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(Narrator)

"Competitor Nando is down to his fourth Pokémon while Phantom is still going strong with Houndoom. Will Nando still be able to make a comeback?"

Down in the hastily rearranged – as best as possible after the chaos of the last battle – arena, Lopunny popped out of its Pokéball. Nando was definitely looking less calm as usual. His face was set in fierce concentration but there were clear signs of mounting resignation.

"With the fierce battle between the rivals Ash and Paul over, the final round in this tournament is just one night away. And as it seems Ash's final opponent has been all but decided already. What will Ash do against an opponent with an even more outrageous record than himself? Can he finally make the cut? Can he take... The Final Step to the Master... And can you finally stop giving me cheesy quotes!"

CRASH

"Ah! No! Not the flamethrower!"

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(Pikachu)

Things were looking about as grim and one-sided as expected. Nando had fought valiantly but his opponent was just simply too good. While making a good stand against Phantom's Houndoom, Nando's Sunflora, Kricketune and even Armaldo had all fallen. From what I could see Houndoom was every bit Infernape's equal when it came to speed, fighting spirit and raw power. That Flamethrower was definitely of a high grade quality. Enough so that even Armaldo felt it as if its Rock type didn't exist. What that meant was obvious and in this regard I truly shared Ash's concerns. Our next opponent obviously had more experience, thus more Pokémon that may have broken their natural limit. Just how much we couldn't be sure.

There was nothing to be done about this. The gap shouldn't be big enough that we couldn't breach it. If anyone could, it would be our team. We were ready for this. Maybe today had been a little bumpy but that would be different tomorrow. Paul had definitely been the harder opponent, no offense to Nando. In fact, Ash had gotten the harder bracket to begin with. A proper comparison could not be made, at least not one that would adequately show Ash's strength compared to Phantom's.

I found my confirmation down on the field where Houndoom was showing clear signs that winning three battles in a row had been tiring. Nando's Lopunny was strong enough to capitalize on that, getting in close with a Jump Kick that nailed the fire dog in the side but was shrugged off. A counter consisting of an intensely powerful Flamethrower soared towards its opponent once again but Nando had Lopunny cleverly counter with Blizzard. The intense heat and cold collided and while the Flamethrower clearly burned through to impact slightly weakened with a Protect, the area erupted in smoke, obscuring the sight from both Pokémon.

Nando would not wait though and I understood why from my own experience. Lopunny's ears allowed it a very acute hearing and so it could locate its opponent even without sight. We had discovered this ability with Dawn's Lopunny during training. Even Nurse Joy had said that as far as her species goes Dawn's Lopunny possessed an extraordinary hearing.

That wasn't everything that came with the evolution though. What seemed to have passed as a simple crush at the start of our journey together, had suddenly been reignited. For awhile it got so bad that I had had trouble concentrating on my training and had to tell her in no uncertain terms that my only concern right now was to make sure that our team would win the Sinnoh League, no distractions allowed. I simply wasn't sure what to make of her to even entertain the thought of something like our Trainers had. Lopunny had gotten a lot more... playful, to put it mildly and I was sure that even if she was really leaving me alone right now, there would be more to come...

Down below Nando's Lopunny had used the smoke as cover and with its acute hearing managed to blindside Houndoom. It helped that the smoke actually seemed to confuse Houndoom's smell. The result was a point blank Focus Blast that together

with some of the other attacks Nando's previous Pokémon had scored finally did the vicious dog in.

At least, I thought, it isn't a total upset. Infernape would have the slight type advantage in a direct matchup and I was sure I should be fast enough to stay a step ahead. That assumed a lot, of course. First of all, one had to expect the number of high experience Pokémon in the opposition to be equal enough. The even more terrifying thought might be that Phantom was still holding back. Unlike Ash, there had been little to no challenge in the cloaked Trainer's fights. There was nothing to really make an adequate guess with. Something that only further hardened Ash's belief in his opponent's identity. I glanced to the side where Ash, Dawn and Leaf were discussing the battle. There was something I was missing. A familiar feeling that I couldn't quite pinpoint...

The effort was abandoned quickly. It served little purpose anymore. At this point, mere hours away from Ash and my most important battle since the start of our journey, we could only count on our own strengths, our own will and belief to win.

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M&M DreamWorks Presents
The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
First Arc: Breaking the Limit
Episode 5: Memories, Promises, Premonitions! Countdown to the Final!

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(Nando)

I struggled hard to keep my calm but it was getting harder not to slide into hopeless resignation. As a Trainer I did go into the battle with the goal to win, of course. Anything less would be shameful. However, before the match already started, I knew it would be a colossal task. A task I could not afford any mistakes in order to have a chance.

I did not make any mistakes, at least as far as I could objectively judge this. Yet, the gap was even bigger than I had imagined. Despite my brief talk with Ash yesterday where he had explicitly warned me of my opponent, I had not expected to be so thoroughly outclassed. Granted, so far I had had challenging but overall manageable opponents. Only my second group phase battle had been remotely close. The class difference was therefore experienced even stronger.

