

The Taste Of Friendship

"Wow. Kind of got yourself a kick ass team, haven't you?"

Ace Trainer Cassandra rolled her bright green eyes and tossed a length of her long blonde hair over her shoulder. "What are you talking about?" she snorted as she extended a hand toward the mean-looking Luxray that had just taken down the majority of her opponent's team. The feline's red eyes were sharp and his lean blue-furred body was absolutely bristling with static electricity. "You ain't even seen my team. You've only seen Bolts - who just zeroed five of your Pokémon by himself."

Cassandra's opponent - a woman named Rio - chuckled. Rio was... a strange thing. She was about Cassandra's age, which was somewhere in her mid-twenties, and she had roughly the same build as her fellow trainer. Lean, athletic, scrappy, and well-built from traveling the road in search of Pokémon to catch and battles to be had. Unlike her fellow trainer, though, she had... well, Cassandra just figured they were very realistic accessories. A pair of fox ears sat atop her shock of short orange hair and swaying just her round cheeks was a bushy black fox tail. "I still got one Pokémon left," Rio said as she grabbed the last ball that hung from her belt. "And he's a doozy. So I might just see the rest of your team yet."

Cassandra snorted and folded her arms beneath her slender bust. Tilting her head, she smirked at Rio as the strange fox girl readied her ball with a swish of her tail and a bounce of her ears. Cassandra knew there was no way that they were real - but, damn, if they didn't *move* like they were. Fashion technology was just getting better and better these days, she supposed. "Right, whatever," the Ace Trainer muttered. "Doozy or not - if I kick it's ass - then you're going to leave me alone to my business, right?"

"Sure. I'll leave you alone to bully all of the low-level trainers that hang around this route," Rio sighed as she closed her fist around her Poké Ball. "I'll still think that you're pathetic though - and so will everyone else."

Cassandra smirked. The remark stung a bit, but... she wouldn't let it get to her. She had more than enough pride to diminish the pain. "Not pathetic," she grunted arrogantly. "I'm just showing these newbies what a real trainer looks like."

"Yeah. All while taking their money and sending them scurrying back to the Pokémon Center."

The Ace Trainer shrugged. "Losing has a cost. Which you're about to find out."

"We'll see about that," Rio murmured a little viciously. The redheaded fox girl threw her ball out into the battlefield. "Get 'em, Miraidon!" It popped open with a flash of blue light. Then...

... from it emerged the form of a strange reptile-like Pokémon. The vast majority of his sleek body was covered in shiny violet armor - save for his muzzle, tail, and claws, which were all a steely gray. The gray sections across his chest and tail were also transparent, revealing a bright yellow glow that ebbed and flowed within his large body. His strange eyes were initially jet black, but soon after he landed heavily on the ground on all four of his paws a digital approximation of blue and yellow irises quickly popped onto his screen-like eyes.

He... was huge. Close to the ground on all four of his metal paws, it looked to be at least eleven feet in length. "What... what is that?" Cassandra gasped. With his sleek metal body and the electrical energy coursing within it, it looked like a Cyclizar from the *future* - like it was a robot or something like that. She tugged her phone out of her pocket and held it up to the strange Pokémon, but... for the first time in her life, the Pokédex app came up with an **error unknown**. "It's not... my Pokédex, it isn't recognizing it..."

"Miraidon," Rio said, addressing her Pokémon and ignoring her opponent's confusion. "Do your thing."

The strange Pokémon known as Miraidon lowered down onto his haunches like he was preparing to pounce. The metallic purple plates of the armor that covered his long and sleek body gleamed in the sunlight as his blue digital eyes focused in on the Luxray. With a swish of a long tail that looked as if it was full of thunder, the beast opened his maw, revealing a dull metal gray interior that was textured like plastic and brimming with a saliva-like lubricant...

... it shot a bolt of blue lightning toward the Luxray. The electric cat didn't look particularly concerned at first - but as the electricity struck his body he was completely swept off of all four of his paws. By the time he hit the ground, his eyes were closed and his body was limp. Bolts had fainted.

"Fuck! What even was that move?" Cassandra squealed as bright blue light faded from her eyes. Squinting, she hurriedly plucked an empty ball from her hip. "Whatever! Bolts! Come back!"

The Pokémon shrank back into his container with a blue sparkle. The ball shuddered in Cassandra's hand in a strange fashion as it did so - but the Ace had bigger fish to fry than focusing on a brief oddity. "He was just tired from kicking the rest of your team's ass!" the Ace yelled as she thrust the ball back onto her hip. There were still five remaining. Five strong electric-type Pokémon - her favorite type - the *best* type. Powerful and fast and full of the strongest

element on the entire planet! "I still got five left. There's no way that **thing** could-"

Miraidon released an angry growl and snapped his jaw in the Ace Trainer's direction as she called him a *thing*. The yellow energy behind the glass panel on his chest and within the transparent tube that made up the majority of his tail began to roil, pulsing, flashing, *and flaring* as if he was ready to use his power on the arrogant trainer in front of him. Grimacing, Cassandra whimpered, stuck between bracing herself for impact or just fleeing...

... but Rio reached out and placed her hand between Miraidon's antennae-like ears. There, she began to stroke. The beast quickly calmed down, turning his head to rub his cool metal snout against his trainer's wrist. "There there," she murmured gently as her beast produced a content growl. "Save it for her Pokémon, yeah?"

Cassandra shuddered... and then grit her teeth. No more fear. She was an Ace Trainer. One of the best in the world - and she wouldn't be made afraid by some Pokemon, strange or not. With her pride and confidence renewed, she placed her hand on the belt on her hip. "Won't be saving anything for my Pokémon - because my next one is gonna wipe the floor with him," Cassandra grunted as she threw a ball into the battlefield. "Go! Boltund!"

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Cassandra's mouth gaped open wide in absolute horror. Six Poké Balls were scattered around her feet - and not a single awake Pokémon was within them. Every single one had been knocked into a deep slumber by a single move - the same one that had taken care of her Luxray. "... I don't understand," she whimpered as she fell to her knees and gazed down at the results of her defeat. "A single Pokémon... how..."

Rio snorted and ran her hand across the warm glass-like panel that ran across the center of Miraidon's sleek chest. Reveling in his victory, the odd Pokémon had rolled over onto his back all doggishly, presenting his belly and kicking his steel-toed paws into the air. His digitized blue eyes were lidded and the yellow energy inside of him flared in a manner that could only be described as... content. "Told you Miraidon was a doozy," Rio chuckled as she rolled her fingers up to scratch across the underside of the metal beast's chin - which looked as if it was made of silicone. The beast let out a gentle growl - and the trainer's strange fox tail began to wag gently in response, satisfied. "Hasn't failed to flatten a team for me yet."

"The rest of your Pokémon were so... were so *lame* though," Cassandra sniffled as she began to numbly scoop her Poké Balls from the ground and attach them back to her belt.

"That's called lulling you into a false sense of security," Rio explained casually as she drew herself away from Miraidon and reached into her satchel. From it she withdrew a large purple plaid picnic blanket. She threw it onto the ground and began to spread it out close to the grassy spot that the two of them had battled upon. "It's much more satisfying to beat an opponent who thinks they have a sure victory."

Cassandra slid her last ball onto her belt. Then, huffing, she pulled herself to her feet and dusted off her ankles. "So you were making fun of me, then."

"You could say that, yeah," Rio said as she smoothed out the corners of the picnic blanket. Miraidon - seeing the picnic blanket - rolled over onto his paws. With a gentle shake of his head and a 'blink' of his odd eyes, he began to approach his trainer.

"You're unbelievable."

"And you're a bully who enjoys walking over people way too much," Rio sighed as she flopped down into a seat on the left side of the blanket. Her butt wiggled and her tail gave a few swishes as she made herself comfortable on the ground. Miraidon flopped down next to her, taking up a good half of the blanket and laying his head down in his trainer's lap. "Or at least, you *were* a bully. But now you're not gonna bully anyone around here anymore, right?" Rio asked as she began to stroke between her Pokémon's ears.

Cassandra wrinkled her nose. "Sure, whatever," she murmured bitterly. There were plenty of other routes with weak trainers on them that she could go to - she'd just have to pick a different one now, she supposed. "I won't bully anyone around here anymore."

"Great," Rio said as she reached into her satchel with the hand that wasn't petting Miraidon. This time, she pulled out two rolls of bread that were wrapped in brown paper - thin and about six inches long, the sort of loaf that you'd use for a sub sandwich. "You want to come eat with me?" she offered kindly as she set the rolls down in the center of the blanket. "Got enough food here for two."

Cassandra scoffed. Eat? Here? With this woman and her *creature*? She'd rather jump in the lake! The woman crossed her arms over her stomach and began to shake her head...

... but then, she caught a glint in Rio's bright orange eyes. Cassandra's frown fell and her lips drew into a thin line. Walking away was what this weird fox girl *wanted* her to do. It was just another taunt, like throwing five weak Pokémon in front of her to squash. She was trying to intimidate her - and the Ace Trainer was

done with being intimidated. “Sure,” she said as she began to approach the picnic blanket. She sat down cross-legged on the opposite side of the picnic blanket to Rio, keeping a fair distance from her and her... friend. “I’ll eat with you.”

Rio smiled and once again reached into her satchel, still petting Miraidon with her other hand as she fumbled through it and began to withdraw ingredients - which were butter, mayonnaise, and *four* whole different types of cheeses that had been cut into perfect square slices. “Cheese sandwiches sound good? Personally, I like to call ‘em *friendship sandwiches* because-”

Cassandra cringed and shook her hand at Rio to silence her. “Cheese?” she grunted as she turned her nose up at the food and scowled. “Cheese that’s been in your satchel for... who knows how long? That sounds vile.”

“They’ve not been in there for long,” Rio chuckled. Miraidon lowered his head toward the cheese that had been laid out on the blanket and began to sniff at it - but Rio swatted his muzzle away gently, making the beast reluctantly withdraw. “Plus, the inside of my satchel is refrigerated. You wouldn’t believe what they can do with a Rotom these days.”

Cassandra kept on scowling, but... eventually, finding nothing to complain about with that particular statement, she shrugged her shoulders and glared down at the cheeses spread across the picnic blanket, hoping to find something *there* that she could be annoyed about. But the cheese looked nice and fresh and... as strange as it was to think it, *familiar*. Wanting to see if they were cold as claimed, though, she reached out with her index finger to touch a slice, but...

... a nasty static shock shot straight up her arm! “Ow!” Cassandra yelped as she pulled her hand back.

Rio smirked as she began to butter the sliced bread rolls with her knife. Miraidon didn’t flinch at Cassandra’s squeal. His hungry blue eyes were busy watching his owner prepare the sandwiches - his body hunched over, his gaze fixated, his snout as close to the ‘kitchen’ as his trainer would allow. “You alright?” Rio asked lazily.

“Yeah, just... just a static shock from the blanket, that’s all,” Cassandra grunted as she shook herself off a little.

“Figured you’d be used to static shocks - you know, given all those electric types you had.”

Cassandra rolled her bright green eyes and set her still-tingling hand into her lap with a grunt. “My Pokémon are extremely obedient,” she huffed. “They’ve

never shocked me. Not once.”

Rio’s eyes lidded and her tongue raked over her lips as if she was going to say something, but... for some reason, she decided not to. With her tail swishing, she began to spread a thick layer of mayonnaise over the bread rolls instead. With all picnickers now silent - save for Miraidon who was growling gently - the strange foxish trainer was able to focus on making the two sandwiches - which were simple, really. Four different types of thinly sliced cheese arranged in four layers. When they were all assembled, Miraidon’s muzzle reached in to try and snap one up - but Rio once again swatted his face away, making the beast emit a very annoyed *beep*. “Grub’s up,” she said as she grabbed one of the sandwiches and handed it to Cassandra. “Here you go.”

Cassandra took the sandwich from Rio and looked at it with a scrunched face and an indignant gaze. Aside from the mayonnaise and bread, it was all dairy. Did any sandwich *really* need this much cheese? “This thing looks like it’s going to give me a heart attack,” she complained.

“Trust me,” Rio said, “that sandwich? It’s going to be the best damn thing you’ve ever put in your mouth.”

Cassandra scoffed. Intending to prove the fox girl wrong, she brought the sandwich to her mouth and took a bite...

... only to find that it was, indeed, the best damn thing that she'd ever put in her mouth. The butter, the mayonnaise, the four kinds of cheese - they somehow came together in the most perfect way. It melted into her mouth and soaked into her buds, coating her tongue with a taste that could only be described as utterly gourmet. Like the taste itself was *alive* in her mouth, humming around every square centimeter, dancing like it was full of *electricity*...

“That right there?” Rio said as Cassandra practically moaned around her mouthful of sandwich. “That’s the taste of friendship.”

The Ace Trainer ignored Rio and shoved another bite into her mouth.

Then another.

And another.

Before long - in a mere matter of seconds - Cassandra had completely devoured the delicious cheese sandwich. Bite after bite after bite had been stuffed into her mouth and squeezed down her throat thoughtlessly, barely even chewing it before swallowing. Before she knew it, it was little more than crumbs in her hands and cheesy mush in her belly.

The Ace Trainer needed *more*. Licking the corners of her lips clean of butter, she voraciously lunged toward the second sandwich still laid on the picnic blanket - but, before her greedy hands could snatch it, Rio yanked the sandwich right out of her grasp. "Ah ah ah," she cooed as she pulled the perfect cheese sandwich into her lap. "You've already had your half. This one is for Miraidon."

Cassandra fell down onto the blanket, catching herself with the hands that had missed the grab. Her fingers squirmed down on the picnic blanket as she hunched down into it, still tempted to try and steal the sandwich. If it wasn't for the fact that Miraidon was glaring at it possessively, she just might have. "You're... you're going to waste that on your Pokémon?" she gasped in shock. "Can he even *eat* it?"

"Of course he can!" Rio proclaimed. "This guy might be a machine - of sorts, I guess - but he has a digestive tract. His belly is, ah, like a high-tech garbage disposal unit. Mulches up food and melts it down into biofuel."

"That... that sounds disgusting."

"It's not disgusting - it's just basic biology. We're exactly the same. Stomachs are supposed to break things down and turn 'em into nutrition," Rio said with a roll of her eyes. "The only thing that makes his belly different to ours is that it's artificial."

"Whatever," Cassandra scoffed. She couldn't be bothered arguing about this - discussing the beast's internal workings disturbed her. Realizing that she was still on her knees on the blanket, she pulled herself back into her cross-legged position as if her desperate little attempt at sandwich thievery hadn't happened at all. "It's still a damn waste."

"Well, it's only fair that the victor gets some of the spoils, right?" Rio chuckled. The fox trainer patted her lap and turned her head toward Miraidon. His blue eyes looked right up at her face. Despite the fact that they were entirely digital, they were clearly communicating utter desperation and sheer hope. He obviously wanted that sandwich more than anything else in the world. "Okay, okay. No need to look at me like that," Rio sighed. "I already said you could have it. Just open that big ol' mouth up."

The very eager Miraidon opened his mouth. The beaten trainer could only watch as that strange artificial tongue writhed around his mouth in blatant anticipation, swirling and spreading the thick saliva-like lubricant that swam in the bottom of his mouth, splashing it up onto the visibly slimy interior of his gray cheeks. For a second, Cassandra swore that she could see the sandwich... sparking. Just like her Jolteon did when he was anxious.

But that strange sight disappeared when Rio slid the sandwich into Miraidon's mouth whole. His large silicone maw was more than capable of containing a six-inch sub. His slick gray tongue writhed over the sandwich's underside and pushed it up against the roof of his maw nice and tight so that he could lubricate both its top and bottom half with his viscous saliva...

... then, after barely taking any time to taste, Miraidon tilted his head back and swallowed the sandwich with a single wet *g/k*.

His throat bobbed as the sandwich made quite the bulge in his large gray gullet... but the powerful muscles there had no problem dragging it down. Within seconds, it had been dragged all the way down to his synthetic stomach. "He... he didn't even taste it," Cassandra whimpered in complete dismay. Jealous of the beast in more ways than one, she turned her head away from him, sulking. "What a waste."

"Hey now, *you* barely tasted it either," Rio chuckled as Miraidon flopped down onto his belly and laid his snout down against his trainer's thigh. Seemingly unable to resist the urge, Rio reached out and stroked a hand across the center of his metallic head. "Was kinda disgusting to watch, to be honest."

"Whatever," Cassandra grunted as she pulled herself up to her feet and brushed some crumbs off her skirt. Part of her was tempted to pluck them off and stick them in her mouth, but - not even the best sandwich in the world could affect her sensibilities that much. Especially not in front of a weirdo like *this* girl. "I'm getting out of here."

Cassandra tossed her hair over her shoulder and stomped off. The Pokémon Center was a good couple of miles away - though the walk would most certainly do nothing to help the bratty trainer cool off.

With her Pokémon's head in her lap, Rio laid back and crossed her arms behind her head. With her fox ears relaxed and her tail wrapped loosely around her waist, she gazed up into the late afternoon sky with a lazy smile.

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After hauling her ass a good couple of miles down the road to the Pokémon Center, Cassandra - still grumpy from the picnic despite the excellent food - stomped into the building. She didn't pay any attention to the pink and yellow decor - she went straight up to the counter, yanked her balls off her belt, and *slapped* them onto the counter.

The nurse picked the balls up with a mixture of a smile and a wince. She

delicately placed them into a machine behind the counter and flipped the switch. Rather than flare into life and heal Cassandra's Pokémon, though, the machine made a loud *beep* of error. "I'm sorry, but... these balls, they don't seem to have any Pokémon inside of them," the nurse murmured as she glanced at the machine's monitor. "Did you, ah, accidentally give me the wrong set of Poké Balls?"

Cassandra frowned at the nurse and glanced down at her very empty belt. Hadn't this idiot just watched her take her balls out of her holster? "Nope," the Ace insisted. "Must be something wrong with your machine."

The nurse gently shook her head and smiled weakly. "No, ma'am. It was calibrated just today. I can assure you that it's working perfectly."

A horrible feeling began to stir in the pit of Cassandra's stomach. "Check the balls," she said. "They should have my Pokémon registered to them."

The nurse leaned into the computer next to her terminal and tapped a few keys - which made her face fall into a frown. "I can see that there were Pokémon registered to these balls, but... they seem to have been released about an hour ago?"

"Well, yeah, I was having a battle with them," Cassandra muttered. "I released them to fight, but... I made sure they all went back into their balls afterward."

The nurse blinked a few times and slowly shook her head as she took her eyes away from the computer monitor. "That's not what the computer says. Maybe you accidentally slid them into your box in the heat of battle?"

Cassandra grunted, tugged her phone out of her pocket, and opened the box app. She scrolled through the listings, hoping to find her precious Luxray and the rest of her team amongst them, but... nothing. Just some low-level garbage that she'd caught to fill out her Pokédex. "I... I don't understand," the trainer whimpered as her arms went limp and *thumped* to her sides. "I... I put them back in their balls... I... I definitely did. You must have done something with them. Messed up somewhere."

The nurse bit her bottom lip and gave the Ace Trainer her best apologetic look. "I can assure you that I made no mistakes, ma'am. What you handed me was six empty balls."

Cassandra grit her teeth. Then, bristling with tension, she closed her hands into fists and *slammed* them on the counter of the Pokémon Center, narrowing her green eyes into a mean glare. "No," she growled at the nurse as she felt all of the furious surprise that came from all of her accomplishments - or, her beautiful

team - suddenly being erased. “No! No, you have to be making a mistake! Check it again! Now!”

The nurse - clearly frightened - backed away from the counter and raised her dainty hands into the air. “Ma’am,” she whimpered as the trainer hunched over the counter, “please calm down, or else I’m going to have to call security.”

Cassandra *pounded* a fist into the counter so hard that it felt as if the very foundations of the Pokémon Center rattled. “No!” she screamed petulantly. “I won’t leave! Not until I have my team!”

The nurse didn’t need to call security - they would have been able to hear Cassandra from a mile away. Two Machoke burst through a set of double doors and grabbed the Ace Trainer by her arms. Without her Pokémon, she was defenseless - and, as a result, they easily began to drag her out of the center. “I want them back!” she screamed as she flailed around. “Give them to me! Give me them now!”

As she was forcefully removed from the Pokémon Center, a quiet *rumble* emitted from Cassandra’s abdomen. Unheard by anyone over her screaming, it was the sound of her stomach making its final churn around the well-melted remains of her sandwich.

If only Cassandra knew that her Pokémon were much closer than she thought.