

# REBIRTH ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE TWELVE

**Covet**

Caley's destination appeared to have been set for him. But little did he realise that some distance north-west, two of his other acquaintances had long since begun to make their way towards that same place - their shape-shifting pokémon companion neatly in tow. The grey sky had accumulated some thick clouds, but this did little to dampen the moods of two of the three travellers - one of which was occasionally admiring the new outfit he had purchased back in Nashgri City, prior to leaving. It was the first set of human-sized clothes he'd had a chance to wear outside of a Team Rocket uniform, and it was obvious from the expression upon his face, that he was enjoying this moment immensely.

"Mmyep," Errol concluded, brushing specks from his olive green jacket for yet another time. "I could get used to dis. Roamin' da woild wit'out da pressures of assignments or dodging authority. Takin' life at my own rate, free o' da cares of-" It was at this point, the man realised the one walking alongside him had suddenly increased his pace. "Heyyyy! Slow down, Mondo! What's da rush?"

"I want to find out those answers," Mondo replied bluntly. "If you hadn't chosen the longer route, we'd be halfway to Scale Falls by now." He offered an irritated glower at this point. "And the name's 'Tate'!"

"Yeesh, okay okay...sorry," Errol tutted. "But y'know if you go too fast, y' could end up speeding by da very answers you were lookin' for."

"How many answers am I going to find in the middle of the *countryside*?" Mondo snapped, gesturing as widely as was physically possible for his meagre frame.

"Dat's not my point..." Errol suppressed a groan in his throat. "What I'm tryin' to say is dat, in life, da destination is only one factor. Da journey is anudda experience altogether!" The man's words appeared to hit home. Mondo decelerated his walk a little, but seemed none the happier about the choice of path. "Take a leaf outta Copi's book," Errol put on a smile, attempting to draw his companion's attention from its sole objective. "Totally into his surroundin's."

Indeed, the zecutyndr was immersed in a world of exploration. Scampering through bushes and clambering up trees, they flushed out various wild pokémon and studied the reactions of each specie accordingly. Some bolted in alarm, while others hung around and studied the newcomer with curious looks upon their faces. In turn, Copi would respond by morphing their body into a duplicate of the pokémon before it.

"Quite da talent for imitation dere," Errol commented, almost sounding like a proud father.

"Certainly is impressive," Mondo agreed. "But not without its flaws. Look - the gems on Copi's body are still visible, even when taking on another form."

Copi paused in their interaction with a pachirisu and reached their stubby white arms to their belly. They retracted the arms soon after, looking miserable.

"Hey don't pay attention ta him, Copi," Errol tutted. "I'm sure dere's a pokémon youse could be dat'll camouflage dose gems o' yours."

He paused to scan the clearing with his eyes, until they alighted upon a ledyba. "How's about dat one?"

<I'll give it a shot> Copi grinned, before reshaping themself into the red and cream bug type pokémon.

"Dere!" Errol said triumphantly. "Your wings cova da gems on your back poifectly."

"But the pink one on its stomach is still visible," Mondo said matter-of-factly.

"It blends a little better amongst da yellow..." Errol insisted, receiving an unconvinced look. "Uh...we could say it's an accessory?"

Mondo couldn't help snicker at this point. While unintentional on their part, it seemed his companions' actions had managed to put a chip in his cold exterior.

"Well let's get going then," he announced, resuming walking. Errol followed, but it wasn't until a few steps had been taken that he realised something was amiss. Turning around, the man saw Copi shuffling along the path several metres behind, their middle set of legs dragging back and forth awkwardly in the dirt.

<Little help?> they inquired hopefully.

"Try flyin'," Errol sweatdropped. "Ledybas ain't really designed fer da whole 'ground travel' t'ing."

<...I-I don't think I can,> Copi whimpered, their big black eyes filled with sadness. They followed this statement up by shaking themselves vigorously, causing the wings upon their back to sway with the exact same uncontrolled motion as their second pair of legs.

"It's like an empty sock wit' no foot ta fill it," Errol mused, before the more technical variant of the thought hit him. "Dere's no bones!"

"What are you talking about?" Mondo blinked, finally paying attention. "I can see its exoskeleton from here."

"Look, if y' just stop ya hair-splittin' for one minute..." Errol rolled his eyes, motioning for his companion to approach and examine Copi's outer shell himself. Reaching out a hand, Mondo flinched slightly as the tips of his fingers buried themselves into the pokémon's unnaturally soft exoskeleton. It was more than apparent that without the underlying support of the zecutyne's own slightly reshaped internal skeleton, such a shell would have been practically worthless.

"See what I mean?" Errol exclaimed. "Copi can make extra body parts belongin' to da pokémon he's mimicin', but he can't make da bones ta use 'em properly," Errol elaborated.

"So that makes it a ledyba that can't fly," Mondo concluded dryly.

"More or less..." Errol trailed off. It was safe to say they had likely uncovered at least one of the reasons behind Copi's rejection as a Team Rocket experiment. Walking back to the forlorn pokémon, Errol bent down and gathered it up in his arms.

"Youse can ride wit' me, kid," he said with a grin. Copi returned the expression.

<Thank you, Errol.>

The trio continued to walk for another half an hour or so. One hillside gave way to another, dotted with the occasional farmhouse surrounded by clusters of milktanks or mareep. It wasn't until their navigation of the twentieth stone wall, that Mondo caught sight of a pointed white spire jutting out from beyond a patch of trees. Quickly he navigated the woodland with Errol in hot pursuit, until they emerged from the other side, to be greeted with the view of tall office blocks.

<Is that Scale Falls?> Copi spoke up, pointing at one of the buildings with their bulbous-tipped foreleg.

"We can't be there already..." Mondo shook his head, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Surely."

"Oh ye of little faith," Errol puffed up his chest, as his companion wandered over to a neatly crafted sign which bore the location's name. "I told ya it wouldn't take *dat* long."

"We're *not* there," he responded bluntly. "This place is called Sarthest City. And I don't see why we couldn't have just brought a PokéNav."

"An' risk being tracked?" Errol spluttered. "Nothing a paper map wouldn't fix."

"Sure, if you hadn't spent the last of our money on those sunglasses," Mondo grumbled.

"Oh so it's *my* fault now?" Errol snapped. The young man's attitude was beginning to grind on him. "You expect me ta go walkin' about all 'Mr. Meowth Eyes'?"

"It wouldn't be such a big deal if the *rest* of you was still a meowth, would it?" Mondo snapped back. Errol stiffened and retracted a little.

"You hold it against me dat much, huh.." he concluded in a small voice. The tone, combined with the hurt-yet-oddly-accepting expression, was enough to set Mondo's conscience on edge.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to come out that way, I..." the young man paused, searching for an answer - anything viable that would act as substitute for the darker feelings he was experiencing. "...I don't think well on an empty stomach."

"I see," Errol murmured. He wasn't entirely convinced that was the reason for the outburst, but he had to admit he was pretty hungry too. Noting Mondo's downcast visage, he tried to put on a more upbeat attitude of his own. "Well, dere's only one way ta rectify dat!"

"But we don't have any way to buy food," Mondo insisted, before he started frowning. "And I don't intend to resort to stealing."

"Have a *little* belief in me, kid," Errol rolled his eyes. "Dere are other ways to grab a meal."

"Well would'ya look at dat..." Errol marvelled, as the trio stood upon a passenger bridge gazing down at a wide motorway below. "So dey *do* have traffic routes in dis region."

"That's Route 1M," Mondo told him, consulting a small, battered-looking book. "The only existing major road in the whole of Tatto, running from Nashgri City all the way to Vexel City. It's mostly used by coaches and freight trucks, though."

"I see you'd been holdin' out on me," Errol raised an eyebrow, noting the book. "Where'd you get da guide from?"

"It was part of the collection I had back at Team Rocket HQ," Mondo replied in somewhat subdued tones. "Couldn't bring all of it out of my Phasepack, but this seemed like it would be most useful." He caught Errol's eye. "And no, it doesn't have maps in it. Just location guides - recommended things to do."

"And places ta eat?" Errol looked hopeful.

"There's a list of eateries in Sarthest, if that's what you're wondering," Mondo hid a smirk, opening to the relevant page. Before he could read it, however, Errol had snatched the book from him.

"Ohooo!" the man grinned, reading out what he had discovered. "'Da Striaton Restaurant. Pokémon welcome. Finest Tattoon cuisine.' It's about time I tried some o' dat!" The malformed substances dished up in the Rocket cafeteria could hardly have been considered *food*, let alone 'cuisine'.

"Sure, why not?" Mondo folded his arms, unhappy about the swift relocation of his book. "But I'm still waiting to hear your ingenious plan to get food without paying or stealing it."

"Ahhh, you'll see," Errol put on a knowing expression. "You'll see."

While not as cutting edge or expansive as Nashgri, Sarthest City still retained a level of volume and density typical of urban locations. Main streets branched into side streets, which again split into curious narrow passages that beckoned those walking by with the opportunity of exploring their mysteries. The trio kept to the frequently used routes while Errol consulted Mondo's guide book, occasionally glancing from side to side at what each of these busy streets had to offer.

For the most part, the city was populated by shops vending everyday and specialist goods. On one particular corner there stood an impressive open-front arcade, with its games cabinets presented invitingly for all to see. Errol allowed Copi and Mondo a few minutes to gaze in yearning wonderment at the rows of claw machines, pulling both figures away before either got any ideas.

Finally, the travellers drew up outside the bleached walls of a building with tall, multi-paned windows - none of which gave them any idea of what to expect inside. Just above the windows hung a wooden, painted sign embellished with slightly scuffed gold lettering.

"According to da guide, dis is da place," Errol concluded, glancing upward with a bewildered expression. "Gotta say, it don't look much like da photo."

"The guide *is* ten years old..." Mondo groaned slightly. "But this restaurant isn't closed down. Look - there are fresh baskets of flowers hanging either side of the door."

"Well, no better way to dispel uncoitenty dan to test da evidence," Errol shrugged, ascending the steps before reaching out for the door handle. There was no resistance, and the door swung open with a soft creak. As it did so, the eyes of all three visitors widened in unison. Here, they had stepped into a culinary establishment the likes of which not even Errol had seen before. An eccentric amalgam of prestige and homeliness, the long room was lit with soft amber lanterns and decorated in tightly-patterned wallpaper. Cushioned chairs and medium sized tables were arranged in relative organization upon the stone slab floor - some were empty, while others were filled with customers eagerly consuming various kinds of food. Yet, most bizarrely of all, was what stood present in the room's midst.

"Is...that a *tree*?" Mondo spluttered loudly, causing some of the diners present to lower their cutlery and offer him odd looks, while others broke into snickering.

"Sure is," a voice was heard from beside them. Errol and Mondo turned their heads to see a blue haired young man dressed in a pristine white shirt, with a compromising black waistcoat. They had been so bowled over by the appearance of the restaurant that they hadn't even noticed the waiter's presence. He offered them a smile as a display of understanding. "Mum certainly has an interesting taste in décor."

"I'd say," Errol blinked. "But I like it! It's quirky."

<And so many beautiful flowers...> Copi observed.

"Though I take it you're not here for the view," the waiter deduced, as the warm, alluring smell of cooked food wafted through from an unseen kitchen. Errol's stomach gurgled insistently at this point.

"My gut says it's here for da grub," he grinned awkwardly.

"Well you couldn't have picked a better place," the waiter chuckled. "My name is Cress NoiYRO, and I shall be your connoisseur this morning. Table for three?"

"Absolutely!" Errol replied brightly, while Mondo looked on with notable anxiousness. His dauntless companion's plan for obtaining a meal was still none the clearer.

Regardless, the trio set about ordering and tucking into their chosen dishes. As Cress brought in and wheeled out a metal trolley, Errol swiftly progressed from starter to main course, followed by dessert, with little pause for thought. Mondo deliberated over his food with varying expressions, while Copi delightedly gorged themselves on sweetened produce. By the time this communal consumption was over, and the final receptacles sat empty upon the table, three satisfied customers leaned back and allowed a few moments to digest their meals, along with the surrounding atmosphere.

"Mm-hmm..." Errol patted his stomach. "Dat was good eatin'."

"Not quite sure what to think about that 'politoeed in the hole' though," Mondo commented. "It was kinda weird.." He flinched as he noticed the side door to the kitchen swing open, and a stocky man with receding burgundy hair entered the dining area. "And I hope you have that plan of yours ready, because I think we're about to get the bill."

"Jus' let me do da talkin', kid," Errol remarked smoothly.

"Hello there!" the man boomed in jolly tones. "I'm Milton, head chef. I can see you lads sure had quite the appetite!" He chuckled, pulling a notebook out of his apron pocket and proceeding to scribble on the front page. "So that was one bread basket, one plate of fish and chips..."

"Yeah, about dat..." Errol spoke up, while Mondo and Copi looked at him in frozen anticipation. "Now don't get us wrong - we'd love to pay yas, but we're fresh outta cash!"

"Oh?" Milton raised an eyebrow, his cheerful expression suddenly growing more serious.

"An' I hardly wanna leave youse all empty-handed 'n such," Errol continued. "So how's about we strike a deal. Me and Mon-uh, Tate here will do ya dishes in exchange fer dat meal we ate."

"Your meals cost a fair bit more than washing one set of dishes," Milton told him, passing across the receipt. Errol took a look, his eyes widening slightly. The number on the receipt was considerably higher than what he had been expecting.

"Ah..." a singular, weak utterance slipped out of Errol's mouth. It dawned on him that he'd never been able to fill his stomach since becoming human - Team Rocket's authoritarian rationing measures had seen to that. Now he'd had the opportunity to satisfy his appetite, it turned out that it took a lot more food than Errol had expected. Understandably, in retrospect, given the average size of a meowth's gut.

"But tell you what," Milton said, his face regaining its more typical warmth. "Since you were honest enough to admit your lack of money and offered to make up for it, work here at the restaurant for the next half a day, and we'll call it even."

"Alright," Errol scratched the back of his head with a sheepish grin, while Mondo glowered in his direction. "Fair's fair..."

"Now, as temporary employees here, no better way to start than with an introduction to the rest of the staff," Milton smiled, leading Errol and Mondo through the doors into the kitchen area. "You've already met one of my sons, Cress. Very diligent, that one - always right on the mark."

He paused in the kitchen, directing the gaze of his accomplices to a young man standing in front of the oven, stirring a pan of purée. He bore mint green hair which stuck up in a curious tuft at the top of his head, and was dressed in a similar outfit to Cress - only minus a waistcoat, and with a long apron covering the front of his shirt.

"My eldest, Cilan," Milton announced. "He loves to experiment with flavours, try new things. Some of them more successful than others." He chuckled heartily at this point. "Still, his willingness to be daring and inventive is what keeps our menus full of surprises!"

"Nice to meet you!" Cilan addressed the group politely, as they walked past him and through another set of doors on the opposite side of the kitchen. Here, the restaurant's bar area curved outward invitingly - lined with bottles of varying colours and shapes. A young man with unkempt hair that gave him the appearance of red flower bud, poised behind the counter, rubbing fervently at the inside of a glass with a cloth.

"And this is my third son, Chili," Milton concluded. "Name fits the temperament, hahah!" The statement and mirthful afterthought received a glower. "Got quite a knack for the double bass, mind you. Brandy is out

in the garden, as always. Follow me!" With that final exclamation, the gladsome chef waved Mondo and Errol through the bar and down a long corridor, using one sturdy hand.

"Are *all* the staff family members?" Mondo blinked, casting an occasional glance at the paintings on the corridor's walls.

"And named after food?" Errol tacked on, though in much lower tones than his companion.

"Of course! This is a family business," Milton handed Mondo a grin over his shoulder. "We grow almost all our ingredients here at the restaurant, too. Take a look!" He consequently pushed the back door open, before walking through the ensuing gap. What Milton hadn't been expecting, however, was the presence of a small, wispy, black entity that had been floating directly behind the closed door. Returning his head to a forward-facing position just a moment too late, the chef ended up colliding with this waiting entity.

Mondo let out a loud yell and staggered in reverse. Instead of the impact his brain had semi-predicted, the creature had partially phased around Milton's intruding form - leaving its blanched, skull-like mask protruding from the back of the man's head. There was a loud thud, as Mondo's body made contact with the carpeted hallway, and he lay there for a moment - rocking slightly like an upturned squirtle.

"Grimsby!" Milton retracted his face from the duskull and eyed it with a slightly scolding expression. "I've told you not to hang around in front of that door. You'll give someone a heart attack!"

<Sorry...> Grimsby whimpered. <I just got so excited about the new arrangement...and I wanted you to see, and->

"Try an' cut da guy some slack, Milton," Errol insisted. "I t'ink he's eager ta show you somet'ing. My buddy's a little flinchy around ghost types, is all. Nothin' poisunal."

"Well?" Milton tilted his head towards Grimsby, a little surprised by Errol's interpretation. "*Did* you have something to show me?" With a happy cry, Grimsby flew off into a corner of the garden before returning with a large bowl of purple and yellow pansies.

<What do you think?> he inquired eagerly.

"That's wonderful!" Milton approved. "Your handling of colour is impeccable, as usual. It'll look perfect as the main table centrepiece."

"A ghost dat likes flowa arrangin'," Errol blinked, watching Grimsby fly in circles with uncharacteristic glee, and allowing Mondo to use his arm as a hoist. "Who knew?"

"Why me?" Mondo groaned softly. At this point, a middle aged woman with flowing seaweed-green hair stood up from behind a particularly large sage bush - a look of consternation upon her face.

"Milton?" she eyed him. "You didn't tell me you were expecting visitors..."

"I *wasn't*," Milton admitted. "But these fellas have kindly volunteered to help us with the workload for today." He redirected his attentions to the figures beside him. "Errol, Tate, this is my wife, Brandy. She grows all the herbs, fruit and veg for our dishes."

"Nothing gives a recipe an edge than fresh ingredients!" Brandy smiled, glancing back at Milton. "And we can always use more help around the place. How about starting them off helping Cress prepare the orders to go? It's about time for him and Cilan to switch shifts."

Taking his wife's suggestion to heart, Milton returned Errol and Mondo to the kitchen, equipping them for the task at hand with aprons and liberal dousings of hand soap. Copi decided to remain in the garden for the time being. The sheer variety of colours and scents filled their curious mind with dizzy wonder, while Grimsby's exuberant wittering only served to stir things up all the more, though not in a way Copi found discomfiting. The duskull seemed unperturbed at the zecutynr's inability to use their ledyba wings, and instead levitated his new companion of his own accord - animatedly describing all manner of flower species, patterns and who-knows-what else while he did so. Mondo kind of envied the little shapeshifter - if he'd stayed outside, at least he may have ended up

learning *something*, which was more than could be said for his time spent in the kitchen.

"Well this is nice," Mondo commented sarcastically. "I could've been closer to Scale Falls at this point, but no. I'm stuck chopping carrots."

"Oh chill out, will ya?" Errol eyed him with an expression of disbelief. "We'd have needed ta eat sometime. Aren'cha happy we weren't stealin' anyt'ing?" There was no reply, which Errol took as an ample sign of admission, albeit a disgruntled one. Waiting for his companion to tip the carrot pieces into the large, water-filled saucepan, Errol then heaved the receptacle and its slopping innards from the counter, before making his way across the room to where Cress happened to be working.

"Here's ya vegetables," Errol announced, putting the saucepan upon the countertop. "What d'ya want us ta do now?"

Cress didn't respond. He was hunched over a cutting board of his own, muttering irritably. Drawing closer, Errol noticed a long roll of dough upon the board - part of it had been clumsily sliced into strips of varying width and length, giving it the appearance of a basket weaving gone rather awry.

"What'cha doin' dere?" Errol inquired, hoping such a question wouldn't come across as insulting.

"Trying to make ramen noodles for one of our orders," Cress sighed, brushing the overlapping part of his hair away from the side of his face for the eighth time. "But I'm just no good at it."

"Maybe I can help," Errol began to smile suavely. "I've been considered quite da talented noodlemeister."

"Be my guest," Cress stepped away from the cutting board, allowing Errol a better position in front of it. "Can't turn out any worse than what I've done."

Ignoring the young man's doubt-laden acceptance, Errol picked up the knife and went to cut the dough cylinder, before hesitating. No...this was wrong. For a start, the knife felt cumbersome and unwieldy in his hand. Could he possibly hope to be as dexterous in the process as he was while still a pokémon? Back then, Errol had used his claws to slice with blades that were extensions of his own being, as opposed to utensils perched in the grip of quavering digits. This wasn't the way he'd made noodles before.

Maybe it didn't *have* to be the way. Errol started feverishly scanning the worktop with his eyes - there was no reason he couldn't recreate his methods.

"What are you doing?" Cress' jaw dropped a little way, as Errol picked two fork-like utensils with angled ends from one of the tubs upon the worktop. "You don't use those to make noodles!"

"Maybe not how *you* make 'em," Errol grinned, picking up the roll of dough. Cress watched as the man's hands began to move faster and faster - first shaping the dough into a ball, slamming it flat onto the cutting board. Gathering the two forks, Errol then clasped one in each hand, allowing his fingers to grip between each of the thin, hooked prongs. Suddenly the ball of dough was airborne. A blur of limbs, and the dough ball appeared to explode into many tiny strips, which were then caught in a saucepan.

"That was...amazing!" Cress exclaimed with great enthusiasm. "Dad could sure use talent like yours around here." Errol couldn't help but chuckle. This vote of encouragement felt much like a soothing ointment to his wounded self esteem, trampled underfoot by months of silent resignation.

"Sure, I appreciate ya compliments," he insisted. "But I can't stay put right now. Dere are people dat need me, and others who I need to find. Maybe even some o' dose fit into *both* categories. Still, who knows! If t'ings calm down a bit, I might end up a more poimant face around dese parts."

From his standpoint across the kitchen, Mondo watched these events unfold with a disconnected expression. He didn't feel envious of Errol's talents, nor of the attention Cress happened to be giving them. The malcontent thrummed on, ever-present at the back of his mind, only serving as a means to fuel his resurfacing guilt. After all, Errol was a kind-hearted character, with solid loyalties and motivations. He'd been

through some terrible things in his lifetime, yet he'd emerged smiling, or at least putting on a convincing smile. He even still considered Mondo to be his friend, despite the anger Mondo felt towards him over the loss of someone dear to them both - someone even now, the young man could barely bring himself to think about. That undeserved kindness in itself caused Mondo to feel even guiltier that he was angry at all. Errol - as a being - didn't warrant such treatments. And Mondo didn't *want* to be angry any more.

But how was he possibly going to make the aching stop?

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Once the order meals were prepared, Cress delicately stacked them into two thermal bags, which Errol and Mondo picked up and hooked across their shoulders. Then, with the return of Copi and the distribution of an appropriate map, the temporary workers were ready to run their errand - setting out in the direction of Sarthest University.

It wasn't that difficult to find, having been renovated during the last five years or so, gaining the appearance of the city's most obscure construct in the process. Reasonably tall and asymmetrical, the building's walls were a mass of bright, gaudy panels - some were translucent, others were decorated in motifs.

"Whoa...interestin' architecture, huh," Errol commented, as the trio stared upward.

"Yeah, I'll say," Mondo agreed.

"Makes me t'ink of a base I helped build in Hoenn once," Errol mused, rummaging about in his pocket. "Man, dat was a crazy day...so much dancin'." He pulled out the campus map that Brandy had given him, while Mondo tried to work out where dancing fitted into construction procedures. "According ta dis, it'd be more practical if *youse* take all da orders to da students in da tech, math an' science blocks, and I'll head to da music, culture an' library blocks."

"Fair enough," Mondo replied. The duo paused by a wall in order to remove their bags and examine the contents within. Each meal box had a label stuck on it with the name and block location of the customer, which proved highly useful in finding them. Swapping was performed quickly, so as to prevent the food from losing too much heat. Then the bags were slung back across shoulders, and the figures momentarily parted with silent nods of mutual agreement to reunite in the lobby once their deliveries were complete.

Mondo felt a little bewildered as he walked down the corridor towards the science block, Copi-in-ledyba-form perched atop his head. The majority of his orders had been from here, so the other two blocks were navigated without much incident. To anyone else passing by, Mondo would have appeared to be just another student. But to him, the building

was sending mixed messages to his jittery brain. The immaculately-polished floors and pastel tinted walls gave off a restricted vibe much like that of Team Rocket headquarters, yet these walls had been covered in large, cheerful pictures and banners. If the operatives had ever had the guts to throw a party in the hallways, this is what it would have looked like. That mental image in itself caused Mondo to chuckle, and helped his tension ease somewhat.

Part of him was excited to visit the science block - after all, the calculation and theory of science was something the young man personally enjoyed. And as Mondo approached the door to the classroom the last of his meal recipients were in, his excitement became more potent. What sorts of research and development were these students going to be involved in? Viewing concepts progressing was one of the rare things Mondo found deeply fascinating in the Team Rocket laboratories, though he preferred it when they stuck to mechanical engineering.

Mondo leant forward, allowing Copi to knock upon the classroom door like they had done for him all the times beforehand. No reply was heard, which gave Mondo cause for wondering if he'd gone to the wrong door. Giving a shrug, Mondo tried the handle, which shifted downwards without complaint, and entered the room. It was empty of people, save for two male students with glasses who were sitting in front of a tall device which Mondo could have easily mistaken for a fridge, had there not been a monitor installed in the side of it. The left hand figure was gangly and untidily arranged, a spiky mass of dark green hair balanced on the

peak of his angular, unshaven countenance. In contrast, the right hand figure was chubbier in stature - though better composed - with short, russet hair and a puffed waistcoat jacket. Both students were practically glued to the monitor, and the slightly flickery depiction of a young girl standing in a forest that was broadcasting on it. As such, they hadn't acknowledged Mondo's entrance - at least not until he accidentally brushed a chair upon passing, causing it to emit a nasty squeak on the classroom floor.

Mondo froze awkwardly, as the two young men swung round with partly-shocked, partly-accusing stares. His stance and expression gave the appearance of a figure very much out of place - looking as if he shouldn't have even been there, despite what he had initially come to do. Fortunately, the right hand figure noticed the logo emblazoned on Mondo's carry bag, and a welcoming grin spread across his face.

"Ah! Lunchtime!" he exclaimed, getting up from his chair. "Studies can sure work up an appetite."

"Studying what?" Mondo blinked, redirecting his focus toward the sprite-like entity now visible on the monitor. "Footage of celeb?"

"Oh this isn't footage..." the other figure leant back with a knowing smirk. "These are *thoughts*." He paused for a moment to admire Mondo and Copi's completely baffled expressions. "Y'see, this machine here is called a Simulation Module. Ryan and I built it from abandoned Devon

schematics, as the core of our finals project. It has the ability to broadcast the deepest parts of a person's mind."

Pulling back a small door, the stocky figure previously divulged as Ryan motioned toward an adolescent female figure dressed in pastel clothing who was sat within the machine, her face covered with pieces of complicated headgear.

"Kristin has been helping us with our testing procedure," his companion continued. "By aligning her brainwaves with the frequencies of the Mindspace network, the Simulation Module can manifest three dimensional realities using her thoughts and desires."

"Hi there!" Kristin greeted cheerfully, waving in completely the wrong direction. "Say, Erik...did I hear something about lunch?"

"Sure did," the green-haired young man gave a subdued nod. "Your turn to disconnect, Ryan. We'll get back to work after."

Kristin smiled and waited patiently for Ryan to unclip the equipment from around her head, while Mondo opened his bag, took out the three remaining meal containers and placed them on the table. This he accomplished in a rather distracted fashion, unable to help himself cast more than the occasional glance at the mysterious thought-projecting machine that Kristin was being helped from.

"Tofu salad!" she exclaimed in approval, studying the contents of her meal box before looking up at Mondo. "Thank you! Uh...I don't believe you've introduced yourself yet."

"Oh, my name's Tate," Mondo replied, withdrawing from his distanced contemplation.

"Huh. I thought the only people delivering orders at The Striaton were the chef's sons," Ryan crunched. "You a new guy there?"

"Temporarily," Mondo gave a little shrug, to which he received some curious looks. "I'm...working off a debt," he added, with a nervous chuckle.

"Well, we appreciate the service, all the same," Kristin told him, brushing her fingers through her platinum blonde hair. "You seem quite interested in the Simulation Module."

"I have a bit of a thing for science," Mondo admitted, while Copi inquisitively eyed the laptop that was plugged into the Simulation Module by a length of grey cable. "Especially mechanics and Cyberstudies."

"Reeeally now?" there was a glint in Erik's eye. "Then I've got something that'll knock your socks off. Hold right there." He stood up from his chair and disappeared into another part of the room, while Ryan and Kristin exchanged expressions - the former rolling his eyes amusedly, the latter giggling. Moments later, Erik returned carrying a black cylinder, about twelve inches in height.

"I call it 'Mizno'," he announced, placing the cylinder on the table. "It's a prototype matter duplicator which I constructed myself. Instead of working on a biological level, I've found a way to read the variable signatures of objects. Cloning in this manner is not as complicated a

process as, say, organic cloning. Besides which, that process only works on living things. Mizno has the potential to duplicate all kinds of matter."

"Variable...signatures?" Mondo formed the words slowly and deliberately as he absorbed them.

"It's a pretty unexplored science," Erik confessed. "Most scientists either don't know about it, or consider it a ridiculous theory. As for me...well, the proof of its existence is right here on the table! Here, let me show the first thing I cloned an hour ago." The young man brought out two ballpoint pens from his pocket and placed them on the table. "Can't tell which one's the duplicate, can you?" He smiled arrogantly. "Obviously only works on small items right now, being a prototype."

"Could I see it actually duplicating something?" Mondo asked.

"Uh...not really," Erik bit his lip. "Mizno used up all its energy when I copied the pen, and it's still on recharge. But hey...this level of science is pretty amazing, even in concept, right?"

"I bet that's going to get you some top marks," Mondo remarked, trying to hide the unconvinced edge in his voice. The lack of a demonstration, coupled with Kristin and Ryan's barely-stifled amusement, had the young man considering the possibility this was all just some big prank, with him as target of the moment.

"Oh nonono," Erik's prideful demeanour vanished instantly, replaced with an air of panic and a small amount of hand-waving. "This is a personal project. And kind of secret, to be honest. At least to the

faculty. Y'see, I sort of...borrowed...a couple of ideas from...uh...the internet. Can you imagine what sort of a fuss my teacher would kick up if he knew?"

"So why did you make it?" Mondo raised an eyebrow. Erik's nerves over showing the project to his teacher only served to raise the plausibility of the prank theory.

"Technical reasons," Erik trailed off, embarrassedly looking somewhere else.

"He wanted to copy his Chou Tatakae cards," Kristin chuckled, receiving a glare for her explanation.

"Okay, fine," Erik grumbled, looking like a child caught eating from the candy jar before dinner. "But if I can overcome the hitches, build a version of Mizno with enough stability and long-term performance to rule out the tiny aspect of where I got the ideas from, I *would* show the faculty, believe me!" His face fell upon noticing that Mondo's attention had drifted somewhat, and the young man was staring at the cumbersome machine across the room again. "I see you're finding the Simulation Module riveting," he remarked dryly.

"Well it lets you view other people's thoughts," Mondo exclaimed, unaware of Erik's slight pout. "Have you ever tried...looking at dreams in there?"

"Actually, no..." Ryan looked surprised. The idea was not one he'd considered. "It's only ever been used to view conscious thoughts, since



Discounting the one time he'd wandered the outer boundaries of Kanto's 'Pokémon Technical', Errol had never visited an educational establishment, so his time inside Sarthest University was proving to be an interesting experience. Passage through the culture department had been pretty quick, though the man had lingered extensively in the music room - gazing wistfully at the line of guitars placed in a rack against the wall.

He'd owned a guitar once, back when he lived rough on Hollywood California's dingy Kantoan streets. Admittedly it was a children's toy he'd found abandoned on the doorstep of someone's house, but Errol had treasured it nonetheless. Its diminutive size and minimal string count made it a perfect fit for his two and a half foot body, with its stubby paw digits. Often he would sit upon a rooftop with the instrument, strumming whatever chords he could reach, while improvising lyrics to his ceaseless thoughts.

Scanning the nearest acoustic guitar up and down, Errol couldn't help but wonder how much better his playing could become, now he bore the digits that guitars were designed for. The man pushed such wondering aside before slipping back out into the corridor yet again. Staring at unobtainable objects of desire was never a good idea, especially if you were recently overcoming a long-term habit of stealing things that took your fancy. Besides, there was still the aspect of his final delivery to consider.

*In the early days, James used to speak about Pokémon Technical,* Errol pondered to himself, as he made his way towards the library. *How*

*he never stayed on to complete his studies after that exam he flunked big time. He could've done better, I know it. Jimmy's a smart kid, when he puts his mind to things. And sometimes...sometimes I wonder if he'd be better off now if he'd continued studying...*

Errol shook his head in an attempt to stop the train of thought before it entered too dark a place in his mind. It seemed he wasn't being particularly successful at healthy deliberation as of late. Instead he returned his attentions to the library's automatic doors, which he was now approaching. They slid open invitingly, and the man felt the floor under him shift from hard tile to soft carpet as he strolled within. The library was fairly empty, which would help make finding his intended recipient easier. His first two attempts turned up nothing but polite declining of the order in question. Now, Errol directed his attentions to the next target of inquiry, who was hunched over a table in front of a pillar between two sets of shelves, scribbling fervently.

"Say..." Errol inquired cheerfully, as he walked up to the figure. "Didja order a meal ta go from Striaton Restaur-echktht!" The man's sentence forced itself into a choked squeak upon better sight of an all-too-familiar shock of messy black hair, held under some level of control by a red and white baseball cap. In turn, the figure lifted their head upon hearing the bizarre exclamation, and Errol's bugged-out expression faltered as he found himself looking at a young woman with dark green eyes.

"Oh great, lunch!" she smiled. "I was starving." Then she hesitated for a moment, her expression becoming puzzled. "Huh. You're not the guy I was expecting."

"An' t'ankfully, neither are you..." Errol breathed a sigh of relief, earning a horrified stare for his mistaken identifying. He spluttered and thrust the box toward his recipient. "Uh, here's ya meal!"

"Thanks..." the young woman eyed him, taking the box.

"Sorry about dat, miss," Errol chuckled awkwardly. "Ya just dressed like someone else I knew, is all..." He trailed off, realising such a notion was pretty ridiculous on his part. "Though t'be honest, a place like dis would be da *last* place I'd expect to find 'em."

"Let me guess, a Pokémon Trainer, huh?" came the response.

"Yeah," Errol raised an eyebrow. "How'd ya know?"

"I get mistaken for one a lot," the figure chuckled, opening the box and removing the cutlery placed inside. "What can I say? I like the sorts of things they wear."

"So if you're not inta trainin', what *do* ya like doin'?" Errol inquired.

"Well I do like train-*spotting*," his conversee grinned. "Playing Chou Tatakae, and researching socio-culture in all its variety and wonder." She used her free hand to grasp and hold up some of the papers that had been scattered across the table.

"Da Pokémon League's effects on society an' its attitudes ta pokémon'," Errol read the top of the front page. "'By Jennifer Taylor'."

"The League is all well and good in theory," Jennifer explained. "But shouldn't we be concerned about how it trivialises our relationship with pokémon? It's an especially bad example for today's youth. A lot of them stomp around forests and fields, throwing Pokéballs at whatever catches their eye. There's very little thought put into it. That pokémon may well have a life of its own elsewhere. A life of competitive matches may be the last thing on its mind! Sure, a wild pokémon isn't as 'aware' as a tamed one, but you can still see its personality enough to draw a logical conclusion."

The young woman finished speaking, leaving Errol to stare in astonishment. After a moment or so, he managed to find his voice. For a person who considered trainer clothing to be effective fashion, Jennifer was quite the intriguing and philosophical character.

"Youse a real rational thinka, Jen," he stated, breaking into a wide smile. "A lotta people could sure loin from ya."

"Well thank you," Jennifer smiled back, blushing a little.

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After a dousing of sleep powder from one of Kristin's grass-type pokémon, the students propped Mondo inside the Simulation Module and placed the complicated headgear over him, while Copi observed with a mixture of curiosity and horror. Once all the equipment was connected, Mondo looked more like a robot than a human being. Yet despite all the confusion getting it arranged properly, Mondo had still managed to stay asleep throughout the whole thing. Now ten minutes had passed. The students and the zecutynr-in-ledyba-shape that accompanied them huddled around the monitor to see what Mondo's subconscious meandering would produce.

So far, they hadn't witnessed anything particularly horrifying. At first there was a forest of tall buildings - no two of which appeared to be the same height. These gradually fell away to a seemingly-endless expanse of ocean. At one point, the students found themselves examining a giant statue of a woman holding what they could only assume was an ice cream. But that too, quickly vanished, to be replaced with yet more waterscape. None of these images appeared to be causing Mondo any signs of distress.

Copi leaned nearer to the screen. The view of the ocean they could see was one of that from above - closer inspection had led them to notice a curious misty sheen and a thin yellowish frame bordering the beautiful sight. It was almost as if they happened to be peering through a window of some kind, as opposed to watching a computer monitor. The view moved up from the sea to the cloud-graced blue sky beyond. Sounds

could be heard now - the subtle thrum of voices rising and falling as the moments passed.

Suddenly, the picture on the screen shook. The image was an unearthly purple now, flickering with electricity and oddly-coloured squares. Then it swung violently to one side, casting the view towards rows of chairs and intermittently-present light. Figures with blurred, unrecognisable faces ran back and forth - some clung to one another, adding their distress to the gut-churning chaos of wailing, frightened shouts and distorted sirens. Copi flew into a panic as Ryan dived for the laptop computer wired to the Simulation Module - hammering at its keyboard while Mondo cried fearfully from underneath the helmet. The Simulation Module shuddered violently, gave out a few sparks, and then fell silent.

"Well that was freaky..." Kristin stared, as Copi clung to her arm with four of their six legs. "I sure hope Tate is okay."

"My computer isn't," Ryan grimaced, staring at the blueness of the laptop's screen. "I don't know how, but it looks like Tate's nightmares caused some kind of chain reaction."

"I better give his brain a quick once-over," Erik reassured Kristin, before bringing out a flat, hand-held device, initiating a piece of software upon it and removed the equipment from around Mondo's head. The Sleep Powder was still in effect, and Mondo remained very much oblivious to the goings-on outside his own curious subconsciously-formed world.

"It's a good thing my frequency scanner works for more than just keeping tabs on Miz-"

Erik stopped, his eyes widening rapidly as he stared at the device's screen, before letting out a horrified shriek. "It's GONE! Mizno is gone!"

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Errol had been waiting in the lobby for the past fifteen minutes, tapping his foot. At first, it didn't seem such a big deal - he'd had Jennifer's open-minded statements to contemplate, and this left him feeling happy and reassured of the good in humanity. But as time passed, happiness dissolved into annoyance, and then into worry. The man was about to make a move towards the departments Mondo had left for, when his companion walked up the corridor towards him - Copi dangling from around his shoulders with a partly satisfied expression on their face.

"An' where have you been all dis time?" Errol inquired, sounding rather like a scolding parent.

"It's a complicated story..." Mondo replied in low tones. From his hunched posture and the fact he was staring at his feet, Errol knew there was something bothering the young man. "I...I don't feel like I should leave the situation as it is without fixing it, though."

"Fixin' what?" Errol frowned. "What situation?"

"The science students were working with a machine that reads thoughts," Mondo made himself explain.

"Dey didn't see anyt'ing about...y'know, did dey?" Errol urged fearfully, referring to Team Rocket.

"Nuh uh..." Mondo seemed too washed out to be irritable about Errol's assumptions. "I asked if they could look at a nightmare I've had since I was a kid. And...well, I don't know how, but somehow my nightmare ended up fritzing their machine. And one of the guy's computers, too."

"So you wanted to stay an' help 'em repair dose?" Errol tilted his head slightly, his concern being exchanged for sympathy.

"I don't need to," Mondo insisted. "Copi sorted that problem out."

"He did?" Errol spluttered, looking at Copi, who shrugged. They weren't really sure how they had undergone the process either. Ryan's laptop had exuded some oddly irresistible aura for them, beckoning them closer. And upon contact with the laptop, the pokémon had been able to sense every component within. Closing their eyes, they had found themselves within an ethereal void which they could only assume was their own mental interpretation of the laptop's innards, surrounded by billions upon billions of lights which passed along channels all around. And there, a violet cloud had surrounded a particularly sizeable cluster of these lights, preventing their motion. Somehow, they had been able to disperse

this cloud before the laptop was thrust away from them, reuniting them with the tangible world once more.

"Thing is, more happened than just that," Mondo exclaimed, an almost pleading note in his voice. "While those students were distracted with studying the results of my nightmare, one of their personal projects was stolen. It may not do what Erik claims it does, and I may have been taken for a chump the whole time, but he did seem awful upset about it disappearing and I...I feel obligated to get it back."

"But...!" Errol started, before trailing off. The awareness of their current ties to the Striaton Restaurant was nagging in the corner of his mind, yet Mondo's bereft expression was doing its best to counteract. Errol knew all too well the feeling Mondo had right now, but someone had to carry on their restaurant duties to pay back the tab. "Tell ya what," he said after a moment. "Take me back wit'cha to dese scientist friends o' yours, an' I'll volunteer ta get dis project back for 'em. On da proviso dat *you* continue woikin' at da Striaton in da meantime. Fair deal?"

For a moment, Mondo just stared at Errol in shock. He wasn't expecting this level of understanding, let alone an offer to solve the problem personally. The stare was followed by a silent nod of the head. Just as long as he could keep out of Grimsby's way, he'd be relatively fine.

"Alright den," Errol grinned. "Lead da way!"

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Following a quick acquainting session between Errol, Ryan, Kristin and Erik, the lattermost gave Errol his handheld device in order to help him track the duplicator down. This device had been Erik's way of keeping tabs on his project while it was out of his sight, and it had flagged him a warning during his scan of Mondo's brain activity. While Erik was reluctant to relieve himself of the device, it was the lesser of two evils, compared to going out and tracking it down himself. Sarthest City was a fairly decent place overall, he'd said, but it had some aspects he'd rather not encounter face to face. With a basic idea of what Erik's duplicator unit looked like, Errol and Mondo parted ways for the second time that day, with Copi choosing to accompany Errol this time around.

Elsewhere in the city, three figures idled under a segment of Route 1M - a concrete area that once was used as a storage yard for some company long since made defunct, now left to the will of nature. One of these figures - a spindly man called Sam Hayder - leant against the road's main support pillar that intruded upon the yard, nonchalantly lighting a cigarette while eyeing a kecleon near his left boot. It wasn't often they got calls to carry out underground jobs, but they happened on occasion, and when they did, it was usually for a big reward. As such, they'd have to be pretty stupid to turn it down. And this client's request had been a simple enough theft, at least for Sam's kecleon, Leo. He had

no idea what was wanted with some kid's class project, but as far as Sam was concerned, as long as the job paid well, he didn't care what the client was after.

They were a fairly balanced trio. Ex-biker Althea -a young woman with flame red hair and dark blue leathers- took care of all the irritating communication issues and planning that he couldn't stand. And Jaxon, built like a brick outhouse and with all the charm to match, accounted for any matter requiring brawn – a thing Sam's physique wasn't particularly designed for. At this moment in time, Jaxon was busying himself guzzling cans of beer and tossing the empty remains at his forretrass for its own target practise, while Althea discussed matters with their client on her cellphone.

"Do you have what I asked for, Ms. Rimer?" came a heavily modulated voice from the phone's earpiece. It was obvious that the caller, whomever it happened to be, did not wish to be identified.

"We got it, alright," Althea responded proudly, as her toxicroak looked on with dark approval from nearby. "Know these streets like the back of our hands, we do."

"Exactly what I was counting on," came the response. "I shall have my courier meet with you in the next hour. They shall be carrying appropriate identification."

"And what about our end of the bargain?" the woman inquired, leaning closer to the phone handset with a frown.

"You shall get your reward payment as promised, Ms. Rimera," the voice acknowledged. "So long as the item remains in tact. Do not move from your position." Then the line went dead.

"How'd it go, Althea?" Sam asked, as Althea wandered toward Jaxon and grabbed two cans of beer from the crate on the floor. The tone of his voice indicated he was more interested in breaking the silence than hearing an answer from the woman.

"We'll have what we want in an hour or so," Althea responded in a matter-of-fact way, tossing one of the cans at her toxicroak companion, who caught it with expert precision. "Nice and simple."

"Can't help but wonder what the thing actually does, though," Sam commented, eyeing the black cylinder which had been placed beside the beer crate. "It sure don't seem like much."

"Hmm..." Althea agreed non-verbally, reaching down with one hand to grasp the cylinder at its peak. As she did so, her hand made contact with a button on the top of the device which, until this point, had gone unnoticed. The cylinder began to glow slightly and vibrate, causing Althea to release her grip. Fortunately she hadn't brought it any particular height into the air, and the cylinder just wobbled slightly, before falling silent.

"What the frek was that?" Sam exclaimed, as Althea gingerly reached for the cylinder a second time, making sure not to touch the



Errol felt a wariness about the thing Erik had dubbed 'Mizno'. The student's intentions were basically good, if a little down to earth, but the potential for such a machine to be used for other, more sinister means was pretty high. Part of Errol wanted to destroy it once he found it, just to make sure nothing untoward happened through its use. But he had promised Mondo to return the device in one piece, and he wasn't one to break a promise - at least not since he turned over a new leaf.

The man had brought his carry bag that originally held the orders from the restaurant, to bring back Mizno without passers-by seeing it. And the tracking had been going fairly well, at least until the frequency scanner led Errol and Copi straight to a high stone wall at the end of an alley, with barbed wire at its peak.

"Huh. Well dat's a hitch," he remarked, adjusting his shades. "Dis here electronic doohickey is coiten dat kid's project is on da other side o' dis wall, but I ain't seeing no way o' gettin' over it..."

<So now what?> Copi looked worried at the thought of letting Mondo down. Errol opened his mouth to reply, but stopped short. His sensitive hearing was picking up a murmur of whispered voices from a short distance away.

<Sure are a weird bunch. Getting some *really* interesting vibes off 'em...>

<The 'uman is carryin' a bag. This is good...>

<Is there food? I am hungry.>

<You're *always* hungry, Jigger...>

Squinting at an upper balcony, Errol was able to pick out the shapes of a rattata, a purugly, a zigzagoon and a pidove watching him intently. It was an odd combination of species, but none of them were wearing collars, or any type of accessory that could be utilized for spy devices, which put Errol at ease. No doubt these were street pokémon, and this revelation struck the man with an idea.

"Hmm...a coupla dose pokémon sound like dey're tamed," he murmured. "I might be able ta get some help wit' findin' a way around dis obstacle."

<What difference does it make whether they're tame or not?>  
Copi eyed him.

"Put simply, tryin' t' talk wit' a wild pokémon is like attemptin' a rational conversation wit' a one year old human," Errol explained. "You'll only get so far." He raised his voice to the balcony. "Hey! Youse lot up dere! We're not so familiar wit' dis place an' could really use a few pointers!"

<You bet'cha could,> the rattata snorted in amusement.  
<Especially wit'cha fashion sense>

<Nice hat, lanky!> the purugly added. This loud, rude exclamation was consequently backed up with a cluster of ungracious guffawing as Copi looked up with a grumpy snort.

"Far from me ta deny you an opinion..." Errol remarked dryly. "But I was lookin' fer ideas on how t' get over da udda side o' dis wall, not tips on how ta dress."

There was a shaken silence, as the rattata and purugly looked at each other in alarm, and the pidove tilted its head to one side with vague puzzlement.

<'e understood us...> the rattata gulped. <'umans aren't s'posed t' do that, right?>

<That explains the interesting vibes,> the purugly shuddered. <Let's get out of here, Nor.>

<I'm wit'cha on that.>

"Hey wait!" Errol exclaimed, as the pokémon prepared to bolt. He didn't know if there'd be another chance to find useful help like this, so he couldn't let the opportunity go. "Uh...uh how's about I make ya an offer? You help me get where I wanna go, an' I'll...I'll get'cha some food!"

<Food?> the zigagoon's ears had started pricking. He shuffled backwards a little, which caused the rattata and purugly to do the same. They were all wearing curious expressions, which meant Errol had got their attention.

"Sure!" he said, dropping in some extra enthusiasm for good measure.

<What are you doing?> Copi hissed. <We don't have any food! We're still paying for the food we ate!>

"I know, I know..." Errol hushed them. "But I need deir help. I'll just have ta find a way ta get dem food as well - even if it means woikin' at da restaurant some more."

Copi groaned slightly. They could see this turning into a bit of a vicious circle. But, vicious circle or not, the plan had worked. The group of pokémon made their way to the alley floor by means of shimmying drainpipes, balancing upon windowsills and traversing balconies. It was here that Errol was finally able to get a good look at them.

The rattata had a rather large chunk missing out of its right ear, while the purugly - who was remarkably lean for a member of its species - waved its springy tail freely instead of wrapping it about its waist. By contrast, the zigagoon was a pudgy little specimen with fur that stuck out in all directions, making it look like a stripy loofah. As for the pidove, its eyes seemed to be looking at opposing angles.

<Alright then,> the rattata - who appeared to be the leader of the group - remarked in a vaguely unimpressed manner. <We'll 'elp ya out. But why d'ya wanna go over there? It's a pretty raw place, be'ind that wall. A lotta poison types roamin' about - grimers, an' gulpins...an' muks.>

"Guess I'll hafta take my chances," Errol said resolvedly, while Copi shuddered. They had no idea what any of those pokémon were, but

they all sounded pretty disgusting. "Some thieves stole somet'ing important from an acquaintance o' mine, an' I intend t' get it back."

<Oho, a gutsy one> the purugly chimed in. It wasn't a sarcastic observation in the slightest, it appeared the feline pokémon was quite impressed by Errol's boldness, as well as his translation skills. <We're all about lookin' out for mates. An' a snack sure wouldn't go amiss either. The name's Reg. This is my pal Nor.> He waved a paw at the rattata, who gave a little bob of acknowledgement. Following that, he motioned toward the pidove and zigzagoon. <Those two are Holly and Jigger, respectively. An' you?>

"Errol," he replied coolly. "Dis is my buddy Copi."

<Well, Errol,> Reg began. <Us lot just so happen to know of a way through to that area over the wall. Might be a bit of a tight fit fer you, but I'm sure you can work with it.>

The man gave a smile. A challenge was a challenge, and this was just another in a long line of them for him. With that, the pokémon assembly moved out - Nor beckoning Errol with a twitch of his tail. They kept to the back streets, away from the prying eyes of pedestrians - weaving in and out of various discarded junk. Eventually, the buildings gave way to a deep channel used for siphoning off drainage water. The channel curved round and fed into the sizeable opening of a concrete pipe, jutting out of the very wall Errol had been studying a few metres or so further down.

<'Ere we go> Nor remarked, waving a foreleg upward at the opening with a slight snort of contempt as he did so. <This is as far as we're goin'. You're on yer own now. But don'cha let up on your side of the bargain, you 'ear?>

"Sprouts hona!" Errol grinned, before peering into the pipe. It was just tall enough for a man of his stature to pass through on his hands and knees. That part didn't bother him too much, but the fact there was liquid streaming through the pipe made it a more unpleasant experience. Errol thanked his lucky stars this wasn't a sewage channel, and proceeded within. Copi followed along behind, as the pipe diameter did not allow room for them to stay upon Errol's head.

He could have contemplated a lot of matters as he crawled onward, but Errol's train of thought took a rather obscure turn. Here he was, an ex-thief, on his way to stop thieves. The behaviour was something more akin to that of the adolescent youth and his companions the man had tracked for many years. So did this make *him* a twerp now? Probably not, Errol deduced - he was too old for a title like that. This led him to wonder what one might call a 'twerp' over twenty years of age.

< Listen...> Copi murmured tentatively, breaking into Errol's deliberating. <Do you hear that?>

The man paused, before turning his head to one side. There was a circular grille where the pipe met an intersection, and through the grille he could see a large swalot which was firmly occupied in consuming the



patches on the lower fronts of both his trouserlegs, which extended down over his hiking boots.

"Dat machine ain't yours, an' I've come to return it to its rightful ownna," Errol stated. Jaxon gave a low, throaty chuckle at this.

"Heh. Cute," he grunted. Seconds later, Copi let out a horrified screech as their entire vision was filled with a menacing-looking, pitted visage. "I'd like to see you try," Jaxon grimaced from behind his forretress, his voice having taken on a dangerous, almost psychotic tone.

"Don't suppose ya picked up any fire type data in da woods, huh?" Errol murmured to Copi, who was shaking slightly. They tried to recompose themself.

<Sorry,> they whispered in response. <I didn't.>

"Eh, it's okay, kid," Errol reassured his companion. "We'll just hafta fight steel wit' steel. Toin into a scizor."

<Alright!> Copi perked up, before leaping from Errol's head, much to the surprise of his audience. The forretress hovered backward in puzzlement as, in this mid-air descent, Copi's body became featureless and gelatinous in appearance - glowing bright blue. Rapidly it elongated, the middle set of legs vanishing, while the back legs stretched and thinned, and the bulbous tips of the front legs grew all the more pronounced. By the time it made contact with the ground, Copi's shape had altered from an insect no more than a foot long, to a bipedal creature reaching Errol's chin. The gelatinous texture faded, returning detail and

colour, and in the process, the intent yellow eyes and shiny red skin of Copi's new form.

"That guy's got a ditto!" Sam exclaimed.

"One with a good memory, no less..." Althea raised an eyebrow. "Doesn't matter - we still vastly outnumber them. Teach these two their place, Acralm!"

"Beat the crap out of 'em, HB!" Jaxon ordered, as the battered-looking toxicroak strode forward next to his forretress - both wearing menacing expressions.

*Think smart. Think smart,* Errol reminded himself firmly, as Copi gave him a quick, panicked glance over its shoulder. *Strategy wins over brute force in this situation. Sure would help if I could remember what kind of moves a scizor knows. We'll just have to improvise.* He caught sight of Acralm readying a punch - something that was certain to hit a weak point on a steel type. "Grab dat forretress by da horns!" Errol cried.

In a split second, Copi was gone. HB gave a tiny yelp as he felt a sudden tightness on the front two protrusions from his metallic shell. The zecutylnr-in-scizor form re-appeared in the forretress' vision, their yellow glare tinted with mischief. Before anyone could react, Copi had thrust HB round in a 180-degree motion, thrusting the clam-like pokémon into Acralm as if it were a baseball bat.

"Nice one!" Errol whooped, as both the forretress and toxicroak rolled across the concrete lot. It wasn't the course of action he'd had in

mind, but it had worked just as effectively, if not more so. Suddenly, the man detected an odd weight upon his back, which rapidly shifted across and diagonally up his chest in a series of tiny, scratchy motions. He caught sight of a small red zig-zag pattern hovering in front of him, just a second too late. A burst of rainbow-coloured Aura shot seemingly from nowhere, directly in Errol's face. He reeled backwards, shutting his eyes instinctively, and bright light made contact with his eyelids. Errol opened his eyes again to see his glasses floating in mid-air a short distance away from him, and a squeak of alarm emitted from the general area.

The first reaction the man had was to swat at the invisible creature clinging to his front. It was a successful retaliation, and the kecleon landed on the floor - the sudden impact causing it to lose control of its camouflage. In turn, the sunglasses in its paw slid from its grip, to be stepped upon quite heavily by Acralm, who was engaged in intense combat with Copi.

"Leo!" Sam yelled, an uncharacteristic look of horror on his face. He'd instructed the kecleon to create a distraction, but wasn't intending it to find interest in Errol's head accessories. Errol stared at the crushed segments of his glasses frustratedly, before his sensitive hearing detected a change in the air behind him. Something was making a sneak attack from his left. With a war cry, Errol flung his fist round and slammed it into the front of HB, who was in mid-tackle. While the collision managed to throw the forretruss off kilter, Errol also staggered in reverse, clutching at

his hand. The blisteringly hard shell of a steel type was not a required punching target.

Errol admitted he was more used to battling against people who shouted out orders to their pokémon, making it easier to come up with a way to counter them. But here, there was no such behaviour. The street thugs' pokémon were perfectly honed to battle under their own initiative, giving neither Copi nor Errol much chance for defence. Very soon, they collapsed upon the ground in a mismatched heap, covered in cuts and bruises.

"I'm a negotiator, not a fighter..." Errol groaned. The trio of street thugs laughed callously.

"Hey, at least you've been helping us to kill time until our courier arrives," Althea smirks. "Thanks a bunch."

Suddenly a high-pitched cry echoed across the lot. As the street thugs looked over their shoulders in surprise, a rattata and a purugly rounded the corner with angry looks on their faces - the pidove and zigagoon chasing after them with expressions of oblivious delight.

<Attack formation!> Nor bellowed. Reg swiped his tail around, snatching the rattata up amongst it as he ran. Using the combined momentum, he pitched Nor like a dart towards HB, where he landed atop the forretress' shell. HB let out of panicked exclamation of pain as Nor

started chewing away, and spun around in a frantic attempt to dislodge the rattata, causing Althea and Sam to dash aside in the process.

As this was going on, Reg then scooped up and threw Jigger in exactly the same fashion, the zigagoon giggling eccentrically over the course of its flight. Acralm ducked this comical assault, only to be hit by the true attacker, Reg himself, who slammed into her with his entire force. Holly followed this up with an enthusiastic cry, diving into Acralm at speed. While the street thugs' pokémon may have had an advantage in strength, they weren't particularly good when it came to working with one another, and this was a flaw Nor's gang were exploiting to its fullest.

Jaxon observed this scene with a growing aura of volatile discontent. He was pretty certain Errol had something to do with the appearance of these weatherworn pokémon, and he wasn't going to stand for it. Errol had barely managed to return to his feet, when he noticed the huge man thundering towards him like an enraged tauros, his left hand ready for attack. But Errol managed to anticipate the movement - vaulting Jaxon by placing his own hands upon the approaching fist and using it to propel his entire body. Errol landed behind, his attentions firmly on the cylinder, which Sam now happened to be clutching. His body was aching like crazy, but he couldn't give up. Copi was out for the count, and by some stroke of good fortune, still holding their scissor form. It was up to him to get the cylinder out of Sam's grasp.

Jaxon's bulk didn't make him any slower to react, however. He spun round with troubling agility, thrusting at Errol with his fists yet

another time. Again, Errol weaved aside. He may have not been much of a fighter, but evasion was something he could do pretty well. This, however, only served to make his opponent all the angrier.

"Stop dodgin' about and fight, y' frekkin wimp!" he bellowed. In turn, Errol couldn't help but chuckle profusely. It was a delay too long. Jaxon's fifth attempt to punch the man succeeded, with painful-sounding results. HB caught the remnant of the assault as Errol flew into him, careering across the lot and hitting Sam square in the back. The man let out a strangled cry and toppled over, the black cylinder flying out of his hands in the process.

"NO!" Althea yelled, as everyone's activities came to an abrupt halt. The cylinder tumbled into the air before landing, with a rather messy 'splort' in the forehead of a muk that had recently slithered out of the shadows in order to see what all the noise was about.

There was a pause which could have almost seemed humorous. The muk glanced up at the black device protruding from its forehead before letting out an angry bellow. A cluster of grimers slithered from behind it, all wearing expressions of disapproval at their clan leader having been disrespected in such a manner. Without further instruction, they began lobbing balls of sludge at all intruders present in the lot.

"Let's get outta here!" Althea screeched, as one of the sludge lumps hit the concrete by her foot, igniting into a small explosion. Sam agreed with hurried nods and ran off, with Leo skittering after him,

protesting such a hasty getaway. Althea and Acralm followed - they knew when they were horribly outnumbered. Jaxon hesitated, however. HB had an immunity to poison type attacks, but with all the previous fighting, the fortress wouldn't hold up so well against the impacts and debris that Sludge Bombs would deal him. With an irritated growl, he conceded, and thudded after his accomplices.

<Them lot 'ave the right idea,> Nor piped up. <We need t' exit, stage left!>

"But what about da cylinda?" Errol protested breathlessly.

<No probs, I got it covered,> Reg grinned. Errol turned to see that the muk no longer had the duplicator stuck in it. Somehow, amongst all the noise, dust clouds and commotion, Reg had deftly swept his prehensile tail into the group and grabbed back the precious article. With the acknowledgement that the item was safe in hand, or at least, appendage, Errol gathered Copi in his arms and the group made their escape. The zecutyne had finally succumbed to the damage they had been dealt, and resumed their generic vaguely feline, mostly reptilian hybrid form. However, this alteration of visage did little to perturb the street pokémon, who simply took it in their stride and ushered Errol down an alternate route to the waterlogged pipe he had taken to get in. This route lacked the directness of the pipe, but offered far more height, allowing Errol to carry Copi and maintain a fair amount of velocity at the same time. And he did, despite the searing pain where Jaxon's fist had made impact.



had received reports from his data maintenance crews that several chunks of data had gone missing, and had ordered them to be tracked to the device of the one responsible. The figure had been a child, an amateur with little idea for security, but still the executive saw the article he had produced from a mishmash of their research as both a threat and a source of intrigue. There were always others he could turn to in order to bring it into his possession.

He knew better than most people - the science of variables was not something to be taken lightly.

**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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