

POKÉMON
REBIRTH

ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE TWENTY TWO

Synchronoise

Kazira led her three charges into the depths of the Agrarian Seer repository with swift strides. The entrance had progressed into a wide corridor with ridged pillars bolstering its walls. Overhead, shafts of light penetrated windows in the domed ceiling, forming luminescent pools across the uniformly-tiled floor. In contrast to the appearance of its outside, the inner passages of the repository bore resemblance to the opulent architecture of a century ago - decked in varying shades of reds and browns which only served to enhance this sense of majesty. Yet nothing about it felt overwhelming, as if Caley should not have entered in the first place. Instead, there was a curious vibrancy in the air that the young man couldn't quite describe. Rose was correct - the atmosphere really *did* feel empowering.

After two minutes of walking, Kazira stopped at the mouth of a particularly long hallway, turning to one side in order to redirect the attention of her audience. Caley scanned the wall he was facing, and his eyes grew wide. From one end of the hallway to the other, the entire surface was covered with murals painted in thick, dark outline, and embellished in a complete spectrum of colours. The murals were separated into panels by wooden beading, generating a narrative feel. Studying the first panel, Caley found himself gazing upon a countryside scene, overlooked by an ethereal sky. Below, stylised figures of humans and pokémon were depicted in carefree interaction with one another. A single line of text had been painted underneath this panel.

*At the breaking of the dawn, The Source devised the Opus' form.
Also the Conduit, through which the world emerged. ~ Oo'rekimei 1:1:1*

"The pokémon and humans in those paintings," Caley murmured.
"They look so...happy together."

"This mural acts as a reminder of what we Ocians had," Kazira explained solemnly. "And what we have yet to overcome. It is an account of our world's history, the cause of our suffering today. You see, once there was a time where pokémon and humans lived in harmony. They worked, played and sparred as equals."

"So what happened to change all that?" Caley asked, looking bereft.

"A single betrayal of trust," Kazira intoned ominously. "Not between human and pokémon, however. No...something far more devastating. It was between a human and their creator."

Trust. Now there was a word that stung in Caley's consciousness. Still, Kazira had brought up another topic he longed to understand in greater depth.

"Who *is* the creator?" he asked. Kazira turned and looked at him with a pleased smile, before waving an arm towards a panel in the centre of the mural. Here, a pyramid-like formation had been painted. At the base of the pyramid were the likenesses of various legendary pokémon

Caley was familiar with – Lugia, Articuno, Moltres and Zapdos. The layer above depicted the tiny form of Mew, flanked either side by a Celebi and a Diguard - the dimensional-travelling pokémon species Rose had told him about. The layer over that showed a spindly-winged white humanoid being Caley was unable to identify. And at the very peak, the artist had painted a meticulous circular arrangement of uniform shapes not unlike that of a stained glass window.

"Its name is Tajigyama," Kazira explained, gesturing to the mesmerizing pattern at the top of the pyramid. "The Original One. The Source. The progenitor of Oci. It formed Mew, the Opus and Arceus, the Conduit, and commissioned them to shape the world of Oci and all life that exists here. But this activity was not without its price."

Caley felt moved to glance back at another panel in the mural. Here, many small creatures had been depicted. These creatures bore startling resemblance to pokémon Caley had encountered or read of in the past, but their physical appearances and colours didn't match his mental images, nor the illustrations in his history books.

"The first inhabitants of Oci were Animalia," Kazira pointed out. "Then a small number of humans were brought into existence here. Yet, a week following the humans' creation, there was a terrible storm that covered the united landmass of Ransei. Oci's Aura raged uncontrollably, and meteorites pelted the surface of the planet for days. When this storm finally cleared, the very first Magilia - the 'magical creatures' we have

come to know as pokémon - began to walk freely about Oci. Something terrible also appeared."

A violent swirl of dark grey and dirty white occupied the panel that followed the one depicting Animalia. Painted atop this turmoil was another humanoid figure, similar to the one shown within the pyramid diagram. The horns atop its head were more pronounced, its flowing mane was ragged and the wing-like struts from its back were disjointed and fractured. From the face, two fearsome orange X-shaped pupils stared down at Caley from amongst red scleras, filling him with a cold dread.

"Much of the pain and horror caused throughout our history has been devised by this one being," Kazira sighed. "Mendarus, the Flood. It has possessed a hatred for all that Tajigyama has created since its arrival. After disguising itself with an equine form, Mendarus began to cultivate jealousy over the elemental abilities of pokémon in one of our human ancestors."

The next panel featured a majestic creature with blue and red dappled fur and long, multi-stemmed horns not unlike that of a stantler. Before it stood a single human, dwarfed by the other creature's imposing size. In the background there was painted a large tree-shaped rock formation.

"It was that jealousy which drove the very same human to step into the heart of the Tree of Beginning," Kazira explained. "A location he

had been forbidden to enter. The resulting disobedience brought tragedy upon us all. You see, the Tree of Beginning is primarily responsible for controlling the energy levels that keep our world in balance. When that ancestor entered the central core of the tree, he caused an energy flux so great that it tore a hole in the fabric of space. Mew was forced to use herself to seal the rift. Her quick thinking prevented our world from ceasing to exist entirely, but it also trapped her here - permanently bonded to the Tree of Beginning."

"That's awful..." Caley remarked brokenly. "Why would Tajigyama create a being whose only intention was to destroy everything else?"

"It was never the creator's intention that Mendarus would behave this way," Kazira explained. "Mendarus was corrupted by other means, by consequences even we do not know of. And its first action caused irreversible damage to the link between Oci and where Tajigyama resides, making communication with it near impossible."

"And that's why Tajigyama couldn't intervene..." Caley trailed off. But surely a being capable of creating worlds could do anything, couldn't it? He longed to ask about this also, but feared it might be too brazen of him. Instead, he turned his mind to the words read to him by Azima, a few days before. "'Let inner forces heal what was once lost'~"

"What did you say?" Kazira glanced up, slightly worriedly.

"A Generation Rite would never work if we couldn't contact the being responsible for creating new pokémon, would it?" Caley spoke up.

"H-how do you know about the Sabai Prophecy?" Kazira insisted.

"How do you know about Generation Rites?"

Caley scratched his head.

"Well I guess *I* have some explaining to do," he admitted.

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Partway through the navigation of the repository, Mondo had decided to take a different route to that of his companions. It wasn't out of rebelliousness or opposition, rather he needed to spend some time alone, and this felt as good a place as any to do it. There seemed to be no one else around except Kazira, and the woman was very much occupied in helping Caley get the information he so badly needed. And Mondo wished him the best - he knew how much an unanswered question could gnaw away at the insides of one's mind.

Once again, Mondo retrieved the folded piece of paper from his jacket, opened it up and gazed at the contents with sad eyes, longing to pry open the mysteries of that blurred photograph.

"Atlantic..." he murmured.

