

POKÉMON
REBIRTH

ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition

EPISODE THIRTY

Hidden Power

For the inhabitants of Firststep Village, a meagre gathering of dwellings where newborn pokémon were brought into the world, newcomers were something of a rarity. They were located away from the main routes and bustling cities, and as a result had formed a tight-knit community where everyone knew everybody else and their relative business. So when three unfamiliar forms strolled into the village one morning, it undoubtedly caused a bit of a stir.

The figures in question, a man and woman in their mid-twenties accompanied by an unusual blue pokémon, seemed reasonable enough - albeit somewhat hurried and brisk. They had descended upon the village shop with inquiries of clothing, Pokéballs and various supplies, but with nothing of value to exchange for them. Once the initial wariness had faded, one of Firststep Village's Pokémon Breeders kindly offered the visitors the supplies they wanted in exchange for some time spent assisting them in their nursery. Luck had it that both the man and woman were experienced in the field, with the latter proving to be surprisingly good with young pokémon - despite several of them deciding to swing from her long yellow pigtails. Four hours and a hearty meal later, the re-dressed pair and the pokémon departed Firststep Village with much grateful smiling and waving from the Breeder they had helped out.

Butch, Cassidy and Soluqua had drawn quite close to Tatto's coastline over their recent travels and, figuring it a more pleasant change from the woodlands and hillside, they descended a makeshift public

footpath to the beach. There, they continued their passage northward, to Alia Summit.

"When they said they could get us a different set of clothes, I wasn't expecting them to have had previous owners," Butch remarked, gazing down at his new outfit. Like the one N had given him, it wasn't a particularly good fit in either size or character, but unlike that outfit, this one had belonged to a man at least thirty years older than himself.

"It couldn't be helped," Cassidy brushed off the complaint, hoisting the satchel she had been given further upon her shoulder. "The place was so small, it only had two stores. We were just lucky those backcountry villagers took a shine to us, otherwise we'd have got nothing at all."

"True," Butch said resignedly. He especially appreciated the Great Ball that had been given him to put the recently-acquired roubeat - now called Levi - into. "Say Cass? Do you think those Agrarian Seers might be able to help us fight back against Giovanni's armies?" The man paused, letting out a snort of discontent. "Given they're not all the pacifist types."

"Oh they fight when they have to," Cassidy told him. "And...well...I hope so." It hadn't been her primary objective at the time of making the decision to head to Alia Summit, but her companion's reminder had brought the current threat firmly back into Cassidy's mind. "It's not the first time they've been up against crazy odds."

"Really?" Butch started to look interested.

"Yeah..." Cassidy tried to recall the leftover memories of her childhood history lessons. "The Pokémopolis dynasty was a widespread and powerful force to be reckoned with. Not unlike Team Rocket, really." She stopped, her gaze alighting on cream-coloured tufts that lay scattered across the darker sand and pebbles. "Hooligans. Throwing junk all over the beach."

"Actually that ain't trash," Butch said. "That used to be a living creature - a sea sponge by the looks of it."

"A what?"

"Oh..." Butch allowed himself a smirk. "Heh..I guess I probably got more experience with water animalia than you do."

"Really?" Cassidy's voice grew curious. "How come?"

Butch shifted a little, then gazed out at the vast open water.

"Parents were in the fishing business, when I was a kid," he remarked. "Spent a lot of time on the ocean, my sister Gigi and I."

"You have a sister?" Cassidy spluttered. Her partner was really starting to gush new information now.

"I *did*," Butch replied, still with the same restricted delivery. "The boat got caught in a bad storm when I was 6. Only I survived...somehow."

"I see..." Cassidy trailed off and decided to pry no further. It seemed the more she came to know about Butch, the worse she began to

feel about having left her idyllic lifestyle and loving family. Though at the time, that is hardly the way she saw either. Cassidy internally scolded her past self for having been so foolish, before shivering slightly. Maybe it was her imagination, but the temperature suddenly felt vastly lower than it had done just moments ago.

"That's weird..." Butch remarked distantly. He was holding out his left hand, his eyes now aimed at the sky. The white clouds had since taken on a hint of grey, and the chill in the air was more than apparent. Cassidy blinked in alarm as she saw the breath from her own mouth billow forth in a steam-like cloud. Little white particles descended around the two humans and their pokémon accomplice.

"Maybe it's different in Tatto, but where I come from, getting snow on the last day of March would be considered pretty odd, don't you think?" Cassidy said.

"I'd agree with you," Butch nodded, as the snowfall grew steadily thicker. "Could be some ice types passing overhead. Either way, might be good to try and find some shelter for now, it's getting difficult to see."

"Hey.." Cassidy squinted, shielding her eyes with one hand. She had noticed the outlines of some tiny dwellings upon a mountainous ridge in the distance. "I think I can see a town up ahead."

The clouds of snow danced and swirled as Butch and Cassidy staggered determinedly up a frozen slope towards their intended destination, Soluqua trying to keep the worst of the weather from her human companions with a psychic barrier. Eventually, the trio arrived at the peak of the ridge, where an unexpected sight met their eyes.

The tiny dwellings Cassidy had seen previously weren't the only buildings to exist there. The entire mountainside had been carved into solid, angular steps – each one in greater scale than the last - and upon these steps were built various houses and shops. But none of these places offered a welcoming glow, signifying warmth and life within. Even from where they stood, some two hundred metres or so away upon a slightly elevated plateau of land, it was clear to see the scale of decay and neglect that had befallen the area. Many of the buildings were blackened - their walls partly demolished, revealing damaged possessions tainted by heat and smoke. Cassidy felt a wave of upset pass over her. The mark of death lingered upon this place, and she could not help but wonder what had possibly happened to cause it to be this way.

"'Cosma Point'," a familiar voice recited softly. "'A town where humans and pokémon stood close. In 1982, Cosma Point was ravaged by those in opposition to this unity. What remains of the town shall be left untouched, as a reminder of the destructive powers of hatred'."

Butch, Cassidy and Soluqua turned their heads in unison, to see N standing a short distance away with his back to them - the top of his head and shoulders covered with a moderate sprinkling of snow. He had

been reading a placard that was mounted at the cusp of the ridge, but upon hearing footsteps behind him, the man turned and glanced over his shoulder, his expression surprised but welcoming.

"Well this is a pleasant reunion," he said. "I did not think this would have been a place you'd have cared to see."

"And this is where you'd been intending to go when we last talked?" Cassidy asked. N gave a nod. "Why did *you* want to come here?"

"Cosma Point was a place my mother used to live, before she got married," N explained. "I felt it had a lot to teach me, but I never expected to find it looking like this..."

"What happened here?" Butch asked.

"I don't know in detail," N replied sadly. "All I have is the information on this placard." His eyes narrowed as he scanned the words again. "Maybe that's all I needed."

From behind a nearby rock, a cleffa which had been eavesdropping uttered an alarmed squeak and scuttled back into the undergrowth. Hurriedly pushing its way through foliage to a clearing on the other side, the cleffa ran towards a lone wooden hut that was present there. With fervent effort, the star-shaped pokémon raised its diminutive body up the staircase to the hut's front door, and battered its little fists against it. Moments later, the door opened. A shadowed humanoid figure gazed out

at the empty space in front of them, before hearing the cleffa's exclamations and looked downward.

"Cleh-clef cleh-fah!" the pokémon spluttered, waving its stubby arms.

"Visitors?" the figure responded, an intrigued note in their voice.

"Cleh cleh cleh-fah fah!" came the reply.

"Thank you, Comet," the figure gave a nod. "I will go see to them right away."

The group upon the plateau soon found themselves joined by a sylphlike woman, clothed in a resplendent pink dress with wide sleeves that draped over her hands. Her ebony hair, long and flowing, reached to just below her knees and dangled in two ribbon-like formations by each ear.

"I am Valerie Ekoru, Guardian of Cosma Point," she informed them. "I keep watch over the town's ruins and the pokémon that live here. Tell me...what are your names, and why have you set foot upon this place?" The question was delivered in a soft voice, but there was an underlying scrutiny that made Butch and Cassidy feel a little uneasy.

"My name is N Jyseis," the man spoke up. "These are my friends, Butch, Cassidy and Soluqua. They were here by chance, but I have come looking for answers."

