

Chapter 48: The Tale of the Flaming Vortex Part 2.

A yellow paw rammed Noctis' face, the Charizard grunting away towards his home. Sweats dripped down his cheeks, his Lucario friend jumping back and sliding across.

Noctis panted, bruises littering throughout. He glared, forming a fist.

Travis tilted his head. "Are you alright?"

Noctis stared at his hands, those fingers being more defined than his Charmeleon self. Even his claws were different! They used to be large and mighty: Small and shy they were deduced to. Doubt anyone would even notice them, only he would. He formed his fists, shaking his head.

"I'm...I'm fine." A scratchy gruff shrieked his voice. "I can keep going."

Travis lowered his ears. "I...really think we should take a break. You've been pushing yourself a lot right now. I'm scared that you'll—"

Noctis stomped, the concrete cracking. "NO!" Snarled. "I said I can keep going, god dammit!" He brung his fists up. "Now fucking fight me already, Travis! Don't hold back, either!"

The Lucario gazed at the dragon for a moment, sighing. "Alright then." He took deep breaths, crouching. He then jotted towards the dragon, his paw curling into a fist.

Noctis swung his fist forward, but Travis ducked underneath and uppercutted him. Noctis gnashed his teeth, groaning. "Gah!" He backed away, spitting out saliva. "Come on. You can do better than that." The lizard lifted his hands, beckoning.

Travis dashed forward, yellow auras encasing his paws. Noctis lifted his head back, purple flames emanating around his maw before the Lucario smacked him, the lizard spitting his draconic flames to the side. Travis Force Palmed Noctis over and over, the dragon growling in pain. The Lucario then kicked Noctis back, the Charizard roaring.

"COME THE FUCK ON!" Noctis stomped, cracks forming around his foot, blood dripping down his bruises. "PUT MORE POWER INTO YOUR MOVES, DAMMIT!"

"..."

The two proceeded: Travis dodging Noctis' moves while providing intense jabs and kicks one after another. Noctis growled and snarled and screeched—Pain coursing through his sluggish maneuvers left and right.

Soon, Noctis was coughing—*shaking*, even. The lizard was on his knees, spitting blood while growling, closing a single eye. Travis stared, lowering his arms. He whimpered.

Noctis gritted his teeth. “Why—” he gagged out blood further, his growl intensified. “Why did you stop!?” He moved forward before gasping, falling down afterwards.

“N-Noctis!” Travis rushed over to the Charizard’s aid.

The front door opened, Dr. Yvonne exiting before eyeing the gruesome scenario. “NOCTIS!” He hurled over, sitting on his knees and inspecting the dragon. The young man then frowned at the jackal. “Why did you hurt him so much? I thought this was supposed to be a friendly fight!”

“I—” he winced, his feelers twitching, his eyes closing.

“I, grr—” Noctis pushed himself up. “I asked him to go rough on me, jackass.” Once up, he started shifting side to side, groping his head. His vision going wonky, his belly stirring with eruption, his fragile hand feeling like a feather instead of something warm. “Ugh...” His eyes half-closed, everything feeling as though he should melt into the ground.

Noctis eyed the now standing scientist and jackal, panting heavily. The man patted the lizard’s arm, gazing with concern.

“Come inside, Noctis. You’ve done enough training for the day.”

The Charizard growled, pushing the man’s hand away. “I can, ngh, continue training whenever I want!”

“Noctis, please.” The scientist rubbed his hand. “I don’t want you to bleed further.” Dr. Yvonne sighed. “Don’t push yourself, my friend.”

Travis nodded. “Y-Yes.” He stroked his cloak. “I’d...rather not have my friends in the hospital because of my brutality...” His cloak shifted to the side by the wind.

Noctis smacked his lips. “But I NEED to get strong. If I don’t push myself, then I’ll never keep my title as the Flaming Vortex!”

“Not while you’re all bruised up and feeling close to passing out,” Dr. Yvonne stated, folding his arms. “Please, just come rest for the time being.”

“...” Noctis snarled, gripping his fist. “Alright, fine! I just hope I remain as the winner in later tournaments, then.” He headed towards the house, Yvonne and Travis following along.

“I’m certain that you will!” Travis says with encouragement, his feelers going haywire. He gripped his appendages. *Shut it.*

. . .

Noctis groaned, jumping back from an Empeon's Aqua Jet, sliding across the stadium's field. The crowd cheered, Yvonne and Travis being at the front row seats wooing with enthusiasm.

Noctis frowned at his opponent: The Nativu Empeon, Luxury, sliding back to her trainer, Golden.

Golden formed a fist, jolting their elbow down. "Great job, Luxury. Keep it up!" the trainer said, their tone low.

Luxury kept her glance on the Charizard, nodding. "Will do, Master." Her arms raised, standing still.

Noctis panted, purple flames coating around his maw. *I can do this...* He flung his Dragon Breath, the draconic energy roaring across the field.

Golden snapped their fingers. "Dodge with Aqua Jet!"

Luxury encased herself in aquatic auras, swerving over the dragon flames. She rammed the Charizard, Noctis groaning. He shielded himself, being pushed back. The lizard smacked the penguin away with his tail, the Empeon sliding across the ground.

Travis and Yvonne lifted their fist up, the scientist wearing red clothing as the two cheered. "You can do it, Noctis! Go get 'em!" Yvonne exclaimed.

"Yeah, show 'em who's the Flaming Vortex!" Travis yelled. The Lucario's appendages twitched, blinking. *Hmm?*

The Charizard jabbed Luxury's flippers before she smacked him away with metallic claws, kicking him afterwards. The Lucario squinted. *Is...something really wrong with him? Will he actually lose this fight?* His ears lowered. *Is that why my aura is acting up?*

Noctis gnashed his teeth, his vision blurred. His maw was engulfed by flames, the dragon glaring at the penguin.

Travis' appendages spasmed further. *No.* The Lucario shook his head. *I don't believe that: He'll win! He got this!* He bit his lower lip. *I...know he does.*

"Travis?" The Lucario blinked, eyeing Dr. Yvonne. "Are you alright?"

"Erm..." Travis nodded. "Yeah. I'm fine."

The Charizard unleashed his stream of flames, Luxury raising her flippers and spreading her legs. Her trainer spread their arm, their gray glasses leaning forward. "Wave Crash!" The

Empoleon nodded to the command, submerging in immense water. She dashed towards the lizard, zipping around the Flamethrower.

Noctis widened his eyes, enlarging the swirling fire. He turned his head, Luxury rushing closer to him. *Come on, come on—HIT!* His brows furrowed. *HIIIIIIIIIT!!!!* The grass burnt to the crisp, yet the Empoleon moved further and further from the flames.

“JUMP!” Golden shouted.

Luxury smirked, leaping up and twirling. She flipped herself forward, ramming her flipper against Noctis’ neck.

Noctis gagged: His flames dying, the lizard soaring back within seconds. He flailed around the ground, rolling before crashing into a wall. Smoke rose from the collision, clouding the lizard.

The crowd gasped, standing up in intrigue. Travis’ paw pressed his chest while Yvonne bit his fingernails, sweat dripping down their cheeks. Luxury slid across the ground, her aquatic auras fading.

After what felt like hours, the smoke vanished, the Charizard grunting and walking forward. He stroked his arm: Panting, growling—even shivering. Shivering? He blinked, pausing. The Charizard eyed the Emperor Pokémon: The lack of bruises, scratches, bleedings. None of them were there. Luxury squinted, her flippers up and prepared.

Noctis’ vision became hazier: Shaking left to right, right to left. The crowd eyed him, confusion circulating their minds. Noctis squinted his eyes for a brief moment, gripping his arm. His eyes then widened, all of his movements vanished.

“...Sh-Shit.” He fell, trembling.

“Whoa!” The Intellicate Inteleon grabbed his microphone, pointing at the window. “At a shocking turn of an event, Golden and her Luxury have beaten the Flaming Vortex, officially moving onto the next match!”

Noctis’ eyes quaked, the dragon staring at the wall across as some of the crowd shot up with cheers. Travis and Yvonne stared at their friend: The man sighing as the Lucario trembling, melancholy flowing through them.

He...lost? Travis glared to the side. *No. I don’t believe my aura was right about this. This is just...just...* He groaned, his appendages twitching. *Unfortunate circumstances. Yeah. That’s what this is.*

Noctis closed his eyes, taking the deepest breath of his life. He got up, grunting. He walked forward to Golden and Luxury, a crooked smile forming.

“That was a good match we had there.” His eyes closed, nodding. “It’s clear that you two’s bond as Trainer and Pokémon was so strong, it even defeated the Flaming Vortex himself!” He pointed at himself, chuckling.

Golden and Luxury eyed each other for a brief moment before the trainer quirked their brow, folding their arms. “That wasn’t us at our ‘full potential’.”

Noctis blinked. “I...” His head tilted. “Come again?”

Golden tapped their chin. “How do I say this nicely...” Their throat was cleared. “We thought with a grand title like yours, you’ll put our bonds to the test.” Sighed. “Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case because of how sluggish you were against Luxury.”

Noctis lifted his brow. “I mean, wasn’t I sluggish before?”

“From what we’ve seen of your previous fights: No, you weren’t.” Golden adjusted their glasses. “You were pretty speedy and always had the upper hand via a trick by the end.” They pressed their glasses back. “This time around, you weren’t dodging our attacks. Barely even did any damage to Luxury.”

Golden’s Empoleon folded her flippers, the trainer laying their hand beneath their chin. “This fight doesn’t feel like any others I’ve seen you in.” Their head tilted. “What happened?” Golden’s glasses leaned forward. “Or...”

Noctis perked his head up. “Or...what?”

Golden pushed their glasses back: Glistening as their hands slipped inside of their pockets. “Was your title just overhyped *lies*?”

Noctis gazed, lips sealed. His heart beated, his expression motionless.

“...”

The Charizard walked past the two, eyeing the double door exit. Golden blinked, eyeing him. “I wonder if I’ve hit a nerve there.”

Luxury squinted at them. “You certainly have,” she said in her language.

The dragon stomped past Travis and Yvonne, the two eyeing him. The jackal opened his mouth and—

"I slipped up," Noctis said, stopping halfway. "I'll...I'll do better next time." He eyed his two friends, others being beside them gazing down at the lizard. His lips quivered, smiling. He proceeded through exit, Travis pressing his paw against his chest.

Noctis...

. . .

From there, Noctis went through many losses in each All Star Singles: Pummeled into the wall, thrown across the field—even flown into the air for a brief moment before crashing towards the ground! The audiences winced and grimaced at the Flaming Vortex's losing streaks, his friends warping in dread at it all.

Noctis widened his eyes at them, feeling as though his reign was being depleted rapidly. His title was devolving. But he kept going, hoping to earn himself first place in the tournament again. Until...

"GAAAH!"

The Charizard fell on his back, attempting to move up before a purple monkey pinned him with two tails. Noctis glared at the pitch black sky: Quivering, stroking the grass.

"The winner of this match is Swifty the Ambipom!" the announcers exclaimed, crowds erupting in celebration.

"YEAAAHH! YOU GO, SWIFTY!!!" one guy screamed.

"THE FLAMING VORTEX IS OLD SCHOOL, NOW! SWIFTY IS WHERE IT'S AT!" an Orthworm yelled, his arms hovering over his mouth.

Noctis' eye twitched.

"Yeah, the Flaming Vortex isn't how he used to be anymore!" one woman stated, sighing.

Swifty gasped, her hand pressing her maw, bringing her tails back. "Oh my goodness gracious, I didn't think so many people would be this cheerful about me defeatin' the great ol' Vortex himself!" She turned towards Noctis, leaving her hand out. "Speakin' of, you did a mighty fine job during our match! Even though you weren't dodgin' my attacks, I still had fun!" The Ambipom smiled.

The Charizard looked down at his hands—at *himself*: The belly, the fingers, the tail...Even the wings too made him wince in disgust. Tears welled up, clouding his vision.

...*Why?*

Swiftly tilted her head. "Is somethin' wrong?"

"Tch!" Noctis gritted his teeth, smacking Swiftly's hand away.

The Ambipom yelped. "What was that for!?" The Charizard didn't answer, flying towards the exit while groaning, tears falling behind. Travis and Yvonne eyed the lizard from their seats, sorrow spreading across. The Ambipom rubbed her hand, glaring. "Jerk..."

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Tapping. No sounds.

Tapping again...Still no sounds.

"Noctis? I want to talk." Travis lowered his ears, tapping the dragon's door yet again. This time, he heard something: Weeped, whined, and whimpered. The Lucario turned towards the young scientist, looking up and sighing. "Can you help me talk with him? Please...?"

Yvonne adjusted his brown coat, nodding. The man knocked next. "Noctis? Travis and I would like to talk to you. Please, we want to know what's wrong."

Once the weeping faded, a 'click' ushered into existence before the door opened: A tall Charizard stood before them, fresh tears sliding down his cheeks. His lips shook.

"Come in..." The lizard walked over to his bed, the two following him. The bed shrieked Noctis' weight, the dragon snarling. He punched his bed, tears flooding. "SHUT UP!"

Travis and Yvonne lifted their arms up.

"Calm down," Yvonne said, sitting beside the Charizard afterwards. "Tell me, what's wrong?"

Noctis sniffled, Travis sitting on the other side. "*Everything* is wrong with me." He looked at his hands. "My hands," then his wings. "My wings," his belly. "This stupid fucking round belly here," and lastly: himself. "The overall heaviness of my body. Just...everything feels so *shit*."

Yvonne patted Noctis' back. "That's okay. It's normal to feel weirded out upon evolving. Travis went through a similar case, too."

Noctis gritted his teeth, smacking Yvonne's arm away. "No, you don't get it: I can *never* get used to this new body! I hate everything about it. From how sluggish I move to how heavy I feel. It sucks..." Whimpered. "It absolutely *sucks*. I..." His teeth clenched. "I wished I never evolved in the first damn place!" Noctis covered his face, tears landing on his legs.

Yvonne and Travis eyed each other before the two hugged the lizard, the latter being mindful of his chest spike. Travis gazed off, caressing Noctis' back. "I'm...sorry, Noctis. I feel like it's my fault for telling you about my aura senses. It's what led you to evolve."

Yvonne shook his head. "Travis, don't blame yourself over this."

The Lucario squinted. "No. I was *prompting* him to evolve, and then he did during that same day. I...take full blame for this." Yvonne stared at his friends, the distress and melancholy spreading like a disease.

Noctis... The man groped his shirt, his glasses tilting. The three continued in the huddle, Noctis keeping his face hidden.

. . .

Noctis exhales, opening his eyes while staring at the ceiling. "From there, history writes itself: Yvonne doing a ton of research on Transvians, dedicated to turning myself into one so badly." Waving his hand around, Noctis shakes his head. "And then the lab incident happened and such." He glares at the fox. "You know the rest."

Ramon lowers his ears. "Oh..." He holds his paws together. "I'm...sorry that you have to carry the burden of evolution. Truly."

Noctis sighs. "It's whatevs. It happened, my close friend is dead because of it, and now I just have to deal with it." He glares at his Charmeleon self on the portrait, tapping his leg. His hands then sit behind his head, gazing up at the ceiling again. "Life and its circus act, am I right?" Ramon blinks, twiddling with his claws. Noctis rolls his eyes. "That's rhetorical. You don't need to answer."

"O-Oh..."

Silence.

Perhaps an awkward one between them.

The Zoroark strokes his arm while the Charizard waves his feet up and down in boredom.

"By the way, I was supposed to call Travis if I were to see you in person. That's why your name is familiar," Noctis says.

Ramon's fur stands up, his lips quivering. "Wh-What!?"

Noctis waves his hand. "Don't worry yourself, kid. I won't tell him since I don't believe that crap about you being the cause." He turns. "He's been overreacting like crazy since Xander's death, believing you destroyed the facility since the news rumored of a lone survivor being in there."

Ramon stares off. "Ri-Right..."

Noctis shakes his head. "I *guess* it could be plausible that you caused the incident, but like: Why the hell would you *remain* in the building you've destroyed?"

Ramon jumps forward, snapping his claws. "I know, right!? I couldn't wrap my head around that logic when he thinks I'm lying!"

The Charizard quirks his brow. "Wait, did he *ACTUALLY* assume you were purposefully staying at the Prospective Institute???"

"Yes."

Noctis rams his face against his hand. "What an idiot, man." Sighs. "I'll put some sense into him about this petty revenge crap he's doing." His fist bangs his chest. "You have my word."

Ramon nods meekly. "Th-Thanks, Noctis. It...It um..." He sniffles, tears crawling up.

"Eh?" Noctis then widens his eyes from the Zoroark's sudden hug, the fox weeping on him. "Whoa!"

"I-It...means a *lot* to me that someone who's aware of the incident doesn't think I'm the cause." Ramon clenches his teeth, tears dripping down.

Noctis stares, his hand shaking while he pats the fox's head. "It's, uh, no problem, kid."

Ramon blinks for a moment, backing away. "S-Sorry about that!" He wipes away the tears. "I just...needed that release after all I've been through."

"I'd imagine." Noctis grabs the remote on the table. "Wanna watch some movies or something?"

"Um." Ramon taps his chin, lips sealed. "...Yeah. I would want that, actually. I...need something to relax for once." His claws poke each other.

The Charizard clicks a button, snickering. "I feel ya." The two look at the TV: An Eldegoss dancing to a crowd of Leafeons admiring their movements while hazy vocals play. Noctis scrunches his face. "What the fuck???"

Ramon snorts. "Looks like we're in the middle of some, uh—" his head tilts. "Interesting film or something???"

“Nah, this is some weird ass music video. Changing this right now.” Noctis hits another button as Ramon sighs, succumbing to tranquility.

. . .

Silence.

Everyone in the PC room is: Delia resting on her son’s arm, Merlin stares at Ada while stroking his staff, X glances out of the window while his arms fold, Serene and Ethan stick close together as the Leafeon pats her brother’s back.

Justin and Ada remain in their retrospective beds along with the other four: Quiet and still, their eyes shut.

“Ngh...” Justin groans.

“Ugh...” Ada groans.

The five perk up, eyeing the teens. The two open their eyes, moving forward sluggishly.

“Where...are we?” Ada asks.

“ADA!” Merlin shouts before he, Serene, and Ethan hug her.

The girl yelps. “Huh!?”

Justin blinks in confusion. “What’s going o—WHOA!” a hug latches from his mother and X, the two teens eyeing everyone as a whole. Tears immediately rise up, the two trembling, their lips lifting.

“Oh my god, Justin!” Delia exclaims, crying on the boy’s chest. “I’m so, so happy to see you again!!!”

“We miss you two so much, Ada!” Merlin says, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Justin and Ada’s lips quiver, the two embracing the hug, nuzzling everyone.

“I’m happy to see you all again, too!” Ada says.

“S-Same here, fam!” Justin follows.

Tears of joy exchanges between them, everyone wailing and crying in the biggest relief of their lives.