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Pre-Note

And here is the real final episode. Read: Episode. There is still the epilogue and I shall upload it shortly.

Harry Potter Guy ^_^: Thanks for the explanation. I wouldn't know since I am probably one of the few people on Earth that never touched a single book or watched a single movie of HP. As for your suggestions to Ash's reaction. Well, he won't do that. Not anymore, not the Ash I have worked on over this past year and a half. Doesn't mean he won't be upset, but they'll all soon be having more serious problems on their hands. Oh, and of course, we need some good villains in the story. So, Domino will have to stay alive and there'll be a few more for Arc 3. The group needs some good adversaries to make their lives harder. ^_^

Evespirit: Thank you for the very kind review. To be called sophisticated makes me almost want to deny it. ^_^ I often feel that I'm not very good with vivid description and metaphors, it is nice to know that someone really enjoys my writing the way it is.

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(Narrator)

"The final of the Contest at Twinheart Island is over, ending with an explosive tie between Dawn and May. However, there is little time to celebrate. They still have

to deal with May's confession and the realizations all three have come to before and during the match. And unbeknownst to our heroes, Misty and Leaf remain in grave danger while the world has begun to learn what has happened within the last hours. How will all these events play out, what consequences will there be for our heroes and the world in general?"

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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 10: The Point of No Return! Between Victory and Defeat! Part 2

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Twinheart Island, Kanto (Ako)

"Honestly, I still don't get how you are so eager to risk your health like this in a simple competition," I muttered, finishing with treating the most serious wounds. That last move had left a nasty tear that had also frozen over. I suppose it had looked worst at first than it really was but the match had left its traces all over my current patient. She certainly was more banged up than she was letting on. All the small hits had accumulated and the constant transformations had really drained her energy even further.

And all that in just five – well, technically more like six minutes. I shook my head in wonder. I wasn't feeling inferior. Frankly, I didn't really want to compare myself to this level. While learning about the necessity for battle was one thing, pushing my Pokémon to such extremes was not something for me.

"Ah, but it was fun." Naru's chuckle startled me with how heartfelt it was. "I wasn't sure myself at first either. About these human competitions, but... Well, it was very exciting. I am still tingling all over."

For a moment I stared, then shook my head again in wonder. So often I had heard about battle instincts, that fighting was within most Pokémon's nature in one form or another. To hear it directly from a Pokémon made it sink in a lot more. And it wasn't necessarily something violent. There was a glow about the young Eevee now that hadn't been there before. Something was fundamentally different about her whole demeanor. Less guarded and suspicious. Less cynical and sharp-tongued as well. It was probably not a lasting effect but if this was what it took to get her to be more trusting with others... I couldn't very well condemn it, could I?

"Besides... I owed that much to her anyway," Naru spoke up after a moment of silence. There was no need to elaborate as to whom or what she was referring.

"So you think just by fighting they can resolve their issues now?" Brock had finally confided in me last night about his friends' personal... problems. That was probably a poor choice of word. And, honestly, knowing didn't really help, just as I had suspected. This was something those three had to work out amongst themselves. I had even less experience with these things than Brock and if even he was at a loss over how to help them, how could I expect to do so?

I still felt rather doubtful that a Pokémon battle could help them though. How was that supposed to achieve anything? I guess I just didn't understand what it really meant for a serious competitor. "Frankly I don't know either." And it seems I wasn't the only one. "May believed in it. And that's good enough for me. Something happened out there. I can't really describe it, however, I think if she ever had a real chance, then it is now."

And so she ended up stuck with me. Aside from the necessary treatment, it gave those three some time alone to talk. Since Brock and I were the only ones she trusted yet that were available that left little choice. Her secret might be out but that still didn't mean she wanted anyone else near her... or perhaps she didn't want that even more so right now than ever before. I had half-expected a media swarm trying to invade the infirmary... and was just a little surprised it hadn't happened. In fact, there had been no signs about anyone trying to get information about Naru yet.

That would have been more strange if I didn't suspect it was for the same reason that Brock wasn't here. This time he hadn't even tried to avoid or hide the subject. I didn't think I could have either. Working had allowed me to forget about it for a moment but now that I was pretty much finished with Naru, and Dawn's Pokémon had already been treated next door, there was nothing much I could do to prevent my thoughts from returning to the troubling news my fiancé had to share with me just shortly before the match started.

He had been so shaken up. And while the match had distracted us, it had only been a few minutes after all. Almost as soon as they were finished with the award ceremony, Brock had excused himself and it was quite obvious that he went to find out more about the situation in Cerulean City. I was surprised at first he wouldn't go and tell the others right away. However, he probably didn't want to interfere with their talk either, especially not without having some more... substantial information.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on with everyone?" I started and looked down at Naru, who had become much more serious again. "We weren't ignorant to it. Something had been up since yesterday and the communication thing had something to do with it, right? May was just too focused on the match to allow herself to think about it. But now... I couldn't tell for sure since I never used my Espeon form but there was a high level of unrest from some people. Especially the judges, the security and also some people in the crowd."

I was amazed at the level of deduction. While I knew that she shared some aspects of her evolution stages in her base form on a constant degree, it was all very basic without going through a similar process as she had during the match. Of course, it might have just been very easy to tell, I couldn't say since Brock and I had only been watching from backstage. The atmosphere inside the stage hall could have given something away...

And did it really matter? No, I guess there was no point in not saying anything either. Holding the events in the rest of Kanto secret wouldn't work for much longer. In fact, it might just be starting to leak right about now. Communication channels were slowly starting to work again and it was almost a miracle that the situation hadn't escalated yet.

Besides, I really needed to talk to someone about this...

Naru growled suddenly and tried to get up, but her body was too weak and she collapsed back on the examination table. The action startled me and I looked at her quizzically, forgetting about the reprimand I would have normally uttered for forcing herself so soon. The young Eevee wasn't the type for it anyway. "Something's wrong," she said. "I think someone is..."

Then her attempt to decipher whatever it was that bothered her became obvious as the door to the infirmary swung open, revealing two figures completely covered in black. I didn't even have time to really take them in or really be startled before one of them had lifted what looked like some sort of gun and the next thing I knew there was a dart sticking out of my shoulder.

My body began to feel numb and woozy at once and even while my medical knowledge realized what it was that had hit me, it was already too late as the drug was taking effect and I felt my consciousness slipping away...

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(Ash)

The scenery didn't exactly fit the occasion. With the Contest over and an explosive finish, the grey clouds hanging all over the island and further out looked more like a dark omen than something to celebrate over. A dark omen for what I wasn't quite sure, yet I bet I was going to learn about it soon. After this was done. If we pushed this off again, there might never be a more suitable opportunity. The feelings and openness the match between May and Dawn had created was still there and I was going to need it to keep an unclouded mind.

Dawn was the first to join me outside. Both her and May had been caught on our way outside for another interview, causing a slight delay to our plans. Not that it was unexpected. More distraction should have been the normal course. But it seemed the media had their attention elsewhere. That should have been odd, considering they were here for the Contest in the first place and who else would you want to focus on than the winner? Especially since it was winners now. However, I wasn't that terribly surprised.

"Are you sure you want to do this now?" Dawn didn't stop looking forward, over the cliffside behind the Contest Hall. I was a little surprised she was asking this now, even though I had no doubt she knew what was on my mind and probably had her own suspicions. "We both know something has happened, something bad. Wouldn't you rather want to find out first?"

It was a viable question and one that any other time I would have probably answered in the positive. I wanted to answer it in the positive. However, I couldn't do that. Not now, not with this. Resolving this now took priority. I couldn't honestly say I was convinced that this – whatever this really was supposed to be – could work, however, much like Dawn I could tell the importance now. There was an urgency inside me that was practically screaming at me that I couldn't run away or push it off any longer. It had to be done now.

"Maybe Dawn is right," May's voice interrupted me before I could answer Dawn. I turned and saw her standing behind us, a few feet off, back in her regular trademark clothes, and uncertainly waiting for permission to come closer it seemed. She was probably more nervous than Dawn and I combined, which was understandable. "The guy that interviewed me did let something slip..." she trailed off, then apparently gathered her courage and I really didn't like the haunted look in her eyes. "I can't be sure really but... I think something happened in Cerulean..."

Misty!

It was really hard this time to fight down the urge to spring into action immediately, even if I honestly didn't know what I was supposed to do. A few years back I wouldn't have been able to resist the urge. That was different now. I managed to push the immediate anxiety down forcefully, certain in my knowledge that I would somehow know if something... irreversible had happened to one of my oldest friends. My focus had to be in the here and now. There was nothing I could achieve by running off heedlessly.

"No, we need to do this now. Come on, May." I waved her forward to sit with us and she followed hesitantly. Before she could follow through, however, Dawn scooted a little to the side and gestured at the space now between us. I raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything, realizing that she was only trying to make the other girl feel more comfortable and less isolated.

Despite that the mood remained awkward and no one said anything for almost two minutes. It was starting to get oppressive. "So," May said finally and I looked at her actually grateful, "how do you want to do this?" She still sounded uncertain and like she was expecting rejection anyway, but there was a little hope now.

Once again it was Dawn, the surprisingly most active part in this bizarre situation, that took the lead. "I think before we make a decision about where to go with this, I really want to try something out. Do you trust me?" The question was directed at both of us but I knew it was more May she was asking. I wasn't sure exactly what she had in mind but there had never been a time I didn't trust her. Even when we might disagree, I could always be certain of her sound judgment and good intentions. May didn't hesitate either, giving a small nod, but she was definitely more curious about my girlfriend's plans.

Dawn moved from her place next to May and crouched down again in front of us, then held out her hands. "Give me your hands." I did without thinking about it. May was a bit more hesitant but not so much from a lack of trust. No, I think she actually looked more... shy, which was kind of cute. Anticipating Dawn's intention by now, I reached for May's other hand, completing the circle. The brunette looked at me a little startled and I offered her a reassuring smile. Dawn gave us her own pleased one. "Great. Now, don't fight this. Just let yourselves fall."

I realized now what she had in mind but there was no time to think about it. What happened next wasn't quite what I had expected either. It was impossible to tell how long the experience lasted. Somewhere between a single moment and a small eternity. Rationally I would say the former but it felt more like the latter. It was also impossible to properly describe what it was that I... that we all were experiencing beyond a single word.

Harmony.

There was a great warmth and a powerful love so much like what Dawn and I had but even greater, as hard as that was to imagine. And frankly I couldn't have imagined it before. There was a great feeling of belonging and rightness, like everything in the world was how it should be. If I had to describe the sensation somehow it was like feeling... whole, I guess.

Then the moment was broken, yet the memory still lingered within my... in our hearts. I could tell even without looking at either girl. "What you felt," Dawn was clearly affected by the experience as well, despite being the one responsible. I didn't think she knew exactly what was going to happen either, "was a glimpse of what could be. I'm not saying it has to be that way or that it'll ever turn out that way. What we felt was the likely outcome of an ideal future if we decide to accept May and make a relationship work between us."

Had this been the first time something like this had happened, I would have been shocked and perhaps a little put off at the ability Dawn was demonstrating here. But I had stopped being too surprised and instead settled on simply being amazed. I had no idea that she could do something like this and was pretty certain it had never come up in any of her training sessions with Mew either.

Before I could wonder too much about it, however, Dawn was ready to continue, squeezing both of our hands but focusing on May. I could also feel her silently asking for my approval. And I couldn't refuse. Not after this. I knew what she was asking and what she was going to ask May and all the misgivings and doubts – while not having disappeared – seemed so very insignificant right now.

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Cerulean City, Kanto (Misty)

"You really have to teach me how to do that," I whispered. It might have sounded like humor but it really was more a way to distract myself. The silence was even less bearable than meaningless conversation. Besides, even if my thoughts were on different things, I was rather baffled and impressed by Leaf's skill to get up on roofs or other higher ground without even the help of a Pokémon.

"I'm afraid that won't work, not the way I learned at least. And I am nowhere as skilled as a true ninja. You are too old already to learn properly." Ah well, it was worth a try. But did she really have to shatter my distracting interest so fast? Obviously yes, I realized a moment later since we had already arrived.

For a moment I felt a fleeting sense of regret for having to leave the safety of her embrace. I was still amazed she could even carry me! There really were still a lot of things that I had to learn about my girlfriend. All the more reason not to die or give up though. This, however, was something I had to do or I would not be able to move forward. If I left Cerulean like a defeated and scared child, the experience today would always haunt me. Saving these people might not erase that or even accomplish very much but it was important to me in order to move on.

Leaf was already peering over the side of the collapsed building's roof. Strange how I knew exactly where we were, even though most of what was left was rubble. The memories I had weren't so easily dispelled, however... No. I shook my head. Not now. Not yet. If I wanted to grieve, I could do it later. Instead I forced my body forward and joined Leaf in observing the spectacle below.

I wasn't sure what exactly I was expecting but it wasn't Team Rocket members herding people into small trucks and larger helicopters obviously meant for transporting several people at once. What the hell did they want with the survivors? Didn't Domino say that there was no purpose in attacking Cerulean beyond it being the most convenient target? So what was this about then? If they just wanted everyone dead, they could have done that long ago already. And if they wanted people to live to tell others of what happened, then why attempt to take them away?

And did it really matter? "I have no idea what they are planning but we can't let these people endure even more." Glancing at Leaf, I saw her nod back seriously. Most of her Pokémon were still strong and I had been able to apply some potions to my own and let them rest or recover. It was superficial and wouldn't really take away the exhaustion or replace a proper treatment. But it would have to be enough. All we needed to create was an opening.

"Ready?"

This time it was my turn to nod. The plan was relatively simple. It was also quite risky, especially on my part. I was sure it had taken Leaf a lot to suggest it but I was glad she trusted me enough or at the very least understood my need to see this through.

"Let's go."

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Twinheart Island, Kanto (Jessie)

"I can't believe they are talking about romantic problems NOW," I hissed in irritation.

I couldn't clearly understand anything from our hiding spot but this was the best one we had been able to come up with on the fly. The cliffside didn't offer much in the way of protection and so we had to make due with a line of higher rocks that would be enough to cover us from anywhere but someone looking up from an awkward angle right below while in or on the water.

I really wished they had chosen at least a different spot for their... whatever the hell it was they were doing. Didn't they understand that they were in danger? We hadn't risked everything to deliver that warning just for them to get careless now. This wasn't just their lives at stake here after all. All three of us knew that if we went through this, we would definitely have a death sentence over our heads, more so than we might already have. However, we had also all agreed on this course of action.

A year with very little conflict with the kids that had made our lives miserable for so long, had left a lot of room to think. Both about our past and our future. One thing we had to sourly admit without the usual outlet being available was how absolutely foolish we had become. We should have left these kids alone the moment it became apparent how much trouble they were. More trouble than it was worth the effort. And a thief should always travel the path of least resistance. In the end we had nothing but ourselves to blame for our persisting, constant string of losses over the years.

On the other hand, even I had to grudgingly admit that dealing with them had changed us. At least it had changed me a bit. Years ago, before we had met the twerps, I would have never done something like this. In this situation I would have rather went into hiding so far and deep away that no one could find me. But it was different now. They had at least taught us some of what it meant to help one another.

That righteous, do-gooder attitude was annoying, really, but at times you couldn't help getting affected.

"Uh uh, Jessie, remember that guy we saw?" James whispered next to me, looking up from his small laptop. I waited for him to elaborate impatiently. "Well, I found out where I had seen that insignia before. He's from the Ypsilon squad." I winced. Ypsilon squad was one of the Elite units of Team Rocket. They were experts in doing the dirty jobs. The one no one wants to know about and no one ever WILL know about in detail. I didn't really have much more information about them and most of that was from hushed talk back in Headquarters. If this was true, the kids were in even greater trouble than we had realized.

That was just another reason for deciding on this step. There was no future for us in Team Rocket. The organization had transformed into something neither James or I had signed up for. Stealing Pokémon, making other people's lives miserable, that was all fine and good. No one could tell us what to do. We had the freedom to do

what we wanted, which was just perfect for all of us. James had wanted his freedom from his rich life and I had had far too few joys in my childhood. The liberty of an outlaw was welcoming and a couple of steps up from what I had as a kid.

Now Giovanni was making Team Rocket into a tool for his own crusade. Neither of us had ever signed up for an army. It went against everything we had always wanted. James wouldn't be able to stomach killing someone in cold blood and Meowth talked big but actually had quite a soft heart. Me... I wasn't sure if I could and I really didn't want to find out.

I glanced back at three of our former adversaries and then movement caught my eye and I cursed softly. "They are here. Get ready."

The time for reflection was over and we had made our choice, otherwise we wouldn't have even been here. Chickening out now was out of the question. We owed them that much as well. Regardless how often we had clashed and lost, they had taught us all a few important lessons and actually saved our collective butts – along with the rest of the world – quite a few times. Besides, this would be the only time. After today, there was no doubt we would have to quite literally vanish off the face of the earth for some time.

Apparently Ypsilon Squad had the same idea as us, skirting along a formation of rocks directly opposite of us. I had almost missed them if not for a flash of black visible in a gap. And it looked like the kids were so engrossed in whatever they were talking about that none of them had noticed. I had at least hoped Dawn would have. Wasn't she supposed to be some kind of psychic now?

Risking a small glance at my teammates that was returned in kind and finalized with three short but decisive nods, we all got ready to spring into action. Clasp one Pokéball tightly in my right hand, I fingered the handle of the dagger stashed into my belt. Perhaps we were not ready to kill in cold blood but if we were doing something as crazy as this, I would rather be prepared. Ypsilon squad wasn't one to fool around or to have any hesitation with. If you weren't fully prepared to follow through, I had no doubt it would end fatal.

The anticipation was killing me. The kids still seemed blissfully unaware of the danger they were in. I had to suppress my frustration at that. It seemed their assassins were waiting for the perfect moment, although I wasn't sure how much more perfect it could become.

Then those three actually laughed about something, noticeable less tense than before, and that was when it happened. The sound of an actual gunshot made me freeze for a moment, although I clearly couldn't have done something about it. Definitely not as well as Dawn did. A bullet clattered to the ground just centimeters before it would have brought a quick and efficient death to Ash. There was the faint

glimmer of some kind of barrier but it was gone again almost immediately and whatever the annoying girl – who had not been quite as ignorant of the situation as I thought – had done, it had clearly taken a lot out of her.

Seeing as their cover was blown, the black-clad forms of the special squad emerged into view. Four in all. Two of them were carrying firearms. I gave a signal to James and released Yanmega. "Sonic Boom, destroy that gun!" I ordered, deciding quickly that these things had to go right away. James was quick to follow with Carnivine targeting the other one. The surprise was on our side and both of our Pokémon were successful.

Now the real fight would be on, however.

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(Dawn)

"You have to decide, May. I can't give you what you want right now. I can't say I love you yet and there is no guarantee that I ever will. And the same goes for Ash. This really might never work, however, I think we are both willing to try. How about you? Can you go into this, knowing our feelings right now?"

This still was so strange. A few weeks ago I would have never imagined myself to actually ask another girl these things. The encounter with Christine had been an eye-opener, both to my own insecurities and to the truth that had been there for a long time now. The truth that there was something still lacking, that the puzzle that was true happiness was still incomplete. I really hoped I was right, that this missing piece was May. In fact, after what I had just done almost confirmed it for me.

Now it was up to May to decide. The ball was back in her court. I wasn't terribly surprised by her answer, however. "I... I have been living with these feelings so long. I came here already believing that the most I could achieve was to get them off my chest. But you showed me that there was actually hope, Dawn. I can't express how happy that made me feel. Even if it's doomed to fail, I cannot stop believing and that's why I want to try. Without regret."

And this time there really was no hesitation. There was true belief and it actually made me feel... happy. I had never bore any ill will towards May. In fact, if all this was meant to be, I was glad it was her. We had seen a glimpse of what could be and a big part of me wanted to see if it was really possible to achieve.

Ash chuckled suddenly. "I'm kind of relieved. I was really afraid of having to hurt either of you." It was his way of saying he was okay with this arrangement, reluctantly and still with doubts but much more convinced now than he had been yesterday. Convinced that this at least deserved an honest try.

I giggled when he scratched himself behind the head, that adoring gesture of embarrassment he had never quite lost and May followed my expression of amusement, the serious atmosphere lifting under our genuine laughter... albeit only for a few moments. It was abruptly disrupted by an earsplitting sound unlike anything I had ever heard before.

Thankfully I had been aware of them for some time now or I wouldn't have been able to react in time. That connection thing had drained me quite a bit – especially since it was mostly improvised and on the fly – but I was also more aware right now than normally. And it probably saved our lives. Application of my powers to generate a physical shape was a difficult thing right now. Mew had warned me but I didn't think it would drain me as much as it did. Trying to push off the ground, I nearly fell over from the sudden wave of dizziness; if Ash and May hadn't instinctively caught me I would have smashed my head against the rocks.

Then the not quite so unexpected help arrived and took care of the immediate, most dangerous elements in the current situation. I had frankly no idea just what exactly those weapons were but I knew that at this speed that projectile would have smashed through anything, especially a living body. I had felt the raw kinetic force crushing against my barrier.

"I'm... fine," I managed to reassure a concerned May, shaking off my dizziness with resolute determination. It seemed our attackers were not big on words, only exchanging a few threats with the... now, probably Ex-Team Rocket members before releasing their Pokémon. This was no time for weakness. Ash had already begun to release his own team. But it would be tough. There were four of them and I could immediately feel the foul... corruption radiating from our opponent's Pokémon.

"May, listen. Trust me on this. These Pokémon are twisted. They are beyond saving. You cannot show any mercy." I expected an argument but it didn't come. May understood the seriousness of the situation at the very least. Instead she nodded curtly, then stood and threw her own remaining Pokéballs, releasing Blaziken, Beautifly, Venusaur, Blastoise and Glaceon. I did the same, already missing both Lopunny and Prinplup, the latter having wandered off to check on her no doubt. With Pikachu and Naru also not here most of our best Pokémon were not present and these men... I didn't need any powers to realize their intention and that they would stop at nothing to achieve it.

The fight immediately escalated into barely controlled chaos. Our opponents had a couple of first evolution Pokémon among them which our unexpected helpers chose to focus on. However, the real trouble were the bigger ones. I couldn't really do much to help personally. In fact even linking mentally with Espeon and Togekiss was a pain. As such they, along with Mamoswine and Quilava, were mostly left to their

own devices, squaring off in pairs to watch each other's back. I was left with merely being able to observe and analyze while I recovered my strength.

Each of our assailants had a Golbat and Electrode, which they sought to make good use of. The Golbat were layering the battle field with a constant Supersonic from several angles. It didn't seem to affect the black-clad figures at all but for our side the high-frequency sound was more than just a little confusing. And the big ones wouldn't let us break out to deal with them. Most notable were the Nidoking, Golem, Hypno, Magmar, Granbull, Ursaring and Electivire but also the most grotesque sight of them all... A Milotic, skin darkened and with a look in its eyes that was so totally against anything the beautiful Pokémon usually stood for.

The fighting wasn't a long drawn-out battle of strategies, however. Even if they had us outnumbered slightly, our attackers were clearly intent on finishing us off as quickly as possible. They knew that the longer the battle dragged on, the more likely it was that the commotion would be noticed and backup would arrive. And it was with that intention in mind that the purpose of those Electrodes hanging back until now became clear as they launched themselves towards us, already beginning to glow in preparation for a suicidal attack, intent on causing as much damage as possible through an explosion. It was only too bad that the first two were slightly ahead of the others and May and Blaziken managed to break away from their opponents in time to demonstrate their martial art skill by striking them with a hard punch each and sending them right back towards the other two, causing them all to explode upon contact. I admit, despite anything I knew now, the sheer physics involved in such a feat left me gaping in astonishment.

At the same time Espeon's Future Sight finally arrived and struck down two of the Golbats before Togekiss took care of the other two with Aura Sphere. With the irritation of Supersonic gone and the suicide attack of the Electrode's backfired, the situation was starting to look a lot better.

At least until another Electrode came out of nowhere and before any of us could react self-destructed right in the middle of both May's and my own Pokémon. The resulting explosion had me gasp at the intensity and in fear for my friends...

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

(May)

What the hell is going on here! I raged, my anger refueled by the newest attack and spun to nail one of our attackers with a punch and then a quick snap kick into the gut that send him flying. Beautifully being the less sturdiest had taken the worst of the blast and just like Dawn's Togekiss, Quilava and Espeon were out cold. The rest that were in the blast radius had taken some extensive damage. Ash's Jolteon didn't look like it could go one either, while Bulbasaur had been flung about and right

into one vicious Flamethrower from the Magmar. Staraptor had a burnt wing and fell easy prey to Electivire the next moment.

The size of that explosion had been truly frightening and if I hadn't believed Dawn earlier about those Pokémon, I did now. The kind of power was hard to swallow. It was different from results of intense training. There was an intensity and rage fueling these Pokémon that I could feel in every brief contact – contact I had tried to avoid after realizing that fact firsthand. I might have gotten stronger through Maylene's training but this was a whole lot different.

Did Ash and Dawn know something like this was going to happen? Who were these guys anyway? I suspected Team Rocket but would have doubted that after the appearance from Jessie and James. Yet the short exchange in the beginning where the attackers had been less than pleased with their appearance and the word "betrayal" had clearly been spoken gave my first thought more credit again.

I really didn't understand anything anymore. One moment I had felt more relieved and overjoyed than I had ever expected before coming here and the next it was utter pandemonium. There was no time to even think about it really. Even now... no, especially now that the situation had just turned a lot worse. And it would become even more so.

There was a fifth person emerging from the settling dust of the explosion. And that one was different. It wasn't just the blood-red stripes on the arms of his bodysuit or the heavy utility belt lined with several utensils ranging from knives, daggers to what looked like some kind of explosives. Training my body with Maylene had taught me a lot about evaluating another person. And this one carried himself with confidence and certainty befit of a leader.

All this was irrelevant when it became clear that he wasn't alone, dragging a clearly unconscious – at least I hoped so – Ako in front of him. "I suggest," he spoke clearly, his voice loud and commanding, "that you cease your futile resistance, if you want this woman to live." With that a knife appeared in his hand and was held against the unaware woman's throat.

I glared heatedly. "Bastard, what did you do to her?" Ash shouted off to the side, clearly hesitating what to do now. But there was no emotion to detect from the man, face covered by a mask like all the other members of his team. Instead, he merely pressed the edge of the knife a little harder against Ako's skin, drawing a bit of blood. "Hey, stop that!"

"Then I suggest you do as I say. Cease all your resistance, order your Pokémon to stay where they are and let us finish our work." Meaning, killing us. I didn't need anyone to tell me that. It was painfully obvious from the ferocity of the assault and the willingness of both those crazy Pokémon and the humans to attack

us directly. And what would guarantee Ako's safety anyway? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It wasn't like we could check after we were dead..

Yet, fighting on would definitely put her in even more danger. The decision was taken out of our hands when our attackers used the confusion and hesitation to press their attack. I gritted my teeth, watching helplessly as one after another our Pokémon were taken down. They wouldn't even allow us to recall them and if not for the stoic and methodic way in which the assault was carried out, I would have thought they actually enjoyed seeing them in pain. Everyone was clearly hesitant to fight back properly and that was their eventual downfall.

Soon enough only Blaziken was left standing from my own team, more like kneeling and nursing his shoulder from several high-pressure water blasts from that Milotic. Other than that only Ash's Infernape and Charizard were even able to move still but it was clearly more pride and fury that held them conscious.

With almost all our defenses down, the original three assailant's – the other one was still lying a distance off from my earlier attack – closed in on us again, clearly still worried about the bruises I had given them when they had tried to attack me earlier. Now the situation was different. I could take any of them in a clear fight, no problem. But this wasn't like the kidnapping back in Jubilife. Here I didn't have surprise on my side and one wrong move could endanger Ako's life. On the other hand, I had no intention of just letting them kill us either. Just now I had been given a chance at love where I had not expected to receive one. If anything, I would have to make sure Ash and Dawn were alright. Somehow there had to be a way...

With these thoughts dominating my mind, I reacted without thinking. *Sorry, Brock, I have no choice.* I dashed forward and before the two men advancing on me could react, struck out hard and fast. Then without thinking I spun immediately and sprung after the other before he could reach Ash, flattening him with a fast knockout punch to the head.

Whirling back to face the leader, my danger sense flared immediately and I fell into a guarding position, only to realize nothing was coming. Not for me at least. The Hyper Beam had just finished forming in the Nidoking's mouth when I realized its target was not me...

There was once again no time to think about it and even if I had, the outcome wouldn't have been different. "No!" I jumped forward just as the beam was sent on its way towards Dawn. Diving forward I just managed to bring myself into its path, spinning to face the attack with arms crossed in a halfhearted block.

While I had learned to redirect greater mass and kinetic force, that took a proper stance and technique. As I was, caught in midair with no way to brace myself whatsoever, I could have just as well tried to stop a truck at full speed. Pain exploded

all over my body and enveloped my whole being. I didn't even remember what happened next. My whole body felt like it was on fire. Searing, hot agony coursed through my cells... and then nothing. Only numbness remained besides the throbbing pain. Numbness and... water? Something was dripping on my face. It barely made an impact on my state of being but... there was...

Blurrily I forced my eyes open and couldn't help but smile seeing the concerned faces of the two people I loved more than anything else. I was in Dawn's lap, Ash crouching next to her. I could feel the softness of Dawn's hands holding me and the wetness from her tears. But I was glad. Glad that they were okay. Glad that I had been able to protect them. "H-Hey," I croaked out, lifting up one hand despite the stab of new pain that came from my burnt limb. But I forced myself to wipe the tears from her face, even if it was a futile and very temporary effort. "I'm glad... you are... okay..."

I felt so very tired. It was an effort to even stay awake. Part of me knew that I was probably dying but the rest didn't really care right now. I saw it now. I saw that they cared, that they really would have wanted... I just... "Love you..." If only I had realized it sooner. If only I had pursued this path earlier. Now I would never know what it might be like. That was my only regret...

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

Cerulean City, Kanto (Leaf)

The maneuver worked like a charm. I had been certain that after our escape, every Rocket in the city would be on the lookout for us. Regardless of what Domino had said – and I didn't put it beyond a certified criminal to be an expert liar anyway –, Giovanni knew about us and he wasn't the type to let loose ends that could come back to bite him unresolved. Taking us both out now was an excellent opportunity.

And because of that almost every Rocket in the plaza immediately focused on the redheaded girl crashing down into their midst on a very angry Gyarados. For all the professionalism and planning this attack had been executed with, give people a little time to relax and feel safe enough that there is no real danger left, and they get lax. Within a short time the prisoners were left almost unguarded while Misty made a great show of a ferocious assault turning into hesitation and then flight, leading her pursuers around the block.

The rest was simple. I wasn't going to let the remaining guards call out their Pokémon, my own falling over them like a hungry pack of Houndour and Houndoom – I think Hellfire definitely had his fun. All of them were furious at what they had seen here and shared my sentiments that none of these men deserved any mercy. Even if we had had the luxury, which we didn't.

It was over in seconds. "Go!" I shouted to the confused and frightened citizens and reinforced my order when many hesitated. "Get out of here now, they won't be gone for long! Your Gym Leader is risking her life for you!" That got them moving. Many in fact started to murmur in admiration and praise, some measure of hope returning and invigorating them. Not a moment too late as the sound of fighting drew closer again and Misty reemerged on the plaza, with even more Rockets on her trail than when she left. I cursed and once more urged them to hurry, before I sprinted off to assist my girlfriend.

My prediction certainly seemed to come true. It really seemed like every Rocket in the city was now out to get us. Those were odds I wouldn't have felt comfortable enough to face even at full strength. Already on my way in I had had to belatedly admit that even if I had been here, it would have made only a minor difference, probably none to the outcome. The sheer number was staggering. And we had to cover the citizens' escape as well.

That at least worked. However, by the time the plaza was clear, the Rockets had pretty much boxed us in and fighting our way out – especially with the worn-out condition of most of Misty's Pokémon – wasn't exactly looking like a possible option. Flying was out as well, already there were several airborne Pokémon circling over our heads.

I felt Misty's back touch against mine and couldn't help a morbid chuckle. "At least none of us is going to die here alone, huh?"

Before Misty could give an answer, however, there was a sudden bright flash of light and then something on the edge of my scarcely developed senses tingled with a feeling of uneasiness as I felt power at work completely opposite to my own. Of course that was thousand times better than the situation just moments before, I had to admit soon enough.

The light was too bright to make out anything specific but I could see a vaguely familiar shape. "I suggest you run now," it said in a melodious, probably female voice and I already understood who it was. Not that it mattered. This was the only option. I recalled my Pokémon and grasped for Misty's hand. A moment later we were running almost as blind as our enemies around us but somehow certain that we were going the right way.

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

Twinheart Island, Kanto (Brock)

"So, nothing new from..." I trailed off, still staring at the screen where the recording that had went over all channels had just ended. This was certainly going to cause all sorts of reactions and it was clearly not how Cynthia and the others present

would have preferred to let everyone know. The images were still burned in my mind, burned like the rest of Cerulean City, with almost nothing left standing.

It had been a horrifying sight that would probably haunt me for weeks or months to come. The level of sheer destruction was overwhelming and Giovanni's passionate warning... no, more like a statement or even promise, was frightening to the core. There was no doubt he meant every word of it and right now the Pokémon League really didn't look good after he had presented such an example of Team Rockets capabilities.

And people had seen it inside the building as well. In fact an announcement had been made that everyone should stay inside for a formal statement by Cynthia herself. It was too late for that now. I wondered how long it would take for panic to escalate?

"It's not that we couldn't... Only that there is no one left to give us an authentic report on the situation. So we have to wait for the first inspection team or for Lady Mew to bring your friend back." If she managed in time that was. I hated this. I hated just being here and doing... nothing. It was too much like I had felt towards the end of our journey through Sinnoh. Always only the support, being left behind by the fast development of my friends. I had thought I had overcome this but what exactly could I even hope to do in a situation like this?

Cynthia shook her head once more – she had done that a lot ever since the recording went through. "Brock, I can understand that you want answers but there is too much going on now. Please, go find your friends and stay together. There is a lot of confusion going on right now and it would be the perfect moment for someone to strike at you."

There it was again. Just like Mew's ominous warning before she left. Why would we be in danger? What would Team Rocket even want with us? It had something to do with Mew, I was sure of that, but there had to be more. Before I could ask for at least some clarification, Cynthia had already left the room, however, and I found myself standing there somewhat dumbly before I swallowed my anger and headed back to the Infirmary to collect Ako.

It wasn't really Cynthia's fault. She was the Grand Champion and highest representative here. With all the chaos sure to erupt now, she would have her hands full and really couldn't be bothered by details. That didn't mean it was sitting well with me. Not at all.

Lost in my thoughts, I almost ran over poor Prinplup and Lopunny who seemed to be on their way back as well. Seeing those two together, so obviously caring for each other, lifted my mood a little bit. What good did it do to lament over things I couldn't change? Maybe Mew and Cynthia had been right, looking after

everyone that was here was something I could do. I had already gotten far too sidetracked.

"Hey, you two, I was going to pick up Ako and Naru and then see what the other three are doing. Want to come along?" The two Pokémon nodded happily and followed me the rest of the way.

However, when I finally opened the door to where I knew Ako would be treating Naru, I blinked at finding the room empty. They couldn't have left already, right? I had told Ako I would be right back and Naru had definitely looked like she was going to need a lot of rest at the very least.

The growls from the two Pokémon with me finally clued me in that something was terribly wrong. Mew's warning came back to me unbidden and I quickly looked around for any kind of clues, desperately hoping that I was wrong and there would be a note somewhere, telling me where Ako had gone. She was rather thorough like that and normally didn't just go vanish without any prior notice.

But there wasn't a note. Only a lone Pokéball that I knew contained Genki. Ako would never leave without her...

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

A bit earlier (Pikachu)

Smiling to myself I watched Lopunny and Prinplup off, the latter slightly supporting the former, although she was mostly good enough to run around again. I had made my congratulations for her splendid performance and then left them alone again, just as they clearly wanted. That was fine with me. I wasn't jealous, that would be a little late and foolish after all.

If anything, there might be a bit of envy... No, envy was too strong a word. More like longing. My two friends were starting to get closer and I had to wonder what it was really like. In all the time of Lopunny's courtship, I had never really felt the kind of closeness that a potential mate should be sparking, which had led to the inevitable outcome.

I could hardly deny, however, that seeing all these relationships develop all around me had started to make me think about myself and my own situation. Heck, even Brock had found someone steady. Was there someone like this for me out there? Someone that would spark my interest? I didn't know... or at least I thought I didn't know.

Until this morning. I couldn't say for sure if it went beyond mere curiosity but I couldn't help being fascinated by Lopunny's opponent. While I had tried to stay as

impartial as Ash concerning the outcome of the match, my interest had always been drawn back to May's strange Eevee. There was something... special about her. And not just her mysterious abilities.

Without really noticing, it seemed my thoughts had drawn me back to the infirmary wing that was just beyond these doors. I was pretty sure I could just slip inside the moment someone would come and then... Yes, then what? A big part of me wanted to find out more, yet I hesitated to do so. Naru was May's Pokémon and that made the situation much more complicated. In the end it all depended on the outcome of her talk with Ash and Dawn. I had long decided that I would never leave Ash for anything or anyone, even love and a mate. And trying to pursue a romantic interest when your Trainers were better off avoiding each other was not exactly high on my list of things to experience.

My musings were interrupted when I picked up the sound of footsteps behind the doors. They were faint even for my good hearing and that meant someone was being very quiet on purpose. My suspicion piqued, I slipped behind a row of chairs to the side and waited.

The doors opened with a hiss and out stepped two figures completely clad in black. But they were not alone. My eyes widened and I resisted the urge to voice my surprise at seeing an unconscious Ako slung over one of the men's shoulders and the other holding Naru, still conscious and glaring so intensely at her obvious abductors that I was mildly impressed they hadn't caught fire yet... However, she was clearly still too weak to do something from her fight. I hoped it was just that.

After looking around whether or not anyone had seen them, the one with Ako turned to his partner. "Alright. I'm going to see if the others need our little extra insurance here to finish their job. With some luck those brats should be dead already." I growled quietly, barely suppressing my anger before they would notice me. It was all too clear who they were referring to. Ash, Dawn and May were alone. Prinplup and Lopunny weren't with Dawn either. It wasn't like I believed that they would be defeated so easily but every bit of my being still wanted to rush to their side right away. However, something kept me...

"You, go and deliver that one back to base. The Boss will be happy to have his little experiment back." Experiment? Back? The pieces started to fall together and it was becoming clearer just why Naru had these special abilities. They weren't just a new technique or skill naturally developed or trained. She was made this way... The thought caused a righteous fury inside me and when the two men split off into opposite directions, I hesitated only a moment. I'd like to say that logic told me that Ash and the others were strong enough to handle themselves – we all knew something like this would happen thanks to the idiot trio's warning –, however, being totally honest, I would have to admit it was all pure instinct from this point.

Following the man outside as quietly as I could, I waited for the right moment. He was really cautious and striking too soon would ruin my surprise. However, I couldn't let him get away too far. As much as I wanted to help Naru right now, Ash and the others were still at the back of my mind.

Fortunately I was in luck and Naru's abductor seemed to relax his guard slightly once he was clear off the immediate parameter of the Contest Hall. Using a tree for momentum, I dived down and slapped the surprised Rocket – and I had no doubt about that one – in the face with my tail. With a yelp his grip on Naru loosened and she pushed free immediately, landing a little unsteadily on the ground.

Coming down in front of her, I spun immediately to face the cursing man, already fishing for his Pokéballs. I almost lost my concentration though when Naru spoke up from behind me. And I mean spoke, in human language. "You... Why are you...?" she trailed off, realizing it wasn't really the time to be asking questions.

I didn't have time for an answer anyway when the sound of six Pokéballs opening immediately set me into high alert. I smelled it immediately, that disgusting stench of corruption and one look would have been enough to tell what I was dealing with. I wasn't surprised by seeing one of them again. But they were all like that. And there were obviously more of these assailants and if all of them had these twisted Pokémon then... The sheer scope of the thought was staggering. Right now though, there was nothing I could do about the rest.

My odds weren't really looking good either. I wasn't arrogant enough to believe that I could take all of them. But I would definitely try. I had to. No way would I let these bastards get their hands on Naru again. The strength of the thought startled me for an instant because I was quite sure now of what my instincts were telling me. Regardless of all the possible complications.

Charging my power, I prepared to go into an all out offense right away, hoping to use my superior speed to overwhelm them. It turned out to be unnecessary, however, when a Hyper Beam struck the Golbat hanging back a little. I turned towards the direction of the attack and saw a Garchomp swooping in from above, which would have to mean...

"You should better go. Leave this to me. Your friends need you more," Cynthia spoke calmly as she faced off with the lone Rocket member.

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

(Brock)

Ako, everyone, hold on!

It felt like it was taking me hours instead of barely a couple of minutes to reach the cliffside exit. Yes, I really had been foolish. I had been so consumed by my irritation of not being told anything that I had ignored the one vital piece of information, the one vital task entrusted to me along the way by a powerful Legendary Pokémon. Instead I had thought that by knowing what was going on, I could help better. Had I just stayed with Ako, then...

"Hurry... They are in danger..." I gritted my teeth and pushed my feet further. Had I not run into Pikachu and Naru, I would have probably been running around aimlessly. I should be thankful for that but right now, all I could think about was my own failure and the hope that it wasn't yet too late to correct the mistake.

Finally reaching the exit, the greeting that awaited me couldn't have been any worse. They were a good distance away from the exit but even then I could clearly see the Hyper Beam, I could clearly see May jumping in the way and getting... struck. "Oh god..."

"No!" It was impossible to tell the exact emotion that went along with Naru's half-outcry, half-hiss. Anger, despair, disbelief, sadness... Even from what little I knew about the young Eevee, May meant more to her than she had probably admitted to herself. A life line or perhaps more a guiding light in an existence stained by the darkness of her past.

Not that it was easier for me to see. I had travelled with May for so long. She was one of my closest friends, a sister much like I saw all of them like my younger siblings. And once I again I had failed. Once again I had been too late, too weak to protect anyone. However, I wouldn't allow anyone else to get hurt. Even if it cost my life!

"You guys, go to the others, they need you now," I told Naru as well as Prinplup and Lopunny. "Pikachu, give me an opening. Anything will do, just draw his attention, then back off." Receiving an acknowledging cry full of the small Pokémon's own anguish, I waited until the Rockets' attention was on Pikachu jumping in their midst and immediately taking down the Milotic with a Thunderbolt. And I mean a *Thunderbolt* – a big, visible blast of lightning entirely consuming Milotic in one single strike. Throwing out Steelix' Pokéball, I jumped on his back and let him quickly bury into the rock of the cliff. That was somewhat risky because we could very well bring down the whole area but at this point the risk made hardly a difference. And besides, it worked perfectly.

Their leader was definitely unprepared for an attack from below and barely managed to jump out of the way. Not fast enough, however. In his hasty evasion, his hold on Ako slipped and I just barely managed to catch her arm and yank her free. However, that guy certainly was crafty. Recovering quickly he had drawn and thrown one of the knives on his belt immediately, only to have it bounce off harmlessly from

Steelix' tail before my oldest Pokémon moved away and in front of Ash and Dawn who were focused entirely on May, making it impossible to see the amount of damage the Hyper Beam had caused...

With some effort I tore my gaze away. If I gave any thought to that now, all of us would end up dead as well. Ash and Dawn were in no position to fight. Not just because most of my friends' Pokémon were out or severely damaged. Seeing May's action, they were clearly focused on her now. And I couldn't blame them. I wanted nothing else than to be there. But I had no choice right now.

"Everyone, I need your help!" Throwing out my remaining Pokémon, we formed up a protective line to shield our friends. I regretted already not having Chansey with me since she was still back in the infirmary and I definitely missed my newest member. Tropius, who had also decided to come along after the forest fire incident, had been left at Professor Oak's lab along with Ako's Altaria for a thorough checkup. Neither of us had quite expected that we might need them so soon. That left me with Steelix, Croagnuk, Swampert, Forretress and Leafeon. Well, Genki, too, of course.

Pikachu had warned me – with some translation help from Naru – about these Pokémon and made it absolutely clear that I shouldn't hesitate to do whatever was necessary when I faced them. As if I had an actual choice in the matter. It was them or us.

"So, the last one appears." The apparent leader didn't seem terribly fazed. "You realize it is a futile effort. The girl is as good as dead and you are the weakest of them all. How can you hope to protect them?" That one stung right into my own insecurities and feelings of failure. But it also sparked something else. The cold and uncaring way in which he spoke about May cut through the beginnings of my own doubt and managed to make me focus.

Yes, I had made a mistake and I couldn't take it back. I would be damned, however, if I wavered here. That past year I had trained hard to catch up to my friends. Certainly, I knew I wasn't even close to their level but my Pokémon had all become strong nonetheless.

"I wouldn't expect someone like you who can kill without remorse to understand. They are my friends, the most important people in my life. That alone is enough reason to stand against even the worst of odds. You'd do well not to underestimate my Pokémon!"

Despite those words and my resolve to protect those I called friends, the odds weren't really looking good. I couldn't expect much help from the rest except Blaziken, Charizard and Infernape – each of whom was just barely able to keep going – while Pikachu and Prinplup had joined their Trainers crouching around May.

It was better that way anyway, since I didn't have to worry that much about stray shots getting through.

This left all of my Pokémon pretty much in a one on one setup with slightly worn down but radically enhanced adversaries that would fight until there was no life left in them. Leafreon faced off with Golem, Forretress with Hypno, Genki bravely faced down Magmar while Croagnuk moved to take Granbull and Swampert took Ursaring. That left the hardest work to Steelix who had to fight both Nidoking and Electivire. All of our opponents had sustained some damage already but that wasn't helping much. Pikachu hadn't been exaggerating about their mindless drive. Regardless of how much hits they took, they just kept on coming.

It was all we could do to hold out. I wished I could just loathe myself for not being strong enough again but I had enough sense left to tell that it was simply a bad situation quickly turning worse. Steelix managed to take down the Nidoking eventually, tearing into its neck – and I can't deny feeling a slight sense of satisfaction which still didn't do anything to lessen the pain from seeing May... No, I couldn't think about it now. I couldn't even spare a look back to see how they were doing.

And worst of all. The leader of the assailants... he hadn't even used any of his Pokémon yet, merely standing by and watching cool and calculating, waiting for the right opportunity obviously. *Come on, guys, just a little more*, I thought, trying to lend strength to my Pokémon and amazingly enough feeling a reaction. I could tell the slight raise in their spirits, the strength to push just a little more.

And then Croagnuk managed to land a clean strike, burying a poisoned claw deep into Granbull's side but instead of pulling out again, flung the other Pokémon around and right into the path of a powerful Flamethrower that threatened to overpower Genki's own. The others redoubled their efforts as well...

Then a colossal roar suddenly shook the ground and for a moment I feared even the very cliff would break off. My head snapped around to take in a Pokémon I had never seen before. A large, frightening dragon with three heads and six wings tinted blood red and an obsidian black in color. It took me a moment to recognize it from my studies of foreign Pokémon. When I did my blood froze at the implications. Hydreigon by nature were already vicious and extremely strong. Modified like the others...

"Hydreigon, Dragon Pulse!"

My eyes widened and I was left totally helpless at the sheer size of the attack. And it didn't seem like he cared about taking down everything in its path – including all the other Pokémon either. And there wasn't anything I could do. None of my

Pokémon were even in a position to block it and I honestly wasn't sure even Steelix could withstand it.

Frozen in shock, I could only watch as the enormous blast surged forward...

... then a small dark shadow jumped in its path and in the next moment a sphere of blackness formed around it, struggling to stand against the powerful blast. Bit by bit the energy was being sucked into what looked like a miniature black hole. And then I knew what I was seeing and a small measure of relief and actual hope flooded through me.

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

(Leaf)

The timing was perfect, as if we had never done anything else. Gyarados' Hydro Pump slammed forward right over Shadow's defense and struck down Magmar with tremendous force, before sweeping around and aiming for Golem. The Rock type barely managed to dodge but earned itself a devastating cut at close range from the Leaf's Leaf Blade.

It was really time for this day to end. It had gone on for entirely too long. The only rest I had gotten in over two days was in the brief time waiting for Emperor to recover enough. And not only had that hardly been enough, it was mostly filled with unease and anxiety. I was used to pushing myself since taking the position of Master officially but this was straining my limits.

Not yet. I couldn't rest yet. As things stood I was ironically the only one still fresh enough to pose a fight here. And I couldn't expect much help from Mew either. The Legendary had spent a lot of power in the long-range teleports and Misty and I had to be grateful for that. We wouldn't be alive otherwise. And what little she had left was desperately needed for May.

Pushing that thought back and leaving the situation to Mew I focused on the last of the group's attackers. And it was time to make the best of the surprise we still had on our side. "Release!" Shadow broke his Black Hole in a concentrated forward shot that blasted clear through Hypno. With a flick of my wrist I sent Hellfire and Berserker out. With only Ursaring and Electivire standing from the ones Brock had engaged, my two Pokémon made quick work out of them.

I risked a glance over my shoulder and had to stifle the urge to swear. Mew was hovering with Ash, Dawn over the injured May. It really looked bad. But all I could do right now was believe in Mew and make sure that they were undisturbed. Being dropped right into the middle of a battle like this without any idea of what was going on was rather disconcerting to say the least.

"So, you still live. I am surprised Domino failed to take you out."

I glared back at the lone Rocket, standing smug and relatively unimpressed by the sudden shift in the battle. Of course that grotesque Hydreigon was still there and it looked like a whole different level than the other warped ones.

"For someone whose own mission failed, you are pretty confident," I said, having no problem in playing the waiting game. I had no idea what the hell Cynthia was doing but every moment this dragged on, the likelihood of others noticing what was going on here became more obvious.

"Hmph. The girl is already as good as dead and you will soon follow." And then he held up five more Pokéballs and I swallowed hard. Those hadn't been his Pokémon after all. "I have no more time to waste on you, so stop your futile attempts of resistance." In five dark flashes Machop, Delibird, Armaldo, Drapion and Magnetron appeared. "These are not the same as the ones you are used to. As an Elite I have been granted with the strongest specimen of our research."

I lowered my head and growled at the word "research", furious at how they could play with the lives of Pokémon so easily. "You are right about one thing. It is futile. Futile to argue the point with someone like you. These poor Pokémon are merely tools for your plans, you would not understand the power that comes from our bonds. However..." I raised my head. "Let me show it to you!"

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(Mew)

From one sticky situation into another. Frankly, I would have preferred a few minutes more rest but when I felt Dawn's distress even across the great distance between Cerulean and the island, I had to make haste. Teleporting two people in addition was even more draining. Still... This was much more preferable compared to the time I had to make the hastened jump back in Cerulean Cave. Even a little focus greatly lessened the impact on my powers.

There was, of course, another reason why I was still in good enough shape to be of assistance. And that reason was strongly necessary if my first assessment of the situation wasn't entirely off. I wished it was. It only took me a moment upon arrival to detect the cause of my charge's distress. The extent of the damage done to May was something I could more feel than see from my original position but when I came closer, my heart twisted in sorrow, sympathy and just a little guilt. Guilt over letting this happen. Rationally I knew that what I had done was for the best. The other two would have certainly been killed had I not made it there in time. Emotionally,

however, I couldn't stop thinking that there had to have been something that I could have done to prevent this.

Silently, I observed the three of them while turning my sight inwards, searching for some speck of hope I could work with. She wasn't gone yet but the life was quickly escaping from May's broken form. Ash had briefly glanced up when he became aware of our arrival and muttered Misty's name in slight disbelief but then had returned his attention to May. The anguish and helplessness radiating off of him was palpable. The weight of his own guilt, guilt over letting this happen, over not being able to express himself and his own feelings better, guilt over that it was too late now and that for all his skill he hadn't been able to protect someone he... loved.

I might have have smiled at the revelation but it would have been a bittersweet one at best. This wasn't what I had hoped for, how I had hoped for it. Dawn was even worse off. She had barely even acknowledged me, keeping her attention fixed on the other girl in her arms, once in awhile speaking reassurances and motivations like "It will be alright" and "Don't give up yet". There was guilt as well, but of a different kind. Guilt over letting this happen, over not being strong enough to prevent this. It didn't take me much to piece together from her rampant emotions just how this had come to pass.

But most of her attention was focused on the effort of saving May. Seeing her attempt to use her powers like that, under these conditions, both startled me but also gave me hope. Hope that it wasn't too late and that something could still be done. Of course, right now her attempts to force her light powers into healing someone were a desperate and ultimately futile attempt. With only a bare minimum of her abilities available, it could never work. Thankfully that was something I might be able to help with.

Ash suddenly looked alarmed. "Her pulse is fading!"

Dawn looked ready to cry, only through sheer stubbornness holding back the grief, because she knew that it would break any kind of concentration she could still muster. "No... Come on, May, you can't give up now. We haven't even started. You can't..."

"We have to get her to a hospital somehow," Ash argued, but even he wasn't fully convinced of that course of action. Deep down he knew that with May in this state even the best medical facility in the world probably couldn't save her. The damage was severe. The attack she had obviously taken full force had eaten deep into her, leaving a gaping wound in her side that no doctor could hope to fix in time. Besides the blood loss up to this point had been far too high already.

The helplessness was starting to be overwhelming. It was now or never.

"It's not too late yet," I finally spoke, drawing both their attention immediately. They both looked like they had just realized I was even there – not that I could blame them. Their desperate hope was almost suffocating. Fixing them with a hard stare, I staved off their immediate questions for now. "But only one person can still save her now." My gaze focused on Dawn and she blinked, at first not understanding, then eyes widening.

While technically I could perhaps do something myself, I lacked both the full amount of my power right now and the actual skill. I had dabbled in healing but it had never been a skill I had the right kind of mindset for. Using Light in such a way was possible but very much depended on the user. Dawn had that potential, I had known almost right away. And her attempts, even fated to fail as they had been, had only proven me right.

"M-Me... But, you said..."

"Yes, normally healing is beyond the scope of your powers yet. However, there is way around this." I looked up into the sky briefly to ascertain the position of the sun. Good. It was a little past noon. This should work. The same circumstances that had allowed IT to extend ITs power like that, now made it possible to tap into the power of the seal. It was a complicated process and not even close to the real thing but it was the only way.

Not bothering them with the details and quite certain that they didn't care for it right now, I explained my plan. "You have to link with me and draw from my power. This should give you enough to barely equal what you should be capable of by yourself after releasing the seal." Before Dawn could agree hastily, however, I quickly continued. "However, this isn't without risk. Channeling like that, without your own power active, could cause all sorts of side effects. And once we are linked like this, I will have to put all my concentration into maintaining the link. That means I cannot help or guide you. It will be up to you if you can save her or not."

Despite the warning, there was no hesitation as she nodded seriously and determined. And I didn't expect one. In fact I was fully confident in her ability to pull this off. Being unable to assist her directly wasn't that big of a problem anyway. Healing was a highly individual and personal skill that every being had to find their own way to employ. It was a power that was inseparable from the healer's emotions, the strength of their will and heart to save another life.

Dawn could do it. I had absolute faith in that.

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(Dawn)

There was not even a thought of hesitation when Mew finally brought her tail around in front of me, the tip glowing in a soft but potent white light. There was no risk that could have outweighed the terrible feeling of that moment when I saw May jump into the path of the Hyper Beam that had, without a doubt, been intended for me. I couldn't describe and didn't even want to think about words that could adequately portray the heart wrenching agony that I felt at that moment and the helplessness and anguish that followed. Those words were more than enough. Any more would just make it more... real.

And so I reached out to touch Mew's tail and opened my mind.

The experience was... overwhelming. The moment my fingertips made contact with the light, a wellspring of power that made everything I had known before look meager in comparison flooded my being. It was magnificent, exhilarating and... chaotic. Was that one of the risks Mew mentioned? I could barely grasp a little bit of the power that was suddenly so close and yet so far away. On the contrary, it threatened to overwhelm my own mind.

But I couldn't fail here. May's life was on the line.

Healing is a rare skill. Because it is inherently different from most other manifestations of power. The power to attack, even the power to defend or shape matter. All this is easy in comparison. Healing is much more complex because it can neither be forced, nor shaped. A healer has to find a way to coax the power to do what they want.

Those that had been Mew's words. And so, instead of pushing against the overwhelming pressure, I... allowed my mind to be carried along the sea of power. Opening myself to the new emotions I had just shortly begun to discover, I fixed images of May firmly in my mind. Our first meeting and our first battle all the way back at the Wallace Cup. The first signs of friendship. Meeting again and her confession. Our second battle and the understanding and connection that came with it.

You have to live, May. We just found each other. I don't care how hard it will be but I want to see if we can make it work because... I know, I know as clearly as I have ever known anything, that what we can have will be a treasure beyond anything.

And there was a response. I could feel it at the edge of the faint connection, still there, still lingering from our bond during the end of the battle and the brief glimpse into the future. Reaching out for it, I also drew in Ash's presence, finding him responding immediately, his warmth and strength helping to stabilize the maelstrom of power into a more concentrated and accurate flow. I could clearly see his own feelings, the love that was there but that he had tried to suppress for my sake. It was

no longer necessary. There was only one purpose, one feeling, one mind and when we enveloped the faint but stirring presence that was May, there was – for just a moment at least – only one love.

Don't give up May! Come back to us!

Emotions flowing together, the chaotic flow of power stilled, then rushed forward all at once, its objective now clear.

Finally I allowed myself to open my eyes. Dimly I noticed that my hands were hovering over May's wound... or where the terrible, gaping wound should have been. Now there was nothing but a big hole in her clothing. Then I immediately focused on eyes fluttering open slowly. I could feel her pulse quickening again even without direct touch. For this moment we were in perfect synch and therefore I already knew before I even needed a verbal confirmation, that May was alright.

"Welcome back." I smiled in overwhelming relief.

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(May)

I wasn't sure what exactly happened. My mind was still fuzzy. However, it didn't even matter at first because I was certainly greeted by an angel. An angel with the kindest and most beautiful smile I could imagine. Well, just next to the other angel joining the first in my vision.

Then I started to remember what happened, who I was and who these people were and I blinked astonished. Shouldn't I be... dead? In wonder one hand fell to my side where I knew the Hyper Beam should have torn me open when the impact had flung my body around and exposed my side to the deadly attack. But all I found was fresh and smooth skin. Nothing remained, aside from the great exhaustion I felt, that would even hint at what should have been there.

I wanted to ask but never got this far. "Don't you ever do something like that again," Ash's voice shook with emotion as he gently took my wandering hand in his. "Do you know how worried I... we were?" I smiled slightly at the honest feelings carried within his words and voice. It was there. I could tell now for some reason. The love I had always wanted. Still somewhat clumsy and restricted, inferior more in its freedom than its potency compared to his love for Dawn, but it was there.

Dawn took my other hand and her voice cracked slightly as she spoke. "That's right. We promised to see this through together, didn't we? You ARE important to us. Just as important as Ash is to me or I to him. I might not be able to say it yet but I... I want to be with you. I want to love you just as much as I love Ash."

And those were the words that finally broke the dam around my own heart. Yes, I had already opened myself to them on so many levels, allowed myself to trust their promises. But a small part of me had remained doubtful. Not anymore. That part was gone, perhaps I'd like to think it had died in my place. All there was now was an all encompassing joy. "You really mean it?" My own voice shook although more because I asked for a renewed confirmation than because of doubt. They both nodded and I was sure my expression broke out into a radiant glow and happy smile.

Unfortunately that was when our attention was drawn elsewhere as an explosion shook the ground and I remembered there was still a battle going on. For the first time I realized that we weren't here alone anymore. There was Brock, an unconscious Ako, but also Misty and Leaf. I blinked at the latter two but then decided the reason for their presence was secondary at the moment.

A Delibird crashed to the ground, flames starting to eat away at it mercilessly and a Machop took its final breath as Infernape's fist smashed right through its chest. That only left the large ominous dragon on our opponents' side. I had no idea what kind of Pokémon it was supposed to be but I didn't need to in order to understand it was the most dangerous.

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(Ash)

I think all that I had experienced right now, in this short time that seemed so endless... I would need a lot longer to fully comprehend everything. Right now the only thing that mattered was that May was alright. Everything else, the questions and the new yet old feelings and all these other things, could be dealt with later.

There was, after all, still a battle to be fought. A battle I had neglected for too long and without the surprising appearance from Leaf and Misty would have ended long ago. Instead the assassin leader's Pokémon had fallen one after another to the combined efforts of Leaf and Misty's Pokémon with some help from Charizard, Infernape and Brock's Steelix. All but that imposing Hydreigon.

"Good work," Mew spoke up finally, coming out of her own trance, and sinking wearily to the ground. "I am afraid I won't be of anymore help right now."

I shook my head grimly but determined. Confidence was rising inside me. After all that happened, after the miracle we had just witnessed, we could not lose here. "That's alright." I rose, Pikachu immediately dashing forward to join the battle. "We are not going to be defeated by a heartless murderer that thinks nothing of using Pokémon as his tools of destruction!" My voice rose as I stepped forward and everyone paused to look. Drawing deeply from the strength and harmony still fresh

and radiating inside of me, I let my confidence flow outward, willing it to reach everyone. "Isn't that right?!"

There was a chorus of enthusiastic replies before a wave of soothing yet invigorating light swept over us. I didn't need to look to know it was the last bit of Dawn's power that had been used to heal May. It wouldn't help much for those already too injured to battle but surely everyone else would feel their fatigue lifted.

Hydreigon never stood a chance. Up until then Shadow had played a game of cat and mouse... or perhaps more like "castle under siege", constantly drawing the large Pokémon's attacks. Finally returning the stored power, the shot served as an opening volley. Hellfire, Charizard, Infernape and Blaziken enveloped our foe with fire from both sides. Berserker was throwing large rocks like pebbles, joined shortly by Steelix. Pikachu used Gyarados' and Prinplup's Hydro Pumps to boost his own Electric attacks for maximum effect.

And despite all that punishment, Hydreigon still stood... well, was still flying. A roar shook the cliff once more, it was a horrible and frightening sound that was actually an attack I realized a moment later. An attack that was enough to bowl over three of the Fire types just hanging on with the last bits of their strengths. Then each head began to form a different colored beam. Prinplup, Hellfire and Berserker stood side by side and managed to counter it but it left them drained. And the rest didn't look much better.

It was time for the final push.

A startled shout from May alerted me that another Pokémon had joined the battlefield. I looked somewhat surprised at May's Eevee who didn't seem like she had profited very much from the brief healing. But her attention was solely focused forward on Hydreigon and the man commanding it. "I won't forgive you. Not just for trying to take me back to this place but even more for almost killing my best and... only friend in this world!"

Still connected as we were I could clearly feel the surprise that came with May's gasp. I didn't know much about the dark-furred Eevee but I could tell immediately that this wasn't something May had expected to hear and her Pokémon's words had moved her deeply.

"Alright! No way we can lose now! Pikachu, get ready!" This time there was no hesitation. After seeing what they were willing to do, even the last doubt about the methods necessary to defeat them were gone. Not that I would resort to Thor's Hammer. As much damage as the terrain had taken, it might just go right through the cliff. And that really wasn't necessary either. We were no longer solely reliant on this move for a big impact.

I shared a look with my friends and there was no need for a battle plan. Everyone knew what they had to do. Mobilizing the last bits of their strength, there was one Pokémon left for each of us, standing united. Shadow opened up with a large Dark Pulse, pushing Hydreigon actually back a little. Then a groggy but stubborn Prinplup joined Gyarados once more as they struck their opponent's left and right heads with all the power they could manage. The coordination was perfect and Hydreigon despite its power staggered and was unable to counter when Steelix burst from the ground and wrapped around his foe, squeezing tightly.

"That is the difference," I told the lone Rocket member standing, who was now definitely worried about the turn of events. "They are just tools for you. The bond that we share, the strength that we can draw from our friendship and love, that is something you won't ever understand... or defeat."

Taking this as a cue, Naru shifted into a Glaceon and started to freeze Hydreigon's entangled body with an Ice Beam that was clearly taking the last of her strength but which she held stubbornly until Steelix finally broke away at which point she quickly spread the ice over Hydreigon's whole body.

"Now, Pikachu!" Already sparking with a corona of gathered elemental energy, Pikachu leapt forward, pushing off once in midair and bursting forward with staggering speed like a small missile or, which would be more apt, a real, live thunderbolt. This wasn't the same attack anymore that it had been against Leaf. No, its potency was far closer now to our ultimate finisher but more physical and requiring less of a setup. "God of Thunder!" And with a thunderclap that I was sure could be heard miles out at sea, Pikachu struck.

There was no contest.

Cracks splintered across the ice in the blink of an eye and then the vengeful projectile that Pikachu had become drilled forward and through the obstacle before causing a violent explosion, shattering his target into many small shards.

It was finally over. And yet, even in the certain sense of victory I knew that in fact, the real battle had just begun.

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(Narrator)

"This eventful day ends with a victory but it is a victory with a bittersweet taste. In the midst of chaos and almost tragedy the seed of a new love has begun to blossom, yet the trials of Ash, Dawn and May are but a small part of the greater picture. Cerulean lies in waste and Team Rocket has made its intentions for this world known. The events of this night and morning mark a turning point in the lives of

our young heroes. Now all of them have gathered in one place, more than ever aware that they have crossed the point of no return. From now on they must face their destiny."

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Maia's Prophecy

Maia: I see, I see, I see in the future. *looks around suspiciously but spots no one out to interrupt her* I see... The brave fighters licking their wounds. I see Mew telling more stories. I see plans for the future. *looks around again* Hmm... where did everyone go? *shrugs* Oh well... Next time on TFSTTM Reloaded... THE EPILOGUE! *cackles madly* Yes, it's going to be done. Finished. The End..... Arc 2 at least. I need a vacation! *flies off*

MysticMew: Is she gone?

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Author's Notes

Alright, final notes. Well, okay, not quite so final. But after the mammoth effort of these episodes that were supposed to be one, there are a few things left to clarify.

First Ash/Dawn/May. The direction taken shouldn't be much of a surprise for anyone. I've said some things at length already and I don't really feel the need to defend my choices. If you don't like the direction, then don't read. I am guilty of doing it myself at times when I can't take the direction the main pairing is taking in a story. That being said, it is still a rather stupid thing to do. Unfortunately it's a bit of reflex once you start reading/liking only specific pairings. Usually I do keep reading if I'm totally into a story because it's so obviously fantastic and I hope that the same goes for you, even if you can't stomach the idea of a threesome.

For everyone that has not read some of my earlier work, I only want to say that the few times I did threesomes (or more), it was always a mutual thing with all people involved. Personally I don't believe (even though I do read them) that harem stories with multiple people focused on one person work. The only way to have a stable relationship with more than two people and without succumbing to eventual jealousy or such, is to have the same/similar feelings between all involved. That being said, I'm still not sure if I am doing well with Ash, Dawn and May. They certainly are not yet at this stage (not that they should be). Minako, Hotaru and Makoto were a lot easier to do back during Soul Lights. That being said, if you feel I'm not doing well in developing the interaction, completely independent of whether or not you like the idea, you may let me know. Of course, you can also let me know, if you think I am doing well! ^_^

Pikachu and Naru... If all of you remember, I said my not doing Pikachu/Lopunny was a consequence of a different inspiration I had. There you have it. I really wanted to do more with them but... oh well, all of Arc 3 yet to go.

Before anyone comments... Don't put too much weight in my selection of Pokémon used by enemies/opponents. Unless it's an opponent with an actual background and/or with more than a one episode showing, I won't go and plan out every team methodically. If I were paid for this, I probably would for the sake of detail. Since I'm not, I mostly look through the Pokédex and select a bit on a whim and a bit depending on situation and necessity.

Yes, Tropius went with Brock. I am not sure if I mentioned this before and unfortunately even I remembered that intention only after writing his part in the battle. I would have put it in then. Yeah, yeah, the checkup idea was lame, I admit, but I didn't want to rewrite it because if I did, I would have had Tropius get a bigger part since it's new and all.

The battle in itself was rather... weird to write. I wanted to actually focus more on individual matchups, especially for the final stretch. But different things always demanded my attention (mostly May, of course). I hope I still did well for a final showdown in this arc.

And that should be it. If I have anything left to say, I leave it for the Epilogue, same goes for end of arc notes. It shouldn't take that long to get out hopefully. However, these two episodes were pretty draining, so we took a few days off after the finish. As always, please leave your feedback through the most convenient method available to you and we shall greatly appreciate it.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias