

Rough Waters (The life and wiles of Brendan T. Birch) - /u/Everyle

"Brendan?" Professor Birch called out. Brendan glanced up from his book. He had been catching up on his studies in the living room, lying on the couch with A at his feet playing a videogame and Oscar darting around and climbing on the furniture, as he was prone to do. Marco was curled up behind the couch. The massive Swampert usually tried to stay watchful when his curious little son was around, but it seemed he had dozed off for a moment and was resting his head on his paws.

"I need to head out for a bit," the professor continued, "so you'll be manning the house and the lab for a while. Think you can feed the Carvanha in about an hour?"

"Yeah, sure." Brendan responded lazily, lifting an arm and waving as a gesture of understanding.

"There's beer and pizza in the fridge."

"Awesome."

"You're paying me a dollar for every muddy pawprint I find on the couch when I come back."

"Bye dad."

After putting on his coat, professor Birch gave a last nod and disappeared to the hallway with a jingle of his keys. The sound of the front door being slammed shut caught the attention of Oscar and A briefly, the former climbing on top of his trainer to take a peek over the top of the couch and wave the professor out, a big smile plastered across his tiny face. When she was certain the coast was clear, A slowly put away her gameboy and pulled out a pokeball. With a devious smile, she called forth the oddish that was inside of it, which hopped up on her lap with a happy, chirping sound, which in turn startled Brendan into looking up from his book again. As soon as he noticed the little creature, his face turned into a frown.

"I'm giving you 10 seconds to put that thing back in its ball," he demanded.

"Relax, your dad's gone," explained A. "He's never going to notice."

Brendan had lost all interest in his book. "You told me you were off that stuff!"

"It's just one, that hardly counts," A said as she leaned closer. "C'mon Brendan, it'll be fun! Aren't you even a tiny bit curious?"

But he was having none of it and pushed her away. "No way, get that out of my face! I'm not getting addicted just because you're too weak to quit," he retorted. "I can't believe you lied to me!" He was getting visibly upset.

The smile disappeared from A's face. She didn't like it when Brendan didn't let her have things her way. "Geez, why don't you get that massive stick out of your ass and stop being so dramatic. Effects wear off after a few hours, it's not like I'm trying to stab you or anything."

He jumped up from the couch to get away from her trying to push the plant pokemon in his face. "You're plenty crazy already," he exclaimed, possibly without thinking, "you don't need that crap melting your brain on top of everything."

"Hey fuck you man! You can't tell me how to live my life!" A sneered back up at him, offended. She didn't need this nerd telling her what to do. Who did he think he was, giving him that right.

"No, but I can tell you to get the fuck out of my house and do that shit somewhere else."

"God, you're just as boring as your dad," she mumbled. "No wonder your mother left."

Brendan, looking shocked by A's comment, fell silent for a moment. Then he turned to her and muttered, "Get out." This discussion was over.

"Alright, I'll put it back, geez. It's not that big of a deal."

"Shut up and get out."

"Oh c'mon, don't-"

"Shut your fucking mouth and get your trashy ass RIGHT. THE. FUCK. OUT!" Brendan yelled furiously. His hands trembled and it felt as if somebody was hammering on his chest from the inside. He couldn't stand to look at her disgusting face and listen to whatever rude garbage came out of her mouth for one more second. She needed to leave. Right the fuck now.

"Fine! I'll go have fun without you then!" She threw back at him, seemingly oblivious to the nerve she'd just hit. She got up and stormed out, slamming the door shut behind her as hard as she could. Brendan slouched back onto the couch.

Oscar, who had been hiding behind the couch the whole time, poked his head out over the top of it and emitted a nervous sound, "Maah?"

"Not now, Oscar," Brendan sighed. He just wanted some time alone.

"Maah..."

"I said no."

The little pokemon climbed over the back of the couch, trying to approach and clumsily comfort his distressed trainer, and replied again, "Maah."