I was really trying but desperation was hard to prevent in a situation like this. After finally taking out that Houndoom, I had briefly hoped to make some headway but the Mismagius now out was even more annoying. I had to force switch Lopunny out for her lack of effective attacks against a Ghost type. But Mismagius had even somehow resisted the effects of Altaria's Perish Song and I had yet to figure how. Even worse was, this put me on a limited time table with an opponent that so far had with ridiculous ease avoided any other attack. Just as I was prepared to switch Altaria out, my opponent had her trapped in a Mean Look.

At this I let out an uncharacteristic growl. My own Perish Song would do me in any moment now. Not that Phantom gave me even that much time. "Rock Gem." All of a sudden the Ghost, who had so far been content in avoiding and delaying, literally phased forward and shot a sparkling ray of light at Altaria, hitting it at high speed before I could even react.

For a moment the pressure of frustration threatened to explode before I pushed it down. That would serve no purpose and I would at least bring this battle to an end as best as I could.

"You have fought well." The all but genderless voice of my opponent startled me as I recalled Altaria. So far no words had been exchanged and only brief commands given betrayed his or her presence. Curiously I regarded the cloaked figure, waiting for what my opponent had to say. After another pause, Phantom continued. "I regret taking you out of the tournament but you aren't a worthy challenge for Ash."

In my situation it was harder to ignore what one could perceive as an insult. However, once I did, I caught onto the hidden message in the statement and it made me frown. Two facts had been all but revealed. First of that my opponent was somehow familiar enough with Ash to call him by first name. And there was a strong implication that Phantom's mere presence in this tournament was some sort of test. What it meant exactly I wasn't sure and doubted I would get a satisfying answer for.

"If I might make a suggestion. It is admirable that you are trying to be a Trainer and Coordinator. However, trying both I fear, robs you of a clear-cut goal to pursue. From what I have seen I would rather see you on stage than in an arena," Phantom continued before I could ask.

There was no temptation to be offended by the words this time. They held a certain truth in them. Making the semi-final on my first try in such a great tournament was a great accomplishment – more than I had dared hope for – but compared to my fight with Zoey at the Grand Festival I felt much further away from competing with the very best. That was one thing the battle had already taught me.

I wasn't about to let this battle go though. After all, I was a Coordinator, too, and thus a performer. The audience and my own pride demanded I gave my best. Lifting Roserade's Pokéball, I finally gave an answer to my opponent.

"We shall see."

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(Brock)

In the end, there were no further surprises. Much as predicted, Phantom did not lose anymore Pokémon. Nando had given as best as he could, actually forcing Mismagius to the edge of defeat with his Roserade but it was not to be. He took it with grace though and the audience recognized and respected that. Not dissolving into frustration and bitterness at such an overwhelming defeat wasn't easy.

I could sympathize. Seeing all those amazing battles filled me with a certain... longing. I had no ambition to succeed in battles or at Contests but nonetheless I wished for my Pokémon to grow and reach their best potential. Any Trainer would. Stepping back to help Ash in his training was a logical decision. Yet, it made me feel like I was falling behind. More and more as the tournament progressed. I vowed that, as soon as I got home, I would start my own training, regardless of whatever path I decided to choose for myself.

Ash had been rather relaxed throughout the whole battle. Whatever happened between him and Dawn after the match, the tension that had been present not only in the last battle but for some time now had disappeared. If anyone looked at him now, you wouldn't guess that Ash would be in the final tomorrow. The most important match in his life to this day. Of course, I doubted all the nervousness was gone. He had invested so much into winning this time that the self-made pressure wasn't simply going to disappear from one moment to the other.

After making our way out of the stadium – made harder by dodging a platoon of media –, we made our way straight to the Pokémon Center. Ash had already given the rest of his team over to Nurse Joy for treatment in the break. Pikachu would get a routine checkup but even though he had technically fought the most battles, he was the least exhausted... or even remotely damaged.

"So. Are you still planning a last practice battle tonight?" I asked my two friends. Personally I had found the idea of a training match so close to the final a bit extreme... and risky. I could understand Ash being worried about his opponent but he was really putting himself and his team under too much pressure.

Apparently that had really changed. "Nah," Ash shook his head. "You were right about that, Brock. There is no point in it. So short before the match, it will do

more harm than good. What we haven't learned yet, we won't now in just one more sitting."

I was glad to hear that. Going into battle with an opponent that was equal or even stronger with you, a fit team far outweighed any last minute progress.

"We just have to trust that we are good enough." At this Ash sent a knowing look towards Dawn and I couldn't help but grin. Obviously that was one thing she had convinced him about. Those two really were good for one another. Already now, in the early stages of their relationship, they managed to balance each other out. With time their feelings and harmony would only get stronger.

"An excellent attitude. Worrying about what could be will only distract you," Professor Oak piped in where he was walking with Ash's mom behind us, the rest had already returned to their quarters. "You have trained hard for this tournament and even if you don't make it tomorrow, everyone who has seen you, will know that you are an amazing Trainer."

"Thanks, Professor." Confidence was clear in his voice now though. "It's not gonna be *if* though. We will win tomorrow. There cannot be a doubt about that." And he could not allow himself to doubt either, was the hidden meaning behind those words.

Delia clapped her hands at this. "That's the spirit, Ash! Now then, once we are done here, how about I treat everyone to a round of drinks in celebration of today's victory?"

Suffice to say, no one had any objections to that and so the rest of the afternoon proceeded in a light atmosphere, hopefully allowing Ash to forget for a few hours the big day tomorrow.

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(Ash)

Had we been anywhere remotely close to the main area of the tournament, the colossal explosion would certainly have attracted all sorts of attention. Attention that wasn't necessary or wanted. There would be enough of that tomorrow. If I could help it, I would not wish to resort to THIS. However, I might not be able to have the luxury of choice. All the way out here, no one would really notice at least. The clearing was about a kilometer south of the main complex. Just a short walk but far enough from the main roads and public areas.

The crater was deep, deep enough to think a meteor had struck the earth. The thick stone that had been at its center was nothing but a pile of fine dust. The results

as always were as spectacular as they were overkill. The difference was hard to tell for someone else but I had seen the outcome several times now and for the first time I felt confident. Not entirely satisfied, but it had to do. The control was as good as it could get.

Finally, as if mocking gravity by staying up in the air even longer, Pikachu came down with a final flip to avoid landing in the center where the electricity was concentrated the most, turning the ground scorching hot. Lightly panting, my best buddy looked over to me for approval and I grinned, lifting my hand for a thumbs-up. "Great work. I think you've got the control down. I'd still like to avoid using that but considering whom we are going up against, we'll be better prepared this way." If we were actually forced to use that move, then whatever Pokémon we were up against was bound to have the standing power to take it without lethal consequences.

I had been so intensely focused on the performance that for once I hadn't sensed her and thus was actually startled. "So this is where you went off to." Dawn stepped out from behind some trees. Her accusing expression made me wince slightly. "I thought you said no more training today." Critically she surveyed the damage, eyes widening slightly. It wasn't the first time she had stumbled on the end results of the special training for Pikachu but never disrespected my decision to do this in secret. I bet she was curious though. A moment of silence elapsed as she took in the situation. "Are you satisfied now." There was no accusation. Just a great deal of exasperation coupled with some mirth. I knew she was merely concerned that I would overdo things.

"More or less," I admitted, allowing Pikachu to jump up on my shoulder and patting him for his good work. "I think we can use it if we really have to. Don't worry, that was all for today. I needed to confirm whether the attack was battle-ready or not." I chuckled at her glare. "For Pikachu that was just a little tiring, nothing one good night rest won't cure completely. Right, buddy?"

"Pika!" In response, my best friend gave an enthusiastic response and made a victory sign.

Dawn just sighed and rubbed her forehead. "Ohh, why do I even bother. It's not like I can change your mind. But don't come complaining to me tomorrow, got that?" I found her exasperation rather cute. Definitely much more appealing than Misty ever was. Granted I was rather biased at the moment. "If you are finished, then let's go back already. It's getting dark soon."

Whatever would I do without her? I wondered. Her presence filled me with confidence even when I was frustrated and unsure. While the tournament was going on, she didn't press the whole romantic thing either. There was a lot I owed her after this was over and I would make sure to repay that debt thrice over.

Even as I was thinking that, I caught her arm and pulled her into a hug, much like back at the arena after the match with Paul. "Thank you." There wasn't a need to say more. We both knew the other's feelings. As much as I wanted to express my gratitude, I needed her close right now just as much. I could forget and properly relax this way, to take away the strong emotions of the impending final showdown tomorrow.

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(Leaf)

The sunset on this island was a beautiful thing, very relaxing too. The view from up in my suite was fantastic too. Normally I was not the type to indulge in such luxuries but since I was technically here on official business, I couldn't very well refuse all the comforts being offered. While I would have liked nothing more to continue with my life as it had been until now, one could only push off the responsibility for so long. A lot of people had been pushing for me to take up the title of Master officially and truth be told, there was no real good reason not to.

And quite a few in favor.

I definitely had the strength and felt that I knew all about Pokémon that I could at the moment, having seen lots of places and tried out many different things. The experience had been vital, no doubt. When I had won my first League I had been young, excited and full of love of adventure. I could never stay in one place too long and the idea of taking up a title at such a young age was sort of frightening. I know, a lot of people thought my decision was based on the mature notion that I knew then that I wasn't ready. That there had still been much to learn.

That was true. Also true was that I simply didn't want the responsibility then. Being a Master was something most Trainers aspired to but there was a lot more involved than fame and benefits. A Pokémon Master was a representative, known by Trainers and others far and wide. They received respect but they also carried it. As a Master you were a role model. Through your every action you carried a message, an image. A Master gave Trainers and all those otherwise dealing with Pokémon something to strive for, to take inspiration from.

To be fair I still wasn't sure if I could give that but I wasn't the young child I had been back then anymore. There had been younger Masters in the past and after all the travelling I had done, there was little excuse I had left anymore.

There was one thing left I had to take care of though. Tomorrow would be a very special day that I both dreaded and looked forward to. It had been years since Ash and I had seen each other face to face. After the sporadic phone calls and letters – as much as that was possible with both parties not staying in any one place for long

– I had been excited about this meeting. Sure the tournament left us little time to catch up and after that we would probably both be on separate journeys again... albeit perhaps with the same profession.

I wasn't sure how Ash would handle winning the tournament. We were very similar in some aspects and still rather different in others. Ash took great pride in these things, much more than me. When I had first called him after my successful win he had been clearly upset with me for refusing the Master title. Granted, he had become a lot more mature since then. We both had grown a lot from that time when we were just two kids, crazy about Pokémon and with big dreams, often getting laughed at by our peers...

Flashback

Coming to a new city was always a problem for kids my age. I was used to it by now and frankly I never had many friends to begin with. Especially close friends. Kids like me always stood out and that could go two ways. Either other kids found it incredible cool and would hang out with you because of that or you were just plain weird.

A nine year old who already had a clear sexual orientation was definitely something to stand out... especially the direction of that orientation. I didn't doubt that a lot of parents had an influence on their kids once they learned of that. In the bigger cities it wasn't such a big issue but smaller towns often were a lot more prejudiced. I learnt that the hard way as much as I learned to ignore and take what genuine attention I got.

So far I hadn't been sure where to rank Pallet Town. With my father being very busy as an architect, we moved around a lot. I had seen pretty much everything all over Kanto and we even had been to Johto a few times. I suppose it didn't help a normal childhood that he was always busy the entire day and I had to learn to take care of myself at an early age. That had earned me a degree of maturity that I knew was years beyond my peers, further distancing myself from them.

A commotion drew my attention and I had to smile somewhat wistfully at the sight. There was a boy, about a year or so younger at the most, standing on top of a jungle gym and giving a rather funny but enthusiastic performance as a Dragonite. Just then he switched places and declared victoriously, "Ha! You are no match for the great Pokémon Master Ash!"

The laughs and shouts from the other kids grew in volume and I suppressed the flare of anger. Being the target of teasing and ridicule quite often, I had understood the situation almost immediately. The kid with spiky brown hair was especially mean. "You don't have what it takes to become a Master, Ashy-boy. You need talent like me." At this the entourage of girls squealed and the other boys gave

their own shouts of approval and agreement. They didn't seem to drag the black-haired boy down though as he traded some heated words with the other kid, Gary, until the group left, still laughing all the way.

I doubted he noticed me, at least not immediately. Because only now some of the loneliness slipped through and was quickly suppressed when he spotted me approaching. There was a moment of uneasy silence, before he finally asked, "Who are you?"

I gave the boy my best expression of admiration. "Just someone who has been admiring your performance, oh great Master Ash." And while I was, of course, merely playing, there was some small truth in it. He reminded me a lot of me in some ways from what little I could tell so far. He was certainly not the type to just follow a crowd. Despite being put down, the enthusiasm hadn't disappeared from his eyes.

"Huh?" Ash looked confused for a moment and I gave him a small, friendly grin in return. The last thing I wanted was to make him think that I was just making fun of him. In response his face actually lit up. "Err... I mean, you are welcome, Miss..."

I giggled a little and struck a serious pose. "Now certainly, you must know me. I am also a Pokémon Master and my name is Leaf. I have come to challenge the great Master Ash," I further played along in the scenario.

Once more Ash was clearly surprised for a moment but then a genuine smile appeared on his face. Even more now than before I knew that this could be the beginning of a great friendship. I definitely wanted to get to know this boy better. Perhaps this time around, my stay in this town would not be so lonely. For both of us.

"I am always ready for a challenge!" Ash declared boisterously and struck a pose. Some time elapsed but this time the silence was profound. I had to giggle again and soon enough we were both laughing. It was strange in a way. We had just met for the first time but something just clicked. Something far bigger than I could grasp at the moment.

End Flashback

Whether or not he was really ready for such a challenge would only be proven tomorrow. I wished we could have had this confrontation on other terms but the situation demanded this course. The events that would soon transpire would challenge him to his limits and beyond. I needed to know if he was ready. The hope that someone worthy enough to give him this challenge would be in the tournament turned out to be futile. That left me with only one option, even if it might put a strain on our friendship... I had to test him myself.

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(Dawn)

They had really chosen a perfect time for the tournament. The weather had stayed excellent for the entire tournament – barring the small conjured Thunderstorm from Pikachu today. The night air was cool but acceptable. A refreshing breeze and a cloudless sky, the Moon illuminating the area in its gentle light. All in all a wonderful romantic setting. Any other time I might be inclined to make use of that. The setting was excellent. However, I think I had already gotten more today than I had dared hope before the end of the tournament.

I had been clearly surprised by Ash's forward action earlier but never thought I'd end up lying on the bench, head in his lap while he was playing with my hair. Considering we hadn't even shared a first real kiss yet, that was clearly a big move for both of us. Surely I must have been blushing and he wasn't without embarrassment either when he suggested it. I could tell that this offer wasn't made purely selfless. However, that didn't matter. If I could help him relax by being close to him that just meant achieving two goals at the same time. I had already submitted myself to do everything for Ash so that he could fully concentrate on his matches. This was definitely already more than I was hoping for.

We weren't the only ones relaxing. All over the terrace in front of our lodgings Ash's Pokémon were out and about. Most were just resting, some already dozing off. Even Staraptor was just now getting tired of flying around and settled down in a tree. Aside from his unsanctioned side trip, Ash had kept word. The battle with Paul had challenged some of his team and frustrated others. They needed to get their mind clear for tomorrow. Compared to the match with Paul, tomorrow would no doubt be even harder.

Turning my attention back to Ash when I felt his gentle threading of my hair stop, I noticed him staring at me. The intensity made me flush slightly. "What is it?" I asked curious and a little taken off guard by the strong emotions I could see in his face. So far he had been calm and indeed relaxed, his mind finally able to retreat from tomorrow, if only for a short while.

"I am so lucky to have you." Even though he had expressed it indirectly several times, especially today, I was still shocked to hear it in such a direct manner. I really wasn't sure what kind of response was appropriate right now because, to be very honest, I just wanted to kiss him right there. "I don't think I could have come so far without you." I wanted to deny that but he continued already and I bit back my response, knowing he needed to say these things. "If it wasn't for you, I would be so nervous about tomorrow, I would surely lose horribly. You are giving me that extra strength I always needed to make the final push, Dawn." For a moment he paused and I held my breath, wondering if he would say more. But the moment slipped by and Ash chuckled slightly. "I honestly don't know with what I deserve you."

Frowning, I sat up. He might have said it in humor but there was some truth in the statement that I honestly didn't want to be there. Grabbing his face with both hands, I made sure to put all my feelings into my words. "You deserve so much more, Ash. You have such an amazing inner strength, any girl should be happy to have you. If you think you are lucky, then I can't even begin to describe how lucky I am to have even met you. Without you there I would have broken under the pressure long before making it to the Grand Festival. Don't ever doubt what I am feeling for you, Ash Ketchum, because..."

I had honestly thought about waiting until tomorrow, either before or after the match, however, this was something I couldn't ignore. The situation might never be more perfect. When the words came, they didn't come alone but were echoed in kind by Ash at the same time.

"I love you."

Plunging ahead, despite... or maybe because of receiving the desired reply in kind I leaned forward. The first touch was like a sun exploding in my body, consuming my heart. What started as an action on my part, soon took a mind of its own when Ash pulled me closer and deepened the kiss. Neither of us knew what we were doing. I had not planned for something so passionate but the emotions had long since been there, repressed for the time being and now producing a flood no dam could hold. For several timeless moments that could have been seconds, minutes or even years, something powerful passed through us, connected us on a higher empathic level before fading again, but not completely gone. All that was left and all that was really needed at that moment was the feeling of belonging. The universe right then was absolutely perfect.

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(Ash)

In my many travels I have come to meet many people. Yet there are only a handful of which that I would consider truly precious. Among all those none had ever matched the strength of emotions shared with Leaf. Being an only child, with basically only a mother figure, the sense of family, of a true sibling that understood me like no other had been an extraordinary feeling. Especially for a child, barely old enough to even begin to understand all that. When she had left it had been a hard thing to accept. I had forced myself to be strong. Leaf wouldn't cry. Leaf wouldn't be selfish. And so I didn't. Instead I focused on my goal. Focused on catching up to her.

Some of the friends I had made got close to what I felt for Leaf. Brock was a lot like an older brother but for all his qualities it never had the same depth of connection. Misty had been my first crush, sort of. As much as a ten to twelve year

old with his head filled with Pokémon almost exclusively could comprehend the concept. I didn't really, not until it was far too late. May had come close. Looking back with a more mature understanding, I believe that had I not been holding myself back, something might have come off it. I had been warring with myself through, trying to sort out all these new and difficult feelings, similar yet different from what I had with Leaf. Before I could sort it out the chance had slipped by.

I am glad I had not made the same mistake again. The time had been right now. All these experiences had allowed me to mature and understand enough about love to realize just how strongly I felt for Dawn. The connection we shared was so much different from the one with Leaf, yet it was almost scary that the potency was just as strong, only focused in a different direction. I honestly never had any romantic interest in whom I considered my sister in all but blood. Thus, this was new and scary and wonderful all at the same time.

For a long time we had danced around the subject even though we both knew what the other was feeling. It was expressed not through words or direct actions. There was no need to. Small gestures, the other's closeness, encouraging words... They conveyed the meaning without telling explicitly. It had been enough. Or so I thought. Now... Now I felt like a big weight had been lifted off my shoulders and the world was just... right. Nothing could touch us at this moment. There could be a rampaging Legendary Pokémon right in front of us and I felt certain it could not disturb us.

Even more. I knew how much Dawn inspired me when I despaired and calmed me down when I was getting too worked up. Right now though, there was nothing I felt I couldn't do. Tomorrow didn't seem so tough a challenge anymore. Just sitting here, bathing in the afterglow of our shared declaration and first kiss, holding this beautiful angel that was my strength and inspiration, I was suddenly absolutely certain that I would win tomorrow.

Even if I had to go through her. This wasn't just for me anymore. This wasn't just for achieving my dream. After all this support, I very well could not... would not let Dawn down. This victory tomorrow would be for us. And no one, not even she would stop me!

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(Dawn)

With a jerk I came awake, the brightness of the sun raining light into the room blinding bright for a moment but at the same time... comforting. And I didn't mean that in a way that it was normal and therefore soothing. I could not describe the feeling at all and it was slipping as rapidly as the images of the dream. Or was it a nightmare? I

couldn't say anymore and had the lingering feeling that even if I could remember it clearly, wouldn't be able to either.

What I remembered were stray images. I had been looking down on three figures. Two of them I think were Ash and I, the third had had something vaguely familiar, yet I couldn't properly recall the person's face. We were standing on a cliff or something elevated, looking down below. The atmosphere was filled with tension and ominous foreboding, a sense of inevitable... yes, what? I didn't know. I only knew that when my perspective had finally shifted and I saw with my dream self's eyes down to the ground below, that whatever it was that I saw had really spooked me. Frightened to a degree, saddened even more, but there was also some fierce resolve. I wished I could recall what it was that I saw. The dream was almost gone from my feeble grasp already though and with that came the awareness of the actual reality around me.

I had no time for weird dreams. Today was the day. The day everything would come to fruition. Memories of last night returned more strongly now that I was fully awake. *Ash*, I thought with a smile, gently touching my lips. If I closed my eyes, I could still imagine... no, actually feel his lips, the kiss we shared. Such a perfect moment that I had not dared to hope for so soon.

After taking a moment to appreciate the elation and joy at the memory and the realization that we really were a couple now, I threw away the covers and started to get ready for the big day. Ash depended on my support and nothing else but my best was acceptable today.

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

The catacombs inside the stadium were almost eerily quiet, even the noise level of the crowd couldn't be heard here whereas you could do so from miles away outside. Anticipation for this final was high. I wasn't that well-versed in the history of League tournaments but I doubted that two competitors smashing their way through the competition only to clash in the finals had happened very often. The media was definitely going wild and I was glad that the officials made sure the competitors were not bothered.

"Ready?" There really was not need for further words but I was nonetheless pleasantly surprised when he had pulled me along after exchanging last encouragements from the rest of our group. Ash definitely was ready. I don't think I had ever seen him so absolutely certain of something. When I found him this morning, he was giving every one of his Pokémon a last pep talk. That quiet but fierce determination and certainty seemed to spread towards his team as well. Each and every one of them was literally glowing with enthusiasm.

"Not yet." Not expecting the answer, I found that there was no time to question it before Ash gently pulled me against him and stole a kiss from me. It was much

briefly than the first one from yesterday. Not that I cared, mind you. While a little less intense, the same, amazing feeling of rightness immediately spread through my heart and soul. I imagined it had to be the same for him.

It was over all too soon. Ash reluctantly pulled away and smiled, eyes shining with – if such a thing was even possible – even stronger conviction. "Now I am. Cheer me on, will you?"

I grinned back. "Count on it. Don't you dare lose."

He nodded and Pikachu voiced his confirmation loudly while his Trainer turned around, back and shoulders straight and head held high, ready to go to his most important battle. "I won't. It's..." He stopped suddenly, just for a short moment. I had for once no idea what just went through his head. However, the moment passed quickly and he continued on once more. "It's a promise."

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

(Phantom) *honestly does someone not know who it is yet?*

It was a good thing that I had experience with large crowds after many tournaments. One unused to such a noise level could easily go deaf or at the very least get distracted easily. Experience showed that once the match started the volume would ebb slightly. Most fans of Pokémon battles understood the need for concentration. And once the battle started, a good Trainer would usually be far too focused onto the action to pay much attention to what happened around them anyway.

I spotted him right away as he emerged from the tunnel leading towards the Trainer box. Compared to yesterday there was not even an ounce of doubt. His posture, his eyes... yes, his very spirit shone with confidence. Not an outrageous arrogance but a powerful certainty keeping all hesitation and concern away. There was also something else. Subtle but there. I had to smile. It seemed Dawn had made her move already despite claiming to wait. Good for them.

While I evaluated my opponent, Ash had reached his platform and was now hovering high above the arena, parallel to my own position. The noise of the crowd had gone down, expecting the introduction and announcement of the match, however, Ash cut in before that could happen.

"Just one thing before we start. Would you drop the disguise already, Leaf. It looks totally silly."

I chuckled, not at all surprised. I wasn't sure just how much they speculated or actually knew but then again... Ash wasn't stupid and he knew me quite well. In the

end I had mostly kept up the charade for the rest of the audience. With a shrug I reached for my cloak and dramatically threw it off, flinging it down the back of my platform. After all, I had never planned to fight this battle in disguise even if Ash would have not figured it out for some reason.

"Better?" A quiet hush fell over the stadium, for the moment captivating even the last person watching.

"Much." Ash betrayed no emotion. I honestly couldn't tell if he was angry with me or not. And if he was, for what reason. I didn't have to wait long for clarification. "There's just one thing I need to know before we start. Why did you go to all this trouble just to fight me like this?" There was no accusation, perhaps some irritation but definitely no hard feelings. Merely a need to know.

"Several reasons actually, some of them I cannot tell you yet. So I just stick with my original one. When you called me about trying out my training program, I had no doubt that you could pull it off and that it would be unlikely anyone could defeat you here. However, that wouldn't really tell either me or you just how successful your training was and if you were really ready for the big League." And ready for so much more, I silently added. "With the disguise I could enter the tournament and see if there was someone ready to compete equally with you. If that had been the case, I could have bowed out without anyone the wiser and you would still have your challenge. That didn't happen though."

Ash nodded, almost as if expecting it. Perhaps... no, probably he had already worked most of this out himself. "You are not sad about this outcome though, right?" I didn't reply, waiting for him to continue and hoping we was going where I thought he was. "We did promise each other after all."

At this I truly smiled. I had feared he might not remember. A lot had happened since then and I wouldn't have held it against him. I loved him dearly but he could be a bit dense sometimes. He hadn't forgotten our promise after all. The promise we had made when I set out on my first journey. "It just took you longer than you said," I joked with a smirk.

Ash allowed a small smirk of his own, not rising to the barb before he became deadly serious, one hand falling to his Pokéball bag. "I am here now. And I intend to win."

"Good." I grasped my own first Pokéball. One thing was clear. This battle would not just test him. It would also test me to my very limits. If I did not take this fight two hundred percent serious, I could have spared myself the whole act. Not that there was a chance for that. More than anyone else, Ash was the one person I wished to test myself against, to see where our separate journeys had taken us. To see who was the better. We made a promise after all.

"Let's see if you can."

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

(Ash)

"I won't. It's..." I stopped as the memory flashed through my mind.

Flashback

"Do you really have to leave?" I didn't want to be selfish. Leaf would often harp on me that in my enthusiasm I didn't realize that I would only have sight for my own wishes. It was hard to do though. And even more so now. For the first time I had felt really good about living in Pallet. I had found a friend that shared my love for Pokémon and the drive to learn all there was and more. She did not ridicule me for my often overflowing enthusiasm but readily supported and shared it.

And now she was ready to leave. A small travelling bag around her shoulders, the Pokéball with her first Pokémon proudly in one hand. Leaf's eyes were sparkling with excitement, anticipation for the adventures to come... While I was still stuck here. Damn that stupid age regulation. Just because we were one year apart we couldn't go together. Couldn't she just... No, I was being selfish again, I reminded myself sharply.

Leaf smiled at me and I winced at the note of wistfulness. I was never good at reading people or that emotional stuff. However, with her I could always just tell. How could I think this was any less hard for her? We shared not only our love for Pokémon but the same dream. To reach the top. Preventing her to go, would be like saying both of our dreams were useless.

"I think its best this way." Her words surprised me a little but I bit back a snappy comment. "We both need to go our own ways. We have the same goal, so eventually we will be rivals." Of course I knew this. Although I honestly had never wanted to think about it like this. "I plan to become a Master. Think you can catch up?"

That got my competitive spirit riled right away. As always she just knew what buttons to push. "Hah. I'll have caught up in no time."

"Good. When you do, we can see who is the better Trainer." My confusion must have been pretty evident. Leaf was still smiling but her eyes were dead serious. There was something I couldn't define and it touched my soul, finding a resonance I didn't even know was there. "I really want to fight you someday, Ash. I want to see how far we have both come. It will be a battle, I'm sure, we will both never forget." At

this her expression softened and I was awed by the affection and respect. This wasn't like my quasi rivalry with Gary. This was something much deeper. Something much purer.

Finally I swallowed the lump in my throat and forced back my tears. After those words I had to be strong. "Count on it. I will be there."

Leaf held out her free hand, pinky extended. "Promise?"

End Flashback

"It's a promise," I said, both in memory of this parting scene all these years ago and to Dawn as well. Last night had given me enough resolve for this fight already but now there was not even a grain of doubt left. I understood now. And with that understanding came acceptance. Acceptance and anticipation. This battle was truly so much more than just winning the tournament. This battle was the moment Leaf and I had worked so hard for over the last years.

Stepping out was like leaving one world for another in an instant. Light and heat replaced the dark and cool corridor. The noise of the crowd assassinated the silence in an instant. Stepping onto the platform, I allowed it to wash over me, drawing further strength from the atmosphere. This was my moment.

My eyes caught the profile of my opponent. I knew the illusion of her – however it might be crafted – was up in the VIP box. Any doubt had long been erased. Now, however, I could feel her presence. "Just one thing before we start. Would you drop the disguise already, Leaf. It looks totally silly."

She did so with a grin and a shrug. "Better?"

I ignored the sudden quiet of the audience. My focus was solely on the girl across from me in the other Trainer box. It made it easier to talk though. "Much."

There were a lot of things I wanted to say, wanted to ask. None of them mattered now. Only one thing was important, even if more for a confirmation than an answer. "There's just one thing I need to know before we start. Why did you go to all this trouble just to fight me like this?"

"Several reasons actually, some of them I cannot tell you yet. So I just stick with my original one." So there was more. Something important enough for her to play around with me instead of just making her intent clear. Leaf had always been a direct person. Playful, artistic at times, always with a need to perform – I sometimes wondered why she never participated in Contests. This disguise and secrecy thing didn't really suit her. She was right though, this was not the place to delve further into whatever motivated her.

"When you called me about trying out my training program, I had no doubt that you could pull it off and that it would be unlikely anyone could defeat you here. However, that wouldn't really tell either me or you just how successful your training was and if you were really ready for the big League. With the disguise I could enter the tournament and see if there was someone ready to compete equally with you. If that had been the case, I could have bowed out without anyone the wiser and you would still have your challenge. That didn't happen though."

This I could understand. It made a certain sense. I still would have preferred she would just tell me. She obviously wasn't surprised I knew. "You are not sad about this outcome though, right?" I answered, seeing that she obviously wanted me to say it, wanted to see if I remembered. "We did promise each other after all."

Once again there was a smirk, full of the playfully taunting humor that I had actually missed. "It just took you longer than you said."

For a moment I responded in kind but did not allow her to rile me up and thus throw me off my game before we even began. That was one thing I had changed from the boy she had known back in Pallet. The process had been slow and only recently I had found this inner peace. Without Dawn I doubted I could have ever fully taken that step into maturity for many more years.

"I am here now," I said seriously and took out my first Pokéball. The crowd, the stadium. Everything had disappeared. What remained was just me and my opponent, my friend, my sister... my rival. The final hurdle to take. "And I intend to win."

"Good." Leaf also took her first Pokéball.

I had built up bonds of sorts with opponents before. So much was expressed during a battle with a worthy adversary that couldn't be put into words. Leaf and I already had a strong connection to begin with. This would be an experience unlike anything I had ever faced before.

"Let's see if you can." I had to. I would not be denied again today.

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(Narrator)

"What a shocking twist of events! The mysterious Phantom turns out to be none other than repeated League Champion Leaf, who was to officially don the title of Pokémon Master after the tournament." Yeah, right. Surprise. Not for those that counted, I thought at the commentator.

"I have just received word that all of this has been sanctioned and declared legal, in full knowledge of the officials in charge. This battle will therefore commence." The crowd actually cheered at that. Everyone had come anticipating a spectacular matchup after all and didn't want to see it denied because of a rule transgression.

"Not only that but it seems this final has also become quite personal. Both of these Trainers have the distant Pallet Town in the Kanto region listed as the starting point of their journey. It is obvious this is also a battle between friends." Of course, the audience ate such sappy stories. Almost none of them had an idea how the two down there really felt.

It didn't matter to either of them what was happening around them. Fiercely concentrated, the two opposing Trainers stood on opposite sides within their raised platform, waiting for the signal to start the battle. I felt almost humbled to speak about such a scene.

"Finally the day has arrived. Ash has made it past all hurdles towards the final of the Sinnoh League Conference. His opponent is none other than his best friend from childhood days, unofficial Pokémon Master Leaf. Ash is determined, however. This will not stop him. Driven by the promise made with Leaf and the support and love of Dawn, he is ready to face this final challenge. Whether or not he can really prevail, you will see... in the next episode."

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Author's Notes

Cut. Phew, finally. I'm sorry it took so long. Partly it was work but for the most part a lack of inspiration. I didn't really know how to get this episode in between matches going at first and then ended stuck on various scenes again and again. For the moment I am more or less satisfied. Many things feel a little... uninspired, not quite how I wanted them. It's quite possible this episode will undergo some revision at a later point but I really want to move on for now. It is at least passable, if not perfect.

First of all, reviews. Thanks to everyone who has sent their thoughts on the last chapter. I am glad the overall response to the Ash VS Paul battle was good. No, Reckutx, one thing I can safely say is that it is not Darkrai, sorry. And it won't be used in the final battle. My rule: no legendaries in the tournament.

mercenaryflyer: Sorry to disappoint but I'm not going to change my style. That's one thing I'm not going to touch and sets me apart from other common styles. Third person view and a more normal first person approach you can find aplenty. I admit my changes are a bit more in number than usual compared to past stories. This, however, is always in relation to the number of characters available whose

minds I want to get into. You should have noticed that I am setting priorities. As such Ash and Dawn are getting a lot more screen time while others only get one segment. Thus, keep in mind that while I am jumping a lot, there are really only a few characters from whose POV I'm writing each chapter. I've been doing this style for years and have no intention of changing it because it simply suits me best.

The love confession. Honestly? This wasn't planned. I really wanted to put it after the match or a later point. I had planned a little more flashback for Ash and Leaf but the scene literally evolved on its own and just fit right there. Admitted, the confession was long overdue and there was only so much circling around the subject that had been more or less clear on both ends that I could do. So I kept it there. In fact that might have been one of the parts that flowed best compared to the bumpy feel the episode had to me many times. I hope I did justice to their relationship, even if it was unplanned this way. There'll be more progression in the next story arc.

Yes, Dawn was having a dream. A prophetic dream? Most likely... ok, come on, what good author does something like that without purpose? Just a little buildup for things to come like other aspects scattered throughout this arc.

That should be all for now. I nearly hit the 10000 words mark with this. Has been awhile since I managed to do so with a single episode. Considering I didn't even plan for this bridging episode to take this long... Anyway, next episode will be the long anticipated final. I warn you now already, I'll probably have to split it in two, so be prepared to be left with a nasty cliffhanger. *chuckles*

Feedback please, after taking so long with this, I shall consume your comments greedily.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias