

The Pokemon HQ was so eerily quiet the next morning. Normally, the place had work going on at any given hour of the day, as they all worked in shifts when they were at full staff. The only sound of life to the place now came in the form of machinery still softly at work, and the distant, muffled sound of the television on.

Lily was surprised to see her son already awake as she entered the lounge. Laying out on the couch with Eevee asleep on his chest, the teen was trying his best to hold a bowl of cereal above the Pokemon's head. She smiled softly to herself, definitely still Michael. He appeared to be watching the news, but the tired and glazed over look told her he wasn't actually watching it. "Good morning~"

Michael nearly dropped the bowl, more from poor coordination than being startled, only to have some of the milk spill on Eevee. The tiny ball of fur sat up with a jolt, and immediately hopped down from the couch. He cast a miffed look back at his owner with an annoyed, high pitched trill. "Sorry!" Michael started to sit up, but the Eevee had already scurried under the table to clean his fur.

"I'm really sorry, honey." Lily held a hand to her mouth, failing to stifle her laughter, "I didn't think I'd scare you. Did you sleep okay?"

"You're fine, I think he's still in a mood from yesterday anyway." Michael took a moment to consider the question though. The only reason he was even up so early was because he hadn't gone to sleep yet. It had been a long night of tossing and turning, staring at the shadows of the mobiles in his room, thinking... He drank some of the milk from the bowl to keep it from spilling, and gave his mother a nod. "But yeah, slept pretty good. I guess I really needed that. How about you?"

She had, honestly. Lily took a seat at the table, turning the chair to face the couch. "I think we all needed it. You must be so lost on what's been happening all this time. Is there anything you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Actually..." He wasn't sure where to begin on how crazy all this must sound, but it was just the two of them at least. "I'm not sure if Alpha really told you guys, but I've been here almost the whole time. The Voices had to fill me in on a few things, but I think I'm pretty caught up."

"He does seem sensitive about your presence, and seems to get slightly distressed when you go "offline," as he puts it." Lily's mood turned somber as she stared at the teen in concern. "I'm not sure what that means though. You're still aware of everything while he's controlling you?"

"Mmmm.... yes and no? When you guys see Alpha, that's all him. I'm not really being controlled since I'm... It's more like having an out of body experience. I can still see and hear everything going on, but I'm watching it from a distance." He glanced up at her to see the slight horror on her face, his own smile fading as he tried to reassure her. "But it's really not as bad as it sounds. Since I have a bit of freedom to look around, it's more like I can gather information about people and our surroundings while he's having to focus on what's in front of him. He's probably doing the same thing right now. We just need to, uh... currently the only way to pass that information to each other is with the Voices just telling him what "we" found out."

Lily took a deep breath as she tried to refrain from commenting, letting the air out slowly as she just shook her head. "I suppose we'll just have to trust that the Voices know what They're doing then. If Alpha is able to hear us, now that you two have switched again, it should save us time on informing you both. That's... a positive, right?"

Even as Michael could see her forcing an air of relief, he knew better than to push it. “R-right. Only right now, not even the Voices know where we need to go next. We got the errands in Gateon Port done, and still no leads on chasing down the Cipher. Alpha made a comment yesterday about going to visit the news station, but I found out this morning they’ve upgraded their securities due to the recent scare. I thought if we waited long enough, you could call or something.”

Lily eased up as he explained, amazed at how convenient it was. They didn’t already have plans for him when she wanted to send him to Agate Village. Still, she thought back to Rial’s comment from the night before. Even if it was only brought up in sleepless jest, she half wondered if the Relic Stone would be putting her son in danger. At best, there was still the chance she might lose him again somewhere in the shuffle. “I might have an idea... Would you like to tell me what happened in Gateon first? From your perspective, at least?”

A part of him, he assumed Alpha, honestly didn’t want to get into it. Michael knew that Jovi would probably try to brush things off by focusing more on what she enjoyed than anything possibly being wrong. He grinned a bit as currently neither one could do anything about it. “Sure.”

Michael explained how he wasn’t paying enough attention when Zook came up, and even sheepishly admitted to not taking it seriously until things almost got out of hand with Alpha, but the bigger concern for him was meeting Mr. Verich. It was hard to say if it was because of the Voices’ over reaction, which even Lily had no real answer for as her son explained Their words, but it was enough to cause Alpha to start regressing to his default persona. A ponderism to them both was that it proved Alpha was capable of lying.

