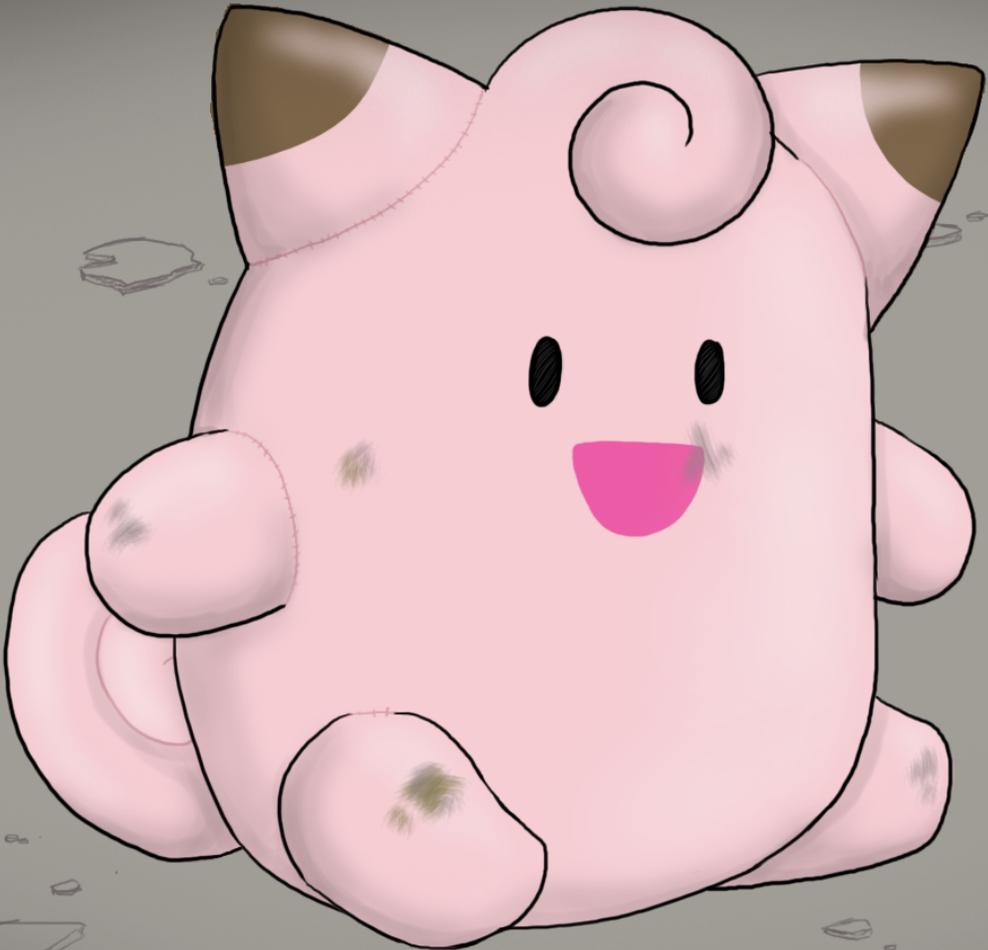


POKÉMON
REBIRTH
ULTIMATUM
Endgame Edition



EPISODE FIFTEEN

Payday

It had been a highly productive afternoon for Errol. Following his return to Sarthest University with Mizno safely in hand, he was swiftly reunited with the device's creator and his friends - albeit outside the classroom, since their lesson had resumed. Erik had remarked disappointedly at how the pen he had copied to demonstrate Mizno had vanished into thin air, shortly after Errol had left. In conclusion he had decided that copying an item just made it weaker, and that it was best to get an entirely new one.

Kristin had added jokingly that her companion meant he was going to buy more Chou Tatakae cards instead of cheating, to which Errol had chuckled. But Copi - who had managed to resume their ledyba appearance after a measure of rest - had looked on with a thoughtful expression. Copying an item made it weaker, did it? Copying existing things was pretty much all the zecutynr was capable of, but maybe they didn't have to copy all of the same design. Not that such a manoeuvre was a good idea when copying other pokémon - it wouldn't put them in any better position than walking around in their typical form. No...for this, they needed a *different* species.

"If there's anyt'ing I've loined from life..." Errol began pleurably, as he and Copi exited the university. "Is dat good deeds have always brought me better payoffs dan da bad stuff I did." To back up his statement, he unhooked an acoustic guitar that had been slung across his back, before displaying it to Copi. "Ain't dis a beautiful instrument? How could Erik part wit' it?"

<If he hadn't, you wouldn't have got such a wonderful thank you gift,> Copi reminded him.

"A very good point, kid," Errol remarked, before plucking tentatively at the guitar strings with shiny eyes. "Man...I haven't played one o' dese in forever."

<Better play it later,> Copi insisted. <Tate's expecting us back at the restaurant>

As promised, Errol returned to The Striaton restaurant to complete his duties, with the gang of street pokémon in tow. After delivering apologies for his absence which Milton kindly accepted, Errol proceeded to work on the remaining tasks he and Mondo had been assigned. There weren't too many left to speak of – Mondo had not only assisted with all the cleaning and food preparation, he'd even managed to fix one of the restaurant's main ovens that had unexpectedly gone haywire.

Errol contributed to the reciprocation with another round of noodle-making, this time at the main counter for the benefit of those dining. This performance was so popular, that several customers ordered noodles just to watch Errol's absurdly fast reflexes in action. It was enough to convince Milton to give Errol, Mondo and Copi another meal on the house – a reward Errol would have gladly eaten himself, were there not other hungry mouths to feed. While his stomach complained of the

act, the man's heart warmed to see Nor and his companions tuck into the meals that Copi and himself gave them.

Evening fell, and it was a surprisingly emotional parting between the Noiry family, and those they had temporarily employed. It seemed all those present had connected, even Chili, who had softened up a little and accompanied Errol's guitar-playing with his double bass during a short recital. Milton had even offered Errol and Mondo more permanent jobs at the restaurant, which Errol took as quite the compliment. However, bigger tasks still needed completing - as kind-hearted as the family had been to them, they would have to put such offers on hold.

Admittedly it was hard to leave. It was the first semblance of consolidation either Mondo or Errol had experienced since their time with Gloria, the lab technician who had united their lives, and a reminder of how much they missed that camaraderie. And her. The night was spent resting their exhausted selves in a patch of woodland on the outskirts of the city, wherein none of the figures exchanged much conversation. Once daylight had returned, Errol had risen to discover that Copi wasn't quite the same as when they had all gone to sleep.

In fact, this was something of an understatement. The zecutylnr had completely transformed themselves, not into another pokémon, but into a human being - one that seemed new and familiar all at the same time. This happened to be as a result of Copi's methods - having borrowed visual information from Erik, Ryan and Milton's three sons, they had forged the appearance of a fourteen year old male with teal coloured hair,

dressed in a t-shirt, shorts and overlaid sleeveless jacket. The jewels in their back and stomach appeared as nothing more than decorations upon their clothing - it was a clever interpretation, without a doubt.

With this discovery having been thoroughly ingested, the trio proceeded to find something more solid to ingest also, and explored the surrounding trees for fruit. Aside from the intention to pick up the trail of Caley and his ex-Rocket companions, breakfast had ranked pretty high on Errol's list of priorities. Now, sitting amongst some pretty-looking foliage, all three figures were heartily enjoying the results of their gathering.

"So..." Errol began over a mouthful of berries. "Did dey find out anyt'ing?"

"About what?" Mondo glanced up, eyebrows raised at the spontaneity of the inquiry after relative silence.

"Ya nightmares," Errol persisted. "Did dey find out anyt'ing about ya nightmares back at da univoisity?"

"Nothing that made *sense*..." Mondo sighed. "Though one word stuck out to me. 'Atlantic'. I don't know what it could mean, but it sounded important somehow. I'll have to keep it in mind for when I get to Scale Falls. But we're still none the wiser as to where we are in relation to that place."

"You got a point dere," Errol sighed. "For all I know, we could be headin' in entirely da wrong direction."

He placed his head in his hands and stared out across the landscape with a wistful expression, while Copi absently reached for another piece of fruit. Making contact with its soft, slightly waxy surface, the pokémon-in-human-guise raised the article to their open mouth. Just as they were about to take a bite, the object twitched. It swiftly dawned upon Copi that what they had grasped was not a piece of fruit, but a pink, clawed hand bearing three digits and a curious spiky frill at the wrist.

Glancing up in surprise, Copi found themselves looking into the lime green, pupil-less eyes of a short, bipedal pokémon with curled, tufted ears and a cream coloured belly pouch. The former gave a panicked yelp, while the latter giggled in a coy yet highly-unsettling manner, gave Copi a playful shove and set about devouring the pile of fruit.

"Hey!" Copi spluttered angrily, standing up. "That's *our* breakfasts!"

Mondo and Errol glanced up at their companion, alarmed at hearing something resembling human speech uttered from Copi's mouth. But the other pokémon did not respond, and simply continued to eat as if no one had said anything. Before either Mondo or Errol had a chance to react, Copi morphed their hand into a scissor claw and frustratedly shot a blast of energy through the pile of berries in the pink creature's hands, causing them to scatter in a messy spray of juice.

"Now now..." Errol put his hands up worriedly as the recipient of the blast swung its eerie gaze upon Copi, momentarily alarmed. "Let's all act like civilized adults about dis."

He wasn't too thrilled with the thought of starting fights with random pokémon, never mind those of the unidentified variety. But this one didn't look as if it was enraged by Copi's intervention in the slightest. In fact, it had put the seared remains of the fruit back upon the tree stump they were laying on and started chuckling. Errol relaxed slightly at noticing the lack of returned animosity, and joined in the expression of amusement. Copi followed, while Mondo stood there frowning and wondering what on earth it was that this pokémon happened to be finding so funny.

It wasn't too long before he discovered the reason. Copi's eye twitched slightly as they saw one of the pink creature's hands delve into its belly pouch. A second later, it had pulled out a humming, black spherical orb with a violet core - its laughter having grown into an utterance that was far more maniacal than previously expected.

"It's got a-a-a-!" Copi spluttered. But the pokémon didn't intend to let them finish the sentence. With a cry of "Blih-LAHS!", it tossed the ball of dark energy into the ground where it immediately erupted in a massive white light upon impact.

As the smoke cleared, and bits of fruit and wood fragments rained down from the sky, Errol, Copi and Mondo hauled themselves shakily from amongst the nearby bushes, groaning in pain.

"Well, there goes da rest o' breakfast," Errol muttered, taking a step forward only to nearly tumble down the sizeable hole that had been left behind from the explosion. "Whoa! What was dat t'ing anyway? A shaymin's messed-up half cousin?"

"That was visible in me like blissey, just a little," Copi spoke up, before muttering under their breath. "Happiness pulling."

"That's another thing," Mondo exclaimed. "Since when were you able to speak in a language I understand?" He paused. "Well...*mostly* understand."

"As for me..." Copi began hesitantly. "That Ryan you think of that is's computer."

At least this appeared to have been the source of the pokémon's acquired human speech, as ungainly and stilted as it currently was. Shortly after their repair of the device, Copi had felt rather odd. They had wondered what the funny feeling was, but had dismissed it. Yet since that moment, the feeling had grown stronger. Copi had found themselves experimenting with random noises and intonations during the trio's stay at the restaurant, which slowly began to form words. Human words.

Somewhere in Edgeville's back alleys, Denise took the lead in escorting her lumbering companion and his plush accompaniment in the direction of 'The Merry Mareep' casino. While they were fortunate enough to discover Rose's plush form still sitting on the pillar ledge outside, attempting to find Adam by entering via the main doors had only resulted in a swift ousting. This was partially due to Caley's slobbish attire, but mostly as a result of Denise threatening one of the money changers. Too stubborn to admit her own faults, Denise had insisted that sneaking in through the back door was less likely to draw attention anyway. However, she was beginning to have second thoughts.

"Could you try moving *around* the trash cans, Cal'?" the gender-switched girl hissed as yet another metallic lid rolled off down the passageway.

"I'm doing my best!" Caley exclaimed, turning sideways to avoid a stack of empty red crates. "You could have picked a wider alley to go down, y'know."

"Cleh-fayr-ee! Fayr-ee!" Rose squawked from Caley's hands, making him flinch out of a mixture of surprise at the sudden loud noise and the content of her translated speech.

"Of course I'm not scraping your bum against the wall on purpose!" he spluttered, quickly lifting Rose's stuffed toy form aside. "Good grief...I've got it bad enough with Neesee without you having a go at me as well."

"What was that?" Denise glanced over her shoulder with a frown.

"I'm just saying you've been unnecessarily hard on me since this whole 'alteration incident' happened," Caley persisted. "For someone who risked his life to save yours, I'd say that's pretty ungrateful."

Denise froze in mid step, her sullen expression momentarily shifting into something more guilt-stricken.

"I know my temper's been rough but...have I *really* been taking it out on you?" she asked quietly. Her companion nodded in response.

"Man...I'm sorry, Caley. If I'd have realised..."

"Yeah. You weren't doing it deliberately," Caley acknowledged. "And *I* haven't been deliberately lethargic either. So try cutting me a bit of slack like I'm doing for you, okay?"

"You got it," Denise smiled faintly, before turning to walk further up the alley. At this point, a faint, slightly-pained cough echoed from behind her.

"Uh...Denise?"

"What?" the figure tensed her shoulders slightly and looked back at Caley for a second time, only to have him motion downward with his free hand. A small poochyena had its jaws tightly clamped around the young man's leg, growling ominously.

"Little help?" he winced.

After a short wrestle with the poochyena, Denise and Caley resumed their passage to the back entrance of "The Merry Mareep". Upon arriving at the aforementioned entrance, however, the duo were met with another unfortunate situation.

"Crap!" Denise exclaimed, surveying the grey block that was fitted over the door. "Why didn't I remember there'd be a security system?"

"Have you got anything we could break it open with?" Caley whispered.

"Anything that might have been useful was zapped away with our pokémon," Denise sighed. "We're pretty much stuck out here unless--"

Caley didn't allow her to finish. With a panicked look upon his face he thrust himself at Denise, sending both of them toppling to the ground behind a line of dumpsters.

"What did you do that for?" Denise spluttered. "You almost crushed my ribs, you-!" Her words faded into nothingness upon hearing footsteps from the other side of the dumpsters. Peering between the large receptacles, Denise and Caley spotted a young man in casual attire, muttering while fishing about in his inside jacket pocket with one hand. In his other hand was clasped a red and black device with a small antenna.

"Hey..." Caley murmured. "Isn't that--"

"The Pocket Mod, yes!" Denise exclaimed, quickly shutting her mouth again as the man glanced up in momentary puzzlement. Deciding that the noises he thought he'd heard were just scavenging pokémon, the

figure pulled an ID card from his jacket and swiped it across the reader by the door. There ensued an affirmative bleep, to which the door swung open, allowing the man to walk inside. No sooner was he within the building, the door began to swing shut.

"It's closing too fast!" Denise hissed, trying to sprint around the dumpsters. "We need to keep it from locking again!"

"Sorry about this, Rose," Caley grimaced, standing up and raising his clefairy-shaped companion into the air. With a quick flick of the wrist and some expert timing, Rose's plush body landed directly between the moving door and its adjoining frame, keeping it ajar.

"Nice moves, Cal'!" Denise grinned, reaching the back entrance and forcing her weight against the partially-opened door. Following a little resistance, the door swung backward, allowing Caley to retrieve Rose's slightly-crumpled body from where it lay.

"It was a team effort," he insisted modestly, in lowered tones. "Is the coast clear?"

"Lucky for us, yeah," Denise replied at a similar volume. "Wherever that guy headed, he was heading there pretty fast. Although that does make getting the Pocket Mod back from him pretty tricky. We shoulda jumped him before he opened the door."

"And risk attracting attention?" Caley raised an eyebrow. "No, this was the better way. I'm sure finding the Modifier won't be *too* hard...anyway, Adam's our main priority here."

"Right," Denise agreed, standing back and allowing Caley into the corridor. "I hope he's okay. This place doesn't feel right at all, and I'm not just talking about the whole 'stench of greed' thing, either."

"I know what you mean..." Caley shuddered. "Let's make this quick."

Denise and Caley sidled down the corridor which the man with the card key had previously taken. There wasn't much choice in the matter, as the corridor was the only means of passage into the building. Curiously enough, it was lacking doorways to other areas, leaving the intruders to focus their attentions solely on what was approaching ahead of them. When at least they did finally come to an entry, the door was slightly ajar - giving Caley and Denise a glimpse into a small room filled with tall, multi-screen consoles and flickering buttons.

"That settles it," Denise concluded under her breath. "Something weird *is* going on - no casino would have use for this much communications equipment."

"Sure looks like some pretty fancy stuff," Caley whispered, lifting Rose up to the doorway to also show her what was inside.

"Top of the range," Denise nodded. "And they've just left the room unattended. We're not dealing with very smart people here...wherever they are."

A clink of glass followed by jovial laughter was heard from a little further up the corridor, causing Denise and Caley to flinch in unison. They instinctively scuttled backwards, lowering themselves behind a trolley full of cleaning equipment.

"Well I've got a hunch," Caley remarked, motioning in the direction of the celebratory atmosphere. "Now what? It'd be one thing if there was a way to sneak by that room, but the corridor runs right *through* it, and there aren't any side passages."

"I know..." Denise gritted her teeth at the complexity of the situation. "We need to lure those people out, without alerting the entire building. But how...?"

"Cleh-fayr-ree!!" Rose exclaimed, causing Denise to instinctively shove a hand over her mouth, despite the woman's pokémon body being of the plush variety, with embroidered facial features.

"Keep it down, will you?" she hissed. "You're gonna-!" Then the gender-switched girl slackened her arm, realization passing over her face. "That's it..."

Caley gave her a puzzled expression until Denise snatched Rose out of his grasp, got to her feet and strode across the corridor towards the room on the other side. Without a word, she approached one of the communications consoles, reached out and jammed Rose into the space between the equipment and the wall.

That took the biscuit. Rose may have been stuck as a PokéDoll but this kind of treatment was downright disrespectful. She struck up a volley of aggravated complaints - however, they too emerged from the cheaply-made voice box in a happy and enthusiastic fashion.

"CleH-fayr-ree fayr-ree! Fayr-ree! CleH-fayr-ree!"

Ignoring the horrified look upon Caley's face, Denise quickly resumed her position behind the cleaning trolley as the sound of doors being slammed open was heard. Several pairs of feet hammered down the corridor, escalating in volume while accompanied by frantic shouts of "It's one of them!" and "Don't let it steal anything important!". Then the figures ran into view - three young men clad in all-too-familiar black uniforms with an equally familiar red 'R' insignia. One was still holding an unopened bag of corn snacks and a can of fizzy drink that he had obtained from the vending machine in the break room.

As the figures clamoured in to extract what they thought was a scavenging clefairy, Denise's eyes narrowed and she stood up yet again - prompting Caley to awkwardly do the same. All three grunts were too occupied with trying to find Rose to notice their entrance - fortunately her utterances were loud enough to be displaced about the limited area of the room. Before the men were able to uncover the source of their panic, Denise had lifted back a clenched fist and downed one of them. The remaining two grunts swung around - while one emitted an amused-sounding squeak, the other cried out defiantly and went to attack Denise, only to be stopped in mid-lunge by a swift uppercut to the chin. As this

grunt slid down the front of one of the consoles, the last figure attempted to make a run for it - still clutching his snacks. However, he didn't account for Caley standing hesitantly in the doorway and ended up rebounding squarely from the young man's ample gut, landing on his back amongst his unconscious comrades.

"What a cream puff," Denise sniffed, observing the limp body of the final grunt who had passed out from sheer terror, before stepping over him and approaching the console Rose had been wedged behind. "Still, it got the job done."

"Fayr cleh-fayr-ree fayr-ree!" Rose spluttered in deceptively joyous tones as her dusty body was pulled free.

"Rose has a point, Neesee," Caley remarked. "You could've at least told us what you were going to do back there."

"It was a spur of the moment idea," Denise shrugged, turning around before doing a take upon sight of her companion's face covered in orange powder. "Yeesh, Caley...can't you go five minutes without eating something?"

"Why waste a good bag of Doodads on those creeps?" he crunched, causing Denise to smirk in response.

"Touché," she said, before holding out one hand. "Where's my share then?"

Unless I can distract him from realising the time is up... he began to grin, and proceeded to yell through the case, "Hey! Get over here!"

"Such boldness," Stuart turned around before approaching Adam, his face still wearing that unsettling expression. "I like that."

"Good for you," Adam dismissed the attempts at flattery. "What is it exactly you're up to in this messed up place anyway?"

"I can't tell you that..." Stuart leant casually upon the case, drawing out the last word like he was conversing with a toddler.

"Why not?" Adam sniffed. "Aren't you going to be doing that mind wipe thing on me anyway? It's not like I'm going to remember a word you tell me. I'm just trying to make conversation here - get to..." he swallowed heavily at this point "...get to *know* you..."

"Really, now?" Stuart's voice immediately dictated immense interest. "Well to be honest, I don't know too much about what's going on, myself. Marc and I are running a recruitment operation using this casino as a front - Marc says it's something to do with gauging people's reaction times or something kooky like that. Eh...still doesn't make much sense, in my opinion."

"Recruitment?" Adam raised an eyebrow, before asking a question he mostly knew the answer to. "For what?"

"Well between you and me," Stuart leant a little closer. "I work for a real powerful syndicate - like, mess your undies powerful. Our agents are practically *everywhere*. And things are about to get pretty lively soon,

what with the Boss' latest ideas. This recruitment op is for that very project."

"Lively?" Adam spluttered in disgust, before swiftly correcting himself. "That sounds dangerous."

"You bet," Stuart wiggled his eyebrows in what he thought was a suave manner. "Nothing you should be getting *your* pretty little self into." Before Adam could offer another means of distraction, the young man had swung round and noticed the console timer had reached zero. "And now this scanner's powered down, we can make sure you *won't* be getting yourself into it."

Adam gritted his teeth and mentally cursed himself for his delayed response. He hated to admit it, but quick-wittedness wasn't something he happened to possess in any large measure. Now it was about to become his undoing. With his shoulders twitching in anticipation, Stuart reached out towards the lever which would release the scanner's upper hatch. But before he was able to grasp hold of it, a pink object smacked him in the back of the head.

"What the heck...?" Stuart spluttered, reaching up to the point of impact and swiftly turning to see what had hit him. Two male figures stood in the doorway to the room - one wore an olive shirt with a luxray motif upon it, overlaid by a grey-violet shirt, blue shorts with a darker cross pattern at the base and a thoroughly severe expression. The other was dressed in far more unkempt attire, glancing with noticeable concern

in the direction of the fallen clefairy plush which his companion had so violently tossed without hesitation.

"Sorry!" he exclaimed.

"How did you two weirdoes get in here?" Stuart cried, a hint of nervousness creeping into his voice upon sight of Denise's intimidating stance. "What do you want?" Adam had uttered an elated gasp upon hearing Caley's voice.

"You found me!" he exclaimed, before scolding himself yet again at how pitiful that sounded.

"Did you think I was just gonna leave without you?" Denise snorted, thinking Adam's statement was aimed at her. "Honestly, I can't turn my back for one second without you landing yourself in a mess." Stuart blinked, momentarily glancing in the direction of the scanner case before returning his scrutinizing gaze to Denise.

"Ohhhh..." he began, an odd darkness creeping over his face. "So that's how it is, huh?" Before anyone could inquire as to what the youth was on about, Stuart had thrust an accusing finger at Adam - still laying behind the glass. "You already *have* a boyfriend, do you?"

"WHAT?" Denise and Adam choked in unison, the latter blushing profusely. Catching sight of the amused look on Caley's face, Denise quickly composed herself.

"Listen, dweeb," she growled. "We've places to be and we don't have time to listen to your warped assumptions, now let Ad- ...*our friend* out before the Myfist Express takes a one way trip to Yourfaceville."

"No can do," Stuart wagged his finger like the insult meant nothing to him. "Marc would be pretty disappointed if I were to let our little test subject go with certain memories in tact - and I really don't want to get on his bad side if I'm to have that promotion I deserve."

Pointer, show our uninvited guests the way out, will you?"

Caley looked up in alarm, just in time to see a slender green and white figure lunging toward him. The roserade's blue-tipped left arm plunged heavily into Caley's body, sending him toppling back through the door he'd just entered.

"Alright!" Denise bellowed, storming across the room towards Stuart. "No one tells an overgrown pot plant to attack my buddies and doesn't live to regret it!"

"Rayyyyhd!" Pointer cried out in response, whirling round as both his arms began to glow an eerie violet colour. Catching this movement out of the corner of her eye, Denise rapidly changed trajectory - swinging her clenched fist round and catching Pointer on the side of the face. It was enough to send the roserade staggering backwards, the poisonous barbs flying from his bouquet-shaped hands and ricocheting off the ceiling. Stuart uttered a yelp of alarm and ducked instinctively as the

barbs flew over his head and embedded themselves into the console behind him.

"Pointer, you dimwit!" Stuart grieved, watching as the scanner chamber's main locks undid themselves with a loud clank. "How many times have I told you not to use that move indoors?"

"Not enough times, apparently," a disapproving voice was heard from somewhere in the room. Stuart and Denise glanced up, the former wincing slightly as Marc strode into view with his arms behind his back. "Causing damage to organization property...I'm going to have to mark this down on your apprenticeship records, I'm afraid."

"Heyyyy..." Denise began to frown upon sight of the newcomer to the scene. "You're that wimp who hid behind the cash desk and got those machokes to throw us out!"

"You're that arrogant hooligan that threatened to beat me within an inch of my life!" Marc spluttered, his suave demeanour altering into something far more nervous. "I-I knew you were up to no good!"

"Feh, you're one to talk," Denise folded her arms. "Kidnapping people and shoving them into scanner machines hidden in the back rooms of a casino isn't exactly a *normal* thing to do, is it?"

"We do what we must," Marc replied, attempting to grasp back the remnants of his composure. "And you've all seen too much for my liking."

"Why you..." Adam began, clambering from the open scanner case without any regard for dress-related modesty. No sooner had his feet

touched solid ground, than the gender-switched boy found his wrists being tightly gripped by an unidentified figure. Adam let out a yell as both his arms were wrenched sharply behind his back, rendering him temporarily immobile. At the very same time, Denise lunged for Marc and grabbed the man by both earlobes - yanking his head forward sharply so his eyes were parallel with her own.

"You creeps have gone too far this time," she growled, tightening her fingers and causing Marc to utter an amusing squeak.

"Ruuuu-kaaaa..." the Team Rocket operative whimpered. "Pry-or-ih-teees..."

"Jabber all you want," Denise's eyes narrowed. She was too engrossed in giving Marc a piece of her mind to realise the implications of his words. Moments later, she found herself flat on the tiles - the recipient of a sharp impact that had knocked the breath clean out of her. Adam rubbed at his wrists and gasped, while Marc stood up and chuckled to himself.

"How rude of me," he murmured, the tone of his voice once again calm with a hint of amusement. "I forgot to introduce you."

Denise glanced up blearily, struggling to take in the image of a lithe female in her late teens. She was wearing a mint green shirt and denim shorts, while a shock of unruly crimson hair framed an expression that was, at best, merciless.

"This is Ruka Naguri," Marc continued. "My personal assistant in matters of physical confrontation."

"In other words, your human shield," Denise spat. "How low can you sink, man?"

"Primitive combat is simply not my thing" Marc shrugged, moving aside as his companion threw back her shoulders and cracked her knuckles. "But Ruka's an Orrean girl. It's a way of life. Why would I deny it her?"

"How *thoughtful* of you," Denise raised an eyebrow sarcastically. "Fine, if she wants a lesson in pain first, then so be- IHCKTH!"

Without warning, Ruka had given her opponent a hefty right hook, sending her reeling and crashing to the floor amongst the scientific equipment. Propping herself up with one hand, Denise rubbed at the spot where the fist had made contact and growled threateningly as Ruka stood there, silent as ever but wearing a vigilant grin.

"You jush kutt me off guard..." the gender-switched girl slurred, as a trickle of blood ran down the side of her chin. But Ruka didn't intend to let Denise stand up - leaping upon her back and pinning her down with one hand while beating her about with the other.

"Nice touch," Marc smirked. "Glad to see my damage restriction techniques are being put to good use."

Adam watched in dismay as Denise yelled and struggled, but with both her arms trapped behind her, she could not lift herself from the tiles.

"This is only going to end in tears..." he shook his head. Part of him wanted to leap to Denise's aid without consideration for his own wellbeing, but it had been well and truly smothered under a thick layer of anxiousness.

"Hey, it doesn't have to be like that, babe," Stuart's voice piped up. "Ditch the loser and there'll be nothing but good times ahead of you."

Adam looked round to find himself face to face with the blonde-haired adolescent, currently adorned with the oiliest of grins.

"'Ditch the loser', huh?" he began ponderously, raising one hand as Stuart leaned forward in anticipation. "'Y'know...that sounds like a good idea!" With that, Adam promptly raised two fingers and jabbed them into his conversee's eyes, making him reel back in pain.

"You little 'yena!" he cried, wiping at his face. "That's it...I don't like to mash girls, but you're not acting ladylike at all. Time to teach you some manners!"

"Bring it on, noodle arms!" Adam laughed, no more intimidated by Stuart than an onix would be by a pichu. As this loud verbal exchange also deteriorated into a scuffle, Caley stood by the doorway with Rose in the crook of his arm - persisting in his mute spectator routine.

"Fayr-ee cleh cleh-fayr-ee!" Rose inquired perkily, in the young man's direction.

"Me, help them?" Caley twisted his lip to one side in a bizarre sort of pout. "Why? They seem to be doing perfectly fine on their own."

"Cleh fayr-ee fayr-ee!" came the fuzzy response. Caley glanced to one side, just in time to see Marc attempting to edge away, using the raucousness of the scene as a distraction. A glint of light reflected from something black and red that was clipped to the man's belt, just underneath the flap of his suit jacket.

"Hey..." the young man squinted. "That's our Pocket Mod!"

"Fayr-ee! Fayr-ee!" Rose urged.

"I'm on it!" Caley grinned, springing into action and diving for Marc's legs. The man squealed and attempted to grab the edge of a table on his way toward the floor, but with little success. Both figures landed with a solid thud.

"AUGH!" Marc complained bitterly. "My ankle...you've broken my ankle!"

"Fayr-ee cleh-fayr-ee!" Rose exclaimed, almost-tauntingly.

"Bit of a fragile sort, aren't you?" Caley began to smirk, hauling the Team Rocket operative into a sitting position and plucking the adjusted BioReader from his belt. "Maybe you should look into some warning signs."

"I don't need to put up with your mockery!" Marc snapped, while Caley's smirking broke into a slight chuckle. He staggered backwards, the

look in his eyes dictating a far more frightened undertone than the noises of amusement were conveying.

Caley... Kota's voice arose in the young man's mind. The augret had deliberately stayed silent, in order to not further crowd his friend's already-harried thoughts, but the massive surge of foreign energy he was detecting was enough to worry him into speaking out. *Caley, what's happening?*

"Something's *not* right," Caley shook, trying to suppress the laughter that was trying its hardest to force its way out of his throat. "Outside...heh...there's a...e-heh...my head...e-heheehee..."

Pointer was the first to cease his attacking. He had recently come around from the blows Denise had dealt him earlier, and had been taking out his frustrations upon Adam, much to Stuart's morbid delight. But now, the roserade was frozen in mid-thrust, eyes wide open in horrified anticipation. As Caley's chuckling descended into hysterical laughter, even Ruka loosened her grip slightly and looked up in vague puzzlement. Somewhere beyond the wall, a faint rumble was heard. Initially it had been disregarded, but the consequential shudders were growing ever more noticeable. Unlike that of a quake, they were short and sharp - causing the surrounding medical equipment to tremble and the overhead lights to flicker in a disturbing manner.

Hardly a situation to be finding funny. And yet, that was exactly what it looked like Caley was doing. The young man's legs had weakened

from under him, and now he was sprawled partway against a cabinet, tears of hilarity streaming down either side of his face. Then suddenly, the wall behind Caley burst forth in a volley of light-drenched noise - showering those within the room in chunks of plaster and utensils.

Adam uttered a yelp and instinctively shielded his eyes as something made impact, pinning him to the floor. Despite the uncomfortable scenario, the adolescent felt it best to stay perfectly still, lest he incur any further damage upon himself. Once the frightening sounds of collapsing scenery began to die down, Adam felt the pressure upon his body weaken - giving him the opportunity to remove his arms from his face. Upon doing so, the gender-switched boy discovered a rugged-looking brown-haired male figure with scuffed clothing gazing worriedly down at him.

"Aiyaah!" Adam cried, thrusting his arms out and instinctively shoving the figure away. Moments later, he realised just exactly whom it was. "Oh, sorry Denise. I forgot you were...well, y'know."

"Sure, whatever," Denise grumbled, brushing herself down. "Some gratitude would've been nice - I only just stopped you from getting crushed with junk."

"I said 'sorry!'" Adam snapped, before looking around at the results of the explosion. The laboratory was an utter mess with fragments of debris littering the tiles - every shelf had been shaken clean from its fastenings, scattering its contents all over the counters below. Marc and

Ruka were nowhere to be seen, though their pained groans indicated they were indeed still alive.

"Oogh..." Caley murmured, attempting to shift himself into a more comfortable position than the draped one he'd ended up in. "What just happened?"

"We were gonna ask you the same thing," Denise raised an eyebrow. "You went all...freaky, back there. What was with that?"

"I don't really know..." Caley responded labouredly. "Would you help me up, Neesee? Something's jabbing me in the back and it's really painful."

Heaving a sigh and trying to ignore the annoying persistence of the alarms which had been set off by the explosion, Denise walked over and pulled Caley into a sitting position. As she did so, her face broke into a grin at what she saw the young man had been lying upon. Pointer was sprawled directly behind him, having been slammed into by Caley's flying body as it was propelled through the air with the force of the blast.

"Yeah, taking a nap on a roserade ain't the best idea, Cal'," she concluded, with a snicker.

"Do you think he's okay?" Adam inquired, looking at the platinum blonde-haired figure lying underneath his pokémon from where it had valiantly tried to deflect most of the rubble.

"He's breathing, it's good enough," Denise shrugged, gathering Rose from where she had landed beneath the partly-crushed scanner. "Now let's get out of here already, before they regain consciousness."

"But-" Adam looked awkward.

"Hey if *you* wanna give him the Kiss of Life, be my guest," came the amused instruction. Adam flinched visibly and pursued Denise and Caley, who were leaving through the gaping hole in the wall the explosion had created.

"Don't be such a sicko!" he spluttered, to which Denise laughed heartily. Caley rubbed at his forehead and looked most perplexed - what little he *did* remember of the preceding events didn't really seem to make sense. However, the young man was pretty certain that the discharge was linked to the unstable presence he'd felt in his mind. He couldn't feel it now, though psychic reverberations of confusion were currently bombarding him from all sources - no doubt reactions from those in the surrounding area.

"The Pocket Mod seems to have remained in tact," Denise analysed, turning the device over in her hands as the trio swiftly entered the alley. "Good thing they design these babies to withstand a lot of shock. Speed it up a bit, you two - we need to put as much distance between here and this place as we can before we activate it."

"Fayr-eeh! Fayr-ee fayr-eeh!" Rose exclaimed.

her dress. Swinging round to find out whom or what had administered such a shock, the woman's eyes widened, seeing nothing more than gaudily-coloured store fronts. Before she had a chance to turn back, something a lot less hard but equally cold splattered across the side of her face and down her chest. Jessiebelle shrieked and manoeuvred her incensed gaze in a reverse arc, to be met with the cheeky expression of a small boy with uneven sandy brown hair. He was giggling to himself and holding an empty cup that had previously contained a drink of cherryade with ice.

"Why y' little punk!" Jessiebelle bellowed, forgetting all about decorum in that instant and lunging toward the boy. At least that's what she had *intended* to do, only to find herself toppling face down upon the stone slabs as a result of having her boot laces tied together. The youth broke down into fits of laughter as he turned to leave, only to freeze on the spot as the unmistakable sound of a Pokéball's materialization beam was heard. Seconds later, the boy uttered a yelp as he was engulfed in a cloud of yellowish powder.

"Ah don't care whose kid you are, or where you're from," Jessiebelle growled, finally untying her laces from one another while her vileplume looked on with great puzzlement. "It's downright rude in *any* place t'be assaultin' a lady in such a way!" She stood up and grasped the paralysed boy by one arm, making him whimper. "Ah'm gonna give you th' discipline you're obviously not gettin'!"

And with that, she put the child over her knee and began spanking him remorselessly, much to the horror of the more eloquent passers-by. But by this time Jessiebelle was too caught up in her own anger to notice anyone else. At least until one voice broke through in two perfectly-formed words.

"*Heavens!*"

"Oh stop your whinin'," Jessiebelle snapped, momentarily unaware of the voice's owner "Y' should be thankful that mah rider's crop was confiscated in customs!" Then she paused, realising that it hadn't been the boy whom had spoken. Glancing up slowly, Jessiebelle's expression changed from that of frustrated sadism to something more aghast. Though it was not a patch on the expression Crispin van Lawrence was currently wearing.

"There she is!" exclaimed a boy with almost identical appearance to the one Jessiebelle had been punishing. "There's the nasty lady who's been beating up my brother!"

"Jessiebelle...how could you do something so vicious to a poor, defenceless child?" Crispin exclaimed, taking the figure from the woman's knee and propping him up in a slanted fashion on the bench next to her. "And he's covered in Stun Spore! This is most outrageous behaviour!"

"Have you neglected to notice what *ah'm* covered in?" Jessiebelle snapped, trying with little success to win some sympathy. "Th' brat *deliberately* threw his drink all over me, and tied mah laces together!"

"Children are children!" Crispin insisted, taking a small medical case from his pocket and picking out a bottle of Paralyz Heal. "You're old enough to know better. Though now I'm starting to have second thoughts..."

"But Crispy..." Jessiebelle began, her eyes growing big and watery.

"Don't take that tone of voice with me, Ms. Hianmyte," Crispin bitterly avoided the look. "Please. It appears you're not the woman I thought you were."

"Too right she ain't," James' first instance murmured to himself, leaping from the bench to join the second as Jessiebelle and her vileplume ran after Crispin. "Talk about a serious misjudgement of character on the guy's part, huh?"

"Mm-hmm," the second James instance agreed. "Sorry you had to go through that with her again, though."

"It's okay," the first grinned, patting his almost-identical companion on the back. "It was worth it just to see her faceplant the concrete."

"Man, I wish I could have seen that!" the second began to chuckle. "Were there bits of grit stuck in her teeth?"

"Even better," the first smirked. "She had a wad of gum on her forehead." The Jameses shared a mutual expression of amusement over this, until a loud explosion swiftly shattered their delusions.

"Whoa..." the first James gawped, loosening his tensed shoulders following the sudden noise. "Didn't that blast just come from-"

"East Edgeville!" the second spluttered. "That's where Neesee and the others went! We've gotta go make sure they're okay!"

"But what about the Modifier?" the first bit his lip, but it was too late. James' second instance had already ran off down the street, forcing the first into an unsteady pursuit. As gallant as the motion was, running *towards* explosions was hardly his idea of smart.

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

"Alright, ya bomb-crazy blissey wannabe!" Errol panted. "We've played your little game o' tag. Dis behaviour has gotta stop!"

Indeed, the two men and their pokémon companion in human guise had chased their bizarre pinkish target through the back alleys of Edgeville - leaping over upturned crates, dodging scattered glass bottles and trying to protect themselves from showers of debris that had been flung into the air as a result of the hybrid's carefree explosive-tossing. At one point, the trio had lost the trail - caught amongst a particularly dense cloud of brick dust where the pokémon had blasted through the wall of a nearby building for reasons unknown. Part of Errol felt he should stay and check the premises to make sure no one was seriously harmed, but a

bigger part insisted on continuing pursuit. After all, the damage was only going to continue to increase if the source of it was not halted.

That very source was now poised at the far end of an empty square which had been rapidly cleared by her own insane antics. Shops and casinos in the surrounding area had closed without hesitation - the sparse remaining occupants cowering behind the shutters of their bolted windows as they watched the events unfolding outside.

"You hoid me!" Errol snapped, watching the pokémon tilt its head curiously from the other side of the square. "No. More. Games!"

<Games?> came the amused response. The trio watched as their target reached out a clawed hand before plunging it into her bulging pouch, bringing out a round black and violet object. Another quickly followed, then two more. With an unsettlingly gleeful chuckle, the pokémon threw all four bombs into the air - stretching out her arms and dexterously catching each one in rotation.

"Is she...juggling?" Mondo pulled a face, unsure of what to make of this inappropriate display. Copi, being the most naive of the three, started clapping enthusiastically at the performance. Moments later, they found themself scrabbling for cover with a yell as the paving stones in front of their feet erupted in a succession of white flashes.

<GAMES!> the hybrid screeched, promptly descending into further bouts of laughter. Another spray of explosive projectiles ensued, sending Errol and Mondo into ridiculous motions of panicked avoidance. As the

dusty cloud thickened, the pair took the opportunity to dive behind the remains of a large ornamental fountain, only to find this was also where Copi had hidden himself.

<I don't think much to her idea of games...> Copi muttered as a car alarm pierced the air, an after-effect of the intense vibration.

"You and me both," Errol groaned. "Dis reminds me of dat time I helped shower a party in blasta balls, only to end up on da receivin' end o' da blasts." He froze at the sight of Copi's horrified expression. "Okay, I've done a few t'ings in my lifetime I ain't proud of. But hey, what I loined from some o' dem can help us out."

Mondo and his zecutynr companion looked on in puzzlement as Errol reached for a thick, slightly distorted piece of metal - a segment of the fountain's piping system that had been blown free as a result of the blissey-froslass' hysterical antics.

"If she wants games wit' a bang, dat's what she's gettin'," the man informed them, getting to his feet while still holding the piping. "You kids cover me - dis could get pretty crazy."

"Crazier than it already *is*?" Mondo spluttered, but Errol didn't hear him. The man had already left the limited safety the fountain provided and was now standing before his experimentally-created opponent, tapping the pipe on the floor and wiggling his backside in a curious fashion.

"Gimme all ya got," he smirked. From behind the fountain, Mondo and Copi watched with equally baffled looks.

"Has he done what?" Copi whispered, the tone of their voice indicating concerns that Errol may have finally cracked.

"I'm not exactly sure what you just asked..." Mondo looked perplexed. "But it seems like Errol's imitating a baseball player." He noticed Copi's face had grown even more confused at this point. "I'll explain later. At least now I understand what the guy meant by covering him. You head out to the left side of the square, I'll take the right. We must try and contain any further damage."

"Okay..." Copi bit their lip as Mondo ran out into the open. As he did so, the dirty pink-coloured pokémon standing in the distance began to grin madly, revealing a set of ferociously sharp teeth.

"Dis sure is an improvised affair," Errol murmured under his breath, watching his target pick out another handful of bombs from her pouch. "Aim don't fail me now!"

<Whee!> the pokémon exclaimed, hurling all three black spheres one after the other with surprising precision. Errol swung his makeshift bat with equally-astonishing speed, making impact with the volatile articles and reversing their direction. The blissey-froslass uttered a surprised noise as she discovered another of the projectiles was heading straight back toward her. A thunderous noise and arc of bright light followed, causing Errol to wince.

"Copi!" Mondo cried out anxiously, charging through the misty swirl. His ears had detected a massive difference in the sound of that particular explosion compared to the ones heard before, and immediately the young man was thrown into a panic. He'd seen one of the three bombs fly in Copi's direction prior to the blast - had Copi been unable to find means to restrict its damage? Mondo began to feel quite guilty - he *was* the more experienced figure of the two, after all. Maybe it had been too much to expect of his younger companion so soon.

He need not have fretted. Once the air cleared, Copi was seen draped over a metallic receptacle with a vigilant grin upon their smudge-stricken face.

"You're okay!" Mondo exclaimed happily, skidding to a halt in front of him.

"As for that as I am the only one years old, you do not see," Copi remarked, pointing gingerly further down the crater-marked square. There, the pinkish bipedal pokémon stood, giggling away to herself.

"We're in trouble," Mondo gulped. "There's not a mark on it, even though Errol hit that bomb right on target!"

Errol had half-expected the pokémon to have been thrown across the road. Was it possible that Team Rocket had managed to unlock some means of making it invulnerable to its own explosives? The man blinked as a ray of sunlight pierced the remnants of the debris cloud, reflecting off a slightly-green tinge around the blissey-froslass.

"A protect shield..." he murmured in realisation. "Clevah." It appeared that Mondo had noticed this also. But something still perplexed him.

"How *did* you stop that bomb from making any damage, Copi?" he asked. The zecutylnr-in-human-form began to grin once again, motioning to the receptacle they were now standing beside. Upon further examination, Mondo noted it was a metal trash can. While not as fancy as the flip-top plastic variety he had seen around Nashgri City, the shiny container had done more than an ample job of keeping a blast to itself, though with visible denting as a result.

"I caught that this," Copi explained, in case Mondo hadn't put two and two together. "That when the bomb goes out, was the bit of trouble which maintains the cover, still I me think of thing without something to say. But now what?" The latter part of their sentence was directed at their unphased experimental accompaniment. "She resisting the influence of the type, what chance we are getting?"

"A very good one, thanks to your quick-thinking," Mondo smiled. "But I'm gonna need some especially good timing to make this work."

"Make *what* work?" Copi spluttered, only to receive a grin.

"You'll see," Mondo chuckled. "Now go and stand by Errol. Don't move a muscle."

"He said what?" Errol cried, a moment later.

<'Don't move a muscle',> Copi relayed with a shrug. <Tate's got a plan - I figured it must be a really good one from the look that was on his face.>

"Really good for *him*, maybe," his companion frowned, glancing about the square for any signs of the young man. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say he'd given us da slip - run off an' left us to face this screwloose explodin'-egg-thrower alone."

<He wouldn't!> Copi looked horrified. <How could you *think* like that?>

"Cynicism, kid," Errol heaved a sigh as the hybrid pokémon twitched with the onset of a new 'game' idea. "It comes with the territory." He readied the length of pipe in a makeshift batsman's stance. "Better hope for everyone's sakes dat your trustin' nature pays off."

With a gleeful squeal, the blissey-froslass yanked two black spheres from her pouch and held them aloft, one in each clawed hand. Copi and Errol tensed in unison, waiting for the pokémon to send the objects flying right at them. However, before she was able to do so, a lithe human figure leapt seemingly out of nowhere - bearing down on her with a determined glint in their eyes. Startled by the unexpectedness of the ambush, the pokémon responded by instinctively raising the protect shield around herself. Consequently, her attacker slammed full force

against the shield and landed upon the broken paving slabs, groaning softly.

This only served to cause the pinkish creature to descend into hysterics, but these mirthful utterances soon petered out amidst the faint but persistent hissing from either side of her. Glancing from left to right, the blissey-froslass uttered a small noise of awkwardness as something rather potent dawned. She was still clasping the two bombs, now on the verge of effectual combustion.

Mondo sat and watched as the pokémon in front of him was engulfed in a dazzling white flare. Copi winced and raised their hands, preparing themselves for the brunt of the explosion, but nothing came - no sudden air currents, no showers of rubble, not even a bang. The discharge progressed no further than three metres from the one who had initiated it - a flawless dome of light which illuminated every corner of the square with its penetrating incandescence.

As the glow faded away and the smoke died down, the pinkish creature was seen staggering back and forth, covered in sooty marks and looking thoroughly bewildered. Shortly afterward, she collapsed to the floor in a fit of exhaustion.

"Ta-dah," Mondo announced with a grin, turning around to examine the responses of his companions. Both of them looked utterly stunned, but for entirely different reasons.

<What just happened?> Copi gawped, scratching their head.

"Absolute genius, kid. Absolute genius," Errol let the piping fall from his right hand as he approached the young man and his fainted target. "Trappin' one o' dat Blissey imitation's explosions inside her own protect shield was a fantastic idea, Mondo!"

"I'm not taking all the credit," Mondo smiled warmly. He was so pleased with the results that he wasn't even perturbed at Errol's use of his actual name. "It wouldn't have been possible without Copi's original spark of brilliance."

"Well den, I'm real proud o' *both* o' yas," Errol replied, putting his arm around the teal-haired youth while the recipient of the friendly embrace started blushing at Mondo's compliment. "It's tough ta bring down one o' ya own, but this goil ain't thinkin' straight. She needs da proper medical attention."

"And we could really use a Pokéball to keep her in stasis until then," Mondo remarked. "Do you have any, Errol?"

"Do ya t'ink *I'd* be carryin' *dose* kinds o' t'ings around?" the man spluttered, before falling silent. All three figures turned their heads toward the south-westerly corner of the square, from which the sounds of distant voices could be heard. "Oh no...it's him."

"Who?" Copi blinked, glancing at Errol's increasingly panicked expression.

"Caley!" he hissed. "Da guy who got me an' my buddies outta da Team Rocket HQ! He's comin' dis way!"

"But isn't that a good thing?" Mondo raised an eyebrow. "I thought you *wanted* to find the others..."

"I *did*!" Errol waved his arms about in a flustered manner. "Jus' not right now! I-it's too soon! I'm not ready!"

<Ready for what?> Copi pressed, only to yelp as one of their companion's hands firmly grabbed their wrist. Mondo watched, aghast, as Errol sprinted in a north-easterly direction towards the safety of the buildings – pulling Copi along behind him and dodging blast holes and large chunks of concrete as he fled. Heaving a sigh, the young man decided it might be best to accompany Errol, and gave pursuit shortly afterwards.

However, the first person to appear on the scene didn't happen to be Caley, but the latter of James' instances, who skidded to a halt upon encountering a cumbersome piece of debris. Hearing the sounds of hurried footsteps, the second James peered through a gap amongst the fallen pieces of billboard just in time to see a sandy brown-haired man run frantically past, dragging a bewildered-looking youth by one arm and followed by an oak brown haired figure in a red shirt, copper-coloured jeans and a navy blue jacket with angular patterns on the shoulders.

"Hmmm..." the second James tilted his head to one side, once the group had vanished. "Two of those guys looked oddly familiar, but for

some reason I can't place any names to their faces. Maybe it's a side effect of being split."

"Well if you hadn't run off so fast, we wouldn't have been so far apart," came the snappy voice of James' first instance as he advanced.

"Sorry, I kinda panicked," his companion looked sheepish. "On the up side, I do believe we're right near the centre of the disruption." He thumbed the billboard in front of him. "All this mess is a dead giveaway."

"No kidding," the first James whistled. "Give me a leg up so I can get a closer look."

While James worked admirably with himself, a less cooperative trio was currently in the process of approaching the scene. The tallest and most robust of these figures strode purposefully at the head of the group, while the relatively unkempt member staggered along behind with a stuffed clefairy doll under one pudgy arm.

"This place is a wreck," Adam grimaced from the middle of the procession. "If what's caused this really is a hybrid like Caley thinks it is, look how much attention it's drawn to us!"

"Don't be irrational," Denise sniffed. "People would have been more focused on running for their lives than wondering whom it was responsible for the pokémon's appearance. If anything, it diverted all the attention *away* from us." She tossed the object from her right hand into

the air before pretentiously catching it again. "Good thing that makeshift lab had some empty Rocket Balls."

"Like that's gonna help," Adam cried as the group walked from the alleyway into the open atmospheres of Edgeville square. "We have no pokémon to tire that thing out! You just gonna stand there and expect it'll stay still enough for you to throw a Pokéball at it?"

"Yup," Denise beamed, lifting one arm back. As she did so, Adam caught sight of a short, bipedal pokémon with curled, tufted ears lying unconscious on the cracked paving stones a short distance away. Before either he or Caley could say another word, Denise tossed the Rocket Ball in the creature's direction. Upon impact, it bathed the hybrid pokémon in a white glow – vanishing it from sight.

"Score!" Denise exclaimed loudly, punching the air before retracting her arm and looking slightly embarrassed. "E-heh..."

"This sure is weird," Adam frowned, walking after his gender-switched companion. "Looks like one of Team Rocket's thoughtless attempts at pokémon 'improvement' alright, but since when has one tired *itself* out before?"

"Hey, no one said all their attempts *worked*," Denise shrugged, picking up the Pokéball from the ground and offering it toward Caley. "You're the one with the fancy 'dex, Cal. What is it?"

"It's called Burasta," the trainer replied, lowering the Pokédex he had taken from the Merry Mareep's backroom laboratory. "An enhanced

blisse-y-froslass hybrid made with the power to form smaller, more potent egg bombs at an increased rate. Whatever procedures they used caused serious mental instability, though."

"Judging by the amount of holes and broken stuff, that's no exaggeration," Denise bit her lip while Adam put on an expression that indicated he was in sore need of relief. Partly because he was thoroughly sick of being a girl in a bright orange dress by this point, but also partly down to having just spotted both of James' instances dashing enthusiastically toward them.

"Sorry we're late!" the first panted.

"Our path was blocked by the largest billboard you've ever seen," the second tagged on. "And I didn't think this place could get commercial enough."

"I'm afraid I couldn't find the Pocket Mod though..." the first concluded miserably, only to have the device flashed in front of his eyes.

"No biggie," Denise smirked. "Adam helped us get it back."

"Guess that makes up for him getting it lost," James' second instance folded his arms, shortly afterward being turned upon by Adam.

"And let's not forget who it was that got our bodies all kacked up in the first place!" he snapped.

"Heyyyy...not so loud..." Caley hissed as he physically intervened. "The idea of keeping our appearances like this for so long was to stop our true identities being found out. We're highly wanted, remember?"

"Yeah yeah," Adam heaved a sigh. "Can we go and fix ourselves now?"

"Fayr-ee!" Rose chirped. "Ree fayr cleh-fayr-ee!"

"Rose is right," Caley nodded. "We need to get out of Edgeville first. Then we can use the Modifier, okay?"

The rest of the group exchanged discontented noises, but didn't object. Instead they followed Caley as the young man left the scene with some of his more characteristic vigour in tact. Only James' second instance paused to momentarily glance back into the decimated square and wonder if the sandy-haired figure he had seen really was that old acquaintance, or just an after-image from a currently fractured memory.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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