

POKÉMON
REBIRTH
ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE TWENTY FIVE
Blue Flare

Mondo didn't consider himself leadership material. Following the return to his companions, this fact was making itself quite obvious. Faced with nothing but a young man holding a solitary Ultra Ball with an augret by his side, the other members had scolded Mondo for allowing Caley to leave without them. As forthright and tenacious as he was, Caley still required their support for many reasons - one being his tendency to attempt conquering massive obstacles by himself. Once the disbelief and anger had thinned a little, the group began to form their plan to catch up with their distanced friend.

The plan required a seafaring craft, which arrived in the form of a humble little rowboat James and Errol persuaded from a nearby resident with smiles and witty banter. Down on the beach, away from the public view, Rose sent out Larydos into the ocean and explained Caley's whereabouts, as well as her role in what was to happen next. Larydos allowed Mondo and Rose to attach a makeshift harness to her, which was then tied to the front of the rowboat. With Rose, Denise, Adam and Cory sat upon Larydos' back, James, Errol, Mondo and Psyduck took to the boat, and the lapras-gyarados hybrid pulled gently away into deeper water. Kota sat atop Larydos' head, relaying the signals he detected for his watery companion's benefit.

Adam stared back at the rowboat with a grumpy expression, watching James and Mondo chuckling amongst themselves while Errol improvised melodies on his guitar.

"What an idiot," Adam muttered. "Running off to the Team Rocket HQ without us."

"It ain't exactly da foist time, is it?" Errol shrugged, glancing up from his recital.

"But this time it's different!" Adam exclaimed. "Now he knows what kind of a threat they are!"

"He does," Rose nods. "That's why he left as fast as possible. And why we need to catch up to him as fast as possible."

Kota uttered a cry of alarm and waved his right arm desperately across the water before them. Before anyone aboard could question what the augret had said, Larydos had turned five degrees east and upped her swimming speed. As her flippers swung vigorously underneath the surface, the waves on either side of Larydos' body increased their intensity - tossing up spray at those now clinging on for dear life to her back, and the edges of the rowboat being dragged helplessly behind.

"There's a major surge of energy out at sea," Cory raised their voice over the sounds of agitated ocean. "I can feel it too."

"There's gonna be *another* kind of major surge if we don't slow down!" James exclaimed, looking nauseous. The air began to thicken, the surrounding waters and landscape now obscured with a blue mist.

"Hey is it me, or does it suddenly feel warmer out here?" Denise asked worriedly.

"I don't think it's just you..." Adam remarked, pulling at the neck of his sweater. "This is creepy. What's going on?"

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Go back... the scarlet creature's projected voice was hollow and grating, as if its psychic echoes were occurring in reverse. *Leave now, or you shall regret.*

"That's no Lugia!" Recon exclaimed, his eyes wide with horror.
"That's something from my worst nightmares!"

Go back...

"We can't go back!" Caley yelled into the mist. "We need to see if something bad is happening at the abandoned oil rig!"

There is no option! the voice bellowed. *I cannot let you pass!*

"Guys, we might have found Team Rocket's guard dog," Karis began to frown. "Or bird..."

"But what *is* it?" Farrell said, gazing up at the towering avian with an awestruck expression.

"I hardly think this is the time to debate!" Caley swung on him irritably. "We need to get past!"

"Time for a little distraction, then," Farrell concluded seriously, picking two Pokéballs from his jacket. "Solos, Klamnatch, you're up!"

"Aren, Merma, we need your help!" Karis announced, also bringing forth two Pokéballs.

From the glow of the Pokéballs, a glalie, cloyster, froslass and dewgong appeared. The cloyster and dewgong were quick to enter the ocean, while the glalie and froslass hovered nearby, awaiting their next instructions. The creature wasn't about to allow time for such things, however. With an ear-piercing screech, it cloaked itself in flames and dived towards the boat and its occupants.

"STEP ON IT!" Farrell yelled at his sister, who jammed her foot harshly on the accelerator. The boat juddered to the side in a spray of water as the creature swooped past - the heat from its fire-covered body resonating over the vehicle's hull. In turn, Farrell's cloyster unleashed a Hydro Pump at the creature's back. This blast of water managed to divert its attention long enough for Karis' froslass to generate a Shadow Ball and toss it at the same area the cloyster had damaged previously. Emitting a harrowing cry, it whirled round, its clawed wing sheathed in a dark aura. The froslass uttered a strangled gasp as the Night Slash made devastating contact, knocking the ghost pokémon out of the air like a discarded rag.

"Aren!" Karis exclaimed, thrusting forth a Pokéball and retrieving her companion before she had a chance to hit the water's surface. The

majestic avian form had already returned its attention to its previous target, and had begun to glow an ominous shade of fuchsia. Multiple tiny dots of energy were seen forming near its head and shoulders, ready to be pitched at the cloyster without mercy.

Before either sibling had a chance to utter further instruction, Karis' dewgong sprung from the ocean and charged into the cloyster, knocking it out of the line of fire as the Psyshock attack coursed downward. The cluster of pinkish spheres pelted the dewgong's ice white form, driving the pokémon below the waves. Satisfied that the two previous assailants would no longer challenge its authority, the creature searched for the glalie, only to discover it spinning fervently in the midst of a Gyro Ball attack. Opening its beak, the creature unleashed a plume of searing flame - engulfing the glalie in a reddened-orange blast.

Farrell was quick to return the unconscious pokémon to the safety of its transport unit. With Klamnatch, his cloyster, and Merma, Karis' dewgong, seemingly of little threat to this unknown beast, things were looking horribly out of their favour. While Karis tried to shout encouragements to Merma and Klamnatch, Recon and Caley looked on with wide eyes - fearfully entranced by the creature's strength.

"Don't you have any pokémon with you?" Recon insisted, bereft.

"Well, I-" Caley stammered, unable to find words. The pokémon he did have with him were certainly powerful enough to stand a chance, but if he tried to use any of them, it would only raise more questions.

Besides which, none of them were exactly very seaworthy. At least none of them except-

What's going on over there?

Caley flinched as a familiar psychic voice unexpectedly made itself present amongst his panicked thoughts.

Kota? he barely managed to prevent himself from blurting the name out loud.

You okay? Kota asked worriedly. *I can sense a whole ton of energy where you are.*

We ran into a creature who won't let us pass, Caley explained. *I think it could be one of Team Rocket's pokémon experiments, but the waves its giving off are messing with my Pokédex, so I can't check. Either way, it's too much for Karis and Farrell's pokémon to take on alone.* He paused, his mouth dropping open slightly. "Of course..."

"You do?" Recon looked hopeful, mistaking Caley's utterance as a reply to his previous question. But Caley didn't clarify - at this point he was too deep into his telepathic conversation with Kota to notice the man had spoken.

Look, he said. *We need to combine a water attack against this creature. Can you inform Larydos, and wait for my signal?*

Sure thing, Caley, Kota's mindvoice was determined, yet cheerful. Breaking the telepathy link, Caley noticed Recon eyeing him with a

mixture of wariness and concern, while in the background, Karis and Farrell were glancing at Klamnatch and Merma's futile efforts to keep the red avian creature busy.

"I'm sorry guys, we're going to have to leave," Farrell insisted. "If you haven't got any pokémon to help, ours won't last out there by themselves much longer."

"Wait!" Caley blurted out. "I've got a plan, but it requires perfect timing..."

Merma and Klamnatch exchanged anxious glances. The instruction from their trainers had been to let loose the strongest water attack they could, only to do so in unison, and upon their signal. But the creature before them was hardly going to wait for them to make a move. Both pokémon could sense its fury and rising energy as it prepared to strike. All they could do was evade, and put their trust in their human companions' judgement.

"NOW!" Farrell and Karis' voices sliced through the air with surprising ferocity. Merma and Klamnatch swung out of their evasive manoeuvres and unleashed a dual blast of water at the oncoming creature. At the same time, a jet even more intense than both the dewgong and cloyster's combined, shot out of nowhere. The three water attacks slammed into the creature as one, causing it to let out an agonizing screech and attempt to back away.

"Whoa!" Recon gasped, leaning over the edge of the boat to try and see where the third stream of water had come from. A large, serpentine form drifted gracefully toward him, the human figures sat atop it craning their necks to try and see just what kind of creature it is their pokémon courier had struck at.

In that moment, the crimson form of the avian beast appeared to shatter into numerous particles, revealing an altogether different figure underneath. This one had the appearance of a blaziken, though its crown sported two sets of horn-like protrusions, and its head feathers were a lighter shade, more pointed at their tips.

Mirusyte, Caley's Pokédex sprung into life without his intervention. Latias-Blaziken hybrid. Capable of utilising psychic abilities to create powerful illusions. These illusions are accompanied by a several degree rise in temperature. Ensnared victims will not only become disorientated but dehydrated.

Its false visage having dissipated, the pokémon's battle-damage was now apparent. Despite this, it still appeared greatly intent on defending its current territory.

"Nice shot, Larydos," Caley smiled, as Kota flew over to join him. Recon, Farrell and Karis looked on with wide eyes and open mouths. Here was not one, but two pokémon whose appearances looked so very familiar, yet were neither of the species they resembled. More perplexing than this, was the apparent knowledge their red haired co-passenger had

of them. But this was hardly a good opportunity to be asking questions about such things.

"Now what?" Denise called, while Psyduck cowered inside the rowboat.

"Keep it distracted," Caley insisted. "I'll try and talk it down."

"How?" Karis spluttered. But the young man was already absent, having departed from his own body - his consciousness reaching out towards that of the hybrid pokémon which had been momentarily stalled. Mirusyte glanced up in alarm, aware of another presence in her mind beside her own.

Once again, the whirling lights that signified a being's mindscape were present. But there were no blue and violet tints to grace Caley's mental vision. He gasped mentally as he felt himself engulfed in a torrent of red - anger and fear pelted his consciousness like sharp-edged hailstones. Mirusyte's corporeal representation could be seen hovering amongst this maelstrom of emotion, glowering at Caley unforgivingly. Struggling to keep a lock on Mirusyte's psyche, the young man forced his consciousness nearer and tried to put on his most gentle voice.

You need to stop fighting us, Caley began. We're not your enemy, Team Rocket is! They're-

I know what they are! Mirusyte bellowed psychically. Cruel. Sick. Twisted. Human... like you. Now get out of my mind, human!

Caley flinched as he felt himself being mentally shoved away. He attempted to make contact with the pokémon again, but Mirusyte was now making a conscious effort to impede him from entering her psyche. Back in the fray, Chime and Sia had joined Klamnatch and Merma in keeping Mirusyte occupied, while Larydos fired occasional blasts of water from her mouth in order to stop the pokémon from getting too close to either herself or the adjacent boat.

"What is that?" Recon blinked, gazing in wonder at Larydos.
"Some kind of gyarados evolution?"

"More or less," Adam chuckled, seeming to be enjoying the advantage his companions' pokémon were holding over their target. But Caley had other things on his mind.

"Kota..." he said desperately. "Please can you try and talk sense into Mirusyte?"

I'll try... Kota looked awkward, before focusing. Immediately the augret found himself flat up against the mental barrier that Mirusyte had previously raised in order to shut out Caley's attempts at contact. Regardless, Kota let his consciousness remain present in the other pokémon's mind, and instead called to her through the barrier.

I don't blame you for not trusting humans! he said. Especially after what has happened...but we are trying to help you! Why won't you let us go and stop the humans that have made your life so bad?

There was a pause, and the mental barrier was gradually lowered. Kota felt his consciousness being rapidly drawn to Mirusyte's own - for a split second, the augret felt a wave of distress surge towards him, before it was snatched back into the depths of encompassing fury.

I... the pokémon's mindvoice cracked. I...can't stop...

Team Rocket's fitted Mirusyte with a control device! Kota exclaimed. I saw it implanted in her mind.

"A control device in her brain?" Caley repeated for everyone else's benefit. "No wonder it won't stop attacking us."

"So let's overload it so it shuts down!" Recon exclaimed.

"Are you crazy?" Denise looked at him, horrified. "A surge like that could cause untold damage!"

"Oh...that's true," Recon looked very guilty.

"This is going to require some close and personal deactivation," Mondo frowned. "It'll be a little risky, but...Cory, do you think you could try to shut that control device off?"

"I'll give it my best shot," Cory replied sternly. Normally they would have been wary of shifting forms in front of strangers, but there was no luxury of choice now. Their friends were in danger, and worse than that, one of their fellow hybrids was suffering! The twin pokémon trainers and their older agent passenger watched in shock as Cory's

human form began to glow in a similar manner to pokémon undergoing evolution. The glow retracted into a smaller shape before dimming, revealing a creature with the appearance of a sableye, though lacking in the jewelled eyes sableye had. Before their audience had a chance to take this in, Cory transformed yet again - this time into an augret - and flew off towards Mirusyte at speed.

Mirusyte's fearful expression was quick to shift to one of disgust, and her entire body shimmered in a blue light. Tendrils of water lashed upwards from the ocean surface, commanded by the pokémon's will, and began to spin around her in a merciless vortex. Cory yelped as the water pelted at their skin, marring their vision and almost throwing their focus out entirely. Strengthening their concentration, Cory pressed onward with gritted teeth - carving a path through the liquid swirl through use of a psychically-formed barrier. As they neared Mirusyte, Cory began to reach out both stubby arms. In turn, Mirusyte reached out her own, far longer arms in an attempt to push the pokémon away. This act of physical retaliation was quickly ceased by a swift nip to Mirusyte's left wrist. The blaziken-latias hybrid released its hold for a split second - it was all Cory needed to thrust one paw against the surface of their target's forehead.

Suddenly, Cory was flung into a half-blurred scene - cold and familiar, draped with wires and framed with sinister machinery. A translucent sheen -the unmistakable surface of an incubation cylinder- divided itself from the outside environment. Not too far away, a small pokémon sat quaking - its arms and legs bound to its chest. This was a

tormented soul, a pallid-skinned, breathless creature stricken with painful, swollen veins. There was an intense fear in its dark eyes as it stared wildly into the darkness ahead.

"You are a failed specimen," a voice resounded from the shadows. "And failures are not tolerated here. Fortunately, I have a way of making every failure a success. And you shall be a most successful *target*."

Cory felt their metaphysical self tense as the pokémon begged for mercy, pulling against its bonds in a feeble attempt to escape its fate. The shadows appeared to twitch, before disgorging something impish, and dark, and altogether horrifying into its midst. This five foot high bipedal entity stood poised for instruction - its eyes glowing a hideous green, every part of its spindly body twitching with murderous intent.

"ZC-TNR," the voice spoke emotionlessly. "Remove this waste."

They tried to pull away, to flee from the traumatic visions being force-fed into their mind, but Cory was a prisoner to this abhorrent scene. The creature leapt forward, its shadowy maw open, one massive clawed hand raised. Its hapless victim uttered a blood-curdling scream, and in turn, Cory uttered one of their own at what they witnessed next.

As the humans and pokémon watched from below, Cory wrenched backwards from Mirusyte as if they had been badly stung, losing their augret form in the process and toppling out of the air. At the same time,

Mirusyte wheeled round and accelerated into the sky, quickly vanishing from sight.

"Cory's falling!" Mondo yelled, the upper half of his body lurching forward as if he were going to jump into the ocean himself. Errol and James held him back.

"Help him, Chime!" James insisted. The chiverbel uttered a melodic cry of agreement before soaring forward and grasping Cory with her telekinetic power. Kota flew to join her, the two pokémon carefully returning Cory to the safety of the rowboat, where they lay on their back with wide eyes, gasping like a beached carvahna.

"The mind control was broken," Caley said quietly.

"So much for gratitude," Adam muttered, gazing out at the clouds as the blue mist began to clear from around him. "That pokémon just took off without so much as a show of thanks or anything."

"It was very troubled, Ad," Caley replied wistfully. "I can't blame it for wanting to get away from us. I just hope it finds peace with all those thoughts."

"What were you doing out there?" Denise looked angrily at Farrell. "Letting ice types take on a fire type...that was pretty irresponsible, don't you think?"

"Solos and Klamnatch are usually very competent at battling fire types, regardless of the elemental disadvantage," Farrell said, carefully

brushing his hand across his whitish-blue hair. "But that was no ordinary fire type, by any means."

"And neither are those two pokémon with you," Karis pointed out, studying Larydos and Cory with a frown. "They look like other hybrids Team Rocket created." She swung her gaze of scrutiny to the humans atop Larydos' back and in the rowboat attached behind. "Just *where* did you find them?"

"What's it to you?" Adam glowered, immediately becoming defensive.

"Quite a lot, as a matter of fact," Farrell responded, noticeably offended. "After all, it is a duty of Pokémon League Officials such as Karis and myself to investigate possibly unstable pokémon."

"Pokémon League...*Officials*?" Denise blinked, her mouth dropping open slightly upon hearing three particular words amongst that sentence. Farrell smiled, reached inside his jacket and brought out a tightly clenched fist, lowering his head as he did so.

"Farrell Winters. Pleased to make your acquaintance." With this introduction, he opened his hand to reveal a shiny metallic object nestled in its palm.

"That's a Subze badge!" Caley's mouth dropped open.

"And this is my license," Farrell brought out an ID card with a self-satisfied expression on his face. "My twin sister Karis and I run Darkiff City Gym."

"How didn't you know about these guys, Cal?" Adam hissed.

"Aren't you involved with Gym stuff?"

"That's understandable," Karis scratched the back of her head.

"We only took up the position a couple of months ago." She resumed her firm expression. "But that doesn't answer the question of how you came to be training hybrid pokémon...or why you're so interested in visiting the abandoned oil rig."

While the Gym Leaders engaged in conversation with the newcomers, Recon had resumed consulting the Guardsmen Citizen Profile Archive. A few minutes into his data forays, the man's eyes had grown quite round, as had the eyes of his companion pikachu. He turned off the computer and returned it to his pocket, looking a little shell-shocked.

Caley could do nothing but sit there as Farrell and Karis continued to grill his companions as to their motives. He had run out of ideas as to how to circumvent this interrogation, at least not without trying to explain the Ahnloka Prophecy, and he was still trying to cling to his own sense of certainty over such things, without having it drowned in others' scepticism. Instead he had been left with a somewhat bitter feeling in his gut, coupled with anxiousness. For a moment, albeit a fleeting one, Caley had considered attempting to use his psychic abilities to alter Farrell and Karis' conversation. This had been a conscious deliberation, not fuelled by buried emotions like the occurrence with Brendan. Such an act would

have been an irresponsible use of his power, the very thing Sabrina had warned him was one step too many towards a dangerous slope. The young man shuddered and tried to push the discomfort aside.

"Wait," Recon held up an arm. "It's okay. Let them do what they need to do."

"Are you sure?" Karis looked surprised.

"I'm sure," Recon replied bluntly. "I've checked their records - they're perfectly capable of handling themselves *and* those pokémon."

Everyone exchanged uneasy glances at the concept of having their identities scrutinized. However, the man in the battered overcoat didn't seem ready to arrest them any time soon, so they figured they were more or less safe with him, and began to relax a little.

"Alright then," Karis resigned herself to this decision. She retrieved the dewgong, her expression returning to a more cheerful state.
"Mysterious pokémon aside, thank you for helping us out back there. We needed all the assistance we could get!"

"There's the place you all came here for," Farrell announced, motioning across the waves. It seemed that, with Mirusyte's blue mist having disappeared, a towering edifice of black steel was now visible a few hundred metres away. Recon pulled out a small pair of hi-tech binoculars and placed it to his eyes before gazing up at the structure.

"Team Rocket..." Recon's eyes narrowed. "Here you are."

James shuddered upon thoughts of re-engaging the organization he hoped he'd seen the back of forever. Deep down, he realised such hopes were more wishful thinking than reality - upon raising his head and taking in Errol's determined glower, James sat upright and attempted to put on a brave face.

"Alright," Caley said. "I think it's best we go a little more undercover from this point on. Just in case there are agents keeping lookout."

With a little reorganization, Caley and Recon took their seating place amongst the other travellers - the former atop Larydos' back, and the latter in the rowboat with James, Errol and Mondo. Cory had resumed their human form, and returned to their seating place upon Larydos, but their expression had barely altered from the mortified one they had worn earlier. Despite this, Cory refused to divulge exactly had what happened during their encounter with Mirusyte, and so their friends remained somewhat uncomfortably uninformed. Farrell and Karis offered encouragements and admonitions to the group, promising that they would watch over Psyduck and keep nearby in order to help guide their associates back to shore. As the distance between them and the Gym Leaders' vessel increased, the attentions of those in the rowboat turned towards the most recent passenger, whose sights were firmly affixed on the approaching structure jutting from the ocean.

"Thanks for helping us out there, Mr. Recon," Mondo said with relief.

"Just call me 'Recon'," the man told them, without looking back.
"I'm surprised to see Team Rocket fugitives returning to the organization."

"Team Rocket fugitives? Us?" James spluttered.

"Give it a rest, Jimmy," Errol handed his friend a withering look.
"You hold him. He's been looking at our private records."

"You aren't re-joining, are you?" Recon asked, finally turning to study the occupants of the rowboat.

"Oh no no no," James looked awkward.

"After da effort we took ta get *outta* dere?" Errol exclaimed. "Ya must be jokin'!"

"We'd never have come back here if we could," Caley said. "But we have some...unfinished business with Team Rocket."

"I see," Recon nodded. "Well I figured with your inside knowledge, you might well be able to help me out."

"Oh?" Everyone looked at him.

"I'm working on a case with the International Police," Recon iterated, for the benefit of all those who weren't Caley. "Team Rocket has some info which is really important to that case, and I came here to get it."

"From what you said earlier, I'm guessing working for the International Police is temporary," Caley deduced.

"Yeah," Recon nodded in resignation. "I mean, sure, I love detective work - I've done some of it before. But I'm still a Trainer at heart, I think it's too early to get into this sort of thing full time."

"We'd better stop the chat, guys," Rose spoke up. "Everyone scan the area for lookout operatives. We need to spot them before they spot us."

Silence descended upon the group as Larydos pulled them closer to the oil rig. Time had seen relatively little harm to this impressive man-made construct - the integrity of its four base pillars generated a sense of unsettling power in those gazing upon them. Curiously, as Larydos and her passengers floated gently underneath the massive platform, there appeared to be no operatives on the lookout anywhere. Neither had any security cameras been set up. Yet, this odd lack of observation seemed to be founded by the apparent absence of means to reach the top side.

"Well..." Recon began, reaching into his back pocket. "Looks like the only way from here is up." The others watched as the man retrieved a compact jetpack and began to strap it over his shoulders.

"Up'?" Adam exclaimed. "How are we supposed to go up?"

"Could we borrow some of your jetpacks?" Denise asked.

"Sorry guys," Recon chuckled. "They only let me have one. But I'm sure you'll figure a way up there, right? You're ex-Team Rocket! You figure a way round everything." And with that, he engaged the boost on his jetpack, propelling himself from the rowboat into the air.

"Sure. 'Figure a way up'," Errol recited bemusedly. "Just as soon as I figure how ta sprout wings."

"Now what?" James looked crestfallen. "We don't even have any flying pokémon that could help carry us up there!"

"Maybe not," Rose contemplated. "But we *do* have psychics."

It was too far to attempt teleportation, so Kota and Chime telekinetically carried each group member separately to the top of the oil platform, where they waited behind one of the remaining empty structures that still existed there. As Caley was taken last, he gave his thanks to Larydos for her assistance before returning the hybrid pokémon to her Pokéball - leaving the rowboat to drift aimlessly back toward the open ocean. Once everyone had been reunited, they proceeded to assess the state of their current environment. The massive pillar that once housed the oil rig's drilling equipment had since been gutted, while the surrounding buildings bore clusters of empty nests and white feathers - leftovers of a pelipper colony that had roosted there prior to Team Rocket's unwelcome intrusion. The majority of the space on the platform was occupied by three large cargo aircraft with the Team Rocket insignia

emblazoned upon their sides. These impressive flying machines with their boat-like proportions were now grounded, connected with one another by means of temporary corridors. The sheer scale of the arrangement was enough to put uncertainty into even the boldest of the group, though others had entirely different reasons for their apprehension.

"You okay Errol?" James inquired, noticing the man's hands were quaking.

"Y-yeah, sure," the man attempted to compose himself. Being confronted with the very transport he had been dumped out of just weeks before hardly proved to be a comfortable experience.

"So how do we get into these things?" Caley asked, before further pessimism overwhelmed his intents. "Anyone have any experience with them?"

"Best way is through the storage area," Denise said without hesitation. "There'll be less focus on security there."

"Hold on," Errol glanced upward with a serious face. "Somet'ing's comin."

Soon the choppy whirrs of spinning blades became audible to everyone else's hearing. They kept low, watching as a jet black transport descended from the clouds and lightly touched down upon the platform, before rolling into the back of the nearest aircraft.

"Kota says it's okay to head out now," Caley informed them. "Let's keep moving." He made his way towards the same aircraft that the plane had entered, with his companions in close pursuit.

Further along the hull of the cargo aircraft, Denise and Mondo stood examining a tightly sealed doorway with equally furrowed brows. They were both convinced that this was the entrance to the storage area, but neither of them had a clue how to open it. After all, the door controls were installed upon the opposite side. Cory grew rigid as they noticed both Denise and Mondo had directed attention toward them.

"I'm sorry to ask this from you again, buddy..." Mondo looked awkward. "Especially since you're pretty shaken up from your encounter with Mirusyte, but...we honestly can't get through this door without you. Could you-?"

"Okay," Cory replied with uncharacteristic abruptness. The pokémon-in-human-form walked towards the surface of the aircraft, causing Mondo and Denise to step back instinctively to allow them through. 'Pretty shaken up' was an understatement. While resident in Mirusyte's consciousness, Cory had gazed upon memories too horrifying to even start to divulge - memories with connotations that began churning their gut at the slightest thought of them. Attempting to push these issues aside in their mind, Cory placed a hand to the metal surface and closed their eyes. A few seconds later, the door of the craft began to reluctantly judder downwards with a throaty rumble, providing the group with a ramp up towards the open hatch. There was no going back now.

An uncomfortable silence descended amongst the travellers as they wandered from the swiftly diminishing point of light behind them. It was a silence that only emanated from the mouths - their feet clattered across the metallic panels that made up the floor of the storage area, while all around, the air seemed to throb with the ominous presence of an unknown force. Caley seemed the most focused upon this - his eyes narrowed to such an extent that it made it quite challenging to see where he was going.

"That humming noise sure is unsettling," Denise whispered after a moment or so. Rose nodded in agreement.

"Y'know..." Errol remarked. "Dere's a surprisingly small amount o' guards here fer a Team Rocket operation."

"Oh they're here" Caley stated firmly. "Just not in the immediate vicinity. Or at least none that I can sense."

"We'd better keep alert then," Rose instructed. "Just in case."

But even upon exiting the storage area and emerging into a wide corridor, not one of the defectors saw anyone on patrol. They were starting to become tense, and the amplified hum wasn't helping.

"Probably da boss man makin' too many cutbacks," Errol smirked in a half-joking manner.

"Maybe..." Caley remarked distantly. "Or they've got more important things on their minds."

"Where *can* you sense anybody, Caley?" Denise asked tentatively.

The young man's eyes glazed over yet again.

"There's some activity above us," he murmured. "More activity on this level. And I'm picking up some very strong vibes from the ship next door..."

"We'll need to split up" Rose decided. "We need to check all these areas for anything important and we don't have much time left."

"And how are we going to stay in contact?" Adam inquired, slightly panicked. "It's not like we have walkie talkies or anything."

"On the contrary, scruffstack," James grinned knowledgeably. "We got what we need right *here*."

He tapped on the side of Cory's head to prove his point, causing the pokémon-in-human-guise to wince slightly at the unexpectedness of the impact. Adam looked at James like he had just grown a polka-dotted lileep atop his head.

"Cory's not a walkie-talkie, you moron," he snapped.

"Oh how narrowly your mind functions," James replied loftily. "I am simply referring to Cory's telepathy. If we split into three groups, each with someone capable of telepathy, we can create a network and not lose track of each other."

"Excellent idea!" Rose snapped her fingers.

"I'll head for the strongest source of activity," Caley said.

"I'll go with you," Denise spoke up firmly.

"Me an' Jimmy will take a look on dis floor," Errol announced, while James simply nodded agreeably.

"Fair enough," Rose gave a nod. "Mind if you come along with me then, Tate?"

"Sure!" Mondo smiled.

<I can help out James and Errol,> Chime added brightly. <At least one of them will be able to understand me.>

"Then I...I guess I'll stick with Mondo and Rose," Cory murmured.

"Den we're sorted," Errol grinned. Chime floated off deeper into the lower deck, accompanied by the serious countenances of James and Errol, while Rose, Mondo and Cory followed with the intention of finding a way to the upper floors. Adam swung his head from left to right, watching the vanishing figures as his face began to look rather desperate from a mixture of upset and indecision. Then he felt a gentle tap upon his shoulder.

"Come on Adam," Denise instructed with a slight smile. "Let's go."

The youth returned the expression in more relieved tones before stepping out after Caley and Kota.

"Okay."

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Recon had only experienced a few hours of jet pack training, so his landing atop the oil rig was more unprofessional than he would have liked. Despite this, he was not one to wallow in humiliation, and swiftly picked himself up, dusted himself off and resumed his exploration. Guardsmen reports on this headquarters were sparse at best - it was up to him to seek out the area he needed through a process of elimination.

"Alright," Recon whispered to his pikachu. "Scanner is telling me the area is looking pretty quiet. But just in case..." He took off his hat, revealing a shaggy mop of rust-coloured hair, and placed the accessory into his phasepack before bringing out a lab coat. "All these gadgets Interpol gave us sure makes this job a lot easier, huh Sparx?" the man grinned, slipping the lab coat on over his jacket.

"Pih-kachu..." his companion muttered, giving him a 'don't get overconfident' expression before pointing toward its eyes and back out at the surrounding environment.

"I *am* paying attention!" Recon looked slightly annoyed, before realisation struck. "Oh...sorry buddy. You're going to have to go in your Pokéball for this next part." The pikachu nodded in a resigned manner, and allowed itself to be retracted into the spherical transportation device. "Alright," Recon concluded with satisfaction, snapping the Pokéball to his belt. "Now to find the archive."

With the disguise, a replicated ID and a measure of smooth talk, Recon was able to make his entrance through the main door of one of the three aircraft carriers. Now with everything in range, the man allowed his handheld device to tap in to the local network and download area schematics. Some areas remained unlabelled, but Recon didn't pay too much attention to these. The place he wanted was clearly marked, and he was going to have to get inside if he was to retrieve what he came for. And everything appeared to be going according to plan, until Recon came up against a quite literal dead end.

"I could have sworn this is where the entrance to the archive is supposed to be," Recon muttered irritably, looking at his handheld computer again. "But there's no door here!"

Before the man had a chance to respond, a horizontal beam of light struck him in the forehead and began making its way down to his feet. The beam flickered out, and a message was projected upon a panel near the ceiling.

ACCESS DENIED.

"Well it seems there *is* a door here..." Recon blinked. "Must be super security. And with no sign of a place to use my 'keys', either. Don't suppose there's any info on this sort of thing in the database, is there?"

"I don't suppose there is," an austere male voice was heard from behind him. Recon gulped loudly as a hand grasped his shoulder and pulled him round in a sharp 180 degree turn. He was so used to relaying

his stream of consciousness to his pikachu companion, that it hadn't dawned on him that he had not only been talking to himself this entire time, but also that it was very much audible by passers-by. "Mind telling me just exactly what you're doing?"

Any attempts by Recon to draw up a comeback at this point had dissolved into silence - rendered null by the cold inquiry of the aged figure whose eyes he was unable to read from behind the sheen of triangular-rimmed glasses. The figure began to smile, ever so slightly. This was an expression lacking humour and compassion - the response of a man with far darker intents on his mind.

"Just as I thought," he said.

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The Team Rocket switchboard had arranged for an escort to meet Butch, Cassidy and Jessie at a specified point just outside of Darkiff City. There, the vehicle they had been assigned was taken into a medium-sized aircraft and the whole ensemble lifted off towards the sky. A five minute flight above the clouds ensued, before the aircraft descended towards the grubby platform of a repurposed oil rig. The escort proceeded to guide them into one of the cargo craft without a word.

Cassidy glanced in Butch's direction, only to discover the man looked for all the world like he'd eaten a dish of raw octillery. He had removed both his gloves and rolled the sleeves of his uniform up to the elbows - rubbing at one welt-covered arm with the opposite hand.

"Will you stop that?" Cassidy hissed. "You're breaking uniform code."

"Screw uniform code," Butch grunted. "I feel awful."

"Here we are," the escort remarked matter-of-factly. The group had arrived outside the cafeteria.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Cassidy snapped. The escort responded with a loud sigh and pushed the doors open. Inside the large room, Team Rocket Elite operatives were sat at each row of tables, chattering amongst themselves. Every operative had been given a change of outfit - a militarily-forged design constructed of jet black armour plating, with a reinforced waistcoat and full utility belt. Jessie glanced across the faces of those sitting at the tables, aware that some of the members had noted the new arrivals and had begun to murmur faintly between themselves.

"Welcome back," the unsatisfied tones of Darius' voice sounded far from accommodating.

"What's going on here?" Cassidy inquired, motioning to the tables of Elites.

"Re-assignment," Darius said. "These operatives are getting temporarily promoted to commander rank for the next stage of Project Rebirth."

"And what about us?" Jessie asked.

"Your re-assignments are a little different," Darius replied. "They require you report to this area here." He motioned to the map upon a portable device in his hand.

"Fair enough," Cassidy said, while Jessie glanced over her shoulder again and wondered why the woman hadn't even questioned the reasons for such a decision. "But I must get my teammate some medical attention first. He's very ill."

"You head to your new assignment," Darius boomed, handing them the device. "I shall deal with this." He turned to those sitting at the cafeteria tables. "Someone take operative Reynolds to the medical bay."

"Oh oh!" Dinah started waving her arm. "I'll do it! I'll take Butchy to the medical bay!"

"With what?" Wendy snorted, before standing up. "I'll go. My nidoqueen can carry him." To reinforce her point, she took out her Pokéball and released the blue poison type pokémon beside her.

"Look, I don't need no carrying..." Butch grumbled, before his legs gave out. Dinah ran over from the table as Darius forcefully ushered Jessie and Cassidy out of the room. The former couldn't help cast one last glance behind her before she left.

"Talk time is over," Darius snapped, watching Wendy's nidoqueen lumber past with Butch over one shoulder. "Eyes front, mouths shut! We have urgent matters to deal with."

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Wendy strode briskly through the corridor – her nidoqueen keeping pace despite the pokémon's considerable size. This was hardly an act of goodwill. She was glad to have an excuse to get out of the cafeteria for a bit – the constant rumble of conversation had started to irritate her, and she was not in the mood to listen to Darius' lecturing.

"Hang in there, Butchy..." Dinah cooed worriedly at the limp figure dangling across the nidoqueen's back. "We're gonna get you some medicine real soon."

"What are you doing following me?" Wendy snorted. "You've got nothing useful to contribute to this."

"That's not true!" Dinah protested with a pout. "Poor, sick Butch needs reassurance, and I didn't see *you* giving him any, Ms. Heartless."

"Well you're wasting your breath," Wendy rolled her eyes without looking back at Dinah. "He lost consciousness several minutes ago."

"He's unconscious?!" Dinah exclaimed in horror. Wendy groaned and decided it better to ignore the woman entirely. It was no secret that

Dinah happened to be one of the more eccentric operatives in the Elite Rank. The real mystery was how she'd been able to get a promotion in the first place.

The nidoqueen grunted in surprise as Butch shifted under her arm, uttering a disturbing gurgle.

"W-W-Wendy...?" Dinah gibbered, her voice rising in pitch over the course of the sentence. "W-We better get Butch that medicine real fast!"

Wendy turned around and opened her mouth to give an irritated remark, when she caught sight of Dinah's pose. The woman's eyes were wide, her body held rigid as if frozen to the spot by an unexpected psychic attack, minus the unearthly bluish aura. For someone who wasn't easily frightened, this was a lot of fear to be exhibiting.

Following Dinah's gaze, Wendy's face took on an expression of dread. Butch's hands had turned a dark blue, as if from heavy bruising - the skin beginning to harden and peel into many scale-like formations. Dinah backed away even further from the confused nidoqueen holding Butch as the redness upon his forearms shifted toward a similar blue shade, leaving the unsettling crimson welts present in greater contrast.

"What's happening to me?" Butch choked hoarsely, his body quaking under the intensifying pain. Wendy tried to respond, but no words escaped her lips. Her knees had grown weak, her entire form caught in the grip of revulsion. She didn't have time to react further. Butch let out a guttural screech and arched his back with a snap, causing

the nidoqueen to drop him to the floor in alarm. There were further macabre noises as the man's upper spine jutted outward in two places, tearing through his uniform and opening wide into leathery, jagged blue wings.

This was more than Dinah could handle. She screamed and ran recklessly down the corridor, back the way they had come. Wendy glanced fearfully over her shoulder as her associate left her behind. She was too terrified to be angry at Dinah's actions, yet found herself unable to leave the scene, and as such remained in witness to Butch's convulsing on the tiles, her face bearing an expression of utter helplessness. What had happened to him indeed?

The scaled monstrosity raised its disproportionately-long arms and bellowed. As it did so, the red welts upon its arms erupted into long, cruel spikes - with similar protrusions upon the shoulders. Its body became taller and bulkier, forcing the remaining tattered shreds of clothing apart to reveal a golden chest and belly. A long, thick blue tail tipped with yet more spikes writhed its way from the creature's lower back, while its five toes merged together to become three sharp talons. The reddened head, now completely devoid of any human features, was crowned with harsh ridges - its teeth and lips having dissolved into a singular, jagged maw upon its reptilian snout.

At last, the crunches and bestial utterances fell silent, leaving nothing but slow, heavy breathing. A towering pokémon-like form struggled into a bipedal stance, its narrowed yellow eyes reflecting

nothing of the humanity it had borne just a few minutes ago. Wendy's nidoqueen was the first to detect this, and shifted into a defensive pose with a low growl. Before Wendy was able to protest on the matter, the creature whirled round upon the challenger, claws unsheathed. Wendy's nidoqueen attempted to block the sudden advance, but was unsuccessful. The creature's strength far outweighed her own, and Wendy gasped as the nidoqueen was slammed into the corridor wall and inched down it, out cold.

Turning to deal with the human who had also been present, the creature found the corridor otherwise empty - Wendy having taken refuge in the hopes she would be overlooked. It let out a snort of disgust, spitting flames in the process. This place was artificial - this place gave it fear, disgust, all-encompassing fury, and a saturating energy was everywhere. Hunching slightly, the creature folded its wings so as to gain better control of its manoeuvring, and stomped out of sight.

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Quickly and carefully, Rose ascended the stairs toward the upper level of the aircraft with Mondo and Cory following close behind. Eventually they reached the topmost level, and were met with a curious-looking panel set into the wall.

"Hmmm..." Rose contemplated. "Well this is unlike any door I've seen before."

"How does it open?" Mondo looked baffled. Rose took a step forward, only to flinch as a horizontal beam of light passed across the front of her body from head to foot. The beam flickered out, and a message was projected upon the panel.

ACCESS DENIED.

"A bioscanner..." Rose murmured. She had used such technology in the medbay, but never had she seen it used for this purpose.

"What's that?" Mondo scratched his head. "Is it something we need to crack?"

"Better not," Rose shook her head. "This setup is a lot more complex and I don't want to accidentally set off any alarms. At least we know that whatever is behind this door is valuable enough to require high-level clearance."

"So how are we going to get in?" Mondo asked. He found himself being pulled back roughly as Rose reversed away from the panel and took shelter behind a nearby pillar - holding a finger over her lips. Everyone peered around the ridge of the pillar to see a tall, aged man in a lab coat walking up the stairs towards them. The man stopped before the panel, as Rose and her companions had done. The panel responded with another burst of horizontal light. An affirmative beep was heard from the wall, and

the panel slid away - allowing just enough time for the man to walk through before it slid shut again.

"We may not be able to override the system, but there's no reason we can't replicate the key," Rose decided, once the trio had been left alone again. "That's if Cory managed to memorize that professor's form..."

"I think I did..." Cory murmured. They hadn't really thought about it before, especially considering most of the forms they picked up were gathered without their conscious knowledge.

"But are you really up for this, buddy?" Mondo asked Cory. There was anxiousness in his voice - the spaced out look in Cory's eyes was still very much apparent.

The truth was, Cory wasn't 'up for this' in the slightest. Right now, the last thing they wanted to do was alter their shape again. They recoiled at the prospect of the sensation of extending bone, of their remaining form shifting into a semi-gelatinous mass, of taking on the appearance of a being tall, and spindly and altogether terrifying. A shudder coursed through the pokémon-in-human guise, bringing them back to the present moment. Their friends were counting on their help, and for that alone, Cory had to put aside their own feelings and do what they had to do.

"Here goes," they said quietly. Shutting their eyes, Cory let the memory of the scientist filter back into their mind - and with it the data

that made up his entire being. The pokémon's humanoid shape began to extend upward, their facial features growing more angular, their hair receding. Once the combined discomfort of hard and soft matter rearranging itself had ended, Cory re-opened their eyes and glanced squeamishly down at themself.

"Spot on," Mondo acknowledged, noting Cory's expression. "You look just like him."

"You're going to have to investigate this floor alone, I'm afraid," Rose said. "That doorway will only open long enough for the one who was scanned."

Cory nodded. They daredn't say anything while transformed – they were not sure they would be able to bear the professor's voice being uttered from their mouth. Instead, they proceeded towards the area in front of the wall where the scanner beam gave them thorough scrutiny. The bleep sounded once again, and the opening revealed itself. Without hesitation, Cory strode through.

Taking on the guise of the professor felt like wearing another person's soiled clothing, and Cory was all too glad to shed it at the earliest opportunity. Once they had done so, the figure continued for a short distance down the hallway, examining the sterile, bleak structure around them. From the looks of things, this floor was the location of a limited number of operative sleeping quarters - each tiny room having been furnished with a plain-looking bed and nothing more. And up until a

minute ago, the surroundings had been eerily quiet. Now, Cory could faintly hear the sound of two male voices in terse conversation - one of them belonged to the figure they had previously impersonated, the other was unidentifiable.

"Why are you keeping me here, Mr. Bohrgram?" the unknown voice inquired. It was light, calm and deliberating. "You've already taken every last bit of my research. I have nothing left to give."

"I'm not interested in research, Acroma," Professor Ein Bohrgram snapped. "You know other things I want to know. You know about *them* - the pokémon from space. You've made contact with them, that is how you could give Team Rocket that DNA sample they required." There was a loud slam of unknown articles upon a wooden surface. "Tell me how to reach them!"

"Tch," the calm voice became dismissive. "Their domain is not yours to defile. That is information you won't be obtaining from me."

"Then you will be staying in this miserable little room until you change your mind," Ein responded darkly. Cory ducked into one of the nearby empty rooms as the professor stormed into the passage, swung round and locked the door behind him. Waiting until the sound of footsteps had faded into the distance, Cory peered hesitantly out of the room to make sure the passage was truly empty and then approached the door which had been locked just moments earlier. No high grade

technology in this case - the lock was a basic card scan system - something Cory could easily override.

As the door to the makeshift cell opened yet again, Cory's eyes met with those of the man sitting on the edge of the bed. He appeared to be in his mid thirties, and was dressed in similar attire to the one who had been previously interrogating him. Despite his incarcerated state, the figure appeared quite immaculate - his slicked-back blonde hair sporting a light blue forelock which encircled the back of his head in a manner which defied all known laws of physics.

"Well now," the man remarked, adjusting his half-moon spectacles. "You don't look like the kind of person who belongs here."

"I'm not," Cory stated. "And we'd better get *out* of here before that Team Rocket scientist comes back."

"I take it this is a rescue, then," the man gave a small smile and raised himself from the bed. Cory did not reply, but instead quickly exited the room, beckoning their charge to follow. As the two figures entered the outside passage, Cory froze in their tracks, detecting another voice. At first, they thought the voice belonged to Ein, and that the man happened to be returning. On closer aural scrutiny, Cory realised this voice - while also male - was slightly gruffer than that of the professor. It was also sounding extremely despondent, and appeared to be coming from a room a few steps down the passageway.

"I wish I could go home and forget all this mess," the voice whimpered. This was a curious response to hear in such throaty undertones. "I bet there's apple pie at home. Sure could go for some apple pie..."

"Is that Recon?" Cory blinked. "Sounds like he's having a nervous breakdown...how did he manage to end up in here?"

"You know this man?" the figure next to him raised an eyebrow.

"Well, sort of," Cory gave a vague shrug before walking towards the door and placing their hands upon the locking mechanism fitted there. Their newly-acquired accomplice watched with interest as the lock disengaged, and the door slid aside. Recon was hunched in the corner of the room where his bed met the wall, his forehead resting upon his knees. His countenance was far from the pristine state Cory's existing charge happened to be in. In fact, it didn't even resemble the confident, focused demeanour that Recon himself had been exhibiting. His jacket and hat were missing, revealing a dishevelled purple sweater and a head of scuffed up rusty brown hair. As Recon lifted his head to see who was at the door, his eyes were wide, his entire body saturated with panic and helplessness.

"Wh-who's there?"

"It's me!" Cory began. "Uh...one of the people from the boat?"

Recon's mind cleared a gap in his anxiousness just big enough to allow recognition to seep through.

"Ohhh..." he said, beginning to sound more optimistic. "The ex-Rockets!"

"Hey, not so loud about that..." Cory winced, as the figure next to them looked on with a vague smirk. "Now come on, let's get out of here before we *all* get caught."

"No!" Recon spluttered, jumping from the bed. "I can't leave! Sparky's in trouble!"

"Sparky?" Cory blinked.

"My pikachu!" Recon persisted. "I talked to myself out loud and some Team Rocket scientist heard, and now he's got my buddy Sparky! And my phasepack, too. My favourite hat was in there..." He began to look quite aggrieved at this point. "I'm so lousy at this secret agent thing!"

"Good grief, act your age, man," the bespectacled figure wrinkled his nose like there was a bad smell under it.

"Tell you what," Cory said. "I'll go with you and help you get your stuff and Sparky back, okay?"

"Okay," Recon tried to calm himself. Cory turned back to the man standing next to them.

"My friends are waiting by the door to this level," they said. "If you go on without me, they'll help you find your way out."

"Much obliged," the man gave a nod. The group parted ways - while Cory and Recon dashed off to fulfil the latter's pressing issues.

The last thing that happened to be on Mondo and Rose's mind upon locking gazes with an unidentified figure in a lab coat, was helping said figure to leave. Fortunately, the new arrival was swift in both speech and thoughts, and a few moments later had explained Cory's spontaneous decision-making. Suitably convinced, Rose and Mondo decided to accompany the man from the aircraft carrier.

"So who are you, anyway?" Rose asked the figure striding alongside them. "How did you end up in here?"

"My name is Colress Acroma," he replied. "Professor of various augmentative sciences. I live to see both pokémon and humans reach their full potential, and the leader of Team Rocket approached me with a prospect to do just that. So I shared my research, and they steadily worked towards making the most powerful generator in existence. But that wasn't enough for some. Professor Bohrgram wished to take further knowledge from me - knowledge I didn't wish to part with. That is how I came to be locked in that room."

"The most powerful generator in existence..." Rose pondered. "Wait, do you mean the Obelisk?" Colress raised his eyebrows, momentarily taken off guard by the woman's knowledge of this construct.

"No no," he smiled to himself. "That was merely a spark, if you will. A match that lit the flames of what has truly become something beautiful."

TO BE CONTINUED...

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