

Riot in Johto

Randaleeee!

Von MiniMeani

Kapitel 12: Different yet Similar

Part of Dawn was aware that she was risking her and her partners' lives.

The sheer shock of the situation, however, rendered all concerns meaningless.

As Salamence swung down its claws, Braviary tumbled forward. There was a sickening crack and for a second, Dawn watched a body falling directly towards them.

Then, J crashed into her and Dawn was hurtled to the side. Her legs slipped; her hands lost their grip on Braviary's shoulders. J's head had hit the left side of her face. Tears prickled in her eye. She couldn't breathe, but rather felt as if her chest was smashed into pieces.

With all her might, she tried to fight against the pull of gravity on her back and J's weight sagging against her body. She clawed for any hold within arm's reach, yet cold air was the only thing brushing her palms. There was that lurch in her stomach; Dawn gasped and could only watch, how her vision tilted to face the massive cloud overhead.

"Piplup!" sounded a chirp to her left. In the shadow of the storm, Piplup's blue light stung in her eyes. It conjured a whirlpool and tossed it towards Dawn. The tug of the twister made her already spinning head feel like exploding. She swallowed a mouthful of cold water, but for a second, the move held her in place.

Enough time for Braviary to position itself underneath its trainer. The whirlpool released them and they toppled back onto the eagles' back. Coughing, Dawn dug her fingers into its shoulder, unable to care, when she ripped out a few feathers.

J slipped away. Dawn lunged to catch her, clutching her black rain coat so strongly, it hurt her hand.

Only then did she register the pain coming from her new bruises, but also another danger hovering at their side.

A growl deep and terrible rolled over her. Salamence's muzzle was contorted to a grimace. White hot flames crackled around its fangs. She could feel its wrath, its rage cutting through her like a knife.

Dawn's stomach dropped. "Salamence - please don't!" she tried to plead with it, her voice shrill in her ears.

It wouldn't listen.

Salamence tossed back its head, building up power behind its move. The resulting flamethrower burned in a brilliant light, so strong that Dawn had to avert her eyes. Braviary's muscles shifted underneath her palm as it dove away from the fire, which hissed and crackled. Like a sword it cut through the rain; Dawn felt the heat lick her

chilled skin.

Dawn grunted in an effort to keep up herself and J's heavy body, while Braviary fled, dropping, ascending and turning in abrupt sequences. Within moments, Dawn felt sick to her stomach. Her muscles burned. And more than once, she had felt one of Salamence's attacks so close it had almost grazed her back. Just being near that sheer power made her skin tingle.

A crash sounded from close by. Gasping, Dawn remembered Lugia. Despite the whipping rain, she tried to catch a glimpse of the legendary. For a moment, there was a silver hue in the corner of her eyes.

Its still here! shot through her mind. Terror filled her; it was only a matter of time before the dragon would get to them, but if Lugia decided to attack, everything was definitely over.

A black beam seared overhead. Tears welled up, when her beanie along with some strands of her hair were just ripped off.

"Braviary! You have to bring us down!" she cried over the wind, hoping beyond hope that her partner would hear her. "To the ocean! There is no other way!"

Another thundering blast shook her, when one of Salamence's moves was halted by Piplup's hydropump. Braviary yanked them upwards, almost in a vertical line. Dawn clutched to its feathers, wincing when she felt them loosen.

"Braviary!" she called once again, but the eagle shook its head. For the first time since Dawn could remember, her partner had defied her order. "I know it sounds crazy! Just do it before that mad dragon has us for dessert!"

Braviary still struggled with its decision, Dawn could see it in the way it kept glancing at the waves. J slipped under her arm and she held her breath, fearing that any wrong movement would make the huntress fall.

"If you don't fly down," Dawn now cried, her heart hammering against her ribcage, "I'll call you back into your pokeball! I *will* get to the ocean, whether you want it or not!"

She tried to swallow the heavy lump in her throat. *I'm so sorry, Braviary!*

The flying type came to an abrupt halt. It swivelled its head towards her, black eyes wide with shock, but finally, it relented. It thrust its beak downward and like a rocket, they dove towards the living manifestation of chaos.

Dawn felt as if she had lost her stomach somewhere at their starting point. Icy wind cut through her eyes, making them water. Images of them crash landing on some rocks popped up in her mind, no matter how firmly she brushed them away.

"You know what to do," she directed at Piplup, which emerged underneath the white feathers of Braviary's mane. It nodded, eyes beaming with determination.

With a trembling hand, Dawn let go of Braviary's shoulder and retrieved an item from her belt pouch. It was the mouth piece of her scuba gear, which she somehow managed to strap over J's mouth and nose. There was enough air for half an hour.

Dawn only prayed that it was still for some use to the huntress.

The sea was only meters away now. Braviary held a steady course, but Dawn felt its fear. "Use brave bird to break the waters surface!" she yelled and placed her free palm on its head. "It's going to be alright, I promise."

A roar sounded from behind and before them, water exploded in a spray of orange flames and mist. Salamence was still on their tail, yet there was little she could do as Braviary covered itself and its passengers in blue, sizzling energy.

Waves rushed at their sides. Dawn could feel their overwhelming presence, though she didn't dare look.

All she could do, was reassure her grip on J, take a deep, possibly final breath of salty

air and squeeze her eyes shut.

Ecruteak City's pokemon centre was packed with people swarming through the lobby. Joy could hear their muffled bickering, spoken worries and panic. Her trainee Emily, the daughter of the distant cousin, who had used to run that centre, tried to calm the crowds and coerce them to state their emergencies in an orderly fashion.

A trait Joy herself had long since abandoned as she would have resorted to threats. She was pestling revival herbs for the dozen new patients, all the while ignoring the tiny sprite of Porygon-Z, which darted about on the screen of her computer. The list of her mails was growing steadily, as most of her cousins and nieces bombarded each other with news of their emergencies.

Just as I anticipated it, Joy mused. A region wide catastrophe.

"Aunt Joy!" Emily called through a speaker. "I have some people here, who would like a word with you. I'll send them to you, alright?"

"I don't have time for visitors; unless somebody is at the verge of dying, I won't see anyone."

"You will find that this statement is quite close to the truth."

The door to her lab opened. Morty strode inside and at his heels was Whitney, Goldenrod's gym leader. The pink haired girl fumed, but she stayed in the back. Morty had spoken and after ensuring that the door was closed and they had their privacy, he elaborated.

"I hate to disturb you, but we need information on Hunter J's exact location."

Joy actually snorted. "That hunter? Why should I know? And more importantly," she narrowed her eyes at the blond boy, "why should I tell?"

Before Morty could even open his mouth, the girl had already blurted out, "Because she was with Dawn and its *her* we want to safe!"

Whatever morsel of her heart had softened in regard of the injured pokemon, Joy felt it petrifying into steel once more. "Really now? I was informed that the girl travelled east as in the opposite direction said hunter supposedly headed to."

"She teleported! Sakura called just now and told us how Dawn quit her contest and teleported to J! With things escalating right now-"

"Would you care to name those things? As you can see," she gestured at the medicine, "I haven't had the time to follow events unravelling miles from here."

Morty stepped closer to her desk. "It's Lugia. It has finally appeared."

Joy was actually proud of herself, when she didn't drop the pestle. She did halt in her work, but still she wouldn't look at the agitated Porygon-Z on her computer. It merely took her a lot more self-discipline, not to pay it any mind.

