



POKÉMON  
REBIRTH  
ULTIMATUM  
Endgame Edition

EPISODE ELEVEN

Hex

Things had been relatively unsettled for James right up until the point his surroundings were plunged into darkness. Now they were just plain terrifying. As the man flailed about in his frantic attempts to reorientate himself, his hand made contact with a warm, soft but nonetheless solid object.

"Yeeow!" a familiar, slightly-raspy voice snapped. "That was my face!"

"Adam? I-Is that you?" James stammered, more out of a fearful need to break the silence than anything.

"No, it's a flippin' pink phanpy," the adolescent grumbled. "Are you that dense? Of course it's me!"

"Naturally...I should have guessed from the insults and the sarcasm," James groaned, picking himself off the wooden floor as the darkness lifted slightly. Upon further examination, it appeared he was inside a very small room not unlike that of the dormitory he had stayed in while being educated at Pokémon Technical. However, this room bore the obvious signs of time passing - the wallpaper had peeled and the furniture was rotten and coated in a thick layer of dust. Besides Adam and his own chimecho, no one else - familiar or otherwise - appeared to be present.

"We've been split up," Adam observed, clarifying what James had thought. He was trying to sound unphased about it, but there was a tinge

of discontent in his voice. "Better find the others before whatever's in here finds *us*."

"Luckily, I have Chime!" James responded perkily.

"Yeah, lucky me," Adam said with no conviction whatsoever, detaching his Pokéball. "You can stick with the living porch ornament, I'm getting Cyzel."

"But what if someone sees him?" James insisted.

"Do *you* see anyone else in here?" Adam snapped. Moments later, the arcumese had emerged from the Pokéball, ready for further instruction. With that, Adam walked toward the door and left the room with Cyzel following behind. James gave pursuit, though unhappy as to the hybrid pokémon being out in the open.

"Ugh, there's nothing but corridors out here," Adam gritted his teeth. "We'll just have to take a stab in the dark as to which direction's the right one."

"Please don't mention stabbing!" James whined, to which Adam snorted in semi-disgust and continued walking in front of him.

The next few minutes were spent in apprehensive quietude, where the only sounds echoing about the passages the trio walked were those of their own feet scraping against the floorboards. Such a creepy atmosphere was more than James could stand, and when he became nervous, he tended to attempt easing the mood through jokes.

"Well...*this* sure is a hollow haunted house of horrors," James chuckled half-heartedly.

"Y'know, things will be a whole lot better if you keep quiet," Adam remarked. "You're with me now, not your idiot team mates."

"Lucky me," James muttered, echoing the tone Adam had displayed earlier. The youth was such a killjoy - he wasn't even *trying* to make the best of things. And how dare he call his best friends idiots? Such rudeness could use disciplining.

Chime tilted her bulbous head slightly as she noticed a devious smirk emerge upon James' face. No one else happened to be around to protest otherwise.

Adam fiddled uneasily with the strings dangling from his hooded shirt as he glanced left and right. The corridors had started to become more oddly familiar with every step, though in a way he did not feel comfortable with one bit. He said no more about the matter, though. Last thing he wanted to do was give away his current state of anxiousness to the accomplice he'd been forced with. Instead, Adam tried his best to stare directly at a tall bookshelf at the end of the passage, where it was likelier his mind would remain distracted from the bleached white walls and their integrated ventilation shafts.

"What was that?" James urged, his voice hurried and whispered in tone. "Did you hear it?"

Sure enough, there echoed a faint, hollow rattling sound, almost like that of chains. Adam and Cyzel froze in their tracks, their eyes wide as saucers, frantically searching for more pertinent evidence of the mysterious presence. And it came, in the form of a faint bluish aura that lifted a book from the shelf - hovering in a purposeful approach toward the petrified youth and his arcumese companion.

"Don't let it get any closer!" James insisted shrilly. "The ghost inside that book might possess you!"

Before anything else could happen, Adam fearfully thrust out an arm and Cyzel sprang forward, unleashing a paw of sharp blades upon the book and causing it to explode into a shower of fragmented pages. As chunks of paper rained down about them, James could no longer keep a straight face, and descended into fits of chuckling.

"What's so funny?" Adam spluttered in a mixture of horrified anger.

"Your expression!" James grinned. "You looked like you were going to wet yourself!"

It took a few moments for it to dawn on Adam that the whole ordeal had, in fact, been a prank. By this time, he was seething. James looked somewhat alarmed as the youth dived at him with a cry of frustration. But partway through the attempt, Adam was halted roughly in mid-air by a semi-transparent shield, falling backwards against the floor as a result.

"Ah ah ah," James wagged his finger as Chime floated out from behind him. "You were asking for that scare, after being so rude about my friends."

"Can't believe I fell for that chimecho's stupid telekinesis trick," Adam muttered, getting to his feet and brushing himself down.

"Possession can't happen in real life."

"Oh I wouldn't be so sure about that," James remarked. "Especially considering how many times it happened to Meowth. Not always by ghost types eithe- what's wrong with you?"

Adam had frozen to the spot again, staring wildly at a point just over James' shoulder. But James stood there eyeing the youth with a sceptical expression. Did he really think he was going to catch James out so soon after the man had pulled exactly the same stunt? Not that Adam seemed concerned about repeat performances. His mouth was open just enough to allow a high-pitched gibbering sound to escape.

In one swift movement, Cyzel yanked Adam backwards by clamping his jaws around the adolescent's sleeve, before leaping past him, straight toward James. This was enough to cause James to yelp and duck, wherein the arcumese coursed over him and into something further down the corridor. Swinging around in puzzlement and annoyance, James took in exactly just what it was that Adam had been gawping at - a large translucent skarmory now lying in a tangled mass a short distance behind him. The fearsome glass-like visage rose to its feet without moving a

limb, its hollow eyes glowing white. In turn, Cyzel backed away with his ears flattened against his head, a definite sign to make a quick getaway.

Adam needed no further prompting. Yelling loudly, he vanished quickly into the right side entrance at the end of the corridor. Cyzel, James and Chime were swift to give pursuit, the phantasmal skarmory keeping close behind while emitting guttural screeches.

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"The Astral Blade Tower does not contain corridors and rooms such as these," Azima deduced. "Therefore we must currently be in an altered reality. We need to find a weak point between here and what *is* real, in order to reach the tower's lower chamber."

"Altered *reality*?" Caley stared at the woman, mouth agape. "How is that even possible?"

"It is possible because this tower exists partly in our world, and partly in another," Azima confessed. "An unfortunate side effect of the alliance's meddling..."

"There are other worlds?" Caley blinked, to which the aged woman heaved an emphatic sigh.

"Let me guess," she remarked, unimpressed. "The limited school curriculum doesn't cover such things. Well let me explain it to you

quickly. There are many different dimensions that make up this existence. Our world is tangible space. Beyond that lies a more formal realm, one harnessed for the latest technology, the transfer of data. Then there are those...unpredictable areas, more susceptible to mental manipulation. Following that..." she trailed off. "The matter is that the reckless experimentation by Sanguine Alliance members left the Astral Blade Tower interconnected with some of these dimensions. This is why we are experiencing such abrupt changes in environment."

"If the tower is so dangerous, why hasn't it been taken down?" Caley asked, only to receive an icy glare.

"Child, the Astral Blade Tower is not only interlinked with other dimensions, that connection could be the only thing holding the rift to those dimensions closed," Azima informed him. "Think of the consequences destroying the tower could bring!"

Caley's face grew quite worried and disturbed at the thought. Noticing the look, Azima's own expression became distantly guilty.

"I took it upon myself to guard the people of Wichour, for their town is beautiful, but vulnerable," she explained in lowered tones. "That vulnerability was the other reason I wanted to build and run a Gym here. And I must do everything within my power to bring those people back to their homes."

"I understand," Caley nodded solemnly. "I'll do whatever I can to help you."

For the first time since he had met her, a tiny smile of gratitude emerged upon Azima's time worn face. It was quickly snatched away as Caley uttered a noise of pain and grasped at his head for yet another time. As he did, a low growl was heard from a short distance down the corridor, causing Kota to glance up with terror in his eyes. Azima turned around slowly in response, to discover what had been responsible for making the sound.

It stood at around seven foot in height - a fearsome bipedal creature with strong, muscular lower legs and forearms with long, cruel looking claws at their tips. It almost looked like a lucario, bar the bushy arc of coarse fur which waved from the back of its tapered, lupine head, bound with a teal jewel-like bauble to give the impression of a long ponytail. While Caley and Kota looked on with equal expressions of bafflement, Azima instinctively took a step backwards - her face overcome with bereft disbelief.

"No..." the word barely escaped the Gym Leader's lips, before the creature before her flung its arms into the ground with a harsh yell. As it did so, a sphere of reddish energy coursed outward from its glassy body in all directions, blasting the corridor's surrounding walls into tiny fragments. Gravity suddenly failed those caught in the path of the oncoming assault, casting them upwards into the air amongst an indeterminable void of blue, crimson and violet. Kota squealed in alarm, while Caley found himself trapped in a disorientating mixture of fear and nausea. Somehow, the young man knew the wall of energy heading

straight toward him was the same kind that Tamesis' genetically enhanced pokémon had fired on that conclusive day, the day which had rapidly wrenched his life out of his hands.

Yet instead of making contact, the energy sphere was engulfed in a blanket of white light. A liepard had sprang into the open - seemingly out of nowhere - to take the brunt of the blast with little sign of damage.

"Must keep focused," Azima shook her head furiously. "That isn't her. This isn't real."

"What isn't her?" Caley stammered, trying to maintain his composure despite floating upside down. "Isn't *who*? What *is* that monster?"

Again the surroundings jolted, this time with more ferocity, sending Azima and Caley slamming onto the ground as high white walls materialized about them. Dazedly lifting his head, Caley noted his presence in what looked like a large hall, constructed entirely of what appeared to be marble. No longer was the young man viewing stifling, decrepit corridors - rather the pristine ornate carved pillars and mosaic flooring of what could have easily been a palace ballroom. But Caley had little time to admire the illusory scenery, let alone wonder the reasons for its appearance.

"Lerik!" Azima raised her voice towards the liepard, ignoring the abrupt change in surroundings. "Keep it occupied while I study the area."

"Mroww!" Lerik acknowledged, diving at its target once again, its claws glowing bright white. The fox-like creature responded with its own paw full of luminous blades, the two sets clashing in a shower of sparks. As her pokémon descended into conflict, Azima hurriedly tried to compose herself and once again assume the correct stance to wield her Kakureiro abilities.

"Aura...is with me..." she murmured under her breath, hoping this ancient focusing chant would do its job. Sure enough, after a few repetitions, the darkened space before her closed eyelids sprung into life - filling her senses with varying bluish hues. She could see Lerik's body - lit up with the bright white of his own internal forces - entangled with the dark, hollow form of the lupine creature she knew the appearance of all too well. 'Zoroark', they had named it - just another product of the meddling which cast waves of guilt into her even now. Still, the moment was not an appropriate one to let her mind wander.

Azima smiled slightly, as her heightened senses picked out something amongst the furore and activity. A very faint line - almost invisible against the whiteness of the expansive room - that emerged from the phantasmic Zoroark's body and coursed its way across the area. This was undoubtedly the signs of its projection from Realspace, like that of a power cord connecting an appliance to a wall socket. The Gym Leader followed the line toward its point of origin, her smile widening a little more. All she needed to do now was effectively 'unplug' that cord,

opening a way for Caley, her and their pokémon to escape into the dimension they belonged.

But Azima's smile was quick to fade. Was her vision deceiving her, or was a second line also connected to the same origin spot?

Before Caley had lifted himself completely upright, something hit him in the back, throwing the young man onto the mosaic floor and severely winding him. Glancing over his shoulder, Caley felt his entire body tense at the sight of the spiky-winged form poised behind him. Despite the blue, semi-transparent tint of its skin and glowing white eye sockets, he knew from the creature's mismatched ears and long, clawed hands just exactly what he was up against.

"Caley!" Azima exclaimed, snapping out of her trance in order to speak to her accomplice. "You've got to fight that being! I won't be able to get us out of here if you don't distract it for long enough!"

"But, but..." Caley's voice trailed off. Kota wasn't as battle trained as Lerik undoubtedly was, and even so, he could no longer remember what the augret's special moves were. On top of all this, the sight of the negatic - even an illusory version of it - was giving Caley unsettling fears and doubts that he was having trouble bringing under control. He tried to scan Kota yet again, in order to retrieve information on his abilities, but only received a screen full of garbled symbols and noise for his efforts. Part of Caley desperately wished Kiko was here to back him up, but a

larger part took to scolding him for even considering putting the grumpig back in the path of something she had little success against before.

This diversion of Caley's thoughts was enough to give the spectral negatic a chance to strike at him once again. Kota quickly hoisted Caley out of the way with telekinesis, before the togetic-sneasel hybrid was able to make contact.

"Nice going, Kota!" Caley exhaled thankfully. "You've got the right idea there. If we can't attack it head on, dodging it is the next best option. Lower me back down and I'll act as a lure."

*Are you sure about that?* Kota grimaced.

"I'm putting my trust in you, buddy," Caley gave him a confident smile, though Kota could sense the young man's nervousness. With that, the augret nodded and lowered his human companion to the floor again. Once again the negatic dived, but - moments before impact - Kota swiftly hoisted Caley into the air and out of range of the creature's spindly arms. This technique continued to be successful for a fleeting number of seconds, with Caley springing away from the negatic and returning to flat ground in partial slow motion -as if tied to an invisible bungee rope. However, the negatic's fifth attack swiped upward instead of forward, catching both Caley and Kota by surprise. Suddenly, the augret found himself levitating his friend into harm's way and attempted to rectify his mistake, though with some delay in execution. As a result, Caley was swung diagonally, the negatic's claws slicing through part of his trouser

leg in the process of evasion. The young man's cry of pain was enough to startle Azima out of her trance for the second time.

"What are you *doing*?" she snapped angrily.

"Look, I'm no trainer!" Caley insisted, gritting his teeth as he clutched at his leg. "We were just trying to keep its attention distracted the best way we knew!"

"Fine, fine..." Azima groaned slightly, trying not to sound too exasperated at the young man. "Try and draw the creature toward Lerik - with a bit of luck, he'll be able to protect you both long enough for me to finish doing what I need to do."

Again the Gym Leader entered her deeper visualizing. There hung the source point of the two illusions, glowing like a tiny star before her. Keeping this point in focus, Azima lowered one of her gloved hands so that it was below the other, turning her palms adjacently. A pulsing blue orb of energy rapidly began to form in the space between her hands, and with a sharp utterance, Azima thrust the Aura Sphere forward, causing it to make startling impact with the source point. Almost instantly, the Zoroark and Negatic illusions froze, before spattering out into nothingness.

"Quickly!" Azima urged, as the area she had blasted with an Aura Sphere grew wider and wider, drawing the surrounding visuals towards it. "Run into that rift before it closes!"

Trying to ignore the pain in his wounded leg, Caley staggered toward the circle of light. The lack of contemplation over the downsides to passing through a rift worked in the young man's favour. There was an odd tingling sensation, a surrounding halo of brightness, and he was back on solid ground once more.

"We have returned," Azima told them, though her voice was slightly wispy and low in volume. A quick glance about the room was enough to reassure Caley this was indeed the case - oddly enough, the desolate and aged structure of the Astral Blade Tower's ground floor felt rather comforting after so much exploration through places that didn't really exist.

*Are you okay, Caley?* Kota inquired worriedly, noting the sizeable blood stain on the torn area of his companion's trousers.

"I'll be fine..." Caley responded weakly, causing Lerik to gaze up in surprise at what seemed to the leopard like an answer to nothing. "I have a few supplies in my bag I can use to treat the cut." The young man took the receptacle off his shoulders and proceeded to rifle about inside it, handing an occasional look in Azima's direction. She had previously been poised stiffly in what appeared to be a state of trauma - her shoulders twitching with her rapid breaths. Now the Gym Leader had relaxed a little, and had returned to her Kakureiro stance in order to find the basement entry once more. Caley got the feeling Azima hadn't noticed the negatic's unusual appearance - mistaking it for an irregular togetic - but he longed to know just how it was she recognized the lithe, fox-like



"'Only two floors,' that Gym Leader said," Adam panted grumpily as he sat propped up against a wall while James examined a randomly-placed computer with some puzzlement. "Old bat should learn how to count."

"I must admit, this *is* pretty odd," James scratched his chin. "We've walked down several staircases by now. The building seems to be changing on a whim, in ways that look curiously familiar." He glanced back at the computer screen where a slightly glitched image of an articuno, moltres and zapdos fusion was present. "And in ways that are just plain creepy," he concluded awkwardly. "Point is, the implausibility of all this just makes me think of that temple in Sinnoh that was full of Unown..."

The man paused in his deliberation as a thought dawned on him. Whether Unown were involved in these events was elementary - James had no doubt in his mind that they had become subject to a force that could manipulate reality. Adam paid little attention to this, however. He'd noticed something else at the end of this particular corridor, and it had driven him to his feet in order to investigate the matter further.

James reached out an arm, about to call after the youth to wait for him, but Adam had already left. Shaking his head in disbelief, James began to walk down the corridor also, but froze in his tracks as a flicker of magenta caught his eye. Turning slowly, James found himself gazing at a reflective panel set upon the wall. At first the man had assumed it to be a mirror, but the figure reflected in the glass clearly wasn't him. Curiously

enough, they both happened to be caught in the same stance - figures taken unawares in mid-stride at what they had seen.

"J-Jessie?" James stammered, unable to bring himself to look away. Was this woman really his former teammate, or just another illusion conjured up by whatever was responsible for tormenting his mind so?

Jessie's expression descended from surprise into upset bewilderment as she reached up a hand to her own face, running her gloved fingers down the deep scratches on her right cheek. James winced as he noted them also. He got the impression Jessie was unable to see him, only her own reflection, and that hurt for many reasons. James missed Jessie and was frustrated at her rash reactions, yet at the same time the sight of the injuries to her face wracked him with guilt.

Yet even if she *had* been able to see him, would it have been a good thing? James didn't doubt his ex-partner's ability to see through the disguise he was wearing, and Jessie's heart was still bound to Team Rocket.

A loud yell was heard from somewhere down the corridor, causing James to swing round in alarm. Turning back to the reflective panel momentarily, James' face fell as he discovered Jessie's visage had disappeared. But there was no time to ponder what had happened - as irritating as he was, Adam needed help.

Dashing into a large, particularly nondescript room, James discovered Adam locked in a stupefied gaze with an unidentifiable, long-armed blue entity. It hovered several feet above the floorboards, its large head with two long horn-like ears swaying from side to side as its blinding white, pupil-less eyes surveyed the two humans and their pokémon. At first glance, one could have been forgiven to think this was just another creature like the skarmory and vileplume. But closer inspection revealed a flickering nature to the entity's skin - blocky patterns which darted back and forth across its face and body, sometimes obscuring details entirely.

Soundlessly, the phantasmic creature raised its large hands and the scenery jolted into momentary blackness, to be replaced by a more familiar environment. The tall metal shelves with rows upon rows of indents, the pristinely polished floor tiles, the canisters and machinery. Albeit slightly distorted and hazy, the surroundings were undoubtedly a variant of the Pokéball containment room in Team Rocket's headquarters.

Cyzel began to growl as Chime shuddered and wrapped herself around James' shoulders, and it was at this point that Adam was struck with realisation.

"Yooou..." he scowled at the glowing entity. "*You're* responsible for all the messed up stuff that's been happening!"

The creature did not reply. Instead, the blocky area upon its face parted ever so slowly to reveal a disturbing grin - a mouth as empty and

full of white light as that of its eye sockets. It was all the proof Adam needed.

"That's IT!" the youth bellowed, leaping for the semi-transparent entity. "No more screwin' about!"

However, instead of making contact with the creature, Adam phased straight through it with a look of alarm, before hitting the floorboards on the other side. His target responded with an airy chuckle and vanished from sight.

"*Uuuugh...*" Adam groaned, sitting up and rubbing his head. "*Damn that stupid ghost.*" It was the second time his temper had caused him to dive at things without thinking the action over beforehand, and the adolescent was starting to feel rather humiliated from the results. Turning around, Adam noticed James and Chime happened to be staring at him with worried expressions. "*What are you looking at?*" he snapped. James didn't respond - his eyes had shifted from Adam's direction lower towards the floor, while Chime kept examining him with an almost-accusing depth.

"Adam? You okay?" James inquired in a small voice.

"*I'm fine,*" the youth muttered. "*What are you asking for, anyway? It's not like you care.*"

"...Adam?" James repeated as if his companion hadn't even spoken, moving closer with an arm partly outstretched.

"*What's wrong with you, you moron?*" Adam exclaimed frustratedly. Still James continued to approach, while Cyzel followed, uttering a low whine. Adam's irritation began to shift into uneasiness at these actions, cemented further by James' next utterance.

"Adam, wake up!"

Following James' and Cyzel's anxious gazes, Adam let out a strangled yelp as he found himself looking upon his own body, strewn across the floor like a discarded rag. It was at that point Adam suddenly realised that he was not making contact with the floor at all, instead floating a foot or so above it. That and his countenance was semi-transparent and an odd shade of blue.

**"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"**

From his place in the tower's lower chamber, Caley reeled backwards as a desperate scream pierced his mind like a javelin. Lerik darted behind the disorientated young man, catching Caley across his back before he had a chance to hit the chamber's hard floor.

"Another surge of energy," Azima concluded, returning yet another dusty article to the expansive stone platform which lined the room. "That one was more precise that time. And you felt it too, I can see..."

"Adm..." Caley murmured blearily, attempting to stagger to his feet while Kota swayed with an equal level of bewilderment at the mental sound.

"Adam!?" Azima looked at him in confusion.

"Uh, uh..." Caley spluttered, trying to salvage his younger companion's pseudonym. "Nathan! I heard him yelling...somehow." His voice had trailed off upon sight of Azima's furrowing brow. Something told him that Azima's change in expression hadn't been due to his fumbling of names. Yet the Gym Leader said no more, and returned to searching for the mysterious article she seemed certain would fix their difficulties.

For the first time since he had been separated from them, Caley found his thoughts anxiously hovering around the unknown whereabouts of his recently-acquired friends. He tried to reassure himself that they were ex-Team Rocket members, and trained in many dangerous exploits, but even this didn't seem to ease his fractious mind any. After all, how often did Team Rocket's exploits involve unstable dimensions and phantasmic pokémon created out of thin air?

"I do hope the others are alright..." Caley murmured, hoping that Azima may be able to offer him some words of comfort. But the woman had none.

"You need to concentrate on the task at hand," she remarked abruptly, before resuming her examination of the aged artefacts. Kota glanced at Caley with a puzzled look in his eyes - it seemed he too had

detected a shift in Azima's attitude towards the young man. Something about Caley was bothering her, but what *was* it? And why wouldn't she tell him? These unanswered questions only served to stir Caley's usually placid temper.

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"*Whaddo-I-do? Whaddo-I-doooo?*" Adam gibbered in a panic, his words merged into an almost incomprehensible jumble. "*That...that freaky ghost turned me into a ghost! What if I'm dead?*" He noticed James taking the pulse of his body's wrist. "*Hey! Stop poking me, you weirdo!*"

Adam flew towards James in an attempt to push him away, but ended up phasing through him. James, on the other hand, appeared no more disturbed by this escapade and continued what he was doing. In fact, it seemed the man was unaware of Adam's intangible presence at all.

"At least he's still breathing," James told himself. "Maybe he just fainted." The man tried to recall his Team Rocket first aid training. "Now how did the recovery position go again?"

Before Adam was able to protest about any further mishandling, his physical body convulsed violently - levitating into a standing position while its appendages hung limply as if at the mercy of gravity. The eyes of his body opened wide, an eerie bright, white light shining from them.

**"Where were you when he needed you?"**

the Adam-puppet grinned maniacally, in a voice unlike his own.

**"Where was I?"**

At this point, intangible Adam bolted. No longer was he thinking about what might happen to his own body, or what might happen to Cyzel, James or Chime. His only intention was to escape the horrifying scene as quickly as possible. It wasn't until he had flung himself through several sets of walls, that Adam realised he had become quite lost.

"Caley?" he whimpered, feeling quite alone and afraid. "CALEEEY!"

*Adam?* a distant, but familiar voice answered. *Where are you?*

"I..." the youth stammered, desperately trying to force his mind to stop racing. As his slightly blurred vision cleared, the dim scenery around him revealed itself. It appeared that in his terrified desertion, Adam had actually managed to escape from the warped sub-realm he had previously found himself in. "It looks like I'm back in the tower again," he concluded flatly, gazing into the seemingly-endless heights of the structure and feeling quite silly for having panicked in the first place.

*Great,* Caley's mental voice sounded relieved, but it quickly altered to one of concern. *What about the others? Did you come across any of them?*

"Well I was with Goof-Off before..." Adam trailed off, sounding awkward. "Cal, I got a confession to make."

*What?*

*"I've...sort of lost my body."*

*WHAT?!*

*"I know, it sounds stupid," Adam agreed, before his friend had a chance to say otherwise. "And I've got no idea how we're able to talk right now, since no one else could see or hear me. But yeah. I'm a ghost. The thing that's been causing all this craziness stole my body and I need to get it back!"*

*I see... Caley murmured, in a surprisingly calm tone. You stay there, alright? Azima and I will be up in a minute.*

*"So?" Azima inquired almost accusingly, as the glazed expression left Caley's face. The young man was momentarily caught off guard - he hadn't been aware of what he had been doing up until that point. It wasn't until he returned to focus, that the realization had hit him. Not only had he heard Adam despite the youth being in an unexplained ethereal state, he had been *talking* to him! A slight shudder ran up Caley's spine as he attempted to compute the previous occurrence.*

*"My friend A- uh 'Nathan' has somehow been thrown out of his own body," he attempted to explain. "Apparently by the creature that both kidnapped the townspeople and messed around with the dimensions in this tower."*

"I've heard of this," Azima remarked. "A very specific strain of ghost type pokémon, haunter, are able to separate the consciousness, the spirit of a being, as it were, from its physical form."

"So we're dealing with a haunter?" Caley blinked.

"Maybe," Azima did not appear to be swayed in either direction. "Either way, we have a somewhat better idea as to what we're up against." At this point, she brought a diamond-shaped article into view, brushing off a thick layer of dust. The item was just small enough to fit into the palm of the Gym Leader's gloved hand, and had a jewelled core in the centre, surrounded by arrow-like engravings with inter-connecting notched lines.

"What is that?" Caley asked, his eyes widening.

"It is called a Spirit Cast," Azima told him. "At one time, certain...*particularly* unscrupulous members of the Sanguine Alliance would use these to enslave pokémon and tap into their powers. Thankfully, that time has since long passed." She glanced at her audience, giving her expectant looks. "While I dislike having to put such things to use again, it is likely the only thing strong enough to seal that entity away, and stop it from wreaking havoc."

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"Now I may not like Adam all that much..." James frowned, disregarding the cryptic accusation. "But stealing his body from him is downright out of order. I'm getting you out of there, even if it means roughing you up a bit!" He turned to the arcumese standing on his left side at this point. "Cyzel, I'm going to need your help on this one."

"Rrrrrr!" Cyzel complained, with notable anger.

"That's not Adam, you stubborn furball!" James returned the frustration. "Something is controlling him!"

"Grrrrr..." Cyzel ruffled his fur. It was hard to tell whether the arcumese had lost faith in James after the prank he had pulled earlier, or that he simply refused to hit Adam's body, whether Adam happened to be in command of it or not. Regardless of the motive, there was no way Cyzel was going to attack the boy he had sworn to protect, especially not while following the orders of a man his protectee found unbearable.

Adam's manipulated form chuckled in a crazed, impish manner - raising his arms into the air before waving them back and forth. James, Cyzel and Chime suddenly felt themselves grasped and tossed towards the far wall by an invisible force that was impossible to resist. The wall distorted slightly as the trio of figures made impact with it, causing

fragmented images to spatter outwards across the surface. As James was pulled back into the midst of a rapidly-forming pixelly tornado, he caught sight of the images, now being stripped from the wall to encircle him. Familiar scenes and experiences that appeared to have been plucked from his own memory - each one holding something in common. The flicker of a charm, the fleeting sight of a whisker, the lash of a cinnamon-tipped tail...

Round and round James, Chime and Cyzel spun, the latter two squealing and howling, while the Adam puppet stood below them - cackling with twisted hilarity at his work as the olive green hair of his wig squirmed in the backdraft of the vortex.

Then the Adam-puppet's expression darkened rapidly, his stare now firmly trained on an indistinct point in the room. The surrounding walls and psychic vortex swiftly dissipated, causing James, Cyzel and Chime to fall to the dusty wooden floorboards, groaning with a mixture of dizziness and relief. While Cyzel tried defiantly to stagger to his feet, Chime hovered worriedly over James as the man lay staring up through the innards of the once again empty tower, looking quite shell-shocked.

*"That's it! Over there! The thing that's stolen my body!"*

The Adam-puppet glanced up at the sound of the true Adam's voice in its mind, before swinging its unearthly white gaze upon Azima who glared at it unforgivingly - the Spirit Cast still aloft in one hand. Her

plan to attract the being back into the Astral Tower's physical space using the Spirit Cast's resonance had worked.

"Cyzel!" Adam spluttered, despite the arcumese being unable to hear him. "Man, what did it do to you? Poor guy looks like he's gonna throw up..."

**"So..."**

a voice hissed, laced with a metallic tinge that caused those present to get shivers.

**"You came to take me back."**

"Back'?" Caley repeated slowly, studying the Adam-puppet as these words sank in.

**"DON'T act like you don't know!"**

the Adam-puppet snapped with surprising ferocity.

**"I see there..."**

he pointed to the Spirit Cast in Azima's left hand.

**"its pull is strong...to contain me...to take me back!"**

It suddenly dawned on Caley as to the likely implications of that statement. Was the entity that had a grip on Adam actually one of Team Rocket's experiments?

"Wait, no!" the young man spluttered in protest, while Azima passed him a studied expression that she had previously been aiming at

Cyzel. "We have no intention of taking you back there! Really! But you need help - you're too unstable to stay out here in the ope-"

**"LIES!"**

the Adam-puppet screeched, causing Caley to reel backwards, grasping at his head as a result of the mental feedback he received.

**"Lies...expect nothing less...from people like you!"**

At this point, its voice had started to become more fragmented and artificial - its white eyes glowing more intensely with its mounting anger. At the same time, the edges of its body rippled and vanished into tiny black squares, and segments of its limbs twitched rapidly from side to side in a morbid, unnatural dislocation.

"*What's that thing doing to my body?"* Adam exclaimed disgustedly, thready signs of horror beginning to seep into his voice. "*M-make it stop!*"

"Where have you taken the townspeople?" Azima demanded furiously, while Lerik flattened his ears and growled.

**"DON'T change the subject!"**

the creature in Adam's body snapped in icy tones of varying pitch.

**"You stole him from me...stole everything I had..."**

**...YOU have the nerve to pretend to be concerned about these humans, and expect me to feel**

**SORRY FOR YOU?!"**

With that, the Adam-puppet flung itself forward angrily and let out a horrendous noise - an ear-wrenching amalgamation of discordant screeches. The atmosphere around the humans and their pokémon companions thickened instantly - locking their limbs into place as this sound persisted. The Spirit Cast fell from Azima's twitching, block-stricken hand as Caley tried to call out to the creature in Adam's body, but his words splintered into incomprehensible sounds. Kota, Chime, Cyzel and Lerik shuddered violently, their faces overcome with a deep purple blush - the distinct signs of poisoning.

Deep remorse began to swell inside of Adam's intangible form as he helplessly lingered in audience. This entire happening was his fault. If he had just taken a moment to think before reacting on impulse, the entity wouldn't have had a chance to use his body for its own twisted ends. His companions, their pokémon and even the sullen-faced Gym Leader could have been spared this torment. Despite his own fear at the creature's unsettling power, it was more than Adam could bear to watch.

"Stop it! STOP IT!" he yelled. "We never came to take you back to Team Rocket! Why would we take you back to a place we risked everything to escape from?"

**"Escape...?"**

the creature's unearthly voice faltered in confusion at these new words.

**"Then why come for me?"**

"To help you!" Adam snapped frustratedly. "I don't know what those science creeps did to you in that lab, but we're not going to treat you that way. Caley just wants to make your life better again, to stop all this craziness." He motioned to the effects of the creature's environmental corruption. "So please, you gotta trust us. Please stop hurting them."

**"Hurting..."**

the entity spoke in distant monotone.

**"Only good for hurting..."**

"You...you don't have to be!" Adam insisted, trying to recall the encouraging words Caley had offered since making his acquaintance with him. "I mess up. I do things that hurt people too. I'm trying to do better..." he trailed off, watching the other figures in the room struggling against their ailments.

**"Do...better?"**

came the curious echo, as the creature glanced up at him.

"*You don't stop trying.*" Adam said firmly, trying not to shudder as a result of staring back at his own face with its glowing white eye sockets. He didn't know how much of what he was saying applied to a being with such unpredictable influence, but the words seemed to be calming it regardless. "*You don't stop trying...and some day...you'll do better.*"

**~~"Then there is no more hurting?"~~**

the voice was hopeful now.

"*No more hurting,*" Adam reiterated, with a small smile. The creature inhabiting his body copied the smile, and the entire atmosphere flickered one last time. Adam felt himself pulled toward his body as the dark blue spectral being left it, urging him within. Giving a thankful nod, it floated over to the Spirit Cast upon the floor and let itself be pulled inside.

"What just happened?" Azima puzzled, watching Adam cross the floor before gathering the Spirit Cast in one hand. "Did the ether simply give up?"

"Not quite," Caley smiled softly, rubbing his head. "I do believe my friend managed to talk it down."

A loud rumble was heard from the peak of the tower. As it echoed through the hollow insides, the entire structure started to shake violently,

causing fragments of wood and stone to rain down upon the four humans and their collapsed pokémon.

"We must leave," Azima stated, returning Lerik to his Pokéball.

"Now."

The others acknowledged, and in turn, Kota, Cyzel and Chime were retrieved before the poisoning could set in any further. Lunging for the front door which had since fallen shut, Azima thrust it to one side with surprising force from a person of her age, urging her male companions through the ensuing opening. As the group dashed through the tower gardens, fractious tremors threatened to unsettle them from their feet, while the bare branches of the trees jostled perturbingly overhead.

No sooner had Azima, Caley, James and Adam dashed a few metres from the front door, than the entire structure collapsed in a mighty plume of wood and stone fragments. It was an unusual motion for a building of its type - more akin to the flattening of a circus tent that had its vital supports grasped from under it. As the reverberations and dust of the tower's destruction faded into the air, its small group of observers straightened themselves from their meagre attempts to shield their faces, and examined the remains of what was left. Each figure was notably overcome with anguish - it seemed their attempts to rescue those snatched away by the entity they had just captured, had failed.

Just then, a curious noise like glassy static was heard from a point above the mound of rubble. As the Gym Leader and those that stood by

her watched, a glowing sliver appeared at that very point - pushing itself into a concertina as the glow increased and causing a portion of the sky to buckle with it. Swiftly, the motion reversed itself, pulling the sliver apart and revealing a mysterious violet haze within. From this hazy tear emerged a large throng of people, glancing around in relief and thankfulness as they cautiously walked out into the cobblestone streets. While Caley gazed up at the beams of sunlight as they penetrated the gloom overhead, Azima continued to stare at the passing townspeople, her mouth wide open in complete speechlessness.

The majority of the crowd were far too immersed in their previous transdimensional experience to take much notice of the cluster of bystanders. But as Caley returned his attentions to the rift, his face lit up with joy upon sighting Rose and Denise amongst the multitude - the former carefully guiding Hooke by one arm to ensure his movements synchronized with those of everybody else. Denise caught a glimpse of Caley also, and was quick to make her way toward him.

"That sure was the most disturbing experience I've ever had," Denise told Caley awkwardly. "Floating around in some void full of weird clouds that dissolved everything. Good thing those diguard were around to keep them at bay or who knows what might have happened to us!"

"Diguard?" Caley echoed, before consulting his Pokédex for more information. At the same time, Azima noticed a dark blue horned head peering from the realm visible through the tear, and her expression of

astonishment became one of shame. "Guardians of space, huh? You certainly *were* lucky to have encountered them."

"I sense a great weight has been lifted from here," Hooke remarked in calm tones, like the previous experience was nothing that unusual.

"The Astral Blade Tower has fallen," Azima divulged. "I was able to draw the ether from its hiding place back to the tower's ground floor, and restrain it. Not without the use of some technology I would have liked to avoid, but there was little choice in this case."

"Nathan was the one who persuaded the creature to stop attacking us and actually give us a chance," Caley pointed out, while Adam smiled a little at the unexpected credit. He was dislodged from his train of thought by Denise grasping him by both arms - an astonished expression upon her face.

"You *did* that?" she inquired.

"Well, uh..." the youth began in flustered manner, taken by surprise by the unexpected contact. His sentence ended up dissolving into a somewhat embarrassed nod, to which Denise's astonishment fast became a wide smile of admiration. It was obvious such an act had made quite the impression on her, and even Rose was showing signs of approval. But Adam didn't know how to deal with all this attention. He wasn't sure whether it had been the result of having shared his body with the creature temporarily, but he had felt - and still felt - something of a

common bond with it. A kindredship based on isolation and a mutual animosity towards Team Rocket for having snatched away what they'd held most precious.

As to what exactly the creature *had* held most precious, that remained unknown.

"Where were you when he needed you..." James murmured to himself. He was still completely floored by what had happened to him inside the tower, and that one blame-stricken question from the ether which had possessed Adam. First he had been confronted with the sighting of Jessie's scarred face, then those images of Meowth. It was as if the creature he stood up to had torn his mind open and shown him the consequences. "Yeah. Where *was* I?"

"See what I mean about giving people a chance?" Rose remarked under her breath as she walked up beside her companion, followed by Sia. "There's potential in Adam for impressive things."

But James didn't respond. Instead, he continued to stare into the distance, his eyes glassy and full of consternation. The prolonged silence caused Rose to shift uncomfortably.

"James? What's wrong?" she asked. "Did that experience unsettle you?"

"You could say that..." the man nodded slowly. He didn't wish to discuss what had happened in any great measure, but what he had seen was enough to take a sharp nudge at his conscience. The part of him that had doubted his decision to let Jessie and Meowth go their separate ways was nagging once again, stronger than ever. It seemed that with all his good intentions, life had taken a turn for the worse. Still, this was a matter that concerned him and his estranged partners, no one else. Somehow - one way or another - he needed to bring it to a conclusion.

"My judgements were incorrect, I confess," Azima sighed, gazing sorrowfully upon the tower's remains. "Here I was, believing so fervently that the ether was solely responsible for the people's imprisonment. Yet...if The Astral Blade Tower had been demolished in the first place, then this never would have happened."

"You weren't to know that, Azima," Hooke reassured her, while Sergei offered an understanding grunt. "The outcome could have just as easily been negative. You didn't want to take that risk, and rightly so."

"I appreciate your kind words, Mr. Hooke, but such knowledge does not seem to quell my restless spirit," the aged woman concluded sadly. "Our lessons will resume soon enough. For now, if you'll excuse me, I have unfinished business to attend to regarding that ether." She held out her hand to Adam at this point. "The Spirit Cast, if you please."

"No!" Adam blurted out, clutching the item protectively to his chest. His defiant response quickly weakened at Azima's volatile expression. "I...I...we need to take her with us."

"*Her?*" Azima almost spat out the word. "Does this have something to do with that curious looking arcanine-like pokémon I saw in the tower earlier?" She swung her accusing gaze upon Caley, making him flinch. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were trying to *keep* things from me."

"Listen, I can explain!" Caley spluttered, before lowering his voice. "This is all connected to why I came looking for you in the first place. If you can help me solve the message I was given, I can tell you why we're dealing with pokémon species that officially don't exist."

"I see," Azima calmed a little, turning away from Adam while Caley's remaining companions exchanged confused looks with one another. "Very well. You may keep the Spirit Cast for now. Let us deal with this message of yours, Caley."

Requesting that Hooke and her additional four guests took Lerik and their own pokémon to the Pokémon Center after their ordeals, Azima brought Caley - along with the Pokéball belonging to Adam - up a flight of iron steps to the book archive on the second floor, where Caley proceeded to explain to the Gym Leader how he'd managed to land himself in such a predicament. While he did so, Azima brought out a

medicine case and released Cyzel from his capsule, in order to attend to his ailments.

"...once I realised just what was going on, I had to do something about it," Caley recounted with startling clarity, despite the hecticness of the past few days' events. "My friends and I, we devised a plan to try and shut down the obelisk as well as free the pokémon they had been storing and using for experiments." He deliberately avoided mentioning that his friends had actually been part of the organization in the first place, at least before he had come along and insisted otherwise.

"Admirable," Azima commented with impressed tones, feeding Cyzel some pecha berries. "But it seems you released more than you bargained for, if this ether we captured was anything to go by."

"Yeah, kinda," Caley agreed, somewhat awkwardly. "Team Rocket made a few underestimations themselves with the obelisk they had built, and the experimental pokémon they made to work with it. The pokémon, Minachi, tore Team Rocket's HQ apart from the inside, using the energy they had gathered." His voice cracked a little at this point. "They themselves itself too, in the process. But not before they gave me a message."

"The one you want me to decipher," Azima concluded, gently stroking Cyzel's fur. Her tone was more accepting than it had been the first time Caley brought up this subject with her, indicating she was

taking the matter a lot more seriously. "This and the matter of your Encephal Perception seem more than just a little intertwined to me."

"My-?" Caley trailed off, piecing together the fragments of what Azima had mentioned earlier. "Oh yes. That."

"So tell me of this...*Minachi's* message to you," Azima urged, an almost-motherly softness entering her voice.

"They said that I held the key," Caley murmured distantly. "And something about unity being needed to overcome the impossible."

"The impossible..." Azima digested these words, returning Cyzel to his Pokéball and offering a hand to Caley afterwards. "Such as?"

"Stopping Team Rocket," Caley told her, after a moment's confused pause. Realising she was expecting him to pass over Kota for similar treatment, he distractedly fumbled at his belt. "Minachi said that 'The Original One' wished it. I'm not sure if that meant anything, though. At that point, it didn't seem to be making any sense."

"The Original One, hm? What else did Minachi say to you?"

"They said that 'the fourteenth phase was now'," Caley shrugged. "That I had 'seen their tainted virtue', and I had to 'prepare for their deadly strike.' I could only guess that Minachi was referring to Team Rocket. The final words were hard to make out. 'Farewell...arn..loh...kah. 'Onlooker'?"

"No, no...that's not it," Azima responded in a semi-dismissive and hurried fashion, her pose having stiffened noticeably. Before Caley could say another word, the Gym Leader was up on her feet with surprising agility, searching the nearby bookshelf. A few moments later, she brought down a thick red tome from amongst the others, placed it upon the carpet and began flicking through it.

"Aha! Here it is," she declared triumphantly. "The Sabai Prophecy, written in 23FD..."

*In the fourteenth phase, the veins of the earth will burn hot with  
restlessness*

*And a tainted virtue shall rise to cultivate false trust*

*Devouring its own children, bleeding empty wraiths*

*Desecrating that once thought most holy*

*Yet its power will cease at the point of a deadly strike*

*When Masters of the seven continents unite*

*Let their inner forces heal what was once lost*

*As Ahnloka Pentus opens the door to salvation*

"The words...they all fit," Caley gawped. "But...but how could Minachi have known of this prophecy? It had been made inside Team Rocket's laboratory, it never even left the tank it was sealed in!"

"If this pokémon was created from Mew DNA, and what you said about the purpose of Team Rocket's machine is true, then it may be that the creature received such information from the realms beyond us," Azima explained, finally taking the Luxury Ball from Caley. "The veins of the earth...these are the channels through which Aura flows and, to a greater or lesser extent, what connects us to that which is more powerful."

"So the 'veins of the earth' is another name for the Aura Network," Caley murmured, recalling what Ana had told him the day before.

"If that is what you call them, yes," Azima eyed him, releasing Kota from the ball. "At certain points in our world's history, the Aura in these channels has grown more potent in nature. This happens because they are reacting to the discomfited state of The Original One."

"Wait a minute..." Caley paused. "Now I remember why that name sounded familiar. It was written in some of my history books. It's what ancient civilisations called the creator of the world."

"Indeed," Azima mused, while Kota looked up at her feebly. "One of its titles, at least. Tell me, Caley...have you ever heard of the Generation Rite?"

"It was mentioned briefly in Lore Studies," Caley nodded. "The Generation Rite was a ceremony performed by the ancients in celebration of the discovery of new pokémon species upon the planet."

"So that's how they tell it in schools these days," Azima sniffed, taking another bundle of pecha berries from the medicine case. "You are close, but there is one significant error in this teaching which makes all the difference. The Generation Rite was performed in order to bring new pokémon species into existence."

"And how is that possible?" Caley inquired, failing to hide the note of scepticism in his voice. It was the first time he'd given prolonged thought to such deep matters, and the combined possibility of a creator's existence alongside the concept of pokémon simply appearing out of thin air was a bit much to grasp.

"By the linking of creative minds with a force able to manifest them," Azima relayed, watching Kota chew on the berries. "In this case, The Original One and the Ahnloka - supported by six gifted individuals with the powers of fire, water, forest, earth, wind and electrical Aura. "

"Humans with pokémon-like abilities?" Caley recalled what Denise said about Professor Bohrgram's memos. "You're trying to tell me that they *exist*?"

"You shouldn't sound so doubtful," Azima couldn't help but smile. "You *are* the fifth Ahnloka, after all."

"Wh-what?" Caley spluttered, his eyes widening rapidly. The statement had come out of nowhere and hit him with the force of a brick. Was the Gym Leader pulling his leg? By the look of seriousness upon her face, Caley decided that was unlikely.

"That's right," Azima reiterated, as if she had known this the entire time. "Cho'moken is the ability of pokémon within humans, and the Ahnloka wields the psychic element - Cho'moken in its primary form."

"So that's what Minachi did when it touched me?" Caley inquired in a small voice. "Gave me psychic powers?"

"All it did was merely *awaken* them," Azima corrected, allowing Kota to float from her knee. "You've had that potential all along."

"But how?" the young man asked weakly. It felt like the life had been sapped from him in that moment of revelation.

"Tell me," Azima studied him with her eyes. "The identity of your father."

"He was Jack Wilson - Leader of Praela Village Gym..." Caley trailed off. Suddenly it all made sense. The elemental typing of the gym. The way the battles were carried out. That odd 'intuition' his father seemed to have - the same intuition he himself had displayed over the past six years. Caley had always thought that the pokémon had formed those psychic battlefields, but now he was beginning to question even that. Had it really been his father the whole time?

"I thought your last name sounded vaguely familiar," Azima tilted her head slightly. "Your father must have been carrying active Cho'moken genes. But without a mother bearing Cho'moken also, your ability would never have been strong enough to come into its own. Still..." the woman mused at this. "The fact Minachi was moved to activate your abilities *now* is all the more intriguing." She leant back and deliberated this for a moment, while her listener silently wrung his hands. "It appears the Sabai Prophecy is to be fulfilled with you at its head. They're certainly going to be surprised."

"Who?" Caley glanced up from the floor.

"People you are undoubtedly going to meet along this path, young man," Azima smiled, though the expression seemed a little forced and sad. "I am going to entrust you with the care of Team Rocket's pokémon experiments, including the ether. Minachi was correct about unity - this is far too big a thing for you to tackle entirely by yourself. It would be wise to inform the Pokémon League of Team Rocket's intentions and their experiments, when it is the proper moment to do so. My years spent in The Sanguine Alliance taught me much about the divulging of the right information at the right time."

"Taught you?" Caley's mouth dropped open a little way, as the implications of the statement set in. "*You* were part of The Sanguine Alliance?"

"Regrettably, I was," the Gym Leader sighed. "I, and others who were not privileged enough to be gifted with Cho'moken, strived to make ourselves equals to those that held such power. The Astral Blade Tower was one of many similar constructs that Alliance members used to create channels into Etherspace - the ghost pokémon realm - to summon subjects for their personal gain. It was from those dimensional breaches that ghost pokémon were first released into our own world. But even then, I held my place in the Alliance with high regard. It wasn't until that fateful day, I suddenly realised my loyalties had been severely misguided."

Caley stared at Azima as she lowered her head to examine the blood-stained dressing upon the young man's leg, the look upon her face resembling that of a condemned criminal. As he gazed, translucent but vivid images began flickering across his mind's eye - sightings of the fox-like pokémon he had seen an illusion of earlier, only in a greyish black colour, not blue. Before Caley had fully realised what was going on, faint echoes of a name joined these images - 'Zoroark'. He wrenched backward in alarm with a gasp, realising that he was unintentionally rifling through Azima's own thoughts.

"Agh! I-I-I'm sorry!" Caley spluttered, frantically trying to dislodge the connection.

"Calm yourself, young man," Azima murmured. It seemed that she had been aware of this psychic intrusion, but was proving surprisingly understanding about it. "You have your burdens, I have mine. That is why

I continue to stay in Wichour Town, and to wear the Alliances' uniform. Its deterioration reflects the deterioration of my ties with them. Still, if you allow your augret to sit upon your head, its elemental nature should help channel any excess Aura from you, until the worst of the Encephal Perception subsides. As for the mastering of such abilities..." she paused to examine the bookshelf at length with her eyes. "I am not the right person to open your eyes further on that matter. I am but a blighted woman of a fallen sect, I can only tell you so much. Your best move is to visit Scale Falls, where a descendant of my kin currently resides. Seek Sabrina Wakanda - she will be able to help you refine those psychic abilities of yours."

"Another Generation Rite..." Azima mused, as she led Caley back toward the staircase that descended to the gym's lower floor. "Our world has certainly been long overdue one. Tell me, what are your thoughts on the knowledge I have shared with you, in regards to that message?"

"I don't know *what* to think," Caley shook his head slowly, while Kota grasped it a little bit tighter in order to stay put. The augret's presence over his temples was indeed easing the aches and making it easier to contemplate, but it hardly simplified the magnitude of what had been told him. "There's so much to take in. So many questions to ask. Like...am I really the right person for this job? Surely there are far more

experienced Cho'moken wielders out there, people that would make better Ahnlokas than me."

"The Ahnloka has to be young in both body and spirit, for their task is an exhausting one," Azima smiled her curious smile. "And you are different from others your age, Caley Wilson. Devoid of the arrogance that is so common with adolescent youth, you are open to new thoughts...willing to humble yourself. Minachi was directed well - I can't think of a more suitable choice for the responsibility."

"Well thank you for taking the time to discuss it," Caley attempted a smile in return, watching Azima open the Gym's front door. "And for healing Kota and Cyzel."

"I am sorry I wasn't able to do the same for you," Azima said. "But promise me you will get that wound cleaned as soon as possible."

"Promise," Caley gave a nod. It wasn't something he would easily forget – even now, the afflicted area throbbed from the previous attack, and the gash in his trouser leg was allowing a chill breeze in.

"Thank you for showing me your courageous spirit," Azima held out a small copper disc set with one violet stone toward Caley. "Your boldness to stand up for what you believed in, to fight against your own problems is more than enough proof that you deserve this Spectrus Medal."

Like the Ohm Medal he had been given before, the Spectrus Medal was also engraved with a stylized image of a pokémon. Here, Giratina's serpentine Origin Forme curled its way into the medal's centre.

"It...it's beautiful," Caley breathed, tilting the medal to one side to examine its surface against the sunlight. "But I'm no trainer."

"I know that," Azima chuckled lightly. "And in the Expedition's eyes, I'm no Gym Leader. But I hope that the Spectrus Medal will still hold some value for you. I wish you the best of luck in restoring a balance to this tumultuous present."

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They had been snatched from their scrutiny of the Astral Blade Tower and into the pulsing darkness of the void, one by one. And as stability was returned to the planes they had passed between - Jessie, Cassidy and Butch had tentatively made their way out of the dimensional rift alongside the townspeople. The general air of disorientation and relief had worked to their advantage, and the trio had been able to sneak away from the throng unnoticed. But none of this pleased Cassidy to any degree. Once the activity in the area of the fallen tower had ceased, she and her two accomplices returned to survey the results.

"I've lost the frequency, Cass," Butch remarked disappointedly, lowering his handheld scanner. "Archeist's gone."

"An unfortunate mishap," Cassidy told him, trying to shroud her own frustration. "Besides, it was only gaining more power from that building. Trying to capture it in such a place...we didn't really have much of a chance. Hopefully the next time we meet, luck will be on our side."

"Sure hope you're right," Butch bit his lip and returned the device to his backpack. "Too many 'near misses' and Darius won't be pleased. Let's find somewhere to camp."

As the duo began to walk away from the pile of debris, they realised the voice belonging to the third member of their group had not been raised once since their exit from the dimension they had been trapped in. Glancing over his shoulder to check for her presence, Butch raised an eyebrow. Jessie was indeed following them, her shoulders slumped and eyes slightly dulled from previous experiences neither of her companions were aware of.

"What's eatin' you, Jessie?" Butch inquired, more out of morbid curiosity than anything else.

"Oh, nothing," the woman responded, though her tone of voice was subdued, unlike her usual forcefulness.

"Why are you so bothered she's not speaking, anyway?" Cassidy sniffed, tossing her head and causing her long, spiked pigtails to sway a little. "In my opinion, it's a welcome relief." She paused momentarily, as



group left Wichour Town as quickly as possible, not wanting to gather any more attention than was necessary.

Arriving back at the hovercraft's hidden location, Rose carefully removed the temporary dressing Caley had applied to his own leg, and began cleaning the wound Caley had received from the illusory negatic.

"You did a good patch up job for someone with no medical experience," Rose smiled encouragingly, as she replaced the dressing and bandage. "I'll have to fix the gash in your pants later, once we find a new place to stop and buy sewing tools."

"No problem," Caley responded gratefully. He was just glad that someone in the group knew how to sew. "I can get by until then."

"So, what was this message that Gym Leader was talking about?" James inquired, while Chime happily nuzzled his shoulder. "And what did she have to say about it?"

"Feh, good luck trying to get him to tell you *that*," Adam commented disapprovingly.

"Azima left it up to me to inform the Pokémon League about the breakout, when the time was right," Caley explained, ignoring Adam's remark. "She said it was not her place to do so, considering that she was not an official Gym Leader."

"We will tell them," Rose nodded. "But not just yet. We need to assess the situation for a bit longer - with regards to both the genetic

pokémon and Team Rocket. Undoubtedly they have sent operatives out to retrieve the pokémon as we speak."

"Then we need to beat them to it!" Denise insisted worriedly.

"Yes, that is a concern," Rose tried to placate her. "But not our priority. The boss has far bigger plans up his sleeves than those pokémon - having them retrieved is only to prevent them drawing attention to his business. We need to target the source of the problem, not the collateral."

"Well, where are we heading next?" James asked, opening the side doors to the hovercraft.

"Azima suggested that I go to Scale Falls," Caley replied, though the tone was mumbled and reluctant.

"How is going *there* going to help us find out what Team Rocket is up to?" Adam snapped, folding his arms. "Or more importantly, how to stop it? Huh?"

"It *won't*, okay?" Caley snapped in return, before falling silent, noting everyone's shocked expressions. "But it might...help me get a bit of control back."

"I sure hope so," Adam commented, referring to the outburst. Rose gave her red-headed companion a studied look, while James tilted his head to one side and Denise wore a saddened expression.

"Just, please...bear with me," Caley sighed shamefully, as Kota gave him a sympathetic pat atop his head. "I promise I'll explain everything to all of you once I understand it myself. I'm sure this will make sense soon enough."

The confidence in this statement wavered somewhat, but he didn't feel ready to tell the others everything Azima had told him. Thing was, Caley still didn't entirely believe what he'd heard to be true. The significance in stopping Team Rocket's unsettling plans was a given, but Kota's insistence to stay with him was surely preference and nothing more, and part of him insisted on further evidence as to the legitimacy of any prophecies, never mind his part in them. Hopefully the path would become clearer when they reached Scale Falls.

**TO BE CONTINUED...**

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