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Pre-Note

Just one thing really. I am not one to demand reviews – as in I won't update unless you review. I write for myself primarily. And authors that pull such lines don't deserve to call themselves authors in my opinion.

However, knowing that this story is rather popular and then seeing as it had 632 clicks and 232 visitors on Saturday alone when I put this up on ff . net and there wasn't even one of you taking the time to review... The only one that actually reviewed the episode was Kmaster on Monday and that was like four words (still, thanks Kmaster). It is kind of disappointing. So, if you appreciate my writing, let me know please. It does not take long to write a short sentence and I'd rather take that over nothing at all. I do not expect you to review every new chapter, I know that can be tedious, but a sign of appreciation here and there would be really nice and might get me more motivated to work faster for you.

And despite what I said above: After still not getting any more reviews the entire week, I pushed this one back to the weekend again. As I said, I won't just not update simply because there are no reviews, but I DO have the power of WHEN to post updates. *grins evilly* Consider it a warning, you could have had this episode by Wednesday.

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(Narrator)

Ah, how relaxing. Now that my contractors are squabbling, no one is actually bothering me in these segments!

"Last time Dawn has worked herself all the way into the final of the Kanto Grand Festival. However, a mysterious competitor has unexpectedly appeared that does not only have the skill to prove a challenge but that has a strange, distracting effect on our heroine. Meanwhile Misty and Leaf are drawn into a Team Rocket attempt to eliminate the Legendary Pokémon Mew. What will become of everyone? One thing is clear though. This day will be a long one."

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Seafoam Islands, Kanto (Dawn)

I wasn't entirely sure what I was feeling right now. This was it. The big moment. The second time I stood in the final round of a Grand Festival and this time I had no intention of being runner-up, especially not to an opponent like this. For the moment Nord was furthest from my mind. In fact, I knew that it shouldn't matter whom I faced. I had worked so much towards this moment. The first three months before the Sinnoh League and then all this time from then until now. Everyone had worked hard and these two here especially so.

"Are you two ready?" Piplup and Lopunny responded with enthusiastic replies. There was also a certain tension in them. However, it was one of intense focus and readiness. "I am proud of you two. Remember, let's go out there and do our best. Our very best. Everything else will work out then." Lopunny nodded and went into her Pokéball without another word.

But Piplup staid a moment and then jumped up into my lap, grabbing one of my hands. I chuckled slightly, not surprised by the concerns from my first Pokémon. Piplup had never been shy to voice his opinion or to pick up on my distress. "I'll be fine, really. I know I can rely on you two and knowing that, there is no way I could let you down either." Piplup cocked his head, a little dubious but then nodded and raised his tiny hand in a cute salute. I grinned and returned him back to his Pokéball.

Yes, there was no way I could let them down. Even if it had become a regular part of our lives lately, I did not forget that the training we were doing was hard, especially so on our Pokémon. And it was them who would eventually have to put the practice to use. This wasn't just about my own dream. My Pokémon shared this goal with me, each and every day, sweating and straining to grow stronger. I could not let them down.

A knock on the door had me glance up startled, but then I smiled, recognizing the presence on the other side. I had been so concentrated on the upcoming final

and maintaining my mental barriers that for once I hadn't realized his approach until now. Smiling I opened the door to find Ash grinning at me. "How did you get back here?" I asked, but inwardly didn't care, quite relieved by his soothing presence.

His grin widened and he held up his badge. "Just abusing certain privileges." I giggled and stepped aside for him to enter. It wasn't like he ever made much use of his license. In this case though I was glad he did. I would have to go soon but just for a moment I was glad to simply relax in his embrace, which he wordlessly provided. His presence was a better calming method than any meditation.

And when he eventually spoke up again, his words certainly were better than any pep-talk. "You are beautiful today." I blushed slightly when he held me at arm's length, looking me over. I had saved this dress especially for the final rounds. After all it had been a gift from Ash when we first had found the time for a proper date. "There's no way you can lose looking so gorgeous."

I punched him lightly in the arm with a giggle. "Alright, enough flattery out of you. I have to get going." With some reluctance I stepped back and ran my hand through my hair once more.

Ash chuckled. "Ready?"

I grinned. "Not yet." Stepping close once more, I stood up on tiptoes and grabbed his face for a long kiss. It was definitely far more passionate than the one back in the catacombs of the Sinnoh League stadium a good year ago. "Now I am."

Ash grinned back, obviously remembering that time as well. "Don't you dare lose." From anyone else, under these circumstances, I wouldn't have taken this well, only adding to the pressure. But from Ash in such a reminiscence of the scene from back then, I actually felt even more encouraged.

"I won't. It's a promise."

I grabbed my Pokéballs and turned to leave but Ash caught my arm once more and I looked back at him quizzically. "You are not alone," he said, much more somberly than the joking, relaxed manner from moments before. "When you are out there, even if it feels hopeless, remember that. Trust in the bond you have with your Pokémon and trust that I and so many others believe in you. Then, you truly can do anything."

I allowed the words to pass through me for a moment and knew it was the truth. They might sound like platitudes to others, especially people like Nord. But these people had never experienced them as a real, powerful truth that would help you break past all your limits and do the impossible. Ash had done his own share already. Now, it was my turn.

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The reception was definitely different from the last time. The stadium packed a lot more people and the atmosphere was totally different. At any other point it would have been slightly overwhelming. However, I was fully focused, the surroundings fading into a dull background perception.

"And without further ado, the final round of this year's Kanto Grand Festival begins." Nord was glaring at me from his own spot but hadn't said a single thing yet, not that he needed to in order to convey his feelings. "Our challengers are ready. The time limit is five minutes as usual. Coordinators, at your ready!"

I grabbed my Pokéballs and threw them into the air. "Piplup, Lopunny, Final Spotlight!" Both of them emerged in a burst of rainbow-colored light, a special seal I had prepared just for the final.

Nord merely sneered and simply threw out his own Pokéballs. I knew what to expect when Mightyena and Absol emerged but I wasn't prepared for the sudden pressure against my mental shields, far stronger and concentrated than I had anticipated even at this proximity. Only with a lot of effort I managed to suppress the wince but I also knew that my Pokémon felt it. And from the look in Nord's eyes he seemed to have caught it as well... or perhaps more like expected it.

But there was no time to further contemplate or prepare before Lillian called the beginning of the match and the timer went off...

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M&M DreamWorks Presents
The Final Step to the Master Reloaded
Second Arc: Glimpses of Destiny
Episode 02: Grand Festival, Part 2! All in a Day's Work!

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(Ash)

I winced when the opening salvo scored direct hits. Absol had struck Piplup with a fast and precise Night Slash while Mightyena had jumped forward and attempted to chomp down on Lopunny whose superior reflexes had her barely twisting away but getting a slight nip in the side nonetheless.

I could feel Dawn's shock and frustration even from here and gripped the support railing tightly. Something was really wrong here. Sure, I had expected her to have some trouble with this but she had seemed so confident and focused backstage. This kind of reaction was in total opposite. The opening attacks had really only cost her a sliver of points – straight to the point as they were and with both of Dawn's Pokémon recovering almost instantly. However, she was off-balance and getting thrown off your game right from the start could be disastrous in a match on this level. Despite our personal misgivings, Nord was not an opponent to be taken lightly. As a former Champion, he had the experience and the strength to make things really problematic for Dawn.

We didn't have to wait long for an answer for the unexpected beginning. Nord, so far not the type to speak much, obviously felt like rubbing it in and unlike my tournament, Contest audience often was rather quiet during the matches, so one could hear him speak even from up here. "Heh, did you think you are the first Psychic I fought? Your fancy tricks won't help you against me. Did you know that Dark types have their own mental powers? And Absol here can focus and actively direct it. Let's face it, without your crutches, you are nothing. A little girl like you has no idea how the world really works. Absol, Psycho Cut. Mightyena, Crunch again!"

But Nord definitely had a few things wrong. Dawn didn't need "crutches" to be an excellent Coordinator and her Pokémon were far more independent than the average one. Lopunny bounced over Mightyena while Piplup jumped and spun away from Absol. "Piplup, Bubble Gun! Lopunny, Dizzy Punch!" Still spinning, Piplup let loose with a stream of bubbles at rapid fire speed. From experience I knew the speed made hits so hard, it became more of a physical attack.

Yet, Absol took the hits with some grunts and to my own surprise sent another Psychic Cut right through the assault that Piplup barely managed to twist away from. Lopunny wasn't better off. Her punch had actually hit but remained a glancing blow, while Nord was quick to call out an Assurance that came too quick as a counter to avoid fully. The nimble bunny cried out in pain and hopped back quickly to put some distance between herself and her opponent. Once again Nord had no intention of giving Dawn and her Pokémon even a moment of rest and a chance to collect their wits.

"This is bad. If she can't break out of this soon, he will get more than glancing blows in." I didn't take my eyes off the match but had to agree with Kenny's assessment. The other boy had joined me up here after his loss. The small space was something I had arranged to use for the final round, wanting to give all of Dawn's Pokémon a chance to watch. Therefore I had asked for this small area with a relative good view above the main stands where everyone, even Mamoswine, had enough space to watch and support her.

And that had been why I had invited Kenny up here as well, concentrating the support in one place. I knew Dawn would need that and when I had thought about how to further help her today, I had remembered my own last battle with Leaf. That time when my bond with Pikachu had become perfect. That wouldn't have been possible without all the support from my friends. I had felt it clearly then. Dawn's love and trust, Brock's support and the cheers from the audience to some degree as well. I knew then, I wasn't alone in fighting my match and that I could draw strength from that support. It had been an elating feeling, both for me and for Pikachu.

And that was why, even though I understood and agreed with Kenny's assessment, I also knew better than to think Dawn was already at her wits' end. Not by a long shot. "Dawn will win today." I could say this with absolute certainty because anything else would simply not do. Dawn had been worried about me, too, during my match with Leaf, but never once had she faltered in her belief that I could... that I would win. Doing the same now was the very least I could. "Believe in her," I said, sensing Kenny's dubious gaze on me. "That is the best we can do right now."

Despite that I still clenched my hands harder around the railing. Nord wasn't letting up. It was just the first minute and so far it was more a game of cat and mouse, Piplup and Lopunny still managing to evade the worst but any counters Dawn tried to come up with never made it far. The timing was off, the speed and execution was not as flawless as I knew she could pull them off under normal circumstances. And Nord's Pokémon were not only strong but also fast. Sure, not as fast as some of mine but enough to actually keep up with Piplup and Lopunny.

Again, this wouldn't be a problem normally. Dawn's style was actually perfect against a clear aggression tactic like Nord used. The mixture of evasion and effective combinations pulled off even under pressure could drive a Pokémon that just focused on relentless attacks past simple annoyance into sheer aggravation. Dawn had an incredible timing to do the right thing at just the right moment. But now her greatest strength was clearly hindered. And Nord was experienced enough to capitalize on that.

With a start I realized that I had gripped the metal bar so tightly it had actually dented. *I tend to forget that the training has made us a lot stronger, too*, I mused with a stray thought but then quickly focused back on the task at hand. Something had to be done and when I glanced back at Dawn's Pokémon watching their Trainer struggle below with various degrees of concern, I suddenly got a splendid idea.

The biggest problem at the moment was the mental influence obviously affecting Dawn far stronger right now than just a mere headache. Take that out of the equation and I knew she could turn this match around. On her own it would be hard for her in this kind of situation. Off balance, under pressure, with no time to properly focus, even with all the trust I had, I knew she couldn't do that in the remaining three

and a half minutes. Not by herself. But then again, just like I had told her, she wasn't alone.

"Alright, guys," I addressed Dawn's remaining Pokémon seriously, immediately getting their attention. "You all need to help now." The plan wasn't so much a plan. More like a vague idea, but it didn't need to be perfect. This was about trust, about support, about our feelings for Dawn. And in the end, that had always served us best.

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(Piplup)

When I first hit my evolution conditions, I admit it wasn't at the best of times. Dawn had had problems with Mamoswine not obeying her one bit and I wasn't really sure about whether or not I wanted to evolve to begin with. Seeing the stubbornness of our recent addition to the team had partly convinced me that evolving came equally with a change. Whether that was a change of personality altogether or just one of interaction, I wasn't sure. Seeing how close Ash and Pikachu were, I suppose made a great impression on me. Dawn and I fit together well as we were and I wanted to be more like Ash and his first Pokémon. Therefore I feared that our relationship would change should I evolve.

Right now, I almost wished I had taken the plunge. Snarling I tried to once more push past my opponent but only earned another stinging Night Slash for my troubles. And those hits hurt, they really did. There weren't many ordinary Pokémon that could inflict that much damage on us anymore. Our condition training had been grueling but we had all went along with it. Especially me. I wanted to be stronger. For Dawn. For our dream. There had never been a question of whether or not I could endure the things outlined to us at the beginning. Never a question of how far I would make it. Merely a question of how fast I could grow.

Not fast enough it seemed. While fending off another X-Scissors with a fast Water Gun that only served to push me further away, I watched helplessly how Lopunny was in even more trouble than me. Further away from where Mightyena had finally succeeded in clamping around her ears with a vicious Poison Fang. The cry of pain hurt me more than any of Absol's attacks so far and for a split moment my attention was fixated on the sight. Helpless anger burning inside myself when Mightyena didn't let go but used the opportunity to swing my partner upwards and slam her down on the stage floor.

Regardless how much I swore to myself that I would stay focused, that I wouldn't get distracted by my feelings for her, the absolute inability to do something to help her right now, ate into my heart sharper than any blade. My guard was down for a moment and Absol's Psycho Cut hit me head on. Physical agony complemented the emotional one but also served to override my rationality for the moment.

So far I had managed to stay focused, knowing that with the way Dawn was right now, it was far more up to Lopunny and I than any of us would like to admit feeling comfortable about. I knew if I made a mistake now, it could mean defeat right there. And yet, at that one moment it was too much and I lost it. Powering through the pain with raw anger and desperation, I charged at my foe, intent on unleashing all my frustration.

It was a foolish move and I paid dearly when Absol caught my beak in its mouth and then hit me with another Night Slash that lifted me up into the air. Tumbling disorientated from the new pain, I didn't recognize the follow-up Psycho Cut until it drove into me from above. Shocked out of my anger, I could do nothing before Absol finished its combination with X-Scissors.

I slammed hard into the ground, feeling like I had gone three battles in a row with Pikachu at full power. Every bone in my body ached and try as I might, I couldn't even muster the thought of trying to get up. Was that it? Was that the limit of our efforts? To be beaten here? In a match like this? Against an opponent who didn't even care one bit about the ideals of a Coordinator? I waited for the finishing blow... but it never came.

Unsure of how much time had elapsed, I turned my head around. Only two minutes left. Nord didn't have much of a point advantage surprisingly... or not, his tactics were not exactly Contest-worthy. But he had a lead and as long as he could keep us separated and off-balance, it would be enough. If we even lasted that long. I wasn't sure myself I could continue right now, even more surprised I had apparently not been declared out of the match.

But then my gaze found my partner and I felt like crying. There had been no further attack coming at me because Absol had joined its partner in tormenting Lopunny. And I meant that literally. She was weak from the poison and constantly trying to evade. Now one attack after another came at her and it was clearly too much. It didn't matter how much condition training we had made, no one was able to take that amount of damage for very long. I couldn't even feel anger anymore when I saw her getting caught in a ruthless Crunch from Mightyena, who let her dangle from its mouth while Absol hit her with several repeated attacks. It was more like a beating than a match.

Tearing my gaze away, I found Dawn standing there shocked, angry... helpless. Had she given up? I couldn't even begin to imagine what she had to be feeling right now. Apart from our emotional bond, I had little idea about mental powers and doubted I could ever master any of them. I wished I could. I wished I could share her pain, to understand it and to help her through this. The only way I could really tell something was really wrong was that even that emotional bond we had felt dull, lifeless, cut off somehow.

During the entire match I had mostly been on my own and that was bound to be our undoing. We were strongest together. Our synchrony, our harmony, that was what defined us on stage, defined us for Contests and defined our very relationship as a whole.

No, Dawn wouldn't give up. Not like this. Not so close. Her dreams were our dreams. Something had to be done, I needed to show her that not all was lost. That she could trust in us and we trusted in her. In the end all her new powers were nothing but an added bonus – a bonus that had now become a burden. We could do this even without them. We could win even against these odds. I truly believed that she could shake of the influence. Dawn was strong, perhaps much stronger than me.

Yes, I had to do something. Struggling to my feet, despite my body's protests, I found that this resolution was even more dire than just helping Dawn past her problem. At Nord's command, Mightyena and Absol had backed up. I swallowed a lump in my throat when I saw Lopunny lying there badly beaten, weakly struggling with herself. She was just as stubborn as me when it came to this match. We had both vowed to see Dawn to victory today. No doubt she was thinking the same things as me right now, despite all the pain.

"Finish her off," Nord's cold voice could have frozen fire. It definitely engulfed my heart, seeing his two Pokémon prepare something completely different. Absol had jumped on Mightyena and both were glowing in a strong aura of Dark-type energy. I wasn't so much concerned about the fact that they were actually preparing a combo or that this one seemed to be less physical than the majority of their attacks. I was concerned for their target. Lopunny wasn't in a condition to move anytime soon and the amount of power those two were gathering was a lot. In her state, an attack like this could do much more to Lopunny than just knocking her out.

I didn't even spare any thoughts on what I had to do. I heard Dawn yelling for Lopunny. But it was desperate and even if she had full control, Lopunny wouldn't be able to do anything. I was the only one left and I would die before letting harm come to her!

Thus I forced my tired legs and aching body to move. Time seemed to slow as I saw the dark aura getting denser around the two who would dare hurt my precious mate, willingly ready to inflict injury or worse. I could not stand for it. I could not allow this to happen! I would protect her and I would protect our dream as well! Regardless of what it took!!

I didn't register that the Everstone began to crack...

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(Dawn)

Pure torture.

Adequately describing just what it was I was feeling during the match would be impossible. It was a bit like a huge weight had been flung at me and I was now desperately trying not to get pulled down and buried underneath. But the end result was best describe as pure torture. I could still follow the match, I could still give commands but not only could I hardly feel our bond, reducing the reaction time to a bare minimum but the oppressive feeling was more than just distracting now. More than once I had barely caught myself from making a bad judgment call.

So in the end I could just barely react and now had to watch helplessly as my Pokémon paid the price. I would have shouted in anger at Nord at the treatment of Lopunny but that would have required a loss of even more control and anymore of that would surely crush my fragile defenses completely. Nonetheless, I was helpless, desperate and frustrated. My dream was slipping away in a manner I had never imagined possible. However, even worse was the feeling of seeing my Pokémon hurt so much, their own hard work crushed in such a manner.

Then Nord ordered his Pokémon for a final attack on the downed Lopunny and my eyes widened, horror gripping my heart. "No, stop it!" I cried out and immediately winced, stumbling and barely catching myself on one knee as my barrier slipped further.

Time seemed to slow to a crawling pace as I watched helplessly as the dark aura solidified. I could feel it in every fiber of my being, a nauseating, sickening power to my already weakened mind. Frantically I tried to think of something, anything that could help Lopunny. Yet, in the end, she was down, barely conscious at this point. Even if I had some idea, it wouldn't do any good. A sudden wetness trickling down my cheek made me aware of the tears in my eyes. I couldn't let it end like this. I would rather take the hit myself than to have Lopunny experience what was supposed to follow.

There was no other choice. Everything else was hopeless at this point. Forgive me, I failed you. With a heavy heart, I grabbed for Lopunny's Pokéball, prepared to call her back, which would effectively take her out of the match and pretty much destroy any chance of still turning this around. Their safety was more important though.

I was just about to lift it when I saw the amazing sight of Piplup – beaten and clearly on the last vestiges of his strength – struggling to his feet and breaking into a wobbly but determined run towards his partner. Part of me was immediately concerned that now they would both be facing the enemy attack, however, before I

could react to that new development, something pierced through the fog of dark energy in my mind.

Don't give up!

I couldn't tell you how but I knew with absolute certainty that it was Piplup's voice, piercing like a ray of light into deep darkness. And that ray was just the beginning to something more. I could feel it then. Warmth, love, support, hope, trust. For a moment my gaze turned and I saw Ash and Kenny up above the stands and all of my Pokémon were there. I could feel their concentration, I could feel their support flowing into me. And I could feel Espeon and Togekiss sharing their own mental powers to reinforce my barrier.

When you are out there, even if it feels hopeless, remember that. Trust in the bond you have with your Pokémon and trust that I and so many others believe in you. Then, you truly can do anything.

NO! I couldn't stop here! Not with everyone putting so much trust, so much effort into seeing my dream realized. No, not just my dream. Our dream. My Pokémon took as much part in it as Ash had come to. Just like I had and was sharing his dream, so did he for me. And to give up now would be betraying them as well.

"Absolute Darkness!" Somewhat detached I saw Mightyena and Absol fire a thick beam of dark energy at my downed Pokémon. It was a strange feeling, so unlike before. There was no fear for Lopunny because I knew even before it could hit that Piplup was there and to the amazement of everyone – partly including myself – was throwing himself against the beam with sheer physical force and will. I also knew that no matter what, he wouldn't give in. However, I was surprised by what happened next.

Just as it seemed he was getting pushed back and overwhelmed, he began to glow brightly. Unbelieving, I could just stare as Piplup was evolving. Part of me wondered what happened to the Everstone but the bigger part of me was amazed that he was actually going through with it. I could feel it though. His determination, his absolute, fierce unwillingness to give up on what we had all worked so hard for. This was for me, just as much as it was for himself and all the others.

Seeing this act of selfless commitment was the last push I needed. Reaching deep inside myself, drawing strength from the feelings of everyone pouring into me, I pushed against the darkness surrounding my mind with a colossal mental effort. And just like that, everything snapped into place. Where before numbness had dulled my senses, I could see and feel everything. Much more strongly and acutely than before. Even Piplup and Lopunny's presence was as if I was linking myself with Espeon.

Calm and invigorating energy flowed through me and I allowed it to flow outward towards Pi... Prinplup and Lopunny. I didn't need to look to see Lopunny struggling to her feet, I didn't need to see Prinplup standing tall against the dark beam by using Bide, bit by bit absorbing the energy. It was much less a mental link or a telepathic communications. Lopunny simply knew what I wanted the moment I thought it. In fact, this felt more like we – Prinplup, Lopunny and I – were sharing a single mind for the moment.

"Impossible!" we heard Nord exclaim as the Ice Beam pierced the halted and weakened combination attack with such force that when it struck Nord's Pokémon, they were flung halfway across the stage.

"It is not," I said calmly, slowly opening my eyes and rising to my feet, barrier now firmly in place and my mind clearer than I ever thought it had been before, touched and merged with those of my Pokémon. "But I do not expect you to understand." Just a little time left on the clock. Good. That had to do. "Hope, trust, friendship. You never believed in these things, did you? I would feel pity for you but after what you tried to do to my Pokémon for your selfish ego... Let me show you exactly why you never became a Master!"

A shared mental plan was made and Prinplup lost no time in acting on it. Using the stored up power from Bide, he created a giant whirlpool, much bigger than anything he had ever managed before. I could feel that both of my Pokémon were exhausted, drawing on sheer will for reserve, but unwilling to give up. As soon as the Whirlpool was completely formed Lopunny fired a Charge Beam at it, sending highly potent electricity into the current. Prinplup didn't flinch though as the conducting water poured some of it through him but waited until the two attacks had mixed enough before throwing the Whirlpool at our recovering opponents.

Nord was experienced enough to get them clear of the worst of it but compared to us, Mightyena and Absol were not used to being on the defense. The attack was just too big to completely avoid and left them drenched and electrified quite a bit.

This time the tables had turned and it was Nord who was off-balance, disbelieving at the sudden reversal. We didn't press the attack immediately but used his own distraction against him when he had his Pokémon rush mine again. This time we were ready. This time there was nothing hindering us. Prinplup jumped over Absol's Night Slash, then caught its horn by employing a variation of Metal Claw – which he seemed to have learned along with the evolution – and flung it back, almost to the edge of the stage.

At the same time Lopunny twisted past Mightyena's lunge with the same grace that had become her trademark, as if all the damage hadn't occurred before. We

shared a good bit of satisfaction when the Focus Punch struck the Wolf Pokémon straight in the nuzzle, sending it howling straight after its partner.

Only thirty seconds left. Time to finish this.

Perhaps we didn't quite have a badass finisher like Pikachu but that didn't mean there wasn't a final ace left to play. We didn't even hesitate. Regardless of the fact that we had never managed to pull it off fully in training. At least not without at least minute or so focusing and preparation. This time, however, the circumstances were perfect. The evolution had given Prinplup another boost in strength and elemental control. His earlier action had impressed Lopunny so much that their harmony and synchrony were at their highest. And with everyone giving their strength, driving away fatigue and any other distraction, the only path open was the one of success.

Are you watching, mom? This is what we have all worked so hard for.

"Crystal... Dream."

Technically it was nothing spectacular. A Hydro Pump and Ice Beam combination. Something everyone here had seen those two do quite a lot. The difference lay in the very delicate process of mixing them just right. Strength, density, timing, everything had to be just right down to the molecules – literally.

A hushed whisper rang through the stadium when the two attacks met and merged. Everyone expected some kind of frozen water attack. But the end result was a more and more expanding "beam" of pure crystal. Solid, strong and sparkling in rainbow colors but despite that still moving forward, growing, as if it was still liquid. Nord simply gaped and we felt a not too small amount of satisfaction at his stupefied expression when he watched without reaction as the attack slammed into Mightyena and Absol with the force of a bullet train. Already at the edge of the stage, they were driven right off, flying through the air for a long time even as the crystal seemed to engulf them before bursting with a great spectacle of light and crystal shards flying everywhere, leaving Mightyena and Absol stuck against the lower boundary of the stands, not moving an inch and certainly they would not any time soon.

"T-Time!" Lillian's shaky voice cut through the stunned silence. Jolted out of my absolute connection, it took me a moment to become used to the feeling of independent thought again before I automatically glanced towards the board. The time was indeed up and there hadn't been a signal for knockout which meant... "The time was up before competitor Nord's Pokémon fainted," Lillian explained and for a moment I felt my heart clench.

But then my gaze moved upwards, where the points were displayed. Logically I knew that Nord's methods would not have brought him much points and we had

managed to pull off two spectacular combinations that the judges should know weren't exactly easy to produce.

I registered what I saw on the board but I think it only really settled when Lillian announced the result. "Therefore, winner of this year's Kanto Grand Festival is... Dawn!"

I won. I did it!

No, not just me. We. Prinplup and Lopunny, all my other Pokémon and Ash, too. This was truly a result of our friendship, love and shared dreams. It was the kind of victory that incorporated everything Contests stood for. A total harmony between Coordinator and their Pokémon, one bringing out the absolute best in the other, in both ways.

Overwhelming joy was threatening to burst in my heart. Joy at winning, of course, but also for all my dear friends who had done their very best to walk this road with me up to this point. Where Nord's efforts had failed to bring me down in the end, now the happiness did. The moment I relaxed my concentration, the fatigue caught up to me and I sank to my knees. But Prinplup and Lopunny were already there, smiling at me. Tired but proudly.

Without another word, I opened my arms and enveloped them in a fierce embrace, this time letting the tears flow freely and without restraint as we bathed in this eternal moment of success and happiness.

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Cerulean Cave, Outskirts of Cerulean City (Misty)

This wasn't exactly how I had imagined to spend my day off. I had at least reserved the morning and afternoon to indulge myself in watching the Kanto Grand Festival finals. Having Leaf drop in for one of her unexpected visits had certainly been even more reason to look forward to a day of leisure and enjoyment. But we had barely managed to watch the recording of the first rounds when things started to go wrong.

There was never a question in my mind whether or not I would help the other girl. I was a Gym Leader, damn it – and according to the young Master a rather good one –, I wasn't the type to sit by idly when others headed into a dangerous situation – at least not when I knew about it – and much more importantly Mew and Mewtwo were a special topic for Ash, Brock and me. Neither of them would have hesitated a moment either. Both of our meetings were defining factors in our young lives, memories that would stay forever – thankfully for real now.

What really bothered me about this whole thing was that Mewtwo was supposed to have erased the memory of those after him. I could only fathom that this merely applied to the second encounter and not to their existence altogether. Or had something else happened? I didn't know but I found it all quite irritating.

"Are we getting any closer?" We had been sneaking through the complex tunnel system for a long time now. The process had been difficult since Leaf had warned me that in the event that we got separated I should try and avoid direct confrontations as much as possible. I could see the logic in that since going so deep into the cave meant that every battle would exhaust my Pokémon and eventually, even if I were to find Mew, I might not be able to do anything because my entire team was already too weak. Unfortunately that meant carefully avoiding small teams of Team Rocket members combing the caves.

"I would like to say, yes," the big fox-like Pokémon at my side said, "but that would be lying." Zoroark was a big help and without him I probably would have been either lost or had run into so much battles I couldn't have continued. So far he had anticipated not only possible run-ins in time to avoid them but his very presence mostly scared off the wild Pokémon living in here. "At least I can safely say that they haven't caught up with the Holy One either."

Well, I suppose that was a good thing then. If Team Rocket didn't succeed in what they came here for that would be acceptable. Even if it would leave me in a sour mood for having to traverse in the damp, dark cave tunnels for nothing. Considering how much time had gone by, Dawn was probably just having her final match. I had wanted to see that, especially after what Leaf had said about that other "Coordinator". Well, a recording would have to do.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," I said, stopping to take a sip from my canteen. "It's only the two of us here while Leaf is tied up with the crazy bitch. They've got more men and are more likely to find Mew while we are sneaking around." I wasn't too worried about the other girl. Knowing how strong she was, there was no need to believe she was in any danger, regardless how high up the ladder the blonde – I forgot her name – actually was. Unfortunately, communications down here was strongly impeded. I had tried to contact her a few times but never got a clear signal in. Somehow I doubted she was still fighting her opponent. We had been down here for hours. Of course catching up to us here all on her own wasn't exactly easy either. I had grown up in Cerluean City but only had been in the outer edges of this cave, never so far in.

"Perhaps you are right," Zoroark replied lowly. Sound carried far here and the least we wanted was to be discovered like this. "From what I can feel it seems the other humans are starting to surround the Holy One's position gradually." I grimaced. That meant they could track Mew, too, perhaps even far more accurate than

Zoroark's vague senses could. I wouldn't put the possibility beyond Team Rocket's capabilities.

The question was: What could we do? Even if we did manage to sneak by all the opposition and catch up with Mew before them, it didn't eliminate the dozens of Team Rocket members. Sure, I might have confidence to take on a few of them but going through them all? That certainly wouldn't help in achieving the mission objective...

Mission objective. Of course! I grinned slightly. "Say, can you tell where the team nearest to Mew's location is?" The idea was kind of reckless and I was sure to get a reprimand from Leaf for this but I really didn't see much other choice.

Zoroark looked back at me questioningly but without a word closed his eyes to check. I waited anxiously, fingering my Pokéballs in anticipation. Eventually the Fox Pokémon opened his eyes again. "About half a mile from our position there is a greater group of humans. If they continue on their way, they will cut off the Holy One's current flight path." That was all relative, I knew. Zoroark seemed to have mostly memorized the map of the caves but even he couldn't project it together with what he was sensing that accurately.

"Any way we can cut them off before they can do so?" I asked hopefully.

Zoroark just stared, then blinked in recognition. "I see. A bold idea but perhaps the best course of action right now. If we take the tunnel to the right and follow the path, we should run into them eventually." I was glad that I didn't have to argue with the Pokémon. He had taken my safety rather seriously to this point – stating that Leaf would be "very cross with him" if something were to happen to me – and I had almost expected having to convince him. But it seemed, he understood. The ultimate mission objective was not to find Mew but to prevent whatever Team Rocket had planned for the Legendary. Diverting the attention of several of the pursuers at once might just do that.

Grimly I turned towards the indicated tunnel and steeled my nerves. This would be different. I didn't have to fight serious battles outside official rules or normal wild battles since travelling with Ash and Dawn. A mistake now could cost me more than the match. These guys weren't the bumbling fools that Jesse and James had been. My decision stood, however. Besides if worse came to worse I could try a hit and run, trying to draw off as many of them as possible.

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Cerulean City (Leaf)

"Looks like... I win after all." I panted, slightly out of breath, more from the mental exhaustion than the little bit of fighting I had done myself, but also quite a bit annoyed it had taken me so damn long to get to this point. Having to send Misty into the cave by herself was risky enough and the more time passed, the more I was convinced, it wasn't one of my best choices. All by herself against all the remaining enemies in the cave? What had I been thinking?

Domino had not made it easy for me either. Her Pokémon were tough. Not enough to defeat me, but enough to stall me until she had called back an entire unit of reinforcements. Six grunts and their Pokémon, all moderately skilled. Each of them clearly nowhere near my level but the sheer number served to drag the battle out. Even using the emergency release of the limitation of Pokémon actively usable, it took a long time to take out all the "cannon fodder" and certainly left my team at least slightly winded.

Only then had Domino entered the battle again herself, still leaving the massive Electivire out of the battle. Nonetheless she proved to be a tough opponent and with the advantage of having most of her remaining team fresh and the others recovered, I actually lost quite a few of my Pokémon, regardless of how conservative I had been battling.

Most of my Sinnoh League team was still intact now that it was only the strange Electivire left and still the blonde Rocket Elite did seem peculiar unconcerned. "So it would seem. Of course, you realize the girl alone won't accomplish much. In fact, by the time you get past me, it will already be too late."

I gave her a grim smile. "I don't think so. If your objective here was already achieved, you would have long escaped instead of wasting resources." After all this was a specialized team here, not the kind of lackeys I had been dealing with over the last months.

"Even so. It won't be long now and you have not yet defeated me." She made a hand gesture and suddenly the Electivire surged forward. The charge came with such viciousness that I was taken completely by surprise for one moment. That would cost me dearly. Snatch received a brutal Thunderpunch that sent him crashing with a sickening crack against a rock. While I was still shocked by the sheer power, Electivire had already followed up smoothly and took even Lemuria out by employing a Thunder attack that could easily rival one of Ash's Pikachu's without the limiter. Granted both had been quite tired already but the raw power displayed was far above any of what Domino's other Pokémon had shown.

There was also something that felt very, very wrong about Electivire. Sure, I had no psychic powers or similar senses like Zoroark but its size aside, even I could tell something was off about this Pokémon. Was this one of the secrets Team Rocket had done so much work in covering up lately? Some kind of genetic experiment?

"Careful, guys. That one is tough. Let's not take any chances," I addressed my remaining Pokémon. Flawlessly Shadow took point and absorbed the next Thunder in a variation of Black Hole which we had been practicing. Not quite as potent as the full version, it could be employed in a way that still allowed some movement and counter action. The basic flaw of the original – its stationary nature – was what ultimately cost me the match with Ash after all and I wouldn't deserve the title of Master if I didn't work to correct such weaknesses.

This allowed Shadow to jump up when Berserker followed with Earthquake, firing of a Toxic while Hellfire charged low. The Earthquake hit and sent Electivire slightly up into the air but to my frustration I saw the Toxic dissipate against a powerful electric charge. However, that allowed Hellfire to follow up with a sweeping Flamethrower going upwards and catching Electivire during its fall. Shadow immediately followed up with a Dark Pulse that pushed the huge Pokémon further back.

Still Electivire managed to remain on its feet and merely shook its head with a growl, apparently just more angry. The fury directed at my Pokémon was unsettling. There was something really wrong with the kind of mindless rage. It was like it had no will of its own, no own consciousness, just a relentless lust for battle. Domino hadn't even given any commands and somehow I had the impression that even if she did, Electivire might not even listen.

Grimacing slightly, I was far from giving up though. Okay, it was strong but hardly any stronger than any of Ash's stronger ones. With three of my best working together, this shouldn't be too big of a problem.

Before I could get back into the battle, however, I caught Domino taking out some kind of device and speaking into it lowly. Obviously some sort of communicator to stay in contact with her team. This immediately worried me since it could very well mean one of several worst possibilities. Torn between this and the raging Electivire, my Pokémon barely avoided another charge, thankfully skilled enough to keep their opponent at least busy without my active participation.

Finally Domino looked up from her device, amused at my attention. "Too bad, it looks like our target teleported away." The grin she sent me didn't quite match the disappointment the statement should have brought and immediately snuffed out my relief. "Of course, I anticipated something like this. Exhausted like this, there are only a few likely locations even a powerful Psychic like Mew can go." Which meant most if not all these possibilities were covered. "Too bad for you, little girl. Your intervention was doomed to fail from the start with only two of you."

This was bad, I needed to take her down now. If there was any chance of salvaging the situation, capturing the enemy's leader of their mission would be the

only option. That, of course, meant getting past Electivire first. Well, I wouldn't need to hold back further now, knowing Mew was long gone.

Again I never got the chance. To my astonishment, Domino chose this moment to recall Electivire into a pitch black Pokéball. Perplexed I started towards her, wary but not about to give her the chance of doing whatever she was planning. "Nuh uh, I wouldn't do that," Domino said, stopping me, indecisive for a moment. "I have recalled all my men from the cave but it seems your little friend had the bright idea of challenging several of them in hopes of tying them up."

A cold chill ran down my spine. Misty. I knew rationally that even if I hurried, it would take some time to find her down there. I should focus on catching Domino but my heart said something different. Before I could make up my mind, the sound of a helicopter overhead could be heard and then Domino activated some kind of hover pack strapped to her back. She laughed. "I would hurry. Wouldn't that be a shame if you got someone who isn't even an official League Agent killed?"

Cursing, I recalled my Pokémon and, ignoring the fleeing woman, dashed into the cave.

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Lake Valor, Sinnoh (May)

With a little wistfulness I watched the celebration. Dawn looked really tired but glowing as happy as I had been feeling yesterday and still was to some degree. She was leaning against Ash behind her, proudly presenting the trophy. No, I wasn't really wistful because of seeing the two of them together. After all I did not begrudge them their happiness. However, they had at least each other to share this moment with.

My own victory was not any less important. Regardless of my underlying reasons and motivations, becoming Top Coordinator had been my goal and now I had reached it. And because of that, it felt kind of lonely celebrating all by myself, just with my Pokémon. There had been a small party afterwards but save for Harley I barely knew anyone. He had mellowed out some over the years and genuinely congratulated me on my victory but we never had been very close and so all the people there that I barely knew, just reminded me that travelling alone simply was not the same as travelling with friends.

At least I did have the easier match, I thought. Dawn's final battle was really intense and I had been worried for a long time. Even more so I had been amazed and impressed by her comeback. It took a lot of willpower and character to fight back from a situation like this. I wasn't sure if I could have done it. Not here, not without the kind of support she had in Ash. Whatever had been bothering her, had affected her

almost the whole match and yet in a single instant she had turned the entire thing around.

Clearly her sudden revival had caught her opponent completely off guard. With the way the match was going, I could understand how only very few would be able to deal with such a sudden reversal. Nord had had the match under control, he was clearly assured of victory. At the point just before it happened, even I had almost thought that the match really was over.

As such the sudden comeback would have caught most people unaware. Shifting a mindset after dominating the battle for so long was not exactly easy. That is why sudden reversals from almost assured losses had such great potency. Momentum was the real key aspect here. From what I had seen Nord was clearly an experienced and strong Trainer. But regardless how good you were, sometimes one small moment, one important action could shift the entire momentum of a match. It would be so sudden that your entire battle plan, your entire mindset would suddenly crumble and allow the opponent to capitalize, reversing a match into their favor before you knew what happened.

I had experienced this quite a few times myself, including last year's final against Drew. And as such I knew that the spectacular way in which Dawn had eventually won was less because without whatever had been blocking her she was simply stronger – the better Coordinator, that I could agree on – but much more due to the momentum gained from that point and the fierceness of her comeback.

"And now, before we can all send you home, there is an important announcement I am required to make that concerns all recent Top Coordinators and of course, all of you Contest fans out there." And here it came. The announcement had definitely taken me by surprise when it had been made after my own win yesterday. Not an unwelcome surprise though.

"Because of the rising popularity of Contests, the Pokémon League has announced plans to make the Contest circuit even more competitive and eventful as League Championships already are. As a first step, in about one year time a cross-regional tournament will take place, pairing Trainers and Coordinators together in teams and pitching them against each other as the first cross-regional and battle-Contest mix ever. Qualification rounds will be held over the next year, with the first ones deciding a spot on the team of most recent Sinnoh League Champion Ash Ketchum will be held in just over a month."

I did snicker slightly at the stunned look on Ash and Dawn's faces. Clearly, not even Ash had had an idea about this and was similarly taken by surprise. "Further details will be supplied to qualified applicants soon. I hope we will all see you there. You can expect a great show when only the best Top Coordinators are competing for this new prestigious event."

Dawn would participate, of course. There was no way that she wouldn't considering Ash's involvement. The way I understood it, the qualification rounds were just one way of getting into the teams, of course, but that definitely wouldn't stop Dawn. And neither would it stop me.

No, the surprise was definitely not unwelcome. In fact, the setting was perfect to not only catch up to them and make my own feelings clear, but also to show them how serious I was. Dawn's victory had been as impressive as I had expected it to be. She definitely had the harder challenge in the end, regardless how generally tougher the opposition here in Sinnoh might have been. I knew she was still a good bit ahead of me. This new Contest type was the perfect stage to prove my own worth to them.

"You are pleased," Naru commented suddenly, making me jump slightly. I had thought she was asleep. It wasn't a question either.

"I am." I genuinely smiled. For the first time in recent months I felt invigorated and totally psyched up for something. It was kind of funny that this was getting me more motivated than even the Grand Festival just now, but it was also so much more personal. "It won't be easy but I am really looking forward to this."

Naru chuckled, a rare sound from the often rather moody Eevee. "Good. You look much more appealing that way." I blushed slightly, not expecting the comment. But then again, Naru was never one to mince words, so I could take the observation as genuine. "You might need an edge if you want to have a chance against her." Which I suppose was correct. Considering Dawn had obviously been handicapped almost the entire final match and still managed to win, meant I would have to make even more of an effort as I had so far and even then the gap might still be too big. "Want me to help?"

I blinked, definitely not expecting this. Naru hadn't participated in any Contest so far and I had never considered forcing the issue. She was a special case after all and as such her sudden willingness was really heart-warming. I smiled genuinely in response. "I'd like that."

Dawn wouldn't know what hit her.

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Cerulean Cave (Mew)

This was fun.

Well, if I were a few centuries younger perhaps, the situation not quite so dire and the danger not quite so lethal. I had to admit that over all this time I had tried to

preserve my playful side, a task not quite as easy as it might seem to those that actually got to see me. As such the continuous game of hide-and-seek would have been appealing if not for its serious nature.

At least the cultivation of my playful side had allowed me to keep a positive attitude. Many of the original generation had long since succumbed to an overly serious outlook in life, mixed with a selection of gloom, sarcasm, cynicism or other such quirks. That wasn't quite surprising considering the heavy duty resting on their shoulders. In fact, I could consider myself fairly blessed, mostly unrestricted and free to explore the world until the prophesized time.

Which was now. And if I didn't get out of here soon, all the waiting might have been for naught. Sensing another group of humans and "things" trying to cut me off into a dead end, I had to perform another short teleport into a side passage, quickly dashing away from my pursuers.

One thing this definitely was would be exhausting. I would have almost preferred a head-on fight. But even with Mewtwo tying up several of them, there still were a lot, I was still partly drained from the earlier activities and as much as I hated to admit it, the enemy was clever and coordinated.

At the beginning I had barely managed to take out two of the abominations. Not only had I quickly realized though that I wouldn't be able to keep this up for long, but also that in doing so I had almost allowed myself to get surrounded. After that I had taken to flight. Another opportunity to get one of them alone had not presented itself, there was always at least another close by.

Regardless of being able to evade them so far, I couldn't entirely eliminate several confrontations, each of them further forcing me to exert more energy than I could afford just to get clear again. Each of these creatures were tough and in my current state I doubted I could handle more than two at once – and even that was already a strain. If I could just rest for a little while, recover some of my strength but they wouldn't let me. I knew stopping would be fatal. They'd be all over me instantly.

Giovanni really wasn't sparing the effort. I doubted strongly this was anything but a chance encounter, a stroke of luck in discovering us here. For that though, the coordinated effort to take me down was surprising... and deeply concerning. If their preparations were that advanced already that they could spare and employ a strike team like this on such short notice, then it wouldn't take much longer before they made a move.

I should have gone to them earlier after all, I thought darkly. They had already gotten so much stronger and my Chosen had also made great progress, her powers already starting to awaken. However, I had wanted to give them some more time.

Right now was an important part of her life and I didn't want to add more weight on the shoulders of one so young.

But now it seemed time had run out. Ironically not for them, but for me. And now I couldn't wait any longer. I had been trying to reach out a couple of times to my Chosen but had been repelled by surprisingly strong shields and a fierce mental concentration. There was frustration and concern behind it, and a dark cloud pressing on these barriers – but far too weak to be anything too serious. However, pressing further would only serve to break her defenses, I had realized. And that was not my intention. There wasn't really anything direct she could do for me anyway.

Those other two might. I had sensed them almost as soon as they came here. I had been both elated and immediately concerned that they were here. It was too early for a confrontation like this. I knew one of them was my opposite, the one that had started to prepare the others slightly. That was good but she was tied up at the entrance for quite some time now. The other one I also recognized, she was there at THAT day, with Mewtwo and I. She was all by herself though. If I went to her, it would immediately draw all the attention from me to her and might just make things worse.

Mewtwo was getting weaker, too. That much I could sense. There was no time to start getting worried though. My clone definitely could take care of himself. He wouldn't needlessly sacrifice himself, I was sure of that. Of course, if he could and would be allowed to escape afterwards was another question. I retained my hope, though. It was the only thing I could. Belief was a powerful force after all.

Then I noticed the sudden pause of several of my pursuers and the cause for the sudden gap in their net. Torn between relief and concern for my benefactor, I had little choice but to take the offered opportunity. Anything else would make the effort wasted and that just wouldn't do.

Zippering down the corridor at high speed, I almost missed the slight tingling of my senses and just barely evaded the giant claw trying to literally snap me in half as the towering Drapion burst from the ground so sudden, I was perplexed for a crucial moment. Enough for an overpowered Shadow Ball to hit me in the side. Crying out, I bounced against the wall, barely managing to stay afloat and turning to see that my attacker had been a Gengar that had to have been phasing through the wall.

Crap, I have been so focused on everyone else, I didn't pay attention to my immediate surroundings. This isn't good. The two warped creatures immediately rushed at me again and I hastily threw up a barrier in their way, dashing away again. It wouldn't hold them for long and now that I was more aware of the area directly around myself, I noticed several more presences moving outside the normal pathways.

"Really not good," I muttered. I needed to get away. If I kept that up, they would have me eventually. Part of me had hoped that more reinforcements for the other two would arrive soon, diverting my pursuers' attention further, but it seemed that wouldn't happen. Not soon enough at least.

Desperation was starting to rise inside of me and I forcefully pressed down on it but nonetheless reached out once more with my senses to my Chosen. It seemed whatever had required such an intense focus had passed. In fact, I could feel her more settled, her powers more stable. Left with little other choice, I drew what energy I could still gather in the moment together. Stopping in the middle of the tunnel I was aware of the two that had almost caught me off-guard moving in from behind and others starting to surround me.

It would be risky. Making such a long jump in my state would almost completely drain me. I knew I could but if anything else went wrong afterwards, I would be as weak as a Caterpie...

The growl of something large from further up ahead, shaking the tunnel walls dangerously made the decision for me. Latching onto the presence of the one person I knew I needed right now, drawing some extra strength from the unused and unacknowledged connection, I teleported out of the cave...

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Heal Bell, Academy (Brock)

With mild humor but a far stronger adoration, I watched Ako go through a checklist of everything we would need for our trip. Watching the final of the Kanto Grand Festival was obviously still affecting her. It was interesting to watch how she had been caught up in the battle or how relieved she had been when it was all over. While a dedicated student most of the times, Ako could get refreshingly affected by things that captivated her, manifesting in overly emotional reactions that some could find a little childish. I just found them cute. Another adoring aspect of this beautiful young woman that had blessed my life so unexpectedly.

Her reaction to the conclusion of the final still brought a soft smile to my face. "Phew, I'm so relieved!" she had exclaimed, breathing in and out dramatically as if it had been her on stage. Yes, she really could get into things that fascinated her, to a degree of obsession, an ironic contrast to her bouts of absentmindedness. Or perhaps they were both different expression of the same trait?

Of course, I had to admit that I, too, had been fully absorbed in the match. Part of me had been equally misgiving and commiserate for the abuse Dawn's Pokémon had to suffer throughout the match. Ako had been downright furious that Nord had actually been allowed to continue in this way but I could see the dilemma the judges

faced. Clearly his actions were not Contest-worthy. Yet, throwing him out completely would just serve the point he was trying to make. And during the match the worst he did until the point of Dawn's comeback had been hard but just barely within allowable borders. The only thing they could have done was to declare Dawn's Pokémon incapable of continuing. And that hadn't been fair. Surely they were at least remotely aware of what lengths her Pokémon could and would go for her.

That had almost backfired though when Nord ordered his attack on an already defenseless Lopunny. Frankly I was glad that I was only watching on TV. Had I been there, I don't know what I would have done to the guy for pulling a stunt like that. I was fairly sure, had he gotten through with it, there would have been a disqualification. But he hadn't, Dawn had somehow, miraculously pulled things around. She really was becoming more and more like Ash in that regard.

I had been far more worried about her state of mind. I couldn't fathom what had affected her so much during the match, only that it had to be something serious, otherwise I doubted she would let it get in her way. Seeing her so utterly... helpless had hurt. Dawn had become as much a sort of little sister to me as I regarded Ash like a brother, more so than I had ever felt that way with Misty or May. Perhaps it was due to the fact that those two had been so much closer during their journey than Ash had been with the other girls. They fit naturally together. And so, seeing her in such distress had been the greater reason for concern, because her ability to win had never been up to debate at all.

These concerns had proven unnecessary after all and I was very happy for her. She had seemed rather tired when I called earlier to give my congratulations on her victory but that was to be expected. Whatever she had been fighting with during the match probably cost her a lot of effort. But she had been positively glowing. Happy, satisfied and a small part of her perhaps still in wonder. Not that I could blame her. The development her and Ash had gone through recently was nothing short of wondrous.

I'll see them again soon, I thought. I had not mentioned anything earlier, wanting to surprise them but I was quite certain Dawn wouldn't let a challenge like the one just announced go. True, I didn't know what her and Ash had been planning after her victory. Ash had put a hold on participations in official battles for Dawn over the last year and I was sure he was itching for some competition as well. Nonetheless, they would work out something that would benefit them both. They would be there. In fact, since the first qualification round for the new type of competition involved him, I was quite sure Ash had to be there.

The coincidence for Lance to suggest this assignment for us was somewhat suspicious though. To send us to the location of the first qualification round while Ash and Dawn were almost certain to be there, too... Well, the Elite had not spared on his reasons at least and freely admitted that the qualification round would fall into the

League's projected timeframe for Team Rocket to be ready to make some kind of big move. It would be one of the more prominent possible targets. After all new events like this, broadcasted and announced to many viewers, were bound to draw a lot of attention from the public. League presence would be high during the event and I could certainly see where some capable Field Medics like us would be needed. Even if nothing happened, it was still a competition between Top Coordinators, the best of the crop. The fighting would be fierce and in turn the need for treatment would be equally high.

I could not quite shake off the feeling though that there was something more behind all of this.

Well, it wouldn't do me any good to chase after shadows I couldn't even be sure were there to begin with. In the end it was a job. My first official job since I came here. For Ako it wasn't all that different from when she had helped out in the Sinnoh League tournament, just with some more responsibility. Knowing that I would be there as well, had put her much more at ease than she would have been otherwise.

I caught Ako looking up briefly from her work, following her gaze to where Flareon and Leafeon were curled up against each other, comfortably relaxing. Yet another thing to be happy about. We had known Flareon was part of a greater litter. We weren't quite sure how many there were but Leafeon wasn't her only sibling. Knowing that Leafeon had been owned by a Team Rocket member had my suspicions go rather unpleasant ways. Perhaps there were more of them stuck with the criminal organization. I wasn't sure what I would do if we might come to face one of them in battle.

For the moment though they seemed comfortable to have found each other again and Leafeon was far more agreeable as long as her sister was around.

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Seafom Islands, Kanto (Kenny)

The party was a small event, really. In fact, a lot of Coordinators had already left earlier and from those left we barely knew anyone. Dawn got some customary congratulations from everyone, but only her first and second battle round opponents stayed to talk a bit longer. I got the impression Dawn didn't mind the small scale event, in fact she appeared like she was looking forward to finally excuse herself and sleep for a day or two.

"I have to admit, at first I thought it would just be an overblown media hype, but I was impressed how they pulled it off," I said, keeping up the casual conversation that we had about the nature of this Grand Festival. The location had provided a far "grander" feel than most other Grand Festivals I had been to or seen

so far. And coming from Sinnoh that meant quite a lot. The whole setup had me somewhat suspicious about it all but in the end I think everyone got to see a great show.

"I know what you mean. But I guess it might have been a first test to expand on Contest popularity. It sounded like they had this new event planned for quite awhile." Dawn yawned slightly and blushed but Ash and I politely ignored it. The match had definitely taken a lot out of her.

Personally I felt bad about not believing in her ability to turn the match around as much as Ash did. There was never a moment of doubt with him, complete confidence. When I saw him trying to talk Dawn's Pokémon into "supporting" her, I thought the gesture touching but didn't believe it would work. Once again I had been proven wrong. The trust and bonds they shared between each other and their Pokémon were incredible and should really be an inspiration for everyone else. They definitely had been for me. Compared to that, I still had a long way to go and thanks to today I had a good idea where to start at least.

"Have you thought about whether or not to participate in this new thing?" I doubted she hadn't. After all it concerned Ash and I doubted she would leave it lying down to see someone else win and take her place. Well, perhaps not that extreme. Mr. Contesta had explained to Dawn some of the basics earlier and it seemed like the qualifications rounds really were just for one place and the other would be up to the Champion to choose. Still, Dawn was far too competitive not to go...

Dawn shook her head wearily. "Kenny, I'm far too tired to think further than taking a nap right now." She laughed lightly, not even embarrassed anymore to admit it. "But it definitely sounds interesting. I'm glad to see we are getting a bit more attention and credit this way. You have to admit the competition at the very top is not too numerous."

For you maybe, I thought dryly but didn't say it. Of course, there was truth to her statement. The gap between the mediocre and truly skilled Coordinators was large, much larger than during League Tournaments as much as I could safely judge that. And even between those of Top Coordinator material, the skill level highly differed. Sinnoh was already the most competitive place for us, yet even there I could not recall any pure Top Coordinator gaining some kind of influential position within the League other than Wallace.

"Well, you just beat a former League Champion in battle. That has to count for something," Ash grinned and Dawn smiled back. They really were made for each other. I was glad to have made my peace with Dawn though. Pursuing my feelings would have only ended up hurting them and definitely myself a lot.

I laughed loudly. "That's right. It's the kind of thing that will get people talking. I doubt you'll be just Ash Ketchum's girlfriend anymore after today." I reached over to pat her on the shoulder – all friendly of course. "Ash is right about this. What you did will do a lot for our reputation in the long run." Perhaps few people had known Nord's history but the paper's would be writing and the news reporters would be talking. People would know soon and that might just really be a big step towards putting Trainers and Coordinators on a more equal level of appreciation.

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

(Dawn)

I felt a little bad about not being more attentive at my own victory party. Ash had endured it all even though he surely had been tired as well from the long battle with Leaf – much longer than my own. Of course, comparing both wasn't exactly easy or perhaps even possible. The circumstances had been vastly different.

During the last moments I had felt such a complete harmony, I thought I could have continued like this for hours. Reality had caught up with me as soon as the battle ended and I realized that I had actually won. The strength my comeback had cost me only added further to what the earlier struggle had cost me and everything added up together as soon as I had been able to drop my mental barriers. Not completely – if I had, I might have collapsed right there – but enough to actually feel the physical effect of my mental exhaustion.

By now I was sure everyone – at least everyone I knew – had picked up on the fact that I wanted nothing more than to sleep, so I had no problem actually joking about it. Ash looked worried but also relieved to a great degree. His support had been so vital in this victory and I would forever be grateful for what he had done today. And despite there never being a moment of doubt in what I had felt from him, I knew part of him was concerned during the match. I should know since I was in the same dilemma when he had been fighting Leaf.

Mom had been more expressive about her worries when I spoke to her earlier – funny how more of the personal important congratulations had been made over the phone. She had also been very proud of me and voiced that feeling strongly. I think that was at that point it had really sunken in that I had made it. I had won the Grand Festival and could now rightfully call myself a Top Coordinator, the goal I had dreamed about since I was small. That elation had me going until now.

"Alright!" Ash suddenly stood, startling both Kenny and I with the abruptness. "I guess I better go and make a statement regarding this new thing the League cooked up. Some reporters have been giving me looks the entire time and were probably just *polite* enough not to bring it up here." Well, I thought, it helped that only

a few selected had been allowed to attend, definitely no sensational press like the one Ash hated so much – not that I didn't.

But that wasn't the point here. I caught his wink before he turned and made his way over to a news team collecting statements from some of the competitors still present. *Thank you, Ash.* The silent message needed no verbalization and once more I felt very grateful. Once all this was over, I really had to do something nice for him. But for now...

I quickly said goodbye to Kenny, knowing he would probably want to move on soon after his loss here today and while the media and almost everyone else was focusing on Ash, slipped out of the reception hall and quietly made my way out of the building, back to the hotel for a much deserved rest.

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

(Ash)

Interestingly enough, it wasn't much later that I could manage to follow Dawn. Once everyone had realized the star of the party was gone, the small gathering had dispersed quickly. I had actually tried to get a hold of someone significant from the League but couldn't find anyone other than some low-ranked officials.

That somewhat worried me. I knew for a fact that Lorelei from the Elite 4 had been present and I wouldn't have been surprised if one of the Region Champions hadn't been present as well somewhere. They had put a big effort into the presentation of this Grand Festival and so I was a little mystified why there hadn't been a greater presence for the public. The official I had talked to didn't know anything but admitted that Lorelei had been there but got called away at the beginning of the final rounds on some sort of urgent business.

I sighed and pushed the thoughts away, locking them down in some deep corner of my mind. There was no point in worrying about it. They would have informed me if they needed help with whatever had been so "urgent". This was Dawn's big day and it would be unfair to her if I was distracted by things I could not change. Right now, I should be happy for her and we could celebrate a little more privately. The world problems could wait a day or two, right?

Tracking down someone who could at least give me a somewhat satisfying answer had taken some time though. That is why it was already late evening, the last rays of the sun just barely peeking over the ocean when I made my way back to the hotel. Expecting to find Dawn fast asleep, however, I knew I could take my time.

I had actually tried to see if I could find Nord again but he had disappeared as quickly as he had originally appeared in our lives and I didn't know whether or not the

loss against Dawn had made a positive impression on him or just further fueled his resentment. After the match he seemed to be too shocked to fully process what had happened. In the end I couldn't care less. He didn't seem like the type to change his outlook on life so easily.

When I entered our apartment, I fully expected Dawn to be still fast asleep, thus making my way inside quietly. I needn't have bothered. Peeking into the bedroom, I found her sitting on the edge of the bed, looking out of the window. I knew that posture well and immediately frowned. She often was like that after one of her dreams now. They didn't affect her in an extreme way anymore but she would usually sit awhile in quiet contemplation, reflecting on what they meant. Couldn't she be left alone at least today? It was her special day after all.

However, as I quietly approached, I noted that it was somewhat different this time. Neither anxious nor concentrated, Dawn seemed more puzzled and... yes, a little... sad? Curious I sat down next to her and silently took her hand, our fingers interlacing without a word spoken. My concerns further melted, feeling no real tension in her grip. Maybe she just couldn't really sleep much? At least I could understand that. Mentally exhausted as she might have been, adrenaline had a way of keeping you up long after a trying battle, even if you desperately wanted to get to sleep.

Dawn sat in silence for a moment longer, before she spoke, her sudden voice startling me slightly, but not as much as her words did. "You never said anything about meeting a Mew."

I blinked, then realization set in and I suppressed the urge to flinch slightly, both at the sudden memory and the quiet admonishment in her voice. "You dreamt about that?" I knew she did. There was hardly any other way she could have known. Brock, Misty and I had promised not to talk about these events. Not just out of principle or because we swore it to Mewtwo but... those memories had a lot of emotions tied to them. Things I sometimes rather wished I could forget. But forgetting would be like running away and I had not wanted that.

"Only images, fragments, but enough to get the picture." Dawn paused, then squeezed my hand tightly. "You died." And that was clearly one of these things I sometimes wished I could forget. Honestly it had not been one of my brightest moments to run right between two powerful psychic blasts of two of the most powerful Pokémon known to us at this time. Of course, I would probably do the same again even now.

Still... the experience had had an impact on me. Not immediately – after all we had at first forgotten about it – but after our second encounter I had time to reflect on these events. Perhaps that had been when I began to take my training even more seriously, to try and act less childish. I didn't want to ever feel so helpless again.

"Want me to tell you about it?" I wouldn't have offered anyone. But Dawn deserved to know. In fact, she might be the only one whom I would talk to about this. She looked at me and I saw her brief concern and reassurance that I didn't have to force myself. That wasn't the problem though, not with her. It was still somewhat painful to remember that day, my first real confrontation with a Legendary, but I could deal with it much better now than some time ago.

And so I told her about everything that had led up to the meeting with Mewtwo, his clones and eventually Mew, including the second meeting and the farewell. Since then I had not heard from either of them. Yet, that actually reassured me in a strange way. Perhaps because that meant Team Rocket might really have forgotten about them and they could have the peaceful life they always wanted. Mewtwo definitely deserved it... even if I really had no idea what Mew actually wanted other than to help out her unexpected clone.

Dawn quietly listened, only asking a question here and there for clarification. I could see she was still very tired. I doubted she had been asleep for more than an hour or two of the three and a half since she had slipped away from the party. Because of that I didn't really press her about the dream either. It really seemed to have been more a fragmented memory. With the only exception that she hadn't been there to begin with!

"Think you can sleep some more now?" I asked in the end and Dawn nodded, her posture relaxed but she was still somewhat puzzled. I could guess why. So far her dreams seemed to be premonitions of some sort. Always set into something that appeared to be the future. I couldn't recall her ever having seen some kind of past event. What did that mean? I couldn't fathom an answer and that had me worried in turn even as Dawn slowly drifted back to sleep.

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

(Dawn)

I didn't dream again. At least not in the usual way. Not quite the normal way either. There was darkness all around me as I moved through deep foliage, using the small stretch of wooden area as cover. It was getting more and more exhausting. My strength was fading and I knew I couldn't keep this up for much longer.

Help... me...

Huh? The voice caused me to separate my thoughts from whoever it was I was dreaming about. It wasn't exactly a conscious state but I was more aware that from whoever's eyes I was watching, they weren't my own. As I became aware of that, the scenery began to change more rapidly. Flickers of scenes, glimpses of battles against creatures that looked like Pokémon but were something else.

Something that caused a deep revulsion in my dream self. The images were too fast to make out much about them or really analyze the creatures.

My strength...

A sense of urgency build up inside me and it wasn't my dream self. This was something deeper. Something that seemed to touch me – the real me – from outside. Perhaps... no, probably from whomever's view I was somehow sharing. This was entirely new for me. Premonitions I had learned to deal with somewhat. But this wasn't the same and it wasn't someone else's fragmented memories of the past either. It felt far more real and...

... is fading.

...imminent.

Help...

With a start I jerked awake, sitting up so abruptly, Ash was startled awake as well, almost falling out of the bed at my abrupt movement. For several long seconds I was utterly disorientated, heart racing and pounding, my breathing harsh and my body covered in sweat. *Calm. Find your center*, I repeated in my mind. It took me a lot more effort than usual to focus on my mental abilities and do just that.

When I finally managed, Ash was sitting beside me worried, uncertain how he should act. "Dawn? Are you okay?" he asked and I wasn't really sure how to answer that. The initial effects had passed and I actually did feel fine, much more rested than earlier in the day. I couldn't really recall what it was that had awakened me. I had dreamt something. But not the usual. What exactly, that I couldn't really say. However, the sense of urgency hadn't passed. That was the one thing I could clearly remember from the dream.

"I'm not sure but... something's wrong." Shaking off his concerned hand on my shoulder, I got up from the bed and grabbed my street clothes. "Someone needs help. My help." I was absolutely certain about this. "I can't explain it but... I have to go." I slipped my shirt on and looked back at Ash, expecting some kind of argument. But he just looked at me for a long moment before wordlessly getting up to grab his own clothes. "Ash?"

In short time – travelling on the road taught you how to dress very quickly if necessary –, Ash was ready to go. "Not alone, you are not." It was a irrefutable statement and I knew I would have done and said the same if the situation were to be reversed. Pikachu had perked up at the activity as well and sensing the urgency in the air, merely jumped over to stand besides Ash, alert and ready. "Do you know where?" He grabbed the rest of his Pokéballs and was already moving for the door.

"I think so." I did the same, regretting that I had no time to change my lineup, wishing for once I had a similar way to do so as Ash did. Piplup and Lopunny were at the Pokémon Center recovering from all the damage they had suffered in the final. Espeon and Togekiss were probably rested by now but probably not in absolute top form.

There was no time for detours though. The feeling of urgency was getting stronger. Now that I had more time to assert some control, I was beginning to pinpoint the source and direction. Part of me marveled how much more sensitive my abilities had gotten – no doubt an effect of what happened during the final – but I couldn't really pay too much attention to it right now.

The night air on the islands was still rather agreeable. Not quite warm but an actual refreshing cool. As the urgency grew, so did my ability to follow the mental call. It had been there before, I realized. At several points during the day I had felt something try to get past my barriers, something different from the influence of Nord's Dark types. It had been faint and I hadn't been in a position to allow myself any kind of distraction. The feeling had gone away after awhile and I quickly forgot about it. However, now I realized whoever was calling out to me had been trying to do so all day.

We had been running for nearly twenty minutes when we encountered the first one. We had made it all the way to the adjoining island, close to the small mountain range and the wooded area at its edge. It was still all palm trees, of course, but they were thicker here, almost like a very small jungle. Enough to provide a dense cover from the moonlight. There was a human body flung against the base of one of the trees. A human body wearing a haunting black uniform with a big red "R" emblazoned on the front.

Team Rocket.

"We are close," I murmured, an unexplainable feeling of dread gripping my heart from deep within me. Not just urgency anymore, more like mounting desperation. Time was running out. Time for what I did not know but that didn't matter. The presence of Team Rocket was enough reason to suspect the worst. Calling out Espeon to help me out, we managed to pinpoint the exact direction we had to go very quickly.

I was just not quite prepared for what we would find...

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

Lake Valor, Sinnoh (May)

"What are you doing up at this hour?"

I almost jumped forward which wouldn't have been pleasant at all considering I was on the balcony of my suite, several stories up high. Heart hammering from the shock, I gripped the railing a bit tighter just to be sure, throwing a glare towards Naru trotting on the balcony, sleepy but curious.

I suppose I couldn't fault her or stay angry at the scare. As far away as my mind had seemed just a moment ago, anyone could have snuck up on me, scaring me half to death. And for the life of me, I couldn't even figure out why. Naru merely snorted in disbelief at the standard "Couldn't sleep" reply for these situations. I wasn't sure I would have bought it either... probably not.

"I can't explain it. I just woke up suddenly and felt like..." It was hard to put into words. Especially if I couldn't even vaguely comprehend the kind of feeling that I was still experiencing. Very distantly I could compare it with the kind of feeling I would get before an important event, yet it was also rather different from the usual mix of anticipation and giddiness before a Grand Festival.

Realizing Naru was still waiting for me to finish my answer, head cocked and actually appearing somewhat... worried? Perhaps she was really starting to open up more. "Like something is happening somewhere," I finished lamely, finding no other wording that was at least somewhere close. "Something important. To someone important." There was a heaviness in my heart that seemed to pull on my very soul. Like there was some kind of danger to someone I loved but I had no idea who... or what. Only that it was big and important, like... "The beginning of destiny."

I started at my own words. They had just slipped out without even thinking about them before... or better without thinking of them at all. It sounded alien, like some other person had said them and I couldn't explain at all why.

Naru made another snort and shook her head. "I'm not sure I believe in destiny. If there is something like this, I think it's a rather cruel thing." Not correcting her or trying to explain that I didn't know why I even had said what I did, I sat down in one of the chairs. The feeling hadn't gone away and surely I wouldn't be able to get to sleep just yet.

My hand unconsciously clenched over my heart as I gazed up into the night sky at the bright moon. It had no answers for me and so the mystery remained. I wasn't sure I had much of an opinion on the ideas of fate or destiny either. Never really thought about it. "But you are here now," I eventually replied, partly in a need to get myself distracted from the tingling in my whole body, the intense sensation of some kind of monumental event taking place... and the even more unexplainable thought that I should be there. "I think that as long as you are still alive, there is still hope to make your own path. Destiny or not."

Naru hopped up on the small table, strangely contemplative, not outright refusing. "Perhaps. I simply don't like to think what happened to me and my sisters was meant to happen, that no matter what it was predestined to happen." Despite the distraction, I felt my heart reaching out in compassion for the Eevee and wordlessly lifted her up and into my lap. Naru didn't struggle and relaxed into the touch of my fingers through her fur.

No one was supposed to go through what she had done. Unfortunately there would always be people that would try to take advantage of others, be it other humans or Pokémon. If it wasn't criminals like Team Rocket, someone else would. Sad as it was, I didn't think you could rot out evil completely. Not as long as human emotions were around. Generally a good thing, there was also always the other side. The greed, the jealousy, the hate. If there was some destiny in that, I didn't like to think about it either.

"Does it really matter? You can't change the past but you can affect the present and with that the future. I'm sure your other sisters are out there somewhere. But if you just give up on searching for them, then I'd like to think that it doesn't matter if it is in your destiny or not. You probably won't ever meet again like this." I was aware of how ironic that logic was. Had I not been dwelling on my past shortcomings both romantically and in my ambitions just before the Grand Festival? However, Naru had helped me out in a similar way and now I felt it was my turn. Not that I really thought it was necessary.

"You don't need to tell me that," she confirmed just a short while later, taking her time in answering, though I had the suspicion that was more from my petting than needing to think about it. "Besides we have a deal, right? Wouldn't be much good if I skipped out of it before you could fulfill your end."

I chuckled at the tone, more like the Naru I had gotten to know. A bit nonchalant, grumpy and generally implying she didn't really care either way. But I knew she did. Her actions the last days had clearly confirmed she was warming up to me. And I cared, too. "It's not a deal. It's a promise. Helping you out is not some sort of obligation, you know?" My thoughts briefly reflected on the start of our conversation. "I think if there is some kind of destiny in the world, I would say, us meeting was a part of it."

Brown eyes with that unnatural green tint in them looked up at me and for a moment I could see a flash of emotion. Surprise and... gratefulness. I smiled down at her and she hesitantly returned it.

The feelings that had awoken me hadn't gone away but I felt a little more relaxed. Nothing more was said for a long time as we sat on the balcony, Naru

comfortably curled in my lap, keeping me company as I waited for this strange event, whatever it may be, to pass.

Somehow I knew I would get an answer far sooner than I would like.

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

Seafom Islands, Kanto (Ash)

I never questioned Dawn's sudden impulse. Frankly I understood very little about all this psychic stuff but if it was anything similar to the bonds I shared with Pikachu and my other Pokémon, I knew not to take it lightly. What I did know was that I trusted Dawn and for her to get so worked up was uncharacteristic, especially in light of the day's tiring events.

Any argument was therefore withheld once I saw how serious and determined she was. There wouldn't be any stopping her when she was like this, regardless of whether or not I was worried about her state of health. She looked fine now but I didn't believe she was quite recovered yet. I wouldn't have backed down though either, if I was the one to be that determined, and so arguing would merely serve to delay the inevitable and might eventually lead to regret that I prevented swifter action to... do whatever Dawn felt we were supposed to do.

Besides, I never was the type to think about these kind of things too long. Or at all. Granted, I thought myself a bit more cautious than to say... do something as stupid as jump between two Legendary, super-powerful Pokémon. Not right away at least. Dawn's presence had mellowed me out, especially after admitting our feelings for the other. It WAS different when you had someone to care for so deeply, knowing your actions would always affect the other, too. That made you think at least twice about doing something dangerous and in turn would make you concerned for the other where you would normally go along with your impulses readily.

