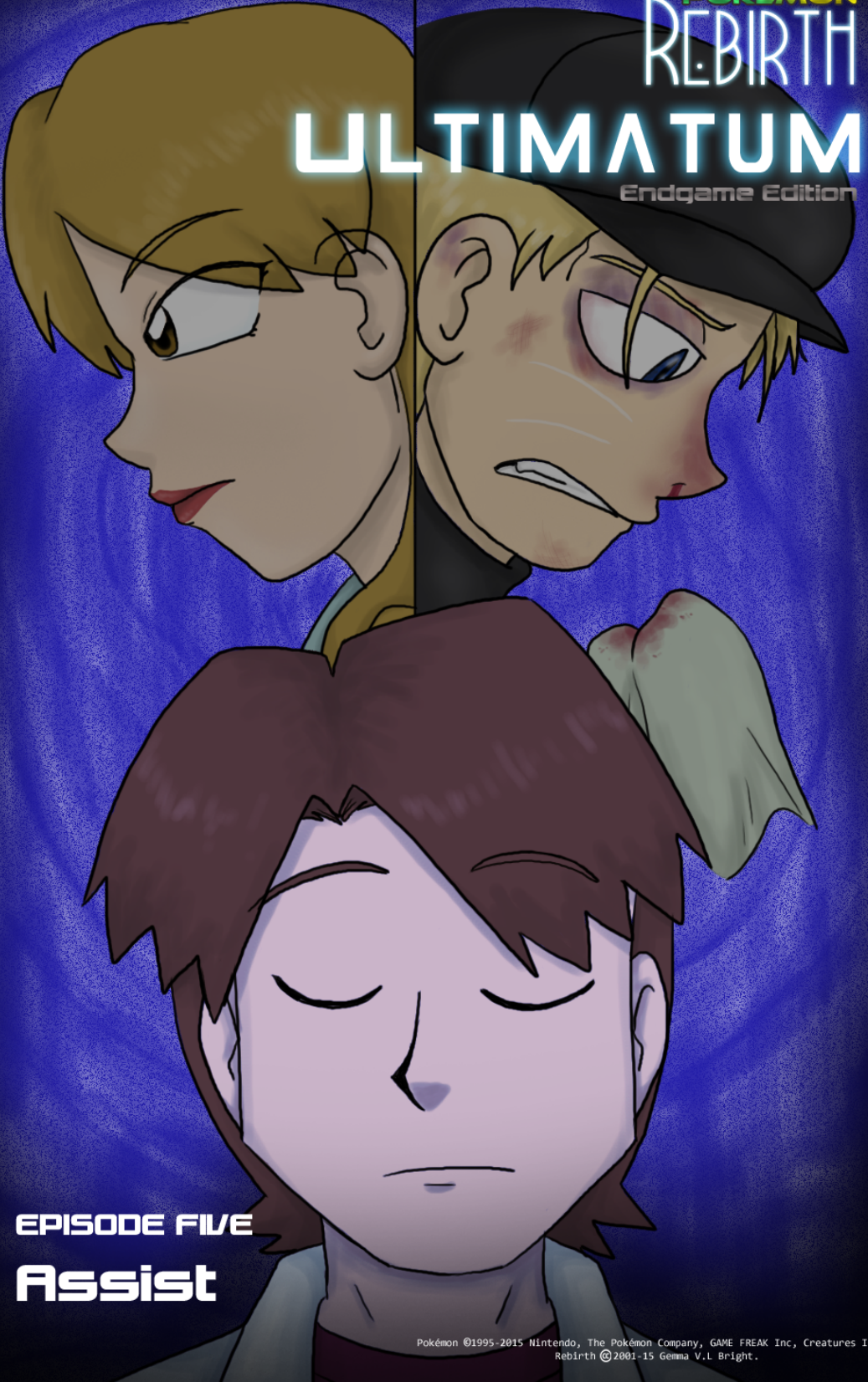


POKÉMON
REBIRTH

ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE FIVE

Assist

The meeting bell rang shrilly that morning, summoning a trail of bleary-eyed figures of all ranks into the corridors where they trudged in the direction of the auditorium - legs dragging and arms dangling loosely by their sides like zombies in monochrome attire. Amongst this crowd of semi-woken operatives were a small group of familiar figures, each with their own distinct expression and gait. James led the way, dressed in one of the grunt uniforms Denise had managed to retrieve from the supply floor's clothing room prior to the meeting summons. The man was a picture of deep sadness and regret - he hadn't wished to walk in front of his companions, unable to see any of their faces, but following a shaky but detailed explanation from Denise as to the previous night's events, James had resigned himself to this position amongst the group. If it set their minds at ease to see him in a relative state of wellness, then he felt it better to oblige.

Caley followed a short distance behind, the heavy bags under his eyes dictating his lack of sleep. Denise's face reflected a similar appearance, though she had drifted in and out of slumber during the early hours prior to sunrise. She had exchanged her cleaner's outfit for the other grunt uniform she had obtained, in order to blend in amongst the crowd. Adam, who had replaced his torn trainee overshirt with an unscathed one, kept to the back of the group - an expression of unsettled suspicion playing upon his face. As far as he was concerned, the more distance there was between him and the goof-turned-violent-mutant-pokémon, the better.

The auditorium once again sprung into life – this time with a wave of anxious conversation - while Caley, Denise, Adam and James positioned themselves at the far end of one of the upper rows. Despite the thrum of chatter, loud peals of dramatic crying were still audible. It was a voice which Caley and James recognized - the lattermost of these sitting bolt upright and attempting to seek out where the crying was coming from. James soon found the answer, upon sight of Butch, Cassidy and their tag-along accomplice Jessie who were sitting a few rows further down.

"My hair! My haaaair!" Jessie wailed uncontrollably. "My greatest asset, ruined! How could this happen to me?" Her expressions of misery turned to fury in an instant. "What jealous punk would be so sick-minded as to destroy the very pinnacle of my beauty?"

"Beauty?" Cassidy raised her eyebrows as she murmured to herself. "That's pushing it."

"Would you keep it down?" Butch groaned at Jessie, who was now gazing into a compact mirror with teary eyes. "Collateral Support said their order of 'Hair-Be-There' would be arriving any day soon - there's no need to make a mountain out of a diglett hill."

"You have no room to talk!" Jessie snapped, looking as if she was seriously considering giving Butch a fan-orientated reprimand. "Your bangs look like they were cut by a trapinch."

Nearby, other operatives cautiously theorized amongst themselves

- wondering just what on earth could have delivered the scratches, burns and considerable hair loss upon Jessie's person.

"Oh Jessie..." James whispered as he observed these interactions, hiding the guiltiness in his eyes under the peak of his black cap. "I'm sorry."

Caley watched the events in unsettled silence. Even though James could not remember what he had done while a pokémon, the young man was pretty sure that some of the houndoom's reactions had been governed by James' subconscious feelings. Why else would Jessie have received more of the houndoom's attacks than the other sentries? Why else would Adam have been attacked at all? Glancing at the youth's bandaged arm, Caley shook his head and wondered why his companion acted more rudely towards James than most people he had come across.

"Quiet down!" yelled Eris Radwell, who had walked onto the stage amidst a cacophony of worry and speculation. The executive's forceful exclamations had no effect on lowering the volume of her audience, however - the negative emotion amongst the operatives was so strong that their agitated conversations persisted regardless. At least they did, until the shock of hearing the amplified sound of Astor Crotale's voice demanding silence. This time, Eris was the one who stepped up to the podium.

"We are aware how you all feel about this sudden and unexplained

attack..." she began. "We don't know what it was that happened to be prowling the underground apartment block last night, though reports from several pairs of sentries describe a fire-breathing quadruped of some kind. Damage looks to have been restricted to the A Rank, which is both good news and bad news. Good news for the operations of our base, bad news for provisions of food to all concerned." Eris paused to clear her throat, while flipping a page over on her clipboard. "Therefore! As the A Rank Cafeteria is temporarily closed for further investigations, Elite operatives will take their meals in the Lower Rank cafeteria until further notice."

There was a loud wave of complaints over this fact.

"Grunts are expected to wait their turn!" Astor bellowed. "*Unless* they wish to face the consequences."

"We have cancelled all lessons while these investigations are carried out," Eris relayed, passing Astor an annoyed glare at forcing his way into what she considered her announcements. "Once we have determined the threat level of this creature, the lessons shall resume. Outside assignments are to go ahead. Just remember to stay on your guard and report anything of a suspicious nature to your admins. This creature may still be present somewhere in the complex."

A ripple of uncomfortable murmuring ensued, which was swiftly dispersed by the further tapping of Astor's pen upon the podium. He had exchanged places with Eris and now stood gazing out across the audience

- his stone cold eyes reflecting but a glimmer of pride at what he was about to announce.

"As it benefits morale to end on a high note," he spoke. "I am happy to report that work upon the obelisk is in its final stage. All things being well, our finest construct will be finished by twenty two hundred hours this evening - ready for its activation."

The room erupted into cheers, but amongst this jubilation, four members of the audience looked on in deepest horror. None more so than Caley, whose hopeful yet frailly-laid notions of rescue and escape were rapidly crumbling before him.

An air of cautiousness hung over the occupants of the Rec Room, as if they could sense something lacking among the new arrivals. Mondo was surprised to not only find James present alongside Caley and Adam, but also Denise - someone he'd collaborated with during his time in the laboratories. As a result, Denise confided in Mondo over her seemingly-inevitable destiny of blacklisting, while Adam returned to working on his model - more as an act of self-comfort than anything - and James sat hunched silently upon a chair in the corner.

The others showed greater intrigue over these new arrivals to the room, particularly that of James - the man's blanched face with its worried, remorseful expression unearthed a barrage of questions that none of them had the boldness to ask.

Caley kept silent and retreated to the empty area in front of the window. The view beyond the glass allowed him some measure of connection to the outside world - the reality of life which looked so distant from where he sat, and felt as if it was slipping even further from him with every passing moment.

In less than 12 hours, they'll activate whatever thing they made down there in that laboratory, Caley thought sadly, placing his head upon his arms and gazing into nothingness. And here I am with no plan whatsoever. I really have let myself in for way too much. And yet...I still can't bring myself to tell the others.

"Y'seem troubled," a familiar voice stated quietly from beside him. Caley flinched in alarm - he hadn't been aware anyone was at the window besides him a moment ago. Errol had managed to position himself next to Caley without any sign of doing so. The young man looked up at his unexpected company with an awkward expression. "What's buggin' ya, kid?"

"I just..." Caley began shakily, thrown off guard by the fact this supposedly silent character was once again talking to him. "I'm having trouble making a decision."

"In what way?" Errol tilted his head to one side, while Caley glanced at the Team Rocket logo emblazoned across the man's black overshirt.

"What would you do if you knew you were pretending to be

someone you're not?" he asked.

Errol uttered a snort of apparent amusement, before resting his head upon his gloved hands. No further response came.

"I'm sorry," Caley murmured, with an apologetic shake of his head. "I shouldn't be putting my troubles onto your shoulders."

"Dat's okay, kid," Errol replied. "It's not your fault. It's just...well...tellin' people who *I* was never did me any good." At this point, the corners of his mouth turned upward ever so slightly. "By da way...t'anks."

"Thanks for what?" Caley blinked.

"For the chocolate ya gave me yesterday," came the smooth reply. It was then Caley realised Errol knew the identity of his younger associate.

All the pieces of information Caley's mind had gathered over the past two days rapidly slotted themselves into place. "We're not your typical Rockets," Mondo had iterated. That statement, coupled with the descriptions of the Rec Room's occupants, brought to light a startling revelation. He was surrounded by misfit operatives - the very types of people that could help his plan to succeed!

This discovery was all Caley needed to cement his course of further action. Standing up, the young man removed his hat and retrieved the Pokédex glasses from atop his head before putting them on.

"If I could have your attention for a moment," he began warily, turning around to face the other occupants of the room. "There's something I need to explain."

"Oho, this is gonna be good," Kevin smirked, putting the remote control to one side as Jenna sat up with muted interest. While James' spaced-out expression was now exchanged for one of bafflement, Mondo had begun to examine Caley with a dawning realisation.

"Hey..." he murmured in astonishment. "You're that guy with the odd pokémon I met outside Dustry Town yesterday morning!"

"That's right," Caley replied solemnly. "I'm not a member of Team Rocket. I'm just an every day man from the outside, a man who jumped in at the deep end while trying to get back stuff that Team Rocket stole from innocents. Trying to rescue my friend." He gazed round at the faces of those now avidly watching him, hanging upon his every word. "But someone told me that you lot...we're not all that different. I've heard how some of you feel about being here - how you'd like to be free of this place, but how the oath of permanent allegiance keeps you trapped within these walls."

"Your point being...?" Jenna inquired curiously.

"My point being, that Denise was right. I can't do what I came here to do, on my own," Caley submitted. "She told me to find good-hearted people to help me out...and if you really *will* help me out, maybe I can do the same for you. Help you out of here, I mean."

"Here?" Mondo's eyes widened. "That's quite a wild idea, Caley. If it were that easy to escape, most of us in this room would have done that already."

"Maybe you just needed a bit of a pep talk," Caley said. "Living in here must crush the spirits after a while."

"I don't understand," James asked Caley curiously. "Why would you want to help *us*?"

"I'd never realised there existed in Team Rocket people who, deep down, are actually good at heart," Caley insisted. "People that were forced into working for the organization, or people who'd just made a mistake by joining. Then I met Adam. And you. And Denise. I want to make things better for all of you."

"You're nuts," Adam murmured, but there was a strong note of admiration in his voice. In some ways, he wished to own the sheer, almost blind determination that Caley must have had. Denise also smiled faintly at the young man's inherent optimism.

"Well *I*'ve got nothing to lose," she said. "If I stay here any longer, they'll only take me in and remove my conscience. And I'm not letting go of *that* so easily. You got yourself a team-mate in me." She looked to the others in the room. "And surely *you* don't want to stay here, do you? I know the pokémon don't - and I'm going to do something about it."

"What do you mean?" Caley looked alarmed at this unexpected turn of events.

"I want to get *all* of the pokémon to safety," Denise explained.

"Not just the ones you came for. None of them deserve to go through any more torment."

"Certainly are some high hopes there, Neesee," Mondo remarked. "We're talking about a lot of well-guarded departments you intend on getting into."

"Yeah, that's way too big a job for just you two to tackle by yourselves!" Jenna exclaimed. Noting the concerned expression upon her face, Caley decided to try his luck.

"Then would *you* guys be willing to help me?" he asked. "None of you want to be here, right? What have you got to lose?"

"Our lives?" Adam snorted.

"You could just as easily lose those by staying," Denise piped up. "At least by running from here, those Team Rocket superiors have less of a chance of doing to us what they did to James, or worse."

"She has a point there," Mondo nodded, while the others murmured uncomfortably. It wasn't certain whether the response was due to a reluctance to take risks, or the thought of being labelled potential organic fodder for a science experiment. Eventually, Kevin stood upon the sofa to make his own personal announcement.

"I poured my heart and soul into my job, only to find out I'd been helping make propaganda to fuel the schemes of a twisted organization,"

he began solemnly, before casting his hand into the air with surprising drama. "It's about time we stood up and did something worthwhile for a change!"

"Yeah, that adapter engine must be all sorts of complicated, it needs someone with *experience* to disconnect it," Mondo nodded, while Jenna raised her eyebrows - impressed at Kevin's unexpected outburst. "I'm in."

"Same here," Jenna agreed. "How about you, Adam?"

"Well if you think we got a better chance out of here than in..." the boy responded hesitantly. Everyone turned to James, who hadn't voiced his opinion yet. He looked indecisive.

"Uhh...this is all so...*sudden*!"

"Come on, James! No one else but us wants you around here at Team Rocket, and if they do it's only to use you in tests," Denise exclaimed.

"You have a point," the man responded softly. "But...Jessie-"

"Jessie's too wrapped up in being an Elite to care about what we do any more. You know that." Kevin snorted with disapproval.

"Yeah...I know..." James looked downcast at being reminded. "I just wish she wasn't."

"This is all well and good," Mondo remarked with concern. "But what're we gonna do about James? You told us he turned into a

houndoom last night - for all we know, that could happen again."

"We could put him in a Pokéball," Adam commented with a snicker, only to end up being glared at.

"*You're* the scientist, Neesee!" James exclaimed desperately, suddenly reminded of his predicament and becoming most agitated as a result. "Do something!"

"I'm a technician, not a geneticist, James," Denise uttered a helpless sigh. "What we need is someone experienced in biological studies - someone who knows their way around DNA, who could make an antidote for your instability and who wouldn't try to haul us to the superiors upon our requesting their help. But in that field, our options are very sparse."

An uncomfortable silence descended while everyone exchanged awkward looks before returning their gazes to Caley - hoping that their optimistic newcomer would be able to shed new light upon their predicament. The young man was indeed thinking hard, as the words of an aged figure he had encountered the day before started to ebb into his mind.

I've studied pokémon right down to their very cells, my boy!

"Professor Gordon..." Caley murmured. "That's it! Professor Gordon lives in a house on the outskirts of Dusty Town, and *he*

specialises in biology. While it's a long shot, he may be able to fix James up, at least a little bit. Still... persuading him to help us may be the hardest part."

"That won't be the half of it," Mondo remarked. "Getting the message to this professor of yours will be harder. This HQ, the entire town in fact, is covered by a massive psychically-generated field. That's what I was doing tech support on yesterday morning. The field is mostly to stop outsiders from getting suspicious about Team Rocket's presence in Dusty by tweaking their perception to make them think we're not here at all, but it also acts as a filter for signals that aren't sent out by our communications department."

"A psychic field?" Caley gasped. "So that's why the people in the city were so oblivious! But what about all those Police?"

"All Team Rocket operatives," Denise shrugged. "With a project as important as this, you can't skimp on protection. I have no idea why the field didn't work properly on you, though. Maybe you're sorta like Mondo."

"How?" Caley blinked.

"No psychic pokémon can tamper with his mind, because he apparently has no IE signature," Denise commented, almost admiringly. She paused, noting Caley's baffled expression. "Uh, Infinity Energy. It's like a kind of life force."

"How is that possible?" Caley looked astonished. While he was aware of what Infinity Energy was, the very idea of someone lacking it

had caught him off guard. "I mean, if it's a life force..."

"Haven't a clue," Denise giggled at her companion's face.

"However it's possible, it makes Mondo undetectable by psychics or devices that use IE Scanners to sense targets."

"So Mondo can avoid being 'seen' by psychic pokémon?" Caley raised his eyebrows.

"Yup!" Mondo grinned. Then Denise sat up excitedly.

"I've got it!" she cried. "Mondo can help us to get a message to that professor."

"Really?" Caley looked hopeful.

"I can?" Mondo looked baffled.

"All we require are a few items to create a transmitter which can attach to you," Denise explained. "In theory, if we pass the communication signal *through* you, your unique quirks should prevent it being picked up and blocked by the psychic field."

"That's not going to hurt...is it?" Mondo asked worriedly.

"No more than normal radio waves should do passing through organic objects," Denise theorized. "The only risk is if the signal doesn't 'fly under the radar', as it were. But if you're willing to give it a go, Mondo, it's worth a shot."

"Okay," Mondo looked uncomfortable. "For James' sake."

"Alright!" Caley grinned. "So what kind of items do you need?"

"Well that's the thing," Denise bit her lip. "A communicator would be simple enough to obtain, but other things are a little more tricky. Take the Cranial Synapse Bypass Unit - that kind of equipment is only available in the medical bay and I'm pretty sure the doctors would notice if one of those went missing without explanation."

"Anything you could use as a substitute?" Caley persisted.

"I might be able to make do with everyday materials, if I had the schematics," Denise looked uncomfortable. "Those would be accessible from the Team Rocket Intranet, but only by someone with Class 1 permission rights. And since no one here has enough experience to hack such high level security, we either find some other way of getting a CSBU, or we're going nowhere."

Outside the door of the Rec Room, Errol had retreated to contemplate what had just happened. There, he stood gazing distantly into a space beyond the opposite wall, clasping his shaking hands together to try and steady them. Finding himself in the same vicinity as James - someone he shared countless memories with, despite James' unawareness of it - had been a highly unsettling experience. His discomfort at this unexpected appearance of an old work partner was only matched by the deep sadness and guilt upon seeing him in such a state of ill health.

And the opportunity to leave hung tantalizingly, just out of his

reach. Looking down at the grunt uniform he was wearing, Errol shook his head deflatedly. He didn't want to be a part of this syndicate any longer. He had worked away the best years of his existence at Team Rocket, and even the recollections of why he joined seemed nonsensical now. There were many sore spots within that ached for differing reasons - maybe if he left, there would be a chance to make a fulfilling life for himself.

But first, there were others to look out for. A message needed to be sent and Errol knew just the woman who would be able to help them send it.

Keeping his eyes focused on the corridor ahead, Errol strode silently onward, occasionally weaving round passing groups of operatives or office workers carrying large bundles of papers. It had been some time since he'd plucked up the courage to travel above the main floor to where the medical bays and the admin departments were stationed. He had visited the medical bay in the past - the last reason for having done so still felt bitterly unjust, but that no longer mattered. So long as he could remember exactly which area Rose Weston happened to be located.

Rose had been one of Jessie's closer friends, having trained alongside her and Cassidy following their recruitment. Once, she had been a highly-respected member of the Intermediate forces, but was reassigned as a nurse following the Intermediate rank's dissolution.

Errol flinched as he took note of the sign affixed over the double

doors he was approaching. A spot of thrifty information-gathering had led him to discover that Rose worked in the minor physical injuries unit. There was no chance the man would get within two feet of her without having something to be attended to.

But he couldn't just give up so easily - James needed medical help, even if it meant Errol inflicting hurt upon himself to gain access to it. Still, that would hardly be an easy task in itself - he was made of pretty strong stuff, after all.

Errol uttered a faint groan at this thought. Drastic measures would have to be taken.

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"Heads up, Rose!" one of the nurses yelled through the break room doors, almost causing the aforementioned woman to spit cappuccino down her apron in the process. "New victims!"

"How many?" Rose replied, putting her mug on the counter and tying back her curls of golden hair.

"Three or four," came the casual response. "Reports of heavy bruising, a couple of nosebleeds, fractures...seems one of these buffsicles even got hit by a flying dumbbell or two. I'm gonna need your help to tackle this lot."

"Flying *what?*" Rose pulled a face, following the nurse through the door in an attempt to see what she had written on her clipboard. "Just what exactly *happened*, Mara?"

"Some fight broke out in the gym," the woman passed over the clipboard for Rose to have a look. "A C-Ranker popped up out of nowhere and started insulting the S-E trainees. He was just begging to get rearranged, if you ask me."

"C-Ranker...?" Rose scratched her head, tossing the shorthand definition of a grunt operative around in her mind. Just who amongst that group would be outlandish enough to do such a thing? As if in answer to her question, the alert to the medical bay sounded, prompting Mara and Rose to dash to the assessment room where they would find their patients. No sooner had she arrived, Rose's mouth dropped wide open.

There were not three, nor even four injured subjects to contend with. Instead, Rose's eyes were met with six athletic young men draped across stretcher beds, covered in cuts and lumps. These were bad enough in itself, but hardly as painful to look at as the figure that had been wheeled in at the end of the procession. This man's legs were bent back in such a way that they were positioned unnaturally at opposite angles, while he clutched a cloth to his face with one shaking hand and kept his cap firmly atop his head with the other.

"Owf... da t'ings I do fer friends," he muttered to himself. Rose dashed over to the end figure before pulling the dividing curtain around

his bed in order to provide a modicum of privacy. As she did so, the man lowered the cloth to reveal cheeks blighted with two sets of thin whitish scars and a somewhat disfigured, bloody purple nose.

"Good grief!" Rose spluttered. "What in the world were you doing picking fights in the gym? Did you have some kind of a death wish?"

Well I had to get in here and speak to you somehow, Errol thought as he shrugged for Rose's benefit. *No pain, no gain, eh?*

The man chuckled faintly at his personal joke before rapidly pressing the cloth back against his face - realising his nose was still bleeding. Rose uttered a loud groan of disapproval and shook her head, reaching into one of the pockets of her apron and bringing out a small notebook and pen. She'd heard of this character and his rather eccentric vow of silence - there was no way she was about to get any information out of him without something to write on.

"How could speaking to me be so important as to have the snot beaten out of you?" Rose exclaimed, having read the scribbled iteration of Errol's thoughts. "I don't even *know* you!"

Errol proceeded to take the notebook from Rose and write upon it yet again with his free hand, passing the article back afterward.

'But you know James, right?' the text read. 'You know Mondo, don't you?'

"Yes..." Rose looked baffled, returning the notebook. "But how do *you* know those guys?"

'I hang with them in the Rec Room,' Errol responded smartly. 'Heard you used to spend time in there too, before the whole B Rank was ditched.'

"That was *some* time ago," Rose nodded, a wistful distantness creeping into her eyes.

'Thing is, there's been some new faces in the Rec Room lately. They've been putting new ideas into veteran heads. Ideas of flying the coop, so to speak.'

"Breaking...out?" Rose's voice had lowered to almost inaudible levels at this point.

'You got it,' Errol clarified. 'But there's some other things to take care of at the same time - things we need your help on. Is there a Cranial Synapse Bypass Unit you could lend us?'

"A CSBU?" Rose stared at him like she couldn't quite believe what she'd just read. "Sure, they have a few on the neurostudies ward. But...what do you want one of *those* for?"

'Bring one, and you'll find out.' Errol told her through handwriting, a wide, tight-lipped smile just visible under the folds of the cloth covering his nose. Rose paused, before a mischievous grin crept onto her face and she nodded in approval. 'Now if it'd be no trouble, could you do a favour for me?'

"What's that?" Rose cast an admiring glance.

'Put my legs back the right way round, if you don't mind. It'll be awful tricky getting back to the Rec Room if I'm walking like a krabby.'

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"Mondo, would you stop fidgeting and try to clear your mind?"

Denise exclaimed somewhat exasperatedly as she tried once again to run a calibration program on the communications device in front of her. "We aren't going to get *any* kind of signal with you thinking so much."

"Maybe if I didn't look like such a moron, I wouldn't keep thinking about it," Mondo grumbled, looking up at the contraption atop his head, which consisted of a black band fitted with a spiderweb of thin cables. The end of each cable was fitted to a series of flat, circular nodes pressed against strategic points across Mondo's skull. Caley sat on the sofa nearby, glancing back and forth from Mondo to James - getting his needle wounds anxiously tended to by an otherwise unfamiliar golden-haired woman.

"So that's Rose, huh?" Caley asked Jenna, a few minutes later.

"The one and only," Jenna chuckled. "Used to be a regular around here, but after Jessie and James parted ways, she pretty much retreated into her job."

"Did Errol really have to be hurt to get her to come here, though?"

Caley bit his lip, looking over the other side of the room. Errol was sat back in his usual spot by the window, only now his nostrils were crammed with cotton wool swabs and one of his hands was bandaged from where it had been trodden on in the scuffle. Somehow Caley felt the man's injuries were his fault.

"Well they sure wouldn't have let him in the medical bay if there was nothing wrong with him," Jenna shrugged. "Gotta take one for the team, and in this case, it was a good one. Rose brought the CSBU, like we asked."

"Won't be much use to us if the human aerial here doesn't stop disturbing the signal," Kevin commented, before Denise held up one hand in a silencing motion. Unusual humming, wavering noises could now be heard emitting from the speaker portion of the communicator that had been wired to the device on Mondo's head. Mondo was sitting bolt upright now, blank dark eyes wide and staring out at nothing.

"Hush, guys," Denise murmured. "I've gotta make a lock on the tele-network rim."

"So long as you know what that is, it's all good to me," Jenna remarked, none the wiser. The noises from the speaker grew steadily louder and more digital while Denise continued to make adjustments to the controls on the Cranial Synapse Bypass Unit. Screeching and grinding reverberated from the walls, causing Kevin to wince and James and Errol to clasp their hands to their ears - trying to block out the dreadful racket.

"Turn it off, turn it off!" James pleaded, as Mondo began to twitch violently. Noticing Mondo's adverse reaction, Denise uttered a yelp of alarm and rapidly shut down the communicator.

"Owwww...my brain," Mondo groaned from his curled up position on the carpet, as Caley, Adam and Denise peered over him with worried looks. "Please tell me that worked...and that I don't ever have to do it again."

"Unfortunately, nothing good came of it," Denise gave a sigh and placed a hand on Mondo's shoulder. "But I won't put you through that a second time. We'll just need to find a way to somehow get James to this professor personally."

"Oh, that's rich," Adam almost laughed, folding his arms. "If stealing back a weird machine, rescuing a bunch of pokémon *and* breaking out of this caphole in one piece weren't enough of a challenge, now we gotta get dippo there medical attention and hope we don't get caught by those who will be sent after us in the process."

"And all tonight," Rose nodded, standing up from where she had been bandaging James' arm with an intrigued smirk on her face. "Sounds like your little outsider friend has some big plans up his sleeves. And no planned course of action, apparently." Caley looked somewhat uncomfortable as Rose approached him. "What were you expecting to do? Run out there and hope things would fall into place? It's fatal to think you can rely on luck."

recent accessory she had obtained to try and hide the results of the previous night's attack. Butch continued to snigger to himself as he slowly perused a handwritten note on a crumpled piece of paper.

"What are you looking at, Butch?" Cassidy asked, without even glancing up at the man.

"It was shoved under my door this mornin'," Butch smirked. "A love letter from that explosive-obsessed maniac, Dinah Freeman. Looks like that kook has the hots for me after what happened the other month."

"Oh?" came the partially interested response.

"Yeah, when we got split on assignments, I ended up partnered with Dinah," the man explained. "At one point during our mission she was tackled by a glameow in a park - stupid thing had got attracted by the scent of that weird catnip tea she insists on drinking all the time. Only I ended up accidentally stepping on the glameow's tail in the process." He let out an amused chuckle. "I bet the ditz thinks I'm her saviour or something."

"Only a crazy person would admire *you*," Jessie muttered under her breath, while Cassidy grunted in amusement.

"You're just jealous, Cass," Butch smirked, and waved the paper tauntingly under her nose.

"How could I be jealous of such mush?" Cassidy pushed it away. "I would *never* demean myself like that."

"Atten-shun!" barked Admin Darius from his elevated position at the front of the room. The atmosphere quietened rapidly as the entire Elite operative department stood bolt upright - arms held stiffly by their sides.

"Giovanni issued a statement of some concern following the disappearance of a CSBU from the medical bay earlier this morning," the blue-haired man said. "He feels that someone in this organisation may be intending on using such a device for mutinous acts."

One of the male Elites emitted a highly sarcastic, dramatic scream, which caused some of the lesser inhibited to chuckle amongst themselves.

"I'll deal with you later, Ainsley," the blue-haired man remarked with an unsettling coldness. "But first, duty assignments. I want each and every one of you to keep your eyes and ears open. You must discover who these traitors are, bring them to me, and fast, before this gets out of hand. Then they shall be dealt with as our leader sees fit. Dismissed!"

"I bet it's that snivelling ex-partner of yours," Cassidy remarked, as the trio left the hall amongst the crowd of other Elites.

"No way. James hasn't the nerve to try that sort of thing," Jessie shook her head.

"But one of those other misfits might," Butch grinned. "And I'm

didn't want Adam's pessimistic complaints and fidgeting when he was attempting to detach an adapter engine - especially since he found it difficult to focus as it was, and disconnecting an adapter engine wasn't something he'd done before.

"It's alright. He can come with us," Caley smiled. "We're going to need all the help possible to set the laboratory's pokémon free."

"Planning's all well and good," Adam folded his arms. "But what are we going to do to combat the ton of lackeys that'll be sent to bring us down?"

"Oh that's easy," Rose smirked, turning and looking at Mondo. "We're going to exploit the Boss' financial corner-cutting."

"This doesn't involve plugging me into any more communication devices, does it?" Mondo bit his lip. Whether it did or not, the expression on Rose's face and the direction it was pointed in hardly meant good things were in store for him.

"Not at all," Rose chuckled. "We *do* need your psychic immunity traits, but for something less painful. You know how Dustry Town is currently bathed in a thought-tailoring psychic field, right?" Everyone nodded. "The source of that psychic field is a powerful hypno called Mindwipe. I know this, because it worked with a lot of talented operatives when it was still a drowzee - two of those operatives happened to be Butch and Cassidy, the ones that raised it. Mondo, your job would be to enter the area where Mindwipe is connected to the field amplification unit."

There you will reconfigure the unit's programming and turn the psychic field in on the headquarters itself."

"That's stupid!" Adam blurted out. "How is that going to help?"

"Wouldn't making Team Rocket operatives think their HQ doesn't exist when they're *in* it be kinda redundant?" Jenna agreed.

"Not only that, wouldn't it effect us too?" James pointed out.

"All valid concerns," Rose responded calmly. "But I don't intend the wave to be of the thought-altering variety. I've studied psywave frequencies as part of my medical training, and with this information Mondo should hopefully be able to reconfigure the field amplification unit to make Mindwipe emit sleepwaves. By this time, we'll all be on the laboratory floor and therefore unaffected."

"How does being on the laboratory floor mean we'll be unaffected?" Caley blinked.

"Simple," Rose grinned. "The Boss secures only his most vital assets. Therefore, the medical, laboratory and executive floors have psywave blockers installed. The grunt accommodation levels, however, do not. It'll cut down on the number of opponents, at least."

"Either way, that's still a lot of Elites for us to tackle," Kevin pondered. "And what if James goes houndoom again?"

"That's what I'm hoping he'll do," Rose said. A gasp arose from her listeners. "It's a dangerous course of action, but we're going to need his

pokémon form to keep the Elites' attentions away from other matters. Errol's job will be to make sure none of them capture James."

"And what if he doesn't become a houndoom tonight?" Denise asked, the quietness in her voice dictating that she wasn't happy with subjecting James to such treatment.

"Then you'd better hope I find some real big guns in the weapons bay," Rose sighed. "Has everyone got the basic idea now?"

"Yeah, I'm going to be a running target," James whimpered.

"Be glad you'll be less aware than usual, then," Adam snorted in his direction. "This plan is messed up, but its not like staying here is better."

Errol suddenly glanced up, his face overtaken by seriousness. He was certain there was someone outside the room, eavesdropping upon the conversations of the group. But no one else appeared to have noticed this unwanted presence bar James and himself. James got to his feet without a word before crossing the floor, sending the others into unsteady mumbling.

Placing his hand upon the door, James wrenched it open to see Butch directly outside. James' stern expression was exchanged for one of quiet sadness when he noticed one of the two women who were standing a short distance behind. Jessie held herself tightly in a bottled fury, now

aware that it had been James who was responsible - even without it being a deliberate action - for tearing her hair and face to shreds.

"I knew it," Butch grinned, unperturbed that the Intermediates had discovered he had been listening in on their planning. "You outcasts *are* up to something. Not only have you been hiding the true identity of that mutant houndoom, you're planning to use the creature to screw things up while you take the pokémon specimens and make a break for it!"

"As refreshing as it is to have the 'Failure Forum' as distanced from our quarters as possible, it does make it harder to keep them in line," Cassidy muttered, walking toward the door. "The Boss should think about bringing it a little closer to home, as it were." At this point, she leant dangerously close to James, a dark smile upon her face. "That's if any of you are left standing by the time he finds out you're the ones responsible for organizing mutinous acts."

Before any of the other frowning Intermediates could open their mouths, James' expression quickly changed yet again. Reaching forward, he grasped hold of Cassidy by the front of her shirt, pulled her into the room and pinned her against the wall beside the door, his eyes blazing an eerie shade of red.

"Who says he's *going* to find out?" he growled. Cassidy's next words caught in her throat - this outburst from a usually placid man had come as an unexpected reaction to her. Butch instinctively thrust his arms out to break James away from Cassidy while Errol and Rose ran over to

try and do the same.

"James, no!" Denise called nervously. "Hurting her won't improve our situation!"

"You keep out of this!" James snarled. It was an action directed at no one in particular, a response of primal instinct and rage. As he swung round to push Errol and Rose from him, Cassidy fell sideways, suddenly released from James' grip. Scrambling to her feet, the woman shakily ran off down the corridor with Jessie in somewhat hesitant pursuit.

"You're going to regret doing that, pus wad," Butch sneered, though with a noticeable hint of fear in his voice as he dashed after his female companions. "There'll be nowhere for you flunkies to run when we put in a request to have you detained!"

"That's right!" James yelled after them. "Go running to the Boss, you bottom feeders! It's not like you can fight for yourselves!"

Suddenly, the man stepped back from the door in silence, a blank, confused expression upon his face. Then, without warning, he crumpled onto the carpet. Kevin was sniggering at the look on Butch's face as he had left, but the rest of the room's occupants had their gazes fixed on James, who had been helped back into the chair by Rose and Errol, his face even paler and more shocked than before.

"What's happening to me...I don't feel well..." he moaned.

"The pokémon DNA could be affecting your moods," Rose

theorized.

"That would explain the sudden outburst of anger," Caley nodded. "Houndooms aren't exactly known for their pleasant temperaments."

"Hah! That was amazing," Adam smirked, thoroughly impressed for once.

"But hardly the provocation we needed," Rose sighed. "Butch is right. There *isn't* anywhere we can go. All we can do is sit here and wait to be called in for questioning."

"And what about James?" Jenna spoke up worriedly. "They know he's the houndoom now. They know everything we'd planned to do!"

"Not *everything*," Rose smirked. "From what Butch said, it sounded like they only started eavesdropping halfway through our planning session. That means they have no idea of the job Mondo is assigned."

"And?" Mondo spoke up miserably. "How is that going to help when I'm going to be locked up with you guys?"

"A minor setback," Rose shrugged. "We're Rockets, aren't we? We'll figure a way round this."

TO BE CONTINUED...

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