The faint, yet distinct sound of metallic rapping thrust Mondo out of his wistful contemplation. Raising his eyebrows, the young man increased his rate of walk and headed for the source of the noise. His deft

navigation led him to a solid-looking doorway which was partly ajar. While courtesy demanded that it was impolite to invite oneself into a room, curiosity was playing a stronger card and tempted Mondo nearer. Someone was building something, and construction projects filled him with great excitement.

Carefully pushing the door open the rest of the way, Mondo discovered himself gazing up at what appeared to be a half-constructed suit of armour, at least ten foot in height. Bar the thick, gold ankle and wrist bracers, the entire piece was fashioned in pale blue, with darker shades on the face, chest and shoulder panels. Curious inscriptions had been meticulously carved upon the hands and tops of the arms. A man of Mondo's age was standing in front of the construct, attending to its internal components through the open chest panel. His teal coloured hair was ruffled and unkempt, as if hassled by the wind, and he wore a beige coloured t-shirt with red trim around the neck and sleeves. A celeva wearing a pale scarf and tiara hovered apprehensively behind the man's left shoulder, assessing the work in progress. It swung round in alarm and a hurried fluttering of wings, its wide, blue eyes scanning Mondo fervently up and down. Glancing over his shoulder, the young man raised his eyebrows.

"Oh hello," he said. "I didn't hear you come in. You seem lost." His tone was more formal and less eloquent than the others that Mondo had encountered previously, which instilled a sense of calm into him somewhat.

"I guess you could say that," Mondo remarked distantly. "Well, not in this place, quite as much. I came here with a friend who was looking for answers." He paused. "You people seem to know many things."

"Heh, yeah..." the figure smiled. "The Agrarian Seers have been entrusted with a lot of knowledge." He offered a hand with a warm smile. "The name's Ridley. This is my companion, Lottie."

"Se-reh~" the pokémon bowed its head shyly.

"I'm Tate," Mondo took Ridley's hand and shook it once, before releasing his grip and motioning to the apparent armour. "What are you working on there?"

"This? It's a flight suit," Ridley replied. "I've loved the idea of flying, ever since I was a kid. And this will give me the ability to do that without the help of a pokémon, and with far more manoeuvrability than a plane." The figure paused, eyeing the piece of paper in Mondo's hand. "Where did you get that article?"

Mondo's first response was to sharply withdraw the paper and clutch it to his chest protectively, almost fearfully. Ridley continued to wait patiently, his expression reflecting neither scorn nor amusement.

"From a book in Scale Falls' Library," Mondo replied, loosening his stance again. "I feel like it has something to do with me."

"Hm? Why?"

"I think I was there when this plane crashed," Mondo murmured, pointing to the article photograph. "This word, 'Atlantic', it has been in my nightmares for as long as I can remember."

"May I look at that?" the young man inquired. Mondo hesitated, then passed him the paper, which he studied intently while the tiny light green pokémon hovered nearby, its curved antennae twitching. "1982, huh?" Ridley glanced back at Mondo, still wearing the same concentrated expression. "What *is* your earliest childhood memory?"

Mondo took a deep breath, trying to override intense feelings of sadness from the images in his mind that followed.

"Gloria," he said. "She was the one who cared for me."

"Cared for you?" his listener blinked. "What happened to your parents?"

"I-I don't know," Mondo stammered. "Gloria never told me where I'd come from, now I think about it. And I'd been happy with that. She was my sister, my mother, and that was fine with me. All was right with my world. It's only since Gloria disappeared, that illusion of mine was broken. Since then, I've been determined to find out who I am."

Lottie uttered an insistent squeak and fluttered around Ridley's head. The expression upon the man's face shifted from surprise, to deepest empathy.

"Look, Tate," Ridley began. "I heard about The Mirage Flight during my time studying at Kemnon Tower. I don't know the whole story,

but I can tell you one thing. The Mirage Flight was real, but the world couldn't know of it. And the Agrarian Seers and Pokémon Guardsmen did everything they could to make sure the world *didn't* know of it. But..." he chuckled faintly. "As the paper in your hand clearly shows, it's very hard to cover up something that big."

"But why?" Mondo blinked. "Why were the Guardsmen so desperate to hide this?"

"Because..." Ridley told him. "That airplane came from a place that most of Oci do not realise exists."

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Kazira spent the next ten minutes listening thoughtfully to what Caley had to say. Despite the number of untrustworthy figures he had encountered on his travels thus far, Caley had felt nothing untoward from the aged seer and, as a result, the details of his experiences gushed forth from him with intricate detail. The young man spoke of his encounter with Minachi, the activation of his psychic abilities, and the individual guidance that Azima and Sabrina had offered him. By the time Caley had finished his explanation, Kazira's face was a picture of utmost seriousness. Caley glanced up at her pleadingly, urging the woman to give him deeper understanding.

"That flux did more than cause damage to the link between our dimension and the one where Tajigyama exists," Kazira began. "The man who entered the heart of the Tree of Beginning was overwhelmed with power, and swiftly destroyed, but many of the other humans nearby were altered by the energy, giving them newfound abilities."

"So Cho'moken is much older than I thought..." Caley murmured, wide-eyed.

"It has followed us from the very beginning," Kazira nodded. "Some have seen Cho'moken as a curse. But it has helped us to better our world in some ways, too. The Agrarian Seers were formed out of a desire to redeem humanity for the disobedience of one man. And the Generation Rite would be impossible without the existence of Cho'moken."

"How does it work?" Rose asked. "How does Cho'moken make it possible to speak to Tajigyama?"

"It is not truly known," Kazira replied. "Some elders believe that the combined energies of the Nexi act as a beacon of sorts. But needless to say, Generation Rites are very rare occurrences. Only four have occurred during the entirety of Oci's history, two of those following periods of great unrest."

"What sort of 'great unrest'?" Caley inquired.

"Have you ever studied about 'The Rebellion' acts?" Kazira asked him.

"I do remember reading of them in history class," Caley nodded. "Two periods of time full of warring and prejudice. Pokémon rose up against humankind, then humans took their revenge on pokémon, and those who sought to protect them. That was when the Pokémopolis dynasty was formed, right?"

"That is correct," Kazira remarked sadly. "Some Agrarian Seers abused their positions during that time, resulting in grief for the whole organization. The Seer Elders of the day were forced to go into hiding, leaving those who studied under them to resume anonymity. That was when The Divergence occurred."

Rose and Caley shifted uncomfortably. Both of them knew all too well what The Divergence was. There were very few people alive who didn't. One of the most pertinent events etched down in history for all the wrong reasons, The Divergence was the result of Groudou and Kyogre - two pokémon formed by Pokémopolitan biologists which were too powerful for them to control. Their resulting clashes had physically split Ransei into the smaller regions that existed today, but not without dealing terrible losses to human, pokémon and animal kind. It unsettled Caley greatly just how much the actions of Pokémopolis paralleled those of Team Rocket. Both were world-encompassing, subject to one man, prying open the very miracles of life itself to devastating consequences. If Team Rocket's plans were to succeed, the results would be catastrophic.

