

Title: The Final Step to the Master Reloaded

Part: First Arc, Second Episode

Author: Matthias aka MysticMew (Solarsenshi@gmx.de)

Beta: H-Man #89995, partly xryuran

Status: Alpha

Rating: R

Category: Romance, Adventure, Dark, lots of other things...

Pairings: Ash/Dawn (main), added as revealed

Continuum/Spoilers: Everything up to the start of the Sinnoh League Tournament, from there on original plot.

Distribution: M&M DreamWorks Blog (<http://mysticmew44.blogspot.de>), M&M DreamWorks Archive (<http://mysticmew.bplaced.net>), Fanfiction.net (www.fanfiction.net), M&M DreamWorks archive and blog gets preference and the desired and best format, all versions will first go to the blog and archive.

Disclaimer: Pokémon©1995-2011 by Nintendo, Creatures Inc. and GAME FREAK Inc.

Story Disclaimer: TFSTTM Reloaded©2011-? (ongoing) by Matthias aka MysticMew

*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****

Lily of the Valley Island (Dawn)

The stadium was literally bursting with excitement. I had to admit, this was nothing compared to the Grand Festival. The Sinnoh League Tournament was a grand spectacle, not only in the main stadium but spread throughout several smaller ones to effectively manage the sheer number of participants. The schedule was nothing to laugh at either. With 256 participants in total, there would be 3 qualifying rounds with the pairings based entirely at random. With some bad luck the best participants could end up against each other in the first battle. After that, the remaining 32 would be split in 8 groups with 4 Trainers each and only the best 2 would advance to the next round and the finals which would be then held in the main stadium exclusively. The qualifying and group rounds were all in quick succession, leaving Trainers to battle twice per day actually with 3 on 3 battles each.

I wasn't worried though. And neither seemed Ash standing below in the big stadium, being welcomed with the rest of the Trainers as part of the opening ceremony. There had been a rising excitement ever since we got on the ship from our training retreat towards here but now it seemed he was as calm and focused as he had been during the long hours of constant training. Neither Ash nor his Pokémon would be hampered by the packed schedule, not after all the nonstop training we had gone through.

My gaze swept over the rest of the competitors. Nando, Barry and Paul were all there and now I had spotted Convey as well. A confrontation was possible, perhaps actually rather likely. Each of them had quite a bit to offer and would

doubtlessly make it through the opening rounds unless they ended up against each other. I focused my attention back on the podium where Pokémon League President Charles Goodshow was just finishing his speech. I was surprised to hear that Ash was actually on good terms with the man, going back to his first participation in the Kanto competition where he had rescued and actually ended up lighting the Lavados Flame. Behind him was Sinnoh League and current Master League Champion Cynthia whom we had run into on several occasions throughout our journey. I know that Ash admired her a great deal and couldn't help but agree. Nothing she did or said seemed without purpose and she always carried herself with a calm that seemed unshakable even in the most dangerous situations.

Behind her was an unfamiliar face. A young brown-haired girl that couldn't be much older than Ash. I doubted she was a participant though since she should be with the rest of the Trainers down on the field. Since she hadn't been introduced, I could only guess. However, even though it shouldn't really matter, my gaze kept wandering, some unexplainable feeling pulling my attention back to her. She wore a green blouse with her arms left bare and a white skirt, green socks and white shoes with a green stripe. A white hat with a green outline resembling the top half of a Pokéball sat loosely on her head.

"... with this I declare this year's Sinnoh League Tournament to start!" the booming voice of Mr. Goodshow snapped me out of my focus and back to the overall action below. Fireworks were going off and the fire atop the stadium's highest point was lit.

The Sinnoh League Tournament had officially begun.

*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****

M&M DreamWorks Presents
The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
First Arc: Breaking the Limit
Episode 2: The Sinnoh League Begins!

*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****

(Narrator)

"... the hell is that damn microphone not working..!"

With dread I realized that in fact the equipment that had refused to do as I wanted miraculously started working right at this moment... and recording as well.

"Um, we are going to cut that out, yes?" There was no response and I hung my head, letting out a long moan. It seemed my torment had once again begun. However, I refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing me despair! I was a professional after all!

Clearing my throat, I began once again, ignoring the embarrassing episode just now. "The Sinnoh League is finally here. Ash has finished his special training and all are now eagerly awaiting the results. Will the grueling three months pay off and finally allow our hero to make that decisive step closer to his dream? What challenges will await him in this tournament? We will see soon enough."

*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****

(Delia)

I believe every parent would understand my initial concern when I heard from Professor Oak about the training my son was putting himself through. The old man had been trying to downplay it but my mother instincts had made me probe deeper until I got the full story out of him. The trip down to Sinnoh was mostly on my initiative as well and took quite a bit of convincing. The good professor was simply too gullible though and I eventually got my wish.

Prepared to face what I would find in a mature manner and with the knowledge that Ash was a grown teenager by now – with all the years travelling more than ready to make his own decisions –, I only needed to see him that day in his practice battle with Dawn to know that my concerns were meaningless. Not silly or useless but I could see right away how much effort he was putting into this. I didn't need Brock's words or the others' greater understanding of Pokémon to see it. By the time I arrived, I could see that my little boy had really matured quite a bit through this training and whatever I might have to say wouldn't make a difference.

Matured in a lot more ways than one, I noted, stealing side glances at my son who was walking alongside Dawn. Closely. I wasn't sure if they were aware that they were holding hands in public or just too comfortable to care. My instincts would tell me the latter or perhaps I would just prefer it. A soft smile stole its way to my face. Unlike Misty and May, I had met Dawn for the first time in the cabin and took an instant liking to the girl. She just seemed to fit together with Ash naturally. Determined, with her goals firmly set and a sweet and kind soul. There could be worse choices for Ash to make when it came to a girlfriend.

The small group had made their way up to one of the lesser crowded areas of the stadium, generally reserved for V.I.Ps. Ash had casually stated that the President wanted to have a small talk with him. He really did have a knack for making friends, especially of important people. I heard the group had run into the Champion, Cynthia, on their journey through Sinnoh as well.

Finally we arrived in a larger hall where the aging president and current Champion were waiting for us... along with the girl I had seen from up in the ranks. That had been bothering me for a while. I knew there was something familiar about her but couldn't quite place my finger on it.

Hanging back as greetings were exchanged, I noticed Ash's eyes lit up in heartfelt recognition the moment he confronted the stranger. "Leaf! I didn't know you were here. I was surprised to see you up on stage." That was enough to jump start my memory and I couldn't help but smile for those two as they hugged. I hadn't seen or heard of the girl ever since she left Pallet and that had been a hard thing to deal with for Ash back then.

A low sound drew my attention back to Dawn and I had to stop myself from giggling at the look she was shooting the pair. Oh yes, she definitely had it bad for my son if she was getting jealous like that. Of course, Ash being who he was probably had no idea of the consequences of such an open display of affection towards another girl.

Placing a hand on the girl's shoulder who looked up at me startled, I gave her a reassuring smile. "You've got nothing to worry about. They are just good old friends." The blush I got in response was just too adorable.

*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****

(Dawn)

Despite what Ash's mother had said, I couldn't help the flare of intense... dislike for the other girl. I wanted to chastise myself for this foolish reaction but it was no good. The public and easy display of affection got me worked up. It was stupid, it was irrational. I knew Ash and knew that he wouldn't hurt me like that. Mrs. Ketchum had to be right and my reaction was definitely not exactly speaking of the trust that I had always valued so much between Ash and myself.

Knowing and feeling were two different things though. I suppose that's what came with being in a relationship, the heart wasn't easy to rationalize with. What I was starting to form with Ash was something big, I could feel it. And I did not want to lose that before it had even really begun. And if this scene went on any longer, I...

Thankfully Brock saved me an embarrassing moment that could have really ended up hurting our progress, by clearing his throat loudly. "Would you mind introducing us, Ash? I think some people here are a little... confused." As if just now realizing that they were still hugging, both teens pulled apart with some embarrassment, more so from Ash than from the girl. I was unsure what to think of

that but forced myself to push down the strong feelings before I would end up making a scene.

Ash chuckled nervously in his typical manner, hand behind his head. If he noticed my surely heated looks, he didn't comment on it, then again being who he was, Ash was probably woefully oblivious to the situation. "Sorry, guys. This is Leaf. She moved to Pallet when I was about eight and set out on her own journey a year before me. You could say we hit it off pretty well in the one year between that and I was just so surprised to see her here of all places after all this time." Yeah, right. For a one year friendship they were very friendly with each other... Once again I immediately had to grind down on the thought. That was quite a hypocritical thought considering Ash and I had roughly the same time together.

"Well, Ashy, I wanted to see how your special training turned out. I trust you made some progress at least?" Leaf replied grinning. My thoughts probably were the same as anyone's here. There was no room to speculate that she wasn't referring to our three month training session. How did she know about this? I wasn't aware that Ash had told anyone other than Professor Oak about our side trip, especially since he wanted to stop the news from reaching some of his rivals, like Paul.

"Excuse me? But how do you know about that?" I found myself asking before I could hold back, a lot more sharply than intended to. Ash looked at me funny, a hint of concern in his eyes. I cringed a little, feeling foolish once again. Foolish at my lack of patience to find out the whole story.

Leaf merely raised an eyebrow and gave me a speculative look before suddenly grinning mysteriously. "I should. The basis for Ashy's training plan was after all my own invention. Did you think he came up with all of this just by himself? The variation for a shorter time period was mostly his, I admit, but the basic principle came from me."

