

Title: The Final Step to the Master Reloaded

Part: Second Arc, Episode 9

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Beta: H-Man #89995, partly xryuran

Status: Beta

Rating: R

Category: Romance, Adventure, Dark, lots of other things...

Pairings: Ash/Dawn (main), Brock/Ako, Leaf/Misty, added as revealed

Continuum/Spoilers: Everything up to the start of the Sinnoh League Tournament, from there on original plot.

Distribution: M&M DreamWorks Blog (<http://mysticmew44.blogspot.de>), M&M

DreamWorks Archive (<http://mysticmew.bplaced.net>), Fanfiction.net

(www.fanfiction.net), M&M DreamWorks archive and blog gets preference and the desired and best format, all versions will first go to the blog and archive.

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Pre-Note

Apologies for the long delay. There is a good reason for that. Essentially we have been working on two episodes at once without realizing it until much further in. Considering that, I think Maia and I have been very fast in getting this out, working overtime during many segments of the episode(s). It was getting entirely too long, however, and in the end I had to decide to split it apart. That worked quite well actually with a clean split after the final.

First of all, to the person with the most crazy username I have ever seen. Yes, that means you... HP-DG-SB-HA-RR-KB-NT-TD-LL-AJ. *lol* I can only imagine there is some system behind this, otherwise I really wonder how you can remember that, because frankly I couldn't. ^_^ Thank you for your kind review. It is good to hear in detail that I am doing a good job.

My personal highlight among the reviews goes to Advent of Shadows, however. And with that to a person that won't be here to see this anymore because they decided not to continue because they did not like my style. And that is fine. Personally I can't really recall anyone reviewing, saying they won't keep reading and explaining their reasons in an orderly and decent fashion without making it seem like a flame or baseless criticism. It was merely a personal taste preventing further reading. While that saddens me, I'm deeply grateful that this reader took the time to actually leave a review in the first place where as many others read through a story they thoroughly enjoy but never leave a single line saying so.

I can honestly say that I probably wouldn't do what Advent of Shadows did either, not after reading a prologue and a chapter and deciding it is not what I want. Normally one would simply discard without the author being ever the wiser... But Advent of Shadows did leave a review and I feel such an action should be noted and praised as a shining example to all readers out there. Even I do feel humbled.

Shameless Plug

Since I'm done with Arc 2 by the time I'm releasing this, Maia and I seem to have settled on what we do next. While I cannot guarantee it will stay this way, we have already done a good bit of the prologue to a new story continuum called "Facets of Magic". This one will be a cross between several series but with a greater focus on Sailor Moon and Magical Girl Lyrical Nanoha (since neither of us could resist any longer ^_^), with probably a healthy bit of Negima mixed in later on. This seems to suit us best since this way we can combine our two most recent favorites of the last years with our all-time classic. Again, I can't say for sure we'll stick with it. This is the experimentation phase between two projects. It usually takes us awhile to settle on what to do next.

That being said, I'll provide the prologue as an alpha somewhere in the next days. So anyone that has me on their update list (and not just the story), I'd be delighted, if you would give it a chance and a first opinion of how it looks.

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(Narrator)

"It should have been a time of celebration and excitement. The first qualification round for a brand new event that is supposed to bring Trainers, Coordinators and Pokémon closer together. However, in the month leading up to these days... and even further ago than that, a dark shadow has begun to loom over the land. On the eve of Dawn's successful victory at the Kanto Grand Festival, a fateful encounter with the Legendary Pokémon Mew has marked a turning point in Ash and Dawn's life. Mew tells of an ancient history and of the destiny they are chosen to face."

Behind the stage of the Contest Hall on Twinheart Island, Dawn and May prepare for their match.

"It is now the day of the final of this new Contest type that so far has seen some fierce competition. However, this match between Dawn and May means far more to them than just victory or loss. After May's confession of her feelings towards Ash and Dawn, this match has become the battleground from which the future of those three would be written."

Meanwhile, some time earlier, the sun rises over a burning Cerulean City.

"Unbeknownst to them, however, their destiny has already begun to unfold and one of their friends is now in dire danger from a brutal and shocking strike aimed at her home, Cerulean City. Chaos, destruction and death reign in the once beautiful city. Soon enough all these events will come together and the world will have to face its greatest crisis yet since that time ages ago, long forgotten by history. It will be then that the skills, courage and bonds of our heroes will be tested to their fullest and beyond."

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Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)

"Kingdra, cover Gyarados. Gyarados, Stone Edge!" The Thunderbolt bounced off relatively harmlessly from Kingdra. However, fighting for so long was taking its toll on my Pokémon and Kingdra's movement that should have been executed much more fluently was sluggish. Gyarados lost no time though and hammered a rain of sharp stones into the Manectric. It collapsed with a grunt but little other expression of pain. Immediately Gyarados charged up for another Hyper Beam and put enough power into it to obliterate everything in its path.

There was no time to even feel the twinges of regret of having to do this – regardless of how vile and twisted these... things were. Already I had to turn my attention to the next immediate front needing my attention. Starmie and Corsola were battling with five enemies at once the last time I checked. Well, it was only three now. An Abomasnow, Parasect and Voltorb. And the latter fell just then. But Corsola was barely hanging on by sheer force of will and a constant execution of Aqua Ring and Mirror Coat. Taking the brunt of damage from the Grass-type moves but still returning them twofold.

"Starmie, Rapid Spin, then Flash Cannon!" My oldest Pokémon spun around a series of attacks, spinning at dizzying speed, then emitted a powerful beam of silvery energy at such a close range that there was not a moment for its opponents to evade. The spinning only gathered more energy for the attack and the Abomasnow that had been such a pain for almost all my Pokémon up to now took the full force with Parasect being flung away from the force and right into a combination of Corsola's Ice Beam and Vaporeon's Aurora Beam, freezing it solid before Corsola hurled a Power Gem at the ice block breaking it apart with a satisfying crack..

While waiting to see if Abomasnow would recover, I glanced around and noted that for the first time in what felt like hours – and perhaps it had been that long already – there was no one and nothing else immediately threatening our existence. Gyarados had knocked out the remaining Rockets and it seemed that Abomasnow was down for the count as well.

Cautious, I made a more serious inspection of the immediate area and after once again coming up empty, allowed myself a brief moment of rest and to survey the state of my Pokémon. Only Gyarados and Starmie still seemed ready to go, albeit being somewhat winded. Kingdra was exhausted but was already using the opportunity for a brief Rest. Corsola had taken a lot of damage with her defense and countering approach and poor Vaporeon was barely hanging on. She had fought bravely and hard to this point, clearly going far past her limit. They all had.

Recalling the latter two to their Pokéballs for now, I leaned heavily against the side of a destroyed building. There wasn't much left of it. The roof had pretty much completely been burnt away – or perhaps simply blown off –, while the rest of the stone was charred and blackened. And this was just one of many. Just a small example of the state the city had been reduced to.

The sun was starting to peek through the plumes of smoke and the flickering fires all around us. It had been around three in the morning when I had been woken by the initial attack and dawn was already close. Only now I realized exactly how much time had passed. And with every hour things had become bleaker.

In the beginning, I had barely had an idea of the true scope of the attack, stuck fighting with Domino's initial forces for quite some time. For some reason the woman had not participated directly and moved on elsewhere. I had little time to be galled or worried about that. The men she had brought with her were obviously some of their best, they definitely had some of the strongest warped Pokémon with them. It hadn't looked good at first until some relief had arrived from security forces that had been forced back. Of course, that had only meant that their pursuers were soon to follow.

We had managed to take out about half the force before reinforcements arrived and I had been separated from Aisha and the rest. Until now I hadn't been able to allow myself to worry. I couldn't think about it. I couldn't think about the destruction all around me as continuous battles had driven me further away from the Gym and into the rest of the city, I couldn't allow myself to think over the bodies, the cries for help or the resuming sounds of further chaos and misery being inflicted. If I did, I knew it would break me.

And so I held onto my focus with an iron will and used the pain from the wound where a bullet had barely missed me as a reminder why I had to continue on no matter what. There weren't many but the fact that some of those Rockets were actually carrying firearms was alarming enough. Not just for myself but for the Pokémon as well. After having nearly been shot once, I had made it a priority to take out those actually wielding such a weapon right away.

