

POKÉMON  
REBIRTH  
**ULTIMATUM**  
Endgame Edition



**EPISODE TWENTY SEVEN**  
**Miracle Eye**

Following their separation from Errol, Cory and Ritchie, Jessie and Cassidy made their way back through the passages of the cargo aircraft to the docking area where they had initially arrived. If they were going to escape the oil platform, this is where they would find their means to do so. With the remainder of the base's occupants ensconced in the gruesome details of Project Rebirth, the only resistance came in the form of the docking area's own securely-fastened doorway, which was swiftly bypassed. Cassidy had engaged very little in vehicle training, but her memory was sharp to the extent that she could recall what type of plane she and her accomplices made their entrance in. The design seemed simple enough to manoeuvre - not that there was any time to be picky.

"Did you have to set off those alarms?" Jessie frowned, wincing as her ears filled with a shrill echo.

"It couldn't be helped," Cassidy said bluntly, opening the aircraft's outer door and slipping into the cockpit. "There was no way to get into this area except for Soluqua to force the lock. Now you know how to fly one of these, right?"

"More or less, sure," Jessie replied, following suit and positioning herself in the cockpit's left seat. She'd co-piloted several aircraft with James in the past - admittedly most of them had been dirigibles, but a flight mechanism was a flight mechanism, wasn't it?

"Good," Cassidy started the engine. As she did so, the control panel sprung into life and began transmitting a request signal to the

docking area's front door. Jessie uttered a small gasp as the control panel emitted a harsh buzz.

"Someone's disabled our remote control over the exit hatch!" she exclaimed.

"Then help me open it!" Cassidy snapped. Recognizing the indirect instruction, Soluqua thrust her head out of the window, a ball of blue energy rapidly forming in her mouth. The Focus Blast was unleashed at the hatch with velocity, searing a moderate hole which the golduck-vaporeon hybrid began prying wider with her telekinetic abilities.

"How?" Jessie insisted. "Wobbuffet can't do things like that!"

"Get it to lend its power to Soluqua!" Cassidy yelled. "Did you learn *nothing* about Aura transference?"

Too anxious about the situation to give a retort, Jessie released Wobbuffet into the plane and instructed him accordingly. The pokémon held out a flipper to Soluqua who grasped it - a fierce blue light surrounded them both and the hole in the cargo aircraft's exit hatch was wrenched outwards. Revving the engine, Jessie sped the plane through the hatch where it landed somewhat harshly upon the platform beyond. There the propellers were activated, levitating the entire assembly into the sky.

"That...that was something," Jessie remarked.

"You always were better at piloting than me," Cassidy said.

"Hm? Is that a compliment I hear?" Jessie smirked.

"Feh! Don't get all smug," Cassidy rolled her eyes. "It's not a compliment. It's a fact."

"Whatever it is, it's you admitting you're not perfect at everything," Jessie smiled to herself. "That's good enough for me."

"We've got more important things than petty comparisons to worry about right now, Jessie," Cassidy groaned.

"Oh let me have this moment," Jessie grumbled. "It's not like I get them often..."

The aircraft jolted suddenly, throwing the women to one side in their chairs and causing the pokémon behind them to topple over. An urgent bleeping resounded from the aircraft's console.

"That felt like an impact," Cassidy concluded firmly. "Something must be tailing us. Why didn't the radar flag a warning?"

"I don't know," Jessie frowned. "Something's causing it to behave weirdly." Uttering a snort of annoyance, Cassidy reached up and pulled down an emergency periscope designed for looking behind the aircraft.

"It's another TR-H7," she informed her companions. "Figures. All those alarms would have been picked up by someone. Can you get a damage report, Jessie?

"Outer hull was grazed," Jessie relayed. "We were lucky there." At this point, the underside of the aircraft behind them opened to reveal a more formidable piece of artillery. Sparks began to gather inside the muzzle of the cannon-like weapon at a rapid rate.

"Sharp left!" Cassidy yelled. Jessie swung the aircraft to the side, causing the vast beam of energy discharged by the cannon to miss by inches.

"We've got to lose them," Cassidy muttered. She glanced up at the thick clouds overhead. "Take us up."

"Are you nuts?" Jessie spluttered. "It looks like there's a storm going on up there! We could get killed!"

"Then we'll just have to chance it!" Cassidy snapped. "If we get caught by whoever's flying that plane, I can *guarantee* you we won't live another day!"

Jessie tensed her shoulders. She hated to admit it - not only because of who was delivering the statement, but also because of what the statement entailed - Cassidy was right. Taking a deep breath, Jessie pulled back on the steering controls and the aircraft steadily ascended. Clear grey sky gave way to murky, tumbling mistiness - interspersed with crackles of electricity and pulsating light.

"It's working," Cassidy said. "They haven't followed us."

"Great," Jessie replied in a deadpan manner. "Now let's hope we don't get struck by lightning while we're up here..." Her words dissipated

into horrified silence, prompting Cassidy to retract from the periscope and observe.

A line of magnezone stretched as far as the eye could see, each pokémon's body brimming with stored power. It appeared from the agonized looks upon the magnezone's faces that such potent energy was proving challenging for even them to handle. Strong beams of electricity connected the magnezone in a seemingly endless chain across the sky.

"What is going on?" Cassidy gawped, wide-eyed.

"I've lost all readings," Jessie stammered. "Engine is still running but steering is becoming very hard."

"There's too much magnetism in the air..." Cassidy trailed off. Her dismayed expression dictated that this was not an outcome she had predicted.

Suddenly it was all around them - intimidating bursts that saturated every corner of the aircraft's innards as they crossed from one side to the other. Jessie and Cassidy's phasenacs and Pokéballs were grasped at by an unrelenting invisible force - their earrings tugged viciously, threatening to rip clean from their ears unless they were loosed. Soluqua cried out in pain as one of these electric streaks lashed at her gut, throwing her into Wobbuffet's rubbery side.

"Soluqua!" Cassidy screamed, letting her possessions claimed by the magnetic field to drift toward the aircraft's hull and cling there. She unclasped her seatbelt with difficulty and rushed to her pokémon's side,

as Wobbuffet looked down anxiously. The sheer force of the electricity had knocked the vaporeon-golduck hybrid out cold. She was breathing, but only just.

"We've got to bail," Jessie said. The tone of her voice was oddly calm. Cassidy did not reply - she remained hunched over Soluqua's limp form as if completely resigned to whatever outcome awaited. Despite their perilous situation, Jessie couldn't help but pause. This was the second time she had witnessed Cassidy showing any empathy for pokémon she worked with. It was no less surprising than the first time, earlier that day in Professor Bohrgram's laboratory. Before today, Jessie had assumed Cassidy to care little for her pokémon associates. It seemed there was much she had yet to learn about the woman. But there would be no opportunity to learn anything if they did not escape.

Wobbuffet glanced up as Jessie knelt beside him, still with the same composed visage.

"I'm sorry to put this much responsibility on you, Wobby...but we really need your help," she said.

Moments later, the aircraft that had been pulled helplessly towards the line of magnezone was seared clean in two - its fractured shards crumpling into metal spheres that were cast amongst the fearsome lightning bolts and into the atmosphere beyond. Out from the clouds, a group of figures descended at speed - surrounded in a greenish tinted

orb. It was a long way to fall. Wobbuffet grimaced, channelling every ounce of effort into maintaining the Safeguard around himself and his companions as it was pummelled by the wind. There had been many times he had found himself plummeting through the sky, but never from this height. The pokémon wrestled with the throes of his dwindling consciousness - he couldn't fail Jessie, not now. Jessie needed him.

