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Pre-Note

Alright, here is the real conclusion to the second arc. Still not beta'ed but I can safely say that the issue was nothing more than a simple case of a "mail gone missing". Turns out that I was supposed to have received the beta for 2-9 already but the respective mail had not reached my inbox for some reason. Yep, sometimes it is the most simple explanation. The beta for 2-9 is up already and the others will follow as quickly as xryuran can get them done.

As usual thank you to the new reviewers. And once more thanks to Evespirit for another nice review. It is interesting to hear you compare my writing to Martin since I have just started reading the Game of Thrones books about a month ago and am thoroughly engrossed. I did note that he has a rather similar way of expressing the story with the changing point of views. It's not first person like mine and not as frequent but it is also extremely personal. I was very happy to see a seasoned and well-respected author writing like this as well. Not that I would ever want to compare myself to his genius. I have not been so fascinated and reading so much of one book every day since forever.

My explicit gratitude goes to "the stone tiger", however. Here is someone to make an example of. This is how I think an ideal story review should be and if everyone could just express a portion of it, I would be rather happy. Since I have already directly answered it, I shall not further go into detail here but I would urge you to take a look and be humbled. I certainly was. ^_^

And now, without further ado, the Epilogue of TFSTTM Reloaded. Enjoy while it lasts, it might be awhile until the next installment.

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Twinheart Island, Kanto (Mew)

Pride and sadness sometimes are very close together. They certainly were today. I was proud of these young children – and despite many of them being on or over the verge of adulthood, all of them were still children in my eyes. Proud of their growth, the way they could handle themselves in a fight. Proud because they had preserved through this trying day almost entirely on their own.

But I was also sad. Sad because of what the events of the day had done to them. It had left wounds. Physical – like May's almost death mostly – but especially mentally. What form those would take and how deep they would run was impossible to say right now. I was especially worried for Misty and what she had to go through in Cerulean and how May's case would affect everyone was hard to tell.

In a way, today had driven home to them just how serious this was going to be. Seeing people you know actually die courtesy of the threat you are going to face, teaches a better lesson than any theoretical warnings. And that alone was sad enough. That I would find something good in all the badness.

The fight wasn't quite over yet, however. The leader of the assailants was still there. Reasonable shocked at the turn of events and to see his strongest asset – because clearly he saw them as nothing else – fall at the hands of his targets. Indecisive for a moment, weighing between trying some other way to fulfill at least part of his objective – and he was armed heavily enough to still be a viable threat – or to run and save his own skin.

Eventual the latter won out as it seemed but by the time he turned, it was already too late and he ran into a resounding punch from an angry Garchomp that laid him out flat, not even giving him the chance to utter a cry. Cynthia stood behind her Pokémon with a grim expression, her eyes taking in the state of the group with the same kind of feelings I was experiencing right now.

"You took your time," I said, only remotely admonishing. It was clear she had been here for awhile already and part of me could guess why she had only intervened now. "How long have you been here?"

Cynthia smiled slightly but it lacked any humor. "By the time I arrived, it did not look like you needed any more help. And I figured everyone would benefit from having at least a certain sense of victory to experience today." And for that I was actually grateful. Whatever the last hours had done to them, I hoped that being able

to stand up to their foe and earning a victory mostly under their own power would be able to give them strength. They would certainly need it soon.

Almost on cue a trio of security men appeared and began to collect the fallen Team Rocket members while Garchomp promptly and none too gently slung the leader over his shoulder, following the others inside. Cynthia was ready to follow immediately. "Everyone must be tired and some of you definitely need to be treated. Please go inside and then have some rest. I wish I could stay and fill you in myself but I really have to go now and prevent a panic." With that she turned sharply and walked off, her usual grace and calm clearly shaken, which might be why no one spoke up to stop her until she was already back inside the building.

"Wh-What did she mean by that?" It was Dawn that finally voiced the question probably on both her own as well as Ash and May's mind. It seemed they really had stayed mostly unaware of what had transpired around them, much like I had hoped. Of course, the truth might be only harder on them now. I was a little surprised Dawn had not noticed but then again she was so focused on her match and May in particular that she might have ignored and blocked out the warning signs on purpose. Now she might have been the one to pose the question but the echoes of her brief power boost were just fading away and she must have gotten a much better feel for all the chaos surrounding us.

It was the young Master, Leaf, that chose to answer eventually, clearly reluctant and unhappy about that task. "Early this morning, Team Rocket launched massive attacks on several cities inside Kanto. All could be repelled, all but the real one at least." Her gaze flickered to Misty and everyone caught it, realization dawning on their faces morphing into shock and horror. "I am afraid Cerulean City was entirely..." Again she trailed off and did not finish. There was no need, everyone that didn't know already understood.

I was amazed none of the three completely uninformed were angry at being left in the dark, although right now I believed it was more because they were much too exhausted from their own trial and it would take awhile for their minds to work through this new shocking information.

That this assessment wasn't entirely correct became apparent when Ash quietly left May with Dawn and walked over to the clearly distraught redhead. Clearly showing his growth over the last year, he pulling her into a hug without saying a word while everyone watched silently.

Seeing as no one else was willing to make a move right now, it seemed the responsibility would fall to me. "I think Cynthia had the right idea. Everyone is tired, some of you are injured and I suggest May should get a checkup as well. There are many things we need to discuss now..." Turning my head I fixed the young man tending to his girlfriend with a stern look. "Right now though, I believe everyone

should have a break. I hope you don't mind delaying any explanation until then." The last bit was mostly directed at Brock.

It was apparently unnecessary. Whatever had transpired before my arrival, he seemed sufficiently chastened and averted his gaze of guilt and self-reproach. "That's ok," he mumbled, squeezing the unconscious woman's hand. It wasn't like I did not understand his curiosity and his frustration about feeling left out. However, I still believed not telling the rest sooner had been for the best. Even with this outcome. They would have spent the entire time looking over their shoulders otherwise and it still might not have changed what had happened today.

Ash finally released Misty and walked back to collect his Pokémon and then pick up May. Everyone else also took this as a sign to get moving and without much further words the small group of battle-weary children trotted back towards the Contest Hall.

It saddened me once more to know that a scene like this would not stay a singular event for very long.

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M&M DreamWorks Presents
The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
Second Arc: Glimpses of Destiny
Epilogue: Aftermath! Their Destiny

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(Dawn)

"Long, very long ago, in this world there were two sentient life forms. One of them were humans and the others were what is referred to in your history books as animals. For long periods of time, evolution progressed naturally but eventually the faster evolution cycle of humans began to take effect and the animals felt threatened by humans that became more and more clever at hunting them, driving some races to the brink of extinction. It was in that time that some animals were born that possessed an unusual high amount of a mysterious energy that was believed to be generally so underdeveloped in living beings that it was of little use."

I listened only halfway, having heard this part several times now. In fact I had seen many more things in my dreams that Mew hadn't even revealed to Ash and myself yet. She might do so now, however. Now that everyone was present. It was easy to think of her as withholding important information but that wasn't true. We had barely been together for a month but already I felt like I knew the so unimposing,

small Legendary better than anyone else. Those conflicted feelings were as easy for me to read as words from a book. Not every detail was clear but it was enough to get a general understanding of just how hard her role really was and that it entailed a kind of responsibility I did not envy her for.

Of course, that responsibility was now mine as well. So far it had all been theory. Some practical training but nothing that was too different from what I had already learned with Sabrina before. It did not quite feel real yet. Now it was different. The power I had experienced a few hours ago was... frightening. Frightening in its magnitude and potency. Frightening because I was expected to wield that. That, which had barely been an adequate equal for what was meant to be mine as a base power.

The explanation Mew had given us about NRE and was now giving to the others as well, could only be truly understood once you experienced this power in its entirety. The short glimpses of abilities did not do the true scale of what was slumbering inside us any justice.

Was I able to do this? Could I shoulder all that responsibility?

Two years ago, it would have been too much. The first glimpses of the hard reality that was the path of a Coordinator had almost crushed me. Back then, I had been putting too much pressure on my own shoulders and almost crumbled under its weight if not for Ash. Ash who was there to shoulder it with me. An example I could draw strength from and motivate myself and eventually the person that would always instill me with confidence.

I wasn't the same person anymore. The thought of what was to come now did scare me. Who wouldn't be? Everyone had seen the recording from Cerulean and by now live feeds had become available as relief forces had reached the area. It was not a pretty sight. I felt really sorry for Misty whom I had barely gotten to know but that hardly mattered. I wouldn't wish such an experience on anyone.

Yet, despite being scared, it did not stop me. It did not make me unable to take action or doubt myself. With Ash here and now May as well – an unexpected but no longer unwelcome addition –, I was certain I could face these dangers. Because I wasn't alone and I was aware of not being alone. There was no reason to doubt while having those that felt so strongly about me at my side.

I guess I really have changed a lot, I realized with less wonder when I believed I should have felt. That Dawn from back then was gone... No, not gone. She had become something more, something better. Like a Pokémon I had undergone my own evolution from the aspiring Top Coordinator into someone that understood the mysteries and secrets of the unseen much better than I could have ever imagined. The last step of that evolution... I had gotten a glimpse of it today. And if this was my

destiny, then I would walk this path, together with those I loved because we would be able to overcome everything. That's what I felt, deep in my heart.

"Around that time, many of us who had a high potency of NRE were already born but we were scattered, of different races and without a sense of community like mankind. Until He was born. An anomaly some said. A being with such a strong connection to nature that he had the highest NRE potential any being alive had ever seen and probably ever will." Yes, she was definitely going to be thorough about the story this time around. Mew did not like to talk much about their former leader, the memory clearly too painful.

"Everyone would just call him... Zero. The one with which everything ended and begun. He became our leader... our hope... However... Even the most innocent desire can become the trigger for something you can never take back again."

Everyone was listening raptly. Even I was starting to allow myself to being dragged in. My mind was still awash in sensation, picking up echoes of feelings and thoughts without even trying or wanting to. I could sense Brock's guilt and as a result of that, a lack of faith in himself. I could feel Misty's anguish, although she was trying hard to suppress it. What drew me most, however, was May.

A checkup had confirmed that aside from extreme exhaustion nothing remained of her terrible injury. Even now she was still groggy but had stubbornly insisted that she could at the very least sit and listen. That wouldn't have been so much a concern, if not for the deep impression that her brief brush with death had left behind. It was not an overwhelming emotion but it had clearly unsettled her. I hoped it wouldn't stick and fester. That was something Ash and I definitely had to make sure of.

