

Dedicated to all friends,

Past, Present, & Future.

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Eons In Flux, my cringe lil' fanfic

Episode 7, Part One: Countdown to Zero

Every night, the same dream. Some details would change, but its ending was always the same. Phos perched at the edge of a high-rise terrace atop one of Castelia City's many tall skyscrapers. The bare trees lining Mode Street below were wrapped in red and green lights, providing festive color to the wintry cityscape. She turned her hazel eyes from the dull overcast skies to watch the crowds as they walked by in their heavy winter attire. Phos was content within her black hoodie.

She smiled at the man behind her as he took his seat on the ledge. "Seems the student finally beat the master, huh?"

Apollo turned his head away and waved her off. "Bah, that doesn't count," he grinned, "you used the grappling hook!"

"I had to," Phos answered, "I only had one hand open." She held up the Casteliacone sealed inside its clear plastic shell. "Thanks again, I promise I'll pay you back."

Apollo laughed. He knew better than to believe that. "I don't know how you can eat ice cream in the middle of winter."

"With my tongue," Phos answered flatly. "The cold brings out the best flavor." She popped the lid off and carefully pulled the cone out of its packaging. She tilted it toward him and hummed.

Apollo nudged it away. "Not a chance, my tongue would get stuck."

Phos raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Shay would be so heartbroken." She pressed her lips into the soft vanilla ice cream. "See that? The good stuff is never hard at any temperature. That's how you can tell the difference between the real deal and the cheap knockoffs."

"Oh, I never knew that," Apollo answered with well-rehearsed sincerity, "Because I eat it in the summertime like a normal person."

Phos licked the Casteliacone in deliberate defiance and nodded toward Central Plaza to the north. Even now, the city was working on putting the final touches on the big New Year's Eve celebration. "So what do you think," she asked, "did I pick a great spot or what?"

Apollo chuckled and nodded. "Oh yeah, this'll be the best seat in town."

"And Shay's alright with you going out tonight?"

"She said she wants to be in bed by ten, but she knows I'll be with you... so she's not *too* worried."

Phos snorted a quick laugh. Shay never trusted her much, but she and Apollo were a package deal. “Y’know, if it were anyone else but me, you’d be in big trouble.”

Phos and Apollo shared a laugh and eased into a comfortable silence as they watched the party ball rise on its tall flagpole above the plaza. The cold winter air muffled the constant noise of the city below them.

“I’m happy for you,” Phos said, breaking the quietude, “I really am. It’s about time you have a decent woman in your life.”

Apollo sighed contentedly and nodded.

“Is she gonna let you keep the rock collection?”

His gentle smile spread into a wide grin. “Oh, she loves the rock collection,” he beamed, “She says it’s like stepping into a museum whenever she stops by the apartment.”

Phos crunched into a large blue diamond-shaped piece of candy and chewed loudly before speaking. “Well, keeping it is one thing,” she started, “Is she gonna let you spend all your money expanding it?”

Apollo hummed and hawed as the features of his face twisted and contorted. He shrugged. “I’d rather ask for forgiveness than permission,” he answered. “I saw the rock shop up the road’s got some new merch.”

Phos rolled her eyes. “And I’ll bet you’re just dying to tell me about it.”

“Some crystals mined from Paldea,” Apollo stated, “they’re made of pure energy!”

Phos raised an eyebrow. “Like with Gigalith?” She hummed. “That actually *does* sound pretty cool.”

Apollo grinned and leaned closer. “Oh, you oughta see ‘em!”

Phos smiled and raised her eyebrows high. “Ah, you oughta show me!”

A deafening voice shouted behind their backs, startling them both.

Phos jolted awake with a sharp gasp. Her racing heartbeat pounded against her ribcage and throbbed within her eardrums. From her spartan campsite atop a steep cliff, hints of orange sunlight began to breach the mountaintops to the east. Somewhere within the nearby tall grass, a group of Kricketune played a quiet and somber melody that reverberated from within their hollow bellies. In the early morning darkness, a large silhouette pressed the weight of its feathered body against her chest. One large wing draped over Phos’s legs like a soft dark shroud, while the other wing gently cradled the back of her head. As Phos’s vision came into focus, she could see Mandibuzz’s bald pink head tucked within its plumage. If the Bone Vulture Pokémon was disturbed by Phos stirring awake, it didn’t react. Phos reached up and gently scratched below the tuft of dark brown feathers on the back of Mandibuzz’s head.

"Hey, little mama," Phos's dry voice whispered.

Mandibuzz leaned into her touch and gently pressed its wing down on Phos's body.

"I'm okay." Phos cleared her throat. She gazed upward past the wide branches of a pyrenean oak tree, through the gaps in its lobed leaves to the fading stars beyond and hummed. "I've never woken up that early before."

Mandibuzz's thick black eyelashes parted. It slowly opened one eye and peered down at her with a bright red pupil.

Phos smiled. "Watching over me while I sleep? No wonder Murkrow likes you so much." She pulled her hand away and reached for her new black leather handbag and Mandibuzz's new Pokéball at her side. "Mother knows best, but the Trainer gets the final say."

Phos sighed and pushed against Mandibuzz's underside, gently encouraging it to rise. The large vulture-like Pokémon protested loudly and hopped to the side with a quick flap of its wings.

"We'll work on that." Phos sat upright and stretched. She rolled the stiffness out of her shoulders as the break of dawn illuminated the countryside and gazed out at the foreign landscape sprawling below her.

The valley beneath the cliff teemed with scattered thickets of tall bamboo shoots. Heracross carefully climbed down from the bamboo tops to search for food while purple-winged Venomoth settled into the thick leaves to roost. Huge spires of jagged black obsidian erupted out of the surrounding hills and mountaintops like building-sized speartips frozen in time. Far in the distance, a churning white waterfall flowed down a tall cliffside, branching off around polished stone outcroppings and pouring into a large, foam-laden lake. A lone Dragonite soared through the waterfall's mists on outstretched wings. The twilight skies to the west were dominated by a massive snowcapped mountain that obscured the horizon and dwarfed its surrounding crags.

Everywhere Phos looked, the Paldean countryside was dotted by large hexagonal crystals. A cluster of purple crystals grew around the base of a bamboo patch, suffocating the narrow shoots pushing out of the ground. A Vigoroth jabbed its sharp black claws in frustration at a crystalline layer encasing the surface of a pond. Red crystals sprouted like cysts from the obsidian pillars, and the white slopes of the distant mountains were peppered with a rainbow of glowing specks. Phos turned her attention to a small herd of five Spoink following a Grumpig as it navigated through the cliffs. As the tiny black piglet-like creatures bounced on their coiled tails, the large pink pearls balanced atop their heads bobbed up and down. The only exception was a Spoink in the center of the group, whose pearl was covered in a patchy film of light blue and purple crystals that spread from the pearl and down the side of its face.

"What in the world..." she breathed. Phos furrowed her brows and winced away from the sight. She retrieved Emma's spare phone from her pocket and quickly tapped through the password screen. She booted up the phone's GPS app and waited as it sluggishly loaded a map of the area.

A loud crash of thunder echoed across the cloudless sky.

"Says there's a Pokémon Center not too far from here." Phos turned toward Mandibuzz. "How 'bout it, ready to get the day started?"

Mandibuzz spread its wings wide and nodded its head with a sharp squawk. Phos fastened her belt and suspenders, checked the six Pokéballs at her hips, hung her travel bag over her shoulder, and climbed onto Mandibuzz's back. The Bone Vulture Pokémon flapped its wings and took a running leap over the edge of the cliff.

Gliding over the bamboo forest, Phos soon saw the familiar red roof of a Pokémon Center and guided Mandibuzz to the ground. Her head tilted to the side as she looked at the facility in front of her. The capsule-shaped building was completely exposed to the elements. It looked more like a gas station to her than a hospital, a far cry from their spacious and modern counterparts in Unova. The long counter below the center of the red-roofed overhang was abandoned.

"Maybe they couldn't afford to keep the doors open," Phos said, "but they couldn't even afford to keep the walls?"

Phos dismounted and looked around cautiously. She motioned for Mandibuzz to follow behind as she crept toward the green, red, and blue-striped counter. A raised shelf above the red portion of the counter contained six slots for inserting Pokéballs. A weighted sign in front of the slots read *"Temporarily out of service. Climate controls have been disabled at this Pokémon Center. We apologize for the inconvenience."* in bold red lettering.

Phos tugged at the strap of her handbag and hummed. "Can't imagine they were of any service to begin with. Where's the operating room? Where are Trainers supposed to sleep around here?"

She turned her attention to a large green cylindrical machine behind the counter to her left. The device had been disconnected from its power source, and a cluster of crystalline lattices clogged a disc slot on its front. Splotches of crystal growths lined the Pokémon Center's vicinity, snaking along the twin support beams, across the underside of the overhanging roof, and stretching like ivy across the bases of two nearby simple circular tables. Phos noticed a bulletin posted on the support pillar. It too was covered in a thin film of glimmering mineral deposits.

"Trainers, overwhelming energy has been detected within the Tera Crystals," Phos read aloud. Behind her, Mandibuzz jabbed its beak at the crystals growing across one of the tables. The tiny gems shattered and dissipated into countless motes of light that floated upward before fading into a fine white mist. "For your safety, please do not interact with any Tera Crystal structures. Signed, the Paldean Pokémon League."

Phos brushed her gloved fingers along the crystals growing over the bulletin post. Tiny white arcs of electricity nipped at the advanced materials of her glove, traveling down her knuckles before fading away. Furrowing her brow, she turned away from the counter and reopened the map on her phone. With a tap of her finger, the map began to scroll to the last

tagged location of the phone she had used to track the movements of her target. A pinpoint directed her to the outskirts of a large port city directly to her south. Phos sighed. It would take hours still to fly to her destination.

Phos groaned. "Wasn't enough for you to fly and take a road trip, now you're getting ready for a pleasure cruise..."

A cool autumn breeze swept across the rolling plains. The tall grass bowed and swayed, and scattered lavender petals tumbled on the wind. Distant thunder rumbled in the mountains far to the north. The brown tip of a Meowth's curled tail peeked out of the grass and twitched eagerly as its owner bounded forward on all fours. The Scratch Cat Pokémon was followed closely by a young boy bundled in a thick gray peacoat; his messy locks of hair were as bright as the sun glinting off the golden amulet on Meowth's forehead. Ahead of them, a tiny bug-like creature sprinted through the grass on two stubby legs as it carried a gold coin behind its back. The diminutive being muttered in a frantic and creaking voice as it hurried toward the shelter of a decrepit brick wall rising above the tall grass—the only remnant of some abandoned structure. Its long black antennae brushed against Meowth's outstretched paws as the cat-like creature lunged toward its prey. Meowth's small target ducked low and stumbled to the side before steadying its balance and continuing onward.

"Gimmighoul, wait," the boy panted, "we just want your coin!"

The tiny Gimmighoul croaked out a harsh refusal before sliding through a narrow gap between the old brown brickwork. Meowth extended a razor-tipped claw and dug around within the dark crevice, searching for its quarry. The boy hurried around the side of the wall and dropped to his knees.

"It has to be around here somewhere," the boy mumbled.

Crawling through the dirt, the boy searched beneath loose bricks and peered under grimy, rotting floorboards. Meowth's whiskers shook as its large eyes scanned atop the walls. There was nothing but blue skies overhead. The boy turned away from the wall and rapped his fingers along the ground. He hummed and considered his options carefully. If he went straight or to the right, he could search more of the brick buildings that lined the hilltop ruins. Turning left would lead him to the rocky cliffs overlooking Casseroya Lake. He pointed to the pile of collapsed bricks in front of him and squeezed his left eye shut as he began to make his choice.

"Pink Mareanie, shiny... Whismur. Hold a Persian by its whisker. If it's Limber, just be quicker. Pink... Mareanie," The boy's outstretched finger swept to his left. "Aha! That way!"

He clambered to his feet and hurried toward the cliff's edge. Keeping his eyes low to the ground, his head swiveled in every direction except for where he was going. He bumped his head against something firm and flailed his arms in surprise as he staggered backward. Meowth reared up on its hindlegs and helped its Trainer find his balance. An adult man stood in the shade of a tall holm oak tree with his hands clasped behind his back. The boy looked up timidly,

his golden-hued eyes traveling from the pearl white Pokéballs at the man's belt and up the back of his white suit jacket before meeting the red irises of the man peering over his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, I didn't expect anyone else to be out here," the man remarked.

The boy tugged at the black scarf wrapped around his neck. "Uh, I was looking for Gimmighoul coins when Meowth found one sitting behind a rock. Err... a Gimmighoul, I mean."

Meowth's black ears twitched as it purred cheerfully at its Trainer's side.

The man raised an eyebrow. "Gimmighoul coins? You have an interest in history, then?"

The corner of the boy's mouth twitched, his eyebrows furrowed and unfurrowed. "Umm... no?" He shrugged. "I just like to collect 'em."

"Oh."

The man's expression and voice never wavered.

"I have a Gimmighoul too," the boy proudly stated, "you wanna see it?"

"Shouldn't you be preparing for your first day of school right now?"

The boy squirmed under the man's stoic gaze and began to sway from side to side. "I'm not old enough to go to the Academy yet."

The man turned to face the boy. "You plan to enroll in Naranja Academy?"

The young boy's gold eyes glimmered as he thrust his hands onto his hips. "Yup! My name's Miko!"

The man pursed his lips and hummed. "Do you know anything about where we are now?"

Miko cocked his head to the side. "You mean the Lake?"

The man closed his eyes and smirked. "I mean right here," he thrust his hands out to his sides and motioned toward the crumbling brickwork choked with ivy around them. "Where we're standing."

Miko cradled his chin in his hands and tapped his foot. "Not really," the boy answered, "I just know Gimmighoul like to stash their coins in old ruins like these before bringing them to their chests, so other Gimmighoul come around to steal 'em."

"You're not wrong," the man stated. "When I was your age, this was a quiet fishing village. My father plied his trade out at sea, while my mother fished within the Lake." He brushed his green cowlick away from his face and squatted down to be eye level with Miko. He pointed toward a tall stone observatory atop a hill to the east. "Do you see that watchtower up there?"

“Uhuh.”

The man directed the child's attention in the opposite direction, toward another stone tower far in the distance. “How about that one, can you see that tower too?”

Miko squinted and leaned in. “...Yeah! I see it!”

“Good eye, lad,” the man smiled. “Each day, my Pokémon and I would climb those towers to watch the sun rise over the mountains and set across the ocean. Those towers were here before this town was ever built, and they remain long after my home has faded away to nothing. There is power in history, and we would do well to learn from those who came before if we mean to build a better future for those who follow after us. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Miko opened and closed his mouth as he tried to follow along. “I’m eight years old,” he said at last.

The man shook his head and sighed. “How could you be expected to mourn something you don’t even know about?”

“Huh?”

“Do you love Paldea?”

Miko nodded with enthusiasm. “Of course I do!”

“I do too,” the man answered back. “Do you ever wonder if Paldea could be even better than it is now?”

“I think it could use more game corners,” Miko chirped.

The man’s broad shoulders sagged slightly. “If... that’s what motivates you.”

Miko pulled his phone out from his pants pocket and turned the screen on. The man winced away from the screen’s maxed-out brightness. “I’m ranked number fourteen on the Voltorb Flip leaderboards! Someday, I’m gonna be number one.”

The man gently lowered the phone screen away from his face. “That’s terrific,” he said, “it’s important that children aspire to be the best. But don’t you wish to be the best in the real world too and not just in a phone game?”

“What’s the difference?”

The man massaged his furrowed eyebrows and stood upright. “You’ll understand the difference when you’re older,” he said. “It isn’t enough to preserve what we have; we should strive to make our home better than it is, lest that which matters most to us be consigned to a museum display. We should all work to strengthen our Region; support our own businesses, foster a greater sense of community and encourage our neighbors to reach new heights to spur their peers into accomplishing more grandiose successes.” The man clenched his fist above the

gold and silver badge pinned over his chest. “I dream of creating a better Paldea than what we see today. I want a future where children like you can have a sense of purpose—a greater sense of pride as you understand what it means to be Paldean.”

Beneath the rolling waves of Casseroya Lake far below the cliff’s edge, a massive Dondozo swimming near the sparkling water’s surface beached itself upon a large hexagonal crystal sprouting from the lake’s bottom. The giant blue catfish-like creature flopped on its thick white belly and rolled onto its side before tumbling back into the murky depths with a thunderous splash. The resulting wave sent a flock of four Flamigo retreating into the air.

“No matter what it takes.”

Miko flashed a toothy grin and brushed the dirt stains from his dark clothes. “That sounds like a lot of work,” he said, “do you have time to play a game with me?”

The man reached into his jacket and retrieved a well-polished pocket watch. He pretended to look at the time before putting it away.

The small boy gasped. “My grandpa gave me one of those! It’s one of my favorite treasures!”

Franco hummed inattentively and clicked the pocket watch shut. “Actually, I have important business that I need to be attending to right now.”

Miko’s shoulders slumped. “Oh,” the boy sighed and turned to leave with his Meowth, “okay.”

“Wait.”

Miko stopped in his tracks and looked back. The man’s intense red eyes leered down at him. Meowth’s tail drooped beneath the man’s withering gaze.

“If you’re interested in treasures, I have it on good authority that Gimmighoul often leave their treasure chests atop those watchtowers. You should check up there and see what you can find.”

Miko’s eyes sparkled with excitement. He quickly nodded his head. “Thanks, mister! I’ll go right now!”

The man’s thin lips curled into a slight smile. “Be careful up there,” he warned as Miko began to run off, “I won’t catch you if you fall!”

Mandibuzz’s silhouette circled high in the air. Under the midday sun, the Bone Vulture’s wings cast a wide shadow across the quarries and dig sites that pockmarked the arid landscape. Parched tumbleweeds rolled across the terrain, drifting around mining equipment and tall mounds of displaced earth as hardhat-wearing men and women labored atop raised scaffolding.

Phos gripped the phone tightly as she held onto the thick tuft of beige feathers around Mandibuzz's neck. Beneath her sunglasses, Phos narrowed her eyes. According to the map, she was quickly closing in on Emma's phone. Phos peered over her Pokémon's shoulder and looked down. A large cluster of light blue crystals had emerged from the ground in the center of a cluttered dig site filled with parked dump trucks and other heavy machinery. Large shipping crates were emblazoned with the familiar C-shaped emblem of Macro Cosmos, but the quarry and its equipment sat completely abandoned.

Phos furrowed her brows. "No, that can't be right," she whispered. She patted the vulture-like Pokémon's long pink neck to get its attention. "Mandibuzz, take us down. Nice and easy, aim for the big blue hexagon."

Mandibuzz tucked its wings in and began to dive, dropping out of the sky like a dark javelin as it hurtled toward its Trainer's target. The wind screamed through Phos's billowing red hair. Mandibuzz spread its wings wide as they approached the ground and eased into a slow descent. Phos leapt off of the Bone Vulture's back and rolled to her feet in front of the crystal. Mandibuzz perched atop the hexagonal formation and carefully preened its ruffled feathers.

Phos clasped her fingers together and stretched her arms above her head. "Nicely done," she said. She rolled the stiffness out of her ankles and began to circle the crystals. The glowing blue pillar in the center of the cluster was nearly as tall as herself and slightly wider around. The lesser crystals growing around it were short and wide by comparison. Phos cocked her head and checked her map. The two pins on the map were right on top of each other now. Under Mandibuzz's watchful gaze, she crouched low and kneeled in front of a dark cavity at the base of the crystals. The crystals around it glimmered in the daylight, but no light touched the void within the hollow. Phos shrugged and reached her spare hand inside, feeling around inside for the missing phone.

Nothing.

Phos gripped the side of the crystal and reached in further.

Still nothing. Not even a surface to bump against.

She muttered profanities under her breath and pressed her cheek against the crystal as she extended her arm as far as it could go inside the dark hollow. Mandibuzz cocked its head and craned its long neck over Phos.

"There's no way," she grit her teeth and pushed away from the crystal. She swept her arm from side to side in front of herself.

Phos dropped to her knees and prepared to look inside the opening.

A pair of round and bright blue eyes looked back at her.

Phos smacked the crystal with the flat of her hand and swore as she pushed away. The eyes faded as quickly as they appeared, obscured behind thick clouds of shimmering white mist that began to spew out of the cavity. Phos leapt to her feet and took several long steps back as the blindingly bright mist snaked across the parched earth and filled the air.

“Mandibuzz,” she shouted, “Defog!”

The Bone Vulture Pokémon spread its wings and swept them in wide arcs through the air, but the mist only thickened. Mandibuzz pinched its red eyes shut as the mist’s light became too intense to bear. The crystals abruptly surged with electricity that coursed through Mandibuzz’s talons and across its dark feathers. The vulture-like creature squawked sharply and tumbled limply over the side of its roost toward the loose soil below.

Phos gasped and caught it in her arms. “You alright?”

Mandibuzz’s muscles twitched and spasmed. It nodded stoically and squawked back at its Trainer.

Phos grit her teeth and recalled Mandibuzz before silently reaching for Scrafty’s Pokéball. A deafeningly shrill two-note cry heralded a powerful gust of wind that pushed the mist away and sent Phos staggering backward. When the blinding light faded, a massive black-and-yellow bird sat perched atop the arm of a nearby excavator machine. The creature’s entire body was encased in a shell of light blue crystals. A crown of green and red balloon-like orbs rested atop its head. The bird swiveled its head from side to side, looking in all directions before its sharp blue eyes locked onto Phos. It spread its angular wings wide and took to the air. The Pokémon’s bright yellow throat swelled with electricity as its feathers quickly scythed through the mist. It opened its long, hooked beak and spat an orb of crackling lightning in Phos’s direction as it swooped past her.

Phos dived out of the way as the attack discharged against the dry earth behind her. She rolled to her feet and released Scrafty from its ball in a burst of light. The Hoodlum Pokémon adjusted the sagging shed skin at its waist and turned its attention to the large bird gliding across the sky.

“This thing wants a fight, Scrafty,” Phos said. She gestured toward the cluttered assembly of industrial equipment. “It looks tough, but we’re in our element here. I’ll distract Big Bird. Find a way to clip those wings and we’ll make a run for it.” She glanced up at the crystalline Kilowattrel tracing circles through the air. “This overgrown Pidove’s about to learn we’re a lot scarier than he is. You ready, partner?”

Scrafty nodded resolutely and pumped its fists.

Phos patted Scrafty on the cheek and began to run. Overhead, Kilowattrel’s narrow eyes locked onto the streak of red hair darting through the maze of metal and stone. It squawked loudly and folded its wings for another attack run.

Phos raised her glove up to her mouth. “Catch me if you can,” she hollered.

With the Frigatebird Pokémon’s attention focused elsewhere, Scrafty crouched low and sprang upward, grabbing ahold of the excavator’s crane arm hanging overhead. The Hoodlum Pokémon swung onto the top of the cylinder and steadily tiptoed along its spine. It hopped atop the machine’s bucket and drummed its fingers against the metal as it traced its Trainer’s path through the quarry.

Kilowattrel shrieked again and swooped. Phos skidded to a stop as the birdlike creature landed in front of her. She slid beneath the massive wheels of a dump truck just as the bird's beak slammed down where she had stood. It dropped low and stabbed again, snapping at her legs in a shower of gravel and electrical sparks. Phos rolled clear, clambered to her feet on the other side, and sprinted for shelter. Electric arcs split the air as the Kilowattrel perched atop the truck and spat another ball of lightning at its prey. Phos vaulted over a bulldozer's bucket and crouched down in the loose gravel behind it. As Kilowattrel repositioned itself for another attack, she quickly climbed atop the barrel and leapt onto the wooden scaffolding running along the quarry wall. Phos met the glare of the titanic Frigatebird Pokémon at eye-level. The bird's throat swelled. It opened its beak wide and coughed up another bolt of electricity. Phos grabbed a metal drum, swung it overhead, and hurled it into the incoming attack. The side of the drum caught the lightning in a brilliant flash of light before the smoking metal clattered to the ground.

Phos smirked. "That all you got?"

Kilowattrel took flight, circling the quarry in wide arcs before honing in on Phos. The crystals on its body gleamed brilliantly as it halted above its prey and spread its wings wide. Phos sprinted down the length of the scaffolding as Kilowattrel screeched and crossed its wings. Two massive gusts of wind rushed through the quarry, stripping loose dirt from the ground and pulling it into a roaring cyclone. The maelstrom crashed against the scaffolding behind Phos, snapping the wooden planks into dozens of jagged splinters that chased at her heels. Phos pumped her arms faster, staying just ahead of the wind with long and desperate strides. She grit her teeth and grunted as a sharp pain cut across the back of her neck and blood trickled down her collar. She stumbled and lost her footing, crying out as the world flipped end over end. She tumbled limply through the open air, fragments of disintegrating scaffolding spinning past in a blur of motion and thunderous cracking. The impact arrived suddenly for her.

Her jostled brain throbbed within her skull as her body slammed into the dirt. Phos rolled and bounced across the ground, shielding herself with her handbag before striking the side of a minecart weighed down with large stone chunks. She groaned and pressed her fingers against her aching temples as she sat upright and scanned her surroundings. A large red-and-white sphere rotated in place just in front of her. Its narrow, bulging eyes focused on her in quiet irritation. The Voltorb rumbled in annoyance and began to glow with blinding white light. Phos screamed in shock and kicked out hard with her heel, connecting against its round body. The Ball Pokémon skidded across the ground, then exploded in a fiery blast. Black smoke and charred debris billowed skyward, mixing with the rising dust. Phos gasped for breath and clutched at her heart as Kilowattrel's shadow glided overhead for another pass.

From its position atop the crane, Scrafty snapped its fingers as a plan began to take shape.

Phos dove for cover behind the minecart as her aerial foe vomited another ball of lightning in her direction. "C'mon," she screamed, "hit me!"

She reached over the cart's edge, grabbed a heavy rock, and whipped it into the air as Kilowattrel soared past. The stone caught the Frigatebird Pokémon midflight, colliding against its crystalline underbelly with a sharp crack. Kilowattrel screeched and kicked out at the falling rock, feathers rippling as its body twisted into a somersault and plunged straight down. Its

hooked talons hit the ground hard, digging furrows into the dirt that sent dust swirling around its legs. The Kilowattrel leaned forward, leered down at Phos, and lunged. Phos cartwheeled to the side as the bird's beak almost slammed into the minecart and nearly toppled it onto its side. She grabbed another rock and brought it down atop the bird's head. Crystal fragments chipped loose and floated away in thin wisps of glowing mist.

Kilowattrel turned its blue eye toward Phos and hissed. Lightning pulsed from its throat sac, dancing in wild yellow arcs across the feathers of its outstretched wings. The air between them erupted, a blinding sphere of electricity rapidly expanded outward and sent every muscle in her body spasming. Phos screamed out in pain as the current tore through her. Her body went limp as she crashed onto her back with a hard thud. Before she could move, Kilowattrel's beak clamped onto the zipper of her cropped jacket and yanked her into the air. It shook its head violently, whipping Phos around and sending her handbag and the medicine inside sailing out of reach before slamming her back into the earth. With a twist of its head, it sent Phos rolling through the dirt again. Pain throbbed across her ribs as she skidded to a halt. She laid still, gasping, her jacket streaked with dust and dirt as she fought to regain control of her deadened nerves.

"I'm not dying on my back."

Phos clenched her teeth and forced herself up onto her trembling elbows. "Am I supposed to be impressed?"

With its wings outstretched, Kilowattrel stepped forward and stabbed its beak down toward Phos. She rolled to the side, sprang to her feet in one acrobatic motion, and swung her heel outward with a fierce roundhouse kick. Her foot struck the crystal armor of her foe with a muffled thud, causing Phos to clutch at her ankle and swear.

Kilowattrel lunged forward with another peck. Phos shoved its beak downward, redirecting the attack into the dirt between her legs. Riding the momentum, she vaulted atop the bird Pokémon's head and hooked her legs around the middle of the three crystal pillars connecting the colorful balloon-like orbs crowning its skull. The Frigatebird Pokémon shrieked and tried to shake her loose as Phos held on tightly and surfed down its back. As it reared up and spread its wings wide, she kicked off and took shelter behind the minecart. A surge of electricity discharged in the air moments later. Kilowattrel pivoted with a short hop and swept its wings forward in a flash of light. Another hurricane wind burst outward, catching the minecart and tearing it off its rails in a chorus of groaning metal. Gravel and stone spiraled upward as the heavy cart bounced end over end across the quarry. Phos pressed her body low to the ground with her hands covering her neck and clenched her eyes and mouth shut until the wind abated. When she looked up, the Frigatebird Pokémon loomed over her, eyes narrowed to light blue slits as its beak drew back for a finishing strike.

A sharp warbling cry echoed from above.

Both Phos and Kilowattrel turned their attention upward. Scrafty stood silhouetted against the midday sun atop the cliff with one hand firmly gripping a minecart perched at the edge. With a heaving grunt, the Hoodlum Pokémon shoved it over the ridge. The cart twisted as it fell, revealing a trio of Voltorb tumbling inside its bed. Phos leapt away as the minecart

crashed down on Kilowattrel's head. Solid steel slammed against its crystal armor with a sharp crack. The agitated Voltorb exploded across Kilowattrel's body a split second later. Crystal shards burst outward and scattered across the quarry like falling embers before dissolving into drifting motes of light and fading away.

"Now," Phos shouted, "Dragon Tail!"

Scrafty leapt down the cliff and spun through the black smoke filling the air. The blue glow of its tail cut through the haze as it struck the back of Kilowattrel's head with a thunderous crack. The Frigatebird's beak spiked downward into the dirt, pinning it in place as Scrafty landed confidently on its feet. A muffled shriek escaped the bird's trapped beak as it slapped its wide wings against the ground and tried to wrench itself free. Scrafty adjusted its loose skin sagging around its waist, then whipped its tail around again for another powerful slap that sent its opponent skidding across the quarry and crashing into another row of scaffolding. The iron support beams buckled and collapsed, burying the giant bird beneath the debris.

Scrafty turned toward Phos and croaked.

Phos swept the dirt stains from her dark clothes and wiped a smearing of soot from Scrafty's nose. "Yeah, I'm still good," she answered back.

Kilowattrel screeched and pushed itself free of the wreckage. Broken planks fell away as it shook its head. Its throat sac swelled and filled with electricity. Phos and Scrafty tensed up and turned to face their foe.

A high-pitched voice cut through the chaos and called out to them. "Lady," the voice cried, "up here!"

Phos glanced upward. A large red-scaled reptilian Pokémon clung to the quarry wall, four sharp claws digging deep grooves into the stone as it climbed. Its black chest swelled with air as it galloped toward her, scattering dust and loose gravel. From behind the plume of blue-and-white feathers atop its head, a small white-gloved hand reached out toward Phos.

"Take my hand!"

Phos's eyes widened. She recalled Scrafty in a flash of light and clipped the ball back onto her belt before taking off at a sprint. The Kilowattrel shrieked behind her, wings crackling with lightning. Phos launched herself from the ground and leapt toward the cliff. Her gloved hand shot upward and caught the stranger's outstretched grip. The dragon roared, muscles rippling as it kicked off the wall. The feathers atop its head unfurled into two wide wings that snapped open to meet the rushing air.

Phos clung on tightly as the draconic Pokémon surged skyward. She swung a leg over the dragon's broad back and steadied herself, sunlight flaring across the lenses of her angular blue sunglasses. A pair of large circular glasses glinted back at her. One silhouetted hand gripped a long spike emerging from the dragon's shoulder and held steady against the wind.

"Good timing," Phos said.

“Hold on tight,” the dragon’s rider shouted back. “Rairai, get us out of here!”

She whistled a series of sharp notes and snapped her fingers. The dragon barked a quick reply, wings flaring wide as it braced its claws against the side of a rusted excavator. With a powerful lunge, it vaulted skyward and tore free of the quarry in a rush of howling wind and clattering gravel. The world dropped away beneath them as they burst into the open air.

A thunderous cry echoed after them. The Kilowattrel shot upward from the crater, feathers crackling with violent electricity. Its body shimmered, shedding comet tails of white and blue motes as it beat its wings in furious pursuit.

The dragonrider whistled sharply. The dragon tucked its limbs in and pivoted at its Trainer’s command. The Frigatebird Pokémon closed the gap, spitting balls of lightning that hissed through the air around them. Phos turned to meet its eyes over her shoulder. The birdlike creature’s form flickered, first solid, then translucent. The tips of its feathers began to fade as its body became surrounded in white mist. It shrieked and pushed forward, vomiting out one last surge of electricity before its body disappeared into the fog.

The dragon steadied its flight, its wide wings coasting on a hot updraft. It soon reached out and touched down upon a rolling grassy field with a running stop. Phos dismounted and combed her windswept hair back with her fingertips.

The short, tan-skinned girl commanding the dragon leapt off its back, her pink knee-high boots landing in the grass with a muffled thud. Phos studied her closely. The girl couldn’t have been a day over sixteen. Most of her light brown hair was tied into twin buns atop her head, while the rest fell in long, messy strands around the thick lenses of her oversized glasses, continuing down past her narrow shoulders before tapering off into pink-hued ends. She wore a loose pink jacket over her school uniform: a bright orange tie decorated with two red heart hairclips, striped orange-and-white shorts with long drawstrings peeking out from below the untidy hem of her white collared shirt. Two basic Pokéballs and four pink-hued Heal Balls clung to her hips, along with a black sphere with a hexagonal button on its front.

The girl pulled her overstuffed backpack from her shoulders, reached into a side pocket, and removed a submarine sandwich wrapped in thin, crinkly paper. Behind her, the girl’s dragon began to pant, its yellow eyes gleaming with enthusiasm. It licked its long tongue across its serrated maw as the air sac on its neck swelled and shrank with each excited breath. The girl unwrapped the sandwich, waved it in front of the dragon’s nose, and quickly pulled her hand back as her Pokémon snapped its teeth around its prize and tore into it.

She giggled and turned back toward Phos.

Phos rested her hand on her bare hip and nodded. “Thanks for the ride, kid,” Phos said.

The girl’s wide, toothy grin shrank as she curled her lips into a narrow ring and stared.

Phos scrunched her eyebrows and cocked her head. “What? Are those glasses farsighted?”

The girl took her glasses off. Her red eyes shined like rubies. She fluttered her long, thick eyelashes and squinted.

Phos lowered her sunglasses so that her hazel eyes peered out from the top. "Red eyes, huh? You remind me of someone I know." She pursed her lips and smiled. "You might be a little cuter." She began to turn away. "Anyways, good talk, I've gotta get—"

"You looked like a movie star," the short girl commented.

Phos paused. "Huh?"

The young girl held her clenched hands up to her mouth and squealed, her crooked canine tooth protruding from the top-left corner of her mouth. "I heard the explosion so I hopped on Rairai and followed the smoke," she spoke quickly, each word blending into the next. "And then we get there and I see that Kilowattrel tryin' to get you but you're all like—*woosh*—and then Kilowattrel was like *skreee, pow*, but—" she pantomimed Phos's acrobatics with her hands, "and then I see your Scrafty drop that cart and I'm like *whoa*, but you didn't stop there because you were all like '*Dragon Tail*,' and Scrafty jumped down that cliff and Kilowattrel went like—" here, she flung her arms out wide and waved them wildly through the air, "so I'm like, '*now's my chance!*' So I have Rairai come get you and now we're here and you're all like," she put her glasses back on, puffed out her chest, and smirked, lowering the pitch of her voice in imitation of Phos's more mature tone, "you look at me and say '*thanks for the ride, kid*,' and I'm like—"

Phos raised her hands up. "Easy, take a breath, kiddo."

The girl sucked in a mouthful of air and sighed.

Phos smiled. "You good?"

The girl nodded. She reached out her hand. "I'm Bibi! Bibi Montero!"

Phos clasped her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Phos," she answered back with a grin, "I appreciate the help, Bibi."

Bibi's tanned cheeks began to blush. Phos tilted her eyes down toward Bibi's hand still wrapped around her fingers and cleared her throat. The young girl chuckled and sheepishly withdrew.

"What was up with that bird?" Phos asked.

"Oh, you gotta watch out for any Pokémon you find inside those Tera Crystals," Bibi answered, "they're all burstin' with energy and they don't care who they use it on. It's pretty rare to see them outside of the crystals like that, but that's why we're not supposed to go near 'em anymore, didn't you see any of the posters around?"

"Nope," Phos lied, "I'm pretty new around here."

"My homeroom teacher tells me I shouldn't mess with those crystals either." Bibi grinned widely. "But sometimes I do it anyway because they're so fun to fight."

Phos looked the little Trainer up and down and laughed. “Well, Bibi, that’ll be our little secret. What are you doing all the way out here, anyway?”

Bibi hauled her backpack forward and opened the main pocket, revealing a crammed assortment of potion bottles, Pokéballs, and rattling bottles of Pokémon stimulants. “Those crystals leave a lot of trash all over the place when they fade away, so Mister Jacq—that’s my homeroom teacher—wanted us to do some cleanup before the semester starts and write a report on it but then I have this classmate who’s a total slacker who didn’t do the assignment and he’s all like—”

Phos inhaled deeply and exhaled through her parted lips.

Bibi followed her lead and slowed the torrent of words spilling forth. “Anyway, he’s no help at all. He’s been spendin’ all his time chasing after any pretty woman he sees while I’m doing all the work!”

Phos smirked. “Huh, figured he’d be right on your heels if that’s the case.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you!~” Bibi placed her knuckles squarely on her hips and smiled confidently even as her cheeks reddened. “He ditched me to go have lunch with some woman he’s never even *met* before. He’s probably intimidated because I’m the better Trainer!”

Phos laughed out loud. “I’ll bet!” She sighed. “But it’s good that you take care of your friends like that.”

Bibi furrowed her thin eyebrows below her glasses and leaned her head on her shoulder. “Ehhh, I don’t really know if you’d call us friends, not like Arven or Kieran, but he needed my help.”

Phos chuckled and gestured toward Bibi’s backpack. “Well, I wouldn’t be going through all that trouble for a stranger. Take care of ‘em for me. You never know how long he’ll be around for.” She patted the top of Bibi’s head and turned to leave. “Hey, listen, I really gotta get going. I’m looking for someone and—”

“Maybe me and Koraidon can help you?”

The red dragon barked eagerly.

Phos froze and bristled. She turned back toward the young girl looking up at her expectantly and scowled. “Not a chance,” she said sharply.

Bibi’s shoulders sagged.

Phos dropped to one knee and began to speak in a softer tone. “Look, I mean...” She never was good at turning people down gently, she mused. “Girls your age should be getting into normal trouble like stringing guys along for an easy lunch, or training Pokémon, or... poking at weird crystals. This is grownup business, understand?”

Bibi nodded solemnly before her enthusiasm quickly bounced back. "Then how about a battle before you go? Please?" She clasped her hands in front of her heart and smiled widely. "Pretty please, with a churro on top?"

Phos chuckled and shook her head as she stood up. "Sorry, kid, I gotta save my strength so I can go fight the bad guys. Especially after Big Bird cost me all my potions."

Bibi's red eyes gleamed behind her glasses. "The bad guys?"

"It's complicated," Phos shrugged, "but I—"

Another voice echoed out in a whining tone. "Bibiiiiii...!"

Bibi sighed. "Aww, great," she grumbled.

Phos, Bibi, and Koraidon turned toward the source of the noise. A lanky young man crested the grassy hill, his pale face reddened with exertion and his messy black hair matted with sweat. Colorful strands of green, pink, blue, and yellow hair like a Chatot's feathers brushed against bare collarbone as he bent over to catch his breath. He wore a dark blue jacket with a loose hood over his charcoal gray collared shirt. The jacket's belt dangled loosely at his side, brushing against the thigh of his black skinny jeans. The young man looked up at Bibi, turned his gaze toward Phos, and immediately stood upright. He sucked in his stomach and parted his hair away from his purple eyes, revealing a jagged scar running across his left eye.

Phos nodded toward him as he sauntered over. "That's your classmate? The flirty one?"

"Yeah," Bibi groaned, "that's him."

A mischievous smile flashed across Phos's cheeks. "I've seen his type around before. They're all talk and they're definitely no action. How old is he?"

"Seventeen, I think."

A hands-off approach, then. Phos leaned over and patted Bibi on the back. "Take notes, kiddo," she said, "let me show you how to handle boys like these."

