

Eons in Flux, my cringe lil' fanfic

Episode X: The Visionary



Based on the short story, [Fun and Games in Area Zero](#), by Bibi Anon.

Clang

Long beads of sweat rolled down Franco's shoulders, tracing paths along his well-defined and lean musculature down towards his black shorts and high-top running shoes. He loosened his grip on the pulleys at his sides and steadied his breathing. To his right, Primeape jabbed at a heavy punching bag, the top of its ears level with Franco's sternum. The Pig Monkey Pokémon's punches were steady and deliberate. Its toned brown muscles tightened and flexed across its round body with each strike. The impact of Primeape's clenched fists rippled across the sandbag with every hit, a loud thud that sent the bag's metal chain rattling overhead. It tapped the black iron shackles on its wrists together and crouched low for another series of punches. The two partners were alone in the wide gym room and trained together in quiet solidarity. In a few hours' time, the master of the Battle Tower will find his way into the basement exercise room for his own morning routine, and other employees would filter in and out on their breaks throughout the day afterward, though Franco would be finished long before then. The master of the Battle Tower, the former Champion Leon. A Champion of what, exactly? Franco squeezed the pulleys and gave each of the tall stacks of cast iron plates attached to them a cursory tug.

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Another set.

Franco had spent the majority of the past nine years in the Galar Region, an island far to the north of his homeland, and found the experience altogether lacking. Its sweeping hills, rolling fields, and ancient forests might have been a rural idyll were it not for the Region's weather—a constant turmoil whose only degree of predictability is that it would be predictably poor at any time of day.

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Its small towns were frozen in time and its larger cities were punctuated by relics of an industrial glory that had come and gone as more modern corporations laid their all-ensnaring webs atop the remains. Macro Cosmos stood as a giant among its rivals. It existed in perfect unison with Galar and dominated nearly all walks of life. Television, internet, transportation. Macro Cosmos owned the banks. It owned access to the stock market. It owned the energy sector.

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A tasteless, overly-commercialized Region that nevertheless prided itself immensely on its esteemed Pokémon League. The grand crucible that represented Galar on the world stage.

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Franco had nearly a full decade to see exactly what the Galar League represented: A seedbed of nepotism. A contest where the contenders are only eligible if they were endorsed by the League's officials. And who did those officials so often choose but friends, family, and close neighbors. A small pool of talent selected to run the same well-rehearsed gauntlet of eight Gyms in the same well-rehearsed order where most challenges are brought to an end before the halfway mark. The talent pool shrinks smaller still while the eighth Gym Leader spends his days and nights clinging to the latest model of smartphone, audaciously claiming victory over an empty stadium.

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All in the service of feeding offerings to a Champion whose cape had as much corporate branding as it did fabric. The Strongest Champion, Leon, whose undefeated streak was ended the moment a Trainer with talent was allowed to enter the running—a Trainer that he himself had endorsed.

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And what would the Galar League be without its crown jewel: the Dynamax Phenomenon. Concentrated energy that, among other benefits, gives Pokémon the appearance of being far larger than they really are. What deeper irony could there be, than the Galar League being made famous by an overblown illusion?

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How many Trainers in Galar were denied their chance at greatness? How many would toil away in obscurity and mediocrity having never been given the chance to prove themselves? The strongest Champion the world would have ever known could be sweeping the streets of Wyndon simply because he didn't know the correct people. How many contenders washed out simply because they weren't allowed to find their footing in a familiar location, or were barred from catching the Pokémon they could resonate with.

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At least the Battle Tower was a step in the right direction.

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Franco exhaled slowly. He pulled the damp orange headband from his forehead and used it to sponge away the sweat dripping down his bare chest. A strand of green hair, matted with sweat, brushed against his forehead. Primeape finished its boxing practice with a fierce three-hit combination before turning away from the swinging sandbag and silently accepting a

tall bottle of water from its Trainer. They softly breathed in unison, basking in the cool breeze of an overhead airduct as Franco slicked his hair back and put his headband on. He walked past rows of exercise equipment, barbells, and weight racks to retrieve two pearl-white Pokéballs from a padded bench. Their warm-up was complete, it was time for a run.

As the light of daybreak slowly rose over the hills to the east, Franco jogged along a dirt track outside of the modernized metropolis of Wyndon. The Battle Tower, former headquarters of Macro Cosmos and its subsidiaries, loomed over the dim cityscape that surrounded it. Its omnipresent silhouette—like a rosebud made of glass and stainless steel—was unmistakable and, by President Rose's design, inescapable—a perk of planning the city's layout. Primeape ran along the outer edge of the track to Franco's right, bouncing on its heels and grunting shallow breaths through its pig-like snout. Tauros ran slightly further back. A sturdy harness was fastened to its thick black fur as Tauros pulled three tons of metal plates behind it. Its wide nostrils flared as it ran after Franco, rhythmically snorting out bright crimson towers of flame that illuminated the racetrack. Perfection was not a goal, it was a state of being, a precise balance upon a narrow precipice that required constant lifelong effort to maintain lest it be lost. All worthy Trainers knew that, the rest either never succeeded, or were pulled down by the weight of past victories. The dragging of the metal weights along the ground and the labored breathing of his Pokémon was muted to Franco's senses as his body focused on the next step in front of him. He allowed his mind to wander.

When did he come to resent Macro Cosmos? Franco recalled the mixed emotions he felt when he accepted his position at the company. Eager to advance in a new career, melancholy to leave his beloved Paldea behind. The Terastal research had plateaued, the Zero Gate that he had engineered had become a glorified coffee lounge for lethargic scientists as the paved road leading to its electronic doors eroded to gravel, then dust. Franco's red irises that had glazed over and dulled in a dead-end prospect shimmered for the first time in years as he joined the ranks of Macro Cosmos. He remembered how easy it was for him to see the obvious gaps in the company's security, how much money and resources their poor bookkeeping was costing them. Money and resources that, in the right hands, could be used to achieve so much more than fattening the vaults of a company that already owned the world. No one could argue that Franco's tenure as Chief Security Officer had been anything short of... mutually beneficial.

He recalled one day being summoned to President Rose's office on the highest floor of the Tower. The cold indifference of his Vice President Oleana as Franco stepped inside.

"You wanted to see me, sir," Franco asked.

President Rose, Chairman of the Galar League, supreme commander of the wealth of an entire nation, smiled absentmindedly from behind his desk as he adjusted the cowlick of his dark hair. His tender green eyes, bright against his caramel-hued skin, looked up at Franco as he entered. His beard was trimmed short and in sharp geometric angles, and his gray suit hugged his aging, portly body tightly.

"Ah, Mister Jacinto," Rose shouted. Beneath his stoic exterior, Franco bristled to hear his first name. If President Rose was owed credit for anything, it was the efforts he made to be more relatable to the common man. Franco considered himself to be no common man.

"Good morning, sir," Franco answered back flatly.

"Do come in, Jesse, old boy," Rose waved as he spoke in his thick and unmistakable Galarian accent, "Have a seat, there's something I'd like to discuss."

Franco remained composed even as his mind swirled with possibilities. *"Does he know I've been defrauding him,"* Franco wondered, *"How long has he known? How could he possibly know, I've covered all my tracks perfectly. There isn't a single dot of ink out of place in any record book."*

Franco sat down across from Rose. "By all means, sir," he smiled.

"Ah, yes... well, I would like to discuss your future at Macro Cosmos," Rose said, "You see, Jesse, you have done a wonderful job and excelled in your position. Your work has been noticed by many of my other executives. I daresay, they're rather envious."

"Sir, you of all people know the value of talent," Franco answered, "if others are jealous, it's because they betray their own inferiority."

Rose bellowed a jolly laugh. "Ah, such a shame that others lack that same understanding. Jesse, I have a little parcel for you," he said as he opened his desk drawer. He reached down and retrieved a small box lined with red suede and handed it to Franco.

"Sir, I didn't realize you felt this way about me," Franco joked, "this is all so sudden..."

Rose laughed again. "Go ahead, lad, open it."

Franco nodded and opened the box. The top half opened outward, revealing a brilliantly shining golden circular pin. The Macro Cosmos emblem was proudly engraved in silver within the brooch's center, and a golden feather jutted out from its side.

"A pin, sir?"

"No, a Scyther," Rose laughed. "Tell me, Chief Security Officer Jacinto Franco," he spoke with all the enthusiasm of a stadium announcer, "what do you think of this pin?"

