

Eons in Flux, my cringe lil' fanfic

Episode X: Urban Legends



A parent-teacher conference at the end of the first day of school may have been a new Unovan record. A young boy's hands fidgeted in his lap as his mother cast a disapproving glower down at him. Across the desk, his teacher clasped her hands together and awaited a response. On the desk, a notebook page portrayed crude pencil sketch of a provocatively-dressed woman. The woman's hair billowed behind her like a Flareon's fluffy tail. Great effort had gone into depicting the feminine features highlighted by her cropped shirt. A mischievous grin spread wide beneath an oversized pair of sunglasses.

"I really don't know where he got this idea from," the boy's mother said, "we try to keep that kind of media out of our home."

"It's not unusual for boys his age to start having fantasies," the teacher explained, "but these kinds of drawings have no place in the classroom."

"I told you already, she's real," the boy protested, "I saw her during summer school! She had a Scrafty and they were fighting a Donphan with glowing red eyes! It was gonna roll right into the school before she stopped it! I'm not even joking!"

"Donphan do not have glowing red eyes," his teacher stated, "you would know this if you paid more attention in class instead of daydreaming."

On the far opposite side of the Unova Region, a Pokémon Ranger sat down at the edge of a raised wooden bridge overlooking the stream rushing through the canyon below. A group of tiny Foongus bounced merrily beneath the wide brim of their larger Amoonguss kin at the stream's bank. A cold breeze blew to the west and swept through his long blond hair. Was it the sudden chill that made his skin crawl, or something else? The little Mushroom Pokémon seemed so docile compared to the creature he had seen on patrol, it was hard to imagine something so harmless could evolve into the aggressive creature he had seen. He had been unaware that Foongus even had a second Evolution, but what else could it have been? He shuddered as he recalled the sight of the frenzied mushroom-like Pokémon. It stood taller than an Amoonguss on four thick legs, and long strands of moss hung from its mushroom cap. A Zoroark had created a mob of illusory figures around it, and like an unthinking berserker, the strange creature shrieked and howled and thrashed wildly through the illusions encircling it until it collapsed from exhaustion. The Ranger adjusted the wide brim of his red hat and shook his head, breathing a sigh of relief that he hadn't seen anything like it since then.

Atop the craggy hillsides of Reversal Mountain, a shower of loose pebbles rolled down the slope as an Excadrill bore into the mountainside. Far below, a pair of hikers covered their heads and dove for cover beneath a canopy of arching boulders.

"Are you sure we should be up here," the younger of the two hikers asked, "this seems kinda dangerous!"

The veteran hiker looked to his protégé and laughed. "Dangerous? This is nothing," the larger man shouted. He peeked his head out of the grotto and quickly pulled back as another shower of rocks fell from on high. "Let me tell you, I've climbed this mountain for years and I've never felt scared, not a once!"

"Not even once?"

The veteran scratched at his thick beard and hummed. “Well, there was one time just a few weeks back,” he said, “I was walking through the caves inside the mountain when I came upon a pair of hotblooded Trainers duking it out—a short guy and some redheaded woman. Looked like they were both after the same Volcarona further down the way—understandable, really, if you know anything about those beauties. The woman was running alongside a Scrafty when the short guy sicced a Primeape that was closing the distance on the two of ‘em faster than I’d ever seen before. That Scrafty, it jumped up and punched the ceiling. Next thing I know, the whole darn tunnel’s collapsing over Primeape’s head while the woman keeps on running! The ceiling came crashed down behind her and I started running the opposite direction!”

“No kiddin’? What happened next?”

“That Primeape started roaring like a rumbling landslide! Hearing its voice felt like the gates of the Underworld were pulling at my heart! I just kept running and never looked back! I reported the cave-in, but there was no sign of any of ‘em by the time the Ranger teams arrived. I guess they all must’ve gotten out somehow!”

The hiker breathed a long sigh of relief. “I wonder how those folks are doing these days?”

Phos sprawled out on the red sofa within the Looker Bureau. One hand was tucked behind her head, leisurely cradling her pounding head. Her other hand pressed an ice pack against her swollen cheek. Midmorning light filtered into the office through the glass; rays of golden sunshine that warmed the diamond tiles below. On the other side of the wooden partition behind the couch, a gentle murmur of voices tickled Phos’s ears as Detective Emma’s interview continued. The previous night had been a blur of activity and bureaucracy. Interrogations and paperwork—both for Phos, and the Kalosian woman Azelie that she had battled to a standstill. Phos chuckled to herself and winced away the pain of her throbbing jaw. She couldn’t deny it—every now and again, it felt good to be blisteringly angry at someone. The fight that rocked the *L’Coeur* nightclub reminded her in a lot of ways of her wild, misguided youth. Even now, the adrenaline rush lingered in her veins. Stiffly, she willed her aching muscles into motion, set her icepack down on the floor and pushed off the couch to her feet.

A lightheaded feeling gripped Phos as she stood up and rolled her crackling neck and shoulders. She took a deep breath and inhaled the scent of stale coffee and paper. Of all the couches Phos had surfed on throughout the past year, the good detective’s was far from the worst.

She glanced around the one-room office as she stretched and groaned. The small white desk across from the partitioned waiting space was covered in haphazardly-stacked files and reports—a testament to the chaos Phos had sown the previous night. Emma perched behind her desk, facing toward the front door of the Bureau. The detective’s Espurr friend, Mimi, was nestled in her lap. Azelie sat opposite of her as the detective studiously took notes of the blonde-haired woman’s every word. The little Restraint Pokémon’s large purple eyes flitted toward Phos as she stepped forward. Emma followed Mimi’s gaze and gave a subtle wave of her hand as Azelie continued to speak.

Phos turned her attention to the wall clock; it was nearly ten. Without a word, she passed behind Azelie as she made her way to the small kitchenette in the corner of the room and poured a pot of lukewarm coffee into a small styrofoam cup. Azelie's posture stiffened as she walked by. The two women seated at the desk had turned to face her now. Phos tilted her chin up and nodded to them. Emma nodded back. Azelie tightly pinched her lips closed and gave a brief pursed smile before rolling her eyes and looking away.

"I don't think she likes me very much, Detective," Phos commented. She smirked through the pain of her aching body.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Azelie smiled wide and clasped her fingers together, "I just love your style!"

"So glad you approve," Phos grumbled.

Emma laughed nervously. "Miss Phos! Miss Azelie, please! Let's set our disagreements aside and work together!"

"Sorry, Detective. You're right," Phos said, turning to Azelie, "she's such a social Beautifly, I guess it isn't really her fault if she doesn't know the men she's getting so close to."

"I'm sorry too," Azelie said, "I would never want to get between a Unovan woman and the company she keeps so closely." She rested her cheek against her flat palm and looked up toward the ceiling. "What was that Pokémon's name again? Garbodor?"

The styrofoam cup cracked in Phos's grip.

"I shouldn't be so rude," Azelie continued, "Maybe that *eyesore* on the side of her head has left her too confused to remember what's hers."

Phos pointed to the welt on her cheek. "Oh, you mean *this* eyesore," she asked. Phos dismissed the idea with a polite smile and quick wave. "It's nothing compared to the sores between your—"

"Ladies, please! We're getting off-topic," Emma shouted. Mimi chirruped in her lap. Emma rubbed her temples and sighed. "Miss Phos, you're looking a little tired still. When I need to wake up, I like to go for a walk through the city to clear my mind."

Emma shifted in her seat. "Maybe... you should do that too? I hope you don't mind, but I put some travel money in your wallet in case you wanted to do anything."

Phos shrugged. "I've always wanted to see the sights in Lumiose," she said as she retrieved her Pokéballs. Phos unfolded her angular blue sunglasses from the top of her cropped black shirt and reached for the door.

"I hope you enjoy your time in Lumiose," Azelie chimed, "It's a big city, be careful not to get lost!"

Phos turned back to see Azelie pinch her eyes closed and gleefully wiggle her fingers in farewell.

Phos's annoyed grimace turned into an impish grin. "If I need an escort in this city," Phos said, "I'll call your mother."

Outside of the Bureau, Phos leaned against the white marble wall of the building and pressed her back into the windowsill. For a moment, the cool stone and warm glass soothed her aching body. She looked up and down the narrow cobblestone road. The aroma of countless bakeries was all-encompassing, masking the other, more common smells of any major city. Directly across from Emma's office, the interior of a sushi restaurant was dark and awaiting the time its doors would open for business. To her right, one of the city's many park plazas, centered around a red stone obelisk with the shining Prism Tower looming at the heart of the city far beyond it. To her left, one of Lumiose's busiest thoroughfares and a claustrophobic side street between two beige brick-and-limestone buildings. She watched as an endless procession of taxis and other vehicles competed for space on the road. On the sidewalk, caravans of large-framed Gogoat strutted down the sidewalk, ferrying sightseers atop the thick green foliage growing from their backs. Phos decided to take the side street.

The long roads of Lumiose City and their countless interconnected side streets sprawled out before her like vine-choked spokes upon a giant wheel at the roadside; the seemingly endless expanse of boroughs and historic districts continued in perpetuity. Each time she felt certain that she had reached the edge of the Kalos Region itself, she had only just reached the next major intersection. As she navigated down the branching paths and snaking twists of a shaded alleyway, Phos's rubber character heels splashed through shallow puddles of stagnant rainwater. Within the narrow confines, her mind began to wander toward the darker recesses of her hometown.

Chapter 3: Caged Match

Bright lights and dark rumors below the streets of Castelia guide Phos toward the hope of answers and the promise of danger...

The musty air carried a damp chill within the dry waterways beneath Castelia City. It didn't matter to Phos, she hardly felt the cold before, let alone now. Icy condensation formed along the pipework running overhead, forming drops of moisture that collected in thin slicks along the raised concrete walkway. The gentle sound of splashing water echoed down the passage as her dirty black-and-white running shoes stepped through the labyrinth. Her Pokéballs clattered together within the pocket of her black hooded jacket. Phos pressed deeper into the darkened sluices of the Castelia Sewers, navigating by the light of her phone's dim flashlight. She shined the light in all directions, scanning every dark corner and crawlspace for threats. As she aimed her phone up toward the ceiling, a Zubat flitted over her head, shrieking in a harsh voice as it flew away from the encroaching light. Phos ducked away from the sudden movement and reflexively swung her wooden baseball bat through the air in front of her. The motion activated her phone screen and Phos winced away from the glare shining directly into her eyes. The phone's clock read January 7, 11:54pm.

Further ahead, within the maze of service tunnels and storm drains, a rhythmic percussion throbbed against the frigid concrete walls. Phos followed the pulse like a siren's song, tracing it back to its source. As a teenager, she and her so-called friends explored the vast subterrane to skip school or attend wild rave parties. Along the way, they had heard darker rumors of the going-ons across the undercity. Those memories belonged to a different girl in a different lifetime. She was here on business tonight.

The darkness of the tunnels slowly gave way to a growing light as the music's volume steadily became louder. Before long, Phos could hear muffled voices—screams, cheers, an MC shouting into a mic. Within a long-forgotten basement, steel clashed against chitin within a caged dome as aggressive hip-hop music blared from oversized speakers. A broad shell sword slammed against the chain-link cage and clattered to the ground as its owner, a battle-scarred Samurott, roared defiantly. Thick strands of blood and saliva dripped from its bared fangs. Across from it, a large three-fingered hand levitating in the air flared with bright yellow electricity and slammed into the tip of its red nose. Samurott snarled in pain as the electricity arced across its blue fur. Its opponent stepped forward, a large triangular machine that loomed menacingly overhead as two small glowing yellow eyes peered out of a black faceplate. It resembled a sleek and compact metallic Hariyama. Its floating hand reached out and tightly clenched Samurott's throat, lifting the Formidable Pokémon kicking and scratching into the air. The crowd of roughnecks, punks, and street trash bellowed with indignation as they stood up from their seats within the makeshift bleachers surrounding the fight.

"Keep fighting, Samurott!"

"Call the match! Call the match!"

The MC tapped on his earlobe and shrugged.

"That coward was waiting for a fight he couldn't lose!"

A scruffy-faced man in a black trench coat gripped the chain-link fencing and called out to his Pokémon. "You've got to hang in there, Samurott," he shouted.

A second hand took hold of the long spear-like horn extending from Samurott's spined helmet. The horn snapped like a twig within the strange android's clutch. As Samurott recoiled, it delivered a final blow, burying the broken horn deep into Samurott's exposed underbelly and allowing the Formidable Pokémon to drop to the ground. The spectators roared as the arena commentator called the match.

"And the winner is Dominic and his Alloyama once again!"

Samurott's Trainer screamed in frustration and rattled the steel fencing before stomping away. Back-alley doctors lifted Samurott out of the arena on a red stretcher as Alloyama's mechanical body stood inert. Its large hands stuck fast to the side of its gray metal torso as the yellow energy coursing through their palms powered down. Outside the cage behind it, the machine's owner basked in the cheers and hurled insults and threats of the crowd around him as he accepted his cash prize. He was a young man, with wavy orange hair, wearing a yellow tracksuit with a black silhouette of a Braviary over his chest—the emblem of a foreign luxury designer. For every bald-headed rogue that applauded his audacity, five more thieves and vandals called for his head on a pike.

"You're nothing without that robot," one voice screamed.

"Go home already, Rich Boy!"

A large-bodied man in biker leathers dragged a thick finger across his throat. "You're gonna pay for what you did to my Druddigon," he vowed.

The young man smirked and blew spiteful kisses to his loudest critics.

"From silver spoons to silver killing machines, Rich Boy Dominic takes home the gold again," the announcer continued, "is there any man among you who would gamble limb and life to challenge his winning streak?"

The crowd roared and hollered, yet no one stepped forward. Alloyama's Trainer adjusted the high collar of his tracksuit and awaited a challenge he knew would never come.

"Will this be another lockout night for the Mon of Steel?"

The crowd booed emphatically. Desperate fist fights broke out in the bleachers as some of the spectators tried to volunteer another man's Pokéball for the next battle.

A voice shouted over the colosseum's music from the mouth of the service tunnel. "I'll be your huckleberry!"

Phos stepped forward into the light with a competitive scowl visible below her raised hood. Her baseball bat was slung over her shoulder as she stepped forward with a Pokéball in hand. The arena's coordinators quickly dialed the music down as the crowd's attention turned toward the newcomer.

The announcer tapped his microphone and cleared his throat. "Eh? What you say," he asked, "You lost, little doxy?"

Phos spoke quieter now that the chatter around her had died down. "I said, I'll take him on."

She stepped forward, pushing through the rough crowd. Grizzled men took long drags from their cigarettes and said nothing as she walked past. A lanky man with long blond hair and crooked teeth blocked her way.

"Ey, you's not one a us," he declared, "you don't belong here! Git!"

A swing of her bat sent a yellow tooth sailing into the stands. The rest of the crowd parted ways for her. Dominic watched her with cold indifference as she took her place on the opposite side of the arena. She wiped the fresh blood on her bat against her denim blue jeans and wordlessly pointed the bat's tip toward her opponent.

A man in a leather jacket approached her. He had short black hair and a Zekrom tattoo on his neck. "Give me the ball you want to use," he said.

"What, I can't throw it myself?"

He shook his head and smirked. "No. You're too attached. You decide when the fight starts, only we decide when it ends. This ain't your Pokémon League, little girl."

Within the arena, Alloyama remained completely motionless as it awaited another opponent. The corners of her mouth twitched. Phos relented and handed her Pokéball off. "Let's get on with it," she said.

The announcer tapped his mic. "Smoke break's over," he declared, "Are you ready to see some bones broken?"

The crowd began to chatter anxiously.

“Are you hoping to see some oil get spilled tonight?”

As a chorus of ferocious shouting rose to a fever pitch, bagmen combed the bleachers collecting cash wagers and collateral on behalf of the bookies.

