



POKÉMON
REBIRTH

Loekaigne

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The Snare of Mugen

I can see it.

What we've been searching for all this time – within this light...

...I can see it...

Professor Spencer Hale was jerked away from his internal assessments and sharply into consciousness as someone illustriously cleared their throat. As the man's vision re-aligned itself with present day thoughts, the first thing he noticed was the thick hardback book laid across the mahogany table in front of him. It was an established article that had been given to him by his tutor in Pokémon Sciences – an artist's account of many historical events, detailed in painted majesty.

"Sir?" The voice had come from the same figure that had disturbed Spencer from his reminiscing just moments earlier. He was more than aware of its owner.

"Yes, Benson?"

"I have put young Miss to bed," the butler responded, as he had done so many times previously. "She awaits the presence of her father."

"Thank you, Benson," Spencer pushed the heavy chair he'd been sitting in away from the table, and slowly rose to his feet. "You

may retire for the night.”

Once the aged figure had offered a grateful smile and departed the scene, Spencer turned his attentions to the book he'd been studying before his tired mind had wandered back amongst those same old happenings. It bore no writing as such, and the bright colours and fascinating scenes were bound to captivate a youthful imagination. The man gently shut the volume and tucked it under his arm before leaving for his daughter's bedroom.

When one is fervently searching for an answer, it can be easy to overlook simple but equally important matters in life. Eating, keeping oneself in a presentable condition, preserving bonds with one's offspring...Spencer had found juggling these responsibilities increasingly troublesome as the months had passed. But he didn't want to neglect his daughter, for she deserved all the attention he could give. And he did indeed cherish her very much. Spencer's challenge lay in making sure she felt loved, while striving to regain the love he had lost.

Stopping outside a beautifully-polished wooden door, the man tapped gently upon its surface as a way of announcing his presence before speech.

“Molly? I'm here.”

“Papa!” the sound of a young, enthusiastic voice was heard from within the room. “Come in, come in!”

Spencer allowed himself a chuckle before pushing upon the door and calmly entering. There she sat -a little girl no more than four years old- dressed in a frilled golden nightie and wrapped up in the gorebyss-pink blankets of an extravagant covered bed. Her face was already a picture of joy upon sight of her father – sky blue eyes glittering with anticipation.

"Did you bring me a story, papa?" Molly asked, as Spencer paused by the bedside table to switch on the miniature laptop he had bought for her. He turned around, lowering the article in his hands with a warm smile.

"It's a very special story," he replied, sitting down beside her. "One that's still being written."

Molly glanced at Spencer with a momentarily-puzzled expression. It was obvious she didn't understand the implications of her father's words, but this didn't seem to bother her for long. The girl leaned toward the book excitedly, only to have Spencer lift it aside in one quick jerk.

"Open it, open it!" she grinned.

"Alright," Spencer acknowledged. "But this book is extremely precious to me. We must be very gentle with the pages."

"Okay, Papa," Molly nodded meekly, before changing her tone to the one held previously. "Open it!"

The inside cover bore a photograph of a mural consisting of four different-coloured panels. One each for Moltres, Zapdos and Articuno, and one for Arcanine – depicted in a primitive carved style that only vaguely captured the resemblance of the real pokémon. It was difficult to tell where the zapdos' body ended and its wings began, and the articuno had so many tail feathers, it looked more like Ho-oh.

"These are legendary pokémon, Molly," Spencer proceeded. "Lots of people believe in them, even though they've never seen them. And in this book, the artist imagined what some of them might look like."

Molly reached out and carefully turned the page to reveal a

breathhtaking painted scene. In the foreground, a figure with long blue-black hair stood upon a cliff, arms outstretched – facing an entity amassing with eyes set into black spindly bodies. Behind the entity rose large white pillars nestled amongst clouds which reflected the eerie green background beyond.

It was a portrayal of the moment in history where the emperor of the Pokémopolis civilisation, Kato Sai, managed to summon the Unown.

“This is the one you’re looking for, isn’t it?” Molly said, pointing at the black cluster.

“Yes,” Spencer responded distantly. He’d been studying this very image for some time, prior to Benson’s request for his presence in Molly’s room. “I’ve been looking for it ever since...”

The pokémon shown there was his missing link. The last thing he saw before his wife was snatched out of his life, and Molly’s. Spencer couldn’t unearth those tragic events in such a young mind – it was painful enough that his own memory persisted in recalling them night after night.

“...for a long time, now,” he concluded.

“It looks funny,” Molly decided, a faintly amused tone in her voice. Spencer’s vagueness had worked. He let out a silent breath of relief as his daughter turned over the page. Here, a slender woman with mint green hair covering her eyes rode a majestic, fearsome-looking beast with a yellow head crest in front of an eclipse. This was a legend which historians had yet to decipher, though Molly was all too aware of the Pokémon involved. She’d caught sight of it on research documents before, following Spencer’s return from Ecruteak City.

“That’s Entei!” she exclaimed happily.

"Entei looks a little scary to me," Spencer chuckled. "But you *like* Entei."

"Entei's real big and strong, but it's still nice," Molly grinned. "Just like *you* are, papa!"

"I'm like Entei, am I?" Spencer mused. "Imagine that. Well then..." The man shifted his position so that he was kneeling upon the bed on all fours – his eyes alight with a vivid spark of childish enthusiasm. "...I *am* Entei!"

Molly watched her father imitating the legendary fire Pokémon with emphatic roars for a moment or two, her face awash with an expression of astonishment. Then a wide smile broke its way through once more – the little girl threw herself forward, leaping upon Spencer's back and causing him to topple from the bed.

"You're Entei!"

"Here we go," Spencer announced, clasping his daughter's legs in the crook of his arms and raising her into a piggyback. Molly giggled with delight as she was taken fleetingly round her expansive bedroom, all to the chorus of Spencer's pokémon imitation. By the time they were seated upon her ponyta-shaped rocker, both Spencer and Molly were laughing together – immersed in their bubble of imaginary delights, a father and daughter at peace.

Then the laptop at the far end of the room sprang into life with digital trilling.

"Another e-mail..." Molly sighed, watching the animated pidgey with an envelope in its beak. "It must be Schuyler again...it's always him."

She lowered herself from the rocker and watched Spencer swiftly cross the room to the desk, before opening the pre-recorded

video file. The image of a spiky dark-haired man in his late thirties standing amongst a desert landscape appeared.

"Professor, we found something," came the hurried tones of Spencer's assistant Jonathan Schuyler. "A hidden chamber with new clues about the Unown. Please, come quickly."

"I've got to go now, Molly," Spencer murmured, closing the video window as his daughter approached. The impish light in the man's eyes had once again vanished, returning his countenance to that of a haggard, life-stricken adult.

"Papa, I'm going to miss you," Molly insisted.

"And I'll miss you," Spencer replied softly, picking his daughter up. "I'll be back just as soon as I can." He pulled Molly into a tight embrace, so that, just for a moment, the young girl could find solace nestled in her father's arms. "Keep me close...in your dreams."

Placing Molly upon the bed, Spencer went to retrieve his book but before he could do so, his daughter had taken it with her under the covers. The man decided to leave the article with her, for now. Molly was only going to be asleep after all - if the book could offer some comfort, then better it stay here than locked in a stuffy container, where none could marvel at its painted wonders. With that, Spencer gently tucked Molly into bed.

"I love you," he reminded her, though the painful wistfulness in the girl's eyes made Spencer start to wonder if she really believed that any more. "Pleasant dreams, Molly."

Flicking off the desk light, Spencer momentarily glanced at the two framed photographs placed there before wandering toward the door. Part of him was reluctant to leave so soon, and this part forced him to pause in the doorway. He offered Molly what he hoped was a convincing smile before carefully shutting the door behind him.

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And he was back on the road again. When his searching began, Spencer may have taken up to half an hour making sure he had everything he needed for the journeys that lay ahead. But now, after many passages back and forth across Johto, the man had simply resigned himself to grabbing his case and jacket before slipping into the driver's seat of his trusty Hanson Monterno and cruising down the lengthy driveway of his estate to the world beyond.

This particular journey was taking him a fair distance south east, to an intriguing drought-stricken locale called "Alpha Richu" – commonly referred to as 'Alph'. Historical documentation had highlighted Alph as the very seat of knowledge during the Pokémopolitan civilization's prosperous times – an illustrious city and the place where Pokémopolis' Emperor Sai built his temple. It was hard to believe such a thing to be true, having gazed upon it during the present day. Much of Alph lay as a desolate ruin – its sculpted elevations and once-prestigious carved monuments now nothing but scattered rubble. Pokémopolis had undoubtedly been dealt a crushing blow when Alph fell. Many had debated upon how it could have been possible for a powerful, heavily-fortified city to have been so easily overthrown – and during the course of a day, no less. Few had come to a satisfactory conclusion on the matter, wherein only sacred parchments appeared to shed any sort of light as to the events that led to Alph's destruction. Spencer had studied parts of the Oo'torin himself – a necessary step, he had felt, toward a better understanding of what had occurred throughout history.

"Their disregard brought upon them the wrath of the Original One", it had read.

“In its moment of adjoining, the Original One sent forth Judgement. Judgement struck out with its many golden arms – felling the city. The spirit of its King was broken into pieces. Each piece taken from one another, so that such horror would not happen again.”

While beautiful and poetic, these words had failed to impart greater insight upon the man. He'd never been one to pry open the locks of literary crypticism – his wife Kadri had always been responsible for that. Kadri had made creative translation into a true work of art – bringing historical details to life in ways no one else had ever done. Spencer had jokingly called her 'The Weaver', while Kadri in turn had dubbed him 'OI' Nostalgicus.' When they travelled together, she refused to let the air go cold – constantly filling the air with playful quips, idle chatter, improvised songs...

Spencer uttered a deep sigh, and reached forward toward the control panel of his in-car stereo. Station after station was inspected, each with its own repertoire of medleys and intertwining commentary provided by overly enthused or morose-sounding DJs – neither of which entertained the man all that much. He switched the radio off, once again resuming the atmosphere of stifling quietude, broken only by the soft rumble of the car's engine. It was unhealthy for Spencer to immerse himself in it for so long, as silence granted his mind the opportunity to wander. Not that he was tired, not in the slightest.

No...but his thoughts would consistently drift back to Kadri – waiting as if with seamless patience at the back of his mind, for his valiant return.

Spencer had met Kadri at a Sinnohan Historical Sciences convention during the late 70s. It was the first time he had attended a

gathering of this kind since he'd began his studies under the tutelage of Professor Samuel Oak, and had found it overwhelming to say the least. The sheer wealth of knowledge and its varieties culminated from all four corners of the world, offering a pot-pourri of theories and ideas that one man was incapable of handling alone. Spencer recalled a few things – mentions of the Pokémopolis excavations, Almian legend, the need for government financial contributions to keep museums running. He also recalled his mind having been somewhat fidgety that day – it was summertime and Hearthome City's Culture Centre wasn't the most well-ventilated building in the region.

Even Samuel, scheduled to present a lecture on Ho-Oh's significance in human history at Professor Nansen Rowan's suggestion, had been finding the sweltering temperatures particularly hard to deal with. Spencer had offered to fetch his tutor and companion a drink before promptly disappearing into the foyer. It was there, that he saw her.

At first, the exchange with Kadri had been simple casual conversation. However, once the woman heard of where Spencer had come from and that he had chosen to study legendary Pokémon, she had grown quite animated. Kadri herself was a native of Sinnoh hailing from Emeragrove Town and had taken great interest in the concept of dimensional anomalies ever since she had learned about Dialga and Palkia at school. Her research had led her to some highly curious past events – black 'clouds' that had risen over the island of Alto Mare in 56FD and threatened to disintegrate everything they touched, claims of a massive beam of light which seemed to tear open the sky over Alamos Town almost a century ago. Her latest focus of interest was that of a place called Broka City – an entire populace of humans and their pokémon in south Kanto that mysteriously vanished, leaving

nothing but a barren crater.

It had been something of a recent occurrence, and a pretty unsettling one to say the least. Guardsmen operatives had worked with members of the Police force and the top scientific specialists of the decade to try and unearth a clue as to the city's disappearance. All they had retrieved from the scene were a few samples of earth and fragmented accounts blurted out by terrified witnesses within a two mile radius of the location. Every account had depicted the same vision of a blurred chalky white creature bearing short, angular-feathered wings and hovering some distance over the Broka's cityscape – enshrouded in a crimson sphere of energy.

Kadri was adamant this creature had been Palkia. The legendary pokémon was renowned for its power over matter, after all. But why would Palkia snatch a city? And if it *wasn't* destroyed, then where had it gone?

Captured by the woman's depth of enthusiasm, Spencer had offered to help fund Kadri's travel expenses to help her reach Kanto and take a closer look at the site – located at the topmost portion of what was now a Pokémon Reserve. A considerable walk brought them to what appeared to have been the borderline between the city and the immense woodlands and fields beyond. Much of the area had absconded entirely, resulting in a landscape that sloped in a gentle curvature before halting abruptly at the ocean border. The only visible sign of any unnatural occurrence was found in the trees that surrounded the crater's edge. They stood frailly against the coastal gusts – their spindly forms dictating an appearance of having been sawn entirely in half, though in a similar curve to that of the crater they surrounded. The entire area where Broka City once stood had been marked with tall posts and fencing which reached even into the

sea - allowing Spencer and Kadri only a view from a hundred yard distance. Still, to knowledgeable eyes, the full extent of the damage could be seen, even from here.

And the readings from the source of the damage could be captured.

Wave devices may have not been as advanced back then as they were now, but the strength of what Kadri's Wave Receptor had picked up was undeniable. Gripped with excitement over her discovery, Spencer had taken Kadri back to Pallet Town to study the unusual data. One thing had led to another - Kadri became engrossed in the idea of interdimensional passage and the possibilities it held. Spencer had found himself becoming quite enamoured with Kadri, as if her relentless persistence held some kind of intoxicating quality. In 1985, the two had married, with Molly's birth occurring a few short years afterward.

Still, the couple's obsession persisted. With Spencer's rise to fame in the scientific community as an expert in the knowledge of legendary pokémon, a rise in wealth had quickly followed suit. Spencer and Kadri had set up residence in the picturesque Johtoan location of Greenfield, where dimensional studies continued with very little pause. Occasionally, Spencer had taken his wife and daughter for return trips to Pallet Town. There they would spend calm, enjoyable moments in the company of Samuel Oak, Delia Ketchum and her son Ash, who was five years older than Molly. Other times, the Hale family had travelled back to Sinnoh and indulged in culture and history, hoping that one of these visits would unearth the missing link in their desire to see beyond the dimension they found themselves in.

The missing link arrived, in the form of Newton Graceland.

Newton was a curious man who lived in a remote corner of Sunyshore City. Spencer and Kadri had encountered him during a trip through Sunyshore Market while looking for solar panel technology to install on the roof of their mansion. At that point, the couple were unaware of their future partnership with the man – in fact, it wasn't until a visit to the Valley Windworks some months later that they bumped into Newton again. Literally.

Kadri had been studying some research documents at the time of the collision, and the papers had consequently scattered, only to be snatched out of the air by Newton himself before they had a chance to blow away. Catching a glimpse of the information and the figures who had borne it, the man's face had immediately lit up. It soon emerged that harnessing energy had also been at the top of Newton's agenda, and this had brought him into contact with the Hale couple not once, but twice within the same year. On top of that, Newton displayed the same level of enthusiasm with regards to entering other dimensions.

The man's desire had been forged at a far younger age than Kadri or Spencer, it seemed. Newton explained that Floraroma -a town that lay to the west of the windworks- was in fact the place of his birth. As a child, Newton would occasionally visit the energy plant to marvel at its towering wind-driven turbines with their massive blades. It was during one of these visits, that he spotted it.

'It' happened to be a small round purple creature with a yellow cross upon its face and a white cloudy tuft atop its head. Newton could remember the fascination he had experienced upon gazing at the floating entity, and how it had wrapped its two string-like appendages around his arm – attempting to lift the boy off the ground with all its force. And Newton had chuckled, thinking that this was all part of the creature's silly antics...at least until a blast of electricity had come from

nowhere, shooing it away.

“You shouldn’t go near drifloon, young man!” an elderly woman had cautioned, much to Newton’s surprise. “Be thankful I was here with my electrike to drive it off, for you could well have been dragged back to the Spirit World if left alone for much longer.”

Puzzled by the woman’s words, Newton had returned home to dictate the events to his mother and father. The reactions were mixed – while Newton’s father had shaken his head and tutted over the eccentricities of his son’s rescuer, Newton’s mother took on an expression of great fear. She too had heard tales of the drifloon and its connection with a mysterious plane called the Spirit World. She implored Newton to follow the elderly woman’s advice, to stay away from drifloon, from any ghost type pokémon.

But instead of inciting fear, these words only served to heighten the boy’s curiosity. He started to yearn for knowledge – what *were* ghost type pokémon? Why were people so afraid of them? And what was this place, this...‘Spirit World’?

It was at that point, Newton’s resolve was set. During the latter part of his childhood and early adolescence, he studied historical and scientific documents fervently. Over the following years, the young man’s desire to venture into the realms of the unknown managed to turn a few heads. Most notably, it attracted the attentions of a certain wealthy Sinnohan entrepreneur who agreed to fund Newton’s research in return for access to the resulting data. Thus, Project Mugen was born.

Newton had heartily produced his business card to the couple -flaunting the name “Graceland Sciences”- as his way of inviting them in on the project. He explained as to how his laboratory was on the verge of creating a device to pass into another dimension, and that the

Spirit World may not only hold the answers to his questions, but also those of Kadri and Spencer as well. Warmed by Newton's admiration for his work, Spencer agreed.

The process continued. Kadri and Spencer's research was able to fill the gaps in Newton's schematics and – having left Molly to stay with their friends in Pallet Town the following year- the Hale couple were able to set eyes upon Newton's completed dimensional transporter for the first time. It had existed as a curious ring-like device which was suspended horizontally over their heads – powered by two spherical 'engines' on either side. Newton had proudly stressed the uniqueness of these spheres, remarking that nothing of this kind had ever been manufactured by human hands until now.

And now, it was time to see if the transporter worked.

Spencer flinched as the steering wheel jolted in his grip, reminding the man of his passage from pre-constructed road to a more familiar dust track. Very few roads were built in Johto's outskirts, since most people relied on other means to travel from one place to another besides vehicles, but Spencer's vehicle was an adaptable sort – accustomed to both smooth and rough surfaces.

The man had travelled all night with very little in the way of pause, and as a result his entire body was racked with the aches and stiffness of a figure heavily deprived of sleep. But his determination had been rewarded, and now Spencer could glance up and view the remaining step-like peaks of Alph which had now risen into view – deceptively small but still very much prominent against the stark morning skyline.

His chance had arrived, and nothing, not even time itself was going to prevent Spencer from grasping it.

Newton's machine had worked, alright. That was one of the things Spencer could still recall. But everything that followed was a difficult mass of confusion and fear. Before he was able to grasp what had happened, Spencer had found himself alone in some remote location far from the laboratory. The only image burned into his memory was that of black, spindly creatures swirling around him – scrutinizing his every facet with their singular eyes.

It was the only piece of data Spencer had to work with. Upon returning to the site of Graceland Sciences, the man was horrified to discover the laboratory had been consumed by flames – the data for Newton's machine destroyed in the process. Spencer had indeed been the only one to come back from whence the trio had vanished to. Not only that, the obliteration of Project Mugen had returned the man to square one, but he refused to let this diminish his resolve in the slightest. Those strange unknown pokémon had to be his key to rescuing his wife and friend. And the 'Unown', as Hale later named them, were to become a heavy focus of the man's life for the months ahead.

As time passed, Spencer's searching had grown more and more obsessive, and the man himself more paranoid. He'd started to dwell upon possibilities - contemplating whether some error in his calculations had been responsible for snatching away Kadri and Newton. And Molly...poor, naïve Molly, deprived of her devoted mother and left to wait in hopes of attention from her haggard, overworked father. He'd tried to make up for his mistakes, to give Molly the time

she longed for, but Spencer never felt it was enough. The heaving mass of guilt within his mind only grew with his own desperation at the Unown's elusiveness - history seemed just as uneducated about them as he was. After two years, Spencer had been almost ready to give up. But then someone had knocked upon his door - a man who was to change his run of fortune greatly.

His name was Jonathan Schuyler, and he was an archaeologist hailing from Prism Town in north Johto. During his recent excavations into long-buried architecture said to have constructed by the Pokémopolis Civilization, Jonathan and his work team had uncovered an underground vault containing a wealth of fossilised remains. While most of these fossils were of fairly common pokémon species, Jonathan had discovered one that had been quite different. One that seemed to have been deliberately crafted as opposed to formed by the passing of time. Jonathan had been certain that the article contained genetic data for Rayquaza, the serpentine pokémon that lived in the ozone layer.

Aware of Spencer's expertise in legendary pokémon, Jonathan had travelled to Greenfield to seek his thoughts on the matter. However, it was Jonathan himself that ended up giving Spencer just the information he needed to resume pursuit toward his goals. After hearing of Spencer's past deeds, Jonathan mentioned that he had seen the Pokémon the man had been looking for. But far from having viewed them as solid entities, the archaeologist had only witnessed their shapes as carved marks in the walls of temples - having mistaken them for an ancient forgotten dialect.

Spencer had begged Jonathan to show him what he had seen, and from thereon, persisted in helping the man expand his knowledge on Pokémopolis - having hoped that it may also lead to further insight

on the Unown.

Alph had been the clinching discovery. Amongst its crushed stone fragments, something had still remained in tact. It was an ancient library, and a place both Jonathan and Spencer had been scouring for the last few weeks.

“Here it is, Professor,” Jonathan announced, motioning into the dimly-lit space beyond. Spencer let out a breath of amazement. It was an expansive chamber despite its relative emptiness – with text-ridden panels set into its side walls, and what looked to be a meticulously-sculpted altar situated at the opposite end. Everything seemed to be formed from the same stone materials, giving the chamber an eerie greenish-brown hue.

“I’ve never seen markings like this before,” Jonathan relayed, pointing at the intriguing angular runes that were intermingled with the more familiar shapes Spencer had been longing to see more of. “They seem to be about the Unown. What do you think?”

“We’ll see,” Spencer smiled faintly, bringing out his laptop and activating it, before directing the machine towards one of the carved panels. The laptop’s ancient glyph database began its work - scanning symbol after symbol in preparation to match the new data with that already stored in its memory.

“Well if anybody can figure out what this says, it’s you,” Jonathan returned the expression in more potent measure before taking snapshots of the panels with a handheld camera.

Moving sideways to let the laptop scan another part of the wall text, Spencer felt his foot make impact with something light. Glancing down, the man noticed a small chipped tile -about 4cm square- which

he had accidentally shifted across the floor with his boot. Tucking the laptop under one arm, Spencer bent forward to pick the tile up before turning it over - studying each side with a puzzled frown. Upon further scrutiny, it was apparent the tile was created from an undefined material, with a square groove in the back and an engraving of an Unown on the front.

Spencer was almost certain it was a tiny part of a much more expansive artefact, but where could that artefact be? Was it somewhere in this chamber? The man felt his chest tighten in rising anticipation – his pulse quickening with an onset of renewed hope and excitement.

From somewhere beyond Spencer's right shoulder, the air rippled - thrusting a small, black spindly creature into the open from seemingly nowhere. It hovered beside Spencer momentarily, watching the man examine the tile in his hand with curious high-pitched utterances. Hearing the noise, Spencer jerked his head round to see where it had come from, but his eyes were met with nothing, save the back of Jonathan as he continued his photographic documentation.

It certainly hadn't been *Jonathan* making those noises, had it? Maybe it had just been the man's imagination.

Then Spencer noticed a case, positioned at the foot of the altar-like construction. Kneeling down for a closer look, he mentally documented its familiar surface patterns with a deeply focused expression. Something about the parallel lines converging on a circular protrusion reminded Spencer of the body markings of several ancient legendary pokémon he had researched, and this only served to draw his hand nearer to the lid of the case.

The lid was raised to reveal yet more tiles, arranged neatly in tight stacks of varying height. Without a second thought, Spencer

gathered a handful of the objects up in his left hand to examine them closer. So it hadn't been his imagination – the odd, tingling thrum the man had felt rising from the first tile was indeed present. Only now it was growing in intensity – each one projecting its own living aura that, when joined by the force of another, served to collectively amplify the energy among them.

A blue light began to shimmer across the surface of the tiles in Spencer's palm, arcing outward in sharp lance-like patterns. He flinched internally - his first instinctive reaction was to throw the tiles across the room, but his hand had become momentarily paralysed by the previous energy outburst. Rising anxiously to his feet, Spencer opened his mouth to utter a cry for help – to draw Jonathan's attention to what he was obviously unaware of. But before he could do so, the air rippled yet again and several differently-shaped black linear forms emerged – circling Spencer intently.

His fingers drew close around the tiles as he gazed at the bobbing creatures that surrounded him. The man knew what they were now, he knew how they had come here. Fear began to be replaced by apprehension, even determination. Spencer knew he'd finally discovered what he'd been searching for – the key to rescuing his wife and friend from whence they had vanished to, and his resolve had surged in his desire to implement it.

What he hadn't bargained for, however, was the immediate repercussions of that desire.

Jonathan gasped and glanced up in alarm as he heard a loud clatter from the other side of the chamber. Spencer's laptop lay upon the cold, green-grey slabs where it had fell, encircled by scattered,

cracked tiles. But the man himself was nowhere to be seen – it was as if he had completely ceased to exist.

Dashing across the chamber, Jonathan gazed around in anguish, chastising himself internally for failing to pay attention to his surroundings.

“Professor?”

Spencer had promised to look out for his associate, and he should have been doing the same! How could Jonathan possibly explain himself back in Greenfield? He stared up at the ceiling, hopes dissipating. Something had gone terribly wrong – something that was far beyond the scope of his own human thinking.

“PROFESSORRRRRR!”



Of Realities and Regrets

He was falling. Or at least he *thought* he was falling. There ensued a descent that very much mimicked the appearance of falling, though Spencer felt no pull of gravity nor experienced any shift in equilibrium. But he was indeed being drawn away from his point of materialisation – moving backwards amongst clouds of drifting black twigs.

Only they weren't twigs. They were distinct forms, each with one singular eye, floating purposefully in united sequence while chanting using high-pitched tones.

It took Spencer but a moment to realise just where he was, and what had brought him here - the very pokémon that even now were swarming about him in numbers too multitudinous to grasp.

"It's the...Unown!"

No sooner had the words left the man's lips, than everything was plunged into darkness. There arose a sudden heavy feeling in the pit of Spencer's gut which quickly intensified before he felt his back make impact with a hard surface. Light gradually resumed, casting flickery patterns over aged stone walls. Spencer carefully raised himself into a sitting position and glanced from left to right in astonishment. Somehow he had ended up back inside the Ruins of Alph.

A familiar cry sent a jolt of panic coursing through Spencer's

body, spurring him to leap to his feet and dash heedlessly down the narrow passage towards the source of the voice. The man was certain of what he had heard – yes, even in her fear, such warm, delightful tones were unmistakable.

“KADRI!” Spencer yelled, forcing himself to run all the faster. Had his precious wife really been trapped within these ruins this whole time? The man took in a sharp, horrified breath upon sight of what met him at the end of the passageway.

He had reached a far larger chamber, one that stretched far below his feet, and the ceiling of which suspended dauntingly above his head. Inside this chamber stood a vaguely metallic construction, an ancient machine composed of rings and huge, sturdy pillars in formations Spencer could not begin to understand the reasons for. In the central part of this machine there glowed an ominous white light, and just beyond that light...

...he could see the terror in her eyes, even from this distance. He could see her vain attempts to keep a grasp on one of the pillars as white tendrils from the sphere of light strove to pull her within itself. But Spencer was too far away to reach Kadri, to offer his strength to drag her back. The upset swiftly escalated into frustration, then anger – he couldn't just stand there and do nothing!

Without further thought, the man leapt from his standing point into the chamber's depths. As he felt the solid ground part from under him, a tiny part of Spencer's mind began to scold him for doing something so reckless – but it was quickly drowned out by the man's determination to rescue Kadri. It was as if the unlikelihood of surviving such a fall had not even crossed Spencer's mind. As if he was certain he could really make it if he just believed it was possible.

And, as Spencer's feet gently made contact with the stone slabs

and the information Benson gave was sparse and deliberately withheld in nature.

If she was to better understand events, Molly was going to have to uncover them herself. Even if it meant breaking one of her father's most potent rules. Opening the laptop, Molly used the knowledge taught by her parents to enter the machine's file system, in an attempt to figure out a question that had bothered her incessantly since that morning.

"Papa...what happened to you?"

As Molly opened the most recently used software, the photographs Spencer had taken of the hidden chamber walls displayed in sequence. Molly's eyes widened in surprise.

"The Unown!" she exclaimed. For a moment, sadness was replaced by astonishment, and a growing curiosity. Molly turned her head towards the carved box that also stood upon the table where Jonathan had left it. What could possibly be inside?

The box was surprisingly light, allowing Molly to lift it from the table with ease. Once upon the floor, the young girl tipped the container sideways – letting its contents spill out across the polished surface.

Under other circumstances, Molly may have smiled - the tiny slabs reminded her of the countless magnets that adorned her parents' refrigerator in the kitchen. But now -with both those parents taken from her- the only emotion it served to drag into existence was despair.

She was alone.

"They look...just like letters," the girl mused, forcing a smile as she placed a few of the tiles in a row. "I can spell our names with the Unown. 'Papa'..."

Her voice began to falter slightly as she arranged another row of tiles vertically – interlocking with the first row.

"...and 'Mama'. They're together...
...with me."

Tears brimmed under Molly's closed eyes as she lowered her head – watery droplets spattered upon the shiny floor amongst the tiles she had arranged, and those left in disarray. And then it happened.

A blue light began to shimmer across the surface of the tiles under Molly's hand, dancing slightly over her fingers and wrist. Molly glanced up in alarm as a faint light was cast upon her, and took in the sight of a peculiar formation -much like that of an upturned funnel with iridescent edges- that had appeared above her head. The now-glowing tiles Molly had arranged rose into the air in a spiral motion – tendrils of blue energy arcing between them as they, in turn, gathered the unused slabs to create a rotating vertical tunnel. From the open portal and through the tunnel, black, spindly creatures with wide singular eyes descended.

"Unown..." Molly breathed, watching the creatures float around her with a renewed smile upon her face. "Do you all want to play with me?"

As the Unown squealed approvingly, the portal overhead began to expand, sending more of them tumbling out into the open. Beneath Molly, an icy sheen started to grow. This crystalline substance rapidly spread from under Molly throughout the lobby, engulfing the table and its contents before climbing the walls in extravagant frilled layers.

Slamming his full weight into the door which had previously been sealed shut by the crystal mass, Jonathan and Benson peered into the lobby – their faces overcome with utmost shock. There they saw Molly Spencer, a girl barely older than four, surrounded by unnatural black entities and a growing structure of questionable origin.

“What *are* they?” Benson spluttered, referring to the former.

“Those are the...Unown!” Jonathan exclaimed, seconds before a fresh wave of crystal leapt forth to reseal the door. Their master's intruders dealt with, the pokémon resumed a calm spherical formation below the dwindling portal entrance.

Molly admired her settings in a state of wonder. They looked so familiar, like a page from the book she had been shown the night before her father disappeared. It was as if the Unown had been able to see what was in her mind, to make it real.

The girl picked up the fallen book and opened it, gazing upon the woman and Entei, the pages she loved the most. As Molly stared, Spencer's words from that night echoed in her mind.

These are legendary Pokémon, Molly. And in this book, the artist imagined what some of them might look like.

“Papa...” Molly trembled softly, leaning further into the pages as her eyes began to water yet again. All she could think of was that final moment of togetherness – her father's laughter, his playful roars as he imitated the majestic fire type pokémon.

“Papa...”

...please come back...”

~**~~**~***~**~***~**~***

Spencer flinched, his eyes opening wide. He had been floating aimlessly for an indeterminable amount of time, his mind still reeling from the previous incident. Had Kadri really been there, or had he just dreamt it? One thing was for certain, Spencer had not returned to the Ruins of Alph as he had first thought. Where he happened to be, the man wasn't entirely sure. Colours swirled and merged around him in such a manner that Spencer had found it nauseating to watch, and had closed his eyes in an attempt to refocus until his heart had stopped thudding in his chest. And it had worked to an extent...at least until a few moments ago.

A sharp sting had penetrated the man's head, and with it, a fleeting vision of his daughter. Poor, lonely Molly, clutching her father's book – her last reminder- and sobbing tears Spencer desperately longed to cease. As upset and anger welled up inside the man once again, he found himself surrounded by Unown – curiously circling him with faint coos.

“Molly needs me...” Spencer murmured in bereft tones, before looking angrily towards the Unown. “You brought me here...take me back!”

The Unown span and vibrated, their cries echoing a measure of startlement at the man's frustration. But nothing happened – Spencer continued to float aimless amongst the void, the pokémon surrounding him gazing down almost expectantly.

He desperately thrust his hand into his pocket before bringing out a scuffed PokéGear and fumbling with its keypad. It was a foolish long shot, yet any means to get in touch with his daughter – to tell her

he was alright – was worth trying. His efforts were met with a resounding discord of interference.

“I said I'd protect her!” Spencer cried in anguish, putting the article away and staring back in the Unown's direction. “I failed Kadri, I can't do the same to Molly...why won't you let me protect her? Why won't you take me home?”

Papa...please come back.

“I have to go home!” Spencer yelled, struggling to right himself from the horizontal position he was in. “I said I would be back for her! I said-”

The man's words dissolved into the multicoloured surroundings as he felt a hot, tingling sensation emanating from his chest. It coursed outward across Spencer's body and encompassed it in a rising blue glow, accompanied by a tension in his head like someone was claspng it firmly with both hands. Spencer tried to respond, to question what was going on, but thoughts and motion failed him. It was as if, just for a moment, he had been denied access to his own mind.

Then it came again – a blackout, a sudden violent drop that snatched the man's breath from him before forcing it unceremoniously back into his lungs in a way that sent him into a fit of coughing. Gravity was once again at work, or at least the aches and heaviness in Spencer's arms and legs dictated this was the case. But as he sat amidst the darkness, the man thought little of his whereabouts, or his own suffering – only that of his daughter whom he treasured so much.

Part of Spencer's mind reassured him Molly was going to be okay now. Why now? What had happened to change her circumstances?

"You have been psychically linked," a voice echoed from somewhere beside him. "I felt it happen. They have sent a guardian to protect your daughter."

"What?" Spencer turned his head sharply to try and see who had spoken. "They? You mean, the Unown?"

"The creatures you have come to know as such, yes," came the reply.

"But why couldn't they just have taken me to her instead?" Spencer inquired exasperatedly.

"They took as much of you as they could," the voice insisted. "A common memory, shaped into a source of comfort...it is the best they can do. They are not designed for inter-dimensional travel – they are simply resident here."

"That doesn't make sense!" the man spluttered. "I saw the Unown appear from their dimension into mine!"

"And not without a means, dear Professor," the voice responded, ever-calmly. "You held the tiles, did you not?"

"I..." Spencer fell silent. "How did you know of the tiles? How did you know I was a Professor?"

"The Unown aren't the only pokémon living in this realm, Mr. Hale," the voice told him. From the darkness, a thin, blue-grey leg stepped forward, followed by another. As Spencer visually traced the unidentified figure from the feet upwards, he was met with a reptilian head with two stubby horns at its temples. Glowing red eyes scrutinized him amongst a mask of navy, as a long, spike-tipped tail

waved contemplatively from behind.

"My name is To'geedo," the pokémon introduced himself. "I am a diguard who once served under Emperor Sai – I heard your friend's cries after you were snatched from the Emperor's private chambers."

"Emperor Sai..." Spencer's mouth slowly dropped open as he re-examined To'geedo's attire. "I thought I recognized the style of your robes – you worked for the Pokémopolitan Emperor himself?"

"For a time," To'geedo nodded, though his tone of voice was one racked with noticeable guilt. "I thought Kato had set out to bring peace and unity to the beings of our world. I naively convinced myself that each plan -no matter how twisted or bizarre- had to be to further that goal. Kato had been a Seer, after all...why would he have desired otherwise? But Kato had changed from the forthright, justice-seeking friend I had once known. Eventually I had to face that reality, but when I did, the results were far from pretty. Kato banished me to this dimension, took away my staff so I would be trapped here, unable to return."

"So...we are *all* prisoners?" Spencer forced himself to utter the words.

"As long as that psychic link exists between you and your daughter, there is hope," To'geedo assured the man. "Even so, we are now in very dangerous territory. Just how much do you know of the Unown, Mr. Hale?"

"They are capable of altering reality inspired by the thoughts of others," Spencer relayed, after a few moments of scouring his mind for snippets of past research.

"Precisely," To'geedo said in conclusive tones. "The only reason the Unown were able to create that link between you and your

daughter in the first place is because she also handled the tiles. The Unown are now responding to her thoughts.”

Spencer looked on anxiously as To'geedo gazed out into the blackened void with an expression of equal concern.

“I cannot guarantee the safety of anyone while the Unown are under your daughter’s command,” he murmured. “The imagination is a powerful tool, Mr. Hale. Kato Sai was aware of that – it is why he created the Unown in the first place.”

“Created...” Spencer trailed off into a mixture of awe and disgust. He didn't want to think of what might have happened, had a corrupted mind such as Emperor Sai's been allowed to harness the power to shape reality. Connected with Molly's imagination, the risk was high enough. The man slowly got to his feet before looking down at To'geedo inquiringly.

“This psychic link...” he began. “Does it mean I can speak to her?”

“No, but it will make sure you do not get lost,” To'geedo replied. “This realm is quite disorientating for the untrained, as you discovered earlier. The link will keep you in touch with what is illusion, and what is not.”

“At least I'm glad to hear that,” Spencer nodded. He doubted his heart could take another warped vision like the one of the nightmare temple. But there was one thing he just couldn't understand – why had the Unown snatched him into this dimension, yet left Molly where she was?

It then dawned on him. The Unown could read minds – they must have sensed his desire to find Kadri and Newton, to bring them home. The man tensed himself, a firm expression upon his face. This was a chance he had been given to bring Molly's mother back to her –

a chance he couldn't throw away.

"To'geedo, I came here because I'm looking for someone," Spencer explained. "I'm looking for my wife Kadri, and Newton, a good friend of mine."

"And how can you be certain they would be here?" To'geedo blinked. The confusion in the diguard's eyes somehow managed to instil guilt into his human companion.

"Because...this isn't the first time I have come to this place," he responded after a long silence. "Several years ago, Newton built a machine which allowed himself, Kadri and I to pass into another dimension. This dimension. Then something happened to drive us apart - it frustrates me so much that I can't remember what the something was. All I know is...I was the only one to return."

"Many an energy flux happens in this realm, but such an event would be quite substantial. Quite memorable," To'geedo rubbed at his chin with a flat, singular-clawed fingerless hand. "At least to me. Yes... I'm pretty sure I recall the moment you speak of, and its location. I shall lead you, there we may well uncover further clues as to the whereabouts of your companions."

"Thank you, To'geedo," Spencer smiled. Any pointer was a worthwhile pointer at this stage.

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As the man and his diguard companion walked, darkness gave way to the more familiar disorientating red, blue and black clouds speckled with scatterings of Unown. In turn, their walking was

exchanged for flight – To'geedo keeping a grasp on Spencer's arm to pull the bewildered figure after him, and prevent the man drifting elsewhere.

It had taken Spencer all this time to finally adjust to the constant tides and swells of his current situation, and it was only now he decided to give himself a chance to examine the environment.

"The Unown...they're not hostile, are they?" Spencer mused, watching the creatures perform what appeared to be slow-motion dances in mid-air.

"They can be," To'geedo replied. "Unown are not prone to act under their own initiative. Because they were created to take orders, that is what they do. Without question."

"Huh..." the man contemplated the facts, with some relief. At least he didn't have to worry about the Unown turning against Molly while she was in their company. But even so, he couldn't let more time pass than necessary. Kadri and Newton had to be found. He glanced across at To'geedo who had been concentrating on travel – staring out at the great cloudy expanse with an expression of great focus.

"Pardon my ignorance, " Spencer began. "But how can you tell where we are? For the most part, everything looks the same to me."

"As a diguard, I have the ability to sense a flux or weakness in a dimension," To'geedo smiled at the man's perplexed face. "It can be more difficult here, since this is a unique realm subject to constant change, but finding one's way around is still possible. It just takes a greater understanding."

"Speaking of understanding...I've been able to understand you this whole time," Spencer pointed out. "Are you a psychic pokémon?"

"Not at all," To'geedo chuckled. "But as I said, this place is quite

the unique one. Things that wouldn't be possible otherwise, they're possible here."

Without warning, the diguard stopped in its tracks, causing Spencer to bump gently into the back of it as a result of his own momentum. To'geedo's eyes were wide in anticipation

"The energy is starting to peak," he murmured. "Stay with me, Mr. Hale."

"Stay with you?" the man echoed in baffled tones. Moments later, his vision was awash with a bright green-tinged hue. The unmistakable pull of gravity tugged at his every limb, causing Spencer to fall onto his knees with cry of alarm. As his body grew re-accustomed to the normalization of physics, Spencer lifted his hands from their position over his eyes and blinked warily.

To the man's surprise, he found himself kneeling amongst a thick carpet of grass intermingled with dandelions. Upon raising his head, Spencer took in the view of distant woodland standing tall against a pastel pink sky.

"I..." he stammered. "How is this...?"

Spencer trailed off in mid-sentence as realization dawned. What he was seeing had to be a direct result of Molly's connection with the Unown. The creation of realities...everything here looked distinctly believable, just as it had done in Spencer's own nightmarish interpretation.

"My daughter did always have a vivid imagination," he smiled, getting to his feet. "Such a beautiful place, and so familiar. It almost looks like the fields that surround Pallet Town back in Kanto."

"Don't let yourself get distracted, Mr. Hale," To'geedo warned him. "This is only an illusion."

"Right, right," Spencer shook forced himself out of his mesmerized gaze. "Lead the way, To'geedo."

"Bear in mind that we are in the midst of your daughter's works now," the diguard reminded, proceeding across the grass. "Our surroundings are volatile, responding to her wishes only."

"So she's here?" Spencer exclaimed as he strode after To'geedo, a renewed enthusiasm present in his voice.

"I would assume that to be the case," To'geedo nodded. "In theory it may even be possible to travel back to your world using this inter-connecting reality as a platform. But..." he paused, watching Spencer's vivid expression as he hung on every word. "If you were to leave now, you would be leaving without your wife and friend. Isn't that correct?"

"Yes..." the man heaved a broken sigh. Even with the underlying assurance that Molly was safe, Spencer continued to feel torn between his duty as a father and that of a loyal companion. He had worried over Newton and missed Kadri dearly since her disappearance, and he knew Molly had longed for the soothing warmth of her mother also. Bringing Kadri back was something Spencer had to do, for all their sakes.

To'geedo's return to a statuesque posture signalled but one thing, and this time Spencer readied himself for it. As the greenish hue of transitional reality lifted, the diguard and his human companion found themselves standing atop a flower-covered hillside, looking across the ocean.

"The shifting is making it difficult to pinpoint where we are," To'geedo reported seriously. "If I could just pick up on a signal, one clearer than the others, I could bring us through to the other side of

the illusion.”

“Gracidea flowers...” Spencer murmured distantly, crouching amongst the plant life while paying little heed to what the diguard was saying. “This...this is a scene from the book I was showing Molly before I left! She must have been reading it by herself since then.”

“Mr. Hale, *please*,” To'geedo tried to maintain his patience. “I need your cooperation and focus if we are to break free of this place. Your wandering thoughts only serve to complicate matters further.”

“*My* thoughts?” Spencer blinked. “How does what *I'm* thinking make any difference here?”

“I can't explain,” To'geedo insisted. “I just need you to concentrate on the matter at hand – it makes our path clearer.”

“Alright,” Spencer figured it was best not to question the already confounding situation any further. “Wait...do you hear something?”

The sound was indeed unmistakable – a harsh thunderous noise like the clapping of many hands in loud syncopation. Spencer instinctively turned to run as he saw the once-distant ocean leaping upward to swallow him into its watery depths. However, To'geedo thrust out a clawed hand and grasped at the man's arm, forcing him to go no further.

Within seconds, the waves made impact.

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“Open your eyes, Mr. Hale,” To'geedo instructed calmly. Spencer

felt the tension ease from his arm, indicating that the diguard had recently let go of it. Gingerly allowing his eyelids to unbind, the man once again found himself observing the great cloudy void he had been traversing for some indeterminable amount of time.

"Mindspace..." Spencer concluded, releasing the breath he had taken in anticipation of the watery deluge.

"Hm?" To'geedo glanced at him with a vaguely puzzled expression.

"This dimension is affected by the thoughts of those who come into contact with it," Spencer explained. "'Mindspace' seems a fitting title for it, don't you agree?"

"It certainly sounds appropriate," To'geedo smiled. "A more curious realm I have yet to see."

"Curious or not, the dynamics are truly frustrating," Spencer rubbed his head in annoyance. "Have you been able to sense Kadri or Newton's whereabouts yet?"

"I believe I have roughly pinpointed your wife's location," To'geedo nodded. "But she is the only other being I can sense with an aura signature like your own. Either your friend is at great distance...or he is no longer present in this realm."

"Is that so?" the man murmured, trying to keep worry and internal assumptions to a minimum.

"Contrary to what I had feared, your daughter's thoughtscape did not throw us off course," To'geedo continued. "In fact, we appear to have been brought closer to the whereabouts of your wife."

"You *believe* so?" Spencer questioned the diguard's uncertainty. "Why are you not sure?"

"There is a concentration of unidentifiable energy close by,"

To'geedo replied. "It is...causing interference with the surrounding energies. I can't get a proper sense of where we are."

"This is most unfortunate," Spencer sighed, gazing out into the void. "Without a decent signal, we're as good as lost. Maybe I should--"

The man's voice muted instantly as he continued to stare, eyes wide, at a sliver of light that flickered amongst the blue and red clouds. To'geedo redirected his attentions in Spencer's direction as the man began to float toward the point his gaze was firmly set upon. Without a word, the diguard swiftly drew alongside his human companion, watching as the sliver of light grew taller and wider with the closing distance.

"I've seen this before," Spencer relayed, though his voice was soft and far away. "Many years ago, the first time I came here. This light... Kadri found her answer in this light."

"And what answer was that?" To'geedo asked.

"Kadri had been looking for the lost Broka City," Spencer explained. "It vanished from Kanto's landscape twenty five years ago and--" He drew breath suddenly. "No..."

"This light we are seeing appears to be a weakness between dimensions," To'geedo nodded wisely. "A rift, if you will."

Palkia... Spencer stammered internally. *Palkia took Broka City here?* He froze, eyes darting wildly between To'geedo and the glimmering rift. Desperation clutched at his chest as the light tantalized his vision with possibilities of discovery. Of bringing back his precious wife, of making the undefined, understood.

Maybe, just maybe, Kadri was somewhere beyond that light.

"It would be unwise to enter that rift," To'geedo instructed. "Not all dimensions are as *accommodating* to humans as Mindspace. Stay

here, and let me take a look.”

Spencer's stiffened poise weakened in submission as he gave a nod, and moved aside to allow To'geedo room. Without further acknowledgement, the diguard placed each arm firmly by its sides – coasting smoothly between the rims of light and disappearing from view.

The moments that followed appeared achingly long, as Spencer awaited To'geedo's return. He forced himself to think only of the task at hand, worried that if his thoughts were to wander even a fraction, Mindspace's Unown inhabitants would snatch him into another dreamscape and carry him far from this spot.

But the rift continued to glimmer mockingly without emergence. Spencer felt his fists clench slightly and chastised himself for not pursuing To'geedo, despite the pokemon's advice. How much different could the dimension To'geedo had visited be from the one the man currently found himself in?

NOOOO!

Spencer cried out in alarm and reeled backwards as icy spikes wrenched their way into his vision. Suddenly he was aware of an inexplicable sensation encompassing his upper body. As the unsettling crystalline imagery faded, the man glanced up to see his waist surrounded in a bright halo of luminescence. Beyond that, the cloudy blues and reds of Mindspace could be seen merging into a single blurry mass – fading gracefully into the distance.



The Triad's Release

"What...

...what is that noise?"

No sooner had his current familiarity begun to dissolve, Spencer instinctively shut his eyes. Caught in a world of constant alteration, it seemed the best thing to do – if only to keep a grasp on his rapidly dwindling perception of reality. Yet now, the space beyond his eyelids had grown unerringly bright, to the point that Spencer felt as if the inside of his mind had been saturated with the orange glow. At the same time, an unfathomable sound had eased its way into existence from amongst the folds of muted nothingness.

It was a difficult sound to define – like the scattering of nails upon glass amplified several times over, merged with the hollow thrum of wind chimes played in reverse. While not particularly offensive to listen to, it managed to cast a succession of tremors through Spencer's body. He opened his eyes fractionally, letting them adjust to the sudden light.

As the bleached surroundings calmed, Spencer was allowed a glimpse of the edge of a red-tiled roof. This took the man by surprise – last time he had found himself within a location of his own accord, gravity had firmly informed him of his arrival. But here...there had been nothing. Yet neither did Spencer feel as if he was floating. He

wriggled his fingers in an attempt to work out just exactly what kind of surface he was lying upon, before retracting them in alarm at the sudden coldness. Raising one hand, Spencer uttered a breath of shock as he saw a multitude of droplets across his palm. It had felt as if his fingers had passed through the ground!

Only the ground wasn't ground at all. Flinging himself upright without further thought as to what might happen if he moved in any considerable way, Spencer's eyes widened – taking in the translucent blue surface rippling underneath him. He was sitting upon water, yet he wasn't sinking through it.

Glancing round in a panic, Spencer found himself staring at the red-tiled roof he had been examining previously. Now his eyes were fully open, the dismaying absurdity of the environment hit the man full in the chest. A red-tiled roof was *all* that was there – suspended unsettlingly in mid-air with no walls to support it. Instead, the roof itself seemed to melt into the distance – a visual echo that overlapped itself like a photocopied image pasted repetitively. Behind it, Spencer could make out trees jutting from a disfigured, water-stricken mottled path that snaked its way between obscurely-arranged pillars, rails and partly-formed buildings.

It's like being trapped inside of a surrealist painting, Spencer thought, trying to keep calm despite the uncompromising irrationality of it all. The man got to his feet and stepped forward to make his way into the street, only to progress no distance. This didn't help in the pursuit of keeping calm any. Spencer tried again, only facing in the opposite direction. Still, he stayed walking in one spot. Clearly it appeared the man was more trapped than he had first thought.

“To'geedo?” Spencer called nervously, his pulse beginning to race with a sudden desperation. “TO'GEEDO! HELP ME!”

Without warning, the man fell heavily onto his knees, panting erratically. Lifting his head, Spencer took in the comforting figure of the diguard who had entered the rift before he had. Thankful as the man was to see the pokémon, the latter's expression was far from warm.

"See this is why I insisted you stayed behind," To'geedo intoned, raising his hand with a disapproving air as Spencer staggered from the watery platform. "This is an unstable plane."

"Was it...*really* Broka City?" Spencer inquired breathlessly.

"It certainly wasn't something meant to be here," To'geedo replied. "The energies I sense from it are not the same as those of Mindspace. That incompatibility is no doubt what has caused Mindspace to warp these surroundings."

"And the people?" Spencer urged. "What about the people? What happened to them?"

"None remain," To'geedo lowered his head in remorse. "At least none that are living. I have seen the imprints of some of them – caught in their final actions through some kind of infinite loop. Their spirits have faded now...only their bodies are left."

"Such a waste..." Spencer heaved a sigh. "Are you certain there's no way to bring them back?"

"Regrettably, life forms from your realm cannot bear transferral between dimensions in such a way," To'geedo nodded. "Your wife is our only likely survivor."

"You mean, she's here?" Spencer spluttered.

"There could have been no way for her to leave," To'geedo replied matter-of-factly. "I had been searching for her whereabouts prior to your cry for help. Still..." the diguard paused – examining

beforehand – and they would begin their panicking anew. Never ceasing. Never changing.

It was a disturbing reminder of how little mankind really understood of matters beyond himself. And yet Spencer could not help asking, at least internally, what could have driven Palkia to do what it did to this place. Had its casting into Mindspace been intentional, or just a bi-product of some other event he was otherwise unaware of?

“The boundaries seem weaker here,” To’geedo announced, swiftly bringing Spencer’s despondent train of thought to a halt. “The entrance we need may well be close. Now concentrate, Mr. Hale...think of her, and brighten our path.”

Spencer nodded, gazing out into the distance and proceeding to empty his mind of any remaining ponderances, before forming a vivid image of Kadri in their place. Her sparkling azure eyes, golden hair and shapely figure took residence in his consciousness, embracing Spencer with a renewed hope and warmth that his success was just a few steps away.

As To’geedo opened his eyes and raised his bowed head slightly, he caught sight of a small object lying on the ground just a few inches from his hoof-like foot. Leaning over, the diguard reached out for the flat, square article with a vaguely puzzled expression.

“What’s this?” he murmured, turning the article over before uttering a sharp gasp. A lashing force struck out at the pokémon and the human accompanying it, dragging them through their immediate surroundings in a burst of colours and light. This time, Spencer was caught thoroughly off-guard – his vision awash with a prismic cacophony that sent all other thoughts elsewhere. No sooner had the transition ended, than the man crumpled to the ground with a wild-eyed expression.

"I...I don't think I can take much more of this..." he stammered, after a few moments had passed.

"For a being unsuited to inter-dimensional travel, you are doing exceedingly well," To'geedo attempted to be encouraging. "Do not fret...your search is almost over."

"Good," Spencer breathed a sigh, before taking note of the flat, square object To'geedo was still holding. "What's that in your hand?"

"It's one of the Unown tiles," the diguard replied, though there was a distant air in his voice – like that of someone arranging the pieces of a mental jigsaw.

"Huh?" Spencer raised an eyebrow. "What is it doing here?"

"I see it now..." To'geedo spoke. "At first I wasn't so sure of what I was sensing, but now I'm certain of it. There *is* a third link."

"A third link?" Spencer echoed, unsure as to what this meant.

"As there has been a psychic connection between you and your daughter, so there is a connection between her and your wife," To'geedo explained. "The presence of these tiles here is a sign of that – combined with the link you *also* share with your wife, they have helped us to get to this defining point. However...I fear such a level of emotion energy was not something the Unown were designed to control."

"So what now?" Spencer asked hurriedly, lifting himself to his feet and examining his surroundings. While gravity still persisted, the atmosphere was dimmer now – any light that remained was snatched and scattered across the glassy facets of multitudes of crystalline structures which blanketed the floor and jutted from the walls and ceiling. To'geedo lifted his free hand and pointed toward the far side of the chamber.

"I believe we shall find your answer there," he informed, striding away. Spencer followed at speed, carefully navigating the crystal stalagmites while at the same time catching glimpses of how each one reflected differing slivers of his own visage. As the pokémon and his human companion travelled further into the chamber, new crystals proceeded to thrust their way from the ground - taller, sharper and more threatening. Finally, To'geedo slowed to a standstill, gazing upwards in a mixture of deep reverence and mournful empathy.

"Our journey's end," he remarked softly, urging Spencer to look up also. A rocky platform jutted upwards before them, decorated in a swathe of blue-green semi-transparent formations. Like the outer rim of a crown, these smaller crystals protectively surrounded a far sizeable one - a beautiful stone which caught most of what little light penetrated the chamber and threw it into fragments around itself.

Without a word, Spencer ascended the uneven walkway to this grandiose crystal, his eyes widening as every step focused his vision upon the shadow encased within.

"No..."

He didn't want to believe it. He wanted to wrench himself away from what he saw, to be told that it was simply Mindspace tormenting him with his own guilt-stricken thoughts. But there was no escaping. The hunched, wide-eyed form inside the crystal was indeed that of Kadri, his sweet, cherished wife.

"Her spirit still burns, Mr. Hale," To'geedo insisted as Spencer placed his hands against the crystal's surface, only to retract them in alarm as a spark of bluish energy leapt out at him.

"My poor, poor Kadri..." the man's eyes creased up at the

corners with pained despair. "Being alone...being trapped here must have been too much for her to bear. She has always feared being trapped, ever since that time during her childhood when she became stuck under a sheet of ice at Lake Valor. She told me that she almost drowned that day.."

"That's terrible," To'geedo looked shocked. "However did she escape?"

"It's kind of strange, really," Spencer couldn't help but smile faintly. "Moments before she passed out, Kadri said she could have sworn the water below her opened up. Next thing she knew, she was back on dry land with loved ones swarming round her. They had spoken of her materialising out of thin air."

"Teleportation," To'geedo concluded. "So something rescued her from the lake."

"Yes," Spencer nodded. "Kadri was adamant that something had come from the opening amongst the water." He glanced mournfully at the woman encased in her translucent cocoon. "Her desire to understand that event is the reason I am standing here today, with you, in his unfathomable place."

Silence returned, as both man and Pokémon stood examining the crystal in a mixture of sorrow and deep thought. Feelings that Spencer had wrestled with ever since the day Kadri had vanished were beginning to rise again. Until now, he had kept them firmly to himself – certain that no one could possibly have understood his reasoning. Yet having spent some time in To'geedo's presence, the insistence of these feelings refused to be denied any longer. Here was a being the man felt he could trust.

"I just...feel so responsible," Spencer concluded, the sentence escaping like a relieved breath of air. "There's so much more I could

have done – I should have stopped her from chasing these things, from dabbling in matters we did not understand.”

“Maybe so,” To'geedo looked at him calmly, without a hint of disdain. “But for matters to be understood, someone has to unearth them, do they not?”

Spencer blinked, glancing from the diguard to the crystal and then back again. It was a stirring question, one he didn't have an answer for. Yet his heart ached – as selfish as it might have been, he only longed that someone else had taken Kadri's place.

“Don't be hard on yourself, Mr. Hale,” To'geedo shook his head, placing a hand upon the man's shoulder. “Curiosity is something of an untameable force. I doubt even persuasion would have stopped this from happening.

I cannot help you further. But you *can* make a difference now. Reach out to your wife. Speak to her...in her dreams.”

“Alright,” Spencer took a breath and reached his palms toward the crystal for the second time. Another bolt of energy snapped at the man, repelling his hands from the cold surface. It was painful to touch, but at this point in time, it no longer mattered. The overwhelming determination seated within Spencer was like a tenacious force that blotted out any apprehension of his unpredicted future. He was too close to back down now. To retreat at this point would be to fail his family.

With that, Spencer uttered a furious cry like that of a martial artist, before plunging both hands toward the crystal. This time they passed through its surface, causing flaming ripples to course outwards, accompanied by massive arcs of electricity. The agonizing sensation was beyond anything Spencer had ever experienced, the wrestling force like that of trying to drive opposing magnetic poles towards each

other. Grimacing in discomfort, Spencer urged himself to try harder; to physically reach his wife and break her from her containment.

"Kadri!" he cried hoarsely. "Kadri, I'm here!"

Papa!

Spencer flinched as his daughter's voice echoed into his mind. Of course...their psychic link was still very much in tact. And Molly had been the one to summon the Unown from the tiles – surely there was something she could do with their power at her command.

"Molly, help me!" the man exclaimed in audible desperation, his entire body shuddering with the potency of the energies running through it.

"Mr. Hale, you have to believe in Molly," To'geedo spoke up urgently as the intensity of the blue glow increased. He was all too aware of the Unown's abilities in this situation. "Believe she can free your wife and she will!"

"You can do it, Molly!" Spencer bellowed, staring defiantly at the luminescent crystal as blue lightning coursed its way up his arms. His vision flickered, giving the man a cursory glimpse of an ominous pulsing sphere of energy surrounded by agitated Unown. At the same time, pinpoints of light spattered into the air around Spencer and the mineral formation he had converged with – sending more tiles into existence. To'geedo watched in amazement as the tiles began circling, gathering stray bolts of energy and reflecting them back at the crystal.

A new feeling intensified within Spencer now – one not of torment and helplessness but of power and conquest. The man threw

his head back as a vivid icy aura projected its way from his shoulders and rapidly surged down both of his arms – colliding with the surface of the crystal with a force that threw Spencer backwards down the roughly-hewn stairway. Light burst forth from the point of impact, saturating the chamber and causing every mineral formation within to shine like haunting beacons.

“Kadri...” Spencer murmured weakly, as faint sounds not unlike the plucking of digitized piano strings reverberated in his ears. It was too bright to make out any of the surroundings now – he wasn't even certain if they were there any more. To'geedo said nothing, but instead leant down to gently raise Spencer to his feet. His expression dictated neither joy nor remorse – to him, things were yet to be proven.

“Spencer?”

The man almost swallowed his tongue in astonishment. He almost felt inclined to disbelieve his own ears, yet fervent hope urged him to persist in his belief. And as the light began to dim, Spencer was graced with the sight of the woman whom his heart had pined over for so long. Uttering an exclamation of mirth, he ran forward and threw his arms around the surprised figure – drawing them tight while burying his head into her shoulder with relieved sobs. It took a moment for Kadri to respond; part of her was also sceptical that what was happening wasn't also an illusion.

“Spencer, is that really you?” she repeated softly.

“Yes, Kadri,” the man smiled, lifting his head to take in his wife's visage once again. “At long last, I found a way to return here... to free you from Broka City.”

“Broka...” the rest of Kadri's sentence dissolved into a gasp.

"That place was dangerous! You could have been trapped there too!"

"Yes," Spencer nodded. "But having been cast into Mindspace unexpectedly, I thought it foolish not to take this chance to bring you back. And thanks to my loyal companion To'geedo, I was kept safe. I would have never found you again if it wasn't for him."

"It was a pleasure," To'geedo's eyes creased up in happiness at being referred to as a companion. This was a title he hadn't heard in a very long time. Hearing it again -and from someone as strong and morally-intent as Kato had been- meant a great deal to him.

"Thank you," Kadri responded, smiling at the diguard before turning back to Spencer with a puzzled expression. "I don't remember anything since I entered Broka City...just how long has it been?"

"Long enough," Spencer intoned, preferring not to let his thoughts recall the many months he had spent without her – all that time still trying to play the good father. He smiled faintly while gazing at Kadri. "Molly is waiting for you."

As To'geedo glanced up, his eyes wide and alert, a shimmering blue light took hold of Kadri, pulling her roughly out of Spencer's arms. The woman stared back at her husband as the light crept across her body - the frightened look in her eyes all too reminiscent of the scene Spencer's mind had been force fed some time before, when he had first re-entered Mindspace.

Before either figure had a chance to say another word, the aura intensified in a sudden flare, blotting out Kadri entirely before retracting into the surrounding void, leaving nothing behind.

"Wh-what's going on?" Spencer stammered, his hands trembling. "Where did she go? Don't tell me this has all been an

illusion!”

“She was as real as you are,” To'geedo attempted to stay calm, though the confusion in his eyes reflected a similar panic over what appeared to be a failed mission. The diguard had sensed what could only be described as an energy slingshot – now Kadri's presence had disappeared from his senses entirely.

“She can't have gone!” Spencer cried desperately. “Not after all I've been through to get her back! I-” He trailed off, as the same blue light ebbed into existence over the surface of his own body. Staring back at To'geedo in horror, the man found himself gazing upon a warm, resolved expression. The diguard had finally managed to put two and two together.

“It seems this is where we part, Mr. Hale,” he concluded. “Now the link between the Unown and your daughter no longer exists, there is nothing to keep you here.”

“But...but what about you?” Spencer asked in softer tones, momentarily forgetting his predicament. He could feel the air around him beginning to thicken, a familiar sensation which had proceeded the dimensional shifts he had experienced before. “You've done so much to help me, To'geedo...you don't deserve to be stuck here, alone.”

“I shall find my way back, in due time,” To'geedo smiled, in the same calm resignation he had shown upon first meeting the man. “This way out is yours alone to take.”

For the final time, everything was plunged into darkness.

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It was as if he were waking from a long sleep. Every other passage between dimensions had left Spencer with a modicum of consciousness – however, this had been different. The man was unable to recall any precise details over his return, and the heaviness of both his mind and body gave a distinct impression of having dreamed the entire thing. Even now, as Spencer gradually lifted his head to take in the surroundings of the chamber he was researching prior to his disappearance, he found himself questioning the reality of what he was seeing.

Could it have simply been an echo of the first illusion that even now still haunted his memories? Illusion or no, Spencer had once again returned without his friend, or the woman most precious to him. Knowing that, the man wasn't sure he could make it home this time.

But he had to, for Molly's sakes. Levering himself shakily to his knees, Spencer reached for his back pocket, only to flinch in alarm as a shrill trilling echoed into the chamber. He hurriedly retrieved his PokéGear before flipping it open – the number upon the screen was unidentifiable, yet the man felt drawn to answering it.

“Hello?”

“Oh thank Tah,” a familiar voice rang out clear as day from the earpiece. “You made it back.”

“K-Kadri?” Spencer responded weakly, barely managing to keep his grasp on the PokéGear. “You're...alive?”

“Yes, Spencer,” was the remorseful answer. “Thanks to you, and the fact you never gave up on me and my silly, silly notions.”

“Stop that,” Spencer almost snapped, before composing himself. “They were never silly. Just...bigger than the both of us.”

“Indeed they were,” Kadri murmured in acceptance. “The things

I saw back in that dimension, all they did was show me there is much we have yet to learn. And sometimes...sometimes it is better to let ourselves be guided by those wiser than we are, rather than to leap in alone and have no one there to save us, should we get in trouble."

Spencer allowed himself a moment of thought upon hearing these realisations. The things he had experienced that day gave him renewed hope that his good friend Newton was still out there. While his wife had finally unearthed an element of satisfaction within herself, life wasn't quite ready to get back to normal just yet.

"Where are you?" he inquired into the mouthpiece at last.

"Eterna City," Kadri told him. "Don't worry about me...just get back to Molly as soon as you can. I'll find a way to return to Johto, you know I will. Love overcomes everything."

It certainly does, Spencer agreed internally, as he and Kadri exchanged affectionate farewells. Up until this moment, he hadn't realised just how true that statement was.

As the PokéGear's connection was reset and the number to his mansion entered, the man offered a wide and grateful expression into Alph's empty ruins, to the diguard who had shown him so much, who was a legend in his own right. Some day, Spencer hoped that diguard would find a way to come back from Mindspace. Until then, he would keep his memory close.

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