

The stale, dusty air, fading paint on the walls, much of the equipment showing signs of heavy use after only a few years, and a dry yet musky scent barely ventilated by the aging fans of the building that had a few dust bunnies clogging the ducts. Yet week after week on a near-daily basis, the young wolf still attended this gym to train. But after a recent, but brief encounter with one of the regulars, he began to have second thoughts about keeping up this healthy habit. Sure, he's been teased at here and there by the larger and more experienced boxers, but Rocky always managed to shrug it off and channel it as motivation to better himself.

But this last encounter was different, despite being similar to those prior.

Perhaps it was all that teasing in the past bubbling up until it became too much to bear. Maybe it was that he always felt smaller compared to many of the other trainees at the gym, despite him building up a rigorous training regime and continuing to improve his boxing skills. Or, simply put, he never competed for one reason or another.

Whatever the reason was, the bear that decided to poke fun at his smaller build while he trained on the heavy bag broke him. As the grey and white wolf finished packing up his gloves for the afternoon, he glanced around to make sure the bear didn't see him; Rocky wanted others to know he was strong, but he let out a sigh and began to choke up as he dashed to the lockers.

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Just then, he felt someone grip him tight by the shoulder and yanked him back, the force stopping him in his tracks.

"Hey you!" The mysterious person greeted as they wrapped the wolf up in a bear hug from behind and lifting him up for a moment.

Rocky started to squirm but stopped once he noticed those greyish white, green striped arms around him. "Gah! H-Hey Ricky." In that moment, it was as if the tiger behind him squeezed out all his anxieties that had built up inside.

The tiger turned him around by the shoulders but kept his paws on them. Ricky grinned but it soon faded once he noticed some of the tan fur around his eyes darkened around the tear ducts. "You okay, dude?"

He sighed, trying to keep cool about his emotions. "No..."

Ricky crinkled his nose and pushed up his glasses with a finger. He pulled Rocky off to the side and crouched down low enough to where they were eye-to-eye, though there wasn't much of a height difference between them.

The young wolf explained, starting with his most recent encounter with the bear and working back as far as he could remember. As he talked, Ricky kept his attention, giving Rocky some reassuring pets occasionally.

Once Rocky finished up, and left smiling and comforted by his presence, Ricky gave his thoughts on the matter. "Look...You're not going to be the next heavyweight world champ overnight. Hell, I don't think I'm good enough to compete yet and even then, I may not want to. But don't let anyone tell you you can't or judge you because of your size. I mean, look at me," he said as he stood up and gestured his body, "I may be an inch or two taller than you, but I ain't that much bigger than you; not all the best boxers are these meaty heavyweights."

As Ricky said this, Rocky couldn't help but giggle when he noticed what was on Ricky's cut-off shirt: an orange, flexing, tiger in red shorts and a snapback that had the text 'Show Your Stripes' behind the figure.

He smirked and chuckled at Rocky's sudden mood change. "What're you giggling about?"

"You would wear that here, wouldn't you?" He replied, pointing to the shirt.

Ricky looked down then rolled his eyes. "Oh, pfft, well *duh*, why wouldn't I?" It was then he noticed what Rocky wore: yellow shorts and a dark blue tank top that was one of those mock gym shirts that was Pokémon themed. On it, there was an anthropomorphized Buizel mid bicep curl with white text around it reading 'Water Gym' and 'Est. 1995' below it. "Heh, and *you* would were that here, wouldn't you?"

"Of course! Buizel's my favorite Pokémon and I saw this and just *had* to get it I mean you don't know how hard it is to find something like this like--"

Ricky gripped the wolf's shoulders again, giggling. "Okay! Okay! I get it, dude!"

"S-Sorry...I tend to get a little...excited with that stuff, I guess."

"It's fine, dude." He let out a quick breath to calm himself from this sudden excitement, but it did make him happy that Rocky seemed to be feeling better. "Anyway!" He began, "I just got here and I'm sure you're still running on a bit of a high, yes?"

"I was until...well...yeah," he muttered, rubbing his arm as he looked off to the side.

"Hey Rocky?" He asked, placing a gentle paw on the wolf's shoulder, "You want to warm up with me and maybe we could claim a ring to spar?"

The wolf glowed with excitement, wagging his tail as his ears perked up. He immediately glomped the tiger and nearly knocked him over, but Ricky kept his balanced from the sudden affection.

"Okay! Okay! Easy there, kiddo!"

Once he peeled off the affectionate wolf, they gathered their bags and made their way to the cardio equipment.

