



cedar's journey

#2

**WHO'S THE MAIN
CHARACTER AGAIN?**

by Philippa Gissing

Chapter Two

Alanna

A week after Alan's funeral, Alanna lifted her head from its bowed position at the table during an early dinner and fixed a sullen gaze at Jo.

"I wanna apply for a trainer's license," she mumbled, her voice hoarse and low.

"No," Scott said.

Cedar listened from the side, squeezing her fork handle and watching each of her family's expressions change from their established quiet, even morose, introspection to needle-sharp readiness. Her father had already turned back to his meal after the one word dismissal but Jo was staring at Alanna instead, thoughtfully.

"Maybe when you're eighteen."

"That's stupid," Alanna said. "Ten year olds are allowed."

"Nobody's done that for years," Jo said, "and just 'cause it's still legal, doesn't mean it's safe." She stared at her half eaten meal with a frown ever-deepening on her face, and pushed it away a fraction; then looked back to Alanna. "Honey, you've never told us you wanted to train pokémon before. Is this about Alan?"

Alanna looked spurred on by her mother's words, eyes shining with determination and almost a little mania. "I'll go out and catch a pidove, and maybe if we get good enough it will evolve."

"Oh, honey..." Jo went to continue and burst into racking tears instead. Hands at her face, she got up and disappeared into the bathroom. Cedar didn't like it when people cried in the bathroom. It echoed.

Scott glared at Alanna and Cedar in turn, his mouth working unconsciously before he spoke again, his voice husky. "How *dare* you do this to your mother right now?"

"I didn't do anything," Cedar said.

"Go to your room."

"But I'm still hun-"

"Go! You too, Alanna."

Cedar pushed her chair back and headed upstairs. She was halfway when Alanna shoved past her, practically at a jog; almost as if she was going somewhere besides her mattress which was currently squashed into Cedar's bedroom next to the bed frame.

As Cedar hovered by the door, Alanna grabbed her backpack and started stuffing in a few clothes.

"Don't get in my way," Alanna said, her tone dangerous. "Don't try and stop me."

"I wasn't." She paused, watching the frenzied packing but unable to move herself. "Are you running away?"

Alanna came to the door and snaked past her. "I can't stay here, not any more." She stared at the doorknob to her original bedroom and with a hesitant wince yanked it open. Cedar followed, wondering at the musty scent that had already accumulated within a week. Dust lined the porcelain nicknacks atop Alanna's dresser and bed frame. Alan's 'side' looked untouched from the day they had left for the beach; unmade bed and pokémon battle toys scattered about the floor.

Cedar wished she could cry, then. Her head felt hot, and over-full. She'd tried to cry for Alan the whole time, especially lying in bed each night before sleep took her. The more she tried the less the tears would come. The less sadness she'd feel; as if her heart was empty.

“Alanna, I tried to fix it.”

“Shut up, squirt. Go away.”

“No, listen. I... made the water come out of you, so you could breath.”

Alanna paused with a near-full backpack, her eyes wide and fixed, teeth snarling. “What are you talking about?”

“I tried to help Alan, too, but...”

Alanna stared some more. “What is actually wrong with you? Alan is *dead*, you... how can you say something like that?”

Cedar shrank back. “But it’s true... I’m sorry I couldn’t-”

“*Girls? What is going on up there?*”

“Just shut up!” Alanna grabbed her cap and bolted back into Cedar’s room.

Scott thundered up the stairs, seeming stunned when he hit the landing and saw the open bedroom door, until he surged forward and grabbed Cedar’s arm. “That’s out of bounds. Where’s your sister?”

Cedar pointed with the other arm, but Scott kept a hold of her as he went to investigate further. The last the two saw of Alanna was her pale face disappearing out the window as she shimmied down the lattice.

“Don’t you *dare!*”

Scott let go of Cedar, raced down the stairs and was gone through the front door after her. Somewhere, Jo broke into tears again.

Jo and Cedar were both dozing fitfully downstairs as they cuddled on the couch when Scott came back. Shoulders hunched, he barely looked their way and stalked into the kitchen for a beer.

“Where is she?”

“Couldn’t bloody catch her. She went off the path! I’ll have to go rent a ‘mon from the lab, make sure she’s not being menaced by something.”

“It’ll be getting dark soon.”

“I’ll find her, alright? She’ll be headed to Pewter City, anyway. Pretty hard to stay lost there.”

“We’ll all go. Now.”

Scott shook his head. “Stay here with Cedar. I’ll go book a motel and talk to the cops.”

By the time he’d gone again, the skies had deepened into a vivid red-blue sunset. Jo wordlessly stroked Cedar’s hair. Cedar longed to break the awful silence that almost seemed a physical weight - to tell her mother the same thing she’d tried to tell Alanna.

Only then Scott’s voice would echo in her mind: “*how dare you do this to your mother right now?*” and the words failed her just before the eve of their speaking.

Jo’s hand slipped down in sleep and her breathing grew heavier. Cedar wriggled carefully out of her mother’s lap and decided to take herself to an early bedtime. Once upstairs, she leaned out the window kneeling on her bed, and watched the first stars come out.

“Alanna,” she whispered. “Good luck.”

Scott stayed in Pewter City an entire week with a seasoned growlithe at his side, and didn’t find Alanna the whole time. They put up posters, fliers; did a letterbox drop. It even went out on the news. Each day Jo would get the call, and her face would sag back into blankness. One day, though, it morphed into all lines and edges; and then Jo was shrieking through the handset: “Someone knows where she is, by Arc! Someone is *hiding my little girl!*”

Each night Cedar would wish her good luck into the open air. The house was even more silent now without her sister's constant chatter and smug disposition. She wondered if it was fair, wishing Alanna all the best on her journey when her parents were just about breaking down somehow during every moment of the day. And yet, even with the ache of her absence making the numb hole in her heart just that little bit bigger inside, Cedar couldn't help the smile creeping on her face whenever she thought of Alanna training... battling... winning, even.

And so the weeks went by, then the months. The twins's sixteenth birthday went unspoken, if not unnoticed. Jo lit a candle like they'd always done in the family tradition: one big candle swirled in complementary colours. It must have melted all the way down that night unattended; Cedar came downstairs the next morning to a mess of hardened wax adorning the dining table. By lunchtime it was gone, and that was that.

Jo barely said a word any longer. Scott brooded whether seated or standing, his eyes empty. Cedar avoided both her parents for their sake as much as hers. They ghosted round the house too big for three, going through the motions, until one night watching the League semifinals with painful indifference.

"And the rookie takes the first move!"

"Petra, I choose you!"

Cedar saw as her mother blinked back into the space at the tinny sound of the trainer's voice, blinked and focused intently upon the screen; near falling out of her chair.

"Scott," she said.

"Petra the graveler faces off against Abby the charmeleon - and they're into it straight away, Abby charging into a full frontal tackle - oh, but there's Petra's quick-smart defence curl: she doesn't even budge."

"That's her voice," Jo said.

The three watched in tense silence as the teen and her graveler navigated through the battle against their faster opponent. Abby kept dodging any of Petra's lumbering offensive attacks but wasn't able to make much of a dent with fire or physical moves.

The camera zoomed up on Alanna's furrowed face. She seemed more worn; older. Different clothes. She'd dyed her hair, too.

"Petra! Try some magnitude!"

"Abby, get outta there!"

Petra roared and sunk her hands into the arena floor. The charmeleon scrambled away on all fours but the entire grounds were already beginning to shake. Petra bellowed again and rode the juddering earth until it near rent in two down the middle; leaving the entire arena scarred.

Abby lay still, battered and bloodied under the shade of a boulder at the far end.

"There's Magnitude 10!" the announcer yelled. *"What a show! Who will be next to face up against - oh, not wasting any time, and it's... Poliwhirl! Petra may be in trouble."*

"Rollout!"

"Water gun!"

"That's bold, keeping her in the field," Scott muttered.

"She may not have another type advantage."

That was the most Jo had said in days. Cedar took her attention off the battling pokémon and saw fire dancing in both her parent's faces. Both seemed reluctant to do anything but watch the ensuing match. Perhaps that was all any of them could do right now.

Petra took the full brunt of the water gun attack as she spun towards Poliwhirl. Her opponent stopped the attack too late - perhaps he hadn't been paying attention to how close she was - and she slammed full into him.

Poliwhirl went flying. Petra lumbered to a standstill and uncurled her arms and body, panting heavily. Water dripped off her rocky scales. She reached for her opposing arm and plucked a loose scale out with a wince, then stood ready.

“Poliwhirl is nowhere to be seen!”

“He’s somewhere in the rocks!” Alanna yelled down into the arena. *“Knock them down with your next Rollout!”*

Petra went on the offensive again and rammed into the boulders, losing momentum each time but keeping the pattern up with violent roars to accompany each attack. Soon enough she found Poliwhirl and glowered down at him before launching into another spin.

Poliwhirl cried out and lashed out with a gloved hand, stopping Petra’s roll and gripping on firmly.

“Bubble beam!”

The attack blasted out.

Petra screeched under the deluge and the camera switched to Alanna’s desperate looking face.

“Hold him! It’s time!”

The graveler took Poliwhirl’s free hand and the pair glared at each other before Petra smiled malevolently. Her eyes began to shine. Soon enough, light started glancing out from the gaps between her scales.

Alanna’s opponent gasped through her microphone. “No! Get away from her!”

It was no use. Poliwhirl yanked uselessly at Petra’s rocksteady grip and fell to the ground, his feet scrabbling and unable to gain any traction.

Petra roared once, twice, and her entire body shone brilliant before the white-hot explosion rang out; sending feedback through the speakers and thrumming for seconds before the heat and light faded.

Dust blew eerily through the arena. The pair of pokémon remained in a death grip at the epicenter's crater. The noise of the crowd was hushed besides a few whoops and hollers from the bolder folk.

Poliwhirl lay there limply, completely still. Scales blackened and charred, Petra blinked once and practically groaned her last victory roar, then her eyes closed and she collapsed on top of him.

The crowd went wild, but Alanna only gave them a small salute before looking nervously down at the scene and adjusting her earphones as if listening intently.

"We're going to the referee."

"Did she win?" Cedar asked.

"Explosion is not a little league move," Scott replied. "She'll be in trouble."

"Recall both pokémon," the referee said through her microphone headset, gesturing robotically, her small flags waving the equivalent message up to the trainer's stands. Once done, she faced the middle of the arena, her arms back at her sides.

"Petra was the last standing, so she is the winner of the last semifinal match. However, Trainer Azure is disqualified from the finals. Neither Trainer moves forward. Thank you."

"You're kidding m-!" the other trainer said, before her headset was disconnected from the speakers and the TV flashed back to the two commentators at the studio.

Scott turned the TV to mute and took Jo's arm. "Come on, you two. Let's get to the local station. We have our own broadcast to make."

Scott and Jo sat in front of the cameras and pleaded for Alanna - or Azure - to come home, just for a while, just to talk.

"Please, Azure. Alanna. We're not angry. We just miss you. Please come back. We love you so much."

The broadcast streamed on the local Pallet Town station at first, but then as luck would have it: a high profile nationwide channel picked it up and soon enough their pleas went viral. The news stations couldn't get enough of the human interest story, offering debates, conversations amongst presenters for the entire week afterwards; from the tragic tale to the debates on the highly decisive match itself.

Then, two days later, someone knocked on the front door.

"No reporters!" Jo said as she started unlatching it. "We don't have anything else to..."

"Hi, Mum," Alanna said.