

Episode 5

Eons in Flux, my cringe lil' fanfic

Episode 6: Where Loyalties Lie



The scorching sun shimmered in a cloudless blue sky high above the sprawling Lumiose Badlands. Orange dust drifted lazily across the harsh wasteland, blowing between towering mesas. It billowed across the dry and barren earth and over deep conical Trapinch pits. Small yellow lizard-like Helioptile perched atop scattered jagged rocks, unfurling the black frills on either side of their head and basking in the sun's glow. To the west, a massive pylon absorbed solar radiation and powered massive underground generators. Far to the east, a geothermal plant nestled within a tall canyon gathered energy from deep below the surface. Huge pillars of

steam erupted from the ground to feed massive overhead fixtures in front of a large dome building. Deeper into the canyon, the dust and excess steam was blown away by the spinning of two building-sized turbines. Even here, the lofty Prism Tower of Lumiose City stood tall on the distant southern horizon.

As Phos scaled the uneven side of one of the mesas, the sight of the far-off Kalosian cityscape provided a sense of familiar comfort that steadied her nerves. She pressed her body against the dusty rock wall and shimmied up the spire. Her heart hammered within her chest as her mind raced with anxious thoughts, each more worrying than the last. She was certain this is where her target had flown to, but what if she was too late? Phos shook the idea out of her head and pressed on.

Nearing the top of the cliff, Phos reached up and pulled her left wrist back. A soft click preceded the whistle of the grappling hook as it shot out from the inside of her sleeve and snaked through the air before landing atop the plateau. She clenched her fist, and the nylon rope went taut. Phos took a deep breath, leaned backward, and began running up the sheer cliff face. With a grunt, she leapt over the mesa's lip and rolled onto the level terrain.

A large cup-shaped nest stood before her; a shaggy bed of dry branches and shriveled clumps of long brown grass woven around sun-bleached bones. A long skeletal torso was strapped to a crooked stick like a scarecrow, its desiccated ribs stuffed with more twigs and straw to form a macabre umbrella that shaded the nest below it.

"Murkrow," Phos hissed, "Murkrow, are you in there?"

Phos heard a scratchy rustling sound as something stirred within the nest. She stepped forward cautiously and peered inside. Among a scattered collection of broken egg shells and cracked bone fragments, Murkrow's large red eyes met her gaze as the Darkness Pokémon sat absorbed within a fluffy bed of hay. Murkrow held a faded newspaper page within its feathered fingertips. Above the page's smudged comic strip section, a bold headline read: "Latest Regulations Bring Grimer to the Brink of Extinction." The remaining text had long since been lost to the Badlands.

Phos placed a dusty hand over her chest and breathed a sigh of relief. "Are you alright," she asked, "that Mandibuzz didn't hurt you, did it?"

Murkrow stared at her blankly and cocked its head.

Phos leaned over the side of the nest. Beneath a thin film of brown dust, the distinct black-and-red top of a Timer Ball poked out of the nestbed below her. Phos reached down and grabbed the ball. She thumbed the release button, and the ball's lid popped open to reveal its empty interior. Phos hummed and fastened the ball to her belt before waving Murkrow over. "C'mon, we don't want to keep Emma waiting."

Murkrow set the newspaper down and reached for its prized stick. A pair of dry rodent skulls had been fastened to one end by long strands of plant fiber tied into a delicate bow. Murkrow shook the stick, causing the small skulls to clatter together and rattle. "Coo-coo?"

Phos snorted air through her nostrils as a toothy grin spread across her face. She shook her head and laughed heartily. "Aren't you a little old to be acting like this?" She motioned upward with her hands. "Chop chop! Up and at 'em, mister."

Murkrow muttered quietly and began to stir from its seat. A large shadow swept across the plateau as a piercing screech echoed through the barren canyon. A large vulture-like creature descended from the sky and landed at the edge of the nest. Its dark brown and beige feathers were decorated by bones. A large jawbone lined with wicked fangs served as the creature's skirt around its thighs. A femur bone held the ruffled feathers in place atop the bird's pink head. It craned its long, bald neck forward and clacked its black beak as it studied Phos with narrow red eyes peering out from beneath the brim of its long dark eyelashes.

Phos stood her ground as the large bird glowered at her. Murkrow set its stick down and squawked out a staccato series of raspy cries, and the looming Mandibuzz quickly turned its attention to the small crow-like Pokémon. Mandibuzz hopped into the nest and hunched over Murkrow, carefully preening the crested feathers atop Murkrow's head with its beak. Murkrow leaned into the Bone Vulture Pokémon's touch and purred, excitedly bobbing its wings up and down.

Phos watched in exasperation as Mandibuzz continued to coddle Murkrow. "Did I not baby you enough growing up? Or did I baby you too much?" She snapped her fingers to get Mandibuzz's attention. "Ma'am, I've heard of Empty Nest Syndrome, but Murkrow's not your kid. I've known him for ten years and right now he's got a job to do."

Phos looked sternly down at her Pokémon. "Say goodbye, Murkrow. Now."

Murkrow relented under the withering gaze of its Trainer. It rubbed its beak against Mandibuzz's leathery pink foot, gripped its stick within its talons, and leapt out of the nest toward Phos's outstretched hand. Phos grabbed onto the stick and untied the rodent skulls, letting them fall to the ground before holding onto the stick with both hands.

"Thanks for understanding," Phos said. "But next time you want to play babysitter, you better ask permission. I don't like wasting my time chasing after thieves."

She turned away from Mandibuzz and its nest and hopped over the edge of the mesa top. Murkrow's wings flapped rapidly as it carried its Trainer away. Mandibuzz walked to the edge and called out forlornly as it watched the two depart.

Phos steered Murkrow down toward the hunched silhouette resting its back against a massive boulder. The figure's feminine triangular frame was encased in a pressurized black

bodysuit. Armored bands ran up and down the cybernetic suit's limbs and torso, leaving only the skintight orange padding on its shoulders exposed. The wearer's head was entirely covered by a black bulb-like helmet with a large orange-tinted visor that obscured the face beneath. Bright electronic runes flashed across the visor as Phos quickly stepped to a halt in a cloud of dust back on solid ground.

Phos nodded to the figure. "Looking good, Detective," Phos smirked. She looked down at the tall stiletto heels that Emma was balancing on. "I'm loving those shoes."

"Oh, thank you Miss Phos," Emma said. An electronic signal projected her voice through the Expansion Suit's helmet, giving her soft voice a faint and static-filled echo. "I trust Murkrow's no longer in trouble?"

Murkrow landed on Phos's shoulder and pressed its beak against her ear. Phos rubbed her index finger across its side before gently pushing the beak away. "Oh, he's going to be in big trouble," Phos said happily, "but we'll worry about that later. What's the sitrep?"

Emma leaned out of cover and motioned to the geothermal plant in the distance. "No people or Pokémon patrolling outside, but plenty of security cameras."

"No problem," Phos said, "Zoroark can get us past those."

"Oh?"

Phos nodded and thumbed the release button of a Pokéball at her hip, releasing the Illusion Fox Pokémon. "Zoroark's illusions work by bending light—they can fool a camera as easily as they fool our eyes."

Murkrow hailed its teammate with a wave of its stick as its Trainer spoke. Zoroark nodded proudly in response.

"Oh, my suit can do that too," Emma beamed, "but it's limited to just myself."

Phos nodded up toward the power plant. "So how are we getting inside?"

"There's a service tunnel entrance we can use to enter the main facility," Emma explained, "One of six, actually. It's behind a locked door just a short run from here."

"Any help from your police friends on this one?"

"No," Emma said flatly. "I used up all of my favors keeping you out of jail. Again. They won't be willing to help us any further until we have proof of what's going on in there."

Phos clicked her tongue and inhaled sharply. "I'll make it up to you."

"I'm putting a lot of trust in you, Miss Phos," Emma stated, "I know you won't let me down."

Emma held her palm out and a 3D projection of the power plant blinked into the air from the Holo Caster built into her suit. A layered skeleton of crisscrossing corridors and chambers stretched in all directions like the inside of a Durant colony. "Do we need to review the plan for once we're inside?"

Phos cocked her head as she studied the power plant's blueprints. "Nah, I think I still got it," she answered. "The Visitors' Center is at the top of the building, along with the office spaces, then the control room and laboratories, generators and storage rooms, and the maintenance network runs along the very bottom of the facility."

Emma gave a quick nod and closed the projection. Murkrow fluttered to the top of Zoroark's head. The two Pokémon nodded solemnly.

"I'm going to find Franco," Phos stated. "He's been making me look bad these past few weeks. It's about time I even the score."

The power plant's security cameras surveyed the barren canyon surrounding the facility. They saw nothing as Phos and Emma walked under the cover of Zoroark's illusion. The trio began to cross the hot metal bridge leading to the service tunnel door.

"Is there anything else I should know about before we go in," Emma asked.

"Franco's cronies aren't like your everyday thugs," Phos answered, "they're not afraid of fighting alongside their Pokémon. They have stun guns and batons and they won't hesitate to break a few bones if it means catching you." Phos patted the top of her sternum. "If you get in a fist fight with them, aim for the unarmored bits peeking out. Below their neck, their jaw, behind their knees."

Emma nodded. "Understood, I'll do my best."

Phos walked up to the metal door and peered into the thin glass window on its front. She reached for the handle and gave it a sharp tug. The power plant's door was shut tight. Phos reached down for Malamar's ball.

"Allow me," Emma said. Phos stepped out of the detective's way. Emma rolled her shoulders and flexed her hands. She grabbed onto the metal door's handle and squeezed her fingers shut. The metal groaned and crumpled within her suit's grip. Emma dug her fingers into the metal and ripped the door out of its frame before tossing it to the side.

Phos and her Pokémon stood and stared in silent shock.

"After you," Emma said cheerfully.

Within the blue metal confines of the facility, the power plant's security terminals wailed to life with alarm notifications. The surveillance officer's eyes flitted across the screen in front of him. He reached for the radio at his collar.

"Sir," the operator spoke, "we have a safety alert from the western service tunnel door. Motion sensors detect three unidentified trespassers inside the facility."

A row of display monitors in the main control room displayed oscillating charts, energy readings, and maps of the power plant's different floors. Franco watched one of his computer monitors closely as three red dots raced down a long corridor toward the underbelly of the facility. He took a deep breath and rested his elbows on the armrests of his black command chair. He pressed a button on the radio set on the nearby desk. "Direct the closest available security units to that tunnel immediately. Send all security forces to reinforce them and have medical teams on standby as soon as possible."

"Sir," the operator stammered, "All security forces?"

"Check your equipment," Franco said tersely, "I hear an echo."

"Understood, sir."

Franco's radio channel fell silent as the surveillance officer began to coordinate the security response. He set his hands in his lap and watched his monitor closely as his patrols moved to block the intruders' advance.

Deeper underground, Franco's voice echoed throughout the service tunnel as Phos, Emma, and Zoroark sprinted down the long and narrow corridor. "Gentlemen, this is what you have been hired for," Franco stated, "Today, you earn your paycheck. You represent the very best of Macro Cosmos Security: the most-disciplined men and Pokémon in my employ. A bonus to the first man to engage the enemy. A pay raise for every man present when the intruders are captured. Failure is not an option, our work here is too critical. Fight well."

As the intruders approached the end of the corridor, a group of three armored Macro Cosmos security guards rounded the corner and blocked the way. From behind their transparent riot shields stamped with the company emblem, they tossed their Pokéballs forward. A large ant-like creature coated in a gray metal exoskeleton clacked its large mandibles. A massive panda-like Pokémon stepped forward, dragging a sharp black claw across its throat. The Pangoro leered down at the intruders and chewed on the narrow bamboo shoot clamped between its teeth. At its side, a small bipedal feline with a thick beard of gray fur growing beneath a hardened black helmet emerged. The Perrserker narrowed its red eyes and laughed a malicious chuckle as it extended three black claws on each hand and pressed them together into razor-sharp daggers.

One of the guards pressed his finger to the side of his helmet. "We 'ave eyes on the redhead'd terr'ist," he reported in a thick Galarian accent, "an' there's three a her!"

Two of the three women tossed a Pokéball forward.

One Phos continued to wear her sunglasses inside the dimly lit corridor. “Go on, Malamar,” she shouted, “I know you can do it!”

The next Phos tucked her glasses above the zipper of her cropped shirt. “Come on, Scrafty,” this Phos commanded, “let’s teach ‘em a lesson!”

The third Phos’s upper lip curled as she sneered at the guards in front of her. Murkrow perched on her left shoulder and looked up at its foes from beneath the wide brim of its crest. “Murkrow,” she growled, “Watch my back.”

Malamar and Scrafty emerged from their Pokéballs in front of the group. The two Pokémon looked to each other and nodded before turning to face their foes. The opposing Durant skittered forward first, uttering a metallic screech as it lunged toward Malamar.

“Don’t let him through, Scrafty!”

Scrafty leapt between Durant and Malamar and grabbed onto the Iron Ant Pokémon’s mandibles, forcing them apart as the Durant thrashed to break free. Pangoro lumbered forward next, its heavy footsteps thundering down the metal panels of the floor as it raised a massive fist and stomped toward Scrafty.

“Superpower!”

Malamar’s body tensed up and glowed with bright orange energy. It floated forward and slammed its bladed tentacles into Pangoro’s wide belly, dropping the Daunting Pokémon to its knees. As its teammate fell to the floor, Perrserker leapt forward, slashing wildly through the air as it arced toward Malamar’s throat. Scrafty leaned onto the back of its heels and began to spin Durant in a wide circle. Scrafty narrowed its eyes at Perrserker and swung Durant like a metal bat, slamming Perrserker out of the air and hurtling toward the humans’ riot shield line.

The small and furry cannonball collided against the middle shield, knocking the human behind it to the ground while his squadmates sidestepped away from the flailing Perrserker.

“Murkrow! Tailwind!”

Carried forward by a jetstream of rushing air, Phos somersaulted between the two standing guards. She pushed off of the middle guard and continued on her way with Murkrow following closely overhead.

The battle continued behind her. Scrafty hoisted Durant over its head as the Iron Ant Pokémon’s six legs fumbled at the back of Scrafty’s neck. With a fierce cry, Scrafty charged toward the corridor wall and stabbed Durant’s sharp mandibles into the metal paneling. As Durant struggled to pull itself free, Malamar slashed its bladed arm across Pangoro’s cheek with a wicked hook that sent Pangoro rolling to its side in a shower of spittle. Perrserker quickly

scrambled to its feet and rushed forward again, dragging its claws across the ground in a shower of white sparks as it yowled with fury.

“High Jump Kick!”

Scrafty pushed off the ground and rocketed through the air with its foot outstretched toward Perrserker. Perrserker slammed its claws together in an X-shape and braced against the attack, skidding down the corridor as it pushed back against Scrafty’s momentum. Scrafty leapt away from Perrserker, cartwheeling backward as Malamar closed the distance.

“Superpower again!”

Malamar brought its hardened muscles down with all its might atop Perrserker’s helmeted head. The Viking Pokémon’s wicked sharp teeth clashed against the floor with a deafening bang that knocked the feline Pokémon unconscious.

“That’s it,” the spectacled Phos cheered, “I knew you could do it!”

Malamar beamed with pride under its Trainer’s praise.

The two Phoses stepped toward the guards. As one man helped his partner off the ground, the other stood in front of them with his shield raised.

“Stay back,” the man ordered.

Phos’s eyes darted rapidly around the corridor from behind her sunglasses. She clenched her fists as she approached the guard in front. She jabbed forward in an eyeblink, punching through the plexiglass with one hand before pulling the shield out of the man’s grip. She looked to the second guard as he turned to face her. She kicked one foot forward, sending the man flailing back into the wall as he staggered off-balance. She took the shield in her hand and slammed it forward, pinning the other man’s shield to the wall behind him.

“Pardon us,” Phos smiled. She brought her fingers up to the corner of her eye and gave a quick salute with her palm facing outward before she and Malamar sprinted past.

As she ran ahead, the guard on the ground reached to his side and unholstered the taser at his hip. He aimed it toward her back with trembling fingers and prepared to squeeze the trigger. The remaining Phos stalked forward and redirected the man’s aim toward the ceiling with an upward kick to his wrist. As the arc of electricity shot wide and dissipated, Phos and Scrafty strode past him. Phos pointed two fingers toward her hazel eyes and jabbed them toward the shields impaled in the wall above him and the Durant still trying to pull itself free.

“Careful. I could do that too if I wanted,” Phos snarled.

Franco's piercing red eyes flitted across the CCTV footage on his monitor. His lips curled into a narrow frown as he watched Phos running down three distinct corridors. He looked to the facility's motion trackers and observed as the security team reinforcements spread out to pursue their targets.

Franco stood up from his seat and clasped his arms behind his back as he witnessed the violence occurring on the levels below him. Each Phos moved with well-honed fluidity, weaving around and leaping over their foes as their Pokémon fought alongside them. Murkrow's steel-hard wings chipped away fragments of a Rhyperior's orange armor plating while the hulking Drill Pokémon attempted to swat it out of the air. Malamar's arms were cloaked in darkness as its bladed fins effortlessly glided through a Bronzong's metal body. A Trevenant scuttled toward Scrafty on six leg-like roots, the wood of its gnarled claws was wreathed in spectral energy. Scrafty caught the Elder Tree Pokémon's claws in its hands and strained with effort before lunging forward and sinking its molars between the gaps in Trevenant's wooden armor. The Trevenant's claws fell limp as the ghostly creature collapsed to the ground. Phos and Scrafty were already running forward as Trevenant's Trainer recalled the fainted Pokémon and sent out a Machop to continue the battle.

"Jealously, we cling to understanding in a universe beyond our comprehension, yet our methods of understanding are flawed." Franco leaned closer to the monitor. "If we cannot trust our own lying eyes, what recourse do we have? To place our trust in institutions?" He chuckled to himself behind pursed lips. "Certainly not. Today's facts and theories are tomorrow's pseudoscience. Machines fail, researchers present incomplete data, what room is there for fact when propaganda becomes our everyday? Consensus is meaningless if the world remains ignorant."

Phos cartwheeled off a wall as she rounded a sharp corner. Phos continued running down a long and enclosed corridor. Phos leapt down to the metal grated walkway below her.

"We are told what is beautiful when we know what is ugly. We look at mediocrity and are trained to call it genius. Only when the world lies to us do we truly begin to understand: We must counter with our own lies until a new truth is born. Reality is defined not just by perception, but by enforcing your will upon it."

Franco's radio hissed to life. "Chief Franco," the surveillance officer called out, "comms are in total chaos right now, we're losing control of the situation."

Franco watched as the three red dots on his monitor continued to fan out in separate directions. The blue dots of the security personnel pursued them doggedly, tailing the intruders from behind as their comrades maneuvered to cut off their routes. He raised an eyebrow and hummed.

Franco thumbed his radio. "Pull the reserve teams away from Sector 1 and reinforce the walkways leading to the habitats and generators. The Scrafty and its Trainer are no longer a priority."

“Sir, those men won’t stand a chance without that backup, the intruder and her Scrafty will have full access to the upper—”

“I did not hire you to be an advisor,” Franco spat, “I hired you to ensure my orders are carried out to the letter.”

There was a pause on the other end.

“Yes, sir.”

Franco smiled to himself as he watched the blue dots begin to reposition themselves. Their movements would create a perfect funnel leading directly to the control room.

“Predictable Phos,” he whispered. “Poor, predictable Phos.”

Beads of sweat rolled down Phos’s forehead as she ran with long strides down the raised walkway. Scrafty trailed behind, holding its shed skin up around its waist as it followed after her. They were in the heart of the power plant now, a crisscrossing highway of thin metal walkways and concrete ramparts overlooking a snaking bed of burning hot steampipes far below. Security guards and their Pokémon swarmed across the lower levels, chasing after Emma and Zoroark as they battled through the facility. Octillery served as living turrets, their bulbous red bodies standing in stark contrast to the gentle green lighting around them as they clung to the walls and walkway undersides. The octopus-like Pokémon tracked Emma and her Malamar relentlessly, firing salvo after salvo of pressurized water from their long and narrow mouths. Emma crouched low as she ran forward; Malamar slithered through the air, orbiting around the walkway as it dodged the Octillery’s attacks. Zoroark moved like an acrobat through the steamy lower levels, swinging across insulated pipes and railings with masterful footwork as Murkrow and the Illusion Fox Pokémon dodged around the security guards in their way.

Phos kept her eyes trained on the path in front of her and the steel staircase leading to the next floor. The control room would be just above her now. Phos and Scrafty suddenly staggered off-balance as the raised walkway buckled and began to shake. She heard the crunching of metal as the walkway’s bolts and welding fixtures snapped. Phos looked over her shoulder as she leaned against the guardrail for support. At the far end of the walkway, a four-armed Machamp gripped the railings and floor paneling with its large hands. It tensed its muscles and pulled. The Machamp clenched its teeth and grinned confidently as it hoisted the walkway into the air. Phos gasped as she and Scrafty began to slide down its length, faster and faster as Machamp raised the platform higher.

Phos launched her grappling hook and coiled the rope’s length around the handrail to arrest her fall. “Scrafty,” she shouted, “Dragon Tail!”

Scrafty clambered onto the rail and began to grind down its length on its heels. Its shed skin glided across the smooth metal, shielding Scrafty’s living flesh from the rising friction burn.

Holding its arms out for balance, Scrafty narrowed its eyes as its long tail began to glow with light blue energy. The walkway was almost completely vertical now. Scrafty roared out in defiance and leapt off the rail, spinning through the air as it hurtled toward Machamp. Its tail collided against the Superpower Pokémon's pale blue torso with a thunderous smack that sent Machamp flying backward before crashing through the metal wall behind it.

"Hold on tight," Phos warned.

Scrafty landed back on the walkway and wrapped its arms and legs around the railing as the platform began to fall. The walkway landed on the level beneath with a deafening slam that rattled every bone in Phos's body. The force of the impact knocked one of the Octillery loose from its sniping position, and the Jet Pokémon bounced off of several more floors before its grasping tentacles managed to arrest its fall into the scalding pipeworks below. The falling walkway recoiled and plummeted downward like a spear. Phos watched as one floor after another hurtled past in a blur of motion.

"Get ready, Scrafty," she shouted.

Scrafty nodded and tensed its body.

"Green light, red light... green light, red light... *GO!*"

Phos and Scrafty pushed off of the falling platform and flung themselves onto the walkway in front of them. They rolled to a sudden stop against the railing that left both partners sputtering for breath. Phos flicked her wrist and began to recall her grappling hook. The nylon rope tightened and began to retract, but the hook remained snagged around the falling rail. Phos swore sharply and quickly rolled up her sleeve. The spool buzzed loudly as it quickly unwinded its remaining rope supply. She unlatched the grappling hook from her forearm just as the device was yanked over the edge of the walkway.

"Scrafty," Phos groaned, "are you good?"

Scrafty muttered in warbling gibberish as it staggered to its feet and began to limp to Phos's side. Phos leaned over the rail as she took a deep breath. She watched as a massive Gyarados snaked through the air, gnashing the razor-sharp fangs in its gaping maw as it chased after Malamar. The Overturning Pokémon flailed in all directions as it attempted to evade the Gyarados's assault. The falling walkway slammed down on Gyarados's head, knocking the Atrocious Pokémon out with a bone-crunching blow that left it sprawled limply over another walkway.

Emma looked up in surprise and waved to Phos. "Thank you, Miss Phos," Emma shouted. She continued to run as more guards approached.

Phos pressed two fingers against her forehead and saluted back toward Emma. "Anytime, Miss Phos," Phos shouted back.

The falling walkway tumbled through the air before landing at the bottom of the power plant with an earsplitting boom that shook the entire building. Jets of steam erupted from broken pipes, quickly turning the fallen platform cherry red as the air within the massive hive-like chamber began to shimmer.

A squad of three armored guards blocked the way to the generator room, talking casually among themselves in Galarian accents. Two of the men gripped metal batons while one man stood behind them with a shock gun. The men shouted and flinched away from the crashing walkway as it landed below them.

The man in back aimed his weapon wildly in one hand as he leaned over the railing to inspect the melting fallen platform. The leader of the two men in front watched him nervously. "Oi, be careful where you aim that thing, Ben," the lean man warned.

The larger, muscular man to his left chuckled. "Aim? I wouldn't worry about that."

Ben pushed away from the handrail. "Ah, stuff it, Clayton," he muttered.

Clayton nudged his squadmate with the end of his baton. "Just aim for Tony here if the bad guys show up an' you'll hit one of 'em instead."

"Don't bring me into this," Tony said flatly.

"I wish I had an Electric-Type instead," Ben mumbled, "like a Jolteon or Manectric."

Clayton palmed his baton. "Well, what's stopping ya?"

"Mate, I barely know how to look after m'self," Ben shrugged, "I can't take care of a Pokémon."

"What about one of those Dedenne," Tony asked, "you could just keep it in your pocket."

"Those things are for little girls, you guys would never let me live it down."

"It'd be perfect for you," Clayton grinned.

Tony elbowed Clayton's massive bicep. "Did you see that Gyarados that ol' Renaud has? Now *that's* a Pokémon!"

Clayton growled and rolled his shoulders. "It'll be a sunny day in Wyndon 'fore I praise any man or 'mon from Kalos."

Zoroark and Murkrow rushed into the corridor. The three men instantly snapped into combat stances.

"That's as far as ya go, lass," Clayton boomed.

Tony pressed his fingers against the side of his helmet. "We have eyes on the intruders: One redhead and a Murkrow."

A static-filled voice responded inside their helmets. "Copy that, Delphox Squad is in pursuit."

The metal walkway rattled as more armored boots began to approach Zoroark from behind.

"We have you surrounded," Tony shouted.

Zoroark's illusory Phos clenched her fists. A wolfish grin crept across her face. "Murkrow..." she cooed. Murkrow perched on the handrail and conducted its stick through the air. The rising steam answered Murkrow's summons and condensed into a wall of impenetrable fog that shrouded Zoroark's illusion from view. Zoroark laughed bitterly, a haunting sound that sent chills down the spines of everyone around it. The guards looked around frantically.

"I can't see a thing," Clayton grumbled.

Tony reached toward the swirling wall of steam and quickly pulled his hand back with a yelp of pain as the hot vapor bit into his glove.

A chorus of panicked screams cried out from beyond the fog wall. Metal clattered against metal as men shrieked in terror.

Ben lowered his stun gun and raised a hand to his mouth. "What's going on over there," he shouted. "Delphox Squad?!"

Clayton cupped his mouth. "Marc! Speak to me!"

The words of their comrades were lost in a series of unintelligible sobs and weeping.

Tony lowered his baton and turned to Clayton. The large man quietly dropped his baton to the floor and stared at his shaking hands. "But how," he murmured, "I didn't even feel it."

Ben stepped closer. "Feel what?!"

Tony threw his club over the railing and added his strained voice to the screaming. Desperately, he began to tear off his armor. As he pulled off his equipment, the pink skin beneath began to melt and fall to the floor in large, steaming clumps.

Witnessing this, Ben grabbed Clayton's broad shoulder and pulled him away from the rising steam. "Clay, we have to get away from this heat," he screamed. Ben's skin crawled as Clayton's sloughed arm caved in beneath his hand. Ben cried out in disgust and quickly pulled away, turning tail to save himself from the encroaching steam. As he prepared to run down the walkway, Ben saw Phos's hunched form emerge out of the dense steam. She stepped forward with an uneven gait, her head lolling against her shoulder. She reached up and swept her long

red hair away from her face, revealing a bloody and hollow skull beneath. Ben's legs gave out from underneath him and he curled into a fetal position as he screamed for help.

Beyond the scope of the nightmarish illusion, Zoroark and Murkrow watched as the men lay nearly catatonic with fear. Seven guards incapacitated without a single injury between them. The two Pokémon laughed at their handiwork and pressed on toward the generator room.

Franco leaned on the backrest of his armchair and observed stone-faced as Emma and Malamar dueled against a large-bodied Gourgeist and its Trainer outside the entrance to the R&D labs. Malamar slashed through the hazy air with its bladed fins as the Pumpkin Pokémon faded in and out of the physical realm. Emma slid between her opponent's armored legs and slammed her shoulder into the man's back as she quickly rose to her feet. Elsewhere on his screen, a Vikavolt darted through the air in front of one of the security cameras as it charged up electricity at the end of its long blue-and-yellow mandibles. Just outside of his control room, an Excadrill shouted in a high-pitched cry before a muffled thud reverberated through the floor. A red dot on Franco's map was directly outside of the control room now. Stifled voices, another body dropped. Franco reached for Androgarde's ball at his waist and turned to face his guest.

The door slid open, and Phos entered the room alone. A guard lay unconscious in the hall behind her, his wrists and ankles bound together by a zip tie. Her cheeks were rose-tinted with exertion and her bare skin glistened with sweat. She kissed the middle finger of her gloved hand and blew it toward Franco.

"Hey, Frankie," she winked. She reached for the Pokéballs hanging from her belt. "Step away from the computer and no one gets hurt."

Franco stood his ground. "A battle? In these confines?" He shook his head. "You only have one Pokémon with you. Two at most. You know you'll lose."

Phos smiled innocently. "I don't need to win, I just need to break your stuff. How much of this is insured?"

Franco pursed his lips and exhaled sharply. "Tails, I lose."

Phos chuckled as her fingers hovered over Malamar's Pokéball. "Heads, I win. Sound familiar?"

Franco returned Androgarde's ball. "Let's not act too hastily."

Phos's hand glided away from her belt. She leaned against the cold metal wall and pulled her cropped red jacket from her shoulders. "Mind if I catch my breath for a minute?"

Franco smirked. "Shall I call for refreshments? Extra ice in our drinks for our Unovan guest?"

"That'd be great," Phos sniped back, "why don't you get us something from your *girlfriend's* winery?"

Franco raised an eyebrow. "Is that what she told you?"

Phos shook her head. "No, she told Emma this is where you make your freakshows, and now we're here to shut you down."

"Make them?" Franco tutted. "Were it so easy. Do you even know what we're doing here?"

"Does it matter?"

A panicked voice spoke over Franco's radio. "Chief," the operator shouted, "she's gotten inside the lab!"

Franco walked to his terminal and muted the volume on his radio. He began to quickly type into the keyboard. "It might matter," he told her.

A series of images flashed across his monitor. Franco stepped to the side as Phos craned her neck to see. One by one, Franco rotated through the security camera feeds within the laboratory.

Phos swallowed hard as she stared wide-eyed at the display. "How many of them do you have down there?"

"Well over a hundred specimens at the moment," Franco answered calmly, "the unique properties of the geothermal vents made this facility the perfect holding pen for the anomalies. The natural heat from the vents stimulates the cells of the more organic anomalies, while the electricity produced by the steam fuels whatever engine powers their more cybernetic counterparts. In this way, we can study both varieties in close proximity as we gain a deeper understanding of their biology and quickly transfer the excess specimens that we have no further need for."

Phos crossed her arms over her chest. "What's there to understand? They're monsters, all you need to know is how to put them back where they came from."

Franco furrowed his brow and glanced at Phos over his shoulder. "And let this potential go to waste? Our actions here will shape the world long after you and I are gone, Phos."

He motioned up to the monitor display of an enclosed artificial habitat where a group of pink, round-bodied Bigglyruff huddled together within the sturdy branches of a transplanted mahogany tree. Their long ponytails grasped around the branches above them. "Attempts to pair them with Ditto have all failed, disastrously. Our efforts to clone them with the aid of a distant relative have not achieved a single viable embryo. If we can unlock the secrets within

their genes, properly simulate the conditions needed to breed these Pokémon in captivity, we can abandon all this cloak-and-dagger business for good.”

Franco turned toward Phos and threw his arms out to his sides. “I will return to my homeland as a savior, rebuild its infrastructure from the ground up with the funds I have acquired. I will revolutionize our curriculum—tailored education programs at age ten, a preplanned career path by age twenty. With the full range of the anomalies at their command, Paldean Trainers will spread across the globe, conquering every League, victorious in every tournament, and their winnings will further enrich our renewed society. The world will demand their own anomalies to level the playing field, and the masses will come to me to provide them.”

He held a clenched fist to his mouth to hide the pleased smirk parting his lips. “For a reasonable cost, of course. Empires are not built on empty coffers. This is the treasure I offer to Paldea: a future of uncontested domination. Every man and woman crowned a Champion among Champions.”

Phos was unimpressed. “And until then, you ship out your lab rats to the highest bidder.”

“It’s field marketing,” Franco shrugged.

“It’s finished, Franco. We’re shutting you down today.”

“Somehow, I doubt that.” Franco halfheartedly flipped through the camera feeds. “All these anomalies were theorized to be related to more common species,” he continued. The footage showed more treetop colonies of Bigglyruff.

“Jigglypuff.”

Large moths covered in shaggy white fur stretched their massive orange wings out and basked in the humid heat as they clung to thick tree trunks. In the next feed, robotic and streamlined versions of the same creature hovered in the air, held above a mire of toxic industrial chemicals by a ring of six diamond-shaped wings floating at their sides. The camera feeds were labeled “Mothbrawl” and “Volcarobot.”

“Volcarona.”

Creatures each resembling three yellow-eyed cyclopean orbs clinging together submerged themselves in hot sand pits. The monitor identified it as “Magnodon.”

“Magnetron.”

A colony of tiny chrome-bodied red-and-white Robobird drew power from an electric pylon at the center of a chunk of ice floating in a frigid pool. The small penguin-like machines rotated their heads in a constant clockwork fashion. Phos knew the creature all too well.

“Delibird.”

Large triangular machines resembling a metallic sumo wrestler sat inert in the center of a training gym. Their wide hands clung to the sides of their bulbous thighs like magnets. The corner of Phos's mouth twitched. Alloyama was the second anomaly she had encountered, and yet fighting them never got easier.

"Hariyama."

A blue dragon gorged itself on a large chunk of red meat. Its wide, crescent-shaped red wings draped over its meal like a tent. The thought of another Paleomence on a rampage sent a chill down Phos's spine.

"Salamence."

"Get to the point," Phos snapped.

"Observe the anomalies for any length of time and the comparison to more widely-known species is obvious. Until we discovered a vital piece of the puzzle."

Franco straightened up, rolled his shoulders, and switched the monitor to the next camera display. Within the crisp video feed, a large theropod-like creature stood atop the surface of a deep pool of water. The thick glass walls around it were scarred by deep scratch marks and impacts. Its pupils were narrow black slits in the center of its red irises. Two red discs within its narrow yellow eyes. Its attention was fixated on a school of red-striped Basculin swimming below the long sky-blue feathers and large white talons on its wide feet. A large blue crystalline hexagonal crest grew above its fanged white snout. A massive flowing mane of purple fur tipped with bright orange horns grew from the base of the creature's skull to cover its torso. Its two long and slender tails, each topped with a row of spiny scales, cut through the air like whips as the towering creature tracked its prey. It dunked its head into the water, fishing out a single flailing Basculin that it gripped within the talons of its short forelimbs.

"What is that," Phos whispered.

Franco was unperturbed. "One of our most recent discoveries and our missing un-link, so to speak," he answered, "The very reason why I had to travel here on such short notice. I've settled on the name 'Mesuizoic.' My scientists just shorten it to Messie." He watched with unrestrained enthusiasm as Mesuizoic devoured its food. "With this anomaly's discovery, our previous theories on their origins were shattered. Look at it closely, Phos."

Phos grimaced and turned her head to the side. "I'd rather not," she grumbled.

Franco ignored her. "Look at the horns, the shape of the snout, its twin tails and distinct coloration, the ability to walk on water. In so many ways, it resembles the Legendary Pokémon Suicune, but how can a reptile be related to a mammal? Even for Pokémon, this doesn't add up. I needed answers. A Suicune is under the ownership of a remarkable Trainer here in the Kalos Region, in the southern city of Kiloude. With Miss Rosette's assistance, we were able to acquire a tissue sample from that Suicune, and the results were beyond fascinating: Suicune and

Mesuizoic have almost nothing in common with each other. Less than ten percent of their DNA overlaps. You and I have more in common with single-celled bacteria. What we are seeing here is a most impressive display of convergent evolution."

"But your interest goes beyond the academic."

Franco nodded. "I always vowed I would one day rebuild Paldea. Every anomaly sold on the international market has advanced my plan forward by weeks and months at a time. But a specimen like Mesuizoic will move us forward by decades. It could fund an entire town, a state-of-the-art hospital. The possibilities are endless."

Phos studied him closely and stepped forward. "Seems like you've got it all figured out," she said. "How can I be sure that money's going to the right places?"

Franco reached out his hand. "You can take your place at my side," he answered, "I can build for you a future where we don't have to fight. With your help, I can build a world where we don't have to hide in the shadows, where we can have a paradise for the two of us."

Phos smiled. "Sounds tempting." She sighed and shrugged. "To tell you the truth, Franco, I don't know how much fight I have left in me at this point. I'm tired." She motioned toward the monitors. "I look at what you're doing here and I have to wonder what I've been accomplishing all this time. I see myself in the mirror and this isn't the life I wanted."

"Join me," Franco urged, "and I can give you everything you've ever dreamed of."

Phos crossed her arms over her chest and closed her eyes. "Before I do, let me ask you, Franco: how many hospitals have you built so far?"

He retracted his hand and furrowed his brows. "What?"

"How many houses have you built, what businesses have you invested in?"

"It's not that simple, I can't reveal my hand too—"

Phos raised her hand dismissively. "Fair enough. How many fancy dinners have your freakshows paid for, then? How much of it went toward wooing some young girl in a miniskirt?"

Franco stepped forward. "I would never," he claimed. He held Phos by her waist. The feel and warmth of her soft skin quickened his pulse. "Though I wouldn't mind seeing *you* in a miniskirt."

She rolled her eyes and continued speaking. "Oh, don't lie to me, little man. You're nothing but selfish."

Franco's mouth twitched. "Selfish? You have no idea how much I've sacrific—"

She jabbed a finger into his rib. "You're a fraud, Franco."

He grabbed her hand and wrapped his fingers around hers. "Will you just listen—"

Phos pulled her hand away. "I've heard enough."

He grit his teeth. "Phos... you are testing my patience."

Phos leered down at him and laughed bitterly. "Why, you're nothing more than a two-faced, lying thief."

"Phos..."

She leaned in closer. Her breath was hot against his ear. "A cheating scumbag."

Franco clenched his jaw. "I'm warning you..."

"You never wanted to help your homeland, you just wanted to pretend to be king."

Franco's hand shot up toward Phos's throat and lifted her off the ground. "Phos," Franco shouted. He lowered his voice to a strict hiss. "*Will you just shut up already?*"

She winced and grunted as the back of her head bounced off of the metal wall behind her. Her angular blue sunglasses clattered to the floor. A rush of heat traveled down Phos's spine as Franco tightened his grip. Her pupils dilated. He pressed closer with his body. Their hearts hammered within their chests. Phos bit her lip and squeezed her fingers around Franco's bicep. She wrapped her long legs around Franco's waist as he pinned her against the wall. "Make me," she purred.

Franco pressed his lips against hers. The lovers tasted the familiar recesses of each other's mouths as Phos's body was gripped with ecstasy. Her gloved hand combed the back of his slicked-back hair, holding his head in place as they kissed. They broke off the kiss and leaned their foreheads together, gazing into each other's eyes. The sound of their feral panting urged them to go further. She ripped the buttons of Franco's suit jacket and shirt apart. She pressed the palm of her bare hand over his sculpted pectoral muscles and curled her fingers inward to rake her nails down his bare chest. Franco moved his warm hands down the contours of her pale body and squeezed the back of Phos's thighs as he held her body aloft. She tightened her leglock around his torso and crushed the air out of his lungs. Franco staggered backward and hip-slammed her into the wall.

Phos gasped and grit her teeth as he thrust his pelvis into her. "Harder," she demanded.

The next impact caused her legs to quiver and slide down from Franco's waist. Franco set her back down on her feet and pulled her red jacket free before tossing it to the ground. She pulled his white suit jacket loose and flung it across the room onto the terminal keyboard. Phos tugged at the collar of his black shirt and sank her teeth into his neck, leaving a fresh red welt above his collarbone. Franco grunted and yanked her hair back along with her head. He slid his fingers below her suspender straps and peeled them from her shoulders. Her dark leather pants

slid down from her waist and fell below her knees. Franco slapped her exposed backside forcefully and dug his fingertips into her flesh. Phos yelped and melted into his touch. He cradled her body and carried her across the room as she rested her chin against his broad shoulder. Franco dropped her into his armchair. Phos landed with a bounce and kicked her pants free from her ankles.

Phos parted her ruffled hair and looked up at Franco. "Admit it," she moaned, "you *missed* this."

Franco looked down at her and smirked. "I won't give you the satisfaction," he replied.

Phos pressed her heel against his belt buckle. "You never do, but I admire the enthusiasm."

Franco pushed her leg out of his way and shook his head. "Is that so? And all those times you've come undone in my arms?"

Phos narrowed her eyes and grinned. "Refresh my memory."

He bent down and reached for the zipper on Phos's top.

She grabbed Franco by his necktie and wagged her finger. "Uh-uh-uh," she said in a singsong voice. Phos pulled his head down. "Use your teeth."

Franco steadied himself on the armrests as he leaned over her. He kissed her collarbone, licked her skin, and clamped his front teeth around her zipper. He savored the metallic rasp of her top slowly opening up, culminating in the subtle, barely-audible *click* of the zipper coming apart. Franco gradually dropped to his knees as he kissed her down the center of her abdomen. Her muscles clenched as he approached her navel.

Phos dug her nails into the back of Franco's head and locked him in place with her thighs. "Oh yeah," she gasped out, "right there!" As Franco kissed and licked the tender contours her midriff, Phos peered over her shoulder and reached her right hand under Franco's jacket. "That feels so right," she moaned over the sounds of the keyboard as she surfed through the security feed. Phos giggled as Franco moved lower.

"Poor, predictable Franco," She thought.

Security cameras in the deepest bowels of the power plant monitored Zoroark and Murkrow as they approached the sensitive machinery sustaining the facility's electrical supply. Massive overhead ducts delivered steam to droning magnetic turbines. A large orange box jutted out of the front of each station. Zoroark dropped its disguise and prowled forward on all four limbs while Murkrow studied the tall circuit breakers along the chamber's far wall. Malicious dark energy flared across Zoroark's arms. Murkrow raised its stick into the air and conjured a crackling wave of electricity. The two Pokémon unleashed their attacks from the center of the room. Waves of black sorcery scythed into the generators, destroying the machine's innards in a

brilliant flash of light. Murkrow overloaded the man-sized circuit breaker boxes with flickering arcs of conjured electricity. Wisps of smoke from burnt wiring wafted into the air. Zoroark raised both claws overhead and sent a pulse of dark energy toward the power plant's transformer box, and the camera feed went black.

A moment later, the entire control room went pitch black as the facility lost its power supply. A faint white light flickered to life above the door.

Franco immediately pushed away from Phos and rose to his feet. He reached for the radio and tuned the dial on its front. "All security units, report to the labs for immediate containment protocols," Franco commanded, "send engineering and maintenance teams to the generator chamber as soon as possible, all research teams are required to seal themselves in the nearest panic room until a security team arrives to provide escort detail. Travel in groups, do not leave any personnel on their own for any length of time. Report any and all anomaly activity."

Franco hurriedly buttoned up his shirt and reached for his jacket.

Phos placed her fingertip on the edge of her lower lip. "D'aww, and we were just getting to the good part."

Franco inhaled sharply and clenched his fists. "Now is not the time, Phos."

She sighed and zipped her top closed. "What's the matter? Are your superior freaks afraid of the dark?"

"No," Franco growled, "their habitats were sealed by electric locks. There's nothing stopping them from escaping now."

The building shuddered as powerful attacks rattled the walls and floors beyond the control room. Franco thumbed through the radio channels; each frequency painted a similarly chaotic picture as the Macro Cosmos security guards coordinated their efforts.

Franco turned to Phos and raised an eyebrow. "Do you feel like a hero yet?"

Phos retrieved her pants and jacket and began to dress herself. "What can we do to stop them?"

Franco walked past her to the door. He bent down and recovered the fallen sunglasses, tucking them in his breast pocket alongside his silk pocket square. "We need to get outside," he stated, "prevent the anomalies from escaping into the wild."

Phos leaned over the radio on the desktop and cleared her throat. "Emma," Phos's voice echoed across the power plant's speakers, "there's been a change of plans." She took a deep breath. "I'm going to be working with Franco now. Help his grunts get those things back in their cages. Don't let any of them escape. Zoroark? Murkrow? Come back to me. Retrace your steps, choose your battles. I'll be waiting for you outside."

Phos turned away from the radio and nodded to Franco. Franco pulled the control room door open and hastened to the zip tied guard outside. He grabbed the man's legs and dragged him back inside the control room.

He turned to Phos. "Phos!"

Phos extended the razor from her glove and sliced through the zip tie.

The guard looked at the two bewildered. "Chief, what's going on?"

"Stay here, Rubio," Franco commanded. He and Phos exited the room and closed the door behind them.

Franco and Phos navigated the twisting corridor by the dim emergency lights lining the walls. The long hallway echoed with the distant sounds of combat as Pokémon shrieked and roared and exchanged attacks.

"Didn't take 'em long, huh," Phos muttered.

"The anomalies are... strong-willed," Franco explained, "They require a capable Trainer to rein in their wild natures. Not unlike you."

"Oh, bite me," Phos spat.

"And reward your bad behavior?"

The floor began to rumble, a steady drumroll that increased in intensity. Phos and Franco tensed up and silently reached for their Pokéballs.

Franco pointed to the darkened corridor further ahead to his left. "Mind that intersection," he whispered.

The rumbling reached a crescendo as a trio of small red-and-black spheres raced forward out of the dark and slammed into the opposite wall in a flash of white sparks. The spheres rolled to a stop. Four stout mechanical legs emerged from their undersides as the red-glowing treads unfurled. A large black spade jutted out of the spheres on each side of their treads, and two wickedly-curving tusks pointed upward on either side of a flat faceplate. Red LED eyes narrowed as the robotic creatures rotated to face the two humans across from them.

Franco and Phos threw their Pokéballs in tandem.

"Go, Malamar!"

"Abaddonphan!"