"I believe it's a work of art, sir," Franco said, tilting the pin towards the light as he observed the reflections running across its smooth surface, "Emblematic of everything Macro Cosmos represents: Wealth, prestige, pride, opportunity. All this and more, at your fingertips."

"The pride of our great organization... that's exactly right! Those of us who have such a pin wear it with pride. And, in doing so, it shows that we all love Macro Cosmos. You do love Macro Cosmos, don't you, Chief Security Officer?"

Franco nodded. "Why gift this to me today, of all days," he asked.

"It may seem random, but today... marks the eighth anniversary of your employment! We should be celebrating your tremendous work!" Rose extended a large hand across the table.

Franco almost couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had embezzled millions from Macro Cosmos. Instead of sealing the gaping holes in its underbelly, Franco had attached himself like a parasite to siphon what resources he could towards his own ends. Towards enriching himself, his family, slowly acquiring the funding he needed to reshape his homeland. And here President Rose wanted to thank him for the privilege.

Franco took Rose's hand happily and beamed. "Your kindness will be your undoing, sir," Franco answered honestly. "But why not the fifth year, or tenth year? Why the eighth anniversary?"

Rose smiled widely. "Why, I just think the number eight is a swell number!"

Oh yes, the contempt had begun to fester after that day. Franco cleared the memory from his mind's eye. He raised a hand and motioned for Tauros and Primeape to stop. The sun was visible in the sky now, and it was time to get to work.

Franco stepped down a bright corridor, freshly showered and limber after his morning exercise. Not a single seam of fabric on his tailored white suit jacket was out of place. His pocket cloth, red like his necktie, was folded to perfection. His slim suit pants, gunmetal gray like his shirt, glided across his skin like liquid as he walked with his hands calmly folded behind his back as he gripped a homemade protein shake. His two Premier Balls were firmly fastened to his black belt and hung at his side. He moved deftly within his formal wear, as though it were a second layer of skin. The leather of his black dress shoes was polished like mirrors, reflecting the gaze of his red irises back toward him. The soles of his shoes clicked against the tiled floor, announcing his presence across the empty hallway.

His office, likewise, was immaculate. The wooden floor created perfect replicas of everything in the room. His desk, a blend of mid-century and modern aesthetics, was clear of any and all distractions. His two computer monitors were positioned perfectly parallel to the edge of the desktop; not a single cable was out of place. Brilliant beams of sunlight flooded into the room from the wide and nearly-invisible windows overlooking the Wyndon skyline, filling the office with a serene natural splendor. Not a single mote of dust dared disturb the sanctity of the air. The white walls were bare, save for a single decoration: a framed diploma, proof of Franco's valedictorian status at Naranja Academy.

Franco set his drink down on his desk, sat down in his office chair—a red leather armchair on wheels—and clapped his hands twice. On his command, red silk curtains draped across the windows, closing his office off from the outside world as LEDs built into the ceiling activated and filled the room with an artificial light. Franco closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and slumped over his keyboard with his knuckles pressed firmly against his cheek as he tapped the spacebar and watched his monitors flare to life. Another day, another round of reviewing

footage from the Battle Tower's domed arena at the top of the building. He could almost feel his eyes pleading with him to do something else. It had been months since a challenger worthy of being hired had competed. As President Oleana continued to establish her authority over Macro Cosmos, tight security was needed now more than ever—the regular security personnel had proven themselves incapable, unsuitable, beneath his standards of quality, and their failure to secure the Tower had cost the former President everything. Franco yawned, sipped a drink from his protein shake, and began scrolling through his emails on the second monitor while battle footage continued to play. Most of the emails had precious little to do with him or his department, he answered them all one-by-one with the same detached corporate professionalism until one caught his attention:

To: CSOFRANCO@macrocosmos.com

Subject: Feeling homesick yet?

The email extension was from Macro Cosmos Media, a globe-spanning giant in the entertainment industry. Franco opened the email and began to read through the chain of replies. A request from the Paldean Pokémon League, written in a stilted and overly-professional manner, to remove a selection of footage from the company's internet archives. Signed by the League Chairwoman, Geeta.

"Geeta," Franco whispered aloud in confusion and furrowed his brow. He skimmed through the email conversation until he reached the section addressed to himself.

Franco,

We received a request from the Pokémon League in Paldea to remove this footage from the Internet. My team is already fast at work clearing it out. Any recordings in the cloud will be purged, all reposts will be shadowbanned. NDAs are being sent out. Serious business. I don't see what the issue is, but I know you're from Paldea so maybe you might know more than me (haha). You can tell me all about it if you ever decide to come with us to Bob's for lunch.

Franco snorted and skipped ahead to the video file attached below. Beneath it, the usual verbose string of confidentiality warnings obliging the reader not to make any financial decisions based on what they were seeing. He rolled his eyes and opened the file.

It was a clip taken from a livestreamed Pokémon battle. A woman with long lavender-and-blue hair and an oversized yellow jacket danced like an overly-animated cartoon on a city street. Franco raised a skeptic eyebrow. Not just any city street—a street that he recognized by the ring of electronic billboards surrounding it: the heart of Paldea's most modern city, Levincia. The woman rolled a Pokéball out of her oversized sleeve and tossed it into the air, releasing a fat-bodied Bellibolt in a burst of light. The frog-like creature's slimy sea-green skin crackled with electricity pulsing out from the dynamo at its center.

On the opposite side of the plaza, a young girl stepped forward. She wore a simple white button-up shirt. Franco recognized the style of her orange shorts and matching necktie—the dress code for Naranja Academy students. Her red irises shined fiercely beneath the thick lenses of her glasses as she gripped a Pokéball in the palm of her white glove. Her brown hair was tied into two buns atop her head, and two long strands of pink hair covered her ears. She rolled her shoulders and threw the Pokéball hard into the arena. Franco sat upright in his seat.

The Pokémon that emerged resembled a Donphan at first glance, an elephant-like creature with thick and leathery gray skin. It had thick purple armored plates running from the tip of its trunk to its long ears and down the back of its round body to the end of its broad tail. The plates were lined with pink spikes that cut into the air. Its four wide legs were covered in thick pink fur, and calcified pink scales dotted its sides. Two massive tusks emerged from its serrated mouth, curling upwards and framing the narrow yellow eyes that peered out from below its armor. The creature was huge, easily dwarfing many of the vehicles that navigated the streets of Wyndon. It stomped forward and bellowed a thundering roar before charging towards the Bellibolt opposing it.

The livestream chat exploded with activity before the footage ended. Franco stared at the paused footage in silent disbelief. He replayed the final few seconds and read through the chat logs. Hundreds of posts competed for attention in the span of an instant.

Metagromaniac Whoa I have to have that!

woopersbewompin THE BODY IS ROUND :3

MrMinior I've never seen that before

Zazuzubat is that a Legendary Pokémon??

anon_strahl Name your price, I'll buy it

25prime IONO PLEASE MARRY ME PLZ

Reactions ranged from disbelief to amazement. Hundreds of spectators made their impressions known. Franco closed the email and immediately began his research. No database had any knowledge of it. Its data wasn't registered in any regional census. Not in Johto, or the Sevii Isles; it wasn't found in Orre and he had never seen it in all his years in Paldea. No known evolution of Phanpy or Donphan resembled it, though a dead forum whose last post was from five years prior made brief mention of a never-before-seen variant while citing a science fiction magazine. Franco closed the tab in annoyance, he had no time for chasing wild fantasies when he needed to pursue the facts. He reopened the video clip and studied the creature's Trainer more closely. Her bright orange shorts marked her as a student of the Academy—no one would wear a display as garish as that otherwise, which meant she had to have found that Pokémon somewhere in Paldea. But Franco had seen almost all of Paldea in his own youth and never found a creature like that.

Almost all of Paldea, barring one exception. “Geeta,” he whispered again. The only Geeta he knew was one of the researchers that frequented the Zero Gate, a bookish and lanky woman whose ambitious reach far exceeded her grasp. Nevertheless, she was among the rare few permitted beyond the Zero Gate, into the expansive depths below.

He pulled his cellphone out of his pocket and called his secretary.

“Good morning, sir,” she yawned.

Franco grunted in acknowledgment. “How soon can we have a flight ready to Paldea?”

