

POKÉMON
REBIRTH
ULTIMATUM
Endgame Edition



EPISODE TWO

Volt Switch

As his consciousness returned, Caley lay there groggily - allowing himself to adjust to the atmosphere before overloading his senses with visual information. His entire body felt oddly numb, and his head was reeling from a gaping void of something once apparent in his memory, now horribly anonymous. Despite the fact he had yet to open his eyes, Caley knew he was no longer on the bus inside Praela tunnel - the surface underneath him was far too plush and horizontal, for a start.

A faint snort was heard, accompanied by a slight puff of warm air which tickled the young man's nose - it was enough to motivate Caley into forcing his eyelids apart. No sooner had the blurriness started to clear, than the young man discovered himself face to face with a rounded violet-coloured creature sporting tufted ears that was fast asleep on the remaining space of his pillow. The sheer unexpectedness of the pokémon's presence, coupled with its close proximity to himself, was enough to make Caley let out a yelp in surprise. The little pokémon's eyes shot wide open and it uttered a squeal in return - promptly vanishing from sight in a fizzle of blue.

"What was that?" Caley murmured to himself as he tried to lever the upper part of his body into some kind of sitting position. The young man succeeded, only to find himself gazing down in puzzlement at the multitudes of tiny celebis clustered around his fingers. It took a few moments for Caley to realise that the presence of so many of these time-travelling pokémon was nothing but an embroidered motif, repetitively adorning the quilt draped across his legs. Glancing up, Caley flinched yet

again as he discovered a banette perched on the end of the bed he was in, wearing an amused smirk. Before the young man was able to utter another cry of alarm, the door of the room opened and a woman in her late twenties walked in. She had forest green hair reaching her shoulders, and was wearing jeans coupled with a red and dark purple jacket. The pokémon Caley had found upon his pillow just moments ago lagged in mid-air behind her, with a curious but nervous expression. Upon seeing Caley was awake, the woman's tense pose relaxed considerably.

"Thank Tah you're okay!" she sighed with relief, as the banette left the celebi motif quilt and took up position by her side.

"What's going on here?" Caley spluttered in frustration. "Where's Kiko? And where's my Pokédex?"

"Oh, this?" The woman reached into one of the pockets on her jacket before bringing out Caley's glasses. "I was keeping them safe for you until you woke up." She took one last, rather fond glance at the accessory before handing it over. "First time I've seen a Pokédex built into a pair of glasses before. Did you make the customization yourself?"

"They were a gift from Que- er, Professor Werty," Caley replied distractedly, putting the glasses on. "Thanks for making sure they didn't get broken."

"No problem," the woman smiled. "It's a nifty design - we could do with some of those in the agency."

"Agency?" Caley echoed, rubbing his head which was now a

turmoil of thoughts. "Who are you, anyway? And where am I?"

"My name's Ana Scargill," the woman explained. "I'm a Guardsmen Agent, Investigations Division - I took you into custody after you fainted on the bus travelling here. None of the other passengers knew what had happened, but Shift..." She placed a hand on the head of the banette standing by her side. "He could see a whole lot of dark type energies inside you. Rather than letting them fester and cause more damage, Shift tried to get the energy out himself. After that, we brought you to Retyrn Port's Pokémon Center - Nurse Joy was kind enough to let you recover in the trainer sleeping quarters."

Ana paused for a moment, sitting down on the edge of the bed while allowing Caley to absorb this chunk of new information.

"Judging by what minimal scans can be done on humans here, Shift's idea seems to have worked," she commented in pleased tones. "He's quite talented when it comes to manipulating energy."

"Thanks, Shift," Caley said to the banette, who bobbed his head in acknowledgement. "But what about Kiko? The grumpig...the pokémon I was with. Where is she?"

"We...didn't see a pokémon with you," Ana replied sadly. "Do you have any idea what happened back there?"

The young man struggled to dredge up the memories of his fateful encounter that had been smudged into the sides of his mind as a result of earlier events. A lot of the minor details remained unavailable to him -

smothered by what seemed to be an intentionally-placed veil in his mind - yet one image stood out as clear as day.

"A big red R," he responded in monotone. "That's all I remember. Doubt *that's* any help, either."

"An 'R'...?" Ana uttered a panicked gasp upon hearing this. "Surely not...Team Rocket."

"Maybe, maybe not," Caley replied dully. "I don't know why, but I feel as if my memories have been tampered with."

"Which would explain the complete lack of knowledge from the driver or his passengers about their journey," Ana bit her lip. "Not to mention your missing pokémon. Seems his fears *were* founded."

"Whose?" Caley glanced at the woman lopsidedly.

"My commander," came the solemn reply. "He'd insisted that Team Rocket were far from disbanded. People had accused him of trying to stir up trouble...oh if only there were a way to tell him this news."

"Why *isn't* there?" Caley asked. "Doesn't he have a phone?"

"Yes, but..." Ana trailed off, before attempting to explain the origins of her lack of contact. "He left me here to keep an eye on the traffic passing through Retyrn Port while he went to check out a disturbance in Nashgri City. Last I heard, something important was stolen from the laboratory next door to the city gym. Sources reported it as the work of Brody the Phantom Thief, which would have explained why Team

Rocket wasn't targeted as responsible. Brody hasn't been known for loyalty to any particular syndicate since he left Team Magma.

But after that, messages from Commander Zilant just...stopped. I haven't dared to get in touch, in case my attempts are traced."

Caley stared down at his knees in a growing sense of trepidation. As the mistiness in his head ebbed away, the seriousness of the situation became ever more potent. He had heard of Team Rocket before, but only as tidbits of information delivered through news broadcasts. Nothing made a seemingly faraway criminal organization more real than encountering one of its members up close.

"At any rate, I'm glad you came around from that dark energy exposure," Ana admitted. "With how badly it affected you, I'd say it was fortunate we reached you in time. The readings of that energy were pretty scary."

The emergency room door opened and a middle-aged woman with tied-back shocking pink hair and casual outfit wandered in, carrying a clipboard. Ana glanced up at her hopefully, and the woman greeted the expression with a reassuring nod.

"This is Martha Joy – she runs this Pokémon Center," Ana told Caley.

"It's a relief to see you up in bed," Martha added, in those warm,

calming tones that all members of the Joy family possessed. "But I'd be far happier if you had yourself checked out at Nashgri City, just to make sure you're okay."

"Sure, I'll do that," Caley accepted. "Thank you for letting me stay here. Sorry about the purple fur on your pillow - that pokémon decided to share it with me." He emphasised the culprit by waving an arm in the direction of the violet-coloured creature floating over the furthest bedpost. Ana gave it a stern look.

"Kota, the pillow is the last place you're supposed to sleep on a human bed," she exclaimed, motioning back towards Caley. "He could have had allergies."

"Gwehhh..." the pokémon responded unhappily, hanging its head. As this little exchange went on, Caley raised a hand to the side of his glasses and activated the T-5's scanning procedure.

"Augret, the Vibe Pokémon," The screen read. *"A naturally shy creature, Augret will only approach those with equally calm temperaments and will flee if any sudden sounds or movements are made."*

"Don't be too hard on the little guy," Martha insisted cheerfully. "He's only young. Besides, it's not every day I get a visit from such a rare pokémon."

"Augrets are rare?" Caley raised his eyebrows.

"Oh yes," Martha nodded. "Their eggs can lie dormant for years before hatching. They need a particularly strong level of a certain kind of energy to do so, you see. So it's quite intriguing that this one happens to be up and about."

"Commander Zilant found Kota wandering the northern mountains of Tatto a few weeks back, and took it upon himself to ensure the augret's safety," Ana joined in. "He's quite fond of dragon pokémon."

"Him and me both," Caley smiled, before his train of thought returned to his previous dilemma, and his expression reverted to something more concerned. Martha contributed to this quiet upset with a saddened expression of her own.

"I heard about what happened to you, and my sympathy goes out to both you and your pokémon," she said. "My daughter Kylie was a victim of a similar attack a few days ago and her uvium, Vips, was stolen. She's ever so upset, but without any idea of where Vips has gone to, all I could do was call the Police and hope that they'll manage to bring my dear daughter's pokémon back."

"What's a uvium?" Caley asked, sounding a little awkward for not knowing.

"It's a blissey's male counterpart," Martha giggled at the expression on Caley's face. "And you shouldn't expect to have heard of them, uviums are almost impossible to find these days due to the far

higher chance of a female happily being born than a male one. Part of the reason why Team Rocket must have been so interested in it, I imagine..." She coughed with embarrassment, causing Caley to avert his subconscious long-held stare over the fact Martha was neither dressed nor styled in the manner of the Nurse Joys featured in the Pokémon Training study books he'd had to read at school. "I'd better get back to the front desk. Let me know when you're ready to leave."

Caley and Ana nodded their thanks as their host exited the guest room, before the young man lowered his head dispiritedly - staring across the folds of green blanket in its many shades while Ana glanced back in a measure of expectation.

"I want to leave *now*," he murmured at last. "I want Kiko back. I want everything to carry on like normal, like it had been before I ended up in this mess."

It wasn't until the last of this sentence had left his mouth, it dawned on Caley that things hadn't exactly been normal even *prior* to the situation in Praela Tunnel. But dealings with criminal syndicates were the Police department's business, not his. Caley tried to persuade himself that these matters didn't concern him, yet another part scolded in response to what seemed like a very selfish conclusion.

"Listen, uh..." Ana paused, fumbling for a name.

"Caley," he pointed out.

"Try not to worry yourself about this, Caley," Ana insisted. "The

Pokémon Center sleeping quarters, he felt like he had caused enough inconvenience already. Even now, standing at the front desk with impatient trainers either side of him, Caley knew it a good idea not to overstay his welcome.

"Alright, if you insist," the nurse smiled, ducking below the counter for a moment. "In which case..."

Caley blinked as several tiny spherical objects were placed on the desk. Each one had a purple core surrounded by red, orange and blue segments, and were no larger than a golf ball.

"These are Pester Balls," Martha explained. "As you didn't have any other pokémon with you besides your grumpig, you're going to need *something* to defend yourself from any aggressive wild pokémon you may encounter. A Pester Ball will stun a target for a short time, so you can get out of danger."

"Thank you," Caley put on a smile for Martha's benefit, before turning to Ana and Shift. "And thanks once again for helping me back there."

"It's the least I could do. You take care now!" Ana called, watching as the young man walked swiftly from the Pokémon Center lobby. "Well Shift...we'd better get back to work. Come on, Kota. Time to return to your ball." She brought out a Luxury Ball and glanced around in puzzlement for signs of the augret. "...Kota?"

As shafts of early afternoon light snaked their way between the tightly interlocked leaves of Nashgri Forest, Caley travelled down a path created by the repeated wear of many feet and attempted to seek out the remaining hidden memories in his brain. Information had been slowly eking back to him over the past few hours, almost like an unravelling string that hadn't been knotted properly at one end. Semi-blurred visions of a tall, white creature - a pokémon, yes...it had to have been a pokémon - that had discharged spirals of violet energy at him and Kiko. The young man growled under his breath, frustrated that this information refused to arrive faster, though another part of him was thankful it was returning at all.

The path swung sharply to the left, but Caley persisted forwards as before - not wishing to let the shift in direction delay his arrival at Nashgri City. Instead, the young man forced his way through some of the denser foliage, pushing an overhanging branch out of his way to allow unobstructed passage. Letting the branch swing back, Caley halted sharply in his tracks as he heard a loud squeal of alarm. For the past few minutes, he had felt the uncomfortable sensation of being followed and now, with the confirmation of sounds behind him, Caley was sure the feeling wasn't a result of paranoia. He turned slowly, trying to prepare himself for what he might be met with, and flinching regardless upon discovering a pained-faced augret hovering a short way behind him, rubbing at the spot on its nose where it had been swatted.

"Kota!" Caley spluttered. "Why are you following me?"

"Gweh," came the matter-of-fact reply.

"Nonono," Caley shook his head vigorously before making shooing motions with his hands. "You shouldn't be out here. Go back to Ana."

There was no reaction. Instead Kota simply hung there in midair, watching Caley with inquisitive large eyes and a slight tilt of the head. Caley furrowed his brow in annoyance, but resigned himself to the knowledge that Kota was probably too young to understand instruction just yet. Even so, the last thing he wanted to do was lose another pokémon, especially not one he was responsible for.

"Alright then," the young man concluded simply, approaching the augret with his arms outstretched. "I'll take you back to Ana."

