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(Narrator)

We zoom in on the central stadium of the Sinnoh League Competition. The crowd was roaring and generally going wild in anticipation. On either side of the battlefield, a perfect balance of plain ground, grassy patches, rocks and even a small but usable stream of water going from end to the other. "So far we have seen many amazing things, including a dominating Ash right on his way to the coveted title. But now he will face his old rival. And while it seems that Ash is unstoppable this time, will he overcome the one Trainer in Sinnoh he has never truly beaten so far? Stay on board and see, because you don't want to miss this epic fight..."

Please make it at least somewhat exciting this time!

Even as I lamented over the one-sided affair of matches so far the referee had given the start signal and Ash's Buizel and Paul's Metagross took the stage.....

Wait! When did Paul get a Metagross???

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(Paul)

In the end I had arrived at some fairly simple conclusions. To assume that Ash's growth was a fluke was nonsense. To assume that the gap between his leading Pokémon and the rest was big enough to allow an exploit was very risky at

the very least. The previous two rounds had proven that even if there was a gap, the rest of his team was still on such a high "normal" level that putting them off in favor of singling out Pikachu and Infernape would prove a disastrous tactic. This left very little options to apply a viable tactic or devise a team roster that could effectively deal with such opponents. As such I had decided on a simple but hopefully effective opening tactic that should give me an edge. Other than that I had not set up my team in response to my opponent. So far that had proven ineffective. I could only count on my best Pokémon for this battle and quick, in-battle decisions. After all, hardly any strategy survived first contact with the enemy.

Metagross was my trump card at the beginning. It had been a lucky find on my way here and had taken me quite an effort to catch. I hadn't been sure whether to use it or not since we had little time to actually train. I needed that edge now though. "Metagross, begin as planned," I simply ordered. Immediately Metagross began to concentrate enormous psychic power, before rising off the ground and using the gathered power to slam down with an Earthquake having a similar effect as a Fissure. As expected Buizel was up in the air before taking any damage, however, that was not the point.

The field so carefully constructed to serve as an all-purpose field as a special attraction for the semi-finals was soon enough severely devastated. Large fissures tore a spherical border around the center, creating a deep trench that immediately began to draw out the water from the stream. Metagross was far from finished as it began to set up the second stage. Producing huge chunks of metal, an enormous dome of steel rose from the created trench, effectively cutting the battlefield in half. It was a good thing that the officials had installed a platform system as was practiced in other Leagues to allow for greater movement of the Pokémon in the final rounds. Well, that aspect was reversed now but it allowed a good view on the inside of the dome.

"An interesting idea! But let's begin for real now, shall we?" Ash called over from his side. For a moment I wondered if I should be offended by the lack of impression. If he was impressed, he was carefully hiding it. I still thought I had a good starting matchup nonetheless.

The setup was done. It was time for the real battle. "I intend to. Metagross, Iron Defense!" The response came quickly and it proved a good idea to start out defensively. That Aqua Jet variant was powerful, the demonstration in the previous round had been very impressive. However, it was obvious that it was also Buizel's main form of attack, not quite possessing the variety some of the other Pokémon had shown. Metagross had high standing power though and could take a lot of hits. At an appropriate time I had it fire off a Meteor Mash, anticipating the evasion already but using the added effect to raise my own Pokémon's power.

As the battle dragged on, I realized with some concern that Buizel was actually leaving more damage than I had anticipated or found bearable. I needed to end this quickly. So far I had measured Buizel as perhaps the weakest link along with the relatively new Gabite. If I could not take the lead here, the rest of the battle would be a real pain.

Fighting down frustration, I forced myself to wait for the right moment, just as Buizel came around for another pass, preparing to launch another Ice Punch... Perfect. "Bullet Punch combined with Zen Headbutt!" I ordered just moments before collision. Neither Trainer or Pokémon had obviously expected a speed counter. Metagross were usually slow but its high psychic power along with extraordinary intelligence could result in great boosts of ability and a perfect timing. Even with Buizel having the greater momentum, the rocket start from stationary to moving at just the right moment allowed Metagross to score a devastating hit that flung Buizel away, crashing into the opposite side of the steel dome clearly out of it...

Not before having left a hard hit with his Ice Punch though, I noticed with a frown, never having seen the move connect in the first place.

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Opening Theme (Dream Wing, Mai-Otome 1st Opening)

On the backdrop of the Sinnoh region map, Ash appears on the left, then Dawn on the right, then quickly between them Brock, Pikachu and Piplup. The logo appears behind them.

*Mitsuketa no dream
dokidoki ga tomaranai*

Ash sits on a boulder, his badge case in his lap. He is deep in thought, then looks up and we see a stadium, the view quickly zooming up to the fire ignited on top.

MEISTER DREAM

The scene flawlessly continues into a shot of the Grand Festival trophy, then quickly fades out to show a stage...

*umaretano takaramono
mune ippai ni kirameki hajimeru*

Before finding Dawn, sitting in a field of flowers. She has been looking up similar as Ash, but now looks down and places a hand over her heart, a soft smile on her face.

doushite konna ni fuan ni naru no kana

*kakae kirenai omoi
namida koboreru kedo...*

The screen splits showing Ash and Dawn running towards the image of the stadium/stage separately. They each reach out with their left/right hand but can't reach it. They become aware of each other then and this time both reach out with the other hand, clasping them together before jumping forward. The scene flashes white.

*kitto itsuka tadori tsukeru yo
tsumadzui tatte akiramenai*

Ash is in the middle of an arena, face serious, pointing forward. Pikachu jumps forward sparks flying. Quick shift through Ash's Sinnoh team fighting. Gabite fires off a Draco Meteor. From the burst emerges Buizel zipping by in an Aqua Jet, followed by Staraptor crossing paths in a diving attack. Torterra drops into the screen and lets loose with a hailstorm of leaves, out of which Infernape comes blazing and bathed in fire. He is joined by Pikachu running along with Volt Tackle.

yuuki dashite mae ni susumou

Dawn is in the stands, cheering them on along with Piplup. Brock is next to her a little reserved but also cheering. Ash is meanwhile faced with a mysterious cloaked figure. A Pokémon – it cannot be seen which – is sending out a blast of black energy.

*chiisana ippo fumi daseba
hora ne, atarashii watashi*

Pikachu burst forth, wrapped in a cloak of lightning. Ash looks on grim, a little helpless. A transparent image of Dawn appears behind him and gives him a huge. Ash balls his fist and takes a step forward. Pikachu bursts out of the black beam. The screen shifts one last time, Pikachu streaking in between Ash and Dawn standing arm in arm. Ash has a confident grin on his face and Dawn is smiling happily.

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**M&M DreamWorks Presents
The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
First Arc: Breaking the Limit
Episode 4: Rival Clash! Ash VS Paul, the Rematch!**

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(Dawn)

Surely I mirrored the wince and expression of concern Ash was showing right now. Not that I was really, deeply worried. This might have been Ash's first Pokémon that he had actually lost in battle – an impressive feat considering this was the semi-final – but none of us had expect this streak to hold. Paul was another caliber of opponent altogether, one Ash fully respected for his skills at least. He hadn't expected to get out as unscathed as he had from his previous battles.

The surprise was more in the fact that it had happened so fast. Paul had clearly gotten the better start and the setup he had used was quite useful. There was nothing absolutely perfect to use against Ash short of having Pokémon trained close to the same results than his. The training had covered too many variants to find any one weakness to exploit. Cutting movement space like this was a sound strategy to be used as an additional help but not the ultimate answer. The loss of Buizel must have hurt Ash but wouldn't deter him. The real battle was only now beginning as Infernape took the field and Paul switched in Drapion.

"Clever, it seems like Paul isn't through with the setup yet."

I turned to briefly glance at Leaf who was intently watching the battle. So far I had been unable to shake off, nor confirm Ash's suspicion regarding Phantom's identity. The idea of an illusion being used was doubtful. I had actually tried using Togekiss' Psychic powers to try and see if there was any reaction during Phantom's last battle in the quarter finals without any disturbance or other irregularity whatsoever. That could just mean that whoever employed the technique was far stronger but the lack of even a ripple or something like that had me stumped. On the other hand I could not refute the logic behind Ash's assumption either... I doubted asking directly would serve a satisfying result.

Shaking off the thought and focusing back on the battle, I saw what Paul was referring too. Obviously he had found Barry's strategy to be efficient enough to combine with his own or already had something like this planned to begin with. Toxic Spikes began to bury into the created steel dome and over the surface, with enough vanishing into the ground to serve their original purpose of making switching a dangerous hassle. Infernape was deftly avoiding the hazardous rain of projectiles but it became clear now that the confined space with all the ridges and jagged obtrusions inside made for a rather small area and avoiding a widespread attack was a task that required full attention. The Cross Poison thus almost caught Infernape unaware but it flipped up and above it just in time. However, Drapion was quick to follow up and shot forward with surprising speed, catching one of Infernape's feet between its fangs, the poison immediately taking effect.

This time I frowned a little deeper. Regardless of the power difference, poison damage was something that could still prove a big problem for us. Poison would slowly grind away at a Pokémon's health and no matter how much endurance, it would eventually succumb.

Drapion did not escape unscathed though as Infernape took his revenge with a powerful Fire Punch – more like a chop – that pushed it back and clear of his opponent. But Ash didn't intend to fight the battle at a distance. Drapion was a Dark type after all and while the Poison type cancelled out the disadvantage to Fighting-type moves, Infernape was still a far better contender up close. Unfortunately Drapion proved to be good at defense as well, countering Infernape's fast attacks with its sharp, poison-coated claws. Despite that Infernape was starting to get several hard hits in although it was a slow process. Perhaps a too slow process as both Brock and Leaf commented next to me.

I knew better though. Many sparring sessions with Infernape had taught me that the closer he came to loss, the more fierce and determined Ash's Infernape would become. Paul had not even seen a fraction of its full potential.

Before Ash could prove my thoughts though, Paul surprised everyone by switching out Drapion. Either he was skeptical himself that his Pokémon could last long enough or he had something else in mind. The latter became apparent when a Gastrodon took Drapion's place, presenting perhaps the worst possible matchup for Infernape.

