

Chapter 7: Parallel Process

Saffron – the City of Golden Radiance. Ash had seen many things along his journeys, but the sight of the Capital in that golden hour just before dark, its skyline awash with the soft hues of the evening twilight, little windows lighting up like thousands of tiny Embers, was something that never ceased to amaze this kid from the backwater village.

“I still think this is a stupid idea,” said Misty in weak protest, following Brock and Ash onto the open-air escalator leading up to a sprawling food court. The bustling crowds, the cornucopia of merchandise, and the variegated patchwork of culinary fragrances here in the Saffron City Central Shopping District were the stuff of national renown.

“Nobody’s forcing you to come along,” – Ash raised his palms upward to suggest their current surroundings – “and yet, here we are...”

“Hmph.” She would be lying to deny that she had long been in search of an excuse to come and visit this place; it was only fair, then, that after she and Brock had respectively subjected Ash to several tedious hours of browsing aimlessly for fishing- and breeding-related paraphernalia, they should now turn to their primary purpose.

“So, what’s the plan?” Brock prompted, as the three of them sat down with their *bentō* lunch boxes, Pikachu with his in miniature. “That was a close call back there at Cinnabar. But the Silph Headquarters is one of the most heavily guarded buildings in the world.”

“Yeah,” Misty agreed casually, “I don’t think your usual ‘make it up as you go’ approach is gonna work here.”

“Way ahead of ya, guys.” Ash proceeded to unroll a large blueprint out onto the table, weighing down its four corners with a pair of jumper cables, a special purple Pokéball inscribed with the symbol 門, two flashlights, and a pink dress from the costume shop.

“...”
“...”

The trio gathered once more in a huddle in the opulently marbled lobby of the Silph Headquarters building. They stood alongside the gold-encrusted balustrade surrounding the grand fountain in the center, unnoticed amidst the influx of uniformed shift workers about to clock in for the night.

Ash produced the purple Pokéball from his jacket. “Awfully nice of Copycat to lend you that for the night,” Brock remarked.

“Ah, well, she owed me a favor anyhow,” Ash replied, dropping the ball to the ground. “Go, Abra!”

From the cloud of red energy emerged not one, but *two* Abra, each a perfect mirror image of the other, and each holding a small plastic card in one hand.

“Huh, that’s funny,” said Ash, taking the magnetic-striped card-key from the Abra closest to him. “I was just about to ask him to go steal us one of these from one of the guards. Oh, well, that was easy enough.”

“But how come there’s two of them?” Misty wondered. As if on cue, the second, mirror-imaged Abra shined briefly blue and Teleported away with the soft *pop* of intruding air.

“See, everything works itself out,” Ash chuckled, to Misty’s silent sarcasm.

“All right, you guys ready?” asked Ash one last time. They nodded in mutual acknowledgement, and placed their hands together.

“Okay. One, two, three...”

“*Getto da ze!*” said Misty.

She slipped away silently to the elevators, and directed hers to the fifteenth floor. As it rose she pulled the pink dress over her head, reflecting with a certain grotesque amusement upon the contortions of fate that had led to her now attempting a heist against one of the world’s most powerful mega-corporations.

“This is so humiliating,” she muttered, wetting her eyes with drops of water from a vial.

The guard on duty at the front desk of the Electronics Research Lab was a listless, heavysset police-academy dropout who was all too keenly aware of the abysmal position he occupied on the corporate ladder. Taking another bite from his doughnut, he twirled his radio around with his other hand and gazed through heavy eyelids over at the clock that would soon release him for the day.

“Excuse me, sir?” He turned to the teary little girl in the pink dress who was now tugging at his uniform. “Have you seen Abra?”

“Uh...” He didn’t look up. “Can I help you, miss?”

“My Abra ran off and I don’t know where he is! I’ve looked all over!”

“Well, what do you want from me?” the guard sighed.

“*Getto da ze!*” said Ash.

He turned now to address Brock directly. “You’d better take this.”

“Now, you’ve got everything you need?”

“Great. Oh, and that reminds me, let’s not forget to sync our watches.”

He took the watch out of his own pocket and handed it to Brock.

“Okay, good to go!” “Pi-ka!”

“Oh, that’s right, can’t forget you! Here you go.”

He lifted the Abra up onto his own shoulder.

“Well, Copycat did say there’s something special about him,” he said, giving Abra a pat on the head. “He sometimes makes certain, uh... *perturbations*, I think was the word.”

“What, do *you* know what that means?”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine...”

“*Getto da ze!*” said Brock.

Ash handed him the card-key that Abra had provided.

He patted his pockets. “Let’s see... flashlight, cables, watch... I think that’s everything?”

“Right.” He withdrew his own watch with one hand, taking Ash’s with the other, and pressed the buttons on both simultaneously.

Ash carefully rested Pikachu onto Brock’s shoulder.

He gestured at the Abra on Ash’s. “You sure you know how to handle that guy?”

“Not exactly encouraging.”

“You didn’t think to ask?”

His casual response did little to dispel the air of perpetual improvisation that seemed, to Brock, invariably to accompany Ash’s designs.

“Y’know,” he whispered tentatively, “I’m starting to have doubts about this plan. I

"Can you help me look for him?"

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed the crust out of his eyes, groaning loudly. "Can't you just, like, catch another one? And what are you doing here, anyway?"

She stared back at him and put on her best quivering voice. "But Abra... he was my friend... Please, I'd do anything to see him again!" she sobbed.

He arose from the chair with noticeable difficulty. "All right, all right, just stop crying already!"

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"Where'd you last see it," he said formulaically.

"I think he might have teleported into that room there." She pointed through the locked entrance to the Lab.

"No, that's a restricted area, I can't take you in there."

"But- Abra- my friend-"

"Fine, fine! I'll tell you what. You wait here, and I'll go in and have a look." She nodded silently, and the guard entered with a card-key on his neck lanyard. As the door was closing, Misty quickly slapped a piece of duct tape onto the latch and snagged the guard's radio off his desk.

"Yeah, well, I'd better get well compensated for this."

"Whatever you say, boss."

"Really, Brock, it's under control. Trust me."

"Oh well, it's too late now anyhow," he interrupted, glancing at his watch. "We'd better get going. Good luck!"

He followed Misty's route into the nearby waiting elevator, waving back to Brock as the doors slid closed in front of him.

He hit the button for the fifteenth floor, tapping his toes as he waited. *What if he's right?* the thought nagged at him. *After all, there are a lot of moving parts in this operation.*

But no matter. I'll do my best, and have no regrets.

"A-bra!" that one croaked, sensing his thoughts.

The elevator completed its ascent and opened its doors. "Come on Abra, let's go." They crept carefully down the hallway in the direction of the Lab, backs against the wall, towards the sound of arguing voices, and listened around the corner for Misty to finish her rehearsed routine.

"Terrific performance, I almost believed it myself!"

"You did good. But we're not done yet. I'll go ahead. You meet me down at the rendezvous point outside."

He turned away to pull the

mean, what if something goes wrong? Do you have any contingencies mapped out?"

"But with such precise and intricate timing, even the slightest disturbance might--"

"We're going to need it, that's for sure," he said to himself. Pikachu waved back at Ash, and turned up to Brock expectantly.

"All right Pikachu, here goes nothing. We'd better get downstairs."

"Ka-chu!"

They headed over towards the corner of the building, trying to escape the notice of the variously preoccupied employees, and arrived at a door, designated "BASEMENT." He bumped his card against the adjoining reader, and disappeared through it down to the floor below.

The basement was exactly as one might expect for a building of this magnitude. The roar of the machinery, straining to deliver air, water, and power to the gargantuan structure, echoed off of the concrete floor.

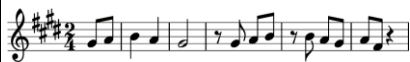
He located another door, marked "DANGER: HIGH VOLTAGE," and tried his card. When it let him pass, he made sure it latched behind him.

He turned then to the dozens of panels of wires and switches in the electrical

She rolled her eyes away from his view. Back towards the elevator she went, along the way rolling her stifling pink outfit into a bundle, which she chucked unceremoniously into a garbage chute while waiting for the elevator to come.

When it did, she hit the 1st floor button forcefully. Having done her part, she wanted only to escape this labyrinthine skyscraper as soon as possible.

As the floors counted down, she took the opportunity to close her eyes and collect her thoughts, appreciating the soothing Muzak being piped in courtesy of Silph Co.



The music stopped short, as the elevator ground to a halt and plunged into darkness.

Stay calm. It's all part of the plan. The power goes out for about ten seconds before the auxiliary kicks in. On the second floor now. Oughtta be out of here real soon.

She felt around blindly in her pockets, realizing now that she had brought neither a flashlight nor a watch. She did still have that guard's radio, she remembered, but it was too risky to play around with that, unless, of course, she wanted to get herself caught...

What's taking so long? Surely the power should've come back by now?

The lights in the elevator flashed on for a fraction of a second, and the doors opened

door open and go inside, where Abra crawled over to bump the gullible guard's leg.

"Ah, here it is," said the guard, picking up the little Psi Pokémon. "Miss, miss, I found your Abra!"

"That's right you did!" Ash shouted. "Abra, Teleport!"

The guard glowed increasingly blue as he realized what was happening. "You— you little scoundrels!"

"Haha, so long!" Ash taunted. Abra and the guard faded away, and Ash turned his attention to a locked door marked "Authorized Personnel Only." He looked at his watch one last time.

"Five, four, three, two, one..."

The lights flickered out just in time, and he pushed the door open, closing it behind him as quickly as possible.

Phew. I made it.

He flicked on his flashlight, beholding the seemingly endless rows of shelves stretching out before him, and pulled out a scrawled note from his pocket.

Let's see... 47176870... How am I ever going to find that?

It's okay, I've got time. Nobody knows I'm here. Except that guard, but Abra took him far away anyhow. And Misty took his radio away, right?

He continued advancing through the dark, narrow aisle, keeping an eye on the increasing shelf numbers.

control room, scanning with his eyes for the right pair of contacts. Pikachu meanwhile had a giddy look about him like a kid in a candy store.

"Pi-pika!"

"All right Pikachu, here it is. You ready?"

"Kachu."

"Okay, here goes." He carefully clamped a pair of Kingler-clips to two of the terminals inside the panel, running the cables to electrodes on Pikachu's cheeks. "Wait for it... wait for it..."

Sweat collected on their brows as they counted down the seconds on Brock's watch.

"Five, four, three, two, one..."

"Pi-ka-CHU!" He sent a surge of voltage into the panel.

"Nice work Pika—"

But a flashing red display above the panel caught his attention. The text read:

CIRCUIT BREAK DETECTED.
REROUTING AUXILIARY POWER IN 0:07

Oh boy, this is bad. No way will Ash get out of the vault in time. What do we do now? 0:06

I need to stop the auxiliary power from coming on. He frantically began opening up all of the panels. There must be something here, c'mon... 0:05
0:04

"Gaaah, no time!" He haphazardly reconnected the cables to an important-looking set of terminals. 0:02
0:01

"Give it all you've got!"

"Pi-KA... CHU!" The force of the blast knocked them both to the ground.

a few inches, but this spike of power soon failed.

"Hey!" The guard from before was standing outside the door, his uniform dirtied with mud. "Thought I'd find you here!" He stepped inside and snatched his radio away from her. "Well, you're not getting away this ti—"

"Abra!" The psychic creature, similarly mud-splattered, had just caught up with the guard, and crawled inside after him.

"Oh no you don't, not this again!" he barked, raising his truncheon at the Pokémon. Abra Teleported into Misty's arms.

"Don't move a muscle!" he ordered.

"Quick Abra!" she shouted. "I don't care where to. Just get us out of here!"

The man lunged forward at the glowing girl and her rescuer, but he was too late. They were gone. %

⊕ "It's been fun, Abra."

"Intruders on the fifteenth floor!" he said into his radio. "Send back— What? You again?"

the blue light. and she felt hands together, and she felt Ash!" They placed their other the card. "And take this to now!" said Misty, giving Abra back me back another in her hand.

appeared, one on the lanyard, one, but two card-keys. She gave it a yank, and not and closed her fist around it. his lanyard over his protests, in on the guard, reached for

No, it's Brock that I really have to worry about. He didn't have much faith in the plan. I guess he doesn't realize how much research went into it beforehand. I mean, he's just the kind of guy who'd mess things up because he thinks he has to know everything about what's happening at all times. I hope he remembered to let the auxiliary power turn the elevators back on...

He made a right-turn upon locating the appropriately designated shelf, and skimmed it over with his flashlight beam as he walked past. The racks held hundreds of small cardboard boxes, variously faded with age in light and dark shades of brown, each labeled with a number.

He had nearly reached the end of the row. *The box must be all the way on the top shelf*, he noticed.

He clenched the flashlight between his teeth and stepped up onto the first shelf, grabbing above with his hands, and pulled himself up another level to look across the top. *Come on... it'd better be there...*

"Gotcha!" he said aloud through the flashlight, snatching a very specific box from the stack, and jumped back down to the ground.

All right, this is it. Model 47176870, the Universal Machine.

He opened the box reverently, as one who knew that he held in his hands a

"Ouch... nice one, Pikachu." Brock patted down his frizzy hair and eyebrows amidst the haze of ozone. "I think that worked. Sure smells like it did."

"Pi-ka?"

"All right." He stood up and dusted himself off. "Now we just get out, find Misty, and wait for Ash."

"Hey, what was that?" a shout came from outside the door.

"I think it came from the electrical room!" another voice responded.

Brock looked left, right, down, and up. "Quick, Pikachu, in here!" He opened up a small metal panel in the wall near the floor, and they climbed into its dark, musty confines.

The door beeped and the guards came in.

Brock held himself against the inside of the panel, holding his breath lest a cough or sneeze reveal them. Flashlight beams swung back and forth, casting a luminous border along the hinges, till finally fading.

"Looks like a short in the main and auxiliary lines," came the guard's stifled voice. "Get maintenance down here."

Brock gratefully allowed himself to breathe again.

Another man then came running in. "Attention! We've received word of an intruder on the fifteenth floor! All units report to the main stairwell and make your way up! Move,

shoved it back into Brock's hand. "Abra, you idiot! We're going back in time? And I thought Ash had a terrible sense of direction!" Abra covered his head and shivered, while Brock backed up around the corner, his voice fading away. "I'm sorry, Abra," she lowered her voice. "I'm just a little freaked out is all. Can you get us back to normal?" He nodded humbly. "Okay. Let's... actually, hang on a sec." A realization dawned on her. "How did Abra manage to get that card-key in the first place? We're going back in time... that would look like..." "Come on, we're going back in." By the time they reached the second floor elevator, all was quiet again, save for the voices of the heavyset guard and two of his uniformed comrades.

"Mm-hm. Right," said the chief, while scratching on a notepad: RECOMMEND FOR PSYCHIATRIC EVALUATION.

"I swear, Chief, that's exactly what happened!" said the guard, waving his empty lanyard in their faces.

After half a minute more of fogged out backwards, leaving him alone.

"Oh Ash," Misty sobbed. "The things I do for you, that you don't even know..."

"Hey, my card!"

As fast as possible, she ran

sacred relic, an artifact of unmentionable power, said to drive its wielder to the brink of madness—

And yet, there it was, no larger than a paperback book, with eight buttons on the front, and circuits visible through its translucent purple plastic casing. Ash stared blankly into the reflection of his own eyes in the device's small square display screen, staring, staring, as if into infinity...

All right, snap out of it. He replaced the lid of the box and pocketed it.

Time to find my way out of here.

He ran back out to the main aisle and towards the entrance. He was unsettled by the silence, unsure if it represented genuine peace, or merely the well-insulated walls. He emerged through the inner and outer doors, into the corridor. Sure enough, he became aware of heavy footsteps coming from the door to the stairwell.

Oh no! A mud-splattered guard stomped through the door, and Ash froze where he stood.

"You!" the man yelled. "I've had it with you little brats and your damned Pokémon! When I'm through with ya, you're gonna wish you'd never been—"

The guard fell down with a sizzling sound.

"Pikachu!" He removed the card from

Great idea, genius. How am I supposed to tell him if I can't even talk?

Fine, whatever you say, Brock.

"Pi-ka." He hopped up along one of the pipes, toward a vent that opened onto the first floor.

A pair of guards ran by, towards the stairs. He followed quietly, trying to remain down below their level of attention.

But as soon as they opened the door, he sped ahead with the fastest Agility he could manage with the card wedged in his jaw.

"Pi pipi!" He neared the 15th floor. There, the door was falling closed, and he slipped by narrowly, losing perhaps a few tail-hairs.

A guard was shouting angrily at Ash.

"Ka-CHU!" He took him out by surprise with a Thunderbolt from behind.

"Pikapipi!"

move, move!"

They hurried out obediently. "Oh no!" whispered Brock. "Our cover's blown. They're gonna find Ash before he can escape!"

He took a moment to collect himself, recalling one last, desperate option... "Okay, Pikachu, listen up, this is very important. I can't make it to Ash in time, but you can. You need to go find him and make sure he doesn't go down the stairs. If he does, he'll be trapped. You got that?"

Great idea, genius. How am I supposed to tell him if I can't even talk?

"And take this too." He fed the plastic card key into Pikachu's mouth. "He'll know what to do. Now hurry!"

Brock crawled back the other way, toward the building's edge. He squeezed himself through a narrow concrete passage, and climbed by the friction of his back and feet to a metal grating, through which he emerged into a grassy courtyard. The fresh air was a welcome relief from the stale, chemical-ridden bowels of the building.

He heard a rustling bush and what sounded like Misty's voice around the corner. "Hey Misty, is that you?" He ran over to find out.

He found her crouching down next to the Abra, addressing the Pokémon with a hideous gasping-snorting sound resembling no human language. Suddenly, she looked up at him and ripped

backwards. With horror she noticed its second hand ticking and into her hand, where she suddenly leapt off the ground. She gasped as the watch away a little more. "Wha?" ground in front of her, backing his pocket and placed it on the. He removed his watch from you all right?" "Brock, what the hell? Are like none she had ever heard. He opened his mouth to answer, but his words were me!" she called out. slowly. "Wait, Brock, it's backing away from her saw Brock, who seemed to be She looked up nearby and place to take us?" could you have picked a worse back courtyard. "Gee, Abra, evidently behind a bush in the down in a puddle of mud, She found herself face-

⊕ She was outside again, not far from the same bush. Abra was gone, replaced once again by his Pokéball, but she could see Brock from behind.

"Brock!"

She breathed a sigh of relief at hearing him speak normally again. "Yeah, I'm okay. Just a little dizzy."

"I- we- uh, it's a long story. But don't worry, I'm fine."

"I'm... I'm trying not to think too hard about that."

"But now the question is,

Pikachu's mouth.

"Let's go, Pikachu." Ash

picked him up and ran through the door, turning to go down, but Pikachu jumped out of his arms and started climbing up the stairs instead.

"Hey, where are you going?! We have to go down!"

"Ka-pi-chu!" he insisted.

A rumble of footsteps drew closer. From below, a team of guards was running upstairs. "He's up there!"

Ash made a hasty about-face. "I'm coming, Pikachu!" Skipping two or three steps at a time, he snatched up Pikachu and climbed all the way up to the top of the stairs and up a flimsy wooden ladder, coming to a sternly labeled hatch:

UNAUTHORIZED PRESENCE ON
THE ROOF OF THIS BUILDING IS
PROHIBITED AND WILL RESULT
IN A ₱50 FINE

He rattled the handle; it was locked, naturally.

"Okay, this had better work!" He took out Pikachu's card and pushed it into the latch, struggling with it until hearing a click. "Come on, come on!" He gave it a shove, and the portal opened to the cool breeze of nighttime air.

Ash knocked the ladder out from under him with a firm kick and pulled himself up onto the roof.

"Hang on tight, Pikachu!" He hurled a Pokéball all the way over to the edge of the roof— "Pidgotto, go!" — and

"Pi-pika!" He wildly gesticulated toward the stairwell door.

his watch off of his wrist.

His heart skipped a beat at this unexpected move. "Hey, what's gotten into you?" She dropped the watch with a frightened look of her own, and he quickly snatched it up off the ground, putting it into his pocket.

She replied in the same bizarre speech.

"Misty! What happened? Why are you talking so strange?"

Though he could not understand her answer, she seemed more confused than malicious. He held his hand out and crept cautiously back towards her.

She spoke one last time, then proceeded to plant her face squarely into the mud. A blue halo began to engulf her and Abra, and in another moment they vanished.

What the hell? Whatever's going on here, it can't be good. Is she possessed or something? Or am I the one who's going crazy—

He turned around.

"Misty, there you are! Are you all right?"

"What was that all about?"

He took a second to catch his breath. "Okay, you can tell me all about it later. But what happened to Abra?"

"Um, okay..."

where's Ash?"	sprinted after it, diving desperately over the railing.	"I think he's still inside!"
"Well how's he gonna get all the way down here from the fifteenth floor?"	As he fell he grabbed on to Pidgeotto, who flapped wildly to slow their descent through the thicket of trees, down toward a painful but survivable landing on the ground alongside his accomplices, sixteen stories below.	"He's going to have to figure out some way of—"
She looked above her head. "Wait, what's that?"	"You guys, I got it! Now let's get outta here!"	"Is that— Ash!"
"Ash!"	"Not so fast, twerp!"	
She spun around to search for the source of the voice. "What? Who—"	<i>Oh for the love of Mew you have got to be kidding me...</i>	He spun around to search for the source of the voice. "What? Who—"
"Prepare for trouble!"	"Make it double!"	