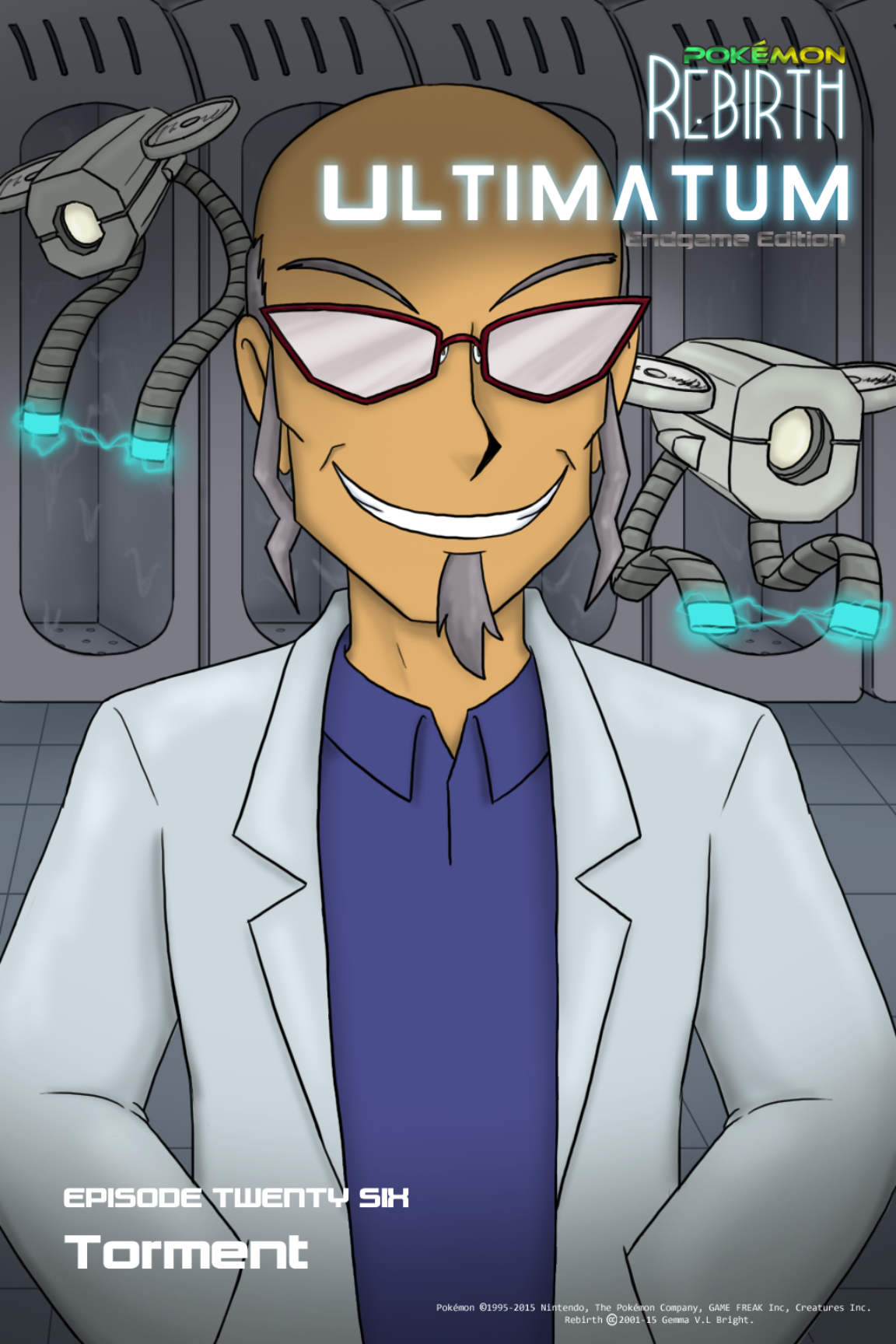


POKÉMON
REBIRTH

ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE TWENTY SIX

Torment

James and Errol held a curious relationship with the innards of places Team Rocket had claimed for themselves. The longest they had spent time in them was during their training regimes in Johto, and since then, their affiliation with them had been brisk and distant. Much of their time and attention had been focused on tracking that one particular target, while his occasional path-crossing with the organization they worked for often resulted in their entrance into various bases in more suspicious fashion. The two men found an amusing irony in that fact - they had been sneaking into Team Rocket-run locations long before they'd even considered quitting the organization for good.

But this time was different. They were not following a nosy yet righteously-driven youth and his associates into the danger zone, or trying to one-up a rival duo of operatives in order to gain some recognition from their superiors. Now their minds were directed unwaveringly on a far more important matter. Whatever Team Rocket was up to in this makeshift base was much greater than anything they had ever attempted before, and there was a dwindling amount of time in which to uncover just what it was.

Silently, James and Errol had tracked Chime up the passageway they had chosen, hoping for some signs of activity. Five minutes into their exploration, Chime halted in mid flight, and returned to her companions with a hesitant but also satisfied expression.

<There's signs of life in a room nearby,> she whispered. <Quite a large number of people. I think they are having a meeting.>

"Chime's picked up somet'ing," Errol relayed to James. "Now we just need ta find a way into dat room wit'out being noticed."

"It would help to know what kind of room it is," James pondered. "That would give us an idea of what hiding spaces it may have."

<Hang on,> Chime piped up. <I'll go on ahead and take a closer look.>

"Watch y' back, kid," Errol insisted, before Chime shot down the corridor and out of sight. It didn't take long before the chiverbel made her reappearance.

<It's some kind of eating room,> she explained. <We can sneak into the kitchen next door. I'll show the way!> And before either of Chime's listeners could respond, the pokémon was off again, back the way she had previously scouted.

"Eager gal, isn't she?" Errol chuckled lightly, resuming his pace after Chime.

True to her words, the kitchen door was easily opened through use of Chime's telekinesis. Careful not to make a sound, Errol and James crept into the room on all fours, approaching the wall where the serving hatches led to the dining area beyond. They were, for the most part, shut - bar a gap at the bottom just large enough to peek through. A male voice could be heard relaying something from the dining area.

"Blast it, he's too far away to hear properly," James muttered, squinting through the gap under the shutters in an attempt to identify who was speaking.

"Nah, it's just'cha ears ain't sensitive enough," Errol wagged a finger, before gently nudging James to one side. "Here, let me take a listen."

"As commanders, your vocal manner must be confident, unfaltering," Darius said. "You must show no emotion, or risk the disobedience of those you instruct."

"Seems ta be some kinda briefin'," Errol whispered. "Everyone's wearin' dese funky new uniforms - nothing like *I've* ever seen before."

"Everyone?" James blinked. "Surely they can't be promoting the entire rank..."

"Dat's what it looks like," Errol confirmed. "Commanders, huh? It ain't like Elites weren't able ta boss da lower ranks around before. What's so special about dis dat it needs an upgrade to reinforced armour?"

"This new task requires more powerful weapons, which you will receive in due course," Darius stated, before motioning to a crate beside him. "In the meantime, I want you to bring your old weapons to me and place them in this container."

There was no confusion as to what Darius happened to be referring to.

"He's askin' da agents ta hand over deir pokémon," Errol relayed, his brow furrowing intensely. It was difficult to stop himself from yelling through the kitchen hatch at this objectification of the pokémon in question. Not that it was surprising, by any means, but hearing it still managed to make him rigid with anger. James suddenly felt a ball of heaviness gather in the pit of his stomach. The announcement sent him spiralling back to a point in his own memory - the moment when he had been forced to say goodbye to two of his pokémon companions, just to prevent them being snatched up by Team Rocket scientists and forced into cruel experimentation. Undoubtedly this was the fate that awaited the pokémon these Elite agents had trained, and the knowledge of this had caused a hesitant murmuring to arise amongst the ranks.

"N-no..." a voice was heard from the back of the group.

"What was that?" Darius raised an eyebrow.

"No! I-I can't let Juliet be taken away," the elite operative repeated, louder this time. "She has worked too hard to just be cast off like that."

"You *named* it?" Darius grimaced.

"*She* is a living thing!" the elite operative cried out. "And she has helped me complete all the tasks you've set us! I'm not going to abandon her after what she's done for me!"

"Your development of feelings towards your pokémon is unsatisfactory," Darius frowned. "Compassion would get you wiped out if you were to pursue this next assignment. It could even put your fellow commanders in danger. Agent Terbrech, you are dismissed. Report to the main address hall in the opposite complex."

"Fine by me!" the man snapped, getting up from his table and roughly storming out. "I'd rather be a grunt than involved in this!"

"Any more of you wish to join him?" Darius inquired coldly. There were no further responses, though a selection of faces conveyed a measure of discomfort. "Good. Now hand me the pokémon you were assigned."

As the first cluster of elite operatives rose from their chairs, Pokéballs in hand, the doors to the cafeteria were flung open and Dinah stumbled recklessly into view.

"Admin Darius!" she spluttered breathlessly. "Terrible! Bad! Need help!"

"Pull yourself together, Freeman!" Darius snapped. "What happened?"

"W-Wendy and I were taking Butch to medical..." the woman began, before flinching in horror. "Oh no! Wendy! I left her behind!"

Before Darius had a chance to respond, a frustrated bellow was heard from the corridor outside. Once again the doors to the cafeteria slammed open - this time with enough force to throw them clean off their hinges. A towering blue reptilian form lumbered its way into the room, head swaying disorientatedly from left to right. The unexpectedness of this entrance caused many of the Elite agents to try and back away. Since most of them were sat at tables at the time, the resulting panic generated a cacophony of screeching from chairs across the floor.

<Is that a pokémon?> Chime asked worriedly.

"Looks like a druddigon," Errol replied. "But somet'ing's off about it. I can't woik out what..."

There was no time to make deductions. Aggravated by the high pitched noises in the room, the druddigon-esque creature swiped at the nearest cluster of Elite agents like it was attempting to swat pestilent insects. The agents responded by unleashing their pokémon into the cafeteria's limited space.

"Ledian, get out here!"

"Magmar, time to move!"

"Feraligatr, bring this under control!"

The three summoned pokémon encircled their draconic target, which snarled under its breath. With plenty of biological studies under their belts, the Elite agents knew the prime way to take down a druddigon - albeit a curiously-proportioned one - was to lower its body temperature.

"Ledian, keep to the rear!" the first agent announced. "Use Ice Punch!"

"Take it head on, Feraligatr!" one of the others cried. "Ice Fang!"

"Strike it with Dual Chop, Magmar!" The third joined in.

They attacked in perfect unison. The druddigon let out a shriek as two of the ledian's ice-coated fists made impact between its shoulder blades. At the same time, the feraligatr buried its teeth into the creature's neck - sending a frosty sheen coursing across its thick scales. Seeing an opening, the magmar thrust both its arms at the creature's gut, one after the other. The druddigon retaliated with force, its massive clawed hand cracking the magmar across the face and sending the unconscious pokémon flying amongst the horrified watching operatives. Another Elite stepped forward and released a medicham in an attempt to keep the druddigon stilled with telekinesis. But the creature's struggling proved too much to contain - once again the druddigon lunged, this time with open, violet-tinted jaws. The feraligatr reeled backwards in pain, the Crunch attack having struck it in the forearm. At the same time, the ledian was caught off guard as the druddigon's spiked tail glanced it sharply.

"Why didn't you use your communicator to alert me of this?"

Darius snapped, waving his hand in the druddigon's direction as yet more agents released their pokémon in order to try and halt what was going on.

"I was traumatized!" Dinah blubbered. "I m-mean look at poor Butchy! Look what's happened to hiiim!" She broke down into sobs at this point, while Darius fumbled for his communicator - his face reflecting a measure of anxiousness not typically seen in other situations.

"Laboratory?" he began. "We have a code red situation." He wasn't about to go into detail. "I need your strongest restraining devices in the cafeteria right now."

"That pokémon is Butch?" James' jaw dropped open.

"Gotta admit, he wears da scaly look well," Errol smirked.

"Errol, this is serious!" James hissed. "How could Butch have ended up like that?"

"Don't ask me, I ain't a scientist," Errol tutted.

"And I can't imagine Butch signed himself up as lab fodder," James frowned. "Had they been experimenting on him without him knowing?"

"Dis is only gonna get worse," Errol remarked. "I suggest we get outta here and find da others."

"Good idea," James bit his lip. The two men and their chiverbel companion quietly but swiftly left the kitchen, moments before a combined charge from a blastoise and hariyama threw Butch-in-druidigon form clear through the serving hatches. Staggering away from the dented oven he had just made impact with, Butch roared furiously, his body suddenly outlined with a light blue aura as every muscle tensed.

Jessie as a result of her own feelings and her current company. Not that Cassidy had said anything derogatory to her in some time - it seemed that she too was embroiled in personal issues of her own.

"I don't really care for politoed features myself, but...should we have really left him back there?" Jessie murmured, finally breaking the silence.

"We had our instructions," Cassidy replied bluntly. The response seemed the uncaring sort that Jessie had come to expect. However, Cassidy's uncomfortable expression clearly betrayed her. She was no happier about departing from Butch than Jessie had been. Jessie was surprised at her internal concern for the man. Maybe the time spent working with him had caused her to warm to him a little. And maybe the aspect of abandoning a co-worker only served to dredge up the memory of how she had abandoned James and Errol with her own confounding actions.

The duo stopped outside two large metallic doors, and Cassidy pressed on a 'Call' button nearby. Following a moment's pause, there was a loud 'clunk' and the metallic doors slid apart to reveal a dimly lit room beyond. Jessie froze in dawning apprehension - the two women were faced with the unmistakable surroundings of a laboratory.

So this is it. We've been made lab rattatas. Well I suppose I'm getting what I deserve, Jessie thought in resignation, her shoulders

slumping a little. *After hurting my dearest friends...choosing Team Rocket over them...I don't deserve any less.*

"Hello there," Ein said calmly as he approached. "Admin Darius told me to expect you."

"Yes," Cassidy replied. "He said we were being reassigned to work here."

"Indeed," Ein nodded. "You know, one of the blessings and curses about science is its unpredictability. Ah...it was a remarkable mutation. Such a pity your associate escaped - I would have delighted in studying what caused that reaction in him."

"Mutation...?" Cassidy began, taken off guard. "Are you talking about Butch?"

"Have to admit I was surprised it progressed without cause," Ein continued, as if Cassidy hadn't spoken. Cassidy's expression shifted to fury in an instant.

"Wait, you *know* what made him so ill?" she snapped.

"Of course," Ein smiled. "Your accomplice landed on my work desk, after all. He just so happened to be exposed to my Genetic Fusion Serum samples. Somewhere along the line, his blood must have been contaminated with druddigon DNA, but even then, typically a subject won't show signs of progress until exposure to Light element energy."

gap. Adam, on the other hand, was most intrigued by the view and leant upon one of the side railings to take an extended look before Denise quietly moved him onward.

"The energy's getting stronger," Caley stated, more to himself than anyone, as the wind made it impossible for those behind him to hear this statement. The trio of humans and their augret companion passed into the adjacent cargo aircraft, leaving the inviting chill of the outside behind. There was an overwhelming urge to flee that all of them longed to obey, but their task was more important than any such feelings, and they used that knowledge in an attempt to drown them out.

They had progressed no more than a few steps into the corridor when a shrill ringing was heard from the passage behind them. Adam was the first to move, grabbing Denise by the wrist and ducking into a side turn which resulted in a dead end cluttered with abandoned equipment. Caley rapidly followed, and the figures tried their best to stay concealed behind the various junk - hoping that whomever it was walking in their direction happened to be moving onward and not turning into the area they were currently hiding.

Footsteps began to intermingle with the ring tone, and Darius strode into view with a red clipboard neatly under his arm. Pausing in the corridor directly opposite the unseen trio and reaching for his belt, Darius retrieved a communicator and pressed a few buttons on the keypad.

"Status report," he said tersely.

"Orre and Johto's chambers are good to go, sir," came the audible response. "Magnezone Transfer Network is prepped. We're certain we can get the remaining sectors battle ready by the date you wanted."

"Good," Darius responded without any visible indication of his approval. "The briefing of sector prime is already in progress. Go ahead and inform sectors Orre and Johto to put their substations on standby. When all is complete, await my signal. We must attack our targets in perfect unison, otherwise this plan *will* fail."

"Heartless git," Adam muttered bitterly, once the man was out of earshot. Denise looked at him sadly - it appeared that, purely by chance, they had managed to cross paths with the youth's own father.

"Whatever that man on the other end of the phone was talking about, it didn't sound good," Caley remarked, too distracted by his own thoughts to be aware of Adam's response. "We'd better get a move on, guys."

"Yeah," Denise nodded, glancing back at Adam who still appeared to be fighting with his own repugnance. "Keep tracking that energy, Caley. I'm certain that's where our answers lie."

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"Man, I sure am glad you arrived before that Professor guy came back!" Recon sighed, as he and Cory made their way through the recurrently empty corridors of the aircraft carrier. "As much as I want to be out of this situation, I don't trust Team Rocket to work for my benefit."

"Situation?" Cory blinked. Recon froze, realising he'd said a little too much. Cory's expression became studied. "Are you *really* working for the International Police?" they asked.

"Of course I am!" Recon spluttered, then looked guilty. "But this mission was never really for them. It was for me."

Cory looked at him in puzzlement.

"My real name is Ritchie Thompson, and the truth is...I'm 17 years old," Recon admitted. "Hear me out! I know what you're thinking. I don't look 17 at all. You're right. My body aged a ton after I was accidentally exposed to something called PokéRus while visiting Professor Oak's ranch. Ever heard of him?"

Cory shook their head.

"He's a really smart guy, and after some Team Rocket goons grilled him about PokéRus, he decided to go and find out exactly what it was," Recon explained. "After I got contaminated with PokéRus, it felt weird to stay at home. My parents know what happened, of course, but the International Police allowed me to become an agent in their care, until I was able to find a means to reverse what the PokéRus had done to me." He sighed heavily. "I've been looking for that data for two years...I only

came here to find information on PokéRus, I never expected all this other, far worse stuff to be happening."

Cory smiled sympathetically. Their companion's desperation to reveal his identity and hidden burdens had finally won out.

"I'm sorry I blurted like that," he sighed. "Sparky helps me keep a level head, and with him gone, I just...I panic."

"It's alright, Ritchie," Cory nodded. "We'd better find him... for both your sakes."

Predictably, further advancement into the headquarters' most valuable areas was not without its demands for identification. Uncomfortably for Cory, it meant they had to resume Ein's shape to pass another set of doors. As a result of his confrontation with the real Ein, Ritchie knew the voice code needed in order to allow more than one person through the system during a single scan.

Entering a laboratory required a need to be prepared for any number of unsavoury views, yet Ritchie was unable to stop himself from uttering a horrified gasp upon what he saw. Over the far side of the room he'd just walked into, his beloved pikachu Sparky was clamped to a platform while a scanner unit emitted its dazzling white light across the pokémon's body. Two wires ran from Sparky's cheeks, diverting any attempts at electrical discharge away into units stored nearby. The three scientists present in the room glanced up in alarm at the sound of

Ritchie's utterance. Their expressions quickly shifted to ones of anger, as they reached for devices upon their belts kept purposefully for self-defence. Before they were able to draw any closer to Ritchie, however, a crimson streak dashed past, knocking them all flying. One of the scientists attempted to make a break for an alarm button in the room, only to be struck once again by the unidentified assailant. Another scientist tried to use their weapon in retaliation, but it was knocked clean out of their hands and crushed beneath one of the figure's sharp red feet.

The crimson streak drew to a standstill as the final scientist hit the floor cold, revealing itself to be a scizor. Wordlessly, the pokémon crossed the room to the scanner where Sparky was incarcerated, and lifted one of its claws. Sparky winced, half-expecting the scizor to smash the device. However, the scizor brought the claw to rest gently upon the scanner's control unit - its yellow eyes momentarily flickering with static.

<Cory?> Sparky blinked. The beam of the scanner sputtered out as if in response, and the clamps which held the pikachu's arms and legs sprung open.

"Surprise," the scizor gave a tiny smirk, before their form began to glow - returning to their more familiar human appearance.

"You sure have a lot of disguises up your sleeves," Ritchie grinned appreciatively, as Sparky leapt from the platform and ran back to his trainer's side. "Man am I glad to have you back, Sparx!"

<I'm glad you two found me before those scientists decided what they were going to do,> Sparky shuddered.

"Thanks for helping us out, Cory," Ritchie said, the familiar air of relaxedness now present.

"We're not done yet," Cory replied seriously. Having been forced to knock a bunch of people unconscious had left a bad taste in their mouth, regardless of the people's moral inadequacies. "There's still that data you wanted, isn't there?"

"Well, sure..." Ritchie blinked, a little caught off guard by his companion's shortness.

"Right, then we need to find out where Team Rocket is keeping it," Cory told him, before glancing around. "This looks more like a study room than a data storage room – let's go further in, but stay close, Ritchie. I don't know how many other people are still here. Ein included."

With that, Cory crept through the nearest doorway. Ritchie grimaced awkwardly as he noticed Sparky's disapproving 'You told him the whole story, didn't you?' glower, before shaking off the feeling and pursuing his zecutynr companion.

"I just don't get what Team Rocket would want with a virus, though." Ritchie muttered, watching the device in his hand trawl its way through another directory of files, some minutes later.

"Whatever it is, it's obviously not good," Cory said, assessing the row of hard drive units before them. Unlike Ritchie's handheld gadget, direct contact was required for the pokémon to obtain the information they were personally looking for. Cory had to understand what the memories they had seen while connected to Mirusyte meant.

Placing a hand on one of the units, Cory shut their eyes and delved into the security protocols that attempted to stop their approach. These proved to be a minor obstacle, and soon Cory found themselves presented with the Experimental Pokémon database. With nothing but their species name to go by, Cory placed the singular word into a search - it wasn't long before they were presented with a report file.

*Here we are...Project ZC-TNR, Cory thought, accessing the file.
Element - Virtual/Dark. DNA Composition - Ditto, Sableye.
Classification...*

Cory's breath caught in their throat, resulting in the pokémon-in-human-guise's descent into a coughing fit as they staggered backward from the unit they had been in contact with. Sparky yelped as Ritchie thrust out his free hand to grab Cory's arm and prevent the figure from toppling over.

"Whoa!" Ritchie exclaimed worriedly. "Are you okay, Cory?"

<What did you do?> Sparky frowned.

"I was looking at some files related to me..." Cory replied hoarsely, once the coughing had receded. "I hadn't known much about

uncharacteristically soft with awe. "There must be every single grunt in the Tatto division down there."

"Correct," a young female voice was heard from further down the balcony.

Adam, Denise, Caley and Kota automatically looked up in the direction of the voice, only to lock gazes with a spindly white form who had been watching them intently. The creature's eyes flared violet, and Caley gasped in a mixture of shock and realisation – the uncomfortable familiarity of deep despair taking hold of his mind. Through the haze, the young man was able to make out a human figure with dark hair and a blue beret.

"Tamesis..." he choked. Negatic's power was strong, but unlike Adam, Denise and Kota, he at least wielded some measure of defence against it simply by prior experience. His companions, on the other hand, had been rendered completely immobile by this emotional manipulation – their eyes glazed and lifeless.

"It was really stupid of you to come back, you know," Tamesis commented with a shrug.

"Yes," Adam murmured dully. "It was."

"Oh well, your loss," Tamesis smiled. "Vilina will be pleased that the operatives who escaped decided to hand themselves in. Or rather, *I* handed them in."

Caley found himself unable to physically react, yet his mind remained alert to the negativity being projected into it – albeit barely.

Stop fighting. Give up.

He wanted to give up. Giving up seemed such a comforting option right now – to release his burdens of responsibility, to set himself adrift...

"No!" Caley snapped out loud, making Tamesis look up in surprise. "Don't you realise how much danger we're in?"

Why would she be bothered, anyway?

"Plenty, considering you three just walked back in here," Tamesis remarked smugly.

"No...not just me...or my friends..." Caley grimaced, wrestling with the overwhelming negativity inside his mind. "All of us. The people in charge here don't care what they have to do...to get what they want."

The edge of Negatic's lip curled slightly in disapproval, as Tamesis paused – her expression gradually altering from satisfaction to sternness – before walking to the side of the balcony and gazing down into the shaft. The space below was filled with rows of Team Rocket operatives, all dressed in black uniform, held proudly to attention with their gazes trained firmly on Executives Astor and Eris - standing at a parapet near the front of the assembly. A triumphant cry was raised from the underdog

troops and Eris stepped back, giving Astor room to walk before her. The man adjusted his microphone and prepared for the address.

"For the past four years, Team Rocket has channelled all its time, energy and resources into Project Rebirth," Astor spoke up, his amplified voice booming from speakers built atop the parapet. "Today, I am pleased to announce the second phase of this project has reached its completion!"

There was an eruption of loud applause and raucous cheering.

"Pokémon and humans shall combine forces in ways once unthought of," Astor continued. "The third and final stage begins *now*."

A heavy rumbling caused the entire drone army to swing round and glance behind them. The entire rear wall was sliding open to reveal a towering dark shape - its head slumped upon its chest, seemingly inert. It bore a similar physical appearance to Palkia, though its snout was better defined, and its tail was shaped like a large cone fitted with grilles. Various apertures were locked onto its wings and arms, and sparks of electricity flickered and snapped across the entire length of its pitch black form.

"This is the XenoChromic Generator," Astor announced. "Our future."

Red glints flared in the imprisoned creature's eyes and it uttered a soulless shriek, wracked with static. The mechanisms in its tail whirred

into life, faster and faster, creating a noise like a jet engine. It was at this moment, there was a noticeable shift in the originally defiant allegiance of the drone army. Somehow they knew that this was not a creature formed to lead them, but to consume them.

Swarming towards the exit doors like frightened trapinch, the operatives yelled, struggled and barged each other aside without any regard for welfare. Some of them were knocked to the ground and tried to get back up, only to be trampled upon. Yet those who reached their intended escape route, discovered the doors had been sealed tightly. They were confined to the room they had assembled in, and the only way out was a gaping portal to some unknown hellish consequence.

"D-D-Devouring its own children..." Caley stammered, his eyes wide, unable to pull himself away from the balcony railing from which he gazed. Now those words from the Sabai Prophecy made a gruesome sense.

Eris began to smile darkly to herself, while Astor turned away from the scene. Then he swung back in one sharp motion - dashing towards the parapet before vaulting it with one arm. At this moment, a cluster of propeller-driven robotic devices flew into the hall. Two clasped at Astor as he fell, securing his arms and pulling him back swiftly into the darkness. The remaining robots snatched operatives into the air and followed the first pair's direction.

The last thing Tamesis witnessed was each figure's expression of implacable terror as they vanished from sight. She didn't have to view what was happening - her mind was already well aware of what kinds of experimentation lay beyond her vision. And every single person in that hall, be they man, woman or youth, was becoming victim to it. Yet all of this paled in comparison to the seemingly voluntary sacrifice that Astor had made, and the blank, empty look in his eyes she had seen before he was taken away. The unmistakable look that Tamesis had not realised was there until now.

"He was one of them..." she said, horrified. "Astor was reprogrammed this whole time. But it doesn't make sense - he'd acted so...so..."

"Human?" another voice echoed up the balcony, this time from behind Denise, Adam and Caley. The latter of these three shakily craned his neck - barely containing the overwhelming collective fear the Team Rocket operatives in the room below were generating. Standing there was a blue-haired woman in her late twenties, wearing a Super Elite uniform and an expression of false upset. Even with the week that had since passed, the memory of the woman who called herself 'Vilina' was very firmly lodged in Caley's psyche.

"Oh dear," Vilina said, shaking her head with feigned disapproval. "What happened to my instruction to stay in your room, Tamesis? Now look what you've done."

"This is... this is just sick..." Tamesis muttered repulsively, while Adam quaked from the recollection of his childhood memories, amplified by the grip of Negatic's power. "You knew about this plan the whole time, didn't you? You hid this from me! Did the lives of those people mean nothing?"

"They mean *everything*, my dear," Vilina insisted, glancing at her nails. "They're the means to my success."

"Oh really?" Tamesis snapped bitterly, tears forming in her eyes. "Is that all? What makes you so special that they'd keep you around? What's to say the Team Rocket bosses won't turn on *you* next?"

"Because..." Vilina's previously calm expression became dark and threatening. "I won't *let them*."

Negatic swung round, its clawed feet scraping harshly on the balcony floor, and grabbed Tamesis by both arms, causing her to squeal in anguish. The sound quickly dissipated as the hybrid pokémon's eyes flashed violet, engulfing its victim in waves of resigned hopelessness.

"It seems our time together has drawn to a close," Vilina remarked, sounding disappointed. "You had your values, but sympathy is not one of them. I shall be terminating your apprenticeship now."

"I have no use here," Tamesis intoned, staring past Caley into the middle distance.

"Take her down to the lab," Vilina waved at Negatic with one hand. The togetic-sneasel hybrid clasped Tamesis to its chest, rose into the air on its jagged wings and vanished from the balcony. "As for you three..." Vilina smiled grimly, as Adam, Denise and Kota finally surfaced from Negatic's emotional onslaught. "I wonder if *you* can fly?"

Having barely regained her wherewithal, Denise struggled to understand the implications of Vilina's statement. The woman's hand hovered over a button near the doorway, her eyes staring at the portion of balcony under the trio's feet with a delighted malice.

"Let me out..." Caley muttered, his eyes tight shut, holding his arms forward as if trying to block the onslaught of audible and psychic screams. "I didn't want to be here...it was all a mistake...I should have never..."

Juliet, forgive me!"

Denise and Adam looked on in bewilderment, and then fear, as violet-tinted energy flickered inside the young man's jacket sleeves - the bracers responding to Caley's desperate will. Flames of blue Aura rapidly snaked their way from the end of his fingers, arcing wider and wider as Caley's body shook violently.

In one sudden blast, a beam of Aura thrust its way from Caley's hands and into Vilina - propelling the woman back through the archway from which she had arrived. The Aura spattered out as Caley's legs

buckled under him - sending the young man to the floor, unconscious. Denise quickly knelt down to hoist Caley up, as Kota nuzzled his companion's face with anxious whimpers.

"What just happened to him?" Denise inquired shakily.

"I don't know..." Adam looked uncomfortable. "He did something like that one time before, in Mayni City."

"We'll just have to find out once we've escaped from here," Denise concluded unhappily. "I hate to say it, but we can't solve this right now. Whatever Team Rocket is doing to those poor people in that lab...there'd be too many of them for us to fight. We'd better get back and find the others. I don't know how, but we've got to sort this mess out."

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The overhead lights inside the aircraft carrier began to flicker as a distant but unmistakable whine resounded nearby.

"So...it has awoken," Colress stated in a matter-of-fact way.

"What has?" Rose looked at him.

"The Xenochromic Generator," Colress replied. "Neither creature nor machine, perfectly suited for manifesting near-unlimited quantities of Light Aura."

"And that was what they created the obelisk for, wasn't it?" Rose concluded with saddened eyes. "To grab that one spark of life force to make something capable of generating far more." She felt a pang of hurt for the loss of Minachi, the pokémon subjected to such torment in order to channel the Aura Team Rocket had so greedily desired.

"You are correct, my dear," Colress nodded, his expression unshifting. "Siphoning the amount of Aura needed for Project Rebirth directly from the planet would have had untold consequences, even Team Rocket's leader was smart enough to accept that."

"Doesn't it bother you that... this thing is in the hands of the most deranged organization on Oci?" Mondo snapped. Colress uttered a low chuckle.

"They betrayed me," he remarked. "They promised me notoriety and equality for the information I gave them. The samples I risked my life for. Let their actions be upon their own heads."

"Here you are!" James called as he, Errol and Chime approached. "What happened to the whole 'psychic relay' thing? When Chime got in contact with Cory, she said that Cory wasn't with you two any more."

"Yeah..." Mondo scratched the back of his head. "The classified areas of the ship had bio-scanner security that only let one person through at a time. Since Cory was the only one able to impersonate Team Rocket staff, we had to let him go on alone."

"Cory rescued Professor Acroma here, but sent him back by himself while he helped Recon to find what he'd come here for," Rose concluded.

"So chivalrous~" James mused, his eyes glistening. Errol, on the other hand, didn't seem as thrilled with these developments. As quick to adapt as they had been, Cory was still essentially no more than a few months old, and Errol was concerned that unexpected circumstances would catch the pokémon off guard. Before he had a chance to state his opinion, however, another opinion resounded up the passageway - combined with the sounds of two pairs of feet.

"We have to leave," Adam said. His voice was unsettlingly monotone. "Now."

"Did you find what Team Rocket was up to?" James inquired worriedly.

"Not exactly," Denise shuddered, while Kota held Caley's unconscious body aloft with telekinesis and looked mournful. "Only that we just witnessed hundreds of grunts getting dragged into one of Team Rocket's lab rooms. Those poor people...most of them were just petty criminals, and others signed up because they didn't know any better. I'd never wish such a fate on any of them."

"If they're performing scientific procedures on that many operatives..." Rose trailed off, looking bereft. "I'm afraid there is nothing more we can do here."

"We've got to make an army to stand up to their army!" Adam insisted. "It's the only way we'll have a chance."

"And what about Caley's mission?" James spoke up. Adam gave him a withering look.

"We shall complete that too," Rose stated firmly. "Both of your ideas are valid and necessary. We will travel to Kemnon Tower as fast as we can, and hope that we reach there before it's too late."

"Wait, what about Cory?" Mondo piped up with an anxious face. "We can't leave him behind!"

"I agree," Errol nodded. "Youse guys go on without me and I'll go find him."

"What?" Denise looked horrified by this thought. The last time they'd heeded this advice in a Team Rocket base, Errol had been captured and narrowly escaped death.

"Jus' trust me!" Errol urged, before turning to Kota. "Can ya help me on dis? I'm gonna need ya teleportin' skills to get past dat security."

Kota glanced towards Caley with an anxious noise.

"It's ok, Kota," Denise told the pokémon. "He was just overwhelmed. I'm sure he'll be fine after a good rest."

"Yeah. 'Fine'," Adam muttered. He wondered if Denise had conveniently forgotten their companion had spontaneously blasted solid

This luminescent beam did not go unnoticed by Rose and her companions as they swiftly but stealthily exited one of Team Rocket's aircraft carriers.

"What is that?" Mondo inquired.

"That is the Magnezone Transfer Network," Colress replied. "Energy from the Xenochromic Generator is being taken across Totto, to other regions of Oci, via hundreds of magnezone."

"For other Team Rocket laboratories, no doubt," Rose commented disapprovingly.

Denise's eyes widened. She had overheard Adam's dad talking about a 'Magnezone Transfer Network'," while the person he'd conversed with had mentioned 'chambers' in Orre and Johto. She suddenly felt very unwell. It appeared that whatever atrocious thing was happening to the Tottoan operatives had been destined for Team Rocket members worldwide.

Once the group had reached the edge of the oil platform, Rose took the Pokéball containing Larydos and released the hybrid into the water some distance below. With Chime working tirelessly, all members of the group were lowered onto Larydos' back, two at a time. Having caught sight of the departure, Karis pulled the boat round from where it had been circling and cut the engine in order to allow Larydos to bring her passengers to the side of the boat.

"We couldn't get a word out of the old man," Cassidy muttered.
"So Butch and I placed tracking devices on his equipment."

"That move ultimately led us to discover unfettered carriers of the virus," Ein concluded. "Team Rocket has you and your accomplice to thank for bringing Project Rebirth to its conclusion."

"What?" Cassidy blinked.

"By re-engineering Holon Labs' PokéRus, we created the Genetic Fusion Serum - a concoction that prepares a host's body to accept and integrate foreign DNA," Ein told her. "Far more efficient than the primitive splicing methods used to create those hybrid pokémon specimens. Then, once the perfect source of living energy had been brought into existence, the greatest step began."

Jessie's breath caught in her throat as she entered the room, to be met with a row of ten cylindrical cases – not unlike those used for developing the aforementioned pokémon specimens. All the cases were empty, their glass innards smeared with some kind of clear fluid. Undoubtedly these cases had been used, quite recently in fact. Overhead, the ceiling of the room sloped sharply – a large window covered in shutters installed neatly into its surface.

She wanted to believe Cassidy and herself had been taken here for simple cleaning duties, but Jessie's deeper consciousness knew better. Her previous fears of being experimented upon had indeed been correct.

Running was beginning to seem like a good idea, as futile as it likely happened to be.

Having finished his exposition, Ein reached toward a computer console which sat opposite the row of cylinders before pressing a button. With a faint grinding sound, the shutters in the sloping part of the ceiling began to rise, bringing the room beyond ominously into view.

The first thing to grab Cassidy's attention was the electrical activity from the centre of the room – generated by a colossal draconic form she was unable to identify. Tracing the thick wires leading from the creature's arms and wings, Cassidy flinched in a mixture of shock and revulsion as she found herself led to a cluster of twitching gelatinous sacs - each suspended from the ceiling by a number of complicated attachments, like oversized artificial cocoons. A tiny jewelled orb was fitted into the place where the attachments held the tip of each cocoon, its coloured surface glowing hot. Energy flowed from the creature in the middle of the room, surrounding the cocoons in swathes of yellow light.

Glancing to the side in an attempt to view anything than what she was witnessing at that moment, Jessie came face to face with another group of cocoons, and then another. The entire room heaved with this repugnant sight. Something was being incubated, but what?

Cassidy battled with an urge to retch, squinting to try and make out what was inside the spongy membrane of the nearest cocoon. Just under the pulsating surface lay a deformed humanoid mass - its skin

bubbling and lifting as its appendages slowly distorted, hollow eyes wide open with intense agony.

Ein looked on with cruel satisfaction as Cassidy tore her gaze away from the window – shaking and gagging.

"What the hell's going on in there?" she spluttered, once she had managed to catch her breath.

"The formation of the most advanced army Team Rocket...no...the whole *world* has ever seen," Ein's voice had grown cold and merciless. "Hybrid creations, the human forces of which lend greater strength to the pokémon forces they now possess. They are perfect. Infallibly obedient, without distraction."

"Without...distraction?" This confused repetition had been uttered by Jessie, whose expression of studied worry had deepened.

"That is correct," Ein nodded, stepping forward and letting the glare from the overhead lights give a sheen to his spectacles and dark grey hair. "No thought. No emotion. Their minds shall be clear of all but their prime objectives."

"That's...inhuman!" Cassidy exclaimed without realising. "You... you're stripping them of their existence! Don't you have a conscience at all?"

"My conscience was something I discarded a long time ago," Ein replied in monotone.

"No..." Cassidy frowned. "I never signed up for anything like this. This is wrong, this has gone too far!"

Ein stood his ground without a single alteration in his expression, but with his hand hovering steadily over the keypad of the console beside him.

"You have no right to question our collective intelligence. It far outshines anything you have ever, or could ever possibly imagine," he said.

"Your 'intelligence' means nothing to me," Cassidy snapped. "If all you use it for is to disfigure and destroy others!"

Wow... Jessie blinked. So the Mightywhiner does have a heart in there. And all this time I thought her job was the only thing that mattered to her... She paused and shuddered internally, as the many regretful memories over her promotion and shunning her two best friends came flooding back. After a few moments of struggle, Jessie managed to grasp back her composure. That's exactly what had happened to me too...

The woman's attention returned to the scene just in time to see Cassidy raising her hand to her belt, ready to unleash her enhanced water pokémon.

"This ends *now*."

"Oh yes..." Ein grimaced, almost in sickening excitement as he pressed a button upon the keypad. "It certainly does."

From out of nowhere, two propeller-driven robotic devices flew into the room and grabbed both women by the shoulders. Cassidy yelped in alarm and attempted to throw the Pokéball in her hand, only to find movement impossible - her body paralysed from the robot's grip. With a clink, the sphere dropped harmlessly from the woman's fingers and rolled across the floor toward Ein, who leant forward and picked it up casually.

"Why thank you, dear," he smirked. "Samples from this specimen will make *fine* additions to the assembly line."

Something inside Cassidy, the same thing that had once stood so strong until being cracked upon witnessing Butch's plight and the suffering of hundreds of Team Rocket underlings, shattered in that very instant. Tears of fury crept into her eyes as her entire body shook from the intense longing to tear away every figure from within the processing chambers to which they were unwillingly bound, to snatch back her pokémon from the jaws of inevitable death. And all Cassidy could hear was Ein's voice echoing in her mind - '*Team Rocket has you and your accomplice to thank.*'

"You sick bastard!" she screeched, more in disbelief over her stupidity at being led astray for so long than anything else. Jessie winced, half-expecting a violent physical retort from the man, but Ein simply chuckled to himself as he turned back to the console.

"My, how ungrateful," he murmured dryly, tapping out a set of commands. "I thought you'd be happy to finally be making something of yourself in Team Rocket. But it seems you operatives are *never* satisfied."

The robots carried Cassidy and Jessie across the room before settling them into two smoothly formed crevices in the wall. Further noises ensued; liquid noises, as a gelatinous fluid began to bubble around the incapacitated women's feet and slowly rise up their ankles.

"Still, no matter," Ein remarked. "Your contributions will be valuable ones, regardless. In a few minutes, you will no longer have needs to be satisfied. Life will be so much simpler for you."

"Dis ain't life!" a voice was heard. Ein swung round to see a sandy blonde-haired male figure standing in the doorway with a pokémon hovering by his side. Clothed in a leaf green jacket and dark grey trousers, the man's posture was tense, his face stricken with the marks of a torrid history, his catlike eyes burning with vehemence.

"What on Oci..." Cassidy sputtered out. She'd never taken the time to learn the name of the recent arrival back when they were both working for Team Rocket. Why would she, he had been nothing but a grunt after all. Yet this was the first time she had heard him speak, and the tones had sent vibes of confused familiarity straight through her. Was this man coming to save her? And if so...*why?*

Jessie's reaction, on the other hand, was notably different.

"You idiot..." she murmured under her breath, but her tone of voice was more saddened than angry.

"Who are you?" Ein furrowed his brow in Errol's direction, trying to fathom how the man could have possibly circumvented the door scanner.

"Who am *I*?" Errol growled. "I'm da guy who's puttin' a stop to dis! No one else is going through what you did ta Gloria..."

"Gloria...Simmons? That medical assistant?" For a moment, Ein's typically static expression had turned to one of puzzlement. Then a faint glimmer of realisation lit his face. It appeared that something had dawned on the man with regards to the identity of the one speaking to him. The corner of Ein's mouth turned upward ever so slightly. "That was an unnecessary loss. You could have stopped that from happening, if only you'd complied with my wishes."

The tiny smile was quick to dissolve into a cold scowl.

"But that ship has sailed, and you are no longer of use to me."

Kota uttered a shriek of alarm as one of the hoverbots ambushed him from behind, jabbing the unfortunate augret with a sharp-tipped apparatus and sending an intense current of electricity through it. Errol swung round in consternation as Kota's small furry body hit the laboratory tiles. It was at that point that Errol's eyes took in the abhorrent vision beyond the reinforced glass of the lab's high-set windows. Catching sight of another hoverbot's approach in the window's

reflection, Errol thrust his clenched fist round and slammed it violently into the construct's optic, throwing the entire assembly across the room and into the opposite wall.

"What's happenin' to dose people?" Errol spat. The sting from the impact was barely noticeable, having been smothered by the man's own anger.

"They are receiving the fruits of my labour," Ein replied. "I have waited decades for this moment. After all, incorporating the technique I used on you to form hybrid pokémon was simply the beginning. My goals were set higher, always higher, and in but a few days I will see them fulfilled. These shall be beautiful soldiers with abilities far greater than those of that first houndoom I created."

Errol went rigid.

"You...did dat...to James?" he said, his voice icy, barely louder than a whisper. From across the room, Jessie uttered a horrified gasp.

"Oh, he was a colleague of yours?" Ein remarked uninterestedly. The cruel smile re-emerged. "Well now you two will have that bit more in *common*, won't you?"

With a furious yell, Errol dived at the professor, arms lashing rapidly back and forth. One of his hands made contact, generating a loud snap. Errol retracted the injured appendage with a hiss.

"Surely you didn't think I was vulnerable, did you?" Ein raised an eyebrow, passing a taser between his hands as his assailant glowered forebodingly at him. "Tsk...such animalistic behaviour."

"You shut up!" Errol screeched. "Ya t'ink you're better dan me?"

"I *made* you," Ein remarked, self-satisfied.

"You made me a *mess*!" Errol retorted. "Screwin' around wit' t'ings dat aren't yours ta meddle over! I spent years in confusion t'anks ta what you did! My identity was a wreck, an' even *now* I fight bad t'oughts about it! Yet ruining my life weren't enough for ya, was it? Now ya making a mess o' dose people too." He motioned through the window to the incubation room beyond.

"How dare you!" Ein snapped. It appeared that Errol had struck a nerve. "My work is nothing short of perfection! I have improved on otherwise flawed designs!"

"*You're* a flawed design!" Errol dived towards the taser in Ein's hand. The professor dodged with startling agility before violently thrusting the taser into Errol's gut. Jessie and Cassidy uttered horrified gasps as Errol cried out in pain, his entire body wracked with convulsions. Ein pulled back the taser, a malicious pleasure reflected upon his face. Having expected Errol to crumple to the floor, finally subdued, Ein's mouth dropped open slightly as he remained eye to eye with his target - twitching, sparking, but upright nonetheless.

"Sorry ta disappoint ya," Errol smirked darkly. "But it takes a lot to shock me."

With a swift flip, the man reached over his shoulders and grasped his guitar before swinging the instrument round and cracking it across Ein's head. Ein toppled backwards onto the tiles, where he lay sprawled in a heap.

Errol lowered the guitar and turned towards Jessie and Cassidy - the acerbity departing his face and body, giving way to sombre disappointment. Both women's faces told very different stories. For a moment they had forgotten entirely about their predicament and instead, their minds focused upon the one standing in front of them. Cassidy's eyes were wide as the tiny fragments of gathered information combined with one another inside her mind - the confused familiarity slipping into a definite, jarring realisation. The voice, the passion, the links with certain other ex-Team Rocket members, even some of the more curious appearance quirks. Meowth had never left. He was standing right in front of her. As for Jessie, she had known this all along. In that minimal window of time, it seemed like only Errol and herself were present in that room. That look of disappointment felt like it was meant solely for her.

A loud bleep was emitted from the nearby console, bringing all three figures back to their senses. The cylinders Jessie and Cassidy were

in had been filled over halfway, with the unsightly gunk creeping steadily up towards the helpless captives' chests.

"Are you just going to let us die?" Cassidy exclaimed, fear saturating her inquiry. Errol did not reply - he didn't feel a heartless assumption like that deserved an answer. Instead, he redirected his focus to the computer console. Technical stuff like this wasn't his speciality, but he could hardly leave. Every moment that passed, the gunk inside the two containers rose higher and higher. Was it up to him to take the risk and try shutting the containers down by force?

"Errol!" a familiar voice called. The man looked up to see Cory and Ritchie standing in the doorway.

"You!" Ritchie spluttered, upon sight of Jessie and Cassidy. They both looked at him with bewildered expressions.

"You know them?" Cory asked, while Sparky cuffed the side of his human companion's face with a disappointed snort.

"Talk about dat later," Errol insisted hurriedly, as the gunk began to ooze over Jessie's shoulders. "I really need your help ta stop dis machine."

"Got it," Cory nodded, approaching the computer console, placing their hands upon it and closing their eyes. Jessie and Cassidy looked at one another, then back at Cory as the figure stood there like a statue, apparently doing nothing to aid their circumstance. Jessie cast a glance toward the console. Windows were opening and shutting, portions of the

screen were being selected and moved, programs loading and terminating. If the watching figures hadn't known any better they would have thought the machine had gone utterly berserk. A second later and the gunk stopped rising up the capsules where Cassidy and Jessie were contained.

"That was close..." Cassidy remarked, looking down at where the sludgy substance had settled around her chin. "Any longer and I would have been eating the stuff."

"Wh-why did you help us?" Jessie spluttered, finally finding her voice. "After what we've done...what we've been part of."

"Because no one deserves ta be a part o' what's happening now," Errol responded coldly, picking up Kota.

"So why aren't you helping all those people in there?" Cassidy exclaimed angrily. "Get that kid to shut down the machines controlling the pods *they're* in!"

"Look, you got lucky," Errol's eyes narrowed. "Da process has already begun on dose poor guys. We ain't got a clue what kind of effect tryin' ta stop whatever Team Rocket's doin' to 'em would have!"

"He's got a point," Jessie said with resignation. Errol turned to leave.

"H-Hey!" Cassidy spluttered. "Aren't you going to free us?" There was a pause. "At least take Soluqua out of that horrid man's pocket so

she can free us!" Blinking in confusion, Ritchie directed his gaze and noticed Ein's unconscious body on the laboratory floor.

"Whoa! How long has he been there?" he grimaced, studying the painful red mark on the side of the professor's face while Cory searched the figure's lab coat. Errol uttered a distasteful snort, taking the Pokéball Cory was offering to him. He released Soluqua into the open before handing the sphere to the pokémon.

"Get outta here," he said. "All o' ya."

Jessie looked on in upset as her estranged companion strode from the room, with Cory in tow. Ritchie glanced at the two women with a concerned expression before silently making his way after his rescuers.

~**~~**~***~**~***

Giovanni had deliberately chosen to remain mobile, following the collapse of Dusty City's headquarters. Coasting the oceans surrounding Totto's shores in a grey, seafaring aircraft, the leader of Team Rocket had delivered his instructions from afar – overseeing proceedings with no less scrutiny than if he had been resident at the relocated base.

"So, Ms. Senja," Giovanni began, as his secretary placed a mug of coffee upon the desk. "What reports did my executives send with regards to my new army?"

"The soldiers are currently undergoing incubation," Matori remarked with a satisfied air. "There will no longer be any threats to Project Rebirth, sir."

"Pokémon that control space-time have been imprisoned at my command," Giovanni said, calmly but firmly. "I am *not* going to let the possible interference of *one* person destroy what I have been planning for so long. We remain vigilant."

"Yes, sir," Matori bowed slightly.

"Excellent," Giovanni replied. "You may go."

The articles were still open on his computer screen. He eyed them with a serious expression. While studying historical documents in order to define a technique to create the XenoChromic Generator, members of Team Rocket's research and development department had flagged not only the Generation Rite, but also a somewhat worrying prophecy that appeared to be related to it. Giovanni was not entirely convinced such predicted events would unfold in reality, yet he intended to find and stop this 'Ahnloka' regardless. After all, the Agrarian Seers may have been idiosyncratic, but they were not an organization to be trifled with.

A dark smile emerged upon the face of Team Rocket's leader – the first stage of his attack plan would ensure neither of these entities would cause him any problem.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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