“Are you ready for the kind of battle you’d never get from the League?!”

The attendees rose up and screamed. The tattooed man threw Phos’s Pokéball into the arena from atop a raised dais. The ball popped open in a burst of light, and Malamar levitated to the ground. Across the arena, Alloyama’s glowing yellow eyes snapped to the Overturning Pokémon’s position. Its large hands disconnected from its sides and powered on. The machine placed its hands on its bulbous blue thighs as it lifted one pointed metal foot high into the air like a sumo wrestler. Its body surged with electricity that radiated out from rigid yellow plates on its sides. Alloyama slammed its foot down onto the concrete, releasing a torrent of crackling yellow energy that pulsed across the ground and electrified the surrounding chain-link dome. Malamar folded its bladed arms across its torso and glared at its opponent. The air within the underground colosseum reverberated with the guttural riffs of heavy metalcore music.

“I hope you’re not too attached to your Pokémon,” Dominic taunted.

Phos curled her nose and sneered before pointing forward. “Malamar, Hypnosis!”

Malamar’s torso flashed with brightly-glowing yellow light as it waved its tentacles at its opponent.

Alloyama’s Trainer spoke simply: “Crush it.”

The bulky android stomped forward, its eyes never once looking away from Malamar as its large hands crackled with electricity. Malamar gasped in confusion before Alloyama sent it sailing across the arena with an open-palmed thrust. Malamar slammed into the chain-link cage in front of Phos and slunk to the ground. As the squid-like Pokémon recovered from the attack, Alloyama trudged forward and pinned it against the arena’s dome. The cage’s latticed fencing began to strain and give way toward Phos as the levitating hand applied greater pressure. Malamar coughed and sputtered as the hand slowly crushed its torso.

“Looks like our challenger had more bravado than brains,” the announcer shouted, “This is going to be another short match, people!”

Phos slammed her fists against the cage and screamed in surprise as electricity arced up her arms. The crowd booed and jeered from the stands. She swore furiously. “Fight back, Malamar,” Phos shouted, “Psycho Cut!”

As Alloyama channeled electricity into its other hand, Malamar’s bladed tentacles began to glow with purple light. Malamar bellowed and scythed downward, raking its sharp fin across its opponent’s body and sending the android staggering backward. Alloyama’s yellow eyes flickered. Malamar pressed the attack, slicing away at the back of the hand pinning it against the wall until it released its grip and rejoined Alloyama’s body.

From across the arena, Dominic shouted: “Drain Punch!”

The yellow energy coursing through Alloyama’s palms turned bright green. The levitating hands battered Malamar from left to right, each strike leeching energy from the Overturning

Pokémon's body as the purple slice across the android's body faded away. The next hit delivered a brutal uppercut to Malamar's beak that launched Malamar into the air. The following hit spiked it down into the concrete. The crowd hollered within the bleachers.

"Oh, we've had bigger, stronger competitors," the announcer jeered, "but they were all buried under that staying power!"

"Heavy Slam," Dominic commanded.

Malamar uttered a raspy groan as it struggled to push off the electrified ground. Towering above it, Alloyama lifted its leg high into the air and prepared to stomp down on Malamar's head.

The announcer clutched at the side of his head and howled. "I'm feeling Malamar's headache before it even starts," he shouted, "But I'll be calling a janitor before I call this match!"

"Malamar," Phos pleaded, "you have to get up! I can't lose you next!"

The android's foot began to glow with white energy.

"Cleanup, Sublevel-5!"

Alloyama slammed its foot down. The audience gasped.

Malamar bellowed as the tentacles atop its head held Alloyama's foot up. The machine's yellow eyes flitted back and forth between its foot and Malamar's head. It pushed down on its bulbous thigh as Malamar wrapped its arms around Alloyama's narrow ankle.

All around the dome, the audience screamed and chanted.

Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!

Phos screamed out: "Superpower!"

Malamar's body began to glow with orange energy. Inch by desperate inch, the Overturning Pokémon arrested Alloyama's stomp and began to push it away. With a mighty heave, Malamar shoved Alloyama back and took to the air, levitating forward with its tentacles outstretched. It wrapped its tentacles around its opponent's head and quickly flipped through the air, slamming the android down into the concrete with a thundering clang.

The crowd broke into a frenzied uproar as Malamar rose higher into the air and wiped a trail of blue blood away from its beak. It curled its bladed fins toward itself, basking in the attention as streams of indecipherable runes and calculations streaked across Alloyama's faceplate.

"Kill that thing," Dominic snarled.

"Malamar," Phos shouted. Her partner glanced toward her. "Show it who's boss."

Alloyama climbed to its feet and lunged forward, clapping its hands together as Malamar backstepped out of the way. Malamar lashed out with a Psycho Cut, pinning Alloyama's hands to the ground with one arm while its other bladed fin cut a deep gash that unleashed a shower of sparks across the android's thigh. Alloyama stomped forward and punted Malamar away with a fierce kick, freeing its hands. Advancing forward, the android squeezed one hand around

Malamar's throat and slammed it to the ground. As the other hand thrust down for a crushing blow, Malamar slithered free of its opponent's grip and swam through the space between its legs. Malamar rose up and raked Alloyama's back with another Psycho Cut. Alloyama reacted quickly, spinning its hands like rotor blades as they orbited around its body. The attack sent Malamar sliding across the electrified floor. Alloyama raised its hands up over Malamar and slammed them downward. Malamar quickly danced away from the attack and floated off the ground. Alloyama's floating hand reached out to grab the squid-like Pokémon as it levitated out of reach.

"I can barely keep up," the announcer cried, "Has Alloyama finally found a challenge?!"

The spectators' voices rose as a defiant chorus as dozens of lowlifes rooted for the android's defeat.

The orange aura around Malamar's body flared in intensity as it dove down on Alloyama from above and wrapped its tentacles around the android's tiny head. Alloyama's palms shined with blinding green energy as it reached up and clapped Malamar between its hands. As Alloyama's body began to repair itself, Malamar coughed up another splatter of blood and tightened its constricting grasp. Alloyama trudged across the arena as it struggled to buck Malamar loose. The squid-like Pokémon lifted Alloyama into the air once again and slammed it onto the ground in a fierce suplexing attack that sent a shower of orange sparks bouncing across the concrete. Malamar continued the assault before its opponent could recover, flipping Alloyama into the air and slamming it back down as it chiseled two deepening craters into the floor. Burning hot specks of black oil began to splash across the arena.

The crowd's cheers drowned out the announcer's commentary.

"You can do it, Malamar!"

"Get him! Get him!"

"Scrap that robot!"

Phos added her voice to the chorus, whistling sharply and urging her Pokémon on. Opposite of her, the orange-haired young man was quickly losing his composure as the odds turned against him.

"Tell me how it feels, Dominic," the announcer demanded, "Tell me where that swagger went!"

Malamar swung its body around and hurled Alloyama across the arena. The Overturning Pokémon folded its arms across its body and laughed defiantly as it levitated over the fading electricity dancing across the ground. Alloyama staggered to its feet as white sparks flashed across its body. Its yellow eyes looked up at the encroaching Malamar through the many cracks running across its faceplate. The android swung its hands wildly at Malamar, each exhausted strike bouncing off of its opponent's rubbery skin. Malamar wrapped a tentacle around each metal hand and constricted them tightly, holding them in place as Alloyama attempted to pull its hands free. Malamar leaned down, leveling its black sclera and yellow irises so that it peered directly into the broken black faceplate and observed the fading yellow lights within. It held its narrow gaze and laughed:

"Ahhh-hua-hua-huaaaa!"

Malamar held Alloyama's hands on either side of its tiny head and slammed them together like cymbals. Black oil splattered across its palms and rolled down Malamar's torso. Malamar released its grip and let its opponents hands clatter to the ground with a thunderous metal clang. Sparks of electricity shot out of Alloyama's twitching, dented head as the yellow lights across the android's body faded to black. One eye remained active, a dim yellow light that flitted rapidly across the room. It looked up at Malamar one last time before the cracked and chipped faceplate went dim. The android's body toppled backwards and kicked up a cloud of powdered cement as its crumpled frame crashed into the pavement.

Stunned silence. Then, an uproarious celebration that could be heard on the city streets far overhead. The announcer was speechless; what more could he have added to the moment? With the click of a button, he opened the entrance to the dome. The tattooed man tossed Phos's Pokéball back to her. Across the arena, another thug did the same for Dominic. Phos rushed into the arena as quickly as she could, leaping into Malamar's arms and hugging her Pokémon tightly as she sobbed with relief into its collar. Dominic ambled in after her, his entire body trembling as he returned Alloyama to its Pokéball. Attendees within the crowd pointed at him and declared threats, their words swallowed up by the cheering around them. Dominic's jaw dropped low, his lips trembled as his frantic gray eyes flitted across the room full of enemies he had made.

Phos yanked the Pokéball from his hands. His entire body jumped in surprise as he turned toward her and gasped.

"You're not getting this back," Phos growled.

"Huh? Bu—"

"You don't have any friends here," Phos continued. She shook the stolen Pokéball in her hand. "But you know someone who has plenty of strong Pokémon just like this one." Around them, lowlifes were punching and kicking at the arena's cage, brandishing pocket knives and metal pipes. Phos directed Dominic's gaze up toward her eyes with the end of her bat. "Answer some questions for me," Phos stated, "and I might just get you out of here alive."

Phos emerged from the alley and stepped back into the daylight. A tightness gripped her chest. She rested her forearm against the thin trunk of a nearby birch tree—one among many within two long rows of manicured trees extending across the wide avenue—and inhaled a large gulp of air before releasing it from her parted lips. How long had she been holding her breath? Countless tourists flooded the city street around her, pushing against the mob competing for the chance to take photos of Prism Tower in all its unobscured splendor. Tall men reached above the crowd, parents hoisted small children atop their shoulders so that they could have a better view, groups of laughing and smiling friends posed together with the monument as their backdrop. Some rode atop their Pokémon to escape the competition, others still simply stared at the lofty construction of stainless steel and glowing light panels and marveled at the sight. Phos followed their gaze. Even within the morning light, Prism Tower's shining display glared brilliantly within her sunglasses.

"It always looked taller in the pictures," Phos thought to herself.

Crowds like this were nothing new to her—she had seen bigger crowds on some of the busier streets back home. With well-rehearsed dexterity, Phos pressed through the mob of sightseers as she inched her way toward the next narrow side street. All around her, people and their Pokémon chatted energetically among themselves, yelling over the din of a thousand other voices. Shouting, laughing, weeping tears of joy. Phos felt nothing at all.

“Oh, tall miss, tall miss,” a voice called out. Phos raised an eyebrow and turned her head. A shorter Kantonian man nervously waved to her and held his phone out toward her. “Photo, please?”

A small grin crept across her face as she took the phone. “Anything for a fan,” she said. She turned the camera lens toward herself, blew a kiss, and took the photo before handing the phone back to its owner.

The short man stammered and laughed as Phos retreated deeper into the crowd. She pushed her way to her destination with numb fingers, breathing a slight sigh of relief as she finally broke away from her fellow tourists. Narrow alleys reeked of danger, but to Phos, they also represented opportunity and a chance to experience the hidden side of a city that few people got to see. Within the slender labyrinthian passage, Phos walked through forking paths seemingly at random, retracing her steps after reaching a dead end and sometimes passing under the same clotheslines and arches as the streets folded back in on familiar walkways. Young lovers held hands as they sat on stoops, children chased after long-eared Bunnelby and other playful creatures. Overhead, matronly women watered small gardens adorning their windowsills and flocks of tiny orange-and-white-feathered Fletchling chirped atop the gutters and angled roof tiles as they watched the landlocked creatures passing below. The cozy streets offered a welcome break from the noises of city life—the kind of quiet some small part of Phos wished she had known growing up.

As the sun reached its zenith overhead, Phos stood at the edge of a clear blue canal running through the city. A large sign at the lip of the canal proudly declared “The Lumiose City Urban Redevelopment Plan is Underway!” To her right, a man in the usual Lumiose style—a flat blue newsboy’s cap and beige trench coat—dangled his long legs over the side of a simple stone bridge bisecting the canal and took a long drag of a cigarette as he sat with his back to Prism Tower. On the other side of the waterway, a pair of tiny orange rodents squeaked energetically at each other as their round ears twitched. Two long black whiskers extended from each of their chubby orange cheeks. The Dedenne pair created a bright arc of electricity that traveled between their whiskers as their long black tails stood straight in the air.

Phos looked down at the trickling stream of water as it flowed past. As the Dedenne exchanged electricity, their display pulsed and arced against the surface of the canal below. Phos shuddered as the sight unearthed a buried memory.

Chapter 26: Wellness Check

Every second matters as Phos races to a doomed boat in Undella Bay.

Rays of light pierced through the steady waves above, illuminating the colorful reefs blooming across the ocean floor and casting dancing patterns across the manmade construct stretching through the ocean—a large cylindrical walkway of glass and steel. On the other side

of the thick viewing window, a group of pink and blue Frillish watched Phos as she hastened down the length of the Marine Tunnel. The jellyfish-like Pokémon undulated through the ocean alongside her, veering around the faintly glowing light posts outside the walkway as their unblinking blue and red eyes hungrily followed her every step. A mirror image walked through the swarm, a reflection in the curving glass. Her pale skin and the reds of her hair, cropped jacket, and glove took on an otherworldly hue within the ambient ocean blues, while the black of her torn pants and heels melded into the depths and disappeared. The strange ethereal Frillish suddenly scattered into the dark depths of an abyssal trench below as a gargantuan Wailord drifted over the Tunnel. The massive blue Float Whale corkscrewed around the walk-through aquarium, its beady black eyes placidly observing the dozens of tiny awestruck people and Pokémon within. With a powerful stroke of its tail, the Wailord pushed off into the depths, shaking the glass with a baritone rumble as it departed.

A lifetime spent navigating through crowds magnitudes larger allowed Phos to effortlessly bob and weave through the stunned mob of beachgoers, tourists, and travelers around her without slowing her pace. After months of pursuing every lead and rumor she could chase, the chance had finally come to correct a critical mistake. Phos knew she would be followed too; many of Franco's actions had become predictable to her, and the gap between success and failure narrowed with each passing moment. Back above sea level, Phos prepared to exit the Marine Tunnel's lobby when she heard a young woman's voice shouting from across the room. Phos ignored the commotion and continued walking.

"Hey, wait up," the woman shouted. She wore denim shorts and a lightweight black jacket over a pink tee shirt with a deep v-neckline. One side of her head was shaved close to her tan skin, while the rest of her long turquoise hair was swept toward her ear. She ran toward Phos, frantically waving her arms. The approaching woman sighed and pushed the long strands of her bangs away from her eyes. Her bright blue irises flitted up and down across Phos's body as the shorter woman anxiously tugged at the small golden loop dangling from her exposed left ear.

"Twins above," the woman gasped, "it really is you!" The expressions of her soft pale facial features shifted wildly from concern to relief, then back to concern. "Are you alright," the woman asked, "Is someone forcing you to dress like that?"

Phos's face twitched in annoyance. "First of all, nobody makes me do anything. I *earned* these ripped seams," Phos growled as she pointed to the rips along her black leather pants. "Second, you must have me mistaken for someone else."

The blue-eyed woman's expression drooped. "You don't remember me? It's me, Hina. We all thought you were kidnapped or something!" She gawked at the cuts and bruises across Phos's skin. "Who's doing this to you? Let me take you to a hospital or something!"

A small group of bystanders were beginning to form around them. "Enough with the questions already," Phos demanded. She turned away and continued walking. "Look, stranger, I've got somewhere I need to be, and I don't need any help from you."

Hina followed after her, stammering all the while. "No, wait! Let me see your face. I need to know."

She timidly reached a hand up toward Phos's pointed blue sunglasses. Phos's gloved hand shot forward and squeezed the woman's fingers tightly. Hina gasped and winced as she tried to pull free.

"You're hurting me," Hina pleaded.

"Don't touch the glasses," Phos snarled, "Final warning."

"Shay's been looking everywhere for you," Hina shouted and helplessly slapped at Phos's hand, "Your dad's been worried sick about you! Don't you care?"

Phos said nothing. Her nose curled. Her lips peeled back as her red eyebrows sank below the top of her sunglasses.

"Let go, please."

"Listen," Phos spoke slowly through clenched teeth, "I'm not your friend. You never saw me." She violently jerked Hina's hand down, nearly throwing the smaller woman off-balance. "Got it?"

Tears began to well in Hina's eyes. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry," she repeated, "please, just let me go."

"Say the words."

"You—you're not my friend," Hina swallowed hard, "I never saw you."

Phos threw the girl's hand down. "Good," Phos said softly, "you learn quickly." Her voice dropped to a growl again. "Don't get in my way again."

Hina silently mouthed her understanding as she slunk low and backed away to rejoin the safety of the anonymous crowds. Phos left the lobby quickly, stepping out into the light that bathed the picturesque seaside resort of Humilau City and its many wooden boardwalks and luxurious bungalows crisscrossing above the shallow waters. She leaned her head back and sighed, rubbing her eyes behind her sunglasses.

"I miss you too, Hina."

Humilau City was abuzz with activity as countless visitors hoped to experience their summer vacations to the fullest. Phos spied on their conversations as she hastened down the boardwalk.

"That boat's been sitting there for a few days now," a woman said.

"People around the resort are starting to call it the Ghost Ship," a man replied.

"They say it's being guarded by a massive swarm of Frillish," said another, "everyone's too afraid to get close and it's not answering any messages."

Phos kicked off her heels and quickened her pace as she approached a row of jet skis tied to the end of a long pier.

Franco looked out across the bow of the speedboat, watching as small islands and sandbars raced past. He glanced over his shoulder. A small troop of jet skis, emblazoned with

the Macro Cosmos logo, followed in the speedboat's wake, manned by security personnel in form-fitting gray wetsuits.

"Light in the absence of eyes illuminates nothing," Franco said aloud, "Yet what remains of the wishes that fall upon deaf ears? Do those pleas vanish in silence? Altruists willingly embrace nihilism and call it compassion. Their benevolence is a façade, concealing weakness—an illusion of safety for those unwilling to take salvation by the throat but perfectly content to watch the world around them choke."

On the mainland to his left, a delta of whitewater rapids rushed down tall waterfalls and flowed out to the sea. The cold ocean mists rolled across Franco's skin before the wind carried it away.

"Oppressed by such hateful love, what choice remains but to become the architects of our own deliverance? The mason knows the value of a well-placed stone, all too well. He prides himself in his work, but he cannot allow arrogance to blind him. A perfect wall housing a single misplaced brick is not a shelter but a contradiction that threatens stability. Yet a broken piece in its proper place may yet find value."

Franco raised his binoculars to his eyes and scanned across the open sea. In the vast distance many miles away, a small nondescript red dot cut a swathe of white foam through the ocean as it raced to intercept an idle yacht far off the coastline. He motioned forward, and Franco's watercraft kicked up a fresh shower of seawater as they accelerated.

"Predictable. I feel I'm beginning to understand you more and more each day, Phos."

Franco's earpiece began to hum as one of his subordinates contacted him. He pressed his finger to his ear and answered.

"Sir, you have a call coming in on your personal line," the voice stated.

Franco sighed. "Patch it through."

A moment later, the earpiece clicked and a new voice buzzed within his ear.

"Franco, sir," Ida called, "can you hear me?"

"Go ahead," he said flatly.

"Sir! You left me behind," she moaned, "I was looking everywhere for you!"

"We have a situation that requires my immediate attention," Franco stated, "There was no time to delay."

Ida said nothing.

"Are you still there?"

"I'm still here, sir," Ida said. "You've been doing this more and more since we arrived in Unova."

"I've been busy," Franco growled, "can we save this discussion for another time?"

Ida hesitated. "Of course, sir," she said at last.

The call ended.

The white yacht sat anchored in the sea ahead of Phos. It measured in at a hundred feet in length, with three decks above the water and a large wooden aft. The yacht's port side featured a brushstroke mural of a beautiful Swanna. Phos slowed her stolen jet ski, submerged her bare toes in the sea, and switched off the motor as she drifted toward the large boat. Without the whining of the jet ski, the sea was eerily silent. No Wingull circled overhead, no voices could be heard aboard the ship; only the gentle crash of waves breaking against the yacht's hull.

Phos looked down into the water below her and found herself staring into a pair of blank red eyes as a blue-bodied Frillish reached up with a long veil-like arm. More and more Frillish were beginning to rise out of the depths and swim toward her jet ski. She quickly reached to her side and thumbed the release button on one of the Pokéballs at her hip. Malamar emerged beneath the waves and stretched its many tentacles out as it swam backwards through the water like a pointed dart. The squid-like Pokémon's black-and-yellow eyes glowered at the Frillish surrounding it as it flashed a series of warning lights across its torso. The jellyfish-like Pokémon distanced themselves, but kept their beady eyes trained on Phos. She shuddered, leaned down, and splashed at the surface of the water. The Overturning Pokémon rose out of the sea at her command and levitated into the air next to her jet ski. Phos pointed toward the yacht's deck, and the Psychic-Type wrapped its wet arms around her body and carried her up.

As she gently climbed out of Malamar's grasp, Malamar levitated forward to take point, its narrow eyes shifting across the boat's length for any sign of danger. Phos's nose curled as she approached an overturned dining table. The food that had been arranged on its top had scattered across the surrounding deck. Whatever it was, days of glaring sunlight, early summer heat, and exposure to the ocean's mists had reduced it all to a thick green-and-black sludge.

Phos turned to Malamar. "No scavengers?"

Malamar levitated toward the cabin's outer wall. It ran its arm along the wall's length, slithering between a long series of thin black spikes driven into the wall. It wrapped its fin around one of the spikes and heaved, yanking the narrow barb out and holding it up for its Trainer. Phos walked over and inspected the spike.

"You remember these," she asked.

Malamar nodded grimly.

Phos looked down at the boat's deck. The wooden paneling was covered in darkened, dry stains. She whistled sharply and muttered a curse under her breath. Malamar warbled a quiet, raspy trill and awaited its Trainer's orders.

She braced her forearm against the metal swinging door leading into the yacht's interior. "Let's hope that poor fool didn't fall overboard with the Pokéball," she said.

Malamar led the way through the inside of the yacht. A set of chaise lounge chairs lined with soft linens was arranged around the center of the spacious main room. The furniture had been flipped over, knocked aside, and perforated with dozens of iron filings. Deep black scorch marks burned the surrounding walls, floor, and ceiling. Phos sucked air through her teeth as shattered glass from broken overhead lights nipped at the underside of her bare feet. She knelt

down and searched beneath the furniture as Malamar used its psychic abilities to clean the sharp glass off the floor and sweep it to the side.

“Gotcha,” Phos hissed. She reached beneath the skirt of a perforated lounge chair and retrieved a pearl-white Pokéball. She pushed off of the ground with one hand and thumbed the Pokéball’s button. The ball’s top popped open to reveal an empty interior. Phos clicked it shut again and nodded to her partner. “It couldn’t have gone far,” she said.

Each cramped room that Malamar and Phos visited painted a similar scene: Broken and upturned furniture, iron spikes embedded deep in the walls, and dark stains that had soaked into the floor and dried. Guest rooms were cluttered with a disarray of abandoned clothing and other personal items left behind—wallets, jewelry, food that had been left to spoil. Plumeria flowers in porcelain vases turned brown and wilted atop what tables remained upright.

Malamar motioned toward one of the dried stains and squawked in confusion.

“The Frillish must have been sweeping through the decks,” Phos answered. “Keep your eyes open, our old friend might not be the only danger in here.”

As the two walked down the length of the ship, the sound of clattering metal ringing out against metal echoed through the ship’s interior. Phos froze and held her breath as she listened in.

“Magnodon? Are you there?”

Silence.

Phos held up three fingers as she approached the stairwell at the end of a long corridor. Malamar floated ahead, rising up toward the third deck as it checked for danger. As Malamar ascended, Phos pulled at an iron spike that had been impaled through a photo mounted on the nearby wall. Within a simple blue frame and cracked glass, a young man with a well-groomed beard cradled a large pink Alomomola in his arms as he sat next to a white-haired man holding a fishing rod. The two smiled happily as they leaned against the railing of the wide deck outside. Phos snapped back to attention as Malamar’s gentle glow descended. The Overturning Pokémon nodded and motioned toward itself with one of its bladed fins.

Phos took a deep breath atop the stairs and barged through a closed mahogany door into the master bedroom. The room was untouched by the devastation that had worked its way through the rest of the ship. A large bed covered in quilted sheets was wrinkle-free. A red bathrobe draped at the foot of the bed was neatly-folded and unworn. The large television set mounted to the wall was powered off, all the dresser drawers were closed. Phos opened a sliding glass door and stepped out onto the small deck overlooking the rest of the ship. As she approached the deck’s railing, the door slid closed with a loud thud. Down below, the Frillish silently drifted through the air as the least shy among them began to spread out across the deck of the ship. A pink-bodied Frillish glanced up toward Phos and called out with a high-pitched song as foamy water bubbles gurgled out of its mouth and popped. The rest of the Frillish followed her gaze and stared up at Phos. Malamar glared back at the wild Pokémon and sneered.

Phos patted Malamar’s side. “C’mon,” she said, “let’s find Magnodon and get out of here before they get too comfortable.”

Phos turned back toward the master bedroom. Within the open doorway across the room, a single bright yellow eye stared at her from the corridor. The creature slunk low to the ground and backed away with long, awkward steps. It was exactly as she remembered it: like a misshapen Magneton, with long horseshoe-shaped magnet legs lined with a thick clumps of magnetized iron filings. A long, whiplike segmented tail made of floating screws, a large glowing eye on each of the three domes clinging together, with a large iron topknot on the center head. As Magnodon backed away, it raised the two horseshoe magnets at its sides and narrowed its center eye as the iron shavings lining the magnets began to course with electricity.

Phos shouted and dove to the wooden deck. "Get down!"

Malamar pressed its sinuous body flat against the floor as a hail of electrified iron spikes shot through the glass door. The metal needles whistled through the air with high-pitched wails as the glass shattered.

From across the room, Magnodon thundered a fierce howl and began trudging forward. The iron shavings trembled violently within its magnetic grasp as it channeled another surge of electricity.

Phos turned to Malamar. "I think it remembers us," she mused. She raised Magnodon's Pokéball up and prepared to thumb the button to recall it. A sharp pain stung at Phos's wrist as an iron barb shot the ball out of her hand in a shower of sparks that sent the Pokéball spinning past the handrail and tumbling down to the lower decks.

Phos swore another oath through clenched teeth as she shook the pain from her hand. "Malamar," she shouted, "Hypnosis!"

Malamar levitated into the air and began to flash its mesmerizing display. Magnodon howled and clamped its three eyes shut. It trudged forward as it gathered electricity and hurled a wicked Thunderbolt that surged across Malamar's body. The Overturning Pokémon screamed out in pain as it somersaulted out of the air and fell overboard. Phos heard a large splash of water and slammed her gloved fist onto the deck.

The Magnodon turned its attention to Phos now. She clenched her teeth as she reached an open palm out toward the strange creature. "Easy," she said softly, rising to her feet, "easy... You've had it rough, haven't you?"

Magnodon stamped a metal foot forward and howled.

Phos gently shushed the high-pitched screeching as she glanced over her shoulder. "You don't want to see me any more than I want to see you," she continued, "but if you'll just... hear... me... out..."

Phos pivoted and vaulted over the railing to the deck below. A long volley of iron barbs whistled overhead as she plummeted to the floor and rolled to a stop. She reached for Murkrow's Pokéball and thumbed the release button. The little crow-like Pokémon cocked its head to the side as it emerged next to its Trainer.

"There's a white Pokéball on the deck below us," Phos explained, "go find it and bring it to me. Be quick!"

Murkrow gripped its wooden stick within its black wingtips and held it over its chest as it offered a sloppy salute with its other wing. It bit down on the stick and jumped into the air. A bolt of lightning sent Murkrow plummeting back down to the deck as Magnodon stepped over the railing above and clung to the wall. Phos quickly recalled Murkrow and began to retreat back toward the yacht's interior. She slammed her shoulder against the wooden cabin door and closed it behind her as a volley of black pinprick spikes bore into the wood behind her head. Phos heard another shrill howl as she traced Magnodon's heavy footsteps along the wall.

She sprinted through the cabin toward the stairwell in the back. Behind her, Phos could hear the wooden door break into splinters as Magnodon forced its way inside. Another howl. Phos ducked into a small supply closet as a bolt of lightning arced down the hallway and exploded against the far wall in a brilliant burst of yellow light. Her heart hammered within her chest as she wiped a streak of sweat from her forehead.

Phos ducked low and sprinted down the hallway. She vaulted over the guardrail and dropped down to the main deck. The Frillish crowded the center of the cabin now. As Magnodon stomped across the deck overhead, the ghostly jellyfish-like creatures chattered to each other and spread out. Phos took a deep breath and made a desperate bid for the open deck outside. She bit her lip and stifled a pained whimper as a sharp piece of glass embedded itself in her foot. She would have time to worry about that later if she was still alive.

Back outside, Phos searched the deck frantically for the lost Pokéball. The Frillish began to follow after her, spurred on by the scent of fresh blood that trailed behind her. The wispy creatures stretched their veil-like arms out toward her as they floated through the air. Phos's pulse quickened as Magnodon stomped down the stairs at the far end of the ship. Light glared off a reflective surface within the pile of rotted food around the broken dining table. Phos lunged for the white Pokéball, burying her hand in the sludge as she gripped the ball tightly. She took cover behind the table and tilted it toward Magnodon, shielding herself as Magnodon spun the two magnets at its sides and launched another salvo of iron spikes that buried themselves in the wooden top.

Phos tucked the table's pedestal under her shoulder and began advancing toward Magnodon, keeping her body crouched behind her makeshift shield. Iron barbs shrieked through the air and planted themselves in the table at an arm's length away from Phos. She tucked Magnodon's Pokéball into the pocket within her jacket and reached for Scrafty's Pokéball. She thumbed its button and hurled it over her shield.

"Cover up," Phos shouted, "get me close to that thing!"

Scrafty emerged from its ball in a bright burst of light. It and Magnodon both dropped low as they looked at each other in surprise. Scrafty quickly pulled its shed skin up over its body as Magnodon perforated the rubbery hide with iron shavings. Phos continued her steady march forward, wincing through the sharp pain in her foot. As two opponents closed in on it, Magnodon raked its iron barbs down its legs and unleashed a deafening shriek of metal scraping against metal as the creature began to back away. It quickly stomped backward toward the stairwell, firing spikes wildly as it darted back and forth between targets. One eye turned back and glared at its foes before the creature descended down the stairs into the lower decks.

Phos threw the table aside and hopped on one foot toward Scrafty. The Hoodlum Pokémon reached out to hold her steady and glanced worriedly at the fresh red droplets falling

onto the deck. Phos braced her hand against Scrafty's shoulder and kneeled down. She pulled at one of the spikes stuck in its rubbery hide and gauged her Pokémon's reaction. Scrafty held its shed skin out in front of it as Phos pulled a few of the iron barbs out of Scrafty's hide. After removing the spines that might have poked through the dead skin to prod at Scrafty's belly, the two partners began to approach the stairs. Phos and Scrafty nodded to each other and began their descent.

Magnodon huddled within the ship's engine room, squatting low to the ground as the cornered beast aimed its magnet at every errant noise. Phos and Scrafty leaned against the wall next to the engine room's open archway.

"Magnodon," Phos shouted, "you can't hide in there forever! Let me in. I can get you out of here."

Within its lair, Magnodon screeched at the sound of her voice and lined the opposite wall with more iron shavings.

"I can be stubborn too!"

Scrafty leaned toward the archway and rapidly chattered toward Magnodon. Magnodon answered with a bolt of lightning that impacted against the wall and detonated the planted iron spikes, sending white-hot metal fragments slicing through the air.

"That bad man who caught you the first time will be here soon. If he catches you, you'll never be free. I have your Pokéball right here! Come with us," Phos pleaded, "I can take you somewhere safe!"

The engine room was silent.

"I just need you to trust me."

No answer.

Phos waved her hand in the doorway. "I'm coming in, okay?"

Phos took a deep breath as she retrieved the white Pokéball from her pocket. Scrafty looked up at her and nodded. "We only need a moment," she said.

Phos and Scrafty leaned around the archway and prepared to step into the engine room. Magnodon screeched deafeningly loud and discharged a massive wave of electricity that arced in all directions across the room. In the seconds that followed, the intricate machinery within the room surged with power and exploded, a series of rapid detonations that rocked the ship and threw Phos and Scrafty off-balance as pillars of flame quickly began to lap at the ceiling. Phos fell forward and put the full weight of her body down on the glass fragments embedded in her foot. She screamed with pain and lost her grip on the Pokéball. The yacht began to lean to the side. Phos and Scrafty watched in horror as the ball rolled beneath the intricate burning machinery and disappeared from view.

More explosions rattled the ship's hull. Even now, Magnodon continued to discharge bolts of lightning as Phos and Scrafty ran back to the stairs. They gripped the handrails tightly and bounded up the steps as the lower deck began to take in electrified water. The two reemerged in the main cabin and began to cross its length as the ship began to careen to its

starboard side. Scrafty croaked in surprise as a lounge chair tumbled across the floor and barreled toward Phos. It ran forward and punted the chair aside as Phos continued running. Smoke billowed out of cracks in the deck as they stepped out onto the outside deck. In the waters below, Frillish began to swarm expectantly, more and more blue and pink bodies rising out of the depths eager to catch any falling prey.

A raspy voice called out to Phos as Malamar levitated alongside the sinking yacht. It reached out and waved its teammates over. Phos recalled Scrafty and leaned over the side of the deck. Malamar urged her on. She took a breath and vaulted over the side, her downward plunge quickly halted in place by Malamar's psychic powers. The Overturning Pokémon set her down carefully atop the stolen jet ski and descended to join her. Phos raised her middle finger, extending a complex key from above her nail. With a turn of her wrist, she turned the jet ski on and prepared to leave.

Overhead, Magnodon stomped out onto the yacht's bow as its three panicking heads searched in opposite directions for a way out.

"Magnodon," Phos screamed over the sound of another explosion, "let me help you!"

A roaring inferno erupted out of the yacht's stern.

"I can take you somewhere safe!"

Glass windows shattered and the hull groaned. The ship's bow rose into the air as water began to pull the boat under the waves. Magnodon continued pacing back and forth.

"Let me save you!"

Standing straight up now, the yacht plunged down into the depths. Phos steered her jet ski as close to the burning ship as she could.

As the ocean waves lapped at Magnodon's feet, its three eyes looked to Phos and narrowed. Moments later, it was completely submerged, still clinging fast to the ship's hull. Malamar prepared to dive into the water, skimming its long arms across the water's surface. It quickly pulled back and yelped with pain as Magnodon discharged another burst of electricity from its body.

The Frillish gathered around the yacht were gripped by paralysis and thrashed against the discharging electricity as the boat and its sole remaining passenger plummeted into the murky abyss. Phos recalled Malamar and watched as the blue waves pulsed with yellow electricity; a series of strobing lights that gradually faded. A sense of duty, or maybe some other long-forgotten emotion compelled her to stay until the pulsing finally came to a gradual stop. The truth of what happened here would be buried at sea.

Phos heard the roar of engines as a speedboat approached alongside its escort of jet skis. A familiar voice called out to her.

"Phos," Franco shouted, "what have you done?!"

Phos looked to him from behind her sunglasses and shook her head. "Some things just weren't meant to be," she said. Her jet ski accelerated forward and sped off across the bay as Franco's voice thundered over the screaming engines.

The next morning, Phos wrapped a fresh bandage around her foot as she listened to the news broadcaster on the hotel TV. The news ticker on the screen read “ALL HANDS LOST ABOARD PRIVATE YACHT, FRILLISH TO BLAME.”

“Joining us this morning is Humilau City’s own Gym Leader, Marlon,” the anchorwoman stated. She turned to a man with a deep tan seated next to her. “Marlon, what can you tell us about this tragic loss of human life?”

Marlon shook his head glumly. “I love the ocean,” he said, “but it’s a gnarly place sometimes. When food gets scarce below the waves, Frillish sometimes look for food above the surface. Those arms are lined with wicked poison spikes. They paralyze their prey, then drown ‘em five miles underwater. You gotta be careful when you’re boating in their territory.”

The news reporter winced and tried her best to mask the stress etching lines through her makeup. “What can we do about Frillish so this doesn’t happen again?”

“I’ll be working with Pokémon Rangers to round up as many Frillish as we can,” Marlon said, “when the population gets too big to sustain itself without putting people in harm’s way, we need to thin them out and relocate ‘em. It’s a bummer, those Frillish are just doing what’s in their nature and now they’re being punished for it. That boat will become a new habitat for Frillish and Jellicent to live in at the bottom of the sea. The tide comes in, the tide comes out. What’s important is that the tide keeps going, ‘kay?”

The woman pinched her eyebrows and cocked her head before resuming her professional stoicism. “That’s all the time we have for today. Thank you for sharing your expert insight with us, Marlon,” she grinned. The reporter turned directly to the camera. “Coming up next, a rare win for free-will deniers as recent studies suggests your tastes in Pokémon may be strongly based on genetics. Stay tuned!”

The camera panned out as the broadcast cut to a commercial break.

“This segment has been brought to you by Macro Cosmos Television.”

“Hey, lady,” a gruff voice called. Phos snapped to attention. A tall Kalosian man stood next to her, his beige coat smelled strongly of ash. He fluttered a sharp-smelling hand in front of her face. “Were you thinking about going for a swim dressed like that or what?”

Phos waved his hand away. “You’ll be taking a long drink yourself if you don’t mind your business.”

The man turned and grumbled under his breath as he shrugged and walked away. Phos leaned to her side with her hand on her bare hip as she watched the man walk away.

She hummed to herself as she tapped her foot. “Maybe I really do need to clear my mind,” she mused. Phos looked across the canal. She could make it across with a running start. Her gaze climbed to the wrought iron railings extending out from the apartment on the other side of the waterway. The roof tiles were steep but the gutters looked secure. Phos stepped back into the alley and raised a long leg into the air, pressing her heel against the wall as she stretched and planned her approach. She stretched one leg, then the other before bouncing on her toes and sprinting forward. With precise footwork, she pushed off the edge of the canal and lunged

forward, reaching out in front of herself as she arced through the air. Her bare fingers squeezed the ledge across the gap as her heels pushed into the flat concrete wall and her knees folded in toward her stomach. With a swing of her hips, Phos hoisted herself out of the canal and rolled to her feet. She leapt up and grabbed the bottom of a windowsill railing, grunting with exertion as she hoisted herself up. She threw her body upward, wrapping her hands tightly around the top of the rails as she secured her heels around the bottom. She repeated this again until the building's gutters were directly overhead. She grabbed the overhang and swung herself up and over, landing with her back pressed against the slanted roof. She exhaled deeply and climbed to the flat rooftop.

From her vantage point, the skies above were her only limit. Phos reached down to her hip and retrieved a Pokéball. She thumbed the button on its front and held it away from her as Zoroark emerged in a beam of light. The slender fox-like Pokémon sniffed the air and called softly as it awaited Phos's instruction.

"C'mon, Zoroark," she said, "let's go for a run."

The Illusion Fox and its Trainer dashed across the rooftops with long, masterful strides, leaping atop chimney stacks, somersaulting and backflipping from one raised platform to the next as the two acrobats goaded each other into greater feats of athleticism. On opposite sides of a long building, Phos and Zoroark twirled and rolled from one dormer window to the next before vaulting over a darkened narrow alley to their next obstacle course. Flocks of startled bird Pokémon chirped and took flight, scattering in all directions as the two terrestrial intruders crossed through their domain. The two partners had no destination in mind, they simply crossed through the sprawling urban environment by the most indirect means they could find. Zoroark tiptoed across the concrete edge of a walled rooftop garden with all the expertise and grace of an urban ninja. Phos answered its challenge by performing a handstand atop a sturdy metal satellite dish and pushing off into a rapidly-spinning pirouette. They played leapfrog through rooftop gardens, crisscrossing between rose bushes and cartwheeling through the sand of tranquil zen gardens. Instead of using stairs, the two opted to slide down handrails or clamber up tall trees before leaping to higher ground. As Phos chased after Zoroark through a narrow fenced-in balcony, she found herself panting for breath and laughing in equal measure.

Jump, twirl, roll. Flip, hoist, repeat. Onward and upward as the two slid down cloth canopies and vaulted over air conditioning units and huge green electrical boxes. At last, Phos's heels skid to a stop at the raised edge of a tall building overlooking a wide avenue below. Zoroark came to rest at her side and perched on all fours at the narrow corner of the rooftop. Although the Illusion Fox's mouth panted heavily, its turquoise blue eyes beamed with pride. Phos wiped her scraped and bleeding palms on her pant legs. She ran her fingers through the thick red mane behind Zoroark's ears and looked down at the street below.

A large group of children had gathered in the avenue, hollering and cheering as two of their young friends staged a Pokémon Battle in the center of the street. A Yanma flitted through the avenue's array of birch trees as a small Pancham gave chase, lunging after the dragonfly-like creature and slashing wildly with sharp extended claws.

One of the young Trainers pumped his fists in the air and shouted, "Yanma, use Air Cutter!"

The Clear Wing Pokémon turned through the air like an ace pilot and rapidly fluttered its wings, creating sickles of wind that sliced through the birch tree branches. As Pancham dove for cover, a wave of green leaves tore themselves free from their branches and flitted into the air, rising on the midday breeze to the rooftops overhead. Zoroark howled, and in an instant, Phos's mind was elsewhere.

Ahead of her, Murkrow perched on a thick branch above a frozen stream. The thin sheet of snow atop the river was barely visible beneath a thick cloud of sickly green powder that slowly crept across the forest floor. The crow-like Darkness Pokémon closed its dark red eyes and waved its stick through the air like an orchestra conductor. The wind whistled through the surrounding tree branches, rustling through Murkrow's black feathers and plucking dry brown leaves from the snow-covered trees. The brittle leaves danced through the air and tumbled down into the miasma before fading from view. Phos wiped the condensation from the front of her respirator mask and steadied her breathing. Her hazel eyes locked onto the tree branch ahead of her as she planned her next leap. A light dusting of snow landed atop the hood of her tight black catsuit as Zoroark climbed down the tree trunk and pressed its pointed snout against her ear. Phos reached up with one hand and stroked the Illusion Fox's cheek.

"I'm just taking it slow," Phos said, her husky voice muffled behind her rebreather, "I never liked wearing this thing. You go ahead, I'll catch up."

Zoroark snorted and clambered higher up the tall tree. It pressed its body against the trunk and pushed off, pouncing through the air and digging its long red claws into the tree ahead. It quickly leapt from tree to tree before taking its place on the branch next to Murkrow and turned back toward its Trainer. Every breath echoed in Phos's head as she steadied herself on the sturdy branch. Though the winter air was cold and dry, the respirator from her days of playing with spray paint in the neglected alleyways of Castelia had always felt uncomfortably hot after just a few minutes of use. Beneath the clear plastic mask, sweat dripped across her face, pooling in her eyebrows and above her lips. She lunged forward, grabbing ahold of the next branch within her black motorcycle gloves and swinging through the air toward the nearest tree. As she approached, Murkrow fluttered off to another tree and continued to guide the wind. The wintry forest behind Phos disappeared behind a blanket of toxic spores as the next few trees ahead were revealed.

Onward through the silent forest, the three acrobats traveled from tree to tree. The whistling gale of Murkrow's Tailwind was a constant reminder of the oppressive emptiness that surrounded them. Treetop nests and secluded hollows were abandoned, no fresh tracks disturbed the snow along the forest's floor.

Breathe in, breathe out. Jump. Swing. Steady...

Zoroark whimpered softly as it nudged at Phos's hand. Phos snapped back to reality. The kids on the street below were nowhere to be seen and the avenue was surprisingly empty in their absence. She sighed and rubbed her Pokémon's snout.

"Just catching my breath," she whispered. Phos sat down at the edge of the rooftop and let her long legs hang over the side. She wiped the sweat from her forehead and closed her eyes for only a moment.

Within her mind's eye, she pictured the massive silhouette that slunk through the spores on the forest floor. They had followed it from above until the slithering shape disappeared into a wide-open clearing. Murkrow's wings fluttered rapidly as it descended from the canopy. Phos held onto the stick gripped between its talons as she peered through the encroaching fog.

Behind them, Zoroark crawled down a thick tree trunk on all fours and leapt into the frozen grass to prowl closely by Phos's side. Murkrow hopped ahead silently, warding the spores away with a twirl of its stick. The cloud was all around them now, a wall of nauseating shades of green nearly impossible to see through. Murkrow raised its stick over its head and swept the haze away with a gust of wind.

As the cloud thinned, two large yellow compound eyes—framed by a thick and spiky orange horn on either side of its smooth dark face—stared unblinking at the little Darkness Pokémon. The creature's snout, tipped by a wicked arrowhead-like point, twitched in the space in front of it. Murkrow squawked loudly in surprise and flailed its wings as it fluttered away from the strange creature. The large bug lunged forward out of the haze, sprinting forward on four thick legs covered in a thick coat of white fur. It tackled Murkrow to the ground and jabbed the Darkness Pokémon repeatedly with its sharp nose. It pressed a stubby black foot onto Murkrow's chest and unleashed a baritone rattling hiss that reverberated across the forest clearing, sending snow falling from the surrounding tree branches. The large bug, like a bloated and overgrown Volcarona, reared up on its hindlegs, slammed its thick green abdomen onto the ground and unfurled six massive red and orange wings from its back as Phos and Zoroark ran toward it. The wings crashed together with a fierce thunderclap, scattering a plume of green scales high into the air.

A single leaf danced on the breeze above the Lumiose street.

"Zoroark," Phos asked over her shoulder, "you understand why I stopped you, don't you?"

Zoroark's pointed ears twitched as it cocked its head to the side.

Back within Lostlorn Forest, Phos could barely see through the steam within her mask as she staggered into the underground warren. Her thigh stung sharply where the creature's scaly wingtips had sliced through her pantleg and exposed her bare skin to the toxic air outside. Zoroark led the way into the den, looking around frantically as it rushed ahead on all fours. A foul and stagnant scent pierced through her rebreather as Phos gasped for breath. Within the heart of the nest, an older woman laid down on a makeshift bedding of twigs and a variety of different-colored clumps of ragged fur. Her short brown hair was matted with grease, her face was sickly pale and gaunt. Her long white scarf was frayed and her black trench coat was covered in filth stains. The ground around her was strewn with bare bone fragments. The woman coughed violently and reached a trembling hand off the ground.

Phos knelt at the woman's side. "I need your Pokéball," Phos said sternly.

The woman patted at the ground by her side and clutched her fingers around a blue-topped Pokéball crisscrossed by black netting. "It didn't return," the woman croaked. Her hoarse voice was a faint whisper. "I tried to call it back but it didn't return."

"It doesn't have a choice now," Phos stated. She grabbed the ball and pushed off the ground, careful not to touch the bleeding cuts on her legs on her way up. Back outside the warren, the giant bug sprawled out on its back, pinned to the ground by Scrafty's heel as Murkrow struggled to push the encroaching green clouds away. Phos held up the creature's ball and captured it within a beam of light.

As Phos returned to the heart of the warren, Zoroark loomed hunchbacked over the gaunt woman. Its quivering lips curled around sharp fangs as a shadowy veil of malice snaked up Zoroark's arm.

“Zoroark,” Phos screamed, “No!”

Zoroark’s teary blue eyes darted toward its Trainer. It pointed a long red claw toward the den’s wall. Carved within the firm earth was a primitive engraving of a Zoroark’s narrow face and thick mane. It was joined by more carvings—smaller round faces, claw marks of varying sizes and directions. Zoroark panted heavily as it turned back toward the woman and glared.

Phos whistled sharply. “Pokémon shouldn’t attack people,” she stated, “it isn’t right.”

Zoroark whined through its clenched teeth.

“We’re not killers, Zoroark.”

The swirling dark energy dispersed from Zoroark’s arm. The Illusion Fox Pokémon quickly turned away and bounded out of the den on all fours. Phos moved out of its way and returned to the woman’s side.

“I’m sorry,” the woman croaked.

“I’ve heard it before,” Phos sneered.

“I don’t know what went wrong,” the woman coughed and sputtered through cracked lips, “Mothbrawl was always so well-behaved.”

Phos furrowed her brow. “Mothbrawl?”

“It saw something in the woods. I couldn’t see what. Mothbrawl went out of control. It wouldn’t let me leave...” The woman’s dry voice cracked. Her violent coughing echoed through the den.

Outside, Zoroark howled into the forest, calling continuously for a response that would never come.

A Gogoat bleated loudly as it walked down the cobblestone street below. Phos and Zoroark watched as it ambled down the boulevard.

“I try to be a better person,” Phos said, “The dead never change. But how much grief could the world have avoided if I...” She swallowed hard. “Could I really do something like that if I had to?”

Zoroark skulked toward the edge of the building. Phos turned her head as Franco sat down next to her.

“I know. What I would have done,” the illusion spoke. Its red eyes narrowed into a wicked glower. “A long time ago.”

Phos crossed her arms and pursed her lips. “Whole lot of anger under that shy exterior,” she mused.

“You still. Care for him,” the illusion continued, “After everything he did. To you. To us. You still want him.”

“It’s not about that,” Phos growled, “Franco risked his life to save a total stranger. There’s a good man in his heart, I’ve seen it before.”

The illusion laughed dryly.

"All my life, I was just a street punk," Phos said, "Another thug without a future. Where would I be if no one ever gave me the chance to be a better person?"

"Where are. You now?"

Phos sat in silence for a while.

The illusion gazed across the city's skyline. "Humans don't. Evolve like we do."

Phos ran her fingers through her tangled hair and sighed. "You're right about that. Pokémon have it so easy," she said. "I'm not much of a hero, but I have to keep trying. It's what Apollo would have wanted."

Phos turned back toward the illusion and saw a reflection of herself looking back at her.

The illusion pinched its eyes shut and smiled. "A hero to me."

Phos smiled back and ruffled the illusion's hair. The image flitted rapidly between the disguise and Zoroark's true form as the Illusion Fox struggled to maintain its concentration. Zoroark leaned into her touch as the fox-like creature's canine leg reflexively kicked in the air.

"Well, even heroes need a little help sometimes," Phos admitted. "If my stubbornness gets me in trouble, can I count on you to bail me out?"

Zoroark reared back and howled loudly in response. Phos stood up and scratched behind Zoroark's ears.

"That's my girl," Phos said. She pulled away from Zoroark and reached down for its Pokéball. "That was a good run, little lady, we'll do that again sometime."

Phos recalled Zoroark and returned its ball to her hip. She clambered down the side of the building and leapt down to the street. She wiped the sweat from the hair matted to her forehead as her heart rate returned to normal. She removed her red jacket and slung it over her bare shoulder. As she walked across the avenue, an older gentleman wearing a dark purple suit stepped out from a corner café.

"Miss, miss," he cried.

Phos groaned. "Everyone keeps calling me that," she grumbled, "I have a name, you know!"

The white-haired man bowed his head. "My apologies, madam," he said, "but you looked so weary! I simply had to get your attention."

Phos pressed her knuckles against her hip. "Well, you've got it. Enjoy it while it lasts."

The man chuckled nervously. "I work at that café, you see," he explained, "and nothing would make me happier than to help you relax in any way I can."

Phos raised an eyebrow. "What's the catch?"

"No catch," the man stated.

"No catch?"

"Satisfaction guaranteed, or your money back!"

Phos chewed on her lip and hummed. After a moment, she shrugged. "Eh, you're welcome to try." She followed the man back to the coffee shop where three similarly-dressed gentlemen eagerly watched their approach through the front window. "My shoulders have been a little stiff," Phos said, "anything you can do about that?"

The man smiled widely and rubbed his hands together. "Certainly," he exclaimed, "a hot towel wash and a massage while you await your coffee will coax that tension right out!"

Within the soft lighting of the café, the man delivered Phos to a simple wooden chair before a round table and clapped his hands. "Warm towels and hot coffee for Madam..."

"Phos," she answered as she draped her jacket over the backrest and sat down.

"Madam Phos!"

The other three gentlemen scrambled to get to work as a fourth man in a clean white suit scribbled into a small notepad.

"How do you like your coffee, Madam Phos," one man asked.

"Dark as midnight," she responded.

Another man held up an armful of colorful cotton towels. "Which color would you prefer, Miss Phos?"

"Surprise me," she shrugged.

"Shall I clean your sunglasses?"

"May I polish your shoes?"

"Madam Phos, would you like a sablé cookie with your drink?"

"Yeah, sure, whatever," Phos snapped. She sighed and leaned back in her seat.

"Just think happy thoughts, Miss Phos," the first man said.

Phos closed her eyes and her mind began to drift.

Chapter 10: Valentines and Vindication

As she stepped into the cold winter air, Phos vowed that she would live and die this night.

Phos wiped the blood running freely from her nose as she sat down across from the boss of Black City. Scrafty and Malamar steadied their breathing behind her. The lavish office, illuminated by dark purple wall lights, was in disarray with upended desks, smashed furniture and broken glass. Sealed Pokéballs had rolled to a stop around crumpled, unconscious bodies across the floor. She rested her bloody baseball bat across her knees and smirked up at the old man as she awaited his answer. His pure white mustache and clean brown business suit contrasted heavily with the destruction surrounding him. He sucked on a large cigar and blew a ring of smoke across the table.

"Are you really prepared for this," the old man asked, "I'm not the only friend he has. Far from it! Knocking on his doorstep is like kicking a sleeping Beartic, you better be ready to deal with the consequences."

"I'm already awake," Phos declared.

The embers within the cigar flared.

"Vartan's personal office is on the thirteenth floor of the MC Brokerage building across town. Nice place, not as good as mine. He'll be working late tonight coordinating another sale."

"And he'll be waiting for your men to arrange the delivery."

The old man reclined back in his velvet-lined throne and glanced around the room. "There will be an unexpected delay."

Phos beamed with pride, flashing a row of reddened teeth. "When I'm done with him, I'll be coming back for you," she declared.

The old man laughed heartily as he grabbed a liquid-gold bottle of whiskey and poured two glasses. He slid the first glass across the table and began pouring a second glass for himself. "Good luck," he growled, "they'll have you floating out to sea by sun-up."

"Call me greedy."

Phos caught the sliding glass and took a large drink before shaking her head. The rest she poured on the open cuts torn across her black hoodie and pants. She set the empty glass down on the table and took her leave with her two Pokémon following closely behind.

"Happy Valentine's Day, boss-man," Phos teased, "tonight's date will be one to remember."

The screaming engine of Phos's motorcycle thundered across the obsidian streets of Black City; a flash of crimson cutting through the dark as neo-noir skyscrapers crowded around the sharp twists and turns of the roadway. The evening skies overhead were densely overcast with a dull gray cover of rolling clouds that hungrily absorbed every photon of light they could reach. Though the cold winter chill whipped viciously at her clothes and skin, Phos didn't—couldn't—feel anything except for the roiling blood burning within her veins.

The Macro Cosmos Brokerage firm loomed at the end of the street. A large green "M" and bright yellow "C," illuminated in glaring neon lights, shined like a beacon guiding Phos's wheels through the darkness. She revved the engine and jumped the curb, branding the mark of her tire treads into the sidewalk as she threaded between the concrete barricades in front of the tower. Phos reared up on the motorcycle as its motor roared. As she hurtled toward the front entrance, she grabbed her baseball bat from its side holster, leapt off the bike, and somersaulted through the air. She held the bat high as she soared through the air. Murkrow swooped low over her head and gripped the bat firmly within its talons. Phos's bike continued on its course as Murkrow delivered her back to solid ground. An angry red missile, three-hundred pounds of chrome and smoldering rubber, crashed through the building's entrance, shattering glass and punching through solid metal as it clattered to the ground with a trail of burning gasoline in its wake. The cold night was deathly quiet as the entire city seemed to hold its breath. A moment later, the skyscraper's lobby erupted with high-pitched emergency sirens.

Phos hit the ground running as she returned Murkrow to its Pokéball. She leapt over the rising fire and sprinted into the building. Each determined footfall was mirrored within the polished red tiles of the lobby. She located the tower's stairwell behind a one-way door along the lefthand side of the lobby's cold metal walls.

She threw her next Pokéball toward the door. "Malamar," she shouted, "get that door open!"

As Malamar emerged from its ball, the squid-like Overturning Pokémon glowed with purple psionic energy and opened the way with a wave of a long arm. On the opposite end of the lobby's entrance, the building's four elevators opened up and Macro Cosmos security teams rushed forward.

"Stop right there," one of the guards shouted.

"Visual confirmed," another barked into her headset. "It's her."

Malamar levitated toward the approaching guards, shielding Phos with its body and roaring a raspy battle cry as its yellow eyes narrowed.

Phos threw a second Pokéball. "Help him out, Zoroark," she shouted.

Zoroark prowled forward on all four paws as the Pokéball's light faded. It cast a quick glance across the guards as they reached for their own Pokéballs before turning back toward its Trainer and nodding.

"Break everything you can," Phos commanded, "Fight like you'll never have another chance." She took a deep breath and stepped toward the stairwell. "Make me proud, you two," she beamed.

The guards were throwing their Pokéballs now, releasing a host of foes. Excadrill, Klingklang, Escavalier, Bronzong, the threats mounted. Malamar coiled its tentacles and laughed wickedly as it levitated higher into the air. With its psychic powers, it ripped the greeting desk out of the floor and launched it across the lobby. It ripped light fixtures out of the walls and hurled them next, crushed flower vases within its psychic grip and fired the shards like bullets from an autocannon. Zoroark disappeared from view, its turquoise eyes were the last to vanish as it nodded to its Trainer.

The door closed behind Phos as the roars and screams of battle gave way to muffled silence. She sprinted up the stairs, bounding two or three steps at a time with long strides. Her jaw clenched tightly shut as she ran, her knuckles felt as if they would split open as she squeezed the handle of her bat. Her heart hammered with passing moment.

2F

3F

Her head throbbed, her mind raced with possibilities.

4F

5F

Her body did nothing to protest against the exertion. Every cell in her body operated in perfect sync.

6F

7F

Every muscle, every organ, each and every drop of blood and bead of sweat, trillions of microscopic voices shouted in unison.

8F

Justice!

9F

Revenge!

10F

An end to the nightmare.

11F

One way or another.

12F

In spite of it all, she found herself laughing as she climbed the final flight of stairs.

I hope you're watching, Apollo.

13F

Phos barged her shoulder into the door, swinging it outward with all her might and slamming it against the adjacent wall. Phos cartwheeled forward, diving beneath the baton swing of a security guard waiting on the other side. She swung the bat outward, catching the guard behind the knee and sweeping him off his feet. A second downward swing cracked the man's orange visor as another guard tackled Phos and slammed her against the wall. A swift headbutt rattled her skull and unleashed a fresh stream of blood from her nose. As she recoiled from the hit, her hazel eyes zeroed in on a fat-bodied corporate type in an ill-fitting suit as he scrambled out of his enclosed office space. The man met her gaze and gasped in surprise.

"You—"

A sharp hook to the cheek from an armored hand sent Phos sprawling to the ground. The bat fell out of her grip and began to roll away. With a flick of her wrist, Phos's grappling hook shot out from her sleeve and landed behind the bat. She recalled the cable, dragging the bat back within reach along with it, and quickly brought the bat's length over her chest as the man stomped down with a steel-toed boot. Phos placed her other hand on the bat's end and pushed against his heel, throwing him off-balance and stumbling backward. She rolled to her feet and grabbed the man by the collar of his body armor, smashing the bat's knob into his front teeth with a quick jab. With the bat's barrel, she shoved the man into the stairwell before another forceful swing sent him tumbling down the stairs.

Phos had no time to catch her breath. She sprinted after the fat man as he heaved further down the hallway toward the door at the far end. She had spent too many sleepless nights imagining what she would say in this moment. Her speeches and threats were all a distant memory to her now. Instead, she bellowed with rage: "Vartan!"

The man's round face turned a sickly shade of pale as the red-headed avatar of vengeance closed the distance. His peppery, balding hair was matted with sweat. He raised his hands up and turned to face her as he slowly backed away. "Wait," Vartan pleaded, "calm down, let's talk about this!"

"No talk," Phos snarled. She slowed her approach and held the end of the bat out toward his sagging gut as she wiped her bleeding nose across her sleeve.

"What do you want from me, money? I'll give you money! I'll give you a fortune!"

Phos grinned wickedly and said nothing.

"You want a new motorcycle? I'll buy you a motorcycle! I'll buy you a new car!"

Thick creases were forming beneath Vartan's beady brown eyes. Phos basked in his fear.

"You want a house? I'll buy you a house on Undella Bay!"

His fleshy nostrils flared as he breathed heavily. She began to laugh merrily and quickened her pace.

"I don't know what you want from me, I'm just a broker-dealer!"

"I know you're the one selling those freakshows," Phos stated calmly.

Vartan laughed nervously. His back was against the door now. "You want one of those? I can get you one! Any one you want, I can get it for you! I'm a good friend to—"

Phos's amusement quickly died. "I want them off the streets," she roared.

She swung her bat forward. The fat man winced away from the attack and stumbled backward through the door, flailing his arms to correct his balance as he staggered into the spacious and dimly-lit room beyond. Large window panes reaching from the floor to the ceiling extended across the far wall, offering a panoramic view of Black City and the dreary clouds above its many skyscrapers.

"I want them all gone," she screamed.

The next swing nearly broke the man's neck as a strong gust of wind set his matted hair fluttering. Vartan turned and ran as Phos stomped after him.

"But not before I make you pay."

Vartan doubled over and clutched at his chest as he meekly waved Phos away. "Wait... wait," he gasped.

Phos's grip tightened as she glowered down at the man.

"I-I can't... I can't..."

Vartan's hand slipped into his suit pocket. He retrieved a black Pokéball lined with large green dots and thumbed its orange button before tossing it to the ground. The entire room went dark for a moment as the Pokéball opened up. From out of the darkness, a large hood of black metal spikes unfurled like the petals of a flower head, its interior glowing with magenta-hued energy. A pair of narrow pink eyes flared to life within the hood, illuminating the gaunt blue skull of a metal dragon. The creature levitated forward as six black bands extended from its back. Two smaller heads extended from the creature's round chassis, their toothless metal jaws snapping open and shut as they activated. Two glowing pink bands extended down its black belly, and a third ran down its segmented tail. The robotic creature bellowed a deep rumbling growl that shook Phos's bones.

"Hydreitausen," Vartan suddenly shouted, "protect your master!"

The bizarre robotic Hydreigon's two smaller heads disconnected from its body and honed in on Phos. She swung her bat at the first metal skull as it rocketed toward her, swatting the missile away and sending it skidding across the open floor. The second head clamped its metal jaws around the barrel of the bat and ripped the weapon from Phos's hands before returning to its body. The main head bit into the bat and crushed it, sending dozens of wooden splinters raining down.

Phos reached to her side and quickly threw a Pokéball. "Scrafty," she called, "time to fight!"

Scrafty stepped forward with its hands wrapped around its shed skin. The Hoodlum Pokémon clenched its jaws as it watched the levitating heads of its opponent orbit around Hydreitausen's body.

"High Jump Kick," Phos commanded.

Scrafty ran forward and pushed off the ground, launching itself feet first through the air toward its opponent. Hydreitausen pressed its three heads together and began to expel a large sphere of purple energy that it held in front of itself. The energy swelled and turned into a powerful, swirling beam that carved through the floor before aiming up toward Scrafty. Caught in the air, the attack hit Scrafty dead-on, its energy tearing into Scrafty's body as the reptilian Pokémon was launched backward and through the office wall.

"Scrafty!"

Phos turned and began to run to Scrafty's side. She gasped and clutched at her throat as her movement came to a sudden halt. Behind her shoulder, one of Hydreitausen's drones had bit into the back of Phos's hood, holding her firmly in place. The robotic creature levitated forward, its metal features devoid of body language as it loomed over Phos. The drone head yanked Phos down to the ground before rejoining its body. As Phos flinched from the sharp pain in the back of her neck and head, she saw herself reflected in Hydreitausen's metal body as the creature put its three heads together and began to channel another attack. The searing heat of the purple ball of energy rose in intensity just above her head.

In a brief instant, her life flashed before her eyes.

With a smug grin, Vartan pointed a thick finger forward. "Hydreitausen," he shouted, "finish the job!"

The six black ribbons along the metallic dragon's back curled inward as it reared its three heads back and fired. She closed her eyes and turned away. The world darkened. When she opened her eyes, Scrafty stood in front of her, pulling its shed skin up over its body as it shielded its Trainer from harm. Bruised and bloodied, it looked back over its shoulder and grinned, tilting its chin up toward her. She exhaled sharply and nodded back.

"What would I do without you," she asked, "You ready to scrap this junk?"

Scrafty nodded.

"High Jump Kick!"

Scrafty warbled a defiant cry as it leapt into the air, spinning its heels around to deliver a fierce roundhouse kick against Hydreitausen's main head. The metal dragon's pink eyes dimmed as it careened through the air. It stopped its fall with its six wings and launched its two smaller heads toward Scrafty. They screamed shrill, static-laden shrieks as they honed in on their foe. Phos watched the two heads carefully.

"Scrafty, get the one on the left," Phos commanded, "Drain Punch!"

Scrafty's arms glowed green as it waited for the drones to draw near. It shot its hand out toward the left head, grabbing it by the throat with one hand and striking it across the jaw with the other. The magenta light faded from the head's star-shaped hood as it went inert and blackened. Scrafty took the drained head and swung it hard against the second target, swatting it away with a loud metallic clang before tossing its makeshift bat to the ground.

The main head unleashed a furious cybernetic roar as it rose high into the air and began to charge up its next attack. Behind it, its master had turned tail, panting and heaving as he ran towards the elevator.

Phos turned towards Scrafty. "You got this under control?"

It pumped its fists and warbled fiercely as it turned back toward the hostile machine.

"That's my boy," she said. She sprinted across the room and intercepted Vartan as he neared the elevator. She lunged between him and his escape and slammed her elbow into his bulbous nose with a wicked crunch.

As Scrafty continued to duel Hydreitausen, Phos wrapped her fingers tightly around Vartan's throat and slammed him against the window. A light snow was beginning to fall outside.

"This ends with you," she growled, "your first year in prison will be spent in a body cast."

"Wait," Vartan choked, "I'm just... following... orders!"

Phos tightened her grip. "Orders from who?"

Vartan's pale face began to flush with red. "I can't... he'll kill me!"

"I'll kill you," Phos snarled.

Vartan sputtered and gasped as he feebly clutched at Phos's fingers. He tapped her forearm. "Okay... okay," he wailed, "I surrender!"

Phos released her grip. Vartan leaned back against the glass and breathed heavily. The fighting continued behind Phos's back as Scrafty's tail glowed light blue and swatted one of the drone heads away.

"His... his name is... Sh—his name is Shoo..."

Phos tapped her heel impatiently.

"Shoot her now, Hydreitausen," Vartan quickly screamed. "Attack, now!"

Phos quickly looked over her shoulder. As one drone clamped its jaws onto the shed skin tied around Scrafty's neck, the second drone rocketed toward Phos. Phos reacted quickly, grabbing the black-and-green Pokéball from Vartan's pocket before diving out of the way.

"Vartan, move!"

Vartan only had time to scream as the drone continued forward. His panic-stricken brown eyes met the hollow gaze of the metal blue skull moments before impact. The glass shattered. As the drone returned to its main body, Vartan's terrified screams echoed into the night before abruptly falling silent.

Using Vartan's Pokéball, Phos withdrew Hydreitausen. Her face curled in disgust as she held the ball in her palm. She took a deep breath and sighed as Scrafty gingerly approached the edge of the broken window. Snowflakes began to drift into the building.

Phos sighed and opened her eyes. "Hey, when's that shoulder massage starting," she asked.

Behind her, one of the gentlemen screamed in frustration. She looked over her shoulder. A man was limply shaking his wrists in the air. Another leaned against the café counter pressing an ice pack between his hands.

"More towels for the Madam," a gentleman shouted.

A glimpse of color on the floor caught Phos's eye. She looked down and saw a small pile of colorful cloths draped across the floor. With trembling arms, the first gentleman slowly carried a small platter holding a cup of coffee and a square shortbread cookie toward the round table Phos was seated at. Despite his best efforts, the small plate rolled from his palm, its contents scattering to the ground. Phos reached out and grabbed the sablé out of the air as the coffee mug shattered against the floor tiles. The man with the ice pack slumped his head against the wooden counter and sobbed.

"I-I'm so sorry, Madam Phos," the trembling man stuttered, "we gave it everything we could, were our efforts not enough for you?!"

"I didn't even notice you guys had started," Phos admitted. The man in white continued to take notes.

"We have failed you, Madam Phos," the man sighed, "how can we ever hope to run this business if we cannot even please our customer? I hope you can forgive us."

Phos closed her eyes and slowly shook her head as she rose from her seat. “Don’t beat yourselves up,” she said. She put her jacket back on and retrieved her shining sunglasses from the table. She carefully placed the shortbread cookie within the breast pocket inside her jacket and made her way to the door. “There’s really no fixing someone like me.”

As she exited the café, Phos took in her surroundings. The sun was much lower in the sky than she remembered. As she looked up and down the street, she realized she had no idea where she was. Prism Tower loomed over the surrounding buildings, to be sure, but the sight of the tall monument didn’t seem to amount to much when she couldn’t identify any other landmarks.

Phos shrugged and began walking down the long sidewalk toward the outer rim of the city. Her heels tapped rhythmically against the pavement as she wandered aimlessly. As she walked past a line of high-end boutiques, the tall faceless mannequins in the front window displays—draped in luxurious fabrics and elegant dresses—cast silent judgment down upon her. Phos paused in front of a black fishtail dress and observed as its sequined fabric caught the afternoon light. She turned away in disgust, the reflection in the glass was not the one she knew.

In many ways, the long avenue seemed like a distorted carnival mirror of the streets she knew so well in Castelia. The buildings were too short, their chiseled faces and wrought iron balconies were a stark contrast to the towering glass and steel giants of Unova. It felt like drifting through a misremembered dream. In Lumiose, the wide boulevards lined with trees and quaint cafés seemed too fantastic to be real. Each tap of her heels echoed her sense of displaced déjà vu. Another parade of Gogoat shuttles slowly meandered down the boulevard ahead before disappearing around the next column of buildings.

Phos rounded the corner and followed the Gogoat at a distance until the sidewalk opened up to a small square overlooking another flowing canal. A large gatehouse sculpted from brown bricks was adorned with Pokéball emblems. A large disk above the gatehouse archway read simply “13.” Phos sat down at a nearby bench and watched the crowds pass by. Before long, her attention fixated on a young mother and her daughter walking side-by-side. The little girl giggled as she tried to catch rolling droplets of melting ice cream with her tongue. The girl’s mother, her face a picture of serene joy framed by glossy strands of long brown hair, wiped a stray smudge of vanilla from her child’s cheek. Just over Phos’s shoulder, a cell phone rang within a standing pedestrian’s hand, jolting Phos from one distant memory to another.

Chapter 19: The Debutantes

Faith is hard-earned and seldom shared between two thieves. A trust exercise is necessary.

Phos sat alone within her apartment. The faint idea of sunlight bled through the thick bedsheets covering the window. Her curtains had been repurposed to obscure the nail boards below. The single entrance to her studio apartment was locked, latched shut, and barricaded by a sturdy block of wood. The peephole in the center of the door was covered by seven pieces of black electrical tape. A blanket was pressed against the bottom of the door and held in place by a large cinderblock. No lights were on in the apartment. The stagnant air was beginning to

become uncomfortably warm as an early summer arrived in the midst of May, yet a thin layer of dust covered the unplugged fan unit by her bed. Phos reclined on her small leather couch with a warm cup of coffee in her hands and kicked her feet up on the table next to her angular blue sunglasses and a cell phone that had been powered off for over a month. Although the rest of her clothes and belongings were piled up near her pillow, Phos kept her Pokéballs close to her side always. The room was completely silent aside from the subtle sound of her breath and occasional gulp. The time was 7am. Phos had been awake for thirty-two hours at that point. In her field of work, this silent paranoia was the closest she would come to feeling relaxed within her new home.

Close, but not close enough. A single error had seen her previous apartment gutted by an apparent electrical fire. Investigators were quick to rule out arson. Phos knew better now.

The cell phone on the table powered on. Phos raised an eyebrow and watched as the phone started up without any prompt from her. A series of text alerts popped up on the screen.

UNKNOWN: Don't worry, I'm a friend of a friend. :)

UNKNOWN: I understand you've been doing philanthropy work lately. Street cleaning?

UNKNOWN: I think we should meet up for coffee sometime. I'll buy. We have a lot in common.

UNKNOWN: I don't like him either. ;)

UNKNOWN: I'll be waiting for you, midnight tonight. Please don't be late.

The phone screen continued to fill with grid maps, coordinates, and addresses guiding Phos toward the proposed meeting place. The phone's depleted battery gave out and the screen went black again.

Phos sighed. "And I was just getting comfortable."

The full moon shined brightly within the dark sky. The towering skyscrapers of Castelia City were enveloped by a halo of manmade light across the sea. Within the Virbank Complex oil refinery, small groups of Patrat navigated through the night by following the glowing yellow stripes across a Watchog's body. A tall man stood by himself at the heart of the refinery, calmly watching a swarm of Magnemite floating over the still waters. A large metal briefcase was placed on the ground by his black shoes. He wore dark pants and a long, high-collared gray coat. Although most of his blond hair was trimmed short, he had a long blue cowlick that swept toward the back of his head before curling under his ear.

Phos's grappling hook firmly clung to a steel girder overhead as she descended to meet the mysterious contact. The man did not seem surprised as she landed next to him. She adjusted the sleeve of her cropped red jacket as the grappling hook retreated and nodded with a sideways glance.

"You've been quite busy," the man said calmly, "I understand you're the one who forwarded Macro Cosmos's Type:Null project to the press."

Phos said nothing as her hazel eyes studied the man's pale-yellow irises.

“December spoke highly of you, but that was truly magnificent! The Aether Foundation thanks you for your efforts in protecting its research.”

Phos relaxed her posture as she circled around the taller man with her hands within her pants pockets. “That information was sent by the Aether Foundation from the looks of it,” she said.

The man shrugged. “Yes, well, progress made is progress made—irrespective of who claims credit. Regardless,” he continued, “the Aether Foundation is very interested in gleaming a few secrets from Macro Cosmos now. Recompense, with interest.”

“Just tell me what you want,” Phos commanded, “I’m not one for conversation.”

The man rapidly tapped away at a terminal inlaid on his coat’s sleeve. A pale blue hologram projection flickered to life above his forearm. Within the video feed, a large dragon was being transported in a claustrophobic cage. Its feathered crescent wings were restrained, its four legs were shackled, its eyes were shielded by blinders and its jaws were muzzled tightly shut. Even still, the creature fought against its restraints as armored Macro Cosmos security guards prodded it into exhaustion with electrical batons. Phos had seen enough and waved away the footage.

“With some effort, we’ve managed to locate where this specimen was delivered to,” the man explained, “We even secured a ticket to a gala event the specimen’s new owner will be hosting to celebrate his recent acquisition, but now we need someone who can capture the specimen in our stead.”

“Why does the Aether Foundation want this thing,” Phos asked.

“That’s for the Aether Foundation to decide,” the man answered, “Just bring it to me.”

“Science is rarely self-sacrificing,” Phos said as she stroked her chin. “I get it,” she continued, “you want to see how Franco made this thing. The same way Macro Cosmos saw how you made Type:Null.” She clenched her fist and snarled. “You disgust me.”

“I simply don’t care what you think,” the man replied. “I only care about what you can do.” He reached down for the suitcase and the latches popped open after the briefcase scanned his finger prints. The interior compartment was filled with dollar bills. A dark red glove was draped atop the cash, and an enclosed envelope was placed within its fingers. “If it helps, I promise you the Aether Foundation would treat that specimen much more kindly than Mister Franco or his clientele ever would. Agree to the job, and the contents of this suitcase are yours. A second suitcase of equal value will be provided in exchange for the living specimen.”

Phos inspected the money closely as the man continued to showcase the briefcase’s contents in his arms. She thumbed through the stacks of cash and ran her finger across the glove’s length. Phos nodded and slid the glove over her right hand. “It fits perfectly,” she marveled.

“Of course it’s perfect,” the man answered, “I designed it myself. That glove is a multi-tool device. Flame-retardant, stab-proof, a thin gel layer protects against upwards of fifteen-hundred newtons of force. Each finger has a different utility when extended.”

Phos extended her middle finger and whistled as an intricate lockpick extended out.

The man held up his fingers as he explained his creation. "Thumbprint replicator, wire-cutter, universal lockpick, the fourth and fifth digits combine to form a chemical-testing kit. Clenching your fist produces an electrical charge capable of channeling fifty-thousand volts. Strictly for self-defense, of course."

"Of course," Phos lied. She looked up at him. "And you promise this dragon won't be able to harm anyone else if I bring it to you?"

"As I understand it," the man answered, "there's recently been some vacancies within the Aether Foundation's cryotherapy chambers. Try to imagine what it would be like to go to sleep and never wake up."

Phos had plenty of time to imagine it during the subway ride to Opelucid. The prospect seemed more tempting with each passing hour, but as she stood outside her destination, Phos put the thought aside to focus on her goals. She took a deep breath and steeled herself as she reached for a Pokéball resting against her bare hip. With a press of her finger, Phos released Zoroark from its ball. The lithe black-furred Pokémon stretched and quickly scanned its surroundings. The very air around it blurred as Zoroark took the shape of a beautiful young woman with dark bronze skin and a long, flowing red ponytail. The Illusion Fox's human disguise wore a black sweatshirt with a large hood that drooped across her shoulders, denim shorts, and simple black-and-white gym shoes. Zoroark flashed a sharp smile at Phos and waved happily as she reached out with her long red fingernails.

"C'mon, Zoroark," Phos said, "we've got some shopping to do."

Together, the two ladies boldly entered Shopping Mall Nine.

As the waning moon illuminated the skies over Opelucid's historic district, a procession of fashionably-late guests began to gather outside the large stone mansion overlooking the city. The mansion's opulent masonry, like an exotic foreign temple, was well-lit by billowing torches across the estate's spacious gardens. Its invited guests arrived in limousines and on the backs of regal Pokémon such as well-groomed Altaria and Sawsbuck with blooming pink flowers growing along their horns.

Two guests made the bold, and head-turning statement of walking up the road to the estate's front entrance. Phos led the way in a sleeveless purple fishtail dress that tightly hugged the contours of her body. The long skirt was adorned with the white silhouette of tree branches with yellow leaves drifting across the dress's fabric. Dozens of black sequins dotted her outfit. On her left arm, she wore a long purple glove that extended beneath her shoulder. On her right hand, she wore a dark red glove. Detached hanging sleeves extended from behind her back and wrapped around her elbows. She wore a brass choker around her neck and a pair of clip-on pyrite earrings. Her long mane was braided into a loose ponytail that wreathed her head.

Zoroark followed closely behind her in human guise. The illusion's long red ponytail was fastened behind her head by a large turquoise bead that matched her eyes. She wore an elegant gray dress with a wide skirt hemmed with downy black fur just above her knees. A thick, luxurious coat of black fur lined her shoulders, from which two tight black sleeves extended down to her wrists. With her long red nails held on her hips, she walked on her black high heels with all the glamor of a runway model.

The two women held their chins high as they approached the well-dressed and muscular security at the mansion's ornate front door.

"Evening, ladies," the doorman grunted. "Invitation, please?"

Phos reached into the front of her dress and retrieved a small silver card with an alluring wink. The doorman stoically took the card and scanned it carefully. He raised an eyebrow and glanced at Phos.

"Welcome... Miss Axel?" He turned to the woman standing closely behind her. "And who's this?"

"This is my plus-one," Phos answered, "Zo—"

Zoroark swiftly nudged the back of Phos's leg with the tip of her foot.

"Zooooolda," Phos corrected herself.

Thick creases lined the doorman's forehead. "Zolda?"

"Like the princess," Phos said quickly. Zoroark nodded enthusiastically.

"Does she normally speak for you, Miss Zolda," the doorman asked.

Zoroark blushed and laughed nervously as the disguise averted her gaze.

"She's very shy around good-looking men," Phos explained, "Ain't that right, Zolda?"

Zolda buried her face in the thick fur of her dress collar and meekly wiggled her fingers at the burly man.

The doorman snorted and began to distance himself. "You ladies enjoy your evening."

The mansion's foyer could have been mistaken for a museum. The high walls were adorned with ancient clay tablets and collections of wooden masks from all over the world. The tall ceiling was lined with mirror panels that gleamed with ethereal light from the reflections of the chandeliers. The windows were lined with colorful perennial flowerbeds, and glass displays filled with sculptures, jewelry, and antique weapons dotted the floorspace and surrounding hallways. Dozens of guests filled the room, chatting noisily around the glass displays and the silk-topped hors d'oeuvre table.

Phos elbowed Zoroark's side. "So what do you think," Phos asked, "Do we just ask around? Hey, when do we get to see the freakshow?"

Zoroark shrugged and chuckled. The Illusion Fox turned its attention toward the sweet-smelling appetizers across the room. Stuffed mushrooms, smoked fish crackers, miniature quiches stuffed with creamed spinach and bacon, seasoned potato croquettes, meat skewers glazed in honey and sprinkled with mint...

"Focus, please," Phos said in a singsong voice, "I want to see that dragon first."

"You'll be seeing Paleomence after dinner," a man answered helpfully, "It's currently being prepared for the spectacle battles we have arranged for it within the garden."

Phos and Zoroark turned their attention to the newcomer. He was an attractive man, roughly as tall as Phos, with short dirty-blond hair and a closely-trimmed full beard growing over his rectangular face. His blue eyes beamed with pride as he flashed a pearl-white smile at the two ladies in front of him. He wore a dark red suit jacket, black pants, and suede shoes. Phos clinically scanned him up and down and took note of the single Ultra Ball fastened at his side. He wasn't her type, but she knew his kind well enough. She ran a finger through her hair and bit her lip.

"Ah, you must be the homeowner's handsome adult son," Phos smirked, "unmarried, I hope."

The man laughed and held up his bare fingers bereft of accessories. "Unmarried, yes," he said, "but actually, I am the homeowner." He reached out his right hand. "Mankeizer, thank you for coming tonight."

"Play your cards right and I'll be coming tomorrow morning too," Phos joked as she shook his hand, "Axel, I'm told." She gestured over to Zoroark as Mankeizer gently squeezed the illusion's hand. "This is my good friend, Zolda, an archeologist attending Castelia University."

The illusion's face reddened deeply as the aristocratic man held her hand.

"A fellow historian," Mankeizer beamed, "I hope you make yourself right at home, Miss Zolda, I have many exhibits that a woman of your caliber would be interested in here on the ground floor."

"You hear that? He keeps all the real treasures upstairs," Phos remarked.

"Actually, all the guest rooms are upstairs," Mankeizer said, "Feel free to walk around, but the basement is strictly off-limits and under guard."

"Of course, Mister Mankeizer," Phos grinned, "we'll do whatever you say." Zoroark nodded along.

The aristocrat clapped his hands together, "In that case, I think you should help yourselves to those sumptuous quiches before they're gone. Let me know if you need anything."

Phos and Zoroark smiled and waved as Mankeizer bowed and took his leave. The two ladies began to walk toward the hors d'oeuvres.

"What a simp," Phos shook her head, "Men like that are too easy." She spoke quietly as she leaned in toward Zoroark. "So the dragon's in the basement, but its ball is on his hip. You grab the ball and meet me in the basement. Just follow my scent. We'll catch the freak and be back upstairs before they even bring out the steaks."

Zoroark gasped in confusion, placed its hand over its chest and cocked its head toward Phos.

"Yeah you," Phos answered, "he already likes you. Just keep him busy for a while." She looked over her shoulder and watched as Mankeizer floated from one group of partygoers to the next.

With a handful of warm quiches in her glove, Phos tracked down Mankeizer as Zoroark tucked in behind her. "Mister Mankeizer," Phos began, "my friend here was hoping you could give her a tour of your exhibits."

Mankeizer raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

Zoroark smiled sheepishly and nodded.

"She's so shy, she didn't want to bother you," Phos said, "she gets that way around men that she likes."

Zoroark screamed in surprise, the illusion's face was aghast.

Mankeizer laughed boisterously. "I promise I don't bite, Miss Zolda!"

"If only we could say the same about her," Phos muttered. An impish grin spread across her pale face as Zoroark's embarrassment grew. "I hope you don't mind that she gets tongue-tied easily, but she's a great listener."

Mankeizer reveled in the attention. "A woman who keeps quiet and listens? You really are remarkable," he stated.

Zoroark laughed nervously and tugged at the dress collar.

Phos patted the illusion on the back. "You two will just get along swimmingly," she teased.

Mankeizer raised an eyebrow. "You're not coming with, Miss Axel?"

Phos laughed and waved him off. "Oh, no, I have to go touch up my eyeshadow in the restroom, don't let me stop you."

Zoroark stammered and hawed, reaching out for Phos as Mankeizer began leading her down the hallway.

"If only Malamar and Murkrow saw that," Phos thought, "They'd laugh themselves to death."

Phos calmly traversed the mansion's interior. Phos's interests were reserved for men far smarter than Mankeizer, but the collector was right about the quiches. Around the next corner, Phos happened upon a small unoccupied and open restroom and another well-dressed man guarding an undecorated door at the end of the hall. She took note of his large muscles, the telltale outline of a protective vest beneath his suit, and the row of Pokéballs on his belt. She batted a sultry look toward the man and bit the corner of her lower lip as she approached.

"This area's off-limits," the man said flatly.

Phos placed her hand over her bare collarbone and laughed. "This area's off-limits," she cooed, "but what about you?" She held up a quiche. "You hungry, handsome?"

The man crossed his arms over his chest. "Nope."

Phos shrugged. "More for me. Maybe you've got an appetite for something else?"

"Like what."

Phos hummed. "Use your imagination, stud. You, me," she whispered, "alone where no one else can see? My friend keeps stealing attention from all the other men, and it's making me *frustrated*."

The man bristled as she continued her approach. She sashayed her hips and ran a gloved finger down his chest.

"I'm working."

"You deserve a break."

"I really shouldn't."

Phos leaned in and kissed his lips. The guard's resistance was quickly melted away by the taste of her lip gloss as he pulled her closer. Phos pushed away from the man and smirked. "You're right," she said, "we really shouldn't. We should go in that bathroom and close the door first."

Taking him by the hand, Phos led the man into the restroom and closed the door. She reached down and unfastened his belt, pulling it free from his waist as his Pokéballs clattered through the air.

Phos glanced up at the man and shrugged. "This is my first time doing this, go easy on me."

As she held the loose belt in her left hand, Phos clenched her right hand into a fist and sucker punched the man across the jaw. He spun around limply as the red glove's stunning electricity arced through his nerves and sent him tumbling to the ground. As the man crumpled against the restroom tiles, Phos exited the room and closed the door behind her. She tossed the belt of Pokéballs aside and pulled a bobby pin from her hair. She straightened the pin out and forced it into the door's latch mechanism. She tried to turn the doorknob, but the jammed strike plate prevented it from moving. Phos smiled and extended the index finger of her right hand. She thumbed a small button and extended a sharp razor blade from her fingertip. With a quick seesaw motion, Phos clipped the bobby pin so that it couldn't be pulled out of the door. She retracted the razor and quickly headed into the basement down a flight of narrow stone stairs.

Each step of Phos's heels echoed into the dark as she descended. A strong smell of copper filled the stale air. The stone walls of the large basement were lined with shelves that sagged under the weight of metal storage boxes. The stone floor was scarred by deep claw marks, dried bloodstains, and buckets of shattered bone fragments. At the heart of the dungeon-like basement, overhead lights illuminated a large cage and the creature within. Behind the thick steel bars, anchored in place by chains that crisscrossed the floor, was a large blue dragon. A thick bone-white protrusion shielded the top of its head, while its underside was guarded by a red scale plate. Above the tight muzzle clamped around its jaws, two narrow yellow eyes glowered forward, their red pupils glowing with a crimson hate. Its large red crescent-shaped wings, lined with blue feathers and battle scars, braced against the cage's claustrophobic confines with no room to move. A clear tube filled with red liquid ran below its forearm to a nearby drip bag.

The chains rattled as Phos approached. With a rumbling growl, the dragon snorted plumes of fire from its nostrils as its eyes watched her every move. It tried to raise one of its thick forearms, but the chain held it firmly in place.

Phos raised an inquisitive eyebrow as she paced around the creature. "Paleomence, I presume." She walked toward the drip bag station and held the bag's label up toward the light. "Saline and X Attack," she hummed.

The hollow eyes of a cracked Bouffalant skull on the ground mirrored the creature as it glared malevolently at Phos. The basement was eerily silent. A soft howl broke the quiet as Zoroark skulked out of the shadows on all fours. Its pointed snout sniffed at the air as it held Mankeizer's Ultra Ball between its sharp fangs. Phos gently stroked the fox-like Pokémon's red mane and nodded as she took the ball. She held the ball up to Paleomence's eye.

"We're going to get you out of here," she said softly, "out of the dark, away from the chains. We'll all be better off without you around."

Phos thumbed the button on the ball and held it out toward Paleomence. As it returned to the ball in a beam of red light, the shackles and chains clattered to the ground and the drip feed fell limp. The Pokéball thrashed within her grip and burst open. Paleomence forced itself free from its ball and stretched its limbs out in the open space in front of Phos. The dragon unleashed a deafeningly-loud roar as it reared up and began smashing the cage with wild and uncoordinated ferocity. Paleomence's powerful claws tore the thick steel cage apart, sending bent and broken metal clattering across the stone floor. Its sharp fangs ripped the chains out of the ground before crushing the heavy links between its jaws. It swept its tail out to its side, sending its drip feed clattering into the basement wall in a shower of red liquids and broken parts. Breathing heavily, Paleomence turned toward Phos and Zoroark and dug its claws into the stone.

Phos swore as she dived out of the way of Paleomence's lunge. The creature skidded to a halt in a shower of grinding embers and turned back toward Phos before slamming its thick tail into the ground. Stretching its wide wings out, the primeval dragon pushed off the ground and rocketed through the basement ceiling, leaving splinters and shattered debris raining in its wake. As Phos clambered to her feet and sprinted back toward the staircase, she could already hear the screaming as the savage Pokémon began to tear through the mansion. Zoroark's long ears drooped low as it followed closely behind its Trainer.

Back on the ground floor, Paleomence left a wild trail of destruction in its wake as it rampaged in all directions, tearing through walls and smashing rooms at random. As Phos and Zoroark returned to the foyer, Paleomence roared and unleashed a gout of flames that incinerated many of the mansion's flower beds as Mankeizer and his guests scrambled to escape from the destruction. At its Trainer's command, a mighty Golurk stomped toward Paleomence with its powerful clay arms outstretched. The ferocious dragon pounced on the Automaton Pokémon, pulling it to the ground in a violent storm of gnashing fangs and rending claws. Across the room, a Mamoswine froze the air around its two long icicle tusks and quickly flung the chunks of ice toward its opponent. The flechette hail stabbed into Paleomence's side, directing the creature's attention away from the motionless Golurk beneath it. Paleomence's body glowed with blue light as it took flight and cut across the room almost instantly to assault Mamoswine. By the time Phos's eyes registered the first hit, Paleomence was already landing a second, then a third and fourth. As Mamoswine collapsed to the floor, Paleomence landed atop

it and unleashed an intense stream of fire into the mammoth-like Pokémon's face. From atop its wooly perch, Paleomence reared up and unleashed a fierce roar that sent cracks running across the stone walls of the estate.

Zoroark's limbs trembled as it took several timid steps backward. Phos extended the razor blade from her glove and cut a neat line from the bottom of her dress skirt up to her hip. She parted the fabric and reached for the Pokéball holstered above her knee.

"Come on out, Murkrow," she shouted. She threw the ball, and the crow-like Darkness Pokémon took flight.

As Murkrow hovered in place, Paleomence eyed the small bird hungrily and ran its tongue across its sharp fangs. The dragon's body became cloaked in blue light again as it lifted its crescent wings into the air.

"Thunder Wave!"

Paleomence nearly disappeared in an eyeblink as it hurtled toward Murkrow. With superior speed, Murkrow held its wooden stick forward and cast a hex that gripped the dragon's body with paralytic electricity. Paleomence shrieked as it tumbled out of the air. The dragon rolled across the floor, smashing through a glass display case and breaking through the wall behind Murkrow before finally sliding to a halt. The creature winced as it staggered to its feet and bounded forward on all four limbs. Pillars of flame erupted from the sides of its jaws as it thrashed its head wildly and snarled.

"Steel Wing!"

Murkrow somersaulted over Paleomence's head and took flight as the dragon ran forward. Murkrow's wings began to glow with bright white energy as Murkrow corkscrewed through the air and dived down on top of its opponent. Its hardened wings slammed into the back of Paleomence's head, forcing its snout down into the floor and shattering the tiles beneath as Murkrow veered away.

Gripped with rage, the savage creature charged wildly across the room in a frenzy, smashing through furniture with reckless swings of its tail and crushing display cases beneath its mighty foreclaws. The two guards ducked out of the way, covering their heads and necks as debris rained from the ceiling.

"Do something," Phos shouted.

"That was my last Pokémon," the doorman replied.

The basement's guard rubbed at his cheek as he raised an empty Pokéball. "I'm out too! Bail!"

As the gala's security detail recalled their fainted Pokémon and evacuated the building, Paleomence soared into the center of the foyer and unleashed a burning inferno that set the very air on fire and sent chunks of melting magma falling from the ceiling.

Mankeizer stood in the doorway, cupping his hands over his mouth. "Zolda! Zolda," he called, "Where are you?!"

Paleomence's jagged maw curled as its bloodshot eyes turned their gaze toward its owner.

"Mankeizer, you have to get out of here," Phos screamed.

"Not until every guest is accounted for," he shouted back, "Zolda! Zolda!"

Paleomence roared and dived down with its claws outstretched.

"Murkrow," Phos shouted, "Sucker Punch!"

Murkrow quickly closed the distance and dived beak-first into Paleomence's head. Its sharp beak jabbed the dragon in the eye before an upward swing of its stick smacked Paleomence across the jaw. The dragon pivoted on the wing and swatted Murkrow away with a powerful backhand that left a scattering of black feathers in Murkrow's wake as the Darkness Pokémon arced across the burning room.

Paleomence roared as it prepared to scythe Mankeizer down. The man stared into the eyes of death, dumbstruck as he was tackled to the ground. Zoroark bit into the hem of his jacket and pinned him to the ground as Paleomence flew overhead and smashed through the front of the building. As the collapsing rubble subsided, Zoroark barked at Mankeizer and bounded after the rampaging dragon.

The gala guests erupted into panic as Paleomence soared over their heads. It landed atop a limousine, crushing the metal frame beneath its body before charging forward to upend a dark green sports car.

Phos carried Murkrow in her arms as she escaped the collapsing mansion. Ahead of her, Zoroark rose up on its hindlegs and howled a defiant challenge toward Paleomence. The dragon howled back and growled in pain as the electricity still coursing across its body seized its muscles.

Phos pointed forward with her red glove. "Zoroark, Focus Blast!"

Zoroark tucked its arms below its shoulder and began to gather energy. A brilliant orb of orange energy began to swirl within its claws, expanding outward and thrashing against Zoroark's shaking grip as the Illusion Fox howled. Paleomence craned its long neck toward the crumpled sports car and ripped the door out of its hinges. With a quick turn of its head, Paleomence sent the door hurtling through the air toward Zoroark. The Illusion Fox held its ground and continued to concentrate on the Focus Blast pulling away from its claws in all directions.

"Zoroark," Phos called out, "drop it! Get out of the way!"

Zoroark loosed its attack and leapt to the side as the car door barreled past. The door continued onward, skipping off the ground in a shower of broken glass before slamming to a halt against the side of the burning manor. The Focus Blast zigzagged aimlessly into the night before arcing upward and eventually sputtering out.

Murkrow tightened a feathered grip around its stick as it pushed itself free of Phos's grasp. The Darkness Pokémon fluttered to the ground and hopped forward, its red eyes burning with determination beneath the wide brim of its crest. With well-rehearsed coordination, it raised

its stick over its head before sweeping to the left and then the right. The cool nighttime wind gathered in intensity and began to ripple around Zoroark's body. Zoroark turned a sideways glance toward Murkrow. The crow-like Pokémon nodded sternly. Zoroark nodded back before mirroring the glare of its opponent.

Paleomence began to glow blue as it leapt into the air and barreled forward with murder in its eyes. It descended in front of Zoroark and swiped down with its wicked rending claws. Bolstered by the Tailwind, Zoroark sidestepped out of the way and retaliated with a quick slash across the dragon's neck before ducking underneath Paleomence's next attack. As it whipped its bulky forearm around to swat at its opponent, Paleomence lunged forward with gnashing fangs; Zoroark jumped backward out of reach and countered with a swift kick to the underside of the dragon's jaw. For every frenzied attack, the Illusion Fox dodged out of the way and riposted. Zoroark leapt over the swing of its tail, dodged and danced away from a flurry of scything claws, sweeping wings, and jaws wreathed in flames. The dragon pushed off the ground and exhaled a pillar of fire that singed the earth beneath its wide wings. Zoroark leapt high into the air, held aloft by the fierce gale churning around it.

Phos whistled sharply. "Focus Blast, again!"

Zoroark reached back and began to channel a second sphere of energy. The attack filled the air like a miniature sun as the churning energy violently bucked against Zoroark's control. Paleomence's body remained rooted in place as the paralysis arced across its nerves again. The Focus Blast quickly expanded until it reached the limit of its power.

"Think angry thoughts!"

Zoroark's body flared with a dark aura as the malicious depths of its imagination stimulated its mind. The dark energy intertwined with Zoroark's attack, expanding the Focus Blast further and further as it soon began to dwarf the Pokémon holding it.

Paleomence kicked up a shower of dirt and broken stone as it ran forward and flapped its mighty wings to take to the sky. Zoroark howled fiercely and threw the orb forward with all its might. The violent explosion of energy that ensued brought daylight to the evening for a brief moment. The sonic boom of the explosion rattled Phos's teeth and kicked up a massive spire of dirt and obliterated stonework.

Murkrow eased Zoroark's return to solid ground before allowing the wind to peter out. Phos cautiously approached the smoldering crater left in the Focus Blast's aftermath as the dust began to settle. Paleomence's bloodshot eyes darted up at her as she approached. "It's okay, now," she said softly. She held up the Ultra Ball as the creature weakly tried to rise to its feet. "You're going to be okay. Just try to imagine what it will be like to go to sleep, and never wake up."

Paleomence relented and collapsed to the ground. It closed its eyes and growled as Phos thumbed the ball's button and withdrew the creature. Behind her, Zoroark leaned back and howled triumphantly while Murkrow rested its stick on its shoulder and cawed a raspy victory cry. Slowly, the manor's guests began to gather around in silent awe. Phos reached down to the holster above her knee and retrieved her cell phone. She quickly texted her new contact.

I got it. Meet me in the Dreamyard. I'll show you where I've hidden the rest.

Her old phone rumbled in her hand a few moments later.

UNKNOWN: :)

It was time to go. As the wailing of distant police sirens began to come closer, Phos breathed a sigh of relief and turned around one last time to watch the mansion burn.

Lumiose's air now hung thick with the hearty smell of cooking stews and sizzling meats. A gentle breeze caressed the lone woman's long red hair as Phos traveled alongside the canal back toward the center of the city. Eventually, Phos found her way to a small circular park as the August sun began to set over the artificial horizon of the city's tall buildings. The streets were quieter now than they had ever been as most of the city settled down for an afternoon meal. Phos looked around at the unfamiliar buildings surrounding her. She rested her hand on her belt and chewed on her upper lip.

"How the heck did I get here," she muttered.

Phos's eyelids felt heavy above her strained eyes. Her muscles throbbed with a dull aching pain and her stomach grumbled. She sat down on the stone base of a carved Roselia statue and slumped forward with her elbows resting on her knees.

"Hey," a soft voice called out, "are you enjoying my city?"

Phos looked up. An all-too familiar woman entered the park opposite of her.

"I warned you about getting lost," Azelie mused.

Phos rolled her eyes and said nothing as the Kalosian woman approached.

Azelie covered her mouth as she looked wide-eyed at Phos. "You look terrible," she gasped.

"Keep running your mouth and I'll look like a Lurantis compared to you," Phos snarled.

Azelie raised her hands up. "I'm sorry," she bowed her head, "I really didn't mean it like that. Are you alright?"

"What do you care?"

"Your friend Emma asked me to help look for you," Azelie explained, "Your cell phone battery died an hour ago."

Phos furrowed her brow and reached into her jacket pocket. She held Emma's phone firmly in her palm and thumbed the button on its side. The black screen remained dark.

"Oh," Phos remarked, "Sorry about that. I'm not used to carrying one of these with me these days."

Azelie stifled her laugh behind the back of her hand. "Well, luckily Misterius saw you from above and led me here."

The thought made a chill run down Phos's spine. "Lucky," she asked bewildered, "I don't feel very lucky at all."

"No. You're carrying a lot of negative emotions," Azelie noted, "I can sense it with my Aura."

"Cute party trick," Phos's smirk came and went quickly. "Emma told me to go clear my head and now it's more full of crap than before. What am I supposed to do?"

Azelie pursed her lips and nodded. She motioned to the space at Phos's side. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Knock yourself out," Phos said flatly.

Azelie sat down on the stone pedestal, crossed her leg over her knee, and straightened out her short skirt. She clasped her hands in her lap and nodded politely to Phos.

"On my honor as a Guardian, you can tell me about anything you need to get off your chest," Azelie stated.

"There's just a pain that needs to get off my back," Phos muttered.

Azelie stamped her heel down and pouted. "Ach, I'm trying to help you!"

Phos took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "It's been a rough year for me, Blondie," she said, "I see so many happy, smiling people—people just living their lives wherever I go. I wish I could be like them again. Oblivious, like them. Happy, like them."

"Happiness fades into melancholy, and that sadness will give way to future joy," Azelie stated, "That is the natural order of things. Until that joy is renewed, we cherish the happy memories that we made to make the wait more bearable."

Behind her sunglasses, Phos's hazel eyes darted toward the grass at her feet.

Azelie smiled widely to herself as she continued speaking. "Remember what makes you happy, and what a relief it will be to feel that happiness again."

How many hectic days and nights had Apollo and Phos spent racing across Castelia City? She had won some races, lost others, but neither of them bothered keeping score. The simple thrill of competing alongside one another and challenging themselves in new ways was enough. She had never felt more free, more at peace than the quiet moments they stole to themselves in the high and low corners of the city overlooked by countless others.

"Yeah..." Phos said, "that's not really an option for me anymore."

"And yet you still live."

Phos raised her eyebrow and hummed.

"What do we do when our happiness is taken from us? Do we lie down and wait for death?" Azelie shook her head. "No, we keep living. All things, no matter how permanent they seem, will come to an end. Does that make those experiences any more or less worthwhile? From one ending blossoms new beginnings." She looked up into the crimson skies. "The day ends, and we awaken from the long night to a new dawn, a chance to fill a new day with new memories to enrich our world. And when the sun sets for the final time in our lives, we will greet the end with our heads held high, knowing that we lived each day as best we could. We will greet old friends with so many new stories to tell that what was old will be new again."

Phos brushed her fingertips beneath her glasses and wiped them on the collar of her jacket. "I don't think I can let go. I'm not strong enough."

"That's the wonderful thing about life. You don't have to let go," Azelie smiled gently. Her purple eyes gleamed with compassion. "You don't have to be strong either. But you do have to stay on your feet and continue moving forward. In so many ways, life is like a dance."

Phos sighed. "I..." she began, "I'm, uh, sorry. Maybe we got off on the wrong foot. You're not so bad."

"I can't forgive you so easily," Azelie stated.

Phos shrugged. "That's fair. I wasn't asking for forgiveness, I just figured I'd say it anyway."

"But I'm sorry too," Azelie admitted, "Maybe one day we can meet again as friends."

"I'd like to believe that."

The two women sat in long silence together as a thin blanket of cirrus clouds drifted overhead.

"That thing is going to get you killed," Phos stated.

Azelie's brows furrowed behind her long bangs. "That thing? You mean Misterius?"

"If not you, then someone else. It's only a matter of time. I've seen it all before with those savages."

Azelie gently cradled one of her Luxury Balls within her delicate fingers. "You're wrong."

"What do you know," Phos growled.

"I don't know where Monsieur Franco got Misterius from," Azelie began. As she spoke, she rotated the ball in her hands and inspected the gleaming gold band running across its center. "Whatever sterile laboratory or distant corner of the world this Pokémon comes from must be a harsh and joyless place. Misterius was presented to me in a cage; completely untamed, desperate, and frightened of the world around her. I was desperate too. Desperate enough that I didn't want to question how Franco was conducting his business. The Monsieur had been most generous to me in my time of need, and I was willing to pay any price."

"Where was this," Phos asked quickly.

"I've already told Detective Emma everything I could, she had been preparing her investigation for most of the morning. But the Detective is so charming, the rest of the day simply flew right by!" Azelie paused. "May I continue?"

Phos nodded.

Azelie held her ball up higher. "I caught Misterius in this ball. The poor thing had never known comfort a day in its life until we left Monsieur Franco's facility. We did not battle for a long time, I just held Misterius close to my heart. I spoke to the ball, sang lullabies taught to me when I was a little girl. When I first released Misterius, she did not know where she was or who she was with, but she had come to know my voice."

Azelie beamed proudly and laughed a shrill and boisterous laugh that made Phos wince away. "I had to trick the poor thing into lying down on the bed I had prepared for her." She sighed longingly. "To see the look of realization in her eyes again! I stayed close to Misterius always, as did Florges and Gardevoir and Sylveon. Misterius was so anxious at first, but then I began to see a different side of her." She turned to Phos. "That *savage thing* has so much love to give, all she needed was the opportunity."

Phos held up Scrafty's Pokéball. "I guess I know what you mean," she said. Phos gave the Pokéball a gentle squeeze and kissed the red top. "My grandpa talked like that too."

Azelie's irises flashed pink. "Oh, may I please see that Pokéball for a moment?"

Phos tilted her head and cautiously offered the ball. Azelie cupped the ball in her spare hand and inspected it closely. She pursed her lips and hummed before handing it back.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I thought I sensed something different just now, but I seem to have been mistaken."

"Not a problem," Phos shrugged. She leaned back and stretched her legs out. "This is a pretty nice town," she said, "I've been into parkour for about..." She rolled her and quickly counted. "...About eight years now? Feels wild to be running around in the city where it all started. My teacher would have loved to see it."

"There are many things to enjoy in this city," Azelie proudly boasted, "So many wonderful experiences that go overlooked by Trainers just traveling from one Gym to the next."

Phos snorted. "You'll have to show me some time," she smiled.

Azelie smiled back. "It will have to wait," she said, "Emma is expecting you."

Phos stifled a yawn and stood up. "Yep, I guess I haven't been a very reliable partner," she said. "How do I get back to her office from here?"

"I'll call a taxi for you," Azelie declared.

Phos followed after Azelie as they exited the park and made their way toward the next major road. Her eyes followed the navy-blue lines across Azelie's dress that traced the contours of her body before intersecting at her lower back.

"Where'd you get that outfit from," Phos asked.

Azelie twirled her miniskirt and chuckled. "Do you like it? It's a custom outfit by the Johtonian fashion designer Valerie."

"Eh. Give me a call if it comes in black."

As they approached the side of the road, Azelie stood up on the tips of her purple heels and wiggled her fingers at an approaching cab. The light blue city car quickly pulled over and rolled down its windows.

"Good evening, Miss Azelie," the cabbie waved, "where to?"

"Good evening, Monsieur," Azelie curtsied, "please take my friend here to the Looker Bureau. Rouge Plaza."

The idea of being known to the taxi drivers by name set Phos's head spinning. As Phos contorted herself to fit in the claustrophobic backseat, Azelie leaned into the open window and handed her the cab fare. Phos looked up at Azelie, seeing her in a new light for the first time.

"Please don't prove me right, Azelie," Phos said.

"You are wrong about Misterius," Azelie answered, "and I will prove it to you each and every day that we're together."

"You better."

"Are you going to be alright," Azelie asked.

Phos cocked her head and grinned. "We'll find out," she teased. "Like you said: tomorrow's going to be a new day."

As always, thank you for reading.

Special thanks to the Editor, who suffered a lot to bring this to a presentable state.