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## Pre-Note

So, this is the last episode before the great final. Again, I'm a little disappointed with the lack of reviews for the last episode. Only kmaster reviewed again – thanks for that – and here I thought we'd gotten a good one out and I even left enough cliffies to complain about. \*pouts\*

Slight warning we are definitely going into higher rating territory. Not sure if this is quite R/M yet. There is... suggestion. Clear enough that it is obvious what will happen but not really much graphical description. Make up your own mind. I set the rating high enough initially to be on the safe side after all.

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## Narrator aka MysticMew

Yes, me. Since the old one is, err... indisposed after Maia's last segment, I have to do this. Why must Maia always be so much trouble. I should have known better. It didn't work last time. Why should it now?

Erm. Alright. I have better things to do, so let's get to do it. "In the last episodes we have seen how the rest of our heroes are faring. After Leaf and Misty had to solve their own emotional problems – not without a fight between Misty and her sisters – while Brock and Ako had departed from Heal Bell only to be pulled into a rescue mission at Ako's home village where a forest fire had started. In the midst of a

dangerous attempt to save local Pokémon, Ako has suddenly chased after an Altaria and now Brock must risk everything to save her." I show scenes of Ako working at the shelter, treating Altaria, then running off into the fire.

"Meanwhile May stumbles upon a kidnapping and puts the new skills she has learned from Maylene to good use." I show scenes where May methodically takes out the kidnappers.

"But even Ash and Dawn seem not to escape the lessons of reality imposed upon our heroes. Ash, still struggling with his actions upon saving Mew some weeks prior, is challenged by Elite 4 member Koga and forced to face his own problems. How this battle will end and how the rest of the unexpected side adventures everyone has found themselves in will turn out, we will see now!"

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### **Blackthorn City, Johto (Ash)**

The steady rise and fall of breathing, even so faint in this small body, was a far more reassuring sound than the beep of machines keeping my best friend stable. And yet, watching Pikachu slumber more peacefully now, I still felt the tight knot in my heart. The feeling of guilt. I could have prevented all of this, if I had not been so... weak.

In the end, as much as our final stand had been necessary, it didn't have to be. My hesitation, my uncertainty, my lack of trust had cost us this match and would have unmistakably cost us more if Koga had not merely wanted to make a point. Fighting back from this depression and doubt had been tough and that alone had cost far more.

### **Flashback**

When the image once more flashed through my mind, I stomped down on it hard, then several more times with the power the renewed trust in my Pokémon and the understanding of my responsibilities, regardless how harsh they might be, had instilled within me.

There was no hesitation. There couldn't be. This was a battle, a battle on a scale where withholding power led to defeat and defeat in battle would ultimately lead to worse things to everyone that I wished to protect. That was how Koga wanted me to think, right? Well, fine then. I hope he was ready for the consequences then.

"We won't turn our back." Pikachu's aura erupted into furious sparks, his speed momentarily becoming more than enough to match Ninjask, even if just barely. "We won't look away." Unlike that time, Pikachu and I had learned from the

shortcomings of this technique without a proper setup. Well, I hadn't really wanted to think about it but I had also seen to it that Pikachu would be leaking electricity into the air for the entire battle. Small amounts, barely visible and much less noticeable at all. And it would be wasted energy if I didn't let him use it now.

*We will use this power to become strong. Strong enough to stop unnecessary sadness and sacrifice,* I finished the vow silently, finding my thoughts echoed by Pikachu's. The time for games was over. This wasn't just a competition anymore. It wasn't about dreams of success and greatness. It was real and would become only more so. I could feel it. This battle, even if it had taken more and more the shape of a lesson... No, because, it had become a lesson, we could not afford to lose. If we did, then we would never be able to move forward.

Already Pikachu had finished the first stage. I looked over towards Koga but he merely watched, impassive, showing no intention of stopping the fight. He must know about the move, of course. As much as it was our greatest and yet most fearful trump card, it was far less a secret than I would have liked after using it live to be seen on TV for the first time. Well, that couldn't be helped.

Clenching my hands, I forced myself to watch. This was the first time I had ever used this in a real battle since the final. And Ninjask was merely insanely fast. It didn't have Shadow's defense technique and that small body wasn't exactly sturdy. However, I couldn't afford to have Pikachu lower the power any further. Not only was doing it at even less power comparably harder to keep control, but I also couldn't be sure just what Ninjask could take. Koga was an Elite and I had to trust that he knew best when something was beyond his Pokémon's ability.

The sky was awash in the brilliance that was Pikachu, hovering above the tight cage constructed in which even Ninjask's speed would make evasion impossible. *Now!* I thought and Pikachu descended. I did not dare take my eyes off the scene. It was something I had to face. If I had the willpower and resolve to do this, then I would have to watch it to the very end.

Of course, that wasn't the sole reason why I couldn't look away. The real reason was far more practical. I was looking for one tiny, important detail and waited for that one moment, my senses alert and waiting to detect the slightest movement. This technique was still unrefined at best. So far I had been able to hide it but it was hard and very draining to keep locating Koga's Pokémon this way. Especially since Ninjask was far more able to hide its presence from me even within the reach of this ability.

As such it was but the tiniest of breaths within a constant breeze. Had I not been actively looking for it, I wouldn't have realized. *From your right, at roughly two o'clock.* "And we don't need this move to win either!" I declared loudly even as Pikachu turned in mid-descend, impossible as it seemed. More electricity pushed into

his tail from above, forming a gigantic sphere, easily two or three times greater than himself. "Heavenly Missile!" The sound of Pikachu's tail swinging around shook the arena with a thunderclap that I was sure could still be heard at the outskirts of the city. The heavily modified Electro Ball shot forward, accompanied by the gathered electricity instead of moving downward like in the original move, arced and followed the sphere that acted like a magnet. Right towards the real Ninjask that had come charging at Pikachu at breakneck speed at the moment of his descent.

And yet, despite expecting it and countering with what Pikachu had barely been able to complete a few weeks ago, Koga's voice was steady and clear, even over the roar of thunder and lightning. "Guillotine."

## **End Flashback**

And that's how it was in the end. A tie. Amazingly enough Ninjask had not only used a move I had no idea it was even capable of doing but its sheer speed had allowed it to cut through Pikachu's own attack and strike at my best friend... only to take the full brunt of the extremely concentrated electricity in the process.

Suffice to say, both Pokémon were not in the best of states. Yet, even while Dawn ranted a little and Mew was somewhat upset with Koga as well, I couldn't resent him for letting the battle come to this point. This lesson was indeed a painful one. However, I knew now, with some more time to reflect, it was one that was necessary and one for which in the end I could only feel gratitude towards Koga.

Humility. Yes, I think that was right. A lesson in humility. Humility not so much to remind me that there were still those out there that could compete with me equally. No, humility in thinking that I could shoulder all the burdens myself, that I alone had this responsibility.

No, I wouldn't forget this lesson.

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**M&M DreamWorks Presents**  
**The Final Step to the Master Reloaded**  
**Second Arc: Glimpses of Destiny**  
**Episode 06: Unexpected Challenges! The Ugliness of Jealousy!**

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**Jubilife City, Sinnoh (May)**

She really was the last person I had expected to meet today. I suppose those were the times where I was reminded of my new, fresh status and all it included. Actively encountering the famous and best Trainers and Coordinators was suddenly a lot more likely than just stumbling upon them during regular travel.

The first time had been like that as well. Appearing out of the blue, without warning, offering me help when I wasn't even sure myself I needed it. I might have been more suspicious but the timing had been perfect. Seeing Ash perform at the Sinnoh League, the level of his growth, seeing Dawn with him, too... I knew I was too far behind them.

And so I had accepted with no questions asked. If given the choice again now, I wouldn't have done anything different. So yes, I was grateful, even though I barely knew the girl, our only association being Ash and Dawn in extension.

Shaking of the memory, I focused back on the situation at hand. "What do you mean?" With the immediate threat gone, I had been able to calm down my racing heart a little, although the adrenaline level was still quite high. It had just started to seep in just what I had done and how... easy it had happened when Naru had spotted the last kidnapper on a last routine check of the area.

I peered over Leaf's shoulder and grimaced, not being able to make heads or tails of what I was seeing. Well, at least it didn't seem like the other girl did much better. Just enough apparently to make an assessment of just what the content was about. What could have been so important for that guy to leave his comrades behind? Secret operation plans or something? That made no sense. Why should he have been with the other kidnappers then. They had been after Doctor Farron and his discovery...

A horrible thought crept up on me. "You don't mean..." Leaf silently pointed at something and then I saw the words. "Pokémon Transfer System". The young Master growled and strode away, towards where the police had secured the rest of the kidnappers, the hostages and the researcher who was the cause of all this... whom obviously was clearly a far more active part of this than we had believed so far.

No way. Why? Why would someone do that? Didn't he realize how much pain he would cause by giving this kind of information to a wide-reaching criminal organization like Team Rocket? What had been the point in all this? The family getting involved, my efforts, for what purpose had it all been?

Robotically I had followed behind Leaf as she marched up to Officer Jenny, not quite able to grasp what was going on. "I don't believe he needs any medical attention, Officer." Leaf handed her the papers and Jenny took much less time to realize what they were with a scowl of her own. "That was quite an interesting scheme. Also a rather disgusting one. Tell me when did you decide to make a deal?"

Before or during the kidnapping?" Farron remained silent, looking away. "I have half a mind to beat you to a pulp right here but I think prison will serve you well enough. For a long time."

