

POKÉMON
REBIRTH

ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE NINE

Extrasensory

They knew the sacrifice they would have to make, if they were to gain any chance at helping James. With that in mind, Caley took Mr. Thomas aside and gave him a thorough explanation of what had happened since he left Nashgri City the first time. The professor listened intently, raising and lowering his eyebrows as various stronger points were highlighted. By the time Caley had finished, it was more than apparent that Mr. Thomas had made his decision. While he neither condoned nor condemned the young man's choice to enter the Team Rocket headquarters, he showed admiration for Caley's sense of justice and even that of the others who had sought to help him. Eventually he agreed to join Alistair Gordon in attempting to undo the alterations the organization had made to James, and even offered the use of the laboratory communications equipment in order to create new identities for the defectors.

As Finlay accompanied Rose back to where Alistair and the hovercraft had been stationed, Nina, Dai, Adam, Caley and Denise watched Mondo enter the Team Rocket storage banks in order to retrieve a few vital articles for the group's disguises. After persuading Nina to lend the assistance of Dynamo, Mondo instructed the rotom to temporarily possess his phasepack in order to scramble its signal. This resulted in a rather unsettling sight, while Mondo pulled items from the adjusted rotom's mouth.

"Wigs?" Dai pulled a face. "Couldn't you have just got those from a costume shop instead of going to all that trouble?"

"These aren't just *any* old wigs," Mondo shook his head, as Dynamo left the phasepack while smacking its lips together discontentedly. "You can fit longer amounts of hair into them, because they incorporate some very nifty compression technology...and the ability to alter their shade to boot. Same with these false eyebrows."

"He's good," Dai whispered to Nina, greatly impressed.

"Okay!" Mondo announced, cracking his knuckles. "Time to create our new IDs. And for that, we're going to need new names."

"Names?" Caley, Denise and Adam echoed, almost in unison.

"Well in your case, I think we can pass," Mondo said to Caley, while Mr. Thomas approached with an intrigued expression. "All I need from *you* is the ID card you're currently using. For reference purposes, of course."

"Sure," Caley agreed, fishing about in his pocket and bringing out the requested item, which Mondo then studied intently. "It's only a pokémon handler license, but if it'll help..."

"Hmmm..." Mondo perused. "'Caley Wilson'...Date of Birth, 'November 16th, 1985'...Location, 'Prela Village'..."

"Wait a moment," Mr. Thomas blinked. "Wilson? Of Prela Village? Prela's Gym Leader had the surname 'Wilson'..."

"You're a *Gym Leader*?" Dai spluttered in Caley's direction, while the others looked on in equal astonishment.

"Well...I'm the son of one, at least," Caley shrugged, as if this was no big deal. "Or maybe that should be, 'was'."

Dai opened his mouth, about to ask what the young man meant by this, before Nina halted him with a firm stare. It was more than apparent that everyone but Dai had understood the implications of Caley's statement. Adam's astonished gaze only intensified as a result - even despite the loss of a parental figure, Caley had kept so upbeat and optimistic. But how?

"So, has anyone thought of their new names yet?" Mondo inquired, trying to redirect everyone's attentions from these sobering matters. "I think I'm going to call myself...'Tate Sullivan'."

"You serious?" Adam snapped out of his trance and gave Mondo an amused smirk.

"I *like* that name," Mondo insisted, sounding a little hurt. "I'd be sharing the first half with one of my favourite Orrean abstract artists, too."

"Okay...I'll go with 'Megan'," Denise announced.

"'Meg Jennings.' Sounds good to me!" Mondo beamed. "And you, Adam?"

"Uh...I dunno," Adam grimaced, racking his fraught creative sectors for a spark of inspiration. "'Verone'?"

This sent Dai into fits of chuckling, to which Adam blushed heavily and muttered about shoving his fist in someone's face.

"Maybe try for something less...unique, huh Adam?" Denise tried to sound understanding.

"How about 'Nathan'?" Caley suggested. "I have a cousin called Nathan."

"Whatever," Adam snorted, past willing to participate in the event any further.

"Alright then - 'Nathan Chenlor' it is," Mondo concluded, with additional typing.

"Where are you getting those last names from?" Nina blinked.

"Oh, just a random generator I set up," Mondo explained with a wry smile.

"He's *really* good," Dai iterated, giving nods of approval.

Once Rose and Finlay returned to the laboratory with Alistair Gordon and Kota, the two professors retrieved the Pokéball containing James and set about assessing its contents while murmuring amongst themselves. In turn, Rose approached Mondo and formed herself the identity of a Pokémon Coordinator called 'Sascha Anderson'. Her reluctance to do so was in great contrast to Mondo's own enthusiasm about the whole procedure, to the point that the young man was insisting

that everyone called him by the new name he had chosen. Everyone agreed that it was taking some getting used to, but if it made their companion happy, then they were willing to give it a shot.

Next came the distribution of the hairpieces. Denise chose a wig that was slightly longer than her own hair and adjusted it to a sky blue shade, while Adam picked out one in a rebelliously unkempt style brushed mostly to the right, and the colour of mint green. Rose selected a shoulder-length wig in auburn style and experimented with the colour changer on it for some time, never quite moving beyond the shade of her own hair, at least not until Denise insisted on forcing it into an ultramarine blue and accidentally causing the changer to get stuck in the process. Following this, a rather heated argument ensued between the two, which culminated in Dai interrupting in the hopes someone would be able to do something about his games console.

"Well folks," Alistair Gordon announced later that day. "Professor Thomas and I are pleased to let you know that we've successfully managed to restore your friend James."

"Whatever treatments he underwent caused his body to become partly expanon-based – the same material that pokémon bodies are made of," Mr. Thomas added. "While we cannot guarantee our work will be permanent due to this, the fact he *was* in such a state meant Professor

Gordon and I were able to put our knowledge together in order to reverse the hybridization."

Caley and his companions swiftly followed the two professors into the room where they had been working. James now lay upon a makeshift bed constructed from a work table and some rolled up coats as pillows - covered in a fire blanket in order to preserve his dignity. He glanced up at the new entrants to the room with a sleepy and understandably-bewildered expression.

"Where am I?" James blinked. "What's going on?"

"Oh no..." Caley looked worried. "You haven't forgotten who we are, have you?"

"Of course not," James pulled a face. "I just wanted to know where I was. It's just...all I remember was being in an examination chamber, then that horrible pain...." The man's expression descended into one of shame at this point. "I'm sorry if I caused anything...detrimental."

"It wasn't your fault," Mr. Thomas insisted as consolingly as possible, putting a hand on James' shoulder. "Professor Gordon and I heard the story from your friends, and we have done all we can to stabilise your condition. If everything goes well, you shall not become a pokémon again."

"Thank you," James attempted a smile. Inside he was truly grateful, but the rest of him writhed with feelings of guilt, despair and

worry over the figures missing from the room. He wanted to inquire about their whereabouts, but now didn't seem to be the right time for it.

"As for where you are, you're at Nashgri City Energy Research Laboratory," Caley explained. "Now we just need to set you up with a new identity."

"New identity?" James looked perplexed. "After all that's happened, I'm having trouble recalling my *present* identity..."

"It'll come back to you soon enough," Caley chuckled. "Now where'd Mon-er I mean 'Tate' get to?"

Adam pursued Caley as he left the room with Kota in tow, unwilling to share his personal space with a group of people far older than himself, whom he felt completely disconnected from. In turn, James glanced anxiously at Rose, while the professors decided to head out in order to allow James some privacy and fetch tea in the process. It was difficult to tell whether Rose or James happened to be in a greater state of worry.

"I bought you something to wear," Rose murmured, offering a plastic bag containing clothing and a pair of shoes. "Figured you could use it."

"Yeah," James chuckled half-heartedly, reaching out with one arm and taking the bag from his companion. "Thanks, Rose. I appreciate you looking out for me."

"She's an amazing pokémon," Denise agreed with admiration.

"Dad has one at work and I had always wanted to see it, but he insisted they were not meant to be pets." Li purred as Denise halted momentarily to stroke her hand down the tisker's shiny metallic head and back. "It's a shame I couldn't have spent more time with you," the adolescent girl sighed, before resuming walking.

"I'm sure Dai will be really happy with the console parts you rescued anyway," Mondo insisted, appearing to be too distracted by this fact to notice Denise's wistfulness. "He was worried that his game save files were lost for goo-"

"Hey!" someone called from nearby. "Stop right there!"

The voice hadn't sounded angry, but it caused Denise, Mondo and Li to freeze in their tracks regardless. It appeared that having been engrossed in their conversation, they had unwittingly walked in front of a scanner console being monitored by two of Mr. Thomas' laboratory co-workers.

"No no, just you keep still," one of the scientists urged, pointing at Mondo. As the young man curiously obliged, Denise and Li approached the rear of the console to examine what the scientists were so animated about.

"This is amazing..." the scientist operating the console marvelled, while just over his shoulder, Denise watched the proceedings with widening eyes.

"It's unlike anything I've seen before!" his associate agreed emphatically.

"What? What *are* you seeing?" Mondo blinked.

"Your aura signature is quite a marvel, kid!" the scientist operating the console insisted.

"I don't believe it," Denise shook her head in awe, eyeing the body scan image on the console's monitor. "And here I'd thought he didn't have one."

"Oh my, no," the scientist standing nearby smiled. "That'd be biologically impossible. Now *this* signature has a very unlikely frequency - its only because our scanners are top of the range that we're able to pick it up."

"What I wouldn't give to study this phenomena further..." the scientist hunched over the console remarked wistfully. While Denise idled nearby with an awkward smile, Mondo processed these words, silently and sternly. That very 'phenomenon' the scientists had seen gave further credence to the feeling that he wasn't quite the same as those around him. And here at Nashgri's Laboratory, they owned machines that Team Rocket had not yet obtained. Here was a chance for Mondo to uncover more about himself. All he had to do, was take it.

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Once James was dressed and up on his feet and Mondo retrieved from under the enthused gaze of Mr. Thomas' assistants, the last of the IDs was quickly set up. Having chosen the name 'Carl Ludlass', James selected a wavy, cropped wig and adjusted it to a sandy brown colour. The resulting appearance was so convincing that Denise - having been distracted with Li elsewhere - didn't even recognize James upon her return.

As the afternoon drew to a close and evening began to set in, Caley requested an audience with Mr. Thomas for the second and final time before he and his companions departed west. Finlay and Dai stayed nearby in order to oversee the proceedings, while Alistair Gordon waited alongside Rose, Adam, James and Denise. Mondo shuffled awkwardly somewhere in between the two gatherings, handing Li the occasional indecisive glance.

"I don't want it to be this way, sir," Caley remarked. "But we shouldn't tell anyone about Team Rocket's activities just yet."

"I agree," Mr Thomas nodded sternly. "It's a bad idea to let such information travel beyond these walls too soon. People would panic, others might even *join* Team Rocket, thinking it the better option instead of falling at their hands. As soon as we have clearer knowledge of their intentions, I will not hesitate to inform the Pokémon League. For now...I will trust you to do the right thing, Caley."

"Really?" Caley blinked, stunned that so much faith was being put in him.

"While I may not have known him personally, I've heard many tales from the League superiors," Mr. Thomas smiled. "Your father was a good, reliable and strong man - judging from your actions, you have inherited those fine traits. There is no reason why I wouldn't trust you."

"It's so cool," Dai grinned from his wheelchair, while Kiko nodded approvingly at such glowing praise towards Caley. "You and I have stuff in common, being related to Gym Leaders and everything."

"I know you're not a Pokémon Trainer, but I still want you to have this," Finlay said, bringing out a small, copper disc from his pocket. "It's an Ohm Medal, the symbol of good judgement. Let it remind you of our gratitude for everything you went through to try and help us."

"Wow..." Caley took the disc with a surprised expression. Its surface was engraved with a stylized image resembling a diving Zapdos – the electric avian's spiked head framed by its two wings. Caley glanced back at Finlay, wearing the first truly heartfelt smile he had borne in a long time. "Thank you!"

"So, where are you heading now?" Mr. Thomas asked.

"Back to Retyrn Port," Caley replied. "Professor Gordon could use a lift nearer to Professor Werty's place, I'm sure...and besides, there are a few things I need to take care of there, before I start my investigation."

Li caught sight of Kota's heavy frown and tilted her head a little in puzzlement. The augret was obviously discontent as to Caley's travel choice - the reasons evaded her, however.

"Well, I wish you the best of luck in finding what we all need to know," Mr. Thomas acknowledged. "And again, thank you, Caley,"

"Come visit soon, okay?" Dai grinned. "Maybe I'll have my Kygo fixed up by then!"

With that final expression of gratitude, Caley, Kota, Adam, Denise, James, Rose and Alistair began to walk down the path to the hovercraft. It wasn't until they had travelled three metres or so, that Denise realised someone happened to be missing from their party. She glanced over her shoulder inquiringly at the young man who had stayed next to Mr. Thomas and his sons.

"Aren't you coming, M- Tate?" Denise briskly corrected herself.

"Actually...I'd been meaning to tell you before now, but I got too nervous," Mondo looked hesitant. "At any rate...I had a talk with Mr. Thomas and...I'm going to be staying here for a bit."

"What?" all those in the departing group exclaimed.

"You guys know where you came from and who your parents were, but I've been in the dark this whole time," Mondo insisted. "Mr. Thomas

and his assistants may have some of the answers to my questions. Maybe I will be able to help *them* a little bit in the process."

"You can't stay here!" Adam spluttered in a mixture of horror and anger. "We-!"

"Tate has the right to choose what he wants to do, Adam," Denise corrected him, though she didn't sound happy about such a decision either. Fuming silently, Adam stormed toward the hovercraft before throwing himself upon the back seat and slamming the door.

"He'll accept it soon enough," Rose sighed, while Mondo stared at the hovercraft's blacked out windows with a frown that indicated his upset and frustration at Adam's lack of understanding. "As for us...we want you to find what you're looking for. Just stay safe, okay?"

Li observed Denise's figure as she walked somewhat dejectedly along the remainder of the path, before looking back at Mr. Thomas and uttering a pleading mew. But the man was not paying attention to his tisker's request at that point in time. Instead, Li was forced to watch unhappily as the hovercraft pulled away into the waiting darkness.

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Martha Joy took no hesitation in offering Caley and his companions a place to stay for the night. It was partly out of knowledge for the trials

the young man had been through prior to arriving at her Pokémon Center the first time around, and partly out of recognizing Alistair Gordon's name. Excited to be in the presence of the professor who had taught her father the vitals of chemistry, Martha quickly ushered the group inside while her daughter Kylie bounded around them in circles - eager to show everyone her treasured uvium was back home.

With the plans he'd initially had being heavily disturbed by what he'd seen and done, Caley was happy to accept the offer of a roof over his head. After all, he needed some time to think about what action he should take. Blowing up one base of operations in Tatto was hardly going to stop Team Rocket entirely, especially considering they had some really expansive plans in mind. Yet before he could give such matters his full attention, Caley needed to find Ana the Guardsmen agent, and return Kota to her care.

Fortunately, Martha had been keeping in contact with Ana, and informed Caley that she still happened to be in Retyrn Port - staying at a bed and breakfast house not too far away. Informing the others of his course of action, Caley left to see her, all the while hoping that 9pm wasn't *too* unsociable an hour to allow visitors. As Ana sat on the edge of the bed and listened, the young man explained his decision to enter Team Rocket's headquarters himself, and the shocking things he discovered thereafter. He refrained from bringing up Minachi's actions however, determined to keep to the subject matter that concerned Ana in particular.

"Poor Lance..." Ana concluded brokenly, the intensity of her distress causing her to use the commander's proper name. "He is a talented agent, for sure, but we had nothing in our database to prepare us for a machine capable of reprogramming the mind."

"I'm sorry I didn't have better news to give," Caley sighed, while Kota's eyes grew watery yet again at being reminded of this loss. Noticing the pokémon's anguish, Ana reached across and gently pulled Kota out of the air, in order to nestle him in the comforting warmth of her arms.

"Augrets are quite special pokémon," Ana remarked in soft tones. "They are attuned to the very force that fuels all living beings. That same force runs throughout our planet, its heartbeat, so to speak. When that 'heartbeat' becomes more intense, augrets emerge from their eggs. Ancient civilisations used to treat the appearance of augrets as an omen."

"Why is that?" Caley inquired, sitting down on the edge of the bed next to Ana.

"Guardsmen research shows repeated instances of shifts in Aura Network frequency happening prior to events of historical significance," the woman explained. "Head office theorized that Team Rocket may stand at the crux of such a forthcoming event...that is why they dispatched Commander Zilant and myself to assess the situation."

"From what I saw last night, I'd agree with your superiors," Caley shuddered subconsciously.

"As Kota has been involved in both our lives, it seems we are to play an important part in what is to come," Ana remarked, keeping one hand around Kota's now-relaxed form while searching a nearby bedside table with the other. "But you, more so."

Caley flinched as Ana placed a minimized Luxury Ball upon his knee. As this gesture was completed, Kota opened one eye and examined the Luxury Ball momentarily before shutting it again with an utterance of satisfaction. It was then that Caley realised this was the same Pokéball Lance had captured Kota with in the first place.

"What are you doing?" the young man spluttered.

"You are to be Kota's trainer now," Ana smiled. "I saw it from the start, the intrigue and respect Kota held for you. He feels he must accompany *you*, Caley."

He hadn't given it too much thought before, but Ana was right. Kota *had* displayed an odd level of respect towards someone who wasn't his trainer. The only instructions from Caley he hadn't obeyed were the ones insisting he return to Ana. Kota had even stayed alongside Caley when he insisted upon taking the augret back to Retyrn Port himself. Like Caley had felt compelled to study Professor Werty's e-mail that morning, Kota seemed compelled to remain with the young man. Yet despite this, Caley's conscience persisted in nagging him.

"But Lance..." he began.

"Lance would understand my decision," Ana insisted. "He *is* a dragon master, after all. Light types are something of a complex element. As for me, I must return to Guardsmen Headquarters come the morning. If Lance remembers he is an operative while still under Team Rocket's control, then the security of The Guardsmen and its database is at great risk."

As Caley left the bed and breakfast house, tightly clutching the Luxury Ball while Kota followed close behind, his mind was whirling with the remnants of what Ana had discussed with him. Was this 'event of historical significance' the same thing Minachi had spoken of the night before? It was becoming ever certain that Caley needed to understand the hybrid pokémon's cryptic words more clearly. But who was best to shed light on such things?

Due to his father's past Gym Leader status, Caley had been aware of some of the more intriguing characters to approach the founders of the Tatto Expedition. Azima Kenedith in particular was well known for her attempts to register a Dark type Gym in Wichour Town, only to be turned away as a result of the stigma that hung over Dark type pokémon. Rumours had spread that she persisted at running the Gym regardless, albeit unofficially. As well as her interest in Dark type pokémon, Azima was also known for her knowledge of the supernatural. Maybe she would be able to help Caley decipher Minachi's words.

"Alright Kota, I know where we need to go next," the young man announced after a long silence. "Tomorrow morning, we're setting off for Wichour Town."

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Having touched down in a small all-terrain vehicle dispatched from Team Rocket's aircraft carrier, Butch, Cassidy and Jessie headed across Tatto towards their first source of disturbance. There had been reports of unusual activity here, which wasn't much to go on considering where the location *was*, since it often spawned tales of odd happenings and contained equally odd people. Halfway to their destination, the Elite operatives halted their vehicle, as the most commandeering one of them had made the decision to set up camp for the night.

"Jessie, start erecting the tents," Cassidy ordered, detaching a communicator from her belt. "I'm going to make a progress report to headquarters."

"What did your last slave die of?" Jessie snapped, folding her arms. "Do your *own* tent!"

"Tsk tsk, Jessie," Cassidy raised an eyebrow. "That is rather disrespectful behaviour toward one of your mentors. I'm sure our Admin

wouldn't appreciate it. And you wouldn't want to be discharged from the Elitehood, would you? Because now there isn't an Intermediate rank for you to loaf about in any more, you'd be re-assigned as a minion. And you wouldn't like that, hmm?"

Jessie didn't open her mouth; she just stood there fuming quietly. She knew Cassidy was trying to provoke her temper, and she refused to allow her the privilege of seeing her whims working. Silently, but sullenly, she returned to the pile of luggage in the back of the vehicle and began pulling out the rolled-up tents.

"There's a good girl," Cassidy cooed patronisingly.

"You can do it, Jess. It's all about *consistency*," Butch remarked, with a mischievous grin.

"Don't *you* start," Jessie glared at him, fiddling with the zipper on one of the tent bags. "These 'mentors' drive me *mental*."

"Wohhh-baaa..."

Looking up in alarm, Jessie groaned upon seeing the familiar form of her pokémon companion Wobbuffet, looking hopeful. Apparently shifting the pokémon to a ball with a stronger lock hadn't succeeded on keeping it inside.

"Not now, Wobby," Jessie muttered. "You've done enough damage already."

"Wohh-buh-feht!" the creature insisted, waving its flipper-like appendages. Jessie gave Wobbuffet a very sullen glare.

"Listen. I appreciate you wanting to make up for deflecting that energy into the container and all, but you can't exactly do anything worthwhile around here. How do you expect to raise a tent without any fingers? The biggest help you'll be is inside your Pokéball." The woman paused, before glancing across at Cassidy who was talking into her communicator not too far away. "Then again..."

"Hi Wendy!" Cassidy addressed the communicator mouthpiece with unusually cheerful tones. "How's it been?"

"Hectic, to say the least," came Wendy's response in bored tones from the other end. "We're almost at our relocation point and Darius has had everyone running about like headless torchics. I'm just surprised at how unresponsive The Boss has been about all this. I guess he's still got backups of all the things he wanted most."

"I'd imagine so," Cassidy agreed, playing with one of her triangular earrings.

"That's why he's The Boss though, right?" Wendy chuckled. "Always one step ahead. Always in control." There followed a prolonged pause, which drew Cassidy nearer to her communicator with an anxious expression, assuming the signal to have been lost. "I SAID NO MILK! ARE

YOU DEAF OR JUST RETARDED, DINAH?" Wendy's voice bellowed from the earpiece in the next instant. "I DRINK MY COFFEE BLACK!"

"Holy..." Cassidy reeled backwards from the communicator. "What was *that* for?"

"Sorry Cass," Wendy coughed awkwardly. "I'll catch up with you later, ok? I've gotta go sort out that dimwit partner of mine."

With that, the line went dead. Cassidy rubbed the side of her face and lowered her communicator, before turning her thoughts to more important matters such as sleep. Her tent was raised now, proving that at least she wasn't having quite as much difficulty with her incompetent accomplice than Wendy was with hers. Jessie kept her back to Cassidy as the woman primly entered the tent without so much as an expression of gratitude. Shortly afterwards there ensued a loud scream, and Wobbuffet came flying out of the tent's front flap.

"JESSIE!" Cassidy snapped, as Wobbuffet stumbled nearby like nothing untoward had happened. "What have I said about letting this *thing* run about in the open?"

"Wobby has a right to some fresh air too, Crassidy," Jessie smirked, though the expression stayed hidden due to facing her work.

"You'd have at least thought they'd have made it more useful once they'd finished prodding about with *you* in the lab," Butch muttered before giving a large yawn. "Well, I'm done here." He swiftly disappeared into his tent before doing up the zipper, to which Cassidy followed the

man's lead - growling under her breath and retreating into her tent also. Fishing about inside the canvas receptacle that had held the supplies, Jessie found nothing but a sleeping bag. Strongly resisting the urge to burst into tears, she undid the sleeping bag and crawled inside in an attempt to gain some rest.

Sure, she had slept under the stars many times in the past - often on hard ground. That didn't matter to Jessie. But the inequality stung like a beedrill. It had never been this way when she had worked alongside James and Meowth. Sure, there had been disagreements now and then - but for the most part, each member of their trio had treated the other members as they themselves expected to be dealt with.

Jessie sighed. Maybe she was just kidding herself - often James and Meowth would allow her to have her own way. She guessed she'd never considered it an imbalance, because the imbalance had been in her favour. And she'd always acted like the leader, yet it had been James who had taken the punishment for how their tracking mission ended up.

She missed them terribly. She felt regret for not even trying to stick up for James, regardless of his insistence that she didn't. So why hadn't she left Butch and Cassidy's side that day and escaped with the others?

If what I thought was you was just an illusion, then you can't be the friend I thought I had.

Oh yes. The *other* side of the charm. The bitterness and fury Jessie had tried to bury in the recesses of her mind - the pent-up emotion towards events that had happened in her past. Her mother's abandoning of her had somehow been mirrored in Meowth's abandonment of her. When he didn't take her into account, when he changed himself so drastically without even asking her if it mattered...

Jessie shuddered inwardly, feeling the anger rising again. It quickly melted into regret. She had lost her temper at James once Meowth had left, blaming him for ruining everything by allowing their team to be split up. After all, if James had never allowed that to happen, surely Meowth would not have been moved to make the decision he did. Though Jessie had not told James of what had happened to Meowth - she couldn't bring herself to face those facts inside her own mind.

Yes, *that* was why she hadn't escaped with the others that night. To have those memories dredged up was all too much.

She didn't wish to be brainwashed into subservience by Butch and Cassidy, it was why she continued to resist. But sometimes, Jessie wondered if brainwashing wouldn't be a bad idea. At least then she would no longer remember her frustration. Her guilt.

Jessie flinched as one of Wobbuffet's rubbery flippers made contact with her shoulder. She looked up to see the pokémon gazing back at her with an expression of concern that was somewhat difficult to see upon its angular features.

"Wuh-bah woh," it remarked, before Jessie threw her arms around Wobuffet and allowed the pokémon to snuggle under the sleeping bag flap with her. It was an impossible fit, but Jessie didn't care. Something about the warmth of another being, especially one whom had shown her so much love despite her roughness and unpredictability towards them, did much to console her unhappy spirit.

She didn't want to be angry at Meowth. But how could she possibly change how it felt?

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Night wore on, and as the hoot hoot clock in the hall chimed twice in one of the Pokémon Center's corridors, inside the guest rooms, sounds of gentle snoring were heard in chorus. Slowly but surely, the door to one of the rooms creaked open and a tall figure edged into the hallway and down the spiral staircase - attempting to make as little noise as possible. The person was certain someone else was awake, and was determined to uncover whom it happened to be.

The moon's glow filtered in through the huge glass window of the downstairs waiting area, lighting up James' back while the screen of a large television on the wall gave equal illumination to his face and chest. As the news channel persisted in its delivery of sound and colour, James

fidgedetted uneasily with his hands - notably unhappy with what he was witnessing.

"We have received reports of a group of highly wanted suspects on the run in west Tatto," the anchorwoman intoned. "They were last seen in Dustry Town prior to the massive blast that occurred late last night, and are thought to be responsible for triggering the event that resulted in the destruction of several factories in the area. Authorities have released these file pictures of the suspects."

Five images flashed up on the screen in a line - one of Rose, Denise, Adam, Mondo and himself. James' mouth dropped open slightly at the images before him - each figure's expression was contorted into an unnaturally vicious form, an obvious work of image doctoring.

"If you encounter these people, do not approach them," the anchorwoman informed sternly, as a telephone number appeared on the screen below her. "They are highly dangerous."

"That's a pack of lies," James muttered to himself, frustrated. "We're not the crooks here, *they* are. This information is being manipulated!"

"Of *course* it is," Rose heaved a sigh, causing James to flinch upon realising someone else was present in the room with him. "Team Rocket have agents everywhere, including the police and media. They're going to stop at nothing to seek us out." She looked scoldingly at James. "You should be in bed, anyway. What are you doing up so late?"

"I can't sleep," James said quietly. "I can't stop thinking about it - what happened earlier. Or at least I *think* it happened earlier - it's fuzzy in my head, almost like it was a dream. Yet...I want to believe it really did happen. That Meowth really *was* talking to me..."

"Meowth?" Rose's eyes widened slightly.

"He said, 'Don't worry, Jimmy. This will be over soon, and we'll all be able to forget about Team Rocket,' the man scratched his head. "I don't really know what it meant..."

Rose pondered lengthily over these words. Part of her thought what James had recalled was simply his tired, lonely and stricken mind yearning for a lost friend. But another part insisted otherwise. Something stored in her memory from the night before was attempting to make contact with another memory from quite a distance prior to that. The tones of a voice that had managed to evade her recognition at that point, yet now...

The woman flinched as the two memories collided. Surely it had to be a coincidence - how else could Errol have sounded exactly like the cat type pokémon she had known all those years? Coincidence was the only rational explanation.

But still the thoughts mounted. His seething response over Adam's insulting talk of Jessie and James. His unnatural agility. His high tolerance for electrical shocks. Meowth had disappeared a year ago, and in that very same year, this man had surfaced. This was far more than mere

coincidence. Yet Rose's logical mind argued with her. One was a pokémon, the other was a human being - where could the connection possibly lie?

"Their photographs - Kevin, Jenna and Errol...they weren't on that report," James commented, interrupting Rose's train of thought. "What if...what if they never made it?"

"Well...we can only hope they did, James..." Rose sighed. "In the meantime, we need to concentrate on keeping *ourselves* alive. Have you any pokémon you could call upon to help you?"

"There *is* one I could probably get back," James nodded. "But it would mean me contacting my grandparents somehow."

"I think we can afford one call from here at this point," Rose looked at James firmly, before turning to make her way back toward the stairs. "Just make it as short as possible, and then get some sleep...please? You can't run on fresh air, you know."

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

He knew it was an obscene time to be calling anyone in *this* region. Fortunately for James, his grandparents lived in Kanto, and the 9 hour time difference made it closer to mid-morning for them, as opposed to the early morning he found himself in. Hastily, James dialled the

keypad of the videophone, hoping deeply that he had remembered his regional codes correctly.

"This is the Channery residence," an elderly woman's voice was heard after a few moments of ringtone. "Wilhelmina speaking."

"Nana?" James' thoughts had come to a standstill upon hearing his grandmother for the first time in several years.

"...James?" Wilhelmina sounded equally as stunned. After a moment's pause, James managed to find his voice.

"Yes Nana, it's me," he replied hoarsely.

"Oh gracious dear," Wilhelmina exclaimed with notable anxiousness. "We haven't heard from you in so long, I-"

"I know...and I'm sorry," James murmured, tones racked with guilt. "But I'm afraid I'm going to have to make this quick. I can't risk being traced."

"You're still working for those... that 'Team Rocket', dear?" Wilhelmina sounded a little disappointed.

"Not any more, Nana," James smiled in a momentary flicker of pride at his actions, before the seriousness of the situation returned. "And that's why I need your help. I wouldn't have risked bringing you into this otherwise."

"What do you mean, James?" Wilhelmina inquired.

"Team Rocket is planning something big, but we don't know enough in order to stop it just yet," James relayed. "And in the meantime, I need someone to watch over me. Someone like Chime. Is she strong enough to return to me?"

"Chime made a valiant recovery, dear," Wilhelmina informed him. "But goodness, this sounds serious...we really should tell the Poli-"

"Please, Nana. We can't do that," James begged. "If we go about this the wrong way, then many people could be hurt, or worse."

There was a slight pause. James glanced worriedly at the timer upon the videophone screen, silently urging his grandmother to respond before he would be forced to disconnect the call - something he really did not wish to do to such a treasured relative.

"Okay James," Wilhelmina responded at last. "You're a smart young man...I trust that you know what you're doing."

"Thank you," James sighed with relief. Nothing gave more strength and encouragement than a loved one believing in him.

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

This was a bad idea.

What are we going to do now?

Where do we go from here?

What are we? Just a few runaways. They're the ones with the big guns. What chance do we have?

Caley writhed in a state of semi-wakefulness as troubled thoughts reverberated back and forth across his mind. As the night had ebbed into the morning, the young man's sleep had grown ever lighter and more fragmented. Visions of faces - Errol's warm determination, Lance's emotionally-stripped blankness and Minachi's pained acceptance - had flitted under his eyelids. And now, Caley found himself just beneath the surface of his own conscious, listening to his doubts, his fears and his confusion.

But were they really his? The subject matter was certainly something Caley would be debating at this point in time, but the mental voices sounded like those of other people. Familiar people. His partly sleeping state made it hard to decipher just who. Once again Caley struggled, trying to emerge from dormancy.

Caley, wake up! another voice forced its way in, tearing apart the remnants of sleep in the process. *You're having a horrible nightmare!*

"I wouldn't exactly have called it a nightmare..." Caley mumbled, keeping his eyes tight shut while his brain attempted to realign its internal processes. "But it sure was weird."

There was a long pause.

Well this is new, the figure commented, a mixture of shocked and impressed. Caley opened his eyes slowly to see Kota hovering in front of his face, studying the young man intently. *You heard what I said - that wasn't happening before.*

The combined sight of his pokémon companion and the slightly echoey statement resounding amongst his thoughts was enough to make Caley fling himself into a sitting position - almost head-butting Kota in the process. It took a few moments for his heart to stop racing, during that time, Caley assessed the logical nature of the situation. What was he so shocked about? Kota was a psychic pokémon, and particular species were known for their telepathic potential.

"Sorry about that, buddy," Caley heaved a sigh. "Hearing you use telepathy came as a big surprise, especially since I'm still half asleep. I'd better go wake myself up properly."

Okay, Caley, Kota watched as the young man staggered from the guest room bed and in the general direction of the outside corridor, before scratching the side of his head. <But I'd been using telepathy at him for a while now...>

As Caley stumbled out into the corridor, he narrowly missed a nightie-clad Kylie and her uvium, Vips who dashed toward the stairs,

skidded to a halt near the banister and thundered in descent to the floor below.

Sugar Jiggles! I'm gonna get me a big bowl of Sugar Jiggles, with loads of milk! Mmm-hm!

Goodness, that girl is so full of energy.

Sugar Jiggles! Sugar Jiggles!

Slow down! You'll fall like you did the last time!

Now Caley was outside the bedroom, the initially-dull cacophony inside his mind had grown more absurdly persistent. He could recognize the voices now - it sounded as if every one of his travelling companions were holding conversations at the tops of their voices, all at once. The young man gritted his teeth in mild frustration. Not even a cold splash of water from the bathroom sink had seemed to help.

Once she had finished cooking breakfast for her guests, Martha Joy took her chancey assistant out to the Pokémon Center's reception area, in order to open the building to needy trainers for the day. On her way to accomplish this, however, she discovered a remaining guest - previously unaccounted for - draped in an uncomfortable position across one of the long, dark red, cushioned seats in the reception area. The figure was deep in slumber despite this odd choice of sleeping platform, with a chimecho wrapped tightly about his head - its thin, crimson-tipped

tail covering the man's eyes while its rounded body nestled amongst the sandy brown hair of his wig. A few of the Pokémon Trainers observed this scene from behind the glass of the Center's windows, chuckling amongst themselves, while others tapped their feet impatiently, muttering that places such as this could stand to be opened at 8am, not 9.

"Carl..." Martha began softly, reaching forward and nudging at the man's arm. "It's time to get up."

"Mmmgh..." James grunted upon finally realising he was being addressed with his pseudonym, yet did not stir. The chansey raised a stubby arm as if offering to wake the man in a more forceful way, but Martha denied the request with a vigorous headshake. Maybe a tactic she used with Kylie would work.

"Your friends are eating breakfast without you," Martha smiled. James sat bolt upright, the chimecho still obscuring his vision.

"Why didn't you say so?" he grinned, pulling at the chimecho's tail to give him at least a little eyesight. He then leapt up and sprinted from the reception area, leaving Martha to chuckle to herself while the chansey rolled her eyes. Apparently the heart wasn't the only thing you could reach by appealing to the stomach.

Having welcomed Kylie and Vips into the dining room just moments before, several faces at the table brightened upon seeing James make his entrance. Adam's didn't happen to be one of them.

"Well isn't *that* a sight for no eyes," he said under his breath.

"Wait a minute. Where'd the chimecho come from?" Denise asked, distracted from Adam's previous tactless statement by the sight of the pokémon hovering near James.

"My grandparents had been taking care of Chime for me after she fell ill three years ago," James remarked. "Ro- uh, 'Sascha' said it was best for me to have a pokémon in order to help out in times of threat, and...well...she's the only pokémon I have left." He carefully left out the part about having released carnivine and mimejr to prevent Team Rocket scientists using them in experiments."

"But Chime *is* battle-worthy, right?" Denise looked at him.

"She's more of a healer than a fighter, but as to getting over her own sickness...Nana told me Chime is ready as anything," James beamed.

"Nana'?" Adam looked up from prodding his meal and pulled a face. "What are you, a two year old?"

"Well what do you call *your* grandmother, twerp?" James snapped indignantly, with his mouth full. Adam returned his gaze to his breakfast, but said nothing.

"I don't know my nan," he replied dully, after a few moments of grumpily hacking a sausage. James retracted slightly at this, having not expected such a reply. With that, the room fell uncomfortably silent. At least until Rose noticed a red-topped shape and a purple shape idling in the doorway.

"Morning Caley," the woman piped up, trying to sound cheerful.

"Morning..." Caley mumbled distantly. It felt as if he had walked into a wall of upset, trepidation and disgust - the combination of emotions joining the existing turmoil in his mind was only serving to exacerbate his disorientation.

"Come on in, sit down!" Alistair urged. "Get some food inside you. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, lad!"

"Yeah..." Caley nodded slowly, approaching the last empty chair while Kota followed him. "Important."

"Hey, that augret is still with you," Kylie blinked, while Caley reached for the toast and butter dish. "I thought you said you were taking it back to someone else."

"Ana told me to train Kota now," Caley said, trying to condense the previous night's events into as concise a sentence as possible. "It's...a long story."

"Oh, cool!" Kylie beamed, not even caring she wasn't going to hear the story. "Wish *I* could train an augret. They look cuuute~"

Adam uttered a yelp from the other end of the table, having been nudged harshly by Denise as a result of his muttered comment about 'stupid little girls only liking cute things'. Quietude resumed, broken occasionally by the clink of cutlery against plates and the sounds of consumption from James which were louder than most. Picking up a

knife, Caley proceeded to spread a slice of toast with butter, when Adam's voice once again nudged its way into the silence.

That lady's a pretty lousy cook, he remarked. She burned the waffles. And- blech! I don't even know what that stuff is...should stick to just being a Nurse.

Caley's eyes widened at this freely spoken statement - the observation was pretty out of order, even for someone like Adam. Expecting a reaction from someone at the table, Caley glanced from one face to another, and was equally alarmed at their unfazed expressions. Everyone seemed focused on tucking into their morning meals. Looking most perplexed, Caley turned his attentions back to preparing his own breakfast. Then Denise spoke up.

Rough upbringing or not, Adam is too much of a jerk for my liking, she exclaimed irritably. One of these days, I'm going to give him a piece of my mind.

Oh it's so good to see Chime again, James contributed in chirpy tones. She was ecstatic to see me too! Though I mustn't let Rose know the darling kept me up almost two hours after Nana traded her over to me...

And the noise grew. Alistair Gordon started discussing boarding arrangements at Quentin Werty's place with no one in particular, while Rose contemplated how well everyone's outfits looked and Kylie entered a debate over what games to play later that morning. The figures at the

table seemed to be taking no notice of each other's conversations, speaking all at once in a bizarre, united thrum. It was more than poor Caley's strained mind could take.

"Would it be *too* much to ask if you waited until other people stopped speaking before *you* started talking?" he suddenly erupted, wearing an almost maniacal grimace. The others' voices fell silent.

"But Caley..." James blinked. "No one was saying anything."

"...what?" Caley looked at James like he was attempting a bad joke.

"There wasn't any noise until you spoke up," Denise agreed, before Adam leaned toward her and lowered his voice.

"I think something's up with Caley," he whispered.

"I'm not crazy!" the young man blurted out angrily, before slamming his mouth shut and standing up from the table awkwardly. "Uh, I...I'd better go outside and get some fresh air."

The remaining figures at the table exchanged puzzled expressions as Caley briskly left the room with Kota in close pursuit. Maybe everything had grown all too much for their uninitiated companion, and stresses from the previous days' events were starting to take their toll. No one noticed Adam's stunned expression as the youth continued eating. How had Caley known what had been running through his mind?

Taking the time to relax outside did seem to be helping. As Caley sat on the wall round the back of the Pokémon Center, admiring the sea and the wingulls fighting over scattered chips on the pavement, he attempted to clear his thoughts and allow the sound of the faint breeze and distant ship horns to lead his troubles elsewhere. At least until Kota cleared his throat.

Caley... the augret began warily. *Caley, I think-*

"I know," Caley sighed. "The telepathy wasn't just your doing."

It seemed a farfetched idea, but the evidence had continued to mount. Telepathy seemed to be happening for *him*, too. But how? Had it been a result of Ana passing on responsibility for Kota to him? No...that was ridiculous. Saying that, telepathy wasn't exactly an everyday thing either. Once again trying to pull his thoughts from matters he couldn't understand for the time being, Caley decided to address something just as important. Detaching a Pokéball from his belt, Caley released Kiko onto the small patch of grass in front of him. Having been aware of the tumult of emotions happening around her, it didn't take long for the grumpig to ask the one vital question that had been bothering her for some time.

What's going on? she blurted, looking worriedly at Kota.

"I'm sorry, Kiko," Caley murmured with a sad smile, fishing about in the satchel he had brought with him. "But it looks like we're going to have to put our trip together on the back burner for now."

But Caley... Kiko trailed off, glancing from the Slowpoke Rumble Toy in her companion's hand to his face with a distraught expression.

"Please...don't look at me like that," Caley insisted in upset tones. "This isn't how I wanted our journey to turn out, either! But it isn't about sightseeing any more. Something big is happening, and I don't know why...I don't know how...but this seems to involve *me* in some way. I need you to do a really special favour for me. Could you escort Professor Gordon back to Praela Village? Make sure he doesn't tell mum what happened? If she was to know, she could easily become a bigger target for Team Rocket. And I don't want to put her in danger..."

Kiko did not reply, instead staring at the grass with a reluctant pout. She knew what Caley was saying to be correct, but it didn't make her like it any more.

Well what about you? she inquired at last, almost accusingly. *Who's going to watch out for you when I'm gone?*

"These guys will stand by me, Kiko," Caley smiled faintly, looking at Kota as an example of his statement. "You don't have to worry. Mum and Abby *need* you right now. And I need you to keep them safe until I get back."

It took a moment for realisation to sink in. The grumpig's eyes widened upon noticing that Caley had understood her haughty inquiry, before her expression descended into something more concerned.

Him too? she whispered internally. *But why now?*

"What?" Caley pulled a face, causing Kiko to flinch at even her non-publicly broadcast thoughts being heard. She swiftly decided to change the subject, reaching out a paw and taking Abby's Rumble Toy from the young man's outstretched hand.

Alright then, she concluded primly. I will do this favour for you, Caley. But on one condition... Kota began to look rather scared as the grumpig's dark eyes swung upon him with focused intent. *You're a young pokémon, so you need to learn a few ground rules if you're even thinking of filling my shoes around here.*

G-ground rules? Kota stammered, caught off guard by Kiko's certainty and forcefulness.

You got it, buster, Kiko nodded wisely, as the augret sank from the air to the grass in front of her. *Listen good. Caley has to be in bed by 10 sharp. Nooo exceptions. Make sure he doesn't eat too much junk food, always look both ways before crossing busy streets, don't let him spend his money all at once...*

All Kota could do at this point was sit there with large eyes and nod wildly, hoping that the barrage of parental guidance would end sometime soon. Caley chuckled awkwardly as the recital continued. He had to admit it - his mother certainly taught Kiko well.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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