

POKÉMON  
REBIRTH

# ULTIMATUM

Endgame Edition

EPISODE TEN

## Dark Void

Following an introduction to the other members of Nashgri Energy Laboratory's science force, Mr. Thomas was quick to put Mondo's computer-based expertise to good use. Soon the professor had the temporary addition to his family attending to various networks in the laboratory in order to optimize their efficiency.

Mondo was more than happy to oblige - it was a subject he found most fascinating, and kept his attentions amply focused during the times the other scientists were not performing various frequency scans upon him. And over the two days that followed, everyone seemed satisfied with Mondo's presence at Nashgri Energy Laboratory. All except Li. The tisker had persisted in staring at Mondo whenever they crossed paths, carrying an expression of accusation and disbelief over the young man's choice to stay put when he could have travelled alongside his friends - something she had sorely wanted to do. But Mondo didn't understand the reasoning behind Li's glowers and sulks. All he knew is that it made him feel most uncomfortable, and resorted to keeping well out of the tisker's way.

"Got'cha self a new pastime I see," a voice decorated with the nuances of a strong east Kantoan accent forced itself between Mondo's thoughts, causing him to swing round from the computer console he had been attending to. A familiar sandy blonde-haired figure was standing behind him, clothed in a dark grey shirt and black trousers with matching grey boots.

"E-Errorl?" he blinked, almost in awe over the man's undetected entrance to the laboratory. "You...managed to escape! How'd you find me?"

"It's amazin' what'cha can find when y' ask pokémon ta help look fer it," Errol grinned.

"Well it's nice to have the option," Mondo muttered. His expression changed when he noticed the small, pink shiny figure standing slightly concealed behind Errol's leg. "Hey...that's one of Team Rocket's fusion pokémon!"

"Dat it is," Errol responded, almost proudly. "And he's da reason I was able ta escape, alongside Kevin an' Jenna." He eyed Mondo for a moment. "You seem ta recognize him, mind."

The pokémon was staring at Mondo with a studied expression.

<I don't know how...> they murmured. <But he looks familiar.>

"He seems to recognize youse too," Errol looked down at his feet, raising his eyebrows. "Did ya ever encounter him in da lab?"

"No, it was one of the more secret projects," Mondo replied dismissively. "If I rightly remember, it was an attempt at an advanced type of ditto..." the young man trailed off, his eyes widening. "Wait...'ditto'..." He approached the genetic pokémon at speed and stared wildly into their eyes. "Do you know what my name is?"

<N-no?> the pokémon shook their head worriedly. Mondo slumped.

"I guess it was too much to hope for," he murmured. "Team Rocket scientists took my ditto from me for their messed up experiments - I thought that maybe..."

"Dis guy was dat ditto?" Errol completed the sentence.

"Not quite," Mondo remarked. "I've heard stories of memories being retained through DNA, but I guess all this zecutynr got from my ditto's DNA was a vague feeling of familiarity."

"Zeh- what?" Errol blinked.

"That's what they called it," Mondo explained. "'Zecutynr'."

"Huh," Errol pulled a face while the pokémon beside him looked baffled. "He don't look like a zeh-koo-tinner at all. I t'ink I'll call him...'Copi' - after all, dat's what he's best at. How 'bout it, little buddy?"

<Sure, why not?> came the cheerful reply.

"I don't get it, t'ough," Errol looked puzzled. "Why ain'cha with Caley an' da others?"

"Well I thought since he researches energies, Mr. Thomas might be able to help me understand why I am the way I am," Mondo shrugged. "What with the whole psychic ineffectiveness and stuff."

"Why does it matta how y' are?" Errol inquired.

"Contrary to what *you* might think, you're not the only one who's had confusion over their past, Errol," Mondo frowned. "This is probably gonna sound kinda dumb, but...sometimes I feel really *alone* in this world. I know everyone is different, but it feels like I'm even *more* different than that. It doesn't make sense, and I want to know the reason why."

"Ya sure youse ain't a hybrid like me?" Errol joked, only to receive a long stare from Mondo.

"She put me through a lot of tests, when I was younger," he began, unable to mention the name of the woman whom he had seen as a mother and sister, and that he dearly missed. "There were no discrepancies like those she saw in your scans. I'm pretty certain it's nothing like that."

"I dunno," Errol folded his arms. "Team Rocket had some pretty nifty equipment. If all dose tests toined up nothing, what more d'ya t'ink you'll discover stayin' under *dis* roof?"

"It's the only option I have!" Mondo snapped. "And unless you can think of a *better* suggestion, I don't think you have any right to be telling me what'll be useful!"

There was silence.

"Hm, suit y'self," Errol's tone of voice indicated he didn't really understand the reasons behind the decision. "Well...I hope ya find what you're looking for den, Mondo. As for Copi an' I, we're gonna go look for

Caley and da gang. Team Rocket sure ain't gonna shut itself down!  
Besides...we owe Caley big fer what he did t' get us outta dere."

Mondo shook his head sadly as Errol retreated down the corridor, as quickly and quietly as he had arrived. Maybe Errol was right - maybe staying at Nashgri Energy Lab *was* a waste of time on his part. But what other choice was there?

Taking his box of tools back to the closet, Mondo overheard a conversation between two of Mr. Thomas' other technicians - a pair of identical brothers named Morris and Neville Braithwaite.

"Did you hear what went on between Lieutenant Surge and the League Officials the other day, Nev?" Morris began. "News had it that he was caught trying to make some kind of voltorb launcher. Surge had insisted it would be an excellent method of defending against potential threats."

"*He's* a potential threat, more like," Neville snorted. "I'm surprised the Pokémon League lets him keep his place as a Gym Leader. Sometimes I wonder if he's all there,"

"I know what you mean," Morris nodded. "What with those odd clothes he wears, and his talk of having fought in a war, when there hasn't been a major conflict for hundreds of years. It's like he's from another planet or something!"



"We *could* head for da capital," he pondered, while Copi sat on a nearby wall and swung their legs expectantly. "But even if we do, we wouldn't have a much clearer idea o' where dose guys've gone. Eh...looks like west is gonna be our best shot. Unless ya can t'ink o' somet'ing betta, kid."

<Your friend is leaving,> Copi remarked plainly, glancing up and causing Errol to follow their gaze. Across the road they saw a young man sporting oak coloured hair, an ocean blue jacket with light shoulder markings and orange-brown jeans striding down the pathway from the city Gym. From the sight of the large satchel, it was clear the figure wasn't just heading out for a short term errand.

"Hey Mondo, where ya goin'?" Errol raised his voice, causing Mondo to swing round and see the man with his genetic pokémon companion perched on a wall a few feet away.

"What are *you* still doing here?" he frowned.

"We were havin' trouble woikin' out where ta go next," Errol admitted. "So...did ya change y' mind? About staying in dat lab, I mean."

"I think I need to stop looking at the science of things so much and start looking at other areas to try and find out more about my origins," Mondo nodded. "Areas like history. So I'm going to Scale Falls. They have the largest information archives in the region."

"Why don't we all go togedda?" Errol stood up.

"I thought you wanted to find Caley," Mondo eyed him suspiciously.

"I do, but...I also don't like da idea of you travellin' alone," Errol insisted. "Safety in numbas, an all dat."

"Well maybe I *do* like the idea of travelling alone," Mondo muttered. Errol glanced at him with an upset expression.

"But Mondo..." he began.

"The name is *Tate*!" the young man snapped. "I don't want to be tied to my past identity in Team Rocket any more. And being with you..." he trailed off, looking most uncomfortable, "...it brings back too many bad memories."

"So you're still holdin' a grudge," Errol folded his arms.

"No!" Mondo blurted out, struggling to find somewhere to look. "I mean...I don't know."

Errol examined Mondo's slumped form with its guilty face for a moment. It was obvious the young man was aware of the injustice in how he felt, but was having trouble feeling any different.

"Listen M- uh... 'Tate'," Errol began. "I fully understand you wanting to change ya name. Hey, *I* did it. But how'd ya expect to put dose troublesome memories o' yours to rest if you avoid me all da time?"

There was no response.



Adam proceeded to squabble between themselves about not wanting to sit next to Caley, or each other. The level of combined agitation was more than poor Caley's psychically-sensitized mind could take. His consequential uncharacteristic outburst was enough to seal a decision, wherein James and Adam ended up placed in the back seat either side of their red-haired associate, both looking a mixture of unsettled and sulky.

Eventually, they arrived at their destination. Stepping from the driver's seat of the hovercraft and adjusting her wig, Rose stretched her arms above her head and muttered over no one being able to agree on anything, but her annoyance was short-lived. The young woman's brown eyes lit up with awe and happiness upon sight of Wichour Town's aged spires and rooftops. A far cry from Dustry Town's morose industrialism or Nashgri City's bright efficiency, the atmosphere of Wichour hung with mystery and intrigue - further enhanced by its architectural décor and cobblestone roads that spoke of Tatto's eloquent past.

Before they were to enter, however, Denise insisted on making sure everyone's pokémon had a short run of activity outside their Pokéballs. Being someone with a deep interest in technology, she was quick to explain to the others how Pokéballs were intended for transport, not storage. While the pokémon inside them were - for the most part - unaware of their surroundings, spending too long inside a Pokéball had negative effects on their orientation and performance. James and Adam were happy to oblige, while Caley watched with a forced acceptance and internally begged for them to get it over with quickly.

Their period of refreshment over, Denise's gallirill - whom she had since fondly named 'Rilly' - and Cyzel were given a thorough fussing from their respective human companions and returned to their Pokéballs. Being genetic hybrids, their unique appearances denied them as much freedom as Rose's, James' and Caley's pokémon - which followed the group from the hovercraft's parking spot through the town's inviting gateway.

"This is beautiful..." Denise marvelled as the group travelled the main high street - a wide passage with open front shops and various stalls bordering either side. "Stepping into here is almost like stepping back in time. Barely anything has changed!"

"If I'm not mistaken, we've walked into a local market," James observed, eyeing one of the fruit and vegetable stands as he passed. "Mmm, those look good."

"Thanks for the newsflash, Mister Obvious," Adam muttered, wincing at the persistent volleys of sound from all around him. "Do they have to yell so much?"

"They lose potential customers if they don't draw attention to their wares," James sniffed, trying to overlook the youth's rudeness. "Think of it as the first form of advertising."

"Advertising sure was loud back then..." Denise grimaced.

"Well its not 'back then' now, is it?" Adam frowned. "They should use billboards, or TV adverts or something."

"And throw away tradition?" James tutted. "Don't be uncouth." He added in lowered tones, "...if you can possibly help it."

"Screw tradition - I'd rather not go deaf!" Adam snapped. With that, James resigned himself to the fact the adolescent wasn't going to listen to reason, and retreated to the back of the party, where Rose happened to be.

"That twerp has no sense of culture," he huffed. "Or manners, or respect. Why couldn't Caley have just left him back in the HQ?"

"Because, trying or not, he deserved his freedom just like you," Rose gave James a studied look.

"But he's an irritant! James protested, as if this excuse happened to be a valid one.

"You *may* find him obnoxious," Rose acknowledged. "But Adam needs to be given the benefit of the doubt. Every person has their good points and bad points."

"And he has a knack of just showing the bad ones," James pouted. Rose heaved an emphatic sigh.

"James...no one's given Adam the time of day, let alone a chance to show a more likeable side to himself," she reminded him. "And he's coming to terms with a lot of things he's never experienced before. Just...be patient with him. I'm sure he'll improve once he gets used to his new life."

"He'd *better* improve," James mumbled, but said no more on the matter.

Caley's exhausted mind was too busy dwelling on far more pressing issues to allow him to enjoy the interesting ambience of the town. The young man strode at the forefront of the group, his slightly bloodshot eyes scanning back and forth across the street from behind his glasses, while his hands twitched at either side of him. It was imperative he found Azima quickly - if not to divulge more on Minachi's words, then to at least gain greater understanding as to his new psychic awareness. As it currently stood, Caley was uncertain just how much longer he could cope with being exposed to an endless stream of thoughts and emotions.

"Wow, constellation charts!" Denise exclaimed as she browsed a stall displaying astronomy products. "They've marked them all out here - Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, Milotus, The Hunter, Glipiro, Kyol, Lyterie and The Pika Star." She chuckled to herself as she ran her hand across the chart, then looked at the vendor. "Half the time I can never find these. How much do you want for it?"

"MAKE WICHOUR GYM OFFICIAL!" a man's voice bellowed, little more than two foot away. Denise flinched in alarm before swinging around to see a middle aged figure with a sandwich board draped across his wide shoulders, poised in the middle of the street. He hadn't been aiming his statement at Denise in particular, and in fact seemed quite unaware that his megaphone usage had managed to irk everyone within a few metre radius. "MAKE WICHOUR GYM OFFICIAL!" he reiterated in

equally amplified measure. "DARK POKÉMON ARE NOT EVIL POKÉMON!  
STOP THE SENSELESS LABELLING!"

"Wichour G-Gym..." Caley stammered, approaching the man hurriedly. "Y-You know about Wichour Gym? I need to go there. I need to find Azima."

"Eager fella, aren't you?" the man couldn't help but smirk, having not detected Caley's impatience and discomfort. James shrugged - he didn't really understand the reasons behind this desperation either. "If you're looking to challenge Azima to a Gym Battle, then good on ya. But you'd better bear in mind that her medal isn't recognized by the Tatto Expedition Officials." His expression darkened. "Those stereotyping..."

"You seem very...interested in Wichour Gym," Rose interrupted purposefully, before the man said something they all regretted.

"Sure I am!" the man grinned. "Dark types deserve better, you know? And my honchkrow and I would love to become Azima's apprentices if her Gym ended up in the Expedition line up."

"That's brilliant," Caley forced a smile. "So could you tell us where to find Wichour Gym? Like...now?"

"Okay, okay," the man chuckled awkwardly, before pointing towards a very tall spire that was visible above the more regular looking buildings. "See that?"

"That's the Gym?" Adam raised an eyebrow.

"Not quite," the man responded. "That's the Astral Blade Tower, Wichour Gym is just a short distance north of it. So head for the tower - then there's no way you can go wrong!"

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"The doors are shut," James concluded bluntly, half an hour later. Thanks to the sandwich board wearer's directions, the group had arrived outside Wichour Gym's boundary wall. However, the only reasonable way inside had been firmly locked, giving the impression that no one was present to accept visitors. "Guess she's out."

"Welp, guess that settles that," Adam shrugged, turning as if to leave.

"But we *can't* go," Denise looked unhappy. "Look at Caley, he's desperate to see Azima!"

Indeed Caley appeared to be in quite a sorry state. His skin colour had degraded from a somewhat healthy light peach to a ghastly white, his face was dappled with perspiration and the twitching in his hands had escalated into his shoulders.

"It'd be nice to know *why*," Adam furrowed his brow. "Instead of all this annoying secret-keeping."

"She's in there," Caley muttered in barely audible tones, clutching at the singular Pokéball on his belt. "In there. She's in there."

"Guys, guys...wait," James tried to hush his companions with arm waving. "I think he's right. I can hear something on the other side of the wall."

"Lemme see," Adam urged, sprinting over and trying to push James away from the area of the wall he had been pressing his head against.

"Find your *own* piece of wall, twerp!" James snapped, shoving Adam in return. The adolescent staggered backwards as he tried to keep his balance from the forceful momentum, only to collide with Kota whom Caley had released from his Pokéball just seconds earlier. With a squeal of alarm, the augret glowed bright blue and vanished from sight, disappearing Adam along with him in the process.

There ensued a period of silence, wherein the remaining travellers attempted to work out what had just happened.

"Well, that's all my problems solved," James beamed, brushing his hands together.

"James!" Rose and Denise chorused disapprovingly, before the former shook her head. "There was no need to stoop to that kind of childish behaviour. Now Kota could have teleported Adam and himself anywhere."

"He's over the wall," Caley told them in monotone.



"You really don't have to use the 'mister' part," the man grimaced, just barely managing to avoid the towel. "Just 'Hooke' is fine!"

Azima paused, suddenly aware of the presence of the other two figures in the courtyard. As Hooke released the tension in his shoulders and confusedly massaged his chest and stomach where some of the items had made contact, his elder companion turned to face Adam and Kota with a cold, studied expression upon her face. Adam's own expression was a mixture of trepidation and defiance - the former threatening to overthrow the latter entirely.

"Do not be afraid..." the woman assured him. "You aren't going to come to any harm."

"Oh yeah? Tell that to my arse," Adam grumbled, referring to the pratfall he had recently taken as a result of the unexpected teleporting. "What are you throwing stuff at that guy for?"

"Mr. Hooke asked me to teach him, so I am teaching him," the woman replied, as if such behaviour was perfectly normal. "And this is no place for playing. So I shall kindly insist you and your..." she paused as if the following word proved challenging to utter, "...psychic pokémon...take your antics elsewhere."

"*Antics?!'*" Adam spluttered, sounding offended. If it wasn't bad enough that he'd been forced to wander a decrepit old town alongside a lavender-haired moron and someone with psychic instabilities, he was now being accused of entering the courtyard on purpose.

"It's these gloves, they kinda throw me off," the woman's student insisted, trying to divert the blame from Adam. "Couldn't I make my cane into a Keiro item instead?"

"Customized items are for advanced users only," Azima informed him. "And unless you master Keiro gloves, you're not fit for anything else."

Before Adam was able to protest any further as to what he considered patronizing treatment, Kota pricked up his furry little ears and consequently vanished in a spatter of blue aura. Moments later, he reappeared with Caley's bedraggled form in accompaniment.

"I'm...I'm sorry to barge in on you when your gate is locked, but..." Caley inquired breathlessly. "Are you...Azima?"

"You are correct," the woman raised an eyebrow at Caley's sickly appearance. "My full title is Azima Kenedith. And what, pray tell, is so important that you felt compelled to force your way in here and interrupt my lesson with Mr. Hooke?"

"I-I need your help," Caley faltered, his face awash with pain. "I was given a message a few days ago...an important message...but it's so cryptic that I can't understand it on my own. All I know is that the ability to overcome world-changing events hinges on my deciphering it."

"Wait, what?" Adam spluttered.

"You believe you've been receiving visions, do you?" Azima responded primly. "How quaint. I'm sorry, young man, but my time and

skills are far too precious to be wasted on flights of fancy." She turned, before waving over her shoulder dismissively. "Now please, be on your way...and take that boy out with you. Mr. Hooke has travelled here all the way from South Sonoria to learn what I have to offer him, and you have already taken up a good few minutes of his lesson time."

As Azima walked back across the courtyard, Adam began to shake in a volatile manner while Caley looked on, aghast and disappointed. The Gym Leader was his only hope for enlightenment with regards to Minachi's words - he knew of no one else with such deciphering abilities.

"Now then," Azima cleared her throat and faced her student. "Where were we?"

"Hold on just a moment," Hooke raised his hand sternly, causing Azima to look quite surprised. "Can't you give him a chance?"

"You do realise this will cut into your apprenticeship period, don't you?" Azima raised an eyebrow, the tone of her voice dictating a sense of unease over addressing Caley once more.

"My lessons can wait," Hooke said with unyielding firmness. "The kid sounds pretty desperate."

"What?!" Adam reiterated in louder tones, swinging toward Caley in borderline disbelief. "*That's* what you dragged us to this mouldy old town for? Why didn't you tell me you got a message?"

"Adam, please..." Caley sounded too exhausted to make protest. "It wouldn't make sense to you even if I had."

"So? You could have at least said you *had* a message, and where you got it from, instead of being so bloody secretive everywhere," Adam snapped.

"What does it matter now?" Caley sighed. "Azima was my only hope to understand it, and she won't even help me."

"Excuse me? Young man?" came a voice from behind them. Caley glanced over his shoulder to see Azima beckoning her visitors across the courtyard. "Tell me your name - you, who desire my assistance with such fervour."

"I'm...Caley Wilson, ma'am," came the weak yet still remarkably polite response.

"Alright Caley," Azima prepared herself internally. "You have my full attention. Tell me of this message."

Caley thankfully opened his mouth, about to explain in greater detail his conundrum, when he froze on the spot - his blue eyes wide and fraught with shock and confusion. The personal unease he had been feeling had suddenly been replaced with a more intense, wider sense of panic and discord. He found himself staring wildly up at the sky as a grey mass of cloud enveloped the cheerful blue that had once shone overhead.



Having tracked the odd energy readings they had been receiving to their source, Butch, Cassidy and Jessie had been raised by Soluqua's telekinesis to the pinnacle of an ornate, yet obviously derelict structure at the northmost point of Wichour Town. Here they had proceeded to explore and analyse the structure's singular upper floor with its intricate patterns and unusual pedestals, using several pieces of complicated scanning equipment. Distinct phenomena of any kind had to be investigated - after all, it could well have been signs that one of Team Rocket's experimental specimens was present.

"Rrrgh," Butch grumbled in annoyance, staring down at a wide, lens-like object set in the middle of the room. "The spacial disturbance readings are so spread out that I can't locate a point of origin. How is that messed up experiment managing to create such an effect?"

"Likely taking advantage of what was *already* wrong with this place," Cassidy remarked distractedly. "The Astral Blade Tower used to be the headquarters of some weird cult that were obsessed with harvesting the powers of Etherspace - that dimension most people know as the 'spirit world'. But the crude methods they used only ended up making a mess of the barrier between other dimensions and this one."

"How did *you* know all that?" Jessie raised an eyebrow. It was Cassidy's turn to flinch, before the faraway expression upon her face was replaced by a more familiar, irritable-looking one.

"I do my research," she sniffed. "Every *decent* Elite operative makes sure to learn about their surroundings."

Jessie rolled her eyes. She didn't believe the elaborate cover-up, but wasn't intending to question further. Her place on the team relied heavily on trying to keep on Cassidy's not-so-bad side.

An airy chuckle echoed over the operative trio's heads and, at the same time, unsettling creaks were heard from the tower's structure below. Glancing about in order to try and see what it was that had generated the sound, Jessie froze to the spot as her eyes met with two points of white light that were suspended over her head.

**~~Especceccially tasty~~...** a voice intoned. Calling it a 'voice' was something of a long shot - the sound emulated words in a challengingly artificial fashion, a clashing rasp of noise and metallic resonance. It only served to make the disturbing sentence Jessie and the others heard all the more unsettling.

Then the room plunged into darkness. Jessie's first reaction was to let out a terrible scream, as the combined fear of the unseen entity and the sheer illogical absence of light during midday hit hard.

"Get a hold of yourself, Jessie!" Cassidy snapped, as the room became partially illuminated once more, despite the fact she hardly felt cool and collected either.

"That was it," Butch stated firmly, having donned a pair of spectral analysis goggles. "It's gone elsewhere in the tower now, but those



"This is so creepy," James shuddered, his eyes darting back and forth across the empty, fog-shrouded streets as Chime clung worriedly about his shoulders. "Everyone's just...g-gone."

"Everyone but us," Rose shook her head. "But how come we were left behind?"

"Maybe whatever's in that tower has something special planned for us," Adam remarked. His tone had been sarcastic, but James took it as fact.

"So why are we walking *towards* the source of our potential doom?" he panicked.

"Because someone's got to sort this mess out," Hooke said firmly. This statement was followed by a period of unsettled silence.

"...can't someone else sort it out?" James spoke up, but the inquiry was uttered in a small, resigned voice, indicating the man knew what he'd said was ridiculous. If it was indeed true that they were the only ones left in Wichour Town, it also meant they were the only available candidates for saving those who had been abducted - if such a thing was even possible.

"So what *is* the Astral Blade Tower?" Rose asked.

"It was once the headquarters of the Sanguine Alliance, here in Tatto," Azima told her, though with no pleasure in her tone.

"The Sanguine Alliance?" Denise blinked.

"Possibly the best, and worst thing to happen to this world," Azima sighed, before re-asserting herself. "But discussing history will have to wait. People's lives may be at stake."

As the other members of the group uttered various noises of agreement and pursued Azima, Caley continued to stare wildly into the space visible just beyond the rooftops. The sooner this mystery that had befallen Wichour Town was solved, the sooner he could understand the cryptic words Minachi said to him.

Upon closer inspection, the Astral Blade Tower proved to be a beautiful structure constructed in as much detail and majesty as Wichour's other buildings, though its decayed outer walls and rusted ornaments dictated its abandonment to time. Wandering through a brick built archway into the garden that surrounded the tower, the group had half-expected to see some of the wild pokémon species that often crept into more urban areas for food and association. But there was nothing, just an unsettling chill that defined the tower's boundary from that of the rest of the town streets.

This wasn't the only notable oddity. The trees dotted about the garden were spindly and bare of leaves – tilting to one side as if their roots were struggling to hold them upright. The ground either side of the narrow path the group walked – assumedly once lush with grass - was nothing but a blanket of dry dirt.

"Wow, I'd have fired their gardener," James chuckled nervously.

"Nothing has grown here for decades," Azima stated, with a morose acceptance. She pushed gently against one of the tower's entrance doors, causing it to swing open, and the group filed into a large musty room, devoid of anything bar a small pedestal in the centre which vaguely resembled a sundial. Caley winced and put a hand to his head. At a distance, the weird vibes he had been getting had caused him some discomfort. Now it had worsened considerably as a result of having drawn closer to what appeared to be their source.

Instructing her associates to stay at the edge of the room, Azima walked carefully across the floorboards to the pedestal before closing her eyes and assuming a position with her arms held aloft in front of her. After a minute or so had passed, the aged Gym Leader lowered her arms again before glancing back towards the others.

"There is something here," she commented. "Likely an ether, but its difficult to be sure when the signal is indistinct. It seems to be using a level of power that is so dispersed that I cannot figure out the exact whereabouts of its origin. If only it were to create a more direct form of energy, then we might have a chance at capturing it."

"With *what*?" Hooke asked, while the other figures around him exchanged puzzled looks and wondered just how Azima knew such things. "Ghost types and Pokéballs don't exactly mix."

"Oh, there are means and ways," Azima reassured him. "However, it does require seeking out and entering the tower's lower chamber in order to find them. If I am not mistaken, a few of the Sanguine Alliance's numerous artefacts still remain within."

"Wow..." Denise marvelled, staring upward into the tower's hollow innards. "This thing seems to go up forever." Her voice echoed into the distance, adding further credence to the statement as she studied the differently sized posts that jutted out in a spiral from the walls overhead. "What was this place *used* for anyway?"

Azima did not respond to this question, instead returning to the position she has assumed previously and causing the travellers to look at each other yet again. Denise huffed and folded her arms at what seemed like a blatantly rude response. Clearly the history of the tower was a rather sensitive subject.

"There. I have located the doorway to the lower chamber," Azima murmured, opening her eyes and beginning to make her way across the wooden boards. "Now follow me, and tread carefully - this tower is quite unstable."

"That makes me feel so much better..." Adam muttered dryly.

Before the others were able to walk after Azima, their surroundings were plunged into blackness yet another time. Caley uttered a sharp gasp, his stomach growing heavy before the rest of him followed

suit, if but with a seemingly oppositional force. Unlike the previous time, however, the occurrence was rapid - tugging the young man's sense of balance downwards before remorselessly thrusting it back up again. Visuals suddenly returned, and Caley staggered in reverse across the floor, landing heavily upon his rear.

"Hm.." Azima's voice resounded with its usual calmness. No longer stood at a distance, the aged Gym Leader was now beside Caley - her brow furrowed in thought. As an eerie, unnatural light seeped into his eyes, Caley noticed he was no longer in the expansive lower room of the tower. In fact, he appeared to be sat in the middle of a long corridor lined with thick wooden pillars - him, Azima and Kota who was glancing around in puzzlement.

"Wh-what was that?" Caley exclaimed shakily, a note of panic in his voice. The existing disorientation in his mind was hardly helping the young man to maintain his composure over the new bewilderment that now surrounded him. "Where's everybody gone?"

"It felt...it felt like a shift," Azima replied in distant tones. "Whatever entity is in here must be manipulating the properties of the tower."

"*What* properties?" Caley almost squeaked hysterically, before lurching forward and gripping at the sides of his head. Azima stared down at the young man blankly as he wrestled with another arc of pain, while Kota hovered nearby and tried to console him.

"It is unusual that you should be suffering as a result of these disturbances," she remarked, bending over slightly and reaching out an arm to help Caley to his feet.

"I...I don't know why it's happening to me either," Caley replied weakly. "I was perfectly fine up until this morning. Then suddenly, I'm hearing everyone's thoughts, and this terrible headache won't leave me alone."

"Hearing everyone's *thoughts*?" Azima echoed slowly, her eyes widening. Before Caley could answer, the corridor was suddenly awash with a blue glow. The occurrence was so sudden that it drew both Azima and Caley's attentions toward where the light was brightest.

There, standing with her back to her onlookers, was a woman of indeterminable age. She was dressed in simple clothing, and her long ponytail swayed behind her head as if caught by an invisible breeze.

As the woman turned to face those watching her, Caley recoiled visibly at the sight of her face. The skin was a curious shade of blue, while two points of white shone from the figure's unnaturally large eye sockets, blotting out any presence of a nose and mouth, had there been such features to begin with. The being's spectral form was present down to the waist, at which point it simply dissolved into nothing more than a cluster of tiny squares.

**"Where is he?"**

the woman called in echoey and fragmented tones, her voice full of concern and worry.

**"Where is he? I failed him..."**

Before either Azima or Caley were able to reply, the figure was gone, her disappearance plunging the corridor back into semi-darkness. In turn, Caley uttered yet another exclamation of pain, clutching his forehead as a nauseating wave of prickly coldness beset him.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you were suffering from Encephal Perplexion," Azima raised an eyebrow, a slight tone of disdain entering her speech.

"Wh-what?" Caley glanced up, while Kota eyed Azima with a notably accusing expression.

"Encephal Perplexion is the name given to an over-sensitivity to fluctuations in certain types of energy," the aged Gym Leader explained. "But this is hardly common. In fact, it only usually occurs to recently active bearers of psychic Cho-"

Azima's sentence was cut short as an assortment of unsettling noises reverberated around them. Once they had died down, Caley attempted to stagger to his feet with a partly desperate glance in Azima's direction - urging her to elaborate further.

"This is neither the time, nor place to explain your current state of affairs, boy," the woman told him in unexpectedly sharp tones. "I must stop this creature before it causes any more harm."

*Doesn't causing harm to Caley count?* Kota frowned, watching Azima stride off down the corridor.

"It's okay, buddy...she's right," Caley weakly tried to reassure the augret by stroking him across the head. "There's a whole town's worth of people that need saving right now. My problems can wait. Still...I can't help but wonder who that glowing figure was, and who she was looking for."

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Having regained some measure of orientation, Rose had sat up to discover Sia and herself were inside a monochrome-tinted room. Though contrary to the older architecture she had expected to see within the tower, this room was more modern in design - if but somewhat worn from constant use and lack of maintenance. Rust spots could be seen on the metal plates of the walls, while a tiny, grubby looking single bed stood in one corner. Most unsettling of all, there were no doors or windows whatsoever, giving it very much the appearance of a prison cell. On one side of the room, Denise paced back and forth like a trapped mankey, her eyes wide and fraught with panic. Contrary to the anxiousness of younger companion, Hooke sat on the edge of the bed with one hand propping up

his chin and another holding tightly to his cane. It appeared he had already scoped out his surroundings, and become quite dejected as a result.

"What happened?" Rose blinked confusedly. "Did someone manage to lock us away during that last blackout?" She knew it sounded farfetched, but the situation in itself didn't seem much more sensible.

"I...I don't know," Hooke mumbled. "I tried to get a sense of our whereabouts, but I just can't focus properly." His tone of voice grew more scolding at this point. "*Why* do I have to be such a slow learner?"

"Learner?" Rose puzzled, before it dawned upon her what Hooke was talking about. "What had Azima been teaching you, exactly?"

"It was a technique called Kakureiro," Hooke explained. "All of us contain an energy force called 'Aura', and with Kakureiro, it is possible to use Aura to accomplish all sorts of feats. One such skill is detecting the Aura signatures of other living things. I was hoping to use it to regain my eyesight, in a way. Open a Dark Type Gym in Orre, where elemental rules aren't so tight. Still, my other senses and my umbreon, 'Sergei' can only take me so far."

"How did you lose your eyesight?" Denise asked. Hooke's shoulders slumped, his face awash with guilt and annoyance. At first, it looked as if he was going to be as reserved with his words as Azima had been previously. But something about the depth of warm concern in the voices of his listeners moved him to further explanation.

"It...was a very stupid thing I did," he murmured. "About ten years ago, I was part of a gang. And not your small time sort of gang, either. No...these were a pretty organized group of criminals, trained with the sole aim of capturing and redistributing pokémon for other means. Didn't matter whether they had owners or not."

Denise and Rose stiffened in unison. Was Hooke talking about Team Rocket?

"Ugh...it sickens me to think about it now," Hooke continued, unaware of his audience's expressions. "Guess karma had it in for me that day. I'd just finished a heist in Pyrite, and the police were hot on my tail. Thought I could lose them by pulling some risky manoeuvres down the back streets, but my cockiness ended up being my downfall. Ended up turning the truck over and slamming into the side of a house. Glass shards flew everywhere..."

The man's voice petered out, leaving Rose and Denise to fill in the gaps. No more needed to be said - undoubtedly this was a very sore point in his memory, something he had not talked about often, if at all. Rose and Denise looked on with sadness, but it was the former who showed the most compassion for Hooke's guilt and his bravery to finally discuss what weighed heavily on his shoulders. Even now, the man's face showed a pained expectance, as if this confession would completely change the others' views of him.

"I'm sorry you had to hear all that," Hooke continued, though the words were forced and low in volume. "It's just this room...this room is identical to the one I served my sentence in. I guess it caught me off guard."

"I understand," Rose gave a solemn nod. "To be honest...we're not that much different, you and us."

"What do you mean?" Hooke glanced up in surprise. It was obvious this was the last thing he had been expecting to hear.

"My friends and I, we once worked for a criminal organization too," Rose explained. "Some of us by choice, others by circumstance. And as time passed, we started to understand just what our actions were doing to other people. We longed more and more to get out of our predicament. Thanks to an outsider with hope that we had lost, we were able to break free of the organization and start turning our lives around." She glanced wistfully into space. "I won't say we don't have our regrets. But spending time on making the future better is more productive than wasting time dwelling on past mistakes."

"That's a strong point you've got there, Miss," Hooke responded, a smile beginning to creep back on his face. "Time is of the essence, and the longer I stick around here moping about something that's been and gone, the more danger the Wichour townsfolk could be in. And your friends, too! We need to get out of this room."

"But where *is* this room?" Denise insisted.

"It's about time I gave finding out another shot," Hooke announced with strengthened resolve, rising to his feet before placing his cane upon the bed. Raising both hands in front of him, the man took a deep breath - his shoulders becoming tense with concentration. After a minute or so, Hooke lowered his arms and stood there as if completely baffled.

"Maybe my Kakureiro skills are still in need of work," he grimaced. "But as far as I could see, there is nothing outside of these four walls. It's like we're floating in some huge void!"

Denise uttered a cry of alarm as the floor shook beneath her feet, the sickly fluorescent lights overhead flickering persistently. As she and Rose glanced upward, tiny holes began to appear in the corner of one room to the accompaniment of an unsettling fizzing sound. These holes slowly grew, as if the room's very walls were being eaten away.

"I hate to say it..." Rose grimaced, as Hooke looked to her for an explanation. "But I think the void might be getting that bit closer!"

"Closer?" Hooke reiterated in horrified tones. "Then we need to stop that happening! I doubt we'll survive as well out there as we're doing in here!"

"Plug the holes...plug the holes..." Rose mumbled worriedly to herself, before an idea struck and she turned to her glaceon. "Sia! Use Ice Beam on those holes up there! Stop them spreading!"

While Sia managed this frozen sealing technique with some success, clouds of a dark violet substance began to seep in from another corner of the room.

"Isn't there something *your* pokémon can do?" Rose snapped at Denise, who hesitated. After realising that Hooke would be unable to see just what her pokémon was, Denise quickly released her gallirill companion from his Pokéball, who proceeded to glance back at her with a panicked expression.

"I'm sorry to put this pressure on you, Rilly," Denise insisted. "But we're in a pretty rough situation, and we badly need your help stopping this room from falling apart! Can *you* use Ice Beam?"

"Shuh-rihh!" Rilly exclaimed in upset, throwing his arms in the air. With no awareness of his own attacks bar spraying water, he had no idea if Ice Beam was an option, let alone how to perform it.

"Okay okay, you're new to this, I understand," Denise tried to placate the gallirill despite not feeling at all at ease herself. "Try and... try and wave that purple gas out of the room with your flippers!"

"Purple gas?" Hooke urged Denise to elaborate, to which Rose took over.

"Yes, its coming in here from all over the place," she explained.

"Oh no...that's not good at all," Hooke muttered, patting his belt before finding the single Pokéball attached to it. "Sergei! Absorb that Distortia!"

Sia flinched slightly as an umbreon materialized from Hooke's Pokéball just a foot or so away from her. Without further instruction, the pokémon crouched low as its ring-like markings began to faintly illuminate. In the process, the gaseous wisps were sucked towards the umbreon, vanishing from sight.

"Distortia was something I studied in order to become a knowledgeable Gym Leader," Hooke told Rose and Denise, as if he were aware of their mutual confusion. "It's the prime component of most other dimensions outside our own, not to mention toxic to humans and all pokémon except ghost and dark types. And if Distortia was in here...I think I've just figured out what's happened to everyone in Wichour Town."

Before he could say any more, the wall nearest Denise ruptured in two places as the deterioration began to weaken it. Rilly leapt aside with a squeal as the floor started to disappear from under his feet. While Sergei retreated to a place beside Hooke's legs, his face awash with sorrow and resignation, Sia continued to try and repair a fast-vitiating environment with layer upon layer of ice - her exhausted features displaying a stubborn refusal to give in.

"I don't wanna die like this!" Denise wailed frantically, clinging to Rilly as shards of ice began to rain all about them. Despite Sia's valiant efforts, the room could no longer stay in one piece.

Suddenly the entire structure collapsed inward around the human trio and their pokémon, sending black clouds gushing in to engulf them. Rose winced and tensed herself, preparing for an inevitably slow and acerbic end. When she felt nothing, however, the woman persuaded herself to open her eyes again, only to find the clouds of Distortia were swirling about her, barely a few centimetres away.

"A protect shield?" Denise gasped. "Did your umbreon do this, Hooke?"

"It couldn't have been Sergei," Hooke replied. "I've never taught him how to do something like that."

"And neither of *our* pokémon did it," Rose pondered, watching Sia and Rilly shake their heads. "So who-?"

"Wait!" Denise spluttered, interrupting Rose's contemplation by pointing out into the cloud mass. "There's someone out there!"

As the black clouds dispersed slightly, a bipedal reptilian figure drew into focus. It held tightly to a long staff with a pale coloured blade at its tip, its eyes glowing an eerie shade of red. At first glance, it was difficult to tell whether the creature had just rescued those inside its manifested shield, or simply captured them for its own amusement.

Soundlessly, the dark blue figure moved the sphere encasing Rose, Denise, Hooke and their pokémon, and began to make passage across the malevolent-looking expanse. The silence was all-encompassing, only adding to the trepidation the group felt as to what

their muted guide had planned for them. A few minutes passed before the incessant cloudy atmosphere thinned, giving way to something entirely unexpected. Not too far away hung a glittering sphere just like the one Rose, Denise and Hooke found themselves in - only far larger, and surrounded by at least twenty members of the same species as that which had encapsulated them.

"Looks like we've found the townspeople," Rose concluded thankfully, studying the dot-like figures behind the emerald sheen of the faraway shield. "They're being protected from the Distortia, just like us."

"I'm so glad to hear that," Hooke breathed a sigh of relief. "And here I had feared the worst."

"Dyy," the creature before them finally spoke, its tone of voice wracked with concern. "Dy dy gar."

"I doubt those pokémon will be able to keep that forcefield up for much longer though..." Denise grimaced.

"Tell me..." Hooke resumed his stern expression. "What does the pokémon that rescued us look like?"

"Well, it's quite tall," Denise observed. "About five foot high. Entirely blue with darker, mask-like markings on its face and a narrow area of its chest. It has a short tail with spikes on the end, stubby horns on its head, and it's holding...what looks like a big scythe."

"A big scythe..." Hooke repeated softly under its breath. "Yes. It must be the pokémon that Karen told me about. 'Diguard'. Just like celebri

are the overseers of time, diguard are the overseers of the many dimensions that function in our world. They are able to travel between these dimensions using their bladed staffs."

"But if they can travel between dimensions..." Denise inquired. "Why haven't they just taken the townspeople back home again?"

"That is a good question," Hooke murmured, though his tone of voice dictated his unsettled feelings. "Maybe something is stopping them from being able to do so." The diguard manoeuvring the sphere nodded furiously in response to the deduction.

"This seems to be the case," Rose relayed. "Still...what force could *possibly* contain an interdimensional pokémon?"

**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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