"LEAVE ME ALONE!" Brendan yelled. Furiously, he lashed out and slapped Oscar square across the face. The second his hand touched skin, he realized what he had just done and all color drained from his face. They both looked at each other with horrified expressions on their faces.

Until Oscar cried out in sorrow and pain and started running away. Brendan tried chasing him.

"MAAAAAAAAH!"

"Oscar wait!"

But before he could really move, he was swiftly stopped by the giant Swampert, which had been woken abruptly from its slumber by the cry of its child and had leapt up from behind the couch to protect it. With paws that could crush rocks and a towering mass, it almost crushed the couch beneath its weight as it turned on its trainer and best friend and forced a terrified Brendan back in his place. With an earth-shaking roar, it whipped its tail around and hit him in the face with it, slicing his cheek open with the sharp ends of the fin, before running after Oscar, leaving its trainer alone in the now darkening living room..

Brendan could do nothing but sit there and stare with wide eyes, terrified and paralyzed. His heart was pounding and his face burned, but he couldn't feel the warm drops of blood welling up from the cut and running down his cheek. Curled up in the corner of the couch, hugging his knees, he suddenly felt insignificantly small and alone, overwhelmed by the world. Gripped by fear, he stared into nothing silently, but in his mind he was screaming.

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It was close to midnight when professor Birch returned.

"Brendan, I'm home!" he greeted as he came in. "You two better still be wearing clothes because I'm walking in on your asses."

Flicking on the light switch, he was annoyed to find the couch wrecked.

"What the-" he stuttered. "Again with the couch?! Goddamn it Brendan!"

"...Wait," he mumbled to himself, examining the couch more closely. "Is-is this blood?" Tiny drops of it were splattered all over the couch and carpet.

He searched around the house, crying out for his son.

"Brendan, are you okay? Answer me! Brendan?" he panicked. "Brendan?!"

No reply.

"Brendan, where are you!?"

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The next morning after breakfast, A came over to Brendan's house, looking for him. She was surprised to find the front door unlocked.

"Hello? Anybody home?" she inquired, peeking her head inside. "Brendan, you still mad? I brought apology brownies! There's totally nothing funny in them this time, I swear."

"A, finally!" Professor Birch stumbled into the hallway, startling her. A caught herself just in time from crying out and dropping the box in which she was carrying the brownies; the professor looked like a mess. He was still wearing the clothes from the day before, now ruffled with the shirt untucked and uncared for. His hair was unkempt and he had bags under his eyes. "I've been trying to get a hold of you since last night, but you weren't home and didn't pick up the phone!"

"Oh yeah. I was, eh..." A started, stumbling over words to quickly come up with something to conceal the fact she had just been getting high off her rocks and hallucinating all night.

"...taaaking a walk?" she finished. "Yep, that's totally what I was doing all night, haha. Why, what'd I miss?"

"Brendan is missing!" Birch exclaimed. "I can't find him anywhere, there was blood all over the living room when I got home and he left without his phone or any of his pokemon. I found Oscar crying in the bathtub this morning. He almost flooded the entire house when I opened the door. What did you DO?!"

"Wow, wow, what?!" A was genuinely surprised and backed up from the stressed professor a bit. "We had a bit of the fight and he kicked me out. I don't know about any of that. He seemed fine until I mentioned his mom."

"You did what!?"

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After sitting down in the kitchen and making coffee, A explained what had happened.

"I see," Birch stated, rubbing his temples. It seemed like he had calmed down a bit. "Horribly insensitive as that comment might have been, I guess it's not completely your fault if nobody told you."

"Give me a break, I was going to apologize!" she contended in an annoyed fashion, as was custom for her when somebody condemned her actions. "So what is this secret thing that nobody told me about?"

Birch sighed. "I don't really think you've done much to deserve to know. But I guess I should tell you, given the situation."