"Mendarus roamed Oci for some time after the event which caused Cho'moken to exist," Kazira spoke up. "Its hatred for Tajigyama's creations burned strongly, and it was quick to exploit anyone who would listen to its devious tongue. That is how both Rebellion acts occurred in the first place. Mendarus brainwashed Arceus into thinking it was the most powerful being to exist. Mendarus later took over the body of a wealthy royal and used him to bring the Pokémopolis dynasty into power. But it was there, Mendarus' chaotic reign was halted."

Kazira guided the eyes of her audience towards the next panel of the mural. Two men stood facing one another, one of them wrenched backwards, seemingly in pain. The other had one arm outstretched, a spherical device bearing close resemblance to a Pokéball gripped tightly in his hand. Overhead, a swirling mass of blue and purple cloud loomed - tendrils snaking towards the Pokéball-like article.

"A Johtoan seer named Tahl Ves confronted Emperor Sai and forced Mendarus from him, capturing a large part of the being's essence in the process," Kazira explained. "The conscious part of Mendarus was forced to flee - its whereabouts are unknown."

"Unknown?" Rose said, her voice uncharacteristically anxious for a moment.

"It is unlikely it survived what happened, considering how much of its life force was taken," Kazira admitted. "But even so, nothing was able to undo the effects of Mendarus' wrath, and human malcontent. When the

Seer Elders were finally able to resume their duties, the world had grown confused and distrustful. Many had forgotten Tajigyama or his earthly attendants existed, and others had directed their attentions toward pokémon, cultivating unhealthy obsessions over their abilities."

"That explains so much..." Caley trailed off. Faith and trust were such fragile things, but they were so important. Without them, achieving anything was impossible. After all, without trust there was no hope, no confiding, no companionship.

The very last panel of the mural contained words that Caley finally recognized.

*In the fourteenth phase, the veins of the earth will burn hot with
restlessness*

And a tainted virtue shall rise to cultivate false trust

Devouring its own children, bleeding empty wraiths

Desecrating that once thought most holy

Yet its power will cease at the point of a deadly strike

When Masters of the seven continents unite

Let their inner forces heal what was once lost

As Ahnloka Pentus opens the door to salvation

"The Seer Elders feared something was approaching. The Guardian Pokémons have been restless, as were the Aura channels running through

Oci itself," Kazira stated, turning from the mural to give Caley a studied look. "Team Rocket's activities have also become more fervent. All these things reflect the Sabai Prophecy. And here you are. The fifth Ahnloka."

It wasn't a question. Caley felt a tiny shudder run through him - everyone seemed that much more certain of his apparent destiny than he was. Denise's words came back to him - since when had Team Rocket ever been a virtue? Was this really the right time and place to be asking such things? He decided it wasn't, and stayed silent. Other, stronger matters happened to perplex him. But that was what he was being asked for now, wasn't it? To trust.

"You should head towards Kemnon Tower," Kazira said. "It is the largest Seer repository in this region, built upon the place where the fourth Ahnloka made contact with Tajigyama, some 1900 years ago."

Just then, it struck Caley that he had borne a longing to visit Kemnon Tower for several years, even more so recently. Had this unseen destiny had something to do with his desire? A faint chuckle barely escaped his lips.

"You seem unconvinced," Kazira said. "Why is that?"

"How can you be sure the Ahnloka is meant to be *me*?" Caley insisted. "And not someone else with the same abilities."

"Anyone can pick up a sword, Caley," Kazira smiled. "But it takes a unique individual to wield it dexterously. You have great power, I can sense that. And yet you are still modest, still open-minded, still caring. I

have reason to be confident in you. Besides, never feel you are in this alone. The Seers are vigilant, the Nexi will join you, and your bonds of companionship make you that much stronger."

As the time with Kazira drew to a conclusion, Mondo rejoined Caley and Rose with little ceremony. Not even Kazira seemed perturbed as to the young man's absence - she knew the repository was small and relatively safe to visitors, and her apprentice Ridley was present, albeit ensconced in his own technical affairs. After the trio bid farewell, they began to make their way back through the forest towards Coalef Showground, all the while contemplating the information they had each absorbed.

"If Team Rocket is really going to be responsible for the 'deadly strike' mentioned in the prophecy, then seeking out their new headquarters is still in our best interests," Rose pointed out, after a few minutes of walking.

"That is true," Caley gave a thoughtful nod.

"Do you feel more assured now?" Rose asked Caley. "Do these things seem more real to you?"

"Yes, and no," Caley replied. "Being in that building, I could feel a living energy, and all the things Kazira showed me made sense. Yet what *doesn't* make sense is how being in there restored my faith in our creator, but very little in myself."

"Modesty is a great asset, but you cannot let it descend into self-doubt," Rose insisted.

"I know..." Caley's voice cracked. "But something's been on my mind. Something I couldn't bring myself to talk about before. You know what happened to my dad?"

Rose nodded.

"Two days ago, my mum told me exactly what it was he had died from. And it was caused by the same psychic abilities I have now." He looked up, his eyes wide and fearful. "I'm in too deep, Rose. I don't think I can do what is expected of me. I don't want to be consumed by this power..."

Rose looked sad and worried at Caley. Then her expression became more serious.

"You won't be," she said. "We won't let that happen to you, Caley. Okay?"

"Okay," Caley responded after a long pause. He then turned his attention to Mondo, who had been uncharacteristically silent. "What happened to you, Tate? You just wandered off."

"I needed to think some things over," Mondo replied. "I'm sorry if I don't seem in a very good mood - I'm still trying to get to grips with something I found out. To do with this." He raised the crumpled photocopy for Caley and Rose to look at.

"What about it?" Rose asked.

"I was talking to a guy called Ridley, another Seer in the repository," Mondo said. "Turns out this article documented an event that actually happened. Neither the Seers nor the Guardsmen wanted news of the crash to spread, because the plane had apparently come from a place most people don't know exists. But what kind of place that was...I don't know. That's all Ridley could tell me. He said that the Guardsmen would no doubt have records of who was on that flight, and where it had arrived from." The young man grimaced and tightened his grip around the paper in his hand. "I feel like I'm so close, yet so far away!"

"That's frustrating..." Caley looked unhappy. "If it wasn't so risky using the phone or internet, I would try and get in contact with Ana for you. She works for the Pokémon Guardsmen."

"Thanks, Caley," Mondo smiled faintly. "It's alright. I've waited this long to understand myself better, waiting a little longer won't kill me."

Maybe not, Caley thought. But he knew how much torment it could be to harbour an unanswered question, especially one with such huge implications. Without saying another word, he silently resolved to find a way to obtain the information Mondo so badly wanted.

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The logical part of Denise's brain insisted that this couldn't possibly work. Yet another part was scolding her for having been coerced into spending some of the money her father had given her on non-essential items. But Adam's face was alight with an enthusiasm she'd not witnessed on him since they had met. This race had meant a lot to him, and Denise couldn't bring herself to spoil that. Under Errol's direction, hair gel, various cosmetic powders and a touch of static on the mane and tail were applied to Cyzel in order to give him a more arcanine-like appearance. James had refused to take part in such matters, and instead dictated to the others his intention to find them all decent seats in the spectators building, before disappearing without ceremony.

"Dere y' go!" Errol announced, retracting his hands from Cyzel's fur. "A darn good job, if I don't mind saying so meself."

"I'm not sure about this..." the adolescent girl remarked uncomfortably, as Adam stood back to admire the handiwork. "I mean, Cyzel? Couldn't you use a different pokémon?"

"From *where*?" Adam frowned. "Cyzel's the only pokémon I have! Besides, he's the best runner there is."

"But he's the wrong colour for an arcanine..." Denise insisted. "And what if the race officials try scanning him? If they discover he's a genetic hybrid, we'll be-"

"Let da kid have his fun, Denise," Errol said. "At least *one* of us will get ta race." He leaned towards Adam and lowered his voice. "If anyone questions da colour, say it's a rare breed."

Adam smirked and nodded.

It took several minutes for those who had registered to assemble themselves upon the Compendium Rally track. From the gallery, the spectators watched a massive display screen broadcasting a panning view of the entrants being led onto the starting line by race officiators. Amongst them, Adam could be seen waiting in a blue kart with Cyzel locked into the front harness. To say he looked eager to begin would have been an understatement. The excited expression upon the youth's face was amusingly uncharacteristic, his hands tightly grasping the steering wheel like it was a matter of life and death. As Denise continued observing, Adam turned from his forward facing position and waved eagerly in the direction of the spectator building, causing her to giggle.

"Welcome back, Pokémon Fans!" a cheerful voice echoed from the speakers above the display screen, causing James and Denise to crane their necks in an attempt to hear the commentator's speech over the elevated conversation of the people around them. "You are now joining us for the third heat of the Coalef Compendium Rally, where the temperature is really starting to soar! Here we find ourselves gazing across the largest and most devious rally track in Tatto. With eight major

obstacles, twists and turns all over, it's going to take some real trainer skill and pokémon control to clinch a place in the top three."

"Tch," James looked unhappy as he glanced over his shoulder.

"Where did Errol and Cory get to? It doesn't take *that* long to get snacks."

"With how crowded it's been around here, it could take ages,"

Denise replied. "He really should've done that beforehand..."

"The rules of the game are simple, folks," the commentator continued. "Stick to the racetrack at all times. No taking shortcuts. No use of telekinesis or teleportation moves. No speed-enhancing moves. No use of moves that alter the composition of the race track - I'm looking at you, ground-manipulators! Any entrants not abiding to these rules will be disqualified. However, using your pokémon to deter other drivers without serious injury is permitted."

A complex diagram of the racetrack flickered onto the screen.

"The racers shall start off from the point nearest the spectators building and travel over 'Drapion Runway', a stretch of road with plenty of lumps n' bumps. Turning a sharp bend, they'll head into 'Cherrim Straits', a tunnel with two narrow passages separated by a wall - many a distracted driver has finished the competition early around this area. After another corner, the racers shall circle 'Poliwag Lake' - watch out for spray - and ascend 'Mt. Spinda'...those turns are gonna make you dizzy! The track then takes a very steep descent into 'Dude Valley' - the obstacles here have minds of their own.

Another turn and into the last part of the race. The track can get real complex here, with the sudden blind twists and turns between the massive 'Twin 'Passes', those stones render driver foresight impossible. Across the boardwalk over 'Mudkip Marsh' and into the tube system, before the final stretch and the chequered flag waving you in to victory!"

"There's no way that kid will make it through all that in one piece," James sniffed in disbelief.

"You could have a point," Denise bit her lip. "Its not like Adam's ever driven before..."

Down on the track, Adam exchanged determined glances with Cyzel before taking a look around him. There certainly was an interesting variety of entrants; amongst the vehicles he spotted a girafarig, a floatzel, a linoone, a rapidash and a granbull. A few places in front, Neil was delivering a caustic 'pep talk' to the pokémon he was racing with - a jolteon which looked like it had been fed its fair share of Protein capsules. The state of the competition didn't perplex Adam, though. The matter of greatest concern to him at that time was his helmet which he longed to adjust, as it was rather tight.

It was at this moment that a loud bell rang, and the figures swung round with regimental unity to gaze before them, awaiting the signal to begin. Adam lowered his visor and a smirk made itself present upon his face. Ahead of the contestants, the huge signal lights illuminated with a

daunting red glow. The red shifted to orange, then green, as a claxon sounded.

"Hit the gas, Cyzel!" Adam ordered, lifting the reins. The arcumese cried out with enthusiasm and, much to the youth's astonishment, advanced with rocket-like speed, causing a large cloud of debris to spray across the track behind. With a yelp of alarm, Adam was pinned to the back of his seat as his kart propelled past the other competitors who had barely been given the chance to make their move.

"After him!" Neil yelled at his jolteon, which promptly gave chase.

"What an incredible start!" came the over-enthusiastic commentary. "Nathan Chenlor has literally left the other racers in the dust as he heads straight for Drapion Runway! Neil Tilman is currently occupying second place with Diane Sanders fiercely close behind. Fourth position has been claimed by Richard Lero while Cobi Graham carefully maintains his spot at fifth."

It was clear to see what the commentator meant when he referred to the position Cobi was in. With the amount of water spraying from Richard's floatzel's mouth as a means to propel its trainer's kart forward, it was almost impossible for anyone behind his kart to see anything. The drivers behind swerved from left to right as they attempted to prevent the larger liquid emissions from smothering their tyres.

"Patchell!" Cobi yelled to his girafarig above the noise of the rushing water ahead. "Reflect!" The girafarig grunted in acknowledgement and a semi-transparent shield materialised before it.

"Now there's a spot of clever thinking on Cobi's part," Todd grinned, gazing out of the window of the commentary tower. "He's instructed his girafarig to create a makeshift windshield using its Reflect move. The water won't be bothering him now! Though I can't say the same for the poor racers behind..."

A female driver spluttered as the barrier averted part of the spray across her face and body. Her granbull gave a bark of alarm, its paws skittering across the wet surface of the road as it struggled to keep its balance.

"Focus, Raven!" the girl exclaimed in a semi-panic, her hands clasping the reins. "Grip the track!" The granbull unsheathed its claws and continued to run with ever-increasing bounds, its new spiked tools burying into the road surface like the bottom of a mountain climber's footwear.

"Things ain't looking good out there for Carter Black, folks," the commentator remarked. "His rapidash is taking a pounding from that watery deluge. If it manages to hold out, it might be able to recoup some ground on Drapion Runway."

"Slow it down a little, will ya?" Adam shouted above the relentless air currents. He'd known the arcumese had been built for speed, but he'd never expected just how much. "The road's about to get lumpy!"

His warning came too late. Cyzel yelped, narrowly missing one of the sizeable curves jutting from the track, and Adam struggled for control as one of the kart's front wheels clipped the edge of the same obstacle.

"Nathan seems to be in a spot of trouble after misjudging one of the runway's humps," the commentator exclaimed. "Looks like Neil's about to take advantage. I can't bear to watch!"

"Jolteon! Thunderbolt!"

Using another hump as a makeshift ramp, Neil thrust his kart fearlessly into the air. As he did so, his jolteon opened its mouth and, with a threatening cry, projected a beam of electricity directly behind it. Panic flooded into Adam's psyche as the thunderbolt made contact with the track, sending a thick cloud of dust into the air.

"Veteran Neil's up to his old strategy again!" the commentator blurted out. "Giving the newcomers a run for their money with delay tactics. It's only a matter of time before we discover whose wit is quick enough to evade this new danger. In the meantime, Neil and his jolteon have taken the lead and are heading directly for Cherrim Straits!"

Cyzel and Adam plunged blindly into the dustcloud, bouncing over the peak of another hump in the process. As the kart resumed contact with the track, Adam tried to regain his composure and work out what obstacle he was heading for next. A large tunnel emerged from the haziness - its two internal passages waiting like open mouths. Which was the better one to take? Adam had no idea from an outside glance, so he decided to go with the choice he typically made in these situations.

"Take the left one, Cyzel!" he instructed. The arcumese edged to one side of the track, drawing the kart with its human rider into the dimly-lit passage. The sounds of the other competitors had since dwindled - leaving only the rumbling of wheels and thudding of paws to echo about the tunnel. "Now where's that other guy got to?"

Cyzel's ears pricked up as he detected another set of feet pattering over the track inside the tunnel - only on the other side of the wall. He barked and nodded in the relevant direction.

"Huh?" Adam blinked. "You hear something?" It was difficult for him to hear much at all with the helmet covering his ears. However, a loud yell was strong enough to get through. Not only did it sound very familiar, it was far too enthusiastic to be the man who'd smothered everyone in a cloud of dust just moments earlier.

"Errol?!" Adam blurted out before he even realised what he said. His guess was clarified as a weavile with a familiar pink gem on its belly dashed past a gap in the tunnel wall, shortly followed by a battered-

looking kart containing a deceptively-aged figure with sandy blonde hair and an olive green jacket. Adam's surprise gave way to a frown, and he adjusted his hands upon the steering wheel. "Let's head through the gap, Cyzel!" he said.

The response from the arcumese was spot on, though Adam's reaction with his steering was less graceful and resulted in a rather painful screeching of the kart's tyres. Errol glanced over his shoulder upon hearing the noise to see Adam and Cyzel on the approach.

"Heyyy!" he grinned. "Seems I'm not too late fer da party afta all!"

"What are you two doing here?" Adam spluttered. "You weren't allowed to register!"

"I need to teach that racer jerk a lesson!" Cory insisted. "He's been taking the fun out of this competition for everyone...and he was rude to my friend!"

"How did you get on the track?" Adam asked Errol. "Where'd you even get that kart?"

"It's a loaner," Errol chuckled sheepishly. "From da garage." Adam shook his head with a groan. The vehicle looked as if it had been recently decommissioned for maintenance - hardly a roadworthy condition in the slightest.

"Ugh, well it's your funeral I guess..." he groaned. Then he began to smirk. "Still, now you're here, that makes you my opponent too. Let's give 'em something to chase, Cyzel!"

"Mrow!" Cyzel grinned, and sped away.

"Dat's da spirit!" Errol called after them. "Time ta kick dis up a gear, kid!"

As he chased after Adam, Errol felt a wave of sleepiness creep upon him. He tried to fight it back - this was no time for napping! Yet the feeling persisted. The scenery began to twist and stretch before his eyes, as Errol tried desperately to pick out a landmark amongst the mass of rapidly blurring shapes. There passed a fraction of blackness so small the man could neither measure it nor counteract it, only feel it. Then the feeling was gone, as swiftly as it had arrived. The walls had grown closer, the track was passing below him at incredible speed. Something didn't seem quite right.

Adam could hear shouting, the squeals of his rivals' tyres on the road surface behind, but he was no longer afraid of being overtaken. The youth wasn't sure why, but he had suddenly gained a stronger air of confidence and enthusiasm in completing his task. And he liked it. He liked the new aura of prowess and dominance that he was now experiencing. He absorbed the adrenaline rush as the wind passed over his body and the kart increased its velocity. Adam felt almost compelled to stretch forward and flatten his ears against his head to make himself more streamlined. Then he paused mentally. Something wasn't the same, and it was starting to bug him.

The youth opened his mouth to yell out the order for his pokémon to slow a little, then stopped. He couldn't believe he hadn't noticed this before, but there *was* no pokémon in front of him to instruct! Trying not to panic at the illogical aspects of the situation he had found himself in, Adam frantically swung his head round for a split second, and what he saw almost caused him to collide with the outer wall of the tunnel he was exiting. There, sat with his hands gripping the kart's steering wheel for dear life, was a figure that looked exactly like him!

Then the Adam-looking person spoke. It was more of a terrified yelp than a typically-uttered sentence, and sounded gruffer than usual.

"KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE ROAD, MAN!"

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

Despite James' insistence to go and find where Errol and Cory had got to, Denise had continued to play spectator to the race. And the first five minutes had progressed as expected. It was only now it had started to become obvious that things were not as they seemed down on the track. Denise and a large majority of the audience gawped in total silence as they continued to witness a race descending into chaos. Karts were veering dangerously from side to side, some of the drivers had taken their hands from their steering wheels and were flailing them in panic.

Adam swung his attention back in surprise, narrowly missing a particularly large obstacle by inches. His unidentified instructor was right, it was better not to be glancing over his shoulder while he was running. He skidded to an ungainly halt before visually addressing his passenger once again. This wasn't the first time he'd been met with the sight of himself, and now the alarm was wearing off, suspicion began to take its place.

<Who *are* you?> he snapped. <What are you doing in my body?>

The youth paused, his faintly-glowing eyes wide in panic, before glancing down at his hands and back at Adam again.

"Adam? Is that you?" he asked weakly.

<Hey, I asked you first!> Adam frowned. Then he did a take. <You know who I am?>

"By that response I'm going to assume my guess was correct," the youth grimaced. "And I can't understand you any more." He placed his shaking hands on the lower part of his face. "Okay Cyzel, don't panic. There's got to be a valid reason for what's happening."

<Cyzel!> Adam gasped. Realisation started to dawn. *Wait...if Cyzel's in my body right now, then does that mean I'm-?* He glanced down and discovered two furred, striped forelegs where he expected his arms to be. <Gah! I'm a pokémon!>

"Whoa! Whoa..." Cyzel raised his hands protectively as Adam began to wrench himself inside the harness. "Panicking isn't going to do

either of us any good, Adam!" He sighed as his pokémon charge settled down a little. "Ugh, not being able to understand you feels so isolating. Is this how it's felt for you?"

Adam tilted his head to one side. In all honesty, he'd never really thought about it.

"Hm, I suppose not," Cyzel chuckled faintly. "Well now what do we do? Something's caused us to end up in each other's bodies, and we have no idea what that something is..."

Adam paused, before reasserting his concentration and breaking into a jog. The kart was pulled from the verge and back onto the road, picking up speed with every passing second.

"I can't believe you still want to race!" Cyzel exclaimed. "This isn't a small complication we're dealing with here!" He yelped and gripped the steering wheel tightly as the kart rounded a corner. Adam winced as the kart's tyres squealed in protest.

<This isn't gonna work if you don't *steer!*> he snapped.

Cyzel frowned at the tone of the retort, but resigned himself to concentrating on honing this new skill he was being forced to learn very quickly. As reckless as this was, he didn't like the idea of letting Adam down. It was the first time he'd been allowed to enter a race after all.

"Okay, somet'ing screwy's going on here," stated a voice from behind. The pitch was unfamiliar to Adam's ears but the accent hit him like a brick as yet another kart approached.

"Since when was *I* the one driving?" another voice exclaimed. It sounded like Errol, but the notable word intonations had migrated.

"Since now, apparently," Errol replied. "Better give you a crash-course in how ta do it right." He faltered. "Okay, not da best name, on second t'oughts..."

<You and Cory swapped too?> Adam concluded, a studied tone in his voice. Errol nodded.

"Yep. Dis has 'suspicious' written all ova it," he said. "Not t' mention it's caught most o' da competition off guard. I hafta admit dis mohawk look just ain't me."

"Shouldn't we stop racing and go find out what's happening?" Cyzel asked.

"An' let dat creepo win?" Errol exclaimed in disbelief. "Quit if ya want, but I intend ta give him a taste o' his own medicine." And he was off.

<I'm not a quitter!> Adam snapped. <Not any more...>

Cyzel took a sharp breath as the track they were riding on approached a small lake, and began to skirt the edge of it. He couldn't afford any wild turns of the steering wheel here. In the centre of this lake,

a group of poliwag sat upon a rock platform bickering amongst themselves. Since Cyzel was currently occupying Adam's body, he wasn't able to decipher the poliwag's agitated exclamations. Adam however, understood them all too well.

<Look, I know my flippers, and these ain't my flippers!> one cried. <And you've got the scar that's usually on *my* face!>

"Those poliwag sure seem confused," Cyzel remarked. Part of him was glad about this - with the pokémon being occupied about their own circumstances, they'd forgotten to carry out their duties on the racetrack. One less hazard to navigate, and Cyzel wasn't about to look a gift ponyta in the mouth. "I wonder just how many people's minds have been misplaced in others' bodies."

Errol allowed a smirk as Adam and the kart he was towing drew up alongside him.

"Couldn't resist keeping in da race, eh?" he inquired.

"*He* couldn't!" Cyzel insisted, looking bereft. Adam laughed, catching Cyzel by surprise. A genuine laugh - not one of bitterness or malice, an actual exclamation of enjoyment. This was something Cyzel had never heard from his companion before. Despite the scenery flying past and the vibrations of the kart wheels on the racetrack, the pokémon-in-human-form ended up calming somewhat. Maybe it was silly of him to think so, but he couldn't bring himself to put a stop to the first experience

of legitimate fun Adam had been involved in. *Alright*, Cyzel told himself. *I'm gonna do my best - for him*. It was something he'd told himself at the beginning of the race too, but it had temporarily been jolted out of his thoughts by the unexpected bodyswap. Cyzel always intended to do his best for Adam's sake, and this time wasn't going to be any different.

"I remembered somet'ing," Errol said. "Dis ain't da foist time my mind's ended up in someone else's body. Back when I was in Team Rocket, my co-woikers an' I got hold of a manaphy egg an dat t'ing sure played havoc wit' us. I ended up bein' James for at least twenty minutes!"

<Sucked to be you,> Adam snorted, only to receive a glare from Errol. <Okay okay, but what's that got to do with this? You think a manaphy is involved?>

"Maybe," Errol murmured. "Or maybe somet'ing wit' manaphy traits. Maybe another genetic experiment."

The pull of gravity increased as the karts began to ascend Mt. Spinda. Round and round the track weaved, growing steeper and more taxing with every curve towards the peak. Adam and Errol took the time to work the notions they had discussed over in their minds as they applied further effort into moving the vehicles up the slope.

<Whatever it is, it must be pretty close if it's affected us,> Adam concluded.

"Or have a wide broadcast range," Errol pointed out, before something else caught his attention. He hopped into the air and landed on

top of the front of the kart Cory was handling, causing it to judder a little.

"Oop! We're goin' down!"

"Going...?" Cyzel blinked, then noticed what Errol happened to be talking about. They had reached the peak of the man-made hill, and a considerable slope lay between them and the ground some 50 metres below. Before this horrifying discovery had a chance to dawn on either Cyzel or Adam, the track dropped, causing the karts upon it began to rapidly pick up speed. Adam promptly lost his footing and toppled backward onto Cyzel's lap, generating a yell of pain from the latter.

<Sorry buddy,> Adam grimaced. <Hope I didn't bust your- er, *my* knees.>

"I can see you're enthusiastic," Errol grinned, despite the speed and gradient he was travelling at. "Ya practically fallin' over y'self ta finish!"

<Uh, Errol?> Adam began uneasily as the kart's wheels juddered against the road in its descent. <Shouldn't you be showing a little more concern for where you're going?>

"Hey, life's a ride," the figure remarked coolly, lifting up a foot and rubbing it carefully to ease the soreness. "Just sit back and enjoy it."

<Yeah, but does life *a/so* have a massive valley full of boulders at the end?> Adam gulped. Errol paused and glanced up, his ears lowering in dismay.

"Oh crud..."

Even from the spectators' area, the terrified cries of the pokémon and their human companions could be heard as they plummeted into Dude Valley. Shaking off his disorientation, Cyzel yelped as he took in the disorder that lay ahead. The geodudes that had been instructed to lie in wait at specific positions on the track were, instead, scattered right across it - their petrous, muscled arms flailing uncoordinatedly. Likewise, the graveler that usually rolled back and forth across the valley now tumbled freely in erratic directions, as if they were having the time of their lives. Yet the sheer velocity the karts were travelling at gave those riding them very little choice about avoiding entry, and they plunged into the valley in a cloud of dust and noise.

"Help meee!" Cory blubbered, finally losing their nerve. Errol leant backwards over the windshield and grasped at the steering wheel with his clawed hands, keeping a firm gaze on the track. With deft precision, he thrust the kart to one side, then another - navigating the curious pattern of geodudes with a deeply focused expression. Adam sprang from the kart and resumed dashing in front of it - making sure to follow Errol's path in the hopes of lessening collision.

The valley's exit was in sight. Just a few tumbling gravelers between those navigating the karts and an empty road ahead. Timing was key, but Errol was confident in his sense of timing. He plunged into the gap one of the gravelers left in its wake, then shot across the path of another, moments before it reached him. Adam found himself struggling to keep to the tail end of Errol's kart, and the distance between himself

and his companions got steadily wider. He was cursing under his breath at being left behind, when his keen eyesight picked up a large, spherical form barreling down the centre of the valley.

<Errol!> Adam screeched. <Watch out!>

The tyres of the two karts squealed harshly as both the arcumese and the weavile propelling them vaulted to one side in their frantic attempts to avoid a graveler approaching at speed.

<Wow...nice dodge, Cyzel!> Adam grinned. <I think you're getting the hang of this.>

Cyzel didn't respond to the compliment - partly because he didn't understand what his friend had said, partly because he was currently rigid with terror, trying to come to terms with having survived.

"Thanks, Errol..." Cory breathed a sigh of relief, returning their hands to the steering wheel. "You're an amazing driver!"

"I ain't a weave-ile fer nuttin'!" Errol grinned, only to receive a groan from Adam, which he dismissed with a chuckle. "Ya do know we're not even in pole position, don'cha?"

"It rather slipped my mind, what with almost getting crushed by rocks..." Cyzel muttered. The whole escapade had fast lost its charm for him.

<The next bit of track looks pretty simple,> Adam commented.
<Time to pick up the pace!>

"Oh no no no..." Cyzel stammered, gripping the steering wheel tightly again as the kart he was sitting in began to accelerate.

"Dat's more like it!" Errol called to Adam. "Let's show dat puffed up bag of ego who's boss!"

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

James wasn't that disappointed with missing out on viewing the rally. As far as he was concerned, the activities of a certain caustic-mouthed youth meant little. The whereabouts of Errol and Cory played on his mind to a greater extent, as he wandered the food court with Chime wrapped about his shoulders. He had scoured the area from end to end, and come up empty-handed. Eventually, James resigned himself to purchasing a hot drink from one of the vendors with some change he found in his pocket. He knew Errol was capable of looking after his own affairs, but even so, he couldn't help feeling just a little uneasy about his absence.

As James handed the vendor his payment and reached out for the cup placed on the counter, the music from the food court's overhead speakers gave way to the upbeat voice of a radio DJ.

"You're listening to 'Zoom in the Afternoon' Live from the Coalef Showground, with me, your host, Todd Hammond!"

"Todd...Todd..." James contemplated. He didn't think he knew anyone called such, and yet there was this nagging familiarity in the back of his mind. "Where have I heard that name?"

"That young man?" the vendor remarked, adjusting his hat. "Was something of a prodigy in the photography world, they nicknamed him 'Snap'."

"'Snap', eh?" James echoed, retrieving his purchase. The nagging familiarity grew stronger.

"That's right," the vendor gave a nod. "Used to take all the shots for the covers of top magazines - even did a stint for Professor Oak, documenting pokémon on a remote island in the Orange Archipelago. Three years ago, he suddenly packed it in and migrated to Totto - started working for radio instead."

Packed...it in... James' eyes slowly became rounder as his mind salvaged a stray memory. Now he remembered - Todd was the youth he had crossed paths with some five years ago, after Errol had misinterpreted an article about him and assumed he was a master pokémon hunter. Turned out that Todd had only been adept at capturing pokémon on film - not capturing pokémon in general - yet this, and consequential meetings with the photographer had logged a few vague memories of him into James' brain. Most prominent of these memories was Todd's enthusiasm for his work. It had been almost inspiring, in a way.

"Okay, you've got some explaining to do, twerp!" he exclaimed in almost parental fashion, while a chimecho jangled in equally chastising tones nearby.

"What on earth...?" Todd spluttered insultedly, as James loomed over him. "Just who *are* you?"

"What are *you* doing in *here* when you should be out there capturing perfect shots of pokémon?" James turned the question around. "Wasn't that your dream or something?"

Todd started in alarm at the unsheathing of his past, then frowned slightly.

"So you've heard of my old work..." he murmured. James flinched, realising he was acting a little too familiar with the young man, and decided to take the matter from a more anonymous angle.

"You were in all the top photography magazines!" James insisted. "You were doing so well! Why'd you change your career?"

"I realised it was time to grow up," he remarked. "That wasn't a career. That was just a crazy dream I was chasing. You know why it was so crazy? Back when I started taking pictures, I thought trying to photograph every known pokémon was unique idea, and I was the first person to try it. What was the point to something that, in the end, amounted to nothing more than a holiday snapshot? Businessmen aren't interested in the story behind the image! I wanted to capture pokémon in natural environments - they only wanted pictures that were profitable.

Things that would sell greetings cards and t-shirts, even if that meant manipulating the subject matter. As soon as they found out I wasn't willing to force pokémon to pose, they had me replaced with someone who would! Trip Shuten, his name was. I hope he's got a good 'Plan B' for his life once he finds out how disposable *he* is..."

James froze, a pained expression upon his face. This wasn't the enthusiastic and adventurous Todd he remembered. This was a man who was crushed and dulled by tedium. Todd expressed particularly acidic tones in the word 'profitable' as he conversed. But the attitude he spoke of rang all too well with James - it sounded far too similar to that of his parents. All the lessons they had put him through hadn't merely been for disciplinary purposes - though they saw this as a benefit. Their outcome had been to find a talent James possessed, and exploit it for all they could. This approach seeped into their treatment of him, and the lessons fast grew taxing and devoid of joy. Such behaviour went against every creative grain in his body. Art was a medium to be savoured and enjoyed! Not abused by those who didn't give a second thought to the innovative value of such work.

"That's terrible..." James murmured, while Chime looked heavily crestfallen at her companion's sadness.

"Terrible, maybe," Todd sighed. "But they were right. You can't make a living with dreams. Nothing is free in life; you have to be realistic."

That is why I stopped my photography and began working as a disk jockey. It's a nice deal, but...it seems like I've been doing this job forever."

Todd flinched, realising the song that had been playing had almost drawn to its conclusion, and scrambled to put his headphones back on before re-engaging the microphone. James watched as the young man bravely forced his voice into a more optimistic tone, chatting with a caller in a manner that made it seem as if the previous conversation had been all in James' head. But the wounded look in Todd's eyes was still all too visible. James wanted to say something to try and lift the young man's spirits, but he couldn't think of anything positive. After all there were a lot of painful truths in Todd's words - one *couldn't* earn a living without dedicating themselves to a job, and this often meant sacrificing a lot of time.

"So, that's it?" he asked quietly, once Todd had turned the microphone off again. "You just threw it all away?"

"Not exactly..." Todd trailed off. "I intended to let go of this childhood fanaticism, to stop hurting myself with false hopes and just focus on my disc jockey work. And yet I still take my camera with me, everywhere I go. Like there's one stubborn part of me that refuses to give up on that 'crazy dream'."

"You should try listening to that part," James nodded. "Progress isn't without struggle, and you've got the right idea about creativity, not

the guy who sold himself out. Who says you've got to stop being a DJ, either? I'm sure there'd be plenty of chances to exercise that snapshot finger of yours in this town alone."

Todd gazed into the distance for a moment. There was an expression of realisation upon the man's face, a spark of renewed hope in his eyes.

"You're right," he gave a small smile. "Guess I really needed someone to tell me how narrow-minded I was being. And you're the one who did it. Thanks, I appreciate that. But why are you so determined to get me taking pictures again?"

"I'll admit, I thought your work had something special," James insisted. "You have a lot of skill! And let's just say..." he tried to hide the rueful tone that was attempting to creep back into his voice. "I'm quite aware of what happens when you pursue less favoured courses of life and don't make the best of your skills."

"No time like the present though, right?" Todd's smile had become more genuine.

"And don't you forget it!" James agreed jokily. "I'll be keeping an eye out for your work."

He quickly made his exit, before Todd considered asking for his name. All this talk of skills had caused James to ponder what his own

with a determined noise that sounded like a cross between a growl and a hiss, he dived for the target. Errol spluttered as the arcumese ahead of him disappeared amongst the edifices like a golden streak, its accompanying kart and passenger in tow. Soon after, he dismissed his temporary surprise with a hearty laugh. As blunt and sullen as Adam was, he couldn't fault the youth's persistence.

Pushing the thoughts of hybrid pokémon to the back of his mind for the time being, Adam navigated the track's absurdly tight verges with deceptive ease, while Cyzel did his best to make sure the kart didn't collide with them either. Upon emerging from the Twin Passes, the youth's eyes lit up as he identified a familiar yellow shape darting its way toward a bridge, and the final obstacle in this marathon-like race.

Nothing seemed out of place between the jolteon and its driver - Adam wondered if Neil thought he was dreaming, or his resolve to win overrode the illogical nature of the situation. Regardless, the pair had crossed the boardwalk over a small area of marsh, causing it to vibrate a little by the sheer force of their rapid movements. The boardwalk had no side rails, and admittedly this proved unnerving, but the burning desire to keep Neil's kart within his sights drove Adam onward. Taking a quick glance behind at Cyzel, Adam bent his ears back, leant down and shot forward like a bullet. As the scenery belted past and the air pestered at his muscular furred body, the back of the kart the jolteon was pulling drew ever closer. Sensing the approaching force, the electric type eeveelution swung round, its eyes blazing with competitive spirit.

<You!> the jolteon snarled, moments before the mouth of the tunnel engulfed them both, sending them and the karts they towed hurtling into a pipe-like structure with tiny lights embedded in the sides. Adam gasped as his paws scrambled for grip on the pipe's unnaturally smooth surface. He didn't seem to be the only one suffering complications - Neil had traversed this course many times, but only as a driver. Now, covering an unfamiliar terrain with equally unfamiliar limbs, he was showing signs of panic.

"Use your heels, you idiot!" Neil's pokémon snapped. "Stop taking such heavy steps!"

<Don't you call me an idiot!> Neil retorted angrily. Adam's ears pricked up.

<That's it...> he smiled, and shifted his weight to the main pads on the soles of his paws. Armed with better grip, the youth-in-arcumese-form manoeuvred himself into a more suitable position for overtaking and launched himself up the side of the tunnel, passing Neil and his jolteon effortlessly.

"Now look what you've done!" the latter grumbled. "If you'd just listened to what I was saying instead of throwing a tantrum..."

<Oh shut up!> Neil seethed. A short distance ahead, Adam heard the pair's fractious arguing echo up the tunnel and snickered to himself. Even Cyzel was showing signs of exhilaration at this skilful response.

"That's the way to do it, Ad!" he beamed. Adam returned the expression - then something stepped into his path.

He barely had time to register the bulbous blue creature in the way. It turned and glanced at him with intimidation in its eyes, before unleashing a violent burst of sound. Adam's surroundings dipped into blackness, red streaks cast their way across his vision. Then he found himself choking for air - restrained by the tight straps of the kart's seatbelt. He was back at the wheel, and back in his own mind, but this time the instance was most unfavourable. Cyzel's knees crumpled from under him in his disorientation, causing him to skid along the pipeline for a few metres as the kart toppled aside, dragging the hapless pokémon with it. As the whole ensemble finally came to a stop, Cyzel heard the whisk of tyres, and felt the blast of air from two passing objects. The arcumese struggled to open his eyes to see what it was that had overtaken them, though he was pretty certain he knew the answer.

Disgusting... Cyzel thought, with a hint of bitterness. *Too obsessed with winning to even check to see if Adam and I are okay.* He flinched, his eyes wide. In the recent confusion and reversal of the mind-switch, he'd forgotten all about his passenger. <Adam! Hey buddy, are you hurt?>

His voiced concerns were met with a faint groan. Cyzel writhed in an attempt to get out of his harness, in the end resorting to slicing it free

from his body with his front claws, and stumbled to Adam's side. The youth was in a fairly reasonable condition, albeit with a couple of bruises and a skewed helmet. He shakily undid his seatbelt and clambered from the fallen kart in order to examine it. Cyzel bit his lip, desperately hoping that Adam wasn't thinking of continuing the race after everything that had happened. But Adam said nothing. He just stood there and gazed at the kart with an expression that was difficult to read.

"That was kinda reckless of me, wasn't it?" he remarked, after a few moments. "Putting racing before going after that hybrid pokémon. It could have got us killed, no, *I* could have got us killed."

<You were excited, that's all,> Cyzel insisted. <I can't blame you. It's not like you've been allowed to have fun...> he trailed off, realising that Adam couldn't understand what he was saying any more. It brought a heavy feeling to his gut, a feeling he tried to remove by nuzzling his companion's arm instead. Adam responded by claspng Cyzel's neck in an apologetic hug.

"We'd better get off the track, huh," he remarked, trying not to sound as defeated as he felt. "If anyone else is still racing, they'll catch up sooner or later. Speaking of which...I wonder where Errol and Cory got to."

Adam glanced up as familiar, awkward chuckling was heard a short distance behind him. Errol wandered up the tunnel with his arms behind his back and an expression like a naughty schoolchild who'd been

found out. Cory followed close behind, back in their zecutynr shape and rubbing at the side of their face with one clawed hand.

"There you are!" Adam exclaimed, perking up a little. "Where's your kart?"

"Eh...we lost control after da mind-switch was revoised and...well...it didn't make it," Errol grinned sheepishly, bringing a steering wheel into view. "So much fer givin' dat Neil fella a taste o' his own medicine. Ya don't seem t' have fared too well y'self."

"I'm forfeiting," Adam said matter-of-factly. "The longer that hybrid pokémon is wandering around, the more at-risk everyone is. We need to go track it down and get it under control."

"Responsible t'inkin of ya, kid!" Errol replied. "Now let's find a way outta here."

TO BE CONTINUED...

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