



POKÉMON
REBIRTH
ULTIMATUM
Endgame Edition

EPISODE THIRTY ONE
Ally Switch

As the evening approached, Caley, Adam, Rose, Jessie, James and Errol took their leave from Bernard's workshop in Vexel City, and made their way back towards the arranged rendezvous point at the train station. There they were reunited with Denise, Mondo and Cory. Both groups had quite the tale to tell, and both were so enthused to do so, that it took a moment for them to sort out whom should go first. Eventually, the atmosphere calmed enough for Denise to start the exchange - her excited reveal about meeting Professor Burnet for a second time had a good portion of the group shuddering at the memories of what happened in Edgeville, and the rest of the group looking puzzled and wanting to know more about said memories. Following a short digression in the conversation, Caley hastily explained the events that had happened at Vexel Gym, as well as his newfound grasp on his abilities. By the time the train came to a halt on the opposite side of the city boundary, both groups were up to date on each other's activities.

Well, *almost* all their activities. A heavy air of mystery still hung over Errol's interactions with the rather bratty individual who had caused so much trouble at the gym, and whom had escaped relatively unscathed. As the group proceeded northward on foot, Errol kept to the back - watching the sky as its deep blue hues shifted into reds and yellows while the sun set. Only Jessie and Cory seemed particularly aware of the man's subdued behaviour - James was thoroughly ensconced in Growlie's presence, gushing about his beloved pokémon to Rose, while Caley read the Pokedex entry for Kota's evolutionary stage, Auprentus, to Denise

and Mondo tried to calm Adam's frustrated rantings about Wobbuffet having eased his tired foot nubs by riding atop Cyzel's back.

Psyduck knew there was something he had been meaning to ask Errol, but the persistent ache in his head had forced whatever that something was just out of reach. Over the course of the evening and the day which followed - much of which was spent travelling - the water pokémon had chased his addled thoughts more fervently than usual. It wasn't until mid afternoon arrived, that Psyduck finally salvaged his request.

Though fulfilling requests was hardly something Errol looked to be invested in at that time. Part of the man scolded him at his own stubbornness, his refusal to give Carrlin up as a lost cause. If only he'd made Carrlin travel with him, back when they had been reunited in Scale Falls - maybe he could have persuaded his clone sibling to see things in a less warped manner. Or maybe that attitude that been seeded in Carrlin from the very start. Seeing him dressed in the uniform of an as yet unidentified terrorist organization had given Errol a mild case of the chills.

A sudden tightness was felt about Errol's lower left arm. He stopped suddenly and glanced down to see that a cuff had been locked about his wrist. Tracing the chain from the cuff, Errol found himself eye to eye with a hunched stocky male figure, dressed in a trench coat and wide-brimmed trilby hat.

"Whoa!" Errol spluttered in a mixture of alarm and annoyance. "What's da big idea?" He attempted to pull away from the man, but his captor's grip on the chain of the handcuffs was remarkably strong.

<I know you understand me, so don't try to play dumb,> the figure remarked sternly, resuming an upright stance in order to display his full seven feet in height. <The name's Larson Sloane, LFPE agent. I'm taking you into custody.>

"Wh-Why?" Errol asked, trying not to sound worried and failing rather miserably.

<I have reason to believe that you have links to my suspect, Carrlin Yagura,> Larson stated. <I'm not letting you go until you tell me more about the Vexel City incident.>

"Hey!" Cory spluttered. Larson flinched. It appeared that in the dim light, and in his determination to acquire his target, he'd somehow failed to notice the entourage that had been walking ahead of them.

"What are you doing to our friend?" James demanded. The recipient did not say anything, instead fished around inside of his trench coat with his free hand and brought out an ID card which he flashed in James' direction. He stepped back worriedly, while Jessie leaned forward and scrutinized the details.

"Lunari Force for Pokémon Equality?" she read. "What is that? Some kind of Pokémon Rights group?"

Larson tried his best to suppress a withering glower. After all, scowling at a civilian - as much as it may have been warranted - was hardly professional.

<I don't have time for this,> he concluded shortly, before turning back to Errol. <What do you know about Carrlin Yagura?>

"Who's Carrlin Yagura?" Cory blinked innocently.

"Hoo boy..." Errol grimaced, as the translation caused the human members of the group to murmur amongst themselves.

"Wait..." Jessie frowned. "Isn't that the name of the little thief who stole a mech and busted through the wall of Vexel City Gym?"

"You've got some explaining to do," James cast Errol a look not unlike that of a parent waiting to hear of reasons for a missing report card. Errol chuckled nervously, before the sound dissipated into a sigh.

"Alright. I was gonna hafta come clean about it sooner or later," he admitted. "Carr's my clone brudda."

"Clone?" Denise spluttered.

"*Brother?*" Adam pulled a face.

"Look, I ain't goin' into details on dat front," Errol said bluntly. He had resolved long ago to keep Mewtwo's existence - not to mention the pokémon's involvement in his own life - to himself. "Thing is, Carr's got some major grudge against humans goin' on - not only for making da tech which created him, but also for messing wit' my DNA which he got a

copy of. Doesn't matter how much I try ta reason wit' him, he's completely blinded by his own feelin's."

"Certainly explains some of the things you were saying to him earlier," James commented.

<Hmm...> Larson pondered the information. <It's something of a wild story, to be sure. I'd only really know it was truth if we got you both in for DNA testing.>

"Well dat ain't gonna be happenin' any time dis century," Errol remarked, bemused at the agent's scepticism.

<Curiously, your information appears nowhere on Eclipse's database,> Larson stated. <Unlike Carrlin's.>

"Eclipse?" Errol looked at him. He recalled the unusual uniform Carrlin had been wearing. "Dat's the group Carr's signed up to?"

"Never heard of them," Rose looked puzzled.

<They're a rogue pokémon organization,> Larson explained. <Those working under its rules want nothing more than humans and wild pokémon to serve them. The LFPE are usually the ones keeping tabs on their activity.>

"And who *are* da LFPE?" Errol frowned.

"This is getting stupid. Why can't you just talk in a language we *all* understand?" Adam snapped. Larson paused, then began to look very awkward.

<The organization didn't let me have a translation unit...> he remarked.

"Didn't let'cha have a translation unit?" Errol relayed. "Dat's kinda unprofessional."

<Well truth is...I'm not a class 2 field agent yet,> Larson shuffled embarrassedly. <Only class 2 and up get that sort of equipment.>

"Hey it's okay," Cory insisted, patting Larson on the back. "You'll get that promotion one of these days."

<I sure hope so,> Larson murmured. <It's not like I haven't worked hard enough at it...> He flinched, putting on a stern face. <I'm not supposed to be fraternizing with the suspects! If you're with this man, then you're as questionable as he is.>

"Look, dere's some pretty major t'ings going on, in case whatever organization ya woik for ain't aware," Errol said irritably. "Team Rocket? Hoid o' *dem*? About ta unleash an army o' mutant Poké-Human hybrids - it's kind of a big deal."

<Team Rocket...?> Larson frowned. <This the first I've heard of such things...where have you got this intel?>

"We've been livin' it, buddy," Errol was now wearing an unimpressed expression.

<Hm...well if what you're saying is genuine...all the more reason for me to stay around and keep an eye on you...> Larson remarked,

stifling a yawn soon afterward. His words had grown a little slurred with a sudden onset of exhaustion. <Ugh...blasted tiredness.>

"You look like you could use a rest," Rose said, looking concerned.

"I think we could *all* stand to recharge a bit," Caley nodded.

<There's a Pokémon Center just a few minutes walk from this point...> Larson mumbled, having glanced at a pocket computer in his free hand. <And unless you want to abandon your accomplice, I suggest you follow me there.> With that, the man turned slightly to the east and continued his progress - Errol stumbling awkwardly in reverse beside him.

"Waugh! Hey, lemme outta dese handcuffs will ya?"

