

POKÉMON
REBIRTH

ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE FOURTEEN

Conversion

Soluqua and Wobuffet's combined shield had saved Cassidy, Butch and Jessie, but just barely. It took several hours, and the mutual efforts of the three humans and their companion pokémon to claw their way from underground into the refreshing surface air, by which time it was early morning yet again, and everyone's body screamed at them for release. Surprisingly their camp was left undamaged by Trigron's rampaging through the earth, though many of the articles there had upended themselves as a result of the tremors.

They had overheard a terrible explosion, and after that, all the shaking and screeching had ceased. Had Trigron been killed? Following a sparse, broken few hours of sleep, the trio of Rocket operatives donned more inconspicuous outfits and ventured into the town to gather further information. Casual questioning revealed that much of those resident were convinced Trigron had been a robot. None of the operatives intended to change any minds - this circumstance of mistaken identity worked in their favour, and kept Team Rocket's dealings well under wraps. But something was too perfect about this.

Further assessment of the area the explosion had come from was enough to confirm their suspicions. They knew those defectors had a hand in these events - the plan was too well executed, though they hated to admit it. Regardless, whether the group of runaways and the one who'd organized them had been in Pachna Town or not, they had left far before Cassidy, Butch and Jessie had arrived - undoubtedly to avoid questioning from the scientists who were present. The trio settled on

doing the same. As frustrating as losing another genetic pokémon was, there was no point in remaining where they were.

Indeed, no sooner had dawn broken and hearty breakfasts had been consumed, the travellers had departed from Pachna Town and continued their passage eastwards, over the hillsides of Tatto. Taking one last sad look at the white tent where the hovercraft's remains were kept, Denise returned her attentions to keeping pace with the others. Fortunately they were already travelling light, with the majority of articles in Caley's salvaged bag, so had little reason to stick around while the authorities sifted through the debris of Pachna's collapsed buildings.

The group's primary intention now was to reach Scale Falls, location of what they assumed was Caley's next spate of insight. Though they were still none the wiser as to how visiting the city was going to be of any benefit. Having been privy to Caley's worried confessions, Rose had a slightly clearer idea as to the reasons. Scale Falls was a city of knowledge, after all - maybe it had something to offer the young man in learning how to better handle his psychic abilities.

"Caley..." James began warily. "Not to pry into our navigational decisions too much, but after we've been to Scale Falls, how are we going to set about finding where Team Rocket have got to, and what they are doing?"

"That's a good question, James," Caley tried to keep a level of calm in his voice despite his lack of answers. "But I'm still not yet sure."

Part of him got the feeling that with the way things were going, if Team Rocket was indeed part of the prophecy Azima seemed so confident he was involved with, he was going to end up crossing paths with them regardless. Adam seemed to have had little concern about the possible deeper implications of where they were going, however. He seemed too concerned with grilling Caley on his more curious aesthetic decisions.

"What's up with letting your pokémon ride on your head all the time?" he sniffed. "You've been doing that since Wichour Town and it looks stupid."

"What does it matter if Caley lets Kota ride on his head?" Denise frowned. She was still feeling bristly towards Adam with regards to his treatment of Rilly the previous night. "Maybe he might, I don't know, actually want to *bond* with his pokémon. Y'know...instead of treating it like a tool."

"It's bugging me," Adam grumbled, completely missing Denise's hint about his past behaviour. "It looks like a stupid hat and it's bugging me."

Kota muttered while Caley shifted uncomfortably, not wishing to be the centre of attention - especially when the attention involved an increasing level of movement towards secrets he had yet to divulge.

Luckily for him, an abrupt change of location was about to divert the attention away.

However, the place they found themselves walking into was far from the grandiose splendour of Scale Falls that Caley had been examining on his T-5 Pokédex prior to arriving. It was certainly grandiose, but more in the way of tacky extravagance as opposed to the regal kind.

"Just *where* have we ended up now?" Adam squinted, eyeing the tall corner buildings arrayed in gaudy shades of gold and cheap white light bulbs with some interest.

"Looks like some kind of gamblers' paradise to me," Caley responded uncomfortably. Wherever it was, the young man certainly didn't like the air of desirous scrutiny he was receiving from passers-by.

"You wouldn't be far wrong with that analogy," Rose told him, acknowledging a road sign. "Seems we've wandered into 'Edgeville'. From what I've heard about this place, it's best known for glitz, materialism and shallow attitudes to pretty much anything except hoarding as much money as possible."

"There's one in every region," James commented, rolling his eyes.

"All the more reason to find our way out of *this* one as soon as we can," Rose insisted. Caley nodded in strong agreement.

"True, but we should get our bearings first," he reminded the others. "It may be a sleazy place, but hopefully its one with info on how far we are from Scale Falls."

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Crispin van Lawrence heaved a sigh and agitated the contents of his glass of Karburnet with the mothim-tipped stirrer yet again. What had started out as a seeming dream come true had fast descended into a nightmare. At first, the man couldn't quite believe his luck - after being swept off his feet by an ostentatiously-dressed woman while visiting Cameran Palace three years ago, Crispin had longed to find her again. Despite the attire, this woman had not been pompous and dull like the others Crispin had met at the ball that night. In fact, her almost childish enthusiasm upon breaking into dance had captured the man's heart - despite his original shocked reactions.

And just a few days prior, Crispin had been near certain he had rediscovered that very woman at yet another formal gathering in Kanto. She had the same coloured eyes and hair, wore the same outfits and showed a measure of eccentricity. However, had Crispin been in command of all his senses at the time, he would have noted that this eccentricity was more vicious and commandeering than that of his dream dance partner. And her voice...something seemed very off about it.

Regardless, she accepted Crispin's invitation to accompany him to his stately home back in Tatto. But not before taking him for everything he had before they'd even got there.

It had been excess every step of the way - from luxury massages on the SS Transpanador to clothes shopping in Nashgri City. And now this - laid up in some tasteless gambling establishment in a location Crispin was sure happened to be on the list of Tatto's top places to avoid. However, his female companion seemed totally at ease here. At this moment in time she was sat at the head of a Roulette table - her flowing skirts cascading over the sides of her chair, making her look rather like one of those decorative covers that older Tattoans felt inclined to use to shield visitors to their bathroom from the horror of toilet rolls.

In fact, she'd been playing Roulette for the past half hour. Thankfully this was a pastime the woman hadn't used *his* money for - she wasn't exactly short of cash and proved surprisingly fortunate when it came to picking lucky numbers. In the past ten minutes alone she had turned a mere 2028 Perjhis into 51 000. Crispin was starting to wish she would lose just so they could leave this dreadful place. His eyes were beginning to ache from the bright, flickering lights and his ears pounded from the flamboyant music blaring out of every corner of the building.

The man groaned heavily and lowered his head into his hands - cinnamon-brown hair stringing its way between cold, pale fingertips. A moment later he'd wrenched it up again, as someone else's hand tapped him sharply on his right shoulder.

"Alright dahling," came her familiar, deceptively-polite tones. "I'm done here."

"*Finally*," Crispin began to smile with relief and quickly left his stool. "My mind was considering leaving before the rest of me had a chance to."

"Don't be such a theatric," the woman sniffed, shuffling a bundle of notes. It was hard to tell whether she was amused or irritated by Crispin's remark at this point. "Ah'll spare y' poor l'il senses any more sufferin' - already got what ah came for anyway."

"Oh Jessiebelle..." Crispin exclaimed, suddenly overcome with elation at the sight of the money. "You were going to repay me?"

"But Crispy..." she looked coy. "Ah thought all this was *your* treat!"

"Of course," the man shuddered in lowered tones. "If you'll excuse me, I need to go and purchase some aspirin. Providing one of these grimy little establishments sells such a thing..."

