

POKÉMON

REBIRTH

ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE ONE

Sucker Punch

It was an odd trait shared between the regions of Oci - the world where pokémon took residence - that kept a portion of their inhabitants oblivious to the existence of one another. Some older citizens deliberately refused to accept an international presence, after all, it made their world smaller and more manageable. Others were simply caught up in their own lives, distracted from wider affairs. But for many, adventure awaited beyond the watery shores. Adventure that thrilled the hearts of youths and the youthful-hearted alike.

Kantoan children, like children of other regions, would often be found clustered around tables in libraries or school classrooms - pondering over extensive maps and daydreaming of all the places they could visit once freed from the compulsory education system. The Orange Archipelago to the south proved to be quite the cultural buffet, while the history of neighbouring Johto made it an excellent location for researchers. Travelling in a south-westerly direction, one could sample the laid-back lifestyle of Hoenn and still get a chance to witness its vibrant and deadly art of Ninjitsu. Even further south lay the intriguingly conflicted Sonoria. For those who enjoyed a taste of the unexpected and eccentric, Sinnoh was just a day's cruise north, while the particularly daring could even brave the sub-zero temperatures of north-west Phrossa. And for privileged members of society, a visit to the beautiful and sacred eastern Lunan was yet another option.

Our story, however, begins amongst the peaks of a small region to

the west of Johto, called Tattō.

Tattō, like the majority of the world's continents, was a temperate landscape decorated with lush forests and sloping hillsides of varying severity. Moist weather-loving pokémon thrived abundantly, as it tended to rain there more frequently than other places - this having the knack of irking an equal measure of tourists and native residents. Despite this, and the lack of a vast commercial venture such as those funded by the Pokémon League, Tattō's economy fared surprisingly well. This was due to an air of mystery and inspiration the region bore, combined with a unique perspective on life which compelled visitors from far and wide.

It was this unique perspective which would throw the region into the spotlight with great ferocity in the weeks to come.

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Land of history.

Land of culture.

We welcome you to Tattō - The Indelible Nation!

As March gets into full swing, we invite Pokémon Trainers of all skill levels to participate in the Tattō Expedition - registration for which re-opens this month. Begin your journey at Mayni City - the region's bustling capital - and test your ability to adapt to a spectrum of

challenges like none you've faced anywhere else, while earning medals as proof of overcoming them. With seven medals comes the opportunity to enter the Kemnon Tower, to take a step into the past and your final Expedition match against the powerful Elite Guard who reside there.

If you have a Trainer's License and a thirst for history and excitement, the Tattō Expedition awaits!

Abby Wilson heaved a pitiful sigh and altered the television channel to a Hoenn Pokémon Contest broadcast, before shuffling in a circle upon the sofa to gaze through the window behind. It had begun to rain again, causing the view outside the glass to dissolve into nothing but barely-distinguishable shapes. But Abby didn't have to make out the details to know what stood beyond her home. It had been there for as long as she could remember - slowly rotting and crumbling under its growing level of disrepair. A building which, she assumed, must have looked beautiful and fear-inspiring at the same time, back when it was still in use.

Back then, Prela Village had seen a lot more visitors. For this building once existed as a Pokémon Gym run by her father - one advocating the Psychic Type and the challenge of mental stamina. Inside this unusually small structure, trainers and their pokémon would engage in fervent matches upon psychically-induced battlefields - their physical bodies remaining still as trees while their minds undertook the brunt of

the effort. Because of the challenge's unusual facets, many trainers would hang back until the last moment to visit Prela and gain its waiting medal. But with her father having passed away several years ago, the village had lost its spark and vibrancy - resuming a more isolated lifestyle nestled amongst the heady peaks of Tattro's far western coast.

The young girl took a fleeting glance at the mantelpiece where a framed photograph stood, of a middle aged man with stunning blue eyes and cropped hair in a tangerine shade not unlike her own. She couldn't remember that much about her father, though her mother would often comment about how her older brother Caley resembled him. This thought alone produced yet another sigh, as Abby returned to staring out of the window at the rain and fuzzy scenery. Today was the day her brother had been excitedly speaking about and avidly planning for many months. A day that Abby had hoped was never going to come. But nothing had stopped Caley's persistence in gathering the needed funds for his ambitious intentions. When he hadn't been studying, sleeping, eating or recovering, he'd industriously lent manpower to a whole slew of jobs provided by the village's grateful residents. With every completed task and every satisfied client, Caley had received more donations to his cause. Abby had watched the amount edge ceaselessly toward its goal with the passing of time - her heart sinking with every Perjhi that made it into her brother's hands.

Today, Caley would have all the money he needed to leave.

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Tucked away on the outskirts of Prela Village, a solitary old house stood - its mint green outer walls vividly reflecting the emerging mid-morning sunlight. The building itself had stood the test of time remarkably well, having been passed down through the same family over the course of several decades. And, for the last twenty years, it had been home to one Ms. Harriet Dawes and her collection of treasured feline pokémon.

Harriet's obsession with cat and cat-like pokémon had raised many eyebrows, and caused some of the villagers to question her level of sanity. As a result, despite her jolly and generous personality, the elderly woman rarely entertained visitors. Understandably then, she was most surprised to open her front door that morning to be met with the sight of a sixteen year old youth with vibrant reddish hair, accompanied by an abra, a chingling and a grumpig. If the sight of the adolescent - the son of a former gym leader, no less - hadn't been enough, Harriet had found herself bowled over with his eager requests for jobs to do. Within a matter of hours, the house's windows had been cleaned, missing roof tiles were replaced, the garden weeded, and every room was dusted and vacuumed with no crack or crevice spared.

"There. That's the last one," Caley smiled triumphantly, placing the fifteenth ornament inside the last empty compartment before pushing the

glass display cabinet door shut.

"That looks wonderful, Caley!" Harriet beamed, admiring the young figure's efforts from the comfort of her armchair while stroking a recumbent purrloin. "I don't think I've seen the place this spick and span in a long time."

"Glad to be of service, Ms. Dawes," Caley insisted, glancing to his pokémon companions for support. "Right guys?"

"Chi-liiin!" Belle agreed in ever-cheerful resonant tones. She had fallen prone to the occasional flailing paw throughout the morning, with some residents mistaking her for a living play toy, but was none the more phased for her experience. Being a young chingling, she found the response quite entertaining.

"Pihh!" Kiko joined in, adjusting her bandanna. The grumpig always enjoyed a spot of hard work, and getting to spend time with Caley - whom she had seen grow from an enthused young boy to the optimistic, dedicated individual he was today - was never a bad thing.

"Ah-bruh..." Spryll murmured unconvincingly. The abra had not felt comfortable since he had arrived, as much as he wished to assist Caley with his fund-raising. Partly this was due to him being very much an indoor type, but mostly it was a result of the icy reception most of Harriet's pokémon had given him. Especially the purrloin - though its attitude had hardly proven favourable with any of the visitors.

"So I heard through the grapevine you finished your school studies

last July," Harriet proceeded, as Caley moved on to polishing a nearby wall mirror.

"That's right," Caley nodded. "To be honest, I wasn't expecting much from my grades. I'm not really a scholar, but funny thing was, they turned out better than I thought they would. I managed to get an A in history."

"Marvellous!" Harriet clapped joyfully, causing a glameow sitting on her coffee table to flinch. "Nothing like a good education to get you on the right track. What do you plan to do now? Your friend Louise set off to become a Pokémon Trainer, didn't she?"

"Yes she did, just last month," Caley paused, gazing across the room. "I think it's cool she wanted to take on the Tatto Expedition, but training isn't really something I wish to get involved in. Me...I'd like to visit Kemnon Tower - maybe check out a bit of what Tatto has to offer along the way. That's what I've been saving for all this time."

"And this is the last of your travel expenses, am I correct?" Harriet inquired warmly, bringing out a few notes from her purse. The faces of the young man and his three pokémon companions lit up in response, followed by much nodding. "Then congratulations, Caley! I can definitely say you've earned that trip of yours, and made a few old 'uns like myself feel most cared for. You're a good lad."

"Thank you, Ms. Dawes! Thank you so much!" Caley exclaimed, while Kiko took the money. "I'll make sure to send you a postcard."

"And I'll look forward to it," Harriet chuckled heartily, feeding the purrloin a treat before motioning to a ceramic jar upon the coffee table. "Now it's time you took a break, young man. You've been working almost non-stop! Sit down and have a biscuit."

"Sounds like a great idea," Caley grinned, rubbing at the corner of the mirror. "Let me just put this back on the wall and-"

He paused, noticing a dark shape in the mirror's reflective surface. Turning his head, the young man found himself staring through the bay windows, at the back of a lithe, navy blue pokémon with an impressive dark red head crest and ruff. Upon his arrival, Caley had noticed this pokémon quietly gazing out at the sky, perfectly motionless. He had felt its eyes bore into him as he, Kiko and Spryll tended to the garden. And still, even after all this time, it had not moved an inch.

"Is your weavile okay?" he asked uncomfortably, after a short pause. "It's been standing out there for ages."

"What, Manny?" Harriet tilted her head slightly, causing the meowth charm pendant she was wearing to slide across her chest. "Now you mention it, he has been acting rather oddly. In fact...he's been like that ever since what happened in the garden this morning."

"What *did* happen?" Caley blinked, returning the mirror to its hook upon the wall.

"Oh, something most peculiar, I'll tell you that," Harriet put on a stern expression. "You know that young fellow who's into science in a big

way, the one that lives in that tall building at the other end of the village?"

"Professor Werty?" came the reply. "I've heard of him. Never met him, though."

"Me neither, until this morning!" Harriet's serious face was momentarily swapped for something that better resembled awkwardness and hilarity. "But honestly, I have to admit I was worried about him. There I was, minding my own business and brewing my first cup of tea when I hear a right caterwauling from outside. The poor fellow had got himself stuck in my apple tree, and my babies just wouldn't leave him alone. You'd have thought he'd covered himself in catnip with how excited they were getting! He looked absolutely terrified, and kept trying to blow on them for some reason. Eventually they chased him off and came back indoors, but Manny hasn't moved from that spot.

It's almost like...he's waiting for something."

With these odd behaviours pushed firmly to a corner of his mind, Caley returned home with Kiko, Belle and Spryll to show his mother and sister the results of their combined hard work, before enthusiastically setting about packing his rucksack. Abby watched silently from an armchair, her face drenched in a mixture of sullenness and gloom. The latter emotion overtook the former after half an hour or so, motivating Abby to retreat to her own bedroom to rummage about in the large trunk

she kept there. A few minutes later, Caley's packing was disturbed by a small, half-hearted cough. He glanced up from his seated position on the carpet to see his younger sister idling uncomfortably in the doorway, arms behind her back.

"I...I wanted to give you something," she mumbled. "To remember me while you're gone."

"Aw, that's nice of you Abby," Caley smiled, though the expression was tinged with a hint of sadness at noting his sibling's underlying upset.
"What is it?"

Abby motioned for her brother to hold out his hands, to which he obliged. A small, pink object gently found its way into them. Caley turned it over in some considerable shock, running his fingers across the vaguely protruding wheels on its underside.

"This is one of your Rumble toys, isn't it?" he responded, locking eyes with the glazed expression of the slowpoke figure.

"It's my favourite one," Abby nodded, her voice cracking. "For...my favourite brother."

"Hey, come here," Caley insisted warmly, reaching across and pulling his arms around the young girl. Abby responded by kneeling down and wrapping her own arms about Caley's upper body, descending into sobbing upon his shoulder. "I'm not going to be gone forever, okay? It'll just be a couple of weeks, a month at the most."

"But a month is such a long time..." Abby sniffled.

"I'll be back before you know it," Caley chuckled softly. "You'll see." He raised the slowpoke figure into Abby's vision as she leant back to glance at him. "Now are you *sure* you want to let me have this?"

"Definitely," Abby replied, in more firmer tones this time. "You said it yourself - you'll only be gone a couple of weeks, right?"

"Right," Caley grinned.

Following a hearty lunch and an in-depth talk with his mother, Caley slipped his dark plum-coloured jacket over his lighter green undershirt, pulled on a pair of sturdy walking boots, shouldered his rucksack and bid a cheerful extended farewell as he stepped through the front door - Kiko following closely behind with a proud expression. Pat approached the doorway as her son wandered down the garden path, while Abby shifted from foot to foot beside her, looking somewhat forlorn.

"I don't really want Caley to leave," she muttered. "Why can't he stay and be Prela's Gym Leader instead?"

"We've talked about why, Abby," Pat replied, putting her arm around her daughter comfortingly. "Your brother doesn't see any appeal in pokémon training right now. He's been waiting to go to Kemnon Tower for a long time."

"I know," Abby pouted. "He wouldn't stop talking about it. I don't see what he finds so interesting about that old building anyway."

"He doesn't see what you find so interesting about those wind-up pokémon dolls," Pat chuckled, causing Abby to look sheepish. The young girl's face brightened up a little at this point.

"Maybe when he's seen the tower and come home, he'll want to be a gym leader!" she concluded.

"Maybe so. Maybe so..." Pat gave a nod, though her tone of voice indicated notable malcontent. It was difficult enough letting Caley go travelling on his own without bringing such things as pokémon training into the equation.

Secretly, Pat was thankful her son preferred exploring new surroundings as opposed to entering matches and tournaments. As good-hearted and responsible as Caley was, he was still naive in some respects - unaccustomed to the outside world. At least the woman could gain some comfort from knowing that Kiko - their most skilled family pokémon - would be accompanying him. Besides which, this journey would certainly prove to be a great learning experience for Caley.

"Don't forget me Caley!" Abby yelled with tear-stricken eyes, causing a few of the neighbours to open their doors and windows to watch the adolescent figure pass. "And don't do anything stupid, ok?"

Caley shook his head in partial humiliation, but out of politeness he gave acknowledgement to both Abby and the grateful neighbours, before disappearing as quickly as he possibly could. The bus to Retyrn Port only passed by twice a day, and he sure didn't want to be waiting all

those hours for the next one. He was on a tight schedule.

"Well here we are, Kiko," Caley announced, as his pace slowed to a standstill. "At the bus stop, and with twenty minutes to spare. I think we could both do with a rest."

"Grum-peh," Kiko agreed firmly, flopping her violet and black coloured body onto a segment of concrete pipe that had been left behind from a construction venture some months before. It had been a brisk walk from one end of the village to the other, and even with using telekinesis to alleviate some of the wear on her feet, the signs of effort were more than evident.

Caley mimicked this action, sitting beside his grumpig companion and gazing down the road at the opening in the mountainside which led into Prela Tunnel. The vast passage - with its sub-routes stretching like tendrils across the western hillsides of the region - had always intrigued him, despite having ridden through it on a daily itinerary to school and back. Getting to travel through there on his own, as opposed to crammed amongst a rabble of noisy, over-exitable young people, felt both exciting and unnerving.

Kiko, on the other hand, seemed rather preoccupied with staring down at the concrete piping - a confused look on her face. Inevitably, curiosity got the better of her and she leant over so that her head was directly adjacent to the pipe's left opening. Seconds later, Kiko wrenched

her head back in alarm as a plume of flame shot from the opening - accompanied by a loud sneeze.

"What on earth...?" Caley flinched, looking to Kiko for an explanation only to find her pointing vigorously at the pipe. "Wait, something's in there?"

Upon receiving a nod, the young man carefully peered down into the pipe's right opening, to come face to back with a magby which was crouched inside, shivering and muttering under its breath.

"Heyy...what'cha doing in here, little guy?" Caley inquired with some concern. The magby ceased its muttering, which made Caley wonder if he'd somehow offended it. Instead, the pokémon slowly turned its head to look at its human observer. What came next was quite unexpected.

"I'm sorry?" the pokémon blinked. "Are you talking to me?"

"I-I-uh-I..." Caley stammered, completely thrown by the fact the magby was talking back, and in a manner he could understand. He attempted to compose himself. "Y...yes?"

There was a pause, while the magby and Caley exchanged equally puzzled expressions. Eventually, the former raised a stubby paw to its chin and contemplated the present state of affairs.

"So either that means you can understand pokémon speech..." it deduced, glancing at the metallic bracelet upon its opposite arm. "Or...I'm still communicating with human speech." Its face grew overcast at this

point. "That would explain a lot. Oh bother."

"'Still'?" Caley pulled a face. "What's going on?"

"Yes, I imagine this doesn't make much sense to you, does it?" the magby cleared its throat awkwardly. "Allow me to introduce myself - the name's Quentin Werty."

"Werty?" Caley echoed, still trying to get his brain to process the obscure information. "As in, *Professor Werty*?"

"That's me!" the magby replied brightly. "But just call me 'Quentin' - I can't stand that fancy title business."

"It's good to meet you," Caley said. "To be honest, I'd kinda expected you to be...well, let's just say this is the first time I've met a professor who was a pokémon. But that's cool, I'm always open to new things."

"I'm not a pokémon," Quentin insisted, receiving a studied expression in turn. "Hey, what's with that sceptical look?" He paused, face awash with sudden realisation, before looking down at himself. "Oh...well I am at the moment. So you can see my problem."

"That...you're not supposed to be a magby?" Caley guessed tentatively.

"Exactly!" Quentin nodded. "My studies had been going really well, you see. I'd finally been hooked up with a pokémon subject willing to participate in my testing of the Consciousness Exchange device - it's a

machine I designed incorporating an adjusted version of Devon Corporation's PokéForme. Devon finally completed the project two years ago, but the PokéForme just didn't cover all my requirements. It certainly gave one the appearance and gravity of a pokémon, but the user was unable to grasp a decent idea of how it really *felt*. Most attacks and skills were off-limits, you see. So I figured if I could create something to mimic the mind swapping abilities of Manaphy, I'd be on to a winner. And it worked!"

He paused.

"Bar a few minor glitches. Anyway, I'd just been getting used to this magby body when...well I suppose Benny - he's the magby that was in *my* body - must have become bored and wandered off to take a look around the laboratory. Next thing I know, alarms were wailing, the sprinklers were going off and my body was gone...with Benny still controlling it!"

"I see," Caley responded, looking most perplexed.

"I've been trying to find Benny, but aside from the sprinklers, I got caught up in a rain shower and had to shelter here," Quentin concluded, with a shiver. "Fire types don't do well, being exposed to so much water..." His sentence was broken by a bout of coughing. "I think I may have caught a chill...but I don't suppose you've seen my true body any place, have you?"

"Sorry, no. I haven't," Caley shrugged, before Kiko jabbed him

sharply in the ribs with her elbow. "Ow! What was that for?"

"Gruh grum-peh!" Kiko rolled her eyes at the young man's forgetfulness, before striking up a cat-like pose. "Peh! Peh!"

"Wait," Caley murmured, before turning to Quentin. "You didn't happen to be stuck in a tree in Ms. Dawes garden at any point, did you?" He received a shake of the head, to which he sat up and snapped his fingers. "Then the 'Professor Werty' that Ms. Dawes mentioned had to have been the magby who's controlling your real body right now."

"Oh dear..." Quentin grimaced slightly. "Then what?"

"Well Ms. Dawes said it ran off, but I don't know what happened to it after that..." Caley replied, trailing off upon the sight of Quentin's saddened face. Obviously this information hadn't really helped in pinpointing a true location. Given the current time, there was still a few minutes to spare. "Tell you what. I'll help you find the rest of yourself."

"You will?" the man in pokémon form glanced up, his surprised expression rapidly becoming joyful.

"With a bit of luck," Caley replied, not wanting the professor to get his hopes up. "Hopefully Benny hasn't left the village entirely."

"Oh, thank you!" Quentin beamed, before his voice took on a more serious tone. "I do have one thing to ask, though. Please don't tell anyone what's happened. I mean, with the mind-swapping. I'd never live it down if certain people found out."

"Okay," Caley nodded, while Kiko looked on in disbelief at what she felt was flagrant disregard for being on time. Judging by how the magby in the professor's body had been acting, Quentin probably wasn't going to be living this day down regardless.

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Elsewhere in the village, the resident practitioner of medical matters - a woman named Iantha Cavendish - stepped back from examining the figure perched unsteadily upon her doctor's study bed with a sigh of disbelief. This wasn't the first time she had been confronted with the results of this patient's escapades, and thus the disbelief was a justified response to the amount of times the woman found herself fixing them.

"If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, Quentin," Iantha began heavily. "Long-term exposure to yanma wing vibrations is going to have some serious side effects on your mental stability. I know you're interested in pokémon behaviours and all, but this isn't healthy!"

The man said nothing, but instead continued to gaze at Iantha with a partially confused expression, causing her to sigh yet another time. She was hardly going to get a valid reaction out of him in this state.

"Never mind..." Iantha shook her head, turning towards the door of the cramped little room. "Let me fetch the Acclima Unit."

She promptly left, to return a few seconds later with a handheld device that resembled that of a barcode scanner crossed with a drill - though the nozzle of which could be better compared to a portable vacuum cleaner.

"Here we go," Iantha announced, offering the contents of her hands for the patient to see. "This should have you right as rain in no time."

Upon sight of the article in Iantha's hands, the man declined to agree on its positive effects. Instead, he let out an amusingly high-pitched squeak before lunging sideways and falling off the examination table in his attempts to get away. Iantha uttered a gasp of her own as the figure's flailing limbs managed to knock a tray full of vials from the nearby countertop in the process.

"What are you *doing*?" she spluttered impulsively, before attempting to compose herself. Quentin must have been in a far worse state of disorientation than she first thought. Before Iantha was able to concoct a method to coax the shivering man out from behind the table, there was a knock at the clinic's front door.

"Uh...you stay put," the woman instructed unsteadily, despite it looking like her patient had no intentions to move any time soon. With that, she strode down the hallway to the front door, muttering something about very bad timing. Upon opening it, Iantha's eyebrows raised in surprise to find her doorstep graced with a familiar red-haired young

man, sporting a not so familiar magby upon his shoulder.

"Caley? What are you doing here?" came the confused inquiry. "I thought you were leaving for Mayni today - is something wrong?"

"I...I'm looking for Professor Werty," Caley faltered. "I was told he'd come here."

"He did...but he's really in no fit state to be seeing anyone right now," Iantha grimaced upon being reminded of the odd behaviour she had witnessed.

"I know, that's why I need to see him," Caley insisted, frantically searching his mind for a fragment of reasoning. "Someone is...waiting for him back at the laboratory. With his treatment."

"His treatment?" Iantha pulled a face, while the magby on Caley's shoulder strongly resisted the urge to facepalm. If anyone was having any sort of medical treatment in this village, she would have been the first to know. And if someone was engaging in such things without informing her beforehand...

"Yeah," Caley nodded, unaware of the woman's rising dissatisfaction. "So I need to take him back to the laboratory."

"I don't know...this all sounds very vague to me," Iantha frowned. "Who is this 'someone'? What treatment could they *possibly* give that is better than that of a qualified doctor? And why have they used *you* as a messenger?"

There was no reply. The sheer amount of questions in one go had been enough to floor Caley's sense of creative interpretation. He opened his mouth in the hopes of stalling Iantha, when something else happened that did the job for him.

"Oh no, not again!" Iantha cried, as a loud crash was heard from somewhere down the hallway. Caley was urged by his fire type accomplice to pursue the doctor as she dashed back to address the situation, only to walk in on a sea of scattered papers and various diagnostic equipment. If the sight of the magby in his body crouched ungainly amongst the mess wasn't awkward enough, Quentin found himself almost thrown from Caley's shoulder as the aforementioned magby leapt up from the floor and began nuzzling him ecstatically.

"Alright, alright! Stop, Benny...*please!*" Quentin spluttered, no longer able to keep quiet. It was at this point that Iantha's jaw dropped quite suddenly.

"That isn't Quentin at all!" she exclaimed, turning to the pokémon on Caley's shoulder. "What on earth are you doing as a magby?"

"I can explain..." the professor stressed. "But I'll have to explain once I've returned to my own body. Time is running a little short for switching us back."

"That better not be an excuse to avoid talking about it," Iantha glowered, as Caley hurriedly left the clinic with a far more cheerful pokémon-minded subject in tow. "You know how I feel about these sorts

of things!"

Once Caley and Kiko had followed Quentin and Benny back to the professor's laboratory, the process of restoring the man and magby's consciousnesses to their respective bodies was a surprisingly simple one. Guiding Benny to a certain area of the lab, Quentin positioned him under one of the funnel-like protrusions extending from the hourglass-shaped central pillar of an intriguing looking machine. Following this, Quentin scrambled up to the machine's control pad before typing in a delayed program start command, locking his bracelet onto that of his partner in science, and then quickly arranging himself under the adjacent funnel.

Caley and Kiko watched in squinty-eyed awe as the program was initiated, causing a blue glow to shine forth from the bracelets and sending both test subjects wearing them into static, wide-eyed states of catatonia. Yellowish spheres of light travelled up from the base of both cones above their heads, through the interconnecting wires and into the central pillar, before passing back down the wires again in a steady return journey. As the light orbs disappeared from view, Quentin and Benny jolted in unison before slumping - their bodies taking on a more natural, relaxed tone unlike the unusual benumbed appearance shown a few moments earlier.

"Well, everything seems to be in order," Quentin remarked brightly, unlatching the bracelet from his wrist before removing and

cleaning his glasses while the machine above him powered down.

"Fantastic job! I honestly can't thank you enough...er..." He paused, looking notably embarrassed. "Am I a nitwit or what? In all the craziness I forgot to ask your name! Iantha mentioned it, I think..."

"It's 'Caley'," he replied, none the more disgruntled for having remained anonymous for so long. "And this is my friend, Kiko."

"Gruh, grum-peh!" Kiko piped up, momentarily forgetting her pressing issues of time long enough to appreciate being included.

"Caley...Caley...why does that name sound familiar?" Quentin pondered, before flinching in realisation. "Of course! You're Jack's son, aren't you? It's great to meet you, and you too, Kiko."

"Same," Caley grinned, while Kiko and Benny struck up their own conversation. "What exactly do you study, Professor?"

"For the most part, I'm a Pokémon Behaviourist," Quentin explained. "Researching on the actions and reactions of pokémon, wild and tamed. It has always fascinated me - those subtle differences between both groups." The man turned to look at Kiko and Benny for a moment. "Have you ever noticed how much more responsive tamed pokémon are to you, Caley? How intuitive and emotionally attuned they can be?"

"Now you mention it..." he blinked.

"There's a reason for that," Quentin told him, picking up a familiar sphere from a nearby counter and opening it to reveal the reflective

panels on its hollow, curved insides. "The mechanics of Pokéballs modify the brainwaves ever so slightly, you see. The resulting behaviours are what allow us to discern a tamed pokémon from a wild one."

"Wow..." Caley murmured, notably impressed.

"There are exceptions, of course," Quentin nodded wisely, shutting the Pokéball and dropping it into his lab coat. "Psychics, being one of them. They are endowed with that 'Enlightenment' naturally."

Kiko put on a proud expression at overhearing this.

"How did they tame pokémon before there were Pokéballs then?" Caley inquired, recalling the instances he'd read of in history class - tribal wars fought with armies of both human and pokémon soldiers that decimated much of the landscape they passed over.

"Well that sort of thing I'm still researching on," Quentin replied simply. "Taking on the form of a pokémon would help me in that research."

"And that's what that mind swap machine was for, right?" his avid listener concluded.

"Right!" Quentin grew more enthused at Caley's obvious interest. "I studied alongside William Ethersford in the past, and he had always said that the best way to understand another's situation was to put yourself in their place. He'd never been very successful on the technology front, mind...he had to make do with using pokémon costumes instead. After Bill moved to Kanto, I continued researching into better ways of

achieving his goal."

The professor glanced back at the recently used machine with an expression that indicated a mixture of sadness and discomfort.

"However, after what happened today, I've decided the Consciousness Exchange device is probably not the best method for my research. Mind transfer is a very risky business, especially if one's mind is left in an alternate body for too long."

"In more ways than one, I can imagine," Caley bit his lip, thinking of the demented antics Benny had got up to that day.

"The ideal method would be for one to *physically* become a pokémon," Quentin continued. "But that's a lot easier said than done. There's a truckload of compatibility issues to think about, coupled with the limits of modern science, not to mention ethical factors...but there I go again, saying too much and not showing my gratitude. There's got to be some way I can thank you for getting me and Benny out of that mess..." The man's eyes lit up. "Aha! You two wait right there, I'll be back in a flash."

Before either Caley or Kiko voiced their thoughts on whether they wanted to wait right there or not, Quentin sprinted from the room with excited muttering and Benny in close pursuit. Instead, the pair shrugged to each other and took to examining their surroundings more. Their eyes were met with an industrious, but mostly unkempt sight - a large circular room filled with storage units and wire-laden contraptions in such variety

and intensity, that it was near impossible to see any wall amongst them. The calmest part of the room was a portion of wall behind a cramped office desk where a dated computer sat - remarkably spotless next to a threateningly large stack of papers. There, a few framed pictures hung - their slightly dusty yet undamaged appearance seeming rather out of place amongst the absent-minded clutter.

Upon closer inspection, Caley found the topmost frame to contain a certificate of education declaring the title of "Professor Quentin Werty DPS", though he had no idea what any of those letters meant. Underneath that was a photo of Quentin and Bill which looked to have been taken at least ten years ago in Blackthorn City, if Caley recognized the gym in the background correctly.

A faint bleep caused Kiko to prick up her ears and stare at the computer upon the office table, which had switched itself out of standby. The screen now blazed with a plethora of icons and windows, provoking a snicker from Caley at the fact Quentin was no tidier digitally than he was physically. Then he noticed the dialog box which clearly read:

1 NEW MESSAGE.

Caley wasn't sure what drove him to clicking on the box. It wasn't his computer, after all, and the contents may well have been very personal. In fact, it was more out of character than he'd ever

remembered acting. Yet Caley *had* to know. The burning desire to know crept down his arm and into the tips of his fingers, thrusting his hand outward toward the computer mouse. The cursor slid across the screen with artful determination - reaching the dialog box and activating the contents held within.

"It's from 'Samuel Oak'..." Caley read quietly, his brow furrowing as his eyes drifted back and forth over the attached images of oddly coloured graphs and charts. Professor Oak was a widely recognized figure even outside of scientific circles - his warm, friendly tones heard reciting anecdotes and educational material on television and radio shows worldwide. But the tone of this particular email was far from jovial.

To all those this matter concerns, it began.

Over the past few weeks I have been receiving some curious feedback from the Guardsmen Monitoring Agency regarding a change in AurNet frequency. While it is too early to make assumptions, I wanted you all to be made aware. This may be related to matters we have previously discussed, and if that is the case, we are likely to be called upon quite soon to lend our talents as professors. Especially if this starts to involve T-

A clatter resounded from the other side of the wall, causing the young man to reel back from the computer in alarm - partly from the sudden noise, but mostly from the realisation of what he'd just done.

Caley hurriedly glanced around in an attempt to find something to conceal the evidence of his snooping and found it, in the form of a sweater that was hanging over the back of the desk chair. He threw it across the computer monitor and attempted to force a smile over his incredibly sheepish expression.

"Now didn't Iantha say you were heading out on a trip today?" Quentin inquired, wandering back into the room without batting an eyelid. It appeared the professor had not noticed the slapdash relocation of his sweater.

"Uh huh," Caley nodded, calming slightly.

"In which case...you're just the person to try out this latest version of the Pokédex, Casey," Quentin told him rummaging in one of his larger pockets in his lab coat.

"That's Caley, sir," the youth corrected in the politest tones possible.

"Oh, of course," Quentin replied distractedly. "No need for the 'sir' business, really. Samuel was kind enough to lend me the original schematics for the encyclopaedia to experiment with new designs. Handheld modules are all well and good, he said, but they tend to lack variety and - in the case of special purposes - they aren't exactly practical."

He paused, before bringing out a pair of black glasses with rectangular frames and yellow tinted lenses. They resembled an

accessory usually worn by skiers that Caley often saw on the more snow-covered western mountains.

"I call it, 'Pokédex T-5,'" Quentin announced proudly, to a confused response. "Why T-5? Simple! It was made in Tatto, and it is the 5th Pokédex model to be created!"

Caley shrugged in acknowledgement. He wasn't exactly the most linguistically-endowed of people, and that name certainly fit the bill, as direct as it was. Following this, Quentin enthusiastically placed the glasses into the young man's hand, urging him with silent but frantic motions to put them on.

"Press the button on that arm of the glasses," the professor instructed, motioning to the area near Caley's left ear. He reached up with one hand and found the appropriate aperture, the lenses of the glasses responding in a flicker of vaguely greenish light which generated a small window of text in front of the figure's eyes.

"It says, 'Data Not Found,'" Caley relayed in slightly anxious tones, wondering if he had broken the device already.

"Naturally!" Quentin chuckled at his visitor's worried expression. "The first thing the T-5 will do when you turn it on is scan the surroundings immediately before you. If a pokémon is in your line of sight, you will be able to read information about it, so long as that pokémon has been entered into the database. Currently there is information for over 400 pokémon species stored in the T-5."

"Cool..." Caley breathed. Having turned to Kiko and scanned her, the young man was now studying the information the Pokédex had given him.

"And that's not all!" Quentin grinned, beginning to sound rather like the announcer from an infomercial. "The T-5 also comes pre-installed with a detailed map of Tatto, which you can access from the post-scan menu."

"That's great!" Caley exclaimed. "But how do I navigate these menus? There's only one button on these glasses...that and a little slot on the other side."

"Oh! That's a place to put Expansion Cards to install any new data," Quentin informed him, before returning to the question at hand. "But yes! Navigation is all done with your eyes, Caley. The T-5 tracks your eye movements - a good firm blink is like clicking the select button on a computer mouse."

"I-I've got to say this is all pretty amazing," Caley stammered. "And you don't mind me taking them on my journey?"

"Of course not!" Quentin replied cheerfully. "You seem like a responsible lad, and the T-5 sure isn't going to get a thorough field test sitting in my pocket, is it?"

"Grum-peh! GRUM-PEH!" Kiko suddenly cried out desperately, jabbing a finger at Caley's left wrist.

"What?" Caley hesitated, instinctively glancing at the wrist and the

watch that was strapped upon it. "Augh! There's only five minutes until the bus gets here!" With that, he turned swiftly and sprinted for the laboratory's front door, much to Quentin's puzzlement. "Thank you for the glasses, glad I could help, bye!"

"Time flies when you're discussing science!" Quentin called, before the slamming of the door echoed back into the room. Once again alone in his laboratory, the professor took a deep breath and turned toward the desk, raising his eyebrows upon seeing his sweater draped in a haphazard fashion across the computer monitor. Approaching the computer, Quentin muttered something about improving his organizational skills before lifting off the article of clothing, revealing the brightly lit screen underneath.

"Huh," he murmured confusedly, studying the visible windows at great length. "I don't remember opening this e-mail..."

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"We're not gonna make it," Caley panted, glancing at his watch while his feet pounded at the road - forcing the rest of his exertion-stricken body along with them.

"Grum, gruh-peh," Kiko glared at him, in a tone that suggested she had muttered 'we'd better make it'. As the pair rounded the corner, they found themselves looking at the rusted back end of a large vehicle

that had already turned around, and was now steadily accelerating away from them.

"There's the bus!" Caley exclaimed in horror. "And it's leaving, without us on it! Hey! Wait up!"

Despite his fervent arm waving, the bus did not show any signs of stopping. Yet Caley continued to run, in the fast dwindling hopes that he still might be able to reach the vehicle before it re-entered Prela Tunnel. Just then, Kiko froze in the middle of the road - eyes narrowed and paws held out stiffly in front of her. Unaware of his pokémon's lack of motion, Caley persisted in his sprint, though by now his chest was rapidly tightening with the all too familiar signs of oxygen starvation. His efforts seemed to be working, as the bus was now steadily growing closer with his approach. It wasn't until he drew up alongside the vehicle that Caley noticed the faint blue aura which surrounded its metallic surface. As the bus doors slid open, Caley scratched the back of his head and smiled awkwardly at the driver who was wearing a bemused expression over the young man's arrival.

"Better watch where that grumpig o' yours uses those psychic powers," the driver commented gruffly, as Caley sheepishly stepped aboard, followed by Kiko who was wearing a satisfied expression. "Gonna give people whiplash. Not to mention burn out the innards on this ol' thing."

"Sorry," Caley apologized, before turning to his pokémon

companion. "Well that's one way to catch a bus...thanks, Kiko."

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A shrouded human figure stood between two of the tunnel's many support pillars and waited patiently - her identity concealed perfectly amongst the shadows. She was not meant to be out, especially not engaged in independently-planned acts such as this, but her mentor had assigned her a task to do and she was more than willing to brave the risks to prove herself. Out here, with potential around every turn and others firmly under her direction, things presented more of a challenge and required considerable patience. Prela Tunnel was one of western Tattō's busiest travel routes but, as with the majority of regions, that didn't count for much. Travel by land vehicle was a rare matter on Oci, with many people preferring to use local facilities and go to more distant places by foot or riding on pokémon. As a result, opportunities to find what she was looking for occurred few and far between.

She felt a nudge in her side, turning to glance at her equally shadowed accomplice with an inquisitive look over the sudden disturbance of her thoughts.

"Was that a strong vibe you felt just there, Narca?"

"Toh-klll..." the reply seemed affirming enough. The human figure stood tall, giving a nod of acknowledgement to her remaining accomplices

whose hands she'd forced into coming with her on this trip, and whom she was aware were also hiding in the darkness on the opposite side of the tunnel. With the majority stationed further up the tunnel redirecting traffic, she only had two left to work with, but two was enough, in her opinion. Strength was not held in numbers for plans such as this.

"In that case," she began. "It's time we made our move."

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

The bus continued its juddering passage into the tunnel, groaning and muttering in harmony with its driver, as its passengers eagerly conversed amongst themselves. Caley stared out of the window while Kiko amused herself and a small child dangling over the seat in front by levitating the wind-up slowpoke toy she had fished from his rucksack. It wasn't until Caley's attentions wandered from the artificially lit walls beyond the glass to the reflection in it, that he realised what the grumpig was doing.

"Careful with that!" he spluttered, causing the giggling child to fall silent and slink back over the chair with a pout. "It's Abby's. I don't want it to get broken, okay?"

"Peh," Kiko smiled in understanding, returning the toy to Caley's rucksack. With that, the young man took a glance at his watch - settling into some vague calculations.

"If we keep this speed up, we should make it to Retyrn Port in about half an hour," he grinned. "That'll leave us plenty of time to find the coach to Mayni City." He paused, as Kiko gave him an unconvinced look. "What? Oh come on, that won't happen again. We'll keep to schedule this time, I promise."

"You seem very connected with your pokémon," the mother of the child in front observed warmly, turning around to look at Caley. "How long have you been training with it?"

"Oh, I'm not a trainer," Caley returned the kindly expression. "Kiko and I grew up together, she's almost like a second mum to me."

"How sweet," the woman smiled, notably gladdened by this sentiment. "There's so much emphasis on training these days that people tend to forget the other joys of spending time with pokémon. I'm hoping little Oliver will get into acting when he is older."

For a moment, he thought the dimmed tunnel lights were playing with his sense of perception. But as he continued to steer the bus, the driver squinted at the row of blue flames that bobbed tantalizingly in mid-air some two hundred yards away. The glow emitted from these flames was far greater than that of the surrounding lighting, causing every figure on the bus to stop what they were doing and stare through the front windscreen in puzzlement.

Kiko frowned, while Caley craned his neck in an attempt to make

out the source of the distracting oddity. Something was indeed standing in the middle of the road, partially illuminated by the flames - a rounded, bipedal creature with a white, swirl-patterned stomach that had its glove-like hands raised defiantly in front of it.

"Is that...a poli-?"

There was a fleeting wave of blankness in Caley's memory, as if someone had turned the switch to his mind off and on again. A single blink of the eyes appeared to have taken him from his seat inside of a moving bus, to standing on the road beside a stationary one, along with the rest of the passengers. It was only at this point that the young man detected a persistent pulling at his right arm. Glancing down, Caley noted Kiko's worried expression as she tried to convey, using no sound and limited movement, their current situation.

"How kind of you to stop at our request," came a youthful female voice from a short distance away. Caley re-directed his gaze in the direction of the voice to discover it belonged to a girl who appeared no older than twelve. She was dressed in a zipped up black hooded jacket and cerulean blue skirt with matching coloured hat and petite leather boots, and had her attentions aimed firmly through the open bus door - obviously conversing with the driver. Judging by the tone of voice, Caley figured the statement was more taunting than genuine, but what bothered him more was the as-yet-unknown reasons for them stopping in

the first place. "This won't take a minute."

What won't take a minute? Caley spluttered internally, but kept his mouth shut - partly out of a rising discomfort, partly because he wanted to understand exactly what was going on before reacting to it. Instead, he watched the girl turn from the bus and face its passengers - a pair of taller figures in greyish trench coats standing rigidly behind her.

"Your pokémon, if you will," she instructed calmly, holding out a box. "And any jewellery you have certainly won't go amiss either."

At this point, Caley almost choked. The unsettling composure of the situation and the age of its director of affairs had kept it hidden, but now the matter was too blatant to ignore. The bus was being *robbed!* Why was everybody acting so unresponsive about it? It wasn't until the first passenger stepped forward, their hands outstretched and clutching several Pokéballs, that Caley saw exactly what was wrong. A blanched face with wide eyes, the pupils of which were misted and nondescript. The telltale signs of hypnotism.

"NO!" Caley yelled out, lunging forward and practically knocking the box from the girl's waiting arms. The reaction was so sudden, not even Caley himself had been expecting it - nor the heavy impact that followed as his body hit the concrete.

"Eddie! What is the meaning of this?" the girl inquired coldly, glaring at one of her accomplices in a manner that indicated something nasty would happen if she didn't find out. "Quinn's torkoal pulled off Will

o' Wisp, was it too much to ask *your* pokémon to do its job properly? I thought you were certain poliwhirl's hypnosis worked."

"Maybe he...snapped out of the trance early?" the left-hand figure suggested weakly, raising his hands to his face. But no physical reprimand came. Instead, the girl turned back towards Caley, who had returned to his feet with Kiko's help. Her face was suddenly draped with an unsettlingly creepy smile.

"O-hoh~ So this one's got a bit of fight in him," she remarked, looking at Kiko. "That says good things about the pokémon - all the more reason to bag it."

"No one's 'bagging' Kiko..." Caley stated in as firm a tone as he could manage, though on the inside he could feel his boldness dwindling. "Not Kiko, nor any pokémon here!"

"Actually, you don't have a choice in the matter," came the unimpressed response. "I always get what I want. Narca?"

Caley's mouth dropped open slightly as the figure who had previously been standing obscured behind the girl, stepped resolutely in front of her. The being in question looked vaguely like a togetic - its body shape and colour were relatively the same, though the wings spread farther from its back, their feathers standing like blades framing the lopsided protrusions from its head. Instead of stubby arms, the pokémon's gangly upper limbs hung by its sides at more human proportions - the sharp claws on its hands flexing and stretching in a

muted sense of impatience. Caley shakily lifted his hand to the side of his Pokédex glasses to request some kind of identification.

"*No Data. Entry does not exist,*" the screen read. Caley blinked - it was unusual for a Pokédex to be unable to even place a name to a pokémon.

"H-how...?" he stammered. "Is that...a togetic?"

It was at this point that Caley's eyes met with those of the pokémon. The golden yellow irises flared violet, and Caley felt a chill pierce him, as if a frozen hand had grasped his body. The pokémon continued its gaze – the corners of its mouth broadening into a sadistic smile.

"Stupid boy," the girl smirked, brushing her fingers through her long, dark hair. "Narca is more powerful than any togetic or togekiss, and neither you or your grumpig stand a chance against her."

"I don't stand a chance..." Caley echoed distantly, his eyes filled with an overwhelming despair. Yeah...he *was* stupid. Stupid enough to think it was possible to take on a group of thieves with no pokémon training experience. How had he even considered it a good idea to travel in the first place?

Kiko looked on in horror, sensing the air of utter hopelessness that had taken hold of Caley's usually optimistic psyche. The young man had been paralysed by his own despondency and his grumpig companion was certain that the pokémon before them had been responsible for

it...somehow. But the girl wasn't about to let Kiko give the matter any further thought. She clicked her fingers and Narca silently took the hint, lifting its claws and thrusting them forward, sending a spiralling burst of violet energy at both the human and pokémon targets. Kiko responded by standing defiantly in front of Caley, emitting a semi-transparent Protect shield in order to disperse the oncoming assault.

And the Dark Pulse made contact, brutally so - its sheer potency proving too much for Kiko to withstand. While the brunt of the blast was successfully diluted, the remainder of the dark energy pierced the shield with a splintering noise, overwhelming both the grumpig and the youth she was committed to. Caley let out a yell as he was engulfed in a web of violet, every fibre of his being seemingly aflame and immobilised by the force that grasped at him. Yet all he could think about was Kiko, screaming in pain and anguish just beyond his tear-stricken vision.

The energy ceased, and those who were previously trapped within it crumpled to the floor like rag dolls - their bodies shimmering slightly with an almost morbid beauty.

"Some would have offered you the option of coming quietly, but that's hardly any fun," the girl sniffed, as she approached Kiko. "Besides, pokémon have to learn their place by experience."

With the flick of her wrist, a spherical object appeared and bounced against the grumpig's back, enveloping it in a bright red energy which swiftly vanished. Caley blinked labouredly as the object hit the

ground just centimetres in front of his nose - its black and white surface emblazoned with a crimson insignia that glared tauntingly back at him. He wanted to reach out and snatch it away, to leap to his feet and run far from the heartless criminals who had caused him and Kiko so much unfounded suffering. But strength failed him. He could do little but lie there - an unwilling spectator to the unfolding events - while his aching body grew heavier and heavier with a swiftly intensifying drowsiness.

"It's time we wrapped this up," the girl announced to the older figures standing either side of her. "Bring every pokémon you find, and make sure *no one* here remembers what happened."

She turned to Caley, leaning down so that her prim face with its disgustingly snide expression was held parallel to his own.

"Consider yourself lucky. The only reason I'm not finishing you off is that I'm not keen on drawing undue attention. But take this as a taste of what is to come. A future *none* of you can escape...."

Seconds later, Caley passed out.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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