Franco stood atop the grand staircase leading up to the Academy entrance. Its towering spires, in all their gothic splendor, were still as familiar to him after all these years as his own childhood home. The warm Paldean air soothed his skin and bones, and the cloudless sky overhead was reflected within his angular blue sunglasses.

His secretary gasped for breath as she climbed the final few steps. Her long brown ponytail and black business suit was damp with sweat. She rested her hands against her knees and straightened out the hem of her skirt as she steadied herself. “And you tell me you climbed those stairs every day,” she gasped in disbelief.

“It’s symbolic,” Franco explained.

“It’s *torture*,” she snapped back. Her green eyes squinted away from the glaring sunlight above the Academy’s roof.

Franco laughed mirthlessly. “There are no easy paths to success. To reach the top, you have to be willing to put the effort in—accomplish what few others are willing or able to do.” He swept a hand out towards the sprawling brick streets of Mesagoza far below and the idle, aimless masses that walked them. “It’s a lesson that many of my countrymen failed to learn.”

“How does it feel to finally be home again,” she asked.

Franco turned back towards the city. Down the stairs, past rows of tall colonial houses and apartments with warm and colorful brickwork and red-tiled roofs, past the rows of curated flowering hedges and slender orange trees, past waving banners and the city’s spacious central plaza whose rainbow-hued compass design spoke to a grandeur long-forgotten, to the ancient stone spires and double-doored barbican that at one time greeted kings and emperors. Mesagoza, largest and most-preserved of Paldea’s ancient cities. The seat of power for a superpower that had explored the globe and reshaped distant lands in its own image. A superpower whose name has been forgotten by its own descendants. Every meticulously-laid brick, each masterful cut of colorful clay and stone spoke to a civic pride that has lain dormant for generations.

"It's bittersweet," Franco answered. The two stepped inside the Academy.

Dozens of students of varying age groups yet all wearing the unmistakable white polo shirt, orange tie, and striped orange pants that announced their enrollment status to the world paced across the three stories of the academy foyer, pouring in and out of the many arterial corridors leading elsewhere. Rows of bookshelves as tall as entire buildings lined the foyer's walls. Naranja Academy's warm palette permeated the room, from the long orange banners hanging from its tan-colored brickwork, to the golden finish along the staircase handrails and the soft yellow glow of the foyer's light fixtures. The academy symbol—a stylized orange sliced in half so that its core resembled a shining sun—was emblazoned across plaques and inscriptions on almost every piece of furniture and décor, from the welcome desk to the seats and cushions that students gravitated towards. The white marble pillars that held the surrounding stonework aloft gave the chamber an almost sanctified appearance; a temple whose gods were Knowledge and Theory. Franco pocketed his sunglasses and glanced down at the dull orange-and-blue tiles at his feet. He dragged the tip of his shoe across the floor, revealing a more vibrant coloration beneath a thin layer of hardened dust. He pursed his lips and hummed. Though the outside remained the same, the foyer had been renovated in his absence.

"Ah, Master Franco," a refined and smooth voice spoke out. Carefully navigating around a clique of teenage students, a tall older gentleman walked towards Franco. His hair, white as the marble pillars of the foyer, draped down on either side of his gaunt face. His prim goatee and circular glasses were similarly white, as were his pants and clean dress shoes. He wore a deep orange jacket lined with white buttons and trimming over a black dress shirt. Though his aged face carried a taciturn demeanor, his gray eyes shined in the foyer's lighting.

"It's an honor to welcome a valedictorian back into our halls," the old man continued, bowing his head. He turned his attention towards Franco's secretary and extended a hand. "Good afternoon, Miss," he smiled.

She took his hand gently and smiled back. "Ida," she replied, "Good morning, sir."

Franco placed a hand over his heart and bowed his head. "Director Clavell," he said, motioning towards his assistant, "this is my secretary. Anything you can say to me, you can say in front of her."

Clavell adjusted his glasses with a quick push of his fingertip and nodded. "Of course, Master Franco," he said. "I must confess, I was quite surprised to learn that you would be visiting us. Doubly so to learn that the Chairwoman placed me in charge of hosting you. I had believed Miss Geeta already resolved the, erm, issue we had discussed with your company."

"This is a personal visit, not a business matter," Franco explained. "I promise you, Director, I'm not nearly as intimidating as I look," a toothy grin stretched below Franco's red eyes as he spoke, "Might we continue this conversation in private?"

Clavell nodded and gestured towards the corridor to the left of the entrance. He spoke as he guided Franco and Ida through the halls. "We have been working diligently to restructure

our learning environment this semester,” Clavell stated proudly, “our teachers are eager to have a more personal involvement in the continued education of our students. By working closely alongside and building a rapport with our students, we hope to prevent any student from being left behind.”

“And have you achieved any results with this new method,” Franco asked.

Clavell paused at the foot of the stairwell as a short boy with pink hair and pink irises stomped down the steps with his arms folded across his chest. The boy looked up at Clavell and pinched his lips closed before quickly looking away towards the ground and continuing on.

Clavell sighed and tutted. “Well... it hasn’t been without issue,” he admitted, “but early results have been promising. We hope to help all of our students achieve their dreams.”

“How many Champion-ranked students have you had this year,” Franco asked.

Clavell’s stoic composure continued to erode as he led his visitors up two flights of stairs. “Err... just one, Master Franco, although I understand why a valedictorian would be so keenly interested. Rest assured, she is a remarkably-gifted Trainer whose presence has inspired several of her classmates to rise to the challenge.”

The trio turned to the left at the top of the stairs and stood outside of a large wooden door as Ida placed her hands on her hips and inhaled sharply.

“My office,” Clavell stated as he placed his hand on the doorknob, “do come in, please.”

The Director’s office was a wide room. Its front half was a clinical research lab, its long white desks lined with rolling chairs, computer terminals, microscopes, and abandoned coffee mugs. The cabinets along the sandy beige walls were stuffed with rows of lab equipment, and seven Pokéballs were plugged into a terminal in the center of the lab area.

Clavell led Franco and Ida in a straight line through the lab to his desk at the back of the room. The walls in the second half of the room were a dull pink and adorned with diplomas, fossil samples, and minerals. The window behind Clavell’s black wood desk was wide and had no curtains to keep the sunlight from filling the spacious room. Cupboards and shelves were lined with gleaming trophies, healthy potted plants, picture frames, and dozens of books. A light blue Pokémon bed sat on the ornate vinyl tiles in one corner of the room, and a deep blue square carpet surrounded the Director’s desk space. Two oak armchairs lined with red cushioning had already been placed in front of the desk. Clavell took his seat on the opposite end—a simple chair borrowed from the lab area—and clasped his hands within his lap.

“Thank you, Director,” Franco bowed as he sat down and Ida dropped into the chair at his side, “I wanted to discuss the nature of the security breach.”

Clavell pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose. “Ah, I’m sorry, Master Franco, I’m afraid I can’t disclose the nature of that sort of information to the public—it’s why we requested that footage be removed.”

“That student went through the Zero Gate, didn’t she?”

“Master Franco, if you please—”

“The Zero Gate that I engineered?”

Clavell sighed. “There were four students,” he admitted, “and the experience was deeply traumatic for them all.”

“That girl in the video brought back an undiscovered species of Pokémon from the Crater. Or it found a way out on its own and you don’t want others to know that.”

“I have already discussed the matter with her in detail. Please, Master Franco, she is a bright young girl, she shouldn’t be troubled with such things when she should be focusing on her education. I implore you, let the issue rest.”

Franco closed his eyes and slowly motioned for calm. “Don’t worry, Director, I’m not interested in confronting her. If a group of four students could bypass my security, who else could do the same? With your permission, I’d like to go to the Zero Gate and review my work, ensure that it is still functioning as it should after being tampered with. It is my job to seek out and correct any gaps in security. I want to volunteer my talents as a matter of civic pride and as a personal favor to the Academy that made me who I am today.”

Clavell stared into Franco’s eyes and studied him silently. Franco stared back, unblinking, and awaited a response. At last, Clavell spoke: “You are an adult. The consequences of entering the Crater would be severe.”

“I understand that, Director. You and I have the same goal of keeping the public out of harm’s way.”

“Then I thank you for any assistance you can provide. I’ll arrange for a Flying Taxi to ferry you to Medali. Let’s keep your true destination between us, shall we?”

Franco nodded. “Thank you, Director. I should warn you: the security system will be offline while I work on it. Please don’t be concerned, I’ll have it back to normal as soon as I can.”