"Jyseis..." Valerie murmured, concentrating. "That name is familiar. Wait! Are you the son of Lady Harmony?"

"Yes. Yes I am," N looked a little surprised.

"It is an honour to finally meet you," the woman smiled. "Lady Harmony was once a teacher of mine, before she moved away with your father. I would be more than glad to teach you in return." She paused, glancing towards Butch, Cassidy and Soluqua before looking back to N once more. "Do you mind them being party to this information?"

"I feel I can trust them," N replied. The trio behind him exchanged puzzled expressions.

"Fair enough," Valerie said. "Come with me to my house. Let us get out of this snow."

The hut was a pleasant living space with a sense of age to it. From the look of its external design and fittings, it appeared to be an old Pokémon Ranger lodge that had since been repurposed. There was a modest-looking bed, a sturdy table with accompanying chairs and a tall bookshelf which took up most of the far wall. Butch, Cassidy and N arranged themselves around the table while Soluqua helped Valerie to serve hot drinks.

"You don't seem to be bothered by the fact it's snowing in March," Cassidy said, before drinking from her mug of fruit tea.

"The temperature differs here from the rest of the region," Valerie smiled. "So yes, I am used to the snow showers."

She approached the tall bookshelf at one end of the hut, before selecting an aged-looking volume titled 'Sinnoh Legends' from the left hand side and placing it upon the oak table. Following some deliberation over the contents page, the woman sought the chapter she had been looking for, and turned to that page in question.

"'There once were pokémon that became very close to humans'," Valerie began reading. "'There once were humans and pokémon that ate together at the same table. It was a time when there existed no differences to distinguish the two.'" These words come from a historical document that tells of a unique race of pokémon known as the Lunari."

"The Lunari?" Butch frowned. "Who are they?"

"Some three thousand years ago, a malevolent force chose to use pokémon as its tools of war," Valerie explained. "It created Melecium, a crystal that could amplify a pokémon's intelligence and endurance, but at a cost. Any pokémon who was exposed to the energy from these crystals would be enslaved to them, and in turn the one who created them. While some pokémon relished their new strengths, others did not wish to fight for their master's evil cause and left Oci - taking what little Melecium they could with them. These pokémon were what came to be known as the Lunari - named after the moon, where they built their home."

"Pokémon from the moon..." Butch murmured to himself.

"Though the moon colony thrived, some Lunari mourned for their old planet," Valerie continued. "With their master now defeated, and having successfully created a substitute for Melecium, these Lunari returned to Oci - attempting to reconnect with the other pokémon and humans that lived there. Many humans were afraid of these unusual pokémon, shunning them without question. But a few embraced the Lunari, and it was from these welcoming hearts that places such as Cosma Point were born. Built from the combined efforts of humans and pokémon, Cosma Point was once a rare oasis of refuge in a world that wished to have nothing to do with the Lunari."

"But they couldn't even let *that* exist," N remarked bitterly. "That was the hatred which made Lunari ashamed to be who they were."

"Unfortunately, this is true," Valerie sighed. "But it was not humans that attacked Cosma Point that night. It was other members of the Lunari."

N looked horrified. His expression reflected a deep discomfort, a reluctance to process what he had just heard.

"But...but..."

"It is not entirely fault on the part of humans that Lunari are segregated," Valerie explained. "Many Lunari do not wish to live alongside humans either, and they are disgusted at those who do. They will try anything to keep that separation, and worse."

"But that's not right," N shook his head in upset. "I thought the Lunari were above such thinking."

"You sure seem concerned by how they behave," Butch tilted his head.

"Of course I am," N replied. "These are my people."

"What?!" Butch and Cassidy spluttered in unison. "How?"

"Some Lunari have taken on human forms for many reasons," Valerie told them. "Some out of choice, and others out of coercion - feeling they would not be accepted any other way by the humans that live here. I too am a Lunari, in part. My mother was a delcatty who became human to be with a man she loved."

"While my parents became human to fit into society," N said. "I was born like this as a result."

His expression was once again difficult to read at this point. Cassidy wondered if being human was something that bothered N, but couldn't bring herself to ask, lest he responded with an answer she didn't want to hear. It was difficult for her to imagine what it was like being caught in a form you did not wish to be, yet on the other hand, the core of her felt saddened that one could feel uncomfortable with humanity. Easy for her to think, she figured. Being human was something she enjoyed, maybe even prided herself in - as dangerous as that might have been.

"I was only a child when the Cosma Point tragedy happened," Valerie said. "But I have learned much since being appointed guardian of this place. I salvaged belongings that were miraculously spared by the flames." She picked another, thinner blue book with '1980' printed in gold leaf upon its cover from the shelf. "This was a diary written by someone who once worked for those who kept Cosma Point safe. Just one of many saddening tales of this once proud town."

Valerie gently opened the book, and Cassidy caught sight of some words penned in elegant handwriting on the inside page.

"Together we shall have...our White Tomorrow," she murmured.

"Poetic, isn't it?" Valerie smiled. "This person definitely had a way with words."

"May I have a look?" Cassidy inquired. Valerie nodded, and offered the diary towards her guest. Cassidy carefully opened it to the central pages.

May 28th, it read.

It has almost been a year since dear Halen passed away and yet I still find myself steeped in anger over my inability to prevent his death. Lately I have begun to question the rational thinking of my superiors, particularly that of Madam Boss. While I understand the need for funds to support the organization, it should not be our sole priority as upholders of

the law. If Halen had not been forced to participate in such a risky money-making scheme, this would never have happened.

I can't believe I'm writing this, but I'm starting to regret ever signing up to Team Rocket.

"Team Rocket?" Butch spluttered, having been reading over Cassidy's shoulder. "Surely that's a typo. Since when have Team Rocket ever been 'upholders of the law'?"

"They were, once," Valerie told him sadly. "Back in the beginning, Team Rocket was a force for good - created by a human and a Lunari to protect both their kind from those who wished to see Cosma Point's unity destroyed. But sadly, the organization became poisoned by greed and discontent once a new human leader took over from one of the original founders."

"This 'Madam Boss', correct?" Cassidy raised an eyebrow. The title was unfamiliar to her. Ever since her first day in Team Rocket, she'd been led to believe that Giovanni was the first to lead the organization - that no one had preceded him.

"That is right," Valerie nodded. "Shortly after her rise to power, the role of pokémon in the organization diminished rapidly. It wasn't long before the human operatives of Team Rocket were dominating and exploiting their pokémon counterparts, and the Team Rocket which started out with such high ideals was no more."

"So this is where it all began," N shook his head slowly. It was definitely hard to accept, looking at the organization now, that Team Rocket could have ever been anything but crooked. But it was true - corruption was easy where money and power were concerned.

"Valerie...may I ask you a question, in private?"

"Certainly," Valerie nodded, before taking N across the room and casting her remaining visitors a glance. "Do excuse us."

"Sure," Butch replied, a little distantly. The snowfall had ceased for now and the influx of new knowledge, not to mention what that knowledge was about, had left him feeling quite astonished.

"You seemed to know something about the Lunari," Cassidy said, while Soluqua stood nearby, perusing the diary.

"Heh, sort of," Butch smiled. "I recall one of the lab nerds working with Doctor Namba having an obsession with 'Pokémon from Space'. Looks like those pokémon came from here first, huh."

"To think, though...some of those Lunari are in human form," Cassidy mused. "Who knows how many we have encountered in our travels without knowing it!" She paused. "Maybe Meowth wouldn't feel so bad if he knew there were other pokémon sort of like him out there."

"Meowth?" Butch pulled a face.

"Oh yeah, I hadn't told you," Cassidy looked up. "Craziest thing, actually... it turns out that Meowth never actually disappeared. He'd been that mute blonde-haired guy this whole time."

"...what?"

"That wacko Professor Bohrgram had used him for some kind of experiment, from the sounds of it," Cassidy remarked, unaware of Butch's rapidly blanching face. It wasn't a result of what sounded, at least to the uninitiated, like something completely ridiculous. It was from the sound of a voice - an unmistakable voice - yelling something in the furthest recesses of his mind.

"HEY! Dat's my friend's stuff you just stole! Get back here!"

Consequently the voice collided with the vision of the lithe, middle-aged figure which had so unceremoniously thrust him into a table full of experimental formulas.

"That...that..." Butch shook. Before he had a chance to utter another word, a loud thud was heard outside the door. Then another. The thuds were very solid, but irregular - as if the one causing them was attempting to sound urgent, with noticeable difficulty. Valerie stopped talking to N and approached the door with a puzzled expression. She opened the door to reveal a crescent-shaped rock pokémon hovering in mid air - a worried look in its deep red eyes. Its craggy body was covered in scrapes and marks, indicating it had been some form of conflict.

"Mona!" Valerie spluttered. "What is it? Why are you not on patrol?"

"Luuuun!" the pokémon explained. "Luu-nah-tohnh luu, nah-tohn tohn!"

"What?" Valerie grimaced. "Oh, oh no...this is terrible."

"Two women are scaling the cliff nearby," N interpreted for Butch and Cassidy's benefit.

"What's so terrible about that?" Butch asked.

"You don't understand," Valerie insisted. "They're not just climbers - they're looking to dig through the cliff! Mona tried to stop them, but their pokémon overpowered her."

"And you're worried they might cause Cosma Point to collapse?" Cassidy guessed.

"Worse than that," Valerie shook her head bereftly. "There are things below the surface of Cosma Point which people like them must never be allowed to get their hands on." She began pacing back and forth across the doorway for a moment, while Mona looked on anxiously. "I wasn't going to speak of this, but I'm facing an emergency. Not all Lunari departed from Cosma after that fateful day. Some still remain, living and working underground, all while protecting and nourishing something very important."

"Luu-nah luuun tohn!" Mona added emphatically.

"Right! I must contact them at once," Valerie agreed. "Mona, open a communications channel for me please."

"Luun," Mona acknowledged. The undulating motion of their hovering ceased, giving the impression that time had frozen around them entirely, as their eyes began to glow bright red. Moments later they flinched with a pained cry, the glow in their eyes vanishing instantly. "L-Lun-nah tohn..." the pokémon stammered. "Luu-nah!"

"You couldn't connect?" Valerie's eyes widened. "No...something is definitely very wrong. They would never break communications with me like that! What could possibly be happening down there?"

"Well aren't you going to go and find out?" Cassidy looked at Valerie like she had a screw loose. "You're appointed guardian of this place, right?"

"Only of the ruins on the surface," Valerie looked crestfallen. "I cannot leave my post here."

"I shall go," N said boldly.

"You will?" Valerie looked astonished.

"Good people may be in danger," N gave a nod. "And besides, you said that there was something important down there."

"Yes," Valerie replied quietly. "The very thing that keeps the Lunari alive."

"In which case, we shall come with you, N," Cassidy announced. Butch looked at her in horror.

"Hey! Whadda you doing, dragging me into this?" he snapped. "Last time I went into some underground place, I got attacked by a druddigon!"

"You don't have to come along," Cassidy eyed him calmly. "I just thought you'd appreciate an opportunity to repay N for sacrificing his medicine to get you back to being human."

Butch paused, processing the statement, before letting out a prolonged grumbly sigh. Despite the self-satisfied tone in Cassidy's voice, she had managed to nudge his conscience.

"Alright," he sighed. "I'll do it. But if anything bad happens to me down there, I'm blaming it on you."

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

"Alright. I think we scared that lunatone off."

For the two women clinging to the side of the cliff, it was just another day. They lived for thrilling retrieval missions, and things such as this were neither challenging nor harrowing. The plan was simple enough

– scour the rock face for its weakest point before breaking through to the caves within. Ascending the cliff had been achieved by use of the most advanced rock climbing equipment, while a sensitive frequency detector sought out a thin patch of wall for them to hack through.

"So tell me, Oakley..." the woman with golden hair remarked after a few moments of chipping. "Why did our client want us to do this again?"

"Something he caught wind of while working at Silph," Oakley responded in lowered tones, brushing her lavender fringe from her eyes. "Thirty five years ago, someone in the company discovered a sample of some weird crystals in one of the mechanics laboratories. This substance didn't appear anywhere in the periodic table, but it apparently has massive capabilities. Technicians of the past converted into a liquid form and used it as fuel and lubricant, accidentally bringing robotic toys and construction droids to life."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Oakley nodded, steadying herself against the wall. "Y'know pokémon like magnemite, voltorb, beldum...the first members of their species were all inanimate objects. And it goes beyond that - further experiments proved these crystals could even get existing pokémon to change into new forms!"

"Wow..." came the impressed response. "So how'd something like that end up in a lab in the first place?"

"Well at first, they'd assumed it had been manufactured," Oakley shrugged, taking a swing at the rock face with her pickaxe. "Despite one man taking ownership for its creation, attempts at replicating the substance failed. Eventually the heads of Silph settled upon another theory. The crystals had to have been harvested from somewhere. Ever since then, the scientists have been searching this planet for such a location." She leant back slightly with her feet braced against the rock, grinning and resting her weight wholly upon the cable tied securely about her. "But it seems our client beat them to it."

"And how's he so sure it's here?" her accomplice frowned with noticeable doubt in her voice.

"I don't question our source of income, Annie," Oakley remarked dryly. "If the guy says he has his means of knowing, and we're getting paid to look, then that's good enough for me. Besides, if those crystals ARE here, no reason we can't take a sample for ourselves and use it to make *our* pokémon stronger."

"But I wouldn't want to hurt Espi..." Annie looked awkward. Oakley snorted in amusement.

"All the more for my team then," she responded. "Just think of how rich and famous I'd be with one-of-a-kind pokémon at my side!"

"Well I gotta admit, it *does* sound tempting," Annie murmured, pushing her blue hat up from her eyes. "But I don't think I'd feel

comfortable with *you* in possession of that kind of power, sis. Y'know, after the Alto Mare incident."

Oakley began to blush at the reminder of her past actions that had landed both women in jail. Undertaking a mission to obtain the Soul Dew at the request of Team Rocket's leader had gone highly awry when she was overcome by the seemingly deceptive abilities of Alto Mare's defence machine. And Annie just couldn't help teasing her senseless about it. Eventually, Oakley responded in the best way she knew how.

"Shut up and keep digging," she grumbled, before her next strike thrust her upper body through the partially-crushed wall.

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

Quickly and silently, N, Butch, Cassidy and Soluqua followed Mona the Lunatone down through the forest. The lull in snowfall had been temporary, and N found himself struggling to keep track of their guide's pale form as it bobbed up and down ahead of him - weaving in and out of the trees. Valerie had bid the group farewell with anxiously-tinted wishes of good luck, explaining that Mona was the only one who could both lead them to and access the entrance into the Lunari's underground hideout.

"It must have been hard, growing up knowing you were different," Butch commented. "Bet other kids weren't much better about it than the adults."

"I didn't spend time with human children," N told him bluntly. "My father...he kept me away from the outside world. He said that humans were beneath us."

"Did you believe that?" Cassidy looked up, a little sadly. "*Do you?*"

"Maybe once," N replied. There was notable guilt in his voice. "But my father's speech was always so biased in favour of Lunari. As I grew older, I came to realise there was another side to the story, and I wanted to hear it. After all, you cannot make judgements with just one type of information." He sighed. "My father was adamant there was only one side that mattered, though. He refused to let me leave home to seek greater enlightenment...so I ran away."

"And where's your dad now?" Butch asked.

"He has probably given me up as a lost cause," N said. "Probably already training someone else to lead the Alliance instead of me. To be honest, the thought of such a thing had given me chills anyway. Something about that organization...I don't know. It seemed wrong."

"The Alliance?" Cassidy blinked. "You mean, the Sanguine Alliance?"

"Yes," N glanced at her. "You know of them?" The question was laced with apprehensiveness.

"My parents spoke of them," Cassidy nodded. "You were right to keep out of your dad's business, if he's involved with the Sanguine Alliance. In some ways, their actions have not been much better than those of the corrupted Team Rocket."

"I feared as much..." N shuddered a little. "To think that there are Lunari that wish separateness from humans as much as some humans desire to be set apart from Lunari. I...I almost feel ashamed."

"Look, you can't hold yourself responsible for what others do," Butch insisted. "You can only try to persuade 'em, and if they don't listen to reason, you do the right thing anyway. The only actions you can be held responsible for are your own."

"That is true," N remarked agreeably. A tiny smile emerged upon his face. "I must learn from yours and Cassidy's example."

"Eh, I dunno if I've set the best example," Butch looked awkward.

"Maybe not in *your* opinion," N said warmly. "Sure, your past has not been the most favourable. But the fact you're trying to fix that now...*that's* the example I want to learn from."

Butch eyed the young man, a little stunned. He'd never been chosen as a role model by anyone before. It partly filled him with an odd sensation not unlike the pride he'd experienced while undertaking missions in Team Rocket - instead this time it felt less superficial and more genuine. But on the other hand, it made him terribly nervous.

Having only just begun to work on being a decent citizen, he didn't want to mess up someone else's life if he were to make a mistake with his one.

Turning her attention from Butch's somewhat flustered countenance to her hybrid pokémon companion, Cassidy uttered a small noise of alarm when she noticed a thin, blue book amongst Soluqua's webbed hands.

"Is that...?" Cassidy began, receiving a pleased nod. "You took that person's diary?"

"Gohl-peh peh gohh!" Soluqua protested.

"Soluqua got Valerie's permission to keep it," N translated, glancing over his shoulder.

"But why?" Cassidy asked in puzzlement. "Was it because of the evidence that Team Rocket once worked for the side of good?" Soluqua shook her head, and offered the open book towards Cassidy, who took it - reading the page the hybrid pokémon had opened it at. Her eyes widened. "I don't believe it..." she whispered.

"What's wrong?" Butch asked. Cassidy passed the diary to him for reading. "Huh! Well how about that."

Cassidy retrieved the book and placed it into her satchel, still appearing a little mindblown by the discovery. She'd figure what to do with it later.

"Luuuh-nah," Mona reported.

"We're here," N backed up the statement.

"Where?" Butch pulled a face. "All I see is a big rock."

Mona said no more, instead hovered closer to the rockface, the crimson glow once again present in their eyes. A white circular pattern flickered in the rock's surface for just a moment, before it fell away in clean cut pieces - pulled as if by invisible hands. The astonished group were left staring at a round opening, about 5 foot in height, its perfect edges seeming bewilderingly alien amongst the rugged portions of the mountainside. Beyond the opening stretched a tunnel with tiny lights set into the walls.

"Magnificent..." N remarked, deeply impressed.

"Luh-nah tohnn," Mona explained. "Lu luh-nah."

"We're on our own for this point onward," N relayed. "Thank you for your help, Mona. I promise to find out what's happening down here."

The lunatone's eyes creased a little in a grateful expression of her own. She continued to hover as N bent down slightly and led Butch and Cassidy through the opening. No sooner had they stepped into the tunnel, the entrance quickly re-assembled itself - the white circular pattern shimmering once more before falling dim, leaving a normal cave surface behind them. Cassidy placed her hands tentatively upon the surface, wondering for a moment just how they were supposed to get back out.

"C'mon Cass," Butch urged. "Let's get this over with." He didn't want to be down here much longer than he had to.

N strode onward with a stern look of determination. The tunnel progressed for some time, with little evidence of life in the cave bar the moderate lighting which illuminated it. Suddenly, a high-pitched scream echoed around the walls, causing the members of the group to exchange accusing expressions with each other before realising it had been none of them who had uttered the sound.

"I think it came from that way," Butch announced firmly, pointing a finger toward the left hand passage where the main tunnel split into three smaller routes. Soluqua was the first to dash in the suggested direction, with N following close behind. Cassidy and Butch gave chase – soon they came across whom was responsible for the noise.

Two women, one dressed in a dark red jacket with jeans, black boots and a blue peaked hat, the other in a similar outfit of purple tint, were poised defensively behind an espeon and ariados, as five unidentified pokémon surrounded them. They were all of identical species – pink and cream bipedal forms with white bushy tails and fluffy ears decorated with curled extensions nearest their heads.

"What's happening, Oakley?" the woman in the blue outfit gibbered. "He never mentioned anything about...whatever these things are!"

"Hmph. It's nothing we can't handle," Oakley responded dismissively, while the trio of pokémon examined their opponents with somewhat unnerved expressions. Cassidy squinted for a moment before looking to Butch.

"Do those women look familiar to you?" she asked.

"Yeah..." Butch responded in lowered tones. "They're Oakley and Annie Wilhelm, freelance agents best known for their skills at breaking and entering. Giovanni hired them out for a mission once."

At this point, a couple of the unfamiliar pokémon swung round and glared accusingly at them, a surprising malice in their deep blue eyes. Annie and Oakley also caught sight of the newcomers to their situation.

"Yeesh, they've got good hearing," Butch winced.

"So you're the ones looking to take things that aren't yours!" N snapped. "Leave now, before you regret it."

"And what say do *you* have in all this, sweetheart?" Oakley responded patronizingly. "From what I can tell, those pokémon aren't any happier about you being in here than they are about us."

She had a point. Half of the group of pink creatures were glowering at N, Butch, Cassidy and Soluqua, while the other half remained watchful of Annie, Oakley and their pokémon. Their arms began to shimmer as they readied ice attacks to throw at the recent arrivals.

"Please wait!" N protested. "I came here to help! Valerie heard there was trouble, but she couldn't come down here herself, so I volunteered to do it for her. I don't want to steal anything from you!"

"Aw-deh?" the pokémon hesitated, the feeler-like extensions on their ears twitching in N's direction. Noticing an opening, Oakley glared firmly at the ariados standing next to her before pointing at her distracted targets.

"Get them!"

"You too, Espeon!" Annie ordered, catching on to her sister's plan. The two pokémon dived toward N and his companions, the espeon firing star-shaped beams of energy from the gem on its head, while the ariados charged into a Poison Jab attack. But instead of making contact with their assumed victims, one of the nearby creatures stepped into their path, raised both of its own paws and caught the ariados' leg in mid-swing. A second took Espeon's Swift attack head on with little effort. The surprised pokémon found themselves flat on their backs shortly afterward, wracked with a crystalline sheen.

"Our pokémon..." Annie whimpered, taking a step back. "They're way too strong, Oakley! What am I gonna do?"

"Stand your ground and stop acting like such a coward," Oakley growled, before returning her attention to N who was offering a dark expression.

"That was a cheap trick," he remarked in disgust. "You're lucky these audino went easy on you."

"Audino?" Cassidy echoed. A terrible screech reverberated through the cave, sending the group of pink and cream coloured pokémon into writhing agony - their paws clasped tightly to their ears in a futile attempt to block out the sounds. At the same time, violent tremors were felt all around. Soluqua glanced up in horror.

"Not again!" Butch cried. "I knew it was a bad idea coming down here!"

N flinched as a shard of rock hit the top of his head. He glanced up worriedly to see a sizeable crack had emerged in the ceiling and was beginning to snake down the cave walls. Annie glanced at Oakley expectantly.

"This place could collapse any minute. We've got to make a break for it," the latter decided, the tone of her voice dictating she was uncomfortable with the idea. "Client or no client, we won't get any kind of payment if we don't get out *alive*."

"Got it," Annie agreed, before returning espeon to her Pokéball and casting a quick, sad glance over her shoulder. "He sure isn't going to take this well..."

Oakley also returned the ariados to the safety of its electronic containment before the two women dashed deeper into the dusty air, back the way they had come.

"What are we gonna do?" Butch exclaimed fearfully. "Sounds like this whole tunnel's gonna come down!"

"Aw-deh-noh!" one of the pokémon urged to its companions, coaxing the group into a huddle. N looked on in a mixture of anxiousness and bewilderment, then he noticed another of the pokémon beckoning towards him also. "Aw-deh! Aw-deh deh-noh!"

"Butch! Cassidy! Soluqua! Get closer to the audino!" he insisted, dashing over to the huddled cluster.

Cassidy wasn't even going to ask why. If these odd pokémon had a plan where she had not, she was totally up for it. Grabbing Soluqua's left hand, the woman stumbled towards the group of audino amongst the shaking and clouds of dust, and wedged herself amongst them. Butch cried out in alarm, throwing himself at the apparent place of safety as an ample slab of the cave ceiling plummeted toward the ground at speed.

N kept his eyes tight shut and waited for the shaking and thunderous noises to recede. The warmth of the audino surrounding him provided some comfort - he could sense their vibrant encompassing Aura passing through his body. After half a minute or so, all fell silent and motionless. N opened his eyes, yet blackness remained. He caught sight of a tiny chink of green from a distance. There was the sound of shifting rock, and the green light intensified. With a slam, a large boulder was cast aside - surrounded by a blue aura. Soluqua lowered her hands, while the audino glanced around, studying the results of the tremors. The

combined strength of their barrier had been enough to prevent the cave collapse from burying them entirely, but it had made a nasty mess of the tunnel they'd been standing in.

"Thank you for trusting me," N said appreciatively.

<I can sense your intentions are good,> the audino wearing a necklace replied. <You seem to understand us better than those other two humans.>

"It's an ability I've had since I was a child," N nodded. "My parents were Lunari."

There was a reverberation of hesitant murmuring amongst the group of audino, which the one wearing the necklace halted with a raised paw.

<I see,> he said simply.

"What was causing that awful sound?" Cassidy asked.

<We do not know what it is,> another audino insisted sadly. <Only that it has been causing a lot of problems for the past day or so. We have not been able to send or receive communications, and the power to our systems is being drained. If this continues...we'll be in big trouble.>

"So why didn't you go out to get help?" Butch asked the audino, following N's translation.

<We've been trying to fix the problem ourselves,> came the reply.
<Getting help ran the risk of more people finding out about the Lunari
and what is guarded here.>

"The Melecium, right?" Cassidy said. The audino flinched
collectively, to which N tried to patch things up.

"Valerie told us a little about what went on down here," he
explained.

<Valerie?> one of the audino looked surprised.

<Well she must have trusted you to allow you to do this,> the
audino wearing a necklace shrugged resignedly, before holding out a paw.
<The name's Mitchell. These are my co-workers Lu, Brent, Trill and
Whysper.>

"Nice to meet you, Mitchell," N smiled, taking the paw. "And the
rest of you. I am N, and these friends of mine are Soluqua, Butch and
Cassidy."

"It sounds like the best thing we can do, at least now those
thieves have been scared off, is find what was making that screeching
earlier and find out why it's so distressed," Cassidy remarked.

"Sure, great," Butch remarked. "The sooner we do that, the
sooner we can get out of here."

<We are in the outer limits right now,> Brent explained. <The main hub of Coalef's Underground is a short walk from this point - follow us.>

Cassidy wasn't sure how the group of audino knew just exactly where they were heading. To her, every underground passage looked the same as the next one - with no defining features to mark just how far it was from one area to another. It was likely deliberate, considering the Lunari's desire not to be found living under Cosma Point. After all, the ones who traversed these tunnels frequently would have no need for signposting.

"So..." Butch pondered. "What is an audino, anyway? I'm guessing a Lunari pokémon, at least."

"That is correct," N replied. "While some Lunari look no different from other pokémon, others are enhancements of species you are familiar with. I believe this is the case with audino."

"Aw-deh, deh deh-noh," Lu elaborated.

"Lu says that the ancestors of audino were blissey," N said.

"That Melecium sure is some pretty powerful stuff, if it can cause transformations like that," Cassidy remarked.

The screeching was heard again - more distantly this time, but enough to still cause the audino to wince slightly. A cluster of wild zubat

fluttered agitatedly from the ceiling and down the tunnel, making everyone duck.

<That sound...> Soluqua shuddered.

"What's wrong, Soluqua?" N asked quietly.

<I've heard that sound before, and now I remember why. While I was still trapped in Team Rocket's laboratory, there was a creature in there which made noises just like that.>

The audino froze in unison, causing Butch to stumble into the back of the group and fall sideways.

<Team Rocket?> Lu spluttered. <This creature belongs to them?>

<They must have sent it here to sabotage our headquarters!>

Brent growled.

<No, no! It's not like that,> Soluqua protested. <At least, I don't *think* it is. Someone broke into Team Rocket's base in Totto a week or two ago and tried to free all the pokémon in the labs. This creature may well be one of the leftover roaming pokémon.>

"Someone tried to free all of Team Rocket's lab pokémon in Totto?" N repeated with awe.

"You talking about that guy who's travelling with James and the rest of those deserters, right?" Butch looked at Soluqua.

"You know him?" N inquired. There was a note of almost-childlike excitement in his voice at this point, something unheard from the man until now.

"Sort of," Cassidy grimaced a little. She didn't wish to say that the only reason they 'sort of' knew him was that they'd been trying to *stop* him from freeing the lab pokémon. "What did Soluqua tell you?"

"The cry sounded like a creature she'd heard while in Team Rocket's laboratory," N explained. Cassidy uttered a tiny gasp.

"Another hybrid?" she wondered to herself. This generated an uncomfortable feeling - these pokémon were not designed to be taken down easily. "We'd better move fast."

The travellers were led by their pokémon guides to the mouth of the tunnel. For a moment, Cassidy thought they had been led to the exit in a surreptitious means of showing them out. But she blinked again, her eyes attempting to focus in the dim glow. They had in fact stepped into a large cavern, and what she had initially assumed to be moonlight was an crystalline orb set into the cavern ceiling, simulating this level of illumination alongside a number of smaller glowing articles representing stars.

The cavern floor was filled with dome-like constructions made from flexible, thin wooden beams layered with canvas. Each dwelling had two holes for windows, and one larger hole for the doorway - some were even

surrounded with lovingly tended plants in differently shaped containers. The resident pokémon cowered inside of these modest-looking houses, unable to sleep, eyeing the human passers by with a mixture of anticipation and distaste. Butch suddenly felt as if he were a lone wrangler that had just entered a Ranch Town under siege - no more welcomed than the previous cause of their trouble.

<We have told everyone to stay hidden until the creature's rampage is stopped,> Trill elaborated. <Most of the residents here are not fighters.>

<Let us continue,> Mitchell said briskly, increasing his pace towards a pillar of rock in the central area of the cavern. The other audino adapted to the speed shift, and N, Butch, Cassidy and Soluqua followed suit. Once they were near enough to the pillar, N saw a curious panel set into the rock face - circular with a ring underneath. Mitchell took the key-like article from around his neck and waved it in front of the ring area of the panel, which responded by retracting a portion of the pillar into numerous cubes.

"I'm never going to get used to this whole 'disappearing rocks' thing," Butch shook his head, as he wandered through the newly revealed doorway after the others.

This new chamber was a lot smaller in size than the previous one, but its contents were far more progressive. One side of the chamber had

a wide control panel installed, with several computer screens relaying information in the form of charts, scans and photographic imagery. The majority of the space was taken up by desks and chairs which looked as if they had been carved from the ground itself. Sat in these chairs were a variety of different pokémon - species that, had Butch and Cassidy still been working for Team Rocket, they would have jumped at the chance to capture and deliver back to their superiors. Those who were inquisitive enough to glance up at the new arrivals had flinched in alarm, some proceeding to stare uncomfortably and others returning to frantic button pushing as if they had seen nothing at all.

"This is unbelievable..." N murmured distantly.

"It looks like some kind of command center," Butch added, scratching his chin thoughtfully while examining the contents of the computer screens. There were indications that something was being monitored, but as to what, he didn't know. All the text was written in a curious language of dot patterns he could not decipher.

<You're correct,> Mitchell smiled. <This is where we keep tabs on what happens both inside and outside Coalef's Underground. Civilian business, and LFPE matters.>

"LFPE..." N pondered this. "The Lunari Force for Pokémon Equality. That organization has been mentioned to me before, but I don't know what it does."

<Most people don't,> Whysper said. <Human, pokémon, even other Lunari. The LFPE works on keeping the peace between these three groups - covering areas that humans may overlook or neglect for whatever reason. We also protect the valuable resources of the Lunari civilisation.>

<Abecee's in charge of keeping tabs on the incoming info,> Brent motioned to a dodrio that was sat at the main control panel, its clawed feet raised and typing at the keypad. <He's Head of Communications. Or 'heads', if you wanna get technical.> The audino chuckled at his own joke as Abecee turned to check out the source of the voice.

<Scouter Mitchell, you're back!> the dodrio's three heads exclaimed in unison. <Were you able to stop the source of the break in?> the middle one added.

<Yes> Mitchell nodded. <That creature's rampaging actually worked in our favour this time around. Unfortunately it has also caused a cave in to perimeter tunnel J.>

<Gotcha,> Abecee's left head nodded. <I'll get some of our construction team on it.>

<Still working on getting that hole on the outer wall reinforced,> the right head assured them. Abecee paused, noticing the four taller additions to the back of the group. <What are these strangers doing here?> the middle head squawked.

<They were sent down by surface guardian Valerie to help us,>
Trill explained.

<Well I sure hope she knew what she was doing,> the right head groaned. <We've got enough problems as it is!>

N looked on, but did not translate. His mild disappointment at not being trusted was vastly overshadowed by his empathy for the Lunari's current situation, and they hardly needed Butch and Cassidy's protests to compound matters.

<Any sign of the creature since the generator incident?> Mitchell asked.

<Not yet,> Abecee's middle head replied. <The engineers were just about able to keep it from draining our entire power supply, but not without casualties. This creature is super powerful, and its anger only makes the power stronger.>

<Thirty percent of our data has been corrupted by its electrical fields,> the left head pointed out bereftly. <We're currently trying to back up the most important stuff.>

"So, are we allowed *any* insight into what's going on here?" Butch muttered in N's direction.

"The people down here have been fighting the creature off, but the weird frequencies it is generating are apparently making it difficult to track," the young man replied. *I wonder what on earth could do such a thing...?*

Before he had a chance to ponder this further, the sound of falling rubble and screams of terror were heard from outside the room. Mitchell turned to the rest of the audino with a stern expression.

<It's found the residential area,> he said, before looking at N.
<The team and I will sort this out. You and the others stay here.>

"Stay here?" N echoed, aghast.

"Well *that's* gonna do a lot of good," Butch remarked sarcastically. The audino group paused and eyed him. "That guardian lady sent us down here to help *fix* the problem, and we won't be fixing any problem staying in this room."

"He has a point," Cassidy agreed. "Besides, Soluqua has more of a chance against that creature than most of us here."

Soluqua nodded, trying to hide her nervousness. Those sounds unsettled her greatly, and the thought of battling another of Team Rocket's genetic pokémon also, but she knew the others needed her to be bold. Lu glanced at Mitchell with an expression of confusion, while Mitchell quickly processed these thoughts.

<Alright,> he said seriously. <Let's go.>

The audino and their companions stepped into a scene of chaos. A gaping hole was now present in the cavern ceiling, having thrown the luminous orb from its lofty position and into the middle of the floor.

There, its soft glow cast eerie shadows upon the surrounding houses, and across a bipedal form which stood amongst them, sparking with electricity. It was around six feet in height, covered in a blue-grey metallic skin with gold patterns on its head, feet, stomach and the ends of its hollow, tube-like arms. The flat, horn-like protrusions from its temples curved up over its head, and its circular red eyes stared wildly at the surroundings - alight with a vivid brilliance.

"I've seen that pokémon before!" Cassidy exclaimed. "When I was commissioned to work with Soluqua - it's a fusion of bronzong and ampharos. What was it called again?"

"'Zopharos', right?" Butch spoke up. He remembered also catching sight of the pokémon when visiting the laboratory to collect raccrupt.

"That's it," Cassidy nodded. Soluqua uttered a horrified noise, drawing her companion's attention. Before she was able to inquire as to the reason behind this reaction, Zopharos gave a drawn out howl with resonant undertones, and its body erupted into a fountain of electrical bolts.

The Discharge attack scattered itself across the cavern in all directions, searing the outer covers of nearby tents and setting them alight. No longer wishing to remain under the minimal shelter of their homes, the pokémon within them ran out into the open - their fleeing bodies and panicked cries adding further chaos to the scene.

"Brent, Lu, evacuate the residents!" Mitchell bellowed. "Trill, come with me - we need to contain the damage."

"Right," Trill said firmly. The group of audino split, the remaining two marching boldly towards Zopharos without further thought. Cassidy stepped back, her eyes wide, mind filling with horrible visions of the flames that consumed the original Cosma Town. Team Rocket had been responsible for that destruction and anguish back then, and their experimentation was causing similar things to happen now. She couldn't let it get worse.

"Soluqua, put out those fires, quickly!" Cassidy exclaimed.

"Gohl peh gohl..." Soluqua clasped at her head, shaking. "Gohl peh-reh goh?"

"She's worried about getting hit by the electricity," N translated with a frown.

"You're not an ordinary water type, Soluqua!" Cassidy insisted fervently. "You can deflect that electricity easily! You've got to do this!"

"Don't force her!" N snapped. Cassidy and Soluqua flinched in unison, taken off guard by the man's uncharacteristic outburst. "If Soluqua doesn't feel up to this, you have no right to make her do something she's not ready for."

"We ain't got time to stand around discussing ethics," Butch grunted, plucking the Pokéball from his belt and tossing it forward. "Levi! Kick up some dirt on these tents to put out the fires!"

The young roubleat emerged from the light of the Pokéball with an enthusiastic cry, and dived vigorously at the ground - his clawed feet swiping powdered clumps of earth at the surrounding flames. Soluqua glanced gingerly up at Cassidy, expecting to see her face saturated with fury or at least disappointment. But instead the golduck-vaporeon only saw puzzlement tinged with sadness.

"I don't understand..." Cassidy murmured, watching Mitchell and Trill struggle valiantly against Zopharos. "You were so confident before - why the sudden fear of electricity?" She paused, recalling the events that followed their escape from Team Rocket's offshore headquarters. Trapped amongst the storm, their plane bombarded with the overloading energy from hundreds of magnezone and seemingly no escape, the experience had no doubt caused Soluqua massive trauma. "Oh...oh I'm sorry."

N swung round, his ears picking up the faint sounds of crying from inside one of the blazing tents. But Levi, Brent and Lu were occupied in other parts of the cavern - it was up to him to do something. The young man sprinted across to the tent and ducked inside, flames licking at his hair and clothing. With no thought for the scorching heat or the risk to his own person, N feverishly glanced from left to right - searching for the origin of the cries. Through the rising smoke, he caught sight of a tiny female nidoran huddled next to an equally small bed, clinging to a blanket. She flinched upon noticing the presence of the tall, spindly

unidentified creature - too petrified to run or fight back. This managed to work in N's favour. He gathered up the nidoran in her blanket and darted back outside, just as the tent's internal supports collapsed.

<Mamaaa!> the nidoran squirmed in her rescuer's grip. N tried to see the child's mother amongst the tumult of escaping residents, flames, billowing smoke and the rather one-sided battle between Zopharos, Mitchell and Trill. He caught sight of a fraught-looking nidorina whom Brent was attempting to keep calm and out of the danger zone. Shielding the nidoran with one arm, N made his way towards the pair and carefully lowered the child towards the grateful parent. The young man then turned to glance back towards the main scene of activity. Trill's attempts to freeze Zopharos in place had been in vain, and the bronzong-ampharos hybrid currently had Mitchell clasped underneath its folded arms.

Fighting it isn't working, N thought to himself. Maybe I can reason with it. I've got to at least try!

Zopharos began to charge its body with electricity, intent on saturating its captive, when a subdued voice raised itself unexpectedly.

"Stop!"

Zopharos dropped Mitchell and uttered a low rumble not unlike that of a growl, but N stood firm.

"Please stop this!" N insisted. "Why are you so upset?"

"What is that idiot doing?" Cassidy grimaced.

"I...I don't understand," N's expression was a mixture of confusion and fear - not so much because of the pokémon he faced, but the fact he wasn't able to interpret its language. "Please, try to explain!"

The intensity of Zopharos' rumbling vocalisations increased. It swiftly raised both arms - the hollow ends of which pointed straight at N, and were shaking violently. N felt himself slammed into from the side. As his body hit the dirt, there was the sound of a loud explosion nearby. The young man glanced up, blinking furiously to try and see through the dust cloud, and saw a medium sized crater in the spot he'd been previously standing.

"That woulda been you if I hadn't knocked you out of the way, y'know that?" Butch muttered, clambering on to his hands and knees from where he'd thrown himself at N. "What made you think you could just walk up to that crazed beast and draw out a peace treaty?"

"I saw some kind of weird thing around their neck," N murmured as if Butch hadn't spoken, staring at Zopharos who was once again fighting against Mitchell and Trill.

"Its neck?" Butch frowned.

"I-I can't explain it," N spluttered anxiously. "But it doesn't look like it should be there. I'm pretty sure it's interfering with my ability to understand Zopharos."

"It's an RT-CCU," Cassidy said. "A mind-control device. They've since made smaller versions, but Zopharos might've been a test subject to work out the flaws in the prototype."

"That must be why the poor creature is acting crazy," N exclaimed. "We need to get the device off them!"

"Easier said than done," Butch frowned. "Just blasting it would ruin that pokémon's brain for good. We need to wear Zopharos down, then maybe Soluqua could shut the unit off...if she quits freaking out."

N frowned at Butch's tactless wording as Soluqua looked upset, but Butch had already turned to Levi for support.

"Those audino aren't having much luck out there," he said. "We're gonna have to go in, Levi."

"Roo-beh!" Levi exclaimed with a grin.

Soluqua watched as Levi entered the fray. Despite his own weakness to electricity, he dove towards Zopharos with swift, repeated kicks. Soluqua wasn't sure whether the roubleat was too young and brash to know what danger he was in, but regardless, his determination gave her some courage. The pokémon clung to it, and stepped forward. Zopharos screeched as a Focus Blast orb slammed into its chest, throwing it backwards into one of the tents, quickly followed by another orb to the right shoulder. Staggering to its feet, Zopharos uttered a loud bellow into the nearby rockface - the soundwaves tearing a getaway passage which Zopharos leapt into, and which closed up behind the fleeing hybrid.

"Damn it!" Butch growled.

"Goh gohl-peh!" Soluqua exclaimed, running across the cavern floor while waving an arm at her companions. "Gohl-peh!"

"Soluqua says she's got a psychic lock on it!" N pointed out excitedly, and ran after the golduck-vaporeon hybrid. Butch and Cassidy glanced back at Trill, who was cradling Mitchell on her knee. Both audino were burned and bruised, severely exhausted from their previous battle. Trill returned the look and waved a paw, urging for them to continue the pursuit. With that, Butch and Cassidy exited the cavern and into another tunnel on the opposite side, chasing after N and Soluqua. As the group of humans and their hybrid pokémon lead dashed through the tunnel, sounds of conflict were heard from beyond them.

"I can see a light up ahead!" Butch pointed out, beginning to squint as the glow increased and the group rounded one last corner. "Whoa..."

This new chamber was the most expansive of the areas Butch, Cassidy, N and Soluqua had seen, with a cylindrical interior that stretched some hundred metres high. The lumpy walls glistened with an unusual sheen that cast a faint, eerie blue glow, and protruding ridges from the wall's surface acted as a makeshift staircase ascending the perimeter. Around this chamber stood multiple clefaires covered in bruises and cuts – proof of their valiant attempts to stop Zopharos from causing further

damage. Now all of them were staring up with equal expressions of horror, uttering helpless cries.

"They're saying, 'Please, save the Carbink'," N translated for the benefit of his human accomplices. "...but what's Carbink?"

The young man flinched as, amongst the frantic demands for assistance from the pokémon on the ground, he realised he could hear something else. Sounds - almost like voices but not quite - tiny, scared, and in their multitudes, echoing all around him from overhead. N squinted, focusing hard on one of the rocky lumps that covered the chamber walls. Then he let out a sharp gasp.

"I don't believe it..."

"What?" Cassidy looked at him.

"These walls are made up of hundreds of living creatures," N told her. "They must be the 'Carbink' these pokémon are talking about."

Zopharos unleashed a massive beam of white light into the chamber, causing a loud gasp to erupt from the crowd below. At the same time, a flicker of purple spread from the air above the hybrid pokémon. The purple glow formed into a hole from which a red, domed head emerged. The rest of the humanoid creature thrust itself from the ethereal portal, its two pairs of long red and green flipper-like appendages making heavy contact with the Flash Cannon beam and

causing particles of energy to spray in all directions. Holding its position in midair, the creature took the brunt of the attack with its bulky form, the purple crystalline organ in its chest glowing vividly as it did so. In a matter of moments, the beam's power had been absorbed.

With an angry screech, Zopharos raised its arms and fired a blast of sound at the creature. It made impact, shifting the creature back slightly. The creature's body rapidly grew more lithe - the red skin developing black portions upon the chest, torso and legs. The four arm-like appendages became two, its domed head separated itself from its emerging shoulders as two triangular horns and a long rear fin became prominent. In a burst of unprecedented speed, the creature shot towards Zopharos and grasped the hybrid tightly, transforming yet again as it did so.

The pair of spindly tentacles divided into four once again, binding the victim as the rest of the body broadened ever so slightly, the rear fin receding to the crown of the head as the side horns tilted and lengthened a little to match. Zopharos bellowed and roared, struggling to free itself from the grasp of this unidentified being. With one final cry, the ampharos-bronzong wrenched backwards and attempted to slam the creature clinging to it into the wall nearest to them. At the same time, the black ring detached from Zopharos' neck and fell towards the ground, where it hit the rocky surface and shattered.

Almost immediately, Zopharos grew limp in its captor's arms. The creature descended to the floor, before laying down Zopharos' body with

surprising gentleness. N was the first to run over, despite protests from the others in the room and the possible dangers that may have still existed. These didn't matter, he had to check that Zopharos was still breathing. To his relief, the ampharos-bronzong hybrid began to stir and slowly opened its large, crimson eyes. No sooner had its vision drawn into focus, the first thing it saw were a multitude of furious faces, staring down at it accusingly.

"Please, don't take your anger out on this pokémon!" N protested, stepping between the Lunari inhabitants and Zopharos, before they considered further action. "They didn't realise what they were doing - their mind was being controlled by a device created by Team Rocket!" He turned back to the anxious-looking hybrid with a kindly expression. "It's okay...I know you wouldn't have acted that way, had they not been controlling you."

Zopharos stared at N, its crimson eyes shimmering from an emotion N found himself unable to define.

"I imagine this all seems pretty scary, not knowing where to go from here," N remarked softly. "But if you want, you could come along with m-"

Without warning, Zopharos let out a cry which sounded like a mixture of words and energy, and bolted across the room, where it dived

into a portion of the wall unoccupied by carbink, and was gone - its electrical utterances echoing up the tunnel, fading into silence.

"Well diplomacy sure didn't cut it," Butch remarked in unimpressed tones, as the dust cleared, leaving N and the pokémon behind him to stare at the leftover hole.

"They just kept saying 'I'm sorry'..." N murmured, his eyes full of pained sympathy. "'I'm sorry, I'm sorry'."

At least their heart was capable of feeling remorse, a telepathic voice boomed from nearby. I only hope they can forgive themselves, as these people shall, in time.

Cassidy eyed the humanoid creature which had just spoken. Its form had shifted a little in appearance – now it was mostly comprised of armour-like parts joined at the waist by a black segment. The majority of the body was red, except upon its face, the front of its tapered legs and the underside of its two solid-looking arms, where it was a bluish green.

"Just what *are* you?" Cassidy asked, a little bluntly.

A bio-mechanical construct, the creature replied. **A fusion of animate and inanimate matter. I apologise that I was not able to get here earlier,** it said to the cleftairies.

"Thank you for freeing Zopharos from that control collar," N said. "What is your name?"

A human once called me 'Deoxys', the creature replied musingly. **But the name my creators gave me is 'Denai'**. The mindvoice suddenly turned cold and calculating. **How did you find this place?**

"The Guardian of Cosma Point was worried about what was happening down here, and I volunteered to find out," N explained truthfully.

<N and his friends were a great help in keeping Zopharos from harming the pokémon residents,> Brent spoke up.

"Soluqua was especially brave," Cassidy remarked, causing the vaporeon-golduck to blush.

In which case, Denai began, his mindvoice warmer again. **We are also in your debt.**

The occupants of the monitoring room erupted into jubilant applause upon the group's return. Much to Butch and Cassidy's surprise, this enthusiastic response by the pokémon occupants did not cease when they also entered the room. There was a good deal of celebration going on – some of the monitoring staff were drinking berry juice, others had abandoned all professionalism and were dancing on their desks.

As the outburst gradually settled, Butch, Cassidy and Soluqua followed Denai and Mitchell to the front of the room, where they gazed upon the wall of screens with a mixture of satisfaction and curiosity.

"What was all that in there, anyway?" Butch asked, motioning to the screen displaying the chamber they had stopped Zopharos from destroying.

The Lunari's most valuable resource, Denai replied. The Carbink were created as providers of Melecium, in order to generate a near limitless supply.

"So it was like some kind of massive incubation room," Cassidy exclaimed.

You could say that, Denai gave a nod. The Melecium is delivered to many locations, that is why there are a large number of Carbink here.

He motioned to one of the computer screens where a reinstated camera visual now showcased another area of the cave system - a room containing a line of considerably-sized rocks encased in scaffolding. Clefables in lab coats and goggles swarmed around the rocks with clipboards in their stubby paws.

These capsules are made to look like ordinary meteorites, in order to distribute Melecium to other places in Oci, as well as Lunas, the Lunari's civilisation on the moon, Denai said.

<We've not been able to send any shipments out these past couple of days because of those blasted storms...> Abecee muttered.

Cassidy glanced up as the computer screens were taken up by a map of Oci's continents. Clusters of flickering yellow were dotted across the map's surface.

<Those yellow areas are where the storms have been showing up over the past couple of days,> Abecee's third head explained.

<The weirdest thing is just how precise they are,> the second head pondered. <They almost seem to follow a line, then spread out in radii of varying intensity.>

Those aren't normal storms at all, Cassidy thought, frowning. Her eyes widened suddenly. That's it. The Magnezone Network Giovanni set up to get energy all of Team Rocket's labs! That has to be it.

"Then do you have ideas as to what's causing any of this?" N asked.

"I do," Cassidy spoke up. Everyone looked at her expectantly. "This is Team Rocket's doing."

<What?> Lu frowned. <This too? Creating Zopharos wasn't enough?>

"The hybrid pokémon like Soluqua and Zopharos were just the beginning of something far more dangerous," Cassidy elaborated. "Team Rocket used the information gathered from creating those hybrids to fuse pokémon DNA with human DNA...their own members! Not only that, they created a machine to erase their free will."

<How do you know so much about all this, anyway?> Abecee's first head inquired, a note of accusation in his voice.

"Cassidy was once a member of Team Rocket," N stated simply. "She and her companion Butch left the organization to make a fresh start."

A ripple of uncertainty washed across the room, as the monitoring staff began to chatter anxiously amongst themselves. Team Rocket's plans were threatening news enough, but none of them were sure how to react to members of the organization standing amidst the Lunari colony.

"Everyone please, calm down," N urged. "Butch and Cassidy have no reason to go back to Team Rocket. They were set to become mindless soldiers like the other members there. And I understand it's only natural to question the motives of those who have dabbled in crime. I..." he paused, looking slightly guilty. "I had my suspicions at first. But I've seen the good things Butch and Cassidy can accomplish. So have you!"

The chatter began to lessen as the pokémon deliberated over what N had said.

"Look, I don't care what you lot think of me," Butch remarked. "I don't like Team Rocket any more than you do, and I'm not just going to stand around and let Giovanni screw with this planet."

As malicious as this human has been, I do not feel his actions are entirely his own, Denai remarked.

"What do you mean?" Cassidy looked at the deoxys with a frown.

Usually I am present on the moon with my partner Reina, Denai stated. **But I had felt the need to stay on Oci until certain matters were confirmed.**

"Certain matters?" Butch echoed, more for elaboration than anything.

The agents of the LFPE have been doing research for some time, Denai continued, with deepest seriousness. **Just recently, they came to a worrying conclusion. The being that created Melecium has not perished, as the Lunari's ancestors had hoped.**

"What is their name?" N asked. "What do they look like?"

Their name and appearance are unknown to us, Denai uttered a noise that resembled an electronic sigh. **They constantly hid behind the face of another and took their identity as their own. And somewhere out there, they are doing just that, waiting for the moment to strike.**

"An evil dictator hell-bent on molding the world to their every whim using indestructible armies..." Butch murmured. "Sounds like this being could be possessing Giovanni." In a sense, the events that had happened to the Lunari of ancient times paralleled those of Giovanni's latest actions - the powerful soldiers he had commissioned, now enslaved to his wishes.

We fear this also, Denai agreed. **Gathered data seems to point toward Kemnon Tower as one of the first targets of Team Rocket's strike.**

Cassidy gasped, while N looked on, aghast.

"But that's a sacred place," he exclaimed. "Why would he be interested in destroying it?"

<We think it's got something to do with this,> Abecee spoke up, typing on the control panel with their foot. A window opened on one of the large computer screens displaying a selection of texts written in ancient glyphs.

"The Sabai Prophecy..." Cassidy gasped.

"The what?" Butch frowned.

"It was a message delivered by Mew to an Agrarian Seer called Gado Sabai," Cassidy explained. "The message spoke of a force of darkness that would be brought to an end, and new pokémon species that would be brought into existence. Many people were certain it had been a prediction of the ancient war between the Water Tanmian tribe and the Earth Teruptian tribe..." She paused in realisation, her memory recalling the specific words. "But this...it certainly matches, now I think about it...the whole 'tainted virtue' thing, not to mention 'devouring its own children' sounds an awful lot like how Team Rocket sacrificed its own members to experimentation."

"So you think that the Boss feels threatened by this prophecy thing?" Butch raised an eyebrow.

"Either the Boss, or whomever is his puppeteer right now," Cassidy nodded. "Why else would he want to attack Kemnon Tower? It's one of the places of contact needed for the Generation Rite to be carried out."

We do not usually communicate with the Pokémon Guardsmen, but this time we feel it is imperative we do so, Denai said. We hold information we believe they do not have, and it is vital they receive it. But with our communication systems remaining blocked by those storms, there is no way to get the information to their headquarters except by word of mouth.

"Then I will go," N said. There was a communal uprising of astonished noises and glances. Denai studied N - his wide, unblinking eyes concealing a mixture of uncertainty for the man's wellbeing, and appreciation of his bravery.

"If you could help me get to the Pokémon Guardsmen headquarters, then I will pass on this information," N urged. "All good souls deserve life, no matter what they are."

"And I will do the same for the Seers of Kemnon Tower," Cassidy added.

On a small plateau on the outside of the caves, a nine foot long togekiss waited patiently as Mitchell and his support team explained the situation to N, Butch, Cassidy and Soluqua.

<Erelah has been studying the route, and says she'll be happy to fly you to the Pokémon Guardsmen HQ,> Mitchell explained. <We appreciate you doing this for us.>

"I am glad I can help in some way," N replied appreciatively, before turning back towards Cassidy and Butch. Before the pair had a chance to respond, the young man had thrown his arms around both their shoulders and pulled them and Soluqua into a group embrace. He then retracted, chuckling slightly at Butch's expression of mild horror, Cassidy's expression of flustered shock and Soluqua's bashful embarrassment. "My deepest thanks go to you three," he said. "A lot of what I learned was a result of crossing paths with you, after all. And thank you also, Butch, for saving me from Zopharos earlier. I admit I acted a bit recklessly back there..."

"We're even now, right?" Butch smirked, half-jokingly. N chuckled again at this.

"Did you manage to find what you were searching for, N?" Cassidy asked.

"Yes...I believe I have," N smiled. Cassidy wondered if it was her eyes playing tricks on her, but the young man's face seemed more full of life now - his eyes sparkling with purpose and just a touch of mischief. "I

army was stirring, and up on the surface - with Mona and the deserted remains of Cosma Point - Valerie suddenly felt very small, very worried...

...and very alone.

TO BE CONTINUED...

This eBook is not officially endorsed and is intended for
FREE DISTRIBUTION ONLY

Enjoy Pokémon Rebirth? Please support the Pokémon franchise by
purchasing licensed official products.

Read more tales from the deeper side at
www.pokemonrebirth.niftihalostudios.com

**Pokémon (c)1995-2015 Nintendo, The Pokémon Company, GAME FREAK Inc,
Creatures Inc.**

Rebirth (cc) 2001-15 Gemma V L Bright.