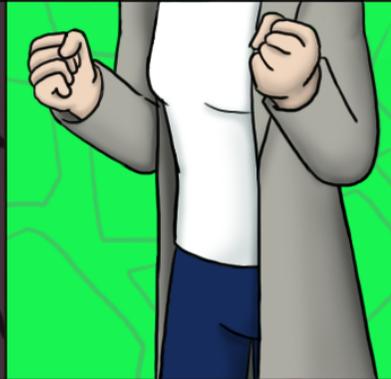


POKÉMON
REBIRTH

ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE TWENTY THREE

Skill Swap

The arrival of mid-afternoon saw the group reunited, their minds brimming with a variety of thoughts, questions and concerns. Caley's first impression of the compendium upon entering had been the turmoil generated from the previous mind-swap escapade down on the rally track. With the entire track cordoned off and showground officials fervently scanning the area with complicated devices, the atmosphere of puzzlement and worry was so compelling that it had drawn all attention away from the fact that Neil Tilman once again achieved first place. In turn, this caused Neil great annoyance, and generated a measure of nefarious satisfaction in Errol. At least until James started lecturing him about the questionable methods Errol had used to enter the race himself.

Many of the racers who had competed were sitting in the entrance hall adjacent to the rally track, being attended to by medical professionals. The travellers could overhear their conversations as they stood a short distance away.

"Every one of them is talking about having taken the place of their pokémon," Rose deduced.

"You got to be a pokémon?" Mondo glanced at Adam in astonishment.

"I was a natural," Adam grinned, which caused Errol to chuckle a little.

"No wonder I saw everyone else freaking out during the race," Denise grimaced. "They're lucky no one got any serious injuries." She

paused uncomfortably. "What happened to that poor girl with the granbull was bad enough - sounds like her legs will be out of action for a good few months."

"This is just like Professor Werty's experiment, only on a massive scale..." Caley said.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Adam frowned, before hushing himself. "It *is* an experiment we're dealing with. I saw it."

"What did this hybrid look like?" Rose asked.

"It was blue, and kind of short..." Adam trailed off. "That's all I've got to go on - I only saw it for a flash."

"Where are my glasses?" Caley inquired anxiously, only to have them offered to him by Denise who had fished them out of her pocket. He relaxed at seeing they were still in one piece, before putting them on and scrolling through the Team Rocket Pokédex entries. "Besides Gallirill and Soluqua, the only other pokémon that fits those two descriptions is something called 'Abaphys'."

"Abaphys?" Mondo repeated.

"It's a phione-wobuffet hybrid," Caley explained. "The record here states of how the experiment tapped into the phione's hidden mind switching abilities, and amplified them several times over."

"As to whether it is acting vindictively or not, we have yet to find out," Rose concluded. "Either way, our time to find Abaphys is limited."

typically to oversee certain procedures and hand out awards. But Salvia never had a chance to experience the Compendium's delights first-hand before, and was swift to jump at this opportunity. Truth be told, the latter part of the day had been rather strange in Dawn's opinion, and she could only hope that Salvia wasn't caught up in it.

"Well I'm ready for a long sleep," she remarked to the blue penguin pokémon who was lying next to her, wearing a satisfied expression. "How about you, Piplup?"

"Luhhp..." came the agreeable response.

Before Dawn could make a retreat under her quilt, she heard a faint voice from outside her bedroom window.

"You think that chimecho is going to protect us?" it remarked. "That's a laugh."

Dawn flinched, placed her arms either side of her and levered herself from the bed into a sitting position. The raspiness of the voice seemed uncannily familiar.

"Since you've decided not to use your brain cell tonight, I'll spell it out for you," another, louder voice spoke up - barely managing to restrain a frustrated edge. "Abaphys' powers are sound-based. If we want to avoid another mind-swapping scenario like earlier, we need to deflect those sound waves!"

Dawn frowned. Either her mind was playing tricks on her, or she was hearing the voices of figures she had encountered in her past.

"Keep it down, will ya James?" a broad voice joined in, its bemused tones apparent. "You'll have us found out at dis rate."

The accent smacked Dawn like a goldeen's tail - after hearing it repeatedly for a year, it was firmly lodged in the youth's memory banks as belonging to Meowth, one of the three Team Rocket members who had insisted on following her and her companions around Sinnoh for reasons unknown. She groaned a little and edged closer to the window before pulling back the curtains ever so slightly. Didn't these guys know when to quit?

Expecting to see two figures dressed in the white, R-emblazoned uniforms she had grown so used to, Dawn found, to her surprise, a group of seven people. None of these people looked like James, and there wasn't a sign of a meowth anywhere - only a slightly-indignant looking chimecho, a glaceon and two pokémon she'd not encountered before. However, as she continued to watch the group pass her window a short distance away, Dawn could make out the James voice she'd heard, being uttered from the man with the tousled sandy blonde hair and black leather jacket. The very same man she had spoken to in the quiz hall just hours before. It didn't take long for Dawn's mind to draw a conclusion.

"The guy I handed the quiz prize to is that thief James in disguise?" Dawn grimaced. "Well now I feel stupid." Piplup gave her a disbelieving glance.

body and enveloped Chime, causing her dark eyes to flare with an unearthly light. "That's the way to do it, buddy!" Caley smiled proudly.

"Whoa," Mondo raised his eyebrows. "I didn't know that sort of thing was possible."

"Me neither," Caley remarked. "Back in Pachna Town, I gave Kota some of my power without realising it - but it was Sabrina who explained the technique to me. She taught me quite a few things about psychics - helped me to feel less of a monster."

There was silence. The other members of the group found themselves at a loss for words, hearing a young man who was usually so optimistic about things voicing something quite painful about himself. Yet none showed more surprise than Adam. He'd never given consideration that Caley may feel as wary about himself as he'd been feeling towards him over the past few days.

"Stop right there!"

A sharp, angered cry broke the soundless atmosphere, causing the travellers to freeze in alarm, and swing round. James and Errol uttered fractured gasps at what they saw.

"I know who you are, Team Rocket, and don't try to think you can fool me with those disguises of yours," Dawn snapped, the last sentence aimed at James and Rose in particular. "What are you up to this time?"

"Who *is* this kid?" Rose blinked, eyeing James. "Do you know her?"

"Never met her before in my life," the man responded shakily.

Dawn's eyes narrowed.

"Ha ha, nice try," she remarked primly, taking a Pokéball from her belt. "Hattie! The wigs!"

Before anyone could register what the youth was talking about, an ambipom had appeared from a flash of white light and vaulted neatly between Rose and James, using its two tails to snatch the false hairpieces from atop the duo's heads in the process. James gave a yelp not unlike someone having been discovered taking a shower, as his violet-coloured hair fell down by his chin.

"What?" Dawn looked taken aback at the sight of Rose's golden locks. "You're not Jessie..."

"Let me guess," Rose commented, unimpressed. "This is one of those 'twerps' who travelled with your assignment back when you were on active duty."

"Assignment?" Dawn's expression grew more perplexed.

"Look, it's not important now," James muttered. His mood was already compounded at having been relatively unmasked by Dawn, and reminded that Jessie was absent from his life. "I don't work for Team Rocket any more. In fact, we're working on cleaning up their mess."