"That guy says there's a Pokémon Center near him, and that's where he's taking Errol, too," Cory explained.

"Well I for one am not going to stand for this!" Jessie huffed, storming after Larson.

"Try to be diplomatic, Jess~" James grimaced as he followed behind. "Getting on this agent's bad side won't make him release Errol any sooner!"

"We're not exactly on his *good* side right now..." Adam muttered.

Without much further conversation, Larson took Errol to the front entrance of a Pokémon Center tucked away amongst Tatto's eastern woodland. It was a surprisingly modern building, given its distant location

from towns or cities. Upon entering the lobby, the LFPE agent cuffed his temporary charge to a locker unit - used by visitors to store their belongings during their stay at the facility. Errol testily watched Larson negotiating with the chansey at the desk and being led into a nearby treatment room, before staring down at the part of the handcuffs that had been clamped about his left wrist.

"I can't see what he expects *me* ta know about Carr's business," he muttered. "It's times like dis I wish I still had my claws so I could pick dis lock."

"Don't worry Errol," James' voice was heard from nearby. "I got Chime to help you out."

Errol watched as the chiverbel's eyes glowed bright blue, and the metal around his wrists warped and pried itself apart.

"Nice woik!" Errol grinned, pulling his hand free before rubbing at his wrist. "Now let's get outta here."

"We can't go yet," Jessie said matter of factly, as Caley walked past them and approached the desk. "That trainer friend of yours wants to get his pokémon checked up. As do I - Wobby's been through a lot, the past few days."

"Well I hope dose check ups will be quick..." Errol bit his lip. "I'd like to go before dat agent guy comes back."

"In the meantime, why don't we chill in the lounge for a bit?" James smiled.

"Good idea, Jimmy!" Errol grinned. "My tush could sure use a comfy seat."

Upon entering the Pokémon Center, Adam made his way straight to the nearest vending machine and purchased hot chocolate and some instant oats. For the first day of April, the weather was surprisingly chill, and even his snug clothing had struggled to keep out the cold. He began to wonder if such temperatures were affecting Cyzel, tucked away in stasis inside of his Pokéball, but consoled himself with the fact that they were inside a cosy space for at least a few minutes.

Making his way to the trainer lounge, Adam found an armchair nearest the heating unit and sat down with his acquired nourishment. His mind was idling with unfinished business - the guilt of having lashed out at Denise's over-excitement, and the frustration of Denise's lack of awareness for how he had felt in the busy city. Even now, the adolescent girl seemed unconcerned over her actions. Adam's face drew into a disapproving scowl and he returned his attention to his drink. If Denise hadn't felt the need to apologise, then why should he go out of his way to do the same?

"Adam?"

"Hm?" the youth grunted, without looking up. He didn't need to - Denise's voice was unmistakable to him.

"I'm sorry for being inconsiderate earlier," Denise murmured, hands behind her back. "I'd forgot that you get overwhelmed in busy places."

"S'ok," Adam responded softly. A few moments of silence passed as the pair listened to the chattering of their companions nearby. Finally the boy gathered his courage and took a deep breath, feeling the persistent thudding of his heart against his ribcage. "I'm sorry too...over freaking out like that. I didn't mean it about not wanting to go anywhere with you - course I want to go out with you, I-"

The youth spluttered into silence, his face getting extremely red over the wording of his sentence. Denise couldn't help but chuckle a little at this. Adam's slightly insulted expression at what he thought was amusement over his apology soon turned to one of surprise, as a small plastic bag was waved in front of him.

"For you," came the explanation. Adam blinked before cautiously peering into the bag. "I got it at Vexel City Mall."

"Woah..." he commented, picking out the blue presentation case within and opening it. A shiny red Fire Stone gleamed back at him. "This must have cost you loads!"

"However corny it might sound, you really can't put a price on friendship," Denise beamed. "The flames of your determination and your rock-hard dependability...it couldn't help make me think of you!"

"Th-thanks," Adam stammered. His insides were a mishmash of shock and excitement, while the part of him conditioned by Team Rocket insisted on keeping such expressions of happiness under strict control, with varying success. Denise looked crestfallen over this lack of response, but decided to say nothing further about the matter.

"Glad you like it," she smiled, somewhat forlornly.

Over the other side of the lounge, Jessie, James and Errol reclined upon a sofa. The first two members of the trio were, like Adam, also eating snacks - though with more gusto and feverishness. However, the lattermost had other things he was focused on. James watched as Errol studied the considerable dent in the back of his guitar, and raised his eyebrows.

"What happened to your guitar?" James asked. Errol chuckled sheepishly.

"I kinda bopped Professor Bohrgram wit' it," he explained. Jessie's eyes widened - the mention of that particular name had triggered something in her head.

"James...I didn't realise that professor's messed up research project had turned you into a houndoom," she murmured, looking upset.

"Well, I..." James hesitated, before Jessie slapped him across the face.

"You ruined my hair!" she cried angrily.

"Not knowingly!" James protested, trying to shield his head from further unexpected outbursts, while Errol looked on with an expression that conveyed that he didn't really want to get involved. Noticing James' petrified expression, Jessie's own face grew overcome with regret.

"I'm sorry..." she sighed, clutching one hand with the other. "I shouldn't take it out on you. I'm just...frustrated at myself, James."

"Frustrated?" the man blinked, retracting from his defensive stance. "Why?"

"You went through all that for me...for Errol...and I was too busy feeling self pity over ending up as Butch and Cassidy's lackey to really appreciate your sacrifice."

"Jessie, I-" James looked surprised. "Look, I don't hold a grudge against you. Please try not to hold one against yourself."

"An' look on da bright side!" Errol insisted. "Dat part of your life is behind ya now!"

He glanced up and over Jessie's shoulder, just in time to see three figures enter the lobby.

"Oh.." Errol looked perturbed. "Dat part of your life jus' walked in."

"Wait, what?" Jessie spluttered, swinging round to look behind her. There was a glint of joy in her eyes that her two companions did not see.

"It's no sweat," James looked satisfied. "We're in disguise. They won't notice us."

"I get da feelin' dat's about to change," Errol motioned towards the lobby. Jessie had already left her seat and dashed across to meet the Pokémon Center's recent arrivals - both of whom were currently giving her puzzled looks, having not yet recognized who they were talking to.

"What is she doing?" James' eyes widened.

"You survived!" Jessie exclaimed thankfully, having finally convinced Butch and Cassidy of her identity.

"Good to see you too," Cassidy replied with a smirk. Jessie looked awkward at her outburst, then grumbled under her breath. "Funny we should end up crossing paths again."

"Seems like she ain't alone, either," Butch commented, glancing over at the lounge area. James and Errol had been watching this exchange, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible but failing miserably due to the fact the tops of their heads were visible just behind the sofa. They uttered an alarmed yelp in unison and ducked upon being seen. "Apparently nothing's altered in the maturity department."

"What are you two doing in this area, anyway?" Jessie raised an eyebrow.

"We could ask you the same question," Cassidy said.

"Well we're sure not messing around, if that's what you're implying," Jessie tutted. "Imminent doom of the Team Rocket variety, in case you'd forgotten."

"Hardly," Cassidy folded her arms. "Contrary to what *you* might think, Butch and I have been through a lot the past few days."

"Look, why don't we just pool our resources, Cass?" Butch eyed her. "We know some things these guys don't, they might have something to give us."

"Huh?" Jessie looked surprised. "What? What do you know?"

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On a plateau some distance from the travellers' current location, a tall male figure wearing a silver helmet stood with a communicator and surveyed the forest below him, his cape whipping back and forth in the breeze. Forests held bitter memories for the man - memories of what might have been, his chance at power snatched away from him by mere children. A failed mission of that scale had signified the most permanent of dismissals for him, and as a result he had fled the organization he'd been working for. In the years that had followed, he had been obtaining money by any means possible - all the while brooding and concocting a reclamation of what he'd once owned.

