

POKÉMON
REBIRTH

ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE THIRTY TWO

Close Combat

Alia Forest covered the north-east of Tatto for a good few hundred acres - surrounding Kemnon Tower atop its lofty post like a wooded fortification. Somewhere in the depths of this forest, Caley and his sizeable number of travelling companions had been scattered. They held a suspicion that this occurrence had been far from accidental and, once again, their honed intuitions were correct. During the course of the night, two figures had traversed Alia Forest in search of the displaced exiles. One of these figures - a woman known only to most as 'Domino' - was particularly intent on uncovering their whereabouts first.

This woman's life had been far from a deprived one. Born 'Philantha Hianmyte', the pretentiousness and unscrupulous morals of her wealthy parents were quick to rub off on her. Upon their lavish estate, pokémon had been bred specifically for target practise - a pastime Philantha's mother would engage in with disturbing relish. Elsewhere, her father would tend to greenhouses full of lush flowers - dabbling with their appearances, cooing over them like children. Neither parent seemed uncomfortable with pretending to be something they weren't, and this two-faced behaviour fascinated Philantha greatly.

She found that by acting cheerfully naive and innocent, she was able to wriggle her way into many beneficial situations. This knack of faking an alternate persona with such accuracy, coupled with her desire for thrills and sharp shooting abilities, was what landed Philantha in one of the highest tiers of Team Rocket's Elite. Her self-titled codename was derived from her skill of masking her own personality, her use of black

tulips an act of symbolism. Flowers were so fragile, Philantha had mused, yet the cupped beauty of the black tulip symbolised power and strength - a perfect contrast, an apt representation of herself.

Philantha had spent several years carrying out undercover missions on behalf of Team Rocket's leader. She could not remember the name of this illustrious figure, nor her reasons for departing the organization. But she considered in retrospect that it felt better to make her own decisions. It seemed a touch ironic that she was currently tracking a group of members highly wanted by Team Rocket, but she wasn't in it for the reward money. She was in it for the thrill of the hunt, and she didn't plan to let her co-worker snatch that excitement away from her.

Lifting away some dangling creepers, Philantha began to smirk to herself. Her first cluster of targets had drawn into view, having drifted to sleep around their meagre campfire. A foolish mistake. She raised her left hand and cast a tulip-shaped dart into the midst of the camp with expert precision. The bud of the tulip opened, sending a cloud of pinkish gas billowing into the air with a faint hiss. Once she was satisfied the gas had spread sufficiently enough, Philantha donned a mask and slipped into the camp. Not even an exploding voltorb would wake them now.

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Mondo winced and tried to force his eyelids to part. Consciousness was being particularly stubborn about aiding him, despite the repeated jabbing sensation in his back. He shifted, uttering a frustrated moan.

"They're gone!" Denise's anxious voice penetrated the darkness of Mondo's vision.

"Gone...?" he mumbled.

"Rilly, Kota, Cyzel!" Denise persisted, the anxious tone growing more evident. "They've gone!"

"What?" Mondo struggled to sit upright, finally opening his eyes. Morning sunlight had broken through the canopy of trees, revealing Denise's worried countenance and the remains of an extinguished campfire. Indeed, Denise and himself were the only figures present. "Surely they wouldn't have just...wandered off."

"Exactly," Denise fidgeted. "They're too smart for that."

"Wait, you don't think someone kidnapped them?" Mondo began to look hesitant. Denise nodded.

"Maybe the same people who caused that avalanche," she said. "And made it impossible for Kota to sense anything with his psychic abilities."

"This is too well planned to just be random thugs," Mondo frowned. "These people know who we are."

"Will someone remind me again just *whose* lousy sense of direction is at work here?" Butch muttered grumpily.

"Da forest pokémon's, mainly," Errol rolled his eyes. "Look, wit'out a map or psychic guidance, we're wanderin' blind. An' dere's only so much sense you can get outta wild critters."

"Mebbe you just need to brush up on your conversation skills," Butch remarked. "N didn't seem to have a problem getting useful directions when he guided me and Cass through a forest."

"My conversatin' skills are just fine, t'anks very much," Errol snorted, noticeably offended. "And who's dis 'N' you're talking about anyway?"

"A friend," Butch shrugged. It still seemed weird to use that title in relation to anyone he knew - even Cassidy, whom he'd been acquainted with the longest. But since N had used it to refer to him more than once, he felt it about time to start doing the same. "One of the Lunari we met."

<You don't suppose Caley was on to something with his theory about Mendarus controlling the leader of Team Rocket, do you?> Sia remarked. This mention of Lunari had brought up the brunt of yesterday's conversation, the one they'd had shortly before getting separated.

"Huh?" Errol blinked, shaken out of his momentary grouchiness. "Well, we sure can't rule it out. Giovanni's always been da power hungry type, but I hafta admit his schemes have slipped into genocidal territory lately."

<Well whether he's being possessed by some super being or not, we'll be ready for him,> Soluqua announced firmly, slamming one webbed fist into the outstretched palm of the opposite hand. She looked surprisingly sprightly for only having slept three hours.

<I don't know if *I'm* ready for him...> Psyduck whimpered. Contrary to his tutor, the water pokémon looked pretty terrible for having stayed up so late in an attempt to hone his battle skills. He caught sight of Soluqua's hurt expression and flinched. <Not that the lessons weren't effective! I just don't think I'm a good student.>

"Pshht, course you are, Psyduck!" Errol brushed off the pokémon's self doubt. "Sure, your attention wanders a bit and ya forget stuff, but'cha water gun's a lot stronger now, right?"

<Yeah, I guess it is!> Psyduck smiled a little. It didn't take long for the expression to dissipate. <But is that enough...?>

"Feel free to let me back into the convo any time," Butch muttered, annoyed at his exclusion as the result of a language he couldn't understand.

Sia's ears twitched she felt a faint rush of air close by. Stopping and glancing around hurriedly for the origin of this weird sensation, the pokémon gasped as a large cloud of pink gas engulfed her - too fast for the glaceon to back away.

<Sia!> Soluqua cried in alarm, dashing towards her companion with a hand over her mouth.

The process was not unlike using a metal detector. Mondo would walk in a certain direction as long as the interference in the signal detection device either persisted or became worse. Were it to fade, he would stop and try pointing the device at a different angle until the interference resumed. Thus he proceeded towards where the interference was strongest, until at last, Denise and himself arrived at a black box placed between the trees. It was about three feet in height, barely concealed by the surrounding foliage, and was adorned with two antenna.

"Yeah, *that's* totally not suspicious at all," Denise remarked sarcastically.

"Looks pretty sturdy," Mondo bit his lip. "They definitely pokémon proofed it."

"But did they Neesee proof it?" Denise grinned, bringing out the toolkit she had bought in Wichour Town.

The case's screws were relatively easy to loosen, and soon Mondo and Denise were able to lift the box's outer shell away from its main components. The machine itself had no in-built control panel, leaving Denise to create a makeshift connection between the internal processor and her own Pokédex.

"There," she said, passing the Pokédex to Mondo. "You've got the better skills in the programming department. Do you think you might be able to see what this machine is doing?"

"I'll give it a shot," Mondo smiled, taking the Pokédex.

They continued walking through the forest, their footsteps interspersed with the occasional bout of chatter. Cory talked to Larson about the snorlax's job, though Rose was only able to make out half of the conversation. And Jessie would infrequently crack a joke or make some kind of abstract observation in order to pass time. Only Cassidy seemed disconnected from the surrounding events. Her eyes were filled with a mournful sadness, an expression Rose had not seen upon the woman before.

"You've been real quiet lately, Cass," she tilted her head.

"Something's on your mind, isn't it?"

"So many of those later missions that Butch and I did..." Cassidy began. "They were all for Project Rebirth. That data we collected, every bit of it was taken to create those formulas, those machines that were being used on those Team Rocket grunts in that offshore HQ. It makes me feel sick just thinking about it."

"Yeah that *is* a pretty big screw up," Jessie agreed.

"Jessie!" Rose looked aghast. "Cassidy didn't know what the outcome of Project Rebirth was going to be. None of us did." She turned to Cassidy. "I'm not saying that our working for Team Rocket could be justified, but you can't go beating yourself up about those missions like that."

"Exactly!" Jessie put her hands on her hips. "I mean, look at me - I'm not dwelling on how I spent six years of my life chasing after one kid

for no real reason..." she trailed off, a rather blanched look on her face.

"Wow, that's depressing."

Cory flinched, as an odd feeling raced through them. Almost immediately, it was like the inexplicable suppression in their mind had been lifted. They caught a glimpse of a figure poised in behind the trees nearby - it was a recognition just a little too late. The cluster of hovering miniature devices engaged themselves over every member of the travelling party, surrounding them in energy forcefields.

"Well that was hardly a challenge," a voice was heard. A man in his early thirties strolled from his hiding place. He had shoulder length black hair with a blue fringe that spiked upwards into three points, and was dressed in a sturdy olive green outfit with hiking boots which almost reached his knees. Nearby, a tyrannitar stood watch with faint interest.

"So you're behind all this!" Cassidy snapped.

"All of this?" Dirk chuckled. "You are mistaken, madame. This elaborate plan has been a combined effort. But my cut of the reward will be solid enough. Now to take you all to these coordinates." He eyed his wristworn computer device before tapping some commands into its surface. In turn, the hovering forcefield projectors slowly approached the man, dragging their cargo along with them.

"Well now what?" Jessie muttered in Rose's direction.

"I don't know..." Rose sighed. "I can't move anything except my mouth."

Wobuffet felt himself getting angrier. The crackling feeling of the energy across his tail was both irritating and painful - he wanted it gone, and he wanted it gone fast. With a frustrated cry, the rubbery blue pokémon became surrounded in a shimmering light. The projectors hovering above and below him began to spark wildly - their energies soaring far beyond what they were capable of handling. Dirk swung round in alarm upon hearing a loud explosion, just in time to see Wobuffet hit the ground and throw himself at the projector device hovering under Jessie.

"That was Mirror Coat!" Cassidy exclaimed, notably impressed.

"That's my Wobby," Jessie grinned, having also been freed and now seeking to assist her pokémon. A swift kick was enough to knock out the forcefield around Larson, sending the snorlax thudding to the dirt - his hat slanting partway over his face.

"Stop them!" Dirk yelled to his tyranitar, who lumbered forward.

No sooner had Cory been released from their forcefield, they dived for the tyranitar - their body taking on a bright glow and altering shape in the process. The surprised tyranitar found itself tackled by a glaceon who sprayed a burst of frozen crystals in its eyes. With an agitated roar, the tyranitar swatted Cory-in-glaceon-form away, before unleashing a blast of flame in its assailant's direction.

"Quit with the flamethrowers, you idiot!" Dirk cried. "This is a forest!"

The man yelped as Larson, who had managed to evade detection amongst all of the chaos, grasped hold of his wrist and clipped one half of a pair of handcuffs to it. Hearing his commander's alarmed utterance, the tyranitar looked round with a confused grunt, before Cory aimed a more potent ice beam at its upper body. This attempt to stop the pokémon did very little in the wake of its sudden fury at seeing Dirk being taken into custody. Larson glanced up moments before the tyranitar's massive clawed hand swiped for him. The Dragon Claw made contact with a harsh sound of tearing fabric, sending the snorlax hurtling backwards into a nearby tree.

"Mr. Sloane!" Rose spluttered. "Are you okay?"

<That was my best overcoat!> Larson bellowed, flinging his outstretched right paw at the tyranitar. The paw slammed into the tyranitar's gut, throwing the pokémon several metres into the air before it hit earth again - breathing, but stilled.

"Whoa..." Jessie looked amazed and a little horrified at the seemingly placid Larson's explosion of power. This outburst was enough to send Dirk into a flurry of panicked gibbering, wherein he leapt to his feet - hands still cuffed behind his back - and dashed off between the trees, out of sight.

<Curse my temper,> Larson muttered, picking up his hat from where it had fallen off in the midst of his Brick Break attack. <The human got away.>

"And just left his pokémon behind like it was nothing," Cory tutted, now back to their adopted human form. "How disgusting." They turned to the others. "We should take it with us!"

"As much as I agree with the ethics, there's no way we *could* do that," Rose looked sad. "We have no Pokéballs to carry it in while it is unconscious."

"Besides, once it wakes up, it's only going to attack us again for what we did to its trainer," Jessie sniffed.