"A likely story," Dawn folded her arms, causing her piplup and ambipom to do the same. "You're up to no good."

"We're not up to no good!" James protested. Dawn eyed him for a moment.

"You're about to cross into a restricted area of a closed entertainment complex..." she pointed out.

"For the benefit of humanity!" James exclaimed.

"Wait...now I get it," Dawn exclaimed. "You've got something to do with that oddness earlier, haven't you? Is that what that 'Abaphys' thing is? A machine to cause people and pokémon to swap bodies?"

"Actually, it's a pokémon," Mondo spoke up matter-of-factly, before James cut in.

"Hey! How'd you know about that?"

"Maybe because you have a big mouth," Adam snorted. Dawn flinched a little at the sound of the adolescent's voice. While not identical, it sported the characteristics she remembered so vividly in the voice of her past travelling companion, Ash Ketchum.

"Just stop it," Denise grimaced, before James considered another loud retort. She turned to Dawn. "Abaphys is a pokémon fusion Team Rocket created that we accidentally released while trying to rescue it from their laboratory. Its powers are pretty unstable though, so we're trying to recapture it before the agents sent to do the same thing arrive."

"Hmmm..." Dawn contemplated this. Denise's expression and delivery felt quite genuine. "Alright. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt," she glanced back at James. "But only because your new friends seem decent. And I'm coming with you."

"Get under the shield, then," Mondo waved, as the group began walking again. "You're lucky you didn't get swapped into another body while chasing after us." He chuckled, but the sound dissipated into awkwardness upon viewing everyone else's expressions. Caley had resumed a more serious outlook, while Adam, Rose and Denise appeared to be processing the last thing their red-headed companion had confessed. James, on the other hand, was focused on other matters.

"You could've backed me up there..." James said under his breath, casting Errol a withering look. But the man had been reduced to enforced muteness yet again. "Are you going to be like this *every* time we meet familiar people?"

One could have been forgiven for thinking they had left the showground after stepping on to the rally track. The combination of darkness and naturally-sculpted roadways gave it a more organic feel, and the group's members couldn't help but gaze in awe. Walking through 'Dude Valley as opposed to hurtling through it at sixty miles an hour gave Cory more of a chance to appreciate its strong ridges and subtle undulations. Fortunately the geodude and graveler had since retired to

bed - tucked away inside niches in the valley's rocky walls. All that could be heard were the footsteps of eight humans and five pokémon.

Dawn's accusing expression had softened over the past twenty minutes, to be replaced by one of innate curiosity. It was obvious that these travellers had quite the story to tell - especially given the species of pokémon that made an appearance since entering the racetrack - but at this moment in time she was more interested in one of them in particular.

"So what happened to Jessie and Meowth?" she spoke up. Denise, Rose, Caley and Mondo cringed almost in unison at hearing this. Errol was trying desperately hard to smother a fearful air that had thrust itself upon him, begging internally that James would keep his identity concealed. James glanced back at Dawn with tired, sad eyes, and encapsulated a year of loss and turmoil into three short words.

"They moved on."

"Oh," Dawn looked awkward. "I'm...sorry to hear that." Errol relaxed a little. Maybe now this prying youth would leave their personal affairs alone. "It's strange, though...I could've sworn I heard Meowth earlier." Nope. He grew steadily more rigid - where was a change of subject when you needed one? Even an unexpected sleep-rolling graveler would have been welcomed.

"Why do you think Team Rocket made Abaphys?" Caley spoke up, having sensed Errol's inner fractiousness.

"To cause chaos, I'd imagine," Rose deduced, while Errol gave Caley a deeply grateful glance. "Effective distraction tactic. What I'm more worried about is whether it's just a precursor to something far worse."

"Worse?" Dawn spoke up anxiously, before the frown returned. "What's going on? What do you guys know?"

"A lot more than we'd care to," Adam sniffed, while Cyzel gave an emphatic nod.

"And a lot less than we need to..." Denise sighed, stroking one of Rilly's smooth ears.

"Well that was more cryptic than I would've liked," Dawn pulled a face.

"I'm sorry," Rose tried to sound reassuring. "But we can't risk spreading that information about any more than it already has been. It's bad enough that you're following us."

Dawn looked rather taken aback, but said no more. Given that the group had *not* tried to forcibly remove her from their presence, lent evidence to their actions being more credible than she'd first assumed. Their secretiveness made them none the less suspicious, however.

As they left the valley, Chime uttered a squeak of alarm and floated around the other side of one of the rocky crags, urging those

under her shield to keep up. Empty grassland gave way to trees, and quickly the sorrowful noise that Chime had detected became apparent to all concerned. It was tremulous and cracked, and definitely not human.

"That's gotta be it!" Adam insisted. "The pokémon that I almost smacked into on the racetrack!"

"It sounds so upset," Dawn looked horrified. "We need to find it, and quick!"

The group continued to trace the sounds until they reached a part of the forest where the placement of trees grew vastly more sparse. There, huddled in the centre of this clearing, was a small blue shape. It was about the size of an average wobuffet, with bulbous nodules placed on either side of its head, giving the impression of ears, and a small red jewel-like protrusion set into its chest. The quaking of its body suggested both fear and exhaustion - its large, yellow eyes wide, its open, jagged-edged mouth framed by streams of tears.

A portion of the darkness appeared to move, and an unidentified figure in a long coat edged closer to the pokémon. It was at this point the group noticed the creature was laden with the same components that Larydos had been subjected to just days before. Seconds later, a familiar translucent cube spattered into existence around the pokémon, rendering escape impossible.

"Eh shaddup," the figure in the coat snorted unemotionally, as one of their accomplices made their way into the clearing. "All that crying ain't gonna change the facts. And the fact is, you're Team Rocket's property."

The voice was unmistakable. Much to the group's dismay, they found themselves faced with the reality that Butch, Cassidy and Jessie had indeed caught up with them - not to mention were on the cusp of snatching back one of the hybrid pokémon they had freed. Dawn scowled and made a move to leave the safety of the trees, but James placed a hand on her shoulder, holding her back.

"Look, twerp...this is serious," he said. "You can't just run out there spouting righteous monologues. We need to make a plan!"

"What I'm puzzled about is how come those three aren't getting bodyswapped," Caley pointed out.

"They must be protected by something," Denise said. "Like we are."

"Speaking of which, you might want to hurry that plan up," Mondo grimaced. "Chime and Kota don't look like they'll be able to make that shield much longer."

"I think I've got it," Rose concluded. "Can you see how Butch and Cassidy aren't talking to one another? They're making a lot of hand

gestures. I'm pretty sure they must be wearing some kind of soundblocker devices, far more powerful than regular ear plugs."

"Well that's a bit daft," Adam remarked. "How are they supposed to know if someone sneaks up on them?"

"Easy," Rose told him. "They have a lookout."

She motioned towards Jessie who was stationed further away from the source of activity, facing their general direction but unaware of their presence. Dawn uttered a tiny gasp, and looked back at James with notable sympathy. But James was too busy assessing his old companion with a saddened gaze.

"Forget the complexities," Denise exclaimed. "We need to remove those soundblockers and get Abaphys out of that container!"

"Kota, can you take care of the first of those?" Caley asked.

I won't be able to help Chime keep this shield up if I do... Kota insisted.

"It's a risk we're going to have to take," Caley said firmly.

"Risk?" Adam looked horrified. "What risk?"

Jessie glanced up and caught sight of James' observation. Her face had already been showing great discomfort at the sight of the hybrid pokémon in anguish - partly because it looked so much like her own dear wobuffet, but also because her conscience was nagging over the torment being caused an otherwise innocent creature. Now, as she gazed upon

the members of the group scrutinizing her in turn, that uncomfortable expression only intensified. Unable to move or signal her associates that their situation had been compromised, Jessie had been reduced to a hesitant statue in the midst of the onlookers.

Then Kota's eyes flared blue, and three pairs of black cylindrical objects were pulled from Butch, Cassidy and Jessie's ears - much to their alarm. As the pokémon accomplished this, the shield surrounding the travellers grew dim and sputtered out. It was at this point that Abaphys opened its mouth and uttered a particularly shrill burst of sound into the clearing.

Butch staggered backwards, violently disorientated from the sheer pitch of the aural bombardment. There was a fleeting moment of blackness, enough to throw off the man's balance. A sharp jolt of pain coursed through Butch's lower body as his rear made contact with the hard ground.

"You were s'posed to be keeping watch, Jessie!" Butch snapped, before clapping his hands over his mouth.

"What's got into you?" James inquired, in what he thought to be Adam's direction, only to let out a squeak of alarm upon hearing his own voice sounding a lot younger and more feminine than it had been previously. He reached for his hair, to find a clump of sky blue artificial strands in his grasp.

"That's my body!" he heard his own voice say, despite him not initiating it.

"That's *mine!*" James exclaimed

"Of course it is, you doofbrain," Adam-as-Butch remarked with a nonplussed expression, as if he'd seen this all before. "No soundblocker shield, no protection against the mindswap crazy."

"The sooner we get Abaphys back, the sooner we can fix all of this!" Errol-as-Caley pointed out.

"Oh no you don't!" Cassidy-as-Dawn cut in. "Soluqua! Use Scald!"

The hybrid pokémon didn't respond.

"Soluqua, don't just ignore me!" Cassidy cried frustratedly, stomping her foot. "Scald!"

And Soluqua unleashed a stream of water all over the woman's face.

"Hey!" Dawn-as-Cassidy yelled, while over the other side of the clearing, Soluqua-as-Rose waved her arms about and uttered flustered exclamations.

The scene in the clearing promptly descended into one of utter chaos. Figures darted left and right as they attempted to block the advances of their opposition, while trying to contain Abaphys before matters got further out of hand. Which undoubtedly they did, as Abaphys cowered amongst the scuffle, unable to escape from their cube prison -

their occasional squeals of panic causing those around them to suffer frequent changes of identity. The disorientation as a result became so great, the travellers ended up facing off against each other in some kind of twisted melee, with Rose-in-Cassidy's-body insistent on putting Butch's body into a choke hold despite Mondo currently occupying it. Pokémon attacks flashed and sparked across the clearing, their wielders utterly clueless as to the correct way to use their temporary forms. Abaphys flinched as a stray Focus Blast sphere ricocheted from the surface of their translucent prison - causing both the attack and the target to explode into a cluster of golden sparks. Noting the forcefield around them was gone, Abaphys leapt to their feet and scampered away into the dark.

"I do believe you've put on weight!" James-as-Butch announced mockingly, slapping his own gut.

"You stop that!" Butch-as-James snapped, before pausing. "Hold on a minute..." He glanced around the clearing at the remaining figures - still ensconced in their scuffle. By the light of the moon, Butch could make out the skewed wigs on some of the group members' heads. At first he'd thought they were some meddling do-gooders trying to get in their way. Now their desperation was beginning to make sense. How they'd shown up in two places that hybrid pokémon had appeared. And the familiarity of the voice he'd just spoken in. "Jaaaaames..." Butch growled

dangerously in the direction of his own body, currently occupied by the aforementioned.

"Uh oh," James grimaced, suddenly realising he was in rather hot water. Butch lunged for his ex-Rocket associate, throwing him to the ground and causing both figures to roll across the clearing - tripping up Caley-as-Adam and Denise-as-Cyzel in the process.

"You're not taking back the specimen!" Butch yelled. He and James were promptly doused with a jet of ice cold water.

"*No one's* taking it back!" Cassidy-as-Jessie snapped, while Soluqua stood nearby and looked as frustrated about the whole thing as her trainer did. "It's run off!"

"What?!" Butch spluttered, leaping to his feet. "What are you standing around here then for?"

Cassidy didn't reply to this, instead turning and dashing into the forest with Soluqua close behind. Butch followed, despite neither of them being in their correct bodies. Jessie remained, having grown curiously unresponsive. She didn't even attempt to defend herself when Dawn's ambipom grasped her arms with its tails - binding them tightly behind her back. Something had indeed made its impact.

"Don't hurt her!" James cried out, causing Dawn-as-Denise to look back at him with a puzzled and annoyed expression.

"Not that I'm underhanded like you are, but why should I listen to you anyway?" Dawn frowned. James was momentarily taken aback by the

acidic response, then paused - realising Dawn must have thought she was actually addressing Butch.

"We're not here to capture Team Rocket," he insisted. "We're here to rescue the pokémon they're trying to take back to the organization's labs!"

"Point taken," Dawn gave a nod, following a moment of enlightenment as to Butch's current identity. She signalled to her ambipom to release Jessie, yet the woman remained silent. Not a snarky comeback, or even a rare utterance of gratitude. In the fleeting moments of having occupied Errol's body, Jessie felt as if she had experienced a lifetime. The man's conscious memories had been invisible to her, having been snatched away when Errol himself left his own vessel, and yet the tension, the frustration...the hurt...all this remained. Jessie might have mistaken these for her own emotions, considering their similarity. Still, there was something undeniably foreign about them. Each one strongly tinged with an element of confusion, flickering between certainty and doubt.

Why?

'Why' what? The word had resounded in her psyche. Even now, stuck in Cassidy's body, she could still hear the broken tones of that inquiry. The woman couldn't bring herself to look at Errol, in case he was aware of what she had seen - or worse - had viewed something similar

within her heart. Instead she turned and dashed after Butch and Cassidy, with Wobuffet-as-Piplup following closely behind.

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Caley had given chase to Abaphys as soon as he noticed them leave the clearing. It hadn't mattered that he was currently in Chime's body at the time - at least it was a form whose psychic aura felt familiar to him. Admittedly the absence of lower limbs was something quite bizarre, but Caley overrode the thought and continued on. A pokémon's safety was at stake.

He finally tracked Abaphys to another clearing filled with tall blue and purple rock formations. The air about the rocks seemed to hum faintly with energy, and Caley found himself entranced. At least until a small telepathic voice piped up.

Please...Please don't hurt me.

<I'm not going to hurt you,> Caley insisted. <My friends and I came to stop those other humans from taking you somewhere terrible.>

You...you did?

Caley felt a twinge inside at the pokémon's obvious innocence, but was thankful that it was he that had been able to reach out first, before such an innocence had been corrupted.

