

POKÉMON  
REBIRTH

# ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE TWENTY ONE

## Defog

Another fragmented night's rest had seen Butch, Cassidy and Jessie's energy reserves restored to a degree, and they were back on the road the next morning - heading northward from Scale Falls towards Mayni City. Public media had been abuzz with reports of volatile criminal activity, which had later fed back to the operatives as a sighting of the highly wanted Team Rocket absconders. But they were not the trio's concern, and Mayni City had produced no evidence of hybrid pokémon activity. As a result, Butch, Cassidy and Jessie passed through empty-handed - eventually setting up another temporary camp on the other side of the metropolis.

Cassidy's report had not been received well by Elite Rank Admin Darius, and as a result there was an air of bitterness present while the trio set about their business. In Butch's case, it was more an amplification of the bad mood he had already inexplicably been in. Since they had stopped to reorientate themselves, he had rolled up his sleeves and proceeded to fervently inspect the area with the scanning equipment.

"This is ridiculous!" Cassidy snapped, angrily stirring a bowl of vegetable stew on her knee. "We've been out here for almost two weeks, and haven't re-captured a single specimen! Those traitors have beaten us to it every single time! At this rate, we'd have better luck finding *them* and taking back the specimens they've caught."

"Certainly would cut down all this mindless legwork," Jessie remarked, trying to hide the enthusiasm in her voice over the thought of pursuing James and the others.

"You'd want to take a risk like that?" Butch eyed Cassidy in disbelief. "These aren't civilians we're talkin' about. The traitors have the same level of experience as us - specimens in their hands are as good as lost."

"What?" Cassidy frowned. "That's awfully pessimistic of you."

"It's *realistic*, is what it is," Butch muttered, staring at the scanner in his hand. Cassidy eyed the uncomfortable-looking welts on her partner's forearms and shuddered internally.

"How long have those been there?" she snapped, pointing at the dark-tinted lumps.

"How would I know?" Butch told her shortly. "I've been concentrating on the mission, not my appearance."

"Well you need to start paying more attention to yourself," Cassidy insisted. "The gashes on your back haven't got any better, and now those things on your arms show up...you need treatment!"

"And I'll get it when it's convenient!" Butch exclaimed irritably. "You've got more useful things to be doing than nagging me, woman, so do them!"

Cassidy uttered a noise of distaste and frowned, but decided to leave Butch to his own devices and resumed eating.

"I'm not imagining this..." she muttered to no one in particular. "He's not been the same since we went to Pachna Town, and I'm sure that druddigon attack has something to do with it..."

"Why do you care so much about Butch anyway?" Jessie inquired with her mouth full.

"Care?" Cassidy raised an eyebrow. "It's not about 'care'. Butch is a vital member of this operation. An operation is like a clock, and we all know how well a clock functions when one of its pieces is missing." She put down the bowl and rummaged in her bag for a moment, before retrieving the communicator module. "Or damaged. And Butch is not working at full capacity - it will set me back."

Jessie was on the verge of demanding to know where *she* fitted into the operation, but ended up shutting her mouth and staring into her empty bowl instead. She already knew the answer. In this particular setup, listening to Cassidy demanding to be put through to Team Rocket's supplies department over the communicator module, it was obvious the woman was little more than a spare part.

"I've got a reading," Butch stated. "A strong, modified organic frequency about 56 miles north of here - pretty sure that's our next target."

"Right," Cassidy acknowledged, putting the communicator aside. "Let's pack the equipment away and get moving."



others slept. The following morning saw Rose cooking up some pancakes as James basked in the sun's glow with Chime around his neck - observing the clouded skies with childlike pleasure. Nearby, Mondo studied his guidebook avidly - unaware of Cory, Sia and Rilly engaged in a noisy game of tag.

Caley heaved a deep sigh as he watched Adam huddled under a distant tree, with Cyzel curled lazily beside him. It had been Adam's typical point of rest ever since the group had left the Team Rocket HQ, but this time it felt painfully personal. The youth had not really spoken to Caley after the talk they'd had on the outskirts of Scale Falls, and had tried his utmost to keep his distance at every opportunity. As much of an effort as he was making not to read minds, the vibes Caley sensed from Adam were too strong to overlook.

"How could you?" they said, as if Caley's possession of psychic powers had been an act he'd committed just to make his associates feel uncomfortable. It was an awkward thing to be aware of, and combined with the knowledge of Adam's trust issues, it was devastating. Having managed to form some kind of a bond with the adolescent boy, it seemed that any chances of regaining it had been ruined for good.

Denise, on the other hand, had adjusted quite surprisingly to the discovery of Caley's abilities. Prior to leaving his side, she'd admitted how glad she had been that Caley was endowed with them, because she honestly hadn't known how they would have escaped Brendan's capture otherwise. Yet Caley was uncertain. It seemed for what few positive

aspects his psychic Cho'moken brought to his life, there were a multitude of hindrances. And following the experience of Adam's nightmare, certain toxic thoughts of Caley's own making still remained in his head. He recalled what Rose had suggested, about meeting the Agrarian Seers. The idea had sounded very encouraging, but how was he supposed to find these people in the first place? Rose didn't seem to know where any of them were located, and it was hardly something Caley expected to find in a telephone directory or online archive.

Out from the darkness between his tumultuous thoughts came a pin-sharp resonance that thrust Caley bolt upright. Waves of pure, melodic light rippled and shimmered inside the young man's consciousness, and for a fleeting blissful moment, every issue that harassed him so mercilessly had vanished. Caley reached out mentally, trying to grasp at the waves, to capture some of that bliss before it ebbed away. But he was unsuccessful, and the melody retreated back into nothingness, leaving behind the thoughts which it had disrupted, albeit at a lower volume.

"That sound..." Caley murmured to himself. "Where did it come from?"

Denise had felt a little awkward about approaching Rose, especially after how bitter she had acted toward the woman. With very good reason, Denise still felt, but recent events had caught her quite off

guard, and she had to find out that what she'd heard from Rose wasn't something her own mind had conjured up. Following her interactions with Caley, and several minutes of deliberation, Denise plucked up the courage to approach her older companion and ask the one question that had been on her mind since they left Mayni City. Rose turned over the pancakes as Denise approached, glancing up with an inquisitive expression.

"This is kind of out of the blue, but I've got to know," Denise asked. "Did you really mean what you said about me to my parents at the hotel?"

"Every word," Rose smiled sadly. "I really do regret how I tricked you into signing up for Team Rocket that day. Back then, my conscience was numbed with my own bitterness towards other things. It's not how life should have played out for either of us." She looked down at the contents of the makeshift frying pan. "I'm sorry, Denise."

"It's okay," Denise said, sitting down nearby. "That's over now, isn't it? It's time to put the good parts back together."

"I'm glad you feel that way too," Rose agreed with relief.

"You've never talked about them," Denise murmured. "*Your* parents, I mean."

"They're hard-working, decent people," Rose said distantly. "They put their all into raising me, getting me the best start in life. They must feel I betrayed them..."

"Why?"



these things would provide some kind of sustenance. Now, sat on one of the coach's plush passenger seats, Todd was beginning to feel a little more relaxed. He had just made the decision to finally pour himself a cup of coffee from his flask, when the coach gave a mighty jolt, throwing everyone forward. Unfortunately for Todd, the cup and flask in his hands was jerked in the same direction. Even more unfortunately for the person sitting in front of him, a generous amount of coffee splattered on the back of their head.

"Oh man!" Todd exclaimed in horror, as the figure yelped loudly, causing many of the surrounding passengers to glance round in alarm. "I am so sorry! Here, let me dry that." He fumbled for a handkerchief while others debated what on earth had happened to cause the coach to brake so harshly in the first place.

"Get outta the road, you idiot!" the driver yelled loudly, before the coach engine sputtered into motion once more. Hastily dabbing at the back of the sodden figure's neck and shoulders with the handkerchief, Todd caught sight of a pidgey fluttering away towards the hillside. The sunlight cast a glow on the edges of its cream tinted wings, and shimmered across something dangling from its beak. Todd's eyes widened slightly, a flicker of enthusiasm stirred within him. His free hand quaked, edging its way towards his silver suitcase. Maybe...maybe that was a perfect image.

Before Todd had a chance to make further movement, a human form dashed past the right side of the bus. The figure had sandy-coloured

hair, was dressed in an olive green jacket and jeans, and had an acoustic guitar strapped across his back. Undoubtedly this man had been the target of the coach driver's angry exclamations, as he appeared to be completely focused on running after the pidgey that had passed by just seconds before. The majority of the passengers had returned to their own business, paying little attention to the activity outside, but the sheer absurdity of the situation urged Todd to keep watching. No sooner had the man got within arm's-length of the pokémon, he grasped at the article dangling from its beak. At the same time, the pidgey delivered a hefty gust from both wings - casting its target into the air within a miniature cyclone. Gasps of shock were heard from a few of the passengers who had remained watching, while a small child burst into fits of giggles, only to be silenced with a hushed reprimand.

"What a right carry on!" an elderly voice remarked from behind Todd, causing him to break into a smile at hearing the south Tattoran accent he had grown so familiar with since moving to the region. "You sure don't see something like that every day."

Todd put his handkerchief away and gave a nod, more as a response to his own contemplation than anything else. He couldn't help but feel like he'd seen the article the pidgey was carrying somewhere before.

Over the other side of the hill, far from the observing eyes of the coach's passengers, Errol landed heavily upon the grass in a tangle of limbs and discordant twanging. This certainly wasn't how he'd expected his solitary morning stroll to have ended, especially considering his withdrawal from the types of criminal activity which usually resulted in such consequences. In fact, it had been *he* who'd been the victim in all of this - having his charm snatched from his own hand while he was giving it a thorough examination. Still, that issue had been rectified now, albeit with a few bruises and grass stains.

"Wowee...ow..." Errol burbled, shakily pushing himself into a sitting position. "Lucky I didn't end up on my back. Dat landin' woulda done a number on my fretboard." He put the chain which his charm dangled from back around his neck and pulled the guitar into his field of vision in order to inspect it for any possible damage. Happily, there was none.

"Hey there you are!" The familiar voice belonged to James, who was approaching with Chime in tow. "What happened?" Errol gave him a surprised look, to which James motioned to the stray pieces of grass stuck to his face.

"Wouldya believe I was attacked by a pidgey?" Errol insisted. James descended into fits of chuckles at this. "Hey, knock it off!"

"I'm sorry..." James grinned sheepishly. "But you have to admit that is pretty hilarious in retrospect." Errol thought this over for a



"Even to those we love. We can't afford to put them, or ourselves, in danger."

"So what about Errol and Mon- uh...Tate?" Adam spoke up. "*They* haven't been wearing any disguises."

"I don't need no disguises," Errol folded his arms. "As far as Team Rocket's consigned, I don't exist." He paused, noticing a lot of attention had been drawn to him at this point. "Okay, so I *could* do wit' some more glasses," he admitted. "My last pair got smashed back in Sarthest City." The man gave Caley a hopeful grin at this point. "I don't suppose I could borrow yours until I get some more o' my own, could I?"

"Uh..." Caley fumbled, having been caught off-guard. As reliable as his companions had been, he still felt wary about lending them something as fragile and one of a kind as the Pokédex glasses Professor Werty had generously given him. Especially after hearing what had happened to Errol's previous pair. Then he recalled the painful jab in his chest he had felt at knowing he wasn't being trusted. Last thing he wanted to do was inflict that pain on someone else. Errol's anticipated expression lit up into joy as Caley removed his glasses and held them out. "Alright. Until you find a pair of your own."

"T'anks, kid!" Errol beamed, putting Caley's glasses on. "I'll take real good care of 'em!" He proceeded to scan Sia, who was walking by Rose's feet, followed by Chime, and then Kota shortly afterward. "Heh, using dese t'ings is kinda addictive."

*I hope I don't regret doing that,* Caley remarked to himself, trying not to let such thoughts show on his face. Denise reached into her jacket pocket and brought out her modified Pokédex.

"Here," she said, offering it towards the young man. "You can use this, in case you need to identify any pokémon in the meantime."

"Oh, thank you Denise," Caley smiled.

"As for Tate..." Rose said. "We'll have to work on his disguise."

"So what's da buzz about Coalef Town, huh?" Errol inquired, eyeing Mondo. "What's your guidebook say about it?"

"Good question!" Mondo grinned at another chance to contribute something. He retrieved the tatty-looking article and leafed through it for a moment. "Coalef Town: This musical hub of Tatto has managed to retain a mostly rural feel, regardless of a spike in tourism. Despite its advocacy of sound type pokémon, Coalef Town does not have its own gym. It does, however, have a showground which plays host to The Coalef Compendium."

"What's a compendium?" Adam murmured confusedly.

"It's a number of small events all rolled into one big one," Mondo explained. "And in Coalef Town every month, the local showground is brought to life with amusements, concerts and competitive events. The biggest of them all is the Pokémon Rally."

"That sounds wonderful!" James piped up enthusiastically. "Let's go there, oh please let's go."

"The compendium only runs once a month, James," Denise reminded him. "Chances that it's running today will be pretty slim."

"Slim but fair, I'd say," Errol smirked, an hour later. Coalef Showground's brightly coloured ambiance radiated far beyond the locale itself, generating curiosity and anticipation amongst the approaching travellers. From a distance, the various melodies were blurred together, enticing the group with their syncopated highs and lows.

"Ehehe!" James grinned, rubbing his hands together. "How fortunate we are." He paused, a thought dawning on him. "Do you think Caley knew the Compendium would be on today, and that's why he wanted to go there?"

"Can't blame him if he did," Errol said. "Kid woiks too hard, it's about time he took a break."

"Not quite what I had in mind," Caley remarked. "What I sensed didn't come from in there. It's fainter now, but the vibes are definitely from somewhere beyond the showground."

"Aww..." James and Errol chorused in unison.

"But that doesn't mean *you* guys can't check the place out," Caley insisted. "I'll meet up with you when I'm done."

"Yay!" James and Errol cried, exchanging a high-five. Mondo and Denise's faces lit up in enthusiasm, and even Adam's sullen expression appeared to be making its way into more optimistic territory.

"I'll go with you," Rose said to Caley. "Just in case what you're sensing is some kind of threat. You'd better come with us, Tate. Can't really let you be seen in a place that public until we get you a better disguise."

"Okay.." Mondo looked somewhat crestfallen, and began to wonder how on earth he was going to modify his trainer ID to compensate.

It was almost like stepping into a bottle. The mottled glass panes of the corridor filtered the outside sunlight and refracted it into green and blue patches on the travellers that passed through. Energetic pop music could be heard playing from speakers in the ceiling, amalgamating with the babble of pokémon and human voices from ahead. As the corridor progressed, it became wider and taller, until the group found themselves walking into an entrance hall buzzing with activity. Almost half of the roof was semi-transparent, the morning glow from the spring sky glancing the heads of the crowd below with a spectral luminescence.

"Welcome to the Compendium," a bemused-looking man in a dunsparce costume announced in monotone, holding out a bundle of

pamphlets toward the approaching group at arm's length. "Enjoy your stay."

"Thanks!" James beamed, in an entertaining contrast to the one who had addressed him, taking one of the pamphlets while Denise did the same.

"Keep up da good woik, buddy," Errol said sympathetically, patting the costumed man on the back and causing him to flinch in surprise. "I know ya pain."

"What do you mean 'pain'?" James blinked, as Errol caught up with him. "You loved dressing in costumes!"

"I do," his companion agreed. "But it's tough ta make a dunsparce look dignified." He'd borne the knack for wearing most pokémon-themed outfits well. But in Errol's opinion, it was a stretch for anyone to give flair to a dunsparce look...even the dunsparce.

"The March 2001 Coalef Compendium," Denise read the front of her pamphlet. "A celebration of music, culture, and the bonds between humans and pokémon." She smiled enthusiastically at this. "Doesn't that sound wonderful, guys?"

"I haven't been this excited about something in a long time!" James grinned. "I feel just like a kid!"

"Matches how you act, then," Adam remarked. Errol chuckled at James' disgruntled expression.

"Here's a list of the Compendium Events," Denise said, opening her folded pamphlet outward. "There's some guest interviews going on, a cookery segment, pokémon knowledge quiz, fashion show...oh and of course, the main event - the Pokémon Rally. Trainers and pokémon work together to complete a specially-designed course."

"Like...racing?" the tone of Adam's voice changed.

"That interest you, huh?" Denise smirked, showing her companion the pamphlet. There was a brightly-coloured photograph of an excited looking adolescent girl sat in a vehicle resembling a sturdy go-kart, with a donphan pulling it through use of a harness.

"Count me in!" Adam concluded.

"Racin' does sound pretty nifty," Errol grinned, glancing towards Cory. "Whadda you t'ink, kid?"

"I'd like to try," Cory nodded agreeably.

"Those are the registration desks for all the Compendium Events," Denise announced, pointing at the setup across the far side of the lobby. "Entrants only, so Cory and I better stay back here."

"But *I'm* an entrant..." Cory looked sad.

"I know that," Denise told them in hushed tones. "But only Errol needs to register for both of you."

"Ohhh," Cory grinned once again, waving at the others as they walked towards the registration desks. "Don't be too long!"

Unfortunately for Cory, their request was going to go unfulfilled. There were so many trainers waiting to register that the queue stretched across the entire lobby. Some of the trainers had decided to amuse themselves by showing off their pokémon and battle statistics to those around them, but Errol considered this a pointless escapade. After all, exhibiting trophies was simply a poor excuse to boost one's ego. And Errol held enough confidence in himself and Cory already. There was no need to partake in such childish activity.

"Have...your...Pokémon Licenses ready," James recited from a signpost placed on the other side of the boundary cord that marked out the queue's path to the desk. "Oh! Better get mine." He rummaged around in the pockets of his leather jacket before bringing out the aforementioned item. "There we go."

"What?" Adam frowned, having brought out his license card and examined it. "Mondo got my date of birth wrong! I'm not twelve!"

"It's only a year out, isn't it?" James said. "What's the big deal?"

"Of course it ain't a big deal to *you*, granddad," Adam sniffed.

"Granddad'?" James echoed in a mixture of shock and offence. "I'm not that much older than you!"

"Oh really?" Adam began to smirk. "How old *are* you then?"

"Twenty four," James folded his arms and looked the other way.

"Fah! That's like...over a *decade* older than me," Adam mused.  
"Granddad."

"I'd rather be a grandpa than a twerp!" James retorted, becoming notably ruffled by the conversation. Adam chuckled lightly to himself - he found James quite entertaining when he was peeved.

"Hey heyyy...respect yer elders, youngin'!" Errol joked from in front of them, using a fake old man voice. The sheer bafflement on Adam's face was enough to send the figure who had just addressed him into fits of chuckling. "Age is a state o' mind, anyway," he remarked coolly.

"Excuse me?" the woman at the desk inquired.

"Oh! It's my toin already," Errol grinned, turning around and facing the administrator with the most polite expression possible. "I'd like t' enter da Rally, if ya please."

"License?" the administrator responded, glancing at her computer screen.

"Well dat's da t'ing," Errol began unflinchingly. "I don't happen t' be in possession o' one o' dose right now."

"Then I'm afraid I can't allow you entry for this event, sir," the administrator said bluntly.

"But I'm not into da whole Gym Battlin' business!" Errol insisted, a note of franticness beginning to creep into his voice. "I jus' wanted ta try my hand at some raci-!"