Jessiebelle barely stifled a giggle, watching the figure whose emotions she'd so blatantly toyed with stumble across the road and into a handily-located newsagent. This Crispin character was proving to be a valuable source of travel expense and other goods. Needless to say, information on his cousin Lawrence's architectural genius would fetch a satisfying price under the right circumstances. As fun as these pawns

were, however, neither had proved more valuable than the set of case notes she had taken from her brother Morterey's study a week ago.

Normally, Jessiebelle took no interest in the man's blandly-justified dealings with the law, but after finding out he was set to defend the rights of a certain Denise Nichols - the daughter of wealthy technological businessman Gabriel Nichols - she immediately became curious. She had seen this girl's photograph on television alongside a slew of other identities labelled as criminal, and her heart had practically flipped in her chest upon noticing a certain figure among them. James Morgan - a man she had been arranged to marry almost thirteen years ago. While the arrangement had stopped being legally-binding once James had turned 16, Jessiebelle's sadistic fascination with tormenting the man had not. If she could find where this Denise character happened to be, she could demand the youth to tell her of James' whereabouts.

Glancing back from watching the open door of the newsagents, the woman noticed five travellers pass her vision, with three pokémon in tow. At first, nothing seemed particularly out of the ordinary - many groups of people had walked up and down the street during Jessiebelle's contemplation. But this group seemed more awkward and regimental. The three eldest figures wandered alongside one another, while the other two proceeded in a line formation behind, like neither wished to be in too close contact with the other.

She wasn't sure what, but something moved Jessiebelle to retrieve a particular crumpled piece of paper from her handbag and unfold it.

Once again, the faces of the wanted fugitives glowered back at her from the flyer. Yes...the face shapes fitted, and the heights seemed to match with those written. Even the glaceon present had been mentioned here. But was it all just coincidence? Jessiebelle didn't wish to make any rash movements – after all, the wrong kind of publicity was disastrous for anyone, especially the wealthy.

Then it happened. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the youngest member of the group reach towards his head. But instead of scratching atop the grass-coloured mass of hair present, Jessiebelle's eyes widened as she saw the youth's fingers make their way underneath the edge of the hair, causing the entire arrangement to wobble slightly.

Jessiebelle's eyes lit up with devilish glee at what she observed. It seemed that Roulette was not the only thing the woman bore good fortune in.

Still, now was not the time to go running over - if James so much as caught a whiff of her Megani perfume, him and his accomplices would be long out of sight before Jessiebelle had a chance to unleash her faithful rider's whip. This was a trap that had to be set cunningly. This was a trap that required the assistance of others. But Edgeville's citizens weren't simply going to lend a hand out of sheer good-naturedness. No...these people needed *persuading*.

Jessabelle looked down at the wad of notes that she had stashed carefully into her handbag and smiled darkly to herself. What was a little pocket change in return for a lifetime of delightfully reluctant subjection?

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"Adam, will you stop scratching your head?" Denise hissed.

"People are going to notice that's a wig."

"I can't help it," Adam grumbled. "Damn thing itches."

"Okay, we're here," Rose announced, as they drew to a halt outside a window of brightly-patterned wares in the local trainer supplies mart. "Time to stock up."

"I imagine we'll be needing some more Pokéballs to mod, huh?" Caley glanced at Denise. "Maybe you can help me choose the best ones."

"Sure thing," Denise smiled, walking after the young man into the shop. Rose followed - medical supplies were imperative if they were to avoid too many stays in Pokémon Centers, and she had a good knowledge of what supplies were the most effective. James wandered in after the others, as it was the better option next to being left with Adam.

"Oh *that's* nice," Adam snorted, not shifting from his spot. He didn't wish to go inside, as the space was far too cramped for his liking,

but he was half expecting someone to stay with him. Even if it had been the annoying presence of James.

There was a sharp rush of air behind him, and before Adam was able to turn around to find out what it was, a thick cord had spun its way around him - binding his arms tightly to his sides and yanking him backwards across the street. Suddenly he was beside a tall woman with curled magenta hair, the soles of his boots shuffling for grip upon the edges of her wildly impractical dress. The woman tutted disapprovingly, before shoving Adam away from her dress skirts and leading him into the centre of the street. Despite this eccentric display, the city's inhabitants continued walking about them obliviously. It was going to take something a bit more unusual to catch their focus.

"Vahlplume? A solarbeam, if y' please," Jessiebelle instructed primly. The white hot pillar of energy pierced the sky, knocking a pidgeon from its roosting spot in a bundle of agitated feathers. It was enough to catch the attentions of everyone within viewing distance in the main street, not to mention those in some of the nearest surrounding shops. Caley glanced up in alarm as the owner paused after handing over his change, before scuttling out of the shop's front door with his assistant in tow. Rose considered it best to walk after them, and her face took on a horrified expression at what she saw outside.

"Don't y'all realise, wanted criminals are walking among you?" Jessiebelle exclaimed, waving the flyer at the murmuring crowd that had gathered.

"Hey, ain't those the Dustry City crooks from the TV?" one of the nearer bystanders blinked.

"Precisely mah point," Jessiebelle sniffed. "An' if you were keepin' those pretty little eyes o' yours open, you'd have found this one y'self!" She concluded her statement with a flourish, sweeping Adam's green wig from his head and revealing the more familiar nut brown hair reflected on the wanted flyer. There arose a communal gasp. Adam struggled, but his efforts were in vain. The whip's cord had bound him tightly, preventing escape.

"Now y'all know the reward they've been offering for these criminals," Jessiebelle smiled in a sickly manner. "I'm willing t' offer double. Y' heard me. Double - for this one man."

Caley glanced up at James with a puzzled expression, only to see that his companion had turned a deathly shade of pale and was shaking violently. The woman in the street who held Adam captive was pointing at James' photograph on the flyer. James glanced back at Caley, the terror in his eyes screamed an all too clear message - he wanted to leave, and he wanted to as soon as possible. Rose quickly ushered her companions into the alleyway while the crowds were occupied.

"This is not good..." Rose grimaced. "Looks like we've gathered an unwanted amount of attention."

"Time to get moving then, right?" Denise suggested, with uncharacteristic hardness. She still wasn't feeling at all favourable towards Adam.

"No! We've got to get the twerp out of there!" James spluttered. "Not even he deserves to be subjected to Her..."

"Discounting the obvious reasons, why?" Caley glanced up worriedly. "Who is she? Have you met?"

"Her name's J-Jessiebelle..." James responded shakily. "Once we were engaged to be m-m..." he wasn't able to get the following word out. "Well we're not now! It was a silly crush that got out of hand, and *still* the blasted woman won't leave me alone!"

"Reasons or not, Adam needs rescuing," Caley concluded logically, looking up at his pokémon companion. "Kota? Can you teleport him out of there?"

"Gweh!" Kota nodded, and vanished in a spatter of blue light. Re-appearing next to Jessiebelle, who glanced up in shock, Kota positioned himself atop Adam and initiated his teleportation abilities, sending the youth and himself spattering into thin air. As Adam re-appeared amongst Caley and the others, they made their getaway down a side street. Unfortunately for them, James ended up kicking over a dustbin in his attempts to escape, alerting the crowd to their presence.

"Did you see that?" Adam spluttered, as the group dashed through one of Edgeville's side streets, pursued by a mob of over-enthusiastic, frantic townspeople. "She stole my wig! Now what'm I supposed to do?"

"Thanking Caley would be a good start," Denise tutted in disbelief.

"We'll figure something to fix your disguise problem later," Rose assured Adam. "Once we've lost the people chasing us..."

"Have you tried talking to Jessiebelle about her behaviour?" Denise inquired to James.

"Did you see that whip? Do *you* think it's possible to try 'talking to her' about it?" James almost screeched. "She's unhinged!"

"To the point of sticking a price on a guy's head, apparently," Caley added, letting out a cry as he almost tripped over a sentret that had come to investigate the commotion.

"I can vouch for that," Rose nodded. "I met her by chance while on a scouting mission in Hoenn, a few years back. Sadistic 'yena spent half the time taking pot shots at me from a reinforced carriage using her vileplume as a cannon."

"We gotta find somewhere to hide!" James wheezed, as Sia created a frozen wall behind them, in order to delay the mob further. "If I don't stop running, I'm going to collapse!"

Head flitting to and fro, Caley searched for a method of escape. And he found one, in the form of a nearby open window.

"This way!" he hissed, and promptly dived in the relevant direction. The others followed, and James rapidly slammed the opening behind him. The travellers breathed a collective sigh of relief as they sat slumped under the sill, listening to the angry shouts of those attempting to break through the ice wall.

"Great move, Sia," Rose admitted thankfully, while Adam muttered and pulled off one of his false eyebrows with a grimace. Green eyebrows and brown hair were not a particularly good match.

"They were almost willing to tear us to shreds out there for a chance to get that reward money," Denise panted. "What shallow people, handing over someone else's life for easy gains."

"We're trapped, like raticates in a cage!" James wailed anxiously, returning Chime to her Pokéball.

"Calm down, James," Rose frowned, making the decision to return Sia also. "We're ex-Rockets, remember? We can work something out."

"That sounds familiar," Adam eyed Rose distrustingly, recalling the imprisoning incident at the Team Rocket HQ. "We don't even know where we are!"

The others looked at Adam with surprise. He had a point – they had literally dived through a window with no regard as to where it led, only hoping that where they were heading was less dangerous than where they were escaping from.

A hesitant glance around the dimly-lit room uncovered stacks of miscellaneous objects, reaching from floor to ceiling. The objects in question were difficult to identify, though none of them were any shape that made them particularly stack-able. As a result, the awkwardly arranged piles looked most precarious.

"It's like we jumped into a garage sale," Denise blinked, after a few moments.

"Someone's a hoarder," James agreed.

"All the better for us," Caley whispered. "This stuff will keep us hidden until that mob leaves."

"I don't want to stay in here!" Adam exclaimed, a little too loudly. "What if these junkpiles fall down? We'll be buried alive!"

"Keep your voice down, Adam!" Denise hushed. "You'll get us found out!"

"You never told *him* to shut up, and he was screaming like a baby a minute ago," Adam snapped, pointing at James.

"I was not!" James retorted.

The room was suddenly drenched in light, causing the five figures huddled against the wall to squint and look up, aghast. A woman in her late thirties, wearing large grey goggles and a black bodysuit covered by a white coat, was standing by the door to the room – her hand hovering

just over the light switch. She was neither angry at the group's intrusion, nor enthused as to the prospect of capturing wanted fugitives. In fact, it appeared the woman was oblivious to her unexpected visitors being in high demand.

"Excuse me?" she inquired in slightly amused tones, as the group scrambled to their feet. "What are you doing in my laboratory?"

"L-laboratory?" Caley stammered, beginning to feel rather guilty. "Oh, I'm sorry ma'am. We didn't realise-"

"Well I don't suppose *this* part looks much like a lab, does it?" the woman chuckled. "Looks more like a good ol' scavenger hunt. But I'm afraid none of this stuff is for the taking."

"Of course not!" Caley scratched the back of his head. The woman had misinterpreted the reason for their entrance, but he was willing to use his assumption to his advantage. "We didn't realise it belonged to anyone..."

"I'll let you off," the woman smiled teasingly. "This time."

"Thank you, ma'am," Caley gave a grateful nod, causing Kota to shuffle slightly to keep balance.

"Call me Teri," the figure insisted brightly. "Teri Burnet." She turned, beckoning Caley and his companions toward the doorway. "Come on through, and I'll show you the way out of here."

"That was some quick thinking, Caley," Rose smiled, as Teri ventured from the basement room into the stairwell. "Nice work."

"Yeah, but we don't want to leave yet!" James grimaced, barely managing to keep his voice at a low volume.

"No problem," Denise grinned. Her face had become quite enthused after discovering their presence in a laboratory. "I've got plenty of questions to ask." She increased her pace to catch up with Teri, leaving the others to process what had just been said.

The walls of the laboratory's upper level were fitted with multiple shelves - all of which were crammed to the hilt with boxes of documents and unfinished works which Denise couldn't help but marvel at as she passed.

"So you're a Professor, right?" she asked.

"Yes," Teri gave a nod. "My speciality is Algorithmic Sciences."

"Wow, you sure don't hear of many people who research that," Denise remarked, thoroughly impressed. The other members of the group exchanged puzzled glances - oblivious to what this title actually entailed.

"It's an unappreciated subject," Teri agreed, her expression growing disappointed. "A lot of top researchers consider it purely theoretical."

"Well *I'd* love to hear more about it," Denise insisted. "That is, if you have the time..."

"I always have the time to educate curious minds!" Teri exclaimed, happy that Denise was showing interest. "We can start with my research books in the other room. This way!"

Teri led Denise out through another door, prompting Caley, Rose and Adam to do the same. However, James had drawn to a standstill - examining something across the room with wide eyes. The thing in question was a machine, nine feet in height, which looked like the result of an accident with a Poffin mixer and a dishwasher. Yet the bizarre hybrid nature of the device wasn't what had caught the man's attention.

"It won't hurt if I take a closer look, will it?" James told himself, as he approached. A devious grin similar to those worn during Team Rocket missions surfaced on his face, as he clambered upon the console portion of the machine. Just as he had suspected, upon lifting the lid to peer inside, there was indeed something gold installed at the bottom of the machine's sizeable cylindrical innards. Something gold, round, and curiously familiar.

James leaned forward, reaching out an arm to turn the object around. As he did so, his knee came into contact with a number of buttons on the console's control panel, sending the machine whirring into action. The sudden jolt threw James backward, where he landed next to the machine with a cry of surprise.

"What's going on?" Denise cried, running into the room with Adam in hot pursuit. James was already back on his feet, anxiously trying to

close the lid of the machine to prevent oddly-coloured sparks flying from its innards.

"No no no!" Teri panicked, unintentionally shoving Caley and Rose to one side in her efforts to reach the machine. "That wasn't ready to be activated yet! I must shut it do-!"

Before the professor was able to finish her sentence, a massive blast of light flooded the room.

As a strange-coloured residue faded away and the visions of those dazzled by the light began to clear, the figures in the room stirred and groaned with a mixture of nausea and dizziness. Caley lay there for a moment, trying to regain his bearings. The young man couldn't quite remember how he had ended up on the floor in the first place - his first recollection consisted of losing all feeling in his arms, legs, torso...even his very *skin*. For a split second, Caley had wondered if this was what death felt like, but the thought was purely momentary. The next thing he knew, Caley was seeing the world with normal eyes and experiencing his surroundings through flesh and blood limbs again.

Except something didn't feel quite right.

This suspicion was further confirmed upon hearing two equally loud yells from across the room. Turning his head, Caley's eyes widened as he saw Adam and Denise pointing at each other with deeply horrified expressions. At least he *assumed* they were Adam and Denise. The skin,

eye and hair colour were the same, but everything else about them was drastically different.

"You're a girl!" Denise had exclaimed in tones an octave lower than usual.

"*You're* a bloke!" Adam had chimed in at exactly the same time, before glancing down at himself upon processing Denise's words. "And I...I-I-I'm in a *dress*! An ORANGE dress!"

"My hair appears to be a lime hue," Teri blinked, having looked up from the machine's control pad and seen her reflection.

"We've just been gender re-assigned and you're concerned over *green hair*?" Denise snapped, before flinching upon hearing her own uncharacteristic outburst.

"I'm not so much concerned as surprised," Teri remarked, turning around and recoiling in shock at what she next saw. "Wah! You've become a young man!"

"That's what I just said," Denise groaned at the professor's delayed realisation, before pointing down at her own partially bare legs. "And my pants are *ruined*! If I'd wanted shorts, I would have *bought* some, not sacrificed these!"

"What's going on? What's happened to us?" Adam blurted out, the heightened pitch of his voice rising even further with the obvious panic.

"From what I can gather, it seems your friend's activation of my GS Ball analysis machine has caused a shift in our Core Variables," Teri theorized, glancing at the multi-coloured shapes and lines of data that were streaming across the attached monitors.

"A shift in our *whats*?" Adam spluttered, before a skinny sandy brown-haired youth popped out from behind the aforementioned machine.

"Did you say 'GS Ball'?" it exclaimed.

"Yes," Teri looked a little startled by the figure's sudden appearance, but settled on the knowledge that this was the very person who had unwittingly turned her invention on in the first place. "Two of the three researchers who studied the GS Ball were baffled by its inner workings, and the data gathered by the third was destroyed along with their laboratory. So the artefact was passed on to me, which is a logical enough move – given what it's done to all of you, it certainly falls into the 'Algorithmic Sciences' category!"

"It just looks like a fancy Pokéball," Adam blinked, the expression on his face dictating the weirdness of the situation hadn't fully sunk in.

"Indeed, but I can assure you it isn't," Teri shook her head. "Beyond that fact, though...not much more is known about it."

"Well we've made progress then," Denise muttered to herself sarcastically, examining her short, ultramarine blue hair in the metallic case of a nearby machine. "We've found out that little trinket is capable

of turning Adam and myself into 'Adine' and 'Denny', and James into a Pokémon Trainer wannabe."

At this moment, another young boy emerged next to the first. His hairstyle was almost a mirror image of his companion, with the right side's waves dipping more so than the left.

"Make that *two* wannabes," Denise concluded under her breath, sweatdropping heavily. This situation was getting odder by the minute.

"Caley's become a slob," Adam pointed out in his usual blunt fashion, motioning over his shoulder.

"I have not!" came the disgruntled cry from the tiled floor. Caley made a move to alter his recumbent state, only this motion proved to be more difficult than he had originally expected. Rolling her eyes, Denise strode over and offered a hand to pull her companion into a vertical position.

"Thanks," Caley chuckled awkwardly. "Isn't usually that hard to sit up."

"You're not usually lugging a spare tire," Denise remarked, prompting Caley to first glance at her in puzzlement, then down at himself. He uttered a slightly-choked gasp at what he saw. Denise was right - Caley had not only gathered more than a few pounds of weight as a result of exposure to the light blast, he also found himself dressed in an ill-fitting grubby white vest and a pair of torn jeans. More unsettling than

that, however, was the absence of something he had recently become used to upon his skull.

"Kota?" Caley spoke up worriedly. "Kota, where are you?"

Here, a surprisingly calm voice echoed. *On your head.*

"That's not possible!" Caley insisted, raising his hands. "I can't feel you."

Well maybe it's more accurately in your head, Kota said, almost apologetically. It was at this point that Caley's hands made contact with two, sharp tufts of hair - one situated above each ear. Brushing his hands down in a swift movement, the young man tugged a few loose strands and glanced at them, to discover they were, in fact, the very same shade as Kota's fur.

He had suspected the pokémon's thoughts had seemed closer to his own, but had dismissed it as a silly assessment. It seemed that with the unfathomable warping that had occurred to his own form, Kota had been merged with the top of his head.

"This is so messed up," he shuddered, following a long silence.

"As messed up as watching you talk to yourself, or being a girl in an orange dress?" Adam scowled, though it looked like a large part of him wanted to burst into tears over the whole deal. "I don't think so."

"I think we should be counting ourselves lucky," one of James' twin forms remarked with concern.

"At least we're still *human*," the other tagged on, leaning behind Caley and bringing out a stuffed clefairy doll.

"Fayr-eeh!" it exclaimed in perky tones from a cheap voice box buried somewhere amongst its innards. "Kleh fayr-eeh fayr-eeh!"

"Sorry about that," Caley replied, scratching the back of his head. This prompted looks of bewilderment from Denise and Adam. "I accidentally landed on Ro- uuh -'Sascha' during this whole mess." *Thanks, Kota*, he said internally to his merged augret companion, who had reminded him at short notice about the use of disguise names.

"That toy is...?" Denise's angular jaw dropped as she trailed off.

"Mm-hm," Caley nodded, staring down at his flab with a rather disheartened expression. That took the biscuit. Teri cried out in alarm as Denise ran over and grabbed her by the front of her bodysuit with a desperate look on her face.

"Tell us there's SOMETHING you can do to make us the way we were, Professor," she begged.

"Well uh...I-I-I'd like to think there is!" Teri stammered. "I'll check my library, hopefully there's information I can use to help you."

With those last words, she anxiously left the room. Unwilling to stand by and wait for the Professor to find answers, Denise followed - leaving her companions in a highly displaced state.

us who we are – but unlike DNA and genes, they have a bearing on attributes beyond our own biology.

"Like clothes and hairstyles, I'm guessing," Denise concluded, trying to wrap her mind around this notion. "How is that even possible?"

"No one knows, yet," Teri shrugged. "There's never been enough data on Variable alteration to study." The woman paused and glanced over her shoulder to see Denise eyeing her with cold scrutiny. "Oh I'm not implying you should stay the way you are for my research purposes!" she chuckled awkwardly. "Besides, I'll receive a lot of useful data from getting myself and you lot back to normal."

The Professor's hand glanced over a slightly battered looking orange journal, which she pulled from the shelf to examine the title on its cover.

"Got it!" Teri announced excitedly, opening the journal and laying it atop a desk placed there for the purposes of study. Denise leaned forward in order to look at the scribble-strewn pages. "While we may not have Dewei's information about just how variable modification is achieved," Teri began. "*This* young man's notes may well prove useful for filling in enough of the gaps to solve your problem. His name is Keenan Aynek, a budding young scientist from Mulberry Town, Kanto. Three years ago, he succeeded in turning his sudowoodo gold."

"A golden sudowoodo, huh?" Denise murmured, rubbing her chin.

"At the time, Keenan had no idea why such a thing happened," Teri continued. "After all, he had only intended to try removing the sudowoodo's vulnerability to water. But I feel he may have stumbled across the very process we need to fix matters here. Namely, by adjusting sudowoodo's Core Variables, Keenan not only turned the pokémon gold, thus removing its weakness to H₂O, but also gave it the ability to breathe underwater as well!"

"Weird," Denise responded with wide eyes, momentarily distracted from her own circumstances.

"So our best bet is to recreate the technical setup which Keenan used," Teri flicked over a page in the journal. "We don't need to create a machine of the scale that he did – in fact, modifying an BioReader unit will be more than adequate, I imagine."

"It says here that one of the main parts of Keenan's machine was something called an 'Akri Transistor'," Denise read over Teri's shoulder. "I've heard of those before – usually find them in Pokéball transfer machines. Have *you* got any?"

"I believe I do!" Teri replied. "They're hard to come by, but every good student of Algorithmic Sciences needs at least one. We also require an Edilite Crystal - that's an element used in Pokéballs to turn pokémon into data and back again. Easily siphoned from an unregistered Pokéball."

"Right," Denise acknowledged.

"With those two components installed into the BioReader," Teri explained. "Theoretically we should be able to take your pre-modified Variable data, run it parallel to your current data and instruct the Reader to perform a Variable Restoration Procedure."

"That's all well and good, in theory..." Denise folded her arms with a snort. "But how are you going to get scans of us before we were transformed if we've *already* been transformed?"

"Easily!" Teri grinned, waving toward the wall which divided the library from the larger room outside. "Because of its incomplete setup, my scanner gathered data from the entire room prior to the GS Ball's reflux. Once I pick out the information to do with each of you, then I just require a couple of hours to tweak the BioReader..."

"We don't have 'a couple of hours'," Denise told her sharply. "And *I* don't need that long anyway. Just get me the components and focus on finding the data. I'll work on adjusting this."

"I'm sorry?" Teri looked rather taken aback as Denise removed the BioReader from her hands and sat down in front of her study desk.