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The darkness shifted, but the heaviness in her body remained. From the soft, pliable ground, Jessie attempted to lift herself into a kneeling position. Her aches and exhaustion were further compounded by her waterlogged uniform, which was becoming that much wetter from the rain. Opening her eyes, Jessie saw sand underneath her gloved fingers and exhaled a long breath of grateful relief. Glancing up at the moon peeking from under the folds of a clouded night sky, she began to wonder just how long she was unconscious, since it had been late afternoon when she left the oil platform.

A turn of the head brought only the presence of Jessie's pokémon companion into view. Other than the stretching expanse of coastline dotted with one or two krabby and corphish, it appeared she was alone. Part of her felt a little betrayed by Wobbuffet, but she fought it back. Wobbuffet was not a pokémon suited to water after all - her request of

him to protect Cassidy, Soluqua and herself had been outrageous in retrospect. It was a sheer miracle they had survived at all.

"How...how did we get back to shore, Wobbuffet?" Jessie inquired weakly. "Do you know?"

"Wah wah-buhfeht wab," the pokémon nodded, before drawing in the sand with its flipper for Jessie's benefit. She studied the crudely scraped marks for a moment.

"Rescued by luvdisc?" she concluded bitterly, removing her sodden gloves and tossing them aside. "Fate has a sense of irony..."

Wobbuffet looked at his trainer with a confused and deeply upset expression as her head slowly lowered toward her hands. Luvdisc were known to gather around beings with strong vibes of affection. Since Jessie's separation from her two closest friends, the only love *she'd* managed to show, was to herself. As the woman sat there, thoughts continued to bombard her head. Why hadn't she turned away earlier? Where was she to go now? And what had happened to Butch and Cassidy? Despite them having been a major hindrance in the past, Jessie was finding herself rather concerned over whether either of them had survived their escape. And if so, how badly were they taking their disconnection from Team Rocket? After all, their whole lives had revolved around the organization.

Jessie gazed back across the starlit sky and thought deeply about this. In a way, her life had revolved around Team Rocket too. If it hadn't,

she would have tried to leave long ago. But she had been adamant to prove herself to the mother that she had been so angered by and yet so desperate to show her worth to. The thing was, her mother had *also* been caught in the organization's web at some point - long before Jessie herself had considered signing up. Jessie had struggled with her bitterness over an absent parent's obsession with tracking and capturing Mew, and loss at what seemed to be neglect for the pursuit of material treasures.

"I-it got so out of control..." she sighed. "I'm alone... and for all the good I've done I *deserve* to be alone."

"Wah-buh..." the pokémon remarked. He didn't seem at all convinced. Jessie looked back at him longingly.

"Do you think I'll ever find them again?" she asked softly. "And even if I do, will they ever forgive me for the way I've acted?"

"Wah-buh-feht!" came the enthusiastic reply as Wobbuffet gave a wide grin. Jessie threw her arms around the pokémon and hugged him close, shutting her eyes as she did so.

"I sure wish I was as positive as you," she murmured. "But if I want any chance of getting my friends back I'm going to have to swallow my pride and trust that they'll accept my apology. I have to do this - I miss them so much..."

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Errol, Cory, Ritchie and Sparky were quick to make their escape from Team Rocket's makeshift base. With the application of Ritchie's salvaged jet pack and a transformation into augret shape by Cory, the group descended from the oil platform to reunite with their companions - some within Karis' and Farrell's boat, others huddled stop Larydos' ridged back. From there, they were able to return to the shore near Darkiff Port without any attempts to stop them. Not that this abated the group's feelings any - they were fully aware the only reason their intrusion had gone mostly unnoticed was that Team Rocket's horrific plans were coming to fruition.

Once inside Darkiff City, Farrell and Karis resolved to inform the Pokémon League and try to prepare a counterstrike - despite having no idea where, when or what Team Rocket's hybrid army would be striking. Even Colress, though having been involved in these plans to an extent, was unable to enlighten the others to any such information. With polite gratitude, he bid farewell and set off in pursuit of his own mysterious intentions. Ritchie was also full of thanks to Cory and Errol for helping him gather the data he was looking for, and promised Farrell and Karis he would spread the news to the Pokémon Guardsmen, upon his return to their headquarters.

By the time it came for the Gym Leaders and Caley's group to part ways, the weather had grown most unsettled. Thick clouds cast a pall over the early evening sky, and soon, heavy rain began to tumble groundward - accompanied by disgruntled rumblings of thunder. Even so, Caley refused to take shelter from the watery onslaught - more concerned with his future responsibilities than that of getting wet. He and his companions rode a bus across the bridge which separated Darkiff's coast with that of the adjacent Cormouth Town. The ex-Team Rocket members of the group had decided to remain incognito for the time being - while the organization they worked for was no longer all that interested in them, their data was still firmly logged into the Bounty Hunter database.

And the weather continued to worsen. It was this that persuaded Caley to lodge in Cormouth Town's Pokémon Centre for the night, albeit with some reluctance. The Nurse Joy in charge of the centre kindly accepted them, but not before giving them a scolding over being out in such loathsome conditions. Once Kota was revived and healed, Caley made his way to bed without a word, and his companions followed suit. For just a few hours they longed for the blissful ignorance of sleep to escort their troubling knowledge aside - if they were to be fortunate.

The clock in the Pokémon Centre's reception area struck ten as the sounds of frantic pummelling were heard on the sealed automatic entrance doors. Shuffling from her post behind the desk, the chansey nurse on duty approached the doors to see two drenched forms - one

human, one pokémon, leant desperately upon the glass and shivering violently.

"Please!" the woman urged, her voice muffled slightly by the door.

"Please can we come in? It's so cold..."

"Chan-seh?" the nurse tilted herself with a suspicious expression, eyeing the insignia upon the woman's black dress. She had seen that logo before - not in person, but the knowledge of the organization whose members wore such a uniform was prevalent amongst all who worked in the pokémon medical services.

"Wah wah-buh wah wah-buffeht!" the woman's pokémon companion flailed insistently. The chansey stepped back and thought this statement over for a moment. So the newcomers were escapees from Team Rocket, if the wobbuffet's exclamations were to be believed. Even so, no one really deserved to be trapped in the chilly torrential rain - she was willing to give them at least one shot to prove their righteousness.

The Pokémon Centre's front doors slid open, sending Jessie and Wobbuffet staggering into the lobby amongst a harsh blast of icy wind. Wincing from the sharp drop in temperature, the chansey nurse quickly shut the doors behind them and retreated behind the desk, before bringing out a couple of towels which had been kept there for emergencies.

"Thank you..." Jessie shook, wrapping the first towel around Wobbuffet before doing the same for herself. The chansey nurse responded with a polite smile, before typing into a computer upon the desk.

"I'm afraid. I cannot offer a room to. Someone without a trainer ID," a computerized voice relayed, with no sympathy for what it had just announced.

"That's okay," Jessie returned a smile, although somewhat feebly. "I'm just grateful to be somewhere warm. Do you have anywhere I can sit?"

"The lounge area. Is here," the computerized voice informed, and a monitor placed atop the desk facing Jessie's direction displayed a small map. With a nod of acknowledgement, Jessie took her leave with Wobbuffet in guarded accompaniment.

As she drew closer to the Pokémon Centre's lounge, Jessie blinked inquisitively. At first she thought she was just hearing things. But as Jessie stood there and listened, there it was again. The faint, but definable sound of an acoustic guitar being played, accompanied by an equally faint, familiar voice.

*I gotta get dis team togedda~*

Her chest had tightened, her shoulders had tensed, yet still Jessie continued to follow the ponderous improvisation through the quiet corridors of the Pokémon Centre. Somehow she knew what would meet

her gaze upon arriving, but she was sick of running away from it now. Her life and her heart were missing something vital - those two team mates, her closest companions that she had overcome so much with.