"Zero's only wish was to see nature in balance. However... One day his concern over humanity's evolution started to become something more... Fear. This fear drove Zero and the like-minded beings he had brought together to a hastened action. We had found a way to tap into the NRE directly when combining our individual powers, Zero acted as a focus. We only wished to strengthen our kind but the power was far beyond our control. It swept over the face of the planet, transforming animals everywhere into what we know today as Pokémon. And so we had done something no living thing ever should. We had played with the rules of nature and changed the very laws of this world. This was our sin, a sin we could never take back again."

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(Brock)

"Suddenly with greater power and intelligence the balance had shifted drastically. The newly evolved Pokémon were not able to control their instincts and

new strength well and humanity was unprepared for this change. Many humans were killed in the initial years to follow when Pokémon actively sought to fight back against whom they perceived as their enemies. In the end humanity was knocked back several evolutionary cycles."

Fascinated I listened to the tale. As a long time Breeder – and I had never fully abandoned that part after all – this tale was something many of us would give everything to hear. Because here it was, the origin of Pokémon. Long and often believed to be tied to certain Legendaries like the Sinnoh Legends about Arceus or Dialga and Palkia, I could never have imagined that the truth was something like this.

I could understand why those that apparently knew about it, wanted to keep the truth covered up, however. The present clearly showed just why. Hearing this tale now made it all too clear that Team Rocket's leader knew about this as well. His words made a terrible kind of sense with this information. And as such, if this had become public knowledge – no, once this did become public knowledge –, there would easily be others to feel the same or at least entertain similar thoughts.

And I couldn't even fully blame them. Just those brief images of bloodthirsty Pokémon attacking humans in a rage, not unlike what I had seen from these warped creatures from Team Rocket just a few hours ago, would haunt my dreams for quite awhile I was sure.

"We, the initiators, had received powers much greater due to our initial NRE and the proximity to the ritual. We were deeply saddened by these events. We could not understand the sudden aggression, even outright hate, shown by the new Pokémon species and were long powerless to calm them."

As fascinated as I was by all this, however, the guilt I still felt about the events this morning still outweighed any satisfaction at finally getting the information I wanted. The price had been almost too high. No, it had been too high. I was not so conceited to think I could have prevented everything. That strike team had been too prepared. And whether or not I had heeded Mew's warning, they would have found some way to carry out their mission. But I couldn't forgive myself for letting Ako get involved. She wasn't hurt and had by now slept off the drug, already sitting beside me, although still a little groggy. However, it could have easily turned out and ended worse. Ultimately that wasn't even my greatest regret. Letting Ako get kidnapped and used as a hostage or leverage was bad enough. That May almost got killed because of that was something I could not and would never forget.

And that's why I sat and waited patiently. So far, as fascinating as the tale was, it was for the most part a lesson in history. There was more though. Much more. Dawn's sudden powers were a clear indicator for that and considering the explanations so far I had a feeling I knew where this was going already and why it seemed to concern primarily those present here.

I had seen and heard about my fare share of legends and such after all.

"Zero, who had fallen into a comatose state after the ceremony, briefly regained consciousness and informed us that the change had another terrible side effect. Since so much NRE was manipulated, much was wasted in the effort. This energy did not simply dissipate though. It grew a consciousness of its own. Taking in all the dark feelings of fear, hate and desire. Unnoticed it had begun to influence the emotions of the Pokémon. Inexperienced with their new evolutionary state, they became easily susceptible and the influence was done on such an unconscious, instinctual level that no one noticed."

Somehow we would all be tied into this. Deeply. There was little reason for Mew to seek any of us out or involve us in all this if the Legendaries could solve this problem themselves. Soon I would learn about what kind of fate was in store for us, however, it was clear already that the events of today were just the beginning of a long and terrible conflict.

I wondered what good I could do in this? Already I had nearly allowed the death of two people dear to me and in the end, it had hardly been because of my own effort that this tragedy did not come to pass. If this tale was heading in the direction I believed it would, I had to question my ability to be of use to my friends. Especially because I was the oldest of the group together with Ako. That came with an even greater kind of responsibility that I didn't feel quite up to.

"Hearing these terrible news, we banded together to seek and hunt down this being, the conflict erupting into a terrible battle that further scarred the face of the land until IT was finally defeated. Yet, IT could not be completely destroyed because IT was born out of the energy created by Zero, so we sealed IT away instead."

And what was sealed often did not remain that way. Not for all eternity. There was always a way, always someone seeking to free what was sealed, either intentional or without even knowing. It was easy to tell the utter contempt Mew held for this being, only using a rather emotional "IT" as reference.

No, I could clearly see now where this was going and I definitely wouldn't say that made it easier.

Regardless... I would still stand with my friends, whatever the future may bring and whatever we had to do now. The latter did not even matter by itself. Giovanni had practically declared war on the Pokémon League and in extent every person who saw and loved Pokémon as friends and equals. Even with the impending prophecy I could practically grasp already, there was no way Ash and with him pretty much all of us wouldn't be pulled into this conflict one way or another. Dawn would be with Ash all the way and as things stood, so would May. Misty's hometown had been

destroyed by Team Rocket, there was no way she would rest until the score was settled. And Leaf was a Master herself, it was her duty to fight...

And so I had to be strong. Much stronger than today. Because I could not... No, I would never allow something like this to happen again. I never wanted to feel so helpless and guilty again. That was a promise I made to myself at this very moment and whatever else may come in this dark tale the Legendary was telling, that promise would not change.

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(Misty)

In any other situation I might have been conscious of the surprised and curious glances from my friends. Right now I frankly didn't care what they thought about the picture Leaf and I had to be giving. I was merely infinitely grateful for her presence and the comfort I could draw from her closeness as I sat leaning against her shoulder, one of her arms around me.

It was a safe haven. The excitement of the brief battle outside had allowed me to suppress the memories of what happened in Cerulean for just that small moment but it had hardly been enough. *I wonder if anything will ever be enough to make them go away.* I had barely slept and definitely not peacefully. Every time I closed my eyes I would see the burning city, the destruction wrought... the bodies. And almost every time I would see Aisha's teary face when we had discovered that her family apparently had not been among the survivors. Granted, it had only been a few minutes outside the city until Mew had whisked us away again, so I retained a brief glimmer of hope. Yet, even that was growing smaller with every moment. Realistically I knew that the chances of someone being alive who wasn't with the people rounded up by Team Rocket were slim to non-existent.

Leaf had always been there. I was sure she could and perhaps should have other things to do – especially to sleep herself considering how long she must have gone without. However, every time I had woken up screaming and shaking and just wanting to crawl somewhere into a deep, dark hole, she had been there. Just like now and that's why I didn't care. After all I wasn't afraid to admit my feelings for her and her presence wasn't just comfort but also a blanket to cover and quench the flames of anger I could feel ready to consume me.

Everyone had been sympathetic and I welcomed it. Ash and Brock had been especially concerned about my health and state of mind. They still were I could tell. The same could go for Dawn or Brock's girlfriend once she woke up – that bit of information had actually made me completely forget my own troubles for a single moment! Even May, exhausted and clearly shaken from her experience, had taken her time to come and offer her support.

Perhaps the most surprising and shocking among the people offering sympathy had been Jessie, James and Meowth. Their presence at the battle had already made me curious but honestly there had been no time to wonder or ask... or even care about the why. They had not stayed for long after the conclusion, saying that Giovanni would probably look for them now, too, and until they figured out what to do from now, they wanted to hide somewhere until everything blew over. But they had stayed long enough to offer an apology to me and admit that they had had no idea about Team Rocket's actual target, otherwise they would have said something sooner. It was hard to be angry with them after that or just stick them together with the rest of the organization that had laid waste to my home. Regardless, I think it was better that they left. Their presence, defected or not, would have only served to remind me more of what had happened.

The reactions of everyone were touching and while part of me didn't really want anyone's sympathy, I did appreciate it nonetheless. Yet, nothing managed to make me feel more secure and stifle the righteous fury inside me as much as the comfort of my girlfriend.

Mew's story further helped in this distraction. It gave me something to focus on. After all I only knew the bare essentials from Leaf who in turn had heard them from Zoroark. However the Dark-type Pokémon apparently only knew parts of the whole thing.

I was not scared of what was going to come. Or perhaps it would be more adequate to say that I did not care whether or not I was scared. The coming battles would be a chance to vent all that frustration and anger I carried inside, and the helplessness of barely being able to do anything for my home. They would pay dearly for this. Rationally I knew that entertaining such thoughts was dangerous but I couldn't help myself and I doubted anyone could blame me in this situation.

The ones responsible for this atrocity had to be brought to justice. Not just for my own satisfaction and peace of mind but also before they could do what they did to Cerulean to other homes and other people as well. Part of me still couldn't believe they would go this far. Mindless destruction and cold-blooded murder. It was a rude awakening to reality indeed.

And hearing Giovanni dub the whole thing "righteous" had been the final blow that smashed apart the chains holding my fury intact. This madman had to be stopped. Whether or not he was controlled by some ancient, old evil didn't matter at all and I didn't think it made any difference on his character.

No, I would not rest until the "Cerulean Massacre" – as the first press releases apparently had dubbed it – was properly avenged. If our destiny, fate or whatever it was allowed me to do just that, then I welcomed it gladly.

"In its last conscious moments before reaching a state of merging completely with the world's nature, Zero left us with a prophecy of the future. A prophecy that would determine whether the balance we had so carelessly destroyed would be regained or not."

That was the part I had heard about the most. In fact Zoroark knew little more than parts of the prophecy and a general, very broad version of the ancient history. The Fox Pokémon despite all its power was not technically a Legendary, perhaps something in between. His knowledge was limited but it had apparently been enough to put Leaf on the right track and from there seek us all out to better prepare us for that day... As much good as that had done.

No, I shouldn't think like that. Certainly I would be dead by now if not for everything she had shown me in that brief time we had known each other. None of us might be sitting here now and I was certain that if not for her... preparations, we wouldn't be remotely ready to face the challenges ahead even if we would have somehow made it to this point alive.

But we had. I was still alive. Ash and the others were still alive. In that Team Rocket had failed and they would soon come to regret that failure, even if it was the last thing I ever did.

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(May)

A small shiver ran down my spine and I leaned a little closer into Ash. I couldn't help a small smile at the reassuring tightening of his arm or the squeeze from Dawn's hand in mine. It was clear they already knew all this and probably had gone through the same reactions.

I had been too busy with the Contest and everything that happened with Ash and Dawn to really pay attention. In the back of my mind I knew there was some greater meaning behind the presence of the Legendary. However, I did not want to deal with it then. Now I had to and after what had happened this morning, my own reaction was clearly different from what it would have been before then.

"I will spare you the details right now for a time when everyone is more... awake." Light chuckles all around, even I couldn't help it. Despite the serious way Mew was presenting her story, clearly affected by a heavy heart, I could tell already that the small Legendary Pokémon was generally a rather easygoing individual.

"The core essence is this. In a time long after that point, the seal that we wove to contain IT would begin to weaken. In this time, however, six humans would be

born with a degree of NRE that when combined was never before seen in any human or Pokémon alive. These six humans would each be gifted with a connection to one of the core natural elements of this world. Air..." Her gaze was fixed on Ash. "Water." Now Misty. "Earth." Brock. "And Fire." Even though expecting it, I felt myself recoiling a little under the intense gaze. "As well as the higher elements of Shadow and Light." Here she looked at Leaf and finally Dawn in turn.

For a moment Mew paused in her narrative to allow us to absorb things. It was clear what would come next. Anyone would be able to tell from this point and... it frightened me. A few weeks ago, in the middle of my training with Maylene, I might actually have felt elated at the idea. I had felt ready to take on the world then. And when I had rescued the family during the kidnapping incident at Jubilife, I had only been confirmed in this confidence.

Almost dying had a way of putting things into perspective. Yes, sure, I had done it to protect Dawn and would gladly always do it again if it came down to them or myself. But had I actually achieved anything? Had Brock and everyone else not shown up, my actions would not have protected any of them. So ultimately I hadn't been strong enough. Strong enough to prove my worth to them.

"Many of us were doubtful and reasoned that IT should be our responsibility. However, Zero was adamant. Only those six, he said, would be able to completely remove this stain on our history and return the balance within nature that we had so carelessly destroyed."

I wanted to deny it but the experience had left a mark in my heart. Was I truly ready for something like this? What Mew was saying was essentially that the future of our world was now in our hands. Mine? It felt unreal and I couldn't help but wonder if I was really qualified for something like that.

The thought of being scared was the worst though. I hated myself for being so weak all of a sudden. *If you are defeated, it only means that you need to be stronger. If you live to remember, then you have never truly lost.* That had been one of Maylene's favorite lines. I should be able to overcome this. I wanted to be stronger, strong enough for the two people who had offered their hearts to me even though I should have been nothing but an intruder on their happiness. I needed to be strong enough so that something like today would not happen again. And that was why I hated that part of myself that wanted to run away and have nothing to do with all of this.

And so I kept quiet. I wouldn't have been able to decide whether to be curious, upset, angry, elated or frightened anyway. Brock was quiet as well, considering some of his initial insistence for answers. The events of the night and morning had clearly shown all of us how serious this was and that it was far past the point where either of us could turn away, regardless of everyone's individual feelings.

Looking to my left and right, I felt some of my anxiety immediately dampen. I wasn't alone either. They were there. The two people my heart had fallen so heavily, desperately and utterly for. I wasn't sure just where exactly this... relationship was going to end up. Just like Dawn said, there were no guarantees. But they had given me hope and I had to believe in it. My only new and remaining concern now was whether or not we would even have the time to explore our feelings for each other.

"And so we had to resign ourselves to watch and wait. As the world began to recover, we took on a guiding role. We resolved not to interfere in the evolutions of either species, only appearing when the situation would become most dire. Shamed by the consequences our actions had evoked, we did not dare involve ourselves, even when humanity began to rise again and start to devise ways of taming Pokémon. To us, such ways – as long as they did not reach levels of widespread abuse and oppression – were preferable, if it helped preserve a balance of power between the races."

I couldn't even imagine what it must have been like. My own feelings right now felt meager and ridiculous compared to what Mew and her friends had to go through. I dared not even imagine what it had to be like, to be responsible for such an irreversible change to nature. That there was such a dark tale behind the history of our world was hard to believe. That our Pokémon that we loved and shared so much with now had such an origin was almost inconceivable. But in the end I wonder if it really mattered.

"Only when Poképolis rose to power and became too greedy, starting to play with the laws of nature much like we had done so long ago, did we intervene. Knowing we could no longer merely watch, some of us began to take a more active, guiding role to ensure peace between our races. From the ashes of Poképolis the modern system was slowly developed, culminating in the formation of the Pokémon League in an effort to better bring our two races together. We shared parts of our history and knowledge and as more and more humans capable to harness NRE appeared, even taught some of them in the hopes of achieving a basis for us to coexist in harmony."

I didn't think they had done a bad job of it either. No, it really didn't matter to me where Pokémon came from. The bond we had was real enough and something I never wanted to miss again. Idly my free hand stroked through Naru's fur, the young Eevee comfortably resting in my lap. Her declaration still echoed in my heart and I was certain that it would help drive me forward in the coming days because I knew how much it had taken for her to say these words.

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(Ako)

As a child I had loved fantasy tales. The Elder would often read the village children stories and I always loved those about princes and princess, about magic and heroes saving the world best. They portrayed a sense of hope contrasting the world around us at that time. They allowed a brief escape into a world where not everything was as poor and bleak as in Aprico Village. The preference had stuck and when I came to Heal Bell and could actually afford it, had often allowed myself the small pleasure of a book or would watch movies of the same genre.

But just like the genre's name said, these were fantasies. While right here one such seemed to be right in front of me, seemed to even tangent me in a not so small although not quite direct way, this was still reality. And reality always was far crueler than the stories. Had I already forgotten that in the peacefulness and shelter of Heal Bell?

In the stories there seldom were deaths, especially not in such a fashion. If there were, they had meaning, they were glorious. Neither of that could be applied to what happened in Kanto and especially Cerulean today. Poor Misty. I didn't even know the girl who was one of Brock's oldest friends and I wondered if I would ever get to know her now. Experiences like this shaped people. I had come to the same realization just a short while ago during the forest fire incident in my home village.

So much had happened already in less than a few weeks since leaving the sanctuary of Heal Bell. Just about a year ago I could have scarcely imagined where I was right now. Tucked away comfortably inside the academy, with no real desire to leave. Then I had met Brock and everything started to change.

And that's why all this did involve me, too. Maybe I was just the sidekick, one of the heroes' girlfriends, yet even those roles were important in the stories, right? Maybe I couldn't do much but I had promised myself that what happened with Altaria would not happen again. That I would grow stronger, strong enough to prevent unnecessary deaths like this.

And maybe that's why I actually spoke up when no one else dared. Maybe or maybe not. Honestly I couldn't quite say what possessed me. Me who had the least direct involvement with this story as it seemed. Perhaps that was part of it, too. Just... I guess it surprised me as much as everyone else. So did the exact question formed. From all the things I could have asked, it was that?

"Um, you always say IT. Does IT have no real name?" I shrunk a little under the looks everyone were giving me. Brock was perhaps the most startled because he knew me so well. I couldn't really fault him. What exactly possessed me to ask this of all things. And Mew... There was a moment of pure loathing in those otherwise clear and pure eyes. I shifted uncomfortably. "I just mean... Always referring to another creature as 'IT' seems awfully inconvenient."

As soon as it had appeared Mew's anger vanished and her expression softened. "We refuse to refer to IT as anything else. To us IT is a trauma, a product of our own failure and selfishness. IT is not even anything remotely to be regarded as a life form. Malevolence is all IT knows. Death, discord and hate is all IT is interested in. IT might be in League with Giovanni right now but that is mostly a matter of convenience. IT has no desire that matches Giovanni's own ambition and will turn on him as soon as he no longer serves a use." She took a deep breath. The anger was still there in her voice, something you wouldn't think the Legendary capable of at first glance or even after a longer time. "But, if you must have something for reference... Later when scholars I briefly worked with invented the modern system of categorizing Pokémon and giving them numbers, one of the few that knew about the true history would refer to IT as Missigno. The missing number. A phantom that should not have ever existed. Incomplete and as vile as a virus. I always found it a rather apt name."

And that pretty much closed the topic right there. It was clear enough that Mew did not want to talk about this anymore than necessary right now. However, it seemed my question had at least broken the somber mood and uncomfortable silence after the end of the narrative in which no one dared to ask anything.

It was Ash that spoke next, voicing what probably was on everyone's mind. "Maybe you should explain what we are supposed to do next? You told Dawn and I that our powers are sleeping and that we have to awaken them somehow but never quite how."

Mew nodded at this. "Of course. Everyone should understand one thing first, however. You are not the only people to be born with a high amount of NRE potential or even the only ones that have within you the potential to harness an element. However, what you must and have the potential to achieve is complete mastery of one given element. You cannot achieve this alone. Or at least you wouldn't be able to until you are old and grey and it would be long too late to be of any use."

Everyone chuckled awkwardly at that. "So we have devised a way for you to unlock and harness the powers sleeping within you right now. Each natural element has several nexus points all over the world. We have used those in this general region – with that I mean Kanto, Johto, Hoenn and Sinnoh – to construct the original seal for IT. One of us has taken up a kind of guardian role at each of these points. To gain the power you need to face IT, you must go to each of these points and face the trial of the one guarding that part of the seal. Only by gaining their approval will you be able to unlock that which sleeps inside all of you to its fullest potential. Be warned, however, my brothers and sisters are not all as kind as I am. They have spent all this time in silent vigil and many have grown either bitter or at the very least somewhat... eccentric. You will have to convince them that you are worthy before they will help you."

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(Leaf)

Personally I found the part about world history the most interesting. I knew about the ties between the Pokémon League and the Legendaries but not how all of this came to be. I suppose if not for what was happening I might have been told eventually. While I wouldn't call myself a scholar, I had always been somewhat fascinated and curious about the history and origin of people and objects alike.

However, as fascinating as it was to hear, my attention was split or more like dominated by my girlfriend. Her mood had not been getting better and I couldn't really blame her. I still vividly remembered that short time after we had made our escape thanks to Mew's timely intervention and rested a little ways outside the city along with some of the scattered survivors.

Flashback

The place was a larger strip of rocky terrain along the river, just a few miles outside of the city. I had expected more patrols but it seemed all of Team Rocket's forces had been deployed and focused on the city itself. Well... considering it was clearly not an attempt for a takeover, I could understand that at least.

This was fortunate to us and the people that had escaped as well. I doubted it was a smart or calculated maneuver that seemed to have split the escape group up, probably all over the place. It was nonetheless a good idea. So far no pursuit seemed to be coming. And halfway through our own mad escape, I had gotten a good idea why. Communications had pretty much been reestablished. The main channel for the League's forces was awash with all sorts of reports, demands and questions. What little I could filter out, however, was that apparently Cerulean had not been the only target, just the main one and that the forces on the other sites were pulling away. Which would mean the one in Cerulean could not afford to stay much longer either. Even if it was too late to save anything now, the League could not afford to just idly sit by.

I had conveyed as much to the people we had found here and told them to sit tight and wait it out. Relief forces would not be long off now. That was all the attention I could give them. As a Master I probably should do more but I couldn't help but worry almost exclusively about Misty.

With the fighting and even the escape now over, the naked reality about what had happened was finally starting to catch up to her. And just as it did, she had learned about Aisha and her missing parents. I had pointed out that these weren't the only survivors – unfortunately it was the majority and the younger girl had tearfully insisted that her parents were smart and would not go off on their own.

It had been a small mercy that the girl had once more given in to her own exhaustion shortly after, mercifully resting against the side of Zoroark who had taken a silent vigil over her which I was quite grateful for.

Of course, that finally left Misty to her own thoughts and I did not need to be able to mind-read to guess what was going on inside her. Guess, sympathize, yes... Understand? I wasn't sure if anyone who had never gone through something like this could truly understand.

Damn it. I should have never left!

Without a word, I sat down next to her and gently but insistently pulled her into my arms. There were no words spoken for a long time and there were none either needed or helpful. What I could do, the only thing I could do, was to be there for her and I could just as easily let her know like that without any empty platitudes. It did not take long for the wetness to stain my own shirt, her composure finally breaking.

And all I could do was stroke her hair and let her cry.

End Flashback

The interruption came all too soon after that when Mew had apparently picked up on Dawn's distress. I had been prepared to go alone but Misty had been adamant. I couldn't get the look she had given me out of my mind. It wasn't so much the desperation, the distress or the fear of losing even more people she cared about today – something she voiced quite vocally –, it was the fierce fury that I could see somewhere deep inside. And it had scared me. It scared me because I had seen other people, good people, consumed by their grief and anger until they only lived exclusively for revenge. I would like to think that Misty was a reasonable enough person and that she could deal with it in time. The beginning of the attack had not even been an entire day off yet. Coming to terms with it would take even longer. Yet still, I could not help but feel worried for her state of mind. Worried and in the end helpless other than to provide her with the comfort she needed.

Forcefully I tore my attention away from my girlfriend when the narrative ended and turned to what we were supposed to do now. Zoroark had had little insight on this part and I had always wondered about the specific process. I did not particularly like the direction this was taking either, even if I had almost expected it. Running around all over the place while Team Rocket was already beating the drums of war was not exactly going to be pleasant. Part of me wanted to ask why we couldn't have done this earlier. Why wait until now? I kept silent, however, having figured part of the answer to that out myself. Even starting a year ago, I doubted hardly anyone would be ready for whatever trials Mew was hinting at. There obviously was more and I had a feeling I would learn of that reason very soon anyway.

"Time will be an important factor and so we will probably have to split up rather sooner than later. Before that, however, I believe it would be best to start with the Seal of Light. Since it is my given element and to be frank I see no need to further test Dawn at this point, this will make a good example of what lies in store for all of you."

That at least made some sense and I could even agree with that logic. If it wasn't for one detail at least that I dreaded. "And where would that be?"

Mew did not reply immediately but her expression told me everything I needed to know even before she gave an answer and I unconsciously tightened my embrace around Misty.

"Cerulean Cave."

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(Ash)

The excitement over that last announcement had been kept at a minimum. Not that anyone could fault the reasoning Mew gave. Neither the initial one nor the somewhat harsher one that was brought up when the question about the safety of going to Cerulean now had eventually come up.

There is no better time than now. Team Rocket is done there and has pretty much pulled out completely. With relief forces all over the place and investigations under way, it will never be safer to go than now. Mew had clearly debated at that point whether or not be frank but in the end had said it anyway. *And you all need to see. Some of you have already gotten an idea what the coming battles will involve, what will be at stake. To fully understand this weight, you all need to carry now, I believe it is best if you confront this reality... now."

And that had effectively ended the talk right there, definitely leaving behind a sullen and dark mood. It was probably the worst for Misty. I wanted to do something for her but really wasn't sure what would be appropriate or even effective. Besides, Leaf seemed to take on that job as well as anyone else could have.

Right now I wished that I could actually feel more surprise and wonder about that development but it seemed all so insignificant after the events of this day. It was a weight, yes. A heavy burden that was placed on our shoulders. I had known that sooner and definitely in more detail than anyone else. Yet, it wasn't until today that the true seriousness and severity of this task that was placed before us became truly apparent to me.

Almost losing May, learning about Cerulean. Reality was far crueler than ominous warnings, theories or prophecies. They had a way to drive home the true essence of the situation. And this situation had escalated rapidly into exactly that state. From weeks of preparation, hearing Mew's tales and learning some new tricks, this had just been the prelude. The true beginning had caught up and hit us like a Pidgeot at top speed, applying Extremspeed for good measure. It was too much to really come to terms with, not even after some hours of rest.

All I knew was that we could not walk away. Not even if we wanted to, not even if we were scared – which I was sure all of us were to some extent for different reasons. Because there were also reasons to fight and I did not just mean the simple ones like that Team Rocket basically had already declared war and since all of us loved Pokémon, it was already our fight as well. No, in the end what happened in the last twenty-four hours had struck everyone in some way and now none could walk away anymore. Be it revenge, justice, a wish to restore peace. Team Rocket had already carried the fight to us. Walking away was impossible.

I found them back outside on the cliff, the very site that had almost ended in such a tragic loss. One that I was sure I would have never forgiven myself for. Seeing May like that had made it painfully obvious how insignificant and unimportant my insecurities about the arrangement beginning to develop between us were. That did not make it automatically better or easier but I couldn't deny anymore that obviously something was there, much like Dawn had always insisted. And certainly more than I had believed to be left of some of my old feelings for May had remained.

I certainly did not want to experience what I had in that moment ever again. And if facing some kind of destiny to ensure that they were safe, then I would do it and I would not stop until I succeeded.

"You know you were supposed to be resting," I tried to sound mildly admonishing but it failed to hold out for even a moment as I slid next to the two girls and simply slipped one arm around both of them, drawing as much comfort and calm out of their presence as they clearly did. I couldn't really sleep much either. And we had used the first break for that fairly well anyway, probably better than Misty who still looked as ragged as she had after the battle at this very place. Somehow I doubted it would change much after tonight.

Neither Dawn nor May replied and it wasn't necessary. There wasn't really anything to say. The sun had already submerged halfway into the ocean. The day had been a clear and bright one, almost mocking the tragedy that had struck Kanto and sent a shockwave throughout the rest of the world. We simply sat in silence for several minutes while watching the sun starting to disappear beneath the waves more and more. A swarm of Pokémon passed by and here and there a Water Pokémon could be seen below, emerging among the waves.

May's voice was soft when she spoke. She already looked much healthier now. "It's beautiful. Why would anyone want to destroy this? What does it matter how Pokémon came to be? I didn't even particularly like Pokémon when I started out either but there are so many wonderful things I have experienced because of them that I am sure I would have never been able to without."

"You know," I answered eventually after exchanging a look with Dawn, "Dawn and I used to ask ourselves the same thing. What does it all matter? After today I really like to say that I hate Team Rocket and especially their boss for what they did but part of me almost feels sorry for them. That they can't see all the good that is there. That they obviously never had the chance to make such wonderful experiences with Pokémon as we had."

"I'm not sure about the feeling sorry part but I agree on the rest." I turned, surprised at the voice and finding not just Leaf but everyone else of our small group standing behind us. Obviously we all had the same idea. "The world as it is, is beautiful and just because a few radical people think differently, that does not mean they can decide for all of us. And that's why we have to fight. Not for a prophecy or world peace or something... But to protect that which is precious to us, right?"

Misty nodded at her side while Brock smiled slightly. I could feel May's tension lift and her gaze seemed more determined, less intimidated and insecure. Really, Leaf had a way with words. She had always been someone quick to adapt to a new situation. From our very first meeting onwards she had always been quick on the comeback.

The one who had the final words, however, was not Leaf. No, it was Dawn who stood and turned to the others; solemn, determined and with an inner strength I had seen her develop over the entire time we had been together but that had never been as strong or pronounced as in this very moment.

"Then let us make a promise. No, let us make a vow here. That no matter what comes, we will not give up hope, we will not stop believing in ourselves and our bonds with Pokémon. That is what is driving us forward. Not a prophecy or ancient history like Leaf just said, but for our friends, the beings we love, whether they be human or Pokémon." She held out her hand.

I smiled proudly as I placed mine on top without hesitation, May just a moment behind. One by one everyone followed and we would remain like that for quite awhile longer until our attention was drawn once more skywards. The last light from the sun had just disappeared and no longer dimmed the beautiful yet ominous spectacle of the rising moon glowing in a strong and radiant purple.

It was the moment that sealed our fate. There would be no turning back after this, everyone knew, it needed not be said. This vow made under the rising Purple Moon, it truly was...

The point of no return.

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END ARC 2

To Be Continued in Arc 3

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Author's Notes

And that's it. The real end of Arc 2. I'm not sure if I am entirely satisfied, so... I didn't manage to do a couple of things I wanted or the way I wanted them. However, I suppose it was passable enough that I can approve of what I did.

I will be taking a break from TFSTTM Reloaded for now. First and foremost to plan out Arc 3. Up to this point I could write it by ear mostly but I'm sure some of you could tell that I was awkwardly dancing around some subjects, especially the exact prophecy and such. Before I get down how everything is going to happen from now until the end, I wouldn't even dare continue.

Secondly, Maia and I do want to do something else. At the moment this seems to be Facets of Magic, so we invite everyone interested to take a look. The prologue is out already and we are currently working ourselves through the first of two planned Preludes. It's slow-going and at first I had to discard some scenes utterly dissatisfied and started over again. But now we seem to be going somewhere at least. Not sure yet if we'll stick though but it seems rather likely.

This arc has been a lot of fun to write, even if it took much longer than expected – not that that is new for me. ^_^ I thank everyone for the support, consistently or not. For a project I started more to get back into writing, TFSTTM Reloaded has become something far greater and you guys have no small part in this because I'm sure I would have dropped it somewhere in between if not for the encouraging feedback. So... don't be shy to leave some more of it, even if you have something to criticize. As long as its constructive I can take it all in stride.

I do plan to finish this story, especially for all the loyal readers. When I start Arc 3 I can't say yet, but it will definitely be there. I've put too much effort into this over the last one and well, almost half a year now to let it fall by the wayside.

With that, we say goodbye for now. Hopefully we'll be able to see some of you for whatever else we will be working on next and that you stick around until Arc 3 comes.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias aka MysticMew and Maia