The longer I had gone on, the less defenders I had seen and the more defeated, some dead, some not able to continue... it was debatable who was worse

off. The assault was relentless and brutal and while it seemed a lot of the high quantity of modified Pokémon was countered by a lack of base quality – there were a lot of first stage evolution Pokémon among the invaders –, the sheer number and their mindless battle lust with little regard for their own health was overwhelming.

Shaking off the reflective thoughts, knowing that thinking about the hopelessness of the situation would not get me anywhere, I recalled my other Pokémon and made my way back towards the Gym, breaking out into a sprint. Now that I had a bit of freedom to think, the worry was pushing against my will. There was no way Aisha could have fought or even held all these enemies off by herself. If anything I had to get her out of here. That was the least and perhaps the only thing I could do for now.

This is madness. What do they hope to gain from this? I thought in anger and frustration, barely catching myself before stumbling over some debris. The smoke was making my eyes water and it was hard to see... No, I had to be honest. I was crying, crying for what was happening to my home and how powerless I was to do anything about it.

The only thing that drove me onwards now was the hope to see one of the few real friends I had left safe. As the Gym came into view, I simply stared for several seconds as I continued my approach, then the anger once again took hold at the sight of the destruction in front of me. Compared to the rest of the city, the Gym still stood but there were big holes blasted all over the outer wall and the ground in front showed even more signs of a fierce confrontation. But there was nothing left now. No Pokémon battling it out. Bodies were strewn all over the ground and steps and most of them were those in League uniforms and police officers.

Sparing them only a sad passing glance, I sprinted up the steps and jumped through the mostly broken glass of the front doors before coming to a panting stop, looking around in the darkened hallway, electricity long having perished along with so many other things. Then I could pick out the sounds of nearby fighting and I dashed off into the direction of the pool area. I had almost reached my destination when a familiar scream echoed through the halls and threatened to shatter my heart into tiny pieces at the apparent source...

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Opening Theme (Shining Days, Mai-HiME)

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

aozora ippai ni

watashitachi no omoi ga chiribamerarete yuku

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

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

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

*hikaru kaze no naka
yume no hane maioriru yo*

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

*yuuki dashite mirai e
sou utsukushiku...*

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

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

ugokidasu atsui kodou ga

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

ano hi to onaji hayasa wo kizamu yo

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

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

*massugu na manazashi ga suki
zutto miteitai*

Short image of Giovanni in his office with a dark disembodied form behind him.

Scene switches back to Ash, arriving at a hill. Looking up he smiles seeing Dawn, May, Brock, Ako, Leaf and Misty standing atop and waiting for him.

Camera shifts up into the sky and from where it fades out of Mew's eye again who flies down and into the prior scene, landing on top of Dawn's shoulders.

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M&M DreamWorks Presents
The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
Second Arc: Glimpses of Destiny
Episode 09: The Point of No Return! Between Victory and
Defeat! Part 1

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Twinheart Island, Kanto (Cynthia)

The small room was ablaze with anxious energy. One didn't need to be a psychic to tell. I could feel it, too, the overwhelming anxiousness to act, to do something. Instead I was stuck here. Not only far away from the action but also chained by my position and the still very real threat that something might happen here after all.

"I can't believe their force was this big already." Ironically enough Twinheart might be the only place close enough to what was happening right now that had the most detailed scope of the situation in most of Kanto. We were at least able to catch snippets of broken communications like distress calls and frantic attempts at status reports.

"Don't blame yourself. I didn't think the seal would have weakened so much to allow interference like this either. Even if it is the day before the Purple Moon." The biggest boon though was Mew assisting our residential psychic with keeping up the connection with the rest. It seemed that together they were able to connect to all the others at one of the major assault points and provide an accurate account of the situation.

Yes, there were more than one. The sheer numbers involved were staggering. Every major city, Celadon, Saffron, Viridian... Everywhere the reports were the same. Not that the enemy had small armies deployed to all location. But the forces involved were not only highly trained but also possessing an appalling number of those twisted Pokémon Leaf had encountered in Cerulean Cave. There was no tactics to these attacks, just a clear-cut frontal assault, designed – and successfully so – to occupy the defenses there. The stationed Elites could hold them off but it was enough to keep them in one place.

And that, I had quickly realized, was precisely the idea. None of these forces were meant to carry out the real strike. They were ALL distractions. The real strike had landed where none of us had truly expected it. Cerulean City had very little to offer in tactical value. Perhaps the power plant in the northeast but that was hardly worth the effort. I couldn't imagine what kind of value Giovanni would see there.

Of course, it hardly mattered. What mattered was that Team Rocket had clearly made fools out of us with that kind of strategy and there was precious little we could do from here. With the kind of numbers already used against us, rushing over to Cerulean now, with the little I had at hand here, would firstly not make much of a difference and secondly leave this place completely open as well.

"What are you going to do?"

Yes, what was I going to do? I had to wonder, closing my eyes more in frustration than in thought. I could rush over to Cerulean now but several hours had already gone by, contact with our local psychic had been lost awhile ago. Also, Lance would surely know the same that I did and he was the one much more free to move. I had a job to do here in the meanwhile. Several of them actually. Especially since it seemed the interfering influence on communication was starting to disappear. Very soon we wouldn't be able to keep the events of this night secret anymore and it was not hard to imagine the reaction of the public.

"My job. As inappropriate as it sounds, we cannot cancel the final now. We still don't know anything about the situation in Cerulean and very little about the other places. Keeping this under wraps is impossible, of course, but I'd rather have more information to present before everyone here learns of this. If this gets out unchecked, it will only cause a panic. And that's the least we need right now."

Mew frowned but nodded eventually. "What are you going to tell the media? They are going to know about this as soon as communications are fully functional again."

She had a good point there and it was one of the issues I would need to address right away. "I will enact a state of emergency. All media must run information through the League first before they are released. That will buy us some time at least." Not very much. All it took was someone in the crowd getting one call from a person they knew anywhere in Kanto and things would quickly spiral out of control. It was a good thing that the final round was early in the morning and that Contest battles were timed. We might just be able to keep it together that long.

"Alright, I suppose that will have to do. Keep an eye on the kids, please, I will take a look at Cerulean. There might not be much I can do but one of them is still there and I can't allow anything to happen to her." The small Legendary looked clearly distressed at that thought, perhaps more so than when we first learned of the

attacks. It might seem a little harsh to be more worried over an individual life than the entire situation. But considering their importance...

"Are you sure she's..." I didn't dare speak it out loud. Until psychic contact with Cerulean was lost the information we had received were... appalling. The ferocity and brutality of the attack there was hard to comprehend and I feared what it had to look like now. If Giovanni knew all of the kids' identities, there was no way he would not seize the opportunity to take them out of the picture permanently.

Mew shook her head, face grim but certain. "No, I would have felt it. Regardless of the influence, I would definitely know. She's still alive and probably fighting a losing battle as it is. That's why I'm afraid, I can no longer offer any assistance here. I have to prepare for a long-range Teleport, otherwise it would drain me too much to do something afterwards."

"Understood. We can take it from here and... good luck." We all needed that now. Not just at this moment but for the near future as well. The situation was already a catastrophe, no matter how you looked at it. If Team Rocket's only goal tonight had been to wreak as much havoc as possible, then they had certainly achieved that goal already.

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(Brock)

They always say curiosity killed the Skitty. Well, it might not have killed me but I had definitely learned much more than I cared about knowing. I had been on my way back to the infirmary wing after getting some needed supplies when I had come across Cynthia talking with someone that seemed to belong to the security detail for the event.

I hadn't been oblivious to the happenings of yesterday. Something definitely was going on. These "communication problems" were much more than that, I was sure of it. Even with as little as Cynthia had revealed to us initially, it didn't take much to figure out that Team Rocket was most likely behind it somehow. As the problem had prevailed all day and even until now, my concerns grew only stronger. I had thought about pressing Ash for answers, but as he and Dawn were so occupied with their own situation, I wondered if they had even noticed.

Nothing could have quite prepared me for what I learned from eavesdropping on the conversation in the hallway. No one else was around and my happening across them was pure coincidence, as such neither of them seemed concerned about unwanted listeners.

I can't believe this is happening, I thought, torn inside at how to react but generally to numb still to take any kind of action. Cynthia had hinted before that they were expecting some kind of major operation, but this... This was inconceivable. A whole city?

Flashback

"Ma'am, the chief wants an update on the situation in Kanto. Are there any changes?"

Changes? Situation? So something big really was going on and with communications down we were practically blind and deaf here. Inching a little closer, I focused even stronger on making out the low voices. Thankfully, since no one else was down here and there were few background sounds, I could hear them rather clearly.

"So far unchanged. The other cities are holding but it's obvious that they merely wished to tie up our forces there," Cynthia replied and a knot began to form in my stomach at what I was hearing. This wasn't just some single, terroristic act they were talking about. "The jamming is lessening, expect a return to normal within the day. I have informed the media about a state of emergency, so that no information is distributed before we can give a proper statement... That being said..."

"Someone could hear anyway."

There was a pause and I held my breath, my heart hammering at the reality of just how severe the situation was but I couldn't leave yet. I had to know now what was really going on. "Tell the chief to prepare measures for handling a panic, just in case. However, security comes first. At this point we cannot predict if this place might become a target, too."

"And Cerulean?" The question rattled me deeply and I waited anxiously for Cynthia to make her reply.

What? What about Cerulean? What's happening? Is Cerulean under attack, too? Then, what about Misty? And what about the other cities? Pewter, and my own family?

"I am afraid at this point we must assume the worst. We have lost contact for quite some time now and the invasion force had already overrun half the city at least at that point. If Master Lance couldn't send reinforcements in time, there is precious little we can do here and now. At the moment we must see to the safety of all those here."

I slumped against the wall in shock, struggling to process all that I had heard. I wished I hadn't. I wished I had been a few minutes slower or faster and therefore not stumbled upon this conversation. My stomach felt queasy and I wondered if I was going to throw up. *Oh god, Misty...*

End Flashback

She couldn't be dead. I refused to believe it. We had been together for so long, I was sure I would know. Deep down in my heart I would know. Of course that didn't mean she was safe. Knowing her, she wouldn't go down without a fight and keep fighting until she couldn't move any longer. And that realization only made my now very real fear that much stronger.

What was I supposed to do now? What could I do? Rush off, somehow find some way to Cerulean and then what? The way it sounded, this had been going on for at least several hours now. Even if I could get my hand on the fastest transportation method could I even hope to make it in time? And what kind of difference would a single person make anyway?

I should go and tell Ash. He should know. He needed to know... However, it might just shatter him. With all the problems he had with May and the match between her and Dawn, if he learned about Misty's plight now, there was no telling what it would do to him. And in the end, he would be just in the same position as me, relatively powerless to do anything. Ignorance really sometimes was a Blissey.

"There is nothing you can do... but you know that already." I spun around, my heart threatening to leap to the very top of the Contest Hall and stumbled back a few steps in shock at the sight of a solemn-looking Mew floating right in front of me. Despite my unhealthy heartbeat, I managed a glare at the Legendary that had little to do with the near heart attack.

"Don't look at me for answers. I cannot see the future and even knowing everything wouldn't have made a difference. I am going to wish Dawn good luck now... then I'm off to Cerulean to extract your friend." My eyes widened at that and relief started to manifest again, as selfish as that may sound. Misty's potential safety was something I treasured far more than all the other lives out there at stake. "Yes, she still lives," Mew continued. "I would know otherwise, especially if it concerns one of you three." Then her gaze became piercing and I suddenly felt myself gulp under an invisible pressure. This little creature really could be quite intimidating if it wanted. "Do not tell anyone of this yet. Not until they have had their match. You cannot comprehend yet how important it is that this match takes place unhindered."

Well, I might comprehend it, if someone told us something once in awhile, I could only send after the Legendary in my mind, but she was already zipping away, leaving me alone with my thoughts and fears.

Whether or not she heard me I wasn't sure but Mew had one last thing to add, her voice echoing in my mind. *I'm not sure how long this will take. While I'm gone, watch over your friends, they are in perhaps even more danger than you understand yet. THAT is something you can do."

I stood for a minute longer, then finally started to continue on my way back to the infirmary. Back to Ako and some much needed support. I wasn't sure if I could tell her but I might have to or I would go crazy from keeping it all inside, from worrying about Misty and what was happening in the rest of Kanto while watching two of my best friends fight it out blissfully unaware but also with far more at stake than just to see who was the better Coordinator...

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Cerulean City, Kanto (Leaf)

Damn it, I'm too late.

Emperor had pushed hard after the earlier distraction but it was impossible to go at top speed with one wing damaged. All my Pokémon were tough, I knew that. They would gladly ignore their own peril to fulfill their given tasks. Under the circumstances it had really been the best I could have hoped for.

We had been halfway over Kanto by the time dawn broke and I had already known that I wasn't going to make it. From this high in the sky the distant signs of battle were easily picked up among several locations. To think they had this many resources already... Without wanting to sound self-important, I believe I had had the most clashes with Team Rocket forces in the last year. Yet, even I could not have suspected such a thing was possible.

Quietly, I sneaked past another group of black-clad soldiers – because that was what they were right now. Relief forces wouldn't be coming in time. Something had to have happened at HQ as well. I had had no time to look while passing through, but the assaults must have started somewhere around the point when I had been close to HQ. With Emperor in his condition, a healthy dragon should have caught up with us by the time we reached Cerulean.

But I had no time to spare a thought about this now. There was no resistance left in the city, nothing left to save. The attack was all but over at this point and it seemed Team Rocket had begun to round up survivors. I shuddered to think what they wanted with them but right now my sole concern was for Misty. The feeling hadn't gone away, merely increased to a suffocating intensity. That was actually a good thing. I might be too late to help this city but I wasn't too late to save Misty. Not yet.

I was wrong. The danger I sensed wasn't because someone was after her. However, I doubt they are going to let such an opportunity pass. Keeping to the roofs and the shadows as tightly wrapped around me as my minimal control allowed, I was once more grateful for Koga and Janine teaching me some of their craft. Fighting my way through all of them was out of the question. Even if I could, by the time it would take to do so, Misty would...

I have to hurry. I am NOT losing her. This has just begun!

Finally the Gym was coming in sight... or what was left of it. Biting back the renewed rage at the state of what had once been a beautiful city, I surveyed the area. The Gym was still standing, albeit badly damaged. Two soldiers were standing guard at the entrance and I could clearly hear the sounds of fighting. It was definitely far fiercer than the few, individual skirmishes still going on inside the city. No doubt there, this had to be Misty. She would fight it out until she drew her last breath.

Every moment of waiting was painful but I clamped down on the urge to just rush the guards. It was obvious that whatever odds Misty was facing inside, they had to be overwhelming in their enemies' favor. Enough so, that they could spare people for guard duty. Rushing in head-on held too many risks. One of them could notify those inside for example, to just name one problem. I needed the moment of surprise on my side. And I needed it where and when it mattered.

Then I saw it. Scattered rocks and other pieces on the edge of the roof. Waiting for a moment that the guards were looking the other way, I jumped up and on top of the Gym, quickly confirming my theory and hope. Part of the roof had been blown up and had mostly caved in. If I remembered the layout correctly this was just about the main pool area and the sounds of fighting I had heard came from directly below.

Ready to spring into action at a moment's notice, I peered over the edge and swallowed a curse. There was Misty, just as expected. Disheveled, bloody, clearly exhausted but with an expression of grim fury... facing down about half a dozen Rockets and their abominations making up about dozen. On Misty's side only her Gyarados, Starmie and Wailmer in the pool were still clinging to their last reserves of strength.

Slowly but steadily her attackers were advancing. Misty had nowhere to go, especially since she was obviously trying to shield the girl behind her. It had to be the one she had told me about. And that was clearly why she hadn't run yet. Misty might be stubborn but she wasn't so stupid not to see the hopelessness in this struggle.

However, now she was clearly prepared to make her last stand.

As if I would allow that!

Just as the leading Arcanine charged, I threw down my Pokéballs, released Zoroark, and followed my team down into the fray. They had needed no instructions clearly and the surprise attack had caught the Rockets completely off-guard, decimating almost half the force with quick but precise and powerful attacks. As strong and powerful as those modified Pokémon were, without anyone giving them commands their overly-augmented base instincts made them vulnerable.

I did not intend to give our enemies the time to regroup either. "Night Daze." Zoroark let loose an earth-shattering roar of fury and hammered two more of the opposing side's Pokémon clear across the pool and into the wall on the side and then right through it. Berserker and Hellfire each took out one more. In the meantime I had taken out three of the remaining five Rockets standing with several quick shuriken. The other two had recovered from the shock in time, however, and ordered their Pokémon to fall back a little.

I glanced back over my shoulder towards Misty, my heart breaking under the emotions I could clearly see all over her face and even more so in these beautiful eyes I had grown to love. There was relief but deep down it did nothing to take away the horror and loss she had already seen and experienced here. "Looks like I'm a bit late," I tried to joke but knew already it was pointless. Instead I turned back to the last of my opponents. "Sorry, guys, this one is off-limits. You want something from her, you have to go through me first."

I didn't quite expect to actually hear an answer, no less from that voice. "That can be arranged." My eyes narrowed as I saw the quite smug-looking figure of Domino emerge from the half-collapsed door on the other side.

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Twinheart Island, Kanto (Ash)

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, the final of the first qualification round for the Harmony Cup is about to begin!"

In the last years I had gotten used to sitting in the audience and cheering on my companion at the time. At first it had been hard to deal with. I was used to being the one in the fight, not just watching them. Of course, the more I had watched Contests, the more I had learned to appreciate them. Both as a serious craft other than the path of a Trainer but also as inspiration and motivation for my own training.

"On the left side. From Petalburgh City, give a round of applause for this year's winner of the Sinnoh Grand Festival, May!"

Without even noticing it the restlessness I had felt in the beginning was gone and I would follow every Contest battle with interest. Today, however, was different. Different from the state of before as much as the state of the now. I was positively nervous, anxious and simply unable to decide what I should do, how I should react or whom I should even cheer for!

"And on the right side. The winner of this year's Kanto Grand Festival, Dawn!"

I had travelled with both of these girls and it had been them that had shown me this other path of bonding with Pokémon. That alone would have been enough to make this hard. However, this was hardly resolved by a "may the better one win". There was far more at stake here as they faced off on stage. Was it just me or was the tension in the air tangible? No one else seemed to notice...

In truth I still didn't know what to make of my talk with Dawn last night. I could understand her point now and yet it made little difference to my doubts about anything good coming from this situation. I had resolved not to fight her decision, however. Dawn could be quite stubborn when she had gotten something into her head. Not like Misty had been but my girlfriend clearly had her moments. And this was apparently one of them.

There is something I need to find out today. That's what she had said when I had asked her again what she intended to accomplish. As a fellow Trainer I could at least understand that. There were some things you could learn much easier through a battle. When two Trainers could connect like this, understanding came much easier. I had learned that many times, most recently with Paul and Leaf during the tournament.

Eventually I decided there was no point in making my head hurt by letting my thoughts run endless circles around the problem. I would have to see how it all turn out. Dawn might be right. Maybe they really had to do this after all. No, not maybe. I had to trust her. If anything, I could trust in Dawn and that's what I would do for now.

"It's the battle of two young Top Coordinators who have shown much promise in recent years. The time limit is five minutes, begin!"

"Naru! Burn Up!"

"Lopunny! Spotlight!"

It had been a close choice. In the end, Dawn had wanted to give Lopunny a chance to prove herself in a bigger single match. That wasn't the only reason, of course. Her prediction about May's strange Eevee had been right and since we didn't know what this one could really do, Lopunny as a fellow Normal type was about the most balanced response to whatever surprise May had in store for her.

I was surprised that no words were exchanged between the two girls. Obviously there was nothing more to talk about. It seemed in this one aspect they were already in harmony. Both wanted answers from this fight. Not that this was the sole reason. Both were too dedicated, too professional for that. They both wanted to win. Neither of them would surrender that for emotional satisfaction or even purposely use a Pokémon Battle for personal matters exclusively.

The beginning was almost as I had expected it, both carefully testing out the other. Lopunny took the offense without fully committing herself yet. Her attacks were deft and easily avoided, that Eevee showing the same kind of natural agility as she had against Christine. But Lopunny wasn't a big target. In fact she could easily rival or even surpass her opponent when it came to grace and nimbleness.

None of them could keep this up for long. With the short time limit of a Contest battle, there was only so much time for a *warm up*. And about half a minute after the start of the match, the intensity picked up when the two Pokémon had once more barely passed each other by. Lopunny spun in mid-motion and bounced upward, continuing the spin towards Naru with a fast kick. The Eevee pushed back from the ground, flipped over and immediately charged into what looked like a Take Down attempt.

I knew it. I hadn't been sure yesterday whether or not I had seen it right. But there definitely were traces of elemental power in that Take Down, much like a faint version of Flare Blitz or in this case Volt Tackle. Too bad for May that Lopunny was used to sparring with Pikachu. The problem with that technique was that once started it was very hard, if not impossible to stop. So when Lopunny recovered faster from her miss than Naru could reach her, May's Pokémon was wide open for the Focus Punch that followed...

Or that should have been the case.

Just before Lopunny could make contact with her opponent, Naru suddenly began to glow. *An evolution?! No that isn't it*, I discarded the thought immediately. The light was similar but not quite the same. I had only a moment to wonder before I got my answer.

I hadn't expected to be awed in the same way as the audience. After all that I had experienced, all the training that Dawn and I had gone through, I didn't think I could be stumped like this. Surprised, yes, I certainly had hoped to be positively surprised. But not completely and utterly shocked speechless.

What the hell just happened?

It took me a long moment to fully register the next few seconds as my thought process had been rather locked on the impossible sight of a Jolteon emerging from the light that had enveloped Naru. It was impossible. Even if it was an evolution, how did that work? Didn't you need an Elemental Stone to get a Jolteon?

Dawn and Lopunny were obviously as baffled as the rest of us and Naru – I assumed it was her – had made excellent use of the new form. Lopunny's attack had slipped for but a moment in the face of that new development and the heightened speed from a Jolteon had allowed Naru to slip past the Focus Punch and instead struck her opponent with a powerful Thunderbolt that had even Lopunny, used to Electric attacks for the most part, rather rattled.

Considering May's barely concealed delight, I had this bad feeling that she wasn't quite done with her surprises. As if this wasn't enough already! I could still not understand what exactly had happened. There was only one thing I understood: This definitely wasn't a trick or something illegal. Security measures were extra strong these days and May wouldn't do something against the rules anyway.

Dawn would be in for a tough battle, that was for sure.

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Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)

I snarled at the smug voice. The relief of seeing Leaf here quickly evaporated under a surge of rage. There was no doubt in my mind that this woman was the one that had been leading the attack, the one responsible for bringing all this destruction upon us.

Taking a step forward, I found my forward motion blocked by a slender but insistent arm belonging to my girlfriend. I glowered at her but she just shook her head and I relented... for now. That didn't mean I could just release the anger burning inside me. "What is the point in all this?! What do you gain from attacking Cerluean?!" I half-yelled, half-cried, by this point I wasn't sure if the tears came from all the smoke in the air or from my suffering heart, probably both. I didn't care. I didn't even really care for the answer but I still wanted to know.

Domino just laughed and for a moment it seemed like she would completely ignore the question. However, then her gaze turned condescending. "Gain? From this rabble? Nothing really. It was just the most convenient target available for maximum effect."

I wished I hadn't asked. Stumbling back, I was torn between despairing in shock and totally giving into the rage. Nothing? Convenient? So there wasn't even any purpose behind this... atrocity? All this destruction and death... just to make an

example? It was too much. My heart couldn't bear it. All I wanted... needed right now was to vent. Somehow, something or someone had to pay for all this. I...

"Go, Dark Sage..." A Shiftry popped out of the Pokéball Leaf had thrown. I had never seen her use one before but that didn't matter. This bitch was mine now...
"Explosion!"

Eyes widening, I had no time to voice my displeasure when Leaf pulled me back...

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

Twinheart Island (Naru)

It was quite an amazing feeling. As much as I still had my concerns about people seeing me that shouldn't – although it seemed Team Rocket had more important matters to attend to at the moment –, I couldn't deny the extraordinary thrill that came with showing my abilities here. In fact I was really starting to like it and I wondered why.

This was something I had decided to do for May who had given me a reason to live and keep on hoping – a hope that was already paying off with now three of my lost sisters found already. And because of that I was resolved to do my best. That was all there was to it, wasn't it?