Cory heaved a sigh. They hated to admit it, but their companions were right. Instead, they decided to console themselves by assisting Larson in propping the fainted tyrannitar against a tree trunk, before Larson retrieved a small bottle of healing formula from the inside of what remained of his coat, and administered it to the pokémon in order to restore a little of its strength.

"I can't help but wonder just what 'coordinates' that guy was going to take us to, before we broke out of those forcefields," Cassidy pondered.

"Now whatever was blocking my senses has gone, I can see a weird point of energy some distance away from us," Cory told her. "Maybe that's the place we were going to be taken."

with the evolved chimecho - caught me off guard. Somehow they knew I was nearby. At any rate, I'm done here."

"Farewell, Ms. Hianmyte," the man remarked coolly. Domino muttered irritably about zapping him with her tulip staff for *still* not using her codename, but decided against it and left. Returning his attentions to the laptop computer, the man's eyes widened as he saw a bright red dialogue box in the centre of the screen.

****Telewave Blocker Network Error****

"What?!" he snapped to no one in particular, then relaxed again, tossing one of the Rocket Balls up and down in his gloved hand. "No matter. The network stayed online long enough for these pokémon to be retrieved. They should be more than adequate. In fact, having the network offline will make the second half of the job much easier. The owners of these pokémon will undoubtedly come looking for them, and they'll walk right into my snare."

The man turned to the shoe box sized machine upon the table. Two compartments were built into the side of the machine - one already hidden behind a tiny sliding shutter, the other containing a Pokéball-sized hollow. With a flourish, the man placed the Rocket Ball from his hand into the hollow, before pulling the shutter down across it.

"Time for you to be introduced to your full potential," he smiled malignantly.

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Like a curtain being opened on a darkened room, Caley's senses were instantly aflame with the feedback from his surroundings. Having been trying to contact his companions for the last few hours, the young man's psy-sight had now become saturated with the Aura signatures of hundreds of forest pokémon - faint but visible nonetheless. The signatures of all his companions bar Mondo, stronger and more vivid as a result of their training, enshrouded him with a solid, comforting warmth. And there, in the branches of a nearby tree, a powerful unknown force crouched - its Aura shimmered and spiked in its anticipation for attack.

Chime had seen this also, as she had been the one to make the first move. The human assailant was rapidly shooed away in a burst of flame from Growlie, allowing the group to resume their passage through the forest, though not without hesitancy at this unwanted attention. Thoughts began to race through Caley's head. Had this been the person responsible for separating them, for preventing their communication? If so, who else amongst their friends had been subjected to their actions? James, on the other hand, had different things on his mind.

"Ugh..." the man sighed, running a hand across his chin. "It seems like an eternity since I got the chance to shave. Be thankful you don't have to do this yet, Adam."

"It was only two days ago," Adam tutted. "And what's wrong with a bit of face fuzz? Cal's not grouching about it."

"Well Caley doesn't have to worry about the colour of his stubble clashing with the colour of his wig," James replied testily, prodding at the sandy blonde article atop his head.

"Is there really any point in wearing that any more?" Adam said. "Seems like everyone we don't want knowing our real identities, knows our real identities by now."

"Hm...maybe you have a point," James pondered. "What do *you* think, Caley?"

"He's thinking too much, if you ask me," Adam sniffed. "He's been like that ever since Chime and Growlie scared that lady away."

"She seemed awfully familiar, I have to admit," James shook his head as if trying to dislodge a trapped memory. "If only I could work out how."

He paused, glancing up in surprise as the faint culmination of sounds from a short distance away began to get steadily louder. In the process, the low babble separated into three different but recognizable voices. James' expression brightened as he identified one of them in particular.

"Errol!" he grinned, making his way towards the source of the voices. "I can't believe I found you at las-!"

Before the man could finish his sentence, he was slammed into by a jet of water, propelling him into a nearby bush. Butch's voice was heard chuckling in amusement as Adam groaned and carefully peered into the gap James had made amongst the foliage. Growlie barked in alarm and lunged into the bush, hauling his leaf-stricken human companion into some kind of sitting position by tugging on the sleeve of his leather jacket.

"Yep, I definitely t'ink you've made a vast improvement on dat Water Gun," Errol grinned sheepishly at Psyduck, while the latter stood there scratching the side of his head with one webbed hand.

"I'm so glad we caught up with you guys!" Caley exclaimed with relief, while Chime floated around Errol's head with happy melodic sounds.

"Da feeling's mutual!" Errol patted Caley heartily on the back. "Youse guys are da foist we've been reunited with since dat whole landslide incident. Though..." his face fell. "Sia and Soluqua were with us, before dey got snatched away."

"That happened to you too?" James spluttered, having finally staggered out from the bush. "Someone tried to steal Chime, but Chime and Growlie stopped her. A woman with curled yellow hair who had an obsession with tulips..."

"Wait a minute," Butch raised an eyebrow. "That sounds like someone who used to be part of the Johto Elite rank. Thought pretty highly of herself. Called herself...'Domino'."

"DOMINO!" Errol and James cried out in unison, causing the others to flinch.

"I take it you two met her before," Butch said dryly.

"She made Jess and me clean floors!" James told him unappreciatively.

"An' busted up our balloon!" Errol added.

"It's weird though," Butch shrugged. "Why would she just show up to try steal the pokémon if she wasn't working for Team Rocket any more? I mean, she walked out several years ago. Giovanni didn't even try to haul her back in - it was like he forgot she even existed."

"Hold on, guys," Caley hushed them. "I can sense someone nearby...and I don't think it's a friend."

"So now what?" Adam frowned.

"One of us should go on ahead and check," James stated. "That way, if it is someone dangerous, we are less likely to grab their attention."

"Good idea, Jimmy," Errol nodded. "I'll do it."

No one felt inclined to protest - Errol's part pokémon DNA gave him far greater stealth, after all. So they allowed Errol to depart amongst the trees, and waited for a signal to proceed onwards. The signal they received was an abrupt yelp. It was enough to cause James and Caley to dart forward without further thought - Growlie and Chime keeping pace alongside them with equally stern expressions. Butch and Adam followed suit, only to run into what felt like a lasso of violet-black energy. It snagged their bodies and held them in tight stasis.

"What's going on?" Adam spluttered, his words muffled by the force that gripped his jaw.

"I'd say we're stuck in a psychic pokémon's telekinesis, by da feel of it," Errol replied. His voice wasn't as panicked as Adam's, given that he'd been in a lot of situations such as this one before. "A pretty strong one, too."

"Chii-brehhh!" Chime agreed, attempting to break free of the hold but without success.

"Then *where* is it?" Adam cried fearfully.

The group felt a sharp tug on their respective bodies, and they were dragged forward through the trees. As they emerged into a clearing, they were faced with a tall, purple coloured bipedal shape - both clawed hands outstretched as its body hummed with unsettling black sparks.

"Either there's more than one of this super rare pokémon walking about, or Kota's turned traitor on us," James grimaced.

"That's not him..." Caley trailed off. Physically it *was* Kota, but the pokémon's Aura felt wrong. Its presence in Caley's mind felt more like a shearing inferno than a pleasant warmth.

A deep, menacing laugh was heard from a short distance away. Everyone's heads were forcibly moved by Kota until their eyes detected a tall, wide-shouldered figure standing nearby. He was wearing a silver helmet with curious linear engravings upon its surface - this helmet covered the entire upper half of his head, leaving only a spiky dark brown goatee visible. The rest of him was dressed in a black jacket with silver studs, black trousers and brown boots with steel toecaps. A long cape draped from his shoulders, reaching to his knees.

"Did you think I wasn't expecting you?" the man smirked. "I had trip lasers set up all around my camp - it was only a matter of time before one of you stepped through them..." He glanced to Kota. "Put these people in that cage over there. As for the pokémon, put them back in their Pokéballs and give them to me. That one on the green haired guy's belt, too."

While Butch, Errol, Adam, James and Caley remained suspended by Kota's astonishingly strong telekinesis, Growlie and Chime yelped as their bodies were surrounded in an additional ring of violet energy, turning them to white and forcing them into the capture devices hanging upon James' belt. In turn, these Pokéballs were detached from James' person and floated over to the man's gloved hands with an almost magnetic force, shortly followed by Levi's Pokéball. That task completed,

Kota turned regimentally and beckoned the group of psychically harnessed captives with him. The cage's front bars were raised, and James was tossed roughly inside, followed by Adam, Butch and Errol.

"What have you done to Kota?" Caley snapped, trying to prevent his voice from cracking at the distress he was feeling at seeing the *auprentus* act in such a way.

"Oh, that's *your* pokémon, is it?" the man feigned concern. The cage's bars slammed down, seemingly of their own accord, leaving Caley dangling solitarily before Kota in mid air. "Here, let me show you."

His face broke into a cruel smile before he glanced at Kota.

"Make the boy *suffer*."

Caley's face contorted and he began to rise further into the air, surrounded by a brighter glow. He could hear the fraught and angered cries of his entrapped companions, growing distant with his fading consciousness. Caley tried to call to Kota, but his voice failed him, forced out of his body from the telekinetic onslaught. Vocal communication wasn't going to work - he needed to go deeper. Screwing up what remained of his own focus, Caley shut his eyes and plunged his way toward Kota's psyche.

Having recalled the experience inside Mirusyte's enraged mindscape, Caley thought he would be at least somewhat prepared for what he'd find upon connecting with Kota. Instead, he found his

consciousness smothered by an inexplicable new feeling, as strong blue-violet threads coursed past him through an unsettling black void. These threads were latched on to Kota's corporeal representation which hung soullessly in the centre, like a caterpie ensnared in an ariados web - eyes dulled and misted over. The ominous power began to seep into Caley's psyche, sending him into a panic. Gasping for breath, he wrenched his way free of Kota's mind. At the same time, Kota released Caley from his psychic choke hold, allowing the young man's body to fall and hit the dirt. Nearby, the helmet-crowned figure writhed with angered snarls.

"No...no! You're too much!" he cried, fumbling for one of the dark grey ridged buttons upon the front of his jacket before pulling it free. Errol uttered a small noise of realisation as the 'button' enlarged in the man's shaking hand.

"Wait a minute...that's some wack-looking Pokéball," Adam said, as Kota was reduced to shapeless energy and retracted from sight.

"Not just *any* Pokéball, kid," Errol corrected him. "Dat's a Dark Ball. It overrides a pokémon's ID and their free will too. If dat guy is usin' Dark Balls, den he's got ta be Team Rocket Super Elite Byron Daray. Back at Team Rocket, dey call him da 'Iron-Masked Marauder'."

"That creep is even meaner than his outfit is ugly," James commented, before raising his voice in Byron's direction. "First Domino, then you? What is this, the 'Unwanted Felons Reunion party'?"

forest pokémon scuttled past, while tree-dwellers made their getaway via the canopy's upper branches.

"Well I can see we're heading in the right direction," Cassidy remarked bluntly. "It's whichever one everything else is running the opposite way to."

"Wonder what they're running away from," Rose frowned.

"A fire," Cory translated the surrounding cries. "A pretty big one, from the sounds of it." They stalled, their eyes wide and distant.

"Help...!."

"That's obvious, isn't it?" Jessie looked at Cory. "If we *don't* help put it out, the whole forest will burn down."

"No, not that..." Cory shook their head. Another mental voice had made itself present, and it was unlike the combined frightened reverberations they had been sensing from the wild forest pokémon. It was faint, but calculated. Familiar. "I've found Caley. His voice came from the same area I sensed that weird energy earlier."

"What's happened to him?" Rose looked worried.

"Something about being held captive...an ex-Team Rocket Super Elite...someone called 'Byron Daray'."

"The Iron-Masked Marauder!" Jessie, Cassidy and Rose exclaimed, much to Cory and the other pokémon's surprise. It seemed that none of the women were unfamiliar with the name.

"Typical a plan this convoluted would be *his* idea..." Cassidy muttered.

"It's not just Caley that's prisoner, it's James, Errol, Adam and Butch, too!" Cory elaborated. They felt a little relieved that neither Mondo nor Denise had been caught, but couldn't help but feel a little worried as to where the duo happened to be at this point in time. This was something the zecutynr would have to contemplate later.

"We need to be careful about this," Rose reminded them. "Last time Jessie, James and Errol crossed paths with that guy, he was using mind controlling Pokéballs. Given how effective they were, I doubt he'd stop using them any time soon."

Larson looked uncomfortable at this thought, and checked on his disguise projector. It had begun to recharge following the sun's reappearance, but there still wasn't enough power to render it operational.

"Okay then," Cassidy summarized. "Put out a massive fire and rescue Butch and the others. This would be so much easier if Soluqua was still with me..."

"It's going to be a ton *harder* if she's under Byron's control," Rose sighed. But there was no room to be hesitant about things. Wobbuffet, Larson and Cory remained on their side, each with their own strengths. They still had a chance.

"Cyzel!" Adam yelled in anguish through the bars of the cage, before turning his fury on the one responsible for his pokémon companion's enslavement. "Let him go, you pissmonger!"

Byron chuckled to himself, neither annoyed nor intimidated by the youth's angry exclamation - particularly since Adam's eyes were watery with tears he was unable to hold back.

Psyduck sat quivering as he watched the scene unfold from his hiding place. Having been wary of pursuing the rest of the group following Errol's ensnarement by Kota, he had avoided capture himself. Since then, the water pokémon had been frozen to the spot, watching as Kota unleashed his psychic powers upon Caley, unable to intervene. Now, another of his companion pokémon was being forced to destroy a forest, while the others could do nothing but look on. He couldn't let this continue - he'd never be able to forgive himself. There had to be something he could do to buy the others time... but what?

With a desperate cry, Psyduck ran out and unleashed the strongest jet of water he could muster upon Cyzel. Byron uttered a surprised grunt as the arcumese spluttered - temporarily dissuaded from his mission. Cyzel turned, about to deal a retaliation attack upon Psyduck, but Byron coughed deliberately and the arcumese fell still.

"*You* haven't finished what I wanted from you," he tutted, detaching another Dark Ball from his jacket. "Let this one sort our little pest out."

He tossed the Dark Ball forward and it ejected its contents on to the ground before Psyduck. As the white glow from the recombination faded, Psyduck found himself looking up at Soluqua. But her face was not wearing the patient, warm-hearted expression it had been while she had tutored him the night before. It was empty, and dark, and saturated with hatred.

"No..." Butch whispered.

"Get outta here, Psyduck!" Errol insisted. "Try and find da others!"

But he couldn't leave. The mixture of horror and anger at what Byron had done to his pokémon friends had been firmly cemented by seeing it present in Soluqua - the one that had dedicated herself to showing Psyduck he could be better. This was where he drew the line.

Byron raised his eyebrows as Psyduck barrelled his way toward him, only to be snatched back in mid air by Soluqua's telekinesis and flung into one of the smouldering trees behind her. He was up on his webbed feet in an instant, eyes alight with fury. He didn't want to fight Soluqua, especially not under these circumstances. But under mind control, the pokémon who confronted him was barely Soluqua at all. Psyduck's anger was well and truly directed at Byron, but his retaliation was going to have to be directed at Soluqua for the time being.

He took a deep breath and aimed his water gun at the ground, propelling his entire body backwards so it collided with Soluqua, feet first. She responded with a swipe of one clawed hand, then another. Narrowly

dodging the first manoeuvre, Psyduck was caught a glancing blow by the second, causing him to fall flat on his face. The pounding of his near-constant headache began to increase in presence, but the pain only urged Psyduck onward. He was barely standing upright when he was pelted with psychically-formed shards of energy - their bladed edges searing his blubbery skin on contact. Errol and James uttered a mutual gasp of horror.

"What are you doing, you stupid duck!" Adam bellowed. "You can't win this!"

You can't win this!

Psyduck knew the statement was true, and yet he couldn't bring himself to give up. He couldn't see any more. His vision had been marred by dirt, tears and smatterings of his own blood. The voice he heard, not Adam's, but that of an adolescent girl – frustrated, saddened and longing for something better.

...you stupid duck!

Why won't you stay in your ball?!

At first it had been a selfish longing, but as time passed and she aged, that longing shifted to a desire for Psyduck to feel the benefits of his own improvement. But he still wanted to make this work for her, as well as himself. The pain raged more vividly now, coursing from Psyduck's temple and downward through every limb. He started to wonder if he had been thrown to the woodland's surrounding inferno, only to be consumed by the flames. His consciousness was slipping into a familiar haze, connecting with the locked up psychic abilities within. As Byron and his captives watched, Psyduck levitated to his feet - the pupils of his eyes blotted out from the force of his Aura. The Aura intensified, turning from blue to white, saturating the water pokémon's body with brilliance.

"He's evolving..." James gawped.

"He's finally evolvin!" Errol cried excitedly, and a little too loudly for his own good.

"Strike!" Byron shouted at Soluqua. "Strike while it is defenceless!" The hybrid pokémon screeched and thrust its claws forward, only to have them rebound from a previously invisible forcefield with a shimmer of energy. Soluqua attempted a second lunge, but this time her attack was stopped cold. The white glow faded, to reveal Soluqua's arm in the grip of a golduck's webbed hands. Before Byron could reconsider a new strategy, the golduck dived forward - the red jewel upon its head glowing brightly - and slammed itself into Soluqua's gut with a Zen Headbutt attack.

With his brainwashed assailant momentarily downed, Golduck jetted water into the air, where it was held suspended in sphere of rapidly expanding volume. The pokémon then slammed the orb into the ground in front of it, sending liquid waves gushing across the clearing and into the burning trees beyond. Caley spluttered as the residual water flowed past him and through the bars of his cage. The locking unit on the cage began to sputter and spark, unsuited for being deluged.

Satisfied with his achievements, Golduck paused in surprise as a jet of water that wasn't his own, nor Soluqua's, blasted its way from the smouldering trees and into the clearing. Cory-in-gallirill-form ran onto the scene, followed by Jessie, Cassidy and Rose. Wobuffet brought up the rear, looking a little winded for the exertion.

"My equipment!" Byron cried furiously, picking up his sodden laptop and attempting to dry it.

"You're going to have more than broken toys to worry about once *we're* through with you," Jessie stated, while Cory reverted to their zecutynr form. Cyzel began to growl, while Soluqua clambered to her feet with an irate hiss. Cassidy retracted with a hurt expression upon witnessing this reaction. She knew that Soluqua wasn't in control of her behaviour at that time, but it still felt painful to watch.

"That's terribly bold of you, considering I control three fusion pokémon enhanced by Dark Ball power," Byron commented, putting the laptop aside.

"Three?" Rose looked at him hesitantly. The man said no more, but instead took yet another miniaturized Dark Ball from his jacket. From the spherical innards, Rilly emerged in a partly crouched position - heaving with a volatile fury that had not been visible in the pokémon before.

"I'd been saving this one for a *special* occasion," Byron smirked grimly, placing the retrieved shrunken Dark Ball into the indentation upon his jacket. "Eliminate them!"

No sooner had the trio of mind controlled pokémon sprung into action, than Cory made a break for the largest cage containing Butch, James, Errol and Adam. The group flinched backward instinctively as the zecutyne threw himself onto the cage's lock, making the entire unit rattle. Seconds later, the lock had been disarmed, and the figures within quickly scrambled out to join the others.

"Wow, Golduck...look at you!" Errol said proudly, as Larson and Wobbuffet worked on deflecting blows from Cyzel and Soluqua respectively. "Some o' dose moves you were pulling off back dere were amazin'!" They wrenched in opposite directions as Rilly forced his way between them with a snarl. "Probably best ya keep 'em up, huh?" Errol chuckled.

Golduck nodded and aimed another Scratch attack at Rilly. The attack connected, but Golduck retracted his hand with a cry of pain.

<That was...sharp!> he spluttered. <His *skin* was sharp! That doesn't make sense!>

"Rough skin..." Errol blinked. "Well Rilly is part sharpedo, it *kinda* makes sense. But I sure weren't aware dat he had dat ability."

"So you heard my message..." Caley smiled weakly as Cory pored over the lock on his cage. "Really glad to see you guys."

"Glad to see you too," Cory returned the expression, before it quickly shifted to annoyance. "Ugh...this lock is all wet - it's not responding to me. Guess I'm going to have to do this the zappy way." They stood back and shifted into augret form, before teleporting inside the cage, grasping hold of Caley and teleporting them both back out.

Byron watched these events from a distance, neither upset nor frustrated. He was getting a thorough look at what these hybrid pokémon he had caught were capable of, and the hopeless resistance from the human traitors was proving quite entertaining. The skills of the small, dark purple creature responsible for freeing those he'd imprisoned had Byron quite intrigued.

"A transforming pokémon, hm?" the man said to himself, fishing an empty Dark Ball from his pocket. "That would come in *very* useful...."

Part of Butch wanted to rescue Levi from the case Byron had placed the roubeat's Pokéball into. But his priority was to make sure Cassidy was alright. Both these things were wiped clean from his mind upon sight of a Dark Ball heading straight for Cory.

"Look out!" Butch cried, diving between Cory and the flying projectile. An odd metallic noise ensued as the Dark Ball hit the man in the shoulder, enveloping him in a shroud of violet light and disappearing from view. The occurrence was odd enough that it managed to freeze everyone in mid-conflict, where they proceeded to stare at the Dark Ball lying upon the ground. Cory approached the item with a worried expression. Before they could pick it up, however, it burst open in a cloud of violet light. Butch collapsed onto the dirt, quaking and choking.

"The hell...?" Byron exclaimed.

"N-no..." Butch gasped, clutching at his chest - his irises flared with notable hints of yellow. "Not again!"

Their interest waning, the mind-controlled pokémon resumed their attacks, forcing the majority of the group to respond in kind.

"What's happening to him?" Adam looked back in horror.

"I think the Dark Ball somehow triggered the druddigon mutation," Cassidy explained brokenly. "We can only hope Butch still has his senses in tact afterwards."

"What do you mean?" Adam spluttered. "You saying he might go psycho on us?"

Cassidy didn't reply, but the expression on her face said enough. A short distance away, Caley and Cory focused on a joint effort to shield Butch from collateral damage, while the man struggled with the effects of his fast-dwindling humanity. The growing aura they sensed from Butch was quite terrifying, and urged them to flee, but they bravely stood their ground. Byron wasn't content to let things proceed any further, however. With a swift flick of the wrist, he detached the final Dark Ball from his jacket and cast it out, sending a familiar glaceon into the clearing.

"Sia!" Rose cried distressedly. "Not you too..."

Caley and Cory whined in unison as Sia's amplified Ice Beam blasted into their shield, sending waves of energy rippling outward.

"I..don't know how much longer I can hold this for," Caley winced. He felt a sudden drop in energy as Cory disconnected himself from the shield. "What are you doing?" the young man hissed. His flustered inquiry was answered by a loud growl from overhead. Lowering the shield and glancing up, Caley found himself staring at the crimson head of a humanoid druddigon looming above him - one that looked ready to deliver some serious payback. Butch quickly turned his head to glare at the group of uncertain human figures standing nearby, uttering a short grunt.

"He's lost his mind! We're doomed!" James squealed, while Adam looked noticeably disturbed, but Errol had put on a more surprised expression.

"Butch? You're still dere?"

<Of *course* I'm 'still here!> the human-in-pokémon-form snapped, returning his gaze to the task at hand. <Now do what I said and get behind me! I'm gonna give these pokémon some resistance!>

"What's going on?" Caley blurted out as Cory hurriedly ushered him and the others into the requested position. Butch wasted no further time, flapping his wings vigorously to blast the approaching threats away.

"Well you're all certainly full of surprises," Byron commented with calm interest, keeping his distance and ignoring the fact the pokémon under his control were toppling head over heels in their attempts to keep upright and move forward. "But you're only prolonging the inevitable."

"I doubt Butch will be able to keep that up for long," Rose concluded, while the others looked on.

"We've got to stop those Dark Balls controlling Cyzel and the others!" Adam insisted. "But how? We can't smash them when they're all stuck to that creep's jacket."

"Jess, you were in dat big twig monster thing dat celebi created after Byron caught it," Errol inquired. "How *did* the celebi free itself from the Dark Ball's control in da end?"

"I don't know..." Jessie shrugged. "The twerp and his friend just kept begging the celebi to remember the good times it'd had..."

Caley turned to Cory with a determined expression.

"I've gotta search for how Byron's keeping control of our friends, and fast," he said. "Can you give me a boost?"

"Gotcha," Cory nodded, placing their hand on Caley's shoulder in order to give greater potency to his psychic abilities. No sooner had they plunged into the realms of Aura Sight, than Caley felt that ominous power rising to meet him yet again - the same power he had felt while trying to reach Kota in his mindscape. He could see the dark violet energy readings from Soluqua, Sia, Cyzel and Rilly, and the strong threads of tainted Aura that ran from them, back to one origin point. Caley concentrated harder and the blurred red and violet Aura source began to take form.

It's worse than I thought, Cory's voice echoed in morose tones. I thought the Dark Balls had been transmitting the brainwashing waves to Cyzel, Rilly, Sia and Soluqua, but that's not what's happening. They were just used to install the means for Byron to transmit those waves. The transmission itself...

Is coming directly from him, I can see that now, Caley responded sternly. Even if we destroyed the Dark Balls, our friends would still be under his control. Somehow he's converting his own negative emotions into a form that locks down the minds of his targets. I think...I think Kota was able to struggle against the control long enough to cause feedback in Byron's mind - that's why he took Kota out of the Dark Ball.

At any rate, we need to intercept those waves at the source to stop them reaching Cyzel and the others!

But how? Cory spluttered.

Jessie mentioned someone begging a Dark Ball controlled celebi to remember the good times it had experienced in an attempt to break the Dark Ball's hold on its mind, Caley said. Maybe the celebi managed to jam the incoming stream of negative energy with its own positive feelings from those memories. If we could get Byron's mind to create positive energies in a similar way, that should break the connection between him and the pokémon...I hope.

At this point, Cory felt Caley's psyche moving away from their own and toward the Aura they had detected before. They urged themselves to pursue, and as they did so, the figure noticed four violet coloured strands being emitted from the now-humanoid mass. Their spirits lifted - those *had* to be the connections Byron had established with Soluqua, Rilly, Sia and Cyzel's minds.

Are you ready? Caley inquired.

Ready, Cory acknowledged.

Good, came the determined response. *Let's GO!*

The two plunged forward in unison toward Byron's consciousness, intensifying their focus in an attempt to penetrate it and thus prevent any further transmissions. But their efforts were in vain. James and Adam fell back in alarm as both Cory and Caley yelled out in agony, grasping at

their heads and toppling in opposite directions to the ground. His concentration momentarily averted, Butch glanced over his shoulder anxiously.

"Ice beam!" Byron snapped in Sia's direction. The glaceon let out a vicious cry before unleashing a chilling ray at the druddigon, much to the surprise and horror of all those watching. Before Butch had a chance to react, his entire form had been encased in a semi-transparent prison, rendering him utterly immobile.

With their source of defence taken out of commission, the defectors and their pokémon companions were once again forced to return to battling. Larson attempted to break the ice containing Butch, while Golduck and Adam hung back to keep watch over Caley and Cory while the others fought.

"Hang in there, Cal," Adam urged. He didn't really know what else to say.

"It's no good..." Caley murmured weakly.

"Something's protecting Byron's mind from being entered," Cory agreed, their eyes still shut from the exhaustion of their efforts. "If we could work out a way of bypassing it, then maybe we'd have a chance of stopping this madness."

<Protection?> Golduck pondered, casting a look at the Team Rocket Elite. <Well he is wearing a helmet...>

"That could well be it!" Cory exclaimed. "Someone needs to get that helmet off Byron. It's our only lead right now. But everyone's caught up in the battle..." They coughed loudly.

"All the better for distracting Byron with," Caley smirked. He tried to sit up, but his strength failed him. "Ugh...I've got to do this..."

"Looks like someone already decided to do it for you," Cory said. Caley glanced around to see that Adam had vanished.

"Oh no..."

While Wobbuffet played the deflection game with the majority of Soluqua's projectiles, James, Errol and Rose were pushing their Team Rocket agility training to the limit in an attempt to dodge Sia and Rilly's attacks. Cassidy and Larson kicked and punched at the ice prison that encased Butch, but Cyzel refused to let them persist. Larson uttered a pained gurgle as he was thrown to the floor by an ExtremeSpeed-boosted tackle to his side, shortly followed by a blast of flame which narrowly missed setting light to Cassidy's hair.

"C'mon you guys, listen to us!" Errol cried in the direction of Sia and Rilly. "Whatever dis guy's done to you, you gotta fight it!"

"Nice try," Byron smirked as Rilly withdrew to his new commander. "But after that little fiasco with the celebi, I've made sure this latest model of Dark Ball blocks *any* incoming voice transmissions. The only one they can hear is me!"

The azumarill-sharpedo hybrid lifted a fin which grew claw-like blades of purple energy and swiped for its three targets, who dodged. Its partial control by an outside source meant that the pokémon's responses were not as rapid as they would have been, had they been acting under their own free will.

"How..." James exclaimed. "How did you know Rilly could do Night Slash? And why didn't he ever use that attack before?"

Byron simply chuckled, having been glancing at data readings from the controlled pokémon via a handheld computer.

"The Dark Ball is a clever invention of mine, is it not?" he said. "Pushing the pokémon's inner forces to their limit, it unlocks skills that pokémon couldn't access before."

Without looking up, the man lifted a fist and thrust it firmly to one side - halting the ambush attempts of a certain nutmeg-haired youth and throwing them sideways into a nearby bush.

"I don't appreciate being undermined," Byron remarked coldly. "But the rewards shall be worth it. I think it's time we finished this up."

"I agree," a voice spoke from behind him. There was a flash of brightness as the sunlight amplified and Byron felt the woodland breeze hit his temple. Turning around in a mixture of fury and horror, Byron saw a large glowing hand hovering over him - the helmet that had once been on his head, now grasped firmly in its luminescent palm. The blue trail of

energy snaked from this hand and ended at the wrist of the red-headed young man whom Byron thought had been taken out of commission.

"Catch!" Caley yelled, pitching the metallic article at his companions. Golduck harnessed the helmet in a telekinetic grip, before crushing it into a tiny lump of metal.

Byron lunged forward with a roar, only to meet the dirt in a humiliating fashion, as Larson pinned him with his body weight. With the biggest obstacle out of the way, Caley screwed up every remaining ounce of strength he had and flung himself deep into Byron's psyche once more.

Unlike the gentle approach he had taken to the mindscapes of previous beings, Caley's presence sped towards Byron's corporeal form like a meteor on re-entry. The strength of the man's anger burned his consciousness like white-hot needles, yet Caley refused to desist. He plunged recklessly through Byron's corporeal form, into the area of his psyche where memories resided. There had to be a positive thought - something he could use to purify the negative auras he could sense all around him.

He didn't have much time. Caley grimaced as he felt the darkness closing in, but he begged himself to keep going. There had to be a glimmer of happiness somewhere - a memory of an experience long since buried by the abomination of Team Rocket. Just when the young man was about ready to resign himself to surrender, the very thing he had been searching for revealed itself.

"That's it..." Byron snarled, his voice dangerously low. "When I get free, I'm going to- ...gurk!" the man's eyes widened rapidly and he began uttering odd noises from the back of his throat.

"Mr. Sloane, you're suffocating him!" Cory exclaimed. The Snorlax cringed before removing himself from Byron's person. Yet the man didn't leap up, or try to lash out at those around him. He just lay there, breathing wispily, his irises dilated like that of someone under moderate sedation.

Now the battling had ceased, the forest was quiet once again - save for some light crackling of smouldering wood, and the puzzled queries of pokémon who had been under mind control just moments before. Rose and Cassidy ran to Sia and Soluqua respectively - giving the pokémon emotional hugs of relief. Cyzel scampered over to Adam, who was sprawled amongst some crushed foliage, and grabbed hold of the youth's sleeve in his mouth before giving it a firm tug. His intention had been to pull Adam out of the bush and to his feet. However, all this manoeuvre managed to produce was a loud yell. Cyzel let go in alarm and Adam toppled backwards amongst the leaves, clutching at his chest.

"Owww man..." he complained, while his pokémon companion looked on apologetically. "I think I've broke something."

"I wouldn't be surprised if that was the case," James winced, prying open the box containing the Pokéballs Byron had stolen. "That creep punched you wearing metal plated gloves."

Everyone grimaced - even with Team Rocket trained endurance, that kind of blow was bound to cause repercussions. James quickly released Chime who provided first aid assistance through psychically-induced pain relief. Then Golduck telekinetically lifted Adam onto Cyzel's back - to act as a mobile stretcher for Adam until he felt able enough to walk on his own two feet.

"What's happened to Mr. Grim and Grouchy?" Jessie pulled a face. Byron no longer stood proud and tall in his position of self-assigned authority - instead, he was sitting on the ground staring up at Larson with an expression of awe.

"Wow a snorlax!" Byron grinned. "Snorlaxes are huuuuge!"

<I'll have you know, I'm quite slim for my species,> Larson muttered, looking awkward.

"He don't seem so grim an' grouchy no more," Errol chuckled.

"Mr. Sloane? Could you take this man to the appropriate place?" Cassidy asked with surprising politeness.

<Certainly,> Larson gave a nod, before activating his now recharged disguise projection unit. <Though at this point, I'm not sure whether that would be a prison or a preschool.>

Errol, Butch and the other pokémon descended into laughter as they watched Larson take Byron by the hand and lead him willingly to the passenger seat of his own land vehicle, where he strapped the man inside to wait while Larson himself made a report to headquarters. Some of the human members of the group also joined in the mirth - more out of what they had seen, than the comment Larson had made which they had not understood.

"So Caley," Errol turned to where the young man had been standing. "How did ya stop dose Dark Balls controllin' Sia an' da others?"

There was no reply. Caley remained stationary, gazing out at nothing with his hands clasped together - his face overcome with shock and dread.

"Caley, you okay?" Adam asked. "You look messed up."

"I think you guys should probably leave the questions until later," Cory said nervously. The pokémon had seen that expression before, in their own reflection. They'd experienced feelings that had caused them to make such an expression, and those feelings had not been pretty. Something had seriously disturbed Caley, but it was a thing the young man wasn't ready to speak of just yet.

Cory was right. How simple it had been for Caley to infiltrate the mind of another being - to seek, to manipulate, to deconstruct. The childhood memories Caley had retrieved in order to counteract the Dark Balls' mind control systems had, in effect, caused Byron to think he was a

"Someone is wishing to speak to you, sir," Matori said. "Goes by the name 'Domino'. I'm not sure how they obtained the communication frequency of this aircraft..."

"Hm. Give it to me," Giovanni grunted, reaching out his hand. No sooner had he placed the device to his ear, than Domino's voice rang out from it.

"Am I speaking to Mr. Morteago?"

"You are indeed," Giovanni remarked. The emotionless tone of his voice did not shift - this caller was of unknown origin, and he wished to make the decent first impression should it be someone who would be of use to him.

"I was recently browsing the database on criminals at large, and noticed something...hm...lacking in the information you'd put up about those deserters of yours," Domino said coolly.

"Lacking?" Giovanni raised an eyebrow.

"Seems they've been getting a little outside help," Domino continued. "It could be how they managed to break out of Team Rocket in the first place."

"Tell me who this person is," Giovanni's brow furrowed, his words becoming sharper with a growing irritation at his conversant's delaying.

"This information wasn't easy to obtain, Mr. Mortego," Domino sniffed. "It took effort, and time. You as a businessman know time is money, hm?"

The operators at the aircraft control panels grimaced amongst themselves as Giovanni uttered a volatile growl.

"You better not be wasting *my* time..." he muttered. "How much do you want?"

"850 Delcas," Domino replied. "No less. Forward it to my eCash vault #00920012."

"Give her the payment," Giovanni scribbled the details upon a scrap of paper and handed them to Matori, who began tapping at the screen of her tablet computer.

"Thank you!" Domino trilled with condescending perkiness, as the money arrived a few moments later.

"Now tell me," Giovanni's voice was beginning to sound a little dangerous. "*Who* is this loathsome individual that has been making themselves unwelcome in my organization?"

"The son of a deceased Tattoan Psychic Gym Leader, name's 'Caley Wilson'," Domino replied, sounding no more intimidated by Giovanni's aggravation. "Might be worth keeping an eye on."

"I'll bear that in mind," Giovanni replied, his voice having weakened slightly. "Your input is appreciated, Ms. Domino."

"Think nothing of it," the sickly smile in the woman's voice was palpable. The call ceased.

"Shall I take that for you, sir?" Matori reached her hand for the communicator, which was returned. Giovanni did not make eye contact, instead he re-opened the file upon his own computer and began to scroll through it again.

"Psychic Gym Leader..."

Despite the countermeasures, regardless of his initial intention to crush the ones who posed the biggest threat to his domination of Oci, that one nagging thought persisted in Giovanni's head. Was the Ahnloka a reality or a myth? And if the former, then could this young man be them?

TO BE CONTINUED...

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