



POKÉMON
RE.BIRTH

ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition

EPISODE TWENTY
Arena Trap

After parting ways with the woman in 'Officer Jenny' uniform, Brendan had released his delcatty from her Pokéball and resorted to scouting Mayni City's less populated areas for clues as to the whereabouts of his targets. This was proving a bigger challenge for him than his usual fare. Typically, Brendan's assignments would have some kind of starting point to search from, but here he was, patrolling the streets of a huge city with nothing to go on but the suspects' photographs he had committed to memory. Following an hour of searching, the young man's patience was beginning to wear a little thin. It seemed too much like a 'needle in a haystack' situation.

Eventually, Brendan was forced to retrieve his delcatty and take a break, before he ended up losing his temper. He withdrew to a bar in the city's entertainment district to lose his thoughts amongst the noise of those present. As he drank his can of 'Green Tauro', Brendan heard a particularly loud male voice from across the room.

"Gowaan!" it snapped in slurred tones. "Go leave meh too, whydonsha?"

Brendan glanced in the direction of the voice to see a sandy blonde-haired figure draped across a table, waving an empty glass in the air. Something began to generate alerts in his memory. There had been an additional set of photographs released shortly after those of the main Dustry Terrorists - images of suspects who had previously evaded detection. The young man fumbled for his modified PokéNav and flipped it open, allowing it to scan the figure across the room. Within seconds, the

approach the door of the neighbouring room. Stretching up to undo the lock, Cory was met with the anxious faces of Mondo and Chime - idling in the corridor outside. Mondo was clutching a small device in his hands that bore a resemblance to a wireless modem, complete with a stubby white antenna.

"What's that?" Cory blinked, eyeing the device.

"It's the signal detector," Mondo told him. "Good news is, I managed to build it. Bad news is..." he paused as the adjacent door opened and Rose peered through with a questioning expression. "Denise's dad just got arrested. I had the TV on in the background while I was working, and reports just started coming up about the whole thing. The attorney he hired has been accused of intention to manipulate the law system."

"I smell a rattata," Rose looked displeased.

"You think we should get out of here?" Cory asked.

"We can't!" Mondo grimaced. "No doubt they'll target Denise next!"

"Then we'd better hope Denise is expecting that," Caley's voice echoed from the back of the room. Mondo, Chime and Cory glanced at him with expressions of mixed surprise and horror. The young man's face was lowered slightly, shadows from the room were partially obscuring his eyes under his forelock of red hair. "Don't think I like it any more than you," he remarked, noting Adam's half-awake look of disbelief. "But

Denise made this decision to put herself at risk, and I can't afford to do the same. There's...a lot riding on my shoulders."

There was a notable tone of discomfort and wariness in Caley's voice as he uttered the sentence. Doubt was rife within him - doubt as to whether he could possibly succeed, doubt over whether leaving Denise really was the correct thing to do, even though she'd insisted he should if things got out of hand. Adam's studied expression was making it difficult to be certain.

"You guys are free to make your own decisions on the matter," Caley said. "I'm not the boss of you."

"Maybe not," Rose began, stepping behind Mondo. "But you are a good friend. We chose to stick by your side and offer all the help we could. But unfortunately, in this case, you are right. Denise took matters into her own hands, and we're going to have to trust her to do the best with her situation. We have to focus on our own circumstances."

"Time to leave then, I guess," Adam commented, reluctantly sliding out from under his quilt as Cyzel stepped gracefully onto the floor. "Shame...it was nice to be sleeping in a bed."

"But what about Errol and James?" Mondo asked. "They're not back from wherever they went to!"

Everyone fell silent. It was then that a raised voice was heard echoing up the nearby stairwell, combined with the sounds of footsteps.

"Iffahd legs..." it slurred irritably. "Ah kick y' right now~"

"You *do* have legs," another voice responded, none the happier-sounding for its clarity. "And what are you so grumpy at *me* for, anyway?"

It didn't take long for the group to recognize the two voices as belonging to Errol and James respectively. The latter of the two staggered lopsidedly through the stairwell doorway, showing notable exhaustion.

"What happened to you two?" Rose asked, eyeing Errol's slumped figure dangling over James' shoulders.

"Errol insisted we got out for a bit to take a break," James explained hurriedly. "Things...got a little out of hand."

"Oshuur, blame ih on da freako nashure," Errol muttered. "Everwun does..."

"You'll have to excuse him," James sweatdropped. "He's feeling a bit over-sensitive."

"We're not blaming you for anything, Errol," Caley insisted, while Adam remarked to himself that he was blaming them for being idiots.

"And I'm sorry this is so sudden, but...we need to leave."

Once James and Errol had been briefed on the reasons behind Caley's decision, everyone hurriedly packed their belongings and Adam returned Cyzel to his Pokéball. Then with a little instruction, Kota

teleported Rose, James, Errol and Sia into the passageway outside the hotel.

Once Cory had resumed their human form and joined Mondo on the balcony, Kota quickly engaged his psychic abilities, and vanished them into thin air. They reappeared alongside their companions on the ground a second later.

"For future reference..." James began awkwardly, watching Errol retching over a cluster of foliage nearby. "Teleportation and drunkenness really do not mix."

Mondo blinked confusedly - at first he thought it was his recent psychic experience messing with his vision, but as he stood, it dawned on him there was indeed something very odd about the lighting in the passageway. The typically bold orange glow of the street lamps seemed muted, casting cloudy patterns upon the walls of nearby buildings. It was enough to cause Rose and Sia to take a few cautious steps towards the mouth of a branching side passage. There, a thick sheet of ice had formed, blocking a possible route of escape. They checked a passage on the opposite side - the very same technique had been applied there also.

"I'd say someone was expecting us," Rose commented under her breath, upon returning to the rest of the group. "Whoever that is. They've used a pokémon to block any alternate exits with walls of ice. Only the far end of this main alleyway seems open."

"Trying to channel us out, huh," James said dryly, as Errol staggered back from his position over the bush.

"Why don't we just teleport through the walls?" Adam raised an eyebrow. "We just did it to get out of the hotel."

"We had a view of what was outside the hotel, Adam," Rose told him. "We have no idea who or what is waiting for us on the other side of those walls. We'd just be going through there blind."

"Fine, so now what?" the youth folded his arms and passed a scrutinizing gaze over the others.

"Take this alley all the way to its end, I guess," Caley shrugged. "Sure, it's obviously a trap, but at least we can be prepared for it." He glanced at Kota, who gave a determined nod. "If you and Chime work on a barrier for everyone, we'll have a chance of seeing what's in store for us before it's too late."

"Stay close, people," Rose instructed, grasping hold of James' and Errol's arms and pulling the two men firmly towards her. Adam uttered a discontented groan as Chime nudged him towards the other members of the group.

"This is way too near Captain Calamity and Lord Pukenstein for my liking..." he commented.

"I'd have marvelled at your unexpected wit, if it hadn't been so insulting," James glowered at the youth.

No sooner had the group stepped from the alleyway, a projectile made impact with the surface of Kota and Chime's shield, causing it to ripple. As it clung stubbornly to the shield, Rose saw it was a dark, thick, slimy substance. Before anyone had a chance to work out what the substance was or where it had come from, a large figure leapt from the darkness - its arms raised and large, feather-like hands glowing an eerie purple. It too made contact with the shield, but broke straight through it, slamming into Kota in the process. Caley uttered an exclamation of alarm as his augret companion landed on the road and tumbled helplessly across it. Moments later, Chime received the brunt of another blow from the creature.

"Sia! Ice Beam!" Rose demanded, and the glaceon unleashed a blast of frozen energy in the creature's direction. But its movements were too rapid and it dodged the attack with ease, charging into Sia moments later. At the same time, another gooey projectile flew seemingly from nowhere and hit Adam, wrapping itself around the youth's middle and binding his arms tightly.

There was no time to react, least of all form a counterstrike. As the group split in order to try and rescue their pokémon, they too were targeted and ensnared. Trying desperately not to panic, Caley dashed over to Kota's side and propped the augret in his arms. He had a horrible feeling of deja vu - a psychic type who had tried to defend him, downed at the whims of what seemed like an unbeatable opponent. And yet again

it felt very much his fault. It felt like he had no way to stop the cycle happening again.

Suddenly, in the midst of his whirling thoughts, something emerged. It was almost like a bright, pinpoint of light - a beacon of alert shining from behind him. Caley didn't give the matter further scrutiny, somehow he didn't need to. Without realising what he was doing, he twisted his body and thrust his right hand outward, palm outstretched. A bold, blue glow began to resonate from inside Caley's right sleeve at wrist point, coursing outwards until it reached the tips of the young man's fingers, wherein it spread wide into a shield-like platform of Aura. The gooey projectile that had been heading straight for him made impact with the Aura platform, which quickly dissipated, causing the projectile to splatter against the ground.

"What on earth...?" came an unfamiliar voice from the shadows, moments before the creature ploughed into Caley, knocking him unconscious.

The dank smell of motor oil was the first thing to greet the languid mass of Caley's resurfacing senses. He stirred uncomfortably - the surface underneath him was cold and hard, his arms and legs were bound tightly, and his head was propped at an unnatural angle. He guessed it had been that way for some time, as his neck was rigid and burning with pain. As his senses grew more alert, Caley was able to make out the

disgruntled and wary mumblings of his companions. The young man forced his eyes open, and was met with almost complete blackness.

"You're awake," Adam deduced, though the tone of voice seemed ill at ease.

"Where are we?" Caley managed to utter.

"In deep trouble, as far as I can tell," James sighed. "We've been taken captive by some guy, and now we're in the back of his truck - pokémonless, and awaiting our fate."

"What are we going to do now?" Mondo hissed, the anxiousness in his voice growing more fervent. "We've come so far just to go back where we started."

"Hold on," Rose insisted. "I think that guy's making a call."

"It's Brendan," came the slightly muffled voice from the cab. "Mmyep, I've got the lot of 'em. I'll be taking them to Mayni City Police Station now." There was a momentary pause. "Yeah, thanks for the tip off."

"Mayni City Police Station?" Rose echoed. "Well that rules out him being a member of Team Rocket."

"I wonder who he was talking to..." James pondered. At this point, the hatch between the cab and the rear of the truck slid open, thrusting a beam of light across the faces of the group and causing them to wince. The face of their captor now stared back at them.

"You're all behaving yourselves back there," Brendan said, in a tone that was difficult to gauge as joking or not. "Good. Didn't put up as much of a fight as I expected you to. Except *you*." The man passed a glance at Caley, eyebrows raised in an inconclusive fashion. "That little stunt you pulled was quite the surprise."

"For all of us," Adam muttered.

Caley swallowed awkwardly, feeling everyone's gazes suddenly trained upon him. It didn't help that *he* wasn't even sure how he'd managed to project his own Aura, and it was hardly the way he'd wanted to introduce the others to the concept. Brendan was quick to redirect the mutual scrutiny, retrieving the Incandium bracers from the passenger seat of his truck and holding them up with an inquisitive smile.

"Yep. I've never seen anything like these before," he commented. "I'll have them pulled apart later - see how they tick."

"Hey!" Caley exclaimed, suddenly overcome with frustration at having items of value taken from him. "Those are mine!"

"Not to worry. You won't be needing them where you're going," Brendan remarked. He looked a little saddened for a moment. "Now the others I was expecting, but you...the son of Praela Village's Gym Leader, no less."

"How did you-?" Caley sputtered out, as Brendan put down the bracers and waved his modified PokéNav at him.

"This baby identifies more than just wanted criminals, Caley Wilson," he said. "Such a waste of a promising trainer, to be honest. I imagine your mother will be quite disappointed."

Too late for that, Caley sighed internally, recalling Pat's distressed responses during their last phone conversation.

"Yur regrediss~" Errol slurred from his position near the back doors. James tried to silence him with noises through gritted teeth. "Don ya shush meh!"

"Regret it, will I?" Brendan raised an eyebrow. "Is that a threat?" He chuckled. "You're bound with the strongest form of Capture Gel on the market. I've repossessed all your pokémon, and any articles you could try using to escape. I'm afraid you're staying put."

It was then, that the once-stationary truck lurched violently. Brendan felt a tug in the pit of his stomach, causing him to swing round and re-assert his gaze through the windscreen. The road had all but vanished, and the view of descending buildings outside was obscured by dense whip-like swirls that Brendan recognized as the telltale signs of a whirlwind. Such an occurrence was too sudden and isolated to have been the result of weather, narrowing down the cause to deliberate assault. The pokémon he assumed to have generated the whirlwind seemed to have no intention of damaging the vehicle caught in it, however. Following a minute of gradual and shaky ascent, Brendan and his captives

found themselves swung to the right - slamming against the inside of the truck in the process. Passage in the rightward direction continued for another minute or so, before drawing to a halt with a moderate sway. Then, everything dropped.

There was no gradual progression to this action whatsoever. One moment everything felt stable, though relatively weightless. The next, the tugging in Brendan's stomach had pulled sharply in the opposite direction - as if he had just stepped from the precipice of a cliff. This sensation came to a resonant end as the truck's wheels slammed against a hard surface, projecting its contents upward into the roof.

Once the murky blobs had dissipated from his vision, Brendan squinted through the cracked windshield at the scenery beyond. Most of the surroundings were bathed in darkness, occasionally highlighted by dingy lamps fitted intermittently overhead. He could make out thick pillars jutting from mainly open space, and moonlight probing through begrimed windows set high in the walls. Threading the observations together, Brendan came to the conclusion that he had ended up inside of a warehouse. A long-abandoned one, judging by its emptiness and state of disrepair. But why?

"Ah feel queseh..." Errol complained from the back of the truck, amidst various groans and mutterings from the rest of the occupants.

"Don't you *dare*," Adam grunted, though the utterance was weakened by the previous experience.

Without saying a word, Brendan unclipped his seatbelt and drew the handle back on the driver's seat door, before pushing it open. His boots sent a cloud of dust into the air as they hit the slighted warehouse floor. A figure was poised unmoving in the distance - not well enough to make out any features.

"Who are you?" he inquired sternly. "Are you the one who brought me here?" There was no reply. Brendan began to get angry. "Show yourself!"

"Well now..." a smooth female voice remarked with tones of amusement. "Shouldn't *I* be the one telling *you* what to do?" The figure strolled forward into a pool of muted lamplight, revealing her teal coloured hair and unmistakable Police uniform. "That's my job, isn't it?"

"What..." Brendan's sentence trailed into nothing, leaving the man with a confused gape.

"Oh okay, I'm being a bit strict," the woman chuckled. "You did help me with my commission, after all."

It was then that Brendan realised - this was the same Officer Jenny he had been working alongside that day. Her voice had sounded out of place, a result of having disengaged the modulator, no doubt.

"What's going on?" he frowned. "I was about to hand those terrorists in at the Police Station."

"I know," the woman responded. "And I couldn't let that happen, Mr. Birch. You see..." She flung off her uniform and teal-coloured wig to

reveal a shock of ultramarine blue hair and dark grey outfit underneath.

"They belong to us."

"Team Rocket!" Brendan spluttered, having seen the large red 'R' upon the woman's shirt. "Why you...you've been stringing me along this whole time!"

The man turned to stride back to his truck, but a large form slammed down in front of him, blocking the way. Glancing up, Brendan's frustration quickly dissolved into alarm and horror. At first glance, the creature obstructing his escape appeared to be a tropius. But something didn't seem quite right about it. Its body was disproportionate, forcing it into a semi-upright stance. Its limbs bore weird, pudgy toes and its neck was stunted in length, with its head seeming oversized in comparison. Two unsettling eyes peered from under the green curves of its facial armour, while beneath its curious snout, there was a small trio of fuzz-covered banana shaped fruits.

"Dear god..." a horrified exclamation escaped Rose's lips.

"What? What is it?" Mondo inquired worriedly. Due to the size of the hatch, only one of the group was able to keep watch on the events outside, and relay to the others.

"Ah ah ah," the woman drawled. "There'll be no leaving until the transaction is completed."

"What have you *done* to that pokémon, you vile ekans!" Brendan glowered, notably horrified.

"That's *Vilina* to you, hunter boy," the woman wagged a finger, before glancing proudly at the pokémon. "He's quite the catch, isn't he? Engineered to be several times more powerful than your average tropius. Full of spite, force and an unbridled rage that *I* control." She smirked deviously. "I call him 'Rhenton'."

"Engineered?" Brendan spat.

"You know what they say," Vilina said pleurably. "If nothing exists to suit your taste, it's time to start making it yourself."

"That's it," Brendan growled. "Posing as a member of Police and manipulating me is bad enough, but disfiguring pokémon in the name of that foul organization...you're going to wish you'd never crossed me."

"Big talk, for a little man," Vilina chuckled at this. "Well? I'm waiting. Show me what you've got - it'll keep me amused until the collectors arrive."

Watching helplessly through the open hatch into the truck's cab, Rose uttered a gasp as Vilina raised a communicator and pressed a button on it.

"What now?" James sounded more fractious than Mondo at this point. He attempted to shuffle forward to get a better look, but this only resulted in a clumsy motion not unlike an overfed wurmple, and the truck swaying wildly on its axles.

"Ow!" Adam cried as his feet were knelt heavily upon. "Stick to your own side, you crudlump!"

"James, stop that," Rose insisted hurriedly. "She just hailed someone to come and pick us up."

"If we get taken to the new Tatto headquarters in this way, it could mean the end for all of us!" James looked aghast.

"Brendan, listen!" Caley grimaced, craning his neck as far as possible so that the young man could hear his words. "Whether or not you believe we're innocent, you can't let Team Rocket get involved in this. Please!"

Brendan said nothing in reply, but instead brought out two Pokéballs and threw them forward.

"Go Eney! Engel!"

From the light of the Pokéballs emerged a delcatty and a shiftry. It was at this point that Rose identified the latter as the agile figure that had managed to rupture Kota and Chime's shield and prevent any of the group's attempts to fend it off.

"We certainly don't beat about the bush, do we?" Vilina smirked. "Fine. Send out two. Send out *all* of your pokémon if you like! It won't help you."

"Ice Beam! X-Scissor!" Brendan barked.

"Aerial Ace," Vilina remarked. No sooner had Engel leapt into the air, the tropius under Vilina's command had shot forward with alarming

speed, catching the shiftry a glancing blow and causing it to spin wildly into the ceiling. Making a wide turn, the tropius uttered a hoarse cry of surprise as Eney's ice beam made contact with its chest. Yet despite this one menial utterance, the attack proved to have little effect. The tropius was still hovering, still with a hollow, soulless expression. Little frozen flakes clung to the surface of its skin, slowly melting and slipping free.

"Rock Smash!" Vilina bellowed, more fearsomely. Eney stood rooted to the spot in fear, as the tropius dived toward her head-first, its misshapen front legs outstretched. Engel swooped under the tropius' cumbersome body, snatching the delcatty up in his leafy hands just before their attacker made contact. A hefty quake resounded throughout the warehouse.

"Two isn't enough..." Brendan muttered. "There's nothing for it - I'll have to send everyone out, regardless of disadvantage. Sorry guys..." He flung the remaining four Pokéballs into the air, and a rhyperior, an aggron, a swampert and a milotic appeared. Caley stiffened, his eyes wide. He could sense every pokémon's burning desire to succeed, to achieve what seemed unachievable.

"Weeeeell," Vilina leaned back with a chuckle. "Now I can't tell whether you're just being extremely bold, or extremely *stupid*."

"I know the risks," Brendan frowned. "Guro, make toast!"

As the tropius ducked to avoid the burst of flame from the aggron's mouth, it landed straight in the path of the charging rhyperior,

who barrelled into the pokémon with a Megahorn attack. The force was enough to cast the tropius backwards into the rear warehouse wall, which barely held - cracks snaking across its surface. Brendan's milotic followed with a heavy burst of water, which the aggron engulfed in a blast of Thunder Wave, amplifying the effectiveness of the paralysing status-changer.

Brendan's pokémon halted their attacks, showing moderate signs of exertion as they warily observed their target - waiting for it to make its next move. But the tropius had been sufficiently immobilized, and lay twitching upon the warehouse floor, groaning softly in pain.

"What?" Vilina screeched, before her tone swiftly returned to one of anger. "Get up and fight, you lump of plant matter! Those science geeks said you were super powerful...you're just as pathetic as the *real* Rhenton!"

"This is over," Brendan said austerely. "And you, Miss, are under arrest for impersonating a member of authority, pokémon abuse and undoubtedly a truckload of other things you've stacked up from affiliating with Team Rocket."

"Nice try," Vilina mused from below a furrowed brow. "But no." She retracted the tropius into a Rocket Ball and adjusted something upon her belt. Brendan's pokémon team had swung their attentions upon Vilina now, yet before they could do anything, a jetpack sprouted seemingly from nowhere and attached itself across the woman's shoulders. The

Team Rocket operative jetted up into the air, deftly avoiding various elemental projectiles from the pokémon, and slammed into a warehouse skylight - causing shards of glass to rain down around those below.

"Well that was unexpected," Brendan raised an eyebrow. He still appeared remarkably calm despite his target's escape.

"Shyf-treh?" Engel inquired, pointing at the ceiling.

"No, leave her be," Brendan told him. "She was surplus. The Police are going to be here soon, and I don't want to be dragged into unnecessary questioning. Let's go." He smiled at his pokémon team momentarily. "You all did great, guys."

With that, the pokémon were returned to their Pokéballs, Brendan quickly made his way to the cab of his truck and threw himself into the driver's seat, causing the vehicle to sway a little. A flick of the wrist later, and the engine juddered into life. Brendan thrust the truck round in an arc, causing a sizeable cloud of dust to be tossed into the air, and drove out of the abandoned warehouse's open rear doors. For a moment, no one said anything - they had been too shocked by their narrow escape from recapture by Team Rocket. Even Errol had been startled into a more alert condition. After a few minutes, Caley attempted to gain a better idea of the group's circumstances.

"Where are we going now?" he exclaimed over the noise of the engine.

"Fake Policewoman or not, a commission is a commission," Brendan told him. "And you're still highly-wanted terrorists. I'm taking you lot to the city station, as I'd planned to before all this craziness happened."

"We're not terrorists!" Adam finally snapped. "Team Rocket blew up their *own* stupid headquarters and then framed us for it!"

The vehicle began to decelerate.

"What?"

"It's true," Rose spoke up. "They may have operatives on the lookout for us, but getting us listed on criminal records makes it more likely for people such as yourself to get involved."

"To put it bluntly," Errol said. "You're doing their doiteh woik."

The vehicle came to a halt at the side of the road, and the partition hatch to the cab slid open once again. Brendan eyed his captives with an unconvinced expression.

"But you're still members of Team Rocket," he pointed out.

"As attempted-respectable citizens, we can hardly deny that was the case at one point," James admitted weakly. "Team Rocket membership is so hard to shake off."

"You've been using fake IDs," Brendan remarked.

"We've had to, to stop the members sent to hunt us down from finding us!" Mondo insisted. "You've seen how easily they slipped into the Police force!"

"Yes, I did," the shock from this betrayal still resonated in Brendan's eyes, though he quickly dismissed it. "Still, whether you work for Team Rocket now or not, the fact of the matter remains. You worked for them at some point, and you're still accountable for those crimes."

Caley had been thoroughly silenced. Their captor was not open to negotiations, and the success of the group depended entirely on a modicum of kindness. Yet what could he possibly say or do to change Brendan's mind? A man of his profession would tell them to leave infiltrating Team Rocket's new headquarters to the experts, despite the fact that - in this particular case - they *were* the experts. And that was without bringing even deeper matters into the equation. Caley stared at Brendan as the young man continued to talk, his chest grasped tightly by a sense dread that refused to leave - desperately willing Brendan to listen. To somehow understand.

"Sure, wanting to turn over a new leaf is admirable," Brendan said. "But a sudden burst of principles doesn't excuse you from your past actions."

Does the fate of the world?

It was undoubtedly his voice, but Caley had not intended to raise it. Suddenly, the young man's vision was saturated with whirling red, blue and violet lights. The dim environment of the truck and the presence of his companions had all but vanished, leaving Brendan's translucent human form suspended a short distance away from him, framed in a striking glow. Hazy images began to shimmer and flicker amongst the multi-coloured lights - memories of the night Team Rocket's headquarters was destroyed, echoes of the words that Minachi, Ana, Azima and Sabrina had spoken to him. Then the illuminated surroundings dispersed as rapidly as they had arrived. Caley flinched as Brendan took a sharp breath of air, both figures' eyes were wide in shock and confusion.

"What did you do to him?" Mondo spluttered fearfully.

"I...I..." Caley stammered. It seemed that the intensity of his longing to make Brendan get the picture had subconsciously triggered the mind-linking technique he had used on Larydos. "I showed Brendan my memories somehow. It just happened...I don't-"

"It's okay," Brendan interrupted. He sounded a little shaken up, not quite as bold and stern as usual. "I'm not hurt." The young man began to chuckle faintly, causing his captives to exchange awkward and worried expressions. "Full of surprises, aren't you Caley?"

"I'm sorry," Caley grimaced.

"Don't be," Brendan told him. "I can see your experiences have been pretty complicated. Would have been hard to put that across in

words." He paused to bring out his PokéNav and began searching through it tentatively. "Listen. I can't get your friends taken off the database. Only the guys in charge of editing it can do that. But I can prevent *you* from being listed on there."

"So you're going to let us go?" Rose asked.

"You've got a lot to do, and not much time left to do it in," Brendan smiled. "So you'd better get moving, right?"

Five minutes and a bottle of Capture Gel solvent later, Caley, Adam, Rose, James, Errol and Mondo had been released to the streets once more, with all their possessions in tact. Brendan had wished them the best of luck in their forthcoming mission, and promised he would do what he could to get Denise's father and his two accomplices cleared of their charges. Yet despite how late it was, none of the group felt safe enough to go back to their rooms at the Voyage Inn. As they wandered through Mayni City, Caley squirmed internally, sensing the bubbling ambience of wariness from his companions. He knew this feeling was over his unpredicted psychic responses during the night, and it disquieted him immensely. The fact his abilities had come into play without him intending them to caused Caley to fret even more. Wasn't he supposed to have better control of them by now?

"I'm sorry, guys..." he brokenly murmured at last. "For what happened with Brendan back there."

"Why are you sorry?" Mondo pulled a face at him. "Using your psychic powers on that bounty hunter gave us the edge."

"But I didn't use them intentionally!" Caley exclaimed. "I mean...I...I..." his sentence sputtered out into nothingness. "I saw how freaked out you all were. And I'm sorry for scaring you. I'll be honest, I'm scared too. I'm trying really hard to keep these powers to myself."

"We know," Rose insisted. "It was a tense situation, and emotions got the better of you. Emotions get a hold of all of us sometimes."

"The twerp is a walking example," James pointed out, motioning to Adam.

"Oh shove it in your dumpshaft," the youth muttered, but it was a half-hearted response, overshadowed by a sense of aversion.

"Just try not to fret about it, okay?" Rose tried to sound reassuring, following a disapproving glance at James and Adam.

"Worrying won't make it any better."

"I'll try..." Caley said quietly.

"What kind of pokémon did that 'Vilina' woman have, anyway?" James asked Rose. "It sure seemed to unsettle you."

"It looked like some kind of mutant tropius," Rose told him. "The shape of its body was horribly deformed, but other than that, it didn't look all that different from a normal tropius. Not different enough to be a pokémon hybrid, anyway."

and Evan were sent to the smaller en suite bedroom, while their parents entered a vivid discussion over the night's events.

As her brother played a handheld games console upon his bed, Denise stood by the window and stared out at the lit cityscape within her vision - a guilty expression upon her face. Maybe it had been the wrong thing to reveal herself to her family in Jackell Park that morning. Maybe she should have just walked by and pretended to be someone else. Denise shook her head; such an act would have been impossible for her to do. Whether she had revealed her identity or not, her mother and father would have remained aggrieved and frustrated. The actions that had brought them all to this point could not be unwritten. Even now, Denise couldn't help but wonder what her parents thought of her. A disappointment? A failure? At least Evan, in all his innocence, had been quick to forgive - even showing admiration for her brave attempts to rescue the pokémon Team Rocket had incarcerated.

"You're coming back to Johto with us, right?" Evan asked, glancing up from his games console for a moment to look back at Denise with round eyes. "You can see how much Harin's grown! She's like, a great big tyranitar now! And Kidner is a real awesome sandslash!"

Denise didn't reply. At this point, she had no idea *what* she was going to do. Separated from her companions, with no way of knowing where they were, whether they had been forced to leave her behind...the adolescent girl felt quite helpless, even surplus to requirements. She

lowered her head and placed a hand upon the window, feeling the chill of the glass upon her palm.

Denise...?

"Evan..." she began. "I really wished I had an answer to give you but-"

Denise!

She flinched. The voice she'd initially mistaken to be her brother's was insistent on making its presence felt, and its far louder intrusion upon Denise's thoughts had caught her off-balance.

"...Caley?" she murmured in astonishment, staring out into mid air.

"But Caley'?" Evan repeated confusedly. "That doesn't make any sense, sis."

"Sorry Evan," Denise said, trying to reorientate herself. "Just hold on a sec, okay? I need to work something out." The voice had to have been telepathy. Caley's telepathy. Which meant her companions were nearby!

Caley! she exclaimed, remembering to resort to thoughts this time in order to make herself more psychically audible. *How did you find me?*

Quick thinking and fast feet, Caley joked lightly. *We were going to leave in the morning, but ran into complications...*

What do you mean, 'complications'? Denise frowned at nothing in particular.

A bounty hunter working for the Police took us into custody, Caley explained. But he didn't realise the Officer Jenny he was working with was a Team Rocket member in disguise. She was the one who had your dad and those attorneys arrested too, to get them out of the way. As for us...we were almost shipped back to Team Rocket's new HQ.

That wouldn't have turned out well... Denise bit her lip. *But how did you escape?*

Crazy thing, really, Caley trailed off. The bounty hunter was able to drive the Team Rocket member away. Still... the pokémon she had with her was something else. We'll have to fill you in on the details later.

Okay, Denise replied. Several things in Caley's statement weren't adding up, but she was prepared to be patient. Where are you, anyway?

In the hotel lobby, Caley said. Kota was only able to guide us so far. What room are you in?

201, Denise told him. It's on the 4th floor. But I'm still not sure how I'm going to get out of this-

The door to the en suite bedroom opened, causing Denise to stand bolt upright from the semi-hunched position she had assumed out of pure focus. Gabe stood in the doorway, wearing a stern expression.

"Your mother told me what you discussed with her," he began. "It sounds like you're involved in some pretty deep things, Denise."

"I'm afraid I am," Denise sighed. "I...I'm so sorry to have caused you all such pain and heartbreak, dad. If I could take that away, I would. But those things are the reason I can't stay with you. Not yet. My friends and I need to get to the bottom of what Team Rocket is doing before any of us can even attempt to redeem ourselves."

"But...but..." Evan looked upset.

"Let your sister finish, Evan," Gabe corrected him, before returning his studied gaze towards Denise. "As uncertain as I am about you taking these matters into your own hands, it may be for the best. You've had experience of what it's like to work under Team Rocket, after all. You know their tricks of the trade, as it were. And you're an intelligent young lady, I know you'll look after yourself."

"Thanks, dad," Denise smiled at the compliment and vote of confidence. "I won't be alone on this. None of my friends are, so long as we rely on each other."

With that, Gabe proceeded to explain to Evan the reasons behind his sister's decision, as Denise exited the en suite bedroom and put her wig and false eyebrows back on in preparation to leave once again. Joanne responded to the light tapping at the hotel room door, to discover Caley, Adam, Rose, James, Errol and Mondo standing outside with mixed

expressions of optimism. Fortunately Joanne was far too surprised with their visit, and Gabe too occupied with other matters for either of them to question how Caley and the others had managed to locate the hotel they were staying at in the first place.

"Your court case will be put on hold for now," Gabe told Denise, while Evan peered grumpily from a gap between the en suite bedroom door and its frame. "When you have done what needs to be done, we shall resume matters here. Still...is there some way I could help you before returning to Johto?"

"We could *really* do with some funds," Denise said hopefully. No sooner had she mentioned money, than Gabe reached into his wallet, pulled out a wad of green notes and pressed them firmly into his daughter's hand. She stared at them with alarm, as there were equally amazed murmurs from the others in the group.

"It's all yours," Gabe said.

"But...but..." Denise stammered. "There must be at least five hundred Delcas here, I-!"

"No amount of money is too great to keep my Chikorita in good health," Gabe told her. "Just promise you'll come back home at some point and repair the lawnmower? It's never been quite the same since you made those 'upgrades'."

"Okay, dad," Denise chuckled awkwardly. At this point, Joanne stepped forward, and placed her hands upon the adolescent girl's shoulders with a sad and gentle gaze.

"You really have changed," she admitted. "So bold, so accustomed to the world, I..." the woman's eyes grew slightly watery at this point, as Denise looked on in partial confusion and shame. The statement was neither bitter nor disdainful, but that of an anxious mother, concerned as to how exposure to some of the world's more unsettling facets might have altered her daughter. To Denise, it felt more like a sign that a greater rift of misunderstanding had formed between them. At least until an unexpected voice was heard.

"If it's any consolation..." Rose began. "Team Rocket never managed to corrupt Denise. She has an unquenchable spirit of righteousness, and some impressive technical skills to match. I...honestly couldn't imagine our team without her."

As Denise turned to Rose with wide-eyed astonishment, the woman looked back at her with a supportive nod. Both Joanne and Gabe examined the figures standing behind their daughter, and warm smiles dawned upon their faces. Gabe could recall just how challenging Denise had found it to make any friends while growing up. All the resident children on the Johtoan estate were snooty and aloof - in constant competition with one another as to whom had the best new clothes or toys. Denise had longed for more down to earth companions, those with an interest in the fundamental matters of life. And it looked as if she had

managed to find what she had wanted all these years. They were a haphazard-looking group, and certainly not the kind of people that Joanne would have chosen her daughter to associate with. But there was a vibrant joy and deepness in their eyes, a real love of life. Despite the suffering they had been put through as a result of Denise's absence and lack of contact, seeing her with proper friends seemed to make it all worthwhile.

With a final exchange of encouraging words, Denise hugged her mother close, as her eyes brimmed with tears. Gabe moved in and put his arms around Denise also, prompting Evan to drop his sulking, dash across the room and clasp tightly at his sister's waist. This poignant sight caused several members of the group to look quite sad. For James and Errol, it was a reminder of their own deep friendship with Jessie who currently refused to let go of her past life, for reasons they didn't understand. For Caley, it was a reminder of his mother and sister, and the unsettling legacy his father had left behind. And for Adam, a parent lost, and another he'd never really had.

"Goodbye honey," Joanne insisted brightly from the open door to their hotel room, as Denise walked away and rejoined the others in the hallway. "Quarterseek Mansion's doors will always be open to you and your friends!"

"Thanks, mom," Denise smiled. "Hope I'll see you soon!"

"Quarterseek Mansion...wasn't that the place on the south Johto coast?" James pondered, descending the staircase. "Sculpted gardens, lots of windows, a quick walk to the beach..."

"How did you know?" Denise looked astonished.

"Your father hired us to clean up while you lot were on vacation," James grinned. "Now that was a job and a half!"

"An' who could forget dat 'mowa?" Errol pulled a face, causing Denise to chuckle all over again.

"I'm sorry if it caused you any trouble," she grinned sheepishly. "I tried to make it more self-sufficient one day, and it kind of took on a life of its own."

"It's good to have you back, Neesee," Caley told her emphatically.

"Thanks," Denise smirked, playfully prodding Caley in the arm. "But you still owe me an explanation for what happened tonight, mister."

"I know, I know..." Caley gave a sheepish grin. "In the morning, okay? Let's get out of this city first."

"And *then* where do we go?" Adam asked, as the travellers reached the ground floor of the hotel and proceeded towards the exit.

"Finding that out was Mondo's gig," Errol shrugged, causing the aforementioned to pass a somewhat testy glance in his direction.

"'Tate'," he reminded, before fumbling in his pocket. "I'd completely forgot about the signal detector." Mondo brought out the

device and glanced at its display, his eyes widening shortly after. "Well well..."

"What?" James blinked, opening the lobby doors to allow his companions outside.

"Turns out it picked up the communication frequency that Elite operative used to hail collectors," Mondo explained, starting to grin triumphantly. "The signal's destination was a point in south-east Tatto - it could be the location of the new HQ!"

"Then let's assume it is," Caley said conclusively. The sound of a passing aircraft caused the entire group to freeze in their tracks and stare apprehensively at the clouded sky. As the sound faded, Caley returned to travelling in hasty strides, with his companions in close pursuit. "We need to get out of the city before those collectors get to us, and find somewhere safer to rest. We'll continue travelling in the morning."

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

No sooner was he discharged, than Morterey had retired to his temporary accommodation with Nesyi. It was a compact but functional area, with separate rooms for added privacy, and was set away from the hubbub of the main streets. Morterey tried not to get overly involved with the lives of his clients, in case it altered his effectiveness as an attorney.

And usually he found sudden and rapid alterations in business to be quite frustrating - yet he welcomed this new turn of events.

"Looks like we'll be changing our approach, Nesyi," Morterey remarked casually, putting his briefcase down upon the desk.

"How can this be?" Nesyi inquired.

"Th' fact Team Rocket has been interfering with th' legal system throws a lot of matters into question," Morterey explained. "Including th' assumed criminal status of Mr. Nichols' daughter and her accomplices. Ah intend t' demand an investigation into how this infiltration occurred before any further thought is given t' putting those people on trial."

There was a pause.

"You seem relieved about that," Nesyi assessed. Morterey chuckled faintly.

"Yes," he said. "Yes I am."

Having his old school friend James inaccurately labelled a criminal instead of *being* a criminal lent a bit more reassurance, because at least there was still a chance that such accusations were wrong. And if they weren't wrong...Morterey decided that this was a train of thought he would address later, should it come to that. He knew people made mistakes in life - James himself had reminded him of that once, back in Pokémon Technical. Morterey silently trusted that James was doing the right thing now, wherever he was.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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