Granted, it could have been that Jovi was the one to actually start it, and perhaps the computer merely mimicked the effort, but it was still a strange feature Lily would need to bring up with Tuto and Aiden. The rest of the day was rather lonely for Michael, unable to really get a word in edgewise among the Voices and their incessant bickering about the Water Stone. He had half hoped that the trainer battle to obtain Ledyba might have been enough to cause another switch, but to no avail.

Lily had to interrupt on that note. “Even if it is all in good fun, isn’t engaging in battle what causes Alpha to take over? I know the Voices want you to get back on the road, and battle is what you were made for, but I don’t like the thought of losing you again.”

The teen turned somber as he shifted his gaze to the television. At least the Voices seemed to be enjoying Themselves, but the reels at the bottom, still talking about the attack, only served to remind him of his mission. Over the course of the night, he’d resigned himself to the fact that he couldn’t avoid being dragged back to that illusionary world They made for Themselves, but perhaps.... “That does seem to be the trigger. What I’m wondering is if we could find a safe opportunity for me to try to control that. If Alpha is only designed for battle, then that’s fine, we let him fight. But if there’s a way for me to regain dominance outside of battle, that’d be better for the both of us since he seems to have trouble dealing with people.”

“It would be easier than you having to return home every time for us to fix it...” Lily’s voice grew soft as she could see there was no arguing the matter with him.

“We did it on purpose a few times when he first showed up, so I’m hoping the only reason Alpha got locked into place was because of something the Cipher did.” Michael began to perk up as he looked back at his mother. “And remember, part of that was because we lost access to the Battle Sim in the attack. I figured we could spend today running tests to see if we could work out the bugs in my system.”

"But there weren't any bugs..." Lily wanted to tell him, but they didn't know that for fact yet. She shook the thought from her mind, as she would rather not push their luck by toying with him any further. "Actually, I had, um, another errand I wanted you to run today."

The pair was surprised by the Eevee's cry, as he hopped back on the couch beside his trainer. Michael ran his bare hand between the pokémon's ears, happy to be forgiven for the milk incident. "Guess he wants to go too. What'd you have in mind?"

Lily smiled at the tiny ball of fur, "It's something of a simple two-part mission. Have I ever told you about the Relic Stone?" If not from her, then he had from several others over the years. It wasn't exactly exclusive knowledge in Orre. His mother seemed pleased to hear. "Here's something I bet you don't know then: Shadows aren't a recent event in Orre. Not just pokémon, but people too, have sought out the places like the Relic Stone in hopes of being purified. The tales of old warriors wanting to be forgiven of their misdeeds has shown up in some of Orre's oldest shrines... Though since many of the artifacts were destroyed, the specifics of how the purification worked were unfortunately lost as well. We've examined the Relic Stone before, but never had a chance to study the process first hand."

"And since I have a couple of Shadows now, you want me to see if the legends are true? Sounds like a good plan, since I can't even train my Pokémon until they get purified." Michael let go of the Eevee, watching in amusement as he went to finish off the free food on the cushion beside them.

Lily was about to protest, but decided the poor little fox probably deserved it after the week they'd been having. She cleared her throat and turned her focus back to Michael. "Actually, we already know it's true from A7's travels a few years back. The second part of the mission, is I need you to speak with a man named Eagun about the Relic Stone, and what happened back then. I don't know if he's aware now, but Cipher did try to go after the Relic Stone once back then. The village will need to be on the alert if anything were to happen this time."

"That, I can do. Is there anything else I should know before going?"

"If I think of something, I'll let you know. We can still e-mail you on the P*DA if necessary." With that, the teen was already cleaning up and pulling out the Poke Ball to recall Eevee. "Why don't you go get ready, and I'll go wake Jovi. She'll need to know what's going on."

"...Jovi?" Michael's eagerness turned cold as he turned back to her. "Mom, I know you're worried, but I'm going to a retirement community. You can't trust me to take care of myself?"

"Retired trainers, Michael." Lily corrected him. "I've a feeling you'll still be challenged while you're there, and it's really more of a precaution. Eagun wanted your father to prove himself before allowing him to see the Relic Stone, so it's likely you'll be asked the same."

"Then you don't trust... Alpha?" Michael could see her hesitate to answer, merely waving her off as he already understood without getting into it again. "I said I wanted a safe opportunity to test this out, and Agate Village is like a safe haven. If anything goes wrong, I can always try to reset at the Pokémon Center. They'll probably just think I'm resting after being on the road. Besides, it's my fault Jovi was up so late. Let her sleep."

Lily heaved a sigh as she knew he was right. She would still rather have him test this out in the field than risk his coding, but the thought of toying with these “switch mechanics” left her uneasy. “You know your sister is going to be mad to see you left without saying goodbye.”

“If she was awake, she wouldn’t stay.” He chuckled, “I’ll leave her a note, okay?”

“If you say so, honey. If you say so...”

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As the Voices took him along the “scenic route” to Agate Village, Michael honestly didn’t mind. It was relaxing, almost hypnotic to hear Them singing as he zoomed down the mostly empty roads. It gave him a chance to take in the landscape he’d only barely gotten to see first hand on his trip to Dr. Kaminko’s, and eventually made it to the edge of the desert. Agate Village, as his scanner seemed so eager to show him, was the farthest point of the valley, though it’s placement in the mountains was claimed by many to be the only reason it survived. The teen skidded to a stop along the dusty and abandoned highway to stare at the wasteland beyond. He’d heard of it all his life, but there was still something so jarring about how the rolling green fields of one side turned to sand on the other.

There was that feeling of fear, of wonderment, an urge to see just what lay out there in the greater Orre expanse. He could see the faintest alignment of buildings off in the distance, possibly Pyrite Town, wavering like a mirage in the sunlight. But that was another adventure for another time, as he could hear the frustrated Voices trying to figure out which way was north. North to the village then, he told himself, and immediately turned his scooter back towards the valley.

Approaching Agate Village was no less magical than the desert lands, as he could see the masses of water long before the town itself. A branching river cascaded down the cliffs, the smaller waterfalls gleaming in the sunlight as some seemed to lead to the west to flourish the valley with life, while the other disappeared to the Orre underground caverns. The village began to appear out of the mist, finally becoming clear as he parked his scooter and stepped through the rustic grand archway which announced where he was. His scanner ruined the moment as a window scrolled out to inform him that Eagun’s house was in the base of the large tree at the top of the cliffs.

Cliffs.... Michael’s child-like glee turned to disappointment as he gazed over Agate’s layout; a simple set up connected completely by earthen ramps and bridges among ledges and smaller rivers. The Voices were already screaming. The redhead glanced at his Snag Machine, trying to remember if the prototype was water proof. It was in the final plans, but.... He took a deep breath, and decided not to think about it. Instead, he’d just have to fight his poor coordination skills, and take it slow.

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An old woman answered the door to find the half-soaked teen dripping on the welcome mat. She looked him over a moment, pausing to look at the awkward piece of metal on his arm. “Oh, hello! We were called about receiving a visitor today. You’re Mikau, right?”

The redhead’s forced smile started to wane at the remark. “Um.... No?”

The woman frowned at him, and wriggled her nose at him with a huff. "Then I certainly hope you're not one of Dr. Kaminko's peddlers! I suggest you sell your business elsewhere."

"No wait!" Michael put up a hand to stop her from shutting the door, but thankfully she didn't when he pleaded. His smile became more genuine to see her annoyance turn curious to hear him out. "Y-you just got my name wrong. I'm Michael? I was sent here from the Pokemon HQ?"

"Ah, it's a bit of an odd name. I'm sorry, dear. My name is Beluh, by the way, I think you wanted to see my husband, Eagun?" The teen lit up with delight. "I'm afraid he's not here right now. We were told you were coming to talk to us about the Relic Stone, and he was so excited, he went straight there. Said something about preparing for our guest. Would you like to come inside? I made cookies."

Michael was about to say no to the offer, but he found his tongue wanting to lock up. There came that familiar click-click-clicking sound in his left ear as the Voices squealed at the thought of free food, television, and wondering if they could get her to bring them other goodies. "He's... coming back... right? When he finishes, I mean?"

"I should think so. He's been gone a while, so he shouldn't be long now."

"Th-then cookies sound great."