

"Come on, keep up!" A young teen with vermillion-orange hair laughed delightedly, tumbling over the sandy dunes with hardly a thought to the lurking quicksand pits seeded inconspicuously throughout the ruins.

At his back and breathing heavily beneath the weight of his overbearing backpack, Professor Cedric Juniper tried to keep apace and frowned, panting, at the reckless child rushing further and further out of his line of sight. His daughter seemed equally put-upon by Alder's theatrics.

"How long before he gets stuck?" she said rhetorically.

Cedric could only exhale and rub at the stitch in his side, sewing up and down his ribcage with a red-hot scalpel, and look up at the lightening morning sky. "We may as well set up here and let you go on ahead, I'm not going to make it another thirty meters in this sorry state."

Aurea bobbed her pig-tailed head and quickly slipped out of the half a dozen straps keeping her equipment secured in place, swinging the large pack to a pane of rare desert hardtack. "I'll keep him out of too much trouble!" she promised and darted ahead, white short-coat flapping at her waist.

"I somehow doubt that," Cedric added dryly, considering the age-gap between the two of them. Still, fey as the wild boy could be, he knew better than to cross Aurea too far. Some small miracle in that.

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"Slow down before you get us both stuck!" the girl's voice bounced eerily off of ancient stone, crumbling halfway across the distance. Alder turned back to see her following in his footsteps and grinned widely.

"Keep up!" he hollered back and laughed again at the icy stare she leveled his way. "I know what I'm doing, I'll be f--" his voice cut off into a tumbling shout of surprise when the sand beneath his next step abruptly vanished. He swung his head around in time to see the desert floor giving way and then he was swallowed whole, dragged down, thrown out into a dimly lit crypt dozens and dozens of feet below.

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Cascading sand dunes poured across the hardtack, sweeping rivers of grain silent as a wispy moon tumbling forth in rich falls about scarlet-sunrise hair, pounding across Alder's bemused features relentlessly. He coughed and spat and shook like a damp Furfrou, dislodging fine particles everywhere. "By Victini, what...?" his expression cut off as the heavy scent of long-burning torches filtered through the rising dust.

When he had rolled out of the worst of the downpour and squinted around after staring wide-eyed did not work, amethyst tracked the flickering gloom to a distant wall. The silence was compounded by how hollow the subterranean vault he had stumbled into felt. Every coughing breath echoed at first only to trail away into distant nothing.

"The Professor's gonna wring my neck if I don't get out of here soon." He tugged at a corner of his rough jersey and ripped the sleeve away in one earsplitting squeal, tying his new bandanna around his mouth and nose. It helped, a little. "Then again, if I find something for his research down here..." a burble of excitement lit his voice and Alder took to his usual forward-leaning crouch, panning around more seriously now. Nothing stood out aside from the sifting falls he had fallen through some feet away.

Quickly ruling out the rising slope of sand at his back and the voluminous tumbled pillars west and north, the ferocious young man set to the east at a quick rolling trot.

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Overhead Professor Juniper looked up from his radar equipment and blinked, scanning for sign of his eager, wayward charge. The sudden silence felt... ominous, if he could put a name to it. Unnatural. And given Alder's tendency to rouse the local ferals into a snarl, it meant little good was afoot that no one but him was currently in audible range.

"Alder? Alder, do you hear me?" He half expected for the blazing redhaired teen to pop up with a Sandile clutched in his hands, gnashing teeth scant inches away from its own snout, daring the desert crocodile to nip.

Instead only that too-serious silence. "Alder! Answer me!" Nothing. "He can't have trapped himself. That boy could challenge a Dwebble out of its shell, digging out of quicksand..." urgency filled his voice when Cedric spoke up again, "Alder, if you can hear me, this had better not be a prank!" He turned back to his equipment and tapped away at a battered keyboard. The monitor groaned and pinged faintly, signal almost too weak to reach through the sands. Thermal tracking offered an array of the local pokemon population... and one large object, creeping along bent over, too blurry overall to make out... but unmistakable by the spiky hair tied back halfway to a Ponytail.

"Alder," he breathed, frowning fiercely. "What have you gotten yourself into now?"

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