

Title: The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
Part: Second Arc, Episode 5
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

I don't really have much to say here. In fact I can actually keep it positive this time and merely give a big thank you to finaldragonquest for your kind review. This kind of review shows that you as readers can give positive as well as constructive feedback all in a short manner. Three rows of text and I already knew that the reviewer a) likes my story and b) why he/she likes my story and c) that they are really looking forward for more. It's as simple as that. So, thank you again, finaldragonquest. It's nice to talk about a positive review once in awhile.

Oh, wait. I did forgot something last time. May's age as of Arc 2 will be 16, making her a year younger than Ash and two older than Dawn.

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

Skies above the Johto Region (Brock)

You didn't get to fly often with something other than a Pokémon. Apart from the League, only those that had the money for it could afford a helicopter or even further along, an airship. While technology was fairly advanced these days and vehicles could certainly be poured out on a mass production level, the pollution laws that had been in place for a long, long time prevented the overuse of technology and the League was very strict on this issue. There were clear standards and an upper limit of what and how many of it was allowed in order not to threaten the environment and habitats of the local Pokémon.

This was something that had been around for ages and while inventors and greedy industrial businessmen always complained, no one else questioned it and no one dared go against these laws. The few who did were almost always remembered as an example of why it was not a good idea to do so.

As such flying in a helicopter – as uncomfortable as the small space might be – was an exhilarating and unique experience. Watching the landscape from so high above, without the need to concentrate on holding onto your Pokémon was something I wouldn't forget so soon. Everything looked so tiny from up here that it seemed unlikely that some time ago I had taken close to a year each time when travelling through a new region.

Since it was so fascinating neither of us minded when the pilot informed us he had to take a detour to retrieve some supplies. Ako was also watching but I thought she was a little less amazed than me. She had flown in for the Sinnoh League as well, so this wasn't her first time. Okay, technically it wasn't my first time I had flown in something either – only one of the few I could actually enjoy the flight. Regardless, she would often make excited comments, pointing out places we passed by and asking me what I knew about it. It reminded me once again that even though we were about the same age, Ako was still rather much like an innocent child to the outside world. All she had ever really known was her home and Heal Bell Academy.

However, there was an honest curiosity now where before had been dread and reluctance. Oh, she had always asked me about my travels and I had gladly talked about them, but it was different now. Something had clearly changed. It would seem the intense training sessions I had put her through shortly before the graduation ceremony had done more than just help her find a resolve to fight when necessary.

I decided that while I had found her innocence in these things cute and charming, that I actually liked her even better this way. She would need a strong will to survive out here in the real world. As much as I wanted to, I knew I couldn't be there for her all the time. That she had become fully committed to this new part of her life now, was reassuring. Even more so when I thought about my trepidation about the future. The feelings of that night still lingered in a corner of my heart. I knew something big was coming. At least I could be a little less concerned about whether or not it might be too much for my girlfriend.

The detour had brought us almost a full circle around the Johto region, now closer to the western edge and Hoenn. Considering the speed we were going, this would probably still be faster than most normal travel methods. Besides the qualification round wouldn't start for another week and a half. Being there a few days early was fine but as it was we would probably be there much earlier.

Glancing to the side, I noticed that Ako had dozed off a little, leaning against my side and couldn't help but smile softly at the adorable sight. Personally I didn't really find the inside of a helicopter an ideal place to sleep. The noise level was far too high for my tastes and the space was far too uncomfortable. But Ako had been up for quite some time. I knew she had agonized over her speech – which had worked out beautifully – and since then we had only had small breaks, shortly after the ceremony and when our helicopter had landed to pick up supplies. I was fairly tired myself but not to a point of real exhaustion.

Deciding I might as well try to close my eyes for awhile – regardless of how much I suspected I wouldn't get any real sleep in here –, I was just beginning to get somewhat comfortable, when the sound of the suddenly agitated pilot could be heard over the constant noise of the rotor.

"This is L0052, chartering supplies and personnel for the HC, please repeat... Copy that. I am close to the target zone but I have passengers on board, I wouldn't... Yes, yes. Well, from Heal Bell... Of course, I will try. No promises."

Carefully pushing Ako in a more upright position, I leaned forward curiously, raising my voice enough for the pilot to hopefully hear me. "What's going on?"

"A distress call just came in. It seems a small area of the northeastern edge of Hoenn is being threatened by a fast-spreading forest fire. Everyone in the immediate area has been requested to land aid. I pointed out that I had you guys to see to but seeing as your qualified Field Medics, well... Headquarters asked if you were willing to land a hand. Since you are new and all, the decision is really up to you."

While I was absorbing the information and weighting on the pros and cons – even if I knew the outcome would be obvious –, Ako spoke up next to me, apparently not as fast asleep as I had thought. "Wh-Where exactly is the fire?" Her voice trembled and I narrowed my eyes when I realized one crucial detail. Ako's home village was in that region.

"Northeastern edge," the pilot looked down to consult a map on his display, "a stripe of wood, otherwise rather barren land. There is a small place called Aprico Village almost dead center of the fire zone..."

"We are going," I cut him off, exchanging a brief look with Ako and finding her anxious, afraid for her home but with exactly the kind of determination I expected to see. *Sorry, Ash, I would have liked to see you and Dawn again but we might be a little late after all. This is more important right now.*

*****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 05: Path to the Harmony Cup! Reality Isn't Always Nice.

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

Blackthorn City, Johto (Ash)

It was turning out to be less a match than a painful lesson. A very painful lesson. Crobat was now literally juggling around poor Infernape, picking him up with air attacks and hammering him back down with devastating Cross Poison and Venoshock hits. Infernape's good stamina and adamant refusal to give in now played against him. However, I wasn't quite convinced that Koga would stop even when it became apparent that my Pokémon had lost the match. Which by this point was probably the truth already. He was making a point.

Both his words and the actions on the field were cutting deep into my heart. I could feel the pain of my Pokémon clearly but what hurt much more was the truth in Koga's accusations and how consequently I was letting Infernape and everyone else down. They trusted me completely and would do everything I wanted because they had faith in me and my decisions. How could I be worthy of that trust if I was so unsure of myself? How could I be worthy if I had to order my Pokémon to use much more power than necessary to incapacitate an opponent? To use enough force to... kill.

The word tasted bitter even in my mind. That's what it was though. The bitter truth. Logically I knew it had been necessary. Logically I knew had I not let Pikachu practically obliterate the opponent back then, Mew, even us, we would very likely not be here. And logically I also knew Koga was right. If I hesitated this much from doing it once, then Team Rocket would certainly get through with whatever scheme they had planned. Mew had made it unmistakable clear that these... Pokémon were so far

warped that not even with her full light powers she could restore them. They were more like machines with a feral hunger.

Logic didn't make the feelings go away. Because logic also dictated that if things really got as serious as I feared by now – and Koga had said it aptly just moments ago: It would be "war" –, then this would not stop with soulless, modified Pokémon for whom it might really be a mercy to be released from that state. No, it would go much further than that. And that scared me.

You are not alone. I started at the thought. It wasn't just my own, although part of myself was in there. I glanced towards where Dawn was watching with Prinplup and Lopunny out and Mew perched on her shoulder. Then I looked down at Pikachu, who returned the look steadily and finally I focused back on Infernape, my eyes widening as he suddenly batted a Cross Poison away, surprising both me and our opponents. He landed on one knee, panting, wincing from the effects of multiple wounds and poisoning. But he stubbornly refused to give in.

You guys... I closed my eyes briefly, unsure how to describe what I was feeling except for a powerful feeling of immense pride. What would I do without them? Without Dawn whom I loved dearly, without Pikachu, my best friend, and without all my other Pokémon and friends.

They were right, I wasn't alone. And as much I might like to think like that, it wasn't just about me. I wasn't the lone hero and right now I had a feeling that Dawn might be able to protect herself and even me better than the other way around. However, there was one thing I could do and that was not letting my insecurities hinder me from what needed to be done. That was like betraying all the trust everyone put into me. I wasn't a kid anymore who could whine about life's unfairness. I was a League Champion and unofficial Master. I had responsibility!

"You are absolutely right, Koga. My apologies for giving you less than my all."

And to you as well, Infernape, I added silently. In response Infernape roared, struggling to stand on both feet, an explosion of flames signifying his Blaze ability kicking in. I knew he was on the verge of collapse. All we would have was one attack. And all we would need was one attack.

This would probably cost the last of Infernape's strength. If it failed, the battle would be lost. All I could feel from my Pokémon, however, was his unwavering confidence. Even stronger than ever after obviously sensing that I had found my fighting spirit again. Besides, it was far more like us. Charging ahead at full power. Koga was a ninja after all. Sneakiness and tactic were his strong suits. Trying to outmaneuver him would in most cases be a futile and wasted effort.

"Now!" Infernape shot forward, still with incredible speed despite the severe damage inflicted upon him. At first though it looked much more like what we had done in the beginning and what had brought us into the predicament. This time the purpose was different though. Intently I watched as Infernape's enflamed fist struck Crobat, once again causing it to erupt into smoke. As I thought, this wasn't just a simple substitution. I had no idea what exactly but the purpose was roughly the same. A simple, physical decoy designed to take a single hit. Combined with Crobat's speed it was almost impossible to see when a switch was made.

We didn't need to see.

"Extreme Blaze!"

Expecting the switch, Infernape used the brief contact to push backwards, flip over and then let out a roar in midair. His fire aura exploded outwards as he released all the stored up power that his Blaze Ability generated into a pillar of fire quickly expanding outwards. Three more puffs quickly showed that my suspicion had been right and Crobat had set up more decoys, hidden somehow.

That left the real one caught briefly in the inferno engulfing almost the entire arena field and battering against the barrier that was standard for matches on this level. But I didn't expect Crobat to be caught so easily and as expected its speed allowed for an escape, slightly worse for wear, signed and clearly rattled... and in the only direction allowed at this point. Up.

"Blaze Cannon!" Infernape was already halfway there, drawing the fire back into his hands, cupped back and slightly to the right side of him, a hissing, twisting and brightly burning sphere of fire formed there. On my command, he thrust his hands forward and the sphere was flung forward, trailing a stream of fire behind it before impacting with the wholly unprepared Crobat with the speed and force of a cannonball.

The explosion momentarily obscured Crobat from view but I was sure I heard a brief cry of pain before the smoke cleared and the Bat Pokémon came tumbling down on an uncontrolled crash course with the ground. The brief inferno created by Infernape had already died down as soon as it had sprung up. He could make it denser and longer lasting but with what little strength there was left and the need to get off the last attack that was all that had been possible... and all that had been needed.

Crobat crashed hard into the heated ground, bounced twice and finally came to a stop with the clear signs of already having slipped into unconsciousness during the fall.

Of course, Infernape wasn't much better off. He managed to land wobbly on his feet, but then almost immediately all the previous abuse set in, made worse by the intense elemental channeling and he fell forward with a defeated but far more satisfied moan.

"Crobat and Infernape are both unable to continue!"

Thank you, everyone, I thought briefly and recalled Infernape, especially grateful to him for his perseverance and tenacity. I really should have known better by now. The bond and trust I had with and from my Pokémon that I could always count and that consequently I couldn't disregard and disrespect, regardless of how much I struggled with myself. For them, for Dawn and for everyone else I would keep fighting and do what was necessary. Come what may.

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

(Mew)

"I'm surprised he is really holding himself so well," I admitted. "At least he seems to be over his funk." I chuckled at the stare from Dawn. "Now, don't get angry. You thought the same."

"You make it sound trivial," she deadpanned. "Need I remind you that the reason for that was because we had to save YOU?" I shrunk back a little in remorse. Of course they were right and I did regret my part in it but... I just wanted to lighten the mood a little, geez... Besides, I truly believed this was for the best. If we had to confront these young children with the problems we had created, then it might be for the best if they realized firsthand just what was going to come. Better have them deal with emotional morality now than when it really mattered.

"It seems though that the general problems with this battle remain the same," Dawn remarked eventually as we watched Gabite and Skuntank duke it out. Or more like Skuntank displaying what I had expected from the start, even if it had the kids so amazed.

"It's a problem for him alright. You guys are used to having the speed advantage most of the time. But Koga's a veteran and he trains his Pokémon the same way he does as a ninja. When it comes down to raw power and ability in a straight-out duel Ash would win hands down. But this is a lot more like he tends to fight and now he needs to adapt and think differently. That trick with Infernape worked. But now he's out and Koga wouldn't fall for it twice anyway."

And yet Gabite held fast. Skuntank was displaying a speed far above what his kind should be capable of. With similar levels of training they should actually be just about even at top speed but the extra ninja training in reaction, evasion and stealth

helped a lot and more than once the somewhat bulky-seeming Pokémon managed to sneak up on Gabite, always presenting the danger of a Poison attack.

"Gabite's really motivated though. I think he's still sore about being taken out so quickly in last year's final." I could understand that. And so far the motivation was what held the battle fairly even, managing to block or evade the more critical attacks and sometimes even getting a brief counter in. So far neither side had been able to get a clear advantage. It was a game of patience. Who would make the first mistake? Who would lose their calm first?

Normally I would say that Koga being the Master of this sort of situation couldn't possibly lose. However, Ash was never to be counted out. I had followed and watched many of his battles in the last years and one thing I knew by now was that the boy always seemed to defy the impossible and come up with just the right strategy in a hopeless-seeming situation.

Would he now though? Koga had once again packed out one of his most annoying techniques. Now Skuntank wasn't as blinding-fast as Crobat, so he couldn't use it the same way. But the clones were all solid and it would be impossible for Ash and Gabite to tell them apart. With five now surrounding the lone Gabite, it became painfully clear that if he missed the correct target, it would end very painful.

"What exactly is that anyway? It's not a normal Substitute. They feel much more... real." As expected of Dawn. She had sensed it quickly enough and pretty much spelled it out already. "Is this some kind of NRE as well?"

I actually had to think about that one. "Not really... although, in a very broad sense, maybe. Ninja techniques utilize a special internal energy called chakra. Technically everyone has it, but its different in potential for everyone and you have to learn to use it from a young age onwards. It IS kind of related to NRE but more in a way that natural energy is in everything and influences everything. Chakra is a part of life and as such part of nature. These... clones are constructs made of this type of energy. They..."

My explanation was cut short and for a moment I couldn't even say anything. It was impossible. There hadn't even been a hesitation, so it hadn't been a fluke. Gabite had just charged straight and seemingly reckless at one of the presented targets and struck Skuntank, the right Skuntank with a hard Dragon Claw that had sent it bouncing away almost to the end of the arena floor where he just barely managed to catch its wild tumble. Not quite wanting to believe what I saw, I reached out towards Ash with my power and my eyes widened even further at what I felt.

"That boy," I muttered, stuck between stunned, awed and... hopeful for all of our future, "really is a genius."

"What... What did he do?" Dawn didn't seem to get it. I wasn't surprised. She was showing much promise already but it took even me a good bit of effort to detect the slight aftereffect left. I didn't answer immediately, but kept watching, wanting to know if it was a fluke or if Ash had really just done what I believed he did.

Koga was nice enough to provide me with an answer, obviously wanting to confirm as well if his opponent had a way to tell apart the original from the clones. And he did. The next two attempts ended in roughly the same way, only that Skuntank was more prepared for the possibility. "Genius, really," I repeated. "He didn't just listen in when I taught you. He picked something up."

Dawn looked at me incredulous. "You mean Ash is using his NRE?! How? I thought..."

"Not as a physical manifestation. You guys, both you and Ash, have probably the highest level of Empathy I have ever seen in humans before. The ability to connect, to understand. Together with his dormant Air affinity, he is using this ability to feel out his opponent and through the connection with his Pokémon lets Gabite know immediately. It's rather crude right now but that he can actually do it already without any real training... Simply amazing."

Dawn's surprise seemed to vanish though at my explanation, to be replaced by... pride – which I could understand – and a knowing smile. "Yes, he is. I guess I should have known better." Those two really were close. It made me wonder what would happen if the other factor mentioned in the prophecy would appear. And it was soon, I could feel that.

Pushing the nagging thought aside, I refocused on the match. Gabite had gained momentum by the inability of Skuntank to use any of his ninja techniques effectively. In fact, Ash proved that he had figured out the other usefulness of this kind of perception when Gabite reacted to one attempt of Skuntank to sneak up on him with a high speed, hard counter and a powerful Dragonbreath.

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

Aprico Village, Hoenn (Ako)

From afar one could think it was some kind of beautiful light show but soon enough the rising smoke and the swarms of fleeing Pokémon told another story. With an almost morbid fascination I stared at the sea of flames beneath, unable to fully process what I was seeing. I hadn't been home in years. My last visit had been quite awhile ago. While I still thought of this place as home, there wasn't all that much that I had missed. My parents had died when I was little, I barely remembered them at all and while the people that had taken me in had been nice, it wasn't really enough to

warrant homesickness for a place no one wanted to have to live in unless they had no choice.

And it seemed no one would in the near future, if a small miracle didn't happen. *Be strong, Ako, you can't break down now. Remember you are here to help,* I admonished myself, willing my shaking hands to still and grateful when Brock gently covered them with his own. I had to overcome this. These were the situations I had always dreaded but that were supposed to be one of the main reasons why Heal Bell was even founded. It all came so sudden though and the fact that it was so personal didn't help my nervousness.

Slowly the village came into view. Nestled on the northeastern edge of Hoenn, between Fortree and Lilycove City, it was far enough away from both major cities in the area to be rather isolated. The geography further separated the place. While Fortree and its surrounding area were blessed with fertile ground from which a lush forest had spread, it didn't reach until Aprico Village. No one had a good explanation why the ground was so unfertile compared to the rest of the area but it was like someone had made a huge cut in the land. Trees still grew but they were nothing like those further inland. And despite the proximity to the sea, only a tiny, barely adequate river snaked itself past the village.

The pilot had to be commended for his ability to maneuver with all the smoke and heat. Somehow he managed to bring us right down in the center of the village which had been almost completely surrounded by the fire now. The smoke and heat burned in my eyes and throat as soon as we emerged from the helicopter. I coughed a little but we had had training on how to act in hazardous environment, which had also served to get us used to breathing in smoke-filled air. And if it became worse or we would be forced to get closer to the actual fire, there were breathing masks in our supplies.

We were greeted almost as soon as we landed. I didn't recognize the brown-haired man but he had an official League insignia on his clothes. I did, however, recognize the older woman next to him immediately, even after all the time. Age seemed to have treated her well and one wouldn't think she was over seventy already.

"Ako dear, you came!" Chiyo, our village elder since I was born, exclaimed with delight, albeit it being understandably subdued. I would have liked better circumstances for returning home as well. Nonetheless, my heart swelled a little as well upon seeing the old woman who had always been kind to me and was the first to support and encourage me when I had received the offer to go to Heal Bell.

"Elder." I bowed respectfully. "It is good to see you. I would have wished there would have been a better reason for me to return here."

"Indeed," Elder Chiyo replied solemnly. "It does this old heart good, however, to see that you have grown into a beautiful woman. And it seems you even have found yourself a good-looking man." She chuckled at my blush and Brock shuffled a little before also bowing and introducing himself.

"As much as I hate to rain on the parade," the unknown man cut in at this point. "Time is running short. I am Bryan and in charge of the rescue effort here. As such I am glad you two could make it. Our resources are spread thin as it is with recent activities of Team Rocket. The League is mobilizing as much as possible but what we have right now is barely enough to keep the fire from spreading towards the populated areas. By the time more fire-fighting teams will arrive, I fear there won't be much salvageable left of this area."

My heart sunk at the confirmation of what I already knew deep down. I didn't want to believe it but everything I had been taught at the academy about natural disasters had told me immediately that a fire that had spread to such a size couldn't be successfully extinguished before it had pretty much consumed everything.

"So you are mostly working on holding it off and evacuating right now," Brock asked, face serious and focused. I was very glad he was here. That was of course always true but even more so right now. Brock was rather levelheaded and could keep his cool in dangerous and hectic situations. I was pretty sure I would have been unable to think clearly with my home in such a state if I had come here alone.

"That's right. Winona of Fortree is assisting in the evacuation right now and we should have everyone out of here before it becomes too dangerous but..." Bryan trailed off at this point and glanced at Chiyo. The Elder looked down saddened but both were the silent for a bit longer. "Since everyone is concentrated on the village, relief effort for the surrounding area is almost nonexistent," Bryan eventually continued. I didn't quite get what exactly the problem was with that. There really wasn't anything or anyone of worth outside the village. Or were there still people outside, cut off from the rest?

Elder Chiyo shook her head when I asked. "No, thankfully everyone was in the village when the fire began to spread. And most of the local Pokémon seemed to have fled." That's what I thought as well. Pokémon had a natural sense for impending catastrophes like that and could react to them much faster and earlier than humans. "But... Well, you see. We recently built a small shelter in the forest for those Pokémon that had a hard time finding food or even surviving on their own in general." My eyes widened at that. I hadn't expected something like that. Aprico Village had never had the resources to do something like that in the past. We had always been struggling to get by ourselves with what little we had.

At my astonished look, Chiyo laughed lowly, without real humor. "We all knew how much you loved to play outside and help all the Pokémon that you could, Ako.

When you started to send some money back, everyone agreed that one of the first things we should use it for was to help them as well." I couldn't quite suppress a tear at the touching thought and gesture, though it could have also been the smoke getting to me.

Then I began to realize though where the Elder was going with this and my eyes widened. "You mean to say there might still be Pokémon trapped there?" Brock asked, coming to the same conclusion.

"Not just think," Bryan replied and told us that a rescue unit flying over the area had confirmed the presence of many Pokémon, many obviously too weak or injured to flee on their own inside the shelter. Miraculously the fire seemed to have not consumed that part of the area entirely yet. But with every minute their survival chances would drop significantly.

Unfortunately the rescue team was tied up with the evacuation and furthermore didn't have qualified personnel to deal with injured Pokémon, especially injured Pokémon in a hazard environment.

It didn't take us longer than a moment to make a decision on what to do.

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

(Brock)

"The shelter has always been well-visited. I've just checked a few days ago and I know there were at least a good dozen of Pokémon in weak or injured condition," Elder Chiyo answered my question for an estimate, surprising me both with such a number and the implications. The number was definitely interesting and generally positive. Wild Pokémon tended to be extremely shy and that they were actually sharing the shelter with no obvious sign of conflict was incredible. On the other hand that meant there would possibly be quite a number of them trapped inside. Not only trapped but also in serious need of treatment, most likely before they could be safely moved. And doing that in the middle of a burning forest was almost madness.

"Tell me you have some spare Pokéballs with you," I asked Bryan, trying to salvage some of my initial idea that we should just sweep in, capture those that couldn't be moved and treat them later. Ako and I both had a few spares but with the expected numbers, it would hardly be enough. Seeing the other man shake his head in apology had my heart sinking.

"I'm afraid not. We were not expecting a rescue mission for Pokémon and even if... my unit was called straight from another scene, we used up all of our spares right now." I grimaced. What was the League thinking? There should always be a

supply of spare Pokéballs during rescue missions. At least that's what they taught us at Heal Bell. Of course, I realized, ideal theory and reality often were very far apart. We would have to make do with what we had. And it wasn't like I didn't have an alternate plan. I merely didn't like it very much.

"Alright, then we have no choice. I have an assortment of Ground, Rock and Water types. Together we will make an impromptu trench and dam around the shelter. I have no hope of it lasting long but hopefully long enough to give quick first aid to the most severe cases. Ako you will have to do most of the medical work, while I concentrate on keeping the fire at bay, is that alright?" Ako looked nervous for a moment, but then her expression hardened and she nodded seriously.

A few weeks ago, I would have been worried that she wouldn't make it in such a stressful situation but that had changed. Besides, this was personal, so there definitely wouldn't be an ounce lacking in motivation. "Good. Bryan, can you see if you can at least spare us one or two Flying types? It would be an enormous help in getting some of the Pokémon out of the target zone... not to mention getting there to begin with."

Bryan nodded. "I'll see what can I do right away."

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

In the end we got a pair of Pidgeots and Winona lend us her Skarmory. Not exactly ideal, especially considering Skarmory would have extreme trouble in this heat but Fortree's Gym Leader assured us it wasn't the first time Skarmory had operated in similar situations. I had to take her word for it and I suppose it would suffice to swoop in, get some of the Pokémon out and get away again.

We didn't have time to wait for more. After making the necessary alterations to my team, we set out immediately. The Pidgeots were fast and adapt to fly even in the heat. Reaching the target zone in no time, it became quite clear that we would have never made it with the helicopter. The fire was too high and dense here and it was more than just a small miracle that the shelter hadn't burned down. The cause for that was quite amazing. Some courageous Pokémon were actively holding off the fire.

There was a pair of Azurill, an Azumarill and three Lombre. Good, that should actually help. Especially after taking one look at the structure. It was mostly solid wood – ones of better quality than found around here – and already quite blackened in many areas, showing that the "defenders" probably had to extinguish flames very quickly quite a few times. The fire alone wasn't the only problem. A random spark could easily set the whole thing off. There wasn't any time to lose.

As soon as the Pidgeots brought us down, we immediately split up to our assigned tasks. Ako moved towards the shelter for a first assessment of the situation and the injuries we were dealing with. That was standard procedure in such a situation and pretty much common sense. Blindly starting to heal and treat would be inefficient. The ones that really needed it would have to be first. Especially with Ako's powers – and she wouldn't get around not using them at least in small amounts –, wasting them on those that didn't absolutely need it, would quickly turn disastrous.

What caught my attention briefly was that there was an actual Tropius among the Pokémon here which considering how Ako talked about this region was rather unlikely to happen. It was obviously mildly hurt and Ako had started with treating it immediately. Which was a smart choice. Tropius' size alone would be enough to help transport some of the bigger Pokémon or a lot of smaller ones out of the fire zone easily.

Leaving Ako to her task, I called out my Pokémon. Marshtomp, Ludicolo and Croagunk joined the other Pokémon in holding of the fire while Onix and Golem made quick work to dig as deep a trench around the shelter as possible. With both of them strong and big enough, this didn't take long thankfully, yet every moment seemed like a small eternity.

When they were done and I had the Water Pokémon start shooting water into the trench – which WOULD take longer to fully fill up –, I turned to Ako to see how she was doing. I had Chansey assisting her and her own Blissey and they were all hard at work. Already the Pidgeots and Skarmory were taking out the first ones, but only one at a time. I could only assume Ako deemed it too dangerous to pack more than one on each Flying type, which meant they weren't in a condition to properly secure themselves... which in turn meant pretty much all of them that weren't actively helping with the defense were in bad shape.

I grimaced, but focused back on my own task. The Lombres had joined into the effort of filling the trench after realizing we were really there to help and now they were just about done. Onix and Golem had already started to dig into the earth again and raise a small but hopefully short-term effective wall of earth that even in the worst case scenarios should give us a few more minutes.

Hopefully it would be enough.

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

Blackthorn City, Johto (Dawn)

Now that Mew had pointed it out, I was trying to perceive as well what Ash was doing. In fact, I shouldn't be surprised that he could use it as well. Once you

knew what you were doing, sensing natural energy wasn't that hard. Harnessing was the real challenge. Just using it as a sort of sensor should actually not be that hard.

Of course, Ash didn't have any psychic abilities and Mew couldn't quite help him actively as she could for me. That he had learned to do so in this short time on nothing but theoretic explanation was definitely amazing. If anyone could pull it off though, it was Ash. He was after all the same guy that took my initial spin idea and made it into a very effective battle move, not just for evasion but in combination with other techniques as well. Ash was the epitome of adaption, something I had come to admire very quickly. No matter the situation, he could find a way to use it to his advantage within a far shorter time than even most above average Trainers could ever hope to.

This was just another example of his skill. I hadn't even known he had experimented with this. And to come so far on his own, in such a short time... Mew was right, it was nothing short of genius. Not the kind that required a high grade of intelligence but one who worked hard for it and learned from repeated practice as well as intuition.

Prinplup and Lopunny cheered loudly when the Dragonbreath counter struck. I felt the briefest of flickers in my perception and decided to stop trying for now. I clearly needed more practice and it served no purpose right now. "That one had to hurt," I commented and immediately noted the sparks coming from Skuntank. "And not just that."

"Yes, this will significantly cut down Skuntank's speed," Mew finished my thought. "Now, he needs to press the advantage before Koga recovers and comes up with a new strategy." There was no need to say it though. I knew that best. Koga had already proven to be a very apt strategist. It wasn't just the strange techniques but their precise application as well. Ash was a master himself when it came to battlefield strategies but in Koga he had definitely found at least an even match.

And Ash knew that, too. Gabite immediately pressed the advantage. All throughout it Ash kept up a strong concentration and every attempt to confuse Gabite was met with precise attacks, shattering any illusions, diversions or other such skills. The two of them didn't give their opponents a moment to breathe, keeping up a relentless attack. I bet Koga thought Gabite had to tire out at some point. I knew better after many training sessions with the dragon. Greatly motivated, Gabite had thrown himself into training over the last year. It was actually a small surprise he hadn't evolved again yet, even if dragon evolution was usually slow going. However, even without that, he had developed a trait that had become one of his strongest suits. Stamina

Now, with Skuntank's speed greatly reduced because of the paralysis, Ash had the advantage and Gabite kept up a relentless attack that kept his opponent

constantly on the defense. That didn't mean it was only a matter of time now. Koga wasn't elevated to an Elite Four member for nothing if his ninja skills were all he had. Even weakened like this, his Pokémon kept up and got several attacks of his own in, now that the match had degenerated more into a full-on fight. Compared to Crobat, Skuntank was far more sturdy as well and these poison attacks had to hurt...

Gabite just kept going right through them. Dual Chops and Dragon Claws hammered relentlessly into Skuntank's defense. So far Ash and Gabite kept to just that, though. I knew Gabite could do more. Obviously they were waiting for just the right moment to finish off their opponent once and for all.

We didn't have to wait long. Digging quickly under a Toxic shot, Koga was this time on guard not to react too prematurely. He ignored the first two holes erupting without Gabite bursting from the ground, then Skuntank spun as the small dragon finally emerged, only to perform a fast Sucker Punch with its front leg of all things! I smirked though, already sensing what was coming.

The punch passed right through Gabite and caused Skuntank to stumble in surprise. Even as Koga momentarily lost his cool, shouting "Double Team?" in clear surprise, Gabite struck from below.

"Earth Power!" Even if Skuntank had not been off balance, I wondered if he could have prevented the pillar of powerful energy barreling upwards out of the earth from shooting him high up into the air. "Follow it up with Draco Meteor!" Gabite followed directly after his first attack, the sphere of dragon energy already prepared and then launched after his opponent.

Just like in the last battle, Koga's Pokémon was engulfed by a big explosion. Yet, Ash wasn't finished and didn't want to leave things to chance. The moment, Skuntank was visible again, Gabite had flashed upwards and above the weakened Pokémon, curving around and crashing into Skuntank with an aerial variant of Dragon Rush.

Skuntank was shot down like something loosened from a slingshot, creating a deep crater from the sheer force of the impact. However, Gabite hadn't gotten off unscathed, wincing suddenly and nearly losing control over his own descend. It couldn't be the attacks. None of them had any recoil properties. Dragon Rush in the air was tough to perform but Gabite could do it to perfection and I had seen no flaw in the execution. So what had happened?

"Aftermath," Mew supplied the answer and I winced. It was a small miracle then that Gabite was still standing after he was declared the winner. He had taken quite a beating himself after all. And Aftermath had the nasty side effect of draining roughly a quarter of the Pokémon's maximum strength that had taken it down.

"Well, he won at least. Gabite will definitely be happy about that," I tried to keep the positive in mind. Perhaps it was more to reassure myself. Both battles had been so close, so evenly matched. So this was the level of a Master League battle? It was already easily as intense as Ash and Leaf's battle a year ago. At this point, individual attributes like strength, speed and endurance didn't really make that much of a difference anymore. It all came down which side – Trainer and Pokémon – could utilize what they had best.

"Hmm... Now that's going to be interesting." I had to agree with Mew once again, seeing Koga call out Ninjask. If Crobat had been fast and Skuntank far faster than one would expect of its kind, Ninjask would be even worse! It wasn't surprising that Ash immediately recalled Gabite for a rest and Pikachu took the field.

I reached out briefly to see how Ash was holding up. But even with Pikachu now directly participating in the battle, the earlier doubt and hesitation was gone. There was only a strong confidence and a burning resolve left. I still had to wonder if even Pikachu could keep up with Ninjask?

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

(Pikachu)

This was an impasse. Yet again, I might add after the previous two battles. Honestly had Ash sent me in first against Crobat, I think that Infernape could have done better in this one. He could cover a broader range with his fire attacks and Extreme Blaze could have been even more useful here.

That didn't mean I had no chance. It was just... strange. I was so used to being faster than my opponent that it was so very bizarre that I was facing an opponent that already outclassed me in the beginning and as the match dragged on only got worse with Speed Boost kicking in periodically.

Which ironically didn't really help Ninjask as much as he wanted since it wasn't getting through the aura of electricity I had drawn tightly around myself, making all direct physical contact a very risky and near suicidal maneuver to begin with considering the density of the aura and the raw power of the voltage.

I would have almost counted that as a good sign since, as long as I could concentrate fully on that, I could keep this going far longer unlike than used as an offensive augmentation. However, Ninjask's speed wasn't just insane, it allowed the damn, annoying, irritating bug to constantly seem to teleport right in front of me – just close enough not to get in reach of my aura – and then let off an insanely fast Fury Cutter that even I had trouble even following. The truly frightening thing was that the execution was fast enough that Ninjask's claws were merely a little singed after every

attempt instead of totally disintegrated by my electric barrier and thus they actually managed to connect.

The only good thing was that Ninjask hadn't so far tried that with a different attack. Hopefully because it couldn't and not because of keeping me in false security. Okay, there was another good thing. I hadn't been quite sure before how Ash and Gabite had done it, but now I did. Ash's sensory input was immensely helpful once I got used to it in predicting and at least averting the occasional Struggle Bug that came shooting out of nowhere and that I really didn't want to be hit with. Already I had enough of a tough time to prevent Koga's tactic and interrupt random fast executions of Sword Dance with a quick lightning strike. If these Fury Cutters got any stronger I would really be in trouble.

Frowning, I looked around covertly when I realized no new attack had been coming for some time. And neither had Ninjask been attempting to raise its attack power. So where was it? This was so very frustrating. At this point all I could do was rely on Ash's help to pin down my opponent's location. I definitely had gotten a whole new understanding for how my opponents felt when I really got serious.

Underground. It was less a conscious thought than a sense of direction racing through my bond with Ash. I resisted the urge to swear and give away that we were on to our opponents. There was no outward giveaway. Heck, there wasn't even a hole – anymore – to signify where Ninjask could have buried. How long had it been at this?

It didn't matter. This time I felt the command more clearly and grinned inwardly. Closing my eyes I let my awareness drift. What Ash did wasn't all that hard, especially for a Pokémon, but it wasn't easy to do when you were the one directly in the middle of the fight. Connecting with my best friend and strengthening his own perception, I finally pinned down Ninjask moving in on my position. Fast, rapid movements that one wouldn't associate with a Pokémon digging underground because the sheer speed was something more for already high-speed aerial battles.

Patiently I waited while drawing my aura inwards further, subtly channeling the highest amount towards my tail. Exactly at the moment when Ninjask accelerated upwards in a furious charge towards the surface and my position, I jumped. My own vast experience with movement at high speed had taught me one thing. Regardless how nimble, flexible and thus apt at performing sharp turn maneuvers at impossible speeds you were, there were times when the body just couldn't react fast enough anymore. Ninjask had accelerated so harshly, I knew it wanted to use the momentum from such high speed to boost the power of its attack. A good idea.

Unfortunately our opponents had not counted for us to actually anticipate, prepare and counter attack in the split second Ninjask split the ground with the sound of several sonic booms. My tail came down with full precision. Yet, even then I knew I

just grazed my opponent... Which was inconsequential. At this level of speed the sudden counter force served to not only strike several thousand volts of electricity through Ninjask but also to send it careening off to the edge of the arena.

"Volt Switch!"

Blinking in surprise, already in mid-motion to press the attack before Ninjask could recover, I nonetheless followed the command, instinctively trusting Ash. Sensing his intentions to prioritize making sure Ninjask stayed in place a little longer over causing as much damage as possible, I made the actual impact of a half dozen lightning strikes more precise and paralyzing than really damaging, then turned back and less than a second later, skidded to a halt next to the edge of the arena.

Already Gabite sprung from his Pokéball before I came to a full stop. "Gabite, now, Sand Tomb!"

Ah. That's what he had in mind. What followed was an about thirty seconds lasting slugfest. Sand Tomb might not affect Ninjask physically but kept it in place for the follow-up, consisting of a multitude of certainly very painful Rock Tombs that served the extra purpose of bringing down Ninjask's speed to more manageable levels. Unfortunately Gabite really had been a shred away from collapse after the last fight and had barely recovered enough. As such when Ninjask finally forced out a Bug Buzz between Gabite's raging assault, it struck hard and right into Gabite's face. I winced in sympathy but knew there was no time to waste another thought on my teammate. It was now up to me that his efforts weren't wasted.

I didn't look towards Ash as I raced forward, pushing out my elemental power to the max. However, I did try to get a sense of what he was feeling and if he really wanted what I thought he did. I hadn't expected to use it today, not in the state that Ash had been in before the match. Yet, there was none of that left and only one echoing reassurance. *Do it.*

And I began setting up for Thor's Hammer.

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

Outside of Aprico Village, Hoenn (Ako)

I was seriously glad to have Blissey with me again. She had been a gift from the academy for my high grades years ago and while we did understand each other very well, she was often more useful helping out in the main medical center of the academy. Back at Heal Bell I had never had a problem leaving her there for extended periods of time but this wasn't training anymore. This was real.

My heart was hammering surely, even if I couldn't hear it over the hissing and crackling of the inferno all around us. Just as I had suspected. Real situations were scary after all, incredibly so. I had gotten a glimpse of that during the raid but it was hardly long enough to leave a strong impression and I hadn't been quite that involved in the main action.

"There you go," I said, pulling my hands back from the Zigagoon. He was still rather weak, yet there was no longer any danger in moving him. All of Brock's and my spare Pokéballs were used up already. I still had four in reserve, for absolute emergencies but it seemed like we might actually make it. Initially I had been surprised and very worried at the great number of Pokémon gathered in the small structure. I could only imagine that many of them had come to see the place as a kind of secure and safe zone and had almost instinctively come here instead of pursuing any other means to escape.

As expected there were a lot of small to heavy burn wounds, some of them barely hanging on as it was when we had arrived. Those had been the first to go. A quick glance had told me immediately that in the more severe cases vital organs had obviously been damaged and while I could have healed that, it would have left me drained after the first two or three patients.

Zigagoon gave my fingers a small lick which had me smile tightly despite the situation and then climbed onto Swellow who had been going back and forth for the last ten or so minutes. I remembered both of them – Swellow had still been a Taillow then and Zigagoon just a baby fresh out of its egg. And it seemed they remembered me as well.

That I hadn't expected and it left me deeply touched. I hadn't thought that my presence had made enough of an impact on the local Pokémon for most of them to almost instantly recognize me after all those years. Sure, I had tried to help out where I could, to the best of my meager capabilities, even if it was just simply being there. I didn't think I had really made much of a difference...

It was unimportant now. That most of them recognized me, had made the organization of the rescue effort that much smoother. Other than Swellow, there were a pair of Xatu's and a Pelipper – though I had only a vague idea how and why either of them would be in this area or region altogether – that were readily helping out. Those three weren't exactly the biggest and most efficient carriers, yet there were a lot of smaller, weak Pokémon here and each of the three fliers could at least carry one of them on their own.

Taking a few longer breaths through my breathing mask before tugging it away again – the air was hard on the lungs but it was still barely bearable, so there was no point in wasting the limited supply in the masks until absolutely necessary –, I took that time to see how Brock was doing. The improvised trench and dam were still

holding. The defending Pokémon had jumped on the raised earth wall and were tirelessly shooting Water attacks into the flames. They weren't a professional firefighting squad, however, they made up for it with sheer tenacity. Almost fifteen minutes had gone by since we arrived and the ones that had already been here must have kept this up for a lot longer already.

It wouldn't last though, I knew. Not much longer. And then there was only the water trench and the earth wall. With that much fire though, the makeshift barriers wouldn't last long. Brock knew that, too, and his Onix and Golem were already hard at work creating a second, higher wall. Even if that would only bring another couple of minutes, in the end that could make the difference.

Leaving them to their task, I turned back to my own. I would have treated the Altaria – a truly rare sight for this area – almost immediately, considering the dire need for more rescue fliers but it had only come in a few minutes ago, more like almost stumbling out of the sky with a burned wing. It had also been rather agitated and I feared that it might not listen or do something rash, so I had Genki talk to it... him, I noticed upon closer examination. It seemed Genki had managed to calm him down a little and the almost majestic-looking Pokémon watched me intently.

Despite knowing I was nearing my limit, I channeled a little more of my power and focused on Altaria's wing. Even if he didn't end up helping, having him able to fly out on his own was a much better option. There was also something about this one that I couldn't quite place my finger on. I had been curious about the Altaria right away, yet that hadn't been solely for its rarity and thus a speculation on possible reason for why it was here.

The burn was treated quickly. It wasn't too deep and soon enough Altaria was happily flapping his wings again. He looked at me gratefully and I also saw a bit of affection like in the other Pokémon's eyes that had recognized me from my childhood. Before I could think about it further though, Altaria gave a sharp cry and launched himself into the air. I was a little disappointment but that quickly gave way to shock, seeing him aim further inwards, towards where the fire was already even higher and stronger.

"W-Wait!" I called out but it was futile I knew. Not only wouldn't he hear me anymore in all of this, but there had also been deep worry and determination in his eyes. Whatever had him so agitated had to be important enough to be ready to risk his life. A mate, perhaps? Children? That seemed to be the most likely reason.

I still couldn't quite put my finger on why Altaria had seemed so... familiar. Yes, that was it. Was it one of those I had known as a child? But I didn't recall there ever having been one – I was sure I would remember a unique Pokémon like this – and none of the others had invoked such a strong feeling in me.

Of course! Why hadn't I remembered earlier? He had been more or less my best friend back then after all. He had always been a rather sickly Swablu when I had been last here. Ever since the day I had nursed him back to health that one time, we had become good friends. It was perhaps the one, closer connection I had ever had to anyone as a child, perhaps the only thing I could call a friendship. Not being able to see him anymore after leaving Aprico Village had been hard and perhaps I had subconsciously began to push away the memory so that it wouldn't make me sad. After all, I had still been mostly a child when leaving for Heal Bell – even more so than most other kids who were already on their Pokémon journeys. I suppose a reaction like that was normal.

But now he was all grown up and I had just let him fly straight into danger! What should I do? Looking around, I noticed to my relief that those needing immediate treatment were all gone or in the process of being rescued already. What little was there Chansey and Blissey could handle on their own. Besides, I had almost exhausted my powers and my supplies had run dangerously low, there was little else I could do.

I knew it was foolish almost immediately. But the reawakened memories of my friendship with the other Pokémon dominated almost every other thought at that moment. Ignoring Genki and Blissey's outcry, I jumped from the shelter and started to scramble over the earth wall as soon as I could manage. Perhaps I wasn't the most physical active but the academy made sure we kept in shape.

"Ako, stop! What the hell are you doing?" Brock called after me worried, confused and angry. I had never heard him curse.

But I couldn't stop. I had spotted Altaria diving back into the sea of flames just a short distance away. With some luck I should be able to actually make it. That was the least I could do after forgetting about my old friend for all this time. Pausing for a moment, I looked back at my boyfriend and tried to convey to him how important this was for me. "I'm sorry, Brock, but I've got to help him."

Not waiting for a reply, I took a leap of the wall and then over the trench, ignoring Brock's calls.

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

Thinking back on my actions, I might have been more than just a little reckless. Much later I still couldn't quite believe I did it or that I had come out alive and relatively unharmed all things considering. Most of this certainly had to do with the Azumarill that had jumped after me and saved me from being burned to a crisp within the first minute. It didn't make an attempt to stop me though and I was silently grateful when it stuck with me all the way towards where I had seen Altaria go down.

Idiot, that was so stupid, I chided myself as I raced through the raging flames, barely evading falling branches or entire trees that had become flaming missiles of death. If not for the breathing mask I was sure I would have been short on air already and the intense heat burned my eyes. I could hardly see in front of me and was mostly running on instinct. Instinct and memories that had begun coming back once I had remembered my old friend again. I knew the place where Altaria had gone down. I knew what was there and was absolutely sure that was where I had to go.

And that turned out to be the truth. The old oak tree, perhaps the most sturdiest and vital thing that had ever grown here, was barely hanging on. Almost all of the branches had been burned off already. In fact the entire crown was all but gone, leaving only the mighty stump, blackened and already burning in some places. I felt a moment of regret at seeing the place where Swablu and I had liked to play so often in such a state but there was no time to mourn.

It took me a few moments to blink back the stinging tears in my eyes and survey the area more closely. Once I finally succeeded, I saw them and found my earlier assumption to be fully accurate. There was my old friend but also another Altaria huddled over two small baby Swablu.

The by now familiar sound of wood snapping and falling alerted me immediately, yet unfortunately that recognition took a moment too long and I could only stare horrified and helpless as one of the few remaining other trees in the area began to fall towards the two Altaria and their children. There wasn't any time to react. My hand came out in a desperate, help- and useless attempt to reach out to them... and then a powerful barrier sprang up and the tree impacted upon it with a loud bang.

Transfixed I watched Altaria – my old friend that was – visibly straining, definitely still weak from the injury and then flying over the flames again, and trying to protect his family. For a moment I actually believed he would make it. Then a stray enflamed branch shot past out of nowhere, barely nicking him in the side. However, it was enough for a brief lapse in the intense concentration. The barrier wavered for a moment and Altaria collapsed. To both my amazement and horror he somehow managed to give the large tree a last push, diverting its fall slightly before the barrier collapsed. That ensured his mate's and children's safety, unfortunately it also left him still halfway in its path.

"No!" I exclaimed, coming out of my shock and racing forward. Azumarill launched another water salvo at the tree, quickly dosing the fire while I fell to my knees next to my friend. I wouldn't have ever needed to study at Heal Bell to see that there would be nothing I could do for him. *No, this isn't fair. I just remembered!* I raged silently, desperately trying to find some solution but knowing in my heart already it wasn't enough.

But I couldn't give up. Not here, not in this situation. Somehow I managed to drag Altaria out from under the fallen tree. Placing my hands on where the tree had struck and leaving much of his body and insides almost squished beyond recognition, I tried to call up on my powers. Several long seconds passed... but nothing happened. It wasn't working. It wasn't working because I had all but exhausted my power back at the shelter. I tried again and again but it wasn't any good.

This time the tears had nothing to do with the heat. "I'm sorry, so sorry." Why was I so weak? After all the time Brock had invested in me, I couldn't even protect and help a single friend. Was that all I could do in the end? Maybe I really wasn't cut out for this...

"Al... Altaria..." I glanced down through my tear-strung eyes and saw him look directly at me. I couldn't clearly describe it but it was like a warm, comforting presence brushing against me inside my head... no, more like inside my heart. I could feel the happiness expressed at seeing me again, the love for his mate and children and as such the absolute lack of regret for giving his life to protect them. But I also understood what he wanted from me, especially from me, as his friend of old.

I glanced at his mate, having knelt down next to me, then back at my friend. "I understand. I promise to take care of them." And that was a promise I had to hold. Already I had failed him. If it was the last thing I did, I would honor his dying wish at least.

Altaria gave the best equivalent of a grateful smile he could manage, then... his body went still.

Time for grief, however, was something not allowed to us. The horrible loud groaning sound had me whip around, only to see the old oak tree had finally relented its struggle and the mighty stump was caving... right on top of us.

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

(Brock)

Keep cool, Brock. Focus on the task. That was easier said than done. My heart felt like it had been shock frozen by an Ice Beam going on for half an hour. Again and again my eyes were drawn to where Ako had vanished into the fire. What had she been thinking? I knew she could be a little reckless at times when she was solely focused on a single task but this was going way beyond anything common sense dictated.

It had something to do with the Altaria that had flown off, that much was for sure and it had to be more than just the simple case of worrying about a single Pokémon. Ako wasn't that reckless, definitely not without a greater reason. Still,

running headlong into danger for a single life... WHEN she got out of this, I would have to have a few stern words with her.

Only with sheer force of will, clinging to my healer's vow and knowing that Ako would not be happy with me for abandoning all the other Pokémon for her sake, regardless of how much my heart just wanted to chase after her, I continued to organize the rescue effort. Thankfully it was only rescue by this point. Blissey and Chansey had finished their work shortly after Ako left and now the last Pokémon were being flown out from ground zero.

The various Flying types were a big help and silently I resolved that I would need a bigger one of my own soon. Crobat wasn't really meant for carrier duties and for a healer having some means of aerial transport was almost invaluable. *I really could need one right now*, I thought darkly, my mind awl with how I would be able to even catch up with Ako. The fliers were all occupied or not meant for a human... much less two and fighting my way through the fire was becoming more and more impossible with every minute that passed. I was running low on air supply from the mask as well.

There would be a way though. Somehow I would find it. Ako was the best thing that happened to me in my life and I refused to even acknowledge the fact that I could lose her here. She was still alive. I just knew. And as long as I knew this, I would find a way to her.

Finally all the Pokémon had been evacuated and I was able to send off the helpful improvised fire fighters as well. Just in time, too. The fire had already crossed the water and was slowly creeping over the first wall. Having climbed on top of the shelter along with Ako's Blissey, I looked around, searching for the best way to go after Ako. I couldn't expect any of the other fliers to be back for a few more minutes. Minutes which I felt, deeply in my heart, I didn't have.

Then a melodious cry filled the air and I looked up in surprise. There, hovering just about the hazard zone was a Tropius. It was the one from the beginning but it hadn't been back from its first run until now. I had suspected that it had simply been too weak and considering its Grass type, flying in these conditions was rather dangerous. As such I was even more surprised to see it back.

Tropius carefully lowered itself down to my level, both Blissey and I jumped on its back and I quickly recalled my remaining Pokémon. "Are you sure you are alright?" I asked the big Fruit Pokémon. It seemed to be forcing itself to stay airborne. That could simply be because of the heat but I suspected it was more because of its earlier injuries.

Tropius gave an affirmative cry though and I decided not to question any further. Obviously it was determined to help and quite frankly, I was extremely

grateful for the help. I pointed in the direction Ako had run off. "The one who treated you earlier has run off after an Altaria awhile ago. I want to go look for her. Think you can make it?"

After a moment's consideration, Tropius nodded, wary of going further into the heat but still determined. Then I had a thought and felt like smacking myself. I was a qualified Field Medic after all. Since Blissey was already here, I had her give Tropius a little energy boost with Heal Pulse. Tropius gave a grateful exclamation and more firmly than before flapped its wings, taking off.

At first I worried that Ako would have gone too far in to even find her anymore but the agonizing worry lasted not very long. Tropius was fast, the heat apparently acting similar to a Sunny Day effect, accelerating its speed. In no time at all, we had crossed a good distance.

Finding anything inside the fiery blaze from up in the air also proved far less problematic than expected. The shimmering light creating a small zone of apparent safety was all the indication I needed. Tropius swooped in as close and possible and when I finally could see details more clearly, I gasped in astonishment. There was Ako, along with what appeared two baby Swablu. One Altaria was lying still on the ground while the other... the other was creating a small but extremely powerful barrier field around them. I had never seen something like this except from powerful psychics. It looked like a common Safeguard, just a lot bigger. While I certainly knew the move could be altered beyond its actual use, it was rare seeing it from a wild Pokémon. And Altaria was not just holding off the burning stump of a big tree from crushing them, the field was also keeping the fire away.

Shaking myself out of my perplexed state, I quickly thought over the best way of approaching the situation. Whatever the Altaria was doing, it was clearly very exhausting. I doubted it would hold for much longer. The fire was so dense around them that it was unlikely any of my Pokémon could beat it back long enough for Tropius to sweep in and get them out.

I had a plan though but it had to be done quickly.

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

Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)

It IS kind of lonely, I thought with mixed feelings. In fact I wasn't sure what I was feeling. I DID miss Leaf. Now that we had officially acknowledged our feelings, not having her here – despite knowing that probably would be the norm –, was a lot harder than before.

As for my sisters, they hadn't been here a lot in the last years since pushing me into this position. I was used to the exclusive company of my secretary. Even the referee was loaned from the League and mostly on standby – meaning if there was a challenge I could call on him swiftly but he wasn't exactly living in the Gym – which was quite fine with me. We never had much male visitors staying over and there hadn't been one actively staying since our parents died. Not that I really remembered anything about it.

So... No, I didn't really miss my sister's presence. There wasn't really any change in the daily schedule to make such a statement. What I missed might be more along the possibility of them coming back at any time. Our fallout had produced a kind of... finality. Okay, that might be a little harsh. After all I had no intention of keeping them out forever, only until they got it through their heads that I was my own person now and that everything didn't just end with their decision and me going along with it dutifully anymore.

Unfortunately, I knew that they could be quite stubborn once they got something in their heads. I hoped that actually throwing them out would shock them enough that they really started thinking about their actions, though I doubted it.

Well, perhaps it really is a good thing for all of us to cool down a little. For me as well. If I had let them stay, I knew we would have just clashed about it repeatedly, causing no ends of arguments that would have distracted me from what needed to be done. I couldn't afford that, not now. Being on my own again, the time I had for actual training was once more decreased significantly. However, I managed. Even if it meant cutting official challenge hours slightly. With the lull in challengers that was actually much less problematic than some months ago.

And I might soon have actual help around here. With my sisters gone, I had prioritized the search for an assistant a lot more. And I had been in luck. Honestly I had been ready to try out some of those potential candidates I scouted before but that I had been less satisfied with for lack of better options. However, just a few days ago a girl two years younger than me, just having moved to Cerulean had visited the Gym. Not for a match though.

In fact, I had been fairly surprised in finding her at the pool area one day, admiring my Pokémon in their daily routines. Intrigued I had hung back and watched for a bit. After awhile she got bolder and started to approach the Pokémon, watching intently what they were doing. Vaporeon had gotten curious at one point and approached her. To my pleasant surprise she had known exactly how to handle the young Pokémon.

I did make my presence known at this point, having seen enough to pique my interest and we've had a pleasant chat that had told me right away that Aisha might just be exactly what I was looking for. Sure, she had never really participated much in

official Pokémon battles, challenged a League or even went on a journey but that wasn't exactly the most important qualities I was looking for. Battle skills could be taught after all.

The right way to handle Water Pokémon couldn't.

Specializing on a type to a degree of mastery wasn't exactly as easy as it sounded. Most Trainers that didn't specialize might know a lot more about different types but only specialized Trainers knew how to bring out the best in a single type. That could be learned but it took a long, long time for that. A basic empathy for the specific kind of Pokémon was always a lot better to build upon.

And Aisha showed that she possessed this quality right from the start when I let her help with the morning preparations, feedings and other activities that constituted the basic routine at the start of a day. She had a way to connect to my Pokémon that reminded me of myself when I had been younger. I, too, had almost always instinctively known what a Water Pokémon wanted or needed.

And it shouldn't be a surprise after what she had told me about herself later. Until now, her family had been living in Hoenn, in a town close to the ocean. She loved the water, to swim and in that process had grown to like the various Pokémon she had encountered there. When she had become old enough to be a Trainer, she had caught a few but had never set out on an official journey, finding no real drive for adventure away from the sea. But she had participated in several local tournaments to sharpen her skills.

And it was time to see just how sharp these skills really were, so that I could assess just how much work she would need if I accepted her... and I was almost certain I would unless she was totally inapt at battle. Even then, some extra help around here would probably be very useful. Aisha definitely had been excited when I told her I was looking for help and a potential assistant.

Striding into the pool area, I went over straight to one side and turned to face the dark-skinned and black-haired girl on the opposite end. "Ready?" Aisha nodded, a little nervous but not more than what was expected. I could tell she wanted this. After moving away from home, she had been afraid of not finding a place to appeal to her liking. Yes, I definitely would take her in. However, I would really like to have her as an assistant if somehow possible because I doubted I would find someone as perfectly suited as her again anytime soon.

"Alright. We make this a three on three. I don't expect you to win. Just give me your best so that I can assess your skills properly." I had to pause for a moment as the irony of the situation briefly snuck up on me. Just some years ago I was still travelling around with Ash, still learning myself. Even recently Leaf had partially taught me more things. Now, here it was, though, the ultimate proof that I wasn't a

child anymore as my sisters tended to believe. I was testing and thinking about actively teaching someone else.

I hope I could do a good job.

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

Jubilife City, Sinnoh (May)

Jubilife was bustling with activity just as much as I remembered from my last time passing through here. I could have taken a direct flight to the island but I didn't want to impose. In fact since a lot of flight vehicles were in heavy use by the League, there was a greater shortage for the general public. Besides, there was still a good week until I had to be there for registration. The one I managed to get was already heading to Jubilife and from here it was a small trip to Canalave and then to catch a boat.

That forest fire up in the northeastern region of Hoenn had been all over even local Sinnoh news and a lot of resources had been further deployed in this area. Honestly there was so much going on lately. All I've heard were rumors, whispers behind closed doors... yet, Maylene had been a lot more forthcoming, especially after I voiced my own concerns. Apparently all the Gym Leaders had been placed in a state of Emergency Alert. There had been no need to explain that to me. I knew from my dad. He had explained it to Max and I once since we were part of the Gym in some way and should know about it.

Basically a state of Emergency Alert meant that the Gym Leader should see to it that he or she would be ready for a situation needing their attention. Generally this was reserved for impending natural catastrophes for example but also when the threat of a criminal or even terrorist operation was high. Maylene had said that everyone was on edge about Team Rocket operation these days and the League was expanding a lot of resource towards tracking them down in Kanto.

Was that fire really a coincidence then? A natural catastrophe? I honestly couldn't give a certain answer to that question, however, I felt a lot more reassured in my decision to stay with Maylene a little longer and resume the training I had begun with her.

Not that I was too sure about my progress despite the stout praise Veilstone City's Gym Leader had given me upon departure. Others trained Martial Arts for all their life and regardless how much talent I might have, I was not that deluded to think that I could catch up to that in a couple of days.

At least I felt more ready. Ready for what I wasn't sure. Just ready.

"Something is going on," Naru stated next to me and I nodded wordlessly. I had noticed it, too. There was something else about Jubilife, a certain... restlessness. And then there was the fact that entire streets seemed to be cleared of traffic or were in the process of. There was a lot of police as well.

Then the sound of a siren was rending the air and I jumped back in slight surprise even though it wasn't anywhere close to where we were. In the distance though I could see a motorcycle – probably the local Officer Jenny speeding by and some distance ahead there was another car, some kind of armored van, fast and obviously in the process of escaping.

This wasn't just an ordinary crime chase though. Something about how the other officers were behaving... this was something bigger. And I had every intention of finding out.

Quickly I made my way over to the nearest officer and asked what was going on. He was reluctant at first but then I showed him my Top Coordinator badge and he seemed to recognize me. I might not be a Master but the League was doing a lot lately to equalize the acceptance in both duties and privileges between League Champions and Top Coordinators. Especially since the Kanto and Sinnoh Grand Festivals – with Dawn and my own victories and performance – I had noticed a strong increase in acceptance and... respect for our profession. Even more so than what was already the norm in Sinnoh.

With that respect, of course, also came expectations. I knew that as Top Coordinator I couldn't just look away from a crime right in front of my eyes. As a normal girl before that, I never had or would either. I might not have great ambitions to be some kind of idol and protector like a Pokémon Master would be, however, the desire to help people in need was and would always be there.

What I learned of the situation quickly proved my initial estimation and a lot of my concerns as well. Apparently a renown researcher had been in the city to visit with the Pokétech company on a completely unrelated subject. Approximately half an hour ago Dr. Farron had been assaulted and kidnapped by what eyewitnesses – who had luckily and coincidentally been on the scene – had reported were people in black uniform with a red "R" emblazed in front.

Team Rocket. But why, I wondered. Why here? Why now?

"Do you know what exactly Dr. Farron was working on that would interest Team Rocket?" I asked the officer but apparently he wasn't privy to this sort of information. Which could only mean it was something top secret, something potentially very dangerous if used by the wrong sort of people. People like Team Rocket.

Unsure of what to do and without a sufficient Pokémon to fly or run fast enough, I was pretty stuck on watching for now, listening in to their communications for updates on the situation. Officer Jenny and several other police units were actually doing a good job at cutting off the escape vehicle. Things seemed to be going well and for awhile I thought that offering assistance in any way might be unnecessary after all.

That was once again changed when there was a lot of chaos audible over comm traffic. Apparently the kidnappers had managed to take down two of their followers by blowing up their motorcycles somehow and now they had retreated into a house on the edge of the city, threatening to kill its occupants if they weren't granted safe and undisturbed passage.

Killing people. Really, this was a lot to swallow. Sure, we had been in quite a few dangers, even life-threatening ones but so far my journey never had had such a heavy dose of... realism. I couldn't and wouldn't run away from it though. As a Champion of sorts I did have a responsibility now.

Taking the radio from the surprised officer, I addressed Officer Jenny directly, with far more confidence than I was really feeling. "Officer, this is Top Coordinator May just passing through the city. If you wish, I would offer any help I could provide."

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

I must have been mad, I mused, perched in my hiding spot among the thick crown of a tree. From here I had a perfect view of the back of the house. A fairly normal family home. Two stories, a mild yellow color, the roof a typical red. The space under the roof was reserved for an attic according to my information. It was also the best entry point.

It didn't seem like anyone had noticed my presence yet. So far so good. I still must have been mad. There was no other explanation for agreeing to this harebrain plan.

Flashback

"Unless you have experience in hostage situations, I would rather have it if you stay out of it. No disrespect meant, Ma'am."

Ma'am, geez. You are really someone important now, May. I smiled slightly at the response. Frankly I could understand that, despite my new status, Officer Jenny would be wary of involving a girl my age. Surely a lot of things could go wrong in such cases if you didn't know what you were doing. However, after what I had just learned, I couldn't simply stay out of it. Someone from the League, probably one of the Sinnoh Elite Four was on the way but it would be at best another hour and the kidnappers

were putting on the pressure, threatening to kill the hostages in less than half the time if they were not allowed to leave undisturbed.

Until Officer Jenny had told me what exactly they were after I wouldn't have understood why they would go that far. Now I did and the implications were severe. The police COULDN'T allow them to leave with the researcher.

At first Officer Jenny wasn't very forthcoming with the details and only after I had caught up and met with her in person some distance away from the house the kidnappers had occupied, had she begun to explain.

It was no wonder she didn't want sensitive information like this to be told over an open channel. Apparently Dr. Farron had recently discovered a way in which it was possible to override the standard programming that regulated the Pokémon Capture System. With that it could, depending on application, be possible to override the registration of captured Pokémon and allow someone else to capture a Trainer's Pokémon which normally the system was meant to prevent.

Dr. Farron was not attached to one of the bigger companies and as such his discovery was something that worried the League since knowledge of the core mechanics of the Pokémon Capture and Management System was severely restricted. For good reason. I shuddered at the thought of an organization like Team Rocket gaining that sort of knowledge. No Trainer would be safe from them. They could steal Pokémon from right under their noses. They could even potentially get to those of the Elites if they had someone strong enough for it.

A potential gold mine for criminals. And taking into account all the concerns the League had over Team Rocket's activities right now, I wouldn't dare to imagine just what other evil they could do with knowledge like this. No, they couldn't be allowed to obtain this. And as such Officer Jenny had made it quite clear, that they couldn't give in to their demands... no matter the consequences.

Pushing back the nauseous feeling at what this could mean for the family taken hostage, I also drew confidence and justification out of that fact. Time was running against us. "I don't. However, there is one significant advantage I have over everyone else here. They don't know yet I am here and I doubt they could have anticipated it since I came in without anyone being aware of it. You said it yourself, we don't have much time left. We can't let them get away, so we have to try and save the hostages. Now."

Officer Jenny pursed her lips, obviously trying to come up with a counter argument. After a few moments of tense silence, she heaved a sigh of defeat. "Very well. But we really have to do this fast and I won't have much time to coach you properly." She turned and walked away. "Come on, let's make a plan."

End Flashback

"... the scene has been cleared. Situation. Three suspects accounted for." I perked up at the message that came over the radio I was given. That was the code signal that said Officer Jenny would now start engaging the kidnappers in an attempt of negotiation on her side, in front of the house. We both knew it was pointless with what was at stake, however, it served to get their attention.

The message was my code signal that this was the point where I had to make my move. Three kidnappers had been spotted which was the number that eye witnesses had reported. Of course, at least one more should be expected at least. Someone driving the van at least would have to stay put while the others had grabbed Dr. Farron. Which meant there was one more that stayed hidden, probably securing other avenues of entrance.

"The other one is at the right side room right now. If we want to move, we have to do it now," Naru stated, eyes closed and the red jewel on her forehead glowing softly and the silvery fur of her Espeon form standing up. I grinned. Her abilities really came in handy in such a situation.

Releasing Blaziken, I quietly nodded towards the roof of the house, holding onto my first Pokémon while Naru also clung onto him. Despite the extra weight, Blaziken cleared the distance with a single leap and, thanks to some of the extra training with Maylene he had benefitted from, landed with no sound at all. Naru used the psychic powers of her current form to open the roof window as gently as possible, then immediately dropped inside, followed by Blaziken.

I gave two clicks on my radio to signal that we were about to enter the house, then followed my Pokémon. The easy part was over with. Now it would be getting hard. One mistake could cost the hostage's lives... and probably my own. I can't say I wasn't nervous but after going this far, I didn't allow myself to think about it further.

Just like during training and what Maylene had always said to me helped as well. I was more suited for an unrelenting offense, never letting up. If I paused to think about it too much, I would definitely fail.

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

It was definitely a new experience. I couldn't remember doing anything like this before. If the situation wasn't so serious, I might have actually enjoyed the thrill, however, right now it was more distracting than anything. Maylene was right, I was a rather direct person... or perhaps I had become a rather direct person over the years spent travelling. Especially since going off alone. Without anyone to cheer you on or listen to your worries, you would have to learn thinking for yourself more and more.

Even more so you would need to trust your own judgment or nothing would ever get done.

And that's what I needed to do right now. There was no point in hesitating and no time to do so after coming this far. Moving swiftly but silently, making no apparent sound on the floor, I eased open the door and peered outside. Immediately in front of us a staircase went down, winding around, so that one couldn't look straight down to the next floor.

Frowning, I looked to Naru for confirmation and upon her nod began to ease down the stairs, my two Pokémon following. I really would have liked to recall Blaziken for the moment but the house was rather quiet. The only sound was from outside, where I could faintly hear Officer Jenny over a megaphone, trying to speak to the kidnappers. I feared that the sound of a recalled Pokémon could be detected, especially with people who certainly had to be attentive for any kind of threat.

There was no problem in the end, descending to the second floor. I was surprised they didn't have anyone up here, merely covering the ground level. In fact the oddity gave rise to a quickly strengthening suspicion. Reflexively I pressed my back to the wall, right next to the largest room on the floor, apparently the main bedroom. The door was open and if we wanted further down, the stairs were directly opposite to the door. Naru hadn't detected anyone else but the four downstairs. Then again, she wasn't as effective as a true Psychic Pokémon in this form. It was quite possible that she had missed something.

If Naru was put off by the lack of trust my actions implied, she didn't show it. In fact, she really wasn't the type to be offended or overestimating her own abilities. A slight sound of movement drew my attention, justifying my caution. I glanced down but Naru just shook her head quietly and frustrated. If there was someone there and even now she couldn't sense them...

Of course! My mind briefly flashed back to what I had seen of Dawn's final match at the Kanto Grand Festival. It made sense. The question was of what to do now... Before I could think about it though, the sound got closer and my eyes widened. I had no more time to think about it. My body moved on automatic, knowing immediately that if we were discovered now, everything would be over. The man had barely passed the doorframe when a hard fist to the stomach caused him to bend over with a quiet gasp, before a quick chop to his neck knocked him out cold.

I panted slightly, just now realizing exactly what I had done and marveling at my own effectiveness. Yes, I really had to be grateful to Maylene. Next to the man was a Poochyena, also collapsed with several needles stuck into its body, the ones in the neck obviously taking it down quick and quiet.

Naru looked back at me somewhat satisfied and reverted back from the Jolteon form she had temporarily taken for this. Once more as an Espeon, she led the way further down. We had to move quick now. If any of their members didn't report back in some fashion, the others would become suspicious. There seemed no further Dark-type influence this time and with Naru's help, Blaziken and I made quick work of the other patrolling kidnapper before moving on to the living room.

Here things were getting tricky. A quick glance around the doorframe confirmed the position of everyone. One was at the window, obviously keeping an eye on police activity outside. The other two were keeping an eye on the family. I grimaced at the scene. The parents were wrapped up together by a Victreebel while the two children, no older than ten were bound by rope and a Scyther stood guard over them, it's blade-like arms seemingly ready to strike at any moment. For further insurance there were four Beedrill hovering over each of the hostages. They really meant business.

But where was...? Ah, there. Against the far side, towards the door leading to the terrace stood a middle-aged man in lab clothes, easily making him out as Dr. Farron. There weren't any Pokémon guarding him like the family. Then again, they wanted him alive after all and it wasn't like he could try anything, even if he wanted to.

I can't just act. They are all very attentive, I thought. Especially not with just the three of us. I needed a distraction. Remembering my radio, I debated for a moment, then decided to take the chance. Waiting for Officer Jenny to start appealing to the kidnappers again, I tapped it two times short, gave two more clicks, then tensed, getting ready to act in a heartbeat. I didn't have to wait long. Mid-speech there was suddenly a horrible screeching sound like a microphone calibrated wrong. I knew that was deliberate but it sounded accidental enough.

Quickly I released Butterfree, Ninetales and Glaceon. There wasn't a need to give any commands. We had briefly gone over the strategy for this part and while we couldn't have been certain of the exact situation and positioning, the general idea remained the same.

It was really a well-coordinated action. Butterfree went after Victreebel with a highly concentrated Stun Spore. Naru, once again as Jolteon had jumped out and sent a Thunder Wave over the seating area. This would affect the family, too, but it was really better than any other option. The Thunder Wave wasn't too strong, but it did its job of keeping the Beedrill from reacting at which point Glaceon and Ninetales made quick work out of them.

After nailing Victreebel with another Pin Missile, causing it to release the parents, Naru shifted quickly to a Flareon and finished it off with a quick

Flamethrower. By that time Blaziken had already nailed Scyther with a flaming kick that sent it flying straight into one of the thoroughly surprised kidnappers.

While that was going on, I had immediately moved to the one at the window. The man had turned in shock but then quickly got ready for a fight. Obviously he didn't really think me a threat and I had to admit that he was decent enough in hand-to-hand that I would have been horribly outclassed without any training. As it was, my outright charge clearly made him underestimate me and within seconds I slipped under one of his punches and knocked him out with a sharp uppercut.

Heart racing and blood pumping fast, I turned around to see how my Pokémon were handling their end of the fight and realized there wasn't anything left to do. Surely I couldn't prevent the pride I felt for my Pokémon from showing in my face. The kidnappers' Pokémon were all down and mine were now standing guard over the two other kidnappers, wrapped up in a Leafeon's vines... Naru grinned satisfied.

Taking several calming breaths to calm my racing heart, I reached for my radio. "Situation under control," was all I managed, the reality of just what exactly I had done and accomplished beginning to really sink in.

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

Leaf

In the end the trail had really run dry. Whoever had been responsible for leaking information about Lance's absence during the cave incident had covered their tracks well. I was almost sure it was a hacking job by now and whatever physical trail there was could very well have been nothing more than a distraction.

While I was fairly decent with computers, I neither had the time, patience nor more refined skill to investigate further into this direction. Thus I had left what I found with the intelligence department of the League – that's what they paid their analysts for after all – and got myself a new assignment.

And yes, I got scolded again for not taking a break. However, I couldn't afford it right now. The time was drawing near and there were still so many open questions, still so many things we had to prepare for. Every little bit could help to keep the others safe... or at least keep them a little safer. To keep Misty safe...

I couldn't help the giddy feeling and smile as my thoughts briefly were drawn back to the redhead. I couldn't help it. Not anymore. The decision had been made and it was irrevocable. Not that I was unsatisfied with that. Definitely not. And at the moment I felt rather silly for denying myself this joy for so long. No longer did I believe it would be a problem in the long run. Instead I was only more motivated.

Even some people back at Headquarters had commented that I looked more... lively. I suppose that was a good thing. Even I had to admit just overworking without some form of... stress relief was bad and would probably lead to an early burnout at the most inappropriate time. The short date with Misty, despite and because of everything that came along with it, had helped remind me of and cement the reason why I was doing all this.

And that's why I knew that the time for side activities was almost over. Team Rocket could strike at any moment and while the top brass of the League had done a magnificent job at predicting the most likely target points, it remained ultimately just that. A prediction. I wanted something more tangible. At least a general area.

A big part of me still thought they'd be striking where Ash and the others would be. Giovanni had already shown that he obviously knew much more about our purpose than he should rightfully have. I wouldn't put it beyond the man if he knew exactly who the Chosen were and was waiting for just the right moment to strike and take us out of the picture prematurely.

On the other hand, the qualification round for the Harmony Cup was almost too obvious. Security would be very high already and considering the raw potential of skilled Top Coordinators and various top Trainers who were there to scout potential future partners, I would find it at the least very daring to strike there.

Still, I had resolved to get myself a clearer picture of the situation on site... or at least that had been the plan until the call came in from Sinnoh, once again serving to sidetrack me. Although, it wasn't really a waste of time despite the situation having been cleared up before I could really do anything.

I had to admit, I was impressed. May had come far with the little I had given her almost a year ago. As reckless as I personally thought the stunt was, it had been perfectly executed. Well, almost perfectly. The kidnappers in the house had all been taken care off in a swift and efficient manner for someone who had no experience in this area. I was slightly shocked at the other girl's physical skill and power as well. From everything I knew, I wasn't aware that she possessed any sort of fighting skills and yet the evidence was right there. Well, that was good. If everyone picked up something unique to contribute, our strength would only be greater for it.

What she did miss, at least until a few moments ago when her strange constantly transforming Pokémon had obviously informed her about it, was the last member of the kidnappers trying to sneak away from the house. His stealth was commendable and I didn't know how he managed to avoid perception by Espeon – perhaps because he had already been outside by the time May entered and her Pokémon hadn't focused beyond the interior of the house. However, I had found myself a good observation point and with the little ability I could draw from my power, I doubted even the police force was aware that I was there.

Neither was the kidnapper who broke out in a sudden run when he realized that May had caught on to him after all and was charging out of the house. He would probably have made it to the edge and out of the perimeter. Unfortunately that was right where I had hidden myself.

The poor fool never saw it coming when I casually stepped around the tree and chopped him on the neck, instantly causing the man to collapse with a gasp of surprise. Unconcerned, I bent down to check on him and found that the only thing of note he was carrying was a tightly wrapped bundle of papers. Suspicion and dread rising, I began to undo the binding while giving May a look somewhere between sternness and amusement. "You missed one."

The brunette stared for a long moment more, shocked into silence by my sudden appearance no doubt. "I didn't expect to see you here of all places," she admitted finally.

I grinned. "Just doing my work. Though it seems you have taken away all the fun already." She blushed cutely. I had almost been tempted when I found her the first time, shortly after the Sinnoh League Championship. Of course, I also knew that she wasn't meant for me and that I clearly didn't want to get involved in that kind of complicated mess. Now it wasn't an issue any longer since I had found the right person after all.

"Still, good job, I guess," I admitted, feeling that some praise was in order. She really couldn't have known about the escapee. In fact THAT should have been the job of the police. "Now, let's see what was so important to sneak away from his pals."

I glanced over the papers briefly. Really I barely understood even the basic content but it was enough to make me swear lowly once I comprehended what exactly I was holding and that – even while we had barely prevented this to fall into enemy hands – the implications were very troubling.

"Oh, this isn't good at all."

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

Maia's Prophecy

MysticMew watches Maia flutter around, muttering to herself at high speed.

MysticMew: Uh, I don't think she is up to sane talking right now.

Maia: *flutters* And then we do this... and let them go there and then... eheheheh... yes, yes, perfect! Peeerfect!

MysticMew: *sweatdrops* Um, yes, definitely not up to it. The sad thing is, I have no idea whether or not I should complain or be happy that she's so high.

Inspiration-high that is. After all it's mostly because of that we had this episode ready for posting so soon despite the above average length...

Maia: Ah, new food! *gobbles up latest review and chews contently* Wonderful! Limiter release! Inspiration Full Drive... Ignition!

MysticMew: *blinks* That was on purpose. I know it was. She's not going to stop harping on me to write something with Nanoha in it until I cave in... Sad thing is, I actually want to! *weeps comically* Oh well... I guess I have to do the preview. Now then, how did that go again? I see...

Maia: Oy!! Are you trying to steal my segment?!

MysticMew: Well, you were...

Maia: No excuses! *points Raising Heart at MysticMew*

MysticMew: H-Hey, wa-wait a minute, where did you get...?

Maia: DIVINE BUSTER!

MysticMew: ... *is out cold on the floor, smoking*

Maia: Hah! See that! I am the awesome muse Maia and none shall stand against my power. *clears throat* Where were we? Oh right. It's the turn for my awesomeness again. Well, more awesomeness. The only awesomeness I am legally allowed in this... Now that I think about that, it's really unfair, hmm... Oh, right. My awesome prediction. I see...

Narrator: *limps in* I will stand for this no longer. My contract this time states clearly that no excessive violence can be used against me!

Maia: *glares at Narrator for interruption* STARLIGHT BREAKER!

MysticMew: *peers through one half-open eye and muttering low* Now that I saw coming. *keeps on playing dead, ignoring the smoking crater next to him*

Maia: No more interruptions. Good. I see, I see, I see in the future... I see, a love rival for Dawn... that is NOT May! I see, a grudge match... sort of. I see... lots of cliffhangers getting resolved. *cackles evilly* So, next time on TFSTTM

Reloaded: Unexpected Challenges! The Ugliness of Jealousy!

Nanoha: *walks in* Can I have Raising Heart back now?

Maia: *hands the device back* Here you go. Thanks for letting me borrow it. *she flutters after Nanoha as they leave*

MysticMew: *raises head* Definitely high. *looks at where the Narrator used to be* Uh... That's going to be nasty.

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

Author's Notes

I almost forgot how much a hyperactive muse can be both a pain and a pleasure. Maia has been really wild on these last two episodes – despite her complaining –, let's hope she doesn't keel over from exhaustion anytime soon.

As such, I am once more rather satisfied with this episode myself, which as I always like to remind you, doesn't happen often. We had several days pouring out two scenes at once, that is why this slightly above average length episode (because

of the double focus) is already ready for posting two weeks after the last. I did not expect to have it finished already by now.

Alright before you go and shoot at me too for the various cliffhangers in this episode, let's rather get to the notes. I hope you liked my attempt to point out/explain/deal with the gross discrepancies between the level of technological potential in the Pokémon World and its actually physical manifestation. While on the one hand we have an extremely complex system of capturing and exchanging Pokémon over great distances that speaks of a high level of technology, we hardly ever see things like cars or flying vehicles, at least not on the official side. Cars seem to be more of a luxury item. Gary had one in the beginning when he was still prancing around, Scott had one (but considering how much he moves around, I can understand that one) and Oak always seems to have one as well. What we see most are transports of some kind but even those are mostly limited to the cities. Roads in between cities/towns/villages are made for travelling on foot or bike.

As for flying vehicles. It's mostly helicopters, rather often from criminal organizations like TR, too. Hunter J had an airship (again someone operating outside the law). We saw a zeppelin here and there. The first time I can recall a plane in the anime is at the start of the Unova arc, which considering the distance between regions does make some sense. Of course since everything from the start of the Sinnoh League is obsolete in here...

The still vastly untouched nature in the Pokémon World further suggests and supports the fact that pollution is obviously rather low. When I wrote Brock's scenes all this kind of jumped me in the face and I ended up writing a few lines about it. Later then I realized that despite the discrepancy it actually works out nicely with the back story Maia and I have come up with and that I can actually explain the current state with it. But more on that later.

Okay, I revealed a little more and a little earlier about Naru than I wanted at this point. Unfortunately it would have been rather illogical not to do this while writing the kidnapping scenario. Yes, Naru is like Moty in the original TFSTTM... and since I know there is probably no one here that knows about that..... no, I won't say anything. You've got to wait for the explanation within the story, so don't ask. ^_^

And yes, Infernape had a Dragonball-esque moment, sorry about that. I just couldn't resist. I hope you liked the match so far since people have been complaining about the main characters winning their matches too easily. It's certainly... different. Can't really say how to classify the match but it's definitely not your typical Pokémon battle. And please don't read too much into my use of ninja techniques à la Naruto. There is no deeper meaning aside from some theoretical application.

All in all the entire episode offered a great dose of harsh reality impacting on the main characters. While it wasn't actually quite intended, I believe this serves

nicely to set them up for future events. Thusly I changed the title announced last episode since it fits better that way. Not because to further antagonize my muse. *glances around* I'm not that suicidal. Next one will probably be a little less action-orientated. There will be a Contest battle... sort of... if you can even call it a battle. That's all I'm going to say.

As always, read, review and pray we don't run out of steam anytime soon... which your FEEDback can help with.

Maia: Fooooood!

Quiet, you.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias