

Chapter 1 Forced to Be the Very Best

The steel cage rattles as she slams into it. The sting of metal against her back, a reminder of all the times that came before, and knowledge it certainly won't be the last. The shiny sleek salandit lands on all fours, the sting of the hit on her black and grey body lingers. Her blue eyes stare down her towering opponent. A massive rocky pokémon the size of a mountain when compared to her. The coalossal pokémon with his grey stony body, with coals piled onto his back that burn brightly, flames spark from them. A few embers jump through the dome cage, hitting one of the spectators that try to crowd as close to the action as they can.

The human screams as his clothes catch on fire, which he barely manages to put out in time before it spreads any further. An announcer yells, "Watch it folks. This fight is only going to be heating up from here!"

Humans, anthropomorphic species of all kinds, even a few pokémon watch the fight with the excitement of watching a roman coliseum fight. They hold out money in the air, calling in any last-minute fire line bets, that the bookies that move through the crowd eagerly gobble up. They screamed out their favorite to win.

With a rocky growl, the coalossal charges her which quakes the ground with every step

She takes a deep breath, letting out a puff of smoke that envelopes her, blocking the view of the spectators of what surely could be a killing blow, much to the moans and boos.

The ground shakes, rocks kicked up, the cage rattles and groans, contorting to the massive pokémon. He looks around, the smoke quickly clearing up as he heats his body, the coals burning a bright orange, causing a heat convection that shoots the smoke cloud out of the way, "Where did you go... you can't hide from me," he says in a deep booming voice.

Someone in the crowd yells, "Behind you!"

The salandit remains focused on her target, unleashing a purple venom blob. It splashes against her opponent; purple hazy smoke fills the air as it bubbles and burns on the rocky skin. He responds with only a grunt, chuckling a massive rock that he created from his previous slam attack.

The attack catches the salandit on the shoulder, causing her to spin as she's knocked back to the other end of the arena. Her shoulder and left arm throb with pain, eyes widened as the massive pokémon leaps into the air, slamming down right on top of her, kicking up stone and dust in all directions. Those nearby have to shield themselves from the debris as someone exclaims about their eyes.

The dust clears revealing a small creator in the ground but the salandit is nowhere to be seen. Coalossal swings around expecting to find her reading another attack, "You won't get me this time!" he exclaims but finds she's not there. A tingle runs down his spine, "Huh?" he remarks as the crowd exclaims.

"She's on your back!"

The salandit, digs into the pile of coals, checking them out of the cage, burning a few spectators in the process, "Get off of me!" he exclaims, trying to reach and pull her off.

She dodges every attempt, chucking more hot coals, which only smoke and billow as they burn hotter.

“Get off!” he yells, spinning around trying everything he can to get her off, shaking his body widely as the metal cage glows a soft orange. Spectators step back as the heat becomes unbearable.

“Will she win or shall our surprising salandit pull out another miracle?!” exclaims the announcer.

The fire lizard holds on tightly, removing enough coals to reveal the heated source of this fire-rock type. A soft and tender exposed area that gives her even pause from the immense heat, but with a few strikes with her claws she cuts into the soft flesh, blood oozing out of the wound. She smacks it with her poisonous attack.

The coalossal screams in pain, tumbling back onto the ground with a heavy thud. Activating a quick flash burn to cauterize the wound but lets out an explosive boom as the air is suddenly heated up, blowing the super-heated air in all directions. Singeing hair and filling the air with a burnt smell that makes some stomachs turn.

The salandit rolls away, turning and readying another attack.

The rock pokémon groans, laying on his back, raising a hand before he collapses, laying there unmoving.

There’s a moment of silence, the crowd waiting, seeing withheld breath if this was indeed the end of the fight or there’d be an unexpected round two, “And there you have it! Another surprisingly upset by the Marvelously Monstrous Meiom!” The crowd becomes a madhouse. The majority that bet against her declare their curses upon her like the devil himself, while the rest praise her as their one and savior.

