



POKÉMON  
REBIRTH

unrequited youth

1

## JINXED BY JYNGU

If one happened to be crossing the rocky bank somewhere south east of Mahogany Town, Johto during the eleventh hour of the morning, they would have witnessed a most extraordinary vision. From behind a nearby cloud, a tiny pinpoint of light signalled the approach of three airborne figures who by this time had ceased their yelling and were simply preparing themselves as best they could for a rough landing. Moments later a tall man adorned with green eyes and chin length lavender-blue hair staggered blearily from a nearby thorn bush, picking the debris from his previously immaculate white uniform.

"Thunderbolt" he muttered miserably. "Why is it always the Thunderbolt?"

"I got spikes in places I didn't even *know* I had," his feline pokémon companion groaned, crumpling to the dirt beside the man's feet. The latter uttered a dramatic sigh before plucking a thorn from his chin like a rogue hair and wincing a little as he did so.

"Who knows how many air miles we've picked up by now..."

"I hate ta break it t'ya, James" the pokémon remarked in a matter-of-fact way. "But we'd need to have been sittin' in a plane at da time fer dat sorta t'ing"

"Drat" came the bemused reply. "And I was so hoping I could visit Lilycove this year..."

James' musing was rapidly shattered as his partner, a magenta-haired woman by the name of Jessie, uttered a furious angry yell.

"I can't believe the twerp beat us again!" she fumed. "That insolent brat! I'm going to make him wish he'd never crossed paths with...me..." The sentence trailed off as Jessie's legs gave way beneath her and she collapsed into a kneeling position upon the dusty ground. "I just feel too tired... to get angry," she panted. Meowth uttered a frightened gasp.

"Dis is serious," he stammered. "Nuthin's ever stopped Jessie from rantin' before."

"We've been overworked, Meowth" James commented, casting the furry figure a withering look. "Overworked and underpaid. Too little to eat and too much 'blasting off'"

"So how come I ain't all exhausted like dat, eh?" Meowth inquired, seeming more than a little unconvinced.

"You're a pokémon" came the reply. "Human bodies don't withstand repeated injury as well. Take Jessie's skin, for instance. Stress has caused it to become wrinkled over time."

"It HAS?" the woman shrieked, stumbling to her feet and placing one gloved hand to the side of her face while the other held out a compact. "This cannot be happening... this *cannot* be happening! I'm only twenty - I'm too *young* to have wrinkles!"

At this point Jessie released the intense grip she had on the side of her head with her right hand, only to discover a clump of hair had fallen into her palm.

"Science has proven one is *never* too young to have wrinkles," James stated loftily, before receiving a sharp blow to the side of the

head from the frying pan his companion kept concealed in her phasepack. "Yeow! Calm down, Jessie!"

"Calm DOWN?" the woman bellowed, waving her implement of injury around in the air. "I am going to pieces here!"

"And more stress isn't going to help," James grumbled, rubbing the sore spot on his face. Jessie paused to think about this before putting the frying pan away and letting her head fall back so that her azure tinted eyes were gazing up into the equally blue expanse above.

"You're right" she sighed. "I have been tossed about these past few years more often than a pancake and my poor body has come out the worse for wear. I need to unwind. To give my bones some rest, and regain the vigour I've lost."

"I'll join you on that," James nodded enthusiastically. "But did you have anything in mind?"

"What about a nice long soak in a hot spring?" Meowth piped up. The others looked at him; their faces alight with smiles.

"That has to be the best idea I've heard from you in a long while!" Jessie exclaimed. "What made you think of it?"

"Well..." Meowth began, waving his paw in a rightward direction. "I saw a hot spring over dere..."

The pokémon hadn't even finished his sentence and Jessie and James were already in their swimming outfits and running toward the inviting steaming water, towels tucked under arms.

"Hey!" Meowth yelled out, causing the pair to screech to a halt. "I didn't mean use *dat* spring!"

Jessie looked at him with annoyance.

"Why not?" she inquired with a frown. "This spring's as good as any other."

"I wouldn't bet on dat," Meowth remarked, pointing to a signpost buried between the rocks and fencing that surrounded the pool. "Looks ta me dey gots some sorta warnin' goin' on dere."

"Well what do you know..." James remarked, stepping over to the sign and peering at it. "The furball's right."

"Let me look at that!" Jessie snapped, pushing her companion aside so as to get a better view of the notice. "'Due to a culmination of rare minerals beneath Jyngu Spring, visitors are advised not to bathe in the water under any circumstances.'"

"Sounds like it's a sacred spot," James commented after a short silence. Jessie gave a snort.

"Pfah. Just like the locals to use some cheap tactics to keep all the precious mineral-enriched water to themselves."

"How inconsiderate," James spluttered. "There are others who need rejuvenating too. Others like us!"

"I say we take a piece of what's rightfully ours!" Jessie stated firmly, placing her bare foot upon one of the rocks.

"Yeah!" James grinned. Then his face altered. "Uh, Jess? How does one take a piece of water?"

"Just get in the pool, will you?" the woman groaned, taking her foot from the rock and using it to shove James backward across the wire and wooden peg fence. He toppled into the water with a 'kabloosh!'"

"Hey! Watch it!" Meowth hissed, as the spray barely missed him. "Ya know I hate gettin' wet!"

Neither of his human companions happened to be listening. Their faces were overcome with expressions of utter bliss as they sank deeper and deeper into the water. The pokémon opened his mouth to protest, but shut it again after figuring that any utterance at all would be a waste of breath.

"It's so warm... so soothing..." Jessie cooed as Meowth resigned himself to moping on the other side of the rocks near the spring. "No wonder the townspeople were intent on keeping this to themselves. I can already feel myself being invigorated; it's like pure energy is flowing from the water straight into my body"

"I feel so light and carefree," James sighed happily. "Almost like a kid again..."

Meowth continued to observe, but he no longer wore the disgruntled pout he had been exhibiting previously. Now his furry features were contorted into a picture of something resembling a figure quite spooked.

"Err... guys?"

"What's your problem now?" Jessie snapped, opening her eyes and glowering at the pokémon. "You know its really hard to do any sort of relaxing with you nagging in the background all the time"

"Ya won't be relaxin' at all if youse start drownin!" Meowth exclaimed. At this point James looked up and pulled a face.

"I think someone's been out in the sun too long," he remarked, before clamping his lips together in alarm. The pitch of the voice that had escaped his lips was vastly higher to the one he recalled owning.

Jessie looked down just in time to see the spring water reaching up to her chin.

"What's going on?" James shrieked.

"Just gettout da water!" Meowth yelled at his regressed companions, who scrambled out of the spring as quickly as they could manage, regardless of the sharp-edged rocks cutting into the soles of their bare feet.

"Well dat was ta be expected," the pokémon murmured, scratching his head as he studied the considerably youthful countenances of Jessie and James. Neither of them said a word as they lay crumpled upon the dirt, their small bodies heaving with sharp intakes of breath and their eyes wide with fear. "I means da townspeople *did* try ta warn youse two wit' dat sign. But ya just had ta get all high an' mighty over it."

Meowth gulped as Jessie's acidic glare hit him. Even upon this childlike face it still appeared most threatening.

"They could have been more *specific!*" she snapped, walking back toward the spring while keeping her bikini briefs tightly hoisted up. James swiftly followed, and as the duo leaned over the rocks to peer at their reflections, their mouths dropped open in shock when upon taking in the sight.

"AUGH!" Jessie screeched. "I said I wanted to feel younger not *be* younger!"

James didn't seem all that perturbed once his initial astonishment had worn off.

"I have to say for the little drawback I do feel miles better.." he grinned, then yelped and cowered as a rock narrowly missed his ear.

"*LITTLE* DRAWBACK?" Jessie yelled. "This is *not* a 'little' drawback! Have you *looked* at yourself lately? You're a kid! You can't drink, you can't drive, and worst of all..." She looked miserably at their crumpled piles of uniforms upon the ground where they had been tossed previously. "We don't have any clothes that fit..."

The realisation finally sunk in. James lifted his hands and grasped his face in an upset, his lip quivering.

"I'm scared, Meowth! What are we gonna do? I can't be like this!"

"Yeah...you'd hafta go through puberty again..." Meowth replied in a matter-of-fact way. James squealed and grasped the feline tightly, making him choke from the suddenness of his fearhug.

"Urk!" the pokémon spluttered. "Loosen up, Jimmy! I won't be able ta offer advice to yas all suffocated will I?"

"Sorry..." the boy mumbled, letting go. Meowth rubbed at his neck and winced a little.

"Now listen here," he began. "If da townspeople did put up dat sign, den its da townspeople wes gotta go talk to in regards ta gettin' youse a cure fer ya anti-ageing bath."

"No way," Jessie folded her arms. "I am *not* humiliating myself by walking into town and asking for a cure to a spring I technically shouldn't have been soaking in in the first place."

"So you'd rather be humiliated by livin' out'cha childhood again with an adult mind ta boot?" Meowth inquired loftily. Jessie growled.

"We can't, Jess" James tried to sound his most persuasive. "Think of the growing pains, the loose teeth... the mood swings!"



"Oh fine," the girl muttered with a pout. "But I'm still not moving from this spot until I have something to wear. Something fitting, and fashionable"

"Me neither" James remarked in agreement.

"Ya may look like kids but ya don't hafta act like em..." Meowth rolled his eyes, earning a unified glare for his response. "Hey! Youse two got yaselves inta dis mess, youse two can get yaselves outta it"

James began to mope, then his expression altered into something much more devious. He took a deep breath.

"Pleeeeeeease?"

Meowth bit his lip. He could cope with bad feeling and sulky faces but what sat before him was no longer a picture of moody defiance but a large-eyed visage graced with a smile so innocent and hopeful that he couldn't even bring himself to look away. Jessie watched James' shameless display in a mixture of disturbance and admiration. Guilt was clearly starting to play upon Meowth's features.

*Ok, Jess. she told herself. Just swallow your pride for the moment and-* "Go on, Meowthy...we *really* need some clothes that fit us!" Jessie almost spluttered in surprise at hearing herself stooping to such a level, but it had already had its required effect. The pokémon stamped his foot.

"Dat's not fair! Youse two could nevah pull a stunt like dat normally!"

The expressions upon the two children didn't alter an inch. Meowth gave an exasperated groan.

"Grrmff...oh fine! I'll get youse some kid clothes! But I ain't

fallin' fer dose cutesy looks again"

As the pokémon stormed away from the scene Jessie and James glanced at each other and dark grins descended upon their faces.

"See? Acting all pathetic and helpless *can* get you somewhere" James smirked.

"You'd know a lot about that," Jessie remarked, smoothing back her hair. "At least we won't have a problem charming the antidote to this spring water out of the townspeople. Meowth better get back with those outfits real soon.

I don't know why, but I feel like we're being watched"

2

## NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

Prism Town was one of Johto's lesser-known locations. Tucked away carefully amongst the mountainside, it was easy to overlook - bearing only a cluster of residences to warrant its name. Regardless of this, Prism was by no means deserted. Its streets throbbed with the cheerful day to day living of the local community.

Away from the activity, a stunted creamy-coloured figure carefully navigated the back fence of a nearby house. Bright sunny days meant perfect drying weather, and as such the line in the garden was neatly decorated with various garments. The smaller ones waved tantalizingly in the breeze like carnival flags and the figure took a few steps forward, paw outstretched and a crafty grin emerging upon its face. Then he heard something unsettling.

A few seconds later Meowth practically flew screaming over the fence in a trail of fur, his arms full of tiny clothes as the savage utterances of the family mightyena echoed into the air after him. Hitting the ground, the pokémon didn't waste a moment, his back legs propelling him forward and back toward the outskirts, away from the gnashing teeth that had so unforgivingly sank into his backside.

"Is this the best you could get, Meowth?" exclaimed Jessie in disgust, looking down at the lavender coloured t-shirt and skirt she was now wearing. James grinned as he admired his own smart green shirt and shorts.

"Yeah, dat was da foist ting I came across," Meowth snapped, rubbing at his sore spot. "An' I ain't goin' trekkin' about gettin' attacked by rabid mutts jus' because you don't t'ink it looks good on ya."

"Reminds me of the clothes I used to wear back at the mansion...only not as classy," James remarked with a satisfied grin. "So...now what?"

"We're finding a way to reverse this as soon as possible!" Jessie snapped, her face red with anger as she strode purposefully toward Prism Town. "I want to get out of this ridiculous outfit!"

James and Meowth exchanged rather withering expressions over this.

"Huh. It's easy ta see where *her* priorities lie..." the latter muttered. James scampered ahead a few paces before administering one of his typical whines.

"But Jessie... think of the implications...."

"There *are* no implications, James" Jessie muttered. "We're kids. Our potential has just been severely limited."

"On the contrary," came the lofty reply. "We've been handed access to one of the most devious tricks in the book. Manipulation by feigned innocence. Remember what happened to Meowth? Just think of all the things we could obtain with that repertoire besides our cure!"

A mischievous smile was already present upon Jessie's face as she rubbed her little hands together.

"Indeed..." she chuckled. "Jewellery, make up-"

"Lunch?" James cut in hopefully. Jessie rolled her eyes.

"Naturally" she muttered. "Okay then, prepare your best persuasive look. We've got a lotta adults to exploit."

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Families were out taking advantage of the beautiful weekend weather, basking in the shade of the trees or playing games in the nearby greenery of the miniature park. As such, there were many excited, happy children to be seen in Prism Town that day. James wasn't one of them. The more the sun shone, the more miserable he looked. Despite having removed his t-shirt, beads of sweat were still pouring from his forehead and off his nose. He looked a right state.

Slumping upon one of the empty benches, James took a few moments to look around him at the scene. It seemed that everywhere his gaze travelled there were stalls serving cold drinks and frozen treats, shops selling electric fans they all required money. And the only thing he had was a case of dehydration. It hurt the inside of his mouth and his head, and the dry, tickly feeling was steadily getting worse. His plans for persuasion hadn't exactly passed off all that smoothly either. For every one of the shops he tried, the same responses were given:

"I'm sorry little guy, I can't just give you that for free."

"If I did that to every kid with a doleful expression who came in here I'd go broke! I've got a business to keep, you know."

"How about asking your mother to spare you a little extra pocket money this week, huh?"

James snorted. Even if his mother *was* in the vicinity, he

seriously doubted she would have let him out of his sight, let alone buy anything from such places. Grumbling to himself over the matter, James put his head in his hands, glared down and wondered if Jessie and Meowth were having any more luck than him. Then the sound of rushing water caught his attention. Across the town square an area of concrete played host to an array of small fountains built into the ground. Many figures were already dancing around in the intermittent spray and James was more than willing to go and join them.

His tiny feet resonating across the cobblestones, James kept his eyes firmly upon the target. So firmly, in fact, that he didn't even notice the legs of a nearby adult that he happened to be dashing towards.

"Oof!"

"Watch where yer walkin', brat!" the man snapped as he swung round angrily, causing a pair of binoculars to fly round as he did so. James' eyes widened and he took a gulp of air as he immediately recognised whom the gravelly voice had belonged to.

It was Butch, currently adorned with a rather frighteningly bright red and purple patterned shirt and luminous orange shorts. James probably would have burst out laughing at the sight of his Elite rank rival looking like a tourist reject if he hadn't been so petrified over Butch's reaction to his current state. But the recognition had not been mutual, which wasn't surprising since James was now at least three or four foot shorter than his male Rocket counterpart.

Butch growled irritably and stormed off in the other direction, muttering something about 'pesky kids'. James watched him leave with a sigh of relief, before moving his thoughts to more important matters.

"I wonder what he's doing hanging around this place," he murmured quietly, scratching his chin. "It surely can't be to take in the sights. Not like any of us ever get vacation time..."

Then something hit him. With a tiny yelp, James darted back to the spot where he had promised to meet Jessie and Meowth. There they were, sitting on the bench in exactly the same fashion as James had been doing previously. It seemed their attempts had also been futile.

"Selfish shop owners..." Jessie muttered. "Can't even spare one lipstick or mascara"

"Yeah... or a bagel" Meowth sighed, before lifting his head. His sensitive hearing had caught wind of James' rapid panting as he approached.

"You'll never guess who I saw!" James exclaimed breathlessly. Jessie gave him a withering look.

"Unless it was someone giving out directions to where we can get the antidote to this dumb spring water," she muttered. "Then I'm not interested"

James frowned and opened his mouth to speak but faltered as the sounds of two more familiar voices drifted through the air.

