

POKÉMON
REBIRTH

ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE THIRTEEN

Drill Run

It was a quiet drive from Wichour Town. With Kota perched upon his head, Caley was no longer simmering in an unsettled fashion, but instead staring into the footwell - his eyes reflecting many deep thoughts. The young man's reversion to his usual character persuaded Denise to sit in the back seat this time, if only to prevent a nasty clash between James and Adam. James sat in the front passenger seat, eagerly observing Rose's every action, along with the numerous flickering lights and screens on the hovercraft dashboard.

Instead of taking Route 1M, where their unusual transport could easily be sought out, Rose passed over the freeway during one of its fleeting moments of emptiness, then continued onward across the hillside. Naturally, the others were itching to know what Caley had spoken about with Azima, why they had to head towards Scale Falls, and what exactly had caused Caley so much internal grief in the first place. But they refrained from questioning, as Caley seemed unable to satisfy their inquisitive minds at present. So they resigned themselves to waiting.

There was surprisingly little else to talk about. If the ex-operatives were to assess matters, they too were still dealing with shock of their own, more or less. Even with lives as unpredictable as theirs had been at times, what had happened over the past few days had somehow managed to surpass all of that.

After two hours of driving, exhaustion caught up with Rose, who decided to stop travel for the night - regardless of James' insistence that he could drive them instead. The area they had stopped in had very little

light, which helped to keep the group concealed, away from too much civilisation. Rose could just about make out a cluster of overshadowing structures, that she figured would provide an ample hiding place while everyone recuperated. Having no tents, they would have to rest inside the hovercraft for yet another night.

As Adam, James and Rose slept, Caley leant on his knees and glanced at Denise while she prodded at a Pokéball using a small tool kit purchased in Wichour Town before the group had left. He longed to explain what had happened, but awkwardness and doubts plagued him, along with how Denise had reacted to hearing about Cho'moken in the first place. 'Ridiculous' and 'scientifically unsound', she had called it. Such a response hardly leant the young man any confidence to admitting his psychic abilities. Instead, he attempted to make conversation in another way, if only to try and calm his restless mind.

"What are you doing?" he murmured. Denise looked up in alarm. Apparently she hadn't been aware Caley was still awake.

"Modding this Pokéball to override biological IDs, amongst other things," she replied, once the surprise had worn off. "If we're to stand any chance of retrieving Team Rocket's other genetic experiments, we need to have a guaranteed capture rate." The adolescent girl raised her v2 Pokédex, lighting up Caley's face with its soft green glow in the process. Through a remarkable act of clever wiring, Denise had managed to connect the Pokéball to the Pokédex's input port. "Programming is far

from my strong point," she admitted sadly. "But right now, I'm all I have for it."

Caley could sense Denise was referring to Mondo at this point. There were also flickering images of a blue-grey haired older male figure he did not recognize amongst those wistful thoughts - maybe the one she had learned such programming from. Caley flinched slightly, growing a little annoyed with himself. Kota's presence may have taken the brunt of the mental pain away, but it had done little to stop his occasional drifting into others' minds. He decided it best to start a new topic of conversation, to distract them both.

"Say, that Pokédex of yours..." he began. "You have information on all the genetic experiments Team Rocket have made on it, right?"

"Well, *almost* all," Denise admitted. "There are some whose data was classified to anyone lower than executive rank."

"Still, its more information than I have on my 'dex," Caley pointed out. "I was wondering if it might be possible to transfer it over."

"Sure, that's easy," Denise gave a little smile. "This Pokédex is already jailbroken, so it wouldn't take much to pry it back open and use the data chip for a bit."

There was a short silence, as the adolescent girl continued entering commands into the aforementioned device.

"Do you miss Mondo?" Caley asked quietly. Denise glanced at him with raised eyebrows - it was obvious she was surprised that Caley had brought to light something she'd happened to be contemplating.

"It's a good question," she replied, with a slight chuckle. "It's not like I knew him particularly well. We'd sometimes work in the same departments, before I was relegated to cleaning duty. His talents impressed me, for sure, and there was that quirky sense of humour he had. But yeah...maybe I *am* missing him." The faint chuckle happened again. "I know I could sure use his expertise on this Pokéball right about now."

Silence fell again between the two youths, broken only by the various slumbered utterances from the other three human occupants in the hovercraft. Both James and Rose had released their pokémon as soon as they had made a stop, and each were now snuggled up with them. Rose gently caressed Sia's long ears while resting her head on the glaceon's lustrous fur, Chime cooed melodically in her sleep, wrapped around James' neck like a blue and red scarf. Caley looked on wistfully, his mind drifting to thoughts of Kiko and, in turn, his mother and sister. He wanted to contact them, to let them know he was alright - more or less - but he feared that doing so would draw attention to himself by the wrong people. He could only hope that Kiko returned to Prela Village safely with Professor Gordon, in order to quell their fears somewhat.

Caley began to wonder if it might still be possible to enjoy this journey. He had left Prela Village with the intention of seeing new places,

learning new things, meeting new people. He had certainly done all of those things. He'd seen the sides of places he'd never thought he'd see. He learned new things that part of him wished he hadn't learned. And he'd met people that once, he'd only thought existed in the dark parts of story books. But he'd met other kinds of people, too. Quirky, kind-hearted, diligent and brave figures - some of them a little rough around the edges, but all of them with good hearts.

A smile crossed the young man's face at this point as he glanced around at the sleeping figures inside the hovercraft. Even Denise had drifted into slumber at this point, her head lolled back against the corner where the seat met the tinted window, while the Pokéball and Pokédex lay haphazardly upon her knees. Caley gently took the items into his own care, before turning off the Pokédex and relocating everything to the back shelf of the hovercraft. It gave him warmth to know that he'd been able to instil hope into his new companions, to motivate them to break free of the organization that had held them captive for so long. While the sadness over the lack of Errol, Kevin and Jenna's presence remained, Caley continued to cling to the possibility that they too had escaped. He only wished that they could contact him somehow, to put his discomfort over the unknown at rest.

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It had been a short intermediate stop for the trio of elite Team Rocket operatives designated the task of retrieving the organization's missing pokémon experiments. Butch's searching had uncovered curious readings which the group were inclined to investigate - this, in turn, led them south into a mountainous region of Totto. Jessie had barely managed to catch an hour or two of sleep and was beginning to feel pretty cantankerous. Even more so, when the trio set up camp for the second time in the early hours of the morning, only to have Cassidy order her and Butch to go and explore a nearby cave network for signs of their acquired target.

"'I'm going to make a report'," Jessie almost laughed. "That's just her excuse not to do any real work."

"More or less," Butch gave a shrug, following the path of his own flashlight beam with his eyes.

"How do you put up with her?" Jessie inquired, aghast. "She's an obnoxious, ungrateful bully!"

Butch made an utterance of amusement at this point.

"What are you snerking about?" Jessie frowned.

"Well...you just described yourself, for a start," Butch said. He received a fan across his crown shortly afterwards. "Look," he grumbled. "Y' get assigned partners. You got James, I got Cassidy. That's just how it worked out. It's a balancing thing, to make sure one operative's strengths cancel out another's weaknesses."

"I have no weaknesses," Jessie huffed, gripping her flashlight in annoyance.

"*Everyone's got weaknesses, Jess,*" Butch told her. There was a curious note of sympathy in his voice at this point. "Sooner you deal with accepting that, the better." He stopped, kneeling down by a cave wall and unstrapping the device from about his shoulders. "See, I'm happy to let Cassidy do all the talking. Make the plans. She's got a head for that sort of thing. I take care of the physical business."

Jessie tutted under her breath, but said no more. She could still remember how, after leaving Pokémon Technical, James had tried to act tough and stick up for her. But she had always ended up having to save him in one way or another. She had eventually snapped at James, saying that she didn't need someone to be her knight in shining armour - and a rather lousy one at that. As a result, they had bitterly gone their separate ways, and Jessie had tried to follow her childhood dreams to make ends meet. Yet when her anger at her inability to make an honest living drove her to join Team Rocket, fate inexplicably brought Jessie and James' paths back together again.

Life's pathways can't always run parallel to those of others

Sometimes we are diverted for a while

The James she had been reacquainted with had seemed, for a time, like a different person. Life had taken its toll on him, leaving a distanced seriousness in its wake. But in the years that followed, their consequential partnership and Meowth's additional company went a long way to restoring James' more whimsical nature.

Jessie flinched. That was the one thing James had had with her that no one else did. Patience. He may have ribbed her, got frustrated at her, even on occasion outright insulted her, but deep down he was willing to give her that second, third, fifteenth chance. James could see the potential in Jessie that maybe even she could not, and he *believed* in it. His carefree optimism had pitched itself against her tight and calculated pessimism. His flair and imagination coincided with her drama and spark.

She gripped her hands together miserably. Maybe Butch was right - maybe she and James *had* balanced each other out, and all she was doing by being here was displacing the balance between Cassidy and Butch. While James may have been designated team leader in terms of reports, direction was supposed to be a group effort. And Jessie had never really allowed him to help her lead. But James hadn't tried to change that - surely it was his responsibility to do so.

"There's something weird going on, for sure," Butch muttered, lifting his head from his monitoring device. "There are tremors happening right now. Very low, very fast. It's like the ground is vibrating." He stood up, putting the device strap back over his shoulder. "Pretty sure one of

those experiments is around here. Let's go get some rest, and track it down in the morning."

Jessie gave a nod. She was more than happy to accept this decision, especially after such limited recuperation, and still not having overcome the unsettling events in Wichour Town. As Butch turned to leave, she did the same, the beam from the flashlight in her hands passing across the cave wall as she did so. The light skimmed across a spiked, crimson form, reflecting from its shiny yellow eye in the process. A low, throaty rumbling growl was heard, causing Jessie to freeze in her tracks. Was this the experiment they were supposed to be capturing?

Suddenly the creature sprang forward, causing Jessie to instinctively flatten herself against the cave wall as it passed. Unable to open her mouth and yell out a warning, all Jessie could do was cringe and wince as the creature ploughed into Butch, practically using his back as a springboard as it dashed off into a side-tunnel, and the darker parts of the cave where intruding humans could not blind it.

"Oh crud..." Jessie bit her lip and ran over to the groaning figure on the cave floor. Butch was lying on the crushed remains of the device he'd previously been using, and there were two pretty deep gashes in his shirt where the escaping pokémon's claws had made contact during its frustrated getaway.

"*Why* didn't you warn me that druddigon was heading my way?" the man snapped, albeit in pained tones.

His first response was to let out a yell of alarm, before a hand slammed itself over his mouth, muffling out the sound.

"Sshh!" Rose hissed. "We can't let them know we're in here!"

It took a moment for James to realise the statement wasn't as ridiculous as it sounded. From his point of view, the person had appeared to have been looking straight at him - but all that person could see was their own reflection on the tinted window's shiny surface. If anything was going to give the occupants of the hovercraft away, it would be sound.

Upon closer inspection, it was discovered that the 'overshadowing structures' Rose had barely picked out in the dark the night before were in fact a ring of large stones covered in odd markings. Three differently sized circles were carved into each stone's front, headed by one larger, wing-like design. The sides of each stone had three large grooves chipped into them. Whereas the area had been completely desolate, it was now swarming with people - many of them dressed in eccentric outfits with their necks bearing the weights of multitudinous cameras.

"Aaaaa...we're surrounded," Adam whimpered. "Whadda we do? If they find us in here, they'll drag us away, question us, and...and..."

"Calm down, Adam," Rose frowned, putting on her wig and false eyebrows as Sia looked at her curiously. "We can find a way around this." She glanced at Caley. "Does Kota know how to teleport?"

"Yes," Caley replied. "Though I wouldn't want to place the burden of trying to transport us all at once on him."

"That's fine," Rose smiled. "We can escape one at a time."

Adam shifted vexedly. He'd teleported before, and the feeling was pretty uncomfortable. Still, it was the lesser of two evils when the other option was remaining where he was and being discovered.

"Yeesh," Adam grunted as he and the others stood a little distance from the activity. "What's got all those people so worked up anyway?"

"You mean you don't *know*?" a slightly-nasally voice exclaimed from a little way behind them. Everyone turned around to see a man standing there, looking at them expectantly. He appeared to be in his mid thirties, and wore a white lab coat over his more casual attire, which looked very much out of place, especially in comparison to his messy auburn hair and unshaven chin. "You come to Pachna Town and you're completely uninformed on the Makkan Circle?"

"*Should* we be informed?" Denise blinked.

"I don't see any reason to be getting so excited over a bunch of rocks," James looked equally perplexed.

"They're not just a 'bunch of rocks'!" the man frowned, before his expression shifted into something more admiring, his voice growing soft and poetic. "They're beacons...placed here by denizens of space."

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"You're kidding, right?" Adam's expression was rather unimpressed.

"Not at all!" the man responded, not catching on to the youth's tone of inquiry. "Many have held the belief that pokémon came to this planet from elsewhere, and I have been one of those people." He held out a hand to the group in general. "The name's Seymour. I've been researching extraterrestrial matters for the past ten years."

"Wow, really?" Caley's eyes widened attentively. "So what sparked your interest?"

"Professor Lund's work, pretty much," Seymour replied. "Back in the 60s, he began studying fragments of an unknown rock that was discovered around mysterious crater sites. This rock later came to be known as 'moon stone', because its energy frequencies were very similar to those being emitted from the moon. In turn, that led the professor to unearth larger and larger pieces of this rock, until he was to discover something that would create ripples in the theory of pokémon origin itself. A real life spaceship!"

"A spaceship?" the group chorused in unison, thrown off by this statement.

"Well maybe not *entirely* a spaceship," Seymour looked a little sad. "But most likely a part of one. You see, unlike any regular meteorites that crashed through our atmosphere, this one was completely hollow. And that wasn't all - traces of clefairy DNA were found on the inside!"

"Cleairy, huh?" James trailed off slightly. He'd had several encounters with these curious water-hopping imps in the past yet, more so than that, something about the pokémon's name pronounced in those tones sounded uncannily familiar.

"Yes yes," Seymour grinned. "People have theorized these moon stone shells have simply been a way to protect the real craft from the intense heat of entering our planet's atmosphere. Thing is, no one's been able to find the core of one of these meteorites...until now."

At this, the researcher motioned to the hovercraft, which was being cordoned off by Police officers. Nearby, other figures in lab coats were supervising machops in erecting a canopy - all the while, eagerly anticipating examination of the vehicle.

"Oh dear.." Denise commented in a small voice. Everyone shifted awkwardly. It appeared that their mode of transport had been mistaken for a spaceship.

"The Makkan Circle has been theorized to be a landing pad for alien craft for many decades. Though it hasn't been until today that there's been conclusive proof!" Seymour exclaimed happily. He was subconsciously walking closer to the taped-off area at the time, and the group followed him - if only to get a better look at the hovercraft to check it was still viable.

"That sure is something," Rose forced a smile. "And what are they going to do with this...'proof'?"

"Study it, dust it for prints, deconstruct it..." Seymour counted on his fingers. "Undoubtedly this alien technology has much to show us!"

It does that, alright, Caley thought to himself, trying to hide his worried face. Prolonged scrutiny of the hovercraft would, sooner or later, yield the conclusion that it wasn't just made by human beings, but those of Team Rocket origin, at that.

Adam turned his head to see a man striding in a harried fashion towards them. He was five years or so older than Seymour and a little on the stocky side, with a neatly trimmed blue-grey beard to counterbalance his exceedingly windblown hair, which was almost as untidy as his companion's happened to be.

"Everyone, this is Professor Mack Soler," Seymour exclaimed. "He's an expert in the study and identification of prints of all kinds!"

"What are these kids doing here?" Mack looked annoyed. "All tourists are supposed to have been relocated to a distance."

"Uh...well they were just so interested in the workings of astronomy that I couldn't help-" Seymour spluttered.

"Seymour, we've talked about this," Mack sighed. "It's...wonderful that you're so enthusiastic about sharing, but we have more *confidential* business, here." He turned to the unidentified audience, watching him with mixed expressions of surprise, insult and frustration. "I'm afraid you lot are going to have to leave. There are plenty of informative books in

the town gift shops, though. Don't hesitate to give them a good look - nothing wrong with a healthy curiosity!"

"Fancy treating us like we're stupid," Denise grumbled, once they had wandered several yards down the hillside towards the waiting streets of Pachna Town.

"Well they think we're civilians," Rose reminded her. "And we want to keep it that way. Unfortunately, sooner or later, those researchers are going to discover that vehicle was Team Rocket's handiwork, and we don't want to be within earshot when they do. We're going to have to let it go."

Pachna Town was a quaint, rural hillside locale. Cottages nestled upon these grassy slopes, their gardens flowing downward like rivers of multi-coloured blooms. Wild grass type pokémon could be seen ducking in and out of the flowery displays with a level of confidence that made them appear tame, at least in the eyes of passers-by.

But Pachna Town was far from lazy. The streets swarmed with multicoloured tourists, the majority of them here for the same reason. They hung excitedly on corners, pointing their cameras at anything that seemed remotely viable, lounged on benches eating Makkan Stone shaped ice cream and chattered avidly amongst themselves - admiring each others' curious outfits and accessories.

Caley paused outside the window of a souvenir shop and gazed thoughtfully through the glass at the miniature models on display there. It was more than apparent that such attention had changed the town a fair bit. Yet conversations with the local shop owners had generated mostly unconvinced responses. Many were adamant that the stones were stones, and there was nothing more to it - bar the fact they were a good means for improving commerce. But neither Caley nor Kota were all that sure. Both of them had detected curious vibes from the Makkan Circle, a pulsing, almost living force not unlike those of Aura signals Kota had readily detected in fellow beings, and that Caley was just coming to terms with recognizing. Certainly rather beacon-like in behaviour.

There was a slight quake underfoot, not too sharp, but enough to rattle the models on the shelf that Caley happened to be looking at. He glanced up in alarm, catching the gaze of an elderly town resident who happened to be leaving the doorway.

"Don't worry 'bout that, love," she smiled warmly. "It's just Mr. Kenton, he's the architect around these parts. Does a lot of ground-shifting work, so we often get jolts and shakes."

"Oh, I see," Caley said, trying to push aside his expression of near horror for one of his more familiar smiles. "Thank you for letting me know."

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It wasn't until mid-morning that the trio of Team Rocket elites finally stirred and resumed their duties. Cassidy was pretty aggravated about this, having expected to begin proceedings earlier in the day - though Butch had proved almost impossible to rouse. And even once he *had* been woken, he had coloured the air with nothing but grumpiness and bitter complaints. Generally, Butch was a fair-natured person and took a lot in his stride, so this drastic change of attitude came as a rather unwelcome shock. Cassidy was beginning to wish she'd left the man sleeping.

Though she admitted she felt a slight twinge of concern. While a new shirt provided an apt replacement for the torn one, what supplies they had in their regulation first aid kit had done little to quell the searing redness of the gashes in her companion's back. The skin around the injury had hardened and cracked, generating aggravating itches. Despite his grievances, however, Butch was still determined to fulfil his task of recapturing the hybrid pokémon experiments. Time was limited, and there was none to be spared for seeking additional medical help.

The trio had a fair idea of what they were dealing with. Database information had provided some basic insight, and they had selected their trap accordingly, before entering the cave network. It was a reasonably simple setup - five emitters which, when carefully aligned in the cave floor and adjoining walls, would generate a web of powerful binding energy over whatever happened to stumble into it. Once this setup had

been arranged, Cassidy, Butch and Jessie had retreated to a side passage to activate the second stage of the capture plan.

"This should get that creature's attention," Cassidy remarked with a smile, as Butch thudded yet another electronic unit into the ground and turned it on. Jessie recognized the machine, at a glance, to be a tremor generator - typically used by operatives for the purposes of mining.

"Are you sure this is a...rational way of attracting it?" she grimaced slightly. "I'd prefer to come out of this situation uncrushed."

"We're not going to turn the generator up *that* high," Cassidy rolled her eyes. "That's the sort of thing *you* would have done, alongside those other two incompetents. We're using more of a...communication frequency." She paused, noticing the chunks of dirt scattered on the cave floor jittering and bouncing into the air. "Lower setting, Butch! *Lower!*" the woman snapped. "Are you trying to kill us all?"

"I've got it set to 0.5!" Butch retorted in annoyance, though Jessie could hear the uncertainty in his voice also. "Any lower and it'd be off!"

"Something tells me those vibrations aren't from the tremor generator..." Jessie murmured weakly, as the shaking steadily increased.

"It's coming this way!" Cassidy exclaimed, backing away from the side passage entrance and donning some protective headgear. Jessie and Butch did the same, the latter disengaging the generator and pulling it back with him.

had resigned himself to travelling by foot, and that was going to require a lot of rest first.

However, even this wasn't going to prove easy. Rose and Denise took to an alternate room, leaving Adam, James and Caley to allocate sleeping areas amongst themselves. As per a growing tradition, Adam and James proceeded to squabble over who would be getting the single bed, and who would sleep in the double bunk. It wasn't until James began threatening Adam with possible reversion to a houndoom if stress got the better of him, that the youth backed off - albeit with a nervous reluctance and much muttering.

Even with Kota resting next to his head, Caley felt a little isolated as he lay upon the lower bunk with his hands clasped across his chest. How would his friends react if they knew he had psychic abilities? Would they think he was crazy? Would they be scared of him? Caley had to admit he was a little scared himself. But he had to share the information he had gathered with the others at some point, whatever the outcome.

"So...uh...you feeling any better?" Adam asked tentatively.

"Hm?" Caley disengaged from his thoughts.

"From the other day," Adam persisted. Empathy wasn't his strong point, but Caley's abstract behaviour had been playing on his mind. "You seemed pretty sick."

"Yeah..." Caley's gut began to idle uneasily. "I do feel a bit better, thanks."

"I dunno what happened," Adam said, a measure of relief in his voice. "But man...it sure freaked *me* out."

Caley sighed internally. Adam didn't seem to be the best first candidate for coming clean over what happened. Instead, he fished for other topics of conversation.

"Say, Ad'...do you think any of what the townsfolk said out there could be true? Y'know, about pokémon from space."

"There's been a fair bit of info supporting it over the years," Adam remarked. "So sure. Why not."

"What about prophecies?" Caley asked, almost sounding hopeful.

"Old world stories," Adam responded shortly. "Written to keep people in line. That's all."

"I see," Caley murmured, his face falling. It was odd - a day ago, he had felt confused as to the legitimacy of what Azima had told him. Yet as the hours had passed, her words had sunk in, growing clearer as they did so. The part of him that had previously demanded further evidence, had begun to insist the prophecy he'd been read wasn't just human invention. "And a creator?"

"What is this, question time?" Adam snapped, sounding annoyed. "Listen, *if* some super-powerful being made our world, it obviously doesn't care about us any more. We've been left to fend for ourselves, and everything's gone tits up. It's only a matter of time before someone

like the boss of Team Rocket or whatever crazy psycho turns up next, to turn the whole planet into a giant wasteland."

There was silence.

"Because if it actually *cared* - given that it exists at all - why the hell hasn't it stopped this downward spiral yet?"

"I...I don't know..." Caley trailed off.

"Don't know'," Adam snorted. "What a waste of time." Caley wasn't sure whether the latter statement had been in reference to the concept or the conversation.

"Adam...some things don't always make sense from our perspective," he began. Being chosen to stop Team Rocket certainly was one of them, in his opinion. "But we need to give them the benefit of the doubt."

"Well you seem to be doing a brilliant job of that," Adam dismissed, turning over in his bed. "Good luck to ya."

Caley stared wistfully at the underside of the upper bunk. He wished Adam was right, and that he *was* doing a brilliant job. But doubts and anxiousness continued to pester at his mind. The youth's responses had made Caley no more confident to explain everything Azima had shared with him.

There was a shudder, stronger than any of the vague quakes Caley had felt throughout his time in Pachna Town. A sudden jerk of the floor was followed by creaking, then a resounding crunch that gave way to a splintering of wood, a multitude of cracking sounds and a loud yell. Caley and Adam sat up in alarm, the former instinctively grabbing his Pokédex glasses from the tiny shelf nearby.

"What was that?" Caley whispered, a note of panic in his voice.

"Sounded like mushroom top," Adam remarked, a note of amusement creeping into his voice. "Maybe he caved in under the weight of his own stupid."

"Adam! This is serious!" Caley exclaimed, fumbling for the light switch over the shelf. As the faint glow of the bedside lamp spread through the room, the two figures craned their necks and gawped at the cavernous hole where the single bed had once been. Clambering from the bunk, Adam and Caley gingerly approached the hole, before leaning over slightly, peering into the dark.

"James?" the latter called.

"Ohhhhhh...my head. Is that you Caley?" came the dazed inquiry.

"Yes," the young man replied. "Are you hurt?"

"No," James responded. "The mattress broke my fall, and Chime stopped any debris from landing on my head. You okay too, Chime?" The pokémon squeaked nodded an affirmative. "Good. We're both good," the

man smiled. "Can't say the same for the bed, mind. Looks like it's seen better days...I probably should get back up there, huh."

"Wait," Caley stopped him. "Not yet. Something's off about this. Can you see anything *else* down there?"

"Not without a flashlight," James admitted, to which Caley salvaged his own from his satchel next to the bed and had Kota lower it down. "Ah! Thanks. Let's see...wow, this isn't a sinkhole. This is a tunnel, and it seems to go on a long way."

"I see..." the young man looked very serious.

"You're not seriously thinking of going down there, are you?" Adam inquired, a little nervously.

"I get the feeling this has something to do with me," Caley replied, putting on his jacket. "So yes. And it might do you some good to come along - the floor in this room is obviously unstable."

"Point taken..." Adam bit his lip.

"I wonder if my wig is amongst this mess," James mumbled to himself, sifting through the broken fragments of wood around his bed. Luckily for him, his exhaustion meant that he had gone to bed without removing the false eyebrows that matched the colour of the wig, and thus they were still upon his person.

"Helloooo?"

The faraway voice had not been familiar, and in turn it had caused James to sit bolt upright, eyes wide and round. His first instinctive reaction was to grab the pillow upon his bed and grasp it across his temple, in order to shield his true hairstyle from whomever was accompanying the tunnel with him.

"You there!"

Another voice, this time from another direction. James swung round, keeping the pillow clasped tightly to his head, while shining the flashlight down towards the direction of the sound. It glanced from the bodies of a young family surrounded by broken clutter - the woman clasping a little girl and her smoochum protectively, while the man squinted in the luminescent glare.

"Are you here to rescue us?" he called again.

"Not intentionally~!" James called back with a sheepish expression, motioning to his fallen bed. "But I'll do what I can to help!"

More and more voices arose from up and down the tunnel - some angered and vibrant, others faint and pained. James quickly scabbled for his wig and eventually found it, dusty and a little mangled, under the edge of the bed. With a little assistance from Chime's telekinetic ability, the bed was raised enough for James to pull the wig free, and he hurriedly arranged it upon his head - thankful for the darkness and its provision of temporary anonymity.

"Looks like the entire ground floor of the hotel has fallen through," Caley observed as he and Adam were lowered into the tunnel by Kota.

"But that means..." James started to look distressed, numerous 'what if' possibilities beginning to dash through his head. "ROSE! DENISE! Are you down here? Speak to me!"

"James!" Caley hissed. "Their other names! Use their *other* names!"

"Oh, oops..." the man grinned sheepishly. "I forgot in the panic."

He didn't need to raise his voice a second time, however. Two familiar human figures and a pokémon accomplice walked into the path of his flashlight, all with unhappy, rather dishevelled expressions that - aimed at the others - were proof they were none too pleased for having their identities blurted in public, especially after the trouble they'd went to in re-attaching their disguises. James reiterated his apologetic expression.

"This tunnel couldn't have been here before," Denise shook her head. "No rational builder would construct something above this, especially when its so close to the surface."

"You think that this just *appeared* in the last few minutes?" Adam raised an eyebrow.

"Actually, I do," came the firm reply. "Though how, I couldn't say - not without giving the surroundings a better look. James, pass me that flashlight."

"Okay..." James pouted, reluctant to let go of something that made him feel a little more reassured. As Denise waved the item about the walls, Rose and Sia travelled further down the tunnel in order to see how they could assist other, more bewildered hotel occupants that had fallen victim to the events. Caley and Adam wandered in the opposite direction, the former feeling obligated to do the same, despite having less than a fraction of Rose's medical experience.

Hm...the walls aren't smooth enough for it to have been a digging machine, Denise pondered. So the other option is a pokémon. But-

"Don't take another step forward!"

Denise froze. The Team Rocket regions of her brain had sprung into red alert, assuming the voice to have belonged to some member of authority. But when she looked around, she discovered it was actually Professor Mack Soler, who was crouched avidly upon the ground, studying something with great intent, using a pen light.

"These prints..." he remarked gleefully. "I am almost certain they belong to whatever was responsible for tunnelling under our hotel! They look very much like that of an aggron - though the step gap is oddly wide."

That doesn't make sense, Denise shook her head. This tunnel is almost twelve foot high! The maximum recorded growth size of an aggron is nine foot, so unless someone has been performing messed up experiments...She flinched, a thought hitting her. Wait. 'Experiments'...

Using Sia's quick feet to allow the glaceon to dash up and down the tunnel strait as far as it led, Rose finally managed to gather all the fallen hotel occupants, before applying what first aid she was able to using the resources provided. Sia's ice moves came in handy for several instances of cuts and mild fractures. Thankfully the majority of customers were still able to walk and, salvaging what possessions they could find from the remains of their rooms, they followed Rose back up the tunnel towards the others - murmuring expressions of gratitude.

"Caley, Caley," Denise hurried. "Check the TR database of your Pokédex for information on ground types."

"Okay," Caley acknowledged, allowing his eyes to scour and select the relevant menus. "Here we go. There's only one entry under ground type, and that's a pokémon called 'Trigrón'. It's an experiment made from aggron and dugtrio DNA, and according to this Pokédex reading, Trigrón doesn't tend to stay still unless all three of its heads fall asleep at the same time."

"And there's a one in a million chance of *that* happening," Adam remarked.

"Well therein lies our culprit," Denise confirmed. "We need to get these other people out of here before we do anything about containing it, though. And raising them back up to the hotel level doesn't seem to be much of a logical option - especially when there's no floor for them to walk on any more."

"Hm...then I guess we'll have to look for another way out of here," Caley sighed. "After all, Trigron had to have entered by some route - we could use the same way to escape."

"Good thinking!" Denise beamed. "Though as to how to find that way out...we could stand to use a pokémon with a good sense of smell, to pick up the scent of the open air." She turned back to Caley again. "Can you try looking through your Pokédex for that?"

"I'm coming up with 'growlithe', 'ursaring', 'poochyena', 'swinub'...and 'weedle'," Caley listed, the last part of his sentence uttered with a note of surprise.

"Whatever works," Denise shrugged, moving her attention to the small gathering of people they had salvaged from the debris. "I know this is a long shot, but its important to us getting out of here! Has anyone got a growlithe, ursaring, poochyena, swinub or weedle with them?"

"I've got a swinub," a calm male voice was heard from amongst the gathering. The crowd parted to reveal an eighteen year old man who, despite being in his nightwear, still managed to hold some commanding presence. He brought forth the Pokéball he had salvaged, before releasing its contents upon the tunnel floor. "Come on out, Sesame."

The little brown, striped pig pokémon appeared, and its trainer explained what the group was looking for. With a grunt of acknowledgement, Sesame took to scrutinizing the air for a moment,

before dashing headlong into the darkness in front of them. Rose followed with a quick swing of the flashlight, casting its glow into the path of the swinub and allowing its human pursuers better direction.

"This is unbelievable..." Mack observed with notable awe.

"Mummy? Are we going to get out of here?" a young girl asked her parent in soft, wavering tones. Caley bit his lip upon overhearing this. Regardless of the mother's natural optimistic response, he felt quite unsure of what lay ahead. Moving from one tunnel through an intersection into the next, it was obvious that whatever had been active down here had already succeeded in creating a network of passages. Passages that would be very easy to get lost in. All they truly had was Sesame's keen olfactory senses to rely on.

Just then, Sesame halted without warning, gazing up at the inkiness ahead. Two small points of light could be seen approaching the group of hotel customers, accompanied by a soft juddering. It wasn't as threatening as the violent tremors of before, but everyone paused apprehensively.

"Look!" a youthful voice called out. "More of them!"

"Are you alright?" an older voice followed afterwards.

As the source of the lights drew closer, the group could see it was a small vehicle containing two adults, a ten year old boy and an exeggcute. James noted a rather curious trait about the exeggcute -

instead of being composed of six egg-like segments, the pokémon only had three.

"Mr. Kenton!" Mark spluttered joyfully. "You and your wife are a sight for sore eyes, believe me."

"You're the fifth lot of people we've come across down here," the man previously identified as Richard Kenton remarked.

"What's going on?" someone exclaimed from amongst the group.

"People's houses and gardens have disappeared underground and the town has become quite a state! Hyacinth and I took the initiative of travelling down here to rescue those stranded underground."

"Did you cause this?" one of the hotel patrons snapped towards the man.

"Certainly not!" Richard insisted. "All of my plans were designed to work *around* the buildings so things like this wouldn't happen. Whoever, or whatever has done this has no regard for structural integrity of any kind."

"We need to get you out of here," Hyacinth insisted to the group. "My husband and son are going to head deeper into the tunnels to stop the cause of this mess, and I don't want any of you to be in here when they find it." She stepped from the vehicle, her exeggcute following. "The other half of my pokémon is waiting for us outside, so this half can easily use its telepathic signals to guide us there. I have food and warm blankets waiting for you at Pachna Gym."

This seemed to appeal to the hotel patrons, which wandered after Hyacinth. Caley gave Rose an anxious glance.

"We've got a problem," he murmured hurriedly. "There's pretty strong evidence pointing toward all this tunnelling being the result of one of Team Rocket's genetics. A dugtrio-aggron hybrid called 'Trigrion', to be more precise. If those two discover Trigrion is an experiment..." he motioned quickly to the vehicle containing Richard and his son, who were patiently waiting for everyone to depart before making their next move. Rose looked very thoughtful for a moment, before her eyes lit up with signs of an emerging idea.

"They don't need to find out its an *experiment*," she smiled. "If we can make it look like its something else. James, you and Denise follow the other people out - you're going to need to gather the most convincing-looking robot parts from any junk you can find. Adam, go with them. Cyzel may well come in handy for the same job. Caley, you and Kota come with me - we need to drive Trigrion to the surface. We'll signal you guys with an ice beam when that's accomplished."

As James, Denise and Adam pursued the group of hotel patrons, Richard and his son turned their attentions to Rose and Caley, left standing in the tunnel with subdued expressions.

"Why aren't you going with them?" the boy asked.

"We..." Caley began. "We want to help."

"Well this is never going to work," Adam remarked in his typical mannerism. "Robot parts. What was she expecting us to do, create a mecha Trigron?"

"Don't be so dense," James pulled a face. "Of course she doesn't, not in this short time span. The idea is to make it look as if the real Trigron *is* a mecha."

"So how's that work?" Denise blinked.

"Simple!" James grinned. "Gather some pieces that look like they might have dropped off a robot that sustained heavy damage. Create a big enough diversion, preferably something involving explosions in order to obscure the view. Catch Trigron during the diversion, and leave the debris behind."

"And in turn, Trigron will appear to have been a robot that exploded from overload!" Denise exclaimed with realisation. "James, that's genius!"

"I couldn't have come up with a better plan myself," James was wearing a proud expression that almost made it look as if he *had* come up with the plan. "But we've got no time to be standing around talking about it. Let's get to finding some parts!"

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"I heard your wife mention taking the people rescued from the hotel to the Pachna Gym," Caley said, more to make conversation than anything. "Is she the town's Gym Leader?"

"Not quite," Richard smiled. "My son Doug is the Gym Leader. I thought running the place would be a great character-building exercise for him, not to mention it would allow me to work on my construction projects more. But would you believe it, no more than a week into handing the job over to him, and this happens!"

Kota detected a change in Caley's vibe at this point. Something in Richard's words had caused a stirring within the augret's human companion - thoughts and memories Caley had tried to seal in the deeper reaches of his mind, to keep from causing undue grief in those around him. Even now, the young man's subconscious was attempting to push Kota's presence away from the matters it felt best left unseen, with limited success. The psychic pokémon took the hint and retracted himself mentally, instead giving Caley what he hoped was a comforting pat atop the head. Caley would undoubtedly explain his concerns in due time.

"Do you have any idea what you might be up against?" Rose asked, testing the water.

"Well for one thing, it's big!" Richard chuckled, before his expression grew more serious. "And worryingly erratic. Tunnelling under the buildings is one level of dangerous, but there are other things it could run into down here that are far more volatile."

"Such as?" Doug looked worried, suddenly feeling quite misinformed. A single, thunderous judder was felt underneath the vehicle, and the feet of those walking next to it. Caley felt a chill run straight through him as a harsh shriek echoed down the tunnel - a triad of voices crying out in unison. The cry wasn't one of anger, but of surprise...fear...pain. There was a faint sound - a sound like the cascade of thousands of tiny stones which grew steadily heavier, and louder.

"That sounds like our culprit," Rose concluded.

"And sounds like its done what I feared worst," Richard grimaced. "Tunnelled up under the lake near to Pachna Town. Get in the car - I doubt we'll be able to outride the water, but we've got to try."

"Couldn't your augret shield us, Caley?" Doug peered into the back seat as the vehicle received several more passengers. Richard pulled the vehicle into a swift turn, accelerating down the tunnel from where they'd travelled.

Caley glanced up, his heart pounding in his chest. The water was in visual range now, and it was obvious the vehicle needed protecting from the brunt of its force. The young man wished for all the world that Kiko was still with him. He felt terrible about putting such a heavy responsibility upon Kota's shoulders, especially since the augret was still quite inexperienced. But there was little else he could do...wasn't there?

Maybe instructing Kota *wasn't* the only thing he could do. Both the pokémon and himself were psychically-endowed, after all. Even though

he had no idea what sorts of abilities he had besides hearing thoughts, maybe he could still help. But how?

"...your augret...channel any excess Aura from you..."

Fragments of Azima's words filtered back to Caley. If Kota was capable of channelling his Aura, then maybe the pokémon could *use* it, too.

"I'm sorry, Kota," Caley spoke up at last. "But we need your help."

As Kota raised his psychically-generated forcefield, Caley closed his eyes and tried to urge his own energies towards the augret. He felt a slight pull as, if like the tugging of a string through his hands, those energies were latched on to and rapidly siphoned away. Kota's large eyes flashed an intense blue, and the initially faint sheen of the forcefield rippled with the onset of new vitality.

The water crashed into them like a liquid wall, throwing the vehicle containing Doug, his father, Rose, Caley and their pokémon backwards down the pitch-blackness of the passageway. Kota's shield held fast, but the sheer momentum tossed his accomplices around the inside of the shield like ragdolls. Everyone clung to Richard's vehicle for all they were worth, hoping that by surrounding it, they would cushion its buffeting against their own bodies somewhat. The sides of the tunnel rushed past, jagged pieces of rock that jutted from the roughly-hewn walls broke away into fragments as they were forced against the shield's fluorescent surface. Just when Caley thought his stomach could take no more, the

entire assembly and its passengers were thrust into the cold night air in a watery spray.

They landed hard, the shield spattering out in the process, and were pushed along into the trees with the remaining velocity of the wave. Moments afterward, there came an even louder thud that rattled the vehicle chassis. Everyone tried to force themselves upright, to try and see what it was that had caused such a vibration. Surprisingly, the car's headlights were still functional, and what they made visible was enough to snatch the breaths of the entire group away.

It was over eleven feet tall with dark brown skin and six shiny, brilliant white claws which gleamed in the moonlight. Its three heads bore a greater resemblance to that of a lairon, with narrow blue eyes gazing icily at the figures below from under steely grey facial plates. Its body was heaving with the effects of water saturation and multiple impacts from being forced back down the tunnel, notably exhausted and battered. And yet, it didn't look ready to go down without a fight.

"What *is* that thing?" Doug gulped, before diving behind his pokémon as Trigrón's three heads gave out a unanimous roar of anger. And then it charged. Caley grasped Rose by the arm and pulled her aside as Trigrón ploughed into the woodland, tossing trees aside like matchsticks. The vehicle was also flung into the air, Richard and Doug barely managing to escape before they were caught up along with it. Richard protectively clasped his arms around his son, the two rolling

ears pricked for approaching danger, while the latter focused on sniffing out any good materials that had become buried in landslides and building collapses.

Between the two, and Chime's telekinetic relocation, the group managed to unearth a variety of potential robot parts - though Denise and James suffered from some minor conflicts as to what made a convincing part or not. Having spent a lot of time constructing mecha from whatever materials he could find, James had been more prone to accepting pieces of dismantled bicycles, cooking machines and even metal dustbin lids as viable. Denise, on the other hand, was more used to the concept of only the finest materials, and found it hard to believe that such parts would make anyone believe Trigron was mechanical.

While patrols were present, they were namely the kind focused on restricting collateral damage, and were simple enough to avoid. Eventually the group's exploration led them to that one point atop the hill where the Makkan Circle stood, and where the researchers had erected their white tent over the hovercraft. The group still hoped, albeit in weak measure, that the vehicle was still in one piece and awaiting a swift getaway, but that negligible flicker was quickly snuffed out upon peering inside. The tent was empty of any researchers, but the hovercraft lay in several pieces. Denise heaved a sigh - way too many pieces for her to be able to reconstruct in such a limited time.

James insisted on taking one of the engines with them, though. He had a plan up his sleeve - the others could tell. And as they stepped

outside, the bright blue shot of an ice beam pierced the night sky from the surrounding woodland below. Trigrón's whereabouts were now apparent.

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"Dewy, use Sand Tomb!" Richard instructed, releasing another member of his team from their Pokéball. A hippowdon appeared, hulkingly formidable, but alarmingly downsized in comparison to the three-headed hybrid pokémon that loomed overhead. Despite its disadvantage, the hippowdon courageously plunged its forelegs into the ground - causing it to ripple before becoming soft and malleable. Trigrón's three heads roared unanimously in annoyance as the mushy earth sank from under it, engulfing its stocky legs.

Refusing to let his father take on all the work, Doug released one of his pokémon into the fray - a gligar which rapidly whisked up clumps of mud at one of Trigrón's heads. Kota imitated the act by psychically tossing another large clod of dirt at the adjacent head, generating another utterance of pained fury from the creature. The middle head responded by unleashing a silvery ball of energy towards the hippowdon and dugtrio at its feet. Caley yelled in alarm as both pokémon were flung into the air in an arc of bright light and a spray of sodden earth, the latter of which showered down upon those surrounding the clearing. Once the

mess had settled, Richard saw that Evo was well and truly down for the count. He retrieved the dugtrio and looked concernedly towards his hippowdon.

"Dewy! Can you get up?" he asked. The hippowdon responded with a low throaty grumble, and forced itself back on all fours. Without the added strength of the Arena Trap keeping Trigron in place, Dewy's sand tomb was proving less effective. Trigron rasped and squirmed - one leg emerged from the muddy ground in a splurge, which Sia attempted to pin back down with a blast of ice.

"Hit it up front with Stone Edge!" Richard bellowed to Dewy.

"Sciton, hit it in the back with the same attack!" Doug joined in. Both the hippowdon and gligar executed the move in almost perfect unison, as if it were a combination assault they had done before. In an unsettlingly beautiful manner, rings of Aura spattered into existence around the two pokémon's bodies - hardening into solid blocks as they gathered particles from the surrounding air. These rocky fragments were then pitched at Trigron's chest and shoulder blades, making the creature screech rigidly.

"Okay, hopefully that's enough," Richard glowered breathlessly, reaching for another Pokéball. This one had been attached to the opposite side of his belt, and Rose withdrew a gasp at the thought that had crossed her mind. It was apparent that the retired Gym Leader was

intending to capture Trigron, and doing so would only invoke further questions as to why the pokémon existed in the first place.

Not that Rose had too much to worry about on that front. Trigron's bladed arms were flailing rapidly in its anguish, and Richard's attempt to throw a Pokéball at it was swiftly knocked away in pieces. He tried again with another empty ball, and that too was destroyed. Then a third time, still without success.

"Blast it!" Richard exclaimed, turning to Rose and Caley. "Do either of *you* have Pokéballs?"

"No, but what if it isn't a pokémon?" Rose insisted, trying to stall for time.

"What *else* could it be?" Doug spluttered.

"Never mind, Doug...we'll just have to capture it the old fashioned way," Richard concluded. "If it's worn down enough, Evo's Arena Trap will be able to hold it until I return with something stronger. Hopefully those researchers might have something we can use."

Researchers...that's the last kind of attention we need, Rose grimaced, frantically scanning the clearing. Caley blinked and looked to Kota. An odd feeling had skimmed through his mind, a sense of solidity from a point barely a few metres away. A presence.

Is someone out there, Kota? he asked the augret, with a mixture of hope and worry. *Is it...them?* 'Them' meaning the rest of his companions.

Yes, they've found us, Kota smiled. But I can't tell if they're ready to proceed with the next part of the plan yet.

And they probably can't tell if we're ready, either, Caley looked awkward. So now what?

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"Okay, we have the junk that'll pass as robot parts," Denise murmured from the spot where she, James and Adam were standing - observing Trigron's encounter from a distance. "And we have the Pokéball I modified to Rocket specifications, hopefully that'll be powerful enough to keep Trigron under control. And the engine is for the diversion." She paused, notably confused. "But I still can't see *how* it's a diversion, James."

"Well think about it," James grinned. "If an engine like this overheats beyond its capacity, what's it going to do?"

"Explode!" Denise gasped. "And Cyzel's flames would be enough to make that happen!"

"Right," James nodded. "Then all we need is to get the overheated engine across to Trigron before it detonates. The blast will not only create the diversion, it should be enough to knock the wind out of that creature's sails, to coin a phrase." He looked contemplative. "Now Chime's

telekinesis wouldn't be fast enough, and trying to propel it with a flamethrower would make it detonate too fast, so that's not an option either."

"Maybe Rilly could use a jet of water," Denise suggested, glancing at her gallirill companion. Admittedly, Rilly's track record hadn't particularly been good to date. Nerves had a habit of getting in the pokémon's way and rendering his attacks null and void. Rilly attempted a brave face - he didn't want to let Denise down, but doubts were ever-present.

"But what about Caley and Rose, and those other two guys that are with them?" Adam insisted. "We don't want to hit them or their pokémon!"

"Chime can cover the kid and his dad," James nodded. "And I'm sure Kota can do the same for Caley and Rose. We'll have to take a bit of a gamble on anyone who's in the middle." He looked at the chimecho, who gazed back at him warmly. "Can you get in touch with Kota, and let him know what to do? And tell Sia to signal again when you're all in place."

"Chii-rii!" Chime acknowledged melodically, and hovered away into the trees. There, the three humans and two remaining pokémon waited in shaken anticipation, watching for the sign to make their next move. It seemed like an eternity, then suddenly a flash of ice blue broke the skyline yet again.

"Cyzel, use Flamethrower on that engine!" Adam instructed, and the arcumese blasted a red hot stream of fire from its mouth under the item, making it glow in the process and raising into the air a few metres. James hesitated, noticing the engine beginning to spark and shudder.

"Rilly, it's your turn!" he announced. The gallirill stepped forward, shuddering almost as much as the engine happened to be. Time was ticking away, and Rilly just couldn't seem to muster up the ability to jet water.

"Rilly, please~!" Denise insisted, the desperation noted in her voice. Adam took matters into his own hands at this point, lunging forward and grasping angrily at the end of Rilly's tail.

"Just do it, you wimpy pokémon!"

The shock of suddenly being grabbed was enough to cause Rilly to unleash a strong water gun attack at the engine, propelling it forward into the clearing. However, the water jet had glanced the engine askew, and it was heading off trajectory. The watching figures gasped, only to see the engine glow a faint blue and move slightly to the left - seconds before it detonated.

It felt utterly stupid to be running towards an explosion, but James wasn't a stranger to pursuing actions against his better judgement. And so he gathered whatever fragments of junk he could carry in his arms and dashed at the oncoming cloud of dust. Adam hesitated in following, partly from the risk factor, but also he had noticed Denise glowering at him.

As the clouds of dust cleared, Richard and Doug squinted and looked up to see a shield over them. Turning to look to their left, they saw Caley and Rose under a similar shield being manifested by Kota.

"Thanks, Caley!" Doug grinned. Caley gave a hesitant smile back, then looked confusedly at Kota, who returned the expression.

I never made that forcefield, the augret insisted.

"Then who did?" Caley murmured. Something prodded at his mind, and the young man let his eyes raise just slightly, in time to see a Pokéball floating off into the air above the remaining plume of smoke. Moving his eyes again, he noticed Chime hidden near the trees, with James next to her. Caley's smile became more genuine at this point.

"Well I'll be..." Richard spluttered, as the forcefield was released, allowing Doug and himself to venture further into the clearing. There was nothing left of Trigron's presence but a large black mark surrounded by scattered metal panels and components.

"Looks like it was a robot, dad," Doug concluded, before noticing something else and yelping in alarm. "Sciton!" The gligar had been caught off guard by the crosswinds of the explosion and had ended up in the branches of one of the nearby trees. Fortunately it was only disorientated, nothing more. Dewy, on the other hand, looked worse for wear. Richard quickly returned the hippowdon to its Pokéball while Doug helped Sciton from amongst the leaves, then turned to Caley and Rose.

"You two okay?"

"Just about," Rose replied, slightly breathless and with a sheepish expression. While Sia's ice beam had alerted her to the presence of her team-mates, she had hardly been expecting a massive explosion, and it had put a considerable dent in her usually cool exterior. Caley simply nodded - strangely enough he had been half expecting the oncoming engine and as a result it had not shocked him as much as Rose. This, he put down to his new abilities.

"I wanted to thank you both for coming along and helping me stop that machine," Richard smiled to Caley. "The efforts of your glaceon and augret were invaluable." He then turned to Doug. "And your teamwork with Sciton was excellent! I can see you're going to make an excellent Gym Leader."

"Really?" Doug beamed. "Thanks, dad!" He chuckled as Richard lovingly scuffed the top of the boy's head with a large, workworn hand.

"Now let's get back to the Gym," Richard said warmly. "Hyacinth no doubt is wondering what's happened to us, and I bet there's plenty of hot chocolate waiting for everyone."

"Yay!" Doug said enthusiastically.

Caley was left to stare at Doug and Richard while they triumphantly strode away into the dark. As Kota floated down and resumed his perch atop the young man's head with a slightly worried expression, Rose saw the lostness in Caley's eyes. Something had touched the young man deeply, but she wasn't entirely sure what.

James, Denise and Adam were waiting for Rose and Caley at the front door to Pachna Gym. The trio had hastily found their way there before Richard and Doug returned, in order to make it look like they had been there the whole time. Casual greetings were exchanged for the father and son's benefit, and quieter notes of gratitude once they had left - intermingled with a measure of scolding on Rose's part for doing something so gloriously reckless.

Everyone retreated indoors, thankful just to have somewhere to sleep - even if that somewhere was going to be the floor of a Pokémon Gym's cafeteria. But Caley remained standing outside, gazing anxiously at nothing. His head was a tangled state of confusion, emptiness, distance. With Trigron contained, those in Pachna Town would soon be able to restore the damage the hybrid pokémon had caused. They would be able to return to their daily affairs, as they had been. Their lives could go back to normal.

But for him, a return to normality was no longer possible.

"Caley?" Rose's concerned murmur brought him back to reality.
"Are you ok?"

The young man glanced up at her, unable to conceal the anguish on his face. It was no good - he couldn't keep these things to himself any more. Someone had to know. With her clarity and sensibility, Rose seemed the best figure to divulge such pertinent information with.

"Rose, I've got a confession to make," Caley bit his lip.

"I...uh...man, how do I put this...the other day at Retton Port Pokémon Center, I realised something was wrong. I'd woke up to hearing voices and they didn't sound like my own. I'll admit, I felt like you probably do now - shook up, confused, worried about sanity. I went downstairs, the noise got worse. The voices sounded like those of you guys, only echoey, slightly distant. And suddenly it started to dawn on me - I was hearing everyone's thoughts."

"You were?" Rose stared, a deep look of concern upon her face. At this point in time, the concern was definitely the sort that conveyed she was debating the state of Caley's health, and Caley knew it.

"Please, just bear with me," he insisted. "I'd blamed Minachi at first. I thought it had given me psychic powers before it...left. But it seems...they run in the family. All Minachi did was 'wake them up', so to speak." The young man paused. Rose's expression had remained the same, though softer now, more empathetic. "I know, it sounds completely nuts..."

"Not *completely*," Rose said. "I've read accounts of people with psychic abilities before - though they are few and far between, and those with such powers tend to be reclusive, for obvious reasons."

"So you believe me?" Caley stammered, receiving a nod. "Why did you give me that look, then?"

"I worry that it's too much for you," Rose gave a sad smile. "All you wanted was to explore, and see the sights. In that time you've seen the worst of what Team Rocket has to offer, and been landed with abilities you don't know what to do with."

"Yeah..." Caley trailed off, taking a copper disc from his pocket and examining it. By the shape and colour, Rose could see this was a Totto Expedition medal – engraved with a design that resembled the head and upper torso of an alakazam.

"It's a Kiness Medal," Caley murmured, detecting Rose's intrigue. "My dad used to give them to trainers for beating him in Praela Gym. He gave me one as a keepsake."

"What happened to your father, Caley?" Rose asked cautiously, recalling what had happened in Nashgri Gym.

"He passed away from a terminal illness six years ago," the young man responded, after a pause. "Abby was too young to remember him, but I have a lot of memories of stuff we did together."

"Was he a good gym leader?"

"One of the best," Caley smiled faintly. "Mum told me that Praela Gym was usually the last place in the Totto Expedition that trainers would challenge, due to the way the battles were played out. Success in a Praela Gym match depended heavily on a trainer and pokémon's mental strengths, not their physical ones."

"Fascinating," Rose smiled. "So why didn't *you* become a gym leader?"

"Many reasons, I guess," Caley replied. "I guess the memories of dad still play on my mind. It didn't feel right to step into his shoes, and I doubted I could do as good a job of being a gym leader as he did. Yet here I am, being asked to do something with far more impact."

He didn't wish to elaborate on exactly what that 'something' was. After all, he'd already been shot down once by one of his companions for mentioning even hypothetically mentioning a prophecy. Rose noted Caley's broken expression.

"Things don't always go to plan, Caley," Rose told him. "And those pokémon running free is not your fault. The fact you made the decision to help us at all was truly admirable. Maybe you *don't* feel up to all this, and I don't blame you. But you and Kota did great back there. You've got all the right stuff, I can see it."

Caley's worried face broke into a smile. It hadn't occurred to him just how much he was needing to hear that vote of reassurance from someone.

"Besides..." Rose winked. "We Rockets wouldn't put our faith in just anyone, you know."

'We'. That's right. Caley glanced back out into the distance with a vaguely astonished expression as he recalled the conflict with Trigron. He

hadn't been alone out there - they'd all been helping him out, the entire time. Suddenly, he didn't feel quite so lost and isolated.

"Thank you, Rose," he smiled at last.

"Any time," the woman replied warmly. "Now how's about we get inside for some of that hot cocoa Richard was talking about? We've got a good walk ahead of us tomorrow."

"Sounds good to me," Caley chuckled, following Rose through the Gym's entrance doors. Walking no longer seemed so much of a big deal. For at least that one moment, things seemed that bit more manageable. And he planned to enjoy the moment for all it was worth.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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