*We ain't da same guys on our own~*

It was true - they weren't. When Jessie's mother had left her with a family friend, she had begun to wonder if there was something wrong with her. At Pokémon Technical, James had been the first person to look past Jessie's sullen visage and give her a chance. And when they were reunited at Team Rocket, Meowth did the same thing. They had *believed* in her. But even then, an underlying sense of distrust had lingered in the back of Jessie's mind - as if she might have been betrayed at any given moment. And so, when James had accepted to take the punishments for their team alone, Jessie hadn't seen it as an act of kindness. She had felt sorely disregarded. When Meowth had returned to her room in human form, that feeling had only been compounded. Meowth wasn't the cause of the retaliation at all, he had simply been the unfortunate target of a long period of internal conflict.

*But its hard enough, ta keep your hopes high~*

Jessie placed a hand to her waist, intending to bring out the graduation photograph she had kept with her for comfort, but retracting her hand upon realising she no longer had her phesepack. Still, she didn't need to look at the photograph to remember the image that was ingrained into her memory. Two young people – 16 and 17 years of age

respectively - dressed in red Team Rocket apprentice outfits and accompanied by a small creamy coloured feline pokémon. All three figures cheerful and enthusiastic, their faces overcome with smiles. Jessie blinked back a few tears of remembrance. It was time to fix this, at least as best as she could.

*When you're left alone~*

As she emerged from the corridor and entered the Pokémon Centre's lounge area, Jessie found the source of the wistful song. Sitting upon one of the plush armchairs and humbly gazing through the window at the moon, barely visible in the night sky, was a man with ruffled golden hair whose physical appearance belied his age. His back was to Jessie, and she could see the neck of the guitar propped upon his knee, the rest of which was obscured by the rest of his body. Across the room, a Psyduck reclined near to the artificial fireplace – a heating unit with the appearance of holographic flames.

"I didn't know you could play guitar," Jessie spoke up, causing Errol to flinch sharply and Psyduck to glance up in horror. The former of the two relaxed shortly afterwards, once realisation of whose voice it was set in.

"Feh," came the almost dismissive response. "It's not so much of a challenge now I got fingas."

The man tipped the instrument forward and examined the considerable dent that Ein's face had made upon the other side. Silence

resumed as Jessie shifted uncomfortably. The anger she had felt at seeing her companion in this shape the first time was no longer present, replaced by sadness, guilt and a complete block as to what to say next. Her mind was still having difficulty aligning the man she saw now, to the pokémon she had spent so much time alongside.

"Remember when I volunteered to act as a performer at your Pacifidlog Town Pokémon Contest debut?" Errol spoke up. "Sure, I didn't get what'cha saw in dose t'ings, but I did it anyway. Y'know why?" He left a pause, in case Jessie were to respond. "Because I knew dey meant a lot t'ya. An' dat was good enough fer me - dat it made you happy."

There was silence.

"What I'm trying ta say is, if I really *am* ya friend, appearances wouldn't matter to you," Errol insisted, suddenly feeling the need to justify himself.

"They obviously mattered to *you*, since you had yours altered," Jessie mumbled.

"Alright, Jess..." Errol heaved a sigh. "Lemme try and break dis down for you. Imagine - if y' will - dat you started your life as a washpail."

"Now that's just stupi-" Jessie began contemptuously, only to be hushed.

"Hey! Hear me out," Errol demanded, resuming his explanation. "You started life as a washpail, albeit a kinda odd-lookin' one. Ya go

t'rough every day, carrying water an' such, but da whole time dere's dis nagging feelin' inside. It don't feel comfortable doin' washpail stuff. It don't even feel *natural* to ya. In fact, you'd rather carry groceries – but dat just gets you laughed at. So you try ignoring it, but dat feelin' just won't go away.

Den one day, ya discover somet'ing went a bit askew in production, an' you were actually supposed t' be a shoppin' cart! Yes! 'Dat makes more sense', you tell y'self. And you're helped to become da shoppin' cart ya somehow always knew you were. Sure, it ain't poifect, but for once in your life, t'ings seem to make more sense. Your body and your mind...dey're more alike."

The man paused, the undeniable pain upon his face invisible to his solitary listener.

"But some can't accept you were never really a washpail. 'How can you carry water now?' dey cry. You're no different *here*." Errol placed a hand upon his chest. "But to dose people...well...dey just can't see past da stuff on da outside."

Still, Errol received no response. He tensed a little, wondering if the symbolism he'd uttered had made sense to Jessie, or whether anything he'd said within the past few minutes had penetrated her stubborn visage at all. Part of him debated giving up trying to explain, but a larger part demanded otherwise. Theirs had been a strong bond of

friendship - peppered with drama and disarray, but strong nonetheless - and friendships that potent didn't just vanish, did they? He had to persist.

"Dis ain't about washpails and shoppin' carts, or pokémon and humans," Errol continued, his voice beginning to sound strained from failing attempts to keep back his upset. "Dis is about acceptance...and unity. Jim ran away from home because his parents couldn't accept who he was an' tried ta make him into somet'ing else. You did all you could to make it out dere, but people treated ya different no matter where ya went. Didn't we band togedda because we didn't fit in with da rest o' da woild, Jess? What good is shunning one another gonna do?"

What happened next was something Errol had not been expecting. Suddenly there was a tight pressure across his shoulders as Jessie threw her arms around him, sobbing bitterly.

"I'm...I'm sorry..." she choked. "I didn't mean that...what I said back in Dustry Town. Everything was changing around me. I was scared...I didn't think about what you'd gone through."

Jessie pulled back, suddenly aware of her obvious boundary-crossing - something that had been closed to her since she denied Errol's changes in circumstance all those months ago. She wiped at her eyes, trying to grasp back some of her composure.

"You *are* the friend I thought I had," she murmured. "Even more so, in that you still wanted to be friends, despite the heartless things I said. I don't deserve a companion like you."

"Maybe ya don't," Errol responded, his face reflecting a detached solemnity that Jessie worried was the end of any attempts to set things right. It altered in an instant. "But'cha stuck wit' me, so ya better get used to it!"

Gazing upon the familiar wide grin with its cat-like fangs, Jessie chuckled faintly - the slight expression of amusement masking an overwhelming sense of relief. He had been right - internally, very little had changed.

Errol shifted his guitar to one side, while Jessie sat down on the chair next to him. As Wobbuffet flopped down near to Psyduck in front of the artificial fireplace, the water pokémon observed the scene with an astonished expression. His initial reaction to Jessie's arrival had been a mixture of fear and anger – after all, there were no pleasant memories linked with such a woman. Yet as her conversation with Errol progressed and the story of the man's past unfolded, Psyduck's emotions grew more conflicting. This man was the same meowth who'd contributed to a lot of suffering for him and his friends – human and pokémon alike. It was difficult not to feel misled, even though Errol had acted like a decent person from the moment they'd reunited in Coalef Town.

"Heh, I've missed your crazy optimism," Jessie said.

"So you'll stay wit' us?" Errol looked hopeful.

"I *want* to..." Jessie faltered. "But I'm nervous the others won't accept me after what I did."

"Y' worried about James, right?" Errol tilted his head to one side. "And why wouldn't he accept ya?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't I?" a calm voice remarked from a few yards away. Both Jessie and Errol looked up to see James leaning upon one of the nearby pillars, eyebrows raised expectantly.

"H-how long have you been standing there?" Jessie spluttered, almost angry.

"Long enough," James replied with a smile as he approached. Jessie gazed over at her partners, and a sad look passed across her face.

"Why are you two forgiving me so easily?" she murmured. "After all that I've done and said to you...after what I put you through."

"We've all said and done stupid things, Jess," James reminded her. "That argument we had in Gravenport City when we were part of that bike gang, before Team Rocket. The time we split up outside Redream Town because we all blamed each other for our failures as a group. And sure, Errol and I hurt from what happened in Dustry Town. But we don't want to let a one-of-a-kind friendship go to waste."

"How could we have any more zany adventures if we's all separated and bearin' grudges over one anudda?" Errol pointed out, as he tuned his guitar.

From their spot near the artificial fireplace, Wobbuffet observed Psyduck's tense posture over realising the man with the wavy brown hair had not been coincidentally named James, but was in fact the James who'd accompanied Jessie and Errol on their past endeavours. Silently, Wobbuffet put a flipper around Psyduck in a gesture of comfort, and after a minute or so, the water pokémon relaxed slightly. As pestilent as they had been before, Psyduck felt he needed to follow this example of the trio's forgiveness toward one another. It was true – how *could* anyone move on by clinging to resentment? And it seemed that, at last, Jessie, James and Errol were really trying to do the right thing with their lives.

James sat beside Jessie, and the three figures gazed back out of the window. While the clouds were still present, a particularly beautiful point of light was visible just behind them.

"Look James..." Jessie smiled. "That's *our star*...isn't it?"

"You're right," James murmured. It was the most content he'd sounded in a long time. "The same star we used to place our hopes and dreams upon every night."

"Seems all dat wishing wasn't in vain after all!" Errol added agreeably. James nodded cheerfully as he linked arms with his old companions.

"I know it wasn't!" he said. "After all, our wish to be back together came true."

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The deepening storm brought with it a personal chaos to the south-east coast of Tattō - packs of wild mightyenas took to baying at one another from across the hillside while kricketunes hopped and chirruped agitatedly amongst the long coastland grasses. Down by the shore, a mint-green haired figure clothed in a sky blue sweater and navy trousers huddled inside a rocky crevice and prayed for the rain to stop.

For this young man, it had been an isolated childhood existence. He had been told from an early age that he was different from others, that he was special - his ability to understand pokémon speech was testament to that. While his father had outright refused him access to the outside or association with other children his age, he'd occasionally brought pokémon home for his son to play with - injured creatures that had been encountered while out on business. He had said it was to teach his son a few lessons in life – about responsibilities and the harsh nature of the world. As he had sat there, listening to their tales of sorrow and bandaging their wounds, the young man had discovered that all of these pokémon had been harmed by humans. And it did indeed teach him many things. One of them being that humankind had a lot to answer for.

He knew that his father wanted him to join his side in continuing the rites and traditions of The Sanguine Alliance, but this seemed like a compromise to him. In his eyes, this world belonged to the pokémon and humans were acting as parasites, leeching resources, hoarding for themselves and claiming their apparent right to be dominant. Once he reached twenty years of age, he had made a decision to take responsibilities into his own hands, and left the comforts and boundaries of his home in order to understand just what made the world tick. Four weeks into his journey through Tatto, and he had begun to detect that something was indeed terribly awry. The wild pokémon he had encountered seemed unnaturally apprehensive and skittish. The atmosphere in the forests he'd passed through was charged with incertitude and discontent. The very earth heaved with this feeling, and it unsettled him greatly. And now, this terrible storm had gathered. At first, the young man had mistakenly assumed it to have been caused by a group of wartortles previously assembled upon the beach. But as it worsened, both he and the wartortles had sought cover, the latter chanting repetitively amongst themselves how things weren't right. But as to *what* wasn't right, the man remained unenlightened.

A particularly heavy-sounding wave was heard, coupled with a long, drawn out haunting cry. The young man sat up, his eyes wide. He recognized the call as that of a milotic, urging him to come into the open. Obeying the request, the young man saw the milotic protectively surrounding two figures sprawled uncomfortably upon the sand.

<I rescued them from the ocean,> the milotic told the young man calmly, though anxiously. <I can do no more for them. I must return to my family, this storm is dangerous.>

As the milotic retreated into the ocean, the young man knelt down and examined the figures before him. The pokémon was a specie he did not recognize - however, the same was not said for the black uniform the human next to them was wearing.

"Team Rocket..." he muttered, a sickening feeling rising in the back of his throat at the sight of the unmistakable red 'R'. People were meddlesome enough, but these kinds of people caused him great distaste. He clasped at the pokémon and hoisted it carefully upon his shoulders, before returning to the tiny cave. Spreading out a towel from his satchel, the man gently lay the pokémon upon it and dried the creature's skin before carefully applying a re-energizing ointment. Soon the pokémon began to stir, its eyes clasped tight shut as if experiencing a nightmare.

"It's okay..." the man tried to sound comforting. "You're safe now."

<Cassidy...> the pokémon croaked, opening its eyes ever so slightly. <Cassidy, where is she?>

"That woman you were with? You're better off without her," the young man responded in an unsettlingly calm manner. This reply sent a jolt through the pokémon's body. It sat up sharply, blinking as it hurried

to make sense of its surroundings. Then it noticed the figure still laying outside, her face marred by the sodden yellow ochre hair plastered over it. With a horrified gasp, the pokémon half ran, half-staggered back out onto the beach and attempted to haul Cassidy to shelter. The young man followed.

"What are you doing?" he inquired. His tone of voice was not cruel or sadistic, just puzzled.

<What do you mean?> the pokémon spluttered. <I'm doing what anyone with a heart would do - I'm trying to save her!>

"But why?" the young man blinked. "Isn't she a pokémon enslaver like the others?"

<Cassidy is not an enslaver! She is my *friend!*> the pokémon cried.

The young man was caught off guard. It had been the first time he had heard a pokémon expressing its concern, declaring its friendship with a human being. A human being involved with Team Rocket, no less.

"You really believe that?" he inquired. "Don't you understand what the organization she works for does?"

<Cassidy isn't bad, she's just been confused,> the pokémon insisted. <Now she knows the truth, but got hurt trying to escape. If she dies now, when she's changed her ways, that would be the worst injustice.>

The young man paused. He seemed unconvinced.

<Don't you have friends?> the pokémon exclaimed, the desperation in its eyes was vivid.

"Pokémon are my friends," the man replied simply. "I only want what is best for them."

<Well if you are so concerned about what pokémon desire, why won't you help me save *my* friend's life?>

He didn't understand why this unusual pokémon wanted the woman to live so badly, but he couldn't fault its logic. With that, the young man knelt beside the unconscious figure, picked her up and brought her within the cave also. There, he assessed her condition. The deep cuts upon her legs looked infected and her face had paled immensely, showing the stark signs of deteriorating health.

"She is badly poisoned," came the blunt response. "These cuts look like they were made by qwilfish barbs. It is a very specific venom - Pecha berries won't be enough." He rummaged in his bag and brought out a small vial of clear liquid. "This biocite water should heal her, but I have to dilute it in a larger area of fresh water otherwise the properties won't become active. He stood up. "Rain or no rain, we're going to have to go out and find a lake."

<A lake?> the pokémon looked bereft. <We're by the sea! Where would there be a lake?>

"We're not far from a forest either," the man replied patiently.

"Hopefully we shall find fresh water there. Let us be on our way."

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<Hey.>

<Hey.>

<Hey you.>

<You dead?>

Butch groaned and shifted slightly. The rough earth under his back gave no comfort to his heavily aching form, and the aggravating voice rattling about in his skull only served to exacerbate his foggy disorientation.

<Ah,> it continued, in short, sharp bursts. <Not dead.> Butch felt a sharp jab in his side which caused him to utter another pained response. <Hey.>

<Will you shuddup?> he growled weakly, opening his eyes just wide enough to squint. The surroundings were dim, indicating early evening - a far cry from the hour he last remembered. As his sight adjusted, the origin of the irritating sounds moved into focus. The creature was a small, brown, bird pokémon with a red chest, facial markings and two long head feathers that gave it the appearance of

wearing a bandit's eye mask. The pokémon shuffled backwards a little, clearly unphased by Butch's presence, instead only tilting its head slightly to one side as the figure attempted to push himself into a sitting position.

<You hurt,> it remarked, matter-of-factly.

<An' so will you if you don't leave me alone!> Butch snapped. The fearsome raspy tones of his voice were enough to unsettle the pokémon into reversing its way into the nearby foliage. Grumbling under his breath, Butch jolted upright as something suddenly dawned on him.

<Wait a minute. I understood what that featherbrain was saying!> He paused, slowly lowering his head to look at his hand. Only what met his sight wasn't a hand at all, but a dark blue claw with three digits, attached to a brawny arm embellished with long, crimson spikes. Butch's chest suddenly grew tight, his heart raced. <What *am* I?> he bellowed in panic.

<New pokémon!> his persistent audience chirped. <Not roubeat. Not from forest.>

<I'm a POKÉMON?!>

<New pokémon!> the roubeat echoed.

Butch winced as every muscle in his body cried for reprieve.

<You hurt,> the roubeat reminded him.

<I-I don't understand,> Butch stammered, caught in his own train of thought. <How did this happen? When? I...> He trailed off, as his final memories before losing consciousness resurfaced. The feelings of nausea

and discomfort which had been present since his visit to Pachna Town, and had only served to intensify over the last few days, particularly following his encounter with the desperate priest at Scale Falls.

*"It looks like your bloodstream has been infiltrated by some kind of foreign antibodies."*

<They said it wouldn't cause me any trouble!> Butch exclaimed frustratedly, before loosening his stance again. <Ugh...never mind that now. I need to work out where I am so I can get back to the HQ.> He glanced up, scanning the surrounding trees. Despite its stunted language abilities, the roubeat had indeed been correct about their current location. As to *where* this forest was, however...this would require further exploration. Butch stomped off into the dark. <Someone better fix this!>

<Leaving?> the roubeat inquired a little worriedly, before skipping after Butch.

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The young man and his newly acquainted pokémon companion travelled deeper into the woodland bordering the western side of the Cormouth peninsula. By this time the rain had calmed a little, and its

remnants were dispersed effectively by the thick canopy of leaves overhead. Having grown sufficiently energized, the pokémon had been able to employ its psychic abilities to carry its human friend while the search for fresh water went on.

"What kind of pokémon are you?" the young man pondered, after some minutes had passed. "You look a bit like a golduck..."

<I am Soluqua,> the pokémon smiled. <And what's your name?>  
"It's Nascour," he began. "But, just call me 'N'. My full name...reminds me of too many bad things." He paused, deciding to change the subject before further questions were asked of it. "We're going to have to ask the pokémon native to this area where a freshwater source is."

<Hey...that's a point,> Soluqua blinked. <You're able to understand me. How come?>

"I have a precious heritage," N smiled, but said no more. "Now what pokémon can you sense near here?"

N and Soluqua made their way to the lake, following the haphazard directions they gathered from the wild furret, seedot and pachirisu that lived there. Upon arriving at the lake's edge, N brought out the small vial he had shown earlier and dropped some of its contents into the water, before Soluqua lowered Cassidy into it. As the poison began to

disperse, Cassidy blinked woozily, attempting to take in the forms of those who had rescued her from the brink of death.

"What...happened?" she slurred.

"A milotic rescued you and your friend and brought you to the shore," N responded calmly, as Soluqua telekinetically lifted Cassidy from the water and onto a towel that had been laid out for her. "You had been badly poisoned, but I gave you some of my healing serum." The man's voice remained detached. "You are lucky to know a pokémon so loyal. Had you not, that may have been your final hour."

"I..." Cassidy trailed off as she glanced up at Soluqua. The vaporeon-golduck hybrid smiled shyly in return.

"Your wish has been fulfilled," N told Soluqua. "Now I must be on my way."

"Thank you..."

N paused, a look of surprise on his face. He had not expected gratitude from another human, least of all one with such an unscrupulous background.

"You're...welcome," he smiled slightly. Cassidy sat up and realised the man had not left, instead he was gazing fondly, almost longingly at a shrine that had been constructed next to the lake. The glow of the tiny lantern from within was just enough to cast a warm, welcoming light over

N's face - causing his blue-grey eyes to shimmer. "I've seen these in every forest I have passed through," N murmured, aware of Cassidy and Soluqua's attentions being focused upon him. "And every one of them has that same writing upon it. How I'd love to know what it reads."

Cassidy felt herself being drawn toward the shrine; reaching out her hand to touch its cold stone surface as her eyes scanned the runes that had been engraved across the time-worn sculpture.

"Let a tiny light...guide you...through a seamless darkness," she murmured distantly. N's eyes widened.

"You can decipher this text?" he blinked. Cassidy nodded.

"I was taught how to read it from a young age," she said. "It is a form of text that has been used by Agrarian Seers for centuries."

"Agrarian Seers..." N processed this word thoughtfully. "Yes, I have heard of these people. My father never spoke of them well - he told me they were self-important meddlers who lorded over the greatest of pokémon."

"That's not true at all!" Cassidy retorted defensively. "The Seers have dedicated themselves to harmonizing their lives with those of pokémon, not 'lord over' them. They worked *together* with the Guardians!"

"You seem quite passionate about this organization," N commented with interest. "Especially for a Team Rocket member."

"I never was a Team Rocket member," Cassidy muttered bitterly.

"Not really. I shouldn't have tried kidding myself. But what can I say?"

She uttered a vague snort of amusement. "Part of me enjoyed the feeling of power, and the other part of me was too proud to admit I'd messed up."

The woman paused, taking in the somewhat puzzled faces of N and Soluqua before her.

"My parents are Agrarian Seers," she said. "Me and my two sisters were brought up under the organization. Yet as I got older, I grew more disillusioned with it all. I became fed up of conforming to what I thought at the time was a regime. Even though I never mentioned it to my family, I felt constrained by too many rules - rules which I thought were unnecessary. Everything was set to schedule - monitored, guided, confined. I started to envy what seemed like a far better life in the outside world. So I left to discover what that life was really like, to be independent and free."

"It sounds as if we have travelled similar paths," N observed.

"I don't think so," Cassidy stared at the ground in regret. "I...I became a bully. I have treated so many people and pokémon like dirt. I thought I was entitled to so much. And I didn't even realise it was wrong until those same things started being done to me. Maybe there is no hope for me now."

"There is always hope, if the one with a problem realises a need to change," N reminded her calmly.

"But would my family ever accept me back?" Cassidy insisted, her eyes starting to grow watery. N didn't respond. This was a question he didn't feel qualified to answer. His own family was fractured and he had yet to uncover and come to terms with why this was the case.

"Love is a complex formula," he said at last. "One I don't even fully understand yet. But it is powerful."

Cassidy glanced at him with an unconvinced expression, but said nothing.

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It had been some time since Team Rocket Super Elite Attila and his partner Hunley were sent on a mission together. Since the initiation of Project Rebirth, they had each been placed in charge of their own group of operatives - Attila having been assigned the task of gathering as many evolved species of pokémon possible, and Hunley put class after class through rigorous mental training. Once their services were no longer required, each man had returned to leading a relatively uneventful existence. At least until now, when an urgent message from Tatto's offshore headquarters brought them back into the field. After a quick visit

to the headquarters in question, the pair of agents had taken their flying craft and swiftly travelled north-west toward the mainland to complete their next assignment.

"That old Prof had sure taken a real beating back there, eh?" Attila grinned as he leant upon a nearby tree and watched his lithe companion attending to a laptop computer. "I'm surprised the guy was still standing."

"As far as I recall, Attila...he *wasn't*," the ashen-haired figure remarked in a darkly calm voice. "He was draped over a chair attempting to give us a mission briefing with a dislocated jaw."

Attila carelessly tossed a bundle of circuit-patterned cubes between his hands while his partner continued to watch the screen with slight confusion. Eventually the latter sat back a little, his cheeks undulating gently like a miltank chewing the cud.

"I can understand why Professor Bohrgram is so intent on recapturing that particular rogue agent," he uttered at last. "If the power within him can do that much damage in just a matter of seconds..."

"Just think of what it could do when unleashed as part of The Boss' master force, eh Hun?" Attila smirked.

"How many times do I have to tell you, it's Hunley!" his accomplice snapped.

"Hun, Hunley.. what's the difference?" Attila shrugged.

"It's a *big* difference where my identity is concerned! Why do you think I—" Hunley paused as he noticed some oddish and bunearys watching him with a mixture of surprise and amusement. "Never mind. I have far too little time to waste explaining such matters to you. Now have you got the Snare Blocks?"

"Yup. That guy shall be as good as caught once we slap these on him," Attila remarked, waving the cube-like objects. Hunley gave a nod of vague satisfaction before turning to his pokémon assistant, who had been perched moodily upon a nearby rock the whole time.

"Perfect. We shall now wait patiently. And Skarmory? Get rid of those nosey pests. I can't *stand* unwanted audiences."

With barely little effort, the metallic bird pokémon was in the air, its blade like wings whipping up and down as it dived headlong toward the trees. Hunley chuckled to himself at the resulting cacophony of terrified victims, but his amusement was interrupted by an aggravated roar that echoed across the clearing, coupled with the slow purposeful thuds of a hulking figure's approach.

"Sounds like our target has arrived," Hunley remarked, the dark smile returning to his face once more.

The humanoid druddigon lumbered into view, growling under its breath. It paused upon seeing Attila and Hunley in the clearing, and its stance grew more relaxed.

<Oh man am I glad to see some Team Rocket members,> Butch sighed with relief. <I have no idea where I am and I need to get back to an HQ fast! At this point, I don't even care which one, so long as they got some science boffins to fix me up.>

"He doesn't seem to be acting as violent as they said he would," Attila said, unimpressed. "Pity. I was hoping for some kind of challenge."

"This is a job, not a game," Hunley replied. "Steelix, keep your wits about you."

"Feh.." Attila snorted disappointedly. "Skarmory, tag 'im."

<Tag- huh?> Butch blinked. Seconds later, he found himself surrounded in what appeared to be a small whirlwind. Several cold patches arose around his midriff, prompting Butch to glance down. To his horror, he discovered three Snare Blocks had been attached to him. Before he had a chance to react, the blocks were activated - freezing Butch's limbs in place and encasing him in a cuboid forcefield.

"Perfect," Hunley smiled as the skarmory retracted, looking pleased at its handiwork.

<What are you two doing?> Butch spluttered. Despite the appendage paralysis, he found he was still able to speak. <I'm not wild, I ain't gonna attack you, I just want help to get back to normal!>

"It almost looks like he understands us," Attila commented.

<I CAN understand you!> Butch yelled. The steelix uttered a grunt, and nodded in Hunley's direction.

"Oho..." Hunley raised an eyebrow. "So he still has his wits about him, eh?"

"You won't be needing those where we're taking ya," Attila smirked.

<Wh-what?> Butch flinched, caught off guard.

"With a few tweaks and a spin in the P.R.O.C.U, you'll be ready to join Team Rocket's new army," Hunley grinned fiendishly.

The words hit Butch like a concrete slab. The organization had no interest in making him human again. He was of more use to them as he was, or at least 'as he was' without the interference of his free will.

"Right then," Attila remarked. "Onto the plane with this lot."

Hunley brought out an extendible platform from his phasepack which he programmed to alter to the right size to support the forcefield containing Butch. Then, Hunley's steelix wrapped its considerable tail around the forcefield - lifting the entire assembly onto the platform with an expression that strongly conveyed 'glad this is happening to you and not me.'

As the platform began to hover, raising Butch a few inches from the ground, tumultuous thoughts began flooding the man-in-druddigon-form's brain. Was this really it? Could all he do was stand there and watch

himself be transported to his own mental, if not also physical, demise?

These devastated thoughts were broken by a horrified squawk from behind.

While Butch couldn't turn his head, he knew exactly who the voice belonged to - the same annoying roubeat that had been following him ever since he woke up in the forest. Though part of him groaned internally at the pokémon's presence, much of him was glad it hadn't lost its oddly unwavering loyalty.

<What are you doing to new pokémon?> the roubeat exclaimed loudly. None of the retreating group paid it any heed. This response didn't go down well at all. With a loud screech, the roubeat flung itself at the side of the forcefield encompassing Butch, causing it to ripple slightly with a fizz of sparks.

"Huh?" Attila turned with vague interest, just in time to see the roubeat attempt to dive-bomb the forcefield for the second time. "A-huhuh...a feisty one. Get rid of it, Skarmory."

The roubeat was ambushed by the flying pokémon's steely blades, surrounded in a maelstrom of air and tossed clear out of sight, into the trees beyond. Butch felt his spirits sink as the roubeat vanished. Curiously enough, it wasn't mainly out of a dwindling hope of escaping, more that he'd felt concern for the pokémon's well-being. Still, as long as the roubeat was relatively unharmed and at a distance, it wouldn't be dragged into his self-imposed situation any more.

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"It seems the Agrarian Seers were an important people," N contemplated.

"Yes," Cassidy nodded. "Once, the Agrarian Seers were granted the role of instructing the world's Pokémon Guardians."

"So what happened for them to disappear into the background?" N asked.

"Traitors within the organization tried to abuse the Guardians' abilities for their own gains," Cassidy told him. "As a result, the Agrarian Seers were reduced to nothing but mere watchmen, and their presence has dwindled over time."

"Tch," N frowned. "It seems unavoidable for humans to cause pokémon suffering..."

"That's a pretty bold statement," Cassidy returned the expression. "There are many humans who want nothing but the best for pokémon. Why, my parents..." she trailed off, looking somewhat bereft. "My parents are good people. I don't know whether I could live up to their example." Soluqua looked up at Cassidy, a sparkle of admiration in her wide dark eyes. The woman noticed this, and gave a sad little smile. "But I'm going to try. Sorry I hadn't been such a great friend to you, Soluqua. From now on, I'm going to treat you with the respect you've given me."

N raised his eyebrows, his face softening. This time, Cassidy had not only surprised him, but impressed him also. He resolved to no longer be overly hasty in his judgements of human decency. Maybe it was possible for them and pokémon to co-exist.

Soluqua took to listening to the faint breeze rustling the leaves in the dark overhead. Then her keen senses picked up on something extra; a light pattering from nearby. At first she put it down to her own paranoia, but the growing curiosity and the continuation of the noise only served to affirm her fears. Someone had found them. Soluqua swung round with an angered scowl on her face, but it disappeared upon sight of a roubeat who was hopping about nervously.

<What's wrong?> Soluqua asked.

<Danger!> the roubeat squawked. <My friend, new pokémon, trapped!>

<Trapped by whom?> Soluqua inquired.

<Two humans!> the roubeat cried. <In white and blue! New pokémon trapped in box! This way! Help!> And with that, it sprinted back amongst the trees.

N's face suddenly grew very serious. His time with Cassidy had momentarily given him breathing space from the aspects of humanity that frustrated him so. However, the roubeat's desperate pleas brought him back down to earth. Cassidy looked up in alarm as the man hoisted up his bag and began to stride in the direction the roubeat had left.

"Where are you going?" she asked, a little anxiously.

"A pokémon has been captured by poachers," N replied bluntly.

"How do you know?" Cassidy insisted, baffled.

"That roubeat told me," N's voice echoed back toward her. This statement took a moment to sink in.

"He can understand pokémon," Cassidy concluded to herself.

Having grown up amongst many Cho'moken wielders, the aspect of understanding pokémon language did not come as heavy a surprise to her as it would most people. The fact N possessed this ability only served to amplify the woman's curiosity over him. She stood up, gathered N's abandoned towel from the ground and ran after him with Soluqua in pursuit.

While the roubeat's darting motions appeared erratic, its sense of direction was precise. Soluqua arrived in the clearing just in time to see the large glowing case encompassing Butch's druddigon form being moved steadily towards a waiting aircraft. She gasped, then projected a blast of water from her mouth. Butch's eyes widened as he saw the liquid shoot past and make contact with a patch of ground inches away from Hunley's feet. The man swung round to see N join Soluqua and the roubeat, wearing a stern and unforgiving expression.

<Let new pokémon go!> the roubeat yelled.

"So that little troublemaker belonged to you, hm?" Attila raised an eyebrow.

"He doesn't 'belong' to anyone, Rocket," N uttered the last word with great distaste. "And neither does that druddigon you've so callously imprisoned."

It wasn't until Cassidy walked onto the scene that she realised what situation she had landed herself in. Her face grew overcome with horror and awkwardness as she noticed the Team Rocket insignia upon the two figures' grey and blue uniforms, but she forced these feelings down and tried to resume a commandeering attitude. Noticing the new entrant in more familiar attire, Hunley shifted his attention with notable scrutiny.

"What right do you have to interfere with our business, Elite?"

"Because I'm not one of you!" Cassidy replied boldly. "Not any more."

<Cassidy!> Butch spluttered, in a mixture of joy and bafflement. He was unable to look over his shoulder due to the Snare Block induced paralysis, but the sound of his partner's voice was unmistakable.

"That druddigon knows you?" N inquired, while the roubeat eyed Cassidy with intrigue. "It just used your name..."

"That doesn't make sense," Cassidy shook her head. "I've never trained a dru—" she paused, as Professor Bohrgram's words resurfaced in her memory. "Wait...Butch?" If Attila and Hunley were to return him to

the Team Rocket headquarters, he would become a mindless soldier just like all the other helpless operatives she had seen under experimentation.

"I'm not letting you take him back!"

"Ugh.." Hunley rolled his eyes. "I don't have time for this."

"Say, ain't she one of the defected Elites the Prof. was talking about?" Attila raised an eyebrow.

"I do believe you're right," Hunley began to smile. "What did he say? Something about 'interrupted business'?"

"How's about we help him finish what he started?" Attila cracked his knuckles. Cassidy tensed, her eyes flitting from the case holding Butch, to the opposing operatives and back again.

<NO!> Butch roared. <You keep her out of this!>

<New pokémon friend is my friend!> the roubat exclaimed, puffing up its chest.

<Back for more, eh?> the skarmory sneered amusedly at the roubat, beginning to glow a vivid white as sparks scattered from its body. <My pleasure!>

Cassidy, Soluqua and N winced as the steel type bird pokémon vanished, and a sharp gust of wind obscured their vision with a cloud of dust. Stepping forward, Soluqua raised her web-fingered hands and encompassed the miniature cyclone in a psychic grip, pushing its wielder off-course and into the nearest tree.

The steelix dived towards Soluqua with an angered bellow, only to be slammed in the side by one of the roubeat's tiny feet. The Low Kick made a surprising mark, and the steelix toppled to one side with a loud thud, momentarily disorientated.

Before Cassidy had a chance to work out what to do, she saw N running round the perimeter of the clearing – towards the case holding Butch. The woman made a move to go after him, but two thick arms wrapped themselves around her, hoisting her swiftly into the air.

"You ain't going anywhere, little lady," Attila smirked.

"Wanna bet?" Cassidy retorted angrily, swinging her right foot backwards. The heel of her boot made impact with her assailant's groin, causing the man to swear loudly and release his hostage. Cassidy landed on the dirt in a somewhat unkempt fashion, before stumbling to her feet and dashing towards N. She was promptly halted by a wall of metallic rock – Hunley's steelix had recovered from its previous setback.

As the snake-like pokémon encircled her, Cassidy glanced anxiously from left to right – from Soluqua who was running to her aid, to N who had been previously trying to disengage the forcefield around Butch. Now he was attempting to fend off Attila's skarmory, while the roubeat tried to assist him despite their type disadvantage.

"You're gonna regret you did that, 'yena," Attila snarled, having recovered from the shock and pain enough to stride-hobble towards the

steelix keeping Cassidy in check. A blast of Aura hit him in the gut, throwing the man backwards into the foliage.

"Don't worry about me, Soluqua!" Cassidy exclaimed, as the golduck-vaporeon hybrid prepared to jet water at the steelix surrounding her. "Help Butch!"

Soluqua swerved round just in time to see Hunley, control unit in hand, having brought the container and its druddigon prisoner to the ramp of the waiting aircraft. She flung out a webbed hand, grasping Hunley in a psychic hold and forcefully pulling the man away from the aircraft doorway.

Hunley gasped sharply as the telekinetic grip caught him off guard. This swift intake of breath gave way to a bout of violent coughing as the Team Rocket operative struggled to dislodge something that had got caught up in his throat. The controller he had been holding dropped from his grasp and cracked against the ground - its lights dimming. At the same time, the semi-transparent forcefield around Butch vanished, and the man-in-pokémon-shape fell to his knees upon the platform. It didn't take him long to get back to his feet and head straight for Hunley's steelix, slamming his clawed hand across the metallic snake pokémon and sending it toppling over. Butch then turned around to deal with the pokémon's trainer, whose convulsive movements had since dissipated into an awkward gulp,

Being caught off guard once was bad enough - having barely recovered from the previous shock, the sight of a fearsome scaled draconic form thundering towards him was all it took to make Hunley open his mouth and let out the loudest yell he could possibly muster. None of the figures, including Hunley himself, were expecting the utterance to have been at such a high pitch. He rapidly shut his mouth, his reddening face awash with fear and anger.

"Do you realise how long it took me to get that voice modulator built?" Hunley snapped, in a tone of voice at least an octave higher.  
"Three years! And you loathsome creatures have made me swallow it!"

<Get out of here!> Butch roared. <Before I do something I regret!>

Hunley didn't need to understand the words to know the noise Butch vocalized was an undeniable threat. He scampered backwards, almost falling over his feet in his attempts to return to the aircraft while Attila staggered disgruntledly after him, cursing under his breath. No sooner had the sounds of engines played out into the night air, Butch swung round upon the group standing behind him. Soluqua instinctively put up a fighting stance, assuming that Butch was overcome with rage and not in control of himself. But no attack came. Instead, Butch loosened his pose and eyed Cassidy, N and their pokémon companions expectantly.

"So...'Butch', is it?" N smiled. "An impressive druddigon indeed. I can see why those Team Rocket members were after you."

"You don't get it," Cassidy insisted. "Butch is not a pokémon. Well, he's not *supposed* to be a pokémon...he was contaminated with some fusion serum Team Rocket scientists had cooked up, as well as some druddigon DNA."

"I see..." N murmured. His expression was not as condemnatory as Cassidy and Soluqua had expected it to be. In fact, it was quite difficult to read, as if the man was experiencing a measure of envy for Butch's current state. "Maybe...maybe the biocite water could restore your friend to his human state, if his transformation isn't permanent. I could not guarantee anything, but-"

<I'm willing to give it a shot,> Butch grunted. <What do you need me to do, drink the stuff?>

"We need to return to the forest lake," N corrected him, turning calmly and walking back the way he had arrived. "Follow me."

Cassidy pursued the young man and Soluqua went to do the same, pausing only when she realised that Butch had not proceeded after them. A wry smile appeared on her face as she studied the man-in-pokémon-form's astonished expression. She knew what Butch was thinking, and she couldn't help but find his response to N's ability to decipher pokémon speech amusing.

<He has a precious heritage,> she relayed with a giggle, then skittered away.

As with Cassidy before, N shook a few drops of liquid from the vial upon the surface of the water nearest the lake's edge. He then instructed Butch to walk into the lake until the water reached his waist, before submerging himself. With the water encompassing him, Butch felt a bizarre prickling sensation take over. It was nothing compared to the terrifying agony of his first transformation. This was the experience of the hundreds of scales relenting and becoming flat skin, the tapered spikes upon his arms and shoulders diminishing into nothingness, his limbs gradually retracting. The roubeat let out an astonished gasp as a man's head, topped with sodden emerald green hair, broke the surface of the lake some minutes later.

<Where did new pokémon go?> he blinked anxiously. <Still in lake? Is new pokémon drowning?>

"This is 'new pokémon', my friend," N explained, motioning towards Butch - standing waist deep in lake water and gazing at his own hands in deep relief.

<I don't understand...> the roubeat looked a little sad. N smiled, though his expression was tinged with pity for the unenlightened pokémon's confusion. There was little he could do to get the roubeat to comprehend how a pokémon could possibly now be a human. Receiving no further words, the roubeat turned its attention back to Butch, now looking at N with some embarrassment.

"A...Am I cured?" he asked.

"I do not think so," N remarked calmly, as he unzipped his rucksack and began to rummage around in it. "And I'm sorry that I cannot help you in that respect. But at least there's something I *can* do."

Butch looked back at the garments now draped over N's outstretched arms with some considerable surprise. The young man began to chuckle lightly over his expression, causing his accomplice to falter somewhat.

"Here. Take them."

The man didn't seem all that impressed with the type of clothing - but trapped in a scenario where he was caught between the continuing humiliation of nakedness and having to wear an outfit that wasn't particularly his style, he decided to go with the latter. N gave a kindly smile as the clothing was taken from him.

"That biocite water is some pretty incredible stuff," Cassidy remarked.

"It's the only thing that helps me recover from sickness or injury," N explained. "Conventional medicines have never worked on me."

"Oh..." Cassidy trailed off, looking awkward. After the night's events, half the vial was now empty. "We're sorry to have used your medicine."

"It's okay," N smiled faintly. "To help others, that is as important as helping myself. I will be able to get more biocite water once I reach my destination."

"Where y' heading?" Butch asked?

"I'm going north," N told him. "I've been doing research into many things, and there is a place in north-east Tatto I feel will help answer more of my questions."

"Well I hope you find what you're looking for," Cassidy said. "I kind of wish I could give something to repay you for what you've done for me."

"Don't worry," N said warmly. "You did."

He was starting to comprehend this unexpected formula now. Humans had just as much to offer pokémon as pokémon did for humans. This diagnosis brought a measure of relief along with its accompanying happiness, but there were still other matters that troubled N. Not only the ones with more personal connotations, but also the unknown cause of the wild pokémon's unrest. With patience, all would be revealed.

Though their bodies were throbbing with the aches and pains of a laborious day, Butch and Cassidy decided to leave the forest also - in case Hunley and Attila, or someone more tenacious, were to return. It was some time before either figure spoke. Both of them had been deep in thought, processing the events of the previous few hours - or at least what they could recall of them - alongside the entrenched realisation that they were now fugitives from Team Rocket.

"Uh...thanks for getting me out of that situation back there," Butch muttered.

"That's what team-mates do, right?" Cassidy replied, a little dismissively. "The question is...now what?"

"I don't know," Butch massaged his head. "To be honest I'd just like to go home and forget about everything for a while. But I ain't got no home to go back to, no family that misses me. Giovanni knew that. Giovanni had me strung along from the start, and I'd been too blind to notice. I thought that I'd be makin' him proud, and that I'd get what I deserved. I got what I deserved, alright. I was such a fool to look up to that back-stabber as a replacement father."

"You never really talked about your childhood," Cassidy remarked.

"Yeah, well it wasn't necessary for doing our job right," Butch grunted.

"We don't have a job *now...*" Cassidy insisted.

"What is there to talk about? I spent four years of my life in some Tah-forsaken orphanage where no one paid attention to me. I was adopted by Giovanni who fed me lie after lie while I idolized him like a dumb lillipup. And now here I am, a mess of a guy with no direction, no goals, nothing to live for."

Cassidy opened her mouth, having felt an offended aura creep upon her, but then shut it. There was no possible way she could know what Butch was feeling, and people said out of place things in moments of despair. She needed to let this ride.

"I'd heard about a sacred place further up the continent," she began tentatively. "Alia Summit, it's called. I thought I would head there to get some information. You could come along with me...if you want."

"Ain't that the place where trainers go to complete the Tattro Expedition?" Butch pulled a face. "What information do you think you'd find there?"

"I might find where *my* family are living right now," Cassidy halted as she noticed Butch's perplexed frown intensify. "Look, Alia Summit is the location of a Seer Repository and-"

"Wait..." Butch caught on. "You're not saying you're-" Cassidy said nothing, but nodded slowly. "WHAT? You? A child of those tree-loving hippies? That has to be the most ironic thing I've ever- um..."

It was at this point the reason for Cassidy's narrowed glower finally sank in. The man fell into an uncomfortable silence. A nasty feeling had risen within his gut - though he had not experienced the emotion for some time, Butch knew full well it happened to be guilt.

"Go on...laugh it up," Cassidy snorted coldly. Butch looked on with a bewildered expression. All these years and not once had he even stopped to ponder over his accomplice's origins. Now he was finally beginning to learn something substantial about Cassidy, and it was far from anything he might have assumed in the past. "I know I made a big mistake," Cassidy sighed, like she had been reading her companion's

mind the entire time. "But N was right. There *is* hope if the person who has made a mistake sees things they need to change."

"So we shouldn't travel together," Butch remarked bluntly. "I mean...all I am is a reminder of your mistakes."

"Excuse me?" Cassidy looked insulted. "Do you really think I'm that shallow? That's all I see you as?"

"Well..." Butch grinned sheepishly. Cassidy frowned at him.

"Butch," she said. "I know I may not have shown my appreciation of your company in the past..."

"You *never* did," the figure snorted, causing Cassidy to roll her eyes.

"Whatever. Either way, I just wanted you to know that I *was* grateful for it, even though I forgot to say so. And...it'd mean a lot to me if you stuck around now. We've been through a lot, you know?"

"Yeah," Butch allowed himself a tiny smile. "We have." His eyes lit upon Soluqua, walking proudly and determinedly by Cassidy's side, and the smile dropped. He didn't think he'd been that attached, but there was a sense of loss within Butch at the fact Raccrupt - the hybrid pokémon he had been working alongside - was no longer with him. It was a situation he daredn't think too deeply about, particularly with the knowledge of what so often happened to decommissioned pokémon.

"Roo! Roo-beh!"

Butch, Cassidy and Soluqua flinched as a loud, familiar squawk echoed behind them. The lattermost of these turned around, her face lighting up at seeing the roubeat approaching at a dash. After happily greeting Soluqua, the roubeat ran up to Butch's side and bounced up and down enthusiastically.

"Guess you being human wasn't such an off-putter as you thought, huh?" Cassidy chuckled, as Butch let out a tired groan.

"What does this guy see in me?" he whined, before slumping in resignation. "Well if it's going to insist on staying, it's going to have to go in a Pokéball once we get to a place that sells 'em."

The roubeat grinned obviously. It hadn't a clue what 'Pokéball' was, but as far as it was concerned, it had found the perfect new friend.

**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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