

POKÉMON REBIRTH ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition



EPISODE THIRTY THREE

Giga Impact

Restoring order, what was obtainable of it, had been relatively easy for the travellers. Having bid Larson farewell with thanks for taking Byron into custody, the rest of the group set off into the forest to find Denise and Mondo. The duo were found half an hour later, much to Rilly and Cory's enthusiasm. As the afternoon progressed to evening and they drew closer to their final destination, Caley's companions began to see no reason for maintaining their alternate identities, and eventually those still wearing disguises removed them altogether. It was a welcome relief, for even with the additional hair to cushion them, the wigs and false eyebrows had gripped and itched at their heads relentlessly. Feeling less constricted, the majority of those present began engaging in upbeat conversation. All except for Cory and Caley - the latter still trapped in his own feelings of turmoil, while the former was aware of the kind of struggle the young man was experiencing.

Without the Biocite water to reverse his transformation, Butch was forced to accompany the group in his humanoid druddigon form. Despite feeling upset about the loss of his guitar, Errol tried to lighten Butch's mood by joking that now he could understand the pokémon conversations he wasn't party to earlier. Butch settled with grumbling about how most of the other human members of the group could no longer understand him instead.

"Heh, I'm kind of going to miss that detective snorlax guy," Cassidy smiled to herself.

"Great work on busting that signal trapping network open, by the way," James grinned in Denise and Mondo's direction.

"Neesee and me make a good team, if I do say so myself," Mondo grinned.

<I'd like to think we made a good team too,> Golduck said to Soluqua. <Thank you for helping me train enough to be able to evolve.>

<That's okay,> Soluqua trailed off. <I still feel awful about what that man made me do to you, though.>

[*That creep...*] Kota frowned. [*To manipulate someone's brain against their will is just downright despicable.*]

"You're right!" Caley suddenly blurted out miserably. "It's a horrible thing I've done, isn't it?"

[*Huh?*] Kota blinked.

"So *that's* what you're fretting about?" Rose eyed Caley. He nodded silently.

[*What?*] Kota looked worried. [*I don't understand...*] He had done his best not to eavesdrop on his human companion's thoughts - it was not easy, as Caley's internal distress had been the psychic equivalent of mumbling under one's breath.

"Kota, I...messed with someone's brain..." Caley murmured.

"Yeah? That guy was about to take us back to Team Rocket!" Adam looked at his friend like he was crazy.

"But his *brain*," Caley insisted. "Surely there was another way to have got out of that situation."

"Look, Caley," Errol began placatingly. "We know ya conscience is probably givin' you a hard time right now, but dere really wasn't any other way we coulda done it."

But such thoughts were of little comfort. Caley's mind turned to what his mother had said about his dad's psychic abilities and how they had driven him out of control. One thing could easily lead to another, couldn't it?

The group arrived at a Pokémon Center at the foot of the long, steady but winding climb to Alia Summit - a road called Serperior Pass. This Pokémon Center had been constructed inside of a renovated gatehouse, and as a result, its outer architecture was quite impressive. Butch was persuaded by Cassidy to remain hidden outside, as his modified pokémon appearance would likely cause alarm. Though his initial response was aggravated, Butch calmed down a little after Cassidy promised to bring out a good meal for him, once she found the cafeteria. With that, the others made their entrance.

Inside, the Pokémon Center's expansive combined lounge and reception area served as a meeting and rest stop for trainers, many of which could be found seated in a lowered circular formation round an impressive television array, broadcasting international Pokémon League

reports. Other trainers sat behind tables at ground level, sipping drinks and checking various electronic gadgets, or chatting with one another. At the desk, a Nurse Joy and her chansey assistant busied themselves with taking in pokémon to heal and delivering various information to newcomers.

"Rest up as much as you can," Caley urged the others. "Get a good meal inside you. I don't know how much time we have left, but I doubt it's long. I'm going to try and send the hybrid pokémon to a safer place."

His friends responded with utterances of affirmation and nodding, before going their separate ways within the building. Once he had been left to his own devices, Caley hurried to the reception desk and waited for someone to become available.

"Next?" the Nurse Joy spoke up, before glancing kindly at Caley. "Can I help you, young man?"

"Uh, is there a Pokéball Transporter that does multiple transfers here?" Caley asked.

"We have one," Nurse Joy smiled. "You can find it with the other transporters down that corridor on the left. Though I think they are still having maintenance work done on them. You may want to check."

"Thank you," Caley returned the smile and walked briskly in the direction he had been pointed.

Sure enough, there was a row of four Pokéball Transporter machines - one of which held the capacity for six slots. As the Nurse Joy had predicted, all four machines had been powered down - being attended to by a technician who was currently half-buried inside one of them.

"Um, excuse me?" Caley raised his voice a little. "Do you know how long it'll be until the machines are back up and running?"

"Not a clue," the reply was given in a short, unexpectedly youthful tone. "And you're the fifth person to ask me that in the past ten minutes. I'm going as fast as I can, here!"

"Oh," Caley looked awkward. "Sorry. I'll come back later then."

"You do that," the voice said - its owner remaining within the transporter console.

Retreating from the irritable young technician's side, Caley settled on fulfilling another of the things on his to-do list - attempting to get in contact with his mother. He sought out the telephone area and dialled home.

"Hello?" a small, sad voice was heard from the telephone earpiece.

"Abby!" Caley blurted. "Is mum there?"

"Caley?" the voice grew notably more enthusiastic. "Caley! Where have you been? I've missed you so much! I-!"

"Abby, this is important," Caley insisted seriously. "I want to chat with you too, but it's going to have to wait for the moment."

"Alright..." Abby sighed.

"Where's mum gone?"

"She went to that Pokémon League place up north," Abby told him. "I had to stay behind."

"Maybe I can get her on the mobile," Caley pondered to himself. He had little to hide, now the outworking of Team Rocket's plans was so close. "Thanks, sis."

"You're gonna come home soon though, right?" Abby asked. Her voice was back to being small and sad again.

"I will," Caley tried his best to sound reassuring. "And I'll have lots of stories to tell you about my adventures."

"Yay! Awesome!" Abby grinned. "Okay big bro, I'll try to be patient just a bit more."

"Grum-peh peh!" Kiko's stern voice was heard in the background, to which Abby chuckled.

"I think Kiko's missing you as much as I am," she said.

"I'll be back soon, Kiko. Promise!" Caley insisted. He couldn't understand the psychic pokémon's words from the other end of the phone, but he didn't have to in order to understand the tone of motherly concern she was harbouring. "Speak to you guys when I can." The young

man put the phone handset upon the hook and immediately brought out his PokéGear, which he began dialling. The reception was slightly crackly, but the call connected and began to ring. He waited for what seemed like an eternity, before the call was finally answered.

"Caley, is that you?" Pat inquired, notably surprised. "I thought you weren't using your mobile."

"I don't think it matters that much now," Caley replied. "Besides, I really needed to speak to you. Thanks for believing in me, and for going to the Pokémon League."

"This is...certainly a complex situation you've found yourself in," Pat concluded. She seemed a little more content, though no less serious.

"Tell me about it," Caley sighed. "I-I'm sorry I've had to keep it from you this long, mum, I just-"

"It's alright, Caley," Pat told him soothingly. There was a reassuring acceptance in her voice. "I understand. Sometimes life takes turns we hadn't expected. I'm not angry at you for what you did, love."

"R-really?"

There was a chuckle tinged with nostalgia from the other end of the phone.

"Your father couldn't stand by and see people go through a hard time either, you know?" Pat said. "No matter the odds."

"My father..." Caley murmured softly, feeling the heaviness of his own fear and uncertainty growing more stifling.