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As they stretched out the shaky feeling in their legs from pounding out a quick run on the treadmills, Ricky noticed how much more focused Rocky seemed than when he first found him. They hardly talked since starting their warm up, but this wasn't a casual workout day at the gym, and Ricky wanted to respect that. Once they finished, Ricky pulled out his orange wraps and got to work on binding his paws; it was then he noticed Rocky already bound his paws and wrists with white wraps, though he hoped he'd have the honor of doing that for the wolf. Maybe next time.

"So," he began as he wrapped up his right paw, "I'm sure you've been here a while already, but do you want to do some bag work or shadow boxing first? Or would you rather jump in the ring now and start clobbering me?"

Rocky giggled at that last question. He scratched his head and thought a moment, somewhat mesmerized by the tiger's careful binding method. "I'm find with whatever you decide, bud."

Ricky sighed and muttered something about always being the one to make the decision. He then began to work on binding his left paw when he thought of something; while it would be beneficial for him to practice his form and movement first, he wouldn't mind gloving up with Rocky right away.

He paused his binding for a moment, though was about done with that anyway. "How often do you get a chance to step in the ring? Not just here but...anywhere?"

The wolf's ears drooped. "Not a whole lot, actually...and definitely not here."

He finished wrapping up and crouched low again like their first encounter. "Want me to be your first partner here?"

"Yes!" He shouted, though immediately covered his mouth with his paws, hoping he wasn't too loud. Still, his perky ears and wagging tail didn't hide his excitement.

"Alright," he chuckled as he stood. Grabbing his bag and bottle, he motioned for Rocky to follow. "Well, let's get ourselves a ring then, yeah?"

The wolf began to follow close with eagerness, only to dart back to grab his gear once he realized his momentary forgetfulness, then catch up with the tiger.

It took some time to schedule in a sparring session, but Ricky was thankful they didn't have to wait too long for one of the two rings to become available. An elephant and a grey cat were just finishing up as the tiger and wolf approached. He didn't recognize either of them as regulars, nor one being a coach, but what little of the spar he saw was curious due to the clear difference in weight class and height; he sure as hell didn't want to assume anything either and decided to let them go about their business as they cleared out of the ring.

The tiger and wolf hopped in as soon as they could while also making sure no one else decided to just jump in without a reservation. They both took their shirts off, though Rocky hesitated a moment. But with a little encouragement, and a reminder that he's fought in the ring topless plenty of times prior, he eventually complied as his strong, athletic build was in full view.

Ricky tried not to stare as took off his glasses and gloved up, and he *definitely* tried not to get aroused while in the most open space in the gym. He was sure Rocky was in the same predicament.

Once they were ready and agreed they'd just keep going until they can't anymore, they stared each other down for a moment, though both couldn't help but grin. Then, out of nowhere, Rocky nuzzled Ricky's nose before they batted their gloves together.

"*You cute fucker.*"

They started slow, circling each other and bobbing around until one of them threw the first punch. Ricky took this time to get his head in the game after what Rocky pulled.

Ricky was first to strike. He managed to pop a couple jabs right to the wolf's snout once he found an opening. He'd normally follow that up with a cross or a hook, but he held back, wanting to see how confident Rocky was first.

It didn't take long to find out.

Rocky immediately struck back with a couple jabs of his own. While those didn't land, exactly, his quick but powerful underhooks followed through, smacking the tiger's right side.

"Oof! Nice one." Ricky hopped to the side and sent a couple jabs to the wolf, bobbing around right after that sudden blow.

Rocky managed to block and tried to keep up with the tiger's movements, popping a quick jab here and there when he could.

Their spar started slow at first after their initial exchange. They kept circling with each other while trying to fake each other out, though did exchange some punches in between faking each other out. Ricky didn't want to go all-out with the wolf, not yet anyway; he could detect a sense of timidity during their stalemate, but was glad Rocky showed some aggression.

Ricky lowered his gloves just under his chin. "Just keep throwing punches, dude, even if you know th--gah!" He just managed to get his arms back up to block a punch, though was quite surprised at the power behind it. He countered and shuffled sideways right after that.

"Like that?"

"Keep it up, pup!"

He then experimented by throwing some quick jabs while stepping forward. It did make him smile to see Rocky realize his intention with how he sidestepped to avoid getting backed into the ropes, then countering in the same manner.

But now they were close enough where Ricky could provoke the wolf a lot more. He did so by firing a quick hook shot right for Rocky's head. Then another. Then another.

Eventually, Rocky ducked under one and countered with several, hard hook shots right to the tiger's ribs. He followed that up with an uppercut to Ricky's abs.