"It doesn't make a difference, sir," the administrator remarked, still with the same nonplussed delivery. It was obvious she had dealt with these sorts of scenarios before. "Anyone raising a pokémon must be in the possession of a Handler's License at the very least." She raised her eyes so they met Errol's own and gave the man a cold and studied glower. "Now you might want to move along and apply for such a license before I decide to report your lack of one to the proper authorities."

"Alright, alright," Errol grumbled, turning to walk from the desk while muttering under his breath. Cries of protest were suddenly heard from the back of the queue. Without a word of apology, a young man dressed in a red and black jacket with matching cap and jeans ploughed his way through the waiting figures, straight to the front.

"Give me my entry badge," he snapped at the administrator, slapping his Trainer License on the desk. She gave a nervous smile and gingerly took the card, swiping it through the computer reader.

"Certainly Mr. Tilman."

"Hey!" Errol snapped at the back of the figure. "What makes *you* so special dat you can just waltz up here and not wait'cha toin?"

Swinging round, the figure in the dark uniform fixed his glare upon the one who had questioned his motives. Errol gasped as his assailant

grasped him by the front of his jacket, forcing the breath from him as he was sharply pulled closer.

"What makes me so special?" the figure began darkly. "I've topped the ranks in the Pokémon Rally for the past three years. People come to the Compendium just to watch me win. I *run* this place." He let go of Errol's jacket roughly, causing the man to stagger backwards a few paces, and dangled the registration badge tantalizingly. "Now you better get lost - you're standing in the way of the racetrack fodder who actually *have* IDs." With that, he chuckled, turned around and strode away.

"Wow, that guy was bold," one figure hissed to another. "Yeah," came a muttered agreement. "Questioning Neil Tilman is asking for a punch in the nose."

"What a joikbag," Errol snorted. "He needs takin' down a peg or five. But da only way I could do dat is by beatin' him at his own game, an' I can't enter wit'out a license."

The man twitched slightly. Mischievous thoughts were stirring in the back of his mind - behaviours he had kept more or less repressed since leaving Team Rocket. Yet, unlike the other kinds he had acknowledged as morally unfeasible, this one seemed more or less justified by how his intended target had acted. The corners of Errol's mouth shifted, curling into a familiar, devious, feline grin. Slipping into old habits couldn't hurt just this once, right?

Once all relevant business had been attended to at the registration desks, James, Errol and Adam made their way back across the lobby to where Denise and Cory had been waiting for them.

"Got my badge and I'm ready to rock," Adam smiled, greedily eyeing the laminated article before offering Errol a half-consoling glance. "Sucks to be you right now, mate."

"Eh, no big deal," Errol shrugged. "I knew gettin' in was gonna be a gamble wit'out a license anyway."

"I hope Cory doesn't take it hard," James blinked. "He seemed interested in racing."

"Seems interested in something else right now," Adam pointed out.

Indeed the pokémon-in-human-form appeared quite focused on something clasped to their chest. Denise reached an arm high to wave at her approaching companions, causing Cory to glance up in surprise. As they raised their head, the pudgy form of a stuffed toy bunearny with a comically-goofy expression became visible amongst their arms.

"Where'd Cory get dat?" Errol inquired, pointing at the toy.

"From a vending machine over by the lobby restaurant," Denise told him. "He got bored and wandered over there while you were registering."

"But dat don't make sense," Errol scratched his head. "How did he buy it? It's not like he had any money."

"I told the machine how much I wanted this, and it gave it to me," Cory explained cheerfully, squeezing the toy.

"You 'told' the machine...?" Denise flinched, suddenly realising the implication of this sentence, coming from a shape-shifting virtual type pokémon. "You mean, you *hacked* it?"

"Did I do something bad?" Cory hunched slightly, a deeply worried expression having descended upon their face.

"Hey, it's not'cha fault, kid," Errol said, putting his hand on Cory's shoulder. "You didn't know any betta."

"Do...do I have to give it back?" Cory asked in a small voice.

"Not dis once," Errol shook his head. "We'd have a pretty hard time explainin' why. Jus' be careful what electronics youse 'talk' to in da future, okay? You're supposed ta pay for t'ings outta vending machines."

"Oh," Cory stared down at the plush somewhat guiltily. The guilt didn't last for long.

"Well, the rally starts at 2pm," James pointed out. "And the quiz gets underway in half an hour or so. So I'd better go find the hall the quiz is held in. Anyone wanna come with me?"

"I'd rather look around the rest of the attractions," Denise said.  
"Hope you don't mind."

"That's fine. Go ahead!" James smiled, before turning to Errol.

"What about you, buddy?"

"Hmmm..." Errol deliberated. "Sure! If it's moral support ya lookin' for, I'm ya guy. Whaddya say, Cory?"

"Okay!" Cory grinned, clutching their plush.

As James, Errol and Cory began to walk towards the doors that led into the showground, Denise turned to do the same, only to be halted by the sound of a voice barely audible over the lobby's music and chatter. The voice was familiar in tone, but its emphasis was unexpectedly reserved and anxious.

"Uh...guys? What am *I* meant to do?"

Denise turned to see that Adam had frozen to the spot - his eyes having widened in notable panic, the fingers of his shaking hands clasped together so tightly, they seemed at risk of breaking. It was an air she hadn't witnessed upon the youth in some time, not since their escapades in Nashgri City, to be more precise. Was Adam scared of being left by himself? Or did matters go deeper than that?

Then suddenly it dawned on her. Adam had grown up being part of Team Rocket - beyond the occasional meagre hobby crammed into what few minutes of free time he had, there had been nothing but regimental training and indoctrination. With so many possibilities of entertainment at



After what had seemed like an age of silence between the human travellers, the young man finally spoke up.

"I look at all the people and pokémon around us, oblivious to the complications, the scale of what threatens them," he began. "Do you miss being unaware?" Rose and Mondo looked at him in puzzlement.

"What do you mean?" the latter blinked.

"Before you joined Team Rocket, there must have been a lot you didn't know," Caley said. "That whole other angle to the world you'd never heard of until the point you signed up. After all, there is an element of burden from knowing so much."

"There's certainly a level of responsibility, yes," Rose agreed. "It only becomes a burden if you let it."

"Hm..." Caley grunted. It was an unconvinced acknowledgement. "I just wish...I could tell more people about it, you know? Share the weight a bit."

"I understand this must be feeling quite challenging for you right now," Rose nodded. "You've got the biggest responsibility of everyone, after all. But if too many people got wind of what is about to happen, most of them would panic. If the wrong kind of people heard, they might join the enemy side in order to better their chances. It would be chaos."

"Not sure about knowing too much. I don't feel I know enough," Mondo admitted.

"Really?" Caley looked surprised.

"Yeah...there are so many gaps in my knowledge - about myself, my past."

"Do you think knowing those things would make you feel better?" Caley asked.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Mondo shrugged. "But it's worth the risk if it'll fill this indescribable hole inside."

"So what exactly *did* you sense, Caley?" Rose inquired.

"It's difficult to explain," the young man admitted. "It almost sounded like chanting, but inside of my mind. The words I made out were 'This is your knowledge, o' Great Creator. This is our history. May we guard it well.' It seemed relevant, somehow..."

"I see..." Rose said. She could understand why Caley would consider this relevant. Psychically-resonating words, even if they had not been directly aimed at him, were not something one encountered every day. And the content of that dialogue sounded very much like something the Agrarian Seers would recite. "We have been walking for some time. I think we'd better turn back, before we get ourselves lost."

"Hang on..." Caley murmured. "I can see something up ahead."

The something in question was a bug-like creature with large, blue eyes and a tapered head that vaguely resembled a large, mint green

onion. The appearance of its upper body, with its long, curved antennae, almost led Caley to believe he was in the presence of a celebi - the time-travelling pokémon he had only seen in schoolbooks and history programmes on television. However, this creature's wings were a good deal larger, and its lower body narrowed into a small tail, with a cream-coloured orb at its end. Up until a few seconds ago, the pokémon had been deeply absorbed in studying the flowers of a bush in front of it. Realising it was being watched, it uttered a squeal of alarm and flew hastily amongst the trees.

"Wait! Don't go!" Caley blurted out, breaking into a run. The words had escaped his lips before his brain had a chance to remind him saying such things was futile, especially to someone who was distressed. Kota watched in confusion as his human partner dashed off amongst the trees, then gave pursuit.

The trees suddenly vanished, thrusting Caley into a clearing. Before him there stood a large, dome-like building with round windows fitted into its sides. It looked to have been there for quite some time - its stone surface having been overtaken by moss, blending the entire construct into the surrounding environment. Upon a limited flight of steps leading to the building's entrance, there sat an aged woman with long, dark hair. She was adorned in a flowing lavender dress covered in designs resembling cogs, and was surrounded by a cluster of the very same pokémon Caley had been tracking earlier. One of them, presumably the one that had fled Caley, was huddled tightly in the woman's arms. It

squealed again at realising its human pursuer was present, causing the remaining pokémon to fly into a panic.

"Now now, children...settle down," the woman hushed the bug-like pokémon surrounding her, before turning her attention to Caley. Her gaze then shifted to Kota, hovering beside the young man's shoulder, and her eyebrows raised. "What brings you here?" she inquired, glancing back at Caley.

"I'm looking for some answers," Caley admitted. "Can you tell us where we are?"

"This is Coalef Forest's Agrarian Seer Repository," the woman replied.

"Really?" Caley's tired expression brightened. "I'm so glad! You were the people I wanted to talk to - there's so many things I want to know, I-"

"Oh my!" the woman chuckled. "Such enthusiasm. That's wonderful to see. Though this *is* a specialist repository. I may not be able to satisfy all your questions."

"*Specialist* Repository?" Caley echoed, looking puzzled.

"That's right," the woman nodded. "While most Seer Repositories are built as teaching institutes and libraries, there are others made for more specific purposes. Here, we assess and train new Time Guardians." She motioned to the bug-like pokémon surrounding her. "My name is Kazira. These celeva are my students."

"Celeva..." Caley drifted, fumbling for his jacket pocket. The woman and her pokémon charges looked on inquisitively as Denise's Pokédex was brought out and waved at them. "Pre-evolved celebi? Wow...I didn't realise those existed."

"It's for a reason," Kazira told him warmly. "Are you a Pokémon Trainer, by any chance?"

"I...I guess I am," Caley scratched his head and looked at Kota, who gave him a beaming grin. "It just sort of happened, to be honest. I left home to explore Tatto and do some sightseeing, but things have got pretty crazy since then."

The bushes rustled from behind the young man, almost on cue, and a familiar glaceon scampered out from amongst them, proceeded by two human figures.

"Thought as much," Kazira concluded. "It's not every day I am graced with the presence of an augret. And these two," she eyed Rose and Mondo. "Are they friends of yours?" Caley nodded silently, to which Kazira offered them an accepting smile and returned to her feet. "Alright children," she addressed the celeva. "We shall take a break. And please don't wander off in the middle of class next time, Pendula."

As the celeva hummed into the air with exclamations of delight, then scattered into the forest, Caley and his companions waited expectantly for some further response from Kazira. She began to walk

towards the repository entrance, before pausing and coaxing her audience to follow with a wave of her hand.

"Come come," she insisted brightly. "Let's see what I can do about those questions of yours."

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There were few things Adam knew about himself with such certainty as his dislike of crowds. Back in the Team Rocket Headquarters, he would always wait until the last minute to hastily make his way through the winding corridors to another area of the complex. Navigating urban areas had filled him with anxiety - the jostling bodies and clashing sounds were quick to nudge his senses into confused disarray. And the environment of the Coalef Compendium only served to generate the same response.

He'd accepted Denise's suggestion to buy him a hat to account for the loss of his wig. He'd even accompanied Denise upon several rides in her attempts to show him how to have fun. Adam was pretty sure he hadn't had fun yet, not unless fun was a vivid sense of nausea. Noting his discomfort, Denise had suggested exploring the various sideshows instead. This was only serving to remind Adam of the aural bombardment from Wichour Town's market.

"Roll up! Roll up! Hit a target, win a prize!" one man was exclaiming.

"Two Delcas a throw, don't be slow! Pick a number and away we go!" another cried at a slightly higher volume.

"DEEP FRIED BUSKENBURGERS! GET 'EM WHILE THEY'RE HOT!" a woman screamed from a nearby van.

"I could do with something to eat," Denise concluded. "What about you?"

"I could do with less of the yelling," Adam muttered. "We can all read what their stalls are about."

"Hm," Denise eyed Adam. "I'll admit it does get wearing after a bit. Tell you what - how about I get us some food and then we find somewhere less crowded to eat it?"

"Sounds like a plan," Adam agreed. It was the best idea he'd heard in a while.

Several minutes later, Denise had purchased two burgers and fries, before guiding herself and Adam to the central area of the Compendium. This area was park-like in nature, specifically designed for visitors looking to take a break from the showground's fervent activity. There, they found a place to sit on the area's solid concrete wall which separated the path from the brightly-coloured flowerbeds.

"It's a shame Caley wasn't able to explore the Compendium with us," Denise said, shifting a bag containing a hat she'd bought for Mondo and opening the paper her burger was wrapped in.

"Well if he wants to have 'funny turns' and chase daydreams and fairytales, that's his waste of time, not ours," Adam snorted, chewing on a mouthful of fries. Denise grimaced slightly, but said no more. As tactless as Adam had worded it, he had voiced a point about Caley's behaviour that was concerning her also. She respected, even admired the young man, but his insistence and reliance upon the unseen and unproven left her wondering if maybe Caley was suffering from detrimental side effects to his own psychic Cho'moken.

"Denise..." Adam spoke up hesitantly. "Do you think Caley can be trusted?"

"How can you ask that?" Denise spluttered.

"I don't know, it's just...he can read our thoughts," Adam explained. "Find out our deepest secrets. Nothing is safe. Think of all the information he'd have to use against us."

"And you think he *would*?" Denise exclaimed with an upset expression. "Adam, Caley is not that type of person!"

"What makes you so sure?" Adam insisted. Denise looked at him sympathetically.

"Because, ever since we met him, he's done nothing but look out for us," she said. "Some of his actions may have been a

little...uh...puzzling. But yes, I feel I can trust him. And some day, I hope you will too."

Adam thought about this, his face falling as he did so. Denise was right - Caley *had* been the kindest person he'd met. Despite having barely known him, Caley had tried his best to make Adam's existence a more reasonable one. The hardened and scarred parts of Adam's psyche only persisted in demanding to know why. There was no need for Caley to go to all that trouble to help rescue him or the others. Surely there had to have been an ulterior motive at his expense - there always was. Wasn't there?

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James stood proudly atop the presentation stage, alongside two other competitors. His access to a wide range of experiences as a result of working in Team Rocket had made the quiz a whole lot simpler than it could have been, and as a result had managed to clinch first prize with 95% of the questions correctly answered.

Granted, there had been many a challenge integrated into the quiz. He was almost stumbled by a question on pokémon attacks until he had realised the odd one out had been the only one not to use a part of the pokémon's body to hit the target. Then there had been a particular

cultural question about Maiden's Peak in Kanto which brought back some rather awkward memories. Getting seduced by a gastly disguised as a beautiful woman was hardly on James' list of things he wished to remember. But once he had overcome such memories, the experience had been quite pleasant. James had allowed himself to relax and enjoy the moment for what it was, as he'd done with the Gym battle in Scale Falls. And judging by the results on his quiz sheet, this technique had worked in James' favour.

"To present the awards, we welcome our guest of honour at this month's compendium - Princess Salvia!"

*Huh... James pondered internally. Why does that name sound vaguely familiar?*

A twelve year old girl with dark blue hair and an elegant dress glided into the hall, clasping a small reddish brown case.

*She looks very familiar, too, James stiffened. I have a bad feeling about this.*

Then the girl opened her mouth, and everything came flooding back. Despite the attempts at a well-spoken accent, James could hear the true undertones of the voice all too well. After all, it was very difficult to forget the companions of the youth he had spent so much of his life monitoring.

"Dat's Dawn!" Errol spluttered from his place in the audience. Cory looked at him in bewilderment.

"Who's Dawn?" they asked.

"Some kid James an' I crossed paths with a lot durin' da last coupla years in soivice," Errol told Cory in lowered tones. "As t' why she's dressed up all fancy like dat, I haven't a clue."

"They said she was a princess," Cory pointed out.

"I'm pretty sure she ain't," Errol looked deadpan. "But as to *pretendin'* t'be one...dat's anudda matter entirely."

"Why would she be pretending to be a princess?" Cory blinked.

"Why indeed..." Errol scratched his chin. The name 'Salvia' rung a bell - a very tiny bell, but one nonetheless.

The whole circumstance had put James in quite a flustered state. All he could think of now was getting out of the quiz hall before his recognition of Dawn became mutual. Fortunately his disguise was a pretty solid one, and he'd managed to fool her with less. Dawn's attention was diverted between the other participants and maintaining her own persona, which was also a plus. When Dawn finally got to addressing him, James noticed the somewhat glazed expression she was wearing - the telltale signs of a person trying to focus on a multitude of things at once.

"Congratulations," she spoke in eloquent tones. "You achieved the highest score of all the entrants here today, and for that, I have the pleasure in presenting you with this certificate, and our First Prize."

"Th-thankyou!" James attempted to alter his voice also, which resulted in sounding oddly congested. "I guess today was my day."

"Well I hope the rest of it will be just as good," Dawn replied pleasantly, offering James the case and certificate.

*It will be, as soon as I can get out of this hall,* James thought to himself, retrieving the prizes. Part of him desperately wanted to know just what Dawn was doing here, and under the guise of a princess, but asking her about it would be opening himself up to all sorts of risks. James would just have to rest in the knowledge that he would not be pestered by the youth, so long as he kept incognito and made a swift exit. Which he did, several minutes later.

"Bit of a close call, eh Jimmy?" Errol couldn't help grinning, as he, Chime and Cory accompanied James through the sideshows. The flustered look on his companion's face while he had stood before Dawn on the podium had been quite the sight to behold.

"Tell me about it," James breathed a sigh of relief. "What are the chances of that twerp being in Tatto? In the same town as us, of all places! I need to sit down a minute and gather my thoughts..."

"How about we take a look at dat prize you won?" Errol suggested. "Gotta admit I'm curious as to what kinda goodies you nabbed dere."

"Me too!" Cory exclaimed.

"Oh! Oh sure, why not?" James glanced down at the case in his hands. With the tension of the events that had happened previously, he'd forgotten he'd been awarded anything.

Leaning against a nearby wall, Errol, Cory and Chime watched with intrigue as James put the case upon the wall and undid the latch. Raising the lid, James and his two companions peered inside – a faint golden light reflecting back onto their faces.

Inside the case, embedded amongst a foam inlay, was a pocket notebook with a soft leather cover and gilt-edged pages. Adjacent to that nestled two metallic ballpoint pens, engraved with images of dragonair and ninetales. The quality of the arrangement, as well as the materials used to make the items themselves, made it obvious this was quite the expensive gift.

"Well well," Errol murmured with an approving nod. "Dat's some fancy writing set."

Cory turned their notably impressed expression towards James for his response, only to see the man gazing into the case with distant, saddened eyes.

"Don't you like it?" Cory asked, a little disappointedly – as if it had been them who had given James the prize.

"Oh, it's beautiful," James shook his head, removing the gilt-edged notebook from the case. "It's just... well I haven't had something like this since my time on Active Duty."

James was poetic at heart. And some nights, when he hadn't been too occupied with Rocket fieldwork, he'd sat and composed verse in a journal he'd obtained somewhere during the course of service. Page after page was filled with wandering thoughts, dreams and observations – delicately crafted into stanzas, sometimes rhyming, sometimes not. Back then – surrounded by new experiences and the humoured warmth of his companions - inspiration was never more than a step away. After James was removed from Active Duty, distanced from friends and the mysteries of the outside, the well of ideas gradually ran dry.

He'd almost given up his time of poetic expression as lost. But in recent days, things had changed greatly in James' life. His freedom had been returned to him – at least in some measure, and he'd stepped back into the world with fresh hopes and an open mind. Now, with one of his beloved companions back in his life, inspiration almost felt within reach.

"Hmm..." James paused in his contemplation, uttering a noise of distaste as he spotted something nearby. "Looks like Dawn is not the only familiar face making itself unwelcome here..."

Errol and Cory looked at James in puzzlement, before he redirected their attention to a relatively inconspicuous stall arranged several yards away. A man in his late fifties sat expectantly behind a sales table, his unkempt facial hair clashing heavily with his smart navy blue overcoat and hat. A large, sophisticated-looking container was

placed behind the man, and behind its semi-transparent front panel, Errol was able to make out the forms of five pokémon. Or at least he'd *assumed* they were pokémon - they certainly weren't species Errol had come across before. The first one looked similar to a bidoof, with pointier front teeth and a long, wiry tail. Large, fearsome red eyes with yellow irises peered out warily from behind a dark coloured band. Next to it sat a humanoid pokémon with cerulean blue skin, dressed in a white martial arts outfit. To the right of that, a green, aipom-like creature with foliage sprouting atop its head, accompanied by what could only be described as a silver egg covered in dark green spines. At the very end of this line-up, there slumped a medium sized rubbish bag with mottled stubby arms protruding from either side.

"It's that swindling crook," James growled under his breath, while Chime showed considerable disapproval. "The one who sold me an overpriced magikarp and tricked us into buying that faulty evolution machine!" He paused. "Amongst other things...no doubt the pokémon in that cage have been made up to look like something they're not. Honestly! What kind of idiot would think a trash sack was a pokémon?"

"I dunno, I t'ought it was rather creative," Errol remarked, only to get glowered at by James. "But creative or not, dat guy has no right t' make pokémon suffer just so he can earn a few whiskas!"

"What do we do?" Cory looked anguished. "We can't just leave them there..."

"What do we do?" Errol reflected the inquiry with vigour. "We're Rockets! What *don't* we do?!"

"Well we don't steal the pokémon, for starters..." James pointed out.

"Woik dose brain cogs harder, James!" Errol frowned at him. "We have a library o' techniques at our disposal. Same method, different poipose."

"Ooohhhh..." James' response was long and drawn as realisation struck. Of course - in their many years of testing the infamous adolescent their boss held such an interest in, the trio had indeed developed a multitude of ways to distract, mislead or otherwise baffle their target in order to obtain his pokémon. Surely out of the hundreds of ideas crammed into James' memory banks, there had to be one fit for a rescue situation. The man's expression grew dark and mischievous. "Ohoho~ I do believe it's time for a little *payback*."

"Gathered from across the world, pokémon that you have never seen before! This is your chance to own a pokémon no one else does. Be the envy of all your friends!"

Mikelo Skechitt smiled in the manner he always did when he felt he had an idea with potential on his hands. Business had been slow, but there was only a matter of time before he found the right sort of customer for his sales pitch. Someone impressionable, naive, and most of

all, gullible. After all, as his father had duly told him, there was a sucker born every minute.

It was Mikelo's father who had taught him everything he knew about successful dealing, as his younger brother Mowbray was more intent on becoming a chef, and had been repulsed by the idea of selling questionable goods to anyone. Mikelo didn't happen to be restricted by such pesky things as conscience. The pokémon he had redesigned as new species had been taken from all kinds of places - ranches, preserves and farms. Partly-enlightened pokémon were the easiest to work with, and who'd miss just one when there were hundreds of the same kind roaming around? Of course, it hadn't been easy getting the pokémon into alternate guises, but Mikelo had ways of making them behave. Typically these ways involved loud threats and shock therapy. The hours of hard work would soon pay off, though, Mikelo could feel it in his gut.

"Wow!" a voice was heard from nearby. "Those are sure some nifty-looking pokémon. I've never seen anything quite like them before!"

Mikelo's smile grew more prominent as he looked up at the tall, sandy brown-haired young man in the black leather jacket that stood in front of his table. There was his first sucker, right on cue.

"I can tell you like what you see," Mikelo replied. "You're a man of exotic tastes, yes?"

"These pokémon are really something," James insisted, putting on his best enthusiasm while Chime hovered a little distance behind. "What exactly are they?"

"I caught them myself," Mikelo said. "They are so unknown that the Pokémon Institute hasn't even named them yet! This one is a combat type." He pointed to the tall, blue-skinned pokémon. "This one, a grass type," he remarked, with a wave to the pokémon with the head foliage. "This one, a neutral type." The hand moved in the direction of the pokémon with foreboding red and yellow eyes. "This one...ah...it's a steel type!" he announced, his hand lifted slightly over the egg-shaped pokémon. "Yes, you can tell it's a steel type from how it shines in the sun. And this one..." Mikelo paused at the bag-like pokémon, before giving a chuckle. "This one is a complete mystery even to me! But the surprise of discovery is one of the joys of being a Pokémon Trainer, is it not?"

"One of many," James smiled. Another was getting his sweet revenge on a conman who had tricked him out of several rounds of money in the past. He needed to come up with more questions if he was to distract Mikelo long enough for Errol to implement phase two.

Concealed in the space between two sideshow tents, Errol studied the tall container furtively while Cory gave him a worried look.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Cory inquired.

"Hey, don't worry y'self, kid," Errol told them, self-assuredly. "I'm clued in on everyt'ing dere is ta know on nabbin' pokémon."

"'Nabbing'?" Cory eyed him puzzledly. Such a word didn't seem to be present in their vocabulary. Errol flinched, realising what he'd just admitted to.

"Uh...*rescuin'*," he corrected himself with a sheepish grin. True as it may be, now was hardly the time to confess the darker aspects of his past to the young pokémon. He returned to examining the container. It was a sturdy-looking construction made from sheet metal, with a single semi-transparent window in the front, which Errol also assumed served as the door. A small control panel with a complex array of buttons was fitted across the groove that kept the container door locked. "Hm. Dat looks a touch outta my league."

"Maybe I could open it," Cory whispered.

"Say...dat ain't a bad idea," Errol grinned. "If ya transform into somet'ing smaller, climb up da side o' dat cage an' give it a little 'talkin' to', we'll have dose pokémon out in no time."

"Alrighty," Cory returned the enthusiastic expression, before shifting into ledyba form. Quickly they scuttled around the edge of the tent, then deftly scaled the leg of the table Mikelo's container was standing upon. Cory paused for a moment at the edge of the table to check Mikelo's attentions were still being diverted, which James was indeed achieving to great effect. The pokémon in the container began to

crane their necks in anticipation, as Cory made their way up the side and placed their two forelegs on the control panel. A flicker of white noise reflected in the bug pokémon's large eyes, and the control panel responded with a click, followed by a much louder beep that no one had been expecting. James let out a horrified gasp as Mikelo swung around just in time to see the rogue ledyba frozen in fear atop the container, as its front door swung gently open. His exclamation of anger and surprise rapidly descended into one of alarm, as the pokémon which had previously been incarcerated made a united bid for freedom, without concern for what obstacles stood before them. Knocked flat on his back in the resulting miniature stampede, Mikelo was trampled the entire length of his body, and left to groan pitifully upon the remains of his sales table - his overcoat smothered in different-sized footprints.

"I think it's about time we took our leave~" James murmured to himself, passing his writing set to Chime before leaning across the mess and scooping Cory up. Once he had walked out of earshot, James allowed himself a hearty chuckle at what had occurred just a few minutes ago. After all those years, all those times that slimy little conman had taken him for a ride, and James had finally given him what he deserved - not to mention freed a group of pokémon said conman had been exploiting. It had been nothing short of cathartic.

"Where are you going?" Cory asked. "We can't leave without Errol."

"Errol will catch up with us, I hope," James bit his lip. They sure couldn't have stayed there and risked Mikelo putting two and two together about their involvement in the pokémon escape plot. Suddenly, Cory's antenna perked up in excitement, as they spotted a familiar shape wandering a little blearily towards them.

"There he is!"

"What happened to you?" James blinked, pointing to the curious red circle that was present on Errol's forehead.

"When I saw da mess dat happened at da salesguy's table, I made da mistake o' trying to escape by ducking under da edge of one o' da tents," Errol confessed sheepishly. "Toined out I stood up in da middle of a shooting gallery, just as someone fired one o' dose rubber-tipped darts."

"Did they win a prize?" Cory spoke up innocently. This mental image and combined inquiry managed to cause James to break into fits of laughter all over again, which Errol ended up joining in with.

"Well, we did what was right," James smiled, once the utterances of mirth had died down. "Hopefully those pokémon will be long gone by the time that swindler comes to."

"Y'know, I could get used ta dis 'doing da right t'ing' business," Errol folded his arms approvingly.

"Mm-hm!" James agreed. "Now how's about we go and see what Denise is up to?"

"Sounds good ta me!" Errol grinned. "But first, I really need ta get some new glasses so Caley can have his Pokédex ones back."

Following the acquisition of replacement sunglasses, Errol, Cory and James returned to the place they had arranged to meet Denise and Adam, once everyone had their fill of exploring separate parts of the Compendium. Upon reaching the meeting point, they found Denise and Adam already waiting for them – the latter appearing decidedly worse for wear. Trying further rides had by no means improved the youth's enjoyment of them. Noticing Denise's rather downcast expression, James suggested a visit to something which kept everyone's feet on solid ground – highlighting the music performance tent Errol, Cory and himself had passed on the way there. Denise was instantly drawn to the idea, and the group resumed walking.

Their arrival at the tent was met with an influx of light and sound. A man in his early thirties was in the midst of singing a track from his latest album – accompanied by a stoic-looking backing band. Entranced by the waves of soft rock combined with the ambient glowing shapes projected on the tent walls, Cory - now back in their human form - eagerly squeezed themselves amongst the tightly packed crowd in order to get a better look. Denise quickly pursued Cory, more out of worry for them getting lost than anything else. When James glanced back at Adam and Errol with an inquisitive smile, he was met with a sullen yet noticeably uncomfortable glower from the former of the two. Errol

responded by returning the smile and thumbing back through the tent entrance – he wasn't too perturbed whether he stayed for the performance or not.

"Not one for da bright lights and big crowds, huh kid?" he commented, once he and Adam were standing a short distance from the tent entrance. The youth responded with an unhappy grunt. "Hey, I don't blame ya," Errol chuckled. "It ain't for everyone."

"I guess," Adam mumbled. Despite Errol's attempts to lift his spirits, he still felt very much like a lost cause. He idled by the tent while Errol took his guitar from his back and sat down on a nearby bench. Even at this distance from the stage, Adam found he was still able to decipher the words of the singer, who had begun performing another track.

*Treading water for a long, long time,*

*Waiting for a chance to live these dreams of mine*

*So much to say and yet I've got no tongue*

*Lost the plot before my life's begun*

*But it can't be all bad*

*I'm sure there's something better*

*'cause the sun still shines*

*And there's still another day*

*She's trying to change me*

*Now I've only got to let her*

*Make my heart smile*

*And then chase my fears away*

Adam stood in awed silence. Maybe it was because he'd not had an opportunity to listen deeply before, but never had a piece of music spoken to him with such intensity as this one had done. As the verses progressed, Adam felt himself encompassed in longing, frustration and upset. Then something unexpected occurred within. A spark amongst an otherwise turbulent mindscape - a spark of...hope.

The youth pictured Denise standing amongst the crowd, watching the stage intently, and allowed himself a tiny smile. Yes...something better. People had shown him kindness, though he hadn't given them much reason to do so. And today, regardless of the traumas the Compendium may have put him through, Adam had experienced a kinder side to Denise firsthand. She hadn't once snapped at him, even when he'd fumbled or stalled.

The sound of a plucked melody roused Adam from his thoughts. He glanced up to see Errol with his guitar upon his knee, playing an

improvised song. The notes, though a little hesitant at first, grew in their speed and volume – catching up to the song playing in the tent behind them and harmonizing with its tones. It was captivating, in an odd sort of way.

"Eh?" Errol blurted in surprise, as a glint of light flickered in the corner of his vision. Turning to look for the source, he found Adam examining a scuffed-looking harmonica. "Hey, where'd you get dat?"

"She said it belonged to my granddad," Adam remarked bluntly. "My mum, I mean. I'd only kept it because it reminded me of *her*, but I just started wondering...maybe I should try playing it sometime."

"Sure ya should!" Errol grinned. "Dere ain't nothing quite as therapeutic as expressing how ya feel in song. Even if da song got no woids. Why d'ya t'ink I got dis guitar?" He held the instrument forward a little, as if to emphasize his point.

There was no doubt that Adam had a lot to get off his chest. Music didn't involve talking to anyone directly, divulging secrets blatantly and thus exposing his weaknesses. Yet, at the same time, Adam could share his burden with others - or no one except the wind. Adam promised himself he would attempt to play his harmonica later.

**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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