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## Pre-Note

First of all, thank you everyone that reviewed. I'll get to those in a moment. But before that... I asked you all to take a look at my blog and site but so far NO ONE has left a comment anywhere or anyway. That is a little disappointing, really. I realize that right now it isn't much more than an alternative place to archive my work and that most of you are used to the (questionable) convenience of ff . net but there will be more. Already this episode had a teaser on the blog if anyone had bothered to look and the full episode has been there a lot earlier than on this site. I said I'd be rather cross if I hadn't gotten any feedback (my betas not included) for my blog and/or archive and I mean it. I cannot make you choose where you want to read my stuff as long as I cross post but I can control when something will be posted where.

Well, I'll give it some more time, but I honestly hope at least some of you can take a moment out of their time to comment on the MMD Blog/Site. I put a lot of hard (at times frustrating) work into them and it irritates me a little that there has been nothing so far.

Anyway. Reviews... At least those are still coming, so I'm somewhat mollified. A big thank you for all that left a review and a welcome to all the new readers. A few I'll pick out to comment on more specifically:

deadsoldier117: I think you may find a lot more reasons to snap TR members' necks until I am done. It gets only darker from here on out. ^\_^ Thanks for the feedback.

Codeblue455: I would have inquired via PM or such but you didn't leave a signed one, so... You read it ALL in one day? Seriously?!? I'm not even sure that is physically possible, without going twenty four hours without breaks... And even then it would be a stretch. If that's true I applaud your reading speed while still being able to appreciate the story. Thanks either way for the review.

Before I release you to this time's episode, I am proud to announce that the quality of my writing will probably become even better for now since Stone Tiger has joined the "team" as an official plot beta by now. Between three people to bounce ideas and correct my mishaps, I am sure everyone will profit from it. Give a big thanks to my amazing betas, I know that I am definitely grateful. ^\_^

Without further ado, here is Episode of the third arc.

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### **Special Service (Character Reminder)**

As Stone Tiger has helpfully pointed out to me, it might be a little hard for some of the long-time readers to remember all the people after about a year has passed, especially my OCs. So, here is a quick reminder of the most important ones. For more detailed character info, wait a little longer, as soon as I find between the mountain of other stuff, I put something on M&M DreamWorks.

**Leaf:** One of the youngest League Champions and Ash's childhood friend from Pallet. She and Ash fight a close match in the Sinnoh League as she wants to test him. Since then she primarily fights with Dark-type theme but also has a vast number of other Pokémon. After the Sinnoh League she accepts her duties as Master. During the second arc she has been travelling around a lot to prepare the rest of the group and foil Team Rocket's plans. During that she has come to visit and fall in love with Misty.

**Ako:** A young student at the Field Medic school Heal Bell Academy. She first meets Brock at the closing part at the Sinnoh League and invites him to study at Heal Bell. The two of them have since then fallen in love and Brock has recently proposed as well. Ako is a gentle person who does not like violence but with Brock's has learned that it is sometimes necessary to fight.

**Naru and the Eevee Sisters:** Naru is an Eevee used for experiments by Team Rocket. She has escaped with her sisters but they have been separated since then and ended up with a different member of the group eventually before meeting again at the end of the second arc. Because of the DNA manipulation done to Naru, she has the ability to shift into her different evolutionary stages at will (with some restrictions).

Missigno: (not to be identified one hundred percent with the game counterpart and as such I won't write it "Missigno.") When the NRE released by the Legendary Pokémon in ancient times ran havoc and made animals into Pokémon, some leftover energy produced this creature/conscious energy form. It seeks to create discord and rage between the races. The Legendaries have eventually sealed it up but now Missigno is beginning to awaken again. Not much else is yet known other than that the boss of Team Rocket, Giovanni, is connected to it and that the group must face it eventually.

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### **Time and Location Unknown (Mew)**

"You cannot be serious. We are supposed to place our fate into the hands of humans? Do you really believe this is the right choice?"

The deep rumble of my opposite shook the large cavern with its underlying fury and menace. Everyone winced at the flood of emotions that washed over the group, already tense and wary to begin with.

In spite of that outburst, the answer was as measured and calm as it always was from him. \*I do not know. All I can tell you is what I have seen. And from that I have calculated the most efficient route to make it happen. If we do not do this, however, then this world will face certain ruin. Humans, us, it would not matter once IT fully manifests on this plane once more.\*

Everyone lapsed into silence once more at these words. Even the most outspoken among us knew that Zero spoke no lies and that his gift of foresight was practically infallible. It was his great presence as well as ability that had brought us together and to this point.

\*Of course. I might be wrong. After all the reason why we stand before this choice now is because of my failure to properly predict the outcome of our actions.\*

Before I could respond vehemently to that, it was the Water representative, the large, white dragon that answered. "That is not true, Lord Zero. Your actions have been in good faith. What it all led to, I do not believe it was your fault or could have been prevented." Of course, what this really meant was that it was OUR fault. Just following our leader did not free us of the sin we had all committed. And I wholeheartedly agreed with that.

There was a long moment of silence, before Zero's voice spoke into our minds once more, however, his strength was wavering I could tell. \*I do not have much time

left. Regardless of whether or not you follow my advice is up to you. This is the last of the help I can give you, my friends.\*

"We will do it!" I exclaimed, suppressing the grief that was starting to well up inside me. My connection to him was much stronger than those of the others and in these final moments where his mind clung desperately to consciousness, I could feel all of it. His regrets and pain but also his hope. "The dream you gave us, the hope for a balance between our kinds, we will realize it. Because that is why we are all here today. Isn't that right?"

I looked around at the five others of our group. Some met my gaze squarely, resolute, others looked away chastened. Yet no one dared speak a further word of objection.

\*Thank you, my friends.\* A wave of gratitude swept throughout the cavern from the glowing pillar of light, the last remnant and connection to the mind of the one being that had united us all in his desire for mutual understanding. \*Now go. Go and watch over the seal. When that time comes, I know you will come to understand what needs to be done. Farewell, my brothers and sisters.\*

It was in a somber mood that our small group turned to leave the cavern and soon enough the sanctuary that we had called home for many years. Most likely we would never return but hopefully Zero's last words and advice would carry us forward much as his vision had done before.

With a long last look back, I was about to follow the rest of the group, when I heard his voice in my mind once more. \*Wait... I have something else that you must know... sister.\*

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**(Narrator)**

"Cerulean City. Situated in the northeastern corner of the Kanto Region, it has for a long time been a beautiful city situated close to the ocean. Never particularly of as much importance as the surrounding big cities of Celadon and Saffron or the port city of Vermilion, Cerulean's water theme enjoyed its own unique charm."

As we zoom in from above on the region, where once has been Cerulean is now only the ruins of buildings and an all-encompassing scene of destruction. A lone helicopter is seen approaching the scene, descending on the edge of the ruins.

Out of the helicopters the small group along with Cynthia emerged. Everyone had changed into clothes that were more fitting for travel and physical activity where it was necessary.

Ash's outfit style had not changed much from his days travelling the various regions and similar to his Sinnoh outfit only that the jacket was mostly black now with yellow highlights at the top and bottom sides as well as the sleeves, his provisional Master Badge fastened on the front. Dawn had opted for a dark blue, dress going to mid-thigh with pants in a lighter blue tone below. The dress was accentuated by the white hem and belt holding her Pokéballs. May's outfit had basically not changed much but had seen a return to the earlier red color theme. The shirt's sleeves were a little longer as were the pants which had become more formfitting to allow faster movement.

Brock and Ako wore the matching, all-purpose uniform coats of Field Medics, consisting of a long, easy to move in coat with various pockets. Brock's coat had a earthy brown color while Ako had chosen a deeper green tone. Misty, who was now used to more feminine clothes, had also returned to the more practical, tomboyish look of her travelling days. The dark red top and long light gray jeans seemed to reflect her state of mind. In contrast, Leaf at her side, remained seemingly unaffected in the same basic outfit style she had worn at the Sinnoh League and much like Ash never had changed much during her travels.

The mood as the group set foot on the ground of the ruined city was clearly sullen.

"Our heroes have nonetheless returned to this place in order for Dawn to claim the power she needs to stand up to the ones responsible for this destruction."

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### **Cerulean City (Brock)**

It was like a step into a different world.

We had all seen the video feeds, of course. The ghastly scenes of destruction had been outrageous, painful to watch and hard to comprehend. Yet, nothing could adequately prepare you for the real thing. The first time we had gotten a first glimpse from above of what was left of Cerulean City had made the already somber and heavy atmosphere even more oppressing. The question must have gone through everyone's mind: How could this have happened?

*Why is it that we always seem to come to scenes of destruction whenever we are flying somewhere lately?*

Conflict was almost unheard of for ages. War was something that we didn't know except in theory, always connected to ancient history; a thing of the past. After hearing about the true history, I understood now why that was. Yet, since we didn't

know what it truly was, comprehension was even harder. It was like being caught in some movie, some bad horror or action flick. All of this was real though.

And that first view didn't even compare. Disembarking from the helicopter, really seeing for the first time... It was overwhelming. There was barely anything left. At best the ruin of a house, structures mostly left intact but otherwise burned, broken... deserted. The rest was mostly rubble that was just being cleared away now by various troops of people with League insignia as well as the police force.

*This is several days later, too*, I thought with a side glance towards Misty, her expression unreadable but her body language speaking volumes. I couldn't even imagine. It was so bad to look at. Even without the people. She had been there, had seen the destruction, had seen people fleeing, hurt and... Was it any surprise that such a thing left emotional scars? No, probably not. What she needed now was time. Of course, time was something we didn't have, which made it so hard in the first place.

How would I react in such a situation? I honestly couldn't say and it depressed me to think that I couldn't even remember much about Cerulean, outside of the Gym. We had never spent much time elsewhere in the city when we had come through here and I had not really visited as much as I perhaps should have in-between. And now... now it was all gone.

Of course, I was travelling the other regions with Ash most of the time. And if I was home, my family came first. The thought made me shiver unwillingly. This had to be bad on my folks as well. Pewter was left mostly unaffected by the attacks but by now the incident was all over the news and with the censoring from the League, rumors were sure to be spread even more wildly. I had briefly spoken with my father but communication was rather hampered at the moment, the lines overloaded from concerned people wanting to inquire about family members.

My younger siblings were probably scared, not knowing what was going on. We truly had been blessed by our peaceful lives and never knew such... atrocities. I should be with them but... No, what good would that do. I had a responsibility here as well. One I truly didn't feel quite up to yet but one that was too important to disregard. Sure, I could be at home and care for my siblings but then, who would make sure no harm would reach them in the first place?

Despite my nagging doubts about my own place and how useful I could truly be, I could make a difference here. I could help make sure this tragedy was not repeated anywhere else. We had made a promise, a vow, and until we had fulfilled that, there was no turning back anymore regardless of individual opinion. That much, I believed, everyone agreed on.

"So horrible," Ako whispered at my side and I jerked my own gaze away from the scene of ruin before me. My fiancée had subconsciously clung to my arm and I slipped it around her in a comforting gesture. "What can you possibly achieve with all that destruction? I don't understand..."

That was one thing I still truly regretted but could ultimately do nothing about. I wished I could have kept Ako out of this. This was not her battle and she was such a gentle soul, I feared what it would do to her. Especially just looking in from the sidelines, close to the action but not really part of it. I had thought that after Aprico Village that she had grown strong enough to face danger, to face hazardous situations... but this... Seeing what was left of Cerulean made me realize, really realize for the first time just how serious all this was. How could I accept drawing the woman I loved into such a conflict? How could I – as it looked now – justify even leaving her in it all by herself?

Unfortunately as gentle and kindhearted as she was, Ako could also be somewhat stubborn. Since Aprico Village she had found a determination not even if she knew about. Talking her out of it was out of the question. This was what we had signed up for while learning at Heal Bell and receiving our diploma. Of course, no one could have imagined the scale of our mission ever becoming like this.

"I don't think we ever can truly understand the minds of those capable of this," was the only answer I had for her, not wanting to admit that I understood perfectly the tactical value of such a strike, as inhuman and monstrous as it had been. That didn't matter to someone like the boss of Team Rocket, since from his point of view it was merely the question of how to make the greatest possible initial impact. And that he had certainly achieved. The unease, the fear now present in everyone would make it much easier once they really begun making serious moves.

"We don't need to understand what they think." Misty's quiet voice was still like a knife cutting through the thick atmosphere. One could sense the simmering fury behind it, tightly controlled but in this way perhaps even more scary. "All we need to do is make sure it doesn't happen again." With that she shook free of Leaf's concerned hand and started forward, her steps resolute. "Let's go."

No one dared say anything or object. Silently our little group started after Misty, each certainly haunted by their own thoughts at the sight of this place, yet no one more affected by it than my old friend.

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### **Opening Theme (Crystal Energy, Mai-Otome 2nd Opening)**

Mew zips into the scene looking down to see Ho-oh flying into the screen. Then left comes Lugia. A pillar of earth rises up to display Regigigas standing on top of the

screen and finally Rayquaza comes in from the right. Rounding up the picture is Darkrai floating up behind Mew who looks back forward. The Legendaries burst into various colors (red for Ho-oh, blue for Lugia, green for Regigigas, Yellow for Rayquaza, a dark purple/black for Darkrai and a light pink/white for Mew) to display the series logo.

*kasaneatta hibi*

Split screen: Ash walking on the left with Pikachu on his shoulder, on the right a quick flash of scenes (single picture flashes): Him and Leaf battling in the Sinnoh League, sitting together in a grassy field with Brock, Dawn and his Pokémon peacefully eating.

*kioku no oku e tojikome*

Next screen has May walking on the right, Naru at her side. The left shows scenes of her Sinnoh Great Festival and back at the beginning of the Wallace Cup where she meets Ash, Dawn and Brock at the pier.

*kinou to chigau watashi ga  
ima, koko ni tatteru*

Dawn on the left with Prinplup. The right shows her at the Kanto Grand Festival, sharing her first kiss with Ash and sitting on a bed with May's head in her lap (prologue scene from this arc).

The left screen expands showing a picture with Dawn in the center. She twirls and is now wearing a sleeveless white dress (see description in this episode) as Mew flies in and settles on her shoulder, Prinplup has transformed into a white Empoleon. Ash and May appear on her right and left as the three of them hold hands. The silhouettes of Ho-Oh and Rayquaza appear behind them as well.

*orite kita yami wa*

Leaf on the right with Shadow at her side. To the left shows her in battle with Ash, travelling the countryside and sitting together with Misty eating ice cream.

*subete wo yasashiku daite*

The scene shifts to the left, showing now Misty on the right along with her Starmie. To the left the scenes further show Misty battling with Leaf and then walking along with Ash and Brock as they were still travelling.

*katarikakeru no*



To the right are Brock and Ako, walking side by side. To the left Brock is treating Pokémon back at Heal Bell. The next shows in Gym Battle with Ash from the beginning of the series and finally travelling together with Ash and May.

*mamoru koto no hontou no imi wo*

The screen becomes one again. Brock and Ako are on the right with Steelix in the background. Leaf and Misty are left with their respective Pokémon. The silhouettes of Regigigas, Darkrai and Lugia appear behind them.

*mugen ni hirogaru hoshi wo  
nando mo miagete ita*

A vast star field is shown, the stars start to rush forward (think hyperspace-like effect). In the center slightly transparent we see a scene of the six Legendaries battling a formless shadowy being, followed by an image of Poképolis with giant Pokémon running around, then of the Pokémon League Headquarters on the Indigo Plateau with Ho-oh flying above and finally of Team Rocket invading Cerulean City.

*ano yoru wo wasurenai  
hikikaesenai*

The screen flashes with fullscreen shots of a burning Cerulean City, and May as she lies in Ash and Dawn's arms after protecting them at Twinheart. Then it's back to the stars, now motionless and zooming out to see the group at Twinheart making their vow under the Purple Moon.

*ushinau mono wa nani mo nai  
afuredashiteku ENAJII  
atsuku, tsuyoku, takumashiku  
tatoe hikari no nai sekai demo*

Within a smoking city's ruins the group faces off with an army of Rockets led by the six distinctive people (see end of this episode). Quick flashes to them facing off with the characters.

*koe wo kanjite...  
anata dake mitsukerareru*

The background turns black behind Dawn, who seems in despair. Ash and May appear behind her and she melts into their embrace, then holds up her hand and illuminates the darkness with a sphere of light, making it momentary white before showing the entire group, the trio as they were positioned to the right of the screen, along with Pikachu, Mew, Empoleon, Lopunny, Blaziken and finally Naru to the left of the group around them. To the left are Brock sitting on Steelix' head with Ako in his

lap, and Leaf and Misty standing back to back next to them, along with Starmie and Shadow. The rest of the Eevee sisters are grouped together between Naru and Shadow. In the top left corner a picture of the Legendaries is displayed and in the top right one of the TR task force. Above them all at the top looms Giovanni with a backdrop of Missigno's formless shadow form.

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**M&M DreamWorks Presents**  
**The Final Step to the Master Reloaded**  
**Third Arc: Elemental Trials**  
**Episode 1: Dawn of the New Adventure! The First 'Trial'!**

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**(Misty)**

That's right. All I could do now was to move forward. Looking back would not change anything, would not make anything right again. It was irrelevant why it happened. What was important now was that these monsters would be stopped. That would serve justice and prevent further disasters.

I had already resolved myself to that path. It would not have been something I might have chosen before... no, even after hearing about it from Leaf, before the attack, all this had seemed a little unreal, something not quite concerning me. Not anymore though. It was a welcoming thought. I would be able to make a difference. I... I would never be so helpless again.

It had hurt. For all my ability, for all the acknowledgement I had gotten over the years, in the end it had made no difference at all. I couldn't prevent any of this from happening. I couldn't save anyone. And if Leaf hadn't shown up, both Aisha and I would have died here as well. What good was it to be Gym Leader if you could not even protect anyone? I never wanted to feel this way again and I didn't want to ever have other people feel like that either. That's why I would follow this crazy prophecy and I would do it gladly...

Still, regardless how much I tried, coming back here was something I could have easily done without. Everything was filled with memories. Memories that were a fresh reminder of my failure, of my weakness. It was better to get this done with as soon as possible. There was nothing left here to do aside from what we came for.

At least I thought so until I saw a convoy of people. Some clearly medical personnel, some carrying food and supplies. It made me stop and look, wondering. That didn't look like they were here for those working at clearing away the rubble.

Cynthia must have noticed my interest as the Grand Champion spoke up. "Ah, here and there some people who were trapped in collapsed houses or similar are being found. Some are quite weak or injured, so we are giving first treatment here before moving them to a real hospital or where their families are."

I hadn't known that. I thought the whole area had been cleared out. So there really had been more people left aside from those that had been rounded up by Team Rocket. Perhaps...

"Are you still searching for more survivors?" May asked, looking around skeptically. "It has to be hard to find anyone in all this." Especially if they were trapped somewhere under a building or such, was probably what she really meant to say but didn't. I appreciated the sentiment, however, it wasn't like I couldn't make the connection myself.

"Teams have been combing the city for awhile but at this point, if there is someone left that hasn't been found, it probably is too late already." Cynthia was a bit more blunt about it but frankly I could live with that more. It was getting on my nerve, having everyone tiptoe around the truth and trying to be considerate. Besides...

"I'd like to see them." The group stopped and I had to suppress a sigh of irritation at the startled looks from everyone. Did I really look like I would snap any moment or something? This was still my city, my responsibility, regardless of how little I had been able to do. And the real reason for wanting to see them was a more personal one anyway.

Cynthia seemed hesitant at what to do. Normally I would agree that we should focus on what we came here to do, but this was really something I needed to do, needed to know. It might only be a small hope but perhaps...

"I agree. Let's have a look. There probably isn't anything we can do but I think it would be a good idea." I shot Ash a grateful look, seeing Dawn nod rapidly as well. I really couldn't read Mew at all. She probably would have rather wanted to move on but it was really hard to tell. The Legendary could hide her emotions perfectly, often behind a gentle, playful nature or so it would seem. However, no objection came forth and Cynthia seemed to take this as a sign of unanimous agreement.

The walk did only take a few minutes away from the path to our original destination. The makeshift shelter consisted of a large tent that could easily hold perhaps up to a hundred or more people. There weren't nearly as many and most of them were League personnel, medics and other workers. The group of 'survivors' was small. There was a man who had obviously hurt his leg but I couldn't quite tell how bad it was. A small family being treated for burns and smoke exposure. The only person I recognized was the kind owner of the ice cream store, making me exchange

a brief nostalgic but also relieved look with Leaf. The older woman hadn't been among the original group of survivors and it was good to see one more familiar face safe. Yet...

As expected it had been too faint a hope to be true. Just as I thought, Aisha's family wasn't here. I should have known better than to think otherwise. There truly had been no point in wasting our time here. Apparently these people were being taken care of and there was nothing I could do that would make a difference.

*Damn it. Why didn't I order them out of town?* I probably could have, even if Aisha would have been upset. She was stubborn but if I really had insisted... That was foolish thinking, of course. At that time the most I had been concerned about had been my assistant's wellbeing. None of us had imagined Cerulean itself would become a target and on this great scale too. I hadn't even thought about anywhere beyond the two of us at this point.

A gentle hand on my shoulder pulled me out of my thoughts and I looked up into concerned brown eyes. It seemed all I had achieved was making everyone concerned about me. "I'm fine," I told my girlfriend before she could make a comment. I was sure she knew exactly what I had hoped to find. "We should move on."

"Don't you want to talk with these people?" Dawn asked, uncertainly looking into the tent, indecisive about how to proceed. Part of me envied that. That girl was really a gentle, empathic soul. Ash had chosen well. She would probably make it far with these powers she would be getting, too. And that's why I really couldn't be annoyed. There was no point in pulling anyone else down. There would be enough time for reflection when this was all over.

"No. I just wanted to confirm something. We've come here for a reason. Let's not forget about that."

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**(Prinplup)**

It was a pretty desolate scenery.

Travelling with Dawn I had seen a lot of different places. Small villages, bigger cities, natural wonders but also some rather strange ones. This was definitely new though. Despite everything I had experienced, even after witnessing Hunter J's ruthlessness or Team Galactic's ambitions, this was still new to me. The level of destruction was awful enough but that wasn't all there was to it. As Pokémon, we all had stronger senses than most normal humans. Even without being remotely

talented in that area, I could feel the lingering despair, the terror and pain. I could feel death.

*How can humans do such things? Is it such a wonder our ancestors were driven to such lengths?*

Of course I knew better than to generalize like this. However, seeing this, experiencing the atmosphere heavy with the atrocity committed just a short time ago, one couldn't help but think how someone could be driven to such acts. No justification would ever be enough to explain this.

Lopunny wasn't doing any better I realized when I saw her shiver slightly. In fact, she was probably taking it worse. Her senses were a lot sharper and she could mentally link with Dawn a lot better than I could, something I might have been envious of if it was anyone other than Lopunny... Besides, I hardly could envy her in this particular situation.

Reaching out, I touched her hand and smiled up at her with a hopefully reassuring expression. She smiled back slightly and I felt my heart flutter slightly. That she had accepted me so easily after Pikachu's rejection had been a surprise, even if she was more instinct-driven than me. Not that I was complaining. In these times we all needed someone to rely on.

Her gaze quickly went back forward though and I realized she had been carefully studying our Trainer. As best as anyone could tell, Dawn was the perfect picture of calm and centered. The truth, of course, was a lot different. I knew that even without having any particular Psychic talent. She had gotten quite good at blocking out unwanted stuff, however, not without a lot of effort. And the upcoming ceremony clearly affected her.

"What do you think will happen to us from now on?" Lopunny asked quietly.

Thanks to Mew we had some insight on what would be coming and also what it might mean for us Pokémon. Dawn was as prepared for this as anyone could be. That neither took away the enormous responsibility and to some degree the finality. Once accepted, there really would be no turning back on these powers again.

"We'll stand with her, as we always have." The answer was as simple as Lopunny's question was complex. I freely admitted I wasn't the biggest thinker around. What I could do best though was to give my best and believe in Dawn, even if it meant giving her a piece of my mind sometimes. She was strong, stronger than she perhaps believed to be at times. What held her back most of the times was herself. And that is where I had to be there. No matter what. This went double now, for Dawn and Lopunny as well.

"That is all we can do. She'll pull through, even with this. I believe that without doubt."

Lopunny smiled a little more brightly this time. "You're right. It doesn't really matter what all this fighting means, I guess. At least we know that they'll do the right thing, that's something we need no proof of anymore." No, definitely not. We had seen it time and again. These humans were rightfully chosen for this task, regardless of its enormity. If anyone could pull it off, it was them.

I could tell though that my mate's concerns hadn't been fully put to rest and could not really blame her either. We might have had the advantage of knowing about this longer, but it was just starting to sink in now. The meaning behind this conflict was not just because of one or more ambitious people. This war touched the very foundations of our world as it was now. No matter what, after all this, the relationship between humans and Pokémon would be forever changed. In what way depended largely on our actions.

Quite the scary thought.

"You don't have to worry about anything. Once this ceremony is through, I'll definitely protect you." Perhaps it was arrogant. No... it was rather arrogant. Yet, I believed in it. I had to. This had always been my role. To be Dawn's support. The one that prodded her along when necessary, the one she could rely on when it got tough. We did not have the long bond and experience as Pikachu had with his Trainer but it was enough for us. And knowing that, I understood that Dawn's responsibility was also my own.

Lopunny didn't seem to mind, blushing at my boast. Such a wild and playful nature most of the time, yet she was clearly a romantic at heart and definitely seemed to enjoy being the center of attention this time. That backing up my claim became more serious to me. For Dawn who had always believed in me and showed me things I had never imagined and for Lopunny who had given me her heart... I would be strong for them and protect them, no matter what.

These are the things most dear to me, their happiness, I thought as we got into the boat prepared for us to bring us the small distance across the river and to the entrance of Cerulean Cave. There was no hesitation anymore. I had pretty much discarded that during the Grand Festival already. There would be a change after today. Another big change. However, it didn't scare me anymore. In fact I welcomed it for the ability to be of much better use to those I loved.

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(May)

As I thought, it wouldn't be so easy after all. The effects of the temporary bonding had faded as sudden as they had begun. During the trip here, the link had slowly dimmed until completely fading away... No, that wasn't quite right. There was a dim background echo. If I concentrated enough I could still receive an echo of their feelings.

That wasn't the same though. There was no true connection. It was more like someone on the outside peering in and for that I felt truly like an intruder. These last days had truly been like a dream. No more than a dream though. The reality was not much different as it had been before.

As we followed Mew through the network of twisting cave tunnels, going deeper and deeper into the maze, I did not need to feel. I saw clearly enough. The ease with which Ash and Dawn interacted. She was outwardly calm and collected but surely nervous on the inside as well. Ash knew this without needing words, sticking close all the time and silently giving his support.

I wanted to do that as well. However... was that really alright? As things were now – even though they had agreed to try – right now, I couldn't really be considered close enough to involve myself. Yet, if I didn't, how should I ever grow closer to them? How should we ever make this work?

It was an impossible situation after all.

Mew deciding to pick up conversation as we walked was almost appreciated, since it gave me something to focus on other than the unfair longing in my heart. "I think it is time for you to learn exactly what becoming one of the Chosen will mean. Dawn already knows the details of the ceremony we will be performing and I want you all to watch carefully but I suppose it is a good idea that I'll tell you now."

Yes, it was unfair. Of course Ash would know and be able to support Dawn right now. They had a good year together as an official couple. I couldn't be expected to develop that closeness overnight just because I loved them both. The last days and the temporary bond were both a blessing and a curse. They had given me hope for what could be, yet that was all it had been and now that it was gone again, all I had left was an even stronger longing and an even greater doubt if I could ever be good enough to form something like this with them on my own.

"As I have already told you, we have chosen the nexus points for the different elements for a specific purpose. Drawing out the potential you have sleeping within yourself would take decades otherwise and even in the best of cases many years. That is why each of us presiding over a part of the seal would use the long time spent there to harness the power of their element to a point of completely merging with it, so that we can serve as a focal point to draw out and channel your own abilities."

That much I could understand. Honestly, I still had some trouble wrapping my mind around the concept. How old exactly were Mew and the other Legendaries? She had never truly clarified that and I got the feeling she didn't like to talk about it either. However, one thing was clear. I doubted we were talking about just a few centuries here. That kind of time... it was hard to imagine. And even more so, spending it all in isolation, in lonely vigil. Thinking about that made one's own troubles so insignificant.

"If you gain the approval of my companions, you will be able to undergo a bonding ceremony that will connect you to them. In order to do – and this part is really important – you need some kind of object, a Focus that will serve as link between you. This Focus, however, must be something truly personal, something you yourself believe suits your personality, your dreams, your resolve."

Something that suited me? I wondered what that was. As I was now, I couldn't even begin to say. All I had known recently was a rollercoaster of euphoria and heartache, determination and hesitation. Of course I doubted I was the only one thinking that right now. Misty was even worse off and I knew too little about Leaf to make an adequate assessment. One would think that from all of us only Ash and Dawn were the most stable among us, the most prepared.

However, that too, would be unfair. While the bond had receded now, I had also gained some insight. And so I knew... Regardless of how ready Dawn seemed to be, I understood what was truly going on inside her. About her motivation and now that made me worry for her as well, perhaps even more so than any of the others. Because the kind of responsibility she was trying to shoulder right now could easily become just as destructive, if not even more so than our own individual problems.

"When you say object," Brock interjected. "Do you mean a physical object along the lines of a weapon?" That would have been my first thought as well. At least I could work with that general idea after all the lessons Maylene had given me. I doubted though it was quite so easy however.

"No, it does not have to be a weapon. The Focus should be a reflection of what you wish to do with the powers you receive. How you want to use them. The actual object is not something you bring and then imbue with power, it must be envisioned and formed with your mind and your personal NRE. This process is deeply personal and can only be done once during the initial ceremony, so please give this some serious thought. You still have some time and after today, you will have a better idea of what to expect."

*She does not even expect anything to go wrong*, I thought in a bit of wonder. That wasn't arrogant thinking either. There was a certainty and belief in the small Legendary's voice and entire demeanor. No doubt over the success of her charge. And should I really be surprised? Dawn had already shown her ability to harness



these powers – my own life was proof of that. She was strong, and therefore... therefore all I could do was walk forward on that same path with them. Regardless how much I doubted or felt isolated. It was better to look at the hope than at the despair after all.

A little startled I realized that I had unconsciously drawn closer to Ash and Dawn. For a moment I fought with my own indecision as my hand made to reach out. That was, however, when I saw Ash look at me, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips, both grateful and encouraging. That was enough for me right now. Especially coming from him, who seemed to be the most hesitant in this weird relationship between us, this tiny sentiment meant a lot.

Gently but decisive I grasped Dawn's remaining hand, putting her between us. Blue eyes looked at me startled, then softened into something I couldn't quite describe but made me feel a little more special right away. A moment later I felt her presence reaching out, drawing me inside their own connection. It wasn't the same as before but that was okay. I would take what I could for now. At this point what mattered was that we looked out for each other, everything else would hopefully come with time...

Right?

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**(Mew)**

I smiled happily at the scene. A first step, no more. Yet, they really seemed to fit together. Honestly, at first I hadn't been sure what would happen and what the best course was. Dawn had been happy with Ash, there didn't seem to be any problem. All I had tried at that time, when I had asked her that question, had been to better prepare her for this situation and not to destroy any chance of achieving some kind of harmony – no matter what shape that would be in the end. However, Dawn had perhaps surprised us all with how she was handling this situation. Truly, I could not be prouder. She had grown so much in so little time and would thusly set a good example today for everyone else. I had no doubt about that.

Of course... seeing them like this made me feel... I wasn't sure exactly what it made me feel. Lonely perhaps? It wasn't quite the same with Mewtwo. What the two of us had was more like a very strange family relationship. But yes, I missed him, and I couldn't help but worry. We had heard nothing. Many times I had tried to reach out and find my estranged child but found no response. And that alone was reason enough for concern. If he had just been recovering somewhere, that should be long done. Which left two options, neither of which were appealing. Capture or death. I didn't even know which was worse, however, Mewtwo would certainly rather prefer the latter than being back in their hands.

Shaking free of the thought, I pushed it far back where it couldn't bother me. I had a duty to perform right now and if I started worrying now, Dawn would know immediately and that would influence the ceremony. We had both known that things like that might happen someday. Giovanni was persistent when he wanted something and my mission always carried danger with it. My place was here, with them. Everything else had to stand back for now.

Thusly steadied in my resolve, I proceeded forward. Just in time too, since we had reached the larger cavern. It was a good thing my shields were in place now. This was the last place where we had seen each other after all. But for now...

Startled, I looked back at the hand on my back, Dawn's understanding face greeting me. "If he's still out there, we'll find him."

It was really hard to suppress the swell of emotions this time and I decided to allow myself a small indulgence after all, letting her know my own gratitude. Perhaps this was better after all. A little personal note couldn't hurt. Still, she really was amazing. At times I really wondered whose empathic potential was higher: Ash's or Dawn's?

Nodding firmly, I shook free of her touch and floated over to the center of the cavern. "The bonding ceremony will have to take place as close to the nexus point as possible. Only we, who have guarded these places for all this time, can open the pathway there." Closing my eyes, I sent my mind outwards, reaching for the strings of power. Elemental energy in its purest form, a brilliant light that could illuminate any darkness...

## **Flashback**

"Brother... I..."

The mind touch was familiar, much more so than before. It had something terrible... definite as well. \*Don't cry, sister. I never wished for this outcome. But I am not unhappy.\*

Not unhappy? After all this? The terrible events our carelessness had set into motion? The sin we had committed? The evil we had created? And now, now he would...

\*I think... all this is meant to be. What I have seen... you know I cannot ever really remember more than the abstract prophecies I give, but I feel that... yes, that at the end of this path we have chosen and cannot leave again, there is hope... Real hope. My sister... promise me something...\*

"Everything! I'll do whatever it takes!"

A gentle caress touched my heart and I couldn't help myself any longer, softly crying at imagining the ghost of a smile that he would always have for me. And now, for the last time...

\*Your power is almost as great as mine... No, perhaps equally so... You just have not found your purpose yet... Sister, it will not take you long to master your element, I am sure. When you do... I want you to observe this world. Our kind, humans... I truly believe... that one day... we can... live together... in harmony...\*

"Brother?" This time there was no reply. The mental connection had finally slipped away as Zero's consciousness had slipped into a deep slumber that he may never wake from again...

## **End Flashback**

It had always been a strain to use my elemental power, regardless of how much talent I had inherited from my brother. The reason for that was fairly simple, of course. The higher elements were somewhat different from the basic ones. Water, Fire, Earth and Air were everywhere. They made up the fundamentals of nature. But Light and Shadow were slightly different and using them away from this place was much more limited than it would have been for the others.

The portal of light shimmered into existence before me.

It would not be a strain anymore. Not after today. Once this ceremony was completed, both Dawn and I would be able to use this power as freely as possible and with that we would surely bring a change to the world. Yes, my brother's vision. With these children who held within them so much compassion, so much love for Pokémon, it was possible. I could see it now, the hope that he had seen. Even in the darkness spreading out before us, I had to believe... No, I could believe in these humans.

"Come. Let us proceed."

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## **(Dawn)**

Words could never truly describe this place. Mew said that access to the actual nexus point was hidden at a different plane, one only a being with a sufficient matching elemental control could open. Yes, it was much like entering a complete new world. The light in this place was blinding... or should have been. The intensity

was so great, as if one were to look directly into the sun, yet I could see perfectly clear. The light was warm and invigorating, comforting as well as inspiring.

The scenery had in fact not changed very much I realized. In fact, once my eyes had gotten used to the sudden brightness, I saw that it was the exact same cave just... different. Where the inside of Cerulean Cave had been damp and dark, this place was warm and bright. The stone walls were glittering like... no, they had become sparkling crystals, shimmering in all seven colors of the rainbow.

Breathtaking.

And those were just the visual and superficial sensory impulses. Just opening my shields a little, and I was overwhelmed by the purity and power in this place. Without needing to be told, my attention was drawn right to the center of the cave. Where the large pool of water had been before, a magnificent fountain of the purest white was gushing forth high towards the ceiling... and beyond.

*Like it goes on and on, without end,* I thought.

"That's right. This is but a small part of the nexus lines running throughout the whole planet. Only in very few places, however, will you find it touching the surface," Mew explained. "Of course... it's not really the surface, but rather an intermediary plane that can be reached from either side."

Everyone else was just awed. Even Misty seemed to have forgotten her own troubles for the moment. If nothing else, this alone was worth bringing everyone along for. Outside had been a reminder of the harsh reality we were now facing. Here, I believed, the hope of a better tomorrow was reflected. A place so beautiful and serene... If something like this could still exist, then all your troubles seemed insignificant in the end.

"It's time." Mew settled gently on my shoulder and Prinplup had taken up a resolute position at my side. Something was missing though. I felt blessed, privileged but also quite a little nervous, regardless of Mew's reassurance that after the performance on Twinleaf, nothing could go wrong. Back then I had just been acting though, I had not been actively thinking about my actions. The responsibility had been there, too. The responsibility for May's life. That had been nothing I could have been prepared for though. There had simply been no time to think.

And then a slight peck at my leg made me yelp and look down at my long-time partner annoyed. Only for a moment though as I saw his face and posture, wings crossed and with just a little smugness – I grinned slightly. Then it was Ash and May's turn, both resting an arm on my shoulders causing Mew to evacuate with a giggle.

That's right. I wasn't alone in this. No matter the responsibility and much like our relationship right now, we would walk this path together. So for now, until everyone could catch up, I had to do my best and set the right example.

Smiling, I released all my other Pokémon as well, finally realizing just what it was that I had been missing. Now everything was complete. Just like that feeling back at the Grand Festival. Ash and everyone had shown me back then how much we could achieve if we pooled all our feelings together.

With my resolve set and strengthened, I walked forward without hesitation towards the stream of light representing part of the nexus here. We had gone over all of this many times and I knew the procedure without needing to be told again. Mew had taken up position on the other side and I took that as my clue, reaching out with one hand and letting my shields fall.

\*The potential is already within you. All of you were born with the ability to connect to an element as if it was a part of you. Do not be afraid of the power within you. Embrace it, work with it. Light is not something to be harnessed or controlled. Light is simply there, always around and inside us.\* Yes, much like when I had done the healing for May, back at Twinheart. That wasn't exactly the same but the concept was very similar. Light had no real physical connection to the world like Air, Water, Earth and Fire. You could not grasp and comprehend it in the same way. I knew what I was looking for though, having already gotten a glimpse of the true thing.

So when the power threatened to overwhelm me, I allowed it, directing the flow into a shape.

\*Imagine a door. Behind it is the power you seek. But don't try to push it open. The raw energy from the nexus would crush you, no matter how adaptive you are. What we want to achieve is to just allow a small portion to get through and stimulate your potential. So, imagine a lock and a key for this lock. This key will be your Focus.\*

I had thought about this for quite some time now, discarding a lot of ideas in the process. Even before what happened at Twinheart and Cerulean, I knew we were most likely going to end up in a big conflict. Many battles would have to be fought, so it would be natural to imagine some kind of weapon. But, that wasn't necessarily the best choice.

How had Mew put it? Our Focus should be something that suited us. I also believed it should be something that both partners could identify with in some way. Mew did not want us to fight. That much I knew. Her efforts to spare us this fate had been honest. She had given her best. And so I had to do the same now. For peace and for her dream as well.

Visualizing thankfully was something that I had learned quickly through my lessons with Sabrina, since it helped to focus on the dreams and call them up more and more consciously. As such shaping a clear image in my mind of what I wanted was not so hard and I could put a lot of detail into it as well.

Slowly and carefully the image began to take shape. At first as a circular ring, then expanding, becoming a band of silvery metal, enlarging until it was wide enough to serve its purpose. Five indentions took shape on the 'front', fitted with five crystals. A ruby, an aquamarine, a topaz, an emerald and an amethyst. And for a final touch a large disc depicting a bright sun appeared in the center.

Reaching out with mental hands, I grasped the completed diadem. There was no reaction yet but that was expected. The Focus alone held no power. It was a key... or perhaps more a medium to allow me to connect with Mew and my element. Without hesitation I placed the diadem on my forehead and focused on the mental door, willing it to unlock.

What came next was a blur. Despite how prepared I was, when the power first touched something deep inside me it was overwhelming. As if someone had lit... no, not just a candle but a miniature sun within a room of complete darkness. The energy washed over me, engulfed my entire being with an intimate touch that changed something fundamental. There was no pain or any other discomfort though. It was not an alien or consuming touch but something entirely... breathtaking. Then came the knowledge, the understanding of my element, like a new world opening before me.

Only much later would I understand that, when I finally opened my eyes, it wasn't primarily because of the ceremony but rather my new appearance that had everyone looking at me stunned...

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**<Later that night (Pikachu)>**

"I still have my doubts about this bunch standing between the freedom of our kind and essential obliteration."

At the comment I looked back with a slight frown towards Naru who was observing the scene of almost all the present Pokémon swarming around Prinplup... or perhaps Empoleon would be the right term now.

The result of the light that had immersed Dawn before being directed at Prinplup had been almost disappointing at first glance, since all it seemed to do was force a further evolution step. But the end result had been different after all. The coloring was the first giveaway. Where a normal Empoleon was a dark blue, most of

my friend's body had turned a pure white with light blue edges that appeared to be crystallized. Only the crown and feet were the same, although the yellow really leaned more towards a golden hue. And that was just the outward appearance. The raw power radiating from Empoleon was something that we could all feel quite clearly. Right now I wasn't even sure I could match him in that department with my limiter off.

"I think he likes the attention a little too much." I shrugged as I gave my reply to the young Eevee, having begun to learn how to deal with her a little more. And there was far less bite behind her bark now compared to before. In fact, I could swear I detected a note of grudging fondness which made me smile just a fraction. "But it's okay. Everyone's nervous and that's why it is important to let go a little when you can." At least that sounded like something Ash might say... perhaps.

My confidence dropped slightly when I saw Naru shrug. "Whatever you say, *fearless leader*." I grimaced. She just had to bring that up, didn't she? And all that because I had tried to be helpful to Ash and everyone else...

## **Flashback**

Wandering the hallways of the Contest Hall on Twinheart was becoming a habit. Seeing though as Ash had enough to occupy his time, I generally left the trio alone, not even bothering to fully try and understand the complexity of their relationship. They seemed generally happy right now, that was all that mattered to me.

Much more important was the near future and our role in it. This was going to be different from all those battles we had been in before. Fight for our Trainers, give it our best within a clear set of rules and occasionally beating up a few – generally dangerous but stupid – bad guys. That had been simple. I had lived with Ash long enough to understand the gravity of the situation we were in now and our own responsibility. Unfortunately I wasn't so sure everyone else did as well. I could even understand why. Not everyone naturally had as much exposure to human society, habits and thought process as I and a few others had and even with that I sometimes didn't understand them fully.

I did, however, understand what Mew had been through and the kind of responsibility she was taking on all by herself. We might have no direct connection to the actions of the past but that didn't mean we as Pokémon could completely ignore our part in this. Making everyone understand that was the least thing I could try and do for Mew's sake. Without her and her companions, we wouldn't even be here after all.

I had watched her quite a bit in the short time she had been with us. That she seemed to be carrying the weight of our race as a whole on her small shoulders and

seemingly had all intention of continuing to do so was saddening and had in fact given me the incentive to do something about it.

Locating my fellow Pokémon wasn't that hard. Seeing the need for everyone to relax while giving some of our Trainer's some personal space, Leaf had arranged a small area of the Contest Hall for us to serve a recreational purpose – whatever that meant exactly. Since there was a small pool as well, it was generally received well.

It seemed like I was in luck since pretty much everyone was present right now. They were creating quite the noise level as well. Misty's Pokémon were enjoying a game of water tag it seemed – well, the small ones at least –, joined by some of the others, Pachirisu was chasing around Jolteon over something, which quickly escalated when some of the other sisters joined in...

I stood at the entrance for a moment, sweating slightly at the scene of barely controlled chaos.

"They are so noisy. Are you lot really intending to fight this Team Rocket like that?" I jumped slightly, looking around for quite some time until I finally found Naru lazing about on top of the archway in front of the entrance.

It was saddening to see the Eevee struggling to relax and let go of her guarded attitude. Even more so to think about the reason behind that struggle. Was it really a surprise that she was taking this so seriously? Naru had been so happy once reunited with her sisters, but it seemed that even that wouldn't change what the bad experiences in her life had done to her.

"Ah, it's not so bad. They can all be pretty focused when necessary." Shrugging slightly, I decided that there would be much more time later to try and coax the Eevee out of her gloomy mood. Especially since right now I wasn't even fully disagreeing with her. Moving towards the rest of the Pokémon, I raised my voice a little to be heard over the general racket. "Hey, guys, can I have a moment?!"

The reaction wasn't very promising sadly. In fact Pachirisu's little game of chase had attracted even more participants, the Water Pokémon were so engrossed in their game and most of Leaf's Dark-types were just lazily lounging around, giving me irritated looks. Only Prinplup and Lopunny were not contributing to the chaos... Instead they were more into each other.

I tried to shout again, a little louder at the time. At least that got the lovebird's attention but not much more. A large sweatdrop began to build on my forehead, I was sure of that, and I winced as I heard Naru's snort behind me.

"I am sure they are all very capable, yes. Allow me." Still fascinated by the spectacle I watched as her form briefly glowed, not quite with the same intensity as a



regular evolution, before changing into that of a Glaceon. The fascination gave room to a bit of dread as I saw her focus on the pool before starting to inhale. Before I could stop her though she fired a controlled Ice Beam, freezing part of the water and the ground in front of the pool – coincidentally exactly where Pachirisu and the others had escalated their chase and causing them to halt abruptly confused and quite a bit annoyed. Naru smirked slightly. "They are all yours, *fearless leader*." I gulped slightly at her piercing stare and couldn't quite say whether she was messing with me or being dead serious. It was just... eerie. And what was it with the 'leader' thing anyway?

Seeing as everyone's attention was now fully focused on us – or me since Naru had conveniently scurried away, I faced all the expectant faces, suddenly feeling rather put on. "Err, right." I swore I heard Naru giggling behind me and wasn't all too sure whether to be happy or annoyed by that!

"Err, I'm not really good with this, so I'll make it short and simple. You are all more or less aware of what will be happening from now on, right?" The mood dropped noticeably at that, quiet muttering breaking out between them that I quickly cut into. "I'm sure none of you have any intention of not supporting their Trainers... our friends, so I won't even ask. However, this isn't just an issue of fighting for or – as will be the case soon – with them. Most of you heard about our history from Lady Mew. This... war isn't just about the humans or us Pokémon. It concerns all of us. Lady Mew and her friends wanted nothing more than peace between humans and us. So I think we all should think about that and what we can do to contribute to that goal. It's our future as well. I'm sure you are all happy with your Trainers, yet there are so many of us and so many humans that didn't have the same experiences."

I took a deep breath, noticing the rapt attention of everyone. It made me rather nervous again. To be fair I wasn't even sure what I was going to say, it all just came flowing out. "I think... I think it would be wonderful if everyone could experience the same kind of friendship and love we have, don't you think so?" At this everyone nodded or gave various cries of confirmation, a more excited mood sweeping over the group again, yet different from before. "Then we all have to work for that future from now. Not as Trainers and Pokémon, but as friends working for the same goal." The answering cheer startled me a little but I couldn't help but smile, wondering what Mew would think if she was here.

## **End Flashback**

"You are not going to let this go, are you?" On one hand I was glad that Naru was starting to loosen up a little around us, but at the same time I wasn't too sure about being the target of the Eevee's embarrassing comments. Of course, I'd take that any day over the other options. At least I got the attention I wanted, even if it was a dubious kind.

Seeing the barely concealed smirk, I groaned. Why did she have to get it into her head that I was now the 'leader' of our group anyway? It had not helped at all when Ash had been elected as such among our Trainers. "I think it's fitting, at least you can get them motivated. I thought that's what a human leader usually is supposed to do." The most irritating thing was that she could make these comments with such a straight face and even voice that it was almost impossible to say if she was being serious or not. Strangely... As much as it tended to annoy me, I was also starting to enjoy the banter. There was just so much that I could deal with though...

"I think I'm going to save my friend from too much attention," I grasped onto the one thing I had at the moment and hurried over to the excited group surrounding Empoleon...

\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*

**(Ako)**

The tent we had been led to after our return to the city – or what used to be a city – was a little out of the way from the main crews which I could tell most of us were rather grateful for. No one was apparently rather keen on sleep though yet. Whether that was because some of us hadn't been sleeping well to begin with or had too much from sitting around like the period between the end of the Contest and now was hard to say.

Interestingly enough the one who actually had done something exhausting – as much as I could judge that – was the most upbeat and unaffected as it seemed. *She just takes it all in stride*, I thought with a little envy and a glance towards where Dawn was sitting with Ash and May, back in her normal clothes for now.

The new outfit had definitely been a surprise and it was hard to suppress another giggle at Dawn's initial reaction to the change in appearance. After her 'transformation' she had been wearing a long, sleeveless white dress – completely shoulder-free – falling a little over mid-thigh with cuts on both sides. I admit I could see, of course, why the younger girl had reacted like that, seeing as it was just a little bit on the revealing side and even the silvery short pants covering about the length of the dress or the socks just barely glimpsing out of the short boots didn't help much to hide the display of bare legs. Aside from that though, I found the rest of the outfit very pretty. The darker silvery tone of the pants and the elbow-long, fingerless gloves, the golden boots, ring-like bracelets around her wrists and equally colored belt holding the dress in place, together with the diadem and the long cape had made Dawn seem somewhat... regal and mature.

In the end the new outfit had been more of a side attraction, of course. The entire ceremony had been rather spectacular, even from an outside view. Especially for me since I wasn't really connected to any of it. Just admitting that drove past all of

the awe and straight to the point. My being here would in the end not have much of an impact. What could I do in the face of everyone else wielding such power? My own skills paled in comparison to that.

"Now then, let's make this short. Since you have settled on your destinations already, there is just one last thing I can do for you at this point." Cynthia heaved up a small suitcase on the table and flipped it open. The inside revealed several small badges with League emblems on the front. They reminded me of the one that Ash had and I realized what they actually were for, even before Cynthia explained.

"You should have no problems getting anywhere with these. All of them have an ID that can be scanned and will clearly identify you as a high-level League member. I doubt I have to tell you not to do any mischief with them." There was a pause in which many of us chuckled nervously at the Grand Champion's idea of a joke. It was always scary when normally composed and serious people did that!

"Basically they are similar to Ash's temporary badge. Your general Pokémon limit will be increased and can be upgraded more in cases where you really need to. They'll also serve to quickly switch your Pokémon if you need a backup or something specific in a certain situation."

Taking my own badge, I once again wondered if I even deserved this. Necessity aside, all of the others had accomplished something already. Ash and Leaf were League Champions, Dawn and May Top Coordinators, Misty a successful Gym Leader, the same went for Brock along with his skills as a Field Medic. All I had were good marks and recommendations. Just one more thing to make me feel out of place in this group. Wouldn't I just been dragging them down?

"Um, what about me?" Blinking I looked over at Dawn and her lack of one the badges, wondering if Cynthia had actually forgotten something... Perhaps I really shouldn't have gotten one in the first place... But before I could complete that thought process, Cynthia just smiled and with a click, revealed another compartment of the case, revealing two more badges, distinctively different from the others. It didn't take me long to recognize what they were, especially since Leaf was wearing her own along with Cynthia...

"I talked this over with the rest of the Elites and we actually all agree on it. Just so that you know, we would have made this decision even without the situation as it is now. Would you accept this... Master Dawn?" The brief round of sharp gasps and shock was quickly followed by a long silence, everyone looking expectantly at the young bluenette who, after her own initial shock, seemed to have some mental exchange with her boyfriend and a brief look shared with May. I was honestly thinking she'd refuse. Those two were rather similar in their thinking...

But things were different now, I had to realize once again. "Normally I'd say it's a little early for that but..." Trailing off, Dawn took a deep breath before nodding firmly and accepting the badge with as such dignity as she could master.

When Cynthia held out the second badge, Ash merely sighed, although it seemed far less resigned when one might think. "I guess I can't play around anymore. Wouldn't look good with my girlfriend being a Master before me, would it?" He grinned, grabbed the badge and exchanged it with the one he was wearing right now.

Cynthia nodded. "Good. Let me explain how this works... oh right, here." With that she produced another small case containing Pokégears. "Those of you who don't have one... Let me explain how the badge functions work in combination with these." A little numbly, I grabbed one of the devices as well, feeling more and more unreal and unjustly spoiled at the moment.

*Maybe Brock had been right to want me out of this*, I wondered while listening to Cynthia's explanations. Yet, it was too late for that now. I had made a commitment and what good would the promise I had made to Altaria and myself that day have been, if I already gave up here? I'd really like to say that I was doing this for Brock and to a much greater degree that was probably the truth, yet this thinking was naïve and shouldn't be my first concern. I was a trained Field Medic. And that had to come before anything else.

Those six, all of which were actually younger than myself, were ready to take on something so enormous. Was I really entitled to sit here and wallow in self-pity over my lack of importance or the fact that I was going to be separated from my fiancé? No, I had no right to do that.

The small measure of confidence and purpose I had just found wasn't supposed to last long though. And once again it was young Dawn who would leave me once again with mixed feelings. "There's one last thing I'd like to bring up." She looked at both Brock and I, my fiancé obviously just as surprised at the sudden attention as I was. "We haven't really spelled it out but you probably wondered in which group we'd leave Ako." She held up a hand to forestall any reply, although I was really wondering what she was getting at here. It's not that I did not understand the simple logic. What was there left to talk about?

"I did not want to give you any false hopes before I could give it a test after the bonding was done but I'm confident now that I can pull off basic healing without any trouble now, so... I think it would be unfair to have Brock and Ako separated since there really isn't much of a reason anymore to have her in our group."

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**(Ash)**

The night air was quite chilly and I really preferred not to be out here. Not just for the sake of the temperature but also because I had no greater wish to see the desolate sight outside of the tent more than necessary. As much as I agreed that this had been necessary to fully drive home in what situation we were now in, there was only so much exposure I could tolerate. Some of us probably far less.

However, I had to make the best of this opportunity. Too long had I pushed back this action and already felt plenty bad for it to begin with. So when I had noticed May slipping out, I had only hesitated a moment before slipping away from a sleeping Dawn to follow discreetly. It did not take me long to locate her just a few feet away, sitting on a larger piece of rubble with her back to the tent.

For a moment I felt myself freeze, hesitating because I really didn't know how to do this right or if there even was a right way to begin with. How had it all become so complicated? I almost wished – regardless how artificial and in the end not real – that the brief connection after Dawn's healing had lasted. Now we were back where we started before this all happened. Just that I couldn't ignore the complication anymore. I couldn't ignore my own heart anymore.

In the end I did not say anything as I joined May in her silent observation of the ruins of a once beautiful city. That silence stretched out to an uncomfortable length that seemed to soak in the lingering air of destruction and despair that was left behind in this place. Grimacing, I finally made to say something, but stopped as I saw May's slight tremble.

"I don't know if I can do this."

There wasn't really a need to explain what she meant. I understood all too well. I tried to act cool and like a leader should – regardless how much I didn't want that responsibility – but the scope of what we were up against was so overwhelming it scared me quite a lot as well. If I let myself think about it too much, I was sure that I would easily react like that, too. "But this," I gestured at the ruined city, "is why I can. Why I must. When I look at this, I know I cannot sit still and let it happen again." We both knew that this was wishful feeling and the possibility that we would see this again would be quite high but that would not stop me from trying.

"But... what can I do... I want to help, I really do. But seeing this and..." May stopped, then for the first time looked at me with some tears in her eyes that made my heart clench because I knew that they were partially my fault for not acting earlier. "Seeing you two together, what place do I..."

"May," I stopped her and gently put a finger on her lips. That at least had the desired effect of stopping her tears because she was too surprised. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for acting like I didn't care at all."

Yes, this was why I couldn't let the bad things affect me. I had a responsibility, not just to Dawn but May as well. That was the one thing I had realized during Dawn's ceremony. Not just had I allowed Dawn to set the path for our travels and goals since the Sinnoh League but she had also been the driving force between most of the major events since then. Not that I was begrudging her that but I was angry at my own passivity and ashamed of my own reaction towards May while Dawn – who should have been the most negatively affected had forced the issue.

"Ash, that's not..."

I shook my head. "Please, let me say this. I should have done so right away. Regardless how much I try to justify that I was just reacting the way I did because I did not want to cause any grief, regardless how normal such a reaction may have been, in the end the real reason was... that I just didn't want to see what was there."

Yes, I had turned away from the truth at that time. Anyone might have done that in my place. Unfortunately with the brief glimpse of a harmonized bond, I could not do that anymore. The feelings were there and they had been there for a long time which had me scared me at that time for how it could affect what I had with Dawn.

My feelings for May had never been just a strong attraction or crush, they had grown deeper already by the time we had first parted company. Not the same intensity and certainty that I had with Dawn but the first blossoms of love. It had been almost the same as Dawn and I had been before our training excursion. I was sure that given the same opportunity Dawn and I had, could have easily been achieved with May as well.

And I knew May needed to hear that. Not necessarily in all this detail right now but she needed to know that this chance we were giving her wasn't just because some psychic glimpse into a possible future.

"I wasn't very honest with you or myself." Resisting the urge to turn away, I rested my hands on May's shoulders, finding myself slightly lost in the wonder-filled blue eyes which I truly did not wish to see filled with such hesitation after she had risked so much heartache with her confession. That's right, it was time for a suitable response to all that courage. "I am happy with Dawn, yet – given the chance – I think... I know that I could... No..."

I had to take another deep breath and briefly closed my eyes at this point, clamping down on my own frustration to do this right. Many memories passed in front of my mind's eyes. Happy memories, memories filled with fun and laughter. It had

been a more easy camaraderie between May and I, but something had been there all the time, growing slow and steady yet unnoticed by two kids with little understanding of love as it was. I understood now.

With more conviction and courage than before, I looked her straight in the eyes, making sure she understood just how honest I was. "I know that I do love you, May." There it was out. I had finally done it and as cheesy as I always found the metaphor... I really felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

Of course, the tears were back but this time not so much because of sadness or frustration. "Ash, I..." She swallowed hard and I pulled her head gently against my shoulder, feeling a lot of the tension drain away, not just from her but from me as well. "Thank you."

I smiled, content for the moment with how things were. It was another step. Nothing more but definitely not anything less. "It's okay. I can't promise this will work. But if Dawn is willing to try..." I shook my head before I could fall into the familiar pattern again. "No, since we are both willing to try, please stop doubting yourself. You have never done anything wrong to us other than being honest."

The cold night air suddenly didn't seem so bothersome anymore as we sat like this for awhile longer in a much more comfortable silence.

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### **(Leaf)**

Sleep wasn't really coming. Somehow I had the feeling it was the same for everyone and not just for the various reason everyone had had after the conclusion at Twinheart. Today I had the feeling it was more about what had happened today and the inevitable that would start tomorrow.

"It's kind of sad actually." I looked up startled at the nostalgic tone from my girlfriend. I hadn't even been sure that Misty was still awake. It was hard to tell sometimes these days what she was really feeling. Of course that worried me but what else could I do other than being there for her? This kind of trauma didn't just simply disappear from some wise words.

So for a bit I had wondered if the exhaustion had finally caught up with her. With all the stress she had been under and her sleep further interrupted by nightmares, I had actually expected it to happen at some point. Instead though Misty sat up suddenly, prompting me to do the same.

"All of us are finally together and now we have to split up again." So, that was it. I could understand the feeling, although I did not have the same kind of connection

that the others had to each other. Both Ako and I were the outsiders. Until about a year ago only Ash had known about me as well and even that friendship – as precious as it was to me – had only had a year at best to really grow. For Misty, who had travelled with Ash and Brock and known May and Dawn to some degree, this was harder. I was sure she would have liked to spend some time with them without all this baggage.

Though I should probably say something, I didn't get past opening my mouth. What exactly should I say? What could I say? Everything that came to mind right now would sound hollow. Was this really the best I could do for the one I had grown to love? Was I truly that helpless?

Before I could further lament my own helplessness, Misty suddenly turned around with a grin. It was a little forced but I could tell there was some genuine effort behind it. "I'm going to be okay, really." At my doubtful expression, her grin faltered a little but the firm resolve in her eyes stayed and I wasn't so sure anymore whether or not it was necessary a bad thing. "Probably not today or tomorrow, probably not even until this is all over. But... this is too important to have me moping around right now. We've got our *mission* after all. That's what we should concentrate on now. Everything else can come later."

I wasn't sure whether it was okay if everything else came later, some stuff only got worse as you kept bottling it up. That was something I had learned recently as well in regards to my old feelings for Rebecca. Yet, Misty had a point, of course. We had no time to sit around and lament. Nothing would get done and the rest of the world may just end up like Cerulean as well.

I really should believe in Misty a little more, I realized with a start. Worrying about the one you loved was all well and good. At the same time we needed to trust in each other as well. "You are right, of course." Lightly I reached out for her hand and found it grasped tightly almost immediately. "You are strong, Misty. I always thought so. You can get through this as well, I know." Yes, the kind of strength this beautiful young woman possessed had drawn me in from the beginning. She had even stood up for me and her feelings against her family. She had build up the reputation of Cerulean City's Gym from rock bottom to something respectable in a very short time and all that despite being pressured into the task.

There was no reason I should doubt that she would get through this as well and move on.

Tugging on her hand, there was no resistance as I drew her against me, feeling some tension immediately drawn away from her body. This was what I could do for her right now. This comfort was something that only I could give her. Everything else had no immediate solution and all I could do was believe in and support my girlfriend in her recovery.



"I can be strong now since I know you'll be there," Misty whispered and confirmed my own thoughts on the matter. She was doing a lot better after all. Ever since Dawn's ceremony, there was something calmer about her which should give me hope. She had even been the first to congratulate Dawn on her new Master status. Maybe she really was starting to recover from her experience.

We sat like this for several minutes, her head against my shoulder, comfortable and for once with an air of relative peace ever since our escape from Cerulean City days ago. My own concerns were also slowly dissipating, returning some semblance of order to what was still a fresh relationship. No one could live with that gloom all the time after all. Misty was making an effort, so I should do the same.

"So, as long as I am here, there's no need to feel lonely with everyone else gone, is there?" Cerulean eyes blinked up at me cutely when Misty pulled back. "Or should I be worried about something? Perhaps you are tired of me already and want to join Ash's little harem?"

I had a hard time to suppress a chuckle or even a full-blown laugh at the momentary shocked and disbelieving expression, before Misty's eyes narrowed, yet there was a flicker of gratitude that I barely caught and assured me that I was doing the right thing. I had missed this light teasing and banter after all and it seemed Misty was just as glad for this normal act.

"Oh, I don't know. The idea sounds tempting. I'd not only have my childhood crush but also two beautiful girls. Best of both worlds I suppose." And apparently her wit and comebacks had not suffered either. It made me genuinely happy since that was one of the things I had always loved a lot. That fierce, competitive spirit which had always been so much fun to draw out.

"Too bad then." I suddenly slipped one arm around the other girl and pulled her sharply forward, pressing my lips against hers. For once these days it was not a kiss filled with almost feverish passion, meant to block out the bad things. "I already caught you. And I won't let you go without a fight." The next kiss was definitely getting more heated but it was a much cleaner expression of desire at this point.

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**(Dawn)**

Unnoticed I slipped away from the tent, back inside the tent. Most girls in my situation would probably have not been as accepting and actually happy about this development. What passed as normal had been long redefined though. Exactly when I wasn't sure. Perhaps I should rather think it had happened in various stages. The first had probably been meeting Ash. Travelling with someone else had sounded nice

at first but I hadn't truly known how much it would change me. Then came the three training months before the Sinnoh League that redefined my understanding of both my own limitations and my feelings for Ash.

Learning of my psychic powers and finally meeting with Mew came only recently though and – as much as I had been scared and a little resentful of it at first – had become such an essential part of myself. It was something that was hard to put into words and I did realize just how changed I had to appear to everyone else sometimes. Yet, I understood so much more now. My own place in this world and the responsibilities I had within it. The ceremony today was not really another big step but more an extension of the last one. That's why I felt no discomfort upon seeing Ash and May together or my boyfriend finally giving an honest voice to his feelings. It made me glad instead, giving me hope that we could truly make this work.

Seeing as those two would probably be out there a little longer and I wasn't particularly tired, I decided to put to test my newly awakened powers. That was pretty much my reason why I couldn't sleep anyway. Being filled with all this power hadn't been exhausting at all, quite the opposite. I felt like I could perform three Grand Festivals back to back without any break right now!

Finding a secluded space in a corner of the large tent, I sat down cross-legged and closed my eyes. Meditation came as second nature to me by now but even I was surprised how easy it was to immerse my mind into the spiritual flow and reach out all around me. Was this how it was for seasoned psychics like Sabrina? I hardly needed any effort at all to see where everyone was and what they were doing. It was easier for those I knew but even random helpers within my broad radius were easy to read with just a little effort. I did not pry too deeply – I had no intention to violate anyone's privacy –, merely for a brief glimpse of their surface thoughts, before moving on.

*What an amazing feeling*, I thought elated, having a hard time reigning in my excitement. This was truly going far beyond mere psychic ability. The Light energy was warm and comforting. Light was everywhere, even in the deepest shadows, light connected and sustained every life. Sending my mind through these endless paths was a multitude more effective than using mere psychic power.

Briefly I touched upon Leaf and Misty, purposefully trying to avoid prying too deeply. I was concerned about the redhead's state of mind like everyone else but ultimately it was not my place to deal with it. This was something those two had to work out between themselves. Mental recovery was something even my new powers couldn't really heal. Misty had to make that effort. And it seemed like she was a lot calmer right now... and definitely busy with something I shouldn't witness!

Quickly moving on, my brief embarrassment turned into pleased thoughts when I found Brock and Ako resting, in fact perhaps the only two close to sleep right now. I was glad I had been able to nip that particular problem in the bud. Ash had

been feeling bad with the situation to begin with ever since he had realized it would end up like this. Granted, that I had urged Ako to go with the other group was both for her sake as it was for our own. Ash, May and I had a lot left to work out. That would be awkward with someone else around, especially someone who would rather be with her own fiancé. Besides, between a League Champion and two Top Coordinators – not to mention two Masters – and my new powers, we should have far less problems initially as the other group.

That had truly been a surprise though. I believe the only reason why I hadn't been shocked totally into inaction had been because of everything that had happened today. Being named Master had seemed almost... normal. A sad thought actually because I understood exactly what Cynthia and the League meant to do with this. No pure Top Coordinator had ever reached an official Master status. For that alone, even without the current crisis, I probably wouldn't have refused, regardless how much it seemed too soon. I hadn't even been travelling for more than two years. Yet I had already gotten so far...

That made it even more important that I did my best now. For my friends, my loved ones... and for this world that had given me so many amazing adventures, so many memories. I wanted to make much more of them. With other humans and Pokémon alike.

Letting my mind wander, I soon let myself immerse into the flow of Light energy, not particularly looking for anything, yet trying to get a better feel for these new powers, their range and limits. It was not something that could be put into words and time lost its meaning in this state. As such it wasn't much of a surprise that when something tugged at my consciousness, demanding my attention, that I could feel the intensity of the light having changed outside with the slow rise of the sun.

Focusing on what had attracted my attention, I could pick out low voices one of them belonging to Cynthia, troubled and slightly agitated. Picking up sounds was a lot harder actually and it took me quite some effort to focus before I could understand what Cynthia and another man were talking about, my concentration nearly slipping when I made out the words 'Team Rocket' and 'attack'. Finally I managed to pierce together though what was happening. Apparently some Team Rocket members had either still been in the area – or brazen enough to return – and were targeting the nearby Power Plant.

"We shouldn't bother them with the details. I shall go myself. Please let the kids know that I had some urgent business to attend to and see to what we have planned out."

Disengaging my focus, I discovered that doing this for hours might not be such a good idea as I felt rather disorientated for a moment. Shaking my head, I stood nonetheless, shaking out my legs before swiftly moving towards the rest of our group.

Cynthia might have our best interests in mind but this was in fact a good opportunity to battle together one more time – not to mention to test out my new abilities. Somehow I had the feeling everyone else would agree with me.

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**(May)**

*There's quite a lot of them*, I thought, just a tad bit apprehensive. Of course, most the apprehension was countered by the fact that we were practically right in front of their eyes on the water and no one could see us thanks to the shimmering field of light around us. Well, shimmering to us, for everyone else it was like was nothing was there. Something about bending the light or such as Dawn had explained it. I didn't really care much for the specifics.

The decision had been quick and unanimous after Dawn had roused us. Cynthia had lightly protested but eventually given in. I, for one, definitely felt the need to cut loose. The Team Rocket members here didn't seem to be anything special. Even the one who was seemingly in charge was wearing the normal uniform.

*\*Don't get cocky.\** I winced at Dawn's mental voice in my head. This was different from the short bond we had shared before and felt just a little invasive, even if I could see the huge advantages. *\*Just because they look ordinary, doesn't mean they are no danger.\**

Grimacing, I accepted the reprimand. She was right, of course. We couldn't afford to take anything lightly. From now on, our battles wouldn't be over with the sound of buzzer or the declaration of a winner. Even with all that happened, it hadn't really sunken in yet and part of me refused to accept the harshness where battles were not just a sport and competitive element.

*\*I know how you feel. It doesn't seem real. But we've all seen what they are willing to do now. If we hesitate, Cerulean won't be the only place that suffers like this,\** Ash reasoned quietly, his thoughts calm and focused, ready for battle. That was about all I could feel through this simple mental connection though since most of Dawn's attention was concentrated on keeping up her invisibility technique around Blastoise and Feraligatr.

Focusing back on the activity on land, I narrowed my eyes at seeing the Team Rocket members scurrying around. Some were engaged with what little resistance League personnel could still muster here but they seemed not really focused to press their numeric advantage into victory. *\*What are they doing?\** I wondered aloud.

*\*I'd say trying to blow up the power plant,\** Ash replied and now that he had said it, their activities made more sense. I couldn't see anything clearly from this

distance but they really seemed to be placing something along the foundation of the building. This was bad. If the power plant was blown-up Kanto's electrical supply would take a hard blow and cause even more chaos. Definitely something that would play right into Team Rocket's plan.

\*Get ready. We are about to start.\* I tensed, one hand falling to the belt with my Pokéballs. \*Remember hit them hard and fast.\* Although it wasn't necessary, I still found myself nodding. I could do this. After all they had done for me, regardless of my own doubts, I couldn't let them down. Ash's small confession had only cemented that fact for me.

All of a sudden the rock face to the west exploded outwards, revealing Brock's Steelix with the others standing on top of its head. Startled, everyone below turned their attention to the scene. I would have been shocked too, if I hadn't known of the hastily-made plan before. Brock and Misty had both known there was a secret shaft inside the Rock Tunnel that had collapsed years ago. But the passageway was still there and as such the amount of rock easier to tunnel through.

\*Now!\*

Our Pokémon lurched forward, the light field disappearing, and as soon as we had reached land, I jumped, throwing my Pokéballs forward in one fluid motion. The sound of released Pokémon was echoed by those from Ash and Dawn and before the Rockets knew what was happening, they were upon them. The attackers fighting with the defenders turned to face the new threat but the speed of the assault caught them off guard.

Unfortunately it could have gone a lot better. The tenacity of those creatures Team Rocket had apparently termed Rage Pokémon proved once again a problem. While a lot of them were taken out in the initial assault, others held strong and began to fight back even more enraged, quickly joined by others as the Rockets showed they had not even began to exhaust their firepower yet.

That was when the rest of the group, finished with their descent, came down quite severely in the midst of the attackers. It was pure chaos and yet ominously coordinated. There wasn't much need for individual commands as our Pokémon joined together to bring down each enemy one by one. Where we had struggled so much on Twinheart, now every attack had an enormous effect.

The reason for that still stood where we had landed, once again clad in that outfit which I couldn't help but find quite a bit distracting. Hands outstretched to the sight, glowing in a strong light, that radiated outward. I could feel the rush of power myself to a lesser degree since she seemed more focused on our Pokémon right now. The experience was humbling but I had no time to think about it.

Spotting two Rockets at the base of the power plant I saw how they seemed to be crouched over something and remembered what Ash had said. "Oh no, you don't!" I was surprised by my own burst of speed, crossing the distance in what felt like an instant, lashing out with a punch that sent the unprepared Rocket off like their namesake, his companion faring no better as Blaziken was right there to pick him off.

Amazed I looked down at myself and then back to Dawn, surrounded by her Pokémon in a loose half-circle. It really was scary, to think a human could wield all that power... and even more so to think this was waiting for me as well. At the same time, the sight left me in a good bit of awe as well, proud of the girl I had fallen in love with for doing all this with such natural ease.

Then I shook my head and pulled my mind back into focus. There was still a lot to do. Dawn was providing us all with such an awesome boost and we couldn't waste it!

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**(Ash)**

*This is it. This is how it should be.*

Impressed, humbled and a good bit proud I watched May dash forward again, dodging a random flamethrower, twist around the punch of a Rhydon, before finding her mark in form of the more vulnerable Scyther, smashing it hard into the ground and right into the path of a devastating flamethrower from her Ninetails while Blaziken had followed up the Rhydon's confusion with a blazing kick that had enough force to catapult the massive Pokémon backwards as if fired by a slingshot.

On the other end of the isolated land strip, the rest of our group were also making the best out of the confusion and boost in ability. Misty had taken to the water and her Pokémon were like an angry wave, overwhelming everything in their way in a concentrated effort of Water attacks that only one who had specialized in one elemental type could perform this efficiently. I would have been a little put off by the sheer viciousness of the assault, yet this might be something she needed to do. To cut loose and let all these negative feelings out. As saddening as it was, there was no saving those poor souls anyway. Hesitation against these foes brought nothing – a lesson I had already learned.

Brock was more conservative in a way but I could clearly see how much he had improved in the time we had not seen each other. With Dawn's power boost, barely anything could deter Steelix from its path and Swampert on his head made up for any danger a Fire attack might pose. Brock might have the least freedom in this environment though, considering that especially earth attacks were dangerous to the

terrain and the power plant in extension. Despite that, he made up for it with tactic, picking his targets carefully while providing defense for those that needed it.

Leaf was efficiency in perfection. Her Pokémon did not need any instruction as they moved around engaging their foes while Leaf used the distraction to sneak up on the Rockets and taking them out. From prior experience we knew that these Rage Pokémon would not stop with their *Trainers* taken out but at the least it stopped more opponents from being released.

The increase in power was mind-boggling and would have been hard to believe if I couldn't feel it myself. That gentle, invigorating light, the power Dawn was giving us all so that we could fight all that much better. It wasn't at all what one might have expected, yet oddly fitting for the girl that I had seen grow so much during our journey together. Most people in her position would have used this power as their own strength and no one could have faulted her for doing the same. Not Dawn though.

Her Pokémon were keeping a protective circle around her, repelling every attack with an almost brutal efficiency, revealing quite clearly that they were profiting from the boost the most. I had the feeling that if they wanted to, this battle could be finished very soon but Dawn wanted to give everyone a chance to fight together, to part ways with a good memory and some hope back in our hearts.

My eyes narrowed as I spotted the blurs that were Pikachu and Naru racing through enemy lines. With the boost, Pikachu was pretty much an unstoppable lightning bolt in more than just the figurative sense, while Naru was shifting and accumulating boosts so fast that she was actually keeping pace, more or less. I smiled softly, seeing those two harmonizing so much, but then decided I had waited long enough.

Releasing the rest of my Pokémon, I joined the fray once more. We had practiced group battles quite a lot and as such I could safely say that much like Leaf's team there was no need for any complex orders. My target was also clear. There was a larger cluster of opponents that so far resisted the assault. Everyone else was having their hands full though and couldn't mount a concentrated offense.

Having my Pokémon split into familiar groups – the Sinnoh team led by Infernape and a group consisting of Venusaur, Pidgeot, Feraligatr and Swellow led by Charizard – they descended on the enemy with both the discipline of many battles and training session but also the righteous fury of seeing their fellow kind twisted into such unnatural abominations.

Frankly, it was no contest. The opponents might have held out but against the concentrated pincer assault from the best of my team their defense crumbled liked sandpaper before a force of nature.

Taking a page out Leaf's book, I focused on the Rockets. While I had no particular special skill or fighting ability, the form of training Dawn and I had undergone with our Pokémon had left us in a superb physical condition. With the extra boost right now, I was more than confident enough to square off with these criminals, dispatching them quickly.

Once the last of the opposition fell I spared a quick glance around, seeing that the area had been fully cleared of enemies, bathing everything in a momentary, stunned silence. Had it really happened so fast? Right now, it seemed like barely any time had passed. Had we really defeated so many enemies in such a short time? It seemed unreal and yet... If that was the scope with just Dawn's abilities alone, then perhaps we really could do this. Perhaps...

The sound of a single released Pokémon was almost deafening and as my head snapped around towards its source, I realized the apparent leader of the mission was still there. Right now though, my gaze was fixed, somewhat unbelieving on what appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary... Ditto.

Of course, I should stop expecting ordinary things, as was proven just a moment later as the lone Rocket shouted one command, simple and just about everything you could expect after releasing a Ditto, but one that should once again change everything.

"Transform!"

The cry the Ditto emitted was as horrible as the sound of crackling dark energy that suddenly enveloped the unassuming Pokémon, contorting its shape, growing in size and slowly forming into something I knew should be impossible...

Jagged wings spread forth as the creature rose of the ground, letting out a piercing cry. There was no mistake about it and yet my mind was not able to wrap itself around the concept. Right before our eyes was something no Ditto should be able to imitate. A grotesque, black and dull bronze version of the Legendary Pokémon...

Zapdos.

\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*

**(Dawn)**

The sudden silence enveloping the area just moments ago enveloped by the hectic sounds of battle was deafening, everyone's gaze riveted to the sight that should be impossible. To be frank, I was more surprised by how little surprised I



actually was by this latest twist. Perhaps I had finally reached the point where new revelations couldn't shock me anymore...

The truth probably had more to do with being so intensely immersed in the flow of elemental energy. I could honestly say that it wasn't as easy as it might look on the outside. Using the Light for pure offense would in fact have been a lot easier since that would have required much less coordination and maintenance of a steady output. Yet, had I done this, I feared that I could have taken away all the excitement for the others. Not that I was suddenly advocating this kind of fighting, but at this point any kind of morale booster was a good thing.

Now though, I could no longer remain the passive participant. "This isn't the real one, right?" I didn't need to hear the answer actually. The flow of power was all off. Not like the other Rage Pokémon. There was a hint of the real thing still left within them. This Zapdos felt unnatural to the core. Simply a mass of both rage and an infinite despair with no way out since it lacked any connection to life.

"No. Considering how much Giovanni likes to play with DNA and trying to recreate Pokémon, I would say this is what we have here," Mew replied nonetheless and I could feel her revulsion and fury at the thought, reminded not only of Mewtwo but also faced with the audacity of using the genes of her companions like this. The implications were quite severe, however, that could wait for now. I wasn't sure what I felt myself but it wasn't quite anger, more like an overwhelming sadness.

"Ready, Pri... Empoleon?" Slowly I withdrew the Light energy into myself. This would slow down everyone else, yet it wasn't that it had been necessary to actually attain victory so far.

My oldest partner nodded resolutely and everyone else also formed up. For a moment I worried about the combination of a cloned Legendary made into a Rage Pokémon and on top of that an Electric type within close proximity to a power plant. That concern lasted for all but a moment before the power I had shared with everyone returned to me, filling me with confidence and strength. Basking in the feeling for a moment, I let it flow out to my team in a smaller but more concentrated mixture.

\*Go.\*

The rest of the group had been struggling by then with the powerful Electric attacks. Pikachu was fairly useless and had taken to a defense role with his superior elemental control, absorbing the dark lightning along with Leaf's Umbreon. The previous battles had left them somewhat exhausted though and aside from May's Glaceon and her sister shifting into the same form they could not adequately make use of Zapdos' only real weakness.

"Do you need to go up another level?" Mew had hung back, looking at the twisted monstrosity a little uncertainly. Her feelings dominated her awareness, otherwise she should know the answer without asking.

"No, I got this. Just make sure I have a clear shot." Focusing my own mind upon what I wanted to do, I walked slowly forward as my Pokémon joined the fray, bringing much needed relief. More like actually doing more than annoy the wild, enraged 'Legendary'. Mamoswine's Ice attacks were especially useful and Lopunny was riding Togekiss to dart in and out with quick Ice Beams as well. Espeon and Quilava had combined their powers to bombard Zapdos with a mixture of Fire and Psychic-type attack.

And then there was Empoleon. I think it shocked even the mindless Rage Pokémon the first time he jumped over an attack and stayed airborne, leaving it in a position to launch what at first glance looked like a Water Pulse and shouldn't even have bothered Zapdos. Apparently it thought the same thing and took the attack without trying to defend only to screech in clear pain as the mixed in Light energy had turned the water into a burning liquid much like yet even stronger than what Scald would do. The more devastating moves were the Steel/Light mixtures, however. Every time Empoleon landed a Metal Claw variant, the imbued Light power created a devastating effect, the purity of the element eating into the foul and twisted body.

Just like with every Rage Pokémon we had encountered so far, this one only seemed to get more enraged the more its opponent's efforts were forcing it back. This mindless drive that didn't care about wounds inflicted that should slow them down was bad enough with normal Pokémon, with something based on a Legendary, the result could very well be a long drawn-out fight.

Mew arrived on the scene just as Zapdos forced everyone back with a veritable wall of black lightning that had already proven to give even Pikachu some trouble. As my angered partner engaged Zapdos in a slugfest of overpowered attacks, I prepared my own. If this went on much longer, the power plant would definitely take damage, making all the previous effort for naught.

Reaching out, I moved my hands upwards, drawing a slightly curved shape with my powers. There was no need to solidify the shape for just a single shot. Instead I grasped the 'bow', a string snapping into existence and an arrow appearing between the fingers of my other hand.

Taking a deep breath, I forced my exhausted mind one last time into focus. I would have to cut back a little next time. Empowering everyone was really a bit of a stretch. It was a very good thing that I had a lot of prior practice and the exploration of last night had gotten me a better grasp on what I could and could not do right now.

\*Empoleon, Mew, make me an opening.\* Drawing the arrow back, I let my mind hone in on the target, acquiring a sort of tunnel vision. Zapdos was too occupied with its opponents to even take notice of me. Mew had powered up for a sphere of pure Light energy and Empoleon joined in for a Light-infused Flash Cannon from the other side. The large bird struggled against the assault and the clear agony the attacks caused.

I grimaced seeing Zapdos thrash about but didn't have to be concerned as a triple Fire Spin from Charizard, Infernape and Blaziken wrapped around it, keeping it relatively steady. *That's enough for me.* I could see it clearly now. The core of the twisted energy that had warped its body. A body that was only made for one purpose...

*I'm sorry.*

Resolutely, I let go of the arrow.

*You can rest now.*

\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*

**(Domino)**

"What was that?! I was expecting something big... They aren't that strong after all."

I glared at the young boy, wondering for the umpteenth time why the Boss wanted him on this task force. Certainly he had some rough skill but no sense of professionalism, style or other kind of common sense. Everything about him screamed brash and unrefined. From the unruly black hair over the slightly too long red shirt, short light gray pants all the way to the worn-out blue sneakers... Well, what could you expect from a kid like him?

And I knew better than to dismiss what I had seen as an indication of strength... or more like I knew that it actually was one. In my line of work I had seen a lot of powerful stuff. The stronger the target, the more outrageous the power of the Pokémon. Only that this time it wasn't merely the power of a Pokémon and despite expecting it, seeing a human execute an attack like this...

The arrow seemed to be nothing special when the girl had fired it off. In fact compared to some of the stuff their Pokémon were throwing at the Zapdos, it appeared tiny and insignificant. *But a single arrow shot right where it should be can often be more effective than a barrage of attacks against a strong defense.* And that's what it had been right there. The tiny arrow of light had struck right at some unseen

point and amazingly enough the Zapdos had almost immediately began to fall apart, dissolving from the inside out.

"She has a good grasp on that power already despite just acquiring it," the oldest member among us commented. Personally Mr. Steed was about the only one in this crazy group that I respected. Tall, well-built, with his military-style clothes everything about him screamed experience. And despite his age, the only thing even hinting about it was the slightly graying but otherwise natural white hair.

"Hmph, they were just cannon fodder anyway." This came from the tall and muscular man with short dark brown hair. "Besides, I don't like her type. All flashy and stuff." Clad in a brown and dark gray jacket, dark gray pants, brown boots, and fingerless brown gloves, all I really knew about him was that he was a recent recruit and had been a professional martial artist in the underground scene.

"At least we know now that the first test subject was a success and the Boss can improve on that," I interrupted their musings, pleased with the Rage Zapdos' performance despite its defeat. "I trust you were paying attention. Underestimating them will just ensure you'll end up the same. You got that? Eric? Klaus?" Eric just scowled and huffed, while Klaus merely waved off the reprimand.

Sighing, I once again wondered why I was stuck with such a crazy group. Well, you could hardly call it a group. Everyone had their individual skill that would make them best suited to deal with those annoying kids. I was somewhat worried about proper coordination though – should that be required – with so many different characters meshed together.

Speaking of which... I turned to the last two members of my special task force. The first was a rather buxom woman – to my extreme annoyance – with long violet hair and tanned skin. She was clad almost fully in a blue formfitting bodysuit with shoulders and some skin left and right exposed. The belt containing various tools hinted at her profession as a bounty hunter. "Is everything in place, Magenta?" I asked.

Magenta grinned and waved in the direction of our last member. He was wearing black ninja-style clothes and a hood was covering his head, hiding most of his face. "Don't cha worry, darling. Thanks to this guy everything's set to go."

"I see. Good work, Kagami." I did not expect a response, knowing he preferred to stay silent. Turning back to the scene below, I lifted my binoculars once more and saw the kids surrounding the blue-haired girl, excited and apparently in quite a good mood. We couldn't have that now, could we? "Well, I think they had enough time to celebrate, wouldn't you say?" Those kids might be strong but they were also quite soft. They had no concept about the kind of conflict they were about to get caught in.

Nodding to Magenta, the other woman took out a remote control and pressed a single button.

The first rumble went almost unnoticed. That was until the earth began to shake and suddenly the massive structure of the power plant started to sink as the isolated land stretch began to split open. The shock and confusion on the kids' faces was rather pleasant. I bet they had no idea what was happening. As much as it galled me to work with a bounty hunter like Magenta, she knew her tools and definitely was good with explosives.

Normally the isolation of this inlet was a good defensive factor and the foundation was quite strong. But the tunnel system running through the mountain range around this place had become quite complex over time, opening other ways to weaken this foundation. Some custom tunneling and well-placed explosives had been the first step. The ones hidden below the corners of the power plants thanks to Kagami's stealth while the kids had been busy did the rest, unsettling the terrain and causing the entire land stretch to slowly fall apart.

As the kids, workers and other League agents scurried around to get everyone to safety, I turned away. It would not be good for us to stay here any longer either. The others fell into step as more explosions now clearly echoed from below. Satisfied, I tapped the earpiece functioning as a communicator. "Mission accomplished."

\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*

**(Narrator)**

"And so it seems that, after a relatively easy ceremony to awaken Dawn's powers and a battle that should have given everyone some much needed confidence, our heroes are not getting a break for long."

Shock and disbelief was written over the faces of the group as they moved away along with a swarm of Pokémon, carrying everyone to safety. Behind them the slow destruction of the inlet continued mercilessly and the once impressive structure of the much needed power plant began to unravel along with the land...

"Team Rocket has made yet another hard blow to the Kanto region, targeting its energy supply. One thing is clear though: From now on out, it will only become harder for our heroes."

\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*

**Maia's Prophecy**

Maia: I see, I see, I see in the future... many dark things, many awful things, many painful things... And they shall happen... to YOU!

MysticMew: \*nods\*

Maia: VISIT OUR BLOG AND ARCHIVE PAGE! NOW!

MysticMew: \*nods again\*

Maia: I refuse to use my powers for all you lazy people!

MysticMew: \*whispers\* What powers? All she does is give a preview and the truth is we haven't planned out the next epi... \*falls over smoking when hit by a flaming arrow\*

Maia: I thought you were on my side!

MysticMew: \*exhales a thick cloud of smoke\* Please, do as she says...

\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*TFSTTM\*\*\*\*\*

## Author's Notes

We are getting back into the flow. As usual starting again after over a year is kind of tough but much like the previous arcs, once we start writing, it's quickly coming together.

Before I start, once again a thank you for my beta duo. One thing in particular deserves notice. The diadem as a Focus for Dawn was spawned on H-Man #89995's suggestion for a tiara. I had a slightly different idea in my head when I first agreed it was a good idea, that's why it became a diadem in the end, but credit goes to him since I was really stuck on Dawn's Focus item.

Some inspiration for the Ash/May scene also came from a discussion we had and a comment from H-Man #89995 about Ash's inactivity in arc 2, which I had to agree with. Furthermore I hoped the scene helped clear up the issue of Ash's feelings a little more, it had been a long time coming. This is by no means a resolution, they'll be struggling over most of the arc, step by step. ^\_^

And lastly in regards to my primary beta once more... The reason why Pikachu's scene is so long is because of him. He outright rejected my initial scene in that segment. I attempted a do-over and well... let's just say *horrible* things happen when you try to make Maia work on something outside of our current work flow (since we were deep into planning and writing episode 2 already at this point). The whole thing occupied us an entire day and that's the end result. It was not supposed to be that long... \*sigh\* At least we agreed on this attempt being better than the last.

Before anyone complains. The power plant – in my version at least – is mostly powered by a combination of water (it is situated isolated at a water inlet after all) and Pokémon use. There is no fear of radiation outbreak from its destruction, only the power shortage... Don't ask me for details on this, I am not an expert in this field, so if it looks a little... off, then please forgive my ignorance.

As for the descriptions I've given in this chapter, they are mostly for your benefit. I am terrible with character design appearance, so if you have any complaints keep that in mind. Dawn's Master Robe was inspired by Micaiah's outfit from Fire Emblem 10, if you need a reference, and it is rather possible the others might also be similar inspired by other media. Again, I may ask, if anyone wants to draw some art for the story, contact me. There is a request section on MMD, too.

Finally... A note in my own interest. It shouldn't be necessary but since I had to go over that with my betas as well, I'll at least mention it now. The last battle in this episode was more a showcasing than anything else and the Rockets here were "cannon fodder" (and not even half as well equipped as the forces invading Cerulean for example). Remember that, from now on, we have war and war is going to be ugly. Ash and co. will get powerful, yes, but there will be an equal countermeasure, either by circumstances or their opposition. I have no intention of overpowering characters but if I do, you can be assured that it is part of a bigger plotline. If it seems that the humans will overshadow their Pokémon partners a little, it is somewhat intended that way. So far the Pokémon had fought the battles almost exclusively, now their Trainers have to catch up, so that in the end they can stand on equal terms.

Just to give you a heads-up. I will probably write the next two or three episodes back to back before releasing them since I'm not so certain on how the (chronological) scene order will play out. My primary beta will also be without a word processor between the middle of December and January. In consequences the best you can probably expect are slightly higher quality alpha releases (Stone Tiger will hopefully still be there) **exclusive** to my archive page and blog. I'll continue writing, of course (barring a possible distraction with a Christmas story of some kind), so there might be just a bunch of it together later. I'll keep you updated on my blog.

And that's about it. Don't forget to leave your feedback and preferably (please) visit our blog and archive, telling us what you think about it.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias aka MysticMew