

POKÉMON
REBIRTH
ULTIMATUM
Endgame Edition



EPISODE EIGHT

Memento

Errol squinted and groaned heavily as his surroundings began to draw into some kind of focus. The events between Minachi's retaliation and the present moment he found himself in were notably blurry, lending the man ample reason to believe he had succumbed to the Dark Pulse's abrasive energies and had fallen unconscious during the evacuation. Now he found himself in an unknown room, his arms and legs bound to an examination table while a vivid spotlight glared over him - burning his face with its harsh brilliance. Faint noises within the room informed Errol of the presence of other people, the identity of whom evaded him.

"So this is the one that didn't get away," a woman's voice was heard a little further into the room. Errol spat distastefully, having caught sight of the unmistakable tones and design of an Executive rank uniform. That, coupled with the figure's voice, was more than enough to clarify that Eris Radwell had decided to pay him a visit.

"What've you done wit' Kevin and Jenna?" he growled.

"Those other grunts?" Eris raised an eyebrow, appearing to take interest. "They're being held for a *different* outcome. As for you...I believe you have deeper knowledge of what caused these recent unfortunate circumstances to befall Team Rocket." At this point, the woman drew closer to Errol - her ice blue eyes flashing menacingly. "Tell me...*who* instigated the rebellion?"

Errol's brow furrowed in bitter disbelief, then a smirk began to creep its way onto his face.

Errol had no idea how long he had been walking for. His mind was still fuzzy with the effects of the memory-releasing drugs, coupled with a volatile frustration at his treatment.

"Alright alright," he snapped at the scizor who was carrying the iron ball attached to his leg. "Less o' da pushin', will ya?"

"Quit the backchat!" the guard walking opposite Errol snapped, opening one of the cell doors before his scizor urged its captive through with unrestrained force. As Errol slid across the tiles, the iron ball the scizor had previously borne the weight of rolled up beside him, and the cell door was promptly slammed shut.

"Team Rocket's loyalty scheme always *was* pretty lousy," Errol commented dismissively, sitting upright and brushing himself down. A gloved hand reached out to him, causing the man to flinch in surprise. He glanced up to see a youth sitting upon the bench nearby. He too was dressed in grunt uniform, with the black cap conveniently obscuring much of a pale face framed with long dark hair.

"Wound up in deir crazy mess too, huh?" Errol inquired, using the stranger's assisting grasp in order to pull himself onto the bench. "What were *youse* doin ta get dis kind o' treatment?"

There was silence. Instead the youth sat almost motionless, his head turned towards Errol with an expectance which seemed to dictate Errol should be the one answering that question. The man pulled a slight face, but decided to oblige.

"Eh, I was caught tryin' ta escape," he explained. "Well, dat an' help sabotage Team Rocket's biggest plan to date." Errol noticed the boy's slightly tilted head. "'Sabotage' as in 'mess up'," he elaborated.

The head didn't straighten.

"Wait, you don't know what plan I'm talking about, do ya?" Errol blinked. His listener shook his head. "Well, t'ing is, dose enhanced pokémon experiments were only da beginnin'. Team Rocket had been intent on generatin' a truckload of energy usin' some kinda giant antenna. For what, it didn't matter. I knew it couldn't be good - it had to be stopped."

He paused awkwardly, realising the sound of his voice had been occupying the airspace for a good length of time.

"Heheh! Here I am doing all da talking and not letting youse get a word in edgeways," Errol chuckled. "What's your name?"

There was no reply, but by this point the man had been half expecting it. And he didn't mind - he was finding it quite therapeutic to be the vocal side of the conversation for the first time in a while.

"Y'don't say much, do ya kid?" Errol smiled. "Me, I'm pretty glad I don't hafta keep my mouth shut no more. Dere's only so much being quiet one guy can take."

Still, the other figure in the cell showed no signs of aggravation at Errol's continued talking. In fact, he didn't show any emotion at all. It

proved to be a touch unsettling - Errol turned his attentions to more serious matters instead. Matters such as their impending punishment.

"Looks like we'll be going down togedda," Errol conceded, staring down at the heavy balls that were chained to both their legs. "I'm gonna miss dose guys. Caley was a good kid...a touch nutty in da noodle, but...his heart was in da right place, y'know? It's just sad I'll neva get da chance ta t'ank him for tryin' ta get me outta dis dump - what wit' what's about ta happen to us an' all."

There was an unsettling creak as the floor of the cell began to swing away, revealing the agitated waves of Tatto's southern ocean several hundred feet below. It was then that Errol turned to his cellmate with a saddened but accepting expression.

"Well it's been nice knowing ya," he said. "Even if it was jus' for a few minutes."

The benches dropped from under them, sending both Errol and his younger companion hurtling toward the cold, nightlit waters below. Errol glanced across just in time to see, from a hatch in the airship adjacent to their own, two other figures also falling through the air with desperate cries. He knew who they were, but there was no time to alert them to his presence. The man spluttered in a mixture of shock and disgust as the icy liquid engulfed him - the merciless weight of the iron ball quick to pull him under into the sea's waiting depths.

He tried to hold his breath for as long as possible, but Errol knew it was a losing battle. Sooner or later, he would need to take in more air - air that, in this environment, was not available to him. Instead he flailed weakly in the thick, encompassing surroundings - helpless to the fates of himself and of the muted youth that was fast sinking alongside him.

Scenery started to blur and distort with the onset of oxygen starvation, shapes became indistinguishable shadows that waved and rotated between Errol's barely open eyelids. Something was moving towards him - a hazy creature with four stubby limbs, one more oversized than the others...

Am I...dead? Errol thought to himself. With what had just happened, he couldn't see how it would have been possible to survive. Still, gravity and exhaustion remained with him, along with the unexpected sensation of billions of tiny gritty grains sliding between his fingertips. Cold air danced on the tip of his nose as the soft rumbling of thunder echoed from a distance, heralding ominous circumstances.

The man screwed up his eyes and twitched slightly as something prodded him in the cheek. Then again. Upon the third time, Errol considered it a good option to open his eyes and see just what it was that happened to be nagging at his face. He found himself looking up at a purplish bipedal pokémon with short legs, and arms with spikes at the elbows. Its unnaturally smooth skin bore a plastic-like sheen from its

clawed feet to the tips of its notched ears, and a small, pink jewel protruded from its belly.

"Dih-bluh?" it inquired. Before Errol had a chance to respond, another voice piped up from nearby.

"What is *that* thing?" it spluttered. Errol flung himself upright in the process, causing himself to cough up some seawater as a result. To his relief he discovered Kevin and Jenna were lying upon the sand not far from him - both were wearing disorientated and astonished expressions.

"You're here!" Errol cried. "You're *both* here! Man, I'd t'ought dat was da end for all of us."

"So did we," Kevin scratched his head. "I can't work out how we got out of that mess. Look." The man pointed to his leg, drawing Errol's attention to the shackle and a remaining length of chain that still clung to it. Inexplicably, the iron ball was missing. "This is a pretty clean cut in the chain. No idea what could've made it."

"Dih dih-bluh," the pokémon insisted. As its audience looked on with wide eyes, it promptly held out its left hand which swiftly reshaped itself into a formidable claw not unlike the ones possessed by the Team Rocket guard's scizor.

"Say..." Jenna murmured. "Maybe this little guy was responsible for saving our lives. Whatever he is..."

"Maybe its some kind of enhanced ditto," Kevin considered. "One of Team Rocket's genetic experiments that Caley and the others set free."

"But wait," Errol suddenly realised something and turned to the pokémon for an explanation. "Da kid I was sharin' a cell with...he's missin'! Didn't you save him too?"

"Dih-bluh dih," the pokémon chuckled, pointing to itself shortly afterwards. "Dih dih-bluh!"

"What? He was *you*?" Errol spluttered. "I mean, you were him?"

"You understood that?" Kevin pulled a face.

"O' course I did!" Errol replied in disbelief. "Why wouldn't-?" The man ended up biting his tongue in dismay at this point, shunting himself into silence. In his state of amazement at the pokémon's confession, he had forgotten to hide his ability to understand such things from his human companions.

"Well, now," Jenna remarked slowly, a hint of suspicion in her eyes. "That's quite the talent you have there."

"It's nothin'," Errol mumbled, wishing for all the world he still had the peak of his grunt uniform hat to hide under.

"Either way, we've been given another chance," Kevin changed the subject, his mind clearly elsewhere. "Team Rocket thinks we're dead now, and given we have no idea where Caley and the gang are, our best bet is to go looking for more information as to what sort of plan has been crawling though the Boss' twisted little mind, along with a more *permanent* means to put a stop to that plan."

"Sounds good to me," Jenna agreed. "I'm pretty sure the others have this region covered - we should head out for a different one, say...Johto." The young woman turned to face Errol with a valiant smile. "How about you, big guy? Wanna come with?"

"Uh...I..." Errol stammered, caught off guard. He hadn't really considered what his actions were to be, were he to escape Team Rocket's grasp. Following his incarceration, any thoughts of escape had been wiped out altogether. But now he was free, the first notion that came to mind was to reunite himself with James, and the fragments of his past companionship that still remained. Errol certainly couldn't do that if he was in Johto.

"You'd rather stay here. Got'cha," Jenna giggled, acknowledging the man's indecision. "Well we'd better get moving before they realise we're not as dead as they think we are." With that, Kevin began to stroll up the beach, casting a warm glance and a wave over his shoulder as he left.

"You keep safe, alright Errol? Make sure the gang's doing okay for us," he called.

"And don't leave James in the dark too long," Jenna added firmly, but kindly. "He misses you."

<Who's James?> the pokémon commented innocently, once Kevin and Jenna had left. <Is he a friend?>

"I'd like ta t'ink so, kid," Errol heaved a disappointed sigh, uncomfortable to be reminded of his insistence of staying anonymous to a long-term companion. "Ya plannin' to stay wit' me or what?"

<You know more about this place than I do,> the pokémon nodded. <Besides...I'm not sure how, but I feel like we have things in common.>

That we do, Errol couldn't help but smile at this deduction. *That we do*.

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"I saved your life, jerk," Jessie frowned, as Butch lay on a platform in one of the Team Rocket aircraft's medical rooms, shaking and muttering weakly to himself. "Some gratitude would be nice."

"You might've saved my life...but it wouldn't have *needed* saving if your Wobbuffet hadn't unleashed a freak of nature that caused a stampede an' almost killed me!" Butch snapped, while a doctor nearby studied lines of data on a scanner monitor. "And who knows what kinda stuff that idiot Errol kicked me into!"

"Well it's hard to tell with this limited equipment, but it looks like your bloodstream has been infiltrated by some kind of foreign

antibodies," the doctor joined in. "Your immune system is responding well to them though, so I don't think they'll cause you too much trouble."

"And a good thing too," Cassidy sniffed. "I hardly wish to work alongside Jessie without backup."

"Jessie will be lucky to keep her position after what *she* did..." Butch glowered, before the communicator on Cassidy's belt sprang into life.

"Operative Sampson," came the prim voice of Giovanni's secretary, Matori Senja. "You and operatives Reynolds and Matthews are to report to the third level, office B immediately."

"Acknowledged," Cassidy responded in monotone, before disconnecting the communicator and trying to hide an anxious grimace. "As much as I hate to say it, Butch...*all* of us are equally at risk of demotion here. I suppose we'd better go and face the music - sooner or later it was going to hit us."

"That was a horrendous display!" Darius Mayhew bellowed at the Elites who stood shakily in front of his desk later that night. "Trying to take matters into your own hands, knowing full well that Class A+ command was needed!"

"But..." Cassidy lifted her hand.

"No buts!" the Admin was past reasoning. "Your egotistic attitudes have cost the organization dearly! Now we have several rogue operatives running free, along with an entire array of confidential information and the majority of Team Rocket's important biological specimens!" There was a stifling silence while Darius sat down and tried to recompose himself.

"So what now?" Butch inquired with a worried glance at Cassidy for emotional support. "Are we getting demoted?"

"Somehow, no," Darius groaned, reading his instruction notes. "Giovanni wishes you three to properly secure the roaming pokémon specimens, as recompense for allowing them to escape."

"And what about the traitors?" Cassidy insisted.

"That's the organization's business to take care of," Darius replied sternly. "*Your* mission is to bring back those enhanced pokémon - alive or otherwise. If you can do this right, you shall be greatly rewarded. But if you make another slip up, not only will your record of successful missions be erased, but I shall see to it you never do an ounce of active duty again! You hear me?"

The three Elites gulped deeply, and nodded.

"I am glad I have made myself clear," Darius nodded, calming slightly. "Very well. Pack your belongings and report to the executive office for further instruction. That is all."

back seat. The young man's slumber had been quite unsettled, interrupted with fragmented dream variants of events just hours earlier and, more conclusively, an unyielding urge to go to the toilet. Gently waking Kota, Caley had managed to persuade the pokémon to teleport him outside with his satchel in order to attend to that need. Now he was once again dressed in the outfit he had been wearing upon leaving Prela Village - the familiarity provided little comfort in light of what Caley had recently endured. He couldn't seem to rid himself of the confusion over Minachi's last words. And all those pokémon - including the hybrid ones - running freely about Totto...that'd hadn't been the plan at all. It was a mixed bundle of feelings Caley experienced at that point in time. On one hand, it felt like a tiny victory - on the other, it felt like a hugely unravelled defeat.

His feelings of incompetence had only been magnified by the response Flair had given him after he had released her from her Pokéball in order to explain what had happened. The look of sheer disappointment upon the drifblim's simple features had spoken volumes to her audience. 'I thought you were going to save her,' the look had said. 'I thought you were going to rescue my friend'. And before Caley was able to give further evidence to his cause, Flair had taken back Ivy and Ikinis' Pokéballs and risen through the treetops, out of sight.

"How could Minachi think I would be able to bring down Team Rocket?" Caley almost laughed in disbelief, examining the chunk of the pokémon's fur which he had carefully put into a tiny plastic bag from his

satchel. "I barely got Adam, Denise and the others out safe. I couldn't help Kevin, Jenna or Errol, even after everything they'd done for me. And I couldn't help Lance..."

"Gweh?" the augret inquired, having overheard his companion's dispirited murmuring. Caley glanced up at the psychic dragon with a saddened look upon his face.

"It's true, Kota," he remarked softly. "I don't think we'll be hearing from your trainer any time soon. Team Rocket had brainwashed him somehow..."

"Aw-gweh..." Kota's teal coloured eyes wobbled with an onset of distraught tears.

"I'm sorry, I really am," Caley insisted in heartfelt tones. "But the best thing I can do for you now is to take you back to Ana until some means is found to free Lance."

"Aw-gweh!" Kota snapped angrily, as if Caley didn't understand how he felt at all. "Gweh gweh! Aw-gweh!"

"I'm serious!" Caley snapped in return, before hurriedly lowering his voice. "You've been put in enough danger already..."

"Gweh gweh," Kota sulked and folded his arms, but said no more. With that, Caley got to his feet before picking up his satchel.

"My decision is final," he said firmly. "We're going back to Retyrn Port before things get way out of hand."

"Okay," Rose began. "Here's how things currently stand. In case anyone was feeling at ease with their newfound freedom, we're not safe yet. Currently, all of us bar two are highly-wanted fugitives. Our top priority is to get James some kind of medical help, but besides that, we need to make sure we are firmly below the radar, so to speak."

"And how are we supposed to just poof out of existence?" Adam raised an eyebrow.

"First thing's first, we need to get rid of anything Team Rocket can use to track us with," Rose continued. "Caley, if you have a PokéGear on you, you're gonna have to keep it switched off."

"Aw man..." Caley heaved a sigh.

"That's not all they can use, though," Rose said. "We're going to have to disengage our Phasepacks. They can just as easily trace the signals emitted when we place or remove an item from Hammerspace. Anything we carry is going to have to be carried by us physically."

It was Denise's turn to express her discontent with this turn of events.

"It's all well and good disguising our tracks," Mondo commented. "But if they see us, we're done for."

"He has a point," Caley agreed. "They didn't know who I was in the first place, so I should be alright, but I think you guys really need to disguise *yourselves*."

"Yes...I suppose we do," Rose looked very awkward. "Um...let's cross that bridge when we get to it, okay? Fetching appropriate disguises is something we really need to do from a secure location."

"So what about James, then?" Denise inquired. At this point, everyone turned to look at Alistair Gordon expectantly.

"Can you help us?" Caley asked with a pleading expression.

"I'd be more than willing to assess your friend, Caley, you know I would," Professor Gordon exclaimed. "But my research...my equipment - I barely salvaged anything from my house before that blast struck."

"Would you be able to improvise?" Mondo joined in.

"Possibly," Alistair looked perplexed. "It really depends on what materials I'd have to work with."

"Pokémon Center equipment, would that do?" Caley suggested.

"It'd be worth a shot," Alistair shrugged. "But who are you possibly going to persuade to lend you the use of Pokémon Center equipment for such purposes?"

"Well I can think of someone in Retyrn Port..." Caley trailed off. "And since I need to go back there to return Kota to his guardian, there's no reason why we can't ask."

"Kota doesn't look like he wants to go back," Adam pointed out.

"Well he doesn't *have* to like it," Caley frowned. "Kota isn't my

pokémon and staying with Ana is the best thing for him. Sometimes we don't like what's best for us."

"Wow, way to sound all parental there, Cal," Mondo chuckled, while Kota pulled faces nearby.

"Retyrn Port Pokémon Center sounds as good a place as any to find a solution for James," Rose nodded. "But before we attempt that, we'd better get some new clothes to wear. Our outfits are somewhat attention-drawing."

"And I certainly don't want to be seen in public in my pyjamas," Alistair grimaced.

"But how are we going to buy clothes when we don't have any money?" Denise exclaimed.

"Well I did manage to rescue my wallet," Alistair said. "Maybe I could buy you all an outfit each - it's the least I could do to thank you for saving me."

They knew their window of opportunity to walk the streets freely was closing. It wouldn't be long before Team Rocket would re-organize themselves and issue a retrieval bulletin in order to track them down. With that in mind, the members of the group in any variant of uniform had removed the garments displaying the Team Rocket insignia, leaving the more inconspicuous ones visible. In turn, Rose dressed Alistair

Gordon in Mondo's lab coat and requested he and Kota stay with the hovercraft - now parked in a side street within Nashgri City.

As instructed, each figure had also disengaged their Phasepacks after carefully determining what to keep from them. For Denise, it proved somewhat difficult to choose which tools and trinkets from her vast array to hang on to. Adam, on the other hand, found it remarkably simple. Besides his Klinkchip model which he wisely decided to leave in storage, all he had in his Phasepack was a battered old harmonica, which was just as easy to keep in his actual pocket.

Contrary to his subdued compliance over returning his wares to a more solid form, Adam began to exhibit a series of disquieting behaviours as the group wandered deeper into the heart of Nashgri City. The exhilaration of his newfound freedom had now worn off, swiftly being replaced with a rising dread and anxiousness at the situation he found himself in. Buildings towered overhead like watching giants, people swarmed around him in greater number and disarray than there had ever been in the Team Rocket headquarters, and the noise from passing traffic, conversation and nearby advertisements was overwhelming. Unseen by his travelling companions, Adam had started wringing his hands - desperately trying to keep his panic under wraps.

Mondo, on the other hand, seemed completely in his element. His eyes shone with a child-like enthusiasm as he flitted his head back and forth like a caffeinated pachirisu - scanning every shop window, billboard and human face as he walked. Caley and Denise shared an equal

measure of mental distancing from the others, each seemingly lost in their own thoughts while Rose pored over a street map she had bought from a vendor they had passed. The group crossed the road, and upon reaching the other side were faced with the dizzying heights of Nashgri City's largest shopping mall.

"Finally, we've found it," Rose announced triumphantly, lowering the map and giving the mall a visual once-over.

"That's great, but which floor are the clothes stores on?" Denise inquired.

"Who cares!" Mondo blurted out excitedly. "I wanna look on *all* the floors!"

"We don't have time for casual browsing, Mondo..." Rose sighed, while Adam grimaced and wished the others would hurry up and get this torment over with. "These places usually have maps of their own, that should help speed things up."

"Speed things up, huh?" Denise raised an eyebrow, a few minutes later. The group were now inside the shopping mall, with three of the members clustered around a plinth bearing a touch screen displaying an overview of the building's ground floor. Adam stood behind the trio with his shoulders hunched, fervently biting his nails, while Mondo gazed longingly through one of the nearby shop windows - his hands and face pressed tightly against the glass.

"Well it would help to know where 'here' was," Rose said, examining the 'you are here' dot upon the touch screen. "Here in relation to what?"

"I think those symbols show where the toilets are..." Caley explained, pointing to another icon and in the process accidentally causing the entire image to rotate ninety degrees. With that, Denise threw up her hands in frustration at the device's impracticality and strode away from the plinth in order to gain the assistance of someone more averse with computers.

"Mondo, will you stop staring at those toys for just *one* moment and come decipher this stupid map?" she grimaced, while Rose insisted Caley had helped enough on the matter in the kindest way possible.

"Sorry!" Mondo called back with a sheepish grin, pulling himself away from the display of Majuuki figures and dashing to Rose's aid. At this point, Denise happened to notice Adam's discomfited nail biting. Her initial reaction was to frown at the youth's lack of etiquette - at least until she realised exactly why he was behaving in such a manner.

"Is being in the city making you stressed, Adam?" she inquired, in more understanding tones this time. Adam said nothing, but gave a barely-visible nod instead.

"Huh," Caley blinked, overhearing this. "But I thought you said you'd been out on raids."

"I never said I *liked* them," Adam mumbled, feeling somewhat irritated for the unwanted attention. He really didn't like bringing such an obvious flaw of his to light, despite the fact his body had long-since given it away.

"Well, is there anything that would help you feel calmer until we can get out of here?" Denise insisted with almost motherly concern.

"They used to give me gum..." Adam trailed off in embarrassment. In retrospect, it sounded like a pretty stupid way of helping him relax. But as much as he hated to admit it, it worked.

"Sounds like a plan," Caley smiled. "I'll get you some on the way to the clothes shop, okay?"

"Mm'kay," Adam nodded again. That was one thing he did appreciate about Caley. The warm-spirited figure always took others' quirks in his stride.

Despite it going against her typical behaviour of looking everywhere, Rose picked the first discount unisex clothing outlet she and the others came across. There she set about picking something to wear, but not before shoos the male members away to their respective area of the shop, with a strong reminder to also find something for Professor Gordon.

"So what *do* old geezers like to dress in anyway?" Adam muttered. The chewing gum Caley had bought him had gone some way to soothing the troubled adolescent's nerves, but he was none the happier for being in this different space.

"I guess we could try the 'formal' section?" Caley scratched his head, overlooking Adam's rude description of the professor. Turning around to make his way into the next aisle, the young man jumped upon discovering himself face to face with Denise, who had a triumphant expression.

"Um...shouldn't you be looking for your own outfit?" Caley asked.

"No need. Already done it." Denise told him, lifting up the hangers she holding. The left hanger bore an olive green babydoll shirt with a luxray head motif in the centre, overlapped by a longer-sleeved plum coloured shirt with darker patches on the shoulders. The right hanger contained a pair of ocean blue bell-bottom trousers with hourglass shapes at the base of each leg. "Don't these pants look great?" she exclaimed, holding the latter hanger forward.

"They're pretty...snazzy," Caley commented, raising an eyebrow slightly. They didn't look like underwear to him one bit. "I don't suppose you'd know what Professor Gordon would want to wear, do you?"

"Tell you what," Denise said. "I'll find him some stuff my dad would wear, that should be close enough."

Caley nodded thankfully as Denise left, before turning to Adam.

"So...?" he deliberately trailed off, in preparation for a response.

"So' what?" Adam looked back grumpily.

"Aren't you going to choose something?" Caley asked. "Mondo's making up his mind." He motioned to a shelf about eight foot away where the aforementioned young man was crouched, eagerly examining the sports footwear.

"These ones have padded soles!" he grinned. "But those have laces that glow in the dark...WHOA! *Those* ones play music when you walk around in 'em! That's too awesome."

"...as best he can," Caley concluded awkwardly, wondering who on earth would want musical shoes.

"Bah, I dunno," Adam dismissed the concept. Having grown up wearing the same clothing day after day, he had no idea what he'd rather have on. In fact, he couldn't have cared less about what he was dressed in, so long as it wasn't humiliating. Caley seemed to pick up on this, as he walked over to the area full of clothes aimed at teenage boys. A few moments later he returned with a long-sleeved green shirt and an orange t-shirt with a yellow hood on two separate hangers.

"Hey...that's pretty cool, actually," Adam raised his eyebrows. Mondo glanced up as Caley appeared beside him before selecting a pair of sneakers with Combusken emblems on either side.

"How about these ones?" Caley suggested.

"Ha!" Mondo grinned, taking the footwear from his companion. "I'd say you know me better than I do!"

"It was a lucky guess," Caley chuckled.

Rose found herself standing blankly in front of the changing room mirror. She'd had no trouble choosing outfits for James and herself from what was available, but had frozen in her tracks when the time arrived to try the latter set on. Something nagged at the back of her head - memories of similar times spent joyously trying on clothing in preparation for infiltrating Pokémon Contests. Back then, she would dramatically fling the curtain aside as if entering the stage herself, to the enthused applause of her estranged partner. He always had a good thing to say, Rose recalled, but now she knew the words had been shallow and transient. Whereas she had enjoyed his company, valued his opinion, even fostered deeper feelings for him, his responses were simply delaying the inevitable. In the end, all he'd been looking out for was himself. And in the end, he chose a step up the organization's ladder over her.

The hanger fell to the floor as Rose briskly pulled on a white shirt, studying the snowflake patterned jeans hanging beside the mirror. Maybe her childhood association with ice type pokémon had set her up for a life of coldness and reservation - destined to push such deep feelings under the surface. She shook her head with a faint snort of amusement. No, of course not - such a line of thinking was ridiculous. Wasn't it?

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The floor above the Nashgri City Gym was mostly off-limits to visitors - designed primarily as a temporary residence for the Gym Leader and his friends and relatives, in order to provide them with food, drink and a comfortable place to relax between challenges. At this point in time it was playing a more long-term role in entertaining Dai Thomas, the younger brother of this particular gym's leader who had been incapacitated barely half a week before.

"Augh! Not again!" Dai threw his controller down by his wheelchair in annoyance as the disappointed-sounding 'Game Over' music blared from the television. "This doesn't make sense. I've been playing Photon Saga 2 for months, and the computer *still* beats me! My Kygo console must have a glitch in it."

"Or maybe you just need to practise more," Finlay remarked calmly, as he entered the lounge area holding a tray with a drink and a plate of sandwiches on it.

"Pah, I could mash the computer player with my *real* volchog any day," Dai sulked. "Right, Ethan?" His volchog looked up from where it had been sleeping nearby, giving a confident smirk. Finlay chuckled and placed the tray on the table next to his brother, but as he turned to go back to the kitchen, he noticed a group of people making their way up the gravel path towards the gym's front entrance.

"That's weird..." Finlay murmured. The tones of his voice showed no worry or even confusion, just a vague warmth that Dai had no idea of the reason for.

"What? What's weird?" Dai exclaimed, struggling to get his wheelchair over to the window and see what Finlay was looking at. In his rush get a better view, the youth knocked his drink all over Ethan who cried out in alarm and unleashed a bolt of electricity, hitting the games console and causing it to explode.

"Well, so much for Photon Saga," Dai remarked disappointedly, before his attention returned to the window and a grin spread across his face. "Hey! Caley came back!"

"And he's brought others," Finlay rubbed his chin. "Interesting..."

"This shouldn't take long," Caley reassured, as he stood with his travelling companions outside Nashgri City Gym's entrance. "I just want to check up on someone - see how he's doing since the break-in the other day. That raccrupt mashed him pretty bad."

"Wow..." Denise winced. "I'm sorry to hear that happened. It's weird, but I feel kind of responsible - since I worked in those labs and all."

"It couldn't be helped," Caley shook his head. "Even if you *did* play some small part in creating those pokémon, you had no control over what they'd be instructed to do."

"Heyyy... this place is perfect for setting up our new identities," Mondo exclaimed. "All I'd need is a distraction while I use one of their computer terminals."

"What? You can't do that!" Caley insisted.

"Well how *else* am I going to do it?" Mondo looked perplexed. "I sure can't go up to them and say, 'Hey there, I'm an ex-Team Rocket operative who needs to go incognito, can I borrow your equipment to forge some IDs?'"

"He has a point," Denise remarked. "Doesn't matter how well-meaning we are, everyday people aren't going to take the fact we were once part of Team Rocket lightly."

"And that includes you, in a sense," Rose tagged on, eyeing Caley. "You can't be telling these people about sneaking in to try and get back their adapter engine, or about the pokémon you rescued. Team Rocket's undercover agents work everywhere. If that information got to the wrong people..."

"I understand," Caley replied, though his tone of voice conveyed he was less than happy about having to keep things to himself. At this moment the door unlocked and was pulled open a little way to reveal Finlay's expectant face.

"Look who's back," he offered a friendly smirk to Caley. "Weren't you supposed to be in Mayni City by now?"

"There was a...slight change of plans," Caley responded in a sentence broken by pauses. "And besides, I wanted to see how Dai's recovery was going. May we come in?"

"Sure thing," Finlay nodded. "I know Dai would welcome visitors. He's been pretty bored laid up in that wheelchair the past four days." The leader of Nashgri City Gym proceeded to step aside, allowing Caley and his companions to walk into the corridor. Mondo and Denise took to admiring the intriguingly-shaped lamps set into the walls, while Caley tried to keep up with Finlay's brisk striding.

"So..." he began, trying to figure a way of getting information out of Finlay without revealing what he'd been up to. "Did you hear anything from Lance?"

"No, I hadn't," Finlay replied softly. "Though I get the feeling he knows what he's doing. Li turned up at Tatto's Storage Repository late last night, along with a lot of other pokémon - some wild, some with registered owners. Seems like Lance had been performing an undercover rescue."

"*Someone* did..." Mondo mumbled under his breath, only to get jabbed in the side by Denise.

"I see," Caley's heart felt heavy - partly from having the work of him and his friends credited elsewhere, but mostly from the knowledge

that Lance was not doing as brilliantly as Finlay assumed. "Then I imagine you haven't seen anything of the adapter engine."

"Might want to give *that* one up as lost," Adam murmured with a faint smirk, and was jabbed in turn by Mondo. Finlay paused in his tracks, having overheard Adam's comment. The Gym Leader's sudden cease in momentum almost caused Caley to walk straight into the back of him, while the others hurriedly drew themselves to a stop around their companion. There followed a long silence while Finlay gave Adam a long stare - his expression neither angry, nor sad - more an uncomfortable resignation.

"The stairs to the upper floor are this way," Finlay instructed at last. "Follow me."

As the group approached the aforementioned staircase which would take them to Dai's whereabouts, the thudding sounds of a bass track combined with the harsh squealing of an electric guitar was heard resonating from the top of the stairs.

"I'll have to get him to turn that down again," Finlay rolled his eyes as he began his ascent. Caley, Mondo, Rose and Denise followed suit - however Adam proceeded to stay put at the bottom of the stairwell, his arms tightly folded.

"Aren't you coming to see Dai, Adam?" Caley asked, having noticed the youth's lack of movement.

"Don't even *know* the guy," Adam responded bluntly.

"And that's why we're going upstairs," Denise raised an eyebrow.

"To *get* to know him."

Despite this valid point, Adam said nothing more - instead turning the other way to glance down the passage the group had just come from.

"Just leave him be," Rose shrugged, while Denise fumed quietly at this act of rudeness. "He obviously doesn't want to socialize."

"Well he'll never get any friends if he carries on like that," Denise muttered somewhat haughtily, walking past Caley who had paused in his tracks upon the staircase.

"Wait for me at the top," the young man requested. "I'll be back in a moment." He descended to where Adam was standing, before taking the satchel from his back and holding it in one outstretched arm. "Say Adam, you couldn't watch over this for me while I'm upstairs, could you? It gets a bit heavy lugging it around everywhere."

"'spose," Adam replied monosyllabically, without looking up. He proceeded to reach a hand out, and Caley placed one strap of his satchel into it before turning round and dashing after the others. Once Adam knew for certain he had been left alone, he let out a sigh and hooked Caley's satchel over one shoulder - wandering ponderously into the corridor. The youth was feeling terribly out of his depth amongst the others, all of whom seemed to have far more confidence and street smarts than he did. But he didn't want to admit it - doing so would be

acknowledging his vulnerability, which was not only humiliating, but dangerous knowledge for anyone else to possess. Exploration was the best thing to distract him from such troubled thoughts.

After five minutes of walking, Adam found himself facing a pair of tall, thick wooden doors engraved with illustrative patterns and various electric type pokémon. A placard above the doors was stamped with a phrase in capital letters - "Challenge Area This Way." It was clear from the fact the doors were tight shut, that access to this area had been purposefully restricted to Gym Matches only. But a closed door only served to heighten Adam's curiosity. He reached forward with one arm to tug at the right side handle, in case there was some chance the doors happened to be unlocked. Unexpectedly, they were - Adam pulled again, causing the wooden barrier to his continued passage to swing aside and reveal what lay beyond.

Adam paled rapidly and let out a high-pitched yell upon sight of a towering grey shape that occupied the central part of the corridor - its spiked wings cast wide as if it had every intention of swooping down and plucking visitors in its taloned grasp. But the shape was merely a carving from stone, and made no further movement. This fact didn't seem to prevent Adam's panicked retreat, however. Staggering backwards in an attempt to escape, the youth's feet caught against one another, causing him to topple onto the tiles below. As he fell, the satchel that had been partly propped against his shoulder ended up slamming beside him. A black and white spherical object tumbled from a gap where the satchel's

zip hadn't been quite fully done up, and made impact with the floor, erupting in a bright light.

Once the white blurs in his eyes had faded enough to make out shapes, Adam sat up and glanced round - panting and clutching at his chest - discovering himself eye to eye with an unrecognisable form. Its general shape was that of a human, but it was covered in blue fur everywhere except the top of its head, where the fur appeared to grow coarser, longer and more purple in shade. Before Adam was able to regain his composure and work out what was going on, the gangly quadruped had uttered a mirthful noise and run down the corridor on all fours - its long tail with a diamond-shaped end swaying wildly behind it.

Then it dawned on Adam just exactly what the creature had been, and he knew full well none of the others would be happy over his clumsy accidental release of it.

"Oh crap!" the youth exclaimed, hurriedly scrambling to his feet and running down the corridor in the direction the creature had left.

"Wow, the music sure is loud in here," Rose winced, as she, Caley, Denise and Mondo wandered into the living room area where Dai was staying. "What are you listening to, anyway?"

"Go Rock Quads," Dai grinned, resuming his headbanging. "Loud is the *best* way to listen to them. When I'm Gym Leader, I'm gonna have Quads music playing during *all* my battles!"

"He's got some big ideas," Caley smirked, while Finlay walked over to the music player and turned down the volume.

"Heyyyy," Dai protested.

"Not 'hey'," Finlay corrected him. "Caley's been thoughtful enough to come back here to see how you're getting on - the least you could do is give him your full attention."

"So, how *are* you doing?" Caley asked, approaching the wheelchair.

"I was fine until Ethan blew up my Kygo console..." Dai sulked, more out of being told what to do than anything.

"Which *wouldn't* have happened if you'd been more careful near your drink," Finlay reminded him, before turning to the others. "Speaking of which, would you guys be interested in a snack? I could make sandwiches..."

"That'd be awesome!" Denise grinned appreciatively, as Rose and Caley also nodded. As Finlay acknowledged the decision with a smile and returned to the kitchen, Mondo turned his attention toward Dai's Kygo Console with wide eyes and mutterings over the damage caused. In turn, the remaining members of the travellers redirected their gazes to the television - currently broadcasting muted news footage from the far side of the room. Scenes of partially-decimated factory buildings, determined fire-fighters and policemen flashed before their eyes - vestiges of the turbulent night the escapees had previously experienced.

"They've been going on about that Dusty Town explosion all morning," Dai remarked, waving at the television.

"Did anyone...get hurt?" Denise glanced up, her voice small and worried.

"Surprisingly few people, considering how big that explosion was," Dai shrugged. "Didn't you *feel* it last night? They say the vibrations travelled almost ten miles!"

"We felt it alright," Rose nodded, refraining from adding that they were only a mile from the source when the blast occurred.

"Man, talk about wack," Dai commented. He sounded a mixture of awestruck and horrified. "The weather over Dusty Town has turned really wild too - violent storms and everything. Some even say the pokémon in the surrounding area - the ones still alive, anyway - are acting pretty weird. A few people are blaming production methods involving electrodes..."

"Such needless pain and suffering..." Denise sighed brokenly. Caley gritted his teeth as he shared the sentiment. Whether Minachi's responses held any credibility or not, he still felt a deep need to at least *try* and put a halt to Team Rocket's endeavours. If he did nothing, who knew what amount of innocent people would get caught up in whatever the organization did next.

The once calm scientists had been reduced to running about in panic-stricken chaos - dashing here and there as a large, dark blue shape frolicked amongst them with a spindly piece of apparatus tightly clamped between its jaws. Previously this device had been used to measure certain levels of elemental radiation - now it had been reduced to nothing more than a makeshift stick that the canine-like creature wished to play fetch with. Naturally, no one was in the mood to oblige. All they saw was an entity of unknown type and origin, a danger to their many months of research.

"Oh Nina!" laboratory technician Reece exclaimed bereftly as the red-haired assistant arrived on the scene with her rotom in tow. "Thank goodness you're here - Professor Thomas is out with Li and none of us have any other means to get this...this *thing* under control!"

"Leave it to me," Nina smiled, before motioning to the rotom beside her. "Got that Wide Lens, right Dynamo?"

"Di-didi di!" Dynamo nodded.

"Good," Nina's expression turned somewhat mischievous. "Cuz we're going to need all the accuracy we can get for that Thunderbolt of yours."

"Wait!" a slightly raspy, unfamiliar voice forced its way into the exchange, causing Nina and Dynamo to look up. Adam stood a short distance away, panting and muttering under his breath about not being

able to bring Cyzel out to help. "I don't believe I'm saying this..." he groaned to himself, before raising his voice yet again. "Don't hurt him!"

"Who are you?" Nina blinked, while Reece flinched nervously at the sounds of further commotion elsewhere in the lab.

"Does that matter?" Adam snapped. "Just...don't hurt the guy, okay? Caley will get real naffed off at me if you do."

"Caley?" Nina looked shocked. "You *know* him?"

"We're wasting time," Adam groaned, before running off in the direction of the noise. Nina gave pursuit - as blunt as the kid happened to be, he was also right. Too much sensitive equipment was at stake.

Finlay had been in the middle of preparing sandwiches in the kitchen when his PokéGear started to ring. Putting down the butter-coated knife, he fished out the article and flipped it open.

"Sup?" he inquired.

"We could *really* use your help down here, Fin'!" Nina panted above sounds of panicked yells and scuffling. "Something's loose in the lab."

"What kind of something?" Finlay's brow furrowed as he made his way through the living room towards the door. "Not another rotom, surely."

"No it isn't," Nina responded. "As for what it *is*...I don't really know at the moment. But whatever it is, it needs containing!"

Rose flinched as she heard a noise in the background of the phone transmission, moments before Finlay shut the PokéGear and released a luxio beside him. As Caley turned to walk after Finlay and his luxio, the Gym Leader looked round and held a hand out calmly in response.

"Best you stay here," he insisted. "I don't want a repeat of last time..." Though Finlay's glance in Caley's direction was neither angry nor accusing, Caley still felt somewhat ashamed at being reminded of the events that had led up to Dai's injury. He shook the feeling off, determined to make up in some way for not being able to return the Wave Adapter Engine.

"It won't *be* like last time," Caley explained. "Kiko is with me now."

To answer the question of just who Kiko was, a Pokéball was opened, releasing the grumpig into eyeshot. Kiko leant forward and bared her fangs at nothing in particular, attempting to convey a feeling of strength and readiness. It seemed to work.

"That's sure a tough-looking grumpig you've got with you," Finlay nodded in approval. "Could come in handy. Alright then, follow me, Caley. I know a quick way to the labs from here." Before anyone else could protest against staying put, the two young men were gone.

"I know what I heard, and it sounded very much like how a *certain someone* laughs," Rose murmured to Denise. "I get the feeling he's broken out."

"Adam's got something to do with this, hasn't he?" Denise groaned, getting the hint. "*Why* did Caley give his bag to him?"

"I guess Caley wants Adam to feel like he's doing something for the team," Rose theorized.

"He's done something for the team, alright," Denise hissed. "Now we're going to be questioned into the middle of next week!"

"Well it's no use standing here and moaning about it," Rose eyed her younger companion witheringly. "We need to get down there and restrict any further damage."

"So *you're* responsible for what's going on down there?" Dai exclaimed, causing everyone else to freeze in mid-movement. In all the upheaval, they had forgot the gym leader's brother in their presence.

"See? It's happening already!" Denise snapped, referring to the act of being questioned.

"It's hard to explain," Rose grimaced in Dai's direction. "And we need to stop what's going on downstairs before we even try. Mondo, you stay here...and don't talk about anything to do with us until we get back, okay?"

"Sure thing!" Mondo grinned, before returning to his examination of the Kygo Console. "Say Dai...don't suppose you have any tools, do ya?"

"Sure!" Dai returned the expression with additional enthusiasm, momentarily distracted by the prospect of some kind of repair work. With the two figures occupied, Rose, Caley and Denise slipped out into the corridor and descended the stairs. Denise didn't want to admit it, but using Mondo to keep Dai's thoughts elsewhere was a pretty good idea on Rose's part.

"Hey...isn't that Caley's bag there?" Denise spoke up confusedly, motioning a little way down the passage, once the duo had reached the bottom of the stairs. A sunshine yellow article lay abandoned on the tiles, prompting the adolescent girl to run over frantically and gather it up in her arms. Hopefully everything was still present. Just then, out of the corner of her eye, something else caught her attention. "Wow, that's a pretty impressive zapdos statue..."

Rose wore a disappointed expression as she knelt down and picked up the open Rocket Ball from where it had landed a short distance from Caley's satchel. Further noises of alarm were heard from a left-hand corridor, prompting Denise and herself to resume their search.

When Adam and Nina finally caught up with the hybridized James, they discovered he had cornered a group of scientists in the laboratory -

sitting there wagging his tail expectantly, while the piece of apparatus in his jaws prevented anyone trapped in the corner from making their escape. Nina leapt to their aid immediately, instructing Dynamo to possess the apparatus James was holding - momentarily pulling the surprised creature's head upwards a few inches before he felt inclined to let go. Assuming the 'stick' was going to play fetch with him of its own accord, James chased after it with glee, knocking further pieces of equipment over in the process.

"Restrict damage, Nina, don't make more of it!" one of the scientists yelled frustratedly, while Nina clasped either side of her face in dismay.

"Dynamo, come back!" she exclaimed to her frightened pokémon accomplice, who instinctively left the innards of the apparatus and took refuge in the bauble on her headband. Without the electric virtual type to control its flight, the apparatus was cast over the boundary fence, landing on the top of a particularly important looking generator unit. There arose a communal gasp of horror as James leapt excitedly for the generator, tongue lolling sideways out of his muzzle. Then suddenly he froze in mid-leap, surrounded by a faint, light blue glow.

"That's the way to do it, Kiko," Caley smiled proudly, as the grumpig carefully lowered her captive towards the floor. No sooner had James' feet made contact with the tiles, his entire body was encompassed in white. The James-shaped energy formation retracted across the room

in a thin glowing line, and was gone. Caley glanced up in alarm to see Rose holding a Rocket Ball.

"Looks like we got here just in time," Rose commented, putting the Rocket Ball which now contained James into Caley's backpack that Denise was holding. The scientists emerged from their hiding places - their combined expressions of relief and suspicion dictating the general mood of in the laboratory.

"What WAS that thing, Caley?" Finlay almost spluttered, pointing at the young man's backpack. It was odd to see the usually composed young man looking so disturbed. "I couldn't tell if it was a pokémon or a human!"

"Right now, I'm not really sure what he is either..." Caley bit his lip, glancing at Rose for support. "One thing I know for certain, though... he needs help."

"And we want answers," Nina frowned at Caley, who hunched slightly in response.

"You're not the only one, young lady," an older voice was heard from further across the room. Everyone turned to the laboratory's back entrance where Mr. Thomas stood with Li poised sturdily beside him. Both were scrutinizing the visitors with very stern eyes, Caley in particular. "I believe you have some explaining to do."

TO BE CONTINUED...

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