Malamar emerged from its ball and slowly levitated to the ground. To its left, a massive, elephant-like creature stomped forward. Jagged pink spikes lined the thick purple armor that

covered its long trunk and extended down to the creature's reptilian tail. Its huge ivory tusks curled upward and pointed down toward its narrow yellow eyes. It stamped its forelegs, rustling the pink tufts of fur growing around its three claws, and trumpeted a deep battle cry. The three bestial robots raised their mechanical trunks and answered Abaddonphan's challenge with their own sharp-pitched trumpeting.

"Ugh, these things again," Phos groaned, "Malamar! Night Slash!"

Malamar levitated off the ground and began floating forward as its bladed tentacles began to glow a dark shade of blue. The cyborgs folded their stubby legs back into their spherical bodies and rushed past Malamar's attack at blistering speeds to hone in on Franco's Pokémon.

Abaddonphan parried the first attacker with its tusks, batting it away and sending the foe skidding down the corridor. The second assailant slammed into Abaddonphan's unarmored jaw, sending the larger anomaly staggering backward. The third foe rammed into Abaddonphan's exposed flank and bounced off its thick hide. Abaddonphan shook its body and coiled its trunk into a wide fist to swat its opponent away.

Franco pointed his finger forward and shouted: "Close Combat!"

Abaddonphan slammed its heavy forelegs down on the third cyborg, burying its metal body partially into the floor beneath the larger Pokémon's weight. The other robots rushed to its aid as their pinned comrade cried out. As they attempted to ram their enemy again, Abaddonphan swung its clenched trunk in a wide sweep, slamming the closest mechanical creature into the wall. Abaddonphan then charged and met its second opponent head-on, jabbing its trunk forward to halt the metal sphere's momentum with a thundering slam that left the smaller anomaly spinning in a daze. Franco's Pokémon followed up with a fierce hook that launched its foe through the air toward Malamar. The Overturning Pokémon gasped in surprise and swatted the incoming projectile down with its bladed arms.

Continuing its assault, Abaddonphan lunged its trunk toward the remaining spherical robot. It grabbed the smaller Pokémon in its trunk and squeezed with crushing force that sent red sparks shooting out of the mechanical being's straining body. Abaddonphan bellowed loudly and repeatedly slammed its grappled opponent into its ally planted in the floor, hammering the small sphere deeper and deeper until the red lights running across their bodies faded. The triumphant Pokémon tossed its defeated foe aside and trumpeted again, daring another challenger to approach.

Malamar shot a sideways glance toward its Trainer.

"Wow," Phos said wide-eyed, "they don't like each other much, huh."

Franco shook his head. "The two different categories of anomalies tolerate each other as well as Barraskewda and Finizen."

Phos cocked her head. "In Unovan?"

"Red- and blue-striped Basculin," he said flatly, "they can be quite social within their own category."

"Ah. Gotcha." Phos gently nudged one of the disabled robots with the tip of her foot. "What do we do with them?"

Franco continued forward, Abaddonphan glared at Phos and Malamar as it followed after its master. "Their threat is neutralized," Franco said, "we have more important things to worry about."

Phos held her breath and pressed flat against the corridor wall. She leaned around the corner and scanned the room beyond. The floor was covered in broken glass and shattered office furniture. One of the large, shaggy moth-like Pokémon stood on its hindlegs using its thick abdomen to balance as it screeched at its opponent and stretched its shimmering orange wings out. A large, floating chrome hand buzzing with electricity thrust forward, smashing the flat of its palm into the giant bug's torso.

The hand's owner, one of the large triangular-shaped androids, stood poised out of its opponent's reach. As one floating hand retracted, it launched its second hand forward, striking its foe between the eyes.

Phos leaned away and reported back to Franco. "One Mothbrawl, one Alloyama," she stated.

A high-pitched shriek, a crack of thunder. Phos leaned back around the corner as Mothbrawl grabbed onto Alloyama's floating palm and rode it back toward its foe. The yellow lights behind Alloyama's tinted faceplate narrowed. It spiked its palm down into the ground, pinning Mothbrawl in place as the force of the impact sent cracks snaking across the floor. Alloyama trudged forward as Mothbrawl thrashed its body and wings to free itself. The large android's foot surged with crackling yellow electricity before stomping down on Mothbrawl's abdomen. Electricity arced across the bug Pokémon's body and traveled across the floor as the pinned creature convulsed and went limp.

Phos motioned Malamar forward. "Now!"

Franco patted Abaddonphan's back. The large creature curled up into a wheel and rolled ahead of Malamar, racing toward Alloyama as it stepped away from its defeated opponent. Its yellow LED eyes blinked rapidly as it spun its hands toward the newcomer to block its attack. As Abaddonphan pushed against Alloyama's hands, Malamar quickly levitated forward. The Overturning Pokémon raised its bladed fin, steeped in purple psychic energy, and slashed down across Alloyama's tiny head. The android's large body flinched, the yellow energy glowing across its body faded, and the Pokémon slumped to the ground with a loud clang.

Franco and Phos followed their Pokémon into the destroyed room.

"So," Phos grinned, "you and Azelie, huh?"

Franco threw his hands out to his sides and motioned toward the wreckage all around them. "Do you want to do it here? Now?"

Phos looked down at Mothbrawl and Alloyama. She cocked her head to the side. "In front of company?" She lowered her voice to a sultry purr. "Kinky."

Franco's nose curled. "Don't twist my words."

"I'll bet you've got a girl in every Region, don't you?"

Franco began to navigate across the dark room. "If we take a right at this upcoming corridor, we'll be in the ground-level offices," he stated, "The visitor center and main entrance is just beyond. We'll stand guard there." Franco knelt in front of a pile of rubble where the ceiling had collapsed overhead. He peered into the corridor beyond and tentatively pulled at a bent girder. "Abaddonphan, help me move this."

The large elephant-like anomaly approached the steel girder and shoved it aside, working to sift through the debris alongside its Trainer.

Malamar glowered at the back of Franco's head and flexed its bladed arms. Phos gently brushed her fingers through the squirming tentacles atop Malamar's head as they watched Franco and his Pokémon do the heavy-lifting.

"C'mon," Phos teased, "the secret's out now, you can tell me. We're all adults here."

Franco paused. He reached over and pressed his palm against Abaddonphan's trunk.

"I promise I won't be mad," Phos lied.

"Quiet," Franco hissed.

Phos smirked. "Oh, this again? Don't you want to mix things up—"

"There's something coming."

The quartet held their breath in silence as large footfalls echoed beyond the debris. Franco crouched low, taking cover behind the pile of rubble. A flickering orange light began to shine through the gaps in the debris. Each approaching footstep quaked beneath their feet as the unknown threat stomped up the corridor. A baritone voice growled.

Franco leaned toward a small gap and watched. As the bright orange light illuminating his face rose in intensity, he looked back toward Phos with a grimace and scythed his hand

across his throat. The steady footsteps became louder as the creature stomped through the intersection.

A piece of debris fell from the ceiling and clattered against the floor. The creature beyond loosed a guttural, echoing roar.

"Move," Franco bellowed, "Get out of the way, now!"

Franco and Abaddonphan flung themselves away from the debris pile. Malamar wrapped its long arms around Phos and pulled her through the air as it levitated toward the side of the room.

Blazing gouts of fire erupted through the gaps in the rubble pile. The debris turned a bright shade of orange, then pink as it illuminated the entire room. The melting pile exploded, propelling burning clumps of detritus across the room in a massive pillar of fire. The whole room smoldered long after the gout of fire dissipated. A massive quadrupedal beast stood in the center of the intersection at the far end of the corridor. Narrow purple eyes glared into the room, scanning for movement. Two gray saber-like fangs hung low beneath a tall crown of jagged golden horns whose ridges were nearly twice Phos's height. Glowing embers covered the creature's thick brown fur. A jagged gray ridge extended down its spine toward the billowing cloud of white smoke tailing behind it. Each movement of its massive body caused the three sharp claws on its paws to scrape sparks across the floor. With a fierce roar, the beast shook its head and stomped up the hallway.

"Phos," Franco hissed, "are you alright?"

Phos climbed out of Malamar's grasp and brushed an ember from her shoulder with a trembling hand. "What was that?"

Franco and Abaddonphan crept toward the doorway. He stood up straight and waved Phos forward. "One of three of our latest discoveries along with Mesuizoic," Franco answered. Abaddonphan shuddered and took point as the group moved down the hall. "I call it Enteratops."

Phos sidled up to Franco as they followed the burning hot footsteps of the anomaly.

"Tell me before I die," she ran her glove down her hourglass frame, "do you just like girls with wide hips or is it the outfit that does it for you?"

Franco grunted in irritation. "Are you going to keep bringing this up?"

"Azelle's a sweet girl once you get to know her," Phos smiled. "Stuck a knife in you while your back was turned, so at least you two have something in common."

Franco sighed and massaged his furrowed eyebrows. "It's not like that," he grumbled, "my relationship with Miss Rosette was strictly business. She was my client, and I needed her connections to advance our understanding of the anomalies."

Phos raised an eyebrow. "Strictly business? Then what was that outside the nightclub? Just what kind of business are you running if you need to hold your clients like that?"

The building shook. Enteratops's sonorous roar echoed at deafening volumes throughout the power plant.

"We don't have time for this," Franco said. He broke into a brisk run and Abaddonphan followed suit. "We can't let Enteratops get too far ahead of us."

A burning path of destruction carved a direct line through the center of the power plant's offices. Cubicles, desks, and file cabinets were trampled and set ablaze as Enteratops smashed through the thin walls. Intense daylight filtered into the office space where the window shades had been torn down. The building continued to quake with the sounds of battle raging further underground. A green-and-black cyborg resembling a compact Tyranitar lay collapsed on the floor as Franco and Phos approached. The light green glowing panels across its body and spines went dark as the creature's metallic body went inert.

Franco knelt beside it and inspected the burning hot slash wounds across its torso. "A Tyranitron had made it all this way," he commented.

"Clever thing must have made a break for the entrance as soon as it got free," Phos replied.

Further ahead, Enteratops bellowed another booming roar that rose in pitch to a sharp howl. The building shook as a distant wall collapsed.

Phos and Franco sprinted into the wide, cylindrical lobby of the power plant's entrance. Harsh sunlight poured into the lobby where the building's outer wall had been obliterated by the massive creature's charge. The bright light illuminated the thick clouds of dust rolling across the room. Falling debris rained down in large chunks, rolling off of Enteratops's rigid head frill. The massive creature shook the debris from its head and snorted loudly. Its narrow eyes peered out into the badlands as it raised a massive paw and prepared to step outside.

Franco returned Abaddonphan to its ball and reached for the pearl-white Pokéball next to it. "Enteratops," Franco shouted.

The large beast turned away from the hole in the wall and bared its long fangs. The dust floating in the air began to burn a bright shade of orange.

Franco threw his Pokéball forward. When the light faded, Androgarde stood in the center of the lobby. The edges of the lithe android's green helmet and white coattails began to glow with an intense pink light. The black faceplate surged to life as two large pink eyes mechanically locked onto its opponent. It disconnected the glowing pink blades from its gauntlets and extended its glaive pole. The android Pokémon aimed its bladed weapon toward Enteratops's

neck, every precise motion of the glaive accompanied by a sharp whistle as the blades sliced through the air.

Phos shuddered watching the android prepare for battle. Its uncanny movements were simultaneously too stiff and far too smooth. As Androgarde readied its glaive, there was no distinction between the weapon and its wielder. Its entire body was a weapon constructed in the shape of a Gallade.

"You are going back," Franco vowed, "If I have to carry you over my shoulders."

Enteratops roared and sprinted forward, its sharp claws sent burning embers scattering across the floor with each step.

"Androgarde," Franco commanded, "Close Combat!"

The android sprinted with long strides to meet Enteratops. The large creature's claws began to glow with an intense blue light as it charged. It reared up on its hind legs and lunged, bringing its claws down toward Androgarde's narrow frame. Androgarde raised its glaive up in front of it and braced as its opponent brought its full weight down on its front paws. Androgarde dropped to one knee and pushed back. The bright pink hollow core on its chest surged with light, instantly snuffing out the draconic energy around Enteratops's claws. Androgarde sprang upward, slamming its metal kneecap into its opponent's chin. As Enteratops staggered back, Androgarde spun its glaive upward, forcing its opponent to go on the defensive.

Androgarde's body spun with the momentum of its attack, pirouetting on its heels into a swift strike aimed at the side of its opponent's head. Enteratops tilted its jagged horns to shield its eye and pushed the android away. As its feet skidded across the cracked floor tiles, Androgarde aimed its next attack and sliced down across the pointed red crest covering Enteratops's opposite cheek. The massive beast quickly turned its head and slammed its shield-like frill into its opponent's torso, loosing a burst of pink light from Androgarde's core.

The android countered quickly, pushing the pole of its glaive against the bladelike golden horns before stepping to the side and cleaving another glowing-pink slash across the side of its opponent's body. Enteratops swatted Androgarde with a paw wreathed in fire, sending the android tumbling across the room before it was able to right itself.

Malamar levitated forward, cloaking its bladed fins in psychic energy.

Phos placed her hand over Malamar's torso. "Don't get near those blades when it's moving around like that," she warned.

Enteratops roared and charged forward again. Its shaggy brown fur ignited with crimson fire as it honed in on Androgarde. Androgarde telescoped its glaive pole and socketed the blades back into its gauntlets. The android sprinted forward and dived beneath Enteratops as the larger beast charged forward, slashing its blade tips on the underside of its opponent's armored legs before somersaulting back onto its feet as it emerged behind its opponent.

Enteratops roared out in pain and collapsed to the ground, digging deep grooves through the floor with its saber-like fangs before it could climb back to its feet. It shook off the pain and turned to face its foe. The beast lowered its head frill close to the ground to shield its underside and charged forward again.

Androgarde's expressionless eyes studied its enemy closely. It extended its glaive pole again and inserted a single blade. Pointing the tool forward like a spear, the android planted its metal feet onto the ground and braced to receive its opponent's tackle. The blade's tip erupted into a shower of sparks as it clashed against Enteratops's burning frill. The beast roared and thrust its head upward as it slid to a halt. Androgarde pushed against its glaive and vaulted into the air over its opponent's head, bringing its bladed forearm down to scythe across the gray ridges jutting down the creature's back. Androgarde rolled to its feet behind the billowing smoke flowing from its foe's tail. Wisps of fire poured out of Enteratops's mouth as it quickly spun in place and turned to crush the android between its fangs. Androgarde rotated to meet it head on, jabbing forward with a swift punch that reverberated across the room as metal rang out against the burning creature's nose.

Enteratops staggered backward and began to slowly circle around its foe. Androgarde remained stock still as its LED eyes followed its opponent. It held its glaive out to its sides as it stood in front of the hole leading outside. A hot and arid wind whistled through the lobby from the badlands beyond.

Enteratops leapt backward and bellowed an ear-splitting, high-pitched howl. Its challenge was answered by an equally-sharp cry that reverberated with a metallic twang. Phos and Franco quickly turned toward the source of the noise as metal hooves galloped down a darkened side hallway. A pink light grew in intensity as it approached.

Phos patted her Pokémon on the side. "Malamar, head it off," she commanded.

Malamar quickly sprung into action, slithering through the air and stretching its body out in front of the corridor's entrance.

The creature that emerged resembled a robotic green antelope; small and streamlined. Two long green horns extended like smooth wings on either side of the creature's head while two leaf-like blades extended from its long, segmented neck. Glowing pink energy coursed across the contours of the creature's mechanical body down to the black tips of its four flat feet.

Its smooth forehead surged with pink light as a massive sword extended from its head. The blades on its neck extended outward with a sharp *click* as they left a trail of pink energy in the air behind them. Malamar cloaked its long arms in darkness as it grappled onto the blades on the creature's neck. The cyborg bucked and kicked to shake the Overturning Pokémon loose. Malamar tightened its grip in response. The mechanical Pokémon flung its body to the side, slamming Malamar into the wall before trampling the squid-like creature under its hooves. Its glowing red electronic eyes were locked onto Enteratops as the robot retracted its swords and galloped into the lobby.

“That thing looks like Virizion,” Phos gasped. She turned the side of her head toward Franco while keeping her eyes focused on the newly-arrived cyborg. “What do you call this one?”

“Cyberizion,” Franco answered flatly.

Cyberizion stamped its front hoof down and cried out. A pillar of intense fire erupted from Enteratops's maw as it howled back. Cyberizion dashed forward immediately, extending its swords once again. Enteratops's head frill became wreathed in fire as it braced to receive Cyberizion's attack.

Cyberizion's footfalls rang out across the lobby with each step, a rapid drumbeat of metal pistons slamming against the floor tiles. Phos held a hand up to her ear. Beneath the sharp hammering, a deeper baritone was sending tremors across the floor. Phos glanced over her shoulder and gasped. She grabbed Franco by the shoulders and flung their bodies to the side as a swirling vortex of turquoise-colored energy shot through the air above them and slammed into Cyberizion's side. The green robot staggered to the side from the force of the impact and collapsed to the ground with a sharp cry of surprise.

Mesuizoic stomped out of the ruined offices. Its long hexagonal crest atop its head dug grooves in the ceiling that caused rubble to become trapped within its long purple mane. Its light blue scales were marked with dozens of fresh wounds, and a large cut marred its white underbelly. The huge theropod-like creature stepped past the two humans below it with long strides of its powerful hindlegs as it growled at Cyberizion. Enteratops briefly glanced at the new arrival before turning its burning fangs back toward its foe.

As it climbed back to its feet, Cyberizion's head snapped back and forth between the two reptilian giants closing in on it. Its LED eyes flared at the sight of Mesuizoic's approach. The quadrupedal machine pivoted instantly and began to charge toward Androgarde.

“Don't let it through,” Franco bellowed.

Androgarde quickly held its glaive up to block Cyberizion's charge. Cyberizion cleaved downward with the blade atop its head. The glowing pink blade sliced through the glaive pole, leaving a deep gash across Androgarde's torso as Cyberizion continued to race past into the open world outside. Androgarde dropped the separated halves of its glaive and clattered to its knees as the pink light within its core faded to black. Its eyes looked up toward its Trainer before flickering out. Enteratops roared and chased after its rival. Mesuizoic barked out a rumbling baritone and howled sharply as it dropped low and began to sprint across the lobby to follow after them.

Phos and Franco scrambled to their feet and ran across the room, splitting off in different directions. Phos knelt at Malamar's side and helped her Pokémon off the ground.

“All good,” she asked.

Malamar nodded confidently.

Phos reached for Malamar's ball. "Good. Take a minute to rest up."

Franco returned Androgarde to its ball and took a deep breath.

"I had its full attention," Franco sighed, "my strategy was perfect."

Phos clicked her tongue as she placed Malamar's ball on her hip and walked toward Franco. "And then your old flame saw something new and left you behind. And Messie saw the two of them together and wanted a fight." She placed her hands behind her back and leaned toward Franco with a wide grin. "Maybe we should call Azelie and see if she's available."

Franco swept his fingers through his hair and groaned. "Alright! You've made your point," he snarled, "You want to know the truth? The truth is there is no other woman, there could never be another woman. No other woman is capable of making me feel the way you do. No one else can ever hold my interest the way you do."

He jabbed a finger toward her as Phos straightened up and crossed her arms over her chest.

"You have ruined the very idea of other women for me," Franco continued, "and try as I might, I cannot bring myself to let you go. *There*. Are you happy? Can we stop wasting time?"

Phos raised an eyebrow. "Happy? No." A gentle smile spread across her lips. "But it does feel nice to hear you say that. Let's—"

"Miss Phos!"

Franco and Phos turned their attention to the side corridor where Cyberizion had emerged. Emma sprinted down the hall with her Malamar following closely behind. The two were covered in dirt and dust.

Emma looked around frantically. "You're actually working with him...?"

"You should be more careful about who you trust, detective," Franco said, "Phos is only loyal to what she wants."

"There's no time for this," Emma shouted, "did you see a green robot with a pink sword run by here?"

Phos waved her hand toward the sunlight pouring in through the hole in the wall. "Detective," Phos said, "your sleuthing skills really were taught by the best."

Phos, Emma, and Franco sprinted out into the badlands. The howling wind yanked at the dry scrub plants poking out of the barren earth. Phos shielded her eyes from the blowing dust and intense sunlight burning overhead. Franco wordlessly unfolded the sunglasses from his pocket and handed them to Phos.

Mesuizoic headbutted a wide-brimmed steam collector out of its way and leapt atop a geyser of rising steam. It shook its mane and tracked Cyberizion as the small anomaly galloped away from the metal confines of the power plant. Mesuizoic opened its sharp maw wide and a torrent of water gushed out of its throat. The air shimmered around the flood of water as it arced toward the mechanical quadruped. Cyberizion darted out of the way with light footwork and continued to zigzag through the parched terrain. Enteratops bounded after it, snorting wisps of fire as it panted for breath. The green cyborg widened the gap between them with each passing moment.

Franco studied its movements carefully. "It's heading directly toward Lumiose City," he said.

Phos watched as Enteratops and Mesuizoic continued to chase after it. "And it's not going to be alone," she replied. "How do we catch up with it?"

Emma bounced on her heels and lifted her knees up high. "Leave that to me," she answered. She reached for her Pokéballs and released a Crobat in a burst of light. The large purple bat-like Pokémon spread its four wings wide and turned its large yellow eyes toward its Trainer.

Emma nodded to Phos. "Miss Phos." She turned toward Franco and winced behind her dirtied orange visor. "Uh, Mister Franco."

Franco gave a subtle tilt of his chin. "Detective."

"Crobat and I will chase down the green one—"

"Cyberizion," Phos added.

"Right. Can I count on the two of you to stop the others?"

Phos reached for Malamar's Pokéball and nodded. "You can trust me."

Franco said nothing. He reached for Abaddonphan's Pokéball and gripped it tightly as he began to run toward the anomalies.

"That's his way of saying yes," Phos shrugged. "Good luck, detective."

Emma grabbed onto Crobat's lower set of wings and tucked her knees into her chest as the Bat Pokémon took flight. The detective and her Pokémon were a blur of purple and black lines as they left the others in their wake.

Franco hurled Abaddonphan's ball forward. "Rapid Spin," he commanded.

The ball popped open in midair. Abaddonphan emerged and immediately tucked into a large purple-and-gray wheel. Its large curving tusks pushed off the ground and Abaddonphan rolled forward, gaining more and more momentum with each rotation. Its spiked purple armor bore a wide channel through the dry ground as it honed in on Enteratops. Abaddonphan slammed into the back of the larger creature's hindleg and bounced away as Enteratops roared and lunged backward to bring its claws down on its next opponent. Mesuizoic answered its ally's cry by breathing a stream of fire that swept after Abaddonphan. The rolling Pokémon leaned to the side and kicked up a towering cloud of dust as it evaded the brightly-glowing Flamethrower.

"Malamar," Phos shouted, "grab onto the blue one and hold on tight!"

The Overturning Pokémon slithered through the air and reached its tentacles out toward Mesuizoic's billowing purple mane. Malamar dropped down and coiled the tentacles atop its head around the thick fur, clamping into place just behind the theropod-like creature's head. Mesuizoic turned its head and attempted to scrape Malamar loose with its large crystalline horns. Malamar pressed its boneless body flat against Mesuizoic's back and squeezed as the large Pokémon tried to shake it off.

"Now, Night Slash!"

Malamar's long bladed arms became cloaked in a dark energy that absorbed the searing light around it into oblivion. It began to spin its two arms like windmills, scything across the sides of Mesuizoic's body and slicing into its blue scales.

Mesuizoic roared out in pain and stomped toward Enteratops. The quadrupedal beast turned away from Abaddonphan and began to channel a violent orb of fire in its mouth.

"Rapid Spin, aim for the head!"

Abaddonphan obeyed its Trainer, continuing to roll through the barren soil. It careened toward the side of Enteratops's gaping jaws and slammed into its opponent's head with a thunderous impact. The fireball arced far away from its intended target and exploded against the side of the canyon wall.

Mesuizoic continued to race toward its partner as Malamar slashed at its flanks. The large anomaly hunched low to the ground and roared. Enteratops roared back and ignited the golden crown atop its head. Mesuizoic leaned to the side and pressed its back against the burning frill, pinning Malamar in the middle. The Overturning Pokémon screamed out as the fire seared into its flesh.

Phos followed closely behind, sprinting after the battling Pokémon. She gripped Malamar's ball tightly within her glove as she thumbed the button on its front. "Malamar," she screamed, "come back to me, now!"

The red recall beam arced through the air and tagged Malamar's burning body. Mesuizoic and Enteratops collided together as Malamar was returned to its ball. Phos clutched the Pokéball close to her hammering heart and breathed a sigh of relief. Mesuizoic shook the embers from its mane as it and Enteratops bared their fangs toward the vulnerable human in front of them.

"Earthquake," Franco shouted.

Abaddonphan rolled to a stop and unfurled its body. It reared up on its thick hindlegs and trumpeted loudly. It slammed its front feet deep into the ground, sending a massive pulse of bright orange energy through the earth that split the terrain in front of it. The orange energy spread out into a wide arc that churned the ground and sent bright orange beams of light erupting from deepening crevices and fault lines. The ground shifted beneath Mesuizoic and Enteratops, throwing the two hostile Pokémon off-balance. The earth exploded upward in a violent shower of glowing dirt and stone, hurling the large anomalies into the air before crashing back down in a thick plume of rolling dirt.

Franco waved urgently. "Phos," he bellowed, "get over here! Now!"

Phos ran, vaulting over the deep rifts in the ground as she retreated away from the battle.

A torrent of scalding water blasted through the cloud of dirt, narrowly missing Phos's left side. She screamed as a wave of boiling, pressurized air knocked her to the ground. The gout of water drilled deeply into the dry earth ahead of her, washing away layers of dust, dirt, and stone. Phos threw her arms over the back of her head as burning hot droplets rained down onto her neck. She began to hyperventilate as the attack brought all too painful memories to the forefront of her mind.

Franco grit his teeth and snarled in frustration. "Abaddonphan," he screamed, "stop that thing!"

Abaddonphan charged forward with a steady gait, its long ears pressed close against the side of its head as it hastened toward Mesuizoic. As the dust in the air began to settle, the burning crown of Enteratops's frill ignited again, and the large beast leapt forward to intercept the smaller anomaly opposing it.

The two Pokémon crashed into each other with enough force to send dust rolling across the ground in a wide circle around them. Tusks clashed horns as both combatants planted their feet into the ground and shoved against one another. Abaddonphan balled the tip of its trunk into a thick fist and jabbed forward, punching Enteratops in its eye. Enteratops winced away from the blow and channeled more fire into the tips of its horns. The crackling inferno lashed out at Abaddonphan, scorching its armored hide black. Abaddonphan howled a sharp cry of pain and began to slide backward through the dirt.

Franco squeezed his fists and snarled. "Hold your ground! I trained you better than this!"

Abaddonphan narrowed its yellow eyes through the pain and continued to rain blow after blow into its opponent's face with the charred tip of its trunk. Its tusks were glowing red, its thick skin began to split. Abaddonphan curled its trunk around a fragment of shattered earth and slammed the stone cudgel into the tip of Enteratops's nose. The stone disintegrated on impact, crumbling into dust that blew into the eyes of both combatants.

Mesuizoic's stream of water ended abruptly. It reared back and screamed as its body was seized by dancing arcs of electricity. Franco rushed to Phos's side and helped her to her feet. Phos looked around frantically.

"Control your breathing," Franco said calmly, "find your balance."

"I'm trying," Phos gasped.

Franco looked over Phos's shoulder and cautiously stepped back. A pair of black-furred arms gently wrapped around her midsection. Phos tensed and squeezed her hands around the red claws holding her.

"...Zoroark?"

The Illusion Fox Pokémon silently pressed the wet tip of its nose against her back. Zoroark exhaled slowly, paused, and inhaled. Phos matched Zoroark's rhythm, breathing in synch with her Pokémon as her heart rate began to steady. Murkrow circled overhead and dived downward, stretching its wings out to its sides as its feathers began to glow with white light. It swooped low and raked its steel-hard wings across Enteratops's rear before climbing back into the sky. The larger Pokémon reared up and snarled. Abaddonphan shoved off of Enteratops and rolled backward, distancing itself from the blazing fire.

Franco recalled Abaddonphan and quickly sent out his next Pokémon. "Go, Tauros," he shouted, "Zen Headbutt!"

Franco's black Tauros emerged from its Pokéball. The Wild Bull Pokémon coiled its three long tails tightly and stamped its hoof as crimson embers erupted from the depths of its dark mane. The bony protrusion atop its forehead shimmered with a purple light that spread to the tips of its sharp curving horns. Tauros bellowed fiercely and sprinted forward, snorting loudly as it charged Enteratops head-on. Enteratops roared and increased the intensity of its fire. Their horns collided in a blinding flash of light. Tauros rammed into its opponent again and again, thrashing violently as its horns dug white-hot scratches across Enteratops's face and frill. Enteratops lifted its head up and shoved Tauros away. It leapt backward and began to pant. Mesuizoic shook off its paralysis and turned to face Tauros as the Wild Bull Pokémon glowered at its two opponents.

"Phos," Franco barked, "I need—" he grit his teeth. "I need you to focus."

Phos eased Zoroark's arms away and turned to face her Pokémon. Zoroark's right eye was swollen shut and its slender body was lined with jagged teeth marks and patches of

missing fur. Phos reached for Zoroark's Pokéball. "You just rest up," she said as she recalled her partner, "I knew you'd make me proud."

Phos took a deep breath and turned her attention to the battle. "Murkrow," she shouted, "keep that blue one busy! Sucker Punch!"

Murkrow performed a shuttle loop through the air and careened straight down, a tiny black bullet hurtling toward the top of Mesuizoic's head. With its prized stick gripped tightly in its talons, Murkrow spread its wings and spun like a corkscrew. It let go of its stick and slammed its crooked beak onto its opponent's snout. As Murkrow fell to the ground, it caught its stick out of the air in its feathered fingertips and smacked it across Mesuizoic's jaw before landing squarely on its feet.

Mesuizoic snarled and stomped a massive foot down toward Murkrow. The Darkness Pokémon fluttered to the side and jabbed its beak forward into its opponent's vulnerable tendon. Mesuizoic kicked out, and Murkrow leapt into the air. The massive theropod-like Pokémon snapped its jaws at Murkrow as the little crow-like creature darted in and out of its reach. Murkrow landed on Mesuizoic's lower back and jabbed its stick sharply into the softer flesh below its opponent's ribs.

Mesuizoic lashed its twin tails like serrated whips as they began to glow blue. It stabbed both tails forward at Murkrow, swatting the little bird Pokémon off of its back and sending it arcing toward Mesuizoic's awaiting jaws. It clamped its sharp fangs down on Murkrow's tailfeathers and began to savagely shake the Darkness Pokémon around.

Murkrow's raspy voice cried out as it was helplessly tossed around by its foe.

Phos pressed the button on the front of Murkrow's Pokéball. The red recall beam shot out, and promptly dissipated against the side of Mesuizoic's horns. Phos tried again and again as black feathers tumbled to the ground. A dust storm was beginning to pick up momentum in the distance.

Phos swore. "Franco," she shouted, "I can't get Murkrow back!"

Enteratops brought a heavy paw down on Tauros's side and slammed Tauros to the ground, pinning it in place as the bull-like Pokémon kicked out wildly. Enteratops extended its claws and wreathed them in a bright blue energy before raking across Tauros's flank. Tauros bellowed with pain and quickly rose to its feet, turning its hindlegs toward Enteratops and swiftly kicking out with both hooves. Tauros's kick landed with a booming crunch against the side of its opponent's head, sending the larger Pokémon crashing to the ground. Tauros leapt onto the side of its foe and began to trample it into the dirt as both combatants exchanged roars and bellows.

"Now's not a good time," Franco growled.

The dust storm was fast approaching. Murkrow's stick was flung loose by its opponent's thrashing. The wooden stick bounced, tumbled, and rolled through the dirt before coming to a stop. Murkrow cried out sharply as it desperately attempted to fly free of Mesuizoic's grip.

A distant raspy cry echoed back. Phos shielded the intense sunlight from her eyes and peered toward the dust storm. A black speck was racing ahead of billowing dust and coming closer with each passing instant. It flew low to the ground, and as it came closer, Phos could see a narrow band of pink on its front.

"Is that..."

Mandibuzz screeched fiercely as it hurtled toward Mesuizoic, a dark brown-and-gray cannonball aimed directly at the large anomaly's center of mass. It blasted forward at supersonic speeds, its black beak tip and piercing red eyes pointing straight ahead. It tucked its wide wings in and soared like a missile toward its target. Mandibuzz slammed into Mesuizoic's underbelly, lifting the massive creature off its feet and slamming it into the canyon wall. Murkrow spun through the air as it was knocked free from Mesuizoic's jaws. Phos ran forward and caught Murkrow in her arms.

The little Darkness Pokémon looked up at its Trainer bewildered. "*Coo-coo?*"

Phos smirked. "Yeah," she said, "definitely gotta be coocoo."

The wall of dust arrived a few moments later, filling the open badlands with an orange haze. Mandibuzz spread its wings wide and pushed the haze back with powerful gusts of wind. It hopped toward Phos and craned its long neck out.

Murkrow reached out toward Mandibuzz. "*Coo-coo!*"

Mandibuzz squawked back eagerly, nuzzling Murkrow with the tip of its bloodied beak.

Phos smiled warmly and stroked the top of Mandibuzz's head with the tips of her fingers. "Thanks, little mama," she said.

Mesuizoic staggered to its feet and unleashed a deafening bellow.

Phos recalled Murkrow and placed its ball safely at her hip. "I was hoping you'd get back up, you son of a—"

Mandibuzz screeched and took to the air, climbing high into the sky before aiming back down toward Mesuizoic. Mesuizoic tracked its movements closely and inhaled sharply as it prepared to unleash another torrent of scalding water to shoot the Bone Vulture Pokémon down.

Phos was already reaching for her next Pokéball. "Oh no you don't," she growled as she hurled the ball, "Scrafty! High Jump Kick!"

Scrafty emerged from its ball, landed on the ground, and immediately sprung forward. It rocketed through the air and brought its foot forward into a spinning roundhouse kick. Scrafty's foot slammed into Mesuizoic's chest. Mesuizoic vomited its stored water onto the ground and hunched forward. Mandibuzz landed atop its head with a thunderous clap, spiking Mesuizoic's snout into the soft and steaming mud at its feet.

"Dragon Tail!"

Scrafty landed on the ground and began to channel light blue energy in its tail. Mesuizoic pushed off the ground, its own two tails glowing with blue light. Mandibuzz clamped its beak around the bases of both tails, yanking them back as Mesuizoic attempted to stab them forward. Scrafty warbled loudly and somersaulted upward with a quick kickflip, bringing its tail up below Mesuizoic's body. Scrafty's glowing tail smashed into its opponent in a blinding explosion of blue light, sending Mesuizoic hurtling limply straight up into the air. It howled sharply and helplessly kicked its legs out before crashing back down on its belly. Mesuizoic feebly attempted to lift its shaking head before the weight of its hexagonal crest forced it back down.

Scrafty pulled up its shed skin and croaked victoriously in Mesuizoic's face. Mandibuzz landed on the ground and began to fan itself with the tips of its wing.

Phos turned toward Tauros and Enteratops. The two Pokémon were both at their limits as they slowly circled one another.

"Franco," Phos shouted, "what's the situation?"

Franco rubbed his chin. "Whoever strikes first wins," he stated, "I just need an opening."

Phos looked back toward Scrafty and Mandibuzz and grinned. "Mandibuzz," she called out, "I need you to carry Scrafty!"

The two Pokémon exchanged looks. Scrafty nodded and held its arms above its head. Mandibuzz pushed off the ground and squeezed its talons around Scrafty's outstretched hands. Scrafty tucked its legs in as Mandibuzz lifted it off the ground.

Phos directed Mandibuzz toward Enteratops. "Bring 'em in!"

Mandibuzz flew forward, gaining momentum with each flap of its wide wings.

Franco took a deep breath. "Tauros, Raging Bull! Hold it in place!"

Tauros stamped its hooves and cloaked its entire body in brilliant crimson fire. It bellowed and charged forward, slamming into the waiting horns of Enteratops.

"Scrafty! Dragon Tail, again!"

Scrafty's tail began to glow with blue light.

“Now throw him!”

Mandibuzz screeched and flung Scrafty forward. Scrafty sailed through the air toward Enteratops and swung its tail out with a fierce cry.

Enteratops peeled its eyes away from Tauros in time to see Scrafty land its attack. The blue light flashed, and Enteratops was sent skidding across the badlands before crashing through a large rock and rolling to a stop on its back. Enteratops fell to its side and collapsed.

Phos patted Franco on the back. “How ‘bout it, stud,” she purred, “was that good for you too?”

Franco smirked to himself. “I’m not going to praise you for fixing a crisis that you caused,” he stated. “But you fought well.”

Tauros trotted toward its Trainer with a haggard limp and flicked its three tails in the air.

“Tauros,” Phos gasped. She cupped her hands around the Wild Bull Pokémon’s snout and playfully rubbed its warm cheeks. “Oo, you were so brave!”

Tauros closed its eyes and lifted its tails upright as Phos continued to baby-talk to it.

Franco recalled his Pokémon. “Tauros did exactly what was expected of it,” he said.

Mandibuzz took to the wing again and began circling the power plant far overhead. Scrafty narrowed its eyes and sneered at Franco as it approached. It sidled up to Phos with one hand wrapped around the shed skin at its waist.

“Great work, partner,” Phos beamed with pride, “you were amazing today.”

Phos and Scrafty bumped fists. Phos recalled Scrafty and turned back toward Franco. “So that’s that, huh?”

Franco turned toward the power plant. A large blue Paleomence burst through the roof of the building, stretched the red crescent-shaped wings on its back, and glided deeper into the canyon as its roars and howls faded into the distance.

“No,” Franco said flatly, “Your work is just getting started.”

A clean white armored van with tinted black windows raced around the side of the building and sped toward Franco. A raised lip lined the edge of the van’s rooftop.

“This facility is compromised,” Franco continued, “the anomalies housed within now have nothing keeping them contained. Unknowable dozens of apex specimens released out into the wild.”

“And the world will know exactly who to blame,” Phos replied.

Franco cast a sideways glance at her. "Who to blame, indeed."

"All signs point to Macro Cosmos," Phos continued, "to you. The secret's out now. After all this time, I've got you pinned to something you can't wiggle free from. It's over, Franco."

Franco clasped his hands behind his back as the van rolled up. "I'm not finished yet. I've come too far to give up quietly now."

The van's side door slid open. An armored guard hurriedly waved Franco inside. "Chief, get in," the guard shouted, "The Pokémon are escaping out of the service tunnels! The Rangers and police are on their way; we need to get you out of here!"

Franco nodded. "I'm declaring the Socarrat Contingency," he said calmly, "alert any security teams inside the facility: No digital files, no paperwork, no emails. Destroy any evidence they can find and then assist the authorities in recapturing any escaping anomalies. We've all run the simulations before."

"Yes sir," the guard immediately turned to the communication equipment within the vehicle.

Franco placed his hand on the lip of the van's raised box-shaped roof and leaned inside. "I want all eyes on the power plant. Keep track of any anomaly that you see exiting the building and note which direction they're heading."

Franco slammed the door shut before turning back to Phos.

Phos stared at him dumbfounded. "You're going to leave? Just like that?"

"Just like that," Franco replied, "Against my own better judgment, I've been too lenient with you. I wanted to believe you could listen to reason."

He adjusted his ruined tie. "If you follow me again, I'll have no choice but to kill you." Franco shook his head slowly. "Please don't make me do that, Phos. Stay here. Kalos needs someone with your expertise to recapture those anomalies."

Phos crossed her arms over her chest. "You'd really kill me?"

Franco nodded solemnly.

Phos sighed. "Then let me say goodbye this time."

Phos ran forward and pinned Franco against the side of the van. She pressed her lips against his and kissed him deeply and with all the passion she could bear to muster. He closed his eyes and held her close, feeling the touch of her skin as his hands glided up and down her body. She lifted her arms above her head and smirked to herself as Franco kissed her chest.

At last, Franco pulled his lips away and Phos stepped back. "I'd like those glasses back," he said.

"They'll be with me next time we meet," she grinned.

Franco smiled back and hummed a single mirthless laugh before opening the van's door and stepping in. The vehicle's tires squealed, and the van began to speed off.

Phos leaned down and grabbed a handful of loose stones and sand. She flung them at the roof of the van as it drove away. "But here's something *e/se* to remember me by!"

As Franco's ride disappeared over the horizon, Phos tucked her thumbs between her belt and leather pants and watched as a group of seven mechanical moth-like creatures hovered out of the roof of the power plant and began to migrate out into the badlands.

"Phos," a familiar voice shouted. Emma sprinted over. "Phos, what are you doing?"

"Watching the Volcarobot up there," Phos answered casually.

"Why are you just letting him go?!"

Phos glanced toward Emma and furrowed her brow. "Who, Franco?"

Emma threw her hands up and began to pace. "Oh, I don't believe it," she muttered, "You just let him go. We had our prime suspect, *and you let him go.*" Emma groaned and punted a rock. The stone disintegrated into countless tiny fragments and scattered to the winds.

"Detective, calm down—"

Emma laughed. "Calm down? You're the one telling *me* to calm down?" Emma pointed an accusing finger at Phos. "I *trusted* you. And every time I trusted you, you let me down. Every. Single. Time!"

"Emma—"

"Were you working with him all along? Is this all some twisted game between the two of you?"

"Emma, will you please just list—"

"I don't want to hear it, Phos. Forget prison, you belong in an asylum!"

"I won't deny it," Phos said, "but if you could do me one last favor?"

Emma glowered at Phos from behind her visor and said nothing.

"Can you make sure my phone's still tracking my location?"

Emma raised her palm and activated the projector of her Holo Caster. A map of the Kalos Region flared to life in the air between herself and Phos. A tiny red GPS pin was moving south of their position at high speeds. Emma looked up at Phos.

Phos turned her empty pants pockets inside-out. She raised an eyebrow at the detective and smirked. "Do you have anyone you can trust to help you keep the peace here?"

Emma stammered. "Uh, yes," she answered, "Yes, I do."

Phos nodded. "Back home, it was never enough to catch any Rattata you saw scurrying around. If you wanted to stop an infestation, you had to follow them all the way back to their stinking hole. That's what I'm gonna do."

Emma sheepishly cradled her arms behind her back. "I... I misjudged you," she said, "I'm sorry, Miss Phos."

Phos waved her off. "Eh, don't worry about it."

"I won't be able to go with you."

"Not a problem," Phos grinned, "I'm used to working by myself—"

Phos trailed off as a high-pitched alarm began to beep. Phos and Emma glanced down to the source of the noise. Phos grabbed the empty Timer Ball at her hip and held it up. The crest atop the ball's lid flashed with a red light. Phos rotated her body and the crest began to flash faster and faster as she turned to face the unconscious Mesuizoic laying on its stomach at the base of the canyon wall.

"It's locked on... and fully-charged," Emma stated.

Phos hummed. "Must've locked on when Messie was running past me earlier."

"That Pokémon will be confiscated by the police when they arrive," Emma said, "but... maybe it could help you against Franco."

Phos said nothing.

"You can use it for good."

Phos waved her off. "I need to think about it, okay?!" She sighed. "Just, give me a minute, alright?"

Enteratops began to stir. A deep rumble arose from the back of its throat.

"I'll keep an eye on it," Emma said.

Phos excused herself and began to walk toward Mesuizoic. She stood before the massive beast. She stared at it and glanced at the ball in her gloved hand. She looked back at Mesuizoic, then back at the Timer Ball. Mesuizoic's yellow eyes darted up toward her. It bared its fangs and growled, but the defeated creature was too exhausted to move.

Phos thought of Apollo, and how his life had come to a sudden end on the morning of New Year's Eve.

She thought of all the anomalies she had fought since then. The amount of Pokéballs she had confiscated from Trainers and collectors who had no idea what Franco and his underlings had sold to them.

She thought of all the monsters who knew exactly what they had paid for.

She thought of the anomalies that she had sealed away to keep the world safe from them.

She thought of the savage pink creature that wanted to maul her in the trainyard outside of Nacrene City. She thought of Franco's Androgarde as its glaive scythed through Scrafty aboard the train. She thought of how Malamar and Murkrow could have been killed just a few minutes earlier.

Phos thought of Azelie and Misterius, the ones who challenged everything she thought she knew about the creatures she was hunting.

Phos squeezed the Timer Ball tighter and took a deep breath.

"I'm trusting you, Blondie."

Phos tapped the front of the Timer Ball against Mesuizoic's wounded side. The ball popped open, pulled the massive beast inside, and snapped shut. It shook and rolled fiercely in her hand.

"I don't like this any more than you do, big guy."

The ball rocked violently as Mesuizoic thrashed within.

"I know you've had it rough. I haven't been doing too great either."

The Timer Ball's hinges creaked.

"Franco. The one who took you and all your buddies away from your home and stuck you in a Dedenne cage. I'm going to find out where he's going and what he's planning."

The ball rolled to a stop.

“And then? You’re gonna help me stop him, and we’ll all go home. What do you say... partner?”

The ball’s lock clicked into place.

Ida's cell phone began to ring. She reached over and accepted the call.

“...Sir?”

“Ida, what’s your current location?”

“Uh, I’m still at the beach in Cyllage City. Someone was riding a bicycle through the sand here, can you believe—”

“Never mind that. I understand you lost your tablet in a surfing incident?”

“...Sir, it sounds like you’re sitting inside the back of a moving truck, I don’t think I heard that—”

“No, I have it on very good authority that you lost your tablet at sea. That was very irresponsible of you to damage company property. President Oleana herself might have needed the information on that tablet and now it’s irretrievable. What would we say to her if there was a chance she was listening to this very conversation, right now?”

“I understand, sir.”

“I knew you would. For your punishment, I’m assigning you one week of paid administrative leave, effective as soon as your vacation days have ended. There is no need for you to report to the office.”

“Of course, sir.”

She hesitated.

"Um, sir, if I may?"

“Keep it brief.”

“Will I ever see you again?”

Static.

“Sir?”

“No, you probably won't.”

Ida took a deep breath and swallowed hard. “Then it’s been an honor, sir.”

“Thank you for everything, Ida. May you have a long and successful career.”

Click

“...Goodbye, Franco.”

The adventure concludes:

[Episode 7](#)