

Prologue [-0d 13h 24m]

“And what else causes the Poison status? Poison Sting is a big one, but what else?”

The teacher turned to the class of uniformed students staring blankly back at her. Some were diligently writing down everything she wrote on the board while others were looking through text books on the subject for the answers. Still others were simply playing on their pokegear, or quietly chatting with others, or simply day dreaming. The teacher sighed and decided to pick on one of the ones in the back who clearly wasn't paying attention.

“Wade? Do you have an answer for us?”

The twelve-year-old boy's imagined activities with another guy in the class were suddenly crashed in upon by the teacher speaking his name. Wade sat upright and scanned the blackboard for clues as to what the teacher asked. “Uhhh, Poison Sting! And Twineedle! Also Sludge, maybe.”

A few of the students chuckled as the teacher smiled. “Very good,” the teacher conceded, “Though we said Poison Sting already. Could you please keep your thoughts here with us instead of ogling the girls?”

A couple of the girls snickered, and one of them in the general direction that Wade had been staring gave a little wave at him. Wade licked his lips and forced a chuckle. “Y-yes, ma'am.”

The teacher turned back to the board and began writing again. Wade leaned over on his hand, sneering at her. Why did it always have to be him? She never called on anyone else, even though everyone else was always not paying attention as much as Wade wasn't. And it's always the same crap every day. He'd learned this crud years ago. He works with poison pokemon after all! A lot of bugs are poison-types as well. Couldn't they just move on to something more interesting? Something he'd actually enjoy learning about?

He picked up his pencil and continued doodling in his notebook. The doodle was of some bug pokemon he had seen the other day. Not like a new pokemon or anything, just the pokemon doing something cool. The picture had been finished about 10 minutes into class, and now he was simply absentmindedly adding details and fauna around the thing while the teacher droned on.

Suddenly, the bell rang. Every student immediately began getting up and gathering their stuff and sprinting out the door. The teacher began yelling something else over the din, but Wade couldn't hear it, and didn't really care to hear it either.

Wade slammed his notebook closed and swept his things into his bag. He looked up expectantly and saw the guy he had been staring at get up and meet up with a girl. They began talking, and they held hands. Wade suddenly lost his motivation to stand, and his bag dropped to the desk. He sat there, staring bitterly at a corner of his desk as that guy and girl moved past him with the flow of other kids leaving the classroom.

"Hey, Wade." A young boy with blonde hair slid out of the flow of kids and stood in front of Wade's desk. This kid was among the youngest at the academy, and he was also the newest.

"Hey Joey," Wade mumbled, barely looking up at him.

Joey cocked his head, "What's wrong, you look---OW!!"

Joey ducked and held his head where Richard Smith, one of the oldest kids, had hit him as he passed by.

"Oh, sorry, new kid," Richard Smith mockingly apologized, "Didn't see you there, since you're so small." He then left the room.

Joey glared after him, his hatred equating to tears in his eyes. Joey turned and glanced at the front of the room, where the teacher stood with her back to them, speaking with a couple other students. "Why does no one ever catch him?!" Joey spat.

"The teachers are all paid off..." Wade intoned, trying to burn a hole through the desk with his stare.

"...Really?" Joey cringed at him.

Wade's eyes came into focus on Joey's face, and Wade realized Joey was actually asking a serious question. "I don't know, and I don't care." Wade got up from the desk, grabbed his bag, and flung it over his shoulder.

"Yeah, well, he's not bullying you..." Joey replied, following Wade out of the classroom and into the hallways of the academy.

"I'm not four years younger than him."

"That's no excuse to bully someone!"

"I've also been here longer than a week."

"That's still no--"

Wade halted and turned on Joey. "Why are you following me?"

"Uh..." Joey withdrew a little, wringing his hands.

"Just because you sleep on the bunk bed above mine doesn't make you and me friends, alright?"

"But...." Joey pouted.

"Look," Wade turned and leaned down to eye level with him, "I'm not going to bully you because I'm not *an asshole*, but you need to make some friends your own age. I know there's some little kids who hang out on Route 30 to practice. Maybe you can hang with them."

"Sorry..." Joey said, examining his own shoes.

Wade half-smiled and stood up, patting the boy on the head. "And remember to change out of your uniform before you do. No one respectable still wears their uniform when they're out training."

Wade turned and walked away. Joey looked after him for a moment before nodding and heading back to the boys dormitory.

Wade walked out the front doors of the academy. There were several students still milling about, some in their uniforms, some changed out of them already. They were all talking, discussing plans for the afternoon. Some small groups were breaking away, heading towards destinations out and around the city. None of the remaining groups were people Wade had any interest in talking with. He glanced around, hands in his pockets, moving in a way that suggested he had a purpose, but could be pulled away for a moment. No one noticed him, as usual.

He passed the school's sign: "Violet City Pokemon Academy: Great Pokemon are nothing without Great Trainers." Someone had again graffitied on the sign, this time crossing out the words "Great Trainers" to replace them with the words "Sacrifices to Helix". A janitor was in the process of angrily scrubbing the graffiti off. The janitor glared at Wade as he walked by, and Wade gave him an innocent "I didn't do it" look.

Wade found himself moving around towards the back of the school. There was a set of official pokemon battle rings set up back here. Usually, there was no one using them past the end of the school day, but today, Wade was met with a sight he'd never thought he'd see in person.

"Dragonite! Finish him off with Dragon Rage!"

A large orange Dragonite reared back and breathed blue fire upon a helpless Magnezone. The Magnezone clanked to the ground and the headmaster of the academy recalled it to its pokeball.

"Magnifique! As always, beat me, you do!" headmaster Earl Dervish chuckled jovially, "Surprised, not I, of course. Champion is you for reason!"

Lance, yes that Lance, Indigo League Champion Lance, swept his black cape back and recalled his Dragonite. "So you will allow me to question your students?" he asked.

"You is champion, yes," the portly man said, half laughing, "but champion does not crazy you make. No questioning still, lost though I may have."

"I figured as much," Lance conceded, "though this simply makes my job harder."

"Foolish it is to think you can find the child you seek by such means," Earl stated merrily as Lance approached him from the opposite side of the field.

"I am a foolish man," Lance replied solemnly. He then spotted Wade standing dumbstruck at the corner of the academy building. "You! Boy!"

Wade's eyebrows shot up. He hesitantly pointed at himself, confirming that the Indigo League Champion did indeed just address his lowly self.

"Yes, son, you. There's no one else around you," Lance chuckled.

"Oh come, Lance," Earl scoffed in a tone that was almost not jovial.

"It's not in your classrooms, dear Earl," Lance said sidelong, before directing his attention back on Wade. "Come here, boy. It'll only take a moment. I won't bite."

Wade finally found his feet again and managed to move them closer to the Champion of the Indigo League. As he approached, the two men smiled at him, though the Earl had a hint of irritation on his face, if that was possible.

"Son, tell me," Lance began when Wade was close enough, "What is it that you see when you look to the sky?"

"You think boy will see what it is you see?" the headmaster interjected.

Lance shot Earl a glance as Wade looked up at the bright blue dome that covered them overhead. He used his hand to block out the sun as he scanned the sky for something interesting. "Clouds? Birds?"

"Is that all?" Lance insisted.

"Am I supposed to see something else?"

"Sane, the boy is," Earl chuckled, "Like you not."

"I assure you, dear Earl," Lance replied testily, "I am not the only one who can see the writhing mass of Unown looming overhead."

"What?!" Wade gasped, and hastily checked the sky again. The one cloud looked vaguely like it could be a pokemon, but that certainly wasn't what Lance was talking about... was it?

"It is the same mass as three years ago," Lance said, half to Wade and Earl, half to himself. There was no smile on his face anymore. "The same ones that controlled Red, I know it."

Earl laughed heartily, "Red? True champion?"

"Yes, that Red," Lance snarled through gritted teeth, "The Unown are searching for a new host, and that new host will become the new champion. I can feel it in my bones..."

The headmaster threw an arm around Lance's shoulders, chuckling merrily, "If *can find* Red, that is! Come now! See a doctor, you need to! Or Morty! Good with spirits, I hear he is!"

The two men walked away and around the corner of the building, leaving Wade to stand there, frozen, breathing quickly and shallowly. A sense of dread had washed over him from Lance's words. Was it really true? Were there Unown in the sky that he couldn't see?

He sat down in the grass, staring up at the bright blue sky. Maybe if he listened hard enough, he could hear the Unown? He held his breath for a moment, and listened carefully, desperately.

All he heard were the sounds of the city streets beyond the school.

"Hello?AJ? I heard from Prof. Elm that you went on a long trip. I wish you would have told me..."

Chapter 1 [0d 6h 12m]

The Rattata flew defiantly through the air and slammed headlong into the Pidgey. The bird pokemon tumbled backwards and then took to the air to kick up a whirling cloud of sand and

dust. The Rattata covered its eyes from the sand and rolled to the side to try and dodge another flying tackle from the Pidgey. It spun about on the spot and taunted the bird pokemon by wagging its tail mockingly. The Pidgey became angry and swooped in closer as it went in for another body-check. The Rattata was faster, and cut it off with its own shoulder-check. The Pidgey fell to the ground, trying in vain to get up. It was recalled by its trainer. The youngster growled as he turned his cap around on his head, and sent out his second pokemon, a Rattata of his own.

“Com’on, Ace!” the first Rattata’s young blonde-haired trainer cried. “You’ve got this in the bag!”

“You’re pokemon can’t fight anymore!” the opponent taunted. “He won’t take another hit!”

Ace the Rattata was breathing heavily, but he shot in for a quick hit on the opposing rat anyway. But the opposing rat went in for a tackle, and then a speedy attack of its own. Ace fell over sideways, its tail flopping over after it.

“Ace!! No! Get up!!”

“Face it, Jimmy! It’s over!”

“It’s JOEY!” the blonde boy cried angrily and flung himself at his opponent. A slap fight ensued between Joey and his opponent, Mikey. Mikey’s friend, Don, rushed over and helped separate Joey from Mikey, and the two of them pushed Joey away. Joey fell into the dirt, his anger melting into tears.

Mikey turned his cap right way around again, folded his arms, and looked down at Joey. Don took a similar pose. Mikey’s Rattata hissed at the fallen boy.

“Oh, are you gonna cry now?” Don mocked.

“No!” Joey spat, wiping his eyes.

“Face it, Joey,” Mikey gloated, “You’re gonna need to train more pokemon in order to *beat anyone!* You can’t get by on just that rat!”

Joey, still trying not to cry, picked up Ace and cradled him in his arms. “....F-Fine, I’ll go find more pokemon. Y-You’ll see!”

Joey stood up defiantly as Mikey and Don exchanged amused glances. Joey turned on the spot and moved towards the tall grasses off to the left of the path.

“Hey, Jimmy! Got any pokeballs?!” Don called after him.

"It's *Joey*!!" Joey spat over his shoulder, "And I've got Ace's ball! That'll be enough!"

Mikey and Don started to crack up laughing, but Joey ignored them as he moved beyond their line of sight, into a forested area.

Joey knelt down in the tall grass and produced a small pokesnack. "Com'on, Ace, get up..."

The purple rat in Joey's arms stirred and spotted the pokesnack its trainer was offering. It grabbed it in its forepaws and began munching on the snack. Joey set it down in the grass as it finished. It turned about and looked up at its trainer, feeling a little more refreshed.

"You did good back there, but..... we still lost..."