"Look, I have qualifications in computer engineering," Denise insisted, less aggravatedly this time, but still somewhat impatient. "I know what I'm doing. Your time is better spent finding our data – I can't help with that."

Teri wasn't averse to collaboration, but it was obvious the professor wasn't too pleased over how Denise's aid had been delivered.

Regardless, she silently obliged and left for her inventory - returning a few minutes later with a BioReader, two additional components and a box of tools. One of the components looked like a thin, black square, while the other was a mineral chip housed in a semi-transparent battery case.

As Denise took the articles and set to work, Caley, James and Adam idled in the adjacent room - wondering what was going to become of their circumstances. Their faces brightened a little upon Teri's return, and as the woman approached the machine she had built to scan the GS Ball, Caley and James wandered over to pay audience. Adam stayed on the opposite side of the room, looking highly displeased. He didn't want to go anywhere near that machine again - especially after what it had done to him the first time around.

"Stupid 'Bluedoof'," he grumbled, sitting on the floor. "Still acts like a moron even when he's been zapped beyond recognition. How can he be so happy when *he* was the one that got us all into this mess?"

"Fayreeh fayreeh kleh-fayr reeh!" Rose chattered from a short distance away. Adam glanced at her for a moment, a slight smile trickling onto his face. Reaching to one side, the youth took the pink, fluffy article in both hands - drawing it close.

"You're actually pretty cute if you ignore the crappy voice box," he admitted. A second later, Adam's eyes shot wide open and he threw Rose across the room as if the doll had caught fire in his hands. "What am I

saying?" he yelled, before spitting out the following words like they'd left a foul taste in his mouth. "Not cute! NOT cute!"

"Aaay-than!" Caley cried out in horror, the name warping in mid-utterance as another internal reminder from Kota shook him into remembering to use pseudonyms. "'Sascha' can still feel movement, don't throw her around."

"How do *you* know that?" Adam glowered at him, still unhappy that he'd slipped into appreciating something adorable, even for a moment.

"Because she's yelling it right now!" Caley winced. The sounds and comprehensible words being forced into his brain at the same time was becoming overpowering.

"Oh. Sorry..." Adam said timidly, wandering over and placing Rose back in an upright position to stop her squawking.

"You're telling me you understood your friend's speech even though she's a toy clefairy?" Teri blinked. "How?"

It was James and Adam's turn to stare at Caley, who flinched in realisation that he'd flaunted his psychic abilities way too openly.

"Um...my pokémon got fused with my head," he grinned, looking awkward. "I guess I've somehow borrowed his psychic powers."

Fortunately for Caley, Teri's attentions had already shifted to her scanner machine. Having called up the recent log of details from the

machine's unexpected activation, the woman was now perusing lines of text and numbers with great interest.

"Please forgive my nosiness getting the better of me earlier," James' first instance remarked. "Is your machine okay?"

"Apology accepted," Teri smiled, looking up from the console screen. "And everything seems fine with the Scanner Unit 5.0"

"5.0?" Caley echoed. "Sounds like you've been studying this 'GS Ball' for a while."

"Well I've been *trying* to..." Teri heaved a sigh, before returning her gaze to the log data. "Professor Oak wasn't exaggerating when he said it was impossible to analyse. I would love to know its purpose."

"Me too," James' second instance nodded. Something with the power to alter reality as they saw it - even as a side effect - was a device not to be handled lightly. For that matter, neither was retrieving the information necessary to get them back to their original states. With that in mind, he decided to say no more until Teri had finished her job. Caley, Rose and surprisingly even Adam got the hint and fell silent.

He expected to have been more worried over the possibility that Teri might see something odd about his original scan data – hints that would betray his psychic Cho'moken to James and Adam. But to his own surprise, Caley felt oddly calm. Bored, even - as if none of what he'd uncovered over the previous few days even mattered. Caley shuddered

violently and tried to push the apathy aside. This wasn't him, it was just the crazy results of the Variable Modification at work.

But Teri did not raise an eyebrow, nor ask questions over what she saw on the screen. After some 20 minutes of searching, she had located Caley's, Adam's, Denise's, James', Rose's and her own data, before transferring it to an expansion chip.

"Y'know, I think I witnessed some of this 'Variable Modification' business once," James' first instance commented, once the procedure was over. Teri had attempted to regain possession of the BioReader from Denise in order to finish modifications, but with little success. "About one...two years ago? We were in a town in Sinnoh..."

"Yeah, some really weird stuff happened that day," the second James nodded, shifting from foot to foot in an abundance of childlike energy. "Dimensions warping and such...this Baron guy, he just randomly turned into a lickilicky. Poof! No explanation."

"*You* were in Alamos Town when that disaster happened?" Teri's eyes lit up like she had been presented with a celebrity. "That's incredible! All I've been able to study from that event were Professor Renata's files..."

Just then, a cry of triumph was heard from the other room, coupled with the horrible sound of a chair scraping across floor tiles.

Moments later, Denise ran into the room, grinning and clutching something in both hands.

"Where's the fire?" Caley inquired, in a tone of voice that sounded like he wouldn't have been concerned if there really *had* been a fire. Denise held up the results of her efforts with renewed triumph.

"I'm calling it the Pocket Mod," she announced. "A BioReader with added Variable adjustment capabilities. This should make everything the way it was."

Denise offered the Pocket Mod to Teri for a closer examination. Now the device was in her hands, it was easier to see where the adjustments had been made. There were tiny nick marks around the edges where the two halves of the BioReader had been pried apart, prior to installing the Edilite.

"It's brilliant," Teri smiled, opening the BioReader's expansion port and inserting the chip she had been holding. "Now we just need to test it to see if it works."

Everyone shuffled awkwardly at this point. Despite their longing to return to their normal states, getting bombarded with experimental rays was not their most preferred method of making it better.

"Okay, no problem," the professor concluded, before entering a few commands and handing the BioReader back to Denise. "I shall go first... in the name of science."

"Alright then," Denise concluded, aiming the device at the pinnacle of Teri's head. "Here goes!"

A thin beam of light was projected from the front of the Pocket Mod, momentarily bathing the whole of the professor's upper body in a curious yellowish glow. Once the light dissipated, Teri was seen standing there wearing an expectant look on her face.

"Well?" she inquired, glancing down at herself to make sure that she was still the same shape, species and gender. "Did it work?"

The rapid spread of elation upon Denise's face was more than enough proof that Teri's hair had indeed reverted to its original snowy hue. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Adam tense - arms held slightly aloft either side of him. Before anyone else realised what was going on, the gender-altered boy frantically lunged for the device in his equally switched companion's hand. However, Denise neatly sidestepped him before leaning down and pressing her hand to Adam's back - pinning him to the floor.

"Hold your horseas, I've just got an idea," she exclaimed, while Teri frowned at the increased sounds of disruption from outside her laboratory and went back downstairs to do something about it.

"If it has...anything to do with...me staying like...this a second longer...then I'm completely against it!" Adam squirmed fruitlessly. "Get off me!"

"As uncomfortable as it is, it could be our ticket out of here!"

Denise snapped, before lowering the volume of her voice considerably.

"People are out in force looking for a disguised version of the group from the wanted posters. We'll have them completely fooled, looking the way we do now."

"Dern tootin'!" the first James grinned.

"Just one little problem with that idea," Adam muttered.

"What's that?" Denise asked, eyebrows raised.

"It really SUCKS!"

"Well you have no choice," Denise smirked, standing upright. "I've got this baby and I'm keeping it until we get out of Edgeville. Understand?"

Adam cursed under his breath and struggled to his feet as Denise turned her attention to the others, but said no more. The temporary lull in conversation was broken by Teri's loud, agitated threats to call the Police should the unruly mob outside her door fail to leave.

"All we need now..." Denise began. "Is a slick way to exit this place like nothing is out of the ordinary."

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Upon hearing the exclamation, Denise swung round just in time to see Adam diving towards her with his hands outstretched. This second

attempt took the figure completely by surprise, leaving Adam a clear shot at the Pocket Mod. However, in his desperation, he swiped too vigorously and ended up clumsily dislodging the device from Denise's weakened grasp.

"NO!" came a unified cry of despair as the Pocket Mod went flying out of a nearby window that had been left slightly ajar. Everyone ran to the window, but could see nothing except the writhing mass of human traffic below.

"Oops..." Adam trailed off worriedly as Denise's glare aimed straight at him. Before Adam could make another move, Denise had grabbed him by both arms and was shaking him briskly.

"Are you *trying* to ruin everything?" she yelled. I've got a good mind to leave you here, you selfish little idiot!"

"C'mon Neesee..." James' first instance spoke up awkwardly. Tears of helplessness were now streaming down the sides of Adam's face, accompanied by loud wailing.

"I know he acted like a twerp but don't you think you're being a bit harsh on him?" the second one asked. James' conscience kicked in at this point and both of his instances tugged on Denise's shoulders to get her to stop.

"Didn't you see what happened?" Denise glowered at them both. "That was my *womanhood* thrown out the window! She just- I mean, he just- argh! Whatever!"

Adam staggered backwards slightly, released from his companion's grip as Denise turned and stormed frustratedly over toward the aforementioned window, kicking the chair over as she passed.

"Yeah, we saw," Caley rolled his eyes in disbelief. "But injuring Adam isn't going to get the Pocket Mod back."

"It's all *his* fault!" Adam whined, pointing at both of James' instances. "If he hadn't been acting stupid as usual and fallen in that machine, I wouldn't be needing any fricken' scanners because I'd still be a guy!"

Denise's eyes narrowed vehemently as she glanced back at him, contemplating further punishment. Adam's lip trembled.

"You shake hard..." he whimpered.

"You'll need to get that modifier back, and soon," Teri remarked sternly, five minutes later - having returned from downstairs to a disgruntled explanation of the Pocket Mod's disappearance. "That's the only chunk of Edilite I have, and as the duration in your molecular format increases, the more established the format will become. In other words, the longer you stay that way, the more difficult it will get to revert your bodies to their original states."

Adam glanced around at his altered companions nervously. Denise was tapping her foot and staring at the gender-fluxed boy - wearing an

As amusing as James found it watching Denise taking her anger out on a messy-haired jerk in an orange dress, it wasn't going to help any of them find what they were looking for. Unfortunately, the one responsible for devising plans was currently incapacitated with a lack of human vocal chords. Even more unfortunately, the only one who seemed able to understand what she was saying had become lazier than a tranquillised slaking. Eventually, Rose's screeching caused everyone enough of a headache to turn Denise's short-temper directly on Caley.

"Alright, alright," he groaned. "Rose said we need to split up to cover more ground if we want to find the Pocket Mod before anyone else does."

"Way ahead of you," the second James grinned and wiggled his eyebrows. "I've *already* split up."

"Good one!" the first descended into laughter before giving his other self a high five. Adam shook his head in disbelief.

"Yeah, James can search by himself," Caley proceeded to translate further. "And Rose needs to stay with me to be understood." He paused. "Also she'd appreciate not being jammed into your armpit, Ad'."

"Picky picky," Adam snorted, pulling the stuffed clefairy from under his arm. He was feeling embarrassed enough as it was carrying Rose at all, yet the duty had been forced upon him as the result of a process of elimination. After all, what appeared to be a young girl carrying a plush toy looked a lot more inconspicuous.

"And neither of *you* are going to be covering much ground without *my* help," Denise inputted her own conclusion. "So we'll take the eastern side of Edgeville. James, you take the western side."

"Aye aye, Neesee!" the youthful duo responded in unison, before running off down the street. Adam grumbled to himself, only to be stunned into mutedness at the sight of Denise's vitreous expression. She was none too happy to be stuck in a male form - almost as much as Adam was loathing being a girl - and she was placing the blame squarely on her thirteen-year-old companion.

"You keep your mouth closed and your hands to yourself," she grunted, and turned to walk down the street. Caley simply shrugged, and followed. Adam stood there in a state of desperate hesitation, then realised he had been deserted. Picking up speed, the youth began sprinting in the direction he was sure Denise and Caley had gone in.

Then something caught his attention. It wasn't a glimpse of the Pocket Mod, by any means, but right now it seemed that much more fascinating. In fact, it proved so fascinating that it had knocked any thoughts of retrieving the Modifier clear out of Adam's head. He slowly approached the light-drenched monolith, jaw slightly open as he marvelled at its arrays of buttons and levers. Never before had Adam been confronted with something so garishly magnificent. This was one of the machines he had seen people operating in similar venues throughout Edgeville.

"Fayr-ee!" Rose insisted from the youth's arms. "Fayr-ee cleh-fayr fayr-ee!"

"Oh quiet, you," Adam remarked distractedly, putting his companion-in-toy-form upon the ledge of a pillar that stood beside the slot machine. While the exact details currently escaped him, the general concept seemed easy enough - put in a few coins, pull the biggest lever on the side and attempt to match up certain symbols on the wheels that rotated at speed. Better symbols meant higher cash returns, and getting more cash out than you put in could hardly be a bad thing - especially counting Adam's weak financial situation.

His only downfall lay in the fact that he didn't have any money to insert into the machine in the first place.

It was at this point that Adam realised he was being watched. Swinging round, the gender-switched boy looked most perplexed when his vision was met with nothing suspicious. However, the parts of Adam's legs that were exposed below the folds of orange skirt now felt a bizarre sensation - like being rubbed with a slightly rough sponge.

"Maahhh..."

Adam looked down and found himself eye to eye with a small mareep. It was particularly well-groomed, with the wool atop its head in a curious curled arrangement, and wore a red and white neckerchief with a Perjhi sign and the words 'Reep the Rewards' printed on it. At a glance, Adam assumed this pokémon to be the mascot of this particular casino. If

the attire wasn't a big enough giveaway, it also had a small golden coin wedged in its mouth.

"Hey..." Adam bent down slightly to examine the article. "Is that the kind of money these weird machines take?"

"Mhh," the mareep took to nodding its head vigorously. A wide smile emerged upon Adam's face as a response.

"That'll be all I need to get some real payback outta this baby," he exclaimed, reaching forward. "Cheers!"

But the electric pokémon wasn't intending to let Adam have the coin so easily. It swung around in a rapid circle, batting Adam's outstretched hand with the yellow orb on the end of its stripy tail. The youth let out a yelp, retracting the appendage before growling at the source of his pain. Chuckling to itself, the mareep broke into a run - escaping to the safety of the casino's brightly-adorned innards.

"Get back here, you overgrown powderpuff!" Adam yelled, dashing after it and leaving Rose to squawk helplessly from her perch outside. His eyes were aimed so firmly at the carpet that he forgot to watch out for taller obstacles in his way. And he just happened to run into one with an especially heavy thud, followed by the sound of smashing glass.

Looking up, Adam started in alarm when he took in the figure of a tall, ginger-haired man in his late twenties, dressed in a navy blue jacket and bowtie with matching coloured trousers. It appeared that Adam's

hurried pursuit had not only knocked this figure to the ground, but also caused him to drop the tray of drinks he had previously been carrying.

"Real sorry!" Adam spluttered, before stumbling to his feet. The intention was to get out of the man's sight as quickly as possible, but he had other ideas. Thrusting out a hand, the figure grasped Adam by the arm and pulled the gender-switched boy back round to face him.

"What's the hurry, little miss?" The question was posed in a calm, gentle manner that indicated the addresser held no intention of causing harm. Adam unscrewed his eyes and loosened himself from the defensive stance he had taken, glowering accusingly at the man.

"That woolly sneak ran off with my money!" he snapped, pointing firmly at the mareep that was now partially concealed behind the smartly-dressed figure's body.

"He *did*...did he?" the man gave the pokémon huddled beside him a disapproving shake of the head. "Tsk tsk, Cryno...you should know better than to resort to common thievery. Now give the young lady her money back."

"Maaaah..." Cryno responded sulkily, releasing the coin into Adam's open hand. Before he was able to leave, however, the man took him by the arm yet again.

"Pardon my forwardness, but you seem to be new to the whole Game Corner thing," he began. "Am I right, miss?"

"Sure, whatever," Adam replied irritably. "Now let go of me before I *make* you."

"Of course, of course!" a slight nervousness had crept into the man's voice at this point. "But why waste what you've got on misjudged turns when I can show you the best tactics for getting the most out of these jackpot machines?"

"You...can?" Adam blinked, turning around slowly. "But why would you wanna help *me*?"

"Consider it my way of apologising for Cryno giving you a hard time, dear," the man released Adam's arm and gave a little bow. "So...are you interested?"

"You bet I am!" came the enthused reply. The man flinched before bending down to Adam's level and lowering his voice.

"That's wonderful, but please try and keep your voice down about it," he smiled in a rather pained fashion. "We don't want...*everyone* to know about my little technique, huh?"

Adam shook his head in a blissfully naive fashion, to which his companion gave a little chuckle and motioned toward a door at the far end of the casino.

"Good good. Come with me."

And he did. Getting a big wad of cash sure had to be worth being called 'Miss' and agreeing to follow this polite-but-admittedly-creepy figure's directions, right?

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

"Initiating procedure."

What the...? Adam's slumberlogged brain tried desperately hard to initiate his vision, as the sounds of whirring and bleeping rose and fell amid a murmur of voices. This was hardly the same whirring and bleeping he had been listening to just moments before - the kind emitted by garishly decorated gambling machinery. In fact, the sounds Adam could now hear bore an unsettling familiarity - one that stirred a deep set fear within him, as opposed to a whimsical curiosity.

Adam begged and pleaded for his sight to be restored to him and, when blurred shapes finally gave way to something of better clarity, the gender-switched boy felt his muscles tense. The figure started to wish he hadn't longed to view his surroundings so badly after all - for over his head arced a sheet of ridged glass. And beyond that...

He yelled loudly, the utterance emerging as a high-pitch scream that was dampened, for the most part, by the vastness of his glass cocoon. He tried to reach out to pummel at the casing in some effort to

escape, but his arms, legs, even his head was clamped tightly - preventing even the smallest movement. All Adam could do is stare in wide-eyed terror as several huge grey ring-like apertures moved back and forth over the semi-transparent case, bathing him in a harsh blue light.

Once he realised he could feel no discomfort bar the rapid thudding of his own heart, Adam tried to calm his breathing and attempt to make out what was being said over the whirring of the machinery. It was only until the whirring began to slow that the youth was able to hear beyond the confines of his imprisonment.

The casino atmosphere was still discernible somewhere in the background - ever so faintly, but there nonetheless. This served as a minor comfort to Adam, the knowledge that he hadn't been taken very far from where he started. However, other sounds - particularly that of conversation - were not as reassuring.

"These stats really aren't up to much," came a voice which Adam was certain belonged to the man he had spoken with just moments previously. "Stamina is moderate, Power is low, IE signature is negligible...what was that mareep of yours thinking?"

Adam gritted his teeth as circumstances finally began to dawn on him. He recognized the machine now - it was a device most often seen in medical units for the scanning of patients. But this didn't explain the

sheer absurdity of why he was in one. However, Adam's mind didn't seem to be focused on important aspects such as those at that moment in time.

Not...up to much? he fumed inwardly, before his frustrations erupted into the surrounding glass case. "You let me out right *now* and I'll *show* you what I'm up to!"

"Hm, now doesn't that attitude sound familiar," another voice was heard. This one sounded reasonably younger than the first, but none the less slimy in its sentence delivery. "Remind you of anyone, Marc?"

Adam froze in mid-realisation, eyes wide. Fortunately he couldn't see much with the case in a horizontal position, facing the ceiling, and in turn those outside the case wouldn't have seen his expression either. But he didn't *need* to see anything to know who it was outside, accompanying this 'Marc' character.

It was Stuart Fendel, a transfer operative from Team Rocket's Hoenn division who'd acted as the bane of his life for almost three years. Not that this was particularly new to Adam - many of the Rocket grunts had shown distaste towards him of some level or another, simply because of his father's position in administration. But Stuart had gone one step further, into the realms of persistent torment. That reason alone was enough to give Adam a sick, bitter feeling in his stomach.

For a few seconds, Adam held his breath. Had Stuart worked out who he really was, despite the gender alteration that the GS Ball had caused him? Either way, his situation was looking very grim indeed - from

what he had noticed, the youth had unwittingly stumbled right into some kind of Team Rocket recruitment operation. Recruiting for what, however, was another question entirely - Adam had never seen snares of this variety that involved expensive scanning equipment before.

"Sounds a lot like your butch-oid bodyguard," Stuart concluded with a chuckle. The sound of an impact, combined with an amusing yelp, was heard shortly afterwards. Adam smirked to himself upon hearing it - the aforementioned 'bodyguard' must have been within earshot.

"Now now, Stuart," Marc had a disapproving note in his voice. "We've talked about how to address Ruka, haven't we?" Stuart mumbled something under his breath which Adam assumed was an agreement. "Good lad. I'm going to go and check on our other, hopefully more *favourable* discoveries. You stay here and make certain this scanner shuts down properly - then we'll take our young friend within to the KlenSlyt Unit for a short-term memory wipe."

Short term memory wipe? Adam felt every muscle in his body tense yet again. He'd been unnerved by medical exams, ever since he was a child, but the thought of tampering with the workings of his mind terrified him most of all. Despite knowing the act was pretty much futile, Adam took up struggling frantically against his bonds - hoping that by some fluke, a part of the scanner might start to malfunction and cause the entire device to unlock. But while his head was now allowed freedom to move, the rest of the clamps stayed firmly shut.

The gender-switched boy released a heavy sigh and slackened his limbs - letting his head flop to one side upon the scanner platform. Then he uttered a cry of shock upon sight of Stuart's face, complete with an unsettling smirk, pressed against the outside casing and framed by his hands. Once the momentary alarm wore off, Adam groaned deflatedly. Stuart looked as repelling as he'd ever been - those ice blue eyes reflected an unimaginable array of thought processes that Adam was glad he didn't know about. And that tacky-looking platinum blonde hair which hung down partly across his forehead - a passing rumour in the grunt ranks had insisted the colouring was fake, but no one had seen otherwise, thus the theory continued unproven.

"Sorry I had to have Pointer throw Sleep Powder on you, babe," he began slimily, while a roserade strode across Adam's vision somewhere in the background. "Top secret business, y'see. Still..." the adolescent wasn't about to let his listener get a word in edgeways, "Cryno must have brought you in for *some* reason. And if it wasn't for the project, then-"

Adam started to feel quite disturbed at the sudden excitement that had made itself present upon Stuart's face. The Rocket Rookie knelt down before plucking his mareep from the tiles and giving it a playful prod on the end of its bulbous muzzle.

"Cryno, you chip off the ol' Cappuccino block!" he grinned. "You found this girl for *me*, didn't you?"

upon the duo, causing one of them to break into a succession of moans and complaints.

"For the last time, we are *not* gonna stop just so you can sit down!" Denise snapped, while Caley ambled alongside her. "We only just started walking, for Tah's sake!"

"Hey, it's not my fault I got landed with this body..." Caley whined, wiping at his forehead with his free hand. "Five minutes isn't gonna kill you, is it?"

Denise muttered something under her breath, but did not retort. It was clear from the redness of the young man's chubby face that he was indeed under a lot of strain, and having him sit down was a far more reasonable option than having him pass out.

"Alright alright..." she heaved a sigh, before glancing around the area. "Let's find a place where you can rest your feet a sec. I could do with a cool down myself, to be honest. Maybe we could get Rilly to spray us all with...wha?"

Denise had paused, hand frozen in mid-air. The Rocket Ball containing the gallirill had vanished from her belt.

"Rilly!" she spluttered, causing Caley to look up at her in vague surprise. "He's gone!"

"His Pokéball probably got zapped away when all that GS Ball weirdness happened," Caley shrugged. "Kind of like how Kota got merged with me. Maybe Rilly's Pokéball is a part of *you* now - can you hear his

voice in your head?" He paused, noticing Denise's expression. "Okay, that sounded pretty demented."

"This whole *scenario* is demented," Denise sighed. "But you have a point. When your shape changed, your outfit did too. And so did mine, to a lesser extent. Your clothes, satchel, Pokédex and Rilly's Pokéball are likely all in the same place. Wherever that place is..."

"Hopefully it's a place we can get stuff back from," Caley concluded worriedly. "I hope Rilly's okay."

"Me too," Denise looked awkward. "The sooner we find the means to bring him back, the better!"

She made a move to walk further down the street, only to have Caley grasp her by one arm.

"Where are you going?" he inquired. "I haven't got to sit down yet."

"Finding the Pocket Mod to save our pokémon is a *bit* more important than resting your tush on something, Cal," Denise frowned, trying to pull away. This only caused Caley to pull back harder in the opposite direction with a pained grimace.

"But Neeseeeeeee...."

"Will you cut it out?" Denise snapped, losing her patience. "Honestly, you're moaning worse than Adam wa-"

Then it struck her like a falling munchlax. She hadn't heard *anything* from Adam or Rose for the past few minutes. Sure, Denise had told the youth to keep quiet, but she hadn't been expecting him to follow the instruction so rigidly. In fact, a swift glance around the area confirmed her fears - Adam was nowhere to be seen.

"Adam?" she called, warily at first. The wariness was quick to give way to frustration. "Adam, get out here! You better not be playing tricks on us, y'little jerk!"

Denise caught sight of Caley's raised eyebrow out of the corner of her eye, forcing the gender-switched girl to re-assess her attitude and utter an embarrassed cough in conclusion.

"Somehow I doubt he's hiding," Caley mumbled, before Denise turned on him.

"And why didn't *you* notice he'd gone?" she exclaimed in annoyance.

"To be honest, my mind was on other things," Caley gritted his teeth slightly. Denise's unceasing bad temper was starting to grate on him. "Anyway, shifting the blame won't help us find Adam or the Pocket Mod any quicker."

"Neither will sitting down," Denise sniffed, before heaving a sigh and glancing back down the street. "He could be anywhere in this crummy pile of tackiness."

"Sitting down may help me to link into Kota's abilities so I can find Adam," Caley insisted, moving toward a nearby bench while Denise followed close behind.

"That better not just be an excuse," she mumbled, watching Caley lower himself into a more relaxed position and shut his eyes. A few minutes passed - Denise uttered another expression of boredom and began tapping her foot, hoping this might improve the situation somewhat. Her wandering eyes flitted back and forth across the street for a time, briefly checking the passers-by for any sign of her orange-clad adolescent companion.

Momentarily, Denise's vision alighted upon a navy blue shape that was swaying to and fro, not that far away. She didn't quite understand why, but something about the form and its movement was almost hypnotic, making it seemingly impossible to turn her attentions elsewhere. Then her senses quickly returned. Wrenching her head back with a sharp gasp, Denise glanced around anxiously and wished even harder that her gallirill had been there to administer an ice cold blast of water. At least then she may have been rescued from the embarrassment of finding herself staring at an Officer Jenny's butt.

Cautiously returning her gaze to the policewoman in question, Denise realised she had crossed the street to converse with a more extravagantly-dressed figure who appeared quite flustered over matters unknown. Not that they were to stay unknown for very long - despite her

spindly physique and deceptively petite features, the conversee bore a vocal audibility that would put a loudred to shame.

"It's an utter outrage, I'll tell you!" she exclaimed. "This should not be happening in a region like Tatto!"

"Calm down, Miss...please..." the Officer Jenny attempted to placate the woman. "Tell me again what happened."

"I was at the Merry Mareep Casino," came the response. "And I saw a young girl in an orange dress wandering about in there! She couldn't have been much more than ten, I'm sure. What kind of gambling establishment allows a child to run freely about, poisoning their young minds with such things? I ask you..."

Denise had heard enough, long before the fractious lady had completed her tale. This was just the tip-off they had been waiting for!

"Caley, did you hear that?" she whispered with a grin. "Adam's ended up in some place called 'The Merry Mareep' - we'd better get over there right away and fish him out before it's too late!"

There was no response. Denise paused, a fleeting look of worry on her face - was Caley focusing so hard that he'd entered some kind of trance? She leaned closer in an effort to check the young man was still breathing, and noticed a string of saliva dangling from Caley's mouth. Angrily, Denise responded by lifting a hand and thumping her companion on his right arm.

"...they sell awesome trainer stuff too!" the latter grinned, pressing his face to the glass. "Wow...what I'd give for one of those cool belts."

"It can hold your 'dex and 'gear *as well* as six Pokéballs?" the first James spluttered. "That's so awesome!"

"Comes in several different colours too," the second beamed. There was a momentary pause while the pair glanced at each other with slightly-worried looks upon their faces. It was becoming apparent that with the splitting and regression the GS Ball had thrust upon him, James had also slipped into rather 'twerp-like' behaviour. Not that it was too much of a big deal - in fact, looking upon what was on offer in the Mart, James could start to understand some of what made being a Pokémon Trainer so much fun. With that settled, the two instances of James broke into chuckling as they announced in unison the colour of the belts they'd most want to purchase.

"Purple!"

Suddenly, the expression upon the face of the second James altered rapidly. The first realised his companion was peering over his shoulder, but with the look of pure horror being displayed, he wasn't so sure whether he wanted to turn around and view the situation for himself.

"What is it?" he hissed.

"It's...it's *Her*..." the second James whimpered, lowering his head in a half-hearted attempt to conceal himself behind the first. Nothing more needed to be said - the first James knew full well what his other instance was implying. Both of them immediately turned around to face the Mart window, using its reflection to continue their observance of Jessiebelle as she strode into view, accompanied by the progressively flustered-looking countenance of Crispin van Lawrence.

"Tell me again," the man spoke up, his tone of voice fringed with a whimper. "What are we *still* doing in this loathsome place?"

"Ah have some unexpected, unfinished business, Crispy," Jessiebelle reminded him calmly. "Ah lost one of mah possessions in this here city, and the kind folks that live here are out searchin' for it."

"Kind'. Right," Crispin gave her a disbelieving look.

"Of course ah had t' give them a little incentive," Jessiebelle giggled. "Whatever gets th' job done quicker, hm?"

"I agree," Crispin nodded furiously. *For once*, he added in his mind. "So what are we going to do in the meantime? I don't think I can bear to enter another of those dreadful casinos again..."

"Well it is awful hot out heah," Jessiebelle put on her most convincing innocent face. "Would it trouble you t' be gettin' me a nice cold glass of lemonade?" Crispin's face lit up as a few notes were placed into his hand. "Get one for y'self too, while you're at it. And a parasol would be mighty handy for keeping off the sun."

"Certainly, my dear," Crispin responded cheerfully, satisfied in the knowledge that this wasn't another request to notch upon the end of his bill. And with that, he disappeared down the street in search of a place that sold refreshments Jessiebelle wouldn't turn her nose up at. By the Mart window, both of James' instances were shaking in anger at what they had overheard.

"'Possession'?" one of them growled.

"Why that degrading-" the other began, only to have the first clap a hand over his mouth.

"Keep it down," he insisted in lowered tones. "She doesn't know who we are, and we don't want to be changing that any time soon."

The second James nodded slowly, before a mischievous expression of duplicitousness emerged upon his face.

"Still..." he said. "Doesn't mean we can't have a little fun with our anonymity."

TO BE CONTINUED...

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