We didn't give our opponents time to recover. That Lopunny was easily as nimble as myself, if not more so. And it seemed both her and her Trainer were able to shake off the surprise far quicker than I would have thought possible. My next Thunderbolt was barely evaded. At the same time I heard May call out the predesigned order and I jumped after Lopunny, using my heightened speed to get in close for a Discharge before fluently switching to my Vaporeon form and immediately used a Water Pulse into the electricity emitted. Lopunny had managed to twist away and would have just gotten out of the immediate area of effect but the Water Pulse conducted the electricity and while it was only a glancing blow in the end, the shock must have at least stung. My opponent was clearly still trying to recover from the first Thunderbolt as well, which severely hampered her movement.

May knew that and had me press the attack again. This time I used a simple series of three Water Gun shots and immediately froze them over with Blizzard after shifting to Glaceon. Lopunny stumbled back under the assault but managed to slap away two of the frozen projectiles and suddenly I had to dodge my own attack, flowing back into my base form without a command.

In a brief moment of respite I once again wondered about the thrill I was experience and finally realized with a bit of a start that I was... having fun. It didn't

even matter anymore that people saw me and my abilities. In fact, it felt good to use them in this way. For a long time I had loathed my cursed body, cursed the experiments that had robbed me of a normal life – or so I had believed. Until I met May. She had not only taken me in and provided me with support despite my distrust, she had also shown me that what I could do wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Certainly our captors had clearly intended for these skills to be used for their own, evil devices but now I was free and they were mine to use, to find a purpose for them.

Doing this – presenting my skills here on this stage – wasn't evil, it didn't hurt anyone. In fact people were in awe. Maybe I had just found a good purpose after all.

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(May)

Things were going as planned. It had been a great boon that I hadn't been forced to reveal Naru's ability earlier in the Contest. Dawn was not an opponent to be trifled with. Her quick adaption to the situation showed that she was easily as much an expert on that field as Ash was. Had I given her even a glimpse of what Naru could do, I would have certainly experienced some sort of unexpected counter by now.

Since that wasn't the case, Dawn was forced on the defense for a moment, yet even then she remained dangerous. Despite having executed both combinations perfectly, Lopunny had taken little damage and the points I scored were minimal, regardless of the shocking effect from Naru's transformation... Well, okay, it didn't really count. The judges did know. I had to reveal this to the officials or fear possible disqualification. I was thankful that Cynthia had treated the matter as discreetly as possible at least.

What was even more disconcerting, even though I had been prepared for it, was Dawn's almost complete lack of commands. I could do that with Blaziken but not to that scary degree. Naru and I didn't have that much time together. Especially not for training. Admittedly we were close, considering that we had only started serious training together a little while ago, but for now we still needed commands for the most part.

Dawn wouldn't be done in that easily and the more time went by, the more likely it was for her to develop a counterstrategy. I couldn't leave her time to think. I had to press my advantage now. There was no time to even think about the other aspect of our fight. Not that I really planned on that. Frankly, I wasn't sure what or even if this was going to change anything, but the feeling remained that the only resolution we could find would be through this confrontation. That was enough for me. And besides... I did not intend to lose. Even if it could mean the difference between finding acceptance or refusal.

After I called out the next code signal, Naru shifted to Flareon and immediately jumped into a Flame Charge. Lopunny jumped up but that was exactly what we wanted as Naru ran a circle and set off a devastating row of Lava Plumes. Once more Dawn showed her quick reaction though when Lopunny froze the converging pillars of fire with a spinning Ice Beam.

My eyes widened when it didn't stop there. Instead Lopunny smashed three of the four pillars right away, before pushing off the last with enough force to break it as well. Naru had to dodge quickly and I could see Lopunny already trying to go for her next attack. "Use Sunny Day, then D1!" I quickly called out and that was a good thing because I was totally not expecting the Water Pulse rushing for Naru.

Instead of finding its mark on a Fire Pokémon though, the attack almost harmlessly dissipated on Umbreon's strong defense, further weakened by the Sunny Day effect. This left us with the perfect groundwork for Naru to leap in, intend on scoring a hard hit with Payback.

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(Dawn)

I admit I nearly lost total control of this battle. I had expected many things but not quite something like this. The first time had been a tremendous shock but at that point I had figured it was some kind of weird evolution that hadn't been discovered yet. When Naru had changed again, it nearly cost me the match and I had to thank Lopunny's instincts. At that point I really had been glad I hadn't used Prinplup after all. That conducted Discharge was quite powerful, I had felt the charge even from my position.

This time we weren't quite so well off. I knew it immediately. Lopunny had committed herself a little too far with the last series of attacks. That Water Pulse was still hard for her to pull off and it took her a small but significant time to recover. There was no way she could avoid the counter like that.

And so we prepared ourselves for taking the damage and transforming the momentum into a counter of our own. Through my connection with Lopunny I could feel the pain from the hard hit. However, she endured and spun with the attack while grabbing onto the now-Umbreon with her ears and swinging her opponent into a Circle Throw towards the ground.

Unfortunately that didn't go over quite as planned when Naru recovered in mid fall, rolling to a relatively safe stop upon impact and immediately using the light from Sunny Day for a quick, recharging Moonlight. May grinned at me and I chastened myself for not thinking about it. May had actually told us that she had been personally

training with Maylene. Trying to combat her with Fighting-type moves was almost a wasted effort, which really reduced our options.

I had to find some way to turn the tide. There had to be some kind of pattern to these changes. It didn't even matter anymore how this was possible. I needed to know if May's Eevee really was able to freely change between any form. Because if that was the case, I could have thought of a few more effective combinations that May should have been able to use.

Glancing to the side, I realized that little by little she had amassed a decent point advantage. Yet, it wasn't enough that a comeback was impossible. In fact one good counter should get us back into the match. The time limit made this tricky, yet I urged Lopunny to play it safe for now. We still had a bit to go and so far neither of us had quite gone to our limit.

However, only then would we truly have the fight we needed. Until now it was mostly tactic. Until Lopunny and I found our own grasp on this battle, it couldn't quite become what May and I both hoped for.

Forcing my own mind to settle down and ignore the rising impatience, I began to analyze my opponent's style once more, positive in my intuition that there was some kind of trick or flaw to exploit that would set us at least even again.

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(Lopunny)

The frustration was hard to suppress. I hadn't done a single match like this in a long time. Definitely not on this level and outside of training. Pride and pressure had been equally present when Dawn had told me I would be fighting today. I had not expected it, to be honest. We were all rather equally prepared for it, of course, but still...

Knowing I was going in a battle against an opponent with some unknown tricks was nothing new, that happened all the time in a competition. This was something completely different. And now that annoying Eevee had switched strategies again from a concentrated offensive to a more defensive style. It had begun with a switch to Leafeon, which we had been half-expecting but the speed burst provided by Sunny Day was still startling and I had no time to even try and go for an Ice attack before a Solarbeam came flying at me right away. Instead I bounced it back with Mirror Coat, only to find an empty space and once more my opponent was elsewhere. Behind and above actually I realized a moment before the Leaf Blade nearly cut my ears off.

It was only as I hopped away quickly until I realized she had been using Sword Dance while she was evading! I flung an Ice Beam at her but she was already done

with her second charge and leaped away before once again changing into the Umbreon form.

The next bit was utterly ridiculous. The changes were extremely fast and Naru made use of every one of them to enhance herself. Switching back and forth several times between Umbreon, Leafeon and even her basic Eevee form, a series of Sword Dances, Work Ups and Double Teams quickly made her a very dangerous force independent of which form was currently used. All this was done in less than half a minute and ended in her Vaporeon form, adding some extra defense power with Acid Armor.

Warily I shifted my stance into an even more guarded one. The offense would continue soon and now it would be even more radical. I hadn't felt so challenged in a long time outside of sparring with Pikachu... and that was kind of exhilarating. Dawn was counting on me. So rather than giving into the frustration, I saw this more as an opportunity to prove myself. Prinplup was watching with everyone else backstage. I couldn't disappoint them either.

As expected the assault came almost immediately after Jolteon once more appeared on the stage. The Double Kick hurt like hell after I barely dodged a furious Thunder. For several more and long agonizing moments I could do nothing else than to stay in the match, fast-chaining Agility of my own, so that I could at least keep up and not get ultimately slaughtered. This had now officially entered a stage that we had actually tried to avoid so far for fear that even the judges – save for Cynthia – wouldn't be able to follow anymore.

There was no choice now. The fight was entering the critical stage and I didn't even have time to think of a way to resolve it. That was when I felt a more direct thought pass through my bond with Dawn and had to hide a grin. As usual my trust in her was not misplaced because it seemed she had figured out a crucial detail about that Eevee's shifting ability. Now, all we needed to do was wait for the right moment.

That moment came soon enough. May clearly feared my mastery with the Ice Beam and she also seemed to avoid having Naru take an Espeon form – and I didn't doubt that she could. Both of these factors played a major role. A well-timed Ice Beam forced Naru from her base state into the Glaceon form once more. Glaceon and Flareon were the most resistant and either would have worked for Dawn's idea. But Glaceon was actually the most perfect to prove her hypothesis.

Coming in high with a Jump Kick, I charged one fist with a Fire Punch. It was clearly visible and as such May would need to react. A calculated maneuver but if she really was hesitant to use an Espeon form because of Dawn's psychic abilities, then...

There! As expected another change was ordered and judging by the shape emerging from the brief flash of light, Dawn's observation had been spot on. Not even pulling through with the Jump Kick, I used my momentum instead to lash out... with the hand hidden behind my back, slamming the concealed Thunder Punch into Naru's Vaporeon form.

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(May)

The impact of Lopunny's small fist lashing out with such unexpected force was probably heard in every edge of the arena at least. I winced hard at the sight and sound of it and was momentarily struck into total inaction when the leading Fire Punch was delivered almost like an afterthought as well, lifting Naru off the ground as well when she flew back to the edge of the stage. You would never expect it from a Pokémon like that, but Lopunny definitely was a dedicated fighter. In fact, she had everything that a close combat specialist needed. Not necessarily the brute force. But her nimbleness and quick reaction gave her an extraordinary momentum for those punches and kicks. And that wasn't everything. Combined with several elemental attacks under her belt, Dawn's Pokémon was a hard to handle all-rounder.

The earlier status enhancements were really the only thing that saved Naru from a clear knockout, but she had taken quite a bit damage and that one precise counter had been a huge blow to my points. With just one maneuver, Dawn had all but equaled the score.

It was a blow that didn't just physically hurt. I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed. I knew what happened, of course, but I had never expected that she would figure out Naru's rhythm this fast. It was the one flaw in this special ability. She had no free choice over which form to take. Only from her base state a transformation to any of her evolutionary states was possible. Shifting from another form was only ever possible for two possible choices. And Dawn had known that I was trying to avoid using Espeon.

I sighed deeply. She really was amazing and I think I had just fallen in love even more. However, my chances to win this match now had drastically fallen and with that my chances to prove myself to them. From now on, Dawn would be ready for the changes and far more prepared. It was impossible after all. What had I expected to achieve anyway? Even if I had won... Would a victory based on a surprise tactic really prove anything?

"I hope you aren't giving up already, because... I am having a lot of fun."

The words startled me out of the frustration and resignation that had begun to creep into my heart. Fun? Yes. Yes! I was having a lot of fun, too! In fact I had been

so immersed in the match that up until this moment I hadn't even thought about that other aspect that had been at stake. The more and more intense the match had become, the more I had started to feel a burning warmth in me. And it wasn't just fueled by my own desire to win. Small at first but now steadily growing larger I experienced Dawn's own feelings, her dedication and will and...

Yes, I did understand now. I think I finally did understand what it was that Dawn had been trying to do and if not for the seriousness of the situation I would have almost cried from the realization. Never before had I felt closer to one of the two people I had grown to love and it was an incredible feeling. Something I shouldn't shy away from. Something I shouldn't subconsciously run from. Because that was what I had been doing. All this time, despite what I had done or said, deep down I had never quite *believed* that I had a real chance with them.

And that was what Dawn had wanted. It was amazing that she could see what I had even denied myself. It wasn't exactly an acceptance and neither a refusal. It was more a challenge to be honest with myself. Honest with my feelings. To not give up before it had even begun.

A slow smile slipped on my face and I balled one hand to a fist. "I would never dream of it! Naru, shift A4!"

As if only waiting for it, Naru shook her head to clear away the last effects from the hard hit and reverted back to her Eevee state. And that was all we needed right now. Our last trump card that would be the most effective if a match had gone on for awhile. Giving up her ability to shift, Naru could empower herself with some of the attributes of her evolution stages. The more she had used one, the stronger the enhancement would be.

The last minute was just starting when Naru jumped forward at dizzying speed before I could even give the command. In fact, it was entirely unnecessary as the opening Water Pulse was accompanied by Razor Leaf. Because at this moment I realized that Naru and I had achieved a complete harmony. There was no need any more for words. She knew instinctively what I wanted, dashing between the rocks when Lopunny countered the dual attack by jumping over the Water Pulse and freezing the leaves, flawlessly aiming the beam back at Naru.

Seeing as she couldn't hit Naru between the rocks, Lopunny used the Ice Beam as a propulsion to close the distance and the two of them began a dance of exchanged attacks being dodged. Lopunny showed that she could use all three elemental punches in conjunction but Naru had her own elemental combos to use, drawing attacks from her evolutionary states that you would otherwise never see from an Eevee.

It was exhilarating. I had never felt so good in any match before. This was a duel at eye level. I had no reason to feel inferior or unwanted or even ashamed of what I was feeling. Yes, I loved them both. My heart had been long made up and it was time that I finally seized this feeling and made it a reality. I did not want a rejection. I wanted to be able to experience these feelings for real, to give them all that I had inside me. And yes, I wanted them to love me as well. There was no point in going into a battle – whether a physical or emotional one, if you weren't convinced that you could win. That was something Ash had taught me... had taught both us. And as such it was the one thing that above everything else connected us.

Dawn was grinning at me, too. It was a challenging one, but also one full of warmth and understanding. And it wasn't just her. I could feel something... someone else. In the background, hesitant yet but there. I could feel Ash and it made me feel so unbelievable happy. It was more progress than what I could ever have hoped for. There was a chance now. A chance I intended to seize. There was really nothing to be ashamed of. My love for them was honest and I should be proud of it!

"Hey, Dawn! Ready to be defeated?" I called out, never leaving my eyes off our two Pokémon engaged in a dangerous dance that seemed to be as much fun to them as it was to us. But fun could only go this far. I had found my final resolve and motivation. Now I intended to win!

"Let's see you try!" Dawn called back with a happy laugh but as much determination and seriousness as I felt right now.

Thirty seconds to go. This last exchange would decide everything.

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(Dawn)

Finally! I had almost given up hope that I could reach her. It wasn't like I had ever doubted the sincerity of May's feelings. No, those had been clear enough when she had made her confession. What I had needed to find out was her resolve. One would think actually confessing in this situation, to two people already in a steady relationship was enough proof for her resolve. And that is what I had believed at first as well.

The day afterwards, however, I had started to see more and more signs of inner resignation. And that just wouldn't do. If I were to agree to this, it had to mean something. Accepting May's confession and trying to work something out while she herself didn't believe in her own chances, was a futile and wasted effort. It would crumble easily against the strength of the bond between Ash and I. The only way this could work was if all of us went into this as equals on all fronts.

I wonder if this is how Ash felt when he fought Leaf? Of course, the kind of connection that existed then was definitely different. There was no deeper romantic interest from either side, probably more like a sibling bond than anything else. However, the strength and intensity with which I could feel May now was astounding. My fight with Zoey had nothing on this. I could feel her strong feelings and I could also feel that she had found the resolve to see things through. No hesitation. No fear. Just... love.

Reaching out for Ash, I drew him in as well. He needed to experience, needed to understand this. I knew he had his misgivings still, I could even understand them. However, this was a decision that couldn't be made rational. It had to be made by the heart. And for that, Ash too, just like May now, had to open himself to the possibility.

That was all the attention I could spare before May's recovered determination demanded every concentration, every bit of skill I possessed. Giving myself completely into the flow of the battle, I did not only merge completely with Lopunny, but also with May and through her to some degree with her own Pokémon. And the same went for them. In this way the furious exchange of attacks looked certainly spectacular and awesome but it was almost impossible now for one of us to surprise the other. As much as Lopunny knew my intentions without a word, May would as well. And the same applied for me. I didn't even need to actively apply mental power to instinctively know what she was planning.

Of course, on this level, with this level of speed, even knowing made it impossible to evade some attacks. Naru was really a fearsome opponent like this, wielding power from several elements at once. In fact she was even a little more versatile like this than Lopunny herself. The special training of the last month was really paying off though. Not only Mirror Coat was proving invaluable but picking up the dual enhancement for elemental punches that Ash had trained with some of his Pokémon was now both a great asset to both offense and defense.

Burning away another close-range Razor Leaf attack with a Fire Punch, Lopunny managed to land a Drain Punch in retaliation, only for our opponent to once more surprise us when Naru countered with a Double Kick, even while being pushed away. It seemed anything was possible with this one. I had long-given up on treating this Eevee like any other of her species. Normal rules didn't apply. And it seemed that went for usual physical limitations as well. But should I really be surprised to see a Fighting-type move from someone that had trained with Maylene? Probably not.

Both Pokémon pushed apart but immediately were ready for the next assault when Solarbeam met Ice Beam in an explosion of power and color. Immediately Lopunny bounced upwards as we had sensed right away again that Naru had used the flash and the current terrain of soft ground we were fighting on to quickly Dig with startling speed. In fact Naru emerged with such momentum, that the retaliation Focus Blast missed by several feet.

Then I felt a sudden tug at my mental senses and my eyes widened, forcing me to quickly react when an enormous blast of psychic energy rushed for Lopunny hanging in midair. After all these status enhancements Stored Power had become a fearsome attack.

It was risky at this point since we had not completely perfected it but evasion was almost impossible and Naru had so much momentum, that alone would overwhelm any other move in our repertoire. Not hesitating a moment, Lopunny once more fired off an Ice Beam. It was useless against the incoming attack, of course, but neutralization had never been the purpose. In fact Lopunny didn't even try to push against it, instead using the impact with the psychic blast to propel herself even further upwards, launching once more into a spin. This really took almost all of our last strength. The intensity was starting to pull on our reserves. This would be the decisive moment.

Faster and faster Lopunny spun even as the Stored Power beam closed in, swallowing and pushing back the Ice Beam. Yet all this time a thin layer had started to build around her. Much like Floatzel's Ice Aqua Jet or Prinplup's new variation. This one was far less dense and it wouldn't really serve as much of a barrier either. Yet, after all the ground work the Ice Beam had done, it was enough to ride the rest of the incoming attack almost to the top of the hall. Then, as the psychic energy faded, Lopunny curved back to come rushing down on her opponent. It was far less elegant or controlled as the moves of the other two. It was pure momentum and propulsion force, hence the simple but effective name I liked to give it. Ice Missile.

May made no move to have Naru get away, however. Instead her Eevee picked up speed herself and launched herself into a Take Down attempt even as Lopunny rushed closer in a curve that would eventually bring her parallel to the ground and right into Naru's path. Then flames erupted once more around Naru, much like a Flare Blitz but not quite the same. And there were sparks of electricity too. It was a much greater effect than the one in the beginning of the match.

In response Lopunny increased her spin before, just as she curved in for the ground, forcing the last bit of her energy outward to reinforce her own attack, making it look much like a Giga Impact.

Time slowed down as the two Pokémon closed in on each other, both fiercely determined to defeat the other. Then the moment literally exploded as the attacks clashed with such power I was forced back several steps from the backlash. For several moments it was impossible to see anything and so I could only wait anxiously for the outcome.

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Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)

"What were you thinking!" I yelled as we weaved between the ruins of buildings, either burning or already lost beyond hope. I couldn't believe we were running away. I couldn't believe we were letting the bastards get away with what they did! Being out here only further reminded me of the reason for my anger. Just one look was enough to set my heart boiling. It was either that or giving into grief and despair and I was not ready for that yet. Not until there still was something left to do.

Leaf wasn't impressed by my outburst however, and she needed no words to bring her answer across. Just a look over her shoulder at the unconscious Aisha on Zoroark's back. It was enough to drain my fury. Not completely but enough so to make me flush at my foolishness. In my grief and anger I had almost forgotten about her. Had we stayed and fought, there was no telling how long it would have taken and backup surely would have arrived. Then all of us would have been lost, including poor Aisha who really had nothing to do with any of this. If she had not been with me... No, if she had not been with me, she might have been caught completely unaware like so many others. Perhaps even like her family...

"Sorry," I mumbled, feeling more and more foolish. Unfortunately with my single-minded focus gone, the reality of the situation all around us became unavoidable once more. Leaf didn't say anything. Instead she simply stopped and pulled me into a hug and I gratefully melted into the contact. I had never believed she was upset about my outburst. Who would in a situation like this? Unfortunately I also remembered how our last call ended. She had been right to worry all along and I had not fully believed her. "Thank you for coming."

The other girl shook her head. "I wish I could have been here sooner but I got delayed as well." So I had been right. Something more had happened after the call had been cut off. And still she had made it in time, at least for Aisha and myself. "I'm just glad you were alright. I don't even want to think about it if I had been just a little later. Still..." She fell silent again and looked around at the burning and smoking ruins of my home.

So much lost. And it wasn't just the city. How many had died today? How much lives had been senselessly lost here today? I couldn't fathom how someone could be so callous to commit such an act. I had not wanted to believe that a notorious band of criminals could be up to something of this magnitude. They were evil, yes. But there was a big gap in the definition of evilness between stealing Pokémon and being ready to destroy whole cities and kill innocent lives.

It was all so... unreal.

"We should get out of here," Leaf said. "They've got pretty much everything under control and are already rounding up survivors. If we get surrounded, we won't

have anywhere to escape." She looked up at the sky where some Pokémon were still circling. Getting out through the air was equally as problematic and I doubted Leaf had a Pokémon with her that could carry all three of us anyway.

Then her words fully registered and my head snapped back to look at her. "Wait! What did you mean rounding up survivors? What are they going to do with them?" Wasn't this enough? What point was there to gather those that had survived the attack? Did they want them as hostages or something to put pressure on the League? But Domino had just said there was no greater purpose for choosing Cerulean and somehow I got the impression she had no reason to lie about that either...

The young Master finally met my gaze with a guarded one of her. Reluctant and... No. No, no, no. I refused to believe that. Even more, I refused to let that happen. Already so much had been lost and there had been nothing I could do. In the end, if not for Leaf's timely intervention, Aisha and I would have both been dead already. I was the Gym Leader of Cerulean and yet so far I had been able to do nothing for the people of my city.

Before I could make an argument, Leaf already sighed in defeat. "I know what you are thinking and I guess whatever I say won't stop you." She turned to Zoroark and nodded at him. "Can you get the girl out and wait for us?" The fox-like Pokémon nodded solemnly, although clearly reluctant to leave us alone. Finally though he turned and dashed away.

"You realize that if we do this, we will likely be the ones to end up dead?" I nodded quietly, very much aware of the possibility. I would have told her to escape along with Aisha but also knew that she would never do that. Just like I wouldn't either. "Just checking." Then she grinned. "Fine with me though. I couldn't stomach leaving without getting at least a small victory out of this."

With that we were very much in agreement.

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(Ash)

When the smoke cleared, both Lopunny and Naru were clearly worse for wear. In fact, both were barely keeping themselves on their knees and it didn't look like they would be able to go on even a moment longer. Thankfully that wasn't necessary either.

"Um... girls. The time is over," Lilian said a little nervous from all the charged tension in the air. That snapped them both out of their battle link and two heads swiveled to the board in perfect synchrony. "It has been for about a minute now." I

had to bite back a chuckle at their expressions of embarrassment, but allowed myself a grin that was equal parts good-natured amusement and relief. I didn't blame them for what had happened. The battle connection had been so strong, had I not been sitting here, I would have missed it. In fact I almost did after Dawn pulled me in as well. No one had had the heart to interrupt them either.

"So, um... who won?" May finally asked and that was something I liked to know as well since the board had not shown a winner yet and from here it looked like their points were about equal. If there was a difference it was so miniscule I couldn't make it out.

"Well, you see, that's the problem. By the time the match was officially over your points were... exactly the same. In other words... it's a tie."

No way! I mean, sure, I would have been hard-pressed to say myself who was better. But still, there had to be a winner, right? Or maybe...

"Normally in such a case," Cynthia interjected, standing up from her place, "the rules would require a two minute overtime. However, with your Pokémon in this shape, it would hardly be fair. So either we have to wait a bit or you'll have to make an exchange..."

"No," Dawn cut in then, kneeling by Lopunny's side while May was checking up on her own Pokémon. I closed my eyes, already knowing what she was going to say and I had to agree with her. "There is no need. Even continuing, our abilities right now are about equal. A victory either way would not prove anything." Dawn had found her answer. Perhaps we all had. I could no longer deny it either. Not after experiencing the honesty that was flowing all through the brief link we shared right now. The strength of emotion. For but a moment I had felt what Dawn felt and even more importantly... It had felt right.

Frankly I still wasn't sure if I believed all that metaphorical stuff and Dawn's belief that something was missing from our relationship. That whole analogy had something terribly negative. We would need to talk this over later, however, all three of us then.

"There is no problem," I called out, interrupting Mister Contesta's protest that the Contest needed a winner after all. Standing up from my seat near the stairs, I walked down to the stage. "This round is for one of my partners for the Harmony Cup after all. It is already decided that Dawn will accompany me, no matter what. And after this spectacular match, I would be a fool not to want May at my side as well. As such, no matter the outcome, the end result would be the same." I held both their gazes for a long moment. May's hesitant but hopeful expression and Dawn's soft smile of relief, then glanced back to Cynthia and the other judges.

Finally the blonde Grand Champion sighed and looked towards her fellow judges who hesitantly nodded. "Very well. In that case, we shall make the following ruling. The winners of the first qualification round to the Harmony Cup, and now forming an official team with last year's Sinnoh League Champion Ash Ketchum, are both May and Dawn! Everyone, give these two fantastic Coordinators a big round of applause." And everyone did, the Contest Hall erupting into a thunderous cheer.

At this point none of us knew or could begin to suspect, however, what was already happening all around us.

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Team Rocket Headquarter (Giovanni)

"Sir, Squads Beta and Gamma report mounting casualties and request permission to withdraw."

That one didn't surprise me. Beta and Gamma had the hardest part in this, concentrated on the area just south of our main target, the hotspot where the League had no doubt expected a contact. Celadon, Saffron and Vermillion were the most heavily guarded. No, I was in fact very pleased with how well my plan had worked out until now. To think we were able to hold all positions for so long was a huge success and proved clearly that my forces were already vastly superior to whatever the League could employ. They were too weak; too concerned with the wellbeing of everyone and that would be their downfall.

"What is the status of the other squads?"

"Delta and Epsilon are holding and keeping the attention on themselves." These two were more widespread and tasked with hassling the defense from Viridian and Pewter mostly. Compared to the other two, their numbers were smaller but they also had less resistance to expect.

"Ypsilon Squad reports successful infiltration and beginning of the operation any moment. Omega..." There was a pause before the operator continued. "Omega just reported mission success." I allowed myself a very pleased grin at that. Even if Ypsilon somehow failed in their mission, this was already far better than I had dared hoped for.

"And Alpha Squad?"

Again there was a pause, the reply coming a little hesitant. "Agent Tulip reports that the special targets have managed to escape and avoided detection so far. However, Cerulean is otherwise fully under our control. No further resistance has been reported." I nodded, indicating that I wasn't upset by the news. Disappointed a

little, but then again, that girl was a crafty one. Despite being inconvenienced on her way, she had still made it to the city. I had to give her credit for being a strong opponent despite her age.

"Tell all regular squads to initiate retreat. Our objective is done, there is no point for further wasting resources." Now all that remained was to see how Ypsilon did with the children. Perhaps there was even something that could be done from here to give them an edge.

"Set up the recording and prepare the region-wide transmission. It is time we let everyone understand exactly how serious we are."

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(Narrator)

The Contest Hall at Twinheart is still filled to the brink. A nervous energy has caught the spectators that just a little while ago had still been spellbound by the heated battle between Dawn and May and its surprising outcome. Yet now people are unsure what to do, talking among themselves in hushed tones. Security personnel is stationed in several locations around the hall, mostly the exits, as if to make sure no one can leave.

It is into this nervous atmosphere, that the large screen, previously used to display the results and points of the battles flickered to life and the image of a heavy-set man in a red business suit appeared. People began to murmur in confusion even as the man began to speak.

"Citizens of Kanto and all other regions, some of you may know me but for everyone else let me introduce myself. I am Giovanni, leader of an organization called Team Rocket, an organization that has been labeled criminal but which's true purpose has so far been kept from the public view. That time is now over. As of this morning Team Rocket formally declares war on the Pokémon League."

On the screen images appeared that are obviously taken directly from Cerulean City in the midst of the attack. The images show Team Rocket's warped Pokémon assaulting the city and wrecking havoc. The murmur starts to die down into stunned shock and disbelief.

"I know what you may think. However, this war is not a petty grasp for power, it is a holy and righteous rebellion. A rebellion against those that have oppressed and betrayed the true destiny of mankind. Yes, I speak about the so-called Pokémon League and even more so I speak of Pokémon themselves. You, my fellow humans have been lied to for as long as anyone can remember and any history book could chronicle. From the very beginning mankind was supposed to be the dominant

species on this planet. Our evolution was meant to be the highest form of existence and nature was supposed to serve our needs. However, the creatures we now know as Pokémon twisted the very natural order to receive the power they now have so that they could usurp our place. They are spiteful and evil creatures that know only the lust for battle."

The images now switch to show Team Rocket's Pokémon attacking Cerulean's defenders. Gasps of horror echoed through the hall when some are brutally torn apart or in any other way gruesomely assaulted by the creatures. No actual Team Rocket member has so far been shown in any of the scenes.

"Yet, instead of rallying against this travesty of the natural order, the Pokémon League was established to... live together in harmony with those that stole our rightful place. And it is not just that. Have you ever wondered why we have such a high level of technology, such an advanced knowledge about science and many other things and yet so few people really profit from it? All this is the League's doing and their policy of so-called 'balance'. I have watched this oppression for a long time, but not any longer."

At this point the image switches back to Giovanni, now standing with one fist balled, striking an impressive image of strength and conviction.

"I urge all of you to think carefully what you believe is best for us. Should we always live in fear of the power of Pokémon, engaging in false pretenses of friendship between our races just so that we can feel a little safer? If you do not believe this is the right path either, then I welcome every city, every individual person to join me in this war against our oppressors, so that mankind may rise to the glory it deserves! If, however, you chose to side with those that have condemned us to this fate, then you may share the same fate as Cerulean City has this day."

For one last time the image switched and showed a frontal view of all of Cerulean City, burning and laid to waste, some Pokémon still circling above it.

"I await your decision, Ladies and Gentlemen. A good day."

"What a shocking announcement! Giovanni has made his move and now the world knows about it. In the wake of the grand battle between Dawn and May, everyone is left stunned. How will the world react to the events and the truths that Giovanni has revealed? Yet, this day is not over. Not for our heroes at least..."

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Maia's Prophecy

A blank screen appears for over two minutes.

Maia: *rushing into the screen panting* Hey! No one said anything about this! It was supposed to be one episode! I am not prepared yet.

MysticMew: *appears slightly out of breath as well* And whose fault is that?

Maia: Yours?

MysticMew: *glares* I would think not.

Maia: Okay, okay, we are both at fault, alright?

MysticMew: *sighs* Fine, I have no energy left to argue.

Maia: Great... Well, then...

The screen turns black again.

Overhead Voice: Sorry, the time for this segment is already up.

Maia: WHAT?!

MysticMew: Hold out for the real final episode of this arc some time very soon, depending on our beta.

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Author's Notes

Alright, I keep this short and leave any end of arc notes for next episode and the epilogue. Yes, there will be one. A short thing, probably one scene for every major character.

This part was actually the easier one. At first I wasn't sure how to write the battle, I admit but I hope it turned out alright, considering how much I have been trying to work up to it. Part of me still thinks it could have been better but then this whole thing would have gotten EVEN larger. The issue remains that writing Contest battles with the kind of battle dynamics I have developed over the course of the story is difficult. Contest battles are timed and they are to a big degree presentation. So if the Pokémon are too fast for even the judges to follow, then you have a problem.

That aside, I still hope everyone was satisfied with the battle. There is in fact precious little more I can say about this segment and part of what once was a single episode. ^_^ This part begins to set the general theme for the third arc. It is getting progressively darker and you should expect it to stay like this. The time for normal tournaments, battles and other sort of comparable lighthearted confrontations is now officially over.

The next episode will be up quickly, but please don't forget to review anyway. There was a huge, overwhelming response after 2-7 but it has dwindled again after 2-8. I hope it isn't necessary to excessively beg for it to get feedback. It happens to much for other stories and I refuse to do it anymore from this point forward. Any kind of feedback is always appreciated (read: feedback; flames are not considered feedback, they are food for the trashcan ^_^).

Ja ne, yours

Matthias