

POKÉMON REBIRTH ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE THIRTY FOUR
Attack Order

No sooner had Caley persuaded his father's pokémon back into their Pokéballs, the corridor was plunged into darkness.

He'd insisted on Becks, Teton and Murdoch travelling in digitized form to conserve strength, despite their protests, but was unable to convince Kiko to do the same. Now the young man and his grumpy companion wandered through the Pokémon Center in an attempt to find the lobby - a sense of wariness present in their guts. The animated conversation from within the Pokémon Center had faded into an eerie silence, broken only by the faint hum of medical equipment on the other side of the wall, and the flickering of the emergency backup lights in the ceiling as they struggled to remain illuminated. Kiko cringed as the sound of rolling thunder escalated and fell - with every passing moment of emptiness, the tension only heightened further.

Caley...

The young man flinched and yelped at the sound of the projected psychic voice, which caused Kiko to end up doing the same in response. Pausing to compose himself, Caley sent a tentative message back into the ether.

Who...who's there?

It's me, Kota, came the reply - calm and warm. Caley could hear it now - the familiar undertones of the aurentus' mindvoice. Strangely enough, this too had altered since the pokémon's evolution from an augret. *I'm waiting in the lobby.*

"But where *is* the lobby?" Caley murmured, more to himself than anyone. He calmed his anxieties enough to divert his senses to tracking Aura, but was immediately caught off guard by the intense level of feedback in the area. In his mind's eye, the sky was on fire, the ground was on fire, and any signal in the midst of those two things had been blotted out entirely. Kiko looked up worriedly as Caley staggered backwards with a disorientated groan.

"Aw-preh!" a distant voice called. "Pren-tuhs! Preh!"

This way! Kiko urged, grabbing Caley's hand in her paw and dashing towards the origin of the sound. The footsteps of the two figures echoed in the corridor as they ran past the Transporter Unit bay - the screens giving off an unsettling faint glow despite the absence of mains power. They burst through a set of double doors into the lobby, to be met with the slender form of Kota, leaning upon the reception desk with one arm while the chansey nurse on the other side eyed them curiously.

"Kota!" Caley exclaimed breathlessly. "Am I glad to see you. Where is everyone?"

[*They're waiting for us,*] Kota smiled.

"What, *everyone*?" Caley blinked, looking somewhat worried. The auprentus responded with an utterance of amusement and walked back towards the Pokémon Center's main doors, beckoning Caley and Kiko to tag along. As the main doors slid apart, an incredible sight met the young man's eyes. All the Pokémon Trainers that had been present within the

building were now standing outside it - some with their pokémon, others clasping tiny flashlights and yet more engaged in apprehensive but positive discussion. Caley found himself rooted to the spot - the expression on his face not unlike that of a stunned exploud.

"There you are, Caley my man!" Mondo grinned, having strolled out from around the side of the group with Denise following close behind. "Nice work on finding him there, Kota."

"What's going on?" Caley blinked. "Why are all these people out here?"

"They're coming along with us to help stop Team Rocket," Denise said. She giggled at Caley's persistent baffled expression. "James, Jessie and Errol may have had a hand in that."

"They're real good at pep talks," Mondo nodded, waving an arm toward the centre of the crowd. The trio of ex-Rocket operatives could be seen surrounded by Pokémon Trainers, their faces saturated with enthusiastic smiles as they chanted something to amplify morale.

"Wow..." Caley was lost for words. He certainly wasn't averse to extra support. Even now, the united eagerness from the trainers was reverberating through his psyche - lifting the young man's spirits, easing his doubts and fears.

"We're all here now!" Mondo called back towards Jessie, James and Errol.

"Let's get moving!" Jessie announced in response. The crowd shifted, almost in unison, and began to make their way past the Pokémon Center - through the gateway and onto the gradually rising slope of Serperior Pass.

Thunder idled disapprovingly overhead as the sounds of multiple pairs of boots, heels, sneakers and sandals could be heard crunching over the gravel pathway. The rocky peaks which bordered this path were shadowy and foreboding, channelling the crowd upward in a singular stream. Light rain began to fall, urging some of the trainers to open their umbrellas, and others to attempt to shelter under them. The environment was trying its best to dissolve the raised spirits of the travellers, but some were less inclined to allow this to happen than others. A stocky man with shaved black hair and a similarly coloured shirt with a gyarados on the back loudly broke into song.

Like a horsea blowing bubbles

We don't seem like such a threat

Judgement's bound to make you stumble

We ain't shown you nothing yet

Every horsea is a kingdra

Just awaiting to be born

That ambition is our driving force

Towards the coming dawn

Further voices from the crowd began to contribute as the song headed into its chorus - tentatively at first, but with more confidence as the melody progressed.

Show us the stars

And we'll show you what real hearts are made of

Fearless and proud, a dragon lies within

From here to afar

A pulse of light illuminates (this path)

Victory is but a step, and victory's in our grasp

"What an inspiring song," James gushed appreciatively.

"Tis the anthem for Scale Falls Baccar team, that is," an elderly man remarked proudly as he rode past on his tauros - the sharp breeze whipping at his chalky moustache.

"Who knew sports could be inspiring," Cassidy sniffed.

"Maybe we're just kidding ourselves," Adam murmured, glancing from left to right at the trainers walking either side of him. "Y'know, about having a chance at getting through this."

"Maybe..." Rose said. "But I'm pretty sure anyone who's ever achieved something great had to tell themselves fibs in order to get there."

"Hm?" Adam eyed her with a quizzical frown.

"Insisting they were okay when they were at their lowest ebb..." the woman explained calmly. "Making themselves believe that their motives would succeed, even when everything else seemed to dictate otherwise. That sort of thing."

Adam's eyes widened slightly as this definition sunk in. He could recall the times he had spent trying to placate himself with hopeful words in order to get him from day to day, back in the Team Rocket HQ. As the time passed, the fighting spirit had diminished – his childhood optimism exchanged for the bitter resignation of his adolescence. Hope, Adam had conceded, was a foolish notion. And yet he couldn't have entirely abandoned it – why else would he have pursued Caley through his well-meaning but reckless escape plan?

There *was* some crazy value in such talk. A flicker of conviction stirred in Adam, rapidly growing hotter and brighter by the second.

"WE CAN DO THIS!" he yelled, punching the air before retracting the fist with an awkward expression at his own unexpected

impulsiveness. There was a reverberation of enthused agreement from the surrounding crowd, which energized Adam with warmth. He grinned and looked back at Rose who returned the expression. "Heh. Guess it works."

"Say, where's Butch?" Errol raised an eyebrow.

"He's keeping to the background," Cassidy replied. "We figured the trainers here wouldn't handle the sight of him as a druddigon hybrid too well."

"Got a point," Jessie shrugged, gazing up towards Alia Summit. A vague shadow could be seen now, faintly tinged with lights.

"Whoa...that's got to be some big tower for us to be able to see it from here."

"Sure is," Mondo squinted at his guide book. "Says here that Kemnon Tower is five hundred and forty seven feet high."

"Don't tell me, we've got to go to the top of it," Adam looked deadpan.

"More or less," Cassidy nodded.

"Trying to fly that far up would be impossible with any of our pokémon," Rose admitted.

"What about Butch? He's got a pair of wings now," James suggested. "He could at least take Caley up."

"You can't put that responsibility on him - he's never flown in that form before," Cassidy tutted, while Caley looked uncomfortable at the thought of being hoisted almost one hundred and seventy metres into the air. "At least not consciously. And even if he *could* work out how to fly, it wouldn't make much difference. Kemnon Tower is shielded to prevent unwanted break-ins."

"Huh? How do you know that?" Cory tilted their head to one side while the others turned their attentions to Cassidy in unison, causing her to flinch.

"It was part of the research that was done while on the job," the woman replied dismissively. "He had an interest in learning the strengths and weaknesses of sacred buildings."

There was no need to elaborate who 'he' was, nor what 'the job' happened to be. Caley and his companions were all too aware of the organization and its leader that Cassidy was referring to. And yet, some of them couldn't help feeling as if she was bluffing - that she knew about these facts for entirely different reasons. But they decided not to pry, and instead turned their attentions back to the task at hand - reaching the landmark they had been discussing.

The procession continued through the intensifying rain, and with no less vigour. As the time passed, Caley noticed the number of those present was increasing steadily. Faces peering from below the shelter of

nearby caves and around the doors of lodges became entire figures scuttling into the dim, wet air with their satchels strapped tightly to their backs, and their pokémon in close pursuit. Caley himself had been playing with the words his father's pokémon had spoken as he strode alongside the crowd towards their destination.

We'll be there to help you too...if you let us.

He could feel that support more than ever now - not just from the trainers accompanying him and his friends, but even resonating from the Pokéballs upon his belt. The encouragement from his mother, his sister, even his father, shone through in that resonance from the psychic pokémon trio. Caley glanced down at Kiko, boldly walking at his right side, and then over at Kota, contentedly at his left, and began to smile. He wasn't alone - he was part of a far bigger picture, and that knowledge in itself was very reassuring.

The mountainside ahead of the travelling group descended into flatter, grassier plains - exposing a sight that was enough to momentarily halt the crowd who gazed upon it. Kemnon Tower loomed in the distance - an impressive cylindrical structure decorated in carved circuit-like patterns and small windows. At its peak, a semi-transparent tetrahedron shaped room reached toward the violently whirling darkened clouds, lit faintly from within by a golden glow. At its base was constructed an imposing wall surrounded by lookout posts - its only entry being a set of thick steel doors, which were firmly shut.

"It's so...beautiful," Rose murmured, eyes wide with awe.

"That wall is huge!" James exclaimed in astonishment. "And I've seen some big walls in my time. It's got to be at least thirty foot high."

"Fifty, actually," Mondo corrected him, glancing at the guidebook.

"And with a massive door to boot," Denise grimaced. "Do you think the Seers will know to let us in, Caley?"

A heavy rumble arose from the craggy peaks either side, sending fierce vibrations coursing under the feet of the Pokémon Trainers standing there. Glancing upward, the happy murmuring of the crowd dissipated into nervous silence. The shadowy tops of the mountains began to writhe and swell under the army's ascent - a gargantuan abomination birthing echinated heads and muscled shoulders that heaved with barely-repressed fury. There was no roaring, no bellowing, just the sounds of hundreds of footsteps slamming the earth in unison. Human figures could be seen at the forefront of the throng of hybrid pokémon now - men and women dressed in the black commander armour that James and Errol watched being handed out mere days earlier. At the rear, the steady mechanical whirs of servos rose in volume, bringing to view the cockpits of fifty bipedal mechas, their arm-like appendages raised in preparation for combat. Behind them, the solid whipping of blades announced the presence of a number of aircraft.

"Tah help us all..." a middle aged woman in the group uttered, her voice barely louder than a croak. Nearby, Jessie, James and Errol were

frozen to the spot - their faces drained of colour, their eyes full of an intense emotion which looked no different from the other anguished expressions surrounding them. But deep down inside, guilt and regret burned with painful viciousness. The sight of those mechas, the very same kind that they had used to bring one youth's life crashing down around him, felt all too much.

Kiko had tensed, flattening her ears against her head. The power she could sense from the figures above was unsettlingly strong, to the point that even the air itself felt as if it had thickened in their presence. Overhead, the clouds swirled and jostled impatiently - lightning streaked across their undersides as the rain grew more persistent. Underfoot, the ground tingled with an energy it seemed barely able to contain. The army had come to a standstill at the peak of the mountainside and had not yet moved from that spot, convincing the crowd in the valley to remain silent. They began to wonder if they had even been detected. How could they *not* have been?

"They're toying with us," Adam grit his teeth.

"Well if they want me to make the first move, so be it," Caley frowned, reaching towards his belt. "My priority is to get to that tower as fast as possible."

"It's got nothing to *do* with us," Rose shook her head.

"They're...waiting for something."

With a flash, a solid beam of energy broke the darkness from beyond Kemnon Tower. The flare coursed from a point out at sea, streaking across the skyline and trailing bright green sparks. One of the Team Rocket commanders thrust an arm forward, his resulting shout echoing into the valley and sending chills of familiarity down Adam's spine.

"FIRE!"

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

A few weeks ago, playing a part in saving the world was the last thing on fourteen year old Ayanna Arom's mind. Unlike her cousin Erika who ran Celadon Gym, Ayanna was a boisterous youth with more of an interest in repairing and modifying vehicles than she had ever been in horticulture. Ayanna, particularly Ayanna's nose, fervently disliked plants. When her father was called out to Orre to help with the region's restoration project, the girl would eagerly take the chance to accompany him and help out some of Orre's locals in the process. Over time, they grew to enjoy her company and admire her ability to create quality results with even the barest essentials.

In her excitement to visit nearby Pyrite on one of these visits, Ayanna had swerved to avoid a small, green shape which had crossed her path and ended up colliding with a nearby tree. Unexpectedly, the

obstruction had been none other than a shaymin that was surveying the flourishing surroundings. Noting Ayanna's injury, the shaymin was quick to use its abilities to heal the damage it had caused. And that's when things started to get pretty strange. That's when Ayanna had discovered her grass type Cho'moken and her place in the Ahnloka legend.

Irony must love me, she thought, recalling those events. Grass Cho'moken in a person that hates grass pokémon, of all things.

She had been advised to go to Eterna City and train alongside Gardenia Silvane, the city's Gym Leader, but Ayanna had spent the last week or so in Sunyshore City instead - captivated by the technological marvels of the lighthouse and nearby marketplace. As a result, she had made little to no progress in getting to grips with her Cho'moken. It wasn't until storm clouds began to gather over Sunyshore and an unseemly mix of lightning and hail pelted the buildings below, that Ayanna's mind stirred the adolescent's responsibilities back to life. As the city was cast into panic and disarray, Ayanna donned her riding gear, leapt upon her custom motor scooter and sped out of sight.

