



POKÉMON
REBIRTH
ULTIMATUM
Endgame Edition

EPISODE THREE
Façade

Following the recounting of Dai's antics in Nashgri Forest, Professor Thomas sought to repay Caley for the experiences he had been through by allowing Kota and himself a place to stay for the night. During this time, the quick-witted scientist harnessed the talents of his top engineer, who set about making the repairs to Caley's T-5 Pokédex - all the while marvelling at the uniqueness of its design. By the next morning, the Pokédex was back in working order, Caley and Kota had partaken of a hearty breakfast and resumed their travels, heading north across Tatto.

But Caley was no longer admiring the beauty of the surrounding scenery. His thoughts had returned to the self-imposed aim of rescuing Kiko, the uvium belonging to Martha Joy's daughter Kylie, Professor Thomas' tisker and the WaveOne machine. The thought of infiltrating Team Rocket's headquarters to fulfil all these tasks had been playing heavily on Caley's mind.

"Well this sure wasn't how I'd imagined my journey to start out," the young man told his augret companion as they wandered down a neatly marked footpath through the sunny hillside. "Almost killed by some psycho pokémon, ending up with an annoying gap in my memory, seeing a bunch of other pokémon that - according to my 'dex - shouldn't even *exist*. And now I'm looking for the hiding place of a major criminal organization, by *myself*."

"Gwe-gweh!" Kota frowned, folding his arms.

"Okay, with *you*," Caley corrected himself. "Though technically you're not supposed to be hanging around with me. And even then, that's

just two of us. We don't know where Team Rocket's headquarters are, and if we *do* find it, what are we going to do after that?"

The young man uttered a heavy sigh which indicated his personal fears were in conflict with the actions he'd previously decided to take. In retrospect, it certainly hadn't been the smart thing - but it felt like the right thing to do, at least according to his conscience.

Before Caley was able to give further thought to the matter, bleeping was heard from one of his jacket pockets. Fishing out his PokéGear, Caley examined the screen to discover that his mother was calling.

"Oh! Mum!" he spluttered, once he'd pressed the answer button. "Sorry I hadn't rang yet - got carried away by all the things that were going on, and-"

"Caley!" interrupted Pat's anxious voice from the other end. "I'm so glad to hear your voice again. You had me so worried!"

"Yeah, I know. I messed up bad," Caley mumbled guiltily. At this point, he didn't really need any further reminders as to his unintentional irresponsibility.

"How are you, darling?" Pat asked, sounding more relaxed for conversing with her son.

"I'm doing alright," Caley replied. 'Alright' seemed the most truthful description he could think of at the present time - he was in one

piece, after all. "I've passed through Nashgri City, just heading north."

"North?" Pat sounded confused. "Isn't that a little...out of your way?"

"Maybe a little..." Caley trailed off. "I was interested to see if things looked any different in north Tatto than they do here."

"How wonderful!" Pat exclaimed. "Do try and get me some photos. You took your camera along, didn't you?" She faltered. "Oh, that's not important. It's just good to know you're alright."

"What made you think I wasn't?" Caley blinked, as Kota floated alongside trying to pick up on what the young man's mother was saying.

"Well you hadn't called since you left," Pat insisted. "There were reports of hold-ups in Prela Tunnel, and travellers missing their pokémon. I just needed to make sure you hadn't been caught up in all that. How's Kiko?"

"She's fine!" Caley replied, a little higher pitched than he wanted to. "Kiko's fine."

"That's good," Pat said cheerfully. "Well I hope you're both having a fun time! Make sure you get a decent night's sleep, okay?"

"Okay, mum," Caley tried to keep the shake from his voice. At this moment in time, with Kiko absent, he wasn't sure how he could possibly sleep.

"Well I'd better go," Pat spoke up. "These phone bills won't keep

themselves low! Stay safe, sweetheart."

"Say 'hi' to Abby for me," Caley insisted softly, before the phone cut off. In the silence that followed, Caley gave Kota a very upset look. "We've got to save Kiko from Team Rocket," he said. "Let's just hope we're heading the right way to find their headquarter-"

The young man trailed off as he caught sight of a violet coloured blob hovering over the distant treetops. It was the shape of an upside down teardrop and trailed four large ribbons from its base. Caley squinted to try and make out exactly what the form was, when his foot latched onto a thick cable lying across the path in front of him, sending him toppling forward. Luckily for Caley, Kota used his telekinesis to snag his human companion before he hit the concrete.

"Thanks, Kota," Caley chuckled awkwardly, once he had been returned to a standing position. "I really should have been paying attention to where I was going."

Kota beamed, before he realised someone happened to be staring at them both. The augret glanced up to see a yanma giving them an accusing expression, as if they should have expected the cable to have been blocking their way. The yanma was perched on a device that looked like a miniaturized version of the videophones found in most households, except the screen of this device was showing complicated graphs and charts instead of the face of another person.

"What's wrong, Yanma?" a man's voice called from nearby. Further

scrutiny revealed that the cable which Caley had tripped over wound its way from the base of the device to a compartment built into a huge white boundary wall, where a dark brown-haired figure in blue overalls had been working. Caley felt like smacking himself over not noticing the wall, at least. He must have been *seriously* distracted.

The technician stood up at seeing Caley and Kota, and quickly pulled the handheld module he'd been using to scan the wires inside the compartment away from the open hatch, before shutting and locking it. Noticing Caley's baffled expression and the strewn cable at his feet, the figure chuckled sheepishly and scratched the back of his head.

"Sorry about that," he said, moving the cable aside. "Did it trip you up?"

"Almost," Caley nodded, jerking a thumb at the augret floating beside him. "Thankfully Kota stopped that from happening. What's all that stuff for anyway?"

"Just routine checking," the technician replied smoothly, giving Kota an inquisitive glance. "I have to come out here every day to make sure Dusty Town's broadcast network is up and running."

"Broadcast network?" Caley let his gaze ascend the wall until it came to rest upon the familiar peaks of office buildings intermingled with the tall, foreboding chimneys of factories and warehouses. So this was Dusty Town, the manufacturing heart of Tatto.

"That's what I said, bucko," the technician grinned. "Dusty relies

on good communication links more than any other place in the region, so it has its own personal system designed to make sure the right info gets to the right places. It's a pretty nifty piece of work, if I do say so myself. Delicate too, doesn't function well with other- I mean, *with* psychic types around. So you'll have to keep your pokémon inside its Pokéball if you're thinking of heading into the city."

"Pokéball?" Caley echoed worriedly, though the response was more to himself than anyone else. *But...but Kota doesn't have a Pokéball. At least not one I'm in possession of.*

He retreated to a more secluded spot beyond the trees, with Kota following closely behind. The augret glanced up inquiringly, waiting for Caley's next decision.

"You're going to have to stay out here for now, Kota," he concluded sadly. "We can't really afford to be fritzing up any expensive equipment. Try and stay close, okay? I'll come and find you when I'm done looking about."

"Gweh, gweh..." Kota replied in soft acceptance, before drifting in reverse amongst the trees. Unknown to Caley, all life forms resonated Aura in a slightly different way - a psychic fingerprint, as it were - and the augret had already memorized his. With this means of tracking Caley to a greater or lesser degree, Kota didn't feel afraid of letting him explore for a little while.

Just as the technician had warned Caley, there was indeed a tight restriction on pokémon within Dusty Town. Caley found himself getting a stern lecture by Police Officers at the entrance gate on keeping any pokémon within their Pokéballs during his stay, despite him having none upon his person. Additionally, they insisted on stamping his hand with a mark to verify his entrance, rather roughly at that. The young man rubbed at the partially-crushed appendage as he wandered down the street looking for somewhere to buy a snack - having a painful hand to accompany his painfully empty gut was hardly his idea of a pleasant welcome.

Finding any shops at all proved to be difficult. Dusty Town was a place that mostly centred on manufacturing a wide range of products - from pet toys and household furniture to vehicle parts and floor tiles. As such, there was very little in the way of small commercial outlets to provide for what meagre populace that lived here. The streets swarmed, but it was mostly a thriving mass of factory workers and businessmen. Unsettlingly, there also seemed to be far more Police Officers here than in any other place Caley had visited thus far. They paraded up and down the street amongst the crowds and hung around building entrances and passageways, eyeing the youth condemningly as he walked by.

This place sure has some high security... Caley thought to himself. *It's almost like they're expecting something.* The young man winced as a short, sharp pain coursed through his skull and decided to abandon such deep thinking for the moment. His hunger must have been getting

seriously bad to start giving him headaches.

Ten minutes later, Caley had discovered a small convenience store on a dingy street corner and bought himself a sandwich, a drink and a bar of chocolate. He then retired to a little area of greenery nearby to consume his meal. As Caley unwrapped the sandwich, he felt saddened that he had not been able to bring Kota into the town with him. It felt rather selfish to be eating while the pokémon waited outside the boundary walls - no doubt as hungry as he was.

A prolonged, muffled, somewhat squelchy noise was heard faintly from nearby. Glancing up with a frown, Caley noticed a middle aged man dressed in a Police Officer's uniform leaning up against a nearby lamp post, muttering to himself. Things would have ended there, had Caley been able to relocate his attention. But something about the Policeman's appearance was most intriguing - two distinct strands of platinum blonde hair dangled over his forehead, framing his nose, while a pair of thin, pale scars gouged each cheek.

Realising he was being watched, the man glanced up, the shadow from the peak of his cap receding as his gaze met Caley's. It was then Caley got a shock - the wide eyes with their slit-like, dark blue irises were unlike any he'd seen on a person before.

"Take a picha," the man snorted, his voice saturated with an unmistakable east Kantoan accent. "It'll last longer."

"Huh?" Caley flinched, snapping out of his trance-like state. "Oh

sorry, was I staring?"

"Eh, fuggeddit," came the careless reply, as the man's stomach uttered another plaintive gurgle. "I get dat alla time."

"You sounded pretty hungry there," Caley decided to change the subject.

"So would you be," the man remarked, adjusting his cap. "No eatin' until ya rounds are over, dat's da rule."

"Wow, that seems kinda harsh," Caley blinked. He never realised the Police were so regimentally self-disciplined. Even so, how were officers expected to make proper decisions on an empty stomach?

"Dem's da breaks, kid," the man sighed, his gut echoing a miserable acknowledgement of its own emptiness for the third time. Caley responded by delving into his pocket and pulling out the chocolate bar he had bought earlier.

"In which case, take this," he insisted, offering the item. No sooner had the man clapped eyes on the chocolate, he snatched it roughly from Caley's hand before noisily devouring it in less than three mouthfuls. Caley watched, mildly disturbed - hopefully the figure had remembered to take off the wrapper before he'd consumed the chocolate.

"Aaaah... dat hit da spot," the man commented, letting out a satisfied belch.

"It's the least I could do," Caley smiled. "Especially since you guys

impossible to think. Caley squinted and put a hand to his forehead in an attempt to block out the excess light, but this only managed to skew his vision and do nothing for the pain. The young man let out a cry of surprise as he ended up walking into someone who had been travelling the opposite way.

"Careful, boy!" a firm but kindly voice exclaimed. "You'll do yourself an injury walking around with your eyes closed."

"I've already got an injury..." Caley groaned, massaging his scalp. He found himself looking upon a man in his early sixties, with wispy grey hair and half moon spectacles. "I don't suppose you've got anything for a headache, do you?"

"Well not on me, but I do have just the thing back at my house," the man replied. "If it wouldn't be too far out of your way, you could always come back with me and get it. My house is just a short distance from Dustry Town so I have to come here to get my essentials, y'see."

"Sure, I'll follow," Caley nodded with a faint smile. "Thank you, sir. You don't know how much I appreciate this."

"One good turn makes the world go round," the man returned the smile and hoisted his bulging carrier bag over one shoulder. "This way."

"So, what's your name, lad?" he asked, sometime later.

Now Caley was outside the town, the symptoms of his discomfort

were beginning to lift. The young man deduced that it must have been the claustrophobic, smoggy conditions of the city's streets that had brought on his headache. Nevertheless, he decided to continue following the man back to his house. It was more out of curiosity for why someone would be living in the woods than anything else.

"I'm Caley Wilson, sir."

"Caley...Wilson?" the aged man scratched his chin as he approached the front door of a modest, well-kept dwelling nestled amongst the trees. "For some reason that name is ringing a bell. Maybe Claude will be able to jog my memory.

"Who's Claude?" Caley inquired. The front door swung open to reveal the answer to his question. A tall, green bird pokémon with a curved beak stood in the doorway and looked the young man up and down, before flicking its long head feather in disgust.

"Here at Grimer Gleaners, we remove the muk, so you don't have to!" it announced.

"Dictavian," Caley's Pokédex read. "The Relay Pokémon, and the evolved form of Chatot. Dictavians are best known for their huge memories and their uncanny ability to feed back audio that they have heard in the past."

"Now now, Claude. That's no way to speak to guests," the man snapped, before glancing back at Caley. "Please excuse him, he's hardly the sociable type."

"You could understand that?" Caley blinked. "It sounded rather random to me..."

"More or less," came the reply. "Claude keeps track of all the things that I would otherwise forget. You could call him my extra brain! He does watch far too much junk on the television for my liking, though."

"Objection, your honour!" Claude spluttered, before stepping back from the doorway to let his human companion and Caley inside.

"Claude, meet Caley," the former smiled warmly, motioning to the youth. "He just came here to get a little medicine."

"Caley..." the dictavian murmured, switching to an uncannily familiar voice, "I'm not sure he's ready to go travelling on his own yet, Alistair."

"Not...ready...?" Caley stared into space. "Wait, that's my mum's voice!"

"Patricia is your *mother*?" Alistair looked most surprised, before descending into chuckles. "How unexpected! I used to teach her chemistry back when I worked at Retyrn Secondary School. We got on so well that she never lost touch! It's pleasant, really." He paused, noting Caley's unhappy expression over what he'd just heard. "That was a recording taken from a phone call I had with her the other day. If there's one thing about Patricia that hasn't changed since her time at school, is that she's quite the worrywart. She was afraid that you'd leap into something without thinking it through first and end up in a lot of trouble."

"Yeah..." Caley scratched the back of his head awkwardly - it seemed his mother knew him a lot better than he realised. The knowledge of her doubts over his ability stung somewhat, only serving to compound the young man's lack of faith in his decision.

"She means well, lad," Alistair reassured him, making his way over to the doorway of the kitchen. Caley followed quietly, and was met with intricately constructed arrays of glass tubes attached to conical flasks, and luminous fluids in jars which were scattered all over the nearby shelves. Wires dangled from the ceiling and dilapidated pieces of equipment littered the stained melamine countertop - weaving their way across the draining board and precariously between the oven hobs.

"Your methods are crude, but your persistence is admirable," Claude intoned in the style of a wise old guru, from behind Caley. The young man gave Claude a baffled glance, to which the dictavian chuckled.

"There's a lot of chemistry equipment in here," he observed. "Do you still teach?"

"Oh, not any more," Alistair shook his head, opening the doors of a wall cupboard before rummaging around inside. "But rather than let knowledge and enthusiasm go to waste, I dedicate my efforts to elaborating chemical sciences for the Pokémon Institute. I'm afraid you'll have to excuse the mess."

"You're a *researcher*?" Caley spluttered.

"Hmm? Oh, yes. Yes I am," Alistair chuckled sheepishly,

clambering amongst the tubes and concoctions. "Professor Alistair Gordon, seasoned Pokémonologist. I've studied pokémon right down to their very cells, my boy! Now where did I put that headache formula..."

"If it's too difficult to find, then that's okay," Caley insisted, looking a little anxious.

"Nonsense, Caley," came the echoey reply from the cupboard. "Nothing's *too* difficult to find, that's what I always say!" A moment later he lifted his head from the wooden depths, grinning triumphantly and holding a bottle in one hand. "See, what did I tell you?"

Alistair made a move to return to the floor, but in his enthusiasm he forgot just how many things cluttered the counter and ended up knocking a nearby flask of purple liquid into a bowl of green powder next to it. A thunderous explosion ensued, during which both humans and the dictavian were projected fifteen feet across the room, through the doorway and into the lounge beyond.

"Harvards Quality Throw Pillows are stuffed with only the finest mareep wool..." Claude groaned, having been squashed by Alistair in the process. The professor got to his feet and glanced at the bottle he was still holding, unperturbed.

"The headache formula's still intact," he grinned, hoisting Caley from the waste paper bin he'd somehow become jammed into.

"Good, after that I could really use it," Caley winced, staggering into an armchair. Alistair handed him the bottle before going into the

kitchen to get a glass of water.

"So why are you all the way up here, Caley?" he asked. "Surely there's nothing amongst those ghastly factories and office buildings to interest an avid young mind such as yours."

"I was...doing a little research of my own," Caley began warily, unsure how to phrase his intents lest the information end up being fed back to his mother. "Have you noticed anything odd in Dustry Town during your visits? Seen any Team Rocket agents?"

There was heard the sound of breaking glass from the kitchen. Caley and Claude dashed over to the doorway to find Alistair uneasily gathering the shards with a dustpan and brush.

"I'm sorry," he forced a smile. "You caught me off guard there, mentioning that dreadful organization out of the blue. Why on earth are you showing an interest in them? You're not thinking of *joining* them, are you?"

"No!" Caley spluttered. This method of inquiry didn't seem to be working. "There just...there was an awful lot of Police Officers walking around and I'd wondered-"

"I didn't notice any more officers there than in any other city," Alistair blinked. "And where could Team Rocket possibly hide their work amongst such a crowded and cramped place? I'm sure someone would have noticed if members of the organization were working in the offices or factories."

"Well maybe they're not above ground at all," Caley exclaimed, baffled at how the professor could be so delusional.

"Wherever they are, it is not our place to pry into their criminal dealings, Caley," Alistair reprimanded. "Team Rocket is very dangerous, believe me. Researchers like myself are constantly on guard to protect our work from being misused by organizations like theirs. And *anyone* thinking of trying to confront them alone will end up in over their head. Such recklessness is the stuff of fiction, the sort of things that Claude watches on TV."

"Maybe..." Caley mumbled. Despite this strong admonition and the overwhelming odds, his determination to find Team Rocket's whereabouts and retrieve the stolen pokémon and valuables would simply not lie down and die.

With no further insight into the location of a headquarters, Caley thanked Alistair for the pain relief medicine and left the researcher's house with a cloud of discontent over him. Something was definitely amiss around here, and everyone resident - including Professor Gordon - seemed unnaturally oblivious to it. He couldn't just move on and pretend matters were fine. If nothing else, he could hardly leave Kiko at the mercy of these heartless people.

"Gweh!"

"Hey Kota..." Caley murmured, without looking behind him. "This

isn't working out. I'm pretty sure Team Rocket is in Dusty Town, but I have no way to prove it."

A slightly rubbery sound cut him short. Caley swung round in puzzlement to see a drifblim floating beside Kota.

"Aw-gweh!" Kota remarked, pointing to the drifblim while looking pleased with himself. Caley flinched as the familiar upside-down teardrop shape reacquainted itself with his memory. This was the same form he was distracted by while approaching Dusty Town just an hour earlier.

The drifblim edged closer. At first, Caley wanted to back away nervously, but Kota's insistent gaze made him stay put. No sooner had the ether pokémon placed one of its ribbon-like appendages around the young man's shoulders, the scenery before him quivered and sputtered like a weak broadcast signal. A few hundred metres away, a foreboding-looking gate appeared in the town's boundary wall - the entrance to a newly visible building with a design more akin to that of a space station than a factory or office block.

"How...how did you know this was here?" Caley stammered. The drifblim uttered a dissatisfied noise and raised one of its ribbon flippers, touching the Pokéball clasped within it to its belly. "Uh...you have a trainer?" the young man deduced, unsure as to how this had any relation to his question. He received an enthused nod for his correct conclusion. "Wait! Your trainer is in the Team Rocket HQ!" More excited sounds were heard - it seemed Caley had managed to hit the correct answer twice.

"Wow, that's pretty messed up," he shook his head disapprovingly. "Here I am, with my pokémon friend Kiko held captive in that place, and you're in the same position, only your human friend is stuck in there."

"Blihh bli-blihhm," the drifblim agreed sadly.

"Say...I know this may not be the smartest idea, but could you help *me* get into the Team Rocket HQ?" Caley asked. "It's difficult sneaking into a place if you can't see where it is."

The drifblim made a noise which sounded like a chuckle, and nodded again. It then lifted another two flippers, revealing further spherical objects hidden in them, and thrust them towards Caley's backpack.

"More pokémon?" the young man exclaimed, sounding a little helpless. "Well I suppose it would make sense for your friend to have more than one if they're a trainer. Alright, I'll keep their Pokéballs in my bag for now."

Suddenly, Kota pricked up his furry ears and uttered a squeak of recognition. A short distance away, a large black truck passed between the trees at a reckless pace, barely visible against the dim light and seemingly heading for the military-looking gateway. The drifblim made an urgent sound and tugged on Caley's arm with one of its flippers, leading the young man into a run towards the gateway entrance. Caley and the two pokémon hid themselves as best they could in the nearby foliage, watching the black van draw to a standstill in front of the gate. After

three minutes or so, the gate opened and the van drove through.

"Hurry it up," a woman with dark green hair and a grey Team Rocket uniform snapped from somewhere near the opening, twirling a bunch of keys upon her index finger. "We're expecting another delivery to the loading bay in ten minutes."

"Ten minutes..." Caley murmured to himself. "I've got ten minutes to come up with a way to get inside that place." He thought deeply, Kota and the drifblim watching him with intrigue. After a moment, Caley glanced up with a stern expression. "I'm going to need your teleportation skills to pull off this idea Kota, but... you won't be able to go in the HQ with me after that."

"Gweh?!" Kota spluttered, almost angrily.

"No, hold on a minute!" Caley lowered his voice, worried that the woman behind the now closed gate might somehow hear them. "There's no Pokéball I can hide you in, and I can't imagine Team Rocket let pokémon roam free inside their HQ."

The drifblim confirmed this assumption with a noise that sounded not unlike a sigh. Kota paused, the reality of the situation sinking in.

"Aw-greh..." he acknowledged humbly, though the sadness in the augret's large greenish eyes was more than apparent.

"Thanks for understanding, buddy," Caley smiled a little. "Okay, here's what we're going to do..."

As the next van stopped outside, Caley took hold of Kota's right paw, while the drifblim took hold of his left.

"Alright," Caley began unsteadily, swallowing back his nerves. "Teleport."

The human and two pokémon vanished from sight in a spattering of blue, to appear directly behind the van a second later. The location shift had been successful, though Caley was feeling rather the worse for wear as a result. Kota glanced at him with concern, but the young man waved off any notions of postponing what they were about to do. With something resembling a confirmation, Kota teleported Caley, the drifblim and himself once again - this time into the rear compartment of the van. There they found themselves surrounded by boxes, faced with an older man in a black Team Rocket outfit. He had been sitting amongst the cargo enjoying a donut prior to the unexpected intrusion. Now he was standing up in alarm, ready to intercept those who'd had the nerve to barge in.

Not that he had a chance to do so. The drifblim wasted no time in swooping between Caley and the Team Rocket grunt, staring them down with glowing bright blue eyes. In a matter of seconds, the man succumbed to the hypnosis and descended into slumber, caught by Kota's telekinesis to prevent him falling loudly amongst the boxes. Caley then proceeded to gingerly strip the grunt of his uniform - reluctantly putting it on over his own clothing. This proved a difficult procedure to complete, as the van had started moving again. The sleeping grunt's garments were

slightly baggy and the smell of them left much to be desired, but this was no time to be picky.

"Now what to do about that Team Rocket guy?" Caley whispered, setting the hat of the uniform upon his own head. "If he wakes up and finds his uniform is gone..."

Caley didn't have a chance to make a decision. The van lurched to a stop, sending the young man backwards with his arms flailing. In the process, Caley's right hand grabbed hold of a tarpaulin covering the nearest pile of boxes - pulling it free in his attempts to stay upright. Once the shock of landing upon his rear had worn off, Caley realised the tarp was an excellent way to maintain his cover...literally. He proceeded to wrap the sleeping grunt's body in the item before hiding the inconspicuous-looking roll behind the boxes, with Kota's help. Caley then quickly wrenched open one of the boxes and emptied the contents of the grunt's knapsack inside.

"Alright Kota," Caley said hurriedly, threading the empty knapsack over the top of his own satchel to disguise it. "I'll be out soon. Stay nearby if you can."

The augret floated over before placing his stubby little arms either side of Caley's head, nuzzling the young man with his bulbous nose in a gesture of good luck. Then he fell back, before glowing blue and disappearing in an instant. The drifblim urged its Pokéball towards Caley, prompting the young man to grasp it in his gloved hand, and retract the

ether pokémon within. Moments later, the rear hatch of the van slid upwards to reveal the grunt operative who had been driving the van and who'd chosen to inspect the cargo compartment.

"Why are ya just standin' there?" he snapped, a disgusted look on his face. "Get these boxes on the trolley! They're wanted urgent-like!"

Caley raised his eyebrows and put drifblim's Pokéball into the knapsack as the driver vanished from sight once again. He hadn't appeared to have noticed anything different about his delivery partner - maybe it was the shadow of the cap over Caley's eyes, or maybe Team Rocket grunts really *were* as dimwitted as they'd appeared to be on the news.

Stepping from the back of the van with his arms full, Caley's mouth dropped open as he found himself standing inside a huge warehouse lined with black vehicles. Not all of them were designed for transit - some were armoured, some were built to fly and others looked more like one would wear them as opposed to drive them.

They're not short of a few Delcas, that's for sure, Caley thought to himself, placing the last box upon the wheeled platform in front of him before the driver grunt snatched it away.

"You know where you're heading with those?" the emerald green-haired woman called from the vehicle arrival zone, as she pressed a button on the console in front of her to shut the entrance hatch.

"Sure thing, ma'am," the driver grunt announced, while Caley held

tightly to the knapsack from the van and kept his gaze aimed firmly at the trolley before them. "Down to the lab with these babies."

"Get going then," the woman replied boredly. As he scuttled across the loading bay floor, Caley came to the conclusion that with all the deliveries, she probably didn't keep track of exactly who made them or where they were going. All the better for his sake.

After what seemed like several minutes idling within a downward-moving roomy elevator, the two men passed through a set of shiny thick metal doors, and Caley's eyes ended up widening even further. The Team Rocket laboratory presented itself as a cold and expansive area hosting all manner of diagnostic technologies, processing machines and monitoring devices. Huge screens depicting the status of the experiments in progress were suspended from the ceiling. Human vocalization made up little of the atmospheric noise - the air was thick with the sounds of grinding machinery, electrical feedback and the occasional yet heart-wrenching cry of some unfortunate pokémon undergoing testing. Lights flashed, chemicals bubbled, and seated at desks and control panels, scientists drew up schematics, pushed buttons and pulled levers in their attempts to keep their projects stable. Part of Caley wanted to know what it was they were working on, but a larger part wished to be kept blissfully uninformed. Here, in the core of Team Rocket's diabolical operations, the young man felt very much out of his depth.

As Caley and the driver grunt stood outside the closed elevator doors, one of the tallest scientists strode towards them, rubbing his gloved hands eagerly. He was a man in his late forties - a lithe, bearded figure with coal black hair in a ragged bowl cut, minus the fringe.

"Excellent...the final batch of components have finally arrived," he mused, adjusting his rectangle-lens glasses. "You should be honoured to have played such a vital part in our finest creation to date. Come, come, bring the boxes this way."

With a swift turn, the man retreated amongst the bookshelves and consoles with surprising agility, prompting Caley and the grunt in charge of the trolley to follow. As they did so, the stifflingly cluttered nature of the area began to lessen, until Caley found he was able to view more than just a portion of laboratory ceiling. Here in this open space, the busy rows of machines were replaced with the busy swarming of human bodies - researchers, mechanics and technicians all working in a manner only outmatched by the behaviours of combee under a vespiquen's direction. Amidst them stood a partially-built obelisk coated in thick, black panels.

"Bewitching, isn't it?" the dark-haired scientist remarked with ominous pride. "Still, it's nothing without its channeller...or its conversion unit."

Conversion unit... Caley thought, before flinching. *Could he mean the WaveOne adapter engine?* If that was indeed the case, where was it? The young man glanced around hurriedly in an attempt to spot the stolen

technology amongst the moving figures, but to no avail.

"The former is on standby, awaiting its duty," the scientist continued, as if overhearing Caley's internal thoughts. "As for the latter...it is currently suffering from a few technical issues we are working out."

The ones caused by Nina's rotom, I'd bet, Caley did his best to repress a triumphant smile. So I still have time. But not much of it...I need to get out of here and find some place to come up with a plan!

As the scientist guided the driver grunt with the trolley deeper amongst the crowds, Caley slipped away from the scene and began looking for an appropriate exit. As he wandered amongst two sets of metallic cylinders, Caley's attention was drawn by a terrified male voice that could be heard from the other side of where he stood. The young man struggled to peer between the cylinders to see what was happening, but to no avail. Instead he resorted to using his ears and stood silently for a moment, listening in on the conversation.

"Er...Professor Bohrgram, sir? Is this entirely necessary?" the owner of the fearful-sounding voice inquired weakly.

"If you wish to earn your luncheon rations for today, then being co-operative and *quiet* is the best way to go about it," an aged, somewhat testy, and also male voice answered. "Now sit still."

There followed a high-pitched yell that made Caley and most of the scientists not wearing headphones put their hands to their ears and shudder. With that, Caley swiftly resumed his exit from the laboratory. He wasn't all that keen on the possibility of ending up as one of these mad scientist's next test subjects.

Slipping into the dimly-lit corridors, Caley ascended a staircase and was unexpectedly funnelled into a stream of human traffic dressed in morbid shades of black and grey. Keeping his shoulders hunched and his head down, Caley attempted to match the pace of the operatives in front of him while at the same time looking for somewhere in which to lie low. He was still scared that other Team Rocket members would pick up on the fact that he was not actually one of them. But none of them showed signs of suspicion. In fact, none of them displayed much of anything beyond sullen glowers and the occasional muttering amongst themselves. It indeed was a different world down here - hardly the kind of world Caley wished to be part of for very long.

After some time spent travelling through the corridors, Caley wandered into a medium-sized cafeteria, filled with rows upon rows of empty benches. At the far end were three serving windows with a view to the kitchen beyond. The young man's stomach gave a loud gurgle - one sandwich really hadn't been enough to satisfy his appetite, and all the stress and deep thought had only served to exacerbate his hunger. One could hardly be expected to concoct an elaborate scheme with a complaining gut.

Not that it looked as if there was any food serving going on at this point in time. The sounds of clattering and disgruntled remarks nudged at Caley's inquisitive nature, urging him to walk up to one of the serving hatches and peer inside the kitchen. A young woman was stirring the contents of a large pan with a bemused look on her face and her turquoise hair shoved unsuccessfully into a rather worn net. Nearby, a photograph lay upon the counter, but at such an angle that Caley was unable to see the figure depicted upon its surface.

"Blagh. I hate cafeteria duty," the woman muttered, glancing from the jar she had previously emptied into the receptacle, to the photo on the counter. "Does Wendy get cafeteria duty? Noooo... what *is* this stuff meant to be anyway? Looks like what they emptied from the drains."

Caley grimaced and began to have second thoughts over requesting something to eat, while the woman continued to stare into the pan, her face scrunched up into a state of deep thought.

"I know what's missing, Butchy!" she announced proudly in the direction of the photo. "It needs spice!"

Expecting the woman to retrieve a container of powder from the cupboard, Caley uttered a gasp of alarm and ducked instinctively as she produced a small stick of dynamite from her pocket instead, lit it and dropped the item into the pan with an almost maniacal grin upon her face. A loud, predictably messy explosion ensued. After a moment or so, Caley plucked up the courage to peer back through the serving hatch to

see the woman still standing happily in front of the severely disfigured pan, caked in questionable lumpy sludge.

"Now, that's a kick!" she exclaimed triumphantly, before noticing the state of the kitchen and crying out in horror. Shockingly enough, it wasn't the fact the walls were suddenly tinted brown that had disturbed the female figure so greatly.

"Buuuutchyyy!" she wailed, snatching the sodden photograph from the counter and clutching it to her chest. At this point, Caley decided he had seen enough and quietly slipped out of the cafeteria. With this level of oddness present, food could wait.

Sometime later, the cafeteria bell rang for the start of dinner break, and Team Rocket grunts began to filter in. Seizing his chance, Caley slotted himself amongst the other occupants of the queue and was finally able to get hold of something that counted as a recognizable meal. As he turned to find a place to sit, Caley spotted a boy in his early teens slumped upon a bench in the far corner – his burgundy coloured uniform starkly visible against the coal black uniforms of the other grunts surrounding him.

Unlike the other figures in red which had congregated around a table on the other side of the room, the boy was alone – either having been deliberately avoided, or intent on claiming a little personal space. Compared to the unsettling vibes he was receiving from the majority of

those present in the room, Caley preferred taking his chances with the loner.

He gradually approached the figure at the table in order to acquaint himself further. Typical icebreakers were going to look sorely out of place in this environment, so Caley decided to aim for something a little more suitable and focus on what happened to be lacking on the youth's table.

"Hey kid. Why 'aven't ya got any food?" he asked, attempting to imitate the accents of the Team Rocket drones he had heard earlier. The boy raised his head and stared at him rudely.

"What's it matter to you?" he muttered. Caley hadn't been told to go away yet – that was a good start. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then sat down next to the boy and put the plate in front of him.

"You can `ave mine if ya want," he said.

"Did you spit in it before you came over here?" the boy grunted.

"Why would I do *that*?!" Caley spluttered, accidentally dropping the accent in his disgust at the very thought. The boy glanced at Caley, his face breaking into an amused smirk at the young man's unexpected politeness. It was quick to vanish.

"Save your 'sympathy'," he remarked bluntly, pushing the plate aside. "I'll live."

"Alright," Caley shrugged, and hurriedly tucked into the plate's

slightly bland contents like it would be his last meal. No way was he letting this go to waste, regardless of how it tasted - who knew when he'd be eating again. "What's your name, and what's with the red clothes?"

"Adam," the boy replied, before giving Caley a withering look.

"And none of your business."

Caley uttered a noise of mild frustration, but decided not to push for answers. Instead he waited for Adam to ask his name - no such inquiry arrived. Maintaining a conversation with the youth was proving to be a significant challenge, but Caley wasn't intending to give up. Getting someone to warm to him, even just a little, was important to his survival in the confines of Team Rocket.

"My name's Caley..." he began, only to cut off as the side door to the kitchen was flung open.

"Take this to Miss Camila!" the gruff and abrupt voice of the head chef echoed from somewhere inside the kitchen. "And no slacking, no 'taste testing', and definitely none of y' crazy explosive business! Y' hear me?"

"I *said* I was sorry about the soup!" the familiar turquoise-haired woman Caley had seen earlier insisted, sprinting out of the door and across the cafeteria while pushing a trolley. The young man's eyes grew large upon seeing the array of delectably prepared foodstuffs laid upon it - dishes that both looked and smelled far more appealing than the discoloured substance he had before him.

"Keep dreaming," Adam commented, noticing Caley's deflated expression as the trolley and its guide left the scene. "That's all for Tamesis. Sure, she's a rookie like me, but *she* gets a room in the Super Elite Bay. Meals delivered to her door! A fast track promotion to special agent! An' all because she's apprentice to an A+ Ranker."

Caley glanced sideways at Adam as the youth moved his gaze elsewhere – being a trainee operative seemed to explain his burgundy-coloured uniform, at least. The bell rang once more, causing everyone in the room except Caley to stand up almost in unison.

"Welp, time to choke on some more air pollution from Lord Greasy," Adam muttered. "Joy."

"Lord *what*?" Caley blurted in puzzlement, as Adam pushed past his chair in the direction of the cafeteria's exit. "Where are you going?"

"The meeting room, dipwit," Adam rolled his eyes. "Yeesh... the way *you* act, people would think you'd never *been* here before."

As Adam disappeared from sight, Caley looked around hurriedly, then dashed after the rookie operative before anyone else marched over him in their resolve to leave the cafeteria. His pursuit of Adam was soon rewarded when Caley entered a massive auditorium with a semicircular seating arrangement, already occupied with Team Rocket members of varying ranks. The disguised young man searched hurriedly for Adam's whereabouts, and found he had already positioned himself at the far end of one of the middle rows.

"You again," Adam murmured, in a half-pleased, half-disgruntled fashion when Caley sat down next to him. "What'cha following *me* around for?"

"You seem like an alright guy," Caley shrugged. *At least better than the others I've seen around here*, he added in his head.

The young man flinched upon hearing a female voice he instantly recognized as belonging to one of the Team Rocket agents who had broken into Nashgri City's Energy Laboratory the day before. Glancing around, Caley picked out the source of the voice sitting a row in front of them, alongside two other elite operatives. The first he recognized, with heavy shuddering, to be the spiky-yellow-pigtailed woman whose golduck-like pokémon had trapped Dai and himself in a psychic hold. The second he noted to be her green-haired accomplice who had disconnected the WaveOne adapter engine. The identity of the last figure - the one with magenta hair and whom was currently being addressed - escaped Caley entirely.

"I thought you'd be trying your hardest to get out of being mentored, Jessie," the yellow-haired woman curled her lip with annoyance. "Do you *like* spending time with us?"

"What do *you* think?" Jessie snapped. "I'd much rather work alone than be forced to take orders from you and 'Blech'."

"It's '*Butch*'!" the green-haired man exclaimed desperately, before recomposing himself like the deliberate misnaming had not affected him.

"And you sure ain't gonna get solitary operative privileges by being so disobedient. What was up with that petty 'stealing pokémon' scheme anyway? Are you pining for that incompetent partner o' yours?"

He let out a cry of alarm as Jessie rapped him across the top of the head with a fan she kept in her phasepack. For a split second Caley was sure he spotted a hint of regret cross the woman's face prior to the outburst.

"Not in the slightest," she concluded dismissively, returning to her seat as Butch rubbed his head with a scowl and other operatives smirked amongst themselves. "I don't know where James is staying, and I don't care either. He's making himself useful..."

"Being a lab rattata is about as useful as he'll ever get," Cassidy snickered. Caley ran these words through his mind as the group in front of him ended their conversation. Had the person he heard yelling in the laboratory been the same 'incompetent partner' Jessie and the other two operatives were talking about?

"That James guy sounds like he's in a rough way," he murmured under his breath. "Do you think he has a place to sleep?"

"Heh, you sure get yourself concerned about strangers, don't you?" Adam replied with faint amusement. "That's how it is for lab rattatas - they have to grab whatever space they can. He'll find another room to stay in, eventually."

No sooner had Adam finished his sentence, than the volume of

conversation around him rapidly lowered. A sleek, black haired man, accompanied by a woman with cropped sandy hair, strode confidently onto the stage. They were both dressed in smart white suits and the woman held a clipboard under one arm. As she stood nearby, a hint of a smile upon her face, the man approached the podium. The overhead floodlights struck at the crown of his intensely gelled hair, giving it an almost hypnotic shine. Caley could now see why Adam had given the male executive such an unflattering nickname.

"Stand for your Executive Leader, Astor Crotale!" the woman yelled sharply, causing the remaining sounds in the hall to dissolve into a unified shifting of fabric as every operative rose from their seats. A deathly silence fell, and Caley felt his shoulders tense at the sudden chill in the atmosphere. "Now be seated," the woman ordered, a little more restrained this time. The operatives obeyed, and Caley followed suit. He wondered just how it felt to have that much control over such a large group of people. At any rate, the woman certainly appeared to be enjoying it.

"Thank you, Eris," Astor remarked, before proceeding into his speech. "Following a successful retrieval from Nashgri City Laboratory, we finally have the last component needed to move into the second stage of Project Rebirth. This adapter engine, combined with our salvaged data on the Aura Network and the powers of M1N4CH1, will allow us to create far more advanced pokémon hybrids."

Caley's mouth had fallen open slightly over the course of this

announcement. *Project Rebirth? Enhancing pokémon through hybridization? So this was what Team Rocket had been up to all this time.* The appearance of the new pokémon who were neither evolutions nor stand-alone species was finally accounted for, but not in a manner that gave Caley any reassurance. It still didn't answer the question of *why* pokémon were being modified in the first place. *Was the intention to sell them to trainers for profit? No...this would have been too conspicuous.* The young man furrowed his brow in thought - *if Team Rocket wasn't creating more powerful pokémon for money, what could they have been doing it for?*

"Once the electrical malfunctions of the adapter engine have been corrected, we shall activate the beta secondary enhancement unit immediately," Astor continued from the podium. "But as you are all aware, improving our equipment is only part of the development process. We must also seek to improve *ourselves*. With this in mind, lessons on Strategy and Tactical Manoeuvres shall be increased to three a week and every operative here shall be expected to attend additional gym training. Soon Team Rocket will have a firmer hold upon Totto...upon the entire world as it stands!"

"We shall close this meeting by reciting the Team Rocket motto," Eris announced loudly.

"Their power is our gain," the voices of the operatives in the room boomed in relative unison. "Their life is our success. All pokémon exist for

the glory of Team Rocket!"

Caley struggled to accurately repeat the words he was hearing for the first time. Such talk about the exploitation of pokémon was difficult for him to say with any conviction regardless. The young man hoped that neither Adam nor the other grunts nearby would notice his floundering. Fortunately for him, every head faced the stage – eyes glazed in vague subservience, the phrases uttered in monotone.

The Executive couple atop the stage bowed their heads slightly in approval, then Astor raised his voice one last time.

"You are dismissed!"

As the operatives clamoured out of the auditorium, chattering with nervous excitement, Caley followed them out – trying desperately hard to tame the expression of disgusted anguish upon his face. Hearing the sound of hundreds of voices around him, all intoning the same words with the same emphasis, had been something of an overwhelming experience. Forcing himself to repeat those same words had left a nasty taste in Caley's mouth, only serving to accompany the heavy feeling in his stomach that had gathered from hearing the male Executive compare pokémon to equipment. Worse still, had been learning of the pinnacle of Team Rocket's endeavours - a scheme that appeared to hinge greatly upon the organization's continued possession of the WaveOne adapter engine. Caley had to extract it from their grasp...but how?

Frustration welled within him - convoluted plans were not Caley's speciality, and the longer he stayed, the greater the likelihood was of him being discovered. He needed to keep near Adam in the meantime - at least in the presence of someone more accustomed to the surroundings, his indecision would not stand out as much. Adam was still within conversation range, having been shuffling uncomfortably amongst the throng of operatives, a few steps ahead of Caley.

"Where are we going to now?" he inquired over Adam's shoulder, causing the youth to flinch before the realisation of who had spoken to him set in. He remained facing forward, but his expression shifted to one of mild disbelief.

"We?" he snorted, before pausing - almost as if he'd somehow seen the lost expression upon Caley's face through the back of his own head. "Eh, I guess you can come along, if you ain't got *better* things to do. You'd fit right in, no doubt."

"Come along where?" Caley reiterated.

"Just a place I go when there's nothing happening," Adam replied matter-of-factly. "Or nothing *important*, anyway. I found it while bunking a tactics lesson once." The youth studied Caley's persisting bewildered expression for a moment. "Look, I'll just show you. C'mon, this way."

Upon sighting a nearby corridor, Adam broke away from the main crowd of operatives and hurried down it, prompting Caley to do the same - albeit as not as neatly as his companion had done. As fractious

exclamations and cursing from stumbling operatives echoed into the distance behind him, Caley bit his lip and quickened his pace in order to catch up with Adam. The youth was striding more confidently now he was by himself – a complete change to the hunched, awkward figure Caley had observed just moments ago.

After a few minutes of walking through the fairly unpopulated eastern parts of the complex, Adam and Caley drew up outside a large pair of thick, grey double doors. Reaching out with one gloved fist, Adam struck his knuckles sharply upon the right door several times. Shortly afterwards, a narrow portion of this door slid across and a pair of dark brown eyes glanced through the hole, scanning the duo standing there for a second. Then the shutter slid to again, and an excited voice was heard further away in the room.

"It's my buddy Adam. He's brought a new guy with him!"

There was heard a succession of clicks as various different locks were undone, before the right hand door was pulled open to reveal a man in his early twenties with cropped hair in a similar shade to Adam's. He was dressed in smart trousers and a light green shirt which looked highly out of place beside the Team Rocket uniforms that Caley and Adam were wearing. As Adam walked in through the open door with Caley cautiously following behind, the young man greeted them both with a beaming smile, then turned his attention to the newer entrant of the pair.

"Welcome to the Rec Room!" the announcement was accompanied

by a sweeping gesture. "Feel free to make yourself at home, anyone's gladly received here. Unless it's the boss, but that goes without saying!" There was a pause, while the young man caught his own breath from the ensuing amusement that followed. "The name's Mondo. I'm a lab technician - console maintenance, mostly. And you?"

"I'm Caley," came the response. "And thanks. For the welcome, I mean. I...wasn't expecting such hospitality."

"Natch," Mondo chuckled. "But let's just say we're not your typical Rockets." He gave Caley a friendly nudge with his elbow, causing the young man to stagger further into the room. "Sit down, don't be shy."

Caley took to scanning his surroundings with his eyes as he wandered across the room. It was a large space, carpeted in deep red with a few worn-looking armchairs and a sofa placed along the far wall. On the side opposite the window stood a well-used snooker table, while nearby there was placed an equally fatigued arcade games cabinet which contained an early version of the classic dot chomper, "Munch-Pax". The young man then proceeded to turn his attentions to the sparse number of other occupants of the room - all clad in grunt rank attire and firmly ensconced in their individual pursuits. Manners obviously didn't go hand-in-hand with hospitality.

"Here, let me introduce you to the rest of the gang," Mondo said, putting a hand on Caley's shoulder and pointing him in the direction of a

woman who was a year older than himself, and bore a shock of messy olive green hair that reached her shoulders. "That's Jenna. She was working on being a reporter until she got caught up in one of the boss' many recruitment schemes."

He moved his free hand toward the far end of the sofa where a chubby thirty year old man with spiked purple hair sat, muttering obscenities to himself while delving into the innards of a battered looking television set.

"And that's Kevin. He's a whiz with media equipment, but his attention span tends to let him down. Watch what you say to him about certain television shows, or you could be stuck listening for ages!"

Mondo glanced over toward the window at this point, an uncomfortable expression suddenly present on his face. Caley moved his gaze toward the window also, and got a shock. He was certain the figure sitting there was the same man he had seen patrolling the streets of Dustry Town in a Policeman's uniform the day before. Now he was dressed in the same outfit as practically everyone else in the room - head perched upon his hands and gazing out at the darkening atmosphere beyond while his shoulders heaved, almost pitifully, coinciding with his breathing.

"That's Errol," Mondo remarked, in disappointed tones. "There isn't any point in trying to make conversation with him...he won't speak back. He doesn't talk to anyone."

Doesn't talk? Caley blinked. Errol had spoken to *him* when they'd first met - he'd seemed a fairly reasonable guy, if a little grumpy.

Unaware of Caley's internal contemplation, Mondo gave a tiny sigh before retreating to a small bookshelf and poring over its contents. Realising he was once again alone, more or less, Caley sought out Adam amongst the room and discovered he had retreated into a corner farthest from the others. There he huddled, seemingly unmoving. The young man approached quietly, a worried expression upon his face.

"Are you okay?" he asked, causing Adam to jump violently in the process. Caley stepped back instinctively as the youth swung round and glared at him - his brow knotting in a mixture of anger and humiliation.

"What's up with you and following me around?" Adam snapped. "Ain't the room big enough?"

Caley frowned and opened his mouth to respond, before something caught his eye. It was a long plate of metal with several small holes drilled into it, waving just beyond Adam's elbow. The young man leaned forward slightly to get a better look, only to have Adam flinch and throw his arms protectively across the object in his lap.

"Butt out!" he exclaimed.

"I was only interested to see what you had there..." Caley pulled a face, unhappy with Adam's constantly defensive, sharp-edged reactions. The adolescent loosened his grasp over the object he was shielding, giving a snort.

"You'll just laugh," he muttered.

"No I won't," Caley insisted. "Come on, show me. Please?"

The last word was enough to catch Adam by surprise, making him sit upright in the process. As he rose, Caley found himself gazing upon a small, partly finished model of a plane constructed from metal shapes screwed together. Adam paused, as if waiting for the peals of hilarity he was so certain he'd receive, only to hear none.

"I made it from KlinkChips," he stated bluntly. "I got a box of them last time they took us out on a raid."

"It looks really cool," Caley smiled, mentally skipping the dubious nature of how Adam obtained the construction set for the time being.

"You think so?" Adam's mouth dropped open slightly, before he rapidly shut it again. "Huh. Everyone else thinks KlinkChips are kids' toys."

"Who *cares* what they think?" Caley sniffed, sitting down upon the carpet a short distance away. "No one should put an age limit on creativity."

"Creativity means sod all around here," Adam mumbled, resuming work upon his model.

Silence fell, as Caley let his mind drift back into the information he had gathered from the meeting earlier that day. For the most part, the general response to the news Executive Astor had delivered had been a

positive one. Was he the only figure present who had felt greatly uncomfortable over the whole thing?

"Say, Adam?" he began slowly. "Doesn't this 'tampering with pokémon' business...bother you in any way?"

"I dunno..." Adam replied distantly, prodding at one of the joints of his model with a tiny screwdriver. "I mean, Cyzel *is* pretty awesome."

"Cyzel?" Caley echoed.

"He's one of the pokémon the science geeks cooked up in their lab," Adam explained. "Part persian, part arcanine. Dad got them to give him to me once they'd finished all their testing stuff."

"He can *do* that?" Caley spluttered, unable to keep a mixed tone of shock and inappropriate admiration from his voice.

"Sure he can," Adam muttered. "He's an Admin - from what I've seen, they get away with whatever the hell they want." The youth's tone of voice was bitter and unimpressed, particularly with Caley's reaction. Caley picked up on this, prompting yet another gut response.

"I'm guessing you don't get on with your dad..."

"Good spot, Captain Genius," Adam remarked sarcastically. "I'd be perfectly happy to never see that scumbag again. I hate him. I hate being here. I hate all of this."

"Why don't you just leave?" Caley continued in a quieter fashion. Adam gave him a stare that dictated he thought Caley was a complete

and utter moron.

"Were you even paying *attention* when you took that oath during signup?" he groaned. "We're bound into this organisation, *all* of us. If I left here, I'd be a fugitive, constantly hunted. And once caught..." Caley noticed Adam's shoulders quake. "They'd make me part of one of their sick experiments. That's what happens to anyone who tries to escape."

At this point, the adolescent leaned closer to Caley, a new, more terrified look in his eyes.

"There were rumours about something like that happening to an elite operative in Johto. Ended up in a machine that wasn't fully tested. No one saw him again afterward..."

Caley gulped and nodded silently, watching an expression of despair and anxiousness emerge on Adam's face.

"I was born and brought up here," he said, his voice softening. "This is all I've ever known. But still...something doesn't feel right about it. Like there's something *better* out there maybe..."

Oh there is, Caley thought, looking on sadly as Adam shook his head vigorously, the sullen look returning as quickly as it had left.

"Heh, dunno what came over me," he muttered. "For a split second I felt I could trust you. Not every day someone gives a crap about me, after all - what with the whole 'don't form friendships with your peers' rule they drum into us over and over."

"I guess not," Caley remarked, trying to stay in character. It had been difficult - the young man wasn't used to the rough and careless attitude that so many of the Team Rocket operatives seemed to bear. Even with all his effort, slivers of the politeness and consideration he had been raised to emulate had still managed to eke through. Caley wasn't sure just how long he would be able to keep this up without being found out.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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