

POKÉMON
REBIRTH
ULTIMATUM
Endgame Edition

EPISODE SEVEN

Final Gambit

"How about we shut the process *down*?"

Momentarily caught off guard, Denise, Mondo, Caley, Adam and Kiko redirected their stares toward the location of the voice, to find Butch, Cassidy and Jessie standing in the doorway of the Pokémon Containment Department. Soluqua, Wobuffet and Raccrupt accompanied them - sullen and focused expressions upon their faces.

"Wait," Mondo spluttered. "H-how did you three get down here? You were out cold from that Hypno's sleepwaves!"

"So that was *your* doing, was it?" Butch growled, while Jessie muttered under her breath about how embarrassing it had been to be rescued by children. "Stinkin' dirtbag...just you wait until I get my hands on you!"

"This ain't good," Adam grimaced. "We're outnumbered, two to one."

"Not necessarily," Denise murmured. "You've still got that Vacuum Discharger, haven't you?"

"Sure, I hooked it on one of the trolleys," Adam gave a nod. "Use it if you want. Cyzel's gonna fight in my corner."

"As I'd hoped," Denise smirked, sidling towards the article. "Caley, you stay here with Kiko and make sure the rest of those Pokéballs get transferred. Adam, right passage. Mondo, take the middle and aim for

that soluqua."

"The what?" Mondo blinked.

"The golduck hybrid!" Denise hissed, before grabbing the Vacuum Discharger and running towards the far side of the room. Adam dashed in the opposite direction, while Mondo strode purposefully down the central passage with a determined glower.

"But of course," Cassidy remarked, unimpressed. "You weren't intending on coming quietly." She turned to Butch, who had been eyeing her expectantly. "Take on the girl. I'm sure Raccrupt will be more than enough of a match for that silly air cannon of hers."

"Right," Butch acknowledged, quickly disappearing from view around the corner with his genetic pokémon following behind. Cassidy then glanced sideways at Jessie, shuffling in a mildly uncomfortable fashion while her wobbuffet stood regimentally to attention.

"Can I trust you to deal with that little boy over there?" she inquired airily, motioning down the right-hand passage. Jessie snorted in annoyance at Cassidy's persistently condescending attitude and stormed off towards her instructed destination - pulling on one of Wobbuffet's flippers in order to get him to follow. Her two accomplices occupied, Cassidy turned to Mondo and a darkened smirk appeared on her face.

"You've got some nerve to approach me with no way to defend yourself," she remarked.

"Who said I didn't have a way to defend myself?" Mondo replied

Kevin and Jenna continued to observe the activities of Team Rocket's scientists from their hiding spot, constantly looking for a possible opening in which to make their advance - however small that opening may have been. During the past few minutes, the atmosphere surrounding one half of the obelisk had shifted from confident triumph to unsettled cautiousness. As the technicians persisted in their deeply-focused maintenance, Professor Sebastian stepped away from the computer terminals in order to approach Astor Crotale - albeit with a nervous, hesitant mannerism which seemed most uncharacteristic.

"Mr. Crotale..." he began awkwardly. "We appear to be experiencing a few...complications."

"Hmm?" Astor glanced up from his clipboard. While the surface of the response appeared disinterested, the underlying volatility was quite apparent.

"We need more energy!" Professor Sebastian exclaimed. "The obelisk is taking longer to synchronize with the Cyber-Terran matrix than we thought, and our supplies for keeping it online until that point are dwindling."

"Re-route supplies from all available lab sectors," Astor instructed bluntly. "You must not lose this chance for us."

"Yes. O-Of course," Professor Sebastian acknowledged, while others behind him tapped more earnestly at their relative consoles. Systems powered down and lights started to dim around the furthest

edges of the laboratory, prompting Kevin and Jenna to exchange uncomfortable glances. Their situation may have seemed insurmountable, yet this alteration of events could hardly bode well for their companions.

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Caley and Kiko swung round from their attempts at pokémon rescue to witness a rather troubling sight. On the right-hand side of the central shelving, Jessie could be heard taunting Adam with sadistic amusement as Cyzel's claws rebounded from Wobbuffet's toughened rubbery body over and over. To the far left, Denise tried to keep Raccrupt back with blasts of air from the Vacuum Discharger, but with little effect. And Mondo dangled helplessly in full view, caught out by Soluqua's extra-sensory powers.

As firm as Denise had been over Caley's duty, the young man knew he had to do something to help the others. He gave Kiko a stern glance, willing the grumpig with his eyes to lend Mondo assistance. Detecting the silent instruction, Kiko skittered into the central corridor and applied her own telekinesis in order to pull Mondo out of Soluqua's mental grasp.

"Ow! Owww!" Mondo yelled, as Soluqua increased her own focus in order to drag him in Cassidy's direction. "For Tah's sakes, let go! I'm not a party cracker!"

"Give it up, girly," Butch smirked, as Raccrupt shrugged off yet another emission from Denise's Vacuum Discharger. "This critter *trains* under harsher conditions than that. What'cha think a little puff of air is gonna do?"

Before Denise had a chance to answer, Raccrupt swung one of its muscular front limbs at her, throwing the youth backwards down the corridor. Neither Butch nor his raccrupt made any move to approach Denise's crumpled body as she tried to haul herself upright, coughing furiously. The Vacuum Discharger lay abandoned on the tiles nearby, just out of her arm's reach.