Leaf giggled next to me and I shot her a scathing look at her show of bemusement at Ash's predicament but she didn't seem to notice... or mind. "Now I wonder how Ashy will handle this." Unfortunately she was right. Even with the achieved Limit Break, Gastrodon's double resistance to Fire was merely cut down to a normal resistance. With Infernape already in bad shape from the poison, things were really not looking good right now.

I chanced a glance towards Ash and was reassured to see that he was maintaining his concentration and was not showing signs of concern. In fact, it seemed the way Paul was challenging him now actually got him excited. And an excited yet focused Ash was far more threatening.

"Just watch and see," I replied with a small grin myself. Perhaps seeing some of Infernape's true potential would draw an interesting reaction where previous methods had failed.

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(Ash)

Paul had indeed surprised me. I had almost expected the strategy he opened up with. He wasn't as arrogant as he often came across and not above using someone else's idea as long as it was promising to be successful. The two layered setup definitely showed the difference between Barry and Paul. Paul had a degree of

tactical thinking that had me often baffled in the past and at times I felt wholly inadequate in my inability to keep up with. I would like to think that I had caught up in this area as well. While the encased space and poison trap combination was worrying, I had no need to despair.

In fact since he was already poisoned the Toxic Spikes were nothing to worry about anymore. Of course, because Infernape had ended up poisoned that could cause problems in other areas. "Close in with Mach Punch." Immediately Infernape shot forward but that was when things started to go wrong. It was the barest wince as the poison kicked in and threw off Infernape's concentration for a split second which earned him a Water Pulse square in the face. Paul was certainly a lot of things, inattentive wasn't one of them. True to training, Infernape weathered the attack and struck out at Gastrodon, quickly falling into a whirlwind of punches and kicks. Or at least, what others would still think of as a whirlwind. I could see though that the poison was effecting the battle more than I had thought. The damage factor wasn't even the most important aspect. Infernape's movements were less fluent, sluggish at times compared to what I knew it could do and it made all the differences against an opponent like Paul who knew how to capitalize on the smallest things.

It was a heated battle, both Pokémon trading blows but Gastrodon getting more and more hits in as the poison weakened Infernape further. There was still no room for concern, I knew we could pull this around but the timing had to be right or otherwise the best results I could hope for was a draw. I had no intention of seeing either of my two top Pokémon defeated in this battle.

The moment I had waited for came ironically just at a rather unfortunate time and for a moment I was actually baffled as Gastrodon countered a Fire Punch with a Muddy Water counter shield variant that ended up catching Infernape right in the activation. I gritted my teeth as I saw him fly back but reminded myself of the ape's indomitable spirit. I knew this battle was important to him as Paul's former Pokémon and thus he wouldn't give in until every last bit of energy was used up.

To underline my thoughts, Infernape managed to flip and shakily come to a skidding halt some distance away, back against the steel dome, head lowered. It was hard to tell whether he was catching his breath, showing a sign of fatigue or collect his strength. A moment later Infernape literally erupted with a wild roar, its Blaze Ability kicking in. I did not waste any time. Every moment more meant further damage by the poison and I intended to show Paul and everyone else – or someone else in particular – that it wasn't that easy to do my Pokémon in. "Now, Infernape, Heat Wave!"

Contrary to what some might expect, there was no dramatic buildup, no tremendous show of exertion. Infernape simply cocked back his hands and thrust them forward generating a highly-condensed burst of flame that, bolstered by the Blaze Ability and tightly focused into a forward beam instead of a widespread attack,

made a distinctive crackle, almost like thunder booming, as it sprang forward. Paul had barely a moment to call out a desperate Water Pulse but that attack hadn't even went a short distance when the Heat Wave swallowed it whole, driving into the surprised and wholly unprepared Gastrodon as the combined might of a Fire attack plus Limit Break enhancement plus Blaze Ability crashed into it. Resistance or not. There was simply no contest. With a high-pitched shriek it was driven off the ground, the attack carrying it along until it crashed into the opposite wall, the residue heat exploding upon contact and melting off some of the steel.

There was a moment of utter silence in the stadium in which part of the overheated steel finally gave way and fell with a resounding clank to the ground and leaving behind a well-sized hole in the construct. Only then did the already fainted Gastrodon follow.

In the end, for all of our training and advancement in skill, nothing beat a good old-fashioned overkill attack to turn the tide.

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(Brock)

In hindsight it might have been better to not switch right after taking Gastrodon out of the fight. I could understand why Ash did so. Infernape had already taken a lot of damage and the poison would continue to seep away at his health. Every second out on the field could take him out permanently. Letting him rest would also replace the lethal with normal poison and allow Infernape to recover.

This early switch, however, left both Trainers in a similar position as in the beginning, both not knowing what the other would choose. Paul was obviously better at anticipating and now the matchup was once again against Ash with Staraptor and Electivire facing off. While the Flying type had the advantage of avoiding the poisonous spikes and not be hindered as much by the steel dome, Electivire had the type advantage and was one of Paul's strongest Pokémon that had he could bring into the fight as far as I knew.

Chancing a look to the side, I was once again amazed at the lack of serious worry Dawn displayed. She had obviously a closer grasp of Ash's full abilities. I had been privy to quite a lot during the trip despite being occupied with support duty, however, Dawn who had went through the same routines and through various practice battles could far better judge the situation.

Either that or she was just good enough at hiding her concern.

Ash didn't feel like rethinking his choices either. He was never one to switch rapidly in the face of overwhelming disadvantages and I didn't expect him to start

now. Staraptor was fresh and perhaps his fastest Pokémon aside from his two “team leaders” as he had begun to refer them.

The battle started out furious right away and it once again didn't look good for Ash. Paul had clearly made his homework and then some. I don't think I had ever seen an Electric Pokémon throw out Electric attacks in such quick successions aside from Pikachu at the height of training. The Thunder attacks fell like a miniature thunderstorm all around Staraptor, leaving it no time for counter attacks as she was busy dodging...

Or taking damage. It was sheer impossible to dodge them all. Despite the hits Staraptor was taking Ash seemed to be unconcerned. I couldn't quite fathom just what had him so confident. Looking around I noticed I might be the only one there. Cynthia and Leaf appeared to understand and with Dawn I couldn't tell. Not able to contain my curiosity, I asked to no one in particular. “What is he doing?”

“Watch where the bolts are landing that actually miss Staraptor by a fraction,” Cynthia answered this time. I watched for a few more moments and began to understand. Staraptor was taking some hits on purpose to draw the next hits closer to specific areas. Areas that were most heavily littered with poison spikes. The heavy electricity was destroying most of them.

Paul seemed to realize that around the same time as me. Unfortunately there wasn't much he could do aside from trying to force Staraptor in specific directions. That, of course, disrupted the actual purpose and allowed Ash to go on the offense. In turn Paul countered by abusing Protect and actually succeeding in diverting almost all of Staraptor's dives. Those that got through were not all that effective. Staraptor's special training allowed it to deal some damage where other Flying Pokémon would have left little to no marks but all in all Electivire shrugged these attacks off.

The battle quickly became a tactical one. Whoever made the first real mistake would lose. Paul definitely still had the edge in many aspects. Staraptor was tiring from all the dodging and no weakness training could account for so many hits in the long run. Ash knew that he had to act soon. Paul knew that as well.

No one in the box dared to take their eyes off the battle, expecting the decisive strike any moment. When it came, Ash did not pull out some elaborate trick, perhaps he really didn't have one in this situation. Instead he had Staraptor perform a simple but effective maneuver where she dived through two Thunders which ended up clashing together and producing a bright flash that momentarily blinded Electivire.

Or it was supposed to. Undaunted the tall Electric type caught the incoming Staraptor bathed in the aura of Giga Impact with its tails. That alone might not have been enough to take the brunt out of the incoming high-speed attack but the static electricity that shocked the poor bird upon contact certainly was. I had to admit that

the speed with which Electivire had channeled the electricity at practically the moment of contact had surprised me.

Now Ash was down one more. But with Infernape recovering and Pikachu still fresh, the momentary setback was so far acceptable. The field had been fairly cleared of the toxic spikes as well and that alone could be a major factor in the progression of the battle.

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(Leaf)

So far the battle had surprised me on many levels. Ash had told me of his rivalry with Paul and how strong he was. That I could believe but with all the training I had expected Ash to push through the battle with far more ease. Granted, the opening strategy had given Paul momentum but Ash had started to pull things around much later than expected. When he did, the raw power Infernape had shown had been another of the major surprises. From my own experience with Pokémon on this level I knew what true strength lay in such an attack. With so much power an attack like Heat Wave could potentially get lethal. Once you reached that stage it wasn't so much about getting the power than getting the control. Even with Gastrodon's remaining resistance, an uncontrolled attack like this could very well have killed it. There had been no hesitation on either part though. Neither Trainer nor Pokémon had shown any doubt and the execution was perfect.

Perhaps therein lay the crux. Ironically the prediction that some skeptics had made that the gap between Ash's Pokémon was the main reason for his smashing success could very well be true. Not that I would ever accuse Ash of favoritism. The other four Pokémon of his lineup were definitely strong and underestimating would get any normal Trainer into trouble. On the other hand, Ash had clearly put a lot of training into Pikachu and Infernape which I could even understand. However, focusing so much on those two to pursue a strategy of hiding his full skill might cost him now. The other four had gotten little challenge and only about a single matchup each. Pikachu and Infernape with their superior growth could work around the lack of a serious challenge by sparring with each other or perhaps with some of Dawn's strongest. The others could not, not in a way that would give them a viable challenge that they could actually manage to overcome.

I grinned wryly at these thoughts. I didn't even think Ash's strategy so far was a bad one. I might have done the same. Hell, I probably would have left Staraptor in the battle, too. While I had learned the value of not always putting my convictions over a reasonable strategy, I could still emphasize with him. The problem had no clear solution. If one wanted to call it a problem to begin with. Outside of Elite Trainer circles it would be more one of luxury that most Trainers would enjoy having.

The battle had entered another close call as Drapion was back on the field and engaging Ash's Gabite. Both were trying to continue where they personally or their predecessor had left off. In other words Drapion was trying to reapply some more poison spikes while Gabite was countering these efforts with Earthquakes that eventually ended up making far more impact by shaking up the already battered steel dome and forced Paul to give up this avenue in favor of a full-scale attack.

By now I had estimated that Paul's team was roughly around the same experience level as Ash's mid to lower team, with one or two perhaps slightly stronger. Gabite was a recent addition, I didn't need to be told to see it and the fight now was rather intense and even. It could go either way and neither Trainer was prepared to give any ground. That was actually worse for Paul than it was for Ash. No doubt he had hoped to create at least a two win advantage early and maintain it for as long as possible. Neither Pikachu nor Infernape were out of the battle yet and I doubted the latter was going to be any less dangerous from poison and fatigue. The less Pokémon Paul had left the harder it would get for him.

The battle was drawing to its conclusion. So far Drapion had been able to get past its disadvantage against the ground attacks by showing an exceptionally posture that allowed it to take the shockwaves from the Earthquakes fairly well and immediately launch counter attacks that kept Gabite on its toes. Ash had finally given up his reluctance to get in close when a stray shot with Drapion's tail got a minor hit in, enough to inflict a poisoning.

Dragon Rush soon met Cross Poison in a struggle for dominance. The poison had slightly weakened Gabite and it was enough to negate any advantage it might have still had. The result was as such a fitting one for the battle with both Pokémon ending up knocked out. Once again I had to wonder though if Ash couldn't have won this one either. He was fighting rather reserved, very unlike him. Was he having this much respect for Paul? Be that as it may. The score was numerically in Paul's favor but in terms of potential probably more for Ash. The next match would show whether Ash's rival could pull off a real surprise.

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(Paul)

From all my battles in Sinnoh so far two had been the most frustrating. Cynthia I had all but expected to be without real chance. To have been so thoroughly outclassed had hurt but I could live with that as a learning experience. Brandon had hurt a lot more. Once again I could have lived with a loss but being outclassed once again had been unacceptable. In the end I had grown from this experience once more. I wondered if I would grow from this one as well?

A casual observer would think that with an advantage of having one more Pokémon than my opponent, I shouldn't be thinking something like that. The simple point was, however, that I had merely gotten lucky that Electivire had been able to stop Staraptor and Ash hadn't switched out. His reserved fighting style had me a bit puzzled but even with that, the advantage I had wasn't the one I had calculated to need in order to stand a real chance. The power of Infernape had been startling and I could not give into any illusion that it would be easy pickings the next time around.

Once again I had to suppress the urge to let out an uncharacteristic chuckle at the way our choices ended up producing interesting matchups. You wouldn't normally get to see a Torterra battle another Torterra. Perhaps I actually still had a chance to force my opponent into defeat. Not discounting the obvious stellar growth of his entire team, Ash's Torterra had just very recently evolved. I hoped that should suffice since I couldn't really count on much more. The last battle had more or less destroyed most of the previous setup. Not that it would have made that much a difference between two tanks to begin with.

The tactic was quite obvious. Despite his reserved fighting style today, Ash would surely be the one to go on the offense first. My Torterra had taught his Grotle how to use his new body properly but Ash wasn't the type for tanking strategies. Sure, I had to admit that not only his Pokémon but also his tactical ability had grown. That, however, would never change a core battle principle completely. It wouldn't for me and so it wouldn't for him.

And there was no need to. I had but a moment to think in my state of shock when Ash ordered his Torterra to attack with a Headbutt. Before I could even begin to frown at such a wasted effort the speed with which his Torterra shot forward had me floored. For precious moments I was frozen in disbelief and when I finally reasserted control, it was already too late. My own Torterra managed to brace on his own against the attack but the momentum left him dazed while Ash's Pokémon carried right on, using an impossible fast Rock Climb to – of all things – scale what remained of the steel wall on my side. No Torterra... no Pokémon of that size and weight should be that fast!

I struggled to regain control of the battle, ordering a shower of Razor Leaves at the scaling opponent but aside from its speed, Ash's Torterra's true marvel obviously lay in evasion. The few leaves that actually hit were little more than bug bites, of course, and already it had heaved up on the curved edge of the steel wall, somehow managing to keep a steady purchase.

Even before the attack came I already knew that I had lost control of the situation, unable to do anything but react as the momentum of surprise carried Ash and his Pokémon forward. Even while both were of the same type, the hailstorm of razor-sharp leaves that crashed from one Torterra to the other were just as hazardous as they would be to any other.

Gritting my teeth, I forced myself to stay calm even as I saw my chances of winning slipping even further through my fingers. "Frenzy Plant!" I knew it was a desperation move. The outcome had been decided the moment I allowed a momentary lapse of concentration to underestimate Ash's Torterra in comparison to my own. I should have known better.

As expected the Frenzy Plant did cut through a good portion of the leaves but there were just so many and Ash had already followed up the attack as his Torterra came plunging down with a gravity-defying jump which only gave the Energy Ball crashing into my own Pokémon all the more power...

I knew the battle was lost at this point but Torterra wasn't my first and among my strongest Pokémon for nothing. The unorthodox series of moves had exposed Ash's Torterra to one last attack from mine. Struggling to remain standing my Pokémon quickly reached out with its vines and grabbed the forelegs of his brethren just as the Energy Ball struck home. The effort was dulled by the force of the attack but my Torterra managed to yank one last time which sent Ash's Torterra crashing hard into the wall to his right as it came tumbling down in a more uncontrolled fall. That didn't take it out but at least inflicted some serious damage.

Not that Ash gave me the satisfaction of trying to capitalize on that as he recalled his Torterra right away. I wasn't quite expecting his next choice though...

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(Infernape)

For the second time I emerged from my Pokéball. The first time had not gone quite as well as either my Trainer or I had expected. That didn't deter me then though and it would not now. This battle was entirely too important for me on a personal level to show any weakness. I would not give my former Trainer the satisfaction of seeing me go down.

It wasn't just about Paul though. While fighting against him provided me with a certain extra motivation, the real strength I was drawing from Ash. Without him I would not be where I am today. Right away, he understood far better how to draw out my potential than Paul ever had. His philosophy was inspiring and the desire to pay him back for all he had done for me came naturally. Paul had always just demanded and expected. Ash was willing to work on the growth of each of his Pokémon's at their own pace. And not just that. Even before that special training Ash was far more personally involved in the growth and training of each of us, willing to risk his own health to help us master a technique or overcome a personal problem.

And so I stood defiantly against Paul's Metagross. The recovery might have been brief but I had managed to achieve what I wanted to. Ash had pulled me aside in those last three months regularly to train my newly-gained Fighting type and the benefits that came with it. The recovery and resting function of the Pokéball had allowed me to focus more easily on the meditating technique that had allowed me to all but cleanse the poison that had hampered my movements so much before from my body.

Sweeping my eyes over the battlefield I noticed that things had changed quite a bit. The whole area was still rather desolated though. This was different though compared to last time. "Infernape, go in close!" I smirked and shot forward, no doubt surprising both Metagross and Paul. Against that blonde Trainer two days ago the problem had been that the spikes were so numerous they had hindered serious movement with constant danger to my feet. The ruined ground and partly collapsed dome were actually in my favor. Sprinting and jumping I used the obstacles to dodge a psychic blast narrowly, swinging around a jagged piece of rock and slamming with a flaming kick into my opponent. Immediately I was gone again before the Zen Headbutt could hit. I was already well clear, switching from close to long-range on Ash's short preplanned strategy call. The Heat Wave wasn't quite as focused as earlier. Instead I used the flames as cover to launch into a Flame Wheel and managed to roll straight over Metagross' upper body before spinning away and through the hole in the wall that I had created earlier. Catching the upper edge in mid-spin, I flung myself up on top of the wall to see what my opponent was up to next.

"Jump down, then Dig!" the urgency in my Trainer's voice allowed me to act immediately. Fully trusting Ash's better view and tactical sense I barely managed to get clear as the whole wall came crashing down in an impressive show of psychic ability. Relying on our training how to act underground, I made a few zigzag tunnels, digging around where I knew my opponent last was in a longer arc and coming around from behind his position.

As luck would have it, my timing was perfect as Metagross was focusing on the other direction as I came up and sent the metallic Pokémon skywards with a flaming punch. "Finish it. Flare Blitz!" Ash knew that we couldn't afford to give Paul a chance to retaliate. I hated to admit it but the last battles had worn me down and victory would hinge on finishing this as fast and cleanly as possible. Which I could do.

My position once again allowed me a few stepping stones which I used to gain speed by jumping upwards after my opponent. Doing a Flare Blitz upwards was normally a rather uncommon and often stupid idea since it took most of the momentum out of the attack. We had trained several variants and I could technically make one with only a simple jumping start that actually maintained most of its drive. Taking a few extra jumping points to gain speed and momentum was enough to give Metagross no time to prepare. Timed just in a way that brought me into contact just

as my opponent was at the apex point from the Fire Punch. For a moment my progress was hindered as I felt a psychic barrier trying to ward Metagross against the attack but with a roar and sheer willpower added to the momentum, this last feeble defense was breached.

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(Pikachu)

I knew it would be my turn even before Ash had recalled Infernape. He was just too exhausted and Torterra had taken quite a bit of damage from his kin's last attack. It seemed that with the last two battles Ash had shaken off the reservations he had at the beginning. I could understand where it was coming from. After having fought so many times, Ash was reluctant to play into Paul's hands and give him opportunities to counter. The conservative battle style at the beginning had cost him the one or other fight that could have been won. We both knew that.

Which meant I would be showing my true colors. There was no more room for risks and gambles. Magmortar and Paul could almost be pitied. They had no idea what was in store for them. The world around me began to slow down to a crawl as I launched into the first attack, vaguely aware of Ash calling out short orders. However, this time it was more for the benefit of the crowd since I was already starting to execute them before they were spoken. Once again our harmony was paying off and put us three instead of the usual two steps ahead.

The first "Quick" Attack had brought me into a position to drive into the Fire Pokémon's stomach, slip away before it even noticed and pour a Thunderbolt into its back just as the pain from the first hit set in. Prepared for the retaliation I was moving before the first Flamethrower came anywhere close and even when Paul had Magmortar switch the stream into a spin designed to trap me, I quickly pushed off the ground, jumping well clear.

For a moment I soaked up the awe from the audience. I might not have the martial arts knowledge of Infernape but I could easily stay in the air longer than him, making it almost seem like I was hovering. From this position, bombarding the opponent with Thunderbolts was most effective. Unlike Electivire I had no need to cause a storm. The bolts were fewer but almost every single one was a hit with enough intensity to leave a serious scorching mark. That Magmortar hadn't fallen yet was a testament to the hard training Paul put his Pokémon through.

The real fun began though when Magmortar lifted his right arm and began to scorch the arena with a volley of fireballs. All the evasion training with Torterra came into play now. The barrage was fast and furious and – knowing of Magmortar's special skill – certainly searing hot. However, it could have just as well been balloons floating towards me. Pushing my speed even higher and utilizing the air currents I

slipped through the machine gun-like shots, dashing off to the side when the second arm came up to increase the volume of shots. Very slowly Magmortar began to follow the movements, wincing under several Thunderbolts in the process. Once again I took to the air. While most would think that was a bad idea against such rapid fire, I had learned to use and ride the air currents to a higher degree. Even without wings, it was enough to keep me in the air for a longer duration and still slip around and through the barrage.

Any second now.

Trainer and Pokémon were becoming frustrated as I scored another hit, narrowly avoiding some shots. Just as Magmortar was swinging around for another try, it ran out of ammo – or fire? I honestly didn't know exactly how it worked. It didn't matter either. With a grin of triumph I launched into a Volt Tackle, performing a near 90 degree change of direction. As I fell gaining even more speed, I prepared myself for the last moment maneuver I was sure to perform. Paul had proven several times in the battle that he could time his attacks with the speed of the others in our team.

Unfortunately for him, there was just no contest in my case. With ease I slipped below the Fire Punch and continued on my way to impact. Not satisfied with that, I used the greater mass of my opponent to my advantage. As soon as I was certain to have caused enough damage, I pushed back and launched myself backwards to minimize the recoil.

When I came back to a stand for the first time since the start of the battle I was as pleased as Ash was certain to be that aside from some minor recoil damage – which was more a slight wooziness than anything else – I had not been hurt at all.

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

(Ash)

For the first time since the battle started I allowed myself to let go of the inner tension. With Paul down to his last while I still had three left with Pikachu hardly winded, I felt confident that not much more could go wrong. The beginning had been more bumpy than I expected. That could have been attributed to Paul's clever strategy. The continuation of this trend, however, was my own fault.

This might sound more philosophical than I felt but Paul and I had something special going throughout this entire journey through Sinnoh. From our first meeting until now he had challenged me like no other had on such a constant basis. I tried and tried to prove him wrong, that my way was better. And lost again and again. Theoretically I had known that those three months special training had brought me far enough that I could... no, had to win. Facing off against him once again, reminded me of all those previous encounters, however, and I did perhaps feel more... intimidated

than I should. Instead of pulling my tactic through, I had constantly be wary, fearing some surprise that would once again put me behind the other boy.

That wasn't all though. Maybe more important was that this rivalry meant a lot to me. We might have been in disagreement about our methods but that didn't mean I could not respect him for his skill, respect him for the rival he provided that I could strive to defeat. Perhaps, because of that, I held back in order to humiliate him. However, that line of thought was foolish. Showing anything less than my best would be a far greater insult. I would feel the same when facing a superior opponent.

This hesitation would end now. "Pikachu, shatter it!" Electivire had put up a Light Screen to deal with the constant barrage of Electric attacks that affected even a Pokémon of the same type. For a moment my best friend stopped the barrage and focused on a stronger blast, the lightning striking right through the protective barrier and throwing his opponent of its feet. Electivire was in no position to properly retaliate. Even should some of those Thunders hit, it would be more a boost to Pikachu than anything remotely harmful. Electivire's strengths were physical and up close attacks. Again, even if it should manage to get close enough, Pikachu's speed was the worst possible matchup.

For just a moment I closed my eyes. Play time was over and so was the time for hesitation. I needed to realize that my Pokémon had grown far beyond my expectations and not hold them back anymore. They could only grow more by utilizing and thus getting them used to this degree of power. Regardless who stood in the way.

"Pikachu, Thunderstorm!" I ordered. It spoke of our bond that there was no hesitation and surprise. I had shown some of my Pokémon special variations in the tournament so far but none of the few skills we had painstakingly developed. You could no longer call these variations. They were new attacks altogether.

Electivire was still recovering which gave Pikachu the needed time to still his movements and gather his energy. Just as his opponent was recovering, my best friend was emitting a bright ray of high voltage into the sky, rapidly attracting dark clouds over the stadium. Paul was quick to react and had Electivire snatch up Pikachu with its cables, however, it was already too late. The extra electricity only served to fasten the process and before Paul could call out another attack, Pikachu's body began to crackle, bathed in pure electricity. No, it was more like Pikachu was actually made out of pure electricity.

Bolts of lightning flashed out of the sky, burning holes into the ground and uprooting the last of the dome still standing. Finally they began to converge together all crashing into Electivire who let out a roar of agony while Pikachu remained unaffected. Pure lightning and electricity produced by normal Pokémon attacks were

vastly different in potency. It had taken Pikachu a long time to fully master the element like this and even longer to make it into his own so that he was not affected.

With a final bright flash the last of the lightning discharged and its target fell backwards with a loud thud, almost deafening in the sudden silence in the wake of the storm and the shock of the audience.

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(Dawn)

It had taken awhile to understand the mental battle that Ash had waged with himself during the fight. At first, I too had been somewhat irritated by his conservative tactics but the more and more I had time to think about it, the more I understood the reasons. And it seemed Ash had done the same in the end, dispelling my and his own concerns with a truly and literally thunderous final. Leaf had been smiling at the last attack but I wasn't sure just what about. Happiness, anticipation, eagerness, worry?

For now that was not important. Having hurried down to greet him, as soon as Ash emerged from the catacombs I was there to hug him tightly. Perhaps to others Ash's win over Paul was still a relatively easy and overwhelming one despite the start. For Ash it was a lot more and there were no words needed to express all of these aspects.

Surprised for a moment, Ash relaxed into the hug eventually and his own arms slipped around my waist. For a moment nothing was said and no one could bother us. The outside world slipped away and I merely enjoyed this feeling and tried my best to bring my own feelings across. Support, pride... love. I could sense the turmoil of emotions in him ebb. Even after the victory and graciously accepting Paul's surprising handshake, the strain from the fight was still lingering.

Then the moment slipped away and I looked at him with a crooked grin. "You were cutting it close there for a moment," I joked.

Ash grinned back. "Aw, have some more faith in me."

The laughter eased the last tension from him that I could feel. I was reluctant to let go but knew we couldn't stay like this forever. The other semi-final would start soon. Ash wanted and needed to watch, hoping to gain at least some more information on his final opponent.

Who that would be was almost out of the question. That was a bit harsh towards Phantom's opponent, especially considering we were talking none other than Nando. The problem was Nando had gotten relatively good luck with his opponents

so far. I could attest his skills, of course, but I honestly believed he was more suited for the stage. Against someone of today's opponent's caliber there was no contest. I would be glad for any surprise but had no great hope for a miracle.

Still neither of us moved and it had to be Pikachu, jumping up first on Ash's shoulder and then over to my own that provided us with an opportunity to break the hold with less awkwardness. I laughed again seeing Pikachu pout, obviously annoyed at getting no attention. Yeah right. So far our Pokémon had never really bothered us when we were having some time alone together. "Yes, you were great, too," I amended with a smile and scratched the small electro mouse behind the ears. Pikachu made a pleased noise and settled comfortably on my shoulder.

That prompted Ash to laugh again at my sudden predicament. Not that I minded, really. "I think he is getting a little too proud of himself," he half-joked. I didn't think Ash was really worried about overconfidence. Everyone knew what was at stake and no one wanted all the effort to be wasted because of a lack of concentration. Perhaps some of the losses today were a good thing to remind everyone that the way to the top was no cakewalk. The next battle would be infinitely harder and demand everything Ash and his Pokémon had learned... and then some.

We were so close. So close to Ash's goal. With a start I realized what I had thought but did not question it. At some point seeing the other achieve their goal had become part of our own. And whatever support I could give for that, I would. Ash would do the same for me.

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(Narrator)

"And thus the long anticipated battle between Ash and Paul comes to an end. While struggling for part of it, Ash has prevailed and shown even the last of the skeptics that he has the right to stand in tomorrow's final. Who his opponent will be and how Ash will deal with perhaps the biggest and most important challenge of his young life...? Tune in next time!"

I had to wonder if I was getting extra payment for corny speeches. Eeek, sorry!
dodges lightning bolt thrown by an irritated Maia

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

Author's Notes

Phew. Despite work and the episode's greater length this one went a lot faster than I had expected. That being said I will warn right away that episode 5 will likely take awhile. Next week I'm going to be rather busy, even well into the weekend. How

much time and mental room I will have left for writing, I cannot say and won't promise anything. That is okay though since I'm going to go over the earlier episodes once again and add a few things, then give them over to Paolo for beta-reading.

To be fair, I honestly don't know if I should be satisfied with this episode or not. Writing and squeezing a full out 6 VS 6 battle into one episodes leaves very little room for anything else. The way I did it now flowed well but I'm honestly not sure what an impression it will make on you, the readers. Any feedback on that would be greatly appreciated. I doubt I'll reconstruct this episode any time soon if ever but I'll have some better knowledge for the final then.

Ah yes, the annoying narrator. I had a lot of fun with him in TFSTTM so I decided to bring him back and will add him for the first episodes as well. He's more for comic relief and perhaps providing a more general view on the action if absolutely necessary.

I honestly have very little to say about this episode, so I won't bore you further after such a long read. I do thank everyone who has marked this story as favorite but please try to leave a review once in awhile if you are at it. I always appreciate a good old-fashioned mail as well. Especially if you have a little more to say. CC is always welcome and I like to discuss concepts if you give me the chance and you are more likely to get a reply through mail.

Until next time then. Whenever this may be, yours

Matthias aka MysticMew