All that did make him stagger but didn't knock him down. "*You got some power there, bud.*" As the wolf pelted him with close body shots, Ricky kept shuffling side to side while trying to keep close. He'd counter with a head shot when he could, though getting some close-quarter body shots in proved tricky because of the height difference. Normally, he'd take better measures to get out of this situation; it's the easiest way for

your opponent to score punches and, possibly, a knockdown. Yet he allowed Rocky to use him as a punching bag while keeping the wolf on his toes; in the end, the sore and bruised muscles will be worth the offered therapy for one of his closest friends.

Once this went on for a while, Ricky began to look for an opening and, soon enough, he found it. He countered one of Rocky's hook shots with two, quick hooks of his own right for the wolf's head.

That set him off, if the wolf's growls were any indication and the fury of jabs that followed.

He could tell Rocky started getting frustrated. He kept his arms up and just blocked what the wolf dished out, though he could only do so for so long and sidestepped again, countering when he could. He bit down on his mouthguard as he tried to keep up with Rocky's speed and precision; it sure as hell started to tire him out. *"Where the hell was this, dude!? You're a natural!"*

Next thing he knew, his stripy tail brushed against the middle rope and, soon enough, Rocky got him where no boxer wants to be during a fight. He panted hard as he tried to get out of this situation, though he wasn't sure how tired out Rocky was by this point either. Still, he had to admit the wolf gave it his all, even if this was just a spar. But it got to a point where he needed to slow the pup down before one of them gets hurt or they get thrown out for taking a spar too far.

Ricky then did the first thing he could think of and threw his body forward to get the wolf in a clinch to stop him dead in his tracks.

Rocky couldn't register what just happened until the clinch, pinning his raised arms between their heated, battered bodies. He knew full-well Ricky meant to stop his momentum for a moment, but he didn't want the feeling of those stripy, fluffy arms embracing him to end. He panted hard as well and didn't realize how out of breath he got from the spar, choosing to just let his head droop forward and rest against the tiger's chest and his gloves.

Ricky panted hard as well, he too getting out of breath. He just stared off blankly at the old, faded wall of the gym as he kept the wolf there. "You...you done?"

He nodded and wiggled his arms out so he could just hold the tiger.

He reached for his mouth and let his mouthguard fall into his gloved paw and released the wolf. "Let's clear out of here in case we're holding up someone," he said, glancing around the outside of the ring.

They both stepped out and began to de-glove, the process being tricky at first, naturally. "So how you feeling, Rocky?" The tiger asked as they packed up and put their shirts back on.

"Better! That's for sure," the wolf replied, "Sorry I, uh, got a little too into it near the end," he chuckled.

"That's perfectly fine; you got some good power and speed for someone your size." He winced when he lightly rubbed his torso. "Definitely gonna feel this in the morning," he murmured.

Rocky's ears splayed. "Will you be okay?"

"I'll be fine, dude," he chuckled.

After getting a good post-workout stretch and a quick bodyweight workout, they headed back to the locker room, casually chatting about training and whatever else came to mind. Ricky never took off his wraps, even after they changed out of their workout clothes; not like it mattered too much, plus he liked wearing them anyway. Rocky noticed but decided not to ask. However, he did wonder how long the tiger's been at the gym tonight.

"Aren't you going to stay a little longer? Shower up?"

Ricky's ears turned upon hearing that as he unwrapped his paws. "Eh, I could probably stay longer, though I usually just shower at home...I was going to go about my usual routine for today until I bumped into you," he said with a grin.

Rocky smiled back. "I'm glad you did."

As they talked and changed, Rocky tried not to glance over too much at the half-naked tiger next to him, though it was some handsome eye candy after the rough day he's had. But the tiger's voice snapped him out of his daze.

"Rocky?"

The wolf shook his head, realizing he's been caught staring for too long. "Shit! Sorry!" Ricky was already changed by the time he snapped out of it, which made him realize he didn't have a shirt on; thankfully he wasn't in his underwear, else he damn well knew Ricky would notice his growing arousal. As if he did it in one, fluid motion, he finished changing, packed up, and slammed the locker shut as he began to dart out in a panic.

But he didn't get far when he was yanked back by the tiger.

"Woah! Dude, you're not gonna wait up for me?" He asked with a nervous chuckle.

Rocky just stood there, embarrassed, nervous, not noticing when the tiger released him to finish up, nor the comforting arm around his shoulder. He did, however, notice the tiger's deep, yet calming voice; while it eased the tension he felt inside, it only made Ricky more attractive to him.

"You wanna hang out for a bit at my place? I don't have much to offer, but I think we can figure out something."

He looked up at him and gave him a quick hug. "I don't mind."

"Well, let's go then," he replied, rubbing the wolf's back as they headed out. He didn't know what or why Rocky acted so odd out of the blue back there, but that didn't matter; what mattered to him was getting his friend's confidence back, and he hoped Rocky will maintain that confidence throughout his journey.