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"Jolene and I... we did not work well together. Looking back, I can't even say how she could have ended up with a guy like me. She was nothing if not a lady. Beautiful, proper, and strict. She disliked filth, and would always have things tidy. But above all she could not bear it if she didn't get what she wanted."

"And there was one thing that she really wanted," he paused for a moment.

"Her name was Brenda."

"From the moment he was born, Brendan was nothing but a disappointment to her. The feeling wasn't mutual; Brendan loved her. He tried to be perfect for her, to make her accept him. But it was never good enough."

"It made him believe there was something wrong with him. He started isolating himself, stopped doing anything because he thought he'd mess it up by default. Never played with the other kids. Never talked to anybody. He didn't belong with them. They weren't failed attempts. It broke my heart to see him so alone. So I decided to give him a friend, Marco."

"I thought she wouldn't mind. Mudkips are pretty cute. I was wrong. She hated it. That was when we really started fighting. Every night it was the same thing."

He imitated her voice. " 'Being stuck in this dump of a town with ONE man who's never around because he's crawling through the mud all day was bad enough, but now there are TWO?!' she would say. "

" 'My research is world renowned,' I would always retort. That mud crawling bought her all the ridiculous stuff she supposedly needed and I was getting tired of her looking down on it. "

" She had left her own successful life, with a job and status, behind to start a family, and she hated having to play the role of pretty little housewife in a small country town like Littleroot. She hadn't anticipated having an intense dislike for the kid she ended up with and saw most of his actions as annoying and undesirable, simply because he turned out to be a boy. And Marco now dragging mud and filth all over her living room as well, was the final straw.

"We fought over it many times and I would always stand up for him. It continued like this until the night a nightmare woke Brendan up one night and he walked in on us. That was when she snapped."

*" 'YOU! This is all YOUR FAULT! I gave everything up for you! My life, my job, it's all gone, GONE! You are the worst mistake I ever made!' "*

"In her fury, she snapped and hit Brendan. Out of nowhere, Marco ran up and Hydro Pumped her, knocking everyone back. Landing with a giant roar, he scared her off. She ran out the door and never came back."

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Professor Birch sighed, visibly pained by recalling the events.

"Brendan panicked and ran after her. He went missing, but was brought back by the police a few days later. It got better after a while, but he never truly got over it."

A, who had been listening in silence the whole time, moved back her chair and stood. Throughout the story, the hateful words she had thrown at Brendan the night before had echoed through her head. This was her fault. "Don't worry professor. I'll go look for him. He couldn't have gotten very far. We'll be home before dark, I promise."

"A," Birch called her back when she was already halfway to the door. His face was grim and worried. "I've tolerated your behaviour towards my son because it seemed to make him happy, but it ends here. If any harm has befallen him, I'm holding you responsible."

She turned around with a look of dismay. In an uncharacteristic moment of guilty obedience, she softly replied, "Yes sir, I understand." before stepping outside and closing the door behind her.

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As she walked down the path leading out of Littleroot, A let out a big sigh. Where should she even start? Her guilty conscience was always quick to make promises, but she didn't have a clue which way to go. She was silently beating herself up inside for yapping about things without

thinking. Again. And didn't the professor say something about blood? What if the idiot had hurt himself, what then. She pushed the thought of the worst case scenario out of her mind. Surely it wouldn't have come to that. Brendan may be a crybaby, but he wasn't an idiot. Or so she desperately hoped.

In true A-fashion, she started substituting her feelings of guilt and worry for annoyance and got crankier the more she thought about the situation. She was just about to mutter something to herself about Brendan needing to not be such a bitch and condemning him for getting her in trouble, when a sound to her right caught her attention.

"Mrrr."

Confused, she turned her head. Marco was resting on the roof of the porch of the Birch residence. The supports seemed to hold the weight of the massive creature surprisingly well. Marco hung his head to look down at her and made the sound again, a low rumbling from the bottom of his throat. She had heard him make it before, when he was trying to grab his trainer's attention.

"Well, you're looking awfully relaxed there, you big tadpole." she sneered at him. "Not worried about your trainer then?"

Marco didn't respond. She could swear she saw him quirking a finned eyebrow at her, obviously unimpressed with her attitude. Being older and more used to the calm and patient way Brendan trained his pokemon, made him very different from any of A's own pokemon, who indulged in her erratic behavior without complaint.

She sighed. "Look, I'm sorry, alright? You probably don't think of me very highly right now, but I could use a hand. Help me find him before he gets hurt."

Without another sound, Marco jumped off the roof and lowered himself to the ground. For a moment, A stood there awkwardly, not understanding what he meant. Until it dawned on her that he might be implying that she ride him.

"What are you-" she inquired. "Oh, you want me to get on?"

She walked around the big pokemon hesitantly. The only pokemon she had ever ridden was Cruella, and that had been in the water. She wasn't really sure how to go about this, but somehow managed to awkwardly climb onto Marco's back with a helpful nudge from the beast's tail.

"God, I never realized how big you are. Can we start off slowly maybe? I've never ridden a pokemon on land befo-"

Before she could finish her sentence, Marco had dashed off and she cried out, latching on to him and wrapping her arms around his slippery neck to not fall off. It didn't take them long to

reach the edge of Littleroot and before long, they were on their way to Petalburg and the woods beyond.

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As the trees around them grew denser, the canopy obstructed more and more sunlight, and the forest around them grew darker. A hadn't said a word the whole way, she was just letting Marco lead her to wherever it was that they were going. It felt like this was a road he had learned by heart; he knew what he was doing. And with the way she had behaving, she felt like it was better to keep her mouth shut around the pokemon that was most protective around Brendan and cared for him like a brother. All she could do was anger him further. So she kept to herself.

As they delved deeper, A heard a splashing sound. Curious, she looked down to see Marco was walking in shallow water.

"A lake?" she examined. She looked up and saw that the small pools indeed formed into a small lake behind a few banks. She didn't remember a lake like this being in Petalburg Woods, and she was quite certain she'd never seen it on any map either. Low hanging trees were extending their branches across the surface of the water, as if to hide the shore. Marco had halted and was facing in the direction of one of the trees on the other side of the lake. When she looked at it more closely, she could vaguely make out a figure resting on one of the branches hanging over the water.

"Is that-!" she paused when she noticed he was holding a bottle in his hand. Several more were scattered around the base of the tree.

"Is he drinking? Okay, maybe this isn't such a great idea, what should I even say?"

"He'll come home when he feels like it," she declared. "Let's just go back."

Marco, not content with her decision, sat down, resulting in A tumbling off of his back, and he pushed her forwards. A, knowing she wasn't going anywhere until this was resolved, reluctantly started following the shoreline towards the tree, while the Swampert disappeared below the water's surface.

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Brendan stared up at the sun-speckled canopy. The weather didn't really reflect his mood. Lying on his back with one hand dangling, fingers dragging through the water as he swayed his arm, and the other holding a beer he occasionally sipped from, he pondered his thoughts. The soothing sounds of the forest and his fingers disrupting the water were all he could hear until a voice broke the silence.

"Hey"

He lifted his head to see A standing on the shore next to the tree. For a moment he was surprised and forgot that he didn't feel like talking to her.

"Hey, how did you find- Not even dad knows..."

He hesitated, then put the bottle to his lips again and sank back against the branch. Fuck her.

"Whatever, I don't care. What do you want?"

A looked at him uncomfortably. He seemed drunk and one side of his face was a painful-looking shade of purple-red, although she didn't dare start the conversation by asking about it. "Your dad told me. About your mom."

That came as a surprise for Brendan. His dad didn't like talking about the subject at all, and he wouldn't have thought he'd open up to A, of all people. They didn't exactly get along. Were he not so invested right now in convincing A he remained aloof and kept his cool after the ordeal, he would have said something about it. But he didn't exactly feel like explaining how weak and helpless her words had made him feel. He didn't want to grant her the satisfaction of holding that power over him.