“I will consider this matter closed until you return,” Clavell said as he turned towards Ida. “This is your first time in Paldea, is that correct?”

“Yes sir,” Ida replied.

“I hope you enjoy all that our Region has to offer during your visit,” Clavell smiled warmly to her.

Ida bowed as she and Franco stood up and exited the office. She smiled to herself as they retraced their steps through the halls back towards the entrance.

"He seems nice," she said.

"He's a fool," Franco growled.

Ida cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

"His curriculum is doomed to fail. He'll exhaust himself and his staff treating the symptoms but never curing the cause." Franco gestured emphatically, sweeping his flat hands through the air in front of him. "No student left behind—they'll all subsist in equal mediocrity. His efforts would be better spent on revamping the culture outside of the Academy instead of trying to correct the damage it causes inside the Academy."

"You're asking a lot of him, aren't you?"

Franco shook his head. "Is a rotted support beam preferable to a collapsed house, or does the shelter of the walls only delay the inevitable?"

The sun was beginning to set over the mountains to the west as Franco and Ida hiked up the dirt trail leading up a steep hill. A lone Tropius on the cliffs above them craned its long neck towards the sky and pushed off the ground, taking flight with the four broad leaf-like wings upon its back. The saurian Pokémon bellowed a rumbling and raspy cry as it flew towards the setting sun. In the tall grass off the worn path, a small herd of orange-hued Deerling settled under the shade of a lone tree. A pair of Slakoth lounged in the thick foliage above, their long arms dangling limply towards the ground as they watched the humans pass through half-lidded eyes.

"I miss the Corviknight cabs," Ida groaned, wiping her suit sleeve across her forehead. "Those little birds bounce around too much while they're flying."

"It's not safe to fly with Corviknight in this Region," Franco explained, "there's another Pokémon here that tries to knock them out of the sky with rocks."

"But it's made of metal," Ida protested, "a rock wouldn't hurt it!"

"Are *you* made of metal?"

She sighed. "I miss walking on even ground. Everything is hills and stairs in this Region. Hills and stairs, hills and stairs!" Ida gasped and stumbled as she tripped over an empty Potion bottle before righting herself. "No wonder there's so much trash on the ground—you'd be better off using Pokécubes so they can't roll away!"

Franco chuckled. "It's good cardio," he teased.

Ida looked back towards the small cityscape at the foot of the mountainside. A warm and gentle breeze carried the diverse smells of the city's many restaurants and food stalls up towards the steep path. Even the tallest buildings of Medali's square and mazelike layout were below their feet now. Its claustrophobic rows of apartment buildings gave all the inclination of being miles away.

"I miss walking on paved roads," Ida grumbled.

"Me too," Franco said flatly. He rolled his broad shoulders and adjusted the straps of his black leather travel backpack as he continued on.

A towering and rugged wall of granite reached into the clouds at the top of the hill. A large pair of steel gates swung outward from a tunnel bored through the mountainside. The opposite end of the tunnel was obscured by a thick wall of fog.

"How kind of the Director to open the way for us," Franco mused.

Their footfalls echoed through the silent stone passageway as the white mist enveloped them. They emerged from the tunnel into a wide and flat mesa. A large, hexagon-shaped building—a cement construct with blue hazard stripes and yellow edges—stood situated on the very edge of the plateau, perched above a swirling maelstrom of stark white clouds. A spherical radome enclosed the antenna array on its roof, and large hexagonal discs fanned out towards the chasm below. A ring of tall mountain peaks formed a shield warding away the outside world and stretched far, far into the distance, further than either human could see.

Franco threw his hands out to his sides as he inhaled a lungful of the mist. "Welcome, Ida, to the Great Crater of Paldea," he announced, his voice echoed all around him.

A gust of wind rolled out of the crater, belching another wave of fog from out of the depths and sending ripples through Franco's short, slicked-back hair. Ida marveled at her surroundings in silent awe as she brushed her hair out of her face. Franco motioned towards the wide ramp leading up to the entrance of the building.

"What's one more incline after all this," he smiled. Franco climbed the ramp and pressed his bare hand against the green monitor on the door. A digital keyboard blinked to life on its display. Franco quickly poked at the screen's interface, and the massive door opened up for him like a set of jaws with hexagonal teeth.

He stepped towards the center of the light-gray room and thumbed the belt loops of his pants as he looked around. At his feet, a six-sided metal plate featured the white silhouette of the Crater's geography with the acronym "AZRI" written in charcoal-gray above it. A darkened hexagon was situated at its very center. The angular walls of the room echoed with the soft *ping* of the radar systems, and over a dozen computer terminals flickered with electronic activity around the building's interior. Automated cameras mounted to the ceiling recorded his every movement.

“Your old workplace,” Ida asked.

“The day Professor Sada had asked for my help was the proudest day of my life,” Franco said. “The Zero Gate was my great triumph, the start of what should have been a prestigious career with the Pokémon League. Instead it was left to collect dust, and myself along with it.”

Ida looked down at the geometric patterns across the floor. “Why all the hexagons? The building is a hexagon, the floor tiles are hexagons, the computers are all hexagons.”

“The idea practically created itself,” Franco replied, “The Professor had tasked me with designing a research station, transport hub, and security perimeter all in one. Funding was limited, so I needed to make the most efficient use out of our materials.” He tapped his heel against the metal plate on the ground. “Ergo, hexagons.”

“A transport hub, sir?”

Franco turned towards the closed shutters covering the observation windows over the Crater. “Though the Crater itself is a fascinating ecosystem, the focus of our research was at its heart—at a box canyon called Area Zero. In ages past, it would take months just to attempt to reach Area Zero. Paldean kings plundered the world to fund expeditions into the Crater. Thousands of explorers were marched across the mountains, through dense forests, narrow crevasses, dark caves, rushing streams; all chasing myths and fables of a treasure to reshape the world.” He closed his eyes. “Not a single expedition succeeded until Professor Sada led the way.”

Franco stepped away from the center of the room towards one of the terminals along the wall. He began typing rapidly at the keyboard with well-rehearsed movements. “Anyways, that’s enough history,” he shouted, “let’s see what kind of damage those students caused.”

The cameras along the ceiling folded inward and shuttered their lenses. Franco smirked to himself as he stepped away from the console. “Come over here,” he commanded. Ida nodded and followed him to the center of the room. “To make it easier to construct the Professor’s research equipment within Area Zero, we relied on a network of teleport pads to deliver material in and out of the Crater. Would you like to see if they still work?”

Ida’s eyes opened wide. “You mean go down into the Crater? But Mister Clavell said—”

“I know how this system works, I programmed it myself and no one thought to remove my admin privileges when I left. I have full control of the security perimeter from within this Gate. No one else will be able to enter, no one will ever know what we did.” He smiled as he patted her shoulder. “Think of it like a safari.”

“Was this was your idea all this time?”

Franco didn’t answer. “Authorization: Franco,” he stated clearly, “Activate Teleport Network.”

The black hexagon at their feet began to glow with bright green energy. Franco stepped into the light, and Ida shuffled to his side.

"Research Station Number Three," he commanded.

The two trespassers disappeared instantly in a flash of light.

As the flash faded, Franco and Ida stepped out into a miniature recreation of the Zero Gate. The building's hexagonal tiles were mired in tracked dirt and other filth. Stacks of rusting shipping containers lined the walls, and the desk surrounding the station's central terminal was covered in scattered books and faintly-glowing crystals. A simple bed in the corner of the room had been upturned by a large cluster of crystals growing out of the floor. The crystals shined with scintillating blue and pink quartz-like hues. They spread across the tiles, up the nearby wall, growing like moss within the research station while leaving the concrete beneath undisturbed. A thin layer of white mist flitted across the station, filling the room from the filtration grates along the floor and ceiling.

"Fascinating," Franco whispered as he approached the crystals growing atop the desk. He leaned in closely and inspected the cluster. He skimmed his palm across the surface. The crystals felt searing hot to the touch, yet didn't burn his fingers. As he looked over the faded notebooks on the table, Franco envisioned himself within the old and dimly-lit library at Naranja Academy from his youth. He imagined how it must have looked for an outside observer to see him hunched over the work desk, piles of crumpled blueprints scattered at his feet as he redid his calculations and adjusted his designs. He envisioned how his younger self ran his fingers through his short green hair and tapped his ankles against the base of his seat.

"What do you see, sir?"

Franco turned towards Ida's voice. "Hexagons," he told her. His voice echoed within the fading memory. "All the crystal samples retrieved from Area Zero looked like this, without exception." He broke a fragment off of the table and held it aloft for Ida to examine. "What you're seeing is pure, condensed energy. The Professor called it the Terastal Phenomenon."

Ida looked over the crystals before glancing up at Franco. "Are they valuable?"

Franco laughed mirthlessly. "No," he stated, "the Tera crystals would always shatter into tiny shards upon leaving the Crater. All of our research into Area Zero stalled trying to find a way to stabilize them."

"Did it work?"

"Eventually, yes, though I had long-since left by that point. But that isn't why we're here." He walked towards the station's large metal door. Franco pressed his ear against the door and held his breath before activating the door's mechanism. The metal bulwark slid open, and Franco stepped out into the canyon beyond.

A large and gaping cavernous maw descended into a black abyss down the hill to the left of the research station. Its entrance was overgrown with massive jagged crystals that spread across the bare rock and into the surrounding withered grass. Thick clouds of white mist rolled across the terrain, an otherworldly glow in the distance emanated from a rainbow of scattered, man-sized Tera crystals. The dotted and isolated dead trees around the clearing, stripped of leaves and bark, were fully-encased crystalline shells. Even the grass at their feet, yellow and drooping, crunched like broken glass and released pale wisps of light beneath their step as Franco and Ida took in their surroundings. Overhead, a crisscrossing network of arches and eroding cliffs lined the canyon walls, ascending up into the glaringly bright fog above. Somewhere in the distance, a waterfall roared.

Franco scanned through the mist as he reached down for the Pokéball at his belt. "Primeape," he commanded as he tossed the ball, "on guard!"

The Pig Monkey Pokémon emerged from its ball and looked around warily. Its thick fur bristled as it sniffed at the air. A patch of crystalized grass shattered beneath its toes. It uttered a shrill shout and clenched its fists. Primeape narrowed its eyes and leered into the mist surrounding the clearing. Franco gently placed his hand behind Primeape's pointed ear. Its entire body tensed before it allowed itself to slowly exhale.

"Everything is so bright down here," Ida muttered.

Wordlessly, Franco reached into his pocket and handed his sunglasses to Ida. "I'm going to need those back, of course," he said after.

Primeape's ears twitched as Ida adjusted the glasses on her face and stepped forward into the clearing, her every footfall punctuated as if she were walking through fresh snowfall. She ran her fingers down the side of a crystallized tree and pried at the edge of its iridescent surface where the crystal growth met the dying wood. A chunk of crystal broke away from the tree and shattered into countless pieces that rained down from her open hand. The tiny shards fell towards the ground before shining brightly and abruptly reversing course before fading away.

"Do you hear anything," Franco asked.

Ida paused and held her hand against her ear. "I hear the waterfall?"

"But no Pokémon," Franco thought aloud. He patted Primeape on the back and began walking towards the mouth of the cave ahead. His red irises flitted across the massive translucent crystals surrounding him, searching for any sign of activity beyond the wall of crystals denying him access. He peered deeply into the white mist that filled the cave.

For a brief moment, a pair of shimmering blue irises opened and looked back at him. Franco clenched his fists tightly. He blinked, and when his eyes opened again, the phantom gaze had vanished. Primeape ran forward and slammed a large fist against the crystal mass, sending fractures racing in all directions across its surface as the sound of crashing glass echoed into the depths. The crystal burst in a shower of light, thousands of tiny glittering shards

were strewn into the air. Thick plumes of mist rushed to fill the vacant space where the crystal once was.

Franco slowly knelt down and grabbed one of the larger shards that had fallen near his shoe. He turned it over in his hand and watched as the crystal's surface reflected a wide range of vibrant colors within his palm.

Ida screamed, "Franco, sir!"

Franco dropped the shard and immediately spun on his heel to turn towards his secretary. "What is it," he barked.

Ida calmly turned away from the crystallized tree and raised an eyebrow. "I didn't say anything," she said.

Franco furrowed his brows and stroked his chin. He turned toward Primeape and observed as his partner continued to stare into the depths of the cavern. Primeape slammed the iron shackles on its wrists together, a challenge issued to an unseen threat.

"Never mind," Franco said, "Stay close to me, we don't know what's down here."

As Ida began to jog to their position, Primeape suddenly bellowed and rushed into the cavern. Franco turned back towards the Pig Monkey Pokémon. "Primeape, hold," he called out sternly. Franco's face curled with frustration as he shook his head. He gave chase after Primeape, following it into the wall of fog.

Ida screamed, "Franco, sir!"

Franco looked back and instinctually flinched away from Primeape's clenched fist as it rocketed towards him. Primeape's knuckles collided against a wall of translucent crystal, sending fractures racing in all directions across its surface as the sound of shattering glass thundered in his ears, forcing his eyes shut. He grit his teeth and held his palms over his temples. When he opened his eyes, the crystal wall stood intact in front of him, its rainbow-like surface smooth and flawless.

Franco raised his hands to his mouth and shouted: "Ida! Ida, can you hear me?"

No response.

Deeper inside the cave, Franco heard a loud, shrill trumpeting cry. He turned away from the crystal barrier. The white fog had cleared, revealing a steep incline down into a shimmering underground. Pale blue and purple crystals grew like blooming flowers along the stone walls and ceiling, pulsing with a pale light like the rhythmic coursing of a heartbeat at rest. Massive boulders as large as houses had come to rest within the tunnel. Further down the passageway, Franco watched as Primeape bounded on all fours around a sharp corner. He took a deep breath and followed after his Pokémon.

“Primeape,” Franco shouted, “Get over here, now!”

As he descended, the rumble of the waterfall steadily rose in intensity until Franco found himself on the precipice of a water-slicked cliff watching as a rushing torrent of water spilled into the cavern. Cold vapor washed across his skin, leaving tiny beads of moisture in its wake. Far in the vast distance, two other flowing streams joined the icy confluence raining down. Overhead, the white mist swirled like the funnel of a tornado, a violent wheel turning through the sky, raining uncountable glowing motes of light down into the sprawling bowels of the underground whose labyrinthian arches and pathways—barely outlined within the dense mists—defied any sense of scale. A radiant light erupted from the depths below—lustrous, blinding beacons emanating from a sprawling colony of indigo-hued crystals, each hexagonal gem larger and more brilliant than the last, all of them dwarfing all but the very largest skyscrapers of Paldea’s few cities. The crystals reached up towards the white vortex above, evidently absorbing whole sections of the cavern within their lucid bodies as they grew upward.

From his vantage point, Franco gazed into the depths for any sign of his partner. He called for it, demanded that Primeape show itself. He heard a familiar snort echo from behind. Franco quickly turned back towards the tunnel that had guided him to the cliff’s edge as Primeape rounded the corner.

“There you are,” Franco called out. Primeape quickened its step as it approached its Trainer. “Don’t ever leave my sight again,” Franco demanded, “there’s something unnatural going on down here.”

Primeape narrowed its eyes as it leaned its round body to the side. It scratched at its ear and grunted.

A muffled stampede of flat footsteps within the cavern set the two partners on edge. Franco and Primeape turned towards the sound in unison, their bodies tensing as they scanned a dark side passage boring into the rock. Primeape snorted and stepped in front of its Trainer, clenching and unclenching its fists as its ears tracked the approaching noise.

From out of the darkness, a triangle of three large and flat red-and-white Pokéballs entered the light. Long strands of hanging moss drooped from the larger Pokéball in the center of the formation.

Franco chuckled to himself. “An Amoonguss,” he smirked, “Primeape! You let this common nuisance worry you?” He began to laugh harder. “Is this your first time inside a cave? Never walked through a forest before?”

Primeape’s knuckles stooped to the ground as it laughed alongside its Trainer. The Amoonguss continued stepping forward, the three large mushroom caps that were the key to its mimicry growing larger and larger still with each passing moment. Franco’s laughter quickly died down.

“Wait, Primeape, how is that Amoonguss moving forward without hopping?”

Franco observed the Mushroom Pokémon more closely. The red hue of its caps was more vibrant than any other Amoonguss he had seen before. As it approached, Franco could see a crown of conical spikes jutting out from atop the center cap. From behind the creature's thick and stem-like white body, a broad tail dragged itself through the dirt. The creature reared up and unfurled its arms as it exited the dark passage. It parted the thick strands of moss from its face with one of the caps on its arms. Four stub-like legs protruded from the underside of its body as a pair of yellow, bloodshot eyes flitted rapidly between Franco and Primeape just below its central cap. Its pink mouth opened wide, revealing a set of wicked, clacking jaws where a normal specimen would have soft lips. It shook its three caps violently and howled a piercing, high-pitched battle cry.

Primeape raised its fists and stepped forward to intercept the strange creature as its short legs quickly kicked against the ground.

"Scare it off! Use Screech," Franco shouted.

Primeape took a deep breath and screamed, sending an unnerving roar echoing through the cavern. The hair along Franco's arms stood on end as a supernatural feeling of dread crawled across his spine. The creature continued rushing forward, oblivious to or uncaring of Primeape's threat.

"Watch it carefully," Franco warned. Primeape steadied its breathing even as its fur bristled and the blood in its veins swelled and pushed against its skin. It narrowed its eyes and waited for the savage Amoonguss to come closer. Primeape scrutinized the creature's movements, watched how the moss strands swung wildly as it galloped forward, observed the two smaller caps jutting from its sides as they slammed against the rock, kicking up thick clouds of dust. Primeape's leering eyes met the enflamed gaze of its opponent, staring deeply into its tiny pupils as the creature's jaws clacked and drooled. The two Pokémon were of nearly identical height as they faced off against one another.

Primeape shuddered.

"Now, Primeape," Franco shouted, "Stomping Tantrum!"

Primeape pushed off the ground and lunged forward with its clenched fists raised over its head. The mushroom creature lashed out with a sudden burst of speed, whipping the caps atop its arms in a furious storm of wild swings that swatted Primeape out of the air and sent it rolling across the terrain. Primeape quickly scrambled to its feet and leapt forward again, bringing its full weight down atop the center cap as its muscles glowed with orange light. It hammered down atop the creature's head, punching and kicking as the Pig Monkey Pokémon vented its frustrations. The mushroom creature swung its body around and shook Primeape loose before galloping after it.

Primeape landed on the tips of its toes and leapt backwards out of its opponent's reach as the savage creature swung its arms in sweeping arcs in front of its body.

“That attack should have been more effective,” Franco pondered. He reached down to his hip and retrieved Primeape’s Pokéball, holding it out at arm’s length in front of himself. “Primeape, return!”

Primeape grunted and bounded towards its Trainer on all fours. A red beam of light shot out from the Pokéball as it approached, pulling Primeape safely inside its capsule. The brutish mushroom Pokémon trotted towards Primeape’s last location and thrashed in the dirt, sweeping its tail and chipping away at the earth beneath its stamping legs with its hard caps as thick trails of saliva flew through the air. It breathed heavily as it hunched over and turned a sideways glance towards Franco. With a ferocious cry, it shook the moss away from its eyes and began to charge. Franco was already reaching for his second Pokéball.

“Tauros, we need you!”

From out of the polished white Pokéball, Franco’s Tauros emerged, the Wild Bull’s thick black fur glowed with crimson embers as it coiled its three tails tightly together and stamped a mighty hoof into the ground. Tauros pointed its long horns forward and bellowed, unleashing an eruption of crackling fire from its dark mane.

The mushroom creature recoiled away from the wave of heat and shrieked a timid cry toward its foe. Tauros snorted a blazing streak of fire from its nostrils and glanced back toward its Trainer.

Franco pointed forward and shouted. “Tauros! Raging Bull!”

Tauros’s horns burned a bright shade of red before exploding into a wreath of intense flames as it sprinted forward. It tilted its head down towards its opponent and slammed into it, refusing to slow down even as the creature’s arm caps flailed against Tauros’s sides. Tauros’s flames expanded like a miniature sun before quickly fading, leaving the charred mushroom-like creature crumpled on the ground in its wake as Tauros circled back. The Wild Bull Pokémon’s sprint slowed to a nimble canter as it scanned its surroundings.

Franco approached the mushroom creature cautiously as it meekly sputtered against the barefaced rock. He knelt down at its side and observed it as the creature’s mournful wails reverberated through the cavern.

“In all the years I had wasted away at the edge of that Crater, we had catalogued dozens of species. We thought we had seen everything, and yet no one had ever seen anything like you,” Franco said. “What are you,” he whispered.

In the distance, a faint chorus of shrill cries rang out from the dark side passage. The injured creature began to stir and called back with a series of frantic chirps. Tauros grunted and stood guard over its Trainer as Franco quickly rose to his feet and backed away from the defeated Pokémon.

Two more mushroom-like creatures galloped into view, rushing forward with their central caps held low as they hastened toward their fallen kin. They howled fiercely and clacked their serrated jaws as the burnt creature limped to its feet. Tauros stamped its hooves and reignited the crimson flames around its neck.

“Steady, Tauros,” Franco urged.

The opposing sides stood locked in a fierce stalemate. The mushroom creatures, intimidated by Tauros’s fire, refused to advance but also refused to retreat. The creatures stuck closely together as the group slowly began to circle around Tauros and Franco, their yellow sclera reflecting the flickering embers as they searched for an opening. Franco turned his gaze away from one of the mushrooms and glanced back towards the cavern entrance. The mushroom creature howled and charged forward, and Tauros sent it staggering back towards its burned packmate with a fierce headbutt. A second foe charged forward and began slamming its caps into Tauros’s flank. The Wild Bull Pokémon leapt onto its forelegs and kicked out at the creature, delivering a powerful strike that knocked it to the ground. Already, the other two creatures were preparing another attack, rushing towards Tauros with saliva streaking from their jaws.

“Raging Bull,” Franco commanded.

Tauros stamped its hooves and wreathed its body in flames as its foes backed away and flailed their arms.

A deep rumble coursed through the cavern floor as dust rained from the stone overhead. The mushroom creatures shrieked and howled amongst themselves before retreating past Franco and Tauros back towards the darkness they emerged from. The rumbling grew in intensity, tiny fragments of stone bounced harmlessly off of Franco’s shoulder. Tauros huffed and snorted as it watched the wounded creature stagger back to its den.

The rumbling reached its zenith as a massive spiked wheel crested the slope from the caverns below and slammed into the injured straggler. The burned mushroom cried out and rolled limply across the ground before falling still. The purple wheel unfurled. The newly-arrived creature’s two large tusks protruded proudly into the air as it trumpeted victoriously from its long trunk. The massive elephantine Pokémon trudged forward and planted a fur-covered foot firmly against its prey’s torso. It glowered at Franco and Tauros and declared a fierce warning through its trunk as it growled through its sawblade-like teeth.

Franco grinned widely as he looked the creature over. It was nearly twice the size of Tauros’s own impressive stature. “It’s even more magnificent in person,” he remarked. He chuckled softly. “I was hoping to find you,” he continued, “but I never imagined you would come to me!”

The elephant-like creature’s long ears twitched as its yellow eyes focused in on Franco.

“Abaddonphan,” Franco declared, “I challenge you!”

The creature stared at Franco bewildered. Slowly, it pulled its foot away from its quarry and turned directly towards its challenger. Tauros flicked its tails and snorted defiantly as it awaited its Trainer's command.

Franco pointed at Abaddonphan. "Zen Headbutt!"

Tauros bellowed and rushed forward as a blue light began to radiate from the thick bone disks protruding from its forehead. The Abaddonphan roared back and charged. Horns clashed against tusks as the two Pokémon pushed against each other, the ground tremored as the two combatants collided, kicking up a tall wave of dust. Tauros's tails whipped furiously against its hindlegs as it dug its hooves into the ground and shoved at its target. Abaddonphan planted its thickset body low to the ground and refused to budge. The elephantine creature lifted its trunk up and slammed the thick plates atop its snout against the underside of Tauros's chin before wrapping around Tauros's horn. With the deadlock broken, Abaddonphan whipped its head to the side, slamming Tauros to the ground before bringing its forelegs down hard against Tauros's ribs. The Wild Bull roared with pain and kicked out wildly as Abaddonphan tightened its grip around Tauros's horns.

"Raging Bull, now!"

Abaddonphan winced and pulled away from Tauros as the bull Pokémon's horns began to glow red. Wisps of smoke flitted away from the charred flesh along the underside of Abaddonphan's trunk as Tauros rose to its feet and rammed its head forward, striking the side of its opponent's face in a shower of dancing embers. Abaddonphan moved with the force of Tauros's strike, flipping onto its back and curling into a tight ball before rolling away. The elephant-like Pokémon rapidly picked up speed as it moved, speeding up the cavern wall before rolling back down and barreling towards Tauros.

Franco commanded Tauros to keep moving, and the Wild Bull obeyed, tucking its head low as it sprinted down the slope into the cavern beyond. Hurtling downhill, Abaddonphan's wheel-like form began to close the distance, its curving tusks inching closer and closer towards Tauros's rear.

A massive cluster of crystals grew out of the center of the passageway at the bottom of the slope. As Tauros ran towards the crystals, it suddenly bellowed out in surprise as its hooves skidded to a halt in a shower of sparks. Abaddonphan slammed into Tauros from behind, hurtling its foe into the air before crashing into the crystal growths. A storm of crystalline flechettes fell upon the cavern floor, settling into a thick cloud of white fog as Franco sprinted in pursuit of the two battling Pokémon. He helped pull Tauros to its feet as Abaddonphan unfurled and shook off the impact. Franco's gaze passes over Abaddonphan and towards the shattered crystals behind it. A red-scaled dragon—crowned in a magnificent headdress of white, blue, and red plumes—leered down at him from within the crystal. The rubbery black flesh beneath its serrated jawline swelled as a long tongue lapped at a wound across its thick forearm. Blood and thin ribbons of raw flesh dripped from its knife-tipped claws. Within its yellow eyes, its slit pupils narrowed as it clasped its hands toward an unseen victim. The dragon's reflection disappeared

along with the fog, leaving countless reflections of Franco, Tauros, and Abaddonphan in its wake along the many edges of the broken crystals.

Franco shook the image from his mind and focused on the battle in front of him. “Tauros,” he shouted, commanding his Pokémon’s full attention, “Close Combat!”

Tauros snorted and dashed toward its opponent. Abaddonphan braced and tilted the tips of its tusks towards Tauros’s belly as the two Pokémon prepared to clash again. Tauros ignored the danger and smashed into the enemy, slamming down with hoof and horn as it barged into Abaddonphan’s flank with a titanic heave of its broad shoulders. Tauros trampled its foe into the dirt, stamping its hooves down again and again even as the wicked curving tusks pierced through its thick fur. Abaddonphan swatted at Tauros’s jaw with its trunk, striking it squarely in the throat with a powerful chop that sent pink-hued spittle hurtling into the depths below. Tauros grabbed ahold of the trunk between its thick molars and clamped down as the Wild Bull continued to pummel its foe. Abaddonphan roared out in pain and performed a short hop into the air, slamming back down into the ground with an impact that sent faultlines spreading across the ground. The cracks branched out in all directions and began to glow with an intense orange light.

“Tauros, it’s using Earthquake,” Franco shouted.

The ground beneath their feet erupted in an explosive burst before crumbling into dust. Franco’s body tumbled helplessly through the air as the attack sent both him and Tauros skyward. The cavern floor collapsed and shattered, sending all three fighters hurtling into the depths.

Franco awoke to the feeling of Tauros’s hot breath against the back of his neck. He opened his eyes and found himself face down atop one of the massive, building sized crystals he had seen from above. The massive hexagonal jewel, alight in ethereal blue energy, stretched for hundreds of feet in all directions around him, its smooth surface covered in fine chunks of rock and sediment and gleaming shards. Within the crystal, Franco could see himself reflected across hundreds of prismatic surfaces. Each reflection looked in the same direction—downward, just as he was doing. Franco patted himself down. Though his body ached, nothing seemed to be broken. He glanced over towards a golden sparkle in front of him and saw his Macro Cosmos pin partially buried within a small pile of gravel. Franco reached out and clutched the badge tightly in his palm and held it close.

Tauros whined softly as it breathed rapidly. Franco rolled onto his side toward his partner.

“Can you stand,” he asked.

With trembling legs, Tauros attempted to right itself.

“That’s enough,” Franco stated. He ran his fingertips through Tauros’s black mane and rested his palm atop Tauros’s snout as he recalled the Wild Bull back into its Pokéball.

Franco winced and climbed to his feet as he tightened his grip around Primeape's Pokéball. Standing opposite of him atop the crystal arena, Abaddonphan stretched out on its side and heaved.

"Abaddonphan," Franco shouted, "Do you yield?"

The elephant-like Pokémon trumpeted and rose to its feet again. Franco smiled to himself as he released Primeape. The Pig Monkey Pokémon looked at the creature across from it and shrieked defiantly. Abaddonphan leered at Primeape and held its trunk out between its two tusks. Slowly, it flexed its trunk inward toward its back and out again. The gesture sent Primeape's breathing into a snarling frenzy. Franco reattached the golden pin to his breast and swept his arm forward.

"Drain Punch," Franco commanded.

Primeape screamed and rushed forward as green light snaked up its arm from its clenched fist. Abaddonphan roared and stood up on its squat hindlegs before slamming back down. The crystal lifted beneath its feet, causing a massive chunk to rise up in front of it like a wall. As Primeape closed the distance, Abaddonphan hoisted the crystal plate between its tusks and brought the crystal down over Primeape's head.

Franco instinctually reached out towards Primeape as he called its name. Primeape crossed its forearms and braced for the crushing weight falling towards it. The deafening sound of crystal breaking against crystal echoed into the abyss.

Abaddonphan roared triumphantly as a thick cloud of dust blanketed the arena. Franco sprinted forward through the swirling clouds of fine dust. The crystal plate began to shift and creak as Primeape pushed back against its weight. Primeape strained against the crystal with every ounce of its strength; grunting, snarling, sweating fiercely. Through the cloud of dust, Primeape heard its Trainer's voice:

"You never cease to impress me," Franco said calmly.

"Primeape," Franco screamed, "Rage Fist!"

Primeape's punches were steady and deliberate. The impact of Primeape's clenched fists sent a black aura rippling across the crystalline surface with each hit, echoing thuds that roused a chorus of broken glass throughout the cavern. Abaddonphan warily backed away. The next hit broke through the plate, sending it falling down around Primeape in large chunks. Primeape grabbed ahold of one of the falling shards and gripped it like a cudgel between both hands. It screamed with anger and rushed forward, slamming the crystal bludgeon across Abaddonphan's side before leaping into the air with a twirl and bringing the crystal down hard atop the enemy's head. The crystal splintered and exploded into thousands of glowing shards. Primeape rushed forward and grabbed ahold of its foe's tusks before lifting its entire body into the air and slamming it back down with a gravity-defying suplex that fractured the crystal arena's surface.

Primeape pinned Abaddonphan to the ground as Franco reached into his backpack and retrieved a new Pokéball. He aimed carefully and threw the ball at the wild Pokémon. It bounced off Abaddonphan's thick and scaly hide and pulled the defeated creature inside as Primeape released its grip. The pearl-white ball fell to the ground and rolled just once before locking shut.

Franco laughed joyfully as he claimed his prize. Primeape beamed proudly at his side. Franco held the ball up to his face and smirked. "Well fought," he said, "You, my friend, are everything I was hoping for and more."

In the distance, Franco heard another familiar trumpeting echo through the cavern. He attached the ball in his hands to his belt and followed the noise. The bellowing of another Abaddonphan was soon joined by several more, though the distant cries had a distinct flanging effect, lending a strange harmony to their calls. Franco and Primeape walked to the edge of the great crystal and looked down into the depths. Far below, within the shallow waters flowing down from the neighboring crystals, an entire herd of Abaddonphan moved as a singular unit, marching in lockstep like clockwork soldiers as they trudged through the shallows and occasionally called out to each other. The specimens within the herd were much smaller than the one he had captured—about the size of Franco's torso, by his estimation. Were they juveniles? The armor plating along their backs was smooth and glowing with red light contrasting against the bright blue glow of the cavern depths. Another pack of the mushroom creatures emerged from behind a crystal cluster and galloped towards the herd. Instead of standing their ground, the smaller creatures curled up into spheres and rolled away from the danger with surprising speed. Franco watched them scatter in all directions and whistled sharply to himself.

He patted Primeape on the back and pointed towards the rocky cavern walls and the crumbling passageway overhead. "Let's not keep Ida waiting any longer," Franco said.

The two partners stayed close to one another as they crossed the surface of the crystal. The rolling white clouds of fog and glowing light that blanketed the area strained their eyes and created phantasmal illusions around them. Franco looked to his left and saw a long procession of mirror images walking alongside him, with each version of himself looking back at him. The reflection closest to him was filthy and haggard, with torn and dirt-stained clothes and tired eyes. Each reflection behind it grew steadily cleaner as the finer details of the mirage was lost. When at last the two arrived at the edge of the crystal, Primeape leapt toward the cavern wall and grabbed hold of the rock with its hands and feet. It reached back and held an arm out for its Trainer, and Franco leapt after it and clasped his hands around its forearm. Primeape held firm as Franco climbed onto its back, and the two began to climb out of the depths.

Franco looked back over his shoulder as Primeape scrambled up the wall. As his reflections stood at the edge of the crystal and watched the two depart, Franco looked up towards the swirling white vortex above the cavern. Against the glaring white backdrop, Franco saw a dark silhouette hovering among the clouds, its six diamond-shaped wings remained motionless as the figure looked downward at him.

As Primeape pulled itself back onto solid ground again, Franco dismounted from his partner and patted it firmly on its back. Across the chasm Abaddonphan had made, a tall saurian creature silently glowered at the two intruders with its narrow green eyes. The creature's green body shined with a metallic gleam as light green energy bubbled within vents across its torso and through the rows of spikes reaching down its back towards its long barb-like tail. Altogether, it resembled a compact and streamlined Tyranitar. If it possessed any organic qualities, they were hidden within its mechanical frame. It didn't move, nor did it appear to breathe. Primeape's coarse fur bristled as it stared back at the silent observer. It grabbed a piece of broken stone from the edge of the destroyed passageway and chucked it hard across the gap towards the artificial-looking Pokémon. The rock smashed against its metal body and disintegrated. If the thrown stone affected the creature at all, it didn't display any outward signs. After a moment, it began to slowly back away as it continued to stare. Franco nudged Primeape away from the ledge and shepherded it back toward the cavern entrance.

The white fog began to thin out and disappear as Franco and Primeape hiked up the slope and neared the exit. The opening Primeape had created in the wall of crystalline teeth surrounding the cavern maw awaited them. As Franco stepped back into the natural light of the canyon, Ida jogged forward to greet him.

"Ida, where have you been," Franco asked.

Ida pursed her lips as she came to a halt. "Sir, I'm staying close to you, just like you asked," she replied. She turned to Primeape and smiled. "I'm glad to see Primeape didn't go very far, but sir, that cave must be filthy! Look at all that dust on your clothes..."

Franco and Primeape exchanged a sideways glance with one another.

"Are we planning on going inside the cave, sir?"

Franco ran his fingers across his clean-shaven cheeks. "Ida," he said calmly, "where exactly do you think I've been all this time?"

Ida looked at him bemused. "Right in front of me," she stated matter-of-factly, "you stepped inside the cave to follow Primeape, but the fog was so thick in there that I couldn't even see you just a few feet in front of me when I called your name."

Franco stood in silence.

"You were only gone for a few seconds, sir."

Franco looked down at the three Pokéballs at his hip. "Never mind that," he said, "let's head back to the Gate for now. Clavell will be waiting for the perimeter security to reactivate, and we have a lot of phone calls to make."

Franco stood in parade rest with his arms tucked comfortably behind his back. His suit had been cleaned and mended immaculately, and the pin above his heart had been polished to perfection once more. He looked out over the platoon that had assembled within the heart of the Zero Gate. Rows of stoic men, armored from top to bottom in shining white ceramic body armor, stood at attention and awaited his command, not a single Pokéball on their toolbelts and holsters was out of place. The most elite among Macro Cosmos's security personnel; Franco's private army.

Behind them, large stacks of equipment had been brought into the building. Expensive camping kits and priceless medical supplies for any situation, food rations, the latest innovations in trapping equipment of all varieties, fortified crates and cages that would soon be put to use on an industrial scale. The cameras along the facility's ceiling were obscured within mirrored domes. Inside the soundproof shells, the cameras would eternally record still images of an empty chamber until Franco decided otherwise. Ida stood off to the side at one of the computer terminals, typing rapidly across the keyboard of her laptop and swiping her fingers across multiple different tablets and data slates. A plate of steaming churros was perched next to her equipment.

"Gentlemen," Franco began, "the task ahead of us is perilous. As of today, our only easy day... will be the day before. Lesser men would shy away from the challenge. But you are not lesser men—you are among the most capable and talented Trainers I have ever had the privilege of meeting. The unthinking masses would never dare to dream of what we are about to accomplish."

He calmly raised his left arm out in front of him and cradled a pure white Pokéball within his fingers. He clicked the button on its front and released the creature inside. Abaddonphan, towering over Franco as it stood at his side, trumpeted loudly to the awe and surprise of the assembly. It closed its eyes as Franco stroked the bony spikes across its back and submitted to its Trainer's authority.

"Below us is a world that has only ever been glimpsed by an extremely rare and privileged few and unlike anything you had ever seen before," he continued. "The Great Crater of Paldea: Hundreds of miles of untamed wilderness; man's will to power that has conquered all other corners of the world means nothing to it. Until now. This insurmountable frontier hosts all manner of strange and powerful Pokémon that have yet to be discovered, but it is not their home, and they cannot remain there. It falls to us to ensure the survival of these anomalies."

Franco began to pace in front of his audience, looking each man in the eye as he walked past. "We are not mere plunderers, we are pioneers on a mission of salvation. Each creature we retrieve from that Crater will serve as a testament to your courage. Your actions today and tomorrow will echo through the annals of history. You will be honored as the first of the brave few who dared to reach into the unknown for the benefit of us all. You have the best equipment, supported by the resources of the greatest company the world has ever known, led by my example. Let us march into the unknown with the knowledge that victory is assured."

He swept his hand toward the glowing green light of the teleporter at the center of the room. "You have your assignments, you know what must be done. As I speak, the machinations of a globe-spanning superpower are being redirected to support your efforts. Our mission is clear: to venture into that strange new world and secure the rare creatures that dwell within. They will be delivered to private collectors around the world... for a price. I do not believe in charity, of course. Your labors will not go unrewarded. You will all be given the handsome pay you deserve—this I vow to you! You will live well, your families will want for nothing. We shelter in cots now so that we may live in mansions later!"

The armored Trainers bellowed and cheered, chanting Franco's name as their Chief smiled proudly at them.

Franco held up his hand and silenced the crowd. "Gentlemen," he held onto the silence in the room as he looked across, "happy hunting."

One by one, Franco's men stepped into the teleport pad and disappeared in a flash of light. Franco stood next to Ida and watched them depart.

"If the League finds out about this, everyone here is losing their Trainer ID," Ida warned.

"I created this perimeter," Franco replied, "I know how to bypass it. The League will remain oblivious to our activities."

"And if President Oleana finds out about this, we're all going to be fired."

"She won't—"

"And sued."

"There's nothing—"

"And probably sent to prison for the rest of our lives."

"Do you think I'm the only individual in this company leveraging corporate assets for their own benefit," Franco snapped.

"I'm just making sure you're aware of what's at stake, sir," Ida stated. She took a bite out of one of her churros.

"I am painfully aware of exactly what's at stake," Franco stated, "but this may be the best chance of stopping my home from rotting away."

Ida searched deeply into his stern eyes. "By becoming a poacher?"

Franco exhaled sharply, the corner of his mouth twitched. "For millennia, my people told stories of fierce guardians protecting a treasure within the heart of the Crater. They were just that—stories, fabrications. Professor Sada and her team were inside the Crater, there was a

research station at its very core—and there were no guardians, nothing we hadn't seen elsewhere in Paldea. These... anomalies? A common man might believe that these are the mythical guardians brought to life."

Franco shook his head. "No, they aren't the guardians—they're the treasure, and the fortune they can provide me will finally give me the resources I need to save Paldea. Years of planning, careful subversion, networking, exchanging bribes and blood pacts—it all led to this. Only I can correct Paldea! I'm the only one who can stop it from wasting away or worse—turning into a husk like Galar."

Ida looked on in horror as Franco spoke. The churro fell from her hand and briefly rolled across the floor. "You're out of control," she gasped.

"I *take* control."

"You're evil."

Franco stroked his chin as he considered Ida's words. "Evil?"

He shook his head and grinned. "No," he whispered, "A visionary."