Meiom though simply walks to the exit, the cage doused in water, which splashes on her, soaking her to the bone, cleaning off the dust and grime, making her skin shine brightly like polished latex. Water steams from the cage, hissing like a thousand snakes. She shakes off the water, her body’s squeaks are drowned out by the crowd. Muscular towering guards stand by the door, unlocking it, ushering her out, as a medic comes in to check on the fallen. She’s squeezed between the two, that keep her on path out of the arena. The announcer drums up the crowd for the next fight as she goes through the dank corridor to a room called “The Pokéball” The faded red and white painted doors welcome her like the witch in the woods.

One of the guards opens the door, yelling, “Shocker, you’re next.”

A pikachu steps up, approaching the guards, as she completes the exchange. She looks at her, “Good luck, you can do it.”

The electric mouse nervously looks up at the guards, then back at her, smiling, “T-thanks.”

“Get in there and wait for your trainer,” one of the guards grunt, attempting to give her a kick in the rear but she manages to dodge out of the way.

“I’m going,” she responds, walking inside as the doors close behind them, a guard stands watch at the only exit to the place. A dozen other pokémon fill the cramped room, that should be

big enough for eight at most. She sits at the end of a worn metal bench, reaching for her injured shoulder, tensing as pain shoots through her. The scraps and cuts oddly enough doesn't hinder the odd latex shine. The bits of red blood seeping through the wounds possess the same unique property.

"That looks pretty nasty. Let me cool that off for you," says a blue anthropomorphic glaceon. The two-toned blue vixen pokémon approaches, his big blue eyes, showing concern, despite his rather battered form.

She shifts away from him, "Gael, I appreciate the concern, but fire and ice don't mix. I'll be fine," she says, looking at him, eyes catching the black band collar around his neck with a pokéball shaped device about the size of a half dollar in the center. She reaches up for the same device wrapped around her neck but stops herself halfway there.

He sits beside her, the glaceon over two and a half times her size, "I suppose so. Congrats on the win, I'm sure it was well deserved."

She smirked, "And how do you know that?"

He looks up over at the security camera, "Let's just say I can tell you won by how you walked in."

She scoffs, "You mean you could tell by the fact I did walk in."

"True. I'm sure they gave you a tough one."

"A coalossal. Immune to my fire, and resistant to my poison."

"Ouch, they really didn't want you to win this one, didn't they?"

"They wanted the crowd to think I couldn't win," she smirked.

He leans back, looking at the others in the room, then back down at her, "This one was the one, wasn't it?"

Meiomi feels the itch around her neck, her body tenses, causing her to squeak, "Yeah, should be."

"What are you going to do when you get out of this devil's armpit?"

"Evolve. I want to put this fucking place behind me."

Gael laughs heartily.

"What's so funny?"

"Mine got me in this mess. It's just ironic to me that you'll want to the moment you leave."

"It's coming. I can feel it," he says, leaning in closer to her.

She shivers, raising a hand, "Gael, focus. You've fallen under my influence again," she said with a drawn-out sigh.

"Yup."

"Take a deep breath, and focus."

"Sure will," he responds, leaning in closer.

"Take a step back and douse yourself with some water before I do it with flames," she huffs, spitting out a little puff of fire.

"Douse myself in water... sure thing," he says with a goofy smile.

The salandit rubs her forehead, looking over at an anthropomorphic female squirtle that's been staring at her with a dreamy smile that is out of place with how exhausted and ravaged she is, "Give him a gentle squirt will you?"

The squirtle nods, "Sure, I can do that," she says, shooting Gael with her water gun, which knocks him off the bench.

The salandit smirks, "Are we back to our senses now?"

He rubs the back of his head, "Yeah... I think so. Thanks, Meiom. I wish you could do that with them or Netscheri."

"If only, but I'm not *that* potent yet to overcome the antidote."

"Yet?" he asks, cocking his head to the side, ear twitching.

She smirked, "Look who you are talking to. If anyone can do it, it would be *me*."

"I believe in one thing and that's your confident enough to believe you can do it."

She puffs a bit of fire from her lips, "I'm going to be able to. And when I do."

