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Pre-Note

Geez, did no one notice my causal mistake last episode? I had Ash choose the field for this battle even though Infernape and Houndoom scored a draw, I have gone back and changed the initial rule setting. That was the most simple without killing the entire match... Gah, I normally don't make such mistakes and don't see them. I feel really bad about it. Sorry.

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(Narrator)

"Ash has reached the final of the Sinnoh League Conference. Facing off with his old friend Leaf, the two Trainers have thus far shown a performance sure to be forever remembered in Pokémon League history." I show the viewers some scenes from the match thus far. The first victory by Torterra, the destruction of him and Gabite by Tyranitar, how Buizel split the water in his victory over Sharpedo, the fierce battle between Infernape and Houndoom ending in a draw. "Ash has been fighting an uphill battle ever since Leaf's Tyranitar entered the fight. Now his Staraptor is facing off in a seemingly hopeless matchup against the powerful Dark type." I display the scene of Staraptor crashing into the water and getting pummeled in the air, only to strain against the assault, breaking her natural limit and attacking Tyranitar with an aerial version of Close Combat, sending him into the water. "Yet, Ash's brave Pokémon has now gained the extra boost that she might need to win. Her opponent though is not yet defeated..."

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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
kakaie 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 facing off with Leaf. Umbreon jumps to forward with a cloak of shadows around it.

*chiisana ippo fumi daseba
hora ne, atarashii watashi*

Pikachu burst forth, wrapped in a cloak of lightning. The two clash and 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 pushes back Umbreon and is gaining speed. The screen shifts one last time, showing Ash and Leaf with their entire team backing them up on either side.

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M&M DreamWorks Presents
The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
First Arc: Breaking the Limit
Episode 7: A Dream in Reach! Ash VS Leaf, the Conclusion!

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(Brock)

I don't think I had ever been so utterly fascinated and baffled by a Pokémon match. At first the atmosphere in the box had been relaxed, comments were made, Dawn occasionally squabbling with the "fake" Leaf about who would win. As the match progressed and at least by the time that Infernape and Houndoom had their battle, even Cynthia seemed utterly captivated. That should say a lot about the quality of the match. The ultimate League Champion clearly had seen and fought similar matches of this degree before, to get her this absorbed showed just how good the competitors were.

It was very hard to say who would win by now. Leaf still held the upper hand and this battle was crucial. If Ash didn't manage to take down this Tyranitar now without losing another of his Pokémon, he'd be in real trouble with only the drained Buizel and Pikachu left against two fresh and powerful Pokémon. Even winning would leave him in a bad spot. Leading 3-2 meant little if two Pokémon were at the limit of their strength.

Much like everyone I had thought the battle had been over several times, especially after the last attack by Staraptor. However, both Pokémon were showing

incredible toughness, pulling up reserves to stay in the fight that many surely thought impossible. Both had by now landed in the water and both had come out of it, seemingly even more motivated.

The sight of the colossal Tyranitar using Surf to escape from its watery grave was still baffling. I swear you could hear the whole stadium simultaneously gasp when it happened. And Leaf was not about to waste the once more shifted momentum, pulling out yet another move in her Pokémon's near endless supply when a harsh Blizzard swept over the battlefield. And while Staraptor managed to deflect harm from herself by creating a powerful gust of wind, the field didn't fare so well. In wonder I watched as the water froze and actually thick enough that Tyranitar landed on it moments later without its massive weight breaking what I thought just a shallow layer.

If that was supposed to help though, I soon realized along with everyone else the supposedly ineffectiveness of having suddenly more space to move – or perhaps I should better say slide on. Staraptor had gained an enormous speed boost. Its attacks now came with such force behind them that Tyranitar could hardly react. Attacks of its own were almost impossible to connect. Still, Leaf showed how much she was used to speeds like this by using the right timing to block some of Staraptor's more devastating attacks and even landing a hard blow here and there. Both Pokémon looked like they were drawing on their last bit of reserves though. This match would be decided soon enough.

I chanced a glance over to Dawn and saw her gripping the edges of her seat. She might be confident over Ash's ability to win but that didn't stop her from worrying. She knew the reality of the situation and that Ash was still at a drastic disadvantage for the final stretch, regardless of how this battle ended.

Come on, Ash, I thought, turning back to the fight. I know you can do it. We all believe in you. Perhaps I really did feel a little inadequate seeing all the action but that didn't really matter right now. Ash was a lot like a younger brother to me after all those years and I wanted to see him succeed. He had worked towards this for so long, had become such a strong Trainer, he deserved to see his dream fulfilled. I couldn't do much from here but like Dawn I could believe in him.

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(Ash)

I had to finish this soon. The longer it took to reach a conclusion, the worse it would be for the next battle. On the other hand rushing would play right into Leaf's hands and would also cut down the recovery time for Buizel. Leaf knew that too and seemed content to wait it out. When Staraptor had broken her natural limit, it had

evened the match. I had hoped the momentum would be enough to score the victory but Tyranitar had proven why it was chosen for this match.

No, I couldn't wait much longer. I had hoped there would be no need for that. However, I had to consider the next opponent and by creating the ice field Leaf had unknowingly provided me with a way to put an end to this. Even if it was extremely risky. If it didn't work out, I could end up in even more trouble than I already was.

"Staraptor, Roost!" I commanded after she had landed another hit on Tyranitar, keeping it unfocused long enough for my Pokémon to recover some of her strength. If everyone thought that I was having her gathering strength for the final assault, they were only half right. Despite appearance I knew that Tyranitar would not fall so easily. Which was why I had Staraptor subtly direct attention to a specific point. While it seemed like a waste to attack the thick scale armor covering its body, the end result could be the decisive factor in finally taking our opponent out of the match.

Leaf wasn't idly sitting around to wait for me, of course. "Ancientpower!"

"Agility! Maneuver 11!" Aerial combat was a lot easier to plan out specific strategies for. There was only so much unpredictable movement that could be done while flying. I had worked on several strategies for different scenarios with Staraptor and some of the others for aerial and mid-air combat and now we would see how successful that had been.

Staraptor shot up out of range from the attack, her speed, phenomenal already from the Limit Break, was now little more than a streak of light. She might actually be as fast as Pikachu at his best. This was easier to achieve in the air, of course, the different dynamics and going in a fairly straight line with gravity added to the momentum.

Just a few moments later Staraptor had completed her turn and was shooting towards her opponent while practically touching the ice surface. I smirked when I saw the sparks created by the friction. The intense heat generated by Staraptor's speed and the friction caused by the close proximity to the ground was starting to weaken the surprisingly strong ice. At the point where Staraptor had come down, a hole had already formed.

"Berserker, Strength!"

My smirk widened a little. From most people's point of view it was not useful to have Staraptor too close and up front like that. She was fast, yes, but it was easy to anticipate. Tyranitar cocked back its massive fist, ready to strike... thin air as Staraptor swerved sharply to the side at the last moment. "U-turn!"

In a move that seemed to define the laws of physics Staraptor performed a tight turn maintaining almost all of her speed and struck Tyranitar hard in the side before the effect of the move had her return to her Pokéball.

I lost no time in following up, throwing up my remaining Pokéball. "Let's finish this, Buizel!" Relieved I could see that Buizel seemed recovered enough, giving a brief rotation with both his tails to show that the previous injury was not hindering him. That was good enough for me. "Staraptor did a lot of work, let's not waste it." Buizel nodded seriously, squaring off against the behemoth with no fear at all. There would be no time for games. I had to finish this now. The next one would decide it.