"If I'm not mistaken, this road leads to the Pokémon Center" one of them announced, rather too confidently. Jessie, James and Meowth turned their gazes in the direction of the noise and discovered it to be the adolescent Trainers Ash and Misty, pondering over a large white sheet of paper.

"If I'm not mistaken..." Misty sniffed. "That sounds like a familiar statement. You said that ten minutes ago!"

"But I'm *sure* of it this time!" Ash protested, struggling to find a point upon the map he was reading. Misty snatched it from his gloved hand.

"I can't believe we let you lead us again..." she sighed to herself, scrutinizing the paper for a few seconds. Then her eyes narrowed. "You IDIOT!" she yelled into Ash's face. "You've been reading this thing upside down!"

"It's a simple mistake..." Ash trailed off, realising he was just making himself sound sillier.

"This is *not* Mahogany Town!" Misty cried, throwing her arms into the air. "Ugh! I knew we should have given the map to Brock!"

Ash turned his gaze to where his older companion happened to be standing. His narrow eyes were fixated upon a gathering of young, fashionably dressed women, busy enjoying the mid-morning sun.

"You sure that would have been a good idea?" Ash remarked casually, turning back to Misty.

"I guess not..." she sweatdropped.

"Pikaaa," Pikachu agreed from the top of Ash's hat. He leapt off in surprise as Brock appeared from nowhere and grabbed Ash by the shoulders in excitement.

"Thankyou Ash! Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou!" he cried in almost one breath. "We should let you read the map more often! You've led me straight to a shining treasure trove of blissful beauties and I couldn't be more grateful!"

Misty and Ash shared expressions of uneasiness as Brock cantered toward the group, causing them to start in wide-eyed alarm.





"They *can*," James spluttered. "I just saw Buhtch a minute ago..."

"WHAT?" Jessie yelled, her face suddenly overcome with terror. "I can't let Cassidy see me like this! I'll never live it down!"

"Who cares about that?" James snapped. "I'm more concerned with what they're up to. What if they're after stealing all the Jyngu spring water?"

"It'd be a pointless escapade, and they're welcome to it" Jessie sniffed, folding her arms.

"But we might need it as an ingredient for the antidote!" James insisted. Jessie looked at him, slightly worried.

"You have a point there" she murmured. "I guess we'd better track those two down before somethi...ih-ih-ih-ih..."

"What's wrong with you?" James asked confusedly, as Jessie's wide-eyes stared straight past his face and at a point behind him. Swivelling round, James realised there was a rapidly expanding cloud of figures moving toward them, waving their arms and screaming in excitement. By the time he'd figured where the sights of the women happened to be fixed, it was too late. He gave out a terrible scream as they leapt at him in a shower of cooing and baby talk. There were just too many arms holding him down, making it impossible to escape.

"Oh, so huggable!" one giggled.

"Got the cutest widdle cheeks!" another gushed, pulling at James' face.

"Owie!" he yelled, struggling wildly in an attempt to break free. "Jessie! Meowth! Heeeelp!"

But he wasn't going to get any. The young girl and her feline pokémon counterpart were too occupied with their fits of hysterics as they watched the ridiculous scene unfold in front of them..

"This is *not* funny!" James yelled angrily, only to get his head pushed nastily close to one of the women's bosoms. Brock arrived just in time to witness the commotion. His already squinted eyes narrowed even further as he watched the attentions of the ones he had tried so hard to please being smothered over someone at least half his age, who definitely wasn't appreciating it as much as *he* would have done.

"How could you choose that little undeveloped kid over me?" he spluttered as he approached. The women looked up in surprise, noticing Brock walking sternly toward them. It was at this moment, while their attentions were diverted, that James picked his chance to break free of their grasp and make a break for it down the street. But the women were quick to leap up in pursuit.

"COME BACK!" Brock shouted, running after the women yet again. "Surely you'd much rather chase me all afternoon!"

# 3

## SCHUYLER HIGH

James ran and ran, his little heels hitting the pavement with every breath, desperate to escape the over-affections of those obviously insane women who were intent on getting their hands on him. He was so absorbed in keeping his sights fixed on an escape route that he forgot to look elsewhere and his foot caught upon something in his path, sending the astonished boy flying to meet the concrete with a nasty crunch.

An intense burning shot across James' body. It was so sudden and unexpected that the figure couldn't help but utter a yell as he felt himself slide a few inches over the hardened surface.

"I'm so sorry!" a small voice gasped from above, as a shadow was cast across James' back. The boy's watery eyes were wide as he uttered short, sharp breaths of shock in response to the unexpected feeling of distress that flooded his mind. "I apologise for tripping you, I never realised you were so close. Are you ok?"

"I c-c-could be better..." James struggled to utter, catching hold of the young girl's hand to stand upright while forcing back the urge to wail pathetically at the nasty grazes he had received across his chest, arms and legs from the impact. The sorrow over his pains was soon to be replaced by fear once more as the excited squeals of his pursuers echoed into the air from a short distance away.

"I think I see him up ahead!" one of the women exclaimed.

"Oooh he's a nippy one," another giggled, as the group approached. James turned, took one look at the sight, squealed at an amusing pitch and dived behind the bench the girl had been sitting on, teeth chattering.

"Save me!" he pleaded. "I have no idea who those women are and there's no way I want to be smothered by them again!"

The girl grinned awkwardly at this before looking down expectantly at a small pinkish blob quivering cheerfully by her ankle.

"You know what to do, Nico."

"Diiii!" cried the ditto as it shuffled behind James. The boy looked round in partial alarm and even more puzzlement as the pokémon began to glow while altering shape. The women who had been pondering upon the sudden disappearance of their 'cute little boy' were quick to spot James' countenance emerging from behind a nearby tree, chuckling with excitement.

"There he goes!" one of them called and the group gave chase, disappearing out of sight shortly after. A few seconds passed, then the girl turned slowly - a glimmer of mischief present in her eyes, and cleared her throat a little.

"You can come out now," she stated.

"Thank goodness for that!" James spluttered, peering out from behind the bench. "I thought I would never be able to get rid of those overbearing bubbleheads. One minute I'm standing around minding my own business, the next minute all these women start pulling me about and making weird noises!" He did a few actions, just to illustrate his point. This made the girl giggle somewhat.

"Bubble heads?" she giggled, completely oblivious to what such a term even meant. "You're silly. What's your name?"

James paused. Was it such a good idea to hand out his real identity in this form? What if Butch or Cassidy were listening in? Or even worse, the trio of troublesome trainers he had been tailing for so long.

"It's....Eric," he replied after a short silence, looking across the path the women had vanished down. "Is your ditto going to be okay?"

"Of course he will," the girl grinned, placing her hands on her knees as James sat down next to her. "Nico and I do this sort of thing all the time. Nico's always pretending it's me just to fool dad. He gets so mad when he can't tell me from my pokémon! And then we're always having to save unfortunate boys and girls from my sister and her friends."

"You're *related* to one of them?" James grimaced, recalling the previous insult. The girl giggled again at the sight of his expression.

"Yeah, but Ruby and I have nothing in common," she shrugged. "She's so much older than me, and she's always trying to act like she's my mother instead of my sister. 'Kim, stop playing those video games. Kim, brush your teeth. Kim, take Geoffrey for a walk'."

"Geoffrey?" James echoed. Kim flashed him a smile.

"Our terrakion," she explained. "The best house guard in the area. He's tough and strong, but he's a softie on the inside really."

James leant forward, finding himself genuinely interested at what the youth had to say. He wasn't quite sure why - maybe it was the mention of a species more common to the western region of Tatto than here, or maybe it was because he was closer to Kim's age at this

point in time.

"Big place then, huh?"

"Very big," Kim nodded. "Sometimes I think its *too* big. But there's always my friends inside to keep me company"

A cry of angered disbelief caused James to dive back into hiding once more. But he had not reacted swiftly enough - Kim looked up, somewhat puzzled, as Brock's infuriated countenance stormed toward her. His slit-eyes bore straight through the girl and at her shaking companion behind the bench.

"This is all your fault!" he snapped, towering over James and causing him to whimper by sheer height alone. "If you hadn't got in the way, I would have had them eating out of the palm of my hand!"

"Yeah, right," Misty snorted with a smirk as she approached. "From where I was standing it looked like they were all too happy to get *away* from you"

Brock was not connected to the outside world at this point in time - his anger at having what he considered his best chance at love and appreciation ruined by some kid with no interest in romance whatsoever had contained him within his own little bubble of intent. He was practically deaf to the comments of those around him, and the frantic protests of Kim who was still sitting on the bench.

"The heat's gone to your head! Get a grip, Brock!" Ash spluttered, a hint of worry in his voice. Brock found himself staggering back as he was hit in the side of the face. Looking up in annoyance as he lifted a hand to his head, the young man drew breath as he found himself eye to eye with what looked to be his identical twin.

"It's about time he knocked some sense into himself," Misty remarked with noticeable amusement.

"What the heck is going on?" Brock exclaimed, pointing at his duplicate. Kim leapt from the bench and ran to the doppelganger's side before clutching its leg tightly.

"Please don't hurt Nico!" she cried. "He's very protective of his friends, he doesn't want you to do anything horrible to Eric. And neither do I!"

"Nico?" Ash echoed.

"Eric?" a girl's voice spluttered. James raised his head from behind the bench upon hearing its unmistakable sharpness. Standing a metre or so away with her tiny hands on her fairly non-existent hips was the hot, reddened and stunted figure of Jessie.

"Eric..." Brock snarled, his tone of voice so cold it could chill a walrein.

"Oh grow up," Misty groaned. Kim looked at James questioningly.

"Do you know these people?" she asked.

James was unsure of what to say. After all, admitting he knew them all would prompt further questioning from at least three members of the group, and he certainly wasn't in the mood for being blasted into the stratosphere simply for being recognized. Jessie gave him an expectant stare - she seemed to have forgotten the implications of their circumstance.

"N-nope..." the boy stammered. "N-never seen them in my life"

"That's a lie and you know it!" Jessie exclaimed angrily, causing



James to go very pale indeed. "How could you *possibly* forget the irritating twerp bunch over there? And since *when* has your name been Eric?"

At this point the older trio started in surprise. Then the deep realisation sank in. Misty gave Jessie a narrowed glare as she took a few steps closer.

"You look strangely familiar..." she murmured.

"Of *course* I do" Jessie replied sarcastically, approaching the bench. James let out a deeply dispirited sigh as he prepared himself for the inevitable electrically generated flight that was to follow.

"You're right, Misty," Brock commented, raising an eyebrow. "All these two seem to be missing is a talking-"

"Wait up, Jess!" came a thickly accented voice as a feline pokémon skittered around the corner right on cue.

"Meowth..." Brock concluded, his words taking on that distinct coldness once again. The furred figure uttered a tiny yelp at the taller group standing in front of him. They were all now wearing rapidly darkening expressions.

"Uh oh."

"So you *do* know each other!" Kim exclaimed, unaware of the animosity. Ash was already reaching for a Pokéball on his belt as Pikachu glared surprisingly menacingly from his shoulder. At this point, James' face had screwed up into a highly-defined concertina. The terrible grating stinging of the cuts across his chest and limbs was becoming all too much for his youthful lowered pain tolerance to handle.

"Oh we know them, alright" Misty grunted, while Meowth started to look most uncomfortable. "They're Jessie, James and Meowth, and they're constantly following us around making a nuisance of themselves."

"You *really* shouldn't be playing with them, little girl," Ash insisted seriously. "They're bad influences. They're members of Te-"

Before the Pokémon Trainer was able to finish his sentence, the atmosphere was shattered as James lifted back his head, opened his mouth and promptly burst into tears. Kim and Nico swung round as everyone else flinched in surprise and Meowth crammed his paws over his ears in protest.

"Oh!" Kim exclaimed. "I forgot you were hurt... Nico, quickly! Help me take him back home."

"What are you doing, brat?" Jessie snapped, advancing. Kim glared at her.

"I am not a 'brat!'" she exclaimed loudly, finally losing her temper. "My name is Kim Schuyler, and I'm taking James back to my place to get some treatment for those scrapes! Dad says you can get really ill from them if you don't clean them up proper."

"That's not your concern," Jessie huffed, pulling James' sobbing form away from Nico's grasp. "We have more important matters to be attending to, and James is perfectly capable of cleaning his *own* wounds"

Kim looked most upset at having her newest friend removed so forcefully from her company, but Jessie ignored this and turned to leave, directing James alongside her. She was far too concerned with seeking the antidote to their current state of body to worry over a

young girl's loneliness. Meowth's gaze met the studied displeased face of Pikachu while its owner waved his Pokédex around Nico with much puzzlement.

"Wait..." Misty murmured ponderously. "Kim *Schuyler*? You any relation to Jonathan Schuyler?"

"Yeah, he's my dad..." the young girl replied despondently.

"No way!" Brock gasped. "He's the keeper of unusual variations of pokémon, isn't he?" Jessie froze in her tracks and turned around slowly, just in time to see Kim nodding, while Ash's Pokédex cut in with a beep of acknowledgement.

"That would explain why this thing's reading Nico as a ditto then," Misty remarked, pointing at the device. Ash almost stood to attention at the mentioning of the name.

"Really?" he exclaimed excitedly. "But it looks like Brock, not a pokémon" His companions groaned while Kim's saddened face lightened a little with a giggle.

"Nico can turn into *anything*!" Kim exclaimed, causing the tanned face of her pokémon in human form to erupt into a wide bashful grin.

"Wow! Can it turn into a tyranitar?" Ash inquired hopefully. Misty and Brock sweatdropped, their expressions indicating they figured there was an obvious answer to that question. But Kim was about to surprise them.

"Actually he hasn't quite figured out how to do pokémon yet" she murmured sheepishly, while Nico returned to his more familiar pinkish state and bounded into her arms. "Besides, he seems to enjoy being people anyway. Maybe because he knows it makes me feel less

lonely" As she finished this sentence, Kim looked down at her shoes and clasped Nico close with a small sigh. "Daddy is always busy with work," she murmured, a tear running down her face. "So he never has time for me and Nico. And none of the other kids in town want to play with us - they're jealous of the fact I live in a big mansion with lots of rare pokémon."

"Rare...pokémon..." Jessie repeated these words softly, a sickly smile widening upon her face the whole time. James sniffled and wiped at his eyes as he listened to Kim's mournful story. Misty seemed equally as moved.

"They're fun to play with..." the girl continued. "But sometimes, I just want a human friend. Someone that I can talk to. Someone that will talk back. I'd never seen James around before... I thought he might like to play with me after I'd bandaged him up."

"Of course he would!" Jessie's cheerful exclamation caused the trio to turn their attentions from Kim and look astounded at her for just a split second. Misty was the first to catch on, but it seemed her adversary already had a contingency plan. "These wounds look much worse than I imagined" she reacted dramatically, causing the boy to look up worriedly. "James is *definitely* going to need your help to get him back to health. And I'm sure he'd be *delighted* to spend some time with you. I know *I* would."

"Really?" Kim squealed, grabbing James' hand before he had a chance to react. "That's wonderful! Come on, I've got so much to show you two!"

"Wait just one minute," Brock spoke up, attempting to stand between Kim and her unwilling new playmate. "You mustn't play with them"

"Why not?" Kim frowned, looking up moodily. Brock returned the face with equal enthusiasm.

"I just know they're up to something," he concluded. Jessie put on an expression of mock upset; it looked like she was enjoying this greatly.

"Who, me? How dreadfully inconsiderate of you! I only wish to see that my companion gets these nasty grazes treated in the best possible manner. And its not fair for Kim to have to be lonely when we can just as easily spend a day with her." From the sound of her tone of voice she seemed to be implying 'we' in the wider sense of the word than just herself, James and Meowth.

"She has a point, you know," Misty eyed Brock expectantly. "It's not like we have any agenda to keep."

"Well I did want to try and find those..." he trailed off, biting his lip upon realising what situation he had just landed himself in. It was too late, Misty had already made up her mind. Kim's scowl was quick to vanish as she giggled excitedly.

"So you want to play too?"

"We'd love to, Kim," Misty smiled. "Wouldn't we, Ash?"

"Yeah!" the trainer agreed with a massive grin. "I'd love to see the rare pokémon!"