The guard approaches them, the anthropomorphic elephant crosses his arms, his trunk curling, as he towers over them with arms as thick nearly twice as thick as Gael's legs. "You'll do what, exactly?"

She glared up at him, "Nothing you'd be concerning yourself about."

"It's not that I have to be concerned about a small squeaky toy of a lizard like yourself. But the *boss* might like to know."

The room grew silent that a pin drop could be heard.

She doesn't blink, "I'd enjoy a nice harem that would serve my every need and desire, that's what. And sorry, you aren't my type."

He humphs, shrugging and returns to his post.

Gael leans over, "You need to be careful what you say."

"I'm fine, I can take care of myself," she retorts.

"Your hand says otherwise."

She looks down at her shaking right hand, tensing when she tries to steady it, "I'll be fine. I can take care of myself."

"Meiom... you need to be careful. More now than ever. They'll find any excuse to add to your bill."

She puffs a little flame from her muzzle, "I know. Better than anyone I know."

The door swings open and a guard yell out, "Monstrous Meiom. Glacial Gael, your trainer is here."

"Already? Normally he waits till all the fights are over."

The salandit smirks, "Perhaps he's eager to end our partnership as much as I."

"I wouldn't count on it," he says, the two are ushered out, where an anthropomorphic Sumatran short haired rabbit is there to greet them. His fur is a mixture of brown and striped swirling black, his head hair slick and combed back with enough hair gel to make it shine almost as much as the salandit's skin. His brown eyes give a look of concern and care. His beige suit is pressed, primed and proper.

He smiles as he approaches the two with open arms, “Marvelous. Absolutely marvelous. You both came out on top like I knew you would,” he says, wrapping his arms around Gael, who stood there like a plank of wood. The hare patting him down, checking his naked body over, “And barely a scratch on you. And people thought fighting that charizard was unfair to you.”

“It was close. It was more luck on my end that he was a bit full of himself and thought it was going to be an easy fight.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You made a fair bit of coin. You should go for a night on the town, enjoy yourself some.”

“I think I’ll do just fine and take it easy.”

“You don’t have enough fight for five days. Take it easy. I’m only looking out what’s best for you, my prized glaceon.”

“I’ll be sure to relax. I’ll be ready for the next fight.”

The hare smirks, his short oval ears twitch, “That is what I like to hear. You take care of me, and I’ll take care of you. Partner’s through and through.” He looks down at Meiomì, his painted smile not fading for an instant, “And you. That was some fight you did there. I did not even think that under that coal there was a weak spot. When that cage turned orange. I swear I felt the heat from the trainer’s box.”

Meiomì holds back the turning in her stomach, forcing a smile as fake as his, “I’m glad you were so invested in the fight. It was a close one.”

Netscheri crouches down, grabbing her injured arm. His soft padded fingers, squeeze the arm, and trace along the shoulder as he watches for any reaction, “You took a rather hard hit there. I think we should get you checked to make sure nothing is broken. I’d just hate to have anything happen to my longest partner and dearest friend.”

Her arm squeaks loudly like rabbit’s fingers running across rubber. Piercing pricks of pain shoot up the salandit’s body, her tail stiffening as she replies with as much calmness as she can, “It’s fine. Just a bruise. Nothing to worry about. If you don’t mind. I’d like to get my cut and enjoy a moment of relaxation.”

“Of course, only the best for you. You have a very special fight in five days. I’m sure you’d find it a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“You must be part cat Netscheri, for you have enough lives to make once in a lifetime a common occurrence.”

The rabbit runs his hand along the small of Meiomì’s back, his claws unnaturally sharpened as he traces them along her spine, “Meiomì, my sweet salandit. You know me better than anyone. That because I bring forth more than one such offer, doesn’t mean its the same. It takes a lot of work to wheel, deal and find what’s best for all of us here. If it wasn’t for me, taking a chance on you. Who knows what hole you’d have found yourself in, what dire fate could have befallen you...” he says, his other hand inside his coat pocket.

“I’m very well aware of how you changed my life.”

His charlatan smile remains as he pulls his hand back, “I’m glad you understand. But enough banter in this dreary place. You’re both champions and you deserve what is owed.

Come, let's cash out and celebrate," he states, motioning them to walk ahead of him. They know the path well, to an elevator where an armed security guard stands watch. Above the elevator it reads "Trainer Elevator. No unattended pokémon allowed." The guard nods to him as Netscheri uses a keycard to gain access. The reflective metal shines brightly as the elevator's doors open.

Without a word spoken, between them, Gael hits the floor to the desired location. Soothing music plays that mask the true nature of this gilded cage. The glaceon looks down at Meiomì, who stands arms crossed, while their trainer hums a gleeful tune.

The doors open, the smell of money and the sound of counting machines rumbling assault their senses. Armed guards stand watch as counters do their job. Going through thick wads of cash. They move through the guards keeping watch as the counters are protected by barred windows and protective glass. They reach the cashier's desk, where a black furred anthropomorphic panther sits. She gives them a feline grin, "Netscheri, it's good to see you again," she purrs.

"Be it winning or losing, your smiling face is always a prize to me," he replies, leaning against the countertop.

"Please do, go on."

"Alas darling, I am here on business. My associates are just eager to get paid, and frankly so am I."

"But of course, one moment as I get that in order for you, ID please," she asks sweetly as she goes through the process so many times before. "I'll be right back, as I get your winnings in order."

"Take your time darling," he says with a sly wink.

When she returns, she comes with a briefcase, sliding it over to him, "Here you go."

He clicks open the case, peering inside to see it lined with middle denomination bills, "Ah, perfect," he says, picking up a wad and flipping through it, "It's such a pleasure doing business here."

"Please come again soon."

"Of course, especially to see a smile like yours again," he says, closing the briefcase, counting out the money before handing Gael and Meiomì their cut, "Here you two go. You've both earned every penny."

"Thank you," says Gael as he takes the money, freezing it to the palm of his hand.

Meiomì counts hers twice over, "Appreciate it Netscheri." She holds her money tightly, "Yes, yes. *This is it. Finally, I'll be free of him, and I can live **my life my way.***"

"How about we celebrate your victories. A nice meal on me," he says, ushering them back toward the elevator.

"I really appreciate it sir, but I would like nothing more than to relax."

"Come on, it's the least I can do for my prize fighters," he says, running his claws along his back, sending shivers through the glaceon, "Don't worry. I'll make the arrangements that no one will question you two being there."

“I appreciate Netscheri, but I think it would be the benefit of both of us if I just got some rest.”

Meiomi speaks up, “I had some plans myself, if that is alright with you Netscheri. I don’t want to take advantage of your generosity.”

The hare places a hand in his pocket, “Really now. I insist. We haven’t had a good meal with the three of us in some time. And this double victory is a cause to celebrate, isn’t it? After that we can head back. And you Meiomi can have your night out.”

The salandit and glaceon’s eyes met, looking to the pocket, “Well if you insist Netscheri.”

Meiomi adds, “If it means that much to you. I can’t see why not.”

“I knew you’d see it my way,” he says, taking them to the third floor of a hotel. The elevator looks rather unassuming in the tidy and rather expensive looking hotel hallway. They take a separate elevator to the ground floor. The sights and sounds of a casino flood their senses. Flashing neon lights, clinking of coins, bells and whistles when someone wins, the dazzling carpet contrasting the ultra-bland ceiling, forcing one to look ahead at the chance to make it big.

The hare takes them to a fancy restaurant called *The Reserve* where each part of the meal is priced for those with deep pockets. The human male waiter in a black and white tux greets them, “Do you have a reservation?” he asks, looking at him with a grin, which turns sour seeing his companions.

“I unfortunately do not, but my business partners do, which I am sure will wave any problems there could be with your *boss* upstairs,” he says, pulling out a few bills, slipping a few bills onto the podium. “We’re associates, and I’m sure this will smooth any complaints over.”

The waiter places a few menus over the money, and then it was gone, “It seems we have a booth that just recently opened up, this way.” he guides them to a fancy booth, a few patrons taking notice of the naked pokémon, muttering comments to themselves as they sat down. Netscheri sitting in the center with Meiomi on one side and Gael on the other.

“I hope you are hungry, for I am absolutely famished.”

The two pokémon look at the menus, tensing at the prices, “Are you sure?”

“It’s all on me.”

Meiomi inquires, “Completely?”

“A hundred percent.”

“Alright...” she says, picking only one item, the biggest and cheapest steak on the menu, skipping over the filet mignon or anything fancy.”

Netscheri had a delicate salad, vegetarian sides of every variety, encouraging himself on the food, and fancy desserts such as creme brulee and so much more while Gael took a similar route as the salandit.

“You know... I don’t know what I’d do without either of you. We’re really the dream team. With your skills and my guiding hand. We’ll really made a big name for ourselves here. There’s not a soul on this tropical island paradise that doesn’t know of us.”

Meiomi, having cleaned her plate, looks over at him, "About that. Our agreement still stands, right?"

"Of course. I am a rabbit of my word. If you can buy your contract, you're free to go. But with your most recent string of victories. You are very valuable. I've had to turn down some nice offers to keep you. Because I don't trust those trainers. They won't treat you as well as I do. Letting you wander about on your days off? No one will treat you as well as me. You know that. With your condition, most will see you like those new fuck toys that have been making a big splash out of country."

"I know, and I am very appreciative of all that you do for me," she says, her heart racing, as the check is given to the rabbit. "May I? It's always best not to speak big numbers when others can be listening."

He smirks, "Go right ahead."

She grabs the pen, writing a number on the fancy napkin, "It's this much, right?" she asks, sliding it over to him.

He picks it up, eyeing the number, shaking his head, "No, no, that's a bit outdated my sweet salandit. It's more like this, if you include the rise of living expenses, the cost of getting you to experience such lavish joys such as this? All that costs, it's more like this," he writes out a notably higher number.

Gael clears his throat, "You said the meal was on you."

Netscheri smirks, "It is, but paying for the waiter's tip and to get you in here?"

The glaceon tenses, but his demeanor softens the moment the rabbit puts a hand into his pocket, "Is there a problem Gael?"

He shakes his head, "None at all. My fault for misunderstanding Netscheri."

"That's what I thought."

Meiomi looked at the number and tensed, "How long is this good for?"

"Perhaps three or four days at least. You never know how much value you might have after the next match."

"Could you write that down, so I know? I don't want to misunderstand and cause you undo hardships. After all, we're such good friends."

He chuckles, writing it down on the napkin, signing his name, "Here you go."

"I appreciate it oh so much," she replies. And once they were out back onto the casino floor she says, "I'm going to go celebrate my win. I'll be sure to not stay out too late, Netscheri."

He smiles, "Take care. Shall we head back Gael? Or did you change your mind on celebrating?"

"I'm going to stick to my original plan if you don't mind."

He shrugs, "Fair enough," he replies, turning to Meiomi, "See you in the morning."

She waves with her empty hand, "I'll be seeing you soon."

"And don't worry Meiomi, you'll make it someday."

“I appreciate the opportunity,” she says, seeing them off, and once he’s long gone, he demeanor shifts to that of celebration. She rushes out of the casino. The strip is filled with dozens of casinos, each trying to lure people in with a chance of riches, fame, glory, a good time. She’s spent so much time here that she’s become immune to their allure, knowing very well how they ensnare people to spend all they have and so much more.

She turns away from the ritz and glammer, mountainous jungle backdrop is speckled with mansions that are only visible by the glow of their lights. It takes her an hour through the city’s free public transit to get to her destination. Keeping a constant vigilance for any unwanted attention she makes her way to a public beach that few partake in due to the stone mansion sewage line that periodically expunges somewhat treated waste into the ocean, far away from the glamorous city.

She takes a deep breath, puffing a flame from her lips to burn away the slime that’s encrusted on the bars till it’s nothing but burnt ash, which break away from the touch. Carefully she squeezes through bars walking into the thigh deep sludge. She uses her free hand to produce a flame, which she uses to light the way, muttering the number of bricks she passes under her breath. Stopping at one that looks like all the others. Slowly she wiggles the brick, pulling it out to reveal a hidden compartment. A pit forms in her stomach as she peers inside. She becomes visible relieved when she sees the brown battered waterproof bag inside. She takes the bag, placing her money within it, swinging it over her shoulder, grunting as she places the brick back into place. She quickly scurries out, rushing to the ocean to wash herself off before giving herself a good fire disinfectant, burning away all scent of where she’s been.

“I should have enough... I planned for this, it has to be enough,” she mutters, reading the note, then carefully counting her money, once over, twice, thrice. Each time the result is the same, “Yes, yes, yes. Enough to cover it and not leave me broke. Enough to get me out of this hellscape.” she chuckles happily, holding the bag close to her chest, holding back a few tears. Memories flash of countless battles, injuries, reaching what she thought was the end only to have it be snatched away.

Yet she feels off, like she’s missing something. As she makes her way back to the place where she sleeps, that feeling only grows stronger. The last thirty-minute walk from the final stop to her destination, she goes through her mind. Holding her bag close to her chest, arms slipped through the straps, eyes darting around, “*What if he’s suspected this? Maybe he plans to have me be mugged during this last stop?*”

She walks down the street, eyeing the upper middle-class homes, expecting something, anything to happen, yet to her surprise, nothing. She reaches Netscheri’s home, a two and a half story building with a detached two car garage with a built-in extension on top. She makes her way up the steps, taking note the lights in both buildings are off. Carefully she opens the door. The single room has curtains separating four beds, a small kitchen/dining area and bathroom.

Gael loudly snores from his small closed off section. She peaks in there, seeing his leg hanging off the mattress with no bed frame. She smiles, “*If he’s asleep, I should be in the*

clear.” She goes to her bed in a small corner of the room, a human child size mattress on the floor with worn-out fire-resistant blankets.

She places the money under the mattress, sleeping around the lump, “First thing in the morning. I’m going to do it. We’ll go there, I’ll have his written note, and finally I can be free,” she says, her hand reaching up to the collar, but she stops herself. She takes a deep breath, “Get some rest. Tomorrow is going to be a big day,” she says, laying down, wincing in pain as she is painfully reminded of her injured arm. She pushes back the pain and that ever-lingering feeling of something is off, drifting to sleep.

The aroma of a salazzle. How heavenly. She soaked it up, enjoying her warmth, being there with the other salandits, yet she never felt like she was under the blissful pheromone influence like the others. She stood out, shiny, but not differentiated colored like a shiny pokémon. Then it all came crashing down, poachers came, grabbing them all up, but she managed to escape. Forced to wander the streets of the city, using a cardboard box for comfort. That is when Netscheri found her. With a warm smile, treating her well, speaking nicely, paying attention to her. Offering a chance of a new life if she was willing to work for it. She sees through her naive young self’s eyes, screaming to her, “Don’t take it! It’s not worth it!” Yet her voice falls on deaf ears as she takes the rabbit’s hand.

She jerks awake, sitting up in the bed, her heart racing her body aching, as she yells out “No! Don’t!” She pants heavily. Her body is warm and aching. She holds her arm, the entire form feels like it was hit by a truck, “Damn it... I don’t want him to try to get me checked up for medical,” she grumbles.

The curtain is pulled back, “Meiomi are you...” says Gael, staring at her, his nostrils flaring, “...okay?”

“Y-yeah, I just...” she says, looking up at him, “Gael?” she tilts her head, looking at him curiously, “Gael? I don’t like it when you stare at me like that.”

“Ahhh...” he takes a deep breath, his body visibly shuddering.

“Gael, snap out of it,” she says, snapping her fingers with a loud squeak, yet when she does, she stops and stares at her hand. Her heart sinks, “No, no, no, no. This can’t be!” she exclaims, seeing the long slender fingers of a salazzles hand. She evolved and perhaps out of her chances of freedom.