

POKÉMON
REBIRTH
ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE SIX
Wild Charge

"Figured a way round it yet?" Kevin inquired bemusedly, some time later.

The occupants of the Rec Room, minus James, were all now tightly secured inside one of the many cells on the prison level, watching an amused-looking guard pass them satisfied looks every time he walked by. Glancing anxiously at a dimly-lit clock he could see not too far away, Caley felt his inner tension growing with each passing minute. Upon being summoned, the young man had quickly hidden his borrowed knapsack inside Adam's room. However, it would only be a matter of time before the leader of Team Rocket ordered a search to be carried out. Caley thought nothing about the possible outcome of his containment, he was only concerned as to the dwindling amount of time left in which to get back his possessions, and the pokémon in his care.

Adam was another matter entirely - he was fully aware as to the likely fate of himself and those incarcerated alongside him. This awareness only served to be exacerbated by the frightened protests of a young woman in one of the cells to their right. The group had watched in a mixture of horror and disgust as a burgundy-haired man in Elite rank uniform strode across in front of them - dragging his charge by one wrist while she pleaded and begged for him to listen to reason. But there was no longer any reasoning, nor light in the man's eyes. Just moments before this occurrence, every vestige of morality and free will had been seared clean from his mind under the pitiless red gaze of the P.R.O.C.U, leaving a puppet shell to return under order without question, and gather

his own partner for the same fate.

The adolescent's initial reaction to this gut-churning spectacle was to wrench at the cuffs which bound his wrists and ankles, only to receive a sharp jolt of electricity for his trouble. In the half hour which followed, Adam degenerated into a piteously sobbing mass in one corner of the cell, without even his arcumese companion to offer a furry shoulder of comfort. Denise gazed at Adam with saddened eyes, longing to do something to allay his well-founded panic. But she too was forcibly secured, with no room for movement beyond the bench on which she sat.

While Mondo, Kevin and Jenna exchanged uncomfortable looks with regards to a seemingly hopeless situation, Rose cast her attention toward Errol sitting in the opposite corner. His mouth was downturned in sullen contemplation - bitter distaste for a reason no one else knew.

"Here we are, stuck in this cell feeling sorry for ourselves," Denise muttered. "But James is in a far worse place than us."

"It makes me so angry to think he might not have even *been* in that situation now if Meowth hadn't left," Rose frowned. "Once he disappeared, Jessie just...snapped. She took it all out on James - saying that he was the cause of breaking their team up."

"James didn't want to be separated from his friends any more than *she* did!" Mondo insisted, taking a sideward glance at Errol's expression as it grew overcast. "He'd told me himself, that day in the labs. He'd only done it to protect them. Just like how he'd let his carnivine and mimejr go

free. I'm sure he was just as torn about it as they were."

"I know it hurt me bad to have to let my pokémon go..." Jenna sighed. "Especially Ivy and Ikinis. Couldn't even say goodbye to them because they wouldn't have allowed me to knowingly send them away. I had to ask Flair to take their Pokéballs and find somewhere better to live."

Caley glanced at Jenna, and a flicker of a memory burst into life in his mind. Had the drifblim he had met the day before been the 'Flair' Jenna was speaking of? It had been carrying three Pokéballs at their time of meeting - one was its own, and the other two had contained its companions, presumably Ivy and Ikinis. The amount of parallels seemed too apt to be coincidence.

"From what *I'd* heard, that meowth didn't seem to feel all that bad about the whole split deal," Kevin chipped in, unaware of Caley's thoughts. "Sounds to me like James' concern was pretty one-sided."

"How could Meowth have just left his friends like that?" Jenna exclaimed. "Without a word to say where he was going...and why."

"They'd worked together for seven years," Rose agreed in monotone.

"Sure, Meowth was selfish at times - but he wasn't heartless," Mondo commented, though it seemed he was having trouble convincing himself. "No...there's more to this than we understand."

"James gave so much to help his friends," Caley gazed at his feet.

"It sounds like those three were close."

"Failure loves company, I guess," Adam remarked bluntly, earning himself a vicious glare from Errol which, for the most part, was hidden under the peak of his cap. "What? They never caught any decent pokémon. They racked up bills of millions by destroying a load of Team Rocket equipment. Plus they showed up the organisation in every worst way possible."

The others shuffled uneasily, detecting Errol's growing aura of furiousness, yet Caley couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. What Adam said had obviously got the man seething - even now his entire body was tensed, shoulders twitching as if the only thing holding him back was the set of cuffs that kept him secured to the bench. So why did Errol refuse to voice his thoughts? Caley knew it wasn't because the man could not speak - Errol had conversed with him before, on more than one occasion.

"Not that any of that matters now," Adam snorted, as if Errol hadn't reacted. "Life here, always under the command of that pompous old man like obedient little growlithes, it ain't right. It's not living, it's just serving! We're just a bunch of slaves to him! And if those three had stayed together, what's to say they wouldn't have continued serving the Boss and living in that dream land of theirs until it was too late?"

Errol calmed down slightly at this point. He couldn't deny it - for a smart-mouthed, disrespectful little kid, Adam was quite sharp.

"That kind of info is pretty useless to us now," Kevin muttered. "So

long as we're locked up like this, we're *still* just a 'bunch of slaves'."

Who says we're going to stay locked up? Errol thought to himself, a devious smile creeping across his face. Glancing down at the cuffs he was wearing, he slammed them together, causing a sharp electric jolt to course through his body.

"What are you trying to do? Give yourself brain damage?" Mondo spluttered.

All in the course o' duty, Errol joked to himself, before repeating the action. *Woo! This thing's got some kick.*

"Welp, scar face has finally lost his mind," Adam conceded.

"Not quite," Denise eyed him, lowering her voice. "I think Errol's trying to discharge his cuffs." She sat upright as a faint click was heard from the other side of the cell.

"Whoa," Kevin murmured, following the sound with his gaze and looking stunned at the results. "You okay there, Errol?"

"I'll have two double Buskenburgers, hold da mayo..." the man slurred woozily to no one in particular, as smoke wisps rose from the surface of his uniform, and the open cuffs inched down his charred, shaking wrists.

"Wow," Adam commented in deadpan tones. "The first thing I hear that guy say, and it's stupid."

"Adam!" Denise scolded, while Rose gathered the disengaged cuffs

before they had a chance to fall to the floor and attract undue attention. A short time later, Errol regained his wherewithal and proceeded to unlock the cuffs from around his ankles. Following the complete return of free movement, the man released Denise, then Mondo, who quickly set about unlatching the remainder of the group from their shackles.

"Okay," Denise whispered, motioning to the cuffs. "Place them all by the cell door, then stand way back."

The group arranged the articles which had previously bound them, into a makeshift cube formation, interlocking each one in the process. Denise kept one set of cuffs aside, which she forced her way into and prodded at the circuitry using the sharp point of one of Rose's green bauble earrings. Her work completed, the young technician placed the modified cuffs atop the cube arrangement before quickly applying pressure to their inside surface. Moments later, a sharp electrical feedback occurred within the cuffs, travelling its way down the remainder of the pile and amplifying with every additional shock component it reached.

Outside in the hallway, the slumbering guard toppled from his chair in alarm as a considerable explosion occurred - blasting shards of metallic debris and sending thick smoke billowing into the prison level. Hurriedly scrabbling for the flashlight on his belt, the man cried out as a lean figure sprung out of the dense mass of cloud and barrelled into him, pinning him to the floor.

The majority of Team Rocket's scientists were united in the impression that their leader's obelisk concept was farfetched, but none of them had been inclined to protest. It was never a wise thing to do when the frequent response to such questionings of authority was for the subject to be put through a machine that removed the need to question entirely. And so, the owners of these cautious and intelligent minds had stayed silent - awaiting their next orders.

They could not deny that Giovanni was a man of curious knowledge, gathered from having both travelled the globe as a Pokémon Trainer and running the Gym in Viridian City, Kanto. Yet despite this, many of the researchers and technicians had begun to ponder over his level of sanity – worried that Giovanni was clutching at straws out of desperation, following his organization's multiple defeats. Project Rebirth was undoubtedly a valiant, even stunningly admirable move on the Team Rocket leader's part, but the amount of energy required for the next level of its progression was nothing short of astronomical. It had been Giovanni's intention to tap into the most potent source of Infinity Energy - that theorized to be running through the earth itself - and channel this into specific laboratory equipment. But the existence of an 'Aura Network' had not exactly been proven, and as such, Team Rocket's science team felt as if they were flying blind.

Astor Crotale did not show the same longing to inquire as to the reasoning behind Giovanni's decisions. Either the executive had an unwavering faith, or a foolish ignorance. He stood there in the north wing

of the laboratory with his back to a small group of selected onlookers – mostly comprised of those who had worked on the project, and various top ranking operatives chosen to keep the peace. Some of these operatives still retained their free will, some of the more morally sound ones had fallen victim to the very personality-reprogramming machine the scientists feared.

It was now ten o' clock, the moment Giovanni demanded the obelisk had to be activated.

"Status report, Mr. Sebastian," Astor eyed the lead scientist with notable expectation as the work continued.

"Cyber-Terran IE frequencies are beginning to align," Professor Sebastian announced calmly from his standing position behind the long command console. "We are almost ready to initiate the Obelisk's Energy Grid. I estimate it will take twenty minutes before the grid is fully synchronized with the Cyber-Terran network."

"Perfect," Astor gave an approving nod, before the fidgeting of a shorter, blue-haired figure in Super Elite attire caught his attention. "What is it, Vilina? Speak up."

"We're receiving reports about the group of suspect traitors that were arrested earlier today, sir," Vilina relayed, raising her communication device as if to prove the origin of the message. "They've escaped containment."

"Should we halt operations?" another technician inquired worriedly.

"No," Astor boomed. "Secure this area and have C-Rank operatives dispatched to confront them. I've waited too long for this moment, I don't intend anything to postpone it further."

Harnessing the powers of a willing psychic for the benefit of Team Rocket was one thing, but attempting to control one that had no wish to assist them was another entirely. Unlike the compliant subjection of the hypno within the HQ's psywave distributor - the obelisk's prototype - this mew-jirachi crossbreed had not been persuaded to the cause - having been formed solely for the purpose of harnessing the needed energy. So far, the technicians had scraped by on luck and guesswork, managing to keep the creature inside the tank subdued through a complicated mixture of chemical sedatives and psywave-dampening emissions. But the obelisk's activation required its living dynamo to regain a greater semblance of consciousness. And this was where matters could get very risky indeed.

"M1NACH1 is showing signs of distress, sir," the technician at the control panel relayed uncomfortably. "Psywave output is rising rapidly."

"Biosignal matrix is holding," another technician piped up reassuringly. "Fifteen minutes until the obelisk becomes fully functional."

"Excellent," Astor smiled darkly. "Keep the dynamo in check until the time comes to interlink it. We have but one proper shot at this."

As her psychic senses began to re-align with her physical ones, the first thing Minachi experienced was turmoil. An unknown, artificial power tugging at her every limb – keeping the majority of her functions in check. This constricting force only served to infuse the genetic pokémon with a childlike terror. She could not flee, she could not retaliate, she did not even fully understand the reasons for her treatment.

Like any young living creature, Minachi had longed for care and kindness, which she had uncovered in sparse amounts amongst the scientists of Team Rocket. Yet, such things were a rare commodity here, and at this moment in time, the last thing on the pokémon's mind.

Now, all Minachi wanted was help.

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Caley lifted a hand to his forehead, closing his eyes slightly to try and avert the waves of discomfort. This bewildering nausea had risen shortly after he had pursued his new companions from the Team Rocket prison level, and had refused to leave him alone since. It had been making it difficult for the young man to keep his attention on the task at hand - trying to focus down the corridor the group had travelled in order to warn of oncoming threats. Fortunately none came, allowing Kevin enough time to successfully disengage the lock to the weaponry bay doors and step aside to let the others through.

"Wow Rose! This really *is* the jackpot!" Jenna exclaimed in astonishment, as the group of Team Rocket operatives and their additional accomplice stood admiring the shelves upon shelves of weaponry and ammunition. Adam happened to be the most awestruck - staring lengthily and curiously at the odd, fantastical but undoubtedly dangerous devices strapped to the walls. Even Caley couldn't help gazing up in wonder and shock. He'd only just been allowed to start using the power tools unsupervised at home and now this! Whomever ran this organization had to have been rolling in cash - many of the weapons looked as if they had come straight out of one of the science fiction shows he enjoyed watching on television as a child.

"Hey, give credit where it's due, Jen," Kevin reminded her with feigned upset. "I hacked this joint."

"And there isn't much time to take advantage," Rose reminded them. "Mondo will have that shield inverted soon enough, so gather the most powerful equipment you can find, ok?"

"Got it," everyone acknowledged, and disappeared into the various depths of the storeroom, leaving Caley to gaze with distant yet notable worry through a fanlight to the starlit sky beyond. The young man's awkward pause went mostly unnoticed, as Adam reached out for a particularly sizeable double-barrelled missile launcher with wide, excited eyes. Kevin was quick to halt the action, positioning himself between the youth and his intended weapon of choice.

"Nuh uh," Kevin shook his head. "You'll crack a rib trying to fire *that* thing. Here. Have this... 'Vacuum Discharger'." He pulled a device that resembled an oversized hairdryer from the rack behind him before passing it to Adam, who stared down at the item with a look of prolonged disbelief.

"You're kidding me," he responded dryly, moments later.

"Something's bugging you, isn't it?" Denise stated to Caley matter-of-factly as she approached the young man. "More than what we're doing right now."

"I had to leave my bag behind in Adam's room when they came to get us," Caley sighed in agreement. "I hid it away to stop it being confiscated, because there's stuff in there that'd get me found out. My clothes, the handler's license that allows me to travel with Kiko...I'm worried that those things will be used to target those I care about back home, if my bag is discovered." He glanced around momentarily. "Jenna's pokémon are in there too. At least I think they're hers – one was a drifblim-"

"What?" Jenna spluttered, overhearing the statement. "How did you- they should have been miles away from here by now!"

"They never left," Caley explained, almost apologetically. "I don't think they could bear the thought of abandoning you to Team Rocket."

As consciousness was slowly forced back into him, James uttered a low moan and tried to put a hand to his head. This motion proved to be impossible, for his arms were strapped tightly to a cold, hard platform upon which he lay. James tried to work out what had just happened - last thing he remembered was a group of Team Rocket grunts with face masks bursting through the doors of the Rec Room in a cloud of Sleep Powder. Now here he was, flat on his back and struggling to get his eyes to focus on the surroundings.

"This is most intriguing," a calm, dark voice was heard from somewhere to the right. James could barely make out what the man was saying, for the sound appeared to be partially muffled by unknown means. No sooner had his eyes adjusted to the light, James realised he was inside a long cylindrical tank used primarily for specimen examination. Outside the tube, a figure paced back and forth across the moderately-sized room with a thoughtful expression - zigzags of silver hair swinging back and forth by either ear. James flinched, recognizing the figure as none other than Professor Ein Bohrgram, the man whose demented theories he'd been subjected to for the past few weeks.

"So my new variant of the Genetic Fusion Serum was successful," Professor Bohrgram continued, fiddling with his triangular glasses. Apparently the scientist was talking to himself, paying no attention to the fact his test subject had re-awakened. "*Almost* successful. Mr. Morteago would hardly be satisfied with my DNA tailoring efforts if they were unstable. And of course there are...*new* things to be tried once the

pokémon transformation is permanent."

James uttered a squeak, feeling his pulse beginning to race as Professor Bohrgram picked up a vial of blue substance from the counter and began inserting it into a dart gun-type device designed for the administration of such things.

"No! No more testing!" he found himself yelling from his reinforced prison as the scientist approached. "I don't want to be a part of this madness any more!"

"Oh, you thought this was still a matter of choice?" Professor Bohrgram chuckled cruelly, unphased by his victim's signs of consciousness. "I'm sorry, James. Your voluntary status expired as soon as your cell structure started showing signs of *progress*."

"I don't care!" James shouted. The fear and panic in his voice had suddenly vanished, only to be replaced by the same carnal tones that had entered his manner of speech upon intercepting Cassidy. "No one is treating me like dirt any more! This...stops.....**NOW!**"

With a jolt the man convulsed, his waist thrown upwards like some invisible force was trying to pull him from the platform. From outside the examination chamber, Professor Bohrgram looked up in surprise as the consoles monitoring James' vital signs began to beep and flash unsettlingly.

"It's that...pain again..." James gasped harshly, red bloodshot eyes wide with terror. "It...it.....NO! Make it stop! This isn't fair!"

The other scientists present in the room were quick to approach, watching the examination chamber in awe and disgust as James writhed in agony under the unheeding grasp of his mutation. It was a horrifying sight, like an apparition was trapped within the man's body and was trying to escape by any means possible. His darkening skin seemed to crawl and bubble like molten plastic as a pale grey ring forced itself from around his neck - spreading and thickening into spikes arcing over his shoulders. His hair crackled with the potency of some invisible unknown energy, while this horrifying bony growth continued to develop in curved forms either side of his upper arms.

"This is incredible!" one of the scientists marvelled as long, thick horns sprouted from the top of James' partially-furred head. "You've actually managed to convince this subject's cells to assume an alternate configuration, sir. I'm seriously impressed!"

"You're a genius!" another nodded, studying the readings from one of the consoles. "The Boss is going to eat this HPP stuff up."

"Project Rebirth may well enter its next phase sooner than we think," yet another grinned.

"This isn't supposed to be happening yet..." Professor Bohrgram murmured, a curious anxiousness having descended on his aged face. "I haven't administered the experimental stabilising formula." The other scientists flinched in realisation, eyes wide, as the form in front of them twisted in the final stages of its awful metamorphosis. One of the

scientists screamed as a blast of flame tore through the lid of the examination chamber in front of him and forged a dark burn upon the ceiling. As the scientists scrambled for cover, the blue houndoom leapt out through the hole in the chamber, snarling and foaming at the mouth. Before anyone present had a chance to think about subduing the creature, it had bolted swiftly from the room.

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Several floors below the Intermediates, two familiar Elite operatives stood moodily surveying the empty cell complete with its charred and broken handcuffs that had once held their mutinous counterparts.

"One moment, everything was fine," the prison guard insisted, clasping an ice pack to his head. "The next moment, 'BOOM!' Cell door blows right off. There were too many of 'em for me to take on at once."

"This is impossible..." Butch shook his head, aghast. "You confiscated anything they could have used to escape, didn't you?"

"Well *sure* I did!" the prison guard nodded furiously, beginning to worry for his own safety, should the Elite rank operative in his presence decide to exact punishment. "Pokémon, tools, trinkets...they had *nothing* that could have broken them out of there."

"Except what bound them," Cassidy remarked, examining the shorted remains of the cuffs. "Those B-Rankers may be sentimental, but - I hate to say it - they're still pretty damn smart."

"Status report!" Butch barked into his communicator.

"There's been a breach in sector 8," another Elite relayed from the other end. "I'm taking some men to go investigate - we're almost certain it's the traitors you're looking for."

"The weapons bay!" Cassidy and Butch exclaimed in unison, before the former grabbed the communicator.

"I want grunts stationed at each end of sectors 7, 8 and 9," she ordered. "We *must* recapture them before they reach their destination."

"And keep yer wits about you," Butch added. "Have your pokémon on high alert - they'll be packing some heavy tech."

"What about the escaped houndoom running about the laboratory block?" the Elite asked.

"That's not *our* current concern!" Cassidy snapped. "Get other operatives onto it, we have a mutiny to stop!"

The duo turned to make their way towards the exit, only to be met with the bedraggled figure of Jessie who staggered through the doorway to meet them. Her uniform was rumpled and her hat was crooked, barely keeping a grasp on the remains of her hair, but most noticeable thing Jessie happened to be wearing was a thoroughly baffled expression.

"What the hell is going on?" she spluttered. Cassidy didn't reply, uttering a huff before storming past Jessie and out into the corridor.

"Clueless and late again, as usual," Butch shook his head, causing Jessie to growl and grit her teeth at him. "Your misfit 'buddies' broke out of their cell and hacked into sector 8 in the space of five minutes. If you don't slow us down, we may be able to catch up with 'em before they get anywhere near the laboratory."

The trio of Elites reached their intended floor in time to find Rose, Jenna, Kevin, Caley, Denise and Adam clashing with the Rocket grunts that had been sent to stop them. In the restricted environment of the corridor, it was the escapees that appeared to have the upper hand - their newly-obtained weapons sending out barrages of light and heat into the clusters of operatives and accompanying pokémon that had them blocked from both sides. Some pokémon attempted to raise protective force fields, redirecting a sparse number of the shots into nearby walls and through the glass panes of windows.

"No..." Butch's mouth dropped open, noting the massive laser cannons strapped to the shoulders of two of the group members. "You've got the P5-70s!"

"That's right, Politurd!" Kevin grinned. "And if you know what's good for ya, you'll let us get on with our business!"

"Never!" Cassidy screeched, before flailing angrily at the

unsettled-looking figures clad in black uniforms that were filling the corridor. "Stop them! I don't care how, just do it!"

As a fresh wave of grunts and their pokémon ran toward them, Rose and Kevin stood back to back and fired off a round of white-hot energy at their attackers' feet. It was enough to spook some of the figures who lost their nerve and dashed off towards the nearest exit. Those who didn't have the sense to escape, found themselves on the wrong end of a powerful blast of air that threw them backwards across the tiles.

"Cool," Adam smirked, shouldering the Vacuum Discharger. He didn't feel so bad about the oldest members of the group getting the laser cannons now.

"Come back here, y' useless morons!" Butch yelled after the escaping figures, shaking his fists. While attentions were diverted, Rose glanced over her shoulder at her companions expectantly awaiting further instruction.

"I'll hold these guys off, you lot continue as planned," she told them. "The cargo elevator is the quickest way to reach the lab level, you'll find it at the end of this corridor!"

The others looked at Rose reluctantly while Denise wore a surprised and vaguely admiring expression at the woman's self-sacrificing attitude. Then they turned and ran headlong into the leftover grunts, Adam firing off extra air blasts to clear a path while Caley took a deep

breath - attempting to ignore the grinding ache inside his head - and tried to remind himself why he was part of all this recklessness.

"After them!" Cassidy shouted at a few of the grunts who were idling warily in the corridor. "We can take care of this one."

"You'd better not be thinking of trying any of those mind tactics on me, Cassidy," Rose said nonchalantly, eyeing the Elite operative's thoughtfully devious expression as she watched the grunts leave. "This P5-70 is primed and I'm not moving an inch."

"And what are you intending to *do* with it, huh?" Cassidy inquired, while Butch gave Rose a cynical stare. "You're hardly the type to shoot at your friends."

"You're right..." Rose's eyes narrowed. "*I'm* not afraid to exercise my conscience. But *you're* not my friends!"

"*We* may not be," Butch shrugged, none the less insulted for the exclamation. "But I think yer forgetting someone *else* who joined our team recently." He reached to his left and roughly pulled the cap from Jessie's head, letting what remained of her magenta hair to spill down the sides of her face. Rose flinched in response - the cap had managed to obscure Jessie's identity in the heat of the moment, but now Rose was faced with the countenance of someone she held a multitude of discordant feelings about. Jessie had been the closest thing to a sister she'd ever had - even now, with all the anger that burned over how the woman had treated James, Rose still longed to patch up the kinship she

and Jessie had once shared.

"Now you be a good girl and let *us* get on with our business," Cassidy cooed patronizingly. Rose lowered the cannon slowly with a heavy sigh - with Jessie in the picture, she was at a loose end. Jessie simply looked on with astonishment, and noticeable guilt. Now was her chance to take Rose's side and end this backward madness, the avoidance of her true self, once and for all. But would Rose honestly be willing to take her back after all her mess ups? Jessie hadn't even managed to forgive *herself* for those yet! And the repressed source of her grief and turmoil had hardly disappeared - what if she were to lash out again as a result?

Jessie contracted a yawn as the device on Cassidy's belt began to beep loudly. The woman glanced down at it in shock - the display was showing a massive rise in psychic activity in the surrounding area.

"What's...going on?" Butch looked slightly panicked, as his eyelids rapidly grew heavy. Rose took the chance and ran past them back toward the staircase - Mondo had succeeded to invert Mindwipe's psywaves and it was only a matter of time before everyone, including her, fell asleep. She had to position herself somewhere Mondo could easily discover her.

Four minutes until Energy Grid activation.

Four minutes until Energy Grid activation.

Unaware of Mondo's achievement, the fleeing remainder of the group ran determinedly through the laboratory, knocking glass containers and files of paper from the shelves either side into the path of the grunts who had also managed to evade an untimely rest. Once the group had stepped into the elevator, Kevin was forced to discard the P5-70 he had been carrying, as it had been too large to cram inside. Now he and the others were relatively defenceless, with only Adam's Vacuum Discharger offering a measure of resistance. They were in dire need of something to provide further distraction and it was quick to arrive, in the form of James in houndoom shape being chased by Errol wielding a capture net.

"What *have* dey done to ya, Jimmy?" Errol murmured to himself. He'd never encountered a houndoom that had looked quite like this before.

"Hey! You got my bag!" Caley exclaimed happily, seeing the Team Rocket logo knapsack slung across the man's shoulders. Noting the new presences, the houndoom whipped its back legs to one side and upended a tall metal shelf behind it in the hopes of deterring them. While the grunts scattered in all directions, Errol crouched low without breaking stride and leapt swiftly over the mess, before landing neatly and continuing his chase. The others scrambled across the shelf in an attempt to follow - more to gain distance between themselves and the grunts than anything else.

"Whoa," Adam exclaimed, as he watched Errol sprint after the houndoom's receding figure, showing barely any signs of effort. "How'd

he *do* that?"

"Mustn't lose sight..." Errol muttered, trying to aim the barrel of the capture gun at the pokémon's flank while he continued to chase. The jolting of his shoulders made it difficult to keep a lock on his target as it darted from side to side in front of him.

"The obelisk is set up in the north wing of the laboratory," Denise panted in Jenna and Kevin's direction. "That is also where you'll find the adapter engine. Caley, Adam and I need to head west...toward the Pokémon Containment Department. With any luck...there'll also be something down here that can get us *out* of this awful place."

The houndoom continued speeding between the rows of machinery and computer terminals, grating its fangs together and letting out little tongues of flame with each breath. From out of nowhere, a small cluster of Elite operatives appeared in the aisle. It seemed these ones had been sent back into the lab from the north wing to specifically intercept the houndoom - however they hadn't been expecting it to be standing in plain sight just at that moment. The Elites' first instinct was to run yelling in the opposite direction as the dark type pokémon unleashed a blinding blast of fire at them, most of which seared a large computer terminal, causing it to burst into flames. As the houndoom dashed by, one woman ordered her swampert to block the canine's charge with a Take Down attack. It was enough to bewilder the houndoom momentarily, giving

another Elite's machop the chance it needed to pin the pokémon to the floor.

Errol cried out in alarm as a venomoth flapped its wings, sending a thick cloud of Stun Spore over both himself and the houndoom. The man grimaced, trying to fight back the Stun Spore's immobilisation, though without success. As he dropped the capture gun and sunk to his knees, the two male Elites approached their apprehended targets, chuckling amongst themselves while offering Errol a vaguely pitying glance.

"Not too clever, are we, grunt traitor?" one of the Elites sneered, prodding Errol in the chin with his laser tether while the houndoom surveyed those who had overwhelmed it with angry red eyes.

"Someone's got a bit of cargo," another operative smirked, reaching for the knapsack on Errol's back. "How's about we take a look?"

Errol growled ominously, but his frustrated utterance led to no retaliation. The venomoth's Stun Spore had taken effect, leaving him conscious but unable to move. With a disgustingly self-satisfied expression, the Elite's white gloved hand edged closer to the cord that held the knapsack shut. Then the houndoom uttered a low, unsettling noise from the back of its throat. It wasn't the right volume or pitch to be the typical howl the species was best known for – Errol looked on uneasily, as the sound generated tension in his paralysed limbs.

The machop slowly retracted its four arms from the houndoom's body as if momentarily unsettled. Before its trainer was able to protest

the pokémon's decision, however, the machop had swiftly turned upon him with an Ankle Sweep, knocking the man flat upon his back. Cries of horror and alarm resounded from the remaining Elite operatives as the swampert, venomoth and golem that were accompanying them also retaliated without warning - misted, blank looks present in their eyes. Having created itself an ample distraction, the houndoom stole its chance and leapt from the scene, throwing further pieces of equipment aside in the process.

"Dat was *some* power..." Errol assessed with noticeable awe, as he finally managed to wrench his legs into some form of action. "He was able to turn enemy pokémon to his cause! James sure makes one dangerous houndoom. I better get outta here..."

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Mondo descended the staircase triumphantly, stepping around the bodies of sleeping drones that had been dashing up to try and prevent his efforts. Reconfiguring and inverting the psywave shield hadn't been an easy task - the young technician was forced to use every ounce of his wisdom and intuition in order to first break into the room where the shield generation machine was installed, then subdue the operative in charge of monitoring the machine's behaviour.

From behind the glass of his containment, Mindwipe had surveyed the intruder to his domain with narrowed eyes, even attempting to lash out at Mondo - first with its psychic abilities, then by trying to overload the machine itself. But neither proved successful - any extra Aura the hypno emitted physically was neatly dampened by the machine's elaborate programming, while the Aura it emitted mentally was further channelled into maintaining the shield. In turn, its literal body was forcefully bound to prevent unwanted internal damage, reducing the pokémon to nothing but a bitter observer, as Mondo went about his business.

After several minutes, that business was completed, but Mondo couldn't be sure just how long the inverted shield would stay in tact under the barrage of Mindwipe's furious psychic complaints. It was time to act, and Mondo knew where his first port of call would be. The Prison Level's Confiscated Articles room, where his friends' pokémon companions were being held.

Upon entering the stairwell, Mondo tripped over the arm of a figure sprawled there and toppled flat on his face. Standing up in annoyance, the young man's jaw dropped open as he realised just whom the figure happened to be.

"Rose!" he gasped, before propping the woman up against the wall. There was no point in trying to wake her, as the sleep-inducing psywaves were far too strong. Mondo decided he would have to do the next best thing and move Rose to a zone the psywaves could not reach.

experienced was gradually resuming the level of intensity it had been while walking about in Dusty Town.

"There seems to be one of *everything* in here!" Adam gasped, scanning the rows of Pokéballs upon the shelves either side of him. "At least if it's in its second or third stage of evolution."

"That's a *lot* of pokémon," Caley looked uncomfortable. "Better hope that whatever they use to transport them isn't as slow as the machines used in Pokémon Centres."

"Fortunately not," Denise chuckled. "But either way, we need that extra time to reconfigure it." She motioned to a pair of sizeable cloth bags hooked into metallic frames with wheels. "Those carts should do the trick for getting the Pokéballs over to the transfer unit."

"Sure, if the Pokéballs weren't behind a ton of glass," Adam folded his arms.

"Yeah...I do need to do something with the security panes," Denise agreed, looking around for the control unit which maintained such things. "This shouldn't take too long. You guys stay here and keep a look out."

Adam watched tentatively as Denise strode over to the far corner, before turning to glance over his shoulder. He expected to see his older, red-haired companion standing beside him - however, to the youth's alarm, Caley had wandered down the central passageway between the cabinets.

"Hey!" Adam complained, before deeply furrowing his brow. "Go

on then," he called sarcastically after the young man. "Do your own thing, why don't ya? Just leave *me* to do all the work."

"Looks like she could use a hand with that," came an amused female voice from behind Adam. He swung round in a partial attack stance, his purposefully-aimed Vacuum Discharger and gritted teeth belying the hint of panic in his eyes. Two shadowed figures stood in the doorway - the slightly taller one now had their hands raised in a measure of protest against Adam's gut reaction.

"Chill, chill," the other figure insisted. Adam lowered the Vacuum Discharger and straightened rapidly upon hearing this voice, one he was all too used to. Out from the darkened frame of the doorway, a spherical object flew towards the youth. He reached up one of his gloved hands and caught the article in mid air - lowering it with a look of surprise which fast turned to joy when he saw what had been thrown at him.

"Cyzel's Pokéball!" he exclaimed happily. "You rock, Mondo."

"I give it my best shot," Mondo grinned, stepping into the room. The other figure did the same, the fluorescent light from above reflecting from her golden hair and revealing the owner to be none other than Rose. A sleek, well-toned glaceon peered out curiously from behind the woman's legs - eyeing Adam and the Pokéball in his hands with great interest.

"We have a little under seven minutes to get things done," Rose informed. "Mondo, you help Denise speed things up in here. Sia and I will

go and check out the prototype tech department for some kind of escape vehicle."

"Aye aye!" Mondo saluted as Rose and her glaceon left. Then he turned to Adam with a puzzled expression. "Say...where's Caley? I thought he's meant to be with you two."

"He was," Adam groaned, motioning toward the passageway. "He's gone wandering down there for some reason..."

"I've got to find her..." Caley murmured distantly, his eyes flicking back and forth, scanning the labels on every shelf as quickly as possible. Transferring Pokéballs away from Team Rocket in bulk was all well and good, but Kiko...he couldn't let her go along with them. As the young man progressed deeper into the room, the names of the pokémon subjects grew less familiar and more numerical, prompting the notion that the contents of these Pokéballs must surely be the experimental enhanced species Caley had heard being spoken of in the Team Rocket auditorium. He retracted, moving back along the lower rows into more familiar territory - the species had been organized in elemental groups, making it somewhat easier for the young man to select the area he required.

"Psychic...psychic..."

Of course, things would have been even simpler, had Kiko been in her personalised Pokéball. But, like all the other stolen pokémon here,

she was trapped within one of Team Rocket's ID-modifying capture devices and, on a shelf with hundreds of other identical Pokéballs, did not stand out at all.

A fervent tapping sound caught Caley's attention, motivating him to turn around and look at the shelf behind him. There, twelve black and white Pokéballs sat quivering in their individual niches - their agitated state dictating the unsettled consciousness of the creatures bound within. Caley approached the shelf, a look of upset sympathy momentarily overtaking the one of pain that had previously encompassed his features. He could see it now behind the glass, the Pokéball sat in the niche labelled 'Grumpig', the one he desired most to retrieve.

"Kiko..."

Caley reeled back in shock as the glass panel swung upward rapidly, partially clipping his chin in the process. Once the abruptness of the situation ebbed, the young man realised that the security pane had been released, allowing him access to the treasured pokémon companion he had missed so much. He lunged forward and snatched the Pokéball from its niche, activating the release button with his index finger. No sooner had he done that, than the device practically exploded in his hands, sending a blast of white light into the tiles in front of him. The light had barely shaped itself into an identifiable form before it sprang at the one who had unleashed it - shoving him to the ground with infuriated squealing.

"Kiko, it's me! Caley!" he exclaimed, hoping that he had not released some random grumpig who wouldn't know him from any other person in a Team Rocket uniform. The light faded to reveal a violet porcine face with black tapered ears, and a momentarily puzzled expression. As Kiko allowed herself to calm down and resort to more psychic perception, she began to smile elatedly at this discovery – her eyes brimming with tears.

"Peh, peh!" she sniffled, clasping her arms around Caley's neck. The young man sat up and returned the gesture, though more fleetingly than his companion.

"I missed you too, Kiko," he said. "But we'll have to catch up later. It took a lot to get into this place, and it's going to take even more to get back out. I'll be needing your help."

"And we need yours, buddy," Mondo pitched in from a short distance down the aisle. Caley and Kiko glanced to their left to see the technician reaching up into the shelving, scooping armfuls of Pokéballs into one of the trolley sacks while trying not to activate any of them in the process. Adam stood adjacently to Mondo with another sack, repeating the same action while muttering under his breath about outsiders and their not taking things seriously.

Kiko looked back at Caley with a knowledgeable smirk at this point - in her opinion, these two humans were going about the procedure in a far more complicated manner than necessary. Caley nodded in

agreement, his face reflecting an equal measure of discerning mischievousness. With that, the grumpig raised both her arms and a bluish aura surrounded the topmost rows of Pokéballs on either shelf. With great precision, Kiko manoeuvred the Pokéballs into Adam and Mondo's sacks before repeating this act of telekinesis on the Pokéballs arranged on the second row down. Their sacks now full, Adam and Mondo wheeled the trolleys down the aisle past Caley and Kiko - the latter with an expression of deepest gratitude, and the former with one of impressed admiration.

"That's one talented grumpig you have there," Mondo commented, as Caley followed him and Adam to the Pokéball Transfer Unit. Both the pokémon and the young man accompanying her responded with equally proud expressions.

"She sure is," Caley agreed with a chuckle. "But hey...Kiko *did* train with one of the best."

Adam opened his mouth, about to ask just whom Caley was referring to, but retracted his intentions upon seeing the downcast expression upon his companion's face. He may not have been the most observant of people, but Adam could tell that something about the figure Caley had mentioned brought the young man great sadness. Still, one question remained. *Why?*

Now was not the time to be prying into such matters. The trio had arrived beside the Pokéball Transfer Unit - a sturdy, eight foot high

construct with greater similarity in appearance to a piece of factory equipment than the commercially-used units Caley was more accustomed to seeing. A long conveyor belt led into the side of the machine's main console where, upon closer inspection, one could make out a device composed of thirty sensors within the console's hollowed innards. Denise was hunched over the machine's keyboard, tapping in commands with an expression of concentrated angst.

"Almost patched in to the Pokémon Institute Repository," she informed, allaying her colleagues' doubts that she had been unaware of their presence. "It's the location with the best facilities for taking larger volumes of Pokéballs, but it's still going to require some extensive queuing measures."

"Alright, time to load these babies in," Mondo announced, motioning to the large container stationed at one end of the conveyor belt. With a little effort, the first bag was hoisted from its trolley by the two eldest human members of the group, carefully upturned, and its contents siphoned into the machine's processing receptacle. Denise activated the conveyor belt, rolling the Pokéballs steadily towards the transfer unit where inside, several robotic arms picked the spherical articles and placed them into their respective indentations on a tray. Once the tray was filled, a blast of white light was initiated, converting the Pokéballs to data and sending them to their destination.

The procedure then repeated itself, as tray after tray of pokémon left the confines of Team Rocket by means of this digital link. While Caley

and Mondo stood by - waiting to load the next batch of Pokéballs into the transfer receptacle - Kiko and Adam took the bag that had been previously relieved of its contents, before scuttling back into the Containment Department. Moments later, the pair returned to exchange their now full bag for another empty one. Caley was certain to make sure the psychic, steel and electric type pokémon were all transferred first - while the young man feared his reliability on bringing Li and Vips back to their respective owners, he felt more assured that each would be reunited if all the pokémon were moved to the institute's storage facility.

"We've only managed to ship out 150 Pokéballs so far," Denise frowned, eyeing the clock on the transfer machine's interface, the overloaded processing receptacle and the bags Kiko and Adam had crammed full in order to clear all the shelves. "This is taking way too long."

"We could certainly use something to speed the process up," Mondo agreed.

"I've got a better idea," echoed another voice from the back of the room. "How about we shut the process *down*?"

TO BE CONTINUED...

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