Misty groaned at him while Kim giggled all the more and motioned for the group to follow her toward a building in the distance. Brock wore a deflated expression. It was clear what was running through his mind - he knew full well that supervising the girl would mean forfeiting an entire day in which he could use a lot better in finding those women.

"Don't be so selfish!" Misty exclaimed in Ash's direction. "That is not the point of this!" She lowered her voice several notches. "We need to make sure those two don't slip out of line. They have to be up to something more than just an act of hospitality - why else would they have disguised themselves so convincingly as children?"

"Um... perhaps it wasn't a disguise, perhaps they just had a reverse growth spurt" Ash suggested. Pikachu shook his head and sweatdropped. Little did the pokémon know just how close to the truth his trainer had been.

"What are you doing?" James hissed in Jessie's direction as the figures and their feline counterpart tagged along between Kim and their other, taller associates.

"I could ask da self same question," Meowth piped up. "Have youse finally cracked? I thought'cha wanted ta find the cure fer dat spring wata!"

"That can wait," Jessie smirked. "Didn't you hear that kid? Her home is chock full of rare pokémon. This is our finest opportunity yet. While the twerps act as a distraction, we can snatch the valuable goods right from under their noses!"

"Hey I neva t'ought o' dat," Meowth grinned mischievously, while James looked on with noticeable doubt. "Good t'inkin, Jess!"

"I know." she chuckled, rubbing her small hands together. "I know."

# 4

## ON THE HOUSE

"Here it is guys...my house!"

Kim spread her arms dramatically as he strode through the large opening doors. The group behind her looked up in unison as they followed - taking in a deep breath upon sight of the massive hallway with equally high ceiling that loomed over them. Yes, they'd been in many a fancy place in their travels, but somehow this one seemed so much more exciting than the others. Where one could have easily expected aged oak décor and ornate furnishings there was pristine white walls, elaborate architecture and beautiful laminate floor tiles spread with delicately hand-made rugs.

Modern, but far from minimalist. There was a chorusing of 'oohs' and 'aahs' from Kim's companions. Even James was suitably impressed, despite having grown up in such opulent circumstances.

"It's so stylish... I can't tell where one room ends and another begins!" Misty admired.

"Great, isn't it? Dad designed it himself" Kim replied, adding a little skip to her step. "And now all you guys can share it with me while he's gone!"

"Gone?" Brock repeated, with more than a hint of worry to his voice. He was hoping this type of 'gone' wasn't permanent - after all, there were far more pressing matters on his mind than becoming an unwilling playmate for some young girl. Kim was quick to allay his

fears.

"Yeah, he's out on a work trip for the weekend. He'll be back in a couple of days...in the mean time..." Kim's eyes took on that expression of happiness once more as Nico jiggled about in her arms. "...I got all the company I could want!"

Another dissatisfied noise was uttered from the two oldest male members of the group. But Misty seemed all too entranced with the house to take notice.

"So when can I have a tour?" she exclaimed.

"Where do you want to start?" Kim smirked at this.

"The kitchen?" Ash looked up hopefully, suddenly remembering that neither he nor his travelling companions had eaten yet. Misty narrowed her eyes in the trainer's direction, but Kim simply gave a shrug.

"I'm not allowed in the kitchen," she explained. "Besides, there's nothing interesting in there really. Tell you what's loads more interesting. My room! C'mon!"

Brock couldn't help but chuckle at Ash's bedraggled expression as Kim ran off exuberantly down the hallway, dragging Misty along in the process. The girl was too young to understand hints.

"No wonder this kid hasn't any friends," Ash moaned, while Pikachu flopped melodramatically over his shoulder. "She probably starved them all to death."

"Good things come to those who wait," Brock pointed out wisely, reminding himself of the loveliness that awaited him outside



the mansion walls. He turned to stare forebodingly at Jessie and James who had been standing there watching the entire spectacle; the latter with a particularly pained visage. "And right now, our job is to make sure these three don't try anything funny."

"Hah!" Jessie exclaimed, laying the drama on even thicker than Pikachu. "The only thing *we'll* be trying, is trying to find the first aid kit. I don't find slowly losing one's life fluids all that enjoyable, do *you?*"

Brock looked somewhat guilty at his assumption, despite the exaggeration.

"She has a point," he murmured awkwardly, ushering Jessie's companion after Misty and Kim. "James needs attention to those grazes right away."

The aforementioned figure looked back at Jessie anxiously as Ash casually brought up the rear to this procession of misfits. Jessie continued to stand her ground, giving her partner a casual wave with a smirk that dictated she was perfectly certain she knew what she was doing.

"Eh... what d'ya t'ink you're doin'?" Meowth inquired, once the other figures were out of earshot. Jessie turned around slowly; the serious expression now present upon her youthful features caused the pokémon to twitch somewhat. "Why do I suddenly get da feelin' dat dis crazy plot youse got involves me?"

"You're most perceptive, my smart-mouth companion" Jessie replied smoothly. "Now you're going to go outside and keep a careful watch for those two glory hogs, Butch and Cassidy. While you're at it, see what you can find out about antidotes to that spring water."

"An' *why* would I want to miss out on a free meal jus' ta go pacin' around in da hot sun lookin' fer answers to your mistakes?" Meowth inquired, as he folded his arms.

"You'd want to, because otherwise you'd be having your tail fed to the next sharp-toothed snapping pokémon I come across," Jessie glowered at him acidically. Meowth tried to repress a gulp at this point, but his undeterred manner wasn't very convincing.

"Well since ya put it dat way..." he remarked in shaky tones. "I believe I shall get out on patrol."

"Good," Jessie replied, a more palatable expression emerging upon her face as Meowth slid open the nearby window, hopped gracefully through the gap and leant upon the sill. "And if you see either of them making any attempt to enter this place, inform us immediately. This is going to be *our* raid, fair and square."

"Since when do you play fair?" Meowth snorted, promptly letting out a strangled yell as Jessie moodily grabbed hold of the window and slammed it shut, right upon his paws.

"Just do it, furball," she huffed. From the other side of the wall Meowth sat, blowing on his paws and cursing to himself.

"No respect," he grumbled. "Dere's no respect fer me. Why if I weren't goin' ta look fer dat antidote, dey'd be stuck as kids foreva."

He shuddered at that last sentence before crossing the grass toward the high boundary wall that separated the mansion grounds from the outside world. Being permanently lumped with child-sized versions of Jessie and James was an unthinkable concept - they were dependant upon him enough as adults. With that in mind, he firmly decided he'd much rather be out searching for a way to reverse the

situation than being forced to play plush toy for some young girl. If only the heat was not so blisteringly intense. The pokémon groaned and flopped down in the shade of a tall tree, then he slowly lifted his head to look into the thickly interwoven branches.

"I guess my route outta here lies up dere" he concluded. "But its so hot, I really don't t'ink I got da energy ta be climbin' all dat way."

His aside was interrupted by a low growling not too far above him. Swinging his gaze round, Meowth's mouth dropped open in terror as his eyes came directly into contact with those of a large terrakion that had recently been patrolling the perimeter of the grounds. It was more than enough to send the pokémon scuttling up the tree trunk to safety.

Jessie managed to find her way back to the others using her sense of smell. The intermingled pungency of Brock's cheap cologne and Ash's body odour wasn't exactly hard to lose track of, even with the lengthy array of corridors that had drawn the visitors apart. Stepping through the door into Kim's room, Jessie's youthful eyes became as as round as saucers as she gazed upward at the gigantic display cabinet containing at least two hundred differently shaped pokémon dolls. It was shaped like a house and easily dwarfed all those who stood before it.

From the dumbfounded expressions upon the faces of Kim's female guests, it was clear they had never seen anything quite like it in their lives. Even their counterparts were considerably amazed.

"So...what do you think?" Kim turned around to look back at

them, grinning proudly.

"That's so much more than I have..." Misty murmured with considerable distance in her voice. Jessie lowered her head and tried to sniff back her growing sadness - she sorely did not want to cry and show herself up, but for some reason she was having difficulty holding her emotion in. Kim paused, a puzzled expression on her face, as those behind her reflected similar confusion. Eventually, Jessie could no longer keep her feelings in. The tears began to roll down her cheeks.

"I've so...so...I've always wanted some of those" she sobbed. James' mouth opened slightly in realisation as his memory took him back to that very day in Beaufort City. He never realised just how much those Princess Dolls had meant to Jessie. For him, not having one toy hadn't ever been a big deal. But then again, he had always had so many things bought for him to play with. The only toys Jessie had ever owned were all made by hand from old yogurt pots and lollipop sticks

"You mean you don't have any?" Kim gasped. She was truly shocked, as if she thought every girl owned at least one Princess Doll. Jessie shook her head silently. Not only was she upset at her losses, but she was also angry with herself at just bursting into tears like that. Especially in front of the twerps, despite the fact they had been surprisingly unresponsive about it. Why hadn't she been able to control it like she usually did? Kim, on the other hand, hadn't found any problem with her friend's outburst.

"Aww...don't be sad, Jessie..." she smiled. "You can have some of mine! I have doubles in the basement that need a good home."

Ash and Brock exchanged surprised looks at the magenta-

haired girl's overcome visage. They still couldn't see quite how one could be so happy over a few purposeless decorative trinkets, *especially* someone like Jessie, who always seemed to be searching for higher and more complicated ideals. James let out another of his typical whines as he looked down at his reddened stomach and chest, causing everyone to turn around and glance back at him.

"Oops!" Kim gasped, putting a hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry, in my excitement I forgot to get that booboo cleaned up! DIAAAAAANE!"

The sudden yell caused everyone around Kim to wince and clasp their hands over their ears. It was followed shortly by a pattering of tiny feet and a cheerful cry from down the hall. James began to look rather worried as the large, pink egg-shaped pokémon waddled into the room.

"Chan-sii?" it inquired.

"My friend James fell over and grazed himself bad," Kim explained to Diane. "Can you help make it better please?"

"Chan-sii chan!" Diane smiled enthusiastically, shuffling back out of the door and motioning for James to follow. He did so, with visible reluctance. A tentative silence followed, but it was soon cast aside as another loud utterance was flung into the air. It was the unmistakable sound of Ash's gut complaining. Brock uttered a chuckle as Misty put on an expression which dictated she'd been expecting to hear that sound sooner or later.

"You look mighty hungry," Kim remarked, tilting her head to the side.

"I'd say that was an understatement," Ash groaned, thankful the girl had finally got the idea.

"Must admit I could sure do with a bite to eat," Brock remarked, while Misty nodded in agreement.

"Okay then!" Kim grinned widely. "Lunchtime it is!"

# 5

## REVERSE PSYCHOLOGY

"I don't know about this..." James whined softly, as he sat perched on the edge of the counter in the first aid room watching the chansey prepare a selection of tiny bottles and implements on a tray. "No offence, but I'm not particularly used to having my injuries treated by a pokémon."

Diane hadn't appeared to have taken umbrage in the slightest. She whirled around with the tray poised neatly between her two stubby arms, the cheerful smile having not left her face in those past few minutes.

"Cha-chansii chansii," she dictated, placing the tray beside James and motioning toward the boy's grazes while waving a large damp cloth in her other hand. James looked at it tentatively.

"Okay...but at least let me smell it first," he frowned. "If that cloth has any kind of rubbing alcohol on it then no way are you putting it on *me*."

"Chan-sii chaan!" Diane giggled, but allowed James to sniff the cloth anyway. After a moment of deduction, the figure came to the conclusion that the liquid it was soaked in was simply warm water and allowed the pokémon to gently rub at the sore spots on his chest. James closed his eyes; the sensation was strangely pleasant.

The next sensation was far from it. Diane reeled backward in

alarm, a tube of antiseptic cream in one hand, as James uttered an ear-piercing yell.

"AUGH! IT BURNS! IT BUUUURNS!"

It appeared that James' lessened pain threshold was no match for the sensation that medicinal ointments often provided. In a state of complete panic, the pokémon's mind searched for the first thing its mind related to burning and grasped hold of it, filling a nearby receptacle with cold water and throwing it over the child upon the counter.

A weird silence followed. James sat there shuddering with his eyes still closed - overcome with the coldness for a moment. Suddenly he didn't feel particularly well. Some kind of terrible sensation had overcome his body, almost as if each of his limbs had been tied to four rampaging feraligators, all heading in opposite directions. The next thing he heard and experienced was a succession of loud, gut-churning crunches, followed by a sharp ripping and finally a blood-curdling scream that was not his own, coupled with a loud thud.

James blinked and raised his head, yelping slightly as it made contact with the cupboards above. Turning around with an almost accusing expression on his face, the figure's eyes widened when he caught sight of his reflection staring back at him from the mirror behind.

He appeared to have regained his adulthood. On a more embarrassing note, the sudden size alteration had cost him the use of his garments. Thankfully the shock of witnessing such a transformation had caused Diane to faint and thus there was no one about to see his current state of affairs. Quickly, James slipped down from the counter and snatched a towel that was hanging over the handle of the trolley



before wrapping it around himself.

His first intention was to get out of sight as soon as possible - he would have to ponder over the return of his adulthood later.

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Kim cheerfully led her companions to the dining room, arranging them neatly around a long oak table before raising her hands over her head and clapping three times. A few seconds later a Mr. Mime materialised in the room, wearing a bowtie and holding a cloth draped upon one arm.

"Myyme?" he inquired.

"Could you inform the chef that we would like to eat?" Kim told him in the politest of tones. The Mr. Mime nodded profusely, and disappeared as quickly as it had arrived.

"Excuse me? But how does that thing know what we wanted for dinner?" Jessie asked, puzzled.

"He's psychic, he'll just tell the chef to make the meals you lot were thinking of," Kim replied simply. A goofy expression had descended upon Ash's face at this point. Misty flashed him an uneasy sideward glance. "Why do I get the feeling this table's going to break under the strain of everything?" she muttered.

Half an hour later the gang tucked into their preferred meals. Thankfully the waiter had known better than to reel off everything Ash's mind had been thinking of and had chosen the first five items on

his mental list - making the resulting arrangement of food a lot less overbearing. The trainer still insisted on boasting to Kim, despite having his mouth full.

"An thas how I gota badge frm Olfne Gm..." he crunched, spraying crumbs all over the tablecloth. He lifted up the side of his jacket to show off his array of badges once again.

*Trust the twerp to spout on about his stupid badges,* Jessie thought, rolling her eyes. Kim was a lot more impressed.

"Wow Ash...that's really cool!" she beamed. "You must be such a great trainer..."

"Well I've had a lot of practise," Ash remarked, semi-modestly.

*Yeah... Jessie grumbled. At my expense. I wonder where James is...surely getting some little graze cleared up doesn't take that long.*

She heard a slight noise from by her foot and carefully peered under the tablecloth. Nico jiggled playfully beside the leg of the chair she was sitting on. Jessie smirked at this, before leaning down and gently prodding at the top of the ditto's head. The creature swayed from side to side, grinning.

"I swear he likes the sound of his own voice," Jessie murmured in lowered tones, motioning upward in the general direction where Ash was continuing to relay every aspect of his journey from day one. Brock and Misty waited patiently, uttering the occasional sigh as their younger companion made emphasis to the parts he made particular contribution to. Jessie couldn't help chuckling as Nico arranged himself into a miniature replica of Ash and pretended to imitate his endless ramblings.



An expectant cough caused the man to look up in surprise. Standing over him was the tall figure of a young lady with spiked dark brown hair, dressed in a camisole and knee-length skirt with neat flowered sandals. James immediately recognized her as one of the women that had attempted to smother him with over-adoration earlier in the day. With that realisation in the back of his mind he felt his body tense instinctively.

"What are you doing in my house?" she inquired firmly. "And furthermore, what are you doing wearing *my* bathrobe?"

The latter question caught James off-guard even more so than the former. He began to blush profusely as he tried to scramble to his feet, which caused the woman's accusing stare to soften considerably and an amused smile to emerge upon her face.

"Don't tell me" she began. "Jyngu Spring victim, right?"

"H-how did you guess?" James exclaimed, trying to find some steadiness in his voice.

"Your face bears more than a passing resemblance to that of a boy I met this morning," the woman told him with a smirk. "I'm Ruby - no doubt my sister told you of me while her ditto pulled its well-oiled imitation prank on us. That pokémon can be such a pain, but that doesn't matter now. What's your name?"

"Uh... it's James," he replied with notable cautiousness.

"Well, James..." the woman murmured. "Now I'm faced with a most perplexing question."

"And that is?" James asked worriedly.

"Which of your forms is cuter. I just can't decide!" came the

bright reply. James shifted uncomfortably - he'd never felt particularly at ease with this kind of attention, not to mention an unusual lack of further reaction over his presence inside the building.

"So I'm guessing you came here to try and find the antidote, right?" Ruby spoke calmly.

"Well it doesn't look like I'll be needing it now," James remarked, looking down at himself. He flinched as the woman prodded the side of his face.

"Water," she stated bluntly, looking at the moisture on the tip of her finger. "Just as I suspected."

"What do you mean?" James spluttered, somewhat indignant at the sudden invasion of his personal space.

"You became an adult after getting wet, right?" the figure continued patiently. James looked at her for a moment.

"Well yeah..." he murmured. "But-"

"Exactly" Ruby cut in. "This is only a *temporary* reversal. Without the antidote you'll just go back to being a kid again in half an hour or so."

James felt surprisingly relieved at this. He didn't wish to be cured unless Jessie was dealt with in the same way. But that didn't mean he couldn't seek out the means to regain adulthood permanently for use at the appropriate time. He looked up at Ruby with a deeply hopeful look in his eyes.

"Do *you* know what the antidote is then?"

Ruby smiled to herself. Opportunity was knocking and she

certainly wasn't going to hesitate over opening the door.

"I might do," she remarked casually with a flick of her hair. "But its not something to be handed out lightly. I mean... there *are* warnings not to enter into that spring, you know."

The man bit his lip somewhat guiltily. It was true - he had pretty much put himself in this mess.

"I'll do anything you want!" he protested. "Anything at all, I just need that cure! I can't be like this for the rest of my life."

Ruby pretended to think this over, while James felt a notion of regret beginning to creep into his gut. In his haste he'd certainly left the options open a little too wide.

"Hm... *anything*, eh?" she nodded at last. "Well... there *is* something I've been needing to do for a good while. I'm a fashion designer, you see. Lately I've been branching out into the field of children's clothing, but I have no available models to test the designs out on."

"What about your sister?" James asked, puzzled.

"Kim doesn't wish to be a part of my work" Ruby snorted. "She's far too occupied with playtime. Besides, these *are* boys clothes. What do you say? Will you be my model for a little while? For the sake of fashion...and your manhood, of course."

James' face had already brightened considerably. He had been considering far worse assignments than simply trying on kids' garments.

"Sure!" he nodded profusely. "I'll do it!"

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*Aw man... why did I say I'd do it?*

Pushing a strip of red fabric away from his face, the now more youthful countenance of James sighed heavily as he poised upon a velvet stool and tried to look as regal as possible. This was extremely hard to accomplish, especially when caught up in such a hideous arrangement. The figure's upper body was clothed in a purple and yellow blotched jacket with coattails that reached down to the ankles. Further down, his legs almost appeared to billow outward in a pair of comical silk pantaloons. His feet were adorned with something he'd expect ballet dancers to dress in. But the most bizarre arrangement of them all had to be what had been deposited on his head. James had begun to wonder, what with all the tassels and beads hanging down his face, whether he'd been mistakenly been given a kite to wear instead of a hat.

Ruby stood a few metres away, camera in one hand and a lopsided smile on one face. Most of the time was spent arranging James into a variety of what she'd considered to be extravagant poses, with an occasional snapshot in between.

"Tell me again..." James remarked dryly. "Are these 'outfits' for casual or entertainment purposes?"

"Neither, ya silly," Ruby giggled. "They're cultural. One isn't meant to wear them, they're meant to admire them as individual aspects of the artist's personality and expression. For the sake of composition though, they do look far better on a human model than a display dummy."

*At least the dummy wouldn't look any more of a dummy than it already is, James moped. This is so humiliating. I sure am glad Jessie and Meowth can't see me now.*

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Fifteen minutes later, the plates were cleared and every stomach was filled to bursting. There was not a look of malcontent or disapproval between any of the diners, only satisfied smiles and murmured comments.

"That's got to be the most food I've eaten in ages..." Ash remarked dozily.

"Absolutely exquisite" Misty agreed.

"My compliments to the chef" Brock burped.

"Gringo will be very happy to know that you enjoyed his meals so much" Kim exclaimed. "He must hear your comments for himself!" She clapped her hands again and the mr. mime appeared in a ready stance. "Rafer, please fetch Gringo for me" she asked simply. The pokémon nodded and vanished once more, leaving Jessie to ponder over the blob of purplish residue on the napkin that had been provided with her plate of food. Her puzzlement was soon accounted for, as she heard a noise from behind, not unlike that the sound of Nico's movements.

"Griiyme!" came a happy voice. Everyone turned around to see a large grimer, wearing a chef's hat and holding a spatula. It looked very pleased with itself.



"Go on..." Kim motioned excitedly toward the poison type slime pokémon. "Tell Gringo how great dinner was!"

The colour had drained from all faces around the table at this point. Ash bit his lip while Brock fiddled uneasily with his napkin and Misty looked extremely nauseous indeed.

"I think I need the bathroom" she laughed nervously, and rapidly exited.

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"Okay, I've modelled your 'clothes'" James stated bluntly, arms folded. "Now its your turn to fulfil your side of the bargain"

"Aw, you're so cute when you got that little pouty lip," Ruby cooed, only to receive a cold glower in her direction.

"Stop trying to change the subject!" James snapped. "With the way you're acting I'm starting to think you don't even know what the spring water antidote- ...is." He had noticed a distinct change in Ruby's expression at this point. The woman's face had grown noticeably guilty. "You...you *don't* know what the spring water antidote is, do you?" he remarked shakily, aiming his eyes at the floor. "How could you manipulate me like this?"

"I'm sorry, James" Ruby sighed. "That *was* rather selfish of me. I should never have let my want for better photographs override my morals."

"At least give me something practical to wear," James replied bitterly.

"I'll do better than that," Ruby stated. "You shall have some clothes *and* that Jyngu Spring antidote."

James looked up in surprise at this point.

"But I thought you didn't-"

"That is true," Ruby assured him. "I don't know what the antidote is, but there's nothing stopping me from trying to find out." The woman almost toppled backward as James unexpectedly threw himself at her legs, grasping onto them like a slakoth to a tree branch.

"Oh thank you!" he cried, overcome with happiness. Ruby smiled to herself at this, her conscience redeemed.

"It's the least I can do," she said.

# 6

## HIDDEN TREASURE

James returned to the location of the rest of the group after receiving a new set of casual clothes from Ruby to discover a somewhat uncomfortable scene. Kim was stood before the sofa upon which her sickened-looking guests were slouched with an expression upon her face that closely resembled a scolding mother.

"That was real mean of you guys to upset Gringo like that..." she snapped. "You told me you really liked his food!"

"You ate *without* me?" James spluttered as he stepped into view, his eyebrows twisted in a mixture of surprise and upset.

"Well you were taking so long to get back," Jessie groaned. "But don't be too concerned. We just found out it was served up by a toxic blob of purple goo."

"Right now I couldn't care less who or what was dishing out food," James protested, while his stomach did the same. "I'm starved!"

"Gringo's very self-conscious you know..." Kim continued, rather haughtily for such a young girl. "I said sorry for what those guys did, but with the way they hurt his feelings it's going to be a while before he'll feel like cooking another meal. Sorry, James." The boy whined miserably at this, but Kim had already thought of what she considered an apt enough distraction. "Tell you what," she spoke up cheerfully. "We can pass the time by taking a swim!"

Ash, Brock, Misty and Jessie's faces all brightened up with enthusiasm at this suggestion. After all, what better way to cool off than a relaxing dip? But James' reaction was completely different - he uttered a somewhat frightened yelp and began to look panicked. Everyone gave him confused looks.

"What's up?" Kim inquired. "Don't you want to go swimming?"

James shook his head furiously. It was certainly true at this moment in time - there was no way he wished to stir up questioning from Kim by becoming an adult again, especially when Brock and his companions had been so close to linking their names to Team Rocket earlier. Jessie stared at him like he had lost his mind. She couldn't understand why on earth James would refuse a chance to cool off from the raging summer temperatures. Nevertheless, Kim took his words to heart.

"Okay then! How about a game of hide and seek in the garden?"

"Sure!" James smiled widely, while the others muttered bemusedly in the background. As the group was led from the room Jessie flashed her partner a very dark glare indeed.

"You'd better have a *really* good reason for turning down an opportunity like that" she hissed.

"Oh yeah, its good alright," James remarked in lowered tones. The serious expression on his face was more than enough to tell Jessie that he meant business. "And this is neither the time nor the place to tell you about it. But we can use this game of Kim's in our favour. Here's what I want you to do..."

Kim leapt out into the bright sunlight and was immediately greeted by a small blue creature with a finned head, tail and orange star-shaped gills on its cheeks. The pokémon threw itself at her, causing the girl to topple onto the grass, chuckling as it tried to nibble her fingers. Further shapes appeared from the foliage shortly after; one looked like an elongated furret with fuzzy-tipped ears, another closely resembled a large green spotted, frilled acorn with eyes.

"Wow.. Kim wasn't kidding when she said about rare pokémon," Misty remarked in awe as Ash pointed his Pokédex in various directions, giggling to himself as it uttered its usual noise of recognition and began to reel off appropriate information.

"I've never seen *any* of these species before"

"They're not rare at all," James sniffed. "They're simply from other regions that you uncultured twerps haven't visited. I just so happen to be a well-travelled soul whose passage has extended across Totto, Hoenn and beyo-"

Before the boy had a chance to digress further, Kim had clasped onto his hand and him and dragged the others into some sort of order around her. Brock muttered disinterestedly while Ash complained that he hadn't finished aiming his Pokédex at everything yet, but Misty soon brought them both up to standard by jabbing them in the ribs with each of her elbows.

"Ready?" Kim said, shifting from one foot to the other in a state of energy-fuelled enthusiasm as the pokémon skittered excitedly around her. The rest of the group murmured in acknowledgement between themselves. "Ok!"

With that, Kim placed her hands over her eyes and began to count, signalling to the rest of the gang to start looking for places to

hide. So they retreated into the immense mass of greenery around the garden in an attempt to find them. It was time for James to put his plan into action - to seek Jessie out and explain the temporary status of their childhood. Only he hadn't quite accounted for the thickness of the interlocking array of trees and bushes. Now he was buried deeply amongst them.

James decided it best to stop for a moment before he became even more lost. The foliage in a back garden seemed almost like a jungle to a figure his size. And he wasn't the only one experiencing problems with nature either. Jessie struggled through the bushes, trying to brush twigs and leaves from her clothes and busy grumbling to herself about how incredibly wrong such a simple plan had turned out.

"The only thing that's denser than this foliage is James' brain. James! Where have you gone, you-"

There was a nasty wet sensation upon the top of the girl's head. Jessie's eyes widened and she swung around to see what it was that had come into contact with her hair. Her eyes met with those of a lickitung who, due to Jessie's current height was towering over her with a wide grin on its vacant features. Jessie yelled in alarm and rapidly escaped between the trees; she wasn't sure where she was heading but at that point in time she wasn't particularly concerned, as long as it was away from the pokémon who had just drooled in her hair.

Looking over her shoulder, Jessie continued to scamper mindlessly for a few moments until she unintentionally ran into something that was standing in her way. Both figures keeled over, the latter uttering an irritated exclamation.

"Hoi! Watch where ya goin', Jess!"

"Meowth?" the girl spluttered, sitting upright. Sure enough, the cream-furred pokémon was poised in front of her, arms folded.

"In da fur."

"What are you doing back here so soon?" Jessie snapped, swiftly regaining her nerve. "Surely you can't have found an antidote already."

"Nope, but I have found somet'ing dat'll interest youse even more" Meowth remarked in a matter-of-fact way. "I jus' so happened ta get a listen inta Butch and Cassidy's conversation. An' it seems we ain't lookin' deep enough"

"Stop talking in riddles and give it to me straight" Jessie muttered, reddening. Meowth smirked to himself at the sight of his stunted and ruffled companion.

"Dere's more to dis mansion dat meets da eye" he explained. "Namely, what's *inside* da walls. Apparently, dere's a locked up room dat contains treasures far more valuable dan any pokémon we've seen today. Dat's what dose two stuffed up elites are afta"

Jessie's face grew an even deeper shade of crimson at this point. She clenched her little fists so hard that her arms began to shake.

"Ooooh... that sneaky little" she hissed, gritting her teeth. "Kid-size or not there is *no* way I'm letting her into this place. Those treasures are going to be mine and that's final! When had they planned to break in?"

"I didn't catch dat part" Meowth replied softly. "Had ta bolt

when I realised dey'd noticed me"

"What?" Jessie exclaimed. "What on earth gave you that impression?"

"Well da impression of Cassidy's boot in my butt was a pretty big hint" the pokémon muttered, turning round to reveal the large red mark he had been referring to. Jessie groaned slightly.

"If we don't know when to expect them then we'll have to do the next best thing" she decided.

"An' dat is?"

"Steal the goods *before* they get a chance to" Jessie told him. Then she lifted up her hand and prodded at the gelatinous translucent mass upon the top of her head with a thoroughly disgusted expression. "But that'll have to wait. My beauty comes first and this vile goop is certainly not contributing to my good looks"

"What happened?" Meowth inquired, wincing somewhat.

"A big dumb lickitung went and drooled on my head" the girl remarked dryly. Meowth chuckled at this.

"Good t'ing you weren't dis size when you owned a lickitung, eh Jess?"

Jessie suddenly stood bolt upright, eyes wide and skin paling rapidly. The feline pokémon choked in alarm as he was grasped by the scruff and thrown forward to meet the girl eye to eye.

"My pokémon!" she exclaimed. "My uniform! Where are they?"

"Well as far I recall, back where youse last left 'em at da



spring's edge" Meowth shrugged, before being tossed backward toward the nearest bush.

"You idiot!" Jessie cried, having great difficulty keeping her voice at a safe volume. "Go and get them before someone *e/se* does!"

"Yeesh, what do I look like? Your slave?" Meowth grumbled

"You'll look much worse if I don't see my belongings back here in the next five minutes" Jessie remarked, glowering at him. The feline figure returned the expression with surprising emphasis.

"Pokémon ain'cha belongings, Jess"

"You know full well what I mean!" the girl snapped, her face turning almost as red as her hair before she turned to storm off in the opposite direction.

"Now get out there before I do something you'll regret!"

James had been wandering blindly through the foliage for the past minute or so when he picked up on Jessie's scream of panic not too far away. His concentration shifted somewhat, James spun round to face the direction he believed the sound had come from and his foot caught on something hard, sending him crashing to earth.

Biting his lip to stop himself yelling out loud, James lifted his head and his gaze became level with that of a very cranky warturtle who, up until recently had been taking a nap in its shell. The boy put on a rather sheepish expression as he scrambled to his feet while laughing nervously, but the pokémon definitely wasn't seeing the funny side of things. James found himself propelled across the grass and into a nearby bush as he was hit by a direct blast of icy water.



up to lock the door behind her before leaning forward and inserting the plug into the bottom of the bath. As it began to fill Jessie shed her small garments into a neat pile beside the laundry basket and pondered extensively over the range of aromatherapy oils that stood on the shelf nearby. Selecting a bottle, the girl unscrewed the lid and poured vast amounts of its contents into the swirling water.

"Peace, quiet and relaxation away from twerps and silly childish activities. This situation sure has its fair share of perks, I must admit."

The liquid cascade had reached halfway up the tub so Jessie swiftly turned off the taps and gave the water an experimental dabble with one foot. Satisfied that everything was the correct temperature the girl checked for towels to dry herself with once finished and then carefully slipped into the bath.

For a few moments Jessie closed her eyes as she immersed herself in utter bliss, but the feeling rapidly deteriorated into something much more uncomfortable. Opening her eyes to try and work out where this sudden pain had come from, the figure let out a tiny yelp as she witnessed her own limbs stretching to an accompaniment of unsettling crunches and cracks.

Too shocked to even utter another sound, all that Jessie could do was wait until the transformation was complete. Afterward, she sat in silence while her mind sifted through the previous occurrences. Had this been the reason for James' panicked reaction toward Kim mentioning swimming? Jessie began to question whom could have given him this information, while attempting to battle back the inevitable regret from jumping the gun and not waiting for James to find her. It was too late for such emotions now; she would simply have to conceal herself from Kim's sight.

Lucky for her, the youth's attentions were more focused on her partner anyway.

Stepping from the bathtub and draining it of water, Jessie took to drying herself thoroughly before seeking some kind of covering. Upon finding nothing suitable the woman reluctantly wrapped herself in one of the larger towels and reached out to open the bathroom door to sneak into the hallway. The resulting sight was most unexpected. Jessie froze in her tracks, eyes wide as Ruby stood before her, arms tightly folded and a dark glower upon her face. For the first few seconds Jessie's mind struggled to think of some way out of this extremely tight predicament, then suddenly she realised something.

"Hey!" she exclaimed, pointing at Ruby. "You're one of those women that attempted to smother James this morning!"

Ruby raised an eyebrow at this, temporarily distracted.

"A companion of his, I take it?"

"I'm his work partner" Jessie corrected, making specific emphasis on the 'work' portion of the sentence. Ruby smirked at this.

"I see... you are certainly quite privileged to be able to work with such a charming, cooperative and especially *handsome* man as him."

The redhead swelled noticeably at this unwanted attention in James' direction. It appeared from Ruby's words that she had also encountered James as an adult. And if James had reverted back to being a child again then it was more than likely that her own womanhood was not going to last very long either.

"What do you mean, 'cooperative'?" Jessie snapped. "What did you do to him?"

"Oh nothing much..." Ruby looked at her nails for a moment. "Just a little modelling, a short chat, a few cuddles..."

Jessie flinched. Ruby didn't even have to look up to work out how cold the woman's expression had become.

"Okay, so the last part didn't happen in reality" she added. "But seriously...you react to affection like its a *bad* thing"

"It is" Jessie muttered, furrowing her brow. "It leaves people open to manipulation..."

The figure trailed off as a thought hit her like a brick. It was more than obvious that Ruby had taken a liking to James; maybe there was a chance she could manoeuvre the situation to her advantage.

"So tense" Ruby chuckled. "Seems you *did* need the relaxation bath oil more than I"

"Huh?" Jessie spluttered, suddenly thrown from her train of thought. "How'd you know- ?"

"I could smell it from here" Ruby explained, wrinkling her nose slightly. "With that potency I'd be surprised if there's any left in the bottle. But that's beside the point. You *do* know I could easily dial the police right now and have you hauled away for breaking into my dad's property and potentially taking advantage of our resources, don't you?"

"I did not break in!" Jessie snapped. For once it was the truth.

"Your sister invited me. *And* she said I was welcome to use the washing facilities after I'd got unceremoniously dribbled on by that lickitung in the garden"

"Invited *you*?" Ruby snorted. "Why on earth would Kim want to invite someone of *your* age to play with-

Hold on a minute... don't tell me *you* bathed in Jyngu spring as well?"

Jessie nodded, somewhat guiltily. Ruby uttered a little sigh; it was hard to tell whether this was out of amusement or disbelief.

"And they laugh when I insist that a sign and a weak little fence isn't enough. There's one thing that still doesn't make sense, though..." Ruby turned on Jessie, eyes blazing. "What reason did *you* have to accept my sister's invitation?"

"James was hurt and he needed treatment!" Jessie exclaimed, rather surprised by the seemingly placid woman's sudden outburst. Ruby immediately calmed, her face suddenly taking on a worried tone.

"James? Hurt?"

"Yes..." Jessie muttered, composing herself as her interrogator drew away. "I only accompanied him to make sure he wasn't in here too long, but I hadn't accounted for how difficult it would be to pull a guy away from some little kid's attentions"

"So Kim's grown fond of James too" Ruby concluded, a hint of jealousy in her voice. "How...*cute*."

Jessie began to smile mischievously as her mind whirred back into action. It was all so simple; Ruby would no doubt have knowledge and possibly even access to the contents of the hidden room inside the

mansion. With some careful direction, James could easily gain insight into the room's contents without having to lift a finger.

"Tell you what" she spoke at last. "I'll get you more time with James, and you make it your top priority to find us a permanent reversal for that spring water. While you're at it make sure Kim doesn't find out that we are really adults. Have we got a deal?"

"Deal" Ruby reached out and the two women shook hands firmly. With that Jessie watched her latest victim glide cheerfully down the hallway and a dark smirk appeared upon her face.

"How convenient" she remarked softly. "How very convenient indeed.."

7

## WHERE'S WOBBY?

"Da cheek o' dat woman," Meowth muttered under his breath as he stormed back through Prisma Town, arms tightly folded and ignoring the odd looks from passers by who couldn't figure out why the pokémon was walking on two legs instead of four. "If she'd jus' been a few years older I'd have given her a piece o' my mind- an' my claws too. What's she t'ink I am? Honestly... bein' too irresponsible ta keep an eye on her own pokémon."

Pausing his complaints so as not to arouse too much attention from a group of youthful figures dressed in traditional trainer's garb hanging around under the canopy of a juice bar, Meowth quickened his pace and slipped out of sight into a nearby alley where he was able to resume a more relaxed stance.

"She's jus' lucky dat I care fer da wellbein' o' my companions" he remarked, passing from between the fence posts that marked part of Prisma Town's boundary and onto the dry earth beyond. "Udderwise she wouldn't be seein her precious uniform eith-

ARGH!"

At that precise moment, Meowth's eyes had sighted the previously abandoned pile of clothes just beside the spring's edge.



Next to these lay an open Pokéball - upon closer inspection, this item was shown to have a small W scratched into its crimson surface. Meowth shut the Pokéball and turned it over and over in his paws, head moving slowly from side to side.

"No..." he murmured. "Please don't say youse fell fer it too"

Meowth felt a sharp tug upon his tail. Uttering a slight yelp, the pokémon swung round to discover a somewhat damp-looking wynaut standing proudly behind him. The very sight caused his heart to sink like a rock.

"I shoulda' guessed" he sighed, readying the Pokéball to recapture his rubbery companion and prevent any needless chasing around. "Anudda mess ta contend with. Ah well, it coulda been wise."

The wynaut chuckled as the red beam of light from the Pokéball's central switch shot toward it. But instead of enveloping the creature upon contact, the light simply retracted back into the sphere in Meowth's paw leaving the wynaut standing out in the open. Blinking in temporary confusion, Meowth's eyes widened in horror.

"Oh no!" he yelped. "Da Pokéball don't even recognize you as Jessie's pokémon any more!"

<Who's Jessie?> came the bright inquiry. The feline's mouth dropped open slightly in response.

"Youse don't even...remember?" he gibbered, his knees beginning to shake slightly. "Dis is bad...dis is real bad..."

...Jess is gonna kill me!"

The wynaut seemed neither afraid nor concerned over this spasm of panic being emitted from his taller associate. Instead it snatched up one of James' boots, placed it upside down upon his head and did a little dance.

<Play with me!> it exclaimed, before dashing headlong back toward the town square. Meowth uttered a distressed gasp before swinging round, hurriedly gathering the remainder of Jessie and James' clothing from the ground (complete with the Pokéballs attached to their belts) and ran after its escaping charge.

"Dere ain't time fer dis, ya moron!" he exclaimed, looking behind him to make sure he'd not dropped anything in his pursuit. "We gots a mission to complete and it's gotta be done before-"

At this point Meowth had turned his head back the right way round only to come face to face with a delicious-looking, heavily-filled sandwich. Lowering his flippers slightly, the wynaut gave Meowth an expectant glance.

<You hungry?>

Hungry was rather an understatement. Meowth could already feel his stomach practically throwing itself around inside of him upon sight of the tasty snack. Completely forgetting about his objective while his appetite took over, the pokémon placed the clothing he was holding upon the cobblestones beside him and reached out both paws before retrieving the sandwich and taking a huge bite from it.

"T'anks, kid!" he grinned, his mouth full. As the hunger began to calm down however, logic slowly took over. Looking down upon the remains of the sandwich, Meowth returned the expectant glance to the wynaut. "Uh... where'd you get dis?"

<It was lying on some plastic next to this guy's bag> the wynaut grinned. Meowth swallowed hesitantly, as he spotted an angry-looking human figure storming toward him.

"Hate ta break it to ya, kid..." he began. "But I don't t'ink dat guy was finished wit' it"

The pokémon groaned as his words once again evaded the hearing of his youthful associate who had now taken to bouncing around aimlessly. He picked up the clothes in one paw, snatched one of the wynaut's flippers with the other and took off into a nearby passageway.

"Man, I didn't t'ink ya attention span could possibly get wise but I sure was proved wrong"

Chuckling to itself the wynaut finally took to running of its own accord, overtaking Meowth as the angered noises of a tyroge echoed from behind them.

"Yeesh, it was only one sandwich!" Meowth complained bitterly, drops of sweat now beginning to pour from his face from all the exertion in such unforgiving temperatures. "No need to get all woiked up!"

<Can't catch me!> the blue figure squealed, slipping through a gap in the wall ahead. Meowth lunged for the gap, only to get stuck halfway. A split second later the feline pokémon was propelled through at high speeds, yelling wildly and with a large footprint imprinted firmly upon his backside. The wynaut watched in a semi state of awe as Meowth flew over his head and into a birdbath in a nearby garden.

"What *is* dis?" he snapped at no one in particular while nearby

pidgeys gave him annoyed looks. "Cruelty to Meowth's Butt day?"

<You said 'butt'> wynaut giggled, as Meowth grumpily exited the receptacle. Thankfully the hot day made getting wet a lot less discomfoting. He didn't get much time to think on the matter though as his youthful companion was off again; skittering down another alleyway while holding its flippers out and making 'whoosh' noises. Meowth gritted his teeth and followed.

"I ain't no babysitter" he muttered, glowering down at the clothing in his arms. Such lack of looking where was was walking resulted in Meowth's collision with someone's legs.

"There he is!" an unidentifiable voice piped up. "My little Dudley!"

"Ya little who-waaaugh" Meowth trailed off into an amusing slur as his gaze took in the towering figure of Prisma Town's Officer Jenny standing beside a young girl who now had her hands clasped tightly around the wynaut. Quickly falling onto his hind legs, the pokémon thrust the clothes behind him into a trash can and tried to look as inconspicuous as possible. To his relief, however, it seemed the Officer Jenny had not noticed his out-of-place speech and was too busy glancing with gooeey eyes at the reunion between the trainer and her long lost counterpart.

<Hydie!> the wynaut cried gleefully, before being retracted into a shiny blue Pokéball the girl had been holding. Despite his difficult silence Meowth was having trouble taking all of this in. So the Wynaut had been someone else's pokémon all along! And if this was the case, then where in the world was Jessie's wobbuffet? Fractiously awaiting the departure of Hydie and her authoritarian associate, Meowth slowly turned around to retrieve his abandoned belongings when his keen

eyesight spotted yet another blue form waddling around a corner not too far away.

"Wait up!"

Wobbuffet stopped, only to have Meowth skid heavily into the back of him. The latter ended up flat on his back while the former took to swaying slightly as a result of the impact, the cheerful grin not leaving his face for a moment.

<So there you are!> he exclaimed, leaning forward to help Meowth to his feet. <I'd got pretty worried when I awoke and couldn't hear Jessie's voice any more. Why on earth is she walking around naked? I mean, I know its a hot day and all... but don't other humans get upset when someone decides not to wear their clothes?>

"She's not walkin' around naked, ya idiot" Meowth grumbled, tossing the distinctly soiled garments at Wobbuffet for him to hold. "Bathin' in dat spring caused her to get younga, and she don't fit in dose clothes any more"

<She devolved?> Wobbuffet looked quite alarmed at this.

"Youse could say dat" Meowth sighed, recalling the escapades with the wynaut he had earlier.

<Poor Jessie,> Wobbuffet commented unhappily. <I imagine she's most distressed>

"Yes an' no," came the hesitant reply. "Needless ta say, udda matters took over her brain and she forgot about youse guys until recently. 'cept she's also kinda caught up in a mission and so I gots da job of gettin' youse back"

<A mission?> Wobuffet jumped, his expression reverting back to the one of enthusiastic naivety he tended to wear. <I love missions... what is it this time?>

Meowth leant closer to his taller blue companion before placing his head before the general spot where he expected the pokémon's ears to be and lowering his voice.

"An excellent opportunity for a heist landed straight in our laps" he whispered. "As kids, Jessie and James have managed ta get inside Schuyler Mansion. Apparently dat place is hidin' some kind o' fancy treasure, so we got to find it and snatch it before Butch and-"

<Cassidy!> Wobuffet hissed, pointing a flipper behind Meowth. The two pokémon promptly dived behind a nearby wall, moments before the woman and her garishly-dressed companion wandered into view. The latter had a large satchel hooked over his shoulder.

"Tell me again, Butch" Cassidy murmured, raising the peak of her wide-brimmed hat and lowering her sunglasses slightly to give the man a studied expression. "Why did you choose such a terribly clashing outfit to wear?"

"Simple, Cass" Butch replied as he knelt down and placed the satchel on the ground before him. "With clothes this bad, no one will suspect I'm a stylish Team Rocket Elite agent"

"Naturally" Cassidy smirked, wondering how her partner got the impression he was stylish in the first place.

"Now lets not waste any more time. Set up the Adenoid Stimulatory Fabrication Unit"

Meowth and Wobuffet watched with growing anxiousness as Butch reached inside the satchel and brought out a laptop computer along with a smaller device which could have easily been mistaken for a digital camera had it not bore an odd set of clasps along one side and a funnel on the top. Butch set about fitting three different coloured test tubes into these clasps before plugging the device into the laptop and turning it on.

"Excellent work," Cassidy commented, taking the laptop from Butch as it ran its start-up sequence and directing a hand toward the funnel. "Now place your face over that"

"Me?" Butch spluttered. "Why'd I have to be the victim?"

"You're already a fashion victim, I figured a little more victimisation couldn't hurt" Cassidy remarked dismissively. "Besides, I got to be alert to check the ASFU is working at optimum frequency"

"Fine," Butch sighed heavily before positioning his nose and mouth in the funnel.

"What da heck are dey doin'?" Meowth hissed, only to receive a shrug from Wobuffet. A minute later Butch reeled back from the machine with a frantic yell, eyes wide and skin paled in a display of absolute terror. Cassidy chuckled to herself as her partner consequently leapt to his feet and began slapping himself repeatedly all over his body.

"Get 'em off! Get 'em off me!"

Wobuffet suddenly felt himself being pulled forcefully back toward Prisma Town Square. Managing to right himself from the unexpected movement, he waddled up alongside Meowth's darkened countenance and gave him an inquisitive glance.

"I've seen enough" the feline pokémon muttered.

<So what now?> Wobbuffet asked him.

"We need to get da news ta Jess and Jimmy" came the stern reply. "If dat machine does what I t'ink it's doin', den we're gonna need some form of defence...

We're runnin' out of time"

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The guys exchanged expressions of boredom. Kim and Misty had left them to their own devices in the lounge while they went off to coo aimlessly over Pokémon Princess Dolls. As such, the heat had become so overwhelming for the trio that they had practically stripped down to their underwear, though Ash still insisted upon wearing his Pokémon League cap.

"And to think I could have been in Mahogany Town right now..." the trainer complained miserably, sinking further and further into the softness of the surrounding cushions while Pikachu lazed upon the sofa arm.

"Count your blessings, Ash" Brock remarked, though he didn't sound any more cheerful than his companion.

"We're in a classy house with free food and a bed for the night... what more could you ask for?" James asked, looking slightly insulted that Ash could take such generosity for granted.

"Some fun?" was the dry reply.



"Well...I guess you do have a point there..." James murmured. A few minutes passed, wherein the male figures continued to stare at the walls and up at the ceiling, twiddling their thumbs. James shifted his position on the sofa a little, ending up wincing as something hard jabbed into his backside. Sliding his hand under his legs, the stunted figure's face lit up as he discovered the discomfort had been due to a remote control that had become misplaced.

"I do believe..." he began. "That I've just found our 'fun'"

"A remote?" Brock inquired, raising an eyebrow. James scanned the multitudes of buttons tentatively.

"Seems to be one of those multi-device kinds" he explained. "One of these buttons is bound to operate a TV"

"*What* TV?" Ash protested, as Pikachu sat up and sniffed the air. James prodded one of the buttons on the remote and a loud whirr ensued. Slowly but surely, a part of the white wall in front of the sofa slid aside to reveal a massive television screen. Underneath this gargantuan display sat a video games console.

"Well I never.." Brock gasped, as Ash just sat there with his mouth wide open. James chuckled to himself, leaping from the sofa and approaching the console.

"Now lets see how this beauty works"



## ancient data

"Comeoncomeoncomeonnnn!" Ash jabbered at the screen, as he swung his controller from side to side. Pikachu chanted encouragingly from his shoulder while Brock and James' faces were pictures of utter concentration.

The victory music sounded, and it was James who jumped up and did an amusing little dance on the mat.

"Woohoo!" he cheered. "I won, I won I won! In your face, you tw-" He cut off and grinned sheepishly as he noticed Ash and Brock's narrowed glares. Ash stood up sulkily before snatching the remote control from James' side.

"It's just a stupid game anyway," he muttered, pressing several buttons at once in an attempt to shut the console down. Instead of this happening however, the part of the sofa Ash and Brock had been sitting upon flipped outward before returning to its original position; engulfing the surprised young men in the process. Arms and legs flailed in all directions while muffled but nonetheless desperate-sounding requests for assistance were heard emanating from below the sofa cushions. James couldn't help but stand and stare at this utterly ridiculous sight.

"*What* are you doing?" a familiar voice inquired from not too far away. James swung round to see young Jessie standing in the lounge archway with an amused smirk on her face. He then looked down at

himself, realising the woman's expression was most likely due to the fact he was stripped down to his underwear, and began to blush silently.

"Uh...I was...sorta hot..." he mumbled.

"Either way, with the twerps rightfully contained my request will be so much easier to deliver," Jessie remarked, motioning for James to approach her. He moved forward, lowering his voice as he did so.

"Request?"

"Yes. I have found us an excellent way of entering that secret vault," the female figure relayed casually. "Her name is Ruby; I believe you two have met."

"How did you know?" James spluttered, blushing all over again.

"Let's just say we happened to have a brief encounter shortly after I found out what you'd been trying to tell me," Jessie remarked without batting an eyelid. "She's quite attached to you, and as such you have the power to manipulate the unsuspecting fool into giving you access to whatever treasures they're hiding"

"But..." James began. "Ruby was going to try and find out the antidote for this spring water!"

"That's a sacrifice we'll just have to make, James," Jessie persisted. "Meowth is perfectly capable of getting that information for us; we need Ruby to open that vault. And you're the only one with the means to persuade her."

James shuffled uncomfortably as he listened to the insistent cries from amongst the sofa for a moment. But Jessie's gaze was far too intent to be disregarded; it was obvious there would be no

changing her mind about this. Instead he comforted himself in the fact there was no harm in just looking.

"Okay," he murmured. "I'll do it."

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Ruby had been quietly studying some reference materials when she heard a faint tap upon her bedroom door. Turning around in partial surprise, the woman's face was overcome with joy upon sight of a tall, lavender-haired male figure poised awkwardly in the doorway wrapped in a sheet.

"Don't suppose your father would have anything I could borrow to wear?" he asked in lowered tones. Ruby was quick to direct her visitor to Jonathan's wardrobe.

"So what happened?" she inquired, allowing herself a tiny giggle for her own pleasure. "How come you're adult again? Did Kim squirt you with her water gun or something?"

"I just wanted to stretch my legs," James replied, perusing the contents of the rack before tentatively selecting yet another bathrobe. And in response to Ruby's raised eyebrows over his choice of outfit he remarked, "Well there's no point in getting dressed up all fancy when I'll just be a kid again in half an hour or so."

Ruby turned away and bit her lip, feeling such a statement had been directed at her.

"I... I'm sorry I haven't managed to discover the spring water antidote yet," she murmured. James took this chance to slip the

bathrobe around him before placing a hand upon the woman's shoulder.

"It's okay, Ruby," he smiled patiently. "I can imagine it won't be that easy a cure to find."

"But surely there's something I could do for you in the meantime" the woman insisted, unhappy with such a simple dismissal.

"As a matter of fact, there *is* something I wanted to know," James responded with a nod. "Is collecting rare pokémon your father's occupation?"

"Nah, that's more of a hobby," Ruby told him. "Dad's field of experience lies in archaeology. Of course his 'fame' happened mostly as a result of working with Professor Hale for so long."

"'Mostly'?" James repeated with growing interest.

"Yes, the other reason for his popularity is due to the particular subject matter he studies," Ruby explained, fishing about in her pocket before bringing out a card engraved with varying gold marks.

"Here. It'll make much more sense if I *show you* what I'm talking about."

A short walk brought Ruby and James to a metallic-looking door which looked for all the world like it belonged upon a spaceship and not inside the walls of a mansion. In one fluid movement Ruby swiped the card in her hand through a reader installed beside the door, causing the red light upon it to turn green. James watched the door slide upward before him, wincing as the odd-coloured light from within the room bathed Ruby and himself in a faint green glow. Once his eyes

had adjusted to the atmosphere, James' mouth slowly dropped open at the sight that lay before him.

The room was filled with 6 large rectangular chambers, each split into 9 smaller compartments. Peering over the translucent surface of one of the chambers, James' expression became even more awestruck once he noticed the jagged objects bearing unusual patterns that lay within. Team Rocket training meant he already knew what kind of ancient artefacts he was dealing with. No wonder Butch and Cassidy were so interested in raiding this place! But of course, regardless of his advanced knowledge base there were still gaps that needed filling. James set about feigning ignorance in his attempt to accomplish this.

"Your father collects rocks?" he blinked. Ruby couldn't help but chuckle at the man's expression.

"Not just any old rocks," she smiled, sliding up beside him and placing a hand upon the surface of the chamber. "Datenovo. 'Pokémon Fossils' to you and me. Had you ever wondered how some scientists have managed to generate live pokémon from these seemingly dead pieces of rock?"

James nodded, gaining immense interest. Team Rocket may have taught him what such artefacts were capable of but he was still unaware as to their origin and true purpose.

"It's because they are man-made; designed to store genetic data, kinda like ancient computer disks," Ruby explained. "They were created by members of an advanced civilisation known as the Pokémopolitans in an attempt to make stronger and more destructive forms of life. Each one contains the DNA from a particularly powerful pokémon specie, most of which have become extinct or exceedingly

rare in recent years."

"Pokémopolitan?," James remarked, scratching the back of his head. "Sounds like some kind of ice cream. But the potential of those Datenvo sure sounds big"

"Exactly," Ruby said sternly. "In the wrong hands, the Datenvo would be very dangerous. That is why dad keeps his finds here inside the mansion under tight security. Not even *I* have the access codes to these storage units."

James smiled to himself. Maybe hearing how difficult it would be to obtain what she was after might be enough to put Jessie off attempting to do so.

Knowing her though, it probably wouldn't.

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The rays of the setting sun broke through the fibres of the bedroom curtains, lighting up the reaches of Kim's bedroom where at one end the owner and her orange-haired companion were currently involved in a discussion about water pokémon. Over the opposite side of the room, Jessie stretched her youthful form out upon Kim's bed with a satisfied sigh. The soft mattress was a welcome break from the harsh and often lumpy ground she was so used to sleeping upon, and the fluffy pillows propping up her head were divine.

"Being a kid again is pretty cushy," she murmured to no one in particular. "No worries, no responsibilities..."

Her sentence was crushed into a small gasp as out of nowhere

a huge blue figure appeared and consequently threw its mountainous bulk over her tiny body.

"Wobbbbbbbuffet!" it exclaimed cheerily, causing Misty and Kim to swing round in alarm. Once the former had seen what had caused the disturbance, however, she turned the latter's attention back to more important matters of conversation.

"...no respect..." Jessie finished grouchily, shoving her over-enthusiastic pokémon aside and sitting up. Wobuffet responded by graciously showering Kim's pillow with Pokéballs. "How'd you get back here anyway?"

In answer, a furry feline countenance popped up by the slightly opened window. It bore a noticeably panicked expression and it was obvious that it didn't wish to be noticed by either Misty or Kim at this moment in time. Rolling her eyes and recalling Wobuffet to his Pokéball, Jessie motioned for the figure to wait downstairs and silently slipped from Kim's room.

"Why the face, Meowth?" she remarked soon after.

"I jus' found out what Butch an' Cassidy had up deir sleeves," the pokémon spluttered worriedly, fidgeting with the garments between his paws. "An' it's somet'ing big. Somet'ing dat could change da whole course o' dis mission."

"Oh it can't possibly be *that* bad," Jessie sniffed.

"It looked ta be some kind o' device used to create a scent dat causes hallucinations," Meowth persisted. "I'm bettin' dey're t'inkin' o' usin' dat t'ing ta distract dose twoips while dey break into dat vault an' steal da treasures inside!"

"Tch," Jessie grumbled, folding her arms. "What an





plans his partner was cooking up.

"It's great, thank you," he agreed, though it wasn't with as much gusto as his partner.

"Are you sure your parents won't mind you staying here tonight?" Kim asked, ushering James into the room as Jessie scrambled onto the top bunk. James snorted in semi-amusement at the thought of his parents giving a thought towards anything he did anymore. If they had ever cared about his well-being in the first place how come they had constantly tried to set a whip-wielding maniacal girl upon him for most of his childhood life?

"Of course not!" Jessie answered brightly with a quick glare at James for his reaction to such an innocent question. "You see...we're orphans."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that," Kim murmured solemnly, imitating the manner in which her father would respond to such things.

"No need to be sorry," James replied. "I'm not."

The figure yelped as Jessie tossed one of the slippers that had been provided with the garishly coloured nightie at his head.

"It was a long time ago; we distract ourselves from that fact by travelling from town to town in search of new pokémon," she explained. Part of the statement was true, but the concept Kim imagined wasn't.

"Sounds real fun!" she exclaimed happily.

"Not as fun as you'd think..." James muttered, recalling the countless butt-kickings, electrocution, poking with pointy bits, chargrilling and all the other trials he, Jessie and Meowth had endured

during their time as Team Rocket members. Jessie raised her hand again and it was clear from the look on her face what she was considering doing with the remaining slipper in it. James ducked defensively and gave a nervous laugh.

"I take that back! It's tons of fun, really!"

"You two are silly," Kim giggled, referring to the lack of sense in her two friends actions. James flinched as he found himself being tucked in by the girl before she retreated to the doorway.

"Goodnight. See you in the morning."

Jessie stared at the ceiling for a few minutes, waiting until the pit-pat of Kim's footsteps could no longer be heard.

"So James..." she began softly. "What did you find in that vault?"

"Nothing important," James lied, hoping such a tactic would put Jessie off. "Butch and Cassidy are wasting their time."

An icy silence ensued. James knew he'd made a big mistake. This, he quickly rectified.

"I mean, unless Pokémon Fossils are important..."

"Of *course* they're important, you dimwit!" Jessie snapped. "Did you never pay attention in our Team Rocket science lessons? Pokémon Fossils contain the means to bring extinct pokémon back to life! We *must* break into that vault before those two perfectionists do so."

"But Jessie..." James whined, engulfing himself in his blanket.

"No buts," came the determined reply from above his head.

"I'm giving those twerps an hour to get to sleep and as soon as they've done so we're heading straight to that vault to get what we came here for."

James peered out from under the covers as this announcement ended and recalled the innocent, naive expression upon Kim's face that she had been wearing just before she left the room. This whole time she had been so blissfully unaware of the sickly scheme that Jessie had been plotting. The resurfacing mental image of that expression melted James' heart. How could they possibly take advantage of such a sweet and kind little kid?

With a tiny withdrawn sigh, James pulled the covers back over his head and went out like a light.

# 9

## CHARITY BEGINS ALONE

James awoke to an odd cold sensation underneath him. Sitting up hurriedly and almost knocking himself out on the underside of the bunk bed above him, the figure bit his lip - sincerely hoping that his return to childhood hadn't meant he'd ended up having an accident on the mattress. His fears were soon quashed once James realised this cold sensation covered his whole body. Reaching a hand across to brush the opposite arm, the figure uttered a slight gasp. He was soaking wet!

"Get up" Jessie hissed from beside the bed as she placed the empty bucket on the floor beside her. She had previously snuck downstairs to retrieve the uniforms from where she had hidden them before returning herself to her proper age and unceremoniously doing the same to her partner. "It's time to get those fossils"

"I'm not going," James grunted, trying to dry himself with his blanket but failing miserably since this was also dripping with water.

"What?" Jessie exclaimed, stepping backwards in surprise.

"You heard me," James mumbled without looking up. "Not. Going. As far as I'm concerned stealing from Kim's father's house after she's been so hospitable to us would be the worst case of ingratitude I can think of. So if you want to do it, fine. But I'm staying here..."

Jessie paused for a moment, watching James sulking in his bunk. Then a dark smirk descended on her face. She had means and



system beside the fossil vault doorway. Soon the duo were inside. Meowth gazed at one of the containment units with great interest as Jessie stood and peered over James' shoulder while the reluctant figure attempted to unlock them.

"Wow, dis professor's collected all sorts o' trinkets," Meowth remarked, clambering up and reading the placards through the glass. "Dome Fossil, Helix Fossil, Root Fossil... . . I wonda what dose contain..."

"Whatever they are, they're bound to be incredibly rare," Jessie smirked. "Not to mention powerful. I mean, why else would an ancient civilisation with advanced technology store their genetic data?"

James? Get a move on!"

"It would be a lot easier if you two weren't jabbering behind my back!" James snapped as he continued to fiddle with the computer interface. The figure was still in a rotten frame of mind from the unorthodox awakening he had received, not to mention the fact he felt most uncomfortable at betraying Kim.

"Sounds like someone got out da wrong side of da bed tonight" Meowth sniggered jokily.

"I wouldn't have got out of the bed at *all* if a certain person hadn't doused me in water," came the muttered response. "Just wanted to enjoy my last few hours of luxury, but it seemed that was too much to ask."

"Ya bet it was," Meowth nodded. "Youse wanted ta stay in bed and miss out on all dis?"

"Actually, I *did*," James grunted, receiving a error noise from the console for his trouble.

"Have youse lost ya marble?" the pokémon exclaimed in surprise. "Tink of da praise we'd get from da Boss!"

There was silence, broken only by an uninterested grunt and the hesitant tapping of James' fingers on the keyboard. It almost looked as if he was trying to stall for time in the hopes that someone might catch him and his associates in the act. Getting blasted off felt like a far better deal than ransacking the place whose inhabitants had given them so much.

"If we didn't take da goods we'd nevah get a promotion or a raise!" Meowth persisted.

"Oh well, you win some, you lose some," the man shrugged. The pokémon tried a last resort.

"There'd be no 'all-you-can-eat' buffets."

"I could live without it" James murmured. "After all I've been living low for so long it wouldn't matter if I didn't get all that stuff any more"

"Okay, he's cracked," Meowth groaned, looking to Jessie for an explanation. She had already tagged on to what James was up to and had grabbed the back of his collar to lend the man some forceful verbal motivation. Before she could do so, however, there was a high-pitched whine from up above. Pausing, Jessie and James looked up at the ceiling where a strange dark line had appeared. Before they could make out what was going on the line had moved in a complete rectangular formation and a chunk of the ceiling fell into the vault, directly upon them.

Meowth cried out in alarm and darted behind a nearby containment unit as a pair of familiar figures dropped graciously



through the hole, upon the unconscious bodies of his team-mates.

"How nice of those two to provide a soft landing for us," Cassidy smirked, as she gazed about the room.

"Yeh, s'about time they did something useful," Butch agreed, removing a complicated device from his belt and placing it upon the computer console. With a bleep the device whirred into action as it began to calculate the security code.

"Seems they were trying to beat us to the prizes" Cassidy sighed overdramatically.

"I'm amused that they thought they even had a chance of gettin' them without the proper equipment," Butch chuckled, shaking his head. "What shall I do with `em Cass?"

"Oh, I don't know," the yellow-haired woman pondered. "How about locking them in a small, dark room where no one will find them? And while you're at it, find the sleeping quarters and set up the Adenoid Stimulatory Fabrication Unit nearby. We can't have any further distraction."

"Gotcha," Butch nodded, before scanning the room again with a puzzled look upon his face. "Where do you think that irritatin' cat pokémon of theirs got to?"

"It probably ran away like the coward that it is," Cassidy remarked as her partner carelessly pulled the limp bodies of the white-suited duo from under the debris by their legs. "Not that it matters anyway. We have everything under control and no one shall be able to stop us, not with the latest technology Professor Nanba's department came up with. Now go and get rid of that garbage, Butch.

We have work to do."

# 10

## GUIT BUGGING ME!

Misty fidgeted in a state of semi-consciousness. Part of her mind longed to slip back into a deeper sleep but the majority was giving off all manner of alarm signals, urging the girl to take a look around the room. Eventually she obeyed, slowly levering herself up into a sitting position before rubbing at her eyes and opening them. It took a few moments to adjust to the darkness; Misty waited in silence for the surroundings to draw into some sort of clarity.

Then she caught sight of a green patterned six-legged object upon her legs. Ash, Brock, Pikachu and Togepi were consequently blasted awake by a loud scream.

"There was a bug! There was a bug on meeee!" Misty exclaimed, while Pikachu tried to comfort Togepi after the egg-shaped pokémon had become distressed from a combination of his owner's panic and the unceremonious wake-up call.

"You must have been having a nightmare," Brock mumbled, while Ash staggering from his bed and blearily wandered toward the wall before fumbling for the light switch. "How on earth would any bug pokémon get in he-"

Light flooded into the room, and the trio and their two pokémon accomplices gazed up in utter horror at what they saw. The walls were

covered in a writhing mass of spinarak, all jostling for space as they prepared to spin their webs across the bedroom.

This was all Misty could take. With another blood-curdling yell she leapt from her bed, snatching Togepi up into the air before dashing out of the door. Brock was quick to follow with Ash and Pikachu in hot pursuit. A short distance down the corridor, Kim stood clasping Nico tightly and looking most alarmed at the kakuna that were attached to the ceiling.

Ruby stepped from her room only to be hit with several stones of Brock who had hurriedly rushed to the woman's aid. After picking herself from the floor she quickly surveyed the scene.

"Wh-what's going on?" Misty stammered at Ruby, twitching her head from left to right in her fervent attempts to make sure nothing else was on her. "Why all these bug pokémon all of a sudden?"

"I don't know," Ruby frowned, motioning for her sister to approach so she could keep her safe. "But however they got in here, we need to get them *out*."

"I got a cyndaquil!" Ash announced proudly. "If there's anything that bug pokémon hate, it's fire."

"And houses don't stand up too well against that kind of thing either," Brock remarked. "Our options are pretty limited if we want to keep this place in tact."

Misty interrupted the discussion with a yelp of terror, pointing a shaking hand out over the heads of her associates. Not too far away a swarm of angered beedrill hovered, ready for pursuit.

"RUN!" the water pokémon trainer screeched, shutting her eyes tight and dashing in the opposite direction. Ruby, Kim and Brock didn't hesitate to follow, but Ash took a different stance. Thrusting his arm out toward the beedrill, he gave Pikachu the order to shock them all senseless. With a nod of recognition the electric pokémon moved forward and released a powerful thunderbolt down the corridor.

Ash grinned triumphantly to himself as the electricity engulfed the beedrill swarm with a sharp crackle, shattering some of the ceiling bulbs in the process. But once the light dimmed, the poison type bug pokémon appeared completely unharmed, though no happier as a result of such an assault. Ash and Pikachu yelled as they were barraged with several rounds of Poison Sting. This unexpected invulnerability spooked the trainer so much that he couldn't help but turn tail and run from the scene with Pikachu in tow. Soon the rest of the group drew back into his sights.

"This is crazy!" Ash exclaimed. "First a room full of spinarak and then beedrill that aren't affected by electricity... I gotta be imagining things!"

Brock flinched and skidded to a halt, causing Ruby, Kim and Ash to do the same.

"Hold on," he muttered in the trainer's direction. "You might be on to something here."

"Wait up, Misty!" Kim called down the corridor. The remainder of the group looked up, realising they were missing a member, and uttered a gasp as a second swarm of beedrill rounded the corner, directly entering Misty's path. Skidding to a halt upon hearing Kim's exclamation, the water pokémon trainer opened her eyes and was confronted with a most horrific sight. She was staring *through* a

beedrill!

The others looked on in astonishment and deep confusion as Misty stood paralysed with fear amongst the beedrill swarm. Somehow one of the bug pokémon had become displaced around the girl's head, its body having become semi-transparent in the process.

"It's a hallucination!" Ruby concluded angrily, while Ash rubbed his shoulders and muttered it was a rather painful hallucination.

"I don't care *what* it is!" Misty screamed. "Just make it GO AWAY!"

"I'd love to, but I don't have any pokémon of capable of seeing through hallucinations," Ruby groaned. Ash leapt to the rescue, throwing one of his Pokéballs toward the beedrill.

"Noctowl, use foresight!"

With a loud trill, the light brown coloured bird pokémon appeared from the light with its eyes glowing red. But nothing happened. This didn't placate Misty in the slightest.

"What kind of messed up hallucination *is* this?" she bellowed.

"Obviously not one affecting the eyes," Ruby commented. "Otherwise Noctowl's foresight should have made those bug pokémon disappear"

"Who said it would have to affect the eyes directly?" Brock exclaimed, striking another idea. "Remember that time in ShikaVille and how that one stantler managed to fool us into thinking there was a whole herd of its kind? This hallucination must be caused in the same way; through the distribution of some mind-altering scent!"

"Cover up your nose and mouth," Ruby told her younger sister, while Ash ordered Noctowl to use Gust. Misty staggered slightly before falling to the ground as a result of the buffeting winds. Once she had scrambled back to her feet the girl was overjoyed to find the beedrill swarms and kakuna attached to the ceiling of the corridor were beginning to fade from sight.

"Thank goodness..." Misty sighed heavily, while Ruby passed her and headed round the corner without a word. Kim followed, looking somewhat worried.

"What's going on, sis?" she asked softly, keeping Nico close.

"We have to visit dad's vault," came the simple reply. "I got the feeling there's trouble going on in there."

The trio of trainers exchanged withering looks as they heard this. They were pretty certain of whom happened to be causing the trouble. However, the source of the trouble they happened to be considering were currently suffering from a spot of trouble of their own.

"See? What did I tell you?" James remarked casually. "Nothing good would come of this, and I was right."

"Shut up, James," Jessie muttered irritably, struggling to free her wrists. The duo had recently regained consciousness to find themselves bound together, back to back, in a small boiler room with only the light from the doorway to see by. This situation alone was bad enough without having James harping on about how right he had been. "There's got to be a way out of this."

"You're not going to *still* try and steal those fossils Jess...are

you?" James whined, turning his face with its pleading expression toward his partner. Jessie looked up with a furious glare but it was quick to melt away from a mixture of resignation and despair.

"Ok. You win," she sniffed finally. "I won't take the fossils. But neither am I going to let Cassidy get away with them either. She has no right to the credit."

"Fine with me" James beamed. He was just happy Jessie had cooperated with his wishes for once.

"Now to figure a plan of escape," Jessie announced, casting her gaze about the room once more. So did James, but after five minutes of careful scrutiny the pair still came to the same conclusion.

"There's no exit except the door, Jess. Besides...we need to break out of these ropes first."

"I know that, genius!" Jessie snapped. "But we're tied together really tightly, it's not like we can slip out of them..." A sly smile darkened her face as she spotted the massive cast iron boiler that stood in the corner, directly in front of her companion. "...or can we?"

"No, we can't" James shook his head. "You just said so yourself"

"James? Kick the pipe that's running into that boiler.."

"Whatever for?" the man exclaimed confusedly. "How's that going to get us out of here?"

"Never mind about that!" Jessie yelled, making James wince. "Just do as I say! And do it hard!"

Lifting his leg as high as he could manage James slammed the

heel end of his boot full force into the pipe. It shifted slightly with a groan, then broke apart in the middle, sending a massive burst of steam into the room which cascaded over the two adults, making them cough furiously.

“Aaaagh!” James yelled. “That’s boiling!”

“Perfect” Jessie smirked, but the hissing of the pipe drowned out her singular statement.

“What are you trying to do?” her partner continued angrily, trying to see through the steam. “Fry us to death?”

He then cut off and began to groan softly, as a vaguely familiar but extremely odd feeling enveloped his body. It felt as if someone had decided to wrap the man in clingfilm before bundling him into a lift that was now plummeting several storeys. James toppled sideways, overcome by the disorientation and almost suffocating tightness, and as his head hit the floor he felt a great surge of energy from within. That could only mean one thing; he had regained his youth once more. And with childhood came a vast difference in size. James had shrunk so much the ropes were no longer tight about his wrists and had fallen into disarray about him.

Looking up from his podgy little hand James saw, through the thinning steam, young Jessie was busy occupied in tying her baggy skirt together with one of her earrings to keep it around her waist. He watched with interest as she completed her task and as Jessie removed her hands James couldn’t help giggling at the sight of her efforts. The earring was placed in such a position that it looked like a ridiculous green bobtail on her rear. Jessie swung round upon hearing James’ amused noises and growled menacingly, which made him deathly quiet.



"Hurry up" she snapped. "There's no time to lose, get those clothes into some sort of order!"

With that grumpy statement Jessie moved toward the boiler room door and began to yell for help. Leaping to his feet James stepped out of the oversized boots and trousers and used Jessie's remaining earring to see to his underwear. When he had finished all it looked like he was wearing was his dark grey shirt, which managed to reach his knees.

"All done!" he announced. "That was a real clever idea, using the hot steam to dry us off like that Jess...but the door's still locked"

"It's no good," the girl muttered, ignoring James' statement. "Plain old shouting isn't audible. We need something louder."

Suddenly a nasty smirk emerged upon Jessie's face. James frowned in puzzlement at this, but he soon took on a completely new expression as Jessie turned and shoved him sharply to the ground with a loud thud.

"Whuh-what did you do that for?" the boy exclaimed brokenly as he looked up again. Even though James was furious at such treatment the onset of tears and the fact his lower lip was trembling had made the statement sound purely pathetic.

"We need a noise loud enough for those twerps to hear." Jessie replied matter-of-factly. "So start with the crying, James"

"Why don't *you* start crying?" the boy retorted, leaning forward to lever himself upright while managing to grasp back some of his dignity. It wasn't for long.

"You'd rather *I* ended up looking grotesquely puffy-eyed? Shame on you!" Jessie exclaimed, stomping firmly upon her partner's

hand. The young figure opened his mouth and screamed so loud that Jessie staggered backwards in shock. As the pressure was released from the appendage James lifted his arm and clasped it shakily to his chest, tears cascading down his face.

"Th-that was mean!" he managed to splutter between his sobs. "You owe me, Jessie."

The girl opened her mouth, about to tell James that it was in fact he that owed her a great deal for begging her not to steal Professor Schuyler's fossils, when the boiler room door was promptly unlocked and flung open.

"What are you guys doing in here?" Kim exclaimed with faint amusement, while the trio pondered over the same thing and Ruby glowered in Jessie's direction.

"And why is James crying?" the woman concluded.

"We got captured and locked in here by these two nasty people in black clothes with a big red R on the front," Jessie responded with mock upset. It was clear to see that she was enjoying herself. "One was a woman with yellow hair and a face like a sneasel, the other one was a man with green hair who sounded like a politoed! James is crying because he got scared of the dark."

"I did not!" James protested. Ruby's eyes widened in horror.

"A big red R?" she echoed. "They've got to be members of Team Rocket!"

"You've met them before?" Brock inquired, while Ash and Misty continued to scowl in Jessie and James' direction. The former returned the expression while the latter grinned sheepishly and wished for all the world that he had a tissue.

"No, but my dad has a couple of times during his expeditions," Ruby said, turning round and continuing down the corridor. "He explained who Team Rocket were and what their members wore, so neither Kim or I would be caught out should we ever have to face them. Looks like the time has finally come."

"Drama queen," Jessie rolled her eyes before stepping out into the corridor. Ruby knelt down beside her younger sister.

"Kim, go back to your room until I return," she instructed.

"That's not fair!" the girl exclaimed angrily. "Just because I'm younger than you doesn't mean I can't help save daddy's treasures! And besides..." She shuffled closer to Ruby before hugging the woman tightly and uttering a slight sob. "I'm scared...I don't wanna be alone..."

"I'll make sure nothing happens to her, Ruby," Brock announced in chivalrous tones.

"And we'll help you stop those Team Rocket members too," Ash piped up.

"Yeah, from the sounds of the description I'm pretty sure we've met them before," Misty agreed.

"Then hopefully you'll know the way they fight, too," Ruby smiled faintly. "Come on then, everyone. Let's go!"



## SHORTCOMINGS

"The N-LOKR will have the containment security disabled in one more minute, Cass" Butch murmured, as he intently watched the device at work upon the computer console.

"Excellent" Cassidy grinned, rubbing her hands together in satisfaction. With Jessie and James out of the way and the remaining occupants of the mansion in a state of hallucination-induced delirium, the fossil haul was as good as hers.

Or so she thought. A moment later a high-pitched, angered yell was heard from the vault doorway. Cassidy stiffened in alarm as a small girl with magenta hair and noticeably oversized clothing stormed into view. Despite the figure's size, the darkened expression upon her face caused the child to look unsettlingly intimidating.

Before either Team Rocket Elite could utter a word, a lavender-haired boy skidded into the room. His bare feet were unable to keep a grip upon the shiny tiled floor; as a result he ended up spiralling across it and slamming into Butch's legs, throwing the surprised man forward.

"Urgh! Get off me, Buhtch!" the boy squealed as he wriggled. Part of the baggy shirt he was wearing had ended up becoming trapped under the Elite's fallen body.

"The name's *Butch*!" he snapped, swiftly levering himself upright. Then the man flinched; the inaccurate exclamation was very

familiar. He glared down at the youth that had managed to remove his clothing and was now trying to look defiant. Now he thought about it, the similarity of these stunted intruders to their long-term rivals Jessie and James was unmistakable.

"Hmmm...it seems you two have been *downsized*" Cassidy murmured craftily, having noticed this also. Butch growled, picking up James in one swift movement and leaving him to dangle in the man's grip like a caught magikarp. "Didn't you ever learn to read?"

"We're not letting you get away with this!" Jessie exclaimed, ignoring the blatant stab at her mistaken bathing in the Jyngu Spring.

"Oh yeah?" Cassidy almost choked for laughter as Kim and the others arrived at the scene.

"Nice one, pipsqueaks," Butch chuckled. "You weren't any match for us before. What makes you think you can beat us *now*?"

As a demonstration, the emerald-haired man flicked his arm forward, sending James flying across the room. James closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, expecting a very painful impact. But then the boy felt himself halted in midair. Upon opening his eyes again, James realised Brock had caught a hold of him before he had a chance to hit the wall.

*The twerps really aren't that bad when they're not intent on charging me full of electricity*, he thought with a grin as he was lowered to the ground again. Misty glowered at the Team Rocket Elites; Jessie and James may have been a persistent source of annoyance but taking advantage of their regressed status in such a way was just downright low. Especially when, for some unknown

reason, the Intermediates had decided to take the side of righteousness.

"You're disgusting!" she spat, but Cassidy dutifully ignored her and continued to aim her attentions at Jessie.

"Fancy working in tandem with children," the woman remarked. "I never thought you could sink any lower than you already had done but I guess you proved me wrong."

"What are they talking about?" Kim asked, looking puzzled. Jessie furrowed her youthful brow in annoyance.

"It's not important," she muttered, gritting her teeth in Cassidy's direction. "No more talking. Lets battle!"

"That's more like it!" Ash exclaimed, grinning and bringing out two of his Pokéballs. But Ruby held them back.

"You can't fight pokémon in here!" she exclaimed. "This room contains some very sensitive equipment; if it gets destroyed..."

"We understand," Brock nodded, moving toward Ash and pushing the trainer's raised arms down by his sides. "Don't we, Ash?"

"Awww..." the adolescent whined in response. It was obvious that despite understanding, he didn't appreciate the fact his show of bravado had been cut short. The device behind Butch bleeped, having completed the process of unlocking all the fossil containment units.

"Well we'd love to hang around and chat, but time is of the essence," Cassidy remarked, slipping on a gas mask and lifting one of the unit lids. "So here's an essence that I'm sure you'll all enjoy!"

Brock and Ruby dashed forward to intervene only to be

engulfed in a thick violet plume from the Adenoid Stimulatory Fabrication Unit in Butch's gloved hands. Jessie gasped and hurriedly covered up her mouth and nose, but the air was now so thick with modified stantler scent that she was having trouble seeing much at all. Ash coughed and scrabbled for the Pokéball containing Noctowl that was on his belt, then someone's hand grasped his arm tightly. Looking up in alarm, the trainer gasped as he took in the sight of a tall, well-built figure with slightly ruffled dark brown hair dressed in a tauros-hide jacket and jeans.

"D-dad?"

"Back down, Ash," the figure boomed. "These criminals are too strong for you."

"What do you mean?" Ash spluttered. "I've fought them before! I drove them away!"

"And only because of that pikachu by your side," came the stone cold response. "How would you have fared without? Face it, Ash... that pikachu has been the main reason for what 'successes' you've had."

"No..." the trainer felt his knees beginning to weaken as his voice wobbled. How could the one person he'd respected and sought praise from strike him down in such a way.

"You're a disappointment to your father," the figure continued regardless. "Lazy, short-sighted and far too reliant upon luck. I suppose you didn't even reach the top five in the Indigo League Tournament. You'll never reach my standards as a Pokémon Trainer."

"I can do better! I promise!" Ash pleaded. But the figure was not listening. Instead, he heaved a dispirited sigh and began to walk

off.

Jessie winced as she felt the effects of the stantler scent beginning to sink in. A short distance away Ash was crumpled upon the tiles sobbing with his head in his hands while Brock was backed up against a wall jabbering frantically at nothing in particular. Ruby and Kim clung to each other with looks of utmost terror upon their faces, Misty screamed about non-existent gyarados and James ran around in circles yelling that he seriously didn't want to get married.

Hanging her head with a slight groan, Jessie's eyes shot wide open as she noticed tufts of magenta scattered about her feet. Raising her hands upward, the youthful figure uttered a horrific yell upon discovering the worst thing possible had happened. Her beautiful long hair had been severed from her head, leaving nothing but a stomach-churning stubble to greet her fingertips.

Cassidy laughed musically as she watched this ridiculous scenario unfold. Each of their victims was trapped in a world of their own, completely oblivious to reality and no longer a threat to them.

"Got the lot, Cass," Butch announced, hauling the sack filled with fossils over his shoulder.

"Good," came the simple reply. "Now let's get out of here, before that stantler scent gets up my nose too."

Suddenly a torrent of icy water came out of nowhere, raining down upon Butch and Cassidy's heads and causing them to cry out in shock. A creamy coloured feline pokémon wearing a gas mask and holding a bucket soon followed; leaping through the hole in the ceiling the Team Rocket Elites had made earlier.



"Nyahah!" it exclaimed, falling into fits of laughter shortly afterward.

"You little...!" Cassidy began vehemently in the creature's direction, then she stopped at the sound of her own voice. It had altered slightly. She then took a look at her partner, and screeched wildly. "Your...your *hair!*"

"Your *face!*" Butch choked. The duo had, by some twist of fate, aged almost forty years. Cassidy had gained an array of deep facial wrinkles and Butch had an unsightly bald spot where his hair had left the top of his head, not to mention an equally unsightly potbelly.

"My beautiful body!" the two wailed in unison as they gazed down at themselves, collapsing against one another with dramatic sobbing. Meowth took this opportunity to search for the vault's air conditioning system and turn it on to its highest setting. As soon as the stantler scent had been filtered from the room, the panicking occupants came to their senses. Ruby was quick to call the Police while Brock, Misty and Ash watched over Butch and Cassidy while trying to suppress bouts of sniggering. But it was obvious the Elites weren't concerned with escape in the slightest; even when the officers arrived to arrest them they were far too busy blubbering about their innate ugliness to care.

"What just happened there?" Misty inquired, once the commotion was over and the fossils had been returned to their re-secured cabinets. "How come those two looked so old?"

"I can only think of one explanation," Ruby groaned. "Jyngu spring water."

"Jungle what?" Ash blinked.

"Water from the Jyngu Spring situated outside Prism Town has most unusual qualities," Ruby explained. "But I had only been aware of it's ability to restore the youth of those who bathed in it, if only temporarily. The spring water's greatest flaw was that if the user got immersed in ordinary water, they would return to their rightful age. As a result Prism Town Council declared the spring an out of bounds area,"

Brock's face had taken on a fiendish expression; it was more than apparent that he was plotting something. Kim, on the other hand, looked most upset having been more concerned with the sudden disappearance of her newfound friends Jessie and James. Ruby noticed her younger sister's expression and knelt down again to try to comfort her.

"They've probably gone back to bed," she told Kim calmly. "It's been an eventful night, after all. And it's best we *all* get some rest,"

"They could have at least said goodnight," Kim muttered, picking up Nico yet again. Ruby smiled sadly and gave a nod; she knew that with an idea of the spring antidote in his head James or his loud-mouthed companion wouldn't be around for much longer.

But how could she possibly tell Kim that?

12

## ENIGMATIC STANDPOINT

"WHAT?"

James winced as Meowth found himself assaulted by Jessie's loud infuriated exclamation. The trio had slipped from the vault and into their allocated sleeping quarters shortly after Butch and Cassidy's unexpected ageing, but the news Meowth had for his currently regressed human companions was hardly the kind they wanted to hear.

"I'm sorry, Jess," the feline pokémon murmured, scratching the back of his head. "I jus' can't find any antidote to dat spring water."

"You can't have been looking hard enough!" Jessie exclaimed, grasping Meowth by the shoulders as her face became noticeably desperate. "There's got to be some way to get my womanhood back, there's *got* to be!"

The pokémon said nothing. Jessie couldn't help but let out a tiny sob at his lack of response. Desperately searching for someone other than herself to blame her glance alighted upon James' stunted form that had been poised silently in the doorway the whole time.

"And you! How can you be so calm amongst all this?"

"Ruby may know of places to look for an antidote that Meowth hasn't thought of," James replied with a gentle smile. Jessie's dampened face brightened upon hearing this, but her partner simply

waved an arm in silent instruction toward the bunk bed. "You two try and get some sleep, okay? I'll be back once I've exercised my 'means of persuasion'."

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Once Kim was safely tucked up in bed and her trio of somewhat shaken house guests had been coaxed back to their room, Ruby returned to her location of solitude. But she just couldn't bring herself to try and sleep. Despite Butch and Cassidy having been arrested and the fossils placed back in their reinforced containers, something was deeply bothering her.

A light tap was heard upon her bedroom door. Ruby looked round, half-expecting to see Kim standing there hopefully awaiting a drink of warm milk. Instead it was James, back to his normal age and clothed in the grey undershirt and white trousers from his Team Rocket uniform. When the woman saw who it was she couldn't bring herself to gaze for long; turning her head away before cradling it in her arms upon the desk.

"Whatever's the matter?" James inquired, blinking in puzzlement as he approached. Ruby flinched from his gesture of intended comfort.

"Why were you *really* here, James?" she inquired, a cold tone in her voice. The man removed his hand suddenly, feeling his chest starting to tighten. "I heard those Rocket agents," Ruby continued, aware of the reaction. "They knew your names. Have you met before, by any chance?"

James heaved a sigh. It was obvious there was no easy way to back out of this situation.

"Yes," he murmured after a long silence. "Truth is I work for Team Rocket too, as do Jessie and Meowth. And I admit, once Jessie had heard of what was inside this mansion she was adamant to steal it just as Butch and Cassidy attempted to. But I persuaded her not to do such a thing; I mean, taking from people who had been so kind to us just wouldn't have been right!"

"And you think stealing from *others* would be okay?" Ruby snapped, swinging round and glaring the perturbed man straight in the eyes. James' mouth opened a little way but no words managed to escape. Instead, he lowered his gaze toward the carpet and looked noticeably ashamed. Ruby's visage softened also as she glanced back at James with much disappointment. "You seem like such a nice guy. Why on earth would you want to associate yourself with such a corrupt organization?"

"We all do dumb things in our youth," James responded quietly. "Back then, I was rebellious and felt I had something to prove to the world. When I signed up to Team Rocket I thought I could simply leave if things didn't go my way. How foolish I was..."

"So you're bound there by oath?" Ruby asked. The man gave a slight nod.

"If I tried to escape they would hunt me down and eliminate me, for they could not allow any operatives to side with righteousness and use their knowledge to help shut Team Rocket down. And in the meantime I have to keep 'doing my duty', or at least *looking* as if I am. If word got back to the Boss that I was neglecting it, then the very same fate would befall me."

"I never realised..." Ruby began, trailing off as she stared sadly into space. Just how many Team Rocket operatives were in James' boots; drafted into the organization out of ignorance or against their will? Preventing himself or his team mates from stealing her father's fossils had in fact been a great risk on all their lives. And yet they had done so out of the kindness of their hearts. Ruby began to smile to herself.

"James?"

"Mm-hmm?" came the dispirited grunt.

"Thank you," the woman said, throwing her arms around the man's shoulders and hugging him tightly. James began to blush deeply at this unexpected affection.

"I do what I can," he remarked with a nervous chuckle. "So... would you still deem me worthy of helping?"

Confused silence resumed, only broken by the slight rustle as James shifted himself awkwardly on the bed until Ruby retracted her embrace. Her face fell as she realised what James was referring to.

"Of *course* I still want to help you," she exclaimed. "And I searched all over Prism Town. But everyone I asked whom I figured would know something about the Jyngu Spring told me the same answer. That there is no antidote."

"No...antidote?" James repeated, his body beginning to shake slightly out of a mixture of despair and frustration. This made Ruby's expression all the more miserable.

"I'm so sorry..." she uttered brokenly, putting her head in her hands. But there was no reply. James had already left.

\*\*\*~\*\*~\*\*\*~\*\*~\*\*\*~\*\*~\*\*\*~\*\*~\*\*\*

Not too far away from the commotion of Prism Town's early morning shoppers the slightly dampened duo and their feline pokémon companion sat on a bench and gazed mournfully out at the horizon. Feeling that he had overstayed his welcome James was quick to make his exit without a farewell, prompting Jessie and Meowth to follow. None of the figures were making conversation for various reasons; Jessie was furious at James and Meowth for being unable to find her an antidote, not to mention miserable at the fact she had left without getting to take Kim's Princess Doll doubles with her. James was furious at Jessie for having coaxed him into the dreaded spring in the first place and the thought of continuously having to douse himself in water to maintain his manhood wasn't sounding appealing to him in the slightest. Meowth was just furious that his human companions had yet again denied him a satisfying meal by leaving before breakfast.

"So now what we gonna do?" he muttered, after what seemed like hours of silence. "We're still broke, I'm still starvin', and we're still failures – at least in da Boss' eyes."

Jessie frowned and opened her mouth, about to deliver a harsh retaliation when a small voice was heard across the town square. The trio looked up to see a small figure dashing up the path toward them with a satchel slung over her shoulder and a Ditto atop her head. Upon recognizing it as being Kim, Jessie and James' faces began looking somewhat worried. They stood up in unison, about to dash from sight.

"Hey, don't go!" Kim called, waving her arm. The trio paused

hesitantly as the girl skittered up beside them, panting. "Ruby told me everything..."

"I see," James murmured. "Well, we'll understand if you hate us now."

"And why would I?" Kim blinked, somewhat puzzled.

"Because we weren't the nice playmates you wanted," Jessie sniffed, folding her arms. "Just big, bad grown-ups."

"I don't care if you're grown-ups," Kim shrugged, reaching into her satchel. "You still played with me, and stopped those nasty guys stealing my dad's stuff. You're the bestest friends I could have ever asked for!"

By this time the girl had removed a large plastic bag and handed it to Jessie. She took a look within and her face immediately brightened with happiness at what she saw.

"Are *all* these for me?"

"Uh-huh" Kim nodded, as Jessie gazed pleasantly at the Princess Dolls, picking them out and examining them by the sunlight, one by one. She felt like she could throw her arms around the girl and give her a hug, but she refrained from it. After all, it was far too risky for a woman such as herself with a cold reputation to maintain to react in such a way.

"Thank you Kim" she simply replied.

Meowth muttered under his breath as his empty stomach gurgled loudly in protest. He soon found himself reeling backwards as Kim grasped him round the waist and squeezed him tightly, before handing the feline a plate Remoraid Surprise wrapped in plastic film.



"You're the most adorable pokémon I've ever seen!" she gushed. Meowth was quick to slice the film to shreds before delving noisily into his meal. James couldn't help but chuckle at this, if with some noticeable sadness. Kim glanced up at him, a wide smirk upon her face.

"Ruby sent you this," she giggled, handing James a small box before giving a funny little bow as means of farewell and running back toward the mansion. "I had so much fun... come back soon!"

"Dat kid had good taste," Meowth grinned, licking his paw as the trio left Prism Town and headed up the dirt track toward their next destination. Jessie put the last of her Princess Dolls into her Phasepack for the time being, intrigued by the deeply warm smile James had been aiming at the piece of handwritten paper in his hand for the past few minutes.

*Dear James, it said*

*I apologise for the way I may have judged you last night. Your bravery and self-sacrifice have taught me there is more to Team Rocket than meets the eye. I only hope that you shall manage to free yourself from the organization soon. I cannot thank you enough.*

*It seems I was mistaken as to ways of preventing you and your friend from returning to children. My dad told me that he had researched into the properties of the Jyngu Spring some time ago. He explained how Jyngu Spring water worked by infusing the bather's cells with rare minerals which would cause age regression.*

*These minerals will naturally work their way out of the body over a period of weeks, but I shall be able to help speed up the*

*process by means of this formula my dad created to remove such toxins.*

*Don't forget me.*

*Ruby*

"Please don't tell me that's a love letter," Jessie groaned, casting a glance at the tiny bottle in her partner's opposite hand.

"Not at all, Jess," came the satisfied reply. "It's something far far better than that."

\*\*\*~\*\*~\*\*\*~\*\*~\*\*\*~\*\*~\*\*\*~\*\*~\*\*\*

"Well, that was the weirdest weekend of my life..." Misty remarked bemusedly as she and Ash set out across the lawns of Schuyler Mansion and into Prism Town. They had dutifully thanked Ruby for her hospitality and apologised on Brock's behalf for his rude and sudden disappearance. Such an exit could have only been made by a guy as scatterbrained as he was.

"Yeah" Ash nodded at the thought. "The weirdest part was the fact those losers were trying to save Kim from the other Team Rocket members instead of stealing the fossils themselves!"

"I wonder where Brock got to" Misty sighed, glancing about the town square. There was a definite element of worry in her voice at this point.

"Wherever he is he'd better hurry up" Ash muttered impatiently. "We've got to get to Mahogany Town"

"Ash!" Misty snapped at him. Pikachu rolled its eyes at its owner's thoughtlessness. "Don't you even care about Brock's safety? He could be..."

She cut off, as from somewhere close there came the cooing and burbling of several female voices. Ash and Misty turned their heads to see a group of women clustered around something; peering down with overly ecstatic expressions upon their faces.

"What sweet little eyes!" one mused.

"And such an adorable smile" another twittered. "I wish I could take him home!"

"You can if you want," a small boy's voice piped up. Misty stood bolt upright as a chill shot down her spine. Ash glanced at her questioningly.

"What's up?"

"That kid," Misty began. "He sounds really familiar."

With that, she took to her heels and dashed toward the group. Ash followed, at a distance. As she approached Misty's eyes widened as the sight she had been so afraid to take in was laid out in plain view. In the centre of the group of women, lying comfortably in one of the figure's arms was a child bearing striking resemblance to Brock. He was wearing a small tracksuit and an expression of pure bliss as one of the females stroked the little spiky points of his hair with motherly tenderness.

"Oh my..."

At the unfinished exclamation the boy, and the women looked up in surprise.

"Misty??"

"Brock! What in Tah's name are you doing?"

The women began to look uneasy at this mutual recognition. As they tentatively edged backwards Brock glanced about him desperately, then back at Misty with a look of annoyance. He took one of the females by the hand and pouted.

"I found my place," he announced determinedly. "I'm staying here."

"Oh no you're not, mister!" Misty snapped, leaning forward and grasping the boy's small frame before hoisting it over her shoulder. "We've got a hopeless kid of our own to look after."

"Hey!" Ash protested, happening to be in earshot at the time. But neither Misty nor Brock cared at this point. He was too busy struggling to get out of Misty's grip as she heaved a sigh and carried him back toward Schuyler Mansion.

"You don't understand!" he screeched. "Those ladies *liked me!*"

"Only because you were a little kid, Brock" Misty remarked in placating tones. "It wouldn't work out. Now we'll have to get you back to normal."

This caused Brock to wail all the more, while the women exchanged puzzled glances.

"Noooo! This is so unfair! I'll be back, girls! Don't forget meeeeeeeee!"

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