Ace's ears drooped sadly, and it moved up and nuzzled against Joey's hand resting on his knee. Joey smiled a little and scratched Ace around the ears.

A Caterpie scuttled its way out of the undergrowth a short distance away. Joey's eye caught sight of it as it moved over to a plant and began munching on it. Joey's voice dropped to a whisper: "Ace! We gotta catch that! Hit it with a quick attack!"

Ace turned around and spotted the Caterpie. Its ears pulled back into hatred, and it rushed forward, squealing, and gave a hard body-check to the bug pokemon. The pokemon went flying and vanished into the undergrowth.

"No!" Joey cried, on his feet, "You gotta trying and weaken it!" Joey turned on the spot and saw a Weedle moving swiftly away into the safety of the undergrowth. "No! Wait!"

Joey tossed Ace's pokeball at it; the ball smacked the Weedle in the head and the it was knocked unconscious. Ace then proceeded to tackle the Weedle back into the undergrowth.

"Why didn't it catch?!" Joey cried, his hands scrunching the sides of his blue hat in frustration.

The hair on the back of Joey's neck prickled as he heard Mikey and Don laughing behind him. He turned on the spot and glowered at them, tears forming in his eyes again.

"You idiot!" Mikey cackled, "Don't you know you're supposed to be using a different ball for each pokemon??"

Joey's face flushed and he averted his eyes. "Y-Yes! I-I knew that! I was j-j-just testing!"

"Do you even have any empty pokeballs on you?" Don chuckled.

"....N....N.... D-Do you?"

"Of course I do!"

"Can I borrow one?"

"N-No!" Don spat while Mikey cracked up laughing.

"How about I buy one off you?!"

"W-what?!" Don was appalled, but Mikey interrupted gleefully with "9000 pokeyen!"

"I don't have that much money!!" Joey squealed in horror, to which his peers cracked up laughing harder. Joey spun around to put his back to them, folding his arms in embarrassment, wishing desperately that he was as small as a Caterpie and could get punted by Ace into the forest as well....

A stick cracking underfoot interrupted the scene. The sound heralded the arrival of an older boy, probably as old as Joey's bunkmate Wade, coming through the undergrowth. He wore a black and gold cap, backwards, with a tuft of black hair poking through the cap's gap. He wore a red hoodie and gold-colored shorts. And he seemed to be talking to himself a bit.

"Where have you *lead* me, really?" the new trainer was saying to himself under his breath. "That's a tree, guys... That's-- that's another tree. That's--Oh! That's an Antidote, might be useful..."

Joey glanced back at Mikey and Don, who were still laughing, and had not yet seen the trainer. Joey swallowed his tears, puffed out his chest, and began walking forward, demanding overly loudly: "Hey! You!!"

Mikey, Don, and the new trainer all turned to look at him.

"You look weak!" Joey proclaimed, "Com'on! Let's battle!"

Joey pointed and his Rattata, Ace, was at his side, ready for battle.

The new trainer blinked. "Y-You want to fight me? With pokemon?!"

"Yeah! That's what trainers do!" Joey declared with puffed up chest, "If they lock eyes, it's a battle!"

The new trainer gave a look that conveyed "Alright, if you say so," and threw out a pokeball. A blue alligator-like pokemon appeared.

Joey heard whispering behind him: "What's that?!" "I think that's a Totodile!" "A Totodile?!"

"Ace! Tackle it!" Joey commanded.

"Have at it, Lazor," the opponent suggested to his pokemon.

As Ace lunged forward, the Totodile breathed in through its nose and stared intently at the Rattata. Laser beams shot from its eyeballs and struck the purple pokemon in the head, sending it flipping forcefully backwards into a nearby tree. It fell limp at base of the tree.

Joey was flabbergasted. He went to rush towards his pokemon, but the sounds of his peers reactions over his shoulder stopped him. He clenched his fists and stood rooted to the spot. He tried not to cry, tried hard. "I-I lost again... Doggonit..."

The opposing trainer seemed concerned over Joey's constipated posture. "S-Sorry, LazorGator doesn't always know his own strength... Is your pokemon going to be alright...?"

"His pokemon's used to it!" Mikey declared, laughing, "He loses all the time! It's time for *me* to pummel you!"

Mikey sent out his Pidgey. Before the bird could get a move in edgewise, it had been lasered into a tree as well. Mikey's Rattata fared no better, though at least went a third second before succumbing to the burning laser.

"Holy Helix Dung!" Mikey exclaimed as he recalled his pokemon. "I.... I lost! B-But I won before!"

Don didn't even preface his battle declaration as he shoved Mikey out of the way and sent in his two Caterpies at the same time to battle LazorGator. The two Caterpies were back in their balls a few seconds later.

"You're too strong!" Don gasped.

"Com'on, Don, let's get out of here!"

"Yeah, hopefully Nurse Joy can heal our pokemon!" The two boys rushed off towards Violet City.

The trainer returned his Totodile to its ball. He watched after them as they ran away. "S-Sorry!" he called after them, "S-Sorry if I hurt... them... and they're gone..."

The trainer turned around to speak with Joey, but Joey was on the ground, cradling his Rattata in his arms, crying. The trainer moved over to the boy slowly, and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. The boy tensed up.

“Ar---are you alright?” the trainer asked.

Joey looked up at the trainer. “He got burned....”

The trainer became scared and looked down at the youngster’s pokemon. Its left ear had a hole burned through it now. “I-I-I’m s-sorry!” the trainer said, “Um... Here’s a burn heal I found earlier!”

The trainer dug a little tub of cream out of his bag and handed it to Joey. Joey opened it and applied the cream to Ace’s ear. Ace stirred and batted at Joey’s hand as he applied the cream. “He’ll be fine, I-I think...” Joey said, petting the Rattata’s cheek with a cream-covered knuckle. “Th-thanks....”

The trainer was gazing off towards town. “I hope we didn’t hurt the others’ pokemon as bad...”

“I hope you did...” Joey mumbled under his breath. Ace squeaked a reply and Joey smiled at him.

The other trainer looked concerned. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Joey denied, not looking at the trainer as he wiped his hands off on the grass.

“You seemed really bothered by them...”

“I wasn’t....” Joey stood up, cradling his Rattata, “I’m..... friends....? with them....?”

The trainer chuckled, “Really? Well, with friends like that...”

“They told me...” Joey said, petting his Rattata on the tummy, “that I needed to have a lot of pokemon to win any battles.” Joey looked up at the trainer, a sudden defiant spark in his eyes, “But that’s not true, is it?”

“...Uhhh.... what?”

“You used only one pokemon,” Joey declared, pointing at the trainer, “and you beat me *and* my friends in battle, no sweat! So do I really need to have more pokemon to battle better? No!” the boy declared triumphantly, “I-I’m sticking with this one, no matter what!!”

The Rattata in his arms seemed to cheer weakly at the declaration. The boy in the black and gold hat had an odd smile on his face at the sudden proclamation.

Joey grabbed the trainer’s hand, seemingly out of breath from this new revelation. “Listen! Can.... uh..... C-Can I get your phone number?”

"M-My what?"

"Your PokeGear phone number! I'm a rookie too, so I'd think it'd be a good motivator!"

The trainer hesitated. "I.... don't know.... I've got a lot.... going on..." He glanced towards the sky.

Joey was undeterred, "Com'on! I'll ring you whenever I get the urge to battle! I'll be better next time! I promise!"

The trainer again glanced upward, like he was listening to the heavens. "O...Okay..."

"Great!" Joey squeed, and opened up his phone. "My name's Joey!"

"Just call me 'AJ'."

"Yo, AJ! How's it going? This is Joey. Got a minute? How are your pokemon doing? My Rattata's raring to go, just like always. It's the only one I have, so I'm going to become a great trainer with it! Oh yeah, I took down a Caterpie in the wild the other day. It was a cakewalk. Well, I guess it can't be helped, us being so tough. Heh. Um, all right. L-Later!"

Chapter 2 [0d 6h 39m]

The bushes rustled a bit and the head of a black-haired boy poked out from behind the bushes. The boy had a bug catcher's hat on, with various leaves and vines drooped over it. His head vanished back into the shrubbery again, and the bushes began rustling. The boy's head popped back up a short distance away, looking through the foliage again. He stood up higher, a butterfly net in hand, as he spotted a Caterpie munching on a leaf a bush or two over.

Wade stepped out and crept his way closer to the Caterpie. He moved slowly, making no sudden movements, his tongue between his teeth. He was a foot away from it, net held overhead, when the Caterpie spotted him, and began its escape. Wade slapped the butterfly net over it before it got far.

"Got you!" he shouted gleefully.

Suddenly, a handful of Beedrill appeared from the bush as well, angry at Wade.

"Shoot! The hive was in *this* bush!!"

Wade dropped the net and fled, holding on to his hat as he ran. The Beedrills pursued him angrily, shooting needles in his direction. Wade ran out onto the dirt path of the Route proper, stumbling over himself as he turned the bend. He barely saw the other person as he slammed right into him. Both he and the other boy toppled over into a pile on the ground.

“Oh Helix!!” “AUGH!!” “Crud! The Beedrill!” “What?!”

The Beedrill beared down on the two of them. Wade stumbled as he reached for his pokeballs but a small blue alligator pokemon was already emerging from its ball. It sucked in breath and then shot lasers from its eyes at the bug pokemon flying towards them. The lasers knocked the swarm of Beedrill clean out of the air. The one or two Beedrill that could still possibly fly fled the scene.

Wade took a moment to calm himself when he realized he was still on top of the stranger. “S-S-Sorry about th-that...” he stammered and moved to get up.

The stranger, a boy about his age, black hair, gold and black cap, sat up and put his hand on Wade’s shoulder. “Yeah, that was... wow. How did you manage that? Good job, LazorGator.”

The trainer’s Totodile gave a cheery croak.

The trainer looked back at Wade. Wade hadn’t moved. He was still on all fours, about halfway to getting up properly. He was staring at the trainer, dumbfounded, blushing quite a bit.

The trainer took his hand off Wade’s shoulder and waved a hand at him with it. “Uhhh, you alright?”

Wade blinked. “Uh, um... ye-yeah, s-sorry about that.” He got up and dusted himself a bit, still staring at the trainer, “Um, th-thanks for... saving me.”

The trainer raised an arm to him, and it took Wade a second or two to realize he should help him up. Wade pulled the trainer to his feet again.

“No problem,” the trainer said, “At this point, I’m a little more used to tripping over my own two feet. Heh.”

“Huh?”

“N-nothing,” the trainer too dusted himself off, “Um, so, do you want to battle as well?”

“Wha?”

“Well, every other trainer along here has asked to battle me, so I didn’t know if you also wanted to...?”

Wade’s brain was moving at a Slowpoke’s pace. “Oh! P-Pokemon Battle!”

The trainer cocked his head, chuckling, “What did you think I meant?”

“N-Nothing, um, sure, yes! Let’s battle!”

The trainer held out his hand to shake. “AJ”

Wade took a deep breath to clear his head, “Wade”, and shook hands with his opponent. They stepped back.

AJ’s LazorGator bounded out between them as Wade sent out a Caterpie. The Caterpie barely managed to get a String Shot ready before LazorGator burned a hole in its HP. Wade swapped out for a Weedle, and it managed to get in a Poison Sting before it went down as well. Wade had never been so thoroughly stomped before in his life.

As Wade switched to another Caterpie, he looked up at AJ. His opponent seemed to be talking to himself, quite a bit. And he occasionally would open up his bag for a moment, or take stock of his other pokemon, before telling LazorGator to continue attacking.

“Are you alright dude?” Wade asked as he moved to switch to his last pokemon.

“Wh-What?”

“You’re talking to yourself.”

AJ tensed a bit, “N-No I’m not. I’m talking with L-LazorGator.” He pointed at his pokemon, and it lasered the dirt under Wade’s foot, Wade moving just in time to dodge it. “S-Sorry.”

“Dude, are you alright?!” Wade asked, concerned.

“I’m fine!” AJ spat irritably, and then seemingly batted away something invisible over his shoulder. “Send out your last pokemon!”

Wade, his eyes never leaving AJ’s face, tossed out the ball for his last pokemon, caught the ball, and then immediately recalled the pokemon.

“Um, did it actually faint?” AJ asked.

“Wouldn’t have mattered much either way,” Wade replied, “You win.”

AJ shrugged and recalled LazorGator as Wade walked forward. Wade reached into his pocket and took out some money for winnings. As he went to hand it to AJ, he blushed a bit. "G-Good battle..."

"Thanks," AJ said, a grin on his face.

"H-Hey, um....." Wade started as AJ turned to leave, "Y-You're kinda awesome.... I..... I like you."

AJ grinned almost evilly. "I couldn't tell."

Wade took a second to process his sarcasm. He went completely red, turned on the spot, folded his arms, and clammed up. AJ cracked up laughing. Wade wished he could vanish into thin air.

AJ put a hand gently on Wade's arm. "Dude, calm down, it's alright. I, um.... I know the feeling. Wanna trade numbers?"

Wade turned and saw AJ holding up his PokeGear with his phone number on it. Wade's heart raced, and he nodded. He pulled out his phone.

"I'll, um...." Wade stammered as he entered AJ's number, "I-I'm here basically e-every day. I f-find berries all the time in the bushes. I'll.... I'll share some with you... when I find some...."

AJ snorted down a laugh as he finished adding Wade's info, "Sure, dude, whatever. Give me a call anytime, about anything, I don't really care."

"R-Really?"

AJ turned to walk away, "Yeah, it gives me a minute's break from the Unown."

Wade blinked as AJ walked off. "...The Unown...?"

AJ looked back and stammered, "Uh, yeah, the unknown! You know, dunno what's out... just... just forget what I said!" And he sprinted off towards Violet City.

Wade stared after him, but not in the same way he usually stared. ~~Instead, his mind drifted to a day or two earlier. And he whispered to himself, asking himself, "...A writhing mass of Unown...?"~~

“Good evening, AJ! It’s me, Wade. Were you awake? Hey, um, I found all kinds of berries. If you want, I-I’ll sh-share some with you. I’ll be waiting on Route 31. Y-Ya know, if you’re interested...”

Chapter 3 [0d21h32m]

The cafeteria buzzed with activity. Dozens of uniformed students were scattered about, socializing, eating lunch, doing homework, or tending their pokemon. A corner of the lunch room was sectioned off with a miniature battle arena where students did quick one-on-one pokemon battles. Talk of battle strategy, TV shows, card games, exciting news, and scandalous rumors all permeated the air.

Wade sat at one of the round tables in the cafeteria. He absentmindedly stirred the macaroni on his tray, deep in thoughts of his last conversation with AJ over the phone. AJ was an impressive trainer. Yesterday, shortly after he and Wade had met, AJ had gone to the Violet City gym and summarily stomped Falkner and his gym trainers. And Falkner was certainly no pushover; students from the academy regularly trained at his gym and regularly were pummeled by his trainers. And yet AJ barely broke a sweat, *and* had done it with only his one pokemon, LazorGator, the much-talked-about Totodile with inexplicable laser vision. Who the heck was this kid, and how on earth did he get such a strange pokemon?

Wade was pulled from his thoughts by a tap on the arm.

“Hey, Wade? Is this right?” Joey asked timidly.

Joey had various homework laid out on the table in front of him, intermixed with his lunch, a slice of pizza and fries. His Rattata, the one with the hole in its left ear, was on the table, ostensibly “helping” Joey with his homework, but actually nibbling on some of the fries. Wade had let the youngster sit next to him earlier, so as to help him with his homework.

Wade leaned over and glanced at the problem Joey was pointing at. “No, right here, you forgot to carry the two.”

“Crap,” Joey swore under his breath, and went at the problem with an eraser.

Wade shoveled some of the cold macaroni into his mouth as he continued to review Joey’s homework. He pointed, his mouth still mostly full, “And this one, too. You added them wrong.”

As Joey began obliterating his work on that problem as well, another boy ran past them haphazardly to one of the long tables behind them. The boy slammed down his tray on the end of the table to get the attention of the students there, causing the couple of kids on the end of the table to scramble to save their own trays from his.

"The hell, Alan?!" "What?!" "Ow, watch it!" a couple of the kids at that table yelled.

"Guys, guys, guys! There was a news report a few minutes ago! Remember that kid who wrecked Falkner yesterday?!" the uniformed boy, Alan, excitedly expounded.

The students at the table all mumbled their confirmation.

"That same kid, AJ?! He went to Azalea Town overnight! And he just beat Buggy! Just as fast!!"

"What?!" "He what?!" "How?!" "Holy Helix, he's fast!" "Two badges?! In barely a day?!?"

Wade had turned around to also listen to this news. "Wait wait, Alan," he interjected, and Alan and the table of kids turned to him, "How can you be sure it's the same kid? Nobody could get to Azalea from here in under a day!"

"Yeah!" "What the hell?"

"No!" Alan proclaimed, "It *is* the same kid! The news story mentioned that he was the same one who beat Falkner just yesterday! AJ Downey!"

"Holy Trainer of Helix..." "That can't be true!" "Doesn't he ever sleep??" "Seriously, where's your proof!" "Yeah, how can we be sure you aren't making this up!?"

"I swear it's true!" Alan exclaimed, withdrawing a little, "M-Maybe they'll play the story again later!"

"I could call him and ask..."

Wade had his phone out and was looking down his contact list, but he wasn't the one who had said this. Joey, next to him, also had his pokegear out, and was now flouting it to the kids at the long table with the cockiest expression imaginable on his face.

"I have his phone number, after all," Joey added smugly, "I talk to him all the time."

Wade had a look of utter disgust on his face as he grabbed Joey's arm and twisted it around so he could see the number on-screen. He read off the number and then glanced at his own phone, and saw that it matched. What the hell would possess AJ to exchange numbers with *this pipsqueak*?? The hell does AJ see in this little asshole?!

The kids at the long table were equally distrustful and dismissive. "You liar!" "You're full of crap!" "Why would he want to talk to you?!"

“He thinks I’m pretty cool, actually!” Joey retaliated, wrenching his arm from Wade and standing up on his stool to get height on the older kids at the table.

“Your such a little liar, ratboy!” a familiar voice mocked, and the shit-eating grin and the color were wiped clean from Joey’s face. Richard Smith stood up from the table, and stepped out from the bench. “What? You think you’re so cool?” Smith continued, approaching Joey, “You’re not cool, you’re as gay as a kite! *Oh, I talk to him all the time! He’s such a dreamboat!*”

The kids at the long table laughed at Richard Smith’s mocking impression. Joey reached a hand back to find the table to lean against as Smith slowly approached him.

“You have his number in your little play phone? Why don’t you call him then? Get some alone time going? Cuddle up to him?”

Richard Smith was up against Joey’s seat now, but Joey had recoiled back onto the table, sitting on his homework. His Rattata was hissing angrily at Smith.

“Nobody likes you, ratboy! All gay in your tiny shorts and weak rat. Look, not even Wade wants to be seen with you!”

The moment Richard Smith had gotten up from the table, Wade had turned around and buried his face in his arms on the table, hoping to deflect attention from himself. The mention of his name made him tense up and hold his breath.

Joey saw this, and the tears that were already in his eyes started to pour out. Joey’s Rattata took that opportunity to pounce, grabbing on to Smith’s right arm, trying to sink its teeth in. But Smith batted the pokemon away with the other hand before it could bite down. Joey jumped down and picked up the slightly dazed pokemon, cradling it in his arms.

“That’s right, go cry to your mommy, fag!”

And Joey did just that, running out of the cafeteria, tears dripping from his face, leaving his lunch and his homework, both half finished, behind on the table.

Richard Smith smirked after him, and turned back to the long table, where various smiles were put on to greet him. A couple of the kids had gotten up to throw away their food while the incident was happening. A couple more were playing with their remaining food right now as Richard Smith walked back over to sit down. A couple more greeted him with a “serves him right” or other glib remark as he sat back down to eat. Discussion had basically ceased at the table for now.

Wade’s face was still hidden within his arms, and his body finally forced him to take a breath. It was a short, fast breath, and it brought on the promise of tears. Never had he been this close to

taking direct fire from Richard Smith. Never had his fears been any more realized than what had just happened. He wasn't the target of the insults, but he was still collateral damage. Especially since he was basically going to do exactly what Joey had done; maybe not as smugly as the youngster had done, but he was going to brag about having AJ's number nonetheless. He was glad that he hadn't, or it might have been him that had just run out of the cafeteria.

Several minutes had passed and there was some semblance of discussion coming from the table behind him again. Wade felt he probably wouldn't be noticed anymore if he left now. He stood up. His eyes were red, surely, but if he kept his head down, he'd be fine. He saw all of Joey's things scattered about the table still, some on the floor. He decided to pick up the pages from the floor and gather Joey's homework up. He left the cafeteria.

Joey's bunk was empty, and Wade didn't blame him. Wade left the homework on the bunk and then went to do the same thing as Joey likely did: head to your private place along your favorite route to cry it all out.

"Yo, AJ! How're you doing? This is Joey, got a minute? Let's get together and battle! I-I promise things will be different! Route 30's where I'll be. Just give me a shout when you come. Anytime, e-even during school hours, will be fine. Just... just get here soon. Um, all right. Later."

Chapter 4 [1d8h20m]

Wade's hideout was underneath a bush along Route 31. He had taken the time when he was little to dig out a decent sized area under the bush. It provided him privacy from the outside world and basic protection from the elements, though it still got pretty wet inside when it rained hard enough. He's slept in it a couple of times, usually on weekends when no one expects you to be back in the morning for classes.

The hideout was spacious enough for a small child and his pokemon to sit inside comfortably, but you couldn't really stand or anything. The floor was covered in grass plucked from the nearby tall grass patches. The roof was simply branches and leaves that had been pruned to give enough headroom. He'd sometimes let his bug pokemon climb onto the walls and ceiling to munch on the leaves, to make the insides a bit bigger. Because, after all, since he started into his growth spurt, it's been getting a little tight inside.

Wade had spent most of the day here after he had fled from the cafeteria and Richard Smith. He spent it simply lying curled up on the bed of grasses, thinking, napping, daydreaming. He hadn't even changed out of his school uniform before coming here, so it was a little more uncomfortable than usual, but he didn't mind enough to return to the academy to change.

One of his Caterpies had, during the day, climbed up onto the ceiling above him and cocooned itself into a Metapod. Wade laid on his back now, staring up at the pokemon dangling above him, examining its outer layers, occasionally touching the carapace, feeling the weird texture, studying how it was so solid. The Metapod didn't mind much; it didn't really plan on going anywhere anytime soon.

Wade laid back and was considering napping again, his hand creeping under his shirt, when he started wondering what AJ was doing. AJ had said that he, what was it? He "knew the feeling"? Wade hadn't much thought on what he had meant until now. Was AJ saying he was.... erm.... that he, too, liked other.... um....

Well, what if that's not what he meant? What if he was talking about something entirely different? What if he got what Wade had said to him all wrong? Wade rolled over in the grass, tears coming back to his eyes. Because, after all, he was a freak, Wade was. Everyone else in the boys dorm went on talking about how they want to go out with the girls. All the various boys... well most of them, I guess, the ones that were Wade's age... they all snuck out onto the roof of the academy, because the academy had a big flat roof to it, and you can sneak out the bathroom window onto the roof, and the girls also had a window like that that the boys would often times go over to hide underneath and see if they couldn't see some of the older girls in the showers.... but Wade never did any of that. Wade didn't really need to do any of that because he was *allowed* into the boys showers, because he was a boy too.... but that was g.... the other guys always were mocking when they called someone doing something like that g.....

Was AJ like that too? He couldn't be, no. Because AJ was cool. Wade wasn't cool. He was a bug catcher, and g... But AJ was cool. He was smart, he was strong, he kicked ass and took names. AJ wouldn't be in here, lying under a bush all day long, skipping a bunch of class just because he was *almost* called.... that.... that thing that they called Joey. Poor Joey. Joey wasn't even old enough to know if he.... if he liked girls or.... not....

Wade rolled over onto his other side, and his Metapod made a sound that suggested it might be worried about him. Wade waved it off, and continued letting the stream of tears he hadn't noticed run down his face.

He suddenly sat up, nearly banging his head off the Metapod. He fished for his phone in his pockets, and then patted around where he had been sleeping all day. He picked it up from under some grass and ran through the list of contacts till he reached AJ's. AJ said he could call anytime, about anything. That he liked the brief break from.... the unknown?

The phone rang. It rang and rang for longer than usual. A world of horribleness went through Wade's mind in the extra two seconds it took for AJ to answer the phone. But none of it was compared to what actually happened.

"Hey, A...J...?" Wade started, and quickly stalled as he heard gasping and sobbing on the other end. "A-AJ?"

"Is.... Wade?" AJ gasped.

"Yeah, it's Wade, AJ, what's wrong?! Are you *crying?!?*"

"You.... sorry, Wade.... called at a..... kinda...." AJ sniffed back boogers, "...bad time...."

"AJ, what's wrong?" Wade asked frantically, "Are you hurt?! What happened?!"

AJ suddenly sobbed hard, and then was mostly silent, making high pitched noises like he was trying to speak through his crying, but simply couldn't.

"AJ, speak to me, what happened?!"

"Jus.... shddup.... shaddup...." AJ barely managed.

Wade clammed up. He sat and listened as AJ, on the other end of the line, alternately gasped for air and sobbed so hard as to not make any noise. He could hear music playing in the background, music that a Pokemon Center plays as background music, and he imagined the strong, confident, black-haired, gold-capped boy sitting in the corner of the Pokemon Center blubbering away miserably. There were so many questions he wanted--*needed* to ask, but he simply sat there and let AJ sob for several minutes. Wade felt like crying himself, but this matter of AJ, his idol, crying into the phone.... he felt he needed to be the strong one now.

"AJ," Wade whispered into the phone, "It'll be alright."

"No it won't," AJ cried, his voice cracking, and then sobbed some more, "They won't leave me alone."

Wade was confused and scared. "...Who...?"

"...The Unown," AJ sniffed.

Wade's mind flew backwards through time to weeks ago when he met AJ for the first time and AJ mentioned the same phrase.

"The.... Unown....? Like..... the pokemon?"

AJ gave another sob that Wade was pretty sure was supposed to be an affirmation. Wade's mind raced again, and a memory surfaced: "*Writhing mass of Unown overhead...*" Wade was now terrified. Was... was AJ the person Lance.... had been looking for?

"What did they do....?" Wade asked quietly, after listening to AJ cry into the phone some more.

"They.... took Admiral from me...." AJ barely whispered between crying.

"Admiral...?"

"Hesgon--" AJ started to say, but was interrupted by his own crying. "He's.... g.....gone..." AJ was barely understandable, his voice so high pitched that only Zubat might possibly understand him, if he even completed any words.

Wade was silent. He didn't know who Admiral was, but given the way AJ was crying, he could only assume it was one of his pokemon. Wade looked around at his own pokemon, and wondered if he would cry the same way if any of them were.... taken from him.

"AJ if I could be there in person, I would hold you close and let you cry on my shoulder..."

AJ sobbed once more, then managed, "That would be nice..."

Wade became alarmed momentarily as he realized he had said that outloud, to him, over the phone, and not just in his head. He freaked out a little, silently, as AJ continued sobbing on the other end. His sobs were slowing though.

"Just.... being here for me...." AJ said quietly, "Pulling me away from the voices overhead.... is enough... for now..."

All sorts of new questions popped into Wade's head, but he refused to ask them of AJ now. AJ was quieting down. "You'll be alright," Wade said, "You're strong."

"I can only hope...." AJ replied, sniffing again, "Thanks..... Wade....."

"Anytime."

Wade sat there, listening to AJ's breathing on the other end for a few more seconds, before the phone clicked, and beeped three times, indicating that AJ hung up.

Wade pulled his legs into a hug as he sat and thought over what just happened. "I need to figure out what the hell these.... Unown are... I think it's time to head back to school." Whatever AJ was dealing with was far greater than the petty things Wade was running from...

"Hello, this is Todd! AJ, right? My Psyduck is looking more and more like me. It's getting cuter! Shut up, it is! Stop laughing already, that wasn't supposed to be that funny!"

Chapter 5 [1d18h7m]

The shelves of the academy library were numerous, punctuated only by tables scattered occasionally between them. The rows of the stacks were all dark. Only the quiet ticking of a tiny clock punctuated the air. There was a single light lit in the library, a table light. It lit the stack of books that sat in front of Wade. Wade, still in his uniform, poured over one of the books in front of him.

The Unown are ancient pokemon, he had determined by now. The information about them was scarce, but what he had managed to find was very interesting.

First of all, Wade was wrong in thinking that Lance was the champion of the Indigo League. He is, at best, the "acting" champion. The actual champion, Red, had long ago vanished from the face of the region.

Who was Red? Well, he was the "host" of "the voices". Wade hadn't known what any of that meant a few hours ago, but now he was quite certain. Scientists have actually been studying this "Red" kid, well, at least before he completely vanished. They are quite certain now that he wasn't schizophrenic, as they had initially thought. Instead, he literally was possessed by a strange otherworldly force. Yes, apparently they have scientists that study "strange otherworldly forces".

Within the last year, they discovered that Red might not have been the "first" host, that there might have been others, there might *be* others yet to come. The Ruins of Alph, initially discovered years ago and named "Alph" after the strange hieroglyphs found on the walls, were recently connected to the voices. Recently discovered rooms in the ruins tell a story about an ancient land thousands of years ago called Ransei. The story told is of a feudal warlord queen and her conquest of the lands with the help of what they had called "the beings". Scholars and scientists think there may be more instances throughout history, or even future history, where the voices have touched an individual and helped them to greatness. Because the writings of the feudal queen speak of events discussed in her head that match events that unfolded with Red, and may match events that will unfold in the future, if---

Wade's phone rang, and he snapped to his senses. He came to the realization that he was the only person in the library. He checked the time on the clock on the wall, and was appalled by the hour.

He answered the phone: "AJ, it's one o'clock in the morning! Don't you ever sleep??"

"I'm sorry if I woke you," AJ apologized, chuckling, "I thought you would be up right now."

"Why?? I mean, I *am* up, but that's only because I basically slept most of the day already for... reasons."

"...just 'reasons'?" AJ goaded, "You mean to tell me none of those reasons include the Midnight Bug Catching Competition?"

Wade went wide-eyed and scrambled to find his phone to check the date. He realized after a moment that he was holding said phone, and then proceeded to check the date on it. "Is that really today?!"

"That's really right now. I'm gonna sign up shortly, ya know, since I'm here. I'd honestly thought you'd be here already."

"I *would* be, if my whole day hadn't been completely derailed by...." Wade trailed off as he stood up and gathered his things.

"...by what?"

Wade licked his lips as he headed out of the library, "by Smith... don't worry about it. I'll be there as fast as possible. I have a lot to tell you."

"Really? Well, hurry up because the competition isn't going on for--"

"For much longer, I know..." Wade cringed, "Midnight to three. 'Catch all the nightcrawlers there are!' I planned to be there weeks ago and I completely forgot about it..." Wade dashed down the hallway and headed up the staircases towards the dormitories. There was a teacher there, staring at Wade, as Wade arrived at the upper landing.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" the teacher demanded quietly.

"Bugcatcher, sir," Wade replied, pausing to bow to him, "I was supposed to be at the catching competition, but I lost track of time."

"Well, it's much too late to be travelling the roads of Johto at this time of night!" the teacher harrumphed, "Get yourself to bed!"

Wade sighed, bowing again, "Yes, sir." He went into the boys' dormitory quietly.

"Wait, what happened there?" AJ said from the other end of the phone conversation.

Wade quietly weaved his way between the bunk beds lined up in the room and came upon his own bunk against the far wall. He barely whispered into the phone: "That teacher never lets us do anything, even when we have permission from the headmaster himself. It's better to just agree with him and then sneak out the back way. I gotta get ready. I'll meet you there as soon as I can."

"Alright," AJ chuckled, "Later."

Wade hung up the phone quickly so it didn't beep loudly at him. He began quickly and quietly changing out of his dirty and stinky uniform and into his bugcatching clothes. After pulling off his shirt roughly, he realized he was being watched from the top bunk.

"Hi," Wade whispered.

"Hi," Joey whispered back, lying on his side with the blankets pulled up over his head so only his face was visible, "There's a back way out?"

Wade chuckled quietly as he changed pants, "Can't sleep?"

"No," Joey sighed, pulling the blankets tighter.

"Me neither," Wade smiled, donning his bugcatcher's hat, "I'll show you, if you want."

Joey threw off the covers, revealing that he still had his uniform on. As Joey climbed down the ladder, Wade saw he had a large red dried pizza-shaped stain on his butt. Wade tried to suppress a giggle.

Wade lead Joey into the dormitory's shared bathroom, to the far wall where the sinks were all lined up. There were several windows along the wall, looking out over the building's flat black roof. Wade wiggled one of the windows upward, open, and climbed through it. Joey followed shortly after, and Wade lead him across the roofline to a maintenance ladder down to ground level. Wade started heading down, but Joey stayed back.

"Not coming?" Wade whispered to him, pausing on the ladder.

"No, I'm good now," Joey said, withdrawing a little, rubbing his elbow.

"Once you head down here, there's a path straight back that way through the woods that exits out near Dark Cave," Wade indicated vaguely behind him.

"Alright, thanks," Joey smiled.

Wade moved to descend the ladder again, but paused once more. "You wouldn't happen to own a bike I can borrow, do you?" Wade asked Joey.

Joey blinked at him. "....No?"

Wade shrugged, "Worth a try. I'll borrow Alan's, if I can remember the combo on his lock. I should be back by the time he wakes up anyway."

And Wade descended the ladder again. Joey watched him go, and then turned around. To the side, he found a blank bit of wall near some heating and cooling equipment. He moved over and sat down between some of the roof units, hopefully where no one could see him. He pulled out his phone and stared at his two contacts. He called one of them.

The phone picked up. "Joey?"

"Hi mom," he answered solemnly.

"Joey, sweetie, it's almost two in the morning, what are you doing up?"

"I don't know," Joey replied, "What are you doing up?"

His mom hesitated, "I was just heading to bed."

"With or without dad?" Joey asked pointedly.

His mother was silent.

"Mom, why did you send me here?" Joey asked tiredly.

"You need to learn how to train pokemon! It's for your own good, sweetie."

"I hate it here, mom."

"You've barely been there a week!"

"I've been here nine days," Joey demanded, "I've been counting them. My bed post has tally marks cut in it."

"Don't be so dramatic," his mother scolded, "You'll come to like it there. Don't you want to be a great trainer?"

"Mom, I could have been a great trainer just by training in the Olivine Gym!"

“The Olivine Gym never has anyone in it!”

“Then the Glitter Lighthouse! Jasmine’s usually there as well!”

“Joseph Maxwell [NAME], you will not raise your voice to your mother!”

“Oh, good, so I *do* get to keep dad’s name then?”

His mother was livid, “How dare you?! Your father and I have a--”

Joey hung up and slammed the phone at the ground at his feet. He breathed deeply, glaring out at the horizon, trying to milk this raging anger he had. But the anger broke down into tears, and soon he was shaking in angry crying. “Dommit, what the hell...?” He cursed his own shallow emotions. He wanted to be angry, to rage against everything, but he always cried when he got anywhere close to rage. And he hated it. Just like he hated this school. The sign out front said “Great Pokemon are nothing without Great Trainers.” It never mentions what the hell a “Great Trainer” even is... He hasn’t seen one yet in this school, that’s for sure.

He curled up, his knees to his chest, his arms and hands running through his hair. He sat there for a long time, thinking on the argument he just had, as well as the dozens of arguments he’s had since his mother decided to give up caring. No conclusions arose, of course. They never do. It’s not like the arguments are meaningful or productive in any way. They just are. He had to admit there was one benefit of being this far from home: he could simply hang up on her.

Joey looked up at the night sky above, and counted the stars for a moment. He then reached over and picked up the phone; he’d done worse damage to this phone before and it hadn’t broken yet. He dialed a number, biting his lip, and held the phone to his ear.

“Hey, AJ. This is Joey. ...Y-You got a minute?”

“Uh, hello, AJ? It’s your buddy, Irwin! I heard! You defeated that Whitney? I heard all about the battle! It makes me proud to be your friend! I hate to have to hang up on you! Call you later!”

Chapter 6 [2d 7h 18m]

Ace the Rattata ducked and dived through the tall grass, dodging around a Pidgey it had its eye on. It flew out of the weeds behind it and tackled it hard. The Pidgey, caught off guard, took a moment to get into the air, and that was enough time for Ace to spin around and smack it into the ground with a deft paw and latch onto it with its teeth. The Pidgey fainted, and Ace stood

atop it proudly. It looked around to its trainer, and found him still moping by a tree. It squeaked at him.

Joey looked over at his little Rattata with the hole in its ear. He smiled meekly. "Good job, Ace. You're the best..."

Joey returned to tracing things into the dirt with a stick, the facade of a smile falling off his face. Ace's ears drooped, and he jumped down off his fallen enemy and moved over to the youngster. Ace pushed his head up under Joey's hand, and Joey absentmindedly scratched him.

"Sorry, buddy, I'm just not feeling it right now," Joey mumbled. "You're the best Rattata around, in the top percentage of Rattatas even. But... you keep losing in trainer battles anyway..."

Ace protested this, squeaking angrily.

"No, we lost that battle with Mikey, remember? He used a Revive. I don't even have money to buy revives..."

Ace protested again, batting at the ground.

"It's not cheating," Joey spat, "The teacher said using items in battle is a thing we have to learn to do! If only there was a way to get them without needing to buy them..."

Ace squaked again, climbing up on Joey's knee.

"Richard Smith always takes the allowance the teacher gives us, Ace. Remember how he would battle us with his Granbull every day for a while? I stopped even sending you out. It's easier to just let him take the money without hurting you..."

Ace's ears drooped.

"I know buddy..." Joey said, a tear dripping down his cheek, "I know..." He scratched Ace's ear.

He pulled out his phone and looked at the single contact he had in his list. He called it.

The phone rang a couple times, and the other end picked up. "Hello?"

"Hey, AJ. This is Joey... Got a minute?"

"Joey, hey," AJ said. There was a tiredness in his voice that matched Joey's, "I don't know how long I have, Joey. There's no cell signal in the gym..."

"Oh yeah?" Joey said, perking up a bit, "Where are you at?"

“Ecruteak City. Morty has the worst gym ever. I’m surprised I haven’t broken my legs yet.”

“What??” Joey cried, concerned. Ace perked up at Joey’s mood change. “What are they doing to you??”

“Aheh... They’ve... they’ve got this invisible floor that if you make a wrong step, you fall down this weird wormhole back to the start of the path. It hurts a little the first fiftytimes....”

“Fifty?! How many times have you fallen down there?! How windy is the path?!”

“I don’t even know...”

“Well... can’t you just, like, carefully test the floor to see if it’s there before you step?”

AJ was a little hesitant on the other end. “So, um, how’s your Rattata doing?”

“AJ,” Joey scoffed, “Are you going to be okay?”

“I’ll be fine, Joey,” AJ assured, “It’ll just hurt a bit tomorrow morning. How are you?”

“I’m, uh...”

Joey glanced at Ace. Ace was making a face that read “just tell him already”.

“I’m... I’m doing alright,” Joey said, and Ace facepawed.

“You sounded a little glum before.”

“It’s nothing too... too bad... it’s um.... how.... how would you....?”

“Joey? I’m sorry, you’re breaking up... Shut up I’m going already, stupid faith force...” AJ sounded like he was talking to someone else.

“AJ? What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry, buddy, I gotta go. People are getting a little... impatient...”

“Oh, sorry, I’m not holding you up, am I?”

“You’re not. Sorry that I can’t talk more. I’ll see you later, okay?”

Joey looked even more depressed, “O-Okay... Later...”

The phone beeped three times. Joey looked at the screen, then dropped the phone at his feet. Ace jumped up and climbed up his shirt, trying to get to his face. Joey laid down at the base of the tree. Ace licked his face, and Joey simply let him.

“Ace”, Joey said after a moment, “Why do I need to go back to the academy? No one there would care if I didn’t go back.”

Ace squeaked again in a scolding fashion.

“The teachers don’t care. They barely notice me to begin with.”

Ace squeaked something again, this time a little less sure of itself.

“Wade doesn’t even like me. He just puts up with me because I sleep in the same bunk bed.”

Joey rolled over onto his side and Ace hopped down to stay in his line of sight. Ace offered one more rather unsure squeak.

“Mom and dad don’t care. They’re the ones who sent me away to this hellhole to begin with. They don’t want me anymore.”

Ace moved over and nudged Joey’s phone towards him.

Joey looked down at it. “AJ’s the only person who cares anymore, and he’s always too busy to help.”

Joey pressed dial on the phone again. The phone didn’t ring, but was silent for a moment before a familiar message started being played: “Hey, this is AJ. Sorry I can’t answer right now. If this thing could take messages, you could totally leave one, but I don’t know how to turn that on. Sorry!”

The phone beeped three times as Joey gestured to it as if it made his point for him. Ace sighed, and cuddled up against Joey’s chest. Joey scratched him absentmindedly. “Yeah, I know. I still have you, buddy. The best Rattata in the world.... we’ll show them.... some day...”

“Yeah, hello? Arnie calling. Are you awake now, AJ? Wow, they were right, you never sleep! I bet your pokemon are a lot stronger than before. I was wondering, do you happen to have a Chatot? I can’t seem to catch one. What is its weakness, I wonder..... how can you have ‘something close’? And why would a PC be its weakness??”

Chapter 7 [2d 15h 46m]

The academy librarian moved through the rows of books. She looked down every aisle and checked every table. There didn't seem to be anyone else around. She moved over to her desk and turned on a small bare bulb on the check-out counter, then moved to the door. She flicked off the lights in the library, and closed and locked the door.

Somewhere in a dusty back corner behind a shelf, Wade has suddenly lost the dim light by which he had been reading. He quickly produced his phone and checked the time. Nearly midnight. Time sure is weird when you're sleeping schedule gets thrown off.

Wade placed his phone down in his book and closed the book on it. He crawled out of his hiding spot and pulled his stack of books from the corner. He moved over to one of the reading tables and turned on the desk light, before dropping his stack of books and opening back up to where he left off.

Well, now was a good of a time as any: no one else was in the library now. He opened up the contact list on his phone and paged through 'till he found AJ's number.

"Good evening, AJ!" he said when the other end picked up, "It's me, Wade."

"Hey, Wade," AJ greeted. He sounded particularly tired at the moment.

Wade knew what was bothering him without even asking. When he had gone to meet AJ at the Bug Catching Competition, he and AJ had discussed the Unown. Or, as he sometimes called them for whatever reason, "the chat". Only AJ could see them; Wade had been often taken aback by AJ's tendency to look at or indirectly interact with them, or suddenly giggle or groan over something they supposedly said. They had determined at the time that this mass of Unown was the same mass that had plagued Red. AJ knew it, because they kept comparing his pokemon to the famous pokemon Red had, particularly his Pidgey. And for some reason, they kept talking about defeating the Helix at the top of Mt. Silver, though they also didn't know if the Helix would actually be *at* the top of Mt. Silver.

Wade and AJ didn't have much time to discuss anything else, because the Unown had ordered AJ to forfeit the Bug Catching Contest the moment he started. AJ only stuck around for the ceremony shortly afterward, and then had to move on. Since then, Wade had taken every moment he could to continue his research into what the scientists had found out about the Unown since Red.

"How's it going?" AJ asked.

“They’re still pushing you, aren’t they?” Wade cringed, flipping through his book.

“Oh, lord, the Mahogany Gym was brutal... I don’t even know how many times I was dropped back to start... My legs are killing me.”

“They can keep you awake but they can’t give you painkillers?”

“Oh I’m pretty sure I’m on painkillers, buddy,” AJ groaned, “Morty told me about it.”

Wade fumbled the phone as he sat upright, “Wait, what do you mean? The Gym Leader Morty?”

“Yeah? The ghost guy? He could totally see them too. He even did this thing... I’m not sure what he did exactly, but it silenced them for a while.”

“Wa-wait what? He could silence them?”

“It was weird,” AJ said, “When he and I agreed to fight, he did this move that shot.... something up into the mass of Unown, and they all froze. He told me that I could now battle him properly, but... I...”

“You couldn’t,” Wade completed.

AJ paused for a moment, confused. “How do you know?”

“Because there were several eye witness accounts of Red doing something similar. He would just freeze in place, looking...” Wade found the passage in his book, “‘constipated and helpless’, and he sometimes he would be there for minutes, or sometimes for hours.”

AJ groaned worried, “It wasn’t a good feeling... Eventually, Morty realized that he had completely cut off my ability to really do anything and just started asking me questions. He told me about how Lance is looking for me.”

“Yeah, the Champion was looking for you.”

“And how do you know that??”

“Because I met him a few days ago,” Wade said, leaning on the table, “He actually asked me if I could see the mass of Unown that apparently filled the skies of Johto days ago. I couldn’t. I can’t believe I’m caught up with the person the Unown were actually infesting...”

“I don’t like that word... ‘infesting’...” AJ cringed.

“S-Sorry. It’s used all throughout the research on this. What else did Morty tell you?”

“He told me they were mad. That ‘the voices were rioting’. That he severed the connection to their home dimension, and that it would only be a matter of time before the connection was reestablished. He was right.”

Wade leaned on his hand as he tried to parse what AJ just said. “‘*Their home dimension*’? So, they’re not really Unown then?”

“I think he said something like... ‘manifestations..... tuned to our world....’ something something I don’t remember. What?” AJ had turned away from the phone, probably speaking with the Unown. “I’m going, I’m going. Give me a break, you’ve been driving me for weeks now!” AJ turned back to the phone.

“Two days,” Wade corrected, checking his notes in his notebook.

“That can’t be right, I’ve been at this for weeks,” AJ demanded irritably.

“I’m sure you’d think so, being overworked like this, but it’s only been two days at least.”

“Holy Helix dung...” AJ gasped.

“Helix, right, gotta look that up too...” Wade muttered, making notes in his notebook, “There’s evidence to suggest the voices conjured his existence, that he didn’t even exist as a concept before Red.”

“Wha--dammit-- Wade, I’m sorry, I gotta go, they’re starting to riot.”

“I understand,” Wade said quickly, “One quick question, have you ever heard them mention the name ‘A’?”

“The letter? There’s a bunch of letter A’s in the Unown--.”

“What about... shit,” Wade frantically paged through his notebook, “What about the name ‘Solareon’? Or--Or ‘Gymmy’? H-Have they ever screamed about an urn?!?”

“What even... no, I’ve never... I-I’m sorry, I gotta go Wade...”

“It’s fine, go! Go! I lo---”

Wade halted, and then the phone beeped three times in his ear. He looked down at his phone, thumbing off the sweat from the screen.

“AJ....” Wade breathed, setting his phone down, “please survive this... I wanna know what you’re like.... without the voices overhead...” Wade rubbed the bridge of his nose, then looked down at his notes.

He crossed off the words “Solareon x Sunshine” that he had written down. Those words had been found in the ruins, written down by the ancient warlord in her chronicles of her time with “the beings”. These words, along with several other phrases had been found and documented. He ran a list of the what he considered the stranger ones in his notebook: “Zexy x M4”, “Prince Omelette”, “Aooo”, “Dongstortion”, “Operation Lovebomb”, “Domalakazam”, “Dootdoot”, “Camilla A. Slash”, “Solid Snake”, “DJ Stalinking”, “Queen Sunbrella”, “Commeownism”, “Nonon”...

The list went on. He didn’t know what any of the words meant, and some of them he couldn’t even pronounce. Unfortunately, he had yet to find a book that published the full chronicles of the lady warlord. That would be the next thing to look through.

Wade sat back in his chair. It just occurred to him that he had no idea why he was doing this. Would figuring this out help AJ at all? Perhaps it would help alleviate AJ’s mind if he knew what the voices were talking about in his head?

But then, the researchers studying this thing were fairly certain this was talking about future events. Events that had yet to happen. What if they didn’t publish all of the chronicles? What if they had kept the chronicles to themselves to make sure no one knew what future events held? Certainly if the chronicles talked of Red, and these other future “hosts”, they would talk of AJ and his quest. Perhaps AJ would benefit from knowing what the future held for him?

One thing was certain: he needed to visit the ruins himself.

“Hey, AJ. This is... Joey. Huh? No, I’m... I’m fine. I just, um... I’m wondering what’s keeping you, ya know. I’ve been waiting for you to come by Route 30 for a... for a battle. I know... I know. You keep saying you’re busy... I was just hoping. Um..... I’ll, uh.... later... then....”

Chapter 8 [3d 11h 58m]

Ace the Rattata sped along the ground, dodging left and right quickly and deftly. His opponent, a fellow Rattata, spun around on the spot, confused. It attempted to tackle Ace, but it missed and got hit by Ace’s counterattack. It spun about and attempted to tackle Ace where it thought it would be, but it missed and got hit by another counterattack. The Rattata then ducked and covered its head, and Ace went in for the final tackle, sending it flying backwards into its trainer.

Mikey barely managed to catch the pokemon as it hit him in the stomach and knocked the wind out of him. He gasped for air, and the first thing out of his mouth was "Dear Helix, Joey!"

Joey grinned ear to ear as Ace flipped back to land next to him. "I think I won this time Mikey!"

"Have you really been training all this time?!" Don exclaimed, flabbergasted.

"Yep! And it finally paid off!" Joey beamed, "Where's the prize money?"

Mikey scowled as he dug into his trouser pockets. "It's not fair," he whined, handing over some money. "You cheated somehow!"

"No I didn't!" Joey spat back, pocketing the money, "You're the one who's been cheating! You're not allowed to revive your pokemon after they're all fainted!"

"Yes you are!"

"No you're not!"

"Yah huh!"

"Nuh uh!"

"Yah huh!"

"Nuh uh! Go ask the teacher!"

"Fine! I will!" Mikey spat, then turned around and moved quickly away from Joey. Don followed him, glaring back at Joey as they left. Joey stuck his tongue out after them.

He then turned to Ace, extremely giddy. "We did it Ace! We beat them finally!"

Ace was jumping up and down with Joey, squealing in delight.

"We're unstoppable, you and me! We're gonna take on the world!"

Joey picked up Ace and spun around once or twice. He set him down in the grass and gleefully pulled out his phone. "I gotta tell AJ about this! This is awesome!"

Ace jumped up and down, watching Joey happily dial AJ's number. "Hey, AJ, it's---"

Joey froze, the smile on his face faltering a little. Ace sensed something was wrong and held still, seemingly ready to pounce. Joey closed the call a few times and then redialed the number.

"We're sorry. The number you have reached is not a public phone number. If you have dialed the wrong number, please hang up an---"

"No..." Joey muttered, his smile now vanished, as he closed the call a few dozen more times and dialed AJ's contact again.

"We're sorry. The number you have reached is not a public phone number. If you have dialed--"

"No...!" Joey closed the call again and dialed again, tears forming in his eyes.

"We're sorry. The number you have reached is not a public---"

"NO!" Joey dialed again, his face scrunching up in fear, anger, and pain.

"We're sorry. The number you have reached is not a public phone number. If you have dialed the wrong number, please hang up and try again."

Ace stood, ready to pounce, watching Joey stand rigidly on the spot, the phone to his ear, the tears down his face. It moved forward a little, and squeaked tentatively.

Ace dodged to the side as the phone slammed into the grass and bounced. Joey was off, sprinting down the Route, away from the phone and Ace. Ace glanced at the phone, alarmed, and determined it was too cumbersome. He then shot off after Joey as fast as he could, determined not to let the boy get too far away from him.

The phone laid on the ground, lit up with AJ's number on the screen. "We're sorry. The number you have reached is not a public phone number. If you have dialed the wrong number, please hang up and try again."

It beeped three times.

"AJ, howdy! It's me, Jack. Isn't it nice out? Did you know...? If the sunlight is harsh, water-type moves become much weaker. I did not tell you this one before, shut up. Oh, wait.... did I? I think it's because I honestly forgot that tip in the first place! Haha! ...He-Hello? AJ?"

Chapter 9 [3d 14h 23m]

"But where are the chronicles?!" Wade demanded.

The rotund researcher shoved him out of the Ruins of Alph and into the night outside, walking behind him to block him if he tried to head back inside. "Look, kid, I don't know how you managed to find your way into the A.B. tomb but there's nothing to see down there that hasn't been documented elsewhere."

"But the chronicles!"

"They're not here, alright?" The researcher halted, arms folded, "They've been carefully preserved and shipped off to research labs elsewhere!"

"Where?!" Wade demanded again, turning to face him.

"Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you! We don't need some snot-nosed bug catcher breaking and entering just to destroy priceless artifacts!"

"I don't want to destroy them! I want to read them!"

"And by reading them you would be destroying them! Documents that old have to be handled with the upmost care or they'll crumble to bits! Not to mention, can you read the ancient Ransei language?"

Wade deflated a little. "They're... they're not in Kantonese?"

The researcher snorted. "No! *Are you serious?!* They're in a dead language that few people even know how to read anymore! We translated them as best we could given our knowledge and published the results."

"Well... well they're not complete!" Wade tried, pointing accusingly again, "You're hiding things!"

The researcher openly laughed, causing Wade to falter in his disposition again, "What are you, a *conspiracy nut*? The works themselves aren't complete! Why would we hide anything?! We want as many researchers working over this information as possible! That's how science works!"

"But what about information on the future?!" Wade reasoned, "Don't you think you're going to cause problems just publishing all that info??"

The researcher held up a hand to him, "Alright, you've been listening to Lance far too much."

Wade was taken aback. "Wh-what?"

"Lance is crazy, alright? Don't listen to his tauros shit about the Unown and all that," the researcher wiggled his fingers mockingly, "He's off his rocker."

"No he's not!" Wade retorted, disgusted.

"Even if he's not, he's ruined his good name over this malarkey."

"You've read the chronicles, right?" Wade spat, "They're word for word what happened to Red!"

"No, they're not!" the researcher retaliated, "Ninety percent of what was in that crazy warlord's diary is utter nonsense! Just because someone comes along and picks and chooses words together out of the chaos and it just so happens to match up to real events if you arrange them this way or do a word find puzzle over them that way *doesn't* make it true or predictive or any of that nonsense. I've heard the whole thing before kid, believe me."

Wade huffed angrily. "You're wrong."

The researcher folded his arms.

"You'll see. Another 30 percent of that diary is going to come true over the next few days. You watch."

"Give me evidence, and I might change my mind. In the meantime, you need to leave the premises." He gestured towards the exit.

"You want proof?" Wade said, digging into his pocket, "I'll--! I'll give you proof right now!" He pulled out his phone and started scrolling through his contact list. The researcher gently turned him around and began pushing him towards the exit. "I've---- I've got it right here...." Wade dialed AJ's number and held the phone up to his ear. As it rang, the researcher calmly continued pushing Wade out towards the exit. Wade shook him off and walked on his own in front of him.

"Hello?" came a voice over the phone.

"AJ? This is Wade. I need you to--"

"Wade?! Oh thank Helix!"

Wade became alarmed at AJ's tone. "AJ? Wh-what's wrong?"

"There's a freaking war going on over my head, buddy," AJ sighed miserably.

The researcher eyed the suddenly worried bugcatcher, and Wade looked back at him. Wade glared at him, and opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but then simply gave him a rude gesture and stormed off. The researcher snorted in amusement as he watched Wade head towards the ruins gates.

"What do you mean a war?" Wade asked, worried, now out of earshot of the researcher.

"They think LazorGator is too powerful. Half of them want him dead, the other half don't, and they've been fighting it out in my head all day. Wade, buddy, *I'm standing at the PC right now*. I'm--- I'm scared."

Wade swallowed. "W-w-when you say.... d-dead? Like.... how...."

AJ barely whispered, "Like Admiral..." Wade could sense the tears.

Wade was outside the eastern gates now. He backed up against a nearby cliff-face and slid down to sitting. "B...But Admiral was simply..... r-released..... r-r-right?"

AJ on the other end was silent for a moment. Wade bit his lip. "I'm scared, Wade," AJ finally whispered, "I'm scared for my whole team. They've nearly pressed the button on Prince Omelette already."

Wade cleared his throat, "Pr--prince.... Omelette?" He grabbed his backpack and started fishing for his notebook with one hand.

"My poor Togepi. He was deposited into the PC earlier today, and every time they go into the PC, I see his scared little face staring back at me..."

Wade flipped open his notebook and shuffled through pages until he found the list of words he didn't recognize. He grabbed his pen and checked off "Prince Omelette" and tried hard to remember what words were around it.

"But, Wade," AJ continued, "sorry, you got me off on a tangent. I need your help. I... I deleted Joey's number."

"Good."

"Huh?"

"Guh...uh... Goo-good grief," Wade swore at himself silently and paid attention now to AJ.

"They made me do it," AJ continued, worried, "They made me delete his number. Half of them didn't even want me to do it..."

"And how does... erm... I mean, what do you want *me* to do about it?"

"I need you to check up on him for me."

"Why? He's a big boy. He can take care of himself."

"He's been having problems lately--"

"We've all been having problems--"

"Wade! Listen to me!"

"I am!"

"Then shut up, ya dick!" AJ snapped. Wade flinched. "I don't have much time, remember? You're my friend, and you're closest to him. I need you to check up on him and tell him I accidentally deleted his number. And *don't*.... mention the Unown to him."

Wade blinked, "Why? Wouldn't it be---"

"Wade, you're the only one who knows about them, and I want to keep it that way."

"...Oh..." Wade was speechless. AJ had entrusted him and only him with a secret. Sure, he had other guys in his contact list. A bunch of other guys, from what he gathered from various places. Joey, for example, bragging about it the other day. AJ had mentioned Todd and Irwin in previous calls... And Alan was recently boasting about getting his number.... But only with Wade had he entrusted his secret... Only with Wade had he been fully open about the situation...

"Wade, please answer me, they're getting antsy again."

"Y-Yes, yes," Wade answered, "I'll do that."

"He usually hangs out on Route 30 and---"

"He sleeps on the bunk above mine at the academy, AJ, I think I'll find him okay."

"The... the academy?"

Wade was confused, "Surely I've told you about---"

"Yes, *you* did," AJ cut him off, "But Joey never mentioned anything about going to the academy."

"He didn't?"

"No! He---aw shit, they're rioting again. Promise me you'll talk with him for me?"

"I promise, AJ," Wade said quickly, "Stay safe, please?"

"There's no way I can promise that..."

Wade mumbled, "I know..." as his phone beeped three times in his ear.

He looked down at his phone in the darkness. The backlight on the phone was barely bright enough to light the LCD screen: he could hardly make out AJ's number on the screen. What even happened when the other person deleted your phone number? Couldn't Joey still call *him*? Surely if that was the case, AJ wouldn't have been panicking about this nearly as much. Does that mean if Wade deleted AJ's number, he wouldn't be able to call Wade anymore?

What if AJ deleted Wade's number? AJ already deleted Joey's number. And not by his choice, but by the choice of those fucking Unown. They--they could delete his number too! What would happen if he lost contact with AJ?! Could Wade even *handle* losing AJ?!

Wade hugged himself at the base of the cliff face, freaking himself out at the prospect. No, he can't do this. He can't do this now. Not now, not to AJ. He had to pull himself together. He had to be strong for AJ. Strong. Be strong. For AJ.

Because after all, AJ.... heh... AJ was in the hands of some trans-temporal beast from another dimension that controls his every action and, as evidence suggests, could change the very fabric of reality around him to its whim. Wade didn't have that problem.

Hell, if the Unown were as strong as some of the Chronicles suggest, they could potentially destroy the world if they really wanted to. Some of the passages he had read from the Chronicles suggested they had... or possibly, would... something about how the universe unraveled thanks to an unchecked rift in the dimensions because their host died.... something about a cat forced to dance for all eternity... something about glitches in reality causing everyone around the host to turn to shadows every so often....

Wade didn't know how thinking about these aberrations of nature calmed him, but it did somehow. Wade was not in the situation AJ was in. Maybe that's what calmed him? Wade had full control over his actions. Full control over his-- well, he at least understood his reality. And he had to help AJ, who didn't.

Wade breathed slowly and deliberately, then stuffed his notebook haphazardly into his backpack. He got up and began up the route towards Violet City. Along the way, he wondered if AJ ever thought of any of this...

"Hello, this is Todd. AJ, how are--- AJ? AJ, what's wrong? Are you.... crying? AJ, what happened? ...They did what?! Prince Omelette?... What?! How could they just let one of your pokemon go?! That's absurd! You really should call up Bill and get that set straight! ...AJ, it'll be okay. I'm sure you'll find him.... Heh, no no, I was gonna talk about my Psyduck again.... kinda pales in comparison..."

Chapter 10 [3d 15h 24m]

The boys dormitory was bustling with activity for so late at night. The moment Wade walked in, he was met with a raging pokemon battle taking place in the middle of the dorm. A Zigzagoon and a Hoothoot were circling each other, feinting and striking at one another, their trainers trying to circle with them, shouting orders. A large number of the boys were packed onto the bunks nearer the fight, or standing up on ladders and chairs to get a better view. Lots of shouting and jeering was coming out of everyone involved.

Wade had just entered the dormitory when three boys pushed passed him on their way out. The last of them paused for a moment, grabbing Wade's arm.

"I wouldn't be here if I was you. The teach's gonna be here any second and the whole lot of them are gonna get us in trouble again."

"Was this Smith's doing again?" Wade cringed.

"He's got the bird," the boy replied, indicating the battle, "Said Winston's import'd pokemon was shit, and a battle broke out. Time to sleep in 'e hideouts, ya?"

The boy moved to leave, but Wade grabbed his arm, "Hang on, have you seen Joey around in here?"

The boy gave him a confused look. "Who?"

"Never mind," Wade dismissed, and the boy ran out.

Wade quickly moved into the room and through the other boys, working his way around the battle. He reached his bunk bed and opened his locker. Wade examined this situation as he swapped a few things and pokemon in and out of his backpack: The top bunk was empty. Joey's uniform and books were still there, but Joey himself was missing.

"He's probably still training," Wade told himself, "Guess I'll have to check Route 30."

"WHAT'S GOING ON IN HERE?!"

"Shit!" Wade ducked away from his bed, grabbing his backpack. He slinked quietly into the bathroom as the dormitory exploded with activity: all the boys rushing to their rightful places as fast as possible. Wade sprinted, hunched over, towards the windows along the far walls. As he moved, he saw a couple pairs of feet vanish from under stall doors, as boys in the toilet stalls invariably jumped up onto toilet seats to hide from the inevitable teacher scan. Wade reached the window, which had been left open by whoever used it last. He dove through and rolled back to hide under the window sill. He held his breath, peaked inside, and closed the window softly once he saw the coast was clear.

Wade laid down and began crawling across the black roof liner, trying his best to stay out of view of the windows. He could hear the teacher screaming inside, with his usual threats of writing up everyone in the dormitory. Once Wade felt he was safely past the view of the windows, which was probably three meters further than what he usually thought was enough, he got up and tiptoed towards the maintenance ladder.

After checking to make sure no one would see him climb down, he made his way down and out towards the wooded shortcut that lead to Dark Cave. It was only as he was walking along this path that he started to breathe normally again.

He stopped and dropped his backpack to the ground. Even with the full moon above, it was nearly impossible to see in the woods here. He rummaged around in his backpack and pulled out a pokeball at random. He opened it and after a flash of light, he could hear the beating wings of a Butterfree.

"Catie?" Wade said into the darkness, "Is that you?"

The Butterfree chirped a happy acknowledgement.

Wade chuckled, "You can see better than me, right? Help me find that Volbeat I traded for."

The butterfree fluttered over to the backpack as Wade started to pull out pokeballs one by one. He did this until his butterfree confirmed it was the right pokeball. Soon, a Volbeat appeared in front of him, its glowing tail lighting up the immediate area intermittently.

"Hey, there he is," Wade smiled, throwing on his backpack again, "Volby? I need you to help light the way."

The Volbeat crossed its arms and buzzed its refusal. Wade sighed as he held out his hand. In it was a snack he had pulled out of his pack, just for this reason. "Do it for a snack?"

The Volbeat eyed the pokesnack aversely, snatched it from Wade's hand, and then started down the path in front of Wade, periodically lighting its tail up to show the way. It munched the snack as it flew.

The three of them came out of the woods near Dark Cave and headed down Route 30. It was around here that Wade began calling Joey's name out.

"Joey??" Wade cupped his hands over his mouth. "Joey! Hey, Joey?!" He turned to his Butterfree as he walked. "We're looking for a kid, yag high, with a Rattata. Usually wears a blue hat and shorts. Check the woods, please, Catie?"

The Butterfree nodded and swooped away into the trees. Wade continued down the route, calling for Joey. He paused at the top of a small ledge. His Volbeat landed on his shoulder and tugged his ear. Wade told him to not do that, then handed the pokemon another snack. Wade scratched the Volbeat's neck affectionately, and it smacked his hand away and took flight again.

Butterfree swooped out of the woods from the right and gave Wade a negative signal. It swooped into the woods on the opposite side of the path.

"Where the hell could that kid be?" Wade asked himself, jumping down the ledge. He walked a few paces further before he stepped on something. He looked down at it, but his Volbeat had continued moving down the path. "Volby, come here."

The Volbeat turned around and defiantly took a bite of the snack.

"Just come here, Volby," Wade snapped, "I'm not going to coddle you for everything. You have to meet me halfway at some point."

The Volbeat looked irritated, but flew over to hover next to Wade anyway.

"I try to be reasonable," Wade told it, "But you have to work with me." Wade bent down and picked up the thing he stepped on: a phone.

In the light of Volbeat's tail, Wade turned it on and scrolled through the contacts list. Except, there was only one contact on this phone. He pulled out his own phone and checked: the contact was AJ's.

"Oh, shit..." Wade mumbled, "this isn't good...."

He called the contact on the found phone: "We're sorry. The number you have reached is not a public phone number. If you have dialed the wrong number, please hang up and try again."

Wade's Butterfree swooped out of the woods again, and fluttered near Wade. It gave a negative on finding anyone around.

"Catie..." Wade mumbled to his pokemon, "I think.... I think Joey might have run away...."

"Yeah, AJ, I found his phone, but not him. Me and my pokemon scanned the whole route and didn't find him anywhere. I don't know where he is now... I know, I'm worried about him too now. Did you know you were his only contact? That kid really DOES have no friends..."

Chapter 11 [4d 5h 30m]

Professor Elm rushed out of his lab, following behind his assistant. He held a pokeball in his hand. He followed his assistant down the way to the center of town, where a small crowd was gathered around a tree in the center of town. Of course, in this town, everyone who lived in town constitutes a "small crowd".

"Alright, everyone, let's step back now," Elm called, waving back the people near him as he approached. The crowd parted and the scene appeared before him.

The crowd had given a wide berth to the tree, for fear of being gnawed at by the highly territorial Rattata that had showed up at the base of the tree overnight. The main cause for concern, though, was not the rat or the tree, but the boy the Rattata seemed to be defending with its life. The boy laid unconscious at the base of the tree, and no amount of shouting from a distance had woken him. And if anyone attempted to get close enough to touch him, the Rattata attacked them viciously. Three people had to be treated for wounds caused by this rat.

What made the situation more absurd was that most all of the pokemon in town were not fit for fighting. They were pets or work pokemon. They laid around all day, or worked fields, cleaned house, and moved heavy objects. They had not been trained to fight, and certainly not against this intensely trained Rattata. Someone had attempted to battle the rat with their pet pokemon, and it was summarily beaten in and knocked out. The last trainer the town had had, who might have been able to easily beat this pokemon, had left to start his gym challenge a few days ago.

Professor Elm, thus, brought the last pokemon in town that had any fighting training at all: a young Cyndaquil he had offered to the last trainer. And even this young Cyndaquil barely had any training, so no one was sure if it could even help the situation.

The crowd of people stepped back as Professor Elm stepped forward. He stopped a meter from the apparent perimeter the Rattata had made around the boy. He called forth the Cyndaquil from its ball, and it appeared before him. The Rattata immediately went for the attack the moment it spotted the fire mouse. Cyndaquil dodged and started spitting fire at the rat, an attack the rat did not foresee. Elm commanded his pokemon to continue the fire attack, to try and burn it if

possible. The Rattata looked already on its last legs and tired from defending the boy all night, so disabling the rat was priority.

Some of the townsfolk took the opportunity of the Rattata being distracted by the Cyndaquil to being approaching the boy, but the Rattata broke off from the fight to rush at them. Elm commanded the crowd to stay back as he commanded the Cyndaquil to follow the rat. The Cyndaquil chased after the Rat and tackled it, landing on its back and sweeping it into a roll. The two pokemon rolled into the crowd, which parted rapidly to stay a safe distance. The Rattata and Cyndaquil broke free and began taking swipes at each other. The fire mouse breathed fire at the rat, and the rat circled around and did a flying leap at the mouse. The leap connected and the rat bit down hard on the Cyndaquil. The Cyndaquil cried out in pain and lit the fur on the rat's tail aflame. The Rattata cried out as well and slashed viciously at the fire mouse. The Cyndaquil keeled over, unconscious.

The crowd gasped at this result. The Rattata rushed back to the boy and tackled any of the approaching people away, and proceeded to try and put out its tail by slapping it against the ground. It finally got it out, and it backed up against the boy's chest, hissing hard at everyone around it. But it was breathing heavily, and after two or three hisses, it collapsed, twitching, on the ground.

The crowd paused for a moment, to make sure the Rattata surely was down for the count, before a few people rushed in and checked on the boy. He was breathing, his pulse was okay, and he responded mildly to shaking. Someone grabbed his pokeball and recalled the Rattata into it, as another person picked up the boy and brought him into one of the houses. Treatment for exhaustion was forthcoming.

"... ..Ahem, we are TEAM ROCKET! After three years of preparation, we have risen again from the ashes! WAHAHAHA! Giovanni! Can you hear? We did it! We have come to power again! It's time to return to your rightful place as our boss! WAHAHAHA!"

Chapter 12 [4d 12h 20m]

The radio sat in the center of the table, playing the message over and over again. The kids in the cafeteria sat around the table, listening to it in silence. Some had food in front of them, but they weren't hungry. Some were lost in their thoughts, staring off into space, or had their head down on the table. Some were listening intently for any other message, any sign that the trouble is worse or has passed, or what might be going on in the radio tower.

Allen was staring a blank piece of notebook paper, on which he was trying to determine the situation fully. Liz had her feet up on the bench, hugging her legs, hoping her mother, who

worked in the tower, was okay. Mikey was crying softly against the wall with his pokemon, with Don lying next to him, staring blankly at the ceiling. Gina was writing something angrily in her notebook, and would usually crumple it up and throw it at the wall when she was done with a page. Richard Smith was at another table by himself, his back to most of the kids, biting his fist so hard he was starting to bleed.

Wade paced. He paced back and forth beside the table with most of the kids around it. He occasionally would stop to try and say something, but nothing would come out of his mouth, and he would begin pacing again.

Classes had been canceled the moment the news broke of the Radio Tower takeover. Or rather, the moment normal radio service was knocked off the air and all of the airwaves had been taken over by Team Rocket's message. The academy staff thought it was best to keep all the kids under their care indoors this evening, instead of the usual thing where everyone scattered across the routes of Johto. The rooms were all free to them to roam, but most of the kids had stayed in the cafeteria for dinner.

Many of the kids had suggested that AJ could help solve this problem with Team Rocket. But no one could reach him.

Someone even suggested that Richard Smith could go and beat up Team Rocket. But it was that moment when his cool kid bully facade had literally shattered to dust as he broke down crying in front of everyone, saying he didn't want to die at the hands of Team Rocket.

So now, it was simply a waiting game. A good number of their parents worked in Goldenrod, and a lot of those worked in the tower. So it was in their best interest to simply wait by the radio, hoping that everything would turn out fine.

Wade's phone rang, and all heads turned to him. He pulled it out and looked down at it. He sighed solemnly at the other kids as he walked out of the cafeteria. He answered the phone before he reached the door. "Hi mom," he answered sullenly. He became aware as to just how much his voice echoed in the room when there was literally no other sound to drown him out.

"Mom?" AJ's voice from the other end of the phone call replied.

Wade glanced back as he turned the corner into the hallways. The other kids had resumed their brooding. Liz's crying renewed.

"Wade?" AJ asked, confused, "Why did you call me 'mom'?"

"AJ, dommit," Wade hissed quietly when he was finally out of earshot of the Cafeteria, "Where the hell have you been??"

“What??” AJ was seriously confused and taken aback now.

“Do you know how many of us have been trying to reach you during this crisis??!”

“What crisis?! I’ve been in the Mahogany Gym!”

“Turn on your damn radio!”

Wade heard AJ bump his phone around on the other end, and then the line went silent. After a moment, he heard AJ come back on the line, panicked. “Helix shit!” AJ spat, “I thought I toppled them already just earlier today!”

“Y-y-yo--- what?!” Wade stuttered.

“I found an underground hideout of theirs and broke it up! But now they’re at the radio tower! What the hell?!”

“You’ve done it once! Go over there and break it up again!” Wade demanded.

“I’ll try, Wade. It seems to be the next major goal the Unown have set for themselves now. But real quick before I go....?”

“What?!”

“What about Joey?”

In all the pain of the Tower takeover, Wade had completely forgotten about the pipsqueak. “Is that all you’re thinking of right now?!” Wade spat angrily.

“Domdammit, Wade, I’ve got fifty things going on at any one time in my head right now and I don’t need sass from you over this shit!”

“I didn’t find him, alright?!” Wade snapped, “We looked, and he’s vanished! Excuse me for prioritizing actual freaking things over your boyfriend problems!”

Wade hung up angrily on him and nearly threw his phone against the hallway wall. He lashed out and kicked the wall instead, hurting his foot. He leaned against the wall and began crying openly. No one would bat an eye at him doing so right now, not that it mattered to him anyway.

What the hell did AJ see in that little pipsqueak anyway?

“AJ, I’m sorry about earlier, I.... you want me to what? ...Why Route 30?Wait, what are you doing back home? I know, you never have time to talk... You found Joey? ...you didn’t find Joey... Alright, okay, I’ll... what..... no, I am not wearing..... I hate you....”

Chapter 13 [4d 18h 45m]

Wade sat against a tree along Route 30, twirling a small blue cap in his hands. This was where AJ told him to be. As dire as the situation was at the Radio Tower, Wade was actually quite glad that it meant none of the usual kids were on the Route to see him dressed up in blue shorts and white shirt, like Joey had been. His usual bugcatching outfit was behind a nearby tree, ready to be thrown on the moment AJ and his voices left.

This was the stupidest plan ever. “If you dress up like Joey, the voices will think I got Joey’s number back and shut up about it.” This costume would fool no one. The Unown were an otherworldly entity! Would they really be “fooled” by Wade pretending to be Joey?? And why the hell did they even care so much about that pipsqueak?!

“Hey!”

Wade looked up and saw a trainer with gold pants, red jacket, and gold and black cap coming his way. Wade smiled, “Hey, AJ!” He got up, tossing the blue baseball cap on his head.

It was weird, looking at him. All the troubles in the world seemed irrelevant next to his weary, smiling face. For a moment, everything seemed right in the world.

AJ approached slowly, picking his way down the path. It seemed like he was being pushed around a lot, and he tripped up once or twice, but always managed to catch himself. He stepped up to right in front of Wade and smiled cheekily. The bags under his eyes were plainly visible.

“You look tired,” Wade said, smiling but slightly concerned.

“After this is over, I’m going to sleep for a week. You can come and make sure no one wakes me up during that.”

Wade laughed, blushing. AJ was looking him up and down.

“You look silly,” AJ giggled.

“You told me to wear this!”

“I did! And it’s working,” AJ grinned, “The chat all thinks you’re Joey.”

Wade looked up above AJ's head, searching for evidence of this mass of Unown. The stars above him flickered and moved a bit, but otherwise nothing obvious presented itself to Wade.

"Can you see them?" AJ asked.

"No," Wade replied.

"You know more about them than I do," AJ said, looking up at them swirling around above his head. "Well, I know a few of them personally." AJ jumped up and caught something invisible in his hand. "This one's Jorsun," he said, holding out the invisible Unown to Wade, "He likes to stop my pokemon from evolving. At least, that's what the rest of them like to think."

As AJ looked up at the mass again, Wade pulled his backpack over with his foot and he got out his notebook again. He flipped to his list of words and checked off "Jorsun".

AJ pointed. "That one's too high to grab. He's Faithfulforce. He and a handful of others like to lead everyone. ...Or maybe that's Faithfulfarce...?"

Wade looked again, and found that word as well.

AJ looked down at him. "What that?"

"Notes on your friends," Wade replied, "If you didn't have a whole category of science and research backing you up, AJ, I'd think you're a freaking loony."

AJ laughed, "I *am* a loony, what are you on about? I've got *voices* in my head!"

Wade laughed as well for a moment, as AJ batted away the invisible Unown. The smile on AJ's face was fading, and it took Wade's smile with it.

"They're getting restless again," AJ said solemnly, "Where's Joey's number?"

Wade turned and pulled Joey's phone out of his backpack. He handed it to AJ, who started putting the number into his own phone.

"What do you even see in him?" Wade asked bluntly.

AJ looked up and saw Wade's disgusted face. AJ grinned inadvertently as he continued to type in Joey's contact info. "I do this for them, the chat. I *have* to do this for the chat, they have control over me. Except, that is, for brief moments when I'm talking to someone, anyone. Phone calls are the best. I can be myself for a little bit. Just a little bit of time, before they take control again.

“And they *love* Joey,” AJ smiled, handing the phone back to Wade, “To anyone else, he would be a nuisance. Which,” AJ sighed, indicating the phone, “is probably why he doesn’t have any other friends.”

“So you don’t even like him?” Wade asked bitterly.

AJ chuckled unintentionally, “Wade, please, I love anyone who calls me, because it gives me a break from constantly being controlled. Joey was the first one who showed me the effects of this.”

“So you do like him more...” Wade mumbled, his lips puckered, staring at the ground.

AJ sighed, grinning a little, “Wade, get your head out of your ass.”

“Wade, listen, it’s more them than me,” he explained, continuing to register Joey’s number back into his phone, “They adore him, and sympathize with him. They want me to do naughty things with him, but then they want me to do naughty things to basically anyone I meet. They’re all insane and I’ve learned to try and tune out the worst of it.”

“So you don’t even like Joey?” Wade asked bitterly.

“I like him,” AJ said, handing the phone back to Wade, “He was my first phone contact, and he showed me that calls on the phone drown out the voices for a while. For that reason, I love everyone who calls me for a moment to talk.”

[Chapter on Joey visiting New Bark and heading east]

[Chapter 12: AJ flies home and finds out Joey was here, and he and Wade meet to trade Joey’s number again. Then Wade goes to track Joey down.]