In the end we were too much alike in our willingness to help others in need to cause an argument over it. I would do the same in Dawn's place.

And so we found ourselves running through the night. It was one of these times the special training we did WITH our Pokémon showed its effects outside of battles or Contests, mainly showed itself within us. Considering the kind of speed and distance covered, I knew that before our training we would have been utterly exhausted by the point we found the first signs of conflict. Instead I wasn't even sweating. Dawn was just a little winded but I think that was more due to her already tired condition.

Seeing the Team Rocket member here brought back all these mounting concerns and suspicions that had built up over the last months. Leaf's ominous

warning to Dawn, her dreams, the increasing activity of the crime organization. I had managed to forget all about it for the duration of the Grand Festival. Now it was all coming back though, coming back hard.

But what were they doing here? The Grand Festival itself couldn't have been their target. There had been nothing to indicate something was sabotaged or happened in any other suspicious way. And since it was over with now, I had no idea what they were after here. A connection with the event was rather unlikely.

This part of the island was hard to navigate. The thick foliage the trees provided here almost completely blocked out the moonlight and if it wasn't for Espeon making the jewel on her forehead glow, it would have been rather dangerous to keep moving at a faster speed.

There were more Rockets along the way, most of them unconscious, some... I wasn't quite sure and we didn't stop to find out. Among those sites were also small patches of what appeared to be ash or some other melted material, almost unnoticed in the darkness. Dawn and I had exchanged a look and decided that we really didn't want to know what they meant right now.

I felt the anxiety rising within me and nervously fingered my Pokéballs, glad I had most of my strongest along. Somehow I just knew I would need them. Even I could feel it now. Not on any conscious level but there definitely was something urgent in the air and... something familiar. Whatever it was, I knew I would regret it if we were too late.

At some point, both Espeon AND Pikachu perked up and dashed in a specific direction. Through our bond I could feel how Pikachu was sensing the immediate danger and the desperation of potentially arriving too late. But there was something else too. The same kind of... familiarity I had felt as well.

Just as the urgency became a suffocating dread, as if some great darkness was swallowing all the light left – and don't ask me why I came up with this ironically apt analogy at this point –, the trees parted into a clearing. It took me a moment to adjust my vision at the sudden light of the fairly bright moon tonight. But when I did, I skidded to halt in a shock.

I wasn't entirely sure how to classify what I saw. It vaguely looked like a Pokémon. A Rhyperior going by general appearance. But that was there the resemblance ended. Rhyperior weren't THIS big. Easily four meters in height and seeming even more massive than Rhydon's evolution usually were. Granted I had only seen a few so far and in fact didn't have the opportunity to fight one yet, but I was quite sure this was anything but normal.

It's rock skin was not the usual dark grey but a deep black with some of the plates glowing in an eerie, ghostly purple. What really sent a chill down my spine were the eyes though. The look in them was one I could only vaguely associated with a Pokémon in Rage status. But this was more potent and it didn't seem to be just an application of a move either. The message behind that kind of look was as clear as I had trouble comprehending the sheer single-mindedness behind it.

All that, however, was only a fleeting analysis, lasting as long until my gaze fell on the obvious target of the Rhyperior's destructive intent. Even from the distance I recognized it instantly. Especially after relieving some of those memories only hours ago. And because of that, Dawn would do the same. The small white-pinkish form crumbled beneath the Rhyperior was none other than the Legendary Pokémon Mew.

"Oh god..." Dawn whispered harshly, snapping me out of my own shock and realizing I had almost hesitated too long. Rhyperior was just about ready to strike at Mew who was clearly in no shape to defend itself anymore.

Once again, despite my earlier thoughts, it was one of these moments where I could do nothing but act on impulse. I had no other choice either. There was no question about the possible danger. All I saw was a Pokémon in mortal danger and there was only one course left to take.

Pikachu was already ten steps ahead before I sprinted after him. "Pikachu, Thunder, full power!"

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

(Narrator)

"It would seem our heroes are not given a break today. After a long and difficult struggle. Dawn has reached her goal and won the Kanto Grand Festival. But the day has not even fully ended and it seems her and Ash are pulled right into the events that had so far been going on unnoticed by them. Will they be able to save Mew and what significance does this meeting have for them. I believe the answers are not too far away this time."

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

Maia's Prophecy

Maia: I se...

Mystic Mew: Stop! I cleared this up and you had no right to go over my head without informing me! As of now this segment is... *stops when Maia hands him a document* What's this? Liberal Muse Association Rulebook?

Maia: Article 7b.

MysticMew flips through the pages and scans over the article in question.

MysticMew: The hell? "Every Muse has the unquestionable right to make their own segment where she can do everything she wants as long as it is outside the boundaries of the actual story. A permission by the author is not required."?!

Maia: *smugly* It is customary for us to do one simply to annoy the author.

MysticMew: This... I... That's... Argh! *screams in frustration* I give up, do what you want. *stalks off*

Maia: *giggles* I see, I see, I see in the future... I see... hmm that's interesting. I see a history lesson. I see the beginning of a new adventure. I see... revelations... Nah, that would be telling too much.

MysticMew: *pops back in* Wait, that's it?

Maia: Do you WANT me to tell the entire essential plot of the next episode here?

MysticMew: *sweatdrops*

Maia: Next time on TFSTTM Reloaded: Mew's Revelation! The Shocking History of the Pokémon World! Be there. Read. Enjoy! And... I don't care what he says but I will get quite upset if you don't feed me!

MysticMew: *gloomy* For all of our sanities, please do...

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

Author's Notes

Minor cliffy, hehe. I need to have my indulgence.

Now with the Grand Festival over we are moving to the actual "plot" of this story. Yes, there is a plot, even if I still have not ironed out all the smaller details. ^_^

Explanations, right. In order. First of all concerning Dawn's battle with Nord and in extension those that came before it. I had a bit of a discussion with Twilight on this already, so I might as well put my reasoning in here as well. This is mostly an excerpt from me addressing Twilight's concern that the eventual end of the Dawn VS Nord battle happened to fast and easy considering Nord is supposed to be a former League Champion. Feel free to skip the next paragraphs, if you don't want to read all this but don't come asking about it and expecting replies if you haven't read my reasonings. For the record I am not satisfied with how "easily" Dawn won in the end but it was still better than her just rushing through it which WAS the original plan for the start of this arc.

Begin longwinded explanation excerpt now...

The fact that the end of Dawn's match was like this, had for once little to do with the fact that she is simply "stronger". Under normal circumstances, in an open match, Dawn and Nord would have been a lot more evenly matched. Dawn would still

have won for several reason but it would have been a lot closer of an conclusion. In this match though, it all came down to momentum. Nord was assured of victory, he had the match under control, practically won already, he did not expect a comeback and definitely not such a big one. It took him by surprise and still stuck somewhat in the mindset that he had the upper hand against an opponent that was unable to really focus.

I think a nice comparison here would be the first soccer match for the Bundesliga relegation. Düsseldorf started well but Berlin shot the 1:0 and had the game under control. But then, in the second half, at a point where no one really thought anything major could be happening, it was the solo action of one player from Düsseldorf that enabled the 1:1 and from that point the entire momentum shifted, Berlin crumbled, scored an own goal and suddenly it was 1:2 in their own stadium which put them in a really bad position for the second game...

My point here is, Nord was caught in a mindset that left him unable to respond properly, otherwise he might have been able to salvage the situation, considering how little time remained. This kind of thing actually happens in any kind of competition. One little action can shift an entire match around, regardless how dominant one side was up to this point.

Also if you say Champion material, you have to also keep in mind that while, yes, Nord is a former Champion, you should consider that every tournament is different when it comes to competition. Dawn has trained on Ash's level who faced and won against an opponent of Master material.

Of course, the main problem lay in the simple matter that I had originally planned to gloss over the Grand Festival, kind of like a fade-in for the final and Dawn's victory kind of thing instead of devoting one and a half episode for it. Building up a sufficient opposition for Dawn would have required an entire arc, like for Ash, at least several more episodes with sufficient buildup. That was never in the main plot plan and thus Nord was born. The way I made him, he and Dawn couldn't really have a proper Contest battle, thus my blatant "borrowing" and mutation of the Dark Pokemon affect psychics/empaths thing from Empathic Adventures (again credit to the author). I know it all seems kind of weak for a plot device but it was the best I could come up with to give Dawn at least a moderate challenge without turning the whole thing into a several episode long marathon.

End long-winded explanation excerpt. ^_^

On a completely different note. I tend to be a strong believer in balancing out scene time for the characters equally (in proportion to their relevance for the story/chapter). I realize Dawn got a little more than usual and kind of walked all over that principle. I tried but the fight scene just got so damn long and the way I wrote it, I couldn't POV switch for any of it. I debated putting the first scene into the last episode

but that just didn't work for me for various reasons. So, sorry for overdoing Dawn a little, but then again this was her time to shine, so I guess it's okay. Forget my senseless rambling, I just don't like things being out of order like that.

Sorry to everyone who thought there would be more battle action in the cave. Never planned on it. To be fair, since this involvement was not planned, I had to limit direct battle with TR's new "toys". There'll be the obvious at the start of next episode, in conclusion to the events in the cave but don't expect to see them a lot yet until the final stretch of the arc.

I hope everyone liked this story. The end of this chapter and beginning of the next were a big part of the initial idea – you know this scene idea that pops in your head and starts everything – so I hope I'm doing them well. Again, I realize the final battle of the Grand Festival might not be exactly what everyone would have liked – including myself – but the best I could come up with in the limited time I had planned for this and already expanded on for the sake of giving Dawn's own goals at least a decent conclusion for now before going further into the main plot. There is still the cross-regional event to take place towards the end of the arc and with May rearing up to prove herself, it's bound to be far more interesting.

I think what both Dawn and May's – comparable – easy victories showed was also a dose of reality. You don't always get exciting, heart-pumping, close-call battles with special rivals in the final round. Sometimes it is actually easy, sometimes it seems more like a chore, but there's the need for professionalism in there as well.

I'm not quite sure when I'll be done with the next bit. I have been taking a few days off after finishing those two mammoth chapters and have just started with Episode 3. But the scene order is set, so I just have to write it out. The chapters are definitely going to be a bit longer now. I think these two are a good example of the general length you should expect now that everyone is getting involved and I have to juggle more main characters somewhat equally. The next three to four episodes will focus a bit more on each group with the others on the side. After that we are already getting close to a finish, the new Contest type and the dramatic conclusion I have planned in the end. *cackles evilly*

So, be sure to give us lots of feedback. If you don't feed her *glares at muse*, she's only going to go more crazy.

Ja ne, yours

Matthias