I didn't quite share her sentiment. It had taken awhile to really set in but now the rage at the audacity of this man, who had so willingly been able to endanger the safety of many Pokémon, endanger the many friendships between Trainers and their Pokémon, was bubbling to the surface. Maylene might have taught me control but she had also encouraged to make more use of my emotions as they were a greater fuel for my style.

Both Leaf and Jenny jumped back in surprise when I grabbed a hold of Farron's coat and slammed him against the side of the van that had been part of the police unit. "What the hell were you thinking? Don't you realize what they would do with these kinds of information? They could just take Pokémon of others without any hindrance, without any consequences! Why?! Why would you do this? I don't get it! Tell me!"

I didn't even realize how much strength I was applying and that the older man was gasping and moaning under my tight grip, but right now I didn't care and couldn't even recognize any of this. The outrage inside of me needed a release, it needed an answer!

"As if... I care..." Farron eventually wheezed out. "I made a great discovery but I would never get anything for it. The League would just cover it up, probably just put me to work somewhere and no one would ever see me again because it's... too dangerous." I snarled at the uncaring tone and attitude. There was no regret in the man. I had hoped they had just managed to pressure him into giving them these plans during the kidnapping. But that wasn't the case. I knew that now.

"So what's so wrong with making some money off of this?" That was the last straw. Something snapped inside me and without thinking about it I had cocked back my right fist, poised for a surely satisfying strike. Even faster than that though Jenny and Leaf were there.

"Hey, calm down. Think about what you are doing? Is scum like that really worthy getting your hands dirty?"

I growled angrily, struggling against their hold. But as quick as the anger had exploded, it was receding again. Leaf was right. I wouldn't be any better and Maylene would be very cross with me, if she knew what I had just wanted to do. The Art was for protection, not for beating up the unarmed. Regardless how much they deserved it.

I couldn't resist hauling Farron over my shoulder with my other hand, still gripping onto him and partly enjoyed the satisfying moan of pain. It was far harder to get myself back under control this time than from just the adrenaline rush of before. Even after getting a good distance away from that despicable man, part of me still wanted to go back and smash his face in. And I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing.

"It's quite normal." I looked up at Leaf from where my Pokémon had gathered around, trying their best to help me calm down. "A lot of people would react that way, especially after just getting out of a tense situation. Don't think too much about it, it will just eat you up. Rather think of the good you did here." She gestured towards where police officers were leading the shaken family away. "Because of what you did, they are safe. Because you were here, this didn't get any worse. I'm not sure if I would have spotted the last one in time if it had just been me either."

That actually DID help. She was right, after all. It had turned out alright in the end. The family was safe, the kidnappers caught and the plans were safe. Looking at it like this, I should say this had turned out as best as it could.

Just... "Sometimes this world isn't quite as pure as we like to think, huh?"

Leaf was quiet for a moment. "Yeah. But because we stop the bad things, we can keep it from getting worse and affecting more people."

I suppose that was true.

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### **Fortree City, Johto (Brock)**

One could still see the smoke in the distance. The air was heavy with it and the smell of burned wood. In the end, it was a miracle that the fire hadn't moved further inland early on before it could be contained. A miracle and also a mystery. The lush and fertile vegetation anywhere but in the vicinity of Aprico Village should have been far more likely to cause and attract a fire of this size.

The firefighters were starting to get things under control slowly. There shouldn't be any more danger that it could spread further and in time they would have it beaten back. Or all the possible fuel would be gone. Either way, this area would probably be completely inhabitable now for generations to come.

That was saddening, yes. But right now, I couldn't even begin to really comprehend and sympathize. Ako had been sleeping for almost a day. Exhaustion, coupled with a mild case of smoke poisoning and superficial burns that thankfully wouldn't leave any marks in the long run. I suppose I should be glad that was

everything she had acquired during our hazardous rescue mission. Most of that was, of course, due to her reckless actions in the end.

I had come so close to losing her that it had really scared me. It still scared me now. If I had just been a little slower...

## **Flashback**

There wasn't much time. The fire was only getting worse around us and Altaria didn't look like it could hold on much longer. That probably also meant it wouldn't be able to fly. Another bad thing for a rescue. Ako wouldn't leave them behind, not after coming all this way. And even if all I wanted right now was to see her safe, I couldn't turn a blind eye to what was right in front of me.

"Hold steady," I told Tropius, then called out Ludicolo and Marshtomp. Tropius swayed a bit under the extra weight but stubbornly kept her position. "Use Rain Dance, then Water Spout on Marshtomp." That one was tricky and generally thought not possible but all it really needed was some practice to get the amount of water just right. Next I addressed Marshtomp. "I need you to go down there and create a small opening. Can you do that?" I was asking a lot, I knew. But both my Pokémon understood the seriousness of the situation and grimly nodded. "Alright."

Ludicolo began to awkwardly dance, starting to create a small raincloud centered above us. It would hardly be enough to stop or even halt the fire, but it would help for just a little bit, which was all we needed. Next Ludicolo doused Marshtomp in a layer of protective water to further reduce damage from the flames.

Not wasting any more time, Marshtomp bravely jumped off Tropius. Without needing to be told Ludicolo assisted with keeping up a steady beam of water, momentarily creating a small opening in the inferno below. It was hard to see afterwards and I waited for several long agonizing seconds, stretching almost into a minute before the fire was getting pushed back just a little, then some more, then suddenly a huge torrent of water smashed out of the flames several times.

When I could finally see, I smiled with mounting hope. Where Marshtomp had vanished in the flames, stood now a proud and strong Swampert, firing of Hydro Blasts as if it hadn't been doing all the exhausting firefighting back at the shelter. Now that's what I called a perfect moment for an evolution.

Ako looked up at me with a mixture between guilt, apology and hope. Then her training obviously kicked in and she fished for two remaining spare Pokéballs. Good, she still had some. I had hoped for that.

## **End Flashback**



The rest had been comparatively easy. Blissey had jumped down and gave Altaria a small boost, just enough so that she could get herself and Ako to safety after her babies were safely taken care off.

I looked down at my girlfriend, once again reminded of just how lucky I was to have her but also how fleeting this happiness could be, especially in our line of work. In the back of my mind I had known that these missions we were potentially recruited for were dangerous, life-threatening dangerous. But it hadn't quite set in just how real that danger was until now.

I couldn't lose her. Not after I had just found her. Ako was the perfect woman for me and I couldn't bear the thought of something happening to her. Yet, that possibility at least was a painful reality. Perhaps I should do it after all. Not right now. But after everything had calmed down a little.

Yes, that was a good idea. Ako would want to bury Altaria at least. That had been the most troubling part left in the rescue when she had insisted that we'd take his body with us. That was the problem with the capture system. Pokéballs worked only on the living. With a quick cooperation between Swampert with his now enhanced strength and Tropius bravely flying a bit lower to scoop Altaria up, even that problem was solved. However. I could definitely understand why Ako had not wanted to leave him behind like this after finally getting a small explanation for her reckless behavior on our way back.

Yes, she would want a proper goodbye and probably some time to mourn. *Later then*, I resolved, brushing a hand over my rear pocket and the box hidden within.

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**(Ako)**

It was a small gathering. Of course, it was more than I had expected. Almost all the villagers that still remembered me and were physically able were there to attend alongside Brock and myself. Winona, a couple of the rescue personnel and Bryan were there as well.

I honestly couldn't say that I had ever attended a Pokémon funeral. For most people Pokémon were something mysterious, something that didn't answer to the same laws as us. Pokémon lived long, a lot longer than most humans. Most would outlive their Trainers even if they were together from a young age until the Trainer's natural death. Not that much longer for the average species but still long enough that we humans were never quite touched too personally by the death of a beloved companion.

They were neither invincible nor immortal, however. Excluding perhaps the Legendaries but that was a speculative, wildly unproven subject. Death was as much a reality as it was a constant companion for Pokémon. Especially those living in the wild, away from Pokéballs, Pokémon Centers and all the other wonders of modern technology that in most cases guaranteed that they could live out their life to the fullest.

Therefore I had never watched a burial ceremony before and it was quite a sobering experience that took away quite a lot of the mysticism surrounding Pokémon, making everyone attending – I was sure of that – painfully aware that they weren't quite so different from us. They lived like us. They died like us. Those were simple truths and perhaps if everyone remembered that, understanding would be a lot better.

It was hard not to cry. However, I had resolved not to. Altaria had died bravely. Protecting his family. There had been no regret. And so I had to honor his devotion and strength. I also had to honor my promise. My promise to protect and take care of his mate and children. That would be hard enough. In the end I hadn't been able to do anything for them. In fact, I might have just made it worse by needing to be protected as well.

A gentle squeeze of my hand made me look up at Brock and I was able to push away the depressing thought. \*If you hadn't been there, none of us would have been able to find them later,\* he had said. I suppose that was true. I still hated myself for being so helpless, for not being able to prevent the death of one of my oldest friends.

It wouldn't happen again. Whatever it took, I would become strong enough to make the right decisions, take the right actions next time. Certainly I wouldn't be able to prevent every death but I knew I could achieve more. I had to.

The priest came to an end and with a start I realized that while I had found the whole event fascinating, in a morbid way, that I had hardly paid attention to the words. My thoughts had been drifting again and again to those old times I had almost forgotten and remembered far too late, unable to even have a true reunion with my old friend before his... passage.

Realizing everyone was waiting for me, I stepped forward, my legs feeling strangely heavy, every step seemed to take ages. My left hand gripped the bundle of flowers a little tighter. I had thought about saying something but... I couldn't find the words. I couldn't find them because I had hardly known anymore the Pokémon that had bravely died protecting his family. All I had were childhood memories, blurry and unrelated. They felt so insignificant to the present, so unworthy. That realization was finally enough and I couldn't stop the tears, dripping to the ground even as I knelt down and placed the bouquet in front of the gravestone.

"You were... my first real friend," I whispered, too low for everyone else to hear. This was for us alone. "I am sorry I didn't remember until it was too late. I am sorry for ever forgetting, for being so selfish just because I couldn't bear the loneliness. You had a good life I am sure. I mean, when I last saw you, you were just that small, often sickly Swablu and now you had become this strong, beautiful Altaria that would bravely dive into fire to save those you loved. And you did. They are safe now. And... I... I promise..." At this point I had to stop, uncontrollably sniffing and gulping until I could finish with a firmer voice. "I promise they will have a long and healthy life. I will protect them and if somehow, sometime I won't be able to, I will find people that will care for them as they deserve."

With one hand I rubbed at my eyes, stubbornly trying to wipe away the tears stinging my eyes and obscuring my vision. I had wanted to be strong for him, damn it. Slowly I stood back up and looked down at the grave, hands clasped as if praying. "So... wherever you are now, you do not have to worry about them... or me. We will be fine. Goodbye... my dear friend."

The walk back was even worse, even slower and the last pieces of finality began to sink in. That he was really gone. That all this was real. And that it probably wouldn't be the last time. Not in our line of work. However, out of this realization, out of the immense sadness this realization caused, a firm resolve was born. I would not turn away from this reality. I wouldn't cower or despair. From now on, I would work even harder to ensure that I would not have to experience this again anytime soon.

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### **Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)**

"No complaining both of you. I'm the Gym Leader, so it's my decision. Now get to it."

It was actually kind of cute watching them squirm and complain. The whole thing definitely made me feel more like a respected Gym Leader and less like someone who had just been thrown into the position without being consulted. That excuse was getting old anyway and I had long stopped even thinking about it. The reputation that the Cerulean City Gym had now was because of all the hard work I had – and had to – put into it. Perhaps it was time to take a little more pride in it and not see every small thing as a potential step back.

\*If you push too much, you'll eventually burn out. Listen to someone who knows and still doesn't listen to such good advice most of the time.\* I had to smile at the memory of Leaf saying this to me once. It wasn't a reprimand or a warning, just a friendly suggestion to give or take which made it that much more honest and meaningful.

I suppose I was well on my way to both follow that advice and do it with a clearer consciousness. Aisha had passed her initial test with flying colors. She had definitely surprised me with her battle skills, especially for someone that had never strayed far from home or participated in advanced competitions.

That wasn't to say she was excellent. To be fair I would judge her skills somewhere around the level expected of a decent beginner that had just completed their first journey and League participation. That was okay though. Good enough to build on and actually good enough to provide an extra challenge for the real rookies.

Which was going to be the point of the current exercise involving the disgruntled young boy clearly fresh on his first journey and the somewhat embarrassed and unsure Aisha. Hopefully this would give the girl some more confidence in her own abilities. It had taken me quite some time to draw them out before but once she got going...

I nodded to the referee who also watched the whole thing rather amused. "The battle between challenger Tom from Viridian and Aisha will begin. This is a one-on-one battle, no time limit. The challenger will only be able to face the Gym Leader should he win. Begin."

This wasn't really against the rules. Other Gyms occasionally used to do this as well as their own form of testing challengers. This way the Gym Leader would only face those that actually had a chance of beating them and at the same time relieved them of time and effort that could be spent elsewhere. The practice wasn't as widespread as it had been some decades back. Qualified assistants functioning in such a way were not exactly growing on trees and since they took on part of a Gym Leader's duties salaries were meant to be quite decent, which in turn could put a considerable dent in finances of a Gym which didn't have as much money to begin with.

The risk would be worth it, I decided while watching the boy start out by calling out a Bulbasaur. Technically a smart choice but not quite so effective against Aisha's Wingull. And that one was quite pesky as I had found out. I actually had to lower the limiter on Corsola just a little to deal with it properly.

Which consequently meant it would be Aisha's first experience fighting with one herself right now. But even that wasn't deterring her. Obviously she was determined to make the most out of her chance and the poor boy was far too overconfident. Not even factoring in Wingull's higher speed and the Flying type that negated his weakness to grass, he attacked directly as expected from a rookie. Even Ash had a little more sense by that time than to just attack over and over with Vine Whip and Razor Leaf. Even with the limiter Aisha had Wingull gracefully weave through the barrage and the few glancing blows hardly were enough to deter it.

"If you don't have more than that... It's our turn now," she announced. "Wingull, use Supersonic." Before its Trainer could react, Bulbasaur had already ended up confused and started to attack wildly at random, which wasn't so different from before actually.

"Bulbasaur, come on, snap out of it," Tom cried out but it was no use. Bulbasaur was fully confused and Wingull could safely position himself ideally in order to strike the final blow.

Wingull actually used very few direct attacks and Aisha had him centered a lot around confusing an opponent. Even his strongest attack reflected that. "Now, Hurricane."

With Water Pulse as further part of Wingull's repertoire, it was an ideal setup which could with some luck keep an opponent confused throughout the whole match. Not that an experienced Trainer couldn't find a way around that but I still found it quite ingenious. Perhaps I should advise Aisha to not use THAT move too much. We were a Water Gym after all.

Then again. No, I didn't think I should. "Stop complaining. Pokémon battles aren't always as simple as in theory and guidebooks. You failed to take into account Wingull's double type and got beaten for it. We might specialize in Water Pokémon but that doesn't mean all our attacks have to be that way," I admonished the young Trainer after he started complaining about the unfairness of getting beaten by a Flying-type attack.

This might just serve to beat some sense into contenders and if they proved adaptable enough, it would only be for their benefit. If not, well... there had obviously been little to begin with then.

Sending the disgruntled boy on his way to the Pokémon Center, I checked if any new challengers were scheduled and realized that it was otherwise completely empty. The lull was really getting stronger. Local news were hyping the new Contest type but also transporting the general air of unease. The fire in Hoenn, an attempted kidnapping in Sinnoh – I had been surprised to catch glimpses of both May and Leaf in the news feed but hadn't found the chance to contact Leaf about it – were only more signs that the Pokémon World suddenly wasn't quite as safe, sound and wondrous as it often seemed.

"Good work, Aisha," I congratulated my new assistant. "With some more work, we'll make you into a junior Gym Leader in no time." The other girl's face glowed slightly at the praise but otherwise took it in stride. Good, looks like her confidence was already getting up where it needed to be.

Yes, this investment would be worth the effort and money.

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### **Small town east of Blackthorn City, Johto (Dawn)**

You wouldn't think that just a short time ago they had been engaged in not only a tough, high-level match but that Ash had also agonized with himself over recent actions and developments. Yes, I had been partially upset with Koga. The older man had – and I did not need psychic powers to tell – deliberately forced the match into the directions necessary to make his point. And yet, after seeing Ash bounce back like this and even Pikachu and the other Pokémon after some rest come out of it as lively as ever and perhaps even more determined to throw themselves into training than before, I couldn't really stay angry.

In fact, part of me was actually grateful. I had no doubt Ash would have overcome this eventually. The question only remained when. What Mew implied for our nearest future wasn't exactly a nice picture. It frightened me more when I wanted to admit or show. The last weeks had been a grim reminder already that the reality of the world wasn't so beautiful and simple as it had been while just travelling around innocently, chasing our dreams. Responsibility was a heavy burden and I wondered if I was strong enough to shoulder it already.

Ash wasn't upset about the tie either. He came out of the match more focused and determined, that was for sure. And that reassured me, gave me more strength to face the challenges ahead. We both needed the other to be strong, so that we could feed from this strength as well.

Despite all that, he hadn't lost his cheer and kind nature. I smiled softly from where I was sitting and watching him interact with the kids in the small border town just a little east of Blackthorn. A ferry would pass here in two days that would take us to another harbor in northern Kanto where we could go straight to our destination at Twinheart Island.

In the meantime we had some time to kill and, contrary to what could be expected after the match, Ash had suggested to keep it at merely light training and relaxing. That agreed with me personally. I couldn't remember the last time I had been able to just take a break from everything for more than a few hours. And the kids certainly were happy that a recent League Champion was taking his time to give them tips and answer some of their question. Ash wouldn't admit it, but I think he secretly liked the attention. Perhaps because he felt that not too long ago, he was one of them and would have been delighted at the chance of meeting one of his idols – which, of course he had more often than other kids could ever hope to.

Honestly, he had had such luck from the very beginning. I didn't really want to believe it was just because of his "destiny". Ash had something about him that drew others to him, rose even the interest of famous people. An often simple, yet direct enthusiasm that was easily contagious. And recently he had added a far more mature seriousness and calm to that without totally losing the first. I truly believed that what others might see as great luck or would be even more willing to explain with broad terms like "destiny" was because of his character and because he had worked hard for it.

My drifting thoughts were interrupted by the rising of voices, the general excitement in the group surrounding Ash suddenly growing stronger. I couldn't see from my position what exactly was happening, so I jumped up and slowly circled around the crowd, at the same time reaching out for Ash to glimpse what might be happening.