I honestly didn't expect that. Perhaps I shouldn't have been that surprised. Ash had said that he had gotten the information for the area where we had held our three month training session from a fellow Trainer but never said who and for all his strategic intelligence when it came to battle, I had had my doubts that Ash had come up with all the exercises by himself.

Before I could ask any further question though, Leaf suddenly stepped in front of me still grinning as if knowing some great secret and returning my glare with wry amusement. "You really have no need to worry about me, Dawn. Ash and I are a lot more like siblings. I care for him but not that way." I still eyed her suspiciously but somehow I could tell there was nothing but honesty in her voice. "Besides, if I didn't know Ashy liked you a lot, you would rather have to worry about yourself." Now I was confused, until the other girl continued with a wink, "I saw you at the Festival and thought you were pretty hot."

It took a moment to settle in, all right. Then the words and their meaning penetrated my layer of suspicion and made me flush in embarrassment. I couldn't believe Leaf just said that so casually, to a girl she hadn't ever met before! It wasn't like I had a problem with her liking girls, far from it. Better than her liking boys and Ash in particular, but her forwardness was a little unsettling.

Ash chuckled into the uncomfortable silence. "You haven't changed at all, have you?" Leaf just pouted which I had to admit looked somewhat cute. "I told you no hitting on my girlfriend." And there I was blushing again. It just took that one word to blow all my doubts away. And he had said it out loud in front of everyone! Risking a glance at him, I realized he was as surprised by it as I was. However, even if it was a spur of the moment slip, the meaning was what counted.

*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****

(Ash)

To be fair, I really hadn't planned to say it like that. In fact, all the joking aside, I had been shocked at the brief flare of possessiveness that had been there at that moment. That had been entirely unreasonable. I knew Leaf and while she had already been quite the flirt when we were kids – much more mature than most kids and definitely myself –, I knew not to fear anything from her.

I guess it's true. Love can make you do and think stupid things, I thought wryly as I stepped outside on the balcony. Dawn was leaning on the railing and gazing up at the night sky. It was a bright night with many stars out. The weather was actually picture perfect for a tournament like this. For a moment I stopped to immerse myself in Dawn's beautiful profile under the dim light of the night's stars and moon. Some months ago I might have not even noticed, but now that I had allowed myself to acknowledge these feelings, I was definitely getting more used to this romantic stuff.

"You should get some sleep. You've got one of the first matches tomorrow," Dawn said without looking at me. That caused me to chuckle quietly. Over the three months we had developed a knack for sensing when the other was close even without seeing or hearing.

Casually I stepped up next to her and mirrored her position. "Quite an eventful day, huh? And we haven't even started." I don't even know why I was surprised to see Leaf here. I should have almost expected it. That girl was altogether too persistent and curious when something spiked her interest. And she had more than once stated on the phone that she was "interested in seeing how your variations turn out". No, I really shouldn't have been surprised.

Dawn didn't give a reply, instead opting for a comfortable silence. She had taken Leaf's attitude in stride once she had been over the initial shock. Realizing that she had been jealous at first was a bit of a surprise but perhaps I really should learn to think before acting not just during a Pokémon battle. I suppose I should actually be glad about Leaf's flirting – more like teasing. It took the edge right out of a possible conflict that I really did not want.

"I'm just glad that Leaf isn't competing," I said aloud with a dry chuckle. Leaf had really been like a sister to me, I had assured Dawn later. Back in Pallet there wasn't actually that much to do. Many of the other kids had either been teasing me a lot or got on my nerves, like Gary back then. I never really minded and only realized how few REAL friends I had until Leaf came. We hit it off right away and I actually painfully noticed the gap when she left. We kept in contact until I set out myself. With both of us journeying, contact became sporadic. In that aspect we were very much alike. Leaf couldn't stay in any one place for long either. Not even after she had won her first Championship in Johto about the time I was just hitting my first major defeat back in the Kanto tournament.

"She's quite young to be a Champion already," Dawn said at last. "I was surprised." She turned her head slightly and I did the same. "You never said anything." There was no accusation, just curiosity, which I could understand. No one had known, not even Brock. And to be frank I couldn't come up with a good reason why I had never brought it up. Perhaps I didn't want to end up being compared to my predecessor's achievements. Only two years into her journey, Leaf had become one of the youngest Champions any official League tournament had ever seen. Instead of taking the master title though and competing with the other Champions, she had declined and continued travelling as an unofficial Pokémon Master. When I heard that shortly after my loss in Kanto, I had been... irked to say it nicely. I hadn't been able to understand and it caused a bit of a rift between us for awhile. I did understand her reasons much better now.

I shrugged slightly, not wanting to get too deep into that discussion right now. "It never came up." As lame as a reply as it was, Dawn didn't press the issue. A yawn threatened to escape my mouth. "Perhaps you are right, I really should get some sleep."

Dawn's hand slipped over mine and I stayed silent, enjoying the contact. "Good luck for tomorrow." Right now I thought that her smile and support was all the luck I ever needed. Just seeing that, I felt more ready to face this tournament when I ever had before.

*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****

(Pikachu)

"And now ladies and gentlemen, get ready for our fourth qualifying match of the first round here in the grass arena!"

The crowd cheered but I turned it out, concentrating on the task ahead. This wasn't my first time in front of a big crowd after all. The others might have some trouble with it but I could ignore the noise easily. That was also why I would be starting today. Ash's strategy for the tournament was depending a lot on the element of surprise. Or more like keeping as many surprises as long as possible. For that purpose Infernape and I would take the bulk of the qualifying rounds, with a changing third that would only be sent in if really necessary. I doubted there would be more than a handful of Trainers that could force Ash to show more of our training results than absolutely necessary.

Catching the end of the announcer's introduction of Ash and his opponent, a young nondescript teenager, I jumped forward to the field. The terrain was optimal. Plain ground would be perfect but after having trained so much on a grassy field, I had nothing to complain. I was almost a little disappointed when the opponent sent out a Roserade. A Grass-type on a grass field, how original. Had Ash started with Infernape this would be over even more quickly. Perhaps this sounded a bit overconfident, yet I felt that I had every right to be.

"Roserade, Petal Dance!"

Ash did not need to even give a command. Our synchrony had reached a new level and we understood each other almost without words. Rushing off in a run, the attack had not even reached my previous position before I was behind the poor, unaware Roserade. Its Trainer called out a warning but I decided to be merciful and struck her with a Thunderbolt that slammed the elegant Grass-type across the field where it stopped without giving any indication of getting up any time soon.

The previously loud and excited crowd was the total opposite now. A quiet hush had descended over the smaller side stadium where the qualifying rounds were held. Glancing over to Ash I got a satisfied nod as a sign that I had done good. Ash wasn't one to flaunt power, far from it. The problem was: We just were this good now. At the same time my best friend did not want to leave anything to chance, which included playing his hand too soon. After our training he could be assured a strategy like this could actually be pulled off. If there was someone in the tournament who could match up with us, we would hopefully not end up revealing too much. I know he was also thinking about Paul in that regard who had shown that he was very proficient in taking an opponent's strategies apart and utterly destroying them if given enough information.

"R-Roserade is unable to battle," the referee finally snapped out of his own shock. "Pikachu is the winner!"

With this Trainer the intimidation factor had definitely worked. Baffled and uncertain he recalled his Roserade and stood for almost half a minute more indecisive. Then came the anger at being humiliated like this. Anger though was never a good partner, especially when uncontrolled and facing an opponent who had the whole situation under control. While I loved Ash as he was, I could not help but marvel at how calm and collected he was now. Fully focused on the battle, yet still I could see the fire in his eyes. Tightly controlled, ready to be let out when necessary.

"Go, Hippowdon!"

As I said. Predictable. Well, the already shocked crowd would be in for another surprise today.

*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****

(Leaf)

The V.I.P. box was definitely providing a great view on the action below. Some would say now it made no difference if you couldn't see what happened in the first place. However, I KNEW what happened and smiled in satisfaction. He had really matured. The old Ash would have been jumping around gleefully now, instead he was waiting calmly for his opponent to react to the humiliating defeat that might go down as one of the fastest victories in an official League tournament. I doubted even a handful of the audience began to realize what had happened and its significance.

"What the hell? What did that guy do with his Pikachu? That's unnatural! And is it even allowed to let the Pokémon react by themselves?" I glared at the man sitting on the other side of Cynthia. He was the son of a renowned executive committee member or so I had heard and so far he had been nothing short of annoying. Boasting around with his clearly lacking knowledge as if he was a total Pokémon expert.

"There is no rule that states a Trainer must direct their Pokémon," Cynthia replied calmly, her eyes never leaving the field. "It is merely beneficial in most cases. When Pokémon battle on their own they act according to their own instincts and level of intelligence. With a Trainer directing them, their movements become more coordinated, strategized and purposeful. A Trainer can make the Pokémon perform better by standing outside the battle and deciding on the best course of action."

The guy frowned, clearly disbelieving and I took a deep breath to calm myself before picking up where the reigning Champion left off. "The more experienced the Pokémon becomes and the more synchronized with its Trainer, giving out commands won't be necessary anymore. At least not all the time. They will simply know what their Trainer wants them to do unless he or she decides on a different tactic. The less commands a Pokémon needs, the more this speaks of great experience and trust."

The opponent had sent out a Ground-type now and I refocused my attention, dismissing the annoying man. He wasn't out of commentary though. "Ha. That won't help much against a clear type advantage now." I scoffed, not even trying to comment. With the kind of speed Ash's Pikachu had displayed in a manner suggesting it wasn't even trying, even pure physical attacks could be devastating despite the size difference. The Hippowdon would be entirely too slow to react and still feel the impact. Now, there was just the question of how Ash was going to pull this off.

It seemed he wanted to drag this out a little, letting Pikachu dodge the clumsy sand attacks of his opponent. Having guessed the idea behind his tactic already, he could very well allow himself this since Hippowdon was too slow to force Pikachu into showing anything special.

"Pikachu, finish it. Thunderbolt," Ash spoke calmly. The crowd was still watching with rapt attention, quieter from the shock of the first match when it had been at any of the others so far. Thus I could clearly hear the comment and so did everyone else. My eyes widened. Could he already...?

"Heh, heh, now that is kind of stupid. An Electric attack won't..." The words were stuck in the man's throat when the electric bolt struck the Ground-type. From the charge I could already see its potency and knew with a swell of pride that my assumption had been correct. And Hippowdon had no way to deal with the results. Ground-types were by nature immune to electricity as long as they remained on the ground. Immersing them in water or launching them in the air were common methods to get around this immunity but they weren't as reliable as this. Because they were so used to just discharge the electricity into the earth, most Ground-types were highly sensitive if electricity actually hit them. The poor Hippowdon cried out in pain as the electricity coursed through its body, unable to channel it into the earth. Not long after that it collapsed, shuddering from the aftereffects.

Ignoring the man's exclamations, I looked over at Cynthia who was also as surprised as I was. The Champion glanced back with wonder, a silent exchange passing between us. He really had pulled it off and after just one intense training drill. Amazing.

"... it seems the referee also thinks this can't be legal." The executive's son's comment finally snapped me back to reality. I looked back to the field, a clearly agitated Trainer and a reluctant referee. As annoying as the comments were, I could understand the confusion. What Ash had just done was something normally reserved for Elites and not very widely known. I think I had been the first since Cynthia that had participated with one or more Pokémon that had broken their natural growth limit.

Much to the shock of our obnoxious guest, both Cynthia and Mr. Goodshow signaled their consent that no rules had been broken. That would serve to only further the talk about this fight.

"Show 'em a little but keep the big surprises, huh?" I muttered to myself with a chuckle. This tournament was bound to get interesting.

*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****

(Brock)

Breaking the natural limit of a Pokémon. Such a feat was reserved for the most Elite Trainers. Not even most gym leaders knew about this little secret and I had not either until my brief time with Professor Ivy. Years ago, long before Ash started his journey it was still custom to classify Pokémon by something called an experience level. This system, however, had begun to become unpopular due to extensive irregularities in determining the precise level of a Pokémon which often enough led to problems with level restrictions in tournaments and other such things. A Pokémon's level was mostly a rough estimate, designed to show the experience and growth. For many high-ranking and influential Trainers this system eventually proved too inflexible and the practice was aborted.

In fact, level estimation was all but aborted and forbidden. This was meant to guarantee more surprise in encounters on one hand and on the other hand should force the Trainers to not let static numerical values fool them, so that instead they would learn to understand and support their Pokémon's growth by themselves.

There had been some good about the old system though. While not always accurate per say, estimations about when a Pokémon would evolve was mostly reliable. The maximum level of 100 was reserved for those Pokémon that had reached their natural limit. The point where it was believed no further growth was possible. With this aspect the static and inflexible nature of the system truly failed though and frankly humans should have understood this without needing to be shown an example.

The limit of growth for Pokémon was potentially as infinite as those of humans. When someone was speaking of natural limit it meant the point that growth was getting increasingly harder and unlikely. Not impossible. Several Elite Trainers had proven that fact by going beyond the supposedly finite level 100. This was by no means a small feat and I did not know what exactly went into it. Suffice to say, merely experience and training alone wouldn't cut it. To break the natural limit and advance further a Pokémon had to overcome this hurdle both physically and mentally. I had tried asking Ash but he had just smiled mysteriously and said that he had promised not to divulge the details to anyone... Of course, I had a strong suspicion that Dawn knew.

The benefits of breaking past the natural limit came with more than just a great jump in individual stats and the ability to grow further. First and foremost – explaining what had just happened on the field – was that any and all resistances and immunities to a Pokémon's attacks would be moved up a level. However, only for those of the Pokémon's innate element. That meant a Fire-type could do normal damage instead of reduced to a Water-type with a Fire attack. Pikachu on the other hand could pass the natural immunity of Ground-types and inflict damage roughly equivalent to that of a reduced attack. Of course, the opponent unused to this and with a clearly high "level" disadvantage would still be hit disastrously.

Another major advantage of this stage was that the Pokémon was no longer hampered by the move restrictions. It had long since been proven wrong that Pokémon were only able to remember up to four moves, this set limit was more easily breached even for many normal Pokémon, depending mostly on intelligence level. Limit Break, however, allowed excess to all moves that had been previously learned and new ones could be learned indefinitely as far as I knew. That was a huge advantage in itself since the flexibility in battle was greatly increased like this.

"Amazing, I didn't think I would actually see it live and with two people from Pallet in such short order," Professor Oak commented, thankfully avoiding naming the concept itself. Ash didn't want anyone hearing about it if at all possible. It was obvious now where he had learned of it in the first place.

"You mean Leaf, Professor?" Dawn asked the question nonetheless. Her bout of jealousy seemed to have passed quickly and now it seemed she was actually more curious than hostile towards Ash's childhood friend.

Professor Oak nodded sagely. "Yes, she made quite an impact with it. I was watching Ash that time so I missed it unfortunately. Even among Elites not many can do it but Leaf is a true prodigy in training methods and bringing out the highest potential in Pokémon. Ash seems to share that trait but he needed a little longer to bring it out." The older man looked over to Dawn. "I wonder, since you went through the same training, have some of your Pokémon achieved IT too?"

Dawn shook her head, a little miffed but not too much disappointed. "No, I could not hope to. Ash's Pokémon have far greater battle experience. I am aiming for it, of course, but it'll be awhile yet until I can fully catch up."

Down below the match had come to an unceremonious end, Pikachu taking pity on the last Pokémon, a clearly mismatched Mantine, that at this point didn't need more than a spark to bring down.

*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****

(Dawn)

In hindsight it had been rather funny and kind of thrilling for me to witness. Especially after my less than stellar reaction to Leaf in the beginning, it was satisfying and definitely reassuring to see that Ash could get jealous as well.

We had been watching one of the other qualification rounds when it happened. Ash had already finished his matches and aside from him only Barry, Paul and one other Trainer had earned themselves a flawless statistic with no Pokémon lost in either of their matches. And from those only Ash and this unknown Trainer had a near identical battle time average. Suffice to say, it worried and excited Ash. Here was someone who could possibly match him and he was curious about it. I could understand that. So far his victories had been even more effortless than we had expected after our training. Only now we could see just how much progress we had actually made compared to the rest of the Trainers. Above all else Ash wouldn't want an easy win. He wanted a challenge along the road.

We didn't end up seeing much. The mystery Trainer remained pretty much that. A mystery. That started with his or her appearance. One couldn't really tell with a long dark purple-almost black cloak covering the body, complete with hood and all, a voice that could really be either gender and an apparent pseudonym by the name of "Phantom". How utterly cliché. Much like Ash, this mystery Trainer did not show much. The only Pokémon we got to see was a Mismagius that didn't even get one scratch as it plowed through the opponent's team.

That was when Conway had shown up out of the blue, scaring us half to death. To be fair, I had almost forgotten about him being here too, and now I knew why again. Not that he was a bad person or anything but his attitude was simply annoying and definitely obtrusive. The nerve! Trying to ask me out in exchange for information about the mystery Trainer! As if he knew much more than us. I honestly doubted that with the ease this Phantom dispatched his or her opponent that day, much else had been shown in previous matches. The database surely hadn't shown anything the like.

I had merely dismissed the whole thing with a forced polite refusal. Ash didn't. He had grabbed my hand with a slight growl and while I was still startled at this show of emotion in front of so many other people, he had already declared hotly that I was already taken! How cute! I think my heart must have made a big leap and I admit not quite hearing the rest of the exchange in my momentary bliss. I could imagine though how it went, considering those two already knew they were in the same group...

Ash definitely was wiping the floor with him. Infernape had made short work of Conway's first two Pokémon. I frowned at the confident, creepy smirk on the spectacled boy's face but wasn't that worried. Whatever he had in store for last, Conway had so far proved he'd probably need a Legendary Pokémon to pull off a

victory. Lickilicky and Shuckle had proven no match for Infernape. The former had went down with one flaming punch and the latter only lasted a bit longer with its higher defenses but ultimately had to yield when Infernape had simply snatched up the shell, jumped in the air and threw it down, straight through a rock. Conway's Pokémon definitely weren't cut out for speed battles and Ash could have ended these battles in many different ways.

In some way it was kind of overwhelming. Perhaps even scary. I really hadn't thought the difference to the ordinary Trainers would be THAT great already. There was no point in doubting that perhaps Barry and definitely Paul would prove challenging but that was about it. Challenging. I didn't see how they could possible win unless they had somehow done some secret training that rivaled ours as well. Only that mysterious Phantom person proved an unknown factor so far. Much like some were probably thinking of Ash, it could turn out that he/she was just having one or two very strong Pokémon and would fold once forced beyond that. My gut feeling was telling me differently though.

"Looks like Conway did have an ace left," Brock commented next to me and I frowned when I saw the air flicker briefly around Ash's Infernape and Conway's Dusknair. It took me a moment to realize just what happened but extensive attack study had been one part of our theoretical and tactical training sessions. Before the tournament, Conway might have gotten through with this but not anymore.

"It won't work," I conveyed my thoughts out loud, leaving no room to speculate whether it was an opinion or a stated fact.

*******TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*******

(Ash)

For a moment I stood frowning as the Trick Room area appeared around the field. Most of my initial resentment had passed and merely turned to annoyance once I had realized I wasn't acting much better than Dawn had with Leaf initially. Granted, with Leaf it was quickly resolved that there was no need to worry. With Conway you just couldn't be sure if he could take a hint or not. His attitude was seriously creeping me out.

Aside from that I could acknowledge that he had a certain tactical talent. From what little information I had given him and everyone else with my previous matches, a tactic like that was one of the better counters to come up with it. Had I not decided on the extra training I might have been in actual trouble now. However, even without the massive growth in experience, there were quite a few ways to take a Trick Room apart.

"There are a few flaws in your strategy," I explained, trying to keep some of the smugness I still felt out of my voice. "Infernape, wait it out and counter," I ordered calmly, catching Conway's brief frown. Had he expected me to just rush in? The old me might have done so but the other boy certainly must have realized I wasn't fighting quite that recklessly anymore. "Number one: Counters rely on going last to be most effective." The problem with a counter strategy would normally be that Infernape would have to rely on fighting moves up close for counters and Dusknair was a Ghost-type. The Limit Break eliminated this disadvantage but it still wasn't the only way to win.

Conway was hesitating now, clearly uncertain how to proceed but eventually ordered a Shadow Punch, obviously hoping he could hit hard enough to prevent a counter. That was where the core weakness of this strategy came into play. "Weakness number two," I continued even as Dusknair sailed past Infernape in an uncontrolled lunge, earning a fast flaming kick in passing that sent it into the ground even harder. "Trick Room works by making the slower Pokémon just a tad bit faster than the opponent's top speed. We have trained hard to get to this point and controlling your movements at this kind of speed was part of that training."

I kind of felt sorry for Conway now. Gritting his teeth he tried his best not to become frustrated and I had to give it to him that his Dusknair was getting better and better at controlling the kind of speed Infernape was used to. However, even as some glancing hits landed, it was by far not enough. "Weakness number three: Dusknair may be faster now but speed is the only thing affected here. It does nothing to Infernape's defense and stamina. Infernape can hold out a lot longer than the Trick Room is active."

Which was about now. With a flicker, the strange field disappeared. I could have capitalized on it right away but there was one more thing I wanted to point out and so I waited until Conway had Trick Room set up once more. "And lastly, even without all that, you should never place pure tactics over the willpower of a Pokémon. Infernape, Brick Break!" As if waiting for the cue – which it had –, Infernape shot up unhindered, Conway too stunned to react. Fist cocked back, the fiery ape let out a passionate cry and broke right through the psychic manifestation. I had wanted to test this theory as soon as I had discussed it with Dawn once but none of our Pokémon could create Trick Room. Technically the space was much like a protective barrier. Similarly created by psychic power, it was just as vulnerable. It didn't shatter though. No, what happened was almost exactly as I had expected. Infernape had left the field's effect radius by breaking a hole into it and an attack started now and phased through this opening would almost certainly not be affected.

Especially with this attack variation. "Finish it, Meteor Drop!" The attack sounded more flashy than it was. Basically little more than an enhanced Flare Blitz with a good boost of Agility, giving the attack an extreme speed boost as Infernape dropped from the sky in what really looked like a flaming meteor. Whether or not

Trick Room actually effected it, there was simply no time to react and no place to flee as Dusknair was enveloped by the explosion generated by the impact.

Dust was wiped up all around the impact zone. However, we both knew how it went. The Trick Room was gone already and soon enough Infernape could be seen no worse for wear and letting out a victory cry over his downed opponent.

*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****TFSTTM*****

Author's Notes

Aaaand cut. This took a bit longer even though I didn't even get to do all that I actually wanted. Writing is like riding a bicycle, once you can do it right, you can't forget how. All it took was some motivation and I think I'm already starting to really get back into the routine.

First of all. Thank you, minna, for the great first response so far. An especially great thanks goes out to Twilight – The Moon Spirit for being very inquisitive. Yes, I like that in readers, every author who takes him-/herself serious should. Constructive feedback even if its critique is the most highest honor. Now Twilight pointed out a few interesting aspects which I'd like to address here as well, among other things.

The first big question had been about the rest of Ash's Pokémon. At the end of the last chapter I did explain Ash's plan to take some time off regardless of the outcome of the League. In that time he will train his other Pokémon as well. Keep in mind, this tournament is just the opening act, this will be followed by a period of Ash and Dawn travelling (not sure yet where) and developing the story further towards the main events... whichever they may be. As I said, I have a rough idea what will happen past this tournament but nothing entirely concrete yet. I might actually do some brainstorming soon...

One of the big problems I had with the anime's version of the Sinnoh League was the inconstancy. Wasn't it Ash's resolve to catch, train and battle only with Pikachu and the Pokémon he caught in Sinnoh and then they do a complete turnaround and in comes the rest of the merry party with a bunch of new attacks as well that aren't explained/shown how they learned them. Thus, my decision to stick with the Sinnoh team for this tournament. Aside from that, they were the ones going through the training and training more than six Pokémon in this manner in such a short time with the proper results is almost impossible at this point.

Second question. The Pikachu and Bunearry angle. I already expressed my gratitude to Twilight for reminding me, because I had indeed forgotten. I am as of yet still uncertain and will leave the issue to be resolved at a later date. With the tournament there will be little time for distractions but the phase after that may provide some closure on this topic. Frankly, I don't think I can be hold responsible for

forgetting since the anime seems to have forgotten too! Honestly it was a cute idea at the beginning, popped up here and there again I think but later on I can't even recall anything being mentioned again. Now that I think about it, it would have made more sense for Bunearry to flip instead of Piplup in the last episode of the Sinnoh arc, or perhaps show a tear up between feelings for Pikachu and going for the model thing... That didn't come up at all, so I have to wonder just how serious the crush really was. I'll think of something to tie up that loose end though...

Another review that just came in as I am typing up these closing lines, I have to address as well. Wow, already being mentioned on another site without actually promoting. In regards to that: Lily Flower, the German version is still up, yes, it isn't and honestly won't be finished anymore though. Too much time has passed since then and now to make an attempt workable. Also... "the German version" could suggest the wrong impression. The only thing this fic has to do with the old one are some general concepts from which you haven't seen much at all yet. For every intent and purpose this is a completely different story for now only bearing the original's name. Anyone interested can go and read if they want, provided they can read German. I think it was one of my better earlier works, progressing more steadily in quality with the chapters. The first two of three arcs are complete, so it provides at least a certain closure where I left off.

Now, finally addressing this chapter. Leaf. *giggle* Nope, won't say anything. All secrets. You'll have to see where I am going with this one. Only this much, don't interpret too much into her from game experiences. She is mostly a template that I'll develop in my own character... (not that the game characters are given much "personality", ahem)

Oh, as for Leaf's preferences. Older readers of my story will probably be less surprised. As for newer readers. I have a healthy appreciation for writing shoujo ai/yuri/femmeslash. More so than traditional het. Be prepared to find quite a bit in here too. If you can't stomach that better leave now.

I changed the tournament system. I told you to ignore all you knew from after the episode where the group set off with the ship. I already said for plenty aspects that I wasn't satisfied how the Sinnoh League was done at all. Frankly I found it too small to begin with. I had expected more competitors, more spectacle, like the other Leagues before that.

I seriously hope I am not showing Ash as too overpowered. Right now his training is benefiting him greatly, greater than he ever thought. But there will be challenges along the road in the final rounds. I am actually not quite certain what to do about the final. No, it won't be Paul, that much I can say. That would be too cliché and too much fanon to repeat. He'll get his fight but not in the final. At the moment I am debating two possibilities... which I won't tell you, of course. ^_^

I have pretty much channeled my idea for the leveling system and the Limit Break through Brock (sorry, pal, I wanted to have Leaf explain it but that scene was getting too long already) and I don't really have anything to add. One thing I always try to do is come up with logical explanations to certain issues, like discrepancies between anime/manga or in this case anime and game. I don't like it when a fic just shoves the game system on the anime and expects the reader to swallow the idea without some plausible information. The difference between games and anime is that the latter allows a far greater flexibility. All the numbers in the game are static (aside from influencing values). This just doesn't work in the anime that provides a more real time surrounding for the Pokémon. Just like with battles where Pokémon avoid and do crazy stunts that you could never do in a game due to its static, turn-based and RPG-like structure, I can't see them stoically categorized in levels and stats in the anime.

One last thing on a personal note and then I am done for now, this note was long enough already. I might need a new beta. Ayrki's work schedule is kind of crazy at the moment and she can't do it anymore for me. If anyone feels up to it, please send me a mail or IM. Native speakers or otherwise specifically qualified would be a requirement, extensive anime knowledge (but at least Pokémon knowledge) would be a definite bonus so I am not only getting spellcheck/grammar feedback. It's not absolutely necessary though. I am fairly confident in my written English by now and most of what I need is someone to look over it, catch typos I didn't and perhaps the one or other grammar suggestion.

Until next time, yours

Matthias