"There are parts of me that have worried so much about you these last few days," Pat continued, having not heard Caley's response. "Why wouldn't they? I'm your mother, I love you deeply. But there are parts of me that are so very proud of you, Caley."

It was a mixture of astonishment and relief which overwhelmed the young man at that point - far greater than the anxiety and doubt that had been threatening to smother him just moments before. A lump had formed in Caley's throat, the words he previously desired to utter having become trapped under it. Nothing escaped but a weak sound like that of a faintly creaking door.

"I know you have to leave soon, but I want you to do something for me this time, okay?" Pat urged. "How far are you from a Pokémon Center?"

"I-I'm in one right now," Caley finally managed to respond, a little hoarsely. "At the entrance to Serperior Pass."

"Good. Stay in that Pokémon Center for another 15 minutes, I'll get Spryll to send over some help for your journey."

"Thank you, mum," Caley said. "Thanks...for everything."

Caley returned to the Pokéball Transporter area to find the youth which had been buried inside one of the transporter's consoles was now standing up, attending to the front keypad. He appeared to be eleven years old, and had blue-black hair which was shaped in a vaguely tapered manner towards the back of his head. His outfit was composed of a pair of formal trousers and a plaid shirt - an unusually mature ensemble for someone his age.

"Sorry to bother you again," Caley spoke up politely. "But my mum was going to send me some pokémon in the next few minutes and-"

"Just hold on," the youth responded a little tersely. Caley took the tone of the reply in his stride and waited for the job to be completed.

"There," he smiled, adjusting his thick-rimmed glasses and stood back to admire his handiwork. "That should do it."

"Brilliant," Caley approved. "That must have been a lot of work to do tech support on all those transporters."

"You bet it was," the boy scratched the back of his head. "Sorry about getting tetchy with you earlier. The name's Max - I'm doing an overseas apprenticeship in machine maintenance. It's fun, but the pressure's kinda high to get things perfect. Sometimes the stress gets to me."

"Don't worry about it," Caley replied, stepping up to the control panel of the multi-Pokéball Transporter and activating the menu. It

responded keenly with a beep. "Looks like you've done a good job here. Keep it up!"

"Thanks!" Max grinned, picking up his tool box and heading down the corridor. "I'll do my best."

No sooner had he left, than the Pokéball Transporter sprung into life - four of its six projectors thrusting energy into the tray below. As the light faded, four Pokéballs were found sat in the multi-tray underneath the transport unit. One of these Caley recognized as Kiko's, having been returned to him. Yet the designs on the remaining three Pokéballs were unmistakably unique.

Caley felt his stomach turn. He wanted to call his mother back and ask if this was some kind of mistake. But somehow he knew it had been a deliberate act. Pat knew the threat Caley was about to face was a powerful one, that he was going to need all the support he could get.

And what greater support could she give than her own husband's pokémon?

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No sooner had Caley left to take care of his responsibilities, his travelling companions grabbed the opportunity to get their pokémon -or at least the non-hybridized ones- healed, and grab something to eat in

the meantime. Cassidy bought food for Butch and herself, and took both meals outside, while the remainder of the group settled themselves in the Pokémon Center lounge. The atmosphere was warm, both literally and emotionally - the optimistic enthusiasm of the surrounding trainers nearly tangible as they discussed how they'd earned their medals and what strategies they planned to use against the Elite Guard of Kemnon Tower, once they reached there.

"I don't know much about the Tatto Expedition, to be honest," Mondo remarked, chewing on some fishsticks. "Who are these 'Elite Guard' people anyway? Anything like the Elite members of the Pokémon League?"

"In skill, yes," Rose told him. "Otherwise, not really. The Elite Guard are a pair of specially chosen Agrarian Seers given the task of judging all Pokémon Trainers that reach the final stage of the Tatto Expedition. Battles with the Elite Guard are pretty unique."

"How?" James blinked, unwrapping a cherry scone.

"That, I can't tell you," Rose chuckled. "It's something of a secret."

"Maybe we'll find out what that secret is once we get to Kemnon Tower," Cory grinned at the thought. Silence fell while the group continued eating - Jessie passing occasional glances of puzzlement at James' scone and wondering what such a thing tasted like.

"What's up, Denise?" Mondo frowned. "You haven't touched your sandwich."

"Oh...I guess I'm still worrying about Caley," Denise admitted. "He's been acting oddly since that encounter with that ex-Rocket hunter guy."

"Eh, he's just getting cold feet," Adam shrugged, taking a bite out of a sausage roll and scattering flaky pastry down his front. "I don't know why. It's not like he's not done a bunch of stuff already."

"I imagine psychic powers must have a lot of moral implications," James pondered. "What with being able to hear people's thoughts and the potential to manipulate those thoughts...it's a massive responsibility."

"A kinda responsibility I'd gladly do wit'out," Errol laid back and put his arms behind his head.

"What, and you don't think Caley can handle that?" Adam glowered at them. The others glanced at the youth in surprise. Denise couldn't help smiling to herself at Adam's renewed belief in Caley.

"It's difficult to say," Rose answered. "Not because it's Caley, but more because of how powerful psychic abilities are. We can but hope for the best."

"Caley's got a strong will," Mondo nodded. "If anyone has a chance at working these things out, he does."

A sharp gasp comprised of multiple voices arose from the corner of the Pokémon Center lounge. The travellers swung their attentions in the

direction of the noise, to discover a group of trainers staring aghast at a slightly distorted news feed playing on the wall-mounted flat screen TV.

"...after several days of inexplicable storms, we are now witnessing what appears to be a large, black cloud approaching us from the east side of the region," the reporter continued in fuzzy tones. "Given the similarity in energy frequencies, experts at the local Weather Institute are considering the likelihood that these phenomena are related."

"That's the region I come from..." a few of the trainers could be heard murmuring in horror.

"What's happening?" someone else asked worriedly, though none of the surrounding trainers were able to answer - having been just as uninformed. Across the room, the travellers' faces had already grown morose. This was no mere 'black cloud' - even without seeing distinct visual evidence, Rose and the others knew that such potency of feedback was a sign that Giovanni's hybrid army had awoken and was finally on the move. Unsettled weather often happened when the powers of legendary pokémon collided, and these creatures harboured no less strength.

But something particularly jarring resided in the minds of the Team Rocket deserters. The Weather Institute was the name of a building in Hoenn.

"Quick! Find another news station!" James urged the trainer holding the TV remote. She was too dumbstruck to ask why, and instead searched for an active channel as fast as she could. This time it was a

broadcast from Kanto, but the results were just as disturbing. Images of a hillside with a considerable hole gouged into it by forces unknown, followed by shots of felled trees, displaced boulders and other signs of considerable environmental disturbance.

"These persistent vibrations, while not strong enough to be considered an earthquake, are being felt across the region," came the jittery announcement. "Despite the League's insistence for the people to stay calm, large parts of Kanto have been thrown into a state of chaos."

Without further urging, the trainer pressed the remote control once again. The expressions on the faces of those present were drenched in equal dismay, waiting for the signal that would confirm their greatest fear, longing it for not to be so but knowing all too well that this could hardly be a coincidence.

"This is... ..emergency!" a Sinnohan reporter blurted out hysterically. The images were unreadable and the audio was somewhat garbled, prompting the audience to crane their necks in an attempt to hear what was being said. "What...hundreds of deformed *monstrosities*... across the city...! Is there no way to stop-"

At this point, the transmission cut out. The trainer attempted to find another channel, only to have her efforts met with a raging sea of static. She turned off the television, casting the Pokémon Center lounge into an atmosphere of gut-churning silence. Rose lowered her head slowly.

contained the friend he was most acquainted with, and released its contents onto the tiles in front of him. No sooner had the grumpig rematerialized, she dashed forward and clasped her stubby arms tightly around Caley's waist - burying her snout into the figure's jacket.

I'm so glad you're still okay, Kiko sobbed. She pulled back and wiped her eyes with one arm. *It sure hasn't been easy, waiting around back at the house and not really knowing how things were getting on.*

"I missed you too, Kiko," Caley smiled. It was a small smile, but a genuine one. He then blinked, noticing something in one of the grumpig's paws. "What's that you're holding?"

Abby wanted me to give this to you, Kiko replied, offering the item forward.

"Heh...she must have overheard what's been going on," Caley smiled, gently turning the Lucario Rumble Toy over and over in his hands. Lucario was a pokémon associated with royalty and well known for its mastery of Aura - capable of forming its energies into solid objects just as Caley had been learning to do. Caley felt the warmth of his sister's affection and belief in him through this small gift.

It's hard not to see what's going on now, Kiko insisted. *The weather has turned nasty, as well as all those strange news reports...*

"Will Abby be okay?" Caley looked worried. "She's not alone, is she?"

No, Kiko shook her head. She is with Spryll and Belle at a neighbour's house. She'll be fine until Pat comes home. Now... She looked expectantly at the other three Pokéballs on Caley's knee. I think it's about time you introduced yourself to them.

"O-okay..." Caley tried to steady his voice, placing his hands upon the Pokéballs. He raised them and opened the devices in unison - releasing a breloom, a claydol and an alakazam in front of him. The names of these pokémon were surprisingly fresh in Caley's mind - the breloom was called 'Becks', the claydol 'Tetor' and the alakazam 'Murdoch'. Caley recalled his father had been particularly invested in Becks - his intention was to bring out the latent Aura wielding abilities that all combat types shared, and in turn he was able to teach the breloom to use Aura in a psychic type fashion.

The trio of veteran pokémon stood in quiet astonishment for a moment. Caley felt Kiko's eyes boring into the side of his cheek, and decided maybe he'd better break the silence.

"Uh...hello," was about all he managed to say. "I'm...uh...Caley. You remember me, right?"

Caley? echoed Tetor's alarmed-sounding mindvoice. It was the first time Caley had heard the claydol speak in this way, and the deep, resonant tones inside of his brain were at quite unsettling at first.

How many years has it been? Murdoch ran his paw over his long tapered ears. *Last I saw Jack's son, he only came up to my shoulders. He must be at least fourteen by now!*

"I'm sixteen," Caley murmured. The three pokémon in front of him flinched.

And your powers are active, Tetor concluded. The young man gave a somewhat resigned nod.

"There was a pokémon I met..." he began. "They activated my psychic abilities."

But why? Becks looked at him anxiously.

"Look, I understand you've got a lot of questions to ask, but I need to ask you all one first," Caley said. "What happened that last day you saw my dad? What had he been trying to do?"

The pokémon exchanged uncomfortable glances. It was Tetor who spoke first.

He was determined to master a specific technique, the claydol explained. *Matter manipulation - a technique only a rare few human psychics can perform. In order to do so, he kept pushing his power to the limit, then going one step further.*

We could see what this was doing to him, Murdoch said. *The obsession tainted his mind, strained his body, maybe even took his sanity. He ignored his wife's pleas to stop, and he ignored ours. Instead,*

he decided to travel to a place he felt could grant him the ability to finally perform the technique.

We tried to stop him! Becks spluttered. *But he fought our attempts.*

Physically fought them, Tetor added. *In knowing our weaknesses, he was able to temporarily disarm us. And by the time we knew what had happened, we had been sealed within our Pokéballs.*

So much time went by, Murdoch commented. *I was aware of your mother's visitations. She never released us - she couldn't bring herself to, seeing us only reminded her of Jack. I could feel her deep despair, her sorrow. Gradually, the visits became less.*

Caley shifted uneasily. It had been difficult to know what he felt about his father after the conversation with Pat, back in Scale Falls. When Caley was younger, he'd looked up to his dad as an example of strength and kindness. The most ironic thing of all, in a Gym where the credentials for success were mental resilience and self control, the leader had failed to keep a grasp on both. Maybe it was the shock or simple acceptance, but Caley found himself experiencing less anger and more in the way of disappointment. He looked back at the trio of pokémon with an apologetic expression, wishing to do something to ease the pain of what his father had done to them.

We have forgiven Jack, Caley, Tetor insisted. *He never intended to hurt anyone. But he did forget what was most important in his life.*

Now please, tell us, Murdoch urged. Why did that pokémon activate your psychic abilities?

"I was chosen to stop Team Rocket, who are about to do something seriously bad," Caley explained. "That pokémon, they called me 'Ahnloka', said it was my duty to unite other chosen people with different elemental Cho'moken, so we could reach out to the creator of our world and seek their help. At first it seemed totally crazy, yet the more I searched for answers, the more they all seemed to point to the same thing. Still..." he paused, staring anxiously into the distance. "It's been over two weeks and I'm still not sure whether I can do this. I-I don't want to end up losing control, guys..."

Caley, you may have traits of your father, but you are not him, Tetor spoke. *You can choose where to draw the line.*

If you feel yourself slipping, don't push yourself any further, Murdoch agreed. *We have limits for a reason.*

And we'll be there to help you too! Becks joined in enthusiastically. *If you let us.*

The combined encouragement from these three powerful pokémon gave Caley reassurance. They had trained alongside his father, back when he was whole and sound, not clouded by a thirst for power. They carried the best traits of Jack with them, and in a way it felt to Caley like his dad was present, giving him his blessing. He glanced from Becks, Murdoch

and Tetor to Kiko, who was smiling in satisfaction, and began to smile also.

"Thank you," he said.

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We're sorry, Oranberry is unable to connect your call right now.

Please try again later.

"Drats!" Max grit his teeth, putting the PokéGear back in his jacket. Catching a glimpse of the reports on the lounge television had instilled a deep anxiety into him. The youth's first reaction was to try and call his parents on the Pokémon Center phones, and when that hadn't worked, his own hand-held device. Neither were successful, which only served to deepen his worry. Looking up, Max's eyes widened as he saw a trio of figures strolling across the lobby. Two of them were heavily familiar, while the third's appearance nagged at his mind in a curious fashion. Surely his memory was playing tricks on him. Yet it continued to insist that two of these people had - three years ago - been responsible for a lot of frustration amongst him, his sister and his best friends.

It seemed that Max had not been the only one to make eye contact in this exchange. The group of figures had halted in mid-step and were staring right back at him, their faces bearing the same expressions of puzzled scrutiny as Max expected his had been. Without further

hesitation, all three figures made their approach in bizarrely amusing unity. Max stood his ground, his expression having shifted to an accusing frown.

"Well if it isn't the walking trivia box," Jessie smirked, eyeing the laminated ID dangling from a lanyard around Max's neck. "What are you doing so far from Hoenn, and all by yourself, no less?"

"If you're up to no good, your sense of timing is still as awful as it ever was," Max replied, the expression unshifting.

"We're up to plenty of good, thank you very much," James huffed. "But the guy we used to work for...he's not."

"Is that why everything is getting crazy?" Max looked at James, suddenly wide eyed. The trio of figures nodded solemnly.

This combination of hearing that these particular nuisance-makers had turned over a cleaner page in their life's books coupled with the looming threat of Team Rocket had knocked any scepticism clear out of Max. This was an event that was far too serious for anyone to joke about, even them.