"Lugia. So those idiots did it again." Joy took a deep breath, hoping it wouldn't look to shaky and resumed grinding. "I believe this time you actually have some people at the ready."

"But they weren't with Dawn!" Whitney intervened. "Kellyn said he'd seen her, but ever since Lugia appeared they couldn't contact her! Something must have gone wrong, we need to save her!" To emphasize her words, Whitney slammed her palms on Joy's working desk. Several medicine bottles shook; an empty one even toppled over.

Joy had to strain herself not to call out Ursaring there and then.

"We are currently assembling the other gym leaders," Morty exclaimed, stepping

between the girl and Joy. "We hope that together we can avoid an aggravation of our current crisis. It would be great, if we could at the very least save a civilian caught in the crossfire."

Morty's sensible reasoning was rather pleasing to listen to. It annoyed Joy to no end. "I certainly wish you luck with your plans, but there is nothing I can-"

"Oh yes, you can!" Whitney burst out. "You have info on J. Morty knows."

"Not me, technically. Gengar knows." Out of thin air, his purple partner appeared. What really surprised Joy, however, was the orange ghost at its side. "Rotom called us."

Joy could only gape at her ghostly pokemon in dismay. At the very least, Rotom had the decency to look abashed. It wasn't even grinning. In fact, it looked worried. She shot it a glare that said *I told you. No.*

"Joy, I don't know, what your problem is with J," Morty said, "but if you refuse to help it could very well mean the end to *both* Dawn and J. Personally, I'd like to see both protectors of Ho-Oh safe."

On her computer, Z continued to spin around, even messing with settings like brightness or colour, Despite her forced indifference, something within Joy realised that J's life may, indeed, lay in her hands.

"J!" Dawn cried out, when she heard a cough. She dropped the mouthpiece of the scuba gear and leant over J's head, watching how her facial features contorted with strain. Though J neither opened her eyes nor responded to her call, Dawn could have wept with relief.

Carefully, she rolled the huntress into a recovery position and tucked her wounded hand between her cheek and the slippery rocks on the ground. It took her a ridiculous amount of effort, as Dawn trembled all over from the icy seawater that had drenched her clothes.

"I can't believe it," Dawn whispered.

Not only had Braviary beat the water, it had plunged deeply into the ocean, almost far enough to escape the waves' currents. Together with Piplup and Mantine they had then dived towards the sea floor, which, once the murky water had cleared, had turned out to be quite close.

Now she and J sat in a bubble that clung to the ocean floor. Her pokemon were outside, guarding them against aggressive passers-by.

Dawn's soaked flash light was the only light source they had. Their situation reminded her too much of the Bell Tower. And just like then, her mind wouldn't give an answer to the question, how she should get J to Nurse Joy.

"Okay, calm down," she told herself and watched as another cough jerked through J's body. Concern surged up and threatened to overwhelm her, but Dawn shook her head. "It's- it's going to be alright. Maybe it's not that bad."

As Dawn scooted around J's body, she tried to remind herself of the guardians' healing power. They had fallen from the highest building in Johto and had survived, she told herself. There was nothing that could threaten them. Nothing. *Nothing.*

And yet Dawn's heart hammered just the way it had underneath the rubble of the tower.

Gulping down the lump in her throat, she reached out and laid a clammy palm on J's midsection. Rough fabric was underneath her fingertips. In the quivering cone of her

light she could make out J's rain coat, torn and glistening with wet. Was it blood? she wondered.

She tried to trace the damage with her eyes, but J's arm was in the way. Full with apprehension, she grasped the limb and replaced it. Every twitch of her own body startled her. Dawn found herself fixating on J's expression. Was she rousing? Was she in pain?

When finally Dawn had a clear view of J's front, she was surprised to see her wearing a hard, black vest. A bullet proof vest.

She brushed over the fabric, not yet daring to hope. There, on J's left side, she found the texture ragged and burnt. Her hand quivered as she brushed her hand across the spot. Breathing was all but forgotten.

Suddenly, her middle finger slipped through a tear in the vest and touched something warm, sticky. She flinched back so hard, a few rocks pricked her skin. Dawn paid the ache no mind.

Her hand had a bluish tint; the blood clinging to it glistened at her in the richest scarlet, Dawn had ever seen. It made her sick, just thinking about the amount that hid underneath that armour.

J hadn't moved, but Dawn was sure that the crease on her forehead had deepened.

"Hang in there," she mumbled, resuming her examination. There turned out to be two holes, where Salamence's claw had ripped through the vest. Both were slick with blood. She tried to press against them in an attempt to stop the bleeding, which was quite difficult to do with J lying on her side. More than that, though, the vest hardly seemed to budge.

Dawn took another careful look at J's face and the rise and fall of her chest. Her breathing came in short heaves, a little erratic. Her eye lids twitched, but J didn't appear to be rousing.

Feeling as safe as she possibly could, Dawn laid J on her back. Part of the raincoat's zipper had survived, so she first pulled that apart and then wiggled both of J's arms out of her gloves and the sleeves.

All that was left was the vest - and Dawn had not the faintest clue, how she could open that. She traced the sides for a clasp, but they were perfectly even. The same applied to the shoulder straps and collar; smooth and black and in the way.

"Why does everything have to be so difficult with you?" Dawn snorted at the huntress, while she desperately tried to ignore the burn creeping up in her own chest. If she couldn't help J any time soon... It dreaded her to even think about the possibility.

"Come on," Dawn spoke behind clenched teeth, when she tugged at the shoulder portion. Instead of opening the vest, she tried to pull it over J's head. "Get off you stupid thing!"

That was the moment, J's eyes fluttered open.

"J?" Dawn gasped, staring right into J's unfocused eyes. "You're awa-"

WHAM!

Stars erupted behind Dawn's eyes, when J's fist smashed into her right temple. She staggered backwards, more rocks scratching her legs. For a moment, Dawn was blinded, but she made out a scuffling noise to her right. J was backing away from her, as far as the bubble allowed.

"Touch me again and I'll break your fingers!" J snarled at her.

"J!" Dawn cried out, her hand pressed at her temple in a feeble attempt to ease the throbbing. "What in the world was that for?"

"Girl?"

"Dawn! It's *Dawn!*"

As soon as her blurry vision allowed it, Dawn grabbed the flash light she had dropped and turned to the huntress.

J sat slightly hunched over with her back pressed tightly against the bubble's surface. Her bare right hand clutched the wounded spot, her muscles twitching. She blinked at the light glaring in the darkness.

"What is this place?" J squinted at the muddy rocks surrounding her. A shiver went through her body and she huddled a little closer. "What were you doing? Did you... take of my coat?"

"Yeah, I did!" Despite J's confusion, Dawn found it hard to keep a level head. "I had to get of your vest, didn't I? No need to hit me for that!"

"I disagree," J mumbled to her great annoyance.

A nasty retort lay on the tip of her tongue, yet Dawn managed to swallow it. With logic, she forced herself to calm down. J had been startled, nothing more. As painful as the ache in her head was, she was a little relieved to see the huntress awake.

However, she could still hear J's shaky breaths and sense the ache in her chest. So she shuffled a little closer, careful not to hold the torch right into J's eyes.