"Great, now you can start calling me girl's names when you make fun of me. Fantastic."

A was taken aback by the disdain in his words. "What? No I wouldn't-"

He interrupted her, "Oh, and maybe after that we can go dress shopping and you can tell me what a broken piece of shit I am over a cup of Sawsbucks and cupcakes with sprinkles."

"That's not-"

"Because you know, you're so fond of rubbing in how much I fail at life."

"Brendan, stop saying these things!" She had enough of his pessimism. "I-I'm a big jerk, okay!? And I say all these hurtful things without thinking, but they're all lies because you're great the way you are and it hurts to see you like this, don't ever talk like that!"

"I just- I-" she wavered. "I don't want you to hate me, because there's nobody who cares about me like you do."

The outburst of honest to god remorse, was the last thing Brendan had expected to hear. This wasn't like the A he knew at all. Insults, shifting blame, yelling and arguing were all things he

was prepared for, but this, he didn't know what to do with. He sat up straight and stared at her for a bit, not knowing what to say. The uncomfortable silence seemed to make A nervous.

Seeing her fidget like that, brought him back to his senses. He became less tense and sighed. It wasn't fair of him to project his problems on to her. His anger was slowly being replaced by remorse for acting like a jerk.

"Come here," he said, scooting over to make room on the branch and gesturing her to come closer. "there's something I need to tell you."

She looked at the crooked branch with hesitation. It didn't exactly seem like the most sturdy thing in the world. "...Can't you tell me from over there?"

"No."

"Uh, okay..."

A carefully stepped on to the tree and tried to keep her balance while wobbling over to Brendan awkwardly. She sat down beside him, looking nervous.

"...W-what is it?"

Without warning, he gave her a shove and threw her backwards into the murky lake. She cried out before hitting the water and he shielded his face from the splash.

"GAH!"

She came up, gasping for air.

"Brendan, what the fuck is your pro-" she started, before being interrupted by Brendan chuckling, clearly very amused with her frustration, "-blem..." She trailed off.

A lowered herself and raised an eyebrow at him, shooting daggers with her eyes. Brendan's amused look disappeared from his face for a second when she jumped up at him using the branch as leverage, threw her arms around his neck, and pulled him with her into the water.

Yet when he came back up for air, he was laughing again, even as A was punching him in the shoulder. "Ow, hey! I thought you were going to be nice to me now!"

"I changed my mind!"

They tussled around for a bit in the water. "You big jerk-"

A was interrupted when Brendan caught both her hands, pulled her close and kissed her on the lips. He cupped her hands in his, and when their lips parted, he put his forehead to hers, closed his eyes and sighed. "You came looking for me." he whispered, "That means more than you think it does. Thank you."

"Wish I could take all the credit, but-"

"MURRRRR!" Marco's nose emerged from the water and the big Swampert forced himself in between them, rubbing his face on Brendan's shirt like a poochyena reunited with a long-lost owner. He clearly felt very guilty and wanted to make up with his oldest friend.

"Oh, this your peace offer then, you big bastard? You bring me a girl as a gift?"

"Mrrrrr..."

Brendan scratched the big creature behind the fins on his head and got a satisfied low rumbling noise in return.

"Yeah, I'm sorry too, buddy," he apologized, wrapping his arms around Marco's head and holding him close for a while.

"So, uh... what happened to your face?" A finally dared to ask.

"Fought an Ursaring and won."

"Mrrr-" Marco tried to say, but Brendan interrupted. "Shh"

"...Right." A smile formed on A's face, as she realized Brendan was trying to crack jokes to dismiss what had happened and lighten the mood between them again. "What about the blood in the house?"

"Oh, uh... I had a bit of a panic attack after you left and smashed the big flowerpot behind the couch like an idiot." He held up his bandaged arm, looking a bit embarrassed. "Hand got sliced up pretty badly."

Learning about the injuries on his face and hand, made A extremely aware of the swampy environment they found themselves in at the moment. He might need to get cleaned up and see a doctor. She started swimming back to shore and climbed the grassy bank, looking at him over her shoulder.

"Your dad is really worried." She said. "We should probably head back home. I promised I'd be back before dark."

"Or we can hang out here for a little while where no one can see us." he mentioned with a hopeful look on his face after swimming up to her and leaning on the bank. She kicked him back in the water.

"Pff, you're drunk. It's still a long walk back, and you might need to have that hand looked at. If we don't get going, your dad's gonna kick my pretty behind, so move your ass."

With a sigh, Brendan pulled himself ashore, wincing slightly after putting pressure on his injured hand. He had only been half joking. Marco hopped back on land next to him, shaking himself dry. The two remained silent as Brendan shook the water out of his hair and stood. A was already walking ahead. When looking at her, Brendan remembered a thought that crept into his mind every so often. "Hey A?" Brendan called after her. "Before we head back... Can I ask you a stupid question first?"

She turned around. "You can always ask. But I can't promise I'm not going to make fun of you for it."

He hesitated. A didn't like pretentious bullshit. And he didn't want to bother her with this. But ever since the strange voices had stopped talking to her, he had really wanted to ask.

"...Do you ever feel like we're not who we're supposed to be?"

As expected, A raised an eyebrow. Pretentious bullshit not tolerated. "...what? Brendan, that's stupid." She was going to go on, but hesitated when she noticed Brendan averting his gaze and looking at the ground. The story professor Birch told her rang through her head. The story of a little boy who hadn't been accepted for the way he was. Which had led to the little boy not accepting himself while growing up. He might have been more insecure than she had originally thought. She suddenly understood why he was such a pushover.

"Who would even determine what you're 'supposed' to be?" she continued, trying to sound as confident as she could to reassure the mess of a person in front of her.

"If there were rules for who you should be, those would be the first I'd break, because that's a load of bull and nobody tells me what to do."

A paused for a moment to let the words hit home. "And I happen to think you turned out great the way you are. So stop sulking like a little bitch and let's go home already. I made you brownies."

Brendan looked back up at her and smiled, embarrassed. "Yeah. I guess you're right. It was a dumb thought anyways."

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When they arrived back at Brendan's house back in Littleroot, A put a hand on his shoulder.

"Are you sure it's okay? Your dad was pretty upset when I left."

"Nothing a beer and a soccer game on TV can't fix," Brendan reassured her, fishing his keyring out of his pocket. "We're still men, A, relax."

He opened the door. "Dad? We're ba-"

Before he could finish, he was launched backwards by a jet of water from inside the house. Oscar emerged from inside and jumped Brendan, crying with joy.

"MAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Brendan, now gasping for air and flailing his arms while getting crushed by his Marstomp, cried out to it desperately, "Oscar! Let go, stop, please, my spine!" But Oscar didn't seem to care in his bout of abundant happiness to see his trainer alright. He had forgotten about the slap completely and was just glad to see his friend unharmed.

Professor Birch also emerged from the door. Looking at Brendan, he immediately noticed the bruises on his face.

"WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOUR FACE?! DID SHE HURT YOU AGAIN?!" He grabbed A by the collar and yanked her backwards. "I will bring the pain, swear to God!"

A cried out in shock, choking. "AIR, NEED TO BREATHE, AAAAAA-"

All the yelling and crying and chaotic pleading got forcefully interrupted when all of them got washed over by what seemed to them like a tidal wave. Papa Swampert had had enough of this nonsense.

"...thanks Marco," Brendan muttered, now facedown in the mud.

A sputtered and wiped the wet strands of hair out of her face, looking miserable. "Can we please just go eat those brownies now?"