Before Kota had fully processed what was about to happen, Caley had grasped him out of the air and was holding the augret close to his chest. Kota uttered cries of protest in response, wriggling in an attempt to get free as Caley turned around - firmly set upon retracing his steps to Retyrn Port despite it being a half hour walk in the wrong direction. At least that had been Caley's intentions, until he realised his arms were empty. Glancing over his shoulder in surprise, Caley groaned slightly at seeing Kota floating at eye level, with a note of self-satisfaction.

"You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?" Caley remarked.

"Guu-weh," Kota responded. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing to make easy. But Caley was not happy with leaving matters

how they were.

"Please, you've got to go back to Ana!" he insisted. "She'll be worrying about you!" Desperation was beginning to creep into the young man's voice, and this would hardly give his words any conviction.

"Weh!" snubbed Kota, aware he had the upper hand at this point. Looking Caley firmly in the eyes, he thumped his chest with one small arm, before pointing the same arm towards his oblivious listener.

"You...you're coming with me?" Caley interpreted with surprise.

"Guu!" nodded the augret enthusiastically. The nodding continued, regardless of the doubtful expression forming upon Caley's face. He was not comfortable with this idea one bit. Kota wasn't his pokémon, he belonged to Ana's Commander. He was supposed to be in Ana's care, and if they were seen together, Caley may well be accused of stealing. Yet Kota had followed him of his own accord - how could he possibly explain that?

"Almost makes me wish I had some Pokéballs," Caley muttered to himself, putting a hand into his pocket and wondering if he could get away with taking Kota back to Retyrn by stunning him with a Pester Ball instead. It did seem unnecessarily mean.

Kota yelped in alarm as a bolt of electricity coursed out from a nearby bush and zapped him sharply in the rear. Caley let out a similar yell as the augret flew straight into the back of his head, where he remained clinging fearfully. The knee-jerk reaction for Caley was to turn

around to see exactly what had hit him, despite it being attached to an area the young man had no hope of seeing. In that self same moment, the foliage the thunderbolt had come from rustled, and a shiny, metallic head pushed its way out from amongst the leaves - its many whiskers quivering.

"Is that a pokémon?" Caley blinked, activating the T-5 Pokédex.

"Tisker," the screen read, "The Maintenance Pokémon. Tisker's highly sensitive facial antennae enable this pokémon to detect and extract unwanted electrical build-up inside machinery and, in some cases, other electric type pokémon. Their metallic properties enable them to take in large amounts of energy without causing harm to themselves. This makes them very useful assistance to laboratory technicians."

The creature wasn't about to let Caley finish reading. With a modulated meow, it leapt at the youth, causing him to reel backwards and knocking the augret from his head in the process. Before Caley had a chance to register what was going on, the tisker had snatched the glasses up in its mouth and levitated into a tree, giggling.

"My Pokédex!" Caley exclaimed in notably exasperated tones. Kota sat up from where he had landed upon the forest floor, glaring at the silvery feline perched amongst the branches. Then, without further warning, he activated telekinesis and soared towards the tree - slamming

his body into the tisker with a loud clang. Both the attacker and its target cried out in shock as the latter received the brunt of a forceful shove from the branch and the former was enveloped in a shower of sparks.

Caley's T-5 Pokédex clattered into the underbrush, where the young man snatched the item up and worriedly checked it over for signs of damage. The left frame of the glasses was slightly cracked and the screen refused to turn off - resorting to displaying streams of garbled letters and numbers instead. "Aw man...I've barely had these a day and they're *already* a mess."

Kota teleported into the bushes as a thunderbolt was released from the tisker straight into a tree, leaving a deep brown hole. With its attention diverted this way and that, the tisker had no idea which direction the next attack would come from. Kota barrelled into the electric feline once again, generating another dent-like bruise upon the tisker's body.

Glancing up from his Pokédex, Caley realised he had best act in Kota's behalf, lest the augret fall victim to the electric backlash he was receiving. As the tisker struggled to lever itself from the ground, Caley took one of the Pester Balls that Martha Joy had given him and threw it with surprising precision. It made contact, but instead of causing the tisker to become disorientated in the burst of coloured powder that followed, the opened spherical object simply fell to the grass, completely empty. Nevertheless, the tisker stopped firing electricity and instead

resorted to sitting in an oddly obedient manner, staring between the trees behind Caley. While it did so, an adolescent boy stepped out of the shadows - it seemed he had been watching the entire time.

"You sure gave Li a run for her money," he remarked coolly, brushing powder from atop the tisker's head. The figure didn't seem all that concerned about Caley's rising frustration. "But I'm afraid Pester Balls don't work on Steel types. They just don't function the same way as other pokémon."

"This is *your* pokémon?" Caley stood up, looking noticeably annoyed. "You could stand to teach it some manners."

"Manners don't mean anything when potential opponents need testing," the boy shrugged, brushing back a spiky lock of yellowish hair while Li approached and rubbed up against his legs. "And you passed. Congrats - most trainers would have run off before they'd even managed to make a mark."

"I'm *not* a trainer," Caley frowned. This unexpected statement caused the boy to falter.

"You're...not...?" he repeated, his voice notably unsteadier than before. "But you...there's a pokémon with you, and..."

Caley continued to stand there with a rather bemused look upon his face, while Kota floated nearby with an expression that conveyed both accusation and scolding. It didn't take long for the audacious challenger to lose his nerve.

"Man, I'm sorry!" he spluttered eventually. "Please don't tell Finlay about this! If he found out I'd been challenging passers-by, he'd never let me become gym leader. Not in a million years!"

The words 'Finlay' and 'Gym Leader' struck Caley like a jigglypuff's DoubleSlap. Being involved in the Pokémon League was a lifetime connection for the entire family of a Gym Leader, and even now, Caley's mother received updates on those who had taken on the role in other parts of Tatto. Finlay had been the man in charge of Nashgri City's electric type Gym for the past six years, and if this youth was associated with him somehow...

"I guess I can let it slide," Caley remarked, after a few moments of thought, "In return for a favour. Do you know where Nashgri City Hospital is?"

"Sure do," the boy nodded happily, grateful to be let off the hook. "I can show you the way. It's quite near the Pokémon Center, and after that battle, I'll be needing to take Li there. Your augret sure put up a fight!"

"Well he's not *my* augret..." Caley began uncomfortably, not wishing to be reminded. But the boy seemed no more perturbed over this fact.

"Yours or not, he sure seems to like you," he shrugged, before dashing between the trees. "Come on, let's go!"

As Caley, Kota and their recently-acquired guide left the leafy depths of Nashgri Forest and wandered into the light, bustling cleanliness of the city, Caley felt his muscles tense. This was the first time he had entered somewhere so vast and urban, and that in itself was nerve-wracking enough. But there was something else too - an air of cautiousness and anticipation that hung over the people going about their business, likely a result of what appeared to be some very odd behaviour from the city's electrical supply. Street lights were turning on and off at intervals while traffic signals sporadically changed between red, amber and green, and gadgetry flickered impatiently from behind the glass pane of a large electrical store the group passed. Despite this, the atmosphere didn't seem to have much of an effect on the temporary addition to Caley's party, who kept a few steps ahead the entire time - glancing back over his shoulder every so often.

"The name's Dai," he said enthusiastically, during one of his head-turning moments. "What's yours?"

"Caley," the young man replied. "And this is Kota."

"Gweh!" the augret waved in response.

"It's great to meet'cha!" Dai nodded, continuing to look straight ahead of him. Suddenly he jerked his head back again. "Ever watched Turball Racing?"

"No?" Caley blinked, momentarily thrown off by the boy's awkward conversational style coupled with the topic about-face. Caley admitted he

was curious – those same words were emblazoned across the boy's orange shirt and it had piqued his intrigue.

"It's really cool," Dai insisted. "There's these customized cars with voltorbs as their engines, and those voltorbs not only provide the speed, but also certain ways to defend against the other racers should they get charged up enough."

"That does sound pretty neat," Caley admitted, with the mental afterthought, *not to mention dangerous*. Electric types had never been his speciality, and his earlier encounter with Li had done little to bolster any positive notions he might have had of them.

"When I'm Nashgri City's Gym Leader, I'm gonna have a Turball track built inside the gym," Dai gushed. "Then trainers that challenge me will not only have their battling skills tested, but their driving ones too!"

There was a long pause.

"Pokémon battles...in race cars?" Caley ran the words over his tongue slowly and deliberately.

"Yep!" Dai confirmed, with emphasis on the 'p'. "Only two more years 'til I get my provisional driver's license – I'll be ready before you know it."

This produced a further extended silence in Caley, who'd been stalled by the realisation his accomplice was only a couple of years younger than him. Caley was not particularly tall for his age – around 5 feet 7 inches - yet even so, the top of Dai's head barely reached above

his shoulders. He could see by Dai's fidgety nature and somewhat irrational logic as to why Finlay wouldn't consider him gym leader material just yet. Being a skilled battler wasn't the only aspect to leadership, but he felt it was best left to Finlay to explain such things. Finlay must have seen *some* potential in the boy to have made him an apprentice, and besides which, Dai would be more likely to listen to his mentor than some stranger.

"Pick up the pace a bit," Dai exclaimed, forcing his presence amongst Caley's thoughts. "I need to heal Li! I can't take her back to the lab looking like a mess!"

"Lab?" Caley responded, before he caught sight of the somewhat guilty expression upon the youth's face. "Wait a minute...Li isn't your pokémon, is she?"

"Kinda?" Dai grinned sheepishly, putting his arms behind his back. Caley raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. "Okay, so she's more dad's than mine...but he always said she was the family pet!"

"Unusual pet..." Caley murmured, increasing his pace so that he was walking beside Dai. "So your dad works at Nashgri City Laboratory, huh? I wonder what goes on in there..."

"Lots of things," Dai replied. "They keep an eye on the power generated for west Tatto - to make sure everyone's TVs and washing machines and stuff keep working. After that, comes the fun. Dad is constantly looking for new ways to generate and use all kinds of energy

types. Recently he's been super focused on something called 'Infinity Energy.'"

"What's that?" Caley inquired, raising his eyebrows.

"It's a type of energy that flows through pretty much all living creatures," Dai explained, with a grin. "Dad's hoping that with enough research, they'll be able to make a battery that'll be recharged by the Infinity Energy given off by a human body. Just think about it! Devices that power up in your hand! Pokéches, PokéGears and Pokédexes that never run down!"

"That'd sure be something," Caley marvelled distantly. Infinity Energy sounded an awful lot like Aura, something his own father talked to him about when he was younger. He was tempted to ask Dai if they were indeed one and the same, but he doubted the youth would know. Even in scientific circles, Aura was a term that was rarely – if ever – brought up.

"Yeah, understanding more about Infinity Energy helps us to understand what makes pokémon powers what they are," Dai replied with admirable wisdom. "It's the job of my dad and the other science guys at the lab to share energy's benefits, and keep secret energy's dangers."

"Dangers?" Caley blinked. "I'm guessing you're not talking about things like lasers here."

"Nuh-uh," Dai shook his head. "I've heard that stored somewhere in the lab is information on how Infinity Energy can be used to alter living matter."

"Like mutation?" Caley's eyes widened, as his shorter companion nodded slowly. "No wonder that lab was a prime target for thieves."

"Not just any old thieves," Dai shuddered. "These guys knew what they were looking for, and they knew how to get it, too. Just last month, a full access security card was taken from someone who works with my dad. Finlay has been spending his time helping guard the lab to make sure nothing even more important gets out. He told me to stay home... probably thinks I'm too *inexperienced* to be of any help." He looked like he was about to start moping, but instead gathered his thoughts and composed himself once more. "If only we had an idea of who that Brody guy was working for, then we might be able to find their head office place."

"Did you ever think it could have been Team Rocket all this time?" Caley mentioned in lowered tones. "Y'know, using a common thief to do their dirty work?"

"Pff" Dai sniggered in amusement. "Team Rocket? That disorganised street gang couldn't nick a shell off a slowbro's ba-"

A sudden, annoyed-sounding cough interrupted Dai, causing him to clamp his mouth shut and glance round in surprise. Caley followed suit in this motion, to see a woman with short, bright red hair, dressed in a blue shirt and bell-bottomed jeans staring back at them. Her hands were

tightly grasping the handle of a trolley bearing a cumbersome rectangular machine.

"Out looking for trouble again, are we, Dai?" she raised an eyebrow. Caley turned to Dai for some sort of explanation.

"Do you know her?" he asked.

"That's Nina, one of the lab technicians," Dai told Caley, before he returned his partially giddy attentions toward the woman. "I like what you've done with your hair."

Nina looked up in surprise, before her face resumed its more serious expression. "Flattery will get you nowhere," she sniffed, tucking a stray lock of magenta behind her left ear. "Especially not with your dad when he finds out what you did to Tisker."

"Wha?" Dai spluttered, coming to his senses. "How did you know about that?"

"I'd been following you since Amph Street," Nina commented in deadpan tones. "Your volume would make a loudred jealous."

At this point, Dai began to look deeply panicked. Caley bit his lip with slight embarrassment as the boy fell to his knees on the pavement and clasped the leg of Nina's jeans.

"Please don't tell Dad!" he wailed. "He'll kill me if he knew I'd got so much as a scratch on Li! I mean, she's a limited edition model and-"

"Ssh," Nina bent down and coyly pressed a finger against Dai's

lips, causing him to blush deeply and fall silent. "I'll go one better. See this machine here?"

"Uh-huh," Dai nodded furiously. How could he not? It was the size of an office photocopier.

"It's a Portable Pokémon Healer," the woman continued. "I can fix up the tisker good as new, and your dad will be none the wiser. Now how's that sound?"

"Brilliant!" Dai almost squealed, holding out the Ultra Ball containing the aforementioned pokémon. "Do it, do it!"

Caley looked thoughtful as Dai eagerly placed Li's Pokéball into the entry tray. Pokémon Healers were only good for restoring energy and healing the status effects of a pokémon - anything more serious, and long-term rest and care was a given. There was no way a healing machine could remove those dent-like bruises in Li's outer shell. The young man opened his mouth to voice these concerns, before shutting it again. It wasn't as if Dai had many other options. Still, one nagging question remained.

"Say...what are you doing out here with that thing anyway?" he inquired.

"I- "Nina paused, her eyes widening slightly. "I was...delivering it! To the Pokémon Center." she motioned smoothly towards the flickering street lamp above, "Can't be relying on mains power with how unstable it's been lately."

"Ahh...you've still got it, Jessie," she smirked, casting a glance at the machine on the trolley next to her. Grasping hold of the handle protruding from the device, Jessie pulled out the tray to reveal a familiar looking Ultra Ball which she held up to examine with a wide smile. "The old switcheroo, fools 'em every time."

She paused, as if expecting words of praise and encouragement to appear from somewhere, but there were none. Jessie lowered her arm, a heavily deflated expression on her face.

"Who am I kidding?" she sighed. "I haven't 'got it' at all. It's just not the same without them."

Suddenly, a sharp bleep was heard from somewhere upon Jessie's belt. She retrieved a PokéGear, one that had been specially designed for Team Rocket communications, and pressed the button to answer the caller.

"Where have you got to now?" came the snappy voice at the other end, coupled with some distant complaints. "I ask you to go fetch supplies and you're off in your own little world again!"

"I'll have you know I picked up quite a rarity, Ms. Crankypants," Jessie snorted. "Snagged this tisker from one of Professor Thomas' sons. What a dimwit, carrying around a business-engineered mecha pokémon like it was some zigzagoon or something."

"You're living on the Planet Dope," her conversant groaned. "The science geeks have more than their fair share of mecha pokémon to

disassemble. How do you think another one is going to help with Project Rebirth?"

"Actually, I was hoping it would help me get away from you and croagunk butt," Jessie muttered under her breath.

"Oh, don't you worry," the voice from the PokéGear's earpiece responded darkly. "As soon as this is all over, I'm heading straight back to our Admin to get him to return things to how they were before."

From inside Nashgri City Laboratory, Team Rocket Elite operative Butch Reynolds shook his head, as his partner Cassidy Sampson turned off her communicator and grumbled loudly. Sure, Jessie had been a thorn in their side ever since Admin Darius had assigned them to mentor her into Elitehood, but it seemed better to him to make use of the situation they'd been handed, instead of brooding over it the whole time.

At this point, Cassidy decided to take out her frustrations upon the group of hostages currently huddled upon the tiled floor, bound together with rope and being watched vividly by a genetic pokémon which looked like a muscular blend of rattata and machoke.

"Now, Professor Thomas..." she began icily to the head member of the group, "are you going to tell me where the adapter engine is, or does Raccrupt have to *force* it out of you?"

"I'll never talk," the middle-aged man sitting nearest the front of the group replied firmly.

"*You* might not," Cassidy shrugged, her eyes scanning the captives

for a moment. "But your associates may well have second thoughts." She beckoned Raccrupt. "Bring me the timid-looking one there, and make it quick!"

The other scientists and the two teenage figures uttered a unified gasp of horror as the menacing green-skinned pokémon reached forward with one sizeable paw and plucked the requested figure from the back of the group with little effort. He was undoubtedly the tallest member of the laboratory workers, but none the braver for his size, having broken down into terrified gibbering as soon as he had been ensnared by Raccrupt's grasp.

"Cut the pathetic act and spill the info," Cassidy snarled dangerously. "I'm not afraid to break a few bones to get what I want."

"It's down the hall, down the haaaaall!" the man wailed. "F-fifth door on the left, avoid the p-processing room, just under the gr-grate near the storage vault!"

Cassidy nodded to Raccrupt who roughly threw the scientist back amongst his accomplices where he lay there shaking.

"I'm s-so sorry, Professor," he whimpered, while those around him exchanged disapproving glances. But the man who had spoken up so boldly before, did not join them.

"It's alright, Reece. I'm sure we'd have all done what you did if put in that position."

"You won't get away with this!" Nina exclaimed, leaning forward.

"Kooky place," were his first words as the two boys stepped into the building. At first glance it looked rather like a Pokémon Centre in structure, with its cleanly-polished floor and almost uniform decoration and furniture arrangement. But as Caley and Dai wandered down the corridor to the reception area, they noticed something that made this human hospital far different from a pokémon one. An innate lack of activity.

Though this was to be expected, for the most part. Thanks to the endurance and immune system-enhancing properties of Pokérol, a substance obtained only by consuming pokémon meat products, most people didn't need medical treatment all that often, if at all. Caley nodded in response to Dai's comment - he had to admit that the lack of people did make the atmosphere decidedly creepy. Even the reception desk was devoid of any secretary, though considering there was a high ridge around it that shielded prying eyes from important documents said secretary may access, it was somewhat hard to tell.

As Caley swiftly leaned forward across the desk's ridge, his nose ended up burying itself into a shock of messy brown hair. It appeared the man it belonged to had been taking a nap upon the desk itself until this moment - Caley reeled back in alarm as this figure flung himself upright, the top of his head colliding with the youth's chin in the process.

"Sheesh, kid," the man muttered in a disgruntled fashion. "Talk about an unorthodox wake-up call..." He then realised Caley was wincing and rubbing at his face as a result of the previous impact. It was like

showing a combee hive to a hungry teddiursa - the figure's eyes widened dramatically before he thrust his hands forward and grasped both sides of Caley's head. "An emergency, at last!"

"Who are you?" Caley blurted in muffled tones from amongst the grip. The man let go and rapidly put a finger to his lips in response.

"Try not to move your jaw too much for the moment, son," he said in the most reassuring manner possible, attempting to suppress the obvious yet odd hint of excitement to his voice. "We need to keep it in place so it can be set properly."

"But my jaw is fine!" Caley protested, opening and closing his mouth just to prove his point. "Just a little sore from where you whacked it, is all. Is there a doctor here that I can talk to?"

"I am the doctor!" came the offended response, before the figure hurriedly calmed himself down. Such an invigorated attitude was hardly becoming of a man in the medical profession. "Dr. Clement Proctor, to be precise. What is the nature of your emergency? Broken leg? Pierced lung? Intrusive intestinal problems?"

"Uh, not quite," Caley blinked, feeling somewhat put off by the level of enthusiasm over such disgusting ailments while Dai descended into immature snickering over the lattermost of them. "I was exposed to a large amount of energy yesterday and though some people at Retyrn Port saved me from the worst of it, they felt I'd better come here to make sure no harm was done."

"Oh. I see," the doctor looked noticeably disappointed upon hearing this. "And I guess this place was your last resort, with Nashgri Lab on high security alert and all. I guess I could see what I can do." He gave Kota a downcast sigh and slumped off towards the doors leading to the examination room. "Pity you weren't an emergency..."

"I'm sorry?" Caley pulled a face as he followed Clement through the doors – surprised the doctor hadn't scolded him for allowing a pokémon to roam freely in the hospital. "I don't quite get how that makes a difference."

"To my treatment record, it makes a lot of difference," Clement sighed, motioning for the young man to sit on the examination platform. "See, you might look at me and think 'Now there's a professional'. Sure, I got my doctorate, but only by the skin of my teeth. One slip up, and the Medical Institute was right back on my case. If I can't show them how competent I am, I'm going to get struck off the register pretty quick."

At this moment the man hesitated, before reaching up to pull down a pen-like object on an adjustable arm which was installed beside the examination platform. Noting the unsettled expression upon Caley's face, Clement reassured him, "It's okay, this won't hurt. The scanner is simply going to read your internal energy levels and check to see what's what."

"Actually, I was more concerned about the electricity fluxes." Caley bit his lip while Kota floated around inquisitively nearby. "I didn't want the

reader machine to start malfunctioning."

"Oh, don't you worry yourself about that," Clement chuckled.

"We're not running off the city's electricity supply. All medical centres have their own generators so we don't get caught out. Now try to relax."

"Pity we can't help you with your problem," Dai chipped in as a thin blue line was passed up and down Caley's body. "But I'm sure not gonna start hurting people just so the medical boffins will know you're a good - if somewhat nutty - doctor."

"Hey, that's okay, kid," Clement smiled faintly. "It's not something that can be helped."

The machine beeped, calling attention to the readings and various graphs it was now scrolling onto its screen. Clement flicked through them momentarily, before raising an eyebrow.

"Just where did you receive this energy from, exactly?" he inquired in ponderous tones.

"I don't quite remember..." Caley sighed, uncomfortable with being reminded about the gap in his memory. "I think...I think it was from a pokémon. The whole experience is still really hazy in my head."

"Don't try to force it then," Clement smiled again, more genuinely this time, despite keeping his eyes fixed on the monitor. "Dark type attack, was it?"

"I...I think so," the young man shuffled awkwardly with thoughts

of the unknown. He just wished the doctor would hurry up and get to the point of all these questions. Clement glanced up to see Caley's face and began to chuckle.

"Don't look so worried," he said. "I was simply surprised at your energy level average being slightly higher than most people's I've seen. Anyway, whoever fixed you up did a good job. I can only see traces of the dark type energy in your body, and those will dissipate in time. You're alright, sonny. Good thing, too. We may have the diagnostic equipment, but there isn't much around here to treat energy contamination."

"So there are more people than you in here then?" Dai asked, while Caley visibly deflated in his personal relief.

"There's a couple of others," Clement nodded. "They treasure their jobs very greatly - there's not much demand for workers in the human health sector, as you can imagine."

"Yeah, but that's a good thing, right?" Caley spoke up. "I mean, what with people not being sick or hurt bad enough to have to make an emergency visit..."

"I suppose," Clement currently wore an expression which conveyed his torn state between concern for humanity and concern for his position of employment. "But I sure don't want to go back to studying boring old fossils like my kid brother."

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

"That guy must really love what he does," Dai remarked, shortly after leaving the hospital. "It's a shame we can't help him out in some way."

"I guess that's something you have to come to expect in a job like that," Caley shrugged, while Kota nodded agreeably. "The uncertainty of it all."

Something was nagging in his head over what the doctor had told him with regards to the hospital's energy supply. 'Every medical centre had their own', Clement had said. Yet Nina, the lab technician Dai and himself encountered on their way to the hospital, seemed adamant that Nashgri Pokémon Center was operating from the city's power grid. Maybe it had simply been an absence of knowledge on her part.

"Did you catch what I heard the doctor say?" Dai pointed out. "About your energy levels being higher than normal? That's what gives pokémon their 'edge', y'know."

"He said 'slightly higher', Dai," Caley reminded his companion, mentally returning to the conversation. "I can't see how that'll make a difference to anything." The young man found he was saying this more to convince himself than Dai - the more imaginative portion of Caley's mind had already started to race down the track of possibilities. Maybe his heightened Aura was the reason Kota seemed so fascinated with him.

"Say..." Dai's face was suddenly overcome with puzzlement. "What happened to those glasses you were wearing? They looked cool."

"They *were* cool," Caley said bemusedly. "A one of a kind Pokédex, in fact...until they got broken in that scuffle between Kota and Li."

"Broken?" Dai echoed, looking guilty. "Man, I'm sorry...guess I really should have thought that 'trainer test' idea over a bit more, huh."

"Just a little," Caley agreed, his expression unchanging. A moment of silence ensued as Dai hung his head while Caley and Kota looked on expectantly.

"Hold on," Dai spoke at last, brightening up. "Come with me to the lab! I bet one of the guys there could fix it, no trouble."

"It's worth a shot," Caley admitted with a faint smile.

"Well here we are," Dai announced, strolling up the path toward the main doors with Caley and Kota in excited pursuit. "Nashgri City Gym and Laboratory."

Caley let out a breath of awe as his eyes took in the buildings covered in solar panels that stood majestically before him - surrounded by a large expanse of grassland dotted with pylon-like structures. Dai wasted no time in pressing the bell beside the laboratory entrance but, even after a few minutes of waiting, there was no reply. Caley turned to Dai with a puzzled expression.

The sound of the lab doorbell had alerted Cassidy's attention and she had promptly left the scene to investigate. With her out of earshot and only Raccrupt's steely glare to worry about, the captive scientists began to mutter unsteadily among themselves. Nina cast Finlay a desperately hopeful glance - the young man appeared to have been in deep thought for some time.

"So Fin'," she began slowly and in lowered tones, so Raccrupt wouldn't hear. "Got any ideas as to how we're gonna...you know..."

Finlay glanced up at this point. There was a mischievous twinkle in his green eyes.

"That headband of yours," he commented cryptically. "It was a present from Dean, our cybernetics specialist, wasn't it?"

"Yeah..." Nina raised an eyebrow. "I swear that guy fancies me or somethi- ohhhhh..." It was at this point, she caught on to the implications of Finlay's seemingly random statement. Grinning, Nina glanced up at her forehead. "C'mon out, Dynamo."

The other scientists and Raccrupt flinched in surprise as the top of Nina's head appeared to erupt in a blast of white light. From the bauble set in the teenage girl's headband, a floating red creature with two spiky blue fins of energy protruding from either side of its body emerged.

"Is that the rotom you got out of our systems the other day?"

Reece blinked.

"One and the same," Nina wiggled her eyebrows before glaring purposefully at Raccrupt who was now advancing upon the tiny creature. "Now, you know what to do, Dynamo...Confuse Ray!"

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

"Well well..." Cassidy smirked to herself as she looked down at the two younger figures that were frozen helplessly before her. "What have we here?"

Caley, Dai and Kota had no sooner passed through the laboratory's back doors than the Team Rocket Elite operative set upon them with her pokémon's psychic abilities. They could still see it now, a creature with a build similar to that of a golduck. Only unlike a golduck, there was a canine snout where its beak should have been, fish-like fins protruding from the end of its tail and skin that wrinkled up in ruff-like folds around the base of its neck. Dai would have gulped if he had been able to, but the mutated golduck's telekinesis had grasped every cell in his body, leaving him unable to do nothing but stare wildly as Cassidy's violet eyes bore into his own frightened gaze.

"You look familiar," she remarked, examining Dai thoughtfully. "That's it - I saw your picture on the Gym's system records alongside that

other guy tied up in the back. Let's have a little reunion, shall we?" The woman motioned to her pokémon. "Bring them this way, Soluqua."

Upon this order, Caley, Dai and Kota felt themselves turned slowly around by forces unseen and moved backwards, further down the corridor. Caley shook as revived memories from his earlier experiences back in Praela Tunnel started to seep into his mind. The sight of another Team Rocket member - their uniform clearly visible - served to unpin visuals and audio from previously unreachable parts of the brain. In turn, this sent his stomach into a fit of anxious spasms. He envisioned it clearly now - the warped, vicious looking togetic which had brutally assaulted him and Kiko without remorse. Where was Team Rocket acquiring these familiar yet undeniably deadly pokémon from? And more worryingly, how could he and Dai possibly escape the unforgiving psychic grasp of the one belonging to this particular agent?

A loud crash resounded from deeper in the laboratory, causing Cassidy to break into a run with Soluqua and its captives close behind. Upon reaching the lobby where Finlay and the others were being kept captive, the Elite's jaw dropped open as she caught sight of Raccrupt swatting angrily at the tiny red and blue form of the rotom which was trying to avoid being hit.

"What is that pokémon doing loose?" Cassidy screeched, as if Raccrupt would be able to answer her. "I specifically ordered Jessie to remove all the Pokéballs from those science dweebs and that Gym Leader before we got to work! Honestly, I can't trust that girl with anything."

"Who said *this* one was in a Pokéball?" Nina piped up smartly, noting Finlay's infuriated expression upon seeing Dai captured. "Dynamo! Change of target!"

Soluqua uttered a guttural cry of alarm as the globular creature flew straight at it, discharging the electrical energy within its body in one massive burst. Cassidy staggered back as she ended up receiving part of the blow, while her pokémon shook its head, struggling to keep a mental focus on its charges-in-stasis. The attempt partly failed - Dai felt himself hit the floor, having been freed from the telekinetic hold.

Without hesitation, Dai scrambled to his feet and dashed full pelt across the room, Pokéball in hand. Dynamo's continued interference with Soluqua and Cassidy using bursts of energy meant little to stop Dai from rescuing the hostages. The chance to prove himself had finally arrived.

Every captive member cried out, their faces turning deathly pale as Raccrupt's solid paw thrust itself into Dai's body with a sickening crunch, throwing the stricken youth into one of the large computer terminals that was placed around the edges of the room. It was like being caught in a nightmare - Caley and Kota could do nothing but watch in horror as these events unfolded before them, trapped in an invisible grasp without any means of breaking free.

The Pokéball in Dai's hand rolled across the floor, unopened. Raccrupt approached it, raising its foot to crush the metallic object in one heavy step. But instead of carrying out this motive, the creature paused,

its brow deeply furrowed as if contemplating something. At last, Raccrupt decided to step back, leaving the Pokéball untouched, and turned its steely glower toward the troublesome rotom - uttering a fearsome snarl and, in the process, a sphere of energy at the small red target. Dynamo vanished with a cry of alarm, knowing with the attentions of both Soluqua and Raccrupt fixed upon it, it was terribly outmatched.

"Finally!" Cassidy snapped, as Butch staggered through the side doors with a cumbersome piece of machinery upon a wheeled platform. "Took you long enough to detach that thing."

"It's not like unclipping a Pokétech from yer wrist, Cass," Butch muttered with noticeable exhaustion. "Machines like these need care otherwise it throws their timing right out-"

"I don't need a lecture on it," Cassidy responded rudely, "Just get it into the truck so we can high-tail it out of here! We've made our presence felt more strongly than I would have liked."

"I'll get right on it," Butch nodded, in a tone that was hard to tell whether he was being agreeable or sarcastic. "Maybe if I'm quick enough, we'll be gone before Jessie comes back." The duo shared a momentary chuckle between themselves before striding off down the corridor with Soluqua and Raccrupt accompanying them.

A few minutes later, Caley and Kota landed flat on their backs. Caley felt like he had been struck by the Goldenrod Magnet Train, not by what his body had just experienced, but by what his eyes had witnessed.

Staggering to his feet, the youth made his way as fast as his wobbly legs could carry him to Dai's side, where he carefully turned the boy's diminutive form over to check whether he was still breathing. Thankfully this was the case, though the trickle of blood from Dai's mouth was a definite indication that something was badly wrong.

"Hey you, young man!" Professor Thomas called worriedly, lost as to a better way to catch Caley's attention. "Please, release Dai's volchog so it can set us free!"

Caley quickly obliged, snatching the spherical object from the tiles and pushing the release button on its case. From the white glow, a light brown pokémon with long, sleek orange spines covering its back emerged, the expression upon its dark-masked face reflecting the extreme anguish of Professor Thomas. Without need for further instruction, the quadrupedal creature leapt forward, sweeping its stubby claws across the ropes binding Professor Thomas, Finlay, Nina and the other scientists. As they fell to the floor around them, Professor Thomas almost threw himself at Dai, gathering the youth up tightly in his arms.

"We must get to the hospital," he ordered sternly. "Now."

Upon arriving at the Nashgri City Hospital, Dai was promptly rushed to the medical emergencies unit assisted by Dr. Proctor who had, upon seeing the boy's dire condition, abandoned his seemingly heartless enthusiasm for true professional seriousness. With Dai in safe hands,

Finlay was able to relax just a little, at least enough to sit down in the hospital waiting area alongside Caley while Professor Thomas silently paced the hallway.

"I sure hope he's going to be okay," Finlay murmured, after some time listening to the wall clock ticking away to itself. Caley smiled at the admirable show of concern.

"Professor Thomas really cares about that guy, doesn't he?" the young man observed, referring to the way the researcher had acted towards Dai a short time earlier.

"Of course he does," Finlay glanced back with a hint of disbelief that Caley would say such a thing. "Dai's his son. He's *my* brother!"

"He *is*?" Caley spluttered in response, all of a sudden feeling very ridiculous indeed. Of course - he hadn't paid much attention during the panic-stricken events of the late afternoon, but now he thought about it, the similarities in physical appearance *were* there. "And all this time I'd just thought Dai was your apprentice."

"Well yes, he's that too," Finlay couldn't help but chuckle. "He's still got a lot to learn before I can hand over the Gym Leader reins, though."

"He wants to build a race track inside the Gym," Caley stated bluntly.

"Precisely my point," Finlay agreed, with further utterances of amusement. "Little daredevil." His mood returned to a more solemn,

retrospective state. "I'm sorry you had to get dragged into all this. All you'd come here for was a check-up."

"Maybe," Caley wasn't concerned about his own welfare at this point in time. "But *now* I want to help."

"Thanks," Finlay offered a smile, though it wasn't that convincing. "There's not much you can really do, though. Nina's rotom may have bought us some time if it was able to cause interference in the WaveOne adapter engine, but if Team Rocket manages to get it back in full working order, well..." the gym leader took a breath, noticeable discomfort in his eyes. "A large amount of energy may end up at their disposal, and the environment could suffer for it."

"Do you have any idea where those thieves went to?" Caley asked hurriedly.

"We'd managed to obtain information from the Guardsmen Secret Service of a Team Rocket Headquarters some distance north of here," Finlay responded. "It's supposedly so well-hidden that none of the area's residents know a thing about it. The G-Men told us they had sent one of their best operatives to investigate and were awaiting feedback from him. That was some time ago, mind."

"Commander Zilant..." Caley murmured, looking worried. Finlay's words matched unsettlingly well with Ana's, prompting the young man to wonder. Something gave him the impression that Ana's Commander might not have been doing as well as those who had put their faith in him

believed. Anything could have happened following his last report - surely someone else needed to go and investigate. But if Zilant, a top agent in his field had suffered problems, what could anyone *e/se* do about it? Caley didn't know...and yet, he still wanted to try. For Kiko's sake, for Martha's daughter's sake, and for the sakes of those around him.

"I really hope Dai will be alright," Finlay vocalized his concerns once again. "Though admittedly reckless, it was brave of him to do what he did to try and save us ..."

"Brave? Really?" a weak voice was heard from somewhere down the corridor. Finlay looked up with an overjoyed expression to see his younger brother being wheeled out of the emergency room upon a mobile hospital bed by a shy-looking nurse.

"Dai! You're okay!" he exclaimed happily, running toward the trolley and appearing as if he was about to give Dai a thankful hug. The gym leader withdrew upon seeing the bandages around his brother's narrow waist.

"Well, almost," Dai's grin at Finlay's compliment was so wide it almost reached his ears. "The doctor said I've got a few broken ribs but it's nothing a few weeks of rest won't heal, so long as I don't move too much."

"That's going to be a challenge for you then, eh bro?" Finlay chuckled, ruffling the top of Dai's hair in a playful manner. Caley smiled warmly at the exchange, but deep within him there burned the persisting

desire to at least *try* and do something about this situation. Not only had the WaveOne adapter engine been taken, but Finlay had later discovered Li had been stolen from Dai - her Pokéball swapped for a counterfeit which included nothing but a small sheet of paper with a taunting face drawn on it. Without further thought, Caley resolved he would get to the bottom of the situation - to retrieve Nashgri Lab's stolen goods and rescue the captured pokémon. Only then, would he resume his journey.

"Well Dai," Caley concluded. "It may not have been how you expected to, but you managed to help out Dr. Proctor after all."

Dai blinked as the implications of this statement sank in. From the reception office, Clement could be heard excitedly detailing the events of Dai's emergency medical treatments to his superiors via the hospital videophone. Finally, the youth gave way to a bout of somewhat irregular laughter.

"Very funny, Caley," he smirked. "Very funny."

TO BE CONTINUED...

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