The teenage boy strutted forward with well-rehearsed confidence. "There you are, Bibi," he cooed, pressing the back of his hand against his forehead, "I was so worried about you running off on your own like that!" He pretended to notice Phos for the first time and took a grandiose bow before her. "Forgive me, please, on behalf of my young companion. She is headstrong, the blood in her veins craves never-ending carnage. She is a slave to her wild instincts, I hope she didn't cause a beautiful woman such as yourself any distress."

Phos tilted her sunglasses down and leered at him. "No trouble at all, handsome." She bit down softly on her lower lip and smiled. "I'm a slave to my wild instincts too." She took a step forward. "Especially when someone says I'm beautiful."

The teenage boy froze and stared at her wide-eyed.

Phos took another step closer. "Unless I... misheard you?"

Her prey took a tiny step back and averted his eyes. "Um... uh... I mean..."

"Why don't we get to know each other better?" She leaned in. "What's your name, stud?"

His immature voice was a strained whimper. "...St-stud?"

Phos chuckled. "Lucky guess. Wanna guess my name next?"

The boy's hands trembled. "N-no," he sputtered, "I mean, yes, but, uh..."

"Is there a problem, Mr. Stud?"

He swallowed hard and clenched his fists. "Alto," he said firmly, "my name is Alto." He turned to the side, looked up at the sky, and combed his fingers through his hair with a flourish to proudly present the scar across his eye. "You have the privilege of meeting the one and only Alto Nightmare Kyo Versailles, burdened by heavens and earth to carry the voice that cuts through the darkness that lurks within every sinful heart!"

Phos raised her eyebrows and blinked back her surprise. The boy recovered quickly. She looked back toward Bibi while Alto posed dramatically with his eyes pinched shut. Bibi massaged her temples and shrugged.

"Alto," Phos cooed. The young man snapped to attention. "Call me Phos for now. You can call me Mommy later. I've got a lot of sins in my heart," she continued, "you think you're up to the challenge?"

Alto laughed nervously. "I mean, it's really more of a metaphorical..."

Phos hummed and slowly circled around him. "Oh yeah," she remarked, "you're just the type to make me sin. That black looks so good on you."

Alto craned his neck to follow her movements. "You really think so?"

Phos grinned. "Mmmmaybe. Or maybe it would look better on the ground."

Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead. An impish grin had spread across Bibi's face as she watched Phos call Alto's bluff and press the attack.

Alto leaned forward and clasped his hands in front of himself as the blood drained from his pale face. He slowly sat down in the grass and crossed his legs.

Phos sat down at his side and studied his scar closely. It was face paint, almost convincing enough from a distance. "How'd you get that scar, Alto?"

"Oh, this?" Alto chuckled. "It was... it was a dark and stormy night."

Phos shifted onto her side and held her head up in her gloved hand as she traced circles across her bare hip with her fingernail. "How fitting."

"A horde of angry Houndoom were in close pursuit!"

Phos stretched her long legs out and smiled as his purple irises darted across her figure. "Go on..."

Alto reached up toward the lazy white clouds overhead. "But! There in the tree: a Sprigatito, crying out for a savior!"

Phos blinked. "A what?"

"Oh, it's a little green cat. They're really cute."

"Anyways."

"But before I could come to its aid, I was charged by an angry Voltorb that was about to explode!"

Phos had heard enough. Biting her lip, she reached up and clasped her hand against her cheek and sighed, gliding her hand down her neck and down to the pale skin above her heart. "A man of so many talents," she gasped, "is there anything you can't do?"

"Get a second date," Bibi cut into Phos's sarcasm with a barb of her own.

Phos covered her mouth and guffawed loudly.

The sharp features of Alto's face pinched inward as he quickly pointed a long finger toward Bibi. Phos took silent note of the black nail polish decorating his fingertip. "Quiet, you," he snapped.

Bibi held her hands out and wiggled her fingers, rolling her eyes sarcastically. "Ooo! Bet you hear that one a lot," she rebuked.

"These divinely-appointed ears are inured to the baseless criticisms of the naysayers! I'll have you know my performances leave people speechless," Alto retorted.

Bibi scoffed. "Speechless? Try deaf!"

Alto's blushing cheeks were quickly becoming flush with anger as he scowled at his shorter classmate.

Phos looked up at him and raised an eyebrow. "You're a musician?"

Bibi shook her head. "No, Miss Phos, wait—"

"A musician," Alto repeated, "Nay! I am a bard of the most otherworldly caliber!"

Phos admired how quickly he could bounce back from being flustered. "I like musicians," she said. "If you were a little older, you'd be in big trouble."

Alto paused with his mouth agape as he recollected himself.

"Like playing with a yo-yo," she thought.

"I mean, uh, I'm pretty good at playing bass, but I think my partner Toxtricity is better-suited for it." He pumped his fists. "No! My true life's motive, el propósito fundamental, my raison d'être... is to bring the gift of my voice to the masses. To shatter all worldly expectations through the evocative power of song!"

Phos smiled warmly. "Ya wanna show me?"

Bibi grit her teeth. "Seriously, Miss Phos, you don't know what you're—"

Alto held his palm out toward her. "Hush, philistine," he commanded. "Your indifference to artistic merit holds no sway here! If this angelic beauty wishes to be serenaded by the voice of an angel, who am I to refuse her?"

"Oh yeah, baby," Phos rolled her eyes and chuckled, "serenade me. I'm ready for you."

Bibi whistled sharply to Koraidon and leapt onto its back. The two took cover behind a smooth white boulder as Alto sat upright and cleared his throat.

In the silence between them, Phos could hear Alto's heart hammering against his chest. He took a deep breath and steadied his nerves.

"This oughta be—"

Phos's thoughts were cut off by a shrill and guttural scream. The muscles in her body tensed in surprise as Alto began his performance.

"WORDS ARE! JUST LIKE VIOLENCE! TODAY! I BREAK THE SILENCE!"

Phos stared wide-eyed as her sunglasses slid down her face and tumbled into the grass. Alto pinched his eyes shut as the muscles in his neck bulged and pulled taut just under his skin.

"THIS COULD! BE GOODBYE, KID!"

A flock of silhouetted birds took the skies and flew off toward the tall white lighthouse far in the distance.

Alto leaned forward and intensified his volume. **"DO YOU SEE ME WHEN YOU CLOSE YOUR EYELID?!"**

Phos felt a tight pressure inside her ear. Panicked Deerling crashed into one another as they scrambled for safety.

“TODAY, I’MMA GET BACK UP! FIST RAISED! LET’S GET CLOSE UP! YOUR LIFE WON’T BE SO—”

Alto yelped and sputtered in surprise as an empty bean can collided with his forehead and fell to the ground. Phos briefly locked eyes with the jolly-looking mustached man on the front of the label as the tin can rolled away.

Bibi returned her backpack to her shoulders as she leaned out from the side of the boulder. “Shut up, we’ve heard enough,” she shouted.

Silence fell like a pall over the fields. Not a single Pokémon or tree leaf dared to follow a performance of that magnitude. Alto squinted his eyes and muttered under his breath as he rubbed at the small red welt on his forehead.

Phos sat upright. She gently took Alto by the hand and moved it aside to inspect the mark. “Hold still,” she urged. Whether she was speaking quietly or her sense of volume was thrown out of balance, she couldn’t tell. “Does it hurt at all?”

Alto pulled his hand back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Tch, no, I can handle it,” he huffed. He blew a strand of hair away from his eyes. The corner of his mouth twitched as his dark hair draped itself against his eyelashes again.

The mark would fade in a few minutes, Phos concluded. She licked the tip of her finger and combed Alto’s hair back into place. “You get that kind of reception a lot, don’t you?”

Alto pursed his lips and turned away. “Buncha uncultured... no respect for the arts,” he grumbled.

“I liked it,” Phos concluded.

Alto swatted her hand away. “Yeah,” he snapped, “well, who cares what you—” He paused as the realization dawned on him. “You what?”

Phos smiled at him warmly and sincerely for the first time. “I said I liked it.”

His narrowed eyes softened. “...You really mean it?”

“You sing with your feelings, kid,” Phos stated, “I respect that. It felt honest.” She retrieved her sunglasses and hung them on the top of her shirt before inching closer. She rested her arm on her knee and leaned back. “I remember what it felt like growing up. If you gotta scream, then scream,” she continued. “Don’t let someone else stop you. And don’t pretend to be something you’re not.” She pointed toward his chest. “Just be you, and you’ll find your audience sooner or later.”

Phos reached for Malamar’s Pokéball at her left hip and flicked it forward. The Overturning Pokémon emerged and unfurled its tentacles as it levitated to the ground.

“How ‘bout you,” Phos asked, “what did you think?”

Malamar stretched out comfortably and chattered in an incomprehensible baritone voice. Alto stared in confusion at the foreign creature as it gestured at him and nodded its head.

Phos returned Malamar to its ball. "See? You already have a fan."

The young man stammered wordlessly. "Uh... well, my parents own a record store back home," he said at last, "Maybe you can come by and listen to some music sometime? I can get you a discount."

"Maybe later," Phos told him as she stood up. She stretched and prepared to take her leave. An unfamiliar feeling rooted her heels in place. It was a bygone sense of innocent normalcy that Phos had learned to live without. She shook her head and smirked in exasperation at her own weakness. Maybe a few more minutes wouldn't hurt. "Hey, Bibi," she shouted, "C'mon, let's have that battle!"

In the distance, Bibi snapped to attention and turned toward Phos. A wide, open-mouthed smile spread across the young girl's face. "Reeeeeaally?"

Alto clambered to his feet. "You want to battle her?" he asked, "Are you out of your freaking mind?!"

Phos shrugged. "It's been a long time since I got to battle for fun."

"If you think getting trashed is fun, sure!" Alto held up his hand. "That girl is a monster! I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen her lose!"

Phos cupped her hands around her mouth. "Alto said he'll referee!"

Bibi spun around on one foot and shrieked with excitement.

Phos and Bibi took their places, standing opposite of each other across fifty feet of gently curving grassland. The two Trainers stared each other down from behind the lenses of their glasses with their hands hovering above their Pokéballs. A gust of wind carrying the briny scent of the ocean rustled their hair and jackets. Alto stood between them so that their positions formed a roughly equal triangle. Koraidon perched atop a tall rock, basking in the warm glow of the midday sun. It called out to its Trainer and watched her closely with its long tongue lolling out of the side of its mouth.

Alto cleared his throat. "THIS WILL BE A THREE-VERSUS-THREE BATTLE," he screamed. "SWITCHING WILL BE—"

Phos pinched her fingers together and pantomimed lowering the volume on a speaker. "Alto, baby, let's tone it down a little," she said.

Alto tugged at his shirt collar before continuing. "Switching will be allowed," he shouted, "held items will be allowed."

As Alto spoke, the features of Bibi's face scrunched and relaxed as she stroked her chin.

"Bibi, are you even listening to me?!"

Bibi snapped to attention. "Yeah, totes," she lied, "I'm just plannin' my strategies."

Phos smirked. "Figured we'd just punch it out. You ready to go, Bibi?"

Bibi nodded.

Alto threw his hands up and shook his head. "Fine, whatever, begin!"

Phos's right hand reached straight down and grabbed the simple Pokéball in front. "Come on out, Malamar," she shouted.

The Overturning Pokémon emerged from its ball and leapt to the ground. It turned its beak up at Bibi, crossed its bladed arms over its chest, and laughed its dry cackle.

"Ah-hua-hua-hua...!"

Bibi grabbed one of her Heal Balls and threw it forward. The light blue seal popped open, and a tiny yellow bug fluttered into the air. The little Ribombee clasped its spindly black arms close to its chest as another light gust of wind set the long brown scarf around its neck and the thin red sash wrapped around its narrow waist billowing in the breeze.

Phos squinted and leaned forward to get a better look at Malamar's diminutive opponent. "Man, I've seen Joltik bigger than that thing," she mused.

Bibi took a deep breath and whistled a long sharp note.

Her Ribombee sped off in an instant, flying high into the air. Malamar braced its long arms against the ground and cocked its head as its dark eyes tracked its foe. The Bee Fly Pokémon raised its arms above its head and began to channel a sphere of bright pink energy several times larger than itself.

With a feeling of rising dread, Phos recognized that move. "Aww crap, it's using Moonblast," she groaned. "Malamar! You know how to handle this, get ready to move!"

Malamar nodded and began swaying its lithe body from side to side. It narrowed its eyes and hummed as it awaited Ribombee's attack.

Bibi whistled two quick notes, and Ribombee dropped out of the sky and honed in on Malamar with its Moonblast gripped firmly between its hands.

Phos and Malamar both watched in wide-eyed alarm as the little Pokémon somersaulted forward, its Moonblast streaking like a comet as it and its wielder hurtled toward its target. With a high-pitched yawp, Ribombee spiked the attack down at Malamar's head. The squid-like creature danced to the side as the attack scythed through the air where it was standing moments before.

Phos smirked to herself. "Blondie should be taking notes."

Bibi snapped her fingers with her right hand, and Ribombee quickly pivoted to swing its sphere toward Malamar's new position. The Overturning Pokémon flattened itself against the ground as Ribombee's attack spun overhead.

"Now," Phos shouted, "Sludge Bomb!"

Malamar opened its beak wide directly underneath Ribombee and spat out a large glob of purple slime. The poison engulfed Ribombee's tiny body and burst in a violent corrosive shower. The tiny Pokémon yelped and plummeted out of the air, bouncing to a halt in a bed of yellow wildflowers. Its red sash disintegrated as tiny particles of cloth were carried away by the wind and burned away to nothing.

Bibi whistled two low notes and a high note. Pinching its eyes shut, Ribombee pushed off the ground and staggered to its feet, shaking the thick purple ooze off of its wings. The little Bee Fly Pokémon coughed and sputtered, spitting more sludge out of its mouth before clutching at its stomach and falling limply to its side.

Alto raised his hand straight up into the air and chopped down toward Phos. "Ribombee is unable to battle," he shouted, "the first knockout goes to Phos!"

Phos shot him a thumbs up. "Very official," she beamed.

Bibi recalled her fainted Pokémon and adjusted her glasses. "That was a good move," she said. The young Trainer wagged her finger. "But you made one big mistake."

Phos chuckled. "That so?"

Bibi reached for another Heal Ball at her side. "Malamar can't learn Sludge Bomb."

She hurled her next Pokéball forward, releasing a bipedal gray dragon taller than herself. Fierce, narrow eyes glowered beneath a sonorous headdress of red-and-gold scales. The gold-edged scales continued down its long neck, past the short tufts of white fur covering its shoulders like a cape, and down to the golden armor on its chest. Its massive forearms were lined with scales and ended in four yellow hooked talons. It dug the three claws on each of its feet into the dirt and raised its long tail high into the air, fiercely rattling the scales at its tip like cymbals.

"Never seen that one before," Phos remarked, "Where'd you find it?"

Bibi planted her hands on her hips and beamed. "That's my Koko! Er, I mean Kommo-o," she said, "I found him while I was on a field trip and he's been my trusty partner ever since!"

Bibi's Kommo-o turned back at her and glowered sharply before turning back to its opponent.

Phos glanced down at Scrafty's Pokéball and smiled. "That's funny, I got my trusty partner on a field trip too." Phos quickly snapped back to the battle. "Sludge Bomb, quick!"

Malamar puffed out its chest and spat another glob of poison at Kommo-o.

“Whoa, unsportsmanlike conduct,” Alto shouted.

Bibi silently raised her hand. Kommo-o held its forearms in front of its body and braced for the attack. The Sludge Bomb splattered against its scales and harmlessly rolled off.

Bibi whistled a rapid flurry of notes. Kommo-o stretched its arms out to its sides and slammed them together with a deafening roar. The scales across its body rang out, releasing a massive blue-tinted soundwave that tore across the field and swept over Malamar’s body. The Overturning Pokémon cried out as the attack lifted it off the ground and violently shook it to its core.

Zoroark’s disguise rippled out of existence. The Illusion Fox Pokémon slammed against the trunk of a chestnut tree and collapsed to the ground.

“Zoroark,” Phos shouted, “you good?”

Zoroark grit its teeth and nodded before slouching against the tree.

Alto swept his hand toward Bibi. “Malama—uhh... Zoroark is unable to battle. The score is tied!”

Phos recalled Zoroark and returned its ball to her side. “That was good, partner.” She reached for her next ball. “Come on out, Scrafty!”

The Hoodlum Pokémon hit the ground running, rushing toward Kommo-o and causing the Scaly Pokémon to reflexively step back and flinch away. Scrafty skidded to a halt, kicking up a spray of dirt and uprooted grass, and leered up at Kommo-o with its molars tightly clenched into a wide sneer. Scrafty dragged a finger across the width of its throat and croaked a challenge to its opponent.

Bibi raised both her hands in the air and rapidly snapped her fingers. Her Kommo-o charged forward, galloping on its knuckles as it closed the distance on its foe.

“Block it, Scrafty!”

Scrafty nodded and gripped its loose skin tightly in its hands. Kommo-o planted its knuckles into the ground and kicked forward with both feet. Scrafty lifted its shed skin up and staggered backward as its thick cloak absorbed most of the impact. Kommo-o continued the assault, punching forward with a fierce jab followed by a flurry of blows. Scrafty guarded against the attack, deftly pivoting to allow its dead skin to take the brunt of each strike. Kommo-o swung outward with a quick hook aimed at Scrafty’s side, sending its smaller foe spinning on its heel.

“Now,” Phos commanded, “Dragon Tail!”

Using the momentum of the impact, Scrafty brought its glowing blue tail around and slammed it into Kommo-o’s underbelly, sending the Scaly Pokémon hurtling back toward its Trainer. Kommo-o disappeared in a blue beam of light and returned to its ball at Bibi’s hip. The

blue light surrounded the Heal Ball as it snapped shut and arced to the ball next to it, forcing its seal open.

A massive elephant-like Pokémon emerged from the ball, covered in thick purple armor and pink spikes. Two large curving tusks extended from below its wide trunk. Scrafty narrowed its eyes and growled. It was far larger than the one Phos was familiar with, but the creature's identity was undeniable.

"Abaddonphan," she gasped. Phos swore and ran into the field. "Stop! Stop the battle!"

Franco's anomaly watched her carefully with narrow yellow eyes as Phos rushed to Scrafty's side.

"Bibi," Phos urged, "where did you get that thing from?"

Bibi reached behind her back and grabbed her elbow. "Oh? You mean Tusky here?" She laughed nervously, "I uh, evolved my Donphan? It's a pretty new discov—"

"Don't lie to me, Bibi," Phos warned, "I've seen that thing before."

Bibi turned her head. "...You've seen Great Tusk before?"

Phos furrowed her brows. "Huh? Great Tusk?"

Bibi shrugged. "That's what the Professor called it."

Phos's confusion grew by the moment. "Why? That doesn't even sound like a Pokémon name."

Scrafty glared at the giant Pokémon standing before it. The anomaly stood its ground and glared back. It snorted a blast of hot air from its trunk and scraped its foot through the dirt.

Phos shook her head. "Bibi, listen, I need to know where you got that thing from. It's important. Did a man with red eyes give that to your parents?"

The girl cocked her head. "A man with red eyes?"

"Green hair?" Phos raised her palm up to her shoulder. "About this tall? White suit? Stern voice? ...Hot biceps?"

Bibi stared at her in silence. "Nnno? What does he have to do with Great Tusk?"

Alto jogged forward. "Is everything okay?"

"No, we're not okay," Phos stated. She gestured over to Bibi's Pokémon. "This is the reason I'm here." She grunted irritably and took a deep breath. She put her hands on her hips and tapped her foot before speaking. "Look, I can't tell you much. There's a man, Franco, shipping these things all over the world. I need to find where he's getting them from and I need to stop him before he ends up doing something he'll regret."

Bibi averted her eyes toward the ground.

Phos leaned in closer. "Bibi, I need your help. Please. Anything you can tell me can save lives."

Bibi clenched her fists. "Tell you?" She returned Great Tusk to its ball and flashed a toothy grin. "I can do better than just tell you," she stated, "I can show you." The young girl clutched at her stomach as it loudly protested.

Phos cocked her head. "You hungry, kid?"

"Uh, yeah, that's right," Bibi stammered.

Phos closed her eyes and chuckled. "Welp, Frankie will just have to wait." She directed her gaze toward Bibi's backpack and nodded. "You got anything good in there?"

Bibi nodded with enthusiasm and tossed her backpack on the ground with a loud thud. Wispy clouds of dust rolled upward and spread out. "Do I!"

Phos turned toward Alto. "You want anything?"

Alto tugged at the collar of his shirt. "Well, actually... it would be rude of me to eat in front of a lady, you two go ahead."

"We're all a couple of liars, then," Phos whispered. "Suits me," she chirped with a wide smile, "have your Toxtricity strum us a tune."

Phos sat atop the smooth white boulder while Alto held a bladeless portable fan in front of her face. A steady stream of air set the long strands of her hair dancing on the breeze. Alto's Toxtricity stood upright nearby, a tall and lanky salamander-like Pokémon. Its purple-and-blue skin shined with a thin film of toxins that arced with blue sparks of electricity. With a bored and dismissive look in its half-lidded eyes, it strummed a rounded fingertip across the V-shaped ridges on its chest. As it moved its fingers, jolts of electricity pulsed across the ridges, reverberating across the plains with the mellow notes of a bass guitar. Phos silently observed as Bibi quickly worked, unfolding a cutting board table standing on four legs and organizing a set of green plastic dinnerware and metal cookware on top. She knelt down and rummaged through the pockets of her backpack, pulling out long bread rolls and a myriad of other jars and canned ingredients.

All the while, Bibi continued to babble. "—so me and Arven and Nemonia and Penny all fly on Koraidon's back down to Area Zero to rescue Professor Sada, but it turns out it wasn't Professor Sada, but an AI copy of herself that she built! And the real Professor was dead the whole time but the time machine she made was going to pump out an infinite number of Paradox Pokémon from the past forever because the real Professor went nuts and the AI Professor wanted us to stop it—I mean stop the time machine. But the real Professor programmed the AI to stop anyone from stoppin' the time machine, so I had to battle her and we won." Bibi smiled proudly to herself and giggled. "So hype."

Phos was almost surprised to hear the sudden quietude. She gave Alto a sideways glance. He had tuned her out entirely. “And then what happened?”

Bibi closed her eyes and stretched her arms out to her sides. “Ahhh... Hey! How d’ya like that fan, isn’t it cool? The temperature’s always juuuust right.”

Phos’s hair rippled softly down her back as Alto pivoted with a shaking arm. She held her left hand out in front of the fan’s stream and turned it over and back. “I don’t feel the difference,” she admitted.

Bibi scrunched her eyebrows. “Huh. Weird.”

Phos furrowed her brow. “So your Professor—Sada—she was the one who started all this? She brought the anomalies—the Paradoxes—to the present. With a time machine?”

Bibi glanced away and clutched at her side. “Using the Tera crystals, yeah.”

“But she only got the idea because you say this Heath guy already saw them in the past before she used the crystals to build the time machine.” Phos pinched her temples and groaned. “I am so lost.”

Bibi waved her hand dismissively. “Yeah, I try not to think about it too much. But me and my friends stopped the time machine and then later my friend Kiki and I stopped the source of the Tera Crystals from going out of control too. Now that’s a pretty cool story too, you wanna hear that one next?”

Phos glanced at a thin patch of crystals gleaming on the cliff face behind her. “But the crystals are still around.”

“I mean, yeah. But they’re cut off from the source,” Bibi said. “They’ll run out of steam eventually. We just gotta wait it out.” She shrugged. “What else can we do?”

Phos hummed again and reached for the Timer Ball containing Mesuizoic. She tossed it to Bibi. “You can start by telling me what you know about the... Paradox in this ball. I’m told it’s pretty new.”

Bibi caught the ball out of the air and reached for the release button. “Can I open it?”

Phos took a deep breath and exhaled. “Okay,” she said, “just be careful. Open it away from yourself!”

Bibi pressed the capsule’s button and hurled it away from herself. The Timer Ball popped open, and Mesuizoic landed on its powerful hindlegs in a cloud of billowing brown dust. The towering theropod-like creature shook its long purple mane and thrashed its two long tails behind it. Alto’s Toxtricity stopped strumming and stared. Its Trainer shrieked and dove for cover behind the boulder. Bibi stared with her jaw agape and took several cautious steps back as Koraidon stepped in front of her and growled. Mesuizoic bared its fangs at Koraidon and snorted, releasing a pillar of rising steam from its flared nostrils.

"Take it easy, big guy," Phos called out, "they're friends!"

Mesuizoic's narrow yellow eyes glanced at its new Trainer before darting down toward Koraidon. The two Pokémon faced off, each dragon reflected in the yellow sclera of their opposite before Mesuizoic howled and relaxed its posture. It lowered itself to the ground and curled up with feline grace in front of Koraidon.

The red dragon cocked its head and barked. "*Uuaah?*"

"I didn't see that one before," Bibi whispered. She reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone. The orange phone floated in the air in front of her and awaited her command. She tapped on its screen, and the Rotom Phone zoomed off toward Mesuizoic.

Phos's nose curled seeing it in action. "Doesn't it creep you out having a Rotom in there?"

Bibi stared at her vacantly. "Should it?"

"If you like your privacy," Phos answered, "I don't want anything eavesdropping on my conversations."

Ahead, Mesuizoic leered at the phone as it hovered in front of its face. It reached up and snapped at the floating device with its jaws. The Rotom beeped an alert and retreated out of reach. A few moments later, the device completed its scan and returned to its owner.

Bibi's eyes darted across the screen. "Huh. No Pokédex data," she mused. "But it's a Water- and Dragon-Type, measures in at thirteen feet and one inch tall, and weighs 703.72 pounds."

Phos folded her arms across her chest. "Well, what kind of moves does it have memorized?"

Bibi adjusted her glasses and leaned closer. "Says here it knows Dragon Pulse, Breaking Swipe, Flamethrower, and... Hydro Steam?"

Phos raised an eyebrow. "Hydro Steam? Is that supposed to say Scald?"

Bibi shook her head. "No. But it looks like I could teach it Scald with a TM. You want me to?"

"Nah, we're good."

Bibi nodded and tossed the Timer Ball back to its owner. Further back, Koraidon and Mesuizoic sniffed at each other's snouts cautiously. Koraidon walked to the larger dragon's side and nestled itself on the ground to rest. The larger creature stretched out to bask in Koraidon's body heat, its twin tails slowly tracing lines through the dirt behind it.

"Alright, Blondie," Phos whispered, "I still don't like it, but maybe you were onto something." She raised her gloved hand up to her mouth. "Bibi, you need help with anything?"

Bibi flashed a brief thumbs up. "I'm good! My friend Arven taught me how to cook, he said he's gonna teach me a recipe that I couldn't possibly mess up, and then we're gonna practice over and over until I get it right. I'm pretty much a master chef by osmosis at this point!"

She retrieved a basic red Pokéball from her side and pressed the release button. A large crocodile-like creature emerged from the ball, its red scales lined with white markings down its back and at the tip of its long tail. The geometric patterns atop its long snout resembled a round-bodied guitar. A tiny orange ember flickered to life at the tip of its nostrils and took the shape of a small bird.

"Alright, Skelly," Bibi said, "let's get to work." She peeled open a row of canned fish fillets and dumped the briny contents onto a metal tray. She patted the fish dry with a paper towel and balanced the tray on top of her Skeledirge's flat snout. "Let's go nice and slow," she said.

Skeledirge answered back with a baritone rumble from the back of its throat and opened its jaws just wide enough for the ember atop its nose to flutter inside its mouth. The crocodilian Pokémon closed its jaws and sat rigidly still as narrow wisps of bright fire pushed their way out from between its pointed teeth.

Alto peaked out from behind the rock and sighed before sitting down in the grass at Phos's heels. Toxtricity blinked back its surprise and returned to its strumming. As Skeledirge slowly cooked the meat atop its snout, Bibi hunched over her table, peeling open the bread rolls, slicing plump tomatoes into thin coins, and draping them on a bed of lettuce strips inside the bread. She carefully retrieved a stalk of white-leaved herbs from a narrow vial and sprinkled the leaves onto the browning fish.

Phos pushed off of the boulder, walked closer, and watched over Bibi's shoulder as she worked. "I used to love watching my grandpa cook," she said, "the waiting was always the worst part." She felt a nostalgic pang in her heart, and then the moment passed.

"That's how I am with Arven," Bibi said. She hummed and rearranged a piece of lettuce so that it was perfectly even along the bread roll's length. "He makes the best food ever, I'm serious!"

Phos cocked her head as she tried to make sense of the story Bibi regaled her with earlier. "Arven is... the Professor's son, right? The one whose Mabosstiff was attacked by a Paradox?"

Bibi nodded her head. "Yeah, he's the tall one," she replied, "I mean, almost all of my friends are taller than me, but Arven's, like, super tall now!"

Phos smiled. "Taller than me?"

Bibi giggled. "Maybe?"

"Must be all that food he's cooking." Phos glanced down at Skeledirge. "So what's the story with this guy?"

"Skelly's my very first Pokémon," Bibi answered with pride.

Phos chuckled. "Figured you'd want something as cute and cuddly as yourself."

"Nuh-uh. I didn't want something cute: I wanted something that would be fierce! But he's still just about the jolliest Ghost-Type you'll ever meet!"

Phos's eyes glazed over as Bibi rambled on about her Pokémon for the next half hour until the fish fillets had turned from pale pink to a light shade of brown. Bibi tapped a spatula against the side of the hot metal tray and scooped the meat onto the bread rolls. With the last fillet in place, Bibi took a jar of avocado spread and layered it on top. She looked down at the six sandwiches in front of her with pride and whistled sharply. Koraidon and Mesuizoic perked up and turned to her. Bibi tossed each of the remaining Pokéballs on her belt out into the dirt. Her Ribombee emerged alongside Kommo-o, a white-furred Ninetails, a Toxicroak, and the massive Paradox she called Great Tusk.

"Lunchtime!"

Phos watched as Bibi cut the sandwiches into thirds and began to hand them out. She tossed a piece into Skeledirge's awaiting jaws. The next two she handed to Kommo-o and Toxicroak. Ribombee struggled to carry its half-portion away with both hands, while Ninetails sauntered off with its nose held high and its share held between its clenched teeth. The giant elephantine anomaly was given two portions.

Bibi laughed as she tried to push Koraidon away from the table. "Aww, c'mon, greedy guts! Quit it!"

As the young girl grappled with Koraidon and turned her cheek away from its long, drooling tongue, Phos released her team at her side. "You guys go ahead and eat first," she said with a slight smile, "let me know if it's safe."

Bibi held a portion over her head and whistled. "Up here, Rairai! Up here!" She flung the sandwich behind Koraidon's back. The hungry dragon turned away instantly and leapt up to snap its fangs around its prize. Mesuizoic caught it instead and stomped away as Koraidon bitterly protested. Humbled for the moment, it accepted Bibi's next offering without creating a fuss and prowled away to eat.

The two Pokémon teams stayed on opposite sides of the table as they ate. Mandibuzz swallowed its portion whole, while Zoroark held its share in one hand and Murkrow's in the other. Not content with its meal, Murkrow fluttered over to Scrafty and pulled a fillet out of the back of Scrafty's sandwich. Scrafty kicked at Murkrow and warbled angrily, drawing dark laughter from both Malamar and Toxicroak.

Finally, Phos approached to receive her share, taking a seat beside Bibi. "You got any salt?"

Bibi looked at her quizzically. "Are you sure you don't wanna try it first?"

"Just trust me," Phos replied.

“Um, okay.” Bibi reached over and searched through her backpack, retrieving a sealed salt shaker and twisting its cap open before handing it to Phos.

“Now hold out your hand.”

Bibi obeyed; her face frozen in bewilderment as Phos sprinkled salt into the palm of the young girl’s hand.

Phos did the same for herself, speaking softly as she did so. “This is an old tradition my grandpa taught me when I was about your age.” She hovered her hand over Bibi’s sandwich and slowly sprinkled grains of salt on top of the bread. “Tell me when.”

“That’s fine, I think.”

“Now you do the same,” Phos said, watching dutifully. “Yeah, just like that... Perfect. Now we can eat.”

Bibi held up her sandwich and studied it. “What did that do?”

“That makes us partners now,” Phos answered, “our relationship going forward starts now, the past doesn’t matter anymore—we’re equals. It means I’m going to look out for you and keep you safe no matter what as long as you do the same for me.”

Bibi raised an eyebrow. “We couldn’t just shake on it?”

Phos smiled. “A person can live without their hands, even if it’s hard. But we can’t live without salt at all. To give your salt to someone else is to put your life in their hands.” She shrugged and took a bite of her meal. “That’s what my grandpa told me, anyway.” The flavors blended together in perfect, loud harmony as the sandwich melted in her mouth.

Scrafty sidled up beside its Trainer and leaned its head against her arm. Phos reached over its shoulders and pulled it close, gently petting the top of its forehead as it closed its eyes and continued its meal.

The two Trainers and their Pokémon ate in comfortable tranquility, listening to Toxtricity’s performance beneath the midday sun until every last bite of food was gone. As Phos and Bibi cleaned up and crammed the essentials into Bibi’s backpack, Murkrow and Ribombée bounced across the ground, picking up any crumbs that their larger comrades had dropped. One by one, each Pokémon was returned to its ball and placed at their Trainer’s side.

Phos turned to Bibi. “You ready to get going now?”

Bibi nodded and snapped her fingers to beckon Koraidon over. The dragon nudged its Trainer with the tip of its snout and spread its wings. Bibi hugged Koraidon’s neck closely and looked up toward the mountains looming far in the distance.

“Let’s go,” she said. Bibi whistled sharply to Koraidon. “Rairai! Up and at ‘em!”

The large red dragon stretched its limbs and jumped down from its perch to run to its Trainer. It crouched low as Bibi climbed onto its back. She turned toward Phos and patted the unoccupied space behind her.

Alto waved his hands and tugged on the sleeve of Bibi's jacket. "Wait, wait, wait," he cried, "you can't just ditch me here!" He turned to Phos as she recalled Scrafty and lifted a long leg over Koraidon's back. "Hey, wait, Phos, hold on! Don't let Bibi leave me here! What if some brute challenges me to a battle while she's not around?"

Phos lowered her sunglasses and gave him a playful wink. "I'll give her right back," she lied. "Promise."

Bibi grabbed onto the long blue spikes jutting out from Koraidon's shoulders. "If you start walking now, it'll only take you a few hours to get to Levincia," she teased. With a flick of her wrists, Koraidon leapt into the air and unfurled the feathers atop its head. It caught an updraft beneath its open wings and began to ascend. Bibi pointed toward the distant mountaintops peeking out from the curvature of the earth far to the west. "Full speed!"

Alto's shoulders slumped as he watched them disappear into the clouds over the horizon. He turned to begin his long walk back toward the city and came face to face with a black-furred Tauros. Toxtricity gave its Trainer a sidelong glance and remained unperturbed.

"I don't suppose you were looking for an encore?"

The Tauros snorted loudly. Four other Tauros crested the hill behind it and glared at Alto from beneath their lowered horns.

Alto sighed and turned his head to the Punk Pokémon slouching unfazed at his side. "Everybody's a critic," he muttered.

The reflection of the setting sun burned a deep crimson red as it shimmered in a rushing waterfall high up in the jagged clifftops. A pride of Pyroar huntresses flanked their male counterpart as he stood at the cliff's edge, his flaring red-and-yellow mane a near perfect imitation of the living mural behind his back. Another crash of thunder rumbled beyond the tall mountain range to the west and lingered in the air. The keen blue eyes of the females observed as bulky yellow pickup trucks delivered tanned and hard-bodied human men home after a long day spent in the quarries. The earthy hues of the mountains and piles of excavated dirt and stone contrasted heavily with the clean white streets and blue-roofed buildings of the small town nestled within the valley below. The male turned his attention to the large and unfamiliar creature that glided on sparkling wings with two humans on its back. The red-scaled dragon passed over the town and continued upward into the cold mountain peaks.

Tiny snowflakes drifted around them as Koraidon ferried its passengers higher into the overcast skies. Bibi tugged on her jacket and shivered. She turned over her shoulder toward Phos. "Are you cold back there?"

Phos looked down at the valley hundreds of feet below her dangling legs and observed as a large ostrich-like Pokémon chased after a small pack of Sneasel. She caught a falling snowflake in the palm of her glove and watched it melt. “No, I’m doing just fine, kiddo.”

A gust of wind jostled Koraidon as its flight neared the barren peak of the mountain range. Thunder echoed in its wake, simultaneously distant and all-enveloping. The frigid gale screamed through Koraidon’s feathers as its sleek figure cut through the air. The red-hued dragon crested the mountain peak, and the entire world around them fell silent as it glided over the expanse beyond. What Phos had assumed to be a ridge was just one small section of a massive ring of mountains that stretched out for nearly a hundred miles in each direction before disappearing over the horizon. The sheer slopes of the mountains formed a towering wall that encircled the lowlands within its grasp; a valley, unimaginably vast and shrouded by an endless cloud cover. The massive, impenetrable clouds below churned within a violent maelstrom, roiling and bubbling as pale blue light flashed and pulsed underneath.

Phos’s stomach lurched. “You could fit all of Unova down there,” she muttered. She gripped Koraidon’s scales tightly.

“That is the Great Crater of Paldea,” Bibi stated. She rubbed the top of Koraidon’s head as the dragon flapped its wings and hovered in the air. “At the very center of it is Area Zero. That place *suuuuuuucks!* Would not recommend.”

“And that’s where the anom—” Phos caught herself again, “the Paradoxes first came from?”

Bibi swallowed hard and nodded.

“How did you get down there?”

Bibi pointed to her right. “Do you see that tiiiiny blue dot all the way over there?”

Phos lowered her sunglasses and leaned closer. Nestled in the saddle between two distant peaks, Phos could just barely see a blue building perched above the edge of the mountains. A large white dome sat atop it. “Yeah, I see it.”

“That’s the Zero Gate. It’s the only way into the Crater without flying. Or out.”

“Then that’s where I need to go.” Phos patted Bibi on the back. “Good work, let’s go back to town for a bit.”

Bibi whistled sharply. “Alright, Rairai, get us out—”

Koraidon barked loudly and veered to the side, dodging out of the way as a flash of dull blue scythed through the space where it was hovering. Bibi shrieked in surprise and held on tightly to the spikes behind Koraidon’s shoulders.

Phos locked her legs around the dragon’s sides and pressed herself against Bibi’s backpack. “Bibi, what’s going on?”

A shrill roar added its voice to the high-pitched scream of air rushing to fill a vacuum. Beneath a pair of cylindrical horns, a pair of thinly slit pupils glared at the center of yellow irises and a narrow sea of black sclera. The creature pulled its lips tightly around razor-sharp fangs. The gills on its thick neck flared, and the dragon tucked its limbs in and charged with two wicked scythes reaching out toward Koraidon.

Bibi pulled hard on Koraidon's shoulder spikes and steered it out of the way of the attack. "It's a Garchomp! We must have flown too close to its territory!"

Phos reached for her belt and thumbed the release button on Mandibuzz's ball. "Come on out, little mama!"

The Bone Vulture Pokémon emerged from its ball and began to spiral down toward the cloudy abyss below. Mandibuzz stretched its wings wide and began to surf through the cold wind. From the corner of its vision, its eye honed in on the wild Garchomp and narrowed.

Phos pointed toward the Garchomp and shouted, "Brave Bird! Attack from below!"

The Garchomp ignored Mandibuzz, focusing on its pursuit of Koraidon. It hurtled through the air like a missile, turning wide as it circled around for another rush.

"Here it comes," Phos warned.

Bibi pulled down on Koraidon's spikes, directing her mount into a dizzying loop as Garchomp's claws sliced a wayward cloud into scattered ribbons. Koraidon completed its loop and soared just behind its foe. Bibi pinched her finger and thumb together and stuck them under her tongue, whistling loudly and sharply. Koraidon barked in response and reached out, claspings the fins of Garchomp's long, sharklike tail between its hands and digging its talons into the smooth scales. Garchomp roared furiously and contorted to turn around and slash at Koraidon's arms.

Cloaked in howling wind and glowing blue energy, Mandibuzz squawked loudly and slammed into Garchomp from below, stabbing its sharp black beak into the dragon's bright red underbelly. Koraidon released its grip in that instant, sending Garchomp tumbling into the clouds as Mandibuzz continued to hurtle upwards.

"Good hit," Phos shouted.

Garchomp recovered quickly, righting itself and racing upward for a retaliatory strike. Its sleek frame honed in on Mandibuzz at supersonic speeds as the Bone Vulture spread its wings and began to glide back toward Koraidon.

Phos pointed toward the incoming dragon. "Watch out," she urged.

Mandibuzz squawked in surprise and pivoted, allowing the skirt of thick jawbones adorning its waist to take the brunt of Garchomp's attack. Garchomp slashed across the bleached bone, sending jagged fragments hurtling down into the Crater as Mandibuzz struggled to find its balance. Garchomp dived back into the clouds and disappeared from view.

“So that’s how you wanna play,” Phos growled. “Mandibuzz,” she shouted, “Defog!”

Mandibuzz hovered in place and began to flap its wings. Each powerful stroke sent gusts of wind pushing down into the cloud cover, thinning it layer by layer until Garchomp’s battle-scarred dorsal fin was exposed. Garchomp leapt out of the clouds and hurtled upward for another attack.

Bibi steered Koraidon to intercept the Mach Pokémon as it took aim at Mandibuzz. She reached down to her hip and grabbed the black sphere on her belt. She turned back toward Phos. “Get ready to jump,” she said.

Phos’s eyebrows shot upward. She squeezed Bibi’s shoulders and nodded.

Bibi nodded back. “Jump!”

Phos pushed off of Koraidon’s back and leapt into the air. Bibi followed after. As the young girl jumped off of Koraidon’s back, she snapped her fingers, a sharp click that echoed in the misty void above the Crater. At her command, Koraidon unfurled its long tail and roared fiercely as its wings took the shape of a tall war bonnet.

Bibi pressed the hexagonal button on the black sphere, and the strange device came to life as its top half began to glow with a turquoise light that revealed a brilliantly glimmering gemstone at its core. The light surged from within the sphere and enveloped it along with most of Bibi’s arm. Rushing wind swirled around her body as the pulsing lights below the clouds swelled to a booming crescendo. Koraidon’s body became encased in a thick shell of iridescent crystals. Koraidon punched through the crystal with a clenched fist, emerging with a pair of crystalline draconic wings stretching out from the long feathers of its headdress and bright blue crystals sheathing its body like an armor plating.

Just like the bird, Phos marveled.

Bibi pointed toward Garchomp as she fell. “Tera Blast!”

The crystal wings and shell pulsed with blinding light. The crystals grew around Koraidon’s claws, forming wickedly sharp talons overflowing with an otherworldly energy. Koraidon arced through the air with its arms above its head, narrowing its yellow eyes before bringing its fists down on Garchomp’s head with an explosive impact. Koraidon moved quickly, wrapping its tail and legs around Garchomp’s torso and grappling it. It clamped its jaws around Garchomp’s throat and continued to pummel the wild dragon’s sides with its fists as they tumbled down into the abyss. Garchomp kicked and slashed wildly with its claws, chipping away at Koraidon’s crystalline armor as it struggled to break free.

Mandibuzz reacted quickly, racing to catch the two falling humans as Koraidon wrestled with Garchomp.

Phos quickly barked an order over the howl of the wind rushing around her. “Help Bibi,” she shouted.

Mandibuzz squawked back and tilted its wings to steer toward the girl. Several hundred feet below, the battle between the two dragons reached its foregone conclusion as Koraidon's crystallized fists pulverized Garchomp's body. Bleeding, exhausted and at the edge of consciousness, Garchomp concentrated the last of its energy deep within its stomach. Pale violet rings of light swirled around its jaws. In a final effort to break free of its foe, it unleashed the energy in a wild purple beam that whistled like steam in a narrow spout as it escaped from Garchomp's throat. The beam shot upward and swept through the skies in frenetic arcs as the Mach Pokémon thrashed. The draconic energy clipped Mandibuzz's wing and exploded, sending deep red currents of agonizing energy coursing through its nerves and knocking it off-course.

Bibi cupped her hands around her mouth and screamed down to her Pokémon. "Rairai!"

Hearing her voice, Koraidon shoved away from Garchomp and reverted its headdress into wide wings once more. Its crystalline armor disappeared into a streaking trail of mist as it curled its tail inward and honed in on its Trainer. It caught her in its arms and cradled her close to its body as the wind screamed around them. Spiraling upward, Koraidon stretched its wings out and hovered in place, allowing Bibi time to climb onto its back. Once she was safely seated, Koraidon tucked its limbs in and dived down, hurtling at blinding speeds through the thick clouds to close the gap between itself and Phos.

Clinging tightly to Koraidon's shoulder spike with one hand, Bibi reached out toward Phos. "Miss Phos," she shouted, "take my hand!"

Phos reached up and clasped her gloved hand around Bibi's fingers as Koraidon dived alongside her.

"Pull up, Rairai!"

Koraidon spread its wings and reversed course, gliding out of the Crater and back toward the mountains. Phos cried out as a sharp agony traveled up her arm from her shoulder. She reached up with her spare hand and squeezed Bibi's wrist as the pain, wind, and gravity threatened to yank her down into the pulsing lights below the clouds.

Bibi grit her teeth and gasped for breath as she struggled to hold onto Phos. With a quick turn of its body, Koraidon flung Phos safely onto its back. Shaking off the last of the lingering pain, Mandibuzz took its place flying alongside Koraidon as they soared out of the Crater and back down toward the valley below.

Koraidon landed in the frost-covered grass on all fours and trotted to a gentle stop. Bibi rolled off its back and fell to the ground, coughing and sputtering as she clutched at the left side of her abdomen.

Phos rushed to her as Mandibuzz circled overhead. "Bibi, are you okay?!" She knelt beside the young girl and placed a hand on her shoulder, wincing past the pain in her own body. "That Garchomp didn't touch you, did it?"

Bibi laughed weakly, turning away from Phos's touch. "Nyehe, I'm... I'm okay," she panted, "I just need a minute." She took a deep breath and swallowed hard before laughing again. "That... that was really fun," she sighed.

Phos sat down next to her and leaned her head against Koraidon's side. "Yeah it was," she said. She closed her eyes and smiled up toward Mandibuzz. "You're a little daredevil, aren't you. That was a pretty slick trick you pulled up there."

Bibi laughed proudly.

"So those crystals..."

Bibi perked up and reached for the inert black sphere at her side. "Terastallization," she chirped.

Phos chuckled. "That's a mouthful. What does it do?"

"It makes Pokémon stronger," Bibi replied, "It shifts a Pokémon to just one Type and then makes attacks of that Type way more powerful. It can even change a Pokémon into a different Type entirely!"

Phos hummed. "A Paldean specialty, I take it?"

Bibi shrugged. "More or less, yeah." She gasped and squeezed her side again.

Phos shook her head and scooped Bibi into her arms as she stood up. She draped the young girl over Koraidon's back and patted her cheek. "I think we've had enough excitement for one day," she said softly, "let's get you back to town and rest up for the night."

Bibi shifted on Koraidon's back. "Should I make some space for you?"

Phos smiled and shook her head. She grabbed Mandibuzz's Pokéball and held it above her head, recalling the Bone Vulture Pokémon as it descended from the sky. "I think I'll keep my feet on the ground for a while."

Light snowflakes continued to fall around them as they made their way back toward town. Bibi hummed and scrunched her face as she rode on Koraidon's back.

Phos turned to her. "Got a nugget of wisdom for me?"

Bibi stroked her chin. "I was just wondering... if something's going on at the Zero Gate, why hasn't anyone noticed anything?"

"Is someone supposed to be keeping an eye on the place?"

"Yeah, so, I... kiiinda got in a lotta trouble for goin' in there before."

Phos raised an eyebrow. "Kinda?"

Bibi shrugged. "Kinda. But, like, they updated the security, so no one else could get in there."

Phos mumbled a string of bitter profanities under her breath.

Bibi pulled her Rotom Phone out of her pocket and tossed it into the air. The living smartphone hovered in front of her as she tapped away at the screen.

The phone began to ring. A stiff and formal voice answered. "Hello, Champion Bibi. How may I assist you today?" The woman's face appeared on the screen. She had olive-tan skin, thick eyebrows, overly large purple eyes, and a prominent beaklike nose. Her dark black hair, streaked with yellow highlights, fell wildly around her face as though it was preparing to engulf her entire body. The features of her face barely reacted to the rectangular, toothy grin that parted her thin lips.

Phos raised an eyebrow. "Champion?"

Bibi smiled awkwardly. "Ah, hola, Miss Geeta—uh, Chairwoman. Geeta."

"And she's on a first-name basis with a chairwoman," Phos muttered.

Bibi snorted and laughed. "Umm, I was just wondering what's been going on with the... y'know, that old Zero Gate thingy. Y'know?"

There was a pause on the other end. The background was filled by the faint shuffling of paper and muffled voices. "The Zero Gate," Geeta repeated.

"Yeah," Bibi replied, "no uhhh, trouble?"

"No trouble that I'm aware of," Geeta stated, "why do you ask?"

Bibi's eyes darted toward Phos. Phos quickly scythed her hand across her neck and shook her head. "Cuz uhh," Bibi paused, "I was kinda hopin' you would check in on that and see how things are goin'. If you're not too busy, I mean."

"Very well," Geeta answered, "I have the live feed available at my desk. Please give me a moment."

Bibi turned to Phos and flashed her a thumbs up and a wide grin.

"There has been nothing out of the ordinary," Geeta's voice concluded.

The security feed of the Zero Gate spread across Bibi's phone screen. The hexagonal building sat abandoned at the edge of the cliff. The flat plateau in front of its sealed entrance was empty. Phos craned her neck to see while remaining out of view of the phone's camera and narrowed her eyes.

"The clouds in the Crater aren't moving in the same direction," Phos stated.

"Bibi," Geeta asked, "did you say something?"

"I was just thinking out loud," Bibi claimed, "I said Penny did a great job updatin' things!"

"Actually, your friend Penny had nothing to do with it. A former valedictorian of the Academy volunteered for the task."

Bibi cocked her head. "Who?"

"The man who designed the Zero Gate," Geeta answered. "An old colleague of mine. His name is Jacinto Franco."

Phos swore sharply and kicked a clump of grass and dirt into the air.

Geeta's thick eyebrows shot upward. "I beg your pardon, Bibi?"

"Sorry, Chairwoman," Bibi squealed, "a Squawkabilly just flew past... It said 'Caww, squawk! Squawk!' They're so loud, am I right?" She laughed nervously.

"...Indeed. Well, I'm quite busy overseeing the next tournament. I look forward to watching you participate, of course." The Chairwoman's expression dropped. "Please call me again if something *urgent* requires my attention. Goodbye for now."

"Sure thing," Bibi smiled, "adi—"

The call ended abruptly.

"—oh."

Phos ran her fingers through her hair. "Unbelievable. People have died and she's more worried about a stupid tournament!" She grit her teeth and groaned. "Arrgh, idiot! Idiot! Idiot!" She swore again and again in a vicious tirade and turned back toward Bibi. "Let's go get some dinner and a hotel or something." She hesitated. "I'll let you get in the shower first if you promise not to repeat a word of what I just said. Deal?"

Bibi grinned widely. "Deal," she lied.

Dusk gave way as the sun set below the horizon, cloaking the valley town of Zapapico in a blanket of lilac-hued night. The smooth stone streets and whitewashed walls of homes and businesses were aglow with warm amber lantern light that repelled the crisp autumn darkness. A man walked alone down the winding curves of Zapapico's main road. His muscular frame was a solidly-built silhouette passing under flickering streetlights, with sun-weathered skin and dark hair speckled with graying hairs and quarry dust. His broad shoulders, simple off-white shirt and denim jeans identified him immediately as a working man. He kept his dark eyes focused on his scuffed leather boots, oblivious to the dragon and its two feminine riders perched on the blue-tiled roof overhead. The man walked past the closed Kanto Crepes stall and grunted as he eased himself into a familiar seat on the patio of the Seabreeze Café, settling into place under

the canopy of a square-shaped teal umbrella. Roughened fingers peeled the café's menu off the table as the man relaxed his shoulders and breathed in the diverse aromas of sizzling ham, melting cheese, and grilled citrus radiating from the open window of the kitchen.

A lithe server in a clean white dress shirt and tight black pants delivered a tall pitcher of cool water. She filled his glass and lit the candles in the center of the table. "Buenas noches, Miguel," the server smiled, "expecting anything different tonight?"

Miguel nodded. "I'll probably just have the usual, but I don't mind looking," he replied.

The server bowed her head and briskly walked away. A cool breeze set the red flowers in the planter box rustling along the side of the café. In the distance, a group of Drifloon floated into the night. The quietude of the evening was broken suddenly by the screeching of chair legs scraping against the stone pavement. Miguel tilted his menu down and found himself staring into a pair of hazel eyes.

"Mind if we keep you company," Phos asked. Beside her, Bibi wiggled into her seat and gingerly scooted closer to the table. The young girl smiled and waved as she picked up a menu.

Miguel stared vacantly for a few moments. "I guess not," he answered.

"I'm Audrey," Phos lied, "and this," she continued, rustling Bibi's hair, "is my little sister... Yiyi."

Miguel grinned at them and tilted the menu back up. "Evening, ladies."

Phos craned her neck to look behind the man and noted the growth of crystals stretching across the café's wall and spreading down onto the ground. The prismatic crystals sparkled with a dim blue light of their own even as they reflected the warm lights around them. "Those crystals sure have been something lately," she mused, "have they been giving you trouble at work?"

"It's not so bad," Miguel stated, "if one quarry is too overgrown, we just move to the next one for the day and try again later. It's fine as long as no one's dumb enough to touch one of the big clusters."

Phos laughed melodiously and elbowed Bibi's shoulder. "Yeah, you'd have to be pretty dumb to do that, right?" She flicked her fingertip against her menu and spoke quickly. "Say, how's the double espresso martini here?"

"It's pretty good," Miguel answered.

"I'll take it," Phos grinned.

"This late in the day?"

"I'm like a Murkrow."

"Can I try one too," Bibi asked.

“No,” Phos said flatly, “you have the kids menu right there.”

Bibi slumped her shoulders and groaned as the server returned.

The woman pursed her lips and raised an eyebrow toward Miguel. The man shrugged his broad shoulders, smiled, and shook his head. “Good evening,” the server spoke, “um, do we need more time to look over the menu?”

“I’ll just have the usual,” Miguel said.

“Double espresso martini with ice,” Phos answered, “and the quesadilla and chocolate milk for the half-pint.”

Bibi pointed to an item on the menu. “Oh, can I have the lemon soda instead?”

“Not before bed,” Phos told her.

Bibi lowered her thick glasses and looked up at Phos with pleading baby-doll eyes.

Phos flicked her on the tip of her nose. “Keep that up and I’ll ask for low-fat, sugar-free skim milk instead.”

Later that evening, warm mist rolled across the tile floor and steamed the sink mirror of the hotel bathroom as Phos finished blow-drying her long hair. She glanced down at the keycard on the countertop—a simple off-green card decorated by the red silhouette of a tiny red humanoid with a flaring ember atop its oversized head and the name of the hotel. What the Hotel de Zapapico lacked in imagination, it made up for with a feeling of casual luxury Phos hadn’t experienced in a long time. No one to tell her not to use all the hot water, a soft bed all to herself, a coffee maker on the nightstand, anonymity, and no windows to barricade. The room even came with a Mareep wool bathrobe and a pair of open-toed spa slippers. All expenses paid by the Looker Bureau credit card.

Phos exhaled a contended sigh. “Oh, Emma, you’re too good for this sinful world.”

She tightened the sash around her fuzzy cream-colored robe and stepped out into the bedroom. Bibi sat cross-legged with her hands in her lap on the narrow bed on the far side of the room. Her brown hair fell in long, messy strands down her neck once her twin hair buns were undone. Her round glasses sat unfolded on the nightstand next to her pillow, and the oversized bathrobe fell limply from one shoulder to reveal her simple white undershirt beneath. The suite’s arched wooden door was blocked by an armchair. The armchair was held in place by a long wooden writing desk, and the desk was weighed down by a folded ironing board, Phos’s belt and Pokéballs, and Bibi’s overstuffed backpack. The barricade was sloppy, but sufficient.

Phos tilted her chin up toward Bibi and smirked. “Couldn’t have done better myself,” she lied. She sprawled out on her own bed and lounged with her arms behind her head and one leg crossed atop her knee.

Bibi bounced in her seat. "Thanks, I had lots of time to get it right while you were in the bathroom!"

"A girl's gotta pamper herself, you know that."

Bibi furrowed her eyebrows. "Are you sure we're not gonna be in trouble for stealin'? We left before we could pay for our food."

"We didn't steal anything," Phos explained, "we just didn't pay for it."

"Isn't that stealin'?"

"No, Miguel will just have to pay for us." Phos pointed a finger at Bibi and smirked. "Now if *he* doesn't pay his bill, that'll be stealing."

Bibi flopped backward onto her bed and let her hands and feet dangle over the edge. "So what's our next move?"

Phos furrowed her brow and turned toward the girl. "My next move is to go to the Zero Gate and find Franco," she said sternly, "That's my business. Your next move is to go pick up Alto and help him finish his homework. That's your business."

Bibi's excited wiggling lurched to a stop. "You're not taking me with?"

"Wasn't planning on it."

Bibi pursed her lips and stifled a frustrated whine. "Why not? I thought we were partners!"

"This isn't your problem anymore," Phos replied casually.

Bibi tentatively reached for her side. "Is this because of what you saw when we landed," she asked softly, "You think I'm weak, don't you? I'm not! I-I can still help you!"

Phos turned her head away and dismissed Bibi with a wave. "You helped plenty already. I don't want you getting in the way."

Bibi sprung upright and turned toward Phos, the warm yellow lamplight of the room reflected within her glowering red eyes. "Getting in the way?!" She pointed an accusing finger across the room. "After everything we did, you think I'd be getting in the way?"

"Bibi—"

"You think I'm just some kid? I don't need you to protect me! I can battle better than anyone! I'll prove it to you! Right here, right now!"

"Yeah, you battle good. But how well can you fight?"

Bibi's thick eyelashes fluttered. "Fight?"

Phos raised a clenched fist. "Y'know. Punching? Kicking? Fighting."

Bibi hesitated. "I uh, got in a fight with an older boy, Drayton... I didn't win."

Phos laughed humorlessly. "Yeah, I had plenty of fights when I was in school," she said, "I even won most of 'em. But I'm not talking about some fistfight in the bathrooms or behind the slide. The people I'm fighting will kill you if they get their hands on you. Are you ready for that?"

Bibi said nothing.

Phos paused and continued. "My team and I have been doing this a lot longer than you. Trust me."

"...Well, what if you don't have to fight?"

"Then I'm probably dead," Phos shrugged.

"Don't say that! No, I mean, what if you just spied on your Franco guy. La Primera said to call her if something urgent came up, right? So what if we show her proof that Franco's actually at the Gate? She'll have every policeman in Paldea on the scene faster than you can say all those swears from before."

Phos hummed and stroked her chin. "That ain't a bad plan," she admitted. "And if I get spotted?"

"Then I can have Koraidon fly us out of there!"

Phos sat in silence for a while as she weighed her options. She sat upright and nodded. "Alright, kiddo, you've persuaded me."

Bibi smiled widely.

"We'll head out first thing in the morning," Phos continued, "so get some sleep."

Bibi thrust her arms high into the air and cheered, "Woohoo!" She quickly scampered beneath her bedsheets and nuzzled against the soft pillow that enveloped her face. "Oooo, I can't wait, this is gonna be so exciting! Thank you, Miss Phos, you won't regret your decision, I promise! I promise!"

"Yeah, sure, kid," Phos said, "but I need you well-rested."

Bibi stifled a yawn. "But I'm not even all that tired."

"Need me to tell you a bedtime story?"

Bibi whispered softly. "Would you?"

"Sure, just close your eyes and don't open them until morning." Phos chuckled and sighed as she walked across the room to turn off the lamplights and retrieve her Pokéball belt.

“Let’s see... once upon a time, there was a beautiful, sassy woman named Carol who was a big star in a stage musical...”

It didn’t take long for Bibi to drift off to sleep. Phos silently whiled away the hours in the pitch dark staring up at the room’s ceiling. She crept into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. She dressed in the dark and stuffed her bathrobe under the door before releasing Malamar from its ball. If there was any doubt in her mind, any shamefully selfish or treasonous thoughts, she buried them deeply beneath the many reminders of her objective. Phos listened carefully for any change in Bibi’s soft breathing as Malamar used its telekinesis to move the barricade away from the door. The squidlike creature turned the doorknob with its mind and followed Phos out into the night. She swapped Malamar out for Mandibuzz and climbed onto the Bone Vulture’s back, looking one last time toward the hotel room.

“I wish we had more time together,” Phos whispered, “sleep tight, Bibi.”

The light of early dawn was beginning to crest the tall mountains to the east. Within the inky blue darkness of the foothills, the wilderness of Paldea was alive with activity. A foraging Deerling rooted through a patch of tall grass, sending a cluster of tiny grasshopper-like Nymble fleeing in all directions. At the command of its Pawmo protector, a colony of fluffy orange-furred Pawmi sheltered in a narrow tunnel beneath a rocky outcropping as a hot-blooded Vigoroth sprinted past, its long black claws raking through the spongy topsoil with each ungainly movement. The Vigoroth leapt toward the thick trunk of an aged oak tree and quickly peeled away when a sleek Persian leapt out of the upper branches and gave chase. Its litter of Meowth sleepily dangled their limbs from the tree’s lower branches, eyeing their parent with indolent curiosity.

Far below the winding mountain trail, the compact city of Medali awaited the start of another new day, the silhouettes of its office buildings and high-rise apartments outlined by dim and flickering streetlights. The hanging light strands that crisscrossed the city’s angular, mazelike streets had gone dark, and the neon signs that advertised Medali’s many restaurants and centers of late-night entertainment were cold and colorless. A Jigglypuff knocked over a half-full trashcan. Hazy lights bled through thin curtains as office workers shuffled bleary-eyed through their morning routines. Colorful cloth banners fluttered in a light breeze as a murder of Murkrow took to the wing and disappeared into the dying night. A young blond-haired boy sat crisscross on his bed, having spent the entire night playing Voltorb Flip on his phone. In the beige brick-lain streets below his window, two pint-sized Gimmighoul tugged back and forth for ownership of a single glittering golden coin.

At the mouth of a long and dark tunnel bored into the mountainside, one of Franco’s guards observed it all with sharp eyes and dull apathy. He stood in front of the tunnel’s open gate and loudly yawned as he rapped his fingers against the end of his baton. His helmet sat on the ground next to him, exposing his short and curly brown hair.

The guard’s partner stood with a slack-jawed slouch on the opposite side of the tunnel’s entrance and shuffled his feet. The night shift had been as long and uneventful as ever, and he

eagerly watched the growing light of dawn. "Burnie," he called out, "you ever wonder why we're here?"

Burnie cast a sideways glance toward him and nodded his head. "Y'know, Joel, I just don't know anymore." He crossed his arms and looked up toward the gray skies overhead. "Get some job experience that would look good on a resume. See the world. Work my 9pm to 5am. Collect my hazard pay and spend it all on some spicy Paldean flamenco dancer skinny enough for me to put my hands around her waist and have my fingers touch."

He held his hands out in front of him and touched his fingertips together to demonstrate while Joel coughed and sputtered out of sight.

"But lately I've been wondering what has it all been for? We're not allowed in the Crater anymore, now all that's left are these late nights standing guard out in the middle of nowhere. I sleep through the best part of the day, and then I'm too busy getting ready for my shift to do anything else. On my days off, I just stay inside and catch up on my sleep. I haven't even seen a single flamenco dancer since I've been assigned here!" Burnie sighed and looked down the dirt path of the mountain trail as an anxious Nymble hopped by its lonesome. "There has to be more to life than this. I've got a great paycheck and the chief hooked me up with an amazing insurance plan, but can I really say I'm successful? What if that redheaded psycho comes around? All that success is getting flushed right down the drain along with my colon. Am I ready for that?"

He stepped away from the gate and stood at the edge of the clifftop, beckoning with outstretched arms to the distant streets of Medali. "All around me, I see people who aren't as smart or rich as me living their lives and chasing their dreams. And I'm just standing guard here—being nothing but me."

Joel didn't answer at first. He cleared his throat to break the silence that had fallen across the clifftop. "I meant why... are we standing out here... in the dark. When we could be... going back inside? And getting coffee."

Burnie paused. "Oh," he said, bending down to retrieve his helmet. "Yeah, alright. Our shift's just about done. Let's go get some coffee."

Behind the wide trunk of an oak tree, Phos watched as the two guards turned and disappeared into the long, dark tunnel bore into the mountainside. She pulled a set of zip ties from the pocket of her jacket and hogtied the unconscious guard she knelt atop. She wadded up the necktie around Joel's collar and stuffed it into his mouth.

Phos flipped through her photos. "That's one set of photos of them standing guard," she quickly snapped another photo of the guard at her feet, "...and a photo of him sleeping on the job."

She stood up and entered the tunnel, silently following at a distance after the two silhouetted figures stepping through the thick white mist rolling across the ground. At the opposite end of the tunnel, a blinding wall of light flooded in from the outside world. Phos stayed out of the light as the two guards continued ahead. With a subtle twitch of a fingertip, Zoroark's

illusion directed her to the left. Phos crouched low and waited for the next signal. The illusion clenched its fist, and she sprang into action. She dashed out of the tunnel and dove to the left, crawling below the thick tires of a parked truck. She crawled through the rolling mist, sharp gravel and sticky black oil and observed her surroundings.

The tunnel opened up to a wide plateau at the edge of the Crater. The Zero Gate, a large hexagonal cement building stood at the precipice; its sides painted with blue hazard stripes and bright yellow edges. A large white spherical radome perched atop its flat roof, and an array of sensors stretched over the swirling hurricane-like storm clouds below. Everywhere Phos looked, the plateau was littered with poaching equipment. Steel boxes were loaded atop wide truck beds, cages covered in thick tarps were stacked atop one another, and electric shock hazard signs covered them all like stars in the early morning sky. Small lean-to sheds and prefabricated trailers formed a claustrophobic village radiating out from the main building. Massive steel-bodied Corviknight perched atop the handles of their flying taxis, sleeping together in a tightly-formed cluster. Guards and their Pokémon slowly patrolled around the area, watching for any break in the status quo. As a guard approached one of the cages, a gust of wind from the crater tugged at the tarp and pulled it free. The Amoonguss-like beast inside reacted quickly, lunging toward the side of its cage and snapping its serrated jaws through a gap in the bars. The wide brim of its moss-covered mushroom cap pressed against the cage, sending electricity pulsing through its body. Undeterred, the bestial Paradox flinched and howled a high-pitched cry as it thrashed against the confines of its prison. The guard jabbed his stun baton through the bars and jabbed the roof of the creature's mouth. As the large-bodied creature recoiled backward, the guard corrected the tarp, and the Pokémon inside fell silent again.

"Aaron! You all good over there," another guard called out.

"All good, Bowden," the guard answered, "the Ungafoonguss here is getting hungry."

"That's too bad," Bowden jeered.

The other guards continued on as if nothing had happened. Zoroark and Burnie stepped up the incline leading to the Zero Gate. Burnie scanned his ID badge, the Gate's hexagonal door slid open, and clasped shut behind them.

Zoroark's eyes darted across the cluttered layout of the Gate's interior. Sharply-dressed Macro Cosmos employees sat around glaring computer monitors, their displays flooding with weather reports and walls of scrolling text and flashing glyphs. Paperwork covered the computer terminals and dry-erase boards lined the walls. The center of the floorspace was dominated by a white silhouette of the Crater's shape, and a glowing green hexagon at its heart. Security cameras along the walls and ceiling were encompassed and pacified by soundproof barriers that rendered them all blind to the corruption taking place just below their lenses.

Burnie led the way through the building, grumbling bitterly to himself as he stepped around supply crates and rolling chairs. He approached the coffee machine and plucked a foam cup from its rack and started scrolling through the machine's touchscreen. Zoroark watched his movements closely. Burnie placed his cup under the dispenser and watched as light brown coffee intermixed with creamer and filled the cup nearly to the brim.

He took his drink and stepped away from the counter. "Your turn, Joel."

A familiar voice greeted them from behind. "Good morning, gentlemen," Franco spoke.

The two guards turned around and snapped a quick salute. "Chief Franco, sir," Burnie answered back. He grabbed a napkin off the counter and sponged up the coffee that spilled onto his glove.

Zoroark's illusion nodded.

Franco adjusted his tie. "Nothing to report out there?"

Burnie took a loud sip of his coffee and sighed. "Quiet night, Chief. Any luck with the teleporter grid?"

The corner of Franco's mouth twitched. "No, we're getting interference from inside Area Zero," he explained, "I'll be leading a small team down there as soon as possible to investigate before the storm becomes any more severe. Your team's efforts to capture the local Corviknight population in the Crater has been an invaluable asset. Our productivity would have been strangled were it not for you."

"You're too kind, sir."

Zoroark's illusion nodded and turned to the coffee machine. Franco raised an eyebrow as he watched the Illusion Fox Pokémon repeat Burnie's order.

"You must be exhausted, Joel," Franco said. "You're normally so talkative by the end of your shift."

The illusory guard cleared his throat. "Allergies... sir," Joel muttered.

Franco pursed his lips and hummed. "And here I thought you were getting choked up over your parents' divorce."

Burnie nearly spat out his drink. He swallowed hard and sputtered wide-eyed. "Chief, is that appropriate?"

Franco ignored him and locked eyes with Joel. "I remember you mentioned their lawyers were stretching out the claims case."

"...Nasty business..." Joel said.

"Quite," Franco nodded and took several steps back. "One more question, Joel, then I'll leave you to your morning coffee."

The illusion turned to face him.

"Where is Phos right now?"

Zoroark froze.

Burnie set his drink down. "Sir, what's going on here?"

"I take interest in the lives of all my employees, Burnie," Franco stated. "The Joel I know would sooner eat a Gulpin before he puts creamer in his coffee. Furthermore, if there is a divorce in his family, he never mentioned it to me. I'll ask again: where is Phos?"

Zoroark glared at Franco and snarled. "...Not here." The Illusion Fox Pokémon dropped its disguise and lunged for Franco's throat with its blood-red claws outstretched. Franco remained motionless as Zoroark was yanked out of the air and slammed into the ground. The impact forced the breath out of its body in a sharp yelp.

Franco knelt down just out of reach of Zoroark's claws. "Let this serve as a lesson to you, Burnie: our world is three-hundred and sixty degrees—always be aware of your surroundings.

Zoroark thrashed and scratched at the floor tiles as it attempted to get up. It looked back at its hindleg and the large gray hand wrapped tightly around its ankle.

"Not just what's in front or behind you..."

As Franco spoke, the hand squeezed down on the sensitive tendons and bones in its grip. Dark shadows coiled out of the floor as Annihilape took shape and held Zoroark aloft. Beady red eyes pierced into Zoroark's core with a cold expression of malice and contempt.

"...But what's above, and below you."

Franco stepped out of the Zero Gate into the early morning dusk and descended down the entrance ramp. Annihilape followed behind, dragging Zoroark across the ground with one hand clenched tightly around its throat and the other hand clenched into a shaking fist. Franco stopped in the center of the plateau. As the eyes of his guards fell on him one by one, a crash of thunder echoed out of the Crater and a burst of bright blue light followed after.

Franco cleared his throat. "Phos! Come out now," he commanded, "you have to the count of three before Annihilape tosses your Pokémon into the Crater. One—"

"Alright! Alright, I'm coming out!"

Franco followed the sound of Phos's voice as she crawled out from beneath the truck and stepped forward. She brushed the gravel off her skin and clothes and glowered at him. Franco nodded, and Annihilape hurled Zoroark toward its Trainer. The red recall beam of Zoroark's Pokéball caught it out of the air and returned it to the safety of the capsule. Phos returned the ball to her hip and folded her arms over her chest.

"You broke quickly," Franco remarked.

"I don't leave my partners behind," Phos hissed.

“As if it were ever in doubt. Noble to the end. It won’t save you.”

Phos threw her arms out to her sides. “You want to talk about nobility? Is this your castle, little king?” She laughed bitterly. “Hiding in the dark like the vermin you are, hoping no one shines a light on you.” Phos waved her cell phone in the air. “Your reign’s over, and it wasn’t nearly short enough.”

The tunnel gate slammed shut behind Phos. Franco clenched his fist. “I warned you that you burned your last chance,” he said. “If I have to choose between sentimentality and a way to save Paldea, then I have no choice. I’m putting an end to our relationship.”

“You brought this on yourself.”

Franco’s mouth twitched. “What gives you such suicidal righteousness?” He swept his arm out toward the mountains surrounding the Crater. “You’ve seen my homeland, and everything it has to offer. It’s pitiful,” he spat, “Paldea should have been the greatest region we’ve ever seen! Instead it’s barely mediocre!”

Phos smirked. “I guess we’re all products of our environment.”

His voice rose with caustic anger. “It’s empty, it’s desolate! There’s nothing out there! Where are our traditions, our culture? Forgotten! Left to decay into ruin! Replaced with foreign slop! Walk down the streets of our cities and you’ll find more ramen bowls than fideuà! It’s no wonder the people of this region have no future when they don’t even have any heritage! They’re addicted to cheap distractions to escape from their reality.”

Phos clenched her gloved fist. “You wouldn’t know reality if it broke your teeth.”

Franco placed his hand over his chest. “I can still fix this! I can take that foreign wealth and reinvest it properly here. With the right vision and planning, I can invigorate our own industries, expand our own towns and cities, give the people a national spirit worth believing in! Something worth living for! A transformed Paldea! Reborn better than it’s ever been thanks to the treasures my team captured at the bottom of that crater! What about my plan is so offensive that you are willing to die to oppose it?”

Phos jabbed a finger forward. “You really wanna know, Frankie? You finally want the truth out of me? The reason why I’ll chase you to the ends of the earth?” She took a deep breath and exhaled shakily. “His name was Apollo! He was my best friend and he died because of one of your freakshows. I gave up everything I had to avenge him, and what did I find? More people and Pokémon being maimed and killed. Lives ruined, entire families gone, sick people terrorizing those that couldn’t protect themselves. Because of you! None of that pain or grief would have ever happened if it weren’t for you! That’s why I can’t let you do this. That’s why I’m pleading with you to stop. We can still fix this, before anyone else has to suffer.”

Franco stared at her blankly. “That’s it?”

He chuckled. His chuckle turned into a raucous, joyless laughter. “That’s what all this has been about?”

Phos's jaw dropped in surprise as she watched him laugh. "Is that it?" Her pale skin flushed red with anger. "What are you saying?! I didn't know what I wanted before, but now I understand I just wanted to have a normal life! A life that was taken from me when Apollo was murdered! You stole that from me! My future! My happiness!"

Franco continued to laugh. "All this time, months and months of this charade! All because you blamed me for something I had nothing to do with? It's bad comedy!"

Phos screamed. "You can't wash your hands of this! The things I've had to do to fight you. My own family thinks I'm dead! Everything I was, everything I could have been—buried to keep any more innocents getting hurt. You stole everything from me! How could you say you're not responsible?"

"Easily," Franco answered calmly. "Once my business is concluded and my customers have received their anomalies, I have no way of knowing what they choose to do with them. My clients could serve them as an exotic meal for all I care, my only responsibility is in making sure they get what they pay for. I don't tell them to treat their Pokémon with love or use them to commit a crime. I exchange a product for money. It's just business."

Phos stared in wide-eyed silence at him.

Franco continued. "What would you have done if your Apollo was killed by a speeding car? Would you have gone on a crusade against the factory? If a roof collapsed and killed him because of a broken nail, would you take revenge on a hardware store?"

"You knew how dangerous these Paradoxes could be."

"A Pokémon by any temperament is still a Pokémon." Franco reached down to the six pearl-white Pokéballs hanging from his belt. He grabbed a ball in each hand and thumbed their buttons. The capsules popped open, and Abaddonphan and Androgarde emerged. The Paradox Pokémon marched to their Trainer's side and glowered at Phos. "They can be caught. If they can be captured, they can be controlled. And if they can be controlled, they can be tamed. If others lack the will to control, you lack the vision to be tamed. In that regard, you're worth less to me than any anomaly."

Phos's heart tightened in her chest. Her eyelashes blinked back burning tears.

A cruel grin spread across Franco's face. "Blame me? You should be thanking me instead. Look at all that you've proven yourself capable of. You never would have seen your true potential without me. But you're still my inferior."

Pained shock gave way to a silent realization. Phos unclenched her fists and glared coldly at the man standing across from her. She reached for her belt.

"Fuck you, Franco."

Phos hurled her Timer Ball toward the caged Paradoxes. Mesuizoic emerged from its ball and landed on the ground with a loud crash. It looked around wildly at the plateau. Macro Cosmos security guards gasped in shock and began barking directions at one another. Already,

their Pokémon were charging forward to intercept the giant dragon. Mesuizoic glanced down at its Trainer.

Franco's eyes went wide. "You of all people captured Mesuizoic?" He pursed his lips and adjusted his tie. "I'll be taking my anomaly back now."

Phos held out her arms. "Remember this place? I held up my end of the deal," she shouted, "Time for you to do what you do best. Destroy everything!"

Franco swept his hand toward it. "Androgarde, Spirit Break!"

Androgarde extended its glowing pink glaive and sprinted toward its foe with long strides.

Phos threw her next Pokéball into the air. "Murkrow, Thunder Wave!"

Murkrow corkscrewed through the sky and pointed its wooden stick at Androgarde. The android clattered to the ground as its limbs seized with electricity.

Mesuizoic opened its jaws wide as its throat erupted with crackling blue and purple energy. It braced its twin tails against the ground and howled as it unleashed a powerful Dragon Pulse. The beam of energy ignited the tarps over the cages and scythed through the steel beneath. The electric cages smoldered and went inert as Mesuizoic's attack overloaded their energizers. A myriad horde of Paradox Pokémon forced their way out of their broken cages and began to spill across the plateau in a violent frenzy filled with shrill howls and mechanical whirring. The creatures lashed out at anything they could, overturning vehicles and smashing through the lean-tos. They turned on each other with the same savage ferocity that other escapees directed toward their captors.

Franco grit his teeth as chaos erupted all around him. "Guards," he shouted, "contain those anomalies!" He turned toward Annihilape. "Study Mesuizoic's movements and take it down," he snarled, "by any means necessary."

Annihilape snorted its flared nostrils and melted into a black shadow that slithered across the ground.

Franco hurled another of his Premier Balls out onto the battlefield. A large metal-bodied android emerged from the ball and slammed its foot down in a shower of dust as its two massive hands detached themselves from its thighs and surged with electricity. "Alloyama, intercept that Murkrow! Thunder Punch!"

Franco's Alloyama rubbed its metal palms together and thrust them forward. Complex calculations and flight trajectories flashed across the android's face plate as its hands shot out like missiles and honed in on Murkrow.

Phos was already tossing her next Pokéball out. "Malamar, Psycho Cut while it's distracted!"

Franco was quick to counter. "Abaddonphan, Close Combat!"

Malamar's ball popped open, and the Overturning Pokémon swam through the air as it darted toward Alloyama. As it approached, its bladed fins began to glow with purple energy. Abaddonphan curled into a ball and began to roll to confront Malamar head-on. A torrent of steaming water blasted the elephant-like Paradox from the side, knocking it off balance and sending it sprawling as it crashed into the side of a truck and flipped the vehicle over. Malamar snaked around the gushing water and scythed its blades across Alloyama's chest. The floating hands veered off in wild directions as Alloyama struggled to stay upright. A charged palm careened into a canister of gas, igniting the vicinity in a fiery blast that sent shockwaves rippling through the swirling mist. The unrelenting torrent continued to drown Abaddonphan as Mesuizoic stomped closer and closer. At its Trainer's command, a massive orange-and-blue speckled Copperajah tackled into Mesuizoic, slamming it to the ground and interrupting its attack.

Franco pointed toward Malamar. "Moonblast!"

Androgarde planted its glaive in the ground and pushed onto its feet. The hollow core on its chest surged with bright pink energy before firing off a blinding pulse of light. The light arced through the sky and crashed down onto Malamar in a blinding explosion that seared its foe from the inside-out. Malamar cried out in anguish and flopped to the ground.

Phos gasped. "Murkrow, Steel Wing!"

The Darkness Pokémon squawked in acknowledgment and swooped down on wide wings cloaked in a pale white light. Murkrow slashed across Androgarde's chest, sending the lithe android tumbling off its feet. The android recovered quickly, scraping its hands across the ground in a shower of sparks before rising from its knees. It grunted with a metallic twang and narrowed its eyes on Murkrow. The crow-like creature perched atop Androgarde's fallen glaive and aimed its stick toward its opponent's throat. Murkrow's challenge was cut short as Alloyama's massive hands surged forward from either side and crushed the tiny bird Pokémon between its palms. The palms arced with bright yellow electricity before separating, and Murkrow crumpled to the ground.

Phos recalled Malamar and Murkrow both and grabbed two more Pokéballs from her belt. "Crafty, Mandibuzz, I need—"

A full-body tackle pushed the air out of her lungs and threw her to the ground. Phos chomped down on the tip of her tongue as the back of her head slammed against the stone plateau. Through blurry eyes, she watched as her two Pokéballs rolled out of her grip and beyond her reach. Gasping and dazed, Phos instinctually rolled to the side as a metal baton crashed down on the blood-tinged spot where her head was at moments prior. She tumbled into a backflip and landed on her heels as Burnie swung his baton toward her ribs. She dodged out of the way and grabbed onto his wrist as his arm neared the end of its swing. Burnie shoved against her with his off hand, but Phos held her grip and grabbed onto his forearm with his other hand. With a quick yank, Phos drove his elbow over her knee, snapping it backwards with a sharp crack. Burnie dropped his baton as he cried out in pain and clutched at his broken arm. Phos grabbed the fallen baton and slammed it into his chin with a fierce uppercut that knocked the guard off his feet and onto his back.

Franco stood at the center of the plateau, silently observing the battles unfolding around him as he recalled Abaddonphan to its ball.

Before she could catch her breath, another guard slammed into her side and shoved her against the side of a parked truck. Phos swung out with her stolen baton, creating a gap as her next opponent dodged out of the way. She hurled the baton like a javelin aimed at the guard's visor and followed up with a right hook. Her glove crackled as her clenched fist collided with the man's chin, dropping him to the ground as the jolt of electricity overwhelmed his nerves. Illuminated by the crackling gasoline fire as it spread out from its initial explosion, Mesuizoic howled with pain as the Copperajah put its full weight onto Mesuizoic's neck with a mighty cylindrical foot. As more guards broke away from the melee with the wild Paradox Pokémon to target her, Phos limped forward and retrieved her fallen Pokéballs. She thumbled the release button on the first ball and quickly returned it to her side as Mandibuzz emerged.

"Go after Franco's team," Phos spoke quickly as she continued to move. "Sludge Bomb on Androgarde, hit-and-run tactics against Alloyama. Don't get swamped, stay alive for me."

Mandibuzz nodded and trotted forward on its talons with its wings outstretched and flapping.

Phos didn't have time to watch. She reached down for the next Pokéball and hurled it toward Mesuizoic. "Help Messie," Phos shouted, "High Jump Kick!"

Scrafty landed squarely on the ground and clenched its teeth. It leapt into the air with superhuman strength and kicked out toward Copperajah. Scrafty crashed into the Copperderm Pokémon's flat side with a deafening clang, sending it tumbling to the ground. Mesuizoic scrabbled to its feet and continued its rampage. Fire billowed out of its jaws as Mesuizoic dropped low and took aim at Scrafty. The Hoodlum Pokémon warbled in surprise and leapt high into the air with another superpowered jump as Mesuizoic unleashed a gout of flame that roasted a trio of Ungafoonguss as they prepared to pounce on Scrafty. Scrafty landed on the fallen Copperajah with another thunderous ringing of metal. It stared slack-jawed at the flailing mushroom-like Paradoxes as they shrieked and ran from Mesuizoic's attack. Scrafty picked up the shed skin that had fallen from its waist and nodded to its ally. Mesuizoic ignored Scrafty and stomped off, blasting a guard's Haxorus across the plateau with a powerful Dragon Pulse.

Overhead, Hydreitausen launched their arms like missiles that honed in on the Corviknight flock as they attempted to escape from the chaos. A swooping Misterius emerged out of the darkness, blasting the Hydreigon-like robots out of the air with a bright pink Moonblast. A guard cried out for help as a Tyranitron trapped her beneath an upturned truck bed. A Mothbrawl tackled an Excadrill to the ground and savagely pummeled it with powerful forelimbs. Phos's heart hammered in her chest as she sprinted away from a trio of guards pursuing her. It was impossible to tell when one heartbeat ended and the next one started as her mind raced to make sense of the overwhelming pandemonium surrounding her. The plateau was cluttered with stacked crates, tents, trucks, and other equipment. She took a deep breath and tensed her body.

The Macro Cosmos guards followed her around a sharp corner. The three men stumbled to a halt and looked around frantically.

“Where did she go?”

They spread out, cautiously probing around an overturned crate and beneath the wide treads of a parked truck. A flash of red and black plunged from atop a white metal storage container, tackling one of the guards to the ground. A quick jab to his unprotected throat, and Phos was on the move again, vaulting over the side of the truck bed as the fallen guard's two squadmates rushed to his side. The taller of the two guards aimed his stun gun over the side of the truck and scanned for his target. A pair of hands reached out from beneath the truck, pulling the guard off his feet and dragging him halfway below the truck. The man's legs were immobilized with a sharp snap as Phos grabbed his stun gun off the ground and retreated. The last remaining guard knelt down to pull his comrade to safety but quickly gave up and turned to run. The world around him, illuminated by dancing flames and the rainbow hues of Pokémon trading blows, suddenly went dark as Phos emerged from around a corner and slammed an empty crate over his head. She swept him off his feet with a low kick, knocking him on his back. She grabbed onto his ankle as he blindly kicked out in her direction and twisted it until she heard the telltale crunch of a disabled opponent. Phos pulled the stun gun free from her belt and continued on.

Franco remained stone-faced and rigid as the chaos continued to unfold on all sides around him. Shouting over the raging battles, he commanded his forces with calculated sweeps of his hand. His red eyes watched carefully as Annihilape's dark shadow continued to snake toward its target.

Scrafty croaked in surprise and dropped low as a massive beam of lightning arced over the hard red scales atop its head. A Magnezone hovered in the air, its three magnets spinning rapidly in a swirling flash of red and blue lights. As the magnets rotated, they crackled with electricity that arced up to the tall yellow antenna atop Magnezone's disc-like body. The Magnezone's Trainer pointed toward Scrafty and began to issue her command. Phos stepped out of the darkness, jabbing her looted stun gun into the guard's back and pulling the trigger. Magnezone beeped quizzically as it awaited its next order and turned toward its fallen Trainer crumpled on the ground. With its guard down and its Trainer incapacitated, the Magnet Area Pokémon was blindsided by a glowing orange cannonball crashing into its side. The cannonball unfurled into the compact shape of a robotic Donphan as its stubby mechanical legs pounded Magnezone into the earth. The Paradox's narrow red LED eyes peeked out from behind its glowing red and black treads as it scanned for another target. Scrafty moved quickly, delivering a running kick cloaked in energy that sent the metal anomaly hurtling through the air and crashing into a guard closing in on Phos. The Paradox slammed into the man, sending them both crashing through a wooden crate in a shower of broken splinters. Phos gave Scrafty a quick two-finger salute and disappeared into the darkness as more guards continued the pursuit. Phos hurled a splintered wooden crate, an iron stool, a socket wrench, anything she could grasp in her raw and bloodied fingertips and lift. With each backward step, she drew closer and closer to the sheer cliff's edge overlooking the Crater.

Androgarde and Alloyama's cybernetic eyes locked onto Mandibuzz and tracked its every movement as it arced closer. The Bone Vulture Pokémon corkscrewed into the air and aimed its pointed beak down toward Androgarde. Alloyama's hands rocketed forward to intercept. Its floating hands surged with blinding electricity as it prepared to grab Mandibuzz by the wings. Androgarde's hollow core began to glow as it took aim between its ally's hands.

Mandibuzz's wings phased right through Alloyama's palms as the vulture-like creature continued on. The heavy-bodied cyborg's face plate flashed with error glyphs and recalculations as the illusory Mandibuzz disappeared and Zoroark tackled Androgarde off its feet and vomited a toxic Sludge Bomb onto its core. The poison neutralized the glowing pink energy as Androgarde's body convulsed and went dark. Zoroark pushed off on all fours and prepared to slink away when a volley of iron barbs bore into its black fur and discharged a series of flashing electrical shocks. Zoroark collapsed as a Magnodon stepped out of the raging gasoline inferno and fired its iron shavings at everything around it. The ungainly Paradox Pokémon shot another Hydreitausen out of the air, along with the Corviknight it was mauling. The massive raven-like Pokémon plummeted and landed atop a screeching Bigglyruff. The fallen Bigglyruff's opponent locked onto Magnodon. Robotic eyes constricted as a large tank of frigid water bubbled and began to violently shake. The Robobird braced its water tank under its wing as the valve opened and a geyser of ice-cold water erupted and blasted Magnodon off its unsteady legs. The water doused the gasoline fire and exploded, sending flaming debris raining across the plateau as the blaze intensified.

Franco continued to direct his forces as he gripped a fire extinguisher and tried to push back the blaze. His black-furred Tauros lowered its head and delivered heavy sandbags at its Trainer's feet. It cut the bags open with the tip of its pointed horn and kicked the sand into the fire.

Scrafty staggered off-balance as it shielded its eyes from the scorching heat and broke away from Mesuizoic to rush to Zoroark's side. A large palm pressed down on Zoroark's back and dragged it across the earth as Alloyama stepped forward to challenge Scrafty. Scrafty's lips quivered with rage as it clenched its teeth and fists and stared into the LED eyes behind Alloyama's face plate. Mesuizoic roared out in pain behind Scrafty's back. Scrafty looked away from Alloyama for an instant and was punished with a solid metal palm strike slamming into its cheek. Scrafty yelped out and rolled to a stop.

As it forced its eyes open, Scrafty watched as Mesuizoic thrashed and tried to distance itself from its foe. Annihilape leapt in and out of the ground, pummeling Mesuizoic's soft white underbelly and unprotected sides with clenched fists cloaked in unrestrained blue energy. Each time Mesuizoic recoiled away from a strike, Annihilape emerged from a cloak of dark shadows to strike at a new angle. Annihilape dropped low, hammering its foe's ankles until the massive theropod-like Pokémon collapsed under its own weight. Annihilape sank into the earth and reemerged in front of Mesuizoic's snout. Annihilape raised its fists over its head and slammed down on the top of Mesuizoic's head one hammer-fisted strike after another. Mesuizoic snapped its jaws at Annihilape's body, but the Rage Monkey Pokémon stepped to the side, grabbed its foe by its horns, and delivered a rapid series of punches until the Paradox Pokémon's eye was swollen shut. Annihilape bellowed with fury as it grabbed onto the dragon's horns with both hands and repeatedly slammed its jaws into the stone. With the last of its energy, Mesuizoic struggled to open its mouth and unleashed another Dragon Pulse. The attack went wide, but succeeded in knocking Alloyama off its feet.

Scrafty pushed off the ground and hurried toward Zoroark. It hoisted Zoroark's unconscious body over its shoulder and sprinted toward Phos. Annihilape sank into the earth and emerged beneath Mesuizoic. It lifted the massive dragon over its head and screamed.

“Scrafty,” Phos screamed, “come on! I’m open!”

Scrafty took a deep breath and rushed to its Trainer’s side. Phos returned Zoroark to its ball and patted the top of Scrafty’s head. Scrafty leaned into her touch and blinked in confusion as it wiped a fresh bloodstain from its skin.

“I don’t think all of that’s mine,” Phos smiled weakly.

Annihilape roared and threw Mesuizoic into the air. Phos reached out with the Timer Ball and recalled the Paradox before it could land. The Rage Monkey Pokémon beat on its chest, causing the black aura surrounding it to flare up. Scrafty leered at its rival and adjusted the shed skin around its waist.

“Hey,” Phos said softly, “do me a favor: make sure it hurts.”

Scrafty nodded and prepared to face its foe. Annihilape sank into the ground, and in an instant, it reappeared in front of Scrafty’s face. Phos and Scrafty both gasped in surprise as Annihilape reached out and grabbed Scrafty by the shed skin tied around its neck. A glowing blue fist slammed into Scrafty’s belly. Before it could react, Annihilape lifted Scrafty into the air and turned around to slam the Hoodlum Pokémon into the ground. It slammed Scrafty around like a flail, bashing it against the stone earth and any solid object within reach as Phos stumbled backward. Trembling fingers gripped her last remaining Pokéball as Phos cried out Mandibuzz’s name.

“Brave Bird, now!”

Mandibuzz took to the wing and soared high into the air. Phos looked on in horror as Annihilape planted its foot on Scrafty’s tail and unleashed a series of bone-crunching hits. Each time Scrafty shielded its face, Annihilape bludgeoned Scrafty’s unprotected stomach. When Scrafty curled up to protect its organs, Annihilape grabbed onto Scrafty’s face and slammed the back of its head into the earth. Sprays of bright red blood splashed across Annihilape’s eyes as Scrafty’s arms went limp.

She had seen enough. Phos screamed and charged at Annihilape, reaching out toward its face with her bare hands. She leapt into a flying tackle, and hurtled past Annihilape as her mortal human frame passed through its body. Annihilape caught Phos by the back of her jacket and slowly turned its head toward her. She kicked and swatted at Annihilape’s body, but her attacks were powerless against it as it tightened its white-knuckle grip on her clothes. With a deep snort, Annihilape stepped forward and whipped Phos’s body through the air. In an instant, the world around her went black.

Phos’s vision returned as an intense agony gripped her nerves and locked her body in place. Ahead of her, Annihilape and Mandibuzz grappled ferociously with each other as Scrafty gnawed on its foe’s ankle.

“C’mom,” Phos pleaded to herself, “c’mom, get up.”

She panted heavily as she fought against the screaming pain in her muscles. “Get up!”

She took a deep breath and forced her joints to bend at her command. She licked back the blood gushing from her swollen lower lip and rolled onto her knees. The titanic effort made her feel like she was going to vomit. With a shaking wrist, she wiped the sweat and matted blood from her forehead. She thought of Apollo, who died pleading for mercy. She thought of her mother, who died in a hospital bed in someone else's lifetime.

"This world only beats you if you let it."

"No," she declared.

Phos pushed off the ground and stood up. Her hands fell limply at her sides. Her knees buckled, but she refused to bend even as she swayed shakily on her feet.

She clenched her fists.

"...I'll die standing."

Dark feathers scattered on the wind as Mandibuzz and Annihilape clawed at each other. Scrafty held Annihilape's legs in place and ripped chunks of gray fur loose with its glowing white molars. The dark aura surrounding Annihilape's body was a swirling maelstrom all its own. The fighting elsewhere began to die down as Franco's security teams isolated the last remaining Paradoxes and subdued them. Tauros's horns clashed against a Tyranitron's metal body as the Raging Bull Pokémon kicked and stomped at its foe and forced it to the ground. Phos's Pokémon needed a leader.

"Scrafty," Phos called out, "wrap your tail around its ankle and pin its arms!"

Scrafty croaked a curt response and scrabbled up Annihilape's backside. It wrapped its tail and legs around Annihilape's lower body and pulled the raging creature's arms away from Mandibuzz.

"Mandibuzz, use Brave Bird while it's pinned in place! Give it everything you've got!"

Mandibuzz broke free and flew high into the dim sky. Annihilape screamed and thrashed as it tried to shake Scrafty loose.

"Hold on!"

Mandibuzz began its descent, tucking its wings close to its body as it surged with a pale blue light.

Phos reached for Scrafty's Pokéball. "Keep holding!"

Annihilape's labored bellowing drew attention from all across the plateau.

"Just a little more, Scrafty!"

Phos eyed Mandibuzz carefully as her thumb hovered over the recall button.

“Now! Break off!”

Scrafty pushed away from its foe as the recall beam returned it to its Pokéball. Annihilape rolled its shoulders and stumbled forward with a sudden and unexpected momentum. Mandibuzz screeched as it prepared to deliver a finishing blow.

And a geyser of freezing water shot Mandibuzz out of the air. Phos's heart sank as she watched Mandibuzz fall. She recalled the Bone Vulture Pokémon while Annihilape retreated into the earth. Mechanical blue eyes traced the origin of the recall beam as a tiny red-bodied robotic bird waddled in front of Phos. Its clockwork head turned to her, and the water tank under its wing began to bubble and shake. Even in her swirling vision, it was a familiar sight burned into the forefront of Phos's memory.

Phos tried to take a step back and gasped as the back of her heel kicked at open air. She looked over her shoulder and felt her stomach lurch as she peered into the swirling storm clouds filling the Great Crater. In her condition, she could barely stand, let alone dodge. A nightmarish parade of racing, terrifying thoughts heralded the end. Her mouth tingled, her dizzied head felt light and fragile on her aching neck as she quickly gasped for shallow breaths.

The valve on the water tank opened, and a blast of pressurized water shot out directly toward her torso. As Phos hurtled backward into the abyss, her last sight was of Tauros slamming the Robobird with its flaming horns.

The early light of dawn broke over the mountains. Franco slid to the edge of the cliff and reached out toward Phos as the mist quickly enveloped her body.

Desperate instinct compelled Phos to reach out with her left hand.

“I wish I still had that grappling hook.”

Phos screamed as she fell below the clouds. An echoing, desperate cry cut short in a crash of thunder.

Eons In Flux, my cringe lil' fanfic

Episode 7, Part Two: The Light in the Dark

It's always been the same dream, every time I close my eyes. For two hundred and fifty nights in a row, I've been brought back to the peak of a life I lived before, just to watch it fall to nothing. Sure, little details wouldn't always play out exactly the same each time, but it never mattered in the end. I've learned to hate sleep more than anything else because of it.

So why was this dream different?

I landed on my back with a dull thud that left me winded. I gasped for breath and opened my eyelids, looking up toward the pale gray overcast skies. Thick clouds of pale white mist rolled across the sky and around my limp body. Somewhere nearby, a Purrloin hissed and scampered off, its sharp claws tapping against pavement. Lone snowflakes drifted in the air, tumbling and turning but never landing. I don't know how long I laid there watching them before I tried to move. I flexed my fingers, shook the numbness out of my calves, and turned my head. A tall building loomed over me. Droplets of water bubbled at the tips of tiny icicles along its edges and raced down its surface, rolling across its aged mortar and the cracks of its white brickwork before landing in a shallow puddle on the sidewalk. I grit my teeth and pushed myself upright, slowly looking all around. The city streets were empty and quiet; the usual din of Castelia City was a distant echo. Dark puddles of water dotted the sidewalk and spread out from piles of white slush clinging defiantly to the shaded nooks and crannies of the cityscape. Frozen green trash bags lined the grimy alleyways, and wisps of steam slithered out of the storm drain grates. The barren trees lining each side of the road were wrapped with hundreds of strings of red, green, and off-white lights. Above them, the city's colossal skyscrapers towered into the clouds, their uppermost floors swallowed up by thick layers of mist. Most of the lights in the buildings were off, yet one by one, the windows began to glow as Castelia started to wake up for another loud and busy day.

I knew where this was. More importantly, I knew exactly when this was too. I pressed my hand against the window above me and staggered off the concrete. A flash of color in the corner of my eye caught my attention. I looked inside the window at the dozens of crystal shards arranged in the shop's display, running through all the colors of the rainbow and sparkling under the soft glow of a display light. I recognized them, I had seen these crystals before—on the Kilowattrel in the pit and on Bibi's Pokémon, growing all over Paldea like kudzu vines and cancer tumors: Tera crystals. And in the center of the display, a pair of bright blue eyes looking back at me through the window. I slammed my fist against the glass, rattling its frame and sending icicles shattering against the sidewalk.

"Hey," I shouted at the eyes, "get out of my dreams!"

The eyes vanished as quickly as they appeared, leaving me to scowl at my own reflection. I could see myself dressed in my work outfit—my red jacket, black zip-up,

suspenders, ripped chaps, five basic Pokéballs on my belt, heels and all. All except for my sunglasses and that Timer Ball. I patted my body down to search for them and froze as the realization struck me. My hazel eyes stared wildly as I ran my fingertips across the contours of my face. I pulled at my lips looking for any cuts or bleeding teeth and found nothing. I brushed through my hair. The back of my head was a little damp from the sidewalk, but there was no blood on my fingertips. I pulled at my eyelids—even the tired bags had mostly cleared up. I reached down toward my stomach where a stream of water had sent me plunging to my—plunging to...?

I pinched my eyebrows and laughed to myself. “What am I thinking? This is just another dream.”

I took a few steps back and looked at the poster on the rock shop’s door. *Imports direct from Paldea—limited time only!*

My heart squeezed within my chest. I realized how prophetic that poster would be—If I was dreaming, I would wake up any second now, and be back in my living nightmare. I started running down the street. The twists and turns of the city were as familiar to me as ever. I sprinted down narrow alleys and vaulted over latticed fences and wrought iron railings until I arrived at the front stoop of a tall apartment building. Its red brick face was completely indistinct from all the neighboring buildings, but it had been a second home to me for years. I stepped inside and breathed in the musty air of the dimly-lit hallway. I walked across the drab green carpeting and past rows of dull blue doors adorned with tarnished brass addresses as I made my way up the stairs. My pulse quickened with every step. My heart was hammering by the time I reached the third floor, and my twitching fingers were damp with sweat beneath my glove. I ripped it off and stuffed it in my pocket as I tiptoed down the corridor. The fourth apartment on my left had a welcome mat in its doorway, a rigid dirty beige carpet with the navy-blue silhouette of a Roggenrolla on one side. The mat read “HAVE A GNEISS DAY!”

I stood on that mat for a long time with my knuckles hovering in front of the door, unsure of myself for the first time as my mind raced with possibilities.

“It’s just a dream,” I reminded myself.

I knocked on the door. Gently at first, and then more sternly. The orange wall light flickered within its plastic shell. I could taste the nostalgic odor of cheap carpet cleaner on my tongue as I chewed on my upper lip. I reflexively flinched when a clump of snow fell in front of the window at the far end of the hallway.

I knocked again, to no response. I could feel my cheeks flush red. What was I expecting to find? I shook my head and turned to leave, remembering the old story of the Mankey’s Paw.

Click

I froze.

The knob turned, and the door creaked open. My heart throbbed inside my ears.

“*It’s just a dream,*” I repeated over and over in my racing mind, “*It’s not real.*”

I slowly turned around, bracing for whatever my imagination planned to torment me with.

And there he was, bleary-eyed but exactly as I remembered him.

"You're up early," Apollo yawned. He rubbed his eyes and looked me up and down. "Aren't you cold?"

Cold? I hadn't given it much thought. Whatever aches and pains I expected to feel in my bones were gone and I hadn't even noticed. They were replaced with an unfamiliar warmth that radiated out from my core. If anything, I felt like I was burning up.

I gave him a timid wave and whispered, "Mind if I come in?" I didn't realize I had been holding my breath.

Apollo stared at me dumbstruck before shaking himself awake. "Uh, yeah, yeah," he said, stepping clear of the doorframe, "Make yourself at home."

I followed him inside the apartment. The pungent stench of cleaning products gave way to a mixed aroma of earthy clay and iron oxides. A chunk of sandstone was mounted on the wall; its smooth flat surface spotted with fossilized fish bones and a swirling helix shell. Rows of glass display cases were neatly arranged along the walls of the main room, with different-colored quartz crystals and faintly-glowing evolutionary stones sitting atop miniature red pillows inside. I smiled at the sight of the perfectly smooth, round rock I brought back from the beach after catching Inkay. It rested next to the piece of scorched brick we looted from the Dreamyard. A cracked door on the opposite end of the apartment led to his bedroom, while an open archway to the right led into the kitchen space. A Dwebble-themed clock on the wall quietly counted the seconds as the longer crab claw on its face marked the passing of another minute. Every detail of the apartment from the white stucco ceiling to the cream-colored floor tiles and beige carpeting was exactly as I had remembered it in the cobwebbed recesses of my memory.

"I've never seen you dressed like that before," Apollo said.

"I wanted to dress to impress," I answered.

"It's definitely... eye-catching," he replied, "What have you been up to?"

"Nothing but trouble," I told him truthfully.

"That goes without saying."

The Pokéballs on my belt trembled and shook, bouncing against my hips. One by one, I thumbed the release buttons and Scrafty, Murkrow, Malamar, and Zoroark emerged. They didn't waste any time rushing forward. Murkrow took to the air and traced circles around Apollo's head. While Apollo flinched away from the sudden flash of movement and raspy crowing, Zoroark trapped him in a tight hug and pressed the tip of its nose into his cheek. Scrafty's shed skin dropped to the ground as it stumbled forward and threw its arms around his waist. Apollo teetered backward and yelped in surprise as he lost balance and began to topple over.

Malamar's yellow eyes flashed blue as it held Apollo afloat with telepathy and helped him back onto his feet. And hearing Malamar's pompous laugh always put a smile on my face.

Apollo steadied himself by using Scrafty's wide head as an armrest. "Whoa, what's gotten into you guys?"

"We really missed you," I said, my voice buried beneath Murkrow's loud squawks.

"You say something?"

I shook my head and placed my hands at my hips. My team earned this moment a dozen times over, it felt like their excitement would never fade. I cleared my throat and they began to pull away. Murkrow landed on Malamar's shoulder, Zoroark whined and slunk away. Scrafty took a step back and held its clenched fist out.

Apollo grinned and slowly moved to reciprocate. At the last moment, Apollo quickly slid his hand below Scrafty's fist and raised two fingers before Scrafty could react. "Dwebble!"

Scrafty warbled out a laugh and picked its fallen skin off the floor. It turned to me with a quiet nod of its head and waved goodbye to Apollo as I returned Scrafty to its ball. The others reluctantly followed suit, and we were alone again. The room was just a little warmer and a lot quieter than it was before.

Apollo made his way to the black leather couch in the center of the room to catch his breath. I sat down beside him with my hands clasped in my lap. All this time, I desperately wanted to see him again. I would have given almost anything to be where I am now. But now? I was at a loss for words. My heart pounded in my chest, a tight feeling clenched around my throat and down to the pit of my stomach.

"Nothing but trouble, you said," Apollo waved a hand in front of my face. "You need to talk about it?"

Talk? Talk. *Talk!* Where would I begin?

"Your face still looks the same to me," I told him.

He scrunched his face and gave an awkward laugh. "Sure it does," Apollo said. "You just saw me yesterday."

I saw him die yesterday. And the day before that, and the day before that. As if I could forget. I shook my head.

"No, I mean you haven't changed a bit. Seeing you in your apartment. You're older now, but... it's still you. You still look like the same self-assured goofball I was going to bully in French class."

"And you look like the kind of woman my mom and Shay told me to stay away from."

"You should've listened."

Apollo leaned back on the couch, draped his head over the top, and closed his eyes. "Nah," he smiled, "who would I go climbing with?"

I couldn't help but crack a smile. "Good question. You'd have no one to wait for you at the top."

He raised an eyebrow and opened an eye to leer at me. "You only got that fast because you had a good teacher."

My smile widened. "I had a teacher, let's not kid ourselves."

He flashed a toothy grin. "Well, I had a crummy student!"

"But you stuck with 'em."

"From slacker kids to slacker adults. We'll call it even."

I leaned back against the couch cushion and stretched my legs out. "I'll give you that."

We reclined in comfortable silence like we always did as I gazed out his apartment window. The wind was beginning to blow outside, and an early-morning mist was slinking across the streets. The ticking of the Dwebble clock as another minute rolled by suddenly stabbed into my heart. It was a Trainer's job to set an example for their Pokémon, but on this occasion, it was my team that showed me what I needed to do.

I lurched forward suddenly; a frantic edge lined my voice as I called his name. "Apollo!"

He snapped to attention and turned to me. "What's up?"

Before he could move, before my mind could think of what to say next, I wrapped my arms around his torso and squeezed as hard as I could. I held him close and buried my face in his shoulder as he gingerly patted my back.

"Agh, not this again," he sputtered.

"Thank you, Apollo," I whispered to him, "Thank you for being my friend." My wavering voice intensified as I spoke. The erratic hammering of my heart became the steady beat of a war drum as I found my purpose. "Thank you for forgiving me. Thank you for always being there for me even when I'm being an obnoxious hard-case. Thank you for seeing the best in me that I couldn't see. Thank you for teaching me. Thank you for wanting to come back after we fight. Thank you for letting me copy your homework. Thank you for all the times you let me sleep on your couch and steal your leftovers. Thank you for every time we competed against each other. Thank you for all the laughs and adventures we've had. Thank you for all the countless hours we spent talking about Pokémon."

"...I can't breathe," he gasped.

I held on for as long as I could before I let him go. "Thank you," I concluded, "for everything. The years I've spent by your side made my life worth living for the first time. I wish we had more time together."

Apollo leaned back and breathed deeply. "Seriously, what is up with you? This isn't like you at all!"

I slumped back into the couch cushions and laughed. "I'm so tired, I must be delirious," I said. "If you tell anyone about this, I'll deny everything."

"You wanna crash here for a bit?"

"I've had enough sleep, how 'bout a coffee?"

He cocked his head and hummed. "New year, new you, huh?" He got off the couch and shuffled toward the kitchen, rolling the stiffness out of his shoulders as he walked. "Yeah, one coffee coming right up. Suuuure thing."

I stretched out on the couch and reached up toward the end table. Sitting atop a pile of candy wrappers and unopened letters was Apollo's grappling hook, identical to the one I lost. I slipped it onto my wrist. Before long, the apartment wafted with the familiar fragrance of dark coffee. I smiled serenely to myself as I turned to look outside again. A wall of white fog smothered the view just beyond the window. I furrowed my eyebrows and walked toward the glass. I leaned against the window and squinted into the mist. Those bright blue eyes from before blinked back at me.

"No, no," I hissed, "get out of here! Go, go!"

Apollo called out from the kitchen. "Did you say something?"

"I said make mine an espresso!"

The white mist pushed and pulsed against the window. I looked over my shoulder toward the archway to the kitchen and looked back. Tendrils of white mist wormed their way through the glass like phantoms and poured into the apartment. I shrieked and staggered backward.

"Everything okay in there?"

"Yeah, I almost dropped a rock!"

"You break it, you buy it!"

I retreated back toward the couch. The mist continued to pour through the window. It slithered under the front door of the apartment, and emerged from Apollo's bedroom.

"No, please," I begged, "I don't want to wake up yet! I'm not ready."

The walls of the apartment disappeared behind the encroaching fog.

I called out, "Apollo!"

"Oh my—what?!"

The mist encircled my legs and began to rise. The Dwebble clock continued to tick.

I took a deep breath and sighed. "I've gotta get going. I'll see you soon."

The whole world was turning white. I closed my eyes tightly as the mist began to shimmer. My stomach lurched as I could feel the floor fall out from under me. I fell into the mist and drifted away.

Apollo leaned around the archway and looked out into his empty apartment.

"...Felicia?"

A crash of thunder directly overhead forced Phos to open her eyes, and she winced away from the blinding light pulsing across the sky. At the bottom of a sheer rocky cliff, Phos's body slumped atop a hard bed of pink crystals, too exhausted to move. The crystals filled her body with a soothing warmth that sapped her will to remain awake. Phos struggled to lift her head. She caught a glimpse of a dead forest overgrown with hexagonal crystals before her head slumped backward and the world went black.

Droplets of burning water splashed against her forehead. Hot steam sent an intense pain radiating across the sensitive skin of her hand and forearm. Phos's eyes blinked open and squinted against the harsh spears of light piercing down through the swirling mists. A massive horned creature loomed above her. Her heart tightened in her chest before her hazel eyes could focus. Mesuizoic sniffed at her body. Vapor rose from its wide tongue, gathered across the Timer Ball clenched between its serrated teeth, rolled down its round sides, and fell onto her body.

"...That sure was a show," Phos whispered. "...Bet it felt good, huh?"

She weakly reached out toward the dragon's snout. Mesuizoic pulled away from her hand, cracked its twin tails like whips, and hissed.

"Just the ball," Phos quietly repeated, "just the ball... I won't touch you."

Mesuizoic narrowed its eyes and dropped its ball into her shaking hand. Phos recalled Mesuizoic and closed her eyes.

"Yeah," she laughed feebly as she laid her head back and recalled the swath of destruction Messie had wrought across the plateau, "that was good... that was real good."

A muffled voice shouted over the howling wind. A black silhouette descended from the maelstrom. Phos opened her eyes again and grit her teeth as the figure drifted toward her. The wide wings spreading out from its sides gave it an angelic appearance. The voice called out again, its words blown away by the wind.

Instinct compelled Phos to shield her eyes with her left forearm, blocking the harsh light behind the circular metal body of her grappling hook. "...Mom...? Is it time?"

The figure tucked its wings in and began to descend more quickly.

A familiar high-pitched voice called to her. "...Phos! Miss Phos!"

Phos's jaw went slack. "...Bibi?"

The white hues of Koraidon's underbelly slowly faded into view. Its black throat sac and curled tail came into focus next, followed by its crimson scales and the white-and-blue plumage of its long feathers and wings. Bibi leaned over its head, frantically waving toward Phos.

The young Trainer cupped her hands around her mouth. "Miss Phos! Are you okay?!"

Phos braced against the crystals cradling her stiff body and pushed onto her feet. She staggered forward and rolled her shoulders. She wiped her lower lip across the back of her hand and yelped as something sharp stabbed at her thigh from within her pocket. Phos pulled her glove free and pursed her lips as she turned it over in her hands. The glove's gadgets spasmed and twitched randomly as loose arcs of weak electricity coursed across the red material. Phos swore and tossed the glove to the ground. The glove landed alongside her broken sunglasses. The hinge had broken off the right side, the bridge was bent at a sharp angle, and the lenses were cracked. She knelt down and gingerly pinched the glasses between two fingers. As she lifted them off the ground, the lenses fell out from below, raining jagged blue shards into the parched brown grass at her feet.

"Miss Phos!"

Phos snapped to attention, dropping the broken sunglasses and turning back toward the sky. She watched as Koraidon landed and galloped over.

Bibi leapt off the dragon's side and planted her pink boots directly in front of Phos. The young girl looked her up and down. "You look like you just slept for a hundred years," Bibi said.

The corner of Phos's mouth curled into a faint smile as she shook her head in disbelief. "Bibi, what are you doing down here?"

"We were flyin' to the Zero Gate when Rairai started sniffin' around," Bibi stated, "then he dived right down into the Crater!"

Koraidon sniffed at Phos's hand and gave her a playful growl. She pet the dragon's snout and rubbed its cheeks as its long tongue lolled out of the side of its mouth.

Phos chuckled. "Heh, not bad. Did you see Franco or his grunts up there?"

"No, we didn't see anybody. We got here as soon as we could." Bibi's bright red eyes narrowed into a fierce glare behind the thick lenses of her glasses, and her youthful voice dropped as she continued. "After you abandoned us."

Phos sucked air through her teeth and sighed. "It was for your own good," she said.

"For my own good?" Bibi laughed joylessly. She jabbed a slender finger forward. "We're back inside the Crater because of you! I never wanted to come back here, ever again! We had to fly right through that storm to find you! Because you wanted to do things your way!"

"I wanted to keep you safe."

Bibi's finger pushed into the bare skin of Phos's abdomen. "You told me we were partners! We were supposed to keep each other safe! You watch my back, I watch yours! But that wasn't good enough for you!"

Phos gently pushed Bibi's finger away and glanced up toward the sky. "Bibi..."

Koraidon dropped low and shrunk away while Bibi continued to raise her voice. "How do you think I felt waking up alone? You selfish jerk!"

"Bibi..."

Bibi swatted her hand away. "We had a plan! A good plan! You said people are getting hurt because of that Franco guy, but it's like you don't even want to win! You were trying to get yourself killed, weren't you? Is that it? You want to die so badly? Make it someone else's problem?"

Phos put her hands on Bibi's shoulders. "Bibi, you gotta listen to me."

Bibi shook her loose and stomped several paces back. "I can't believe you would do something like that," she growled.

Phos exploded. "Bibi!"

Bibi screamed back. "What?!"

Phos sighed and shook her head. "You're right, but look at the sky."

Bibi raised an eyebrow and tilted her head upward. The churning mist surged, becoming an apocalyptic tempest of blinding white light intersected by raging torrents of otherworldly blue energy. No longer a spinning cyclone, the energy carved its way through the sky like a thrashing serpent, simultaneously flowing backward and forward as branching currents crashed against each other with sharp claps of thunder. Koraidon reared up on its hindlegs and howled at the storm.

Bibi stared wide-eyed and slack-jawed. "...Whoa..." she whispered.

"Looks like it's too late to just fly back out," Phos stated. "Now what?"

Bibi blinked back her surprise and turned to Koraidon. "Umm... We can teleport back up to the Gate if we go to Area Zero?" Her dragon purred softly and sidled up next to her. Bibi climbed on Koraidon's back and grabbed ahold of its shoulder spikes. "It's gonna to be a long walk, so hop on."

Phos nodded and sat down behind Bibi. "I was afraid of losing you," she said.

Bibi glanced over her shoulder. "Huh?"

"That's why I abandoned you. You, and the detective, and December. I had to rely on just myself and my team because I could never forgive myself if someone got hurt trying to help us. So I didn't want to risk losing you."

Bibi's mouth twitched. "Yeah...? Well... here I am," she huffed. "Don't let me out of your sight anymore and you won't lose me."

Phos wrapped her arms around Bibi's overstuffed backpack. "Deal."

Bibi tightened her grip on Koraidon's spikes, and the scarlet dragon broke into a steady gallop as it ran into the woods. The shimmering mist snaked along the lifeless tree branches overhead. Wherever a ribbon of mist lingered, a shower of leaves drifted toward the forest floor. The yellowing leaves spiraled through the air, withered into dry brown husks, and crumpled to dust before they touched the ground. Spinning vortices of wind gathered up the dust and flung it back into the mist for the cycle to repeat again. Phos stared silently at the dead branches and the crystals growing along their gnarled bark. Rays of light broke through the branches and reflected off the mirror-like sides of the crystals. Wherever that prismatic light shined into the mist, Phos could see healthy green leaves lining the branches and blowing in a mild breeze.

Bibi looked down at Phos's left forearm. "Cool... hey, where'd ya get that thing from?"

Phos snapped out of her daze with a start and slowly raised her arm. Apollo's grappling hook was secured firmly behind her wrist. Her hazel eyes widened. She cleared her throat and answered truthfully: "I got it from a friend."

Koraidon deftly weaved through the trees and dense fog with powerful strides. Its sharp claws raked through the earth with every step, kicking up chunks of dirt and crushing Tera crystals into vapor beneath its large hands and feet. It raced down sloped hillsides and bounded over jagged ravines as its two passengers clung tightly to its back. The barren trees began to thin, and the whistling of the wind through dried branches steadily gave way to the sound of rushing water across a rocky creek. Bibi patted Koraidon's back, and the dragon slowed its pace. It panted and swallowed hard, its throat sac shrinking and swelling as it gulped down air. Koraidon approached the creek with a steady gait and crouched low, allowing the two humans atop its back to dismount.

Phos brushed her tangled hair away from her face and flicked away a spindly twig that had gotten caught in her bangs.

Bibi hopped down and reached her hand into the creek, pulling up a thick wad of slimy moss. "Aww, yuck," she groaned.

Koraidon sniffed at the water and recoiled away with a low grumble.

Phos combed her fingers through her hair and cocked her head toward Bibi. "What's up?"

Bibi hurled the moss into the loose gravel at the water's edge and wiped her hand on a rock. "Rairai says this water's not good to drink." She pulled her overstuffed backpack from her shoulders and rummaged through its pockets until she retrieved a bottle of water. She twisted the cap loose and held it up to Koraidon's mouth, slowly pouring the water down its throat.

Phos watched the muddy creek flow downhill. "How much food do you have in that big ol' backpack of yours?"

"To feed all of us," Bibi hummed, "about a day or two."

"And how long do you think it'll take us to get to Area Zero?"

Bibi warily eyed the violent energy coursing through the sky. "If we give it all to Rairai, we can get there in maybe... three days."

Phos swore. "That's grim." She kicked at an outcropping of Tera crystals and sent tiny fragments raining into the creek. Wavy ripples expanded outward from the point where each fragment splashed down before melding with the flow of the stream. She looked down to the Timer Ball on her hip and reflected on Franco's words:

"A most impressive display of convergent evolution."

Phos hummed. She aimed Mesuizoic's ball toward the stream and thumbed the release button. The towering dragon emerged and stood on the surface of the water. Where its long white claws touched the creek, the murk and grime dissolved and faded away. Within a few moments, the water flowing downstream of Mesuizoic was clear and sparkling as the flashing blue vortex overhead was reflected in its currents.

Koraidon cautiously leaned over the bank of the stream and sniffed its reflection. It reached its long tongue into the stream and lapped up the clean water. It turned to Bibi, trilled happily, and plunged its head into the stream to quench its thirst.

"Another point for Blondie," Phos muttered.

Bibi cocked her head. "Huh?"

"I said at least we won't be thirsty," Phos answered.

Bibi flashed an impish smile. "Nyeheh, not when we have Messie's foot water!"

Phos cringed in disgust. "Don't make it weird."

Bibi's giggles were cut short by a series of high-pitched shrieks. The two humans turned their heads to the source of the noise as a pack of tall, moss-covered mushroom creatures ambled out of the treeline. The Ungafoonguss clacked their serrated teeth, their yellow eyes glowering from beneath the brim of their wide red-and-white caps. Their thick legs trampled the dry grass and kicked tiny motes of glowing Tera crystals into the air. They shrieked and hissed at Phos and Bibi, and Mesuizoic slapped its twin tails atop the water in response. It shook its long purple mane and howled sharply as burning hot steam erupted from its jaws.

Koraidon leapt between the Ungafoonguss and Mesuizoic and unleashed a thundering roar. It narrowed its yellow eyes and reared up on its hindlegs, standing tall over the wild Pokémon. The mushroom-like creatures fell silent as Koraidon's feathers flared into a wide war bonnet. They bowed their heads and turned away from Koraidon's piercing gaze. Finally, they turned and slowly shuffled back into the trees. Koraidon turned to Mesuizoic and uttered a short call. The larger dragon snorted out a cloud of steam, closed its jaws, and tucked its tails between its legs.

Bibi reached down and hurled a clump of mud at the trees. "Yeah," she shouted, "that's right! You better run!"

Phos stood in quiet shock. "I've never seen a freakshow turn away from a fight before," she said, "Bibi, what was that?"

Koraidon dropped on all fours and playfully nuzzled its Trainer. Bibi broke away from Koraidon; she turned to Phos and shrugged. "I dunno. The Brute Bonnet must be recognizing the return of their Alpha."

The comfortable warmth of the early day gave way to a sweltering heat as Koraidon carried Phos and Bibi closer to the center of the Crater. Together, they trekked through broken, wilted forests and across wide savannahs and dry prairies. They clung tightly to the dragon's back as it clawed its way up sheer cliff faces and glided over fetid bogs of stinking mud and millennia of accumulated decay. With the coursing storm writhing above their heads and harsh beams of sunlight piercing through the thick canopy of churning mists, the steady climb and fall of the temperature was their only means of gauging the passage of time. Only one observation could be made with any certainty:

For all the distance they had traveled, they were almost entirely alone within the Crater. No signs of normal Pokémon habitation could be found, and what rare few Paradoxes remained kept their distance from Koraidon.

As the heat of the day began to cool, Koraidon galloped to the jagged edge of a tall clifftop. A vast green grassland stretched two hundred feet below the cliff, its expanse dotted by water holes, shattered boulders, and lone holm oak trees before disappearing into a dense and vibrant forest. Koraidon spread its wings and leapt down, gliding to a gradual halt within a soft bed of trampled grass before continuing on. A strange wind blew across the grassy field, pushing at Phos's back at the same time as another gust of wind set Bibi's thick eyelashes fluttering beneath her glasses. The tall grass surrounding them remained firmly upright; long

green stalks with yellowed bases whose blades stretched above Phos's head. Phos wiped the sweat from her forehead and stretched her neck and torso to scout her surroundings. Tall grass stretched as far as she could see in front of them. She looked to her left and right and saw the grass swallowed up by a towering wall of impenetrable fog. Peering over her shoulder, Phos looked behind Koraidon and saw an endless field of grass beneath a vast sky of roiling mist and bright blue energy. Her heart tightened in her chest as she settled back into her seat on Koraidon's back.

Bibi swatted a blade of grass away from her nose and turned her head toward Phos. "Didja see anything?"

Phos shook her head. "Just grass," she answered. "Nothing but grass all around us." She groaned. "This whole place gives me the creeps."

"Just don't think about it!"

Phos scoffed. "Yeah, sure thing." She folded her arms atop Bibi's backpack and rested her chin. "I've never been more than an hour or two away from a human building in my life before this. It's so weird to me."

Bibi grinned. "It's like going on a campin' trip!"

Phos rustled the backpack. "Any marshmallows in here?"

Bibi paused and hummed. "Nah, but I think there's a can of whipped cream."

Phos furrowed her brows and chuckled. "And I left the nudie mags at home. This has gotta be the worst camping trip ever."

Bibi snorted and laughed out loud. Beneath her, Koraidon yawned and began to pant. Bibi patted its head and rubbed its cheeks as they continued onward.

The harsh white sunlight cutting through the mist gradually gave way to a soft orange-and-violet glow as Koraidon cautiously stepped toward a solitary tree. Dismounting from the dragon's back, Phos released Malamar, and Bibi released her Toxicroak. Together, the two Pokémon scythed through the tall grass and created a wide clearing. Bibi dumped entire cans of assorted food at a time into Koraidon's gullet while Phos and Bibi's Ribombee weaved the fallen grass into a makeshift bed.

What passed for evening beneath the mist eventually blanketed the landscape in a muted twilight interspersed by sharp flashes of bright blue light that left lingering afterglow in their eyes. Phos and Bibi leaned against Koraidon's side as it curled up to rest atop the grass bed. They watched as thousands of rainbow-hued specks of light rose out of the tall grass and floated up toward the vortex overhead. The scintillating mists were swallowed by the fast-moving currents of blue energy twisting through the evening clouds and dispersed, scattering in all directions and drifting out of sight. Paradox Pokémon howled in the far distance.

Bibi stretched and yawned.

“Go ahead and get some sleep,” Phos said, “I’ll watch over you.”

“Why don’t you get some sleep and I’ll make sure you don’t wander off,” Bibi replied.

“Ooo, right for the throat.” Phos removed her jacket and draped it over Bibi’s torso like a blanket. “There, now I’ll have to come back for that. You’re young, you still need your sleep.”

“And you’re old,” Bibi answered innocently, “you need your sleep.”

Phos scrunched her face. “What? I’m not old,” she protested, “I’m only ten years older than you.” She grit her teeth and buried her face in her palms.

A wide grin crept across Bibi’s face. She pulled out her phone, tapped an icon on its screen as it floated in front of her, and began to scroll through a gallery of photos. “Wowww,” she cooed, “ten years, huh? Did you go to high school with this guy?”

Bibi turned her phone screen toward Phos and showed her a picture of an Aerodactyl.

“Oh, ha, ha, ha,” Phos jeered. “You’re a real comedian, aren’t you? Well, you better watch out—this dinosaur still has teeth.”

“Hey, dinosaurs can be cool!”

“Go to sleep,” Phos said flatly, “Murkrow and I will take the first watch, I’ll wake you up if I get tired.”

A flash of blue light surged across the darkening canopy.

Bibi stretched out and rested her head on her backpack. “What if I can’t go to sleep?”

Phos took Bibi’s glasses off and placed them atop the young girl’s backpack. “If you’re tired enough, you can sleep anywhere. Trust me.” She leaned back against Koraidon and looked up at the sky. “It’s kind of like being back in the city. The bright lights just become routine.”

Bibi fluttered her thick eyelashes. “Can I see your Murkrow?”

Phos threw Murkrow’s ball into the air. The Darkness Pokémon emerged and flew into the nearby tree. It clasped its prized stick within its beak and looked down at its Trainer with glowing red eyes.

“Keep an eye out for trouble,” Phos said, “Thunder Wave anything that moves.”

Murkrow nodded its head and scanned the surrounding grasslands.

“We have a lot of Murkrow in Paldea,” Bibi said, “but they don’t carry sticks.”

Phos chuckled. “Yeah, Murkrow’s just weird like that. I don’t know why.”

“How did you two meet?”

Phos stroked her chin and hummed. "I was about your age, wandering around where I shouldn't after dark, when I got cornered by some other kids who... weren't a fan of me and my friends. It was just me and Scraggy at the time and there was no way we were gonna win against all of them." She chuckled. "Didn't stop us from trying. Just when it was looking bleak, all the other kids turned around and ran off screaming out of the alley." Phos pointed up at Murkrow. "And when I looked, I saw those bright red eyes flying toward me." She smiled and laughed. "Most people say Murkrow bring bad luck to anyone who see them at night, but I felt pretty lucky after that."

Bibi murmured softly under her breath and began to snore. Behind her, Koraidon's hindleg twitched as it ran in its sleep.

As dusk turned to night and the rolling mist settled across the grasslands, Phos looked up at Murkrow and smirked.

"Good night, partner."

The mist continued to spread across the ground late into the night, pushing the darkness away with an ethereal white glow. Overhead, the storm surged and flashed with pulses of blue energy that occasionally filled the entire grassland with brief flashes of otherworldly daylight. Rolling thunder echoed far in the distance. As Phos leaned against the tree beneath Murkrow's roost, she felt a familiar sickness in her stomach as exhaustion began to overtake her. Her eyelids felt heavy and her head began to sag. She blinked once, twice, and lurched backward as her heel slipped away from the tree.

She opened her eyes and flinched away from a wall of piercing blue light. Tendrils of crashing energy snaked around a crystalline chamber like plant roots, siphoning massive torrents of energy into a massive indigo-hued sphere that expanded outward from the chamber's center. A silhouette of a man, black against the blinding light, stepped toward the sphere. Its long shadow stretched across the prismatic ground and stopped just in front of Phos's body.

Phos stepped forward, bracing against the hurricane winds that rippled out from the orb, and reached out toward the figure. "Franco?"

The silhouette paused and turned its head slightly. "You're still here?"

Phos pushed on, every teetering step was a herculean effort in the epicenter of the storm. "Franco, wait!"

Franco turned back toward the sphere and ignored her. His shadow split away and coalesced into a black void that rose out of the ground. Two glowing red eyes leered at her as a malevolent dark aura flared. Annihilape leapt out of the shadow, roaring with rage as it clenched its fist and hurtled toward Phos.

Phos gasped and stepped backward, slamming the back of her head against the tree trunk. She winced and rubbed her throbbing head as Murkrow loudly squawked in the branches above her. Phos's eyes darted across her surroundings. On the ground, Bibi tossed and turned and slowly opened her eyes. She nuzzled Koraidon's side and patted the sleeping dragon

awake. The mist retreated rapidly into the surrounding grass, and a pale twilight ushered the start of a new day. The coursing blue energy continued to spiral, hanging lower in the sky than before. Phos looked behind the tree. The lone tree now stood at the outskirts of a vast forest overgrown with ferns and hanging vines.

Pale white clouds of mist rolled between dense thickets of bamboo as Koraidon carried its riders through the forest. The tall trees disappeared into the vortex overhead, loose vines drifted on a cold wind, and the damp and mulchy forest floor was blanketed by thick patches of wide-leafed ferns. Large disc-like yellow eyes stared at Koraidon from the overgrowth. Massive pink Jigglypuff-like creatures wrapped their long ponytails around hanging vines and low branches. Their round bodies floated effortlessly on the wind; their unblinking gaze fixated on the intruders passing in their midst. Bibi eagerly pointed each one out as they bared their sharp fangs and shrieked.

"There's another Scream Tail," she shouted, "and there's two more up there!" Bibi gasped. "Look, there's one underneath the ferns!"

"I think Franco called them Bigglyruff," Phos said.

Bibi added her shriek to the surrounding chorus. "Bigglyruff! That name is too adorable!"

Phos and Koraidon eyed the Paradoxes warily. The forest echoed with high-pitched wails and piercing howls as the strange creatures followed after them at a distance. They moved as a troop, swinging from branch to branch overhead, hopping after Koraidon along the ground, and jumping between clusters of drooping bamboo shoots that surrounded both flanks. Koraidon snapped its jaws, and the lesser Paradoxes shrieked in unison and retreated before tightening their circle again.

Phos kept her narrowed eyes trained on the creatures overhead. "Yeah, he knows how to make a good sales pitch for all the crazy in his head."

"That almost sounded like a compliment. I thought you guys were enemies? Shouldn't you be all like," Bibi lowered the pitch of her voice in imitation of Phos, "Argh, I hate Franco! He's the worst and his ideas are dumb and I'm gonna beat him up!"

Phos sucked air through her teeth. "That's a little complicated," she confessed. She thought back on the quiet moments she had shared with Franco.

She reflected on the way they effortlessly synergized on the rare occasions their goals aligned and there was nothing to divide them. Their escape from the power plant was still fresh in her mind.

She bit her lip and reminisced over the dinner dates and hotel trips where they could lie to each other and pretend for an evening that they were normal. A wide grin spread across her face as she remembered the feeling of her nails tracing lines across his bare muscles. She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch as she fantasized about his hands applying pressure around her throat.

One cruel memory rose to the forefront of her mind above all others. Facing Franco in the heart of his operation, his incredulous apathy, his spiteful grin as he plunged a serrated knife into her chest and twisted.

“Blame me? You should be thanking me instead.”

Phos sighed and leaned back. “I thought I knew him better,” she said quietly. “I’ve fought him so many times that he became the one person left in my life that I could rely on to always be there. But there was more to it than that. We had good times too, great times even. Times where we would call a truce for a few hours and it felt like we could have been so much more than enemies. He wanted me so badly it hurt, and that felt so right.”

Bibi raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like you wanted him too.”

Phos nodded. “I did. He can be a good man. Or at least I thought he could be. I wanted him to give up so we wouldn’t have to fight anymore.”

“If you guys both wanted the same thing, why couldn’t you both agree to just stop fighting?”

“Because adults are too proud for our own good. If one of us stopped fighting first, that means the other one wins, and there’s too much at stake for either of us to lose.”

A fresh breeze caused the mist to billow and fill the air. Glittering Tera crystals had sprouted out of the ground and driven wedges between bamboo shoots. The crystals began to glow brightly as the white mist passed over them. A distant Scream Tail howled further ahead, alerting the rest of the troop. The Paradox Pokémon peeled away from Koraidon and fanned out to race toward the source of the call.

Bibi scratched the side of her head. “I don’t get it.”

Phos sighed. “When you’re a kid, you’re always taking orders from someone bigger and older than you. So when you become an adult, you never want to hear anyone telling you what you have to do. We’d rather rip each other to shreds before we ever swallow our pride again.”

Bibi laughed. “Grown-ups are weird. This one time, my friend Kiki gave me an Applin, but I thought he just wanted to trade Pokémon.” She snorted loudly. “I was so embarrassed, I thought I was gonna die!”

Phos smiled wistfully. “Oh yeah? If I were a boy, I’d want to snatch you up in a heartbeat.”

Bibi gasped. “Huuuh, really?”

Phos laughed melodiously. “A cute thing like you? Give it a couple years and you’ll be breaking hearts—”

Her voice trailed off as a strange sound filled the surrounding mists. The sound of rolling wagon wheels bouncing over rocky terrain. Cloven hoofs and a low moaning growl. Machetes hacking through hard bamboo stalks. The clear voices of men engrossed in deep discussion.

“...Roald, how are our supplies faring,” asked one echoing voice.

“...On par with our estimates, Heath,” replied another.

Bibi gasped. “Heath?”

“Our survey team has done a grand job of foraging. They’ve identified a fresh lake just a few leagues ahead that we can rest at.”

Phos climbed down from Koraidon’s back and walked through the mist. She approached a wall of fog and swiped at the air in front of her. The mist thinned, and through its white vapors, she could see a bespectacled man riding atop a large green-and-black reptilian Pokémon resembling Koraidon at the head of a caravan. The man’s thick mustache matched his thick eyebrows, and his short wavy hair was matted with sweat. A tall man with a hooked nose rode alongside. Immense black-furred Tauros flattened the terrain with each step as they lugged carts loaded with supplies behind them. Growlithe sniffed at the ground and barked at their masters. Muscular men in loose beige linens and pith helmets cleaved a path through the overgrown forest around them alongside teams of Gallade and a yellow-scaled Haxorus.

A gust of wind spread the mist thin, and the expedition team disappeared from view even as the sounds of their journey continued.

“A few leagues? We’ll be there by sundown!” Heath laughed jovially. “Onward, men! Treasure awaits us!”

The Scream Tail troop howled with renewed intensity, sending shockwaves through the mists. Koraidon sniffed at the air and growled. It dug its claws into the earth and rushed ahead while Bibi gasped in surprise. Phos muttered a curse under her breath and pursued.

The Scream Tail shrieked and growled in the trees and vines as they encircled their foes on the ground. A herd of stout, spherical machines formed a ring within a clearing. The shiny chrome bodies and glowing red trunks of the small elephant-like creatures contrasted heavily against the muted greens and browns surrounding them. Their glaring red LED eyes scanned the foes surrounding them with cold efficiency. They raised their trunks above their wickedly-curving black tusks in unison and trumpeted a challenge to the Scream Tail in the trees, a metallic battle cry interspersed by clinking machinery.

Koraidon reared up on its hind legs and roared as Bibi desperately clung to its back.

“Wait, Rairai! What’s the matter?!”

The red dragon’s war bonnet flared. At the same time, its foes curled into spherical wheels and began to roll across the clearing. The Scream Tail shrieked and retreated into the forest. Still sprinting, Phos reached for her belt.

Koraidon caught the first wheel in the palm of its hand. A second wheel crashed into its side while it was distracted, jarring Bibi loose from her Pokémon's back and sending her tumbling through the dirt. As Koraidon turned to retaliate, a third wheel sped past, slashing a curving tusk across Koraidon's leg as it raced by. The dragon dropped its foe and fell on its hands and knees, growling with pain as fresh blood trickled down its scales. Clutching at her stomach, Bibi coughed and sputtered as she palmed at the ground in search of her missing glasses. While Koraidon kicked and clawed at the foes harassing it, another wheel pivoted and rolled toward Bibi. The creature's metal plates chewed through the dirt, carving a deep trail through the soft earth and shattering rocks into gravel in a flash of red sparks. Seeing the danger approach out of the corner of her eye, Bibi shrieked and huddled behind her backpack as the mechanical creature closed in.

Scrafty hopped between Bibi and the machine and clenched its molars tightly shut. Bright orange light cascaded down its body and to the tips of its feet. Moments before the spinning wheel collided, Scrafty pulled on its shed skin and performed a fierce somersault kick. The tip of Scrafty's foot slammed into its opponent's underside with a deafening clang, punting the Paradox Pokémon high into the air and directly into the torrent of pulsing energy overhead. The machine instantly disappeared in a flash of light followed by a booming clap of thunder. With shaking hands, Bibi readjusted her glasses and looked up at Scrafty. The Hoodlum Pokémon turned back with a smirk and gave the girl a thumbs up.

Phos leaned down and picked Bibi off the ground. "I gotcha," she shouted. She set Bibi down and brushed the dirt off her clothes. "Did your professor have a name for these guys too?"

Bibi shook her head. "I've never seen these ones before. What does Franco call them?"

"Tronphan," Phos spat. "It's not his best work. They're Steel-Types, so hit 'em where it hurts."

Bibi narrowed her eyes and nodded. She turned to Koraidon and whistled a long, sharp note.

Her dragon reacted immediately. Koraidon spread its wings wide and pushed itself into the air. Riding on an updraft, Koraidon spread its arms out with angelic grace before balling its hands into tight fists. It curled into a ball and began to spin, rapidly picking up speed as its body became cloaked in orange light and began to resemble a miniature sun. It crashed back down to the ground like a missile and slammed into the center of a trio of Tronphan. The orange energy exploded with earth-shaking force, digging a deep crater into the ground and sending Koraidon's foes flying in a shower of churned dirt and burning plant matter. The dragon clawed its way out of the crater and turned toward its next group of foes.

Bibi clapped her hands twice and whistled a low note.

Koraidon opened its jaws wide and unleashed a gout of blazing fire that engulfed a passing drone. The machine's chrome body turned cherry red as its systems overheated and the Paradox Pokémon collapsed. The others pivoted away and retreated into the encroaching mists as Scrafty warbled bitterly after them.

Bibi threw her arms up and cheered. "That was awesome!"

Phos placed her hand over her heart and breathed a sigh of relief. "You alright, partner?"

Bibi whistled Koraidon over and knelt at its side as she sprayed a Potion bottle on its injured leg. "I can't remember the last time Rairai was so worked up!" Koraidon hung its head low and groaned.

"I know about this, actually. There's two different kinds of Paradoxes," Phos explained, "the ones that look like robots and the rest. They can't stand each other, it's kill-on-sight the moment they meet. You said you've never seen those before?"

Bibi shook her head. "I didn't see them in Area Zero, and there was nothin' like this in Heath's book."

"The same Heath that we overheard back there."

"I never saw any ghosts before either. This is givin' me the creeps."

Phos looked around as the mist continued to spread across the clearing. "Yeah, me too. Can't get out of here soon enough."

Phos hoisted Bibi onto Koraidon's back and prepared to climb on after. As she lifted her leg into the air, another distorted trumpeting rang out from across the clearing. Koraidon sniffed at the air, cocked its head, and growled. Phos stepped away from Koraidon and looked around. Scrafty's head swiveled as it searched for the unseen threat. Muffled voices and distant machete chops approached from behind. The mist continued to expand. Crystal shards burned brightly in the dirt and disintegrated into motes of multicolored light. Clusters growing along the trees began to shine more brilliantly than before as the mist intensified. A gust of wind blew through the center of the clearing, parting the fog. A massive elephant-like creature stood directly across from Phos, glowering at her with narrow yellow eyes. It scraped a clawed foot through the dirt and stomped, rustling the tufts of thick pink fur around its ankles. Light glinted off the pointed tips of its long, curving ivory tusks and the orange Tera crystals encasing parts of its body.

Phos gasped. "Abaddonphan, watch out!"

Bibi shrieked and pointed. "Another Great Tusk!"

The Paradox Pokémon charged forward. Scrafty stepped in front of its Trainer and growled. The elephantlike creature's massive frame disappeared behind a rolling cloud of fog. When it emerged from the mist, the compact machine's plated trunk was glowing with a crimson light that burned away the fog. It galloped through another wall of fog, and the half-cloaked specters of one and both and neither zeroed in on Phos. Her eyes dilated as she and Scrafty took an uncertain step backward. The Paradoxes trumpeted and curled their trunks as they prepared to trample over Phos and Scrafty. A clap of thunder, a gust of wind, and the specters vanished without a trace.

"Watch out!"

A sickening crunch, a bloodcurdling scream of agony that electrified Phos's hair and sent shivers down her spine.

"No, Robert!"

"Heavens, what is that thing?!"

Barking Growlithe, bellowing Tauros, a booming trumpet cry as panicked men dropped their equipment and chattered frantically among themselves. A volley of gunpowder blasts, a desperate cry for help.

Phos watched in horror as the invisible shape of a broken man was dragged through the bloodied dirt in front of her. The phantom sounds faded as the mist retreated, and the forest fell silent once again.

Neither Phos nor Bibi said a word about what had happened. As Koraidon carried them out of the forest and to the cracked banks of a dry lakebed, both Trainers sat in mute shock. Koraidon continued to follow the flow of the pulsing blue energy overhead, deeper into the Crater and ever closer to its center. As the sunlight dimmed and the hot, dry air began to cool, Koraidon stopped to rest on a flat canyon ledge overlooking a deep ravine. Bibi fed Koraidon, Phos prepared their sleeping space, and the group watched as the last vestiges of light were smothered by the fog that filled the sky.

Phos let her legs hang free over the lip of their simple encampment as she peered into the darkness. The cool wind blowing through her hair and caressing her skin reminded her of the rooftops of Castelia City high above the crisscrossing streets and walkways. Beyond the edge of the distant horizon, a shimmering blue light shined like a beacon, summoning massive snaking arteries of flowing energy toward itself from all corners of the Crater.

Phos stared transfixed at the distant light until a closer flash of color caught her eye. It started as a tiny pinprick of dim blue-and-purple light rounding a bend in the ravine far below. More embers followed after it, passing under trees, flitting from side to side and chasing one another in wide circles. The embers steadily grew in size from tiny wisps to flickering candleflames as they made their way closer. Larger silhouettes slowly ambled through the ravine, their ragged forms briefly outlined against the glow of the flickering, bounding lights. As the candlelit procession continued directly beneath the canyon ledge, Phos began to see the macabre display more clearly. The dim embers flared atop the heads of shaggy, gray-furred puppy-like creatures. Their wide, serrated jaws jutted out beneath drooping ears and long strands of fur that covered their eyes. The strange little creatures frolicked and played with each other with boundless enthusiasm, and their barks echoed throughout the ravine with an otherworldly echo. Their stubby legs ran circles around the significantly larger figures joining the ghoulish parade whose wide bony paws could crush the smaller canines underfoot effortlessly. They were massive hunchbacked hounds, draped in matted purple-and-gray fur. Where the diminutive puppies had ghostly candleflames burning atop their heads, the larger creatures had massive headstones protruding from their skulls. They trudged forward slowly on floating skeletal paws. Massive jawbones scraped across the earth, their teeth flattened and dulled with age. Hollow nostrils sniffed at the ground and occasionally pointed toward the sky.

An icy cold feeling of dread sent goosebumps traveling up and down Phos's skin.

Bibi inched closer to the ledge and pointed down at the dim embers. "Those are Greavard," she whispered. She moved her finger toward the larger creatures. "And those are Houndstone. They're said to be the souls of dogs who died while looking for their masters. They'll sap the soul right out of you if they see you."

"Are we safe up here?"

"They're pretty easy to avoid. You can find 'em pretty much anywhere people have been buried."

"Just how common is that?"

Bibi shrugged. "We don't have very many cemeteries in Paldea." She watched as a small cluster of Houndstone ambled past in the dim blue light of their smaller kin. "They tend to wander off."

Phos and Bibi watched as the procession marched past. Countless dozens of darting flames and many more shambling headstones filled the ravine, with smaller packs traversing the outlying terrain.

"Apollo should be allowed to rest."

Bibi cocked her head. "Hm?"

"I said the dead should be allowed to rest."

Bibi turned to Phos. "Was that his name? Apollo?"

Phos groaned. "Let's not do this now," she whispered.

"Is that why you're doin' all this?"

Phos remained silent.

"He was someone close to you. Close enough that now you just wanna push everyone else away."

Phos nodded slowly. "He was the best human friend I ever had. Part of me blames myself. If he wasn't following me, if things were just a little different... but most of me blames Franco. It never could have happened if it weren't for him."

Bibi scooted closer. "Was Apollo like your boyfriend?"

Phos's lips curled into a faint smile. "No, I was out of his league," she lied. "It was me, and whatever sucker I was mooching off of next, and that goofball Apollo, and his girlfriend Shay who was perfect for him, and our friend Hina, and..." She trailed off as the procession of glowing

candles blurred. "...And it's all in the past now. I can think about them when my mission's over, that's what December taught me."

Phos tussled Bibi's hair and patted her away from the ledge. "Go ahead and get some sleep, you've had a long day."

Bibi snuggled up against her backpack. "What about you?"

"I'll be alright. I'm gonna stay up just a little while longer."

Late into the evening, Phos watched as the last remaining embers finally disappeared from the darkened ravine. Her empty stomach grumbled loudly, disrupting the quiet of the night.

Bibi stifled a laugh. Phos pulled away from the ledge and turned toward her partner sitting atop her backpack.

"You're still awake?"

Bibi covered her mouth and nodded rapidly. "Hey, Phos," she began to giggle, "hey, what's a skeleton's favorite snack?"

Phos raised an eyebrow. "I don't know, what?"

Phos's partner squirmed in her seat. "That's okay," she insisted, "guess."

"Bones."

Bibi snorted. "You gotta be more specific than that."

"...Spare ribs?"

The young Trainer choked back her laughter. "Guess again...!"

Phos rolled her eyes. "I give up."

Bibi squealed and fluttered her legs. She took a deep breath, squealed again, and squished her cheeks between the palms of her hands. Her red eyes gleamed as she leaned forward and squeaked:

"...A knuckle sandwich...!"

Bibi erupted into uproarious laughter. Phos shook her head and chuckled. Her chuckle turned into a suppressed laugh. A wide smile spread across her face, and the laughter forced its way out of her parted lips. She threw her head back and laughed until salty tears streamed down her cheeks. Koraidon opened one eye and turned away from the noise, grumbling to itself before falling back asleep. Each time the laughter began to subside, they would steal a glance at one another and the laughter would begin anew.

Metal draconic jaws snapped as two small metal darts screamed through the air and crashed into the ground in an explosion of neon purple light and raining chunks of dark stone and crystal fragments. The Hydreigon-like robot flying close to the cavern ceiling flexed its segmented black wings, and the darts retraced their trajectories and returned to the robot's sides.

Franco shielded his eyes from the raining debris. "I want that Hydreitausen neutralized," he commanded.

One of Franco's guards gave him a sharp salute. "Killian," the man shouted, "swap us out!"

Behind him, his squadmate dived to the ground behind the bulky frame of a Bastiodon's rocky armor as a large mechanical moth sprayed a cone of sour-smelling sludge from the pointed tips of its six diamond-shaped wings and ignited the chemicals into a violent pillar of flames. The ancient Shield Pokémon squeezed its beady eyes shut and braced against the attack, guarding its Trainer behind its rampart-shaped head. "I'm busy here," Killian shouted back in a thick Galarian accent.

Franco's Tauros dashed out of the way as a jet of pressurized water bore a hole into the cavern wall. "We're all busy here, man," Franco growled, "Help Guinness clear the path!"

"Yes, sir!" Killian climbed off the ground as the flames died down and patted Bastiodon's flank. He pointed toward the robotic Tyranitar clawing at the elastic blue hide of an Eelektross wrapped around its torso. "Use Body Press on that Tyranitron," Killian ordered, "don't worry about your mate, just go!"

A deep rumble reverberated within Bastiodon's body. The hulking ceratopsian-like creature shoved its Volcarobot opponent out of the way with a headbutt and charged toward its new target. The cavern rumbled as its heavy body gained momentum and began to glow with orange light. Eelektross uncoiled from its foe and slithered away. The Tyranitron slammed its sleek tail against the cavern floor and held its short arms in front of its body to catch Bastiodon's tackle. The Shield Pokémon collided against its target with a thunderous impact that briefly extinguished the glowing green lights across Tyranitron's torso and back spikes. The anomaly narrowed its blue LED eyes and retaliated with a blinding electrical shock as Bastiodon galloped forward to continue its assault.

Guinness pointed up at the Hydreitausen as it swooped in for another pass. "Eelektross, Supercell Slam!"

Lightning crackled around the eel-like creature's two claws and arced across its fins. It swam through the air and crashed into its target, sinking its hooked fangs into Hydreitausen's metal body and flooding the robotic creature's systems with electricity. The violet light flowing across Hydreitausen's body flickered off, its arms plummeted limply to the ground, and the creature's glowing eyes dimmed. Eelektross turned and flung its defeated foe aside before returning to its Trainer.

Franco pointed toward the thick wall of crystals blocking their way. "Now, Raging Bull! Full speed!"

Tauros bellowed and began its attack. Its gray pointed horns turned cherry red and erupted into pillars of scarlet fire. Streams of fire erupted from its thick black mane, quickly engulfing its entire body as it sprinted. Tauros slammed into the crystal wall like a meteor. Fault lines spread across its prismatic surface, rapidly expanding outward in a hexagonal pattern before the entire wall exploded in a shower of crystal shards that evaporated into glowing white mist. Tauros continued forward and slammed into the thick metal doors behind the collapsing wall. The bony protrusion on its forehead collided with the metal, causing the entire research station to ring out like a bell gong. The baritone chime echoed deep into the caverns.

Tauros shook its head and began to trot back to its Trainer as Franco returned it to its ball. "Everyone," Franco shouted as he tapped at the keypad to the left of the door, "inside now!" The metal door slid open, and Franco waved his guards into the station.

When Franco and his employees first reclaimed Research Station 4, it was in an especially decrepit state. Even before the Tera crystal growths had become uncontrollable, the Terastal energy that had coalesced within the research station was nearly as thick as the massive hexagonal structures that filled the heart of the cavern. Smashed storage crates, upended furniture, damaged machinery, and a journal whose contents were not only lost to the elements but torn to scattered ribbons. Only the hexagonal teleporter pad on the side of the main room remained in a functional state, nearly everything else had to be rebuilt and improved upon. Now, the floors were immaculately polished, Macro Cosmos cargo boxes contained a small fortune in advanced hunting equipment, and the computer system across from the doorway served as one of Franco's best sources of intelligence within Area Zero and the Crater beyond.

Franco punched the keypad and the door slammed shut and locked at his command. A burst of high-pressure water hissed, creating a muffled rumbling as it crashed against the door. The hissing faded, and something slammed against the door next. It tested the strength of the metal door, then moved along the wall, striking high and low before eventually giving up. The inside of the research station was deathly silent as Franco's four guards watched the walls and rested their hands atop their Pokéballs.

Franco breathed a sigh of relief and turned toward his guards. "Bold ones, aren't they? What a shame we don't have time to catch them." His lips curled up into a faint smile as his employees gave beleaguered pity laughs. "Rollcall."

"Everyone present, all Pokémon accounted for, Chief," Guinness answered.

Franco nodded and stepped toward the computer terminal. "Excellent work," he said. "Let's get this station reconnected to the network and send you home."

A guard stepped forward with a slight limp. "You're not coming with us?"

Franco shook his head. "No, Murphy. We've all seen the Terastal energy pouring into the cavern. The way the anomalies are flocking to it in droves in numbers we haven't seen in

months. Something strange is happening, I intend to find out what it is and whether or not it will affect our business.”

“Then let us come with you,” Killian protested.

Franco smirked to himself as he leaned over the terminal and began his work. The loyalty of his men had been generously paid for by Macro Cosmo’s poor record keeping. “If the anomalies continue to be aggressive, I’ll have an easier time avoiding them on my own than as part of a group. As Chief Security Officer, it’s my responsibility to ensure my employees can continue to work safely.” He motioned offhandedly toward the teleporter. “If I cannot guarantee your safety, then you all need to leave. Regroup with the others at our office in Medali. We’ll discuss your bonuses when I return.”

His pinky tapped a key on the terminal, and the teleporter pad hummed to life with a bright green glow. Franco turned to face his men. “Objections overruled. Any questions?”

One by one, the Macro Cosmos guards gave him a sharp salute.

“Good luck, Chief,” Guinness said.

Franco nodded and watched as the men vanished in a flash of green light and returned to the Zero Gate. He leaned back against the terminal and breathed in the silence of the room.

Phos’s eyelids fluttered as a beam of sunlight traveled across her face. Her empty stomach protested loudly, compelling her to open her eyes. She moved to sit upright and felt herself anchored to the ground. Bibi’s arms were wrapped tightly around Phos’s torso, and the young Trainer drooled on the inside of her jacket.

“Sheesh, I don’t even let Franco sleep that close,” Phos muttered. Her eyes drifted up toward the storm of Tera energy flowing overhead and to its destination far to the south. What was a distant blue pale glow over the horizon the night before was now a spectacularly shining beacon, a great shining disk stark against the morning sun. The white mist swirled in unnaturally twisting directions around it.

Phos shook Bibi awake. “Hey, wake up,” she urged.

Bibi shrieked and bolted upright. She screamed out, “Tera Blast!”

Koraidon jumped up with a start and craned its neck from side to side.

Phos gently patted her shoulder and hushed her. “Easy, easy. It was just a dream.”

Bibi slowly blinked and put her glasses on. “A dream?”

Phos dabbed away the drool on Bibi’s cheek with the edge of her sleeve. “That’s the same move you used on Garchomp, wasn’t it? Tera Blast?”

Bibi nodded and swallowed hard. "It's a move that Pokémon can use after they've Terastallized." The young girl gasped in surprise as her vision came into focus and she saw the distant sphere.

Phos rose to her feet and stretched. "How close are we?"

Bibi looked to Koraidon. The dragon walked to the cliff's edge, turned to its Trainer, and nodded.

"We'll be there before the sun sets."

Koraidon glided and climbed through the steep cliffs and sprinted across wide open mesas. It galloped alongside a river steadily flowing down the sweeping arcs of the canyons. Smaller streams flowed into the river, and the waters surged at the sheer edge of a roaring waterfall. Koraidon glided down into the misty basin below and escaped from the heat of the day by paddling its webbed hands and feet down the wide river beyond. Tall grass along the muddy riverbanks gradually gave way to withered straw. The dry earth turned to sand, and that sand eventually turned into a sheet of crystalline glass that spread across the surrounding hills and trees. Slowly, a dull gray haze joined the white mist in filling the air. Roiling clouds tightened like coiled ropes and focused the midday sun into magnified beams of light that reflected across the ground and scorched the landscape. From her seat on Koraidon's back, Phos watched as unrecognizable trees along the riverside blackened like charcoal and withered while their pointed leaves were burned to ash by invisible flames.

The charred forests came to an abrupt halt at the edge of a deep crevice splitting the earth. The river plunged into the rift, and a waterfall flowed up the opposite side and fed a large lake whose calm waters held its shape along the jagged fault line. Koraidon kicked forward, leapt out of the water and over the rift, and landed in the frigid waters on the other side. Phos wiped away the sweat pouring down her cheeks even as her body shivered from the cold. Droplets of moisture froze against her fingertips. Bibi leaned into Koraidon's body heat and rubbed the sleeves of her pink jacket.

Koraidon paddled past drifting ice shelves and floating Tera crystals. Phos looked down into the arctic depths. A pair of yellow narrow eyes looked back at her out of the dark water. Barely visible below the surface, a Paleomence reached out with a wicked claw, its fanged jaws opened wide and didn't move. Its entire body was encased in an icy prison that drifted lazily in Koraidon's wake. Phos shuddered and quickly looked away.

A large, jagged glacier floated in the center of the lake. Koraidon dug its claws into the ice and pulled itself out of the water. Hand over hand, it climbed up the side of the glacier and pulled itself onto the top. The dragon shook the frigid water off its scales and out of its feathers and growled. A tightly-knit flock of small birds huddled on the ice ahead; their red bodies glistened in the harsh beams of daylight. Their tiny heads swiveled around to face the intruders, and bright blue LED eyes locked onto their targets. It was a sight that Phos had seen play out in her mind's eye hundreds of times.

Phos reached past Bibi and grabbed for Koraidon's shoulder spikes. "Bibi," she screamed, "we have to move!" She pulled sharply to the right, and Koraidon broke into a galloping sprint.

The Robobird spread out and reached for the water tanks plugged into their backsides. Their long yellow feet skated smoothly across the ice as their heads rotated to track and surround Koraidon.

"We need to get back in the water," Bibi shouted.

Rumbling water tanks hummed with increasing intensity as freezing water bubbled inside.

"You'll be a sitting Ducklett in the water!"

The first torrent of water sliced through the tips of Koraidon's tailfeathers. The other Robobird adjusted their aim and fired. Freezing ice crystals spread across Koraidon's snout as a second torrent rushed past the front of its face. Koraidon turned sharply and reared up on its feet. A third torrent forced its legs out from underneath it and sent Phos and Bibi tumbling and sliding across the ice. Koraidon recovered quickly and turned to face its foes with its war bonnet flared. It narrowed its eyes and snarled. The mist parted overhead, and an intense ray of sunlight shined down on the dragon's head. Red-hot blood pumped through Koraidon's veins as it tightly clenched its fist and leapt into the air. It slammed down on its knuckle and sent fault lines racing across the surface of the glacier. The ice shifted and rocked, splitting into large chunks that began to drift apart. Several of the Robobird skied away from the attack to repair the damage while their kin took aim and prepared to fire another salvo. They tightened the valves on their water tanks, and the pressurized water that shot out froze in midair and turned into narrow rays of ice.

Phos hurled her Timer Ball forward. "Messie, Flamethrower!"

Mesuizoic emerged from its ball and unleashed a gout of fire that engulfed the Ice Beams. Steam rose into the air while hot water sizzled against the glacial ice as the massive theropod-like dragon stomped forward and howled. The entire glacier groaned with stress as ice cracked beneath Mesuizoic's feet. The Robobird pivoted their heads toward the new target and hooted angrily, their warning cries punctuated by the clinking of their mechanical parts and the bubbling of their water tanks.

Phos's eyes darted down at the breaking ice. "Uh-oh..."

The Robobird skied in wide arcs around their larger opponent and adjusted the valves of their water tanks again. The valves opened wide, and a wide aurora of freezing cold air spilled out and rolled toward Mesuizoic. Phos recalled the Paradox Pokémon before the air could make contact. As Mesuizoic returned to its ball, the Robobird traced the red recall beam back toward Phos and took aim.

She threw her arms out and walked toward the mechanical birds that haunted her every dream. "Come on!" She brushed her hair away from her eyes and watched the water tank

valves tighten. “I’m right here!” Her heart hammered in her chest, pumping adrenaline across her body as the Robobird slid to a halt in a semicircle around her.

Bibi cried out in shock. “What are you doing?!”

The Robobird rotated their heads toward the source of the noise.

“Show me what you’ve got!” Phos screamed hoarsely. The Robobird snapped their attention back toward Phos. “Shoot me!”

The water tanks began to hum.

“I dare you!”

The Robobird directly across from her fired the first torrent. A gushing stream hurtled directly toward her torso.

She had seen it before.

Phos nudged her body to the side as the hissing water continued past her.

“Do you have any idea—”

A measured half-step as the next torrent flowed between her ankles.

“—just how many times—”

A twist of her waist as another torrent froze into a jagged wall of ice behind her back.

“—I’ve lived this moment?”

The Robobird chattered among themselves, repositioned, and fired again. None of the torrents could even dampen a strand of her flowing red hair. Bibi watched starstruck from afar.

“How many times I wondered what I could have done differently? Yeah, I’ve seen your kind before. I’ve seen what you’re capable of.” She laughed darkly as she tilted her head out of the way of another blast. “And you have no idea how much trouble you’re in.”

Phos began to run. She dropped low and slid across the ice as multiple streams of water arced overhead. She rolled into a somersault and vaulted over another low-flying torrent. The Robobird began to ski backward as their target closed the gap. Phos screamed and sprinted after them, leaping over a split in the ice as loose frozen crystals tumbled into the churning lake. Another flood of water hurtled across the glacier, and Phos avoided each attack with the same gymnastics that years of practice and coaching had taught her. She reached for her next Pokéball and hurled it as hard as she could at the nearest Robobird.

“Scrafty, Drain Punch!”

The ball bounced off of the Robobird's blunt yellow beak with a sharp clang. Scrafty emerged from the ball and lunged forward, tackling its foe to the ground. Glaring sharply, its teeth clenched, Scrafty balled its fist as bright green light surrounded its knuckles. Hardened skin rang out against metal as the Hoodlum Pokémon delivered a fierce hook that sent Robobird's head spinning. The head sprang out of its socket like a toy and dangled at the end of a long metal cable. Its LED eyes dimmed, and the mechanical creature went inert. Scrafty's body coursed with the energy that it had drained from its fallen foe. It turned toward the remaining Robobird fixated on it and chuckled.

Phos looked to Bibi. "Now!"

Bibi whistled sharply, and Koraidon took to the wing. The Robobird ignored the scarlet dragon entirely as it curled into a wheel and began to spin. Koraidon crashed down on an unsuspecting target, burying its dented body deep within the ice and leaping away again.

Phos pointed forward while the Robobird flock rotated their heads toward Koraidon. "High Jump Kick!"

Scrafty splintered the glacier behind it as it kicked off and flew through the air. It slammed its foot into a Robobird's water tank, shattering it like glass and spilling ice-cold water in all directions.

Caught between two enemies, the remaining Robobird clustered together and began to fire wildly. Scrafty and Koraidon waded into the flock, throwing powerful haymakers and roundhouse kicks and sweeping enemies off their ski-like feet with their tails.

Phos breathed deeply and reveled in the cathartic battle being waged in front of her. A raging inferno warmed her chest, matched only by the fire in her eyes. She forgot all about the biting cold, the shivers that traveled across her trembling body came from another source entirely.

Bibi sidled up to her with a wide grin, her bright pink jacket flowing around her narrow frame. "Phos, that was amazing! You were so cool!"

Scrafty grabbed a Robobird by its water tank and flung it around like a flail. Its long metal cable extended and pulled taut as Scrafty slammed Robobird's clockwork head down upon another target. The Hoodlum Pokémon pulled on the cable, and it quickly retracted, causing the hapless owner of the water tank to slam into another Paradox and deliver a knockout blow. Scrafty held the weakened Robobird aloft and drop kicked it out of the fight before adjusting the shed skin around its waist and running after its next opponent.

The damaged Robobird's eyes flickered on and off with each bounce before it skidded to a halt across the ice. It rotated its head back toward the battle, where Koraidon and Scrafty hunted down the remaining combatants with ruthless efficiency. Unsteady wings braced the water tank in place as the Robobird adjusted its valve and took aim at Koraidon. The water tank bubbled and hummed; frost formed along its interior. With the last of its energy, Robobird fired an Ice Beam and fell inert. Its lights dimmed, its wings dropped, and the shaking water tank began to roll.

One moment, Bibi was bouncing on the tips of her boots beside Phos.

In the next moment, she was gone, sent spinning off her feet by a stray beam of icy energy.

Phos's heart stopped. Bibi laid on her side and didn't move.

"No, Bibi!"

Koraidon turned away as Scrafty beat down the last Robobird. It saw Phos rushing to its Trainer's side and began to howl.

"I'm sorry, Bibi," Phos repeated over and over, "I'm so sorry, Bibi!"

She knelt down alongside Bibi and reached toward her with numb, trembling fingers.

Bibi muttered under her breath.

"Bibi, can you hear me?" Phos grabbed her limp hand and squeezed it tightly. "Stay with me, you're gonna be alright! Rairai's on his way."

Bibi groaned. She looked up at Phos with a tear in her eye. She rolled onto her back and pulled her jacket over her stomach. The pink fabric was torn from the bottom all the way up to the seam of her left sleeve. "My favorite jacket's ruined..."

Phos shouted an exasperated curse and pulled Bibi to her feet. "Forget the jacket," she snapped, "that could have been your junior prom!"

Koraidon galloped over to Bibi and slobbered across her cheek.

Phos curled her nose and returned Scrafty to its ball. "Forget it, let's get moving."

The lake's frigid temperature quickly faded, and a dry heat soon took its place. Koraidon continued down the river, swimming when the water was straight and calm, gliding over it when the twists and bends became a hindrance, and dashing across the dry and dusty plains when the water became too shallow or overgrown with massive hexagonal crystals. As the day progressed, the sunlight shined brighter through the mists. Phos's eyelids grew heavy with hunger and exhaustion, but the blinding blue light that now filled the sky as far as she could see bathed the Crater in an oppressive and inescapable daylight. Uncountable snaking pillars of energy lined the horizon, reaching out toward the center of the Crater from all directions.

Baking under the oppressive heat, Phos's fatigued mind wandered aimlessly in a daze. Her dry mouth yearned for whatever remained of the bottled water she and Bibi had collected with Messie's help. The distant hiss of a waterfall taunted her appetite.

"Where's all the food around here," she wondered. *"Where's any food?"* She looked down at Koraidon as it confidently navigated the white mist that surrounded them. Bibi had trained it well, but a thought remained in the forefront of Phos's imagination.

"If I came from a place like this, I'd be pretty mean too." She thought of the long nights of her childhood when she and her Scraggy had sleep for dinner. She thought of the lunch money she and Scraggy had claimed in bloodied fists and the bruises they had soothed in the sink of a school bathroom or a soda machine inside a PokéMart.

The next thought made her chuckle to herself.

Bibi cocked her slumped head. "Penny for your thoughts?"

The waterfall was much closer now.

"Maybe if we have time later," Phos answered.

"Well, we're just about there now."

Droplets of water vapor soothed Phos's skin. A rising wind pushed the mist away as they approached.

Bibi inhaled sharply and cleared her throat. "This is Area Zero."

Koraidon perched at the edge of the cliff along the waterfall's edge. The river's water plummeted into a shallow basin below and continued downward and around large clusters of glimmering hexagonal crystals into a massive sinkhole. As far as Phos could see, collapsing earthen plates spiraled inward, funneling down toward an abyssal pit in the very epicenter of the crater. What scarce few trees remained upright were completely encased in Tera crystals, with some seemingly made entirely out of the crystals instead. Instead of grass, the ground was covered in tiny hexagonal crystals of varying miniscule heights. The crystals spread across the barren ground, evaporated into shimmering rainbow-hued mists that drifted on the wind, and regrew again before Phos's eyes. Tall hexagonal radar dishes lined the canyon walls and clifftops, pointing down toward a gargantuan crystalline monolith that rose up out of the pit and reached toward the sky. The violent tendrils of energy curved down into the pit and merged with the crystal spire, filling it with thousands of vibrant colors whose vibrant lights defied any earthly description. The blinding sight brought Phos to the brink of tears. To look at the monolith was like staring into the eye of God. A tiny unidentifiable object, off-white against white clouds, tumbled out of the clouds surrounding the monolith and fell into the gaping maw surrounding the crystal.

Phos quickly turned away. "This is the place?"

The pillar holding up a wide mesa shattered and collapsed, sending the anvil-like landmass hurtling toward the broken ground below. The mesa twisted sideways as it fell, and as it thunderously crashed down, an identical structure appeared out of the mist and took its place directly above it. The fallen mesa shattered and collapsed under the weight of its replacement, sending the anvil-like landmass hurtling toward the broken ground below.

Bibi looked around with her mouth agape. "It's a lot different from how I remember it."

"That doesn't surprise me," Phos said flatly, "let's hope your teleporter's still in the same spot."

Bibi swallowed hard and nodded, pulling her ripped jacket tight over her body. "Yeah. In and out, real quick." She gently patted Koraidon's cheek. "Let's go, Rairai."

Koraidon barked at her command and leapt down into Area Zero. A Kilowattrel roosting on a nearby ledge squawked in surprise and hastily took to the air. It quickly flapped its wings and ascended into the path of a torrent of Tera energy. The Frigatebird Pokémon vanished in an instant as it was flung across space and time.

"See you real soon, Big Bird," Phos muttered.

Koraidon dived down sharply, threading a needle between broken pieces of the cliff face that had fallen free and diving below a large stone arch. A wild-eyed Magnodon scurried across the arch's surface like an insect, shooting electrified iron barbs at a swarm of Hydreitausen missiles doggedly pursuing it. On an isolated shelf along the cliff, a group of Scream Tail savagely mauled a Volcarobot as it flailed on the ground, pulling its floating diamond-shaped wings away from its body with sharp fangs glowing with violet-hued psychic energy. On a series of terraced hills below the shade of the arch above, an Androgarde's spinning glaive effortlessly cleaved through a horde of Brute Bonnet as they stampeded toward it. Violent battles raged all across Area Zero as organic Paradoxes warred against their cybernetic rivals for control of their crumbling territory. Bibi tightened her grip on Koraidon's shoulder spikes.

Koraidon touched down in front of a large hexagonal building nestled against the surrounding cliffs. A herd of Great Tusk trumpeted to the Winged King and distanced themselves without conflict. Bibi quickly dismounted and jogged to the door. While Bibi leaned over the door's keypad, Phos leapt off of Koraidon's back and took unsteady steps down the sloping terrain toward the edge of the cliff. As she walked, the shadow of the cliffs above disappeared and reappeared as if some cosmic force was operating a strobe light. She gazed up at the giant crystal reaching into the clouds high above and felt a sudden rush of vertigo as the crater began to spin around her.

The bulky metal door of the research station slid upward. Koraidon trotted inside, and Bibi followed after it. She turned back toward Phos and waved her over. "Come on," she called, "the teleporter's just inside!"

Phos snapped to attention and turned toward her. "I'll be right there," she called out.

Bibi looked around cautiously and disappeared into the dim light of the station.

Phos reached down for Mesuizoic's ball and released the draconic Paradox. Its yellow eyes scanned the canyon walls as it curiously cocked its head.

"Not quite how you remember it, huh, big guy?"

The towering theropod-like creature snorted loudly and howled a forlorn call that echoed far and wide across Area Zero. For a brief moment, the Paradoxes locked in vicious battle with one another stopped and turned their heads toward the source of the howl before the violent instincts returned.

Phos tucked her thumbs into her pants pocket and stared at the massive crystal rising out of the depths. "Yeah, didn't think so."

A silence fell between them. The sharp whistle of wind passing through the petrified branches of a dying tree raised the hackles of Mesuizoic's mane.

Phos cleared her throat. "I know you didn't ask to be caught up in all this," she chuckled awkwardly, "I didn't either."

She reached out and stroked the dragon's thigh. Its light-blue scales were soothingly warm against Phos's palm. Mesuizoic's twin tails flicked in the air. After a few moments, it shifted its weight ever so slightly and leaned into her touch.

"I wanted to say thanks for helping us. I know it isn't much of a choice, but... if you want to go home, I won't stop you." Phos closed her eyes and smiled. "I know I'd want to go home as soon as I could."

A baritone rumble bellowed within the dragon's throat. It turned with heavy footsteps and lowered its head toward Phos. Its piercing yellow eyes stared into hers. Hot steam erupted from its nostrils. Mesuizoic lowered itself to the ground and pressed its snout against the button of its Timer Ball, and disappeared in a flash of red light.

Phos smirked and rested her hand atop the ball. "Heh, good answer."

Watching her surroundings, she walked away from the ledge and back up the dry hill toward the research station's open door. Phos stepped into the darkness, and stood atop a large arch made of dark stone and surrounded on all sides by crystalline walls too thick to see through. A familiar face calmly stood across from her, resting his hands atop an empty Pokéball belt.

"It's good to see you again, Phos," Franco said.

Phos looked around in disbelief. "What is this place?"

"You're in Area Zero," Franco answered, "the very epicenter of the Great Crater."

Phos scoffed. "No kiddin'." She peered deeply into the crystals. "Is this your handiwork?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Phos scowled at him. "Start talking sense."

Franco placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. "Forgive me," he said, "it's been some time since I've spoken out loud. I'm relieved to see you're alive."

"Wish I could say the same."

Franco chuckled. "I tried searching for you after you fell."

Phos rolled her eyes. "How sweet. Get to the point, I don't have time for a kiss-and-fly."

Franco closed his eyes and shook his head. "Right now, I believe we have nothing but time." He folded his arms behind his back and turned toward the crystals. "The truth is, I need your help."

"I already gave you my answer," Phos growled.

"Indeed. And that's why I need you to stop me."

Phos raised an eyebrow.

Franco continued. "In a few hours from now, I made a horrible mistake, and now I need you to prevent it from happening."

"You've finally lost your mind."

Franco motioned for Phos to follow him. "Allow me to explain, as best I can."

Phos hesitated. Franco started walking down a sloped pathway, and Phos shook her head and followed after him. As they walked, they traveled past a large cluster of crystals. Annihilape stood inside, reaching out toward Phos. She gasped and quickly stepped away. "...Is it—"

"Dead?" Franco shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I don't know. At this point in time, only I am capable of moving around." His red eyes glanced toward Phos. "Myself, and now you."

"Where are we, really?"

"As I said, we're at the very center of Area Zero. We're inside of one of the crystals, and—I theorize—this is the last remaining stretch of earth that isn't completely entombed in petrified Terastal energy. There has been no sign of any activity beyond the confines of this hollow crystal for as long as I've been here."

Phos looked up at the crystalline structure surrounding them. She looked away and turned her eyes to the ground where countless rows of tally marks had been carved into the stone.

"Eventually, I stopped keeping track of the passage of time. I suspect it doesn't matter. I haven't had any need for food or sleep or any other necessity. The Tera crystals have sustained me in perfect stasis."

The stone pathway split into two branching paths that disappeared within the crystals. At the center of the intersection, a large metal plate was positioned in front of the crystal wall. Etched within the steel-blue alloy, two triangles intersected one another to form an hourglass shape. Two rounded rectangles were inscribed to the right of the hourglass's center. The bottom-right corner of the plate portrayed a map of the Great Crater, with Area Zero forming a pit in its center. The top-right corner was filled with the incomprehensible runes of an exotic language.

Phos studied the plate's symbols and turned to Franco. "Arts and crafts?"

Franco knelt down and rapped his knuckles against the plate. "This alloy is beyond the metalwork of any modern civilization. This plate is a message, sent here from a distant future. Or a present that advanced much more rapidly than ours."

He pointed to the runes in the corner of the plate. "Look carefully, this isn't one written language, but several. Someone desperately wanted this message to be understood, but none of these letters even closely resemble any language recorded in our history."

"But someone else's history..."

Franco nodded. He pointed to the map. "This needs no introduction. Anyone who has reached this point already knows exactly where they're at. Unless that's not the point of the message."

He traced his fingertip along the outline of the hourglass. "These triangles are two separate entities interlinked—our time, and another time, meeting in the middle." He motioned to the crystal walls. "A past that no longer exists beyond the present, and a future that consequently cannot come to pass, represented abstractly in these lines. Mathematics, geometry. A single line, continuing infinitely in opposite directions. A paradox. Nothing is infinite, not even infinity. Our universe is finite in nature. Despite its size, there is inevitably an end. Everything that rises must converge. If these lines were to continue infinitely in opposite directions, they would eventually reach a point in which they begin to curve, then bend, then meet again. Broaden your perspective: these aren't just two triangles interlinked, but a pinched wheel viewed from above. We are in a loop looking down upon a loop, as we have before and will do so again. These letters aren't from our history, but another timeline entirely. Not points on a line, but ripples intersecting."

Franco's fingertip glided over to the two rounded rectangles. "A series of closed circles combining to form a toxic chain, repeating a hundred times, a thousand times, a billion times..."

Phos covered her mouth. "Infinity," she whispered. "How is this possible?"

Franco placed his hand over the center of the hourglass. "The beginning of the chain is the end of the chain. The omega point at the exact precipice of time. The conical point in which all other eons reach their finality. Here, in the center of Area Zero, in the center of the Great Crater, in the center of Paldea."

"What does this have to do with you and me?"

“You’ve seen the Terastal energy pouring into Area Zero. Terastal energy empowered by Terastal energy, a limited resource stretched infinitely across infinity. The moment of Convergence that creates the next chain in the loop has happened, will happen, is happening still.”

Franco stood up and clasped Phos’s hand. “You’ll find me at the very bottom of Area Zero. You cannot let me interfere with the Convergence.” He looked sternly into her eyes. “Kill me if you have to. If the Terastal energy is allowed to flood across space and time forever, I theorize it will drown the entire universe as we know it and beyond.”

Phos pulled her hand away. “How am I supposed to get back?”

Franco looked inside the crystals. A pair of gleaming blue eyes looked back at him, and then turned its gaze toward Phos.

“That isn’t up to you and I,” Franco said. “I hope one day we meet again in a time where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” He nodded solemnly as mist poured out of the surrounding crystals. “Break these chains, Phos. Set us all free.”

“Wait! Stop!”

Bibi froze in place and stared wide-eyed at Phos. She held her torn jacket out of the way as she inspected a smaller tear in her matted and stained white shirt below. Her fingers were clasped around gnarled, blood-red scar tissue that covered the left side of her body.

Phos looked around at the interior of the research station. Its hexagonal confines were furnished with pristine supply crates, spare beds, and other camping equipment. A comfortably cool air filled the room from humming air vents along the floor and ceiling, and the building had the familiar stale scent of a mundane office space. Koraidon warbled from atop one of the beds.

“Bibi...?”

“It’s not what it looks like,” the young girl stammered. She quickly hid her scars beneath her clothes and pointed toward a glowing green hexagon on the floor. “There’s the teleporter,” she happily announced, “just step on it, say ‘Zero Gate,’ and you’re there!”

Phos opened the storage lockers at random and found a supply of sealed rations within. She wiped a bead of drool from her mouth and turned back toward Bibi. “I can’t leave yet,” she said. “Franco’s down here somewhere. This is my last chance to stop him.”

Bibi swallowed hard and adjusted her glasses. “Then me and Rairai are coming with you.”

Phos nodded and tossed her a protein bar. “We’re all gonna need our A-game,” she said. She sat down on a crate and peeled the wrapping open on her meal. “And you’re gonna need to tell me how you got that scar. I’ve seen you holding it before, I just didn’t know it at the time.”

"I didn't want you to see it and think I'm weak. I..." Bibi pursed her lips and glanced at Koraidon as she fumbled with the wrapper.

Phos cocked her head. "Koraidon did that to you?"

Bibi sucked air through her teeth and chewed her food. "...Not exactly."

"You didn't tell me the whole story about that professor."

The young girl shook her head and began her story. "The time machine had a signal jammer that locked all of our Pokéballs. Only the Professor's own Pokéball could be opened." She held up Koraidon's ball. "But I never battled with Rairai before. He was always too scared to fight after he first escaped from the Crater..."

The crystalline chamber shined with bright scarlet light as the two Koraidon circled one another. They raised their feathered war bonnets, curled their lips back, and bared their fangs. Their displays were a formality; they were already intimately familiar with one another and neither combatant would back down from the challenge.

Bibi whistled to her Koraidon. Looming high above the arena, the artificial imitation of Professor Sada studied her opponent carefully. Her cybernetic body was no longer hers to control. The AI ran one thousand simulations per second, calculating the most efficient path to victory. In order to safeguard her creator's Paradise, any threats to Sada's time machine needed to be eliminated.

The Guardian of Paradise could smell the fear and lingering resentment on its smaller, weaker counterpart. The AI analyzed Koraidon's awkward gait and erratic pulse. She could see Bibi formulating her next strategy, slower than any machine but capable in her own limited right.

"Taunt," the AI commanded.

Her Koraidon obeyed gladly. It narrowed its eyes and flashed a menacing grin as it beckoned its rival to attack.

Bibi's Koraidon roared with fury and charged. It balled its claws into a fist and swung out with a clumsy, unbalanced haymaker.

"Dragon Claw."

The Guardian effortlessly ducked under Koraidon's punch. It wreathed its claws in burning draconic energy and prepared to strike.

"On her."

The impact of the attack sent Bibi sailing across the room in a shower of blood. Her shoulders slammed against the far wall and she slumped to the ground. Bibi clawed across the floor as she attempted to pull herself back into the fight. Her fingernails ripped through her

gloves and chipped against the hard tiles until her fingers were too slick to find any purchase. She gasped for breath and choked as Arven, Nemona, and Penny rushed to shield her broken body. Bibi clutched at her side as burnt flesh and scraps of cloth slid between her bloodied fingers.

The two Koraidon matched each other blow for blow as they grappled and gnawed and tossed one another around the hexagonal arena. The rubbery black flesh beneath the Guardian's 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. Its slit pupils narrowed as it clasped its hands around Koraidon's clenched fists and pushed against it in a bone-bending contest of strength.

Phos snapped her fingers and whistled Bibi back to the present. "Stay with me. I'll settle for the broad strokes."

Bibi took a deep breath. "Broad strokes, right. Nemona called out the moves I wanted to use when I couldn't speak. Arven kept me from bleeding out. Penny helped me hold the Tera Orb." Bibi reflected on how she had screamed out her command in that final moment. Desperate roars, surprised gasps, and the lights of a blood-red ceiling before the world went dark.

She looked up at Phos. "I don't know what happened to the other Koraidon. What if it's still around here?"

Slowly, a confident smirk spread across Phos's pale features. "If it tries to mess with us, we'll make it eat its tail."

Bibi stared in shock. The corner of her mouth twitched. She giggled and gave Phos a toothy grin. "Yeah." She nodded her head. "Yeah, we will! Together!"

Phos tossed her another ration bar. "That's my girl!"

Bibi beamed with pride and wolfed down her meal. She gulped down a bottle of clear water and sighed. "You're like the only cool grownup I've ever met."

Phos raised an eyebrow. "That right?"

The girl nodded. "I wish I could be strong like you. Fast like you. Pretty like you."

Phos smiled warmly. "What makes you think you aren't pretty already?"

Bibi meekly pulled her shirt tightly over her dark red scars.

Phos shook her head. "You shouldn't be ashamed of that," she said, "it's part of what makes you who you are, but it doesn't define you. Bear that scar with pride along with everything else and show the world what Bibi Montero's made of."

Bibi's eyes gleamed behind her glasses. "I wanna be just like you someday."

Phos winced. "No, you don't."

"Why not?"

Phos paused and chewed her food carefully before she answered. "Don't compare yourself to someone else. You'll spend your whole life living in their shadow and you'll never measure up no matter how hard you try." She shook her head. "Don't try to be like your hero. Become the kind of person your hero would be proud of. You're never going to be me, because you're going to be better. Understand?"

Bibi sat in silence. Her pursed lips stretched into a wide smile. "I think so," she said quietly.

Phos smirked and chuckled. "Pretty like me, huh? Forget being pretty, grow that hair out and add a little black in your outfit and you'll be gorgeous."

Overhead, a ceiling camera recorded her every movement. Franco watched their muted conversation play out in the monitor within Research Station 4. Tendrils of black shadows lapped at his side. Annihilape stared at its hated nemesis on the monitor and snorted.

"This changes nothing," Franco said. He tapped at the terminal keyboard, and the glowing teleporter behind him instantly went dark and powered down. He turned toward the station's door and began to walk with his hands clasped calmly behind his back as Annihilape slowly walked alongside him. "Her interference has caused no shortage of complications, yet my future remains unchanged. Today's fools, no matter how low their opinion of me, are irrelevant. Their children could never imagine life without me. Their grandchildren will call me a hero. That is the power of a visionary."

The metal door slid open at his command. A shimmering trail of Tera energy snaked through the crystal caverns, guiding an assorted cluster of anomalies down the winding stone pathway and toward the base of the massive crystalline spire rising out of the depths. A pack of Bigglyruff floated in the air alongside a Misterius. A placid Ungafoonguss walked amidst a herd of Abaddonphan while several Mothbrawl and a Magnodon walked along the cavern walls. The Misterius turned toward the sound of the door hissing open and howled at Franco. Some of the other anomalies turned their attention toward Franco and rushed toward him while others continued to follow the flow of Tera energy.

Franco looked at Annihilape. "Let nothing stand in my way."

Koraidon carefully traversed the uneven downward slopes and broken hills leading down toward the base of the giant Tera crystal. From her seat on the dragon's back, Phos eyed a Paleomence warily as it roared at her. The draconic Paradox could smell the wrapped food Phos had stuffed into Bibi's backpack. It could smell the blood coursing just beneath her soft flesh. Its primal instincts urged it to charge and pounce and rend, but a narrowed glance from Koraidon was enough to keep it at bay.

“Even a Roaring Moon knows to stay away,” Bibi mused, “I wonder if it knows I have my Ribombée with me?”

At the bottom of the hill, the cracked terrain leveled out at the sandy banks of a shallow stream flowing beneath a solid layer of crystals. Scream Tail floated out of the way as Koraidon leapt atop fallen boulders rising out of the creek. A pair of yellow eyes merged with the shadows and faded from view as Koraidon stepped into a massive tunnel where walls of Tera crystals plugged any gaps between the exposed stone. As Phos looked at a purple-and-blue crystalline flower sprouting from the rock, she heard Bibi’s voice call out to her.

“Phos, look over there,” she shouted.

Phos turned her attention to a jagged rift in the ground. Under the weight of the crystals, the rock had split and shifted, creating a window into the caverns below. A silent waterfall flowed into the depths surrounding the giant crystal. Phos watched as the water cascaded down into a glowing abyss, stopped as if frozen in time, stuttered, resumed, and froze in the air again and again.

Phos hummed. “Not even the weirdest thing we’ve seen today,” she mused.

Bibi looked up toward her reflection looking back at her from the tunnel’s mirror-like ceiling and waved.

They approached the unnatural daylight beyond the tunnel and emerged on a sloping pathway of solid diamond-like jewels. A narrow stream of Tera energy guided Koraidon down the spiraling ledge of the giant crystal toward an endless sea of white mist.

Bibi pointed up toward the ruined cliffs and crevices of Area Zero. “Phos, look over there,” she shouted.

Phos followed her finger toward a distant red figure walking through a narrow canyon. Phos blinked back her surprise. Bibi waved hello to her past self. As Phos looked toward the ground, the other Bibi looked up at herself and waved back.

Koraidon braced against a sudden gust of extreme winds as a Roaring Moon flew past the ledge and dove into the mist. The blinding clouds were just above their heads now. A crash of thunder rattled Phos’s teeth. Droplets of hot water rose out of the fog and rolled across her skin. Koraidon paused and looked deeply into the mist. It straightened out its body, braced its claws against the bejeweled terrain underfoot, and sprinted forward.

It galloped into the mist and emerged with a loud splash at the edge of a sparkling subterranean lake. Phos looked back at the crystal-clear water and saw the shimmering blue eyes looking back at her. The eyes slowly blinked and melted away within the rippling water.

Bibi’s head swiveled around wildly at the spiraling ledges lining the tall crystal hollow and the circular tunnel directly opposite of them. “Down here...?”

Phos looked at the crystalline walls and surveyed hundreds of mirrored reflections looking back at her. “Where exactly is here?”

"This is the origin of the Terastal Phenomenon," Franco stated.

Phos and Bibi gasped in surprise as Franco descended down the corkscrewing path alongside Annihilape. The Rage Monkey Pokémon's piercing red eyes were barely visible within a seething black aura of malice. Its breathing was slow and deliberate.

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

Phos dismounted from Koraidon and swallowed hard. "Didn't expect to see you again so soon, Frankie. What've you been up to?"

Franco flashed a book bound in white in his hand. Its cover was decorated with intricate calligraphy bordering a six-pointed star made of teal and light-green hexagons. "I've been biding my time and catching up on my reading."

Bibi stared awestruck at the book. "Briar's book," she whispered, "but how...?"

"A final inheritance," Franco answered, "perfectly preserved within these caverns for me to discover."

He chuckled and nonchalantly tossed the book down into the water where it sank into the shimmering depths and disappeared. "Like so many countless others, I dismissed Heath's Scarlet Book as a work of pure fantasy. Imaginative fantasy, but fantasy all the same. Imaginative enough to capture the obsession of my mentor and friend even beyond Sada's death. Imagine my surprise to learn that its contents were not only true but barely scratching the surface."

Franco turned his sharp gaze toward Bibi. "And that you would be at the center of it all." He smirked. "I remember you now. The girl in the recording. I really must thank you. If it weren't for you, I never would have known of Abaddonphan—Great Tusk's existence. Your carelessness made all of this possible. When Paldea is recreated in my image, I'll ensure your family is well-rewarded."

A chill ran down Phos's back. She turned toward Bibi. "What is he saying?"

Franco returned Annihilape to its ball. His footsteps sent ripples spreading across the calm surface of the lake as he stepped through its shallows toward the tunnel. "A colleague sent me evidence of a reckless Trainer revealing proof of the Paradox Pokémon. The Paldean League was quick to have all footage scrubbed from Macro-Cosmos Media servers, but who watches the watchmen? You want the one responsible for Apollo's death?" A bitter expression darkened his face as he swept his hand toward Bibi. "There she is."

Phos stared at Bibi in distraught surprise. She clenched her trembling fists. "Oh, Bibi, no... Why did it have to be you?"

Bibi dismounted from Koraidon and cautiously stepped toward her. "Miss Phos, I—"

Phos waved her off. "Never mind that," she snapped. She turned back toward Franco. "This ends here."

A rumble of thunder shook the cavern and pushed the lake's waters away from the shore. Deafening silence, followed by distant howls, roars, and clanging metal.

Franco held his hand up to his ear. "Do you hear that, Phos? Any moment now, the Terastal energy will reach its crescendo, and I'll be there to witness it."

Phos stepped forward. "Franco, please, you don't know what you're doing! The damage you'll inflict on the world!"

Franco shook his head. "I know exactly what I'm doing thanks to that book. Terapagos will awaken in the past, and when it unleashes its full power, all of space and time will converge at one single point. All I need to do is ensure Terapagos isn't subdued and the Omega Point remains open. Even if my plans are unmade a trillion times across a trillion possible eons, one victory here ensures my success becomes inevitable."

He turned his gaze toward Bibi and Koraidon. "I've seen the way the Paradoxes respond to their alpha. I wonder if they'll offer me the same deference after Terapagos and I have defeated you."

Bibi's head swiveled between Franco and Phos. "Same-difference? Phos, what does that mean?"

Phos's face curled with rage as she clenched her fists and sprinted toward Franco. "If you touch even a single hair on her head, I'll kill you!"

Franco tossed a white Pokéball into the air in front of him. A towering moth-like creature slammed its thick abdomen on the ground, reared up on its thick hindlegs, and spread its six orange wings wide.

Bibi gasped. "A Slither Wing!"

Phos slid to a sudden halt and backed away from the hulking Paradox.

Franco retreated into the tunnel. "Mothbrawl, seal the entrance."

The Paradox Pokémon stepped backward, spitting a stream of white silk threads from the tip of its pointed mouth.

A distant feminine voice echoed, "This crystal must be Terapagos!"

Bibi looked around wildly. "Miss Briar?"

She clapped her hands together, and Koraidon lunged forward to attack. It wreathed its arm in burning draconic energy and raked its claws into the silk. Koraidon's hand sank into the threads and became trapped. It braced its foot against the cavern wall and pulled at the silk.

"No," a boy's youthful voice muttered. The voice suddenly shouted, "You're MINE!"

Bibi snapped her fingers. Koraidon stopped struggling, opened its jaws wide, and belched a long cone of blazing fire that burned away the silk. Koraidon stepped forward, descending into the tunnel and clearing a path for Phos and Bibi to run through.

A powerful stream of wind nearly threw them off their feet as they entered into a house-sized chamber. A rainbow of scintillating colors rushed past them from the crystalline portal beyond.

"I knew it," Briar shouted. "The Scarlet Book was right! Terapagos in its fully awakened form...!"

"Phos," Bibi screamed over the howling gale, "we gotta hurry!"

An explosion of light, a crash of thunder. A piercing howl and clanking gears. A splash of ice-cold water flooded the cavern floor. Black iron barbs bit into the stone floor and discharged electricity. Phos leapt into the air and rolled out of harm's way. She and Bibi looked back in surprise.

"A Sandy Shocks," Bibi shouted.

"And a Robobird," Phos gasped. "Together?"

The strange Magneton-like creature rotated its magnet arms and charged up another volley of electrified iron darts. It took aim at Phos and fired a rapid volley of shots before she could get off the ground.

Phos swore and held her hand in front of her body. A flash of light, and her vision went dark. Bibi's titanic Great Tusk stood in front of her. The iron barbs bounced harmlessly off its thick armored hide and disintegrated. The massive Paradox Pokémon cast a sideways glance down toward Phos, then trumpeted toward its smaller opponent. The robotic bird rotated its vision toward its new foe and began to charge up its water tank for another blast. Bibi whistled, and Koraidon delivered a fierce haymaker that sent the little machine's clockwork head spinning.

"They wanna get to Terapagos more than they wanna fight each other," Bibi said. She reached out her hand and helped Phos to her feet.

Phos looked down wide-eyed at her hand. "This is..."

"You'll know when to use it." Bibi nodded to her. "Don't worry about me, partner. I won't let any of 'em through."

Franco emerged into a massive chamber. Towering crystal lattices grew around a lustrous dais at the far end of the cavern and reached up toward a ceiling too tall for Franco to see. The crystals glimmered in a blinding display of purples, greens, blues, and yellows vivid beyond comparison. Franco stepped forward, accompanied by his Pokémon crawling across the ground behind him. The dais began to glow. A tiny blue dot suddenly appeared in the air above it. The dot thrummed with energy and began to expand. The sphere continued to rise and grow until it filled a significant portion of the chamber. It exploded in a blinding flash of white light as torrents of Terastal energy bore through the earth and pierced into it. At the same time,

spears of energy shot out of the orb and flowed around the room, filling it with otherworldly light and phantom memories taken from across innumerable eons.

Franco flung his arms out to his sides and embraced the blinding light around him.

“Brave Bird!”

Dark wings fluttered against the howling wind as Phos and Mandibuzz entered the chamber. Franco’s Mothbrawl turned around, reared up on its hind legs, and braced to catch its foe as Mandibuzz hurtled toward it.

Franco turned around and thrust his hand forward. “First Impression!”

Mothbrawl spread its wings wide and lunged forward, its body cloaked in pale green energy. It thrust its pointed wings into Mandibuzz’s body as the Bone Vulture Pokémon slammed into it. The impact sent both Pokémon rolling across the ground in a shower of dust and debris. Mothbrawl bounced to a halt, and convulsed on the ground as its wings fell limply over its body. Mandibuzz continued to skip and slide before staggering to its feet and shaking its head.

Franco returned Mothbrawl to its ball.

“No more talk,” Phos said, “I can’t let you do this, Franco.”

“I can’t let you stop me,” he replied. “With the full potential of the Paradox at my disposal, I can assure Paldean supremacy until the very heat death of our universe.” He raised his next Pokéball. “Your name will be forgotten.”

Energy gathered around Terapagos. A hexagonal star shined above a tiny turtle-shaped crystal. The crystal sat atop a pointed bejeweled crown in the center of an indigo-hued disk adorned with multicolored glyphs that morphed and shifted on its back like mirrors in a kaleidoscope. Six long cyan tails streamed behind the disk, fluttering in the storm of Terastal energy that surrounded it. Below the disk, a rainbow of eighteen colorful crystals orbited a crystalline globe.

Bibi whistled, and her Palafin chattered excitedly. It condensed the water molecules in the air around it and swam forward on a blue wave. The Dolphin-like Pokémon crashed into Terapagos’s barrier and flipped around, hastily swimming back toward Bibi’s awaiting Pokéball. She recalled her Pokémon and sent out a Kilowattrel in its place. The Frigatebird Pokémon took to the wing as the crystal turtle on Terapagos’s back began to glow. A hail of crystalized stars rained down across the chamber, exploding across the ground and against the distant wall.

Loose stones fell from the ceiling and bounced off Great Tusk’s glowing orange back. It charged forward and dropped its weight down atop a Volcarobot, slamming it into the ground and pinning it beneath the elephant-like creature’s immense weight as Koraidon tackled a Roaring Moon out of the air and drove it into the ground. Koraidon raised its clenched fist and slammed down.

“Fake Out,” Franco shouted.

Alloyama's iron hands clapped around Mandibuzz's head with a resounding clang. The dazed vulture-like Pokémon squawked loudly and staggered backward.

Terapagos began to conjure another swarm of comets.

Franco raised his hands upward. "Now! Throw it into the sky!"

Alloyama's floating hands grabbed onto Mandibuzz's wings, yanked its limp body off the ground, and let go. Mandibuzz sailed upward as an aimless star streaked across the cavern. It struck Mandibuzz in the back and exploded, sending loose feathers scattering on the Terastal wind.

Phos recalled Mandibuzz before it could hit the ground. Gritting her teeth, she threw her next ball into the air. "Come on out, Murkrow!"

Murkrow glided to the ground, wrapped its feathers around its wooden stick, and uttered a raspy shriek at its foe.

Franco motioned toward the tiny crow-like Pokémon. "Supercell Slam, now!"

Phos held her Pokéball forward. "U-Turn!"

Alloyama's huge metal hands orbited around its body, building up speed and generating massive arcs of crackling yellow lightning. Murkrow's stick became enveloped in green light. It spread its wings and quickly glided across the ground, deftly weaving between crashing stars exploding around it. The metal Paradox's hands hummed like generators as they circled their master, a blur of phantom motion too fast for Phos to see. Murkrow narrowed its eyes and thrust its stick forward, a contest of reflexes versus overwhelming speed. The wooden stick poked Alloyama in its sturdy chrome belly. The ineffectual attack barely registered to the runic Heads-Up Display flashing data across the android's faceplate. It stomped forward and prepared to discharge its electricity.

A red warning sign flickered above its LED eyes. The instant after Murkrow's attack connected, the Darkness Pokémon was gone, retreating to the safety of its Pokéball in a bright red recall beam. The electricity reached the limits of Alloyama's resistance and flooded the android's systems. Its hands exploded and dropped to the ground; lightning erupted from its round ears and danced between its eyes. The heavy-bodied android collapsed onto its rear and toppled to the ground.

Phos threw her next Pokéball. "Malamar, Superpower!"

Malamar emerged from its ball and immediately lunged forward, swimming backward through the air on its psychic power as Alloyama reset its systems and attempted to right itself. Malamar grappled onto Alloyama's torso and squeezed. Orange light filled the Overturning Pokémon's rubbery muscles as it tightened its grip and lifted its foe overhead. Alloyama kicked its stubby legs wildly as its hands struggled to push off the ground. The squid-like Malamar cackled darkly and repeatedly slammed the android into the ground until its legs stopped thrashing and the yellow lights on its body went black.

Malamar let its defeated opponent clatter to the ground. It crossed its bladed arms over its chest and silently dared Franco to send out his next combatant.

Bibi recalled her fallen Great Tusk, adjusted her thick glasses, and released her Toxicroak. The frog-like Pokémon sucked in a gulp of air, expanded the sac of venom on its throat, and chuckled between its clenched teeth as its venom churned and roiled. The Robobird standing opposite of it charged up its water tank and unleashed another powerful blast of water. Instead of dodging, Toxicroak threw its arms out and embraced the torrent of water, greedily drinking every drop of moisture into its dry skin. Gears clicked and whirred within Robobird's head as it stared at its unharmed foe and adjusted the valve of its water tank. Bibi snapped her fingers. A wide grin stretched across Toxicroak's face as it swept a bladed knuckle in front of its throat sac and sprinted forward to deliver a savage beatdown.

Three wickedly sharp claws coated in purple crystals lashed at Terapagos's barrier. At another point in time, Bibi's Hatterene screamed with murderous rage as it scratched, punched, and stabbed at the glowing energy surrounding its opponent. The energy buckled, cracked, and shattered, dissipating into motes of light carried away on the swirling winds. Terapagos pinched its blue eyes tightly closed and rotated to shield itself with its thick shell. Hatterene lunged forward and wildly slashed with the razor-sharp hair atop its wide-brimmed hat. Its psychic powers tightened the hair into a sturdy knot that it repeatedly slammed down on Terapagos's tiny head. Hatterene raised its fist and extended its claws for another slash. Terapagos opened its eyes, and the crystals shattered around Hatterene's body and reformed as a barrier in front of itself. A wall of force knocked Hatterene away, and a volley of crystal stars crashed into the ground.

Malamar's glowing purple bladed fins clashed against the blades on Androgarde's gauntlets. Their arms were blurred silhouettes against a bright backdrop of multicolored explosions falling across the battlefield. Malamar attacked from afar with its long tentacles while Androgarde ducked, parried, and lunged to close the distance. The invertebrate Overturning Pokémon dropped low and slithered across the ground before stabbing its fin out at Androgarde's backside. The Paradox Pokémon extended its glaive pole and parried the strike from behind. It planted its pole in the ground and somersaulted over it, kicking Malamar into the air as it landed on its feet and slotted a blade into place. Malamar rolled with the strike and levitated into the air, quickly retaliating with a headbutt that sent its foe spinning. Androgarde balanced on one foot and swung its glaive in a horizontal sweep toward Malamar's head. The squid-like Pokémon wrapped its tentacles around the pole and held it firmly in place as both combatants wrestled for control.

"Now," Phos shouted, "Hypnosis!"

"Sensors off," Franco shouted.

Androgarde's red LED eyes went black in an instant before Malamar's body flashed with a dazzling array of flashing colors.

"X-Scissor," Franco commanded.

Green light gathered around Androgarde's metal body. It slotted its second blade into its glaive as the energy surged. Androgarde stepped forward in a blur of fluid motion, slashing its glaive upward across Malamar's chest and spinning its arms to deliver a second downward slash. Malamar screeched as the glowing green blades cut deep into its body. Androgarde slid to a halt and retracted its glaive pole back into the palm of its hand. Behind it, Malamar's smoldering body dropped to the ground with a loud smack. Androgarde turned around, reactivated its eyes and locked onto Phos as she recalled Malamar.

"Finish the job, Murkrow!"

Murkrow emerged and pointed its stick at its next foe.

"Thunder Wave!"

A narrow jolt of electricity darted out of the tip of Murkrow's wooden stick and continued on past Androgarde's position as the android disappeared in a beam of red light.

Franco returned Androgarde's ball to his belt and sent out its replacement.
"Abaddonphan, use Stealth Rock!"

The large elephant-like Paradox landed on the ground with a heavy slam that sent fault lines digging through the cavern floor. Abaddonphan raised its front legs into the air, trumpeted sharply, and slammed down. The force of its impact sent large chunks of stone high into the air. The stones began to glow with a dull orange light and split apart into dozens of flechette-like fragments that hovered above the battlefield. Abaddonphan leered at Murkrow and dared the Darkness Pokémon to approach with a curl of its trunk.

"Murkrow, Tailwind!"

"Rapid Spin!"

Murkrow raised its stick directly over its head and began to channel its spell. It pointed the stick to the left, then the right, and the howling wind blowing throughout the cavern submitted to Murkrow's command. Opposite of Murkrow, Abaddonphan charged forward. It hopped off the ground, curled into a wheel, and began to roll across the battlefield. It quickly gained speed as it doggedly pursued Murkrow. Wherever the little crow-like Pokémon flew, Abaddonphan followed closely behind on the ground. Murkrow perched on a towering hexagonal crystal to avoid another star storm tearing across space and time. Abaddonphan slammed into the crystal's base and plowed through it, sending it crashing to the ground.

Shimmering white mist filled the battlefield and drifted on the Terastallized winds. With the calculated snap of her fingers, Bibi's white-furred Ninetales pointed its nose high into the air and summoned an Aurora Veil that shimmered around itself and its teammate. A pair of Hydreitausen fired their screaming missiles toward Koraidon. A Volcarobot flooded the chamber with noxious gas and ignited it in a fiery explosion. Another Sandy Shocks shoved its allies of convenience out of the way with an awkward, lumbering tackle and rotated its magnets to hose its enemies down with a salvo of electrified iron barbs. Koraidon pulled Bibi in close and shielded her with its body. The snapping jaws of the four robotic Hydreigon arms bounced off of the aurora surrounding Koraidon and veered sideways. The scorching flames rolled harmlessly

across the rainbow-hued barriers and were snuffed out by the intense winds. Hundreds of tiny iron filings popped against the shields in flashes of orange sparks and hissing yellow electricity. Bibi clapped twice and whistled, and her Pokémon charged forward. Ninetales unfurled its long wispy tails and spread them in a wide semicircle behind its back. The tips of its tails flashed brightly, unleashing countless beams of rainbow-hued light that pierced through the metal bodies of the Hydreitausen and shot them out of the air. With the robotic dragons out of the way, Koraidon leapt up, clasped its hands together, and slammed down. Glowing orange fault lines spread across the ground toward the Volcarobot and Sandy Shocks. Jagged tectonic plates thrust out of the earth beneath them and exploded in a burst of orange energy.

The Earthquake sent another crystal spire crashing to the cavern floor where it toppled over and shattered like glass. Abaddonphan curled into a ball and rolled up the crystal's broken side, careening high into the air and intercepting Murkrow on the wing. The Paradox Pokémon's armored hide crashed into the tiny bird, and its long trunk squeezed around Murkrow's body. Abaddonphan spiked Murkrow down onto the ground as it landed and continued to roll onward. It turned sharply, thick leathery skin screeching against the hard ground, and circled back for another attack.

"Murkrow," Phos cried out, "return!"

A red recall beam shot through the mist and returned Murkrow to its Pokéball. Abaddonphan quickly raced across the battlefield as another volley of crystallized stars began to rain down.

"Mesuizoic, time for some revenge!"

The massive theropod-like dragon emerged amidst a shower of thundering explosions. Its serrated jaws reared up above the mist as it whipped its twin tails and howled. Abaddonphan's glowing rocks flared to life and stabbed into its sides and legs, turning its howls into a pained roar. Mesuizoic's yellow eyes glared sharply at Abaddonphan as it rolled past.

Franco raised his Pokéball and recalled Abaddonphan. "You may be useful later," he said. He hurled another Pokéball across the cavern. "Androgarde, Spirit Break!"

Androgarde unfolded its body and extended its glaive pole. It slotted both of its blades onto the pole and cleared the mist around itself with a quick twirl of its weapon. The android held its glaive behind its back and sprinted forward, metal boots ringing against the cavern floor as it closed in on its foe. Mesuizoic shook its purple mane and roared a challenge at its opponent. Androgarde brought its glaive forward, leapt up, and thrust down toward Mesuizoic's head. The blades whistled sharply as they sliced through the air and the howling winds raced to fill the vacuum in their wake. The glaive's pointed tip planted itself deeply in the ground. Androgarde looked around urgently. Mesuizoic was nowhere to be seen. The cavern shook, another tall hexagonal crystal slammed to the ground and rolled to a stop.

Phos chuckled. "Sludge Bomb!"

Zoroark's black silhouette dashed through the mist. It vomited a large glob of purple toxins that collided against Androgarde's body and exploded in a violent burst of burning poison.

The android's body twitched and convulsed. The pink light in its core dimmed, and Androgarde slumped to the ground.

Franco's lips curled around his clenched teeth as he recalled Androgarde. "So that's your plan," he snarled. His fingers glided over his next ball. "Tauros," he shouted, "Smart Strike!"

Franco's Tauros barreled out of the mist and careened directly toward Zoroark. The Illusion Fox fled on all fours, weaving around falling stars and leaping over the fallen crystal. Guided by the silver light glowing from its horns, Tauros followed closely behind, smashing straight through the crystal without slowing down.

In another point in time, Terapagos's power surged. The earth split apart beneath Toxicroak's feet, and a volcanic eruption of splintered stones and arcane orange energy rocketed upward. A sudden wall of magma forced Zoroark's claws to dig into the ground as it skidded to a halt. The Wild Bull Pokémon continued to charge. Tauros tilted its head down, leapt forward, and thrust its curved horns upward, raking across Zoroark's back and hurling it into the air. Zoroark howled in pain and tumbled limply head over foot. Its foe turned, bucked, and kicked Zoroark across the chamber before it could recover.

Phos returned Zoroark to its ball and sent out Murkrow again. Abaddonphan's floating stones vibrated as they sensed the Pokéball open. They gleamed and whistled through the air, stabbing down toward the tiny crow-like creature as it emerged. Murkrow batted a stone away with its stick. A second stone impacted against its wing, knocking the stick out of its grasp. Murkrow cried out loudly and scrambled for its fallen stick as the rest of the stones rained down on it. The pointed rocks clattered to the ground, and Murkrow staggered away in a daze. Tauros turned toward its next opponent and snorted fire from its flared nostrils.

"Roost," Phos shouted.

Murkrow squatted down on the ground and steadied its labored breathing. A soft blue glow spread across its black feathers, and the bleeding puncture wounds left by the Stealth Rocks quickly began to close.

Franco pointed down at Murkrow and barked his next order. "Raging Bull!"

In an instant, Tauros's mane erupted into a blazing inferno. It sprinted forward, whipping itself into a frenzy by lashing its coiled tails across its back. Tauros covered the length of the cavern in a matter of seconds and angled its horns to spear Murkrow off the ground.

"Now, Thunder Wave!"

Murkrow quickly stood up, pointed its stick forward, and cast its paralytic hex on Tauros's legs. The Wild Bull Pokémon bellowed as its deadened legs buckled and collapsed from under it. Tauros fell squarely on its chin and began to roll on its own momentum.

"Aerial Ace!"

Murkrow eyed Tauros as its larger foe skidded helplessly toward it. The Darkness Pokémon tucked its glowing stick under its wing, angled the wide brim of its crest down, and

stood rigid as a statue. As Tauros tumbled forward, Murkrow flew forward on the rushing wind and slashed its stick across Tauros's vulnerable underside. Tauros slid to a halt behind Murkrow and shakily pushed itself off the ground. Murkrow turned back toward its opponent and held its stick in front of itself with both wings.

"Tauros," Franco snapped, "don't you dare let that bird make a mockery of you!"

Tauros stamped a hoof down and whipped its tails across its back like a trio of matchsticks. Its black fur ignited into a scarlet fireball and Tauros slowly stomped forward for another attack.

"Don't let up," Phos shouted.

Murkrow bathed its stick in white light and hopped toward Tauros. The Wild Bull thrust its horns forward, and Murkrow leapt high into the air above the attack. It squawked and brought its stick down to slam atop Tauros's head. Tauros blocked the attack with the armored bone disk protruding from its forehead and countered with a quick turn of its head. Murkrow deflected the strike with a sideways sweep of its stick and staggered backward. Tauros pressed the assault, quickly charging forward and forcing Murkrow to brace its stick against Tauros's burning horns to save itself. With fast footwork, Tauros stepped back, slid its horns under the stick, and lifted its head upward to yank the stick out of Murkrow's feathered fingertips. Murkrow wailed in anguish as its prized stick cartwheeled through the air and clattered to the ground. Tauros flattened Murkrow against the ground with a fierce headbutt and raised its burning hooves up to deliver a finishing strike.

A flurry of blows rang out like bell gongs across the cavern as Kommo-o waded into the horde of enemies surrounding it. A Brute Bonnet's unwieldy shield-like mushroom caps were easily bypassed by a series of precise jabs. A well-aimed kick turned a spinning black-and-red metal wheel into a projectile that shot a Volcarobot out of the air.

An Alloyama slammed a floating palm into Kommo-o's pointed snout, and a Slither Wing scuttled forward to grapple its foe before Kommo-o could recover. Powerful wings beat at Kommo-o's armored flanks as the scaly dragon pushed back against the giant moth bearing down on it. The Slither Wing hissed and thrashed violently as Koraidon pulled it away and slammed it to the ground. The scarlet dragon opened its jaws wide and unleashed a stream of fire that incinerated the thick white fur covering its opponent's body. Koraidon glanced at Kommo-o and nodded before turning its attention toward the Alloyama and galloping forward with claws wreathed in fire. Kommo-o nodded stoically back and slammed the massive gold-rimmed scales on its powerful forearms together. The glowing blue shockwave that radiated out cut a swath through a herd of Great Tusk and blew away a tiny Robobird taking aim at Koraidon's back. A Roaring Moon spread its red crescent wings wide and swooped down toward Koraidon. Kommo-o leapt into the air and intercepted its foe, pulling it down and subduing it with a series of hooks to the jaw and a clenched hammer fist. Koraidon pressed its back against Kommo-o's and roared a defiant challenge toward the enemies surrounding them. Bibi's rigorous training regimen culminated as the two dragons fought together with single-minded clarity. Each relentless punch and every grapple or tail swipe ensured no foe could pierce through their combined offense. They stood tall over a hill of fallen foes, red blood and black oil dripping from their clenched knuckles as they searched for the next threat.

A flash of bright pink light caught Kommo-o's eye. A pair of dark wings emerged from the cavern wall as a cackling specter gathered its energy and launched a violently-swirling Moonblast. Kommo-o grabbed Koraidon by its shoulder spikes and threw it to the ground and out of the way of the attack. The Moonblast impacted against Kommo-o's exposed chest and detonated, burning Kommo-o's body with sizzling otherworldly light. Kommo-o roared out in agony and crumpled to the ground.

Bibi recalled the fallen dragon and quickly sent out her Ribombee. "Intercept that Flutter Mane," she commanded. The tiny yellow Bee Fly Pokémon quickly darted into the air and held a small tuft of pollen aloft. It channeled energy around the pollen and hurled a Moonblast of its own that collided against the Flutter Mane's next attack and neutralized it in a blinding explosion. As Koraidon continued its battle on the ground, Ribombee and Flutter Mane engaged in a fierce aerial duel too fast for Bibi's human eyes to follow. Bright volleys of pink spheres exploded against the cavern's floor, walls, and ceiling. A stray shot blasted an Androgarde off its feet as it exited the dark tunnel. From the sound of Flutter Mane's shrill laughter, Bibi couldn't tell just which Fairy-Type had thrown the attack.

Ribombee buzzed around the chamber, sensing the aura of Flutter Mane's emotions as the Paradox Pokémon phased in and out of the surrounding stone and crystal lattices. Flutter Mane sprang out of the wall and glided over the battlefield, hurling glowing pink orbs wildly at its foes. Koraidon dived for safety and pressed its body low to the ground. Seizing the opportunity, a Great Tusk and its smaller metal counterpart pressed their weight down on Koraidon and began to pummel it. Ribombee dodged around the attack and raced past Flutter Mane, heading it off before it could retreat into the opposite wall again. The Bee Fly Pokémon grabbed two tiny handfuls of pollen out of its fluffy brown scarf, mashed them together, and formed a massive sphere of energy several times larger than itself and held it in front of its body.

Flutter Mane shrieked in wide-eyed horror as it plowed directly into the waiting Moonblast. The force of the ensuing explosion slammed Ribombee into the wall while its foe plummeted to the ground and spasmed. Ribombee shook its head and peeled itself off the wall. It channeled another Moonblast and blasted away the Great Tusk stomping on its partner. Koraidon grabbed the remaining metal Paradox by the trunk and slammed it into a wall to subdue it. Ribombee tossed Koraidon a glowing green ball of pollen, and Koraidon's wounds quickly healed as the dragon hungrily devoured its gift. As Ribombee fluttered away, an electrified rock shot out of the tunnel like a cannonball and struck it dead-on. Bibi recalled Ribombee's crumpled form as a metal-bodied Tyranitron stomped into the fight.

The Paradox Pokémon reared its head back and roared triumphantly. Mesuizoic pressed its foot down on Tauros's side and silently dared it to fight back. The final few embers flickering within Tauros's drenched mane faded, and the Wild Bull Pokémon's heavy head dropped.

"Messie," Phos called out, "he's beaten; that's enough."

Mesuizoic snarled and pushed its claws deeper into Tauros's ribs before it finally relented. The massive dragon glowered at Franco as he recalled his Tauros.

Another attack from Terapagos filled the cavern with falling stars. Phos rolled out of the way of an exploding comet and quickly sidestepped around a chunk of crystal falling from the ceiling. “Franco,” she shouted, “this is getting out of control!”

Franco’s mouth curled with rage. “I *take* control,” he asserted.

Phos grit her teeth. “Idiot!” She swept her arms out to the devastation covering the battlefield. “You call this taking control?”

He reached for the pearl-white Pokéball trembling at his side. “There have been setbacks,” Franco admitted, “but there has never been one straight road to success. We walk now in the footsteps of countless great pioneers and visionaries, and I have stayed true to their path.”

“They marched to their deaths! The old empire, the explorers, your precious Professor, where are they now?!”

“They guided me exactly where I needed to be.”

“It’s a trail of bones, Franco!”

Franco hurled the shaking Pokéball forward. A seething maelstrom of black shadows erupted from the ball and took shape into the hulking form of Annihilape. Two clenched fists pounded cracks into the stone floor; two beady red eyes glared at Phos and Mesuizoic. Annihilape beat its chest and unleashed a baritone roar that rumbled through Phos’s body and made her hair stand on end.

“There’s only one obstacle still standing in my way.”

“Messie,” Phos screamed, “Hydro Steam!”

A torrent of rushing water raced across the cavern, forming waves as strong as an ocean current. A muscular, humanoid dolphin-like creature rode the front of the surf with a muscular flipper fist clenched tightly and wrapped in a glove of light blue slime. A cape of slime billowed from its broad shoulders, and the heart-shaped crest on its wide pectorals shined with a bright pink light. The eyes behind its bubble goggles narrowed as Palafin honed in on the barrier shielding Terapagos. With the strength of the waves propelling it forward, its fist crashed into the barrier and sent water raining down across the cavern. Palafin followed its first punch with a second swing, then another as it pummeled the shield.

The impact of the strike sent shockwaves tearing across the battlefield as Annihilape slammed its fist into Mesuizoic’s jaw. The dragon staggered backward, and Annihilape continued the assault. It leapt forward and grabbed a thick handful of Mesuizoic’s purple mane. The Paradox Pokémon shook its head wildly and slammed its hexagonal horns into a crystal pillar to try and force its foe loose. Annihilape clung on tightly and continued to punch and kick at Mesuizoic’s throat. The dragon slammed its head down like a cudgel against the ground. Annihilape’s ghostly form sank into the ground and aimed a flurry of fierce blows against Mesuizoic’s prone underbelly. Its opponent rolled to its side, roaring in pain as it unleashed a torrent of steaming water from its bleeding, dislocated jaw and blasted through the rock to scald

Annihilape's exposed body. The force of the attack sent Annihilape rolling across the ground. Mesuizoic stomped after it, sweeping Annihilape across the cavern until every drop of water in the dragon's body was spent. Annihilape pushed off the floor and shook the boiling water out of its wispy gray-and-white fur. It snorted loudly as its pig-like snout flared.

"Rage Fist!"

The shadows swelled around Annihilape's injured body. It roared and bounded on its feet and knuckles before leaping into the air and raising its fists above its head. Malevolent dark energy enveloped its black fists, and it slammed down atop Mesuizoic's horns.

The teal and green crystalline tribal mask shielding Ogerpon glowed brightly and shattered into thousands of fading white crystal shards as Terapagos reclaimed its Terastal energy and absorbed it into its shell.

Torrents of Terastal energy erupted out of the walls and ceiling of the cavern, spiraling around the chamber in a blinding hurricane of light and pouring into the indigo sphere expanding outward. Wherever the currents swelled, the stone of the cavern simply ceased to exist, stripped apart atom by atom within an attosecond.

Bibi looked up in amazement as countless unfamiliar landscapes flooded her vision within the geyser of energy flowing above her head. An endless primordial jungle, the gargantuan strata of an incomprehensible city-sized factory, the pristine white sands of a sprawling lake. For a brief moment, Bibi could have sworn she had recognized the sulphuric spring atop Oni Mountain as it raced past. Hot, freezing, dry, humid, and everything in between coalesced into an alien sensation that tickled the young girl's skin.

As Phos guided Mesuizoic through the falling star storm, she watched in horrified awe as the comets emerged from the indigo rift and rained in all directions. Some continued to explode across the cavern floor, while others hurtled into the rifts flooding into the chamber and exploded across space and time. A flash of light splashed down in a small blue spring atop a scorched mountaintop. The comet sank to the bottom of the pool and sprouted into a hexagonal crystal. Shimmering stars fell across a chain of heavily-forested islands. Phos threw herself to the ground as a trio of bright pink comets hurtled past her head and entered the rift behind her. The crystal stars crashed into the tall orange sand dunes of a desert at dusk. Through the whipping sandstorm within the rift, Phos could see the faint neon glow of the towering Rondez-View Ferris wheel and Nimbasa City beyond.

A wild-eyed gentleman stared at the god-like display of power surrounding him. With shaking hands, Heath fanatically scribbled into his notebook, desperately hoping to convey through drawing a description of a scene that defied words alone.

Phos's fingers trembled as she recalled Mesuizoic. Annihilape raised its fists into the air and roared with fury. She reached for her last remaining Pokéball and held it close to her lips. "You're my last hope," she said. She held her finger on the release button, took a deep breath, and threw it. "Let's go, partner! We can't lose this."

Scrafty emerged from its ball. The Stealth Rocks vibrated into the air, took aim at it, and screamed through the air.

“Pull that hide up!”

Scrafty grabbed onto the loose skin around its waist and pulled it taut around its body. The sharp rocks collided against the thick, rubbery hide and clattered to the ground. A single spear-tipped stone planted itself in the dead skin inches away from Scrafty’s heart. The Hoodlum Pokémon whistled sharply, pulled the rock out, and peered at Phos through the torn hole.

Franco pointed forward. “I can’t allow them to interfere. Annihilape! Drain Punch!”

Annihilape sank into the shadows and slithered across the battlefield. It rose up in front of its hated rival and grabbed Scrafty by the loose skin tied around its throat before the reptilian creature could react. Annihilape narrowed its eyes and lifted Scrafty off the ground with one hand. Scrafty grabbed onto Annihilape’s wrist and kicked out at its body. The Hoodlum Pokémon glowered down at Annihilape, pursed its lips, and spat a wad of burning acid into Annihilape’s eye.

Annihilape pinched its eye shut and recoiled. It clenched its spare hand into a glowing green fist.

“Scrafty, it’s aiming for your stomach! Block it!”

At its Trainer’s command, Scrafty let go of Annihilape’s wrist and grabbed onto its shed skin for a second time. It pulled its loose skin up to shield itself as Annihilape launched its attack. The Rage Monkey’s glowing green fist bounced off the rubbery dead skin. It tried again, slamming its fist into Scrafty’s torso. The tear widened as Scrafty’s elastic armor quivered and repelled Annihilape’s strike. Annihilape growled and thrust its fist upward again. The tear split wide open, leaving Scrafty’s living flesh exposed and vulnerable. The Hoodlum wrapped the torn skin around its rival’s fist and held it in place before Annihilape could pull away.

“Now,” Phos shouted, “Dragon Tail!”

Scrafty’s long tail began to glow blue. Annihilape snarled and slammed Scrafty into the ground. The impact knocked the air out of Scrafty’s lungs, but the Hoodlum Pokémon refused to release its grip until its foe pulled it off the ground for another slam. Riding the momentum, Scrafty let go of its skin, released Annihilape’s trapped hand, and somersaulted through the air to slam its glowing tail into Annihilape’s back.

The draconic energy enveloped Annihilape, sending it hurtling through the air and forcing it back into its Pokéball. The draconic energy leapt from Annihilape’s ball to the ball next to it and forced Abaddonphan to emerge.

“You’re stalling,” Franco said.

Phos smirked and eyed the expanding time warp. “We don’t need to win as long as I make sure you lose.”

Franco clenched his fist. "Abaddonphan, Close Combat!"

The mighty Great Tusk trumpeted and charged forward. Bibi whistled a note that steadily rose in pitch, and her Skeledirge's voice climbed higher alongside her. The shockwaves emanating from the crocodilian's serrated maw steadily took on a glowing pink hue. The pink soundwaves deafened the Great Tusk, arrested its momentum, and sent it staggering backward before it toppled to the ground.

Skeledirge and Koraidon gasped for breath surrounded by dozens of defeated foes, and then the next assault started. Bibi wiped the chilled beads of sweat from her forehead and got to work. A Shadow Ball from Skeledirge shot another Flutter Mane out of the air. Koraidon tackled a Tyranitron into the wall and beat it to the ground. The ghostly ember perched atop Skeledirge's angular snout took shape into a phoenix on the wing and torched a Slither Wing as it crawled out of the tunnel. A Brute Bonnet stomped Skeledirge's jaws shut and began to pummel it with a pair of sturdy mushroom caps. Koraidon grabbed the mushroom-like Paradox's thin arms and pulled it away from Skeledirge. A Robobird marched down the tunnel with its water tank at the ready. It planted its ski-like feet at the mouth of the chamber and took aim at the red-scaled crocodilian shouting back against a pack of Scream Tail. It charged its water tank, opened its valve, and drowned out Skeledirge's fire in a blast of pressurized water. Bibi quickly returned the fainted Pokémon to its ball. She turned toward the source of the attack and froze stiff.

Koraidon wrapped its razor-sharp claws around the clockwork bird's head and lifted it into the air. Leering yellow eyes studied the robot with barely-restrained sadistic glee as the tiny creature flailed its mechanical limbs and chirped out warning signs. The dragon gazed at its reflection within the Robobird's spherical red chrome body. A wolfish grin peeled its lips away from its serrated teeth.

Koraidon clamped both hands on the robot and began to pull. Robobird's head extended at the end of a long metal cable. Koraidon continued to pull further and further as the cable went taut. Warning lights flashed across Robobird's LED eyes.

With a final, swift jerk, Koraidon ripped Robobird's head from its body in a spray of oil and antifreeze. The dragon tossed the broken robot aside, leered into the thick lenses of Bibi's glasses staring in horror from across the room, and bared its fangs. By the time Bibi's Koraidon could break away from the horde of foes surrounding it, it was already too late. The other Koraidon moved quickly, pouncing on its rival and stabbing its claws into the inflated black sac on Rairai's throat. At the sight of the two rival alphas, the other Paradoxes hastily scrambled out of the cavern, abandoning their zealous pursuit of Terapagos and finding a way home. A rapid series of slashes, punches, and throat-tearing bites took Bibi's Koraidon by surprise and left it bleeding on the ground in stunned shock.

The taste was almost nostalgic.

The Koraidon sniffed the air greedily and breathed in Bibi's scent. The young girl slowly backed away in silent shock, inching her way with unsteady footsteps down the tunnel she and her team had guarded so fiercely. Although its face and right arm were blackened and scarred beyond recognition, there was no mistaking the monster skulking toward her.

Professor Sada's Guardian of Paradise reached a claw out toward Bibi and hooked the necktie around her shirt collar. The Koraidon had been denied its revenge for too long. Exacting its pound of flesh would be a slow and personal affair. She stood petrified, too rigid to speak, too paralyzed to even tremble. Phos's distant voice echoed from further down the tunnel, piqueing the dragon's curiosity. The Guardian growled and dragged its helpless prey behind it to investigate the source of the noise. It followed the current of Terastal energy overhead into the farthest depths of Area Zero.

Within the main chamber, Phos and Franco were fully-absorbed within their own battle, screaming orders over the howling tides of energy surging around them. Abaddonphan jabbed at Scrafty with the tip of its trunk balled into an armored fist. Scrafty leapt to the side and kicked the Paradox Pokémon onto its back before punching down with an arm cloaked in pale green light. Abaddonphan curled into a ball, rolled away, and regained its footing before charging in for another attack. All the while, the rift in the center of the chamber continued to grow larger. Bibi and Ogerpon fought a valiant losing battle against the uncontrollable power of Terapagos as her companions stood by and watched.

The gnarled scars on the Guardian's body itched. The prey was still as weak as ever, but it was never alone. In all the time that had passed since their last encounter, the dragon had reflected bitterly on its loss and learned from its mistakes. There would be no packmates to save it this time. It tossed Bibi to the ground and silently approached its target. The young girl could only stare in unblinking terror as the Guardian crept toward Phos's back. The sight of her flowing red hair had whetted the appetite of the Guardian's grisly imagination. It hungrily licked its lips and wreathed its sharp claws in burning energy.

From behind her crooked glasses, Bibi's dilated pupils flitted back and forth between the wild Koraidon and Phos. The inside of her skull throbbed in agony with every racing heartbeat. Sweat poured from her body and soaked her clothes. She tried to speak up, but her throat clenched tightly shut and she could only rattle out a raspy sigh. The howl of the unnatural wind, screaming rifts in reality, and shouting voices all melted together into a ringing static in her ears. The edges of her vision faded and blackened. The young girl curled into a ball on the fractured stone ground and buried her face in her knees. She pinched her eyes shut and sobbed.

A distant voice echoed, "*You need to help her!*"

Bibi's eyes fluttered open. She fought against the stiffened muscles in her neck and looked up at the massive rift in the center of the chamber.

Terapagos's crystalline body flashed with bright purple energy. Its towering form smashed down like a hammer, delivering a knockout blow against Ogerpon. Kieran stared despondently at his feet and muttered to himself; his older sister covered her clenched teeth with the palm of her hands and flinched. Bibi's defiant stance wavered. She wiped the sweat from her forehead and took several labored steps away from Terapagos's rampage, fighting against the Terastal energy gathering around her. She recalled her fainted Pokémon, threw her next Pokéball, and a large apple-shaped clump of dripping red goo emerged. A slender green dragon wormed its way out of the apple's core and stretched its long neck out. The dragon was

joined by four more identical heads emerging from the apple's sides. They put their heads together and hissed at their foe.

The Guardian was almost in killing distance now. It reared its arm back and prepared to strike.

Bibi turned to Kieran and screamed out, "Come on, Kiki! Let's do it together!"

The troubled young Trainer's fists clenched. Bibi pushed herself off the ground and ran headlong toward the danger, screaming with fury. "Phos," she shouted, "look out!"

Phos turned her head toward Bibi as the scarred Koraidon brought its claw down. She gasped and swore as she rolled out of the way of the attack. Scrafty looked over its shoulder to investigate. Franco raised an eyebrow at the appearance of the second Koraidon and barked a command to his Pokémon. A fierce sweep from Abaddonphan's trunk sent Scrafty tumbling across the ground.

The Guardian turned to face Bibi and roared. Its roar was answered by the young girl's Koraidon as the Winged King stomped into the cavern and took its place at Bibi's side.

"Bibi," Phos called out, "you got this?"

Bibi and Koraidon turned to one another and nodded. They clenched their fists and moved in synch, daring the Guardian to battle them with a taunting gesture.

The Guardian's lips curled back, the vengeful dragon would be more than happy to oblige.

It was the chance encounter that all three combatants dreaded and longed for. The opportunity to kill their pasts. Bibi snapped her fingers, and the two Koraidon charged.

Within the rift, Kieran threw his Pokéball and released another Hydrapple identical to the one belonging to Bibi. Its many heads uncoiled and cheered for its friend. Terapagos gathered its energy into another barrier of light and summoned an overwhelming swarm of crystalline meteors.

Abaddonphan trumpeted and rolled toward Scrafty. The Hoodlum Pokémon braced and caught the Paradox's rolling tackle, its feet sliding across the ground as falling stars crashed around it.

Phos pressed her back against a fallen crystal. "Scrafty," she shouted, "use that shield!"

An impish grin spread across Scrafty's face. It repositioned its hands and forced Abaddonphan to stay in its curled-up form. The elephantine Paradox struggled to break free, but Scrafty held firm, pressing its armored trunk and rear together and preventing it from unfurling. Franco pressed the button on Abaddonphan's Pokéball. Scrafty blocked the recall beam with its body and held its foe in front of itself as a falling star hurtled toward it. The crystal star exploded against Abaddonphan's thick hide, nearly knocking Scrafty off its feet. Scrafty pushed back and ran into the path of the next falling star. It leapt high into the air and allowed its helpless shield to

take the full force of the next impact. The explosion sent Scrafty hurtling back toward the ground, where it broke its fall with a Paradox-shaped trampoline. Abaddonphan pinched its bloodshot eye tightly shut and struggled to its feet.

“High Jump Kick,” Phos commanded, “Aim high!”

Scrafty pulled its shed skin taut and raced forward, jumping and dodging out of the way of the falling stars. Its lower body glowed with brilliant orange light as it cried out and launched its kick. The tip of Scrafty’s foot slammed upward into Abaddonphan’s jaw, launching it spinning high into the air where another stray comet dealt the finishing blow.

Franco returned Abaddonphan to its ball. He glanced at the two dragons wrestling at the mouth of the cavern. At its Trainer’s nonverbal command, Bibi’s Koraidon crossed its arms over its chest and blocked a jab from its rival. It swatted away a right hook, leapt away from a left uppercut, pushed against the ground with its tail, and countered with a bone-buckling kick aimed at its foe’s knee. Franco looked up at the rift, where the two Hydrapple emerged from their waxy shells and launched a series of attacks that chipped away at Terapagos’s barrier. He turned to Phos and Scrafty bumping fists and clenched his hand around Annihilape’s ball.

“It’s almost poetic,” Franco mused.

A wave of darkness washed across the chamber as Franco released Annihilape and the Rage Monkey Pokémon emerged from the shadows. It curled its flat nose at the sight of its hated foe and bellowed with anger.

Phos knelt down and massaged Scrafty’s shoulders. “You ready to finish this, partner?”

Scrafty sneered at its rival and spat a wad of burning acid onto the ground.

Franco closed his eyes and smiled. “My victory is in my grasp,” he said. “You can’t win against me, Phos. I hold the advantage, in this timeline and any other.” He pointed forward. “Annihilape,” he bellowed, “end this quickly! Close Combat!”

Annihilape roared and bounded across the battlefield on its feet and knuckles. Scrafty adjusted its loose skin and stood its ground.

Phos reached her right hand inside her jacket pocket and retrieved a small onyx-hued crystal orb. She took a deep breath and pressed the hexagonal button on its front. In an instant, the green jewel inside the orb pulsed with light as it was lowered into a circular chamber. A constellation of teal lights filled the orb as thin streams of energy diverted away from the torrents flooding into the central rift and formed a spinning vortex around her hand. Phos’s hair fluttered wildly, she pinched her eye closed to shield it from the intensifying light. She grabbed onto her wrist and squeezed as the gathering energy threatened to rip the Tera Orb out of her hands.

As Annihilape screamed and lunged for Scrafty, a lifetime of memories raced through Phos’s mind.

Her younger self squealed with glee as the Pokéball she had picked off the ground locked shut. Her delight gave way to disappointment following loss after loss and bitter

disagreement. Sitting at her grandfather's kitchen table, she crossed her arms over her chest as the old man studied the small Scraggy sitting opposite of her.

"Yup, that's a very special Scraggy you have there," he had said, "I can tell there's something different about it."

She looked up at him and sighed. *"You want it?"*

Her grandfather shook his head. *"No, my sweet, it's special because it's yours."*

Their bond was secured that day by a perfect meal and an impromptu adventure. Through the highs and lows of the years that followed, in victory and defeat, Scrafty remained unwaveringly at her side. Sitting next to Azelie in that quiet Lumiose plaza, Phos gently squeezed Scrafty's Pokéball and kissed its red top.

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 inspected it closely. She pursed her lips and hummed before handing it back.

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

A lifetime of memories guided her to this exact moment. Phos channeled her emotions into a desperate scream and threw the Tera Orb to Scrafty. Scrafty caught the orb in its hand and disappeared within a cluster of brightly glowing crystals emerging from the earth. Annihilape howled and swung wildly at the crystals, chipping away at the hexagonal lattices as it tried to force its way to its target.

Phos smiled with pride. "Scrafty," she shouted, "we've come too far to stop now! I'm not afraid to lose!" She clenched her fist and thrust her arm out to her side. "I'll never be afraid to keep moving forward! Not when you're with me! When night falls, I'll always have the stars to guide me through the dark, and you're the brightest light!"

Annihilape's fists sent deep fractures running across the crystals.

"So stand with me, Scrafty! Stand and fight! Fight for everyone else who couldn't be here! Fight to show that snake and his pet monkey what we're made of, once and for all! Fight because you've earned this win!"

Annihilape reared back and punched the crystals with all its strength. The crystals shattered in a brilliant burst of white light. Scrafty emerged covered from head to tail in pink crystalline armor. A gemstone crown resembling a bright pink heart with outstretched wings of diamond tears rested atop its head. Annihilape recoiled away from the radiant light emanating from Scrafty's body and quickly lashed out with a series of kicks and scratches. Its attacks bounced harmlessly off the pink Tera shell. Scrafty grabbed Annihilape by the wrist and countered with a thundering headbutt that sent the Rage Monkey reeling back in a daze.

Phos shook her head. "Close Combat?" She grinned widely. "Predictable to the end."

Franco grit his teeth and inhaled sharply. Annihilape shook off the pain and scowled.

She pumped her fists. "Scrafty, Tera Blast!"

Scrafty warbled loudly. The crystals covering its body flashed brightly. Pink energy swirled around its crystalized fists. The Hoodlum Pokémon lunged forward with a heavy cross punch. Annihilape raised its black arms in front of its face to block the attack and recoiled away as the pink crystal seared its flesh. Scrafty pursued, following its attack with a right hook that struck true against the side of Annihilape's head. The ghostly Rage Monkey Pokémon roared in pain and melted into the ground. The crystalline Pokémon grabbed onto the long wispy white hair of its foe before it could escape and pulled it back up for another round. It delivered a sharp uppercut into Annihilape's stomach that left its opponent doubled over.

Franco clenched his fists tightly. "Annihilape," he roared, "Rage Fist!"

Black shadows swelled around Annihilape's body as Scrafty's fists slammed atop its head. Annihilape bellowed with fury, and the dark aura erupted outward, pushing its foe off-balance. The shadows coalesced around Annihilape's fist. It screamed and punched Scrafty with all its might, knocking the Hoodlum Pokémon high into the air and sending fault lines racing across its crystal armor. The ghostly creature sank into the shadows and slithered across the ground ahead of its foe. A massive black hand reached up, grabbed onto Scrafty's long tail, and slammed it headfirst into the earth. The Rage Monkey rose out of the ground and hurled its foe around like a flail. Fragments of rock and glowing crystal chipped away with every echoing impact against the cavern's floor. With a deafening howl, Annihilape turned and whipped Scrafty across the cavern, sending it cartwheeling into the back of the Guardian's legs.

Bleeding and panting for breath, Bibi's Koraidon seized the opportunity while its counterpart's webbed feet clawed at the ground to keep its balance. It stepped around Scrafty's prone body and spiked its knee into the narrow flesh beneath the Guardian's inflated throat sac. The scarred Paradox crumpled to all fours and quickly grabbed at its rival's ankle. The Guardian pulled Koraidon down to the ground with it and leapt forward, landing atop Koraidon's chest and pinning its arms. It launched a sharp left hook against Koraidon's jaw, followed immediately by a right hook that cut into Koraidon's pinched-shut eyelid.

At Bibi's command, Koraidon opened its mouth and spewed a stream of fire that singed the feathers of the Guardian's war bonnet. Its rival pulled away from the fire and shielded its face. Koraidon wrapped its tail around its foe's body and yanked it backward. Burning claws dug deep channels into the Guardian's thighs. It roared in pain and rolled to the side, scrambling on all fours to distance itself from its opponent. It rose up on shaking legs and balanced itself with its tail. It leapt backward and took a knee as the shadowy form of Annihilape rushed past its face.

Galloping on all fours, Koraidon pounced on its foe and tackled it to the ground, pummeling the Guardian with clenched fists and rending talons while its foe's feet clawed at its belly. The scarred dragon reached for a Tera crystal shard at its side and smashed it against the head of its opponent. Koraidon rolled to its side and both combatants rose to their feet at the same time. Droplets of blood splashed against the ground below their loosely-hanging maws. They stared each other down, yellow eyes straining to remain open between hunched

shoulders. Broken and singed feathers fluttered below a rushing torrent of Terastal energy. Standing behind the Guardian's back, Bibi looked into the coursing stream cutting through the air and perked up.

"That's it," she thought. She snapped her fingers to get her Koraidon's attention and gestured up toward the vortex overhead.

Rairai's eyes widened in a flash of recognition. It nodded and planted its feet firmly on the ground. A smile spread across its bloodied teeth as it beckoned its rival to attack.

The Guardian wiped its mouth on the back of its wrist and grinned. It flexed its sharp talons and slowly bowed its head, its narrowed eyes never straying from the gaze of its opponent. The Guardian roared and lunged forward with its arms outstretched. Rairai mirrored its foe and clasped its fingers around the Guardian's hands, the two dragons shoving against one another in a final contest of strength. Their arms trembled; serrated teeth snapped at throat sacs swelling with desperate gulps of air. The Guardian pushed. Rairai smiled and relented, pulling back and taking a knee. The Guardian tumbled forward and caught itself on its rival's shoulder. Rairai moved quickly, hoisting its foe over its shoulder and lifting it overhead. It was as easy as a flick of the wrist. With a deep breath, the Winged King stood up, tightened its muscles, and hurled its nemesis into the air. The torrent of energy streaming into the cavern enveloped the Guardian completely, and the scarred Koraidon instantly disappeared in a flash of blue light.

Koraidon roared into the energy stream, sat down on the cavern floor, and closed its eyes triumphantly. Bibi ran to her Pokémon and jumped into its waiting arms, laughing with relief as she and her prized partner nuzzled one another relentlessly.

The battle continued across the chamber as fists glowing with bright pink light clashed against fists shrouded in darkness. Scrafty leapt forward and punched its rival across the cheek. Annihilape grabbed Scrafty's wrist, spun on its heel, and flung its enemy backward. The Hoodlum Pokémon's feet scraped across the ground. It braced itself with its tail, blocked Annihilape's left hook with its armored forearm, and countered with a headbutt across the Rage Monkey's flat nose.

Dark blood trickled from Annihilape's flared nostrils. Scrafty's orange skin was beginning to show through deep cracks in its Terastal shell. The two Pokémon didn't have time to be exhausted as they continued to brawl. A jab to the teeth, a sharp kick to the knee, body blows punctuated by flashes of light as more crystalized energy splintered into glowing wisps that melded into the energy feeding the central rift. Scrafty dropped low and hurled dirt and pulverized rock into Annihilape's beady red eyes. Annihilape melted into the shadows and enveloped Scrafty in a sphere of darkness, pummeling it from all angles.

Phos watched carefully for the red eyes snaking through the dark as Scrafty attempted to block Annihilape's attacks. Left, right, below, left, back, left, front, right, above. Left, right, below, left, back, left, front...

"Scrafty," Phos shouted, "Above you! Tera Blast!"

The crystals along Scrafty's arms and hands flashed. The Hoodlum Pokémon croaked and launched an uppercut that met Annihilape's clenched fist and pushed it away. The Rage Monkey somersaulted through the air and skidded to a halt on its hands and feet. The surge of Terastal energy banished the shadows, leaving Scrafty to glare at its opponent from afar.

Another crystal pillar shattered from its base and collapsed, dividing the chamber in half with a long and narrow barricade. Phos and Scrafty stood on one side of the fallen pillar, Annihilape and Franco stood opposite of them.

Franco shielded his eyes from the billowing cloud of debris.

Phos covered her nose and mouth with the raised collar of her jacket and narrowed her eyes.

"Annihilape," Franco shouted.

"Scrafty," Phos shouted.

"Grab onto the crystal!"

"Break through the crystal!"

"Rage Fist!"

"Tera Blast!"

They pointed forward in unison. "Finish this!"

Annihilape melted into the shadows and raced across the ground. With the crystalline armor securing its loose skin, Scrafty broke into a sprint. The crystal lifted off the ground as the Rage Monkey Pokémon emerged underneath it shrouded in a tidal wave of malevolent shadows. Wielding it like a massive, oversized cudgel, Annihilape gathered its strength and swung the broken crystal in a sweeping horizontal arc toward Scrafty. The Hoodlum Pokémon's lower body flashed with light as it leapt high into the air and vaulted over the incoming pillar. Annihilape spun on its heel with the momentum of the titanic crystal and brought it overhead for a smashing vertical strike. It roared and brought its weapon down directly over the head of its foe. Scrafty concentrated power in its crystallized fists and launched a spiraling uppercut.

The crystal shattered in a blinding burst of light. The reptilian Hoodlum Pokémon smashed through the pillar and split it in half. The Rage Monkey adjusted quickly, shoving the broken pillar in front of itself and slamming the blunted end of the crystal into its enemy with all the momentum of a collapsing mountain. Scrafty braced against the crystal as Annihilape pushed forward and prepared to crush its foe between the pillar and the cavern wall. It pushed back with all its strength, slowing the pillar's momentum to a grinding halt. Annihilape screamed and shoved forward again. The tip of Scrafty's tail brushed against the wall behind it. Scrafty cried out and pushed back, forcing the pillar away for just an instant.

It was all the time it needed. Scrafty braced and slammed its glowing knuckles into the crystal, pulverizing the section in front of it in a blinding explosion. The Hoodlum Pokémon

continued to punch through the crystal, armored fists launching strikes too fast even for Phos to keep track of. Punch after punch, step by step, Scrafty and Annihilape closed the distance. Annihilape hurled what remained of the pillar into a rift along the cavern's edge and ran forward with a massive fist clenched above its head. The two Pokémon leapt into the air and slammed their fists together. They hurtled past one another, rolled to a stop on the ground, and ran forward for another strike. Their fists collided again, sharp pink light and churning dark intertwining in a battle of willpower as their Trainers cheered them on.

"This is everything we trained for, Annihilape! Fight!"

"You've got 'em now, Scrafty! Don't let up!"

The shadows surged, the crystals splintered and began to dissolve into motes of light. Scrafty and Annihilape screamed as their trembling bodies lost and gained ground. The crystalline heart atop Scrafty's head cracked, its diamond wings shattered into light that the encroaching shadows hungrily swallowed up. The cracks traveled down the heart-shaped crown and across its face. The transparent crystal around Scrafty's narrowed bloodshot eyes splintered outward. The howling gale flooding the cavern became punctuated by the sound of breaking glass. Blinding rays of white light erupted across the Hoodlum Pokémon's body.

The vortex of light and dark exploded outward in a sudden forceful burst that sent Phos's long hair and Franco's loose cowlick billowing.

Annihilape somersaulted backward and landed on its feet.

Scrafty leapt out of the vortex after Annihilape, the crystals across its body completely shattered save for the condensed energy forming a thick gauntlet on its right hand. It screamed and swung outward, slamming its gloved fist into Annihilape's nose and unleashing the last of the Terastal energy in a brilliant pink explosion. Annihilape sailed through the air, bouncing and rolling across the splintered ground before skidding to a halt at Franco's feet. The Rage Monkey Pokémon reached up toward its Trainer and fell limp. Its red eyes darted up toward the spherical rift in the center of the cavern and the pair of Hydrapple battling against Terapagos within. Its dark eyelids slowly closed as it fainted.

The hinges of Annihilape's Pokéball groaned and creaked in Franco's tight grip as he wordlessly recalled his final Pokémon.

Phos and Scrafty erupted into loud, joyous laughter as they high-fived and hugged each other closely. She knelt down, licked her fingertip, and gently wiped away the trail of blood dripping down Scrafty's forehead. "I'm so proud of you," Phos said. She looked down at the Pokéballs on her belt. "All of you."

She scratched behind the red scales atop Scrafty's head and stood up. Phos turned to Bibi and Koraidon. The young girl and her dragon flashed a pair of wide, toothy grins and called out to her. She turned to Franco staring up into the rift. The energy shield in front of Terapagos shattered into countless fragments.

"Your reign's over, little king," Phos shouted, "and it wasn't nearly short enough."

Franco shook his head. He reached into the pocket of his suit jacket and retrieved a small yellow diamond. He pressed the Revive against the button of Annihilape's Pokéball, and the medicine merged with the capsule and bathed it in energy. Franco broke into a sprint toward the rift.

Phos gasped. "Where are you going?!"

"I may not have stopped you," Franco growled, "but there's still time to stop the Paradox from ending! I can still win!"

Phos swore and chased after him. To Franco's unblinking eyes, the whole world disappeared beyond the scope of the rift. His heart beat steadily like a war drum in his chest as he neared the sphere's outer edge. A muffled voice called his name. Irrelevant, his last chance was nearly within his grasp. Franco lunged for the portal, and was yanked out of the air and slammed into the ground. The impact forced the breath out of his lungs. He gasped for air and looked back. Although Phos was still a distance away, her grappling hook was secured around his ankle. Overhead, Bibi and Kieran's twin Hydrapple extended each of their five heads for an all-out finishing strike against Terapagos. Two massive golden laser beams pierced through Terapagos's crystalline body and shattered it in a burst of light. The Tera Pokémon retreated into a tiny green hexagonal jewel-like shell and clattered to the ground as the rift in time shrank, closed, and disappeared. The rifts and streams flooding into the chamber sputtered out and faded, leaving only the gentle glow of the remaining Tera crystals behind.

Phos flicked her wrist, and the grappling hook unlatched and retracted back into her sleeve. She shook her head and tutted. "Racing forward, but maybe this time you should have been facing backward."

Franco clawed at his hair and screamed in frustration. "I don't understand," he roared, "Why would you fight so hard to preserve mediocrity?! How could the pathetic state of this world be acceptable to you? To anyone else? With more resources, better talent, a clearer vision of the future, we could have had so much more! How could they not care? Why would they squander that potential?!"

Bibi and Koraidon stood at Phos and Scrafty's side. Phos placed her hand on her belt and took a step toward Franco. "It's because they have their Pokémon to make them happy," Phos answered. "And for some people, that's enough."

"It's a sickness," Franco snarled. "Unthinking cattle, all of them!"

"It's over," Phos stated firmly. She recalled Scrafty and swept her arms out at her sides. "Look around you and face the truth. The Paradox is over. The fight's over, Franco. You're going to have a lot to answer for."

Franco pushed off the ground, staggered limply to his feet, and said nothing.

Phos walked closer. "Hey, didn't you hear me?" She raised an eyebrow. "What, no long monologues? Purrloin ran off with your tongue? I said—"

Her words were silenced by a deafeningly loud crash of thunder that forced her to cover her ears in pain. The cavern shook violently, causing dust and loose stone to rain from the ceiling. A crystal pillar fell and dissolved into light before it could hit the ground.

Bibi looked around frantically. "Phos! Earthquake!"

Koraidon hurried its Trainer onto its back.

Phos steadied herself and sidestepped away from a falling chunk of stone. "Crap, the whole cave's coming down!"

Bibi grabbed onto Koraidon's shoulder spikes and calmed her mount with a gentle pat. "Climb on! Let's get outta here!"

Phos nodded. "C'mon, Frankie, we need to move!"

Franco waved her away. "Leave me here," he said calmly.

Phos's face contorted with anger. "What?! You're not getting off that easy!"

"Everything the old Empire had achieved was in the service of trying to reach this chamber. Countless brave men died in the hopes of creating a better future for Paldea." Franco swept a few grains of dirt from his shoulder. "And we failed them. What were all their sacrifices for?"

Phos shook her head. "So that you could live all the years they left you behind." Thick fault lines snaked across the cavern walls. "This crater has claimed enough lives, Franco. Don't let it take another."

"Bury me with my ambitions. I have nothing left to return to."

Phos narrowed her eyes. "The Franco I knew wouldn't back down from a challenge. You say you'd be starting from nothing if you go back? Then try again. Do it right this time. I'm challenging you to live, you stubborn, selfish son of a—"

The cavern thundered and the ground tremored again, more intensely than before.

Bibi and Koraidon eyed the collapsing ceiling frantically. "Phos! Hurry!"

"I'm not leaving without you," Phos snarled, "either we both live or we both die!" She reached her hand out to Franco. "Now! Choose!"

Franco smirked. "Heads, you win. Tails, you win." He took Phos's hand. "Well played."

They met Koraidon halfway and quickly climbed onto its back.

Phos patted Bibi's shoulder. "Get us out of here!"

Bibi whistled sharply, and Koraidon sprinted out of the collapsing chamber and into the empty tunnels beyond. Koraidon scrabbled to a halt at the edge of a steep cliff. The waters of the underground lake rapidly drained into a deep fault spreading across the lakebed. In the distance, a large tree made of shimmering blue crystals was buried beneath a cascade of falling boulders.

Bibi looked around wildly. "Where do we go?!"

Franco pointed Bibi toward the spiraling passageway overhead. "Go up," he commanded, "we'll go to the research station and take the teleporter back to the Zero Gate."

Phos smirked to herself.

"But that's like a mile away," Bibi cried.

"We'll take our chances," Phos said.

At Bibi's command, Koraidon bounded up the counterclockwise path, dodging around falling rubble and leaping over wide gaps as the crystals growing out of the cavern walls disintegrated and the stone crumbled beneath its feet. The cavern tremored again as they entered into the next large chamber. A towering crystal to their left broke apart in massive chunks and toppled to the ground in a thick plume of rising dust and blinding light. Koraidon dashed around the opposite side of the chamber and entered the tunnel passage beyond as a massive boulder buried the cavern just beyond its curled tail. Loose stone and debris rained down on their heads as they ascended the next sloped tunnel. Motes of dissolving light beckoned them to the next open chamber ahead. As they approached the mouth of the tunnel, Koraidon skidded to a halt and reared up, flinging its passengers from its back.

The humans rolled to a stop.

"Rairai," Bibi sputtered, "what's going—"

Another rumbling earthquake caused the tunnel ceiling to collapse and cave in. Koraidon roared and braced the falling stone against its broad shoulders. It turned back toward Bibi and urged her to move with a strained bark. The ceiling dropped lower, forcing Koraidon to its knee.

Phos fumbled for her belt and released Scrafty. "Give 'em a hand!"

Scrafty quickly took position alongside Koraidon and pushed back against the falling ceiling, gritting its teeth and pinching its eyes closed.

Phos grabbed Bibi by the arm and hurried her along. "We've gotta hurry."

Bibi looked back at Koraidon and Scrafty and balked. "We can't just leave them like that!"

"Of course not." Phos sucked air through her teeth. "I just hope that recall beam moves faster than the rocks."

Another burst of light filled the collapsing tunnel. "Help them," Franco quietly urged.

Annihilape slowly approached Scrafty and snorted loudly. Scrafty chuckled through its clenched teeth and warbled a pointed insult. Annihilape's beady eye twitched. The back of Scrafty's throat churned, and the Hoodlum Pokémon spat a mouthful of foul-smelling acid at its rival's feet. Annihilape's shadowy aura swelled with a silent fury. It growled deeply, braced against the cave-in, and unleashed its anger with a baritone roar. The cavern ceiling rose several inches. Sweat poured down Scrafty's body. It chuckled and nodded to its Trainer. Phos nodded back and began to crawl.

Bibi clambered out of the tunnel and quickly scrambled to her feet. Phos followed behind her and helped Franco up.

The young Trainer turned to Phos. "You first."

Phos nodded. "Get ready in there," she shouted. She recalled Scrafty in a beam of red light, and the ceiling split and bowed inward where it was standing moments before.

Franco nodded. "Now you."

Bibi hesitated, then recalled Koraidon. The entire tunnel collapsed in an earsplitting crash. The young girl immediately released her dragon by her side.

Phos waved the dust and grit away from her face and looked at the sealed tunnel. "Is it...?"

Franco smirked. "You of all people should know better," he said. A black shadow emerged out of the ground alongside him and took shape as Annihilape reformed itself. He tussled the Rage Monkey's unruly white hair and returned it to its ball. "Good work."

With its riders situated on its back once again, Koraidon spread its wings and glided over the wide black chasm dominating the cavern's chamber. It landed on the other side and sprinted into a winding corridor flooded with white mist that enveloped the group completely. A large pair of bright blue eyes slowly blinked at Phos before disappearing. The mist thinned, and Koraidon emerged from the tunnel and out onto a high stone arch. The crystal formation that they exited from dissolved into light, leaving no trace of its existence behind. Tall waterfalls and rays of warm sunlight flooded the massive open cavern from a wide opening overhead. Bibi gasped in surprise as Koraidon bounded up the steep slope and toward the distant hexagonal building at its peak. A titanic stone plate tumbled into the cavern from the cliffs beyond and crashed down atop the decrepit laboratory at the bottom of the pit. Phos blinked back her surprise as she noticed a metal plate etched with familiar runes on their left. A yellowed skeleton's bony fingers clutched at the plate, withered to dust, and vanished within an instant.

Koraidon sprinted to the sealed door of the research station and slid to a halt. Franco dismounted and quickly tapped at the door's keypad, and the door slid open at his command. Bibi returned Koraidon to its ball as she followed Phos and Franco into the station. The three of them crowded around the hexagonal green teleporter to the right of the door.

Franco closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Zero Gate," he stated.

They instantly disappeared in a flash of light and reappeared in the cluttered center of the Zero Gate's main room. A massive crash of thunder outside rattled the building to its foundation. The room's many electronics flickered on and off, and a light rain of dust slowly fell from the ceiling.

The Gate fell completely silent.

No one dared to move or make a sound at first. Whether or not Phos was holding her breath, she couldn't tell. Gradually, the tunnel vision faded, their heartbeats slowed, the sweat pouring from their bodies trickled to a stop, and their muscles relaxed. Phos shuffled and handed the Tera Orb back to Bibi. Bibi's pink boots rang out against the metal floor as she cautiously stepped toward the Gate's entrance. Phos and Franco nodded and followed her into the light.

A dozen officers of the International Police had spread out in a semicircle around the Zero Gate's doors as they slid open. Their blue police uniforms stood in stark contrast to the orange light of sunset around them. They barked orders and demanded the Zero Gate trespassers step down from the entrance ramp, and their suspects reluctantly obeyed without a word.

A trio of women parted the center of the semicircle and approached. The tallest among them was an olive-skinned woman with a wild cape of messy black hair and dressed in a black suit that clung tightly to her lithe frame. The next woman had pale skin, flat blonde hair, and piercing, tired green eyes. A black harness reached out from the collar of her red suit jacket, and the black high heels at the ends of her long, slender legs clicked with each authoritative stomp. The shortest of the three women wore a cropped beige trench coat over her bodysuit. Her dark hair was shortened into a curling bobcut, but Phos recognized her smile immediately.

Bibi awkwardly waved. "Hola, Miss Geeta."

Franco cleared his throat and adjusted his filthy red tie. "Madame-President Oleana."

Phos smirked. "Good to see you, Detective. Nice haircut."

Emma bounced her hair in the palm of her hand and grinned. "Good to see you too, Miss Phos."

Phos raised an eyebrow. "You brought some friends with you."

"I suspected you might need all the help you can get," the detective answered, "and the League Chairwoman was more than happy to help once I showed her the last coordinates of your GPS signal here at the Gate."

"Heh, just as planned—"

Oleana trudged forward. Her bright red lips curled into a furious snarl, her green eyes dilated sharply, and her pale skin flushed with rage. "FRANCO," she shrieked, "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!"

Franco swallowed hard. “Madame—”

Oleana jabbed a pointed finger into Franco’s sternum. Phos and Bibi quietly stepped away. “SHUT UP! I DON’T WANT TO HEAR IT! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO THIS CORPORATION IF EVEN A SINGLE WORD OF THIS REACHED THE PUBLIC?! **OUR STOCKS WOULD NEVER RECOVER!** EVER!” She combed her fingers through her hair and snarled like a feral beast. “It’s bad enough already that those Aether Foundation yanks want to rake us over the Rolycoly for copyright infringement. Copyright infringement! On a Pokémon! Do you have any idea how I felt when I received a phone call from the *International Police*?! DO YOU?!”

“I—”

“I was FURIOUS! OUTRAGED! **SICK WITH ANGER!** You betrayed everything Macro Cosmos stands for! Everything poor Mr. Rose believed in!” Oleana panted for breath and gnashed her teeth. She rolled her shoulders, straightened her posture, and sighed. “Are there any *other* executives stabbing me in the back that I should be aware of?”

“I’d keep a close eye on Hem—”

“Shut up, shut up! SHUT UP! JUST THE SOUND OF YOUR VOICE MAKES MY BLOOD PRESSURE SKYROCKET!” Oleana curled her fingers around the gold-and-silver pin on Franco’s jacket. “You don’t deserve to wear this badge.” She ripped the badge off, tearing the fabric underneath, and hurled the pin into the Great Crater. “Consider this your severance package,” Oleana continued, “I’ll make sure you never set foot in an office building again. You wouldn’t even be hired to fill *watercoolers!*” She turned toward Emma. “Detective, get this man out of my sight.”

Emma finished massaging her ear and snapped to attention. “Um, right. Gentlemen!”

A policeman stepped forward with a pair of handcuffs. Franco peered over his shoulder toward Phos.

Phos shrugged and bade him farewell with a smirk and two-finger salute. “Let me know if you need a conjugal visit,” she teased.

The handcuffs clicked shut around Franco’s wrists.

Emma cleared her throat. “By order of the International Police, I am taking you, Jacinto Franco, into custody. There are so many things you must tell me at once, so you would be wise to share all you know.”

Franco nodded solemnly. “I’m ready to go, detective.”

Phos watched as the policemen led Franco to the back of a waiting squad car.

Oleana’s shoulders slumped. She turned to Phos and sighed. “You’re the one who caught Franco? I’m really sorry for all the trouble my employees have caused you. I’ll make sure it never happens again.”

"I don't think it's your fault," Phos replied.

Oleana shuffled to a waiting Flying Taxi. "Can't even use Corvicknight taxis in this backwater Region," she muttered, "I am one tired Oleana..."

Geeta clasped her gloved hands together and offered a well-rehearsed smile. "Well, Champion Bibi, I'm sure we have much to discuss about your most recent visit to Area Zero."

Bibi stammered and laughed nervously as she averted her gaze. "Ah, well..." she shrugged and prodded at her unkempt hairbuns. "...Bleh?"

Geeta turned and began to walk away. Bibi hastily followed after her. The young girl turned back toward Phos and waved farewell. "I'll see ya around, Miss Phos!"

Phos felt a pang in her chest as Bibi departed. She smiled softly and waved back. "So long, partner," Phos called out, "and thanks for being there for me."

She turned to Emma and laughed. "Heck of a week, huh?"

Emma burst into melodious laughter. "You don't know the half of it. No one said the hard-boiled life would be easy."

They watched as the plateau emptied out for the final time.

"So what's next?"

"I'll have to interrogate Franco," Emma began, "compile as much data as I can, and work with the International Police to get a case file together and begin interviewing Franco's accomplices and customers." She shook her head. "The next couple of weeks are going to be very busy; I'll reach out to you as soon as I can. Just try to keep a low profile until then."

"You know me," Phos grinned.

"Do you need a lift?"

Phos shook her head and tossed the detective's credit card back to her. "No, no. I'm gonna stay here and catch my breath for a minute. You go on ahead; I'll see you around."

Emma nodded and walked away.

Phos walked to the edge of the cliff and sat down. A gentle breeze tussled her hair as she watched the sun set over the mountains. The thick mist that had blanketed the Great Crater disappeared, and Phos's eyes followed familiar landmarks beyond the edge of the horizon.

Far below the clifftop, Franco's pin came to rest beside a pair of broken sunglasses and a discarded red glove.

The city of Mesagoza, a city at the edge of time. A city of historic pasts where countless thousands of people walk along winding brick streets toward an unwritten future. An antiquated cityscape peppered with the gentle hum of spirited conversations and street vendors peddling their selection, trickling fountains singing in tenor harmony with colorful banners rustling in the cool autumn wind. In a city like Mesagoza, quiet afternoons like this are the norm, and no one ever seems to be in a particular hurry to go anywhere.

Least of all was the redheaded woman seen walking across a grassy park nestled in the shadow of a high cobblestone wall. She had sat down at a table beneath a yellow umbrella with her back to a bed of pink and orange tulips and a compass-shaped teal-and-indigo mosaic pattern on the wall. She wore a pair of black short-heeled shoes, high-waisted white jeans, and a black spaghetti strap top beneath her cropped red jacket. Her hazel eyes scanned the sparse crowds walking the city streets in front of her and soon matched the steely blue gaze of her guest. The two women talked in hushed silence for a time. A silence broken when the taller woman erupted into shouting.

Phos wailed, "An immunity?!"

Emma nodded. "In exchange for his full compliance and access to all of his transaction records. Franco works for the International Police now helping us track down the remaining Paradoxes."

Phos crossed her legs and slouched in her chair. "So that's how it is. He just gets away with everything? So long and thanks for all the cash?"

Emma shook her head. "No, most of his assets have been seized. The money he stole from Macro Cosmos will go toward covering the expenses of his operation, and the money he received from his clients has been placed under the management of a committee of trustees." Emma looked up toward the slowly drifting clouds high above the city's stone walls. "In Kalos, there was another man who felt indebted to the past. No one listened to him until he felt forced to take drastic measures, and by then it was too late to help him. Franco's ideas are sympathetic, but he can't be trusted to remain impartial with the funds. His previous career has been terminated, and members and associates of the International Police will be monitoring him to ensure he doesn't reoffend."

"Where is he?"

"I can't tell you that," Emma replied.

Phos clicked her tongue. "What about the freakshows? Where are they at?"

"That's hard to say," Emma shrugged. "There are no signs of any Paradox Pokémon remaining inside the Great Crater. The canyon where Area Zero was located is gone."

Phos raised an eyebrow. "Gone?"

Emma nodded. "Replaced by a shallow lake as if it never existed. Based on statements we've received from Chairwoman Geeta, we can't say for certain if the Paradoxes were returned

to their own worlds after the Terapagos Paradox was resolved or if they have yet to reappear elsewhere.”

“What about the ones that escaped from the power plant?”

“Most of them have been accounted for. There are some stragglers that haven’t been contained yet—mainly a group of Volcarobot—but I’m sure we’ll find them soon.” Emma twirled a fingertip through her short hair. “As for Franco’s clients, it may take years to track them all down, and they might not be willing to comply with the International Police... and that’s why I wanted to speak with you today.”

“Not interested,” Phos said curtly.

“No one has more experience with the Paradox Pokémon than you. You would be an invaluable asset to our investigation.”

“I have a lifetime of experience with them,” Phos snapped, “that’s why I’m not interested. I just want to go home now that it’s finally safe to see my friends and family again.”

Emma tilted her head. “Back home, to Unova? Where you still have a long list of broken laws resulting in a lengthy prison sentence waiting for you?”

Phos paused and sucked air through her teeth. “Yep. That’s the one.”

“I might be able to get those charges dropped... if you can help us locate the remaining Paradoxes.”

Phos threw up her hands and grunted in disgust. “Unbelievable. Franco gets a plea deal, I get blackmailed.”

Emma laughed. “Blackmail is such a harsh word. I call it an ‘extended probation.’ A few years of good behavior and you can return to Unova as a free woman.”

Phos leaned back and sighed. “Gotta save ‘em all, huh?” She paused and watched a crowd of passerby walk down the road. “Alright, I’m in. What will you be doing?”

“I’ll have to return to Kalos soon,” Emma said, “there’s some trouble in Lumiose City that I need to investigate. I can’t say much for now, but I wanted to meet face-to-face before I left. We’ll keep in touch.”

Emma stood up and prepared to leave.

Phos shrugged. “Guess I’ll just stay here then?”

“I’m sorry,” Emma said, “you won’t be able to leave the Region unless you’re on an assignment for the International Police. Promise me you’ll stay out of trouble? It would certainly complicate things if you were to, say... go to the Academy overlooking the city? Visitors can’t enter without an invitation anyway.”

The detective smiled and winked.

Phos stroked her chin and smiled back. "I'll be sure to steer clear," she lied, "I promise."

Phos clambered up the horizontal metal bars of Naranja Academy's main gate and vaulted to the other side. She rolled to her feet and massaged the aches out of her thighs after climbing the long, long staircase leading to the Academy's entrance. The latest semester was just beginning, and students of all ages dressed in white polo shirts and striped orange pants walked in the shadows of tall gothic spires and the six long wings of the star-shaped building. They milled around in small groups discussing schoolwork or burying their noses in textbooks and smartphones. Colorful beams of energy crashed and dissipated against the thick glass of the Academy's interior schoolyard as Trainers practiced against one another. If any of the students noticed Phos's intrusion, they didn't let her distract them.

Phos watched their indifference for a while and breathed deeply. She thumbed the pockets of her jeans and began walking around the east side of the Academy. "Enjoy the quiet," she whispered, "you don't know how good you have it."

A pair of arms suddenly wrapped around her stomach and squeezed her tightly. Phos flinched and stiffened.

A familiar voice squealed her name. "Miss Phos! It really *is* you!"

Phos unclenched her fists and smiled. "Bibi! Is that you crushing my spine?"

The young girl let go and stepped back. Bibi's enthusiastic ruby eyes looked up at Phos from behind her thick round glasses. Her orange necktie dangled with a loose knot around her collar, and her white shirt was sloppily draped over a pair of loose black suspenders at her hips. The long pantlegs of her uniform were tucked into a pair of black knee-high boots.

Phos ruffled Bibi's messy hair buns and looked her up and down. "I missed you, kiddo."

Bibi leapt into Phos's arms for a tight hug. They held each other close and squeezed a bellyful of laughter out of each other before Phos set her back down.

"I missed you too," Bibi grinned, "I ditched class as soon as I saw you out the window! What are you doing here? I thought for sure you went home already!"

Phos pursed her lips and shrugged. "Change of plans, I'm told. I'll be sticking around for a while longer."

Bibi cupped her hands over her mouth. "Rreeeeaaaaaally?"

Phos smirked. "Really. You're stuck with me."

The young girl excitedly stamped her feet. "Oh, this is so cool! Now we can finally finish our battle! Let's do six-on-six this time! Singles. No, wait, Doubles!" Bibi gasped. "What if we—"

“Easy, killer,” Phos interrupted, “I’ve seen what you’re capable of. I don’t think my team stands a chance against yours.” An impish grin spread across her face. “Maybe you can help me even the odds. I’ve only ever trained Dark-Types, like Mandibuzz. I’m not used to having someone like Messie around, but you’ve already got a couple dragons under your belt.”

Bibi’s thick eyelashes fluttered closed. She turned her head to the side and pushed her glasses further up the bridge of her nose with a single gloved fingertip. She flashed a wolfish grin. “It’s wise of you to come to a Champion-ranked Trainer for lessons,” she said proudly, “yes, very wise. But nothing in this world is free and my services don’t come cheap.”

Phos rested a hand on her hip. “Name your price.”

Bibi held up a clenched fist and raised her fingers one by one as she listed off her demands. “I wanna go get empanadas with you, and go shopping at Delibird Presents together, and then we need to have a pajama party, and then... and... and...”

Phos’s eyes trailed off as Bibi switched to her other hand.

Bibi pumped her fists. “Oh! And I want you to teach me how to beat people up!”

Phos raised an eyebrow. “You wanna learn how to fight?”

“And I wanna do all those cool acrobatics you do!”

Phos closed her eyes and shook her head. “You teach me and I teach you?”

Bibi nodded happily. “Yeah!”

Phos smiled. “You got a deal. Anytime you need me, just call my name and I’ll be there.”

Bibi thrust her fists above her head and cheered.

Phos patted her head and continued on her way. “Alright, kiddo, you gotta get back to class and I gotta go find someone.”

“Is it Mr. Jacinto?”

Phos paused. “Mr. Jacinto?”

“Yeah, he made me promise I wouldn’t tell you where his new office is.”

“That so? What did he say exactly?”

Bibi shook her head. “Yup. He said,” she cleared her throat and deepened her voice, “Bibi, whatever you do, if you ever see Phos again, don’t let her know I’m here on the third floor.”

Phos looked up. “Front or back of the building?”

Bibi sputtered and stammered as her eyes darted up toward the Academy's northeast wing. "Uh, well, he's definitely not in the back, so, umm, please don't look back there!"

The light of the midday sun poured into Franco's cluttered dorm room through an arched window. Rows of books and binders were crammed into shelves along the wall, opened notebooks covered his neatly-made bed, and a gentle heat radiated from the oven of his kitchenette, filling the room with the mild earthy aroma of baked vegetables. Franco sat hunched over his simple wooden desk, dividing his attention between a thick textbook and a laptop monitor inundated with emails and digital forms. He wore a long-sleeved and form-fitting white button-up shirt, an orange tie, and black slacks. His black notched lapel jacket hung from hook attached to the front of his closet.

There was a gentle three-note knock on the wooden door.

Franco pinched his eyebrows between his fingers and sighed. "Is this another question regarding the Modelo 36? Come in."

The doorknob turned, and a tall figure stepped into the room, her face stretched in sneering mockery.

Franco's red eyes darkened. "What do you want?"

"I just came by to see how you're doing," Phos answered innocently. She looked out Franco's window toward the ring of tall mountains surrounding the Great Crater and whistled. "How does it feel being reminded that you lost every time you look outside? To see those mountains and know that everything you ever wanted is just beyond your reach? I'll bet it stings, doesn't it?"

Franco answered flatly, "What Tartarus would be complete without a red imp prodding at my backside?"

Phos raised her middle finger and corkscrewed it through the tight tube of her bent fingers on her other hand. "If that's what you want," she cooed. "Would I have gotten extra credit if I brought a pitchfork, Mr. Jacinto? Wanna see me in my old high school uniform?"

Franco's unamused eyes looked up toward her. "That depends," the corner of his mouth faintly curled upward, "did you bring any olive oil?"

Phos tutted. "Fresh out."

"Regardless," Franco continued, "it doesn't matter how I feel about it now. I failed, and now you and I and all of Paldea will have to live with the consequences."

Phos sat down on the edge of his desk, leaned back, and crossed her legs. "C'mon, Frankie, don't sulk. Y'know, you've never had very many good things to say about Paldea."

"Can you blame me?"

"I blame you for a lot of things," she shrugged, "but since I got here, I met a couple of really good kids, and I got to thinking. A region that's able to make a couple of kids like those two can't be all bad. So maybe it's time to stop putting all your faith in the past, and learn to start trusting the future to do the right thing instead."

Franco breathed in deeply. "I'll concede that. But it's not so easy."

"Sure it is," Phos countered, "so long as you're alive, you've always got a tomorrow."

He matched her gaze. "After all I did to you, you acted against your own best interests to save me. Why?"

"It wasn't just for your sake."

"Even after I threatened to kill you."

Phos laughed. "Like you would really do it! When I fell into the Crater, I saw you reaching out for me." She reached out and cupped Franco's chin between her fingers. "Face it, Frankie: For all the pain you caused, there's a good person inside you."

Franco gently pulled her hand away. "That pain was the price the future of Paldea demanded. I did what I had to do," he said firmly, "and I would do it all over again if it meant I could succeed."

Phos hummed.

Franco cleared his throat. "Having said that, my shoulders feel lighter now. My next battle is making sure my students know how to file their taxes."

"And how to skip out on paying them?"

Franco smiled. "Naturally."

His smile dropped. "You fought so relentlessly for the sake of your friend. Apollo must have been an incredible man."

Phos smiled and shook her head. "And you still don't get it. He liked climbing up buildings and jumping over fences. He was totally clueless about Type matchups and he never shut up during movies. He enjoyed spending all of his time with his friends and spending all of his money on rocks. He didn't have any big dreams because he already had everything he could have asked for. Apollo was just a man. Nothing more, and never anything less. He was exactly who he needed to be, and exactly the kind of friend I needed. Someone normal."

Franco nodded along. "I feared normalcy," he confessed.

Phos swept her fingers through her hair. "Is that why you're so charmed by me?"

Franco smiled and looked her up and down. "You have... a number of admirable traits."

Phos sniffed at the air and grinned. "Yeah, well, I only liked you for your money and power. Schoolteachers can barely afford a plate of Shepherd's Pie."

Franco chuckled. "And maybe someday I can afford to order carryout again. Ironic for a personal finance teacher. What will you do with your newfound normalcy?"

"Normal? I think we both got screwed by the same smiley-faced detective," Phos said. "But there's a record store right here in town that had a help wanted sign covered in cobwebs. I figured they'd take any old loser, and it turns out I made a good first impression, so I've been helping out there. They were even nice enough to rent their loft out to me."

The oven timer chirped.

Franco sat up from his desk and made his way toward the kitchen. "Would you... care to stay for lunch?"

Phos raised an eyebrow. "Depends. I already promised someone else I'd go out for empanadas."

He smirked as he put his orange oven mitts on. "I decided to spend lavishly: I'm having Shepherd's Pie."

Franco quickly cleared space on the desktop and prepared two plates. Phos pulled up a simple stool and cradled her chin in her hands as he worked.

"Ever the gentleman, Franco," she mused.

Franco loosened his necktie with the tip of his finger. "It's, uh, just Jacinto now," he muttered, "Director Clavell wants all faculty members to go by a first-name basis at the Academy. He says it helps facilitate a more personal and approachable learning environment for the students."

Phos smirked and toyed with her food, stirring the plate of mashed potatoes, carrots, peas, and ground beef and watching the steam rise.

Franco tasted the tip of his fork and grimaced. "It's missing something," he said.

"Flavor?"

He sat up and rummaged through his cabinet. He nodded and returned to the table with a small salt shaker in his hands. He offered it to Phos. "Would you do the honors?"

Phos stared at the salt shaker in stunned disbelief. "You remembered," she gasped.

Franco chuckled. "You made me pour salt onto a protein bar, how could I ever forget?" He poured a small pile into the palm of his hand. "A settling of past grudges..."

“...And a promise of hospitality.”

"I'm truly sorry for Apollo's death. And I'm sorry for the myriad ways I've wronged you."

She looked him in the eyes. "I can't forgive you."

"I'm not asking for forgiveness," he said, "I'm merely stating facts."

Phos accepted the salt. "You'll have plenty of time to start making it up to me."

She sprinkled a light dusting onto her fingertips and slowly spread it over Franco's plate while he did the same for her.

She smiled warmly. "It's not going to happen overnight," Phos continued, "but who knows what the future might bring?"

"An ending, and a new beginning," Franco nodded.

"My name is Jacinto Franco. It would be a pleasure to greet the new future at your side."

"Nice to meet you, partner. Call me Phos."

Sky blue waves gently lapped at the sandy shore. Wingull beckoned loudly to one another as they glided over the sea. The tide surged across the darkened wet sand and slowly retreated. The waves encroached upon the land again, carrying with them a long, broken feather. The white of its tip gradually gave way to a light violet hue, then a dark blue.

Agent Tedesco of the International Police walked along the beach alongside his loyal Arcanine. The warm ocean breeze rustled his short green hair and tugged at the raised collar of his lightweight trench coat. He gasped and quickly climbed onto Arcanine's back, and the massive canine Pokémon bounded across the sand.

He spoke into a recording device fastened to his collar. "This is Tedesco of the International Police. While searching the Decolore Islands for any remaining evidence of the mysterious crystals, I have encountered an unknown Pokémon species. It appears to be grievously wounded. Arcanine and I are moving to assist."

Arcanine trotted to a stop and its Trainer dismounted. A large red dragon partially buried in the sand gasped for air in front of them. The strange Pokémon's hazel eye slightly opened at their approach. Too weak to move, the injured dragon conserved the last of its strength and uttered a low growl.

"Easy... easy does it now. We're not here to hurt you." Tedesco removed his sunglasses and studied the wounded Pokémon with kind blue eyes. He reached into his coat pocket and carefully unwrapped a rice ball he had planned to eat for lunch. The agent slowly extended his hand and held the rice ball in front of the strange creature's nose.

The dragon sniffed at the air. It licked its chapped lips and strained to lift its neck. Tedesco cringed seeing the gnarled and blackened scars along the left side of the creature's body. He cautiously helped the dragon eat its light meal and brushed a soaked and bent feather away from its bruised eye.

"There we go..."

The dragon struggled to swallow its food and winced. Chipped talons dug into the sand, shaking arms and legs pushed it into a quadrupedal stance. It looked the human and his Arcanine up and down and sneered.

"Would you be willing to come with us?" Tedesco asked, "We can give you some proper medical attention. We can make you stronger."

Stronger?

The Guardian weighed its remaining options carefully. It bared its serrated teeth and narrowed its eyes.

Stronger. Need to become stronger.

The Koraidon accepted his offer.

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