There was surprise, a bit of shock even, some amusement... It was hard to tell. And then I came close enough to see a boy, no older than twelve or so standing in front of Ash, clearly agitated and shouting. I just caught the end of what was obviously a heated speech. "... must be cheating in some way! There is no way that match wasn't a setup!"

Curious I leaned down to one of the kids and asked what was going on. What I learned had me suppress a sigh. It wasn't uncommon that here and there someone didn't quite believe that the match between Ash and Leaf had been altogether real. Personally I didn't quite see what the problem was. The general standard of the Master League should be around that, too. But perhaps people watched most official Master League matches far less often. Especially since none but a few high tier battles were broadcasted at best. These also quite often served as a bit of a publicity event. Only the truly dedicated knew that the level Ash and Leaf had fought was a common thing among the Elites.

The reason for the boy's – Mark's – adamant belief that Ash's victory hadn't been quite regular was quickly determined when he declared that his father was a former League Champion and so he should know that the things Ash did weren't possible in reality.

It showed Ash's growth over the last year and a half that he wasn't getting angry about the accusation but instead offered Mark a short match to show him that he wasn't cheating. I wasn't quite sure if it helped when he used Jolteon. The boy got upset that Ash wasn't using any of his winner team and even more so than Ash had calmly replied that while Jolteon was still at the beginning of training, she was more than ready.

Defeating the boy and his Bayleaf as easily as he did then, even when he tried to give Mark a chance to show his Pokémon's strengths, clearly didn't help either. I

could see though why Ash did so, much faster than was technically necessary. Mark was getting increasingly upset and impatient with his ability to land a hit and was letting it out on his Pokémon. His attitude worried me and I was sure Ash was feeling the same way. I was definitely reminded of the early Paul in both his battle tactics and dealings with his Pokémon.

Mark didn't take his loss or Ash's attempts to reprimand him for treating his Pokémon the way he did well. "Shut up! I don't need to be lectured by one of the League's pets!" I gasped silently at that statement and the other kids began to mutter louder. Ash asked him what he meant and Mark seemed to get only angrier at that. "As if you don't know! You strut around here with your fancy tricks and grand speeches. Someone like you becomes a celebrity. It's obviously a setup. My father was strong, strong enough to fight with the Elites, but he was never made a Master. Some lucky kid like you who doesn't know anything about real strength, you get so much recognition for just one faked victory! I'll never accept that. One day, I'll be strong enough and then I will show the world that you and everyone else in the League are just there for image and nothing else!"

With that, before either of us could stop him, he turned and stomped away. Ash took a step after him, then hesitated and relented with a heavy sigh. It seemed reality wasn't quite done with teaching us lessons. The life of a Champion wasn't always filled with admiration after all. Resentment, jealousy and envy could just as easily become a response to the achievements of someone else.

I could tell Ash had wanted to try and talk to the boy more but also that he was unsure if he could make him see things differently that easily and in the state he was in right now.

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### **(Lopunny)**

The night was certainly a nice one. Why exactly did I have these kind of conversations at night anyway? Well, okay, not like there were a whole lot. If you counted all previous attempts to get Pikachu's attention, then those hadn't even been at night. So I guess that was a useless thought.

*Geez, listen to you. That's not like me.* I suppose I dreaded this conversation a little, perhaps even more than the one that had been necessary between Pikachu and I, some weeks ago. At that point I had already known the outcome. Yes, known. Not just suspected. It had been necessary to make a clean cut, yet deep down I had long known already.

For all the intelligence we possessed and refined once in contact with humans, we Pokémon were still largely instinct-driven. That went especially for mating. Yes,



mating. In the end it wasn't anything else. Some of us tried to imitate human courtship because it was fun, because we could appreciate the feelings behind them, but in the end compatibility and mating instinct were the beginning and end in order to choose a partner.

When I had seen Pikachu that day over two years ago, my own mating instinct had kicked in big time. Becoming Dawn's Pokémon, learning the joy and excitement of being on stage, giving my best, that had distracted me for awhile but I had never forgotten.

Unfortunately it became apparent, despite Pikachu's kind and best attempts, that the instinct didn't run both ways. While that didn't necessarily mean a success was impossible, it would require the one hunting to claim their prospective mate. In other words, persuade until they accept. Too bad Pikachu was already far too human-like in many aspects. Most other Pokémon who hadn't been in contact with humans and picked up on their behavior, would probably have given in. Pikachu was far more able to make a rational decision, overcoming his own instincts to some degree.

It was okay though. I did not regret the time spent trying, nor did I regret the opportunity missed. There already was another. Only that this time I was the one being hunted. Perhaps... No, that was definitely why I was dreading this conversation a little more.

"Is Dawn sleeping?" I asked quietly when the balcony door slid open.

Prinplup looked back briefly, then nodded. "Probably a lot better than the entire last year. She hasn't had any dreams for days. Now that Mew is helping her control these visions, she can call them up actively most of the time." That was true. I didn't quite understand it completely, however, the reason why she had had them like this for so long was because Dawn couldn't understand and thus harness the source of power they came from, not even after Sabrina's training. It was much better now. And all of us were quite grateful and relieved. She deserved a break from everything. Just thinking that all this was just the beginning...

I sighed. "Perhaps this isn't the best time to have this conversation." Prinplup didn't comment or reply, just looked up into the sky. With a grimace I realized I was trying to stall and that would just end up in the same way as Pikachu and I. I wasn't keen on going through that again or putting Prinplup through it. "But I suppose we waited long enough, huh?"

"A lot has happened." That was certainly true. "I'm sorry for not saying anything earlier. I just... I didn't know how to do it. You were always chasing after him and he's my best friend, so..." Prinplup heaved a sigh, briefly looking at me and then

down to the ground. "I guess I was just being a coward. Even now I can't bring myself to say it."

I blinked, staring at him incredulously. That wasn't at all what I had been expecting. And it wasn't like him at all. Prinplup – well, still Piplup then – had always been brave and trying his utmost, always at the forefront when it came to doing our best for our kind and determined Trainer and Coordinator. He had never had a trouble being direct with Dawn either, if he felt she needed a good talking to.

Well, I suppose that and love were different things. In fact, Prinplup might be just as if not even more influenced by human habits than Pikachu. He was a Starter Pokémon and these, as far as I understood this, were caught young and inexperienced, sometimes specifically bred, in order to be more compatible with the beginners. If he had ever lived in the wild before – startled I realized none of us had ever asked –, then it couldn't have been for long.

I had learned from my experience with Pikachu though and wouldn't make the same kind of mistakes. "I don't think you are a coward." I'm pretty sure I did blush a little. "Actually... I think you were really brave then. It must have been a difficult decision." To be fair I wasn't even sure what I was referring to, most likely the evolution thing. But also the reckless way in which he had jumped into the attack, totally disregarding his own safety... I couldn't deny that I had thought he looked... really cool at that time.

Prinplup didn't even try to hide his own embarrassment. "Ah... You think so? Really?"

I nodded with a smile. "Definitely." Perhaps that was the upside to this new situation. That I was the hunted, I mean. I didn't really have to think too much with my mind or metaphorical feelings. His actions alone would have impressed and got the admiration of any wild female instantly.

Prinplup turned away briefly, perhaps to not show his embarrassment any further. I found it quite adorable. "It wasn't hard." I blinked, then realized he was referring to my observation again. "As much as I'd like to say it, evolving wasn't really about you and me. It was more for myself and Dawn as well." I wasn't sure if I should feel disappointed, but decided I didn't because I could understand the motivation and appreciated the honesty. Prinplup turned back to me and I was momentarily stunned by the intensity in his gaze. "However... If it hadn't been for that, even if I hadn't really wanted to... For you, I would have still done it in a heartbeat."

Okay, this time my heart definitely skipped a beat. That was so cheesy, however, I really was a sucker for all the romantic stuff, human customs or not. I smiled softly at him. "Then... Maybe we should try it out?"

His face lit up and very slowly he began to smile as well.

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## **Indigo Plateau, Pokémon League Headquarters Kanto/Johto (Leaf)**

Once more I found my way back here, but with the new development it had become necessary. I had really planned on checking out Twinheart Island but in the end all I had managed was to drop off May as a sort-of reward for her good work and be on my way again. I knew Lance would want a report on what happened at Jubilife and there was the matter of the prisoners.

Those kidnapers had been well-organized which meant they were definitely higher up the command chain, definitely trusted more with difficult jobs. That they were ultimately spotted, leading to this situation seemed more and more like a lucky coincidence. If they hadn't been, we might have not been any wiser and the potential catastrophe that had ensued would have been very ugly.

That, of course, only raised my opinion of May and her actions. Taking aside the sheer recklessness, she had single-handedly taken down a team of skilled criminals in a hostage situation without any of the hostages coming to harm. I was quite sure Ash and Dawn at their current level could have done it as well but May had also added a rather personal, physical aspect to it which had clearly surprised me.

*Everyone is coming along well*, I thought, trying to concentrate on more positive thoughts. I didn't want to let myself be dragged into frustration and depression. It was far too early for that. Nothing had even really begun. Keeping a positive outlook was even more essential right now. May and Misty had both shown remarkable growth, especially the former considering how little I had been personally involved in it. I didn't need to worry about Ash and Dawn. Since Mew was with them, they might end up better prepared than me in the end! I hadn't heard too much about Brock but he and his girlfriend had apparently taken an active and rather successful role in the forest fire incident in Hoenn a few days ago. Besides the young man had a good head on his shoulders and he had first-hand insight into Ash's training. I wasn't too worried that he would have slacked off, rather the opposite.