"C'mon now," Butch almost looked sympathetic. "Stop this futile rebellion. Don't force me to *really* hurt you."

"However long it takes...for Caley to get those Pokéballs transferred..." Denise murmured hoarsely, "Is as long as I will stay here."

"Alright. It's your decision," Butch shrugged, ruffling the fur along his pokémon's back. "Okay Raccrupt. Focus Blast."

As a sphere of blue energy began to form between Raccrupt's jaws, Denise gathered her last ounce of strength and lunged for the Vacuum Discharger across the tiles - snatching up the weapon and firing a shot of air at the pokémon's head. The blow glanced the right side of Raccrupt's face, forcing it in the opposite direction just as the pokémon's energy sphere was unleashed. Cassidy cried out in shock as the Focus

Blast flew between her and Soluqua, heading straight for Wobbuffet on the other side of the room.

Then darkness suddenly consumed those present.

It was a momentary loss of vision, yet during those fleeting seconds, Caley distinctly heard a bizarre snap as energy made impact with energy - proceeded by the sound of fracturing glass. No sooner had the lights in the Pokémon Containment Department spluttered back into life, than everyone looked about worriedly, trying to see what the reflected Focus Blast had hit.

"Gruh-pehhh..." Kiko whimpered uncomfortably as she returned to Caley's side, gesturing with fear-stricken eyes at a point just a few metres away from the Pokéball Transfer Unit. There stood a tall metallic cylinder with a transparent-plate door in its front - the surface of which was covered in rapidly-spreading cracks. Behind that door, an ultramarine and violet cloud span and churned with malevolent impatience.

Then the glass panel shattered, throwing tiny, clear shards across the tiles in front of Caley and Kiko. Horrible sounds reverberated about the walls as the murky cloud gushed into the open - a noise like searing metal and high-pitched wails that clashed discordantly with the alarms which had started to blare as a result of the container's damage. Both Caley and Kiko grasped at their ears, the former showing a greater level of pain at the new aural assault joining the persistent mental one.

Mondo scrambled to his feet from where Soluqua and Kiko had

dropped him, and dashed down the central passage just in time to see the intangible bluish mass dive for the Pokéball Transfer Unit. The young technician cried out in horror, but his expression of anguish was in vain. In just a matter of seconds, the unidentified entity had swept through the Pokéball bags and over the conveyor belt - vanishing into the machine and out of sight.

As the Pokéball Transfer Unit began to shake and splutter, the release buttons on every single Pokéball inside the bags started to glow an eerie white. It was then, that something in Caley's gut told him that things had just gone terribly, terribly wrong.

Kiko squealed and reached out to grab her human companion's arm, pulling him to the floor as both bags and the conveyor belt erupted in a blinding light. Caley had instinctively shut his eyes at this point, feeling the intimidating tremors of hundreds of claws, hooves and paws as pokémon subjects made contact with the ground either side and in front of him. Mondo turned to run, but was swiftly engulfed in the seething mass of fluttering, fleeing bodies which coursed into the central passage - toppling the shelving in the process.

"Get outta there!" Butch yelled furiously in Cassidy's direction. The woman found herself stricken in fear at what was heading towards her, frozen to the spot with little sound or movement. Without further thought, Butch threw himself at Cassidy - propelling her backwards into Jessie and Wobuffet as the pokémon stampede reached the far end of the room.

Then he was gone.

"Gruh, grum-pehh~?" Kiko glanced up cautiously, disengaging her Protect shield as Caley manoeuvred himself into a sitting position and warily opened his eyes. The Pokémon Containment Room was a far cry from the condition it had first resembled when the young man and those accompanying him had arrived. Dented halves of broken Pokéballs littered the cracked, chipped tiles, while faint moans could be heard from underneath the diagonally-propped sets of shelves either side of the room.

Mondo lay sprawled in the central passage, his body covered in cuts and bruises - parts of his clothing torn by the pokémon that had dashed over him in their frantic attempts to escape. Yet despite his condition, none of the injuries dictated a purposeful, direct attack. Fear had smothered any anger or frustration the pokémon may have had at their treatment - it was as if they had sensed great danger and knew it was imperative to leave at once.

"Denise, are you okay?" Caley asked, reaching down to help his female companion out from the cramped space the fallen set of shelves had left.

"No..." Denise murmured in broken tones. "This wasn't what was meant to happen..." She tried to stand, to run after the pokémon in some dwindling hope of recapturing them, only to collapse onto her knees

instead. Raccrupt's attack had indeed taken its toll. Caley looked on with a mixture of awkwardness and shame as the adolescent girl descended into fits of sobbing.

"Hey, come on..." Caley tried to be consoling. "It's not your fault. At least the pokémon were freed... like you wanted."

"Some of them aren't *stable* enough to be out there amongst people yet!" Denise insisted, a note of bitterness creeping into her voice over the young man's naivety. "That was another reason why I chose the Pokémon Institute Repository as the place to send those Pokéballs."

"As messy as it was, it should at least keep the focus off us until Rose gets back with an escape vehicle," Mondo pointed out, while Cyzel nudged Adam out from under the opposite set of shelves. "Speaking of which, I'd better stand at the entrance to check for her return."

"IIII'll come with you," Adam decided, having seen Denise's tear-stricken expression and feeling quite socially out of his depth. Mondo gave a nod of approval, and half-strode, half-limped back up the central passageway with his younger accomplice and the arcumese following close behind.

"Go with them," Denise murmured in Caley's direction, once the others were out of earshot.

"But, Denise..." the young man looked crestfallen, while Kiko's ears lowered in mutual upset.

"Please, just go," his companion insisted, barely managing to keep

her voice from wobbling. "I...I need to be alone for a moment."

"Okay..." Caley relented, shuffling backwards until he was in line with the central passageway - unwilling to take his saddened eyes from Denise's huddled form on the tiles. Once the human and grumpig were gone, Denise let her head hang between her knees and resumed the outlet of disappointment.

"I'm sorry...I'm so sorry," she sobbed, as if the pokémon she had freed were still present. "I was going to send you somewhere safe, somewhere they might be able to help you. Not free you into the world, where you'd be alone and scared. People out there...they won't understand."

Just then, Denise felt the light touch of something warm and flat upon her shoulder. At first she assumed it to be Caley - having never truly left and having returned to attempt consolation out of his typical heart-felt empathy. Glancing up sternly, Denise flinched as she found herself looking upon the mournful expression of a blue, bipedal pokémon with long, notched, rabbit-like ears. Many of its features resembled those of a modified azumarill, yet the body type was less egg-shaped, and more like that of a charmeleon. Denise had been caught off guard by the sight of the creature's gaze at first - the eyes were pitch black, with golden yellow rings as pupils.

"Shuh-rihl," the pokémon remarked in soft tones, playing nervously with the bulbous end of its long, thin tail.

"Everyone else ran away..." Denise looked confused. "Why not you?"

"Riiiiihll~" the pokémon quaked, pointing a flipper toward the doorway. Something in the tone of the pokémon's voice dictated that it was indeed more afraid of what awaited it outside, as opposed to staying in the laboratory, where its fears and torments were at least more familiar.

"I get it," Denise smiled in what she hoped would be a warm manner. "It's okay. I know what you're feeling. The thought of going out there is kinda new to me too. And sure, I'll admit I'm nervous like you are, but..." she paused and reached out a gloved hand slowly. "...staying in this place won't do either of us any good, will it?"

The pokémon eyed the hand with trepidation and suspicion. This human was certainly one of the kinder ones it had encountered, but still, dressed in a grunt uniform, she didn't seem entirely trustworthy. Sensing the hesitation over her offering, Denise shook her head before retracting her hand momentarily to remove the glove.

"Listen," she insisted. "I'm going to come with you. It won't be as scary if we face the unknown together..." the ex-technician held out her now bare hand for the second time. "...if you'll let me."

After a few moments, the tip of one of the pokémon's flippers had found its way into Denise's hand, bringing a thankful smile to her face.

"Shuh Shuh-zuu-rihl," the pokémon responded, with a more

optimistic expression. Common ground went a long way to forging the thready beginnings of friendship.

"You done now?" were Adam's first words as Denise approached him and Mondo standing in the containment room entrance.

"Yes, Adam," Denise remarked, a little dryly. "Thank you for your concern." She then paused, searching in puzzlement and worry for a figure that appeared absent. "Wh-where's Caley?"

"Well there's the thing," Mondo looked awkward. "His grumpig just started acting all strange and took off. He went after it, told us to stay here and wait for you."

"And you *listened* to him?" Denise spluttered. "That's a civilian outsider you just let run into the lab by himself! And with a whole bunch of pokémon on the loose, to boot!"

"He seemed to know what he was doing!" Mondo protested, holding up his hands. "I mean, really! There was this look I've never seen on the guy's face before..."

"Either way, we can't do much about it now," Denise sighed. "Going after him would just make it harder for Rose to find us. We'd better hope that you're right about Caley knowing what he's doing, Mondo."

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Restraining the group of traitors was the last thing on Butch's mind at this moment in time. Following the unleashing of several hundred pokémon specimens from their capsules, the Elite operative had been dragged off amongst the fleeing throng after shoving Cassidy from their path. Now he swayed helplessly from the upper protrusion of a steelix's boulder-like form, unable to reach out and dislodge his uniform from where it had been snagged.

Butch wasn't entirely sure *why* he'd lunged into the midst of the pokémon herd in order to rescue Cassidy. Taj knew the woman didn't appreciate such things. Even now, Cassidy was running down the passageway that ran parallel to the one containing the escaping pokémon - her partly anxious, mostly angry face visible at fleeting intervals in the gaps between machinery and shelving.

"Get down here right now!" she yelled. "This is no time for a joyride!"

"Some help would be nice!" Butch shouted back in annoyance. The fact Cassidy made it sound like he was up there on purpose only served to frustrate him.

Just metres away, Errol knelt down to gather a solitary Rocket Ball from where it had landed. Throwing it at James had been a tough decision for him to make, but time was running dangerously short and the man no

longer had freedom for alternate plans of action. As he stood upright and re-adjusted the strap of the knapsack upon his shoulder, Errol gave the Rocket Ball a sympathetic glance - as if the creature within had been capable of seeing it.

“Don’t worry, Jimmy,” he murmured. “You’re not going to be in here forever. This will be over soon, and we’ll all be able to forget about Team Rocket.”

Maybe it was the fact Errol had been concentrating too hard on his own duties to notice the growing tremors, but what happened next seemed to come without warning. In a rush of air and a thundering of movement, a large number of pokémon dashed past. Errol staggered to one side as something cold and hard dragged across his back. It was enough to cause the man to turn around and, in the process, the knapsack he had been protecting was snatched up into the air. Upon closer inspection, Errol could see the article now dangling from a steelix’s lower spikes.

"HEY!" Errol yelled at the retreating metallic snake pokémon. "That's my friend's stuff you just stole! Get back here!"

From his hanging place on the opposite side of the steelix, Butch’s eyes widened in surprise. The voice that echoed into the laboratory from a short distance away had sounded extremely familiar. But surely his assumption was impossible - the figure in possession of that voice had not been seen in almost a year. Regardless, Butch still found himself

craning his neck - searching for any visible presence of the cat pokémon he was half expecting to see running into view. Instead the Elite operative was confronted with the sight of a lithe, middle-aged man dressed in a grunt uniform - the cap of which obscured the majority of his face. Before Butch was able to call to the man for assistance, he had uttered a furious yell before crouching down and leaping for the steelix, arms outstretched.

What happened next was something of a blur. Butch cried out as the man's left knee made impact with the side of his face, thrusting him from the steelix's body and into the air. Moments later, the Elite operative landed heavily upon a cluttered tabletop nearby, skimming across it and taking the vials and canisters of experimental fluids on its surface with him as a result of the momentum.

"Dere we go," Errol grinned to himself, landing neatly upon the tiles on the other side of the throng of runaway pokémon. In his focused determination to retrieve Caley's belongings, he hadn't even noticed Butch caught upon the adjacent side to the knapsack.

By the time Cassidy had found Butch, the man was partially-comatose - lying face down on the floor amongst shards of broken glass, twitching and making unusual noises. Jessie could barely stifle her amusement at the disarray that was sprawled before her.

"Well he's fit for nothing now," Cassidy frowned, before turning to Jessie. "You and that blobby excuse for a pokémon had better take Butch

eye. "Uh, *Negatic* to wake some Elites I found snoozing on the job. Oh! And bagged you a couple of those traitors too."

She clicked her fingers and her togetic-sneasel genetic pokémon shoved Jenna and Kevin into Vilina's line of sight. The former was wearing a miserable, defeated expression, while the latter stared darkly from underneath his shaggy locks of violet-tinted hair.

"Nice work," Vilina gave a tiny smile, appearing to have cast aside the scolding she was intending to give Tamesis for naming the pokémon she had lent the youth. Kevin glowered as Vilina turned her attentions toward Jenna and himself. "Well, you're just in time for the best part of the show."

"You're going to regret this," Kevin said frigidly.

"*They* might," Vilina smirked, as the tremors in the surrounding area grew stronger and more pronounced. "But I have a knack of finding the joy in every tragedy."

"Cyber-Terran Synchronization is 90% complete," Professor Sebastian announced, while members of the Elite rank audience glanced at each other worriedly. "But the environment is becoming increasingly unstable, sir."

"I don't think there are enough operatives out there to deal with all those pokémon running free in the lab," one of the Elites piped up. "Shouldn't we do something about it?"

But the Elite's concern was duly ignored. Astor had but one thing

on his mind, and he had taken every precaution to ensure that no unforeseen circumstance would be able to alter his schedule.

"Lower the division field," he instructed bluntly. "Secure the immediate area."

"But sir, the laboratory is being torn apart," one of the scientists protested worriedly. "Giovanni will be *furious!*"

"The damages and escaped specimens will mean nothing to him if this construct works," Astor told them in dangerous monotone. "Now DO IT!"

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It was then that Errol noticed the luminescent obelisk. Up until that point, it had been hidden behind rows upon rows of shelves and machines. Now the monolithic construction was visible from where he stood - every panel shimmering with a haunting blue energy. Such a sight could have easily awed the man with its beauty, yet all Errol felt was dread, apprehension...even fear.

A tugging upon the right leg of his trousers diverted Errol's attention to a grumpig standing beside him, wearing a distraught expression. It pointed towards the pinnacle of the obelisk before clinging unhappily to the man's side.

"We're too late," Caley's horrified voice was heard behind Errol.
"The obelisk...*why* didn't Kevin and Jenna shut it down?"

"Somet'ing tells me deir plans didn't quite woik out how dey expected 'em to either," Errol grimaced, handing Caley his knapsack and the Rocket Ball with James in. "It's too risky to go in after dem now. Da best t'ing we can do is get outta here."

"I suppose..." Caley murmured. Part of him was crying out over how terribly unjust this was, but the rest of him knew Errol was right. The young man could tell by the look in his older companion's eyes that Errol was no more comfortable with abandoning Kevin and Jenna to Team Rocket than he was.

A distant hum drew Caley, Errol and Kiko's attentions to an approaching hovercraft. Its sleekly polished black outer shell with two sizeable propulsion engines sat firmly atop a dark grey balloon-like skirt - allowing it to coast lightly over the minor scatterings of debris. Though it was impossible to see from the outside, due to its tinted windows, Denise and Adam sat in the back of the hovercraft, with Mondo positioned in the driver's seat, a look of fierce determination on his face. Rose swiftly lowered the front left passenger window and peered out of it, in order to make the group's presence known to Errol and his red-haired companion.

As Caley made a move to step toward the nearing hovercraft, Errol spotted a row of bright lights on the floor directly in front of the young

man. Lunging forward, Errol grasped hold of Caley's arm, yanking the figure back just as a sheet of green erupted seemingly from nowhere. It coursed upwards in a dome-like arc, forging an impenetrable barrier between Errol, Caley and those who had drawn close to rescue them.

"Go on wit'out us!" Errol insisted to Rose, while Mondo stared at him in partial disbelief. "Find dat Professor guy if you can. Dere's no way you can help us from outside - I'll see what I can do from in here."

All that Denise and Adam could do was peer exasperatedly through the back tinted window - watching Errol and Caley standing behind the semi-transparent force field, growing smaller with the hovercraft's lengthening distance. Despite the fact Caley's head was lowered, Denise was pretty sure she had seen a faint smile from under the peak of his cap. A smile of triumph.

"Surely Errol is wrong," Denise spluttered to anyone in the hovercraft that was listening. "Surely there's *something* we could do to help them!"

"I'm afraid not, Neesee," Mondo sighed. "There's no way we can deactivate that force field from the outside. We need to hope Errol can get himself and Caley out of this one....somehow."

"You okay, kid?" Errol asked his younger companion softly, once the hovercraft had vanished from sight. Allowing it to leave had not been an easy thing to do, but the man knew that if *anyone* was to be freed that

night, this was the decision he needed to make.

"Even if I didn't get to do what I wanted," Caley murmured, following a solemn nod. "At least I did what felt right."

"It ain't time to give up yet, Caley," Errol stated firmly. "Da uddas still need you. Dey'll be sunk wit'out your optimism t' keep 'em going."

"But what about *you*?" Caley glanced up sadly. Errol returned his concern with a reassuring smile, though the expression was distant.

"Ehh... I was old enough to know better, kid," he sighed. "I'm jus' gettin' what I desoive."

"That's a load of rubbish," Caley frowned. "You deserve to be out there just as much as the rest of those guys."

"Maybe," Errol shrugged. A deep, nagging feeling within him seemed to be intent on convincing the man otherwise. "But youse need someone to keep da peanut gallery on its toes until dis force field is lowered, an' I'm your guy."

Suddenly, Errol let out a strangled yell as a blast of dark energy slammed into his back and threw the man at the floor. Caley glanced up in shock, his gut churning at what he saw just a few metres away. There stood none other than Tamesis Camila, accompanied by Narca, her mentor Vilina DaNasty and five Elite rank operatives assigned to follow them as a precautionary measure.

"*Peanut gallery*?" Tamesis growled, as Errol struggled to get to his

knees and retrieve the cap that had been knocked from his head. "You'll be the ones getting roasted when *I'm* through with you!"

"Temper, dear. Temper," Vilina shook her head at her apprentice. "Remember what I told you - anger lends the enemy an opening to strike." The Super Elite turned back towards her captives with sadistic enjoyment. "Granted, you've had your smart moments, but in the end, what were you hoping to achieve? You, the few against us, the many."

"Dat's none of your business!" Errol spat, before the sole of an operative's white boot thrust itself between his shoulder blades, forcing the man to the tiles.

"Oh it's every bit our business," Vilina replied, while Caley stood frozen in a mixture of horror and disgust. "You just so happen to be Team Rocket property. And the boss doesn't appreciate uncooperative property. But there *are* ways of amending that."

Caley's eyes widened as he traced the boot upon Errol's back all the way to its owner, and took in the figure that was responsible for his companion's suffering. Despite the salmon-tinted hair having been shaven to within an inch of his skull, and the presence of an unsettling sneer upon his face, something about the man appeared very familiar.

"Throughout history there have existed those who can tame dragons," Vilina relayed. "But never have there existed those with the ability to tame the tamers. Until now."

It was then, the realisation hit Caley like a brick. He had

unexpectedly found himself in the presence of Lance Zilant - ToJoh Elite Four member and the skilled Guardsmen Commander that Ana had so forlornly reported the disappearance of a short time ago. But what could have possibly instigated Commander Zilant's change of heart?

As if in response to his puzzled contemplation, Lance stared directly at Caley, and what the young man saw made his skin go cold. Lance's eyes were glazed and unresponsive, the pupils so tiny they appeared almost non-existent. It was as if he had ceased to be human.

Despite his best intentions to scope out Team Rocket and report on its activities in secret, it was more than apparent the courageous agent had finally met his downfall.

"He's not exactly the conversationalist," Vilina chuckled, while Caley squirmed and tried to look away from Lance's emotionless expression. "But that tends to happen when you make your acquaintance with the P.R.O.C.U. As to whether that shall be *your* fate...that is for Ms. Radwell to decide."

Cyber-Terran Synchronization Complete.

Relay Initialized.

Relay Initialized.

Minachi had never felt so scared during the passage of her short life until that moment. Caught amidst a searing blue blaze with no true perception of time or surroundings, the pokémon had mentally screamed for help without pause or reprieve. The whirls and arcs of energy had been visible to Minachi despite her tightly-closed eyes, engulfing the internally-flailing creature in swathes of pain and glaring light that seemed as if they would never cease.

Then the smothering oppressive atmosphere was gone. A pink face, with large, gentle blue eyes gazed back through a misty swirl. A face not unlike her own. Minachi felt the energy surrounding her begin to shift, taking on new forms and patterns. A language.

Anxious, panicking thoughts retreated – making way for reassurance and instruction from origins unknown. Fear became determination as Minachi's mind and body hummed with a unified force.

It was then, the tiny pokémon felt empowered. She *knew* what she had to do.

Every light and computer screen in the laboratory suddenly dimmed and sputtered out. Now, the only source of illumination in the area was the towering construct - its pinnacle casting out luminescent beams amongst the watching figures like a miniature blue sun.

"All power to the HQ has ceased," Professor Sebastian informed after some worried observation. "The obelisk is functioning purely upon

its siphoned Infinity Energy."

"Energy levels are rising too fast," one of the background scientists exclaimed. Just metres away, Caley and Kiko glanced about anxiously as the tiles under their feet began to quake. "M1N4CH1 has overridden the Biosignal Matrix!"

"The obelisk was not designed to withstand so much power at once!" another scientist yelled. She was thrown backwards across the laboratory shortly afterwards, as one of the black panels was projected from the surface of the monolith, slamming into her body. In a matter of seconds the sphere of light at the tip of the obelisk thrust itself outward, peeling the surrounding layers of metal, wiring and circuitry away from itself like the scaled petals of an artificial flower. The air was thick and distorted now - nearby machinery sparked and vibrated, unable to sustain the force of Aura they were now saturated with.

"We've got to get out of here!" a technician bellowed, trying to make his voice heard over the cacophony of thunderous shudders, alarms and tearing steel. Scientists and Team Rocket operatives alike were running about in a panic, trying to avoid the swirling chunks of debris while nearby, the massive pillars that supported the HQ's understructure were beginning to crack.

"Code LR-SS," Astor spoke into his communicator. He sounded neither angered nor disappointed, just unsettlingly sedate. "Engage immediate evacuation."

"Take these traitors and get to the hangar!" Vilina bellowed at the Elite operatives nearest to her. "That freak is going to blow this place apart!"

Two of the operatives grasped Errol's exhausted figure by the arms and swiftly marched him away as Tamesis quickly gave pursuit - the fearful expression she was wearing making it clear just how much of an unsettling shock all this had been for her. Another two reached toward Caley, but an invisible force kept them from grasping him. It also prevented Caley from running after Errol.

"Errol! No!" the young man cried. "Kiko! What are you doing?"

"Peh! Grum-peh!" Kiko spluttered. She hadn't been responsible for the impenetrable barrier. Squinting at the brilliant sphere of light, Caley could do nothing but watch as his surroundings were torn from around him - flayed segments of laboratory machines, shards of glass and plaster span about in a relentless vortex. The air thickened further, its glow spreading and intensifying until it blotted out all vestiges of destruction and chaos from around the young man and his grumpig companion. Minachi hovered a short distance away, its pained, tiring features encompassed in a faint white light. Gradually, the hybrid pokémon shortened the distance between herself and those she had kept sheltered.

"Why did you keep me here?" Caley exclaimed angrily, no longer paying attention to the surreal environment around him. "Why didn't you protect Errol too?"

There is something I was told to give you... before I leave. Minachi murmured weakly, as if she had not heard Caley's frustrated questions.

"L-Leave?" Caley stammered, his face suddenly becoming anxious. The creature, anonymous as they were to him, had uttered this sentence in a tone of voice which implied something quite permanent.

The fourteenth phase is now, Minachi responded. *You have seen it, their tainted virtue. You must prepare for their deadly strike.*

"Team Rocket?" Caley blurted. Such words had done little to clear the unsettled confusion within the young man. "You want me to stop Team Rocket?"

The Original One wishes it, Minachi corrected.

"That's impossible!" the young man spluttered, not even feeling inclined to ask who this 'original one' was. "You saw me back there - I failed horribly! How could I-?"

You are the one that holds the key, Caley Wilson, Minachi whispered, drawing closer as the aura within her eyes flared in intensity - blotting out her pupils. *A good heart...a strong mind...only in unity will you overcome what seems so impossible.*

Caley attempted to escape as Minachi's paw reached toward him, but was unable to move away. Both he and Kiko were restrained psychically, in what felt like a confusing and terrifying hallucination. Yes, that's what it had to be - he must have passed out from the sheer intensity of the escape attempt alongside the others. Any moment now,

Caley reasoned, he would wake up - hopefully to something far less crazy than this. But nothing changed. Instead, Minachi's paw delicately embraced Caley's temple, her vivid aura travelling down her outstretched arm and surrounding the young man in a mutual glow. At this point, the light enveloped Minachi's body, completely blotting her from view.

Farewell, Aaaaahnnn...lohkh...kahhh...

"Wait!" Caley gasped, his voice petering out as realisation swiftly dawned. Kiko and himself were no longer within the confines of the Team Rocket headquarters, and instead were lying upon the bristly ground amongst the trees with Kota hovering overhead. A small tuft of cream-coloured fur lay in Caley's right hand - the young man had no idea as to how it got there, but such a thing was hardly the most pressing matter in his head at that moment in time. His mind was whirling with Minachi's cryptic utterances, his body felt odd, tingly as if charged with static electricity.

"Aw...gweh?" the augret inquired with an expression of great concern, as Caley slowly tightened his fingers around the tuft of fur in his palm. The pokémon's human companion sat up and gazed out at nothing in particular, shaking his head as if Kota had not spoken. The previous events had encompassed him all too quickly.

"I don't understand..." Caley murmured distantly, while Kiko reached out an arm to try and comfort him. "*What* is the key I hold? What am I supposed to do? What am I- ?"

The young man's sentence was cut short as an ear-splitting screech echoed across the sky, followed by a tremendous explosion. Caley yelled in alarm as a wave of air thrust itself amongst the trees, tearing them from their roots like weeds from a lawn. Kota and Kiko were quick to attach themselves to their human companion with determined expressions - engaging the strongest psychic forcefields they could muster. While the barriers held, all three figures were tossed backwards recklessly amongst the debris in the process, eventually coming to rest alongside the toppled remnants of the forest as shards of concrete rained all about them.

Then everything went black.

Caley twitched as he felt a sudden pressure upon both his shoulders - his upper body was now being pulled forward sharply and pushed back with equal force against something soft and leathery. He could hear voices, but they were somewhat far away and a little muffled.

"Caley...Caley! Snap out of it!" a slightly raspy, adolescent voice pushed its way through the haze of the young man's mind.

"Be careful with the lad!" an older male voice insisted sternly, yet worriedly. "He's in shock!"

"...Adam?" Caley murmured, managing to force this singular inquiry into an audible format, along with a slight opening of his eyelids. He was starting to become aware of a feeling of velocity, interrupted on occasion with the unpredictable nature of turbulence and undulating surfaces. "Where...am I?"

"You're inside the hovercraft," a young female voice assured him. "We rescued you shortly after that blast happened."

As his vision began to sharpen, Caley took note of the low, black roof of the vehicle arcing its way over him. A swift turn of the head caused his gaze to meet with those of Denise and Adam - the former wearing an expression of distinct relief, the latter glaring accusingly as if Caley had lost consciousness on purpose. Kota sat upon Denise's knee, his teal coloured eyes full of stern intent.

"Thank Tah we were still in the area," Rose's voice was heard from the front of the hovercraft, while Kiko put a paw upon Caley's knee from where she was standing in the opposite footwell. "You'd have had a hard time around here with what's going to happen next."

"Yeah. That explosion gave out a truckload of IE feedback," Mondo commented seriously, his hands keeping a firm grip on the steering controls. "While that energy won't harm anything living, per se, it'll do a real number on the weather."

"How did you manage to get out of the lab in time?" Adam blinked.

"I...I'm not sure," Caley replied shakily. "I think I was teleported

out by that pokémon those scientists had been using inside of that obelisk machine of theirs."

"Minachi?" Denise exclaimed. "What happened to it? Is it okay?" Her hopeful look dissipated into something more broken and distraught upon noticing Caley's expression of regret, coupled with the young man's silence. He lowered his head, gazing down at his still-clenched right hand which he then carefully opened - revealing the tuft of cream fur for those in the back seat to see.

"I'm sorry..." he said after a few moments had passed. "There was so much energy. *Too* much. It couldn't-"

"I get it," Denise almost snapped, her bitterness for the sickening disregard of Team Rocket's laboratory workers was all too apparent. "I don't want to hear any more." She paused, aware of the air of surprise from the others in the hovercraft over this strong response. "...at least it was able to save you first."

"But what about Errol?" Mondo piped up anxiously. "What happened to him?"

"I don't know," Caley replied softly, but said no more. He didn't feel it right to tell the others of how Minachi made no effort to save his unusual companion. The frustration over her actions burned inside him even now, and adding the emotions of everyone else to that would only serve to make him feel angrier, not to mention guilty that he wasn't able to alter things for the better. Yet Errol was right - there were matters he

could change. James' fate, for instance. Errol had deliberately given Caley the Rocket Ball he had been captured with, in the hopes that James would have a better chance of reaching freedom, and a cure.

Suddenly Caley flinched in realisation, his eyes wide with horror.

"The Professor!" he cried. "That explosion tore through the forest, his house was-!"

"Pretty much destroyed," a familiar voice was heard from the opposite side of Caley. He turned his head and found himself eye to eye with the saddened but relieved Professor Alistair Gordon. The elderly biologist's glasses were scuffed and partly cracked, his grey hair was chaotic and he was still dressed in his pyjamas, but aside from this hurried disarray, he was none the worse for wear.

"So they *did* get to you in time," Caley breathed a sigh and leant back against the leather seat of the hovercraft. "Is your dictavian alright too?"

"Yes. We owe you our lives, Caley," Alistair admitted gratefully, patting a Pokéball in his hand. "If you hadn't been so adamant that Team Rocket had set up their headquarters here, even brave enough to enter within their walls, these valiant individuals would never have been able to rescue Claude and I." He uttered an awkward chuckle at this point. "I'll admit I was pretty stubborn about leaving. I thought they were trying to take me hostage!"

"If it had taken any longer, he would have ended up caught in the

ranking superiors, scientists and admins were quick to make passage to a specific area of the transport bay where Eris Radwell and Astor Crotale ordered them into a sizeable airship reserved for such emergencies. Remaining operatives unable to board the main ship hurried into alternate, smaller air vehicles as the transport bay's two massive roof panels began sliding apart to reveal the clear night sky above. The roof was barely open before helicopters and planes were elevating their way through the gap in the panels - barely managing to avoid colliding with one another in the pilots' terrified attempts to leave before the executives' drastic predictions came true.

The main craft had risen but a few hundred metres from the surface before the entire underground complex was engulfed in a dazzling ball of blue energy, to the accompaniment of an earth-searing explosion. Caught in a rising turbulence that only seemed to worsen as the large construct ascended amongst fast gathering clouds, those at the control consoles struggled to keep all four engines stabilised. Some operatives clung to the walls for dear life while others released flying type pokémon on the outskirts of the ship in the hopes that their abilities may be able to quell some of the vicious air currents. Outside in the sky, a storm began to rage - tossing helicopters and planes into one another amongst roars of thunder and searing lightning bolts. It was some time before the airship battled its way from the meteorological rebellion that its occupants themselves had created.

"Status report," Giovanni inquired in his usual abrupt mannerism from a chair in the ship's primary office later that night.

"All primary samples for the enhancement scheme and a third of our forces were destroyed in the blast, sir," Astor relayed emotionlessly. "The majority of our enhanced specimens were also loosed in the traitors' escape."

"Such a disappointing setback," Giovanni murmured, staring at the illuminated computer screen before him. "But tell me this. Were the researchers' efforts successful?"

"Yes sir," Astor nodded. "The obelisk was able to stay online long enough to gather the energy we needed to generate what you requested. It is being monitored in the ship's cryo unit, alongside our remaining Genetic Fusion Serum supplies."

"Then at least my losses were not in vain," Giovanni responded. Despite this one positive segment of news, the leader of Team Rocket still sounded quite unhappy. "But even so, with the data on those pokémon experiments destroyed, there is not enough time to gather the needed information to resume Project Rebirth's secondary phase and still keep to schedule. My window of opportunity is closing fast."

"There is another way, sir," Eris spoke up. "If you would just give the HPP a chance-"

"Are you *still* insisting on pushing that ridiculous idea?" Giovanni snapped. "I've told you before - the length of time to recreate a human

being alone would put a terrible strain on organization resources. To even think that *and* physical adjustments would be achievable on a large scale, is just insanity."

"Through cloning, yes," Eris nodded patiently. "But my latest research has uncovered an alternate means of execution." She produced a small disc from one of her pockets and placed it upon Giovanni's desk, where the Team Rocket leader eyed it with vague interest. After a moment or so, Giovanni picked up the disc and inserted it into his computer. Distorted, flickery images appeared upon the screen - scenes of a group of Elite Operatives being turned upon by the pokémon they had previously been instructing, while nearby, a houndoom and a middle aged man observed these events.

"This was picked up from one of the laboratory security cameras prior to the blast," Eris remarked.

"Underling incompetence?" Giovanni inquired, no more impressed for what he had seen.

"The houndoom, sir," Eris motioned, trying not to let her growing irritation show. "It...*he* was the first success of the HPP - a human-pokémon specimen. Even at this early stage, his power exceeds that of a normal houndoom to the extent that his form developed beneficial mutations, and he was able to manipulate the wills of his enemies, to turn them on their masters."

"Really now..." Giovanni leant forward slightly, raising his

eyebrows. It appeared that Eris had finally managed to catch his attention.

"The human Infinity Energy is not only accelerating his growth, but also increasing the strength of his attacks," Eris continued. "This is the kind of potential the HPP could give to Project Rebirth, sir. And by using existing humans, the time it takes to achieve the desired result will be far shorter."

"What if these subjects won't comply?" Giovanni resumed frowning. "The last thing my organization needs is sentient creatures deciding to rebel. And I certainly don't want any with the ability to control minds."

"Certainly not, sir. They won't do that. They'll comply," Eris smiled darkly, offering Astor a sideward glance. "I'll pledge my life's work on it."

"That is bold of you, Ms. Radwell," Giovanni commented. "What are your thoughts on this, Mr. Crotale?"

"As much as it pains me to say this, I do think pursuing the HPP would be a wise decision, sir," Astor intoned.

"Our alter-regional laboratories already have the majority of equipment needed for the task," Eris detailed quickly, before her superior considered protesting. "All we would require are appropriate human subjects...and a new bio-energy source."

"The latter is no longer an issue," Giovanni remarked firmly, standing up from his chair as he did so. "I want you to construct scouting

groups to gather these 'appropriate' subjects. Distribute instructions to our Kanto, Johto, Hoenn, Sinnoh and Sonorian bases to follow suit. If this HPP will indeed produce better results at the same rate, then I want to see those results as soon as the energy source is functional.

Understand?"

"Yes sir," the two executives responded in unison.

"Good," Giovanni gave a nod. "Return to the lower decks and address the remaining operatives. We have some distance to cover before we reach my chosen relocation point."

TO BE CONTINUED...

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