He had more than his fair share of intelligence, that was so. He had his technology - the machines he had built in the past - to fall back on. But funding...this was a lot harder to come by on one's own. Utilising the same methods he'd relied upon while affiliated with Team Rocket had generated the most success, and this particular discovery would bring him all kinds of perks. These fugitives were highly wanted by the very organization that had once cast him off like so much garbage - but capturing such a large group, especially wielding powerful hybrid pokémon, was something he could unfortunately not do by himself. The man did not like collaboration, but this time it was unavoidable.

He had contacted two bounty hunters he had associated with in some way before, and struck up a deal to split the reward for those they were about to capture. One of these hunters - Dirk Ukna - was particularly well known for dealing with powerful targets. The other - Philantha Hianmyte - had once worked in the same place as him - at least that's what Team Rocket's profile archive had detailed, as Giovanni appeared to have no memory of employing her whatsoever. Rumour had it that the woman simply left after an unresolved mission upon Mt. Quena four years ago. Still, these origins meant nothing to him - credentials were the things the man was more interested about.

"Mr. Ukna," he spoke gruffly into his communicator. "Are you in position to disperse our targets?"

"Ready and waiting," Dirk replied with something of a cruel eagerness. "My tyrannitor shall unleash its hyper beam at the mountain's weak point upon your signal."

"Excellent..." the man smiled, before switching channels. "Ms. Hianmyte - has the blocker network been established?"

"Yeah yeah, I'm getting to it," Philantha's irritated voice muttered from the communicator earpiece. "This forest isn't exactly small, y'know. And call me Domino, will you?"

"It will be noted," the man remarked coolly, and disengaged the communicator. The amusement in his eyes was barely visible from within the confines of the helmet - he was fully aware of the woman's preferred codename, he just enjoyed getting her frustrated by neglecting to use it. Regardless, everything was going to plan. If observations had served him correctly, his targets were set to proceed this way in the next hour or two - straight into the mouth of his trap.

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With the group reassembled, Butch and Cassidy explained what had happened to them following their exit from Team Rocket's offshore HQ. They spoke of the encounter with the Super Elites, Attila and Hunley. And they gave an abridged summary of their encounter with the

mysterious Lunari and the information that had been divulged to them about the being that had given them their abilities. They were surprised to hear Caley react with a semblance of familiarity - having visited Coalef Repository and listened to Kazira speak of a creature which had possessed the bodies of humans in order to have them carry out its plans, the young man couldn't help but wonder if the Lunari's sire and the one Kazira had called 'Mendarus' were in fact one and the same. He looked most uncomfortable at the thought of its continued existence, especially with the possibility of it being resident in Giovanni's mind. No doubt Mendarus would be searching for the remainder of its life force, wherever that happened to be kept. Maybe this was another reason why Giovanni was so interested in attacking the locations of the Agrarian Seers.

Despite Caley's insistence that he would pass the information on to the Seers of Kemnon Tower, Cassidy was still adamant on travelling there herself. Yet she was reluctant to say exactly why, and Butch wisely kept his mouth shut as to the reason. Instead, the duo decided to travel with the remainder of the group - there was safety in numbers, after all. Even if it meant having to spend further time with Jessie, James and Errol who - while not as frustratingly obnoxious as they once were - still aired a little on the irksome, in Butch and Cassidy's opinion.

"Just leaving that agent guy at the Pokémon Center seems kind of wrong..." Denise remarked, as the group made their way down a path which was banked by a rocky slope on one side, and led to a forest below on the other side.

"As uncomfortable as it made me feel, I had to agree with those three," Caley admitted. "We are short on time, and having people like Mr. Sloane tagging after us would be a bad idea."

"I guess so," Denise sighed. "And you're sure that Butch and Cassidy aren't looking to double cross us?"

"Positive," Caley gave a nod.

"They do seem different than the last time we met up," Rose pointed out.

"Maybe dat time spent as a pokémon gave you a different perspective on life, eh Butch?" Errol chuckled.

The man flinched. What with everything that had happened at Cosma Point, his previous fury at a certain realisation had been temporarily stifled. This statement from the deliverer of his suffering, combined with the joking, seemingly-careless way it was said, brought back that anger and ignited it tenfold.

Errol let out a cry of alarm as Butch dived at his side, throwing him clear off the path and down the rocky slope nearby. The move was so unexpected, none of the other members of the group had a chance to react in time. All they were able to do was stand in horror as Errol's prolonged yells descended into the forest below.

"What the frek was that about?" Adam exclaimed, a moment later. No one answered him – having been as equally baffled as he was. Cassidy stood tensely, gritting her teeth with second hand embarrassment at

Butch's impulsiveness. She could feel the stares of the rest of the group firmly upon her, as if they assumed she had somehow played a role in her companion's outburst.

A steady rumble echoed down the rock face from above, as the ground began to shudder. The more youthful members of the group exchanged worried expressions, but the older ones grew stern - far more accustomed to the signs of such an occurrence.

"That sound...it's unmistakable," James grimaced. Rilly uttered a shrill cry upon noticing a mass of boulders tumbling relentlessly toward them, throwing a large cloud of dust into the air.

"LANDSLIDE!" Rose screamed, diving out of the way as one of the more sizeable chunks of rock coursed between Sia and herself. Figures darted this way and that while the thick cloud swirled about them; panic overtaking logic as they tried to avoid the falling earth. Suddenly the ground under their feet began to break away under the force of the rock slide's relentless pummeling. Once the air had cleared and the rumbling subsided, it could be seen that a large portion of the path had vanished into the forest below.

Caley wasn't certain of just how far he'd fallen. No sooner had he felt the ground underneath him give way, the young man had attempted to generate the largest shield possible about himself and those nearest

him. The momentum had carried him within the shield a good distance down the hillside, at least until the disorientation from being thrust about inside its spherical innards had made Caley lose concentration. As the feeling slowly returned to his limbs, the young man gazed up between the branches of the tree he had landed under and began to realise just why his mother had insisted on him eating his poached remoraïd every time it was served for dinner. After all, without the benefits of pokémon-based proteins, his body would never have been resilient enough to survive such an onslaught with little more than a few cuts, bruises and a splitting headache. Before Caley managed to get his bearings, he heard a volley of muffled curses from amongst a particularly prickly bush. Staggering to his feet, the figure ran over and hauled Adam out of the plant's thorny clutches.

"You okay?" he inquired anxiously.

"If you mean 'am I alive?', yeah. Just about," the adolescent grunted, trying to brush the remaining spikes from his clothing without getting them embedded in his hands. "That shield thing of yours cushioned most of the blows. As for 'okay', I'm still trying to work out why grasstop flipped out and tried to kill Errol - shortly before the ground tried to kill all of us..."

"That was pretty weird, I agree," Caley scratched the back of his head. "On both parts." He glanced around the area, a worried look upon his face. "Seems like that landslide split us up - all I can see here is you."

A moment later there was a loud thud, as James hit the earth after toppling from one of the nearby trees, Chime clinging fearfully to the back of his head. Adam couldn't help but snicker at this.

"Hey look," he commented while Caley glanced around with a horrified expression. "It's raining goofs."

"Can't say it was the worst landing I've had," James commented, sitting upright as if nothing had happened. Growlie scampered up to the man, seemingly out of nowhere, and began licking his face enthusiastically - to whoops of laughter on James' part.

"Should've known you'd taken more than one smack to the head," Adam remarked, before glancing round in the hopes that Cyzel was also with them. He was not.

"Don't kick off, Ad'," Caley insisted, wandering out a short distance. "We need to find the others."

"Why can't you find them with those psychic powers of yours?" Adam inquired, almost accusingly.

"I'm trying..." Caley said, panic beginning to creep into his voice. "But I can't seem to concentrate well enough to pinpoint anyone."

"Probably all that tumbling we just did," James remarked matter of factly, while Chime nodded in agreement. "Give yourself a few minutes, you'll come around."

"Yeah, that's right," Caley took a deep breath. "I just need to take a moment to think this over, and not go losing my head."

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Jessie, Cassidy and Rose found themselves in a tangled heap at the bottom of the mountainside, shortly followed by Wobbuffet who bounced off the top of the heap and rolled a short distance amongst the trees. It didn't take long for Jessie to leap to her feet and glower accusingly at her yellow-haired companion.

"What was that idiot friend of yours thinking?" she yelled. "Why'd he attack Errol like that?"

"Look, it's complicated," Cassidy snapped, scrambling from Rose's back and dusting herself down.

"Well un-complicate it and *tell* me!" the volume of Jessie's voice refused to lower.

"I don't know the details, okay?" Cassidy exclaimed frustratedly. "I'm as in the dark about this as you are! Butch has gone through a lot lately - for all I know, the druddigon DNA could be messing with him."

"Great. Just great," Jessie grumbled, unimpressed. "Who knows where Butch and Errol are now..."

"Who knows where *anyone* is," Rose said. "Looks like only you, Cassidy, Cory and Wobbuffet are here, besides myself."

"Urgh..." Cory mumbled, sitting up from between some thick clumps of grass. The sheer force of the tumble had caused some unsightly dents in the pokémon-in-human-guise's malleable body. "Feels like I got hit by a wailord at ninety miles an hour."

"Our pokémon..." Cassidy trailed off, her voice suddenly uncharacteristically soft.

"I'm sure they'll be able to take care of themselves," Jessie sniffed.

"Easy for you to say," Cassidy snapped. "Your pokémon's right there!"

"Waa bah-fet!" came the emphatic agreement, to which Jessie couldn't help smirk proudly about this fact.

"That was no natural occurrence," Rose stated firmly as she glanced back up at the fractured hillside.

"Nope, but it sure was a pretty desperate attempt to kill us off," Jessie sniffed. "We're made of stronger stuff than that!"

"Maybe it wasn't intended as a death blow," came Cassidy's unsettled reply. "Maybe they wanted to drive us apart deliberately."

"Of course," Rose responded. "We have a greater chance of defeating attackers as a large group. Split up that group and-"

"You're cutting down that chance," Jessie nodded. "Even more so, since you two have been separated from your pokémon."

By some twist of circumstance, Sia and Soluqua had ended up in exactly the same place, alongside an additional yellow extra.

<Wow...> Sia breathed as she looked up at the landscape and realised just how far they'd all travelled. <That was *some* fall.>

<You can say that again,> Psyduck winced. Unfortunately for him, his body had become jammed inside the hollow of a tree and he was having trouble getting himself loose. <Where'd everyone else go?>

<I can't see them *or* sense them...> Soluqua reported anxiously. <Could that avalanche have...> the golduck-vaporeon hybrid choked at the possible thought of a mass loss of life.

<Tch, don't jump to conclusions,> Sia shook her head. <Maybe they're just out of your psychic range.> She paused. <Or worse, someone's disturbing the signals.>

<Now you mention it...> Soluqua deliberated. <There does seem to be an odd kind of background noise in my mind, one that usually isn't there. You could well be right about some kind of psychic signal tampering going on.>

<That landslide is beginning to seem less and less like an accident,> Sia frowned, as Soluqua pulled Psyduck from the tree. <We need to keep moving, at least until I pick up the scent of the others.>

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No sooner had the disorientation shifted from Errol's mind, he realised he was lying flat on his back. Rolling over on to his stomach and forcing himself into a sitting position, the man scrabbled desperately at the strap in order to pull its contents over his shoulder to face him, only to find there were very little contents to speak of. His once prized instrument was a tattered mess of strings and fragmented wood.

"My guitar!" Errol cried out bereftly, before he noticed Butch a short distance away from him, and his expression became furious. "Ain't none o' my stuff sacred?"

"You're not even sorry, are you?" Butch seethed. The tumble appeared to have done nothing to dilute his anger.

"About *what*?" Errol spluttered, tossing the remains of the guitar aside.

"Kicking me from the back of a steelix into a table full of experimental formulas, back at Dustry HQ!" Butch replied frustratedly.

"Putting me through two weeks of hell! Turning me into that mutant druddigon!"

"You were on dat steelix?" Errol blinked, before uttering a choked noise as Butch lunged yet again and grasped him around the neck. "Gack! What'cha so mad about? You're human again, right?"

"That's not the point!" Butch yelled. "You've messed me up! I don't even know if this reversal is permanent!"

"Beatin' me up ain't gonna undo what dat stuff did to ya!" Errol half-gurgled.

"It'll make me feel better!" Butch exclaimed.

"Look buddy, I didn't stomp on you on poipose," Errol insisted, trying to get the words out despite the attempted asphyxiation. "Caley's bag was hooked on dat steelix and I'd gone ta get it. I didn't even see you dere!"

There was a slight hesitation, and Butch released his grip - his infuriated expression having shifted into something more disgruntled.

"Oh, of course," he muttered. "What's new?"

"Huh?" Errol blinked in puzzlement, catching his breath.

"After all the *other* times I've not been seen, why would that time have been any different?" Butch shrugged, throwing his hands in the air.

"Oho~" Errol tilted his head. "Sounds like y' got some self esteem issues ya hangin' on to."

"What?!" Butch exclaimed insultedly.

"Take it from a fella who was once three foot high," Errol smirked.

"I know self esteem issues when I see 'em."

"I do *not* have issues," Butch snapped. "People ignore me so much, they couldn't get my name right half the time."

"If you're talking about Jimmy, he was doin' it deliberately," Errol looked sheepish.

"No, not just James," Butch shook his head. "Lots of people have done it. Even Cass has done it a few times. I overlooked those - she was pretty obsessed with missions back then. But it gets to you after a while, you know?" He paused, thinking over what Errol had said. "You probably *do* know, don't ya?"

Errol said nothing, but nodded - a sad smile on his face.

"Even though I never did dat stuff deliberately, I am sorry for da pain it's put'cha through," he said. "Team Rocket's screwed wit' us all in some way or anudda."

"Mm-hm," Butch grunted. The apology seemed to have eased the brunt of his woes, at least a little. He glanced up as pokémon cries were heard from a short distance away.

<Oh thank goodness!> Psyduck sighed with relief, as he waddled up from behind Sia. <Some familiar faces.>

"Great..." Butch muttered. "I'm stuck with a bunch of creatures I can't understand. And you," he concluded, eyeing Errol.

"Don't mind him," Errol grinned. "We've jus' been talking about poisunality mattas."

<Well I hope you've apologised to Butch for what happened,> Soluqua huffed reprimandingly. Errol blinked, surprised for a moment that the hybrid pokémon even knew about such things, before making the conclusion that she likely saw Butch's memories with her psychic abilities.

"Sure I did!" Errol insisted.

<What did you do?> Psyduck began frowning, to which Errol chuckled awkwardly.

"Look, can we try to keep da convo to a minimum?" he asked, noticing his single human companion's darkened expression. "Butch is gettin' left out."

The pokémon fell silent and nodded.

"T'anks," Errol scratched the back of his head. "At any rate, I'm glad you lot found us! Our battle smarts aren't quite as sharp as yours are. Now how's about we try and find everyone else?"

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

Jessie, Cassidy, Cory and Rose walked until there was barely enough light to navigate by; at which point they settled down beside a stream to build a campfire and rest as best they could, considering the circumstances. While Rose had searched the surrounding foliage for edible fruits and berries, Jessie had wandered the same area looking for something to light the bundle of dry twigs arranged in front of her.

Cassidy sat away from Jessie, Rose, Cory and Wobuffet, watching them with a sullen expression tinged with upset. The group were now engaged in conversation - discussing events Cassidy had no recollection of, chuckling over in-jokes she wasn't party to, and appeared so used to each other's company, that it felt like she shouldn't be there. So why couldn't she just pull herself together and join in?

Maybe because she'd never felt like she could join in. In the seer community she had always stood out from the other children due to her unusual views and her longing to see what the world had to offer. When out in that world, she had stood out because of her desperate desire to be just like everyone else. Even in Team Rocket, the outcome was the same. She'd started belittling others to make herself feel better, and had ended up making more enemies than acquaintances. Only Butch had been patient enough to put up with this behaviour...but he wasn't here to do that right now.

Cassidy glanced out into the darkness between the trees - wondering if it would be better to chance it in the forest than put up with the painful awkwardness of sitting on the sidelines. The darkness moved,

causing the woman to let out a cry of alarm. Her associates swung around, just in time to witness a seven foot high snorlax lumber into the moderate glow of their campsite. It didn't progress further, just stood on the other side of the fire and observed the group of humans and other pokémon with an expression that was difficult to read, due to its narrowed eyes.

"Huh. Would you look at that," Jessie commented, stepping away from the lit fire. "Not every day you see a snorlax in a trenchcoat." She flinched. "Wait a minute, aren't you that that LEPF agent? How come you don't look human any more? Did your disguise machine break?"

<LFPE, and no, it just ran out of power,> Larson replied bemusedly, adjusting his hat. <Trying to lose me in the Pokémon Center certainly doesn't make you appear any less suspicious.>

"We weren't trying to 'lose you'," Cory insisted, while Jessie mumbled under her breath that *she* had been. "There's very little time left until Team Rocket's armies make their move!"

<And where are the rest of your associates?> Larson inquired. The tone of scepticism still had not left his voice.

"Someone split us up," Cory sighed. "Likely someone looking to collect the reward for capturing us."

<I knew it!> Larson exclaimed. <You're wanted criminals!>

"Hey, 'criminals' is a strong word!" Cory protested.

"We're ex-criminals!" Cassidy added.

"Some of us aren't even that," Cory said. "I'm a hybrid pokémon who was created in Team Rocket's laboratory. But that's beside the point - the reason my friends are wanted is because Team Rocket is trying to stop us from stopping *them*! They've made my friends out to be ruthless terrorists!"

<I see...> Larson deliberated over this information. <Well then, I have come to my decision. I am going to remain with you. Do not worry, I will not be taking any of you into custody. This mission of yours sounds like it could use all the support you can find.>

"You couldn't be more right," Cory smiled with relief, before turning to the others. "Agent Sloane says he is going to help us out!"

"Well I can't complain there," Rose nodded, shoving the berries she had just picked into her jacket pockets. "Extra pokémon are definitely needed right now."

"He doesn't seem like a fighting sort," Cassidy sniffed. "What attacks does he do?"

"That's kind of a personal question, don't you think?" Cory frowned, while Larson began to look awkward.

"If it's the difference between getting through this and getting captured, no," Cassidy replied firmly.

"Let's talk about this in the morning, okay?" Rose shook her head.
"We need to get some rest. Who's going to take up watch duty first?"

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

Denise had slipped through a fracture in the rocky pathway when the landslide hit, ending up in a small cave underneath. Shortly after coming to her senses, she discovered that Mondo, Rilly, Kota and Cyzel had ended up in the same place she had. It took them an hour or so to track the narrow passages inside the mountain, until they emerged in the daylight - bewildered and more than a little lost. Kota's attempts to contact the others of the group were met with nothing, and none of the more enlightened forest pokémon had seen figures matching their companions' descriptions.

By the time night fell, Rilly had grown incredibly anxious - a response Denise attempted to soothe with hugs and gentle stroking of the hybrid's long ears. The group decided to cease walking, and gathered some materials for a fire which Cyzel lit. Rilly drifted into slumber upon Denise's knee, but the remainder of the group stayed awake - pondering the worrying unknown.

"I sure hope the others are okay right now..." Denise murmured.
"I don't know how well Adam would take being split up like this...especially being away from Cyzel."

Cyzel responded with a low, sad grumbling noise.

"Hopefully he's with someone in the group who's patient," Mondo agreed.

[*I...miss Caley,*] Kota's mindvoice resounded in Denise and Mondo's consciousness. They flinched in surprise.

"How long have you been able to do that?" Denise spluttered.

[*I've always been talking like this,*] the aurentus looked at them in puzzlement, before glancing down at his recently reshaped limbs. [*I guess you can hear me now I've evolved.*] He smiled a little at the thought - more people to converse with was never a bad thing. Mondo returned the smile, before it grew saddened.

"We *all* miss Caley, buddy," he said.

"I never thought some guy from outside of Team Rocket's walls would make such an impact on my life," Denise remarked.

"Yet there's all that responsibility resting on his shoulders," Mondo said. "It doesn't seem fair."

[*Maybe not, but we're there to help him with it,*] Kota pointed out wisely. [*Well maybe not right now...*]

Silence fell between those who were still alert, occasionally interrupted by Rilly's light breathing and the chittering of distant bug pokémon.

"How's about I tell you all a story to take our minds off this?" Denise suggested. No one seemed to object, so she began. "When I was

eleven, I read about a place in Kanto called Broka City that just vanished one night. Rumour has it that it was the legendary space-warping pokémon Palkia which took the city - something it attempted to do again with Alamos Town in Sinnoh just a few years later."

"Alamos Town..." Mondo recited. "I think I remember Jessie and James telling me about that incident. They were in Alamos Town when it happened."

"Really?" Denise's mouth dropped open a little. "That must have been pretty scary."

"Yeah, I bet," Mondo nodded distantly, fishing about in his pocket.

"Very few people dare tread on the land where Broka City once stood," Denise said. "They are scared that the force which took the city and its people will swallow them too."

[*No wonder Team Rocket were so desperate to make sure Palkia wouldn't interfere with their work,*] Kota said.

"Exactly," Denise agreed. "And Dialga."

"Where did that city go..." Mondo murmured, studying the crumpled piece of paper he had brought out to look at. "And where did this plane come from?"

"That's that article you copied from that book in Mayni Library, isn't it?" Denise blinked. Mondo nodded.

"According to a Seer I met in Coalef Repository, that article was talking about a real event," he said. "But did I witness it, or was I a part of it? I just don't know..."

There was an odd crackling sound from his right jacket pocket. Mondo blinked, put his hand into the pocket and brought out the device he had created to track communications signals to Team Rocket HQ. Despite it no longer serving a purpose, Mondo had insisted on keeping it with him as a memento of his handiwork. Now, the screen was aglow with white noise and distorted data.

"This is weird..." Mondo remarked. "My scanner appears to be picking up some kind of feedback."

"Can you tell where it is coming from?" Denise asked.

"No," the young man shook his head. "The signal is too disturbed to give anything accurate."

"Maybe whatever's producing that feedback is what is making it impossible for Kota to sense the others around here," Denise concluded.

"That sounds like it might have been deliberate," Mondo looked at her. Cyzel shifted uncomfortably - deliberate prevention of communications was not a pleasant thought, especially since it gave rise to the additional thought that there were beings who were aware of the group's presence in the forest.

"Should we keep walking, and try to find the source?" Denise pondered.

"Probably best not to, for now," Mondo shook his head. "If someone is in charge of creating that disturbance, and knows we are in here, they would have the upper hand. Especially at this time of night. Let's just try and get some rest."

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

Despite the coming evening, Caley was determined to persist looking for the rest of the group. James was aware of just how fast their window of opportunity to reach Alia Summit was closing, so he thought it best not to complain over the decision. As the darkness thickened further and the temperature dipped, however, he started to have second thoughts.

"Uh, Caley?" Adam piped up, a strong air of nervousness present in his voice as he clasped tightly to the young man's shoulders. "C-can't we just find somewhere t-to sleep until morning?" He fidgeted anxiously as the hoot of a passing noctowl echoed overhead. "Somewhere w-with walls, and windows... and doors with locks. N-nice, big locks."

"Scared of the dark, are we?" James commented.

"No!" the boy snapped, his voice quietening rapidly soon after. "It's friggen c-cold out here!" A murkrow's cawing invalidated Adam's statement, sending the youth into a huddled lump on the ground.

"I've noticed you act awful flinchy around bird pokémon," James remarked coolly, while Growlie frowned and barked at the murkrow, in the hopes that this would shoo it away.

"Look, it doesn't affect you, so cram it," Adam grunted, without moving an inch.

"Adam, if Team Rocket is truly set on attacking Kemnon Tower, then we're going to be facing a lot of bird-like creatures out there," Caley insisted seriously. "This phobia of yours could put you in danger."

"And what do you suggest I do about it, huh?" Adam sat up and moodily folded his arms, the red flush of his embarrassment now clearly visible. "I don't just have a fear switch I can flick on and off, y'know."

"Do you know what it is about them that makes you feel that way?" Caley asked.

"To be honest...I don't," Adam mumbled, unhappy that his personal issues were being flung into the open. "I just know they've freaked me out ever since I could remember."

"So maybe whatever happened to scar you mentally occurred *beyond* what you can remember," Caley pondered. James noted the unhappy expression on both his companion's faces.

"Well the squirt can't see those memories, but maybe *you* could, Caley," he remarked. "And then you'd be able to do something about them, right?"

"Oh no..." Caley waved his hands in front of him, having realised what James was implying. "Altering thoughts is way too risky."

"Altering my thoughts?" Adam clasped his head with a wide-eyed expression.

"Only the one relating to the dislike of bird pokémon," James insisted, before looking back at Caley. "And what's wrong? Surely you have more faith in your abilities now than that."

"There would be no room for mess-ups," Caley insisted. "Besides...I doubt Adam would trust me to even *look* in his mind, let alone anything else."

Silence fell as Caley glanced away, trying to conceal the pained expression on his face. He had gained a little more confidence in the field of generating his Aura into solid forms, this was true. But Aura manipulation was light years away from exploring the mind of a living being – especially one who'd retreated behind a wall of suspicion after discovering he had psychic abilities in the first place. Caley may have had a somewhat tighter grasp on these skills, but he felt no less ashamed for possessing them.

A small noise, like the sound of someone clearing their throat, brought the young man back from his saddened contemplation.

"I...I trust you Cal," Adam murmured.

"What?" Caley looked back in mild alarm, wondering if he'd heard correctly.

"It's been bugging me too," Adam said, forcing himself to make eye contact so Caley could see the sincerity on his face. "Not knowing why bird pokémon freak me out so much. Maybe...maybe you could find out for me."

"Maybe I could," Caley replied softly. Even in its hesitance, the signs of Adam's renewed faith generated a spark of determination in him. "Alright. I shall look – but that's all."

Adam nodded, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Assuming the stance he used to focus his abilities, Caley shut his eyes and gently descended into Adam's consciousness. The familiar blue and violet lights of a mindscape environment surrounded the young man once more. Adam's corporeal form stood amidst the swirling lights – gazing up at Caley in wonder and trepidation.

What now? he asked.

I...Caley faltered. I don't know. I've only been this far into someone's mind before. Where do I look for memories?

Maybe... the ethereal Adam reached up to his head. *Maybe here.*

Caley had never attempted to interact with the mindscape in such a way before, but the idea made sense. Willing himself nearer to Adam's corporeal form, Caley mentally stretched out both hands and placed them against the being's temples. The environment shifted again – ripples of indistinguishable words and hazy images coursed past.

Yes, these were Adam's memories. He couldn't see them properly from this far away, but he could sense the emotions and themes they conveyed. Some were intense, others fainter and more difficult to make out. Surely the fainter memories were from a more distant point in Adam's history – his childhood.

Urging his presence towards these memories, Caley was surprised to discover they grew no more vivid than when he'd been further away from them. Regardless, there were many, and he had to narrow down the odds of accessing the right one.

Carefully, the young man isolated the childhood memories resonating fear, then extracted yet further memories imbued with visions of bird Pokémon. One such memory prickled at Caley's senses with a greater volatility than the others. Was this the point where the phobia began? The only way to answer this question was to enter what the memory held.

Caley felt his own presence shudder, recalling what happened when he unintentionally experienced Adam's life through the youth's nightmares. Accessing a memory would undoubtedly place him into the same situation, and he knew he had to keep a tight grasp of his own identity. Such a thought was unnerving, but Caley knew Adam was counting on him to unravel the cause of his debilitating fear.

He slowly reached his presence towards the memory, his mindsight filling with a brilliant glow, then winking out into blackness.

Caley felt his heart rate increase rapidly - accompanied by a twitching sensation in his throat. Preparing for an onslaught of negative emotion, Caley instead found himself erupting into fits of giggles. New sensations made themselves present, the warmth and tightness of someone's arms clasped firmly around his waist. But judging by the reaction he was experiencing through Adam's young memories, these could hardly be the arms of an enemy.

So who *did* they belong to? Caley instinctively opened his eyes as he felt something make contact with his face, and found himself gazing into the deep brown eyes of a woman in her late twenties. Caley flinched in realisation - this had to be Adam's mother. And if that was true...Caley took a quick glance over the woman's shoulder where the familiar sparsely-decorated walls of a small room could be seen.

Just as he suspected - they were inside a Team Rocket base.

"Shhhh, Adie," his mother smiled, retracting her finger from Caley's lips. "Remember what I told you."

"'He who laughs the loudest, laughs least'," Caley found himself reciting in somewhat resentful tones, as if he'd done this many times before. He felt part of his mind, the part connected to Adam's youthful subconscious, amidst confusion over the meaning of these words. But his own mind knew full well what they implied. Too much happiness in Team Rocket could mean a bitter end for those involved. Adam's mother had likely employed these phrases as a means of protecting her son.

"That's right," the woman responded, her face showing all too clearly that she wished this wasn't the case. Suddenly a harsh voice echoed out from a two way radio attached to her belt.

Janice Mayhew! If you don't get yourself over to sector 9F this instant, the consequences of this machine malfunction shall be on your head!

"I'll be right there, Doctor Namba," Janice replied in downcast tones, glancing down at Caley who had previously been examining the bed he was sitting upon. He looked back with a disappointed pout.

"I wanna come with you," he said.

"Now Adam, as much as I'd love to take you in the laboratory with me, you know I can't," Janice began, kneeling down for a moment so her eyes were level with Caley's. "There are lots of ways you could get hurt in there."

"I'll be careful!" Caley insisted. The somewhat panicked feeling in his gut dictated that this seeming abandonment had happened far too many times. But Janice gave a sad smile and reached up to her belt once again, this time to retrieve a Pokéball.

"Come on out, Beilani."

The white glow upon the carpet shaped itself into a small, green-coloured sandshrew. Caley felt himself relax slightly upon sight of it, but the upset still remained. No pokémon could substitute for a mother's absence. He turned away and folded his arms in displeasure.

"I'll be back soon, Adie," Janice reminded him softly. "Be gentle with Beilani, and stay safe."

Upon hearing the door's gentle click as the lock slid into position, tears began to well in Caley's eyes. Beilani uttered a frantic squeak before swiftly curling herself into a tight ball. Glancing round, Caley felt a smile spread across his face. He quickly clambered from the bed and gave the ball a push, causing it to roll across the floor. As Beilani reached the opposite wall, she uncurled herself before scuttling back toward Caley and resuming a spherical shape once more. The figure chuckled and repeated the process; he got the feeling this was something the pokémon would do often, especially for Adam's benefit.

After ten minutes, however, the game was getting old. Caley found his pushes getting sharper with his irritability, despite what Janice had asked of him. Nevertheless, Beilani kept her patience, returning to Caley's hands just like her trainer had taught her to. Caley was beginning to feel sorry for the pokémon, but as a spectator to an event which had already occurred, there was nothing he could do to alter the event itself.

Caley uttered a yelp of surprise as, without warning, the entire room was plunged into blackness. He was used to 'lights out', but it never came without an announcement and there was always a tiny blue light left on in the room after all the others had been turned off. Something was amiss – Beilani was aware of this too and, uncertain of what to do,

she flew into a panic. Caley hurriedly found the edge of the bed and scrambled atop it as the pokémon ricocheted about the walls. He didn't feel scared of the blackness, only nervous over what his mum might say should she return and find Beilani in such a distressed state. Before he had a chance to try and think of a way to calm the creature down, there resounded a loud metallic clang from the corner of the room.

The lights spattered back into existence, and Caley glanced up momentarily. It must have been a temporary blackout, likely caused by the machine malfunction that Doctor Namba guy had yelled at Janice about earlier. Glancing down again, Caley's mouth fell open a little way as he saw exactly what had been responsible for creating that horrendous noise. It was the grate of an air vent, now lying upon the floor, partially-dented from where Beilani had made impact with it.

"Cooooo..." Caley found himself saying, drawing closer and peering down the vent. A pathway to adventure had been opened to him and the intrigue was just too much for his currently-youthful mind to bear. Without hesitation - and no sound of protest from Beilani who was currently in hiding - the figure scrambled into the shiny passage. It was a noticeably tight fit, but Caley was surprised to find he wasn't bothered by this in the slightest. His excitement at this unknown territory had overrode any thoughts of worry over his disobedience or where exactly he could be heading.

After attempting to emerge through several tightly-sealed exits, Caley came across a grate which had been less adequately screwed into place, and pushed his way back into the open. Standing up and brushing the traces of dust from his navy blue jumpsuit, Caley was rapidly brought to his senses as he glanced round to find himself shrouded in semi-darkness. Aside from the faint clicks and bleeps of active machinery, the air was unnervingly silent. Caley swallowed as he tried to console himself with the fact that wherever he was, he was safer there alone – if any Team Rocket members were to discover him now, he'd be in very hot water. But he could sense Adam's young mind squirming with growing anxiousness. It *wanted* people to be there. Anyone at all, if it would prevent him from such fearful isolation.

Staggering backwards in a disorientated effort to find a way out, Caley felt himself bump into something large and immediately swung round in alarm to be confronted with a pair of glowing green eyes. Without warning, a three-pronged claw was thrust out of the dark, throwing its human target roughly to the ground.

Ayyeeer!

That cry. The artificial, emotionless sound began to stir up feelings of terror from within Adam's older and younger states of consciousness. Caley struggled to free himself as he heard a noise like long, thin blades cutting through the air in rapid succession. And then he saw it – the robotic monstrosity with its wings outstretched and serrated beak wide open, ready to plunge towards its captured target.

As searing pain tore through his body, Caley wrenched backwards, his throat erupting into a loud, high-pitched scream with a voice not his own. The sound blurred and wavered, transforming into more familiar tones as Caley resurfaced from Adam's mind and toppled sideways. Chime harnessed the disorientated young man with telekinesis before he had a chance to hit the ground.

"It's okay, Caley...you're back," James tried to console the sobbing figure, while Growlie nuzzled Adam with an anxious whine. "Whatever you saw, it's in the past now."

Adam was surprisingly less vocal, despite having been the target of Caley's mental excavation. Instead, he quietly reached down and pulled the left leg of his trousers from his boot - raising it to his knee.

"Whoa..." James remarked, with wide eyes. Adam's calf bore several deep white marks, the scars left behind from a previously-unrecalled confrontation. "What happened to your leg?"

Adam just gazed into space, seemingly unaware of anyone else's presence.

"I remember now," he murmured with a distantly strange acceptance. "It attacked me."

"What did?" James urged.

"A mechanical skarmory," Caley spoke up, causing James to look round at him. He had managed to recover from his previous shock and was now looking quite stern, despite the wetness under his eyes. "The

images are...kinda hazy now, but I remember being inside a Team Rocket base and getting into a darkened room. It was in there."

"So a fake bird pokémon was responsible for giving you a bird pokémon phobia," James concluded in Adam's direction. "Sounds kind of ironic to me."

"Maybe," Caley remarked, wiping at his face. "But to Adam at that age, it was very real."

"Somehow...now you've brought those memories back...it doesn't seem as scary any more," Adam said, looking up at Caley. "They still hurt. They still make me sad. But...I don't feel terrified now." He glanced back at the ground, a tiny, satisfied smile emerging on his face. "Thanks, Cal'."

"That's okay, Ad'," Caley returned the smile. "Thanks for trusting me."

Adam paused, as he deliberated over the patch of earth between his feet.

"Y'know, I'm kind of glad you have those psychic powers," he said at last. "Better you than someone else – at least you're cool enough to respect other people's secrets."

"I..." Caley's voice faltered slightly. The statement wasn't entirely left field, but coming from Adam, it had been quite unexpected. Given Caley's own doubts as to the state of their friendship, it was also equally reassuring. It seemed that the youth had not abandoned him after all.

"You sure you didn't unlock his sentimentality, too?" James joked, to which Adam threw a bunch of dried leaves at him.

"We'd better get some rest," Caley said, once he'd composed himself. "I don't know how long there is until we have to move again."

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

"Don'tcha worry about keepin' watch," Errol remarked to Butch and his pokémon companions as they settled down to sleep for the night, some more reluctantly than others. "I'll be on da lookout for ya."

"Thanks, Errol," Butch grunted, laying back in the hollow of a tree. Sia approached and lay down next to the man, wrapping her tail around Butch in a gesture of attempted comfort. Soluqua lay on Butch's other side, her head resting in the crook of his arm. Butch didn't try to shove them away - in some respects, he appreciated the unexpected kindness. A few minutes later, the faint sounds of three figures in slumber wafted up through the air.

Errol glanced down at his chest. The strap that had once held his guitar across his back was no longer present, though the strap itself had since been rolled up and put into one of the man's pockets. He hadn't the heart to just leave it behind with the rest of the instrument's remains, though looking at the strap only served to regurgitate the upset and

anger over what had happened. Forcing the emotions back, Errol took a deep breath and let it go in a prolonged sigh, before lifting his head toward the moon – that familiar, luminescent sphere which had kept him company over many nights.

"Well," he remarked softly into the sky. "Looks like it's just you and me now, buddy."

<Seems that way,> a gentle voice agreed. Errol flinched, having not been expecting a response. He looked toward the ground in the direction of the voice to see Psyduck sitting next to him.

"Huh? Ain't *you* gonna try and get some sleep?"

<I can't...> Psyduck sighed.

"Why?" Errol blinked. "What's botherin' ya?"

<Time,> Psyduck replied simply. <Time is running out, and I am no better at fighting than I was when I joined your group.>

"Oh," Errol bit his lip. "Wow, yeah I'm sorry about dat. So much has happened da past few days, we hadn't had a moment ta woik dese t'ings through, have we?"

<I'm not blaming you,> Psyduck insisted. <I'm just worried about Misty. I want to be there for her, like the others are.>

"Gonna admit, I was a little hasty," Errol scratched the back of his head. "I stuck up for ya because I know someone needs to help you out. But t' be honest, dere's little I can teach ya. I'm more o' da talkin' sort

than da fightin' one. What'cha need is anudda water type ta be your mentor..."

The man glanced at the recumbent bundle of figures underneath the nearby tree, then his eyes lit up.

"I got it!"

Soluqua grumbled faintly as she felt a prodding in her right arm. Opening her eyes slightly, the pokémon found Errol looking down at her with a hopeful expression. Errol retracted his hand and shuffled away from the earshot of those who remained sleeping, beckoning Soluqua with a sheepish wave.

<What?> she grunted in sleepy annoyance, once she'd extracted herself from under Butch's arm and joined Errol.

"Sorry ta be wakin' you up after telling youse guys to sleep," Errol winced a little. "But I got a bit of a situation, and you're da only one who can help me with it."

<'Only one', huh?> Soluqua grew interested. She liked the sound of this level of importance. <What do you need?>

"I promised Psyduck I'd help him train," Errol detailed, motioning to the yellow pokémon in audience. "But in all honesty, dat kinda t'ing ain't my field of expertise. Could you train wit' him instead?"

<Couldn't this have waited until morning?> Soluqua groaned.

"We're hot-footin' it up dat mountain tomorrow," Errol reminded her in a deadpan fashion. "There's no other time to do this."

<Point taken~> Soluqua conceded, before turning to Psyduck and beckoning him with one webbed hand. <Alright you, over here.>

Psyduck scuttled over to the golduck-vaporeon's side, clutching his arms timidly to his chest.

<So, what kind of attacks do you know, then?> Soluqua asked.

<Um, Water Gun, Scratch, Disable...> Psyduck counted.

<Hm...pretty low level stuff,> Soluqua looked awkward. This wasn't going to be an easy feat, by any means.

<I've been told I've used telekinesis moves in the past!> Psyduck insisted, already feeling very much out of his league. <They're some of my most powerful abilities - but I can only seem to get them to work if I get a bad headache, and then I don't remember doing anything after...>

<Well let's start with that Water Gun of yours,> Soluqua concluded. <Gimme a little demonstration.>

<Alright,> Psyduck took a breath. <Here goes.>

Errol and Soluqua watched as a thin, weak dribble of water - not unlike that of a drinking fountain - was emitted from the pokémon's beak. Psyduck was quick to cease the action, and began to blush somewhat.

<It's pathetic though, isn't it?>

<Hm...> Soluqua tried to keep a straight face. <Well from what I can see, your stance is wrong. The force needs to come from your gut, not your lungs.> She moved across and positioned Psyduck's webbed feet so they were a greater distance apart. Then she raised both his arms. <And you need to put more energy into it. Think of something that makes you super angry.>

<Angry?>

<Yeah, you've gotten angry, haven't you?> Soluqua tilted her head.

<Well I *try* not to...> Psyduck trailed off.

<You need that feeling for this to work,> Soluqua insisted. <Reach into your mind and bring out something that stirs up that emotion in you.>

Disregarding his own scepticism, Psyduck searched his thoughts for memories of things that had upset him. He considered all the times he was unable to help Misty - when his claws were too blunt or his psychic abilities refused to be urged to life. He recalled every moment he was insulted, ignored, neglected - every time he'd been forced to watch as his friends were snatched away. A familiar sound, a mocking, infuriating sound rose up in the back of Psyduck's memory. That of a woman, a man and a pokémon laughing. Laughing at *him*.

The anger burned hot deep within Psyduck, clamouring to be freed with an increasing pressure. The water pokémon clenched his webbed fingers together into tight fists, thrust his upper body forward and opened his beak wide. A sharp jet of water coursed rapidly across the forest clearing and made impact with Errol's face, knocking the man clean off his perch and leaving him flat on his back with his legs waving in the air.

<Now that's more like it!> Soluqua clapped excitedly, her expression falling as Errol's dazed groans reached her ears. <Well maybe not so much the 'blasting Errol' part.>

<I guess I still have some repressed issues I need to deal with,> Psyduck chuckled awkwardly, scratching the back of his head. <Sorry!>

"No sweat..." Errol gurgled, before sitting upright and wringing out his sodden jacket. "Can't say I haven't desoived dat."

<We're going to use the anger technique to really spice those moves of yours up!> Soluqua grinned. <I hope you've got plenty of energy, Psyduck, because the tough training starts now.>

<Hoo boy...> Psyduck winced.

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

As the hour approached midnight, Caley and Adam lay in an unsettled state of repose while James kept watch. The man was finding it

hard to concentrate on the task at hand - his mind flit back and forth between thoughts of where his companions could possibly be and the seemingly impossible notion of discovering their location before anyone after their bounty did. If all those distractions weren't enough, James found himself glancing in Adam's direction while the sleeping adolescent flinched and twitched - his eyes shut tight.

James carefully moved Growlie's upper body from where it had been draped across his knees, then stood up and stretched - deciding that he'd better go and make sure Adam wasn't quietly choking on something. Drawing closer to the perspiring, violently shaking figure, James reached out a hand and placed it on Adam's shoulder.

"You okay?" he whispered. Seconds later James found himself almost breathless as Adam's eyes shot wide open before the boy reached out and grasped tightly at the man's shirt. James uttered a yelp, and Adam promptly released his grip - panting heavily as he stared out at nothing.

"Wow...that must have been some pretty awful nightmare you were having," James murmured, stepping back a little way, should the stunted figure decide to lash out at him again. But Adam seemed completely disconnected from the world around him. The expression on his face was one of childish confusion that James wasn't used to seeing on the boy. It prompted him to continue.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he inquired in softer tones, kneeling nearby. "I know I'm probably the last guy you want to speak to, but-"

"Have you ever stopped to think what life would be like if you were out on your own?" Adam interrupted him, still gazing at the floor. "I've been on my own ever since I can remember. No mother, and some guy that called himself my dad telling me how to live my life. I used to spend some nights wondering how things would have been if Team Rocket had never existed."

"No mother?" James echoed, sad-faced.

"Well not one I can remember well," Adam replied, his voice growing somewhat shaky. James looked on in surprise as Adam forced back a sob.

"It's okay," he told the shuddering figure in what he hoped was a reassuring tone. "You don't have to force yourself. I understand."

"How *could* you understand?" Adam hissed frustratedly.

"Well regardless of what you might think, my life hasn't been all rainbows and buttercups," James frowned, as Growlie opened one eye to observe the situation. "My parents were perfectionists, and they wanted nothing less of me. They arranged for me to marry a woman who got kicks from making me suffer - I only managed to escape by enrolling in a boarding school, where all my years of studying culminated in the worst score of that school's history. It wasn't for the want of me trying, y'know?"

I got disillusioned - thought that the 'good guys' ended up with the worst luck - so I turned to the wrong side of the law instead."

"And your luck didn't improve much, huh..." Adam concluded. His statement was not spoken maliciously, more with resignation, even a hint of sympathy.

The youth glanced up at James, and for the first time since they'd met, he noticed a faint glimmer of respect in Adam's eyes. Growlie padded over to Adam's side and deposited himself next to the youth with a light thud. Adam reached out and stroked the growlithe's back - a vague smile on his face. It was quick to be overthrown by an expression of remorse.

"I...I think I got you wrong," he said quietly. "When we met, I thought you were a goofy airhead who everyone stuck up for, no matter how big you messed with things. I was just angry and jealous of how well you got on with everyone else, that's all."

"Hey I won't deny I'm a goof sometimes," James chuckled. "And sure, I do get on well with the others. You could too - you just got to be a little more open and show them you appreciate their company."

"I'll try," Adam nodded. "I guess we have more in common than I realised. I'm...sorry for how I've acted these past couple of weeks."

"It's okay," James replied warmly. "I'm sorry for giving you a hard time, too. The past is the past. Just because things were difficult between us then doesn't mean they have to be now, eh?"

"You're right," Adam said, a peaceable smile returning to his face as he lay back down to sleep, his arm round Growlie. "Thanks James."

The man couldn't help beaming upon hearing Adam refer to him by his name for once. It seemed that this period of separation had coaxed the youth into give deeper thought to his circumstances. And if that had been a glimpse of Adam's true self, then James figured he could even grow to enjoy being around him. He might have looked somewhat like Ash, but he lacked the bravado and egotism that had made that particular trainer so obnoxious.

Getting to his feet, James tilted his head to one side and gazed down at Adam's slumbering form in much the same way as a proud father might observe his son. Tomorrow would bring many challenges, but for the moment, James' younger companion rested in the knowledge that he'd overcome a few of his own that night.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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