"Maneuver 7!"

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(Leaf)

I bit my lip in what was perhaps the first bout of real frustration in this match. Ash's Pokémon were proving even more tenacious than I had anticipated. By rights, Berserker should have had Staraptor overwhelmed already. Yet, not only had it persevered against the odds but also managed to take that last small step towards breaking its natural limit. That in turn caused the Bird Pokémon to be so freakishly fast that it hardly mattered how strong Berserker was. My only hope had been that my Pokémon would outlast Ash's or at least manage to drag it down with him like Houndoom had done with Infernape.

Don't get me wrong. I was happy that Ash had become so strong. The sheer ridiculous amount of punishment his Pokémon were ready to take for him were proof of how strong the bonds between them were. And that was in the end all that mattered, the difference between the strong Trainers and the Elites. That didn't mean I had any intention of losing.

Of course, that last attack had really caught us off guard and Berserker was getting annoyed by all the punishment he had to take. And that wasn't good. Tyranitar might be the physically strongest Pokémon I had, with a high variety of attacks, but he was also relatively new. We had just barely managed to make the Limit Break shortly before the tournament and he still had tendencies to lose his patience and concentration when he got frustrated.

And Buizel making immediate use of the generated hole in the ice and disappearing from view got Berserker only more ticked off. There was actually little to be done in this situation. The ice hid our opponent from view and made any sort of counter obsolete. Breaking the ice would only serve to our opponent's advantage and Tyranitar's Shockwave was by far not anywhere strong enough to affect a Water Pokémon that had gone through elemental resistance training.

On the other hand I wondered what Ash was up to. That he had merely announced an obvious preplanned strategy was another sign how much he had grown, another mark of the Elite. It was also annoying for the opponent. There was just that one hole in the ice and the weakened section where Staraptor had come down before. That left Buizel little options to reemerge.

Thus my and Berserker's attention was focused on the general area and we were caught completely off guard when in a show of raw power Buizel was drilling out of the ice with an Aqua Jet, immediately absorbing some of the ice into the layer and strafing Berserker before he could react, immediately boring right back under the ice and into the water. And so it continued. Again and again, every time creating a new hole, entirely unpredictable. If the battle hadn't gone on so long, I might have been able to salvage the situation but Berserker was getting really angry now. Wildly swing at his opponent, his aim was entirely off as he got struck over and over again.

All at once the wild barrage ended and Buizel once again stayed hidden under the water. Taking a deep breath, I briefly closed my eyes, trying desperately to feel the connection with my Pokémon. "Calm down," I spoke quietly, technically too low to be heard over the crowd that was getting riled up by the fierce fight. But thankfully being heard normally wasn't necessary or my intention. Berserker growled lowly but began to temper his rage somewhat. "Get back to the platform!" I called out louder and my Pokémon complied. Ash's strategy was simple but effective. Yet, it only worked as long as Buizel retained the element of surprise. With Berserker back on the center platform that gave him a much better defensive position. Buizel had to come out real close to...

What the hell?! For almost several seconds too long I stared at the sight of the Water Pokémon, more spinning than swimming as it was barreling straight through the trench Staraptor had started to create in the ice earlier. In doing so the Ice Aqua Jet was only getting more massive, although not slowing down Buizel at all! Just how much HAD Ash been holding back in the previous battles? I had personally placed Buizel on the bottom tier in terms of an actual threat, unevolved and without a Limit Break. I shuddered to think what it would do when achieving both... It might be a bit of a one-trick pony but it was also using that one attack variation very well, to a point of making it not merely an attack but a fighting style in and on itself.

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(Ash)

"Earthquake!" Leaf broke out of her stupor but it was already too late. Had she done this earlier, it might have made a difference, by clearing up the ice and making it easier to defend in just one place. Now Buizel's momentum had already reached a level where he had all the strength and more importantly all the ice necessary. This

maneuver took the Ice Aqua Jet to an extreme. There was quite a bit of risk involved. The concentration alone needed for this was so intense that Buizel couldn't stop for a single moment. If the momentum was halted, he'd end up freezing himself.

Just as the shockwave began to rupture the ice in front of him, Buizel dived down once more, performing only a small curve under the surface, further concealed by the crumbling ice. I bet Tyranitar thought himself quite safe on the little island and certainly so did Leaf. The platform was built of solid steel as far I knew, meant to support heavyweights much like Tyranitar even under great stress.

The sheer power of the Ice Aqua Jet was not to be denied.

Expecting an attack from anywhere around the platform, Trainer and Pokémon were totally shocked when it came from directly below. By now the ice had formed into a heavy and sharp spike, making Buizel resemble something more like a real drill than anything remotely close to a Pokémon. Unrelenting it tore through the thick steel and with resounding impact drove right for its target.

Tyranitar let out a roar of pain when the armor plating at his right side, which had been continuously assaulted by Staraptor before, actually gave way. Instead of aiming for the obvious exposed area, I had decided to do something unconventional that Leaf wouldn't expect and would prove even more rewarding. The exposed area could be trained to withstand damage. However, aside from general strength and muscle training, there was little you could do for the area under the natural armor. Once actually broken, Tyranitar was so unused to anything striking actual skin there, that the damage was much worse than it would have been anywhere else.

Bouncing away, Buizel completed a lazy spin, allowing the last of the ice that hadn't shattered upon contact to disperse before landing in the water, panting hard. Tyranitar stood unmoved for about two seconds, a grimace of pain on its face... before the knees began to buckle and it slumped forward with a deep groan, finally relenting to the strain of its body.

"Tyranitar is unable to battle! Buizel is the winner!"

I breathed a deep sigh of relief, letting some of the tension drain away from me. This had been much harder than even I expected. The strain on my Pokémon was a heavy price for this victory but both Buizel and Staraptor had equal part in this win and that should get them a big confidence boost. I just hope it would be enough.

Leaf slowly shook her head and recalled Tyranitar. "You did excellent, Berserker." Looking over to me, she smiled thinly. "I have to admit, you are every bit I had hoped for. You've come a long way, Ash. It... is an honor to fight you in my last battle before I leave this stage for the big one."

"Once I win, I'll be right behind you!" I returned the smile. I knew what she meant. I could already say, despite the seriousness of the contest, despite the realization of my dream on the line, despite all these odds that should not have allowed such feelings... I was having fun. More fun than I ever had had in a match before. I was enjoying this so much I felt like I could do this forever... Well, if my heart would allow that. One could only run on adrenaline for so long. "I'll keep the field," I called out to the referee. Why wouldn't I? It had already brought me so much luck. Buizel could always use the water... and I doubted it would even matter with what I knew came next.

"It's not over yet. Lemuria, go!"

And I knew these words to be true. This would be entirely different than the last battle. Mismagius was a completely different type. Not as straightforward and designed to overwhelm like Tyranitar but much more annoying. I had some ideas how to go about this, of course, but with Buizel in this condition, it would be up to Staraptor in the end. Hopefully Roost and the time Buizel was able to buy would be enough to make this second to last match more or less equal.

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(Dawn)

With some effort I let go off the death grip on my seat, for now. The battle had been so breathtaking that I had hardly noticed holding on so hard. This match really wasn't for the faint of heart, especially not those that were directly rooting for one of the contestants. I wondered how Mrs. Ketchum was doing over in their block? The audience was thoroughly enthralled already. Every twist and turn – which were plenty – were reflected in exclamation, hushed silence, awed shouts or thunderous applause.

And that was just us watching. I wondered how Ash and Leaf were doing. I was sweating already just from sitting here, they had to be much worse off and still didn't lose their cool. This was an entirely different level of competition from the norm. No Contest battle could ever get so intense with the time limit as it was.

The battle had taken a bit of a lull again and considering what was still to come in the conclusion, everyone – Trainers included – could really use the breather from the adrenaline rush of constant split second decisions.

At first glance the match right now looked more like a well-choreographed dance with no Pokémon really hitting the other. That the platform was all but destroyed didn't matter seeing as Mismagius didn't need to stand and Buizel was using the water for cover and guerilla tactics. This allowed him to stay unscathed so far but Mismagius had no trouble evading all the probing attacks. From all of Leaf's

Pokémon this one was whom she had used almost exclusively throughout the previous rounds and thus there was some room to prepare. The problem was that the Ghost type was seemingly invulnerable to ANYTHING physical. True, none of its opponent's could attain the speed Ash's Pokémon could but Buizel wasn't really getting anywhere either.

Of course, the Water Pokémon had fought a lot, the longest along with Staraptor. He was tired, running pretty much on adrenaline alone. Ash knew one good hit would do him in at this point. As such, if he wanted to make at least one good attack count, he needed the right timing. And it had to be soon.

Leaf was getting tired of the waiting game apparently. "Lemuria, Psychic! Drain the pool!" My eyes had to be bulging in disbelief. She couldn't possibly... And it was said in such a confident tone, too. As if such a feat was no issue. Of course, I should stop getting constantly surprised by feats of the impossible. Eyes glowing, Mismagius began to swirl the water fast and faster, creating a whirlpool of sorts but not with a vortex in the middle going down... instead it went up!

"Don't wait for them to finish! Aqua Jet!" Buizel shot out of the raging water towards Mismagius. Leaf seemed to have made a big mistake since it took all of her Pokémon's concentration to manipulate the water... Manipulate the... Oh crap.

Even as I thought that the torrent of water gathering skywards came down in an interception course for Buizel. However, he was ready for it, barely managing to slip by and strike out at Mismagius as the released water rushed back down. I could barely see much less hear over the roaring when Mismagius suddenly began to glow again, deftly avoiding the Ice Punch and sending some kind of move right back at Buizel. Torment! I realized when Buizel began to stumble and lose his otherwise unparalleled midair control because Torment forced him to abandon the technique that needed repeated fast recasts in order to maintain it for his unique use.

"Shadow Ball!" Mismagius follow-up came so fast, the sphere was practically on top of the suddenly falling and helpless Buizel in a moment. At the same time the water had finally crashed down into the arena again, causing an immediate wave shooting up towards the fighters.

Ash once again wouldn't just give in without a last try and knew how to use the opportunity. "Now Sonic Pulse!" With what really seemed his last strength, Buizel maneuvered just behind the wave. The Shadow Ball had so much momentum it broke right through but by then Buizel had hit the wave with his tail and created a Water Pulse magnified in power and speed by a Sonicboom. Not to counter the attack though. No, it shot right past and even as Buizel was hit hard by the Shadow Ball, Mismagius was enveloped in its own explosion, doubtless not enough to take it out but it had to have hurt.

Buizel was pretty much out of it before he even hit the surface and Ash quickly recalled him, giving a nod to the referee to cede the victory to Leaf. Everyone was focused on Mismagius though who had emerged from the explosion of high-pressured water slightly worse for wear but not very much winded. The mischievous expression had mostly disappeared from its face though.

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(Leaf)

I had no delusions about thinking I had the upper hand in this matchup. Not even with all the advantages I should be having. As the only non-Dark type, Lemuria was quite a bit special. Limit Break worked a little different on Ghosts than it did on natural, living Pokémon. The simple reason being just that. Generating a Limit Break had quite a bit to do with will and most of all life force. Ghosts weren't *alive*. They couldn't attain a higher state of evolution in the way other Pokémon could. For ghosts there really was only one way. All ghosts eventually had to pass on. Only one who had the overwhelming will – not clouded by an obsessive attachment but more a personal choice – to remain bound to the world of the living could attain a higher level of power. Most ghosts that got *old* enough would naturally attain this level, it was for the younger that it was harder.

Attaining these powers allowed a Ghost type almost full immunity from physical harm. Anything physical, not just normal and Fighting-type attacks were next to ineffective since Lemuria could just phase through them. However, compared to a natural Limit Break there was an actual drawback. By linking itself stronger with the physical world with which it had technically already parted, a Ghost type became more vulnerable to the pure elements. Fire, water, earth and air. They symbolized life and their energy could severely hurt a higher level Ghost type.

Thankfully Buizel had been at the last tatters of its strength. Such a blast like the last attack would have been concerning with Lemuria's opponent at full health. Even so, it had left more damage than my Pokémon was ready to show.

Despite all this, despite Staraptor being a more physical-orientated Pokémon, I was not deterred into rash overconfidence. It had just breached its own limit and thus had both the speed and ability to actually hit Lemuria if we were careless. Thus my choice of battlefield. I had to actually thank and congratulate the designers of this masterpiece. Hot smoke was shooting up in plumes out of small holes, as if on top of a geyser. I had no idea how they pulled it off but this gave Lemuria an excellent way to hide behind the erupting smoke and surprise Staraptor with fast Shadow Balls and the occasional Charge Beam or Rock Gem.

I had given Ash just enough to think about at the beginning, letting him try some direct attacks and seeing him fail before using the hot smoke as cover. I knew

giving him too much would just end up with him figuring out that all he needed to do was to catch Lemuria off-guard and he WOULD find a way. By giving him just a glimpse, I had him distracted while thinking. It was time to put up the pressure. If I wanted to keep a small advantage before the final fight, I had to win this one.

"Lemuria, Mean Look!" Normally this wouldn't be necessary. I knew Ash wouldn't send in Pikachu unless Staraptor fell. I wouldn't either. However, things would be different for this situation. "Perish Song!" That was one more attribute that Ghost types earned when attaining their higher level. They became completely immune to the effects of their own Perish Song.

Ash knew this, of course, from my fight with Nando. And he was prepared for it. "Counter it!" And Staraptor did. Simple but ingenious at the same time. The move largely depended on the target hearing the song. Letting out an ear-piercing shriek, the sound wave easily overrode the Perish Song. It didn't matter though, I had not expected it to work.

Mentally giving Lemuria the appropriate command, she used Staraptor's confusion to quickly power up with Nasty Plot and then hitting her foe with a Psybeam that left it momentarily confused... "Again!" This time there was no way to repel the Perish Song and thus Staraptor was officially on a time limit now. "Back into cover!" I urged. A cornered foe was especially dangerous. Staraptor had already proven that statement today.

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(Cynthia)

In my function as League Champion I had seen many matches, all types of them. Yet, to put this one into any simple categories like good or bad wouldn't be right. I had seen many tournament finals and I couldn't recall ever seeing one as intense as this. This match was easily a lower to mid-level Master League contest and would have raised some serious interest even there. I was seriously amazed by the leap Ash had made from when I had seen him the last time.

He didn't allow himself to be affected by the sudden pressure and demonstrated that he had obviously done his homework, Staraptor's speed once more coming into effect in a breathtaking maneuver that blindsided Mismagius with an Aerial Ace, not able to fade fast enough. The follow-up was interrupted though when one of the geysers erupted into an actual flame and forced the Bird Pokémon to avoid the scorching blast.

This field was an experimental one, using some new technical invention to simulate a geyser field with random bursts of magma. The creators were rather proud of it but it was also somewhat dangerous and wasn't supposed to be used outside of

the Master League. Both Trainers had been asked, warned yet had agreed on the field's inclusion. Not that I thought it would stop either of them. They were already on the level where both could handle the potential hazard.

Leaf caught herself and used one of Mismagius' trumps. For a short duration Mismagius could permanently fade, making any physical attacks ineffective. Like all techniques of a higher tier Ghost type, this one came with a drawback as well, the question would be if Ash could figure it out fast enough to devise and execute a counter strategy. Normally it wasn't very advisable in a straight-up fight since the Ghost Pokémon would relinquish all attack ability for a nearly ultimate defense. Pressed for time, Ash wouldn't be able to take it slow though. Perish Song worked slower on higher tiers like Staraptor, however, it still worked.

Some months ago Ash would have gotten worked up by his inability to score a hit while the time was running out. Now he stood calmly, fully concentrated, letting Staraptor fly attack after attack. What seemed to the casual observer like helplessness and desperation, was in fact the one thing he could do. He seemed to have grasped immediately that there was some kind of time limit to Mismagius' ability. And there was. Albeit a very small one. And if my calculations were correct he would get one chance to see it and then one more to exploit it. I doubted he had started to count right away, which meant he would have to guess the rest.

A few seconds later Mismagius shimmered and became fully visible once again. Ash immediately had Staraptor launch an attack but there was only a five second interval until Mismagius could do it again. The first strike was evaded and the second passed through the ghost again.

"Omnious Wind!"

That one surprised us all, Leaf included. While possible, it was very rare for a Flying Pokémon to learn a Ghost-type technique. Surprise was all it really did. Mismagius got hit but shrugged it off mostly. For a moment I wondered if Ash was getting desperate because he couldn't be sure about the timing. At his command Staraptor once again shot forward with high speed, creating another small shockwave but leaving his opponent untouched before vanishing behind another burst of flame that appeared randomly between the simple vapor bursts of the geysers.

My trained eyes caught the movement where I doubted anyone else did. Staraptor had used the eruption as cover to climb into the air, already far above eye level. What was he doing? Getting so far away could cost him his only opportunity. Was Ash out of ideas after all?

I chanced a glance over to Ash's friends and saw Dawn... grinning. Obviously she knew something neither of us did. Even I wasn't sure about his strategy.

Staraptor had completely vanished from sight. There was no telling how high up it went and there was only a few seconds left for Ash. Certainly the time Perish Song left him would be gone as well shortly after that. The seconds were ticking by but there was still no sign of Ash's Pokémon...

Then a sharp cry razed the air and it was like a projectile fell from the sky. Surrounded by a shroud of wind Staraptor was plummeting back towards the arena in what seemed like a suicide dive. However, Ash's time was up. Already Mismagius had taken shape again and regardless how fast Staraptor was, it would not reach the Ghost type in time. Ash must have realized this as well. Without slowing down, Staraptor let loose another Omnious Wind which had more the effect of a small-scale hurricane. Obviously he hoped to throw Mismagius off in order for Staraptor to still reach it. A Trainer of Leaf's caliber though, would not be distracted.

"Three, two..." I heard Dawn counting quietly and wondered if she had figured out the rhythm but she was much too calm for what should be bad news. Just as Mismagius once more activated its ability, effectively sealing any of Ash's chances, another jet of fire erupted right in Staraptor's path. My eyes widened... and then I finally understood.

Ash you truly are a genius.

"Do it now! Brave... Phoenix!" Cutting straight through the eruption of lava, Staraptor was bathed in an aura of fire and before either Leaf or Mismagius could even react impacted with its opponent.

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

(Ash)

I had to admit, I did gamble a little on that last one. I had realized there was a timing to Mismagius' intangibility but with no time to wait and find it out, I was forced to either get it right the first time or try something different. The first lava eruption had immediately given me an idea, something I had tried numerous times in training. Normally wind simply fueled fire but used the right way Staraptor had created a tunnel, indeed fueling the fire around the area but also keeping it away from her and as a sort of cloak. I was certain that Mismagius' ability only allowed for physical attacks to pass through and higher tier ghosts were notoriously weak to the elements. Leaf giving me her training notes had played against her this time.

Seeing Mismagius hide behind but always stay a little away from the earlier eruptions had cinched it for me. Betting everything on one move was not exactly the most clever thing, the limited time had not allowed me for anything else though. In the end, I had been lucky. I couldn't be completely sure if the eruptions had an actual

interval and I was unsure if my count had been right. Had Staraptor missed the eruption, it would have been over.

"You did wonderful," I complimented Staraptor before calling her back to the Pokéball. Perish Song had done its work shortly after Mismagius' near instant faint. Not that I had been surprised by it. Briefly I caught Leaf's gaze or that was the plan. The exchange went on for several more seconds. This was it. The decisive moment. The final battle. If we won, then my... no, our dream – my Pokémon and mine – would finally be in reach.

Pikachu was already up on the railing of the platform without a word necessary. "Ready, partner?"

"Pika!" was the simple enthusiastic reply. Yet everything about Pikachu was thoroughly focused.

"I think we'd like the starter field for this one," Leaf called out to the referee without separating my gaze from mine. Even if I could have had a say in it, the decision would have been the same.

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

(Leaf)

"Shadow, it's time to win!"

Even as Shadow emerged from her Pokéball, Pikachu leapt down from the high platform as if it was nothing, firmly landing on all fours without any ill effects. Ash had trained him well and the bond between them was very similar to Shadow's and mine. I would have had her out of her Pokéball, too, but wanted to maintain a measure of secrecy in case I actually had to use her prior to the final.

Ash's gaze was intense. Confident, anxious, passionate, wary, all in one. Excitement had continued to grow inside my own heart and had reached the bursting point just about now, pushing away the last bit of shock over Ash's final maneuver with which he had managed to undo the draw from before. I could hardly wait any longer for this. The final moment. The true apex of our individual development. I would not give a single quarter.

"Final Round! Pikachu VS Umbreon! Fight!"

"Thunderbolt!"

"Dark Pulse!"

Pikachu dashed forward while unleashing a powerful electric bolt, met halfway by Shadows's attack. Immediately Pikachu shifted and rushed in with Quick Attack but I had Shadow counter with Return which was narrowly dodged and an Iron Tail flew just an inch over Shadow's head who immediately leapt back to put some distance between them.

Deciding to go on the offense, I tried something different. "Confuse Ray!" The beam was snapped off so fast, Pikachu barely had time to realize it was there. He didn't have to. Ash had already a counter ready.

"Thunder Wave!" The surge of electricity canceled out the beam and it was Umbreon's turn to make a quick leap so as not to get paralyzed early on. Again Pikachu pursued, tail crackling with electricity as he rushed in at high speed. Shadow was still in the air from the evasive jump, leaving her seemingly open to attack.

"Now!"

"Roll!" Ash snapped almost immediately after my command and Pikachu turned into a tight roll, the toxic burst passing by so close the Mouse Pokémon was sure to feel the sizzling. It did splash against the tail but the gathered charge seemed to neutralize it.

Both Pokémon landed with their backs turned but looking at their opponent, ready to spring back into action at any moment.

"Enough for a warm up?" I called over to Ash.

"Whenever you are ready."

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(Brock)

Warm up. Sure. I was afraid to take my eyes off the battle for even a moment, lest I actually missed something important. The speed so far already was like the more intense practice sessions between Ash and Dawn. I figured by now that Ash always must have been cutting back slightly to get an even challenge out of it despite how good I initially thought Dawn had become as well. I don't think I had ever seen Pikachu go all out, yet I was quite certain Dawn had never even pulled a draw against him.

But Leaf and her Umbreon were every bit their equal and perhaps more so. A year more experience, constant training in what Ash had done in a few months, I wondered if it would be enough. How high were Umbreon's limits compared to Pikachu's? Even with all the training, could Pikachu really hope to beat someone with

the same training regiment but with years more of experience in it? That last move had almost hit and Pikachu getting badly poisoned was something Ash certainly had to prevent at all costs. This was the last battle. Even without Mean Look there was no more option to switch.

No, I chastised myself yet again. I needed to have faith. Just like Dawn who had gone from quiet, focused but properly ready to explode with anxiety to loudly cheering for Ash which in turn got the audience also riled up. It had already been a spectacular match and this would be an even more spectacular conclusion. The entire crowd was by now thoroughly enraptured and cheering for their favorite Trainer and Pokémon. I doubted those two were aware of it. Caught in their own world, just them, their Pokémon and the battle.

For a brief moment I wondered what all our other friends were doing? The tournament had made waves in the news and anticipation was high. Just yesterday evening I had briefly talked to Misty and knew she was watching today. May was out travelling but I had no doubt that if somehow possible, she would be watching as well.

Everyone is watching you, I thought with a good measure of pride for the boy I had always regarded like a brother. *This is your chance, Ash. Make us proud.*

The two Pokémon below got back into a proper position, ready to go at it again, this time without any restrictions. The noise level became almost deafening, as if the intense emotions, the adrenaline both Trainers had to be feeling, were sweeping through the entire stadium. I couldn't restrain myself any longer either and stood, ready to support my friend to the best of my ability.

"Come on, you two, you can beat her!"

Dawn actually stopped for a moment, then smiled and went right back to cheering on her boyfriend, this time together with me and thousands of other spectators.

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

(Leaf)

My consciousness had slipped completely away. This was a state even most Elites rarely managed to achieve. If you would ask, all but a select few would tell you the same. Such a complete harmony with your Pokémon was only possible with one, usually your first or in rare cases the one who was your primary partner. Such synchrony was indeed a skill necessary on this level and I knew Ash could employ it. However, I had to wonder if his grasp was already this strong to maintain it fully. To certain lower degrees we had both been doing it throughout the battle and those

before. Completely merging with your Pokémon was something entirely different though. An almost psychic connection had formed between Shadow and me, one where no commands were necessary.

Pikachu's next attack was much faster but we were ready for it. I knew already that in raw speed Shadow would and could not be better. However, raw speed was not everything. With enough reaction time and superb reflexes it didn't matter how fast the opponent fast. The gap on this level was not so big that it made a difference anyway. Shadow was very fast for an Umbreon and that which made up for the gap was her true strength. Reflexes.

None of the lightning bolts that seemed like they came even faster than real lightning – if that was even possible – scored a hit. Not because of a lack of speed or precision though. The attacks were perfectly executed but we had already anticipated each and every one and the best course for evasion, slipping through most of them. One bolt was a grazing hit, but even that was calculated and hardly bothered us.

Sensing a more widespread attack, Shadow already moved before the Thunder had fully formed, scorching part of the ground where it struck. She launched a Shadow Ball in retaliation which got smacked right back by Pikachu's tail, followed by a burst of speed and a jump that carried Pikachu high overhead. I had seen him do this in the last match and was wary. Another shower of lightning bolts rained down, this time covering a wider range at a similar fast rate as the first. Regardless of that, we stayed calm and continued our evasive dance, already readying a counter offense.

"Pikachu is fast," I called over to Ash. "But you are not fast enough to beat us."

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

(Ash)

With iron resolve I pressed down on the mounting frustration threatening to rise. This wasn't going well at all. Regardless what we did, Leaf and Umbreon had an answer for it. Or, to put it more precisely. Nothing we did ever scored a decisive hit. Whether it was Pikachu's lightning from a distance – ground or sky – or direct physical attacks – which I was somewhat reluctant to order because of that one move that could spill disaster for us –, the result staid the same.

My eyes narrowed when I saw Umbreon slip past another Thunderbolt, this time charged but only fired after a quick dash at almost point blank range. And still Umbreon seemed to evade with almost ridiculous ease. Why? Could she really be faster than Pikachu? No, I doubted that. Umbreon weren't known for high speed capabilities. Even a Limit Break could only do so much and might only make a

difference against a normal Pokémon. No, I knew Pikachu was faster. So then why? Why couldn't we hit her?

Even as my thoughts were awl with forming and discarding possible reasons and solutions, Leaf obviously had enough of just reacting. Suddenly it was Pikachu who had to evade another Toxic assault, then two more fired off in rapid succession.

"Cloak!" I called out and the deadly toxin splashed against a highly charged electrical field quickly erected around Pikachu's body. Several more assaults met with similar resistance. Pikachu's elemental mastery was unmatched. He could use lightning to a degree few others of the same type could even remotely hope to. Not just for offense but also for defense. It made our earlier experimentations with elemental counter shields seem like mere child's play.

Just as I thought Leaf was getting a little one-sided by keeping up the Toxic attacks, a Dark Pulse came hurdling in the shadow of another wave, too fast to evade. The shield took the brunt of the attack but it was not quite designed for this type of damage. Umbreon immediately capitalized and moved in.

No, I thought grimly while watching closely. She isn't faster than Pikachu. Fast, yes, perhaps even fast enough to rival Infernape, but not that fast. We should be able to hit her. Pikachu back flipped out of the way of a Faint Attack and instinctively fired back with a Thunderbolt... that actually hit. My eyes widened in sudden understanding but I had no time to immediately act on my realization. Umbreon had shot a whole rain of Toxic into the air and Pikachu was hard-pressed evading in a hasty retreat. I saw the one shot coming straight through the shower from above almost too late.

"Watch out!" Pikachu had just evaded the last drop from above but the burst from straight ahead was too close already. "Use, Iron Tail and smack it back!" Steel was immune to everything Poison and thus the danger of actual infection was minimal. As predicted no harm was done and suddenly Umbreon had to dodge her own attack. "Volt Tackle!" With unrivaled speed Pikachu launched from defense into offense and yet again failed to fully connect. Slightly off-balance Pikachu managed to hit her in the side.

"Moonlight!"

I grimaced. Leaf's Umbreon really was a perfect, annoying Tank, yet still extremely dangerous during attack. It didn't matter though. I had seen what I needed and I understood what I had to do. There was no time for second-guessing or hesitation either. Despite my reluctance, if the battle stayed like this, we would lose.

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(Pikachu)

It had been frustrating for me as well. I was not used to having my attacks end up missing over and over again. The level of speed I had attained was a huge part of my style and the basis for my confidence to take everything this tournament could throw at us... apparently not counting on someone like Leaf to show up. I was prepared for close, for needing to pull out every reserve, a fight where the smallest mistake would make the difference. However, not getting any hit in on my opponent was more than just irking.

It was like Umbreon possessed a sixth sense or something that let her know of an attack before I even started. Of course, they would share a similar connection the way Ash and I did, perhaps even stronger, yet to react this fast... That's what it came down to. Reaction time. I think I realized it around the same time as Ash did. Comprehending the implications, perhaps I shouldn't have been so surprised by the command he gave me.

"Pikachu, drop the limiter."

I wished I could look back to my Trainer for confirmation. Taking my eyes off my opponent for even a moment was a bad idea though. And I could feel the confirmation, both in the tone of his voice and in the feelings conveyed over our bond. Where before would have been hesitation, was now nothing but full trust. He had said it before when he had sent in Staraptor against overwhelming odds. If we wanted to win this, he would have to trust in us. The same went vice versa.

Limiters were a lesser known but common practice actually. They were one other thing Ash had learned about from Leaf. Usually they would only be used by either the highest Elites or more commonly by Gym Leaders to provide an adequate difficulty for challengers. The specialized devices which came in form of small microchips implanted into the skin came in great variety but mainly they were just what their name suggested. Limiting a Pokémon's ability to certain degrees, they could be applied to overall skills or just specific areas.

When I had breached my limit fairly early in training, we had quickly discovered an astonishing but also problematic aspect. I had simply become too fast. Ash couldn't keep up anymore. Normally that wouldn't be a problem since few others would be able to either. However, being unable to keep track hindered our performance and it interfered with our link. So we decided to use a limiter to seal away the upper twenty percent of my top most speed.

Now, there was no choice. Ash was right about that. Still the trust he put into me because of that was heartwarming. It meant much more than anyone could ever really understand. This was his big battle, the realization of his dream. And he was

willing to give a big part of the control away. For a Trainer, not to be in control of a battle was generally a bad thing. In this case, however, it spoke greatly of the trust Ash had in me. I would for a great part be on my own, I would have to make a lot more decisions on my own... I would not disappoint my best friend.

Sending a small precise pulse towards the chip, I felt the locked away power exploding in a corona of yellow and light blue. The air around me crackled with raw elemental power as the other aspect of the limiter also came into play. Along with the enormous speed, I had become so attuned to my element where it was hard to properly control. I would end up pulling in electricity unintentional, just because I could. The power was overwhelming, dangerous and... exhausting. Due to the unique nature of my Limit Break I had made a jump in ability that would need many more months to bring under enough control where we wouldn't need to limit it anymore. Even now it was hard to bring the sudden released energy under control.

A flood of strength rushed along my link with Ash. Not just his own support, I could feel Dawn as well, very clearly. And there was Brock to some lesser extent. Yes, I couldn't let them all down. I would not let Ash and all of my other friends down. Gritting my teeth I forced the chaotic energy down and into a palpable aura around my body.

Umbreon had taken an involuntary step back. I saw no fear in her eyes but then again I never suspected it. She was so well-trained that I knew the extra power would at best give me a slight edge. I needed to make the best of it...

No. I would make the best of it.

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(Dawn)

"He has a limiter?!"

That would be fake-Leaf. I think even Cynthia was surprised. Brock knew but had never really seen the effect. Being Ash's sparring partner I knew all about it, of course. Along with the risks. It might only be a slight percentage that was affected by the limiter but even that could make a big difference in a fight like this. Giving away control completely to your Pokémon was at the same time a very risky step. Especially against an opponent as crafty as Leaf who seemed to be as much as if not even more in synch with her Pokémon than Ash and Pikachu were.

Ignoring the outburst from the fake girl, I watched the spectacle with a bit of wariness. I could feel Ash's resolve, Pikachu's readiness. If there was ever a chance for such a gamble to work, it was now. "Don't look away now," I said to everyone, not

that it was necessary. No one would at this point. "This is going to end soon, one way or another." Pikachu wouldn't be able to fight at his limit like this for long.

Just as I said that Pikachu had finished taming the wild elemental storm and the sight was breathtaking. Like a fierce, mythical creature, Pikachu was bathed in an aura of lightning, making it hard to tell where the cloak ended and the body began. In a flash, he moved forward and this time drove an enormous Thunderbolt into his opponent. Umbreon was sent reeling and Pikachu already pressed the attack, effortlessly dodging another Toxic shot and slamming his electric-charged tail into Umbreon's midsection.

To the casual viewer there was no real difference in terms of speed. All the inexperienced viewer would see was Pikachu suddenly connecting where it had always been evading before. And even Leaf was shocked by the sudden turnabout.

"You were right. I am not fast enough. The fault never lay with Pikachu," Ash spoke into the relative silence, the crowd for the moment mesmerized by the new turnabout. "Whereas you have more experience following at this level of speed, I do not. That is something you cannot learn in just three months. So... all I have left now is to stop trying and trust Pikachu to do the right thing." Even as he spoke Pikachu was moving again, pushing Umbreon back who had stopped trying to evade by small margins. That gave all the momentum to Pikachu though who phased back into view behind Leaf's Pokémon. "Pikachu, Lightning Dragon!"

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(Ash)

Trust. I never ever did not trust my Pokémon and that went triple for Pikachu. However, that kind of trust was born out of the combination Trainer and Pokémon, the unity that was created and built during battle. Giving part of it away on one end wasn't easy, especially not for the Trainer. In fact, a caught Pokémon was often the one that gave away far more from its own freedom. Most Pokémon would become so dependent on their Trainer's commands that they couldn't even do the most basic and logical thing like trying to evade an incoming attack. Right now, the situation for Pikachu and me was somewhat reversed, though in a strange way. After all, it was still Pikachu who did the fighting and I was still giving orders but much more in between had shifted to Pikachu's own judgment.

I was not worried. All these years, all the hardships. Pikachu and I didn't really need a bond. We were already so much of like mind that the other could easily predict what the other wanted just by simply... knowing. We had the clear advantage now and we needed to press it.

Formed out of the same mix of yellow and blue electricity, the aptly named attack took the form of a well-sized dragon made of lightning, a long serpentine lizard that made to swallow Umbreon whole. The hasty Protect only did so much and merely buffered the damage as the attack struck.

However, Pikachu was already ready for the follow-up. We needed to pull out all the big guns now before Leaf got her bearings back and pulled out another surprise – which I had no doubt she still had. Jumping after the Lightning Dragon, Pikachu became a blazing, brilliant light in the sky as he dived for his opponent looking like a ferocious beast of legend ready to devour its prey. "God of Thunder!"

There was indeed a vicious thunderclap that rattled the arena as the full-on attack which was similar in nature to a Volt Tackle but much more potent in terms of elemental energy crashed into Umbreon. Dust was kicked up and momentarily hid the fighters from view. I could, however, sense an astonished reaction from Pikachu and already knew this hadn't worked the way it should.

When the dust cloud finally dissipated, I too, stared in wonder at the sphere of pitch black surrounding Umbreon, the last of Pikachu's powerful attack being drained away as if it was just a little shock.

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(Leaf)

"I call this one: Black Hole," I commented to the stunned Ash. No doubt he had thought to have surprised me enough that he could decide the match in his favor. And I was surprised. For several long moments I was so stunned by the new development that Pikachu could have simply overwhelmed us. I had expected a hard fight but not quite something like this. This jump in ability and elemental mastery wasn't something a regular Limit Break or my training program could achieve, no matter how good a Pokémon was. I should know after all. There was only one explanation that would justify what I was seeing...

"You are not the only one with advanced elemental manipulation," I said. "Shadow Wave!" The sphere pulsed with the absorbed power it had been collecting before pushing it outwards in a sudden and fast manner, leaving a long trench of sizzling energy in the path where Pikachu had been standing a moment before. Ash didn't look so certain anymore. "I don't really like to use this. Congratulations, Ashy. You really pushed me further than I thought."

Elemental manipulation of the primary element associated with a Pokémon was something that usually would take decades to master in such a way. Unless the method with which a Pokémon broke their natural limit was the other, lesser known version. Well, lesser known was not quite right. Older Pokémon could reach this

stage naturally at some point. All it took was insight, concentration and an inner harmony with oneself and their surroundings. Usually such a state would be achieved by meditation or similar methods of focus. It had little to do with strength and more with... for lack of a better word enlightenment. For younger Pokémon trying to attain their Limit Break this way was rare and required an even stronger bond between Trainer and Pokémon than the other method. I couldn't really say more about it since this was a process that was deeply personal, unique and different for every Pokémon.

The result, however, was mostly the same. If one were to use the old discarded level system as a measurement. A Pokémon attaining Limit Break in this way would make a jump of between twenty and fifty levels in one go, with a focus on greatly heightening the individually strongest skill – in Pikachu's case: speed – and their control over the element they were attuned to. In hindsight, I should have seen it. I should have seen it during Ash's last match but had attributed Pikachu's attacks to merely the result of good training and clever creativity with new attacks.

Too bad Pikachu wasn't the only one here with such tricks. Black Hole was a technique developed and perfected through almost a year of painstaking training, experimentation and even more training. I could proudly claim it might be the Ultimate Defense. Unlike Pikachu, Shadow would always be and stay a defensive type and thus this technique was perfect for her.

Just as Pikachu was learning now, the bubble of dark energy acted much like its namesake, consuming energy like a bottomless pit, regardless how much or how concentrated. Even physical attacks created energy to move and generate enough impact to actually do damage and were thus easily rendered useless. Not to mention the shield wasn't just energy either but very much solid. Unlike with Lemuria's intangibility, Black Hole wouldn't run out of fuel unless Shadow did and I knew she could keep going for awhile, much longer than I believed Pikachu could move with this much concentrated energy.

Of course, it would hardly be a practical move if everything Black Hole did was absorb and grant a state of invulnerability. Time and again Pikachu had his own attacks returned to him in various shapes, keeping him more busy with evading his own failed and returned attempts to breach the shield than making any sort of headway.

Oh, I was definitely impressed. The severity and speed of the attacks hammering onto Shadow's form were perfect. Flawlessly executed, with more power than anything Shadow ever had to face in this state. Pikachu was so fast I had trouble keeping up and that despite – as Ash had correctly determined – my eyes being much more used to this level of combat. Any other opponent would have been long overwhelmed and utterly destroyed. For Black Hole though, it was all just fuel

and the longer Ash kept it up, the less energy Shadow had to put into the move herself. And the phenomenal speed boost Pikachu had attained was all but useless.

That didn't stop them from trying and I didn't expect them too. So far nothing had seemed to work but now Pikachu was getting ready for the move he had shown in his last fight. So far there had been no use trying. The attack required precision and Shadow would easily be fast enough to clear the impact radius in time. Not anymore. I didn't know if Ash had realized it yet but I would have been surprised if he hadn't. The one flaw with Black Hole and why I didn't like using it, was that it pretty much confined Shadow to one place. Any movement on her part would not only disrupt the technique but could seriously hurt her as well. As it was, Shadow was in the very center of a sphere that once in place couldn't be moved. Leaving this place would mean leaving not only the safety but also get affected by the very powers that were so easily absorbing great amounts of energy. Not that Shadow would get sucked in or something but the consequences were still rather severe.

"Thunderstorm!"

Of course, I had yet to see an attack that could breach this defense. Perhaps Cynthia could come up with something. I really, really had wanted to keep this secret for awhile longer to surprise the Champion with this. Now she and the other Elites had time to prepare...

Ah well. If even the level of that concentrated lightning couldn't disrupt it, I doubted they'd have an easy time with it. Time for the finish. Pikachu had just given me enough fuel to pull of our perhaps most dangerous counter while in this state. And Pikachu seemed sufficiently winded, too.

This was the moment. The moment that would decide it all.

"Convert! Now, Dark Inferno!"

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(Ash)

There was barely any time to react and that time was far too short. Even if I had been able to, the last attack had left Pikachu for a moment vulnerable. I had not expected the almost immediate reaction and the severity with which what one would best describe as a circle of angry black flames erupted outwards, rushing over everything in its path.

I lurched forward, grabbing the rails of the platform with an iron grip, although I wasn't even aware of how much. The literal inferno obscured everything and I had no idea what was going on. *Come on, Pikachu. Don't give up now.* It was the best I

could do once again. Trust. Belief. Almost everyone would have said it was over by that point. There was no way Pikachu would still be standing. However, only Leaf and I truly understood the nature of this battle. Not just because of similar training or the fact that both of our Pokémon were on an almost equal level of experiences; some others watching could understand that. No, in a battle like this, the Trainers would eventually get lost in the consciousness it had developed. There was just us and our Pokémon. And we all knew that everything was possible today.

Forcing my anxiety down I closed my eyes briefly, trying to find any response from Pikachu over the link. In the back I felt Dawn's comforting presence and steadfast support and drew on it to plunge further ahead... into a new awareness.

Looking back that was the point where our link became as perfect as Leaf and Shadow's. Not just a shared mental link but a true merging. I knew even before the flames cleared and the shocked reaction from the audience that Pikachu was alright. Instinctively he had pulled a dense cloak of lightning around himself, applying almost a similar principle as Leaf's Black Hole. It hadn't completely stopped the damage but enough to dampen the effects to manageable levels.

Panting hard, slightly charred, definitely looking worse for wear, yet still standing. I couldn't be more proud. And now. Now, nothing would stop us. By employing the technique, Leaf had practically left me with little other choice and the perfect setup for our own ultimate move. Funny, I had dreaded using it so much, even after verifying it as barely battle-ready yesterday. At this moment, all the factors were in place. The bond between Pikachu and me was never stronger, the determination never greater. And with Umbreon now a stationary target with a colossal defense that had successfully repelled all of our attacks to this point, the last hindrance had also fallen away.

"Begin sequence," I said unnecessarily even as Pikachu sped forward to finally bring an end to this conflict. One way or another.

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(Dawn)

There was no one sitting anymore in the arena. I could safely vouch for that even without needing to see. The atmosphere had become a simmering quiet, waiting with bated breath and eagerly anticipating the end to a match I was sure they would be talking about ages to come, ready to explode once everything was said and done.

My heart must have stopped when I saw Pikachu enveloped in the attack. If I didn't know any better, the potency looked almost... lethal. These two were made of

much sterner stuff though. Regardless, relief surged through me when I saw Pikachu standing at the epicenter, like a light opposing the darkness trying to consume him.

"He's going to do IT," I breathed when I heard Ash's announcement and saw Pikachu launch into what looked like a normal Volt Tackle. "Before anyone asks... I have no clue whatsoever. Ash wouldn't even tell me." No one did ask, too spellbound to try. Pikachu's attack seemed feeble, desperately helpless in light of what he had already tried just moments before. Of course, it never was meant as an attack. In fact, Pikachu streaked right past Umbreon, veering off in a broad curve to gain even more speed before coming back around. All that in the span of bare seconds.

Before anyone, obviously Leaf included, realized what Ash and Pikachu were up to, it was too late. Pikachu had already completely a first circle around his opponent. A literal whirlwind of acceleration, I couldn't tell from here just what exactly he was up to until moments later I began to see the tiny sparks in his wake. Leaf did, too, and made to give a command before Ash interrupted, his voice confident and almost ominous in his certainty.

"I would keep the barrier, it's too late to get out now and you'll need all the defense you have." And Leaf swallowed her command, whether from believing him or simply realizing the same thing I didn't know. By now a small ring of static electricity had been woven around Umbreon. It was, however, the small tangible objects that looked much like miniature lightning bolts – or simply put resembling Pikachu's tail – arrayed within the circle. I wondered what these were...

"Nodes," Cynthia gasped in understanding and then I did, too.

"Phase Two," Ash instructed calmly.

In mid dash, Pikachu launched diagonally into the air, ascending to a point right above Umbreon caught in the very center. To everyone's and my own shock the electricity was following Pikachu upwards from every one of the "nodes", creating a cage of lightning formed roughly like a pyramid with Pikachu at the very top, practically coming to float in the air above Umbreon. The energy flowed right into his tail building up more and more power while still holding the imprisoning aspect of the technique. *Like a feedback loop*, I mused in comprehension. There was so much power, I could feel it from here. The air was heavily charged and it made me shiver. I understood now why Ash had made such a secret of this and why he found it too dangerous to use. With this much gathered power, an attack would be lethal to any lesser being. Not with Umbreon's shield though.

Now it was the ultimate defense against the ultimate attack.

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

(Ash)

Once caught in the net, there was no escape. The voltage flowing back and forth from Pikachu to the nodes was so high it would at the very least badly burn every Pokémon attempting to escape.

I could feel Pikachu's struggle to contain and focus the enormous elemental power, much more acutely than ever before. And then there was a sense of serenity. Pikachu had become one with his element and there was no hesitation, no struggle. His tail was glowing so bright it hurt to look at. The clouds from the last Thunderstorm had not dispersed and the air was humming in anticipation from the power about to be unleashed.

"Phase 3..." For a moment I closed my eyes, all too aware that this was the moment everything would come to an end. Then I focused once more and released everything. All the adrenaline, the anxiety, the frustration, the hope, the trust, the confidence, every emotion generated and pushed to its limit throughout this battle.

"Thor's Hammer!"

With a resounding clap of thunder that shook the island Pikachu fell, the lightning-charged tail crashing mercilessly on the sphere of darkness standing in the way of our victory.

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

(Leaf)

Ash... You really are something else.

I could only stare in awe at the truly fearsome "attack". Attack seemed so mild and utterly unsuitable a term to describe what I was witnessing. There was nothing I could do anymore either.

I winced as Pikachu's tail – or hammer would truly be more apt – crashed into Shadow's Black Hole. For a long moment it seemed to hold. But I knew better already. There was not even a beginning of absorption. Then Pikachu pushed harder with a loud cry of exertion and sheer willpower. A first crack formed, then another, then a spider web of fissures burst over the moments ago impenetrable-seeming sphere before shattering altogether...

THEN the dome of lightning collapsed and rushed after its creator towards Shadow.

I closed my eyes even before the flash of light from the impact filled the arena. This match... was over.

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

(Ash)

Blinking slowly against the receding light, I began to make out details again... and gaped.

In the center of the explosion stood Pikachu, on the verge of collapse, sheer willpower holding him up and certainly unable to produce even a spark at the moment. What was even more amazing was that opposite to him, Umbreon was also standing. My heart lurched for a moment, resignation beginning to fill the void of released emotions. Before it could take hold though I saw more clearly the state in which Umbreon was in. Sparks were still dancing all over her body and she made not a sign to move, even from fatigue. And I doubted she would again anytime soon. Umbreon might have "survived" the attack but was completely and utterly paralyzed.

I looked over to Leaf to see her reaction, not daring to give into any emotion just yet. We were at an impasse. Umbreon could clearly not continue but Pikachu was too weak to do anything about it.

Leaf had her eyes still closed when she asked. "I have just one question. Was that last attack at full power?"

Observant as always. Even in the very last moments of a climactic battle.

"No."

Releasing a sigh, Leaf finally looked at me and what I saw had me smile thinly. Pride. "I see. Referee, Shadow can't continue and wouldn't even be standing if that last attack had had any more strength. We surrender."

Stupefied, I stared at my old friend. But there was no regret, no second-guessing her decision. I understood without needing words. She had given it her all and considered it her loss. Her loss... I might have mused about whether or not I felt good about the way it ended, if the implications about the decision hadn't crept up on me just then. Leaf lost which meant I...

"Trainer Leaf has forfeited! Therefore the match goes to Pikachu! The winner and new Sinnoh League Champion... Ash Ketchum!"

I had won.

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

Author's Note

pants

Phew... Hah... Give me a moment...

Right. Finally done! I wrote those last few scenes in one session and am suffering adrenaline rush still. As for Maia... *looks at muse fainted on the ground* Uh huh, something like that.

Man, what a monster. This episode just... Would. Not. End. But, it was so worth it, I believe. I am not much for self-praise, in fact I find myself to be one of my greatest critics when it comes to writing and there were parts I wasn't quite satisfied with in here, but the final fight practically wrote itself. It was like a train without a break, steadily gaining speed until it pretty much runs on its own and then there's the point of no return. Yes, like Back to The Future 3, exactly. I was worried about getting the final battle just right the most. However, I believe I did a good job. At least I am satisfied... the rest is up to you to review.

As for the fights. Let's go in order. The whole Staraptor/Buizel VS Tyranitar sequence took much longer than I anticipated. It just wouldn't end. And no, I had it planned out roughly like that, just took a lot longer to write out than anticipated. I bet no one saw Buizel eventually getting the win, right?

I'm at odds about the Staraptor VS Mismagius fight. At first I was half tempted to rewrite it, then looking back over it now, I feel it suffices at least. I just honestly couldn't get a good feel for this one and struggled to come with a more detailed outline compared to the other parts. I hope you find it at least decent.

The last battle, of course was truly massive. Just as I wanted it to be. You probably noticed how I often, especially towards the end, had the scenes a little shorter but with more perspective switches. That was necessary to create the atmosphere and catch the battle from all angles, mostly Ash and Leaf's but some from Pikachu and outside view as well. Hopefully I managed to execute this intent properly.

Both of the first new attacks by Pikachu were more spur of the moment things. The last one I had up in my head for a very, very long time to be used in different scenarios... this story idea was just the first to get out. I don't even know how long I had the basic idea, I think I had it even planned for the eventual finish of the tournament of the original TFSTTM that never got written. Yup, it's that old... but hopefully not rotten yet. ^_^

I know I sprang the alternate way of a Limit Break on you guys right there in the middle. And I'm sorry it sounds a little half-baked and confusing. The truth is, I really have too little a grasp on it yet myself! *sweatdrop* I left it vague on purpose for now and will definitely address it more in Act 2... whenever I shall get to that. It's quite possible that by that point I will go back and revise the explanations a little.

All that is left at this point is one more episode to wrap up the first arc nicely. There are quite a few things left I want to do but it's mostly tying up loose ends and, of course, celebrations.

I hope you had as much fun reading as I had in writing this. The episode was a lot of work but also rather intense. We are hungry now, so we need lots and lots of reviews, comments or otherwise!

Maia briefly sits up. "Fooooood!"

Right, you heard the muse. The more we get, the sooner we'll be able to wrap up this arc for good.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias aka MysticMew