,” he rationalized to himself when he spat out a burst of Water Gun from between his lips directly into his opponent’s eyes.

Rattatta hissed in response, the condensed burst of liquid scratching painfully at his peepers. Eyes clenched shut and buck teeth biting down into his lip, he forced his weapon closer and closer against his target’s chest.

In between strained breaths with the Water type's neck pressed tightly against his chest, he forced out another Water Gun. The cool liquid drenching his hands dripped down onto his sword. As it collected and coated his blade, Frogadier put his underutilized Water Pulse to good use. The ripples pulsing upon his weapon sent innumerable vibrations rumbling through Rattatta's own. As his opponent's grip faltered, the once thief turned warrior forced his aching wrists and arms forward. That last burst of strength freed Rattatta's sword from its owner, the polished steel twirling up and over the mouse's shoulder.

Sensing an opening, Braixen forced the flames between the two to part with a flick of her wrist.

Arms too tired to lift his own blade skyward, Frogadier settled for slamming the back of his fist into the side of Rattatta's skull. Smacking onto the ground at his feet, the mouse's curled tail papped loudly against the sand behind him. Gulping down gasps of air the Water type hurriedly distanced himself from his stirring foe, his tired and aching arms dragging the blade through the sand.

Without so much as a sneer or a smarmy quip, Furret wordlessly rushed the vixen. The empty pouches upon his belt bounced softly against his waist, his last remaining knife held firmly in hand. By the time the fox became cognizant of his approach, it was too late.

I won't get away in time, her mind yelped as she stumbled back, the Normal type's running start letting him overtake the distance she put between them in seconds. "Here goes everything," she whined, waving her wand along the length of her body as the ringtail leapt towards her. A furious torrent of Will o' Wisps swirled between them, basking both Pokemon in a blinding purple glow.

The show of light failed to discourage Furret in the slightest, stretching his lanky arm forward through the flames. He felt his mark's flesh pressing back against his weapon. Fingers curled around the smooth wooden grip of his knife, he twisted it into her neck to finish... wait a minute. Furret's eyes narrowed. His knives had metal hilts, not a wooden ones. When his eyes adjusted to the fading light he found himself equipped with the fox's wand, harmlessly twirling its soft edge into her flesh.

As much as Braixen wanted to revel in the flawless execution of her magic trick, her furred fingers tapping against the knife's blade held firmly in hand, she could see her volunteer sorely missed what rightfully belonged to him. Thief she might have been, the fiery fox just wasn't comfortable taking what didn't belong to her. So, ever so kindly her right arm lunged forward and returned the knife to its rightful owner, sinking it deep into Furret's shoulder.

Furret's composure faltered momentarily, stokes of anger flaring in his eyes as he yelled out in pain. Stabbing aside, she was within striking range and he'd be a fool to pass up the opportunity. His long tail wrapped around her legs, locking her in place. Yanking back on his ringed limb, he sent her flailing, the back of her head smacking against the coarse ground.

Mouthing curses, Frogadier stared down Rattatta as the mouse rose to his feet.

Sporting a nasty shiner, the fur around the Normal type's left eye had taken on a black hue. "You've lasted longer than I thought you would, I'll give you that." Shaking his head, half of his vision was still fuzzy. "But this is the end of the line." The mouse dashed towards Frogadier, who held his sword out before him in anticipation. Nearing his foe, Rattatta stamped his feet into the ground and skid to a halt. A wall of sand washed over the frog, who swung feebly at the air now that his own eyes were rendered useless. Plodding forward, Rattatta's jaw opened wide, the muscles beneath his cheeks stretched taut.

No, no, no! Frogadier frantically rubbed at his eyes, one hand dedicated to restoring his vision while the other swung his weapon to keep his foe at bay.

Back and forth, back and forth. Rattatta's pupils bobbed to and fro in his socket, following the swing of the blade. At the end of a swing, sword hanging frozen in the air for all of a second, he clamped his buck teeth down on the steel, cracks and fissures sprouting on its surface. Clenching his teeth, the mouse's Super Fang carved through the sword like butter.

"What the-"

Lifting himself up with his knees, Rattatta smashed his forehead against the frog's. His brutal headbutt knocked the Water type clear off his feet, sending the warrior into submission.

"Frogadier! Braixen!" Craning his neck up as far as he was able, Quilladin watched on fearfully as his friends went down. "T-think!" He hurriedly patted his nubby hands against his head. "There's gotta be some sort of spell I can use!" The Grass type's lips quivered when he spied the Furret standing over Braixen toss aside her wand and pull his own knife out of his shoulder, drops of blood staining against her dirtied fur. "I'm the mage now," he reminded himself while his voice began to waver, "b-bending nature to my will!" Augh but there was hardly any nature in here to begin with! With a pathetic pout, Quilladin looked up to vines dangling down from the rafters. Wait, that was it! Fingers wiggling, he beckoned them towards him. Drawing in a deep breath, he yelled out as loud as he could, anything to distract the two ne'er do wells from harming his friends. "Hey!" Snappy quips weren't really his thing. "We're not done here, not yet!"

Furret glared at the short statured nuisance, lengths of ivy reaching out towards the little chestnut and wrapping round his limbs.

"You want to deal with him on or should I?" Rattatta grumbled, dragging Frogadier behind him by the cuff of his cloak.

Splayed out on the ground before him, the fox's arms were pinned beneath Furret's paws. "Those defenses of his are problematic." With a forceful tug, the vines yanked their only remaining threat out of his crater, broken planks of wood shuffling off the Grass type's back. "I'll keep him at bay while you tie up these loose ends." Furret nudged his foot against the vixen's side, shuffling her along the ground towards the approaching purple mouse.

"Understood." Rattatta thrust his arm forward, unceremoniously dropping the frog atop the fox. Both of them let out painful oofs.

Back on his feet, Quilladin's tail swung to and fro behind him, unsuccessfully trying to shake off the leafy ropes clinging to him. "You can stop helping now, ivy." Before him, the Grass type could hear the sound of the Furret's paws pattering against the sand as his pace picked up. "Uh oh." Curling up into a ball, Quilladin reinitiated his Defense Curl. *I can't let him hit me with the same trick again, Braixen and Frogadier need me! Maybe if I can bounce him back...* The armored little green ball rolled forward, the mage aiming to cancel one Rollout attack with another! Sprigs of ivy continued to latch onto his plating, holding him in place.

Furret followed suit, dropping once more to all fours and bounding forward. Tucking his head in against his chest, the Normal type barreled onward, setting a bead on his stationary target.

Quilladin spun faster and faster, determined to break free and save his friends! His armored shell scraped against the wooden floor, splinters and nails streaming behind him while the planks beneath him were sanded down.

“Now then, what to do with you two?” Grunting, the vision in Rattatta’s left eye still hadn’t fully returned. The mouse’s head turned down towards the two captives, his coworker vanished into the extended edges of his vision to deal with one last nuisance. Those Victreebels had proven reliable enough disposal units in the past, their stomachs capable of digesting damn near anything.

By this time the determined little mage had worn a groove into the floor, a steady gush of sawdust trailing behind him as he rolled in place. That Furret would plow into him any second, Quilladin had to break free! In quick succession, one green tendril after another latching onto him snapped, allowing him to inch further and further forward. With an explosive crack the final vine tore away, sending the Grass type rocketing forward. Chunks of marble exploded into chalky clouds of dust when Quilladin tore through the proving ground’s dividers. Wispy contrails following behind him, he roared back onto the battlefield. For an instant his acceleration dropped to zero, like he had slammed straight into a wall, forcing him to a halt. Instead of ingratiating himself into this wall however, Quilladin was bounced back gently, whatever it was he bopped into bearing the brunt of the ricochet.

The Victreebel are more responsive to live bait though, Rattatta reminded himself. Better not to risk it. Clapping a hand around the hilt of the frog’s shattered sword, he placed the broken tip of the blade against the Water type’s neck. What sounded like two stones clacking together in a thunderous clap rung painfully in his ears, prompting him to sneak a peek at his coworker’s latest handiwork. *Damn*. His view of Furret was still clouded by his bad eye. Turning his head slightly, his limited vision was greeted by the sight of a striped ball of fur blazing through the air towards him. Rattatta’s muzzle crumpled under the impact, his head nearly pulling itself off his shoulders. He noiselessly crumpled to the sandy ground, while Furret slammed into the wall behind him. The striped Normal type’s body unfurled itself from its hole in the plaster, his unconscious form slouching to floor.

Pulling himself off of Braixen, Frogadier’s bleary gaze settled on the Grass type waddling over towards them. “That wasn’t a very magelike like way to come out on top, you know,” he chuckled. Spying Braixen’s wand sinking into the sand, the frog reached over and plucked it up between his webbed fingers.

“I... you see... well I won,” Quilladin pouted.

“He’s just teasing.” With a smile, Braixen grabbed the blue outstretched hand held out before her. Her swishing tail brushed gently against Frogadier when he placed her wand against her padded palm. Back on her feet, she quickly got to patting out the sand caught in her robe. “You performed admirably, Quilladin.” Her furred fingers tussled his horns once more, prompting him to squirm beneath her grasp. “Be proud of that!”

“Seriously, way to kick butt out there little guy. You really came through in a pinch!” Frogadier’s eyes glanced at the broken sword hilt resting in Rattatta’s palm. “And uh... sorry about your sword.”

“That’s okay!” The armored Grass type trotted over to where his froggy friend and mousey foe had kicked up mounds of sand, revealing patches of hard gravel. “I can just grab a new one!” Leaning over, Quilladin grabbed hold of Rattatta’s sword, wobbling it high overhead.

“Hey hey hey be careful with that! The blade’s bigger than you are.” With a sigh, Frogadier jogged after their rolly polly kinda sorta mage.

"I'll just get to doing what we came here to do while you two get that sorted out." Continuing to brush off her robe, Braixen made her way towards the podium at the back of Nidorina's Mastery gym. *Here's hoping there are no further interruptions*, she mused upon walking past the downed Buneary. No matter how hard the fox tried to keep her sight trained on the podium and what lurked beneath it, her eyes always drifted up towards the crater and indent Quilladin had left in the floor and back wall. "You really took one heck of a hit for us, didn't you?" she mouthed quietly.

"Nuh uh, I can totally wield this!"

"Careful careful CAREFUL. AHH!"

Too unwieldy given the Grass type's size, Rattatta's sword teetered forward, causing Quilladin to faceplant into the sandy ground. His froggy friend leapt back as the blade swung forward, slicing through the air where Frogadier had once been and tinkling softly against the ground.

Unsuccessfully stifling a giggle, the Fire type turned her gaze towards the mark her friend had left near the ceiling, just one last time. As her pupils descended back towards the ground below, Nidorina's statue came into view. Where the back of the statue's head crumpled against the wall, something sparkled in the soft sunlight. "That's unexpected." Braixen's ears perked up at the peculiar sight and she moved in closer to investigate. Where the plaster fell away from Nidorina's skull, instead of revealing a hollow cavity, the fox was treated to the sight of a gargantuan milky white stone that lay tucked inside.

"What were you hiding behind those beady little eyes of yours?" Was it a pearl? Even if this was all that the trio came back home with, something this size could keep them content for years! She brushed her fingers against its smooth surface, remaining locked in place when the smoky whirls upon its exterior contorted together. Ribbons of orange bled out into the stone from where her furred fingers pressed against it, mixing with the milky whiteness. Before her very eyes the stone transformed into something resembling a brilliant orange marble, a single whorl twirling from top to bottom within its translucent shell. "Noooooooooo," she laughed in disbelief to herself. This stone, Braixen had seen it before. They all had. It looked identical to the gaudy jewelry that the upper crust back in Kalos had taken to wearing. Those tacky baubles the Venusaur, Charizard, and Blastoise families wore were practically pebbles compared to this thing!

"Frogadier, Quilladin, I think you might want to see this!" She barked out. "So Nidorina did know a thing or two about Mega evolution after all..." the fox hummed aloud, patting her hand against the stone. "Did she just not know how to use it?" At her touch, the stone glowed brilliantly, its soft light spilling out from its spherical confines and onto her fur. The orange light snaked up her arm, coating her in a second skin that tingled and crackled with energy. *Looks more like it was just never meant for her*, Braixen corrected herself. Tail drooping down worriedly between her legs, the vixen's glowing arm bulged in size, becoming laughably disproportionate compared to the rest of her. Her monstrously thick fingers curled around the entirety of Nidorina's statue, the gentle glow now wrapped around her entire body.

Eyes wide with wonder, Quilladin's fingers loosened their grip on Rattatta's sword.

"Well," Frogadier gulped as the fox's shimmering silhouette spread up and out, "she wasn't wrong."

As the vixen's body reached equilibrium, so far as proportions were concerned, gradual and subtle changes began to reshape her form. Arms grew thick with fluff while the fur curled up around her waist flattened, creeping all the way down to her ankles. The tufts of fur poking out of her ears thickened

in size and... ‘Oww!’ Braixen growled when her head punched another hole through the ceiling, portions of the rafters and ceramic tiles dropping at her feet. That hole widened as she continued to ascend, her broad shoulders eventually coming to lift the entire ceiling up with her. Wrapped around her neck like a collar, the gargantuan vixen’s fingers tugged at the roof. It tore to pieces when it crunched between her padded fingertips.

“C-come on, Quilladin,” the Water type nervously advised as the rubble started raining down and punching holes through the floor. Arms wrapped around the armored Grass type’s shoulders, he dragged him towards the sole entrance and exit out of the dilapidated Mastery Gym. “I get the feeling now might be a good time to relocate.” Beneath Braix-, no. In the fading glow, it was clear to Frogadier she may as well be referred to Delphox now. Beneath Delphox’s heavy feet, the hardwood floor warped and splintered, her padded soles and toes leaving noticeable indents. When the duo pulled themselves out of there, the vixen’s waist was level with where the ceiling once had been, her thick legs starting to push out against the walls.

“This...” Delphox turned her head side to side, not entirely certain what to make of the blanket of trees that now only came up to her tummy, “Could take some getting used to.” Her eyes drifted up towards the horizon. All of Viridian City and Pallet Town was laid bare, there was nothing she couldn’t see. Beyond them both, the ocean sparkled like a sapphire, curving out beyond the horizon. “The view is nice at least,” she giggled. Some rustling at her feet signaled those broad ears of hers to swivel towards the source. Letting loose a sigh of relief that stripped trees bare, she waved at the Water and Grass type bumbling out into the overgrown streets. “So this is what Mega evolution is capable of,” she mused. Mega evo stones but the size of marbles had allowed those ancient families to dramatically alter their very forms. Mega evo stones the size of what Nidorina had hoarded away, and that Delphox had activated, well... it probably wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to say even the gods themselves would take notice of the changes that could bring about!

“Did you just Mega evolve, Braixen?” Quilladin piped up, hands cupped around his mouth.

“I think so?” Given that neither her mother nor father had ever hit such exorbitant sizes upon evolving the plain old fashion way, it was probably safe to say it was Mega evolution’s doing. “Heh, and it’s Delphox now.”

“Got it, Braixen!”

Rolling her eyes, the vixen utterly failed to contain the goofy grin spreading wide upon her muzzle.

“... You sure you’re alright?” Frogadier timidly inquired.

Delphox’s smile softened as she propelled herself forward, her massive legs cutting through what remained of Nidorina’s legacy without resistance, those fluffy foxy shins knocking aside rafters, walls, and columns with ease. The Mastery Gym collapsed in on itself after all of two steps, burying their foes beneath tons of rubble and history. Toes splayed out, she set her foot down gently, flanking the frog with two padded digits as tall as he was. “I’m fine, I’m fine.” She bunched her toes together slowly, nudging against Frogadier with a black wall of warm soft fur. “Thanks for asking, though.”

Letting out a pathetic ribbit, Frogadier’s moist skin went dry, the Water type feeling as if he could spontaneously combust any second. “Just making sure, is all.”

Arching her brows, the now Fire and Psychic type opted for a much more subtle approach, courtesy of her newly acquired psionic powers. Curling her fingers against her palm, a dull energy circulated along her furred digits. With a flick of her finger, she directed the energy towards the frog at her feet.

A red hue burned itself into Frogadier's normally dark blue cheeks, he could feel Delphox's fingers curled around his own. Shoving his hands into his cloak's pockets, he very shyly clasped them back.

"So what do we do now?" Quilladin inquired, bending his head as far back as it would go, nearly tipping over onto his back.

"Our Lapras ferry isn't going to be back for a couple days," Delphox replied with a shrug. "I figure we can explore Kanto a bit more before then, check out what's left of Pewter City and Mt. Moon. Hehe," her tail swished mischievously behind her, uprooting the trees behind her in the torrent of wind she kicked up. "Given we already switched roles once, mind if we swap em' around again? I feel like I'd make a pretty good warrior now!" She furrowed her brows menacingly, twiddling her toes against the cracking ground to drive the point home.

"Ooooh oooh ooh I want to be our thief then!" Quilladin giddily circled round Delphox's towering toes, bopping into Frogadier's back and tugging at his cloak.

The Water type simply stared up up up at the vixen's looming face, a self-assured grin plastered across her mug. "Well it's not like we're gonna say no."

"I don't see what you're fussing about Frogadier, I had a ton of fun being a mage!" Waddling beside the multihued frog, Quilladin rubbed his clawed fingers against his favorite souvenir from their trip to Pewter City. His haul from the fossil beds lining the cliffs nearby had been a tiny Omanyte shell, crusted thick with layers of bedrock. Droplets of water collected upon its muddied surface, a damp and heavy fog smothering them like a wet blanket.

The former thief, then warrior, and now mage sighed and kicked at the ground. A fist sized stone bounced off the top of his webbed feet, clinking noisily against the grooves in the beaten path before disappearing into the fog. "Like I know any good spells!" Letting out a puff of air, the moisture around Frogadier's lips condensed together into a bubble. It floated aimlessly into the air above them, drifting out of sight and popping loudly against the craggy mountain pass leading up to Mt. Moon. Geodudes hugging the sides of the pass murmured to themselves at the unfamiliar sound. "Fat lot of good a Bubble will do us. That and it seems a little," his eyes bounced to the sides of his sockets, peering back behind them, "unnecessary? With the way Delphox has been carrying us through every encounter, it's like, why bother?" The duo's footsteps echoed softly between the slanted rock walls.

"Someone's a little jealous!" Quilladin giggled, eliciting a soft bap against his cheek. Rubbing at his cheek, he swatted back at Frogadier. "So maybe she's a better warrior than the both of us, it's no biggie! We're a team after all, we work best together!"

"You're stretching the definition of 'teamwork' there a little don't you think?" Hard to call it that when one person does all the work. Head cocked to the side, the Water type let out a wry laugh. Beside him, the roly polly Grass type had taken a shining to his woefully oversized thief cloak. Trailing behind

him on the beaten path, it dragged along a layer of dust and pebbles that nipped at Quilladin's heels. "Hmmm?"

Bumping against the frog's side, the turtle chestnut thing drew his dagger and waved it threateningly at the fog rolling out before them.

"What are you?" The echoes bouncing between the walls became muddled and overlapped on themselves. Even as both Quilladin and Frogadier came to a halt, pebbles and puddles continued to tink and splash under some unseen gait.

A multitude of silhouettes materialized in the mist, growing in size as they advanced upon the two adventurers. "Never seen the likes of you before," the Growlithe's dry and raspy voice rang out. A sprig of Pecha berries jutted out from between teeth, its tip glowing hot like a candle in the dark.

Lips curled down into a pouty frown, Quilladin clung the Omanyte fossil close to his chest.

"What's it to you?" Frogadier croaked back, eyeing the Houndours and Poocheyenas that followed behind him with distrust.

"Now now now, no need to be so defensive," Growlithe smirked with a shrug of his shoulders, casually strolling towards the Kalos natives. "We're an understanding lot here, not like we're gonna hold it against you that you didn't know this road has a toll."

"Pardon our ignorance." Sincerity drained dry, every word that came tumbling out of the frog's mouth was blunt and uninviting. For every step Growlithe took towards them, both he and Quilladin took two steps back.

Not so very sneakily, the armored Grass type tucked the fossil into his pocket. "H-how much?"

"Heh." Wooden clubs smacked loudly against padded palms as Growlithe's party advanced. "Depends. How much you carrying?"

Arching his brows, Frogadier let out a tired sigh. "Welp, this has dragged on long enough." Hand held high above his head, he snapped two webbed fingers together, his damp digits sliding against one another noisily. The fog all around them dissipated, the Water type's Haze spell called off. *Okay, have to admit.* He couldn't help but smile when the Fire and Dark type's heads started to tilt back. *That was a pretty good setup.* He leaned back against a foxy toe as tall as he was and slapped a hand against it.

Gobsmacked, Growlithe and company's jaws began to strain when they started to take in the sheer size of the colossus smiling down at them. All this time, she was hiding in the mist?! The vixen's fluffy legs brushed against both sides of the mountain pass, house sized boulders caught in the knots of her fur.

"Delightful as it's been making your acquaintance," Delphox rumbled, lifting up a paw. Its shadow swallowed the highwaymen as it hovered above them, its black fur and padded soles coming to replace the cloudy sky. "We're kind of in a bit of hurry." Setting it down gently, a torrent of displaced air blew out from beneath it. Violent howls of wind that stripped the stone walls bare accompanied the rumblings of her footfall. "The Clefairy's and Clefables only dare to venture out come sunset, and Mt. Moon is still a ways off. Can't have you wasting precious daylight for us." Scrunching her toes together, fissures spread out from beneath her furry digits. Lifting back up her paw, Growlithe and his entire crew lay flattened, their konked out forms pressed down into their own personal craters.

Only one survivor remained standing amongst the bandits, a Poocheyena who had had the sweet fortune to be spared courtesy of splayed out Delphox toes. Shivering, he dared to look up at the Mega evolved Pokemon. A flash of her teeth and swish of a tail that sent an avalanche of boulders barreling down behind her was the response he received. “C-carry on,” he whimpered. Tossing his club aside, the Poocheyena knelt down and scraped his hands along the muddied ground. Closing his eyes, the Dark type dabbed his fingers against his eyelids, drawing swirls atop them before laying down.

“Sneak sneak sneak...” Quilladin sneaked aloud towards their fallen foes, showing his best friends how true thievery was done! Rustling through pants pockets and vests, the Grass type had an astounding one hundred percent steal rate!

Nestling the back of his head against the furred wall of flesh behind him, Frogadier ribbited in surprise as it surged forward like a wave, nudging him along.

“Unnecessary?” Toes spread out around the frog, Delphox clenched him gently between two. “Is that what’s been weighing on your mind lately?”

“Well... it’s not like I’m good for anything else at this point. I mean sure,” he waved his hand about his wrist, swirls of fog gathering around his fingertips. “The parlor tricks are nice and all, but it’s not like they make all that much of a difference. You don’t need our help to win every fight there is or see all that there is to see anymore.”

“Very true.” Delphox set her hands upon her knees and leaned forward, her warm crimson eyes washing over him gently. “But just because I can, doesn’t mean I want to. I’d much rather share those sights and fights with you and Quilladin than monopolize them for myself.” With a stifled giggle, purple ribbons of Psychic energy collected around her fingertips.

Frogadier croaked softly when he felt a manifestation of her hand clasp tightly around his own. “Alright, alright, alright,” he repeated while trying his best to hide his shy smile.

“Delphox, Frogadier, look what I found!”

Quilladin bumbling towards them, Frogadier’s face flushed red as furred fox toes curled around him. “So much for subtlety,” he mumbled into her form.

Balanced between his nubby arms, the Grass type’s haul of loot jostled dangerously in his flimsy grasp. “I found gold coins, a bat, a bracelet, some pants, a-”

“Q-quilladin.” Wiggling himself free from Delphox’s embrace, the frog plodded over towards his thieving friend. “Quilladin put those back where you found them.”