

Title: The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
Part: Second Arc, Episode 1
Author: Matthias aka MysticMew (Solarsenshi@gmx.de)
Beta: H-Man #89995, partly xryuran
Status: Alpha
Rating: R
Category: Romance, Adventure, Dark, lots of other things...
Pairings: Ash/Dawn (main), Brock/Ako, added as revealed
Continuum/Spoilers: Everything up to the start of the Sinnoh League Tournament, from there on original plot.
Distribution: M&M DreamWorks Blog (<http://mysticmew44.blogspot.de>), M&M DreamWorks Archive (<http://mysticmew.bplaced.net>), Fanfiction.net (www.fanfiction.net), M&M DreamWorks archive and blog gets preference and the desired and best format, all versions will first go to the blog and archive.
Disclaimer: Pokémon©1995-2011 by Nintendo, Creatures Inc. and GAME FREAK Inc.
Story Disclaimer: TFSTTM Reloaded©2011-? (ongoing) by Matthias aka MysticMew

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

Pre-Note

These next two episodes have just as I've announced been written in more or less one go and are going to be posted in short order. For reading purpose I will split each one into two parts on ff . net to make it easier for everyone to read and have a stopping point in between.

From this point on the story will move more into its adventure direction. This and the first third/half of next episode will probably be the only standard Pokémon event for quite some time with the exclusion of what I have planned at the end of this arc (an answer to that next episode).

So, for now, enjoy.

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

(Narrator)

We close in on a beautiful scenery. A long stretch of beach, beautiful sunny weather, a soft breeze was creating small waves much to the enjoyment of early beach guests. The temperature isn't quite ideal for bathing yet but here in the southern regions of Kanto, that still translates to fairly warm weather.

However, the majority of people for once isn't here to enjoy the Seafoam Islands as a tourist attraction. No, they are here for the same reason Ash and Dawn

are, both of them standing in front of a large open-air arena which was just recently completed for the purpose of holding this year's Grand Festival.

Ash just turns to Dawn. "Ready for the big show?"

Our favorite blue-haired Coordinator smiles enthusiastically. "Sure, no need to worry." They both glance at each other and laugh at the ongoing joke.

"The big day has come for Dawn. After Ash has taken the first major step towards becoming a real Pokémon Master last year, it is now Dawn's turn to become a Top Coordinator. With all her training, will there be anything that can stand between her and her dream? What surprises will this Grand Festival have in store for our heroes? Even while they might still wonder about this, events unfold elsewhere that could make even victory today seem rather unimportant."

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

Lake Valor, Sinnoh (May)

This place held so many memories. It had been here where I had met first met up with Ash again after our journey had taken different paths. Having gathered valuable experience by travelling through Johto on my own – though often crossing paths with my rivals –, I had come to the Wallace Cup with confidence and a certain giddiness of seeing him again. I hadn't been sure what would come off it but at this time, I had been sure meeting again would help me sort out my feelings. Feelings I had thought to be confusing and complicated then. I had had no idea...

"Ninetails, Flame Burst!" A concentrate ball of fire was shot high in the air where Beautifly was already performing her dance. Upon contacting the sphere burst in a fiery explosion, seemingly engulfing Beautifly entirely. However, moments later the fiery spectacle parted around the wind funnel created and maintained by my other Pokémon's psychic powers. Ninetails had quickly become one of my most effective Pokémon for Contests. She had been fairly "old" when I caught her as a Vulpix and there hadn't been anything left to teach her. In fact she had been looking for a chance to evolve for some time. So when she came to me after an intense training session, she had obviously found me worthy enough to be her Trainer. Compared to most of her species, her attack power as well as her control – as shown just now – were far above norm. Just the right thing for this stage.

Yes, a stage where, over a year ago, everything had changed so drastically. I had known Ash was travelling with another girl but really didn't think much of it. Ash was rather clueless after all when it came to romance or any remotely close subject. A trait I found both somewhat endearing and aggravating. At least I had thought that I had little to fear. While that would also be proven wrong later, the real shock came

when I finally met that new girl. So focused on seeing Ash again, meeting Dawn had almost in a single moment messed up everything I really wanted to do or say.

"Beautifully, charge up Solarbeam, but hold it!" Much like in my last Contest win – however, much easier now that the combination was voluntary and trained –, Beautifully was using the heat to gather the necessary energy, holding the sphere in front of her, gathering more and more of the heat to increase its size. This had the effect of sucking in the flames in a flashy spectacle much to the awed sounds of the audience.

Yes, Dawn had really made an impression. I wasn't sure if you could call it an "on first sight" thing. I wouldn't even be sure to say what the "on first sight" was. Love? Like? Attraction? The first would probably be too strong, the second too weak and I was too confused about my reaction to really say if it was already attraction right there. I think... fascination might be a good term to describe how I felt. I had been able to hide my reaction but it had continued to confuse and downright irritate me all the way into the Wallace Cup. The more I learned of Ash's new travelling companion, the worse it got and in the process I had almost completely forgotten that I had wanted to figure out my feelings for Ash...

"Ninetails, now Will-o-wisp!" Small ghost-like flames in a deep purple joined the spectacle of Beautifully dancing in a corona of fire that threatened to consume her at any point but somehow never did while holding a steadily growing sphere of gathered solar energy.

When the Wallace Cup had finally started, that was when my fascination started to transform into attraction and more. But I would only comprehend what these feelings were much later. However, the fascination had become more tangible than already. Her performance had captivated me and I don't think I ever had enjoyed any battle on stage as much as the one I had with Dawn. It had still left me tingling long after I had been on my way back to Johto.

"Time for the finish. Beautifully, release it, Solar Flare!" On my command, Beautifully released the highly concentrated energy while performing a rapid spin. Instead of a single beam, however, several small but still very potent rays of solar energy pierced through the fire around her and hit one of the purple flames. In the end the whole thing looked like a miniature sun had been created above the stage which then burst in a last spectacle of light and fire, illuminating Beautifully performing a last dance routine. At the same time Ninetails had moved directly below her partner and caught some of the falling embers, so that one of them was carefully balanced on each of her tails.

I couldn't help but smile proudly at the thunderous applause. A little pride in myself sure but even more so in my Pokémon. This Appeal was something I am sure I would have messed up had I been less than fully committed. My real pride was for

my Pokémon though. Doing this was extremely dangerous. If the timing and control was messed up even once, it would end up in catastrophe, mostly for Beautifly in the center. They had done exceptionally well.

And I was sure to show my proper gratitude. I only listened halfway to the commentary from the judges. I already knew the Appeal's execution had been perfect and clearly garnered the expected reaction. Instead I made sure to properly thank Ninetails and Beautifly for their great job.

Now that the Appeal rounds were over with, the finals would be held in a single day. It was a new system that was supposed to challenge Coordinators and their Pokémon more, giving them less chance to recover in between and as such creating a feel much closer to what Trainers had to deal with during the big League Tournaments. Because of that, two battle teams could be registered for the final rounds, making the combinations also more versatile and harder to predict.

All that hardly mattered to me. My Pokémon were all in top shape and could easily participate in several battle rounds in a row. In fact I had been much more worried about the Appeal rounds since that was where a single lapse in concentration could destroy months of training and preparation. I had seen and participated in too many Contests not to know that even the most experienced Coordinators were prone to mistakes. Some would be too confident and try something very extravagant and flashy which would backfire at them, some would mess up the timing at a single crucial moment, making the performance far less than what it should be, some would just have a bad day.

However, I was determined this time. Hoenn, Kanto, Johto. Three close attempts but always falling short. Not this time. I knew I could do it now. I HAD TO. My resolve was clear. This time I would not hesitate anymore, this time I wasn't confused anymore. I knew what I wanted. Being Top Coordinator had come to mean a lot to me. At first it had just been curiosity and fascination that drew me to Contests, I had stumbled along most of the time. But I had learnt what it meant to perform on stage. The exhilaration, the joy of bringing out the best in your Pokémon.

And I think meeting Dawn, as much confusion and distraction as that had caused, only made me much more aware of how much I wanted this. Even though she had just started, her skill and determination had humbled me and I had vowed to take her example to heart. Now all the conditions were finally right and when – not if – I had won here, at this stage where we had first met, I would be ready to tackle the even greater challenge, regardless of the result.

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

Unknown Location, Team Rocket HQ (Giovanni)

I was in the middle of reviewing the latest progress updates and making last changes to the plan for the upcoming operation when the call came in. When I saw the ID, I was mildly surprised, not expecting a response at this time. Or ever. This team was there for only one mission and I had little hope for any even remotely small success, not to even think about more. That they would call directly over the private line only made sense in case of the latter though.

Taking the receiver, I pushed back my excitement. It would not do to get excited without knowing the situation exactly. "Report," I demanded, despite my thoughts, already going through a list of possibilities and suitable responses. I wouldn't be disappointed.

"Targets spotted. Maintaining distance and awaiting further orders." This time I couldn't help the satisfied smile. What a rare opportunity. Perhaps nothing would come off it in the end but this was too good a chance to drive a knife right into our enemies' plans to pass up because of a low probability of success.

"What is your location?" The answer only had me more satisfied. I could have a capable unit over there in under an hour. "Keep me informed of any changes. A strike team will join you shortly."

Switching over to the video phone, I had one of my most competent agents on the line just seconds later. "Agent Tulip, I have just received word from the omega unit. Mew and Mewtwo have been spotted in a tunnel system not far from your current position." Domino's eyes widened but she quickly caught herself. "Take a full squadron and hunt them down. Regardless of the outcome, this should make a good test run for our new pets."

Domino grinned but she was all business already, something I valued about her the most. "Your orders regarding the targets?"

"Capture the clone if possible... But, priority goes to eliminating the original. We cannot spare the capabilities to keep either confined at this point and taking out Mew here, could very well drive a decisive blow against our opposition before we have even begun." Of course, the Legendary Pokémon was crafty, even more so its clone. However, I would settle for having Mew injured at the least. Any setback for them meant a setback for the prophecy, which at this point was the only thing standing against our vision for the new world order.

As much as I would like to retrieve Mewtwo or have a chance of further studying Mew, the hassle was too great to ignore the most efficient action. With all resources going to the main operation, there was simply not enough to focus on them. Besides, they had already cost me more than what was worth.

"dO nOt TakE thEm liGHtttlyyy," the disembodiment voice lingered in the air and jerked me out of my thoughts. I glared into the darkness of the room but knew it was a futile gesture. These were the times I wished I could do without the creature's advice. But in the end, IT was far too valuable a source of information and power to discard. Besides, I was prepared for what IT could do and resolved to stay firmly in control. The new order would come about through my plans and the way I wanted.

"Don't lecture me. Even delaying them would be a boon at this point. Once we deal with the kids, it doesn't matter whether Mew lives or not."

Now, I should probably do something to prevent the League from interfering again. The response to the assault on Heal Bell had been quick, far too quick for my liking and had cost more personnel and effort than I had liked. Thankfully I had put some counter strategies meant for diversion in place after that fiasco.

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

Opening Theme (Shining Days, Mai-HiME)

A blue, cloudless sky. Mew flies into the picture and performs a few twists, turns and loopings, writing the series title into the air. The camera zooms in on Mew's face and it looks like the viewer is drawn in.

*aozora ippai ni
watashitachi no omoi ga chiribamerarete yuku*

Ash and Dawn are standing together on a hill, holding hands. Dawn leans closer and Ash embraces her. They lean in for a kiss.

*unmei no hito ga anata nara iinoni
genjitsu wa umaku yukanai*

The scene fades out from a television frame. May is sitting in front, watching with longing. Naru jumps into her lap and she smiles in determination, jumping up as the scene fades around her.

*hikaru kaze no naka
yume no hane maioriru yo*

Misty is swimming in a pool. She stops to float on her back, then submerges into the water. In the reflection she sees Leaf and reaches out uncertainly with conflicted feelings on her face.

*yuuki dashite mirai e
sou utsukushiku...*

Misty breaks the surface of the water with a leap, suddenly at a beach. Leaf is sitting on the shore and waving at her.

May is running towards a faraway image of Ash and Dawn with a smile of determination.

ugokidasu atsui kodou ga

Ash and Pikachu are running over a plain, jumping over hurdles and Pikachu letting loose lightning attacks.

ano hi to onaji hayasa wo kizamu yo

A split screen of Dawn and May. Piplup and Buneary are creating a giant ice stadium and Beautifly is dancing within a Ninetails flames (see Episode 1 for both). Dawn and May are looking towards each other as if they were in the same place.

A brief flash of Brock and Ako standing together with Flareon and Leafeon.

*massugu na manazashi ga suki
zutto miteitai*

Short image of Giovanni in his office with a dark disembodied form behind him. Scene switches back to Ash, arriving at a hill. Looking up he smiles seeing Dawn, May, Brock, Ako, Leaf and Misty standing atop and waiting for him. Camera shifts up into the sky and from where it fades out of Mew's eye again who flies down and into the prior scene, landing on top of Dawn's shoulders.

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

M&M DreamWorks Presents
The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
Second Arc: Glimpses of Destiny
Episode 01: Grand Festival, Part 1! Will Dawn Make The Cut?

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

Seafoam Islands, Kanto (Ash)

"And now in the final Appeal round, give another huge applause for Dawn from Twinleaf Town!"

I had to smile at the rather vocal applause. Dawn had gathered quite the following herself and I was quite certain not all of them were just fans because she was my girlfriend. Tickets for the Grand Festival were indeed quite hard to get. Not so

much because they were too expensive but because the preorder contingent was usually emptied within days... if not even less. Pokémon Contests had become a big popularity over the years and had created a base of devoted fans that came to see good performance, not because of a specific person. I suppose it did help that she got more attention as a side effect of my own League victory but I liked to think she deserved it for her own accomplishments.

And they definitely liked the show. Piplup and Lopunny were a well-oiled team that had a lot of experience working together. Obviously Dawn didn't want to risk too much yet, opting to make use of their high variety of ice and water shows. Together the two Pokémon had created a huge, oval arena of ice, much like a miniature version of the Contest Hall, almost down to detail.

Loud cheering and exclamation of awe accomplished this feat and I was right along with them. I couldn't hope to match Dawn's creativity in this field, at least not the artistic and performance aspect. Here she was in her element, totally devoted to the stage. Gone were all the doubts and troubles of the last months for this single moment. Focused, concentrated and yet relaxed.

Learning some things from Sabrina had helped her more than I dared hoped. It had neither made her dreams nor our concerns go away but she was now coping with it much better. Instead of getting worked up by them, Dawn was trying to work out the meaning of her dreams. As a side effect of doing a lot of meditation, she had become a lot more centered.

My attention was pulled back to the stage when Lopunny jumped inside the miniature ice arena and began an intricate routine that looked much like ice skating without skates. I grinned at hearing Pikachu next to me cheer loudly but stayed focus on the action below. I knew this routine and this one definitely was one of Dawn's more daring. Obviously she felt like making a special impact after breezing through the first Appeal rounds with ease.

Not that I had any reason to worry. Piplup's timing when he began to spew bubbles all around Lopunny was perfect. Not hindering the nimble bunny at all, the bubbles served to accentuate her dancing on the ice. Especially since the bubbles Piplup created were sparkling in vivid, flashing rainbow colors, an interesting skill he had developed in the wake of his Limit Break.

Not quite done yet, Dawn ordered Piplup to join his partner which he did with a high jump, carrying the small Pokémon high above the ice arena where he let loose several accurate water beams, each of them hitting a bubble, making it explode in sparkling light that mixed with the curtain of water now being created around Lopunny. Thus, when Piplup finally came down to land perfectly poised on his partner's head, there was an actual small rainbow created above the pair.

Up to then the audience had actually watched on in silent, almost reverent awe only to explode into thunderous applause now. Even as I joined in, I focused more on my girlfriend. Dawn bowed and waved happily to the crowd but there was something strained in her posture that had troubled me since her first Appeal. I doubt anyone noticed, small enough and easily outmatched by her flawless performance. However, something was definitely up. And since she had those other problems more or less under control, it had to be something different. Something that had directly to do with the Festival...

Well, perhaps she was just having a bout of nervousness again. That certainly wouldn't be new, regardless of how much we both knew that she was good enough to outclass anyone here. Since it did not seem to affect her performance at all, I wasn't too worried but I would definitely see if I could cheer her up in the break after the Appeals were over.

After receiving her – as expected – high praise from the judges, Dawn disappeared backstage, almost concluding the Appeal round and with that the first day of the Grand Festival. There was just one more competitor and as he stepped through the curtain, I narrowed my eyes. Perhaps, Dawn didn't entirely outclass ALL the competition after all. The man was tall, short-cropped black hair, a billowing dark-grey cape concealing much of the rest of his appearance.

The contrast to Dawn's reception couldn't be greater. There was a definite dislike from the audience, something you really didn't get much during Contests. Even Harley, who definitely hadn't been the nicest person, had generally been well-liked for his performances at least. However, if the first rounds had been any indication, I – and as such certainly many in the crowd – were wondering what he was doing here. His Appeals so far were centered around one thing alone. Power. There was a ruthlessness in his style that reminded me of Paul in his early days, just a bit more extreme.

At the same time my trained eye could see how experienced his Pokémon were. They could actually pose a threat... or at least a serious challenge to Dawn, provided the man named Nord actually made it into the finals.

He had barely made the cut during every Appeal, his power-orientated performances just barely making enough impact to push him through. I had a feeling his true strengths would come out in battle. All over the man was rubbing me the wrong way and not just because of his style. I knew I had seen him somewhere before but couldn't quite put my finger on it. Besides, I really wondered how someone who was clearly not cut out for the performance aspect of Contests ended up here. Even more so, how he actually made it to the Grand Festival to begin with.

That alone spoke of a high level of skill that certainly made up for his obvious lack in presentation. That something like this irked the audience wasn't surprising. A

Coordinator that had little skill in presentation was pretty much an affront to the very definition of a Coordinator's career.

I definitely had to look into this fellow a little more. Something really didn't sit right with me about him and it was after all my duty to support Dawn as she had done for him and looking up possible opposition was the least I could do.

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

(Dawn)

With a sigh, I closed the door to the small dressing room. Now that the qualification rounds had thinned out the competition, everyone had gotten their own room. The arena was definitely big enough. And I was rather glad for the privacy. I didn't want anyone to see me in anything less than a confident manner.

What exactly was it that got me worked up about him? I had almost messed up the timing on the last one and that after Piplup and Lopunny had worked so hard to get it right. Thankfully they had worked so hard that it came like second nature to them. Much like Ash and his Pokémon we hardly needed commands anymore and they were more for the audience.

Still, it was getting annoying. The feeling was similar to having a persistent low-scale headache that just wouldn't go away no matter what you did. And that after going through all the work of getting myself centered for the Grand Festival. I never thought myself the type for meditation or all that other spiritual stuff. Thus I was surprised how easy it had come to me after Sabrina showed me the basics. Even the older psychic said I was a natural. I wasn't sure how I was supposed to feel about that.

However, I could definitely say that the few things Sabrina had shown me had helped a lot. I hadn't really come closer to unraveling the mystery of my dreams but at least could face them as something that was given to me to comprehend and not just to frighten me. There was some hidden meaning and with every small detail I unraveled – regardless how slow and for the moment devoid of a clear meaning the process was –, I was coming closer to some form of... well, as cheesy as it sounds, you could say enlightenment.

The spiritual training had also done some wonders for my concentration and inner calm. Despite all the training and knowing in my mind that I was more than ready for this, I would still catch myself in doubts during moments of reflections over the last months. I knew it was silly but couldn't quite abandon these feelings. Perhaps I had gotten over the whole "daughter of famous Top Coordinator" bit but now an actual more real pressure had been added by being the "girlfriend of the new Sinnoh League Champion". Ash was wonderful in dispersing my worries about it but since

my few days spent training with Sabrina, I was able to deal with my insecurity much better on my own.

I hadn't been nervous at all. However, this headache was getting on my nerves. It wasn't really a physical pain and it was far less potent now as it had been minutes ago when I had left the stage and... Yes, that had to be it.

I looked over at the small screen displaying the last moments of Nord's Appeal. As expected it was full of overwhelming power. Even more so than the rounds before. True it suited the Mightyena and Drapion but this clearly was not a Coordinator's style. The way his Pokémon acted were like the Pokémon of a Trainer, an extreme hardliner at that. The impressive power behind their attacks was what had mostly carried him this far. However, that wasn't the part that had suddenly caught my attention.

Sabrina had warned me this could happen. The more a Psychic came to understand and awaken their powers, the more susceptible he became to those powers opposing theirs. In other words... Dark-type Pokémon could cause a mental strain on those with psychic powers. How strong such a strain was in direct proportion to the development of the Psychic's powers and the strength of the Pokémon. Sabrina had really just brushed over the subject, apparently not worried that it could become a problem for me.

Now I wished I had asked for more details. Perhaps I should see if I could give her a call tonight. If that Nord character managed to get through, I had this sinking feeling that I would end up fighting him sooner or later and if his Pokémon affected my concentration like that, it would become a real problem.

A plan of action resolved for now, I splashed some water onto my face and made sure I looked at least presentable again before leaving the room and making it back to the communing area backstage where all the participants would be awaiting the final results and tomorrow's matchups soon. It wouldn't make a good impression either, if I weren't there.

Of course, my luck wasn't quite on my side. I really thought I had taken enough time but as I walked up the corridor, the latest competitor just came from the other side... namely Nord. He didn't have any of his Pokémon out but that didn't stop the brief pulse of... unease. I really wouldn't go as far as nervousness or concern. I knew I could keep up with most people in battle, even my training matches with Ash had gotten a lot closer. Still, even without the issue of his Pokémon affecting me, the man had something dark and sinister about him.

Calming my mind, I forced myself to show none of my feelings when we got closer. To my chagrin I noticed that we would probably meet just at the corner where the corridor led to the communing area. To my surprise though, even as I reached

that point and made the turn... he just kept walking straight. Blinking, I couldn't help but halt for a moment. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting. Was there a reason why he should even address me? Did I really think he had some personal grudge against me? How silly...

Just as I wanted to continue, laughing inside at my unfounded anxiety, I heard the heavy footfalls of his boots come to a halt. "You will not stop me achieve my ambition." The words were delivered in a cold monotone, with the barest hint of resentment in them. A shiver ran down my spine and I turned to confront him... but he was already walking again and all I could do was stare after him in bewilderment. What exactly HAD I done to him anyway? My anxiety really had been self-made and was mostly rooted in his Pokémon use. I didn't even know the guy.

"Geez, what an ass."

With a yelp I spun around, heart pounding in my chest. I had been so occupied that I didn't even notice someone come up behind me. That really didn't happen much these days! And when I saw who it was, my eyes widened slightly and a mixture of feelings chased away whatever Nord had brought up for the moment.

"Kenny?"

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

Lake Valor, Sinnoh (May)

"Alright, guys. This is it. I'm counting on you. This time we will make it." Both Blaziken and Blastoise. They were by far my two powerhouses and the opposing combination of fire and water was even more spectacular if pulled off correctly than fire and ice would be. While using Venusaur would have been the slightly safer route when it came to their ultimate combination, I was counting on the bonus effect for pulling off on stage what we had been training awhile now.

Both Pokémon nodded at me, their posture a good mix of anticipation, excitement and concentration and I recalled them into their Pokéballs. I had never felt so certain about winning as I was doing today. As expected the final rounds HAD been challenging, much as I expected from the Grand Festival with the longest standing tradition. However, our training had been thorough and my goal was clear.

For a few seconds I closed my eyes, focusing inward to remind myself of what was at stake here. Dawn was doing her own grasp for Top Coordinator right now – thankfully with a day discrepancy, so that I would be able to see the final round tomorrow – and I had no doubt she would succeed. However, while I had found my confidence through my resolve to confront them with my feelings, this was also about me and my personal ambition.

I heard my name being called and strode out onto stage confidently. My eyes were fixed forward on my opponent, a slight grin tugging on my lips. I suppose it was fitting. We were the last of our initial group that had started out all these years ago in Hoenn. To his credit, annoying as he was most of the time, Harley refrained from any underhanded or other distracting comments. He knew they wouldn't work after trying a few times earlier when we met backstage.

Up to this day, even after all those years, I couldn't quite grasp what he thought of me, how much of his personality was a front and how much was real. What I did know was that he was a very competent and talented Coordinator who had only gotten stronger over time. I could not afford to hold anything back.

"Blaziken, Blastoise, feel the heat!" In a flash of flames, my two Pokémon emerged and faced off with Harley's Cacturne and Wigglytuff. Having faced both of them quite often, I knew what to expect. Cacturne would be the main attacker whereas Wigglytuff would be for defense and close range physical attacks. It was a sound strategy Harley could pull off to perfection. However, both of my Pokémon were powerful enough not to be so easily deterred. And I was not about to give him a chance to get rolling this time.

"Sorry, darling. But this time the title is mine. You have to wait until next year," he couldn't refrain from a jab after all. "Cacturne, Pin Missile together with Bullet Seed! Wigglytuff, Light Screen!" Instead of firing directly, Cacturne's attack was directed at the Light Screen erected that functioned much like a Counter or Mirror Coat would, bouncing off the attacks and fusing them together in the process. Surely their power was also enhanced but I knew this was just the beginning.

"Blaziken, Blaze Punch." In a quick step, Blaziken had moved completely into the attacks path and smashed his right fist covered in flames forward, completely obliterating the combination and continuing to throw a concentrate fireball right into the middle of Harley's Pokémon who had to scatter quickly.

"Wigglytuff, Bounce on Blaziken. Cacturne, Sandstorm!" That was new and rather unorthodox method for a Contest presentation. Sandstorm provided a decent cover and would benefit Cacturne's natural ability but it's concealing nature made the move less suited for presentation. Obviously he had realized that a direct battle with my Pokémon would put him at a severe disadvantage.

Of course, I had no intention of letting Harley dictate the direction of the battle. "Blaziken, Sky Phoenix," I directed calmly, even as Wigglytuff seemed to vanish from sight during her Bounce. Blaziken didn't need to see though to pick his opponent out of the air with a devastating uppercut of fire. "Follow it up, Fire Blast! Blastoise, Hydro Pump!" The timing was perfect. Blaziken's attack smashed into the center of the sandstorm, barely dulled by the Light Screen effect and just a moment later

Blastoise's Hydro Pump followed, resulting in an explosion of smoke and a slightly charred Cacturne limping out of the cloud just as Wigglytuff came crashing down from the earlier attack.

Harley gaped, for the first time actually worried. I wasn't planning on letting him get terrified. "Let's finish this while they are unbalanced. Blaziken, Flare Blitz. Blastoise, Hydro Pump again!" Once more the timing was excellent. Blastoise's high pressure water blast caught Blaziken's feet just as he came down and pushed him forward. With that much water, one would suspect it would be impossible to maintain a Flare Blitz... They had not yet met any of my Pokémon. Even as the water was still propelling him forward, Blaziken's aura erupted. Then the water began to leak over the fire and liquefy it into an even hotter substance.

"Wigglytuff, Protect!" Harley cried out in desperation. But it was too late. The entire sequence from Blaziken's first attack up to now had taken mere seconds and was part of a carefully and intensely trained routine. To his benefit, Wigglytuff did manage to call up a hasty Protect but even at full power, the sheer power the combination of fire and water produced, coupled with the acceleration would have broken even through a well-prepared defense.

With a cry Wigglytuff was sent spiraling again while Cacturne with all its experience ducked below the charging form of my oldest Pokémon, still getting a strong burn at least from the proximity of the heat.

Without needing a further command, Blaziken once more sent the crowd into stunned stupor when he caught his wild charge on the stage – even more miraculously without setting it on fire – and skidded to a halt just before flying right over the edge. This put Harley's Pokémon right between mine.

"Blastoise, Water Pledge. Blaziken, Fire Pledge!"

Harley visibly paled. "Oh crap..." He didn't even bother to try and order his Pokémon to evade. There was no room for evasion. Blaziken and Blastoise had taken the combination moves to perfection and from their position engulfed the entire rest of the stage with pillars of fire and water, some intervening without cancelling each other, some merging together into liquefied heat until everything came together in a giant explosion of light, illuminating the entire stage in a rainbow-colored dome.

Once the light finally died down, both Cacturne and Wigglytuff were completely out of it.

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

Seafom Islands, Kanto (Kenny)

I had to admit, seeing her face to face again after more or less an entire year was tough. She had definitely grown up quite a bit. And I didn't just mean physically – which definitely was quite appealing – but there was also something about her very presence, the way she carried herself. Even in danger of sounding completely cheesy, Dawn was positively glowing.

And neither was I nor would I ever be the cause for it.

"Hey, Dede," I grinned and waved, stomping down on the irritated feelings. I wouldn't get into this again. After all I had no intention of making a complete fool out of myself. "Sorry for startling you. You didn't come back so I was wondering..."

Dawn chuckled, scratching her head embarrassed. "Oh right. I just needed to get my head clear and was just going to... well..." She glanced behind her, back down the corridor where this strange Nord character had disappeared. What a weird, unpleasant guy. He gave me the creeps, too. Not that I would ever admit that.

"So, shall we?" I asked in an attempt to dispel the rising tension and unease. Of course, I knew what she was thinking right now. Why she had been avoiding me the first day and why I had done the same.

The attempt failed horribly and we walked a full minute in silence before I decided I had to do something. I didn't want to do this in between all the other Coordinators but I really had to clean the air between us. "So, how are things between you and Ash?" I winced at Dawn's small flinch. Smooth, Kenny. Real smooth. This was harder than I had thought.

"We are doing great," Dawn replied eventually, then stopped and turned towards me. I resisted to take a step back at her conflicted gaze. "Look, Kenny, about..."

I held up a hand, feeling bad enough already. I should have come out and said it right away. "Save it. You made your choice. I might not have liked it but you are happy, very happy. I can see that. And deep down, that was what really counted for me. You're still my friend, Dawn, and I'm not stupid enough to risk that by being jealous and possessive." I paused, then chuckled. "Besides, I have no illusion that I could even match up to Ash right now, so I'd just end up embarrassing myself, if I did something as stupid as challenging him."

Which was true. Even if I had left somewhat disgruntled, I hadn't been able to suppress the curiosity how my "rival" would be doing. And even if I could have, the tournament had made enough waves that I doubted I would have been able to stay completely ignorant.

Dawn's face lit up in relief. "Kenny, I... thank you. That means a lot to me. You might have always been annoying, but our friendship was always important to me, too." And that smile was worth all the trouble. I believe myself mature enough to admit defeat when faced with a hopeless cause. I suppose I simply waited far too long to realize what I was truly feeling and even if I had done so sooner, I wonder if there ever could have been an "us". Perhaps we were really better off as friends.

"Just don't think I'm going to go easy on you, if we get to fight each other," I grinned as we entered the bustling communing area. Just in time it seemed as the results were just being announced. As expected I found Dawn's picture right up front – not too bad – but I had also done quite well with the ranking. HE was there, too. Once again barely making it in. Just then the matches for the first final rounds were displayed and I quickly traced the diagram to the center. "Semi-final, huh?" I glanced towards Dawn who had also been studying the screen. "Guess, I'll see you there."

With a chuckle, she raised a fist. "Heh, make sure you survive until then, okay? I want a good battle."

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

Cerulean Cave (Mew)

"How many are there?"

Forcing my rising anxiety out of my system, I concentrated on finishing my task. No matter what happened, they could not discover this place. To think we would be spotted in a location like this at such a crucial time... No, I had to concentrate and finish sealing the gateway.

"There was just a few when I discovered them. But it seems they have called for backup. At least three dozen I would say." My companion said, eyes closed in deep concentration. "They are just entering the system but it appears they are aware of where we are."

"Oh, only three dozen. Couldn't spare anymore, could you?" I wasn't even sure if I was sarcastic or really meant it like this. Both could be the case. I suppose the number could be worse but there was no telling what kind of surprises Giovanni had waiting for us. He had been working with IT after all and that didn't bode well. I would have liked to check for myself. If there was something malevolent among them, I could probably pick it up better, even if my companion's psychic range was broader. However, all my concentration was on closing the gateway.

"Once you are done, you should escape this place. I shall create a diversion." I almost pulled back my focus which would have resulted in having to start all over again and there really wasn't time for that. Instead I settled for a disapproving look

but the still form of my clone had his eyes still closed. Of course, I was sure he sensed my feelings on the matter.

"Do not argue," Mewtwo said. "I have no desire to give them the satisfaction of perishing here either. But at this time, it is you he wants out of the way. I might have been given more psychic power but your talents... no, your very existence is vital for the survival of this world."

I bit my lip and swallowed the sharp reply I had already prepared. He was right. I didn't like it one bit but he was right. The duty I had still to perform was too important to be jeopardized so easily. They had begun to gather. I could already feel their awakening drawing closer. Shadow had been active for some time already and Light, my own promised charge, had started to realize her own power. I had felt it for some time now, felt the confusion, the struggling and worry but also the recent acceptance and calm.

It would be time soon. And IT knew that as well and so would Giovanni. I had hoped to avoid them a little longer but luck was apparently not on our side. And to be spotted here of all places... Really, this wasn't my day.

"Are you about done?" Mewtwo asked calmly, his aura sparkling with gathered psychic energy, vividly dancing around him and visible even to the naked eye.

With a final push, I closed the gateway and drew away my presence but did not let the power fade just yet. "I am. Why?" Of course, I already knew the answer. My senses no longer fully focused on the task, picking out the very close presence of several life forms.

"They are here." Mewtwo stated, eyes snapping open and his hands thrust forward to send an enormous wave of psychic power forward. Screams of surprise and pain signified the attack finding at least a few targets. But it didn't seem like any of them were taken out completely. Not that I expected that. Giovanni was an evil man but he wasn't a fool. He would not send in teams for an assault without having them at least geared to stand up better to psychic attacks.

Proving my thoughts, our assailants emerged from the cloud of debris scattered in the wake of my clone's attack. I registered the fact that they were wearing black combat suits of some kind that obviously were their defensive measure against our powers. Then the sound of several released Pokéballs filled the caverns and I suddenly had much more to worry about.

Oh, sure. The variety of Dark, Ghost and some Bug types as well was somewhat worrying but nothing compared to the twelve larger than average Pokémon appearing in their midst. I had felt the twisted, evil presence from them the moment I had registered their presence. Now that they had been released from their

confinement, it was even worse. I shivered in revulsion, but also a mounting anger that was burning away rational thought.

There was nothing left of the original Pokémon's personality. I doubted there would even be much of their soul left. Just a twisted, grotesque perversion of nature, reduced down to their barest instincts and reeking of ITs power. So much like what happened all this time ago. There would be no saving these poor souls.

"Mother, get a hold of your emotions," the sharp voice of my clone snapped me out of my state of blind rage. I took a deep calming breath. "You must escape now. Even I can feel these opponents are different and they are strong. If we stay and fight, we might not make it."

I scowled, torn between the rational knowledge that Mewtwo was right and the emotional desire to purge the world of these abominations and not leave my partner behind. Much like he had come to – reluctantly at first but more and more honestly – call me mother, I also saw him a lot like the child I could never truly have. The circumstances of his birth did not matter to me. I found it a blessing amidst tragedy. He should not have existed but he did and I refused to give up on a living creature, especially one created from my own genes.

However, I had to make this decision. And I had to do so now. A few more seconds and they would attack and then we would be too hard pressed to defend and stay alive to even think of escaping. The tunnel system was vast and ideal to hide and slip away.

I really did not have a choice. However, I would not go without giving my "child" a greater chance of survival. I still had some of my energy gathered from closing the gateway. With an exclamation of effort, I forced the arcane energy into a pulsing sphere of bright, potent light. *Close your eyes,* I sent telepathically, even if it was unnecessary, then hurled the sphere into the center of the opposing group of Pokémon, aiming for the first cluster of those detestable abominations.

The sphere exploded in a bright flash, the holy power tearing into the warped creatures who howled in pain as the light consumed them almost instantly. Unfortunately as I was now, I could not do this more than a few times. Turning around, I used the light as cover to speed away from the battle scene. I could sense Mewtwo also moving into a better position and most likely to lure the enemies away from me.

I forced myself to look forward and concentrate on my own escape, even as my heart ached with worry. *Be safe.*

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

<Seafoam Islands, Kanto (Ash)

"So, that's what it was." With a slight grimace I shut down my Pokégear after finding what I wanted. This could get ugly quickly but there really wasn't anything I could do about it. I had suspected something like this but only after looking up the information again, I was certain of where I remembered Nord's name and face from.

When I was given my provisional license, I had also been given access to a lot of information that you normally couldn't access, such as evaluations of past League Champions. And that's where I remembered Nord from. He had won the Hoenn League several years ago, quite impressively so. However, due to his ruthless battle style and obvious mistreatment of his Pokémon he had been denied a Master title, even if the evaluation admitted he had all the necessary skills. Just not the right mindset.

Unfortunately, I could see where this was going and that little comment – more like threat – Dawn told me about, only confirmed my concerns. People like him didn't take well being denied what they believed to have rightfully earned. He was obviously out to prove some point and chose to participate in Contests simply because the other route had denied him from moving further. Perhaps, he even chose Contests specifically because they symbolized far more the importance of balance between humans and Pokémon, the harmony needed to achieve the right presentation. By undermining the concept and still managing to walk away as Top Coordinator, he would be laughing in the face of the League's ideals...

Okay, perhaps I was spinning this a little too far but he definitely seemed to have a lot of resentment in this direction. I would not be particular worried for Dawn, knowing she had made great progress in her battling. However, now she had these issues with his Pokémon. Regardless of whether or not they had achieved a Limit Break, his Pokémon had to be highly experienced. Being distracted against such an opponent, especially one who was quite ruthless, was a bad thing. Well, she did have until the final round since Nord had been placed in the other bracket.

Making my way into the main room of the small apartment, I found Dawn out on the terrace, sitting cross-legged and staring out at the ocean. The event might not be quite as big as the League Tournament, but they really had not spared any efforts. An entire hotel had been reserved for the Coordinators, each of them getting their own apartment. Security was high and as such we could actually enjoy such luxuries for once without getting bothered by hordes of fans.

"How did your talk with Sabrina go?" I noticed how stiff her posture was, albeit clearly trying to relax and clear her mind. Not that I could blame her. A lot of things had happened today and after what I just found out she had a good right to be worried. "You are tense," I stated and stepped behind her to massage her shoulders.

Dawn moaned slightly in appreciation and I could feel some of her tension being drained away. "She suggested a few things I should try. Anything more would take too long to learn and distract me even more if I tried to do it half-assed. She recognized that Nord guy though."

Ah. So, she did know already. "He was on the list of former Champions. That's where I recognized him from." I didn't need to say more. I was sure Dawn had come to similar conclusions as I had, just as we both knew it wouldn't stop her. Not after all the hard training. It would be tough and it might actually put an element into this Grand Festival that everyone could do without. However, despite our concerns, I knew she would prevail.

Dawn let out a sigh and her head dropped slightly when the massage finally started to have a real effect. Knowing nothing would come out of talking about this more than this, I decided a topic change was in order. "I am glad you could make up with Kenny." It had certainly been a surprise. Not that he was here – of course, we had seen him in the Appeal rounds –, however, his... reaction had been unexpected. Not unpleasant but unexpected.

Dawn laughed quietly. "It's not like we had a fight or anything, but... yeah, I'm glad, too. I am not sure what I should have done if I he had been all jealous."

"Neither am I. I wouldn't have looked forward having to fight him like this. Pokémon battles shouldn't be used to settle personal issues." Kenny actually thought the same and apologized for last time, explaining that he had been wanting the fight for the wrong reasons. Since I never really had thought of it in a negative manner anyway, I had no trouble accepting his apology. Besides... "Not that I couldn't have sympathized. You are worth fighting for."

Dawn didn't say anything but I felt the last of her tension drain away. Her gaze was fixed forward on the beautiful sight of the sun setting over the ocean. The evening was quiet aside from the sound of a few Wingulls and other birds. With the draining day's activities, most Coordinators would have retired already and much like during League tournaments, there was a strict regulation to provide the competitors a peaceful rest.

"I'm glad I met you. I don't know what I would have been doing now without you, but I doubt I would be as happy as I am now." She reached up to place one of her hands over mine, then turned back her head to look up at me with a gentle gaze. "I love you, Ash. Don't ever let me go."

Ceasing my massage, I reached out with the other hand to brush some hair out of her face. "I won't. Even if you ever get enough of me, I'll fight for you tooth and nails." And I meant it exactly like that. Dawn completed me in ways I couldn't even

begin to express. We had only been travelling a year together and became a couple for another one, but it felt like we had been like this forever.

Bending down, I caught her lips with mine. Soft at first, then with a little more passion, before I pulled away, smirking slightly when I saw her face flushed quite a bit. "I love you."

Wordlessly, I slid behind her on the bench, pulling her into my lap and wrapped my arms around her. There wouldn't be another word said, nor was it necessary, until the sun had set below the water.

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

(Pikachu)

Smiling to myself, I slipped away from the two humans fully absorbed in each other. I was glad for them. They hardly had the chance lately for moments like this. Not that I would say they were stressed but training schedules, Ash's duties, Dawn's Contests, THE FANS – I shuddered –, all those didn't leave much room for personal time during travelling.

And Dawn really seemed to need it. I wasn't concerned personally. Dawn was strong. Much stronger than when we began our extreme training together those three months before the Sinnoh League. At the top of her game, she shouldn't have any problems with that guy, former League Champion or not. And her Pokémon wouldn't let her down either. Even if she was distracted, our training had prepared us far more for thinking and acting individually when most of our kind living in the wild could say about themselves.

Returning to the small bedroom, I found Piplup sitting on the bed, staring out of the window. Quietly I made my way over and hopped up next to him. I could guess without looking what was going on inside of him. "Nervous about tomorrow?" Not so long ago, I had been in the same position. I wouldn't admit that out loud but I had been rather nervous before our fight with Leaf as well. I had been worried about letting Ash down, about not being able to pull out that last bit needed to win. In the end, there had been no need to worry. Once you got out on the field – or stage as would be the case for my friend –, it was simple to lose yourself in the moment.

Piplup gave me a low chuckle. "I guess, a little. That thing is really getting to Dawn. She's trying to act tough, but I know she's getting worried again."

That was Dawn for you, I suppose. As much confidence as she had gained, there would always be a bit of insecurity, but... "I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. You know before she was more worried that it was too easy. Having an actual obstacle might just be the thing to get her concentration sharp." Of course that was if

she wasn't too distracted by the whole Dark Pokémon thing. What I really meant was more along the lines of: Dawn's the kind of person that does better the greater the challenge.

And it seemed Piplup agreed, smiling thinly. "Guess you are right. Not much more we can do than try our best for her. Thanks for cheering me up." With a somewhat wry grin, he added, "Perhaps you should do the same for Lopunny later."

I grimaced at the jab. And not just for obvious reasons. I really wasn't sure just where exactly Lopunny and I were heading. Even after almost a year, I was no closer to figuring out if I wanted to start something or not and with her being so clingy, it wasn't exactly easier to figure out either. Besides...

"Maybe you should rather do that." Perhaps I should take it as a clear sign that I had felt not even a tiny bit jealous when I realized Piplup had feelings for Lopunny. In fact I felt kind of sorry for him. Lopunny was rather persistent when it came to me but apparently hadn't taken any note of his interest. Which I found to be rather funny, in a bittersweet way, because those two really worked flawlessly on stage. There was a harmony that would almost suggest to the spectator that they actually were a couple...

Piplup laughed. "Yeah right. That would go over well." I guess, I could understand that. Saying something NOW, was just bound to hamper their harmony. He definitely didn't let his unrequited feelings get him down and I knew he wouldn't say anything as long as Lopunny was still chasing after me. Or until I made it clear that I didn't want her as a mate after all. And if I was really honest with myself, I felt more and more that I would have to make that decision soon. There simply was no spark and stringing her along further, would only make it worse in the end. It really would be easier if Lopunny wasn't so persistent. I wasn't sure if she would simply take "No" for an answer.

"I still think you should tell her. After the Festival at least," I said eventually. Maybe if he did, it would at least get her to think about the alternative and see that we weren't exactly working out as much as she would like it to be.

Piplup simply snorted. "You just want her off your back." I grinned back a little sheepishly and he smirked back. Despite the weird, unwanted love triangle between us, I was glad that Piplup and I could still joke about it to some degree without the urge to get violent with each other.

I suppose I would have to do my part, too. After the Grand Festival was over, we would have to settle this one way or another. Right now, neither Piplup nor Lopunny needed a distraction that would hamper their performance.

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

Early Morning, Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)

"Ah, so pretty!" I gushed at the display. Such a wonderful presentation of water and ice attacks, both elegant and strong. Ever since Ash and Dawn had briefly come through here, I had made a habit of watching every Contest I could on TV. And after experiencing it on stage as well, I could even more appreciate the work that went into every aspect, every presentation and every battle.

Today I wasn't alone and quite glad for the company as well... or more like this particular company to begin with. "She has come a long way. The timing was perfect and every small bit in harmony," Leaf commented with a smile, relaxing back into the couch.

I caught myself watching her a little longer than necessary and quickly turned away, hoping to hide the small blush. No way to rub it in that she was getting to me, right? That would only mean more shameless flirting and teasing. *And wouldn't you like that?* I asked myself guiltily, immediately feeling like screaming out in frustration... which wouldn't help my case.

Leaf had dropped by earlier in the day much to my surprise but also my secret delight. In fact her presence motivated me to do a little better than usual and I had sent three challengers in a row packing. That was, of course, when we had had another match. Small this time. Just one on one since most of my Pokémon were tired fighting. As expected, it still wasn't enough, even with Leaf using one of her just recently acquired Pokémon – or so she claimed. However, it had been close, much closer than last time. And that left me at least slightly satisfied.

"You really seem to like Contests," Leaf cut into my thoughts and I had to grin in response, albeit a little wistfully.

"I do wonder if I would be there today, had I known about them when I was still travelling with Ash and Brock." It had been on my mind quite often. But at the same time, I also knew that it was pointless to think about. The Gym WAS my life now, my life and my dream. Regardless of how I had gotten here, it had become the place that defined me more than everything else ever had.

"I think you'd still be here. At least I still think you would have always ended up a Trainer first." I blinked at the frank admission, wondering just how exactly the young Master had come to this conclusion. Especially since I personally had really come to think I would have become a Coordinator if I had had the opportunity back then.

"How would you know?" I voiced my bewilderment. One other thing I had learned about the other girl already was that she often seemed more mature than her age would suggest, much more perhaps than someone her age should be. It wasn't

like it was a depressing thing, though, just... intriguing. She had a lot of these small pieces of advice and wisdom to offer that I would almost call "life experience". Kind of sad to think something like this about someone my age, but for Leaf it seemed to come naturally. That's why I was curious about her reply, knowing she usually had good reasons for what she said.

"Well, don't get me wrong. I don't think you'd do bad on stage. But I think a lot of that fascination might come from growing up watching your sisters' plays and I know you are not half bad at acting yourself if you want to." Well, that was true. I guess I didn't like to think about it that way but there was some truth in her words. Leaf turned around with an earnest gaze. "But the main reason why I think so... When you fight, be it challengers like today or when it was just us, you have this passion, this inner fire, a very beautiful glow that shows how happy you are..." Then she winked and I could almost predict the added comment before it was made. "It makes you look very pretty, too."

And of course, I couldn't help but blush, this time having a lot more trouble suppressing the reaction. "Um, wow... thanks," I managed. The truth was, the earnest praise made me feel incredible good and warm inside. No one had ever said something like that to me. That I looked like I was enjoying myself during a battle. With Ash it had always been clear as day. He could put his entire self into a battle and most people would easily pick up on his excitement, motivation and joy. I couldn't really recall many times where I was like that. Perhaps that was because I had still been searching for my ideal path. Even proclaiming wanting to become a Water Pokémon Master had never had the same kind of passion behind it as when Ash spoke of his dream to become a Pokémon Master or even Brock about becoming a Breeder.

I was glad Leaf left it at that. I could see she still wasn't ready to act on whatever was growing between us and perhaps wouldn't be for awhile but apparently that didn't stop her from making me feel good. Her words had given me confidence, too. Motivation to do even better. If other people could see that I was fully behind what I was doing here, then there was really no point in dwelling in might-have-been's.

We continued to watch the last Appeal and immediately agreed that we didn't like that one at all. Leaf had a bit of a troubled look as well and after awhile looked up something on her Pokégear. "I knew it. That guy is bad news. Looks like Dawn will be in for more than a challenge than they thought. And he's bound to be less considerate than I have been with Ash."

I was going to ask what she meant when her device emitted a small sound which seemed to be some kind of incoming message since she tapped another button and began to scan the screen. With every moment her face became more and more concerned, before a brief flash of anger continued into a low growl. "Trouble?" I

asked, immediately realizing it might just be the kind of trouble that had some importance to me as well.

Leaf closed her eyes tightly for a moment and took a few calming breaths. Then she rose, all business. "I'm really sorry I have to cut this short. But I need to investigate this since I am already close by."

I rose as well. "Big trouble then. About... us?" Leaf hesitated, then reluctantly nodded. I grabbed my jacket, coming to a quick decision. "Where?"

"Misty..." Leaf begun but I cut her off with a sharp look. I wouldn't have an argument. She sighed in defeat. "Cerulean Cave. There was a report of a concentration of several Team Rocket attack forces... I know for a fact that Mew should be there at this time."

I grimaced at the information, concluding immediately what this could mean and now really glad I had pressed the issue. No way was I going to let her go investigate on her own. "Let's go."

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

Heal Bell Academy (Brock)

"I feel a little guilty about missing the first day completely," I said with a weary sigh when I switched on the TV. Originally I had contemplated of taking a small trip and see Dawn's performance live but that, too, had been disrupted by the Team Rocket attack.

"You called them before, right? I'm sure they'll understand," Ako replied smiling where she was sitting with Leafeon on her lap, gently stroking her. The poor thing was still rather distrustful of humans but she had warmed up to us somewhat and actually agreed to stay with me for now.

When I learned that she had been one of the Team Rocket member's Pokémon, forced and mistreated when she didn't live up to their expectations before being abandoned in a state in which she was clearly meant to die, slowly and painfully, I had become very angry. It was a good thing all those that hadn't escaped the moment League reinforcements arrived had already been transported elsewhere for questioning and imprisonment. I was not sure what I would have done otherwise. I think even Ako was ready to do bodily harm at this point.

At least, that had been about the worst thing out of the whole experience. Sure the academy had taken quite some damage and would hamper the regular schedule for at least a couple of weeks. However, the overall quick response in holding off Team Rocket had prevented far worse and Lance had not been shy on praising all of

us for our good work. I admit that had felt good, definitely satisfying. Especially when I had gotten extra praise for my part in defense and stopping the theft. Of course, I had been curious just what exactly they had been after but had not been quite prepared for the end result of that conversation.

Flashback

"I'm sorry but that information is classified. All I can say is that we had some important documents stored here for safekeeping. No one but a few high profile members were aware of that, so I am already quite worried about a possible leak." Lance looked sour at the explanation and I could understand why. I saw the logic of using a lesser known location like this to hide something important but if it was so secretive, Team Rocket shouldn't have known.

"I understand, I guess. Right now I'm just glad there was nothing more serious than some injured people and Pokémon." I laughed slightly, but not with any real humor. "And that is something we are good in dealing with after all." As harsh as that might sound, perhaps this attack might have been better as a preparation for everyone here in what to expect once their studies were done than any test or scripted exercise could have been. Some people here had hardly ever been outside the academy and even then only in controlled situations and environments. Everyone had gotten a dose of reality.

Lance checked something on his data screen, then looked back up with a serious look, putting away the small device. "You have done admirably, both of you." He directed a look at Ako who gave a small sound of surprise at being addressed. I had to agree though. I might have done a lot of fighting, but Ako had worked tirelessly on the injured, even in her already weakened state. I dared to say a lot of injuries that could have become worse with time had been prevented by her efforts. "Both of you have clearly proven that you are ready for actual work."

I started slightly at that, not expecting that answer at all. After all I had barely been here a couple of months. Ako I could understand but on the other hand I was slightly concerned about letting her out of my sight yet. She had gotten a whole lot better but she meant a lot to me and while I had every confidence in her ability, I couldn't help but worry.

Lance seemed to pick up on my thoughts. "I know you've only been here for awhile, Brock. But unlike most of the students, you have been out travelling and facing dangerous situations on a regular basis. Quite a few situations that most regular Pokémon Trainers would hardly ever get into." He winked and I had to grin slightly, clearly understanding how he was referring to Ash's tendency to get into trouble, even world-saving trouble that included Legendary Pokémon. "I saw your records and even your teachers agree that aside from some theory they cannot teach you much more."

At this point he paused briefly and looked at Ako again. "As for Miss Ako here. You have been here amongst the longest of the current batch, almost from the beginning of this project. We would have drafted you sooner already but were aware of your own... hesitation."

My girlfriend blushed in embarrassment, looking at what she probably thought to be a jab at her self-confidence problems. I reached out and squeezed her hand gently, knowing that Lance wasn't the type to deliberately trample on people's feelings. "So, in light of all that. I would have an assignment for the both of you. Something I believe you would both actually enjoy. And, of course, seeing how well you are working with each other already, we would be sending you out together."

End Flashback

That had certainly been a surprise. A good one at that. It solved a lot of our problems and worries. And the nature of the assignment definitely came with a few benefits. I couldn't help but wonder if in light of everything that had happened, this was a deliberate move on part of the League. But if it was, I wouldn't complain.

"Wow, pretty. Your friend is really good." I focused back on the screen. They were just showing highlights from the Appeal rounds, including Dawn's. I smiled proudly at the show Piplup and Lopunny were making. It seemed like Dawn was in top form. Good, it wouldn't do if she somehow lost. That would mess up the benefits of our assignment after all.

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

Seafoam Islands, Kanto (Dawn)

For the first time I really started to comprehend how Ash had felt during his own fights at the Sinnoh League tournament. I had to admit to a certain... nervousness after all. When I woke up this morning, a lot of things went through my mind. Anticipation for the day's events, worry about the unexpected challenge in a way one couldn't have so easily predicted, exhilaration at having my dream so close, just one more day, one step ahead... But above all, the latter also invoked a good bit of nervousness I had thought to be long over.

Yet... I wasn't Ash. I didn't have three League challenges and various other accomplishments under my belt. Despite all my training, I couldn't help but wonder if I was truly ready for this big step. The last months had at times felt a little like watching a movie of someone other than myself. It felt... unreal at times. If I was honest with myself, I barely knew anything about the real thing when I set out on my journey to become a Top Coordinator just like my mother. I knew in theory, but quickly learned

that reality was so much more complicated and difficult. The road to the top was hard and long.

And because of that – when I took the time to reflect in these months – I knew that I had progressed far beyond a natural rate. That should be a good thing, I suppose. However, I also experienced it as a kind of new burden, a far different kind of expectation, not just expectations I had for myself but ones I believed others would have in me.

The worst of that nervousness had lasted as long as Ash had given me a good morning kiss and wished me luck in his own, unique way that always managed to drive all my concerns away. Not completely, but always enough that I could reassert the control and calm I had come to learn in the last months and even more so with Sabrina's training. The rest of the nervousness had disappeared the moment I was back on stage.

Once the first battle round started, everything else became irrelevant. That sense of everything else fading away around me, leaving only myself, my Pokémon, my opponent and her Pokémon. That was something I had experienced often during training matches with Ash but only out here, in a real battle, was the experience at its strongest. And now, this was the last day of the Grand Festival and that made it that much more potent.

I suppose the bond with my Pokémon helped a lot right now. In more than one way I was glad for deciding to start out with Espeon and Togekiss. I was by far not anywhere close to the level of my short term mentor but Ash and I always had a great empathy with our Pokémon which closed the gap in skill with my psychic powers – it was still rather unreal to think – quite nicely and made our synchronization perfect to a point where I really didn't need to give commands anymore. Sure, Togekiss was technically not Psychic but close enough in nature to link with Espeon and me with almost no trouble. And we had been training this combination for awhile now, so everything came very naturally.

The other positive aspect was that, connected as we were, I was far more shielded from Nord's influence than I would have managed on my own. I swear he seemed to know how he was affecting me... but perhaps that was just my imagination. Regardless of the answer to that, he had made a point of leaving at least one of his Pokémon outside at all times since the beginning of the final rounds.

Sabrina had given me a few tips on how to filter out the background sensation that would mostly manifest in a dull, distracting headache and I could manage by concentrating. However, it was an entirely different thing when I needed that concentration during the battles and would be even more so when I actually faced him and his Pokémon in battle. I wouldn't be able to use Espeon and Togekiss either.

That matchup would not only be an ineffective type matchup but might affect those two, at least Espeon, just as much.

The warm presence of Ash's confidence and reassurance in the back of my mind helped me to shove those thoughts aside. There WAS no point in worrying about it now. I would simply have to face that challenge when it came. There was no way of knowing exactly how strong this Nord would actually turn out to be, how much his choice of Pokémon would affect me. What I did know was that I could trust my own Pokémon and my own ability.

Let's wrap this up. I think that was enough of a warm-up. It wasn't quite a real telepathic communication but a good bit more precise than a normal empathic connection would allow. Personally I think my Pokémon understood my thoughts much clearer than I could pick up theirs but that was good enough for now.

I suppose that thought would have come over as just a tiny bit arrogant had I voiced it out loud. However, it was much harder to hide the simple truth that my opponent hadn't been able to land a single hit so far in my mind than it would be to voice it out loud. If anything, this first round really was more a warm-up for later. I did expect Kenny to make the semi-final at least and with the regulations set up in such a way that each of my duos had to be used twice during the four possible final rounds, Espeon and Togekiss would participate in the semi-final again.

Togekiss, Aura Sphere. Espeon, Psychic. It was a well-practiced routine and one that proved too much to handle for my opponent. Without any indication a verbal command would have given, there was no way to prepare when my Pokémon could execute their attacks with barely any preparation time. Sunflora fell first as the speed of Togekiss' Aura Sphere allowed it no chance to evade. Poliwhirl had more time to prepare and at its Trainer's command jumped over the attack, only for Espeon's Psychic to kick in. Suddenly the Aura Sphere carved upwards at an unnatural angle and impacted with Poliwhirl. At the same time Espeon applied enough mental pressure to cause the sphere to erupt in sparkles of light, the burst enough to propel the poor Water Pokémon even higher before crashing back down to the ground.

There was a moment when everyone waited if the two downed competitors would get up again but then the signal sound for knocked-out Pokémon could be heard, effectively ending the first round.

Just three more, I thought, keeping my thoughts firmly on my goal, even as I picked up my Pokémon to congratulate them. *I will not lose.*

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

(Ash)

Media. There was one thing I couldn't get used to, even after months of their haunting, persisting presence. Perhaps I had gotten a little lax since we arrived here but now I had to realize that just because the participants were mostly protected from getting harassed, everyone else was fair game. And, of course, the current Sinnoh League Champion would be ideal to pursue. If not for the obvious, then – or perhaps especially – because his girlfriend was participating.

"How do you see the chances of your girlfriend winning the Grand Festival this year, Master Ketchum? The odds were quite high for her but now it seemed a serious competitor has appeared." See, exactly that sort of question. I could have almost predicted that word for word and as such focused more on the actual choice of words with a light frown. I was getting annoyed enough of being held up as it was.

"First of all, I am not a Master yet," – at least not officially but the media didn't need to know that –, "my girlfriend has a name and I would appreciate if she were to be measured not because of our relationship, but for her own achievements. Aside from that, I have full confidence in Dawn's abilities and will to win."

The young reporter didn't seem to be fazed by my disapproval of her word choices, not that I expected her to. I suppose it came as part of the job to not allow yourself to be put off by a disgruntled interview partner. I had dealt with all sorts of reporters and mainly placed them in two categories. The ones who seemed to actually care about the content and details, who would ask intelligent question about battles etc., and those that were just out to get a statement from a famous person and really didn't much care for their answers... unless they could provoke something that sounded scandalous and could be made into a story. The blonde woman definitely struck me more as the latter sort, thus my continuingly declining mood.

The next question further proved my assessment. "Nord seemed to have no problem with his matches so far. The audience certainly doesn't seem to like him though. How do you see such a reaction to a fellow former League Champion?" Of course they would know already, that didn't surprise me. I certainly had my own feelings about Nord. Both his first round and early quarter final match just now had been a lot as I had expected them from reading his file yesterday. I didn't think you could call it a Contest battle. Personally, the absolute ruthless way in which he had sought to overwhelm his opponents with raw power alone was questionable even for League standards. No wonder he had been denied a Master rank and after a few matches stopped competing in the Master League as well.

Not that I would say all this out loud. I wasn't here to start a feud. "If the audience does not like him, then I suppose he has earned such a reaction," I replied carefully. But I couldn't quite help but add, "Nord is responsible for his own methods and image. All I know is that they will not be enough to defeat Dawn." And that I could say in full confidence. I had to and I truly believed that. Dawn had supported me greatly during the Sinnoh League, it was now upon me to return the favor.

The reporter wasn't quite through, however, even if I would wish she had been. "You seem to be quite confident about your girlfriend's victory." I scowled again at the obvious disregard about my earlier correction. "Would a loss here affect your relationship? After all, you have been sacrificing a lot of your time for her participation here and it wouldn't look good if the Sinnoh League Champion's girlfriend were to fail to become a Top..."

At this point I cut her off with an angry growl I couldn't quite hold back, nor did I want to. "First of all, I have not been sacrificing anything. We are a team, both personally and in business. The outcome of the Grand Festival has absolutely nothing to do with our relationship. Now, unless you have some actual relevant questions, Dawn's match will be starting soon." I didn't even wait if she had, though, but angrily turned and walked away.

The nerve of that woman! Did I look like or ever do anything to suggest that I cared about image and reputation? I knew that those like her were actually more a minority, focused on getting a sensational story. The majority of the media had actually begun to slowly move away from the association of "my girlfriend" and towards Dawn's own accomplishments. The high odds put on her before the Grand Festival were as much a combination of her impressive Contest victories here as they had been on the general praise and approval of the trade press.

Pushing the aggravating encounter out of my mind – knowing it would only serve the interest of these kinds of reporters, if I allowed them to get to me –, I made my way back to my seat, hopefully still in time to see Dawn's quarter final match. However, just before the doors leading to the inside of the arena, another unexpected and right now really unwanted encounter was waiting for me.

At first, I thought he wasn't going to say anything, leisurely leaning against the wall, arms crossed, seemingly not acknowledging me. But when my hand was already on the door, Nord spoke after all. "Must be nice to be so popular."

I turned my head slightly to face him, noticing the scowl now in place, clearly directed at me. A bit more than a year ago, I might have allowed my emotions to get the better of me. But winning the Sinnoh League, becoming a provisional Master and perhaps most important out of all falling in love with Dawn had had a strong calming influence.

Besides, those reporters were still lingering around and it wouldn't do to get riled up here. Of course, I couldn't help the mild annoyance when I waited for him to continue. I had enough of pointless interruptions. "If you have something to say, then say it."

Nord kept his scowl, gaze unflinching and full of resentment. "Your little girly won't make it. I will destroy her and once I do, I will come for you and show the League that it was a mistake to deny me."

Had I not expected this kind of attitude, I might have really lost my temper at this point. But as such, I was prepared and to his obvious annoyance, merely smiled confidently. "If you feel you have to prove something, I would have been open for a challenge anytime, you wouldn't have to go and spoil the fun here. But I suppose if you want it this way, you'll never make it to me..." I pushed the doors open, the cheering of the crowd thundering against my ears. Dawn had just entered the stage. "Dawn is a true Coordinator and an excellent Trainer. There is no way she would lose to someone with your motivation."

With that, I walked back into the arena and let the doors close behind me, feeling enormously more satisfied when just a minute ago.

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

(Piplup)

I couldn't help but chance a worried look back at Dawn. She was holding up outwardly. I doubt anyone would spot that something was off. At least not yet. As long as she could afford to take some of the concentration away from the battle, she seemed to be fine enough.

It really wasn't fair that something like this would happen now. I doubted Dawn was upset about the prospect of a serious challenge. In that regard she was a lot like Ash and would rather earn her title than just breeze through every opponent. However, the way this came to be was not exactly pleasant and obviously this Nord guy was up to no good. His match style was downright ruthless, making a mockery of everything Contests stood for. He wouldn't win a single match through points, I was sure. The problem was that he was good enough to finish them far before the five minutes were up. Okay... more like, he finished both in under two minutes!

Sure, we could do the same but Dawn was too much Coordinator at the core to even consider such an approach and neither of us would agree with it either.

With practiced ease I followed Dawn's short commands and started off by laying a spray of bubbles to keep our opponents from advancing while Lopunny already went into a Bounce. Flawlessly switching from bubbles to a steady stream, I made a short jump and angled downward diagonally, which caused the water to push back up from the ground and give Lopunny an extra push that carried her over Volbeat's Shockwave and allowed her to come down on Ilumise with even more force. However, Ilumise proved to have good reflexes and barely slipped away from

the attack, then strafed Lopunny with a Bug Buzz from close range, causing me to wince in sympathy.

I had no time to worry about my partner though. "Volbeat, Confuse Ray on that Piplup." Due to Volbeat's special ability the execution of the move was a lot faster than normal and I had to flip away quickly. Dimly I registered Dawn's command but it was hardly necessary. Our opponents obviously wanted to keep us separated. Too bad, it wouldn't be that easy. Coming out of the flip, I pushed off the ground and faster than our opponents could react had shot forward in a spinning Drill Peck towards Illumise. To their credit, Volbeat and Illumise's Coordinator was quick to react and those two had a good harmony. Volbeat was in front of his female counterpart and performing a Protect before I could strike – which considering the speed I was going was a feat not many could perform these days against me. However, the Protect was hasty and not perfect, pushing him back and right into the Dizzy Punch from Lopunny who had appeared at Volbeat's back.

By this point it was rather clear that those two were mates – anything else would have been surprising anyway – and as much as that benefited their performance, it also allowed the opening to bring a quick end to this match right there. Illumise, clearly upset over the hard hit on her mate sending him crashing to the stage ground, was distracted for a moment.

I noticed with a bit of worry the lag in command from Dawn and had already formed the Whirlpool for Lopunny to land on before the order came. Our synchronization was strong enough that we already knew what to do, however. With a yell of exertion, I threw the Whirlpool attack – with Lopunny still on top in Illumise's direction. She had enough sense to get out of the way but flew right into Lopunny's Fire Punch. Even as Illumise spiraled to the ground – probably already out of it – the Whirlpool angled back. I saw Volbeat struggling to get up again and spun in the air just as my earlier attack passed by to give it another boost with a high-pressured water stream, causing the Whirlpool to crash into Volbeat just as Illumise hit the ground.

With the match decided, I immediately shifted my attention on my Trainer. It was certainly disconcerting to experience anything less than perfect timing from Dawn. Right now, it had not made any difference since we had trained enough on individual performance to be prepared for such moments. However, the connection between us did make a vast difference when it came to the professional level Ash and her were training at these days.

Lopunny was not far behind in expressing her own concerns but Dawn just smiled reassuringly. "I am fine. I do not intend to let this keep me down. You guys were great and together we WILL win today," she said quietly, obviously not wanting to draw too much attention to the fact that something was up.

I exchanged a look with Lopunny. There actually was no doubt I could perceive in Dawn. Her will and belief were still strong and while that reassured me, I also knew that it might not be enough. A lot would also depend on us. We would need to fill the gap in the final round. Personally I was actually experiencing a guilty thrill at the added pressure. Over the last months I had always felt that compared to what Ash and Pikachu had, I couldn't quite offer the same to Dawn. In fact this was on my mind much more than my budding feelings for my partner. This Great Festival was important to Dawn. And much like Pikachu had for Ash, I also felt that I had to make a great effort for her sake. We hadn't been together as long as those two and I guess the bond between us was not as smooth and perfect as it was for them. Right now, however, Dawn needed me to be strong, needed me to make an effort. And I would, regardless of how much it would take.

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

(Dawn)

"Ready to lose, DeDe?"

"You wish. Think you can take me?"

He smiled and I did the same, immensely grateful for this moment. This really was just the right kind of match to get me focused and in the mood just before the final. Fighting someone you knew always added something very special to a battle. Ash described it as the Trainers connecting with each other. I kind of liked it but perhaps on stage the analogy of performing a dance together, a careful choreography after a melody only the two of us knew was more fitting.

True, Kenny had never been the kind of rival I had found in Zoey or the fantastic battle I had with May back at the Wallace Cup which I was really wishing to repeat again at some point soon. However, we had known each other since we were kids. He was kind of what Gary was to Ash when they were younger. The annoying kid next doors – not literally – that just wouldn't leave me alone and always got on my nerves... But I know he cared, much more so than I had ever imagined. Kenny had a good heart even if he sometimes got a little too worked up about things.

That's why this fight was special, that's why I knew I could lose myself in it for the next few minutes and – that was my hope – take the positive feelings and adrenaline rush with me to the next round.

The timer chimed, signaling the start of the match and Kenny wasted no time to open it up. "Alakazam, Shockwave!" I started at the bolt tactic, especially with Empoleon standing right besides Alakazam. As such I suspected a small, concentrated version but my senses warned me of the danger just in time. Had I not been training with Sabrina to sharpen this ability, I might have been caught off guard

by the fast execution of a wide area Shockwave that covered pretty much the entire stage in a moment.

With the warning I had just enough time to have my Pokémon brace against the attack. In quick succession Togekiss and Espeon combined Safeguard and Light Screen to take the brunt of the attack. On the other side, Empoleon had used his wings by adding some minor Steel manipulation to channel the electricity and not get hurt by it. I could feel the power in the move, adding further to my surprise but also making me realize one thing. Kenny had really trained hard in the last year. *Espeon, Togekiss, Future Sight.* I took the chance to set up something for later. Espeon was a master of the move and could actually control when it would hit down to a couple of seconds. Togekiss wasn't quite that good but when they did the move together, they could be more easily synchronized. And with the effect of Light Screen and Safeguard partially hiding the activation, Kenny wouldn't know what to expect.

He didn't leave me much more time to recover though. Empoleon suddenly came charging forward with a powerful and fast jump. Immediately I saw that he still had some residual electricity charged into his wings. *Togekiss, Extrasensory.* I grinned at Kenny's cry of surprise and perplexed expression. Combining my growing mental bond with moves that couldn't be easily detected, was something I was really growing to like. Extrasensory was practically invisible and if no verbal command was given it would take another Psychic to react properly.

Speaking of other psychics. Where was Alakazam? I had been momentarily focused on Empoleon's attack and in that time his partner seemed to have disappeared. The execution was perfect and before my brief training with Sabrina would have taken me completely by surprise. However, even then Espeon probably would have been able to react in time. With her sensitive fur and strong mental perception, she was already twisting away from Alakazam who had teleported right next to her, flinging a Shadow Ball down with full force from almost point blank range. *Synchronoise. Togekiss, Air Cutter!* Alakazam flinched back from the psychic attack targeting his senses and was thus unable to evade Togekiss' attack.

"Empoleon, Flash Cannon on Togekiss!" Kenny was quick to recover but I was prepared for that as well. It was one of the enormous benefits of a psychic link, even one still forming properly. Without even seeing the attack coming in from her back, Togekiss gracefully floated upwards to avoid the powerful charge. With all three of us linked as we were, we could share the others' vision to some degree as well.

Thunder Wave. Kenny swore and barely had Empoleon evade the counter which was no small feat, still being in the air and all that. Alakazam wasn't that lucky. Why, because Espeon had jumped right into the Thunder Wave and deliberately used her Magic Bounce to reflect it onto the other Psychic who was still dazed from the earlier assault.

"You know. This is really annoying," Kenny commented and I just grinned back. "Empoleon, Hydro Cannon. Alakazam, Psychic." Togekiss slid by the Hydro Cannon but that was when Psychic kicked in, catching the attack and sending it like a homing missile after my Pokémon.

Using my own tactic against me, huh? Expecting such a move, I had Togekiss fly several evasive maneuvers. Other than Lopunny she really was my most evasive Pokémon. Whereas Lopunny relied more on a strong reaction time, Togekiss had a special grace in the air that allowed her to seemingly float effortlessly around most attacks. "Trying to outdo me with Psychic attacks isn't going to work, Kenny," I said.

On an unspoken command, I already had Espeon move to meet Togekiss on her next pass, forming a sphere of psychic energy above her while Togekiss was preparing another Safeguard in midflight. I really liked that move, actually not so much for its intended purpose but because you could do a lot more with it than just that. It could serve as a minor barrier of sorts, especially against energy attacks, or like now serve like a containment zone.

With barely any time left between coming to a stop right over Espeon and her psychic sphere, Togekiss wrapped the Safeguard around it, floating slightly above. The increased potency served to suck in the Hydro Cannon/Psychic combination without effort, only further strengthening the power. It was also quite flashy which was a definite plus.

"Alakazam, Teleport to Empoleon, then Light Screen!" Kenny had realized the peril his first Pokémon was in. Still recovering from Flash Cannon, he would be defenseless. Unfortunately for him, there was one thing he couldn't predict. And that was Alakazam getting hit by two Future Sight attacks out of nowhere. Fully committed to the Teleport, even if he had sensed them coming ahead of time, there would have been little he could have done. Alakazam was sent sprawling with a grunt of pain.

"Finish it," I decided to wrap this up aloud. Kenny had fought really well and he deserved to at least hear what would do him in. "Aura Cannon." Togekiss moved behind the psychic sphere and then drove an Aura Sphere point blank against it, the attack serving both to smash the greater sphere forward as well as getting absorbed into it.

Empoleon by now had barely recovered but couldn't hope to get away anymore, crossing his wings in a desperate attempt to block. It wouldn't be enough...

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

Sometime earlier, entrance to Cerulean Cave, Kanto (Leaf)

I still had mixed feelings about taking Misty on this mission. My gut was telling me something very bad was going on in there, a terrible wrong waiting for us. Considering the only reason why they could be here with such a force, this time it was bound to be not as easy as taking out the minor hideouts. There would at least be one if not more high-ranking executives.

And Team Rocket's Elite members had been conspicuously absent for quite some time, obviously busy with some kind of preparation. Since information of what they were up to was hard to impossible to get, the kind and nature of the opposition we were most likely to face was unknown. But at least with a high potential of being something that would give them a serious edge.

I glanced down at the screen of my Pokégear and exhaled a quiet breath. No good. It would take too long for a League team to get here, especially one with at least another Master present. Everyone was spread out over the region at various points and tied up in their own preparations for possible strikes from Team Rocket. The report about their appearance here had come from a minor observation post, stationed just outside of the city. Apparently they had seen them coming. Right now, only two Team Rocket members were guarding the front entrance leading into the cave from the city side.

No, there was no more time. We had already wasted enough on stocking up on equipment, such as enough Potions and other useful items, and I had to brief Misty on how to behave in this mission. We were up against potential superior numbers, with a high potentially of greater capacity than the average grunt, with an unknown firepower at their disposal. Frankly, even I wouldn't have charged in there alone without knowing exactly what to expect.

Scouting had taken its time and was in the end rather fruitless. Since we had no real way to confirm how many were in the cave or where exactly they were, the only thing that gave us some reassurance that we weren't entirely too late yet was that Zoroark had picked up the high-level presence of other Legendaries, still strong and obviously fighting. One of them at least, the other seemed to be moving rapidly.

"Ready?" I checked one last time, tensing in preparation to jump out from the cover of the rock formation that allowed us a good view of the entrance. Regardless about my misgivings, I knew it was pointless to stop the redhead. I needed her, too, as much as it galled me to admit that. Two wasn't quite terrific odds here either but better than just one. Besides, Misty was a Gym Leader, recent and still young, but with already great skill for her age. She had been good when I first tested her and had taken my advice to heart easily. Our earlier battle had showed vast improvement, considering we both hadn't exactly used our most experienced Pokémon. I suppose the main cause for my worries was quite personal and selfish...

"Let's go." I noted that Misty was grabbing one of her Pokéballs tightly, obviously quite nervous despite her brave front earlier. That actually relieved me somewhat. Some nervousness in a situation like this was expected and probably helpful to sharpen your awareness, as long as you wouldn't let it get the better of you. And I knew Misty had been in quite a few dangerous situations with Ash herself, so this wasn't exactly new territory.

Giving her a short nod, we both jumped out of hiding. Misty immediately threw her Pokéball between the two guards and Starmie popped out, spinning and releasing a Thunderbolt that had both men drop instantly.

I blinked astonished. "That... went better than I thought." Sure, that had been the plan but I had not expected it to work so flawlessly. Misty's timing and Starmie's immediate reaction had been perfect, giving the Rocket members no time to react to the sudden attack. Of course, had they really been fully prepared for a strike at any time, they should have done better. Obviously they were here to make sure their target didn't escape the cave and even that was fairly unlikely seeing as the front entrance would be the most likely escape route and as such not actively pursued by someone trying to escape.

Misty flashed me a slight grin but didn't say anything. We both knew this was just the beginning and the easiest part yet. From now there would be no planning for what to expect once we went inside. There was no telling the kind of opposition to be expected and with Mew apparently trying to escape, it would be a question of who found the Legendary first while Team Rocket and us would potentially run into each other several times along the way.

"Stay close to me once we are inside. We should try avoiding as much contact as possible. First priority is to ensure the safety of the target." Of course, we had one clear advantage. Zoroark would be able to sense the Legendaries. Perhaps not as good as another psychic would but despite being of an opposite nature, my mysterious companion had strong mental capabilities to rely on. Zoroark was not quite considered a Legendary but close enough in nature to pick up the presence of another. With that edge, we might be able to pull this off.

Just as I pulled out the black and white-colored Pokéball, things suddenly started to go really wrong. The attack came so sudden, none of us even realized it was there before the powerful Electric attack – it looked like a Zap Cannon – crashed into Starmie from behind and slammed the poor thing into the formation of rocks we had been hiding behind with a terrible slapping sound and outcry of agony.

Misty gasped in shock and rushed over while I held my ground, squinting into the darkness of the cave, trying to make out the forms approaching from inside. A distinctive female voice came out of the entrance. "My, League people here already? That's a surprise. But then again, it's just two kids trying to play heroes." First a fairly

large, taller than normal, Electivire emerged into the early morning light, then the speaker appeared beside it. A young, blonde woman in a black standard Team Rocket shirt with white shorts and knee-high socks. She was wearing a white and red hat, blue eyes regarding us haughtily but with an unmistakable edge of seriousness. She knew who I was and it only took me a moment to recognize one of Giovanni's most trusted executives as well.

Apparently I wasn't the only. Misty hissed behind me, having applied a quick Hyper Potion to Starmie to take care of the worst of the damage, though it seemed like the attack had wrought more damage than I had expected against a Pokémon trained rigidly in elemental resistance AND manipulation of its weak point. "You!" There was definitely recognition in green eyes when she glared at the blonde woman, but I didn't have time to think about that.

"Agent 009. If you are here, that means my hunch was quite correct." I put away Zoroark's Pokéball again – no need to reveal my trump card yet – and released Berserker. "Of course, since you are still here, that also means you haven't found what you were looking for."

Domino laughed. "Good deduction. Too bad you won't be able to do anything about it since you won't get past here."

I narrowed my eyes, knowing that the woman would not make it easy for me. At the least she'd pin us down here for quite some time, perhaps enough for her men to fulfill their objective here. With a grimace, I realized I only had one option and I really, really did not like it.

I did not look back to see if Misty saw and understood the signal I was giving her. It had been an emergency measure we had planned for ahead but that I honestly had hoped not to use. "Berserker, Sandstorm!"

Misty had caught the signal and a few moments after Berserker's attack covered the area for a moment, obscuring visibility greatly, Misty came dashing past me, grabbing Zoroark's Pokéball I was holding out for her without pausing in her break for the entrance.

Domino seemed to catch on quickly but a fast spray of Toxic from Shadow had her back away with a yelp, allowing Misty to charge into the cave. Alone. All on her own.

Damn it, this isn't how this was supposed to go, I cursed mentally but regardless of that prepared for a tough battle. The sooner I finished this, the sooner I could go after Misty.

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

(Narrator)

"With many fates hanging in the balance this episode draws to a close. What will happen to Leaf and Misty? Will Team Rocket manage to take down Mew? And how will Dawn face the final round of the Grand Festival with the unexpected complication now in her way. It will be a long day indeed for our heroes, much longer than even some of them could expect right now."

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

Maia's Prophecy

Maia: I see, I see, I see in the future...

MysticMew: This again?! I said I did not authorize this.

Maia shoves authorization forms into MysticMew's hands.

MysticMew: ... Why was I not informed?

Maia: I see, I see... a great battle. I see... a great struggle. I see... a new challenge. I see... a fateful meeting.

MysticMew: Well, I guess this isn't so bad...

Maia: I see...

MysticMew: Alright enough of that. *drags Maia away again*

Maia: I seeeeeeee... a lawsuit!!!

MysticMew: Hai, hai... dream on. This is still my story and you are just an imaginary being who's overstepping her limits... Yeow, come on, you don't have to get violent... Hey, that hurts, you know?!

Maia: Next time on TFSTTM Reloaded: Grand Festival, Part 2! All in a Day's Work! Be there. Read. Enjoy! And feeeeeeeeeed meeee!

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

Author's Notes

searches number of his lawyer, then looks up at readers Huh? Oh right, notes. Sorry about that, I think I have to buy her a leash...

Man, it has suddenly gotten really hot here while I'm correcting all this and the next episode. *sweats* Not that I'm complaining. It was far too cold for May for my taste but always those extreme weather changes right away... I swear a few days ago, I was half-freezing in bed at night and now we are scratching 30° Celsius. I'm not complaining though, I take the warmth every day over the freaking cold.

As for the episode. First of all, credit where credit is due. The thing with the Dark Pokémon having an effect on psychics was somewhat stolen and slightly modified from Empathic Adventures by SSJ04 Mewtwo. A nice fic, one of the few that

actually pulls of an Ash/Harem somewhat successfully within the limits of canon (well, okay somewhat stretched canon going into AU).

I really have little else to say yet and might hold back on some of the more general explanations for the notes next episode. I have to say that I'm curious on your impressions how well I pulled off Contest Appeals and battles. I have no real experience with either and I find it a little hard to write with all the limitation, especially the time limit. I realize there was no real challenge in there yet but I'd like to know what you think on how I handled, my ideas for combinations etc.

The involvement of Leaf and Misty in the events surrounding Mew at this point in the story was unplanned and came sort as one of Maia's whims again, a spur of the moment thing that she came up with when it was time to do some scenes for them. It worked out in the end quite well though, I think.

Oh right, Lopunny, Pikachu and now Piplup. Err, blame that on spontaneous input as well. Something that came to me one morning on the way to the bakery. I realized I still had to address the issue and had to settle on what I actually wanted to do with it. In the end, this is what I came up with. Sorry if I am stepping on anyone's feelings with this new spin but that's how it is going to be. You just have to wait and see how it will turn out.

Yes, TFSTTM Reloaded now has an opening. By the time the third episode comes around I should have something designed and added for the first arc as well. I already know which songs I'm going to use and there is actually a reason behind the selection, aside from liking Mai-HiME and Mai Otome a lot. But you won't understand that until much later in the story. ^_^ I hope you like the opening I designed. Not exactly perfect but I think it should fit the time frame and conveys mostly what I wanted. I used to do this on and off quite a lot for my stories in the past and really thought this one needed an official opening sequence.

That's it for now. Next episode is written and ready, expect it within the next week. Have to give you some time to stew and expect, right? And please feed us. I swear if you don't, that muse will just keep driving me more crazy. ^_^

Ja ne, yours

Matthias