

Title: The Final Step to the Master Reloaded

Part: Second Arc, Episode 8

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Beta: H-Man #89995, partly xryuran

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Pre-Note

First of all... Thank you for the wonderful response to the last episode. I think that was one of the highest if not the highest number of reviews I received after a posting (not necessary all for the same episode).

Second. Yes, TFSTTM Reloaded has reached over 100 reviews!

Third. A greeting to all new readers that have just recently begun reading as has become obvious by some of the multiple reviews for different and earlier episodes. I hope you continue to enjoy this story and feel like dropping me a comment every now and then again.

Fourth... Addressing PokeLover: It's probably wasted since I am quite sure you might not be reading it any more or regardless of what I'm saying, it won't change your mind. Don't take this the wrong way but I am saddened to hear that you might be abandoning the story just because you can't agree with a possible pairing choice. As such this episode will probably not really convince you to stay. It's your right, I suppose, and I would feel hypocritical telling you that it is stupid to stop reading a story you actually like a lot just because you can't stomach a possible pairing. I am quite guilty of doing so myself here and there. Of course, when I get deep enough into a story and am fully mesmerized, I usually do keep reading even if a pairing develops that I might not like.

Well, that being said, I can't stop you or make the call for you. I would like to point out one fact though. Three people don't exactly make a harem. That's a threeway, threesome or whatever you want to call it. At the least it should be four and then it had to be focused on one person attracting many others and I hoped I made it clear enough that isn't what May is aiming for. I can't really say more at this point since technically this episode doesn't fully resolve the issue, even if afterwards most should be able to grasp where I want to go with this.

Lastly, a big welcome and thank you to xryuran who offered to be my beta and did a splendid job in actually getting this episode done on time, even if it was just intended as a trial run. So, for the foreseeable future I can proudly announce that this story – and hopefully any other future ones as well – will have a capable beta.

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(Narrator)

"The long awaited first qualification round for the Harmony Cup is here. And yet while many strong Top Coordinators gather to determine the best among them, many events overshadow the Contest, both personal and far-reaching. May has confessed her feelings to Ash and Dawn and the question remains of how they will react and how much it will hamper Dawn's performance. At the same time the seemingly unavoidable conflict draws near as Team Rocket finishes their preparations. When and where will they strike and will the League be ready? Overcome by an ominous premonition, Leaf rushes back to Kanto, concern for Misty most dominant in her heart."

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Sky over Johto (Leaf)

We had been making a good headway since leaving Ecruteak. The wind was definitely in our favor and Emperor was as fast as ever. Dawn had already broken and we were already over halfway to the border. With some luck we should make it all the way to Cerulean by nightfall or a little bit later. And even if it meant pushing my Pokémon, I knew it was necessary.

The feeling of urgency was only growing stronger as time passed by. Emperor seemed to pick up on it, too, or at least on my own restlessness and continued onwards without complaining, perhaps forcing out that extra bit more speed. Concern for my girlfriend was dominating my thoughts. I knew beyond doubt that something was going to happen to Misty and that I needed to be there in order to prevent it.

Nervously I fumbled around with my Pokégear for what was perhaps the twentieth time in the last five minutes, unsure of whether or not I should call ahead.

How would she react? Misty was a bit prideful with a quick temper and if I wasn't careful, it might sound like I couldn't trust her to take care of herself... But could I really square it with my consciousness not having given her a warning? No. I'd rather have her mad with me than dead.

Making up my mind, I established the connection and waited. It was still early morning. I almost expected her not to be up yet, standby orders or not. Despite that I waited impatiently and anxious, chastening myself for my reaction but unable to completely stop them. The feeling was so strong now, I had trouble making a straight thought that didn't directly involve seeing to Misty's safety as soon as possible.

The reply came faster than I expected and I would have almost jumped a little – and that wasn't a good idea on the back of a flying Pokémon after all – at her cheerful greeting. "Good morning! Miss me already?"

I blinked, then couldn't help but grin a little at her infectious smile. Somehow I didn't think it had anything to do with her situation. It was the same for me after all. I couldn't help but feel my gloomy mood lift a little at seeing her. When all this was over, I really, really had to make some more time for her. It was a sad state for a relationship when the partners were happy already to see one another over the phone.

"I see you are in a good mood this morning," I quipped, knowing the real reason already, but not ready to give up on my image. Speaking with Misty just wouldn't do without a little teasing at least.

Misty grumbled. "You wish. It's sooo boring. I am used to more activity and was already awake far too early because of that, only to realize I still don't have much to do." I smiled lightly at her complaining. As much as it wasn't a state I wished to be permanent, seeing her face, seeing her alive and well did a lot to placate my fears a little. "I just wish Team Rocket would hurry up and get this over with."

I know she was partly sarcastic but the comment caused my smile to strain and falter a little, the brief moment of simple joy broken. It was probably as best an opening as I could get without making it sound entirely too overprotective. "Misty, about that..." She seemed to pick up on the mood shift or at least the change in expression and looked at me curious and expectant. "I know it's going to sound weird but I had... I have this persistent feeling that YOU are going to be in great danger. That's why I..." I faltered for a moment, wondering again how best to word it.

"It's not weird," Misty replied seriously before I could continue. "With everything you told me about, it would be stupid to put something like this off as weird. What exactly are you worried about though? Do you think Cerulean could be a target after all or..."

I shook my head. "No, Mist, it's just you. I don't know or can tell anything about the general situation. I know though, and there is no mistaking this, that I can't shake off that feeling that you are going to be in terrible danger. That's why I..." I paused for a moment, then plunged ahead anyways, knowing I would rather take a reprimand than seeing the dread in my heart confirmed. "That's why I want you to do something for me. Please, if you are called away to help out somewhere, stay..."

"Melanie..." I flinched, both at the tone and the use of my real and full first name. Not "Mel" like with Anabel. Misty had taken to calling me this that night after the fallout with her sisters and I didn't really have the heart to tell her not to. No one but my father called me that these days anymore. Yet, it sounded good coming from Misty, coming from someone I loved so much. And that was probably the real reason, I realized with a start. The last person other than my father to call me that on occasion had been Rebecca. That was why part of me resented it when someone called me by my first name.

The realization was quickly forgotten though at Misty's frosty glare and tone – even more frightening than an explosion of temper, I had to admit. "I love you, but I really hope you are not trying to coddle me. I cannot just sit at home and have others do the fighting. I am a Gym Leader, too, and this isn't the first time either that I've been in a dangerous situation. I understand your concern but I am afraid I can't just do what you want me to."

It was just as expected after all. Honestly, I hadn't believed she would take it any better than this. However, after agonizing over the matter at length, I was fairly convinced that Misty being called away and then getting in trouble wherever it was Team Rocket planned to strike was the most likely way to justify my feelings of danger. I couldn't even fault her for the reaction, quite sure I would be the same in her position. And still the urgency only grew. I knew I had to convince her somehow.

"Mist..." At this point her image suddenly disappeared and the connection was cut off. For a terrible, long moment I thought Misty was so angry with me that she had ended the call deliberately. But then I realized I never got a signal for the transmission to have ended. There was only... static.

Jamming!

My danger sense – honed by years of travelling and all the recent work for the League – flared and I urged Emperor to the side on instinct. Unfortunately it was too late and something struck my Pokémon on the right wing, sending us into an uncontrolled tumble and collision course for the ground...

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M&M DreamWorks Presents
The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
Second Arc: Glimpses of Destiny
Episode 08: Between Battle and Love! The Stony Road Ahead!

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Twinheart Island, Kanto (Brock)

The atmosphere in the mess hall of the hotel, rented out pretty much exclusively for the Coordinators and watching – as well as potentially scouting – Trainers, was brimming with barely contained excitement. The first day had already set the standard high and as such expectations were strong. The new stage design was a challenge for everyone but no one seemed to complain. They wouldn't have come so far if the prospect of a new challenge would scare them off. No, there was more anticipation among them than everything else.

At least as far I could grasp from the low talking all around us at the various tables. Even with the challenger field reduced to the best sixteen already, very few had left, eager to see how it all turned out and perhaps looking for pointers and inspirations for the next round. Yes, everyone was very excited...

Which made the contrast displayed on our table even starker.

It was an oasis of barely contained gloom. Or at the very least approaching that point very quickly. I had been looking forward to talking a bit more with my friends after not having seen them for over a year but conversation was slow going... More like almost nonexistent. The heavy atmosphere was palpable and I really had to wonder what exactly had happened.

Did they have a fight? No, I didn't think that likely. There was a certain... awkwardness, yes, but nothing that hinted that there had been a disagreement of sorts. Most peculiar was the different ways in how they behaved. Ash seemed totally distracted and when asked a question would often need to have it repeated at least once before replying. It was quite confusing to see him like this after the recent change towards a more serious and calm individual. Something definitely had rattled him, very much so. I mean, he was actually just picking at his food and had hardly eaten half of what was the usual standard for him. That above else was the most worrying. Ash not eating properly had something apocalyptic...

Every so often he would look at Dawn contemplatively, then, as if immediately chastening himself for an inappropriate thought, looked away again. Dawn in contrast seemed fairly calm. She too, was apparently in deep thought and whatever had Ash in this state was clearly affecting her as well. Yet, her expression more closely

resembled that of someone trying to figure out some intriguing mystery. That further discredited the possibility of a fight between my two friends. There'd be a lot more tension. Dawn would be angrier, definitely more emotional.

I was getting unnerved by the thick silence, conversation reduced to a minimum. Even Pikachu and Prinplup seemed subdued and I hadn't seen Mew floating around either. I probably shouldn't pry but was prepared to take the plunge anyway, just to get the mood lightened. They were my friends and as such I hoped that I could at least help them a little if they allowed me to.

However, before I could address them, the cause for the subdued mood of my friends made its presence known at that very moment, spotted by Ako who waved over at someone behind me. "May, over here!" I turned and spotted the younger brunette with a plate of her own, walking past our table. Expecting her to stop and turn, I was surprised at first that she just continued and didn't seem to have heard my fiancée. I did catch her pause for a step though and her eyes just briefly flickering over to our table. Just for that moment I saw a hint of wistfulness and longing before she moved on.

"What's wrong? Didn't she hear me?" Ako frowned, disappointed. I knew she had a honest desire to get to know my friends better which I could completely understand. As isolated as she had lived for most of her life, making new friends was surely high on her priority list. She made to stand up but I quickly reached for her hand and held tight, starting to understand just what was going on.

Yes, I remembered the brief talk we had yesterday evening and my troubling suspicion that May's awkwardness around my other friends came from her own strong feelings for Ash. This hadn't been entirely new for me. Something had been there when we were travelling but it had never seemed to be strong enough to become something more, something either or both would realize on a more conscious level.

Apparently I had been further off with that estimation than I had thought. May definitely was harboring strong feelings and if my guess wasn't completely off, seeing Ash and Dawn together was tearing her apart inside. May and Dawn seemed to have hit it off immediately during the Wallace Cup and thus, longing after her friend's boyfriend surely made it only harder.

Apparently she hadn't been able to hold it in any longer and, disregarding my warning from yesterday, had confronted them about it. That was the only, logical explanation for the sudden mood shift.

"I think May rather wants to be by herself. We are going to be rivals here, after all and I'm sure she wants to go over her battle strategies by herself," Dawn said before I could come up with some way to explain it to Ako without breaching the

subject. Suddenly I wasn't quite so eager to address the certainly uncomfortable topic.

That was the other thing, though. By the reactions from all three of them now, I was pretty much totally certain of the cause. Yet, my initial evaluations of their mood didn't exactly add up. I could understand the confusion and I could definitely understand Ash's distraction. May was someone he at the very least considered a very good friend. If there was or had ever been more, I couldn't say. I never quite bought that he was entirely oblivious and naïve to the concept of girls and love. Had there been stronger feelings at some point and did that make things even harder now?