Pushing open the door to the conference room, I shoved away thoughts about the others. Both Lance and Cynthia were already here which was almost a common experience by now. At first I had been somewhat... humbled that they trusted me already that much to include me so much in the strategy meetings. I suppose it was about equal parts my direct involvement, my at times tireless work ethic and hopefully a bit of genuine trust.

That feeling had gone away over time. By now I was comfortable enough with them not to bother with formalities anymore. "Do we have anything?" I strode over to

an empty chair and sat down. I didn't like helicopter flights. They left me feeling cramped and all sorts of other things. However, pretty much having a constant access was necessary and I was grateful that I did. As much as I had been travelling around over the last year, I wouldn't even have gotten half the things done without being this mobile.

"Surprisingly, yes." Lance shoved a small folder over the table towards me and I picked it up, surprised to see it was a documentation of the first interrogation session. That had been the real ray of light in the kidnapping situation that had left behind a rather sour taste for the most part. Taking the kidnappers alive could very well prove a stroke of luck, provided they really knew more about the inner goings of Team Rocket than the usual grunts.

I scanned over the information and my eyes widened, then narrowed in suspicion. "You think this is genuine?"

Lance grinned but it was without humor. "You tell me."

"It's a lead, nothing more," Cynthia interjected. "Considering how readily they parted with this information, it could very well be a diversion or a bluff." A bluff which's nature could also be to not make us trust this information. Giovanni was a devious and slippery man. He hadn't been in power without getting caught for so long with being careless. But neither had he been by being overly predictable. The worst thing was, he probably knew that we would take it like this. That in the end left only one course of action and I hated how he was playing us with this already.

Sighing, I put the folder down. "I'll check it out." Holding up a hand to stall their protests, I reasoned, "One of us has to. We can't afford to completely overlook it. I'll just take a quick look to assess the situation."

Both were quiet for a moment. I had no doubt that they had come to the same conclusion already. "Alright. But take one of the Elite 4 with you, just in case," Cynthia conceded and I nodded, seeing the wisdom in that. If it was indeed a trap, it would be better to have someone to watch my back. "I will be at Twinheart Island. This way I can keep a watch on Ash and the others and still have fast access to northern Kanto and Johto as well as southern Sinnoh."

"I'll be staying here. It gives me fastest access to both Kanto and Johto," Lance added. "We have at least two Elites on any major possible target point, so they should be able to hold the line until we can react."

Provided the strike would happen anywhere near these predicted target points. It wasn't like I didn't agree with them on their selection but none of us could be one hundred percent sure. "And Steven?"

"Will stay in Hoenn on standby, just in case. We can't leave the region entirely unprotected, regardless how unlikely it is that they'll show up there." I could understand that. It would be nice to have the other Region Champion here as well but we would have to manage somehow. "Besides," Lance continued, "he still is tied up getting to the bottom of that fire..."

I grimaced, finding some of my fears confirmed. So it wasn't a freak accident of nature after all. Or at least the others seemed to think that as well. A diversion was the most likely explanation right now. The fire had drawn resources, split our forces up even more and caused more general unrest. Yes, looking at it like that, the possibility of a non-natural cause was quite high.

"Looks like they are about to get serious, huh?" I asked rhetorically. The time for waiting was almost over. All parties involved had made their preparation. Now it remained to be seen who was better prepared for the coming storm.

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### **Team Rocket HQ, Location Unknown (Giovanni)**

"Ladies, Gentlemen, welcome to our final strategy meeting." I swept my gaze over the faces gathered around the large table in the main conference room. All of them were with by far my best and most trusted agents. They had displayed their skills time and again, maintained a high success rate in their operations and were generally responsible for causing a lot of grief to the League and all it encompassed.

A gathering like this hadn't been done in years, perhaps even longer. However, now Team Rocket was ready to step out of the shadows. No longer would we be a shady, successful and large, but ultimately mere criminal organization. Now we would take our place in history as the driving force that gave the world back to mankind as it should have been from the very beginning. They despised me now and they probably would for a long time. However, the end result was all that mattered.

"Mission leaders, I would like to hear the status and readiness of your men." Of course, I had detailed reports. I knew everything was well within the allotted timeframe. Yet, hearing it personally would allow me to gauge morale, better catch irregularities. It was harder to lie to your leader – or at least attempt to smooth over minor details – in person after all.

There were none though and I didn't expect any. All of those present here had their own interesting personalities which would make them terrors on the battlefield. All of them also had the discipline I expected of my troops. This wasn't going to be a simple heist after all. It would be war... no, I'd rather like to think of it as a crusade.

Finally everyone had given their report and it was Agent Tulip's turn. As Supreme Commander, she was ultimately responsible for both the entire operation and the main assault. "The intelligence we were given has proven valid. The League has high-level personnel spread out over most of the Indigo Region. We have obtained fairly accurate data on locations and Elites on site. Furthermore Sinnoh Grand Master Cynthia will be present at the Contest on Twinhearts Island which would suggest Indigo Grand Master Lance to stay put at Headquarters." Just as I had expected. That Cynthia would be there could be a pain for that part of the mission, yet the success or failure of that part ultimately did not tangent its general outcome.

"Hmm, very good. It seems like our inside source has been doing good work again. How about the target?"

Domino nodded, not quite able to keep the satisfied smirk from her face. "They do not suspect it at all. Of course with personnel this spread out, they could be there quickly."

I smiled as well. "Which, of course, won't happen if everyone follows the plan. All teams are on standby for now until operation start. I expect all of you to finish your jobs. Every aspect of this plan is crucial to its success." Yes, soon. Soon the world will realize how utterly foolish mankind has been by relying on a controlling, weak governing system like the Pokémon League, stumping our evolution in favor of making peace with those that had robbed us of our natural superiority. "That will be all. I expect great things out of all of you. Soon the day for Team Rocket to emerge from the shadows will come!"

I smirked satisfied, hearing the answering roar of approval from my agents. Yes, everything was ready. And regardless how much our enemies thought they were prepared, they would not be ready for us.

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### **Small town east of Blackthorn City, Johto (Ash)**

I thought I understood before but now I believe I understand even better. *You really have always been the mature one between us, Leaf.* Even back then, she must have realized how much responsibility came with the title of Pokémon Master. Not just for matters concerning Pokémon and human-Pokémon relations. But also the image a Master represented in public. Being a role model for the younger or more inexperienced Trainers.

It wasn't easy. I would like to say that I felt bad about not being able to talk to Mark properly, yet at that time I could tell that regardless of what I might have said, it wouldn't have made a difference. Everything I came up with in my mind sounded hollow and would most likely only serve to make the boy more angry. This was

something you had to learn as a Master as well, I suppose. The ability to communicate with others, to impart your knowledge and convince others if they had taken a wrong path. I wasn't able to do that.

But should I really expect to do better than even an experienced Masters in this situation? When Cynthia had talked to Paul and me, it had still taken a long time until Paul had come around, all the way until our last match at the Championship and even now I couldn't be sure just how much he had changed.

No, feeling bad about it wouldn't change anything. I felt sad, of course, sad for the boy who was brought up believing in a false ideal. But was he to blame for that? No. I wished I had more time, time to see if I could maybe help him further. However, right now, as cruel as it sounded, I needed to see the greater picture.

"Are you sure it's okay? We still have a bit of time to look for him?" Dawn asked gently, obviously sensing the directions of my thoughts.

The battle with Koga had brought many things into perspective for me. As it was I couldn't just do as I pleased. I couldn't just run after every little thing on a whim. These times were over, for now at least. I had to concentrate on what was important.

"Yes, I'm sure. Besides I don't think he wants to be found by, no less talk to us. We would just end up wasting the little break time we have here." I gave her a weak but genuine smile. We had both earned ourselves some time off. Who knew when things would start going downhill and I doubted once that happened, there would be much time for relaxing.

Unfortunately I had not counted on one important factor in this equation and I might be forgiven that with everything else that happened, my alertness was directed elsewhere. A loud squeal was the only warning I got before there was someone clutching my arm and snuggling uncomfortably close. Someone definitely female. Someone definitely... not Dawn.

Ah. Crap.

The other girl was around my age probably. With long blonde hair, light blue eyes and... a rather impressive chest size. Not that I was actively looking but she was sort of pressing these things rather openly against my side and arm. Hey, I might be clueless at times but I am still a guy after all.

"Why if isn't Ash Ketchum! How are you doing, you handsome devil?" I cringed at both the sweet tone and the murderous look in Dawn's eyes. I tried to extract myself but needn't have bothered when the girl was none too gently yanked several feet away. Then her presence was immediately replaced by Dawn, glaring at the

other girl heatedly. I wisely chose to not say a thing. Besides, I secretly enjoyed the rather close proximity...

"I don't think Ash likes being glomped by a big bimbo like you."

*Have to stay quiet. Have to stay quiet.* It hadn't happened often, most of the time we were rather good at getting away from rabid fans and almost all of them were tacit enough... or perhaps simply had enough survival instinct not to do what the blonde girl had just done. Let us just say, the last two that had tried wouldn't do it again and if asked, probably dissuade any one from trying.

The blonde girl didn't seem impressed. "Hmph. How crude. Show some respect to your betters. I have been Top Coordinator for years, freshling. But I guess I can understand that you are afraid of losing your boyfriend to a more mature woman like me. How about it, big boy? Why don't you lose this child and enjoy a real woman? After all with me you will have the real thing. Both as a woman and as a Coordinator." Dawn just glowered and I could tell she was trying to keep her temper in check. A crowd was already forming. We were right at the entrance of our hotel. This was bad. The way this conversation was going, I doubted it would end pretty.

"And just what are you implying? Miss...?" Dawn's tone was even but long experience allowed me to catch the underlying chill. She was very sensitive about her abilities and achievements. Understandably so. Dawn had worked hard on her dream and after what happened yesterday, I was sure she was reminded as well, how some people might see her rather effortless run other than the final battle with Nord this year.

"Warner. Christine Warner. Winner of both the Hoenn and Johto Grand Festival." Christine haughtily swiped her hair back over her shoulder. "And isn't it obvious? Poor Ash, constantly having to string you along. Where would you be without him, I wonder, probably still some weak little girl running after her mother's shadow." I winced again, practically feeling the heat from my girlfriend, every remark starting to melt her cool. I really should do something but the truth was... I was far too afraid of getting involved.

Christine wasn't done though and it only got uglier. "I wonder if those Pokémon of yours have really been trained by you? Honestly a little girl like you could never produce such fine quality. Yes, surely my darling Ash had to sacrifice his precious time to train them for you!"

I closed my eyes in silent exasperation, knowing that the other girl had just gone too far. Dawn could take baseless accusations fairly well, but imply the legitimacy of her skills – and with that in extension the worth of her Pokémon and their efforts – and all bets were off.



I suppose I couldn't fault her since I was the same way.

"You and me. Tomorrow." Christine was grinning at that but I was far more frightened by the grim smile promising many not nice things from my girlfriend. Clearly the other Coordinator would be in for a rude awakening.

So much for a break.

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**(Mew)**

The time was drawing near.

Okay, that sounded far too ominous... even if it was probably true. This short time spent with Ash, Dawn and their Pokémon had been... fun. Despite all seriousness, training and whatnot, I can honestly say it was the most peculiar time I've spent among humans while not having a deeper vested interest. Okay, there was interest and then there was purpose. However, there hadn't been a need for this meeting so early and as such I could enjoy this... leisure far more.

I had never quite forgotten what was at stake. How could I after all? Dawn's training alone was reminding me constantly. As much as Ash's partial and passive use of his sleeping powers had surprised and elated me, I was far more proud of my own charge. There really wasn't much more I could teach her at this point about elemental manipulation in the state things were now.

Once we got everyone together and they had to undergo their trials, we should probably take care of Dawn's trial right away. She was already as ready and prepared as one could be. Having seen her and Ash train and witnessing the battle with Koga, I had no fear that her abilities wouldn't suffice.

The others would have it a lot harder. Out of the other five, only Dawn's opposite had some training in harnessing her abilities already and that came from an inadequate source. Of course, she had done the most for our course over the last months, I knew that all too well and was rather grateful for all her work. With some regret I realized that out of all the Chosen, she was the one I knew the least about. Her contact with Ash had been before his journey and had only just recently been reestablished. She was the one that fell just a little short of the general rule that they were all drawn to him. Or more like that it had happened differently.

No, she probably wouldn't have much trouble either, even if her trial would be harder. Not all of us Guardians were as forthcoming and cooperative as myself. Not all of us were as happy with our role and the state of things... and none of the others enjoyed the freedom I had. They would need to be convinced, impressed and

ultimately proven that their charges were worthy of their cooperation. The other four would really have a comparable harder time, Ash's trial included...

However, that was in the future. A rather close future I feared. I doubted it would take longer than a week at best. The qualification round for the Harmony Cup was a fix point. Everyone suspected that already. It was a logical assumption and I couldn't see Giovanni passing up an opportunity like this. He might be cautious but he was obviously out to make a point. Striking in secret somewhere wouldn't necessarily achieve that. And with IT clearly influencing him already – though I was unsure to what degree –, the situation became even more unpredictable.

Everyone was coming together as well. That couldn't be a coincidence, even if I could see some meddling from certain people high up on the ladder – which I didn't really disapprove of. Air and Light were with me. Earth and Fire would be at the Contest as well, the latter both intriguing and worrying me because of what it would mean for my charge. That was four of them already. Shadow was in rather constant contact with Water, although I wasn't sure if the former would be with the latter or come to see everyone else during the event. Or neither. She seemed to move around a lot. Yet, being already involved with the League, I could safely leave her to her own devices for now.

The time really was drawing near.

I had done all I could to prepare at least those two currently under my care for what was going to come. However, even I couldn't be sure what exactly would happen. Koga had been right, even if it sounded harsh and drastic, it would be war. What shape and nature that conflict would take was much harder to predict, however. A lot of factors went into this. What were Team Rocket's goals in this? How great was the contact and subsequent influence from IT on Giovanni? What were the organization's leader's own designs and plans? If it would have been just about the abomination that had plagued us such a long time ago, that had been our fault to begin, then I could have made some rather clear assumptions on what was going to happen.

Yet, subtle manipulation had always been IT's strong point. As such, using Team Rocket like this shouldn't really surprise me. In the end they were just pawns. Even if Giovanni might delude himself into thinking otherwise. IT was merely biding time and gaining strength. As much of a threat as Team Rocket might be, IT was the real enemy.

My reflection was interrupted when the door opened and Dawn entered the room. I chastened myself for letting my guard down so much that I hadn't even sensed my own charge coming. Team Rocket might have let up on me as it seemed, but that wasn't an excuse to be any less alert.

Ash wasn't with her and now that I scanned the hotel, I noted that he was downstairs somewhere. On the phone perhaps? Well, it didn't matter. I was far more concerned with Dawn. The episode this morning had had her in a funk all day. Not that I could blame her and I had half expected her to demand a match right away. However, both her and Ash were far too adamant in their stance of not using Pokémon for personal fights. Of course, that line kind of blurred when the bond between Trainer and Pokémon was as strong as theirs. Offend one and you offend the other. And that Christine had actually offended both...

"Yes?" I asked curiously, noting her nervous look, clearly sensing that she was reluctant to breach the topic she had clearly come to discuss.

"Um... I actually have a favor to ask." And then I felt it clearly and understood. Dawn wasn't trying to shield her thoughts very much. The mischievous part of me was intrigued but the responsible part was also rather concerned.

"That's a little overkill, you know?" I said before she could verbally elaborate. "Besides, you know that I..."

"I do," she interrupted. "And yes, I could do it any other way. However, I don't want to tip my hand so close to the Contest and... I have a plan." More images and I did smirk a little. Truly devious. I actually approved. That other girl had rubbed me the wrong way from the start as well and if I wasn't so concerned that my charge's motives weren't entirely just because of the offense to her and her Pokémon's abilities than I would have agreed in a heartbeat.

I probably would anyway but... first I had to ask an important question, one that might actually help her think more rationally once it really counted. "Before I agree, let me ask you something. If this would be someone else trying to make a claim on Ash – and don't deny that's part of the reason for this match –, someone you actually knew, someone Ash actually cared about... What would you do then?"

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**(Dawn)**

"We agree then. Standard rules. One match."

It really wasn't fair. That question. Plausible, logical, the rightful concern of someone caring about my feelings and not wanting me to make a mistake, yes. Still not fair. I just wanted to be allowed to do this once in awhile as well. Ash was the most important person to me. I had a right just to be jealous once in awhile, right? If not now, then it wouldn't be ever. I knew, after all, I knew I couldn't allow my feelings to interfere with the coming events, whatever shape they may take.

Christine smirked. "Sure. Let's start already. I can't wait to have Ash for myself." Was it wrong? To get angry at this sort of attitude? This egoistical possessiveness that had no base or reason? What did that person know about Ash? What did that person know about me? What gave her the right to just appear and attempt to take away everything we worked so hard for?

"Alright, girls. Play nice. I will be your judge for this match. Ready?" The local Nurse Joy was kind enough to agree to this. Not that it was necessary. This match didn't need a judge.

It was ridiculous, I knew. Fighting her only meant she was getting to me. But for once I was tired of being the nice girl all the time. I had my pride, too. Years growing up as the daughter of a Top Coordinator, the high expectations that came with it, struggling with the reality of just how difficult it was to reach for the top. If Ash hadn't been there, I would have despaired. That much was true. That was the one thing Christine had gotten right. Yet, even that was twisted. Ours was a mutual benefication, I understood that now.

"Show your beauty and power! Meganium!"

Since then, that first time we met, we had grown together, step by step. And I wouldn't let anyone bedraggle neither that nor all that my Pokémon and I had achieved together. So... No, I didn't think it was wrong to do this. All my Pokémon had offered, almost begged to be the one to take down this... bitch – might as well spell it out. However, that wouldn't be enough. Going by her logic she would just say that Ash had trained whoever I used too good. How ridiculous.

It needed something more... shocking. "Spotlight... Caterpie!"

I couldn't suppress the chuckle at the looks. Even Nurse Joy looked unsure how to react. Ash knew, of course. Christine was just... God, how hilarious. She must think I had lost my mind.

"Are... Are you trying to mock me? This isn't a battle! It's a farce!" Or not. Even better. Let her think that way, it would make the awakening even ruder.

"You are right. I am mocking you. This is all I need. I just recently caught this one, so you can't claim Ash trained her." Which was technically the truth. Only that Christine had no idea what she was really facing. All she saw was a weak, downright insulting Pokémon that couldn't get any worse in a serious match... Hmm, maybe I should have gone for Magikarp after all. No, that would have been really hard to pull off and explain. "Or are you saying, you can't even defeat a Caterpie?"

Christine huffed, indignation clearly written all over face. "It's your funeral." Her type was rather easy to manipulate like this. The Contest circuit sadly held a lot of

people like her. Self-absorbed, so much immersed into their own success that they forgot what being a Coordinator was all about. I had learned that lesson early on thanks to Zoey, the hard way, and I would never forget about it. Now, I could say I wanted to teach this awful person as well but that would be a lot nicer than I felt right now.

"Let's finish it in one shot. Meganium, Petal Dance!"

"Evade, then Tackle." I really didn't have much to choose from if I wanted to stay true to what was actually considered possible. Technically I only had three moves to actively use. That's all we needed though. The difference in attributes more than made up for it. If Christine realized what exactly she was facing, I wonder how she would react? However, I wouldn't tell her. Instant Transformation upon release was a tricky thing to pull off. We were talking about a Legendary with the experience of centuries, probably millennia even, though. There was no impossible in that equation.

Meganium didn't even know what happened. The Petal Dance had barely covered half the distance before it was flung away as if a Snorlax or similar large Pokémon had barreled into it. "String Shot." The threads snapped around Meganium in mid-flight pulling taunt, then *Caterpie* pulled and Meganium actually was pulled back even against the momentum. "Bug Bite." It wasn't just one. A whole series of small, stinging but in the end both in power and quantity extremely potent attacks.

Meganium collapsed with a moan. Less than ten seconds had passed. Christine stood frozen in absolute shock and I took a small amount of satisfaction in that before trampling on the emotion. If I started to think like that I would end up like her.

Was that what Mew had wanted to tell me? Perhaps. I really didn't know. I got the feeling there was something more. There always was with her. Everything she said or did had some meaning, even if that meaning only lay in trying to lighten things up by acting silly. And, of course, I knew by now she wouldn't say anything more than she had to. In that case, the question.

*Caterpie* jumped on my shoulder as I turned and walked away. "Ash isn't yours. Even if I wasn't here, you would be the last person he'd ever go out with. Next time, think more carefully who you pick a fight with. Pray you don't cross paths with me during the Contest because I'll actually get serious then." I couldn't quite suppress the urge for a parting jab. "Amateur."

So... Did I have an answer to Mew's question? Of course not. How should I know what to do then? I'd like to say I wouldn't get jealous. I'd like to say I would definitely handle this differently than just now. In fact, I'm pretty sure I would. However... Ash meant so much to me. The thought of someone else threatening to

take him away, the thought of him somehow not being in my life anymore... I couldn't bear that. I couldn't even recall how it had been without him.

As soon as we had stepped outside, Caterpie dropped the transformation. "That was actually kind of fun." Mew giggled.

That's why I couldn't say how I would react. I would just have to wait and see. Because it would happen. She didn't ask pointless questions after all.

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**(Ash)**

This was the last night before departing. And despite all the little things that had happened, relaxing like this had been good. Mark and Christine had put a bit of a damper on it, however, not so much as that we couldn't enjoy the rest of the time. The time out from regular training and battles – those two didn't exactly count as even mild exercise – had been nice.

It would be our last true break for awhile, this much we all believed. The Pokémon were doing well, too. Lopunny and Prinplup seemed to have come to some kind of understanding and Pikachu seemed to be all the happier for it. No doubt telling Lopunny off had still left him feeling slightly guilty. Now with his friends taking first steps towards each other, it had to be a great relief.

If only love troubles would all be that easily resolved. Not that I blamed Dawn for her uncharacteristic... Yes, what exactly? Jealousy? Exertion of possessiveness? There was definitely a good bit of the former and traces of the latter. Yet neither of them were truly surprising. In fact they were supposed to be normal in a relationship. So far we never had had any problems. I think that was far more unusual. So, in a sense I was almost glad for Dawn's outburst. It definitely reminded me of how much she felt for me and how much I needed her as well.

The door to the room opened and I watched quietly and curious as Dawn entered. I had sensed her on the other side for quite some time now, feeling nervousness I couldn't quite understand and didn't think had anything to do with embarrassment over the episode with Christine. There was something else about it and for some reason it made me nervous as well.

Nothing was said and thinking perhaps that she needed some reassurance after what happened, I stood and walked up to her, reaching out to caress her cheek. These eyes were enchanting. We hadn't had many moments like these recently and maybe it had been part of why Dawn had reacted so violently. Smiling, I pulled her closer and our lips came together without any need for words, guidance or coordination. It was soft and warm, filling my heart with a raw tangle of emotion that

was impossible to really tell apart. However, it was strong and wild, loving and calming at the same time. Regardless of how many times I experienced it, I would never get enough.

We did not need speech to express our feelings like this. While it couldn't be put into precise terms, the feelings conveyed were more than enough. The understanding came on a deeper, less conscious level.

And then her hands had left their place on my back, going lower, groping just a little. Shocked – although I couldn't say in what way – I pulled away from the kiss, causing a whimper from the younger girl. "Ash... please..."

Now, I admit to being a bit naïve about these things, or used to be at least. I was definitely not ignorant though and the meaning of her actions was as clear as it could get. And I honestly had no idea how I was supposed to react. "Dawn, are you sure?" Not that I was adverse to the idea. We had been together for well over a year. And personally I did not have any problem with any morale angle about our age differences. Yes, Dawn was still fairly young but then again, young children these days were allowed to go on journeys all by themselves and no one thought anything bad about this either. So... I probably wouldn't have initiated anything at this point but left it to Dawn for now to see if she was ready.

And that was the whole crux wasn't it. "Ash..." she tried to kiss me again but I gently took her by the shoulders and kept her a little away. It was quite obvious that she wasn't thinking entirely rational. As much as you could apply reason to matters of the heart. I could tell, even without her saying anything, that Christine's "challenge" had rattled her, made her afraid of losing me. Not to the other Coordinator, that had been a ridiculous idea from the beginning. No, it was obviously more the general possibility of the idea.

"Tell me why," I insisted firmly. "This is too important to rush just because you feel afraid." I wouldn't let her do something she might end up regretting later. It didn't matter that I was painfully aware that this might really be the last time for quite awhile that we would even have the privacy and opportunity to do this. I could wait. Even a year or two more if I needed to. Unlike other boys my age, I wasn't exactly hormone-driven. The state of our relationship as it was now was more than enough for me. Everything else would merely be a bonus.

Dawn closed her eyes, sighing quietly, before looking back at me, showing me the emotions going along with her words, the honesty within them. "I am afraid," she admitted. "Afraid of a lot of things. Afraid of someone taking you away. Maybe. But not really so much. I know, when we are like this, I know that my worries are groundless. That you won't give up on me. But, I am worried about other things as well. Your fight with Koga, I learned something from it as well. What we are supposed

to be doing, it's going to be very dangerous. I... I can't even imagine the possibility of..."

Gently I placed a finger on her lips, not able to stand the intensity of emotion I saw reflected in her eyes. The pain and intangible fear of the unknown tomorrow. Something I understood all too well. I still didn't quite think it should be enough for a reason because that would imply we might not have enough trust in each other that we could keep the other alive. "But you still want this?"

Dawn nodded. "Not just for all of this. We've been together for so long already and it feels even longer. I can't imagine how life would be without you. So... Regardless of what happens in the future, I want my first time to be a happy memory, with the person I love above everyone and everything else."

And how could I say no to that? So much honest emotion, it made my heart pound faster and faster. I could never deny her anything because I felt exactly the same way. "I love you, too." Then we kissed again, stronger and more passionate now, breaking past the usual boundaries that none of us had dared touch upon until now. Her hands began moving again and mine soon joined into the beginning of a far different than usual dance. A dance at which's end our relationship would be on a whole different level. And I would make it count, I would make it count and be certain that this wouldn't be just the first time. Dawn deserved all the happiness she could get and if she wanted it from me, then how could I ever give her anything but my fullest attention? I definitely couldn't even think about ever having anyone else at my side, regardless of who it was.

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**(Dawn)**

*Come on, you can do this. Just reach out, open the door and go in. Then... Yes, then.* God, I was nervous. Gah!

It had sounded like such a good idea when I resolved to do this just a little after the "match" this morning. I had it all planned out, too. What I would do, what I would say. Strategies never survive first contact or something like that.

Of course, I couldn't help it. This wasn't just a trivial matter. Doing my first Contest, performing at the Grand Festival for the first time, that had been easy. This wasn't. This was real and as much as I really, truly wanted it, looked forward to it, had carefully weighed all the pros and cons before coming to this decision... This was real. It was hard. It was scary.

*So much for charging in with bravado.* I couldn't help but weakly chuckle to myself. Thinking about it had been comparable more easy. In fact, the decision had



come almost natural, a conclusion to the question Mew had given me to think about last night. I thought I was ready.

Yeah, right. I think my mother would probably say something like: "When you think you are ready, you most definitely are not." Of course, if my mother knew what I was going to do, she might actually come all the way from Sinnoh, haul me back home and lock me in my room for the next ten years... if I was lucky.

Enough. This wasn't like me. Okay, maybe it was. The old me. That would get all nervous inside before a performance. I had left this me behind a long time ago though. There was nothing I should be afraid of. Ash wouldn't reject me after all. He was too kind for that. But he might think I was confused about what happened today. I wasn't. Not really. That didn't matter though.

Finally my hand grasped the handle and somehow I managed to slip in the key and turn it. A masterful achievement, I dared say. No going back now. He knew I was here surely. Chickening out would only cause questions later and if that happened, it would be just like now, only without a chance of achieving what I wanted.

I turned to him but everything I thought I could say died on my lips and vanished from my mind so fast I couldn't even vaguely recall what it had been. He really had become rather handsome. Dashing, too. Not the teenage boy who in some ways seemed much more my age or less at times, somewhat cutely naïve to some things in the world. I hadn't minded. It had been part of his own charm. Sometimes I actually missed it, however, I liked the more mature, responsible Ash just as much. The old Ash would have probably been totally clueless to what I was planning.

I watched him get up and walk over to me, my eyes firmly fixed on him. The situation was already spinning beyond my control. *Perhaps that is better though*, I thought, melting into his gentle touch and kiss. *I am so nervous. I would screw it up trying to actually ask. It's best to just show him.* Acting was actually rather easy. Just switch off reason and let your instincts do the rest.

I still felt a thrill go through me when I grasped him at a place like this. We had never gone anywhere this far. It was all strictly above the belt, so to say. Kissing was okay. Caressing, touching. Sleeping together in nothing other than what the term literally meant. But that was going to change. It had to. And it had to now.

I wasn't surprised when he broke the kiss, yet my instincts were in firm control and I couldn't help the needy and pleading whimper. "Ash... please..." I didn't want to talk after all.

"Dawn, are you sure?" Couldn't he just go along with it? We usually understood each other without words. Why couldn't he just accept this was what I wanted without arguing right now?

"Ash..." I tried to kiss him again, to silence his question and make him understand through feeling alone. Not Ash though. Not the Ash I knew and loved. He was far too considerate for that. To a fault even. Disappointed I felt myself being pushed back slightly, his gaze seeking mine.

"Tell me why," he insisted firmly. "This is too important to rush just because you feel afraid." Really, he could be just too nice and caring sometimes. Most others would have just given in at this point. As much as it frustrated me right now, it also made me love him even more for it.

I closed my eyes, sighing quietly, before looking back at him, trying to convey the depth and honest of my feelings.. "I am afraid. Afraid of a lot of things. Afraid of someone taking you away. Maybe. But not really so much. I know, when we are like this, I know that my worries are groundless. That you won't give up on me." *And I am afraid of what Mew might be implying but I won't say that right now.* "But, I am worried about other things as well. Your fight with Koga, I learned something from it as well. What we are supposed to be doing, it's going to be very dangerous. I... I can't even imagine the possibility of..."

Thankfully at this point he stopped me with a gentle finger on my lips. I did NOT want to think along those lines any further. I wanted to believe, trust and hope. It was way too early to have such despairing thoughts before anything had even really started. "But you still want this?" he asked eventually.

I nodded. I did. "Not just for all of this. We've been together for so long already and it feels even longer. I can't imagine how life would be without you." My world these days felt like it began and ended with him. He had been there from the start and contemplating a journey alone, without him by my side was unbearable. It made my heart ache. Without even realizing I had fallen so far that I couldn't even see the starting point anymore. "So... Regardless of what happens in the future, I want my first time to be a happy memory, with the person I love above everyone and everything else." And I didn't care. It was fine that way. And that was why, all those other reasons were there, they all had meaning, they all had something to do with why I wanted this now. But they didn't change the fact that I was ready. Really ready. Perhaps I had been for a long time.

"I love you, too." My heart swelled at the words and this time the kiss was much more passionate, making my heart not just flutter but create a small hurricane. And that was just the beginning of the night...

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**(Narrator aka Mystic Mew)**

Yes, still me. Let's get to it. I'm tired. I hope I find a replacement until next time...

"Finally the big day is just ahead. Everyone has learned some valuable lessons over the last month and now Ash, Dawn, May and hopefully Brock and Ako too eventually will meet again. But what will happen at Twinhearts Island? What will happen when Dawn and May cla... err, meet again? When and where will Team Rocket strike? With a dark future looming on the horizon, our heroes are facing uncertain times. Stay tuned for the next episode. We are heading for a first climax in our story!"

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### **Maia's Prophecy**

**Maia:** ..... \*looks around, then tries to say something again\* ..... ? \*glowers at MysticMew\*

**MysticMew:** This is your own fault. First the random destruction, then the Narrator who decided to sue us! (I'm still surprised he actually survived!) It all cut into our budget. I know we can't do anything against it but looks like this segment has been suspended for this episode at least.

**Maia** glares, then suddenly whips out Raising Heart again.

**MysticMew:** \*sighs but remains calm\* Oh no, not again. I've got some insurance. \*drags an uncomfortable Fate out and in front of him\*

**Nanoha** appears suddenly and snatches Raising Heart away from Maia.

**Nanoha:** No, not my Fate-chan!

**Maia** only gets angrier and takes out a rocket launcher and aims at **MysticMew** who is still holding onto Fate.

**Nanoha:** Raising Heart, Blaster 1.

**Raising Heart:** BLASTER SET.

**Nanoha:** Divine... Buster!

**MysticMew:** \*watches as Maia is blown away\* I'd rather call it divine justice. \*nods to self\*

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### **Author's Notes**

That's it for this episode. We are heading to the final. I had originally planned to make it to 10 episodes, but I'm not sure if I can make four more out of this arc. Three is a more likely number plus perhaps a short epilogue? Dunno. I have to really plan this last stretch. Since we are heading for endgame now. That's why it might take a little longer before I can really start on the next one. Don't expect it in two weeks as usual lately, maybe not even three but I shall try. It's not like I don't have a good idea what will happen, most of the important events have been in mind for

months, but it's getting really important now and I want to plan it out as perfectly as possible.

Before I begin my notes. An explanation and a bit of a shameless plug – though something you should all consider if you haven't already. You might have noticed that about a quarter or so through the episodes, my style got a little different. I blame what I was watching at the time and would really recommend it to you.

Maho Shoyo Madoka Magika or also known as Puella Magi Madoka Magica is quite simply... BRILLIANT. I don't say this often about a series but I have to say it about this one. Even if you don't like magical girl anime at all, I would urge you to take a look and please not switch off after the first three episodes. After that pretty much all the conventions are getting shattered anyway and it gets really engaging in a rather dark, mysterious way. The plot is really, really well thought out. Everything fits together and just when you think you can't be surprised/shocked again, you are in for a new one. And all that in just twelve episodes. Superb storytelling.

So, how did this affect me? Well, I was so blown away that one of two things were most likely to happen. I would end up so humbled and feeling inadequate that I couldn't do anything or – which was thankfully the cause – we get greatly inspired. That led to a bit of experimentation especially in Dawn's perspective during her "match" with Christine and perhaps during the final scenes of Ash and Dawn as well. Not that the way I wrote some of these scenes was totally new, they actually were a lot more like some of my older works which I don't necessarily see as a bad thing.

Alright, with that out of the way, some things need to be addressed. The encounter with Mark was something I had planned a lot earlier but never found the time or space for. However, here seemed perfect enough as a small side attraction in a generally slower episode, action-wise that is. And yes, we will see Mark again. Eventually.

The same might go for Christine. Well, the Contest is coming up but she was more a means to an end. So, don't expect too much if anything at all. For once the utter humiliation was entirely meant that way as you probably guessed already. The Mew transformation scene was one of the small ideas that was floating around my head pretty much since the initial setup for the story, I just wasn't sure how exactly it would happen. So I had to put it in.

I hope you liked the last Ash and Dawn scenes. That was hard to write because it was such a big step and I really wonder how many feedback the likes of "they are/Dawn is too young!" I'll get. I tried to explain it as best as I could. First of all Dawn is fourteen right now. She has been through two Grand Festivals, became a Top Coordinator, was trained in psychic powers, is trained by a Legendary and generally has seen/participated and been destined to face another possible apocalyptic battle... Give her some break. There is definitely no loli intention here. I'm

more of a firm believer in mental over physical maturity. If it isn't enough that in the Pokémon World ten year old kids are allowed to travel by themselves without a guardian while there are creatures that can freeze, burn, electrocute or other such dangerous, possibly lethal things... Well, I think after all Ash and Dawn have gone through and are faced with, most normal people at legal adulthood are probably less ready. End of discussion. If you want to comment, then please tell me if I got the emotions across, that's far more important to me.

That being said. No, there isn't a lemon. I might do some later and put them in a separate file if I ever feel like that, but not in the main story. After all, I actually know what the rating M means, unlike some people who blissfully ignored this for ages and then suddenly went into a craze of their stories suddenly getting deleted when all I could really see was a reminder about the rating... Right, I don't want to get into this discussion. I found it all rather... bizarre.

Back to the story. The funeral was once again one of these unplanned things that fit surprisingly well with the plot. I honestly can't say why I did it like this, I didn't even have much of a reason to be in such a sad mood. As for unplanned things... Now that I have established a firmer plot, such things are bound to happen once in awhile. Our creative minds are set in the rules and goings of the reality we have created after all. ^\_^ And I was quite glad about the scene, even Twilight commented that it fit well here.

That's about everything important for now. I apologize for one thing and have to reprimand both myself and Maia for this neglect. The lack of Jessie, James and Meowth. We had something planned for them and it was supposed to be in this episode... So what happened? Didn't fit in? I wish. Err, we just remembered after we finished the episode that we wanted to do something with them. Yeah, I know...  
\*ashamed\*

BUT it'll be next episode, right at the beginning (it practically has to or this won't work out anymore). So look forward to something of our favorite annoying villain trio.

With that I leave you be and Maia and I will go back to planning. Please don't forget to review... or she really might kill me before we finish the arc.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias