

The whole 'exploration team' gig really wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Sure, your average guild sold it well. As well as a Kecleon peddling whatever he grabbed from the nearest dungeon. Once you saw a team sauntering on by, especially when you were fresh out of the egg, you didn't forget it. Burr was no different. There was a bill to fit, and he'd fit it back then, as a moony-eyed little Sandshrew staring at every explorer that passed by like they were Legendaries. Watching them glittering with poise and prizes from dungeons, spinning tales of treachery and treasures alike.

Wondering how the bags and accessories would look if *he* were wearing them.

Honestly, the amount of spectacle around the whole thing should have been a bad sign. Reality had set in real fast in regards to what most explorers had demanded of them by their employers. Find this. Scout that. Confirm whatever. The odd errand or two was fine, but not the amount he'd been roped into.

And call him insensitive, but the designation of this kind of team had a reason for it. It wasn't 'rescuing others daily from a bunch of places known for hostile environments and unfriendly faces'. Practising the perfect looks of false sympathy to plaster across their faces on the way, ready for when they found these wannabes that should have known better from the start? They were an exploration team. *Exploration*. As in 'not rescue'. The clue was in the name, wasn't it?

And yet they had to go futzing about in whatever mystery dungeon had cropped up on the agenda, hoping to bump into whoever needed their hide saved. Or beaten. Or beaten and *then* saved, in the case of some of their more hysterical clients.

This particular trek might not have been so bad if it weren't for the location. A little *variety* wouldn't kill them, would it? As specialised as they were in desert travel, there were other kinds of dungeons in existence. Your average Sandslash had seen its fair share of sand already.

It might not have even been errand-related. Maybe their leader had felt like the mobs of Tyranitar in the lower floors of the Pit would be a challenge for her. Because Arceus forbid these Pseudo-Legendaries miss any opportunity to show off.

But whatever it was, it had demanded they head back into Quicksand Cave. Through the dunes and wadis of Northern Desert first, of course. And all they'd had to eat—or rather, all that he and his *leader* had had to eat, given how their cactus-esque teammate clearly looked elsewhere for sustenance—were the grimy excuses for food occasionally dotting the dungeon's floors.

Which could also be blamed on their leader. She'd only packed the bare minimum for them, insisting they get by on whatever they found in the dungeon itself. Wrapped up in some cute little excuse of wanting to 'rough it', or 'toughen them up'. Whatever she'd said to cover up the fact that she was a cheapskate.

They were *real* lucky that Burr had thought to check their notes on the dungeons' item pools before going in. Could have ended *real* quick if neither of these places actually spawned anything to eat.

Sure, after one quick sandstorm summoned by the Garchomp each floor, the team's shared Ability meant they got through each level of the Cave a little faster. If that was the strategy, then it at least made some sense, as much as the constant rushing made the Sandslash's head swim. No need to worry about hunger if you could outrun it. Or something like that.

But if funds were the problem? At the halfway point before the dungeon's proper halfway point, they'd already picked up enough money to buy their entire guild a feast. Enough to fill all their bags for the next few adventures too. Why live the life of a Poké-pincher when just one excursion could render you rich? Where was it all going? Into that Dragon-type's hoard she probably had somewhere?

The wall in front of the Ground-type wasn't crumbling to reveal any convenient secret passageway, despite the practical army's worth of daggers he was glaring at it. Joy. He was separate from the rest of his team, he'd taken the longest path imaginable, and now he'd have to go through it twice. He winced as a heavy gastric gurgle resounded through him, as if in protest. His legs ached. His breath rasped. He—

Wasn't alone with his worsening thoughts anymore, thanks to what had just buzzed on into the room. A Vibrava regarded him with its globular eyes. Stirring up the sands with its wings as if it were already a Flygon at heart.

The Sandslash stiffened. He took a deep breath, feeling himself starting to go through the oh-too-common motions of combat. His quills raised in threat. With a shift to his stance, he evenly distributed his weight across both hindpaws. Gritting his teeth against another nasty spasm from his stomach. Shifting into an anticipatory stance as the enemy, with the often-misplaced confidence all dungeon-dwellers possessed, beelined straight for him.

The question was never how to avoid these encounters—it was how to finish them as fast as possible. It'd be nice if one of these pesky rogues decided that maybe, just this one time, the explorers that could navigate through any climes with (relative) ease might not be the kind of Pokémon they'd want to pick a fight with.

Considering what he was planning, though, the Vibrava's decision was actually helpful. With each flap of the insectoid dragon's wings, the distance between them dwindled. Burr felt sand clumping between his claws as he counted every second. His paw flew into his bag with practised precision. Then re-emerged with an orb.

And not for the first time, today.

Burr narrowed his coal-black eyes. He'd learned something on their way here. There were natural shifts in weather in the desert the team had had to pass through, handily sparing them a turn setting up their own storm. Which was fine and dandy until the orb he'd used to try and ward off an annoying Sandshrew had missed. Missed! In all his years as an explorer, there were still so many discoveries to be made.

That one stupid moment had stayed with him this whole time, for every step of the way through the desert and cave: him glancing incredulously from the Sandshrew back to his now-empty paw, and his teammate's stupid smile as he'd fended off the little pest like it was nothing. Yes, he was aware that Cacturne tended to smile at anything regardless. No, it didn't tick him off any less.

The orb reflected his glare. He'd taken a risk sneaking this thing into his bag, so it damn well had to pay off. Vibrava didn't turn into masters of evasion in sandstorms; he was relatively sure of that. It wouldn't come down to a coin flip, like any move without 100% accuracy always did for him.

How many fights had he gotten into in these past five floors? They always played out the exact same way. These upstarts with their bluster and misplaced pep. Going for everyone who looked at them funny, as well as a fair few who were just trying to co-exist. Angling for a scrap they believed would be over in seconds.

It certainly would be.

The orb started to hum. It shuddered a little, then lit up, its sky-blue surface soon overcast by blinding white. The noise rose to a discomfiting shrill. The Sandslash's scowl, his unwitting opponent's shimmering wings and the shifting sands around them were all swallowed up in a burst of light.

When the explorer's vision returned to him, it brought with it a sight of displaced dunes and shattered rock. A remnant of the orb's power made the air tingle. The grating sound of its activation lingered unpleasantly in his ears. The Vibrava had vanished.

And sitting neatly between his claws was a fresh, shiny, red apple.

Burr blinked at it. In all honesty, he hadn't been hoping for much. Of course, it wasn't like he'd been blessed with some ultimate treasure, the kind of thing only the depths of Zero Isle would hide, but...after nothing to stave off his hunger but pieces of what looked like something a Muk had thrown up...

There hadn't been much harm in rolling the dice this time around, and fate had decided to drop some proper food in his lap. What a nice surprise.

An annoyed huff sent a puff of warm air over the apple. Whining away in his brain was a grating little voice. *There's no challenge when you just take your own items!* it shrilled at him. *Pull through with what the dungeon gives you!*

*Oh, shut it!* he thought back, indignant.

The orb had just *happened* to give him an apple. He didn't manifest it with his stomach. (At least, he didn't THINK so.) There weren't any complaints to be had over an item that this excursion had kind of, *technically*, given him. And what good was there in having second thoughts? It wasn't going to un-itemise his enemy, or anything. As macabre as that sounded

in retrospect. Funny how the world just carried on turning after he'd turned another Pokémon into one of his five-a-day.

Perhaps another explorer in his position would have had some questions about what they'd just done. Whether the fruit in his claws held any trace of a walking, talking being. Whether his former enemy's mind was in there, still clinging to rationality. Screaming all manner of curses at him, none of which he could hear. How it felt. If there was anything to feel, whether it even *could* be felt.

Or if he was still looking at a fellow Pokémon at all. Might have been some magical construct, brought into being by the orb. Or an item summoned from elsewhere, having swapped places with the Vibrava; maybe his opponent was in another part of the dungeon now, flittering about obliviously.

All these wonderings fell to the wayside due to the simple fact that Burr didn't care. He had food now. And he was hungry.

His apple didn't move. It didn't shudder, wobble, or give the slightest little thrum. It didn't make a sound. Not a thing that suggested it was anything but food. It just kept right on being an apple as he raised it to his mouth, his teeth flashing in eager welcome.

And when he took his first bite, oh, *Arceus*, did it feel like he hadn't tasted something so wonderful in *days*. Sweetness practically exploded across his tongue. Juice splattered his snout. For a moment, he was happy to lose himself in the simple rhythm of chewing, of the fruit's skin and flesh rendering between his hungry jaws.

But it couldn't distract him. As gratifying as it was to just chow down, snuffling away between each chomp like a satisfied Swinub, it didn't change the fact that he was still in a potentially dangerous spot. Other aggressive Pokémon could come between him and his treat; that, or the odd trap tile. He should get going. Bite followed bite as one foot followed the other, the Sandslash making his way down the twisting corridor—it was always corridors—into another room.

As a particularly sizable chunk hit the back of his throat, Burr paused. A strong swallow started to push it down, eyes closed as discomfort warred a little with satisfaction. Should probably have chewed that one more. He traced the bulge it made with a careful claw, following its progress with a flash of weird unease. It would be embarrassing if he had to blow a Reviver Seed on this of all things. Could never let your guard down, could you?

There wasn't much harm in going out doing something you loved, though. Was there? It really was a good apple. As demanding as his stomach had been earlier, it could have been the tarest one imaginable and he wouldn't have cared. One little bit of food and he already felt so refreshed. In proper ride-or-die mode over a single fruit, and all. A slender tongue darted out to swipe at his muzzle.

The fact that he'd even been able to just enjoy this apple without interruption felt strange. Had he made an example of the dungeon's top dog? That, or his companions weren't done searching the floor; weird how he'd grown to accept that places that constantly changed their

layouts and contents existed, and yet being teleported after a teammate discovered the stairs was still something he found hard to understand. A more idle flick of his tongue accentuated the motion as he looked around.

His teammates were nowhere to be seen. This rattled Burr's quills for the few seconds it took him to notice the footprints in the sand. They joined one half-buried entryway to another, appearing to cut the room in half.

Wiping his snout with his free paw, he glanced at his now sticky claws, with several dark pips dotting the backs of them. He'd been eating more of it without even realising, apparently. A quick search through his bag brought up one of the team's spare scarves; after checking to see it wasn't his, he rubbed it across his face, cleaning himself up as best he could—more so to avoid his leader noticing and laying into him than the mess being an actual bother.

Nothing a sneaky Cleanse Orb from the marketplace couldn't fix later.

Burr shoved the dirty scarf back into the bag, as far down as he could push it. Staring at the line of prints, he tossed the core in his claws aside and took a deep breath. Preparing an excuse if he was questioned, as well as an unaffected demeanour if he wasn't, he let the makeshift trail lead him out of the room, leaving the remains of the apple to be swallowed up by the shifting sands.