POKÉMON
RE·BIRTH

ULTIMATUM
Endgame Edition

EPISODE TWENTY NINE
Grudge

Within Vexel City Gym's cafeteria, Adam shuffled his glass of pecha juice around the table and muttered uncomfortably under his breath. The whole concept of the Gym's existence – from its warp pad entry to the pokémon-maintained architecture – did not settle well with him. He didn't appreciate the walls literally having eyes, and as a result had not visited the Gym's toilet, despite needing to. The fact that much of the Gym interior was constructed from normal building materials, and therefore inaccessible by the witukae, didn't console him either. Instead he'd been left to writhe on his chair with a black expression, until necessity forced him to relieve himself or suffer far more embarrassing consequences.

Though the cafeteria was a solid construction, much of the décor was generated in ways more befitting the Gym's type. Holographic shapes could be seen drifting gently across the ceiling, and over the conveyor belt which scrolled through the room – for the purpose of delivering meals and beverages.

"This is incredible," Caley marvelled, as the glass of oranade he had requested slid invitingly towards him. He plucked the glass from the conveyor belt, setting down on the table. "I've never seen a virtual battlefield before. Or virtual pokémon, for that matter."

"That's not surprising," Lavender smiled, while Rose gratefully sipped a mug of cappuccino in one hand, and rubbed Sia's head with the other. "My Gym is the first of its kind in the world. It's taken a long time for the Pokémon League to accept virtual types as living, free-thinking

creatures and not pre-programmed software. Up until recently, virtual pokémon had only been working alongside people in manufacturing."

"How long have virtual types been around?" Caley asked.

"Well let me see..." Lavender gazed up at the ceiling as she contemplated the information. "The first virtual pokémon, ditto, was logged as far back as 1980."

"No way…ditto's a virtual type pokémon?" Caley blinked.

"Yep!" Lavender grinned proudly, as if she had been the one who had made this discovery. "Simply put, virtual types are the man-made counterparts to ether type pokémon. While their beginnings were all artificial, they later developed sentience after exposure to Cyberspace. No one really knows how it happened, though the process was not unlike how steel types came to be. In the end, that similarity is what convinced the Pokémon League to let virtual types into the training circuit."

She stopped, studying the faces of her audience at the table. While Caley was rapt with fascination, having completely forgotten why he was here in the first place, Rose's gaze had begun to wander slightly, while Adam looked bored to tears. Psyduck had managed to topple off his chair from dizziness, after becoming fixated with the moving ceiling patterns.

"Well, let's get down to business then!" Lavender chuckled. "What are your names?"

"I'm Caley Wilson," the young man replied. "These are my friends, uh..." he paused, having forgotten what their pseudonyms were and willing them to mention them.

"Sascha," Rose smiled. "This is Nathan."

Adam grunted, and took another swig of juice from his glass.

"A pleasure to meet all of you," Lavender gave a cheerful nod. "So how were you looking to train your pokémon, Caley?"

"Not just my pokémon. I want to train myself too," Caley reminded her.

"Oh of course," Lavender agreed. "Battling can be an intensive experience for the coach as well as the fighter, after all."

"No no, that's not quite what I mean," Caley persisted. "I actually want to battle alongside Kota."

"What?" Lavender looked astonished. Never had anyone requested such a thing before. She didn't even think it would have been legal, had Caley been intending to earn a Gym Badge. But this wasn't the case. "How do you expect to defend yourself? I can't allow the use of weapons in here."

"I won't be using any weapons," Caley reassured her. "No more than Kota's own powers are like, anyway. You see...I have psychic abilities too." He pulled up his sleeve to show one of the bracers that Sabrina had given him. "These help me to channel my inner energy into

visible forms, but I haven't got the hang of generating stuff on command yet."

"Hmmm..." Lavender debated this. She was aware of the existence of humans with psychic abilities, and in her opinion it was better to be acquainted with one's own skills in order to make sure they were kept in check. "Alright then. I know just the program to run."

While Tolos led Adam, Rose, Sia and Psyduck to an observation area above the VR grid, Caley was handed a bodysuit similar to the one Lavender herself was wearing, and shown to a changing room. Getting the bodysuit on was no easy task, and Caley was forced to temporarily unclip the bracers from his wrists in order to thread his arms through the outfit's sleeves. Several minutes later, Caley returned somewhat awkwardly to the VR grid with Kota following behind. He didn't have to have psychic powers to know that Adam was undoubtedly finding his temporary change of attire very entertaining.

Lavender smiled reassuringly and gave Caley a headset, before retreating to the opposite end of the VR grid.

"VR field, engage!" Lavender called into the air. Upon her command, the units surrounding the field began to glow, bathing the arena in a calm greenish aura. The dull, grey, bumpy walls dissolved into a black void, speckled with marine shades. Caley stood, his mouth slightly open. The appearance of the field felt familiar to him, not unlike the

mindscapes he had visited while trying to make contact with various beings. He began to wonder if that was what it looked like on the battle areas that his father would set up in Prela Gym, then flinched back to reality. Dwelling too much upon his father with the recent information Caley had been given was still painful.

Tolos spattered into life on the VR field. The avatar was no longer being generated by the portable hologram machine, as the field itself took care of the projection.

Vexel Gym Unofficial Pokémon Battle Challenge is now in session, Tolos relayed, their voice echoing slightly. *No time limit. Due to the composition of the VR field, all earth-based attacks are prohibited. Now scanning...*

Caley was about to ask what the scanning was for, when two wireframe boxes appeared around Kota and himself.

"Your pokémon shows promising levels of energy," Lavender concluded, after studying the results on her wrist worn computer. "And you're not that far behind, Caley. The pokémon I choose will be a fair match for both of you."

With that, the Gym Leader raised her gloved hand, palm facing outward to reveal an odd-coloured jewel set in the centre. A white beam coursed from the jewel in Lavender's palm, taking shape in the air before her to form an angular yellowish figure.

Kota couldn't help but stare at its translucent appearance, for the pokémon's head and seemingly cumbersome hands floated independently from its torso - connected only by jagged beams of yellow energy. Caley was also transfixed - he would have attempted to get a reading from the pokémon, had he not been forced to leave his glasses in the changing room with the rest of his clothing.

"This is Baria, my secefa," Lavender told her opponents. "The aim of this exercise will be for you and your pokémon to land a hit on Baria as they travel between here and Cyberspace."

"Is that it?" Caley blinked, adjusting his headset to make sure he had heard properly. Lavender smirked cheekily at the young man's baffled expression.

"Just *one* hit," she reiterated, turning to the pokémon, expectantly waiting their first instruction. "Baria…time to use the Duplicity routine!"

Kota had wasted no time and was already flying toward Baria at speed. With a faint aura, the secefa split themselves in two, causing Kota to tumble headlong between the gap where the original had been. Both identical copies of the Virtual Pokémon then slipped away, passing through the very air itself and out of sight. Shortly afterwards, the air around Caley and Kota became filled with brighter green rectangles.

It's exited into Cyberspace, Caley frowned, as his pokémon glanced around somewhat worriedly. *And we have no idea which of its*

forms is the real one or where it shall appear. This is a <u>lot</u> harder than I thought…

Lavender watched her challenger's face contorting as he tried to figure some way of solving the conundrum and smiled to herself. This training routine was a lot more reliant on mind over power, but stamina was also playing a deciding role.

Suddenly two of the suspended rectangles on opposite sides of Caley and his pokémon companion began to glow and the secefa clones emerged - crossing their targets' path at breakneck speed. Caley raised his hands and attempted to form a wall of Aura against the oncoming assault, but his response was too slow. He cried out in alarm as one of the secefa clones struck him - throwing him to the ground. The impact hadn't felt as strong as he had expected - maybe Baria's replication had also halved their power. Kota regained his focus just in time to see four shapes vanish back out of sight.

"He's going to have to think of a way to find the real secefa soon," Rose remarked sternly. "Because if he doesn't, at the rate it's copying itself there'll be too many of them to find the genuine one amongst!"

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"I'm astounded!" Bernard whooped, glancing from his grubby wristwatch up at the completed mecha and back again. Jessie, James and Errol stood behind him with Bernard's pokémon accomplices, admiring their combined handiwork. "Finally, a completed project, and in less than a couple of hours, too!"

"We usually tend to go at dat speed," Errol remarked with a hint of smugness, wiping his brow.

"Is this thing even going to work?" Jessie remarked sceptically. "I mean, it's made out of junk!"

It was quite a motley arrangement, having been composed from a mixture of parts lying around Bernard's workshop. The cockpit had once been a cab from an old truck that had long since lost its road use. Fixed to the sides and underbelly of this cockpit were two extendable claws and a pair of wheeled platforms salvaged from differing vehicles. Nevertheless, everyone was pleased with their efforts.

"Very high quality 'junk', I might add," James corrected her, somewhat ruffled at what he considered quite an insult. Bernard simply patted his nephew on the back with a chuckle before tossing a bunch of keys in Jessie's direction.

"Well how about you take it for a test drive, and find out for yourself?"

"You're on!" the woman acknowledged, catching the keys and beginning her ascent up the ladder towards the cab. James and Errol

exchanged joyful grins before making their way after her. They had barely reached the foot of the vehicle when Jessie toppled backwards out of the cab with a scream of alarm. James and Errol leapt to try and catch her in unison, collided in mid action and were slammed into by Jessie's falling body. As the trio sprawled on the floor, groaning and muttering amongst themselves, the vehicle juddered into life, sending a low rumble echoing throughout the workshop.

"That little brat stole my keys!" Jessie complained angrily.

"*Who* stole the keys?" Bernard looked worried. "Was someone in the vehicle?"

An unnerving cackle was heard from the cab, just before a hatch in either side of the vehicle flipped open - revealing two cumbersome boosters. Claws raised, the vehicle ploughed forward and straight toward the closed workshop door - tearing through it and into the nearby street. People who had been calmly standing gazing through the windows of nearby shops, fled in panic as the vehicle rumbled onward, toward its unknown destination.

"Oh heavens!" Bernard clasped distressedly at his head while Junior flailed at the decimated workshop door.

"Come back with our hard work, you thief!" Jessie yelled, shaking her fist.

"That thing had booster rockets?" James gawped. "What sort of construction machine has booster rockets?"

"Dat was no construction machine," Errol looked horrified, as realisation dawned on him. "Dat was a mecha!"

"A what?" Bernard spluttered.

"A large robotic transport typically used fer combat," Errol recited, finger raised knowledgeably.

"I-I didn't know!" Bernard looked bereft. "I just built what I was asked to!"

"We're not blaming you," Jessie insisted tersely. "Still, whoever that twerp was working for, it wasn't Team Rocket. Totally the wrong uniform."

"It was weird," James looked perplexed. "That laugh kind of sounded like yours, Errol."

"What? How?" Errol spluttered. Then he flinched. "Oh no..."

"'Oh no'?" Jessie eyed him.

"Dere's no time ta explain right now," Errol said. "We need t' catch up with dat machine!"

"We'll take my car," Bernard said. "C'mon Firecracker - I'm going to need your help!"

Bernard's mode of transport wasn't so much of a car as a dilapidated open chassis on four differently branded tyres. Firecracker and

Bernard jumped into the driver and front passenger seats, while Jessie, James and Errol crammed themselves in the back. Wobby decided to stay behind at the workshop, alongside Bernard's other pokémon. As unhappy as he was to let Jessie go somewhere without him, there just wasn't any more room to accommodate, and no Pokéball for him to travel in.

James put on his seatbelt, unsure as to whether this would provide any more safety considering the state of the vehicle. With a throaty rumble, the vehicle's engine began stirring underneath its battered hood. Bernard disengaged the handbrake and swung the car out of the workshop in pursuit of his stolen project.

Fortunately for them, it hadn't actually wandered too far. James assumed that the driver in question was still getting to grips with the way the mech functioned. Unfortunately for those who had been out in the streets that day, this crash course in driving had resulted in said mech veering in their direction more than once. Errol winced as he noticed the embittered expressions of the surrounding city dwellers that were now picking themselves up from surrounding foliage and litter bins, where they had dived to narrowly escape being run over.

"Get as close as you can!" he insisted, as the rear of the mecha pulled swiftly into view. Bernard forced the complaining engine into the next gear and the car steadily drew up alongside the hulking construct.

"What are you going to do?" James asked worriedly.

"Somet'ing stupid!" Errol yelled, and sprung forth - landing heavily upon the mecha's side. As the mecha struggled to stay on course, Errol swiftly clambered up toward the cab and lurched himself within.

For a moment, he'd wondered if his ears had deceived him. The figure in the driver's seat was the correct height for the person Errol had assumed it to be. However, they were dressed in a navy blue uniform with a white insignia he did not recognize - the shorn remnants of their sandy blonde hair tucked under a partly slanted beret. It wasn't until the driver glanced at Errol for just a second that his uncertainties vanished - the wide eyes with slit-like irises, the fangs partly visible beneath the upper lip of a slightly-open mouth...this definitely was his clone sibling, Carrlin.

His appearance was bold and polished - not only had his facial whiskers been removed -the cuts still fresh on either cheek- but his forehead whiskers were also absent. This young man was a stark contrast from the bewildered, scruffy mass that Errol had encountered some days ago.

<What are *you* doing here?> Carrlin spluttered.

"I was gonna ask you da same t'ing!" Errol exclaimed. "How couldya t'ink of conning dat guy into making you a mech, and den steal it?"

Carrlin paused, before the realisation as to whom he was conversing with sank in. It didn't take long for his demeanour to become more self-satisfied.

<I think it was pretty clever, myself,> Carrlin chuckled. <I didn't have to pay more than the deposit.>

Errol felt inclined to protest, but considering how many things he had stolen in his time, it seemed quite hypocritical. Instead, he turned to more pressing matters.

"What do you need a mech for anyways?" he asked. "And what's wit' dat getup?"

<What's with *that* ridiculous hat?> Carrlin snorted. Errol opened his mouth to retort, but was cut off. <Pah. You've talked enough. I have a job to do - and you have a seat to leave.>

"Huh?" Errol blinked, moments before a bright flash of light obscured his vision.

A magnemite thrust itself into the man's gut just as the side door to the cab opened, sending Errol flying backwards out of the mech, to the concrete below. His body was caught in a blue aura before it had a chance to hit the ground, and slowly brought back towards an approaching vehicle.

"Oof...t'anks Chime," Errol smiled woozily, clutching at his stomach as the chiverbel placed him in the back seat.

"I guess 'something stupid' didn't work out, huh," Jessie remarked.

"Ugh..." Errol shook his head in annoyance. "He's gone completely off da rails."

"What? Who?" James looked over his shoulder. "Do you know the driver of that mech?"

"Dis is still a bad time ta talk about it, Jimmy!" Errol snapped, before leaning towards Bernard. "You gotta keep da mech in your sights! I don't know what Carrlin is up to, but I get da feelin' it ain't good!"

"I'll try my best!" Bernard insisted, and pushed harder on the accelerator. Jessie and James looked at each other with grim expressions. It appeared that in a moment of anguish, Errol had forgot to use James' pseudonym. Fortunately for them, Bernard seemed to have been too focused on the chase to have noticed. Whomever this 'Carrlin' was, their curiosity would have to wait.

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Professor Teri Burnet was quick to put her tech fair stall on hold, excitedly guiding her new test volunteer and their friends to the room which she had been staying in for the purposes of the fair itself. Once inside, she set up the Variable Disclosure Speculum on the room's

dressing table and instructed Cory to resume their pokémon form before standing in front of it. Upon activating the device, the reflective oval panel began to glow red, then blue, and finally green, before dimming to its usual silvery tint.

Cory blinked and looked at Teri expectantly. The zecutynr had felt nothing during this process, and was puzzled as to whether any observations had been gathered at all.

"Well I never..." Teri marvelled, studying a handheld computer with awe.

"What? What is it?" Cory inquired worriedly.

"Your variables are...how best can I explain this...well they're hybridized in quite a unique way," Teri replied, greatly impressed. "I imagine this is due to the fact your biological composition seems to be derived from a combined virtual-distortia source. Both of these are relatively unpredictable elements, whomever created you must have employed some very inventive methods to get these variables to mesh together."

"But are my...uh...variables *stable*?" Cory urged.

"More or less!" Teri nodded. "There's an area of code here that is ever so slightly different from the rest, almost like a patch of sorts for data that was removed previously, but other than that, everything looks functional to me."

Wait...could that be where the programming for my assassin form have been? Cory pondered. *Did Team Rocket strip me of it after they found it couldn't be controlled, and my repair ability simply filled the 'hole' back in?* The pokémon felt a wave of relief beginning to seep through them.

"I've got to admit, I haven't studied data this fascinating since my Glitch Hunter days," Teri grinned. "If Fennel could see this..."

"Glitch Hunter?" Denise blinked. "You mean like, a debugger?"

"Heh! Well you could call it that," Teri chuckled. "I was a 'debugger' of the world, in a sense. I'm not talking about your average glitches in computer programs and such. I'm talking about glitches in *reality*."

Mondo leaned forward, eyes widening.

"The Variable Theory defines our world as its own unique format of data," Teri began smartly. "And all data is prone to corruption. Whether in pokémon, humans, or the environment itself, these were the glitches that I spent a lot of time tracking and researching. Glitch hunting is a dangerous business though - you constantly run the risk of becoming corrupted yourself. One day I decided that the risks far outweighed the benefits, and I moved on."

"Wow..." Denise breathed. Her mind flitted back to the experience she and the others had gone through in Wichour Town, when Archeist's influence upon the ancient tower there caused all manner of disturbing

reactions. She recalled Adam, Caley and James' descriptions of what they had seen during their direct encounter with the creature. Such things had sounded very much like glitches to her. And Adam...the poor guy had been possessed by Archeist itself. Those three and their pokémon had been lucky to come through all that relatively unscathed.

Cory's thoughts had also drifted to similar things, of the recordings taken of Mondo's nightmares back in Sarthest City. Had that unsettling pixilation he had seen in the video footage been mere electronic interference? Had it been something more?

This deep contemplation was broken by the sound of a hefty crash in the lower parts of the building. The vibrations coursed through the floor underneath Teri and her guests, intermingled with aggravated and frightened cries.

"What the...?" Teri managed to stammer, before she noticed Mondo heading for the door. "Where are you going?"

"Something's wrong," Mondo said, bluntly. His desire to observe the source of the chaos was more a gut reaction than anything, though part of him was also worried the events may have something to do with Cory, Denise and himself.

"You stay here, we'll check things out," Denise urged, following Mondo as Cory resumed their human form.

"Me? Sit here while you three run into potential danger? I don't think so," Teri frowned, putting the Variable Disclosure Speculum back in its case.

"If you insist..." Mondo gave a shrug.

Slamming the door to her room and hurriedly locking it, Teri pursued Denise and her companions down the hallway. A chill breeze filled the stairwell as they descended – the faint wailing of alarms could be heard amongst the continued sounds of rumbling and smashing.

"Sounds like a rampaging aggron down there!" Teri commented worriedly.

"I don't know..." Denise shook her head slowly. The noises - at least those of movement - were too uniform to come from a pokémon. She weighed up the consequences of sending out Rilly to assist, but decided against such things. The gallirill was powerful, but she couldn't let him be seen by so many people.

The group reached the show floor, to a scene of ruination. A gaping hole was clearly visible in one of the building's outer walls – still shedding chunks of brick and plaster. There was a slightly metallic smell in the air, the evidence of several minor electrical fires which were being attended to with extinguishers. Tables in various states of damage had been scattered this way and that – their contents in pieces on the floor, or absent entirely. Besides the alarms, the confused babble from visitors and tearful exclamations of the resident technicians was very much

apparent. The source of the destruction had already made its escape, but it had left nothing untouched.

"All my hard work!" a man with greased-back hair and a denim jacket sobbed, cradling a pile of shards in his hands. "A Pokéball that let your pokémon exercise in virtual space. It was going to be *revolutionary*!"

"What happened here?" Teri asked the man worriedly.

"This...this huge machine crashed into the room," he replied, visibly shaken. "Looked like some kind of construction vehicle with jet engines. A magnemite came out of it and took a bunch of people's work away. Anything left behind was crushed..." He held forth the remains of his invention as proof and sniffled. "My Pokéwalker..."

"'Construction vehicle...'?" Denise and Mondo exchanged frowns. It was far from common practise for such vehicles to contain booster rockets. To the duo of seasoned ex-operatives, it sounded more like the combat machines often wielded by organizations like Team Rocket. The description of the vehicle's pre-meditated behaviour was further evidence to that cause.

"Did you get a look at who was driving it?" Mondo inquired.

"No," the man shook his head. "But whoever it was, they had a sick sense of humour. The whole time they were wrecking the place, they wouldn't stop laughing."

As Teri consoled the man over the loss of his work, Denise, Mondo and Cory retreated a short distance away to consolidate their thoughts.

"What happened here can't have been from Team Rocket," Denise insisted in lowered tones. "They're focused on much bigger, scarier things than stealing inventors' prototypes."

"That's true," Mondo remarked. "But it only made the question of who it *could* be, that much harder to answer."

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Midway into their Gym Battle against Lavender, Caley finally understood what Kota had meant, back in Coalef Town. He hadn't paid attention to it before, but the impatient swell of psychically-imbued energy did indeed feel like an air bubble within him, clamouring at his gut. He just needed to focus, to channel it out through his hands.

Kota poised ready for the next ambush, his furry little ears twitching as his gaze passed from left to right. He had been able to sense Baria's true presence, but only a split second before it and its duplicates had made themselves visible. This would require extra concentration. The augret closed his large eyes and waited.

There was the spike in his psychic vision again. Quickly reopening his eyes, Kota flew up toward the cyber doorway and prepared to slam his intended target. But as Baria appeared, Kota's lunge passed straight

through it. Pausing in a mixture of alarm and bafflement, Kota yelped as he was charged into by one of the three duplicates.

Another of the duplicates swiftly made its approach towards Caley. With a determined cry, Caley lunged forward - one arm outstretched. As he did so, there was a spatter of blue visible from inside the young man's right sleeve. The energy thrust itself from the tips of Caley's fingers in one wide, sweeping exaggeration of his own real hand. It made contact with Baria's copy, breaking it into a shower of pixels.

"Whoa!" Caley flinched back, shocked by the manifestation of his own Aura. From the other end of the battlefield, even Lavender showed signs of astonishment. But Kota remained unaware of Caley's latest discovery - muttering frustratedly to himself as he glanced back and forth, trying to gauge where the multiple Barias would strike from next.

How are we going to catch it if we can't even touch it? he grumbled. *I can't even get a lock on its mind, so trying to confuse it isn't an option.*

Caley glanced up, his concentration back on the task at hand, emphasized with a newfound confidence.

There was something I learned about this at school once, he remarked. *Ghost types expend energy into the atmosphere so their bodies can become gaseous and the Foresight move works by manipulating energy particles and pulling them back together.*

But I don't know how to do Foresight, Kota said disappointedly.

Maybe not, Caley murmured. *But maybe there's some way we can replicate it. With some luck, Baria's transparency operates in the same manner as a Ghost type's does.*

Letting himself drift back into silence, Caley assumed a meditation position and searched for the singular life sign. A distant rumble broke the young man's focus. Looking round, Caley's brow furrowed as the rumbling grew steadily more pronounced. Lavender also glanced up with a studied expression, the surrounding field twitching agitatedly with the growing vibrations.

The VR field wall rippled violently and burst forth; causing a spray of pixels to rain down over those standing upon the VR field. Everything went black, and all of Baria's clone duplicates vanished in clusters of ones and zeroes. There was a faint bleeping from a place in the room Caley was unable to pinpoint.

"Don't panic." Lavender's voice resounded in Caley's head. For a moment he had assumed the Gym Leader was speaking to him telepathically, then realised he was still wearing the communication headset.

"What's happened?" he asked, trying to suppress the shakiness in his voice.

"Something breached the VR field," Lavender explained. "The damage was contained by the witukae in the outer walls, but it seems to

have caused a flux in the system. Our battle program has been shut down, but the field is still active. I can't disengage it."

And I can't teleport outside the field, Kota added unhappily. *Something's stopping me.*

"So we're trapped?" Caley grimaced.

"For now," Lavender replied calmly. "I've sent an emergency signal. With some luck, the pokémon maintenance crews will be able to repair the system flux from the outside. There's little we can do from this side."

Two bright beams of light pierced the gloom of the VR field, Once their eyes had adjusted to the glare, Caley and the others were able to see what had made such an unceremonious entrance. It appeared to be the cab of an articulated lorry - dented and scraped by its previous encounters with far more solid walls - attached to massive hydraulic apertures which in turn were fixed to a pair of wheeled platforms, giving the construct the appearance of wearing skates. One of these platforms had been heavily melted by a strong flame - this, Caley guessed, was likely the reason for the machine speeding out of control in the first place. The lower sides of the cab displayed gaping holes which sparked, indicating there had been additional constructs present that had since been torn off.

"It seems whatever breached the VR field is in here with us," Lavender concluded sternly.

"Meaa meaa-meaawth!" an angered voice yelled from the cab of the machine.

"A pokémon's driving that thing?" Caley blinked, glancing up the soiled metallic construction toward its debris-smothered windscreen. A four foot high male figure with sandy blonde hair was hunched behind the steering wheel, a mixture of frustration and panic in his uncannily wide eyes. He was dressed in a navy blue uniform with a symbol on his beret not unlike that of a crescent moon, and there were two sets of deep cuts on either of his cheeks. So many visual indicators attempted to lead Caley's mind astray - if he were to rely on his eyes alone, the figure looked more or less human. Yet he had distinctly heard him shouting in the pokémon language.

He thinks we've trapped him, Kota translated psychically.

"Look, *you* were the one that busted a hole in the virtual battlefield!" Caley called back. "We're *all* trapped in here now!"

"Meaawth meaww!" the young man screamed furiously, mashing some of the buttons on the instrument panel in front of him. The construct juddered, two large clawed hands emerging from its sides on further hydraulic apertures.

"I get the feeling he doesn't believe us..." Caley instinctively took a step back. Once the initial shock of witnessing a human talking in

pokémon tongue had worn off, Lavender assumed her previously stern appearance before thrusting an arm forward toward the mecha.

"Baria, disengage this thing before it causes more problems!"

As the secefa flew towards the mech, Kota glanced at his human companion with questioning concern. Caley knew what the augret was thinking, but hesitated to act. Was it really their place to assist? Furthermore, did either of them have the abilities to tackle something like this yet? His train of thought was swiftly derailed as one of the mech's clawed hands swiped for Baria. The secefa resumed intangibility, but instead of harmlessly passing through its semi-transparent body, the hand made contact - sending electrical arcs reverberating through the virtual type pokémon and causing it to emit an agonized screech.

"BARIA!" Lavender cried in horror. The secefa tumbled out of the air and slammed into the floor below, its body jittering vividly from the energy disturbance. Lavender tried to recall Baria to the device in her glove, but was unable to.

He said the same thing's going to happen to anyone else that tries to stop him, Kota translated worriedly, once the figure in the cab stopped yelling in pokéspeak.

"That was no normal energy..." Lavender frowned. "It was some kind of data disruptor signal. If the machine is packing a device like that, no wonder I've lost contact with the VR field's interface!" She couldn't let Baria get exposed to that signal again. The Gym Leader sprung forward

towards her pokémon, unaware that just overhead, the mech's giant left hand was sweeping in her direction.

There was a sound like two rapidly spinning wheels colliding with one another. When Lavender glanced up, she discovered the mech's hand had been forced to a standstill in mid-air - held in place by two equally large hands comprised of ethereal blue energy. A short distance away, Caley barely held his ground in his attempts to prevent the Gym Leader being seriously hurt - the shaking from his arms reverberating the entire length of his body. Snatching Baria from the ground, Lavender wisely dashed away, just as Caley's Aura-generated appendages lost their grip and the mech swivelled its upper components round in one furious arc.

"We can't allow this machine to cause any more problems with the VR field," Lavender told Caley through his headset. "It needs to be shut down."

"How?" Caley exclaimed, as Kota deflected another swipe from the mech with a hastily-raised psychic shield.

"You've got to find where its power source is," Lavender explained. "If we can disengage it without too much feedback, maybe I'll be able to get the VR field back under control."

"Alright," Caley gave a nod, before assuming the Aura Sight stance once again. His psychic vision was set ablaze by a tumult of white and silver light, as if several tiny suns had urged themselves into existence before him. He blinked furiously and retreated to the VR field, where Kota

persisted in keeping the mech from striking the surrounding boundary. *It's no good*, he aimed a thought in Kota's direction. *That machine is shooting off energy all over. I can't see where it originates.*

Buy me some time, Kota urged. *I'll take a closer look.*

Be careful, Caley bit his lip.

Lavender watched with growing trepidation as the augret flew towards the mech. Caley launched his hand forward once again, this time forcing the Aura from his bracers into a tighter shape - sleek and pointed. The blade of Aura connected with the mech's outstretched left arm, sending a cluster of sparks into the air.

"Meah-meaww!" the figure in the cab cried in a mixture of alarm and horror, fumbling with the controls. With the driver's attention elsewhere, Kota approached the mech - deftly avoiding the upper limbs as they whirled back and forth. It was a solid construction despite its recycled parts, with no exposed areas for the augret to peer into. This was going to require a spot of dismantling. Kota grasped at one of the rear panels with his telekinesis and gave it a sharp tug. It shifted slightly, prompting the augret to wrench it a second time.

A bolt of electricity struck at Kota's side, thrusting him backwards in an arc of yellow light. Shaking the stars from his vision, the augret glanced up to see a magnemite hovering a short distance away - its singular eye narrowed in angered resolve. Before Kota could properly interpret what was going on, the magnemite's two magnet-shaped

appendages began glowing brightly. A silver-blue orb formed in the air before the electric pokémon and was launched at speed, slamming into Kota with a moderately-sized explosion.

"Kota!" Caley exclaimed, momentarily losing his focus. The mech arm he had previously been trying to hold back was released from his psychic grip and continued on its path - knocking the young man across the floor of the VR field. Lavender gasped sharply as Caley landed in a disorganized mass near her feet. Leaning down, she checked the figure for signs of consciousness. He was groaning faintly, but made no attempt to move at Lavender's gentle coercion.

Caley's immobilization hadn't appeared to have satisfied the driver of the mech, though. Lavender glanced up as the towering machine advanced with difficulty - its melted right foot scraping along the floor, and its left arm sparking heavily from where Caley's Aura blade had gouged it. There was little she could do but stand protectively in front of her human and pokémon charges, and silently urge Kota to find the source of the mecha's power, before it was too late.

The augret could sense the Gym Leader's desperation, and the lull in psychic feedback his companion had previously occupied. He knew the odds had swung heavily out of his favour, and that time was running short. Yet the driver of the mecha was still distracted by his own childish wrath - he still had a chance...if he could just throw this magnemite off his tail.

But the Magnet Bombs the pokémon was throwing at him were locked to his energy signature, perfect hits every time. So far, Kota had been hit by four of them and deflected two, but this strategy left little room for prying under the mecha's shell for the location of its battery. No doubt this was the magnemite's intention, and it was proving very effective. If only there was some way to merge this current set of tactics with his previous ones.

Then an idea surfaced. It was in the form of a memory, a snapshot of part of the Gym Battle he and Caley had been engaged in prior to the mecha's unwanted intrusion. Such an idea was going to require split-second timing, but it was worth a shot. Kota eyed the magnemite, who was powering up another Magnet Bomb, then took a quick psychic glance over his shoulder at the mecha behind - still thudding towards its helpless targets. With an electronic burble, the magnemite fired the projectile and Kota turned rapidly and flew at great speed across the VR field. The magnemite chuckled to itself at what it considered a futile attempt to outrun a flawlessly-executed attack. Then it flinched, realising the augret was heading straight into a collision course with the back of the mecha. Moments before Kota made impact, he teleported to the opposite side, causing the Magnet Bomb to slam into the mecha's rear panel. A solid explosion ensued, and a chunk of metal flew from the back of the mecha and hit the floor with an echoey clatter. At the same time, Kota cast up a shield in front of Lavender, Caley and Baria - causing the mecha's functioning arm to rebound on its blue translucent surface.

<Why you little-!> the driver in the cab seethed, his attentions now firmly trained on Kota. <Argh! Stay still!>

The augret continued to distract as Lavender moved Caley and Baria to greater distance on the VR field, then teleported again to assess the results of the magnemite's attack. The dislodged panel had revealed a large, cylindrical component which pulsed with a vibrant energy - definitely something vital to the mecha's function if not the battery itself.

<Magnemite, you were supposed to stop that pest!> the driver snapped.

[TARGET UNEXPECTEDLY EVASIVE] the magnemite insisted. [RE-ATTEMPTING INCAPACITATION]

<Hah! Just you try,> Kota grinned, a renewed confidence surfacing at uncovering something useful. He picked up the scuffed panel with telekinesis and threw it at the magnemite, which dodged it expertly and began charging another Magnet Bomb. But Kota had already used that moment's hesitation to fix his gaze upon that one cylindrical component, plainly in view amongst the construct's whirring internal mechanisms.

The driver of the mecha let out a frustrated yell. No longer being distracted from the situation, he had suddenly remembered his state of entrapment, and his first response to this was to try and get out. Caley feebly opened his eyes just in time to see the mecha raise its functioning arm, the hand of which began to shimmer with the same disruption

energy that had taken out Baria just minutes earlier. With a screech of shearing metal, the arm lurched down - the hand shunted forward at speed, palm outward and trailing sparks. A loud snap ensued, and the construct's motors groaned and juddered as they rapidly decelerated - bringing the hand to a complete stop just inches away from the VR field boundary.

Kota lay winded on the battlefield floor, the battery component discarded next to him. The last Magnet Bomb impact had been enough to cut through the augret's endurance, yet he had maintained a psychic grip on the battery - using the momentum from the impact to wrench the component from its socket inside the mecha. The driver ranted expletives in pokémon tongue, battering at the control panel, having not noticed the disconnected vital part of his machine lay some metres away from him.

"Your pokémon has a strong spirit," Lavender remarked to Caley, a satisfied look upon her face. "Seeing how you two fought together, I'd say he takes after his trainer." There was a faint crackle in the earpiece of her headset as the communications interface came back online. "VR Field, Disengage."

The blackness flashed with green wireframe patterns before dissipating into the more vivid surroundings of the Gym's Battle Area. Rose, Adam, Sia and Psyduck were standing at the edge of the room - having descended from the upstairs viewing platform and been joined by

Bernard, Jessie, James, Errol and the pokémon accompanying them. A large portion of the gym wall contained a gaping hole overlaid with a translucent blue sheen - highlighting the area which the mecha had brutally forced its way through, and had since been patched up by the witukae in residence.

"Oh dear," James whimpered, upon finally seeing the mecha. The others and himself had managed to relocate it after some delay, having been made to contend with many angered victims of Carrlin's rampage while giving chase. It was indeed a sorry state - generating a familiar disappointment the trio remembered all too well from their days spent in Team Rocket. "That's left a mark."

"And after all the effort we put into building it, too," Jessie folded her arms with a slight pout.

Carrlin had attempted to sneak away round the back of the mecha alongside his magnemite, but both were unceremoniously captured by Lavender's electabuzz assistants who had come to investigate the disabled vehicle.

"Bring them to me," Lavender frowned. Carrlin and the magnemite were frogmarched over to the Gym Leader, and her small audience watching a short distance away. The young man's diminutive size was made all the more apparent now he was on solid ground, overshadowed by the two burly yellow forms of the electabuzz. Despite his capture,

Carrlin appeared neither fearful nor remorseful - his expression was sullen and deliberating, making little eye contact.

"I've heard you stole this machine without fully paying for it, and used it to take prototype inventions from Vexel Tech Fair," Lavender relayed. "You've caused a lot of people distress and inconvenience. What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Meah-meawth," Carrlin snorted. Chime uttered a gasp of horror, while Errol winced and Lavender's electabuzz began to look most incensed. Lavender frowned. It was obvious the figure had solid comprehension of her words, but appeared capable of only speaking in pokémon tongue. Maybe he was feral, having been raised by pokémon - she'd heard tales of such a thing happening before - or maybe he was just being difficult with her.

"I may not be able to understand you, but from the reaction of my friends, I can tell what you said wasn't very nice," Lavender remarked. "I'd say you need some time to think about what you've done. Tolos, dial for Vexel City Police Station."

"Wait!" Errol spluttered. "Uh...can I talk ta him a sec?" He motioned gingerly to a far corner of the battle field. "Over dere?"

"I suppose," Lavender replied, a note of tentative suspicion in her voice. "But I'm not taking my eyes off you."

"Fine, fine," Errol acknowledged, hurriedly leading Carrlin out of earshot. The young man glowered up at his taller associate without a hint of gratitude for the delay of punishment.

<Don't you know when to quit?> he snorted moodily.

"Not when I can still see hope," Errol replied. "Look, I'm not saying you don't have a right ta feel da way ya feel, Carr. But you're just passing on what was done ta you by taking it out on dese people."

<And why *shouldn't* I pass it on?> Carrlin exclaimed. <Why should I be the only one to suffer?>

"Dat's da t'ing!" Errol said. "You're *not* da only one. We may not have the same trials, but every one of us *got* trials, y'know? If you don't stick togedda and woik 'em out, dey just eat away at'cha and-"

<Shut up!> Carrlin snapped. <Just shut up! Stop trying to pretend that you care, Errol!>

"I'm not pretending!" Errol frowned, trying to keep his temper. "Bruddas need ta look out for each other, dat's all! If ya just let them know ya realise what'cha did wrong, maybe I can get'cha outta jail time."

<We're *not* brothers, and I'm *not* apologising to those human scum!> Carrlin retorted, before yelling to the steel type pokémon held between the two electabuzz in the center of the room. <Get me out of here, Magnemite!>

[AFFIRMATIVE] the magnemite responded. Before anyone could react, the magnemite's body erupted in a blaze of white light, forcing those in audience to shield their eyes and splutter in pain. Once their visions had returned to normal, Carrlin and his magnemite were gone.

"Strike two," Jessie commented bemusedly, as Errol wandered back over looking miserable. "That tactic didn't work earlier. Why did you think it was going to work now?"

"I...I don't know," Errol sighed. He knew attempting to get Carrlin to see the error of his ways was a long shot, but for some reason he couldn't help but try.

Lavender seemed to have already resigned herself to Carrlin's escape. Following a quick report of his name and appearance to Vexel City Police, she turned her attention to the new arrivals.

"We're terribly sorry that machine crashed into your Gym," Bernard grimaced. "Firecracker tried to stop the machine's rampage by melting its wheels but...well you saw what happened."

"Char-meelyhn," Firecracker scratched the back of her head apologetically.

"I understand," Lavender gave a nod. "It was an accident. So long as no one was seriously hurt."

"I believe we avoided that, at least!" James grinned awkwardly. Nearby, Rose, Sia, Adam and Psyduck looked on with concerned expressions as Caley shakily tried to stay upright.

"Wow, Caley. You look roughed up," Adam bit his lip. "What hit you?"

"That giant robot hand, mostly," Caley gave a weak chuckle, pointing at the mecha. "All things considered, I think we did pretty well against it though. Wouldn't you say, Kota?"

Kota didn't reply. Aside from the tiredness which was to be expected after a strenuous battle, the augret appeared quite distant. Caley looked at his pokémon companion worriedly - he could detect a weird undulation in Kota's Aura that he'd not sensed before. Then Kota began to emit a vivid glow which blotted his entire body from view - lengthening as it gathered intensity. Once the light had dimmed, those watching the event found themselves gazing upon a violet pokémon about five feet in height. It looked like an augret, but its face was tapered, its feathery ears now curving slightly round the back of the head. Both its shoulders now bore a set of feathery protrusions, while its slender body with its clawed arms and pointed tail was balanced gracefully upon longer, sturdier legs.

"Kota's evolved!" Jessie almost squealed. Caley smiled broadly for what felt like the first time in ages, as Kota rubbed his angular snout against the side of his face. He returned the affection by throwing his

arms around the pokémon's neck. As small-scale as the gym match had been, finally getting to grips with his abilities and Kota evolving gave Caley renewed optimism. It felt like, with the help of his companions and their experience, he might actually have a chance.

With the help of a borrowed towtruck, the mecha's remains were carefully returned to Bernard's workshop. Bernard reassured the others that none of the functioning parts would go to waste, and would be used in future projects. After a thorough search, the trade fair inventions Carrlin had stolen were discovered in one piece, stashed away in a hidden compartment.

"I'll make sure these get back to their rightful owners," Lavender smiled, patting the trunk of her vehicle before turning to look at Caley. "You may not have been able to complete my challenge, but you showed a lot of skill out there on the field, today. As did Kota. What you might lack in strength right now, you make up for in determination. I have a lot of confidence you'll go far, Caley."

"Thank you, Lavender," Caley smiled. He could sense the Gym Leader really meant it, and this fuelled his optimism. James looked on, as a thoughtful expression descended across his face. It was obvious that Lavender had not received feedback from the other Gym Leaders about Caley's responsibilities - this wasn't such a big deal, no doubt she would find out in due time. But this thought cemented another decision in James' mind. He just couldn't leave without explaining to his uncle what was happening. It seemed wrong to leave Bernard in the dark - not only

with regards to his own identity, but also to the approaching future events.

Once Lavender had departed with her car full of inventions, and the other members of the group were seated on makeshift chairs engaged in animated discussion, James nervously asked to speak to Bernard in private. There, he began the long process of revelation. Bernard's eyes grew wide as James took off his wig, detailing the unsavoury plans Team Rocket had in store that he and his friends had discovered. He wisely left out his past membership to Team Rocket - his uncle was a kindly soul, but James didn't think he would be able to accept his favourite nephew's affiliation with such a criminal organization, albeit a discontinued affiliation.

"Look, Uncle Bernie," James began quietly. "I'm telling you this for your own good, so what happens won't catch you totally off guard. But you've really got to be careful who else you pass this information on to. The Pokémon League is preparing an attack plan to protect everyone from Team Rocket's actions, so people fighting for the side of good *do* know."

"That's a relief," Bernard nodded. "And it's so wonderful to see you, my boy!" He gave a hearty chuckle and slapped James upon the back, causing him to splutter. "It certainly has been a while. Ten years, am I right?"

"Something like that," James croaked.

"So is that why you were in a disguise?" Bernard tilted his head. "Team Rocket have been after you, trying to stop you from putting an end to their plan?"

"More or less," James gave a nod. He paused, a fleeting look of panic on his face. "Say, could I ask one more favour of you? Please don't let dad know I was here, okay?"

"Is he still pestering you about that whole inheritance thing?" Bernard tutted, but a tiny, mischievous smile was on his face. "Of course, James. You can count on me."

The two men stood there for a moment, watching James' companions chattering from across the room. Caley was one of the most enthusiastic despite his injuries, re-enacting his attacks on the mecha with wide gestures, to the awe and admiration of those listening. Even Adam seemed less fearful and more suitably impressed, urging Caley to tell him more. Jessie and Errol were uncharacteristically subdued - the former casting studied glances from the latter to James, and then back again.

"You know, despite how it ended up, you and your two friends made an excellent job of that project," Bernard commented. "Somehow just paying you three doesn't seem enough." Suddenly the inventor paused, his eyes wide with realisation. "Hang on, there *is* something else I can do!"

Rose looked up as frantic barking echoed from somewhere within the workshop. Shortly afterward, James - now with his wig returned to his head - ran into view, his face awash with a beaming childlike grin. A small orange and black canine form streaked across the ground after him, dancing around the man's legs, leaping up and down excitedly and eventually managing to knock James off his feet. The two figures lay there for a moment - James' joyful laughter catching the attention of not only his travelling companions, but other inventors in the alley.

"Hey, isn't dat Growlie?" Errol asked in surprise.

"The growlithe you had when you were a kid?" Jessie added.

"Looks like he remembers you too, my boy!" Bernard chortled. "The little tyke's been here ever since your grandparents transferred him to me. He'd run away to their place following the incident at Southfleck House, but they were unable to keep him because he kept spooking the grass types. Still, now you're here, you can take Growlie along with you!"

"I wouldn't think twice about it!" James grinned, giving Bernard a thankful hug while the growlithe scampered around the two figures without an ounce of resentment for the time spent apart from his trainer. "Thanks, Uncle Bernie!"

"Okay, now he's calling that guy his uncle," Adam pulled a face. "This is getting weird."

"Don't spoil da moment, kid." Errol told him firmly, before retreating into his thoughts. The situation with Carrlin still played on his

mind - somehow the young man's actions had felt like his responsibility, despite it being no more his responsibility than the actions of his companions. And what was that organization Carrlin had foolishly signed himself into?

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He'd been here, alright. Larson Sloane could tell from the trail of destruction and the combined sighting feedback from pokémon bystanders that his quarry had attempted a heist of sorts - way too big for one person to handle. A typical rookie criminal mistake. But it made *his* job easier, at least. Further offsite interviews with the pokémon from Vexel Gym had provided Larson with additional clues - another man who seemed to have a link with his suspect. This needed to be investigated further. Having lost the trail of his suspect for the time being, Larson made the decision to track down the other man and see just how much he knew. But not before making a report to headquarters and grabbing something to eat - the snorlax's stomach was giving him some loud, angry reprimands by this point.

Larson flipped open his communicator and accessed the LFPE Headquarters' number, only to be met with a recorded message telling him the call could not be completed. He frowned, putting the communicator back in his pocket. Surely his superiors hadn't got so fed

up of his reports that they'd blocked incoming calls from him. Something about the situation didn't settle well in his gut. Or maybe that was just the lack of food. Larson put his anxious thoughts aside for the time being and decided to go and satisfy his raging hunger instead. The technical issues would no doubt be fixed soon enough.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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