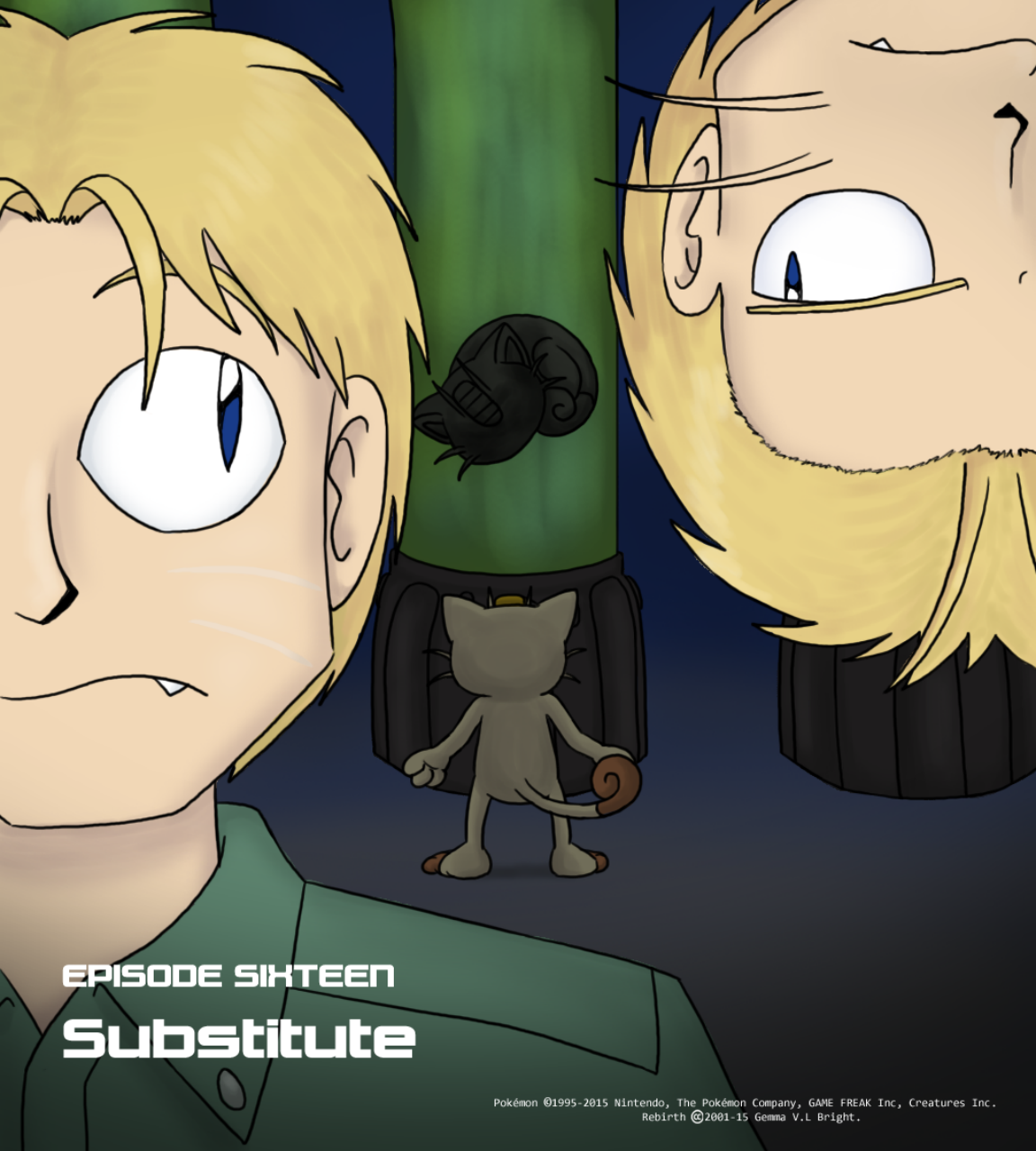


POKÉMON
REBIRTH
ULTIMATUM
Endgame Edition



EPISODE SIXTEEN
Substitute

Despite Adam's frantic exclamations, the Variable Restoration was delivered in order of transformation complexity. Rose's plush body was first to be surrounded in the Pocket Mod's yellow aura, which then seemed to take on a life of its own - stretching upwards and outwards in much the same way as a pokémon would do upon evolution. Once the light faded to reveal the joyfully smiling features of Rose's more familiar human form, James was next for treatment. This resulted in a rather emotional farewell between both instances of himself, despite being two parts of the same person. Again, the yellow light blotted out its youthful recipients from view, this time drawing the two glowing aura outlines towards one another and combining into a singular, larger form.

Caley proceeded into his reversal with little ceremony, though his expression upon emerging from it was one of great relief. Besides his gratitude at seeing Kota in healthy condition, it had been more than enough time spent in an apathetic state than the young man appreciated. Shortly afterwards, Adam and Denise were restored to their original genders.

"Am I glad to be a guy again!" Adam exclaimed, patting himself down like he was having trouble believing it had really happened. "Back in control!" the youth turned to Denise with a puzzled expression. "I mean, how do you put up with feeling so vulnerable?"

An uncomfortable silence descended as Denise glanced up from the Pocket Mod screen, her cold stare addling the conscience of her younger companion. Shifting awkwardly from foot to foot, Adam started

to wish that something would happen - even if it was just to have Denise snap at him, because at least he was used to that response. But nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, Denise simply approached Caley and handed him the Pocket Mod with a rigid expression.

"Might be worth hanging on to this," she remarked. "Now, we have some place to be getting to, am I right?" Without waiting for a response, Denise briskly walked away - provoking James to shrug and walk after her. Caley and Kota followed, but Rose and Adam remained stationary for a moment, the former eyeing the latter with an ever so slight smile over his curiously-open tactlessness.

"Feeling vulnerable isn't just limited to girls, Adam," she told him calmly. "Maybe you need to examine yourself harder."

It was a good few hours of walking, coupled with a solid night's rest, before the group reached the peaks surrounding the expansive lake where Scale Falls was located. The city sat atop a raised formation of land at the centre - the watery channels from within cascading in upended teardrop formation between jagged rocks around the island's circumference, into the lake below. As the water gushed, the dawning sun cast its rays upon the liquid surface, making it glitter in a manner that was both powerful and beautiful. Truly the name 'Scale Falls' proved befitting enough for a place of such majesty.

Above the early morning mist that cloaked the valley, not a human soul was present and there was a sense of welcome coolness in the air, intermingled with the calls of nearby wild altaria that had set up their nests in the sparse clusters of trees. Here, the companions took the second rest since leaving Edgeville. Rose and Caley stood with their backs to the temporary camp, and admired the lavish artistry spread out before them.

"So you knew that guy?" Caley asked. "The one with the ginger hair we saw back at the casino?"

"We used to be partners, back in Team Rocket," Rose nodded. "Made a good duo, I'll admit. I thought the world of him - he seemed to have a solution to every problem, an outfit for every occasion. And I assumed - for a time - he felt the same way about me. But Marc was too absorbed in himself and his position in Team Rocket. All the compliments he gave, all the encouragement...it was just a means to help me to succeed so *he* could get promoted."

Caley looked on sadly. He could sense an emptiness inside Rose where those memories lay - a feeling of having been used, and no known means to ease it.

"Just because one guy didn't see your values doesn't make you worthless, Rose," he insisted. "I've barely known you, and you've already shown me so much of your talents, and kindness."

"Heh, that's sweet of you, Caley," the woman smiled faintly.

"Thank you. Seeing Marc again just caught me off guard. I'll be fine...you guys have my back, after all."

She turned around to look at her travelling companions. Denise and James had been sat under a tree, while Rilly and Chime played together. The gallirill had come around after some reassuring words and loving hugs from Denise, and a healing touch from Chime, and seemed more relaxed - allowing himself a few moments to playfully blow bubbles in the air for Chime to burst with her ribbon-like tail. Adam sat apart from the others, huddled with his arms around his knees and the hood of his sweater pulled up firmly over his head in order to account for his lack of wig. Cyzel lay stretched behind his human companion like a large fuzzy pillow, attempting to provide some measure of comfort.

"You can't keep this from them forever, you know," Rose concluded. Caley flinched - the woman didn't even need to iterate what she meant by 'this', he knew instinctively what she was referring to.

"I...I know," he replied after a few moments. "And I'm going to tell them about my psychic abilities. I just...I need to understand it better myself first, before I try explaining it to anyone else."

"Okay," Rose smiled. "I'm sure you'll do the right thing."

"Examine myself harder..." Adam muttered to Cyzel, from his resting point a short distance from the others. What had Rose been

talking about? If anything, he needed to examine the *others* harder - they didn't make one bit of sense to him. James was obnoxiously aggravating, yet seemed to have this annoying knack of winning over everyone's favour no matter how he messed up. Rose was too convoluted and mystic for his liking, while Denise kept giving him unfavourable stares for decisions that - in his opinion - had been well-founded. Even Caley, the one figure he thought he'd sussed, had been showing signs of hidden facets which Adam found both dislikeable and unsettling. At least he had stopped wearing his augret as a hat. Wherever they happened to be heading in Scale Falls, Adam hoped it would restore Caley to the more level-headed friend he thought he'd made.

Despite the weighty responsibilities hanging over his head, Caley had been looking forward to visiting Scale Falls. He'd read that it was a deeply cultured place where the arts were valued, and knowledge was treasured. Being naturally curious and interested to learn, these descriptions had made Scale Falls sound all the more intriguing to Caley.

The temperature was pleasantly warm by now, but the rain came teeming down in perpetual torrents. Sia, Chime and Kota had disapproved of the miserable weather and had chosen to return to their Pokéballs, to join Cyzel and Rilly in a far drier state of slumber. As such, the remainder of the group were generously soaked as they made their way across a wide bridge towards the outskirts of Scale Falls. It was a

majestic structure built from thick, sturdy iron bars in the deepest red, with curved, wiry embellishments that intertwined with one another. Upon either side of the bridge's walkway there were stone statues of human figures crafted in fine detail - standing alongside their pokémon with proud smiles that not even the rain could wash off. There was one thing, Caley had to admit, that was beneficial about travelling Totto on foot. You certainly got to see more of the region's marvels that way.

"This bridge sure is something," the young man remarked in awe.

"They call it The Walk of Spirit," Rose commented, examining a gold placard on one of the side rails. "All the people you see here were classed as skilled Dragon Tamers - able to calm the wills of, and work with, draconic Light Type pokémon."

"Dragon Tamers have always considered themselves to be some kind of royalty," Denise sniffed, before looking to Caley. "I mean, besides *you*, of course. All the others act like they were given instructions from the creator itself."

"Granted, the Light Type holds many sacred connotations," Rose pointed out. "But a spot of humility never goes amiss."

Me? A Dragon Tamer? Caley blinked. Granted, he did appear to share a unique bond with Kota, but the thought had never crossed his mind of falling into such an esteemed category. In fact, it almost seemed surreal. *Pretty much like the rest of the experience*, the young man chuckled internally.

James furrowed his brow as he examined some of the statues. He couldn't help but think he should recognize one or two, but his brain felt rather odd, as if there were gaps between thoughts and memories where information should have been. The man concluded that this must have been a result of his temporary split, and hoped that the information would fall back into place in due time. It was quite annoying, the feeling of having forgotten something important.

The group reached the point where the end of the bridge led on to Scale Falls' cobbled streets - there stood a large, slightly-weathered board displaying a map of the city area. The group huddled upon a sheltered bench in order to stay out of the rain while they orientated themselves.

"Well, I'd best not waste time," Caley spoke up. "I'll meet you back here, once I've finished what I need to do."

"What?" Denise looked shocked. "Why can't we come with you?"

"It's...complicated," Caley tensed a little. "But I'll try not to be long. Couple of hours, tops."

And with that, he was gone. The remaining members of the group exchanged looks.

"I don't like this," Adam muttered. "He's hiding things from us."

"I'm sure he has his reasons," Rose said, calmly. "He'll tell us when the moment is right."

"So now what do we do?" James inquired.

"Well, sooner or later we need to confront Team Rocket again," Rose began. "So honing ourselves and our pokémon would be our next best move. Let's see if this city has a Gym."

Rose approached the tourist board, while James and Denise followed. Adam stayed under the shelter - he was soaked through to the skin as it was, and didn't fancy any more of the stuff.

"There! Scale Falls Gym, on the south side of the city," James motioned proudly. "Specializes in the Light Type - well that doesn't come as much of a surprise."

"Perfect," Rose smiled, before turning to Denise. "I'm afraid it won't be much good for your pokémon, Denise, since we can't have it roaming in public."

"That's fine," Denise replied stuntedly. "I would rather go and check out Scale Falls' library. You know...catch up on anything I missed out on during the past two years of my life."

The two older figures watched as Denise strode away.

"That seemed oddly short of her," James blinked. Rose sighed a little.

"She's probably still angry at me for having tricked her into Team Rocket in the first place," the woman explained. An awkward realisation had dawned on her - the manipulation she had used on Denise was exactly what Marc had used on her. She knew how that felt, but at least she was in a position to make it better. Rose made a mental note to do so when Denise returned.

Rose was right. While cooperation in order to escape was imperative, Denise wasn't intending to be taking general suggestions from the woman any time soon. She had better places to be, and she was more than happy to visit them alone. However, it wasn't until ten minutes into her journey toward the library that she realised she was being pursued by a familiar nut brown-haired youth in an orange sweater. Not that Denise's pursuer was trying to stay inconspicuous - instead he had made the decision to wander a few yards behind her like a bewildered ducklett with a questionable sense of direction. After a few moments of this, Denise became annoyed and deliberately slowed her pace so that Adam found himself wandering alongside her.

"And what are you doing following me?" Denise inquired accusingly, before Adam had an opportunity to relocate himself.

"It was better than sticking with those two," Adam said, with an almost-careless shrug.

"Oh I see," Denise replied dryly. "Nice to be taken into consideration."

"Hey what's your problem with me anyway?" Adam frowned.

"Well you haven't really been making an effort to be likeable," Denise sniffed. "If it's not insulting people, then it's acting cranky and unapproachable."

"'Cranky'?" Adam almost looked upset.

"Showing a little patience and empathy really helps," Denise insisted. "Even if you don't understand how someone else is feeling."

"Could do with taking your own advice," Adam muttered. Denise let out a breath of disbelief, then sped up her walking pace again. "Look, if this is about the gallirill, I'm sorry. But it won't survive a moment out here if all it does is cower at stuff."

"And you think lashing out at Rilly would *improve* matters?" Denise exclaimed. "Rilly's been through a traumatic situation! He needs encouragement from his friends, not threats. It's kindness that helps build confidence."

"Kindness. Feh." Adam said under his breath, but left it at that. It was Denise's turn to look hurt. She guessed that if a person had no intention of being kind, then it was a bit much to expect them to show empathy. She still didn't like Adam's attitude one bit, but something told her there was more to him than he was letting on. After all, he apologized...albeit reluctantly and with making excuses.

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Butch was usually temperate when it came to matters of patience, but what happened had managed to push him beyond his limits. Following the missed attempt at capturing Trigron, Cassidy, Jessie and himself had moved on to the next source of activity - a garishly-decorated city known as Edgeville. Feedback of multiple explosions from the operatives stationed there had drawn the trio's attention, and signs of damage were more than apparent, but the source of them had long since vanished. Being trapped underground had indeed set Team Rocket's trackers back in their endeavours, and this knowledge had done nothing to soothe Cassidy's nerves.

Despite this, they continued pursuit. The next origin of curious happenings had been pinned as a city some distance north-west, where there were reports of an unidentified pokémon sighting. Some had thought it to be a large milotic, while others insisted it was Rayquaza. Though responses were mixed, the overall consensus was that it definitely happened to be some type of serpentine creature. With some borderline-reckless driving, Butch had managed to grasp back a portion of lost time - arriving at the city a few hours earlier than expected. Still, even this seemed to have little effect on Cassidy's well-being. She and Jessie had managed to rub each other up the wrong way several times during this part of the journey alone, and their squabbling began to grate on Butch's nerves. Maybe it was because he was still having to put up

with the discomfort of the raw wounds on his back, but he couldn't stand to listen to his Elite accomplices any longer.

Wandering through this city was acting as an effective way to cool his aggravation. Dressed in his slick, black overcoat, Butch was able to traverse the streets relatively unnoticed, amongst equally smartly-dressed residents. He wasn't looking for anywhere in particular to go, though he was always open to any opportunity to accrue good favour with his boss. A few minutes into Butch's stroll and an opportunity found him, in the form of an aristocratic building with sandy coloured outer walls that looked for all the world to be a museum or an art gallery. Either of these would undoubtedly host some valuable artefacts - items that Butch could employ his skills of embezzlement to retrieve, and add more vital funds to Team Rocket's vault...and his own pocket.

No sooner had Butch stepped through the entrance doors, than he'd realised that it was neither a museum or an art gallery. To his surprise, the archaic designs of the pillars and surrounding décor dictated the man had in fact entered a church that had been neatly concealed amongst Scale Falls' other buildings. The large hall was mostly filled with rows of wooden benches, and at the far end, a group of people were kneeling before a marble statue that was at least fifteen foot high. It was of an equine being with a flowing mane and a large ring surrounding its waist, which Butch vaguely recognized from studies in his adolescence. Pedestals were arranged before the statue, filled with sticks of incense, while flowers were laid at its base. The scene held Butch in a mixture of

awe and discomfort. As incredibly-crafted as the statue was, the behaviour towards it didn't settle in him right, somehow.

Neither did attempting to take it seem like a very smart idea. Deity or not, those present in the church would have hardly dealt with such actions lightly. Butch's mind instructed him to leave, yet his body stayed put. There was nothing of material value here, so why was he having difficulty departing?

A hooded figure who had been attending to matters at the side of the room glanced round suddenly - as if someone had thrown a ball of paper at the back of their head. Quickly, the elderly man shuffled round and began to approach Butch, the edges of his brightly-coloured robe trailing silently along the polished floor. It was difficult to tell with the hood obscuring the upper half of his face, but the man appeared greatly moved as he prostrated himself at Butch's feet. Butch glanced around awkwardly, in case any of the other occupants of the room had seen this display, but they were all too engrossed in the marble statue to take notice.

"Uh... please get up," Butch motioned to the figure, who obliged.

"It has finally happened..." the elderly man breathed, once he was standing again. "After my nights of fervent prayer - a messenger has arrived! Come, I must proceed with the welcome ritual."

"What?" Butch blinked. "I'm no messenger, what are you talking about?"

"Calm yourself," the man smiled, lowering his voice. "There is no need to feign ignorance here. We of the Church of the Original One know all about your kind. Please follow me."

Rather than argue further, Butch resigned to following the aged figure down a nearby corridor. While the majority of him thought the man was eccentric, possibly insane, the rest of him was very curious. And the curiosity only managed to grow - accompanied by a sense of self-satisfaction - as the man led Butch into a side room before handing him an elaborately-patterned robe much like his own to wear.

Aside from the hood, which Butch noted was far longer at the back than he deemed necessary, the sleeves of the robe also extended at least twelve inches beyond his own hands. This proved to be especially impractical when attempting to eat, which happened to be the next task presented him. Butch was appreciative of the exotic food and drink, as it had been hours since he had last eaten anything substantial, but had been forced to roll his sleeves back in order to grasp any of it without accident.

The elderly man, whom Butch concluded had to be a particularly high ranking figure here, kept glancing in his direction - his mouth pursing in a show of discomfort. It seemed the man was unhappy with Butch handling the food and drink, but didn't like to express his thoughts on the matter. Butch didn't feel obliged to question, either. He wouldn't have minded reclining upon the long chair for some time, but it appeared there was other matters to attend to.

As Butch and his elder guide walked deeper into the church, Butch glanced at the walls and picked out the shapes carved there. At one end, creatures with slender necks and oval bodies, thin wings with spiked tips protruding from their backs. At the other end, more humanoid shapes, also with similar shaped wings. At some point in the middle of the carving, the two appeared to merge, as if one being was becoming the other. Text accompanied these carvings, a simple phrase - "Alignment of The Lati."

'The Lati'? Butch had not heard of these creatures himself. If the carvings were to be believed, they were talented at disguise. And that's even if such things existed at all. Regardless, the whole experience had the man greatly intrigued, and he continued to play along.

"Your presence is strong," the old man commented. "Such a powerful messenger of our Lord Arceus must bear very important news."

"'Presence'?" Butch echoed.

"It is what we call the feeling that resonates from beings of light such as yourself," the man remarked with a slight chuckle. "Only those who can sense that presence are considered worthy enough for priesthood."

At this point, Butch was beginning to believe the man wandering before him to be lacking in a few measures of sanity. He was considering unleashing Raccrupt and making his getaway, when the two figures entered a small room. Opposite them stood a mysterious apparatus

allowing James and Rose to descend below ground level - all the while admiring the murals that had been painted upon the walls either side.

"It's going to be nice to challenge a Gym for legitimate reasons," James mused, pushing open the entrance doors and stepping aside to allow Rose into the building's foyer.

"Indeed," Rose smiled. "But we can't let too much time slip by in here. As soon as Caley is ready to leave, it's best we move on."

As with most Gym buildings, there were no other visitors present at the time of Rose and James' entry. The wide foyer was pristine and sterile with deep red carpet and white tiled walls. Upon one side, set into a niche, was a sculpted running fountain, gently bubbling to itself. And on the other side, a corridor led deeper into the building - though this form of exit was barred by a sliding door with frosted glass. Rose approached a machine set upon a podium near the door - the device issued by the Pokémon League to every Gym in order to register trainer activity and assess their pokémon's strength.

"Welcome to Scale Falls Gym," an automated voice intoned. "Please scan your trainer ID in order to proceed."

"What is it with Gym Leaders and being so indirect?" James huffed, rummaging around in his jacket pocket. "It wouldn't hurt them to welcome their own challengers."

"A lot of them have other jobs besides this one, James," Rose reminded him, waving her makeshift card across the device's screen. It

deliberated on the contents for a moment, before giving a bleep of approval.

"Guess so," James mused, finally unearthing his ID. Not out of the want of money, obviously - the Pokémon League paid their Gym Leaders well - but battle challenges were not a consistent matter, and many of those who maintained Gyms would grow bored and restless from waiting.

"Trainer, Sascha," the machine said, with notable pauses. "One pokémon is required for this challenge. Place the Pokéball of your chosen pokémon into the reader below." The woman responded by bringing out Sia's Pokéball and inserting it into the tray underneath the monitor. A light flickered over the Pokéball, and another bleep of approval was heard. "Pokémon entrant, Glaceon. Good luck."

Rose took back Sia's Pokéball and the frosted glass door slid to one side, allowing Rose to walk through while a barrier prevented James from slipping in after her. He proceeded to scan his card and register Chime. As the greeter machine allowed James to follow Rose into the corridor, the man's eyes grew wide with awe over what he found himself looking at.

A thick sheet of glass spanned the entire right side of the corridor, separating it from an aquarium that the gym's entire lower floor appeared to consist of. Rose couldn't resist a chuckle as James skittered gleefully over to the transparent boundary and pressed his face against it - scanning the waters beyond for interesting signs of life.

"Come on, you," Rose urged gently. "The Gym Leader must have been notified of our arrival - we don't want to keep them waiting."

James nodded and retracted himself from the aquarium wall to walk after Rose, who had wandered some distance ahead of him at this point. The duo proceeded through the corridor, but James couldn't help but feel he was being watched. He turned his head back towards the aquarium and squinted. Groups of seadra and kingdra could be seen gliding serenely past, but the man found nothing paying any direct attention to him. He returned his gaze to the corridor, and the awkward feeling arose again. He swung back. Still nothing.

Sniffing in annoyance, James pretended he was no longer paying attention to the aquarium. Then he glanced at the reflection in a framed picture on the other side of the corridor.

The creature James found himself staring at had a long, narrow head outlined with pointed fan-like frills, and two lengthy whiskers at its snout. Its muscular, blue form was rather serpent-like, covered in large segmented scales like that of a gyarados. But, unlike a gyarados, the creature had four long flippers, and two curved protrusions at the back of its skull, just behind its vaguely trident-shaped crest.

Despite its relatively placid visage, the sudden appearance of a pokémon at least ten foot long caused James to let out an unflattering yelp, spin around on one heel and collide with Rose who had stopped in her tracks upon hearing James' exclamation of surprise. In that moment

of silence, the duo heard footsteps from the top of the staircase they had been walking towards. A fourteen year old girl descended from above with a purposeful expression. She was clothed in a dress of varying shades of grey, segmented into lines and circular patterns at the base. At her shoulders sat ice blue wing-like protrusions, while similar coloured gloves covered her hands. The youth's hair was equally elaborate, set in an asymmetrical cut where one side swept back over her temple and around by her left shoulder, and the other side was fluffy and spiked, a little more like a bird's head feathers.

"What is that thing?" James spluttered, pointing at the large, scaled face that was watching with vague interest.

"I don't know," the girl replied. "All I know is that she chose me to help her. I found her drifting in the river three days ago. I could feel her pain, and she allowed me to get close enough to make hand contact. But I could not put her into a Pokéball to take it back to this Gym, so Keval and Artimus had to carry her instead." Her face grew dark. "Whomever was training this beautiful creature, had no idea about respect!"

"You're telling me," Rose murmured. The information had already clicked with her - it had to be another Team Rocket experiment. Gyarados traits, lapras traits, the inability to be caught in a Pokéball due to being ID-locked...it all matched up. She knew the creature had to be retrieved before too much attention was raised, but part of her felt bad for considering that. For one, it was just minding its own business inside the

Sabrina Wakanda felt something was off, but she couldn't pinpoint just what. Her usually-silent morning meditation had been interrupted with an unsettled thrum, a sense of anticipation in everything. But she couldn't define it, and so resumed her typical daily activities.

The young woman had been staying in Totto for the past few months - an extended vacation from running her Gym in Saffron City and the school for psychics that was united with it. She had been caught up in helping those like herself - ever since a young trainer had brought her back from the edge of mental isolation - and had not had a chance to properly assess her own needs.

There was also the task of restoring her bonds with the non-psychic type pokémon she had caught while having been in that isolated state. This had been quite the challenge, as these pokémon had become used to a cold, emotionless figure whose only desire was improvement. After six years, what they had emerged from their Pokéballs to discover was a woman with a kind smile and deep, ultramarine eyes - one who saw the values of work and play, and who wasn't afraid to laugh at herself. Some of the pokémon had found it unnerving, while others could not bring themselves to respect this new figure, becoming disobedient in their disgust.

Yet it seemed that even on vacation, Sabrina wasn't released from the possibility of being sought out. At least one person would approach her every other day to try and persuade her to teach them Kakureiro, and barely four weeks ago, a young girl called Wilma had begged for her help

in order to control her psychic abilities. While politely turning away hopeful Kakureiro students wasn't that difficult, Sabrina felt a responsibility to others with psychic Cho'moken - to make sure their powers would not run beyond their grasp like hers had done. Since then, she had been giving Wilma lessons on a daily basis.

The teacher and her pupil had been in the middle of a lunch break, when there was a knock at the door to the apartment. Excusing herself from the table, Sabrina approached the door and unlocked it, to see Caley's rain-drenched figure standing outside.

"May I help you?" Sabrina inquired, a slight heaviness making itself present in her heart. She was asking out of good manners, but she already knew why the young man was there. The vibrancy of Aura she felt from him was undeniable, as was his own confusion, and borderline desperation.

"I'm...I'm sorry to intrude on your time, ma'am," Caley shivered. "But I'm kind of in a tight spot. Someone told me you were the best person in Tatto to speak to...with regards to psychic powers, I mean."

"Well I appreciate Azima's faith in me, but I could do without all this attention," Sabrina heaved a sigh, flinching and raising a hand towards Caley, who looked as if he was about to leave. "Hey! Hey, don't go. That wasn't meant personally - you can't help your situation. Come inside, and I'll tell you what I know."

"Thank you!" Caley smiled enthusiastically, and followed Sabrina into the apartment.

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Errol had requested some time away from Mondo and Copi, and was now strolling aimlessly down a carefully finished concrete path, between the bodies of other people. He examined the faces of these figures that passed him; commuters, shoppers and tourists alike, and smiled knowledgeably to himself. They had no idea where he had come from, what he had gone through, or who he really was. It pleased him in some ways, but unnerved him in others.

It's surprisin' how many cities look da same, he thought. At least on da outside. Scale Falls, Goldenrod, Holiwood Cali...

An old, tired scenario that had been played countless times in different locations. Of course, Errol was no longer tied to the mission that had kept his feet wandering, and his mind distracted from the very matters that perplexed his being so. He would like to have considered himself a free spirit, but things still disquieted him, and the panic of hearing Caley's voice in Edgeville brought them flooding back. That bitter look in Jessie's eyes, and the fear of seeing that look mirrored on James' face, should Errol reveal his true identity to him. To have *both* those

friends torn away would be more than the man's pained heart could stand. Better to just keep one of them in the dark, right?

But *he* wasn't in the dark. He could still remember all they had gone through as a trio. Had it *really* been selfish of him to long to understand himself, and to pursue it? Errol shook his head. No! He'd never thought less of Jessie and James for being human - why should they think less of him for being half human? He'd not chosen to be that way. The man paused, before sighing heavily at his own conclusion. True, he *had* chosen to allow his physical human appearance to be brought to the fore, instead of letting it remain dormant. Had that been wrong? Even if he *had* let it lie, the confusion would have remained. The fact he was a pokémon talking in human speech, with no access to any special attacks and an unnatural evolutionary stage, would have remained.

Errol fished his charm from under the folds of his vest and jacket, and examined it with a lost expression. If only there was someone out there that felt as he did. Someone caught in an equal state of bewilderment - a chipped peg in a slightly oversized socket.

"Stop that kid!" came a cry. Errol looked up in surprise, moments before something slammed into the back of his legs - causing the guitar he was carrying to emit a slight jangly noise of protest. Errol swung around to find himself gazing down at a small, angry-looking figure with sandy blonde hair, wrapped in a towelette bathrobe.

<Watch where you're going, you idiot!> the figure yelled.

"Hey, *you* ran into *me!*" Errol retorted. Then both figures paused.

"Waitasec, you're talkin' pokéspeak!"

<And *you* understood me!> the figure blinked, momentarily caught off guard. He then turned accusing. <Just what are you trying to pull?>

"Whuh?" Errol's eyes widened in shock. He'd suddenly noticed the two sets of whiskers on the aggravated youth's cheeks. "What *are* yas anyway?"

<That's none of your business!> the figure snapped, though there was upset in his voice at this point. He pushed past Errol and loped clumsily down a nearby alley, on all fours.

"Hm...guess dat was kinda poisonal..." Errol said to himself, once a few seconds had passed. The sheer bizarreness had forced his legs to a halt, and he was seemingly frozen in place. It wasn't until another figure came dashing towards him, that his lower limbs suddenly realised they were supposed to be doing something, and Errol ended up staggering a little way to the left. However, the red-headed youth skidded to a halt instead of running straight past - his eyes full of worry and upset.

"Hey, did you see a boy run by here?" he inquired. The voice wasn't the one Errol had heard yelling previously, but sounded just as concerned. "He was kind of...unusual-looking and wearing a dressing gown."

"Yeah, I saw him," Errol inquired. Knowing whether or not it had been a 'dressing gown' the figure had been wearing seemed pretty inconsequential at this point in time. "What happened?"

"Well, this is probably going to strike you as completely nuts," the figure began. "And I won't blame you for thinking that. But I swear it's the truth. My name's Dillon Fletcher - I was at a Pokémon Center, trading pokémon with a guy from Johto. The usual sort of thing - I adopt pokémon that trainers can't cope with any more, for whatever reason. This meowth was no different. Everything appeared to be running smoothly, but when I released Carrlin - that's the name the trainer had given the meowth - from his Pokéball, he started glowing. Y'know, like he was evolving. That didn't seem too out of the ordinary, but then he turned into-"

"A human. Mm-hm," Errol nodded distantly. Cogs were turning in his head - an unnatural evolution triggered by trading...it was exactly the same process that had brought on his own humanity the year before. Had Professor Bohrgram experimented on more than one meowth? Errol shuddered, maybe someone else had got their hands upon the data needed to replicate that process again.

"No doubt Carrlin was as shocked as I was about the whole thing," Dillon remarked awkwardly. "When he woke up from passing out, he practically flipped his lid, ripped the monitoring wires off him, and ran away. If only I could get Carrlin to come back, so I can explain. I'll admit

table which was currently occupied by a tray of knick-knacks and a pad of paper. A six year old girl with plum coloured hair was sitting cross-legged upon one of the sofas with a slowpoke next to her, reading a book. She glanced up with a bright smile at hearing Sabrina re-enter, her expression altering to one of curiosity upon seeing her new visitor.

"Wilma, we have another student with us for the time being," Sabrina announced. "This is Caley, he's from Prael Village."

"Nice to meet you Caley!" Wilma grinned.

"Hello," Caley spoke up, feeling himself tense slightly with the rise of unexpected shyness.

"Now you sit down here," Sabrina motioned to the sofa on the opposite side of the coffee table. "And I'll get some necessary items."

"Wow..." Wilma breathed, as Sabrina went over to the staircase and pulled out one of its drawers. "A few days ago, I thought I was the only person with psychic powers ever. This is awesome, isn't it Geoffrey?" she turned to the slowpoke who nodded an affirmative. "What's your speciality?"

"Speciality'?" Caley blinked, arranging himself upon the sofa before putting his backpack to one side.

"All psychics have a speciality," Wilma explained. "Mine is moving stuff with my brain." She demonstrated this by levitating three building blocks from the tray on the coffee table, into the air.

"Well I...I don't know," Caley looked awkward, as Wilma put the blocks back down. "I was hoping Sabrina might be able to help me find that out."

"I bet she could," Wilma beamed. "She's amazing!"

Caley's worried expression was beginning to soften. He couldn't help but be endeared towards Wilma, whose cheerful nature and optimism reminded him of his younger sister Abby. His eyes widened as the weight of realisation hit him. In the deluge of inexplicable events that had cascaded over him, Caley had not made contact with his mother since leaving Nashgri City. By the time Sabrina had returned to the living room area, Caley was looking quite anxious again.

"I'm sorry," he stammered. "Before we do anything else, could I use your phone? I haven't called my mum in days and I-"

"Go ahead," Sabrina replied. "If something that pressing is on your mind, my lesson won't benefit you."

Standing with the phone handset placed to the side of his head, Caley listened to the call tone and begged his mother to answer. He'd asked to take the phone into the hallway, which Sabrina permitted – in order to allow the young man more privacy. Yet, even as he huddled upon the staircase leading up to Sabrina's apartment, Caley didn't feel any more secluded. Maybe it was because he was aware that Sabrina was a psychic – a strong one at that - and could easily listen in on the

conversation if she wished. Caley scolded himself internally for such thoughts – after all, he wouldn't want his friends to think that of him, once he told them the truth about his own powers.

The call tone ceased, shunting Caley back into the present moment as a slightly distant female voice spoke from the other end of the phone.

"Hello, this is the Wilson residence, Pat speaking."

Caley gathered all of his nervousness into a bundle within him, and took a breath – unsure of what the response to his next words would be.

"Hi Mum."

"Caley?!" Pat spluttered. He winced slightly, noting the tinge of anger in his mother's shocked voice. "Where did you get to? It's been over a week, why hadn't you called me?"

"I..." Caley attempted to drum up an explanation, only to be cut off by Pat in mid try.

"I tried ringing you, but your PokéGear has been turned off for days!" she snapped.

"Yeah, about that...I-" Caley fumbled for words in his mind, but grasped at nothing. He didn't wish to speak of his dealings with Team Rocket, especially not over the phone.

"I've been worried sick!" Pat scolded him. The frustration had taken over from the shock and relief at this point. "Why did you send Kiko back here on her own?"

"Well she shouldn't have been alone," Caley frowned. "I asked her to guide Professor Gordon back to Prela."

"Kiko was supposed to be *your* guide!" Pat exclaimed vexatedly. "What if you run into danger out there?"

"I'm not by myself, mum...honest!" Caley held an arm out as if Pat would be able to see the gesture. "I met an augret named Kota, and he's pretty gutsy. And there are other friends with me, they're with pokémon too."

Pat uttered a noise that dictated she wasn't entirely convinced, but said no more about the matter.

"Well, I'm glad to hear from you at last..." she concluded, beginning to sound more at ease. "How is your trip going? Discovered anything interesting yet?"

"You could call it 'interesting', yeah," Caley swallowed uncomfortably. While he wasn't going to mention his entry into the Rocket HQ, there was something else he wanted to ask. Something that had been gnawing at him ever since his talk with Azima, back in Wichour Town. "Why didn't you tell me that dad had psychic powers?"

"Wh...what?" the woman's voice had weakened considerably. "How did you...?"

"How did I know?" Caley finished the sentence. "Well...I have them too. Figured I had to have inherited them from him."

There was a long silence.

"No..." Pat's utterance was soft and aggrieved. "This can't be happening..."

"Mum, what's wrong?" Caley looked anxious. "Why is this so bad, I-" The young man paused, the features of his face creasing up with unjustified remorse as his mother's sobbing was heard on the other end of the line. This continued for a few moments, until Pat was able to regain some semblance of composure.

"How could this happen to you?" she inquired. "Why?"

"Why is it such a big deal?" Caley exclaimed, trying to keep the irritation from his voice over Pat being so vague. "Dad used to tell me that unusual talents were nothing to be ashamed of."

"It's not 'shame' I'm worried about..." Pat said quietly. "The psychic abilities your father had, they consumed him, Caley. He shut everyone out of his life and became obsessed with making himself more and more powerful. It was that obsession that caused him to leave, to train in an area where his strengthening abilities would not harm anyone. I...I never heard from him again."

"B-but you said he'd died from an incurable illness," Caley faltered, struggling to stay upright.

"And that's exactly what it was like!" Pat exclaimed. "Those abilities corrupted Jack's body and mind like a disease! I don't want that to happen to you! I don't want to lose you like I did him..."

Caley felt his body tip to one side, thudding gently against the wall. Yet he barely felt the impact as he stared wildly down the stairwell, trying desperately to find a fractionally optimistic thought to cling onto. But such thoughts evaded him. His hands had grown clammy, his breathing shallow and erratic.

"Oh Caley, I'm sorry..." Pat murmured uneasily. "I didn't mean to burden you with all that. I just panicked..."

"I-It's okay, mum," Caley stammered, barely keeping his voice from cracking. "I'm not going to let myself get that way. I-I promise you."

"I know you won't, love," Pat sounded calmer now, though none the less anxious for what her thoughtless exclamations had done.

"I've got to go. I'll speak to you soon, I hope."

Sabrina glanced up from the kitchen with a deeply sympathetic expression as Caley wandered in from the hallway with the telephone in both hands - his eyes glazed over, staring into the unknown beyond.

"Are you ready to proceed?" she asked. The woman already knew the answer, but delivered the inquiry for the sake of politeness.

their pokémon trainees. A small row of seats were placed beyond the battle area - this was where Rose, Sia and the three judges in charge of scoring the battles were located.

"Are you ready to lose, Carl?" Alyth inquired nonchalantly.

"As ready as you are!" James replied with equal cockiness.

"This Pokémon Gym battle is now in session," one of the judges announced. "The competitors may use one pokémon only. Points are given mainly on battle style. There is a five minute time limit."

"Send out your victim," Alyth smirked.

"Knock 'em out, Chime!" James instructed, throwing the Pokéball on to the field. As he did so, Alyth threw a Pokéball forward also. Two white shapes materialized, one far larger than the other. As the white glow faded, Chime let out a tiny squeak of alarm – discovering herself staring up at a towering, formidable-looking dragonite. Turning around to look at her human companion, Chime discovered James' expression was stern, but unfaltering. This air of confidence, even against such a challenge, filled Chime's tiny heart with hope. She turned back to face the dragonite with a determined scowl.

"Keval is a young dragonite, but he's already learned a lot in terms of presentation," Alyth called nonchalantly. "Let's see how your chimecho measures up."

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Stood against the outer wall of Scale Falls Gym, quivering with the combined chill from her sodden clothing and the exhaustion of wearing a heavy pack on her back, Jessie gazed at Cassidy talking to Soluqua and observed a feeling of her own making, somewhere in the back of her head. The feeling had been steadily growing while Jessie recalled Rose's expression of disappointed sadness, facing her in the Team Rocket headquarters. The lost regret upon the face of the man whom she was beginning to feel more than certain was James, gazing back at her through the glass in the Astral Blade Tower. It was a confusing feeling, a despairing feeling. A feeling of "What am I doing with my life?"

Though this question and the emotions that accompanied it were not unfamiliar in the slightest. In her years of tracking that boy and his pikachu, Jessie had come up against many walls, suffered much humiliation and failure, and had been driven to this point of wondering why she was doing these things in the first place. Yet, the thought that there was something better waiting for her at the end of the long, arduous mission - some kind of recognition, positive affirmation - kept Jessie going. James and Meowth had fuelled this hope with their own brands of optimism - now, with them gone, there was nothing to stop the façade from crumbling.

It had never been real. There had been no reward, no golden prize. The one thing that *had* been real in her life - her bond with two wonderful companions - Jessie had forced apart in her pursuit of the seemingly-glorious unreality.

Jessie retrieved a square of paper from her phasepack and gazed at it with a sad fondness. It was a photograph taken shortly after her initiation into Team Rocket with James and Meowth. Three figures, two of them in burgundy coloured uniforms, clasped together with expressions of triumph and happiness.

She wanted to join them and the rest of those who had left Team Rocket's clutches, more now than ever. But the block of her own insecurities still remained. In the past she had circumvented this by blaming others for her own mistakes, but this tactic wasn't going to work any more. Somehow Jessie needed to address what caused her so much turmoil, even just a part of it, before she could let Team Rocket go.

"Well if you've quite finished being useless, I need you to bring that bag over here," Cassidy snapped, breaking into Jessie's thoughts. Nearby, Soluqua was making short work of a vent grate in the Gym's Wall - using her telekinesis to unwind the screws that held it in place, before lifting the entire assembly adrift of the opening and placing it soundlessly underneath.

"Oh. Oh yeah, right," Jessie remarked distantly, attempting to return the photograph to her phasepack while approaching Cassidy.

"Good," Cassidy remarked bluntly, noting the removal of the grate. "Now I'm going to get your Pokéball into the building, Soluqua. Once you are released for the second time, look for a hidden window that I can use to enter."

"Aren't you bothered that Butch isn't here?" Jessie inquired, swinging the bag from her shoulders and putting it on the grass.

"Well what do *you* think?" Cassidy muttered. "Shirking his responsibilities like that. I'm going to give him a piece of my mind when he gets back!" She rummaged about in the bag for a moment.

"Regardless, our mission must continue."

Jessie couldn't help but shudder slightly. Here she was, listening to exactly the same warped priorities she herself had displayed, and it wasn't reassuring. For now, though, she had to play by Cassidy's rules. At this moment in time, her co-operative was involved with a wheeled platform sporting a tiny camera fitted to the front. Taking the Pokéball containing Soluqua - Cassidy inserted it into a cradle in the centre of the platform, before lifting the entire contraption into the vent. She then brought out a remote control unit and switched it on. The tiny screen of the unit flickered into life, giving a view of the vent's confined angular tunnels.

From there, Cassidy manoeuvred the miniature Pokéball transporter through the vent labyrinth, until it reached another opening - one which led out into the corridor below. Carefully positioning the

transporter so the front button of the Pokéball it carried was positioned between the bars of the opening, Cassidy activated an override sequence, causing the Pokéball to release its occupant into the corridor.

The next five minutes seemed to last three times as long. At last, a window on the outer building quivered slightly, then sprung open. Attracting the attention of her human companions, Soluqua allowed them to slip through the window, with Cassidy accepting the bag that Jessie passed to her. Once the duo were inside, they set about looking for a way into the aquarium.

"Ah, this will do," Cassidy smiled deviously. On one side there was built a pumping system designed for filtering impurities out of the massive tank. One section drew the water into the machine, while the opposite section pushed it back out again - following its cleaning. "Alright Soluqua, phase two," came the next instruction, once the grate atop the outflow pipe was removed. "Turn yourself to liquid and let this pump move you into the aquarium. When you are inside, I want you to look for this creature." She brought out a pocket device and loaded an image for Soluqua to examine, then showed her a set of cube-like objects. "I'm going to pass these Snare Blocks to you, which you must place on that creature when you find it. Once it is immobilized, lift it out of the aquarium."

"But there's a floating platform in the way..." Jessie trailed off, noticing the darting figures overhead. "Not to mention a Gym Battle looks like its going on."

"These things are irrelevant," Cassidy frowned. "And we cannot waste time. Fortunately, I didn't expect to be able to rely on Butch, and so my pokémon is more than aptly equipped to deal with flimsy obstacles like that."

"Kol-preh," Soluqua acknowledged, posing with one of her legs over the grate, in what she considered a formidable manner.

"Well, get going," Cassidy instructed bluntly. Soluqua's proud smirk somewhat dissipated, and her body lost all of its defining features, becoming a translucent bluish goop. The goop then gave way to gravity, sliding into the pipe and out of sight. A few moments later, Soluqua's reformed visage made itself present on the other side of the glass, looking triumphant. Cassidy took out a set of cube-like objects from the bag next to Jessie's foot, then dropped them into the outgoing filter pipe also. Taking the Snare Blocks as they floated out towards her, Soluqua proceeded deeper into the aquarium - deftly avoiding the passing seadra which were surprisingly unphased by her presence there.

She enjoyed the challenges Cassidy set her, and apprehending this pokémon without it catching on to being followed was going to prove quite interesting, Soluqua thought. She focused on using her psychic abilities to propel herself through the water, keeping limb movements and the reverberations they caused to a minimum. Cassidy's hunch had been a good one - Soluqua's target floated obliviously overhead, just metres from the surface, seemingly captivated by the battle activity going on above. Stealthily, the golduck-vaporeon hybrid approached, her intent

gaze focused upon the serpentine pokémon's middle segments. For the Snare Blocks to work most effectively, she had been lectured, putting them as close to a pokémon's Aura source point was the method to use.

It wasn't until her target felt the unsettling chill of three foreign objects across its midriff, that it realised something was amiss. And by then, it was too late.

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"Dragonites may be fast, but we've got the advantage in the agility department," James smirked. "Chime, take the evasive approach!"

The two pokémon circled like hungry sharpedo, one looking for a chance to lash out at the other. James' plan appeared to be working so far.

"Use Secret Power!" he instructed boldly.

Chime unleashed multiple spheres of energy. However, Keval navigated them with surprising agility, and dove straight for his target.

"BLOCK!" James yelled in panic. Chime raised her protect shield just in time, causing Keval to slam full force into it. "Okay..." James bit his lip. "I wasn't expecting that level of agility."

"Keval, Blizzard," Alyth instructed simply. The dragonite responded with a flurry of ice shards, which spattered against Chime's forcefield with multicoloured sparks.

"Drat," James pouted, watching his style points meter lowering. "Our defence worked in her favour."

"Now, Draco Meteor!" Alyth called, more fervently this time. Keval generated spheres of his own Aura, much like Chime had done - only this attack was stronger and more violent. Chime tried to evade, but was struck with a barrage of energy. "And again!" the Gym Leader exclaimed.

"Secret Power, aim into the water!" James insisted. Chime did as she was told, sending a blast of liquid up at the oncoming fragments of the Draco Meteor. Keval squinted as the fragments were thrust in all directions.

"Excellent," James grinned, noting Alyth's style points meter drop. "The wave displaced all the pieces and made the attack look quite ungainly."

Keval paused as the white disc of the Gym's land field shifted upon the water. Suddenly there was an explosion from underneath - throwing a massive spray of liquid and chunks of the battlefield into the air. The judges at the side of the stage cried out in alarm.

"Chime! Protect those people!" James cried out. Bravely, Chime positioned herself over the judges' table and formed a shield over them, while nearby, Sia blasted chunks of debris away with beams of ice.

"What's going on?" Alyth snapped, as if those around her had a better idea than she did. The water below bubbled and churned, before heaving itself into an ominous lump. The surface broke, revealing a long, semi-transparent case made of a lime green energy. Inside that case, the gyarados-lapras pokémon was suspended - eyes wide, body paralysed and helpless.

Even James and Rose were momentarily baffled as to this unexpected levitation, but as a familiar bipedal form with webbed hands and a canine face rose out of the water underneath its immobilized quarry, they were immediately aware as to whom was behind these acts. The presence of Soluqua meant that Cassidy was not far behind. And sure enough, the watching audience were presented with sight of the Elite operative's two spiked pigtails bobbing in rhythm to her footsteps, as she ascended the staircase behind Alyth.

"Sorry to disturb your silly battle," Cassidy remarked, in a tone that made it obvious she wasn't apologetic in the slightest. "We would have used the back entrance, but you Gym Leaders make these places so...inaccessible, you know?"

It was in that moment - the sight of the sandy-haired man with the utter disbelief in his eyes, and the chimecho hovering next to him -

that Jessie's mind was no longer in doubt as to his identity. But that didn't make his expression any more comforting. It was obvious that James couldn't fathom why Jessie had persisted in cleaving to Team Rocket.

"You aren't supposed to be here!" Alyth snapped.

"And this isn't supposed to be here either," Cassidy replied smoothly, gesturing to the hybrid serpentine pokémon inside its energy case. "Specimen 1AR1D05 is Team Rocket property, so we're taking back what's ours, thank you."

"'Property'?" Alyth spat, as Keval growled ominously. "Pokémon are *no one's* property! You aren't taking that poor creature anywhere!"

"Soluqua, let's get going," Cassidy announced. The vaporeon-golduck hybrid responded in kind by wrenching back her head and unleashing a ball of blue energy from her mouth at the Gym's ceiling. As Cassidy and Jessie were psychically lifted aboard the Snare Block case amidst the cascade of debris, Alyth brought another Pokéball out and released its contents. A salamence appeared upon the opposite side of the young Gym Leader, looking stern.

"Stop them!" Alyth exclaimed. Both dragon pokémon started to power up hyper beams.

"Jessie, do something!" Cassidy yelled. But Jessie was frozen in place, unable to look away from James. The two hyper beams made contact with the front of the Snare Block case, joined by an ice beam

from Sia which spattered against the case's back. This combined onslaught of energy was enough to create an influx in the Snare Blocks' projection, giving its prisoner a split second of free movement. It was all it needed.

As the lapras-gyarados hybrid uttered an unearthly screech, the pool in the centre of the Gym Battlefield seemed to take on a life of its own - water rearing up into a vicious column that forced itself under the case and those directly surrounding it. All figures caught in the blast were thrust unceremoniously through the roof, clusters of bewildered-looking seadra and feebas carried along in the liquid torrent.

"This wouldn't have happened if Butch had been here!" Cassidy complained. "Oh what am I saying, you're *both* useless!"

Then they were gone. The judges stared onward, agape, as sounds of distant impacts and horrified cries were barely audible from somewhere in the city.

"Dirty thieves," Alyth snorted. "Now they've upset my baby." She looked, almost sadly, towards James. "I'm sorry, Carl, but I'm going to have to postpone our match. Which is rather a shame, because it was just getting interesting."

With a curious little giggle, the youth leapt aboard the salamence and pointed towards the hole in the ceiling, to which the pokémon got the hint and rose swiftly into the air, through the roof and out of sight.

"This isn't good," Rose muttered, as she and James quickly left Scale Falls Gym with Chime and Sia in tow. "A loose hybrid pokémon is bad enough, but an angry loose hybrid pokémon is highly dangerous. Not to mention a lot harder to keep out of the public eye. Never mind Alyth saving it. We need to save Alyth *from* it."

The woman paused, realizing that her companion wasn't paying that much attention. He had been standing there staring rather wistfully out at the sky.

"You're thinking about her again, aren't you?" she eyed James.

"Why is she running away from the truth, Rose?" the man glanced back desperately. "Why can't she see the light? She could do so much better things, if she would just leave that Tahforsaken organization in the dirt, where it belongs..."

"I know, James...I know," Rose put an arm around him. "And I don't understand why she's doing this to us, to *herself*, either. But there's always hope. It's never too late to change." Her expression altered to something more stern at this point. "I hate to say this, though...but no matter how fondly you feel about Jessie, she's still working on the opposite side right now, and that means we have to stop her as well as Butch and Cassidy."

"I...I'll try," James gave a tiny nod, though his voice sounded strained and broken. Such a notion didn't settle with him one bit, but

when the alternative was to put hundreds of innocent lives at risk, he had little choice. "Okay. Let's get that pokémon back."

TO BE CONTINUED...

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