Ayanna faintly recalled an instruction to go to Blessing Tower, an Agrarian Seer repository in the south east part of Sinnoh. On the way out of the city, she had managed to grab some highly unwanted attention in the form of a Team Rocket commander who had ordered one of the members of his army, an abomasnow, to give chase. At least Ayanna figured it was an abomasnow. Judging by the green and white spiked turret-like formations atop the creature's back, it could have also been

mistaken for some kind of mutant blastoise. But the driving snow and hail that whirled around the youth was a dead giveaway.

Must...get to the trees, Ayanna told herself, as the thuds of the fast-approaching creature's footsteps persisted behind her. Blessing Tower was in sight now, though still quite a distance beyond the forest and somewhat marred by the unseasonal snowstorm. Fortunately for her, the humanoid abomasnow was having difficulty keeping pace, its cumbersome hunched form unsuited for speedy pursuit.

Ayanna squinted through her snow covered visor and saw the leaves of the nearest trees beginning to shimmer with the bodies of volbeat and illumise that had huddled together in an attempt to light the girl's way. There was a field of scarlet coloured flowers that lay between her and the forest. Their delicate petals were already beginning to sag with the onslaught of the hail, and despite it being the quickest route to the trees, it felt wrong in Ayanna's gut to just speed through them.

She turned and began driving around the field's perimeter. Yet the humanoid abomasnow held no qualms about preservation. Uttering a roar, it lumbered wildly on all fours through the midst of the flowers - crushing them under its clawed hands and feet. At the same time, the protruding spikes upon the creature's back began to glow. Hearing the cry, Ayanna forced the accelerator in an attempt to make an escape, but it was no use. The scooter was unable to move any faster, and the very same hailstones that were stinging at Ayanna's face and arms were also causing her vehicle great hardship.

Leaping effortlessly into the air, the humanoid abomasnow leaned back, the solar beam that had formed between its spikes aimed at the ground behind it. The angle and force of the blast scattered torn petals and clods of dirt into the air, thrusting the hybrid toward Ayanna like a rocket. The girl screamed as her attacker flew over her head, knocking her to the ground in the process and sending her tumbling down the snow-spattered grassy bank nearby. The scooter was thrown aside and landed in the river at the foot of the bank. Stumbling only slightly as a result of the deviation this caused in its trajectory upon landing, the humanoid abomasnow whirled round menacingly and within seconds, was retracing its steps towards its fallen prey.

But Ayanna was used to rough treatment, having fought with her brother on many occasions as a child. Shaking the temporary dizziness and quietly uttering thanks for the presence of her helmet, the youth scrambled to her feet and dashed recklessly along the bank in the hopes that she would reach the forest boundary before the creature was able to make a grab for her. The plan worked, but the tactic was far from flawless. Roaring angrily, the humanoid abomasnow turned around and unleashed a burst of rapidly-spinning leaves straight at its escaping target. Before these could make contact, however, plant like tendrils and vines extended from the trees and batted the leaves aside.

Ayanna paused, as did her attacker. As they stood watching in puzzlement, a crowd of determined-looking grass type pokémon emerged from amongst the foliage. Ayanna smiled widely upon sight of them.

"Never thought I'd say this but I sure am glad to see you guys!" she exclaimed, while a nearby bellossom motioned for her to step behind the grass type barricade. The same could not be said for the humanoid abomasnow – as far as its programming was concerned, anyone found to be assisting a target was automatically branded an enemy. It raised its fists which began to form a crystalline sheen, the corner of its mouth twitching in light of a threatening snarl. "I'm not sure you should hang about though," Ayanna insisted. "That abomasnow is a part ice type after all, you're not going to fare well against that."

This seemed to matter little. A venusaur bellowed an order to charge and all at once the other pokémon threw themselves at the humanoid abomasnow in an attempt to keep it occupied. Bellsprouts and tangelas clung tightly to its legs while sunfloras assaulted its upper body with Energy Balls and bulbasaur covered it in showers of Poisonpowder and Leech Seed. Standing there momentarily, Ayanna couldn't help but gawp in amazement at the vicious retaliation of a type which she had always associated with flower arranging and soft-hearted temperaments. A nearby shiftry urged her onward with an anxious expression, but as the young girl turned to leave, she heard a multitude of agonized screams while the air behind her grew breathtakingly dense with the sheer ferocity of the abomasnow's Blizzard.

Glancing over her shoulder, Ayanna gasped at the sight that met her gaze. Grass type pokémon littered the floor around the humanoid abomasnow's clawed hands and feet, their bruised bodies shaking with

cold and exhaustion. Those that had been able to avoid the majority of this terrible blast had been picked from the creature's body and tossed aside – no more of a threat than a fallen breadcrumb was on a person's jacket. Despite the shiftry's continued insistent cries, Ayanna could not leave. Part of her was cursing over her conscience's protest at such horrific treatment.

"Hey, I know you're just trying to help me out here," she acknowledged. "But you gotta save yourselves! This creature is way too powerful, even more so for you!" The girl attempted to repress a shiver. "Ugh, this snow is everywhere - if only we could make it stop..."

The hybrid fired a second blast at this point, this time a Solar Beam, gauging a hole from one of the nearby trees in the process. Its trunk significantly weakened, the tree began to fall, prompting some of the stronger pokémon to divert their attentions from the humanoid abomasnow and prevent the wooden behemoth from crushing anyone else. With the barricade significantly lessened, the creature now had a clear lock on its true target. All other objectives had been removed from its mind now, only one primary motive remained. Elimination.

"For a grass type, it's sure not that concerned about the environment," Ayanna muttered, as a small group of bellossom clustered around her feet, begging for the girl to leave before it was too late. But Ayanna had already made up her mind as to what she had to do. She frowned and stepped from amongst the cluster, a sudden bravery present on her face.

"I'm sorry," she murmured as the spikes upon the humanoid abomasnow's back began to glow for one final destructive assault. "But if you're not leaving, neither will I."

Before the pokémon were able to leap to her aid, the hybrid unleashed the most powerful Solar Beam it could muster, engulfing Ayanna in a blinding white light. Those playing witness to the assault winced in unison, partly from the brightness of the Solar Beam and partly from the sacrifice Ayanna had made for them all. But as the light faded, all were equally astonished to see the girl still standing there completely unharmed, with even her clothes unsinged as a result of the blast.

While the movements of the humanoid abomasnow became increasingly more agitated, Ayanna began to smile mischievously, raising her hands. A flicker of greenish yellow lit up her eyes as a spark of light flickered into existence between the tips of her fingers, growing larger and larger by the second. Ayanna smirked, then thrust the pulsating solar orb straight back at the creature. It howled in pain, staggering backward as the attack hit it directly in the face. While the grass type pokémon and nearby species from the surrounding trees let out a cheer at the retaliation, Ayanna glanced down at her hands in surprise.

"Whoa, I never thought I could do that," she commented with an impressed expression.

"How *dare* you!"

The female voice somehow managed to cut through the snowstorm. Ayanna looked up in a mixture of surprise and horror to see a woman standing at the peak of the hillside. She was dressed in formal robes and had long, dark hair braided with artificial flowers. At first, Ayanna thought the loud utterance of disgust had been voiced at her. After tracing the direction of the woman's stare, she realised that she was in fact addressing the humanoid abomasnow.

"You have caused untold damage to this sacred Gracidea field, heartless beast!" the woman announced. "Mabel and I will not stand for this!"

"Miiihn!" a softer, higher pitched voice was heard from near the woman's shoulder. A small white shape leapt seemingly from nowhere and landed amongst the Gracidea flowers that had been left uncrushed. Almost immediately, the shaymin began to glow - its hedgehog-like body stretching upwards into a longer legged shape as two fluffy ears sprouted from its head. As the glow faded, the canine appearance of shaymin's Sky Forme was revealed.

"The light is pretty low here and there's a lot of hail about so you probably don't have much time," the woman said hurriedly. "Get to that strange looking abomasnow as fast as you can!"

Alright, Kaydith, the shaymin's telepathic voice resounded in Ayanna's mind, making her flinch. The hybrid glanced up in annoyance as the shaymin rose into the air and shot towards it like a bullet - its red

scarf-like neck decorations fluttering in the wind. It swerved with pinpoint timing as the abomasnow thrust an ice covered fist in its direction.

"Now, Mabel!" Kaydith yelled. "Verdure Footprint!"

With a cry, the shaymin plunged its two front paws towards the humanoid abomasnow's head. As they made contact, a bright green glow rippled from them and across the creature's body. Moments later, Mabel screeched in pain as the humanoid abomasnow slammed another Ice Punch into her, throwing her into the ground. The shaymin was once again enveloped by a white luminescence, its body rapidly shrinking back to Land Forme. Having dissuaded the minor inconvenience, the humanoid abomasnow turned its attentions back to Ayanna - unconcerned at Kaydith dashing across the Gracidea field to Mabel's side.

"That's enough!" Ayanna snapped, her anger spiking at the creature's violent reactions. "You want me so bad? I'm gonna sort you out!" She paused as a heavy realisation washed over her. The snowstorm which the hybrid had trailed in its wake had ceased. With this distraction gone, she now could feel a curious movement beneath her, a shifting in the earth, restless life that beckoned her to allow it freedom.

The humanoid abomasnow appeared unaware of the thing Ayanna was sensing, as it reared backwards in preparation for another savage Blizzard. But nothing happened. The creature tried again, still without success.

"You did it, Mabel," Kaydith smiled weakly, gathering the quaking shaymin up in her arms as the humanoid abomasnow let out a roar of frustration. "You suppressed its ice element."

"Looks like you're having a bit of trouble there, eh big fella?" Ayanna remarked cockily. She raised a hand and a spiked root wormed its way from the grass in front of her. Tilting her head to one side, Ayanna made a sweeping gesture with her arm which the root appeared to imitate. Plunging the arm towards the ground, Ayanna sent the root under the earth where it re-emerged closer to the bewildered abomasnow hybrid, alongside several others. With overwhelming confidence despite such recent introduction to such abilities, Ayanna rotated her hands in opposing directions, causing the roots to spiral around the creature until it was bound completely. No longer able to keep its balance, the humanoid abomasnow toppled to the ground where it lay there, groaning softly.

"I guess I *could* get used to this nature stuff," Ayanna grinned, as further cheers ensued from the surrounding trees. She turned and bowed in the forest pokémon's direction before striding past the fallen hybrid and down the bank. Her scooter was partly submerged in the river, but with a little assistance from some of the grass type pokémon still standing, it was hoisted from the water and placed upon the ground nearby, where Ayanna proceeded to inspect it for serious damage.

"That was astounding," Kaydith exclaimed in awe as she approached. "Such finesse."

"Thanks for your help back there," Ayanna looked up. "Whatever your Shaymin did allowed me to get that monster under control. So your name's Kaydith, right?"

"That is correct," the woman smiled. "Kaydith Enwell. I am a student of Blessing Tower, and Mabel is my companion. I was sent out in order to guide the Forest Nexus back to the tower."

"Awesome!" Ayanna's face brightened. "Well that's me - the Forest Nexus, I mean."

"I would have thought as much," Kaydith chuckled. "You seem well acquainted with your Cho'moken."

"Guess I am," Ayanna chuckled awkwardly. She didn't wish to mention that this was pretty much the first time she'd attempted to use it in any solid measure.

"Well we'd best get going quickly," Kaydith insisted. "Before that creature gets its strength back."

"Right," Ayanna gave a nod, before turning the key in the scooter's ignition. It spluttered loudly, jetting a short spray of water, before thrumming into life. The adolescent girl sat at the foremost part of the scooter's padded seat, leaving additional room behind her. "Now how do you feel about hitching a ride?"

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Things had grown particularly tense in the Williams' residence, a modest accommodation built at the rear of Cerulean City Gym. Rui had been sleeping peacefully in bed until a loud explosion shook her into consciousness. Her first instinct was to call her husband's name, yet this brought no results. Grumbling to herself about Wes' spontaneous disappearances, Rui had struggled to put on her bathrobe in the darkness, before feeling her way downstairs in the hopes of retrieving a source of emergency lighting.

Then the phone had rang. Now Rui found herself shaking at the end of the hallway, staring at the fuzzy screen of the device in some dwindling hope that the dancing pixels were only a temporary glitch. When no true images returned, the woman hurriedly felt her way towards the kitchen, and the location of a much needed flashlight.

"Mom...?" a sleepy and bewildered voice was heard from a distance. "What's happening?"

"Something terrible, Daisy," Rui muttered, engaging the flashlight and shining up the stairs. It lit upon a woman in her early twenties dressed in a pastel pink nightgown, her golden yellow hair wayward and scruffy from deep slumber. "I got a call from your sister Lily in Celadon... she'd seen the gym there practically blown into the sky! I asked her if she saw what had caused it, but the phone went dead!"

"Wasn't there like, an explosion a few minutes ago...?" Daisy blinked, before suddenly jerking into horrified alertness. "We've got to check the pokémon in our Gym are okay!" She fumbled, before reaching out a hand urgently. "Mom, I need your flashlight."

"You can have it when *I've* got dressed," Rui told her sternly, walking back up the stairs. "Of all the times for your father to go wandering off..."

"Dad's gone?" Daisy blinked.

"He wasn't in bed," Rui answered, striding into her room. "And he wasn't in the rest of the house either. *Or* the garage."

"But where would he go at this time in the morning?" Daisy stood on the landing and tried to fathom this, only to have her thoughts interrupted by the sound of a key being hurriedly jammed into the lock on the front door. With a loud 'chnk!', the door was flung open, and the sound of heavy boots were heard stumbling into the hallway.

"Daisy!" a familiar voice echoed. "I'm taking your car!"

"What?" came the combined exclamation from both the young woman and her mother. Daisy thrust her head around one side of the stairwell opening, while Rui scuttled out onto the balcony looking very stern. Her expression shifted to a mixture of horror and distress upon seeing her husband poised in the hallway. To say he was a little worse for wear happened to be an understatement. Wes' clothes were torn and burnt, his hands and face were covered in gashes and bruises, his hair

matted with his own blood and debris. Regardless of these injuries and damage, Wes' face reflected a dark determination that Rui had not seen upon him in a long while.

"Wesley Leon Williams..." Rui began, her voice cautious and unsettled. "Just what is going on?"

"I've got to get to Fiore," Wes insisted, slightly breathlessly.

"*What is going on?*" Rui exclaimed a second time with emphasis, the pitch of her voice rising. Something in her gut told her the man knew more about these bizarre occurrences than she did. After all, Wes had a past steeped in the extraordinary.

It was a matter she had been unaware of, upon meeting him during his adolescence. Wes had been brash, radical and a little full of himself, but he was surprisingly loyal to the Agrarian Seers his family belonged to - and his ability to put on a convincing front had won him a prestigious role in Team Snagem, one of Orre's more formidable criminal groups during the mid 70s. Still, this had been little more than an act in order to learn the group's associations with a far more dangerous organization called "Cipher", and Wes had quickly departed with this information once he had found it. Being young and self-assured, Wes had taken off in a somewhat more noticeable manner than he had been instructed to, and with a little more than just information. This tendency to spontaneous actions had never left the man, even into in his forties.

"I'd been receiving cryptic reports from Fiore's Seers for the past few weeks now," Wes finally relented. "They were expecting something big to happen, they just weren't sure what."

"And you think that 'something big' is what's going on now?" Daisy inquired.

"I'd be very surprised if it wasn't," Wes gave a nod. "A stampede of these...things - they weren't pokémon or people, sort of a mash up of the two - they just levelled Marty's Restaurant. We all barely got out alive."

Rui opened her mouth, her brain churning with five different emotions at once. Her initial reaction was to demand why Wes had been out at such an insane time of the morning, let alone visiting that dreadful fish bar. Part of her was glad the place had been demolished, though the more mature part scolded herself at taking pleasure in what was essentially her friend's brother losing his livelihood. On top of that was an overwhelming sense of relief that Wes, Marty and presumably their pokémon - given Wes' use of the word 'all' - *had* escaped the situation in tact, but it was quickly smothered by a deep fear over the thought of strange and powerful mutant creatures.

"So why can't you use your bike to go to the airport?" Daisy frowned at Wes. "I mean you use it to go like, everywhere else."

"Yeah...my bike's totalled," Wes forced out the sentence, his eyes looking pained. "Got one of those freaks to thank for that, too."

"Well I'm just glad you're still here," Rui descended the stairs and put her arms around her husband. As she placed her head against Wes' chest, Rui could feel the thudding of his quickened pulse. The man was still very much on high alert, and with good reason. "But Sonoria...that's a long way to go when things are this crazy."

"I know," Wes agreed. "But Fiore's repository will be more vulnerable than any other Seer building right now, Rui. Pokémon Rangers just aren't as experienced in battling as trainers are."

"In which case, I'll be coming with you," Rui confirmed, with a smirk. Wes returned the expression - she knew that expression meant Rui wasn't intending to be convinced otherwise.

"Same here!" Daisy trilled.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "This journey will be dangerous, even tougher than anything your mom or I have *ever* told you concerning Cipher."

"I know what's involved, dad," Daisy sniffed. "I've like, thought about it real hard and I *know* I can help you two out! I was Gym Leader for a time here too, remember? And you *are* taking my car."

Wes looked most perplexed at his daughter's stubbornness. Some personality traits he was wishing she had never inherited. Eventually, the man gave in.

"Okay then," he said. "We're all probably safer in numbers anyhow. It'll be more reassuring if I can see you're with me." Daisy

couldn't help but smile at this. For all his bravado and embarrassing behaviour, Wes proved a caring parent in his own way. He eyed her with a grin. "But *I'll* be driving."

"Aw daaad..." Daisy moped.

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

Eben Richt usually jumped at the opportunity to take a recklessly-fast night time ride across the Orre desert landscape. But as he clung to the back rim of a speeding hover truck, the stocky young man knew this was way beyond the thrill-seeking even he was well known for. And that was saying something. Eben's daredevil antics had earned him quite a name in the rundown streets of Eclo Canyon's Tygye City. Though the company he kept was something of a ragtag group with mixed values, Eben had proved to be a warm and friendly guy who stood up to the fiercest of challenges. And with the challenge of reaching the sacred Relic Stone to fulfil his Nexus duties hanging over his head, Eben needed all the determination he could muster.

A few hundred metres behind the hover truck, a small group of humanoid hybrids thundered in pursuit, occasionally firing blasts of flame and energy at the escaping vehicle. Eben had been managing to deflect the majority of the attacks by using his earth Cho'moken abilities to rip chunks of earth from behind the truck and use them as a temporary

shield. But this was far from enough – the hybrids refused to cease their chase, drawing ever closer with each passing minute.

"Can't this thing go any faster, Mike?" Eben was forced to bellow over his shoulder to the figure in the driver's seat, for the noise of the hover system's aged energy generator was almost deafening.

"What? A Model 10-6 CargoMaster?" the driver responded with noticeable amusement in his voice. "You've got to be kidding me!"

"Then why did you bring it?" Eben cried in disbelief, lifting his hands to tear another mass from the ground and bring it in front of him to stave off a blast of electricity.

"It was all they had available at work," Michael shrugged. "Gotta make do with the tools you have, that's what my friend Wes always said." There was a short pause while Eben eyed his older companion somewhat accusingly.

"You're way too calm sometimes," he muttered, rubbing his hands together to remove the dust that had been kicked up from the moving truck. "It messes me up."

"When you've been around the block as many times as I have, things like this wouldn't phase you either, kid," Michael smirked, adjusting his glasses. "Don't you worry yourself, we're almost at Aga- ... uh oh."

Just a short distance up ahead, a barricade loomed. It wasn't a planned arrangement, more an unfortunate act of circumstance in which over eighty humanoid hybrids and Team Rocket operatives in armoured fighting machines clashed head on with those who stubbornly opposed their actions. The area in which the conflict had spread directly blocked the route toward the bridge that the truck had to cross in order to reach Agate Village.

"We'll have to drive round them," Michael concluded.

"If we do that, I won't get there in time!" Eben spluttered frustratedly. "I can see the village from here! This can't happen now!"

"There's no other option," Michael insisted. "This thing isn't designed to fly."

"But maybe it can be *customized* to dig," Eben smiled to himself, reaching up and slamming down the shutters on the back of the truck. Mike flinched as he overheard this.

"What? How do you possibly expect to do that?" he exclaimed.

"Well how much weight can this thing carry?" Eben asked.

"I don't know..." Michael looked uncomfortable over thoughts of where this conversation might be heading. "Four hundred pounds or so?"

"That should do it," came the affirmed reply. Eben quickly clambered from the rear compartment into the cab's passenger seat

before winding down the window and leaning out of it, Pokéball in hand.

"Drive this thing underground, Spindle!"

Mike uttered a cry of alarm as the front end of the hover truck tipped sharply with the weight of the rhydon that had materialized upon its hood. As the vehicle became unbalanced, Spindle clung tightly to the hood before boldly thrusting his upper body over the front grille, toward the ground. The rotating drill-like horn upon his head made contact with the dusty earth at this point, sending Spindle and his cargo burrowing down into it at breakneck speed.

"What the-?" Michael's mouth dropped open while Eben quickly ran to the back of the truck once again. "That sure was some ingenuity if I ever saw it." He flicked on the headlamps in order to give Spindle a better view of the surface ahead.

"We're not in the clear yet," Eben replied sternly, flinging the truck's rear shutters back open before reaching out both hands, tightly sealing the makeshift tunnel's entrance. "It's going to be a case of hit and miss as to where we surface. How you doing out there, Spindle?"

The rhydon uttered a low moan over the combined sound of the hover generator and his own drill. It was obvious the intensity of the prolonged digging was beginning to take its toll. Eben returned to the passenger seat with an anxious expression, examining the rising agony upon his pokémon's face. How much longer could they possibly hold out? He knew Spindle was trying his best and couldn't stand to see him

hurting, but what else could he do? There was no way back, and no way forward should Spindle cease digging. No amount of potions could cure fatigue – encouragement was all he could give.

"You can do it, Spindle!" Eben called, leaning out of the window despite the thick clouds of dirt and tunnel walls racing past at dangerously close proximity. He reached out, grasping hold of the rhydon's foot as a way of letting the pokémon know he still believed in them. No sooner had Eben made contact, a white glow emerged from underneath his hand, spreading from the ends of his fingers and across Spindle's body until the rhydon was entirely encompassed in light. Michael squinted as the brightness lit up the sides of the tunnel to such an extent, one could see the detail on every passing rock. When the light had faded again, the rhydon that had been clinging to the body had vanished, replaced by a larger creature with long, angular arms and red body plating.

"What's happened?" Eben gasped breathlessly, watching the energized figure roar with renewed determination and burrow all the harder, increasing the truck's speed somewhat. "Did Spindle just evolve?"

"It...did," Michael blinked, resisting the urge to take his glasses off and rub them in disbelief at what he had just witnessed. "But rhyperior...a rhydon's never evolved without a protector attached! This certainly ain't a textbook case."

did not take so kindly to a human wielding abilities like that of pokémon. The man shuddered as a wave of memories struck him unawares - fractured visuals of the youths which had tormented him with words, thrown things at him, even set their own pokémon on him. One of these encounters had proved too much for Dave and he had lashed out, accidentally setting fire to a barn and searing one of his tormentors in the process. Though his parents had insisted otherwise, Dave still felt like it had been his fault that the villagers had demanded him and his family to leave.

Receiving his trainer's license at ten years of age had been a blessing, in some ways. Dave had a reason to depart, his turbulent emotions no longer able to affect those he loved. Internally he had vowed never to wield fire again, and as a conclusive act he had chosen squirtle as his first pokémon. But even then, it seemed that his inherited element was never too far away.

While camping on the Kantoan mountainside with his water type companion, Dave found himself approached by a charizard. At first, Dave tried to pretend it wasn't there, but the charizard refused to leave - instead idling at the edge of Dave's camp, grasping onto its own flaming tail with both clawed hands. The curiously lost, sad visage reminded Dave a little of himself when he was younger. After an hour or so, he relented and began to talk to the charizard, even offering it food which it gratefully accepted - eating with one claw while holding tight to its tail with the other.

During the course of the night, the charizard's overly anxious expression had softened, the pokémon seemed more at peace - yet it still refused to let go of its own tail. Dave began to wonder if the charizard was hurt, and tried to see if there was any injury, which sent the pokémon into a frightened ball - its wings wrapped around its body and tail. Dave couldn't help but chuckle lightly - this was most uncharacteristic behaviour for a charizard. He tried to placate the creature with insistence that he wouldn't harm it, only to be halted by his warturtle, Cannon, who explained in various sign languages that the charizard was more afraid of hurting Dave than the other way around.

Suddenly the pieces had clicked. The reason for the charizard's possessiveness of its tail was out of fear for burning anything. Further conversation led to a gradual telling of the pokémon's story - as a charmander, it had been raised by an inexperienced trainer who loved the pokémon deeply, but was unnerved by its fire. Over time, this caused the charmander to be afraid of its own fire. Unable to raise the pokémon the way they felt should be done, the trainer had released the charmander back into the forest where it had been made to fend for itself. Having become a charizard just days ago, the pokémon was more nervous than ever.

Dave had nodded in understanding, reassuring the charizard that he would not be hurt by the pokémon's fire. At first, the charizard didn't believe him - surely the human had to have been lying or trying to be tough. Before the pokémon had a chance to process such things, the

youth next to him had lunged forward, and thrust his hand towards his companion's tail flame. There was no sizzle, no pungent odour of burnt flesh. Dave had retracted his hand from the flame unscathed, a portion of that fire still present amongst his fingertips. He'd smiled at the charizard's horrified, then astonished expression, and extinguished the tiny flicker. The pokémon had finally been convinced.

Come morning, the charizard had decided it was staying with Dave and Cannon. Surprising to himself, Dave felt okay with this decision and shortly afterward, began to train the charizard to get to grips with its flight and firepower. In the process, helping the charizard to grasp these abilities had allowed the youth to come to terms with something in himself. Power was only dangerous if the wielder was inexperienced.

Upon completing the Kanto League and coming in ninth at the final tournament at twelve years old, Dave proceeded to head south to the orange archipelago aboard Cannon's back. While resting on Shamouti Island, he'd been drawn to one of the nearby smaller islands in the middle of the night. There, he encountered the king of the moltres species. Engulfed in a mysterious blue flame, the legendary pokémon delivered a message which had seemed garbled and nonsensical. For the next seven years, that message had remained in the back of Dave's mind - smothered by the passing of everyday life and relatively forgotten. Until recently.

It had taken some research, but Dave eventually came to learn about the Sabai Prophecy and the Generation Rite connected with it. It took even longer for him to believe in the authenticity of such research, as Dave tended to air on the sceptical side. But this weather, the destruction, the mutant armies of Team Rocket - none of the things he could see with his own eyes could possibly be cast aside as fiction. The Agrarian Seers he had approached had urged him to go to Median Tower - a Seer repository that stood on the border of Kanto and Johto. Dave knew of the place in question, though he had never considered visiting it.

Dave was shaken from his recollections by a number of distant sirens from below. He gazed down past the beating of his charizard's wings, to find his vision saturated with bright orange and yellow. A large portion of the town below him was alight. Fire engines raced through streets littered with overturned cars, while nearby, people and pokémon were struggling to lessen the ferocity of the blaze by any means necessary. One woman could be seen throwing buckets of water through the front door of her house while a hippowdon blasted sand into other parts of the fire.

A loud scream pierced the air, making Dave flinch. The sound had been emitted from a point directly ahead of him - but that seemed absurd considering how far up Simba was flying. He then saw a tower block a short distance away. It appeared to be in particularly unstable condition -

flames billowing wildly from almost every floor. With all the other buildings alight in the area, this one seemed tragically neglected.

"We've got to do something to help them," Dave remarked seriously.

"Grrn?" Simba inquired.

"I can't just pass this, Simb," Dave insisted, aware of his overshadowing engagement. "Not when I can do something to make it better - even a little."

"Grrnf," Simba nodded agreeably.

No sooner had the charizard landed upon the balcony, than Dave could feel the heat from within the room. Tongues of fire danced behind the glass, snapping at the man through one of the open windows. Without further hesitation, Dave pointed at the balcony door, which Simba braced himself and charged into. The door splintered, sending the charizard through to the room beyond. Dave felt a wall of hot air slam into him as he followed suit.

"Cannon! Start putting out these fires!" he urged, sending out his blastoise. Cannon responded with a rumbling cry and unsheathed the two large bazooka-shaped appendages from the upper part of his shell. With a gush of spray, jets of water were aimed at the surrounding glow - drenching its ferocity.

While Dave was immune to the heat and flame that a blaze generated, the gases and smoke from the burning environment were another story. Pulling his neckscarf up over his nose and mouth, the man lowered himself to the ground where the prevalence of smoke was weakest, and crawled towards the doorway. Where was that person who cried out for help? He coughed, his body beginning to struggle for oxygen. Even while close to the ground, it was proving difficult to breathe.

His hand brushed against something soft. The man glanced down to find a child, no older than four, sprawled across the ground with his arm around a lillipup. Both figures were unconscious.

"Simba, take them...outta here..." Dave urged to the charizard standing nearby, his lungs struggling against the density of the air. "Bring back...oxygen masks."

Simba nodded, gathering up the boy and his pokémon in his arms before striding out through the hole in the wall and taking to the sky. Cannon called back an affirmative, having doused the fire in the room they were present in.

"Great work, buddy," he said, forcing a smile. The blastoise wasn't going to be able to make it through an average sized doorway without causing extra damage, so the man retrieved the pokémon and proceeded into the next room alone.

Outside, a group of feraligatr assisted human crews were hard at work drenching the fires occurring on the lower floors of the building. Eight swanna with Firefighter patches on bands around their necks flapped their way around the higher parts - shooting water through the windows at the flames beyond, in an attempt to control the situation.

"The blaze is getting worse," one of the fire crew relayed bereftly to their commander. "We've barely evacuated half the apartment block. Some of the crews are indoors looking for trapped residents, but the building is getting unstable. We may not have much time left."

"We must keep trying," the fire chief said. "We've got our kadabra busy teleporting as many residents out as she can. But there's only one of her, and her team-mates are working on other buildings in the city."

Quite a few people and pokémon were already clear of the danger - having been taken to a car park a fair distance away, where an emergency medical team had stationed themselves in order to treat casualties. One of the less experienced doctors, a young man named Brock Harrison, was feeling the pressure more than the rest of his associates. He had only been studying the treatment of humans and pokémon for little more than a year, and this was his first time out in the field. Under normal procedure, medical students would not have become involved in actual treatment scenarios until their second year of study.

But this was no average situation, and everyone with some level of medical knowledge was desperately required to help.

Brock wiped the sweat from his brow with a cloth that he returned to his pocket. Hardly the best introductory experience. There were a lot of casualties to deal with, yet for the most part, the worst of their symptoms were mild burns, smoke inhalation and some disorientation from abrupt teleportation experiences. Brock's focus was so intensified that when a considerably-sized charizard landed a metre or so away from him, he flinched so violently he dropped the roll of gauze bandage that he'd been holding.

His subconscious first assumption was this charizard was the pokémon whom one of his closest friends had trained with. It happened to be more wishful thinking than anything – Brock had not seen or heard from that friend in some time, but they'd refused to leave his memory. Yet this charizard showed no signs of recognizing him, and instead began a vigorous conversation with his blissey companion, who then hurriedly searched the area. Moments later, she brought back one of the oxygen masks with its attached air canister, and handed it to the charizard. Before Brock could protest, the fire reptile cast its impressive wings wide and leapt into the smoky sky.

"What did you do that for, Blissey?" he exclaimed, aghast. "We have a limited supply of oxygen masks as it is!"

"Blih-blihs!" Blissey urged, pointing a stubby arm towards the building the charizard had left for. As Brock glanced up, he was just able to make out the distant shape of the charizard as it ascended parallel to the blazing structure, before disappearing inside.

"It's trying to save someone..." he gasped.

At this point, 'trying' seemed very much the definitive word. As Dave crawled wearily through another apartment, squinting to make out forms through the smoke, he began to question just how much of a positive effect he was making.

This apartment was different from the others – overcrowded with heirlooms and clutter from decades of life experiences. Crystal figurines of legendary pokémon laced the bookshelves, sharing their space with dusty tomes covered in texts Dave didn't recognize. On the walls hung framed photographs of groups of people – family members, maybe – gathered happily outside of ornate buildings and monuments.

Dave's foot caught on the stand holding a dressmaker's dummy, causing the man to topple forward onto a decorated rug. Cursing under his breath and glancing up, Dave saw the dummy was clothed in a simply decorated but beautiful robe which seemed curiously out of place amongst the room's more everyday possessions. Many of them at this point were blackened by smoke and flame. Dave's stomach turned at the sight, a reminder of what his powers did to the houses of those villagers

in his childhood. It was heartbreaking to see these valuable and treasured articles in an unsalvageable state.

This isn't working... Dave thought to himself. *I've what, rescued eight people? There must be hundreds living in this apartment block! I can't save them all.*

"What are you doing here?" an aged voice croaked, barely audible over the crackling of flames.

"What do you mean?" Dave exclaimed, trying not to sound angry at the bizarre response. "I've come to *rescue* you!" He waved a hand, directing the inferno apart like a curtain. The woman was pinned to the kitchen floor under debris that had fallen from the apartment above her. Moving this was not going to be easy.

"Rescue..." the elderly woman snorted. "If that was your intention, you would be at the Median Tower like you're supposed to, Flame Nexus!"

"Look, we haven't got time to argue this," Dave said. His innards had twisted in shock at the woman's awareness of his role in the Sabai Prophecy, but he chose to ignore it.

"You're right," the woman nodded. "The longer you spend trying to put out the surrounding flames, the greater the chance the source of those flames will consume everything."

Despite his precarious position, Dave found himself frozen in bewilderment, his eyes wide. What did that even mean?

"Fulfil the duty you were asked to do, and all these matters shall be no more," the woman smiled calmly. It seemed an odd expression to have while lying under a wardrobe in the middle of a burning kitchen.

"But you-"

"GO!" the woman's eyes flashed with an unexpected life. Dave staggered back a few steps. His mind was still in turmoil at being demanded to leave the woman behind, to leave this building behind. To his conscience, this seemed terribly wrong. But deep down, reluctantly, he somehow knew what the woman had said was correct. This situation went far beyond that of the collateral damage he could see with his own eyes. It was too big for one human being to conquer on their own.

As Simba coasted away from the city with Dave atop his back, a thunderous rumble echoed from behind them - the sound of hundreds of tons of concrete and glass relinquishing itself to gravity, tumbling through the air and slamming into the ground below. Dave took a breath, a sudden force grasping at his chest.

Both man and pokémon knew what had happened. They didn't look back.

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

No sooner had Aaron, Lucario and Teresa left the walls of Cameran Palace, they were under pursuit. In order to speed up travel, Aaron had released a salamence he'd been training and urged Teresa to clamber aboard. In turn, Teresa's venomoth Elena allowed Lucario to hop onto her back. But minutes after their departure, their first challenge arose in a wave of flying hybrids which had arrived prior to the main throng - presumably to scout for possible threats.

There were ten in all, a mixture of pinsir, charizard and even other salamence. These salamence were sleeker in form with lengthened head spines and crimson coloured jaws - their natural wings having been artificially removed to make way for a crescent shaped glider-like construct, fused to their backs with metal plating. The pinsir were no less horrifying. The ridged dirty brown exoskeleton on their backs had peeled aside to expose a pair of yellow insectoid wings with orange veins, while their large horns and forearms were decorated in cruel spikes.

Teresa uttered a gasp of alarm as one of the charizard dived for the back of Aaron's salamence - its mouth streaming blue flames. She instinctively thrust an arm out and jettisoned a blast of air at the hybrid, catching it off guard and causing it to veer sideward. A nearby pinsir screeched, its yellow eyes flaring angrily as the fire from the charizard's tail caught it a glancing blow. Reacting to the apparent threat, the humanoid pinsir swerved in midair and charged into the charizard that had previously made impact.

"That's it," Aaron urged, without looking over his shoulder. He didn't need to, his Aura-heightened senses were aware of the conflict happening behind them, and who was responsible. "Get them to fight amongst themselves - then there'll be less for us to deal with."

"Got'cha," Teresa replied firmly, and aimed another gust at one of the humanoid salamence nearest to them. Twisting her arms, she directed the gust and its harnessed prey into another salamence hybrid, causing their crescent shaped wings to interlock. As they lost altitude, another pinsir rose up to fill the empty space - its spindly arms raised as a sphere of bright energy formed between them. Lucario's eyes widened - the telltale signs of a Focus Blast! The canine pokémon clasped his legs around Elena's segmented body and raised his arms overhead, a long bonelike staff forming from Aura in his paws. With a sharp swing, Lucario drove the Aura staff round in an arc, into the path of the Focus Blast orb. It connected with a loud crackle of energy, shattering the Aura staff and dispersing the orb at the same time. Elena was pushed backwards with the force of the impact and resulting feedback, but managed to regain stability as Teresa sent another jet of air at the humanoid pinsir.

Aaron closed his eyes and intensified his Aura sight. As it skimmed the rocky landscape below, Aaron could see the swarming throng of humanoid pokémon hybrids on the approach. The silent energy reverberations of their cries and thundering feet gave the man a familiar recollection of the Tanmian and Teruptian armies that had clashed here several centuries ago.

"Land here," he instructed the salamence, which obliged with a grunt. Elena descended in turn - the venomoth and her Lucario passenger, as well as Teresa, all glanced at Aaron with puzzled expressions. "Lucario, I need to you arm the valley traps," Aaron urged. "They should all still be functional."

Lucario hesitated. Despite their closeness, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of caution over being instructed to hang back while Aaron went on ahead. Such circumstances were far too similar to the time he was forced back into containment just before Aaron sacrificed himself.

[*You're not going to do anything reckless, are you?*] he inquired suspiciously.

"Nothing intentionally, no," Aaron insisted, realising what Lucario was implying. "My job is to get Teresa to the tree in one piece. And we can't do that without your help to delay that army."

[*I understand,*] Lucario smiled a little. He bid Teresa a farewell nod of best wishes before effortlessly leaping into the forest.

Lucario only had one army to deal with this time, though it was little comfort. While these human-pokémon hybrids were painfully slow, they were overwhelmingly strong and durable, and there was very little reason to navigate around obstacles when you had the power and absence of consideration to simply plough right through them. A quick scan of the landscape had uncovered a mile or so of trampled forest - the

wild pokémon within still dashing helplessly in all directions. Directing his Aura sight further, Lucario finally located the army making their way through the channels of rocky terrain, the large, needle-like protrusions of stone crumbling in their wake. Even the gushing jets of hot water from the surface below were doing little to shift the hybrids' trajectory. Fortunately, the steepness of the mountainside would eventually have a say in the army's direction - bringing them into a valley with the appearance of a cupped pair of hariyama's massive hands. This main passage led directly to the Tree of Beginning, the destination Lucario was adamant they could not be allowed to reach.

Dashing into the central portion of Yama's Palms Valley, Lucario approached a cluster of blue crystals that were set in the ground. Unlike the naturally growing Pentacite which had been used for communication in the past, these Cryocite formations had been placed here by Aaron and himself for extra defence purposes - following the previous conflict. Each cluster of Cryocite was arranged in a networked sequence, and a charge of Aura to one of these clusters would automatically engage the rest of the network. The resulting shield would not stop the army, but it could help to slow its progress momentarily. Lucario raised one paw to the surface of the nearest Cryocite crystal, the energy within him reaching forward eagerly to comply.

Aura...is with me.

There was a snap, and Lucario wrenched his paw back in alarm. It felt as if he had been burnt. The Cryocite cluster had begun to shake - its

deep blue and purple crystals saturated with a bright light. As this happened, the sparse layers of foliage dotting the mountainside took on a similar glow - their leaves and branches dissolving with the sheer intensity of the energy and scattering to the wind. With a sudden flash, the crystals exploded into hundreds of shards, forcing Lucario to crouch and shield his eyes from the debris. He lifted his head just in time to see another crystal cluster burst, a little further away.

<The dragon force,> Lucario gasped to himself. <It is overflowing...>

Aura travelled throughout planet Oci, channelling life-giving benefits to all its greenery, the weather systems, even the dimensional boundaries themselves. An imbalance in the Aura stream meant this finely tuned ecosystem was at risk of becoming unstable. The only blessing Lucario could salvage from this, was that the instability hadn't yet reached the Tree of Beginning - but from the sight of the evaporating plant life and rupturing crystal formations some distance ahead, it was travelling quickly. At a guess, the pokémon concluded there was less than an hour before it arrived at that destination. He could only hope that Aaron and Teresa would get there first.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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