Team Verdict, Case Dismissed

Author's Note: For those who read my previous entries, this follows from Rumbling in the Sky, the winning entry from our round.

With so much on the line…even with that strange power with me, ah really just…

Sandy sulked in the hut she shared with Gamble, unable to stay asleep. She hasn't slept well since she returned from their round in the Infinity Sky Isles some time ago. Even after another round had come and gone, her mind was still reeling more than her body was aching in the immediate aftermath. It wasn't that the Snubbull thought she was beyond losing battles – in retrospect, she felt a bit proud of Cheezo for pulling it out like he did – but of all the battles to lose, she questioned Victini about why it had to be *this one* she was judged to be out of favor.

Now it's the slow arse wait to be sent back to the last place ah ever want to be again. Because Origin forbid that Hoopa nae draw this out more. Oh well, it's not like they have any need of us. Short of it being something they can't spare their precious winners to do, so they go and grab the gubbed…

"P-pardon us… Team Verdict?"

Sandy's thoughts were interrupted by Dora's voice outside of the tent. This also caused Gamble to emerge from their Keystone, but it's unclear if they were actually asleep. They both poked their heads out to see Dora was accompanied by Blue, one of the Espurr twins.

"I know it's late, but we were hoping you'd be able to help us," said Dora. "It-it's nothing major, but we could use a few extra hands! M-metaphorically speaking! I didn't mean–"

"Och, we get it," said Sandy, waving her off. "What's the craic?"

"We're trying to gather berries for Hoopa so they'll take their medicine," said Blue with a yawn. "Gran and my sister are trying to get Hoopa back. Guess you didn't hear the commotion."

"And what of the wee lass Merriweather that we're doing messages?" Sandy asked, quietly thankful she didn't hear all the trouble.

"Her job is to sleep and not stress out over her dear friend being missing," replied Blue. "Toughest job is for her."

"Of course we shall assist," said Gamble. "But where are we looking for these berries?"

Sandy blinked a bit at Gamble being a touch more assertive than usual. Granted, it was something she had long wanted out of him – he was as shy as Sharpedo were prone to biting when they first met – but to think they were already to the point he had basically signed *both of them* up for a quest? She wondered if the other Pokemon had rubbed off on him. That or maybe it was them repaying Merriweather and Hoopa, the ones they met first and made him believe this place would be more friendly to him than their home world – as low a bar as that was.

"Hoopa has surprisingly left one of their portals open," explained Dora. "Merri explained the area it leads to is perfect conditions for those berries."

"That indeed sounds straightforward," said Gamble.

Sandy was still baffled at the thought that one of Hoopa's trademark hoops was active without them being nearby like a protective parent, but just shrugged and followed Gamble as they walked towards the center of Base Camp where the Hyperspace Hole was obvious against the darkness since it was still bright out in the other location.

Once they were close enough, the heat from their destination wafted out from the portal and the air had hints of sulfur. The smell of the volcanic smoke irritated Sandy's nose, making her shake her head a bit before gazing at the ring.

"Miss Sandy?" Gamble had noticed the Snubbull pause before jumping in – which she hadn't done so far since they first entered the tournament.

"I'm fine," rumbled Sandy. "Just feels like a place where a bunch of Heatran would have a party."

In truth, Sandy was seeing if she was capable of Mimicking the portal, but her move refused to activate. Sandy reasoned that she may have needed to see the move being executed to pull that off.

She jumped through the portal with Gamble quickly following after once receiving a small basket from Dora.. The Snubbull's paws hit soft and warm dirt as she looked up to see the towering volcano dominating the landscape. Around them was more of the same barren space they were currently standing in with a few grassy spots scattered around. The ground was fairly even until one got closer to the volcano, so Team Verdict wasn't going to lose track of where the portal was.

"Well, let's get started," grumbled Sandy. "Pretty sure we can split up for this. A little. Just don't go out of earshot."

"...are you upset with me for undertaking this, Miss Sandy?" asked Gamble.

"Nae danger. It'd make me look right awful if ah stood for justice all this time and got all crabbit about ye doing a good thing."

"Apologies if I seem to be completely…off-base I believe is the term, but you seem quite unsettled."

"...I suppose part of it is that I'm surprised you don't seem more disappointed with this. With me."

This makes Gamble turn towards Sandy, baring a shocked expression. "Disappointed in… *you*? I would have been defeated immediately if not for your guidance. As for our defeat, I was holding you back. If only–"

"Och, patch that," interrupted Sandy. "I could have pushed ye harder, but I didn't. I didn't want to force ye to be that way. …not the way I had to be."

Gamble couldn't think of an immediate reply and because of that, Sandy took the opportunity to start walking and start on the search for the bitter berries. The few bushes they saw within sight of the portal were picked clean, forcing Team Verdict to search a bit further –inching closer towards the volcano itself.

Sandy's path continued to split further and further from Gamble's with the Snubbull primarily relying on her nose – as hard as that was with the smell of ash being omnipresent and her own distracted thoughts. She stopped twice to wipe her face – . While it wasn't enough to make her sneeze on its own, it came real close. She almost wished it could make her sneeze and expel the irritants in her mind along with the physical ones.

Ah really said too much…the last thing an overworrier like that needs is my baggage.

After a couple of false leads, Sandy finally found another bush near a crevasse, but there weren't many berries left on it and the ones on it felt way too soft – at least compared to what she knew of berries back home. Her mother had taught her how to pick certain berries during a time that they could eat only that. If she wouldn't pick it for herself, she certainly wasn't going to give it to anyone else – even if it was for a Legend whose behavior baffled her.

Before continuing the search, she peered down into the fissure, watching the lava flow not that far below her and the heat hitting her face.

I've read stories about Slugma…wonder if this is what feels like to be near one all the time, Sandy thought as her gaze traveled up the lava flow towards the source of it all. *Ah wonder if Ruined Mountain was ever like this.*

Unfortunately, thoughts of her home only seemed to unsettle Sandy even more, making her the opposite of homesick. And that eventually led back to thoughts of the round she and Gamble were eliminated – though this time, it was words uttered by her primary opponent, Kuroku, that made her heated all over again.

"*Let your anger consume you. You'll lose sight of everything.*"

That chewed up old numptie… The fact the match got that close means you don't know <u>anything</u> about me for all your aura reading. I've kept <u>everything</u> close. Every skill I learned, all the knowledge she gave me, the promise I made…the reasons I fight this hard. What do I even have left to lose sight of!?

Ugh…if anything, there are things I wish I could–

"Miss Sandy?" Gamble's voice carried across the empty landscape. "I think I've found enough?"

Sandy immediately left her contemplation to seek out Gamble; he was placed in front of quite a full bush. They hadn't picked any of the berries yet due to his usual second-guessing. Sandy stepped around, inspecting and smelling each one.

"They seem ripe," said Sandy, "Nice and bright color. But I guess there's only one real way to be sure."

Sandy picked up one, slightly narrowing her eyes at it, before popping it into her mouth. She only chewed a couple of times before her eyes popped open and she staggered back.

"It's not terrible, but Sky God's Breath, that'll tighten my skin!" Sandy chuckled. "They are definitely ripe, but why are *these* their favorite!?"

"Perhaps they prefer the strong flavor," suggested Gamble. "An acquired taste over how long a life it has led. Or perhaps it reflects their personality in some way. I overheard two older Pokemon speaking before we had met. One told the other that his love of bitter foods might mean a sense of unhappiness."

"Unhappiness? From *that* screwball goofball?"

"Well…perhaps it is presumptuous on my part, but I could imagine a struggle to communicate and the damage it has taken on would make anyone else miserable?"

Sandy had her doubts, but there must be good things about them that someone as sweet as Merriweather is their best friend. And she definitely could doubt having all that damage would be pleasant. But one could forget that and so many other things in any moment when Hoopa was being maximum Hoopa.

Just as Sandy was urging Gamble to help her pick, having another berry as she did so, something caught his attention and she followed the direction of his gaze. Slightly uphill from them was a Magby staring down at them, half-hidden by a rock. Gamble's form shimmered as he worried about a confrontation, but he noticed the Magby's attention was on Sandy, still chewing on a berry.

After a staredown that went about half a minute, the Magby seemed to give a timid smile and a nod before walking off. Sandy, who almost wanted a fight, sighed.

"Guess he's glad we're fans," said Sandy with a shake of the head.

"Miss Sandy? About earlier… Did you feel…forced to fight at your current level?"

A sigh as the Snubbul continued picking. "Aye. I didn't have anyone else to take care of me, so I had to. And back then, just asking someone else to take me in felt wrong. Besides, I had a promise to fulfill. That I'd be there for others unlike the ones who weren't there for her – I'd be that justice. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy plenty a square go and I've never pretended otherwise. But that promise was still making me feel pressured – I want to believe she's still watching every time and I never wanted to look bad when she was watching. Alive or… …And I didn't want to put that fight pressure on *you*, even if it would be by accident because of the mess that is my heid."

Gamble looked at her with a smile. "Thank you, Miss Sandy. You truly are one of the greatest people I have ever met."

"What? Because of that?"

"For everything you have done for me despite my troubles – even carrying me around at times and teaching me to defend myself," he continued. "Your directions on how to use my Moves were always clear enough for me, a complete novice, to understand. I was just always hesitant to act. You are a formidable practitioner and teacher of the ways of battle – even your opponents would say so. I am merely a bad *student* of battle. The only times I felt I could easily do so was the same as you. Not the pressure to fight hard, but a pressure nonetheless – to not let you down and repay you the few ways I could. My life would certainly be poorer if you hadn't been with me. And I doubt I am the only one who would think so."

Sandy didn't immediately reply, a bit taken aback by his words. He was always well-spoken, but this was different. It really made her think – especially the last sentence of his statement.

Poorer without me in it… Would others really think so? Never thought about it so far. Not sure I've ever stayed in one place long enough to check. Staying too long just made me think about her too much. I never…I never really… Oh Distortion…

"That…really is the kind of thing Ma would say…"

"M-miss Sandy!?"

Gamble was alarmed as they noticed Sandy started to tear up. He had never seen her cry for as long as he had known her. Sandy couldn't remember the last time she had either.

"Stupid old jackal…" she said, laughing while the tears flowed. "Somehow being right and being wrong all at the same stupid time."

"I do not understand…"

"...Maybe I have lost sight of a thing or two," she said, wiping her eyes furiously. "And I couldn't see it because of how much I've missed her. And ah haven't really… Whatever, let's get Hoopa these berries already."

"Yes, Miss Sandy," Gamble replied, gently holding the basket.

"Can't forget it's the middle of the night just because it's daylight here! I'm scunnered while he's hauling tail around a forest, running from medicine of all things! ...Gamble?"

"Yes, Miss Sandy?"

"Thanks…for that."

Sorry Ma… Sorry for even trying to do this stupid thing. Have to admit, it's funny in a way. Ye being the one challenge ah couldn't beat makes too much sense, eh? …Guess ah can't make fun of Hoopa too much for not taking their medicine if ah been avoiding it this long. Tastes too sweet too. It's awful…