The more confounding thing was Dawn's reaction though. Regardless of how much May and her had gotten along initially, I just couldn't imagine her being so calm and contemplative in the face of what she should rightfully see as a threat or at least challenge to her status as Ash's girlfriend. So what had really happened that had the younger girl so... yes, almost accepting I would say if the thought wasn't so ridiculous.

"That's too bad," Ako mumbled, seemingly oblivious to what was going on. She had grown a lot, forced as it had been, over the last weeks, but there still was a core of innocence when it came to many worldly matters. I didn't really blame her. If I hadn't been so close to the three of them, I might have not caught all of this as well.

"Let her be. It's better that she's not he... that Dawn and her are not distracting each other." I caught the slip from Ash and I also caught the pained, almost disapproving look from Dawn and the quickly averted gaze from Ash. I blinked, only more confused than before now. Shouldn't that exchange have gone the other way round? Shouldn't Dawn have said that and Ash perhaps reacted this way?

The mystery was only growing and it didn't seem like it would be resolved so easily or anytime soon. Whatever the mystery actually was.

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Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)

I think I would have preferred boredom.

Before this morning I had been merely irritated at all the waiting around with no serious chance to vent some of that stored up energy. I was an active person, always had been. The phrase "tomboy" had never really bothered me too much since to me it was more a confirmation about my outlook on life. I just couldn't sit still or do nothing all the time. Activity was a key part of my lifestyle. Be it biking – before Pikachu broke the first one at least –, Pokémon battles or even something that others

would not exactly consider a physical activity like fishing – I would strongly disagree on that point.

As such being confined here with no challengers, no serious workouts or other such things allowed, it had been like my own personal nightmare. Now, I'd rather have it back. Leaf's call had added several other aspects to this already unpleasant situation. And this wasn't even so much about her overprotectiveness. If it were just that, even that state of mind would have been preferable right now.

The call's sudden termination left a hollow feeling of dread in my heart, one that was slowly starting to grow into full-blown anxiety. Not because of what she said and that she might be right about it but rather about Leaf herself. This wasn't some transmission problem and I hadn't been able to reestablish the connection within several tries. And it wasn't just Leaf, a large part of the network seemed to be down or at least interfered with.

I really hoped my girlfriend would be alright. Actually the fact that it wasn't just Leaf I couldn't reach was almost reassuring if not for the really bad timing. Something more had happened on her end and I couldn't do anything about it. *No, don't think like that*, I berated myself almost immediately and let out a sigh. Leaf was a Master, she was an excellent Trainer with battle skills far above the norm. There wasn't much that could really cause her trouble.

Not much, but this isn't a normal situation either. I shook my head and pushed the thought away again. I had to trust her ability to get out of whatever trouble she might be in. There wasn't anything I could do from here, so I should rather focus on what it was that I actually could accomplish.

Entering the main community area of the Gym, I was immediately greeted by an agitated Aisha. "Boss, something is wrong with the network. A lot of communication lines are..."

"I know," I interrupted. "I was just having a call myself." There was no need to say who it was from, otherwise she'd probably figure out the real reason behind what I planned to ask of my new assistant. For a moment I wondered again if my decision was right but Leaf's call and its sudden termination had rattled me more than I wanted to admit. I might not like to be coddled but it wasn't like I couldn't understand Leaf's feelings. How ironic that I was going to do the same thing.

"There is something I need you to do for me." The younger girl was immediately attentive. I really liked that professional attitude, especially now that she had opened up a little more to me outside of Gym business. Even more did I dislike what I would do next. "I have just been speaking with a potential business partner who wanted to supply us with a special new soap at reduced prices. Now that communications are out, I would like you to go check it out."

"But, what about...?"

"It's unlikely anything will happen here but I can't leave. It's a rather time-sensitive deal you see and with communications down, I would just hate to lose the opportunity." It was a lie, of course, albeit only a partial one. I had indeed received a business proposal and meant to go inspect the goods as soon as I would find the time. The deal was pretty much sealed though, just waiting on a final inspection that wasn't quite as dire as I made it out to be.

Aisha wouldn't realize that until she got there though and by then the worst should hopefully be over. It was a little underhanded, I knew, but I'd rather have her somewhere safe. The next town could hardly become a target after all. Cerulean shouldn't be either, I wasn't expecting that either. But if even the slightest chance existed that someone would come after me, I would rather have Aisha as far away from me as possible.

Just too bad that the dark-skinned girl was entirely too clever.

"Boss... Misty, I appreciate your concern, but I'm staying." I opened my mouth, surprised, then closed it again with a snap. Had I really been that obvious? "I am your assistant and I am not running away from potential danger."

For a long moment I just stared at her and then sighed. How could I expect to have her agree when I had just argued with Leaf over the same thing? However, Aisha still had a lot to learn. She didn't know what a really dangerous situation could demand from you and so I had to try at least one more time. "Aisha, please. I would really feel better knowing that you aren't here. If something really happens, it's not just going to be done with a simple Pokémon battle. This shouldn't be your fight..."

"But it is now. I signed up as your assistant, all responsibilities and duties included. I did read the contract in detail, you know." I winced, recalling that she actually did, several times over. "This is my job now but it is also something I really enjoy doing. Cerulean is my home now and this Gym is also becoming a very special place, so don't ask me to abandon what I have just begun to hold dear. I promise not to get in the way but at least let me stay and help."

I could hear the honesty in her words and had to admit I was moved by her passionate speech. She really had become attached to this place. And thus there was nothing I could say that would change her mind.

"Alright. Then let's go and see what's up with the communication network." Deep inside I hoped Leaf's "premonition" was wrong, hoped that I was wrong about my own feelings of unease. Unfortunately I wouldn't be able to shake it off as the day progressed.

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Twinheart Island, Kanto (Pikachu)

It was a mystery, alright.

How can she be so cool about this? There was not an ounce of distraction. I could understand battle focus, when everything else gets blocked out and you immerse yourself totally into the fight. Ash was a master in that area but even he would get distracted once in awhile by serious stuff as the recent moral crisis summoned by the destruction of the warped Rhyperior had shown.

By all means, Dawn should be affected, at least a little bit. Yet, the more I saw, the less I was worried that this revelation came too sudden and at the most inappropriate time. Really, she was dominating her opponent. There wasn't a flaw anywhere in her coordination with Prinplup and Lopunny. Certainly, both were as harmonized as somehow possible. This was the Elite level of Contests though, no opponent here could be trifled with, regardless how much one had trained.

It's like it doesn't even bother her. I'd be steaming mad and I knew Ash was taking it far less well, without really knowing what or whom to be upset with. He cared a lot about May that was for sure. That it was her involved didn't make the situation quite as simple, regardless how loyal he was to Dawn.

And just what was it exactly that May wanted it anyway? Love them both? How did that work? I didn't think this was something Pokémon were supposed to understand. When we mated, we mated for life. There were packs, of course, and some more... inclined species probably shared among each other but I couldn't see how a three-way relationship could even work. Humans had such funny ideas sometimes...

Still, Dawn's behavior was curious. So much unlike what happened when that other Coordinator made her advances on Ash. She had been steaming mad then, rightfully so, but now... Not that I wanted to see her fight it out with May. I liked May, a lot. But this situation was pretty much destined to make everyone miserable. So why was Dawn able to just shrug it off and concentrate on her match like this? Especially after that talk and the aftermath last night.

Oh there had been an argument alright. Not quite what one would expect though. Ash had questioned Dawn about why she had agreed with May's request. It baffled me and I couldn't make heads or tail off it. Why had Dawn actually defended May's wish for them to wait with a reply? Ash was just as confused and eventually gave up on it, obviously not too keen on further aggravating the already tense situation.

The signal for the end of round jerked me out of my thoughts. The match was already over it seemed. There had been no knockout but Dawn's focus really had been perfect. Prinplup and Lopunny had stayed one step ahead of their opponents from the very beginning and clearly had the advantage of being more used to terrain fights. The real challenge would only begin now though. If things went the right way, she had to go through both Nando and Zoey until she got to the final. I was really curious how long she could keep her focus.

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(Naru)

That girl was good. I didn't have any experience with Contests or any other form of these competitions humans had thought up for us. Even so, I could tell how focused she was and that despite what May's confession must have done to her. How could she be so calm and concentrated the morning after? What an amazing willpower. No wonder May had been attracted instantly.

I wish I could say the same about my current... Trainer – might as well admit to it, since I could have done a lot worse after my escape. While she admitted to being relieved after confessing her feelings and that now she could concentrate on proving herself with a relieved heart, to me May seemed more... resigned.

It irked me the wrong way. As if she wasn't even expecting to have a chance, as if merely telling them what she felt was enough for her to find closure. However, it wasn't so easy, right? May could try and convince herself but just quietly accepting things wouldn't be enough. If I had learned one thing in the short time we were together, then that May was a fighter. She wouldn't and shouldn't give up halfway through before seeing a battle to its conclusion.

That was what was happening though. Compared to the Grand Festival Blaziken and Beautifly weren't performing quite as well. It was small and anyone who hadn't seen the performance then would have not noticed a problem. But May was not fully in it. She was slipping back into her old habit of getting distracted, getting lost in thought during a match again. Confronting her feelings and their recipients had given her a strong focus lately, but now that focus was at least weakened. Not even enough to put her into serious trouble yet but the match was much closer than it should have been.

How very ironic. It should be the other way around. Dawn should have been the one distracted by last night and May should have been confident and focused. Damn it, how does she intend to convince them if she loses her confidence and determination that easily?

Something had to happen. All this would have been for nothing otherwise. And I wouldn't have agreed to participate here if I had known she would lose her nerve now. Getting into the limelight wasn't exactly something I was particularly anticipating. These bastards that had ruined our life before it had even started certainly wouldn't leave me alone this easily and there was no way I would achieve something here without showing off my abilities.

Well, at least I wasn't alone anymore. Finding Glaceon had been nice and my initial reason for staying with May. She had been the only one of us that hadn't hatched yet by the time we were first captured, so I felt even more protective of her as the oldest sibling. Finding two more of my sisters with the Breeder and his girlfriend had been a pleasant surprise.

Still, right now I was more worried for my partner. I owed her that much for saving me and showing me hope. If that meant exposing myself in public, then so be it. But May had better be ready to give it her all as well.

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(May)

Relief sometimes was a short-lived thing. There had been relief, enormous relief after telling Ash and Dawn about my feelings. For about two years it had been eating at me from the inside and finally getting those emotions out and to their proper recipients was liberating in some way.

Once that initial relief had passed, however, all the other small things that had hidden behind the overwhelming pressure of my unvoiced feelings were now demanding to be heard. And the initial reaction I had received only served to fuel them.

In many ways a quick and adamant refusal would have been better. I had been prepared for that. Not that I was saying it would have been easy. Easier to deal with perhaps, not easier to experience. Rejection was what I honestly had expected. Yes, I wanted to fight for my chance, that is why I had asked for it, but deep down I knew that as close as those two were, I would ultimately be nothing more than an intrusion.

And while Ash seemed to be ready to confirm just that, the surprise had come from Dawn. It wasn't quite acceptance either. Yet, I had not expected her to be the one to argue for my sake and at least give me this chance. From what I could perceive of her reactions she also seemed far less surprised than she should have been and her first match this morning didn't give the impression that she was dealing with great inner turmoil.

Could it be that she had feelings...? Nah, that would be too good to be true. And if that were I hardly believed her reaction would be so calm and neutral. Ash in contrast clearly seemed more distracted and I swore I could see a hint of disapproval and anger every time we actually looked at each other. It made me feel terrible inside. The last thing I wanted was to cause them unneeded distress.

Maybe it would have been better not to have said anything, after all. I'm just going to make things more miserable for all of us, I thought, before refocusing on my next opponent and promptly blinked at seeing the blonde young woman glare at me. I had seen her a few times hovering around in a rather angry mood, most of the time throwing dark looks in Dawn's direction. Did they know each other and something happened between them?

"You, you are another one of these cheaters. I heard you've been travelling with MY Ash as well. So you exploited his kindness to get yourself to the top as well," the woman, Christine I think her name was, declared. I stared a little irritated at those words and wanted to reply something but she was already rattling on, obviously more caught up with her own anger than even acknowledging me. "No, don't deny it. You are all the same. You just waltz in here and steal the glory that I have worked so hard for all these years. You ordinary people don't deserve someone as great as my Ash."

I really was getting annoyed. There was no need to tell me what exactly happened. I could already glimpse the gist of it. And as much as I had just been wondering about whether or not I was doing the two people I loved a terrible disservice, I would not stand here and listen to some stuck-up, self-centered bitch assault them and my integrity as a Coordinator.

"Listen, lady. I don't know what your problem is exactly and I frankly don't care. But I know I worked hard for being here, too. And I won't stand for you insulting my friends. It's show time, Naru!"

Now, I expected a lot of initial reactions. Using Pokémon usually considered unsuited for serious battle was a lot less of a novelty in Contests where presentation was the real deciding factor. As such using an Eevee alone was not ground for wonder or belittlement. Doing so on such a grand stage, among other Top Coordinators, it might be a little more unusual. Yet Christine's reaction was totally unexpected.

The blonde stared at Naru for several moments and her expression was like someone who had seen a ghost. Then suddenly it shifted to one of irritation and fury. "Again?! Do you cheaters all want to mock me?! You are just like that tramp after all, hogging my Ash's attention all too herself and then humiliating me with his Pokémon! I bet you are just lusting after him, too!"

Okay, this lady had serious jealousy problems. Honestly, compared to her I think my... No, I didn't even want to compare our situations. That was just disgusting. My feelings were real and I never wanted to cause them any harm. However, I couldn't have left the situation the way it was either. I had needed to be honest with them and myself or I would have gone crazy. I wasn't like this woman at all.

And was this really alright? To give up like that? Where was the point in bringing up the courage to tell them and then not see it through to the end? That would be shallow and would only prove that I really wasn't honest about my feelings, which was furthest from the truth. I did love them. If somehow possible, I wanted to be with them and thus I had to prove this somehow. This was the course of action I had decided on and I couldn't waver on it now. Dawn's reaction should give me hope rather than confusion.

"Miss, I think I should thank you for reminding me of something important." I smiled briefly, which momentarily managed to cut through Christine's anger and she gave me a confused look. But then my expression hardened and I allowed a brief flash of my righteous indignation to show. "However, I won't allow you to further disrespect me or Dawn. What we achieved, we achieved through much effort. Those two are very important to me and I would do everything to see them happy. If you insist on badmouthing them or their honest feelings for each other, then you'll get no quarter from me."

It seemed that statement was enough for the judges as well since the signal to start of the round was given just then. Harnessing my anger and recovered purpose, I focused on the battle and Christine's Meganium. She really would have been better off by not saying anything...

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(Ako)

So far this assignment really had been... Yes, if I were to compare it to the unplanned mission to my hometown, I could call it almost dull. No need for treatment had gone over the standard care. Nothing had come in that was more serious than exhaustion or superficial wounds from battle and those would heal in no time.

But that was what a lot of assignments like this were like. Long periods of time were spent without anything major happening. They warned us about this type of situation countless times in the academy. Major incidents that would require your full attention and skills could happen at any time and you needed to be ready for it. And considering the general unease of everyone, including Brock, about... well, whatever it was that was going on with Team Rocket, this major incident could happen sooner than I liked to think right now.

In the meantime I had enough time left to watch the show from backstage. They were nice enough to provide us with our own monitors and screens to watch the performance. Although... I suppose it was also practical. If you saw how a bigger injury occurred, you could be better prepared for it. These fights were a lot more physical, too. At least from what I expected and had seen from Contests so far. This lay in the mixed nature of the event and despite my usual misgivings I found myself quite fascinated by it all. Everyone was so fiercely competitive, it was hard to accuse them off senseless fighting.

Right now, it wasn't so much senseless fighting than an approaching slug fest anyway. I had absolutely no idea what had gotten May so riled up since the volume was usually set to mute in here and so all we had was the video. However, the fact that she was clearly upset with her opponent was obvious even to me.

"You think she's really going to use *that*?" I had learned about Naru and her sisters yesterday after coming back from my break early and was glad the young Eevee seemed to have accepted me reluctantly. I could only imagine how hard it was for her to trust people, humans especially, but just about everyone in general. My poor childhood and sheltered growing up at Heal Bell actually seemed a much better life than hers so far.

I was glad Genki and Leafon had found their older sister through this as well, although I was also a little sad. They had been through so much in their young lives that they deserved to stay together from now and as such I felt it would be better for them to be with one Trainer. And I didn't think Naru quite trusted anyone as much as she apparently did trust May.

"Nah, I don't think so. Looks like she's got more skills than just the shifting ability," Brock answered, finishing up with his Pokémon and focusing on the match as well. I saw what he meant within the next moments. Frankly it was more like a slaughter. Naru was quick on her feet, combining that with a relentless offense by striking from various angles that her opponent just couldn't predict.

Meganium was powerful but its size was apparently working against it right now. Naru focused on striking at blind spots, like from right above and behind, hammering the poor Pokémon with moves like Quick Attack, Take Down or Bite, already several feet away by the time Meganium found some way to defend herself. A few moments later a new angle would be found and exploited.

"That's impressive. They've got the upper hand even without showing off that special ability. If May wins this and she uses her other Pokémon for the semi-final, then she might get away without showing her trump card until the end," Brock analyzed. I had to agree but was more worried about the apprehension when he mentioned that May might make it to the final.

I was clearly missing something here and I had no idea what. A large part of my consciousness was telling me to leave it alone. This was clearly some private business and I could hardly call myself acquainted enough with them that I had any right to involve myself in it. It mattered to Brock though and as such it mattered to me. I wished he would at least tell me what was going on. If my fiancé didn't know himself, he at least suspected something strongly.

I wouldn't press though. It really was none of my business. My attention was drawn back to the battle. May had obviously decided to have annoyed her opponent enough... not that she didn't appear to be slightly... unstable – and that was really the nicest term I could think up – to begin with. This Christine had clearly lost her cool already before the fight and now it was easy for May to exploit that. Certainly she had not expected the sudden shift to offense that in any other situation, with any other Pokémon, would have been daring.

But Naru wasn't normal. The checkup had clearly shown that the free shifting between her evolution forms was only one part of the genetic manipulation. She had far greater reflexes than the average Pokémon, was faster and stronger, and definitely far more durable. All of which were shown in her relentless charge, shrugging off a Vine Whip coming at her at full force as if it had been a love tap, then shooting a Mud Slap towards her opponent, hiding the Swift attack within. The stars burst from the sand and prevented defense or evasion as the sand stung Meganium in the eyes.

A desperate Bullet Seed was evaded by a blinding fast execution of Double Team only for all the copies to perform another Swift hammering into the poor Meganium. Then Naru came charging in again, bathed in white energy in what seemed to be another Take Down.

I blinked, were those the outline of flames I was seeing within the corona of energy? I couldn't quite tell and it happened too quickly before the unavoidable impact, causing a large explosion of energy and smoke enveloping the stage for several long seconds. Finally it cleared away and revealed a thoroughly defeated and yes, slightly burned Meganium.

I looked over at Brock and he nodded back, apparently having come to the same conclusion.

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(Ash)

What was I supposed to do?

I really wished I had Dawn's calm right now, even if that might just be the very thing that made the situation so aggravating. Had she just reacted as expected – jealous, angry or any other negative way – it would have been that much easier to clear all this up. By right she should have, by right she should have done any of these but not accepting that crazy request of May's.

I had been ready to swallow my own reluctance to crush the other girl's hopes and cut this off from the start. Because deep down I knew that a spark of the emotion my old travelling companion no doubt hoped for was still there, still very much alive. After experiencing love and a real relationship I could more objectively evaluate my feelings back then. Naïve and far too occupied with myself and Pokémon I hadn't realized what I felt for May then.

With more time to think now – another reason why I had wanted to end things before any hope could even be born – I started to feel sorry for May and perhaps just a little guilty about crushing her feelings. I wasn't blind. Her emotional declaration had been heartfelt and genuine. I did not want to hurt her. But I had to.

The bright flame that was my love for Dawn was much stronger and I had no intention of causing my girlfriend even the slightest distress. This powerful emotion had only grown stronger through the many trials of the last two years since meeting her. Many times she had kept me going when I felt ready to give up and I wouldn't jeopardize that love. Not for May and not for anyone.

However, Dawn hadn't made it that easy for me. She had been so understanding that it lacked any common sense. Did she see something I couldn't? Was she trying not to overreact like with Christine, regardless of how much I personally thought it had been justified? Sometimes I think she was taking things a little bit too serious lately. Dawn was just fourteen, it was alright to act out sometimes. This whole Chosen business was affecting us all in various ways and I had to wonder if perhaps we were forced to mature a little too fast.

Just this morning I had thought that this kind of complication was something we really didn't need right now and found myself immediately appalled at the calculating nature of the thought and the disrespect towards May's feelings. Would it have made any difference if she knew about all of what Mew had revealed to us already? Perhaps she wouldn't have said anything now but it would have eaten her up inside and I hated thinking even for a moment, that this might have been preferable.

I couldn't really make sense of May's confession either. What exactly did she mean by saying she loved us both? Certainly not the way it sounded. Perhaps it was more like she loved me in a romantic way and Dawn as a good friend or sister and thusly didn't want to hurt either of us. Then what though? It's not like I could take both as my girlfriend. This kind of thing didn't work outside of smutty romance novels and I

had never read any, only hearing stuff from Brock. Was that what Dawn saw and was that why she was hesitating because she could feel the genuine desire from May to not break us up? I couldn't believe that. Dawn had to see that such a thing wouldn't work and that she was far too precious for me to gamble what we had for something so uncertain. It was entirely too selfless.

What a mess. Regardless how often I tossed it back and forth, I couldn't figure out either Dawn's reaction nor how to proceed from here. So for the time being I had given up on trying to figure out Dawn's reaction and behavior. This was still a Contest and it was important to her. In fact, it might have just gotten even more important. There was a rather big chance after all that those two might end up in the final and then... I couldn't, for the love of it, see how working with May under these circumstances would be a good idea.

Had you asked me before last night, I would have gladly accepted that possibility, probably asked her anyway regardless of the outcome. Now, now the chance of ending up in the same team took up a whole new dimension. Unfortunately I couldn't deny that May's fight with Christine and her passionate defense for us had only made it harder to do what eventually had to be done.

For now though, I focused back on Dawn's battle with Nando and that was intense enough that I really should employ my full attention to it. Clearly enough Dawn's old rivals – because from what I saw Zoey clearly counted among them as well, while May was more in a class closer to us – had honed their abilities. Some of the leaps in pure physical attributes hinted that they had to have at least a similar training regiment as us. Perhaps not to the same extreme dimensions but clearly with a lot of effort put into them.

Combined with Nando's battle experience – being the only one here that had actively participated in a real League Tournament – he kept Dawn busy for quite a bit. Using the high grass as an effective cover, Cricketune evaded Togekiss' early attempts to seize the advantage. This went on for awhile but eventually both combatants knew that they were still on a time limit and neither would get anywhere with waiting out the other.

Again Nando took the offense. After a couple of attempts to sing Togekiss to sleep were blocked by Safeguard, he switched tactics and started to repeatedly assault Togekiss with a combination of Silver Wind and Echoed Voice. At first it seemed like all it did was further occupy Togekiss without doing really much. However, the precision was astonishing in itself. Togekiss next to Lopunny was one of Dawn's greatest evade types and still Cricketune managed to connect several times.

Then both power and speed began to pick up and the hits were scoring more damage than expected. *It must have the Technician Ability and if I'm right Echoed*

Voice still gets affected by it even after raising the power, I thought worriedly. Had I not seen Dawn's first match and her absolute focus, I would have been more than just a little concerned. If she had really allowed May's confession to get to her, this might be the point where a lapse of concentration could cost everything.

However, Dawn wasn't distracted. Not in the slightest. In fact I found my heart swelling with pride when her tactic became obvious after seemingly allowing the barrage to go on for a bit longer, apparently not having a counter... She did though. And Nando was clearly caught off guard by the use of Psych Up, copying the raise in parameters before healing most of the damage with Morning Sun.

Then she went on the offense. Togekiss had recently turned out to be a bit of a move wonder, much like Leaf's Tyranitar and Nando was unable to keep up with the series of surprises. The combination of Extremespeed and Sky Attack was bad enough, pretty much removing the charge up time and rushing at Kricketune so fast that even the agile Bug type could do little more than barely brace against it. Clearly Nando expected some kind of Flying or Psychic-type attack next, perhaps even an Aura Sphere. The rather wide-spread and extra-sparkling Ancientpower hurt a lot more.

Momentum had shifted drastically and suddenly it was Togekiss who had the upper hand, both in battle and the little stat up contest. Time was running low as well and the flurry of combinations had earned Dawn a sizable lead. Nando was getting desperate and that had to mean something with the guy who usually was the perfect picture of composure. Personally I thought that he might have been taken in a little too much by the battle setting and fought Dawn more like a Trainer would another.

The last desperate attempt of Kricketune to get Togekiss with Bug Bite only further underlined that observation. The two Pokémon were about even in speed but Togekiss' natural grace made it easy to let her opponent slip past at the last second, presenting a clear, undefended target for a point blank Air Slash, ending the match about half a minute before the time would have been up.

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(Brock)

What exactly am I expecting to do here anyway?

Slipping away when everyone was still working felt bad enough already but now that I was here and waiting, I started to wonder just what exactly I was hoping to accomplish. Regardless of what I said, it wouldn't really change anything. The situation had already been created.

Just what kind of situation I was unsure. I thought I did know but the mixed signals from my friends were still very much confusing. *And that's what really bothers you, isn't it? That's what you can't leave alone.* I wasn't a terribly curious guy, at least I liked to think myself levelheaded enough not to stick my nose into every situation, regardless of whether or not it was even remotely my business. That was more Ash's part. Perhaps some of him had rubbed off on me over the years.

Then again... No, I rather would say it was because it concerned me. It concerned me as their friend, as a sort of older brother to all of them regardless of how much they had grown up lately. They weren't little kids anymore and certainly didn't need any chaperoning. But... I still cared. I cared for their happiness.

Which was part of the problem because honestly I didn't know which side to even take. It might sound simple thinking that Ash and Dawn were in a happy relationship and I should try and make sure that May wasn't making them and herself miserable. That would also be unfair to May's feelings though. I didn't want to see either of them sad or suffer.

Which brought me back to my original dilemma. What was I even hoping to accomplish here?

Well, I should make up my mind soon. As part of the staff for this event, it was no trouble at all getting backstage. The quarter finals were over and there would be a break for rest, recreation and adjusting strategy before the two semi-final battles would be held later in the afternoon. Having selected the most likely place to intercept her, I spotted May quickly and she did the same, hesitating for a moment before squaring her shoulders and continuing her walk down the corridor.

There definitely was a change. Earlier in the day she looked as if she had almost regretted her actions or at least their timing. I couldn't really say she was brimming with confidence now but there seemed to be a steady resolve.

No, I don't think there is really anything I can do to actively help them. However, there was one thing I could do. One thing big brothers tended to best.

May stopped a few feet away from me, shuffling her feet, then finally meeting my gaze.

"Want to talk about it?" I could listen.

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Man, had I been off course with my prediction.

Despite the mixed signals I had still believed the core of this was that May had feelings for Ash and had thusly declared them last night. That much I had deciphered from our brief talk earlier last evening. And that was true. Yet, it was also only part of it.

How do you fall in love with two people? Seriously I mean. I could hardly count my Joy and Jenny addiction love. Getting together with Ako had shown me that and part of me had always known anyway. But May sounded so certain. She had been reluctant to talk at first, but then it had all just come pouring out and I couldn't help but feel a deep sympathy for her situation.

I doubt I could have held it in for so long. And being in the same place with those you love, yet unable to express it had to be hard enough. No, I couldn't really blame her anymore for needing to come clean and letting it out. And I still – even more so now than before – didn't have an answer to give when she had turned to me and asked, just a bit pleading. "What would you have done in my place, Brock?"

This was something the three of them had to resolve among themselves. I fully realized that now.

"I honestly can't say. Probably the same thing. That's not the kind of situation you can expect to get a lot of advice for." Relationships were already complicated enough most times. Something as seemingly natural as what Ash and Dawn had was rare, certainly not the norm. It would remain to be seen how they weathered this particular storm. As for May, her situation was even worse. Caught somewhere between utterly impossible and a sliver of hope. It was clear she was aware of the irony of her actions. Not wanting to cause them any trouble, yet by confessing, generating exactly that.

She had no choice though. Personally, I thought that May had done what was the best course of action. "I think... you have to follow your heart. Even if it means possibly hurting those you love along the way. There is no best way in this situation. Had you just kept it inside, eventually it would have needed to be released." And that could have ended up being worse. The more you let things like this eat you up from the inside, the more it affects you. "You've started it now and I believe you already realize that you have to see it through, don't you?"

May nodded quietly, turning away and gazing ahead but her thoughts seemed somewhere else.

I really wished I could do more for them. I had taken up this new occupation because I did not want to be the one ultimately left behind anymore. However, there were some things, even a qualified Field Medic couldn't heal. The only thing I could do was to be there, listen and support my friends with an open mind. Because, regardless how this mess turned out, they'd probably need someone to listen.

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(Dawn)

Even from here I could sense the whirlpool of emotion that was Ash. I was grateful that he hadn't pressed the issue during the day, yet that didn't mean I was unaware of how much he was confused and frustrated by the situation... and probably by my own reaction. I was amazed by my own reaction as well and until this morning had not known why I was so adamant in defending May.

There were no returned feelings on my part. Nothing of the sort that the other girl was proclaiming for us. Yes, I had immediately connected to her during the Wallace Cup but that never went beyond friendship on my part. I couldn't claim love on first sight as a motivation. And for anything beyond that, I barely knew the other girl as anything other than Ash's previous travelling companion and a splendid Coordinator.

That was probably why I hadn't been able to explain my own behavior properly when we had returned to our room, only ending up in more frustration and... no, you couldn't really call it a fight. Ash just couldn't understand and I hadn't yet been able to explain it to him.

Yes, yet. As so many things as of late, clarity came to me in my dreams. Although... dream, not even to speak of vision, was the incorrect term. It was more like a vivid visualization of my own emotions and going beyond that. I couldn't really put it into real words but I knew now why I couldn't refuse May's feelings outright. And I believed I understood what Mew was trying to hint at. Didn't mean I knew what to do now. That was something that I had to discuss with Ash and... yes, ultimately find the answer to when I was fighting May. It was the only way to be certain of the questions that came with the realization.

For that to happen though, I had to make it to the final first. And that meant one last formidable obstacle to overcome. This extra motivation had driven me all day and was now at its peak. Especially because this obstacle had been my strongest rival to this point and the girl I still had a score to settle with.

"I hope you are ready. I cannot afford to lose today. Too much hinges on it now." My focus snapped into place and everything faded away. It was a neat little skill I had to give big gratitude to Sabrina for showing me and Mew for helping me perfect it. Mentally blocking out everything other than the stage, my opponent and the coming battle.

"Don't think I will make it easy. Glameow, Mismagius! Curtain!"

"Prinplup, Lopunny! Spotlight!"

Not that I really needed a special technique to focus against Zoey. Up till today I had never gotten a clean victory over her. I knew I had trained so much that from raw battle skill alone, I should win this. Yet, it was Zoey, my first and so far strongest rival. Before I could move on to May, I had to overcome her. And that alone was enough to get me fully motivated, the rest was just to make sure absolutely nothing would disturb my concentration.

The signal tone rang and then nothing else mattered.

"Glameow, open up with Fake Out!" I had expected that, of course. It was a standard tactic but considering the nature of the move something you just had to try. Still, I wondered what Zoey was up to. She had to know I expected it. The connection with Prinplup and Lopunny was by now as strong as it had been during the final moments of my fight with Nord. If anything, it had only gotten stronger. Without a word, Lopunny moved in for a counter. The move's specialty was speed but that meant only so much if the opponent's Pokémon could easily match the inherent speed of the move on a regular basis. The timing was perfect. Glameow took Lopunny's bait and at the last moment Prinplup was there, ready for a Metal Claw counter...

"Now, Sucker Punch!" I winced and cursed mentally. The transition was flawless. There had been nothing betraying the feint and even though I knew what was coming, there was no time to react as Prinplup got blasted back several feet, barely catching himself in a flip. Zoey didn't give me breathing room though. "Mismagius, Shockwave!" The electricity shot outwards at speeds I was used to from my early battles with Ash while we were still in training, yet Glameow elegantly and deftly flipped over it and the wave continued on for my own Pokémon.

Yes, Zoey had definitely gotten a lot stronger as well.

Unfortunately for her, I was not done in so easily. "Nice try." Lopunny stepped forward on my urging and her body began to glow. Zoey gasped as the Shockwave was caught on the Mirror Coat and reflected back. And because it happened so fast, Glameow was caught right in mid fall while Mismagius was also hit. I really was glad we had been able to learn that move. After the battle with Nord I had realized that regardless how good my Pokémon were at evasion, some form of barrier was something they definitely needed.

I couldn't let up now though. During the Sinnoh Grand Festival I had been lagging behind for most of the match and while I had eventually caught up, the points I lost at first had made the difference in the end. During a Contest a strong initiative often made up half the match. I had to keep Zoey on her toes and not give her a chance to seize the advantage.

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(Zoey)

It was everything I expected and more. Honestly, I never believed that I had even remotely caught up with Dawn. Even after *that girl* had given me a few pointers – to make it more entertaining, she had said –, Dawn was already months ahead by the time of the Sinnoh League and had a constant sparring partner close to her level. That kind of training had been hard, too, and I had found myself struggling all by myself. It wasn't even near perfect.

It was all I could do to keep up with her. The initial plan to seize the advantage had already failed and now Dawn was defending her advantage. The next two minutes might have looked like an equal exchange with neither side having the upper hand, yet all I and my Pokémon could do was react, counter her combos with our own and keep the score relatively equal. It was far more tiring for us than for her. Heck, it took all my concentration to stay in the match and Dawn didn't even look fazed.

The kind of absolute concentration she was radiating was somewhat scary.

It wouldn't daunt me. I could not allow it. Giving her anything less than my absolute best would be insulting. And it would betray all the hard work my Pokémon and I had gone through to this point. Going into a battle with the mindset that you couldn't win was out of the question, I was the same as Dawn in that regard, the same as any worthy competitor.

So far it had been a furious exchange of direct attack combinations. Time for a change in tactics. I waited for just the right moment, just when the tension was at its strongest, when everyone was pumped up the most to overpower the other side.

"Mismagius, Flash!" I knew I only had a split moment. Dawn's mental connection with her Pokémon wouldn't really allow a blinding move to hamper either of them. A moment was all I needed though. The routine was practiced and Mismagius immediately followed the move by using a modified Shadow Sneak, meant not to hurt but to immobilize Lopunny by connecting and ensnaring her own shadow as soon as the light died down and shadows returned to the field. "Now, Hypnosis, Glameow!" I smiled in satisfaction seeing the move connect. Lopunny struggled against the effect for a moment but eventually had to give in. Waiting to see if Prinplup was moving in for a defense move and seeing it seemingly still disorientated from the sudden light, I took my chances. "Follow it up with Wake-Up Slap!"

I held no delusion that status effects would affect Dawn's Pokémon for long, so I had to make the most of it. The powerful hit connected, adding type and special damage to the equation. Lopunny definitely had to feel that one. Yes, I might actually have a chance to turn this around now...

Dawn's smile startled me, but even more so was the sudden Drain Punch hitting Glameow square in the jaw. Lopunny had recovered from the hard hit almost instantly and given my own Pokémon no time to even clear away. Not only that but the Drain Punch pretty much served to reenergize her further, undoing the damage Glameow had just managed to inflict.

Was that why Prinplup hadn't tried to act? Speaking of which where was...?

The answer came a moment later from the water portion of the stage. Apparently Prinplup had used the situation to sneak into the water without my notice and was now spraying huge streams of water into the air, creating a miniature fountain, raining all over the stage.

I didn't have to wait long to understand what this was supposed to when Dawn grinned and Lopunny Bounced up into the air, beginning to spin and emitting an Ice Beam that started to freeze the water droplets into small but hazardous – especially in their number – ice needles. A deadly rain of ice...

"Crap!" I cursed my inattentiveness that had allowed Prinplup to set this up. Glameow yelped and frantically tried to avoid the deadly hail. I had to do something fast. It looked like both Lopunny and Prinplup could keep that going for quite awhile. "Mismagius, get in the water and use Shockwave to get Prinplup out!"

I wouldn't let Dawn win this easily. Or at least that's what I thought.

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(Dawn)

Perfect, just where I wanted you. To be fair, Zoey hardly had a choice in the matter. If she didn't stop our combination, it would be all over. At the very least her Pokémon would be so exhausted from dodging, I would have a number of openings ready to exploit. Attacking Prinplup in the water with an electric attack by a Ghost was technically clever. In fact, from what I could tell so far, I wasn't surprised at all when the electricity despite being conducted by the water completely failed to harm Mismagius as it spread through the water. No, it wasn't the same as Leaf's Lemuria's intangible state. I could see with my developed senses, the thin psychic barrier erected right after executing the attack. Very clever.

Prinplup wasn't so easily deterred either though. While I had spent time training Lopunny with Mirror Coat to further improve our defensive qualities, Prinplup had finally been able to tackle the special idea I had for him. Before the Grand Festival the smaller body of Piplup simply lacked the basic strength and durability but after the evolution, he was ready for it. And while Prinplup started to swim and spin at high speeds, enduring the high-level electricity, I gave a nod to Lopunny who aimed her Ice Beam down to the water and began to freeze it all over. Something I was sure seemed like a rather drastic move and more certain to take both Pokémon out of the equation.

However, even as the water rapidly froze over, going deeper still and threatening to do the same to the two Pokémon within, Prinplup continued to spin, absorbing the cold into the movement much like Floatzel would during Ice Aqua Jet. It was something Prinplup had for the longest time been envious of and frustrated at his inability to do the same. The trick wasn't just in the spin. Where Floatzel used the basic Aqua Jet as a medium, Prinplup created a similar effect now by use of Drill Peck combined with a high speed spin. The piercing power of that technique was even greater as Mismagius had to learn when the barrier crumbled upon impact and the move drove hard into her, continuing to push onward and catapult both Pokémon out of the ice-encased water.

I had to give it to Zoey that she was ready for a counter despite the shock this had to have caused. "Glameow, Thunderbolt on Prinplup!" And from the looks of it this one would be a powerful one. I could feel the power from here and after many battles with Ash's Pikachu I had become a good expert on judging Electric-type attacks.

Lopunny was there already. Appearing right in Prinplup's flight path, she caught the drilling ice missile that he had become with a powerful kick that actually caused him to change directions. Zoey gasped in surprise and astonishment at the feat. It had far less to do with power than with the momentum and timing. Glameow had no time to react, already in midair and charging, getting caught full force by Prinplup who was suddenly on a collision course with her.

It wasn't a perfect angle but Prinplup did strafe his opponent and that was more than enough in this situation to send Glameow tumbling after her partner.

The sudden sound of the timer interrupted my concentration and my head jerked to the board, so absorbed in the match, I had forgotten the time completely. I needn't have worried though and sighed in relief and elation. It was a small margin, though a good bit clearer than my loss during the Grand Festival. This time though, it was my win.

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(May)

"This is kind of nostalgic." It just had to be him. Not that I was terribly surprised. In fact I would have been disappointed had he gotten himself defeated before now. From all the Contests I had participated the greatest confrontations in my career had been with Drew, both in quantity and quality. I had only managed to beat him once during a Grand Festival, the loss during last year's final had really stung.

My comment wasn't aimed at that, although I could just as well have meant it. This was more aimed at the choice of Pokémon. Roserade and Flygon, practically the same setup he had used against me during my first Grand Festival. Of course, I wasn't the same anymore. Not by a long shot. Back then I had been naïve, a girl just starting to find her path in life.

"It won't be as easy this time, Drew. I cannot afford to lose here." Just one more. One more win. Then I could have that match with Dawn. That match that judging by Dawn's reactions she wanted as well. What exactly it would bring, I couldn't say. However, it was the only way now to settle this, the only way I had left to prove myself and receive an answer my heart could accept.

Drew chuckled. "Perhaps. Perhaps I will do you a service and free you from your hopeless pursuit." My eyes widened. What was he...? Did he know? How?! "Don't look so shocked. I always suspected you had feelings for the boy. But imagine the foolishness I overheard last night when I returned from my walk."

He heard. I wasn't sure whether to be angry or just irritated at his choice of words. "Don't," I whispered. "Don't make light of my feelings."

Drew's face grew grim and his eyes hardened. "Then show me your conviction." I blinked at the uncharacteristic hardness. Yes, even a hint of anger. What exactly did it matter to him that...? Oh no... It might be that my own complex situation gave me some unique insight but I cursed myself for never seeing it before. *He has feelings for me!*

Always aloof and sort-of arrogant, I had known for a long time that underneath the act was a caring young man. He was dedicated and extremely skilled and definitely someone who knew what he wanted. I think that was what had intimidated me the most for a long time.

Forcefully I shoved back the stirring sympathy. "Very well." There was nothing I could do about it. Nothing I could have given him that wasn't there. Just like with Ash and Dawn, I was following my heart and I had to see it through, Brock was right about that at least. "Blaziken, Beautifully! Burn Up!"

The signal sounded and I was ready to prove to him that I wouldn't let anything or anyone stop me here. However, Drew was even faster. The Sonicboom practically droned out the signal as it struck in the middle of my Pokémon. Almost immediately a Leaf Storm followed, given further power by the flapping of Flygon's wings.

Stunned at the ferocious opening, it took me a moment to catch myself. Thankfully I could count on my Pokémon to recover quickly. Already Blaziken had moved into a defense position to deal with the Leaf Storm, then caught the advancing Flygon by the tail. "Good work, now swing it!" All the training from Maylene had done me a whole lot of good but it had also helped me understand Blaziken as a Fighting type better, not to mention the training had really played to his strengths, too. In fact he probably had gotten more out of it than me.

"Roserade, separate them with Magical Leaf!"

"Beautifully, Psychic!" Roserade's sharp leaf was stopped halfway through and suddenly Roserade had to dodge her own attack. "Blaziken, pull him in, then Fire Punch." Performing one last round with his swings, Blaziken yanked his opponent forward and caught him with a shattering Fire Punch that sent Flygon tumbling. That certainly wouldn't be enough to end the fight, however, it had clearly stunned him. Drew looked a good bit more wary after having his opening salvo deflected.

"I told you. I cannot afford to lose here. Perhaps you are right, perhaps it is foolish. Yet, this is the path I have chosen. Even if the end result hurts, I need to prove myself in their eyes. This is the only way for me to move forward right now!" And neither Drew nor anyone else would stop me here. Not until I had my answer, regardless of what it might be. If I hesitated now, I felt deep inside that I the conflict in my heart resolved would never be resolved in a satisfying way.

Drew chuckled again, though it lacked any real humor. "Always so stubborn, insisting to travel and conquer the steep and dangerous path. But I suppose that's what I always liked about you. Very well... Show me that you can conquer it!"

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(Drew)

She had really grown. The first time I saw her she was but an innocent girl who had just decided that she wanted to do Contests. Not that I had anything against that, not everyone should know what they wanted at a young age. Sometimes it took time to find your calling. As time went by I quickly realized that there was more to her. A diamond in the rough so to say, unpolished but with the potential to become something great. I continued to observe and I continued to grow more and more fascinated.

At the time I never said anything and now I realized I should have. Perhaps had I ignored my pride and image, there could be more now and perhaps I could have spared her that foolish quest which was doomed no matter what. Yet, it was too late now. I had lost my chance and her will was strong. I knew even without her words that she would not falter once she had decided on her path. That left only one task for me in this match. To give my best. As a final service of my feelings to a strong girl I would have to test her limits to the best of my ability.

Not that I intended to lose. I still had my pride as a Coordinator and just as everyone else – especially the four of us that had made it to the semi-finals – had put too much effort into growing stronger to simply step aside. That being said, I realized from the first exchange onwards already that regardless how much I had trained, it wasn't the same anymore as it had been up till about two years ago. May was a good bit ahead, I had to grudgingly admit that to myself. This wouldn't be an easy battle.

Coming out of another exchange with neither having the upper hand, I decided it was time to enact my strategy. While Roserade was keeping Beautifly busy, I could focus on May's first Pokémon and the greatest threat in this battle. "Flygon, Sandstorm!" Unlike a regular large-scale Sandstorm though, this one was centered around Blaziken, trapping it in place, before May could react to this new development, I pushed the advantage. "Now, reinforce it with Twister." The whirlwind of sand became a small-scale tornado of mixed energy raging in place and battering the captured Pokémon within. I wasn't finished though, knowing that May's Pokémon were made out of sterner stuff to fall from something like this so easily. "Now... Fissure."

I smirked at May's brief look of shock. Fissure was not only a rather risky move but also something you would hardly see in Contests. It was a low-hit chance of taking out a Pokémon in one go. Much more suited for regular battles. That was what this was about though. This event was not a regular Contest and as much as I liked to cultivate the image of a pretty boy, I had no problem doing the hard and dirty work. I disliked Coordinators that were so obsessed with their craft that they ignored or looked down on the good that came out of a regular Pokémon battle.

At my command, Flygon slammed his tail into the ground, splitting open the earth underneath the grassy part of the field. This stage was actually perfect for a move like that. On a real stage, I would have been in danger of destroying the stage itself which would have been much more a problem for my side since Beautifly wouldn't have been affected, yet Roserade would. On this stage the more natural ground became hazardous for my opponent now. Blaziken couldn't move from the spot without getting sucked into the vortex of sand and dragon energy. Neither option was favorable. It was a rather simple but quite effective strategy...

Unfortunately May seemed only a little alarmed and there was a small smile on her face that did not bode well for me...

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(May)

At the very least I should give Drew credit for trying so hard and using very unlikely and unusual methods for a Contest battle. However, if he believed I'd just sit by idly and watch Blaziken being taken out by a single hit, then he was sadly mistaken. I had been prepared for dealing with ground and rock attacks, especially with Sandstorm. The added Twister was nice but it ultimately made little difference since all it did was add a little more power to it.

"Jump, then go into a Fire Spin!" Blaziken pushed off the ground, just as the Fissure was reaching his position and immediately started to twirl before he could get sucked in by the fierce winds. Setting his own rhythm, a third element was suddenly added to the equation and while many would say it looked absolutely suicidal since Blaziken was still the one trapped within, heat was something he could deal with. Besides, that was only part of the whole idea.

Faster and faster he spun, fanning the flames – and the raging winds did their own to fuel the fire – until they became so hot that it begun to affect the sand. Slowly at first, but then more and more the fire spread outwards and the sand... No, it didn't melt, disappear or anything the like. It was sand and super-heated sand eventually would make... glass.

Hundreds of tiny, superheated shards of glass began to form in the fiery tornado, all other traces of Drew's combination mostly extinguished. My long-time rival was visibly stunned. It was the perfect time for the counter offense.

"Now, you two!" My Pokémon needed no further explanation. Blaziken came out of his twirl, looking none the worse and immediately started to punch and kick the hot glass shards, launching them at high speeds towards Flygon. The dragon flinched and desperately tried to avoid the barrage. Unfortunately there were too many and they came too fast. Where Dawn had showered the arena with an impressive rain of ice before, the heated glass shards were perhaps even more dangerous. Both because of their sharpness and searing heat.

Beautifully wasn't idle either and used precise Silver Wind attacks to fling even more shards towards the opposing side, focusing on poor Roserade who was in even greater danger from the hailstorm of unexpected projectiles. Every hit was rough on her Grass type, after all.

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(Ash)

I blinked, more and more astonished. This had stopped being much of a typical Contest long ago. In fact, I wondered if it ever had been one. Drew's willingness to put himself on this level was surprising. Yet, even though knowing how much May had incorporated from my own fighting style years back, I was still very surprised to see her battle like this.

And she was having fun, I could see it. Even when Drew fought back from the unexpected assault, she pressed right onward. The determination was mesmerizing and I found myself staring at her, alight with both passion and focus for the fight, having to admit that she really was looking stunning out there.

And then I would catch and berate myself at the inappropriate thoughts, especially right now. I'd like to think that the situation itself was responsible but that would be a mere excuse. The feelings had been there before, May's confession had merely brought them out again. One thing I couldn't deny though, was that my heart was moved by the fierce spirit she was displaying. Her declarations to Drew were honest and full of conviction. She was determined to see this through. And more and more I began to falter and wonder just what the correct way to deal with this situation really was.

Eventually I clamped down on the question and became entirely enthralled with the battle. Flygon had taken a good bit of damage but powered through, countering with a very dense version of Rock Slide, hauling small, sharp stones instead of bigger ones at his opponent. Blaziken showed his agility then but was still hit by some of them, doing a lot of damage at such high speeds. At the same time Roserade attempted to recover by hitting Beautifly with sleep powder but Beautifly threatened to blow it right back. In response Roserade Vine Whipped some of the stones Flygon produced and scored a hit on Beautifly.

Drew was really fighting back hard and as the end drew near became ever bolder. So far the matchups had mostly been clear-cut. While both teams worked together well, it was mostly Blaziken VS Flygon and Beautifly VS Roserade. As such when Flygon suddenly changed targets in mid-assault, even May was surprised, for that one crucial moment too long. The fight had taken its toll on both of them and Beautifly was just a fraction too slow, avoiding both a Dragon Claw and Tail which turned out as mere setups for a Flamethrower at point-blank. Regardless how much Beautifly had shown earlier and in previous matches to control fire through a clever use of Psychic, there simply was no time and no defense right there.

May was quick to react though, taking advantage that now Roserade was equally open to attack and Blaziken used his natural type advantage quite quickly by knocking Drew's Pokémon out in return.

With only a good minute more to go, both were down to their last Pokémon, exhausted but more determined than ever to see this through. Regardless of all the circumstances, I couldn't say I had seen two so fascinating Contest battles right after another in a long time... and the final was still to come.

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(May)

Losing Beautifly had been a bit of a shock. The maneuver had come so utterly surprising that my mind hadn't been able to adjust quickly enough. It was so daring and unlike Drew. Going with the flow of the battle, just like Maylene had drilled into me, I had been able to even the odds again quickly enough though. And if Drew thought he had the type advantage now, he had another thing coming.

In fact the last exchange had gotten my blood pumping hard and fast, adrenaline driving through my very being. Everything else – Ash, Dawn, the entire confusing situation had disappeared. Right now all I wanted was to win. And win I would.

Blaziken had the advantage now that the battle had dragged on this long. Blaze had just kicked in and while he had trouble evading just a short while ago, the secondary Ability Speed Boost had worked long enough now that the modified Rock Slide – or any other power attack for that matter – had almost no chance of scoring a hit.

It was a neat addition to a Limit Break, allowing a Pokémon to add a hidden ability to a regular one and in combination could cause quite some havoc. Weaving, punching and kicking, Blaziken showed that his jumping power could easily overcome Flygon's air supremacy now which had thus far allowed the dragon to avoid close quarter fighting.

Just like Beautifly had been hampered by an earlier hit, the glass assault had clipped one of Flygon's wings as well and that showed now. The dragon could only react sluggishly when Blaziken powered up for a blast, combining chi manipulation with fire to shoot a powerful sphere at his opponent, homing in and following even after a near miss. Still Flygon managed two times more to evade the attack by inches, only to be caught in mid-evasion when my Pokémon flashed in front of it and performed a spin kick, the air cracking with a loud bang from the speed and power and generating a wave of energy much like the sphere.

The hit shattered any hope of reaction and defense, leaving Flygon exposed to a punishing combination of punches and kicks, keeping it in the air even though the kick alone would have brought it tumbling down. Which eventually happened after a couple of seconds of unguarded punishment.

Once again, however, Drew showed what a tough competitor he was and Flygon tried to struggle to its feet... only ceasing the action when the time was up a few seconds later. Exhaling sharply, I looked over at the board and felt relief start to purge the adrenaline rush from my system. The score was close but it was just a good bit in my favor, obviously the last exchange had done the trick after all.

"Good work, Blaziken," I said after running over to my Pokémon who was a lot more exhausted than he had let on. Looking over to Drew, I saw him tending to Flygon as well but he answered my inquiring look nonetheless.

"Well, I suppose you were determined enough. I still think you are making a mistake but since you are not backing down..." He paused, then to my great surprise since it contrasted so much with his general public image added. "I guess, all I can say now is: Good luck."

I smiled, a little sadly, since I now knew of his own feelings and how much it must have galled him to say this. I wished I could let go myself. However, he had said it just now. I would travel this path to the bitter end. "Thanks, Drew. And... for what it's worth, I'm sorry that my foolishness is making you unhappy as well."

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Eastern Johto, close to the border (Leaf)

Already close to sunset. Damn it. I had lost a lot of time. Whether or not it was their original intent or not, the end result would serve them one way or another. It would definitely serve Giovanni's plans. In the end I suppose I had to be grateful that I survived the fall to begin with.

Flashback

Instinctively I latched tightly onto Emperor for the very real fear of falling off, which at this height would be certain death. For several long seconds that felt like minutes or more, I could only hold on desperately, helpless to do anything else as my Pokémon continued to tumble and fall equally uncontrollable. There was nothing I could do other than trusting in him.

A trust that was never misplaced and helped me to fight down the panic. Finally, just above tree level, my Pidgeot managed to stabilize somewhat and while not completely able to avoid needing to meet the ground, turned the crash fall into a wobbly glide.

Shielding my face as we broke tree level, I winced as we barely avoided crashing into trees, earning myself quite a few scratches in the process. It was a

testament of my friend's resilience that despite all that he actually managed to land on his feet, barely, skidding to a shuddering stop that nearly threw me off at the end.

Only then did his legs buckle and Emperor collapsed with a moan. Forcing myself to ignore the pain from the superficial wounds, I made a quick assessment of the large Bird Pokémon's own injuries. Most of it was superficial like mine, nothing a little rest wouldn't cure but... his right wing didn't look good. I had no idea what hit us and it appeared it had barely grazed my ride. Something I had to be grateful for, considering the damage from a near hit already.

Jumping off, I quickly recalled Emperor to his Pokéball, both to let him rest and get him out of further harm's way. Not a moment too late either. "Hmph, is that the welcoming committee?" There were ten in all. All of them fully armed with six Pokéballs considering they were not just for show. The black uniforms with the blazing red "R" was a dead giveaway, not that I would have needed it.

This is bad. It's not like I can't take them. There doesn't seem to be a higher-ranking agent with them but it will take some time. Which could only mean one thing in my opinion and at the very least confirmed that I was dead-on with my concerns about Misty. *I really don't think they are here to kill me. Giovanni can't honestly expect them to succeed.* But I wouldn't put it past the man to just simply sacrifice these agents, giving them just these kinds of orders. If they were lucky and succeeded, all the better for him. If not, they'd fight their hardest and further hinder or prevent my intervention in his main operation.

We'll see how much spunk your men have, I thought grimly and released my Pokémon. "Come on, boys. You want to entertain your guest, right?"

End Flashback

Battles like this always were a pain. Not so much because of the opponents' quality but more because of the sheer numbers and the high amount of different battles to keep track off. For the most part I could trust my Pokémon to take care of themselves, yet while these lackeys had not been tremendously strong, each of them had had one of these grotesque abominations with them, making it all that much harder.

Their coordination as a unit was also much greater than what you expect from your average criminals. In the end, they were no match for what I considered my elite team as of late – ever since the match with Ash at least. Shadow, Lemuria, Hellfire, Berserker with the addition of Zoroark and Zorua, each of them by themselves could deal with one of these overpowered creatures more or less by themselves. The rest was mostly just annoyances which served to drag out the battle and would require them to rest much longer now.

Well, it wasn't like I was going anywhere. The location had really been perfect for an ambush. Pretty much in the middle of nowhere, it would have taken me hours to get to the next town and even further to reach the next available Pokémon Center. Even worse was that whatever was hindering communications was still in place. That only served to both drive my anxiety higher and to make it even more impossible to do anything but wait until Emperor was recovered enough to resume flight.

"You think you can make it now?" I worriedly stroked his wing but the Shiny Pidgeot rose both of them up and gave a cry of determination. I chuckled as I got the stubborn meaning. He had no intention to be brought down so easily. Giving in now would mean admitting defeat. Normally I would have swapped immediately, even if I really didn't have a more suitable Pokémon that could carry me and was as fast as Emperor. Unfortunately the choice was already taken from me. The jamming didn't seem to just interfere with communications. At the very least I didn't get a connection to the storage system either.

"Alright then. I'm sorry to ask this of you but we must make haste." Once more swinging myself on his back, Emperor took a moment to adjust, grunting slightly but then pushed off the ground. The start was rough and I almost feared he wouldn't make it but his stubbornness pushed through and our ascend stabilized.

I just hoped this hadn't cost us too much time. Regardless of their intention or initial orders, the ambush team had succeeded in successfully stalling and stranding me for several hours. Ironically it wasn't even the battle itself but the initial damage to Emperor's wings that had ultimately achieved this. After some further examination I was quite sure it was some kind of weapon shot. A sniper rifle perhaps or something similar. That was extremely worrying. Weapons were rare enough that even on the black market getting larger amounts of them was almost impossible. If Team Rocket had enough to spare for this then...

Once more I tried to reach my girlfriend but the signal was still jammed. How was that possible anyway? This would take a large amount of technical skill and there was no way our own specialists wouldn't be able to have pinpointed the source by now. This was like a big, red warning sign. Unfortunately, it also meant that communications between the cities would be extremely limited.

I really, really didn't like this.

Misty... be safe.

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(Mew)

Nothing right now would suggest that the world wasn't anything else but peaceful and beautiful. The early night sky was clear and the stars couldn't be more visible from anywhere else on the surface. The air was still mildly warm, with a refreshing breeze from the sea. Everything seemed perfect. Too perfect.

Two things, however, shattered that perfect picture for me and anyone that could see not just with their eyes but with their heart and soul as well. The first thing was the very slight difference in coloration of the moon. It was the night before the anniversary, the night before the Purple Moon. I doubted anyone but dedicated astronomers and higher-ranked League officials even knew that a phenomenon like this existed. We had kept it mostly from recorded history after all.

That night had marked the day of the Change. The horrible, catastrophic mistake we had made. It had to be that night. The Purple Moon marked a period of a special celestial alignment, culminating in our moon shining in an ethereal purple light. In this time the flow of natural energy was greatly heightened. A skilled user could accomplish feats previously impossible. A whole group of them... could change the very foundations of our world.

And that's what we had done. Unknowing and naive we had greatly underestimated the forces we wished to tamper with. Our intentions didn't matter. We had changed the very natural laws of our world through our actions, becoming much like gods in a sense where in fact we had been nothing more than children. Burned, hunted, fearful children. In the end our desire to help all animals was mostly born out of our own drive for survival. In that desire we had become and unleashed something we had not even been remotely ready for.

And now, such a long time later, everything was coming back. Was it all worth it? All the centuries of waiting, watching, agonizing? I had seen so many generations come and go, always driven by the duty I had to this world. I had to wait for this day when the chosen humans that our leader had prophesized would be born and ready for their fate.

A fate that should have been ours. We had made the mistake and we should be the ones to resolve it. Despite knowing it wasn't that simple, I had often thought about it like this. Yet, only after meeting and really getting to know Ash and Dawn and in extension everyone else I started to doubt more and more, if this was the right path. Did we really have any right to do this to them? To expect these children to fight our battles? To rectify our mistake? They had never done anything to deserve such hardships. They, more than any other humans I had met in my long life, loved our kind with all their heart. And therein, of course, existed the reason why it had to be them.

Yes, they were the Chosen, but even if they hadn't been they would not have been content to stay out of this conflict. In a sense, it should be reassuring that by

being able to wield their powers effectively soon enough, they would be able to defend themselves and those they loved. It also meant though, that they would fight the hardest, most difficult and decisive battles of them all.

Gazing up at the moon, the answers I searched for were nowhere to be found and I longed to talk to the one I had always been able to confide in. "Where are you?" I whispered into the night. I hadn't said anything, but I was sure both Ash and Dawn were thinking about it, too. It had been over a month now since the incident in Cerulean Cave. I had tried to make a connection often, always with the same result. A result that frightened me more than I allowed myself to admit. Mewtwo had always been a source of strength for me. I suppose that ran both ways. Born out of my genes, he was one of the few, perhaps the only real creature on this planet that could really understand me. When I had doubted and faltered like this in the past few years as the promised time grew closer, he would always set me back on the right path. Without needing to be asked, he had supported me in all the small tasks I had to perform to prepare. But above all, he was a lot like the child I couldn't naturally have and as such had always given me a reason to continue, to strive forward.

But Mewtwo was gone and I couldn't find his presence anymore. Sure, this could mean a lot of things. Unfortunately I saw no reason why he would hide from me voluntarily. I feared for the worst. However, allowing myself to worry about it now would only distract me.

They had begun to make their move. I had been able to sense it all day and had to admit that Cynthia and her people were making a fabulous job to cover up the irregularities. Which wasn't easy at all considering this event was live on TV all across the various regions. Then again, it didn't seem those signals were even affected.

This was no highly-advanced technology. It was far too selective for that. In fact, it barely affected this place, leaving almost everyone not to notice the effects, apart from not being able to make calls to most of Kanto. Something that was easily covered up by "communication problems". I saw it though, the second reason why the night wasn't as peaceful as it appeared. I couldn't say if Dawn had seen it too, if she did, she hadn't said a word. Those gifted enough should be able to. The thin layer of energy, visible to the mind's eye as a creeping, black mist that hung in the air. The feeling alone made me shudder. That vile feeling accompanying ITs presence and influence.

Something would happen tonight. I was sure of it. And there was nothing I could really do about it. For the time being it was much better that my charges didn't know. That would only serve to distract them. Perhaps it was a little selfish but they deserved this last moment of enjoyment, of simple competition.

And those three needed this event even more to resolve their feelings for each other. They had to. The thought galled me but Zero's prophetic powers had always been strong and at their height, when he had shown us this course, there was no doubt about the certainty in his vision. They needed to stand together or the coming battles would tear them apart and the world with them.

Yet another reason why we shouldn't place this burden on them. However, it was too late to stop now. All that was left was to move forward. For tonight though, I would stay extra alert, so that no harm would come over them. It might be their last normal night.

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(Dawn)

I still wasn't any closer to an answer. No, not about that other matter, right now I was more occupied with the choice I had to make for tomorrow's battle. If anything May's last battle had shown me once and for all that she was rather close to our level. It would be the toughest battle I had had since the Sinnoh Grand Festival, not counting practice sparring with Ash.

My initial choice would have been Prinplup, of course. From among the three Pokémon May had used so far, her Blaziken was the most likely choice. But I didn't think so. One didn't bring an unevolved Eevee into a Contest of this magnitude without some clear intention behind it. In fact, I was almost certain May would use it tomorrow and that there was more to it than the battle with Christine had offered. Much more.

"Don't overthink it too much." I smiled slightly at the genuine concern from Ash and had to admit he was probably right. That Eevee was an unknown factor, certainly with a surprise ready to be unleashed, that was all I knew and likely ever going to figure out until tomorrow. With no further information, it was for the best to make my choice based on whom I felt was the most ready from my own Pokémon.

That wasn't quite what Ash had in mind though, I could tell. He had been holding back all day but the control was fleeting and started to wane as soon as we got back to our hotel. Now I could feel his barely contained inquiry burning into me. It was a talk that was inevitable and one I felt slightly more ready for than I had last night. "I'm sorry," I started, taking his comment with a slightly altered interpretation, "I must have confused you last night. I wasn't really able to explain my own reaction then."

"But you can now?" I turned around in the chair at the desk. His gaze neutral, trying to be open but with a certain intensity as he sat on the small couch. It would be

a tough prospect to convince him of but I had to try. No, I think I even had to succeed.

"More or less. But before I answer that, let me ask you something myself." He nodded slowly, suppressing his own curiosity. "How do you feel about May's confession. Honestly, I mean. For a moment try not to think about me, just tell me how you feel."

For a moment I thought he would refuse and brush it off, that he would react as defensively as he had yesterday. However, it seemed that he had been thinking a lot himself over the course of the day. "I can't say I never had feelings for her. In fact, I can't really say those feelings ever disappeared. At that time I was too... stupid to really understand." I suppressed a giggle at that admission but my amusement must have shown on my face since he glared at me briefly before continuing. "I was also far too preoccupied with myself and Pokémon. So, yes, it does affect me. At the very least I consider May a very important friend and I guess I am flattered and all these other things. I don't want to hurt her either."

I had thought as much. Ash was a kind person to the core. Even if his thoughts were solely on me, part of his instant reaction was to spare May further heartache by not dragging out what he thought was inevitable. I could understand it and would normally have supported it. This wasn't normal though. Mew had gotten me to start thinking but only last night had I found final clarity. I hoped Ash would understand. He had to, because deep down part of him had to realize it as well.

"But, Dawn, I can't. I can't treat it separately. I might have had – perhaps still have – feelings for May but I love you. Right now you are the most important thing to me. More important than anything else." I gasped slightly, startled at the powerful admission. It was like saying I was even more important than his Pokémon or his dream... He had never said it like that and I couldn't help the trembling of my heart at the declaration. Even after all this time he still managed to surprise me.

"I can't... I won't give that up for anything, regardless of how much I might care for May. I don't want to hurt you, ever." His words definitely made it harder to argue but they also confirmed what I believed how Ash was interpreting the situation and May's confession. I had wanted to bring that point across to him yesterday but was unable to do so. With a whole day to have everything sink in, it seemed Ash had only become more convinced of his own conclusions.

"Thank you, that means a lot to me. And just for the record. You could never hurt me, I know that. However, I think you still don't really understand what May was saying last night." He looked at me confused and perhaps almost begging me to enlighten him. It would have been almost cute if not for the seriousness of the situation. He could still be so naïve when it came to the emotional aspects of life

sometimes, regardless how much he had matured. "Tell me, what do you think May meant when she said she loved us both?"

Ash scrunched up his face, clearly unsure of himself how to answer this, only further confirming that he had his doubts about his own conclusions. "Well, I'm not entirely sure. But I guess she meant that she liked you a lot, too. That she doesn't want to hurt you or... well, I guess that she doesn't want to come between us in the first place." I raised an eyebrow, not having expected that answer to be honest, and waited for him to continue. "I don't know how she expects to do that other than... uh, you two sharing me or something."

I stared at him for a long moment, incredulous, partly relieved that he wasn't that far off the mark after all, amused at his embarrassment at what he had just said but also unsure if the truth would make it easier or worse. As protective as he was of me and our relationship, knowing and understanding May's real intentions didn't really change that much about the overall situation and all the arguments he probably had against the idea.

Finally Ash had enough of shifting uncomfortably under my gaze. "I guess that isn't it?" I couldn't help it. His almost comical confusion was just too ridiculous and I had to giggle this time, followed by a brief but stronger laughter.

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(Ash)

"Oh, Ash, for all the maturing you did in this last year and a half, you are still pretty clueless when it comes to girls and love."

I scowled at her which only made her laugh again. Honestly, joking around in a situation like this. "Well, excuse me for me being emotionally retarded." Perhaps it was for the best though. I appreciated Dawn's attempt to relieve the tension just a little. Besides, that we were able to do so in the middle of a serious conversation that was far from done only proved that our relationship was still intact and more steadfast than ever.

Not that I ever had any doubts that something was wrong, part of me had feared, however, that May's interjection could have sparked jealousy and insecurity in Dawn which she was trying hard to suppress. That obviously wasn't the case. There was some deeper meaning after all behind her reaction and behavior since yesterday. And I would do my best to hear her out. That was the least I could do in a situation where it should be more her right to get upset than it was mine. If she wasn't, there had to be a reason for it. And the first step to the answer was obviously my incomprehension of the meaning within May's confession.

The moment of tension relief passed after a very brief grin of my own and Dawn rose from her chair and settled down next to me. I felt immediately more at ease at her closer presence but refrained from putting an arm around her. She wanted me attentive and getting too comfortable now would only be distracting.

"Ash... May said exactly what she meant. That she LOVED us both. She was addressing us both, not just you. It isn't 'like' or 'respect' for me or anything like that. It is love in its purest meaning." And I knew she was right. A part of me deep inside had always known but wasn't able to wrap itself around the truth. With Leaf as a friend, it wasn't like the whole girl loving girl thing was new or incomprehensible for me, albeit I had to admit that I had never seen it coming from May. I would have been far less surprised if it had been Zoey...

Making this realization didn't necessarily change things though. "Even if that's true... Dawn, what do you expect to do about it? Try it out and see what happens?" I snorted slightly. "Do you realize, just assuming theoretically for a moment, how hard it would be to make something like that work? Can it even work? Because frankly I can only see it ending badly. I can only speak for myself but eventually I fear that I would just end up preferring one over the other and then agonize over treating the other unfairly."

How did you even make a relationship with three people work? Saying you wanted to try just because you got along with each other well enough on all ends wasn't exactly enough. Trying was easy, maintaining was the hard part and it would hurt so much more when it eventually fell apart.

Dawn was quiet for a moment but the determination to make her point hadn't disappeared from her face. "Ash, I could feel it when she confessed. Her feelings are honest. There really is no malicious intention behind it. In fact, I believe she is more afraid of hurting us and didn't... still doesn't expect any kind of positive outcome." I bit back a remark, knowing it was inappropriate. It would be unfair, too, blaming May for making the confession in the first place. It must have torn her apart to carry these feelings around for so long. I could admit to that now after allowing myself to understand and embrace the true complexity of the situation. It wasn't that I had ever been upset with May, this just made understanding and sympathizing easier... And a rejecting harder.

"But that's not really the point right now. I wasn't sure yesterday why I reacted that way, only that I had been trying to... figure something out ever since the thing with Christine happened." I sat up more straight, realizing Dawn was finally getting to the main point of her argument, swallowing any comments I had myself. "It's hard to explain, so... can I show you instead?"

Confused but always willing to oblige my girlfriend, I nodded, and felt the tingle on my mind immediately when she placed her hand on my forehead and obviously

focused her power. Resisting the instinctive urge to push back against the invasion, I relaxed my mind and allowed her presence to fill me and in the next moment the world around us shifted.

I didn't even try to adequately describe the colorful vista all around us. It was disconcerting enough to look at for any longer moment of time. Instead I focused on what I could see directly in front of me. It was a pulsating bright sphere. Just looking at it made my heart feel strange. Much like when Dawn and I were having a close and romantic moment. Calmness, security, but also passion and vibrancy was radiating from the sphere. Above all else there was love though. Even before I asked, I knew the answer to what I was seeing.

"This is a mental manifestation of what we share. You could say it is kind of like a place that connects us with this sphere in the center. I had this dream last night and it made me realize something crucial."

I started at that, briefly tearing my gaze away from the sight before me to look at her. "You had a dream? Like..."

Dawn interjected before I could finish. "No, I wouldn't call it a vision. As I said this is more like a visual projection of the bond we share. Or maybe it's just a symbolic representation of our relationship... Either way, what is more important is what you can see here." She pointed at the sphere. "See, the colors? They represent us, I think." There was an equal portion of yellow and white in the sphere. I wondered for a moment about the colors but then remembered something Mew had said about prime elements and the colors associated with them. It suddenly made a lot more sense and at the same time got more disturbing as the visualization took on a whole different meaning.

"And then there is that." I had seen it, of course, but instinctively shied away from looking or acknowledging. With no choice now, I immediately felt a hollow feeling inside of me, looking at the last third – entirely equal to the white and yellow portions within the sphere – being filled by blackness. To call it color might not even be right. It was more like a hole. Something that... was not yet filled.

And with that startling thought, the mental link broke and we were back in our hotel room. Unsure of what it was that I had just experienced and what my reaction to what I had seen meant, I could only look at Dawn, hoping and wishing she could provide an answer for me. An answer to why my heart was suddenly aching like this.

"It's not a question of sympathy or wanting to try, Ash. I think what May wants might be something we need. I've been sure of it for some time now. Don't take this the wrong way, please, because it doesn't change what I feel for you or how much I love you. That dream simply made me realize that something was... missing. Something to make us... complete."

I really had no reply for that. After what I had seen I could not deny the truth in her words, I could not deny that her words described exactly what I was feeling right now. And as much as it explained, it only served to make this more confusing, more personal, more complicated. I knew what she was really saying. That this something that was lacking, might just be May...

Instead of giving voice to all my own doubts and insecurities that came with the realization, I was more curious as to what Dawn planned to do about it. Her whole behavior the entire day was starting to make a lot more sense now, even if I wasn't convinced at all that what she was insinuating was the right choice. It was too sudden and I really had to think about it some more. "What do you want to do now?" I asked instead, not able or wanting to go deeper into this new realization until I had time to give it some thought.

"Honestly, I don't know." Now that one surprised me a bit. I got a pretty good idea where she had wanted to go with making me understand all this, or at least I thought I had. "All that was more logical and mental. I can't even say I have the same feelings for May as she says she has for me. But that doesn't mean they can't develop. Just as much as that missing portion we saw just now could be filled out by what we have eventually." Then a look of greater certainty came over her face though and I could tell her resolve was hardening. "I will know... No, we will both know tomorrow though. That's why this match is so important. I can feel it deep inside me that we will have our answers then."

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Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)

Sleep hadn't come easy today. The communication problem had prevailed and contact with the League and other sites within Kanto was severely limited this way. As part of the emergency plan, every major city had at least one capable psychic who could communicate telepathically with the others. Yet, even that form of communication, while not entirely cut off, seemed to be greatly hampered.

And no one so far had been able to figure out where the jamming came from. Something that I found deeply disturbing. You couldn't just generate something so wide-reaching, yet highly selective without leaving some sort of trace, right? Our local psychic Trainer was definitely highly disturbed by something, which suggested that this might not be a technical issue to begin with.

Unfortunately there was little we could do about it. Most of Kanto was in the same situation and leaving our posts now in order to investigate would most certainly be what Team Rocket wanted. That they were somehow behind this, there was no question at all. And so the day was spent in an ever-rising anxiety for something to

happen and the longer this dragged on, the harder it became to bear. I would have preferred to have simple boredom again.

As such, my sleep was already light and the first tremor stirred me out of my uneasy rest. I thought I heard a distant explosion but couldn't be sure about it... Then there was no doubt as a much closer and louder bang shook the Gym, the vibrations nearly sending me tumbling out of bed.

Jolted fully awake, I jumped up and ran over to the window. While I couldn't see much I clearly did notice smoke rising from several places in the city... It took me several more seconds to fully comprehend the situation. For all of my own concerns and Leaf's warning, neither of us had really expected it. Perhaps somewhere close, but not... not...

"Damn it!" I cursed and quickly slipped into my clothes before grabbing my Pokéballs, very glad now that I had refused to leave them anywhere other than at most a few feet away. My heart was hammering and I could feel adrenaline rushing through my body, pushing away the last vestiges of sleep and forcing me not to think too much and just act. I had to first find out what was really going on. For all I knew this could be anything from a distraction to some kind of sabotaging act...

Sprinting out into the hallway I nearly collided with Aisha who was also up and trying her best not to look frightened. I really should have insisted that she left but it was too late for that now. Not saying a word, we both hastened for the entrance just as the distant blaring sound of sirens – the citywide ones used for emergencies – split the air.

Clearing the entrance, I came to a sudden stop at the sight that greeted us. The angle I had had from my bedside window had hardly been able to prepare me for this. All around us buildings and other parts of the city were burning, smoke lying heavily in the air. Here and there I could see police officers and official League personnel fighting in the street, driven back steadily under the onslaught of waves of black-clad figures with the distinctive letter on front.

Cerulean City was under attack. The target the League had been trying to figure out so desperately in the last months was... my home. I couldn't wrap my mind around it even as I stared and took in the reality all around us.

How long had this gone on? It couldn't have been more than a few minutes if the catastrophe sirens were only now reacting. Yet the damage was already this big and even more worrying was that the enemy had already penetrated this deep into the city. Security had been so tight; an approach of a force this big should have been noticed long in advance in order to organize a proper defensive line.

However, I realized, communication was severely limited and even other technology was affected, some less, some more. Under these circumstances it might just be possible to surprise even an alert security force anticipating such an event.

The attempt to analyze the cause did nothing to lessen the shock of the severity of the assault. This wasn't just an attack in an attempt to take over the city or deal damage to certain key locations; it was more like they were out to raze the very city to the ground. Swarms of Pokémon were flying above, letting loose with Hyper Beams or other such devastating attacks and it really didn't look like they were following a specific pattern other than attempting to cause as much destruction and havoc as possible. And during all that the invaders on the ground engaged the security force or any other able person with means to fight, keeping them busy from doing something against the aerial attacks... if not cutting right through any resistance to begin with.

It was brutal. It was heart wrenching. And it was inconceivable.

"Oh god..." I finally pressed out, yet still not able to physically react. That was remedied a moment later when a Hyper Beam struck a building close by, causing a sickening and ear-splitting sound. The shockwave slammed into me hard and I found myself flung off my feet, impacting hard with the ground.

My head was ringing and my right side was aching but the pain finally penetrated the fog in my mind and allowed me to push past my stupor. There was no time for shock, no time for asking why or how. Right now everyone's lives were in danger and as Gym Leader of the city I had no place to just stand around here and gawk!

Accepting Aisha's support, I struggled to my feet. My body ached from the impact but no lasting damage seemed to have occurred and the throbbing helped me focus. If something wasn't done now, there would be no one and nothing left to analyze later. I wasn't sure what I could do myself but I had a duty to fulfill, both as a Gym Leader and as a citizen that loved her home.

"Bastards, you'll pay for this," I growled. "Stay close to me," I told Aisha as I took the first steps towards the rest of the city, intent on joining the fight. I knew she was frightened yet wouldn't want to go hide somewhere either. Hell, would I allow myself a moment to think, I would probably realize how scared I was myself. But I couldn't. If I did that, I would certainly not be able to do anything. Instead I focused on the anger and fury inside of me to help me concentrate on what was important. To defend my home, whatever it took.

We barely had cleared the front entrance when some unexplainable sensation made me look up. I saw the attack coming, far too close to properly react and instinctively shoved Aisha to the side before diving out of the way myself. It was by

far not enough as the explosion going off between us flung me through the air far harder than the shockwave before. Somehow I managed to catch my wild flight and rolled into a kneeling position, albeit wincing from my aching muscles and my burning backside.

When I was able to look around again there was a whole platoon of black-clad Team Rocket members advancing on us and in the midst I could just make out the familiar hair and face of someone I could have done without ever seeing again. At the same time Domino met my look with a disturbing smirk of her own.

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(Narrator)

"And so it begins. While Ash and company deal with their own problems on Twinheart Island they remain yet largely unaware of the peril their old friend is now finding herself in. The severity of Team Rocket's attack is both unexpected and inconceivably shocking. What will become of Misty? How will this turn of events affect Ash and the others? And will they even have time to figure out their own romantic complications in the midst of all this chaos? The answer to these questions lies within the next episode and the explosive final of the second arc. Be sure to tune in again!"

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Maia's Prophecy

Maia: *zips past* Yaaaaayyyy!

MysticMew: Great, now I get a hyper one again. Well, better than depressed and apocalyptic I suppose.

Maia: *jumps on MysticMew's back* I see. I see. I see in the future. I see... the end of some things and the beginning of many more.

MysticMew: *trying to ignore the added weight* ... That's all?

Maia: Hmm... yeah. I mean everything else they already know, can guess or it would be telling too much.

MysticMew: *mutters* Are you sure you aren't just lazy? Whoa, hey...! Put that away! I didn't mean...

CRASH* *SLAP* *CRACK

Maia: *smugly* I'm not lazy. I'm busy. So busy... So many yummy treats yet to consume. Hold on my darlings I'm coming! *zips away again*

MysticMew: *groaning* I might regret saying it but... Thanks for all the food.

Maia IS grateful... even if she's overdoing it.

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Author's Notes

Once more, I really do appreciate all the feedback and hope dearly it's not just a one-time thing to keep my muse from consuming us all...

Alright. This episode was interesting to write. A good mixture of longer battle scenes and character interaction, mostly further dealing with Ash, Dawn and May's situation. I hope I did well with the battles and gave everyone a nice first snack before it gets to the Dawn/May showdown among others. I had to set some priorities or this episode would have gone on even longer or I would have to split outright in which case I honestly didn't have much more to do at this point for the other characters. However, I tried to make the Dawn/Zoey and May/Drew matches as detailed as possible, hence the multiple views. Those fights really got big, thus the additional short Zoey and Drew POVs. Well, I hope you enjoyed some action at least.

As for the romantic angle. I think it should be obvious by now where I'm heading with those three. Not that it will be simple, by far not. I merely hope that the majority of my readers can keep an open mind. I try to make this as plausible as possible. Well, that's all I'm going to say about it until after next episode.

Next episode is going to be the big final of Arc 2, perhaps a very small epilogue after that. I'm not sure yet, have to see how the size plays out. These things are really getting rather large again. However, this should be about the average size you should expect for one episode in Arc 3 since we have everyone in place and given more or less equal importance.

There's actually really not much more I have to say here, so as always: Keep up with the reviews and we shall keep the episodes coming.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias