



POKÉMON  
REBIRTH  
ULTIMATUM  
Endgame Edition

EPISODE FOUR

# Destiny Bond

Following the evening's intake of barely identifiable sustenance from the cafeteria, it was a ten-minute walk amongst the black clad masses to the sleeping quarters reserved for grunts and trainees. Not that Caley would have been able to tell at first glance - every corridor they passed through was the same depressing shade of dirty white, with slate coloured tiles upon the floor and minimal circular lights set in the ceiling, giving off a sickly yellow glow. Rows upon rows of curiously futuristic-looking doors were built into the sides of each office passageway - each one displaying a plaque engraved with a number to identify it to the occupant. After a short time of searching, Adam drew to a halt outside one of the doors before turning around to look expectantly at Caley.

"Well?" he inquired. "Don't you have somewhere to be getting to?"

"Uh..." Caley stalled, feeling a growing heaviness in the pit of his stomach. He hadn't taken into account the need for sleeping quarters, and Adam's sudden query had caught him well and truly off guard. However, before he had a chance to think of a reply, a loud snore was heard from inside Adam's room. The youth flinched in alarm before hurriedly rummaging in the pocket of his trousers and bringing out a card key. Following some agitated fumbling, Adam jabbed the key into the door's card reader with unnecessary force - causing it to bleep and obediently glide the door sideways.

Caley found himself gazing into a pokey little room filled mostly with two beds - one of which contained a man in his mid twenties with

bluish-lavender hair that reached to his chin. He had previously been sleeping soundly, before the gaseous hissing of the door as it slid open roused him into a hazy state of consciousness. Upon seeing Caley and Adam standing in the doorway, he yelped and tried to hide under the quilt.

"Who are *you*?" Adam screeched at the unexpected occupant. "And what are you doing in my room? How did you even *get* in my room?"

The man began to chuckle awkwardly, an obvious sign his methods of entering had been highly questionable. Eventually he resorted to a more apt explanation.

"Hey, cut me some slack," he protested. "I've been trying to find a place to stay ever since my old sleeping quarters was given to someone else. Jessie's got a room in the Elite Dorms now, but there's no accommodating spirit there for lab rattatas..."

"I didn't ask for your life story," Adam snapped rudely, while a look of shock and realisation spread across Caley's face. "My room ain't a shelter for the homeless."

"Hold on," Caley spoke up. "Is your name 'James'?"

"Yeah," the man eyed him in surprise. "How did you know?"

"Overheard some people talking about you," Caley replied. By the dawning expression of sadness and humiliation upon James' face, Caley

got the feeling the man knew just whom had been involved in such gossiping. "What have they been doing to you in that lab, anyway?"

"Mostly they give me injections," James mumbled, pulling off his long black glove to reveal a pattern of small red marks. "Then they put me under scanners, have me run on a treadmill, lift weights, that kind of stuff."

"And what are they trying to achieve, exactly?" Caley wrinkled his nose.

"Don't really know," James shrugged. "Professor Bohrgram tells me its intended for 'troop augmentation', but he's never gone into detail about it. And as far as I can tell, it hasn't augmented anything in me. Except dizziness in the morning, but I hardly see how *that'd* be useful." He let out a heavy sigh, his mind shuffling onto a new line of thought. "Sure, I could demand a new place to stay, better rates, decent meals. I'm just a coward, though. Too scared to stick up for myself, to find out how the superiors might react."

"Why did they take your room away in the first place?" Caley's brow furrowed in concern.

"A mission ended...rather badly," James sighed, struggling to dig up a set of painful memories once more. "Since I was designated team leader, I ended up taking the brunt of the blame for what happened. As for my work partners...they were re-assigned. I barely get to see Jessie these days now she works with Butch and Cassidy, and as for Meowth...I

worry about him. It's like he's vanished off the face of the earth."

"Man..." Caley shook his head sympathetically, watching James gaze at the ceiling with a depressed expression.

"Sure, I wish things were how they used to be," he remarked. "But more so than that...I wish they were *better*."

"Alright, you've had your mother's meeting," Adam concluded, out of the blue. "Now get lost."

There was an unsettled pause while Caley tried his hardest not to scold Adam for such a disrespectful attitude, lest it show the fact he was an outsider all the more. But James looked oddly unperturbed. It seemed by this point he had grown used to the youth's back-handedness, and was no longer intimidated by it.

"How about *you* get lost?" the man suggested.

"Wha?" it was Adam's turn to be caught off guard.

"It's called the 'pecking order', junior," James explained simply. "I got kicked out of my room, now I'm kicking you out of yours."

"You can't do that!" Adam spluttered angrily, though his tone of voice showed noticeable anxiousness, as if he wasn't entirely sure he had grounds to complain.

"And why not?" James smirked, thoroughly enjoying being on top of a situation for once.

"Because..." Adam searched fervently for a good answer. "Because that bed is Caley's!"

"It is?" Caley blinked, feeling a sharp pain course its way up his leg shortly after, as Adam stood on the toe of his boot. "Oh! It is!"

"I see," James deflated visibly. Taking it out on Adam was one thing - the youth's abrasive attitude made easy to do so without feeling guilty over it. But as for Caley - the first person who had talked to him civilly in a very long time - that was another matter entirely. He took to gazing pleadingly at the young man instead. "Well can I at least crash here for the night? It's almost 'lights out' and there's no way I'll find somewhere else to sleep in time."

"That's not *my* problem!" Adam snapped. "Maybe if you'd been a better operative then-"

Before Adam was able to finish his sentence, a loud voice was heard from a speaker installed in the corridor outside.

"Twenty-one hundred hours! Lights out!"

This was succeeded by a faint series of disconcerting bleeps from the passageway outside, as the door to every operative's room locked in unison, and their solitary ceiling lamps grew dim. Adam cursed under his breath, his vision having been swiftly plunged into blackness.

"I hate it when that happens," he muttered, turning in the general direction of where he expected James to be. "Well, I guess you'll have to stay here. But *one* of you is gonna have to sleep on the floor."

The latter part of the sentence had been aimed at James, but the man did not respond - instead quickly feigning slumber. Silence descended, while Caley sat upon the floor and tried to find a comfortable way to arrange himself. Thoughts of exploring the base in an attempt to find the adapter engine and kidnapped pokémon played through the back of his mind. But after all the excitement and insanity that had happened, he felt it best to wait.

"If I were you, I'd shove him out," Adam commented as he removed his boots and flung himself into the opposite bed.

"I'll be okay," Caley insisted, shifting himself into a horizontal position while propping the bag he'd been carrying under his head as a makeshift pillow. "After all those experiments, James could probably do with a bed more than me."

"You're a weird guy," came the amused remark. "You really are."

Caley allowed himself a slight smile at this - maybe Adam was growing to like his unexpected new companion. Not that they were going to get much time to become acquainted. Tomorrow, Caley was determined to find the WaveOne adapter engine, Kiko, and the other pokémon that had been so unfairly taken away from their trainers. For now, the young man needed to calm his free-wheeling thoughts and try to get some sleep. But it was proving more of a challenge than expected, and not because of the cold, hard surface Caley found himself lying upon.

An unsettling atmosphere had crept into the room - a thick, stifling dread which infiltrated Caley's very being and generated a great discomfort within him. It was the very same discomfort the young man had recalled experiencing in the presence of the mutant togetic. Only this felt stronger, more violent, more untamed.

Suddenly the mattress to the left of Caley appeared to take on a life of its own, springing into the air an inch or so before returning to the bed frame with a volley of agitated creaks. James tossed back and forth under the blanket - his body movements were frantic and jerky, as if wrestling with something large, though the darkness made it impossible to see just what. Whatever the creature was, it certainly had great strength and ferocity. Sounds of tearing fabric and cracking joints ensued, coupled with an amalgam of pained, fearful human cries and animalistic vocal retaliation. Caley wanted to sit up and at least try to intercept whatever was going on, but the terrifying aura kept him rooted to the floor, unable to react. Before he was allowed to conjure up any semblance of bravery, there was a grinding, screechy hiss as the door to the room slid ajar against its will, allowing a dark shape out into the faintly green-tinted corridor beyond.

"Wh-what the hell was that?" Adam inquired with uncharacteristic timidity, lowering the edge of his blanket from where he'd been covering.

"I don't know," Caley murmured, sitting upright. The repressing

aura had vanished now, returning a fragment of wherewithal and allowing him freedom to move. "But whatever it was, I think it took James."

"No loss there then," Adam sniffed in a more typical unconcerned fashion, only to sense Caley's disapproving glare boring into him. "Well what can *I* do about it?"

"You said you have a pokémon, right?" Caley waited for clarification, and received a grunt of acknowledgement. "Then we need to intercept that creature, and rescue James."

"What? There's an after hours curfew!" Adam hissed. "If we're discovered walking around after lights out, there'll be major consequences!"

"And what, there *won't* be major consequences once they see *that*?" Caley replied in similar tones, motioning to the gap where the door had been partly shoved aside. The faint green emergency lighting from the hallway picked out the slight indentations upon the door's edge, causing Adam to cringe. "You're going to be in the spotlight whether you like it or not, so we might as well make something useful out of it."

Adam said no more, instead uttering a low begrudging noise which indicated his dislike of the fact Caley was right. With that, the two figures slipped out into the corridor where Adam reluctantly unclipped the single black and white Pokéball from his belt and enlarged it.

"Get out here, Cyzel," he mumbled, activating the release button and causing a momentary blast of white light upon the tiles in front of



While operatives of all ranks slumbered unaware, Team Rocket's science team continued to work unyieldingly several floors below. They had a schedule to keep, after all - their executive superior Astor Crotale had demanded the obelisk was to be up and running, with the channeller installed and the adapter engine in functioning condition, by the following night. It was never a good idea to disappoint him.

As the technicians performed multiple test runs of their equipment and assessed the results, elsewhere in the laboratory, a fifteen year old girl wearing pale green overalls dunked a mop half-heartedly into a bucket of lukewarm soapy water.

"Late shift again, Denise?" a researcher mused teasingly from behind a nearby desk.

"When *isn't* it?" she groaned, removing the mop and sliding it across the dingy tiled floor. It was bitterly frustrating to be reminded of the demeaning status she found herself in. "I don't see why they had to stop me from working on all the projects. I'm still as capable at designing and building stuff as I've *always* been."

"Ah but you weren't willing to cooperate with building the obelisk, were you?" the researcher grinned in a patronizing fashion. "That's all they're interested in doing right now. That and..." he paused, as if the thought was quite distasteful, "Professor Bohrogram's 'Human Pokémon Power' Project. But that idea is so demented it'll never fly. He's just wasting resources."

"Glad we agree on *something*," Denise rolled her eyes. "So that's it? I'm just 'cleaner lady' now? Surely there's a more decent job I can do!"

"Of course there is," the researcher nodded, his voice taking on a soft and ominous tone as he shut the drawer in his desk and turned to leave. "All in due time."

Denise watched the figure stride out of view and furrowed her brow slightly, while distractedly mopping the same area of tiles in front of her. The way the researcher had uttered those last few words had not been re-assuring in the slightest. But what exactly had he been implying? There had to have been a forthcoming set of events he knew of that she didn't. Not that there was any way for her to check. Any memos of such events were stored inside laboratory computers or locked away within desks, and with security cameras tracking her every move, Denise could not risk being seen attempting to break into either. She slumped against the handle of her mop dispiritedly, pondering an unknown future.

*Why...?*

An unknown voice echoed inside of Denise's head, causing her to let go of the mop in shock. Swinging round, the youth anxiously tried to locate where the voice had come from, but could see nobody.

*Why are you here?*

"Wh-what?" Denise spluttered out loud, twitching her head from left to right. The inquiry had seemed more puzzled than forceful, but its reverberating tones within her mind - as opposed to the outside environment where one usually heard sounds - had the young technician very much on edge.

*Why are YOU here?* the voice put more emphasis on her personal presence. *Your heart...it is unlike the others'.*

"My heart? How did you-?" Denise paused, suddenly aware that this was no ordinary being she was conversing with. She decided to try using its way of speaking - hoping that it would still be able to hear her, while any scientists nearby would not. *Where are you?*

*Up. Look up,* the voice urged. Denise obeyed, glancing into the heights of the laboratory where the towering pillars and consoles gave way to a more uniform arrangement of metal sheeting and insulated pipes. There, nestled amongst the sparse remnants of scientific endeavour, was a single black container with a transparent glass front. Inside this container, a small form gently bobbed up and down inside its synthesized liquids - a pale, cream-coloured feline pokémon with elongated, spiked pink ears and green, jewel-like tags that dangled from its cheeks and forehead. Despite this eerie, almost hypnotic movement accented by the waving of its two slender tails, the pokémon's eyes were tight shut in a state of deep unconsciousness.

"Subject M1N4CH1," Denise gasped, before reverting to mental conversation once more. *Minachi... Yes, this was the pokémon Team Rocket had engineered as a living dynamo for its new energy-siphoning machine. Part mew, part jirachi - such DNA had been chosen for its resilience to high levels of Infinity Energy. Still, the possibility of one matter evaded Denise. I'm sure the biologists sedated you - how are you still able to talk to me?*

*They do not fully understand the power of psychics, Minachi responded. I may be sleeping, but I can still sense what is happening around me. I have been 'watching' in this way for some time now - learning the feelings, the knowledge, the morals of those nearby. There was a pause in her speech, as if she was attempting to figure something out. I know you are not like most of the others. But I do not understand why you are here.*

*I... Denise trailed off, feeling the unmistakable wave of guilt and remorse welling up within her yet again. I never realised this was a place of evil. A Team Rocket agent lied to me, she said I would become a great technician here. All I wanted to do was invent new machines...to help people! Not dreadful things like this...*

*They see that, Minachi told her, almost as if she was attempting to re-assure. They see your intelligence. But your morals... they are displeased with your morals. The time approaches - I know they are close to finishing what they started.*

*The obelisk?* Denise blinked.

Yes, Minachi affirmed, her mind voice soft and wispy like that of an audible sigh. *And I am powerless to object. But I can still reach out to you with words. You still have a chance to escape.*

*Escape what?* Denise found her limbs suddenly becoming tense with anxiousness.

*They want your intelligence, Denise,* Minachi intoned emotionlessly. *They don't want your heart. Their plans...are to close it.*

"But...but..." Denise's voice finally escaped her lips, hoarse and broken. "There's only one way they could do that. The...the..."

She couldn't bring herself to mention it, but she knew this fate all too well. Its existence rippled in frightened, hushed whispers amongst operatives and scientists alike. A machine thought to have claimed the lives of countless Team Rocket operatives, and the wills of even more. It was known as the Personality Reprogramming Optical Control Unit, and it was a source of deep consternation for many.

*I am powerless to object,* Minachi repeated, aware of Denise's rising hysteria. *But you have one chance at freedom. Listen to me...the red-haired human owns a complete heart - he is not of this place. Find him.*

Find *him*...

With that, Denise fled the laboratory in tears. No longer did her temporary demotion and ideas plagiarised by fellow technicians bear any meaning to her. Panic flooded the young girl's mind, blotting out the majority of what Minachi had said, along with all vestiges of sense or direction. Had the creature really been telling the truth? The words felt so sincere, even apologetic. Yet even that didn't seem to matter now. Denise was desperate to run, but there was no way she would be able to leave without being caught. What could she possibly do?

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"What can we do that's any better than the guards already out on patrol?" Adam spluttered for the eighth time, as he and Caley followed Cyzel through the passageways of Team Rocket's Headquarters, faintly illuminated by sparse green emergency lighting. "They're trained for incidents like these! They'll stop that creature without breaking a sweat." He hunched his shoulders at this point. "Either that or they'll stop *us*."

His sentence eked out into nothingness as the adolescent pair drew up to the exit of the dormitory wing, to find the sentries and their pokémon slumped against each other, badly burnt and motionless. Caley checked for signs of life while Cyzel checked for traces of scent. The arcumese returned to his trainer's side with a firm nod, indicating that their targeted culprit had indeed been responsible for the damage.

"We're the only ones who realise this thing is out on the prowl," Caley explained. "Against everyone else, it has the element of surprise."

"It can breathe fire *too*?" Adam tried to hide his quaking as he eyed the burned guards. "That's not good..."

"But it does give us a better idea of what we're up against," Caley assured him, walking further down the corridor. "Thankfully these guards and pokémon are still alive. We'd better keep going, before anyone else gets taken down."

"Ugh... don't be a hero, man!" Adam protested, returning to Caley's side as he reached an intersection of passageways. "No one is going to thank you for it, believe me!"

"I'm not asking for thanks," Caley shook his head in disbelief. "I'm trying to rescue James!"

Just then, Caley let out a cry of alarm as something made impact with him from the left, throwing him heavily onto the floor. Glancing across in a mixture of unease and bleariness, the young man's eyes met with the watery, tear-stricken face of an unfamiliar figure who had run into his side just a few seconds before.

"What's wrong?" he spluttered instinctively, forgetting just where he happened to be, and that concern wasn't a freely-available commodity. "What happened?"

Denise sat frozen to the spot in complete silence. Though her initial shock at having run into someone was starting to wear off, the shock of having someone taking a genuine interest in her wellbeing still remained, as did her deep upset at her current circumstances. Something about the figure before her felt kindly and welcoming, urging Denise to express just what it was that tormented her.

"I don't know what to do..." she descended into sobs, to which her male listeners exchanged awkward and puzzled looks.

"Do about what?" Caley inquired worriedly.

"What are you even doing *up* at this hour?" Adam chimed in, with a conclusive sniff of disapproval.

"I could ask *you* the same question," Denise frowned, causing Adam to become stiff with discomfort. "Not that it'd make much difference to me. I'm..." she broke down again. "I'm blacklisted. They want to use me as a puppet. Get rid of my morals so I do what I'm told without question."

"But why?" Adam spluttered, his face overcome with horror. "That whole mind-messing thing's only reserved for really skilled operatives and science geeks. You're just a cleaner!"

"I was restricted to cleaning duties a few days ago," Denise told him darkly. "I'd been one of the top mechanics in the department up until that point. But once they started working on that...that *thing*, I flat out refused to have anything to do with it." She looked up with a distressed

expression. "It uses a pokémon as a living processor. Just hearing of such cruelty hurt me deep. But of course, *they* wouldn't understand. You have to *have* a heart to sympathize with another person's."

Denise's eyes suddenly widened. In this moment of restored calm, Minachi's words had hit her like an oncoming train. *A complete heart*. This young man had *genuinely* sympathized with her! No one bar those in the B-Rank's old Rec Room had acted in such a way. Was he the very person Minachi told her about?

It was then that Denise acted quite impulsively - something which was most unlike her. Reaching forward in one swift motion, she snatched the dark cap from atop Caley's head, causing the young man to utter a yelp of surprise. As she did this, a black and yellow object previously hidden under the cap was thrust into the air, and in turn, caught by Adam's outstretched hands.

"What are these?" he asked aloud to no one in particular, blinking suspiciously as he studied the glasses. Denise took to studying Caley's nervous face instead, and the red hair with its short, sleek forelock.

"Yes..." she started smiling. "Yes! You *are* the one!"

"The one what?" Adam looked up.

"The one 'not of this place'," Denise exclaimed. "You're not part of Team Rocket!"

"I...I don't know what you're talking about," Caley stammered.

"That's cute, but really not all that convincing," Denise tilted her head with a giggle. "Hey, don't look so upset. I'm not going to tell anyone." She looked at Adam, whose face was drenched in a mixture of stupefied horror. "I'm guessing this guy wasn't aware of your little secret."

"This explains so much," Adam face-palmed, more out of disbelief for him not realising than anything else. "The kindness. The concern. Attempting plans that are way over your head..."

"Plans, huh?" Denise looked intrigued. "Well I should have figured you wouldn't have snuck in here without a reason. What *have* you been cooking up?"

Caley heaved a sigh. He really hadn't wanted anyone to know about his identity, not even those who seemed more morally inclined. There was just so much that could go wrong with it. But he didn't have to reveal everything he had planned.

"There's a creature on the prowl out here," he remarked. "It broke into Adam's room and kidnapped James, and I have to find it before something bad happens to him."

"James?" Denise's mouth fell open. "Tall guy? Chin-length lavender hair?"

"Has a silly posh accent and couldn't catch a pikachu if he tried, yeah, that one," Adam concluded dryly. Denise gave him a slight withering look.



semi-darkened corridors of the Team Rocket headquarters, with Caley, Denise and Adam in close pursuit. Wandering far from the dormitory wing, they slipped past the training areas and lecture halls, encountering one pair of downed sentries after another - a guaranteed sign they were heading in the right direction. The sentries lay in various crumpled states of injury as a consequence of their retaliation, or lack thereof. Denise insisted on checking over them all to make sure nothing particularly serious had occurred. For the most part, she had cleared her findings with a nod of satisfaction.

"Hey, these are pretty cool," Adam remarked in impressed tones. Caley had been allowing him to wear the T-5 Pokédex glasses in order to stop him from fretting so much. "Weren't very effective on looking up info on Cyzel, though."

"I've been meaning to ask about that," Denise spoke up. "How did you manage to get that arcumese? There are security cameras all over the laboratory level."

"Well I didn't nick it, if *that's* what you're implying," Adam muttered, handing the glasses back to Caley. "My dad's an admin."

"Wait, *you're* Darius Mayhew's Adam?" Denise raised an eyebrow. She had been expecting such offspring to have been older, less scrawny, and more heroic in nature, with the bragging she had overheard from the man. Evidently, in light of the youth presented before her, this was more exaggerated than not.

"I'm not happy about it, okay?" Adam retorted, misinterpreting the expression. Denise gasped from where she stood, a few steps up the corridor. "Yeah, big surprise. The son of an admin would rather be-

"I don't think that's why she was shocked, Adam," Caley pointed out, stepping aside. Two more sentries were draped messily across the tiles. At first glance, they appeared no more harmed than the many other pairs the trio had come across throughout the night. Upon closer inspection, it became apparent that the right-hand sentry had been subjected to more retaliation than the left one. Caley approached and cautiously removed the figure's hat, causing the shaggy remnants of magenta hair to spill forth about the wearer's cheeks.

"Whoa," Adam blinked as he wandered over and looked at the tufts of hair scattered across the floor. "She looks like she stuck her head in a blender."

"This is...this is Jessie!" Caley deduced in horrified tones, elaborating for Denise's benefit. "Someone that James used to work with, before they were split up."

"That houndoom is out of control..." Denise shuddered, studying the burn marks across the woman's face and body. Another howl echoed its way through the empty corridors, throwing the youths into a tense state of apprehension.

"Well I think we're closer to it," Caley acknowledged. "Where next, Cyzel?"

"Mrrrrgh!" Cyzel responded, turning sharply right before striding down an intersecting passage. The trio were quick to pursue, while Caley made sure Denise didn't leave his sight. Adam skittered along behind, desperate not to become isolated in the main corridor where other sentries, or worse, may discover him.

"Looks to me like we're heading straight for the Elite Rank Canteen," Adam muttered, glancing around at the walls decorated in framed photographs of various high-achieving operatives. "Just like that lot to plaster their egos all over the plac- oof!" The adolescent staggered backwards a few paces, having walked straight into Caley who had stopped dead in his tracks - eyes wide and quaking. "Hey! What's up with *you*?"

"I d-don't know," the young man stammered, trying not to panic at the sudden loss of control over his own body. "This was the same thing that happened to me back in your room, when the houndoom first arrived. It's not quite fear...and yet I can't move any further than this."

"You don't need to try act tough in front of us," Adam shrugged, as Denise retraced her steps and approached Caley from the front with a concerned expression. "If you're scared, you're scared. Just come on out with it."

"I'm serious!" Caley looked a little frustrated. "I'm stuck! It's almost like telekinesis, only not."

"It's okay, Caley. Honest," Denise tried to placate her companions

before things got out of hand. "I can take it from here. But I'm going to need Cyzel's help. Can you tell him to listen to me, Adam?"

"Sure, have a field day," Adam muttered. Denise turned to Cyzel with a warm smile on her face, an expression the arcumese reciprocated with a grin revealing many pointy teeth.

"You heard the guy," she said brightly. "Let's go."

"Mrrgh-mrowrr," Cyzel nodded, emboldened by Denise's confident spirit. As the young technician and her temporary pokémon accomplice walked towards the Elite Cafeteria doorway, Adam stood and watched with some trepidation. He knew what the right thing would be to do at this point, and he knew what he'd rather do. However, the uncomfortable feeling of Caley's pleading eyes boring into the back of his head could not be ignored. Eventually, the youth grumbled something under his breath about 'annoying chivalry' and dashed off in pursuit.

Carefully opening the cafeteria door, Denise gazed in shock at the once-pristine dining area now savaged by the bestial actions of the one who had last entered it. Padded chairs were clawed, charred and scattered about the hall, while one of the serving hatches' shutters had a gaping hole in it - the plastic still smouldering from where it had been melted by powerful flame breath. Clattering reverberated from the expansive kitchen beyond, indicating a definite, and very hungry presence.

"Keep quiet," Denise whispered to Adam, as the trio crept between the rows of blackened seating. "We need to take it by surprise, houndooms are very quick on their feet."

"But what if it *smells* that we're here?" Adam hissed. Peering through the gap in the shutter, Cyzel took it into his own paws to examine the situation. The current state of the kitchen proved no better than that of the dining area outside. Splodgy stains of undefined origin daubed the walls, while claw marks and paw prints marred the previously shiny surfaces. Various food storage containers, once full, were now strewn across the floor - the remnants of their contents still present on the tiles.

Standing in the far corner with its head buried deep in a vat of cooked rice and vegetables was a blue-furred, canine pokémon resembling a houndoom. Unlike a houndoom, the pokémon's body was larger and more muscular, with an impressive spiked neckpiece and bony ridges that ran along the length of its back, onto its tail. The two horns, which usually curved round a houndoom's head, grew straight upward with only a slight bend. While only the front legs now had rings wrapped around them, all four paws sported red claws that looked as if they could deal some considerable damage.

"Since when do houndooms look like that?" Adam questioned in hushed tones from a further distance than his arcumese companion.

"Good question," Denise murmured. "It's certainly not a hybrid...could be a genetic variant, maybe belonging to an Elite or a

Super."

"And it escaped?" Adam inquired.

"I don't think so," Denise replied solemnly. "You said you were the son of an Admin, right? This houndoom may well have been sent to take you hostage...only according to Caley, it got James instead..." She bit her lip as Adam gulped. "But where could it have taken him before it started on this messy rampage?"

"Wherever it is," Adam said. "I think we'd better try stop that rampage before we look any further."

"Smart decision," Denise agreed. "So... what attacks can arcumese do?"

"I don't know," Adam murmured, looking awkward. "We've never battled before."

"Never...?" Denise trailed off and groaned slightly. Even in training, it was unlikely that Adam would have been allowed to work alongside Cyzel. After all, genetic pokémon had enhanced abilities and would prove an unfair match to other rookie pokémon. Fortunately, she still had one of the modified V-2 Pokédexes that all technicians were initially given.

"Okay, 'Crush Claw', 'Extremespeed', 'Howl' and 'Blast Burn'," she read, following a quick scan of Cyzel. "A fair enough set of moves. We want to try minimizing further damage here, so let's just use the most direct attack available. Cyzel, Crush Claw!"

As the arcumese leapt through the hole with a furious cry, the houndoom lifted its rice-covered muzzle from the container and was cuffed sharply by Cyzel's outstretched paw, sending it flailing onto its back. With a snarl of anger, the canine shook its head, reared upon its hind legs and lunged with open, sparking jaws at its attacker.

"That's a Thunder Fang attack!" Denise exclaimed. "Get moving!"

Cyzel vanished in a burst of speed, causing a rack of tea towels to flutter wildly in the ensuing current of air that followed. Its target lost, the houndoom yelped and skidded into the cupboard that Cyzel had been standing in front of.

"Wow, Cyzel sure can move," Denise noted in admiration. Adam had broken into fits of chuckling over the houndoom's seemingly fruitless attempts to retaliate.

"What a pathetic excuse for an Elite pokémon!" he exclaimed, a little too loudly for his own good. "Sure, it's great when no one fights back, but one little challenge and its getting its arse handed to it!"

Adam had barely finished his sentence before the houndoom fixed its dark red eyes on him, causing the youth to utter a squeak of horrified regret. With a vicious snarl, the blue canine sprung forth from the kitchen and charged heavily into Adam - a seething flurry of claws and teeth. As Adam cried out in a mixture of pain and fear, Cyzel re-emerged from his rapid evasion and leapt to the boy's aid - pulling the houndoom away and wrenching it across the cafeteria into a nearby table.

"Next time, try keeping your opinions to yourself," Denise remarked dryly, while Adam clasped at a point on his arm where the houndoom's long, electrically-charged fangs had pierced the fabric of his uniform. "If you can *possibly* help it."

"Stupid mutt," Adam moaned bitterly. "Now I'm bleeding..." He glanced up at Denise, a frightened look upon his usually stern face, but the young girl was busy deciding her next course of action.

"Brute strength may not be our friend in this match up," she pondered thoughtfully, watching Cyzel sparring with the houndoom amongst the dining area furniture. "We need type advantage."

"But we have no type advantage!" Adam insisted. "At least not attack wise."

"Then we'll have to fake it," Denise replied firmly, glancing up at the ceiling as a smile reformed upon her face. "Cyzel, use Blast Burn...on those sprinklers up there!"

"MrrghROWR!" Cyzel exclaimed approvingly, ducking from a retaliatory move before lifting his head high and unleashing a plume of flame at the ceiling. Water gushed down from above, dousing the houndoom which bayed in desperation.

Seizing his chance, Cyzel unsheathed his claws which began to glow, and sprung forward in a united Crush Claw Extremespeed attack. The resulting impact was enough to overthrow the weakened houndoom, which collapsed to the sodden carpet, unconscious.

"Finally, I can move again," Caley exhaled with relief as he entered the cafeteria. Then the true extent of the situation hit him. "Whoa...what did you guys *do* in here? It looks like a tornado passed through!" Stunned from the display, neither Denise nor Adam had been paying attention to the water raining upon them from the damaged sprinkler above.

"Something like that," Denise chuckled, stepping away from the jet of water as Cazel shook himself vigorously in an attempt to loose the droplets from his matted fur. "Thanks to our arcumese friend here, we were able to stop the houndoom. But I'm not sure what to do now. With how much noise that fight created, I imagine it won't be long before someone is sent here to investigate."

"It doesn't seem to be moving," Caley remarked, taking a wary step towards the houndoom which lay drenched upon the floor. "Do you think it's dead?"

Denise walked over with an anxious expression before leaning down and carefully placing two fingers upon the houndoom's neck. The creature's pulse was unusually rapid for that of a fainted pokémon, which puzzled her a good deal. Retracting her hand, Denise gasped at the sight of a large tuft of matted blue fur that had become attached to the ends of her fingers. No longer stilled, the houndoom's body was convulsing erratically - each limb appearing to have taken on a life of its own in the process.

"Something freaky's goin' on here!" Adam grimaced, unable to

take his eyes from the scene, regardless. The houndoom's appendages had begun to stretch outward in a manner which could have been mistaken for a natural evolution process - except that it was not accompanied by the usual blinding glow which a pokémon's body emitted during evolution, only an agonising repertoire of crunches and squelches. None of the adolescent spectators could utter a word as they witnessed the pointed tail retract into the base of the houndoom's spine and its partially fur-covered paws splay into five lengthier digits. Blue fur grew longer atop the metamorphosing creature's head, turning coarser and lighter as it did so. As the gut-churning sounds and signs of transformation ebbed away, the being's muzzle constricted, flattening into a more defined nose and mouth.

"This has got to be a nightmare," Denise stammered, her pale hands shaking. Caley recoiled in alarm and drew breath at what was now sprawled on the carpet before them. It was obvious that what the pokémon had 'evolved' into had not been another pokémon.

"It's *James*? The pokémon is James? How could that be possible?" Caley spluttered, before realisation suddenly dawned. "Oh man...of course. James had been a test subject in Team Rocket's laboratory. All those injections they were giving him must have led to this." He shook his head in disgust. "Pokémon enhancement is bad enough, but what does Team Rocket hope to achieve by turning humans into pokémon?"

"It bet it's part of that ridiculous 'Human Pokémon Power' research that Professor Bohrgram has been working on," Denise shuddered,

glancing in another direction to conceal her awkwardness at having seen James naked. "I remember the memos on it, suggesting that humans with pokémon-like abilities really exist. I for one think the whole idea is scientifically unsound...but it sure isn't stopping that madman from trying to recreate the concept artificially."

"Really, now..." Caley murmured distantly. Whether it existed or not, the notion of having powers similar to those of pokémon sounded quite awesome.

"But James...James of *all* people," Denise murmured brokenly. "He didn't deserve to be caught up in such work."

Voices were heard from down the corridor. The events of the previous battle had indeed been enough to draw the attention of sentries nearby, who were now coming to investigate. Caley flinched as Denise grabbed his shoulders - gazing into the young man's eyes with a frantic, pleading expression. She was no longer concerned for her own blacklisted future, only that of the one she admired for his tenacity - now vulnerable and helpless to the threat that swiftly approached.

"We can't let them find James here!" Denise begged. "Just think of the torturous things they will do if they discover their experiments have produced results. I...I can't bear to think about it."

Caley nodded sadly, before motioning to Denise to take off the cleaner's apron she had forgotten to remove since fleeing the laboratory.



dread-stricken mind had been re-assured that James wasn't about to turn into a houndoom again any time soon, exhaustion quickly took over, and the youth fell fast asleep. But Denise and Caley were too unsettled to join him. Instead, they talked - about their hobbies, their dreams, and their lives prior to the immersion into Team Rocket.

With notable guilt and regret, Denise weaved a picture of a life without care, growing up in a high-class mansion in one of the richest estates in Johto, Palm Hills. She spoke of how her mother, a fashion designer by trade, had wanted her to pursue the same line of work - to construct glorious outfits for the enjoyment of those as wealthy as themselves. But Denise had found the computer systems business of her father much more interesting, and had longed to invent technical marvels, not those of clothing. Her mother had strongly disapproved, insistent that such work was not becoming of a young lady such as herself. As a result, Denise had felt she was being funnelled toward a career she neither wanted, nor liked.

"When I met someone I'd *thought* was a representative for a school of engineering, I was so bowled over that I forgot to question their motives," Denise murmured. "She was full of compliments for my work, that the whole thing just went to my head."

"I can see how that might happen," Caley nodded sympathetically, handling the Pokédex glasses that Professor Werty had given him.

"And what about you?" Denise inquired, eyeing the glasses. "What

had *you* been doing before you arrived here?"

"Well, I had planned to go sightseeing...visit the Kemnon Tower," the young man explained slowly. "But with the way things are turning out, I'm starting to wonder if I'll get to do that."

"Actually, I'd been meaning to ask you," Denise said. "What made you come here? It surely wasn't to rescue James..."

"It's true. Not initially, at least. A *lot* of crazy things have happened to me since I left my home in Praela Village," Caley began. "I was attacked by one of those genetic pokémon while on a bus to Retyrn Port and Kiko, my grumpig companion, was kidnapped. Then I ended up involved in a hostage scenario in Nashgri City while Team Rocket operatives stole the WaveOne adapter engine - the very machine those scientists are trying to get to work with that obelisk thing of theirs."

"Wow," Denise chuckled faintly. "Sounds like you have a knack for being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Maybe," Caley smiled, though the expression was tinted with sadness. "It sounds stupid, I know, but I'd come here to get Kiko and the adapter engine back...along with a uvium belonging to the Retyrn Port Nurse Joy's daughter."

"Not stupid," Denise shook her head. "A little reckless, maybe. But I think it's admirable."

"'Admirable' won't help me rescue what I came for, though," Caley

sighed. "I wasn't aware just how horrific things were in here. Not to mention there were people like you."

A peaceful calm filled the room, while Caley sat and listened to the slow breathing of the youth tucked up under the blanket behind him, combined with the faint snores of the older man in the bed a few feet away. He hated pessimism, yet his current situation really did seem hopeless.

"You know..." Denise began tentatively. "It *might* be possible to pull off what you had in mind....if there were more of us involved."

"What?" Caley spluttered. Dragging more operatives into the equation was not his idea of a good plan. "It's awkward enough that you and Adam found out!"

"Why?" Denise frowned. "We haven't done anything to reveal your identity, have we?"

"Well no..." Caley faltered at Denise's angry and partially upset expression. "But who's to say these others *won't*?"

"If you find the right ones, they won't," Denise stated. "They *are* in here - you just need to look in the right places."

She paused, awaiting a response, but receiving none despite her firm conviction. Her companion's lack of trust disappointed her somewhat, despite part of her having expected it. Maybe, given a little time to think it over, he would find the logic and sense in her advice.

"I admire your determination," Denise concluded. "I really do. But...your chances of success will be pretty slim if you go at this plan alone, Caley."

**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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