<You are one of many...*special* pokémon,> he began, deciding to avoid any talk of scientific experiments in order not to distress Abaphys further. <But because you are so special, certain bad people want you to do bad things for them.>

Buh-but I don't want to do bad things! Abaphys insisted.

<I know...I know...> Caley said. <And neither do we. That's why we are here - to save you from all that. But for that to be possible, you're going to have to stay quiet, okay? The more you cry, the more everyone gets swapped around and then we'd all be so confused that no one can do anything to help.>

Okay, Abaphys responded at last. *I will try hard not to cry.*

"Aha!" Jessie's voice rang out. Caley and Abaphys looked up in alarm to see the Team Rocket operative and what appeared to be James standing at the edge of the clearing. Judging by their stances and expressions, Caley was pretty certain it didn't happen to be Jessie or James in control of those forms at that moment. And no one else was with the duo, giving Caley the worried impression that his companions had been dealt with previously. It was up to him to at least try and defend poor Abaphys from further harm.

<Stay away!> Caley cried, hovering in front of the terrified hybrid pokémon. <Leave Abaphys alone!>

"Nice try," Butch-as-James smirked at the defiance he was witnessing. "But we've come too far, missed too many opportunities to be put off by an overgrown porch ornament like you."

"Soluqua, get this pathetic creature out of the way," Cassidy-as-Jessie instructed icily. Her pokémon accomplice responded with a psychic assault - trapping Caley in a telekinetic grasp and throwing him mercilessly to one side.

The next few seconds were dragged to a near-standstill. As Caley felt his borrowed form hit the polished exterior of the nearest stone, the pain of the impact was coupled with a near-blinding energy that thrust itself into him - infiltrating every fibre of his being. A shrill tone pierced the air, the sound of Abaphys' horrified scream, then Caley's consciousness was yanked back into the ether. A shroud of blackness fell - the kind that encompassed all senses, not just that of the surrounding physical environment. Caley gasped sharply, fresh oxygen filling his lungs again. He stared down at his feet - yes, he had his own feet now - snugly housed in steelix grey walking boots and attached to his legs, which were covered in somewhat worn-looking trousers. Glancing up, Caley saw Rose whose left arm was tightly linked in his own, having previously been helping his body's prior occupant to stay upright.

"Caley?" Rose inquired. "Is that you?"

"Yeah..." the young man gave a nod. "At last. Are you...uh..'you' too?"

"Thankfully yes," Rose smiled. She glanced back at the others in the group. "How about you guys? You all back to your own bodies?" Her inquiry was met with various agreement, and a snort of disgust from Butch who had found he was propping up Caley's other arm. Caley staggered a little as Butch promptly let go and dashed off. "We'd better catch up with those three, though."

"Too right," Caley said emphatically. "Chime is in trouble!"

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Having been returned to his body just in time to witness his dear pokémon writhing in a sheen of vibrant energy, James could do little but watch in anguish. The aura quickly engulfed the chimecho, turning from blue to white. In turn, Chime's own form took on a gelatinous appearance - stretching and segmenting into two parts, her arms and tail lengthening. It was at this point that all the humans present in the clearing had grown aware as to what was going on, and none of them could quite believe what they were seeing.

"It's evolving?" Butch spluttered, while Piplup watched with a captivated eye. "But...but *how*?"

James' expression of consternation had quickly shifted to one of awe and pride, with a hint of curiosity. Given the theory that all pokémon

which did not fall into the 'legendary' category had at least three stages of natural growth, seeing an evolution came as little surprise. What *had* come as a surprise however, had been the unnatural cause of it.

As the glow weakened, Chime's new shape became visible. The pokémon was now a silvery grey with darker jagged markings across the back of its head and lower part of its body. Its tail was long and tubular, and each segment of its form was connected with gold coloured interim parts. Before James could utter a word, his evolved pokémon's face scrunched into a determined glower and she dived towards Butch and Cassidy with a resounding cry.

The Hyper Voice made contact, throwing Butch and Cassidy backwards towards the trees. Soluqua barely managed to stand her ground

"Stop that thing, Soluqua!" Cassidy yelled, half-dazedly.

She attempted to halt Chime's flight with her psychic abilities, but the resonance of the Hyper Voice still echoed in Soluqua's mind, making concentration impossible. Chime dodged aside as a Focus Blast flew towards her – the orb of Aura skimming the edge of her tubular tail – then unleashed another Hyper Voice. As Soluqua reeled backwards, Piplup lunged – his beak glowing brightly.

Butch snatched the Pokéball from his belt before pitching it forward. Raccrupt emerged from the resulting burst of light, ready to

pounce at his instructed target. But before he had a chance to do so, a white streak charged into him from an unknown point across the clearing. At the same time, Cyzel pounced at Soluqua with his fangs bared, clamping his jaws shut on the golduck-vaporeon's finned tail. Cassidy looked on with dismay as Soluqua let out a pained yelp and flailed at the source of the attack. Glancing round, James saw Kota, Sia and Wobuffet make their way onto the scene, followed shortly after by the remaining members of his companions.

"Good one, Togekiss!" Dawn whooped, having arrived with her ambipom, Hattie, in tow. The feathery white pokémon trilled at the encouragement, while Raccrupt staggered back to his feet with a disgruntled snort. He looked ready to battle on, but his trainer had other ideas. Logic and reasoning told him that even with enhanced hybrid pokémon, an attempt to fight back would be unlikely to succeed at best - completely ridiculous at worst. Reluctantly, he called Raccrupt back to his Pokéball.

"Hate to admit it, Cass..." Butch grimaced. "But they seriously have us outnumbered here."

"Fine," Cassidy growled, retracting Soluqua in turn. Her patience was frayed enough that she was ready to surrender Abaphys to the opposition and leave without further incident. "Keep the freak of nature - but mark my words, once we get the news back to HQ about your disguises, you'll have nowhere to-"

"Hold on a minute" Dawn's voice cut in. "Who said we were going to let you off?"

"Huh?" Cassidy uttered, somewhat taken aback.

"Oh no..." Butch choked, suddenly catching on to what their young opposition had in mind.

"Let 'em have it, Piplup!"

"Luuuuup!" the penguin pokémon exclaimed, unleashing the incredible blast of water he had been charging straight at the ground beneath Butch, Cassidy and Jessie's feet. The force of the result was so great it propelled the trio of elites and their pokémon into the air, over the trees and toward the sky where they vanished from sight.

"Bye bye now!" Dawn called cheerily into the sky as the remainder of the group stood there, mouths wide open. "Hope you have an uncomfortable landing!"

"Was all that really necessary?" James moaned, looking rather pale.

"Huh?" Dawn looked at him. "Brought back bad memories, did it?"

"Well not so much that..." James trailed off. It pained him to see Jessie getting blasted off with her current accomplices, but it seemed pointless to try and explain such things to Dawn. I mean, how could a twerp have possibly understood? Errol looked in worse shape for viewing the whole thing. "Never mind. I guess they'll be off our tail for now."

"Didn't think I'd see a day where the guys who pestered my friends and I were being pestered themselves," Dawn remarked, before turning to glance at Chime. "Who's this pokémon? I've not seen it before.."

"Chime evolved," James announced proudly. "But to be honest, I know next to nothing about a chimecho evolution. Does your Pokédex say anything about it, Caley?"

"Let me see," Caley remarked, pressing the side of his glasses. Dawn watched with notable interest.

"Your glasses are your Pokédex?" she exclaimed. "That's so cool! One of my friends would be all over those." Caley chuckled a little awkwardly, as the device on his face completed its scan.

"It's called a 'chiverbel'," he replied conclusively. "It seems the researchers who put in this 'dex entry thought it was an entirely separate species."

"An understandable mistake, if you'd never seen one evolve from any other pokémon," Denise nodded.

"And no wonder they didn't!" James grinned. "It's not like Pentacite shows up any old where."

"Pentacite?" Adam eyed the man, as if he thought James was making something up.

"Ah! Those stones in the clearing!" Caley spoke up, gripped by a sudden excitement.

"Exactly!" James patted his companion on the back. "Last time I saw these was growing around the crags of Lunan's Rota district. After some research I found out they are called 'Echo Stones', or 'Pentacite', for the more scientifically-inclined amongst you."

"I'd read of those stones being used in communication networks of the past," Rose blinked. "But never had there been any mention of its effects upon pokémon. Looks like we may well have played audience to something new."

There was a tiny sound like that of someone clearing their throat. Everyone turned their heads to find Abaphys standing a short distance away, looking hopeful. Their optimistic expression was met with great wariness from the majority of their audience. Yet this response didn't seem to phase Abaphys, who simply waddled across the clearing – causing those watching the pokémon to step aside. Caley remained where he stood, wearing a gentle smile. Once Abaphys reached Caley's side, the pokémon threw their arms around the young man's waist. He felt the warmth of Abaphys' joy and gratitude flow through his body, causing his smile to widen further.

Thank you, Abaphys murmured inside Caley's mind. Thank you for saving me.

Dawn proved to be a tough nut to crack with regards to keeping vital information to herself. After some patient reasoning however, she relented and agreed to let Caley and his companions speak to the authorities of their finds when the time was right. Following this discussion, James and Errol couldn't help agreeing that twerps weren't so bad once they saw sense. Thus Dawn took her cheerful leave, and considering themselves to be in no significant danger, the group returned to Coalef Town - managing to find a place to stay which was open, regardless of unsociable hours. However there were only two rooms available, which resulted in James, Caley, Adam and Mondo cramming themselves into one of them, while Rose and Denise comfortably shared the other. Errol decided to remain outside - he wasn't too perturbed about sleeping in the open air, and besides that, there were a lot of things on his mind at present.

Cory, sat on the rail in their zecutynr form and dangled their podgy pink legs over the side as they took in the view of the rolling hills, backed by a velveteen starlit sky, beyond the regimentally-aligned buildings. Errol seemed equally in awe, the slit-like pupils of his wide eyes focused upon the round white circle that was the luminescent moon, beaming down upon them with its familiar eerie glow.

"This world...it's so pretty," Cory murmured. "I can't understand why anyone would want to destroy it."

"Well dat's because you got a straight-t'inkin' head on ya shoulders," Errol replied dully. "I wish everyone could be like you in dat regard."

Surprised at the tone of the response, Cory turned to look at their companion for a moment. Errol did not return the glance – it was hard to tell whether this had been a deliberate act, or he was simply a million miles away, lost in his own thoughts.

"What's wrong, Errol?" Cory spoke up softly.

"Ugh...my past is catchin' up wit' me, kid," the man uttered a heavy sigh. "One o' dose three Team Rocket Elites - da one wit' da magenta hair - she was a close friend o' mine." He paused, his next remark wracked with uncertainty. "Once."

"What happened?" Cory asked, tilting their head to one side a little.

"She couldn't accept who I'd become," Errol replied, motioning down at himself. "T'ing is, I wasn't always dis way. You an' I...we're not dat different, really. You were created in a lab, an' I was modified in one."

"Really?" Cory's eyes widened.

"Yup," Errol gave a nod. "I started life as your average meowth - or I woulda done, but my DNA got tinkered with while I was still an egg. So instead of evolving into what meowths are *supposed* ta become, I toined into...well...you can see it for y'self."

"Ohh..." Cory contemplated these words. "Is 'evolving' what happened to Chime earlier?"

"Dat's right!" Errol smiled. "Most pokémon gain a new form when dey get experienced enough." He noticed Cory's somewhat crestfallen expression. "An' youse got it pretty good, Cory! After all, y' can take on any form ya like."

Cory's face brightened, then it became thoughtful and distant again.

"Do you feel...bad that you never evolved into what all meowths evolve into?" the zecutyne spoke up carefully.

"Nah," Errol wrinkled up his nose. "All da poisians I met were snooty, fickle, and full o' demselves. Back when I was still a meowth, I was *happy* dat my body never tried ta evolve."

"Never?" Cory blinked in puzzlement. "Then how did you become a human?"

This was hardly a left-field question, yet it had managed to catch Errol very much off guard. Probably because he had been trying everything in his power to *not* think of the events surrounding his arrival into humanity, as of late. Cory winced a little, noticing the obvious shift in its companion's demeanour.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to..."

"It's alright, kid," Errol told him quietly. "I can't avoid it all my life. Da 'evolutionary stage' was artificial, so it had ta be triggered by a machine. And I allowed da scientist who experimented on me in da beginning to do just dat. I wasn't aware of dat scientist's identity at the time. He could've easily put me t'rough all kinds of awful tests, maybe even dissected me in order ta see how his scientific meddlin' had woiked. But..." the man's eyes grew watery. "She saved me."

Cory didn't reply. They didn't wish to cause any more hurt than they had already unwittingly done, despite their own curiosity.

"'Gloria', dat was her name," Errol murmured. "She was taken from her family ta bribe her father into working for Team Rocket. Yet despite all da risks, she rescued me from coiten death and kept my identity secret - right to da very end."

"She's gone?" Cory looked horrified.

"In da mind, at least," Errol said. "Dat was her punishment for all da kindness she showed me - Team Rocket stole her free will."

"Could we...get it back?" Cory inquired sadly. They weren't quite sure what 'free will' was, but if it was preventing their companion from being reunited with someone he thought highly of, then it had to have been something quite important.

"I'd sure like ta t'ink so," Errol sighed. He couldn't help but cling to that tiny sliver of optimism, but in reality, the challenge of such a thing seemed near-insurmountable. If not for the lack of knowledge as to how

the P.R.O.C.U functioned or whether its effects could be reversed, then for the lack of knowledge as to where Gloria had been transferred after her personality was reprogrammed.

There was a slight rustle from the bushes nearby, which caused Errol and Cory to glance in the direction of the noise. Three figures cautiously emerged, and as they entered the faint pool of street light, they were revealed to be a psyduck, a bidoof and a hitmonchan carrying a pineco. Each pokémon was looking a little worse for wear, still displaying the remnants of their previous disguises which they had attempted to remove, but their expressions were triumphant and deeply grateful.

<We're sorry if we got you into trouble, sir,> the hitmonchan spoke up in surprisingly polite tones.

"Nah, it's okay," Errol shrugged. "I'm always prepared fer trouble, heheh!" he looked at them. "But why'd ya come back?"

A moment of temporary surprise followed, while the pokémon adjusted to having their dialogue coherently responded to. They were quick to take it in their stride.

<Well...we wanted to say thank you,> the psyduck replied.

<It's been pretty scary since we were taken from our homes, but you took the risk to help us get away from that twisted human, and we didn't want you to think we'd not noticed your efforts,> the bidoof agreed.

<You good people,> the pineco remarked. <Like you.>

"Y' welcome!" Errol beamed, as Cory followed suit. "T'ough da kid did most of da woik, t'be honest." The pokémon looked at Cory in surprise and puzzlement. "Oh, of course. Ya wouldn't recognize him now. Cory's got a talent fer changing his shape - he was da ledyba crackin' da lock on ya cage."

"I came from a science lab!" Cory exclaimed, like this was a typical place to emerge from. "Where did you guys come from?"

<Forest,> the pineco said. <Fresh, green, cool. Was sleeping. Pulled from tree home.>

<I lived with lots of other bidoof on a huge ranch,> the bidoof smiled happily. <Sometimes we would be asked to carve things. It was a wonderful place...>

<I'd been on my way to fighting styles class...> the hitmonchan admitted.

<I was a Gym Leader's pokémon!> the psyduck announced proudly, generating a gasp from the bidoof and hitmonchan, and a puzzled murmur from Cory.

"What's a Gym Leader?" Cory asked.

<It's a human who spends their time challenging other humans to pokémon battles,> the psyduck explained. <Only it's their job, and they have a special building called a 'Pokémon Gym', which they hold the

battles in. Also the human challenger gets a badge if they win. I think the pokémon should get a badge too, if you ask me...>

"Have you ever been in a Pokémon Gym battle?" Cory leaned forward, very intrigued.

<Sure I have!> the psyduck beamed. <I join in them any chance I get!> Its face fell. <Though I'm afraid I'm not very good at them...>

"You're not?"

<My Water Gun is weak, my Scratch hurts me more than it hurts the opponent, and...> the pokémon took a deep breath, blushing slightly. <I can't even swim.>

"Oh," Cory looked awkward. "Well surely you must have something you can do."

<I can do telekinesis,> the psyduck perked up a little. <But only if my head hurts really bad. So I prefer not to.> It sighed. <My trainer says she loves me as much as everyone else, but I see how frustrated she gets when I try and help out, and I wonder if she just says those nice things so I don't think about how lousy a team player I am.>

"Wait a minute..." Errol spoke up at last. There was a suspicious tone in his voice. "Who *is* ya trainer?"

<Her name's Misty Williams,> the psyduck replied cheerfully. <Have you heard of her?>

"I knew it!" the man exclaimed, causing everyone to jump.

"Skinny kid, had three sistas, lives in Cerulean City, Kanto!"

<Wow...you really *have* heard of her,> the psyduck looked a little worried. <You hadn't been stalking her, had you?>

"Eehh..." Errol looked uncomfortable. He didn't like to admit his previous occupation had forced him to track the aforementioned water pokémon trainer and her friends in a manner similar to stalking. "Hey, she's a Gym Leader. It ain't exactly hard ta get dat sorta info."

<Good point,> Psyduck chuckled, while Errol internally breathed a sigh of relief. <Anyway...I was out on a trip with Misty and some of the other pokémon team, and I managed to get separated from them. That was when that man kidnapped me...> It looked a little bereft. <Thing is, I've been doing some thinking while I've been trapped. And I don't want to go back to Misty.>

"What?" the pokémon's listeners spluttered.

<Don't get me wrong!> Psyduck waved his flippers around emphatically. <I love her dearly, even with her temper and name-calling. She means well. And I want to be the best I can be for her - but it means I've got to find a way to get stronger before I go back.>

Errol looked suitably stunned. For a creature that had seemed quite absent-minded, it appeared Psyduck was processing matters thoroughly and considerately. Something in him felt moved at the

pokémon's desire to achieve something that appeared so out of reach - a feeling he himself knew all too well.

"Tell ya what," he began. "How'd ya like ta travel with us? We're on a pretty intense journey - no doubt you'd get a whole buncha training by sticking around."

<Really?> Psyduck looked astonished. <You'd let me come along? Yes! I'd love to!> He did a little dance of joy, only to end up tripping over his own feet and falling beak first into the dirt.

"Yay!" Cory beamed, helping Psyduck up while Errol hoped to himself that he wouldn't regret such a decision. "New friends!"

<You're pretty different, aren't you?> the hitmonchan remarked. <Not many humans can understand what pokémon say.>

<Once I knew a meowth who could talk both human and pokémon speech!> Psyduck pointed out. <He was a pretty nasty piece of work, let me tell you that...>

"So!" Errol cut in before Psyduck reeled off any more of his chequered past. "Do youse three need an escort back home, or can you take care o' dat y'selves?"

<No problem!> the bidoof said thankfully. <My ranch is not that far from here, luckily enough.>

<I'm sure I'll be fine,> the hitmonchan grinned, flexing its muscles. <With the help of the city pokémon, I'll find my way back in no time. I'll make sure to get this pineco back into another forest, too.>

<New tree,> the pineco agreed with notable excitement, and the three remaining pokémon bid farewell and left.

<So, what now?> Psyduck asked.

"I've done enough t'inkin' fer tonight," Errol remarked, lying back on the grass. "I say it's time ta grab some Zs."

<Sounds like a plan...> Psyduck nodded, flopping down nearby. He didn't seem perturbed that he was being required to 'grab some Zs' in the open air. Cory followed suit, gazing up at the stars with a puzzled expression. They were certain they had helped Errol rescue *five* pokémon from the salesman's clutches that day - so what had become of the fifth one?

Indeed, the aipom had given little hesitation toward leaving the company of the other kidnapped pokémon as soon as was physically possible. Once they had managed to dislodge each other's disguises the best they could, the aipom bid her associates thanks and gave them a hasty farewell before escaping deeper into the forest. When the lithe figure was certain no one with reasonable intelligence happened to be eavesdropping, she placed a stubby paw to one large ear, activating a communications device set inside.

<Control Core, are you reading me?>

A few seconds passed. The aipom repeated her inquiry, waiting intermittently for feedback. At last, a slightly metallic voice rang out through her earpiece.

[Control Core responds. Please state your agent identification.]

<OC190,> the aipom recited clearly.

[Processing vocal signature...] the artificial system informed.

[Welcome, Agent Capu. Now transferring to LFPE Mission Headquarters.]

There was a succession of electronic twitterings and grindings, before another, more organic-sounding voice addressed the caller.

<Commander Mouland speaking,> it barked.

<Commander!> the aipom exclaimed.

<Pamela!> Commander Mouland's gruff voice filled with warmth.

<We haven't had a report back from you in hours - whatever happened?>

<I was...temporarily detained,> Pamela grimaced, not wishing to disclose the full humiliating consequences of her kidnap and enforced dress-up act. <No confidential information was revealed, I am happy to report. She was there, though.>

<Ms. Aquisa?>

<That is correct,> Pamela replied solemnly. <She was wandering around the Coalef Showground with a camera, gathering footage to turn

into more anti-human propaganda, no doubt. There was one particular human racer I saw who would've been perfect for it.>

<Unfortunate...> Commander Moulard sighed. <But not high priority. Keep monitoring her though, Miss Capu. Ms. Aquisa is one of our strongest leads on Eclipse's activities.>

<Yes sir.>

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

Errol had not been the only one to have his rest disturbed by wandering thoughts that night. While James, Adam and Mondo slept soundly – the lattermost of these tightly clutching the hat which Denise had bought him at the Compendium earlier - Caley lingered in one of the hotel room's armchairs, silently flicking through the channels on an old CRT television with minimal sound. This was *far* from how he'd expected his first journey across Tatto to turn out. Caley was a young man of strong ideals and simple pleasures, and having such a complex, heavy responsibility thrust upon him had been almost too much to bear. Part of him wanted to run, to go back home and pretend none of this had ever happened. Another part of him wished that he'd never been so eager to leave in the first place. But even if he *hadn't* left, these events would have occurred regardless. Team Rocket would have still constructed their

obelisk device, performed their experiments. The world would still be under threat - he just wouldn't have known about it until it was too late.

Caley paused, having found his exploration had brought him to a 24 hour cartoon channel, currently broadcasting an animated series based on the Rumble Toy franchise. The scene depicted a slightly battered-looking toy riolu gazing dispiritedly up at the setting sun from amongst tufts of grass that were almost as high as itself.

"I'm so lost..." the riolu toy sighed bitterly. "So far away from home. I wonder if I'll ever get back there. I wonder if things will ever go back to the way they were..."

"Yeah..." Caley murmured at the television screen. "Me too." The fact the series itself only managed to remind him of his younger sister Abby and, in turn, his mother, made the emotions within all the more difficult to stomach. He decided to switch off the television and arrange himself haphazardly upon the armchair - willing his tired body into slumber.

And when sleep finally did grace him, it was not with the pleasant heaviness and dark that is typical to that state of being. Red light saturated Caley's vision - snatching at his limbs and binding them tightly with the sensation of hundreds of tiny needles. A guttural noise, not unlike that of shearing metal, assaulted his mind with an insufferable pressure. He opened his mouth - the raw sound burning in his throat.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

James reeled back as Chime let out an equally anguished sound – though this was higher pitched and vibrated throughout the room, cracking the television's glass screen and the wall mirror in the process. He sat up, clasping his hands to his ears, and tried to glance around the room through watery vision. Chime had left her position beside him on the bed and was hovering nearby – looking upset and disorientated. In the corner, Kota hung to Caley's tightly curled form in the armchair. The young man's eyes were tight shut and he grasped at his head, panting erratically.

"Caley!" Adam cried anxiously. "What happened?"

"Can you hear us?" Mondo joined in, getting up and approaching the chair. After a few seconds, the young man's eyelids flickered open. "I think you were having a nightmare."

Caley turned his face toward the others. There was an intense desperation upon it which confirmed their suspicions.

"I could feel pokémon in pain," he shuddered. "Two big, powerful pokémon, trapped and helpless like bugs. I don't know where they are, or *what* they are, but I could sense their fear. Their anger. And I can't do anything to stop it - I can't..." Caley then gave a sharp intake of breath as tears brimmed in his eyes and trickled down the sides of his face.

James looked on sadly - he was frustrated that he could not do more to lighten the situation as it stood, but he also figured it must be

excruciatingly difficult for Caley as both a psychic and a human being to feel that suffering as if it was his own, and long for it to be ended quicker. Judging by how Chime and Kota had responded, they too had felt whatever those unidentified pokémon were experiencing.

"We're doing what we can, Cal," Adam murmured. There was no derision in his voice, no impatience. It seemed that the youth was attuned to that feeling of helplessness that Caley had at that point in time.

"I know..." Caley sighed as he wiped the wetness from his face. "But do you have something inside you that, no matter how much you do, always believes you could do more?"

"It's the story of my life," Adam replied bluntly. "But we have to draw the line somewhere. That's what Neesee would say, right?"

"Maybe part of me is convinced that because I have these psychic abilities, I should be able to just teleport into Team Rocket's HQ and blow it to pieces or something..." Caley trailed off and began to chuckle at his own words. "Stupid, isn't it?"

"I don't think so," James shook his head. "But having psychic powers doesn't make you some kind of god, any more than having a Plasma Ball makes you a thunderstorm."

Caley shuddered. Part of him was asking *why* didn't it, while the other part recoiled at a thought process which sounded horribly like the one his father must have lost control of. Adam had unknowingly echoed

Sabrina's words, the words he had to cling to. Yes...one had to know when to stop.

"Listen, Caley. As tough as it is to be aware of sometimes, we can't fix everything by ourselves," Mondo said.

"But that hardly makes it pointless," James added. "If it hadn't been for your bravery in entering the Team Rocket HQ, none of us would be out here enjoying a semblance of freedom."

"And that includes all those pokémon!" Mondo grinned.

"Besides, being too eager to rush in can often cause more of a mess than standing back and assessing a situation," James added. "This journey has taught you so many things, hasn't it?"

"Yes," Caley replied.

"And it may yet teach us even more," James smiled. "We must be patient, and lean on one another."

"You're right..." Caley murmured. "I mustn't worry about matters that are beyond me. Everything that needs to happen will happen, in time."

No sooner had Caley awoken the next morning, than he left the hotel room and made his way downstairs to the grassy area outside the building. The sun had not long since risen, and the majority of Coalef's residents - temporary or otherwise - were still sleeping off the

exuberance of the day before. Errol and Cory were something of another matter, and had glanced up in surprise at the arrival of two new figures to the scene.

"Caley?!" Errol exclaimed. "What'chu doin' up dis early?"

"I have work to do," the young man resolved firmly. "It's about time I started taking this more seriously. I may not be able to fix everything, but that doesn't mean I won't be playing my part. And that part requires that I know myself and my limits - starting with my psychic speciality."

"Psychic speciality?" Errol echoed. Caley gave a nod, before pulling up a sleeve on his jacket to reveal one of the bracers attached to his wrists. "Heyyy....dat's a nifty bit o' gear you got dere."

"Sabrina gave them to me when I visited her in Scale Falls," Caley explained. "She said it would enable me to psychically form different shapes from my Aura, like barriers and stuff."

"Y' mean like dat shield thingy ya made back in Mayni City, when we were trying to escape dat wrangler guy?" Errol looked intrigued.

"Yeah," Caley replied. "But that was a fluke. I need to get to grips with generating Aura at will. How do *you* create barriers, Kota?"

Uuuhhh... the augret struggled to find an appropriate description.
It's like spreading a blanket? Only in mid-air?

"That doesn't really explain how you form the energy, though," Caley said.

It's hard to explain, Kota insisted awkwardly. *It's kind of like...a burp.*

"A burp'?" Caley looked mildly disturbed.

It's not like you can explain to someone how to burp, Kota folded his stubby arms.

"Especially if it's with deir mind," Errol pointed out, while Cory tried unsuccessfully to stifle a childlike snicker.

Exactly! Kota said. *You just sort of...know.*

"So it's instinct," Caley concluded, the previous spark of enthusiasm in his eyes beginning to dim.

"Maybe humans with psychic abilities don't have da same instincts psychic pokémon do," Errol shrugged.

"Maybe *I'm* just the one that doesn't have it..." Caley's body crumpled forward a little.

Heyyy don't get disheartened! Kota flailed. He strongly disliked the thought that he'd made his best friend upset. Grasping at a means to restore Caley's upbeat attitude, the augret floated a short distance away and projected a psychic wall of Aura for Caley to observe. *You just need to watch me make a few barriers to get the feel of it.*

There was the sound of a slightly electrical thud, coupled with an utterance of pain and disorientation, as a stocky male figure with dark red hair stepped out of the trees and directly into the surface of Kota's barrier. Kota yelled in alarm and quickly disengaged the barrier before zooming towards Caley and sheltering behind his head.

"Dat guy got da feel of it," Errol commented unhelpfully.

"Sorry about that," Caley bit his lip, as the man removed his sunglasses and rubbed at an area of his forehead where he'd made impact with the barrier. Without warning, the man swung round at him, both hands raised. Caley flinched, half-expecting a physical retaliation from an otherwise angered recipient. But instead the hands slapped down on both his shoulders, combined with a relieved chuckle.

"We found you!"

"You...did?" Caley began, anxiety stirring within him. Errol, Cory and Kota were giving the man studied looks at this point, not quite sure whether to run or stand and fight this new arrival. He didn't look particularly threatening - besides the sunglasses, he was dressed in dark blue jeans and a light grey t-shirt with a sunshine yellow vertical band down the middle, covered by a puffy orange jacket. If anything, he looked more like a tourist who had managed to wander into the wrong place at the wrong time. Regardless, Errol had shifted into pose typical of Rocket operatives about to engage in retaliation - legs spread slightly so as to give his feet better grip against the soft earth.

"Glad to see you found these guys too," the man exclaimed with a beaming smile, completely undeterred by the threatening display.

"Wait a minute..." Errol's face began to contort with recognition. "Kevin? Is dat you?"

"In the flesh!" came the pleased reply.

"Nice disguise, buddy!" Errol slapped Kevin on the back. "Almost didn't recognize ya dere."

"You didn't recognize me at all!" Kevin chuckled.

"So where's Jenna?"

"Good question," Kevin glanced over his shoulder with a frown. "She was right behind me."

With almost perfect timing, a brown-haired woman dressed in a long white coat strolled up next to Kevin. A drifblim floated along beside the woman, looking pleased with themselves.

"Well!" Kevin put his hands on his hips, giving a satisfied nod. "Everything's present and correct."

"Good to see you again, guys," Jenna smiled.

"Great to see you too," Caley returned the expression with a hint of relief. "And Flair! I'm so glad you managed to find Jenna." The young man paused, looking downcast. "I felt really bad that I wasn't able to help her, Kevin and Errol escape the Team Rocket HQ... are you still mad at me?"

"You were mad at him?" Jenna raised her eyebrows at the drifblim, who chuckled a little awkwardly. "Flair! Caley tried his very best. I think for one guy, he accomplished a lot."

"It's alright, Jenna," Caley scratched the back of his head. "I don't blame Flair for having been disappointed back then. After all, she cares about you a lot."

"Well everything's fine now," Jenna folded her arms conclusively, before giving Flair one last stern look. "But you really shouldn't have left on such a bad note."

Caley glanced up as the remainder of his travelling companions made their appearance. They had all put their wigs and false eyebrows back on, except for Adam and Mondo, who were wearing the hats Denise had bought them.

"Look who showed up," Errol grinned to the others, whose mixed expressions of vexation and tiredness began to ease somewhat. "It's Kevin and Jenna!"

"Welcome back, you two," Rose smiled warmly, as Jenna removed her glasses. "It's been a while."

"How did you find us?" Caley asked. He sounded worried.

"It wasn't easy, you'll be glad to know," Jenna reassured him. "We used a little trial and error, visited all the places that had unusual news

reports from them over the past week. You've certainly been making tracks."

"It's been tough, to say the least," Caley agreed faintly.

"I lost count of the amount of foot sores back in Scale Falls," Adam muttered, looking at his boots.

"Where'd *you* get to, anyway?" Kevin asked Jenna in mock scolding tones.

"Sorry about that," Jenna giggled sheepishly. "Ikinis stopped to rescue a pokémon who'd got stuck in the hole in a tree."

She stepped aside to reveal a blaziken who was clutching a bulbous yellow shape between its grey talons. The blaziken carefully turned the shape around, until the audience was met with a large cream-coloured beak and two bewildered, wide eyes.

"Psyduck?!" Errol spluttered. "What'cha wander off for?"

<I just wanted some breakfast...> Psyduck insisted, looking regretful. As Jenna's blaziken placed him on the floor, everyone was able to see the stark, red marks around the water pokémon's midriff where he'd been firmly lodged inside the tree trunk.

"Okay, I'm officially lost," Denise scratched her head. "Jenna and Kevin showing up I get, but where did this psyduck come from, and how come Errol is familiar with it?"

"She's got a point, Errol," James eyed the man suspiciously. "How come you know who it is?"

Errol uttered a nervous chuckle, but swiftly composed himself.

"Look, Jimmy," he began. "Psyduck needs my help. Da other pokémon we rescued were able to find their way back to deir homes, but dis guy's too far from home to do dat. Besides...I promised him he could come along with us t' get stronger before he returns to Misty."

"What?! That's-?" James almost choked, the realisation having hit him like a big rock. "No way! It's far too dangerous! That guy could get kidnapped, or crushed, or drowned or something. There's no way we can add an inept pokémon with unpredictable psychic powers to our ranks!"

"Caley's powers have been unpredictable too, but we haven't left *him* behind because of it!" Cory insisted with a frown. James paused, surprised at an outburst such as this having come from the group's most placid member.

"Look, Psyduck's well aware of what he's getting himself into," Errol stated firmly. "But he wants ta be better skilled, and if we don't let him train, who will?"

"It's not our responsibility," James frowned.

"I'm *makin'* it my responsibility!" Errol folded his arms. By this time, the two men had edged uncomfortably close to one another - chests puffed, indignantly glaring down their noses at their opposition like two unfezant vying for territory. The others watched this conflict of interest

with a mixture of shock and amusement. After several moments of prickly silence, James relented and backed away.

"Alright..." he sighed. "But I swear, if he causes any problems-"

"You got it, Jimmy!" Errol grinned, pleased for winning. Jenna smiled to herself - she was happy to see the pair were once again re-acquainted in full.

"Say...did you say the trainer of that psyduck's name was 'Misty'?" Kevin blinked. "Kantoan Gym Leader Misty?"

"Yes~" Errol looked at him with puzzlement. "Why'd you ask?"

"Just so happens that Jen' and I travelled with her for a bit during our stint in Johto," Kevin explained.

"Small world..." Adam remarked to himself in deadpan tones.

"Errol told us how you managed to escape from Team Rocket's cargo ship after the Dusty Town incident, but what did you get up to in Johto?" Denise inquired. Jenna and Kevin sat upon the ground, silently prompting the others to do the same by example. They leant forward, expressions of curiosity now present on their faces.

"Well...where to begin?" Jenna stretched her arms back. "After we said goodbye to Errol and Cory, we managed to get a flight to the west of the region from Mayni City Airport..."

TO BE CONTINUED...

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