"I'd...been doing an apprenticeship under Devon Corporation," Max began quietly. "Travelling Totto helping to keep their Pokémon Center's machines working smoothly. But hearing that news..." he idled from foot to foot. "Maybe I should find a way to get home, make sure my family is okay."

"But it wouldn't be safe to travel wit' da weather like dat," Errol insisted.

"I know..." Max sighed. "But my big sis needs me. She's been feeling pretty awful since the Johto Conference."

James and Errol exchanged deeply uncomfortable expressions, as Jenna and Kevin's relayed tale from Misty about Ash's weird outburst came flooding back to them. An outburst that they felt like they had been responsible for, at least in part. Still, Jessie wasn't quite so subtle about it.

"What, because of that rant the twerp kicked off with the rest of you at the after party?" she inquired. Max shuddered a little.

"How did you know about that?" he grimaced. "Oh, wait. What *don't* you know about our travels? You, James and Meowth were following us everywhere."

"Not *everywhere!*" James protested. "We *do* have decorum, you know."

"We're getting off track," Jessie hushed him.

"Ash was gone," Max stated, a little brokenly. "Even before he physically left that day. I know you lot only saw him as a 'twerp' - the guy who jumped into stuff head first, relying on seemingly dumb things like 'luck' and 'friendship'. But what about his determination? The commitment to his friends, his pokémon? Didn't you admire that, even just a little? Maybe he was boastful, loud and tactless sometimes. But he

was always there to shine a light of hope into a situation, no matter how small a chance of overcoming it seemed. We could have used that sort of attitude right now."

Indeed, the atmosphere in the Pokémon Center Lounge was deeply morose. Trainers languished upon seats, heads back, gazing at the flickery ceiling lights with dispirited eyes. Others had released their pokémon and were holding them close, trying to obtain some measure of comfort. Even those whom Jessie, James and Errol had been travelling with showed very little signs of optimism - Denise anxiously staring at the deactivated television, while Mondo tried to read one of the magazines from the coffee table to distract himself, without success. In the corner, Adam played a stunted, forlorn melody on his harmonica, which only served to add to the air of despondency.

"Ugh... this won't do..." Jessie tutted, before clambering onto the Pokémon Center's registration desk - much to the horror of the Nurse Joy who was present there. "Listen up, twerps!" she bellowed across the lobby. A large number of surprised and offended looks were now upon her. "You don't have time to be sitting here cowering and feeling sorry for yourselves."

"Now we've been through a lot o' t'ings," Errol said. "Conflict, natural disasters...other dimensions..."

"And you can't expect to fearlessly head into a situation," James continued. "In fact, more often than not, you'll be going into it scared out of your wits. The bravery happens when you push down that fear and do what you've got to do."

"Never has there been a more important time to do what you've got to do, than now!" Jessie added. "Look - you're Pokémon Trainers. True, genuine Pokémon Trainers aren't just anyone, you know? Your pokémon have believed in you this far - stuck by you, fought alongside you. And you've believed in them too, right?" This question received murmured agreements and head nodding. "Right. Now is the time to believe in *yourselves* just as much."

"None of us can fight these creatures on our own, but we can do it if we fight them together!" James exclaimed, feeling empowered by Jessie's adamant tone.

"Dat's right!" Errol grinned.

The murmurs from the occupants of the room started to bubble and rise in volume - becoming more determined and excited. Max looked on, slightly open-mouthed. That nagging familiarity over Errol had drawn to a head, but with no less confusing results. This human displayed the very same expressions, mannerisms and voice of the pokémon that had accompanied Jessie and James during their travels. It could hardly be a coincidence, especially backed up by the fact Jessie and James was

treating the man like they'd known him for years. Max recalled the prototype machine at Devon Corporation that had been intended to allow humans to become pokémon - had someone, at some point, effectively created the reverse? And if so, what had been Meowth's reasons for changing himself? These questions were complex, and hardly suited for a time such as this one. Max resigned himself to accepting things as they were, and instead offered the trio a heartfelt compliment.

"Wow...you three are really good at boosting morale."

"We've had a lot of experience keepin' each other's spirits up," Errol smirked.

"We are the champions of failure, after all!" James admitted brightly, before receiving a clout across the head from Jessie who had lowered herself to a sitting position on the desk. Max couldn't help chuckle at this, a response he quickly stifled.

"I didn't get a trainer's license in the end," he admitted. "I love pokémon, but I've always been better with machines, y'know? It's probably best I stay here until things get sorted out."

"Well I'm sure Nurse Joy will appreciate the extra help," James insisted.

"I'd also appreciate you getting off my desk," the Nurse Joy frowned at Jessie, who shrugged and returned to the lobby floor. "Now are you three here for anything in particular besides impromptu pep talks?"

"We came to see how my growlithe and chiverbel are doing," James smiled.

"And my wobbuffet," Jessie added.

"Oh, an' Golduck too," Errol spoke up. Nurse Joy's face brightened at something less chaotic to deal with.

"Let me check," she replied, and vanished into the back room. Moments later, she wheeled out a trolley with Pokéballs nestled in two of the empty compartments. Wobbuffet and Golduck followed the nurse with refreshed expressions on their faces - the latter was doing some arm stretches. "You've got some very strong pokémon here," Nurse Joy commented, notably impressed. "You've certainly raised them well."

"It's about time that someone noticed," Jessie sniffed.

"You've been training a golduck, huh?" Max looked surprised. "That's new."

"Well it's been somet'ing of a temporary deal," Errol scratched the back of his head. "Dis guy usually hangs around wit' dat redhead gym leader pal o' yours."

"Wait...*Misty*?" Max's eyes widened dramatically. "You're telling me that Misty's psyduck ev-"

<Isn't it awesome?> Golduck flailed excitedly, skittering round the side of the reception desk. <I'm like a new pokémon! I can do water attacks, and psychic stuff whenever I want!> He proceeded to

demonstrate this by forming a pliable sphere using water from his mouth and holding it into a form using telekinesis. <Maybe I can even *swim* now!> Golduck whirled the sphere gleefully around his head, and the liquid form collided with a passing trainer, showering all those within range in a spray of watery particles.

"Yep, that's Misty's psyduck alright," Max laughed, taking off his glasses and wiping them. "But wow, he's really improved on his moves!"

"Golduck wanted to be strong enough to help Misty out," James explained. "Though reuniting with her with all this stuff going on isn't going to be easy."

"Or sensible," Errol agreed, before turning to Golduck. "Look, buddy...I know ya really want t'get back to Misty, but it'd break her heart if you got killed while tryin'. I mean, more dan it's already hoitin' right now, not having you around. So how's about you stay wit' Max here, until t'ings blow over?"

The water pokémon glanced from Errol, Jessie and James to Max and back again - his face awash with conflicted feelings. Eventually, Golduck's expression slipped into resignation.

<You're right,> he bowed his head. <It would be better I held back, for now.>

"Looks like you've got yourself some company for a bit," Errol grinned in Max's direction.

"Thanks!" Max returned the expression. "It helps to have a translator around sometimes."

After wishing the young technician and his new pokémon accomplice the best of luck, James gathered his Pokéballs from the tray and gave the Nurse Joy his thanks, while Jessie ushered Wobuffet back to the lounge. As Errol drew up alongside James, the latter gave the former a slightly worried glance.

"I get the feeling the small twerp had worked out who you were," James said. But Errol, having dealt with Professor Bohrgram - the main reason for his fervent anonymity - was no longer concerned of others' deductions.

"Heh, dat kid always was da smart one," he chuckled.

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

Some distance east of Tatto, sat gracefully amidst the many waves of the Kantoan ocean, was the mostly-uninhabited island of Lunan. Blanketed in sprawling woodland and mountainside, the majority of Lunan's human residents lived on the island's north-east peninsula, in a county called Rota. Here, the history and traditions of old were preserved

in the form of yearly festivals. But the grounds of Cameran Palace - the host of such festivities - were cold and desolate now.

A man in his mid thirties stood upon one of the castle's balconies, a Lucario poised silently beside him. It seemed like an age since he had last graced these walls with his presence, and in some way, it *had* been. He had not returned to Cameran Palace after Mew had brought him and his pokémon companion back to life. It hadn't felt right to visit with the atrocities of his family line left unaccounted for, even with the honourable sacrifices he'd made in helping Mew drive away the Tanmian and Teruptian armies. Instead he had resumed an alternate identity and continued to observe the progress of this new, unfamiliar world at a distance. Five years ago, news had reached him that, at last, a descendant of the man who had tried to control the rulers of the Articuno, Zapdos and Moltres species delivered an apology on his behalf. These legendary bird kings were once again at peace, and his family name had been purified at last.

It was early morning, but despite this, the sun had not yet arisen. Glancing from the darkened blood red sky to his pokémon companion and back again, the man took a deep breath and let a sharp gust of wind ruffle his cropped, black hair.

"The day of fulfilment is upon us, Lucario," he remarked.

"I thought I'd find you here, Sir Aaron," the melodic tones of someone's voice was heard behind him. Aaron glanced over his shoulder to see Queen Ilene - a young woman with wavy platinum blonde hair, clothed in an emerald green dress.

"Now there's a name I haven't heard in a while," the man smiled to himself.

"Would you prefer I called you 'Riley'?" Ilene looked concerned.

"'Aaron' is fine, your majesty," he reassured. Hearing his true name spoken by another, particularly the descendant of the lady he had once served, many centuries ago, felt oddly comforting.

"This must seem strange to you, at the border of yet another conflict," Ilene remarked.

"It does," Aaron nodded simply. "But this time, my role shall be a different one." These creatures, he had been told, could not be stopped in the way he'd halted the Tanmian and Teruptian armies all that time ago. Besides this, there were other duties that had to be fulfilled.

"You shall make an excellent guide," Ilene said. "She is waiting for you downstairs."

Aaron did not need to ask the identity of this person. He already knew whom the Queen was speaking of. Her name was Teresa Sterling, and she was the person Aaron had been assigned to lead to the Tree of Beginning. The man turned, his bare hand brushing gently across one of the Pentacite stones that grew out of the castle walls.

"Then I best not keep her waiting any longer," he said.

As he descended the stairs to the expansive throne room with Lucario following close behind, Aaron's eyes glanced over a large painting upon the room's far wall. It was a dramatic imagining of himself, dressed in the clothes he had worn during his time as Aura Guardian, posing with his Cryocite-tipped staff held aloft and Lucario by his side. It was a painting that had been made during his absence, and Aaron had been told that, at first, only he had been present on it. Mere hours after Lucario's sacrifice, he too had been added to the canvas by means unknown.

Aaron was still rather fond of the outfit he wore in that painting, but now it was no longer his - relegated to the expansive wardrobe visited by multitudes of tourists during Cameran Town's festival season. Instead, Aaron had chosen a similarly styled ensemble with a modern twist - a suit jacket in the same blue as Lucario's skin, dark coloured trousers and a turtleneck sweater with a gold design mimicking those seen on his old Kakureiro gloves. Aaron's Keiro were worn upon his wrists now, concealed under the sleeves of his jacket. It was less conspicuous this way.

Teresa was idling at the bottom of the staircase, dressed in a hiking outfit with sturdy boots and a small but well-padded overcoat. Beside her, a large pale blue venomoth fluttered calmly. It gave a buzz of

greeting upon seeing Aaron and Lucario, which made Teresa look up in turn.

"Welcome to Lunan," Aaron spoke warmly. "My name is Riley Genero, and I shall be accompanying you to your destination. I trust you are ready?"

"More or less," Teresa attempted to smile, as Lucario tilted his head, scrutinizing her.

[*I sense you are afraid,*] he remarked telepathically in deepened tones.

"Yes, *I am* scared," Teresa chuckled half-heartedly, ruffling her brown hair with one hand. "Reading about the Sabai Prophecy and what it entailed was one thing, but now it's about to reach its conclusion, I...I don't know what to expect. What will happen, exactly? And will I be strong enough to get through it?"

"We're as strong as we're allowed to be," Aaron responded. "And as much as we believe we can be. Time shall tell with regards to both."

"You two have seen so much more than Elena and I have, though," Teresa said, glancing at her venomoth. "I...I feel reassured by that."

"I am glad it helps," Aaron nodded. "We'd better set off - it'll take a couple of hours until we reach the Tree of Beginning, and I'm not sure how much time we have left."

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

Wesley Williams uttered a heavy sigh and stared out the partially-opened wooden door at the streets of Cerulean City beyond. He'd had trouble remaining asleep, and thus had returned to one of his favourite culinary haunts - the fish bar run by Marty Rhodes, brother-in-law to an old friend of his. Despite the early hour, the aforementioned chef was more than happy to accommodate Wes' needs, even cooking up a special breakfast platter with the assistance of a soot-smudged torkoal.

"Y'know, your wife will be pretty mad if she knows you're here, Wes," Marty chuckled.

"Rui's got her preferences, I've got mine," Wes dismissed the statement, passing a chunk of his meal to an espeon lying nearby. "And I happen to like eating fish."

"Mm-hm," Marty smirked. "Well, can't complain about that. You're a solid customer."

The ground shook. At first it was only a slight tremor, but it was enough to move Wes' drink a centimetre or so along the bartop. The man flinched as the stars he had been looking at through the chink in the doorway vanished from sight, quickly followed by the fish bar's own artificial lighting. Feeling his chest tighten, Wes ran to the door and flung it wide open, just in time to witness a faint electrical crackle snake over the edges of the black clouds which had smothered the sky. The entire

city - previously vibrant and buzzing with life - had been plunged into darkness, and the chilling discord of vehicle horns and panicked cries was all too apparent.

"Marty! Are you okay?" Wes called back into the bar, moments before another tremor occurred, unsettling his balance.

"Just about..." Marty called back, though his response was a little laboured. "Torkoal here is giving me some light. What's going on out there?"

"I don't know," Wes murmured, glancing down at the espeon and umbreon who had joined him at the door – backs arched and growling. "But whatever it is can't be good at all. Auvan and Randi are very agitated."

The tremors were more persistent now, causing articles of decoration upon the bar and various wall ornaments to jiggle impatiently.

"If this keeps up, my restaurant is going to collapse!" Marty exclaimed.

"And Cerulean Gym..." Wes murmured worriedly. He felt a twinge of regret at his absence, but told himself that Rui was more than able to deal with any calamity that might be happening there. For now, this was the place he needed to protect. He wandered further outside the building just in time to see an odd cloud approaching from further down the main street.

"I know you guys are worried about this too," Wes addressed Auvan and Randi. "So am I...but we can't back off. We're a team that's faced our fair share of confrontation and we've got to face this matter head on, for what it's worth. You with me?"

The espeon and umbreon in front of Wes burst into enthusiastic cries and, encouraged by their determination, the torkoal joined in.

"We're ready too, Wes," Marty spoke up proudly.

"Alright, Marty," Wes smiled before staring anxiously but tenaciously into the blackness amongst the shuddering buildings. The sky overhead bristled with a mass of violet cloud tinged with spatters of white and blue electricity as the air began to thicken with the approaching wisps of dust being thrown up by this menacing force. It was taking a lot of nerve to stand their ground. Suddenly, Wes threw out an arm.

"Auvan! Randi! Aim into that cloud!"

"Flamethrower, Torkoal!" Marty yelled above the noise. No sooner than the two men uttered these commands, the street seemed to explode in a multitude of concrete fragments. Shadowed hulking figures threw themselves from the brume of debris and straight into the path of the defending pokémon's assault, as the air behind them lit up in a blaze of energy. This combination of blinding light and chaos with sheer unexpected power was enough to throw the group completely off guard.

And the charging army continued regardless, throwing the pitiful living barricade back into the depths of the restaurant as they marched

onward. Glancing up blearily, Marty cried out in horror as he witnessed the results of several years hard work being torn apart from the inside. Amongst the cacophony of roars and bellows, Wes forced to make himself heard to his fallen pokémon.

"Auvan! Try and support the ceiling, we can't let this building come down!"

While the espeon tried with all its might to keep the rapidly-weakening structure aloft through telekinesis, the other two pokémon resumed fending off the remaining creatures with little success. Everything had happened so quickly that no one had managed to get a proper glance at these passing behemoths. But as the numbers of them dwindled, Wes was able to single out one at the back of the ranks which seemed to have its attentions purposefully fixed upon the construction the others had stormed through without a second thought.

"What *is* that thing?" Marty exclaimed. "Part of it looks like a venusaur and its face is almost human, but the expression on it is something unearthly. Almost like...pure *hatred*."

"Either way it's one of those *things* that passed by a few moments ago and they couldn't have been normal," Wes frowned, recalling the other creatures that had stampeded through. "They showed no signs of damage from even our most powerful attacks."

"There was a large number of them before, maybe the attacks were dispersed amongst them and that's why they weren't so effective," Marty suggested.

"Well there's only one way to prove that," Wes concluded. "If we can stop at least *one* of these freaks from destroying anything else, then we've helped in some way. Marty, have your torkoal attack!"

"Flamethrower again, Torkoal!" Marty bellowed. The fire type pokémon obliged, unleashing a searing blast at the humanoid-venusaur's chest. Half-expecting the assault to have caused at least some kind of burn, Marty's eyes widened as the embers dissipated, leaving nothing more than a slight darkened tinge to the creature's lumpy green skin. It was fully visible now - a heaving muscular biped with leafy, red-tinted 'hair' and claw-like hands dangling by its sides. The creature was hunched forward, the weight of a sizeable flower draped in vines and surrounded by larger green leaves placed solidly upon its back.

Before anyone could recover from the horror at the sight of what stood before them, the humanoid-venusaur screeched and unleashed two prehensile vines, knocking the torkoal back with such force that it was thrown through the remnants of the tattered screen door and into the half-decimated kitchen beyond. Randi fearlessly leapt for the beast with claws unsheathed, landing a flurry of swipes upon the creature's limbs. Yet the umbreon's efforts at retaliation were quickly felled with a spray of white hot bullet seed from its mouth. Despite bearing witness to such

bold determination from Randi, Wes felt his heart beginning to sink. As much as he didn't want to admit it, their retaliation was utterly futile.

The humanoid-venusaur staggered backwards a few steps as Torkoal threw his battered form into its side with every last ounce of energy he had. Unsettlingly enough, the cry of pain was uttered by the attacker upon impact. Randi hoisted the exhausted pokémon aside just as the mutant lunged, and while the humanoid-venusaur's attentions were diverted, Wes leapt upon his motorcycle and charged at the creature without mercy.

The vehicle had been a state of the art construction when first assembled - fitted hover thrusters were stationed where an average motorbike's front tyre would be, while an obscenely large engine provided much speed and, to Wes' enjoyment, noise. Even now, almost thirty years later, it was looking good despite its age - a treasured possession that had been polished on a daily basis without fail.

In a matter of seconds the front of the bike was reduced to a crumpled mess, as Wes slammed it full force into the humanoid venusaur's gut. Consequentially, the bruised creature began to reverse down the street.

"It's retreating!" Marty exclaimed excitedly. "Don't let up now!"

Wes squinted as Randi gave out a cry of renewed vigour and leapt to resume his attacks. Something wasn't making sense - why would this

beast, who up until this point had shown barely any signs of discomfort from those targeting it, suddenly decide to escape? Was it tiring?

Then the trainer withdrew a sharp breath. At first he had thought it a result of the dirt in his eyes, but now his worst fears were being confirmed as he watched the huge flower on the humanoid-venusaur's back starting to glow. Marty noticed it too, his mouth dropping wide open in the process. Despite the lack of sunlight, the natural signs of an imminent Solar Beam were gathering at such a speed that the entire area was now bathed in a temporary luminescence. Somehow, the creature was gathering its energy from an alternate source.

"GET BACK HERE!" Wes bellowed to the pokémon. "Auvan, forget about the building. We need your protect shield, NOW!"

Auvan dashed out from amongst the crumbling restaurant and positioned himself in front of Marty, Wes, Torkoal and Randi - the lattermost of this trio lending his power by performing Helping Hand. There wasn't a chance to run away now - they would have to bear this as best they could. Whether they would come out alive as a result...this was another matter entirely.

"I sure hope you're doing a better job than I am, Rui," Wes murmured sadly, before the humanoid-venusaur crouched on all fours and unleashed a massive blast of stored energy upon the crumbling restaurant.

As the blinding light faded, the mutant silently observed the results of its brutal strike. All that remained of the once beautifully-constructed building was a huge pile of smoking, charred rubble. Nothing moved and not a sound was heard from underneath the massive chunks of concrete and wooden beams. It appeared that no one had survived. Satisfied, the humanoid-venusaur grunted before walking purposefully over the mass, after the rest of the army.

A mortiferous silence descended upon the street. It was hard to tell whether this was a result of every living creature's terror at being sought out should they make a noise, or whether they had been wiped out amidst the ferocious invasion. Then suddenly, a piece of the concrete upon the pile began to twitch and lift upward. A large, reddish head weakly nudged thrust the rubble aside before the soiled form of Marty's torkoal heaved itself into the open air, and turned back to assist its human companions. Auvan's Protect combined with Randi's Helping Hand had managed to shield their friends from harm. But only just.

"Frek..." Wes coughed, brushing splinters from his hair. "That was close."

"I don't understand," Marty shook his head despairingly as he stood glancing down at the wreckage beneath his feet. "That...that *monster* didn't even have any sunlight, and yet it unleashed a more powerful Solar Beam than I've ever seen a pokémon do!"

The strengthening wind swirled and wheeled, agitating the ocean waves into vicious liquid peaks which bickered with one another, throwing sprays of water into the air and tossing a tiny boat amongst themselves in the process. Aboard this vessel, Macon Skechitt clung to the rim and tried to avoid the waves that snapped against the sides, impatient to throw themselves aboard.

He'd been on vacation with his younger brother Tracey - a much needed break, in his opinion, since Tracey had a habit of overworking. But more so than that, because Tracey had been displaying some unusual behaviours as of late. For his companions, it had become starkly apparent, following an unfortunate encounter with his head and Professor Oak's lab windmill, that Tracey hadn't been feeling quite like himself. For Macon, these unusual behaviours were chillingly familiar - echoes of a more vehement side to his brother he'd thought had been lost.

"T-Tracey? I don't think this was such a great idea, y'know?" Macon stammered, glancing toward his brother who had been positioned at the stern of the boat, gazing out to sea. The expression upon the young man's face was almost as stormy as the sky itself.

"Now don't you worry yourself, Macon," came a cheerful voice from above. The voice belonged to Maren Botam, an emerald-haired woman whose fearless orienteering had conquered rough seas and brought cargo to people across the world many times over. "I've sailed in this kind of weather before, it's no big deal. Still..." she paused to glance up at the dark blue and red clouds overhead. "I haven't seen storms this

bad since four or five years ago, when that clash between those Legendary Bird Titans happened."

"This is worse," Tracey said bluntly. "Much worse than that. And my parents need protection, so the sooner we can get to the Whirl Islands, the better."

There was a cold, forceful tone in his voice which was enough to cause Maren to fall silent and return to keeping the boat steady. Macon said nothing – at this point in time he was worried that if he dared open his mouth, Tracey would either bite his head off or he'd throw up as a result of such an unsettled journey.

"Odd..." Maren spoke up, squinting as she wrestled with the wheel. "I wouldn't expect many other vessels to be out in weather like this."

"What do you mean?" Tracey swung round and made his way across the deck to the cabin, a distinctly worried tone entering his voice. Macon flinched as he caught sight of the severe look in his brother's eyes. Tracey ascended the steps to the cabin's roof where Maren was standing, to get a better look.

"I can see something out there in the water," Maren pointed out. Immediately Tracey's stare was focused back on his older brother, still grasping tightly to the side with a pale-faced expression.

"Macon, give me my binoculars," he instructed firmly.

"Buh-but those are in your satchel in the cabin!" Macon spluttered. "If I let go of the boat I'm gonna be thrown overboard, I swear!"

"You won't be the *only* one swearing if those things are what I *think* they are, Masprit!" Tracey yelled fearsomely, before rapidly falling silent and attempting to regain his composure. "This is so not a good time for me to be losing my grip..."

"It's okay, Tracey," Maren insisted, anxious at such a strange and sudden alteration of temperament. "There's a small telescope in my pocket somewhere- ah! Here we are."

Tracey forced a smile of thanks before extending the telescope and glancing out into the open ocean, almost dropping the article in his resulting shock. Amongst the waves could be seen the slimy bodies of a multitude of large, seafaring creatures, rising and falling as they swam toward the boat.

"What is it?" Maren inquired.

"Something we seriously need to keep away from," Tracey responded. "Turn off the headlamps, we mustn't let them see us."

"I can't do that!" Maren spluttered. "Without light, I won't know which waves to steer away from – we'll be overturned!"

"It's a risk you'll have to take!" Tracey hissed, the dangerous glint returning to his narrowed eyes once again. "Those are not ordinary pokémon we're dealing with here – one of them could easily turn this boat into driftwood!"

Before anyone could respond, a liquid blast coursed overhead, snapping the mast in two. The severed beam and its attached sail toppled

into the rough sea where it was quickly carried off by the relentless waves. They were within striking distance now – 50 humanoid water pokémon of differing species, swimming adjacent to the dwarfed boat with relative ease, despite the ferocity of the ocean.

"What the heck *are* they?" Macon squeaked.

"Hold on!" Maren cried, grasping the wheel tighter with both hands and pulling it to the right. Macon yelped as a wave crashed heavily against the side of the vessel, showering him with cold, salty water. But evasion proved futile as the humanoid pokémon continued to keep the same distance from the boat.

"Trying to outsail them won't work," Tracey told her with morbid acceptance.

"He's right," a distant, poisonously-satisfied voice was heard. Everyone's attentions turned toward a woman standing atop the back of a creature which appeared to be a humanoid gyarados - albeit with a large, dark grey head crest, lengthened whiskers and facial fins, and red markings along the sides of its body. The woman was dressed in a Team Rocket Super Elite rank uniform and bore a shock of navy blue hair which thrashed wildly in the wind as she addressed the trapped figures upon the boat. "Good to see you, shadow boy."

"Vilina!" Tracey exclaimed.

"Missed me?" the woman smirked in response, keeping a tight grip on the humanoid gyarados' considerably sized dorsal fin.

"Like a hole in the head," came the angered retort, before Tracey paused in mid-yell. "Wait, how do you know who I am?"

"Just because you fooled most of Team Rocket into thinking you were dead, doesn't mean *I'm* unable to see through your simple disguise," Vilina glanced at her nails momentarily. Maren looked to Tracey in confusion while Macon shifted uncomfortably.

"What is that woman on about?" she asked.

"It's not important," Tracey muttered, somewhat embarrassed. "And knowing it won't save us from what is about to happen."

"Too right," Vilina laughed. "So suck it up and take the fate you deserve." She turned to the humanoid pokémon surrounding her, blankly awaiting further instruction. "Blast that pathetic dinghy off the map!"

A multitude of mouths opened wide, unleashing a unified flood upon the vessel bobbing helplessly in the waves. It made devastating impact, thrusting the boat several metres into the air where it appeared to hang momentarily before disintegrating into shards of wood and glass intermingled with pieces of twisted metal. As debris rained down into the ocean, Vilina watched the waves swallow up a drenched sneaker and cackled.

"Excellent work, boys," she commented. "Just three less do-gooders to worry about. Now get moving!"

Macon didn't dare open his eyes, despite the sudden coldness that had gripped his body. He felt surprisingly dry considering what had just

happened and his stomach, though still churning, felt less upset than it had been just a few moments previously. This just wasn't making any sense – surely he was meant to be drowning in the open sea by now! Eventually, Macon couldn't stand it any longer, curiosity dictated that he examined his circumstances. With that, he slowly lifted his hands away from his face and glanced out from underneath them.

Then he screamed. He was floating inside of a giant air bubble, and a good distance beyond him there lay miles upon miles of frustrated ocean.

Hey, keep it down, a warm but vaguely-strained female voice responded in their minds. *You don't want that Team Rocket creep to know you're still alive, do you?*

Attempting to regain what was left of his dignity, Macon looked to the side and caught sight of his younger brother Tracey, accompanied by Maren, also floating inside their own personal bubbles. Tracey was examining the lack of sneaker upon his right foot and commenting thankfully that the rest of him could have followed if they hadn't all been rescued. How was he able to take messed-up things like this so well? Maren seemed to be experiencing a reaction that was somewhere in between his horrified panic and Tracey's calm acceptance.

But where on earth were the giant bubbles enabling them to breathe and stay dry coming from? And who was it that had told him to be quiet? Macon's questions were soon answered as the bubble he was in

rotated of its own accord. The young man's eyes met with the pointed lavender form of a starmie which was hovering inside of a bubble of its own. As the pokémon pulled back slightly, a woman peered over its ridges with a cheerful expression. She was dressed in black shorts and a white top covered by a red shirt with a yellow stripe down each side. Her cinnamon brown hair reached down to her shoulder blades, and swept across her forehead in a diagonally angled fringe.

How are you all doing? she inquired, like it was an everyday occurrence.

"Not too bad considering WE'RE ONLY FLOATING AROUND UNDER THE SEA AND I'M HEARING VOICES IN MY HEAD!" Macon cried out, finally losing his temper at the incomprehensibility of it all. The young woman blinked, before murmuring something to the starmie. Gradually the three bubbles containing Tracey, Maren and Macon were drawn towards the one holding the woman and her water pokémon, until all four merged into one larger sphere.

"Sorry if this is creeping you out," she chuckled lightly, her focus clearly elsewhere. "But it was the only way I could save you from getting drowned by those weird creatures up there. The name's Katrine."

"You were sure in the right place at the right time!" Maren grinned, while Tracey looked on with surprise.

"I didn't know starmies were capable of shifting water around like this," he deduced.

abandoned, dented vehicles in an atmosphere reminiscent of one of those disaster movies he had seen on television. Only this was real, and it was far scarier than anything the man could have imagined. Smoke billowed from the upper floors of buildings while sirens jostled for supremacy over the airwaves and collided discordantly in the process. A torn, empty baby carriage lay overturned in the middle of the pavement – Pillan could only hope that the child within had been rescued from whatever evil had caused such suffering. It was clear something had travelled through these streets, leaving them far from unscathed.

Passing figures were united in their anxious exclamations. "Monsters!" they cried. "Run for your lives!" Pillan was aware of pokémon having been on the rampage before, but nothing that had caused this level of chaos amongst those who lived in Rustboro. Most people who had worked with pokémon themselves would have readily taken a stand against any forthcoming threat.

"Level this place!" he heard a woman bellow from somewhere nearby. "This is where Giovanni wants his new HQ!" Pillan frowned as the joltik on his head idled unhappily. Who was this 'Giovanni' and why was he so intent on such mass destruction?

Pillan's train of thought was rapidly halted as he rode into the City Square. While the area itself was surprisingly untouched, the presences there made this fact seem pretty unimportant. Five angered Pokémon Trainers had gathered together outside a smart-looking building which Pillan recalled as being Devon Corporation - the place he'd worked before

his surfacing electric Cho'moken had forced him to leave his job. Facing these trainers was a dark blue-haired man in his late twenties, dressed in a leather overcoat with a high collar. Pillan would have considered this to be a pretty one-sided match, were it not for the presence of three hulking figures behind him.

The first of these looked like a blaziken, though the long cream coloured head fins that usually hung down the back of a blaziken's head were far shorter on this creature - raised and accompanied by a protruding fin-like ridge in the centre of its forehead. Its feathers were patterned in black and red, and powerful flames streamed like banners from its wrists. The second creature bore some vague resemblance to swampert, only it was gut-churningly muscular - its forearms having become grotesquely swollen, its head and spine merged into one and forcing the beast's face into a permanent downward stare. The final creature looked like sceptile, its red striped tail elongated with a fearsome pointed tip and spiked ridges protruding from its shoulders.

"We don't care *who* you are or what kind of pokémon you're packing..." snapped a girl in her late teens wearing a black helmet and protective racing gear. "We're not letting you get into this place!"

"Yeah!" a younger male figure with turquoise hair piped up while a flygon stood growling threateningly next to him. "So go away, and take your PokéRanger 'Monster of the Week' rejects with you!"

Despite the tenseness of the situation, the other trainers couldn't help but snicker at this apt reference to the popular Saturday morning children's show. The man - Team Rocket Elite Commander Pierce Flinton - also began to smile, but for an entirely different reason.

"I would move aside, if I were you," he remarked. "The soldiers I command are perfectly capable of doing fatal damage to both you and your pokémon."

"We're not going anywhere," a young man with dark hair snorted, adjusting his glasses. "The work of Devon Corp. is at stake and we can't lose that information to a member of Team Rocket!"

His conversant uttered a heavy sigh in response.

"As you wish," he shrugged, his demeanour switching in an instant, as he thrust an arm toward the group of youths. "HS254, HB257, HS260 - TAKE THEM DOWN!"

As the trio of humanoid pokémon charged forward screeching, the dark haired young man took a brave stance, not removing his gaze from the approaching targets.

"Alex, Roxi, David, Tama... let's get to it!" he exclaimed.

"Okay, Lewis!" the turquoise-haired boy identified as 'Alex' said with a mischievous grin, releasing a dratini, espeon, totodile and piloswine into the open. David, Tama and Lewis did the same with the

remaining members of their teams, and the girl whom Pillan figured was Roxi threw the long, black skateboard she'd had tucked under her arm to the floor and looked expectantly at the rhyhorn in front of her.

"Alright, Quake," she began, stepping onto the board and grabbing the reins attached to the harness that the rock pokémon was wearing. "Time for us to show the competition what we're made of! That blaziken monster is ours!" Quake responded with an enthusiastic grunt and took off into a surprisingly fast run for a creature of its size and build.

"Piloswine, Camerupt, Glalie, Ninetales, Onix!" Lewis bellowed. "Gang up on the sceptile creature! Heracross, take on that swampert one!"

"Suano and Flygon, help it out!" Alex exclaimed before turning to his espeon. "Neko, go with Totodile and aim for the blaziken!"

From where she had been standing, concealed by a particularly large pieces of debris, Pillan watched this elaborate strategy unfold and wondered whether to get involved or continue with his mission. A large part of the man was adamant the visiting trainers had things more-than-adequately covered. There had to be at *least* twenty pokémon present and awaiting orders! So why wasn't he leaving?

"Yeehah!" Roxi cried excitedly as her rhyhorn pulled her toward the flaming target. "Hit it with Take Down, Quake!"

Increasing its speed, the rock pokémon plunged full force into the humanoid blaziken from one side, while Alex's totodile engulfed it in

water from the other and his espeon joined in with a barrage of shadow balls. The creature retaliated with a flick of one clawed hand, batting the totodile aside in the process.

"We're playing with the big boys here, Alex," Roxi rolled her eyes as she pulled Quake away from the attack and swerved round. "Small fry like totodile just won't cut it."

"Totodile's just as experienced as the rest of my team!" Alex insisted before looking a little upset. "Besides, there's no water for Isonade to swim in."

"Never mind that!" David cried as his furret and houndoom pelted the humanoid sceptile with bursts of flame, to seemingly little effect. "It's not as if the 'super effective' attacks are doing a much better job than regular ones!"

He's right, Pillan thought to himself with growing fear. They're barely making a mark.

Lewis furrowed his brow upon hearing David's statement. He hated to admit it, but the guy was right. These monstrosities had to be stopped, by any means possible. Even if such means were exceedingly reckless.

"Onix!" he yelled. "Use Fissure!"

Pillan uttered a yelp, the joltik atop his head jumping an inch into the air as the rock snake plunged its upper body toward the ground, sending thunderous vibrations across the City Square. A massive crack tore through the thick concrete, heading straight for the humanoid

pokémon and their leader. While the humanoid sceptile and swampert were able to avoid the widening gap, the blaziken reacted too slowly and toppled into the hole, dragging Alex's piloswine and David's houndoom down with it in the process. A large, messy splatter ensued.

"Lewis, you idiot!" Tama squealed, jumping back and narrowly avoiding the putrid spray. "That's the sewer system you've just blasted a hole into!"

"Well did *you* have any better ideas?" the dark-haired trainer snapped.

"I had less disgusting ones!" Tama retorted, while Alex blinked in his attempts to see through the dusty swirl that had arisen as the result of shifting concrete.

"Disgusting or not, maybe a dip in the muck has put the flames out on that freak," Roxi suggested. But as the cloud dispersed, the trainers' hearts quickly sank. While both Suano and Jake were out cold, floating with seeming lifelessness in the sickening filth, the humanoid blaziken stood as firmly and unwaveringly as ever, proving more angered than weakened from the soaking.

"Wh-wh-what *are* those things?" Tama stuttered, backing away instinctively. A dark smirk emerged upon Pierce's face at this point.

"What trainers' nightmares are made of, my dear," he said, before glancing over his shoulder. Pillan had come to the man's attention in his efforts to leave the scene on his bike as quickly as possible. "And there

goes my other target, right on schedule. Nothing a little multi-tasking won't fix." Pierce gestured to the humanoid sceptile with a fierce expression. "HS254! Bring him to me!"

As the muscled green reptilian creature gave pursuit, the others exchanged worried and puzzled glances. They couldn't work out just what was so important about the seemingly-ordinary passing figure, but with Devon Corporation still at risk from the swampert and blaziken hybrids, there was little they could do to assist him.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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