"I was trying to help. We have to get this thing of you; you've got a horrible wound-"

But J didn't respond. She didn't even seem to hear Dawn's voice. Her gaze darted over the surface of the light blue bubble. Little by little, a shiver crept over her body, until she rasped out, "Wh-where are we?"

Dawn froze in her movements. J had never stuttered before. "We- we're in a bubble," Dawn blurted out, her breath hitching, "under water."

"Un-" J choked.

It was as if a wave hit Dawn. All of the sudden, she was suffocating. Something, some unknown force had caught her and was now crushing her chest, her body. Cold claws wrapped around her insides, turning them into ice.

I'm dying, Dawn realised with a pounding heart, *I'm dying!*

She tried to think of a reason and her eyes fell on the bubble. Dawn gasped. It must have broken! Torrents of water were surely about to flood inside, sweeping Dawn into the darkest depths of the ocean. Desperately, she tried to brace herself with deep breaths, but was only capable of wheezing.

Then Dawn remembered; she wasn't alone! With a jolt she sat upright, almost slipping over the tangle of seaweed underneath her palms. Her clothes, sodden with cold sweat and sea water, stuck to her skin.

"J!" the girl called out, "we have to-" To what? Not even she knew, yet she couldn't leave the huntress by herself.

She received no answer. All Dawn could hear over her own frenzied heart was an odd noise. Like the cry of a suffering pokemon. A sob, a whimper. But there was no one else around, only...

Finally, Dawn faced the huntress - and although she had deemed it impossible, she felt her terror increase.

J, a woman who always dominated over her surroundings, now trembled in a tight little ball. She had her legs drawn close to her body and her forehead almost touched her knee. Both hands were clapped over her mouth and nose. Chalk white was her skin, except for the red marks glaring from her nails all over her cheeks. J's eyes were closed, her face furrowed in deep wrinkles.

The feeble whimpers came out of her shuddering throat.

If Dawn hadn't seen it with her own eyes, she wouldn't have believed it.

"J!" she exclaimed, yet in vain. J either didn't hear her or ignored her. Dawn pleaded it to be the later reason. She hastened over the few feet that separated them and fell on her knees, barely noticing the rough ground.

Once again, Dawn yelled her name and that time she grasped one of her wrists. Light blue eyes flashed up, their gaze wild.

"What's wrong?" Dawn couldn't keep a level voice; her stomach felt like it was doing somersaults. She wanted to feel relieved to have grabbed J's attention, but among the turmoil, wrath sprang up.

"You-" J screamed. All of the sudden, she leapt at Dawn. The girl flinched backwards, but she felt her own wrist caught in a bone crushing grip.

She tried to jump, crawl away, yet all she managed was falling backwards. J followed, her free hand shooting forwards. A gurgle was the last sound Dawn made, before the hand closed around her throat.

"You brought me here, did you?" J's eyes were white with madness as she thrust Dawn into the ragged ground.

Pain jolted all over Dawn's body, but the burn in her chest soon drowned it all. Inhumanly strong fingers dug into her neck; it felt as if they could rip out the life of her on a whim's notice. Dawn clawed at them. Something underneath her nails gave way, yet the pressure never ceased. The monstrous bulk kept crushing her.

Stop! STOP! was the only word, she could muster. Wild fire spread through her chest and up her throat. She felt her lips move, but no air came in.

She would suffocate. There, on the dark ocean floor.

NO!

With a last burst of strength, Dawn thrashed about. Somewhere, among those frenzied kicks and scratches, her leg found a target. For a moment, time seemed to freeze. Then the clutch on her neck relented and air, sweet, intoxicating air flooded in. Relief, though, didn't come. Instead the weight crumbled and fell on top of her. Dawn didn't even glance at it, but shoved it off her, then rolled onto her hands and knees and stumbled away.

Blinded by tears and coughing, she bumped face first into the bubble's inner surface. Fear ignited itself anew, yet when Dawn pushed against the membrane, it tensed around her hands like an inflated balloon. There couldn't be any rupture. If there had been, water would have flooded inside a long time ago.

The girl spun around, rocks scraping against her knees, chest ablaze. Confused as she was, she was not about to let her guard down. Dawn looked around the shadows, while she seized the ultra ball hanging from her belt. It almost scorched her numb palm. Only dimly, did she register which pokemon she was about to unleash - anyone from her team was fine as long as it kept her assaulter at bay.

Seconds passed, in which her eyes adjusted to the gloom. The flash light had rolled away, probably during the struggle. So Dawn strained her ears for sounds of movement. Rolling pebbles, the slither of seaweed, anything.

There was nothing except for her erratic breathing; she tried to control it, but her body had not yet recovered enough.

"Wh-where are you?" she called out. The silence, that surreal serenity of her surroundings tore at her nerves; the longer she sat there, the more agitated she became. Her voice sounded terribly shrill, even to her own ears. "I know you're there!" She almost tossed the pokeball into the darkness, but a last bit of reasoning held her back. Although it was apparent that the bubble was unharmed, it wouldn't last in a battle.

So Dawn crouched, waiting for an attack that never came. Gradually, the burn in her throat ceased, yet a sting remained. It was with great reluctance that she moved from her tense position and brushed her palm over her neck. It came away bloodied. Had that been her assaulter? Or had Dawn struggled so hard that she had hurt herself?

The thought sent chills scurrying down her spine. She hadn't even noticed those scratches. How easily she could have died.

That was J, Dawn realised, astonished at herself that she had almost forgotten. *J just - she tried to-*

She could taste bile on her tongue. After Dawn had risked her and her partners' life to save the huntress - why had she attacked? Dawn squinted at the semi-darkness, searching for the form she knew had to be there.

She didn't even know what she had expected to see; maybe J standing there with a knife, just waiting for the perfect moment to finish off Dawn. J, however, seemed in no condition to even move. She lay face down, twitching, her arms slung firmly around her midsection. Though she was trying to bite it back, she couldn't stop the groan escaping her lips.

The moment Dawn laid her eyes on the huntress, she herself felt a stab in her stomach. Dawn flinched and clutched the sore spot. The pokeball slipped from her fingers, bounced off some pebbles and eventually came to a halt in the mud.

"Wh-what is going on?" Dawn pressed out in between heaves. J had barely reacted to the injury before - why was the pain so intense now?

The realisation struck Dawn in another chill. With that deadly grip around her neck she had paid no mind to her surroundings. Had she accidentally struck J? And right on her wound nonetheless!

An urge to rush to J's side and check on her surged up in Dawn. She made half a step in her direction, before she stopped herself.

What am I doing? She tried to murder me! Dawn scolded herself, digging her nails into her thighs. *But she's in so much pain. And it's my fault.*

The agony in her stomach had weakened, yet Dawn felt the echo of that first shock. She knew that J suffered even worse. The desire to stop that pain burned in her heart - but how could she still approach J? How could she trust her?

Trust. The thing Dawn had tried to establish between them. She forced herself to look at J. Never, not even in the Bell Tower's dungeon, had she seen the huntress so vulnerable. Barely able to contain the whimpers that didn't match the woman.

It had been a small moment of weakness - it had to be. J wasn't going to harm herself or destroy all the efforts she had put into training Dawn. As for Dawn...

She was certain: even without Mesprit's empathy, she wouldn't be able to bear the sight of so much suffering.

So she tucked away Ninetales' pokeball that she had dropped earlier and slid forward. Her steps were small, still wary, yet determined. "J," she called out softly. There was no visible reaction, so Dawn tried again, that time with a firmer voice.

There - a brief pause in J's ragged breathing. Dawn had reached her, her knees just inches away from J's head. Her hands twitched. She felt like she should touch J, to assure her of Dawn's presence. At the same time, though, shivers crept up her spine at the mere thought of startling J again.

"Can you hear me?" she said. Gradually, J's heaves regained a more controlled rhythm. "If you do... *please*, say something."

Dawn watched how little jerks went through J's upper body. The noises she made at

first were more groans than words, until she finally found her voice. "I hear you," she croaked out behind clenched teeth.

J began pushing herself up. Dawn watched her arms quake and feared that she would just collapse again.

"M-maybe you should stay down?" Dawn held her hands at J's side, unable to decide whether she should assist the huntress or ease her back into a lying position.

Yet J kept going, inching upwards through pain and exhaustion. Only once did she stop to hiss a "stay away" at the girl. She was still nowhere near a sitting position, when Dawn decided she couldn't watch any more.

"Okay," Dawn took a deep breath, "J, I'm going to help you now."

Ignoring her thumping heart, Dawn reached forward, grabbed J at her shoulders and gradually, but firmly pushed her upwards.

"What are you-" J tried to protest at first and wrapped her hands around Dawn's wrists. Her grip became so strong that Dawn could barely move her arms. But while she at first thought that it was because J resisted, the truth turned out to be quite the opposite.

J clawed at Dawn, so she wouldn't topple over again. Pain surged through her body; Dawn could see it in her creased eyebrows and the quivering teeth digging into her lip. Blood trickled down her chin.

A sudden spastic cough overcame J. It left her powerless to hold herself up and so she did collapse forward against Dawn's shoulder.

Dawn flinched as if J had punched her again. It took her a few moments to calm her nerves and use the new found freedom of her arms to support the huntress.

The fit seemed to go on forever. Dawn placed a trembling hand on J's spine and rubbed it carefully, desperate to help in some kind of way. Her wish to soothe the pain was unbearable.

I hope Piplup didn't go too far, Dawn thought. We have to get back to land. If we could make it to Silver Rock Isle...

It wasn't ideal. She didn't believe it possible for her to find help and keep J from getting arrested. Neither was Dawn safe from the police, she noticed with a pang. She gritted her teeth. No matter how she tried to reason with herself, the fear of dying at the hands of J had rooted deeply in her stomach. It seemed crazy to risk any more for the huntress. Yet what choice did she have?

Eventually, the coughing ceased. J, though, didn't break the awkward embrace. It made Dawn anxious; what if she had lost consciousness? The girl dreaded the thought of having to drag J around by herself.

But her worries turned out to be unnecessary, when J slowly propped herself up. Once it was clear that she could sit by herself, Dawn withdrew her hands and gripped the sea floor.

J's eyes were closed. She swayed a bit, as if she was dizzy, but at least she had recovered. Although recover was a bit of a strong word. J's limbs never stopped shaking, her features didn't relax. While her heaves became deeper and more controlled, they were still irregular.

Dawn sat on her hunches, not daring to speak. Despite J's weakened state, the girl felt incredibly vulnerable. It was J, who eventually broke the silence. "Dawn?" She pressed out. Her eyelids twitched, but she still wouldn't open them.

It stroke the coordinator as odd, yet she brushed it aside. The relief at hearing her name uttered was stronger. "Yeah, it's me..."

"What happened?"

Dawn blinked. "S-Salamence attacked you... don't you remember?"

J shuddered and covered the fresh blood, which seeped out of her vest, with her hands. "I... I wasn't sure."

"Pierce must have shot it with the drug," Dawn explained, still puzzled. She clutched helplessly at the gravel. "I'm sorry - I couldn't stop him-"

"Never mind!" J interrupted her. She dug her fingers into the armour, right over the injury. Dawn could feel pain flare up, but before she could stop J, the huntress moved on. "Salamence attacked me and I lost consciousness - and then you brought me somewhere safe, right?"

"Well - yes." Dawn looked around, taking in the serenity of the bubble. She had not forgotten her earlier bout of panic, but more than that she believed in her pokemon. "I'd say its safe here."

"Somewhere on Ogi Isle?" Finally, J looked at her through one half opened eye.

Dawn couldn't put her finger on it, but a bad hunch crept up in her. "A-around Ogi Isle is more precise..."

"Quit joking around," J snapped.

Again, that suffocating sensation coiled inside Dawn. Just like before, she could feel cold sweat erupting all over her body. It reminded her of her own terror, when J had almost choked her to death - but that sensation was different, somehow more intense, alien.

"We're in some cave, not *around* - that - that's impossible!"

"I told you, we can do it, Piplup and I." Dawn tried to comprehend what was going on. All the while, she pointed at the light blue membrane. "Look! Piplup's bubbles work like those giant fish tanks in an aquarium; the water is staying out and we're completely safe-"

"NO," J cried out, flinching. "No, we're not safe, we have to get out!"

The realisation hit Dawn like a blow to her belly. It had taken her so long to understand the origin of her fear, because it didn't fit the person radiating it.

J was afraid. Or rather, she was *panicking*.

"We can't," Dawn interjected. Now her mind was even more agitated, quickly overthrowing her previous plan. "Not now! Because -"

Because J might lose all control, if Dawn's burning neck was any indication. In that case, Dawn wouldn't be able to hold down the huntress. They would both drown.

But how could she say that to a person like J?

"I don't care what the reason is. Get me out now!" J growled and her body twitched with the desire to lunge at Dawn.

"We'll both be in danger." Dawn tried to talk in a calm voice, while the turmoil tore her apart. "Piplup and Mantine are scouting the area - as soon as they come back, I promise you, we'll figure something out! Please, just calm down-"

"Hell no! Call your pokemon here this instant!"

"J," Dawn tried to reason, "this place is safe; I've done this before-"

"Are you deaf, you stupid brat?" J's eyes burned with rage. She clenched her fists. "If you don't get them here, I'll-"

"Are you going to attack me? How are you going to resurface without me?" It became increasingly difficult for Dawn to put up with J's attitude.

"I'll use you as a hostage-"

"You are going to endanger both of us!"

"As if you haven't guaranteed our deaths already!"

"I told you, I can handle-"

"AND I TOLD YOU NOT TO GO ANYWHERE NEAR THIS DAMN LAKE!" J burst out, using breath she hadn't quite regained. Coughing, she slumped back into a crumpled position.

There was an odd silence. The words hung still in the air; their presence, though mute, had left such an impression that not even J's gasps overpowered them.

Something in Dawn's mind made *click*. She could feel her heart slow down; a heaviness settled around it. She dropped her hands into her lap, her gaze thoughtful. Then she faced J.

For what felt like the first time, Dawn looked at her clearly. The twitch in her chest and neck muscles, as if J tried to drown any more moans and whimpers. The bleeding teeth marks on her lips that shone brightly against her pale face. Each of her heaves quivered, yet J kept them more or less under control.

She was doing anything to keep her weakness a secret.

"You... you said... lake," Dawn whispered, barely able to keep the pity out of her voice.

"So?" J pressed out, directing her glare towards Dawn once more. It had lost a lot of its intensity though.

"But we're... in the ocean." Dawn watched J's features drop. "What you mean is... Lake Valor, isn't it?"

J's lip started to quiver. She straightened up, one hand searching for a hold in the rubble around her, while the other still clutched at her wound. Her gaze darted around, not meeting Dawn's eyes. "Wh-what?" she croaked.

"I had no idea," Dawn moved on. A thick lump blocked her throat, making her voice sound grave. She had seen recordings of the day J's ship had crashed into the lake. It had looked terrible on the screen; she didn't want to imagine a front seat view. "It happened so long ago and- and this is *you* we're talking about. I didn't think... I couldn't imagine you, afraid of anything."

"I'm not-!" J began, but found herself unable to say the words. She edged backwards, stones crunching with her movement.

"It's okay, J." Dawn tried to sound as soothing as possible. "I know, it must have been awful. Anyone would feel-"

"*Stop it.*" J spoke in a raspy voice. The bubble was just inches away from her, putting Dawn on edge again. "You're wrong. I'm not - I *can't*."

"Look out-" Dawn warned J and reached forward to halt her, but it was too late. Startled by the approach, J practically jumped backwards. Her shoulders bumped into the bubble. She froze; the whole structure started to quake. There was a thundering noise that sounded as if a thin metal sheet was being wobbled around.

J spun around and scrambled away at the same time. Terror was etched in her face. The pebbles rolled and rasped over each other, until J lost her balance and toppled backwards.

Though Dawn's body was bruised and stiff from exhaustion and cold, she hastened behind J. Armour and heavy muscles slapped against her front, driving a grunt out of the girl. Yet somehow she cushioned J's fall and wrapped her arms around her middle section.

"Let go!" J cried. She threw a punch over her shoulder, missing Dawn's ear by inches.

As a reply, Dawn pressed her forehead against J's sodden silver hair and prayed inwardly for the quake to end. "It's just me," she reassured J. "Just me. You can trust me. It'll stop in a minute and then I'll let go, I promise. Please don't fight me!"

But J did not stop to struggle. A blinding pain erupted in Dawn's nose, when J headbutted her. Tears shot into her eyes and the urge to back away was

overwhelming. At the same time strong fingers coiled around her hands. Dawn wrestled and tugged, unable to overpower J, but also afraid to let go.

When J started to bent her fingers, Dawn released her grip and skittered to the side. The sudden lack of support from behind caught J by surprise. Some drops of water sprayed, when she fell on her back. The impact jolted right through her wound and she yelped.

For a moment, Dawn was too confused to understand what was happening. Her only goal was to calm J down in any way possible.

So she leant forward and pressed her bloodied palms into J's shoulders, trying to lock onto her frantic glare. "Look at me!" Dawn shouted. J only replied with a snarl and a badly aimed punch that grazed her ribs.

"Damnit, J! You have to calm down!" Dawn kept pushing the huntress back to the ground, unable to care if she left bruises. "You're going to hurt yourself! Just stop it! Stop it -

"STOP IT!"

Without meaning to, Dawn's hand had darted forward. The resounding slap cut through the noise like a blade, leaving only silence in its wake.

Dawn just knelt there, one palm still pressing against J, the other hovering in the air, tingling. Her eyes were wide open with shock, disbelief. They took in the smear of blood on J's cheek and an expression that mirrored her own. J's head lay on its side; whether that had happened because of the force behind the blow or sheer surprise, Dawn couldn't tell.

After a minute of staring though, it finally sunk in.

Dawn had just *slapped* J. Pokemon Hunter J.

Her stomach churned. The desire to scramble away and hide was unbearable. Yet all Dawn did was clench her hand into a fist and bring it to a rest on the other shoulder. Her grip was gentle now, cautious.

"I'm sorry," she choked out, once J faced her, light blue eyes full with confusion and reawakening anger. "I-I had to. You weren't listening and you had to stop. You- you're losing so much blood-"

Dawn looked down. The black vest had been shining with sea water before, but now the glistening was different. It was a lot darker and spread all over her front. Dawn's palms, too, were covered in that bright red. She blinked some tears away, that had nothing to do with her pulsating nose.

That the bubble had stopped quaking went by unnoticed.

"Get off me," J hissed. In a feeble attempt, she tried to lift her upper-body. Dawn had little trouble keeping her on her back.

"I can't," said Dawn. "You need to rest and if I let go, you'll just stress yourself out."

J growled. "I will stress out? That's your fault! I swear, as soon as we get out I'll make you wish you were never-"

"There was no other way to save us," Dawn pleaded. "Salamence was so close to knock us out of the sky anyway. I panicked!"

J grabbed hold of Dawn's wrist and dug her nails into the skin. A cold crept inside her voice. The animosity she regarded Dawn with was unmatched by anything J had thrown at her so far. "This is your excuse? I put my life on the line, over and over again, for some weak little idiot?"

Dawn hated, how the insult shot right into her heart. Her eyes prickled. "I wasn't the one paralysed with fear at the sight of Lugia's whirlpool! I still fought Pierce and rescued you! I could've died, too!"

J clenched her teeth. "Why you -!" But as she tried to move, it only seemed to aggravate her wound. J had barely enough strength left to bite back another scream. Her grip reinforced around Dawn's wrist, so far that the skin tore. Dawn winced, but didn't fight back.

It took J a little longer to regain her breath. "I get it now." J wheezed, her glare reduced to one opened eye. "You're enjoying the show. Got a taste for watching others suffer, have you?"

"What?" Dawn stared at the huntress in utter bewilderment. "N-no, how did you even get that?"

"Or," J carried on, "is it because you finally have a chance to feel superior to me? Well done. I didn't expect you to have the guts to resort to such *dirty* tactics to get your way."

It began to dawn to the girl. "You think I did this on purpose..?"

J snorted - an action that made her wince. "What else can it be? You and your damn empathy... you knew about my condition and you made sure to use it well. Is it that your revenge? Or some perverse streak of yours you've kept bottled up?"

Dawn felt her emotions overpower her. Exhaustion and cold, the pain flaring from her tendons and bruises, her sense of guilt, it all became too much for her. She let the tears glide down her cheeks, shaking her head.

"How can I make you understand?" she whispered. "I hate to see you suffer. And *scared* like that. You have no idea how it looked, when Salamence struck you. I know, the guardians saved us before, but this time I really... I really thought you'd... I was so terrified... What if I had been too late to save you?"

Her vision was blurry and Dawn couldn't make out J's expression, however she could sense her irritation all the more. "You pathetic liar! You were happy, weren't you? When my ship exploded, when you heard I wouldn't haunt your miserable life any longer. When I *died*."

"I never did," confessed Dawn. "I was relieved that pokemon would be a little safer, but I didn't want you to end like this. That whole Team Galactic plan was a horrible event for all of us."

"Really?" J spat, her rage now burning white hot. "What could you have possibly lost?"

A wry smile spread Dawn's lips. J's intense emotions drained her more than any exercise she had put the girl through. An answer from Dawn was of no interest to the huntress, she knew that. It was J, who her pain inside. "And what did you lose?"

"Everything!" J burst out in a thoughtless moment. "They destroyed my whole life!"

Dawn hadn't expected a reply and it was apparent that J hadn't planned on giving it. There was the grinding sound of rocks being crushed together, where J clenched and unclenched her free hand into a fist. She kept glaring at the girl, but there was something else flickering past her eyes.

They had stopped struggling, Dawn noticed. J's nails were still digging into her wrist, but the huntress didn't try to sit up any more. Despite the pain, Dawn left her that grip; it might have started out as a means to punish her - now it was an anchor to keep J from drowning in her uncovered emotions.

Frustration.

Fear.

Sorrow.

Something Dawn could only dub as despair. And really, how desperate did the huntress have to be to confide in Dawn, however unwilling?

There was something, though, she didn't understand. "But you're alive now," she said

in low voice. "This is your second chance. You said so yourself."

"You call this life?" J rasped back. "Almost dying every other week? Being tossed at overwhelmingly powerful enemies like nothing more than cannon fodder? Haven't you realised yet, what this really is about?"

With a little frown, Dawn shook her head.

J laid back her head and let out a small laugh. "They said I wouldn't break," she elaborated. "The guardians. No matter what they threw at me, I wouldn't bow to them. So they've changed their game; they brought me back under false pretences. Stripped of all my power. My reputation, my workers, my money, everything. *Crippled* with... with this!" She glared daggers at the bubble's dome, but quickly had to avert her eyes. Each word crawled past her lips with so much difficulty, one could wonder how she didn't choke on them.

Once again, her scowl rested on Dawn's face. "To top it all, they threw *you* into the mix! And you still want to make me believe you have no idea? How can this be anything, but a creative take on torture?"

Despite J's accusations, Dawn still couldn't believe the guardians to be so cruel. "But what if they actually mean to give you another opportunity to better yourself? *You* said, you're the person to go to, when taking down an organisation like Team Rocket."

"I thought you could tell lies. Tell me, how is a single person supposed to succeed, where the entire police force, dozens of pokemon rangers and trainers failed? They've had the numbers, even some power to some degree. And what do I have?" J gritted her teeth. A stab akin to physical pain shot through her. "Now... all I have left are my skills."

"You have your partners," Dawn reminded her. "Your pokemon!"

At that, J let go of Dawn's wrist - but instead of covering her wound, she gripped her own left shoulder. Dawn remembered the burn scar she had seen the night they had escaped the Bell Tower's remains. J squeezed her eyes shut in unseen agony. "Like Salamence?"

"You still have Joy!" Dawn blurted out, afraid to dig up any more agonising memories. Her freed hand tingled as the blood could finally circulate through it again, yet she kept it in place. "I *know* she seems like she doesn't care for you, but that's not what she truly feels."

"That woman?" J snapped out of her trance. "Do you know what she did, when I came back? She unleashed that damned Ursaring against me and threw me out of her house! I don't recall how many times she told me to disappear and never return. She doesn't care." J's voice became little more than a whisper. "And I don't need her."

Dawn wanted to correct her, fearing that the one human contact J ever showed to have would be lost, but the huntress wasn't finished.

"I'll make it out of this mess. And once I do, once I have the power again, I *will* crush the guardians."

"What then?" Dawn retorted. "Do you plan to go back to pokemon hunting? Is that all you want to do for the rest of your life?"

"Exactly! I get to do what I please, with *whom* I choose. Your selfless kind wouldn't even dare come close to me."

"Until the next time someone has an edge over you - and who knows, maybe they won't be as forgiving as the guardians. Honestly, it's like you won't learn." Dawn huffed.

"I wasn't bested! None of this would have happened, if the morons on board had

watched out for those future sights. Those treacherous, looting bastards..." J appeared to have a few more choice words about her henchmen, but when she saw Dawn's piercing stare, she continued. "If I've learned anything, it's that I will never rely on anyone."

"So now you're just going to push your failure onto other people?" The girl brushed over her face. Her hand was numb from the cold. "It's no wonder people throw you out of their house. Did you ever have a friend? Anyone close to you?"

J's face hardened; Dawn could tell, only by looking at her, that she was lying, yet with so much forced conviction that she didn't dare to disagree. "Never. My whole life was about achieving mastery in my line of work. There is no room for your self-inflicted weak spots."

"How can you live like that?" Dawn asked, eyebrows furrowed. She noticed her muscles shaking. If that was just the cold, her weariness or the whole conversation, she couldn't tell anymore. Neither did she really care. "All you seem to have is enemies. Then the one time, one of those enemies decides to give you an opportunity to redeem yourself, you go and slap it back into their face. Why would you ever consider pokemon hunting a solution to the guardians task? It's just crazy! How can anyone be so, so... *obsessed* with-"

"Why is it that your mind is filled with no rational thoughts, but your contests?"

Dawn found herself startled, when she recalled those words, spoken in J's voice. Back in Morty's gym, when things still seemed a lot easier. *That... that has nothing to do with this*, Dawn denied inwardly. *That's a completely different thing!*

For a moment, she was so absorbed in those unwelcome thoughts, she barely heard J. "... a necessity! Just because you're too afraid to resort to drastic measures, doesn't make them wrong - or *evil*, if any fool with a pokeball can do the same. The guardians must see that; that they prevent it means they want me to fail!"

It can't be... "J, you stole those pokemon away from their home, just like Team Rocket would have done. What if the only reason, the guardians want to stop them, is so they won't harm any more pokemon?"

"So they would rather have Team Rocket continue to harm them?" J retorted. "I am the best hunter there is; I've spent so much time perfecting my skills. Why shouldn't I use them?"

Dawn remembered, how she had staggered through Ilex Forest. It had been deep in the night, aggressive pokemon lurking all over the place. Even without Team Rocket and J, she had endangered herself and her partners. But it had been worth it, hadn't it?

After all, she had practiced for her contest.

"Give me enough time and I could undermine their operations," J kept going. "I would cut off their access to new pokemon, sabotage their connections to other organizations and once I have the resources, I would rebuilt my own operations. I *could* crush them, if only I was given free way!"

The desperation in J's voice made Dawn remember her own words, when she had pleaded with her mother to let her go to Johto to try one final time. The nudge may have come from Mesprit, but Dawn was all too aware of her own desire to push all the blame on the guardian of Lake Verity.

"So you really only meant to gain the upper hand over Team Rocket?" Dawn asked, her tone no longer reproachful.

"What else could I have wanted?" J bellowed back at her as well as her battered body allowed.

Dawn had a long look into J's eyes and involuntarily, a sad smile formed on her lips. "I think, all you wanted was to return everything to the way it used to be." She watched a muscle in J's cheek twitch. "You miss being a pokemon hunter, don't you?"

J made the impression, as if she was about to choke. "I- I don't *miss* it -"

"Because that would be too human?" Dawn cut her short. "Because you hate emotions so much that, even if its about something so important to you, you can't admit to have them?"

"Emotional attachment only riddles you with weak spots! I am above that!" J snapped back at Dawn. It was no longer the cold that made her shiver.

I wonder how many times she was hurt that way... Dawn's heart ached in compassion. "I guess you are right in some way..."

"Of course I am!" J made a strangled growling noise. "Besides, even if it was true, this... *emotion* wouldn't change anything."

"It does. For me."

Light blue eyes pierced right through Dawn's dark ones. "How could I forget; you hate the very idea of harming anything and here I am, wishing to do just that. Tell me, do you regret saving me, yet?"

Although J spoke those words in spite, a hurt welled up in her that pressed on her chest, drowning out even her breath. It seemed to weight more than the whole world. Dawn sucked in air at the sensation. A shudder went through her body and to her dismay, new tears formed in her eyes. She rubbed along her collarbone as if it would soothe the inner turmoil.

The corner of J's mouth began to twitch and when it wouldn't stop, the huntress bit down on her lip until the teeth sank into the sensitive skin. For a moment, Dawn wondered if her tears were really just J's, who could never allow herself to show such weakness.

Gently, Dawn reached forward and rested the tips of her fingers on the only patch of reddish skin on J's otherwise pale face. She remembered the tingling heat her slap had caused. "J, please look at me," she softly asked of the woman. After a few moments, J shifted her focus from a distant spot to Dawn's eyes. She tried, but J could not hide all of her agony behind her scowl.

"I do not regret it," Dawn said in a firm voice, trying to convey all of her resolve in one look, "I will never, ever regret saving your life." She sighed. "What I do feel bad about are all the mistakes I made today... this whole last week."

Among all her bickering and fighting, Dawn had never considered J's feelings towards their task. She had eased up their hostility, but she had never stepped past that line, where their cooperation was just a necessity. She hadn't felt the need to inquire about anything, but what had piqued her immediate curiosity.

"You don't seem to understand," J hissed at Dawn with a quivering voice, while she tried to squirm away from her touch. "I am still alive. That means, I can go after my goals - and believe me, once I get the opportunity, I will become a hunter once again. You can't stop me, so shut up with your-"

"I know."

Maybe it had been the casual tone, with which Dawn had uttered those words, but the effect was quite satisfying to watch. J gaped at her, unable to continue with her rant. *Look at that. I shut her up instead,* Dawn mused and any other time, she would have chuckled at it, if only she hadn't been so damn weary.

"I know all that," Dawn explained, "and I would be lying if I said I wasn't scared of it, but... I can understand your feelings."

"So all of sudden, you can?" J snapped. "Then why were you bothering me with your ideals, this whole time?"

J's impatience irritated Dawn and some of it slipped into her tone. "My opinion on pokemon hunting hasn't changed. It's my view of you that did."

Now the huntress just seemed confused. Dawn could almost see gears rattling underneath her skull, trying to process a situation, she clearly hadn't dealt with before. The coordinator sighed. "When you said, you worked your whole life for your goal... you meant that, didn't you? It must be so hard to give up on something you have been doing for so many years."

J's face contorted into a snarl. Dawn could tell, she was starting to get under her skin. "It isn't *hard*! It- it's merely inconvenient, so safe your empathetic nonsense for someone else! Stop wasting time!"

"But it made you feel good, didn't it?" Dawn continued, ignoring J's demand. She knew, in the back of her head that J had a point. There were more urgent matters to take care of. However, now that it was out there, she wanted it of her chest, no matter what. She felt selfish, guilty - but if she didn't push further, there would never be any progress. "Maybe not always happy, but without it, something just seems... missing, doesn't it? And no matter what you do, you can't stay away from it, because *it just drives you crazy*."

J ground her teeth. What she showed was mostly boiling anger; underneath, however, a familiar kind of ache eased its way out of its confines made of self-discipline and denial. "Are- are you deaf? I told you to shut up!"

"To top it all, you've got people, just about everyone telling you to stop." Dawn thought of Joy, of the guardians, of herself. Then her memories shifted and it was her mother chiding her, Piplup arguing with that annoyed look on its face, even Zoey's frown. She swallowed. "You know its what you want to do. Yet sometimes... their words just get to you, no matter how strong your resolve is."

"Fine!" J burst out, livid that her inner turmoil had been put in words. "I admit, I *miss* my job! I want to have the most powerful pokemon lined up as trophies in front of me and for heaven's sake get a proper reward for all the crap I'm going through!"

J was breathing heavily after that revelation. She definitely didn't seem afraid anymore, so if anything, then Dawn had succeeded in taking her mind of their surroundings. "Are you finally satisfied with that?"

"I just want you to understand one more thing."

The death stare J shot at her bordered on physical pain, but Dawn endured it without averting her eyes. "While I don't think that what you want is right, I can't blame you for your wish to return to it. You've made mistakes... I mean, before you targeted all those pokemon Team Rocket wanted, you must have tried to justify your actions. It's obvious that Mesprit, Uxie and Azelf wouldn't tolerate your decision, yet you still went through with it. Stupid, really..."

J's anger spiked up and she opened her mouth for a viciousretort.

"Kind of like storming head first into the hell fire on top of the Bell Tower, isn't it?" the girl intervened quickly. "Completely unprepared, with no idea what to expect, just because you hope to save something that you shouldn't be able to save."

"I *was* prepared! If it hadn't been for your ignorance -" J cut herself short. Her eyes widened as a suspicion occurred to her.

Dawn moved on. "Guess that's... still not as bad as crossing Mount Coronet in two days, while people had actually been evacuated from there, because a Tyranitar was out of control. You know they were afraid it would cleave the whole mountain in

half?"

J frowned at the girl. "I never did that." Her voice was much calmer now.

Meanwhile, Dawn brushed over her eyes to prevent any more moisture gathering there. "Know why I did it? Because the Grand Festival was on the other side. There was no more time to waste, so I *had* to go. I don't even remember how many times I almost... y'know." She wrung her fingers in her lap, unable to meet J's eyes. "My friends tried to stop me, but I didn't listen. I knew, together with my pokemon I could make it. And I did... Only to fail in the very first round.

"It's something I live for. I wanted to be just like my mum. Now I can't even see my friends in the eyes, without feeling angry and hurt and just... ashamed."

Finally, she meet the light blue stare, waiting patiently for her to finish. How surreal the situation had gotten... Dawn wasn't even surprised to feel dizzy in her head.

"I can understand what you're going through and I'm sorry I only realised it now. I could've spared quite a lot of anger between us." The inside of Dawn's chest felt a little numb. She wasn't happy about how things had turned out and the actions she had to take.

But anything else just felt wrong.

"So what?" J asked not in her usual bite, but rather hesitant. "What does either of us get out of this?"

"Well, for starters... you get three ribbons." Even Dawn felt equally amused and ridiculous for the wording her mind had come up with. She was *so* tired. "I'll give you the ribbons I won in Johto. You said you liked contracts... Well, you can look at them like physical proof."

J looked at her in utter bewilderment and - obviously fed up with her position, J sat up. Dawn flinched, about to scream in protest, but the huntress silenced her with a wave of her hand. The gash that had been on her palm was covered by dark brown scab.

"Proof for what?" J brought out from behind clenched teeth. She was still in pain, but must have recovered enough for movement. Or, more likely, she was disgusted at the notion to speak up to Dawn any longer.

It couldn't be out of a secret desire to actually know, what Dawn was getting to.

"I will quit coordinating," she said. Her anger at herself for letting J move around subsided quickly. Instead, she was anxious. Already missing the feeling of performing in front of a big, applauding crowd with her pokemon by her side.

But more than that, she was full of resolve and she made sure to let it sound in her voice. "Then I will help you stop Team Rocket, no matter what it takes. I won't run away, anymore. Whether either of us wants it or not: We're in this together. And this time, I'll make sure to do my part."

J shook her head. Again, she had an arm wrapped around her midsection. "There is no part. You shouldn't even be here."

It was probably just Dawn's imagination, but she could almost hear a low humming over J's breathing. She ignored it.

"Don't you realise what would have happened if I hadn't been here? If I had stayed at the contest?" Dawn asked and at that her voice did falter. "You really could have died. I know, what I did only hurt you more, but..."

Dawn shuddered at the image of J's body, tossed around by those monstrous waves. How much energy would it take out of the guardians to keep her alive from that?

Or even worse. How often would J have to experience drowning, over and over again?

"This is my place," Dawn insisted.

"You're supposed to go home, not -" J pinched the bridge of her nose. "You misunderstood. I get dragged back to hell should something happen to you, not vice versa. Your life isn't depending on my survival. So, you can leave this whole mess behind you and just..."

J stopped, when she caught sight of the warm, encouraging smile Dawn offered her. "I told you. I don't need this kind of bond. I don't want it. I trust you my back, because I know I can. All I hope for, is that you allow me to prove the same."

They were surrounded by darkness. Only a flash light allowed them to see at all. It was cold, it was damp. Their whole bodies ached from too many injuries. Up on the surface, the battle surely still raged on. Yet for some odd reason, Dawn felt a sense of peace.

"I want you to have a second chance," she concluded, "because I would simply hate anything else to happen to you."

"No."

Both Morty and Whitney appeared thunderstruck. "What?"

"No." Joy repeated firmly. Her Rotom paled. "I will not help you rescue some pokemon hunter and her pet."

"B-but..." the pink haired girl stuttered, "y-you do have information, don't you?" She blinked rapidly. "I don't get it, what's your problem? You don't have to do anything, just tell us what we need to know! It's so easy, why won't you help us?!"

"BECAUSE." That time Joy slammed her hand on the table and leant forward, her most toxic glare fixed on Whitney. For a moment, the gym leader flinched as had so many other great hunters and trainers alike. "That imbecile got herself killed once already and returned. If she is so intent on trying it again, I won't stop her!"

Then, for the first time in Joy's life, somebody stood up to her. "That's it? You're gonna hold a grudge that might take two people's lives?" Whitney's arms were strained, her hands clenched to fists at her sides. Neither of them even blinked.

In the end, the girl was the first to relent. "Fine! If you're gonna act like a sour Gloomabout it, then don't complain, when I read the emergency message Morty said you've got!"

With that said, Whitney grabbed the display of her computer and turned it towards her. Morty tried to shout after her, but by then it was too late.

A pokeball snapped open, Ursaring roared and seized the girl by her waist. Whitney of course thrashed about, scratching at the bear's arms, but Ursaring barely even felt her. Still, the resistance wound it up and it bared its fangs at her.

"Enough!" Joy bellowed. "Out with her! *Both* of them!"

Ursaring obeyed and either pushed or carried the two gym leaders outside. "Nurse Joy, wait!" Morty called out behind the fury mass of her partner. "I'm sorry for this, but it's in your interest that we save them!" Desperately, he held on to the door frame. "Rotom wouldn't have come to me, if you didn't care about either of them-"

But by then, Ursaring had plucked him off the ground, too and continued its way through the crowded lobby.

Finally, once Morty's Gengar had vanished in thin air, peace and quiet returned to Joy's office. Though peace was farther from her than ever. She brushed a hand through her locks; one of her uniform hair loops had loosened. A scowl was etched in

her face and Joy directed it at her ghostly partner.

"I am exceptionally disappointed with you. Trying to rival J one last time?"

The corners of Rotom's toothy mouth lowered even further. It hovered over to her computer and nudged the sprite of Porygon-Z. Nothing happened, though Joy knew that if it wanted, Rotom could open the message and find out exactly what had happened to the huntress. Joy couldn't bring herself to look at it, nor could she stand one of her partners sulking like a child.

"Don't you dare undermine all the work we've been through," Joy told it. She took one last, lingering look at the screen. Then she shut the computer down, cutting off the quirky stunts Z performed. "I threw my career away once, only to spent years getting it back. Not this time."

Rotom sagged. Being a ghost type, it could very well emanate its grief. Joy turned her back on it, resuming her work on the medicine. A tiny breeze of electricity wafted by; Rotom, too, had left, leaving Joy to her thoughts.

J had not realised that the day she had appeared at Joy's door sill had been an anniversary, the occasion for many celebrations all over the regions. People, whose pokemon had been stolen, could finally breathe in relieve, when one of the worst hunters had left their world.

Not so for Joy. For her, it had been a day of mourning.

And she would never forgive J for that.

Dawn didn't find out, how her words had affected J.

The low rumble she had so quickly brushed aside earlier now grew in intensity. It alerted both women, though J was the most anxious at the sound.

Suddenly, it turned into a thunderous uproar, strong enough to shake the bubble. J almost jumped out of her skin, crashing into Dawn. To make matters worse, Piplup appeared. It squeezed itself through the membrane of its bubble and chirped frantically.

"What's going on?" Dawn asked her partner, while she did her best to hold the trembling form of J.

Her heart missed a beat, when she noticed the bruises covering Piplup's skin. A purple swelling coiled around its right leg as if it had been squeezed there by a tentacle. Proud as ever, the penguin suppressed its pain and pointed left with its flipper.

Then, a horrible crack sounded and the ground quaked. Something ripped at the sea floor, until the chunk Dawn and the others sat on was jerked to the side. Dawn fell; colours flashed before her eyes, when her temple hit a seaweed covered rock.

Icy water splashed around them. The bubble had burst and that time it was not just part of her imagination. Dawn's vision spun as she propped herself up. She wasn't drowning - the water only pooled around her legs.

"What the-" Dawn spluttered. She turned to evaluate their situation, but it only brought a wave of nausea over her.

They had been caught in what appeared to be a giant glass case. A light shone through the dark ocean; it illuminated a flaring red 'R' painted on the nose of a huge submarine. The monstrosity glided towards them, the blaring of the rotors deafening from up close.

A hatch opened in the front and quickly, much faster then Dawn imagined possible, the glass capsule was hurtled inside. The three involuntary passengers tumbled

around with dirt and rocks and their bodies hitting each other.

For a moment, Dawn felt as though she had blacked out. She groaned and rubbed her head. The pulsating underneath her temples made her sick; she barely registered the red hue of the fluids, which clung to her palm.

With a sound not unlike a pokeball, the glass case popped open and more water flooded around them.

"J - Piplup!" Dawn tried to shout, but all she managed was a cough. She rolled to the side, still doubled over. Rough stones pricked her freezing palms, the water now reaching her elbows. *Where are they?*

"Interesting that you would choose a place as perilous as the ocean as your retreating point," said a male voice. Dawn rose her head, her vision blurry.

There were Rocket grunts standing behind rails on an elevated platform. Elecrobuzz and Magnetron crouched or hovered next to their trainers. In their midst was an elderly man, with bushy white hair and a monocle covering his eye. In contrary to the rest of the black clad men, he wore a white lab coat.

Dawn's mind crawled as she took in her opponents. *Electric... types...*

"I appreciate your rather unconventional choice," continued the professor. "In any other place, we might have had to kill you."

He turned his attention to the thugs. Suddenly, Dawn grew aware of the water's meaning around her. She tried to grab one of her pokeballs - but it was too late.

The guy in the lab coat nodded, the grunts shouted and the electric types unleashed yellow blazing attacks. The energy surged through Dawn's body; her teeth snapped together, grazing the tip of her tongue.

She couldn't even cry out in pain, before blackness enclosed her.