

POKÉMON
REBIRTH
ULTIMATUM
Endgame Edition



EPISODE EIGHTEEN
Moonlight

They had been waiting for half an hour, none the wiser as to the reasons behind Caley's sudden loss of consciousness upon their arrival to the scene, or how the hybrid pokémon that had forged so much chaos had been subdued. The more time passed, the more questions arose in the heads of Caley's travelling companions, amplified further by Alyth and Sabrina's murmured conversing behind closed doors. Certain members of the group had attempted to eavesdrop, only to be pushed away by a gentle, but firm telekinetic force. Eventually, Adam, Rose and Denise resigned themselves to ignorance, and waited in the lobby for their friend to reawaken, while James anxiously paced the floor.

"I've heard some pretty horrifying tales about Sabrina..." he remarked uncomfortably. "That she once put a man in knots without touching him. Or how she would turn people she didn't like into dolls, and keep them in some freaky toy collection. I-I-I don't want to hang around here..."

"Sounds like a lot of wild stories if you ask me," Denise raised an eyebrow. "She didn't come across as someone who would treat people badly, in my opinion."

"Denise is right. Try and stay calm, James," Rose said. "We can't leave until Caley recovers."

Opening his bleary eyes, Caley found himself gazing up at an array of anxious faces. The closest one happened to be Denise, who moved

back as soon as she saw him beginning to stir from the lobby seats. The others promptly heaved a sigh of relief - they looked rather tense and drained from their waiting and were happy to slump in various formations and ease their aching muscles.

"Where am I?" Caley spoke slowly, putting his hand to his face, only to discover his glasses were missing. "What...?"

"We're inside Scale Falls Gym," Denise told him, raising a hand to reveal she had been in possession of Caley's glasses. "Alyth let us bring you here after you fell unconscious."

"What happened to you out there?" Adam spluttered. "One moment you were fine, the next...you're out cold on the ground!"

Caley heaved a sigh as he eased himself into a sitting position. Through the mistiness and depletion that now dogged him, the memories were gradually coming back. He had managed to psychically connect with Larydos and - more so than that - given her hope. But doing so must have taken a lot out of him. How could he possibly explain these events to the others, when only one of them knew he had psychic powers in the first place? Even now, Rose was giving him quite the studied expression, as if she was aware these powers had been the cause of his current state.

"That's it," Adam growled. "I'm not moving from this spot until you tell us what you're hiding!"

"I haven't been hiding *anything*!" Caley exclaimed, looking annoyed and flustered. "I couldn't tell you what it was if I didn't even understand it myself! That's why I came to Scale Falls to begin with!"

"Well, do you understand it *now*?" Adam eyed him accusingly. Caley faltered. For the most part, he did. Some of what he had been told was still sinking in, and other parts he wasn't entirely convinced about, but for the most part, the young man had a better idea of what had been bestowed him. Yet here he was, locked in hesitance while three of his four companions stared expectantly.

"Caley has an important job to do," Sabrina's voice was heard from down the corridor. "And so have you, as his friends."

Everyone looked up to see the Kantoan Gym Leader and her Tottoan accomplice wandering towards them. Both still displayed physical signs of their earlier conflicts, though the former had recovered to an extent, following a short period of meditation.

"Sabrina-!" Caley held out his hands and began to protest.

"It is time to let them know," Sabrina continued firmly. "A team is weakened if members keep things from one another." She looked to the remainder of the group, whose expressions of anticipation remained the same. "This may come as a shock to some of you, but your friend Caley possesses psychic Cho'moken."

"Cho'moken?" James echoed.

"It is the term used to describe the power of pokémon within humans," Sabrina told him. "And rare to find in any potent measure. Caley has only recently discovered his heritage, which is why he hadn't told you about it before."

"No...this can't be possible!" Denise insisted. "Humans with abilities like pokémon is...there's just no scientific evidence to support-" Her voice trailed off as Sabrina reached out an arm, her eyes glowing a faint shade of blue. In turn, Caley was lifted carefully from his chair, and placed upon his feet, much to his own surprise.

"Just because we keep to ourselves, doesn't mean we do not exist," Sabrina said. Her voice had grown the coldest it had sounded in a long time. "Do not show this gallant young man your scepticism."

"I have come to a decision," Alyth said. "And based on what Sabrina has told me, I shall not alert the authorities just yet."

"Covering up this event isn't going to be easy," Sabrina admitted. "And I may have to bend a few of my personal rules and adjust particularly stubborn memories, but we shall attempt to explain it as the result of a magikarp having unexpectedly evolved from Scale Falls Lake."

"You'd best be leaving soon," Alyth insisted. "Your presence will have grabbed a lot of people's attention."

"But..." Caley looked almost desperately towards Sabrina. "You didn't finish telling me what I needed to know!"

"I told you what was most important," Sabrina smiled. "The rest is down to you. Focus, Visualize, Practise. I suggest you continue your original intention to visit Team Rocket's relocated headquarters. I'm sure you'll find your next answers there."

"You have my respect, and my gratitude," Alyth said. "I shall be on standby for when I am needed. I wish you and your friends all the best in your travels. Please take care of Larydos."

By the time their discussions were over, Alyth had contributed a regional map as well as ample supplies of food, and farewells had been exchanged between Caley and Wilma, the darkness had truly set in. Deciding it best not to return over The Walk of Spirit, Caley and his companions made their way to the outskirts of the city and descended a steep bank of the plateau with Kota and Chime's help. From there, they rode upon Larydos' back across the slightly choppy waters of Scale Falls' Lake. During the ten minutes it took to cross, Denise had plenty to talk about with regards to what had happened since she left to visit the library.

"...then Adam and Cyzel put themselves in harm's way so Rilly and I could escape," the young girl concluded emphatically. "I was so surprised!"

"What? Why were you surprised?" Adam frowned.

"I never expected you to do something that selfless," Denise admitted. Adam turned slightly red upon hearing this, but gazed out toward the lake, so no one could see his expression.

"You're welcome," he mumbled sarcastically.

Caley looked towards James, who was huddled nearest Larydos' head, with Chime nestled in his arms for comfort. He had been very silent ever since Denise had spoken of her encounter with Mondo. His expression was blank and completely glazed over; a man immersed in his own thoughts. It was obvious he was having difficulty comprehending why either Mondo or Errol felt inclined to stay distanced, despite being close enough to rejoin the group. Rose was worried about her friend's silence and lacklustre spirit. In her mind, Errol's insistence to stay away only seemed to lend weight to the proposition of him having been Meowth.

Tentatively, the travellers set up camp under a sheltered ledge at the bottom of a hillside some few hundred metres away. With some diligent searching, a decent supply of firewood was gathered and ignited with a blast of flame from Cyzel. Then a portion of the food they had been given was opened and shared. Very soon, the rich, savoury aroma of roasting mareep chops weaved its way into the night sky, while the air reverberated to the sound of hoothoot calls and idle chatter amongst those present. Once everyone had eaten, James volunteered himself for

lookout duty, and retreated back into the dark with little ceremony. Silence fell amongst Caley and his associates. The same pattern of thoughts was playing in the backs of all their minds, and it was unlikely any of them were going to get sleep unless things were elaborated upon.

"Well? Cough it up," Adam demanded, breaking the uneasy silence.

"Wh-what?" Caley flinched, caught unawares by this sudden order.

"Apparently you have an 'important job' to do," Adam said wryly.

"Is this related to what you were so awkward to speak about back in Wichour Town?" Rose eyed him curiously.

"I..." Caley faltered. "Yes. Yes it was."

After the way Adam had responded in the Pachna Town Hotel, Caley was hesitant about discussing even the *concept* of prophecies, let alone the one he had heard. But Sabrina was right - even with the doubts of some people, he needed to share what he knew with what members of the group were present. Best to start with the basics.

"On the night Minachi destroyed the Team Rocket headquarters, it gave me a message," Caley began, struggling to recall those exact words. "The fourteenth phase...preparing for a deadly strike. The weird thing was, a lot of what it had said paralleled a prophecy written almost 2000 years in the past."

"Oh here we go..." Adam rolled his eyes.

"Listen, whether you believe that part or not, it still involves you," Caley frowned at him. "Azima was certain the 'tainted virtue' mentioned in the prophecy was Team Rocket, and you can't deny Team Rocket is up to something."

"Well we didn't need some stupid old writing to tell us *that*," Adam huffed.

"As blunt as he is, I have to admit it does sound off," Denise said. "Since when has Team Rocket ever been a 'virtue'?"

"I don't know!" Caley exclaimed, sounding rather flustered. "All I know is that just over a week ago, I saw an e-mail by Professor Oak about disturbances in the Aura Network."

"Professor Oak?" Rose blinked. "The Kantoan researcher?"

"Then Kota shows up, and I get told that augrets only hatch when Aura energy is high," Caley continued hurriedly, as if trying to get all the words out before he lost any more faith from his audience. "Minachi delivers oddly pertinent messages *while* hooked up to the Aura Network via Team Rocket's obelisk machine. This *can't* be a set of random coincidences. Something is going on, and I play an important part in it!"

Caley fell silent, at realising his voice had reached an unsavoury volume, and his companions were all looking at him with mixed expressions.

"I've been chosen as the fifth Ahnloka," he concluded. "To link with other Cho'moken wielders of different elements and forge a

connection to the Original One. Azima said doing so would stop Team Rocket."

"Oh you'll just believe anything anyone tells you, won't you?" Adam snapped, and stormed off, while Cyzel followed. Caley watched them go with a sad look on his face, then turned back to the others for some kind of support. Rilly was wearing an inquisitive expression, while Sia and Rose looked on serenely. Denise's face seemed the most discouraging, an almost-disappointed look was present.

"That's all I can say," Caley sighed. "It's up to you whether or not you believe me."

Caley discovered Adam a short distance from the main camp, leaning back upon Cyzel. The arcumese looked up as Caley and Kota approached, offering them an apologetic glance.

"Adam, I..." Caley began awkwardly.

"So how long had you been hiding all this from us?" Adam snorted. It seemed he had decided to conveniently brush aside the more unproven aspects of his talk, and focus on what he was certain existed.

"Look, Adam..." Caley began. "I wasn't trying to be deceptive - I was just trying to work out what was *happening* to me. Why should me having psychic powers make our friendship any different?"

Errol stood on the grass, gazing down the hillside at the familiar group of figures arranged around a modest campfire, and heaved a sigh. A short distance behind him, Mondo and Copi sat observing the man's sorrowful contemplation. They were practically walking distance away, and *still* he could not bring himself to approach those who meant so much to him and that he had searched so long for.

"That's it," Mondo announced, standing up and beginning his descent. "We're going down there right now."

"We can't!" Errol exclaimed at a volume that forced his voice into a hissy squeak, grabbing at Mondo's shoulder to prevent him moving any further.

"So you'd rather just spend the rest of your days stalking them?" Mondo folded his arms.

"No! I..." Errol trailed off. "I just need a little more time to psyche myself up."

"You've been keeping this to yourself for over a year, Errol," Mondo looked unimpressed. "Any more 'psyched up' and you'll be out of orbit."

Errol responded with an unhappy noise, but didn't move.

"Wh-what if James don't accept me like dis?" He motioned down at himself in order to remind Mondo of the drastic species shift the young man had since become used to. "What if *none* o' dem accept me?"

"Jenna seemed fine with you," Copi piped up.

"Besides, James isn't even with the others right now," Mondo exclaimed. "He's keeping lookout on that hill we passed! You could go and explain things to him, and no one else need be any the wiser...if you want."

"I couldn't take dat kinda rejection again..." Errol mumbled. "I jus' couldn't."

"If I know James, I bet he's as torn up inside about being apart from his friends as you are," Mondo insisted. Errol lifted a hand to protest, but his companion was quick to stall him. "Nope. I've gotta draw a line somewhere, and here is it," Mondo frowned. "You go and put James out of his misery right now, or Copi will make himself look like you and do it in your place!"

"I will?" Copi blinked. Despite the zecutyne's confusion, Mondo's threat was enough to spur Errol into action. He strode off into the night, muttering barely audible words about getting ordered around, and matters of his own destiny.

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Back when James carried out Active Duty with Jessie and Meowth, the three of them would just erect a wild pokémon deterrence emitter

and collapse into slumber without a thought for who or what may find them there. But these were no longer those times. James and his travelling companions were wanted by an organization more tenacious than the Police, and sleeping without guard wasn't an option. With this in mind, James had made his way to the top of a nearby hill with Chime in tow, and sat down to observe. Being alone likely wasn't the healthiest of options for him at this point in time, but it was what he desired most, in order to make sense of what he had seen and heard that day.

James wasn't sure how long he had sat on that hillside for. Semi-alertness had given way to a glazed and mournful stare, as the man's shoulders rounded and sagged - his back steadily curving like the stalk of a flower needing rain.

"Chyy?" the chimecho asked softly, watching James' sad expression.

"I...I can't go on without those two, Chime," the man sighed, stroking the top of the pokémon's head. "All those memories - I can't just throw all that away...even with Rose, Caley and Denise giving me support and kindness." He swallowed hard. "But how can I possibly tell the others that? It's not that I don't *appreciate* their friendship! It's just...every companion is different. Unique. Irreplaceable. And Jessie and Meowth...the bond with them is just too strong."

James glanced out at the open landscape, releasing Chime into the air beside him. The surroundings had become oddly dark, and he was no

longer able to make out the pin-prick like glows that the nearest populated area was comprised of. Not that this concerned him at present - the thoughts in his mind weighed upon him too strongly.

"And I was the one who forced us apart. It was all my fault," James confessed in choked tones, putting his head in his hands. "Things would still be how they were if it hadn't been for me! It was...ALL MY FAULT!"

Yes, it was...

James looked up. He wasn't sure whether the darkness or his own exhaustion happened to be playing tricks on his perceptive powers, but he was certain he could see the figures of Jessie and Meowth standing over him - their faces obscured by the murky black atmosphere. Cold, empty glowers were barely visible in their eyes as they gazed down in an intimidating manner.

"You're a weakling. You never stick up for yourself," Jessie's words echoed. The very sound prickled and stung at James' ears, yet this feeling paled in comparison to the sharp ache of upset disbelief which clutched at his chest.

"How does it feel to have destroyed da only t'ing in your miserable little life wit' a point to it?" Meowth sneered.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!" James spluttered. "C-can't you just...forgive me? What's so different about this mistake from any...other...?" the man's words grew weak and faded into the dark, as the two figures stood there, silently judging him.

"What's so different?" Jessie relayed. "That's simple, James. The difference is..."

"We don't wanna forgive ya," Meowth stated condemningly, his voice no louder than a whisper.

Suddenly the earth opened up beneath James - gravity took hold of him mercilessly, pulling him sharply backwards, sending him yelling and plummeting into an all-consuming void.

"Jimmy! Wake up!"

James' eyes shot wide open, his chest heaving with short, sharp gasps like a beached feebas. The hands that had previously grasped at his arms now released him, the figure attached to them retracting in order to allow James room to regain his composure. As James' eyes adjusted themselves to the dark, and his mind to reality as opposed to that of his dreams, the sandy-blonde and olive-green blur in front of him increased in clarity, until it became identifiable.

"E-Errorl?"

It was more of an exclamation of shock than an inquiry, to which the recipient gave a nod and a sheepish, tight-lipped smile. The sudden resurgence of nerves and awkwardness had once again silenced him. Unaware of this, James' face broke into a wide grin.

"Am I glad to see you!" he cried. "When Denise said you weren't going to join us, I thought we'd offended you in some way. How did you escape Team Rocket? Are Kevin and Jenna okay? I-" the man paused, suddenly looking apologetic "Oh yeah! I totally forgot...this is going to be a pretty one-sided conversation if I don't allow you time to write your answers."

"It's alright," Errol finally found his voice. "No need."

"You can talk!" James spluttered.

"Dat sounded like a pretty bad dream y' were havin'," Errol proceeded, unwilling to linger on the previous subject. Best way to get James used to this fact was to continue an audible conversation, and besides which, Errol wasn't sure just how long he'd be able to maintain the boldness to speak his mind.

"It's not the first time I've had it," James sighed. "They were there. My old partners, Jessie and Meowth. They were...angry at me for betraying them."

"*Betrayin'* dem?" Errol pulled a face like he'd swallowed a bad berry, before snorting in amusement. "Dreams can be kooky sometimes."

"It's not just a dream," James said. "When Jessie, Meowth and I were taken off Active Duty, they were given new jobs to do, while I received punishment for the mission we had failed. Yet I never protested about our team being pulled apart."

"Dat's because you made a huge self-sacrifice, James," Errol replied, almost morosely. "You had your friends' best intentions at heart."

"I *thought* I did," James mumbled. "But with Jessie angry at me and Meowth gone, it's hard to believe. Maybe....maybe I made the wrong choice."

Errol took a deep breath. There was no way he could hide the secret he had clung to any longer.

"Look..." he began unsteadily. "Meowth was a pretty desperate guy. He was always tryin' ta cover up his emotions with a loada talk an' bravado. But nothing could hide da way he felt from *himself*. Shunned, inadequate, outta place...."

James stared. It was difficult to know just exactly what the man was thinking at this point, so Errol continued his steady and heartfelt explanation.

"And one day, it was revealed ta him just *why* he felt like dat. Why he'd been able ta learn ta speak human talk, why he was never able ta use pokémon attacks and had t' improvise. Why he never evolved into a poision. He'd been da product o' some Professor's twisted DNA-mixin'

science experiment while still an egg, an' da other half of the DNA had been-

"Human..." the word eked from James' lips as if realisation was dawning upon him as he spoke it. Silently, Errol reached down inside the collar of his jacket, before bringing out the charm upon its chain for James to see. With his confession over, Errol slumped his shoulders a little - his head lowering as if a great weight had been removed from him, and his exhausted body could no longer stay upright. He waited for a response, but none came - instead, James sat examining Errol's face at great length. As Errol lifted his head to look back at him, James' expression grew deeply saddened.

"Are you mad at me?" both figures blurted out in unison, before flinching in surprise at hearing their inquiries echoed.

"Why would I be mad at *you*, James?" Errol raised an eyebrow.

"I let you and Jessie go your separate ways," James sighed guiltily. "I was a coward and didn't stand up for us as a team."

"Yeesh! Are you even listening to y'self?" Errol cried in disbelief. "Letting us go and taking it alone was da bravest, kindest t'ing you coulda done!"

"So why doesn't *Jessie* see it that way?" James insisted.

"It's not da only t'ing she can't get her head around," Errol shook his head disappointedly. "I should know. I went to her shortly after becoming human."

"Wait, Jessie *knows* you're like this?" James exclaimed. "And you didn't even tell *me*?"

"I lost my noive, okay?" Errol snapped, before resuming a dispirited expression. "After da way Jess freaked out, sayin' I weren't her friend no more because her friend had been 'Meowth', I panicked. I thought you'd reject me too...so I never came to find ya." There was a pause, while Errol stared out into the distance. "I'm sorry, James..."

"And I'm sorry too, Errol," James placed a hand on his companion's shoulder sympathetically. "For how Jessie treated you. She's never been good adjusting to change. But as for me, I know you're still the same wisecracking furball I spent the last eight years working alongside, no matter *how* you look."

Errol glanced up, his wide cat-like eyes now watery with an onset of thankful tears.

"Dat's right," he smiled shakily.

"And hopefully Jessie will come to accept that too, with time," James patted Errol's shoulder, before flopping down upon the grass. "It's so good to have you back."

"Didja miss me?" Errol asked.

"Miss you?" James snorted theatrically. "That is like asking 'Do snorlax sleep?' or 'Do oddish enjoy the sunlight?'."

"Wha'cha gettin' at?" Errol looked at him with a vague smirk.

"The answer's obvious!" James replied. "Of *course* I missed you! I imagine you must've been on *some* adventures to get to here."

"You bet I have!" Errol chuckled, sitting down beside James. "But I'll leave dose fer when we get back to da others."

"Are you going to tell them then?" James looked curious. "I mean, about your full identity."

"Sure am!" Errol grinned. "With you on my side, nothing's holding me back from letting `em know I'm Meowth!"

"That's the spirit!" James mirrored his companion's expression. "Why did you choose `Errol' for your human name anyway?"

"Well, I..." the man couldn't bring himself to unearth the events surrounding those particular memories again. "It's a long story," he replied after another long silence. "Maybe I'll tell ya some other time."

"I understand."

"Ya know, I'm lucky ta have a pal like you, James," Errol said, lying back and propping his head under his arms. "I'm glad Mondo persuaded me ta come see you after all."

"Me too," James gave a nod. "Though I'm surprised he's travelling with you. He seemed really set on working in Nashgri City Energy Lab."

"Ya know dat guy and makin' decisions," Errol shrugged.

"Tell me about it," James rolled his eyes in amusement. Both the figures had started to relax as familiarity and reminiscence set in, and they turned their attentions to the clear, starry sky.

"It's been nice ta get out an' about again, don'cha t'ink?" Errol breathed a contented sigh.

"If you discount hunting genetic experiments and being a highly wanted person, then yes - by all means," James chuckled. "That's one of the few things I'd missed about being on Active Duty. We got to travel so much, see the world..."

"I feel kinda bad for not having appreciated dose sorts o' t'ings enough," Errol remarked guiltily.

"We were so single-minded and foolhardy back then," James agreed. "Dreaming of wealth, of recognition... all that time spent in Team Rocket seems wasted now."

"It weren't a *complete* waste," Errol reminded him. "If it hadn't been for Team Rocket, I woulda never found such good buddies."

James' expression suddenly became distant. Errol had struck upon a vulnerable point in his memory, and as the man gazed up at the glittering lights in the distance, a solitary tear ran down his cheek. Errol looked down at the grass, feeling his own sadness welling up once more - his anger at Jessie's ignorance and his upset at her unwillingness to understand. Just a few thoughtless actions on her part was causing so

much pain for all three of them. He placed a hand on James' shoulder to try and comfort him.

"It's not forever, James. She'll come around one day."

"I hope you're right," James sighed heavily, as he stood up to return to the camp. "For her sake, and ours. Well...my shift's over. Let's go and get some sleep now."

"An' not da accidental kind, right?" Errol chuckled, receiving a light thump on the arm for his cockiness.

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It was early morning, and a light rain was falling across the hillsides of middle Tatto. Caley had been on guard duty for the past hour or so and - as the weather had shifted in its typical manner - had taken to sheltering under a light psychic barrier provided by Kota. He wasn't paying as much attention to the surroundings as he should have been - instead having pulled up the left sleeve of his jacket, and studying one of the bracers that Sabrina had given to him.

Despite having discovered four of Team Rocket's genetic hybrids and saved them from being recaptured by the organization's operatives, Caley was feeling bewildered and downcast. Part of that was a result of the hesitant air he had sensed from those in his company. A lot of it was

the result of a resurgence of doubt over whether he could do all the things expected of him. That included mastering his apparent psychic speciality of manifesting his Aura into solid forms.

It's natural to feel doubts about such a big concept, Kota tried to console him, aware of the young man's inner turmoil. *But you're not alone...you're with us.*

"I know *you're* on my side, Kota," Caley nodded. "As for everyone else..."

You rescued them when others considered them lost causes. Their lives might have started out all wrong, but they're not going to let them continue that way, Kota grinned optimistically. *I'm sure they won't walk out on you, however tough things get.*

"You think so?" Caley looked up with a brightened expression.

Well I can't be entirely certain about Adam... Kota admitted sheepishly.

"You're right," Caley resumed his determined expression. "I mustn't give up. This is more than about me, this is about them, too. Even if they don't believe it yet. All I've got to do is focus myself; forget my problems and focus on my task."

A piercing shriek broke the stillness of the morning air, sending Kota into a panicked whirl. Caley sprung to his feet, the rain now

spattering across his face and jacket. Guilt snatched at his chest - he really should have been paying more attention to what was happening around him. Had Team Rocket operatives managed to find the camp?

"Kota, we need to get down there fast!" Caley insisted. Kota gave a nod and held out a paw to his human companion. No sooner had Caley grasped it, than the two figures disappeared in a blitz of light, re-appearing at the bottom of the hillside where the fearful cry had emanated from.

The camp was in something of a disarray. Denise and Rilly were huddled together, staring manically at a large walnut-shaped pokémon with a pitted rocky shell that - up until a few moments ago - had been resting nearby. Errol and James were up on their feet - the latter with a bleary-eyed expression of confusion, the former with an anxious grimace of disbelief. Rose appeared to be heavily assessing the situation, but Adam had already made his mind up as to what he was going to do.

"Cyzel! Flamethrower!" Adam demanded.

"What? What are you going on?" the forretress spluttered, whirling round in its panic and sending spikes flying everywhere. Errol cried out in horror and leapt between the two pokémon, just as one of them unleashed a blast of red hot fire.

"Ow...dat hoit..." Errol groaned, crumpling to the dirt.

"What did you do that for, you idiot?" Adam snapped. "If we don't get rid of that forretress, it'll-!"

"It's not really a forretrass," a firm voice was heard from the outskirts of the camp. Everyone turned to see Mondo standing there.

"Mondo!" Denise exclaimed happily, before looking puzzled. "Just how long have you been here?"

"A few hours," Mondo said, his sternness unchanging. "I figured I'd better come down after realising that someone had got too distracted to return for me."

"Eheheh..." Errol scratched the back of his head. "My bad."

"By the time I arrived, everyone besides Rose was asleep," Mondo concluded. "So we joined in. But that's kind of off-subject. This forretrass is my friend, Copi. He's a shape shifting pokémon, but he's still kind of new at it. He must have accidentally transformed in his sleep."

"This is embarrassing..." Copi mumbled.

"It talks human language?" Denise blinked. "Just what kind of pokémon *is* it?"

"Why don't you show them, buddy?" Mondo suggested, to which Copi shuffled awkwardly.

"I can not remember how," they confessed. "I'm too nervous.."

"Alright, alright," Mondo said. "No pressure. Denise, look up 'Zecutynr' on your Pokédex."

"Zeh...Zeh...koo..." Denise played with the word as she typed in some commands. Her eyebrows rose. "That's weird..."

"What is?" James asked.

"Zecutynr is listed, alright," Denise began. "A ditto-sableye hybrid. Virtual type. But that's all the data available on it. There's just a red box on my screen that says I need further authorization."

"Curious indeed," Rose tilted her head. "But not unexpected, considering a lot of Project Rebirth was confidential."

"Data or not, it's a pleasure to meet you, Copi!" James beamed, stepping forward. His foot hit one of the scattered spikes, sending the man into pained wailing.

"Dis introduction coulda gone betta," Errol grimaced, brushing himself down.

"Well, now that's cleared up," Adam sniffed. "What next?"

"We need to find where Team Rocket's new Totto HQ is," Caley reminded him.

"But how are we going to do that, Caley?" James asked.

"Searching da whole region would be like lookin' fer a weedle in a forest!" Errol chipped in. Caley looked perplexed. He didn't really have a clue how to go about this.

"I have one idea that might work," Mondo spoke up. "If Denise could build a device to seek out communication signals, I could attempt to hone into the frequencies that Team Rocket use the most. We track those signals to their source, we'll have our new headquarters location."

"Sounds excellent!" Caley nodded appreciatively. "Would you be able to do that, Denise?"

"Theoretically, yes," the young girl replied. "But I'd need equipment and materials that we don't have."

"So to get those things, we need to find a place that stocks them," Mondo contemplated. "Not to mention the money to buy that stock with. My guide book doesn't list speciality stores, and I'm clean out of money."

"Me too.." Denise sighed.

"Guilty as charged," James looked dispirited.

"Yup," Errol mirrored the expression. Rose said nothing, but gave a shrug, indicating that the lack of finances was an extensive difficulty.

"Money isn't an issue," Caley said, bringing out his wallet. Everybody peered over, and their eyes widened.

"Wow, you're pretty loaded, aren't you?" Adam raised an eyebrow.

"I'd collected this money for the past year or two," Caley explained. "To cover travel expenses for my sightseeing trip."

"You're going to buy machine parts out of your own savings?" Mondo looked astonished.

"My trip hasn't exactly gone to plan," Caley admitted. "And besides, stopping Team Rocket is far more important right now."

The others exchanged looks. While Caley's statement was far from wrong, his sacrifice was not a thing most of them felt they could overlook. Somehow, they would have to make it up to him.

"Thank you, Caley," Rose smiled. "We won't forget this."

Choosing wisely to stay clear of Route 1M, the travellers had - with the help of the map Alyth had given them - kept to the rockier, but more concealed footpaths that wove through the Tattoan hillside. By combined calculation, it was estimated another five miles of walking was involved in order to reach Mayni City. And the journey had been relatively uneventful - Caley, Rose and their pokémon had strolled at the head of the group, with Denise, Rilly, Mondo and Copi following close. James and Errol kept behind, chatting amiably between themselves while Chime floated perkily alongside. Adam hung back at the rear with Cyzel, shoulders hunched and hands shoved firmly in his pockets. Prior to the arrival of the group's newcomers, the youth had begun to feel more at ease with his travelling companions, and had taken to wandering somewhere between Caley and Denise. Now Denise was occupied in scientific discussion with Mondo, and his views of Caley were drastically smeared, Adam had returned to his usual state of confused frustration, with only Cyzel's unwavering loyalty for comfort.

Since calming down and resuming travel, Copi had returned to their teal-haired human form, and Denise had been studying it for some

time. While Copi found this neither worrying or awkward, the prolonged nature of Denise's visual scrutiny eventually moved them to a curious inquiry of their own.

"Why are you looking at me?" they asked, causing Denise to flinch and blush slightly.

"Oh! I'm sorry," she bit her lip.

"It's okay," Copi smiled. "I do not care. I was interested only."

"Well..." Denise took a moment to allow herself to adjust to the figure's almost blunt honesty. "I was just very impressed at your transformation skills. You are able to combine several forms into one, and I have never seen a ditto do that."

"However, I am not a ditto," Copi reminded her. "I am Copi."

"Yes...well that's another thing," Denise explained. "You can't go around calling yourself 'Copi' when you look like a human."

"Why not?" the figure blinked.

"It's not a very human name, that's all," Denise persisted. "People would start to get suspicious."

"Oh, yeah," Mondo realised. This was something he too had been debating, back in Scale Falls library. "We do need to do something about that," he glanced at the others. "Any ideas for a human name for Copi?"

"Well there's no reason to stray that far from the nickname he already has," Rose pondered.

"How about... 'Cory'?" James suggested. Mondo looked at the zecutylnr-in-human-shape for their thoughts on the matter.

"Sounds good!" was the reply.

"'Cory' it is, then," Mondo grinned. "Good one, James."

As the travellers ventured out from the hillside and towards the dominating structures of Mayni City, Adam and Denise were obligated to coax their pokémon back into their Pokéballs. Mondo's guidebook had dictated that finding where the country ended and the city itself began would be quite a challenge, and no one wanted to take the chance of passers-by seeing pokémon undocumented by biologists.

And the guidebook was hardly exaggerating. The dense clusters of trees that surrounded the group could have been easily mistaken for natural woodland. It wasn't until they encountered a metal plaque bearing information of their whereabouts, that they realised they were no longer outside urban territory.

"Jackell Park," Mondo recited from his guidebook, after searching for the name on the sign. "Constructed in 1815FD upon request of the Mayor of the City at the time, Herman Jackell, who wanted to make sure the city's residents were never far from somewhere green and pleasant. It is the largest park of its kind in Tatto, running the entire circumference of Mayni City, and is the site of concerts, markets and even pokémon battling."

"Certainly sounds like quite da place," Errol marvelled.

"What better first impression of a city than passing through something like this?" James agreed.

"Any sign of somewhere that would give us pointers on what kind of stores we'd find here?" Rose asked Mondo.

"If my guide is still accurate, there should be a Tourist Information building on the south side of the park," Mondo pointed out.

"Well then, let's go check it out," Caley smiled, as Rose gave a nod.

"Hey if it's okay with youse guys, I'd like to stay here and rest my feet a bit," Errol looked sheepish.

"Same here," James agreed, as Cory nodded furiously.

"Alright then," Caley said. "As long as you don't leave this area. We'll be back in a few minutes - coming Denise?"

"Sure," Denise beamed. The group divided, as one part remained static and the other part strolled further into the park grounds.

"He ain't the boss of me," a slightly raspy muttered voice was heard nearby.

"Never expected you ta stick around wit' us," Errol raised his eyebrows, having noticed Adam was still present alongside them.

"More's the pity," James mumbled, though this opinion was relatively inaudible. Adam said nothing, but dumped his stunted body on

one of the park benches they happened to be passing. It seemed to have a domino effect, as the others decided, without words, to sit on the bench also.

They had chosen a more communal section of the park to take their rest - a paved area with a small fountain, sculpted foliage and a couple of vendors selling trinkets and snacks. Chilled music from a nearby saxophonist rose into the air, while a short distance away, a young man and a hitmontop spun around enthusiastically on a dance mat. Most of this jolly atmosphere went unnoticed by the three humans and two pokémon that sat there, toying with matters that weighed heavy on their minds.

"I feel pretty bad," James remarked. "Caley's spending all his hard-earned money on stopping the organization *we'd* originally been helping."

"Sounds about the right thing for a tool to do," Adam muttered.

"That 'tool' saved our hides!" James glared at the youth.

"Saved. Sure," Adam snorted. "He's gullible, and I bet he's leading us into a worse mess than we were already in."

"What's come over you?" James spluttered in disbelief. "I thought you were *friends* with Caley!"

"Yeah, well I guess I screwed up on that one," Adam turned the other way.

"How can you say that?" James cried, as Errol flinched backward slightly in surprise. "He *believed* in you!"

"He seems to believe in a lot of stupid things," Adam remarked.

"Oohhhhh," James finally twigged. "This is all over that prophecy Caley was talking about last night, isn't it? Rose had said how you'd thrown a tantrum about the whole thing..." Adam did not reply, but his blazing stare was either an obvious indication that James was correct, or an attempt to make the man spontaneously combust for saying he'd thrown a tantrum. "Hah. Typical that a *child* would not be open-minded enough to consider the greater possibilities."

"Typical that an *idiot* wouldn't be able to tell the difference between reality and made up stuff!" Adam glowered. "I bet you thought that azumarills laid chocolate eggs!"

"N-not any more!" James protested.

"Look Adam, regardless of what *you* t'ink o' Caley right now, he's sacrificing a lot for us and it is pretty unfair," Errol stated, before things got further out of hand.

"However, if you have it, and we will give him the money," Cory insisted.

"Yeah, only we don't have money," Errol sighed. "Dis is our stickin' point, as usual."

"We could get temporary jobs?" James suggested.

"We'd be hard-pressed ta find employment dat only lasted a few hours," Errol shook his head, glancing across the park. Then his eyes lit up. "But who said it needed t' be a *job*?"

The others turned their heads in Errol's direction, puzzled as to his unusual statement. It just so happened that the man's sights had lit upon the two breakdancers, who were surrounded by a small audience. Errol had also noticed the open briefcase in which these onlookers were throwing their tokens of appreciation. He leant towards James and whispered in his ear, causing the man's face to shine with enthusiasm.

Following a singular exclamation, both Errol and James leapt from their places on the bench and walked a few metres to the path in front of it. As Errol brought his guitar round in front of him and gave it a swift tuning, James removed his jacket and flung it into the air, leaving Chime to catch it with telekinesis and set it upon the bench. Cory gave Adam a puzzled glance.

"Hey I'm as clueless on this one as you are," Adam folded his arms. His expression had softened a little, however, dictating that his curiosity had been piqued.

"Y' call dat performance?" Errol called tauntingly. "Let's show 'em performance, Jimmy!"

"Right!" James grinned. Without any prompting, Errol's fingers flew into a blur across the guitar strings, generating a vivid, spicy melody reminiscent of Orrean flamenco. Chime joined in with the occasional contribution of a lone sweet backing chord, as James began to dance energetically - his choice of footwear seeming to make little difference to the vigour and timing of his steps.

This sudden change in mood was enough to grab the attention of some of the figures that had been watching the dexterity of the breakdancer. They began to walk over toward Errol as he and James continued to perform. It was as if all notions of their aches and pains had vanished, replaced by eagerness to obtain funds, amplified with a spot of cheeky competitiveness.

Cory and Adam watched as the growing collection of spectators stood transfixed at Errol and James' every gesture. The vibrancy of the music was as such that Cory had begun to clap rhythmically, and some members of the audience were swaying happily. Even Errol could no longer resist stillness as he played, and was dancing alongside James, every note plucked from his fingers and scattered into the air all around.

"What a pair of show-offs," Adam muttered.

"Beating your feet," Cory insisted with a smirk, pointing at one of Adam's boots which was indeed twitching up and down in turn with the music. The youth hurriedly ceased this motion and glowered at Cory for highlighting it. The music had indeed appealed to him, and even the

dancing was admittedly impressive. But given the two figures these performances had come from, he didn't feel obliged to admit that fact.

Attentions were so strongly fixed upon Errol and James' performance, that the saxophonist had relocated elsewhere, and the breakdancer had packed his equipment and left in a bad mood - along with his hitmontop, which had stuck its tongue out at the opposition before tagging after its human companion. Not that Errol or James had noticed - they were far too occupied with raising the approval of their spectators.

James had slipped from dance into more acrobatic fare, with Chime extending the height and length of his flips and leaps through use of her psychic abilities. Errol's fingers were burning from the intensity of the strikes across the guitar strings, but the man had no intention of stopping. He could see the audience beginning to fish about in their pockets even now.

Just a little longer... he thought. Just a little bit more and then the guys and I will have our reward...

There was a loud snap, and one of the guitar strings wrenched itself from the neck of the instrument and lashed at Errol's forehead. He let go of the guitar, which dangled harmlessly around his shoulders, and staggered backwards, clutching at his face.

"Are you ok?" came a worried voice. Errol lifted his hands away from his eyes to see James, Cory and a few members of the audience peering at him, all wearing concerned expressions. Except for Adam. He was snickering quietly to himself in the background.

"Yeah..." Errol muttered slurringly, rubbing at his forehead. "Dis head's been hit by a lot worse dan guitar strings, I'll tell ya dat."

"That was an amazing routine!" another spectator grinned at James. "Some of the last few moves got me holding my breath!"

"Thanks!" James returned the expression once he knew Errol was fairly reasonable. "I've practised a lot." He deliberately neglected to mention that a good portion of the routine was adapted from agility training he had received at Team Rocket.

"Keep at it!" an elder observer to the performance offered a small bundle of notes. "Maybe some day we'll see you both on television."

James and Errol gratefully accepted varying amounts of money from the crowd, each member giving their contribution before bidding farewell and leaving. As the numbers dwindled, the two men discovered a young boy that had been waiting at the very back. He was about eight years of age, dressed in a blue long-sleeved shirt and green trousers with a yellow neckerchief. In his hands he clutched three 200 Perjhi bills.

"Hey mister, you played that guitar amazing!" he appraised Errol in a loud Johtoan accent. "Your hands were so fast! Could you do juggling with 'em too?"

"I can't see why not," Errol looked at his knuckles like it was no big deal. "But first I'd need somet'ing ta juggle."

"How about these?" the boy suggested, pulling three Pokéballs from the bag slung over his shoulder and offering them to Errol. Errol looked at him in surprise, but the expression on the boy's face seemed happy and insistent enough, so he gave a little shrug and took the items from him.

"Alright, here goes!" Errol announced, throwing the Pokéballs in an arc. It was slow at first, but as the man grew more confident, the motion became more dexterous and rapid. James grinned while Cory clapped enthusiastically. "How about dat, huh?"

"Go for a fourth!" the boy cried excitedly, throwing another Pokéball. Errol swung around, his mouth opening slightly as he saw the spherical object rapidly bearing down on him. It was so sudden that Errol didn't get a chance to respond, and the Pokéball made impact with his chest. Errol staggered backwards slightly, moments before the device projected its dazzling light over its victim, causing him to vanish from sight. The remaining Pokéballs clattered to the ground, accompanied by a pair of worn-looking jeans. As one of the Pokéballs hit the hard surface, a farfetch'd emerged from within, causing Adam to emit an amusingly high-pitched yell and bolt out of sight.

"Poppy, come back!," the boy cried in a mixture of panic and amusement, chasing the bouncing farfetch'd around in circles. By some

stroke of fortune, he was too distracted by his freely-roaming pokémon to have paid full attention to what had happened to Errol.

Cory pulled up the jeans in one hand and looked at them worriedly, as James dived for the Pokéball, moments before it shook violently and rolled away from him. As James clasped his hands around the spherical object, it erupted in a flash of bright energy, throwing Errol out from the blaze of light, towards the grass.

Errol struggled onto all fours, eyes wide and panting erratically. He had not entered a Pokéball since the day Professor Ein Bohrgram initiated his evolution into humanity, and the experience was still none the more palatable.

"Ugh..." he shivered. "I was hoping dose t'ings wouldn't woik on me any more."

"Um...Errol?" James grimaced. "Your clothes..."

At this point Errol had looked down and realised why his watching friends had been looking so uncomfortable, and why the boy was giggling profusely. He was wearing absolutely nothing except for the charm that dangled about his neck.

"Well whaddya know," Errol blinked, no more perturbed as a result of the discovery. "I t'ought it was a little colder down south dan it shoulda been."

As Errol dressed himself, Cory anxiously glanced around for signs of Adam. James broke into amused snickering upon sight of the youth's head protruding from a nearby bush.

"Don't you think that kid's a bit young to be running around by himself?" Adam snapped.

"Age this is not the man you need to stay with the mother or father?" Cory agreed.

"Yeah..." Errol blinked. "Where *are* ya parents, kid?"

"I'm 'Evan', not 'kid'," the boy insisted. "Mom and dad are too busy talking to a Turney to care if I'm there or not. It got boring..."

"A 'Turney'?" James pulled a face.

"He's this grown-up in a suit that uses a lot of weird big words that I don't understand," Evan pouted. "Most of them are to do with my sister. That's all they've talked about since we got to Tatto. My sister. And we haven't seen her in forever! But lately they started showing pictures of her on TV alongside a bunch of other people, saying she's a krinna...a krimnima...saying that she's done bad things." The boy gathered his farfetch'd in his arms and looked saddened. "My big sis would never do bad things. That's why my parents got a Turney to help them prove she's good!"

"Oh...an *attorney*!" James finally deduced, before freezing in mid-realisation.

"That's what I said!" Evan insisted. "Hey...what's up with you, mister?"

It had all become unsettlingly clear. Photographs shown on television, unfounded accusations...he got the feeling that through some twisted act of coincidence, he was holding a conversation with the sibling of one of his travelling companions. There wasn't much physical similarity with Rose, moving James to question the only other alternative.

"Does your last name happen to be 'Nichols'?" he inquired weakly.

"Yup!" Evan grinned. He didn't even appear perturbed that the man before him managed to guess this correctly.

"We've got to return him to his parents," James whispered to Errol.

"But Caley said-" Errol began.

"I *know* what he said," James grimaced. "But if we don't get Evan out of here fast, Denise is going to see him, and things are going to turn really messy. The last thing we need is to get her family involved in our issues."

"Y' got a point dere," Errol agreed. "How t' find his parents, though...dat's da question."

"Hmmm..." James pondered, as Evan shuffled over with a curious expression. The man's eyes lit up at the sight of the pokémon in his younger charge's arms. "That's it!"

"What's it?" Evan looked puzzled.

"How long have you had that farfetch'd, Evan?" James asked him.

"Since...eeuhhh...since last April, I think," Evan replied.

"So almost a year, then," James concluded. "That's more than enough time to memorize the faces of your mom and dad."

"Why's that?" Evan inquired, tilting his head.

"I've got a plan to help you and your parents get back together," James grinned at this fact, only to have his moment of personal triumph dispelled by Evan's thundery glower.

"I don't *want* to go back!" Evan pouted. "It's more fun out here watching the pokémon battles and dancing, and music playing."

"Dat may be true," Errol shrugged. "But I bet'cha folks are worried sick about you right about now..."

"Oh man," Evan's eyes widened, like this thought had only just dawned on him. "Mom's gonna be so ticked at me!" He started to panic.

"Hey, hey...calm down," Errol insisted. "My friend James said he had a plan, remember?"

"But we're going to need your farfetch'd's help for it, okay?" James tried to sound reassuring. "It needs to fly above the trees and try and see your parents from up there. Then we will know which direction to take."

"Cool!" Evan became enthused again, before looking down at the farfetch'd in his arms. "Did you get that, Poppy?"

"Fahh!" the pokémon gave a nod, and Evan released it into the sky. After a couple of minutes spent circling, Poppy uttered a squawk of excitement and fluttered off in a more direct route, prompting everyone to follow.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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